GRAPHIC NOVELS:
SUGGESTIONS FOR LIBRARIANS

ALSO AVAILABLE ONLINE: **WWW.NCAC.ORG/GRAPHICNOVELS**

PREPARED BY:
THE NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP
THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
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INTRODUCTION

Graphic novels are one of the fastest growing categories in publishing and bookselling. Today's graphic novels are far more sophisticated and varied in content than the comics that preceded them and enjoy a level of respect previously denied to this form of popular entertainment; they are the subject of reviews, book-length surveys, museum exhibits and academic study, as well as recipients of prestigious literary awards (Art Speigelman's *Maus*, for instance, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992). As the *U.S. News and World* report phrased it, "The comic books of our youth [have] grown up."

While comics are generally published as magazines, their "grown up" version – the graphic novel – appears in book format. Sometimes graphic novels bring together a series of comics much like Dickens' novels came out of serialized narrative; at other times they are conceived as novels and exhibit novelistic features such as character development and multiple story lines. Although still mostly targeted at youth, graphic novels are increasingly of interest to an expanded audience, which includes many adults.

Narratives composed out of visual images or out of images and words have a very long history that stretches back to the first cave paintings. Today's graphic novels, however, are a singular product of the 20th century. In their combination of text and image they are closest to another major 20th century medium – film. Not surprisingly there is a rich interchange between the two – film technique informs graphic novels and, in turn, many filmmakers base their work on comics or graphic novels (not only *Batman* and the *X-men*, but also *Ghost World*, *American Splendor*, *A History of Violence*, *Art School Confidential*, and many others).

Combining visual art (a sense of space, mass, motion, and color) with literary and cinematic techniques (plot, point of view, character development, metaphor, allegory, flashbacks and flashforwards, speeding and slowing time, close-ups, long views, stream of consciousness, montage, etc.) graphic novels contain some of the most creative work in publishing today. They promote visual and verbal literacy, as well as love of reading. A good collection of graphic novels appeals to young people who might otherwise be reluctant to explore library resources.

"THE COMIC BOOKS OF OUR YOUTH [HAVE] GROWN UP."

The immediacy of graphic novels' visual impact coupled with adult themes and concerns, however, sometimes confuse library patrons used to thinking of comics as the province *solely* of 10 or 12 year olds. The explosive growth of the medium combined with the appearance of more and more graphic novels for older teens and adults presents some unique issues for librarians.

The diversity of graphic novels makes categorizing and shelving them a challenging task. Shelving all graphic novels together, for instance, has occasionally led to parents complaining that their kids have mistakenly picked up an inappropriate book due to its proximity and visual similarity to books targeted at older teenagers or adults. We hope the guidelines we offer here help librarians make the best decisions in serving the specific needs of their patrons.

The guidelines are intended to help in collection development, categorizing and shelving graphic novels, as well as handling complaints.

For regular updates, or to give us feedback to be included in future editions, please visit:

WWW.NCAC.ORG/GRAPHICNOVELS or WWW.ALA.ORG/OIF/IFISSUES/GRAPHICNOVELS.HTM

GRAPHIC NOVELS: A BRIEF HISTORY

The juxtaposition of words and pictures stretches back into antiquity (think about ancient Egyptian wall paintings, which surround human figures with dense lines of hieroglyphs), though the current vocabulary of the form began to take shape with the rise of the comic strip. Popularized in newspapers at the start of the 20th century, the comic strip introduced the fundamentals of the comics language such as the use of balloons for thoughts and dialogue, and panel to panel narrative progression that persist to this day. The work of many visionaries of that period, including Winsor McCay, George Herriman, E.C. Segar, and Frank King is now preserved in popular archival editions. In a parallel development, the 1920s and 1930s saw a revival in the woodcut narrative tradition in the work of Franz Masereel, Lynd Ward, and Milt Gross, whose "silent" 1930 comic *He Done Her Wrong* was recently reissued to popular acclaim.

Comic book traditions have many national variations. The American comic book took shape in the late 1930s with the introduction of Superman and his successors Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and a plethora of others. Arriving at the tail end of the Depression and during the first rumblings of World War II, comics provided cheap, thrilling entertainment that appealed to youngsters and soldiers alike. Comic books became an integral part of the entertainment culture, with the popular heroes spinning off serials, radio programs, and movie features. As the medium progressed, it encompassed a wide variety of genres including romance, horror, crime, science fiction, war, humor, and adventure.

Comic book sales soared into the millions after World War II. Will Eisner's formally audacious *The Spirit*, for instance, circulated as a comic book supplement in national newspapers aimed at a well educated readership. In the early 1950s, the success of EC Comics' horror, science-fiction, and war titles marked a high point in comics art and storytelling.

However, by the mid fifties, the medium suffered a setback: the anti-comic book hysteria whipped up by Frederic Wertham's book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, culminated in Senate hearings on Comics and Juvenile Delinquency. Worried about the possibility of government regulation publishers toned down their content and formed a self-regulatory body, the Comics Code Authority. The CCA prohibited depictions of gore, sexuality, and excessive violence, as well as scenes with vampires, werewolves, ghouls or zombies. It also mandated that authority figures were never to be ridiculed or presented disrespectfully, and that good must always win. EC comics dropped most of its comics. Comics rebounded by the early 1960s, however, with DC Comics reinvigorating many of its classic heroes for young audiences, and Marvel Comics capturing adolescent and college-age imaginations with a new brand of comics storytelling.

The late sixties brought the most immediate antecedent to the content of today's graphic novels, Underground Comix, self-published or small press comic books, which disregarded the restrictions of the Comics Code. Born from the era's counterculture, Underground Comix dealt unflinchingly with the social issues of the day, including attitudes about sex, race, war, and drugs. Its greatest practitioners are today revered as some of the century's most noteworthy artistic voices, most notably R. Crumb, Art Spiegelman, Gilbert Shelton, and Harvey Pekar.

The creative freedom afforded by Underground Comix and changes in distribution that allowed material without the Comics Code seal of approval to find an audience, opened the door for the graphic novel to emerge. The term "graphic novel" was popularized by Will Eisner's 1978 short story collection, *A Contract With God*. Eisner's book, specifically designed to speak to adult readers, provided an example of how the comics medium could be used to serious literary effect.

More and more content was created and marketed as graphic novels. The breakthrough year of 1986 marked the publication of three critically acclaimed, bestselling books: *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize–winning novel about the Holocaust; *Watchmen*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' political deconstruction of the superhero genre; and *The Dark Knight Returns*, Frank Miller's social commentary on media and politics in the Reagan era (with Batman and Superman as allegorical touchstones).

The late nineties brought the influx of manga, Japanese comics which had been slowly coming over to the United States since the late seventies. Ubiquitous in Japan since the end of the second World War, manga differs from American graphic novels in both the storytelling techniques it applies and in subject matter, with each book closely targeted at a specific demographic. Publishers like TokyoPop and Viz have translated a vast array of titles that speak directly to the concerns of young adult readers, who have developed a voracious appetite for the growing genre.

The breakthrough literary success of Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000), and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003), coupled with the popular success of comics-based movies such as *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* on one hand, and *Ghost World* and *American Splendor* on the other, has resulted in an explosion in audience interest in all age groups.

Today, like their counterparts in prose, graphic novels cover every conceivable genre, including fiction, biography, history, journalism, education, crime, horror, fantasy, romance, adventure, memoir, humor, politics, and much more. After a century of growth, the comics that started as amusing ephemera in newspapers have matured into a diverse, insightful, and entertaining form that is beginning to enjoy a permanent place in the literary world.

DEVELOPING A GRAPHIC NOVEL COLLECTION

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

The following books will help librarians develop a graphic novels collection:

Goldsmith, Francisca. *Graphic Novels Now: Building, Managing, And Marketing a Dynamic Collection*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2005.

Lyga, Allyson W. and Lyga, Barry. *Graphic Novels in Your Media Center: A Definitive Guide*. Portsmouth, NH, Libraries Unlimited, 2004.

Miller, Steve. *Developing and Promoting Graphic Novel Collections*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2005.

Rothschild, D. Aviva. *Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide to Book-Length Comics*. Portsmouth, NH, Libraries Unlimited, 1995.

Other helpful books and resources can be found below under "Bibliography."

Another resource for collection development can be found on the Graphic Novels in Libraries (GNLIB) Web site at http://www.angelfire.com/comics/gnlib/resources.html. Also available there is an unmoderated e-list specifically for young adult and adult services public librarians.

Library suppliers have compiled core lists of graphic novels (e.g., Brodart's can be found at http://www.graphicnovels.brodart.com/core_lists.htm).

Consult the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, seventh edition (2005), for important collection development resources, such as the *Diversity in Collection Development: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*.

GUIDES TO GRAPHIC NOVELS

Libraries have created pages devoted to the graphic novel. These are two such sites:

Columbia University's Graphic Novels Page
http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eguides/graphic_novels/

Mercer County (NJ) Library System's Graphic Novel Page
http://www.mcl.org/subj/grafnov.html

TOP 10 GRAPHIC NOVELS

A top 10 list is compiled by *Booklist* editors every spring in the annual "Spotlight on Graphic Novels feature."

Beginning in 2006, all the Graphic Novel top 10 lists, as well as other graphic novel feature material (interviews, etc.), will be published and archived for subscribers on *Booklist Online* (http://www.booklistonline.com).

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Gravett, Paul. *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know*. New York: Collins Design, 2005.

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Jones, Patrick, Gorman, Michele, and Suellentrop, Tricia. *Connecting Young Adults and Libraries: A How-To-Do-It Manual*. 3rd ed. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2005.

"Spotlight on Graphic Novels." *Booklist*, vol. 101, no. 14, March 15, 2005.

Weiner, Stephen. *101 Best Graphic Novels*. 2nd ed. New York: Nantier Beall Minoustchine Publishing, 2006.

WHERE TO SHELVE GRAPHIC NOVELS?

Libraries determine how to best serve their users' needs and wants by providing a logical, intuitive path to desired materials. They consider a range of factors, including classification system in use, format, building layout, age category,[1] and accessibility.[2]

Graphic novels include both fiction and nonfiction, may be directed at any age, and may be viewed as a distinct genre (e.g., mysteries) or as a separate format (e.g., large print). Although shelving practices vary from library to library, graphic novels are commonly shelved:

- By age category (e.g., graphic novels for adults are shelved with other adult books; graphic novels for young adults are shelved with other YA books);
- Together under one classification number (e.g., DDC 741.5, Cartoons, caricatures, comics);
- Combination of the above.

- In a specially designated graphic novels area for easier browsing of all graphic works; for example:
  - Graphic materials—adult, YA, and children—can be cataloged separately, for example, but their cataloging records indicate they are found in the same "home" location;
  - Even in this example, adult graphic novels can be shelved separately from YA and children's graphic novels; and
- Throughout the library on a book-by-book basis.

Most librarians will shelve graphic novels with sexual adult content in an appropriately "adult" area.[3] Nevertheless, shelving location must not be assumed to be a predictor of who will read or borrow a particular graphic novel.

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[1] *Free Access to Libraries for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights* states, "Library policies and procedures that effectively deny minors equal and equitable access to all library resources available to other users violate the *Library Bill of Rights*. The American Library Association opposes all attempts to restrict access to library services, materials, and facilities based on the age of library users."

[2] *Restricted Access to Library Material: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights* states, "Because restricted materials often deal with controversial, unusual, or sensitive subjects, having to ask a librarian or circulation clerk for access to them may be embarrassing or inhibiting for patrons desiring the materials. Requiring a user to ask for materials may create a service barrier or pose a language-skills barrier. Even when a title is listed in the catalog with a reference to its restricted status, a barrier is placed between the patron and the publication. (See also *Labels and Rating Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*.) Because restricted materials often feature information that some people consider objectionable, potential library users may be predisposed to think of the materials as objectionable and, therefore, be reluctant to ask for access to them.

[3] Article V of the *Library Bill of Rights* states, "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views."

DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

In theory, dealing with challenges to graphic novels is no different than dealing with challenges to print material. In practice, however, it is important to keep in mind that many people consider an image to be far more powerful in its impact than any written description of that image. That said, the following tips will help you prepare to cope with challenges to graphic novels.[1]

BE PREPARED

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Make sure all library staff and board members understand the library's policies and procedures for dealing with challenges. Provide customer service and other human relations training that will help staff deal effectively with sensitive matters. "Dealing with Concerns about Library Resources" (*Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 7th ed., 2005) is an excellent guide to handling complaints effectively.

KEY MESSAGES ABOUT LIBRARIES

If responding to a challenge, focus on four key points:

1. Libraries provide ideas and information across the spectrum of social and political views.
2. Libraries provide choice for all people.
3. Parents are responsible for supervising their own children's library use.
4. Collection does not imply endorsement.

FIELDING COMPLAINTS

- Greet each person with a smile. Communicate your openness and show that you take them seriously.
- Listen more than you talk. Indeed, practice "active listening." Take time to really listen and acknowledge the individual's concern. Stay calm and courteous.
- Relate the four key points listed above.
- Sharing personal opinions is not a good idea. Instead, be prepared to distribute facts, policy, and other background materials in writing.
- Be prepared to give a clear, non-intimidating explanation of the library's procedure for registering a complaint, and say when a decision can be expected.

TALKING WITH THE MEDIA

A challenge may attract media attention. How effectively you work with the media may well determine how big the story becomes and will help to shape public opinion.

- Designate a spokesperson or spokespeople for the library. Make sure that reporters, library staff and the members of the board know who has been designated. Make it clear that no one other than a spokesperson should express opinions on behalf of the library.
- Ask questions. What is the approach? Will there be someone with an opposing view present? If you do not feel qualified to address the question or are uncomfortable with the approach, say so. Suggest other angles ("The real issue is freedom of choice…")
- Ask for the reporter's deadline. Even if he or she needs it "right away," you can call back in 15 minutes.
- Remember, nothing is "off the record." Assume that anything you say could end up on the front page or leading the news broadcast.
- Prepare carefully for any contacts with the media. Know the most important message you want to deliver and be able to deliver it in 25 words or less. You will want to review your library's borrowing and collection development policies and the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights*.
- Practice answering difficult questions and answers out loud. You may wish to invest in a session with a professional media consultant or at least practice answering sample questions with someone else (see Sample Questions and Answers below).
- Be prepared to tell stories or quote parents and children about how the library has helped them.
- Be clear who you represent—yourself or your library.
- Don't be afraid to admit you don't know. "I don't know" is a legitimate answer. Reporters do not want incorrect information. Tell them you'll get the information and call back.
- Never say "No comment." A simple "I'm sorry I can't answer that." will suffice.

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION IS WORTH A POUND OF CURE. MAKE SURE ALL LIBRARY STAFF AND BOARD MEMBERS UNDERSTAND THE LIBRARY'S POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR DEALING WITH CHALLENGES.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The following questions provide sample language for answering questions from parents, the media, and others. You will want to personalize your remarks for your library and community. Remember, keep it simple. Keep it human.

Why do libraries have to buy graphic novels?

The library has a responsibility to serve its community—your neighbors—including those you may not agree with or who may not agree with you. Libraries purchase materials, such as graphic novels, because they have a mission statement that requires them to serve a broad range of community needs and wants. The material you find in your library was selected by librarians, who are taught as part of their professional education to determine the needs of their communities and to select materials based on library policies.*

Shouldn't I be able to control what my kids are exposed to?

You can control what your children are exposed to by going with them to visit the library or supervising what they bring home. If there are materials you don't approve of, talk with your children about why you would rather they not read or view them. Most libraries provide suggested reading lists for various ages. And librarians are always glad to advise children and parents on selecting materials we think they would enjoy and find helpful. Ultimately, we believe parents know what's best for their children, and each parent is responsible for supervising his or her child.

Can a child check out graphic novels, even those intended for adults?

The conviction that young persons are entitled to enjoy the same freedom to read as adults is not a belief that children should be given adult-themed materials. We believe in freedom of choice for all people but we also believe in common sense, and common sense will tell you that it is extremely unusual for a young child to check out adult material.

Well, I can't be at the library every time my child is there. Does this mean my child is on her own?

No. The best library resource are the librarians. They provide assistance and guidance, such as suggested reading lists, to help young people make appropriate choices. Our goal is to provide the best possible service for all of our users, and we are very proud of what we offer. If you haven't been to our library recently, we encourage you to come and see for yourself!

What should I do if I find a graphic novel I don't approve of in the library?

We want to know your concerns. If you have a concern, simply speak to a librarian. We take such concerns very seriously. First, we listen. We also have a formal review process in which we ask you to fill out a special form designed to help us understand your concerns more thoroughly. Anyone who makes a written complaint will receive a response in writing.

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*We hope the other sections in these guidelines will help you address the importance and value of graphic novels in more detail if this is necessary in the individual case.

APPENDIX

GRAPHIC NOVEL LIBRARY SURVEY

Survey conducted by the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom in March–April 2005; Total number of responses: 185

What type of library do you work in?
Public libraries

Do you include graphic novels in your collection?
Yes = 179 (97%) No = 6 (3%)

Have you experienced any problems with or challenges to the graphic novels in your collection?
Yes = 35 (23%) No = 143 (77%)

How are graphic novels catalogued and shelved?
A high percentage of the responders shelve their graphic novels in the Young Adult section of their library (either in YA Fiction or as 741's). Those with larger collections were able to devote entire sections to graphic novels, and even separate based on content into Juvenile, Young Adult, and Adult sections. Libraries with small collections add the graphic novels into the YA or Teen Fiction sections of their library without separate designation.

Comments and Success Stories

- "We have partnered with our local comic book store to celebrate Free Comic Book Day. Various comic book writers and artists are at the store that day to promote their titles and to draw sketches. A portion of the proceeds from the sketches and the sales are donated to the library for the purchase of graphic novels for both the YA and Adult collections."

- "My daughter has had two graphic novellas published in anthologies that included several explicit lesbian novellas. I donated a copy to my library and it circulated fairly well. Two other libraries in our system also purchased copies. No complaints yet."

- "We started an anime group in November and meet twice a month. We have 30 registered members and an average of twenty show up every meeting."

- "We've put together a panel of librarians that has been successful at giving information on the history of graphic novels (and comics), as well as how to find reviews and purchase books."

- "One of my most reliable Teen Advisory Board members began walking to our library after school to wait for her mom to get off work. I saw her a few times in the YA Dept. but didn't really know her. One day I was being interviewed by a local reporter about our graphics and manga and he saw her reading 'Lenore: Noogies'. He asked if she read graphics regularly and she said she had always hated reading until she spotted 'Lenore: Wedgies'. She picked it up, read it in one sitting and was hooked. So hooked that she got a library card and began checking out all our graphics and manga. She has now progressed to Edgar Allan Poe and other literature."

- "A big problem is finding reviews. Often the first two or three in a series title are OK, but the next several may deviate towards more violent or 'graphic' stories. It's almost impossible to find reviews that agree on age recommendations."

- "I would like a rating guide, specifically age-related."

- "I would love to see SLJ, Booklist, or LJ review graphics and manga every month"

- "There is quite a bit of concern over the binding of graphic novels"

Tips (developed from survey)

- Partner with a local comic-book store to celebrate Free Comic Book Day.
  - Invite comic-book writers and artists to promote their titles and to draw sketches.
  - Donate a portion of the proceeds from the sketches and the sales to the library for the purchase of graphic novels for both the YA and Adult collections.
- Form specific interest groups (graphic novels, anime, manga).
- Invite librarians and users to present panel discussions around graphic novel topics (e.g., the history of graphic novels and comics; how to find reviews and purchase books).
- Get Teen Friends/Teen Advisory Groups to recommend titles and series, and actively seek patron input.

*Tips have been excerpted and modified from "Coping with Challenges: Strategies and Tips for Dealing with Challenges to Library Materials" and "Libraries and the Internet Toolkit." These guidelines are available on the ALA OIF Web site.

National Coalition Against Censorship

The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), founded in 1974, is an alliance of 50 national non-profit organizations, including literary, artistic, religious, educational, professional, labor, and civil liberties groups. United by a conviction that freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression must be defended, we work to educate our own members and the public at large about the dangers of censorship and how to oppose them. For more information, visit **www.ncac.org**.

ALA American Library Association

The American Library Association (ALA), founded in 1879, is the oldest and largest library association in the world, with more than 64,000 members. Its mission is to promote the highest quality library and information services and public access to information. The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom is charged with implementing ALA policies concerning the concept of intellectual freedom as embodied in the Library Bill of Rights, the Association's basic policy on free access to libraries and library materials. The goal of the office is to educate librarians and the general public about the nature and importance of intellectual freedom in libraries. Visit **www.ala.org**.

COMIC BOOK CBLDF LEGAL DEFENSE FUND

The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) was founded in 1986 to protect the First Amendment rights of the comic book field. Since the Fund's establishment, the organization has defended dozens of retailers and artists in Free Expression cases, while promoting pro-active education to libraries, booksellers, and educators concerning challenges to comic books and graphic novels. For more information, visit **www.cbldf.org**.

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