

Graphic Novels

Anyone who works with teenagers in schools today will sense some discomfiture among teachers and other educators concerning the state of literacy among these teenagers. Faced by this problem, the teacher-librarian customarily promotes reading as a way to foster literacy. As Stephen Krashen observes, “many people clearly don’t read and write well enough to handle the complex literacy demands of modern society” (ix).

These demands run from the complexity of the home and school to those of the work place. The job of the educator, including the teacher-librarian, therefore, is to find ways to make reading and writing second nature to our teens; to enable

them to meet the demands of this complex society. Krashen suggests that the cure for this kind of literacy crisis lies in “free voluntary reading,” regardless of literary format. The “free voluntary reading” that Krashen recommends is pleasure reading, because, although pleasure reading will not produce the highest desired level of competence in literacy by itself, “it provides a foundation so that higher levels of proficiency may be reached.” (1)

From my experience as a librarian, the current trend in teen pleasure reading is graphic novels. Adding graphic novels to the school library collection is a great way to promote free voluntary reading, especially in today’s visual culture where teens are animated and traditional texts seem boring. Sometimes referred to as comics by students, graphic novels are “self contained stories”. These are complete stories with texts and pictures to present the plot. They offer diverse alternatives to traditional texts, and they strongly appeal to young adults; especially teenage males. While many graphic novels are very entertaining and meant for light reading, some demand high cognitive skills which enhance the reader’s imagination.

In addition to promoting pleasure reading, graphic novels in the school library collection help attract teens to the library, consequently increasing their access to other library materials. Research has shown that reading light materials such as comics can lead to reading other types of books. In a research report by Dorrell and Carroll, the presence of graphic novels in the library resulted in an increase in library traffic and in the circulation of other materials (17-19). In view of the concern that teenagers do not use the library enough, one can hope that “the popular nature of this genre can draw new or less frequent users back to the library.” (Gardner and Dillon 2)

Graphic novels are diverse in subject matter, and they can be both entertaining and thought-provoking. They can range from stories of superheroes (X-Men, Batman) or aliens to those with very serious social and political issues (*MAUS: a Survivor’s Tale* by Art Spiegelman and *Louis Riel* by Chester Brown). Romantic comedies (*Love*

