

Some rather interesting characters populate graphic novels, and the readers who gobble them up are just as unique and quirky. The people I want to focus on in this article are the nay-sayers and nail-biters—the school library personnel who are reluctant to bring graphic novels into their collections, and/or the school staff or community members who would gladly see a modern version of the Comics Code of 1954 re-established and rigorously enforced. There are many reasons why people object to graphic novels in school libraries. The following are two of the most common complaints surrounding graphic novels and my somewhat tongue-in-cheek responses, peppered with some references to my favourite series.



Complaint #1: There's too much sex! Comics objectify women! There's nudity!

Response: Not all breasts are created equal.

I heard a true tale about a librarian who took a black marker and blocked out all the exposed nipples in the books in his collection. A colleague of mine dislikes any sign of cleavage or any particularly buxom females. There's no denying that some genres have very curvaceous characters. This is partly a result of supply and demand. Not all graphic novels are meant for young people. Some graphic novels are also meant to appeal to a wide audience, ergo the skimpy outfits or innuendo that the younger readers may not get. The presence of a bare breast or tight sweater does not necessarily equal sex. Breasts don't always equal titillation (forgive the pun). Some versions of the story *The Little Mermaid* have topless heroines, because not all mermaids have seashell bras. Japanese culture often uses its tradition of the communal baths as a source of humour, with characters accidentally getting glimpses of members of the opposite sex disrobed.

My personal favourite

manga series is *Ranma 1/2* by Rumiko Takahashi.

I own all 36 volumes!

It is the saga of Ranma Saotome, a teenage martial artist with a rather unfortunate "disability": when he is splashed with cold water, he transforms into a girl! Hot water reverses the change. Ranma's father Genma (who is also similarly afflicted, except he turns into a panda) has arranged for Ranma to marry Akane Tendo, the youngest daughter of his friend and fellow martial artist Soun Tendo. This is a zany, over-the-top, action-filled romp, with a huge cast of bizarre characters. There is a lot of "boob humour" stemming from ill-timed conversions in *Ranma 1/2*. Most of it is silly rather than sexy—there are bare breasts, but no genitals are seen. Ranma comments on his own voluptuous figure (comparing himself favourably to his less-endowed fiancée) and gets smacked for it. Things take a more adult spin on the hijinx whenever the character of Happosai (Happy), who is first introduced in volume 6, appears in the story. The anime version of *Ranma 1/2* plays on North American television stations, but it is a much more toned-down version than the manga—the few episodes that I have seen did not have any nudity in them.

The publisher, Viz Media, recommends a rating of T+ for older teens, and I'd have to agree. I would deem *Ranma 1/2* to be suitable for a high school audience. Having said that, I know of a couple of students in my elementary school who have borrowed copies of *Ranma 1/2* from the public library and loved it. When I've talked to them and to their parents about it, they say that they discovered the series from older siblings, "tune out" the nudity, and are very open with their parents about what they are reading. To paraphrase one of my otaku: "I won't go grabbing girls just because I saw it in *Ranma 1/2*."

This highlights two challenges for people who are happy with graphic novels and wish to carry them in their collections:

- ◆ sometimes a series may change direction after several volumes and veer towards an older audience base
 - ◆ students see the Westernized anime versions on TV and expect that the manga will be the same
- Kare Kano*, *Naruto*, and *Inu Yasha* are three other examples of quality manga that, for good or for ill, have a young anime fan base which would not suit the written version.

I believe that graphic novels are worth the