

Great Teacher-Librarians and Great Graphic Novels: A Winning Combination

My two brothers, four sisters and I all grew up without a teacher-librarian in our elementary school. In fact, I can't even remember having a library in my first school. It was during my high school experience that I finally had access to a school library and an effective and wonderful teacher librarian, Mrs. Jareth. Her passion for books drew me into a world full of new possibilities. She seemed to know the answer to everything, but ultimately taught me "it's not the answer that's important, it's the question." Little did I know that I would grow up to become a bookseller and meet hundreds of teacher-librarians, so many of them reminding me of Mrs. Jareth.

One of my goals as a bookseller has been to encourage teacher-librarians to add graphic novels to their collections – graphic novels that will engage their students and enrich their programs. Students seem to have the upper hand when it comes to knowing what's new and hot in graphic novels. But while it seems that most educators are aware of the value of graphic novels, there are still some teachers and teacher-librarians who are resistant to this genre of reading (and you know who you are). Often, the most reluctant are the ones who have never read graphic novels because they tell me "I don't like them." But how do you know you won't like it unless you taste it?

To you I say "just take a little bite and try it." Start reading and investing in a graphic novel collection. Watch your students gravitate towards that part of your library. Be committed to giving them books that they want to read.

For the past 7 years I have run a Teacher's Graphic Novel Book Club. The group is made up of teacher-librarians from a few local school boards, and we meet after school to discuss new graphic novels and manga. Initially I assumed the members would be teacher-librarians who were already sold on the idea of graphic novels, but in fact, we have

several members who came because they didn't know anything about this format and wanted to learn more. There are many different opinions expressed in our meetings and these teacher-librarians really "own" their graphic novel collection. It's always exciting to share our experience of graphic novels and those who were reluctant at first are now really feeling comfortable in their choices.

A few months ago, Steve Case, a teacher-librarian from Woodbine Jr. High School in Toronto, brought his students to my store, Tinlids, to purchase books for their school library, including graphic novels. They were allowed to decide how they would go about spending this money.

Steve offered them freedom in making their own choices. I observed Steve's relaxed style as he listened, responded and empowered his students. I asked him what he thought were some good tips for being an effective teacher-librarian. His advice was to "talk to your students. Get to know your kids." When I asked his thoughts around graphic novels, he explained that he feels that there is a misconception that all graphic novels are manga and that all manga is bad. I have heard this many times from teacher-librarians and while there are some reasons to be careful in choosing manga, especially for elementary level, there are still some series that work well for younger students. Some examples for grade 6-8 include *Hikaru No Go*, *Prince of Tennis*, *Dragon Drive* and *Megaman*. Like many others, Steve says, "Kids who won't normally come to the library, come in when there are new graphic novels."

When Steve's students finished with their book selections, we had lunch and a chance to talk. I wanted to know what they thought about the role of the teacher-librarian, as well as their thoughts about graphic novels. They were a very enthusiastic, open group of students and were happy to answer my questions. Here's what they had to say:

Why is it important to see graphic novels in your library?

Gr 7 boy: "At my old school we had lots of books for projects and instruction, but then when I came to this school I saw so many books that were fun. And then I really wanted to read. I read graphic novels because they're fun."

Gr 7 boy: "Graphic novels help me visualize the story."

Gr 7 girl: Some adults see graphic novels as useless junk, but they should be open-minded. When you shop, you should take students with different tastes in books, so they will choose a better variety."

Gr 7 boy: "When I went to my old country to visit, reading manga helped me understand the Korean language better."

Gr 7 boy: "I found it so easy to understand Macbeth when I read the graphic novel version."

What makes a good graphic novel?

Grades 3 to 5

"It has action."

"Funny characters..."

"It's not just good for grade 8."

"Adventure..."

"Funny situations..."

"It has a little bit of everything but not too confusing."

Grades 6-8

"Good characters..."

"Inspiring art..."

"Not babyish..."

"Unpredictable..."

"You can relate to it."

What type of skills do you think someone needs, to be an effective school librarian?

Grades 3 to 5

"You need to be organized and know everything."

"Kindness..."

"Happy..."

"Co-operate..."

"She would help a lot."

"Smart..."

"You need to be not grumpy"

"If we didn't have a librarian, how would we find out about books that are new?"

Grades 6 to 8

"Balance fun and be disciplined too..."

"When we're learning a new topic, the teacher-librarian always brings it up in a fun way."

"She needs to be caring and fun."

"Patient..."

"She teaches us about media with books."

"She needs to connect with the students and know what they need."

"She's funny."

"She's like Superwoman!"

Gr 6 boy: "The teacher-librarian should buy all the volumes in a series."

Gr 6 girl: "teacher-librarians should introduce us to new types of books that we might not know about."

Gr 6 boy: "They should give us more mature titles. Don't give us baby books when we're in grade 5 or 6."

Gr 7 boy: "The best thing about our librarian is that he is open-minded."

Gr 8 girl: "Some adults shouldn't be so biased. Our teacher-librarian isn't biased and that makes me trust her opinion."

Gr 8 boy: "The best thing about our librarian is that he is non-judgmental."

Gr 7 boy: "Don't not buy books just because you don't like them. Find out what the kids want."

Gr 7 boy: "In my old school the teacher-librarian helped me solve a problem with a teacher who didn't like me."

As a bookseller I have seen so many similarities and differences in the approach taken by teacher-librarians across Canada. The teacher-librarian needs to know how to communicate with students, as well as the principal, other teachers, parents and booksellers – what a lesson in diplomacy!

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It astounds me that there continue today to be many schools across Canada that still do not have a teacher-librarian or a strong library program. This seems so incredible in an age that embraces critical thinking, collaboration, the quest for information and changes in technology – all the things that should exist in a school library. If we aren't investing in school libraries, what exactly are we investing in?

I know that there are many challenges that face our school libraries as we work to create progressive learning spaces. I am awed and encouraged by the energy and creative methods that teacher-librarians use to build this environment.

They are teacher-librarians who are fearless and endlessly enthusiastic. They listen, question, collaborate, empower and are open-minded. And they read. That's the kind of person Mrs. Jareth was for me, and I'm sure we all know someone like that. And if you're the teacher-librarian in your library, you probably are already someone else's "Mrs. Jareth."

Popular Graphic Novels and Manga Recommendations

Primary

Elephant and Piggie series by Mo Willems
Babymouse by Jennifer Holm
Frankie Pickle by Eric Wight
Lunch Lady by Jarrett Krosoczka
Binky the Space Cat by Ashley Spires
Stone Rabbit by Erick Craddock
Geronimo Stilton graphic novel series

Junior

Amulet by Kazu Kibuishi
Amelia books by Marissa Moss
Bone series by Jeff Smith
Rapunzel by Shannon Hale
Calamity Jack by Shannon Hale
Diary of a Wimpy Kid by Jeff Kinney

Intermediate

Stormbreaker by Anthony Horowitz
Daniel X by James Patterson
Pendragon by D.J. MacHale
Diary of a Wimpy Kid by Jeff Kinney
Twilight by Stephanie Meyer
The Popularity Papers by Amy Ignatow

Secondary

American Born Chinese by Gene Yang
Skim by Mariko Tamaki
Cirque du Freak by Darren Shan
Death Note (manga series) by Tsugami Ohba
Bleach (manga series) by Tite Kubo
Fullmetal Alchemist (manga series) by Hiromu Arakawa



Join the Super Stories CONTEST
 August 26 to October 3

Help your library's young readers become young writers.

Kids in grades K-8 can enter the Super Stories contest for the chance to read their story onstage at the International Festival of Authors in Toronto, and win other great prizes!

The League of Super Citizens is always looking for ways to improve our world. Super Citizen Enviro Girl wants to know what kids would do to make the world a greener place. We have started a story and it's up to the kids to write the ending:

"The Super Citizens were wondering what they should do with the garbage that had piled up around them when Enviro Girl said..."

Visit tvokids.com for details on how to enter.

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