

'So what is this mango, anyway?' Understanding manga, comics and graphic novels.

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Graphic novels, comics and manga can play an important part in encouraging reading for pleasure amongst students of any age and also have a role in teaching in many subject areas. I'm going to offer a small snapshot of the least well known of these, manga, below, but want to start with a few general points about the comic strip medium.

Graphic novels, comics and manga are often seen as texts specifically for younger male reluctant readers, but such an assumption underestimates this enormously flexible medium, as it can be used to create complex works of fiction or non-fiction for adults and young adults, male and female, as well as humorous stories for the very young.

The comic strip has been used to create a range of work that encompasses the superb [Alice in Sunderland](#), by British creator Bryan Talbot, which explores memory, history and the nature of narrative, drawing on poetry, plays and novels, as well as other comics from around the world, as well as the slapstick humour of [The Beano](#), with its cross-generational appeal and playful approach to language and image. It also includes television spin-offs, most notably, perhaps, [The Simpsons](#) and [Futurama](#), which offer clever, witty takes on family, relationships and media, as well as genres that have generated spin-offs in other media, like superhero comics, themselves capable of addressing a huge range of ages and abilities.

Further, they may be 'text light', containing few words, so offering a comparatively quick read, or 'text heavy' offering challenges to the skilled reader. In all cases, the grammar of the form itself, with speech balloons, panels and, of course, the skills needed to read the images as well as the words, something explored in depth in Scott McCloud's [Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art](#), mean that texts in comic strip form can offer engaging, and demanding, reading experiences.

Consequently, it is possible to build a manga and graphic novel collection in a school library which challenges the good reader whilst supporting those less enthusiastic. This is the key strength of the medium in a school or library setting. They can be acquired simply to broaden current leisure reading material, while certain titles can be used to support specific areas within the curriculum.

Comics and graphic novels have been approached with caution by both libraries and schools in the past, as their content has often been seen as controversial (there are many works created in the medium for adults, but the common cultural assumption about in Britain is that comics are aimed solely at children, so making material for adults seem shocking to some). Most recently this response was evoked by manga, where material for younger readers comprises around 57% of the market, as Paul Gravett states in [Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics](#). Manga publishing is focused on markets differentiated by age and gender, and I'm going to touch on titles for teenage boys and girls below.

Manga is growing in popularity, particularly amongst young adult readers in Britain, who tend to read material aimed at their age group. It offers a useful opportunity in the classroom to talk about cultural difference and globalisation, amongst many other issues. There are initiatives tapping into the enthusiasm of younger readers for Japanese culture, one of the first being Manga Mania, which was run by The

Reading Agency. This passion is also shown in Neo magazine, the main source of information about the adoption of Japanese culture in Britain <http://www.neomag.co.uk/> and so a useful primer for staff.

There is a key difference between manga and graphic novels in that the readership has a different gender balance. Whilst American titles tend to have readerships which are predominantly male, Japanese comics, which also draw in both male and female readers, typically have a readership which is around 60% female. This is, in part, because of the genre of shojo manga, titles published specifically for girls, although this will not stop some boys reading them too.

The appeal of some titles will be startlingly familiar to some older women. Many of the stories include romance, or adventures with magical companions, or lonely girls who have to battle with injustice, either in school, or at home, or narratives about groups of friends. If this reminds you of Bunty, or Jackie, or Girl, then you are already in a position to understand why manga might appeal to girls. These narratives, however, may be up to 22 volumes long, so you can see that manga can ask for a great deal of commitment from the reader. One of the key titles here is Fruits Basket by Natsuki Takaya where central character, Tohru, a sunny and optimistic student, is both orphaned and homeless. Feeling both sorry for her, and desperate to end their days of slobbish living conditions, the Sohma family offer her their spare room in exchange for cooking and housework. However, she also discovers and then protects their secret, which is that they are possessed by the animal spirits of the Chinese Zodiac, something which is activated when they are hugged by the opposite gender, or when they are under stress.

For older readers there are titles like Miwa Ueda's Peach Girl which follows the romances and friendships of the heroine, Momo, who is bullied for her distinctive looks. Although the narrative unfolds across eighteen volumes, so involving the reader in a complex narrative, the nature of serial publication, and the tendency to finish each book on, in effect, a cliff-hanger, will also be familiar to those brought up on narratives that typically unfolded, in Bunty for instance, over fourteen weeks.

For boys, shonen manga encompass adventure, but also themes about growing up, and the responsibilities thrust upon younger people by their parents, in scenarios ranging from sports to science fiction, for instance in Neon Genesis Evangelion by Yoshiyuki Sadamoto. You will find some male students as enthusiastic about these materials as the more familiar superhero genre, or British humour comics, or titles like 2000AD.

To give an example of ways to work with manga, one school I have worked with involved the whole school, and every subject, in a Japan week. Here there were booktalks about manga and graphic novels in the library for students in every year, in a tightly themed version of a school book week. In addition, however, Art and English worked together, analysing and then creating manga, often drawing on student's enthusiasm. This was stimulated by use of a wide range of titles, including the Manga Shakespeare version of Romeo and Juliet, which were contrasted with other comic and filmic versions of the plays. Further, given that Japanese was an increasingly popular 'A' level, the students from that course offered lunchtime sessions in basic Japanese. There were also screenings of Studio Ghibli films, such as My Neighbour Totoro and Spirited Away, which generated discussion around animation in Media Studies. There were also explorations of other aspects of Japanese food and culture in displays and activities around the school.

Less ambitious, but equally successful, are the growing number of reading groups based around graphic novels or manga. Obviously, these groups can be used to review material, as well as discuss them, but they often move into creating manga and comics too, allowing different members, with varied skills, roles as artist, author or editor. The youngest group I have met were all aged 10, were creating a shojo title and were also selling their manga, for which there was an eager audience.

This small snapshot, suggesting some basic understandings about comic strip materials, offering some information about one particular type of comic and suggesting some ways of working with the medium, can only offer a taste of what is possible by drawing on student enthusiasm and developing an understanding of the medium.

To further support work across the curriculum, and offer support to staff in developing their knowledge of the medium and to develop collections I've developed two internet resources. The first, working with Learning and Teaching Scotland <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/literacy/findresources/graphicnovels/section/intro.asp>, is focuses on the classroom specifically, whilst the second, Dr Mel Comics, where I can be contacted, <http://www.dr-mel-comics.co.uk/>, offers resources and links for libraries, universities and schools, supporting research, collection development, and promotional activities about the medium.