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# The A B C's of Graphic Novels

Gail de Vos

San Jose State University, [gail.devos@gmail.com](mailto:gail.devos@gmail.com)

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# THE A B C'S OF GRAPHIC NOVELS

by  
Gail de Vos

I have highlighted twenty-five concerns that I address when talking about the graphic novel in the many recent presentations I have conducted on this topic.

## A is for APPROPRIATENESS

The more exposure to graphic novels one has, the more one realizes that the relative youth of the medium, at least in its current adult readership form, presents its artists with problems of appropriateness that the more established arts do not have. Whereas most established writers know what constitutes a novel, and filmmakers understand what will sustain a film, even the best comic-book artists sometimes seem unsure of their material and their intended audience.

Because many of the general public new to the graphic novel format retain the perception that comic books are for children, there is confusion over the intended readership of any title.

## B is for BUYING AND SELECTING

There are increasing avenues of opportunities for purchasing graphic novels that include jobbers, comic book specialty stores, and online outlets. Selection tools are also becoming increasingly available from online sites such as *No Flying no tights* <http://noflyingnotights.com> and *Friends of Lulu*: <http://www.friends-lulu.org/>

However the best selection tool is still knowledge about the material and your readers. Staff in specialty comic book stores are worth their weight in gold in helping you select the materials that would be most relevant to your needs.

## C is for CIRCULATION CONCERNS

Because this format is fairly new to most library collections, there are several issues that have not yet been addressed with complete satisfaction. They include

- Durability (although several jobbers are publishing titles in a durabound bind-

ing)

- Cataloguing (where do you shelve the titles - in their own special section or interfiled? At the present time Dewey editors are trying to determine the most satisfying cataloguing conclusions for this question by circulating a discussion paper on the topic.)

## D is for DEFINITIONS

The term COMIC BOOK is actually one of the great misnomers in the world of publishing as they are not actually books and are rarely funny. In fact, the term comic for comic books is probably more inappropriate than at any time in their history as there are still very few titles intended for young readers. GRAPHIC NOVELS are equally as difficult to illuminate as they are frequently not fiction or novels but may be compilations of single-issue comic book story arcs or short stories.

For the purpose of clarification, comic books are single-issue magazines that may or may not contain a complete story between its covers. Graphic novels are bound books, fiction and non-fiction, which are created in the comic book format and are issued an ISBN.

## E is for EVALUATION CRITERIA

Graphic novels should be evaluated in much the same way as other illustrated material in your collections. Some of these questions are:

- What is the story and how is it being communicated by the text and the illustrations?
- Are the two balanced? If not, is there a relevant reason for the dominance of text or illustration?
- How do the comic book elements help to tell the story: facial expressions, clothing, background details, lettering, and panel composition?
- Is the art appropriate to the story?
- Does the art detract from the text or

vice versa?

## F is for FORMAT, NOT GENRE

Just as picture books, short stories, poetry, film and novels are formats that contain all of the genres, so do graphic novels. Fantasy, realistic fiction, historical fiction, science fiction, horror, humour and the like are genres and can all be found within the graphic novel format.

## G is for GUTTER

The gutter is the blank space between two comic panels. Much of the reader's individual comprehension of a story depends on the unconscious interpretation of the connection between the panels.

## H is for HIGH PRICES

This is an unfortunate reality at the present time. It is particularly difficult as many young readers are devouring manga series that are made up of many individual volumes.

## I is for INTERNET RESOURCES

The Internet is a great resource for exploring graphic novels from soup to nuts. One of the best resources is the Graphic Novels in Libraries listserv (*GNLIB@topica.com*) where publishers, creators, reviewers, teachers and librarians discuss the very questions that you yourself may have.

## J is for JUVENILE

There are actually very few titles for young readers being published. However, this is changing as educators and libraries are becoming interested in purchasing them in greater numbers.

## K is for KISS AND KILL

Again, a common perception about comics and graphic novels is that they are filled with sex and violence. And some of them are! Selection and knowledge of the material are the key, just as they are in

selected other formats.

### **L is for LAYOUT**

The design elements of each panel and the way they appear on the page have a significant impact on the pacing of a story. Questions to consider include:

- How are the panels situated on the page? Are they easy to follow? How are they shaped? Does their shape affect the story?
- How do the panels break up the artwork? Do these breaks slow the story down, speed the story up, and complicate the story?
- Do the panels provide the necessary information, through foreshadowing and extra detail, for readers to follow jumps in the storyline?

### **M is for MANGA**

Manga is the term for Japanese comic. Nearly one-third of material published in Japan is manga in form including technical manuals, textbooks, and fiction. There are manga published for all age groups and segments of the population. Thus, there are manga for businessmen, for young female readers, mature female readers and the like. There are visual differences, other than the language, in reading the manga that often are difficult to interpret for people new to the format. Manga titles are becoming more and more popular with young readers in North America and are beginning to dominate comic book selections in some stores.

### **N is for NEW**

Titles that are now the rage are quite different from those published when most of us were growing up. This is a case of reader's advisory in reverse: there is a definite need to be very conversant with someone who is an avid comic book/graphic novel reader and who knows the perimeters of your collection policy. Finding this person, or group of people, may be as easy as being seen reading graphic novels in public!

The collection of comic books and graphic novels may seem to be a new fad but libraries have already many examples in their collections of picture books. Illustrators such as Quentin Blake, Maurice Sendak, Raymond Briggs and Edward Gorey employ the use of comic book elements in their work.

### **O is for OLD AND FAMILIAR**

Many of the superhero titles have been published continually since their inception in the 1940s and 50s so there are some familiar titles available. Do not be surprised by how these titles have been updated to make them relevant to today's readership, however. Archie Comics are another familiar staple that still have a wide readership.

### **P is for PERCEPTION**

One of the major obstacles facing the graphic novel is the attitude towards the format by many members of the general public as well as educators and librarians. This attitude of comics being easy to read, filled with sex and violence, and having no literary quality is slowly being addressed, partially by the fact that graphic novels are now being added to library collections.

### **Q is for QUALITY VS QUANTITY**

This question is directly related to price point and readership? How many copies of each title should you have in your collection? Do you collect all of the volumes in a series?

### **R is for READERSHIP**

The average comic book reader is a male between the ages of eighteen and thirty. The average manga reader is a middle school aged female. The average library borrower of graphic novels is anybody and everybody. Since the format is so inclusive, the readership follows suit.

### **S is for SELECTION POLICIES**

Graphic novels and/or comic books should be included in collection policies for all libraries. Selection policies should include criteria for evaluation and collection to provide protection against censorship challenges as well as perception challenges: "You are not wasting our tax money on that!"

### **T is for TEEN READERS (AND NOT ONLY AT RISK ONES!)**

"Graphic novels are terrific in that they have a good story, but they have pictures and images that teens can relate to and enjoy. So you get the combination of the words and images that help pick up on the power of images in teens' lives." (Dr. Maurice Freedman, then president of the American Library Association on the reason for the 2002 ALA campaign, "Get Graphic at your Library.")

The Internet, television, and video games all help make graphic novels a comfortable way to read for today's teenagers. They are, in fact, particularly appealing to young people who have reading difficulties or who do not think they like to read.

### **U is for UNIVERSALITY OF THEMES AND ISSUES**

Not only are the myriad of themes universal but so also is the science of semiotics – the reading of signs and icons. While the written language may not be easily transferable, the comic book grammar (elements) and conventions are often universal.

### **V is for VISUAL LITERACY**

Comic book artists play with every possible visual element. Consider, for example:

- Panels that consist entirely of sound effects
- Word balloons that partially cover other word balloons to indicate interruptions in conversation
- Impossible angles, non-standard use of colour, odd shapes for word balloons and letters, different font for different speakers in a conversation, and the use of collages, computer generated art and other illustrative styles.

### **W is for WRITING**

Text, aside from its visual aspect, is often the forgotten half of comics. Good comic writers are rarely afforded the same attention or significance that the artists receive. The complicated parade of people who can work on a comic include:

- Author/illustrator (the same person)
- Author (writes storyline and dialogue)
- Plotter (responsible for the basic storyline)
- Scripter (person who writes the narration and dialogue)
- Translator
- Illustrator (does all aspects of the visual material)
- Penciler (person who provides the basic art)
- Inker (person who went over the penciled art)
- Colorist (person who paints/colours the drawings)
- Letterer (person who adds the actual writing to the page)

(Cont'd on p. 64)

The artwork of Muriel Wood complements the text. There is a full page illustration in each of the ten chapters and also a smaller print below each chapter title. In a book about polar bears and their environment, what could be more appropriate than the black and white drawings to bring depth and contours to the snowy world?

The care and attention to detail of both creators makes it a very worthwhile book for children with any interest in the natural world.

**Thematic Links:** Polar Bears; The North

Mavis Holder;

(Cont'd from p. 31)

- Editors (of the series or of the individual storyline)

**X is for X-MEN AND OTHER SUPER-HEROES**


Superheroes still constitutes one of the most popular genres in the comic book world. They also tend to dominate the comic book to film trend that is so prevalent today. Do not dismiss them arbitrarily as many titles are extremely relevant and well written.

**Y & Z are for ZZZZZ AND OTHER SOUND EFFECTS**

Sound has been given visual support

with effects such as heavy punctuation, capitalization, variety in size and style of lettering and the shape and size of sound balloons. All of these affect the sound of the story as it is being read and heard by the reader.

*Gail de Vos, storyteller, finds that the comic book format is the closest print medium to oral storytelling. She teaches storytelling, Canadian children's Literature, Young Adult Literature and Comic Books and Graphic Novels in Schools and Public Libraries for the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta. Gail is the author of seven books on storytelling and folklore.*



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 Victoria Pennell, Editor, Resource Links  
 P. O. Box 9, Pouch Cove, NL A0A 3L0  
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 e-mail: resourcelinks@nfld.com



Resource Links  
 P. O. Box 9  
 Pouch Cove, NL  
 A0A 3L0

Phone: 709-335-2394  
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