

The Power and Purpose of the Graphic Novel

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What do you think of when you hear the term, “graphic novel”? I’ve overheard parents call them “comics” and “easy readers”. I had one young reader tell me he had to check out a “real” book. I’ve been told by a parent that their child needed to do some “actual reading” rather than “fun reading”. I also had a patron complain about the term “graphic;” she was under the impression that it meant something her ten year old shouldn’t see until he was an adult.

Don’t let the graphic novel fool you. The fact is, a graphic novel employs the “give and take” of text and pictures in a comic-strip format to tell a story. The use of graphic elements like frames, panels, and speech/thought bubbles in sequential order create and conjure the story in a reader, rather than just relying on plain text to create a narrative. Graphic novels differ from comics in length and complexity of the text. They tell a complete story in one book, where as a comic is usually much shorter and relies on many issues or volumes to tell a story.

Why are graphic novels important tools for learning? A former co-worker of mine used to say that readers use both sides of the brain while reading. Visually your brain is stimulated and engaged to decode the story from the art work, while also trying to pull meaning from the text on the page. In this the reader is able to actively construct the story and this leads to better comprehension. This format is so much less intimidating for a beginning, reluctant, or English as a second language reader. “Graphic novels can be considered an important bridge for greater reading development and exploration of ideas, because confidence gained from this medium could propel the reluctant reader to seek out more textually challenging books.”

(https://www.penguin.com.au/content/resources/TR_OppositeLand.pdf)

Graphic novels cross all genres from fiction to non-fiction, can be funny or very poignant, and appeal to all ages. They can be a series of stories featuring the same characters, or a stand-alone tale. They can also be graphic versions of established novels, such as Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson series, or Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein.” They come in all formats; hardcover, paper back and e-book as well.

Some of my favorite graphic novels include, well, anything by Riana Telgemeier; “Smile”, “Sisters”, “Drama”, “Ghost”, or “Guts”. She packs all of her work with her personal experience of just being a kid. She is honest about how hard some of the simplest things in life really are for kids transitioning from childhood to tween, to teen. I believe that is why there are rarely any copies of her books on my shelves. If you’d rather read something with more humor and less emoting, then try Minnesota native Drew Brockington’s series “CatStronauts”. Ride along with Major Meower, Waffles, Blanket, and Pom-Pom, (yes, they’re cats!) as they take on one mission after another to save the world. Did I mention they’re cats?

A great graphic for beginning readers is "Game for Adventure, Belinda the Unbeatable" by Lee Nordling and Scott Roberts. It is purely graphic: it contains only pictures and no words. This allows a young reader to gather the story from pictures, which is an invaluable skill to learn. Other reader favorites include; "Phoebe and her Unicorn Adventures" by Dana Simpson, "HiLo" by Judd Winick, "Best Friends" and "Making Friends" by Shannon Hale, and "Dog Man" by Dav Pilkey.

If you are interested in graphic novels or want more information about the format, just stop by the Children's desk, we'd be happy to help. Happy Reading!