

Graphicology

by Chris Brown

Reprinted
from

The
School Librarian
volume 57 number 4 winter 2009

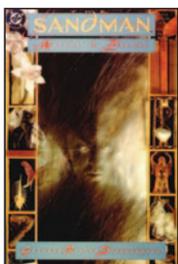


Graphic Novels are receiving increasing amounts of attention. School Librarians who extend the range of their stock by incorporating graphic material may well find they are challenged to justify such expenditure. If any of the following article may be of assistance then any part of it can be freely adapted, adopted, or even re-written, for circulation within any one school.

Amongst my books is a unique treasure. It is handpainted on silk, mounted on a long zig-zag folded card and with dark wood, real wood, end or cover boards. The book unfolds bit by bit, or into one length, revealing a story, or perhaps a proverb, in ten exquisite pictures each with a couple of pieces of Chinese brushed-style line-shape writing. It is of indeterminate age and came to me many years ago from a then elderly lady who had been a missionary nurse in the Far East. The point is that it was obviously a valuable and highly valued object, created with great skill: but in essence it is a comic book, it tells the tale through pictures and some words (see picture spread overleaf).

There's something quite charmingly illogical, or appallingly hypocritical depending on your point of view, about the accepted attitudes to comics and also towards graphic books in the UK. Comics in general are and were regarded as disposable entertainments of no lasting value, whereas *Eagle* and *Girl* are nostalgically considered good fun, jolly good fun even, with educational input as well. The books of Raymond Briggs, and occasional titles such as *Up and Up* by Shirley Hughes, Posy Simmonds' *Baker's Cat* and *Fred*, or Bob Wilson's northern sagas are unquestioningly acceptable as picture books which happen to be in strip form. Occasionally books like *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, have been granted tacit respectability by being reviewed in the books pages of serious newspapers whilst at the same time hundreds of graphic novels are lumped together as some sort of quirky, cultish, underground sub species not to be taken seriously in any way at all.

In bookshops graphic novels can tend to be shelved as a suspect appendix to 'Fantasy' and 'Science Fiction'. It's a bit surprising no bookseller has gone so far as to have a bay end with hooks for hanging anoraks! Awareness of Neil Gaiman's astonishingly complex and multi-layered *Sandman* sequence spread amongst the graphic book literate long before receiving



any acknowledgement from the thought-guiders writing critiques for those heavy weekend broadsheets. Now examples of the art of graphic representation do appear occasionally as inclusions amongst general book reviews and one very traditional publisher, Jonathan Cape, produces some outstanding literary and artistically wonderful books such as Marjane Satrapi's

Persepolis and *Persepolis 2* and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. Here are witty, extraordinarily moving and beautifully humane treatments of complex modern issues, and Joe Sacco's latest conflict reportage book, *Footprints in Gaza*, is published in December 2009. But at a glance, from illogical eyes, these are just comic-books too, disposable picture-strip and of course not to be taken seriously as books and certainly not as literature.

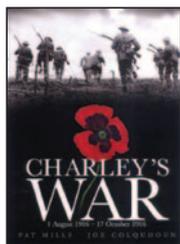
Things are looking up in shops as the great demand for Manga style books means cash in the tills and so greater prominence is given over to these ranks of Japanese graphic style stories. Yet nothing is really new in all this. Many thousands of years ago those spectacular cave paintings at Lascaux were telling of successful hunts with primitive sophistication. In the early 1790s in what was then an archive store at Maidstone Museum I found some seventeenth century single sheet ballads commonly produced for street selling. The crudely impressed black letter print of each versified story told of crime, with execution, or a woman done wrong, and each adorned with boldly eye-catching woodblock pictures. Back in 1758, Hogarth's series of engravings, with text sentences, known as *The Rake's Progress* appeared. Political cartoons which were frequently scurrilous or cleverly satirical circulated in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with



speech-bubbles as an integral narrative element. In his talk at the SLA weekend course in Guildford Paul Gravett referred to the enthusiasm of Goethe for an *Adventures of Dr Festus* portrayed in both pictures and words by a teacher, Rodolphe Töpffer. This pioneering creator went on to publish more in the same style with *Histoire de M. Jabot*, published 1833. Later in Victorian times and into the Edwardian era, technical developments in reproducing drawings in print in multiple copies on cheap paper and the popular appetite for illustrated sensationalism resulted in a vibrant street trade in all major cities.

In the sphere of books for children the joyfully irreverent Raymond Briggs blurred boundaries further by following up two delightfully earthy *Father Christmas* books with the irascible *Fungus The Bogeyman*. The clever cunningly punning humour of *Fungus*, echoing playground silliness, did upset a number of teachers and librarians: youngsters loved, and love, it. The writers of letters of outrage were then totally sidelined when the utterly charming and wordless *The Snowman* appeared. All these books seem to be categorised into that

illogicality of attitude which labels them picture books in avoidance of recognising them as graphic works of art. Briggs of course went on to produce the cold-war pulsating imagery of *When the Wind Blows* and many other picture strip style works: *Ethel and Ernest* is a beautiful and extraordinarily touching biography of his own parents. In *The Tin-Pot General and the Old Iron Woman* his vicious attack on Thatcher's behavioural folly over the Falklands War uses a dramatic change from blatant cartoon exaggeration to soft pencil edge drawing to demonstrate vividly the hypocrisy of victory celebrations which specifically and officially excluded the wounded and the damaged.



Ephemerally, the works of Briggs may seem a world away from the super-hero, fantasising, wham-bang-kerannng which has always been the most obvious and eye-catching amongst graphic, comic-book, publications. But the essence of the medium of expression, the selection of the right words matched with the art and the craft of the whole creation, is exactly the same. When I was lucky enough to see original artwork by Raymond Briggs it

drove home in my mind the manner in which a whole page is so precisely designed, how the frames within the page are matched and linked to give an overall balance and each page has the artistic integrity and eye-line guidance of a single picture. Alongside the entertainment aspects of graphic publishing rich and satisfying pieces constantly arrive. *Charley's War* is a series of hardback books which are a combination of a strip which appeared in *Battle Picture Weekly* from January 1979 on. Collected into book form this black and white imagery starkly conveys the experience of a soldier in the 1914–18 war and it is a perfect ancillary to work on the poetry and poets of the time. The effect of the combination of typical comic illustration styles into such forcefully involving story-telling is intense and amazing.



Classical Comics: A Christmas Carol

To divert a little, there are a couple of common, and persistent, school librarian myths about graphic works:

- Not worth buying – they fall to bits too easily.
 - Yes they *did*. No they do not nowadays. I could go into the technicalities of ‘perfect binding’, glues and the sorts of paper needed for colour print but not now.
- Fun, for boys in particular, but nothing more.
 - Codswallop! Like all print forms, poetry for example, there’s a lot of amusing and intrinsically entertaining material but works of real revelatory and thought provoking depth as well.

New offerings

Graphic books appropriate for school libraries are appearing regularly in a number of strands:

- Popular novels from such authors as Anthony Horowitz, Eoin Colfer and Charlie Higson are appearing in graphic interpretations.
- Picture/word versions of classics, and of Shakespeare, from specialist companies like Classical Comics and Self Made Hero.
- Original, commissioned graphic versions of well-known favourites such as Robin Hood, Beowulf etc.
- Novels which are developed into sections of text and sections of graphic pages: *The Savage* (David Almond) and *Malice* (Chris Wooding) are prime examples.
- Original works and series for particular young audiences, like Andi Watson’s *Glister* series.

- Many, many fantasy and superhero fictions, including TV and Film tie-in titles.
- Young Adult works created and devised in a graphic format and sourced from commissions or from original publications in other countries. These vary from one-off works where the concept and medium match to the absolute maze of series in Manga styles.
- Information, non-fiction, books which convey their facts effectively in picture strip form or through picture strip segments of the book.

Library benefits

Increasingly, school librarians are reaping the benefits of a proportion of graphic material amongst the library stock. Principally:

- They have an instant attraction for many youngsters.
- Reluctant readers and those needing special approaches are attracted to the prospect of seeing less words on a page, words in small blocks rather than whole paragraphs, and with picture guidance in following the tale.
- The 'cool' art and design aspect is often a staple of Art/Design curricular work.
- Readers' reactions absolutely call out for discussion and sharing.

On the surface, at the 'instant attraction' level, the graphic depiction form may seem easy but in reality it can be highly demanding on the reader. Many books can only be wholly accessed by application of all the reader's visual and cognitive resources. So some people, who may be extremely literate and experienced as readers, simply find the transition to the full words and pictures interpretation, with illustrative symbolism and pictorial subtleties, an impossible jump. Fair enough, let's just accept, acknowledge and indeed relish the fact that we are all different. Youngsters do appear to have a close affinity with the form, perhaps because text per se is not so ingrained over time. The affinity is perhaps akin to the accurately mobile and dexterous texting-thumbs they seem to be evolving.

In this opening decade of the twenty-first century a number of mainstream children's book publishers are embracing the graphic books concept. The advantage is that the titles they produce are by definition pre-selected as suitable for young readers and so the task of selection from what can appear as an

overwhelming and impenetrable mountain of titles becomes easier. Walker Books set up a fascinating panel of speakers for a session of useful insight during the SLA Weekend Course in Guildford in June this year. They have published the fine work of Marcia Williams for years and her most recent books, *Archie's War* and *My Secret War Diary*, are superb. With their expertise and experience at the production of first-class picture books Walker are well placed to turn some energies towards graphic works of fiction. Even so there are those who seem surprised that a traditionally respected publisher should diversify into comic-books. It's that illogical blind-spot once again which cannot see the picture strip in picture books as being integrally identical to graphic novels. But here is a wholly reliable publisher, a publisher of prizewinning titles time and time again, developing a list of graphic works. I, for one, am inclined to trust their judgements, though I always assess things for myself, and I hope that their enterprise is commercially viable and successful. The books produced in this vein so far have been impressive and should enhance our library stock in schools enormously.

Walker are not alone of course. Earlier this year *Rapunzel's Revenge*, a grand folk-tale construction by Dean, Shannon and Nathan Hale, came from Bloomsbury, and other publishers are stepping up their plans for the graphic field. Watch their advertisements and catalogues, and *The SL* review pages, as we do appear to be on the cusp of exciting developments.

References

- Briggs, Raymond *Blooming Books*. Cape. 2003
 Gravett, Paul *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life*. Aurum, 2005 and updated
 Mills, Pat and Colquhoun, Joe *Charley's War: 2 June 1916 – 1 August 1916*. Titan, 2004 (Subsequent *Charley's War* volumes cover successive periods, Vol 6 was published in October 2009.)
 Sabin, Roger *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. Phaidon, 1996
 Shepard, Leslie *A History of Street Literature*. David & Charles, 1973

Elspeth Scott has compiled a survey of **websites** covering graphic novels, following this article.

- *Chris Brown is Reviews Editor of The School Librarian. With thanks for the work of Mel Gibson: not the Hollywood geek but the other one.*



Graphic Novels A roundup of web resources

Chris Brown's feature article makes an able case for the value of graphic novels, and addresses some of the concerns that librarians often have about introducing them. This round up of websites is designed to support it.

Graphic novels have an immediate appeal to pupils but are often perceived by adults as 'just like comics' and an inferior form of storytelling in spite of the often sophisticated literacy skills they require and the way they engage different types of intelligence. To engage staff on your side, give them Chris's article and then point them to the Learning and Teaching Scotland literacy resource on graphic novels.

Graphic novels in the curriculum Learning and Teaching Scotland

<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/literacy/findresources/graphicnovels/section/intro.asp>

This comprehensive resource has been produced by LTS to support the use of graphic novels in schools and libraries and links with the concept of critical literacy in the new Curriculum for Excellence.

The sections on the site are:

Reading and making comics which describes a series of workshops by Mel Gibson; *Comic creators* focuses on Raymond Briggs and Colin McNaughton giving suggestions for using their work; *Starting and using a collection* is really too brief to be very helpful, but does have some useful links and bullet points for the complete novice; *Recommended graphic novels* is a (very short) annotated list, which would make a good nucleus for a collection and takes away some of the fear of 'unsuitable' material; *Practical ideas* is an excellent starting point for ideas about what to do with your new collection under headings such as creativity, enterprise and citizenship and including links to computer programmes you could use to make your own; and *Useful links and further reading* is self-explanatory.

Included in the site is a downloadable series of case studies which 'look at using graphic novels across the curriculum. This includes cross-cutting themes and lesson ideas which incorporate areas such as creativity, citizenship, enterprise, expressive arts and social studies. The collection is the work of Mel Gibson, a lecturer in Childhood Studies at the University of Northumbria.' These should certainly spark some ideas for using them in your school, and with the backing of the world expert.

Grovel

<http://www.grovel.org.uk>

Grovel is subtitled 'graphic novels news and reviews' and has a beautiful clean layout which thankfully does not feel the need to look like a graphic novel itself. Reviews can be accessed via author, artist, genre or series; the system is very easy to navigate but does require quite a lot of clicking. The reviews are substantial, including information not only about the plot but also illustration style and highlighting particular notable points and identifying linked works. A tag cloud at the bottom allows you to explore other items with the same tags – it's very easy to spend a long time exploring this site! The reviews tab is a title listing of items reviewed since 2006, but earlier reviews are not yet indexed here although they are available on the other tabs. The Previews section is essentially blurbs of new titles scheduled for later review, but there is still enough information to help with stock selection. As well as the tabs along the top, the site has sidebars flagging up the latest reviews and previews; the newest 5 star reviews; what

Grovel readers are buying and a 'coming soon'. There is even an RSS feed so you can get instant updates when new reviews are added. If you are thinking of starting a graphic novel collection this site will be invaluable.



No flying no tights

<http://www.noflyingnotights.com>

No flying no tights is a website reviewing graphic novels for teens, run by an American library technician. As well the main site for teens, there is a Sidekicks area for children up to 12 and The Lair for older teens and adults. The Lair has plenty of information, if you can cope with the black screen with tiny green writing, with an informal and colloquial approach. The reviews are arranged by genre, though as the section titles are all quotations from either songs or literature it can be confusing to navigate. Sidekicks is bright blue; the main site has a black background with fancy fonts and lots of colours. Although appealing to pupils and useful for the annotations it provides it is not easy to navigate and has not been updated for some time.



GNLIB

<http://www.angelfire.com/comics/gnlib>

GNLIB (Graphic Novels in Libraries) is a librarians' discussion list about graphic novels for the serious collection developer.

Tokyopop

<http://www.tokyopop.com>

Tokyopop are publishers who claim to be 'leading the manga revolution'. The site will immediately appeal to pupils with its range of Youtube videos to watch, a newsfeed, polls and links to Tokyopop's social networking profiles on Facebook, My Space and Twitter as well as information about their newest releases and bestsellers. Information about each title is available for synopsis, character and creator information, along with editors' introductions and reviews from users.



Charley's War

<http://charleyswar.tripod.com>

The **Charley's War** website, created by enthusiast Neil Emery, could be used alongside the books Chris Brown describes. Full of fascinating information and unusual asides, it shows how the original comic strips relate to the true events of the war and the fidelity of the illustrations to contemporary photographs. The site hasn't been updated for some time, and could do with some editing, but with its sections on storyline, character and illustration and the emphasis (because of its source material) on the darker and less explored side of trench warfare, it could provide useful extension material for pupils studying World War I literature.

If you've been putting off starting a graphic novel collection because you weren't sure where to start or how to choose your stock these sites will help – 'All you want to know about Graphic novels but were afraid to ask'.

■ Elspeth S. Scott is Librarian at Menzieshill High School, Dundee.