

Graphic Novels 101: FAQ by Robin Brenner

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Graphic Novels 101: FAQ

By Robin Brenner

By day a mild-mannered library technician at Cary Memorial Library in Lexington, Massachusetts, Brenner is the creator and editor-in-chief of "No Flying, No Tights," a website reviewing graphic novels for teens, and "Sidekicks," its sister site for kids. Here are her answers to some frequently asked questions.

Q What's the difference between a comic book and a graphic novel?

A Most simply, length. A comic and a graphic novel are told via the same format, officially called *sequential art*: the combination of text, panels, and images. Comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels are in this sense all the same thing, but comic books stretch a story out to about thirty pages, whereas graphic novels can be as long as six hundred pages.

Q What's the difference between American comics and Japanese *manga*?

A There are a few key differences between American graphic novels and Japanese graphic novels, or *manga*. While superhero comics still dominate the U.S. market, in Japan there is a much wider diversity of topics, from romantic comedies to historical fiction to how-to comics, and they are published in both weekly and monthly installments. Japanese comics work with a complex language of visual signals, from character design to sound effects to common symbols. The biggest difference is obvious: Japanese comics are from another culture and were never intended for export. In some ways, Japan's pop culture is like ours, but in many ways it's not, and learning the secret code that opens up those stories for us is one thing that makes *manga* so appealing to American readers.

Q Are different graphic novels aimed at different audiences?

A Most certainly! In today's market, graphic novels exist for almost everyone but are not automatically for all ages. In the past, American comics were mostly aimed at children and teens, but today there are graphic novels for everyone from elementary school kids to seniors. It's true that a higher percentage of graphic novels and comics are still essentially aimed at men from teens to middle age, while girls and women have fewer titles created expressly for their tastes. Japanese *manga* creators, on the other hand, have a specific age and gender audience in mind when working on their titles, and those age and gender recommendations usually hold up.

Q What are some common misconceptions about graphic novels?

A **Comics and graphic novels are for kids.** In reality, comics never were just for kids. Even in the 1940s–1950s Golden Age of superhero comics, there were crime, fantasy, and science fiction comics intended for teens and adults rather than children. However, due to the hullabaloo started by psychologist Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), which drew a tenuous connection between juvenile delinquency and comics, comics' content became watered down. Many adults are still under the impression that the format automatically means juvenile content — but as the average age of a comics reader is thirty, this is certainly not true.

Graphic novels are all full of violence and explicit sex. On almost opposite tack to the idea that graphic novels are for kids, many adults fear that they are full of sex and violence. Like many previous formats, graphic novels are painted with the extremes of what's available. There are comics with R- or X-rated content, but they are not the bulk of what's available, nor are those titles intended for younger audiences.

Comics and graphic novels are only superheroes. Yes, superheroes are still the bread and butter of the big companies, but genre diversity is increasing every day with more and more independent companies publishing a range of genres, from memoir to fantasy to historical fiction. This is partly what has allowed graphic novels to truly break into the book market. On the other hand, this distinction could also lead to the mistaken conclusion that there is nothing of value in superhero comics. A few years ago, many dismissed fantasy as a lesser genre, but the success and popularity of *Harry Potter* has reminded the reading public that genre does not define quality.

Graphic novels are for reluctant readers. One of the biggest benefits of graphic novels is that they often attract kids who are considered "reluctant" readers. This is not just hype —the combination of less text, narrative support from images, and a feeling of reading outside the expected canon often relieves the tension of reading expectations for kids who are not natural readers, and lets them learn to be confident and engaged consumers of great stories. That being said, graphic novels are not *only* for reluctant readers —they're for everyone! It's a disservice to the format to dismiss it as only for those who don't read otherwise, and relegating graphic novels to a lower rung of the reading scale is not only snobbish, but wrong.

Graphic novels aren't "real" books. This one's a zinger and contains a bit of truth and a lot of prejudice. The key to categorizing graphic novels is to remember that they're a format, akin to audiobooks, videos, and television, all media that have struggled for acceptance. Graphic novels are not and were never intended to be a replacement for prose. Sequential art is just another way to tell a story, with different demands on the reader. So, yes, graphic novels don't work exactly the same way that traditional novels do, but they can be as demanding, creative, intelligent, compelling, and full of story as any book.

Q Why should kids read comics and graphic novels?

Graphic novels are simply another way to get a story. They represent an *alternative* to other formats, not a replacement. They are as varied as any other medium and have their fair share of every kind of title, from fluff to literary masterpieces. What they always involve, though, is reading — just as books, from Newbery winners to the latest installment in the *Animorphs* series, do. Stephen Krashen, who examines voluntary reading in his book *The Power of Reading*, discovered that comics are an unrecognized influence on reading. He found that not only were kids more likely to pick up comics voluntarily, but the average comic book has twice the vocabulary as the average children's book and three times the vocabulary of a conversation between an adult and child. And the very fact that a child chooses to read them gives them a greater impact on that child's confidence in reading.

Not only do graphic novels entail reading in the traditional sense, they also require reading in a new way. To read a comic requires an active participation in the text that is quite different from reading prose: the reader must make the connections between the images and the text and create the links between each panel and the page as a whole. This is generally referred to as "reading between the panels," and this kind of literacy is not only new but vital in interacting with and succeeding in our multimedia world. If you've ever struggled to make the connections in reading a graphic novel while a teen reader whizzes through it, you've experienced how different this type of literacy is.