

Teenage Reluctant Readers and Graphic Novels

Clare Snowball

Research has shown that recreational reading decreases as students progress through school.¹ Brown has found that children stop going to the public library between the ages of fourteen and twenty, which quite likely correlates with their not reading.² In a discussion between some ninth grade boys they said reading was “boring, it was too difficult, it took too long . . . reading was hard work.” They didn’t get instant gratification from it.³ Australian author Agnes Nieuwenhuizen has found teenagers “don’t want to read, they’re bored, they don’t think books have anything to say to them.”⁴

As librarians, we all know how important reading is. But why is it so important that teenagers read?

John Marsden, an Australian author of young adult books, notes that a common assumption is that reading is good. “This ignores the fact that some of the most successful and envied people in our society are apparently nonreaders,” for example, sports people.⁵ This is not as incongruous as it first seems because he qualifies this with his belief that books are one of the few ways available to help teenagers understand the great passions and dramas.⁶

Krashen has studied the benefits of reading for many years. He has found that children who read for pleasure show improvement in reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, and they acquire these skills “involuntarily and without conscious effort.” He also notes that people who are well read rarely have serious problems with writing, grammar or spelling.⁷ Reeves provides an example of what can happen when a student stops reading for pleasure. Joel was an excellent reader in his first years of school. In seventh grade, he stopped reading because he was

too busy with other activities. On entering high school, he couldn’t understand what he read anymore, and he couldn’t understand why reading had become so hard. His problems with reading came from his lack of reading practice.⁸

Reading can offer a “wealth of experience . . . on both an emotional level and an intellectual level.”⁹ If teenagers don’t read, “they are missing out on so much.” There is no getting away from the printed word in everyday life, whether at home, school, or work. You have to read wherever you go—in books, in newspapers, in magazines, on signs, on television, or when surfing the Internet. Reading allows more understanding of a whole range of issues and improves the ability to argue a point.¹⁰

ALA says reluctant readers are those who, for whatever reason, choose not to read.¹¹ Teenagers in particular often can read but hate to do it.¹² Stringer and Mollineaux define reluctant readers as those who are able to but “do not possess the desire or the inclination to read.” They note the reasons for this lack of reading are diverse.¹³ For example, some young people who hate to read find it difficult and still have bad memories of learning to read.¹⁴

People will read, if and when they are interested.¹⁵ Reluctant readers will not read just for the sake of reading. They tend to be highly selective when choosing what to read, but they are willing to read when they find something they connect with.¹⁶

So to get teenage reluctant readers reading, we need to find the elusive reading material that provides interest. Many writers agree that graphic novels could be that special something that provides interest and that a teenager connects with.

Jones notes the overwhelming evidence for the value of comics. He says

the library that carries comic books will “create raving fans of its collections.”¹⁷ Teenage reluctant readers are especially attracted to comics.¹⁸ Crawford says comics are an “invaluable tool for motivating reluctant readers.”¹⁹ Gorman thinks the cover art pulls in those who are “otherwise disinclined to pick up a book.”²⁰ Mackey and Johnston believe graphic novels appeal to “readers who would reject more traditional fare.”²¹ Research undertaken on sixth graders in Austin, Texas in 1999 found the most popular reading choices for all children, regardless of reading ability or gender, were scary books and comic books.²²

Comics have “low readability levels” and are thus easier for less proficient readers.²³ Crawford mentions the reading level of graphic novels being about that of *Time* magazine, young adult novels, and many adult best sellers.²⁴ This could be the reason graphic novels are less likely to intimidate a reluctant reader.²⁵

The UK Reading Agency had a promotion in February called Manga Mania, which was aimed at teenagers from thirteen to sixteen. It was publicized as a way for libraries to reach those who didn’t think of themselves as readers.²⁶

Why are comics so popular with teenagers?

Teenagers today have so much to keep them occupied and are “surrounded by diverse and increasingly complex media.”²⁷ Correspondingly

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their expectations for entertainment are high.²⁸ They have been raised in a very visual world, with wide-screen television, electronic games, and the Internet.²⁹ Those ninth grade boys I mentioned earlier find television, videos, and computers far more interesting than reading a book.³⁰ These are all highly visual activities and necessitate visual literacy.³¹ Tony Panaccio was the senior vice president of product development for a reading program developed by the former comic publisher CrossGen. He believes comics are a "natural tool" for reaching this generation.³²

Steve Kleckner is the vice president of sales and distribution for manga publisher TokyoPop. He likens reading comics to experiencing entertainment on many different levels. "You are reading and watching a story unravel at the same time."³³ Kan believes it is the "visual aspect" of graphic novels that attracts reluctant readers.³⁴ It could also be the smaller amount of text combined with the "picture activity."³⁵

Teenagers who choose not to read because they find it difficult may prefer comics, whose pictures can provide contextual clues to the meaning of the words.³⁶ The blending of words and pictures in comics allows readers to "see the characters through the illustrations."³⁷ Stringer and Mollineaux discuss the importance of the pictures in helping readers who "have difficulty in entering the story."³⁸ Paxton studied a class of eighth graders and found the students could not visualize the scenes, characters, or action based on what they read. The books did not have extensive illustrations and thus "held little meaning for them."³⁹ Comics could have helped these students with their reading and understanding, "pictures are not only engaging, but also an aid to learning and meaning making."⁴⁰

Are graphic novels a stepping stone to other reading materials, or is it enough that teenagers are reading something? There is some disagreement on this question.

Just getting reluctant readers to read something can help in their discovery of the joy of reading.⁴¹ Carrie Edwards, a

seventh grade teacher in Oklahoma, uses manga in her classes and says, "Even my students who weren't interested in reading readily picked up the books." She encourages other teachers to use them in their classes and although hesitant at first "once they finally pick them up and read them, they realise their value."⁴²

Another teacher, Sister John Delaney, says parents would complain their children only liked to read comic books. She would reply, "At least he is reading." Delaney believes comics "are merely a good introduction to books, not an end."⁴³ Librarian Sandra Rockett believes graphic novels are stepping stones to reading materials at "the next level."⁴⁴ Teacher Diane Roy says a graphic novel can become a "bridge to other things."⁴⁵ Lebrun agrees, as teenagers get older and their tastes mature, these readers may be drawn to "more sophisticated genres."⁴⁶ Krashen has found considerable evidence that comic books do lead to more "serious" reading.⁴⁷ Graphic novels specialist of the United Kingdom bookseller Ottakar, George Walkley, says that comics are not just "books for kids who don't read." He emphasizes that they are "proper" books.⁴⁸

A mother of three boys who were all very reluctant to read and had difficulty in learning to read said, "The first thing my eldest boy read because he wanted to was a comic book." A year or two after this, he progressed to reading other books.⁴⁹

With all this evidence as to the importance of graphic novels in motivating teenage reluctant readers to pick up a book, let's hope every library starts or expands their graphic novel collection. ●

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Reluctant readers. Graphic novels can be a way in for students who are difficult to reach through traditional text. Even those deemed poor readers willingly and enthusiastically gravitate towards these books. However, the quality graphic novels now being published have increasingly come to be accepted by librarians and educators as a method of storytelling on a par with novels, picture books, movies, or audiobooks. The American Library Association has recognized this in establishing its annual list of Great Graphic Novels for Teens. In 2007, the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (Roaring Brook/First Second) won the Michael L. Printz Award for best young adult book of the year.