

Graphic Novels are not a Genre

Five years ago, the only Graphic Novels we had in the Children's area of my Library were Asterix and Tintin. Now the Central Branch alone has over 400 titles. At the moment, like at a lot of Libraries, all of our graphic novels are shelved together –

But should they be? What links these titles apart from a common format? We don't put all the books with small writing together, or all the non-fiction books with big pictorials together. I believe graphic novels are actually a FORMAT, as opposed to a GENRE and therefore could be, and possibly should be, integrated into our collections and recommended for all of our readers.

In this presentation I will analyse the components of a genre and then make the case that graphic novels are not a new genre, but simply a format shift. The perception of graphic novels as a less worthwhile genre can perhaps be overcome if it is approached, more correctly, as a format, with different but not less requirements of the reader.

To start defining "Graphic Novels", we first need to understand a few terms used in the description of texts: codes, genres and format.

In The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms we see that in communications, a code is "one of the six essential elements in Roman Jakobson's influential theory of communication and has an important place in structuralist theories, which stress the extent to which messages (including literary works) call upon already coded meanings rather than fresh revelations of raw reality." In a way, the English language is a type of code, as Carter points out in "Die a Graphic Death" published in the ALAN Review in Fall 2008 :

"letters are simply pictographic images or graphemes that have developed a privileged signification over time" He believes that the conventions and artistic elements of a graphic novel are mistaken for a genre, when in reality, they are just materials that use some common codes that the reader is required to interpret.

Codes are such a basic component of our society, that it can be hard to get a handle on them. A good example of the use of codes, in advertising, is a Coke ad. It has happy smiling people and a bottle of Coke, no other information and no explanation of the meaning we are meant to draw from this, but we aren't puzzled by the connection here; if we drink Coke,

we will be happy and be surrounded by other happy people. Literary genres also have these codes. Whenever we pick up a book to flick through, we are interpreting these codes. A picture book will be large, with large lettering, fewer words on a page and bright illustrations, not all picture books comply with these conventions, but we view the ones that do not as *exceptions*. In this case, the exceptions *do* prove the rule, or prove the code. Do we view all picture books as members of a genre? If someone is looking for a picture book would we pick up any picture book that was nearby and be content that it would meet the borrowers needs? Do people who like to read Colin Thompson also like to read Lauren Child? If someone can't find a Thomas the Tank Engine picture book, are they equally happy with John Burningham?

How often do we do that with graphic novels? If a patron comes in looking for a new graphic novel to read, do we point them towards the graphic novel shelf and disavow any responsibility for their selection here-in? Does someone who likes reading Asterix also like reading Otto's Orange Day? From looking at our shelving, you would think so.

Lets look at genre now. The International Encyclopaedia of Communications defines genre as the traditional organizational system of literature, a series of “coded signals [that] prompt readers to take up a work in an appropriate way.” Another definition of genre is “A category of media texts characterized by a particular style, form or content” The wide variety of Graphic Novels that we have in our libraries meet none of these requirements – there is no consistent style, no consistent form and no consistent content.

Style

Graphic novels range from film noir detective stories to bright comic strip style works, from dry humour to toilet humour, from intense love stories to depictions of a banal day to day existence. The style used is only limited by how many diverse art styles exist, and are yet to exist.

Form

L-a-r-g-e format and tiny, picture dense and a few lines, carefully drawn micro-worlds and water colour emotive landscapes. If you could find a similarity in the form of these books, it *might* be the use of images with text in bubbles but even that is only true for some of these titles. Also, using form as a definition of genre does have its limitations – all books with hard covers and smaller than 10 point font size – on that shelf, all books with little pictures above chapter headings – on that shelf, you see where I am going with this.

Content

Gourmet Cooking to Eating Disorders, Hobos in the Great Depression to Hiroshima Survivors. There is no limit to subjects covered in these volumes. Could a “Western” novel be about robots? Could a “Mystery” novel be about Japanese Cooking? Perhaps once, but not sustainably, another reason why Graphic Novels can not be a genre.

The last term we need to look at is format. Libraries in New Zealand hold materials in a variety of formats. I believe that Graphic Novels are simply another one of these formats. Within this format there are a variety of genres and subjects. A useful way to look at this idea is found in the article “The Truth About Graphic Novels : A Format, Not A Genre” published in the ALAN Review by Fletcher-Spear, Jenson-Benjamin and Copeland, these authors compare the Graphic Novel format with the Audio Book format, and they state that :

Graphic novels, like audio books, can be in any genre, for any audience

A dislike of a title doesn't mean the entire section is ruled out – if you don't enjoy the talking books of Stephen King, you (hopefully) wouldn't avoid all audio books in perpetuity!

This example is helpful as we endeavour to reframe the idea of Graphic Novels. How many of us have already decided from a brief look at indecipherable manga or a big breasted superhero, that Graphic Novels are not for us or not for our library?

Another recent example of the important distinction between genre and format is the controversy over winners of the “Picture Book” category of the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards. In 2006, 2007 and 2008, books that were NOT aimed at preschoolers won this award. The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley by Colin Thompson in 2006, The Arrival by Shaun Tan in 2007 and Requiem for a Beast by Matt Ottley in 2008. The last choice particularly aroused a lot of controversy. The author said it is aimed at adults and young adults, it contain swearing and depictions of suicide. In these choices, the CBC clearly didn't differentiate between format and genre, if a book has a lot of pictures, then it is a picture book and should be judged with other 'picture books'. If a book has lots of words, then it must be an older fiction book and be judged with all the other wordy books. I think we can do better than this, and start grouping our books by audience and content rather than a straight format or number of pictures system!

Why do I believe this distinction is important?

It is important for our borrowers – There will always be people who seek out graphic novels regardless of their content or subject, just as there are people who listen out the audio book section of the Library, BUT, people who are searching for material in a specific genre, historical period or subject area, should NOT be excluded from finding the Graphic Novel resources that we have on the subject. As long as the “Graphic Novels” are in a different location from the “Mysteries” then people who love Agatha Christie will never find François Rivère’s brilliant graphic adaptations of her work. While our “Non-Fiction” stock is separated from our “Graphic Novels”, a victim of domestic abuse will never find “Dragonslippers : This is what an abusive relationship looks like” by Rosalind Penfold.

It is also important for our own understanding of materials in our collections, by thinking every graphic novel is the same, we miss out on the variety of narratives, artistry and information. We need to come to grips with this new format and not put it in the "not for me" category or the "too hard" basket. I'm going to read from something I read recently that I think perhaps has made some of these mistakes -
A reviewing article in Carousel Magazine, writer by Nicholas Tucker, March 2009

"Reviewing a crop of graphic novels could seem a welcome break from poring over texts. But this soon turns out to be an illusion..." I know a lot of parents have this view initially, not content with their children selecting only graphic novel titles they often implore me to help their child find a "real" book. But the reading of a Graphic Novel isn't as simple as picking up "Spot goes to the Beach". They employ a sophisticated visual language and the text needs to be closely read and understood with the images. Tucker continues - "They can be surprisingly hard to follow...I soon got lost." Some invoke traditions of Japanese Man-ga or employ foreign language conventions - Tucker again - "Can you guess what difference is implied with a character grunts either, unnnh' or 'nnngh'? Can you confidently translate 'ptuu', or 'fwoop'? I can't."

Tucker may not be able to, but I'm sure many of our patrons can. Reading this article reminded me of when my parents listened to my music when I was younger. It was too loud, it wasn't proper music, it was weird and they couldn't understand it. But isn't that the point of contemporary music (and in some way contemporary texts)? What would a Victorian think if

they picked up "To Kill A Mockingbird"? The fact that adults can be at first alienated and confused by these texts, is, in a way, an endorsement of their suitability for children and young adults.

Graphic novels can encourage children to approach the classics of literature, enable a child who is a struggling reader to approach a text with knowledge gained from the illustrations, encourage children to incorporate their illustrations and text when creating new stories, appeal to many readers and facilitate them reading large amounts of books during the year, can be a good tool to use with ESOL students and to increase visual literacy. Not only are they suitable for our clients, they are beneficial and essential to them.

Today I've brought along a few books that I believe are precursors to the modern Graphic Novel. When these books came out they were praised as fresh, innovative and presenting important voices and ideas, all traits continued by their graphic novel descendents.

Raymond Briggs has been described as creating "some of the most cherished and admired picture books of our time" and when a Graphic Novel won the Guardian First Book Award in 2001, he said "the strip cartoon has at long last become intellectually respectable. About time too." *The Snowman*, *When the Wind Blows* and *Father Christmas* are clearly graphic novels created before the word was used.

Chris Van Allsburg, winner of two Caldecott Medals, is one of my favourite creators, Peter Kimmins says "There is an incredible stillness, a perfect snapshot of frozen reality that gives his work a unique signature. Unique vantage points and clever perspective along with deft-linework permeate every Van Allsburg piece" Without the illustrations, a Van Allsburg book would be hard to understand, viewing the pictures alone would provide beauty, but not illumination.

"*Fox*" by Margaret Wild has been described as A "book which transcends categorization", if it arrived in our Library today, I know how it would be categorised, as a Graphic Novel.

"*Maus*" by Art Spiegelman, winner of the 1992 Pulitzer Prize, is amazing, If you haven't read it, you should, When it was published, people said it was entirely new kind of book, but again, I think now it clearly sits in the "Graphic Novel" camp.

When these books were received by Libraries, they were processed and shelved with our existing stock, and hopefully browsed and chosen by people who were not specifically looking for that format. Now that we are receiving large numbers of them, we segregate them and perhaps fail to see them as individual titles with an individual view point, characteristics and appeal.

Hopefully looking back at some of the forerunners of Graphic Novels has helped you to widen your idea of them and given you an idea of their history, now lets take a look some of today's more interesting graphic novels.