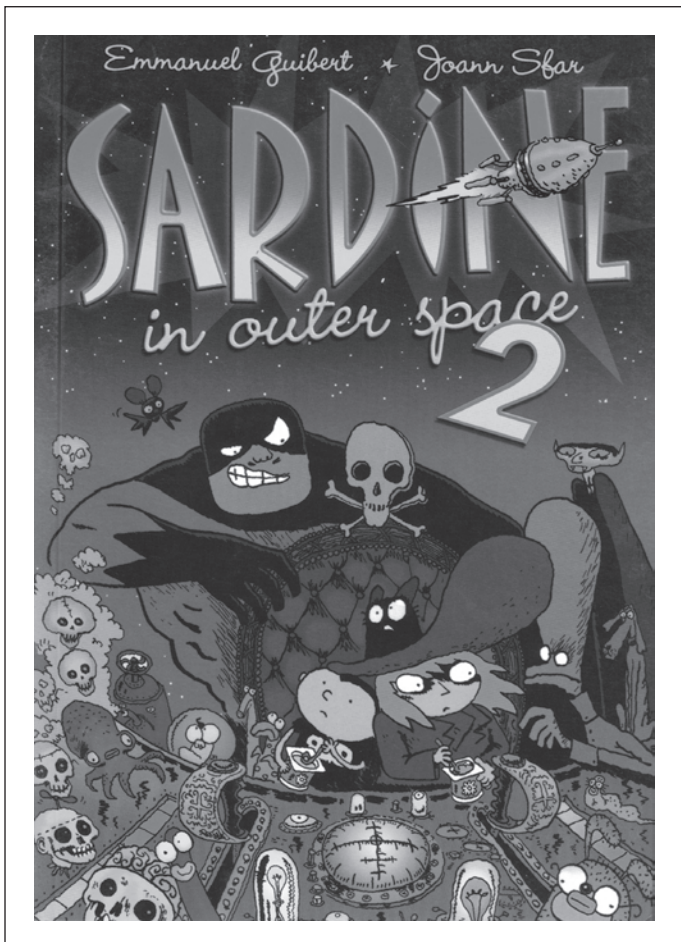# Graphic Novels for Children

Should They Be Considered Literature?

ALSC Research and Development Committee

Sardine in Outer Space 2 by Emmanuel Guibert, illustrated by Joann Sfar (FirstSecond Books, 2006).

What would your first response be if a children's edition of a work by William Shakespeare arrived in your library . . . as a graphic novel? Would you consider it another example of poor reading material or an innovative way to expose children to great literature?

Graphic novels are presented in the same style as comics—with art, dialogue, and narrative captions. The term "graphic novel" refers to a format, not a genre, and although the name suggests fiction, the content is sometimes nonfiction. Young adult librarians have been talking about graphic novels for years, but what about younger readers? Is reading a graphic novel a true reading experience? Should children's librarians encourage their use?

What Do We Know?

Graphic novels are growing in popularity, with phenomenal circulation rates.[1] Sales are up, and publishers are creating new graphic novel imprints just for children.[2] Boys show more interest in comics than girls, but this could change with the introduction of graphic novels targeted at girls.[3]

New Media

The comic format has been compared with the media format of television and computers. One *Washington Post* writer called the graphic novel "a movie in graphics."[4] Stephen Krashen considers both graphic novels and movies "new media."[5] Allyson Lyga calls today's students "Generation Visual," who find plain text boring.[6] This might be true

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for reluctant readers, but for readers who enjoy new media, evidence shows they read more books and read higher-quality books.[7]

Additionally, a review of several media comparison studies led two researchers to conclude that the comic book may be more similar to television in the way it positively affects children's cognitive growth.[8] Yet, they "doubt that the comic book is a less valuable medium than the book."[9]

Essential Alternative?

One educator argues that the graphic novel is not only an alternative to other visual media, it is essential for a literate democracy because it allows for real diversity by presenting alternative views.[10] Another suggests that by teaching the visual literacy of graphic novels, we can provide children with critical skills needed to filter manipulative, multimedia messages.[11]

Introducing comic books into middle school classrooms can provide new perspectives in engaging ways, particularly for students who have difficulties with text. One study of disabled students in Indiana showed their test scores and their motivation to read improved after reading graphic novels.[12] Another researcher used comics to teach mul-

tiple meanings of words to twenty-three students, ages eight to ten, with language and learning disabilities. These students learned multiple-meaning words better when comics were used.[13]

Many school librarians and teachers support the use of graphic novels for English-language learners because the pictures aid in comprehension of words and grammar.[14] Children enjoy comic books, and struggling readers are more likely to read them for pleasure than text-only books.[15]

Pleasure reading is effective in improving vocabulary, spelling, and comprehension for students learning a second language.[16] Colleen MacDonell, a librarian serving international students, agrees that pleasure reading is essential for second-language proficiency and more effective in increasing a student's vocabulary than memorizing words.[17] While graphic novels have less text than prose books, they do contain more rare words than conversation.[18]

Fun, Not Easy

Stories share common attributes, including characters, setting, plot, theme, and others. Studying a novel involves the same methods, whether the book is in graphic format or text format.[19] A recent article by Hollis Rudiger in *The Horn Book Magazine* shows how analyzing the pictures reveals the story's attributes.[20] Robin Brenner, creator of the Web site Sidekicks, said, "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."[21]

To understand the story, the reader must figure out how both the text and the

images combine into a cohesive whole, involving not only traditional reading skills, but also a new literacy skill that is "vital in interacting with and succeeding in our multimedia world."[22] Very young children "read" comic books through the visual cues, and even preschoolers are learning the literacy of comics' visual elements.[23]

Enhancement, Not Replacement

Reading a graphic novel is not easy, yet children are drawn to them, including reluctant readers.[24] Art Spiegelman considers the comic book a "self-teaching machine."[25] Although "comic book reading is at least as beneficial as other reading," we know graphic novels are not here to replace text-based book reading but rather, to enhance it.[26] Comic book readers often move on to more serious reading and have positive attitudes toward reading.[27]

In one junior high school, library use overall dramatically increased, including circulation of noncomic materials, upon the introduction of comics. When children choose books they *like*, they read more. When they read more, their vocabulary improves, and they comprehend, write, and spell better. In fact, just *one* book capturing the interest of an elementary school child can develop a child's love of reading.[28] Because of their popularity, a graphic novel could likely be the material that motivates a student to want to read.

What Can We Do about It?

There are several ways we can support children in learning to love reading:

- Foster a child's joy in reading with support for graphic novels. When a parent or teacher says "That's not real reading," know how to respond. Several recent books and numerous journal articles discuss the value and uses of graphic novels.

- Let go of the idea that comics and graphic novels are junk reading. Desmond Tutu said, "Comics fed my love for English and my love for reading."[29] Comics were certainly not a

poor reading choice for him! Jeff Smith reminds us that comic books are literature. They are read left to right, top to bottom; they have consistent symbols and language, yet the pictures are arranged in panels much like film shots, and they replace most of the prose.[30] The graphic novel is "true reading" and another way we can encourage a child's love of reading. ↺

For more examination of the graphic novels for children phenomenon, watch for additional coverage in the Spring 2007 issue of Children and Libraries.

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