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Graphic novels drawing in readers

08/02/2003

By JEROME WEEKS / The Dallas Morning News

Try to ignore the superhero. Please. Just for a bit.

The big guy is certainly hard to overlook with all of Hollywood's muscle-bound, megabudgeted films based on comics: *X2*, *Spider-Man*, *The Hulk*, *Daredevil*. The sad fact is that ours is an adolescent, action-hero pop culture. And when computer-generated imagery got sophisticated enough to mimic the rubbery, lunging looks of comics, the superhero lined up eagerly for his screen test.

But forget the noisy boys in tights. Consider instead the comics' college-educated cousin: the graphic novel. It's not just an artsy term for a comic in hard covers. The graphic novel has become a separate genre. It's sold in different stores, has its own distributors.

Most graphic novels still are just superhero stories swollen in size. But the ones without superheroes haven't inspired films as bad as *Daredevil* – not yet, anyway. Instead, graphic novels have been adapted into a brooding thriller (*The Road to Perdition* with Tom Hanks and Paul Newman), a deadpan comedy (Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World*), even a cancer memoir (Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, opening Aug. 29 in Dallas).

Graphic novels aren't new – Will Eisner created the first one in 1978. What's new is their audience and influence. In last year's flat economy for books, sales for graphic novels leapt by one-third. Of the \$400 million in annual comics sales, graphic novels now make up \$100 million. *Publishers Weekly*, the book industry bible, calls them "one of the fastest growing categories in publishing."

That's because "the book trade for graphic novels and the specialty comic book have become two different beasts these days," says Eric Reynolds, publicist and editor for Fantagraphics Books.

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Much of the widening divide between comics and graphic novels is a matter of industry economics: Comics are periodicals – they're cheap magazines, sold monthly, mostly as impulse purchases. Graphic novels, in contrast, are books. They cost more, they have longer shelf lives. Newsstand distributors don't like them because they're often oddly sized, and they stick around too long.

Although the two forms do overlap, these differences mean comics are sold more at comics stores and newsstands, while half of graphic novels are sold at mainstream booksellers such as Borders. And those stores are selling not just heavily marketed movie tie-ins but more daring volumes, such as Marjane Satrapi's memoir of the Islamic Revolution, *Persepolis* (Pantheon, \$17.95).

In fact, major graphic novel publishers are trying to escape the teenage comic-book hangout entirely. The current network of comics shops grew in the '80s as a new way for the industry to reach Wolverine and Batman fans.

"It was a pretty good distribution system," says Chris Oliveros, publisher of *Drawn & Quarterly*, an influential anthology of graphic art. "But it ghettoized comics."

And in the '90s, the huge price "bubble" that had been inflated by comic-book collectors burst. Hundreds of comics stores folded.

"We had to find other ways to get our books out there," says Mr. Reynolds. "Don't get me wrong. I like the traditional comic pamphlet format. But we just don't publish genre [superhero comic] books. Our goal has always been to get out of the specialty shop."

Because graphic novels combine stories with art, they're akin to ordinary novels but also to movies. Many graphic novels resemble the storyboards used to plan films, with jump cuts and close-ups.

But movies are best at conveying action and surfaces. They're not strong at depicting the inner lives and thoughts of characters.

In contrast, that's one of the things novels do best. It's possible, then, to make a distinction, based on what a comic emphasizes: Mass-produced superhero tales are big on action, resembling summer movies in all their crash-bang sensationalism. Graphic novels, meanwhile, tend to focus on more internal, literary – occasionally, pretentious – matters.

Not surprisingly, many of the landmark graphic books are personal memoirs or memoirlike novels: *Persepolis*, *American Splendor*, *Ghost World* and *Daddy's Girl*, Debbie Dreschler's study of incest. Or they are hard-edged nonfiction: the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus*, Joe Sacco's *Palestine*.

"There are more cartoonists doing more good work now than ever before," says Chris Ware, creator of *Jimmy Corrigan*, *The Smartest Kid on Earth*, "so maybe that's creating a distinction" between comic books and graphic novels. "Mostly, it's single artists telling the stories they want to tell, apart from any editorial guidance or commercial interest."

Superheroes may have conquered Hollywood, but these economic and artistic factors have led to graphic novels – and their authors – getting serious attention.

Publishers Weekly reviews them regularly, and *The New York Review of Books*

has written about them. Mr. Sacco, a "comic book journalist," recently reported on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for *The New York Times*. And in competition with every kind of novelist, Mr. Ware, a University of Texas at Austin graduate, won the 2001 *Guardian* First Book Award for *Jimmy Corrigan*, his ironic epic about a sad sack.

It's also true that the mainstream comic-book market – although it also includes a number of graphic novels – is concentrated on the traditional, teenage male reader.

So many comics have fallen prey to an insular "fan mentality," argues Terry Nantier, founder of NBM Publishing. "These are fans writing for other superhero fans. The convoluted stories that no one can follow unless you've read it for years: That's a fan mentality."

New demographic

Meanwhile, graphic novels are reaching outside that market, he says – to older and younger readers, hipper, more female.

At BookExpo, the annual booksellers' trade show held this spring in Los Angeles, graphic novels were highlighted as never before. An entire afternoon of the five-day convention was devoted to panels on "the Adult Graphic Literary Novel" and forums for the likes of Neil Gaiman, author of *Books of Magic* and *The Sandman* series.

The sessions were meant to help booksellers and librarians understand the age-appropriate levels of the material and even where they should be shelved (as art books? children's books?).

"Librarians," says Françoise Mouly, "know that for children, comics are a point of entry to reading. They're marvelous for learning the conventions of books."

Ms. Mouly, art director of *The New Yorker*, and her husband, Art Spiegelman, the artist behind *Maus*, created *RAW* in 1980 as a groundbreaking comics magazine.

"*RAW* insisted that comics could be for adults," Ms. Mouly said. Nowadays, she and Mr. Spiegelman are demonstrating the opposite – that comics can be for kids. They have put together a best-selling series of large-size graphic anthologies, *Little Lit*, appealing to kids and the parents who read to them. The third one, *It Was A Dark and Silly Night* (HarperCollins, \$19.99) hits stores Tuesday.

"Comics in Europe have a much broader definition, a wider spectrum, than here," she says. "So the response to *Little Lit* has been very gratifying."

This rediscovered kids' market explains the recent return of "classics illustrated" – adaptations of great novels. These are graphic books with a built-in audience in libraries and schools. NBM has led the way with such works as Lorenzo Mattotti and Jerry Kramsky's stunningly modern version of *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde* (\$15.95) and Stéphane Heuet's sedate adaptation of – of all things – Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (\$16.95 per volume). There's even an eight-volume life of the **Buddha** by Osamu **Tezuka**, "the father of Japanese *manga*" (**Vertical**, \$24.95 per volume).

Japanese *manga* comics, in fact, have long influenced American artists in visual style, but now they are showing how comics can attract other long-lost readers.

"It's particularly exciting to find girls reading them," says NBM's Mr. Nantier. "Manga has been grabbing a whole new teen audience in the [bookstore] chains. American comics haven't gone after that market since the romance comics in the '50s."

Manga for girls – called *shoujo* – are "huge sellers for us," says Kristien Brada-Thompson, public relations manager of Tokyopop Inc. Publishers such as Tokyopop, Viz, CrossGen and Dark Horse translate Japanese *manga*, including such *shoujo* as *Oh My Goddess!* or *Clover*. Some even retain the original back-to-front format of the Japanese.

Meanwhile, the Americans have developed home-grown counterparts – "in romance, comedy, fantasy, a little of everything," says Ms. Brada-Thompson.

"I've started seeing a lot of women in our graphic novel section," says Jonathan Briggs, area marketing manager for Borders in Dallas-Fort Worth. "And I'm talking 35-year-old women. They're our core customers."

Publishing interest

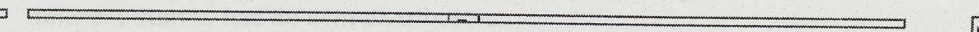
Superheroes still dominate three-fourths of sales and fill movie screens. But Mr. Nantier of NBM says he has no problem predicting that graphic novels will be "the leading item" in the industry some day because they are reaching the younger, the female, the computer-literate. Mr. Reynolds of Fantagraphics even worries about graphic novels attracting the competitive attention of powerhouse publishers in New York.




As if on cue, Peter Olson – the hard-nosed former banker who runs Random House, New York's biggest publishing firm – was recently profiled in *The Times*. Mr. Olson has shaken the book industry with his renewed stress on money-making, his scorn for literary snobbery.

Mr. Olson, reported *The Times*, is keen on graphic novels.

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