

[Return to Main Page](#)

## Publishers Weekly

### Comics Create Big Buzz at BEA

BY DOUGLAS WOLK AND CALVIN REID -- 6/16/2003

#### Manga drives sales as graphic novels find a home in bookstores, libraries

At past BookExpos, graphic novel publishers struggled to gain a toehold with retailers and librarians who weren't quite sure exactly what a graphic novel was. That wasn't a problem this year—the format is one of the fastest-growing categories in publishing right now. Rory Root, Eisner retail award-winner and owner of Berkeley, Calif.'s Comic Relief, noted on a Saturday panel that in his store, which emphasizes book comics and operates like a bookstore, rather than a comics specialty shop, graphic novels average a 92% sell-through rate.



A pavilion of their own: Heavy traffic in the new graphic novel section.

Publishers who came to BEA found retailers and librarians either eager to hop on the graphic novel bandwagon or certainly very curious about all the commotion about sales growth, title variety and teen readers with money to spend. Slave Labor Graphics publisher Dan Vado told *PW*, "Even a few retailers who still think comics are kind of dubious stopped by the booth to say, 'I guess I better order something.'" Nearly every graphic novel publisher *PW* contacted at the show reported excellent responses from booksellers and often wildly supportive encounters with librarians. Manga publishers like Tokyopop, Viz and Dark Horse seemed almost to strut around the floor, all but giggling and making money-counting gestures.

U.S. graphic novel sales (for both general bookstores and comics specialty stores) have increased from approximately \$75 million in 2001 (\$43 million from comics stores; \$32 million from bookstores and noncomics retailers) to about \$100 million in 2002, according to a graphic novel retailing guide published by pop culture Web site ICV2.com.

In 2002, bookstores and noncomics specialty store sales represented about \$50 million in graphic novel sales, making such outlets the fastest-growing retail venues for book-format comics. In fact, ICV2.com projects a total graphic novel market of about \$120 million (\$65 million in bookstores and noncomics retailers) for 2003.

Kuo-Yu Liang, v-p, sales and marketing at Diamond Book Distributors, told *PW*, "Two or three years ago, no one came by the graphic novel booths. Now we're offering about 100 new graphic novels a month; retailers are expanding their sections and there are lots of librarians interested." He pointed to increased news and review coverage in mainstream publications like *Entertainment Weekly*. "People are buying stuff based on word of mouth and browsing," said Liang. "Everything is so new that retailers want us to tell them what to buy."

#### Manga Leads All Categories



Neil Gaiman at the DC booth.

Rick Giering of Borders in Northridge, Calif., said that his graphic novel sales tripled from first quarter 2002 to first quarter 2003, driven by manga fanatics and thoughtful shelving: "I converted four complete wall bays—I'd had the books spined out, and then I thought, 'look how colorful the covers are,' and displayed their faces. It's a magnet: there are always half a dozen people standing there." Tokyopop cosponsored an in-store event for manga artist Tohru Fujisawa, creator of the popular GTO series, the story of an unlikely but charming high school teacher. The event drew hundreds of people. The company's "right-to-left" manga format (printing the books in their original Japanese form with English translation) is very popular with kids ("they love it, because it drives their parents crazy," said Giering).

Basking in the enthusiastic attention of booksellers and librarians, Tokyopop president John Parker said the company has about 14,000

retail outlets for its paperback graphic novels and the number is growing. "Our outlets are growing, but we need more," said Parker. "It's a challenge, but this is still a developing category." The company was highlighting the winners of its Rising Stars of Manga competition, a contest (and new anthology) to identify new authors of American manga stories. Tokyopop v-p of marketing John Powers noted that new titles in the Chobits and Love Hina series consistently sell in the top 25 of all trade paperbacks. Tokyopop is also moving into cinemanga—film stills of popular kids' programs like *Lizzie McGuire*, reconfigured into comics panels with word balloons added.

Viz, the other manga heavy-hitter, has seen triple-digit growth over the last three years, and expects to double its unit sales again this year, driven by its extraordinarily successful *Shonen Jump* magazine and big sales of *Spirited Away* tie-ins (art books and a five-volume manga version). Viz has launched an ambitious program to educate readers about manga. The publisher has ceased publishing periodical "comic books," and is releasing all its manga graphic novels under four categories: action manga; shojo, or girl-oriented manga, focused on the "heart, mind and relationships"; editor's choice, manga on the cutting edge of creativity; and shonen, or "boy-oriented" manga, collected in the company's *Shonen Jump* anthology magazine for kids. Liz Coppola, v-p sales and marketing, told *PW*, "We're starting with four categories to make it simpler for consumers, and to help them know what to read."

### Literary Comics

Meanwhile, publishers of literary graphic novels are enjoying success with bookstore distribution. Chris Oliveros of Drawn & Quarterly noted that six years ago, his company's income came entirely from the direct-sales network of comics specialty stores; now, distributed by Chronicle Books (in whose booth D&Q hosted a signing by *Summer Blonde* author Adrian Tomine), about half of sales come from the book trade. Anticipation is high for fall titles such as Joe Sacco's Bosnian diary, *The Fixer* and Chester Brown's eccentric biography *Louis Riel*.



Sign of the times: Tokyopop on the move.

The day before BEA began, Fantagraphics e-mailed a cry for help—the publisher was experiencing cash-flow troubles stemming from the collapse of its old distributor and fast-rising costs. By the end of the weekend, the company's devoted fan base had ordered tens of thousands of dollars' worth of back stock. W.W. Norton's booth, Fantagraphics' distributor, had become a magnet for buyers intrigued by a lineup of impressive summer releases like Jim Woodring's coffee-table-size *The Frank Book* and Chris Ware's *Quimby the Mouse*, and Fantagraphics representatives were looking a lot happier. Nevertheless, the house was forced to lay off four staffers and now has about 25 employees. Fantagraphics spokesperson Eric Reynolds said its sales have "doubled" under Norton's distribution. Norton's John Dibello told *PW* that Norton expected Fantagraphics to weather the storm—"The reps are happy, the stores are happy and library interest is strong," he said.

Craig Thompson's enormous new graphic novel *Blankets*, due soon from Top Shelf, generated much buzz, along with Marjane Satrapi's much-acclaimed memoir, *Persepolis*, coming from Pantheon this fall.

The big comics companies also made a stronger showing than ever, in part thanks to the special graphic novel pavilion on the exhibit floor and a day devoted to graphic novel-related panels. DC Comics drew crowds for signings by Howard Chaykin and David Tischman (*Barnum*); Warren Ellis and Colleen Doran (*Orbiter*); and Neil Gaiman (the hotly anticipated *Sandman: Endless Nights*). DC also has a number of movie tie-ins (*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) and evergreens (Mad, Batman-related titles, and the newly acquired bestselling Elfquest properties).

Dark Horse announced a new series based on the fictional characters from Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Chabon's acclaimed novel *Kavalier & Clay*, which is set in the early days of the comic-book industry. Chabon will contribute some writing and oversee the series, which will feature a number of writers and artists. Dark Horse will also release a number of manga titles that are also popular anime, including *The Ring* by Takahashi and Inagaki, *Trigun* by Yasuhiro Nightow and *Hellsing* by Kouta Hirano.

Image Comics did well with its cult hit super-hero series Powers (and was touting *The Bunker*, a new novel by Bruce Mutard). CrossGen continues to experiment with formats for its trade titles, most recently a new digest-size paperback.

Marvel Comics, rumored to be seeking a buyer, has quite a few major media tie-ins (including X-Men, Hulk, Daredevil and Spider-Man books), although the comics publisher has incurred retailers' wrath by allowing some hot titles to drift in and out of print and by refusing to go back to press for even fast-selling hardcovers. (This seems to be an unfortunate legacy of the comics industry's obsession with creating "collectible" back issues). New sales manager David Gabriel noted that he's keeping a close eye on inventory, and building on the company's unbeatable brand recognition to try to get its books into new retail venues.

Even conventional publishers are getting in on the graphic-novel act (the collapse of Doubleday's short-lived line was discussed at a panel or two). Byron Preiss's iBooks is publishing a series of manga and nonmanga graphic novels with distribution by S&S. Pantheon's *Satrap* was on hand for a panel of graphic novelists (which included D&Q's Joe Sacco and Top Shelf's Douglas TenNapel) to discuss *Persepolis*; Little Lit cofounder Françoise Mouly, *New Yorker* art director and wife of Art Spiegelman, discussed literary graphic novels and gave a slide preview of the forthcoming *It Was a Dark and Silly Night* (HarperCollins). Vertical, a new house specializing in translations of Japanese prose fiction, announced an American edition of manga pioneer Osamu Tezuka's eight-volume biography of Buddha.

Publisher/distributor Last Gasp, whose series of Tintin classics reissues has gotten into gear, announced the first English translation of the entirety of Keiji Nakazawa's legendary Barefoot Gen series, an extraordinary memoir of the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. In the graphic novel pavilion, NBM's booth drew browsers to its lush and literary graphic-novel adaptation of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, a new adaptation of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and *Johnny Jihad*, a forthcoming work inspired by the life of John Walker Lindh.

### Any Problems?



Viz-ible: Viz looms over BEA.

The only hint of a dark cloud was the threat of a possible glut of titles—particularly in the manga category. With Tokyopop soon to release 40 manga titles a month and Viz planning another 240 volumes next year, it's getting harder for buyers to keep track of them all. Distributors and publishers alike told *PW* that they must educate consumers and retailers at the same time. And while recent movies based on graphic novels have been a boon to sales, some worry that a few flops could make retailers wary.

Indeed, at several panels on Saturday, librarians pleaded for more information on categories, as well as age-appropriate labeling for younger readers. "We don't shelve graphic novels, because we can't keep them on the shelves," proclaimed one enthusiastic librarian.

But with sales figures for graphic novels of all kinds rising steadily, look for an impressive selection of book-format comics—everything from commercial fiction to serious nonfiction to graphic novels for kids—to show up very soon at a general bookstore, comics specialty store or nontraditional retail outlet near you.

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