

Using Comics and Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy in Libraries

By Ray Ganessingh

The Alma Jordan Library

Comic books and graphics novels, by dint of their colorful and lively illustrations and dynamic narratives, are able to appeal to populations of all ages. Sylvia (2023) refers to them as “an art form that is tremendously popular” (p. 124), revealing that the market for this type of reading material continues to be vast. While comics and graphic novels are typically discussed in relation to their appeal for aesthetic reading, researchers also underscore their usefulness for the development of knowledge on a broad range of real-world concerns and literacy skills and habits, and for helping libraries to continue to serve their communities.

Visual storytelling media are valuable tools for educating various populations on current affairs, extant issues, and various other socially relevant information. Schneider and Cannon (2020) note that “the subject matter covered in comics and graphic novels can range from issues on human rights in Palestine to medical and mental health issues like cancer and depression, for example” (p. 178). Furthermore, White (2023) underscores the importance of librarians needing to advocate for the inclusion of visual novels to libraries and for their use to further set learning objectives in classrooms as a way of connecting important issues with accessible and appealing formats that will encourage students to engage with them.

Additionally, by virtue of their popularity, comic books and graphic novels can help to increase literacy skills within populations. Jones (2022) assert that they can be invaluable for promoting reading skills, improving comprehension and developing overall literacy skills. In particular, they serve as tools for promoting critical literacy through the depiction of diverse cultural and social contexts, and they assist with creating frameworks for open discussion. As MacGeorge’s (2024) study found, “Comics being adapted into videos and used in workshops highlight their effectiveness in promoting engagement and facilitating semi-structured discussions” (p. 1).

Comic books have also proven to be useful for documenting and expanding on culturally relevant figures, such as the Anansi character of West African and Caribbean folklore that was historically passed down through oral tradition. By including comics on Anansi in library collections – as they have been in the West Indiana and Special Collections sections at the Alma Jordan Library at The University of the West Indies, St Augustine Campus – this knowledge is made available to researchers and students, ensuring that the cultural practice of “Anansi stories” continues to be passed down.

Moreover, comic books and graphic novel collections can help libraries to continue serving their communities. Comic books may not be easy to acquire from bookstores, nor are all readers able to afford each individual issue or the subscription fees that grant access to digital comics. Libraries, therefore, are a practical way for communities to have access to the narratives they are interested in for aesthetic or efferent reading, or for research purposes. Additionally, libraries can further solidify their position as community spaces through the hosting of events, book clubs, graphic novel discussions, author signings or even comic conventions which can spark interest

and engage users in the library community. In this way, visual novel collections serve to both supply communities and attract them.

Though comic books and visual novels are yet to be unanimously regarded as suitable for classrooms and libraries, studies have found that they have proven their utility in both spaces. Much learning can be facilitated through them, and they can invite communities to spend time at their local libraries. Alverson (2024) states that graphic novels continue to be the most popular titles in libraries. By making room for these collections among the other collections, libraries would simply be continuing to fulfil their core purpose of providing for their communities.

References

- Alverson B. Librarians celebrate comics in the face of censorship. *Publishers Weekly*. 2024;271(23), 56.
- Jones, T. (2022). Teaching media literacy using graphic novels. *Booklist*, 118(21), S37-S37.
- MacGeorge, R. B. (2024). Illustrating tomorrow: The role of comics in engaging research participants in disruptive futures research. *World Futures Review*, 9467567241249710.
- Schneider, E., & Cannon, P. (2020). Comic cons and libraries: Opportunities for patron outreach. *Public Library Quarterly*, 39(2), 170-179.
- Sylvia, M. (2024). Comic books, special collections, and the academic library. *Library Journal*, 149(3), 124-126.
- White, A. L. (2023). Why comics matter: Defending the right to read in the face of challenges. *Booklist*, 119(21), S12-S12.

