

TEEN LIBRARIAN

Monthly

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Editorial

Welcome to the (delayed) September edition of TLM. This month the focus is on Graphic Novels with three main articles – the first being an introduction to Mel Gibson (the premiere Graphic Novels educationalist) and the work she does, the second looking at a potentially disturbing trend in new GNs and the third a first-hand account of a library staff-member's introduction to the world of Graphic Novels in the Library. Also included are links to useful GN-related websites for Librarians, a list of Graphic Novels that should do well in Libraries and another plug for GNLIBUK. Also included in this issue is an interview with YA author Amanda Lees.

A quick reminder – tomorrow is International Talk Like a Pirate Day and should be celebrated by talking like a pirate (this may prove popular with the teens in your libraries. For more information go to: <http://www.yarr.org.uk>

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Dr Mel Comics'...

Someone recently called me by that name and I think I'm going to have to adopt it! I'll be launching a website before Christmas to complement the one that I wrote for Learning and Teaching Scotland
<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/literacy/findresources/graphicnovels/section/intro.asp>

and Dr Mel Comics will be the name I use. It will make things easier for folk who try to find me on the internet and get caught up with all the stuff about the other Mel Gibson!

As the name suggests, I run training and promotional events about comics and graphic novels for libraries, schools and other organizations. I work with all ages, but most of my work has been with 12-21 year olds. I've done this kind of work since 1993 when I contributed to

'Graphic Account' on developing graphic novels collections for 16-25 year olds, which was published by Youth Libraries Group. I also run training events on manga and anime, working with young adults, picture books as art, visual literacies and the links between children's books and the Internet.

In addition, I'm a Senior Lecturer at Northumbria University where I teach modules in both 'Perspectives on Children's Literature' and 'Picture Books and Comics for the Developing Reader'. This links in with my work as the current Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Award judge for Northern YLG and with my research.

When I run training, the packages are tailored to suit the individual organizations I work with and will typically involve several sessions on different themes. I can talk about the range of stock on offer in the medium, exploring, for instance, how it encompasses work written for both adults and children. Focusing entirely on one kind of comic, manga, for instance, is possible too.

I can also incorporate sessions in which participants start to learn how to assess these texts for stock selection purposes (whether they are developing collections for adults or children), discuss issues and problems around these publications, explore which titles may be suitable for use as part of the school curriculum, or develop ways of promoting manga, anime, graphic novels and comics.

Promotional events are similarly customised and are highly interactive rather than straightforward lectures. They can be targeted at a particular age or skills and knowledge level. Themes can be wide-ranging, including, comics around the world, British perspectives on the comic, gender and comics, fandom, manga and anime.

A day or half day event usually encompasses a number of short talks. Such talks, usually lasting about an hour and a half, can incorporate questions and an opportunity to read and borrow from the collections that have been 'booktalked'. This is an ideal format for a school's book week event, for instance. In that context, these sessions can also be used to allow the groups involved an opportunity to build a list of 'wants' for their school library, as a first stage towards setting up a collection.

As reading is usually part of the sessions in both training and promotional events, there needs to be enough books to allow the audience (however big it is) to have a selection to choose from and rummage through, so I often carry enough books to allow that to happen (or bring titles that complement what a venue already has in stock, so I need information about what is in stock before the event). In terms of the number of participants, I have worked with groups as small as 5 and as large as 120, but work best with groups of 15-35.

Longer sessions spent with smaller groups are also an option.. For instance, a number of events I've run for younger audiences have included a follow-up activity, typically something along the lines of 'Design a cover for a comic you'd like to see'. On other occasions I have done an introductory talk that acts as a lead into a day of artist's workshops. What I'll do depends on the time available, as well as on the age of the participants.

These talks, then, can be used to help create collections, promote new collections or breathe life into old ones. However, I don't just work with schools to do this, but run events in range of venues with a number of different audiences. For instance, recent months have seen me working in schools, school libraries, public libraries, colleges and universities with audiences aged between 12 and 50+. I have also been involved in a number of open public events, attracting both adults and children into art galleries, libraries and youth clubs, participated in literature festivals and worked with prison libraries.

My basic needs for equipment are enough tables behind me when I stand and speak to allow all the books I bring

to be spread out and a flip chart and pens. If I can have access to the internet and a large screen, then great, but I can design sessions that work when that is not possible. As these events largely involve small group work, flexible seating is needed.

Costs depend on the nature and length of the event. Expenses will typically need to cover a rail fare to the venue, and possibly an overnight stay.

Contact me via mel.g@blueyonder.co.uk

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Titles

Graphic Novels have been in most Public Libraries for a few years now, so rather than rehash the great and popular titles (e.g. Sandman, Watchmen, Maus, Dark Knight Returns) what follows below is a list of equally good titles that may be popular. First up is:

Marvel Zombies

Published by Marvel Comics, *Marvel Zombies* is a take on the Marvel Universe of super heroes (and villains) as flesh-eating zombies.

Fables

This DC/Vertigo series by Bill Willingham is about characters from fairy-tales and fables (The Big Bad Wolf, Snow White, Bluebeard etc.) who, having been chased out of their homelands by the Adversary (an unknown being of great power), who is busy conquering the worlds of fable and myth, are living in exile in a secret community in New York. This series already has several volumes in print and a spin-off series (*Jack of the Fables*).

Hellboy

Starring Hellboy the demon/monster hunter with his stone right hand of doom. A number of the stories within the series are based on world monster myths and also fighting nazis. An animated film has recently been released and Guillermo del Toro is working on the sequel to the live action film of a few years ago.

Crecy

A graphic novella by Warren Ellis (always a good writer), about the great

English victory at Crecy in France. A factually accurate black & white comic with lots of humour and some swearing.

Ex Machina

A GN series about an ex-superhero turned mayor of New York city, focusing on real-world issues, as well as some issues that relate to a world where a man can become a superhero. Well worth reading and owning.

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Comic Books: The Anti-Trend

Most industries follow or set trends aiming at both retaining their customer base and sucking in new devotees. The mainstream comic book industry however seems to have entered an anti-trend; you might say they've turned their back on the concept of developing new fans and over-indulged in nostalgic trips down retro lane with a far-reaching push to raise the age that comics are suitable for. This pincer-movement is squeezing younger fans out and away from developing a passion for characters that were once role-models for generations.

The problem seems to be that many of today's superstar comic book writers were the uber-geeks of yesteryear. With fond memories of obscure heroes and villains, and a passion for the mind-bending, multi-dimensional storylines of the 70s and 80s, they're bringing back the wacky, but sadly not the funny to the funny books. DC Comics has just re-introduced the 'multiverse' – a series of alternate realities that cross over and give rise to the possibility of popular characters appearing in confusing new guises. Marvel has stripped away years of fun and good times and brought misery to most of its heroes with its Civil War series, whilst expecting readers to accept familiarity with hundreds of characters. Grant Morrison's current run on Batman has focussed on the Club of Heroes – a retro revisiting of a cheesy collection of Batman rip-offs, first introduced in 1955 and rarely seen since. It seems that the concept of original story-telling has found its place firmly on the backseat.

When Batman Year One and The Dark Knight Returns appeared in the 1980s, a new era of adult story telling dawned. The impact of these stories, and other special event comics, pushed the boundaries of acceptability and

screamed 'Grown Up' to publishers, that had previously targeted kids above all other groups. This was no bad thing – the impact was a maturing of the format into something that could be enjoyed on sophisticated or visceral levels, appealing to kids and adults alike. Recently however, many writers seem to have taken the step of sucking much of the innocence out of many of the regular monthly titles, making them quite literally 'adult' entertainment. A recent issue of Birds of Prey, a great comic about a team of female super-heroines, showed two villainesses in a post-coital posture draped only in bed sheets. The new Green Arrow Year One mini series nonchalantly shows its hero temporarily addicted to opium for a short time. Say goodbye to sophisticated and hello to simple extremes.

There isn't much we can do about all of this. Most comic titles, including those mentioned here, provide cracking entertainment to the right type of fan. It's just that those fans don't tend to be the kids we Teen Librarians seek to attract. These issues present a challenge to collection building and there is a real possibility that we could flood our shelves with titles that veer towards the confusing or the extreme. What we should be doing is moving away from the idea of letting suppliers select these books for us and become familiar with them ourselves. While most other areas of library stock are moving towards the de-specialisation of Librarians, graphic novels are arguably requiring more insight than ever to ensure that a balance is struck to maintain and develop the readership we desire in libraries.

There are easy ways out, such as only stocking simple books like Marvel's Ultimate line, which side-steps many of the more confusing continuity issues. But still, many of the most appealing and relevant books come from series that are steeped in continuity and affected by the trend towards representing grown-up concepts. There appears to be no option other than to develop and select these books based on expertise not convenience, and to manually seek balance within a collection to provide the best for both younger and older readers.

Graphic Novels: The Beginner's Tale

Eyebrow raised.

"Graphic Novel? >snort< Puh-leeeeee!"

"It's a **comic-book!**"

Thus I entered into the vast and perplexing world that is '**Graphic Novels**' (A novel whose narrative is conveyed using a combination of text and art, with more lengthy and complex plotlines than '*comic-books*'... Similar to comic-books... but *definitely not* comic-books).

Viewed from the outside, these Graphic Novels (and their devotees) appeared strange to me. Terrifying even. Never before had I seen so many teenage Goths in the library. What was it that attracted them to those shadowy and depressing Manga titles shelved so close by? Egged on by my ever-enthusiastic Teen-Librarian colleague, I decided to break out of my comfort zone...I decided to give one a try.... *Yay me*

Hmmm. Which one to choose...? I scanned the shelves.

Bottom row: Novels based on movies, Star Wars mainly (wa! no Star Trek?!)
>cough< Well, I have watched them already - maybe that's just playing safe.

Next Shelf: American Stuff. Marvel/DC. They definitely look like comic-books to me!! Superheroes mainly; Batman, Superman, X-Men. Sigh. I just can't bring myself to read one. If only I were a pre-pubescent boy. Or that creepy guy with the anorak that keeps hanging around...

Top Shelf: Manga. Don't know much about that. Well, honestly haven't really heard of it. Seems pretty popular though...especially with the 'alternative' types.

Voilà! Manga it was then! (Hey I can be alternative...geek is the new cool - ok?) I start to read one, but it makes no sense. Wait a minute. Reading it wrong way round. *Oooo! Freaky*. I start again (from the beginning). I do NOT approve. >Should kids be **allowed** to read this stuff?< "You probably won't like that one," says Teen Librarian colleague.

"That's Shonen Manga [written for male readers]. Try a Shojo one instead [written for female readers]". He hands me *Aria #1*. I read it. Pretty pictures!! Warm fuzzy storyline! I love it!! Of course I don't admit to it straight away. I mean, I read *proper* books. Still, since I'd started...I finish the complete series.

Suddenly, I have developed new Manga obsession! I begin to choose ones all by myself. I find I can usually tell Shojo/Shonen by the pictures (check out illustrations of female characters...men are so simple). Next series is '*Fushigi Yugi*' - I'm really impressed with Yu Watase's work. I'm completely drawn into the plot - I laugh, I cry! And I fit in reading it between household chores (never yet achieved with regular novel). Soon Manga has opened up a whole new world...I start to watch Anime films. I fall passionately in love with Hayao Miyazaki and all things Studio Ghibli. I am inspired to read Miyazaki's novels.... and so my journey continues on...

So what have I learnt on this pilgrimage of new discovery? Well firstly, that I should never have looked down on Graphic Novels-they deserve more respect. Not only are they fun, with great storylines and amazing artwork, they can also be challenging and intellectually stimulating reads. Secondly, that working with children in a library means listening to their voices. They *know* what they like. If you're not sure about these new-fangled graphic things, try asking a Teen about them.

Also, if you happen to be standing in the Graphic Novel section of Foyles take advantage of that comic-book geek standing close by-they'll be happy to tell you everything you want to know about GNs - believe me. Lastly I've learnt that you should never be afraid to try new things...you might just be pleasantly surprised!

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Links

<http://www.graphicnovels.brodart.com/home.htm>

Graphic Novel Resources for librarians and the like-minded. Includes Forum and latest GN news

<http://my.voyager.net/~sraiteri/comicslinks.htm>

Links page to other sites about Graphic Novels. Many designed to help Librarians new to Gns.

<http://www.noflyingnotights.com/>

Forum/Review site that has area specifically for teens and GNs aimed at them.

In 1997, Image Comics published Lea Hernandez's Texas Steampunk graphic novels *Cathedral Child* and *Clockwork Angels*. *Cathedral Child* is available to read online for free here:

<http://www.webcomicsnation.com/divalea/cc/series.php?view=current>

Comic books and current events get looked at here:

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/09/why_wont_comics_deal_with_terr.html

News

To learn more about comics and Graphic Novels in the UK watch Comics Britannia. Follow this link for more information:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/comicsbritannia/comics-britannia.shtml>

Papercutz, a division of NBM, will be releasing new Classics Illustrated editions. This begins in November with a 144-page adaptation of *Wind in the Willows*.

It will be released in both hardcover and paperback, which is a standard practice for Papercutz, which also publishes the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys graphic novels.

The MCM (Movie, Comic, Media) Expo comes to London 20th - 21st October. It will be held at ExCeL, Royal Victoria Dock (see website below for more details). Apart from appearances by guests from TV and film, a large section of the convention is dedicated to the world of Manga and Anime. Several Graphic Novel artists will also be in attendance as well as authors such as

Eoin Colfer, who hopes to promote the new release of 'Artemis Fowl' in comic-form. Entrance costs approx. £10 but tickets can be bought in advance online (highly recommended). A perfect opportunity to check out what's new in Graphic Novel land!

<http://www.londonexpo.com/>



A discussion group for library professionals in the UK to discuss all things about graphic novels. Inspired by the USA list GNLIB, but this one will be more focused on UK issues in the library world.

<http://groups.google.co.uk/group/GNLIBUK?hl=en>

Join now and chat about comics and graphic novels in UK Libraries with other Librarians!

Submissions

If anyone would like to submit an article or idea for inclusion in the newsletter, please send it to teenlib@teenlibrarian.co.uk

Editor: Matthew Imrie

Contributors: Mel Gibson, Paul Fisher, Jenny Price & Matthew Imrie

Special thanks to Amanda Lees for giving up her time to answer the eight questions.

Eight Questions with... Amanda Lees

Q1. What made you decide to write for teenagers?

I was an avid reader throughout my teens and some of the books I read then stayed with me for life. I thought it would be wonderful to try to make that same impact on another generation. Also, my stepson and some of my friends' kids had all hit their teens and were asking why I hadn't written a book they could read. The result is the KUMARI series...

Q2. How do you get into the heads of your characters?

I find it very easy. I trained as an actress and that really helps me to get inside my characters. Often I will get up and act them out, particularly when writing dialogue, although I make sure I do that well away from the windows in case any neighbours are passing...

Q3. Do you instinctively know what will appeal to Teens or is it more of a hit and miss process?

I spend a lot of time with Teens so I think I'm pretty aware of what they are into (an incredible variety of things that changes on an almost daily basis). I think it helps that I went to a very strict Convent boarding school and therefore suffer from arrested development. In my mind, I'm eternally fourteen...fifteen at a push...

Q4. What is the most satisfying part of the writing process for you?

I love every part of the process from the initial exciting surge of ideas through the crafting of plot and character to the end stage of careful editing.

Q5. Do you ever read the works of other Teen/YA authors? If yes what can you recommend?

I read voraciously and often read the works of other Teen/YA authors although not when I am writing in case I inadvertently lift their ideas! I always hesitate to recommend individual authors as taste is so subjective and I would prefer readers to find their own favourites as it can be such a valuable voyage of discovery. If pressed, I would suggest the works of writers such as Mary Stewart, MM Kaye and Ursula le Guin – all immensely rich and satisfying despite no

longer being at the forefront of literary fashion.

Q6. Are any of your novels based on personal experiences?

I think it is impossible for an author not to put something of themselves and their experiences into their books.

Q7. What are you working on at the moment?

I have just finished writing the second book in the KUMARI series, KUMARI, GODDESS OF SECRETS and am about to begin writing the third.

Q8. Do you ever do Library visits to Teen Reading Groups? If yes, what is the best way to get in contact with you or your agent about it?

Yes of course – I love meeting Teen readers and always find it a mutually beneficial experience. The best way to get in touch is through my publicist, Mary Byrne, on: 020 7729 6359 or mary.byrne@virgin.net

Or through my publishers, Piccadilly Press:

Vivien Tesseract on v.tesseract@piccadillypress.co.uk