

# How can the active promotion of graphic novels support and enhance boys' enthusiasm for leisure reading?

**Val Bunn    Loughborough Grammar School    East Midlands England**

## **Abstract**

Loan statistics indicated that graphic novels were growing in popularity after *Tintin* was chosen for Loughborough Grammar School's Whole School Book Promotion in 2009. In the same year, sales of graphic novels showed the greatest increase of any fiction sub-genre in UK bookshops. I wanted to further investigate this trend with a group of 22 twelve-year old boys.

New stock was purchased, seating cubes were positioned near the graphic novel section, the display area was extended and a visit from Dave Shelton was arranged. His humorous noir graphic novel *Good Dog, Bad Dog* had just been published. Library sessions were timetabled and questionnaires, photographs, video recordings, participant reflections and my observations contributed to the research on the impact of graphic novels on boys' recreational reading.

The findings were positive with two strong outcomes emerging. The first was that the inclusion of a graphic novelist as a central strategy was very successful. The second outcome was that browsing, rather than borrowing, was a significant factor in enhancing reading for pleasure in the school library.

## **Introduction**

An action research project was triggered by my hunch that graphic novels have become more popular since a volume of Hergé's *Adventures of Tintin* was selected as the Whole School Book program in 2009. This is an annual event at Loughborough Grammar School wherein the same book is distributed to all the boys in the summer term. The library is closely involved with this promotion.

As the borrowing and browsing of graphic novels increased significantly after this event, it seemed appropriate to test the assumption that strategically promoting graphic novels would encourage and stimulate more boys to read for pleasure. Hence, I was encouraged, with the support of the Headmaster, the Head of Sixth Form and the Head of English, to investigate what I called the

'Tintin effect' and the impact graphic novels could have on boys' enthusiasm for leisure reading.

## Context of Research

Loughborough Grammar School is an academic independent school situated in the East Midlands in England, near the cities of Nottingham and Leicester. It is a selective school of over 1000 boys aged 10-18 years. There is a strong reading culture in the school. Junior fiction is particularly popular with years 6-9 reading five times more fiction than years 10-11. Loan statistics show that reading decreases in year 9. These statistics also reflect that year 9 is borrowing more graphic novels than the younger boys.

## Literature Review

Graphic novels are now regarded as literature in their own right. Michigan State University and Columbia University are two of the most prominent universities investing in the creation of graphic novel and comic book archives to support future research into the medium. In a European context, comics or *bandes dessinées*, are regarded as a serious art form, described as 'the ninth art' (alongside other media, such as film, theatre and poetry) with no distinction made between comics such as *Asterix* and more serious graphic novels such as *Persepolis*. To add to the debate over graphic novels as legitimate school reading, it is interesting to note that, according to Fingerroth (2008), *Tintin in Tibet* was voted the greatest French language book of all time.

Weiner (2005) defines a graphic novel as a story in comic book format with a beginning, middle and end, and as Fingerroth (2008) states, the term is now common currency. It is used by bookshops and libraries in the UK to include texts as disparate as *Batman*, *The Simpsons*, *Tintin* and the Pulitzer Prize winner *Maus*.

Krashen (1993) refers to comic books as light reading. His comment that, "perhaps the most powerful way of encouraging children to read is by exposing them to light reading" (Krashen, 1993, p.47) underlines his belief that this is exactly how most of us learn to read. McCloud (1994) also described reader progression from the picture books of childhood, to text with occasional pictures, to 'real books' with no pictures and, as he notes, "is sadly the case these days, to no books at all" (p.140).

McCloud's (1994) theories on reader identification and involvement in graphic novels support Booth's (2002) argument that bringing a realistic background to a boy's reading experience is important. McCloud (1994) stated that, "when you enter the world of the cartoon you see yourself"

(p.36). Booth (2002) also referred to reader engagement in comic books in which the boy reader becomes the hero and cannot put the book down. Riches (2009) noted that Philip Pullman praised the comic medium for being a wonderful way of telling stories, combining the immediacy of the cinema with all the advantages of a book.

The Canadian Council on Learning (2010) reaffirms this and concludes that boys prefer to read fantasy, non-fiction and comic books and that comics are the second most popular reading choice for boys, behind newspapers and magazines. The report also states that both good readers and those with reading problems are equally attracted to comics. DeSpirt (2007) observes, “boys need to be encouraged to read by grabbing their attention not by forcing them to read. Forcing boys to read will not make them lifelong readers, rather it will create resistance readers” (para.1). Thus the recent popularity of graphic novels indicates that they might be just the attention grabbing books alluded to by DeSpirt.

In defence of the comic book as legitimate reading material for boys, Ujiie and Krashen (1996 online) agree that the comic book, “does not inhibit other kinds of reading, and is consistent with the hypothesis that comic book reading facilitates heavier reading” (Summary, para.1). From the findings of two of their studies, their evidence points to the strong association between comic book reading and pleasure reading. Krashen (1993) describes comic books as a conduit to free voluntary reading by developing a further interest in books. In a study focused on reading habits in a particular junior high school in the United States, he notes that general library use increased by 82% when more comic books were available. This resonates with the notion that, “those boys who read more comic books did more pleasure reading, liked to read more and tended to read more books” (Ujiie & Krashen 1996, Summary, para. 1).

## **Research Method**

I found the interpretative nature of action research particularly relevant in determining whether my hunch would give me the results I wanted and I used the ‘I wonder what would happen if’ approach, suggested by McNiff (2010). Qualitative techniques were mainly employed to explore the research topic using questionnaires, videos, photographs, participant reflections and field notes to give some measure of triangulation. In addition, I maintained a journal detailing the experience of action research and my observations made during the process. I also used data from loan statistics. The data analysis was manual and I looked for patterns and themes within the data. As a participant observer, I was central to all aspects of the research.

Library sessions were booked over a five-week period, including a visit from Dave Shelton, author of the graphic novel, *Good Dog, Bad Dog*, arranged for week three. Prior to this, I undertook a major review of the graphic novel provision in the library. I extended the graphic novel shelving, purchased new stock, put up new posters which were designed to advertise the graphic novels in the collection and strategically placed new seating cubes nearby. As well as this, I re-categorised the graphic novels along genre and publisher lines, for example DC, Marvel and European graphic novels were grouped separately. I also devoted three shelves to displays of new and eye-catching stock.

### ***Participants***

The sample was a group of 22 year 8 boys, aged 12-13, chosen by the Head of English. They were a mixed ability group with English as their first language. During the previous year their loan statistics showed that they had read 185 books between them, including 41 graphic novels. Three of the boys had no loans at all.

### ***Data Collection and Data Analysis***

To enhance validity, data were gathered from several sources to ascertain the emergence of any recurrent patterns or themes.

As there were only 22 in the focus group, I was able to use a variety of data collection methods, both qualitative and quantitative. A questionnaire was given to each boy during the first and final library session of the research project; the same questions were asked so that reliable comparisons could be made. There was room for brief comments as well thereby allowing the boys' voices to be used as authentic data.

The library visits were filmed and photographs were taken so that any changes in behavioural patterns could be noted. Dave Shelton's talk, which included a question and answer session, was similarly observed. The boys were all asked for written reflections regarding the question 'What did you think of the author visit?' I kept field notes in chronological order in a journal.

The quantitative data was derived from each participant's borrowing record from September to December which provided specific evidence regarding any increase in their leisure reading. In addition, the 'Top 100 Loans' for the same period showed the impact of the graphic novel promotion on boys' reading throughout the school.

In order to gain an overall understanding, I sifted through the accumulated data to identify any emergent trends and patterns. I sorted the data into categories which I considered to be pertinent to the research question. I determined these through video footage of the group, photographs, my observations, questionnaires, boys' reflections and comments and, to a lesser extent, library loan statistics. I continually reviewed the data so that the analysis was ongoing. I used a card system and colour coding, which I found useful for cross-referencing. Participant perspectives have played a large part in my data analysis, giving validity to the data.

My initial categories were: reading enjoyment and habits; the author visit; specific genre promotion; loan statistics; the success of the library sessions; location of the graphic novels; browsing/not borrowing and the impact of *Tintin* as the Whole School Book. After much consideration and reflection, I selected two themes which stood out from the others. This gave some structure to the interpretation of the data.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***The author visit***

The author visit emerged as a significant factor regarding the boys' engagement with graphic novels. It was strikingly successful with 13 of the 22 responses being exceptionally positive. One participant noted that, "*I will definitely be going to read more graphic novels like Watchmen, Dave Shelton's next book and others*". Watching the filming of the author session reinforced this positive enthusiasm. The enjoyment and exuberance of the group was clearly evident in the boys' applause, eager questions and comments. Dave Shelton's love of comics complemented the action research topic perfectly and he promoted the genre with enthusiasm. He sold 12 copies of his book to members of the group and in each he added a cartoon drawing of one of the dog detectives. This really thrilled the boys and one wrote, "*I am making a comic book now. I am inspired*", while another commented that, "*I have started reading his book and thought it was incredible*". The graphic novelist visit was a key element in the success of the graphic novel promotion. There is no better evidence than one boy's comment that, "*Dave Shelton has opened my mind to the world of comics.*"

The research findings also show that the boys' enthusiasm for reading graphic novels increased as a result of Dave Shelton's session. Participant answers to the question 'How often do you read graphic novels?' indicated that boys who read graphic novels 'daily' increased from one to four; boys who read graphic novels weekly increased from five to nine; boys who 'never' read graphic novels decreased from nine to four.

There were positive comments from the 'never read graphic novels' group, including, "*it was a good experience talking to Dave Shelton as it boosted my confidence to read graphic novels*". Another boy noted that he had begun reading *Good Dog, Bad Dog*.

In the second questionnaire one of the boys wrote, "*I am now really enjoying graphic novels as more of an art*". This showed what a positive impact a graphic novelist had in this specific genre promotion and how it successfully enhanced boys' engagement with reading for pleasure. Another boy really enjoyed the author session, "*as Dave Shelton introduced us to many other comics and comic authors*". This resonates with Booth's (2002, p.61) comment that "The personal feelings that children develop from meeting authors promote further reading of selections by those authors, along with books on related themes".

This was certainly true from several of the boys' answers. "*I enjoyed the way he interacted with us and talked to us about books, after that I am more interested in graphic novels*" and, "*he has inspired me to read graphic novels more*". A review from the comic book website Toonhound (2010 online) sums this up perfectly by stating that for a reader who has recently discovered the joys of *Tintin* or *Asterix*, *Good Dog, Bad Dog* is "just the ticket for turning young eyes towards a wonderful world of comics" (para.8).

### ***Browsing, not borrowing***

Browsing, rather than borrowing, was the second theme that added important evidence in answering my research question. From the filming I could see that the boys gravitated to the newly-updated graphic novel section. They settled quickly and looked relaxed. After their library visits, I observed that the graphic novel area of the library showed by far the greatest amount of use. Comments such as, "*with a graphic novel you can read a bit and come back to it*" and, "*I sometimes pick up a graphic novel when I have a bit of spare time in the library*" indicated how the boys liked to browse the graphic novel section.

Analysis of the photographs, video and personal observations all showed that the boys were relaxed browsers of graphic novels in the library sessions. One boy comment that, "*You can read a book and just relax*" and another said, "*I love to read graphic novels and reading for pleasure as it's so fun*".

I chose a time when the boys had the library more or less to themselves and I could see that this

allowed them to browse with no pressure placed on them to quickly select a book and then leave. The provision of new seating cubes in the reading corner adjacent to the new graphic novel display encouraged boys to stay there and read. One boy wrote, “*I think reading is great because it calms you down, you can sit down with a book and relax*”. Replies to the question 'Which section of the library do you go to first?' showed that the graphic novel promotion had had an impact as the number of boys who gave 'the graphic novel section' as their answer increased to twelve from eight.

I assumed that the boys in the focus group would snap up the new stock straight away but this was not the case. They borrowed 28 books, six of which were graphic novels, but none of those were the new books so perhaps the browsing aspect of graphic novels was the appeal.

The library sessions, which were each an hour long, showed that the boys were very happy to read in the library rather than borrowing books to read later, which explains why only six graphic novels were actually borrowed. Photographs and observation indicated that the boys were enthusiastic readers of graphic novels in the library and I noticed that these same boys came back during break, lunchtimes and after school to finish books. It also explains why the graphic novel section was the most disturbed every day.

Further evidence of the increasing popularity of graphic novels, as a consequence of the intervention, was the growing enthusiasm for the *Tintin* books. In the first questionnaire, in response to the question 'Was *Tintin* a good choice for a School Book?' eleven of the 22 boys answered yes. This increased to 17 in the second questionnaire which also revealed that ten boys had read further *Tintin* books, including one boy who said he had read, “*ALL of them*”. Another boy described *Good Dog, Bad Dog* as, “*Somehow Tintin, but with dogs*”.

The evidence indicates that my chosen intervention of promoting graphic novels through an author talk did enhance boys' enthusiasm for voluntary recreational reading. Favourable comments from the second questionnaire confirm this, including, “*I think graphic novels are really interesting, and once you start reading one you can't put it down. I was never into graphic novels until recently*”, as well as, “*I will definitely be going to read more graphic novels*”. Another boy wrote, “*I think we should have more graphic novels because when you read them you are more involved in the story because you see and read what is happening*”.

## **Implications of the Study on Practice**

DeSprit (2007) states that graphic novels are great reading material for boys because they get

hooked into reading the next book and then the next in a series. My action research project has confirmed this as well as the popularity of graphic novels, both in the focus group and throughout the school. Promoting graphic novels through purchase, display and an author visit saw boys gravitate to graphic novels by choice, particularly as browsers, and eventually as borrowers. Series such as *Batman*, *Bone*, *Tintin* and *Scott Pilgrim* were very popular and as one participant volunteered, “*Once I find a series that I like, I read all the way to the end of that series*”. As a consequence, I will continue to purchase and promote similar titles.

The environment made an important contribution to the boys' enjoyment whilst browsing the graphic novels. The boys did seem comfortable reading in the library, especially in the new reading area next to the graphic novels. This validated my decision to provide informal seating around the graphic novels section.

Many of the graphic novels purchased were fairly large and this may have discouraged borrowing in favour of browsing as the boys already have very heavy school bags filled with textbooks. The popularity of the smaller format *Scott Pilgrim* books supports this observation and may indicate that I will need to consider size when purchasing graphic novels.

## **Implications for the Future**

Author visits to enhance boys' engagement with reading a certain genre is an intervention that I hope will become integrated into my practice so I could consider further specific genre promotion as a second cycle to this research. Another possible idea would be to examine the impact of the dystopian-themed *Ship Breaker* by Paolo Bacigalupi, which is the Whole School Book for 2011, on boys and reading and compare it to *Tintin* and graphic novels.

## **Conclusion**

I was struck by a comment on the Lovereading website (2010 online) which encapsulates the appeal of graphic novels in a boys' school stating that, “graphic novels enhance reading skills and are particularly helpful in getting reluctant readers reading more enthusiastically” (para.4). My research strongly supports the conclusions of the Canadian Council on Learning (2010) that comics and graphic novels have become an undeniable aspect of popular culture with so many films based on them, appealing to boys in particular. I agree that school libraries should reflect boys' interests by embracing graphic novels to keep boys reading and prevent their reading enjoyment decreasing as they get older.

Graphic novels are a very valuable medium through which to reach boys at a key age. They are read by both the already committed reader and the reluctant reader, allowing enjoyment and enthusiasm for books to develop. The action research on graphic novels has shown that, given the right material, boys **do** read for pleasure. Graphic novels are to be recommended to all boys' school libraries.

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## **Reflection**

*Action research was a rewarding and challenging experience. I believe it enhanced my professionalism on many levels including meeting and exchanging ideas with the teacher librarians on my team.*

*The research for the literature review was particularly enjoyable.*

*I did find writing and submitting the report more difficult than I had anticipated whereas the library sessions and author visit worked perfectly.*

*I would like to thank the IBSC for the opportunity to investigate graphic novel promotion in the school library and for their invaluable support.*

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