

# Graphic Novels in the Public Library

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Ten years ago, librarian M.R. Lavin wrote an article for *Serials Reviews* that asked, “Do graphic novels belong in libraries?” (1998, 44). While much has changed in the intervening years, with graphic novels now numbering amongst the highest circulating collections in public libraries, the question

today is not *if*, but *where* they belong in the library,<sup>1</sup> Are graphic novels, due to their format, only suitable reading for teens and young adults, or do they demand place and consideration in adult and/or literature collections? Further, what is our role as library professionals in considering this burgeoning medium?

Librarian Francisca Goldsmith (2005) has tackled these questions in her book, *Graphic Novels Now*, and she cautions that the library should not be too quick to judge these collections nor limit perceptions of their use, especially regarding how libraries physically

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<sup>1</sup> Graphic artist Will Eisner coined the term, “graphic novel,” in 1978, though the term only began its common usage in the 1980s with the publication of *Maus* (1986) and two other popular novel-length comics – Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1987), and Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). While there is no set definition for what a “graphic novel” is, the term generally refers to a collection of sequential art (comics) presented in a book-length format with a story that follows a definitive narrative structure. Michele Gorman (2003) in *Getting Graphic: Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens* provides a good discussion and description of the definition of graphic novels (pp. xii). As well, Stephen Weiner’s article, “Beyond Superheroes: Comics Get Serious,” provides an excellent overview of the evolution of graphic novels (2002). The popularity of graphic novels and their impact on library circulation statistics is discussed in several articles in *Library Journal*, including Stephen Raiteri’s “Graphic Novels” (2006 March 15) and Ann Kim and Michael Rogers’s “Librarians Out Front at Comic Con” (2007 April 1). While there is no definitive study of graphic novel circulation statistics overall that I identified for this study, individual libraries have reported that some graphic novel collections currently represent up to 45% of their YA circulation (as reported in Kim and Rogers) and that graphic novels continue to circulate at an increasing rate, with many items circulating over fifteen times/yearly (as reported in Raiteri).

classify and segment these collections to particular bibliographic areas. Goldsmith's suggestion bears especial consideration as current Canadian public library graphic novel collections adhere to little uniformity in classification, collection organization or designation. I will argue that in spite of compelling arguments urging for an increased role of graphic novels in the library as a whole, graphic novels—especially fictional accounts—are often confined to the library's Young Adult (YA) collections, or are the victims of a confusing mix of classifications that leave library users perplexed as to the collections' scope and purpose in the library. Graphic novels can span the varied realms of fiction, non-fiction, historical documentary, and can include Holocaust memoirs and dystopian fantasies, yet their confusing classifications leave their breadth of information inaccessible to many library users.

An example of this confusing mix can be found by consulting public library catalogues in Canada. The Calgary Public Library has classified *Persepolis*—an autobiographical account of Marjane Satrapi's childhood during the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979—as Adult Fiction; by contrast, the London Public Library has classified *Persepolis* according to the Dewey Decimal System (DDS) and has

placed it in their Young Adult collection. This disjuncture is further reflected in library and academic scholarship surrounding graphic novels. Literary critic Edward Said, like Goldsmith, has made a case for the mature and transformative qualities of graphic novels, arguing that graphic novels “in their relentless foregrounding...seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined” (2002, ii). Yet in practice, graphic novels are often defined within the realm of teens and young adults, and are most often maintained in public collections by YA librarians.

To examine these issues and the thorny place of graphic novels in the library, I will conduct a brief overview of relevant library and scholarly literature on graphic novels, as well as explore the collections of four public library systems in Canada: the Calgary Public Library (CPL), the London Public Library (LPL), the Toronto Public Library (TPL) and the Vancouver Public Library (VPL). These catalogues have been chosen due to their extensive graphic novel collections, and the overall size of their holdings and usership. This study however, is by no means comprehensive, but is rather intended as a preliminary investigation in the treatment of graphic novels in large, urban public libraries.

In this survey, I will analyze how graphic novels are classified and considered in the literature, as well as how they are classified and designated within the library catalogues and collections. For my analysis of the library catalogues I will focus on a selection of graphic novels that fall in two categories blurring the line between YA and adult collections: non-fiction historical memoir and fictional mature subject matter. The historical graphic novels include the Holocaust account, *Maus* (1986), by Art Spiegelman; the Iranian memoir, *Persepolis* (2003); and the historical novelization, *Louis Riel: A Comic-strip Biography* (2003), by Chester Brown. The mature subject matter novels include three vanguards of the graphic novel movement: Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987) and *V for Vendetta* (1989).

I will argue that graphic novels should be used in an increased way by the public library, and that further, it is the role of the public library to utilize any and all resources to provide their users with informative and challenging materials. One of the most moving accounts recently published about the 1994 Rwandan genocide is not a novel, or a biography, but a fictional graphic novel, *Deo-gratias: A Tale of Rwanda* (2006); yet it is possi-

ble that many adult readers would overlook this resource due to lingering misperceptions about that format, or confusing classifications (in the LPL this item is shelved in the Teen Annex). Likewise, many interested teen and young adult readers might not think to search for graphic titles within the DDS – overlooking such titles as Joe Sacco's excellent journalistic graphic account, *Palestine* (2001; about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict) due to its classification within the Dewey section 956.9 Middle East: Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Israel, Jordan (as in the CPL catalogue).

Part of the confusion regarding graphic novels as a genre has to do with the broad range of subject matter and format. As noted above, the graphic novel is not genre-specific and it can cover the realms of fiction, non-fiction, manga, memoir, fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, historical document, and others. Current public library collections in Canada include not only *Maus*, *Batman*, *Louis Riel* and *Watchmen*, as mentioned above, but also the government document, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (2006); and even a graphic guide to *Miles Davis for Beginners* (1994). Common to these many variations is the definition of graphic novels proposed by graphic artist and medium vanguard Scott McCloud: graphic novels as “sequential art.”

However, McCloud notes that within this definition lays a spectrum of possibility: juxtaposed images, iconography, and the negotiation between language and pictures (1994, pp. 8-9, 27, 49). Nonetheless, perhaps due to graphic novels' use of imagery, the first and most common treatment of graphic novels within library and academic scholarship is still within the realm of teen and young adult literature, often as pedagogical tools or aids to literacy.

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) in Wisconsin provides educational services on children's and youth literature for librarians and educators. Their website has a special page devoted to graphic novels which they describe as "an essential component of library collections for both children and teenagers...[that has] enormous potential for classroom use" (2008, Introduction section, ¶1). Rollie James Welch (2007), author of *The Guy-Friendly YA Library*, supports this opinion of graphic novels and recommends them as an excellent resource for getting teens, especially young men, into the library. School librarian Mary Jane Heaney (2007) has also noted this aspect of engaging reluctant readers. Heaney argues that the marriage of image and text in graphic novels involves readers by providing visualization in a high interest and

pop culture format—a format that makes reading less threatening to reticent readers (2007, pp. 74). Heaney further adds that the benefit of graphic novels is not only to their readers, but also to the library itself, as graphic novels can energize the collection, increase circulation statistics, and foster student involvement in library clubs (2007, 74).

While these findings are persuasive and offer encouraging news in the areas of teen literacy and engagement with the library, they are limiting in how they view graphic novels and their potential scope of use within the library. Generally, the graphic novels discussed in the literature noted above are fictional and fantastical. In Michele Gorman's list of 50 Graphic Novels for a High School/Young Adult Collection only four of the suggested titles are non-fiction or historical fiction (2003, 56-66). As well, graphic novel guides in secondary literature in general are primarily geared towards the teen and young adult reader, and these guides primarily deal with fantastical or fictional graphic novels. The barrier that this limited perception creates is twofold: it prevents many potential adult readers from accessing graphic novels of interest, it limits teen readers in the scope of information in graphic format that they come across, and it constrains basic ideas of graphic

novels within the library.

Notable exceptions to these “typical” graphic novels are the graphic accounts that depict mass violence. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* is the most notable of this genre, but it is not the only one. *Deogratias* by Jean-Philippe Stassen, Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, Rupert Bazambanza’s *Smile Through the Tears: The Story of the Rwandan Genocide* (2005), and Miriam Katin’s Holocaust memoir, *We Are on Our Own* (2006) are among the many, growing number of memoirs and stories of mass violence that are told in a graphic format. The Nelson Mandela Centre for Memory in South Africa, and the Anne Frank House have even developed graphic novels as pedagogical tools for use by their organizations in their advocacy and awareness work.

One of the reasons for the widening use of the graphic medium to depict mass violence is based on the transformative qualities of the graphic novel addressed by Scott McCloud (1994, 8-9, 27, 49), and the ability of readers to engage and connect with graphic novels (Gravett 2005, 20). Some scholars, including critical theorist Michael Rothberg, have speculated that graphic novels have an ability to mediate several meanings in their interactions between text and image, relation-

ships that Rothberg argues better approximate the disjuncture and trauma of mass violence than text-only publications (2000, 103). As well, works like *Persepolis* possess a significant ability to build bridges and break down stereotypes across international lines, a goal that Satrapi identified herself; in her introduction to *Persepolis* she remarks, “an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists” (2003, ii). To dispel Western stereotypes about Iran she includes images of herself as a child fascinated by Ché Guevara and, after the Islamic Revolution, herself as a young adult participating in small acts of resistance such as wearing lipstick and listening to a walkman (2003, 302). Satrapi could tell her story in a text-only publication, but there is unique power in the meeting of text and image, enabling a richer translation across cultures and linguistic communities.

The above ideas about the potential of graphic novels to depict more “serious” subjects, though marginal, are growing in library and academic scholarship. Yet, while graphic non-fiction like *Maus* or *Persepolis* are often appreciated in this type of scholarship for their nuanced depictions of mass violence, loss, and personal agony, fictional and especially fantastical graphic novels like *Watchmen* are sometimes overlooked as “kid’s stuff.” In

actual fact however, *Watchmen* is a dark, dystopic novel written in a similar satirical and

library catalogues surveyed—the CPL, the LPL, the TPL, and the VPL—*Watchmen* was

**Table 1: Classification of Graphic Novels within Four Public Library Systems in Canada**

	<i>Maus</i>	<i>Persepolis</i>	<i>Louis Riel</i>	<i>Watchmen</i>	<i>Dark Knight</i>	<i>V for Vendetta</i>
<b>Calgary</b>	Adult Dewey	Adult Fiction	YA Dewey	Adult Fiction	Adult Fiction	Adult Fiction
<b>London</b>	YA Dewey (1 Adult copy)	YA Dewey (1 Adult copy)	Adult Dewey	YA Fiction (1 Adult copy)	YA Fiction	<b>*NA (No copy available)</b>
<b>Toronto</b>	Adult Dewey	Adult Dewey	Adult Dewey	Adult Fiction	Adult Fiction	Adult Fiction
<b>Vancouver</b>	YA & Adult Dewey	YA & Adult Dewey	Adult Dewey (1 YA copy)	YA Fiction (1 Adult copy Dewey)	YA Fiction (1 Adult copy Dewey)	YA & Adult Fiction

politically aware style as George Orwell’s *1984* (1949). It depicts a world on the brink of collapse in which the age of superheroes—only one of which has real powers—has passed. One former hero is now an alcoholic, another is a mentally unstable doomsday vigilante, many have died by their own hand or due to their excesses, and the rest exist in similar states of social and emotional disarray. The forthcoming filmic adaptation of *Watchmen* (2009) was recently given an ‘R’ rating by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) for its strong graphic violence, sexuality, nudity and language. However, in the

classified as a YA fiction book in two of the four libraries examined.

This result is not unusual however, as many other libraries catalogue fictional graphic novels within the YA collection. What is surprising, is the lack of uniformity and the broad classifications libraries use for graphic novel collections.

As shown in Table 1, non-fiction accounts are generally classified within Adult collections, and classified using the DDS, but this is only by a small margin. Instead, libraries classify these six novels in different ways across different collections. There is *some* un-

iformity within a library's own collection; the LPL for example has classified 4/5 of its graphic novels within its YA collection. By contrast Calgary has classified 5/6 of its graphic novels in the Adult collection, but even this relationship is tenuous at best and likely confusing to any library user unfamiliar with the CPL graphic novel collection. Table 1 also highlights the classification of *Louis Riel* as an example of these incongruities in graphic collections. *Louis Riel* is the only graphic novel that the CPL has classified as YA, yet it is classified as Adult material by all other libraries (the VPL has one listing within its YA collection).

This difficulty in uniformly classifying graphic collections in an accessible and understandable way has been highlighted by many librarians. Gorman (2003) identifies no less than five different ways that she has seen graphic novels classified: 1) as nonfiction in the DDS alongside comic strips (in the 741.5 section) regardless of story content or genre; 2) as subject specific materials classified alongside similar topics—fiction to be shelved with other fiction, and non-fiction with similar topics in DDS; 3) as their own category—shelved alphabetically within this category; 4) as double collections—one collection for YAs, and one (generally using DDS) for

adults; and 5) as un-catalogued items only accessible in the library's browsing collection like many library paperback collections (2003, 32-33). Goldsmith (2005) even has a chapter in her book dedicated to this issue, entitled, "Can Readers Find Your Library's Graphic Novels? Classification and Descriptive Cataloging" (2005, 52-62). In response, Goldsmith (2005) has several suggestions to improve classification and expedite effective searching of graphic novels collections including additions to an item's MARC record (adding a genre-specific tag for "graphic novels" within the 655 field) and the addition of format-specific prefixes such as "GN" to item call numbers (2005, 54-56).

Of the library catalogues surveyed, several of these suggestions—and some additional solutions—are used, especially the genre tag field. The VPL has two genre tags within the 655 field that they use to label graphic novels: graphic non-fiction and graphic novels. Also the VPL collection is a mix of Adult and YA books for most titles, allowing for a double collection of items in which both historical non-fiction and fictional graphic novels are read by a variety of readers and library users. As well, the VPL has some of their graphic novels further designated to a third location: the Popular Reading Library Fast Reads col-

lection at their Central Branch which allows popular browsing, wide attention, and broad readership of graphic novels.

The LPL maintains the same genre tag labels as the VPL—graphic non-fiction and graphic novels—and they also mark their graphic novels with a yellow sticker with the “GN” acronym to allow for easy browsing. They do not, however, allow for overlap between graphic fiction and non-fiction. Instead the LPL separates the two, classifying all their graphic non-fiction in the DDS and all their graphic fiction in the YA collection. This distinction can allow for greater subject relevance (such as *Palestine* shelved alongside other non-fiction books about the Middle East), but it can impede broad browsing of graphic novel collections and it presents classification issues for graphic novels of historical fiction (such as *Deogratias* which many library catalogues shelve in DDS rather than the YA or adult fiction). The CPL, by contrast, has an Adult Graphic Novels Collection in which non-fiction items like *Maus* are shelved in the same collection as works of fiction like *Watchmen* to allow for genre and format browsing. In addition, the CPL has the prefix “GRAPHIX” in every call number of its graphic novels. One potential drawback to the CPL’s graphic novels collection is that, unlike

many other libraries, it overlooks, to an extent, the strong readership of graphic novels by teens and young adults. However, teens may be less reticent to browse in adult collections than adults might be to browse in young adult collections.

The TPL’s catalogue was the last considered in this survey, and surprisingly, given its size, scope, broad readership, and large service population, TPL seems to be the least effective and the least proactive in taking steps to classify its graphic novel collection as a whole. There is no prefix designation or added genre tag field in its catalogue, at least not on the item’s first catalogue screen, which is often the only screen that users may access. Users have to advance to the third tab to come to the item’s catalogue record, and there is the option of searching by Library of Congress (LOC) subject heading but this is very limiting.

*Watchmen* is classified under the LOC subject heading, “Comic books, strips, etc.-- United States;” by contrast, *Maus* is classified under the multiple subject headings: “Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945) – Poland – Biography – Comic books, strips, etc. – Interactive multimedia,” “Holocaust survivors – United States – Biography – Comic books, strips, etc. – Interactive multimedia,” and “Children of



Holocaust survivors – United States – Biography – Comic books, strips, etc -- Multimedia.” None of these subject headings would lead a user to genre-related graphic novels like *Watchmen*, or similar non-fiction graphic novels like *Persepolis*. The LOC (2008) does have a subject heading, “graphic novels,” but the TPL has not chosen to use this heading.

This short survey of library and academic literature surrounding graphic novels, and the classification and categorization of graphic novels within four Canadian public libraries is by no means comprehensive. Further study of the *use* of graphic novels within libraries would greatly add to an overall understanding of how libraries see their graphic novel collections. As well, a greater survey range including additional library catalogues from both rural and urban areas would also give a better picture of the place of graphic novels in Canadian public libraries.

Future research considerations and additions aside, this preliminary study has shown that there is no continuity in the treatment, classification, or categorization of graphic novels in four large, urban public library systems across Canada. Whether these findings would hold true for all of Canada is something that only further research can answer; however, these four catalogues respectively represent

some of Canada’s largest public library holdings – and consistently across these holdings is the inconsistent and ill-defined place of graphic novels. Due to this, I would argue that there are still questions and lingering misperceptions over the appropriate place and classification of graphic novels in the public library in Canada.

This uncertainty over the place of graphic novels is not uncommon in library literature or in popular culture. As noted by comic publisher and journalist Paul Gravett, a common sentiment about graphic novels still is that, ‘comics are a great way to get kids reading real books’ (2005, 11). Gravett takes issue with this perception, retorting that it “implies that comics and graphic novels are useful primers, stepping stones to literacy, but not worth reading in their own right as ‘real books’ themselves” (2005, 11). Librarian Francisca Goldsmith also addresses this concern and how it can impact collection development and classification in the library, noting that “those who stand outside the effort to develop the graphic novel collection and who do not read graphic novels may assume, due to the books’ image-heavy nature, that the intended audience must be teenaged or juvenile” (2005, 59). Goldsmith further adds that such misinterpretations and assumptions can

create problems for both YA and Adult collections including the selection of possibly inappropriate materials for teens and young adults, and, on the other hand, the lack of materials identified and selected for Adult collections (2005, 59).

The recommendations of both Goldsmith and Gravett, and in much of the emerging literature, indicates that libraries, in order to present a broad, integrative and nuanced range of information and materials for their users, should not draw arbitrary lines based on graphic format. Many non-fiction graphic accounts could be excellent books for teens and young adults, providing enjoyable and pedagogical reads. Likewise, many fictional graphic novels would be perfect and timely additions to adult collections, especially as the three fictional graphic novels discussed in this paper have all been recently adapted for the screen into widely successful films for mature audiences.<sup>2</sup> Given the broad use of the graphic novel medium, I believe that the genre presents viable and integrative forms of information and literature that demands reconsideration in libraries and in classification schemes to achieve the proper development

of the collections' potential. Not all comics may be worthy of the designation "graphic novel," or "sequential art," but many are, and as stewards of public institutions librarians should embrace this flourishing medium.

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<sup>2</sup> Of the three graphic novels, only the filmic adaptation of *Batman: The Dark Knight* (2007) was rated PG-13; *V for Vendetta* (2005) and the forthcoming *Watchmen* (2009) both received R ratings by the MPAA.

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