

BOOKS TO GROW WITH NEWSLETTER FOR APRIL 2004

Hello,

In this month's issue, we talk with Robin Brenner and Jennifer Webb, about the growing field of graphic novels, and how they may assist in helping kids. Robin is a Library Technician at Cary Library in Lexington, MA. She graduated from Bryn Mawr College in 1999 and received her MLS from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in August 2003, which Jennifer also attended. Robin is the creator and editor-in-chief of the graphic novel review website, No Flying, No Tights (<http://www.noflyingnotights.com>), with which Jennifer assists. Robin enjoys speaking whenever she can as an advocate for graphic novels in libraries. Her favorite superhero is Oracle, information gatherer of Gotham and a librarian herself.

As always, I include a list of new books and new topics, just published and available. Next month, we take a look at books about adoption, how the range of topics has broadened in recent years and particularly focused on Asian adoptions.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Last month I reported meeting Tony Petruzzi, Head of Children's Services, Morley Library, Painesville, Ohio at the PLA meeting. Tony, as you may recall, has been instrumental in the Helping Books Program (<http://www.helpingbooks.lib.oh.us/>). I am delighted to report that Tony and I, through Lutra Press, are working together to establish an annual award for the best children's fiction book that helps children. We'll keep you posted on our progress and you may be hearing from us, soliciting your interest in participating in a panel of judges.

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NEW BOOKS AND TOPICS OF INTEREST

Topic: Death of pet

Title: The Best Cat in the World, by Leslea Newman, illustrated by Ronald Himler (Eerdmans)

Topic: New Baby

Title: Tell Me My Story, Mama, by Deb Lund, illustrated by Hiroe Nakata (HarperCollins)

Topic: Bullies

Title: Myrtle, by Tracy Campbell Pearson (FSG)

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OUR DISCUSSION TOPIC FOR MARCH: GRAPHIC NOVELS

A Conversation with Robin Brenner and Jennifer Webb.

Cheryl: Hello Robin and Jennifer. We're intrigued by graphic novels and their popularity. Let's start with the question of what age group you find is most interested in graphic novels? And what about boys versus girls?

Robin: Tweens! The most obvious readers are the 12-13 year olds who swarm into the YA area and read the graphic novels on display and then check out great piles of them. On the other hand, I've had a good many conversations with everyone from mothers of younger kids to 50-something gentlemen asking about the variety of graphic novels we have available. In my library, we have graphic novels separated into sections for kids, for teens, and for adults, so they get a broad age range attention-wise.

As for boys versus girls -- well, I'd say it's about even at this point. At first, when we introduced the collection, the boys were much more excited about it, but lately I've noticed a lot more girls and older female teens taking out just as many graphic novels. As predicted, the manga titles are a bit hit, but girls

are just as likely to pick up the superhero titles -- something I'm happy to see, as a blissfully-ignorant-of-intended-gender reader myself.

Cheryl: Let's focus particularly on elementary school kids and middle-schoolers. Are there particular types of graphic novels to which they seem to gravitate?

Robin: My favorite story about the younger kids and teens happened about a week after we had purchased the entire Bone series by Jeff Smith. I was sitting at the Children's desk, checking in books, when two boys, one about ten and the other about twelve, came running down the stairs and zoomed over to the graphic novel section, all the while chanting, "Bone, Bone, Bone!" I knew then we'd hit a series that they loved. There are also graphic novel titles that compare to popular children's fiction, such as Rachel Hartman's Amy Unbounded.

Cheryl: On your website, you categorize graphic novels into a number of topic headings, including realism. What do you mean by that term?

Robin: Realism on the website is a place for all of the graphic novels out there that reflect everyday life. There's a long history of comic strips and graphic novels that appeal in this way -- from Archie, still one of the most popular comics of all time, to Bill Waterson's Calvin and Hobbes. These titles don't include the superheroes or fantastical elements that most readers associate with comics and graphic novels.

Jen: There's not a whole lot of absolute realism in comics for younger readers, perhaps because comics and cartoons work by bending and stretching reality; in a comic, a boy's imagination can come to life in the form of a talking tiger. Comics can exaggerate the real world or represent it in unusual ways because they stimulate our imaginations to fill in whatever's not on the page. Calvin is represented by a simple body shape with a spiky circle on top, but in our imaginations he's a real kid.

Robin: It's certainly true that there are fewer "realistic" graphic novels for the younger set. A lot of the titles in the realism section mimic the "literary" fiction of the book world, such as Daniel Clowes' Ghost World, and thus are intended for an older audience.

Cheryl: Within the category of realism, which graphic novels do you like?

Jen: Clan Apis, by Jay Hosler, is an example of what comics do best; it mixes humor, imagination, and pathos together with a lot of factual information to tell the story of a hive of bees. We follow wisecracking bee Nyuki from her early days as a young larva to her eventual death, learning all about the life and work of honeybees in the process. Clan Apis is hilarious, but it also deals touchingly with death.

Cheryl: What realistic themes have graphic novels covered? And, is there a fundamental difference in the way that graphic novels approach a particular issue from how it might be handled in a book?

Robin: Graphic novels have covered a huge range of themes -- including bullying (Boys Over Flowers), being the child of divorced parents (Amelia Rules! Alison Dare), sexual abuse (The Tale of One Bat Rat), dating and relationships (Mars), and balancing what you want with what your family wants (Days Like This). Of course, these themes are addressed all the time in titles outside of realism. Spider-Man's lasting popularity is very much based in the fact that Peter Parker is an ordinary guy, with problems everyone can relate to from being a big geek at school to how to work up the courage to ask Mary Jane out.

Jen: Superhero comics deal with real life troubles all the time--for one thing, almost every superhero has had to face a loss or tragedy on the road to becoming a hero. The best comic fantasies feel like real life: in Leave it to Chance, our heroine has to deal with making friends at a new school and defying her father's expectations of what a girl should be (and all this while fighting supernatural baddies!). Courtney Crumrin, the heroine of Ted Naifeh's series of the same name, feels alone in her school and faces bullying and conflicts with her parents.

Robin: As to the fundamental difference between how graphic novels approach topics, I don't believe there is a difference except in the fact that graphic novels are a visual format as well as a textual one. The images within graphic novels are received with different significance than the same scene might be in text. The importance and virtuoso use of expressions, scenery, and cinematic editing relies on our visual literacy, so one image may have much more impact than a pile of description.

Cheryl: Any thoughts on how a graphic novel might be offered to a child or an adult for use in helping a child handle a particular issue or problem?

Robin: One point in graphic novels' favor is that they are great for reluctant readers. All those kids out there who are dubious about reading a much-touted "problem" novel might well be convinced to pick up the latest Green Lantern story instead. Superhero titles, though unfortunately still sneered at by many, are now often extremely well written and topical. Green Lantern, for example, recently featured an excellent storyline addressing gay-bashing entitled Brother's Keeper. That story, I would bet, reached a lot of readers who would never even consider reading a book about that issue, and on top of that, it was a crackerjack story. Therein lies the greatness of comics.

That being said, I think graphic novels can work the same way books do -- they give readers a chance to address what they fear and whatever they find difficult to talk about, all within the privacy of their own head. The Tale of One Bad Rat is a prime example of a work that carefully addresses recovering from child abuse with eloquence and hope. Craig Thompson's outstanding Blankets tackles faith, art and first love, and the points where those three conflict, with so much beauty and emotional tension. I can't imagine a better way for a reader to work through similar struggles. All of these titles simply have the benefit of letting a reader into a story and the realization that others have faced the same problems. Sometimes all you need is that acknowledgement that you're not alone, and that others have survived to tell the tale.

Jen: Comics and graphic novels tend to mix the realistic with the fantastical, more because of how the medium developed than because comics are inherently unrealistic. Even if they don't deal with realistic themes, fantastical stories can still help readers deal with the dangers and unknowns of daily life. We all have dragons we have to slay--or befriend, as the case may be. I think children are particularly drawn to superhero comics because superheroes allow us to feel powerful. They also affirm our belief in justice; younger children especially like to know that the good guys will prevail.

Cheryl: Anything else you'd like to add?

Robin: Well, obviously, I could go on and on. There are two points I'd like to make, or even champion. One big misconception out there is that graphic novels are a genre -- they're not, they're a format. They can be about anything, and the variety out there is only increasing. Related to that is my second point: there's a graphic novel out there for every reader. Not everyone will be a fan, of course, but just like all Readers' Advisory, a graphic novel can be found that any reader will at least take a second look at.

Do you have comments? Questions? Send them to cherylcoon@lutrapress.com and we will respond in our next newsletter.

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NEXT MONTH'S SPECIAL FOCUS: ADOPTION

We'll examine how the range of adoption topics has broadened in recent years and particularly focused on Asian adoptions. We'll talk with a children's author who is herself a mother of two adopted children from Asia.

If you have received this newsletter in error or do not wish to continue to receive it, please let me know at cherylcoon@lutrapress.com.