

“Immediate, Apocalyptic Freaking Out?”: School Librarians and the Phenomenon of the Graphic Novel

Introduction

Frederick Wertham’s 1954 book, *The Seduction of the Innocent*, argued so powerfully that comics could turn readers into juvenile delinquents that it sparked the development of the Comics Code Authority, which was a self-regulation strategy intended to help comics creators avoid the “dangerous” ideas and moral gray areas against which Wertham railed (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2023). Though the Comics Code has since been left behind, the idea that comics corrupt has not. Scott McCloud (1993) provides a foundational definition of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). Though comics are generally considered more episodic in nature, this definition applies to graphic novels as well, and the terms are used interchangeably in much of the professional literature, including this study. According to the American Library Association’s annual list, two of the top five challenged books in 2022 were graphic novels, with *Gender Queer* ranking first and *Flamer* fourth (Gomez, 2023). And between 2010 and 2019, more than 10 percent of the top 100 books challenged were graphic novels (Jensen, 2022).

Comics and graphic novels are often targeted for censorship “because [they] thrive on the power of the static image, a single page or panel can be the impetus for a challenge in a way that’s different from a passage in a book” (Gomez, 2018). As Kjeldsen (2021) explained, “imagery is thought to influence in a stronger way than other forms of expression. A picture is perceived to be more powerful than text... since the beginning of rhetorical thought, vivid and visual communication has been viewed as a problem to truth, freedom, and ethics” (p. 5-6). Visual images have been thought to be “powerful,” “belonging to the unconscious,” and “wholly irrational” (p. 5-6). Given the power and accessibility of images,

it is not surprising that censors would home in on them in often misguided attempts to “protect others, frequently children, from difficult ideas and information” (ALA, 2023).

Literature Review

Graphic novels have enjoyed such a surge in popularity recently that they are currently one of the most circulated types of materials in school libraries (Gavigan, 2014; Becnel and Moeller, 2020; Moeller and Becnel, 2020), with children and teens choosing them to read for enjoyment and pleasure (Jennings, Rule, and Vander Zanden, 2014; Boerman-Cornell, 2016; Moeller, 2022). Not only are they enjoyable; they also support student development of multiple literacy skills (Cromer and Clark, 2007; Chun, 2009; Hammond, 2012; Pagliaro, 2014; Cook, 2017; Lalremruati, 2019) and English language literacy for those whose first language is not English (Park, 2016; Howard, 2017). Despite these benefits, some librarians are reluctant to collect graphic novels because of the difficulty determining reading level (Becnel and Moeller, 2020; Moeller and Becnel, 2020) or the fear of backlash from their communities (Moodie and Calvert, 2018; Becnel and Moeller, 2020; Moeller and Becnel, 2020). Such backlash is a real possibility, as scholars have documented objections to the inclusion of graphic novels in school libraries from teachers (Lapp et. al, 2012; author, Yusof, Lazim, and Salehuddin, 2017), pre-service teachers (Mathews, 2011; Clark, 2013), and parents (Nesmith 2016).

Objections to and discomfort with graphic novels can result in direct and indirect forms of censorship. Censorship might involve external forces such as administrators or school boards banning or restricting access to certain titles or types of content. A more insidious form of censorship, termed self-censorship (Asheim, 1953; Dawkins, 2018), occurs when librarians opt to avoid collecting or providing access to specific material because of their personal discomfort

with or objection to the material or fear that certain stakeholders might cry foul. Some ways that librarians inhibit access include altering material, silently withdrawing potentially problematic content, or creating restricted collections. Dawkins (2018) explains that “School librarians may choose to exclude controversial content if they perceive their community as rural, conservative, or to likely challenge such choices” (p. 12). These descriptors apply to the locations in which this research was conducted--rural areas of North and South Carolina--making this fertile territory for exploring self-censorship behaviors and motivations surrounding graphic novel collection decisions of school librarians.

Methods

This article synthesizes findings from several studies conducted by the authors during a three year period (Becnel and Moeller, 2020; Moeller and Becnel, 2020; Becnel and Moeller, 2021; Becnel and Moeller, 2022; Moeller and Becnel, 2022). In these studies, individual school librarians were invited, through email and social media posts, to engage with surveys, questionnaires, and follow-up interviews in Zoom. Additionally, focus groups were conducted at state library association conferences, in which librarians were gathered and engaged in conversation prompted by scripted questions (Moeller and Becnel, 2022). Topics explored in the surveys, interviews, and focus group include the acquisitions process, collection development, graphic novels for youth, and intellectual freedom. These studies were conducted in the southeastern United States. Though this geographical limitation narrows the potential pool of respondents, it targets an area of the nation with some of highest rates of book banning in schools (Meehan & Friedman, 2023), enabling a robust exploration into the behaviors and motivations associated with self-censorship and material challenges.

Findings

Censorship Behaviors

Librarians described checking purchased items during processing for nudity, objectionable language, and sexually suggestive content and opting to donate items with this type of content to other libraries rather than adding them to the collection they were

purchased for (Moeller and Becnel, 2020). When unsure whether or not a particular item might be problematic, some respondents reported asking the school principal to make the decision about whether to include the book in the collection (Moeller and Becnel, 2022). When the majority of an item was deemed appropriate, librarians [sometimes] reported placing barcodes or stickers over potentially objectionable images (Becnel and Moeller, 2020, p. 131). Another solution recounted was to alter the items by drawing clothing onto naked characters (Moeller and Becnel, 2020, p. 520). For example, one librarian explained: “Sometimes I have drawn a little outfit [on the body] and colored it in” (Moeller and Becnel, 2022, p. 266).

Other methods of censorship engaged in by respondents included monitoring the graphic novel collection closely, dissuading readers from checking out those items (Moeller and Becnel, 2020; Becnel and Moeller, 2022), and creating “restricted collections.” Restricted collections typically involve allowing only students in certain grade levels or those with parental permission to access certain items (Moeller and Becnel, 2020; Becnel and Moeller, 2021). In some cases, restricted collections are kept out of sight so that patrons have to proactively and independently seek them out, even if they fall into the category of patrons allowed access to those items (Becnel and Moeller, 2020; Moeller and Becnel, 2022).

Reasons for Censoring Graphic Novels

School librarians referenced fear of losing their jobs when explaining why they engaged in censorship behaviors. For example, one librarian explained why she had not collected the award-winning children’s graphic novel, *Drama*, for her school’s library by referring to a scene depicting two boys kissing. She stated that this book would be appropriate in a public library setting as “it shows how the world is today,” but added regretfully, that “you’ve gotta step more on eggshells in a public school...unfortunately. If you want to keep your job” (Becnel and Moeller, 2021, p. 14)! Of her high school library, another participant said, “...I do feel like it’s hard because anime and manga is a little... the line between young adult and adult is very fluid, and as someone who likes her job and wants to keep it, that’s hard” (Moeller and Becnel, 2022, p. 265).

This fear of losing a position because of a book challenge might seem overdramatic, as there are steps and procedures for handling what should be an ordinary and expected occurrence. However, this orderly, collaborative process does not always play out according to plan, especially in the case of graphic novels. As one respondent explained, the process often “gets bypassed because the first thing a parent does instead of calling the school and talking to me or talking to the principal, is take a picture of what is objectionable and post it on social media and be like *oh my god* what are we teaching these children? It’s this immediate, apocalyptic freaking out” (Moeller and Becnel, 2022, p. 269). Understandably, librarians fear being judged by the public based on a single page of any book in their collection.

Exacerbating this fear is many school librarians’ lack of familiarity with graphic novels. In the words of one librarian: “I really feel the only time we’ve had issues with it [censorship] is with graphic novels, and I think it’s because we automatically assume that it’s going to be age-appropriate for elementary because it has pictures in it. And I don’t know if that’s a common mistake that new librarians...make, but I know I definitely made that assumption. Oh, if it’s a graphic novel, it’s going to be good for anybody because it has pictures” (Moeller and Becnel, 2020, p. 522)! Another revealed: “I think I don’t read them [graphic novels] personally for enjoyment because I think my visual literacy skills are very low...My brain isn’t trained to read those [visual clues]” (Moeller and Becnel, 2020, p. 522).

The discomfort and lack of familiarity with graphic novels means that librarians often rely on vendor recommendations and publisher information to make selection decisions. Many of them are dissatisfied with vendor information, such as the librarian who purchased an item and recommended it to a student, only to have the student return it and say, “Why did you think I was going to enjoy this? Did you not know there’s nudity in here?” And I was like, no!... Not appropriate for middle school” (Moeller and Becnel, 2020, p. 522-23). Another librarian said of vendor age and grade recommendations: “Don’t trust the labels” (Becnel and Moeller, 2020, p. 130). Publisher recommendations also came under fire. One librarian recounted, “I wish the publishers would

be a little more cognizant about what’s in a graphic novel. We had a beautiful book that came in that was a graphic novel of *The Lottery*, and we were reluctant to put it out because there was a bath scene in it. Which is not even in the story, and she’s nude. It was a beautiful book but in Rock Hill, this is going to get me into trouble” (Moeller and Becnel, 2022, p. 266).

Not only are some librarians unfamiliar or uncomfortable with graphic novels; many consider them simple and juvenile, and useful primarily as a bridge to reading more traditional print formats (Moeller and Becnel, 2020; Moeller and Becnel, 2022). One participant bemoaned: “I just wonder if graphic novel readers are ever going to want to transition to something...You know, are they going to be the ones who read the comics and the informational texts online, and that’s obviously fun but I feel like, is the transition going to happen, or is that the type of reader they are?” Another librarian added, “I would not think you were a healthy human being if you only ate cookies all day, for every meal and you can’t consume just one kind of food and be a healthy human being. And you can’t consume just one kind of literature and be a healthy reader” (Moeller and Becnel, 2022, p. 263). When librarians suggest, directly or indirectly, that the items students gravitate toward are inferior, they engage in what Tetreault (2019) calls “literacy shaming,” which discourages students from pursuing recreational reading. Even when librarians themselves acknowledge the value and sophistication of graphic novels, they often have to overcome the objections of some teachers, who think of graphic novels as “trash literature,” and do not think they should be part of a school library collection.

Implications

It is important to remember that while a majority of librarians we spoke with reported engaging in some kind of censorship behavior in relation to graphic novels, there was also a significant pro-graphic novel contingent who personally enjoy graphic novels and/or celebrate the power of graphic novels to attract and enthrall young readers. These librarians argued that the freedom to choose their own reading material is paramount for students. Some expressed that they felt responsible for providing material that

would spark joy for the children they serve. Other pro-graphic novel librarians pointed out the rich vocabulary that graphic novels employ and the skills needed to decode and interpret visual imagery.

Unfortunately, students' access to a rich collection of graphic novels can come down to whether the librarian in the building is a proponent of the format. As one librarian said of collection development decisions: "A lot of this is personal preference, but what else can you do? It's just me in here. It comes down to me and what I think should be on the shelf" (Becnel and Moeller, 2020). What should be on the library shelves, though, should not be determined by the personal preferences of the librarian, but instead based on factors such as curriculum guidelines, student and teacher requests, professional reviews, and popularity. Librarians' duties include protecting the First Amendment rights of students, and this includes providing students access to items the librarian may not personally care for.

Often self-censorship is not a result of personal bias, though, and is instead rooted in fear of the backlash that might result from a decision to collect something that draws an objection or complaint. A good first step to dealing with this legitimate fear is educating the school community, including the principal and other teachers, about the librarian's role and duties. The ALA (2014) interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights as it pertains to the school library states:

"Students and educators served by the school library have access to resources and services free of constraints resulting from personal, partisan, or doctrinal disapproval. School librarians resist efforts by individuals or groups to define what is appropriate for all students or teachers to read, view, hear, or access regardless of technology formats, or method of delivery."

Beyond educating the community about the library's purpose and role in the life of the school, the librarian can recruit stakeholders to collaborate in the development and implementation of policies and procedures that support that purpose. The relationships and understanding that can develop when this collaboration occurs can result in a ripple effect of support for the library and the librarian throughout the school and beyond, enabling the librarian to

make collection development decisions with more confidence.

To support the selection process for graphic novel content, librarians might do well to look at sources outside of vendor and publisher recommendations and information. Nelson (2022) reported that comics publishing companies can now use artificial intelligence to filter for content in an effort to sanitize graphic novels for commercial gain, a process that invokes the specter of the Comics Code Authority as it limits the freedoms of both creators and consumers. For less potentially problematic professional recommendations, librarians may instead consider selection resources such as the Great Graphic Novels for Teens booklist published by the Young Adult Library Services Association (2023) which is compiled annually by a committee of public and school librarians and includes recommended titles for youth aged 12-18. Likewise, the Association for Library Service to Children (2023) publishes annually lists of recommended titles for kindergarten to second grade; third to fifth grade; and sixth to eighth grade. School librarians can also utilize the list developed by the Graphic Novels & Comics Roundtable (2023) which features recommendations for children aged five to 12 years old and "aims to increase awareness of the graphic novel medium, raise voices of diverse comics creators, and aid library staff in the development of graphic novel collections."

Conclusion

Due to feelings of vulnerability and responsibility, many librarians see it as part of their job to create a challenge-proof collection. However, this is almost certainly an impossible goal, and one that if reached would result in a sterile, uninspiring collection. As Adams (2009) explained, "Since no one can predict which books or other resources will be challenged or who will express a concern, a more effective approach is to take proactive steps toward creating a climate where the principles of intellectual freedom are understood and the legal right of minors to receive information in the school library is acknowledged" (p. 48). To create that climate, librarians have to be proactive and educate library stakeholders about the purposes of the school library, both curricular and recreational, and the responsibilities of the school

librarian. Ideally, interested and engaged stakeholders will then work with the librarian to create or modify existing collection development and reconsideration policies that speak to all types of materials, including graphic novels. With these partnerships in place, librarians should feel supported in their efforts to

create and maintain an appealing, appropriate collection and able to see challenges, to graphic novels or anything else, as entry points for engaging in productive conversation with stakeholders rather than as existential threats.

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