

Comics appeal factors

Adapted from Ranganathan's laws of library science: Every reader his or her comic book. Every comic book its reader.

Some notes about the audience for comics and comics literacy

The audience for comics in the library:

Our audience doesn't necessarily fit the prevailing stereotype of a traditional comics audience. The stereotype has collectors making their weekly visit to the comic book shop for their single issues that they put in plastic when they get them home. Whether that stereotype actually exists or not, our users may or may not be devoted fans, but they are coming to the library for their comics experience. They may want to supplement their subscriptions with historical comics compilations, contemporary graphic novels and other one-off titles they're not sure they want to buy. Or they could be an occasional comics reader who likes to dip in to the form occasionally. They may also be introducing their children to comics and are taking advantage of the exploding publishing market. Finally, we should all be removing any preconceived notions of who reads comics....

Comics literacy:

If you're not a comics reader already, you do have to learn how to read comics. You had to learn how to read print, so it makes sense that you would have to learn the unique visual language of comics. When you are new to comics and learning to read them, choose books that have appeal to you, based on the artwork, story, characters and other factors that appeal to you in other books. If you usually read literary fiction, don't try to pick up the latest X-Men series.

Appeal factors for comics:

What you're looking for as a library staff person when evaluating comics are the same appeal factors you are looking for in any other book: Story, Setting, Character, and Language, along with the illustrations, or visual language of the book. Also, it's not what the book is about, but what it is about the book that appeals to your reader. You can use these appeal factors to suggest comics for patrons.

Visual Language:

- The unique appeal of comics is its visual medium and the visual format is an essential part of their overall appeal. Think of the illustration style and content as the visual language of comics, which is one of the factors that readers use to select comics.
- Many big-publisher comics have a similar style, but some readers are interested in many different illustration styles and appreciate experimentation and non-traditional styles.
 - Superhero and traditional comics: Frank Miller, Alex Ross, John Cassaday, Fiona Staples
 - Alternative styles: Rick Geary, Chris Ware, Craig Thompson, Lisa Hanawalt
- Also, the visual language of a comic may appear simple and child-like, but the content of the comic could be very adult. Examples: Barefoot Gen by Keiji Nakazawa, Persepolis

by Marjane Satrapi, The Frank Book by Jim Woodring.

Language:

- Although the visual language of comics is usually the first thing a reader experiences and a major part of reading comics, the written language and how it weaves with the illustrations is also important to comics readers.
 - Does the book have careful dialogue or narrative storytelling woven into the pages? Examples: Fun Home by Alison Bechdel, From Hell by Alan Moore, Sandman by Neil Gaiman.
 - Does it have violence, explosions, and pithy one-liners? Examples: Sin City by Frank Miller, Hellboy by Mike Mignola, Ultimate Spider-Man by Brian Michael Bendis.

Setting:

- Setting can play as big a role in comics as in other books, and the setting can be depicted visually. Setting can appeal for different reasons and could be in a fictional world, in a high school, or in a city like Gotham.
 - Examples of books with strong settings: Hicksville by Dylan Horrocks, From Hell by Alan Moore, Flood by Eric Drooker

Story:

- This is where elements of genre come into play, i.e. Horror, Sci-fi, Crime, Realistic, coming of age. It may be hard at first to think about comics in terms of genres, but the same genres in fiction and nonfiction texts can be represented in comics.
- Comics does tend towards fantasy and sci-fi elements, and will often blend genres, which is exemplified in superhero books and the output of the top publishers.
 - Examples of books with strong genre and story elements: Walking Dead, Watchmen, Stitches, East of West.

Character:

- This is a major strength of traditional comics, even though it may not seem that way to non-comics readers at first.
 - So many characters in comics are larger than life and have literal superpowers. But these powers often mask a tragic past or a fatal flaw that makes the characters so compelling. Think about Superman--he's been around as essentially the same character since the 1930s!
- Non-traditional comics can also have great characters, but usually come from a different angle.
 - Examples of books with strong characterization: memoirs, Jimmy Corrigan the Smartest Kid on Earth, Love and Rockets

How to read a comic book in five minutes

1. Cover art – often indicates contents and can give a clue to the genre. For comics, be cautious about selecting books only by the cover--often the cover is drawn by a different artist than the interiors.
2. Book Jacket – Does the front cover blurb lure the reader without revealing the whole plot? Are there mentions of like authors? (If so, note them.) Is the book part of a series? Flip to the back blurb about the author. Has the author won major awards? Turn the book over and glance at the back cover. Which other authors have commented on the book? Not all comics have author and artist info.
3. Publisher -- often a publisher or imprint can give clues to audience or genre.
4. Heft – Could a reader balance the book in bed? Or is it too heavy? Heft can indicate a single large work or a compilation covering many years of one character, one title, or a single author.
5. Type or genre – Superhero, historical, crime, science fiction, romance, coming of age, gay or lesbian, nonfiction, surreal, literary, etc. Scan through the book for clues to genres or genre blends.
6. Skim the first few pages, read a bit of the middle of the book, read the last page (unless you've decided to read the book). How complex are the images and panels? Is there a lot of text? How much of the writing is dialogue?
7. Evaluate – style, pace, clarity of both writing and illustration.
8. Characters -- are they familiar characters with traditional depictions or an unusual treatment? How are they characters depicted? Are they realistic? Fantastical? What can you learn about the character from the illustrations and text?
9. Narrative and point of view – first person narrative? Does the book follow one character or multiple characters? Does it have flashbacks or weave different stories together?
10. Who is this book for? Why would they enjoy it?
11. Connect this book with any others that readers of this book might enjoy. Consider why. Think about connections with film and television, as well.