

# Who Is Reading Manga?

## One High School's Story

Melissa Bergin

**T**heir hair is long and short, light and dark, and occasionally a shocking purple. They wear short skirts, long flowing coats, and all-black outfits. And a couple of them have the biggest, most beautiful eyes you have ever seen. Am I talking about the characters in manga? I could be, but in this case I am talking about my students who read them.

As librarians we are always wondering who exactly is reading the books we buy. Sure, we see some readers as we do readers advisory, but others slip to the shelves and back out without ever tripping our radar. I know manga is big with my students. I know I have to hide half-processed books, or they will try to take them out. If I process them while students are around, I need to keep sticky notes at hand to create impromptu reserve lists as the students see them. The manga I have make up less than 1 percent of my collection but is creating between 25 and 30 percent of our circulation most months.

I've known for a long time that the paraprofessionals in my library who handle the reserves and interlibrary loans often know more about a particular student's reading habits than I know. I knew our school had an active anime group who often suggested new titles for our collection and that a significant number of titles were being loaned to our local middle school. But who was reading them here at our high school library?

My casual observation showed three types of readers. The first type was a reader who was interested in anime and Japanese culture and was reading manga in light of its popularity. The second type was an avid reader who would read anything that wouldn't walk away. And the third type was a reluctant reader who was attracted to titles recognizable from current anime on television. But why this

group of readers? What did they have in common? What was the appeal?

I set out to do some research. I created a one-page survey, and, with the help of two wonderful paraprofessionals who spend much more time with the students and the graphic novel collection than I do, I set about surveying students. Between students who came in to borrow manga and those taking the survey to the school's Anime Club, I soon had thirty-three responses.

So what did I find out? Well, first of all, I wasn't finding out who these students were. Their self-descriptions, particularly of their own reader type, differed from others' descriptions of them. I surveyed thirty-three students ages fourteen through eighteen. Of those students, twenty-three were female, and ten were male. This gender difference did not surprise me. Our anime club was started by girls, and my collection is heavily weighted to shōjo (girl) manga, since that is what has been requested. Like many other areas of buying, I also have to fight my own "appeal" criterion to buy what I think is cool. Just because *Yu Yu Hakusho* doesn't appeal to me doesn't, in fact, mean it will not circulate well.

I tried through the survey to see what types of students were reading the manga. The majority almost evenly split (fifteen to sixteen) between being a "good" student and an "average" student, with only two considering themselves "poor" students. Favorite classes were most likely to be English, art, or math, while at the same time the least favorite class was overwhelmingly likely to be math. Is there something about how the mind processes the information in graphic novels that is more or less compatible with a learning style needed for math?

From my sample, manga seems to embrace both readers and nonreaders.

Almost half the sample, fifteen students, reported reading at least twenty books a year, not including manga and required schoolbooks. Within that sample, six reported more than fifty books a year! (And I am embarrassed to say I can only name three of them!) Many reported a preference for fantasy and adventure, echoed by the fact that *Inu-Yasha* is our number one circulating title in the collection. Several reported romance as their favorite, also supported by the constant circulation of shōjo series like *Kare Kano* and *Mars*. All but one student reported that reading was easy for them. Considering that the sample included students who are identified as special education students, it says that students are feeling successful reading manga—even if they have to read it backward. I've wondered for some of these students if the challenge of reading a book forward is so great that the challenge of reading a book backwards is no greater. ("Authentic manga," the most popular of the manga forms being printed currently, is printed in the original Japanese format with the reader starting at what we would consider the back of the book and reads right to left to the front of the book.)

These are also social students. While a few were self-reported bookworms or athletes, a majority of students reported their favorite activity as "hanging out with friends." One of the other teachers in my building brought it to my attention that

**Melissa Bergin** is one of a team of two library media specialists at Niskayuna (N.Y.) High School. She recently spent part of February and March in Japan as a volunteer with Special Olympics for the 2005 World Winter Games. She is currently working on an additional degree in educational administration.

you rarely see a student reading manga alone. They often can be seen reading in groups and discussing what they have read. Perhaps the short length of the books allows for more shared experiences to discuss, but their reading has a sense of camaraderie about it. While many teachers look down at graphic novels, I'm not sure we can dismiss something that has our students critically and enthusiastically discussing what they are reading.

But perhaps where it got most interesting was when I asked students for their favorite three manga series. Of the top fifteen titles suggested we only had nine of them in the school media center. When you went further out on the list even more titles I had never heard of appeared. I knew there was an elaborate network of manga-sharing going on of which the library was only part, but obviously many of the students were getting books from outside sources. Some of the titles suggested were the shojo titles in our collection, while others reflected a more shonen (young boys) preference such as *Naruto* or *Yu Yu Hakusho*. What I had not expected though was the interest in shonen-ai (boy love) series. Shonen-ai are characterized by a fairly innocent, romantic male-male relationship and are targeted to appeal to girls. Two of the most popular for my students are *Gravitation* and *Only the Ring Finger Knows*. The term *yaoi* is sometimes also used in the United States to describe these titles. Though the *yaoi* moniker has traditionally applied to a more mature audience

and more graphic images, the terms are used interchangeably by today's teens.

I have learned several things from this small survey. One of the lessons should have been obvious—be aware of building a balanced collection reflecting the interests of all your users and potential users. Just because the girls were the most vocal does not mean they were the only ones reading. I had the evidence in my circulation reports as well that the boys books were moving too, and they were underrepresented.

I also learned that my instinct was right. There are three basic groups reading them, and I had pretty accurately pegged those groups. One question I could have asked is if there had been any change in their other library habits since they began coming in for manga. Did the manga lead them to other library resources? I know several of them have built wonderful relationships with Linda, one of our paraprofessionals, who has become extremely well read in manga. For those students, I know they have one more adult in the school they feel they can talk to.

I still have a nagging suspicion that there is more here to be researched. I suspect there is something in how these students learn that makes graphic novels appeal to them. If as educators we can tap into that, we have another way to reach these students. Unfortunately I know I did not ask the right questions. While the students overwhelmingly told me that they learned "by doing" over "listening" or "reading," I doubt that they are truly

### Favorite Manga of Niskayuna High School students

- *Naruto*—Masashi Kishimoto
- *Inu-Yasha*—Rumiko Takahashi
- *Rurouni Kenshin*—Nokuhiro Watsuki
- *Only the Ring Finger Knows*—Satoru Kannagi, Hotaru Odagiri
- *Mars*—Fuyumi Soryo
- *Gravitation*—Maki Murakami
- *Fruits Basket*—Natuki Takaya
- *Ceres, Celestial Legend*—Yu Watase
- *Pretear*—Junichi Satou, Kaori Naruse

(Note: not all of these series are held by the high school or would be appropriate for a high school library.)

kinetic learners, more likely some type of visual or spatial learners. Considering the number that said that they did not like math and that none reported any affinity for music, two known learning connections, maybe there is another area of literacy to be explored here. I currently have more copies of the survey at our two middle schools to gather more information, which will hopefully allow me to refine my survey tool and maybe try to ask the right questions. While manga may be recognized as barely more than a fad, it is leaving a mark on a significant part of a generation. ●

### Y ARCHIVE?

### WELCH AND BROWN

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*Watchmen*

Allan Moore, Dave Gibbons.

DC Comics, 1995.

ISBN: 0930289234

The central story in *Watchmen*: apparently someone is killing off or discrediting the former Crimebusters.

The remaining members end up coming together to discover the who and the why behind it all, and the payoff to the mystery is *most* satisfactory.

We hope you find this anecdote/guide helpful and entertaining. Good luck with all your endeavors! ●

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