

Graphic novels at Langara Library

By Mary Afonso.

When I first started working at the Langara College library, I was surprised to see graphic novels in the collection. What were they doing in an academic library? At that point I had only read three such books, all by the same author, and while I enjoyed them, I really wasn't drawn to this format the way I was to formal literature, and definitely did not see their place outside a public library. Of course, this was over a year ago and I have since learned that graphic novels are not just silly stories for pleasure reading among young adults.

Graphic novels are, in fact, on recommended reading lists for several English courses at the college. One English instructor always includes them on his required reading lists, and students in the Young Adult course in the Library and Information Technology program at the college are required to read and review at least one.

The graphic novel collection at Langara College is highly diverse and offers a choice selection. From the highly acclaimed *Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography*, by Chester Brown, to the beautiful coming of age story *Blankets*, by Craig Thompson, these books are more than just a series of drawings and words on pages. They tell stories that can educate you, move you, even leave you nostalgic, and it is this combination of both text and sometimes complex visual elements that draws in readers.

But these books aren't there just for academic reasons, they are there for leisure reading, too. Alison Curtis, Librarian and Coordinator, Collection Development at Langara College Library, informed me that there are studies showing the value of leisure reading to undergrad students. This I can definitely believe as I often turned to novels to relax when I was in school. Alison explained that while "the main purpose of the book collection at the library is to support the curriculum, it is beneficial to enrich lives" through leisure reading too.

I asked Alison what prompted the library to start a graphic novel collection and what influences the selection choices. Interestingly, I learned that for a long time, the library had books about graphic novels, but none actually in the collection. This changed for a variety

of reasons: library literature in journals, popularity with young adults, and the desire to add more leisure reading material into the collection, among others.

Langara's Collection Committee knew graphic novels would be popular in the library, and indeed they are. The first few novels acquired were interfiled among the regular book collection, but now they reside with the paperback books in a high traffic, prominent place on the main floor, easily browsable and accessible to students. And though there are currently 76 graphic titles available, you would almost never know it as most of the collection is out at any given time.

While there is no "strict criteria" when selecting what is appropriate in the library, the selection committee does factor in things such as instructor, staff and student requests, literary/artistic merit, known authors, and monetary considerations. They also refer to selection lists. Ten or fifteen years ago, availability and selection were limited. "Now", says Alison, "there is a huge selection to choose from. This makes it possible to have ongoing collection development."

Whether graphic novels become highly available on e-readers is another question. As Alison mentioned to me, graphic novels are "one of the areas where print materials still consistently work better than the online format." I did look at two of the online graphic novels available through the library, *Skim* and *Chewing on Tinfoil*, and I thought they were okay, but they weren't in colour format and I'm not sure that more complex novels would translate so well, especially given the odd sizes that graphic novels can be. Larger ones would need a lot of scrolling on a small screen.

At this moment, I have two graphic novels waiting to be read, both highly recommended by my coworkers. While they may still not be my first choice of material to read, I certainly will not scorn them as I once did.

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