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Teachers are getting graphic

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

When the American Library Association invited acclaimed comic book artist Jeff Smith and three fellow artists to its annual meeting in 2002, the quartet huddled beforehand and agreed that this was their best — and perhaps only — chance to pitch comics to an influential group of tastemakers.



Bone comic creator Jeff Smith credits the *Peanuts* comic strip for inspiring him to learn to read.

By Bob Riha, Jr., USA TODAY

So the artists were taken aback when the librarians professed that they already were in love with comics and wanted more. "I'm like, 'Hello? Is there a gas leak in here?' " says Smith, the creator of *Bone*, the epic adventures of a trio of cartoon cousins. "We were used to being told comics are bad."

Librarians lavished the artists with kind words, saying their books were teaching kids — especially boys — to read and getting them excited about literature. In fact, the artists heard that comics and their book-length cousins, graphic novels, were the only books for which circulation was up.

"The librarians were way in front of us," Smith says.

And along with librarians, teachers also are embracing comics, both for recreational and instructional reading. They're using the caped crusader *Batman* to explore mythology and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a Holocaust memoir, as well as other titles, to teach history. **(Related story: [Stories for the ages](#))**

"Reading is an acquired skill," says Austin librarian and author Michele Gorman. "If you have negative experiences early on with reading, you just quit."

The push for comics has produced an interesting set of bedfellows. A collaboration of artists, teachers and scholars, the National Association of Comics Art

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Educators, is distributing study guides and lesson plans that include "An Aesthetic History of Comics."

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And a Columbia University professor is leading a 10-city, after-school project that gives 30,000 students, from elementary school through high school, a chance to have their own comic books professionally published.

In previous editions, students have tackled AIDS and the plight of Tibet, among other issues.

"Kids are writing about very real topics," says Michael Bitz, a senior research associate at Columbia's Teachers College and the founding director of the Comic Book Project. It began in 2001 at an after-school program in Queens, N.Y., and has produced three published student collections.

"It's become sort of a national movement," he says. "It's really been fantastic."

A genre on the rise

Meanwhile, teachers in a few Maryland school districts are piloting the use of *Dignifying Science*, a 144-page comic about the lives of women scientists such as Marie Curie and American geneticist Barbara McClintock.

Sales of comic books, while still comparatively small, have grown in recent years, helped in large part by a handful of blockbuster movies.

Graphic novels first appeared on USA TODAY's Best-Selling Books list in 2002. Last week, five titles appeared on the list, including two from the noir crime-novel-inspired *Sin City* series by Frank Miller.

Younger readers thrill to the wordless adventures of *Owly*, an expressive, big-eyed owl drawn by Andy Runton, and Jef Czekaj's mercurial *Grampa and Julie: Shark Hunters*, adapted from *Nickelodeon* magazine.

Even *Harry Potter* publisher Scholastic is wading into graphic novels: Smith, who for more than a decade self-published his popular *Bone* series in black-and-white, is now coloring the frames for a glossy, nine-volume version under Scholastic's new Graphix imprint. The new editions include a few subtle tweaks by Smith to play up tension or foreshadowing.

"This is sort of like the director's cut," says Scholastic's David Saylor, whose assistant discovered *Bone* in a comic book store and passed it on. "I read it, and I loved it." The first reissue appeared in February, and the last is planned for 2009.

From comic stand to library

Many librarians first took note of graphic novels in 1992 when the second volume of *Maus* won a special Pulitzer Prize. But it has been only in the past five years that libraries have developed their own graphic-novel collections, says Gorman, author of *Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens*.

In Austin, she created an entire shelving category for graphic novels, which is "probably the most browsed collection" in the system. "If your intention is to create a library collection that will circulate, it's almost impossible to say it's not worth it," she says.

Sandy Hayes, an eighth-grade teacher at Becker Middle School in Becker, Minn., uses excerpts from *Maus* in a lesson on the Holocaust. She says she doesn't assign the entire two-book series; it's too grim in parts for some eighth-graders.

Hayes says many graphic novels these days are "much more sophisticated than the *Batman* or *Superman* or *Donald Duck* comics that I remember from my youth."

Popular but controversial

Not all teachers are sold on comic books as a teaching tool.

Carol Jago, who teaches English at Santa Monica High School near Los Angeles, says anything "that gets kids reading rather than watching television and playing video games is good." But she stops short of assigning comic books in the classroom,

saying that puts teachers on a slippery slope.

"If our mentality as teachers is how to make the text easier and easier, we're moving in the wrong direction," she says. "Our job as teachers is to help students read hard texts. When a student tells you the work is hard, you should say, 'Good; now I know it's the right book for you.' "

Jago is a fan of Spiegelman and Neil Gaiman, creator of the cult DC Comics series *Sandman* and a popular graphic novelist. She believes their works are "great, great pieces of literature."

But teachers should assign them for outside class, Jago says. "They're serious books. I am not denigrating their artistic merit. It's just not what we should be teaching."

She especially frets about comic book adaptations of classics such as *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf*. She says teachers should think twice before assigning them.

"I worry tremendously that if we bring stuff like this into the schools for low-level students, but everybody else reads regular texts, aren't we creating a two-level system? If we're giving students a comic book version of their English class, something's wrong. ... And that is a danger. Nobody is going to bring comic books into an Advanced Placement class."

Jack Gantos, author of the popular *Joey Pigza* series of children's books, says adults should be delighted by kids' attraction to comic books — or any other lightweight material — if they want them to read heavier books down the road. "Kids have beach reading just like adults have beach reading," he says.

Even French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre loved comic books, Gantos says. "This is a pretty heavy thinker, but he said in his autobiography that he started off reading comic books as a child and that if it wasn't for comic books, he never would have stuck with books.

"That was really where (Sartre) sort of punctured the world of literature and really got excited about books," Gantos says.

Smith, 45, began drawing the characters that eventually would populate *Bone* at age 4. He remembers looking forward to Sunday mornings and his father reading *Peanuts*, learning to read "specifically so I could find out what Snoopy and Charlie Brown were saying in those little bubbles."

He loved the power of Charles Schulz's simple drawings. "Charlie Brown just had two dot eyes and a squiggle line for a mouth, but when his stomach hurt, you knew what was going on."

An image makeover

Advocates are trying to restore the reputation of comic books after 50 years in exile. Once a popular genre among all age groups, they fell prey in the 1950s to a crusading psychologist named Fredric Wertham, who portrayed comics as rife with sex, violence and drug use. Reading them, he asserted, encouraged bad behavior.

Detractors considered Wertham's 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, over the top. He saw nude women hidden in tree bark and hinted that Wonder Woman was a lesbian, but the book led to Senate hearings and a censorship code that put many publishers out of business. Most that survived stuck to a good-vs.-evil formula in which, as the code required, bad guys got their due. Many comics historians believe this relegated comics to life as a lesser genre, fit only for kid-friendly superhero story lines.

"Comics really became sort of 'trash literature,' " Gorman says. "People grew up with those ideas."

A wave of underground comics in the 1960s helped undermine the code, and now few publishers abide by it. This created a new generation of fans who share the books with their own children.

Smith's adult fans have been snapping up copies of *Bone* for more than a decade, but about five years ago, readers attending comic book conventions started bringing their kids along. "I think it appeals to kids because it's the book I wanted to read when I was 9," he says. "I just had to wait until I grew up before I could write it."

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