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The Power of Potter

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If Harry Potter doesn't lure kids in, maybe comic books will. That's what librarians are finding, as they reel in book-wary students with comics, graphic novels, and *manga*, the genre of Japanese comics. "Kids exist in a visual world, and comic books are a natural mode of text for them," says Ben Towle, cofounder of the National Association of Comics Art Educators, which is promoting the use of these works in literacy programs as well as other school subjects.

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Skeptics may still think of comics as trash lit. But Michele Gorman, an Austin librarian, is a believer. "They're fun, but they're not always easy to read. The vocabulary can be advanced, as can the imagery," she says. That's why she's focusing on the library's comics collection. After all, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, the graphic novel telling of his father's story of survival during the Holocaust, is as powerful as (if not more than) any plain-prose volume, and Jeff Smith's *Bone* series, about three cousins who get separated in a weird world, is often compared with *The Lord of the Rings*.

Pick pix. Comics can be a blessing for less confident readers. The art gives clues that promote enjoyable reading. "Clearly, literacy is happening. Kids are talking about books," Gorman says. And even a *manga* addict might segue into more-traditional novels. Gorman noticed a video-game fanatic playing a game similar to *The Lord of the Rings*, so she dug up her copy of the graphic-novel version of *The Hobbit*. When he returned, he told her it was the best book he'd ever read, and he wanted more. So she slipped him the J. R. R. Tolkien trilogy (without pictures). He devoured that, too.

A big obstacle in hooking kids on books as Gorman did, many educators say, is the way schools have evolved. "Teachers are under pressure to accomplish goals for tests. Reading out loud goes by the wayside," says University of Maryland Prof. Mariam Jean Dreher. School library visits are often scheduled appointments; to speed along the study of a topic, many teachers rely on worksheets instead of books. "Why should students think [reading] is important if we don't give them time to do it?" Denman asks.

Boy lit. Lack of choice is part of the problem. Not every child shares the same taste--boys are particularly underserved when it comes to appealing book options--so the books that are assigned can easily strike out. Former elementary school teacher and popular author Jon Scieszka says this arrangement has to change: "We've structured it so kids think of reading like medicine. It tastes bad, but it's good for you."

"A teacher has 25 copies of the same book and marches through it--if you want to ruin a book, that's a good way to do it," says Allington. "When you create choice, you create engaged readers." Just ask Cheryl Hinterleitner, 14, who showed up at a Harry Potter book discussion at the Porter branch of the Central Rappahannock Regional Library in Virginia two weeks ago dressed as a member of the Weasley family, eating Voldertorte (a chocolate confection) and gushing about the other books she's got on her shelf, like everything by Amelia Atwater-Rhodes, who writes about vampires. But what about what she has to read for school? "I hated the selection so much that I'm writing my own," she declared. It's going to be about vampires.

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