

Holy Toledo, Ms Devine!

Our ASLA (NSW) Teacher Librarian of the Year 2008 (Joint Winner with the late John Free), **Di Laycock**, continues to hold, unashamedly, the mirror up to her would-be doubters to steadfastly defend the rise and rise and rise of graphic novels as fitting choices for school based collections.

Moreover, she argues strongly for the rightful place of graphic novels as an additional format for not only recreational reading but as stimulus for units of study that can be delivered or enhanced through story/ image. And she has been successful in delivering the message that graphic novels have a place in our schools. The kids told her so!

However it would seem that Laycock has wandered into a journalists' juggernaut. Both the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* have donned their respective superhero regalia and have leapt across state lines to open up the debate that is raging on the introduction of graphic novels as legitimate reading material in the secondary curriculum.

Liza Power, journalist for Melbourne's *The Age* [Graphic tales make novel teaching tools September 21, 2008], interviewed several secondary teachers, including Di Laycock, as well as **Pam McIntyre**, lecturer in language and literacy at the University of Melbourne. The teachers who used graphic novels in their mainstream teaching were understandably fierce in their defense of the format whilst others, who were less inclined to accept graphic novels as legitimate text for school students, felt that graphic novels were substandard literature with limited scope for critical thinking and deconstruction of literary style and language.

Power's investigation into teachers' attitudes toward graphic novels in the English curriculum portrayed factional responses. She summarizes the vote against graphic novels:

Many teachers argue that class time spent studying [a] non-traditional texts is time taken away from more rigorous scholastic endeavors. Hobby reading, they argue, has no place in the classroom.

Hobby texts for hobby reading are pretty harsh words from our colleagues when you consider the depth of emotion and historical truths in Spiegelman's *Maus*, the empathic and sensitive rendering of Tan's *The Arrival* and the very clever portrayal of the main characters in Hind's adaptation of *Merchant of Venice*.

However, the stalwarts who champion the inclusion of graphic novels in the curriculum as legitimate texts for the purpose of enhancing learning give vent to their passion as they witness the change from disengagement to engagement of their more disaffected students and the intensity of discussion between their more engaged students.

It is this quality in graphic novels—their ability to cater to a wide array of learning styles and abilities—that lends itself to careful examination beyond prejudice that comes from social conditioning.

McIntyre, in her interview with Power, argues that, in today's highly visual world,

students want to look, engage and understand material very quickly. If they're daunted by a difficult to understand text, they simply get bored and move on.

She is steadfast in her belief that young people are, in fact, sophisticated users and readers of the visual form.

It is this comment alone that forces the question *Why do graphic novels carry for some teachers, schools, school councils and parents alike, such stigma?*

Miranda Devine, in her opinion column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* [English teachers have lost the plot October 4 2008] lambasts the English Teachers' Association (NSW) for their lack of responsibility in their response to an HSC syllabus review by the NSW Board of Studies. She is at odds with the Association for wavering from what should be a solid diet of print/word based media:

In their world, as in the curriculum, "texts" can be books as we know them—words on a page that ideally have some literary merit—

and can also be music videos, movies, reality TV shows, comic books ("graphic novels") or songs. To ETA, all texts are equal, and sceptical students are required to expend considerable effort trying to prove it.

Ms Devine continues that:

While oral language and iconography—pictures—are important, it is the written word that has helped us most to think. To elevate pictures and sounds to equal status is to rewind human evolution and primitivise the brain.

For graphic novel advocates, Devine's blatant stab at the visual as legitimate text is provocative.

Those who have involved themselves with the research into the use of graphic novels in the classroom will tell you that students' identification of character, story and response are just as genuine as if they had read the word-only version.

Higher Order Thinking Skills

Laycock argues that teaching students to analyse visual information is crucial and that graphic novels assist in the development of analytic and critical understandings in ways that other texts cannot.



As Power explains:

When Laycock first introduced a year 8 class to an adaptation of Macbeth, boys who had struggled with the language and themes of the traditional text found

that being able to see the relationships between the characters made a dramatic difference. Higher-ability students studied the graphic novel and original text together, evaluating the adaptation process.

Power has done her homework. She interviewed Melbourne High School English teacher Blair Mahoney who also supported the use of graphic novels as excellent texts for the study of English because, as he states, they have the ability to incorporate:

words with visual images—which involve colour, perspectives and framing—often combined with dialogue in speech balloons.

He continues that 'graphic novels represent a unique visual/literary form'.

Supporting Mahoney [in Power] is Laycock's affirmation that 'graphic novels have the ability to cater to a wide array of learning styles and abilities.'

Surely the proof in the pudding is the response of the students. Evidence is what counts!

Laycock has pages of evidence to suggest that, amongst other things, her students were stimulated to think differently about characters and relationships between them; to question critically the body language presented through the images, to make meaning from text between the panels and to critically think about the author's intention.

Her evidence is supported by a growing body of research regarding the efficacy of graphic novels as teaching tools for powerful learning. But will this evidence be enough to convince the sceptics?

Perhaps so, if the debate can swing away from pitting graphic novels and word-only texts as rivals and instead, place them hand in glove.

I'm betting that graphic novels have all the potential that 21st century learning requires—not in how they look but in how they function for young learners who face making meaning in a hypermedia world.

Linda Gibson-Langford