

EXPANDING GRAPHICS

From classic comic collection, to graphic novels' growing literary cachet, to manga mania, three specialty booksellers discuss the broadening appeal of what may be the book world's most rapidly evolving genre.

By Joy Ferguson



Superheroes are faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound and ... able to strengthen bookstore sales even in this weak economy.

Of course, comics and graphic novels are so much more than superhero series. Peter Birkemoe, owner of The Beguiling in Toronto has always viewed these as “a vital medium to attract readers rather than to simply indulge periodical collector mania.” Literary titles, such as Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel* (Drawn & Quarterly/Raincoast Books) and *Mom’s Cancer* (Abrams/Manda Group) by Brian Fies are classics that continue to sell well.

ICv2 (www.icv2.com)—a leading source for

The Beguiling Books & Art Inc. (www.beguiling.com)

The Beguiling, in Toronto, opened in 1987. Peter Birkemoe was enthralled by comics from the very beginning, but didn’t transition from employee to owner until 1998. Birkemoe says, “In 1987 graphic novels as a category did not exist. I experienced the gradual shift from comics to predominately graphic novels.” But Birkemoe’s philosophy within the world of comics, and later graphic novels, has been to “advocate them as something to read rather than just something to collect.”

“In 1987, the original owners,” says Birkemoe, “set out to do something completely different from what other comic book stores had done.” The result

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information on the business of graphic novels, comics and manga—reports that North American dollar sales of comics and graphic novels combined were up one per cent in August 2009 from August 2008. And the actual dollar value is impressive, with combined sales of comics/graphic novels at over US\$715 million in 2008.

A comics and graphic novel section can be a boon to any store, but with the multitude of titles available booksellers need knowledgeable staff and good advice to succeed.

Three exceptional specialty bookshops share their experiences:

is that The Beguiling has a dual identity: For local collectors, the bookshop wears the guise of a community comic shop, stocking popular comics including superheroes; for those interested in literary works, the bookshop appears as an international specialty store with a deeply-stocked selection, including difficult-to-locate alternative comics and graphic novels. “Basically,” says Birkemoe, “our literary selection focuses on the creator over the character, carrying works of artists like Seth.”

Over the years, Birkemoe chose not to add pop culture sidelines like t-shirts, but instead diversified by “broadening the definition of the medium.” He carries titles related to the comics/graphic novels category ranging from picture books to academic works on the comic genre.

Birkemoe’s prime demographic is university students. And with the University of Toronto enjoying an influx of new students each year, his client base continues to grow. Over the years, he has seen gen-



der parity arise in his clientele, although he still finds that men are likely to spend more, and are more compulsive collectors.

Asked about trends, a one-word answer suffices, "Manga." To take advantage of the mega-sales available, Birkemoe cautions that you need staff deeply-knowledgeable about manga, "Not only can they handsell, but they can also help with ordering, which is essential with the avalanche of manga out there." The Beguiling has one of the best-stocked manga sections in North America—and it has taken over the second floor!

The Beguiling hosts events and takes marketing opportunities. The store participates in Free Comic Book Day—Visit www.freecomicbookday.com for details. One of the recent challenges that Birkemoe has worked to overcome is the rising popularity of web comics. To realise opportunities from this trend, he carries the online artists' crossover print books. And whenever an online artist is in town, he creates a store event for him to attend.

Birkemoe appreciates that, "Online comics reach a larger audience than comics have reached before." The fact that people are encountering this genre more frequently makes Birkemoe optimistic, "Once they've scratched the surface, they want help from someone more knowledgeable."

The Labyrinth Books

(www.animationroadshow.blogspot.com/) They began selling at conventions in 1988, but in 2007, Dan and Jessica Merisanu opened their Toronto storefront. The Labyrinth Books sells graphic novels, art books and manga. Not including comics was a conscious decision that Merisanu says has brought success: "We regularly enjoy compliments from customers on our selection. Having limited the categories allows us to carry a wide range of titles." The Labyrinth Books stocks over 3,000 manga and over 1,000 graphic novels.

Merisanu's clientele falls in the 15-25 year range. Last year, their favourites were *Watchmen* (DC Comics) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, and *Scott Pilgrim* (Diamond Comic Distributors) by Bryan Lee O'Malley. He also finds that *Batman* is a crowd-pleaser—"holy bat-book sales!" According to Nielsen's BookScan *Batman: The Killing Joke* (DC Comics) sold over 60,000 copies in 2008. And Merisanu has found that Neil Gaiman's classic, *The Sandman* (DC Comics) continues to be a

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sleeper hit. And he is pleased to add, "The list of popular authors is growing."

At The Labyrinth Books, the buyer—who is a professional animator—sources publishers and self-publishers from around the world. Not surprisingly, customers discover unique and hard-to-find books that would not be available at big box retailers. Schools and libraries are offered free workshops, discounts with their orders, and French graphic novels are also available.

Librairie Drawn & Quarterly Bookstore

(www.drawnandquarterly.com/211bernard/) In 1989, Chris Oliveros sought out artists to contribute to his magazine anthology *Drawn & Quarterly*. Over the past 20 years *Drawn & Quarterly* (D+Q) has evolved to become an influential art and literary comic publisher. Today, D+Q publishes some of the genre's best authors and artists.

In 2007, the Montreal bookshop was opened. Along with comics and graphic novels, Librairie Drawn & Quarterly Bookstore stocks art and photography selections and some adult fiction.

Store Manager, Rory Seydel, says their bookshop has no clear demographic, "our audience is everyone from young zine makers—Montreal is a vibrant art city—to new parents to older clientele loyal to the genre."

To entice the community into the store, Librairie offers workshops, such as those on silk-screening and creating your own comic. The bookshop takes pride in launching local artists, and creating events that bring the community into the store. For example, recently, they hosted Jonathan Goldstein's launch at which he acted out skits from his *WireTap* radio show.

Seydel says that their clientele enjoy being introduced to new artists and ideas. Librairie seeks out smaller publishers like McSweeney's so that staff may share their expert recommendations and their new discoveries with customers. And of course, the store sees strong sales from D+Q published titles, its new releases as well as classic

graphic novels.

According to Diamond Book Distributors (www.diamondcomics.com), graphic novels have higher inventory turn rates than any other category. And North American sales numbers are persuading booksellers that this category can be profitable: Diamond released 2008 sales figures for periodical comics of roughly US\$320 million (with US\$175 million of that being attributed to manga sales) and graphic novel sales totalling US\$395 million.

If you are considering adding a comics and graphic novel section to your bookshop, Librairie Manager, Rory Seydel, says, "Go for it! There is definitely great interest in the marketplace." But with over 3,000 graphic novels alone published in 2007, he cautions that you must learn about the genre first: "Being knowledgeable is a cornerstone of being in this business." Birkemoe agrees, "It's important to familiarize yourself with what is available. Besides knowledgeable staff, customers are a great resource and can assist with ordering. And read more material," he adds with a smile, "no excuses, these are comics, you can read them quickly."

Are comics and graphic novels a strong category to sell in troubled economic times? Well, remember ... it is a Superhero's job to save the world!

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