BEATRICE DAVIS EDITORIAL FELLOWSHIP

Report 2023-24

Sophie Splatt

AUSTRALIAN PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

BEATRICE DAVIS
EDITORIAL
FELLOWSHIP

Graphic novels: Can we grow them at home?

The editing and publishing of graphic novels in the US

Sophie Splatt

2023–24 Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship Report

AUSTRALIAN
PUBLISHERS
ASSOCIATION

Contents

Introduction ... 5
Research aims ... 5
Implementation ... 5
What I learned ... 6
Overview ... 7
What is a graphic novel? ... 7
Recent history of graphic novels in the Australian trade market ... 8
The rise of the graphic novel ... *8*
Graphic novel publishing for adults ... *11*
Graphic novel publishing for children and young adults ... *13*
Overseas opportunities and success stories ... *14*
International rights sales ... *15*
Where to next? ... *16*
Nielsen BookData BookScan figures for the Australian trade market, 2020–23 ... *17*
Recent history of graphic novels in the US trade market ... 20
Brian Hibbs's 2023 Circana BookScan Analysis ... *22*
Circana BookScan figures for the US trade market, 2020–23 ... *25*
Alternative models of publishing ... *27*
Digital comics, platforms and distribution services ... *29*
Publishing ... 34
Categories, genres and age ranges in graphic novels ... 34
Children's ... *34*
Adult ... *39*
Crossover categories ... *42*
Bilingual books ... *42*
Books in translation ... *43*
Adaptations ... 44
Webcomics to graphic novel ... *44*
Novel to graphic novel ... *45*
The Disney-Hyperion model ... 47
Acquisitions ... 48
Finding new talent ... *48*
What editors consider when acquiring ... *50*
Pitching ... *52*
Advances ... *52*
Agents ... *53*
Formats ... *54*
RRPs ... *55*
Commercial viability ... *57*
Print runs ... *58*
Scheduling ... *58*
Series publishing ... *59*
Imprints ... *60*
List planning ... *61*
Expectations of colour ... *62*

Editing ... 64
The editorial process ... 64
Single vs multiple creators ... 64
How creators work ... 66
Stages of the editorial process ... 67
Editing illustrations ... 70
Proofreading and style guides ... 71
Other approaches to editing ... 72
Editorial support and training ... 73
Extra tips for editing graphic novels ... 73
Editing graphic novels for the first time ... 75
Creative roles within graphic novel production ... 77
Inkers ... 77
Flatters ... 77
Colourists ... 78
Letterers ... 79
Bubble artists ... 80
Design and production ... 82
Design ... 82
Production ... 84
Pre-press and proofing ... 86
Printing ... 87
Paper stock ... 87
Publicity and marketing ... 89
Publicity ... 89
Marketing ... 90
Campaigns ... 91
Budgets ... 92
Social media ... 92
Pre-orders ... 93
Author tours and school visits ... 94
Advance reader copies, sales and review materials ... 95
Awards and lists ... 96
Rights, sales and distribution ... 98
Rights ... 98
Sales and distribution ... 99
Retailers ... 100
Shelving and discoverability ... 101
Bookselling concerns ... 103
Public and academic libraries ... 104
School libraries ... 106
Developing sustainable careers for creators ... 107
Role of the greater comics industry ... 109
Diverse voices ... 109
Native American creators ... 111
What's next? Trends in graphic novels ... 113
Conclusions and recommendations: Can we grow them at home? ... 116

Appendixes 119

Appendix A: Nielsen BookData BookScan figures, comics and graphic novels, Australian trade market, 2020–23 120

Appendix B: Circana BookScan figures, comics and graphic novels, US trade market, 2020–23 121

Notes 122

Recommended reading and resources 125

Recommended reading 125

Early reader/chapter book *125*

Middle grade *126*

Young adult *127*

Adult *128*

Other resources 129

Bibliography 130

Thanks 131

Introduction

Graphic novel sales in the US trade market have soared in recent years, and the Australian market has followed this trend. The exponential rise in demand represents untapped opportunities for Australian publishers. So, what can we learn from the US about the editing and publishing of graphic novels? And how can we, as an industry, capitalise on one of the fastest growing formats in publishing today?

Research aims

I set out to understand how we might better champion and grow the graphic novel format in the Australian publishing industry. I planned to do two things: research the US graphic novel publishing ecosystem as a whole, looking to the past and the future, and stepping beyond the bounds of my usual role as an editor; and to discuss the nitty-gritty of all things editorial. Given that my area of editorial specialisation – children's and young adult (YA) books – was also the largest market for graphic novels in the US, I planned to focus on that demographic, but also to research graphic novels for adults, which has been a personal area of interest for years. I had many questions that spanned editorial processes, design and production, publishing, acquisitions and rights, marketing, publicity, sales and distribution; the project grew larger and larger, especially once I started my wish list of people to interview. I wanted to speak with publishers large and small, with people from every department and with creators – authors, illustrators, and those specialising in the various industry-specific tasks I soon found could be outsourced. In fact, the more I learned, the more I realised that I just didn't know what I'd discover – a reminder to myself to be open-minded in my research.

Implementation

I started emailing people, explaining who I was and what it was I was trying to discover. I was fortunate to be connected early on with Judy Hansen (president, Hansen Literary Agency), who gave me a thorough rundown of the US graphic novel industry over the phone. Judy recommended starting out my trip by attending San Diego Comic-Con, which turned out to be a wonderful introduction to the world of US comics. I also made plans to attend a graphic novel course at The Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont – to put myself into the role of 'creator', an invaluable experience that had me thinking like a graphic novelist by the

end of the week (as well as being eternally grateful I wouldn't ever be expected to ink a 300-page book). For the rest of my trip, I would base myself in New York City – the epicentre of English-language trade publishing, with ample publishers and imprints specialising in graphic novels. I would have no end of specialists in the field to speak with.

Given the aim of my research was to understand how graphic novels are published by mainstream trade publishing houses, rather than specialist outfits (such as New York–based Marvel Comics or Yen Press), I focused my efforts on connecting with these publishers. I was aware that offices in post-Covid New York may no longer be fully staffed, and travelling there in summer, I was faced with the additional challenge of the long summer holidays. Despite my best attempts to secure a placement at one of the graphic novel imprints, I had no luck in my enquiries. This quickly made sense to me after my first office visit; after speaking with an editor in a high-rise, I later realised they were the sole person I'd see in the entire cubicle-filled floor during my visit! People simply weren't working from the office in the way that they used to. Some had even moved out of the city and were working entirely remotely. A placement in an almost-empty office would have been illogical. Instead, I set my sights on speaking with as many people as practicable, and pivoting to online meetings when required.

What I learned

Of course, the thing I most quickly learned was something I should not have been surprised about at all, as it's been true of every book I've ever worked on: no two graphic novels are the same. It makes sense – no two creators are the same, and no two editors are the same. A book published in one way at one publishing house might have been treated very differently had another publisher acquired it. Some of what I learned was surprisingly similar to what we know in the Australian publishing industry, some was specific to the US publishing industry; some insights could be applied to many kinds of book, but much of what I learned was particular to the graphic novel format.

Overview

What is a graphic novel?

When I told people I was travelling to the US to research graphic novels, I was often met with a look of confusion as they pondered what the 'graphic' part of these novels may be. So, let's start with this question: what are graphic novels? I think of them as long-form works that use sequential art to tell a story over the course of one book (unless that book is part of a series, of course), combining text and images and spanning fiction, non-fiction and anthologies, for a variety of age groups. Importantly, as Kayla Miller (graphic novelist) told me, 'Graphic novels are … a format. They are not the genre. And I think that was kind of a misconception for a long time – that graphic novels were the genre.' The format itself can show great diversity in its physical manifestation, with hardcovers and paperbacks that might be portrait or landscape or square, in larger and smaller trim sizes, with longer and shorter page counts.

Graphic novels differ from illustrated fiction, where illustrations either reflect the text or extend the meaning of the story in another way. In a graphic novel the illustrations themselves *are* the story, and the art and text are inseparable – though you can have a wordless graphic novel (think Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*), or illustrated fiction that contains some graphic novel elements and straddles the border between the two formats.

Graphic novels employ the language of comics, but comic books differ to graphic novels in that they are usually serialised, are short in length, and tell their story across multiple issues. When we think of comics, we might think of superhero stories like Superman or Batman, but comics encompass many more kinds of stories, for example, Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore's zombie apocalypse comic *The Walking Dead*, which became a popular television series, or Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples' space-opera comic *Saga*.

And then we have the global colossus that is manga. Manga is a broad term that refers to a variety of comics and graphic novels originally published in Japan, where manga is so big these titles can 'represent as much as 30%–40% of big publishers' sales revenues'.[1] Manga series are long-running and titles are read from back to front, right to left (rather than front to back, left to right, as English-language comics and graphic novels usually are) and are largely printed in black and white. There are five main types marketed by demographic:

Shōjo, for tween and teen girls; Shōnen, for tween and teen boys; Josei, for adult women; Seinen, for adult men; and Kodomomuke, for young children. Within these demographics exist a plethora of genres and subgenres. Then there is manhua, comics from China, and manhwa, comics originating in South Korea (which are primarily created digitally now and referred to as 'webtoons'). Their origins are not all that makes them distinct: manga, manhua and manhwa all differ from one another in terms of storytelling, art style, readership and the way they are read.

Of course there is crossover between graphic novels, illustrated fiction, comic books and manga, and some books we might think of as graphic novels, like The Bad Guys or Real Pigeons series, may not be categorised as graphic novels when we look at sales figures, how these books are marketed or even at how they are shelved in a bookstore. For a reader, this fluidity in categorisation perhaps has little bearing; for the publishing industry, it's of vital importance when we are attempting to track these formats via data.

Confused? In this report, when I use the term 'graphic novel' I'm referring to those aforementioned long-form stories that are told using sequential art and make use of other parts that we might typically think of as making up a graphic novel, such as speech balloons. The usage of this term is not predicated on whether or not the books themselves are officially categorised as such.

Graphic novels, comics, and hybrid illustrated fiction that contains graphic novel elements are sometimes conflated in this report. In quoted material, the terms 'comic/s' and 'graphic novel/s' have both been used when discussing graphic novels, and are somewhat interchangeable in most contexts given how inextricably linked the two terms are. I will also refer to the format broadly as 'graphic novels' unless specifying a category within the format, such as graphic memoir.

Recent history of graphic novels in the Australian trade market

Before we dive into the world of graphic novel publishing in the US, let's take a look at what's been happening on our home shores.

The rise of the graphic novel

The year 2007 marked a pivotal moment in the validation of the graphic novel format in Australia. As Kevin Patrick writes in *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, 'Without doubt, the work credited with popularizing the graphic novel amongst mainstream audiences

is Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, which was broadly acclaimed as a children's picture book and as a "graphic novel" with commensurate appeal for adults, as evidenced by its selection as Picture Book of the Year by the Children's Book Council of Australia and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards Book of the Year in 2007.'[2] This groundbreaking work was published by Lothian Books in 2006, and the following year more critical acclaim for the format followed with the publication of Nicki Greenberg's graphic adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. Erica Wagner (publishing consultant, Allen & Unwin; co-publisher, Twelve Panels Press) says:

> Graphic novels were seen as very niche and a bit of an oddity when I first started publishing them at Allen & Unwin back in 2007, starting with *The Great Gatsby*. I remember visiting a bookseller with our sales manager and discussing where we wanted it to be shelved. We ideally wanted it sitting alongside the traditional text editions of the original book, i.e. not far away on a low shelf with a mix of graphic novels of different genres and for different kinds of readers and age groups. That was why we chose that smaller format for that book, so it would literally fit more easily on the shelf.
>
> We chose a much weightier format for Greenberg's 2010 adaptation of *Hamlet*, which was 440 pages. This was joint winner of the CBCA Picture Book of the Year in 2011 and it's now considered a collector's item as it's out of print and too expensive to reprint.

While the success of these titles certainly felt like a high point from which the graphic novel format in Australia might flourish, in the years that followed there were few publishers ready to enter the market, and only sporadic publishing of graphic novels, mostly by independent comics house Gestalt, founded in 2005, and by Allen & Unwin, who published titles including *The Sacrifice* and *The Silence* by Bruce Mutard; *Sensitive Creatures* by Mandy Ord; *Scarygirl* by Nathan Jurevicius; *The Tango Collection* edited by Bernard Caleo; and *Underground* by Mirranda Burton.

The comics community simmered along. The Ledger Awards, held from 2005 to 2007, acknowledged excellence in Australian comic art and publishing, and were reborn as the annual Comic Arts Awards of Australia in 2014. Significant independent comics festivals and markets are now taking place with regularity in Australia: Perth Comic Arts Festival; Adelaide's biennial Papercuts Comics Festival; Melbourne's Homecooked Comics Festival, currently on hiatus; Darwin's Wild North Comic Con; Brisbane's Comicstreet; and Sydney Comics Arts Marketplace. Whereas comic conventions in Australia are firmly focused on pop

culture, these independent events are important in bringing the comics community together and allowing them to showcase their work.

David Blumenstein (cartoonist; co-founder, Squishface Studio) describes the comics and graphic novel community in Australia as a ‘small constellation of loose friendship groups … separated by both distance and by taste/style/genre’, though he notes that there aren’t enough people publishing graphic novels for a separate community of graphic novelists to exist. There is a healthy small press and micro press scene, separate from the zine community, and Blumenstein believes this network is vital. ‘Young artists flounder without the communities formed by self-publishing, comics fests, illustration schools, meet-ups and hubs like Squishface,’ he notes.

Blumenstein laments the lack of opportunities available to showcase cartoonists’ or graphic novelists’ work. ‘There aren’t many avenues for short-form comics in Australia – not for developing cartoonists, but not for “emerged” artists either,’ he says. ‘The only other way for short comics to be seen in Australia is to make them for free and share them on social media, or be published in a small/micro press anthology.’ Joshua Santospirito (graphic novelist) agrees. ‘Comics are excluded from literary spaces, from opportunities, from festival appearances, from publications of pretty much all kinds,’ he says, though some literary journals – such as *Island* and *Meanjin* – now state on their submissions pages that they accept graphic narratives or graphic work. When it comes to funding, he says, ‘Financial support for comics from government funding bodies has ramped up in the last decade as the increase in ambition and confidence of comics authors has led them to apply for funding.’

While ‘those who have the support of a publishing deal have received some sizeable funds in recent years’, Santospirito also noted the influence of the volunteer-run two-week residency Comic Art Workshop (CAW). ‘Those who have been accepted through CAW’s selection process have also fared well with regards to applications for funding. From this perspective CAW has become an “institution” that comic authors have created that can now offer that institutional support where previously none existed. And in the current environment comics now have a small number of graphic novel publishers as well as agents (!) from within the book world who can also offer that.’

Erica Wagner says, ‘There have always been people in the publishing-retail chain who are not fans of the graphic novel format, but now, 17 years later, graphic novels have proved themselves as a viable form of publishing, and less of a risky proposition – there is a clearly

defined audience now and enthusiastic advocates promoting them to readers young and old in Australia.'

One group working to promote and advocate for local graphic novels is ALIA Graphic, the graphic novel and comic arm of the Australian Library and Information Association. Convenor Iurgi Urrutia says, 'Our core aim, right from the start, was to raise the profile of comics, graphic novels and manga in libraries, and of Australian titles and creators in particular.' Among their initiatives, they publish the yearly ALIA Graphic Notable Australian Graphic Novels list, which Urrutia says is 'compiled by librarians and for libraries, celebrating and highlighting the best graphic novels by Australian creators of the previous year available for purchase from library suppliers – an important consideration as most public libraries primarily buy titles through library suppliers and are, often, restricted from buying from any other source'.

Graphic novel publishing for adults

As well as dotting the shelves of libraries, graphic novels can now be found in many bookstores and the small network of comic bookstores scattered across Australia. According to Bernard Caleo (comics maker; scholar; bookseller, Readings Carlton), 'The boom in kids comics and manga, both available from general bookshops, bespeaks a shift in comics literacy and interest.' However, the market for adult graphic novels remains niche, even though the locally originated titles that trade publishers and small presses have published in these years have received significant critical acclaim.

In 2015, graphic novel publisher Twelve Panels Press was launched with the release of a translation of Jan Bauer's *The Salty River*, a graphic memoir set on the Larapinta Trail. It was the first German graphic novel to be published in Australia. Erica Wagner says the small press's objective is 'to publish long-form comics about topics of interest to the general public, not just fans of graphic novels'. Their second title, published in 2021, was the multi-award-winning *Still Alive: Notes from Australia's Immigration Detention System* by Sydney-based Safdar Ahmed, to which they've sold world English (excluding ANZ) rights to Fantagraphics, and French rights to Cambourakis. Wagner says, 'We didn't set out to publish *Still Alive* for children or teenagers, but ironically it's because it's been picked up by schools and won the CBCA's Eve Pownall Award as well as the adult book awards – NSW Multicultural and overall Book of the Year [at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards] – that we've achieved ongoing sales. Publishing it as an adult book allowed us to retain adult

content but our opinion is that young people, 15 plus, can also read adult books if they are mature enough.'

Melbourne creator Mandy Ord was longlisted for The Stella Prize and shortlisted for the Small Press Network Book of the Year for her graphic memoir *When One Person Dies The Whole World is Over*, published by Brow Books in 2020. It was another win for both small presses and for graphic novels.

In 2021 Scribe Publications entered the fray, publishing their first graphic novel, followed by two more titles in 2022, including Sam Wallman's acclaimed *Our Members Be Unlimited*. Their graphic novel publishing program continues to grow. In 2024 they are publishing three graphic non-fiction titles, all from Australian creators – Jeff Sparrow and Sam Wallman's graphic non-fiction handbook for change, *12 Rules For Strife*; Joshua Santospirito's graphic memoir *The Island Where We Left Our Ancestors*; and graphic medicine title *Follow Your Gut* by Ailsa Wild, Lisa Stinson, Briony Barr, Gregory Crocetti and Ben Hutchings. Highlighting the relative infancy of the market, David Golding (senior editor, Scribe) says, 'That may be the most that's ever been published in one year by an Australian publisher, for an adult audience.'

Scribe will publish two fictional graphic novels in 2025: Australian cartoonist Rachel Ang's debut *What You Seek (Is Seeking You)* – also to be published in North America by Drawn & Quarterly – and *The Brownout Murders* by Luke Jackson, Kelly Jackson and Maya Graham. 'These books really excited us to the point where we felt, "We really want to do this,"' says Golding. Yet he acknowledges that in publishing graphic novels, given the overheads and the size of our market, 'every individual book is, in a way, an experiment'. He says: 'If you look at France and Japan and just how normal it is for adults to read comics, [as well as] the size of their comics market, it's kind of staggering.' Yet in Australia, a country where we've not grown up with that same kind of comics-reading culture (which, in turn, creates adult readers of graphic novels), there is a much smaller market. Along with our much smaller population, this means that even today there are only a few publishers bold enough to publish adult graphic novels to their lists.

In 2023 Allen & Unwin published Sarah Firth's debut graphic non-fiction work *Eventually Everything Connects* under their JOAN imprint, curated by Nakkiah Lui. Iurgi Urrutia believes that 'Allen & Unwin has, for a number of years, been the leading avenue for Australian creators to publish graphic novels.'[3]

Graphic novel publishing for children and young adults

Allen & Unwin have also published many graphic novels for children by local creators, originating titles by Australian-based creators Renée Treml, Trace Balla, Gregory Mackay and First Dog on the Moon.

In 2011 Magabala Books published Brenton E. McKenna's *Ubby's Underdogs: The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon*, making him the first ever published First Nations graphic novel author in Australia; and in 2021 Gestalt and the Indigenous Literacy Foundation published three graphic novels by young creators from First Nations comic-book group Stick Mob. Other publishers have also jumped on board: for example, Affirm Press's Kev and Trev series for early readers by Kylie Howarth; Fremantle Press's young adult title *Stars In Their Eyes* by Jessica Walton and Aśka, a Children's Book Council of Australia Notable Book in 2022; Penguin Random House with Gavin Aung Than's middle-grade Super Sidekicks series; ABC Books/HarperCollins's The Odds series by Matt Stanton; and Hardie Grant's Hello Twigs series by Andrew MacDonald and Ben Wood.

Marisa Pintado (publishing director, Hardie Grant Children's Publishing) says Hardie Grant are expanding their publishing program to include more graphic novels, with a plan to publish a minimum of five graphic novels per year from 2025 onwards. 'It's a concern to me that in any given year, there are usually only a handful of graphic novels published by Australian creators, and most of them are originated by US publishing houses,' she says. 'The publishing team at Hardie Grant Children's has built up our forward graphic novel program with local creators over the coming years, particularly for the middle-grade readership – but we are hoping to expand this to all ages within a few years.'

When we look at a broader definition of the term 'graphic novel', we could include even more success stories in the children's category – how about the immensely popular series Real Pigeons? Marisa Pintado says:

> There are loads of series that could be categorised as graphic novels, but are probably a better fit for 'children's fiction'. Real Pigeons is a good example, as the series' inventive, highly integrated visual storytelling combines words and pictures to create sequences across the page. However, it doesn't feel like a graphic novel series to me – one reason is that the books are designed to be effective as a read-aloud experience, so key turning points in the series are always narrated within the text, not just shown in the artwork; and it doesn't rely on classic graphic novel or comic conventions for the majority of its

storytelling. Hello Twigs is also designed to be read-aloud, but it's full-colour and its storytelling more neatly fits in the graphic novel category (and was intentionally conceived of that way).

The Bad Guys is Australia's other hybrid success story that's also categorised as 'children's fiction' though Rebecca Young (senior publisher, Scholastic Press) notes that 'we might approach the category differently if we were to launch the series today'. She says:

> We're about to publish the final instalment in The Bad Guys series – Episode 20, which will close out a decade with these books. Over the last ten years, the series and storytelling style has evolved quite significantly, as has the local landscape for graphic novels. It was always somewhat of a hybrid work – a chapter book with graphic elements – but at that time it felt right to consider The Bad Guys series as illustrated fiction for children. Since the launch in the US, The Bad Guys series spent 113 weeks on *The New York Times* Bestseller list categorised as a 'Children's' book. With the evolving market, it then shifted to the 'Graphic Books and Manga' category and list.

While some hybrid titles blending graphic novel elements with traditional narration may better be classified as 'children's fiction', markets will continue to develop and shift, and whatever categories these hybrid titles ultimately fall into, the immense success of these series is no doubt increasing overall appetite for graphic novels.

Overseas opportunities and success stories

There are many more Australian creators who are finding their path to publication in the US: in adult graphic novels, for example, we have Tommi Parrish (whose *Men I Trust* is also published locally by Scribe), Simon Hanselmann and Lee Lai, all published by Fantagraphics and, interestingly, all by creators who are now living in North America; and Chris Gooch, Campbell Whyte and Pat Grant by Top Shelf Productions. These titles can be found for sale in Australia, with Simon Hanselmann (cartoonist) saying, 'My US-based publisher distributes to Australia, and [my titles] tend to make their way into the hipper bookstores and comics shops.' However Bernard Caleo notes that one of the barriers to imports of adult graphic novels finding a new audience beyond fans and enthusiasts is 'the tyranny of distance and the increase to retail prices incurred by shipping costs from overseas. Thus, graphic novels, particularly from smaller publishers, become pricey.'

In the children's space, Remy Lai and Jason Pamment were both signed first to US publishers, with Allen & Unwin obtaining rights to publish local editions of their works; Tom Taylor and Jon Sommariva's *Neverlanders* sold to Penguin Random House's Razorbill imprint, though, again, it is published locally, even winning the 2023 CBCA Older Readers Book of the Year. Then there are talented comics creators like Ariel Slamet Ries, whose webcomic is out in print with Lion Forge; artist Nicola Scott, who has published series Black Magick with Image Comics and worked extensively with DC Comics; and creators who now call Australia home, like Sarah Winifred Searle – her YA titles *The Greatest Thing* and *The Sweetness Between Us* are both published by First Second with local rights bought by Allen & Unwin – and Reimena Yee, whose latest work *My Aunt Is a Monster* had world rights acquired by Random House Graphic. Heading across the ditch to New Zealand, we'll find two creators whose works have made the transition from webcomic to print: Rachel Smythe with her Lore Olympus series, publishing with Random House Worlds' Inklore imprint, and K. O'Neill with *The Tea Dragon Society*, published by Oni Press. As you can see, there is certainly no dearth of local talent for our industry to draw on.

International rights sales

What about success stories when it comes to selling rights for works by Australian creators? When it comes to ANZ rights, Annabel Barker (agent, Annabel Barker Agency) always wants to keep these with a local publisher so 'creators can have a "home" publisher here in Australia – for the purpose of author care, from both an editorial and marketing perspective, and as it helps to support the graphic novel industry here to see local publishers supporting local creators'. Barker says: 'In the case of all the graphic novels I have submitted – work from Georgina Chadderton, Scott Pritchett and Aśka – there has been a lot of local interest, and many publishers keen to read and consider the work. Particularly in the case Georgina's graphic narrative memoir, we had multiple local offers.' While she thinks most Australian publishers have been considering graphic novels of some kind, Barker also says they 'can be selective when acquiring graphic novels and for very valid reasons … Consequently, I feel publishers here in Australia tend to make "safe" choices and they are looking for contemporary, middle grade graphic novels or graphic memoir or funny, younger graphic novels – styles that are already "proven" and might see more obvious commercial success.'

Yet internationally, Barker observes, 'where markets are larger, it's possible to take more risks – publishers are seeking comic content across all ages and genres and the style of

art tends to differ market to market'. She feels publishers overseas are open to buying rights to stories from Australian creators: 'In the past five years or so there has been a distinct movement, particularly in the US, toward publishers widening their interest in stories from other places … The pandemic, I think, also led to a realisation that creators did not need to be physically present for a book to be marketed and promoted effectively.'

For a case study in rights, let's take a look at Briar Rolfe's debut YA title *Get Your Story Straight,* which Hachette Australia will be publishing in 2026 and is their first graphic novel developed in-house. Danielle Binks (agent, Jacinta di Mase Management) fielded offers from multiple Australian publishers when she pitched ANZ rights for the title in 2021. In January of that year it had been announced that Netflix would be adapting Alice Oseman's YA graphic novel series Heartstopper into an eight-part series. 'Everyone was feeling the Heartstopper phenomenon, and even though the Netflix series hadn't landed yet, the anticipation was palpable,' she says, meaning that publishers saw the book as either 'a perfect project to extend their repertoire or to make a big first splash'. She also received a lot of interest for North American rights sales, saying 'it was just instant; they loved it'. While publishers also 'loved the thought of Briar's being an Australian-developed title, so that Hachette took on the bulk of editorial and development money, frankly – and time', she did encounter 'many major US children's publishers who queried if Briar's book, that takes place in Melbourne and Horsham, might be transplanted to somewhere-USA' – essentially asking Rolfe to 'create two wildly different versions of the one book'.

The book eventually found a happy home with publisher Levine Querido, who took world English (excluding ANZ) rights, as well as world Spanish and Dutch, and who didn't want to change the Australian setting as one of Levine Querido's objectives is 'to bring outside perspectives to US audiences'. Binks says that while 'everyone I pitched to in New York were aware that ANZ rights were off the table, no matter what, I definitely think the US majors would have tried to get rest-of-world had Briar and I opted to explore further with them'.

Where to next?

Binks says many publishers have realised readers of Heartstopper and *Smile* weren't just getting hooked on the books and authors but on the graphic novel format itself. 'It was very much a door that had been swung wide open, and there was no backtracking for young readers who expect the graphic novel format to grow with them – for offerings to keep pace

with them, as they age. And that the next question to follow would be: "What's Australia got to offer?"'

It would seem Australia has a lot to offer. But publishing locally originated graphic novels that are profitable is no easy task. As Erica Wagner says:

> Finding a way to produce graphic novels economically is essential and because of the very long lead times it is risky and difficult for publishers to commit to a format years in advance when there might be increased paper and production costs to accommodate down the track, not to mention the creative and specialised editorial time required to draft and redraft complex books. Creators also need to apply for grants to help them survive while they are creating graphic novels, a process that is both unpredictable and competitive. All publishing is an act of faith, but for many publishers they are reluctant to commit to a project until it is well developed or ideally complete. So publishing graphic novels is a long game.

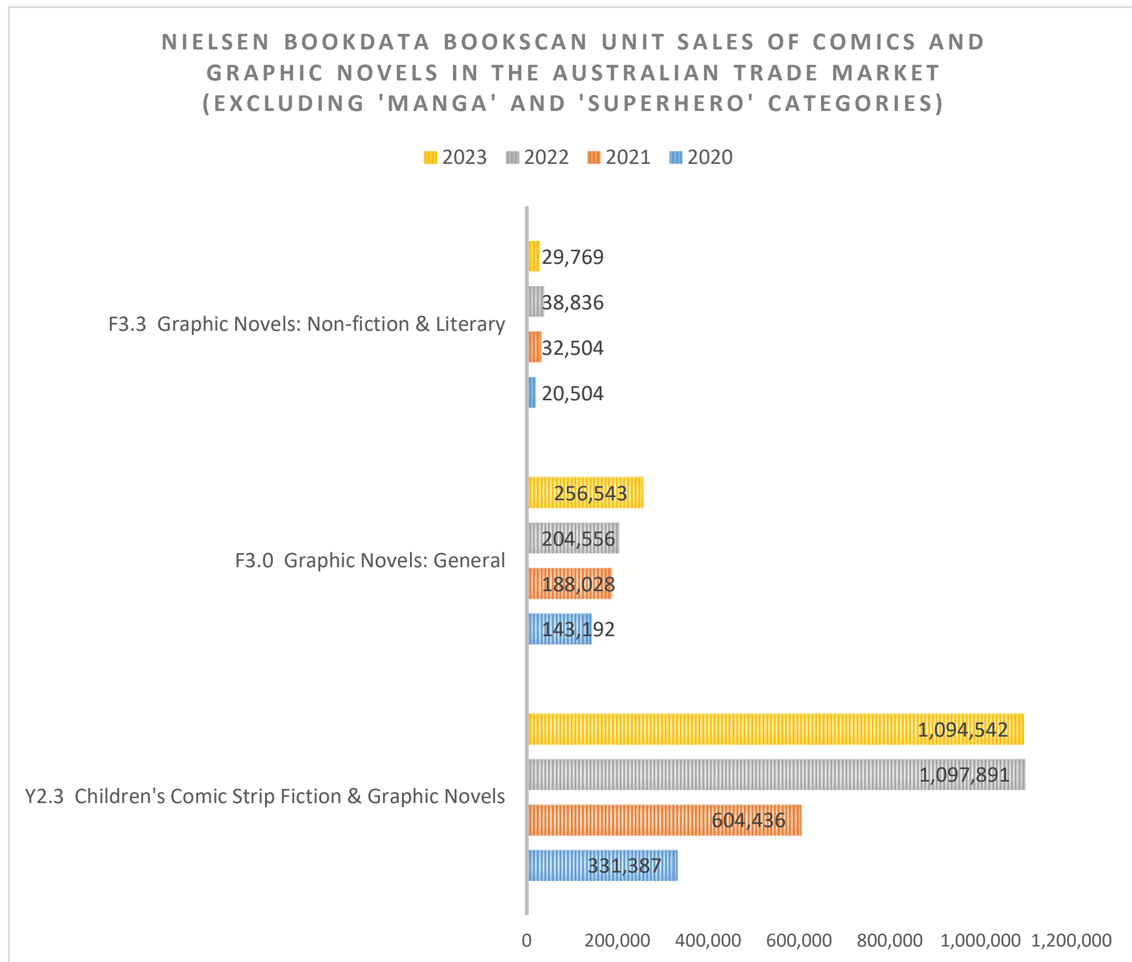
While Australian stories might be finding success locally and overseas, and the format has been validated by winning major awards, being critically acclaimed and by showing robust growth in terms of sales, unfortunately, for local creators, the majority of our graphic novel sales still stem from import titles. And, as Marisa Pintado says, 'There are simply too few Australian graphic novels created to really compete in this country with the many, many big-brand releases from overseas authors, pouring in from the larger multinational publishing houses – such as Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Hachette, Simon & Schuster, Macmillan and Scholastic.' We have a vibrant graphic novel industry, especially when it comes to children's and YA titles, but one would have to question whether we are yet doing enough to originate local content. Are we willing to play the long game?

Nielsen BookData BookScan figures for the Australian trade market, 2020–23

In the Australian trade market, we have seen a meteoric rise in sales of graphic novels in recent years. Figures provided by Nielsen BookData's BookScan service (see Appendix A) show overall unit sales rising from 1.2 million in 2020 to almost 3 million by the end of 2023.[4] Note that the overall unit sales include the categories 'manga' and 'superheroes' – if we exclude these, the growth is just as impressive, almost tripling from 495,000 unit sales to 1.38 million.

During this time period, there was year-by-year growth in 'general' adult graphic novels from 143,000 unit sales to 256,000 unit sales, and in the category of 'non-fiction and literary', growth from 20,000 to 29,000. The January 2023 to December 2023 period saw a 25 per cent growth in 'general' adult graphic novels and a decline of 23 per cent in 'non-fiction and literary'; however, after the preceding three years of incremental growth, the category was in a stronger position in 2023 than it had been in 2020.

Looking at the BookScan category of 'children's comic strip fiction and graphic novels', we can see incredible growth over these years, from 331,000 copies in 2020 to almost 1.1 million copies in both 2022 and 2023. However, the category holding steady meant a superior performance to children's books in general, which, as reported by *Books+Publishing*, fell 4.4 per cent compared to 2022, a dip which 'came after a big boost due to the pandemic and was likely a correction after the category grew 7.7% in 2022'.[5]



Source: Data from Nielsen BookData BookScan, 14 February 2024.

According to *Books+Publishing*, 'Overall, the book market was down in Australia in 2023 by 2.1% in value and 1.7% in volume, according to figures from Nielsen BookData's BookScan service. However, sales in 2023 were up both by value and volume when compared to 2021 figures, and were boosted by strong Christmas sales.'[6] *The Australian Financial Review* reported that 'Industry watchers Nielsen BookData crowned the fifth volume of Alice Oseman's graphic novel series [Heartstopper] as the season's top buy, driven by shoppers dropping the Netflix adaptation about two schoolboys falling in love into many teenagers' Christmas stockings.'[7]

While sales figures in the last four years for graphic novels in Australia are certainly encouraging, one has to wonder why we are seeing such growth. Is it because we are really selling *almost three times as many books* in these categories overall through stores that report to BookScan, or could part of the growth be attributed to a change in the way publishers assign codes to their books? Are publishers calling some titles 'children's comic strip fiction and graphic novels' in a way they may have been reluctant to do in the past when the category wasn't so widely accepted? And when books that are clearly graphic novels (i.e. containing the words 'graphic novel' in their title) fall outside this children's category, one conversely has to wonder: are sales of graphic novels even greater than our figures reflect, especially if we were to consider all those hybrid titles that are often categorised as 'children's fiction' (e.g. need I mention The Bad Guys and Real Pigeons again)? In the adult 'general' category, manga series also pepper the list (e.g. Spy × Family, Chainsaw Man, Jujustu Kaisen), despite BookScan having a separate 'manga' category. The data is only as good as publishers – who are unlikely to be experts on metadata themselves – collectively make it when assigning codes.

And what do BookScan figures say about locally produced content? If you look at the top 5000 titles from BookScan week after week, you'll notice that the majority of the top-selling titles in the 'children's comic strip fiction and graphic novels' category are imports from the US, largely from Scholastic US (with some locally published by Scholastic Australia) – such as Dog Man, Cat Kid Comic Club, Wings of Fire, Five Nights at Freddy's, The Baby-Sitters Club – though the UK makes regular contributions thanks to Heartstopper. Local titles sometimes make thrilling guest appearances but soon slip away from their international cousins. It's worth noting that Australian creators often top the bestseller lists across all other children's categories. Far fewer graphic novels for adults make the top 5000 in fiction, especially once we discount the erroneously categorised manga titles, and again

most of these are from the US and occasionally the UK. In ‘non-fiction and literary’ *The Complete Maus* makes a regular appearance – but we don’t really publish enough Australian titles in the adult graphic novel market to compete here.

While graphic novels are selling in Australia, with the children’s market the most robust, we are primarily selling graphic novels originating from overseas, largely the US.

Recent history of graphic novels in the US trade market

Let’s look now to our US counterparts. Over the last 25 years, sales of graphic novels have been growing at a healthy rate in the US market. This growth, in turn, has prompted the launch many new imprints and focused lists by publishers of all sizes, from the big five – Penguin Random House (e.g. Random House Graphic, an imprint of Random House Children’s Books, and Ten Speed Graphic, an imprint of Ten Speed Press); Hachette (e.g. LB Ink, an imprint of Little, Brown Books for Young Readers); Macmillan (e.g. First Second, an imprint of Roaring Brook Press); Simon & Schuster (e.g. Gallery 13, an imprint of Gallery Publishing Group); and HarperCollins (e.g. HarperAlley, an imprint of HarperCollins Children’s Books) – to mid-size publishers, like Abrams with Amulet Books and Abrams ComicArts (which also includes lines Megascope and Surely Books), and including key players like Scholastic’s Graphix, plus small independent (indie) houses publishing comics and graphic novels (e.g. Street Noise Books, Silver Sprocket and TOON Books). And let’s not forget the many other publishers who have begun experimenting with the format on general lists.

This is by no means an exhaustive account of who is publishing graphic novels in the US, and nor would I attempt to produce such a list, given new imprints are still being established with a healthy frequency. For example, in the northern autumn of 2024, Abrams are launching a new graphic novel imprint for young readers, called Abrams Fanfare, and Macmillan’s imprint First Second will also expand with a sister imprint, 23rd Street Books, which will be their new home for graphic novels aimed at adults.

During these years, the book format has influenced almost every aspect of the US comics market, altering the diversity of comics published, how they are created, who reads them, and how they are marketed and sold. Graphic novels are now read widely, are published on a variety of topics to suit all tastes and all markets, and are readily available for purchase in physical format in bookstores or to read digitally. They are getting starred reviews and receiving awards.

The US children's and YA market took off when Scholastic founded Graphix in 2005 and they published the first volume of Jeff Smith's already well-known self-published serialised comic Bone as a graphic novel, colourised and printed in 6 × 9-inch (152 × 229-millimetre) trim. Scholastic were a trusted publisher, able to distribute to a much bigger market than the independent publishers and comics publishers who were producing graphic novels at that time. The publishing of Bone not only broke down barriers between comics' world creators and mainstream publishers but also brought consumers, teachers and librarians on board, the book's success ultimately proving that there was a graphic novel market for children.

Gene Luen Yang's YA title *American Born Chinese*, published by First Second, followed in 2006, making a mark on the literary space in the children's market. Later, in 2010, came Raina Telgemeier's *Smile*, heralding the arrival of middle-grade contemporary realistic graphic novels, and when printings of her third title, 2014's *Sisters*, 'rocketed to 1.4 million, after an initial planned run of only 200,000 copies',[8] publishers realised they needed to keep pace to meet demand. The 2016 release of the first title in Dav Pilkey's Dog Man series proved there was immense market appetite in the category for younger readers, with more than 60 million copies in the series in print to date.[9] Around 2017, more publishers started to acquire graphic novels in a competitive way, and from there the market and opportunities for growth in children's and YA graphic novels has only expanded.

The most well-known and acclaimed works in the adult space are often cited as the Pulitzer Prize–winning *Maus* (1996), *Persepolis* (2000) and *Fun Home* (2006), though today the market for adult graphic novels is still (relatively) small.

Of course, there are also acclaimed indie publishers of solely comics and graphic novels who have been driving forces in the game since last century, like Seattle-based Fantagraphics, founded in the 1970s and publisher of Daniel Clowes, Simon Hanselmann and Emil Ferris's *My Favourite Thing Is Monsters*, as well as the magazine *The Comics Journal*; and in North America, Canada's Drawn & Quarterly, launched in 1989, and publisher of Adrian Tomine, Lynda Barry and graphic memoir *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands* by Kate Beaton (remember when that made former US president Barack Obama's list of favourite books for 2022?). Then there's Top Shelf Productions, best known for March, John Lewis's three-volume graphic memoir of the US civil rights movement – a series so popular that 'the sales on each volume of the trilogy were larger than just about any other literary graphic novel before or since';[10] and 'the first printing of Book Three sold out in three hours'.[11] Top

Shelf was founded in 1997 and since 2017 has been an imprint of IDW Publishing. Oni Press is publisher of Bryan Lee O'Malley's Scott Pilgrim and Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer: A Memoir*; it was also founded in 1997 and since 2019 has been the lead imprint of Oni–Lion Forge Publishing Group, after a merger with comics publisher Lion Forge.

The industry also comprises direct-market comics publishers, who not only sell single-issue comics (what we might think of when we think of traditional floppy 'comics') direct to specialty comics retailers but also publish graphic novels and sell to the trade market. The top two direct-market publishers have famous characters we'd all recognise – Marvel Comics with Spider-Man, and DC Comics with Superman and Batman – and have both been around since the 1930s, when the superhero comics genre was invented. Other direct-market publishers of note include Image Comics, Boom! Studios (soon to be acquired by Penguin Random House), IDW Publishing, Dynamite and Dark Horse Comics (also a big name in manga).

Then there are publishers focused on manga, like VIZ Media, which dominates the market; Kodansha USA; Seven Seas; imprint Square Enix Manga; and imprints from trade publishers like Hachette Book Group's Yen Press, Random House Worlds' Inklore, and Abrams ComicArts' soon-to-be-launched Kana (which will also publish French comics).

Brian Hibbs's 2023 Circana BookScan Analysis

If we want to take a look at publishers' market share and top-selling titles, there is much to be gleaned from Brian Hibbs's excellent annual analysis of Circana BookScan's 2023 figures. For anyone interested in a closer look at the sales of graphic novels in the US bookstore market, I would highly recommend reading the entire illuminating report, posted to comics culture website The Beat: 'The big picture: of the 44.7 million graphic novels sold via BookScan in 2023, nearly 21.8 million were manga (almost 49%); kids comics were approximately 17 [million] copies (about 38%); and the remaining 5.9 million sold were primarily aimed at adults (around 13%).'[12] For those who are looking for highlights from the article, here's my take, which is largely focused on graphic novels. Note that these figures only reflect sales from bookstores (including Amazon) that report to Circana BookScan, which Circana believes captures 85 per cent of sales – though it does not include direct-to-consumer sales, or library, school or specialty-store purchases, including sales from most comic bookstores and independent bookstores. The figures only include physical books and

no digital sales of any kind, and Hibbs's report and analysis is based on the top-selling 750 graphic novels.

Despite the shortcomings of the data, it still provides a broad brushstroke of 2023's sales. While there was an almost 20 per cent drop in unit sales overall from 2022 to 2023, Hibbs see this as 'a correction to an overheated market' after the 'pandemic-related blip' of 2021 and 2022. Let's take a look a closer look at sales from the top publishers in the market.

Scholastic is currently the biggest graphic novel publisher in the US book market (largely thanks to the Graphix imprint), and in 2023 their sales through BookScan accounted for 39 per cent of the market. Strong sellers included Dav Pilkey, Raina Telgemeier, Alice Oseman's Heartstopper, and graphic novel adaptations of Wings of Fire, The Baby-Sitters Club and Five Nights at Freddy's. The number one bestselling graphic novel was Scholastic's *Dog Man #11: Twenty Thousand Fleas Under the Sea*, which sold 1.09 million copies through BookScan. But this was far from Pilkey's only success story – all up, he had nine titles in the top 20, and sold 3.7 million copies of his titles in 2023, which was (incredibly!) just over 8.25 per cent of *all* comics sold via BookScan. It's important to remember here that BookScan figures do not include books sold through Scholastic Book Fairs (nor school libraries), where one would presume Pilkey is making many, many more sales. Within the top 750 graphic novel titles on BookScan, Scholastic sells an extraordinary 8.5 million copies.

The second biggest publisher in the market is Penguin Random House, which manages 1.5 million copies across those 750 titles, and just over US$28 million in gross sales. Notable bestsellers include New Zealand's Rachel Smythe's Lore Olympus series, with volume 4 selling 70,000 copies on the Inklore imprint. Imprint Pantheon has several solid backlist titles. In 2023, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* sold 105,000 copies, while iterations of *Maus* continue to be perennially popular: volume 1, *My Father Bleeds History*, sold more than 236,000 copies; volume 2, *And Here My Troubles Began*, sold around 95,000 copies; and the complete hardcover edition of both volumes sold another 118,000 copies.

Penguin Random House is closely followed by HarperCollins (who completed the purchase of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2021). HarperCollins sold 1.3 million copies within the top 750 graphic novel titles for almost US$22 million. Successes here are Hooky by Míriam Bonastre Tur (another webcomic adaptation) with volume 1 selling almost 77,000 copies, and seven titles from Kayla Miller, with *Crunch* their top seller at 37,000

copies. FGTeeV's *Out of Time!* is HarperCollins' top seller, with just over 100,000 copies of the YouTube gaming star's title sold.

In fourth position is Macmillan (owned by Holtzbrink). First Second is their star graphic novel imprint, with John Patrick Green's InvestiGators series their biggest hit. Volume 1 of spin-off series InvestiGators: Agents of S.U.I.T. was their top-selling title with 83,000 sold, and next up is volume 7 of the original series *All Tide Up* with 73,000 copies sold. A further six titles in this series sold between 35,000 and 63,000 copies each.

The fifth position is held by Andrews McMeel, whose 'graphic novels' are mostly newspaper comic strips that have been reformatted and repackaged, such as the paperback edition of Bill Watterson's *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes.* The US$135 RRP of this title means that this book was in third position in terms of the dollar value of all titles sold, bringing in almost $4.5 million.

In sixth position we have IDW Publishing with *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Last Ronin* the top seller, with 148,000 units sold in its second year in print. For imprint Top Shelf Productions, backlist titles *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei, and Harmony Becker and John Lewis's *March: Book One* were strong, selling 44,000 copies and 23,000 respectively.

In fact across all publishers there were many solid sellers in the backlist, in addition to those already mentioned. Here's a sampling: Johnnie Christmas's *Swim Team* with 46,000 copies; Jerry Craft's *New Kid* with 75,000 copies; Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* with 17,000 copies; N.D. Stevenson's *Nimona* with 41,000 copies; Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* with 38,000 copies; the paperback of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* with 24,000 copies, and the hardcover edition at 11,000 copies; and, finally – from our home shores! – Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, with a little over 5000 copies.

'Because of this backlist strength, traditional book publishers are going in deeper and deeper with graphic novels,' Hibbs surmises. 'The sales may be mostly among kids and YA titles (and manga, with more to come) but there are dabblings in adult categories. For instance, Simon and Schuster went from 67 graphic novels published in 2013 to 367 in 2023, and just about every other publisher is going big on graphic novels.'[13]

Falling to position 7 was DC Comics. Surprisingly, Marvel and DC combined account for less than 10 per cent of the market, with Marvel underperforming to the point where its licensees VIZ, Disney, Scholastic and Abrams are finding greater success with the same

materials. DC's sales have also plummeted in the bookstore market, down 25 per cent since 2022.

Simon & Schuster has this year risen to position 8 in sales rankings, with nine of their titles falling in the top 750 graphic novels. Their top-selling title was from their Simon For Younger Readers imprint: Stuart Gibbs's *Spy School*, with 36,000 copies sold.

Religious publisher David C Cook was in ninth position, with Sergio Cariello's *The Action Bible: God's Redemptive Story* selling 167,000 copies.

Number 10 on the list was Abrams. Abrams' best seller in 2023 was *Nathan Hale's Hazardous Tales v12: Above the Trenches*, which sold 26,000, followed closely by Cece Bell's *El Deafo* with 25,000 copies.

And what of the rest? Hachette only placed three books in the top 750, all by Svetlana Chmakova: *Enemies*, with 38,000 sold; *Awkward*, with 24,000 sold; and *Crush*, with 14,000 sold. Disney-Hyperion's bestselling book is a My First Comics title, *Spidey and His Amazing Friends: Team Spidey Does It All!*, with 36,000 sold. Oni Press's most popular seller, at 31,000 copies, was Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, followed by the first softcover volume of Scott Pilgrim with a little over 10,000 copies sold. Daniel Clowes' *Monica* gave Fantagraphics a berth in the top 750, with a little over 11,000 copies sold. Canada's Drawn & Quarterly also had a single title in the top 750: Kate Beaton's *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*, which sold just under 10,000 copies. Boom! Studios' only title in the top 750 was Keanu Reeves's *BRZRKR*, which sold around about 9700 copies.

Publishers are no doubt aiming for hits – solid sellers out of the gate that will continue to work for them in years to come in the backlist. Yet while the books in the top 20 all sold over 130,000 copies each, and when combined account for just over 10 per cent of all graphic novel sales, the average graphic novel sold just 837 copies. Only 40 books sold more than 100,000 copies, and only 80 authors sold more than 100,000 copies of all their books combined, with these authors representing 56 per cent of all sales. As Hibbs notes, 'only a tiny number of creators drive the vast majority of the business in comics'.[14]

Circana BookScan figures for the US trade market, 2020–23

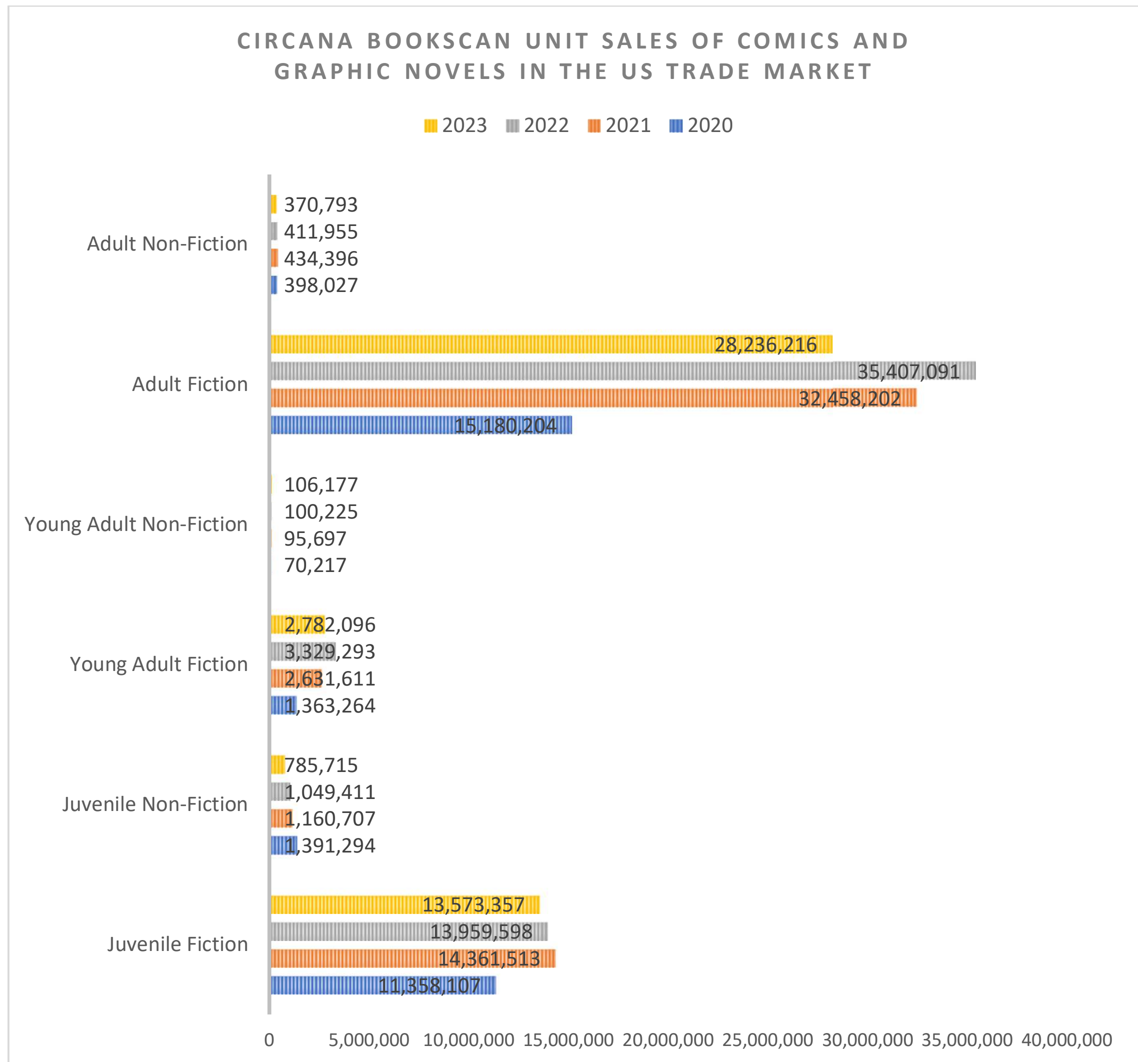
Data provided by Circana BookScan (see Appendix B for full figures) show that over the last four years in the US, overall unit sales for the entire comics and graphic novel category have risen significantly from around 30 million unit sales (December 2019 to November 2020) to

almost 46 million (December 2022 to November 2023). 2022 set a record high in the US trade market, with comics and graphic novels reaching over 54 million unit sales. Note that these figures include bound comics but not weekly periodicals, that the adult fiction category includes manga, and that Circana BookScan data does not include direct-market (comic store) sales.

During this time period there was a significant increase and a smaller decline in the adult fiction category from 15 million to peak at over 35 million and then fall to 28 million, both changes driven by manga, which grew at a triple-digit rate in 2021. Despite this, in the first nine months of 2023, graphic novels were still the third-largest subcategory within adult fiction after general fiction and romance.[15] In adult non-fiction graphic novels there was a negligible decline, from around 400,000 to 370,000 units.

There was overall growth in children's fiction categories, with juvenile fiction seeing a slight rise (from 11.3 million to 13.5 million units) and the young adult fiction category notably doubling unit sales (from 1.3 million to 2.7 million units), though it's a markedly smaller segment in comparison. There was also a significant decline in the subcategories of juvenile non-fiction (from around 1.4 million to 800,000 unit sales) and a not insignificant increase in the very small segment that is young adult non-fiction (from 70,000 to 106,000 units). Note that the Book Industry Study Group (which maintains the BISAC Subject Headings system) state that the 'juvenile' category is for ages 0–11 and 'young adult' is for ages 12–18.

The December 2022 to November 2023 period saw an overall decline in unit sales of graphic novels in all categories except young adult non-fiction – a tiny slice of the overall market. However, graphic novels were not alone. 'Helped by a 1.7% increase in the fourth quarter, unit sales of print books fell only 2.6% in 2023 from 2022 at outlets that report to Circana BookScan,' *Publishers Weekly* reported. 'The dip was less than many industry members had feared this summer, when sales were steadily declining and were down 4.1% after the first nine months of the year.'[16] The juvenile fiction category across these years is undoubtedly strong; it followed this general sales pattern in 2023 and fell 2.8 per cent.



Source: Data from Circana BookScan, 13 December 2023.

It's also important to note that while sales may have fallen in 2023, overall unit sales of comics and graphic novels are still considered very strong in a historical context, giving a positive outlook for the future of the category as a whole.

Alternative models of publishing

Of course it's not just trade publishers in the US who are jumping on the graphic novel bandwagon. University presses are publishing graphic novels. Penn State University Press even launched, in 2021, a trade graphic novel imprint for adults and young adults, Graphic Mundi, expanding on Penn State University's acclaimed graphic medicine series. In 2024, the imprint published a US edition of Sarah Firth's *Eventually Everything Connects*.

Maria Hoey (artist; publisher and co-founder, Coin-Op Books; graphic novelist) describes the small-press and micro-press scene in the US as 'vibrant and diverse', providing 'such freedom on subject matter, style, and production. The bar for entry is very low when it comes to starting a small press and I think that the small press world (everywhere) is a very exciting place to be!' Micro presses may print as few as 100 copies, and put out shorter-form books of 30 to 80 pages that traditional publishers won't touch. By publishing with a micro press, artists can develop their craft, build a readership, and get the attention of mainstream publishers by showing off both their storytelling skills and their ability to finish a project, making it a potential conduit to bigger things for creators. The cost of the print run might be split 50/50 between creator and press, or the creator might get a royalty based on each book sold – or the press might be focused on publishing the founder's own works.

Creators can find out about small and micro presses by attending annual indie comics shows, where the comics community comes together, and creators and publishers can showcase their work. There are many of these comics shows held across the US, from the very small and local, to well-known indie comics shows like Small Press Expo, Short Run or Cartoon Crossroads Columbus (CXC), and even big shows like San Diego Comic-Con have a small press area, though the cost for exhibiting at larger shows could be considered prohibitive to many.

The biggest challenge for many small and micro presses is distribution, with Maria Hoey explaining that Coin-Op Books 'sell probably the majority of our books at festivals [and] the rest are sold via our website. Retail stores will also carry our books, but distributing to individual stores is a challenge. It is nice to do, but financially it accounts for very little profit (because of our size). Many "larger" small presses in the US have distribution (Ingram, Consortium) but on our scale – we are truly a micro press – that option doesn't really exist. Global distribution is non-existent – unless I carry it abroad on a trip, it's too expensive to ship our books overseas.'

Self-publishing is popular among creators. Tom Hart (graphic novelist; author; executive director, Sequential Artists Workshop), who runs the Sequential Artists Workshop (SAW), a school for cartooning and graphic novels in Florida, says: 'We personally, at the school, are seeing self-publishing as a rite of passage. The whole making of the comic itself is a rite of passage. It's a ritual to go through to learn how to see your own story better. And self-publishing can be really marvellous.'

Some creators turned to Kickstarter to fund self-publishing of their work, even if only in digital format, which then provided a finished book to shop around to publishers and to sell at conventions and online. ‘As of August 2024, the Kickstarter category with the highest success rate was comics, with a success rate of 67.13 percent.’[17] A notable example of a Kickstarter success story is Ngozi Ukazu’s popular webcomic Check, Please! – so popular that a series of Kickstarter campaigns to publish volumes in print raised more than US$800,000, making it ‘one of the most highly funded webcomic Kickstarters ever’.[18] These volumes have now been collected into two books and are published by First Second.

Janna Morishima (literary agent; founder, Kids Comics Unite) says, ‘I think now Kickstarter is almost becoming the preferred route for a certain segment of creators to reach the market.’ She thinks in today’s market, this is a good option for graphic novels for adults. ‘But the one downside to it, of course, is that not all Kickstarter comics and graphic novels have been professionally edited – there is a value in editors in terms of helping polish things and reach their full potential.’ Distribution was again a potential pitfall. While self-publishing provides the opportunity to make more money than with a traditional publishing model – especially if you are good with crowdfunding, social media and building an audience (or have the funds to hire a publicist) – distribution is more difficult without a trade publisher. As Simon Hanselmann says, ‘I can’t tap the library market or the mainstream market as well’, and he notes that ‘the rising costs of international shipping have throttled my online storefront over the past few years. It costs around US$17 to ship a comic book to Australia these days, as opposed to roughly US$5 pre-pandemic.’

Digital comics, platforms and distribution services

While trade publishers might think ‘print’ when it comes to graphic novels, it’s hard to estimate the effect the burgeoning webcomics and digital-comics market might have on the print publishing of graphic novels in the next decade. Just ten years ago, as cartoonist Masha Zhdanova writes, ‘Being a webcomics reader before around 2015 was kind of like being an anime fan before the 2010s. There was a list of Classic Webcomics Everyone Read (or at least Knew Of), and then everything else.’[19] Today, WEBTOON alone has around 170 million monthly active users (as of the quarter ended 31 March 2024), not to mention the 24 million creators on the platform – yes, that’s right, 24 *million* people are creating webcomics on this one platform alone, producing a breadth of content one can’t even fathom.[20] In 2023

the global webcomics and digital-comics market was valued at US$7.13 billion and was projected to grow to US$13.04 billion by 2032.[21]

For the uninitiated, digital comics can be print comics that have been adapted to be read online (including e-books), original digital titles, or webcomics. Webcomics are comics created with the intent that they be published to websites, and they vary in format and complexity to include graphic novels. Webcomic platforms are popular with creators given they are afforded the creative freedom to publish whatever they want, at no cost to themselves; readers, on the other end, enjoy the vast variety of content such freedom creates, and the fact that webcomics are largely free to read.

A popular form of webcomics are webtoons. Webtoons originated in South Korea and are a type of digital comic that can be scrolled vertically on a computer or smartphone with no page breaks. The platform WEBTOON provides hosting for these comics, with a self-publishing arm called Canvas, where creators independently manage everything related to their series, and a publishing program called Originals, where WEBTOON licenses content from creators who then work with editorial staff to develop their content for the platform. Signing up to WEBTOON and reading comics is free, though there is the option to pay to unlock episodes earlier – and stories can be accessed via an app or on any web browser.

One of WEBTOON's main rivals is the platform Tapas, which publishes both webtoons and web novels through a website and an app – again, mostly for free, though some premium series may have episodes which, again, need to be unlocked via payment or through other means, like watching ads. The content here is mostly focused on romance and fantasy genres.

GlobalComix is yet another platform where anyone can create, upload and publish their comics, and it offers both free-to-read comics and pay-to-read options. There's also webcomics collective Hiveworks, a creator-owned comics and graphic novel publisher focused on free-to-read webcomics.

Even today, the influence of these digital-comics platforms cannot be underestimated, and they are increasingly playing a pivotal role in the print-publishing ecosystem in terms of acquisition. As Andrea Colvin (editorial director, Little, Brown Ink) says, 'These platforms are absolutely surging in popularity and we are currently falling over ourselves to sign up the next big webcomic that has broken out on WEBTOON, Tapas, etc. Reformatting them for print is a bear of a task though!' Avi Ehrlich (founder and publisher, Silver Sprocket) agrees. 'It's not uncommon for us to publish comics that were initially serialized as webcomics, but

not every comic is well suited for the webcomic reading experience,' he notes. 'It is one of many models out there. Our own comics that are the easiest to read for free on the internet are also the bestselling in print.'

While the transition from webcomic to print is nothing new – notable examples include *Smile*, first serialised on Girlamatic, and Heartstopper, on Tumblr and Tapas and WEBTOON – the global success of WEBTOON means that when it comes to adaptation, many publishers are looking to digital platforms for ready-made titles. WEBTOON itself is tapping this source of content with WEBTOON Unscrolled, its graphic novel imprint for print publishing. In an 2022 interview, executive editor Bobbi Chase said Unscrolled's plan was 'to publish a diverse range of properties, hitting a wide array of genres for a diverse audience, for not only the WEBTOON readers but also graphic novel, manhwa and manga fans. We're not just going for the top hits on the platform'.[22] WEBTOON also has a foreign-rights division to license print publishing rights for its legion of dedicated devotees.

Some comics publishers offer digital comics through their own subscription-based platforms. Marvel Unlimited, for example, provides access to over 30,000 issues of Marvel titles digitally through a desktop web browser or a mobile app; DC Universe Infinite offers a similar service with over 27,000 comics and graphic novels available to subscribers.

Several leading digital-comics apps are now defunct. Madefire, launched in 2011, was one, and alongside selling the usual digital comics, the company experimented with 'motion books', where the reader was in control of driving the 'animated' story; the company folded in 2021. Cloud-based platform ComiXology, formed back in 2007, was, until last year, the most popular distributor for digital comics, also notable for creating 'guided view' technology that allowed readers to view (and zoom in on) comics panel by panel. As co-founder John Roberts claimed, 'We basically created a way for you to read with one hand on your iPhone.'[23] Acquired by Amazon in 2014, the ComiXology app was retired at the end of 2023, with the material instead made available on the Amazon Kindle app.

There's also the app Google Play Books, where comics are available to purchase individually, and which features Bubble Zoom (only on Android devices and only for some titles), making captions, speech bubbles and thought balloons easier to read by expanding them when tapped.

So just how big is this digital slice of the graphic novel pie? Encompassing both download-to-own and subscription-based services, it's hard to put an exact figure on it. In

2022, total sales of comics and graphic novels in the US and Canada amounted to US$2.16 billion, which was an increase from 2021 of 4 per cent. 2021 had been a record year itself, with growth in sales of 62 per cent over 2020's figures. Graphic novel sales amounted to US$1.57 billion in 2022, comic book sales (periodical comics) to $435 million (with no growth from 2021) and digital (download-to-own) comics $155 million (slightly down from $170 million). Note that digital sales do not include any subscription-based services, 'which are an increasing share of the digital revenue derived from comics'.[24]

Digital comics are also accessible via free distribution services available through libraries, like Libby (by Overdrive) and Hoopla Digital, and curated services like Comics Plus (available through LibraryPass), which provides schools and libraries with unlimited access to thousands of digital comics, graphic novels and manga (as well as picture books). Graphic novelist Kayla Miller said that today 'kids can read graphic novels on their phones; they can read [them] on a tablet. They don't even need to have money, they could just use the library's app and get graphic novels right on their screens at home. Whereas, in the '90s, if I wanted a comic book, I had to ask my parents to take me to the store and then I was limited to what the store sold.'

In April this year, Sora – a K–12 digital reading platform by Overdrive – released its first annual reading report of worldwide student digital reading data. The report found that comics and graphic novel usage grew across all age groups during the 2022–23 school year, especially among high school students (up by 56 per cent).[25] Digital publishing platforms and distribution services are working hard to expand the reach of graphic novels across both children's and adult audiences. Moni Barrette (past president, Graphic Novels & Comics Round Table, ALA; director, Collection Development and Publisher Relations, LibraryPass) says: 'Increasing digital accessibility cuts down on pirating and expands availability of age-appropriate content for all readers. While many people still prefer print comics, digital platforms allow readers to discover new graphic novels as well as backlist gems and out-of-print series. It's a win-win!'

Janna Morishima was also full of praise for these platforms. 'What we've seen online platforms do so far is expand the readership of graphic novels overall, which is truly stunning. The graphic novel category is one of the very few book categories that seems to be bringing in new readers. Of course, this is largely due to the popularity of manga.' But as to whether print publishers might benefit from this boost to readership, she says, 'It's tough for traditional print publishers to incorporate online publishing into their business, because the

"platform" business model is fundamentally different from – and in many ways actively *cannibalizes* – print publishers' existing business model.' The popularity of these platforms could conversely see a reduction in the sales volume of printed titles as readers get their fix online. As noted in comprehensive non-fiction title *The Power of Comics and Graphic Novels*, 'It remains to be seen whether the ubiquitous availability of web comics will have the same cannibalization of print in America as it has had in Korea and Japan, where the digital distribution of native and formerly print material has captured the majority of the market.'[26]

I asked Moni Barrette how these platforms and services were influencing graphic novel publishing overall in the US. 'In a variety of ways, including answering what I refer to as the "what next?" question: You've had a successful crowdfunding and/or retail shop graphic novel, people bought it and loved it. But, what next?' Barrette explained. 'Digital platforms are a great solution to infinitely broadening your book's discoverability to a whole new reading audience! Some graphic novel publishers even choose to create digital exclusives just for these platforms. It's been an adjustment for the whole industry but, again, one with favorable outcomes.'

While digital platforms were undoubtedly popular when it came to the consumption of graphic novels, most trade publishers weren't reaping the rewards via e-book sales. Publishers across the board said e-book sales weren't significant but with tight profit-and-loss statements (P&Ls) for graphic novels, even a small number of sales could make a difference. E-books could also be used as a promotional tool to get readers hooked on a series, for example, if they were included in Kindle Unlimited.

*

Graphic novel sales are on an upwards trajectory in both Australia and the US. But the US market is clearly far more developed and in a constant state of evolution, with numerous publishers responding rapidly (or as rapidly as one can with the relatively slow production pace of the format) to market demand. Given that in Australia our local publishing programs shine in almost every other format, I was eager to learn whatever I could from our US colleagues to help the Australian publishing industry expand on the success of our locally produced graphic format titles. As the scope of my research topic was so extensive, I felt the key was to gain a broad overview of all aspects of the format, with a focus on transferable knowledge in the areas of publishing and editing. What follows is just some of what I learned.

Publishing

Given the breadth of the graphic novel format, I was filled with myriad questions for publishers. I wanted to know the kinds of graphic novels they published and who they published them for. How did they make them profitable? And where did they find creators? Fortunately for me, publishers were generous in their responses.

Publishing houses in the US differ from those in Australia in that editors acquire titles – though there are still acquiring 'publishers' at some houses. When I use the term 'publishers' in this section, it usually refers more broadly to publishing houses.

Categories, genres and age ranges in graphic novels

The trade market for graphic novels is segmented by reader demographic: broadly, children's (juvenile fiction and young adult fiction) and adult books. These are further separated into fiction and non-fiction categories, then potentially into further subcategories, such as graphic medicine or graphic memoir, and into genres, such as fantasy or horror.

Children's

Early reader (and chapter book) graphic novels are for readers from ages 4–7 or 4–8; these are books for a broad spectrum of readers, from those who might just be graduating from picture books to those about to make the jump into middle grade. Middle-grade graphic novels are aimed at readers aged 8 to 12, and YA titles are suitable for ages 12 plus, 13 plus or 14 plus, depending on the content.

When it comes to reading habits, a majority of children only choose books at their reading level or above, and the accepted wisdom in children's publishing is that children will only want to read about characters who are the same age or, ideally, a little older than themselves. But readers of graphic novels are different: they have little regard for the target age range, and will read both books for older children and for younger children, about older children and about younger children. As Whitney Leopard (executive editor, Random House Graphic) says, 'If they are already an active graphic novel reader, they'll read everything … So if they see something and it appeals to them, they'll pick it up regardless of what age category it's for.' There were fewer barriers to age ranges in independent comic bookstores as they often don't shelve by age, and this had the flow-through effect of expanding the

audience. Connie Hsu (editorial director, Roaring Brook Press) agrees that with graphic novels, 'the reading range is actually much wider. So, for instance, a reader can pick up [a younger sibling's] book and engage with it and like the story, [and] think it's sweet. And an older reader might feel more connected to the emotional themes.' In general, there is less stigma attached to reading 'outside' your age range in graphic novels.

Another plus, according to Susan Van Metre (executive editorial director, Walker Books US), was that 'boys seem generally more open to reading about female protagonists in graphic novel form than in prose form. This might be a combination of the accessibility/coolness of the format and the way figures in comics form can be broadly relatable and appealing.' In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud explains the universality of the graphic novel reading experience: 'When you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face – you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself. I believe this is the primary cause of our childhood fascination with cartoons, though other factors such as universal identification, simplicity and the childlike features of many cartoon characters also play a part … We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!'[27]

Early readers and chapter books

The early reader category of graphic novels begins at age 4, and is for readers who have moved beyond picture books and are taking their first steps towards independent reading. Françoise Mouly's TOON Books broke the ground in this category when they launched in 2008, publishing a line of graphic novels for pre-readers, and many publishers mentioned wanting to tap into this growing category. One example of early reader comics is I Like to Read Comics, by Holiday House. The books in this series, aimed at readers from kindergarten to first grade age, have simple structured vocabulary and text, are fun to read, and tap into common experiences for the age group. 'It allows young readers to feel a little bit older reading a comic … it might make them feel more independent as opposed to a picture book,' says Della Farrell (editor, Holiday House). Susan Van Metre said that books for this age group are somewhat aspirational, often feature animals and 'tend to be very character-driven'. The economy of storytelling needed for this age bracket means only two to four panels per page are needed, which makes panels easy to follow.

There is also the separate category of chapter books. These titles are aimed at ages 6–8, are a little longer and a step beyond early readers for intermediate independent readers. The

age range is somewhat fluid as it hinges on reader ability and, given there is a smaller window of a child's life that chapter books are relevant for (i.e. before they move on confidently towards more complex and lengthy middle-grade titles), there was thought to be a smaller market for these titles.

These two categories often appear to be conflated, with many publishers ignoring the separate age levels and calling all early books 'readers', a trend that carries over to graphic novel publishing; for example, Graphix 'Chapters' titles are described as early 'readers'. One difficulty publishers faced was working out how sales teams could translate the category of the early reader or chapter book graphic novel for consumers. As I was told at one publisher: '"Graphic novel chapter books" or "your first graphic novel" – we've tried a few different things. We've said "early reader", but it doesn't resonate that well with people. It's more bookseller focused when we talk about it that way.' In this report, the terms 'early readers' and 'chapter books' have been used somewhat interchangeably.

Middle grade

When we're talking about market segments, middle grade is the graphic novel juggernaut, and in the last five years this segment has been expanding from contemporary, realistic, autobiographical fiction – think Raina Telgemeier, and Shannon Hale and LeUyen Pham's *Real Friends* – into other categories, like action, adventure and fantasy, and a lot more non-fiction publishing.

When I asked creator Jarad Greene (cartoonist; graphic novelist) about the specifics of writing for this age group, he said:

> I never want the pages to feel too dense with text … I also don't want to be showing and telling, so I try to have a balance where there are … silent moment[s] … and it doesn't need the text. My books are narrated as well, so it was being really selective of when are we are inside the character's head and when are we just like letting the scene play out …
>
> In terms of the art itself, I have a simpler cartoony style and I think a lot about establishing a scene with the details that it needs and then dropping off some of the backgrounds when it doesn't feel as necessary … It is an interesting balance.

Young Adult

The Heartstopper series is undoubtedly the current shining star of YA graphic novel publishing, and the five volumes of the series had sold 1.4 million copies in the US as of

January 2024.[28] As Penni Russon writes for *The Conversation*, 'To every generation a publishing phenomenon is born – and for Generation Z, it's Heartstopper.'[29]

Gina Gagliano (outreach director, Boston Comic Arts Foundation) says that in the past few years, chapter books and YA have been growing more than middle grade, and it's heartening to note that 'there's been a real rise in stories with BIPOC and queer characters … there's more of those books and they're selling really well. Queer books are the top-selling [sub]category in YA especially.'

Brian Geffen (executive editor, Henry Holt Books For Young Readers) says that 'there have been a ton of big YA graphic novels for a long time', but there was a discoverability issue at bookstores. One industry insider told me they attributed the growth of YA graphic novels in part to the creation of a dedicated shelf space for this category:

> I was seeing publishers take a big stance on YA graphic novels about five or six years ago. Because everyone was seeing how well all the middle-grade contemporary realistic books were doing and there was a concerted effort to push Barnes & Noble to creating a YA graphic novel space. Prior to that, Barnes & Noble had been shelving anything YA and up with manga, which is like bonkers, right? It's just a completely different world. And people were saying, 'Okay, you finally took the middle-grade graphic novels out of the middle-grade prose section. Can you please do that with the YA graphic novels?' So they started doing that and you just see sales all of a sudden go up.

Crossover

The crossover potential of graphic novels from YA to the adult market was considered a 'selling point for the books', given the wider readership and ability to tap the established YA market for graphic novels, according to Vedika Khanna (senior editor, Ten Speed Graphic). Another editor agreed that 'the YA crossover for graphic novels works really well in the US … a series like Heartstopper … it's huge because adults are buying it and kids are buying it, and so you can have these kind of larger print runs: 40,000 or 50,000 [for YA] versus 15,000 copies [for middle grade].' One agent noted that instead of marketing adult graphic novels to readers of comics, publishers are instead trying to market them to the people who read 'important' literary books, meaning it was almost easier to sell an adult graphic novel by aging the protagonist down and calling the book a young adult title.

Non-fiction

Della Farrell says, 'Graphic novels work so well for non-fiction because … you need visuals, you need to show things, process-wise, step-by-step, you need diagrams, and it just makes sense'. Non-fiction graphic novels understandably require more in-house art checks to make sure any visual representations are accurate, and sometimes involve fact checks of both the art and text by expert readers who are paid and credited.

However, on the younger side, and for reluctant readers, one editor argued that graphic novels weren't always preferred: 'What works more are non-fiction [books with] lots of photographs, lots of illustration. Books that they browse and … not necessarily read from back to front.'

Graphic history is a format that works well to convey emotion in a way that other books can't, according to Amie Wright (former president, Graphic Novels & Comics Round Table, ALA): 'When you're talking about historical events, the emotional resonance and that impact on people's lives is often flattened in traditional historical textbooks or text-only publications.'

While juvenile non-fiction sales have fallen year on year since 2020, this segment of the market could still provide solid sales, with Robyn Chapman (editor, First Second Books) saying titles from First Second's Science Comics series, aimed at middle-grade readers, are the 'most reliable seller we have'.

Memoir

In children's graphic novels, memoir continues to be a popular genre, with Raina Telgemeier's *Smile* the first graphic memoir that was solidly middle grade. However, success in this category could somewhat hinge on the seriousness of the topic. As Andrea Colvin says, 'I think people don't have a huge appetite for tough stories in graphic novels, probably because of the graphic nature of it too. I mean, people will read tough stories in prose.'

David Levithan (author; editorial director, Scholastic US) sees memoir generally as 'a more focused version of the truth. It's not that we're changing what happened. It's just that we're leaving out the parts of what happened that had nothing to do with this story.' When working on a memoir, he recommends treating it almost like fiction, so it's not so confronting for the creator: 'Trying to create that distance between the author and their representation is always important.' With the popularity of the genre, he also says there are many great books

you can point to as templates for graphic memoir, which means while ‘people used to be much more intimidated by it, now they see how the format works’.

Daniel Lazar (literary agent, Writers House) highlighted the confusion over the distinction between a graphic memoir and graphic novel. Graphic memoirs are often called ‘novels’ (e.g. on the cover, in reviews) though they are non-fiction books, a distinction that could become important with a high-stakes novel or memoir when this line is blurred. While in stores like Barnes & Noble, graphic novels are all shelved together (by age category), as the market grows, consideration could be given into separating them further (e.g. into fiction and non-fiction), somewhat alleviating this issue.

Adult

While the market for graphic novels for adults is burgeoning in parts of the world such as Europe, even with the most prestigious publishers in the US a lot of books have print runs of just a couple of thousand copies – and, according to Simon Hanselmann, ‘it’s not really worth doing a reprint sometimes because there’s going to be no more press’. There are, of course, exceptions to that, including breakout hits like *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* by Emil Ferris.

Gina Gagliano says that ‘the adult graphic novel market in the US is certainly extremely robust. It’s just more indie press than it is mainstream’, which can become a challenge in terms of limited staff, a lack of distributor support and the smaller advances typically on offer for creators.

Silver Sprocket’s Avi Ehrlich thinks ‘the American market hasn’t really figured it out’, despite the fact that ‘all of the major publishers are making really big investments right now in expanding their graphic novels for adults’.

Robyn Chapman believes that the size of the audience for adult graphic novels is the issue. ‘It’s really hard for us to get big sales numbers. I think there’s just a smaller audience of adult graphic novel readers … All kids today read graphic novels. There’s no prejudice about it. But for an adult graphic novel to hit big, you can’t just appeal to graphic novel readers. You have to have the smart literary person who reads *The New York Times*, who is open-minded enough to read a graphic novel, to buy it as well.’

Vedika Khanna from Ten Speed Graphic, one of the first imprints that a big five publisher has set up specifically dedicated to publishing commercial graphic novels for adults, says, ‘We have a well-established indie comics publishing scene here already, but Ten

Speed is very much looking for the big hits. Thinking of these kids who have grown up and from middle school on [have been] reading graphic novels and are now becoming adults and there's not a lot out there … in a similar vein to what they've grown up reading.' Without specific graphic novel programs abounding on the adult side (in the way they do in the children's market), it's harder for readers to know where to go to buy graphic novels to fill this gap.

But perhaps this segment of the market is on the cusp of growth. As Liz Frances (founder and publisher, Street Noise Books) says, 'The adult space has not had the strong growth we have seen in other areas, but I think that's changing.' Factors could include teen readers of graphic novels growing up and continuing to read the format, and adult manga readers branching out to graphic novels.

Fiction

When it comes to adult fiction graphic novels, there are still many gaps in the market. 'It's much more either obscure or very, very literary rather than being commercial,' notes Gina Gagliano. 'And … it means that there's a lot of chunks of the market that [you don't have] … you don't really have mystery graphic novels. You don't really have romance graphic novels. You don't really have women's fiction graphic novels. You don't really have all of those parts of the market that have sold really well in the prose space.'

One agent told me that it had been hard to sell fantasy or anything on the adult side that wasn't realistic and contemporary. Creators outside these accepted genres will likely not get a competitive advance, as the book will be considered a risk, and money will need to be spent on marketing it. If they experiment with genre and the resulting title isn't profitable, then it's likely that the publisher won't expand in that area.

Non-fiction

'There is no better way to learn things quickly and effectively than with non-fiction comics,' enthused graphic novelist Joel Christian Gill, during the 'Nonfiction Comics' panel at San Diego Comic-Con in 2023. However, with non-fiction, the lengthy path to publication of a graphic novel could be a cause of concern, as it was for one writer I spoke to, given that by publication some content may well be out of date.

Eric Reynolds (VP/associate publisher, Fantagraphics) suggested in the 'Behind the Scenes of Comics Publishing' panel at San Diego Comic-Con 2023 that the majority of

‘event’ graphic novels over the last ten years have been non-fiction, as the media landscape is more open to books centred on issues.

When it came to non-fiction graphic adaptations, such as *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, Amie Wright said publishers were ‘appealing to the folks that wouldn’t consider themselves comic readers but they love the *New Yorker* cartoons’.

Breaking non-fiction concepts into bite-sized pieces was crucial, and Eleri Harris (journalist; cartoonist) notes that, for non-fiction, ‘if there’s a lot of text, you need to be able to make it digestible’.

Memoir

According to Vedika Khanna, memoir ‘is the most established space for adults’ in graphic novels.

Liz Frances decided to publish graphic memoirs ‘because I think that … they’re particularly powerful … I feel that it is important for those stories to be told by the person whose story it is to tell, not by an outsider but in their own voice. And then when it’s drawn by their own hand that’s even more powerful because whatever they’re depicting, you’re basically seeing it through their own eyes.’

Tom Hart wonders whether the market for adult memoir might be oversaturated. ‘Memoir is the big thing, right?’ he says. ‘But the funny thing is, we’re reaching a point where … there’s already this kind of memoir … there’s already that kind of memoir. People have really interesting stories to tell, and they come to me and they’re like, “How come I can’t get a book deal, how come I can’t get an agent?” … So, I don’t know, maybe that’s a saturation point of some kind. But … because kids change, I think, faster than adults do, YA doesn’t seem to have that same problem.’

I wondered what creators thought about illustrative details being factually accurate in graphic memoir. For *Roaming*, co-creator Jillian Tamaki did extensive research to ensure the details of the 2009 New York setting were portrayed as authentically as possible. Briana Loewinsohn (graphic novelist) took the opposite approach in her graphic memoir *Ephemera*, saying, ‘I could tell a more authentic story if I wasn’t so concerned with the visual details matching.’ For her, the interest lies in ambiguity: ‘I’m very interested in reader interpretation and I’m very interested in letting the reader have an experience. That could be my experience or it could be different. So, for me graphic novels have always been a perfect medium

because I can mostly show what I'm interested in and then add words if I feel like it's necessary.'

Crossover categories

Enchanted Lion publishes some category-defying books that contain graphic novel elements. These have included a middle-grade prose novel that includes some speech bubbles; picture books that contain speech bubbles, or pages that contain elements traditionally associated with comics; and wordless graphic novels. Of the latter, Emilie Robert Wong (associate editor, Enchanted Lion Books) says, They're not wordless picture books, because of the length and because of the complexity of the narrative and the storytelling. So, this again is kind of a hybrid area where it can be put on the picture-book shelf but it also could be put on the graphic novel shelf.' By marketing these books as a picture book–graphic novel hybrid, they can also target the two markets. Sometimes it's a matter of finding the closest category to connect books with readers. When showing me French graphic artist Blexbolex's beautifully produced translated title *The Magicians*, she explained, 'Even though there aren't speech bubbles and it's not a traditional graphic novel, that is the best category that we could find for this book … because of the nature of the art being so bold and graphic as well as the fact that it's all sequential storytelling'.

Agent Janna Morishima says, 'I do encourage writers and artists to consider hybrid models, for instance, a black-and-white chapter book that's prose, but that has some comic illustrations peppered throughout – that's affordable. That's one possibility. Younger comics that have shorter page counts, almost more like "picture-book plus" – that's another possibility.' These hybrid models also have the advantage of taking less time to produce.

Bilingual books

Emilie Robert Wong notes that Enchanted Lion has published 'a bilingual edition of one of our books and that is a growing market in the United States'.

David Levithan said middle-grade graphic novel *Invisible*, which includes text in English and Spanish, has 'really caught on [in the US] because it has that bilingual text, because it is a different kind of story and a different kind of format than we've seen in graphics'. In the author's note for this book, Christina Diaz Gonzalez said that during a school visit, 'I realized the tremendous value graphic novels can afford those learning a new language … It made me wonder if there could be … a single book that could be read and

enjoyed no matter which language you spoke or how proficient you were in either language. One that could help with fluency in both languages.'[30]

I also saw the opposite approach in several graphic novels for children – though not dual-language books, as such – where some foreign text was included but not translated, like in YA title *Lost in Taiwan,* which includes text in English and Mandarin. Author Mark Crilley explained his thinking around this in a *School Library Journal* guest post: 'The idea was to make those lines of dialogue just as incomprehensible to readers as the spoken language would be to [the protagonist] Paul … For those who *can* read Chinese, those panels function as a simple continuation of the dialogue. For everyone else—the vast majority of readers in America, surely—those panels put you very firmly in Paul's shoes: locked out of the conversation, and needing to look at facial expressions and so forth to venture a guess at what's being said.'[31]

Demand for bilingual children's and YA books in the US will likely only rise, given that, according to a study by the Brookings Institution, 'Gen Z Americans – who were born between 1997 and 2012 – will be the last generation with a white majority and will give way to a post-2012 "majority minority" generation Alpha.'[32]

Books in translation

Several publishers mentioned they have a network of trusted readers, translators and rights agents reaching out to them directly. Add in the lure of rights fairs, and graphic novels in translation become another attractive possibility because they can be bought and published within a year. Language barriers were not an issue, as Nick Thomas (executive editor, Levine Querido) says: 'The beauty of evaluating a … graphic novel is … do I like the art or not?'

But translation does come with its own set of potential problems. It can sometimes be hard to fit the translated text into bubbles (when one language is wordier than another) and it may need to be cut down, though you can shrink (or expand) the size of the text to fit. Liz Frances also noted that 'many of the books that I have bought the rights to in translation, we've done a lot of work on, because often I find that for something to resonate with our readers it really has to be changed from what worked in the European market'.

File set-up also varied between countries and publishing houses, which could cause difficulties with production.

Adaptations

The multi-format aspect of some adaptations – such as from book to movie to graphic novel – could help build the success of a graphic novel by expanding audiences who might then find the book, or offering existing fan bases a new and collectable format.

Webcomics to graphic novel

For publishers who have already dived in to these adaptations, there are several attractions to scroll-to-print adaptations. As Vedika Khanna, who has some WEBTOON adaptations in the pipeline, says, 'The story is complete, especially if you're publishing something that has been out there for a while or is ongoing … You also know that there's an established fan base in the States with potential that … some of those readers might be from other countries … so you know that there's more worldwide popularity potential there.' Emilia Rhodes (editorial director, HarperCollins/Clarion Books) observes that 'having that kind of built-in platform and audience has been a really great way for us to get retailers on board [and] break through the market'.

While it's faster to produce this kind of adaptation – a schedule may be one year to print – Vedika Khanna notes the difficulties in format: 'What we found is tricky is converting WEBTOON's scroll version to page format.' Emilia Rhodes agrees, saying, 'you're rethinking the whole way it's been packaged', which brings different complications. Rhodes wants adaptations to capture as much of the graphic novel experience as possible. 'I really had wanted a good reading experience for a book reader,' she says, 'which is challenging because sometimes they'll have big climactic moments [that], if you're scrolling and reading vertically, read really differently this way. So sometimes they have to redraw things. Sometimes we have to reframe things to make it fit. It's important to us to shape episodes into a narrative where they have a natural arc to the story, versus feeling tied to a specific number of episodes or original episode starting and end points.' The long-form, instalment-based nature of WEBTOON's storytelling means that it often takes longer to get to a satisfying conclusion for a print title. The conversion to print can be heavily design focused and once the webcomic is laid out for print, creators may wish to rewrite their dialogue to better suit the layout of the new format.

Translation could also be difficult with a webcomic adaptation because the publisher didn't always have layered art files (though creators are becoming savvier), which meant they may not have been able to edit art if, for example, there was a typo in an illustration.

Files from webcomics can become huge and take multiple days to upload to a printer, as every single panel is linked back to a separate file, whereas an original graphic novel will have files set up as single pages. This also means checking PDFs is more complicated as only the designer will see the back end of how the file is created (in InDesign) and will know what should be on each spread. Given that even opening up a file means the potential to introduce errors – such as accidentally turning off a layer – reprint corrections were rarely made. Additionally, as files have originally been created in RGB for screen, and need to be converted to CMYK, some colours and effects (e.g. glowing eyes) were hard to achieve in print.

Many creators, however, are keen to make the jump from online to print. David Levithan says, 'So many people are doing web comics and then web memoir comics that, again, I think we were afraid at first to approach some of these people who would say, "Well, why do I need a book?" But perhaps not surprisingly, all of these creators, they love the idea of having a physical object, and it does make what they're sort of putting online more real. And again, it's rare that we've had a web creator who has said, "No, I don't want to do that."'

Novel to graphic novel

I also spoke with David Levithan about the 2023 adaptation of his YA novel *Every Day*, first published in 2012 by Knopf Books for Young Readers, to graphic novel format, which he says has 'sold more to people who are familiar with the novel who want to experience it a different way'. *Every Day* was also made into a movie, released in 2018, but the nature of adaptation meant Levithan couldn't incorporate anything new that had been added to the movie (i.e. that wasn't in the novel) in the script for his graphic novel adaptation, which was illustrated by Dion MBD. He felt that in adaptations authors sometimes clung to favourite pieces of prose to keep their fans happy, meaning they might include things that are not actually necessary. Of the graphic novel adaptation, he said, 'The novel is all about the narration and about the voice. And so, it was extremely hard to not have voiceover in the graphic novel. But I was like, "You know what? … Let's see if my dialogue can carry the whole thing." And obviously the visual representation. And, ultimately, I think it works. But that was sort of the crucial decision.'

Vedika Khanna said adaptations of novels to graphic novels were 'the projects that require the heaviest lift from us and take a lot of time, and our approach to those is truly focused on books that can stand the test of time, whether they're literary classics … or recent

commercial hits or have a particular significance [at that time]'. Adaptations require script approval by the original author or estate, so while the script is being completed, publishers start signing up the illustrator and getting them to work on character sketches.

One of Ten Speed Graphic's adaptations is *Watership Down: The Graphic Novel.* James Sturm (cartoonist; co-founder, The Center for Cartoon Studies) likened his role in the adaptation to that of a director, saying his strategy was to be as faithful to the work as possible: 'Adapting this work, my role is akin to a movie director, I work from the original text and visualize panel after panel and scene after scene. Once my layouts are complete, [illustrator] Joe Sutphin goes to work. If I am the director, Joe is an A-list actor and his work is the star of the show.' It was fascinating to hear the way that Sturm worked on *Watership Down*: creating a complete storyboard (with black-and-white thumbnails), scanning those pages in, enlarging them in Photoshop, and adding the text. Sutphin then printed these out and brought them to life in pencil and inks; a digital colourist was then hired. Sturm and Sutphin took a trip to England for research, as suggested by the estate, taking rabbit's-eye-view photos of the countryside that Richard Adams, the original author, had known as a child.

Paul Karasik (cartoonist; educator) worked in a similar way with artist David Mazzucchelli on their 1994 adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, first published by Avon Books. Karasik said the challenge with this adaptation was to make a book about language work as a book of pictures, and while Auster said that Karasik could take out as many words as he wanted, he couldn't change a single word. Karasik went through the book and highlighted parts that he wanted for pictures, and underlined parts for which he wanted to use language. He sent thumbnail sketches with text to Mazzucchelli. If Karasik's sketch was working, Mazzucchelli rendered the sketch as it was, but there were revisions if they came up with better ideas. Once they had a final version, they sat down to go through it with Auster before Mazzucchelli rendered the final illustrations.

It was illuminating to hear Karasik talk about how he used the design of the page, and the shape and size of panels, to tell the subtext of the story. The nine-panel grid used throughout represented the monotony of the character's life; Karasik repeated the concept of nine-panel grid wherever he could within the grid itself, so it was being reinforced subconsciously to the reader. Later, when the character starts losing his mind, the panels start to jiggle out of place and lose their straight edges; as the character becomes unhinged, the panels become unhinged from the book and fall off the page. It's no surprise this adaptation has been so widely praised.

The Disney-Hyperion model

I was lucky to speak with Rachel Stark (editor, Disney-Hyperion) about Disney-Hyperion's process for publishing graphic novels for the trade market. Disney publishes creator-owned graphic novels, as well as original graphic novels and reimaginings of existing Disney stories that are developed by an in-house intellectual property (IP) team. When creating new or reimagined IP, they first brainstorm as a team something that either they or a franchise partner, such as one of the TV or film-development teams that fall under Disney's umbrella, is looking for. The ideal is that another arm of the company may want to produce content alongside or inspired by their book; for instance, one of their film departments may want to develop a streaming series to coincide with the graphic novel, or there could be a vision for merchandise.

The team begins with a short proposal to share with the wider company, then fleshes out the idea to a series with concept, plot, characters and so on once they receive feedback. They'll think about the type of author that they want. For example, do they want a big name/heavy hitter, or a debut author (a less expensive endeavour and an opportunity to build that author's profile), or someone with clout in the library market? They might ask agents for samples of work. Sometimes a Disney animator or novelist might be considered to develop the project as an in-house talent. Before sharing the project proposal with an author to see if they're interested, they'll ask them to sign an NDA. If the author is interested, Disney asks for a sample that shows the voice and sensibility the writer will bring to the project. They then take the writer's sample and the proposal developed in-house to acquisitions with a P&L, comparison titles and other information. Everyone has already seen the project at the initial proposal stage so there should be no surprises at this stage – the meeting is really about discussing the best way to publish the project.

For grant of rights (original graphic novels), the process works a little differently. Disney takes submissions from agents, then evaluates the potential both in the children's graphic novel market and in terms of other revenue streams – film, TV, toys and so on. They don't need to have all rights granted to sign a project, but franchise potential is a bonus when considering submissions. In all projects they need to think with two minds: one that considers the publishing market, and one that considers what Disney as a larger media company is looking for. 'Disney's bread and butter is storytelling,' Rachel Stark says, 'and sometimes publishing can lead the way in terms of trends.'

Acquisitions

Finding new talent

So where do publishers, editors and even agents, discover graphic novel creators? As well as receiving pitches direct from literary agents, publishers – and especially smaller publishers or imprints that can't afford to pay big advances – are actively scouting for creators. At indie comic festivals, they are looking at work on display in artists' alleys, and surveying what (and who) small presses are publishing; they are also reviewing portfolios at colleges. When seeking specialised knowledge holders for non-fiction titles, or diverse creators with a unique perspective, they reach out to potential creators using whatever means they can. As well as looking to digital comics platforms, many agents and publishers noted that Instagram was a great place to spot new talent and distinctive art. Tom Hart says, 'Our students, often older, tend to find themselves on Instagram, or even Substack these days, trying to connect with audiences.' (SAW has also created their own webcomics site – SEE SAW Comics – to showcase the work of its students.) Video game designers or writers, proficient at character design, landscapes and scripting, also have a relevant skill set that means they can make the transition to graphic novels quite readily.

Some publishers also find artists through works previously published. The indie comics audience is so different from the traditional publishing audience that sometimes graphic novels that have been published by a small or micro press will then be repackaged and reprinted by a bigger publisher. After nine years of self-publishing Coin-Op comics, Maria and Peter Hoey were approached by Top Shelf Productions, who wanted to publish an anthology of the works, resulting in the Coin-Op Comics Anthology series. Maria Hoey says that 'it was very much out of the blue for us, and a wonderful surprise. In many ways, we were very under the radar, so it was a nice thing to have our work validated in that way. When we started, we didn't see a collection in our future, we were just very energized by putting out the individual issues. In addition to producing a gorgeous book, being published by Top Shelf has allowed our work to be seen by so many more people – from shops and readers all around the world, to hundreds of libraries.' From this unexpected beginning, they've gone on to publish three more titles with Top Shelf, including the 2024 graphic novel release *In Perpetuity*, as well as continuing to publish comics, accordion books and flip books through their press Coin-Op Books.

Independent press Silver Sprocket will also consider reissuing previously published works if an artist who is self-publishing is unable to keep up with demand for their book in Silver Sprocket's own retail storefront. Putting out works with indie publishers could also be a conduit to making deals with larger publishers. Silver Sprocket creators Ben Passmore and Mattie Lubchansky have both later had titles signed up by Pantheon, though Avi Ehrlich notes this also works the other way as 'we've gotten to work with artists like E.M. Carroll and Rosemary Valero-O'Connell who have big deals with giant publishers but still love making books with us as well'.

Given both her extensive industry experience, and her role as founder of a community for children's and YA graphic novelists and industry professionals, agent Janna Morishima has no trouble finding talented creators. Yet word-of-mouth was still important for in her role. Janna finds that she can't represent everyone she likes as 'it's getting more competitive to sell a project' and 'in terms of debut creators, [publishers are] very risk-averse'.

Un-agented creators also sometimes contacted publishers or editors directly – an approach that may be particularly successful in the adult space and for international creators, as adult graphic novel publishers are actively looking for work to publish and are often physically present at comics conventions. I wondered if this approachability was why so many Australian creators have had success publishing adult graphic novels in the US, or if digital platforms like WEBTOON and a social media presence had a bigger impact. Eleri Harris says:

> For Australians, art-based social media platforms have been hugely beneficial for promoting their work, but I think that physically travelling to the US or Canada – either for short promotional visits or to live there for a longer period – have also played a huge role. I think that it has helped when Australians have already built an online fanbase before going to America – so they're not going with material that is raw or maybe green, but professional or near professional quality work. American publishers have definitely snapped up work from Australians that is ready to go, but it may have taken the artist years of working to hone their craft here at home and online first.

Simon Hanselmann agrees that 'social media combined with travelling to overseas festivals (which is prohibitively expensive at the best of times)' would help Australian creators get on the radar of US publishers. Of social media, he says it's all about 'developing a following of your own, getting some "heat" and parlaying that into some kind of deal. You

start in the minors and you bust your ass training and hopefully get spotted by a "talent scout", then you can move up to the major league.'

Editors face the same struggle to ascend; it's worth noting that to move up the US publishing chain, poorly paid junior editors are under considerable pressure to acquire, which one editor told me meant their first graphic novel acquisitions might not necessarily be the best books to acquire but simply the books they *could* acquire, hoping to get their name out there and fast-track that elusive promotion.

Liz Frances has acquired all titles herself since starting Street Noise Books in 2020, publishing around six non-fiction graphic novels a year with a focus on memoir. It was interesting to speak to her about acquiring for a new house:

> When I started out, no one had ever heard of Street Noise – there was no such thing – so I wasn't getting submissions … Our mission is to provide a platform for the voices of marginalised people and publish works that are authentic and politically relevant, so I was looking for voices that weren't being heard elsewhere. And I had to go out of my way to find those things. I would go to comic arts festivals or zine fests, and I would look through anthologies and the first thing that I would look at was the art style. If I liked somebody's art, then I looked further to see: who is this person, and do they possibly have a story to tell that might be the kind of thing that would fit with our mission at Street Noise? If it seemed like they did, I would reach out to them.

While the pandemic made this process somewhat harder, given the dearth of festivals over those years, the growing awareness of Street Noise Books means she's since received many submissions, both with and without agents.

What editors consider when acquiring

Liz Frances wasn't the only publisher to mention the importance of the art style. Della Farrell, who acquires books for children and young adults at Holiday House, has to love the art immediately, but it's not just the style of the art that's important. As well as consistency with character design throughout the sample (e.g. does the height of the character change?), she also checks that the anatomy – even if it's heavily stylised – is still accurate as 'those are the kinds of things that are harder to correct later on'. She also looks at how the artist is approaching the panelling: 'I want something that shows a kind of sophistication but playfulness and awareness that it's still for young readers.'

Whitney Leopard says consideration of the art style depends on what she is looking to publish – thicker lines and rounded characters for something to fill the commercial space, thin and painterly lines for something more literary, and fewer panels for a younger target age. ‘But honestly, usually what I’m looking for is someone who has a unique style, so it doesn’t feel like everything else we’ve already seen. And that even if they’re telling a story that feels familiar to what we’ve already seen, I want there to be something about it that pops in a way to help differentiate it from everything else on the shelf. And then honestly, just someone who feels like they’re ready to be published, that their style, even if it’s not a personal preference, still feels refined in a way that it feels finished.’

While editors are always looking for distinct voices, if they don’t personally have a background in comics then they may not connect to art that is unfamiliar, instead seeking to work backwards to try to emulate successful books already in the market (such as artists working in the style of Raina Telgemeier, who set the tone for middle-grade graphic novels).

Shana Corey (editorial director, Random House Graphic) also looks first to the artwork but says having multiple markets or audiences is the next most important thing. ‘I feel like I want to make sure each book has not just one hook but multiple hooks.’ A hook might be, for example, a curriculum hook (i.e. the book has relevant themes a teacher could build a lesson plan around; the book’s topic itself doesn’t need to be on the curriculum) so the book can be marketed to school libraries, or perhaps the author has an existing platform and thus an existing audience, or the book centres on a topic that hasn’t been covered before. This is particularly important in middle-grade graphic novels today as the market becomes more and more saturated.

Given the current rise in popularity of graphic novels, editors are also contending with submissions from creators unfamiliar with the format and perhaps not best suited to produce graphic novels. Brian Geffen notes that a few years ago he was seeing countless submissions from people who’d written novels trying to break into the graphic novel space for the first time but says, ‘It’s very hard to make that transition.’ Because of the complexities of publishing profitable graphic novels – given their development is often lengthy and complex, and production costs can be high for bulky, full-colour titles – publishers could well afford to be picky when acquiring. As Nick Thomas says, ‘I really have to be won over by a graphic novel and feel even more confident perhaps that it’s going to be a great book.’

Pitching

With prose, publishers don't generally like to buy on a partial manuscript, but the opposite holds true for a graphic novel. Pitches most often include an outline/synopsis plus a sample of finished spreads (in colour), and sometimes character sketches and/or a sample script. One editor that I spoke to mentioned that they sometimes ask if a creator is open to revising the character design or can show more samples before making an offer. Another editor said they liked to see four to six pages of art, however Daniel Lazar thinks it's worth giving more, rather than less. While he was acutely aware that stories morph once publishers take them on, he felt outlines needed a strong beginning, middle and ending.

Given the current competitive nature of the children's graphic novel market (in early reader/chapter books and middle grade), titles that might have previously been acquired over the last few years are now being passed on, and consequently more thought needed to be put into submissions, as well as a spacing out of submissions, so that an editor could properly consider each project on its individual merits.

For adult graphic novels, things seemed to work a little differently. One creator mentioned their agent wanted a fully pencilled book to pitch for auction – unusual, and a lot of unnecessary work if the acquiring editor wanted to change the story significantly.

While publishers may have once worked with creators to develop pitches prior to acquisition, as lists fill, it means there is less time for this developmental work, which may have once been crucial feedback for any debut creators trying to break into the graphic novel format.

Advances

I'm sure no one will be surprised that when it comes to the dollar figure of advances paid, the numbers I heard varied widely, from a mere US$500 (think micro press!) to deals for multi-million-dollar series hard-won at auctions, which invariably drove prices up on advances creators may never earn out.

In children's books, while advances were commonly six figures a few years ago, a more standard and respectful current offer would be in the mid to high five figures, with a 'fair wage' for a graphic novel considered US$40,000 to 50,000, and bigger publishers paying even more. Given the labour and timeframes involved in a graphic novel, a lower advance (e.g. under US$30,000) may be impossible to accept, and in the case of dual creators the

author would typically get a smaller advance than the illustrator (e.g. US$10,000 to an illustrator's US$30,000–40,000).

Yet advances were greater than for prose books; the time and effort required to complete a book were factors. David Levithan says, 'Advances are certainly higher than if [the creator had] just written a novel. I do think that the labour is taken into account. And a lot of times the illustrators [are] paid much more than [the] writer because the illustrators might take much more time.'

Unless an adult graphic novel had a certain hook, advances were likely to be lower for this segment, given the smaller size of the market. In terms of royalties with dual creators, one editor told me if the author and illustrator came as a team then they shared royalties, but if the publisher hired an illustrator then it was usually for a flat fee.

When a publisher couldn't offer a big advance, they could instead highlight the other strengths of signing with that house, such as thorough editing, thoughtful design, and a considered marketing and publicity campaign. Offering a longer schedule could provide time for a creator to work on other projects, or do colouring jobs or other paid work. Conversely, as publishers often want books on the market as quickly as possible, working to a tight schedule could mean securing a bigger advance.

Agents

While agents for graphic novelists were once few and far between, Chris Staros (editor-in-chief, Top Shelf Productions) says that while he prefers to work directly with creators, 'agents are becoming more and more the norm'. This seems to be a direct result of the market embracing graphic novels, though agents are quickly learning that working on graphic novels is complicated logistically (e.g. in terms of file management).

Maria Hoey – who also works as an illustrator, as does her brother, Peter – mentioned the value of agents when it comes to contract negotiations; contracts have become a lot longer and more complex in terms of rights. Having an agent 'allows us to focus on the art side and not the contract side of work', Hoey noted. 'I think many artists also benefit from having representation because agents can submit projects to lots of houses on the artist's behalf.'

For small-press deals with low advances, there was no real advantage to getting an agent as they were not able to help the creator get a better deal. Yet at bigger publishers,

agents were known for driving up the prices of projects – seemingly good news for creators, but they then have a huge advance to earn out before royalties kick in. This strategy has risks: if sales don't reach expected levels, the project will likely be seen as commercial failure.

Formats

In children's graphic novels, hardcovers and paperbacks were often printed and published simultaneously (called a dual edition), with the smaller print run of the hardcovers largely for the institutional market (schools and libraries) and collectors, and the paperback for the general trade. Once the initial print run of the hardback sells out, they generally aren't reprinted, and the paperback edition becomes the only edition available. (In terms of quantities, one example I was given was 11,000 paperbacks to 4000–5000 hardcovers, which was a higher number of hardbacks than I'd expected.) With a universal copyright page, and use of the same paper stock, both runs can be printed at the same time.

Dual editions were sometimes necessary to make a book possible, as Robyn Chapman explains. 'The dual edition does help us where we have paperback, which costs a lot less to print, and then the hardcover, which we price way up. But a couple of times we've tried to do hardcover single editions for kids, and we've had to scrap it because it just didn't work out.'

There are still some titles published as hardcover single editions. For example, if a book has a high-profile author and is likely to be collectable, or if a book is primarily for the school and library market, it's published in hardcover first, with the paperback release following a year later. If a book doesn't have a dust jacket, publishers were obliged to charge less. However, Lillian Sun (production director, Black Dog & Leventhal / Little, Brown Books for Young Readers / Running Press Kids / Running Press Studio, Hachette Book Group US) says that 'the market doesn't really care itself for a jacket, [so] we actually put the spec [cover embellishments] on the case.' Another important factor in publishing a hardcover edition, according to one marketer, was that 'in order to get reviews and be eligible for awards in the United States … it has to be hardcover'. This is due to hardcover books being considered somewhat more prestigious and therefore more worthy of consideration for reviews and awards.

In terms of trim size, 6 × 9 inches (152 × 229 millimetres) was the norm for early readers/chapter books to middle grade, moving down to 5 × 8 inches (127 × 203 millimetres) for middle grade to YA. While some publishers looked for uniformity with standard formats,

others wanted to make sure the size was appropriate for the target age and was the size the illustrator felt worked for their art.

Starting at an extent of 40 pages for very early readers, to 80–112 pages for the upper end of that bracket (i.e. chapter books), extents could blow out to hundreds of pages, even for a middle-grade graphic novel (e.g. Míriam Bonastre Tur's *Hooky: Volume 1*, for ages 8 plus, at 384 pages). When middle-grade graphic novels eclipsed the 200-page mark, production costs started to rise, making it difficult to reprint and thus keep on the shelves, though YA graphic novels were usually 200–300 pages.

As to orientation, editor Chris Staros noted that 'there's still a trend in comics that portrait-oriented books are just more common than landscape-oriented books. You see some landscape … but mostly you see that when they're doing strip collections and … archival stuff.'

In adult graphic novels, it seemed there were fewer rules when it came to format, which one editor attributed to the variety of art styles. With trim size in adult graphic novels, matching market expectation had to be balanced with executing the artist's vision. For Vedika Khanna, 7 × 10 inches (178 × 254 millimetres) was the largest trim size she'd consider, while at the slightly reduced 6 × 9 inches (152 × 229 millimetres) she sometimes wondered if the book was a bit small and had to ask herself: 'What's going to do the illustrations justice?' While Ten Speed Graphic generally publishes hardcover and paperback simultaneously, some of their memoirs are only in hardback because the 'memoirs we acquire are generally very literary'. This was in direct contrast to Liz Frances, who publishes graphic memoir but so far has only printed paperbacks, because she sees them as more accessible. Frances also mentioned the complexities of changing the trim size of a graphic novel to suit the US market when buying rights: 'It involves a lot of design work because it has to be made smaller and all the text has to fit into a much smaller trim.'

RRPs

While RRPs were tricky to pin down by category, many graphic novels fell into the following broad price points:

- early readers: paperback US$5.99 – US$7.99; hardcover US$14.99 – US$17.99
- middle grade: paperback US$12.99 – US$14.99; hardcover US$21.99 – US$24.99
- YA: paperback US$15.99 – US$18.99; hardcover US$24.99 – US$27.99
- adult: paperback US$14.99 – US$29.99; hardcover US$24.99 – US$49.99.

Of course, the RRP was dependent on many factors, including extent, trim size, use of colour (e.g. full colour vs black-and-white) and cover finishes, but was also heavily determined by what the market could bear. For example, WEBTOON adaptations were thought to be less price-sensitive, with a consumer fan base willing to pay extra for hardcover.

In children's and YA graphic novels, the price point for a paperback graphic novel was often a little lower than the price of a comparative hardcover prose novel for the same age (say, US$16.99 vs US$18.99, for a YA title). This factor could help make graphic novels more attractive to consumers (than prose), especially when we consider that prose novels are generally released as hardcover first, with paperback following a year or two later, and that, according to Brian Geffen, 'production costs have outpaced the ability to increase prices' in the prose market. Publishers of graphic novels can therefore to make a little more financially, although graphic novels were also more expensive than prose novels in the same format (e.g. US$9.99 for a paperback novel vs US$15.99 for a paperback graphic novel, or US$19.99 vs US$24.99 for a hardcover).

There was a general feeling that prices had been relatively stable for a long time but would probably have to increase due to rising costs. The cost of paper has been a big issue. Connie Hsu of Roaring Brook says, 'Our accounts have gotten used to the low price point', which she traces back to the release of Raina Telgemeier's *Smile*, a moderately priced bestseller with the high-volume support of Scholastic book clubs and fairs. With everyone then using *Smile* as a comparison title, they found themselves in a bind, unable to increase their own prices by two or three dollars out of fear accounts wouldn't take their books and readers wouldn't purchase them. But Shana Corey thinks that much-needed change is already here: 'I think across graphic novels I've seen everyone's raising their prices now.'

Whitney Leopard thinks there could be value in re-educating teachers and librarians on the long-term value-per-read that graphic novels offer. 'A lot of times parents think children's books are temporary, because it's only going to last for as long as they're a kid … And so that's probably why they're not willing to put in as much of an investment as an adult book … [But] it's been proven that for kids' graphic novels, they are more likely to read the same graphic novel multiple times, where they will only read a prose book once.'

In the adult graphic novel market, prices varied more widely and could go up to US$49.99 for a high-end graphic novel. When I purchased an adult paperback graphic novel

for US$34.95 at a launch (an eye-watering figure for a paperback when converted back to the Australian dollar!), I asked the bookseller if there was any resistance to such price points for paperback graphic novels – and the answer was a resounding no. However, it's hard to believe that the retail price is not an issue. As Avi Ehrlich says, 'When your print run is under 10,000 copies, it's really hard to have it … be affordable. So, the value proposition of "I'm going to spend 30 dollars on a book that might just take me two or three hours to read" … it's a little bit of a tougher sell.'

Commercial viability

I was surprised to find many editors I spoke with said their P&Ls at acquisitions stage often didn't provide the positive outlook they might have hoped for. While publishers wanted to be realistic, as with all kinds of books, the P&L was only an estimate. Sales were either predicted by the acquiring editor or the sales team (depending on the publisher), and – given the long production timeframe of a graphic novel – this was often many years in advance of publication.

For Emilia Rhodes, the long schedules of the format have, especially in recent years, affected the ability to estimate accurate costs: 'When we signed up some of these books in 2019 and 2020, our supply chain looked really different.'

While graphic novels are expensive to produce, reducing trim size or page count could make a book more profitable. Robyn Chapman says that, at First Second, 'Printing costs are going way up for us … and so one thing I've been doing is encouraging my authors to make [their] books shorter, which is less work for them, especially with a graphic novel. They're so hard to draw. In the past, I'd be more like, you know, 240 pages for middle grade or 300 pages for young adult, but now put it closer to 200 … you can even bulk up the paper to make them look the same [on the shelf].'

However, in good news, many noted that in the children's market, graphic novels were not frontlist driven, and the long tail of the format meant that one publisher I spoke to included sales for the first three years (for the main paperback format of the book) in their P&L projections, rather than a 12-month sales period. Connie Hsu says she has found that graphic novels have 'a different sales arc than other formats, where if a book comes out and has steady sales, those will likely, based on the US market, keep happening for three to five years'.

It’s also important to note that, as stated in *The Power of Comics and Graphic Novels*, ‘many of the independent publishers have financed their more artistic endeavours by relying on the production of more marketable comics books based on popular licensed properties … Fantagraphics has produced books reprinting Charles Schultz’s *Peanuts* strips, and IDW has acquired the rights to the *Star Trek* franchise.’[33] Other publishers could sometimes afford to take risks on more experimental titles through the success – and resulting profits – of their lead titles.

Print runs

When it came to initial print runs, I heard figures ranging from 3500 (for an adult graphic novel) to 100,000 (for an established title in a WEBTOON adaptation series). Several publishers, both big and small, cited 10,000 to 20,000 copies as a solid first print run from which they’d be turning a profit, though as many books don’t sell 10,000 copies then they also need books on their list that are selling more – e.g. 50,000+ copies. One agent told me that if a debut graphic novel broke 10,000 copies in its first year it was considered a success, and that unless a book gained that kind of critical momentum, publishers were literally relying on word of mouth for ongoing sales.

Scheduling

How long does it take to produce a graphic novel? Perhaps there is no sensible answer to such a question. From my research, it seemed schedules could span six months to five years, with a timeframe of two to four years common. Of course, this depends on the content, extent and style of the graphic novel itself. For example, in the I Like To Read Comics series (40 pages per title), each book only requires a year-long production timescale.

While many editors mentioned pushing schedules out when advances weren’t high (meaning that creators were managing a day job alongside producing their graphic novels), there were downsides to this strategy. The often-inflexible printing schedules of graphic novels meant there was no allowance or buffer for anything to go wrong – and, over the period of years it takes to create a graphic novel, things invariably do go wrong. As Della Farrell noted, there were even drawbacks to longer schedules of, say, four years: ‘That amount of time makes me a little nervous just because there’s still so many kind of markers that we have to hit to stay on schedule.’ Even with regular check-ins, schedules could also be set back by new artists who often underestimate the time commitment that various stages of

the graphic novel process require, or creators who ran into health issues, sometimes as a result of their work. While some editors expected creators to do a set number of pages per day, Gina Gagliano suggested that ‘the physicality of graphic novels and making the art [means that] most people can only do a maximum of a page a day’. And Paul Karasik emphasised the importance of reasonable timeframes while noting that ‘giving people deadlines, at the same time, will get the work done’.

When schedules got crunched, if moving the publication date was out of the question, the one clear solution to working more quickly invariably involved money: for example, can we hire someone to do some aspect of the book, such as colouring, to get it onto the shelf on time? In the rare cases that a book was cancelled, advances weren’t generally paid back, especially given that most creators had probably long ago spent that money supporting themselves.

Some publishers placed books in their publishing schedules when the title was acquired, while others had a more cautious approach, waiting until all the final art was in before doing so, and even waiting until internals were complete to launch a book in-house, a year in advance of the publication date. Once the final art was in, a three-month production window was cited to get the files ready for print, and a further six to nine months for a book to hit the stores (to account for shipping, printing and distribution).

Series publishing

In children’s publishing, series were popular – but how were these scheduled? Some publishers planned several years ahead, getting people on board and working early so they’re delivering on a regular schedule. Publishing to a yearly schedule was important for middle-grade series like Dog Man and InvestiGators, with Gina Gagliano saying that a retailer’s mindset is that ‘if you don’t have a book a year, we don’t think this is the kind of commercial series that … should have front-of-store placement’. If a series was scheduled quite tightly like this, schedules for individual books sometimes overlapped, or, for example, while the creator is on tour to promote one book, they may also have been writing the next. Another option for books with a separate writer and illustrator was to alternate illustrators between books. But gaining traction for a series was still difficult, with one agent telling me that retail accounts didn’t take notice of a series until the third book, when they could see that the publisher was invested in continuing the series and making it a success.

While it was hard to break out a series, they were an attractive prospect to parents because if their child was a fan, they could then buy multiple books. Graphic novel readers were, in general, committed. David Levithan says, ‘They won’t abandon the series they’ve grown to love’, such as The Baby-Sitters Club, as even if they’ve moved on to manga, they would still see this as ‘in step with what they’re reading’. The readership also regenerated as children eventually aged out and siblings followed, meaning the first book in a series could be continually promoted.

While some books are pitched clearly as a series and signed in a multi-book deal, other titles arrive as a standalone submission and, if successful, are then turned into a series. This was the case for Kayla Miller, who first published one book, then a second one, then signed a multi-book deal. Miller says, ‘I was lucky in that the first book kind of lent itself to having a lot of characters who were not explored as much, so that in the subsequent books, I could be like, “Oh, like, let’s find out more about these two characters.”’ When Miller first took on the Click series, they did everything themself, but say they quickly realised that approach wasn’t sustainable.

Shana Corey says that if a book is successful, it almost feels like a missed opportunity if you don’t turn it into a series, given that graphic novels are such big undertakings but are read so quickly. She is often thinking about how she might change a standalone title to turn it into a series. For book series she has high hopes for, she usually signs up three to four books, planning for one or two titles per year. While some creators can work to that schedule, for others it’s hard (though of course the page extent of the book is also a factor). One potential solution is to bank books. ‘We’ll say, “Yes, the first one could be ready next year, but we’re going to wait and launch in two years, and then we’re going to come out with three books in a year” – which can work well in the beginning but then, at some point, you catch up and then you’re going to slow down … Of course, then the tricky part of that is, that’s great if it takes off but on the flip side, if that particular one doesn’t take off, you’re four books in.’ Even if book one of a series was successful, there was the inevitable dip when it came to the second title, and even if the book made it onto lists and there were teasers in book one for subsequent titles, sometimes publishers – try as they might – just could not pull the readers through.

Imprints

Graphic novel imprints abound in the US, with new imprints being launched all the time. Brand recognition was important in building lists for a graphic novel imprint, giving buyers

an easy way to identify and purchase graphic novels; this meant that the first books published on new lists at times ended up being ‘sacrifices’ as the list worked to become established and recognised. Targeted branding, and a targeted presence in a bookstore or library were also helpful to make that first connection with a reader, so that when someone picks up a book it’s recognisable to them in some way.

Whitney Leopard says Random House Graphic was launched, despite Random House already publishing graphic novels, because ‘we find in our market, it’s easier for people to get behind something if they have something specific to get behind, which is why having a dedicated graphic novel imprint or dedicated graphic novel branding can really help get your book out there because if people pick up a book … they’re like, “Oh, I know that I can trust a certain quality of book from this space.”’

Building on existing brands was one way to capitalise on this connection, as with the I Like To Read Comics series, which built on the I Like To Read series and associated branding with a tweak to the existing logo. Della Farrell also pointed out that being involved in a branded series was ‘a great opportunity for artists whether they’re just starting out in the industry or for veteran creators who are looking for like a project that … [is] going to be something short and sweet.’

List planning

List planning, given the long production timelines of graphic novels, could extend many years ahead. For example, at one imprint I was told the list was planned to the end of 2028, with a full list of around 15 titles per year leaving little room for new acquisitions.

While there is a voracious demand in the market for new titles, lists could also be limited given sales teams can only effectively sell-in so many titles at a time. In the US, most houses have three main seasons they publish into – winter (January to April), summer (May to August) and fall (September to December) – and all books are launched for the season at once. With graphic novel sales soaring during the pandemic, many publishers acquired heavily; given the long production cycle, these books are only now, according to agent Janna Morishima, ‘coming out on the market and there’s a glut’. One editor believed that accounts’ overfamiliarity with the format and the surfeit of books on offer is becoming an issue: ‘The account people are not reading every book. They’re doing a quick flip through and I think that’s why graphic novels were working so well before, because it was so easy to get. You’re like, “Oh, okay, it’s two-colour or it’s full-colour, and it’s about this, and this is the image”,

and it was easy for people to pitch and maybe it was more of a kind of a novel idea back then. Whereas now, if they've got a glut of them, it's like they all start looking the same, in a way.'

At other publishers, quantity wasn't a problem. There was so much pressure on high-volume lists that some thought the quality was lacking and books inevitably got lost on the list.

Complicating planning ahead meant that it became inevitable that every time a publisher set their list, something would happen (e.g. a creator hurting their wrist), and the list would then need to be rebalanced.

Shana Corey also spoke about the importance of building a solid backlist 'because it's so expensive to do the frontlist'. With backlist support, they could then take chances on frontlist titles and publish one-off books in the hopes they would go on to become backlist titles.

Expectations of colour

Given the breadth of possibilities when it came to use of colour (or lack thereof) in graphic novels, I was curious to know whether these decisions were artist-led or editor-led. However, I soon discovered that colour choices were based largely on market expectations and firmly tied to the age level of the target audience.

For early reader graphic novels – such as Narwhal and Jelly, and Pizza and Taco – readers expected full colour. But Disney-Hyperion's Rachel Stark noted that the black-and-white format does work for early reader illustrated books or comic hybrids like The Bad Guys, a category a lot of people are now publishing into.

For middle grade, everyone agreed that the convention was it had to be coloured. 'It used to be that colour was viewed as something extra, whereas now black and white is viewed as something lacking,' observes David Levithan.

In YA, there was more room to be creative with use of colour. YA books might be black and white, duotone, have spot colour throughout or use a limited palette. Printing one colour in Pantone is an affordable domestic printing option, and Connie Hsu recommended this: 'So then you have the gradation, you can lend some really nice texture and dimension to the art. It boosts it a little bit. The first book that I know of that did that, that reached the market on a big scale, was *This One Summer*.'

Yet one agent said that while many YA graphic novels have a limited palette there was marketing and sales resistance to black and white, and that genre titles tended to be full

colour. Stacy Whitman (founder, publisher and editor, Tu Books, an imprint of Lee & Low) has published YA books in black and white but cautioned against doing this for all types of stories. ‘I think it really depends on what story you’re choosing to tell as well. Because if you’re doing a fantasy story that has a lot of special effects, for example, it might be harder to tell in black and white, versus a realistic story where it can be more spare in visual detail because it’s a medium that people understand and know the setting.’

However, publishing in black and white was not a deal-breaker for US publishers when buying rights from overseas, as they could invest in a colourist to produce their edition. Examples of this at Scholastic US include added colour to *Stars in Their Eyes* by Jessica Walton and Aśka, originally published in black and white in Australia, and making Heartstopper titles two-colour to add some sophistication, given this colour option has proven successful in the US YA market.

Overall there were very few black-and-white graphic novels in the children’s space. Given the rich tradition of comics being printed in both black and white and duotone, one editor stressed that so much of the graphic novel experience was about the storytelling, meaning you didn’t necessarily need a rich four-colour experience every time. The rising influence of manga – almost always printed in black and white, and likely read by YA graphic novel readers – and the popularity of black-and-white comic hybrids for middle-grade readers meant there was more room for conversation around black-and-white printing for future books, especially given the cost savings associated with the reduction in colour.

In the adult space, four-colour printing wasn’t necessarily expected but, as one publisher told me, they mostly print in full colour as it’s more appealing.

Editing

When it came to editing graphic novels, what I most wanted to learn was: how did this differ from editing prose novels and illustrated fiction? I soon learned that much of the process hinged on how creators worked, who was involved in the creative process, and what the schedule looked like. As editors in the US commonly acquire titles, 'editing' in this section refers to developmental and structural work, as well as line editing and project editing, though some editors also mentioned copyediting as part of their editorial process.

The editorial process

The process of editing graphic novels was different for every book, just as it is for every prose or illustrated book. Paul Karasik stressed that 'it's very important to start out with an agreed plan of editing and expectation', including a plan for revisions. He believes that 'a creator and editor must build trust. It is not automatic but the project will not succeed without it.' He added: 'I think that you want to have as much editorial involvement as the artist feels comfortable with as early on as possible.' This is particularly important with a graphic novel, as giving feedback at later stages invariably results in more (unnecessary) work for the creator.

Single vs multiple creators

Many publishers mentioned preferring to work with a single creator (i.e. an author–illustrator) as they felt this made the process somewhat easier; they only needed to provide feedback to one person, and it was less expensive to pay one creator. Many people also mentioned the notion that the single 'auteur's' vision was inherently stronger.

David Saylor (vice president and creative director, Scholastic Trade Publishing Group; founder and publisher, Graphix) says, 'With graphic novels it's just really finding that alchemy of a great artist and a great topic … And often, we've been focused on creator-driven works, meaning the artist and the writer are the same person.'

Yet a single creator with all the necessary skills is not easy to find. As Top Shelf's Chris Staros explains, 'You can spend your whole life trying to be a good artist, you can spend your whole life trying to be a good writer', but with graphic novels the difficulty lies in being able 'to do both and then to be able to be a visual storyteller too, where [the story] moves along

the page and also to be able to juxtapose ideas as well'. He says, 'that's what makes comics so hard. That's what makes these people so talented.' He also believes a single creator can make a book more profitable, rather than hiring multiple creators to piece a project together:

> What we try to do is find people who are basically cartoonists, who write and draw stuff, so you're dealing with a single vision. It gets very expensive if you start trying to do assembly-line work where you hire a writer and then you hire an artist and you hire a letterer and you hire a colourist and you hire a designer. At that point, your book is going to be in the red because all those people need to be paid competent wages for their work and now your book's only going to sell *x* number of copies and then you're never going to get out of it.
>
> But oftentimes you can pay an advance to a creator who has a vision for their work but they're going to write and draw it anyway. You get them what you think you can afford for the project and then they're in it for the back end as well as that front end.

Agent Daniel Lazar leans more to solo creators who both write and illustrate their own work, though it's not a rule; he has signed up two graphic novels from prose writers he had previously worked with. Lazar and the writers had found illustrators, written up collaboration agreements, and gone to publishers with their pitch. This wasn't necessarily the norm, however, as some of Lazar's colleagues do work with artists only.

While some publishers were prepared to pair artists with writers, or acquire script-only projects and then find an artist, others found this too great a challenge for the majority of projects. 'It's difficult, and a very heavy lift, to find the right collaborators for such a long-form project,' says Andrea Colvin, though she does 'make exceptions for high-profile authors or stories (such as memoir) that have to be told by that writer'.

In some US houses, the job of finding the right artist could fall to designers, who would then liaise with the illustrator throughout the whole process, giving them feedback on the art and checking their revisions.

Artist availability could be a roadblock, with Bob Bianchini (assistant director Art/Design, Random House Graphic) saying, 'Graphic novels take a considerable amount of an artist's time from start to finish. We often find someone who would be a great fit for a project, but they can already be booked up years in advance. Or they're available to work on one book, but unable to commit to working on an entire series.'

Collaborations were also more labour intensive. According to April Ward (executive art director, Penguin Random House), the books with sole creators 'do tend to be a little less time consuming because the author gets to make decisions while they're making the art. They're the ones who know that the art is accurate and matches the text. Oftentimes when we're hiring artists separately, the process can be more time consuming because the author may have a lot of notes for revision. They might envision the characters or environments differently than how the artist has interpreted the text. Because of this, it can take longer to get everybody on the same page.'

A single creator can also make less work for the designer in that the interiors are delivered in a more finished form. The designer's role then is essentially helping to package the book, art-directing covers, and developing any kind of author or series branding, all in consultation with the creator.

Writers new to the graphic novel format may be unsure of what to expect in terms of giving feedback to an illustrator, invariably funnelled through the editor, showing once again the importance of setting up expectations at the outset. However if Levine Querido's Nick Thomas works with a team, he often lets them communicate freely as it creates a feeling of teamwork and 'that's led to really wonderful things'.

Kayla Miller also believes in the value of close collaboration. 'I find that … some publishers seem to want to keep people separate. And I think it's so hard to work that way. If you're working on something where you're so close to it, you want the other people to be close to it too, but … it should be a collaboration. It shouldn't just be like you're farming out different parts of the job to different people, and like those people never shall meet. So, I talk to my colourist all the time.'

Paul Karasik 'won't collaborate with someone who doesn't have the book's best interest in mind'. To collaborate, he says you need to be willing to concede and 'willing to recognise what's best for the book'.

How creators work

Many editors spoke of being flexible when it came to working out the editorial process with creators, given creators themselves like to work in different ways. One author might be quite prescriptive in terms of art notes for the illustrator in the script, while another may give very spare art notes; a creator may go from script to sketches at scale, rather than thumbnails, but

is happy to rip up any pages up that aren't working, while another artist starts with thumbnails because it doesn't make sense to them to even write a script.

Publishers often had a kick-off call, in which they discussed with creators what their process was so that they could work within it. For subsequent books this could turn into a discussion on what worked last time, and what might be done differently. Designers and art directors were often present, to make sure the technical aspects were set up correctly at the outset.

Whitney Leopard says, 'Everyone works in a different way … What matters the most to me is … if it's fitting the schedule … and then also as long as the [creator] is aware that if they do something that's very heavy art at the beginning, I will have expectations for them to make art changes, because if I haven't been able to give feedback or work with them on the art, then there'll probably be notes. As long as we're all on the same page and we all have set expectations, then basically, I'm pretty open to an artist working in any way that they want.'

For creator Jarad Greene, planning is crucial, before even thumbnails, because 'it can be a lot harder if I just started drawing the pages and then all of a sudden, it's like, "What does the next page look like?" Or if it's going to end in a weird spot … If I'm planning it out ahead of time, I think, "Do I want there to be chapter breaks, do I want a scene to end on a double-page spread or do I want there to be a page turn?" All of those things can be really helpful to plan out in the early stages.'

David Levithan also says that the way that he edits varies depending on the creator. Sometimes it's about getting the script right first; for one creator who was a visual thinker, Levithan didn't edit anything until he had the whole book, though he did get instalments from the creator to check the book was on track.

Stages of the editorial process

So, what might the typical stages of a graphic novel edit look like? An editor will first receive the pitch, which is usually an outline and sample art. Once the book is acquired, and based on an editorial letter providing feedback on the outline (if needed), the editor might receive an updated outline, followed by a script that includes panel descriptions and dialogue. After giving feedback on the script, the process rolls on: thumbnails follow, then pencils, then inks, then letters (typesetting), then colours last.

Of course, there are many variations on what an editor might request and/or receive. Importantly, and just as in editing any kind of a book, different kinds of editorial feedback would be appropriate at different stages of the process – you wouldn't give detailed notes about word choice in a single sentence or fix stray commas in a structural edit of a prose novel, for example. At script stage you might give feedback on character development, pacing and dialogue, as well as checking that art notes are clear if these are notes from an author to an illustrator. Thumbnails will be your first chance to check how well the story is working visually – and there are a lot of elements to look at here, such as panel design, page turns, balloon placement. In pencils you will be checking details that are only now coming to life, including facial expressions and consistency in characters, props, scenes and backgrounds. By inking stage you should only be checking for any fine details you might have missed in an earlier round. Lettering is the time to ensure that your text is clear and legible, that there is no confusion around the reading order, and that all the correct styles and fonts have been used. By colours, you should be looking only at the overall palette, and for consistency in character design and props, while remembering to check that what's shown on the page corresponds to any notes in the text regarding colour.

There was a lot of discussion about the optimal time to copyedit the script. While some editors had the script itself copyedited, they found by the time the book was inked, the artist had often made small changes (e.g. turning one panel into two) that meant the copyedited script no longer matched the layout of the pages, causing confusion – and an extra round of edits – before lettering could take place. Marisa Finkelstein (senior production editor, Little, Brown and Company) combats this issue by making the 'final copyedited document … a living document rather than a finite document' meaning the manuscript 'can be finetuned by the editor to match any changes in text and story beats as the creator (whether an author-artist or just an artist) continues to work on the story during the thumbnailing or pencilling stage'. The copyedited manuscript is then, at all times, an accurate reference for a separate illustrator or a letterer.

Stacy Whitman says that, after much experimentation, she's decided the best practice for copyediting is 'a cold read by the copyeditor of the lettered art pages either in pencils or inks' so you still have time to ask for revisions before final art comes in. She explains this is 'because you want them to be able to do a cold read and make sure that they understand what's going on. So, it's not just about the consistency, sometimes it's about the "I just turned the page and I feel like we skipped something" – you know, that kind of gap – and the "I

don't understand what's going on in this panel."' If you're only editing the script 'you're only doing half the story' and may not notice inconsistencies in the visuals (e.g. a missing logo on a T-shirt from page to page) or character-design flaws like a character's appearance changing in some way halfway through, but 'of course you want the editor to catch as many of those as possible long before it gets to copyediting'.

Others editor – if creators worked this way – mentioned copyediting text placed on pencil sketches, as well as providing art note feedback before a book was inked.

One editor told me they like to copyedit before text is laid out so errors aren't being introduced to the pages, because 'as it happens, sometimes they just stay'. They often find creators work on thumbnails and script in conjunction, but 'before they move on to pencils, I really always want to make sure that the script is as close to final as possible [as] I think it can be really challenging for an artist to have to rethink a whole scene, if they've moved on to pencils or later stages, if something turns out to not be working in the script'. Thumbnails – while a critical stage for some artists – were seen as less useful for an editor; the size and rough nature of the drawings in the panels meant it could sometimes be hard to even tell what was happening. One editor mentioned a creator who went straight from thumbnails to inks without pasting in their text, but made it work.

Brian Geffen trims dialogue early if he knows it won't fit into the panel. So much will change in the script by the time the book is laid out, however, and Geffen says it is more important to see the whole package on the page: 'I feel like I'm not really entering the editing until I'm looking at the art alongside [the text] for spacing and pacing and all of these kinds of things. And sometimes … there's dialogue I'm on the fence about and when I see it, sometimes it lands really well with the art, and sometimes I'm like, "You know, my first instinct was right. We need to change this."'

Kayla Miller receives feedback every step of the way but says 'the script actually tends to get a little bit less feedback than the outline because it's just changing dialogue, while the outline edits focus on the story beats and character development'. When it comes to pencils, they say, 'Occasionally there'll be feedback and it's usually pretty minor. It's maybe something about [how] a character's facial expression could be pushed a little bit more or something like an action is unclear. But it's rarely anything substantial because the story was really ironed out in the writing stages.'

Editing illustrations

As an experienced editor of picture books and illustrated books, there was one question I was still grappling with: how does one edit the illustrative aspect of graphic novels? And how do editors avoid imposing their own aesthetic proclivities on creators? Much like in editing prose, Andrea Colvin says it's a matter of understanding the artist's 'voice'. 'The thing that I try to remember most … is that it's not my book. It's their book. So, it's my job to understand the story they're trying to tell and the voice that they're using to tell it, and then let them know when they're not doing it clearly. I think of my job as clarity overall.' Rather than unnecessarily disrupting an artist's visual language (e.g. suggesting a different panel composition), an editor can point out what might be confusing or isn't working (e.g. not understanding someone's reaction or what they're reacting to, too many beats/drawn-out action). Let the artist bring their own creativity to solving the problem by asking them if there's a way they can make it work better.

Several editors counselled against editing graphic novels as though they were other formats. For example, in a picture book, one might strive for perfection on each page, but a 300-page graphic novel may not require the same level of finesse and feedback in terms of the illustrations.

Similarly, feedback on art notes (i.e. what will be illustrated/shown in the panels) at script stage is not always beneficial as the editor is often projecting what something *might* look like, and the illustrations invariably turn out differently. Feedback should be weighted towards the thumbnails and pencils stages. By the time pages are inked, though, there really should be very few comments as everyone has reviewed the pages multiple times. Ideally at colours stage, there is even less feedback, unless the colours themselves aren't working. If a separate colourist is involved, it's ideal to send a sample of pages (e.g. a few chapters) to the artist to check if they have any feedback or tweaks. Art directors also were often involved in giving these types of notes on the illustrations.

Jarad Greene spoke about working with his editor at HarperAlley, Andrew Arnold. 'Because he's a cartoonist, he has an interesting perspective … so he'll point things out like "the angle that you've like chosen to draw this area – it's a little confusing". Or "this person's face is being obscured – I want to see their face more, make their face bigger" or whatever the case may be. It can be really technical like that and I'm very open to the feedback so I think that helps, especially when it's thumbnails and it's still so malleable'. Arnold also

provides feedback on elements like the panel design and page flow 'and it's interesting getting that feedback too, because you shift one page and that shifts everything, so a lot of times I have to think in terms of two or four pages so that if I have planned for a page turn or double-page spread … everything is still going to fit together.'

Robyn Chapman says: 'We get involved pretty early in the creative process … Sometimes a finished graphic novel comes to us. But usually it's a pitch, and so we can work on those early stages, like a detailed outline, a script or thumbnails. A lot of our creators who are artists might do thumbnails instead of a script. Some do both. But as long as there's that early phase, where you can read the book and give meaningful feedback without asking [for] a lot of reworking from the artist, that's really the important part.'

Chapman also spoke to how art training or relevant illustration experience helped with the editing process. She notes that many of the team at First Second are creators themselves; First Second's editorial and creative director, Mark Siegel, is also a graphic novelist. 'So we understand how much labour goes into redrawing a page. We understand that it shouldn't be an easy ask,' Chapman adds. 'If we can make those edits early, once the final art comes in usually there's not too much we have to edit.'

At one house, managing editorial would also sometimes do an art check, looking at character consistency and ensuring nothing infringed on copyright (e.g. including a trademarked Campbell's soup can), that there was no fuzz in the files (especially a problem if creator has been working with a stylus), that eye lines make sense for what's happening in any given scene, and that nothing is too close to the page gutter or edges.

Proofreading and style guides

Proofreading usually happens once a book has been lettered (and may be read against the script), sometimes with no colour and/or later with colour. Some publishing houses mentioned multiple stages of internal routing/checks with managing editorial and/or design. The pandemic brought a switch to digital routing of in-house files, a permanent change for some, which has resulted in a reduction in printing in-house overall.

At some houses, designers take in corrections, on instruction from the editor. Marisa Finkelstein said that in addition to adhering to usual book style they use a style guide for graphic novels to keep things consistent, e.g. how to treat ellipses across balloons, and says that 'whatever [is] the predominant style of the market is kind of what we follow'. Once a

book has been coloured there was some resistance to making substantial changes, as this also brought the risk of introducing more errors.

In terms of what a proofreader might correct in the illustrations, Andrea Colvin says, ‘Managing editorial and I really had to kind of work together to figure out what made sense and what didn’t. For instance, you know if a person has stripes on their shirt and then in another panel they’re really far away and you can only see two of the stripes? Proofreaders will say, “This shirt has four stripes.” But now we’re far away so we can’t discern the stripes. I just try to remember … that comics are representational. They’re not photographs. They’re not meant to be like a diagram.’

Other approaches to editing

While many editors, and certainly all involved in the publishing of children’s and YA graphic novels, spoke of rigorous editorial processes, some publishers of adult graphic novels didn’t seem so hands-on with the editing process, and I did hear of creators who were more reliant on out-of-house editorial input. Eleri Harris said she has been brought in to work on graphic novels when ‘the artist felt like they weren’t getting the support they wanted from the publisher but also when publishers have been aware that their editors need support too’. Tom Hart said, ‘I was surprised that [for] the two books I did with a big publisher, which was my memoir [*Rosalie Lightning*] and then *The Art of the Graphic Memoir*, I got little editing,’ though he believes this is chiefly because he gave the publisher books that were ‘along the lines of what they hoped for’. David Saylor told me that when he first started working with some previously published creators from the indie comics world, they were very eager for feedback as they hadn’t really had that before.

Some put this perceived lack of editorial support for adult graphic novels down to the publisher believing in the artist’s vision or, conversely, not understanding what a creator wanted to do. Others attribute it to the vast size of the publisher’s list, meaning there simply wasn’t time to edit everything.

Creator Briana Loewinsohn says Fantagraphics ‘really are in the business of printing art books. They believe in their artists. They believe in printing the artist’s vision.’ Simon Hanselmann agreed, but said while Fantagraphics is artist-driven, editors were available when needed to help creators.

Chris Staros cautions against a light-handed approach. He's heavily involved in story editing – and if and when it's necessary, he might do up to nine rounds on a script, or several rounds of thumbnails, to get them right:

> Then, at some point when we're both happy with it, then they can just go to inks and colours and we don't have to worry at that stage that the book's not going to be good. We know it's going to be good. So, we'd spend a lot of time … Some other companies don't, because they're like, 'the artist wears an ascot and a beret and their vision is sacrosanct and just let it be what it is'. I tend to think that we should be the quiet voice in the room that helps them get a little bit better because they're sometimes too close to their own work to know what's working and what's not working.

Editorial support and training

Only one publisher I spoke to mentioned working with freelance editors, who were paid a flat fee, though the publisher managed schedules and also weighed in on every round of script, sketches and art. Another mentioned the luxury of an in-house copyediting team.

Some houses had the support of a managing editor team. Marisa Finkelstein said that, in this role, 'I feel like I'm the stage manager where I don't want to be seen. I'm wearing all black. I'm just kind of setting the scene. I'm telling you when to go … on stage. But the editor is the director and then the actors are the author.'

When it came to learning the art of graphic novel editing, Andrea Colvin says, 'I think most of us get our experience just by watching other people do it, and then forming our own editing strategies and philosophies.' Whitney Leopard agrees that the skills could largely be acquired in-house but said graphic novel editors came from a variety of backgrounds: 'I think it helps to have experience and education in the format that you're editing, but a lot of it can be learned on the job as you start out as an assistant. My background in comics is definitely a strength, and my education – with a sequential art degree, learning how to actually make comics – has been a huge help to my career as a graphic novel editor. But it doesn't have to be the path for everyone and, in fact, I would say most editors come from a writing background instead of art.'

Extra tips for editing graphic novels

- When working with multiple creators, Vedika Khanna works in batches to keep things moving and on schedule. 'It's different from editing prose because with prose you

have your manuscript and you edit it. You go back and forth with the author and that's it,' she explains. 'The graphic novels, I'm often working in batches, just to help expedite the process. So … we were working on the script with the author, but the first three chapters are done. So, I get those chapters to the illustrator. So, the illustrator can get started while I work on chapter four through whatever. And then I batch things over, the illustrator's batching things back to me … that's just to keep the process moving.'

- Brian Geffen says, 'One of the things that I feel firmly about is that art should do as much of the work as possible and only using text and dialogue and narration as the supplement.' He cautions against editing in a way not suited to the format: 'I come from a prose background, and I really had to make sure I'm not going to be [the] prose editor encroaching on this territory and trying to apply the same sort of techniques.'
- Eleri Harris agrees, saying you should make sure you don't think about it in terms of editing prose, where you can 'take out a paragraph and it's not going to impact the flow of the rest of the book'.
- It's a common trap for creators to fall into overusing captions. 'I am often counselling people who are doing books for kids, "I might just take out all of your captions and then only put back the ones that you absolutely need,"' says Andrea Colvin. 'Because I think people – particularly if there is a separate artist and a writer, but sometimes if it's the same person – try to tell the story in captions. And then they're just using these images with some dialogue to kind of illustrate the story. But the story has to be told through the images. Like if you think of it being a movie, you wouldn't want the movie to be all voiceover.'
- For editing WEBTOON adaptations, it's most efficient to proofread after lettering. As for copyediting, Emilia Rhodes says, 'We had to hire someone to go through and create a script that is just a Word document with the text of the bubbles in the order in which they appear on the webcomic, so that we can copy and paste and carry that over. So, we were copyediting just that straight document to catch any typos or issues.' However, given that the creator often rewrites much of the text as the print (rather than vertical) layout changes the story, she did question whether copyediting at that stage was the best use of time and resources.

- Paul Karasik wisely advises: 'Graphic novels have their own language and if someone wants to become a graphic novel editor it behooves them to study that language by reading as many graphic novels as possible, particularly those outside one's interest and existing knowledge. Read the classics.'

Editing graphic novels for the first time

If you've reached the end of this section and you're still confused about how to edit a graphic novel, you're probably not alone. As I've detailed, there are many different approaches. Don't lose heart – with most graphic novels, there is the chance for an editor to engage in significant developmental work with creators, which can be very rewarding (and fun!). So what's my advice for those jumping into editing a graphic novel for the first time?

- A graphic novel is made up of many parts, including panels, captions, sound effects, speech balloons, and emanata (pictorial elements that appear to emanate from a character or object and express something, such as movement or emotion, e.g. question marks around a character's head to show confusion). While an editor doesn't necessarily need to know this terminology to edit a graphic novel, using it can make communicating with creators and designers easier. So it's worth learning and employing these terms when giving feedback.
- Graphic novels involve an incredible amount of work. At the outset of a project, it's important to talk to your creator/s about their process for working; find out what the creator/s will provide (e.g. will they provide thumbnails or go straight to pencils?); discuss your plan for editing and revisions with the creator/s so you can work out the best time to give different kinds of feedback (e.g. providing structural notes on the outline, giving comments on facial expressions once you reach pencils); plan to provide the bulk of your feedback towards the start of the process – the longer you wait to give feedback the more labour-intensive any changes will be; set a realistic schedule (ideally with a buffer for when things go wrong!).
- Talk to your designer once a project has been acquired to discuss the production process and any potential hiccups. Consider getting test proofs of a sample of the colour art before the bulk of the colouring is done to ensure the colour will print as the creator envisions it.

- And while we’re taking about samples: if you’re working with a new creator, consider asking for a sample at some or all stages of the project so you can provide initial feedback (and encouragement!), and also see how the project is tracking in terms of the schedule.
- Create a house style guide for graphic novels, if you don’t already have one, that you can then adapt for any other graphic novels you work on.
- Considering hiring a specialist freelancer to give feedback at the early stages of a graphic novel, for example at script and/or pencils, if you’re not feeling confident yourself. At the tail end of the project, a specialist proofreader will also know what to look out for when reviewing pages to catch any fine details you may have missed.

Finally, remember that as well as applying your usual skills of editing for different age groups and in different genres, you’ll also be grappling with how to edit in a format which uses the (perhaps unfamiliar) language, rules and conventions of comics – no small task for an overburdened editor. Editing graphic novels is a learning curve.

Creative roles within graphic novel production

While some projects began with multiple creators, other roles sometimes became necessary along the way, with some houses budgeting at the outset for potentially hiring a colourist or letterer at a later stage (one cost range I heard for this was US$7500 to $15,000). Illustrators' contract negotiations sometimes included the proviso that the publisher would hire assistance for the artist; at other times an illustrator might hire people for these tasks directly without involvement from the publisher, paying them from their own advance. In the greater comics industry, many of these roles have historically been on a work-for-hire basis (i.e. a flat fee and no royalties), a tradition that carries over to trade publishing.

Inkers

Inkers traditionally work with brushes and ink, and Andrew Pepoy (inker; comic book writer and artist) says a good inker should always be thinking about what is going to make the pencil look its best. Inking is one job that doesn't seem to be freelanced often in graphic novels, however, and at the panel 'The Forgotten Trio: Colorists, Inkers and Letterers' at 2023's San Diego Comic-Con, Pepoy said, 'If you are hoping to be an inker, don't' – referring to the lack of available roles today in this profession (in the comics industry).

Kayla Miller says, 'Since I'm working from my own sketches and I try to get those as clean as possible, by the time I get to inking, I'm just kind of tracing over the sketches and adding some more details.'

As well as adding details, an inker may shade the pencil sketch, for example, changing a scene from day to night. If a penciller had gone into too much detail, it can sometimes stifle the creativity of an inker, making the work look less lively, as inking can be considered as an interpretation of the pencil sketch.

Flatters

A common task to farm out was flatting, the first laborious, technical step in colouring. Flatting involves selecting each object on the page and filling it with a flat colour that the colourist can later alter. Beth Sotelo (colourist and graphic novelist) explained the process:

> You take the artist's line art and you do a lasso around all the shapes, like around the face, around the hair, around the eyes, the pupil, the iris – or whatever is there – [and] the lips. And you put flat colour in there and you copy and paste it into a flat channel. That way, if I ever have to go into rendering the hair, I could just select that shade of grey in the channels and then it's already selected in the colour file. You just keep working on it. It takes a long time. It's really tedious. So, I think one of the first things people do is hire somebody to do that.

Colourists

Many moons ago I had a job that required me to digitally colour in the black-and-white Bristow cartoon that would then appear in the printed version of *The Age.* Was I, in fact, a colourist – before I even knew such a role existed?

In the US, colourists were commonly hired to helped illustrators out when schedules were crunched, and separating this process was much more efficient when it came to publishing series. A colourist's job is to colour and render the flatted selections, sliding these colours underneath the layer of black line art (inks). At one imprint I was told that when a colourist is used, they are asked to make a guide with a focus on skin tones and clothing to ensure the whole team is on the same page. Hiring an outside colourist was not without risks, as a lot of illustrative elements can be left open to interpretation – for example, time of day or season (in one case, a colourist completed the whole book with a summery landscape before being told the book was set in autumn). While it was common for there to be no communication between a colourist and the artist, with the colourist completing the job and then getting feedback, some publishers preferred that the creator manage the colourist, and in one case a publisher mentioned a creator whose assistant did the colouring alongside them.

So how important is the role of the colourist? Kayla Miller says, 'I do think colour, to me anyway, really is important to tell the story because it sets the mood and it says something about characters' personalities based on what colour outfits they're wearing.' Their close relationship with their colourist means open communication and reviewing of work in progress, which sometimes involves colour corrections, rather than looking at the whole thing at the end. They say, 'Imagine if you were making a movie, and the director never talked to the DOP [director of photography]. You would have a mess.'

Beth Sotelo says, of her role as a colourist:

> Creatively, what I'm supposed to be doing is adding mood to these pages. You could completely publish a comic in black and white. Manga does it all day long. What I do is add that ambience, some mood, some danger … That's what colourists bring … just a little bit of extra drama. And then sometimes it helps story-wise too, because maybe the penciller didn't call as much attention as they should have to an object in the background or a person or something of interest. A colourist can give it a real sharp point of light or bright colour to kind of get the reader to focus where they should be focusing. So, it's a little bit of just making it pretty or moody. And sometimes … we have a job to try to guide the eye around if the artist kind of lacked in that particular panel.

Letterers

Lettering was another process that was often farmed out – either to an in-house designer or a freelance letterer, who would also sometimes create balloons. A common process was for the creator to provide pencil roughs with hand-lettered type, which also gave the creator a good idea of how much space to allow for the type. Designers might choose three or four spreads to try different type samples (font and size). There was no set standard as to whether they used all caps or a mix of upper and lower case; this was dependent on the book and personal preference. One editor mentioned that they felt all caps were more readable and tied back to original comic books.

The pencil roughs with type were a handy resource to pass on to the letterer, who could then follow this as a template. Without this, the script needs to be keyed to each panel so that the letterer isn't left to interpret what goes where. Some houses also style a script so that the letterer will know if something is a text message, for example – also useful knowledge for the copyeditor in certain cases (e.g. text messages don't have to be grammatically correct). While the script should make things clear for a letterer, confusion can still reign with multiple characters who look similar if it isn't made clear where each character is positioned.

Good lettering should lead your eye panel to panel, but when it comes to guidelines for how to letter, they seemed to vary by person. Some liked the middle line to be longest, with shorter lines above and below. But the reading experience trumped the 'look' of the text, and words were moved around if the text didn't read well. Speech balloons or even characters sometimes have to be switched for the text to be read in the correct order. If an author is

inexperienced, they may try to put too much text on the page, rather than thinking of how things can be told visually.

When it came to fonts, Maria Hoey said, ‘We have a few typefaces that we like and that we’ve come to love using (which creates a nice consistency). Readability is important and it has to be harmonious with the art – but beyond that I think it’s an individual choice.’ While some publishers encouraged use of fonts, others felt it was the author’s prerogative if they wished to hand-letter, noting only that the text needed to ideally be on a separate layer if they sold rights. Creators mentioned that hand-lettering involved precision and repetition, which could lead to injuries. The best-practice solution to this was the creation of a font from their own handwriting, made by sending a sampling of every letter (in upper case, lower case, bold, etc.) to a composition house. As Whitney Leopard says, ‘Using a font, whether it’s a handwritten font that you’ve created or if it’s a font that you’ve chosen that your publisher already … owns the rights to, can make life easier for everyone involved because then we can handle all the copyediting in-house and all that other stuff.’ If a book is typeset in-house then designers take in changes to the text, whereas if it’s hand-lettered then the artist needs to take on this role.

This wasn’t always the case, though. One creator mentioned taking in their own corrections, despite using their own hand-lettered font, which meant sending giant packaged files back and forth. Given publishers sell files without fonts, which are rights protected, one publisher mentioned that their creators are responsible for making their own font and then licensing it (back to that publisher).

When the text is based on someone’s handwriting, one editor mentioned they thought it better for the creators to letter the book themselves, rather than having a designer do this, as they have a stronger emotional attachment to how the type should look.

Bubble artists

I was again surprised when I learned that the role of ‘bubble artist’ existed. How’s that for a niche job? One publisher told me they hired bubble artists, who initially worked on the shape of the bubble and the placement, then later on the tail. While a common pitfall for illustrators was not allowing enough space for bubbles, at other times the creator made the bubbles too big.

Graphic novelist Jarad Greene says some people do their balloons digitally at the end, which looks nice and neat but is not his approach. 'I play with the shape of the word balloon. I like messing with the tail. I feel like the tail can have a lot of personality in the way something is being said or if there's some sort of hesitation … in the character's voice. If the tail's … wavering a little bit, it kind of adds something to it.'

Kayla Miller has someone put the bubbles in, but does the tails themself: 'I've got all these internal rules about how the tails need to be placed. Some things don't necessarily bother me if I'm reading a comic someone else made, but bug me if I see them on my own pages – and others can affect readability, especially for young readers or people who are new to graphic novels. I like the tails to go pretty close to the mouth and always point to the head and the mouth.' They also have rules about how the bubbles should sit alongside the art:

> I never want the bubbles to overlap anybody's head. If it comes to that, I'm just going to make the character a little bit smaller so their head doesn't bump it … And now with technology, it's easy enough to just edit the art … I try to avoid overlapping the body … don't overlap any limbs.
>
> I talk to a lot of kids and that's one of the things I always talk about. Like, have you ever turned the page and you either don't know which character's speaking or you don't know which bubble you're supposed to refer to? All of them raise their hands. And we talked about: why does that happen, how can you avoid it, and how I try to avoid it in my work.

Placement of bubbles, says Miller, is important for 'readability and flow where we're going left to right, up to down. Sometimes, I think, people will forgo those rules in favour of not having to move the art around. I think it's always worth [it] – even if it's a little bit of a time suck – to go back and change the art. It's worth it to not confuse the readers.'

Design and production

Design

In-house designers and art directors were often involved in the production of graphic novels, though the extent and timing of their involvement varied from house to house and book to book. At some houses the design team was involved from the outset with an introductory call with the creator to discuss file-management systems, and available resources like templates and font options – and to find out what program the artist was using.

As well as giving technical notes (e.g. being mindful of the gutter), designers can ensure creators are working in proportion to the book's trim size (say, if they need to scale down), with proper margins and bleed; that the layers are set up correctly; that they are working in spreads for pencils; and that they are pasting in text as they go to ensure there's enough space for it.

Designers may see the thumbnails, or start giving feedback on art at pencil-sketch stage, or start working on a book as late as final-art stage (inks, letters and colours), when they import the files into InDesign, make corrections and review pages. In some cases a creator might take on the bulk of the design work as part of their process, though designers would step in to aid with cover design and file packaging.

Some designers took on a project-management role, as Penguin Random House's executive art director April Ward explains: 'We've had some cases where we've hired separate artists, letterers, and a separate person to do colour. Then the designer is responsible for bringing all the pieces together and making the final revisions. It can be more time consuming to do a process with that many contributors.'

In terms of art checks, Random House Graphic's assistant art/design director Bob Bianchini said, 'I think one of the biggest challenges we face with graphic novels is maintaining consistency and character continuity throughout the book. With so many pages and individual panels, we're always checking for color consistency and making sure characters' outfits aren't missing any small details. It takes a few passes with copyediting to catch both art and text mistakes.' To help avoid missing any fine details lost during the production process, layouts are reviewed alongside the previous set.

Kayla Miller has received feedback on the art from editors, designers and art directors and said, 'I find the [art] notes that are most helpful to me are … ones that don't necessarily tell you exactly what to do. But they're just like, "Hey, could we work on this a little bit more?" And kind of let me take that and process it.'

While one publisher mentioned a span of three months between receiving the final art and the to-printer deadline, they began routing pages for checks even earlier with inks and text, so they could drop the colour in at the last minute.

Cover design was generally a collaborative effort between the editor, creator, designers, and the wider marketing and publicity team. While editors and designers stayed on top of cover-design trends and what was popular in the graphic novel market, April Ward notes that, given the long production process of graphic novels, 'often, when we try to chase trends, we do fall years behind'. 'It's important for us to be vigilantly aware of other books in the market,' she says. 'Luckily, when you're immersed in publishing there are ways to get ahead of it, to take note of reveals and future publishing plans. Great designers will listen to what editors want, then continue to consistently push for what they feel is good design or has potential to break a mold. It can be harder to get sales and marketing folks behind a design or image that looks new and different, but we are always striving to do better work.'

Designing covers for graphic novels also involved the extra complexity of providing an accurate reflection of the internal art. First Second creative director Kirk Benshoff said, in an interview with comics website The Beat, 'The challenge of a good cover is it must strike the balance of a book that pops out in a crowded marketplace and is also true to the author's vision on the interior. So, we pay attention to feedback from retailers who see what works and what doesn't out there.'[34]

While the front covers of hardbacks and paperbacks generally used the same design, the two formats typically had different back-panel copy and design. While a paperback may get special cover treatment (e.g. foil, spot UV), hardcovers miss out as finishes are incredibly expensive and, given that their intended market (schools, libraries and collectors) will purchase them no matter the look of the book, covers don't need to work to catch the eye on a shelf.

While some houses had a specific team of designers who work on graphic novels, others did not, and when picture-book designers transitioned to designing graphic novels there were inevitably knowledge gaps. While many designers have studied graphic design

and illustration in college, gaining the foundational skills needed to work in publishing, Bob Bianchini said that ‘some designers are also illustrators with a strong background in making their own comics and have transitioned to a career in publishing’. As well as proficiency in Adobe InDesign, he said designers working on graphic novels needed ‘a solid understanding of Photoshop for handling art files’.

Production

Nick Thomas says that ‘the biggest learning curve for traditional publishers has been just all the work that goes into the production of a graphic novel’. Having a knowledgeable team and discussing the production process at the beginning of a project are important.

Using layers in files was crucial. Bob Bianchini says:

> I would say the bulk of the artists that I’ve had the experience of working with either work in Procreate or Clip Studio Paint or Photoshop or a combination of digital applications, and they deliver their final files in a layered Photoshop format. At the start of each project we typically ask the artist to keep word balloons and/or text; line art; and colors all on separate layers in case we need to make any corrections in-house once the layouts start routing to copyediting. It saves some time by not having to go back to the artist or colorist for minor revisions that can be handled in-house.

Layered files were important, particularly with the text and balloons, for rights sales, according to Andrea Colvin: ‘The problem with them not being on separate layers when you sell foreign rights, you have to make the text fit in that balloon. But I’ve been on … the other end of buying foreign rights and then having to put in the translated text and the balloons are never movable or anything. You’re editing words because they don’t fit.’

The complicated nature of layered full-colour art could sometimes cause unexpected issues. For example, if speech bubbles or panels are 4-colour black rather than 100k black, there will be a slight visual difference between them and the colour of the 100k text. But Hachette production director Lillian Sun says that ‘on the production and manufacturing side, the concern is more for registration’: 4-colour blacks are harder to print clean, as opposed to the single-ink 100k black. However, this isn’t a big problem if the speech bubble/panel lines are very thick, and it is more of an issue with web printing (in the US and sometimes Canada) rather than sheetfed printing (in China). While a colour separator could convert speech

bubbles and/or panels to 100k if they were on a separate layer, this involves additional labour (and cost!).

It may seem a minor issue, most likely only noted by the keen eye of someone with knowledge of book production, but it's for this reason Lillian Sun noted the importance of files being created correctly in several layers, and that extensive technical guidelines are sent to the artist at the outset of a project. There could also be issues with colour when creators originally work in RGB but then want a book that prints in two-colour inks and they don't know how to technically do this – again, a separator can do this conversion, but there can be issues if files are not layered well. For instance, if the black isn't the last layer in the files, it won't print correctly. These examples highlight the technical complexities that can arise when working on graphic novels.

Creators most often provided art as single pages, though some sent in spreads. Some creators still worked with physical art, like Simon 'I say no to digital' Hanselmann, who works in watercolour on paper; an added bonus was his ability to then sell his original artwork, which now sometimes goes for up to US$3000 per page. The time lost to scanning art provided the impetus for Kayla Miller to transition to digital art, and they noted the importance of both setting up proper file-naming conventions and saving work at different stages of the process (i.e. working files) in case you need to go back to a previous version. However, 'storage is also expensive now and digital files for artwork are large'.

One publisher told me that while they still accepted physical art for picture books, for graphic novels they now only accept digital single pages (which is the best format for design to add in bleed, etc.) as the cost to send physical art to a colour separator became too great. Digital files again helped for rights sales, and translation as text (on signs, etc.) could be swapped out digitally.

Andrea Colvin says of artwork for graphic novels, 'The process is ideally 100% digital these days. But artists have their own processes, and many of them start out traditionally and then transition to digital somewhere along the way in a project's life cycle (for instance, they will thumbnail on actual paper, pencil digitally, etc.).' While designers work in Photoshop and InDesign, editors need only know their way around marking up a PDF when making corrections and comments. Whitney Leopard suggested that 'with so much new software and tools coming out every year, it can be hard to be familiar with everything a creator might

use', though 'the designer on the book can be a huge help on this', as can communication with the creator.

Pre-press and proofing

When it came to proofing, many publishers recommended doing early test proofs, along with colour swatches and characters in colour (created as separate files), while a book was being inked – particularly if they were trying to decide between a coated or uncoated paper stock, which can have different effects on the colour, or the design team felt it was otherwise necessary. But rather than print-proofing the whole book, they would choose a few spreads that provided the best representation of the colour throughout: for example, a night scene, a morning scene, and different colour palettes. Then they would review soft proofs (PDF versions) of the rest of the book. Test proofs were sometimes produced by a pre-press house in the US (rather than the offshore printer) though they were not 100 per cent accurate. The artist would also be provided with a set so they could make any comments on the colour, and a set sent to the printer later on to match. Issues with colour would be fixed by the design department if they were responsible for pre-press, as the printer wouldn't want to be responsible for an overall shift in colour.

Physical (hard copy) proofs were also recommended for graphic novels. The size of the format versus the size of a typical computer monitor often meant scaling down a PDF to fit, meaning details may be missed. Whether this was a full set of physical proofs or a selection depended on the publishing house (and likely the book itself).

Physical proofs could either be wet proofs, created by printing in CMYK or PMS, or Epson proofs, printed by an Epson inkjet digital proofing machine. While Epsons can only provide an estimation of the final colour result, wet proofs are more accurate as they're printed on the actual paper stock to be used in the book. 'The pandemic sort of pushed us to do more Epson proofing [versus wet proofing] and the technology has improved so much that these days they're able to make an Epson proof on uncoated,' says Lillian Sun. At proofing stage, the production and editorial team is able to check that the art is printing well, then make any necessary clean-ups; that the text is present on the page; and that there have been no conversion issues.

Unless art was physical or printed proofs were specified in the creator's contract, seeing digital proofs only or a smaller selection of printed proofs (e.g. 30 pages) was not unheard of

for creators, and the pandemic has accelerated acceptance of digital proofs only, given they became the norm over the pandemic.

Printing

Books were printed domestically in the US – most commonly for black-and-white, duotone and two-colour books, though paper stock was sometimes an issue – and overseas in countries including Canada, Singapore, China, South Korea, Italy, Latvia and India. Most publishers printed colour books overseas to keep costs down. While they faced the same censorship issues with printing in China that the Australian book industry experiences, vendors have established partnerships with printers outside of China to circumvent this. Domestic printing was also an option to make a publication date when schedules blew out, and on small print runs (e.g. 3000–4000 copies) the cost was similar as it would be overseas for black-and-white printing, and only a little more for two-colour or one-colour Pantone.

Publishers mentioned printing low quantities to avoid unnecessary warehousing costs, but given these quantities were based on early sell-in and general expectations, they ran into problems when titles unexpectedly took off and needed to be reprinted. For speedy reprints, they had the option of domestic printing or printing in Canada, at a price premium, as a stopgap measure to fill back orders and keep a title on the shelves when buzz is building. Some publishers got ahead of this issue, as Whitney Leopard said: 'If we start getting big enough orders on something after we've already put in the [print] order, we will just automatically have the reprint coming in before the book even comes out.' Another publisher took advantage of print-ahead programs: they would print a whole year of stock at once for perennial backlist titles, with the printer holding stock and shipping when needed.

Paper stock

Due to their illustrated nature, graphic novels require a thicker paper stock than prose novels, which makes them a weightier affair. Lillian Sun says that at Hachette their standard stocks for graphic novels are 128 gsm coated and 120 gsm or even 100 gsm uncoated, compared to 67 gsm to 74 gsm cream stock for novels. For all books, she says, 'If it's a glossy coated stock, I think things generally always look better [i.e. appear more vibrant], whereas for uncoated, you really have to know what you're doing in terms of colour'. One publisher mentioned being pushed to print more often on a coated stock to cut costs.

Chris Staros said, ‘The graphic novels are tough in that sense because you can’t really just print them on dirt-cheap paper. You know, there’s colour, there’s artistry, there’s oftentimes the production value set to be just a little bit higher to make them stand out.’

Stacy Whitman agreed that using higher-quality paper stock was a worthwhile expense for Lee & Low, so books didn’t yellow as they sat on library shelves or in the warehouse, given they were aiming for hardcover print runs to sell out in ‘a year or two’. She said, ‘We’re not cutting back on paper the way the bigger houses do. So, our books actually cost a little bit more, but it’s worth it because they have that long tail.’

Publicity and marketing

Publicity

Publicity for graphic novels had to be strategic but with publicists in general overworked, finding new angles for promotion was tough, especially with crowded lists. As Chris Staros said, 'You need a hook and you need a little bit of publicity to happen in several places at once, so … [potential readers] happen to see it several times. And they're like, "Maybe I should check this out." One good article alone will not put a book through the roof. And it's difficult … to do that level of promotion [for] every title, especially when your company's schedule is full. You have to sort of pick and choose what titles you are putting most effort behind.'

With a lack of opportunities for press promotion, reviews were vital in launching titles. A starred review in *Publishers Weekly* – which began reviewing graphic novels and graphic non-fiction regularly in the late 1980s[35] – could make a difference to sales as then library staff would buy copies. Reviews in *School Library Journal* could also make a difference, but reviews in a newspaper less so.

Debut creators were often paired with established creators for events, ensuring the attendance of an existing fan base. Avi Ehrlich utilised Silver Sprocket's roster of creators for publicity, saying, 'We really lean on the artists hard. A lot of our artists have their own existing audiences. We also have a lot of camaraderie amongst our artists and whenever we have a new book we are putting out, we send a PDF to the whole roster and offer to send a physical copy. And that just builds community. Let them be familiar with each other's work, but also give it shout-outs online, like, "Hey, check out this new book I love. I'm a fan of it so you might like this too."'

Maria Hoey notes that 'reviews and press might have a bigger impact on growing an audience' than attending comics conventions. However attendance on panels at conferences was also important, providing entry to the tight-knit comics community in which creators were generally very supportive of one another, and would help to spread the word about new books.

For this reason, creators were often much better at getting endorsements for their books than publishers. Given many US readers lived in bookshop 'deserts' and relied on Amazon

for their purchases, one editor noted that online, a list of endorsements ‘helps make the book’s page look full and look loved’ – useful for readers looking for recommendations or who ‘want to be reading things that people are talking about’.

Marketing

Marketing plans were more important than ever. Graphic novels are thriving, and it is difficult to break something out in an oversaturated market. Comparison titles became meaningless and, as one marketer said of graphic novels, for ‘the one or two that do break out, then the next season every publisher is comping their books to that one … so then that sort of becomes background noise’. Sparking enthusiasm in-house in the sales and marketing team was the first crucial step in making a book stand out, as Random House Graphic’s Shana Corey says: ‘Pitching them in-house is as important as [pitching them to] the consumer because they’re the ones that we want to fall in love with it so that they can then take it from there.’

Retailers were also keen to know of marketing plans while books were being pitched for sales, a shift from publishers making their marketing plans based on feedback from key accounts. One editor explained: ‘Everyone wants to know what our marketing and publicity plan is from the [beginning], which is so different from before, because we used to base those plans off of the estimates that the accounts would give. Our salesperson would go to Barnes & Noble and pitch them the book, and Barnes & Noble would [say], “We’ll probably take 500 copies”, and then we’ve gathered how many copies all these accounts would want and that’s how we would base our marketing plan. Now it’s different, because while we’re pitching Barnes & Noble our books, they’ll be like, “Well, what’s the marketing plan?”’

Kayla Miller spoke about the importance of communicating marketing plans in particular to a graphic novelist: ‘People who are coming from the comics background, even if it’s just self-published, so many of us have had to market our own work and have had to be our own teams, essentially. So, we’ve done social media stuff, we’ve found conventions, we’ve gone everywhere, and promoted our own work in those channels, and had to have that enthusiasm. I think that then being cut off from that is confusing in a way [that’s different from] somebody who’s a traditionally published prose author, or a children’s book illustrator – maybe they haven’t done that same level of hands-on self-promotion.’

Campaigns

Marketing campaigns no longer included ads in print publications but could involve conferences; American Library Association (ALA) shows; comic-cons; social media ads (for example, on Instagram and the Meta network) targeting parents, booksellers and librarians, or consumer ads via Playwire targeted at kids; Goodreads giveaways; TikTok recommendation videos; blog posts; 'grab a galley' seasonal promotions through events such as the now-retired BookExpo; and more.

One marketer told me, 'We did a lot of digital giveaways because, I think especially with graphic novels, it's about getting the read out there and getting the reviews so that people see other readers' reviews of it and know what to expect.' They have 'cut back drastically' on printed sales material overall and moved to digital, which 'a lot of people prefer reading anyway for their early review materials'.

One marketer also explained how schools could play an unwitting role in marketing graphic novels: 'It's funny that schools helped the boom in popularity of graphic novels, because once schools started to adopt them as something you could get in the library, I think that did help because … kids were our biggest marketing tool. They came home excited about certain things.' When it came to young adult graphic novels, a perceived lack of knowledge on the format made influencer campaigns tricky. 'Young adult, for us, is still the hardest … One thing we've struggled with is our influencer campaign, so the "big mouths" on social media … sometimes … people think they have a lack of expertise in graphic novels'. However a recent increase in book influencers across platforms, and therefore more variety in what genres each of them is drawn to, means graphic novels have, overall, become more approachable.

Marketing campaigns don't just end at publication, and publishers are constantly looking for opportunities and different ways to promote their titles. Says one marketer, for 'a lot of our big fall books, we extend the campaign through holiday gift giving'. They described the in-house school library marketing team as the 'backlist champions'. Another publisher noted that in their house, a certain number of starred reviews would set off a second round of marketing.

At one publisher I was told that the *New York Times*' Graphic Books and Manga list 'is the hardest list to crack … so we have to temper expectations with our authors and agents' given it's a monthly list and the threshold for inclusion can be close to 20,000 unit sales,

compared to the weekly Young Adult Hardcover Books (prose) list where, on a competitive week, unit sales might only number 5000.

Budgets

When it came to marketing budgets, the figures I heard per book spanned a few thousand dollars to hundreds of thousands for a major blockbuster (and perhaps, more generally, US$5000 to $20,000 at a big five publisher). Overall budgets were divvied up per book, sometimes based on sales estimates for particular titles, though in an imperfect system sales campaigns were often influenced by the size of the marketing campaign itself.

There was a very big culture of getting behind whatever book had been nominated the 'lead title', with imprints sometimes spending half of their entire marketing budget on one book, with a clear vision and plan to make it a bestseller. One agent told me about how the marketing plan for a middle-grade series they had sold was so different to any other marketing plan they'd ever seen, with the publisher clearly planning to make the series a success from the outset by putting real money behind the book, including ads, giveaways and an author tour. These dollars weren't wasted – the series is a massive hit. Other books, bought at auction with the publisher's assurance they would be lead titles, were not so lucky. With the long path to publication for some graphic novels, sometimes plans would change, or the market would shift, and the book would end up gaining little of the promised marketing attention.

Social media

With fewer opportunities for publicity from traditional press outlets, visibility on social media has become key, yet it was also difficult for creators to manage given the number of platforms and the complexities of knowing how they worked, such as understanding the constantly changing algorithms, which essentially feed and direct content. Twitter, Instagram and TikTok; Bluesky and Patreon, to a lesser extent; and niche private Facebook groups (for comic-shop employees or librarians, for example) were all cited as platforms on which people were talking about graphic novels today. Simon Hanselmann sees social media as part of the business of making comics, and says that part of that is continuing to feed his audience content: 'the key is engaging the community'.

In children's books, one marketer told me that 'the ideal campaign talks to both kids and gatekeepers because kids can go home and they're excited about something, but it's

really the parents, at the end of the day, or teachers that are buying it'. Yet social media was more difficult for middle-grade books, given the curly question of 'Who are you talking (i.e. advertising) to?', and laws around advertising to under-13-year-olds.

While marketing and advertising were now concentrated to social media channels, one publisher pointed out how insular this was in terms of reaching diverse audiences, and felt it was unclear whether or not a positive outcome in this space translated to sales results.

Avi Ehrlich told me, 'Digital platforms play a huge role in the success of graphic novels as they are where lots of people find out about artists and comics; they are the "town halls" where people talk about what they're reading and excited about. [At Silver Sprocket] we don't have an advertising budget, but are really good at corralling word of mouth to get other comic creators and just fans in general to publicly let their digital audiences know how much they love our books, which nowadays has such a greater impact than even favorable reviews in mainstream press outlets.'

Given how quickly trends change, and how long the path to publication for a graphic novel (or indeed any book) was, marketing was used to pivoting when it came to campaigns. But with the slow demise of Twitter (now rebranded to X), previously an important platform in the graphic novel space, and 'BookTok's effects on sales diminishing'[36] – a significant factor given, as Janna Morishima says, 'the impact of TikTok on selling books here in the US [has] been massive, especially for teens' – many were wondering: where to next for social media?

Pre-orders

Jarad Greene felt pre-orders were helpful in terms of promotion as 'they are a somewhat tangible thing for an author to reference in the lead-up to a book's release'. Many US publishers also spoke of the importance of these campaigns. As First Second's Robyn Chapman explained, 'We tailor all our print runs to pre-orders … from merchant accounts, like, you know: what's Amazon doing? What's Barnes & Noble doing? What's Baker & Taylor [or] Walmart [doing]?'

One creator commented that early pre-orders were important for influencing print runs and also for visibility, and added: 'Amazon do dictate a lot of how well a book does. If they get a large pre-order they will be sure to have your book in stock, which really helps numbers.' One editor told me how pre-orders can also create 'bestsellers':

> Pre-orders have become huge. Barnes & Noble will order more quantities of books if the pre-orders are over [a certain number of] copies … I'm constantly telling my authors, go on social media and tell all your followers … that's been the case for about two years now … the more pre-orders you can get on Amazon and Barnes & Noble and all these stores, the easier it is to hit [the number of] copies sold that first week which makes it an instant bestseller. Of course, it immediately then pulls off the list the next week, but it's enough that you can then put it on the book and be like '*New York Times* Bestseller'.

Author tours and school visits

When touring was on hiatus during the pandemic, it was replaced with virtual events. There were positive outcomes to this change, as Liz Frances of Street Noise Books explains: 'We launched during the pandemic [and] we weren't able to have author tours. But we tried to do Zoom events … It was good just to connect with people … and it gave us an opportunity in some ways, because we could do bookstore events in an area that none of us could actually travel to. Without having to pay to fly there, you could do an event with somebody across the country or around the world.' One marketer said they were now doing far fewer events online as 'we're finding a resistance to digital events … People don't want to be online, they want to be in real life … They want the person and the direct contact built back in.' Consequently, many publishers were now getting back into in-person author events.

Shana Corey says that Random House Graphic 'do a lot of school-based tours for middle-grade and younger, and that I think helps because … any time you get a teacher [excited], you're getting the kids in their class [excited] and then the kids in their class next year'. School visits were all about building long-term connections, even if it didn't make a big difference to sales at the time; if authors could engage students – easiest with middle-grade readers – then they were asked to return year after year and the school would place standing orders for all their books. While some authors did casual visits to local schools, others took a more organised approach. If the visit formed part of an author tour, the school would buy copies of the book and cover expenses, but out of the tour cycle, a fee was instead paid – a good source of income for authors.

While it was hard to get meaningful sales for debut authors on tour, Shana Corey says that book events have other benefits: 'We do them as much for the word-of-mouth and getting the author's name known as for the actual sales at the event.' She noted that they would sometimes wait to tour an author until a series had built so they had multiple books to sell,

giving the author's previous books a marketing boost and a reason for booksellers to put the other books back out on the shelf.

Creators of adult graphic novels also toured on occasion, sometimes funded by a publisher, which was considered on a case-by-case basis depending on account expense and author availability. However it was more common for creators to self-fund these tours and plan their itineraries based on appearances at comic conventions held around the States.

Advance reader copies, sales and review materials

While the pandemic caused some publishers to shift from bound galleys or printed advance reader copies (ARCs) to digital (eARCs), some were now moving back to print, though being more selective both as to what they produced (e.g. the first book in a series or a bigger standalone title) and who they sent them to. Some books were benefiting from the shift and now being created as both an eARC and a printed book. For cost savings, some printed the front cover or first section of a graphic novel in full colour, with the rest in black and white.

Production editor Marisa Finkelstein thought digital sales materials were 'an effort by the industry to create less waste in the US', and others mentioned they would like a return to releasing eARCs only for this reason. Digital ARCs had the added bonus of being more effective for schedules and costs.

Liz Frances took advantage of a combination of digital galleys, blads (book layout and design sample pages) and advance copies:

> We make digital galleys available on Edelweiss, so all of the bookstores and librarians can access the digital galleys. And if people write to me, I will send them a copy. But we don't print ARCs because the cost would be prohibitive. We print blads and we send them out to our sales reps and to key bookstores. I think it's nice because it's different to feel it in your hand and to look at it, as opposed to seeing it on a screen. I do it for every single book, and I print about 150 to 250, for those purposes that I just described. But as soon as I get advance copies sent to me of the final book, that's what I use to send out to reviewers and the media.

Seeing a physical book was particularly important for full-colour graphic novels. Emilie Robert Wong noted that for review coverage, many people are requesting PDFs instead of physical books, but said, 'So many of our books really shine when people can see them in person.' While at Enchanted Lion they don't print ARCs, they do try to have finished

copies in time for review, so a reader can appreciate the artwork, colour and production values. However, a simple PDF was useful to get books on reviewers' radars early.

Awards and lists

The value of a graphic novel winning an award in the US varied in terms of sales and exposure depending on the award.

Simon Hanselmann said that receiving a Harvey Award nomination (for achievement in comic books) for his book *Crisis Zone*, along with winning a prestigious Eisner Award (for the book in its earlier webcomic form), gave him a boost in sales and in Amazon rankings, though the lift was nothing compared to his international win at the Angoulême International Comics Festival, which he saw reflected in a large jump in overseas royalties. Smaller comics prizes, like Small Press Expo's Ignatz Awards or the Ringo did little to help sales – though everyone I spoke to agreed that winning these awards could be useful in terms of gaining an editor's attention, as many of the titles entered were self-published.

More prestigious children's awards dished out by the ALA, like the Newbery Medal (for most distinguished contribution to American literature for children) and Caldecott Medal (for most distinguished American picture book for children) did 'move the needle' on sales, according to one marketer, and one editor noted that winning a few awards like the Printz Award (for best book written for teens) and the Newbery Medal meant guaranteed buys, as well as being helpful in garnering new readers.

Also useful in raising profiles was inclusion in library lists, for example, the ALA's Best Graphic Novels Reading Lists or the New York Public Library's Top 10 Comics and Graphic Novels.

For children's books, state awards were of vital importance, with Shana Corey saying 'there is almost no benefit to winning over the nomination'; she notes that nominated books sold and will continue to sell. Stacy Whitman said Lee & Low sends their books out for all state and national awards 'because the more you get your book on any kind of award list, the more awareness there is in [the] school and library market'.

Almost all US states run reading list programs through state library associations or reading associations (for example, Texas Library Association or Florida Association for Media in Education), and getting on these lists can be huge for sales. The Texas Library Association has graphic novel lists Maverick and Little Maverick, though this is not the

norm, as one marketer told me: ‘We had thought – with all the expansion of graphic novels, both imprints but also the number of titles – that there might be, in addition to these Texas lists, newer lists that would be graphic-novel centric, or an increased prevalence of graphic novels on these lists. We like them because it sells a lot of copies … [if you can get on a list in] Texas now that could be 10,000 or more copies … What we’re noticing is we’re not seeing any huge uptick in graphic novels.’

Getting books nominated in kids’ reader’s choice awards or getting books recommended by the Junior Library Guild was also helpful in expanding audiences.

Rights, sales and distribution

Rights

According to agent Judy Hansen, it's hard to sell graphic novels that originate outside of the US to the US market. She says that in the US, while 'there is a tradition of adult French comics in translation selling – and of course manga sells well – generally if a publisher cannot easily promote an author in the US it is harder to sell the book to a US publisher'. Publishers, she says, may factor in sales in the UK and Commonwealth countries, but 'the Australian market is generally too small to be considered separately. Generally there are more licences for languages such as French, Italian and Spanish.' France, with its strong culture of reading *bande dessinée* (Franco-Belgian comics – think Tintin, Asterix, The Smurfs), and where one in four books sold is a comic book,[37] was commonly mentioned as the country with the most sophisticated and developed graphic novel market.

Publishers agreed that they liked to have primarily US creators for children's and YA graphic novels as they could then organise tours, including school visits. They were still open to buying rights to overseas-generated content, though, as there are always notable exceptions that go on to become global bestsellers (think Heartstopper, The Bad Guys). Shana Corey said, 'We buy things on pitches all the time' and was happy to see projects early on, unless it would be a stronger package at a later stage. David Saylor said at Graphix they don't often buy rights to graphic novels from foreign publishers because the Graphix list is so robust. But if he does he would prefer to see the whole book with a good portion translated into English, if needed, to get a feel for the story before hiring an original-language reader. Another editor agreed that a finished stage is better for seeing graphic novels, rather than facing the complexity of having two editors involved in providing feedback on the art.

Emilia Rhodes said there was 'room to do more collaboration' with overseas publishers on graphic novels 'because they are so time-intensive'. She noted that (in a previous role) when Houghton Mifflin Harcourt was launching their graphic novel imprint Etch, she did bring in some European comics, and said as the Australian and UK markets grow, she would be interested in buying rights. Something packaged and ready to go would be more appealing, she noted, though flexibility to make changes was important. As you can see, US publishers were cautious and, given the abundance of locally produced content, selling rights to the US in the graphic novel space was no easy task.

‘There is a huge demand internationally for graphic novels,’ says Nick Thomas of Levine Querido. He cautions publishers against publishing a graphic novel unless you get world rights, and thus the ability to generate further income. ‘I think publishers, particularly smaller ones, have a strong argument for those rights because a graphic novel requires more upfront investment than any other type of book,’ he says. ‘And I think publishers in markets smaller than the US have an even stronger case because it’s hard to just rely on sales in their domestic market to make back their investment.’

Sales and distribution

Graphic novels in the US are sold through both the direct market and the trade market. The direct market is essentially what we might think of as the comic book market – that is, comic book retailers, numbering more than 3000 across the US, that sell single-issue comics and buy largely on a non-returnable basis from specialty distributors. Phil Seuling, a New York City comics retailer and distributor, has been credited with inventing this market in the 1970s.[38] The direct market also encompasses the major distributors to these stores – Diamond Comic Distributors and Lunar Distribution – with Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster also breaking into direct-market distribution. There is some crossover with these companies; for example, Diamond Comic Distributors’ sister company, Diamond Book Distributors, distributes graphic novels within the US and internationally (and with air freight can apparently achieve same-day release in countries like Australia and England) to places like Barnes & Noble, Amazon, the library market, independent bookstores, and stores such as Walmart and Target. Comic book retailers are increasingly carrying more graphic novels from trade publishers through trade market distribution channels, and, as Boston Comic Arts Foundation’s Gina Gagliano says, these stores are ‘selling a huge chunk of what’s on the market, and many of those stores have shifted from focusing on weekly issue comics to … graphic novels and kids’ graphic novels, and that’s really been a change’.

Most graphic novels, though, are purchased through the trade market, or regular book market, which allows returns, and in graphic novels is segmented by reader demographic (i.e. children’s, often further segmented; or adult). If we refer back to Brian Hibbs’s 2023 BookScan analysis, we can see that the major distributors to the trade market for graphic novel sales made through bookstores that report to Circana are as follows: Simon & Schuster (33 per cent), Penguin Random House (28 per cent), Scholastic Books (20 per cent), Hachette

Book Group (8 per cent); HarperCollins (4 per cent); Macmillan (4 per cent); and all others combined (3 per cent).[39]

Indie publishers could also reap financial rewards from other avenues of distribution. Enchanted Lion started doing direct sales over their website during the pandemic to increase their profit per book. Silver Sprocket benefits from having their own storefront, and the ability to do mail order and direct wholesale to over 300 accounts, providing better margins than distributing through the direct or trade market – profit that then filters through to the artist. They also have international reach, as Avi Ehrlich says: 'We have the book trade by way of a Southern California distributor called SCB, and they sell to Ingram, and Baker & Taylor [and others] … They do a lot of our exporting for distributors, because it's easier to ship a pallet or for a freight forwarder [to do it] than for us to do it.'

The school market was crucial for Scholastic taking the plunge into graphic novels with Graphix, as David Levithan explains: 'The thing, obviously, for Graphix that got us off the ground was our school channels. The book fairs and the clubs were really behind it in a big way. That sort of gave us the safety net to make the leap into it … I know no other company has the same sort of school market that we do. And that's crucial because we're like, okay, well, even if in trade, it bombs, you're still going to get 100,000 out that way.'

Retailers

The major market for the book trade in the US is (no surprise) online retailer Amazon. In 2020 the House Judiciary Committee of the US House of Representatives found that the platform 'has significant market power over the entire book industry, including sales, distribution, and publishing. In the U.S. market, Amazon accounts for over half of all print book sales and over 80 percent of e-book sales.'[40] There are also bookstore chains like Barnes & Noble, the largest chain with around 600 stores, independent bookstores, and retailers like Walmart and Target that sell books.

At one publisher I was told of the importance of handselling to independent bookstores: 'I think with a lot of our graphic novels … we work really hard on positioning them with the booksellers because then the booksellers are equipped to handsell them or to promote them to their audiences best.'

Shelving and discoverability

Everyone I spoke to had much to say about where and how graphic novels should be shelved, no doubt due to the breadth in the format. Rich Johnson (vice president sales and business development, Diamond Book Distributors; author) is ‘a key figure in the growth of the graphic novel category in the comics shop market and the book trade over the last 30 years’,[41] and is often credited for getting a separate shelf space for graphic novels in bookstores and libraries. He says: ‘The best way to describe the graphic novel is if you take every subject category in history. And jam it into one section. That’s the graphic novel.’ He believes that ‘there are a lot of faults in the graphic novel section, but you’ve built a destination spot’. Readers cannot tell from the spine (or in many cases from the cover, if the book is face-out) if a book is a graphic novel, unless they are avid readers of the format and the book is published by an imprint whose logo they are familiar with, or they are looking for a specific title, series or author. So a destination is important for readers seeking out the format, and has been pivotal in accelerating sales.

Yet there is no standard in shelving practices, which are constantly evolving. Brian Geffen says, ‘Six years ago there was maybe a children’s graphic novel section at major bookstores, just kind of in its infancy. They used to just be shelved with graphic novels – adults and teen – and at that time there was no teen graphic novel section at most retail stores. So I think a big thing has been bookstores and publishers learning how to cater to consumers and shelve them properly, categorize them properly and I think now that you have this clear delineation between different age groups for graphic novels.’

One editor told me that stores continue to experiment:

> We’re definitely seeing or hearing how especially indie bookstores, and even bigger store retailers like Barnes & Noble, are really rethinking how they display and break up comics … Especially when you get to older readers, there’s so much crossover between adult and younger readers of comics that … we’re hearing of stores experimenting [with] putting books in both sections, in adult and younger readers, or really separating these because these two might cancel each other out in terms of, if a ten-year-old sees these two together, they might go, ‘Oh, no … this is for babies.’ So, we’re seeing that bookstores are getting pretty creative with, and really strategic with, how and where they’re placing graphic novels and comics in their stores.

From my many forays into New York bookstores, I saw a variety of approaches to shelving. Most commonly graphic novels had their own section, and were separated by demographic, i.e. adult or children's (often categorised into some variation on YA, middle grade, young readers). Sometimes graphic novels were not separated at all, instead being mixed in with prose books. In yet another store, I saw new-release graphic novels in a dedicated space, and backlist titles mixed in with prose, perhaps giving these books a 'second life' for a general readership not specifically seeking out the format.

Innovative shelving was important, as Amie Wright, former president of the ALA's Graphic Novels & Comics Round Table, says: 'Pretty much any good independent store in New York will have a great collection of graphics, especially for adults, because it's such a city that loves books. And I think a lot of those bookstores have done some very creative things in terms of shelf-talkers. And this is where we had seen some big developments for comics, especially for adult readers … to put a book like Kate Beaton's *Ducks* in adult popular reading and not even call attention to the format.'

For a publisher like Enchanted Lion, renowned and perhaps pigeonholed for their picture books, it was hard to make sure their titles were reaching the graphic novel world. Emilie Robert Wong said, 'It depends on the bookstore. I think most of them would shelve them in graphic novels because these ones are kind of more clearly on that side of things but … we've had bookstores shelve our books, even our more classic picture books … in the arts section.' While this could be useful in overseas markets (e.g. Asia) where they might be better sold by being marketed as an 'art book', discoverability for graphic novels continues to be an issue when shelving practices are so varied from store to store.

Discoverability was also an issue online. According to agent Janna Morishima:

> There is so much talent in the industry, but so many good books are getting lost in the flood of books being published. At the same time, the algorithmic nature of social media means that there is a 'winner take all' effect, where the most popular titles consume an ever larger share of the market. So, in my opinion, a huge area of opportunity is actually in the online marketing and retail of books, not in publishing. (After all, one of the best ways to succeed in business is 'solve a big problem.') We need user-friendly platforms that allow for better curation and serendipity in helping connect readers with books they'll love.

Bookselling concerns

Returns were an issue across book categories, with many citing Barnes & Noble's new approach, under CEO James Daunt, for each store to operate more like a locally curated independent bookstore in a bid to reduce returns from 30 per cent to around 3 per cent. (As of April 2023, this figure was at 7 per cent.)[42] Rich Johnson explains:

> One of the biggest problems with returnability is, buyers can easily over buy and just return for credit. But there is a cost in return. There's a labour cost in pulling them off the shelf. There's a cost in then packing them up and sending them back to the warehouse for Barnes & Noble. There's a cost there to sort them out by publishers. There's a cost to ship them back out to the publishers. So they're trying to mitigate all these costs by not ordering as much upfront. So instead of a three to six months' supply, they're buying out four to five weeks.

While previously buying decisions were being made at a national level, meaning if a book was picked up by Barnes & Noble the book would go into every store, the shift to buying titles for each individual store meant fewer titles and thus copies were being picked up.

One editor told me many readers were buying their titles from Amazon because when a book gained popularity in bricks-and-mortar stores, retailers would not remove it from the shelf to create the space needed for new-release graphic novels. They said:

> Heartstopper's a great example, because no one wanted to take it, and then they made the Netflix series. It had done well, of course, in indies and Barnes & Noble, but then all of a sudden Walmart and all these big accounts were like, 'Oh, now it's doing really well, let's put it out' – and not just [book one], but all the Heartstopper series books. And that means we come to them and we're like, 'Hey, we have this great YA graphic novel,' and we'll comp it to Heartstopper. And they'll be like, 'We already have Heartstopper. We don't want to remove Heartstopper.' It's so frustrating.

Others lamented Amazon's discounting of books, over which publishers had no control and which changed consumers' perception of how much a book should cost. At one meeting, I was told, 'Amazon has been really detrimental for the US market for many reasons, but one of the reasons is that Amazon is willing to take a loss and give their books periodic deep discounts.' Emilie Robert Wong wished the US had book price-protection laws as they do in

France, which 'really motivates people to reach out [to] their local small business, because it's the same price … Whereas I feel like in the United States, that definitely is not the case. And so, a lot of times we'll see Amazon has decided to discount our book [and] you don't have any control over that.'

Public and academic libraries

According to a recent ALA report, 'Gen Z and Millennials are using public libraries, both in person and digitally, at higher rates compared to older generations'.[43] Associated national survey data showed that more than half of the survey participants had visited a physical library within the previous 12 months, more than half also borrowing from the library's digital collection, though there was 'a distinct preference for physical versions of books: survey respondents read *and* bought on average twice as many print books per month as any other category'. Good news for the future of libraries and printed books in the US!

For smaller and independent publishers, there were barriers to getting stocked in libraries due to the bureaucratic nature of the library system. For a book to be deemed 'important' enough to sit on the shelves, there were often various rules that specified the types (e.g. starred) or number of reviews, printed in major publications, a book would need to qualify for library inclusion. These rules seemed to vary by state. It wasn't enough for a librarian to simply want a copy; they needed to justify its purchase. So, if you want your book stocked in libraries across the country, reviews (and connections to reviewers) matter.

For graphic novelists who are self-publishing, this is just one of the barriers. Matthew Noe (former president, Graphic Novels & Comics Round Table, ALA; head collection and knowledge management librarian, Harvard Medical School) explains:

> A lot of libraries, especially public, municipal, government-funded ones, have limitations on where they're allowed to buy from. And so crowdfunding gets you into trouble because you're not actually buying the title. You're paying for the title to be created with the assumption that when it's finished you'll get a copy, and so finance officers see that as a risk and not you actually paying for something you're going to get. And often that stretches beyond the current fiscal year, which can pose some issues for some people.
>
> And then, similarly, a lot of libraries aren't able to send staff to small comics expos to buy directly from creators or to buy directly from creators online. And so that part of it needs to be addressed on the library side, and there might be some advocacy options for

> publishing to try to be like, 'Hey, let's help the libraries get their purchase policies changed so they can buy these things.'
>
> And then the review side is similar. We should change our collection development policies – [books] should not require a prior review.

With larger libraries, such as the New York Public Library system, resources often simply weren't available to allow the time needed to purchase more widely. As Amie Wright says, 'The other problem with so many library systems is they are getting all of the cataloguing done through the vendor. So … if you're buying for a huge library system … you don't have the time and bandwidth to create individual catalogue records.'

To ensure graphic novels reached their intended audience, Moni Barrette, who works for digital-comics library distribution service LibraryPass, says, 'We are having to very carefully make sure that where we are placing these comics is age appropriate for their intended audiences. To that end, a huge part of my job is vetting the publishers, working with them on their metadata and then using our in-house collection development policy and age-appropriate guidelines to make sure that we are accurately representing and positioning what we're making accessible to our customers for their readers.'

Amie Wright believes that poor shelving practices are contributing circumstances when it comes to the widespread banning of graphic novels in schools and libraries in the US 'because a lot of schools and libraries still have a single graphic novel section'. Graphic novels were frequent magnets for challenges. The ALA reported that the number one most challenged book in 2022 was graphic novel *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe (also in top position in 2021), while number four was graphic novel *Flamer* by Mike Curato. Both were challenged for their LGBTQIA+ content and claims they were sexually explicit.[44] As Kayla Miller says, 'I think graphic novels are easier to target because they are visual and you can just leaf through them quickly and look for something that you find objectionable rather than having to read the whole thing.'

In academic libraries, there was a lot of hesitance in buying graphic novels. Matthew Noe says, 'For the most part you're only finding things like *Maus* and *Persepolis*.' There are exceptions, though, such as the notable and extensive 20,000-item collection of comics and graphic novels curated by Karen Green at Columbia University's Butler Library, used widely by university students in a variety of courses. I was lucky enough to tour Green's labour of

love, and indeed I dreamed of staying in the beautiful reading rooms perusing the collection for the remainder of my trip.

School libraries

While many educators understand that graphic novels have value, investing in outreach to schools is important for publishers, especially with children's books, given the impact on a graphic novel's sales if it can be linked to the curriculum and is selected to be taught in schools. As Amie Wright explains, 'One of the biggest successes we had with a lot of K-to-12 graphic novels in the US was through curriculum adoption. So if you can find a book that's picked up by a large public library system and a book that's picked up by a school board, that becomes huge.'

With the introduction of Common Core State Standards in 2010, which standardised the curriculum and instruction across grades K to 12 in language arts, the value of the graphic novel became tangible. Gina Gagliano explains: 'Many teachers in classrooms and school districts were kind of like, "How do we do this?" And it's like, "Well, the easy way to get this nationwide requirement for visual literacy into your curriculum is having a graphic novel that you teach in your class."'

Amie Wright says that one of the best ways to get K-to-12 graphic novels into schools and library collections was 'really pushing non-fiction comics for kids, or books that had quite explicit pedagogical connections, like Raina Telgemeier's *Guts*'.

Stacy Whitman also points to the long-term profit benefits for the creator when a book is taught in schools, as opposed to being a short-term trade hit on release. 'We're not worried about the *New York Times* list because we're concentrating on the school market. So we're thinking about the long term. And we're talking about things like getting a book in the curriculum and having it be a bestseller, as far as we're concerned, for the next ten years.'

Developing sustainable careers for creators

Given the labour-intensive, time-consuming process of producing a graphic novel, I wondered if it was even possible for graphic novel creators in the US to build a viable long-term career.

For creators themselves, Chris Staros advised that, 'You've got to juggle a lot of things and hopefully build a catalogue that will move in a perennial fashion while you're sleeping. And then also have enough luck to maybe have one or two of your things get developed in Hollywood and TV or film, and get that secondary source of income.'

As cartoonist and Center for Cartoon Studies co-founder James Sturm says:

> It's a real problem sustaining a career and I think you almost have to look beyond the publishing industry to do so. Because unless you're very prolific and quick, it's going to be really tough. And I think there's also a distinction between making work that's personal, which often takes longer because you're creating as an act of discovery, [and] being a hired gun. Doing a straight adaptation is much easier as the path forward and the destination is already determined. That said, the labor involved in making any graphic novel is considerable and unless you are one of the handful of commercially successful graphic novelists it's going to be challenging to earn enough to sustain a career if all your professional eggs are in the commercial publishing basket.

Some graphic novelists turned to grants and scholarships, alternative models of funding like Patreon or Kickstarter, or offering subscriptions to a regular webcomic on the likes of Substack. Even though online content is often free for readers, serialising content and making it available for free online also meant the chance to build an audience.

Other kinds of paid illustrative work (e.g. graphic guides for governments) were also a potential source of income. Eleri Harris noted that 'there is a growing market for informational comics, not just in the media but for organisations explaining things that they want to do'.

Paul Karasik suggests that perhaps being a cartoonist, comic artist or graphic novelist is a calling. 'Back when I was a kid, you were a syndicated cartoonist or you were a comic artist … That was the field of comics. And now it's this huge expanse with online self-

published comics, tiny micro publishers, medium-sized publishers and huge publishers. And everyone's publishing content, and very few people are making any money off of that. So, why do you do it? … The way to be a successful cartoonist is you can't do anything else. You know, it's a compulsion.'

Many creators spoke of the physical toll of working on graphic novels to tight schedules, or over long timeframes, which often resulted in health issues with spines and wrists especially. Making sure they are sitting properly, having breaks, stretching, and working in a well-lit space could help. Hiring extra assistance (e.g. a colourist) to make things more manageable in terms of workload was another option, but, as I've already mentioned, it sometimes fell to the creator to cover the cost.

On the publishing side, apart from the ideal of paying for this assistance or providing financial security for creators in the form of generous advances or multi-book deals – both of which are obviously not feasible for many titles – a house could still help a creator in other ways to build their career.

Della Farrell said, 'My strategy sometimes with these smaller projects is, especially if it's a comics artist who's just starting out in publishing, that this is a really great way to guide them, bring them through the publishing process before they tackle something big.'

Eleri Harris points to the value of now-defunct online daily comics website The Nib, noting that it had 'published a lot of comics that have ended up being books', giving creators the opportunity to showcase a sample of published work.

While deferring deadlines may seem, on the surface, to help a creator struggling with their workload, pushing publishing schedules out also came with a cost, with many creators paid a certain portion of their advance on publication – a payment that would then be delayed. However it was important for publishers to be understanding of medical issues, especially if a creator needed to take a break, and to make them feel supported when it eventually came to the release of their book. With any extended production timeframe on a graphic novel came the risk that the acquiring editor who was championing a creator's work may have moved on to another role, making that perceived support from the publishing house even more vital.

One editor also noted the importance of being realistic with authors in terms of expected sales. For the vast majority of graphic novel creators who wanted to make a career (i.e. a living wage) from their work, it seemed diversification was key.

Role of the greater comics industry

Comics and graphic novels are big business in the US, and not just for publishers. In the US, several colleges and institutions provide training in sequential art, such as Savannah College of Art and Design; The Center for Cartoon Studies, where I spent a week doing a graphic novel short course; non-profit Sequential Artists Workshop; and New York's School of Visual Arts. As well as providing training, the institutions' longstanding relationships with publishers gave graphic novelists an inroad to meeting editors.

The wealth of comics conventions, from the biggest of the big, such as San Diego Comic-Con, to the small and very local, such as The Bronx Library Center's Comic Con – both of which I attended – also provided opportunities for creators to make connections in the greater comics world. Here creators could meet fellow creators, publishers, fans and others, such as art dealers keen to sell illustrators' original work. Maria Hoey says, 'Conventions (for us) are probably the most important for sales. But book fairs, and shows, and conventions are wonderful as an opportunity to be around likeminded people and feel the energy of people responding to our work. Nothing beats "IRL" – in real life.' Panelling at conventions was also useful to creators, publishers, editors and imprints in getting their name out there and building their presence in the community.

Diverse voices

Nick Thomas says, 'Within the last maybe five to ten years, there's been a lot of strides made in publishing more diversely. And, you know, shocker, a lot of books have sold really well, and so that just builds upon itself.' However, he also said that 'there's very few avenues for breaking out new voices' because Amazon and Barnes & Noble are 'for the most part just selling stuff that's already selling'. Stacy Whitman still believes it's a developing area. 'We're growing when it comes to diverse books,' she says. She also notes that five or six years ago, after the movement We Need Diverse Books – which sprung from the Twitter hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks in 2014 – had been firmly established, 'people started treating [diversity] as if it were a trend that was going away. And it's not a trend.'

So where do publishers find diverse voices? Stacy Whitman takes a direct approach: 'We're actively telling agents, "This is what we're looking for: we're looking for LGBTQ, we're looking for intersectional stories, we're looking for indigenous stories" – whatever it is that we're specifically looking for at that moment.' She also asks prominent authors from diverse backgrounds, '"Who are you mentoring? Who should I be aware of? Where should I

be looking?" You go to people from those communities and say, "You know what – we want to do better."'

Other avenues for finding diverse voices include direct submissions from agents, attending writers' conferences, creating relationships within writers' communities that welcome diverse groups (e.g. becoming a member of a Black women's writing group on Facebook to post calls for submissions). While it's considered somewhat taboo to reach out to an author being published elsewhere, the same isn't true of illustrators, making it possible for publishers to trawl Instagram or websites for already published illustrators identifying with different communities (e.g. via the Cartoonists of Color database), or making contact through US agencies that specialise in illustration work.

Work from debut or emerging creators may sometimes be less polished, and requires a lot more work, but as Liz Frances from Street Noise Books says, 'I'm committed to publishing work that wouldn't be published by the bigger publishers. Partly because I can't afford the advances that a big publisher can. So, if someone is from a marginalized community, but they're super professional and they've already had some award-winning books out there, they're going to get a big advance from somebody else. So, we often focus on emerging creators which does mean a lot more work on my part.'

When editing the illustrative aspect of graphic novels with diverse creators, one editor recommended thinking about best practices in editing novels with these creators and applying that visually. Editors could bring in experts who know visual art if they feel their skills are lacking in that area, and if they're doing passes for facts and stereotypes, then they could do that visually as well.

Given the visual language of graphic novels is reductive, where everything is brought down to its essence, it's important to be aware that caricatures can reduce people to racist stereotypes. Doing your research when illustrating people from other backgrounds is essential, so that you're getting the details right. On this front, Stacy Whitman advised:

> I think you have to really train yourself to see visual stereotypes, and how to maybe have conversations about art things. Because, and this is something that I found across the communities that I've worked with, sometimes somebody from a particular community will see stereotypes and be able to counteract them in their own community, but then sometimes perpetuate them about other communities. And so you, as the editor, also have to be able to have conversations that are kind of sensitive about, 'Hey, maybe let's not

> portray this other community in a way that might be offensive' … That means that you have to be educated about a wide variety of issues regarding whatever communities might be involved – so, for example, if you're doing a book about indigenous people, but maybe there's a stereotype about Africans, you know, or vice versa.
>
> There are a lot of visual stereotypes that have been passed down over time as a shorthand. They were originally very racist, but nowadays we just kind of accept them as, 'Oh, that's just what happens in the genre' … like slanted eyes on Asians or exaggerated lips on people of African descent, that kind of thing. Those are the obvious ones, but it's just being educated about those visual stereotypes just as much as you would on any kind of cliché.

To support diverse creators and books, Stacy Whitman said we should be 'reading as much as possible, connecting with the communities as much as possible. That is the work of the white editor. And the work of us in publishing is also making sure that behind the scenes we are hiring as many people as possible who are also from those communities.' While some felt there has been a shake-up in the racial make-up of publishing staff, change on this front was slow. One agent told me that the continuing lack of diversity in publishing houses meant they pitched mostly to white editors who wouldn't necessarily connect with stories from other cultures that traditionally had different narrative structures.

Native American creators

Agent Judy Hansen sold rights to Emily Bowen Cohen's debut graphic novel *Two Tribes* to Heartdrum, an imprint of HarperCollins Children's Books dedicated to the work of Native American creators for children aged 8 plus. Hansen says 'the market for Native American creators in the children's category is small but growing'.

Heartdrum is the first indigenous-focused imprint from one of the big five publishers, author-curated by Cynthia Leitich Smith, a citizen of the Muscogee Creek Nation, and overseen by vice president and editorial director Rosemary Brosnan. In an interview for The Horn Book, Smith says, 'By bringing me in as curator of the imprint, I'm able to ask questions that wouldn't necessarily occur to someone like Rosemary, who is certainly an extended community member – someone who's been brought into the circle of Native people and our close non-Native friends – versus someone who has lived and walked in it for a long time.' Brosnan says she would never have dreamed of launching the imprint without Smith: 'For Native communities, Cynthia's involvement gives the work credibility. She reviews all

of the jacket copy, the catalog copy. We want to make sure we do everything right. It would be all too easy to make a mistake out of ignorance. A well-intentioned mistake, but a mistake nonetheless.'[45]

Genuine collaborations like these are vital when it comes to non-Native American–owned presses publishing the stories of Native people. Chag Lowry (graphic novel author), who is of Yurok, Maidu and Achumawi Native ancestry, says that, often, 'if stories are told about us, they're told by outsiders and … if publishers become interested, it's tilted toward them in terms of, they're going to make the money, they're going to have the oversight and editorial. And the power structure, the power dynamic is all in their favour. And to me, the essence of being able to tell your story is we have to have the power.'

There is a handful of Native American–owned presses in the US, such as Great Oak Press. Yet Lowry says that 'the capacity is not there yet, in terms of both the opportunity for Native writers and Native artists to craft a graphic novel. And then … if the story is about [a] specific culture or geographic area, you want it to be authentic. And I think that that's been a challenge too because a lot of Native writers are going to want to write from their own cultural perspective. And … publishers, they want this pan-Indian thing, something that all attracts a large audience. And so right there you have a dilemma.'

Barriers to the development of graphic novels among Native American people in the US may also have to do with cultural permissions and what they may or may not be able to share. Lowry included indigenous language in his graphic novel *Soldiers Unknown* but said, 'I did not translate it. I never liked when I read comics [and] the character says something in French and then you see the English translation. Make the reader work for it.'

While there is some networking between Native American writers, there is a lack of mentorship programs and fellowships. For a special edition of *Soldiers Unknown*, Lowry invited some Native artists and young Yurok people to each contribute a single illustration, in a bid to cultivate artists. Next time, he plans to ask them to each do a panel, then three or five pages, to develop their skills. The young Yurok artists were also invited to speak with him about their work at a panel at San Diego Comic-Con, where Lowry commented that 'advocacy is part of our culture'. These are words he is living by in his mentorship of these young Native American creators.

What's next? Trends in graphic novels

One question I asked almost everyone I spoke to was, 'Where to next with graphic novels?' But are trends even relevant in graphic novel publishing when you're often trying to predict what will be popular years out from publication? Further complicating matters was the quest for breakout success. Every publisher now wants lead titles only, which is understandable; rather than taking risks, they want books that they are confident will make them money. But if books are not marketed as such, then how do they become lead titles?

Manga and graphic novels are inextricably linked, and manga was a huge talking point given the size of the market and popularity of the format. While it was seen as a separate market, the influence trickling into graphic novels – both in terms of art style and storytelling tropes – felt somewhat inevitable. While it was hard to measure whether manga was being read by young adults, given that all manga titles (and only books that were originally published in Japan, rather than any book with similar style and content) are coded in libraries as adult titles, many suggested that manga was being read by children as young as 12. It was not seen as a competitor to middle-grade graphic novels, however, but rather something that children could read alongside graphic novels. Manga sections were huge in bookstores and David Saylor says, 'After talking with a lot of librarians, we learned that the manga section is one of the most checked out, if not *the* most checked out section of every library Librarians are hungry for manga that's safe for younger readers.' With many more kids aware of the art style, and manga reaching a cultural tipping point in the US, he said, 'I think there is an opening in the market, which we're exploring very actively, to publish manga-influenced graphic novels, or original manga from Japan, that's kid friendly and that parents don't have to worry about for their 8-to-12-year-olds.'

In September 2023 it was announced that in 2024 Graphix would be publishing manga series Unico: Awakening, a reimagination of Osamu Tezuka's original work *Unico*, filling the gap in this market. Rather than being read right to left (as manga usually is) it will be read left to right, as it was (unusually) in the original work.[46]

In children's graphic novels the next possible areas for growth were the early reader and YA categories. Whitney Leopard of Random House Graphic says, 'I feel like the trend right now is that middle grade is actually slowing down. And by slowing down, I mean slowing down in growth, not necessarily slowing down in sales. It's still the biggest sales

[category]. But we see a lot of growth coming from our chapter book and YA spaces. And we think it's just because more people, younger and older, are reading graphic novels.' Shana Corey agrees that 'in terms of the more exponential growth I definitely think that's [on] the YA and the early reader side'.

David Levithan suggested that 'a lot of different publishers are trying to figure out the early reader space'. Whitney Leopard says that, in chapter books, 'we had a lot of success with buddy-duos books. But we've had so much success that now I think the market is oversaturated with them. So we're looking at different ways we can explore that market without it necessarily being a buddy-duo book.' While the potential for growth is there, some felt that there was still a backlash that graphic novels do not help a child's reading skills, so parents would rather children be learning this skill from prose chapter books.

While middle-grade autobiographical and contemporary graphic novels were a perennially safe bet for popularity, the market is such a crowded space right now that most publishers felt these books needed to have a markedly different point of view to be successful (e.g. Jerry Craft's *New Kid*). Diverse stories are popular now. Submissions had moved on from the 'Raina space'; fantasy was a potentially growing area, and one editor mentioned an increase in submissions from creators outside of the US with stories of their mythical traditions.

With the success of Heartstopper, some felt the market may become flooded with YA graphic novels and while YA was, according to Whitney Leopard, a 'mix of anything', she also said that 'romance [or] relationships–focused stuff tends to do the best'. However, a lack of shelf space (when compared to middle grade) made this demographic tricker to crack.

Agent Janna Morishima says she pays 'a lot of attention to WEBTOON because I think that's where a lot of young people go now to find comics to read'. Given more and more US agents are signing WEBTOON creators with the idea of pitching them to publishers, it seems the market for print adaptations of webcomics will only grow.

One agent told me that most of the adult titles that are selling now are memoir and non-fiction but they hope the next growth area in adult graphic novels will be genre because that's all their creators want to do at the moment. Recent examples of adult genre graphic novels are Regency-era romance *Ruined*, written by Sarah Vaughn and illustrated by Sarah Winifred Searle and Niki Smith – the first adult romance title that First Second has acquired; and E.M. Carroll's horror title *A Guest in the House*, also from First Second. Given this publisher has a

slew of commercial bestsellers, one can only surmise the strength of their list enables them to take on the financial risk of publishing into new territory when it comes to genre adult graphic novels. With the 2025 launch of their sister imprint for adult graphic novels, 23rd Street Books, Macmillan senior vice president and publisher Allison Verost says, ‘Beyond capitalizing on an existing market, 23rd Street aims to lead it, shape it, and champion its most visionary minds.’[47]

‘Because graphic novels take so long, you … can’t really react to something working that quickly,’ says Connie Hsu, yet all publishers were looking ahead with clever ideas to fill perceived gaps in the market and to create new audiences for graphic novels.

Conclusions and recommendations: Can we grow them at home?

I went to the US hoping to find out how graphic novels were edited and published and, ten weeks later, faced with this mountain of newly obtained knowledge, I pondered: what can the Australian publishing industry do to expand our local graphic novel publishing program? Publishing graphic novels is complex, and I am sure no one would dispute the inherent difficulties with originating local content into this format profitably – unfortunately, there are no easy fixes. Yet it seems like we're increasingly willing to take a gamble on overcoming these challenges. If we think about all that's happened in Australia since the groundbreaking 2006 publication of Shaun Tan's wordless graphic novel *The Arrival*, we can agree that the format has been validated by winning major awards, that graphic novels have become increasingly visible in the media and the public eye, that vocal advocates for the format have done much to expand the readership and create a viable market, and that we are producing more local content than ever before. Yet week by week, if we check BookScan's Top 5000, we will see it for ourselves: we are selling large numbers of graphic novels in Australia, but our bestsellers are still largely imports, or local editions of books originating overseas. However, there are still significant opportunities for Australian publishers to capitalise on this thriving sector of the market. Drawing from my research, and with a long-term view to increasing local content in this format, I'd recommend the following strategies.

Invest in training for all publishing staff working on graphic novels *and* create a network for collective knowledge-sharing

Publishing professionals involved in the production of graphic novels in the US all shared one commonality: a deep understanding of the graphic novel format. If we want to originate graphic novels in Australia and emulate the success of these imports at scale, then we must be proactive in aiding the people who work with creators to bring these titles to print. Publishers need to have a better overarching understanding of the format itself and how graphic novels are produced; editors need training on the specificities of editing this format, including editing visual narratives and working with creators; designers likewise need training to fill skill gaps, especially when it comes to art direction, design, including lettering, and production of this format; production teams need to understand the technical complexities

that can arise. We need to train our staff and amplify our understanding of graphic novels, rather than stabbing about in the dark and facing the steep ascent alone. That's not to say there aren't select people working in book publishing in Australia who do hold this knowledge, but I believe there are substantial industry-wide gaps that need to be filled. This is a solvable problem: we simply need to invest in training for publishing staff working in this format and create a network for further knowledge sharing, boosting our skills across the board. We'll then have the key skills needed to assist local creators as they develop their works, providing feedback and guidance that will allow them – and their graphic novels – to reach their full potential.

Provide greater support for creators

Financial support of creatives is key. Advances will likely never be high enough for creators to sustain a living wage, which is a conundrum most authors in Australia face but is a huge obstacle in the creation of graphic novels, as they generally take many more years to produce than most other kinds of books. We should lobby for government, institutional and industry funding to specifically support the development of graphic novels.

But we need to do even more to physically support our local creators if we want to originate local content. Before my trip, I hadn't realised just how common it was for other creatives to be involved in the production of graphic novels in the US. Employing graphic novelists for their specialised knowledge, feedback or technical skills would help upskill in-house staff and also provide creators with another income stream while they're working on their books. And it can also help share the enormous creative load. While many publishers in the US turned to other creatives (e.g. colourists, flatters, letterers and bubble artists) to help graphic novelists in the production of their titles, particularly when it came to high-volume series publishing, others noted that this kind of publishing quickly became expensive. While it would not be a viable option for every title in our market, some creators could benefit (in terms of a reduced outlay of both labour and time) by having even one element of a book's production outsourced – and again, this work could be freelanced out to other graphic novelists. Or might some of this work – for example, lettering – be more commonly taken over by designers in-house?

Build better connections between publishers and creators

While we are acquiring local graphic novels in Australia, we need better pathways to build bridges between creators and publishers – as exist in the US – especially if they don't have the helping hand of an agent. Publishers (and agents) who are open to accepting pitches for graphic novels should state this on their submission pages. To create better connections between trade publishers and the comics industry, a visible presence of publishing staff is needed at independent comics festivals, at conferences, on panels, in discussion and, more simply, to meet creators and see their work. Graphic novelists need to be given opportunities to pitch their work and to form networks with industry. First Nations creators and graphic novelists from groups historically underrepresented in publishing should be provided the additional support of informal feedback for works in development. We could even go a step further and, as an industry, offer graphic novel creators an award that includes a mentorship with an expert editor or an established creator, with assistance in pitching any work that may eventuate to appropriate publishers.

While US publishers all had ideas on how to originate graphic novels that were commercially viable – these are peppered throughout this report – their ideas cannot be taken up by the industry as a blanket approach with a view to growing local content in Australia. Each graphic novel is different, and I believe Australian publishers are full of their own creative ideas when it comes to publishing profitable books. In Australia, we are fortunate to have a wealth of local, talented creators of comics and graphic novels who are passionate about telling stories – and we also have a publishing industry brimming with brilliant and accomplished staff who are eager to learn new skills. The graphic novel category has never been more enticing, especially if we look at children's fiction, and consider sales figures including hybrid titles and BookScan outliers.

It's time for the publishing industry to play the long game. If we wish to publish locally originated graphic novels that can flourish and sell on the same scale as import titles, we need to train staff and build our collective knowledge on the graphic novel format, and we need to do more to support local creators both financially and creatively in order to originate local content. And we need to make one thing very clear to local graphic novelists: we want to publish your stories. Let's commit to growing local graphic novels cooperatively, panel by panel, book by book.

Appendixes

Appendix A: Nielsen BookData BookScan figures, comics and graphic novels, Australian trade market, 2020–23

ABM Volume	p/e 28-DEC-2019 to p/e 28-NOV-2020	p/e 02-JAN-2021 to p/e 04-DEC-2021	p/e 01-JAN-2022 to p/e 03-DEC-2022	p/e 31-DEC-2022 to p/e 02-DEC-2023
F3.0 Graphic Novels: General	143,192	188,028	204,556	256,543
F3.1 Graphic Novels: Manga	644,168	1,336,207	1,674,239	1,500,346
F3.2 Graphic Novels: Superheroes	68,118	79,508	84,053	76,443
F3.3 Graphic Novels: Non-fiction & Literary	20,504	32,504	38,836	29,769
F3 Graphic Novels	**875,982**	**1,636,247**	**2,001,684**	**1,863,101**
Y2.3 Children's Comic Strip Fiction & Grapl	331,387	604,436	1,097,891	1,094,542
Grand Total (F3 Graphic Novels + Y2.3 Children's Comic Strip Fiction & Graphic Novels)	1,207,369	2,240,683	3,099,575	2,957,643

ABM Volume % Change	p/e 31-DEC-2022 to p/e 02-DEC-2023 **VS** p/e 28-DEC-2019 to p/e 28-NOV-2020	p/e 02-JAN-2021 to p/e 04-DEC-2021 **VS** p/e 28-DEC-2019 to p/e 28-NOV-2020	p/e 01-JAN-2022 to p/e 03-DEC-2022 **VS** p/e 02-JAN-2021 to p/e 04-DEC-2021	p/e 31-DEC-2022 to p/e 02-DEC-2023 **VS** p/e 01-JAN-2022 to p/e 03-DEC-2022
F3.0 Graphic Novels: General	79%	31%	9%	25%
F3.1 Graphic Novels: Manga	133%	107%	25%	-10%
F3.2 Graphic Novels: Superheroes	12%	17%	6%	-9%
F3.3 Graphic Novels: Non-fiction & Literary	45%	59%	19%	-23%
F3 Graphic Novels	113%	87%	22%	-7%
Y2.3 Children's Comic Strip Fiction & Grapl	230%	82%	82%	0%
Grand Total (F3 Graphic Novels + Y2.3 Children's Comic Strip Fiction & Graphic Novels)	145%	86%	38%	-5%

Source: Nielsen BookData BookScan (infobookscanaus@nielseniq.com), 14 February 2024.

Appendix B: Circana BookScan figures, comics and graphic novels, US trade market, 2020–23

	Measures	Time Period(s) Monthly						
Supercategory	Units 12 Months (Dec'19 - Nov'20)	Units 12 Months (Dec'20 - Nov'21)	Units 12 Months (Dec'21 - Nov'22)	Units 12 Months (Dec'22 - Nov'23)	Units Percent Change 12 Months (Dec'22 - Nov'23) vs 3 YA	Units Percent Change 12 Months (Dec'20 - Nov'21)	Units Percent Change 12 Months (Dec'21 - Nov'22)	Units Percent Change 12 Months (Dec'22 - Nov'23)
Grand Total	29,793,850	51,162,594	54,265,843	45,861,980	53.9	71.7	6.1	-15.5
ADULT FICTION	15,180,204	32,458,202	35,407,091	28,236,216	86.0	113.8	9.1	-20.3
JUVENILE FICTION	11,358,107	14,361,513	13,959,598	13,573,357	19.5	26.4	-2.8	-2.8
YOUNG ADULT FICTION	1,363,264	2,631,611	3,329,293	2,782,096	104.1	93.0	26.5	-16.4
JUVENILE NON-FICTION	1,391,294	1,160,707	1,049,411	785,715	-43.5	-16.6	-9.6	-25.1
ADULT NON-FICTION	398,027	434,396	411,955	370,793	-6.8	9.1	-5.2	-10.0
YOUNG ADULT NON-FIC	70,217	95,697	100,225	106,177	51.2	36.3	4.7	5.9
OTHER	32,737	20,468	8,270	7,626	-76.7	-37.5	-59.6	-7.8

Data available from Jan 2004 - Dec 2023

Copyright 2023. The NPD Group, L.P. All Rights Reserved. Proprietary and Confidential
Property of NPD and its Affiliates. Licensed for Use by NPD Clients Only.

Source: Circana BookScan, 13 December 2023.

Notes

1 C. Reid, 'How comics got to now', *Publishers Weekly*, 19 April 2022, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/89013-how-comics-got-to-now.html.

2 K. Patrick, 'In search of the great Australian (graphic) novel', *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2011, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 51–66, doi.org/10.1386/ajpc.1.1.51_1.

3 I. Urrutia, 'Get on board with the new wave of Australian graphic novels', *INCITE*, 2023, vol. 44, no. 4, https://issuu.com/incite_magazine/docs/incite_june_2023/s/26020951.

4 Nielsen BookData BookScan, data supplied 14 February 2024.

5 Books+Publishing, '2023 Australian market overview', *Books+Publishing*, 20 March 2024, www.booksandpublishing.com.au/articles/2024/03/20/248728/2023-australian-market-overview/.

6 Books+Publishing, '2023 Australian market overview'.

7 H. Wootton, 'The books flying off the shelves right now', *Australian Financial Review*, 21 December 2023, www.afr.com/companies/retail/hyper-local-fiction-booktok-hits-and-romantasy-top-christmas-books-20231219-p5esju.

8 ICv2, 'Raina Telgemeier has over 3.5 million graphic novels in print', ICv2, 2 January 2015, https://icv2.com/articles/news/view/30545/raina-telgemeier-has-over-3-5-million-graphic-novels-print.

9 J. Draper Carlson, 'Next Dog Man title announced', *School Library Journal*, 12 August 2023, https://goodcomicsforkids.slj.com/2023/08/12/next-dog-man-title-announced-news/.

10 R. Salkowitz, 'By the book: Dollar signs or danger signs for comics in the latest BookScan figures?', ICv2, 29 April 2024, https://icv2.com/articles/columns/view/56803/by-book-dollar-signs-danger-signs-comics-latest-bookscan-figures.

11 H. MacDonald, 'Report: March trilogy has sold so many copies the printer ran out of paper', The Beat, 8 August 2016, www.comicsbeat.com/report-march-trilogy-has-sold-so-many-copies-the-printer-ran-out-of-paper/.

12 B. Hibbs, 'Tilting at windmills #297: Bookscan 2023 – comics sales sag but Scholastic was still a powerhouse', The Beat, 11 April 2024, www.comicsbeat.com/tilting-at-windmills-297-bookscan-2023-comics-sales-sag-but-scholastic-was-still-a-powerhouse/.

13 Hibbs, 'Tilting at windmills #297'.

14 Hibbs, 'Tilting at windmills #297'.

15 J. Milliot, 'Print book sales fell 4.1% in first nine months of 2023', *Publishers Weekly*, 6 October 2023, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/93353-print-units-fell-4-1-in-first-nine-months-of-2023.html.

16 J. Milliot, 'Print book sales fell 2.6% in 2023', *Publishers Weekly*, 5 January 2024, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/financial-reporting/article/94037-print-book-sales-fell-2-6-in-2023.html.

17 Kickstarter, 'Stats', 23 August 2024, www.kickstarter.com/help/stats.

18 A. Steele, 'NYCC '19 Interview: Ngozi Ukazu on CHECK, PLEASE!, fandom & upcoming projects', The Beat, 9 October 2019, www.comicsbeat.com/nycc-19-interview-ngozi-ukazu/.

19 M. Zhdanova, 'A brief history of webcomics: 2010 to now', WWAC, 12 November 2021, https://womenwriteaboutcomics.com/2021/11/history-webcomics-now/.

20 WEBTOON, 'Our brands', WEBTOON, n.d., https://about.webtoon.com/our-brands.

21 Fortune Business Insights, 'Webcomics market size, share & industry analysis … 2024–2032', Fortune Business Insights, 22 July 2024, www.fortunebusinessinsights.com/webcomics-market-105731.

22 R. Salkowitz, 'Q&A with Bobbie Chase, Webtoon Unscrolled', ICv2, 13 June 2022, https://icv2.com/articles/columns/view/51388/q-a-bobbie-chase-webtoon-unscrolled.

23 D. Simons, 'The rise and fall of Comixology', The Beat, 5 December 2023, www.comicsbeat.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-comixology/.

24 ICv2, 'Covid surge in comics and graphic novel sales crested in 2022', ICv2, 16 October 2023, https://icv2.com/articles/markets/view/55334/covid-surge-comics-graphic-novel-sales-crested-2022.

25 SLJ Staff, 'Sora Report: Digital reading increases with double-digit growth in comics and graphic novels', *School Library Journal*, 3 April 2024, www.slj.com/story/Sora-Report-digital-Reading-Increases-with-Double-Digit-Growth-in-Comics-and-Graphic-Novels.

26 R. Duncan, M.J. Smith & P. Levitz, *The Power of Comics and Graphic Novels: Culture, Form and Context*, 3rd ed., London: Bloomsbury, 2024, p. 34.

27 S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1994, p. 36.

28 R. Johnston, 'Now Heartstopper volume 5 is also the best selling book in the USA', Bleeding Cool, 4 January 2024, https://bleedingcool.com/comics/now-heartstopper-volume-5-is-also-the-best-selling-book-in-the-usa/.

29 P. Russon, 'Why Heartstopper is Gen Z's defining publishing phenomenon', The Conversation, 7 February 2024, https://theconversation.com/why-heartstopper-is-gen-zs-defining-publishing-phenomenon-221726.

30 C. Diaz Gonzalez and G. Epstein, *Invisible*, New York: Graphix, 2022, p. 198.

31 M. Crilley, 'Lost in Taiwan: The story behind my new graphic novel, a guest post by Mark Crilley', *School Library Journal*, 26 May 2023, https://teenlibrariantoolbox.com/2023/05/26/lost-in-taiwan-the-story-behind-my-new-graphic-novel-a-guest-post-by-mark-crilley/.

32 E. Helmore, 'Gen Z will be last generation with white majority in US, study finds', *The Guardian*, 9 August 2023, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/aug/08/gen-z-americans-white-majority-study.

33 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 31.

34 A. Kaplan and R. Oliver Kaplan, 'Interview: Kirk Benshoff walks us through First Second's design process', The Beat, 8 March 2024, www.comicsbeat.com/interview-kirk-benshoff-walks-us-through-first-seconds-design-process/.

35 Reid, 'How comics got to now'.

36 J. Milliot, 'BookTok helped book sales soar. How long will that last?', *Publishers Weekly*, 18 August 2023, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/93014-booktok-helped-book-sales-soar-how-long-will-that-last.html.

37 J. Webster Ayuso, 'A boom in comics drawn from fact', *New York Times*, 24 January 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/01/24/books/french-nonfiction-comic-books.html.

38 Reid, 'How comics got to now'.

39 Hibbs, 'Tilting at windmills #297'.

40 Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial, and Administrative Law of the Committee on the Judiciary of the House of Representatives, *Investigation of Competition in Digital Markets*, Washington, D.C.: US Government Publishing Office, 2022, p. 213, www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-117HPRT47832/pdf/CPRT-117HPRT47832.pdf.

41 C. Reid, 'Rich Johnson joins Diamond Book Distributors', *Publishers Weekly*, 20 April 2022, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/89098-rich-johnson-joins-diamond-book-distributors.html.

42 L. Aratani, '"Amazon doesn't care about books": How Barnes & Noble bounced back', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2023, www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/15/barnes-and-noble-bookstores-james-daunt.

43 American Library Association (ALA), 'New ALA report: Gen Z & Millennials are visiting the library & prefer print books', ALA, 1 November 2023, www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2023/11/new-ala-report-gen-z-millennials-are-visiting-library-prefer-print-books.

44 ALA, 'Top 10 most challenged books of 2023', ALA, n.d., www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10.

45 R. Sutton, 'Cynthia Leitich Smith and Rosemary Brosnan talk with Roger', The Horn Book, 4 November 2020, https://www.hbook.com/story/cynthia-leitich-smith-and-rosemary-brosnan-talk-with-roger.

46 Scholastic News Room, 'Scholastic's Graphix imprint blasts onto the manga scene', Scholastic, 20 September 2023, https://mediaroom.scholastic.com/index.php?q=press-release/scholastics-graphix-imprint-blasts-manga-scene.

47 B. Alverson, 'First Second launches sister imprint, 23rd St. Books', ICv2, 11 July 2024, https://icv2.com/articles/news/view/57326/first-second-launches-sister-imprint-23rd-st-books.

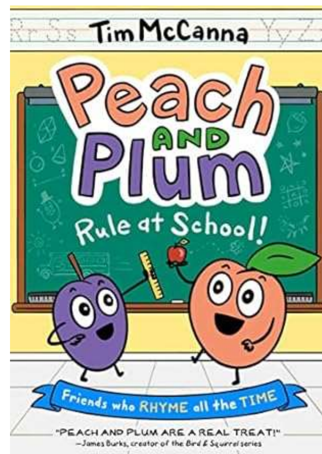
Recommended reading and resources

Recommended reading

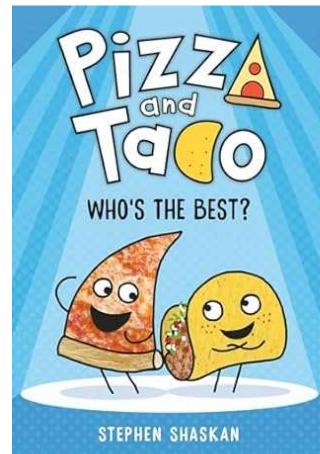
Graphic novels are an addictive format. Over the course of my research I read more than 100 graphic novels – once I started, I couldn't stop. All in the name of 'research', of course! Here are a few that I loved from North American publishers.

Early reader/chapter book

Jannie Ho
The Lost Mitten
Holiday House, 2023

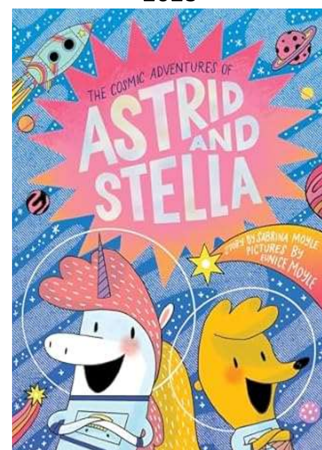


Tim McCanna
Peach and Plum 2: Rule at School!
Little, Brown and Company, 2023

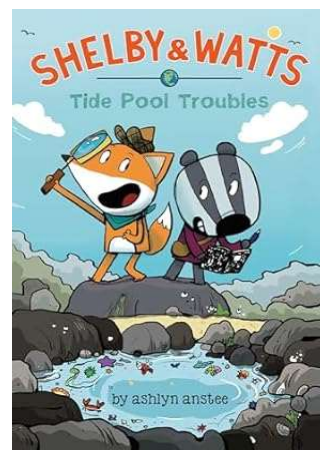


Stephen Shaskan
Pizza and Taco 1: Who's the Best?
Random House Graphic, 2020

Susie Yi
Cat & Cat Adventures 1: The Quest for Snacks
HarperAlley, 2022

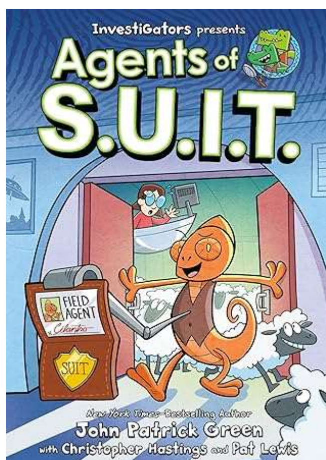


Sabrina Moyle (author) & Eunice Moyle (illustrator)
The Cosmic Adventures of Astrid and Stella 1
Abrams, 2022

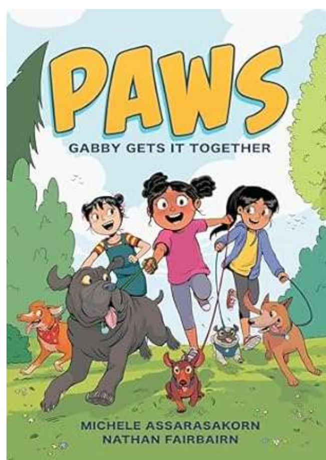


Ashlyn Anstee
Shelby & Watts 1: Tide Pool Troubles
Viking Books for Young Readers, 2022

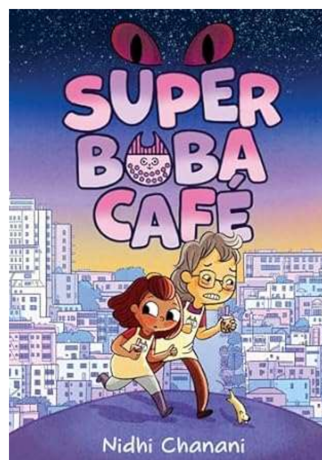
Middle grade



John Patrick Green & Christopher Hastings (authors) & Pat Lewis (illustrator)
InvestiGators: Agents of S.U.I.T. 1
First Second, 2022



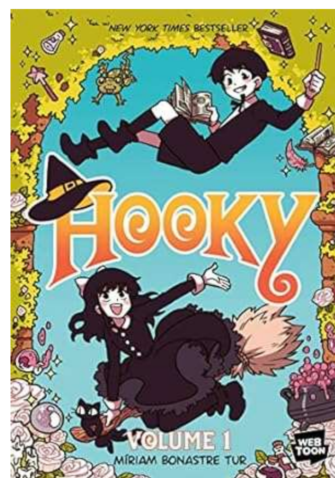
Nathan Fairbairn (author) & Michele Assarasakorn (illustrator)
PAWS 1: Gabby Gets It Together
Razorbill, 2022



Nidhi Chanani
Super Boba Café 1
Abrams, 2023

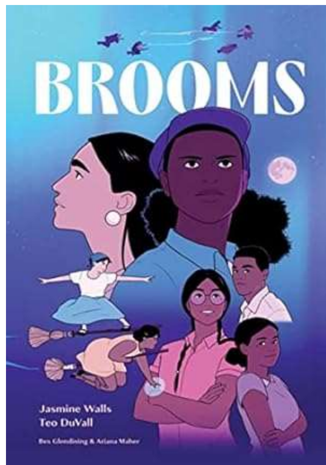
Kayla Miller & Jeffrey Canino (authors) & Kristina Luu (illustrator)
Besties 1: Work It Out
Etch/HMH Books for Young Readers, 2021

Johnnie Christmas
Swim Team
HarperAlley, 2022

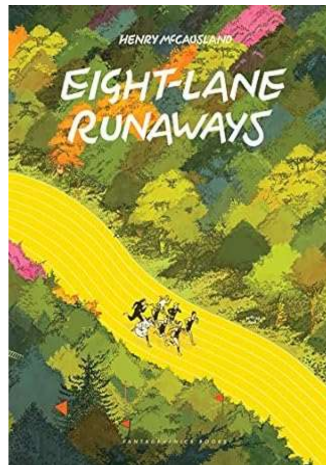


Míriam Bonastre Tur
Hooky: Volume 1
Clarion Books, 2021

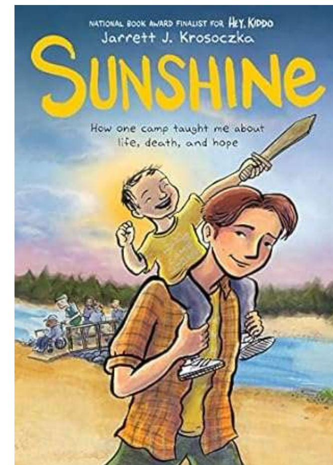
Young adult



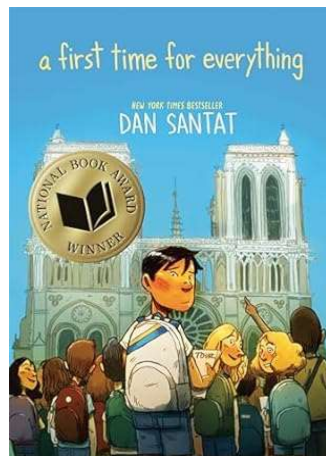
Jasmine Walls (author) & Teo DuVall (illustrator)
Brooms
Levine Querido, 2023



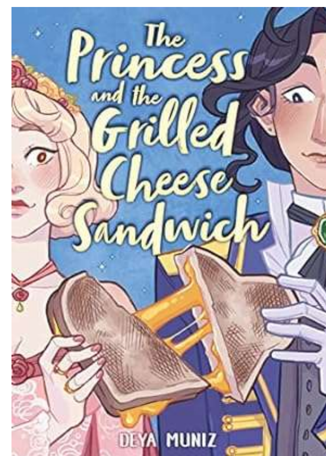
Henry McCausland
Eight-Lane Runaways
Fantagraphics, 2020



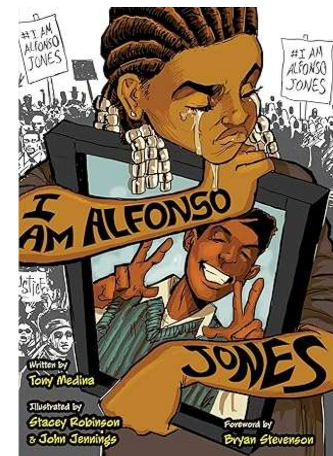
Jarrett J. Krosoczka
Sunshine
Graphix, 2023



Dan Santat
A First Time for Everything
First Second, 2023



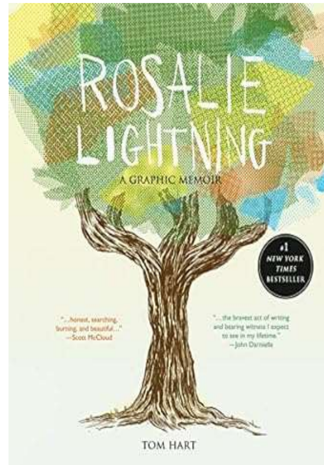
Deya Muniz
The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich
Little, Brown Ink, 2023



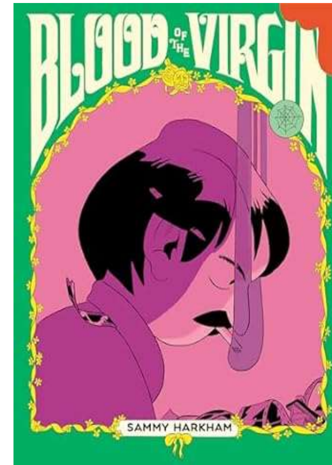
Tony Medina (author), Stacey Robinson & John Jennings (illustrators)
I Am Alfonso Jones
Tu Books, 2017

Adult

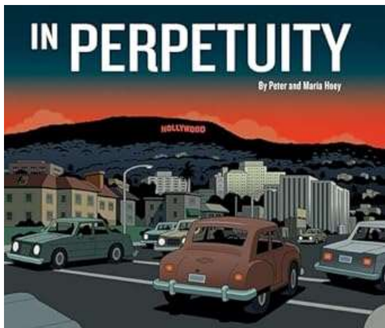
E.M. Carroll
A Guest in the House
First Second, 2023



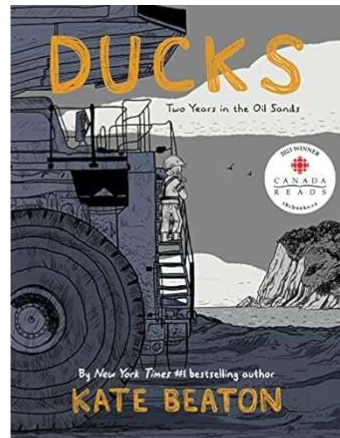
Tom Hart
Rosalie Lightning: A Graphic Memoir
St. Martin's Press, 2016



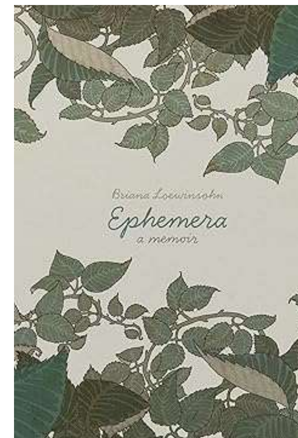
Sammy Harkham
Blood of the Virgin
Pantheon, 2023



Peter Hoey and Maria Hoey
In Perpetuity
Top Shelf Productions, 2024



Kate Beaton
Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands
Drawn & Quarterly, 2022



Briana Loewinsohn
Ephemera: A Memoir
Fantagraphics, 2023

Other resources

I highly recommend these excellent books:

Bond, S. *Filth & Grammar: The Comic Book Editor's (Secret) Handbook*. Los Angeles: Off Register Press, 2022.

McCloud, S. *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*. New York: William Morrow, 2006.

McCloud, S. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.

Piekos, N. *The Essential Guide to Comic Book Lettering*. Portland, OR: Image Comics, 2021.

Duncan, R., Smith, M.J. & Levitz, P. *The Power of Comics and Graphic Novels: Culture, Form and Context.* London: Bloomsbury, 2023.

There are also many resources online:

Tips on lettering from graphic designer Nate Piekos:
https://blambot.com/en-au/pages/lettering-tips

Technical tips and tricks from First Second's creative director Kirk Benshoff:
www.youtube.com/@KirkBenshoffDesigns

The Beat: latest news on graphic novels (and more):
www.comicsbeat.com

Small Press Expo, previous years' panels:
www.youtube.com/@SmallPressExpo

Reimena Yee's excellent Creator's Guide to Comics Devices:
https://comicsdevices.com

Folio: stories of contemporary Australian comics:
www.foliocomics.com

ALIA Graphic Novels and Comics:
https://graphic.alia.org.au
www.youtube.com/@aliagraphic

Australian Comics & Graphic Novels Database for Libraries:
www.ozcomicsdb.com

Bibliography

Duncan, R., Smith, M.J. & Levitz, P. *The Power of Comics and Graphic Novels: Culture, Form and Context.* London: Bloomsbury, 2023.

Grant, P., Clark, G., MacFarlane, E. & Scott, R. *Graphic Storytellers at Work: Cross-Industry Opportunities for Cartoonists, Illustrators and Comics-Makers*. Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, 2021. https://creative.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Graphic-Storytellers-at-Work-GSAW-Report_WEB.pdf

Hayward, D. (director). *Graphic Novels! Melbourne!* Aisle Five Pictures, 2014.

Maynard, A.L. 'The Melbourne scene: Comics production, city spaces, and the creative industries'. In B. Woo & J. Stoll (eds), *The Comics World: Comic Books, Graphic Novels, and Their Publics*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2021, pp. 19–31.

—— 'A scene in sequence: Australian comics production as a creative industry 1975–2017'. PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 2017. https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/handle/2440/112807

McCloud, S. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.

Patrick, K. 'In search of the great Australian (graphic) novel'. *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2011, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 51–66, doi.org/10.1386/ajpc.1.1.51_1.

Spence, P. & Henningsgaard, P. 'International publication pathways for Australian comic books and graphic novels'. *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 2022, vol. 38, pp. 189–208, doi.org/10.1007/s12109-021-09855-0.

Thanks

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body.

Thank you to Creative Australia, and the Australian Publishers Association's Trade Publishers Committee and Children's Publishers Committee, for their financial support of the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship, and to the members of the APA's Editorial Working Group and the Children's Publishers Committee – Agata Mrva-Montoya, Anna McFarlane and Tash Besliev – who provided assistance and feedback on the draft report.

Many thanks to:

Andrea Hanke, the APA's Editorial Working Group – Meredith Curnow, Chair (Penguin Random House Australia), Agata Mrva-Montoya (University of Sydney), Anna McFarlane (Allen & Unwin), Karen Lee (IPEd), Madonna Duffy (UQP), Vanessa Radnidge (Hachette Australia), Rachel Bin Salleh (Magabala) and Tracy O'Shaughnessy (RMIT) – Ana Vivas, Bianca Whiteley, Caleb Vines, Carey Schroeter, Claire West, Dani Solomon, Dave Lloyd, Emma Driver, Jodie Webster, Kristen McLean, Nicola Santili, Radhiah Chowdhury, Susannah Chambers and Zoe Walton.

I am extremely grateful to the following people who kindly volunteered their time to speak with me while I was in the US, and shared their wealth of experience and knowledge:

Amie Wright, former president, Graphic Novels & Comics Round Table, ALA

Andrea Colvin, editorial director, Little, Brown Ink

April Ward, executive art director, Penguin Random House

Avi Ehrlich, founder and publisher, Silver Sprocket

Beth Sotelo, colourist (Lady Mechanika series by Joe Benitez) and graphic novelist (*Grump*)

Bob Bianchini, assistant director Art/Design, Random House Graphic

Brian Geffen, executive editor, Henry Holt Books For Young Readers

Briana Loewinsohn, graphic novelist (*Ephemera: A Memoir*)

Chag Lowry, graphic novel author (*Soldiers Unknown*, illustrated by Rahsan Ekedal)

Chris Staros, editor-in-chief, Top Shelf Productions

Claire Duffy, graphic novel author

Connie Hsu, editorial director, Roaring Brook Press

Daniel Lazar, literary agent, Writers House

David Levithan, author; editorial director, Scholastic

David Saylor, vice president and creative director, Scholastic Trade Publishing Group; founder and publisher, Graphix

Della Farrell, editor, Holiday House

Eleri Harris, journalist; cartoonist

Emilia Rhodes, editorial director, HarperCollins/Clarion Books

Emilie Robert Wong, associate editor, Enchanted Lion Books

Gina Gagliano, outreach director, Boston Comic Arts Foundation

James Sturm, cartoonist; co-founder, The Center for Cartoon Studies

Jane Starr, literary scout; owner and principal, Jane Starr Literary Scouts

Janna Morishima, literary agent; founder, Kids Comics Unite

Jarad Greene, cartoonist; graphic novelist (*A for Effort*; *A-Okay*)

Jen Linnan, agent, Linnan Literary Management LLC

Judy Hansen, president, Hansen Literary Agency

Justin Krasner, Executive Editor, Odd Dot

Karen Green, curator for comics and cartoons, Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library

Kayla Miller, graphic novelist (Click series; co-author, Besties series, with Jeffrey Canino, illustrated by Kristina Luu)

Lillian Sun, production director, Black Dog & Leventhal / Little, Brown Books for Young Readers / Running Press Kids / Running Press Studio, Hachette Book Group US

Liz Frances, founder and publisher, Street Noise Books

Maria Hoey, artist; publisher and co-founder, Coin-Op Books; graphic novelist (all with Peter Hoey: *Coin-Op Comics Anthology*; *The Bend of Luck*; *Animal Stories*; *In Perpetuity*)

Marisa Finkelstein, senior production editor, Little, Brown and Company

Matt Huynh, graphic novelist and illustrator

Matthew Noe, former president, Graphic Novels & Comics Round Table, ALA; head collection and knowledge management librarian, Harvard Medical School

Moni Barrette, past president, Graphic Novels & Comics Round Table, ALA; director Collection Development and Publisher Relations, LibraryPass

Nick Thomas, executive editor, Levine Querido

Paul Karasik, cartoonist; educator

Rachel Stark, editor, Disney-Hyperion

Rich Johnson, vice president sales and business development, Diamond Book Distributors; author (*Captain America: Avenger, Hero, Icon*; *The Amazing Spider-Man: Web-Slinger, Hero, Icon*; *The Incredible Hulk: Worldbreaker, Hero, Icon*; *The Avengers: Heroes, Icons, Assembled*)

Robyn Chapman, editor, First Second Books

Shana Corey, editorial director, Random House Graphic

Simon Hanselmann, cartoonist; graphic Novelist (*Megahex*; *Megg & Mogg in Amsterdam (And Other Stories)*; *One More Year*; *Bad Gateway*; *Seeds and Stems*; *Below Ambition*; *Crisis Zone*; *Werewolf Jones & Sons Deluxe Summer Fun Annual* with Josh Pettinger)

Stacy Whitman, founder, publisher and editor, Tu Books, an imprint of Lee & Low

Stefanie Hoffman, senior marketing manager, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers

Susan Van Metre, executive editorial director, Walker Books US

Tom Hart, graphic novelist (*Rosalie Lightning*); author (*The Art of the Graphic Memoir*); executive director, Sequential Artists Workshop

Vedika Khanna, senior editor, Ten Speed Graphic

Victoria Stapleton, executive director School & Library Marketing, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers

Whitney Leopard, executive editor, Random House Graphic

Thank you also to the following people who shared insights, thoughts and ideas about graphic novel publishing in Australia:

Annabel Barker, agent, Annabel Barker Agency

Bernard Caleo, comics maker; scholar; bookseller, Readings Carlton

Danielle Binks, agent, Jacinta di Mase Management

David Blumenstein, cartoonist; co-founder, Squishface Studio

David Golding, senior editor, Scribe

Erica Wagner, publishing consultant, Allen & Unwin; co-publisher, Twelve Panels Press

Iurgi Urrutia, convenor, ALIA Graphic

Joshua Santospirito, graphic novelist (*The Islands Where We Left Our Ancestors*)

Marisa Pintado, publishing director, Hardie Grant Children's Publishing

Rebecca Young, senior publisher, Scholastic Press