“Aren’t These Boy Books?”: High School Students’ Readings of Gender in Graphic Novels

Adolescents of both sexes enjoy reading graphic novels—but are somewhat uneasy about it.

Interest in the use of graphic novels in education has increased as reports of their potential continue to come forth. Notable among these reports are those that describe how graphic novels can be used to help improve reading skills among students whose first language is English (Gustafson, 2007; Thompson, 2007) and students who participate in English as a Second Language programs (“Adding Comic Books,” 2004; Crawford, 2004).

Graphic novels have also been touted as a tool in the development of multiple literacies, such as verbal and visual literacy (The National Coalition Against Censorship, the American Library Association, & the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2006; Schwartz, 2002). Numerous articles have reported the high level of interest that graphic novels hold for many students (MacDonald, 2004; Nylund, 2007) and the potential this format has to encourage literature appreciation (Mooney, 2005; Young, 2007). Additionally, others (Lavin, 1998; Lyga, 2006) have contended that engaging with graphic novels is a more rigorous cognitive activity than reading conventional text-only books.

The American Library Association (ALA; The National Coalition Against Censorship et al., 2006) has described the graphic novel format as a “singular product of the 20th century” (p. 2) that shares similar techniques with film. The ALA further explained that graphic novels are “far more sophisticated and varied in content than the comics that preceded them,” and that “while comics are generally published as magazines, their ‘grown up’ version—the graphic novel—appears in book format” (The National Coalition Against Censorship et al., 2006, p. 2).

Although they are often presented as a literary genre, graphic novels are actually a format for literary genres and works of nonfiction. The Japanese version of the graphic novel, called manga, is proportionally smaller and thicker than U.S. graphic novels and contains mostly stories of genre fiction such as romance, mystery, or horror (Weiner, 2003).

Based on the aforementioned reports, I, like other school library media specialists, encouraged graphic novel usage in our high school. What I noticed, however, was that the majority of graphic novel readers were male.
When I approached different girls in an effort to persuade them to read graphic novels, they would often say, “Those are boy books.”

Reports made by education practitioners and the general media (e.g., Chelton, 2006; Horton, 2005; Krashen, 2004) have also suggested that graphic novels hold more appeal for boys. This notion that graphic novels are of interest to only one sex made me question whether educators should be using graphic novels in the curriculum. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how the cultural category of gender was connected with the way in which high school students read graphic novels.

**Related Research**

The theoretical framework used to develop this study was informed by poststructural feminist theory and Hall’s (1980) theory of media encoding and decoding. Both theories assume that a reader has different understandings of those meanings communicated by various media. Hall described three ideological positions that a subject may take when decoding messages relayed through media: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional.

Dominant-hegemonic readings suggest that a reader identifies with the cultural mores communicated by the preferred reading that is being offered by the media. When a reader experiences a negotiated reading, he or she generally accepts the preferred reading but alters it so that it reflects his or her cultural values. The point at which a reader completely rejects the media or text is during an oppositional reading, which suggests the reader has created his or her own interpretation of the messages being communicated.

Poststructural feminist theory takes the notion of positioned reading a step further by suggesting that one’s position is constantly subject to change, depending on the historical moment and particular discourse within which the reading, or conversation about that reading, is taking place (Weedon, 1997).

The dual notions of boy books and girl books imply that there are absolutes associated with reading and biological sex; that is not my belief, and I do not present the following research studies with the intent of furthering this idea. Gender is a fluid concept and one that adolescents have the opportunity to explore more freely when they engage in reading literature.

Previous studies have examined the literacy practices and preferences of girls and boys as a means of understanding the materials that appeal to certain readers and how children enact various forms of literacy. Segel (1986) demonstrated that the dual notion of boy books and girl books has deep historical roots that continue to foster views about what is socially acceptable for girls and boys, particularly through the influence of one’s family and teachers.

Several scholars (Cherland, 1994; De Jean, Upitis, Koch, & Young, 1999; Millard, 1997a; Simpson, 1996) have determined those aspects that appeal most to girls as being fictional stories that focus on the relationships between characters. Boys’ literary interests have been identified (Cherland, 1994; Millard, 1997a; Simpson, 1996; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) as being of a nonfictional nature with an emphasis on action or the storyline. For girls and boys, however, several researchers (e.g., Cherland, 1994; Mitchell, 1995; Sarland, 1991; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) found that children must identify with characters in some fashion to find them meaningful.

Researchers (Finders, 1997; Millard & Marsh, 2001; Norton, 2003; Ryan, 2005) suggested that because of the middle class, feminine nature of schooling, and the library profession (Tilley, 2007), the literacy practices most familiar with boys and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, such as listening to music and reading graphic novels, are not recognized as academically legitimate.

Predictably, researchers (Ryan, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) found that this creates a disconnection between more enjoyable home literacy activities and those considered to be mandatory in the realm of schooling. Simpson (1996) noted, however, that neither girls nor boys benefit from this situation, as “boys’ reading practices” such as newspaper and nonfiction reading “are more congruent with the acquisition of social power and financial success” (p. 274).
These studies laid the framework for the development of the following research questions:

1. Which of Hall’s (1980) ideological positions do students take when reading graphic novels?
2. What is the relation to the perceived gender differences in graphic novel preference?
3. How do students think that graphic novels should be used in a school context?

Method

To gain entry into the high school where I wished to conduct my study, I asked for the assistance of the school’s library media specialist. Upon meeting with me and discussing my research goals, she introduced me to three teachers who she felt would be sympathetic to my research topic. These teachers allowed me to speak to their students about my research project in an attempt to recruit them for participation. Additionally, the library media specialist allowed me to attempt to recruit her student library assistants. Through these opportunities, I was able to speak to students in grades 9–12 taking core and honor-level language arts and social studies classes.

Fifteen high school students, 8 females and 7 males, voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. The students attended a predominately white, middle class, Midwestern public high school serving 1,565 students in grades 9–12. All but one student identified as white, and two students reported receiving free or reduced-cost lunch.

The participants were asked to read three graphic novels that were randomly selected from the Great Graphic Novels for Teens booklist published by the Young Adult Library Services Association (2007). These were X-23: Innocence Lost by Craig Kyle (2006), Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda by J.P. Stassen (2006), and Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall by Bill Willingham (2006).

X-23 reflects the name of the main character, a girl who was genetically engineered to become an assassin for hire. Biologically adapted with metal claws and the ability to heal quickly, X-23 discovers that she can become something other than a murderer but must escape the corporation that has deemed her too valuable for release. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is the subject of Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda, as the main character of the same name reflects on his experience during the conflict while he stumbles into insanity. Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall is a collection of stories about traditional fairy tale characters who have been banished from their homeland.

After reading each graphic novel, the students participated in one focus-group interview. The focus groups were divided by sex in an effort to foster a more comfortable environment from which issues of gender may be broached and discussed. In this same vein, I as a female researcher served as the moderator for the group of girls and a male colleague served as the moderator for the group of boys.

At the beginning of each focus-group session, the moderators introduced a topic to the focus groups and let the students speak to each as they saw fit. The moderators then followed up on those ideas and concepts provided by students, with more specific questions. The students also had an opportunity to provide opinions, suggestions, and additional questions about graphic novels. If conversation lagged, each moderator had a list of prepared questions from which he or she could choose to ask the group.

Each focus group often developed a consensus about the issues that were discussed. Points of disagreement among the students’ responses are reflected in the results of this study. Additionally, a final focus-group interview was conducted, in which the students were asked if and how graphic novels should be used in the context of schooling. Focus-group discussions lasted no longer than 45 minutes and were audiotaped and videotaped.

Each student was also interviewed individually on two occasions; once after the first focus-group interview and once after the third interview. The individual interviews were conducted to give each student the opportunity to provide further comment or to speak about topics he or she did not wish to mention in the focus-group setting. Each individual interview lasted no longer than 30 minutes and was audiotaped and videotaped.

All focus group and individual interviews were transcribed for analysis. This analysis was a grounded theory approach to coding in two stages; initial and focused coding. As Charmaz (2006) noted, “initial codes are provisional, comparative and grounded in
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Results and Discussion

Ideological Positioning When Reading Graphic Novels

Rather than affirming the notion that graphic novels are boy books, this study’s participants experienced various levels of interest in this sample of graphic novels, depending on the extent to which they identified with characters from the stories. Using Hall’s (1980) language of decoding, the readings the participants took with each graphic novel differed only slightly by gender. The stories featured in Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall recalled traditional fairy tales, such as Red Riding Hood and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, which the students reflected on hearing and reading when they were children.

The pleasurable childhood associations with the main characters of Fables, combined with realistic themes such as relocation, divorce, and abuse, led the students to read this graphic novel from a dominant-hegemonic position. One student said, “Well, I think it [the graphic novel] gives a more humanized version of fairy tales. It shows Cinderella, instead of her foot being too short to try the shoe, she actually cut her heel off, so it’s kind of like that version to the fairy tales. It almost gives fairy tales more weight in the real world and real lessons.”

Conversely, the students in both focus groups expressed little knowledge of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 in Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda. Sarland (1991) noted that boys and girls often fail to “find themselves in the text” (p. 93) when a story’s characters behave “in a way that [is] totally foreign to their experience of how people behave and what they are like” (p. 93). This was evident in one student’s comment when she explained why she did not like the book: “I didn’t really feel any connection to anyone. I just didn’t really care about them.”

This notion held true with regard to the students’ reading of Deogratias, in which their largely white, Western frame of reference inspired their oppositional reading. Many students noted that they were confused by the nature of the conflict and in trying to identify which characters belonged to which ethnic group. Many also claimed that the story was “too depressing” for them to say that they liked the novel and that the Rwandan genocide and people were too foreign for the students to really appreciate the story.

The most evident instance of a connection between gender and reading difference came during the students’ conversations of X-23: Innocence Lost. The protagonist was featured as a petite female who exhibited characteristics of both a fierce warrior and a vulnerable teenager. One girl described the character of X-23 as “a tiny girl kicking everyone’s ass.” The girls expressed a shared sense of enjoyment and empowerment at this depiction, causing them to read this graphic novel from a dominant-hegemonic position. They began their conversation about this book by admitting that they thought they were going to like this book the least of the three read for this study, but they were surprised to find that they enjoyed reading about an intelligent and physically strong girl growing up in extreme conditions.

One girl said, “Honestly, I opened the book and I was like oh gosh, I’m not going to like this, but I read some of it anyway and I was like, well, maybe I’ll change my mind.” On the other hand, the boys experienced either a negotiated or oppositional stance to the reading of this book, depending on how they chose to understand the gender of the protagonist.

From a negotiated reading, X-23 was considered by the male participants to be, as Hall (1980) described, “an exception to the rule” (p. 137), meaning that X-23’s gender as female was felt to be an
feelings and desire to know more about the characters and the relationships between characters while the boys spent most of their time discussing those actions taken or not taken by the characters.

For example, in their discussions of Deogratias, the girls focused on the characters’ personalities and their like or dislike of the characters’ interactions with others. The boys focused on interpreting the characters’ actions, identifying what happened, why the action happened, and what should or could have happened instead. Moreover, the boys’ discussions focused on the male characters in each graphic novel. References to the female characters were relegated to their association to the male characters or when the boys expressed confusion or derision toward the female characters’ actions.

Relation to the Perceived Gender Differences in Graphic Novel Preference

Rather than identifying graphic novel reading as being of interest solely to persons of a distinct race or sex, the participants in this study ascribed graphic novel reading to the subculture of “nerds.” Even though the participants did not expressly associate graphic novel reading with gender, their responses indicated that they held certain subconscious beliefs about nerds—that being that they are male, which implied that the popular perception of the graphic novel reader is, in fact, associated with gender.

For example, when asked if they were surprised by the number of participants in the female focus group, one boy said, “It’s that cultural thing. You just don’t expect girls to be into that whole thing as much as guys are. You know, video games, graphic novels, comic books, and all that, the works of nerd culture, not saying that in an insulting way. I’m a nerd really. But that’s not what you would expect. It’s a surprising number.”

Furthermore, both groups of students described how the public act of graphic novel reading would leave them open for scrutiny by peers and popular social groups such as “jocks and cheerleaders.” One boy suggested that if graphic novels were to be used in school, they should be made mandatory reading because “cliques won’t read them because they don’t think it’s cool.” One girl said, “I didn’t read them in public. So I guess it wasn’t necessarily like what

In discussing both their oppositional or negotiated stances, the boys described how they could understand the character of X-23, either as a quirky take on the original character of Wolverine or as knockoff of the same. These versions of X-23 that the boys produced reflected their own internal negotiations with gender norms.

Another aspect of gender and graphic novel reading that surfaced was the way in which the students talked about the stories. The students’ conversations mirrored Cherland’s (1994) theory that girls speak of stories through a “discourse of feeling” (p. 133), while boys use a “discourse of action” (p. 134). Throughout the focus-group discussions, the girls expressed their feelings and desire to know more about the characters and the relationships between characters while the boys spent most of their time discussing those actions taken or not taken by the characters.

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I intended to do, but it was definitely pretty obvious that I didn’t really want anyone to see me reading them. But I couldn’t really tell you why other than people just made it out to be kind of embarrassing to be reading them.”

The relationship between graphic literature readership and “nerdiness” has been found elsewhere. Nugent (2008) reported that “Tokyo is the city where *otaku*, a type similar to the American nerd, has its own neighborhood...known for waitresses who dress as manga characters” (p. 10). At first glance, this “performance of identity” (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 220) seems unrelated to gender differences in graphic novel preference; however, as Wilkins (2008) described, “cool [or lack thereof] activates race, class, and gender understandings” (p. 26). Weedon (1997) wrote that individuals “commit themselves to specific subject positions and embrace quite contradictory modes of subjectivity at different moments” (p. 94). Truly, these understandings serve to complicate the desires and intentions of would-be graphic novel readers, particularly girls.

In keeping with the concept of identity performance, Wilkins (2008) noted that gender as well as race and class are performed, “but these performances are not a free-for-all; instead they draw-on and re-make existing cultural ideas about race, gender, and class-cultural ideas that are tightly bound up with structural conditions” (p. 6).

Few studies have examined multiple diversities of nerds, but those that have, have determined that the cultural ideas that embody being a nerd include maleness (Anderegg, 2007; Barba & Mason, 1994) as well as whiteness (Carter, 2005; Wilkins, 2008). The gender performances enacted by the participants in this study reflect these cultural ideas, particularly the notion that graphic novel reading is not included in the performance of “female.” The girls expressed an unwillingness to openly read graphic novels in public, for fear of being labeled a nerd by peers or of being judged by others in general.

The level of enjoyment that each focus group found in reading the sample of graphic novels was determined by the amount of imaginative skill required in their reading experiences. The boys expressed pleasure in knowing the authors’ intentions as they were communicated through the graphic novels’ illustrations. That traditional novels lack this type of clarification was a fault that the boys noted and described as being one reason they chose not to read them in their spare time.

The girls’ opinion was the opposite of the boys’. Even though the girls enjoyed reading the sample of graphic novels, they indicated that they preferred reading traditional novels because this type of reading allowed them to exercise their imaginative skills to a greater degree.

**How Do Students Think Graphic Novels Should Be Used in a School Context?**

Each focus group indicated that there were degrees of appropriateness in terms of which graphic novels should be used in school. Most students felt that *X-23: Innocence Lost* should be made available in the library media center. Some students felt that *Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall* might have had some relation to the curriculum, but both groups overwhelmingly agreed that *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* had the most educational significance. This latter response was likely a reflection of a majority of the students’ own experiences of being introduced to the Rwandan genocide of 1994 through reading this graphic novel.

Despite their acknowledgment that graphic novels hold a place in school, the participants’ responses indicated that they struggled with socializing forces that challenged the notion that graphic novels are legitimate forms of school knowledge. For example, many students indicated that despite being excited about reading graphic novels, they didn’t think their teachers would encourage them to read graphic novels over the “real books” they read in class. This served as a point of contention in the male focus group, as the boys proffered suggestions for their implementation. Conversely, the idea of “real books” taking precedent in the classroom was a comfortable notion with the girls, who felt that graphic novels would best serve as supplemental curricular material.

When I had initially applied to the school district administration for permission to conduct this particular research study with the students in their schools, my request was rejected based on the assistant superintendent’s expressed judgment that graphic novels in general were inappropriate material to be
The notion that graphic novels are not normally school-sanctioned material possibly lent a subversive and edgy status to the books.

Despite findings (Millard, 1997b) that indicate reading is a shared experience among girls only, the majority of male and female participants in this study related stories regarding how they shared their graphic novel reading with siblings, parents, and friends. The notion that graphic novels are not normally school-sanctioned material possibly lent a subversive and edgy status to the books, thus providing the participants with something different to share with those individuals they felt were “safe.”

Implications
The results of this study indicate that graphic novel reading is both enjoyed and valued to differing degrees by high school students, male and female; however I have also identified, as Ortner (1996) described, “certain cultural meanings and structural arrangements that construct and constrain their ‘agency,’ and that limit the transformative potential” (p. 2) of graphic novel reading for all students.

Both male and female participants in this study clearly expressed a sense of double consciousness as they struggled to find a balance between engaging in what is considered to be nerd culture while refraining from defining themselves as nerds. Another point of struggle presented itself as the students battled with the notion that graphic novels are not “real books” despite their real reading of graphic novels.

These struggles with identity illustrate the multiple discourses that inform how these students consider themselves with relation to how they define the gender appropriateness and legitimacy of graphic novel reading. As Weedon (1997) said, “Individuals are both the site and subjects [italics in the original] of discursive struggle for their identity. Yet the interpellation of individuals as subjects within particular discourses is never final. It is always open to challenge” (pp. 93–94).

Despite their oppositional reading of one graphic novel and their struggle with the gender characterization in another, this study’s group of male participants enjoyed reading a fictional graphic novel and expressed interest in reading others. This finding challenges prior studies related to boys’ reading interests (Cherland, 1994; Millard, 1997a; Simpson, 1996; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) and suggests that graphic novels hold significant potential for connecting boys with literature. Although the female participants did not feel as strongly about graphic novels as the male participants, they did respond favorably to those read for this study, a notion that implies that the inclusion of graphic novels into the curriculum would do more to balance the reading interests of both sexes.

The use of graphic novels within the formal curriculum creates opportunities for students to engage in practices of media literacy, or creating, using, analyzing, and critiquing various forms of media messages. For example, the boys contemplated the intentionality of the authors and illustrators of X-23: Innocence Lost whose characters were at times depicted with exaggerated physical traits; so, too, can issues of cultural socialization be deconstructed and examined by male and female students alike. Ensuring that students can read media appropriately by thinking critically and understanding how messages are produced and reproduced is an important competency of a 21st-century learner.

The participants’ responses to this sample of graphic novels also indicated that they were more diverse and sophisticated readers than recent research has suggested. According to Pustz (1999), there exist two types of comic fans: the mainstream readers who are adolescent males interested primarily in reading about superheroes, and the alternative readers who are characteristically older women who have a variety of literary interests.

The graphic novel readers that emerged from this study were males and females who preferred the more sophisticated literary graphic novels as well as the superhero graphic novel, which suggests that these...
participants were a combination of Pustz’s (1999) categories. I would also argue that the three graphic novels used in this study are examples of postmodern texts, given that the visual element inherent in graphic novels allowed the authors to juxtapose time and to show memories, devices which cannot be used in traditional texts. The use of postmodern texts in the curriculum has the potential of encouraging students to understand the negotiated and contested nature of the subjects of which they are studying.

Segel (1986) acknowledged the power of adults to sanction certain types of literature when she noted that “adults decide what books are written, published, offered for sale, and for the most part, purchased for children” (p. 165). To address those elements that limit the potential of graphic novel use in schools, there needs to exist a kind of instruction that “can support a developing sense of community among adolescents who are, or have the potential to become, avid readers” (Alvermann et al., 1999, p. 257) of graphic novels. In terms of addressing this need for those already working in education, the inclusion of graphic novels in classrooms and the school library media collection may help to legitimate graphic novels as curricular materials to the rest of the school community.

Fiske (2001) wrote that “economics and ideology can never be separated” (p. 247). This notion is especially relevant when speaking about the production and sustainability of graphic novels written for youth. The ongoing, historically informed perception that graphic novels are written for and purchased exclusively by adolescent males seems to continue to limit the educational potential of this format. My own experience during this study, in which the school administration resisted my efforts to provide students with graphic novels to read, suggests that educators need to look beyond those graphic novels that are commercially successful and, instead, use those found on booklists of recommended titles, similar to the one used to draw the sample for this study.

Suggestions for Future Research

In this article, I have attempted to illustrate “the way that the dominant ideology is structured into the text and into the reading subject and those textual features that enable negotiated, resisting, or oppositional readings to be made” (Fiske, 2001, p. 248). I have also described how power works through legitimation from peers and teachers, limitations based on the social constructions of masculine and feminine, and sanctioning of certain forms of knowledge communicated through academic studies and practitioner journals.

The homogeneity of the study’s participants limited the potential of this research to delve further into questions that would have created a richer description of the ways in which high school students read gender in graphic novels, questions that would have explored how issues of ethnicity, race, and class might influence students as they read gender in graphic novels. To fully understand the latter question, a foundational study should be conducted that examines the depictions of race in those graphic novels included on the Great Graphic Novels for Teens booklist.

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