

Graphic Fiction

A LOOK AT THE LATEST IN
COMICS, GRAPHIC NOVELS AND
MANGA FOR THE UNINITIATED

By Anne Elizabeth

ROMANCE IS ALIVE and thriving. But did you know it's flourishing, really prospering (and some would

argue has been for many years) in genres that rely on artists and sketches — namely comic books, graphic novels and manga?

“Before the superhero books of the 1960s, the most popular comics were romance comics, so they are not necessarily a new thing, as much as they are a revived format,” says Jim McCann, a marketing manager at Marvel comics.

Indeed, as early as the 1950s, romantic storylines and theme-based graphic novels and comics were being sold. And these weren't the only books finding attention. At the same time, classic action-adventure and science fiction stories were also bringing audiences into stores.

The reasons readers are drawn to this remarkable visual style of reading are vast. Some say it's the incredible artwork, the fascinating storylines and the mystique that follows the heroes through their trials; others say that each comic becomes a collectible work of art — one in which the audience enjoys the pleasure and sheer excitement of experiencing it.

Plus, many of these visual books provide an examination of issues and concerns affecting the world around us.

“Comic readers are smart, sophisticated,” proclaims Karen Berger, founder of Vertigo, an imprint at DC Comics, and a veteran of the industry for more than 28 years. “Vertigo has shown that you can do comics that adults will read. They have depth and complexity and can still be entertaining.” The line targets readers in their late teens, as well as adults, and the stories contain intellectual, controversial and often hot topics that are handled with sophistication and style.

“Comics as a medium, a form of literature, can stand



Art like this from Marjorie M. Liu's new comic series (above and left) and Sherrilyn Kenyon's upcoming *Dark-Hunter* comics (far left) is drawing women into the world of graphic storytelling.

alongside contemporary fiction because of the relevance and quality of the material,” Berger continues. “There is a uniqueness about the comic form: the wonders of the written word and the wonders of the art, and then you have an amalgam of everything joined together. It's a special kind of reading experience.”

Berger also recently created the Minx line, a manga imprint geared to teenagers, females in particular. Among those writing for the line are fiction author Alisa Kwitney (*Flirting in Cars*), whose graphic novel *Token* has the same snappy appeal as her traditional novels.

Increasingly, women are finding their way to the graphic formats. At this year's Comic-Con International in San Diego — a convention for all things pop culture but still heavily based around the comic industry — analysts say more women and teen girls attended than ever before.

In part, the interest comes from some of their favorite authors in the romance and paranormal worlds making the leap from straight text to text with art.

“Retailers have noticed an increase in female readers coming into their stores, driven by the graphic fiction adaptations and new series” by writers like Laurell K. Hamilton, Sherrilyn Kenyon and Marjorie M. Liu, says Marvel's McCann, noting that Hamilton's Anita Blake comics were bestsellers. “We're also starting to see more female readers picking up traditional superhero comics as well, suggesting that these adaptations

and original works are like gateway comics to the novelists' fans."

The trend, or perhaps return, to comics by women who grew up on Archie tales also owes something to younger women — those in their teens and early 20s — who grew up reading the manga lines.

"The industry's always had strong female editors, writers and artists The turn of the century saw younger female readers dictating bookstore content with their huge appetites for manga, and those readers helped to drive and popularize graphic novels in chain and larger mainstream bookstores across the country," says Philip Simon, editor of Dark Horse's Red String. "I feel that young, female manga readers were essential in the movement to get manga and graphic novels on older readers' radars."

Like traditional fiction, comics, graphic novels and manga seek to entertain, but they often have a message to impart. They offer exposure to topics in a manageable way, providing practical troubleshooting methods or ways to deal with unusual or even ordinary situations. The draw is often the ability to relate to a character or plot.

"Reading wasn't easy for me. I can put a book and a manga side by side and I've learned how to understand a story," says female teen reader Bobbi. "Also, it makes me feel better about where I'm at and how to move on."

In explaining what makes comics and manga special, Marvel's McCann says, "It's the most unique reading experience there is. Combining art and words uses both sides of the brain and gives you a world to fully immerse yourself in. It's like getting a movie and a novel in one package."

John Shableski, sales manager for Diamond Book Distributor, which puts graphic novels into bookstores, says "It's a more dramatic method for telling a story. You, the reader, get to see what the author truly intended the story to be. It is like reading a movie."

"We live in a visual society," notes Rich Johnson, co-publisher of the Yen Press, the manga and graphic novel division of Hachette Book Group USA. "The Internet is words and pictures, more and more technology is merging that combination, such as the iPhone. I also believe that we are in a time where there is truly a story told in a graphic way that will appeal to just about anyone."

Says "T," a male reader in his 40s from Hawaii: "It's different cues. You see a set of pictures and your mind relates. Either you stay and think and participate in the process of the story. Or, if you don't relate, you move on."

While many of the traditional comics have names that sound familiar — *Archie*, *Richie Rich*, *Superman*, *Spider-Man* and *Cloak & Dagger*, which last had its own series in 1991 and is being relaunched this year — and publishers with names you may recognize, like DC and Marvel, there are plenty of new products from independent houses such as Dark Horse and Titan.

One growing style of graphic storytelling is the adaptation of novels to comics and graphic novels. Leading the way, many say, are the Dabel Brothers, who have done it successfully by adapting titles from Dean Koontz, Jim Butcher and Sherrilyn Kenyon.

"A lot of readers embrace these formats on our end because it brings to life the books they know and love," says Derek Ruiz, editor and special projects manager at Dabel Brothers.

Comic Round-up

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ANT TO KNOW IF your favorite author writes comics or has had their novel turned graphic? Here are some names you may recognize and some works that may appeal.

NEIL GAIMAN: *Sandman* series from DC Comics, 1990s (also various other titles)

CHRISTINE FEEHAN: *Dark Hunger* graphic novel from Berkley, 2007

JODI PICOULT: *Wonder Woman* from DC Comics, 2007

BRAD MELTZER: *Justice League of America* graphic novel from DC Comics, 2007 (also various other titles)

GREGG HURWITZ: *Wolverine* comic from Marvel, 2007 (also various other titles)

JIM BUTCHER: *Welcome to the Jungle*, a Harry Dresden comic from Dabel Brothers, 2008; Coming soon, *Storm Front* graphic novel

DEAN KOONTZ: *In Odd We Trust* graphic novel from Del Rey, 2008; also out, *Frankenstein* comic from Marvel, 2008

STEPHEN KING: *The Dark Tower*, *Treachery* comics from Marvel, 2009 (also various other titles)

SHERRILYN KENYON/KINLEY MacGREGOR: *Lords of Avalon* from Marvel; *Dark-Hunters* graphic novel from Dabel Brothers, 2009

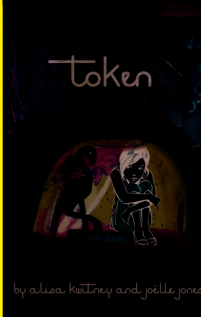
ALISA KWITNEY: *Token* graphic novel from Minx, 2008

MARJORIE M. LIU: *NYX* from Marvel, 2008

PATRICIA BRIGGS: *Mercedes Thompson* graphic novel from Dabel Brothers, 2008

L.A. BANKS: *Vampire Huntress* prequel from Dabel Brothers, 2009. The graphic novel will, says Banks, explore the "early days of Damali Richards as she comes into her powers, and we'll see how that red-hot affair she later has with Carlos Rivera came to be."

JAMES PATTERSON: *Maximum Ride* graphic novel from Yen Press, 2009



Harlequin Presents' Trish Wylie Loves Comics

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AYBE IT'S BECAUSE I'm a "visual" writer. Maybe it's the amazing artwork that adds an extra layer. But a big part of my love for comics are the superheroes. They have many romance hero traits: confidence, strength, an honorable streak a mile wide and that rocky road to love ... an excellent study aid!

As a kid, I watched mesmerized as Christopher Reeve brought Superman to life. I started reading comics because of it. As I've gotten older I'll admit I like my superheroes with a dangerous, darker edge too. But recommendation-wise, I'd go back to that early influence and the Death of Superman trilogy: Invincible hero defeated; the agony of Lois losing the man she loves; the resurrection and aftermath that carried through to Superman facing his fears.

And you've only to look at the success of the TV show *Heroes* and the movie *The Dark Knight* to know superheroes are a hot property now; 125,000 people at Comic-Con 2008 might be another clue. Geek is the new chic!

Several authors have taken the concept a step further, crafting prequels to their main storylines. Laurell K. Hamilton and her husband, Jonathon Green, did so with a two-part comic book prequel to the Anita Blake series titled *First Death* and Jim Butcher with a four-part comic book prequel to the first Dresden Files novel, *Storm Front*.

So what's next on the horizon? More integration of technologies and the availability of downloadable comics and graphic novels similar to e-books.

For example, says McMann from Marvel, "Stephen King is doing a digital, animated comic format adaptation" of his "N" short story. After its animated release (check out NISHHERE.com for details), the story will then be available as part of King's anthology *Just After Sunset*, releasing in November. McMann says King is also working on a graphic novel that portrays the missing years of Roland the Gunslinger's youth in his Dark Tower series.

Comic/graphic novel fan TC, a man in his late 30s from San Diego, is one of those people who's excited to see comics and graphic novels branch out into the digital arena.

"I grew up with it. My dad loved comics and we — all the kids — had a great appreciation of them," he says. "It was one of the really fun things we did together as a family. ... Watching it go digital and morph into other forms is very cool, especially since it's all about the way to appreciate the art of the books and story."

Meaning you can buy your comic book in a store or go online and purchase one to read on your computer. Some houses have just begun to explore this technology. At Vertigo you can download a sneak peek and the first issue, after the

initial release is sold in stores, while at Tokyopop and Marvel you can join their download program and purchase, and begin reading, the digital comics immediately.

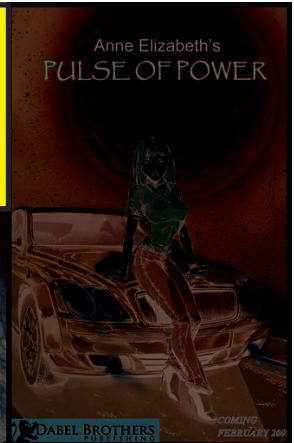
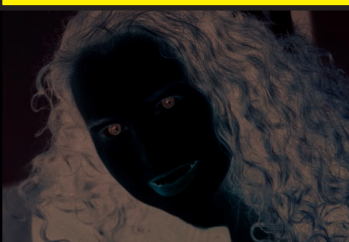
Comics, manga and the graphic novel are doing well. It may once have been your grandmother's or your mother's comic book, but now it's yours and your daughter's. There's a story for everyone. Once you find your favorite, with its beautiful drawings, memorable heroes and plotlines, you're likely to revisit it or collect it through the years. Maybe your favorite author wrote it or a friend recommended it. The opportunities for fun and intrigue are out there.

If you're interested in writing or drawing, being published is a possibility. Attend a comic convention or visit the submission guidelines on a publisher's website. Artist/creators or writer-and-artist teams who have book samples should take a look at the DC Comics online talent search; go to DCComics.com and click on "submissions" for more information. The Zuda comics contest for new talent is another option: ZudaComics.com/competition_rules. You also might want to attend the 2009 RT Booklovers Convention, where there will be special workshops on comics and graphic novels as part of the emerging markets programs. Also, several comic book/graphic novel publishers will also be on hand at the E-book, Independent Publisher & Multimedia Expo. (Learn more at RomanticTimes.com.)

To wrap up the discussion on new trends in graphic novels, Diamond Books' Shableski says it best. "All the major houses have projects in development. Some will be really amazing ... At this moment though, the field is wide open.

"Look back to the beginning of rock 'n' roll and you'll see what the future of graphic novel publishing will look like," Shableski explains. "Boy bands, girl bands, British invasion, beach sounds, heavy metal, R&B, soul, stadium rock, disco, punk, new wave, rap, grunge. ... It's going to happen all over again — but this time, it's in print." ♦

TALKBACK: How do you feel about comics and graphic novels? Tell us. E-mail: Faygie@RomanticTimes.com. Your comments may be used in an upcoming issue.



Anne Elizabeth's *Pulse of Power* comic will be released by Dabel Brothers at New York Comic Con in February 2009. Her stories are also featured in the Atria anthologies *Caramel Flava* and *Honey Flava*. For more details, visit AnneElizabeth.net.

Marjorie M. Liu Talks About Her New Series and Love

I'VE HAD A lot of people ask me how I got into writing comics, and I suppose the answer is the same one I give when asked why I started writing at all.

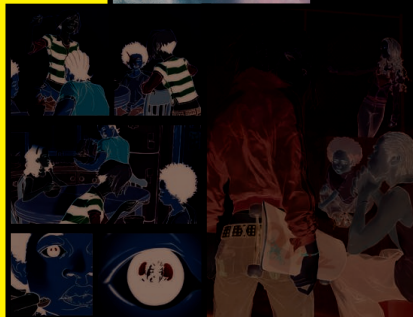
Because I love words. Because I read everything.

Storytelling is storytelling. You have heroes. You have villains. You have journeys. And in that mix, if you — as the writer — find yourself surprised by the twists and turns your mind creates, and if the tale you tell is one that is born from the passion of your heart — and if, and if — then you'll find that it doesn't matter if the medium has changed. The essentials stay the same. It is always about the story.

Several years ago I wrote an X-Men novel for Pocket Star, in conjunction with Marvel comics. Wolverine, Scott — most of the entire team — body-snatched and forced to live as humans in a mental asylum. Huge fun to write, and that was my foot in the door with Marvel. Three years of discussion led to my current project, a six-issue, limited series called *NYX*, about mutant teenagers living homeless on the streets of New York City. And look to the future, because that's not all the work I'm doing for Marvel.

I love it, pure and simple. Really, how could I not? I've enjoyed comics for more than a decade — but not, I admit, without some criticism from those who deem such books to be a waste of time (and brain cells). Something, I'm sure, most romance readers and writers are familiar with. Romance novels, after all, are often derided by the ignorant and snobbish for being "cookie-cutter creations" or "trash." Comics receive a similarly bad rap — also by those who don't know any better.

As with novels, there are comics that soar, and those that do not, but the diversity of storytelling is just as immense and powerful as anything you might find in prose — and, occasionally, more so. Take, for example, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the literary masterpiece and Pulitzer Prize winner, which recounts the Holocaust and one man's struggle to survive. Or, if you prefer superheroes, there is Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or Frank Miller's *Return of the Dark Knight* (in addition to his superb, and equally gritty, *Sin City* series). And for stories that defy classification, try Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, or Brian K.



Liu and images from her new NYX comic book series about mutant teenagers who live in New York, out now from Marvel comics.

Vaughan's *Y: The Last Man*, about a virus that wipes out every male primate on earth — except for one man and his pet monkey.

I could go on. Like prose fiction, comics allow the exploration of realities that are beyond human experience, or so deep within the human experience, the only way to understand and cope with such truths is through story — in this case, a synthesis between words and pictures — in a medium where there are no artistic constraints. Comics provoke, comics provide entertainment, comics can be nothing but a superhero in spandex or a literary dervish, waiting to work your mind into a whirlwind.

Most romance readers are literary omnivores. We will read anything and appreciate a good story with the same enthusiasm and delight, no matter the genre. And — forgive me while I speak in generalities — it seems we've begun to make the transition into comics. Or rather, the comic book industry began the transition, and many readers followed. First, with the wildly successful adaptation of Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake* series, as well as adaptations of Stephen King's *Dark Tower*, Sherrilyn Kenyon's *Lords of Avalon*, and the manga version of Christine Feehan's *Carpathians*. Other romance writers too are venturing into the field: Anne Elizabeth is writing *Pulse of Power*, a monthly comic for Dabel Brothers, and Jodi Picoult wrote six issues of *Wonder Woman*. And don't forget Tamora Pierce, Duane Swierczynski, Charlie Huston and others — successful novelists who have written, or are writing, comic books.

I love writing novels. I love writing, period. Comic books are merely an extension of that love. And I will say too that I take some delight in the fact that I'm writing in a field that has, until recently, been dominated by men. In truth, quite a few women work in comics — as editors, pencillers, colorists and writers — but sometimes it feels as though they're an invisible force, lost behind the scenes, which continues to fuel the perception that women in the comic book industry are a novelty.

Regardless, if you're not reading comics — if you don't even care to try — then you're ignoring an untapped well of entertainment that combines the best of both prose and illustration. Great stories are being told — and there is no reason in the world not to enjoy them. ✧

For a chance to win an autographed copy of Liu's new comic, send an e-mail to: Faygie@RomanticTimes.com.