

Turning Japanese

MATTHEW IMRIE introduces the manga phenomenon, offering suggestions for collection development and management, events and running a manga group.

The first thing you realise when you pick up a manga book is that these are not your usual comics. When people delve deeper into this phenomenon they realise that there is more to it than spiky-haired ninja kids and large-eyed, nubile women with no inhibitions (although there is a part of the market dedicated to such stereotypes).

Librarians are well-placed to help change public perceptions of manga, but perhaps we need to change our own views as well by finding out more about this art form and talking to the readers, who are often teens. This can also help to challenge the stereotypical perception of librarians as being only interested in pushing 'proper' books, as well as helping us to find out more about our often marginalised library patrons by discovering first-hand what they read and enjoy.

A brief history of manga

As most people now know, manga was created and developed in Japan; its history dates back to 1814 when the Japanese artist Hokusai first used the word to describe his books of 'whimsical sketches'. Nowadays manga is a Japanese word for comics, but that's putting it too simply. The Japanese comic style is highly distinctive in the way its characters and stories are portrayed.

Osamu Tezuka is known as the father of modern manga and is credited with inventing manga as it is known today. Influenced by Walt Disney's style of animation (Bambi eyes being the most noticeable), he developed the storytelling style and imagery that helped make manga popular across cultural and geographic boundaries. Tezuka's creations include Astro Boy, Black Jack and Kimba the White Lion (which was one of the inspirations for Disney's *The Lion King*).

In Japan manga is mass-produced and is distributed in weekly or fortnightly telephone-directory-sized publications. These publications contain a number of different storylines – much like 2000AD's weekly magazine, although on a more massive scale. The stories are then collected into books (known as *tankobon* in the manga industry). It is in this *tankobon* format that manga is best known in the UK. The books are usually published to be read from right to left as they are in Japan, only the language is translated into English. Early manga titles were reformatted to be read from left to right in Europe and America, but this was abandoned because publishers wanted to give readers as authentic a manga experience as possible.

The first major manga publisher in the UK (and still one of the largest) is Tokyopop. It has since been joined by Viz Media (in partnership with Simon & Schuster), Tanoshimi (an imprint of Random House) and more recently Self Made Hero Press, publishing the popular Manga Shakespeare line. Walker Books is planning to release a range of manga titles and there

are also a number of independent publishers including Sweatdrop Studios, Umisen-Yamasen and Dimensional Manga.

Manga in libraries

In recent years manga collections in libraries have been growing, due in part to librarians realising the popularity of manga and readers requesting titles. In many cases borrowers have a greater knowledge of manga than librarians and this can lead to titles being ordered and purchased that are inappropriate for the collections into which they are placed.

Starting a manga collection in a library can be a nerve-racking decision to make, especially if you don't know much about what is available. Before purchasing vast quantities of manga it may be a good idea to start up with a seed collection of 20 to 50 titles; this will enable you to ascertain the level of popularity that manga has in the community the library serves.

Initial collection development and display

Initial selection can be based on what is currently popular on television: many popular manga titles have been adapted into anime (Japanese animated series and movies) and it is in this format that many young people have their first encounter with Japanese popular culture. Popular manga series like *Naruto* and *Bleach* are but two examples of this. The card game *Yu-Gi-Oh* is also based on a manga series. For younger readers the *Pokémon* manga series is also incredibly popular. *Neo* magazine focuses on aspects of Asian popular culture available in the UK, and also includes up-to-date lists of the most popular new manga and anime. There is some manga available through library suppliers (Peters in Birmingham has a limited selection); however, I have found that they do not cater fully to the needs of the borrowers. It will probably be necessary to approach an outside source – there are a number of specialist comic shops across the UK that offer special deals to libraries including discounts and stock servicing. Specialist suppliers include Gosh Comics in London and Forbidden Planet, which has recently started offering a library provision service.

Once you have identified the more voracious readers, you should then be able to approach them in order to gather more information on the titles which they themselves would like to see on the shelves. Gaining community input on what titles they enjoy and would like to read is a good way of building a collection that is relevant to their needs and will engender a sense of ownership amongst the readers. Once you have opened up a dialogue with the readers it may also be possible to entice them into forming the nucleus of a manga discussion group. It is important to realise that while manga is incredibly popular it is by no means universal, and it is possible, although unlikely, that manga will not find a foothold in the community that uses the library. Conversely, you may find that manga readers will flock to the library, and while the manga collection will generate strong issue figures you must make sure that the library collection as a whole does not become unbalanced. I have found that manga readers are the most



Top: Library Assistant Jenny Price (second from right) and former Teen Librarian Liz Chapman (left) with manga group members at a library cosplay event; Above: The author (centre) with Library Assistant Jenny Price (right) and a fellow Librarian at the Edmonton Green Tokyopop ReCon; Right: Manga group member dressed as Naruto at a library-based cosplay event

likely to make requests for new and continuing titles on a regular basis, which can quickly eat into the budget.

Initially shelving titles in a face-forward display will maximise stock exposure; this will last until the collection grows large enough to require more shelf space. It is however a good idea to keep one shelf for face-on display to show off new stock. It is important to remember that as manga is published in the Japanese style and is thus designed to be read from right to left, it is very easy to put books on display with the back cover facing forward. Adding to the confusion are western manga titles which are usually published to be read from left to right, as are Korean *manwha* titles.

The first rule of purchasing manga is always start the collection with volume one, and it should be made clear to the borrowers that this is how the library will operate. I have come across a number of teens who will ask for, say, volume 12 in a series, having read the previous volumes either in bookshops or online. If not nipped in the bud, this could lead to the library holding the middle volumes of some series and not being able to purchase the original volumes as they are out of print.

Manga and censorship

Most manga publishers adhere to a voluntary age-banding system for their books, but these ages are guidelines only, are not legally binding, are routinely ignored by most readers and are

Manga itself is not a genre; rather it is a type of graphic literature that contains many sub-sets, some of which are mentioned below:

Shōnen

A Japanese word used in English to refer to anime and manga primarily intended for boys.

Shōjo

A term used in English to refer to manga and anime aimed at a young, female audience.

Seinen

A subset of manga that is generally targeted at an 18 – 30-year-old male audience.

Kodomo

A Japanese word that means child. However, to many non-Japanese readers of manga and anime, the word refers to a specific genre intended primarily for children.

Josei

A genre of manga or anime created mostly by women, for late teenage and adult female audiences.

Moé

Anime or manga featuring characters that are extremely perky or cute.

Yaoi (also known as Shonen-ai)*

Manga or anime focusing on gay male relationships aimed at a (primarily) female audience.

*The terms 'Yaoi' and 'Shonen-ai' are sometimes used by western audiences to differentiate between tales that contain (sometimes graphic) sex scenes (Yaoi) and stories that focus primarily on romance (Shonen-ai).

Yuri

Manga focusing on lesbian relationships. These are (unsurprisingly perhaps) usually aimed at an adolescent male audience.

usually overlooked by parents and librarians alike. Nonetheless, since they are there, it is a good idea to at least consider them due to the sometimes graphic depictions contained within their covers. I suggest clearly labelling manga titles for teen or adult collections; this is a good way of keeping the collection out of the children's library. This is recommended for two reasons: first, it will cover libraries if parents complain about their children being allowed to borrow what they may consider to be inappropriate materials; and second, until the library staff becomes acclimatised to manga, it limits the risk of more mature manga titles being misshelved. Keeping the teen- and adult-appropriate collections together is usually a good idea as, initially at least, manga collections can be rather small and easily lost on a library's shelves.

While it is a good idea to pay attention to the age-banding when making shelving decisions, I do not believe that children should be refused access to manga and graphic novels. There are a few exceptions to this, namely extreme graphic violence

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and sexual situations. Due to the negative image which manga still has in some sectors of the library community (both users and staff), it may be necessary to educate one's colleagues, particularly with regard to the viewpoint that it is not our job to tell borrowers what they can and cannot take out. While staff may sometimes wish to tactfully enquire if borrowers are sure that their chosen books are appropriate, I believe that teenagers should be able to decide which books they would like to read and it is not up to us to police their reading materials. I have encountered one situation where a stropky teen sought to outrage her parents by flaunting *yaoi* in front of them, but that (fortunately) did not impact on the library. The only time I had a query over the appropriateness of *yaoi* was when my manager got a shock as he picked up a new *yaoi* book and flipped through it; I explained that all *yaoi* titles were marked as adult fiction as a matter of course and that was the end of the issue.

'Why *yaoi*?' is one of the most commonly asked questions I get when discussing manga with staff and the public. *Yaoi* is most widely read by girls and women ranging in age from their mid-teens to late 20s and early 30s. Studies suggest that *yaoi* is popular due largely to the romantic element and that male-male relationships are seen as less threatening (Brenner, 2008; Ho, 2007). Popularity aside (*yaoi* is one of the fastest-growing sub-genres in my library's manga collection), it can also help people come to terms with either their own sexuality or that of people around them. Refusing to stock such titles just because you personally do not like what they depict is censorship pure and simple.

In Britain, manga is shaking off its image of being a form that appeals only to geeks and weirdos, as well as the accusation that it lacks literary merit. From the history of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and its aftermath in *Barefoot Gen*, to Shakespeare's works being rendered in this style for use in schools, the educational potential of manga is slowly being realised.

Pitfalls

Manga collections for all their crowd-pulling potential are not without their pitfalls. The positive aspects of manga far outweigh the negatives, but it is important to be aware of potential difficulties beforehand so as to be prepared.

- *Series length* is important to keep in mind. Manga is by nature episodic; *mangaka* (authors) often start their manga with the hope of becoming popular and keeping the story going for as long as possible. *Naruto* is presently one of the most popular manga titles in the world and currently stands at 44 books in the series, with only 33 available in English so far.

- *Theft* is, fortunately, not too common in my library but it does happen. I have lost most of the *Naruto* books twice over the past year. Many of the *Bleach* books have also gone and while it is possible to replace stolen titles, once you lose two sets of one series it gets difficult to justify replacing them again. The manga books are security tagged as are most of the books in the library, but it is fairly easy to identify the tags and rip them out.

- *Checking the books* to make sure they are correctly labelled as adult or teen before they are put onto the shelf is important, as while many adult-oriented books are clearly marked by the publishers there are some that look just like every other manga book. A quick flip-through of the book is usually sufficient to determine what type of book it is. Depending on the size of the collection, this can be fairly time-consuming and does require some knowledge of manga.



Above: Prizewinners at the Edmonton Green Tokyopop ReCon; Right: Manga group members at a drawing event with mangaka Chie Kutsuwada

Often some of the more knowledgeable borrowers place holds for books that are new in Japanese and have not yet been licensed in English. While not a pitfall per se, it can lead to unhappy teens demanding to know why the library can't obtain the books in English.

Beyond reading: art, anime and cosplay

Manga fans often have an interest in art and are interested in creating their own manga illustrations and comic strips. Running manga groups can be a good way of nurturing their creativity by providing a forum where like-minded individuals can gather to discuss their interests and work on their art together. A good way of encouraging the use of the non-fiction section is to increase the number of books on how to draw manga as well as books that focus on the creation of anime and the artists themselves. In addition to this, a growing number of *mangaka* are willing to run drawing and portfolio discussion workshops in libraries. Manga collectives such as Sweatdrop Studios and Umisen-Yamasen are two examples of groups that have organised workshops around the country.

As previously mentioned, there are a number of manga titles that have spawned anime series (and vice versa). Anime is the term used for Japanese animated series and movies and like manga it is easily identifiable due to the art style. One of the most famous anime production studios is Studio Ghibli, best-known for the award-winning film *Spirited Away* and the adaptation of Diana Wynne-Jones' novel *Howl's Moving Castle*. Studio Ghibli's latest film *Ponyo on the Cliff*, based in part on *The Little Mermaid*, will be released over the summer in the UK. Like the previous Studio Ghibli movie *Tales from Earthsea*, this film will have a mainstream cinema release. MVM and Manga Entertainment both offer permission for libraries to show non-theatrical screenings of their licensed anime.

Cosplay is a portmanteau of the English words 'costume' and 'roleplay'. It is also a Japanese subculture centred on dressing as characters from manga, anime, video games, *tokusatsu* (a type of Japanese film or TV drama which features a lot of special effects) and, less commonly, Japanese live-action television shows, fantasy movies, or Japanese pop music bands. However, in some circles, 'cosplay' has been expanded to mean simply wearing a costume. One of the more popular fashion styles is Gothic & Lolita – a style based on English Victorian children's clothing composed of knee-



Low-cost event ideas

Organising manga-based events in libraries need not be expensive, apart from inviting artists or costume creators to run workshops. Holding an art competition can involve little more than providing paper and pencils or art pens. All you need to do is set a theme – the most popular competition I ran was challenging the artists in the group to draw a manga representation of me! To keep the entire group involved, those that did not draw were called upon to choose the winning picture.

Organising cosplay competitions has also proven to be popular, with some of my regular group attendees coming in costume each month. Manga- and anime-based quizzes can also increase your knowledge of the various titles that are available and encourage friendly rivalry in the group.

Prizes need not be lavish: Japanese confectionary is fairly easily obtainable and is always popular. Pocky, a biscuit stick dipped in chocolate or yoghurt, is the most sought-after snack! White Rabbit sweets were also popular but it is not advisable to use them at present due to the melamine milk scare in China. Occasionally publishers provide freebies to promote their titles; these can also be used as prizes. It is often a good idea to forge links with UK-based publishers and ask if they are able to send preview copies of their books to discuss with your group. Lastly, just discussing the titles the group members enjoy, and providing pencils and paper for drawing, can fill several hours and add to the general enjoyment that they experience when they visit the library.

Manga is, at present, on the cutting edge of literary provision but not everyone is sure that it should be provided in libraries. While it can be argued that not all manga has literary merit, the same could be said about many of the books that are held in libraries. Whilst some believe that not providing manga will make young readers turn to more literary texts, the fact remains that the demand for manga is definitely there. Ignoring this demand increases the chance that many more teenagers will be turned away from going to the library altogether. In fact, the search for a manga title may be the first time that a teenager has set foot inside a library since their parent or carer took them. It is only once we have these young people physically coming into the library that it becomes easier to identify with them and provide for their needs, and that can only lead to good things.

Matthew Imrie is Teen Librarian at Edmonton Green Library, London Borough of Enfield. Contact him (matthew.imrie@enfield.gov.uk) for 'starter lists' of recommended manga.

References

- Brenner, R. (2008). 'Boy meets boy and girl meets girl, *otaku* style.' *Voice of Youth Advocates*, 31 (3), 212-215.
- Ho, J. (2007). 'Gender alchemy: the transformative power of manga.' *The Horn Book Magazine*, 83 (5), 505-512.

length skirt or dress, headdress, blouse, petticoat, knee-length socks or stockings and rocking horse or high heel / platform shoes. The colour scheme is largely black and white, hence the Gothic appellation. This style has its own magazine – *The Gothic & Lolita Bible*, published in English by Tokyopop. It is important to note that Lolita as used in this context has nothing to do with the fetishisation of young girls. Another offshoot of the manga collection is the increasing number of requests, particularly from teenage girls (and one or two of the more adventurous boys), for books on the styles derived from Harajuku street fashion.

In a wider sense, there is an increasing appreciation of, and interest in, Japan and Japanese culture. Authors like Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto are becoming more mainstream. Current cultural obsessions being embraced by my manga group include the tea ceremony, the art of wearing the kimono and sushi making.

Manga links

Publishers

- Tokyopop www.tokyopop.com
- Viz Media www.vizeurope.com/
- Tanoshimi www.randomhouse.co.uk/Tanoshimi/
- Self Made Hero www.selfmadehero.com/

UK Manga Collectives

- Sweatdrop Studios www.sweatdrop.com/
- Umisen-Yamasen www.umisen-yamasen.com/

Anime producers

- MVM Entertainment www.mvm-films.com/
- Manga Entertainment www.manga.co.uk/

Art supplies

- Letraset Manga Pens www.letraset.com/Manga/

Some examples of good art books

- *Draw Your Own Manga: All the Basics* by Haruno Nagatomo, Yuriko Tamaki, and Françoise White. Kodansha International Limited, 2003.
- *Manga Clip Art: Everything You Need to Create Your Own Professional-looking Manga Artwork* by Hayden Scott-Baron. ILEX, 2006.
- *Manga (Draw)* by Sweatdrop Studios. New Holland Publishers, 2006.
- *Manga Secrets: Over 50 Quick Lessons in Drawing the World's Most Popular Art Style* by Lea Hernandez. IMPACT Books, 2005.
- *500 Manga Creatures with CD Rom* by Yishan Studios. Collins Design, 2008.

Recommended reading

- *Hokusai, First Manga Master* by Jocelyn

Bouillard and Christophe Marquet. Harry N. Abrams, 2007.

- *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* by Paul Gravett. Laurence King, 2004.
- *Manga for Dummies* by Kensuke Okabayashi. John Wiley & Sons, 2007.
- *Gothic and Lolita* by Masayuki Yoshinaga and Katsuhiko Ishikawa. Phaidon Press, 2007.
- *Fruits* by Shoichi Aoki. Phaidon Press, 2001.
- *Fresh Fruits* by Shoichi Aoki. Phaidon Press, 2005.
- *Japanese Schoolgirl Inferno* by Patrick Macias and Jay Tack. Chronicle Books, 2007.
- *Tokyo Look Book: Stylish to Spectacular, Goth to Gyarū, Sidewalk to Catwalk* by Philomena Keet and Yuri Manabe. Kodansha Europe, 2007.