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A Graphic Manifesto: D&Q Explains How to Sell the Hip New Novels

BY CHANNING JOSEPH, PW DAILY FOR BOOKSELLERS -- 1/16/2003

The graphic novel has long been a puzzle to many booksellers, in part because many people believe that graphic novels are superhero comics that appeal only to children and geeky men. The result is that bookstores have often relegated this emerging format to the humor sections, where the books have little chance to sell.

Some graphic novel publishers have been frustrated that their books are not getting the attention they say they deserve. In response, Drawn and Quarterly, a Canadian graphic novel publisher, has released a new illustrated pamphlet entitled "A Drawn and Quarterly Manifesto," which aims to help confused booksellers.

Chris Oliveros, the "Manifesto"'s designer, said that the company created the new booklet in part because it just signed a distribution agreement with Chronicle Books and was confronted with the problem of how to sell the books once they were distributed. "Of course, one of the big hurdles is that most bookstores in North America don't have a proper graphic novels section," Oliveros said. "We wanted to try to address that problem" by showing booksellers that there are more graphic novels than just Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Random, \$14) and Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* (Pantheon, \$29.95)."

The "Manifesto" itself lists several graphic novels that fall outside of the common superhero stereotype, including Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (Fantagraphics, \$24.95), an illustrated journalistic account of life in the war-stricken region, and Ben Katchor's sorrowfully poetic *Beauty Supply District* (Pantheon, \$22).

Oliveros is convinced that graphic novels are suitable for all bookstores, saying, "I used to think that the target centers would be in large urban centers. But lots of stores in smaller cities actually have success as well."

The reason the format has become "hip," Oliveros stated, is because so much high-quality material is being created. "When we started in 1990," he said, "there was a lot of interesting stuff going on, but it was just the beginning."

Oliveros said he is very optimistic about the future of the graphic novel. "This is the tip of the iceberg," he said. "In the next two or three years, it's really going to grow a lot." He did add one caveat, saying that although a lot of stores have caught onto the graphic novel format, they will have "a little bit of a learning curve."

One contributor to the "Manifesto," Paul Constant of Seattle's Elliott Bay Book Co., has already traversed that curve. He told PW Daily that creating a graphic novels section in the store, "probably tripled the sales" compared to having them "ghettoized in sci-fi." Constant predicted that the format "is just going to get more mainstream... as people lose their biases."

"In 10 years," he said, "there will be a graphic novel section in every bookstore of every size."

Booksellers can obtain a free copy of the new Drawn and Quarterly Manifesto at BookExpo America in Los Angeles or by calling Chronicle Books at 1-800-722-6657.

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