

# Analyzing the Appeal of Manga

## Teaching Information Literacy Skills through Japanese Popular Culture

By Maureen Donovan

Manga's rapid rise in popularity around the world in the twenty-first century is an example of the diffusion of information and culture across borders in today's "global information soci-

ety." Manga (Japanese comics) are appealing and accessible to high school and college students who sometimes pursue an avid interest and go on to become independent learners in the world of Japanese popular culture. With thousands of manga volumes published in English translation over the past decade, librarians and teachers can exploit these works to engage students in developing information literacy skills that will be useful across the curriculum and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of information literacy skills for success in the twenty-first century is widely noted.<sup>2</sup> An information-literate person knows how to learn independently by first defining information needs, then developing effective search strategies, critically evaluating the information collected, identifying bias, irrelevance, and other issues, and finally using information in a productive, but ethical, manner. School and academic library associations have developed national standards for information literacy skills, incorporating the wide range of competencies required for independent and lifelong learning.<sup>3</sup>

### USING MANGA IN THE CLASSROOM

The first opportunity to teach information skills comes with the task of selecting a manga to read. Young people select manga based on friends' suggestions, advertising on television, and recommendation systems such as popularity ratings in Anime News Network's *Encyclopedia* or lists posted to online sites.<sup>4</sup> However, more sophisticated selection tools do exist, including lists of prizes awarded in Japan, such as the Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize and Kodansha's or Shogakukan's Manga Awards.<sup>5</sup>

Manga are associated with target audiences. *Shōnen* or *shounen* (boys) and *shōjo* or *shoujo* (girls) manga are especially appropriate for classroom use, while *seinen* (young men), *josei* (female), and ladies (adult women) manga generally include content which makes them unsuitable. In selecting manga for pedagogical purposes, an effective approach is to pair one that was written in the 1970s or 1980s (before manga became a globalized commodity), with a more recent title. Some recommended titles include:

Osamu Tezuka, *Black Jack* (originally published 1973 to 1983), which is a story of a mysterious, but extraordinarily talented—and unlicensed—surgeon that addresses ethical and moral issues; written by Japan's pioneering master of manga storytelling and art.<sup>6</sup>

Hayao Miyazaki, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (originally published 1982 to 1994), is an epic science fiction tale of a princess confronting the polluted lands, poisonous seas, and giant mutants of the future; written by the Academy Award winning director of anime films.<sup>7</sup>

Rumiko Takahashi, *Inu-yasha: A Feudal Fairy Tale* (originally published 1996 to 2008), is a story of a high school student who travels back in time to Sengoku (fifteenth to seventeenth century) Japan and encounters extraordinary adventures.<sup>8</sup>



Black Jack poster.



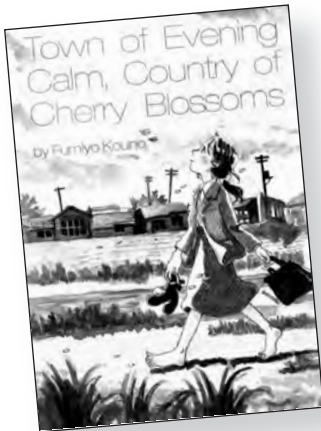
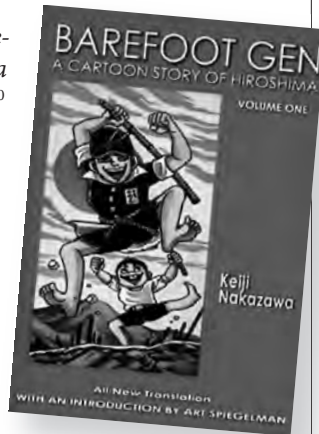
From the author's book, *Tezuka Osamu*



Eiichiro Oda, *One Piece* (originally published in 1997, ongoing), is a pirate manga that includes romance, sword fights, and intrigue, but essentially is about the importance of friendship amidst the confusion and challenges of life.<sup>9</sup>

Pairings according to similar thematic treatments are also possible. For example, these two manga tell stories about survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima:

Keiji Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima* (originally published 1973 to 1974).<sup>10</sup>



Fumiyo Kouno, *Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms* (originally published in 2004).<sup>11</sup>

### LEARNING TO READ MANGA

The most basic information skill, of course, is reading. It might seem that books incorporating both pictures and words would be particularly easy to read in the same way that children's picture books are considered. However, the best manga employ sophisticated narrative techniques and cover complex subjects, so even students who are already immersed in manga or anime culture benefit from careful analysis. For those who find manga perplexing, such analysis is essential in developing appreciation.

Since reading manga is an immersive experience, similar to watching a film, students can begin their analysis by writing a short summary and description (*précis*) of the manga, noting things that interested them and what seemed especially important. This kind of "descriptive analysis" helps students make the transition from experiencing manga as entertainment to viewing it as an object of analysis and potentially the subject of research.

Active reading involves asking oneself questions. Students can learn the habit of posing questions as they read while engaging popular culture artifacts such as manga. Levels and types of questions range from basic exploratory inquiries into facts or probes of cause-and-effect relationships, to the higher-level scientific sequence of analysis (breaking something into parts and explaining their interrelationships), synthesis (putting parts together into a new whole), and evaluation (establishing criteria to arrive at a reasoned judgment of something's value).<sup>12</sup>

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## STUDENTS ENJOY THE CHALLENGE OF MOVING BEYOND SIMPLE EXPRESSIONS OF LIKES AND DISLIKES TO DISCUSSION OF STYLISTICS, CONTENT, CHARACTERS, AND CONTEXTS.

### ANALYZING MANGA'S STYLE

Students enjoy the challenge of moving beyond simple expressions of likes and dislikes to discussion of stylistics, content, characters, and contexts. Stylistic analysis is perhaps the most fundamental step. Scott McCloud's classic work, *Understanding Comics*, introduces manga stylistics and techniques.<sup>13</sup> His later book, *Making Comics*, has a chapter entitled, "Understanding Manga" that is especially useful.<sup>14</sup>

Technical or stylistic analysis of manga includes three approaches. First, students analyze the *mangaka's* (comic artist or cartoonist) use of artistic techniques such as exaggeration or contortion, cross-hatching, or bleeds (panels running off the edge of the paper). Second, they analyze how the mangaka makes the story come alive. Some storytelling techniques that are especially associated with manga include: use of "birds' eye" views to set the stage; employment of flashbacks, memories, simultaneous actions, and pacing of action to build a sense of time passing; creation of mood through stylized backgrounds; pulling the reader into a sense of "being there" with evocative details or through realistic environments.

Finally, stylistic analysis includes looking at how the manga functions as sequential art. Foremost in this regard is examination of composition within individual panels, including depth of composition (fore-, middle, background), depth of field (deep/shallow), use of perspective and angle (straight on, high—bird's eye, low—worm's eye, acute—from below the plane of action, oblique—from above the plane of action). Establishing the mangaka's intention regarding the proper sequence of panels is often anything but straightforward. Discussion can revolve around such questions as: How does the eye move through the page? In what order do the panels flow?

Further analysis of how manga function as sequential art extends to consideration of words and sounds. When are speech balloons used? How is onomatopoeia (using imitative and naturally suggestive words for rhetorical effect) handled to express voices or sounds (*giongo*) and actions, emotions or moods (*gitaigo*)? Are they translated? Romanized? Left in the original Japanese as part of the background? Are they diegetic (essential to the story)? Non-diegetic (added for dramatic effect or contributed by the narrator)? Last, but not least, is the matter of closure (panel-to-panel transitions). Japanese cartoonists are known for using closure to construct a sense of looking around, seeing everything, and almost feeling that one is present at the scene.<sup>15</sup>

Content analysis varies, but often includes finding recurring images (images, events, sounds, phrases, and people) and discussing their meaning within the story. Themes and topics that the manga cover help to identify what it is really about. Discussion of issues



Hayao Miyazaki, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (San Francisco: VIZ, 2004), 3:125.

focuses on questions that the manga raises, conflicts, and dialectical oppositions that the cartoonist constructed.

Students are drawn instinctively to character analysis, but it is essential that they go beyond the superficial and learn how to dissect both the characters and why they react to them with positive or negative judgments. Classifying characters by type (heroes, villains, mad scientists) and identifying positive and negative traits along with related evidence and attributes (names, age, hair, clothing, props) brings this into focus.



Contextual analysis involves what was happening locally or globally—or in the cartoonist's life—at the time the manga was written. How do those contexts relate to the manga? To whom is its message addressed? Questions like these provide an opportunity to teach search strategies for locating background information such as statistics, maps, key terms, historical allusions, biographies, along with related articles, books, and online resources.

Finally, reading manga can prompt discussions about today's "global information society," the compression of time and space, and various other aspects of global media.<sup>16</sup> Manga can also be a stimulus for student research projects in subjects ranging from science and technology to art, politics, sociology, psychology, and literature.

### CONCLUSION

Teachers and librarians who have no previous experience with manga can still use them in the classroom as they use other literary works or

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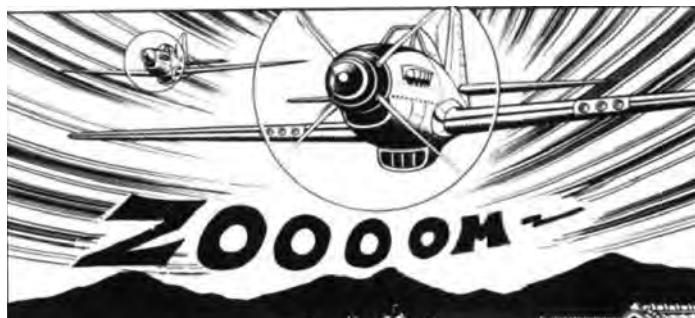
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Keiji Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2004), 5.

films. Those students who are already manga fans will appreciate that manga are being taken seriously as objects of analysis. Students who are not particularly interested in manga can still learn useful analytical skills with broad applicability. ■

### NOTES

1. Statistics are reported periodically in *Publisher's Weekly*. There were 1,468 manga titles released in 2007. See: Calvin Reid, "New Report Finds Manga Sales Up; Anime DVD Down in '07," *Publisher's Weekly*, December 7, 2007 at <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6510598>. Accessed October 12, 2008.
2. American Association of School Librarians, *Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Learner* (American Association of School Librarians, 2007) at [http://www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslproftools/learningstandards/ALA\\_print\\_layout\\_1\\_248674\\_248674.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslproftools/learningstandards/ALA_print_layout_1_248674_248674.cfm). Accessed October 12, 2008.
3. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000) at <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf>. Accessed December 5, 2008.
4. Anime News Network, *Encyclopedia* at <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/>. Accessed October 12, 2008.
5. Lists of prizewinners are available in Wikipedia, as well as on each organization's Web site.
6. Tezuka Osamu, *Black Jack*, trans. Camellia Nieh (New York: Vertical, 2008).
7. Miyazaki Hayao, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, trans. David Lewis and Toren Smith (San Francisco: VIZ, 2004).
8. Takahashi Rumiko, *Inu-yasha: A Feudal Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: Viz Comics, 2003).
9. Oda Eiichiro, *One Piece* (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2005).
10. Keiji Nakazawa. *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2004).
11. Kouno Fumiyu, *Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2007).
12. For further ideas about levels and types of questions, see: Barbara Gross Davis, *Tools for Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 83–85.
13. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).
14. \_\_\_\_\_, *Making Comics* (New York: Harper, 2006), 215–223.
15. \_\_\_\_\_, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 70–72.
16. A useful overview of these and other topics related to globalization can be found in: Thomas H. Eriksen, *Globalization: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

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