America is Drawn to Manga

By Coco Masters

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While Marvel wings its superheroes across the globe, the Japanese-style graphic novel called manga is rapidly gaining popularity with U.S. girls and teens. At least 40 syndicated newspapers have added manga to the funny pages; magazines like CosmoGirl showcase manga by young creators such as Svetlana Chmakova.

Manga is the comic book's richly illustrated Japanese cousin, alive with adolescent strife and romance, often written with a dose of the supernatural. A $180 million market in 2005, U.S. manga is quickly getting comfortable tucked under the arms of young readers, and major publishing houses are rushing into the category. "Books are not a growth business," says Milton Griepp, CEO of ICv2.com a pop-culture news site. "But the manga category has tripled in the last three years. That gets their attention."

So does the readership: 60% are female, a group that also dominates book sales. "That demographic hasn't existed in American comics," says Kurt Hassler, a graphic-novel buyer for Borders Group who was on to the trend early.

While comics feature 50-year-old superheroes who appeal to boys, manga in the U.S. is often created by women for women of all ages. "Every major publishing house has either got their whole foot or their big toe in this pool right now," says Calvin Reid, a co-editor of the trade magazine PW Comics Week. It makes sense, considering the $5 billion global manga market. Tokyopop, the largest U.S.-owned creator and licensor of manga, with $40 million in sales last year, signed a co-publishing deal with HarperCollins. The 11-to-21-year-old market is huge, says CEO Jane Friedman, who predicts steady growth for the category. The Princess Diaries' Meg Cabot will publish Avalon High next spring; additional young-adult titles will follow. In January, Simon & Schuster expanded its partnership with San Francisco--based Viz Media, a top publisher that licenses manga from Japanese publishers Shueisha and Shogakukan. Random House just launched its second label, Tanoshimi. And Canadian Harlequin will launch Ginger Blossom, romance story lines in manga, in September.

The climate for such deals owes much to Tokyopop and its aggressive development of a new paradigm. It moved manga from comics shops to mainstream booksellers. "Tokyopop created what is known as the authentic Japanese manga," says Reid. Tokyopop insisted the books read from back to front so as not to compromise the original artwork and spelled Japanese sound effects phonetically. It changed the books' dimensions to mass-market paperback size (about 200 pages) but stuck to a $10 price--about an hour's worth of babysitting.

The Americans have introduced an artistic controversy: Is a doe-eyed Nancy Drew, who debuted last April, really manga? Japanese manga resembles a cinematic storyboard with less happening in each panel than in U.S. comics. There are more motion lines; simple, expressive facial lines; and stories that depict "ordinary people in extraordinary situations dealing with the weirdest things you've ever thought of," according to Tokyopop.

Style aside, Viz Media contends that true manga is made only in Japan--which isn't surprising, since Viz has access to Japanese titles. Tokyopop CEO Stu Levy disagrees: "Manga is like hip-hop. It's a lifestyle. To say that you can't draw it because you don't have the DNA is just silly."

Manga is also drawing new media. Fans can download Tokyopop's "manga pods" (audio snippets). There's a music label and a MySpace site, and mobile-manga games are on the way. Tokyopop is planning TV animation and-- the ultimate crossover--a motion picture with Sony Screen Gems. Anyone for Manga Meets Spider-Man?

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