

Manga comic strip stories, originating from Japan in the 1950s, are typically printed in black and white and are read in paperback form from back to front. Hugely popular in their country of origin, this format is now becoming popular with publishers in Britain, France and America, who sometimes add colour and use better quality paper. Often read by audiences of all ages, they cover everything from action-adventure to comedy, science fiction and horror

# Manga Carta



Reviewing a crop of graphic novels could seem a welcome break from poring over texts. But this soon turns out to be an illusion, particularly with Manga publications, originating and still largely produced from Japan. Designed to be read from back to front, with around four scratchy black and white line drawings accompanied by speech balloons on each page, they can be surprisingly hard to follow. Particularly significant detail is often signalled by appearing in close-up, but given that plots are entirely speech-led there is never any authorial voice-over to doubly inform puzzled readers about what is really going on. Further enlightenment is made extra hard by the inclusion of so many strange noises. Can you guess what difference is implied when a character grunts either 'unnnh' or 'nnngh'? Can you confidently translate 'ptuu', or 'fwoop'? I can't.

Manga books also often seem fairly sexist for their times. One typical title, *Warcraft: The Sunwell Trilogy* (Tokyopop, £6.99) is populated by bikini-clad young heroines, whose favourite open-mouthed expressions makes them look like those inflatable dolls sold as sex aids. The story, about a young hero who changes periodically into a dragon, is derivative in the extreme. Another title, *Love Hina* (Tokyopop, £6.99) concerns a Japanese student who unwittingly becomes the superintendent of a teenage girls' dormitory. Also mildly salacious, its plot is very repetitive for something aspiring to be funny. Awarded the Best Manga USA Release 2002, it makes one wonder about the quality of the runners-up for this

particular honour. Manga Shakespeare could be another matter, but here again I was disappointed. Squeezing *Othello* (Self Made Hero, £7.99) into speech bubbles means that all major soliloquies are fractured into sound-bites. The accompanying drawings also lack any sort of depth. And as for *As You Like It* (Self Made Hero, £7.99) I soon got lost even knowing the play. It's hard to imagine any first-time reader making much of it at all.

I am happy to report some more positive experiences. *Silverfin* (Puffin, £9.99) is a straight graphic novel rather than anything from the Manga stables and works well. Adapted by Charlie Higson from his original novel about the young James Bond, its full colour pictures by Kev Walker of Marvel Comics fame are printed on quality paper and come over effectively. The result is a graphic novel where pictures and text genuinely complement each other. When the young Bond enters Scotland by steam train, the accompanying half-page picture showing green mountains and lochs set against a cloudy blue sky instantly communicates the wild beauty of the scene in a single snap-shot. A writer could labour over a whole paragraph still without achieving half the effect. There is also a lot of humour in the illustrations of different characters, with eccentric Eton schoolmasters shown sucking on pipes and sporting weird haircuts. The chief villain, Lord Hellebore, possesses a chin the size of which makes even Desperate Dan's prize feature look modest. This is a fun book to look at, with dialogue kept to the minimum and pictures hovering intriguingly between naturalism and cartoon.

I also greatly enjoyed husband and wife Shannon and Dean Hale's *Rapunzel's Revenge* (Bloomsbury, £9.99). Illustrated in colour comic strip by Nathan Hale (no relation) it uses pictures to get across emotional points at an immediate level. Rapunzel's loneliness

Left: A page from *Love Hina* and (right) a spread from *Othello*.



is made clear by an illustration showing her standing small and very alone in a vast courtyard, overlooked by one armed guard standing above her on a fortified wall. When she is remembering her past pictures fade into half-colours. Later on, a full page map containing dialogue boxes explaining particular hazards en route succeeds in making Rapunzel's forthcoming journey much clearer than any prose description could do. Set in the Wild West, this determinedly anti-sexist story shows Rapunzel using her long hair as her most effective weapon once she has transformed it into a cross between a boomerang and a lasso. This witty, exciting and stylish book is entertaining for all ages.

So too is the graphic novel adaptation of Eoin Colfer's famous story *Artemis Fowl* (Puffin, £7.99). Its comparatively small format sets a severe problem to illustrator Giovanni Rigano and his colourist Paola Lamanna. But the two still manage to pack in a lot of detail into comic strips of varying sizes. The three-quarter page illustration of Ho Chi Minh City, with which the story opens, is brilliantly realised, setting the scene for the action still to come just as those opening establishing shots used to do in old-fashioned movies. Elsewhere, full page profiles of key characters help fill in some of the gaps inevitable when pictures and dialogue alone tell a story. Adapted by Andrew Donkin and the author, himself a lifelong graphic novel fan, the pace here never lets up. Although print size is small, I doubt whether readers will mind or even notice as they race towards the end.



experience in the graphic novel form; this book is a perfect example of how in the right hands it can serve an already existing story supremely well.

Chris Wooding, another experienced author, has teamed up with the illustrator Dan Chernet to produce *Malice* (Scholastic, £6.99), a hybrid graphic novel where large chunks of text alternate with smaller sections of comic strip. These occur at moments when characters become sucked into menacing other worlds. Like the dream sequence designed by Salvador Dali in Alfred Hitchcock's film drama *Spellbound*, it makes sense to separate reality from fantasy by using two quite different pictorial styles. Even so, my guess is that Wooding would have been quite equal to the challenge of describing both worlds using prose alone, with Chernet's illustrations an easily skipped digression. The sinister figure of evil Tall Jake, who kidnaps his victims into a dark comic book world of his own, is embossed in raised black plastic on the book's front cover. A sequel is promised: you have been warned.

Nothing scary in Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Puffin, £4.99). Starting out as the daily online journal of a bright but under-sized American middle school pupil, this half-novel, half-comic strip book has already made it to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. Greg Heffley, the anti-hero of these adventures, is a natural comedian with easy going best friend Rowley acting as his feed. Together they experience various school set pieces – the annual play, games, class elections and mini-exams – all of which afford ample comic possibilities to a natural class clown.

Neil Gaiman has also recently adapted one of his stories for this format. *Coraline* *Graphic Novel* (Bloomsbury, £9.99) is brilliantly illustrated by P.Craig Russell. Packed with extraordinary images, at times dreamlike, at others closer to nightmare, this story always retains emotional credibility however outwardly fantastic. The figure of the false mother with boot-button eyes comes out much clearer in this graphic edition, particularly to younger readers who may never have seen an actual boot button in their lives. The phantom house joined on to Coraline's real home also works particularly well in picture form, being just alike enough to the real thing to be so sinisterly different at the same time. Gaiman has much

Kinney's crude ink drawings punctuating Greg's diary entrances on every page are equally effective, wringing maximum humour from all the various caricatured characters, whose main expression rarely changes save for moments of extreme emotion, of which there are many. Passing Americanisms are soon made clear, such as the 'Giving Tree' at Greg's local church (like the Simpsons, this family turn out every Sunday as a matter of course). This truly funny illustrated book well deserves its international success; two more sequels have already been announced.

Nicholas Tucker