



## **Comics Go To School**

### **Interview with Guy LeCharles Gonzalez**

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**KENNEALLY:** During the pandemic year of 2020, many in lockdown turned to reading for escape, and book sales surged. That same impulse helped drive a substantial rise in comics and graphic novel sales in the US and Canada for 2020, even though many retail outlets were forced to close for long periods.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content. Comics have long played an important role in the reading habits of many children and adults around the world, but in North America, appreciation of the format, including graphic novels and manga, has been late to come. Librarians now recognize that access to comics spurs patron engagement and propels circulation. Teachers, too, know that avid comics readers acquire the book-reading habit more readily.

In June, Kodansha USA Publishing, a subsidiary of Japan's largest publishing company and home to some of the world's most recognizable manga properties, agreed to make its digital catalog of manga available to libraries and schools through Comics Plus from LibraryPass, a content gateway for K-12, public, and academic libraries.

Guy LeCharles Gonzalez joined LibraryPass in October 2020 as chief content officer. Previously, Guy was project lead for the Panorama Project, a cross-industry research initiative to measure the role public libraries play in the book business. An avid comics reader from childhood, Gonzalez expects the diverse Kodansha catalog of titles for every age range and interest will heighten awareness and appreciation of manga and other comic formats for American readers and in American classrooms. Welcome to the program, Guy LeCharles Gonzalez.

**LeCHARLES GONZALEZ:** Hey. Thanks, Chris. Glad to be back.

**KENNEALLY:** I guess I'll start with the announcement from Kodansha and LibraryPass about the Kodansha catalog. What impact do you expect that to have for your Comics Plus program?

**LeCHARLES GONZALEZ:** So for us, I think the impact is going to be pretty significant. There are two really big manga publishers who publish translations into the US. Kodansha and



VIZ are kind of the Marvel/DC of the manga world, or maybe more appropriately, the PRH/HarperCollins, if you think about it. So their catalog has a number of titles that we're regularly asked about, both from our customers and from their patrons. Being able to add such a high-quality, high-profile collection to the catalog is going to be great for us, because it's helping us grow the collection in a particularly popular category, manga, but with a publisher that is so big and has so many well-known titles.

There's two forms of discovery. There's give me the thing I know I want, which is a lot of Kodansha's. And then there's that deeper, give me the thing I'm not aware of. At Comics Plus, we get to do both. We've got a lot of deep backlist from publishers, a lot that the average comics fan might not know about, as well as a number of high-profile titles – Dark Horse, IDW, now Kodansha.

KENNEALLY: Right. You've been talking about PRH, Penguin Random House. And I think it's indicative of the emphasis you're placing on the seriousness with which we should take the whole comics format, because you've moved that analogy from DC and Marvel to really a substantial book world analogy of Penguin Random House and HarperCollins.

Let me ask you to expand on that some. What place do you think comics, manga, and graphic novels should have in our reading habits, especially in the classroom?

LeCHARLES GONZALEZ: I think what's interesting about comics in the US is for a long time, particularly in my childhood, comics had kind of been pretty firmly rooted in the superhero world – Marvel, DC. In the '90s, indie comics started to grow. Image was born and is now the number three direct-market comics publisher – that's an important distinction – versus broad trade market. But for the most part, they were superheroes. They were generally dismissed as for kids.

Then they went through kind of an awkward maturation period, where the kids who grew up reading superheroes starting writing superheroes, but also wanted to tell more serious stories. So some superhero comics took a noteworthy turn, like *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, and a less noteworthy turn, like 90% of the '90s, where they tried to be serious, but didn't really have the sophistication to pull it off.

And the audience for those comics aged, so Marvel and DC weren't reaching new readers. I was born in '69. My kids were born in 2000, 2002. Marvel and DC were pretty irrelevant to them as kids, because Marvel didn't really publish for kids. They were publishing still for me at 40 and 50, as opposed to my kids for 10- and 15-year-olds.

What happened in the late '90s, early 2000s – manga blew up in the US and was really kind of sidelined as, well, it's not American comics. It's this foreign thing. We don't take



it as seriously. A bunch of new publishers in the market – they weren't being published by the Marvels or DCs. The big five – well, big six, I guess, back then – who knows what the count was at that point? Comics really weren't part of their publishing programs. Scholastic was maybe dabbling a little bit.

But then you started to see this growth in manga, and then separately, a few years later, this growth in comics specifically for children, mostly coming out of nontraditional comics publishers. It wasn't Marvel and DC. It was First Second. I'm blanking on some of the names. TOON Books was one of the first ones to really recognize comics for kids and comics in classrooms really being important. So you had this kind of slow, under-the-radar growth in a couple of areas of comics, where for most people, the definition of comics was still superheroes, Marvel and DC. They'd be called the big two – not recognizing that they're the big two in the direct market, which was a small fraction of the overall trade market.

**KENNEALLY:** We talk about this category of comics and graphic novels. They even have their own BISAC subject heading. That's alongside genres like fiction, biography, and autobiography. But you are keen to clear up the matter – comic books, graphic novels, manga – they are all formats of comics, a distinct storytelling medium that can stand alongside film and books for versatility and range of expression. This isn't just an academic point we're making here. This really matters. Explain why. Because it leads to some misconceptions, which you've already hinted at, I think.

**LeCHARLES GONZALEZ:** Yeah, so positioning comics as just a format I think diminishes the difference from a traditional fully text book or a picture book or an art book. The level of storytelling that goes into creating and reading a comic is closer to engaging with movies or video games than they are a traditional book. There are a number of studies that show that comics facilitate visual learning a lot more effectively and are great as adaptive learning tools for challenged readers. So readers who may not be as comfortable with straight text – maybe they aren't able to decipher certain ideas or concepts – in comics, that processing is different, because you've got visual cues to go with the words.

What's the cliché? A picture's worth a thousand words. Comics literally prove that, where a book has to describe. And some authors are notorious for being overly descriptive and writing thousand-page books that maybe could have been 400. A comic can take a chapter's worth of description of a setting and put it out there in three panels and move on to the story, and you can spend 30 seconds skimming past those panels and just reading the story, or you can spend 30 minutes deciphering all the detail in those panels and picking up all the same nuance a great author can deliver in words. A comic gives you the best of both.



So from an educational perspective, one of the interesting things that's been noted is we increasingly live in a visual world. Mobile phones have turned us into much more of a visually communicating culture. Back to hieroglyphics, emojis and animated GIFs – I resisted that for years, but there's pretty much nobody who these days hasn't at least shared one animated GIF, where that had to have been three tweets in the old days. So we've gotten a lot more comfortable with communicating visually. Instagram has built an entire humongous business around visual communication. And comics – I think some of the acceptance and understanding of comics' unique abilities have grown alongside the recognition of we live in an increasingly visual culture.

**KENNEALLY:** To sort of add to that point, as we live in this increasingly visual culture, there's been a shift away from comic books and towards graphic novels as the preferred format for readers. Sales in the book channel have now climbed above the comic store channel in North America for the first time. I have to ask you, as a veteran observer of the publishing industry and an avid reader of these formats since you were a child, do you think the book world has sufficiently taken note of this change? What does the change mean for publishers, for sales, and for readers, as well?

**LeCHARLES GONZALEZ:** You know, it's interesting. I think in a lot of ways, publishers don't often get credit for when they get things right. I'm first on line, ready to criticize publishers for things they get wrong. But I think when it comes to comics, several publishers – Macmillan of note with First Second – recognized the value of comics as a storytelling medium of its own outside of the serial format that was kind of the traditional approach for direct-market and superhero comics well before those traditional publishers did.

Even today, most of your old-school comics publishers, they still – single-issue periodicals building up to a series. Then they collect that into a graphic novel or a collection to then sell to the book market. Whereas traditional publishers who have gotten into comics for the most part don't play around in the periodicals space. They've gone straight to graphic novels.

So I think what's been interesting about that shift is it's less about people are losing interest in periodicals. There's still kind of a hardcore audience that still likes their weekly comic releases. All the major superheroes are still published in that format. A lot of popular franchises that people don't know came out of comics were still in periodical form. *Walking Dead* – that was a periodical that led to collections that now people buy in omnibuses. A lot of people watch the show, and some of them have no idea it started out as a traditional periodical comic.



So that shift to graphic novels is more about the growth in the audience for comics past the superhero fan and the comic book store aficionado into young kids who were reading *Wimpy Kid* and *Big Nate* and *Bone* and *Avatar* and comics like that, some of which cross the line and also still come out as periodicals. But you've seen that growth largely from – comics, I think, as a category of publishing have done a much better job at diversification both in storytellers, in the stories being told, and in the audiences they try to reach than most of publishing writ large. That, I think, is where the growth came from.

KENNEALLY: But I want to end on a point that you've already alluded to, which is the digital side of this business, the stories that are told expressly in a digital way. That's known as webcomics. You've said that the growth has advanced considerably. I guess in 2020, those new figures show it at about \$160 million of that total \$1.3 billion in sales. That's higher by \$70 million over the 2019 figure. What's your sense of the direction this is going, and what kind of expectations – and what's your own assessment of that particular format?

LeCHARLES GONZALEZ: One clarification – digital comics as ICv2 and Comichron measure are basically ebooks, the literal digital format of comics. Webcomics are a little looser category. Generally, webcomics refer to natively online comics. WEBTOON is kind of the big company everyone's discovered when their parent company acquired Wattpad, and now they recently announced they're merging their production studios to produce other things out of the IP.

But webcomics are basically – think of blogs versus books. Webcomics are published natively online. Most of them are free. Where they're monetized tend to be through either a Patreon-like model, or there are some platforms out there that have helped creators monetize their content. From an audience perspective, that is a huge global audience that is arguably way more – we here in the US are a small subset of the audience for that content. And the potential for money is vague, because it's digital content that started out as free, and we know the challenges of getting people to pay for things they're used to being free. But from an audience perspective, the opportunities there are huge. Where you'll see some crossover is a successful webcomic will probably eventually either publish digital editions that they can sell through comiXology and on the Kindle, or they'll publish physical collections that get distributed to comics stores and to retailers.

So webcomics is an undetermined size that's actually not part of that \$150-160 million. comiXology is kind of the big player in that space. Several publishers have their own standalone platforms. Marvel and DC have their own. VIZ has their own.

We're the only subscription model platform in the library space for digital comics. OverDrive and Hoopla both offer digital comics, but in variations of a single-user license.



So we're the only one that's built around a subscription, all-you-can-eat kind of model. And from our perspective, we see a humongous opportunity for growth. Hoopla's not in schools. It's a public library-only platform. OverDrive has Sora, which is edging its way into schools. We've found our primary success so far in schools, and we're slowly working our way back into public libraries.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, I appreciate the clarification and the education on that point, and I think it really, again, underscores that there's a lot to learn in this space. I want to end, Guy LeCharles Gonzalez, by asking you about the reaction you get to all these points. As I say, I'm learning a lot. I'm sure there's plenty in the market to learn further. What's the most surprising thing you've heard, the most exciting thing, or maybe the most disappointing thing when you tell people about comics and their value for reading and literacy?

**LeCHARLES GONZALEZ:** A combination of surprising and disappointing – there are still a significant number of librarians and educators who question the value of comics, and there are a small, but very vocal group of advocates who absolutely see their value and have spent 10 years plus kind of advocating for them with success.

Over the past eight months or so, we were doing a series of educational webinars. Invariably, every one of them had some form of two questions – either how do I convince my administration that comics are a worthwhile addition to my collection? Or worse, how do I convince parents that it's OK for their kids to read comics? With the explosion of comics for kids over the past 10 years, I feel like that's a little disappointing, that there's still a significant percentage of parents and educators who – mostly out of ignorance, I think – don't understand comics' value, mostly because they still think of comics from whatever their reference point from childhood was, whether that's superheroes, comic strips, hopefully not the '90s superhero comics. Depending on that childhood reference, that really colors people's perspective on what they think comics are today. But once you get them engaged and introduce them to the variety of genres and styles and stories, most people are eventually won over to at least accepting, hey, comics are actually pretty good for reading. Let me learn more.

**KENNEALLY:** All right. Well, Guy LeCharles Gonzalez, chief content officer for LibraryPass and Comics Plus, thanks so much for joining me on the program.

**LeCHARLES GONZALEZ:** Appreciate it. Thanks for having me.

**KENNEALLY:** Guy publishes a biweekly newsletter, *As in guillotine...*, every other Thursday. Five things of interest – that's it. That's the description. We will link to his newsletter on our web post for this podcast.



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