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Manga and the Autistic Mind

O

f its millions of readers worldwide, manga, or Japanese comics, seems to hold a special appeal for adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). If you have a student with ASD in your English language arts classroom, chances are he or she reads manga: the latest issues of Bleach, One Piece, Skip Beat, or Attack on Titan are all popular titles with adolescents in both Japan and the United States. Why individuals with ASD love manga—and its animated cousin, anime—remains mostly unexplored, though their preference is discussed on ASD message boards and Facebook pages, recognized by practicing psychologists and social workers, mentioned in journalistic memoirs concerned with the disorder, and noted by renowned autistic Temple Grandin in her 2013 NCTE Annual Convention keynote address.

Given the 2014 finding by the Centers for Disease Control—that an astounding 1 in 68 children are on the autism spectrum—it seems more important than ever to examine the literacy practices of this increasingly present but still misunderstood group. Your classroom likely has at least one student who is on the spectrum, and perhaps more who have gone undiagnosed or undetected. They are likely boys, who are diagnosed with ASD at a rate five times higher than girls. This group includes my son, who was diagnosed with high-functioning autism three years ago and is heading toward adolescence all too quickly. If many of these young adults are reading manga, it is critical for English teachers to ask two questions: What does the preference for manga reveal about the way adolescents with ASD view and process the world around them? How can manga be used as a teaching tool in classrooms with both neurotypical and neurodivergent students?

Reading Manga through the Spectrum

Whatever insights manga can provide into the adolescent with ASD, however, should be tempered by a favorite saying within the autism community: “If you know one child with autism, you know one child with autism.” Like other neurodevelopmental disorders, in other words, autism expresses itself differently in different individuals. There is no single autistic mind, brain, or point of view. And while research grows ever closer to identifying genetic and biological factors that might predict autism, the reality is that right now, we know autism only through the symptoms exhibited by affected individuals. These symptoms vary widely, so that one adolescent with ASD may demonstrate easily recognizable autistic traits, such as severely impaired verbal skills and repetitive twirling or hand-flapping, while a classmate with ASD may be almost indistinguishable from his or her neurotypical peers. Most people are surprised to learn, for instance, that my son is autistic. To them, he talks and acts nothing like Raymond from *Rain Man*, the most enduring pop-culture portrayal of autism.

To remedy some of the uncertainty surrounding autism, the 2013 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) removed the diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome—long considered
a distinct, milder form of the disorder—in favor of the more inclusive term *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, which now encompasses the entire range of the disability. The reformulated *DSM-5* definition includes only two broad diagnostic criteria for autism: first, persistent deficits in social communication; and second, restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. It is clear that an obsession with manga qualifies as a repetitive pattern of interest, the second major criterion. But *why* is this the case?

At the most basic level, manga may appeal to adolescents with ASD simply because it is an image-rich medium, and many autistic individuals are better at processing images than words. As Temple Grandin observes in *The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum*, they are *visual thinkers* (Grandin and Panek 28). Not all adolescents with ASD in your class will possess exceptional visuospatial skills like Grandin, who can reproduce complicated architectural structures from memory, but research has shown that many will pay more attention to small visual details than will their neurotypical peers, sometimes at the cost of the larger picture (Dakin and Frith 500). As a medium, manga typically contains fewer words and more pictures than Western comics. Aarnoud Rommens notes, “The amount of wordless passages in any volume of manga may be striking to the Western eye. To ‘read’ manga is to read images—the rhythm is determined by the sequence of images . . . . In most cases, this means that the image alone conveys narrative information.” The spare use of narrative captions and word bubbles in manga, combined with its reliance on picture-specific storytelling, then, may be the main reason it hooks visually oriented adolescents with ASD. Adding to this appeal, manga often features highly detailed, photorealistic illustrations of buildings and landscapes, employed as backgrounds or as stand-alone, scene-setting panels. The celebrated series *A Distant Neighborhood* by Jiro Taniguchi, for example, includes exquisite renderings of trains and train stations that adolescents with ASD may find captivating.

Beyond appealing to visual thinkers, the unique aesthetics of manga may also provide adolescents with ASD with unambiguous social and emotional input, primarily through its exaggerated, stereotypical depiction of the human face. For many individuals with autism, the inability to recognize faces, differentiate between them, and identify facial expressions severely impairs social interaction (Behrmann, Thomas, and Humphreys 258). The *DSM-5* calls this a “deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors . . . in understanding and use of gestures.” John Elder Robison recounts this difficulty in his 2012 memoir *Be Different: My Adventures with Asperger’s*:

As I got older, I encountered a steady stream of people who’d make “faces” at me and expect some kind of response. People would approach me with big smiles and a hand held out. Who were they? What did they want? They often looked offended when I just stared, and things really got strange if I turned and ran. (80)

Individuals with autism can improve their ability to recognize faces and facial expressions through social therapy, which my son receives weekly, and increasingly, with the help of computer technologies (el Kaliouby, Picard, and Baron-Cohen 230). But manga may also help adolescents with ASD recognize and discriminate between faces. In modern manga, faces are usually drawn with enormous eyes, small pointed chins, and extreme hairstyles. Iconic rather than realistic in depiction, manga faces are the most salient aspect of what Neil Cohn calls *Japanese Visual Language* (JVL), a set of aesthetic conventions that characterize Japanese comics and animation. Cohn observes that in JVL, “this style [of rendering faces] is so schematized that often characters’ faces cannot be distinguished from each other, leading to authors’ use of other features to allow readers to differentiate them” (189). As Figure 1 shows, the heroes of *shōnen* (manga for boys) are very similar in appearance across series, at least in terms of their stereotypical facial features, but one may have spiky black hair, like Komuro from *High School of the Dead*, while another has light blue bangs that fall in his eyes, like Kuroko from *Kuroko’s Basketball*. How...
Might this help the adolescent with ASD? While faces in Western comics take a variety of forms—from *Prince Valiant* to *Peanuts*—a manga face always looks like a manga face, making them easy for adolescents with ASD to recognize. At the same time, each bears a simple feature that signifies, unequivocally, the identity of the character, helping adolescents with ASD draw distinctions between faces.

Manga may also resonate with individuals with autism because it depicts facial expressions with little ambiguity. In comics, as Scott McCloud observes, faces are critical in evoking emotional responses from the reader. McCloud identifies six primary emotions that a face can express: anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise. These primary emotions combine to yield more nuanced secondary expressions, so that anger (primary) + sadness (primary) = betrayal (secondary) (83–85). But emotional subtlety is not the goal of most manga. Indeed, manga typically caricatures...
characters’ emotional states: angry characters are drawn in grotesque distortions; sad characters are shown with tears streaming down their cheeks. JVL also relies on a common set of symbols, or emenata, to further reinforce the emotional content of a panel (Ingulsrud and Allen 6). Culturally specific to Japan, emenata can bewilder Western readers: in manga, a drop of sweat on the brow of a character represents worry, tension, surprise, or anger; a bloody nose symbolizes sexual arousal. Experienced manga readers recognize and interpret these symbols without thinking, just as Western readers know that a dark cloud hovering above Charlie Brown’s head means that he is, as usual, a little depressed. When combined in a single portrayal, as when an angry character grimaces horribly (cartoon) and grows horns (emenata), the emotional message is loud and clear, perhaps even to adolescents with ASD who typically struggle to interpret the emotional affect of others.

Panel backgrounds and borders, too, can further communicate an emotional context while appealing to another kind of individual with autism—the pattern thinker (Grandin and Panek 140). According to Grandin, pattern thinkers are unusually acute in perceiving spatial relations. Put simply, manga abounds with patterns. Panel backgrounds frequently contain simple geometric shapes, such as pentagons or circles, or more elaborate abstract patterns, depending on the intended emotional effect. Individual panels are sometimes set off with subtle floral or geometric borders—another kind of pattern for the adolescent with ASD. And pages themselves consist of panels that can be arranged into a nearly infinite number of patterns, from the contained grids of Tezuka Osuma’s classic New Treasure Island to the free-flowing structure of Kieko Tobe’s With the Light. Each issue of a manga series also follows a similar structure: a title page, a splash page introducing the main characters or conflict, and then 20 or more pages of story. These patterns—of panel, page, and issue—recur across manga genres, making it possible for an adolescent with ASD to navigate a vast narrative universe without ever really leaving home.

Two other related components of manga—time and motion—may help to explain its appeal to adolescents with ASD, though admittedly, the following points are highly speculative. The first component, germane to the comics medium, is the way time is represented. Unlike any other visual medium, comics can represent the past, present, and future on the same page. The panel is the key structural device that allows this to happen. As Will Eisner writes, “Critical to the success of a visual narrative is the ability to convey time. But to convey ‘timing,’ which is the manipulation of the elements of time to achieve a specific message or emotion, panels are the critical element” (29). In their sequence and inside their borders, panels allow readers to perceive and control the flow of time (see Figure 2). Some research has concluded that individuals with ASD have difficulty perceiving the passage of time (Martin, Poirier, and Bowler 644), so a medium that makes time explicit and malleable may serve them well. My son’s anxiety about time—being late, missing events, departing from the schedule—is eased when we use a timer to indicate precisely when an activity will conclude. Theoretically, at least, manga or any other comic puts time back into his hands, letting him run the clock.

Along with time, motion in manga is shown in ways that adolescents with ASD may find appealing. In manga, as McCloud explains, motion is depicted subjectively; that is, the sense of motion is achieved through the use of streaked backgrounds that “make readers feel like they were moving with the character, instead of just watching motion from the sidelines” (216). While many Western comics have adopted this technique, it has long been a mainstay of manga, and especially anime. Many autistic individuals have impaired motion perception (Milne, Swettenham, and Campbell 19), and it may be that manga makes motion easier for adolescents with ASD to detect by positioning them, the readers, at its center.

The final insight that manga may provide about adolescents with ASD concerns the verbal thinker (Grandin and Panek 154), the individual whose verbosity and single-minded fixations would have previously received an Asperger’s diagnosis, prior to the DSM-5 revisions. My son fits into this category, and like many ASD kids, he went through an obsession with dinosaurs. He read and memorized dense quantities of information about paleontology, extinction, species classifications,
evolutionary theory, and more. During his first-grade study of dinosaurs, an exasperated classmate once told him, “We don’t need to know everything about the Jurassic era!” For students like my son, manga offers a universe of information to be memorized, categorized, and likely recited at inopportune moments. A single series such as *Dragon Ball* has more than 500 chapters, with hundreds of characters, settings, and storylines. And there are thousands of manga series, not to mention the video games, anime, and trading card games that expand the manga universe.

All of this gives avid manga readers—known as *otaku* in Japan—a nearly infinite amount of information to collect and categorize. Manga is meant to be disposable. It is inexpensive and printed on cheap paper. But otaku store up manga series, accumulating vast encyclopedias of single issues and collected volumes. They cosplay as manga characters at manga conventions and parties, and they frequent manga cafes (*kissa*), sometimes staying all night. As Ernst VanBergeijk wryly observes, the difference between these fanatical manga readers and individuals with ASD is not always clear. Otaku, he writes, are “isolated, socially awkward, knowledgeable and smart, and were highly skilled in or obsessed with computer technology to the detriment of their social skills. Descriptions of the otaku are similar to how in the West we describe higher functioning individuals on the autism spectrum” (381).

**Teaching with Manga**

Graphic works have established a presence in the English language arts classroom, and a number of...
scholars have already articulated how works such as *Maus, American Born Chinese*, and *Persepolis* can be approached in literature, writing, literacy, and other instructional contexts. In this journal, for example, James Bucky Carter has argued that comics can transform the secondary English curriculum by appealing to student interest, narrowing the achievement gap between genders and social classes, and addressing social justice issues (49–53). Carter, one of comics’ strongest comics advocates, has also published several book-length works on teaching comics, including *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*, published by NCTE in 2007. A more recent *English Journal* treatment is Michael Pagliaro’s 2014 effort to establish criteria for judging the literary merit of graphic novels: these include expressive characters, detailed setting, form that functions, and authentic dialogue (31–42). In the above and many other teaching-focused articles and books, comics and graphic novels are positioned, rightly so, as multimodal texts that can teach visual literacy skills.

Manga has been less examined from an educational perspective, perhaps because it raises so many cultural and linguistic barriers. To the initiate, manga can seem overwhelmingly *other*: its wide range of genres includes *shōnen* (for boys), *shōjo* (for girls), *yaoi* (gay love stories), *yuri* (lesbian love stories), *fujoshi* (for adult women), *seinen* (for adult men), and even *bentai* (pornography). Manga can also be categorized by subject—fantasy, school life, romance, comedy, tragedy, historical, supernatural, horror, science fiction, gender bender, and more. Despite a tough learning curve, educators have begun recognizing the potential of manga. The most notable exploration is Michael Bitz’s book *Manga High: Literacy, Identity, and Coming of Age in an Urban High School*, a case study of the comic book project, an afterschool program that taught New York City teenagers how to create their own manga. Here, adolescents read manga, researched Japanese culture and history, imitated their favorite manga authors, and eventually produced meaningful personal manga, acquiring valuable literacy skills necessary for academic and occupational success.

There is no doubt that manga can be a useful resource for teaching neurotypical and neurodivergent adolescents. Widely available in print or digital forms, manga can be incorporated into a secondary English curriculum as independent reading material, for literature circles, and, as I suggest below, as a class text. Teachers should be aware that some manga contain violence and sexual themes, but even so, manga can raise interesting questions of translation, call sociocultural norms into question, and offer new takes on old mythologies. Its diversity of genres assures that every reader can find an appealing series, while simultaneously prompting students to think critically about genre conventions and audience expectations.

One manga in particular bears special relevance to this discussion. The work, an eight-volume series titled *With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child*, portrays a Japanese couple struggling to raise their autistic son, Hikaru. Written by Keiko Tobe from 2002 to 2009, and published in the United States by Yen Press in 2011, the series has already received brief attention in this journal (Letcher 114) but merits further consideration here. *With the Light* is the only manga about autism and, to my knowledge, the only graphic work, period, that deals with the disorder in a sustained, in-depth manner. What is remarkable about this series—and what makes the first volume of the series an excellent choice for a class text, particularly in settings with students with ASD—is the way it educates readers about autism and encourages readers to empathize with individuals with ASD.

The first volume of *With the Light* begins the story of Masato and Sachiko Azuma, a middle-class Japanese family living on the outskirts of Tokyo. As the manga opens, Masato and Sachiko have just had their first child, a boy they name Hikaru, which means “with the morning light.” Hikaru, however, is proving difficult: he cries frequently, hates to be held, and does not respond normally to light and sound. Masato has recently been promoted and devotes long hours to work, so Sachiko is left to care for Hikaru. As Hikaru’s behavior grows increasingly volatile, friends and family blame Sachiko for poor mothering. Realizing this is not true,
Sachiko—and eventually Masato—begin the long process of determining what exactly is wrong with Hikaru. After multiple visits to pediatric doctors and medical clinics, Hikaru is finally diagnosed with autism. The remainder of the volume details how Sachiko and Masato explain his disability to friends and family members, while finding specialists and schools for Hikaru.

While information about ASD has changed in the decade since With the Light was first published, the opening volume is still highly accurate in its depiction of autism. As the narrative unfolds, readers learn key symptoms of the disorder through Hikaru, who exhibits delayed language acquisition, emotional dysregulation, rigid thinking, and sensory problems. We see these symptoms

FIGURE 3. Sensory Overload. Hiraku visits the Buddhist Temple, shown here as a chaotic swirl of sounds, sights, and smells. From Keiko Tobe’s With the Light 1: 39.
from the perspective of Sachiko, the narrator, but on occasion, we glimpse what the world looks like to Hikaru. As Figure 3 illustrates, these instances are particularly powerful in a visual medium. *With the Light* also contains helpful information about autism, most often inserted to advance the story (Sachiko distributes autism pamphlets to her mother-in-law), but sometimes more directly, as in footnoted tips, sidebars, or short testimonies written by individuals with autism or their parents. For the Western reader, these moments can seem like a breaking of the fourth wall, but within *Josei* manga, or manga written specifically for women, who still do the majority of child rearing in Japan, the combination of story and practical information is perfectly appropriate. Notably, it was this combination of information and narrative that was praised by the *Journal of Autism Developmental Disorder* in its review of *With the Light*: “Tobe's series on raising a child with autism simultaneously entertains and educates its readership. Tobe draws her readers into the daily struggles and successes of the Azuma family in raising their son with autism” (VanBergeijk 382).

Beyond educating, *With the Light* does what any good work of fiction does—it fosters empathy in its readers. Set in a society where mental illness is both widespread and stigmatized, the series returns again and again to its main argument: that society must make efforts to understand, accommodate, and welcome individuals with disabilities. This argument is made persistently and optimistically by the Azuma family, as they encounter unknowing and sometimes uncaring friends, family members, classmates, parents, and employees. The Azuma family is impossible to resist, and Hikaru, for all of his tantrums, is a deeply sympathetic character. The book also shows that teachers have a critical role to play in developing the capabilities of neurodivergent students and in nurturing empathy in their neurotypical classmates. One in particular, a special education teacher named Aoki-Sensei, is instrumental in helping Hikaru grow and in teaching those around Hikaru to love and accept him. Introducing Hikaru to his classmates, Aoki-Sensei says:

Hikaru Azuma, who entered school today, has a disability known as autism. It is not something you get from the way you were raised or something you get later. Unfortunately, the cause is yet unknown. It also can’t be cured like a regular disease. What’s different about autistic people is how they “feel” things. They live in a world of chaotic senses. Please watch over him warmly. (294–95)

Watch over him warmly. This seems like succinct advice for those of us who teach adolescents with ASD. As I have argued here, doing so may mean finding a place for manga in your English language arts course, or better still, teaching a manga that expresses all the hardships and joys of raising an autistic child, educating and moving us toward empathy as it does so. 

**Works Cited**


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Readers of picture books and graphic novels know that visual images sometimes tell a story in a way that words cannot. Although the majority of visual texts are published for children, a growing number of books written for teens incorporate visual material in ways that can challenge and stretch older readers. Tune in to the ReadWriteThink.org podcast episode “Visual Texts for Teens” to hear about newly published middle grade and young adult fiction, graphic novels, biographies, travel memoirs, and informational books, all of which use visual material in ways that enrich the text’s meaning. http://bit.ly/1MmetLU

Rescue Window

He walks in after school, red-faced and wet. I get him a tissue. He says thank you. Then he punches himself in the face. But there’s movement in the window. He sees a bee. More than one. Ten, twenty are trapped between the glass and the screen.

They’re going to kill them, he says. Probably, I say. His anger pushed aside, he moves to the window. Slides it open. Reaches in.

In his right hand, a bee rests in his palm. He speaks to the bee in a language I don’t recognize, at least not from this troubled young man, these nurturing sweet words of calm. He walks to the unscreened rescue window and with his free hand, he makes a pointing motion lifting toward the trees and sky. Fly, he says. And the bee flies. He rescues more than twenty, one-by-one, each with the same care, each with the same words. As I watch this spectacle it hits me that there’s magic in this boy. Am I the only one who sees it? Is this a gift for me alone? He points to the light. I follow with my eyes. Fly, he says. And so I rise.

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