Manga for Girls

With stories about brother-sister romances, cross-dressing heroes and other literary oddities, Japanese comics known as shojo are one of the hottest markets in American publishing.

WALK into almost any chain book store and you're likely to find a teenage girl sprawled on the floor reading manga—thick black-and-white comic books by Japanese authors. Graphic novels, including manga, have been popular with American boys for years now. But, to the surprise of publishers, "shojo" comics (or manga for girls) have become one of the hottest markets in the book business. Two publishers—Viz Media, which has been owned, and Tokyopop, an American company—have been the leaders in the American manga market, which has more than doubled manga publisher since 2002, helped along by a $35 billion business in related animated films, TV series and licensed products like dolls and action figures. Del Rey, in the Random House Publishing Group, has become the first New York publisher to enter the shojo market in a big way (in partnership with Kodansha in Japan). Last year, Del Rey sold a million copies of its first 16 releases combined. Next year, it plans to bring out close to 85 manga titles, most of them aimed at teenage girls.

Shojo—the word means girl in Japanese—frequently involves a lovelorn teenager seeking a boyfriend or dealing with situations like entering a new school, being bullied or trying to break away from a clique. There are also action stories featuring girls in strong roles as scientists and samurai warriors. (The shojo genre has been called "big eyes save the world." after the characteristic drawing of style of girls with saucer-shaped eyes who are sometimes endowed with supernatural powers.)

But parents and teachers, who are sometimes happy to see teenagers reading just about anything, might be caught off guard by some of the content of the girls' favorite books. Among the best-selling shojo stories that involve cross-dressing boys and characters who magically change sex, brother-sister romances and teenage girls falling in love with 10-year-old boys in a sub-genre known as shonen ai, or boy's love, which usually features romances between two impossibly young men. "Shonen ai" is common in Japanese comics for girls (as they are in Japanese literature) but, intriguingly, they've become as popular with girls here.

"Faker," a best-selling series from Tokyopop, is one of the largest manga series in the United States, reaches around two New York City police officers who look more like male fashion models. The story experienced one surprise in its plot: a French kiss halfway through Volume 1, complete with cinematic close-ups.

"Faker" is one of 10 manga series requested by teenage girls in Glendale, Ariz., but Kristin Fletcher-Spear, a librarian who specializes in teenage services there, says she recommends it to her audience. "Faker" is one of the graphic sex scenes in the last volume. That volume, the seventh, which finally lands the heroes in bed, is shrunken and wrapped "Mature" for ages 18-plus by Tokyopop. (Volume 1 is rated for readers 13 and older.)

So far, publishers have been relying on their own age-rating schemes, and there's no central governing body enforcing a uniform rating system. While parents have campaigned against books by authors like Judy Blume to Rea Dahl, there have been few complaints about manga, according to a survey of Fletcher-Spear conducted of 16 librarians around the country. That could be because most adults have never even heard of it. (More than 40 percent of the general population is still unfamiliar with the genre, according to the market research released by Viz Media.) And manga is unlikely to catch the attention of the local P.T.A. because teachers don't typically sign comics as homework or accept them for book reports.

"Manga has been below the radar of the kind of people who insist certain works be pulled from libraries," says Giles Potras, a librarian at Golden Gate University in San Francisco who leads manga workshops for librarians. "I'm expecting more challenges to come up in the next few years."

During her five-year tenure as a young-adult librarian in Fort Wayne, Ind., which ended in 2003, Katharine Kan had many requests for manga from kids, but she could recall only one complaint, concerning nudity in a story about a boy who changes into a girl when splashed with water. Publishers say they encounter the most resistance to manga not from parents but from independent booksellers, like Sarah Glazer last wrote for the Book Review in April, about self-publishing.

JoAnn Fruchman, owner of the Children's Bookstore in Baltimore, which does not stock any manga. "I feel most of it is quite violent and the outcome is not necessarily as I think literature should be," she says.

Tokyopop in America are mostly translated from Japanese originals, and like all manga are meant to be read back to front, right to left. If you get a typical shojo like a regular book, you're likely to see a note saying: "Stop! You are going the wrong way!" The idea is that it's a completely different reading experience," as one popular series, "Oshino," explains on its first (that is, last) page. Shojo has also spawned a fashion craze among girls for dressing up as their favorite characters; the oddest must be "Gothic Lolita"—an innocent-girl-gone-bad look that involves black frilly Victorian dresses and a little girl's bonnet or headband. All this adds to the books' cult appeal.

MANGA has been the engine driving one of the fastest-growing segments of publishing—graphic novels, according to Milton Griep, publisher of ICV2, an online trade publication. Manga sales alone surged to $125 million last year, from $55 million in 1999, and girls and women account for about 60 percent of manga's readership. The strongest market right now is among girls aged 12 to 17, according to Tokyopop.

The proliferation of Web sites and high school clubs devoted to manga testifies to the devotion of its fans. And not all of it is R-rated or gender-bending. "Points of View," a series which has just hit Volume 1 and with 11 volumes already, is No. 1 on the latest shojo best-seller chart compiled by ICV2; it follows the adventures of a girl who moves in with a supernatural family suffering under a curse. The latest volume is expected to sell well into six figures, according to Tokyopop.

But sales figures don't fully capture the fan base among shojo readers, who can whip through a volume in half an hour in a bookstore and often pass along copies to friends. Librarians complain that shojo is so well sold out from multiple readers that they quickly fall apart. Manga titles in general are among the most popular young-adult books at the Brooklyn Public Library, according to one librarian, Joe Anne Shapiro—in fact, the top five young-adult books on the current reserved list are shojo books. (The No. 1 spot going to the fantasy best seller "Eldest"). The recent volume of "Fruits Basket" had 90 holds placed on it, she said.

However, like the owner of Children's Bookstore, some librarians and booksellers are unwilling to stock shojo because of their
concerns about nudity, sex and violence. “I’m constantly amazed at what I see. Books that appear appropriate for little girls all of a sudden have a girl and boy in bed together,” Betsy Mitchell, vice president and editor in chief of Del Rey, says of Japanese shojo that she declined to publish here.

Some publishers have exaggerated manga for the American market. But they run the risk of outraging fans, many of whom buy the books in the original Japanese and find fan translations online (known as “fanlations”) to make sure they’re getting their manga pure. After DC Comics deleted some sexual and violent content from “Tenjho Tenge” — a “Lord of the Flies” set in Tokyo — incensed readers attacked the publisher for censorship on fan Web sites and picketed its booth at comic conventions.

“We’ve made a serious decision to publish only series that we didn’t have to do that to because readers that enjoy manga hate seeing it touched in any way,” Mitchell says.

At a Manhattan Barnes & Noble recently, I found 14-year-old Hilary Roberts sitting on the floor in the manga section absorbed in “Ray,” a series by Akito Yoshizumi, about a nurse who uses her X-ray vision to save patients. She also showed me to “W Juliet,” by Emura, in which a boy disguised as a girl wins the part of Juliet in the school play and falls in love with the androgynous-looking girl playing Romeo.

“Normal American comics like ‘Superman’ don’t appeal to me that much. They focus more on superheroes and fighting evil. Manga has more fantasy and it’s more romantic,” Roberts, who is in 10th grade at Bronx High School of Science, told me, adding, “I think the art is prettier.” That about sums up why girls long ago abandoned American superhero comics, a market increasingly dominated by male collectors saving mint-condition comics in plastic bags.

Some manga experts have tried to explain the huge popularity in Japan of shonen ai and “yaoi” — its racier version aimed at older women — by noting the lack of romance in traditional Japanese marriages and the more restrictive dating codes common until recently. In Japan, manga are “like the release of the id.” says Frederik L. Schodt, a Japanese translator and author of “Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga.”

But why should these girls in anything-goes America be equally attracted? “It’s safer, especially if you’re a younger teen, because it doesn’t put you in the story; you can relate and not feel it’s something you have to emulate sexually,” says Robin Brenner, a librarian in Lexington, Mass., who runs a manga fan group.

The frequent Shakespearean switches of sexual identity also mirror the fluctuations for girls at puberty between feeling like a tomboy and a sexual woman, several psychologists suggested. As for the standard plot, in which a resistant male is overwhelmed by an older male, may get a thrill from seeing the tables turned on traditional sex roles.

In June, Viz Media introduced “Shojo Beat,” the first manga magazine aimed at American girls and last month Tokyopop began serializing manga in CosmoGirl, which has six million readers. Both publishers have also announced novelizations of popular shojo. Tokyopop’s autumn lineup includes a novel version of a best-selling shonen ai, “Gravitation,” about a love affair between a high school boy and a female fan. And last month Tokyopop began a shojo beat fiction imprint. Next month “Socrates in Love,” an all-time best-selling romance novel in Japan about a girl who falls ill with leukaemia, will come out, and early next year “Kimakaze Girls,” about the high school friendship between a female biker gang member and a trilly Lolita type, will be published.

Publishers are also banking on girls staying interested in manga as they head into their college years and beyond. Masumi O’Donnell, publisher of the New York-based Central Park Media imprint BeBeautiful, believes that the sexier yaoi novels, which her company introduced in the United States a year ago, are the key to keeping female readers.

Books like BeBeautiful’s “Kimakaze,” a male love triangle featuring explicit sex scenes between men, have been selling strongly at Borders and Barnes & Noble, and adult women make up the most enthusiastic readers. Among the almost 500 fans who lined up for a book signing by the author, Kazuma Kiberi, in New York City in May, only two were men, ICV2 reported, and they were seeking autographs for female fans.

“We hit gold with shojo with 14-year-old girls,” says Eric Scarleman, an editor at Viz Media. “Now we have to lay the groundwork for the 20-year-old woman.”

The industry will be watching closely to see if these phenomena can be emulated by six top-selling Harlequin romances coming out in manga format starting this December. The new joint venture between Harlequin Enterprises and Dark Horse Comics, based in Oregon, will feature two color-coded series: pink for 13-year-olds and purple for older teenagers and readers in their early 20s. Harlequin sees the venture as an opportunity to take their novels to “a much younger audience” than the typical romance reader, says Mary Abthorpe, vice president for new business development.

More than 250 Harlequin books have already been released as manga in Japan, where manga are read much more by adults than they are here. Whether American women will enjoy their bodice-rippers in comic-book form as much as Japanese readers remains to be seen.

How to read manga: from right to left, top to bottom. In 'Fake,' two police officers get to know each other better.