Meeting Our Heroes: The Fight for Diversity in Comic Books

Background Facts:

- Superman debuted in 1938, and was the creation of Canadian artist Joe Shuster. (Macleans)
- The first female superhero, Fantomah, didn’t appear in comics until 1940. The first black superhero to headline a series was Lobo in 1965. Before this, most appearances of black characters reinforced negative stereotypes. The first Asian superhero, Shang-Chi, appeared in 1973, a full 35 years after Superman. (Complex)
- Canada’s first national superhero was Inuit: Nelvana of the Northern Lights. She appeared in 1941 as a goddess who drew a power from the Aurora Borealis to defend Canada from Nazi spies and other invaders. (Toronto Star)
- Amka Aliyak, better-known by her superhero name Snowguard, is the new teenage Inuk superhero from Marvel Comics. She was created with Inuit film and VR producer Nyla Innuksuk as a consultant to make sure her cultural inspiration, setting and powers were portrayed accurately. Snowguard draws on Sila, an Inuit spirit force that allows her to shapeshift and grow fur, claws, antlers and wings. She first appeared in June 2018. (CBC)
- Comic conventions have a long history of struggling with inclusion and diversity. In 2015, Denver Comic Con host a panel on women in comics with only male presenters and received backlash online and in the media. (Slate)
- Black Panther, a 2018 movie starring the African superhero who first appeared in 1966, more than doubled its expected box office earnings, taking in more than $1 billion. (BBC)
- Black Panther received critical acclaim for portraying both African culture and African American political struggles in an accurate, compelling way. The director, as well as the majority of the cast, crew and designers, were black. (Vox)

Classroom Activity - Grades 9 to 12

Essential Question:

► How does representation in comic books reflect patterns and trends in all types of media?
► Why does diversity in media matter?
► How can consumers shape trends and patterns in media?

Learning Goals:

Students will:

► Explore the history of diversity in comic books and other forms of media
► Analyze how their media consumption influences their worldview

Discussion:

1. Whose voices, identities or perspectives have historically been represented in comic books?
2. Why is it important for young people to see themselves represented in comic books or other types of media?
3. What do the authors mean when they say, “It’s rare to see fictional heroes from the communities that deal with these challenges in real life”?
4. What does Sonya Ballantyne mean when she encourages audiences to “Vote with your money”?
5. Why do the authors suggest learning more about the artists, writers and directors who create the media you consume? Why is diversity in the artists or creators of media just as important as diversity in what is being produced?

Warm Up: (20 minutes)

Begin the lesson by giving students an opportunity to explore a variety of comic books. Encourage students to bring in their favourite comic books or graphic novels to share with their peers. If students are not familiar with comics, ask your Teacher-Librarian for support to gather a collection of comics and graphic novels or source digital versions.

Set up stations that students can rotate through or invite students to explore the resources in pairs or small groups.

Encourage students to consider the following questions as they explore the resources:

► What are key text features of this genre?
► What patterns or trends do you notice?
► Why do you think young people and adults choose to read comics and graphic novels?
► What criticisms do you have of the comics or graphic novels you read?

Investigate and Learn: (2 x 60 minutes)

Using the jigsaw strategy, divide students into home groups of four. Give students in each group a number from one to four and have students join others with the same number to form expert groups. Ask each expert group to read the article “Meeting Our Heroes: The Fight for Diversity in Comic Books” and answer one of the questions from the Discussion section.

Once students have read the article and discussed the question, ask them to return to their home group and share what they learned with the members in their groups.

As a class, summarize what students learned from the article. Encourage students to develop an understanding of why representation in media is important.

Ask students to review the comics and graphic novels they explored at the beginning of the lesson and consider what the dominant voices and perspectives are in the texts and what voices and perspectives are not represented.

Individually, have each student to create an inventory of the media they consume on a regular basis. This can include books, magazines, television shows, etc. Ask students to write a short reflective paragraph or record an oral response describing the patterns and trends in representation they see in their own media consumption. Challenge students to consider how what they choose to consume can influence the way they see the world. Do they tend to watch shows or read books that showcase one type of story or one perspective? What would be the benefits of consuming media created by someone with a life experience different than their own?

Educator’s Note: In class, provide students with an opportunity to explore a variety of different texts and share them with their peers. Consider using sites like https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/ or www.adifferentbooklist.com/ to encourage students to engage with authors and stories that might be unfamiliar to them.
Dive Deeper: (2 x 60 minutes)

Show students “If I Don’t See Myself, How Do I Know I Exist? Sonya Ballantyne – TEDxWinnipeg,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuplC1q_2E (13:14). Ask students to discuss the main message in Sonya’s video.

Remind students that each of them has their own unique voice and perspective and that they all have their own stories to tell.

Challenge students to use the comic or graphic novel medium to create a text that represents their own story. Students can choose to use paper and art materials or digital software. Encourage students to use the texts they have explored throughout the lesson as inspiration, especially if they have not created a comic or graphic novel before.

If students feel comfortable, give them an opportunity to share their work with students in other classes or with students in younger grades. Students may also display their work in the library or other shared spaces in the school as a way to highlight the importance of representation in media.

Extension: Challenge students to investigate comic book websites, school and local libraries, and other sources to find comic books or graphic novels that represent a variety of diverse perspectives through their characters, storylines or the artists who created them.

Encourage students to celebrate the texts they find throughout their school and community by creating a poster or social media campaign. Students should focus on raising awareness for the importance of diversity in comics and graphic novels and helping students understand why representation in media is important.