

Local comic store caters to new crowd

Comics about gritty city life sell big in D.C., new Tenleytown shop owner says

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Around the corner from Best Buy and the Container Store is an easily missed Tenleytown treasure: Fantom Comics. Last November, owner and sole employee Matt Klokel opened the store to work for himself. "I had a good job, and I had a good boss, and I still wanted to work for myself, so I made a business plan and did it," Klokel says.

The store's main focus is selling comics (new and back issues), graphic novels (longer comics in book form) and trade paperbacks (bound collections of individual comics). Klokel's product line also includes Japanese comic books, or "manga," as well as a few toys and collector's items that costumers requested. However, Fantom is not a typical comics store.

There are no displays of Warhammer pieces or Magic the Gathering cards. The emphasis is truly on comics because the costumers of Fantom run contrary to the popular stereotype of nerdy, comic-reading teenaged boys. Klokel says his clientele fit into what he calls a "dumbbell demographic." Many more of his comics are bought for children or professional adults than for teenagers or college students.

According to Adam Tamashasky, a professor in the College of Arts and Sciences, faculty advisor of the Comic Book Appreciation Club and frequent patron of Fantom Comics, "Comics continue to find a niche in our culture because they were able to adapt, I think, and bring the problems of modern life into their pages. Far from being a simple means of escapism, one could make the argument that in fact comics allow the average reader to come into contact with the frightening and inexplicable forces of life while watching as others grapple with them - hopefully to a sort of victory, though not always."

Perhaps even more surprisingly, Klokel insists that women are costumers as frequently as men. Trade paperbacks and graphic novels are equally split, but more women prefer manga and more men prefer superhero titles. Drawing a comparison to pre-1960s comics, Klokel notes that many old romance titles were geared toward women. Only with the advent of superheroes dominating the major publishers' comics did the industry lose female readership.

Right now, the most popular single comic in the store is by far DC comics' "Infinity Crisis." The seven-part series is a crossover series in which almost all of the DC characters fight and certain elements of the fiction-

al "DC Universe" are surely altered forever.

Conversely, titles published by Vertigo, an edgy DC imprint company featuring "non-spandex" - or without superheroes - stories, sell wildly, according to Klokel. He describes the way that interested costumers will buy a Vertigo sampler - a few first issues of popular titles - for \$5 and 65-70 percent of them will come back and read the rest of the series.

"What I like about Fantom, is the location and Matt, the owner," said Jordan Watts, a sophomore in CAS. "He'll never try and sell you something that he doesn't think is good. Every time I go in I like it more and more."

Klokel is never surprised at the popularity of DC comics versus other publishers like Marvel or Dark Horse. "D.C. is a DC city," he says. "I sell three times as much DC as anything else." Klokel theorizes that working people in the District can relate to the

abstract symbolism found in DC comics because of the symbolism intertwined with the city and the government, where a number of his costumers work.

When asked about the other comics stores in the area (Big Planet in Georgetown and Bethesda and Big Monkey in Georgetown) Klokel stresses that due to geography and differences in products, there's not serious competition.

In terms of selection, Klokel concedes that Fantom is probably most similar to the Big Planet in Bethesda, but he says he continues to strive to set his store apart with opportunities and events like this weekend's grand opening (see sidebar) and Fantom's useful subscription service.

Klokel says his main goal right now is to get people in the door. Once a customer takes a look into the black racks of new issues, "the comics sell themselves."

Fantom's Grand Opening - with Simpson's Trivia Contest

This weekend, Fantom Comics in Tenleytown - located in the same building as Best Buy - is having its grand opening celebration. Aside from a comics sale, free raffles will take place throughout the weekend. Prizes include toys, comics, graphic novels and more. There will also be a Simpsons trivia contest that is free to enter.

Register online to compete at www.fantomcomics.com or show up to watch the final round on Sunday at noon, after which the "Champion of Simpsons Trivia" will be awarded \$500 worth of free Fantom Comics merchandise. The second place winner will receive \$50 worth of merchandise.

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Even shoppers who don't fit the typical comic book reader stereotype still flock to Fantom's Tenleytown aisles.