



Japanese gay-themed YAOI in Italian translation. Photograph by Giovanni dal Orto. The image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike License.

Manga

by Mark McLelland

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In Japan, manga--or comic books--have, for more than four decades, been an important medium of cultural expression; more than one billion are sold every year, including titles dedicated to food, travel, sports, business, education, and, of course, sex.

Men's manga are notorious in the west for their *rorikon* ("Lolita Complex") stories featuring sexualized and at times violent representations of girls; but women's manga, too, feature a wide range of sexual situations.

A genre of erotic manga known as "ladies comics," created by women artists such as Milk Morizono, sometimes feature male and female homosexuality, pedophilia, scatology and B&D/S&M. However, the most widespread representations of homosexuality occur in a genre of women's comics known as "boy love" (*shonen'ai*) featuring romantic stories about "beautiful boys" (*bishonen*).

One pioneer of this style in the early 1970s was Moto Hagio, whose *November Gymnasium* (1971) and *Thomas' Heart* (1974) featured tragic love triangles set in private schools at the beginning of the last century.

Other famous titles also include cross-dressed heroines, such as Riyoko Ikeda's *The Rose of Versailles* (1972). Set at the time of the French Revolution, the story features both homoerotic and heterosexual encounters and was later staged as a popular musical by the all-female Takarazuka revue.

The early tales were long and beautifully crafted, and the sex--although hinted at--was rather demurely pictured. In the late 1970s, however, thousands of primarily female manga fans began to converge at "comic markets" all over Japan where they both bought and sold their own amateur manga. A favorite topic for these amateurs was boy love; but, unlike the earlier stories, they tended to emphasize sex at the expense of the story line, which gave rise to the acronym YAOI, taken from the first characters of the phrase "no resolution, no point, no meaning."

Publishing houses were not slow to realize that some of these amateur artists had talent and that YAOI was potentially profitable. *June* (1978), Japan's first commercial YAOI title, was a huge success and was soon followed by many imitators. In the mid-1990s *June* was selling between 80,000 and 100,000 copies a month, more than twice the distribution of Japan's top gay magazine, *Badi*.

The amateur manga movement is still alive and well and has spread on to the internet, which hosts thousands of sites dedicated to boy love as well as a smaller number featuring girl love (*shojo ai*). However, longer boy-love stories remain popular, such as Akimi Yoshida's nineteen-volume *Banana Fish* (1985-1994), which includes scenes of male homosexuality and transvestism set in New York's gangland.

Manga dealing with homosexuality are not limited to titles aimed at women but have a more general appeal as well. Stories such as Tomoko Nitta's *Okama in the Office* (*okama* is a term for male homosexuals rather

like "queen") have been serialized in the popular *Manga Time Family*. In these works, both male and female homosexuality are often conflated with transgenderism and cross-dressing, leading gay organizations in Japan to object that gay life is often distorted.

Still, there have been a number of volumes that address realities faced by some gay men. For example, the first attempt to deal with AIDS in any literary medium in Japan was Akisato Wakuni's *Tomoi*, about a gay Japanese doctor working in New York, which was serialized in the mid-1980s in the women's manga *Petite Flower*.

Significantly, many boy love stories are set in the United States and other "exotic" destinations, and the plots are full of melodrama, leading some Japanese gay men and lesbians to complain that they are irrelevant to their concerns.

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About the Author

Mark McLelland is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland, where he researches and writes about sexuality and the media in Japan. He is author of *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities* and editor of *Japanese Cybercultures*. He serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.