

Magnificent Manga

The Joy of Reading Studio Ghibli

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Enter any Barnes & Noble bookstore and chances are that you will see Japanese comic books (manga) prominently displayed, many of which have all the outward trappings of a fairy tale. It is not uncommon to see customers of various ages wearing clothing and carrying smartphone cases decorated with manga-related products, as even the most casual visitor to the bookstore can attest. Read from right to left, manga graphic novels encompass a wide range of genres. Even though they originate from Japan, many of them draw inspiration from a variety of sources that transcend geographic boundaries—such as the Studio Ghibli film comic *The Secret World of Arrietty*, which is based on Mary Norton's 1952 children's novel *The Borrowers*.

Young readers appear to be particularly drawn to Studio Ghibli film comics, such as *Ponyo* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Many of these manga comics are a throwback to childhood innocence. They resonate with the readers, capturing the timeless theme of friendship in a way that captivates their imagination. Their visual palettes are breathtakingly vivid.

Many of these protagonists triumph in the most unlikely circumstances while expressing deep, profound emotions—verbalizing their fears and making them relatable to young audiences from diverse backgrounds. As such, these graphic novels not only make for an interesting reading experience but they also prompt readers to ask deep questions.

Consider the case of *My Neighbor Totoro*, a manga that rewards repeated reading. As a newly transplanted family in a quiet, picturesque country, the Kusakabe sisters (Mei and Satsuki) certainly do not expect to encounter anything out of the ordinary. Before long, the story takes on the characteristics of a fairy tale. It is the kind of story that many children dream of—two young

What is Studio Ghibli?

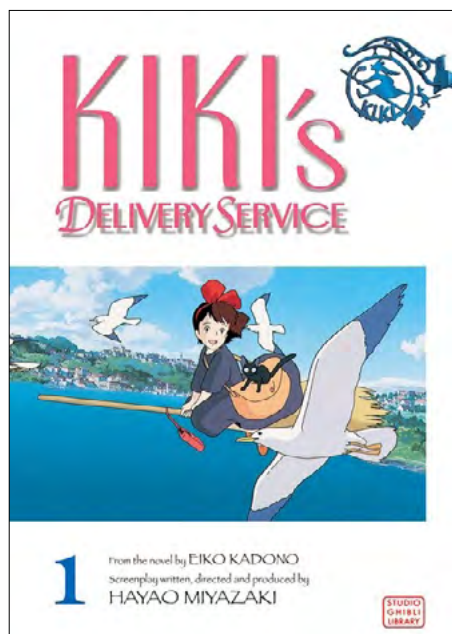
Studio Ghibli is a famous animation studio in Japan, co-founded by Hayao Miyazaki. Among other things, its films are known for their stunningly beautiful hand-drawn animation. Miyazaki's films *Spirited Away* and *The Boy and the Heron* each won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, in 2003 and 2024 respectively. Many Studio Ghibli films have been adapted into manga series and novels.

sisters befriend a forest spirit, who takes them on a magical ride through the blue hues of a moonlit night—a passage that constitutes one of the most memorable and endearing moments in the series. The forest spirit also helps the sisters during their times of greatest need.

The story is full of magical worlds while depicting the many textures of everyday rural life in Japan. There are numerous



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instances in which the sisters embody childlike curiosity and uninhibited joy as they forge a new life in the countryside. The story also explores some of the heartbreaking emotions that children encounter, mirroring the experiences of young readers. Through a heart-warming narrative, the story fosters empathy. Upon reading this graphic novel, one learns that it is okay to cry and depend on others. No story can completely capture all the vagaries of emotion of children, but at moments, *My Neighbor Totoro* appears to come close.

The aforementioned manga series is of many that engages young readers' interests as they are invited to enter into the realm of fantasy. Each Studio Ghibli film comic is unique in its own way as it explores some of life's challenges through the lens of children, and together they expand the prismatic portrait of what a hero is: courageous, imaginative, compassionate, curious, and selfless.

Their storylines may be conventional, and yet their messages are undeniably compelling and uplifting as they weave joyful and heart-rending scenes into a satisfying aesthetic whole. They have a knack for telling stories that leave children quizzically wondering as they ponder such questions as, "What does it mean to be a true friend?" The theme of friendship is a mainstay in manga, a topic that is pertinent at a time when so many young people seem to experience loneliness.

Can Studio Ghibli graphic novels serve as great reading materials for young people? Just as importantly, can they serve as a catalyst for deep discussions about life? Studio Ghibli manga books answer with a resounding yes. A sense of enchantment consistently pulses through these stories as they intersperse the narratives with ordinary and fantastical elements. The dominant feeling in these graphic novels is one of optimism. There is no doubt that people are moving beyond the conventional ways of thinking about these Japanese comic books. They inspire feelings of joy, community, and wonderment.

Moreover, they can help readers envision new ways of understanding life's challenges. All of this creates an opportunity to reconfigure our approach to these graphic novels. It is hoped that these family friendly Studio Ghibli manga series will be available in children's libraries across the globe. As they immerse themselves in these stories, young readers will no doubt gain invaluable insights regarding loyalty, compassion, and unconditional love, among other themes that tug at their heartstrings. At the same time, these family friendly manga books can instill a life-long love of reading in them.

The books mentioned are available from American manga publisher VIZ Media. In addition to those mentioned earlier, another manga series recommended for reading is Castle in the Sky. &