An Introduction to Manga

When you think of comics it seems normal in the Western world for minds to jump to the likes of *Spider-man* and *Batman*. In fact, these days characters like the Dark Knight are more synonymous with cartoons and big named directors than the paper products that spawned them. In shops we are bombarded with web emblazoned merchandise and T-shirts with a familiar ‘S’ in a diamond. Whether we like it or not (I personally love it), comics are leading pop culture and we cannot escape them.

So, what if I mentioned the words *Astro Boy*, *Ghost In The Shell* or *Full Metal Alchemist*? Can you tell me much about them? Surely you know what I mean when I say *Bobobo-Bo Bo-bobo*? … Surely you recognise Studio Ghibli who are like the Asian Disney and even won an *Oscar* a few years ago…? No?...Oh my.

Well, it sounds to me like you need a quick learning in manga. And I, my friends, am here to help you with a brief introduction to a new world.

*Dons his mortar board cap and cracks out the laser pointer*

What is Manga?

Manga are Japanese comics and they are that wonderfully rare thing that are both cooler than a fridge wearing a sombrero and simultaneously hotter than your mum. You can find a manga to cover pretty much any subject from action and adventure to sports, business, romance and hardcore sex. They are enjoyed by everyone from small children to business class briefcases with legs. In fact, manga sales in Japan account for about twenty percent of all literature sales, so it’s no surprise that manga and anime (animated cartoons based on the manga) are fast becoming big business in the Western world.
So how do we spot these little blighters and where do we find them? Well, they are traditionally black and white and read all over (sorry, I’m a sucker for bad jokes) and if you don’t get them from *Shonen Jump* (a magazine that collects and presents many different popular manga) they tend to be found collected together in their own story arcs in paperback form at the back of your local bookshop.

“But there are loads,” you say. “How do we know what manga we should be reading?” Well first of all it depends on what it is you’re looking for but because this is a fantasy website I shall assume that you are wanting the fantastical and weird. The stuff where people fly, fight and shoot laser beams from their hands (or in the case of Astro Boy, a rocket from your arse), that’s the sort of stuff we want. So what are we looking for? Well, there are many elements that make a great manga, from talking animals to steampunk styles and huge fights, but there are three main things we’ll be looking at today and the first one is hair.

**HAIR**

For me, a sign of a great manga comes in the form of humongous hair. We’re not talking a bit of early morning bed-head; we’re looking for gravity defying, 70s era, ‘would bounce if you fell head first on to concrete’ kinda hair. If you see a protagonist with huge hair then you’re probably on to a winner.

Fans might instantly jump to *Dragon Ball* for great hair but we’ll come to that later, as *Dragon Ball* truly is a staple in the manga enthusiast’s diet.
Instead, the trophy for greatest manga based on hair goes to: *Afro Samurai*.

In the world of *Afro Samurai* there are two head bands. Whoever holds the Number One headband is considered the greatest warrior in the world and they can only be challenged for this mantle by whoever holds the Number Two headband. Whoever holds the Number Two headband can be challenged by absolutely anyone.

As a child, Afro Samurai witnessed his dad (who held the Number One headband) be killed by the evil Justice. Cue Afro devoting his entire life to obtaining the Number Two band and letting no one stand in his way to achieving it. All a bit grim and wonderful.

Like any good manga we need some comic relief and as Afro is a man of few words, we get given NinjaNinja the imaginary-friend embodiment of Afro’s fractured psyche who makes all the observations and cracks all the crude jokes while Afro stays stoic in the face of fear.

I choose Afro as king of hair based manga less for the original comic and more for the anime that spawned off the back of it, which is, incidentally, the first anime produced primarily for the western market.
This anime is the coolest thing on TV and if you have never watched an anime before then I promise you will instantly fall in love with the animation. If the animation alone doesn’t sway you then wait until you realise that Afro is voiced by Samuel-muvvafukkin- L. Jackson, Justice is voiced by Ron ‘Hellboy’ Perlman and the soundtrack rocks along like a hip-hop thunder god with thanks to RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan.

Be warned though, when looking for big hair while flicking though the manga shelves please try and avoid *Bobobo-bo Bo-bobo*. I know I mentioned it above but that was because the name makes you go ‘say-whaaaaat?’ and so does the manga for the same reason, but that does not make it a good thing. You have been warned mes amis.

The next thing to spot when looking for a decent manga is:

**KIDS**

Yes I know looking for a comic about children might seem a little weird but bear with me as in manga it tends to be where the best stuff is.

*Fullmetal Alchemist* is great for super-awesome kids but I'll get to that in a minute, and *Battle Royale* is phenomenal, especially if you like your stories dark and messed up, but as this is an introduction to a genre there is only one kids related manga that you must, I repeat MUST find and devour and it is called *Naruto*. 
Naruto follows a young ninja of the same name who aspires to be the Hokage (or leader) of his village of Konoha. Naruto is an orphan who just happens to have the spirit of the legendary evil Nine Tail Fox trapped inside his body. People shun him for this reason but he eventually proves himself to be a fierce friend and one of the greatest ninja in the world as he struggles to rescue his best mate Sasuke who has his own twisted agenda.

It’s truly a consistently brilliant manga. If you don’t find yourself compelled by Naruto on the strength of the protagonist alone then you will keep reading just to see what new ninja appear. In Naruto, different ninja have different wonderful powers. For example, Sasuke has the Sharingan which means his eyes allow him to see attacks before they happen and can also evolve to become a truly devastating weapon. There’s Gaara who can control sand (and as a result is banned from all sandcastle building competitions). There’s Deidara who makes animated bombs from organic clay, and not to forget Orochimaru the ultimate bat-shit-crazy antagonist who can transfer his soul between hosts effectively making him immortal. Also, I defy you to find a cooler character anywhere than Kakashi Hatake.

Naruto is a manga you can truly immerse yourself in as you follow the children as they grow up. It has everything from huge fights and fantastic powers to cool characters and Godzilla sized monsters. And let’s not forget, it’s about a society of ninjas. ‘Nuff said.

Believe it or not I actually wrote my uni dissertation on Naruto, debating the historic representation of feudal Japan blah blah blah but I won’t bore you any further.

The final thing you need to look for in a good manga is:

PERSONAL CONFLICT
Yeah okay so a conflicted protagonist is pretty standard no matter what story you read but my small brain couldn’t think of a better way to introduce the next two manga, *Fullmetal Alchemist* and *Death Note*.

*Fullmetal Alchemist* is a great example of a story driven by personal conflict. Set in a world where magic (or alchemy) is rife, the two brothers Alphonse and Edward Elric are searching for the fabled Philosopher’s Stone to restore their bodies. Y’see, they were trying to perform a forbidden alchemy to bring their mother back to life but things of course went wrong leaving Edward losing his leg and then having to sacrifice his own arm to save his brother’s soul which he then trapped in a giant suit of armour. We then follow the brothers as they struggle to restore their lives while Edward battles with himself for what he did to his brother and as Alphonse struggles to retain his humanity. Sounds nuts and it is but it’s also brilliant.

If you want something a smidge darker then you should pick up *Death Note*.
In *Death Note* a chap called Light finds a mysterious book called the *Death Note* and it turns out that if someone’s name is written in the book then that person will die. Yikes. Light uses this power of God to become a hero and create a better world by killing criminals. But when so many unexplained deaths start occurring, the police obviously become interested and in steps “L” an odd detective who intends on stopping the serial killer. This pushes Light in to a corner…

What is especially cool with *Death Note* is how it plays out like a Tarantino film in that you become so invested in the protagonist that you find yourself rooting for them even though they turn out to be a pretty evil bastard. This is especially true with Light when you want him to succeed with his killings even though he has begun to kill innocent people to protect his anonymity. You don’t want L to catch him even though L is supposed to be the good guy that we traditionally want to win. The films are also worth a look.

**The Perfect Manga**

So what is the perfect manga? Which one should you begin with? Ideally you’ll be looking for a manga that blends the big hair, the super powered kids and the personal conflict. Howabout a manga that has all of these and also huge fights, modern technology and people who can not only fly but also shoot energy blasts that put Ryu to shame? Ladies and gents, I suggest you track down the *Dragon Ball* series.
Dragon Ball begins with a young boy called Goku who has a monkey tail and turns out to be pretty damned good at fighting. The dragon balls of the title are seven mythical balls that legends states will grant a single wish when brought together. With the possibility to wish for eternal glory up for grabs you can imagine that some pretty crazy villains are bound to turn up and guess who the last bastion of hope is for the world… Goku steps up to the plate.

This series has the huge hair that never falters, it has the super powered child (Goku and later Gohan) who struggles with a personal conflict (to do with his tail but I won’t spoil it) and it also has the coolest attack ever in the form of an energy blast called the Kamehameha. So cool.

I would like to say that the villains are the most compelling element of the Dragon Ball series as they just seem to keep getting better and better moving from King Piccolo to the ever brilliant Vegeta all the way up to Majin Buu. However, anyone who knows Dragon Ball will know that we fans live for that epic change from standard fighter to Super Saiyan. I won’t give it away here and if you’re going to read Dragon Ball you’re going to have to be rather patient but oh my, Super Saiyan Goku is an epic moment worth waiting for.

So there we are ladies and gents, a brief introduction to some wonderful Japanese comics. For any fans of manga who have read this article then yes, I appreciate that I have missed tons of fantastic titles here but we’ll get to them another time don’t you worry. For now, jump over to Youtube and remember that amazing buzz from the day you got in from school and watched Goku transform.