

Graphic novels for multiple literacies

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One day after German class, a young man came up to me with a book in hand. He was a bright high school student with good grades, but he usually clowned around when talking to me; this time he was quite serious. “Look, you should read this,” he said. He showed me a copy of *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1986) by Art Spiegelman, a comic book version of the Holocaust in which mice were the Jews and cats the Nazis. The story is based on Spiegelman’s father’s survival of Auschwitz. Before reading *Maus*, I had no idea a “comic book” could be so powerful. *Maus* went on to win the Pulitzer Prize, the first graphic novel to do so, and I recommended it to other students.

In an increasingly visual culture, literacy educators can profit from the use of graphic novels in the classroom, especially for young adults. The term *graphic novel* includes fiction as well as non-fiction text with pictures—“comics” in book format. That such works are being taken seriously is reflected in an issue of *The New York Times Book Review* (Eggers, 2000), which included a review of four graphic novels, and the novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Chabon, 2000) about two comics creators, which was also a Pulitzer Prize winner. Moreover, librarians have become strong supporters of graphic novels. (See, for example, Bruggeman, 1997; DeCandido, 1990; Kan, 1994).

Graphic novels across the curriculum

Graphic novels offer value, variety, and a new medium for literacy that acknowledges the impact of visuals. These novels appeal to young people, are useful across the curriculum, and offer diverse alternatives to traditional texts as well as other mass media. They can also promote literacy. Weiner (2002) listed the major kinds of graphic novels as The Superhero Story, The Human Interest Story, Manga (i.e., translated into English), Nonfiction, Adaptations or Spinoffs (e.g., the Star Trek series), and Satire. Adaptations of literary works can be useful in English classes. I remember looking forward to reading the “real” *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky after I read the Classics Comics version as a child. Illustrated classics still exist, such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1989) and the 2001 translation of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past: Combray*. Graphic novels can introduce students to literature they might never otherwise encounter, such as Peter Kuper’s rendition of Kafka, *Give It Up! And Other Stories* (1995); the black-and-white illustrations are definitely “Kafkaesque” and are as puzzling and mesmerizing as the original texts.

Educators need not worry that graphic novels discourage text reading. Lavin (1998) even

suggested that reading graphic novels may require more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone. Some English teachers use graphic novels to teach literary terms and techniques such as dialogue, and they use works like the Victorian murder novel *The Mystery of Mary Rogers* (Geary, 2001) as a bridge to other classics of that period. Graphic novels can also inspire writing assignments. For example, the human interest story *Jack Cole and the Plastic Man* (Spiegelman & Kidd, 2001) intersperses an essay on the short, tragic life of comic artist Jack Cole with examples of his artwork, photographs, and even reproductions of a Christmas card Cole sent. The collage that results captures biography in a new way. For a challenging classroom project, students could create graphic novels based on literary works or their own autobiographies.

Social studies is another area in which graphic novels can bring new life beyond bland textbooks. *The Cartoon History of the Universe II* (Gonick, 1994) covers the history of China and India up to the fall of Rome with irony and humor. Although packed with information, the book's black-and-white drawings demonstrate that history can be fun and funny, too. An especially potent graphic novel that offers many history and civics lessons is *9–11: Artists Respond* (Chaos! Comics, Dark Horse Comics, & Image, 2002). In it various well-known comic artists like Will Eisner and Frank Miller respond to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Pieces touch on the heroics of the rescuers, the fears of children, reflections on hate, and much more. One picture of the Empire State Building bent and mourning over Ground Zero captures the power of this work.

Graphic novels offer subject matter students might otherwise never consider and help them imagine history. Raymond Briggs's account of his parents' lives in England, called *Ethel and Ernest* (1998), shows the changing look of England over 50 years and how common people reacted to major events like World War II. Likewise, Will Eisner's *A Contract With God and Other Tenement*

Stories (1978) depicts daily life in a Bronx tenement during the 1930s (with some adult content) in ways both humorous and touching. Graphic novel creators have even used the superhero story to examine social, political, and economic issues. In *Superman: Peace on Earth* (Ross & Dini, 1999), Superman tackles world hunger. With its large format and photographic quality illustrations, this Superman novel opens up difficult real-life questions worth discussing in the classroom. Another example is *Hope and Deliverance* (Figuro & Albert, 1996), book two of a multipart graphic novel series, *The Project*, which explores the lives of people in a low-income housing project on the outskirts of a large northeastern city in the United States. Characters include a pregnant crack addict, violent gang members, and a woman trying to fight the influence of the gang on her community. Harsh language and dramatic black-and-white drawings make for a strong experience (and require parental permission).

Other subject areas can benefit from the graphic novel, including art, science, and even math. Larry Gonick and Wollcott Smith wrote *The Cartoon Guide to Statistics* (1993). Although my statistics professor friend found it a bit too busy and simple, I found it a humorous and down-to-earth approach to the subject and a useful introduction for high school students. Furthermore, the graphic novel format is being used in a new series of academic books on great ideas such as *McLuhan for Beginners* (Gordon & Willmarth, 1997) and *Introducing Cultural Studies* (Sardar & Van Loon, 1998). These are like CliffsNotes for adults, but funny; older students can use them to study philosophy, sociology, and other subjects.

In any subject area, studying a graphic novel can bring media literacy into the curriculum as students examine the medium itself. Students can explore such questions as how color affects emotions, how pictures can stereotype people, how angles of viewing affect perception, and how realism or the lack of it plays into the message of a work.

An important benefit of graphic novels is that they present alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general in accessible ways, giving voice to minorities and those with diverse viewpoints. *The Four Immigrants Manga* (Kiyama, 1999), for example, was recently discovered and translated into English. It describes the life of four Japanese immigrants in San Francisco, California, from 1904 to 1924. In a simple black-and-white but entertaining style, these stories, based on the author's real life, contribute genuine insight on the lives of Japanese immigrants. With helpful endnotes and a bibliography, this "comic book" is fun to read but also instructive. Another example is the cartoon history of African Americans *Still I Rise* (Laird, Laird, & Bey, 1997), which was researched and written by African Americans. This thorough work may be hard for white Americans to read; it presents a harsh judgment on U.S. history while celebrating the resilience of African Americans. An example of satire in graphic novels is *2024* (Rall, 2001), which is a contemporary version of George Orwell's *1984*. The language and sexual content make the whole work classroom unfriendly, but parts could be used. Ted Rall's bitter story takes on corporate-sponsored materialism, postmodernism, and the mass media. It is both funny and depressing and offers a true alternative to most TV programs, films, and magazines young people usually see. The production of graphic novels allows for real diversity, which is essential for a literate democracy.

More resources

Educators can access some excellent resources for finding, understanding, and using graphic novels in school, and most can be found in bookstores, comic book specialty stores, libraries, and online. The following are some resources I have discovered.

1. *Comics, Comix, & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* by Roger Sabin (1996, Phaidon Press). This large, heavy book, beautifully illustrated with many examples, covers the his-

tory of comic art from the broadsheets of 17th-century England, through the golden days of U.S. comics, to the comix or alternative comics of the 1960s, and the international influences and varied graphic novels of today.

2. *The Comic Journal* published by Fantagraphics Books in Seattle has been coming out for more than 25 years and covers artists and issues—with pictures, of course.

3. *Understanding Comics* (1993) and *Reinventing Comics* (2000) by Scott McCloud (HarperCollins). In graphic-novel format, these are indispensable explorations of comics, their history, their creation and techniques, their creators, their relationship to the computer, and their place in human communications and culture.

4. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* by Will Eisner (1996, Poorhouse Press). One of the acknowledged masters of the form explains, in graphic format, how images and words work together to create stories. He really makes the reader think about the art of storytelling. Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) from the same publisher is enlightening, too.

5. *Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide to Book-Length Comics* by D. Aviva Rothschild (1995, Libraries Unlimited). This guide reviews over 400 graphic novels.

6. *Cartoons and Comics in the Classroom: A Reference for Teachers and Librarians* (1983, Libraries Unlimited). This book may be a bit dated, but it includes practical teaching suggestions across the curriculum.

7. *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* by Stephen Weiner; Keith R.A. Decandido, editor (2001, NBM). This excellent resource describes 101 graphic novels and rates them for age appropriateness. It also offers a short history of graphic novels and a bibliography.

8. www.nbmpublishing.com. The Nantier Beall Minoustchine Publishing (NBM) Company has a great selection of graphic novels that can be seen online. Publishers like Dark Horse Comics

and others have their own websites as well, as do some artists.

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