

Graphic Books for Diverse Needs: Engaging Reluctant and Curious Readers

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Involving today's adolescent in the joys of reading is a challenge in a hyper-mediated, fast paced world of information. Just getting a teen to stop racing from activity to activity for a few minutes of quiet reading can be difficult. Adolescents are constantly occupied by the mall, movies, jobs, and their cell phones. One genre that is gaining academic respectability can help engage adolescents in reading: the graphic novel. The graphic novel, basically a "comic" in short book length, appeals to diverse readers who have come to expect visuals in the texts they encounter in their world. Graphic novels can offer well written and exciting stories, unusual information and ideas, new points of view, and stimulating art work. Graphic novels have many uses across the curriculum, as well. Everyone from the reluctant, challenged reader to the high achieving but easily bored adolescent can find an intriguing graphic novel. The graphic novel deserves a place in the classroom.

Since Art Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for his 1986 graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, based on the true story of his father's Holocaust survival, the graphic novel has been gaining attention and respect. Graphic novels have been reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*, sections of national chain book stores are now devoted to graphic novels, and Nilsen and Donelson in *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (2001) discuss graphic novels, legitimizing the genre as part of young adult literature. Nilsen and Donelson include the following observations that support the use of graphic novels by educators:

- 1) "Visuals are important . . . In today's books, this trend has expanded so that even with fiction, young readers fan through a book and look disappointed if all they see are pages and pages of plain type . . ."
- 2) "Authors are encouraging multiple perspectives. The "other" is being given increased space . . ." [Graphic novels are multicultural.]
- 3) "Crossover books are commonplace. Just as with television, which is viewed by all ages, more books are being published that can be appreciated by readers of different ages." [Many current graphic novel readers are adults out of school.]
- 4) "Young people's expectations for entertainment are high."
- 5) "The literary canon is expanding." (Nilsen and Donelson, 2001, pp. 107-108)

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Librarians/media specialists have been especially enthusiastic about graphic novels. See, for example, articles by Stephen Weiner (2002), Michael Lavin (1998), and Lora Bruggeman (1997) in various library journals, advising on the emergence of graphic novels for library collections. Other scholars explore graphic novels as artifacts of popular culture. Ultimately, both the written text and graphics of good graphic novels are worthy of reading and study, and students are drawn to them.

The graphic novel is short, has interesting pictures (some in color and some not), usually offers dialogue and action with little narration or description, and comes in paperback form; in short, it is not intimidating to a reluctant reader. A graphic novel can be read fairly quickly. Graphic novels come in a great variety, offering classical literature to nonfiction history, superheroes and light romance to serious current events.

Graphic Books For Teen Who Resist Reading: Superheroes, Mysteries, Contemporary Life Issues, and Histories

The following suggestions regarding graphics books that focus on superheroes, mysteries and crime, real life issues, and history are aimed especially at teens who resist reading and are not confident in their reading abilities. The superhero, the most popular subject of comics and graphic novels, can also prompt more thoughtful stories now than in earlier times. An example is *Superman: Peace on Earth* (1999) by Alex Ross and Paul Dini. This giant-sized graphic novel is long on graphic appeal with beautiful, photographic-looking realism, and the text is brief. In this story Superman wrestles with the problem of world hunger against the interference of military despots and angry mobs; he struggles with the question of what one person can do, even if he is Superman. There is enough action to satisfy a reader, but the story can also provoke deeper thought, perhaps even discussion and research about the difficult issue of world hunger. Similar works exist with Batman and Wonder Woman.

Turning from the superhero to more traditional tales, Art Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly have edited a fascinating volume called *Little Lit: Folklore and Fairy Tale Funnies* (2000) which includes stories by a variety of well known comic artists from Walt Kelly, the creator of Pogo, to Chris Ware, the postmodernist creator of adult comics like *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*. At first glance, this large-sized

hardback appears to be a children's book. But it isn't. These stories are not the usual ones, from "Prince Rooster (A Hasidic Parable)" about a prince who thinks he's a rooster to "The Leafless Tree" about a family perpetually dissatisfied even after discovering a pot of gold. The varied illustrations are interesting, and stories offer different twists on several traditional fairy tales, too. Chris Ware has even designed in the front cover a board game called "Fairy Tale Road Rage," which includes such stops as a Goldilox Pawn Shop and Grandma's House at Sunny Acres Assisted Living. This book is fun to read on one level, and worth study at a higher level. The book could open up the world of fairy tales and folklore for a reader.

A reader attracted by mysteries and crime stories can enjoy the graphic novel version of Raymond Chandler's *The Little Sister* (1997), illustrated by Michael Lark. Using pastels with a great deal of black shadowing and sharp angles, the artist has captured the film noir feeling of Chandler's work. The action, sharp dialogue, and strong characters keep the reader involved as the world weary detective, Philip Marlowe, tries to get to the bottom of things. The engaged reader might even be interested in further exploring the cinematic techniques used in this graphic novel or may want to read another of Chandler's works and compare it to the film version.

Graphic novels also speak to the real world of problems that young people may face, and one outstanding example is *The Tale of One Bad Rat* (1995) by Bryan Talbot. This novel is dramatically and yet realistically illustrated, using dominant colors to express the moods of what is happening such as the hopeful, country greens in the last section. The story traces the journey of a teen runaway in London to the Lake Country where she confronts and deals with her father's sexual abuse as she traces the real life history of Beatrix Potter. Talbot closes with his story of the research he did to write the novel. An easy to read but moving story, any reader could benefit from encountering *The Tale of One Bad Rat* which received the Eisner Award (honoring comic book creators) in 1996.

Also powerfully moving and thought provoking is *9-11: Artists Respond, Volume One* (2002, from Dark Horse Comics in Milwaukie, Oregon), a collection of pieces, some a page and some four or five pages, which consider the events of September 11. Numerous artists contributed diverse pieces which capture the courage of the rescuers, the shock of children viewing, and the costs of hatred and prejudice. The titles are revealing, including "Zero Degrees of Separation," "Arab Americans," and "Which One Is Real?" among many others. Some of the art is in color and some is black and white; one picture shows the Empire State Building weeping over the World Trade Center. All the art is strong. The proceeds of this book and the second volume are designated for relief funds. This work will affect all readers.

One more example which might appeal to students who find their regular history texts boring and difficult is the non-fiction *Still I Rise: A Cartoon History of African Americans* (1997) by Roland Owen Laird, Jr., with illustrations by Elihu "Adofo" Bey. A longer work covering centuries, *Still I Rise* takes a hard look at the oppression of Black Americans but also their resilience and many contributions to America. The black and white drawings make this history more personal

and human as well as harsh. It is not a "fun" read and not meant to be read at one sitting. Yet, it is engaging and presents American history from another point of view which many young people may welcome. There is also a short history of Blacks in comics in the Forward by Charles Johnson. *Still I Rise* is sure to initiate thought and discussion and fits well into the social studies curriculum.

For Skilled but Bored Readers: Comedy, Satire, and Different Perspectives

Reluctant readers are not the only adolescents who do not spend much time reading. Honors and AP students who often tackle difficult books for school may not read for themselves, either. Many older adolescents are short on time, are involved with many other activities, and may not be inspired to read more of what they are often force fed in school. Graphic books may re-engage them in the joys of literacy. Following are six graphic texts that may appeal to the confident and curious but easily bored reader.

Adolescents generally enjoy satire and a prime example is *The Simpsons* by Matt Groening, also in graphic novel form (with as much text as graphics). *The Simpsons' Guide to Springfield* (1998, from HarperPerennial), for example, takes on every tourist subject from hotels (the "Worst Western"), fast food restaurants ("Lard Lad Donut"), local government, and shopping ("Wicked Excess," "the place to shop for platinum lobster traps"). The Simpsons even take on American

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history and our society's strange relationship to history in the description of Old Springfield Towne:

... a for-profit historical park replete with glass blowers, candlemakers, and wig powderers. In response to recent complaints by educators that the park is "just too boring," the Towne's proprietors have given it a minor facelift and restructuring. However, scholars are quick to point out recently added anachronisms: Colonial Springfield did not use muskets with laser sights, three-cornered hats were never used as "ninja star"-type weapons, and tavern waitresses did not wear hot pants. (pp. 19-20)

English teachers teaching about satire and social studies teachers looking at economics, history, or social life could all find uses for this graphic novel, a definite change of pace from school texts.

A graphic novel that is even more strange than *The Simpsons* but not funny is *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch* (1995) by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean. This dark story of childhood memories may first need some explanation to students unfamiliar with British seaside resorts and the history of the Punch and Judy puppet shows. The narrative also demands close attention as memories and nightmares seem interwoven in the revealed fears of childhood and the uncovering of adult secrets. The art work is fascinating, a collage of drawings, odd pictures, and mostly white text on black background. Art students might be especially drawn to this graphic novel.

Graphic novels can present points of view often unheard in textbooks and the usual school materials. A wonderful example is the funny but serious *The Four Immigrants Manga* (1999) by Henry Kiyama, translated by Frederik L. Schodt. (Manga is the Japanese term for graphic novel. Mangas have

been and are widely read by adults as well as children in Japan.) Based on the author's own experiences, this novel traces the adventures of four Japanese immigrants in the San Francisco area from 1904-1924. Against the background of the San Francisco Earthquake, World War I, and other historical events, these four young men try to make a good life in an America which is unrelentingly racist. Still there is no self-pity. The characters' lives have ups as well as downs, and their attempts to meet girls, make a fortune fast, and adapt to American culture supply much humor. The translator offers a glossary and additional information, too. This novel is both fun to read and thought provoking, revealing the insider's view of being an immigrant in America.

Another historic graphic novel presenting the Japanese point of view is *Barefoot Gen: Life after the Bomb* (1999) by Keiji Nakazawa based on his own life experiences surviving the atomic bomb in Hiroshima.

The main character is a young boy, Gen, who takes care of his mother and baby sister after the rest of his family is killed in the bombing. Gen gets angry and is willing to fight for survival, but he also shows compassion to fellow survivors when others want nothing to do with them. Gen does not idealize the Japanese military, but he is horrified at the instant destruction and lingering radiation sickness which result from the bomb and outraged at America for dropping such a bomb. A stirring story of survival, *Gen* leads the reader to consider the effects of war. Other volumes of Gen's story are also available.

Turning from history to literature, young readers may be fascinated by the graphic novel *Kafka: Give It Up!* (1995), illustrated by Peter Kuper. Bizarre black and white illustrations accompany abridged versions of some of Kafka's famous stories such as "A Hunger Artist." This book would serve as a great introduction to Kafka and his themes of alienation, death, and power. The illustrations create an almost cinematic or dreamlike effect. A reader might well want to know more about Kafka, and another excellent work, *Introducing Kafka* (1993), with text by David Zane Mairowitz and illustrations by famous underground comic artist, Robert Crumb, offers an insightful biography of Kafka that includes other Kafka stories and parts of his novels. By examining Kafka in the historical context of pre-World War II Prague, Mairowitz helps the reader understand Kafka as an alienated Jew in a terrible time as well as a man terrified of his own abusive father. Kafka's use of Jewish humor is emphasized. Educators need to be aware of some nudity in the book; graphic novels are often designed for adult readers and must be used with care. However, this graphic novel is an engaging example of visual literary biography, and it is part of a series of similar books on ideas and writers such as *Introducing Camus*, *Introducing Nietzsche*, and *Introducing Cultural Studies*.

Of course, any reader may be drawn to any of the graphic novels above and many more besides. The distinction between the reluctant reader and the advanced but bored reader is rather artificial. All young readers are "on the move." All adolescents may find something worthwhile and of interest in graphic novels, and they may be drawn back into the pleasures of reading for leisure as well as learning. Clearly, graphic novels fit into English, social studies, and art courses, and others exist which would be useful in science or math. Graphic novels are useful for media literacy across the curriculum, as well, allowing students to focus on the power of images. As

Bernstein (1994) notes, graphic novels "are increasingly offering a sophisticated and often literary world The comic format allows the artist to combine the emotional subtlety of a facial expression, for instance, with the dramatic power of dialogue. It also dovetails neatly with the visual sensibilities of an audience raised on small pictures flickering on a TV screen" (p. 57).

For Teachers and Media Specialists Interested in Graphic Novels

For educators who want to know more about the medium of the graphic novel and its potential with adolescent audiences, following are five useful resources:

- 1) *Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide to Book-Length Comics* by D. Aviva Rothschild. Libraries Unlimited, 1995. Although somewhat dated, this book offers plot

and critical comments for 414 books and is a good place to start.

- 2) *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* by Will Eisner. Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1996. Eisner is himself

one of the great comic artists and with plenty of examples, he here explains how text, image, and reader combine for visual storytelling. Topics include symbolism, dialogue, and the influence of film on reading comics.

- 3) *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994. This is a graphic novel that examines the inner workings of comics, everything from how sequencing is created to the use of color, establishing the artistic character of the comic format.

- 4) *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* by Roger Sabin. New York: Phaidon Press, 1996. This large and beautifully illustrated volume traces comic art from British broadsheets through Superman and the Golden Age of American Comics to the underground comics ("comix") of the 1960's and today's international graphic novels.

- 5) *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* by Stephen Weiner. New York: Nantier Beall Minoustchine (NBM), 2001. This slim volume offers the best place to begin for anyone interested. Besides recommendations (rated for children, 12 and up, and adults only), Weiner offers a short history of the genre and additional references.

Many resources exist online, of course, and there is *The Comics Journal* which offers interviews, reviews, and so on. The graphic novel is growing in popularity and influence, more titles are being published, and it may well serve as an inducement to read for many adolescents today. Educators will be intrigued, too. Check it out!

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