

The Truth about Graphic Novels:

A Format, Not a Genre

In the past several years, the buzz about graphic novels has grown deafening. These books, which look like comics on steroids, seem to have near miraculous properties. They attract reluctant readers and bookworms. They lure teen boys, while retaining the qualities beloved by teen girls. They work for ESL students (Krashen 54), teach visual literacy (Gorman 9-10) and sequencing, and, above all else, they are wildly popular with an adolescent audience. If you listen to the praise heaped on the format by its followers, you may think that graphic novels will do everything, including walk your dog and make your teeth whiter.

Even as research piles up on the benefits of these materials, many educators and librarians are reluctant to join in on the graphic novel love fest. Perhaps it is the association with spandex clad heroes saving the world from improbable destruction by impossibly attired villains. Maybe it is the memory of cartoons featuring pretty, big-eyed children and cuddly, but deadly, creatures. Or possibly it is simply the thought, instilled by dozens of teachers and librarians who have come before, that these materials, looking like, feeling like, and acting like a comic book, simply are not “real” books. They have too many pictures, too few words, and lack too much quality to ever be seriously consid-

ered as literature, or even books.

The shortest definition of graphic novels describes them as “book-length comic books.” A definition used by librarians refers to them as book-length narratives told using a combination of words and sequential art, often presented in comic book style. The constant in both definitions is “comic book.” Because the image of comic books seems to fuel resistance to graphic novels by many educators and librarians, correlating the benefits of graphic novels to learning requires a change in the way they are viewed. Instead of thinking of them as a genre, it is necessary to think of them as a format.

To illustrate this, let’s look at another format,

which is already in most public and school libraries: the audiobook. An audiobook can be of any genre, for any audience. The content of audiobooks is variable within the same format. A stroll through the audio section of any large bookstore will reveal titles by authors as varied as Elmore Leonard and Yann Martel, on topics ranging from national security to travel guides, in every genre, for every age group. Graphic novels, as a format, demonstrate a similar diversity among genres and topics. It is important, when thinking about and discussing graphic novels, to not confuse the medium and the message. As an educator, you may

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feel that *X-Men* is not valuable material, but it is important to remember that not all graphic novels are about superheroes. Excluding graphic novels because you dislike “spandex comics” is the equivalent of excluding all audiobooks because you dislike those by Stephen King.

So, “graphic novels” is an imprecise term used to describe a format that uses a combination of words and sequential art to convey a narrative.

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Graphic novels can be of any genre on any topic. What follows is a selection of recommended graphic novels, which the authors hope will encourage you to pick up one on your own, or to include these titles in book displays, reading lists, booktalks, class discussions, or to pair with more traditional materials. Each genre has recommendations for your students in grades 8-12, as well as

books that are recommended for adults and mature teens. These mature titles will be asterisked in our reference list.

Comedy

In Makoto Kobayashi’s *Club 9* series, Harou is a lovable, klutzy country bumpkin who has left everything and everybody she knows to attend college in Tokyo. She works at a bar called Club 9 as a hostess to pay for apartment expenses. Japanese hostesses sit with the customers and provide conversation while continually filling the glasses. Her hostess job leads to some very amusing situations. The black and white art is almost typical manga (Japanese) style, but the eyes are even bigger, giving the art the look of Betty Boop. This series, which will total five volumes when completed, has a great storyline with many cultural aspects to study and many more scenes at which to laugh out loud.

In another world, inhabited by creatures such as vampires, werewolves, and honest-to-god witches, it’s only to be expected that these beasties would occa-

sionally find themselves in need of legal representation. Enter Wolff and Byrd, Councilors of the Macabre, in the *Supernatural Law* series by Bratton Lash. Running the only legal practice that caters to the supernatural, Alanna Wolff and Jeff Byrd find themselves in a variety of genuinely strange and genuinely funny situations with an assortment of paranormally derived problems. To wit: The adopted “son of a witch” who finds himself sued for “hexual” harassment; the demon who finds himself possessed by a human; the hunchback preschool teacher accused of child abuse. This clever series, written and drawn by Lash, is one of the underappreciated gems of the comics’ world. For more supernatural comedy, see *Boneyard, Volume 1* by Richard Moore.

Another representative series is *Kodocha Sana’s Stage, Volumes 1-10* by Miho Obana. In it, Sana, a child actress, is a problem solver—and right now the problem that needs to be solved is Hayama, the devil child who is terrorizing her classroom. The story revolves around Sana’s life and her relationship with Hayama. Once the initial conflict of Hayama terrorizing the classroom is over, they find themselves depending upon one another. Their relationship causes most of the comedy as well as the drama in the story, since Sana is completely clueless about Hayama’s feelings. The black and white art greatly contrasts with the open and expressive looks of Sana and the inexpressive looks of Hayama. Due to the crazy antics of Sana and the inexpressiveness of Hayama, boys and girls alike will love it.

Fantasy

Illustrated by a small army of artists, colorists and letterers, and written entirely by Neil Gaiman, the twelve-volume *Sandman* series is rightfully considered a germinal work in comics’ history. *Sandman* is the story of the Endless—Dream, Death, Destiny, Desire, Despair, Delirium and Destruction—immortal beings that are neither gods nor men, but forces that shape the destinies of both. When the story opens, we meet Morpheus, King of Dreams, as corrupt men seeking relief from death imprison him. Trapped in crystal for a mortal lifetime, Dream eventually makes his escape, extracts revenge on those who imprisoned him, and reunites with his family. As the story progresses, we watch Dream squabble with his siblings, fall in and

out of love, make and lose friends, and oversee his realm of the Dreaming, and his subjects. Incorporating the myths and literature of many cultures, and inhabiting a precarious space between fantasy, horror and truth, *Sandman* stands as an epic accomplishment of storytelling and an unmatched feat in sequential art. Of special note are the stories, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” which is the only comic ever to win a World Fantasy Award, collected in *Volume 4: Dream Country*, and “Norton I, the Emperor of America,” collected in *Volume 8: The Dream Hunters*. The eleventh volume in the series, which stands as a companion piece to the rest of the tale, *Sandman: The Dream Hunters*, is a beautifully illustrated re-telling of a Japanese folktale beloved by *Sandman* and manga fans alike.

A thousand years have passed since the destruction of civilization in Hayao Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind: Perfect Collection 1-4*. Now mankind struggles to survive in a wasteland surrounded by poisonous fungi and giant insects called Ohmu. Nausicaä is the princess of the Valley of the Wind, a land of farmers. When returning to the valley from a survey in the forest, Nausicaä discovers a refugee plane from one of her country’s allies. With her dying breath, the princess from that country begs Nausicaä to give a special stone to her brother and to keep it out of the emperor’s hands at all costs. Nausicaä now faces her first trial as the next ruler of The Valley of the Wind. In a serious fashion, this series deals with environmental issues and war and is an excellent choice for discussion groups.

In the *Bone* series by Jeff Smith, Fone Bone and his cousins, Phoney and Smiley Bone, get run out of town by a mob, ending up in a strange valley. The cousins are soon separated, and the story follows Fone Bone as he survives the winter and meets some of the inhabitants of the valley, including Thorn and her grandmother. Reunited, the Bones just want to find their way home, but their arrival sets off a chain of events that may end in the destruction of the entire valley. Thorn and her grandmother are more than they appear, and by joining them, the Bone cousins find themselves in constant danger. Throughout the ten-volume series the cousins encounter rat creatures, monsters, dragons, scheming politicians, and an ancient power trying to take over the world, all while Fone tries to keep his cousins out of trouble. Phoney

and Smiley, however, have plans of their own—most of them involving getting rich quickly before making a safe escape. This is an engrossing series that any age can enjoy.

Now, imagine if all of the characters from your favorite nursery rhymes and fairy tales were forced to live together in an apartment building in New York City. This is the premise behind the gruesomely funny and highly addictive *Fables* by Bill Willingham. In the first trade paperback of the series, *Legends in Exile*, the “Fables” are consumed with the question of who killed party-girl Rose Red. The suspects include her boyfriend Jack of the Tales, her fiancé Bluebeard, and her sister’s ex-husband Prince Charming. It’s up to the Fabletown house detective, Bigby Wolf, to find the murderer. The second volume of the series, *Animal Farm*, takes us to the Farm, a facility in upstate New York that is home to all Fables who are unable, or unwilling, to take human form. Sedition is brewing at the Farm, as Vice-Mayor Snow White learns when the head of one of the Three Little Pigs is found on a stake. This series, which lampoons fairy tale conventions even as it makes use of them, gets grisly, but you would be hard pressed to find a comic that is better written and more fun than this. For gentler fractured fairy tale graphic novels, see Linda Medley’s *Castle Waiting: The Lucky Road* and *The Curse of Brambly Hedge*.

Historical Fiction

Jack the Ripper and the Whitechapel Murders have been examined and reenacted in art both high and low. In a monumental graphic novel, *From Hell: Being a Melodrama in Sixteen Parts*, Alan Moore, the “mad prophet” of comics, brings his unique perspective to the subject. While readers may not agree with Moore’s theory of a Royal/Masonic conspiracy, the rich characterizations, intricate plotting and meticulous research will draw you into the story. This dark and moody tale is perfectly illustrated by Eddie Campbell’s highly atmospheric black and white artwork, which manages to evoke both the squalor and splendor of Victorian London. For another period piece in Victorian England, try *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Lorenzo Mattotti and Jerry Kramsky.

From a different historical perspective, Gen and his family struggle to survive in the aftermath of the

atomic bombing of Hiroshima in Keiji Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen*. They face starvation, illness, and the lingering effects of radiation—effects, which at the time, no one truly understood. Author and artist Nakazawa himself survived Hiroshima, and his firsthand experiences are woven throughout the story. Despite the horrors experienced by the survivors, Nakazawa's tale remains hopeful and optimistic; focusing on the way the survivors do everything they can to help each other in the midst of the devastation. The images are sometimes graphic and horrific, especially the effect of radiation poisoning and the images of piled bodies, and they may be too much for sensitive readers. This work is an excellent choice, however, to introduce a Japanese viewpoint of Hiroshima to students, and to make it clear just how much devastation resulted from the bombing.

In *Buddha*, a projected eight-volume series, Osamu Tezuka creates fictionalized characters and stories and intertwines them with the biography of Siddhartha, the prince who becomes Buddha. One of Tezuka's more mature masterpieces, the series brings the world of long ago India to life with action and humor. In the first volumes, key moments of Siddhartha's birth and childhood are highlighted and intermingled with the stories of Chapra and Tatta's adventures. Tezuka's humor and style permeate the pages. There is non-titillating imagery of slaves and pariahs without clothing, but it is realistic to the times portrayed. Although this series was published for adults, teens interested in Buddhism will want to pick it up.

During the turbulent times of Bakumatsu, the Japanese civil war that ended in 1868, both sides of the conflict used assassins against their enemies. The *Rurouni Kenshin* series by Nobuhiro Watsuki begins ten years after the end of the war with Kenshin, a heavily fictionalized version of one of the more notorious assassins trying to escape his past. He meets Kaoru, a woman trying to run a martial arts school alone; Yahiko, a war orphan; and a street brawler named Sanosuke. All of them try to adjust to the rapid change in Japanese society that came with the entrance of the West. Together they battle against the groups attempting to return Japan to the way it was. While the story is fictional, many of the historical facts presented in the tale are accurate, and many historical figures are reoccurring characters. For more samurai graphic novels, see the *Usagi Yojimbo* series by Stan

Sakai and the mature series, *Vagabond*, by Takehiko Inoue.

Horror

Out There: The Evil Within by Brian Augustyn follows four teens who find out that the adults of El Dorado are helping aliens take over the world in exchange for their own piece of it. These teens are not willing to stand aside and allow the invasion, but fighting against the others means not only placing themselves in danger, but also turning against people they knew and trusted. Following in the style of classic horror and suspense set by shows like the *Twilight Zone*, this series manages to be scary and suspenseful without resorting to outright gore and violence. The teens are stereotypes at first, but they have to grow out of their standard roles—jock, Goth, geek, and cheerleader—to survive. Augustyn and Ramos weave horror with science fiction, mystery, and social commentary, and the result is an interesting and fascinating series.

Kurozu-cho is a small town on the coast of Japan in which Kirie and her boyfriend, Shuichi, have lived all their lives, in Junji Ito's *Uzumaki: Spiral into Horror Volumes 1-3* series. The town has become a weird Mecca for spiral-obsessed and possessed individuals. Shuichi's father becomes so obsessed that he kills himself trying to become one large spiral. Since his cremation, the town crematorium smoke spins into hypnotic spirals before the ashes fall into the town's lake. The stories are inter-connected, each depicting yet another incident of spiral-induced madness, which ends giving readers chills down their spine. With the characters drawn like realistic Japanese teens, the setting in everyday places, and the usage of black, white and grays, this trilogy brings *Twilight Zone* creepiness to life.

In *Fray* by Joss Whedon, Melaka Fray, a "grab," is perfectly suited for the dystopic future in which she lives. Blessed with unnatural strength, speed and agility, she can steal anything, and doesn't blink at the mutants, 'roid pumps and other freaks who populate her world. All Melaka fears are the lurks, pale and bloodthirsty creatures who haunt the lower levels of her city. So when the demonic Urkon comes to her and tells her she is the Slayer, the Chosen One who will fight the lurks, she is initially skeptical, until a

voice from her past makes her believe. Fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* will find much that is familiar in this futuristic horror tale, but even those not versed in Slayer lore will find a sharp story and expressive artwork in this trade collection.

Mystery

If you could kill with no repercussions, would you? This is the question asked by the amazing noir-crime series *100 Bullets* series by Brian Azzarello. Each of the damaged people featured in the interconnected short stories has suffered an injustice, and each is visited by the mysterious Agent Graves. To these people, Graves brings evidence of those responsible for their pain, a gun, and 100 completely untraceable bullets. He leaves the rest up to them. Watching each recipient of the bullets wrestle with their dilemma is fascinating, as is the shadowy Graves. Who he is, and why he practices this peculiar form of justice is slowly revealed through the five trade collections currently in the series. A perfect blend of moody art and sharp writing, this series is both a fan and critical favorite.

For more mystery, try *The Kindaichi Case Files* series by Yozaburo Kanari. Though Hajime Kindaichi attends an exclusive private high school and has an I.Q. of a genius, he can still be found either cutting class or sleeping on the roof of the school. When Hajime is awake, he is a cocky amateur sleuth with amazing deductive skills. Each of the nine volumes is a conclusive murder mystery and can be read in any order. The mysteries are well designed, and readers will have to use both visual clues in the black and white art and textual clues in the writing to solve the murder mystery. Readers who like traditional “whodunits” will fall hard for this mystery series.

Greg Rucka presents more mystery in *Whiteout: Melt*. Connie Stetko, once a shining star in the U.S. Marshal Service, has now been put on ice, literally. Exiled to Antarctica, where men outnumber women 100 to 1, Connie learns to live on the ice, but does not love it. The prequel, *Whiteout*, tells how Connie wound up in Antarctica, as she solves the murder of an American geologist. In its sequel, she is offered a shot at redemption, and a chance to leave the ice forever. These books feature some of the best characterization in comics today, and Lieber’s stark black and white artwork makes Antarctica not only the setting, but also an actor unto itself.

Realistic Fiction

Mitsuru Adachi proves his mastery of short stories in *Short Program Volumes 1-2*. While the black and white art is an older, simplistic style, the stories told are international and undated. The art helps relay the emotions of his characters. Whether it is a repairman fixing a stereo for the girl he likes or the super-tall student who celebrates his track star friend’s success, Adachi captures the characters’ emotions at major moments in their lives. The stories will warm the readers’ hearts with their dramatic touches of human life and relationships. The quietness of these tales and the older art style may not be for everyone, but given the chance, readers will find stories they connect with in these volumes.

In *Sanctuary Volumes 1-9* by Sho Fumimura, childhood friends Hojo and Asami vow to turn Japan upside down and to create a “Sanctuary” for themselves. After a game of rock, paper, scissors, Hojo takes to the shadow and joins the *yakuza* (Japanese underworld crime syndicate), and Asami takes to the light and strives to be the top Japanese politician, the Prime Minister, by the age of forty. Hojo financially backs Asami, but both intend to topple the leaders of their own worlds. In their path are the powerful politicians and crime syndicate leaders, as well as a pretty female deputy police chief who is out to expose them for the crimes she is sure they have committed. Ikegami’s art is realistic, so the portrayal of sex and violence make this series a mature title. Adults and mature high school teens who like crime dramas or political intrigue will eat this series up.

An autobiographical tale of the author’s childhood in Wisconsin, *Blankets: An Illustrated Novel* follows Craig Thompson and his brother as they grow into teenagers. Born to strict religious parents, Thompson has to face the many challenges to faith that growing up can bring, especially when the religious community considers his art a waste at best, and at worst a

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sin. As the tale turns to the teenage years, Thompson meets his adolescent sweetheart at a church camp. The two fall in love, and Thompson must examine both his faith and his love for Raina as he approaches adulthood. This is a long and complex story, and at nearly 600 pages, it is a lengthy read even in this format. Thompson presents the readers with an inside look at religious fundamentalism and small town ethics, and what it means to grow up in that society. For another coming-of-age graphic novel, try Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World*.

Romance

In Chynna Clugston-Major's *Blue Monday: the Kids are Alright*, Bleu is a modern (well, early 1990s)

kind of girl who longs for an old fashioned guy—Adam Ant. When she finds out that Adam is coming to her small California Town, nothing will stop her from going: not jerky disc jockeys, not a sold-out show, and especially not the hormonally charged pervert boys who hang around her and her friends. In her quest for tickets, many things go wrong, but one thing goes absolutely right. In *Blue Monday: Absolute Beginners*, the “pervy” boys tape Bleu in the bathtub, and then show the tape at school. The only way Bleu can get the tape back is to go out with them—but why? This couldn't be their idea of flirting, could

it? The raunchy comedy in this book covers a very sweet, very true core, which evokes the tragedy and triumphs of being a teenager in love. Clugston-Major's clean manga-inspired artwork gives each character life, and beautifully illustrates her coming-of-age stories.

Skank Zero Hopeless-Savage, youngest daughter

of punk legends Dirk Hopeless and Nikki Savage, is in love for the first time in her young life, in Jen Van Meter's *Hopeless Savages: Ground Zero*. There have been guys who see her as a celebrity conquest or guys who hope she lives up to her name, but this is the real thing. Unfortunately, the object of her affection, a science-geek named Ginger, loves her back, but is afraid of being hurt. This newly blossomed romance also coincides with a bout of overprotectiveness from Mom, and the arrival of a film crew. Can Zero and Ginger and/or Zero and her Mom find a way to work it out? This title, second in the excellent *Hopeless Savages* series, is a sweet and touching story that looks at love of all kinds—between parent and child, between siblings, between boys and girls, and boys and boys. The use of multiple artists for flashbacks and point-of-view changes gives the book a depth and richness that enhances the excellent storytelling.

Miki just wants to be normal, but that's not going to happen with her parents divorcing, swapping partners with another couple, and all four living under the same roof! She is totally against this absurdity, but then she meets Yuu, her new stepbrother. *Marmalade Boy Volumes 1-8* by Waturu Yoshizumi is a romance series if anyone has ever seen one—there are the sweet first meetings, the first misunderstandings, the first realizations that the two may really be biological brother and sister . . . oh wait, that's not normal for a romance! Teens will gobble up all of Miki and Yuu's relationship woes from high school to their first year in college. Readers will cheer for them as they get together and cry for them when they have their hearts broken. The black and white art is fun with the big eyes that detail all of the emotion. Even though it is a romance, the characters are all so goofy and fun that even guys get a kick out of it. Manga is full of romantic graphic novels, and in addition to *Marmalade Boy*, girls will particularly enjoy the *Peach Girl* series by Miwa Ueda and the *MARS* series by Fuyumi Soryo.

Science Fiction

Mai is an ordinary teenage girl with extraordinary psychokinetic abilities in the *Mai the Psychic Girl Perfect Collection 1-3* series by Kazuya Kudo. Her powers come from her mother's family and have been passed down through the generations. The Wisdom Alliance, a secret worldwide organization, has discov-

ered her powers and is willing to do anything to have her and her powers under their control. Lucky for Mai, she has some good friends to help her find her path and to fight the Wisdom Alliance. Ikegami's black and white art has a very realistic tone. His usage of screentones (pre-printed films used for shading) particularly when Mai uses her powers, adds to the science fiction aspect of the story. This trilogy is for the reader who likes stories where ordinary people are put into extraordinary situations.

In Otomo Katsushiro's *Akira Volumes 1-6*, Tetsuo is taken for military testing of his psychic abilities after a bizarre motorcycle accident. His bike gang leader, Kaneda, is concerned for Tetsuo, but once Tetsuo's powers become out of control, Kaneda is one his many enemies. These enemies have two reasons to stop Tetsuo—one, to keep him from connecting with Akira, a paranormal boy who caused World War III, and two, to stop Tetsuo from becoming as powerful as Akira. The black and white art relies heavily on screentones for shading. There is drug usage and violence—both paranormal and realistic—and the graffiti art in background shots are of a sexual nature, making this title probably not for younger students than high school aged. *Akira* is pivotal science fiction manga, having won major awards in Japan and worldwide. This series' influence over the science fiction manga genre is very powerful. While the series is more than 2,000 pages, this manga uses action and the art to further the storyline at a quicker pace, so don't be fooled by the thickness of these books.

The Complete Geisha by Andi Watson features Jomi, an android who has been raised as part of a human family and aspires to become an artist. An admirer of the Dutch painters, anti-android prejudice keeps Jomi from making a living with her art; thus, she is forced to take a job in the family bodyguard business. Her father, disapproving, gives her the most boring, lackluster assignment he can come up with: babysitting a spoiled super-model. Things get complicated fast, however, when the model becomes the target of a stalker, and Jomi is offered big money to forge a Vermeer painting. This series, a basic science fiction action adventure on its surface, is really a look at family dynamics and what makes us human. Written and illustrated by Watson, the smooth line art and subtle use of grey tones create a completely believable, not quite alien future world. For another

tale of androids searching for their place in the world, try the series *Battle Angel Alita* by Yukito Kishiro.

In Conclusion

The titles described represent our picks for some of the best in illustrated storytelling. Be aware, however, that these books barely scratch the surface of the diverse world of graphic novels. Not included are the many excellent biographical and non-fiction titles, martial arts-inspired titles and superhero graphic novels. We hope that you will use these selections as a springboard to further exploration of the format.

Now that we've recommended what graphic novels to read, we'd like to conclude with some tips on how to read them. It is tempting, when first exploring graphic novels, to read them as you would any other prose material. This is a mistake—one that overlooks an important aspect of the format. Graphic novels, with their reliance on a synergy of words and pictures, have more in common, as a format, with film than with prose novels. To illustrate this point, imagine watching a film with nothing but the sound. You would probably be able to follow the plot, but would miss out on a great deal of characterization, setting, and other elements that give the story its richness and depth. Conversely, imagine watching the same film with only the visuals. Again, you would miss out on some of the elements that contribute to the whole of the film, such as dialogue. To get the full experience of the film, the visual and text elements must be considered together. Graphic novels must be read in the same way, with the images being examined in concert with the text. This is a skill that can feel foreign to readers unaccustomed to sequential art. Excellent graphic novels to use as training tools to help you consider illustrations and text together are the various manga novelizations of the *Star Wars* films, illustrated by Hisao Tamaki and published by Dark Horse comics.

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Internet Resources:

- www.noflyingnotights.com—Developed by librarians and librarians in training; includes book reviews and definitions of commonly used terms in the graphic novel world.
- www.artbomb.net—Maintained by the staff of comics creator, Warren Ellis, this site highlights the best of the graphic novel world. Of particular note is a wonderfully informative and beautifully drawn explanation of the graphic novel format by artist Jessica Abel (click on the Introduction image).