

A Book by Any Other Name?

Graphic Novels in Education

What's in a name?" asked Juliet, "that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." The same might be asked about books, particularly graphic novels. In the eyes of some, these books are not held in high regard. Some even think that they stink.

The watershed moment for graphic novels in the US occurred in 1992 when Art Spiegelman's *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize Special Award. For years afterward, people who read comic books and graphic novels pointed to the potential for the medium to produce affecting, meaningful, and complex works of art. Still, there is some amount of apprehension about the medium, as evident in a statement by Tony Long (2006) in *Wired* magazine. He questioned the worthiness of Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese (ABC)* as a nominee for a National Book Award. He opined that *ABC* was a comic book and went on, "This is simply to say that, as literature, the comic book does not deserve equal status with real novels, or short stories." Such a statement points out that the different media have different characteristics, but it also denigrates one over the other, with a bias against the text that has more visual aspects. Surely, writing words is an involved, complex endeavor, but so is drawing pictures that display a narrative and are simultaneously evocative.

Graphic novels' status as second-class texts is further held by current reading practices, where

students read more for testing purposes than they do for pleasure, encouraging thought, or as an otherwise meaningful activity (Gallagher, 2009). Under such a system, there is little or no regard for including students' choices, interests, or backgrounds in required texts. There is no apparent interest in creating lifelong readers, as reading is seen primarily as support for test performance. If students do not find themselves at least somewhat reflected in the curriculum, it becomes difficult for them to relate to lessons or to find much relevance in schooling.

The needs for reading to address multiple purposes and to be practiced using multiple types of texts are so important, according to the National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association's standards for English language arts (ELA), that they are listed in their first entry:

Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works. (NCTE/IRA, 2009)

Purposefully, they used the term *texts*, which can be applied to traditional print resources, such as novels and textbooks, but also to more contemporary, electronic works, such as websites and hypertexts. Texts also can refer to the medium of graphic novels.

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Not Just a Popularity Contest

Graphic novels have been in print since at least the 1950s, but they did not gain much traction in the marketplace or in schools until the last decade. The difference between graphic novels and comic books is that graphic novels tend to contain one single narrative by specific creators as compared to the extended, serial stories told in comic books. Currently, they are one of the most popular types of print text among young readers, as noted by library circulations (Schwarz, 2006) and the inclusion of large graphic novel sections in bookstores. Collections of comic books into books, called trade paperbacks, are included in the graphic novel category and are being used as source material for an increasing number of blockbuster movies.

Their recent popularity is certainly helpful for including graphic novels in instruction, as drawing on youths' interests can be a great motivational tool for teachers engaging reluctant readers, but they also provide substantive material for thinking and analysis. The combination of words and pictures in the medium offers a different examination of how authors make choices to convey meaning. Instead of dealing with nuanced or figurative language, readers can use the pictures to determine an author's message. Reading graphic novels involves inference-making (Jacobs, 2007), but in a manner that can be more intuitive or apparent to students who are more apt to understand or interact with visual texts. Reading pictures and words together opens up an avenue for involved textual analysis.

Such interactions offer stepping stones that may lead to more complex reading practices and an enjoyment of the printed word. I have done work with adults who read comic books and graphic novels to see why they chose and continue to choose to spend time with those texts (Botzakis, 2009), and what I found was that they had learned to read for a great number of purposes. Some read to follow their interests, to revisit favorite characters, or to relax. Others did so for more academic reasons: to learn about different people and cultures or to look for opportunities for reflection, which often involved the readers looking at the text and themselves in a philosophical manner.

I am not saying that reading comic books and graphic novels always leads to such elevated think-

ing, but my research does at least show that there is potential for such thought with these texts. Most of my participants had long been removed from school, but they read in ways that ELA teachers would like *their* students to read—actively, critically, and meaningfully. Instead of serving as a crutch for easy reading experiences, reading graphic novels can be seen as substantial meaning making between pictures and words. Translating the out-of-school reading practices developed over years into in-school reading that interests and involves students is a large part of my own educational work. In what follows, I will use one graphic novel to show how it may be used in school settings to get students thinking critically about their lives, their communities, and their worlds.

The Eternal Smile

Choosing which book to speak about, even in teaching situations, is largely a random activity. Sometimes we teach whatever text is available in the storeroom as a class set. Here, I am going

with another common method—choosing established or award-winning authors. Gene Yang and Derek Kim's (2009) *The Eternal Smile*, a recent graphic novel publication, is a collection of three stories by the authors of *American Born Chinese (ABC)* and *Same Difference and Other Stories (SDaOS)*, respectively. Individually, their works have won much praise: *ABC* won the 2007 Printz Award and was nominated for a National Book Award, while Kim won the three major comics industry awards (the Eisner, the Ignatz, and the Harvey) for his work on *SDaOS*. *The Eternal Smile* brings together three separate stories that all focus on unstable relationships between fact and fantasy. Fiction especially acts as a great coping mechanism for hardships, trepidations, and ennui. It is quite redemptive, guiding uneasy or lost people to find hidden strengths and pleasures within themselves and their worlds. What follows is a short synopsis of each of the three stories.

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“Duncan’s Kingdom”: Duncan is a member of the Royal Guard who seeks vengeance for the murder of the king by diabolical frogmen. Also, he is motivated by the beautiful princess’s hand in marriage in exchange for the frog king’s head. Ostensibly set in a medieval setting, a few modern objects enter into the picture, and Duncan’s sense of reality is seriously questioned. In the end, we learn that Duncan is actually lying in a hospital bed in a coma.

“Gran’pa Greenbax and the Eternal Smile”: One part *The Truman Show* and two parts *Uncle Scrooge* comic, this story mostly follows the exploits of a Disneyesque character. An extremely wealthy frog

plots and plans ways to build even more wealth so that he won’t bump his head on the ground when he dives into his personal money pit. Events turn in strange directions after he decides to use religious beliefs and practices in a money-making scheme. It turns out that Gran’pa is

actually a real frog that has had a microchip implanted in its brain so that it can be controlled as an actor in a popular television show.

“Urgent Request”: Janet is an office worker who struggles to be noticed and rewarded for her efforts on the job. In response to feelings of uselessness, she participates in the classic Nigerian email scam, sending huge amounts of money to a prince who promises to repay her once his proper office and situation are restored. Even though she knows she is being bilked, she continues with the sham because it provides a bright counterpoint to her depressing routine.

Although these three tales are separate narratives, Yang and Kim tie them together visually and thematically. Objects, such as bottles of Snap Cola, appear in each, as do images of frogs and other features. Astute readers can catch these features, and they definitely add to a sense of cohesion in the book.

Role of Fiction in Life

Although probably not intended as such, these stories cut right to the purpose of ELA education in general. One shared feature among them is how these stories

inform people’s lives and help them cope with their circumstances. In addition, they show different ways that fact and fiction relate in people’s lives. These sites of conflict and question in the book also can occur in classrooms. For instance, students often question why they have to read works of fiction—in other words, why things that did not really happen have a bearing on their lives. ELA teachers (or the standards they teach) frequently counter with the argument that fiction can provide a different way of viewing themselves or their world. Reading these stories can help bring these points to light.

Fiction can also provide a way to think through life’s problems. Duncan’s fictive medieval world provides a contrast to his reality. In his fictional world, everything plays out for the best, as in a fairy tale. He kills an evil king, wins the hand of the woman he loves, and is crowned. Through hard work and pluck, he makes a name for himself and establishes a great legacy. This fantasy world provides an escape from difficult situations in his reality: the death of his father and the abuse suffered at the hands of his mother’s new boyfriend. Additionally, this fantasy world serves to help Duncan transpose his real world into a different framework, partly to figure out what is happening to him. By the story’s end, we find that he has acted both heroically and spitefully toward his mother, and he begins to come to grips with what is happening to him. His dream world helps him begin to reconcile his life events.

Fiction may help a person understand the world better, but it can also help a person examine themselves, as happens in “Urgent Request.” This is the story of how Janet uses her fictional relationship with a Nigerian prince to examine herself and what she thinks she’s worth. In much of the story, she is shown as a diligent but underappreciated person who lacks confidence. Her actions seem irrational and misguided as she simply appears to be wasting money and paupering herself. What she is doing is trying on a new persona and escaping into another world, but in the process, she is learning more about herself and what she is worth. In the end, she is ready to take a stand and be more assertive.

Finally, the Gran’pa Greenbax story shows a different side of fiction, one that relies heavily on manipulation. In the course of the story, Gran’pa cre-

ates a religion to further his own agenda, churning out propaganda and false advertising to attract followers, which in turn results in substantial donations. Outside of that narrative, we see another where an enterprising corporation has created a product that they sell in various forms to their audience. Issues of media literacy and consumerism arise as we get a glimpse at the creation of a media phenomenon and its trappings.

Textual Connections

One question that this book begs is why these stories are collected together here. It may be that it is a convenient place for publication, but authors sometimes arrange their works methodically. Two of the most common ways to look at such text connections are to examine the themes and the symbolism of each story and look for common threads.

Thematic Connections

Yang and Kim could be said to have arranged their works thematically. The role of fiction in people's lives is a common thread that runs through these stories, of course, but there may be others. Although getting students to look at the connections between these stories may be easier because they are all between the same covers, this activity is one that ELA educators try to promote across multiple texts and multiple classes. Helping students to see the connections between these three stories could initiate a larger discussion about what connects the texts read throughout an entire course or even a lifetime.

Aside from the role of fiction, themes of audience and consumerism appear throughout the stories as well. In each story, media seems to offer something great to people, whether it be a way of looking at how life should be, as Duncan uses his fantasy, or the rewarding entertainment Gran'pa provides, or the fortune and friendship that Janet seeks from her Nigerian prince. Bundled within these promises are other questions, including whether or not these promises are realistic. Fairy tale stories promise a happy ending; material possessions offer good feelings; a stranger offers the potential for great reward. These stories invite readers to think about the messages around them, to examine them, and also to recast them.

The authors are also comparing emotional and

material needs throughout these stories, exploring how those needs are manipulated by outside forces. The role of business looms large, and readers could examine whether they are being critical of the business practices of corporations like Coca Cola or Disney, or even smaller businesses like the technology firm Janet works for. Readers could also turn a critical eye to persuasive techniques and look at the manipulations that advertisements and email messages use to elicit money from their audiences.

Symbolic Connections

One of the other most common areas for making connections in ELA classes is symbolism. In analyzing texts, teachers and students frequently look at the author's use of certain symbols, such as eyes by Edgar Allan Poe or clothing by William Shakespeare. These symbols usually lie in language, but they also can be conveyed by visual images.

Yang and Kim provide plenty of shared imagery in these stories. For instance, bottles and cans of Snappy Cola appear sporadically throughout two of the stories. In Duncan's adventure, a Snappy Cola bottle is what causes his dream world to collapse and him to snap back to reality.

Also, we learn that his mother is an avid collector of Snappy Cola memorabilia. At the end of Gran'pa's adventure, he hops by Duncan and his mom and ends up swimming in a pond past a discarded Snappy Cola can. Readers may ask why the authors decided to include such details. Were they being clever? Were they trying to make a specific point? Does Snappy Cola represent something else? Readers could look at why Yang and Kim chose to include Snappy Cola in their stories and also to wonder whether it is a stand-in for another product, such as Coca Cola. This question could lead into thinking about how Snappy Cola is used in the story and what that says about the role of soda or other popular brand-named products in people's lives. There are plenty of avenues for discussion and analysis here.

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Creating Lifelong Readers

The questions and analyses above speak to how a particular graphic novel, *The Eternal Smile*, may be used in classrooms. I have shown how the combination of images and words may be fruitful for examination and discussion, and may even lead to students making connections between themselves and their worlds. Naysayers may find that I am cherry-picking an exceptional text and using my own academic experiences to create examples of how it is used, but I argue that educators do that all the time. Don't all teachers pick books they think are best for use with their students? Aren't they always on the lookout for the ideal book for teaching specific ideas or skills? Choosing books with a specific purpose is what they do as responsible, informed teachers.

My argument here is that the selection process should not exclude books just because they have a predominance of pictures in them. There are a great number of graphic novels that may not work well with students, but I would argue that there is an equal if not greater number of traditional print texts that would not work well, either. Much is dependent on the context, the teacher, and the students.

I should also note that the medium may be called graphic novels, but not all of them are fictional. Authors such as Jack Jackson write about historical events, Jay Hosler biology, Jim Ottaviani mathematics and science, and Larry Gonick on a great number of topics, including genetics, world history, and statistics. There is a huge selection for readers of all ages and circumstances.

Looking for a thoughtful and challenging book? Why not choose an interesting, topical, appropriate graphic novel?

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