

“The Best of Both Worlds”: Rethinking the Literary Merit of Graphic Novels

The future of this form awaits its participants who truly believe that the application of sequential art, with its interweaving of words and pictures, could provide a dimension of communication that contributes—hopefully on a level never before attained—to the body of literature that concerns itself with the examination of human experience.”—Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (p. 141)

To say that graphic novels have attracted attention from educators is by now axiomatic. Professional journals, like this one, routinely feature articles that extol their virtue as a pedagogical tool. Books attest to the creative ways teachers are using them to scaffold students as readers and writers. Sessions devoted to graphic novels at the National Council of Teachers of English’s annual convention are invariably well attended and seem to proliferate in number from one year to the next. By all accounts, it would seem that educators have embraced a form of text whose older brother, the comic book, was scorned by teachers in the not-so-distant past. Appearances, however, can be deceiving.

When Melanie Hundley, on behalf of the editors of *The ALAN Review*, invited me to contribute a column on graphic novels for an issue of the journal devoted to the influence of film, new media, digital technology, and the image on young adult literature, I was only too happy to oblige because it afforded me the opportunity to confront two assumptions that strike me as characterizing arguments for using graphic novels in schools: the first is that graphic novels are a means to an end, an assumption that usually results in overlooking their literary merit; the second assumes that students will embrace graphic novels enthusiastically, in spite of the stigmas attached to them.

Literary Merit or Means to an End?: The Professional Debate

Consider, for a moment, some of the reasons educators are encouraged to embrace graphic novels—and, to a lesser extent, comic books—as a teaching tool. Graphic novels are said to:

- scaffold students for whom reading and writing are difficult (Bitz, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002);
- foster visual literacy (Frey & Fisher, 2008);
- support English language learners (Ranker, 2007);
- motivate “reluctant” readers (Crawford, 2004; Dorell, 1987);
- and provide a stepping stone that leads students to transact with more traditional (and presumably more valuable) forms of literature.

These are worthwhile objectives, and it is not hard to understand why a form of text thought to lend itself to addressing so many ends would capture the imagination of educators. At the same time, these arguments strike me as perpetuating—albeit unintentionally—a misperception that has plagued the comic book for the better part of its existence. Specifically, it regards works written in the medium of comics (be it comic books or graphic novels) as a less complex, less sophisticated form of reading material best used with weaker readers or struggling students.

It is tempting to interpret the enthusiasm literacy educators have shown for graphic novels as a sign of the field’s having moved toward a broader understanding of what “counts” as text—surely our willingness to embrace a form of reading material similar

to one our predecessors demonized is evidence of a more progressive, if not more enlightened, view. To be sure, there was no shortage of teachers and librarians who lined up to denounce the comic book when adolescents laid claim to it as a part of youth culture in the 1940s and 1950s. Less frequently acknowledged is that there were also educators who adopted a more tolerant view of the comic book and who sought to use students' interest in it as a foundation on which to develop their literacy practices and literary tastes.

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Parents and educators paid relatively little attention to the comic book when Superman made his debut in Action Comics in 1938. Within two years, however, the commercial success the character experienced, coupled with the legion of imitators he spawned, made it difficult

for them to do so any longer. David Hadju (2008) observes that the number of comic books published in the United States grew from 150 in 1937 to approximately 700 in 1940 (p. 34). While the connection adults drew between comic books and juvenile delinquency would gain traction in the early 1950s, much of the early criticism leveled against comic books focused on their perceived aesthetic value—or lack thereof. Sterling North, a literary critic for the *Chicago Daily News*, was one of the first to question the propriety of allowing adolescents to read comic books. In an editorial published on May 8, 1940, titled “A National Disgrace,” he chastised the comic book for, among other things, being “badly drawn, badly written and badly printed” (p. 56). In his opinion, parents and teachers were obliged to “break the ‘comic’ maga-

zine,” and he identified the antidote: it was necessary, North argued, to ensure that young readers had recourse to quality literature. “The classics,” he wrote, “are full of humor and adventure—plus good writing” (p. 56). Parents and teachers who neglected to substitute traditional literature in place of comic books were, in his opinion, “guilty of criminal negligence” (p. 56). That the newspaper reportedly received over twenty-five million requests to reprint North’s editorial is evidence of the extent to which his call-to-action resonated with the public (Nyberg, 1998).

Although the outcry over comic books dissipated in the face of World War II, professional and scholarly publications aimed at teachers and librarians continued to debate the influence they had on the literary habits of developing readers. Although there were educators who insisted that comic books were detrimental to reading, there were others who acknowledged the value students attached to them and advocated a more tolerant approach. One article, written by a high school English teacher and published in *English Journal* in 1946, is of particular interest, given the theme of this journal issue. Entitled “Comic Books—A Challenge to the English Teacher,” it opened by foregrounding a challenge its author felt “new” media posed for literacy educators:

The teaching of English today is a far more complex matter than it was thirty or forty years ago. It is not that the essential character of the adolescent student has changed, or that the principles of grammar or the tenets that govern good literature have been greatly modified, but rather that the average student of the present is being molded in many ways by three potent influences: the movies, the radio, and the comic book. (Dias, 1946, p. 142)

Rather than condemn comic books as a pernicious influence, he instead chose to appropriate them as a tool with which to foster student interest in traditional literature. Characterizing his efforts to do so as “missionary work among [his] comic-book heathens,” he explained how he engaged students in conversation regarding the comic books they read with the intention of identifying a genre that appealed to them (Dias, 1946, p. 143). Having done so, he recommended a traditional work of literature he thought might interest them. This approach, he argued, made it possible for him to build on students’ interests and use comic books “constructively as a stepping stone to a lasting interest in good literature” (p. 142).

Others took a similar tack. In 1942, Harriet Lee, who taught freshman English, observed that while teachers recognized a need to encourage students to evaluate their experiences with film and radio, they ignored comic books. Citing the success she experienced teaching a series of units that challenged students to critically assess the literary merit of their favorite comic books and comic strips—an approach that bears a faint resemblance to critical media literacy—she encouraged others to do the same. Two years later, W. W. D. Sones (1944), a professor of education at the University of Pittsburgh, foregrounded the instructional value of comic books and cited research that suggested they could be used to support “slow” readers and motivate “non-academic” students (p. 234), a population whose alleged lack of interest in school-based reading and writing appears to have established them as forerunners to the so-called “reluctant” reader of today. Having identified other ends toward which comic books lent themselves, Sones characterized them as vehicles with which “to realize the purposes of the school in the improvement of reading, language development, or acquisition of information” (p. 238).

Significantly, these educators were united by a shared belief—although they advocated using comic books for instructional purposes, they showed little regard for their aesthetic value. Indeed, much like those who criticized comic books, they were unable to recognize any degree of literary merit in them at all. Instead, they regarded them as a way station on a journey whose ultimate purpose was to lead students to transact with traditional literature. Comic books were, as one English teacher put it, “a stepping stone to the realms of good literature—the literature that is the necessary and rightful heritage of the adolescent” (Dias, 1946, p. 143).

It is not hard to recognize points of overlap between the arguments outlined above and those made for using graphic novels in the classroom today. By foregrounding these parallels, I do not mean to suggest that contemporary educators are entirely blind to the graphic novel’s literary merit. Anyone who attends conferences or reads professional journals knows that certain titles—*Maus* (Spiegelman, 1996) and *Persepolis* (Satriapi, 2003) come readily to mind—are frequently cited as warranting close study. Nevertheless, arguments that foreground graphic novels as tools with which to support struggling readers, promote multiple

literacies, motivate reluctant readers, or lead students to transact with more traditional forms of literature have the unintended effect of relegating them to a secondary role in the classroom; in doing so, they overlook the aesthetic value in much the same way as educators did in the past.

There is a difference between acknowledging (or, better yet, appropriating) a form of text and putting it to work in the classroom, and embracing it as a worthwhile form of reading material in its own right. At the current time, anecdotal evidence suggests that educators remain skeptical of the graphic novel’s literary merit. Hillary Chute

(2008), for example, points to “the negative reaction many in the academy have to the notion of ‘literary’ comics as objects of inquiry” (p. 460). Kimberly Campbell (2007), who taught middle and high school language arts prior to teaching college, recalls conversations with colleagues who expressed their “concern that graphic novels don’t provide the rigor that novels require” (p. 207). I have spoken to

high school teachers who were unwilling to use graphic novels with students in honors classes because they feared the ramifications. Asked to provide a rationale for teaching traditional literature—young adult or canonical—educators routinely cite its ability to foster self-reflection, initiate social change, promote tolerance, and stimulate the imagination. As those who read them know, *good graphic novels are capable of realizing these same ends*. As one junior in high school explained, “I love everything about them. I feel that they’re a beautiful painting mixed with an entertaining and thought-provoking novel. They’re the best of both worlds to me.”

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Acceptable In-School Literature?: The Students’ Debate

That educators should continue to question the literary merit of graphic novels is understandable. Graphic

novels, like other novels, are not “value-free” texts, though we often seem to treat them as such. They have a history, and the stigmas that trail in their wake are capable of shaping our perceptions of them as a form of reading material. As John Berger (1972) observed, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (p. 8). Acknowledging this, a decision to introduce graphic novels in a context that has traditionally privileged “high art” can seem radical. Those who write about graphic novels, myself included, consequently recognize a need to

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persuade teachers—as well as parents—of their value. Yet whereas we acknowledge that teachers may question the graphic novel’s literary merit, we often seem to proceed under an assumption that students will embrace them unquestioningly, as if they were somehow impervious to the stigmas their elders recognize. My experiences working with students, both at the university and high school levels, suggest that teachers who are interested in using graphic novels may expect

to encounter a certain degree of resistance.

To support this assertion, allow me to share a personal anecdote. For the past three years, I taught an introductory course on young adult literature for undergraduates interested in pursuing a career in elementary or secondary education. One of the course assignments required them to compose three critical response papers in which they responded to works of literature they read over the course of the quarter. Two of the papers asked them to address traditional young adult novels, while the third invited them to respond to a graphic novel. While there were inevitably students who appreciated the opportunity to read a graphic novel, a surprisingly large number were critical of them. This was especially true of those who wished to teach high school. While they were willing to entertain the notion that young adult literature might warrant a place in the curriculum, they vehemently resisted the possibility that graphic novels

might be of value as well. One student wrote:

It’s understandable to have pictures in elementary grade level books because children at that grade level are still learning about comprehension and formulation of their own ideas. Young adults are at an age where they are able (and teachers want them to) form their own ideas and think critically about books. I believe that providing pictures strips away the young adult’s creative and critical thinking about books.

Another explained:

The combination of pictures and text in novels, to me, seems childish and doesn’t allow readers to think critically.

Still another student wrote:

For my teaching goals, I want to include literature that will do at least one of three things—preferably all of them at once: encourage students to read, teach something, and broaden the reader’s world view and encourage critical thinking. I do not believe that graphic novels do these things. First, there simply is not enough text to make me believe that it significantly encourages reading.

These are not extreme cases. Rather, I selected these excerpts because they are representative of the arguments I received from students who questioned the propriety of teaching graphic novels, particularly as a form of literature. It is interesting to note the negative manner in which they regarded the image, which they assumed precluded critical thinking. This is not the sort of response one might expect from members of a so-called “visual generation.” Yet conversations with colleagues at professional conferences indicate that this sort of resistance to graphic novels is not uncommon.

In conducting a study designed to understand how high school students responded to multimodal texts, Hammond (2009) found that the participants with whom she worked were cognizant of a stigma attached to reading graphic novels, the result of which detracted from their popularity (p. 126). My experiences working with six sophomores and juniors who participated in a case study that sought to understand how high school students read and talk about graphic novels yielded a similar finding. A recurring theme suggested that the students were aware of stigmas attached to graphic novels; one regarded them as a puerile form of reading material, and another saw those who read them as social misfits—or, to borrow their term, “nerds.”

These were not abstract arguments for one of the students, who took great pleasure in reading comic

books and graphic novels. A junior in high school, Barry was familiar with the emotional pain such stigmas can cause, and when he talked about them, an underlying sense of anger often permeated his words. Reflecting on the ease with which his peers dismissed a form of reading material he valued, he wrote:

Why should I feel ashamed when I'm at track practice calling my pals to go to the comic book store while my teammates are around. [sic] It's just strange how they can look at something that I find so beautiful, and spit on it without giving a second thought.

On another occasion, he suggested that the perception that graphic novels constituted a childish form of reading material was so prevalent, it dissuaded younger audiences from reading them, a fact he found ironic. "It's to the point now where even kids that read comics are persecuted by other kids," he explained.

It is worth noting that the students with whom I worked did not harbor a negative view of graphic novels. They volunteered to take part in an after-school reading group devoted to them, and in doing so, they evinced a willingness to explore a form of reading material that was new to some of them. That said, their cognizance of stigmas associated with graphic novels, coupled with the experience of the student who felt the disdain of his peers, suggest that these stigmas may constitute obstacles for teachers who choose to incorporate these texts into the curriculum. In short, we cannot, as educators, proceed from a belief that students will automatically embrace a form of reading material that has historically been stigmatized, especially when we ask them to interact with it in a classroom context. To become a member of what Rabinowitz (1987/1998) calls a text's authorial audience, one might assume that readers have first to regard it as a viable form of reading material, a supposition that, in the case of graphic novels, may not always hold.

So What Now?

By challenging assumptions that underlie arguments for using graphic novels, I do not wish to detract from their value. Rather, I wish to suggest that it's possible to view graphic novels in another light, one that acknowledges them as a viable form of literature that warrants close examination in its own right. My experiences working with the high school students who participated in my study consistently suggested

that graphic novels are capable of inspiring high-level thinking, of stimulating rich discussion, and of fostering aesthetic appreciation—an observation the students shared. Sarah, a sophomore, explained:

I think all of us have taken away just as much from like our graphic novel reading experience as we have from our classroom reading experience. Maybe more. And I think . . . there's just as much substance to graphic novels as there is to just regular literature, and I don't think teachers realize that.

Another student remarked, "I didn't know they were going to have such a big impact on how I look at things in the world." Is this not the sort of thing we want students to say about their experiences with literature—indeed, about their experiences with art?

Good graphic novels, like good literature, are capable of moving readers to reflect on unexamined aspects of their lives. Not all graphic novels will, of course, but the same might be said of much of the traditional literature on bookstore shelves. To increase awareness of their literary merit and to gauge their potential complexity, it is necessary for professional and scholarly journals such as this one to call for articles that subject them to the same degree of critical scrutiny afforded traditional literature. Moreover, there is a need for reviews that acknowledge titles beyond the usual standards and that help educators keep pace with the multitude of graphic novels published each year. Finally, there is a need for a field-wide conversation that identifies the challenges involved in using graphic novels so that we might begin to address them and, in doing so, develop a sense of appreciation for their artistic merit.

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