

Graphic Novels, New Literacies, and Good Old Social Justice

“If literature is an art that brings about new understanding and insight—as I believe it to be—then comics certainly fit the bill.” *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, Rocco Versaci (p. 210)

Graphic novels, the new and longer comic books that transcend predictable superheroes and cute Disney characters, are part of the general buzz about new media and multiple literacies in school. With these new media—blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and even video games—anyone can access diverse kinds of information as never before. While these new media offer new kinds of connections and creativity, they also demand that more attention is paid to images, print, and sounds working together. The human condition, however, remains as it has long been—disturbing—with poverty, desperation, and violence much evident even in the nation’s schools. Perhaps, new media can serve the old purposes of helping adolescents learn about others, appreciate differences, identify injustice and intolerance, and become motivated to act for a better world. A tall order, but worth a try.

Historical Context

The graphic novel is a natural choice for bringing ongoing social problems into question. Moreover, a number of fine graphic novels can introduce young readers to significant social issues while also teaching new or multiple literacies. The history of the graphic novel marks it as an “outsider” force or alternative medium in the United States. The comic book, out of which the graphic novel has grown, was long considered

“trash,” mere kids’ stuff, or, at best, the obsession of geeks. In truth, most comic books in the first half of the 20th century were cheap pulp material, quickly produced by committee, and not great literature. Yet, it is precisely this low status that allowed new talents like Will Eisner, considered the father of the graphic novel, into the field. Hajdu (2008) summarizes this way:

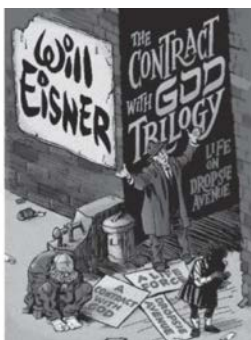
Comic books, even more so than newspaper strips before them, attracted a high quotient of creative people who thought of more established modes of publishing as foreclosed to them: immigrants and the children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts . . . (p. 25)

Michael Chabon writes about this outsider creativity in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel based on the creators of Superman, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). Later in the century, when censorship of comics began, largely due to Fredric Wertham’s condemnation of comics in *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), a lot of rubbish—ridiculous horror stories, predictable romances, and so on—was still emerging. Yet, in 1955, EC Comics, under Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein, managed to produce a short story in *Incredible Science Fiction* that was an allegory about race. It was published among a number of other meaningful pieces (Hajdu, 2008, pp. 321–322). Comic art could be thought provoking.

On the road to graphic novels, comics took a major turn in the late 1960s as creators like Robert Crumb in San Francisco created the underground “comix.” Lopes (2009) describes comix as follows:

In the simplest of terms, comix were humor comic books geared to the counterculture reader, many basing their humor on some form of social satire. While they gained a reputation for their exaggerated portrayal of sex, drugs, and violence—and were criticized for their misogynistic and sadistic content—comix also articulated the antiauthoritarian and radical politics of the counterculture. (pp. 80–81)

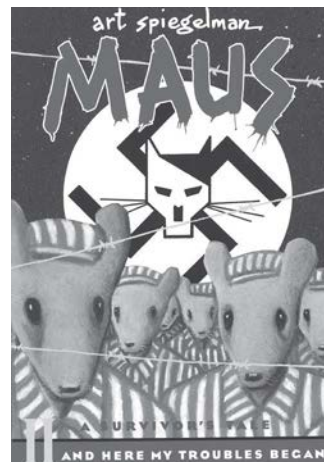
Highly personal and autobiographical, self-produced, and sold out of small shops, these comic books took on social taboos and the Viet Nam War. They became an adult medium that could include quirky artistic styles as well as controversial content. While these comics may not be classroom useful or world changing, they did tackle meaningful subjects like war and peace. Moreover, the individual artist, rather than the committee producing mass entertainment, became the focus. As Hatfield (2005) notes, “[C]omix introduced an ‘alternative’ ethos that valued the productions of the lone cartoonist over collaborative or assembly-line work” (p. 16). Comic books were being taken seriously as art.



Unlike others, Will Eisner, who had worked in American comic books since the early days, long perceived comic art as a genuine art with great potential. He had created a respected crime comic book series in the 1940s, *The Spirit*, and after being drafted during World War II, he produced comics related to vehicle maintenance for the army. In 1978, his *A Contract with God* was published in hardback, and he told the publishers to call it a “graphic novel.” Gravett (2005) describes this novel as “a quartet of sad, moving and disarmingly unglamorous vignettes of Jewish life set in New York in the ‘dirty thirties,’ curiously around the same time as the birth of the comic book” (p. 38). Gravett adds the following:

Eisner committed himself to reinvigorating the ambitions of comics, building on the adult themes pioneered in underground comix, and aspiring to emotional depth and literary seriousness. . . . Since the late 1970s, successive generations of graphic novelists have been exploring the human condition in comics with perceptive insights and intriguing symbolism. (p. 39)

One of the young rebel artists in San Francisco in the late 1960s was Art Spiegelman. In 1986, Spiegelman’s groundbreaking graphic novel *Maus I* came out; *Maus II* was published shortly thereafter. This account of the Holocaust, with Jews portrayed as mice and Nazis as cats, was based on the experi-



ences of Spiegelman’s own parents. The book clearly established the graphic novel as serious literature. *Maus* has been widely read, reviewed, studied, and taught in classrooms from middle school to college. As Hatfield (2005) notes, though, “A reinvigorating, recombinant approach to comic art, international in character but inspired by the American underground, came to the fore in the eighties, labeled ‘alternative’ or ‘the new comics’ but clearly indebted to the comix of yesteryear” (p. 20). Spiegelman demonstrated that comic art, the graphic novel, could do more than be outrageous, as it was in the 1960s, and for this achievement, *Maus* received a Pulitzer Prize.

Now major publishers produce graphic novels, the *New York Times* reviews them, and they have their own sections in bookstores. Nevertheless, the graphic novel retains much of its “outsider” or alternative status, offering unexpected topics, diverse views of the world, and a challenge to readers’ complacency. Creativity is still emerging from the marginalized and minorities, as early in comics history, and many graphic novel creators are still questioning society and the status quo, as during the 1960s. Many examine the human condition fraught with conflict, just as Eisner did in *A Contract with God*, and some explore important topics, as Spiegelman did in *Maus*. Thus, the graphic novel may prove an engaging text for involving secondary students in social issues while also teaching multiple literacies.

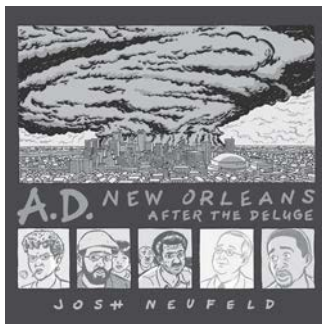
Educational Relevance

The notion of new or multiple literacies is itself something of an “alternative” notion. For years, the

term literacy has been basically understood as the ability to read, the ability to decode print. With the rapid growth in new communications technologies and a growing interest in how students themselves experience literacies—both in the classroom and outside—the terms “new” and “multiple” literacies have become common in the professional literature. In addition, scholars and teachers of “critical literacy” position literacy in a dynamic social context, not as an abstract skill.

Literacy, then, is not a single, easily knowable quantity. “Multiple literacies” remains an elusive term that may include traditional, informational, visual, media literacy, and more. Kist (2005) acknowledges that “this field of new literacies is actually a rather large umbrella that encompasses many perspectives” (p. 5). One thing shared by those who teach and research new/multiple literacies, however, is the sense that “literacy” can no longer be contained in the narrow, standardized reading test scores cherished by NCLB. Kist (2005) summarizes, “The new literacies line of inquiry has been trying to catch up with these staggering changes in media choices that have occurred over the last 25 years and with what they mean for how to define *literacy*” (p. 3). Something nontraditional is evolving, an educational alternative to printed multiple-choice tests with one right answer.

A specific example illustrates how graphic novels may be used to teach both social justice and new/mul-



multiple literacies. *A. D. New Orleans after the Deluge* (2009) by Josh Neufeld recounts the experiences of seven real people before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. Scenes include people abandoned on the roofs of houses, the sick seeking help, flooding sewers and water shortages, and the chaos at the Convention Center. This graphic novel reflects the destruction that befell mostly the poor and disenfranchised in New Orleans, shocking many Americans who didn’t believe that such things could happen here. Appropriate for the social studies or the English classroom, this work offers themes of social justice and conveys to the reader a visceral sense of the catastrophe, especially for those

trapped in New Orleans. Following are several discussion questions centered on the theme of social justice:

- Respond to the dialogue on pages 147 and 148 in which evacuees Leo and Michelle are discussing the radio news as they drive back into the city. Someone on the radio says, “All those folks in the Superdome and whatnot—why didn’t they just leave the city before the storm? What is wrong with those people?” Leo comments, “Yeah, when you take for granted that you can hop on a computer and make a reservation at a Hilton five hundred miles away—it’s pretty easy to forget what it’s like to be a have-not.” Do you agree with Leo? Why or why not?
- Leo ends up losing something very valuable to him. What? How does he feel about it? How would you feel in Leo’s position?
- Abbas and his fishing buddy Darnell spend one night on a house roof, eaten alive by mosquitoes and forced to beat off the rats swimming up to them. Who are these two men and why are they on the roof?
- Denise is an angry character. (You can perhaps tell by her street language.) What makes her angry? Is her anger justified?
- *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* actually began as a webcomic, an online magazine devoted to storytelling (see <http://www.smithmag.net/afterthe-deluge/about-2/>). Josh Neufeld, the author, was a Red Cross volunteer in Biloxi, Mississippi, for three weeks after the storm. He had self-published a graphic novel about his experiences called *Katrina Came Calling*; he was then contacted to write the New Orleans story. On the website is information that goes along with the graphic novel. For example, follow the hyperlinks to YouTube, which offers a video of the evacuation and interviews. Do you think the government acted too slowly, as the graphic novel implies? Why might this be?

Clearly, like most media today, *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* can be linked to a variety of other media. Jenkins (2006) describes this as the “convergence culture,” in which a book, for instance, does not stand alone, but will have a publisher’s website, podcasts from author interviews, and so on. Teachers thus have the opportunity to teach multiple literacies. For example, students could be asked to compare and

contrast different sources of information and ideas about the predicament in New Orleans after Katrina. The *Smith Magazine* website offers BBC coverage of the disaster and a variety of blogs. A Google search reveals reports from CNN, *USA Today*, Wikipedia, and a NOVA science show on PBS. There are even “stupid quotes” on a political humor site. Students should ask questions while comparing sources; here are a few examples:

- Who produced this report/message? Why?
- Who is the target audience for this message? How can you tell?
- How do you know if this is reliable information or ideas? Which information or ideas are left out of this piece?
- What messages do you find about social justice and Katrina?
- How might different people interpret these messages?

Information literacy is key in a convergent culture where messages proliferate so quickly.

Visual literacy involves a set of skills and understandings that can be taught with a graphic novel, as well. *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* is a rich source of images, and images are major communicators. The following classroom discussion questions indicate how *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* may engender learning in visual literacy.

- The first section of the book, “The Storm,” has only pictures except for the dates and places named. Why is there no character dialogue? What is the effect of this section on you?
- Until the last two sections of the book, “The Diaspora” and “The Return,” all sections display just one main color at a time, such as lavender or green. How does this affect you? Why do you suppose the last sections display multi-colors?
- Do the varied colors of the different sections seem “right” for the action? How so? What do the colors make you think of or feel?
- A number of the pictures are large, two pages, and have little or no dialogue—like pages 116–117. What impact do these have on you as you read?
- How would you describe the artistic style of this book—exaggerated, cartoonish, unusual in any way, realistic, something else? Why do you think the author uses this style?

Reading a graphic novel requires traditional literacy skills, but also more. Multiple literacies are essential in the new, digital age.

Student creation of graphic novels can facilitate the teaching of multiple literacies and social justice, too, and *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* could serve as a great model. The Comic Book Project at Teachers College, an arts-based literacy and learning initiative hosted by the nonprofit Center for Educational Pathways and directed by Michael Bitz, has already demonstrated the power of graphic novel creation to teach at-risk students new skills and how to express ideas about social issues. Bitz (2008) describes student graphic novels that reflect on AIDS, environmental degradation, and tobacco abuse. Similarly, researching and creating a nonfiction graphic novel of their own, individually or in groups, after studying *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* would make a great culminating project, allowing students to focus on racism, poverty, excessive consumerism, bullying, or similar issues. A number of books on how to make graphic novels have been published recently, such as Spilsbury’s *Comics and Graphic Novels* (2007), which explains the terms, and Davila’s *How to Draw Graphic Novels* (2004). Help is available online, too; one example is the Comic Creator at www.readwritethink.org.

Educators can find many other excellent graphic novels that encourage thinking about social issues, especially among adolescents who do not have a clear sense of American history and the nation’s shortcomings. Following are just four more suggestions:

- *Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow* by James Sturm and Rich Tommaso (2007, Hyperion) tells about the famous pioneering ball player and the Negro Leagues.
- *The Castaways* by Rob Vollmar and Pablo G. Callejo (2002, Absence of Ink Comic Press) is a black-and-white story about a boy who leaves home to ride the rails during the Depression and is befriended by a Black man.
- *The Four Immigrants Manga* by Henry Kiyama and translated by Frederik Schodt (1999, Stone Bridge Press) is a humorous but moving insider account of four Japanese immigrants living in San Francisco from 1904–1924.
- *The Ride Together* by Paul Karasik and Judy Karasik (2003, Washington Square Press) tells the true story of two siblings (Paul and Judy) growing up

with David, an autistic brother. Chapters alternate between the sister's point of view told in regular prose and the brother's account in graphic novel form. One concern is patient treatment of people who cannot function, like David.

Conclusion

The graphic novel is a relatively new medium that has grown out of comic books. This medium has a controversial history that is also creative and engaging. As Versaci (2007) puts it, "But the marginality of comics has also allowed comic book creators to take advantage of others' (dis)regard for them in order to create representations that can be both surprising and subversive. If one characteristic of good literature is that it challenges our ways of thinking, then comics' cultural position is such that they are able to mount these challenges in unique ways" (p. 12). Many titles offer great stories that can engage students in social issues while teaching new literacy skills. New media may well be useful in teaching old objectives: critical thinking, respect for diverse voices, empathy for fellow humans, regard for social justice, and even the incentive to work towards a different and better society.

Gretchen Schwarz was a high school English and German teacher for 13 years. She taught at Oklahoma State University for over 18 years and is now in Curriculum and Instruction at Baylor University. Her research interests include graphic novels, media literacy education, teacher research and lore, and a variety of curriculum issues.

References

- Bitz, M. (2008). The comic book project: Literacy outside (and inside) the box. In J. Flood, S. Brice Heath, and D. Lapp (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching literacy through the communicative arts, Vol. II* (pp. 29–236). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Chabon, M. (2000). *The amazing adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. New York: Picador.
- Davila, V. (2004). *How to draw graphic novels*. New York: Scholastic.
- Eisner, W. (1978/2006). *A contract with God*. New York: Norton.
- Gravett, P. (2005). *Graphic novels: Everything you need to know*. New York: Collins Design.
- Hajdu, D. (2008). *The ten-cent plague: The great comic book scare and how it changed America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hatfield, C. (2005). *Alternative comics: An emerging literature*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kist, W. (2005). *New literacies in action: Teaching and learning in multiple media*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lopes, P. (2009). *Demanding respect: The evolution of the American comic book*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Neufeld, J. (2009). *A.D. New Orleans after the deluge*. New York: Pantheon.
- Spiegelman, A. (1986). *Maus*. New York: Pantheon.
- Spilsbury, R. (2007). *Comics and graphic novels*. Chicago: Heinemann Library.
- Versaci, R. (2007). *This book contains graphic language: Comics as literature*. New York: Continuum.
- Wertham, F. (1954/2004). *The seduction of the innocent* (rev. ed.). Laurel, NY: Main Road Books.