

Getting Graphic: Connecting with Students Using Graphic Novels

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School's out and we make a mad dash to the library to gather the books on our summer reading list. While I check off my perennial favorites – mostly Newbery and Caldecott winners – my son gravitates toward “graphic novels” such as Kia Asamiya’s *Batman: Child of Dreams* (n.p.: DC Comics, 2003) a psychological superhero tale with elements of violence and drug use. Add this to the pile of Marvel, DC, and Dark Horse comic books in his room, and I foresee many arguments over what is “appropriate” literature. What is a parent to do? Are “graphic novels” worthy reading? Are they credible sources for school assignments?

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature notes: “[Graphic novels are] book-length, high-quality comic books that introduce children and adults to a wide range of literary fiction and non-fiction subjects. Graphic novels stand alone as complete works, as opposed to comic books, which are usually short serials.” (Burdge, 2006, p. 166). Librarian Robin Brenner concurs, noting that while many adults have the misconception that all graphic novels are dark “superhero stories” full of sex and violence, written for adults, graphic novels are written for all age groups – from elementary aged children to adults (2006, p. 124). Further, graphic novels are represented in non-fiction genres such as history, science, and biography, as well as fiction genres, including: “realistic stories; science fiction and fantasy novels; future, contemporary, and historical adventure stories; and manga (Japanese) tales, as well as humorous works, political satires, and adaptations of classics” (Bucher & Manning 2004, p. 68). One only has to explore Brenner’s fun and comprehensive web site, www.noflyingnotights.com, to quickly appreciate the breadth of the graphic novel as a literary art form.

Unlike comic strips and books, which have a long and distinguished publishing history, graphic novels are a relatively new and growing phenomenon. Will Eisner is credited with creating the first graphic novel *A Contract with God* (1978) as well as with coining the term “graphic novel.” (Bucher & Manning, 2004, p. 67). In 1992, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: a survivor’s tale* (NY: Pantheon, 1986) won the Pulitzer Prize. (In *Maus* Spiegelman writes about father’s experience during the Holocaust, and portrays Nazis as cats and Jews as mice). Spiegelman’s honor went a long way in legitimizing graphic novels as a literary form and “the reading public began to notice that Spiegelman and other write-illustrators were producing serious, ambitious work in this genre” (McTaggart, 2005, p. 46). In recent years, sales of graphic novels of all genres have grown at a phenomenal rate from \$75-million 2001 to \$245 million in 2005 (Lewis, 2006). Thousands of people attend annual conventions such as San Diego’s 2005 Comics-Con where attendance reached 104,000 (“Comic-Con 2006,” n.d.) Because of their pictorial and sometimes action-oriented content, comics and graphic novels are natural fodder for movies, such as the ubiquitous *Superman* and *Batman* as well as the recent *V is for Vendetta* (2005) based on Allan Moore’s book. The opposite can also be true – “cult” movies such as *Star Wars* have spawned entire series of graphic novels. In a relatively short time period, graphic novels have become pervasive in popular American culture.

What does a graphic novel look like and what is its appeal? Essentially, graphic novel stories are told in a format called “*sequential art*: the combination of text, panels, and images” which requires the reader to read text and analyze images to interpret the story (Brenner, 2006, p. 123). According to Tabitha Simmons “[g]raphic novel readers have learned to understand print,

but can also decode facial and body expressions, the symbolic meanings of certain images and postures, metaphors and similes, and other social and literary nuances teenagers are mastering as they move from childhood to maturity” (Simmons, “Comic Books in My Library?” as cited in Bucher & Manning, 2004, p. 68). For many readers, “growing up with television and video games, contemporary young adults look for print media that contain the same visual impact and pared-down writing style and contribute to their enthusiasm for visual rather than written literacy” (Bucher & Manning, 2004, p. 67). One might argue that “enthusiasm” for the visual doesn’t –and shouldn’t– supplant written literacy, but is valid method of learning and “knowing” in an increasingly media-rich world.

Many libraries have recognized the popularity of graphic novels among all readers, although some have been quicker than others to add graphic novels to their adult and teen collections. The professional journals that librarians use in developing collections, including *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *VOYA*, and *Publisher’s Weekly*, now include reviews of graphic novels (Ching, 2005, p. 20); these reviews have helped to “legitimize” graphic novels as library purchases. For some libraries, the rationale for adding graphic novels is that they can help make teens feel welcome, create a fun environment, and can add to teens’ sense of being a stakeholder in the library (Ching, 2005, p. 21). The American Library Association helped to cement this rationale when it sponsored “Get Graphic @ Your Library” for Teen Read Week in 2002 (Ching, 2005, p. 19). More recently, librarians from Hennepin County in Minnesota to Tampa Hill Borough in Florida have found that teens flock to readings, signings, and workshops concerning the graphic novel (MacDonald, 2004, p. 20). The Cooperative Children’s Book Center call graphic novels “an essential component of library collections for both children and teenagers” and indicate “they have enormous potential for classroom use” (CCBC, n.d.).

Despite the endorsement by many librarians, many teachers have been reluctant to include graphic novels in their curricula. Yet when used to supplement traditional literature, age-appropriate graphic novels can be used to teach a variety of literary and media devices, can be a device to teach second language learners, and can challenge reluctant readers. Schwarz indicates that English teachers may use graphic novels to teach literary techniques and terms such as dialog (2002, p. 263). She also notes that using graphic novels can enhance students’ media literacy skills. Students can explore “...such questions as how color affects emotions, how pictures can stereotype people, how angles of viewing affect perception, and how realism or the lack of it plays into the message of a work” (Schwarz, 2002, p. 263). While second language learners might not use graphic novels to enhance media literacy, students may find clues in the pictures that help demystify the text and increase comprehension (Cary, 2004, p. 3). In *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* Cary provides a rationale for the various ways that comics (and graphic novels), as “authentic literature,” can assist second language learners by providing engaging content in a sequential, logical order. “Engagement” is also key in challenging reluctant readers (McTaggart, 2005, p. 46). While many teachers note that graphic novels do not constitute “good literature,” they can be a “hook” for grabbing reluctant readers if they are offered as “free choice” classroom reading, if they provide a “traditional” story in an alternative format, if students have the opportunity to use writing and art in literacy projects, and if students are encouraged to give reviews (both written and oral) of the comics (and graphic novels) they have read (McTaggart, 2005, p. 46).

Perhaps the most compelling reason to use graphic novels in the classroom is that they can simplify complex and controversial topics. For example, graphic novels may help students explore social issues such as rape, sexual abuse, AIDS, and terrorism (Bucher & Manning, 2004,

p. 69). Graphic novels may present alternative views of culture and history to make them more accessible to students (Schwarz, 2002, p. 264). *Maus*, for example, has been used to teach about the horror of the Holocaust (Leckbee, 2005, p. 30). Leckbee notes “the image and the text work together on the page, bringing the complicated story of a man and his father, one comic strip frame at a time, to life” (2005, p. 30).

Bring complex stories to life? Motivate a reluctant reader? Help build visual literacy? Make reading fun? Not many choices on our summer reading list can meet all those goals. Graphic novels just may have a place in our summer reading repertoire after all.

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