

## In Defense of Graphic Novels

*The author describes why she teaches graphic novels and directly confronts criticism teachers may face from colleagues, administrators, parents, and students as they first teach examples of this fast-growing genre.*

**I**n the 18th century, critics grumbled about a new literary form that supposedly threatened the abilities of youth to distinguish between reality and artificiality. This kind of text, the criticism ran, misinformed its readers about love, morals, social class, and everything that society most valued. This form was the novel, one of the literary forms that critics now hold dearest. New forms often attract scorn, which is why “novel,” meaning “new,” originally was a term to disparage this Johnny-come-lately style of writing. But newness isn’t a justification for dismissing something outright. Currently, the graphic novel receives a great deal of criticism, much of which betrays a dislike of what is new rather than a carefully considered critique of the graphic novel as a genre. Yet many teachers have shown how graphic novels can help energize students whose interests are hard to capture, can aid low-level and nonnative English-speaking readers through the twinning of words with images, and can challenge higher-level readers to expand their analytical skills to include consideration of visual elements.

These rewards are worth a battle or two with those who might criticize these unfamiliar, undervalued texts. Despite this, teachers might find that they have more battles than they initially anticipate when they set out to include graphic novels in their curricula. I hope that teachers consider graphic novels for inclusion into their classrooms, but before they do so, teachers need to consider carefully the criticism that they are likely to face. By setting forth these potential criticisms, I aim to help pre-

pare teachers to counter these criticisms successfully so that they have at their disposal a uniquely useful body of literature.

Perhaps one reason that graphic novels are on the receiving end of so much skepticism is that the terms used to categorize the genre aren’t clearly set. While *graphic novel* is a common term, other terms also pop up: *sequential art*, *manga*, *comics*, *novel in pictures*.<sup>1</sup> Equally problematic can be the definition of these terms. In essence, a graphic novel can be thought of as a sequence of images, often (but not always) accompanied by text that tells a story or provides information. This definition is imprecise at best. But I argue that the hazy definition telegraphs part of the graphic novel’s appeal. The boundlessness of the category of graphic novel hints at its almost limitless possibilities, which is what I would suggest teachers tell doubting parents and administrators. Some graphic novels can be tools for introducing different cultures, like Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000), a tale about a young Iranian girl, and Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (2006). Other graphic novels are expressly educational, such as Apostolos Doxiadis and Christos H. Papadimitriou’s *Logicomix: An Epic Search for Truth* (2009), which tells about Bertrand Russell’s studies in mathematics, and Shin Takahashi’s *The Manga Guide to Statistics* (2008), which explains statistics concepts that are useful to marketing. Numerous graphic novels are fictional narratives of many kinds. The wide range of stories told, themes advanced, and information presented provides opportunities for the genre to develop in any number of ways. This means that the graphic novel has the

potential to appeal to almost any reader. So despite the definitional and terminological issues, graphic novels are a vibrant and compelling tool for teaching, and in particular the teaching of writing and of literature.

### Criticism from Outside the Classroom

Before discussing how to prepare for some unexpected battles, I will first address the criticisms likely to emerge from disapproving voices outside the classroom that teachers might indeed expect. One such expected argument raised against graphic novels, likely related to their most common name, is that they're too violent, too brutal, or, in a word, too graphic. This criticism might refer to the super-

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hero comics, in which overly muscled characters show their worth by physically subduing their antagonists. In some respects, this is a valid criticism, especially when the assumed audience consists of young children, even though it is a radically simplistic overview of superhero graphic novels. As is the case with any genre of text, not all graphic novels are intended for younger audiences. This is a notion that

teachers must keep in mind. To help emphasize this point, think of it this way: many currently popular animated television shows are analogous to graphic novels. That is, some people think that the seemingly childish format (animation for television shows or "cartoon art" for graphic novels) indicates that the material is targeted at children. As shows such as *Family Guy* and *South Park* demonstrate, this is not always the case. But the need for teachers to choose graphic novels wisely shouldn't bar all graphic novels from classroom use. Some graphic novels have names that pretty clearly label them as beyond the pale for most school use, such as Jhonen Vasquez's *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* (1995–97). Others, including Frank Miller's *Hard Boiled* (1990–92); John Wagner, Carlos Ezquerra, and Pat Mills's *Judge Dredd* (1990–present); and John Albano's *Jonah Hex* (1971–present), are just as inappro-

priate for young children, though an examination of them is necessary to ascertain that. If a novice teacher of graphic novels is worried about text selection, aids exist that provide guidance for using graphic novels in the classroom (see fig. 1). Uneasy teachers can also find a valuable resource in their local comics shop; managers and workers there can help teachers search through graphic novels to find those that are best suited to particular classroom needs.

But the existence of objectionable material in some examples of the form does not excuse opposing the entire canon of graphic novels. Graphic novels range widely in content, so careful selection of texts by instructors can obviate these kinds of claims. First and foremost, no teacher should use a graphic novel that she or he has not read. These texts vary in quality as well as content. This shouldn't be a surprise, but like most genres, the genre of the graphic novel encompasses a wide range of topics. Though many critics of the form believe that punches and bullet sprays are the hallmarks of all graphic novels, this is absolutely untrue. For instance, Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003) tells a story of a teen from an evangelical Christian background and his difficulties in coming of age. Its panels are show-cases of the tumultuous nature of first love and a young man's maturation, not fisticuffs—emotional intensity, not physical violence. For middle school-aged readers, Barry Deutsch's *Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword* (2010) provides a plucky young heroine who comes to terms with her longing for a less-traditional life even as she learns better to understand her stepmother. These complex characters exemplify the wide range of graphic novel characters who exist in a world far apart from one featuring battles between superheroes and supervillians.

Even those who don't find themselves bothered by violence might complain that graphic novels are easy texts for lazy readers. This is by no means the case, but this might be the most persistent criticism to combat. Yet challenging and engaging graphic novels abound. Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* series (1989–96) frequently makes allusions to classical literature, for example, with the character of Orpheus from Greek myth making repeated appearances. Gaiman also riffs on the plots of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's*

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**FIGURE 1.** Resources for Beginning to Use Graphic Novels in the Classroom
 

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Carter, James Bucky, Ed. *Rationales for Teaching Graphic Novels*. Gainesville: Maupin House, 2010. CD-ROM. This sets forth synopses and potential objections for almost 100 graphic novels, giving educators information to explain these works' worth to administrators.

Comic Shop Locator, <http://www.comicshoplocator.com/>. This site allows users to find comic shops in their vicinity and provides additional information, such as graphic novel reviews and notifications of upcoming conferences.

Comics Worth Reading, <http://comicsworthreading.com>. This site offers Johanna Draper Carlson's catalog of graphic novels, manga, and other related works. Her "Must-Read Comic Classics" list is a good starting point.

Cooperative Children's Book Center, <http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/graphicnovels.asp>. The University of Wisconsin–Madison's School of Education hosts this site, which provides lists of recommended graphic novels as well as resources for understanding and defending them.

Graphic Novels Program Guide, [http://www.brightpointliteracy.com/assets/researchfiles/NA63\\_web.pdf](http://www.brightpointliteracy.com/assets/researchfiles/NA63_web.pdf). Bright Point Literacy's guide includes ideas for using graphic novels in the classroom.

Great Graphic Novels for Teens, <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/ggnt>. This site showcases the Young Adult Library Services Association's list of recommended graphic novels for older children.

Newsarama, <http://www.newsarama.com/>. Actor/director Kevin Smith's site keeps abreast of graphic novel news, including reviews and information about movie adaptations.

No Flying, No Tights, <http://noflyingnotights.com/>. This website is a storehouse for reviews of graphic novels that do not feature superheroes.

Teaching Comics, <http://www.teachingcomics.org>. The website of the National Association of Comics Art Educators provides lesson plans, handouts, study guides, and other resources for classroom use of graphic novels.

Using Graphic Novels with Children and Teens: A Guide for Teachers and Librarians, <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/using-graphic-novels-children-and-teens-guide-teachers-and-librarians>. Scholastic's website provides a printable PDF that offers graphic novel suggestions for young readers, middle grade readers, and young adult readers as well as a list of additional resources for educators.

Young Adult Library Services Association, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/great-graphicnovelsforteens/gn.cfm>. This site gives an annual list of "Great Graphic Novels for Teens."

*Dream* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in installments of *The Sandman*, creating possible jumping-off points for introducing—or reexamining—those works. Even without taking into account the beautiful and compelling images in Gaiman's graphic novels, their complex stories and rich character development create pleasurable challenges for readers. Gaiman's work serves as only one example; another engaging piece of literature is found in David B.'s autobiographical graphic novel *Epileptic* (2002). The central character's family slowly unravels as they try to cure his epileptic brother. A moving account of how families experience suffering and disease, it also shows the young protagonist's escape into imagination as a coping mechanism. As a result, this graphic novel raises issues of the differences between literality and metaphor. These examples demonstrate only a tiny bit of the complexity offered in the plot, characterization, and themes of graphic novels.

But it's also important to take into account the subtlety and beauty of graphic novels' artwork. The argument of lazy readership discounts the power and impact of images. While most people claim to honor art as a cultivating force, some of those same people also loudly oppose graphic novels because they so heavily rely on visual elements. Imagery and drawings are not inherently less valuable than verbal, "literary" art. In fact, images often convey a richness and depth of ideas that require interpretation and high-level critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation skills. These are the same kinds of thinking skills and interpretative activities that reading affords students, and I invite teachers to remind skeptics of this. Take as an example a panel from Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus I* (1986), an account of one family's struggles to survive the Holocaust. In one sample panel (125), two mouse-headed characters walk on a path through what looks like a park. The simplicity of the drawing style initially might appear sweet and charming—and it is. But this panel simultaneously shows the relentlessness and

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inescapability of Nazism, because even the path that these characters tread is shaped like a swastika. The darkness and twisted lines of the landscape underscore and enhance this feeling of pervasive doom. When juxtaposed with the sweetness of line drawings of mice, the enormity of the horror imposed by the Holocaust is thrown into starker contrast. This one panel provides an opportunity for students to explore an image that provides no words for them, though the panel is by no means unusual in its depth for a graphic novel panel. To describe this scene, students have to take the role of producers of language. In this way, graphic novels can serve as a basis for writing and critical thinking assignments. They serve as a way of presenting information in an interesting and engaging manner to spark students' attention, and such assignments demand that students actively produce the language not only to describe these visuals, but to interpret, critique, and analyze them. (See also Paula Wolfe and Danielle Kleijwegt's discussion of students as "active perceivers" rather than "passive receivers" of graphic novels in the May 2012 *English Journal*.)

In fact, graphic novels satisfy many of the International Reading Association's and National Council of Teachers of English's joint Standards for the English Language Arts. The first standard specifies that students need to read a "wide range of print and nonprint texts" (19), and thanks to their combining of language and visuals, graphic novels satisfy both of these categories at once. But graphic

novels can help teach many of the aspects of other standards, too. They could be used to discuss the multifaceted range of human experience (standard 2 [21]); to highlight textual features such as sentence structure, context, and graphics (standard 3 [22]); to teach media techniques and figurative language (standard 6 [26]); to aid in learning to synthesize data from print and

nonprint sources (standard 7 [27]); to develop familiarity with differing cultures (standard 9); and to foster enjoyment in reading (standard 12 [32]). In short, graphic novels are like any other kind of literature in their ability to broaden students' ex-

perience and deepen their appreciation for story. Thinking of graphic novels as somehow outside of the realm of literature denies students a chance to master standards in engaging ways.

### Criticism from Inside the Classroom

So far, I've discussed the kinds of criticisms likeliest to come from those with the least familiarity with graphic novels, a category that is likely to include parents and administrators. Yet even those who are more aware of the range, power, and complexity of graphic novels might raise criticism of them. Resistance can even come from unexpected groups, and one of the most important critics of graphic novels could be the students themselves. Even though many students express immediate interest in graphic novels, Sean P. Connors writes that a stigma exists around graphic novels that may make some students less likely to embrace the form. Many well-meaning teachers, librarians, and other educational professionals have touted graphic novels' use with students whose classroom performance falls short of desired outcome, and this way of treating graphic novels has not escaped students' notice. Connors explains that "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" (67). Much of the discussion about the benefit of graphic novels centers on how these texts can help resistant readers and lower-functioning readers. Yet if students equate graphic novels with the establishment of basic skills and with struggling learners, better readers and self-conscious students are likely to want to distance themselves from the genre. Though part of the successes that teachers describe with using graphic novels involves motivating less-than-enthusiastic students to become more active readers, teachers need to monitor how they speak of graphic novels. The stigma of graphic novels being the province of struggling readers threatens to keep other students away from the form—or even to discourage those lower-skilled readers by making them feel as though they are re-

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ceiving less challenging texts because they are not capable of handling more complex texts. Emphasizing the graphic novels' wide-ranging subject matter, stressing their complexity, and focusing on their innovative storylines might go far in battling the perceived association of graphic novels with poorer students.

Once this hurdle is cleared, many teachers report wonderful successes with graphic novels in their classrooms. Maureen Bakis posted her views in an online op-ed piece, joyfully recounting the skills that graphic novels helped foster in her students:

Using graphic novels allowed students to think critically and analytically, and because the graphic novels we read elicited sophisticated and mature discussion about topics that mattered to them, they were able to further develop personal style, voice, and other aspects of their writing. Because they developed a passion about the stories and a real appreciation and understanding of the artistry of the comics they were reading, students were more engaged toward in-depth discussions.

Capitalizing on students' interests, Bakis was able to enhance her students' writing. This kind of success is important not only for improving students' writing but also for inspiring a passion for reading among her students. Other educators report similar results. In discussing a book group he offered as an elective class, Jonathan Seyfried wrote that "more than just an elective or book group, our experience together went right to the heart of books and the joy of reading" (46). For Seyfried, teaching graphic novels provided unexpected payoffs, and he recounts how students sought him out after the class had ended for reading recommendations—and not just for graphic novels. This kind of passion is as important in high-achieving students as it is in those whose reading skills aren't as strongly developed.

Students might harbor other socially based biases regarding graphic novels. Conners discusses how students are "aware of stigmas attached to graphic novels," and one such stigma is that people who read graphic novels are "social misfits—or, to borrow their [his students'] term, 'nerds'" (68). Teachers who ignore the social implications of such labels might not find that graphic novels afford them much classroom success. Again, the way that teachers discuss these texts can help sidestep

these issues. Many graphic novels have achieved acclaim in literary circles as well as in popular culture, and discussing how entrenched in these arenas graphic novels have become might work to chip away at any associations with "nerds." Texts such as Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (2000), Frank Miller's *300* (1998), and Bryan Lee O'Malley's Scott Pilgrim series (2004–10) have found their way into successful movie adaptations. Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay* (2000) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning tale of the complicated lives of two comic-book creators during the mid-20th-century "Golden Age" of comics. Though Chabon's text is not itself a graphic novel, its serious treatment of the impact of comic books helps to show the form's impact on World War II. The documentary *Comic Book Confidential* (1988), directed by Ron Mann, provides historical context that could help show students the patriotic work of early wartime comics that has given way to their development as underground expression as well as literary art. Stressing these and other popular-culture adaptations of or references to graphic novels might help convince the "cool kids" that graphic novels aren't merely the province of social misfits.

But there exists one last group of potential graphic novel critics that is likeliest to be the most difficult to overcome: teachers themselves. Here I don't refer to those teachers who disdain the entire genre, since those teachers need to be exposed to the information in the first section of this essay. I speak instead of the teachers who only view graphic novels as the handmaidens to "real" or "good" literature, those who, through their actions if not their words, treat graphic novels as inherently lesser than any other work of art or literature. These teachers would do well to heed Douglas Wolk's words about graphic novels and comics, which he references under the single term *comics*:

Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they're not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties. The first step toward attentively reading and fully appreciating comics is acknowledging that. (14)

This means that, among other things, graphic novels deserve respect. It also means that they can perform work in classrooms that other genres cannot provide. For instance, Eric S. Rabkin discusses

how he uses graphic novels to focus his class's attention on how narrative time unfolds. He explains that he will have "students in turn focus on a single frame of a graphic narrative, speak aloud whatever they see and whatever they infer, including their reflective and proleptic understandings of how the frame fits into the flow of the larger narrative. When each individual stops, others offer alternative or


complementary observations" (39). Some students might feel less pressure articulating what happens within a panel from a graphic novel than they do when asked to articulate what happens in the line of a poem or a paragraph from a short story. Because of this, students have the opportunity to understand more fully how narrative or time sequences work.

Just as teaching poetry offers different opportunities from teaching drama or novellas, graphic novels offer distinctive teaching opportunities. Jesse Cohn writes about one such opportunity when he argues that graphic novels allow students to understand "visual rhetoric," using the example of "how layout can exercise persuasive force" (49). Cohn uses the complex layouts of Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) to show his students how a graphic novel's form can contribute to its meaning. Pointing out several pages in *Jimmy Corrigan* that do not prompt the reader to read the panels in one clearly labeled path, Cohn discusses with his students how Ware "seems to favor this kind of layout at moments when the question of [interpersonal] relations is at issue" (52). Artists can communicate through their visual presentations of information, allowing the graphic novel to be an excellent vehicle to teach the concepts of symbolism, foreshadowing, metaphor, and many other literary devices.

Many teachers report that their students respond exceptionally well to the graphic novel, and

this creates a unique teaching opportunity with graphic novels. Joanna Schmidt writes of her experience with graphic novels in her college classroom for struggling writers. While her students "were supposed to be nonreaders and . . . defined themselves as reluctant readers (after they learned the term)" and "had said they had never written anything more than six or seven pages, ever," Schmidt's class demonstrated real interest in the graphic novels with which she presented them. In fact, she expected their final essays "to be ten to twelve pages of text, but most were closer to 15 pages" (106). This level of engagement suggests that many students are passionate about graphic novels, and that they can see the distinctiveness of graphic novels that Douglas Wolk articulated.

### Instilling Passion for Learning

Though all aspects of teaching can be challenging, instilling a passion for learning in students might be the most difficult challenge for teachers. To till fertile ground for that passion to spring up, teachers need to examine critically new genres for their pedagogical possibilities, but they should also take into account their students' interest level. It's also important for teachers to be aware that not only might some of their students have some misgivings about graphic novels, but teachers' attitudes toward the form also greatly influence students' views. Readers became passionate about novels in the 18th century, and now the novel enjoys a lofty perch in literary study in part because it inspired so many people to read voraciously. We shouldn't deny graphic novels the same chance to motivate students. 

#### Note

1. For ease and consistency, I have chosen to use the phrase *graphic novel* in this article because it appears to be the most common appellation.

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## Transformation

Just for a second  
 someone looked out from my eyes,  
 shoved me aside  
 and sat in the same head.

A breeze tilted the earth and raced  
 to conclusions without me.  
 I waited for the final answer.  
 None came.

When a message cast about for a rocky landing,  
 I drifted back to my throne.  
 Buzzards circled in the heat.

Years later, I blinked. The sound  
 of such a simple action shattered glass.  
 Sight spilled and  
 I could not contain it in my own head.

—Sally Armstrong Gradle

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