

ALAN v30n1 - Graphic Books for Diverse Needs: Engaging Reluctant and Curious Readers

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Edited by E. Thomas Ewing
and Katherine Randall

Smartest Kid on Earth. At first glance, this large-sized hardback appears to be a children's book, but it isn't. These stories are not the usual ones, from "Prince Rooster (A Historic Parable)" about a prince who thinks he's a rooster to "The Leafless Tree" about a family perpetually dissatisfied even after discovering a pot of gold. The varied illustrations are interesting, and stories offer different twists on several traditional fairy tales, too. Chris Ware has even designed in the front cover a board game called "Fairy Tale Road Rage," which includes such stops as a Goldilox Pawn Shop and Grandma's House at Sunny Acres Assisted Living. This book is fun to read on one level, and worth study at a higher level. The book could open up the world of fairy tales and folklore for a reader.

A reader attracted by mysteries and crime stories can enjoy the graphic novel version of Raymond Chandler's *The Little Sister* (1997), illustrated by Michael Lark. Using pastels with a great deal of black shadowing and sharp angles, the artist has captured the film noir feeling of Chandler's work. The action, sharp dialogue, and strong characters keep the reader involved as the world-weary detective, Philip Marlowe, tries to get to the bottom of things. The engaged reader might even be interested in further exploring the cinematic techniques used in this graphic novel or may want to read another of Chandler's works and compare it to the film version.

Graphic novels also speak to the real world of problems that young people may face, and one outstanding example is *The Tale of One Bad Rat* (1995) by Bryan Talbot. This novel is dramatically and yet realistically illustrated, using dominant colors to express the moods of what is happening such as the hopeful, country greens in the last section. The story traces the journey of a teen runaway in London to the Lake Country where she confronts and deals with her father's sexual abuse as she traces the real life history of Beatrix Potter. Talbot closes with his story of the research he did to write the novel. An easy-to-read but moving story, any reader could benefit from encountering *The Tale of One Bad Rat* which received the Eisner Award (honoring comic book creators) in 1996.

Also powerfully moving and thought-provoking is *9-11: Artists Respond, Volume One* (2002, from Dark Horse Comics in Milwaukie, Oregon), a collection of pieces, some a page and some four or five pages, which consider the events of September 11. Numerous artists contributed diverse pieces which capture the courage of the rescuers, the shock of children viewing, and the costs of hatred and prejudice. The titles are revealing, including "Zero Degrees of Separation," "Arab Americans," and "Which One Is Real?" among many others. Some of the art is in color and some is black and white; one picture shows the Empire State Building weeping over the World Trade Center. All the art is strong. The proceeds of this book and the second volume are designated for relief funds. This work will affect all readers.

One more example which might appeal to students who find their regular history texts boring and difficult is the nonfiction *Still I Rise: A Cartoon History of African Americans* (1997) by Roland Owen Laird, Jr., with illustrations by Elihu "Adofu" Bey. A longer work covering centuries, *Still I Rise* takes a hard look at the oppression of Black Americans but also their resilience and many contributions to America. The black and white drawings make this history more personal and human as well as harsh. It is not a "fun" read and not meant to be read at one sitting. Yet, it is engaging and presents American history from another point of view which many young people may welcome. There is also a short history of Blacks in comics in the Forward by Charles Johnson. *Still I Rise* is sure to initiate thought and discussion and fits well into the social studies curriculum.

For Killed but Bored Readers: Comedy, Satire, and Different Perspectives

Reluctant readers are not the only adolescents who do not spend much time reading. Honors and AP students who often tackle difficult books for school may not read for themselves, either. Many older adolescents are short on time, are involved with many other activities, and may not be inspired to read more of what they are often force fed in school. Graphic books may re-engage them in the joys of literacy. Following are six graphic texts that may appeal to the confident and curious but easily bored reader.

Adolescents generally enjoy satire and a prime example is *The Simpsons* by Matt Groening, also in graphic novel form (with as much text as graphics). *The Simpsons' Guide to Springfield* (1998, from HarperPerennial), for example, takes on every tourist subject from hotels (the "Worst Western"), fast food restaurants ("Lard Lad Donut"), local government, and shopping ("Wicked Excess," "the place to shop for platinum lobster traps"). The Simpsons even take on American history and our society's strange relationship to history in the description of Old Springfield Towne:

... a for-profit historical park replete with glass blowers, candlemakers, and wig powderers. In response to recent complaints by educators that the park is "just too boring," the Towne's proprietors have given it a minor facelift and restructuring. However, scholars are quick to point out recently added anachronisms: Colonial Springfield did not use muskets with laser sights, three-cornered hats were never used as "ninja star"-type weapons, and tavern waitresses did not wear hot pants. (pp. 19-20)

English teachers teaching about satire and social studies teachers looking at economics, history, or social life could all find uses for this graphic novel, a definite change of pace from school texts.

A graphic novel that is even more strange than *The Simpsons* but not funny is *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch* (1995) by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean. This dark story of childhood memories may first need some explanation to students unfamiliar with British seaside resorts and the history of the Punch and Judy puppet shows. The narrative also demands close attention as memories and nightmares seem interwoven in the revealed fears of childhood and the uncovering of adult secrets. The art work is fascinating, a collage of drawings, odd pictures, and mostly white text on black background. Art students might be especially drawn to this graphic novel.

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Graphic novels can present points of view often unheard in textbooks and the usual school materials. A wonderful example is the funny but serious *The Four Immigrants Manga* (1999) by Henry Kiyama, translated by Frederik L. Schodt. (Manga is the Japanese term for graphic novel. Mangas have been and are widely read by adults as well as children in Japan.) Based on the author's own experiences, this novel traces the adventures of four Japanese immigrants in the San Francisco area from 1904-1924. Against the background of the San Francisco Earthquake, World War I, and other historical events, these four young men try to make a good life in an America which is unrelentingly racist. Still there is no self-pity. The characters' lives have ups as well as downs, and their attempts to meet girls, make a fortune fast, and adapt to American culture supply much humor. The translator offers a glossary and additional information, too. This novel is both fun to read and thought provoking, revealing the insider's view of being an immigrant in America.

Another historic graphic novel presenting the Japanese point of view is *Barefoot Gen: Life after the Bomb* (1999) by Keiji Nakazawa based on his own life experiences surviving the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. The main character is a young boy, Gen, who takes care of his mother and baby sister after the rest of his family is killed in the bombing. Gen gets angry and is willing to fight for survival, but he also shows compassion to fellow survivors when others want nothing to do with them. Gen does not idealize the Japanese military, but he is horrified at the instant destruction and lingering radiation sickness which result from the bomb and outraged at America for dropping such a bomb. A stirring story of survival, Gen leads the reader to consider the effects of war. Other volumes of Gen's story are also available.

Turning from history to literature, young readers may be fascinated by the graphic novel *Kafka: Give It Up!* (1995), illustrated by Peter Kuper. Bizarre black and white illustrations accompany abridged versions of some of Kafka's famous stories such as "A Hunger Artist." This book would serve as a great introduction to Kafka and his themes of alienation, death, and power. The illustrations create an almost cinematic or dreamlike effect. A reader might well want to know more about Kafka, and another excellent work, *Introducing Kafka* (1993), with text by David Zane Mairowitz and illustrations by famous underground comic artist, Robert Crumb, offers an insightful biography of Kafka that includes other Kafka stories and parts of his novels. By examining Kafka in the historical context of pre-World War II Prague, Mairowitz helps the reader understand Kafka as an alienated Jew in a terrible time as well as a man terrified of his own abusive father. Kafka's use of Jewish humor is emphasized. Educators need to be aware of some nudity in the book; graphic novels are often designed for adult readers and must be used with care. However, this graphic novel is an engaging example of visual literary biography, and it is part of a series of similar books on ideas and writers such as *Introducing Camus*, *Introducing Nietzsche*, and *Introducing Cultural Studies*.

Of course, any reader may be drawn to any of the graphic novels above and many more besides. The distinction between the reluctant reader and the advanced but bored reader is rather artificial. All young readers are "on the move." All adolescents may find something worthwhile and of interest in graphic novels, and they may be drawn back into the pleasures of reading for leisure as well as learning. Clearly, graphic novels fit into English, social studies, and art courses, and others exist which would be useful in science or math. Graphic novels are useful for media literacy across the curriculum, as well, allowing students to focus on the power of images. As Bernstein (1994) notes, graphic novels "are increasingly offering a sophisticated and often literary world. . . . The comic format allows the artist to combine the emotional subtlety of a facial expression, for instance, with the dramatic power of dialogue. It also dovetails neatly with the visual sensibilities of an audience raised on small pictures flickering on a TV screen" (p. 57).

For Teachers and Media Specialists Interested in Graphic Novels

For educators who want to know more about the medium of the graphic novel and its potential with adolescent audiences, following are five useful resources:

1. *Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide to Book-Length Comics* by D. Aviva Rothschild. Libraries Unlimited, 1995. Although somewhat dated, this book offers plot and critical comments for 414 books and is a good place to start.
2. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* by Will Eisner. Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1996. Eisner is himself one of the great comic artists and with plenty of examples, he here explains how text, image, and reader combine for visual storytelling. Topics include symbolism, dialogue, and the influence of film on reading comics.
3. *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994. This is a graphic novel that examines the inner workings of comics, everything from how sequencing is created to the use of color, establishing the artistic character of the comic format.
4. *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* by Roger Sabin. New York: Phaidon Press, 1996. This large and beautifully illustrated volume traces comic art from British broadsheets through Superman and the Golden Age of American Comics to the underground comics ("comix") of the 1960's and today's international graphic novels.
5. *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* by Stephen Weiner. New York: Nantier Beall Minoustchine (NBM), 2001. This slim volume offers the best place to begin for anyone interested. Besides recommendations (rated for children, 12 and up, and adults only), Weiner offers a short history of the genre and additional references.

Many resources exist online, of course, and there is *The Comics Journal* which offers interviews, reviews, and so on. The graphic novel is growing in popularity and influence, more titles are being published, and it may well serve as an inducement to read for many adolescents today. Educators will be intrigued, too. Check it out!

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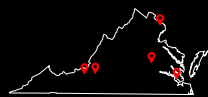
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High Interest-Low Reading Level Books for Reluctant Readers. Encourage reading with books that combine readability with interest levels. Share. Formerly titled "Shorter Books for Taller Readers," this list from the Multnomah County Library in Oregon offers a list of 30 hi-lo books for kids in Grades 6 to 8 (reading levels for each book are cited). The library's annotated booklist for high school students reading below grade level includes fiction and nonfiction titles. Books for Reluctant Readers. Raising a reader can be hard, especially when it's so easy for kids to find a game or device to distract them. Many kids also struggle with their reading skills, so finishing a book can be a huge challenge. But the right book can help convert even the most reluctant reader into a kid who will beg for one more chapter before bedtime. Sometimes all it takes is a relatable character or story, but sometimes thinking outside the box with a comic or a graphic novel can spark a lifelong love of reading. Check out our list below, and for more sure-fire choices, take a... Engaging story is great for reluctant readers. By Cressida Cowell. (2009). Reluctant readers Graphic novels can be a way in for students who are difficult to reach through traditional texts. Even those deemed poor readers willingly and enthusiastically gravitate toward these books. Readers who are not interested in reading or who, despite being capable of reading, prefer gaming or watching media, can be pulled into a story by the visual elements of graphic novels. Benefits to struggling readers, special-needs students, and English-language learners Graphic novels can dramatically help improve reading development for students struggling with language acquisition for v... 9 Great Books for Reluctant Readers in Middle School. By Elizabeth Babbin, EdD. Save. It can be hard to motivate middle-schoolers with reading issues to pick up a book. One way to engage them is to find books with themes they can relate to at a time when they're trying to figure out who they are. Here are nine great titles to explore with your reluctant middle school reader. The Invention of Hugo Cabret, by Brian Selznick. The lavish, enthralling illustrations in this book draw readers in right away. But they include many details that are easy to miss at first glance. The text of the story is similar. It engages readers quickly, but gives way to a complex plot as the book moves