



Graphic Novels in the Classroom

By Adam Martin

Ezra likes the story *Beowulf*. With plenty of monsters, gore, swords, epic battles, and heroics, what high school student wouldn't? The problem: Ezra can't read it, yet. Strange semantics in the translation from Old to Modern English and archaic vocabulary and imagery place a barrier between Ezra and English's oldest adventure. While reading the epic poem, Ezra grumbles and complains, but when his teacher summarizes the passage and asks probing questions to the class, Ezra decides the story is "cool." "But," Ezra asks, "Why doesn't the author just say what he means? Why does it sound so funny?"

Graphic novels may be one solution to Ezra's frustration. Today many authors and artists adapt works of classic literature into a medium more "user friendly" to our increasingly visual student population. Stefan Petrucha and Kody Chamberlain's version of *Beowulf* is one example. The graphic novel captures the entire epic in arresting images and contrasts the darkness of the setting and characters with the vibrancy of the hero. Even more importantly, their work stays true to the original epic, and the narration still highlights the importance of alliteration, caesura, and kenning to Anglo-Saxon story telling. The benefit? Now Ezra can read the epic (proper literary elements included) and have visual cues to follow the story line.

Graphic novels, or graphic literature, rely on a balance between visual imagery and written words. Beginning with comic strips and comic books (and arguably cave paintings and hieroglyphics), graphic novels have evolved into a sophisticated artistic form. Because of its rich history, this literary genre is quickly gaining acceptance as a viable and popular tool to get students enthused about reading and into school libraries. It is important that teachers recognize graphic novels' value and begin implementing their use within the classroom. In "Comix Poetics," Andrew Arnold's defense of graphic novels, he states that reading a classic literary format and reading a graphic novel is "not just a different ballgame but a different sport" (Arnold, 2007). Reading graphic novels involves different strategies, interests, and concentrations that are more important than ever in reaching a variety of learners.

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Many libraries are already using graphic novels, and using them well to engage student interest and get kids into the library, but librarians need to reach out to teachers and highlight this resource. The percentage of graphic novel circulation is often far greater than circulation of other non curricular works (Ching, 2005). Because the genre is so popular with students, school libraries often set up special sections in the library for graphic novels instead of shelving them in their designated Dewey location or mixing them among other books of the same subject or author (Ching, 2005). For teachers, wading through these titles, sometimes odd to the uninitiated, could be daunting and time consuming. Librarians must be proactive and help teachers find titles to support their curriculum. Because graphic literature could be a valuable resource to all students, and not just cliques "in the know," teachers and librarians must work together to bring these stories to the masses.

Graphic novels can reach a variety of learners in the classroom. According to Chris Fallis, graphic novels create a "center for education in a more visual and comprehensible format by contributing both images and concepts in one format that the modern student is more oriented to" (Fallis, 2005). Students rely on visual imagery to shape their world, and teachers must teach abstract concepts, so graphic novels are a logical genre to merge the two necessities. This merger is not new. Fallis explains that in the 1940s, classic novels were adapted into comic books to peak the interest of young readers (Fallis, 2005). The medium has since exploded, and now there are many more graphic resources available for teachers to use. Listed are three broad categories to help teachers and librarians communicate their needs:

1 Curriculum Support

Graphic novels can be used to help struggling readers access information in a different format. Classic works like *Beowulf*, *Moby Dick*, and *Frankenstein* are available and provide a different way to read the work without altering the characters, themes, and tones. A series called *Graphic Classics* could be used to help students get through the dense language of Edgar Allen Poe and understand the wit of Mark Twain, among others. Teachers can use these works to enhance their curriculum and aid students as well as prove that classic stories never tire.

2 Thematic Connections

Like every genre of literature, graphic novels wrestle with weighty themes and classic conflicts. Teachers already connect similar ideas found in poetry, art, music, and prose to each other, so adding graphic novels could reveal even more insight. For instance, to highlight themes of adolescent anger and alienation presented in novels like *Catcher in the Rye* and *House on Mango Street*, a teacher could also assign Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, or Lynda Barry's *100 Demons* to examine how protagonists with different cultural backgrounds deal with similar problems of identity. Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, or Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* could be used to challenge notions of "the hero" presented in many works of literature or to support instruction on archetypes. Graphic novels are complex, and should be used to study old themes in a new way.

3 Research

Graphic novels can be used by teachers of all subjects to research instructional techniques, current events, and social dilemmas. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible*

Art could be used by art teachers to present both the history and aesthetics of the medium. McCloud's *The New Adventures of Abraham Lincoln* contrasts the historical Lincoln with contemporary perceptions of the famed president and could be read in history classes to analyze ethical historical study. Reviewer Michele Gorman believes that Nadia Shivack's graphic novel *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder* "has a place in all high school libraries" because of the accurate and haunting account of Shivack's "battle with bulimia" (Gorman, 2008). Gorman also gives high praise to *With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child* by Keiko Tobe and points out that "Autism has become increasingly more prevalent in young people" (Gorman, 2008). Both of these titles could be used for current events, research, or in P.E. classes to enhance curriculum.

Students live in a constantly changing media frenzy, and teachers need to use works that speak to students' need for visual stimulation. With proper instruction, using graphic novels is one solution to teaching classical literature, research skills, and making thematic connections in a way that students will both appreciate and understand. Potentially, the genre can ease student frustration and encourage access to sometimes difficult works. ■■

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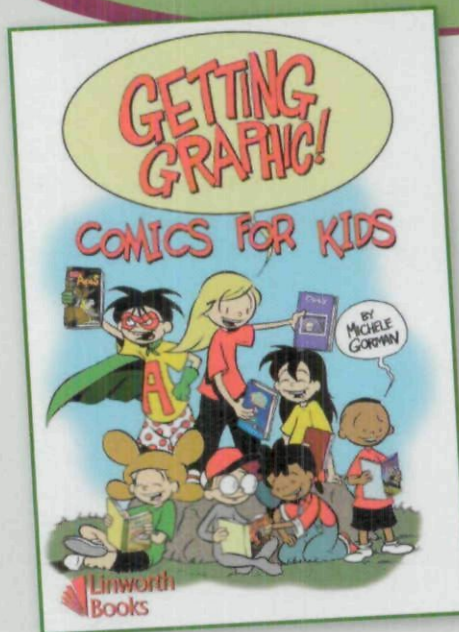
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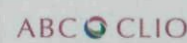
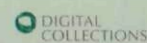
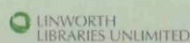
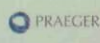


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