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Getting Your Mind *in* The Gutter: Understanding YA Graphic Novels

Recently in one of my college English courses, our class read *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel written and illustrated by Gene Luen Yang. As we discussed the novel, many of my classmates admitted embarrassment at reading such a book in public, especially on campus, where other intellectuals could see them. One of my fellow students even stated that she intentionally tried to hide what she was reading so people around her wouldn't notice and judge her. There is obviously a stigma around comics, graphic novels, and those who read them. However, as the discussion continued, most people (including those who were embarrassed about being seen reading the book) talked about how much they learned from the story, how much they enjoyed the culture and history of it, and how much they appreciated the crafted feel of the literature itself.

Most of us in the class loved the book. But most of us would never pick up a graphic novel again. A lot of people (educators included) think that comic books and graphic novels are the cheater's way through reading. I mean, come on! It's essentially an adult picture book. Right?

Well, yes and no. Let's start with the first and most important question: what exactly is a graphic novel? To find my answer to this question I went to the place that would be most informative: the library. At my local city library, I discovered a shelf I have never before visited. The graphic novel shelf, while a lot shorter than other shelves, was completely packed with a variety of genres, colors, cultures, and stories. The books there ranged from *Full Metal Alchemist* to *Iron Man* to *Pride and Prejudice*. I cracked open a few spines and was able to come up with a general answer.

A graphic novel is a full book made up of illustrations, narrations, and dialogue, in order to tell *and* show a story. Each page of a graphic novel looks a lot like a comic book, with individual illustrated scenes. These scenes are called panels, and panels work together to tell the story. The gray space between the panels is called the gutter, which is where the imagination gets to roam free; it is the space between pictures where readers have to imagine action taking place

(Crandall). The saying goes, "get your mind out of the gutter," but in this case, when your mind is *in* the graphic novel gutter, you are making inferences and predictions, using your imagination, and connecting with the text. The gutter is one of the main elements that differentiates graphic novels from picture books.

The graphic novel is not a genre. In fact, graphic novels come in many different shapes, sizes, and genres. In his article, "The Art of Graphic Novels," Eric Shanower asserts that graphic novels "can be non-fiction or collections of short stories or, really, anything you can think of that consists of drawings that convey narrative between two substantial covers" (32). I would like to add emphasis to the "substantial covers" part of this idea, and so would Gene Luen Yang, who said, "I define 'graphic novel' as simply 'thick comic book.' I call any comic book thick enough to need a spine a graphic novel" (186).

So, where did these modern graphic novels come from? I think it is relatively obvious to most people that graphic novels stem from comics and comic books, just like Yang suggests, but what is the history there? Humans have been using pictures to tell stories for centuries. Cave drawings, hieroglyphics, children's picture books, even the funnies in the Sunday paper. In an article written by Stan Tychinski, a writer for Diamond Bookshelf, a very popular and well-known graphic novel information and promotion website, Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* (printed in 1732) was one of the most well-known satirical cartoons of the time, using pictures to "address social ills or political agendas," and to "advance the cause of American Revolution" (Tychinski). Satirical cartoons are still used today in newspapers to push social agendas and to discuss social issues. It's easy to see how these short cartoons led to comic strips and so on. It's a natural evolution. Weiner explains,

The original American comic books, or funny books, were collections of comic strips from newspapers. In 1934, Max Gaines...put together what would come to be known as the first modern comic book, a collection of comic strips. Cartoons had been published in book form before, but Famous Funnies, published by Eastern Color Printing at the time, was the first to use comic strips where the characters spoke in word balloons in each panel rather than lines of text under the illustrations like children's picture books of today. (Weiner 10)

One comic panel turned into a comic strip, turned into a serial comic, turned into a comic book. Over the years, comic books became longer, more advanced, with deeper themes, plots, and

agendas. The thin comic book evolved into a thicker, picture-driven story where meaning, controversy, and deep thought could be portrayed: the graphic novel.

In 1992, *Maus*, a graphic novel about the author's father's experience as a Polish Jew in WWII, won the Pulitzer Prize, but the Pulitzer board members couldn't figure out which category the book fit in. They had to create a new, "special" category because it was so different from everything that had won previously. It wasn't a novel, but it wasn't a comic book, either. "The problem stemmed from the fact that the term 'comic book' was already in use for material that was less substantial than a magazine, so there was no accepted term for describing comics when they were actually compiled into book form." (Peterson 222). This is another reason why graphic novels are not simply adult picture books: they are full of deep content and cultural and literary elements, rather than shallow storylines and characters like magazines and comic books.

But if graphic novels are so rich in literary elements, so much better than comics, why is there such an educational stigma against them? Probably because majority of American adults think of "literature" as classic novels that have been in the canon for a hundred years. We can't even fathom something new and fresh being worth as much (or even more) for our students. Or can we?

I wondered what school teachers and other educators think of graphic novels, and what the general attitude towards graphic novels was at schools currently. So, again, I went right to the greatest source of information: the library. This time I talked to one of the librarians at Oak Canyon Junior High School in Lindon, Utah, LaRee Linville. We discussed her own personal opinion on graphic novels, and she stated that while she herself doesn't quite understand the draw to the graphic novel, she heavily endorses having a library full of them. She told me that a lot of students in the school gravitate towards the graphic novel shelves. When I asked about if she thought if graphic novels have their place in schools, Linville emphatically stated that anything "that gets students into books and into reading" has a place in schools. Linville talked with me a lot about her worries over students who are struggling or reluctant readers, but left me with some hope. She stated that the graphic novels they have in their library are flying off the shelves. All sorts of students are checking them out, including those that don't usually frequent the library scene. She then went on to point out that she had seen a group of girls come in a few different times to each check out a graphic novel. "They are just eating [the graphic novels] up!"

Reluctant and struggling readers can find support and entertainment in graphic novels. They can find a book that caters to their interests, ranging anywhere from Lincoln's assassination to Batman, to LGBTQ topics. Some research has been done on the effect of graphic novels on struggling readers, and one researcher, Alicia Holsten brings up the fact that "with the increase in visual stimuli in everyday surroundings, single focus information sources, such as text-only books, don't have the wide appeal that multimedia information sources do. Reluctant readers find graphic novels a good way to ease into more advanced reading" (qtd. in Weiner 9). A lot of readers can see a picture in their heads that depicts what they are reading. Struggling readers, however, often state that reading is difficult for them because they can't see the story's picture in their heads. Graphic novels help readers create the picture, thus improving comprehension and overall reading enjoyment.

This led me to another question: what do students think of these books? I interviewed an 8th grade English class about this very question, and got a variety of answers. Most student who read graphic novels stated that they enjoy them. One boy told me that he read a book by Rick Riordan, but didn't understand most of the story because it was all based around Egyptian architecture, symbols, and artifacts that he had never heard of before. He didn't comprehend the vocabulary, and therefore, didn't enjoy the book. However, he informed me that he went and checked out the graphic novel version, and understood the entire thing. The pictures, dialog, and descriptions in the graphic novel increased this students' vocabulary, his reading comprehension, and his general enjoyment of the book.

Another boy surprised me by refuting the old argument that graphic novels take away a reader's ability to use his imagination. This boy said that when he reads graphic novels his imagination is enhanced and magnified, and that he has more things to think about and analyze. Of course, there were a few students who stated they would rather just read the words because the pictures were distracting. But that just goes to show that there are many different kinds of learners in every classroom, and we should be addressing them all.

Later, another student stated that the year previous they had read Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in graphic novel form in their English class. This blew me away. A teacher chose a graphic novel over Shakespeare? Yeah, she did. Rather than using the graphic novel as a supplementary text, the teacher had the students only read the graphic novel version. The play wasn't even touched. And you know what? Most of the students loved it. They talked with me

about how they still remembered the plot and the characters, and how their teacher taught lessons about using images to enhance words. They got the experience of reading Shakespeare with the pleasure of reading a graphic novel.

This made me think about graphic novels in a new way. It made me think that, yes, they can stand on their own in the classroom. That's not to say Shakespeare, Austen, Hawthorne, and Twain should be kicked out of the curriculum, but that maybe we as teachers can be a little more open minded about the texts we assign. As Karen Strong Hansen suggested in her article, "In Defense of Graphic Novels," perhaps teachers should be more open-minded about what will motivate students' "passion to spring up." She said, "teachers need to examine critically new genres for their pedagogical possibilities" (62).

Graphic novels have won Pulitzer Prizes, have enchanted our young students, and have become part of classroom curriculum. They are full of literary devices, they are crafted by artists, and they cater to the needs of struggling and reluctant readers. And still they are undervalued in society and in schools. I would like to add an "Amen!" to Shanower when he spiritedly exclaims that graphic novels are

"not colorful but disposable supplements to the newspaper, not flimsy, ephemeral pamphlets, but substantial books meant to be placed on a bookshelf and preserved—preserved not as collectibles, preserved not as bridges to reading so-called "real" books, but preserved for their own worth—as tangible expressions of creators who have dug down into their hearts and souls and carefully arranged what they found there for the rest of the world to experience" (33).

Parents, teachers, librarians, and even students themselves should take the time to investigate the benefits of graphic novels in and out of the classroom. Libraries should take more of an effort, like that of Oak Canyon Junior High School, and provide a wider, more comprehensive selection of graphic novels for their students. And we, as adult readers, should not be ashamed of the culturally rich and stylistically beautiful graphic novels we hold in our hands. We should carry them proudly. We should share them broadly. We should enjoy them openly. We should pass them on to our students and help them understand the quality and benefits of such an amazing text can have on their lives. We should let go of our prejudices and let our minds wander into the graphic novel gutter every so often, just to see what we can learn there.

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