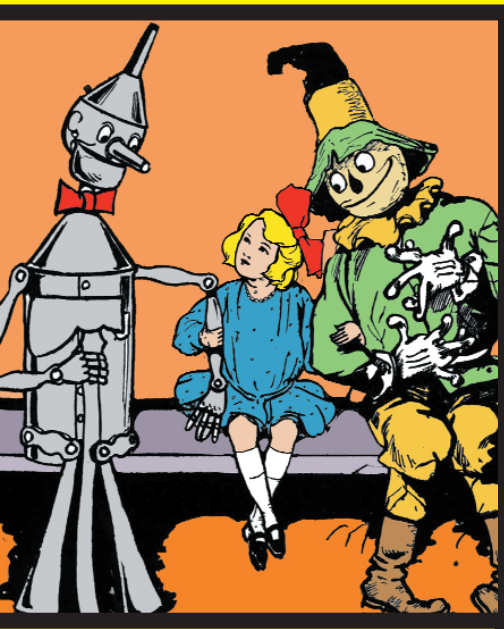
Building Literacy Connections with

GRAPHIC NOVELS

Page by Page, Panel by Panel



Edited by James Bucky Carter

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1 Introduction—Carving a Niche: Graphic Novels in the English Language Arts Classroom

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There is a graphic novel for virtually every learner in your English language arts classroom. From students who "just like to look at pictures" to those who are prepared for a heady academic challenge, interests can be piqued and zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) enriched by reading a graphic novel, herein defined as a "book-length sequential art narrative featuring an anthology-style collection of comic art, a collection of reprinted comic book issues comprising a single story line (or arc), or an original, stand-alone graphic narrative" (Carter, 2004). Indeed, just as comics experienced a "Golden Age" of popularity in the United States in the 1940s, comics and the graphic novel are experiencing a burgeoning Golden Age in education today.

A substantial, expanding body of evidence asserts that using graphic novels and comics in the classroom produces effective learning opportunities over a wide range of subjects and benefits various student populations, from hesitant readers to gifted students. Studies of comics in the classroom go back to the 1940s at least, but, over the last decade, librarians have fervently led the way in making the case for graphic novels as exciting and proper reading material for adolescents. Many public libraries now have graphic novel sections or carry graphic novels in their stacks. Published studies by English language arts teachers who have used graphic novels in their classes have been relatively rare, however, and graphic novels still remain largely on the fringes of the profession.

But the marginalization of the graphic novel is changing rapidly. With the growing understanding of the importance of critical literacy, visual literacy, and other types of literacy that were once considered "alternate," more attention has been paid to graphic novels. The efforts

of librarians have begun to pay off and to extend outside the domain of library conferences and publications. Books such as Michele Gorman's *Getting Graphic: Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens* (2003) and Stephen Weiner's *101 Best Graphic Novels* (2001) and increased interest on behalf of NCTE journals and other education periodicals have brought graphic novels into the mainstream. A recent NCTE statement on multimodal literacies (2005) seems likely to encourage the growing presence of graphic novels in the classroom.

The media are helping to bring comics and graphic novels to the fore as well, with film adaptations of graphic novels such as *Ghost World*, *Road to Perdition*, *From Hell*, and *American Splendor,* which are consistently raking in major returns for moviemakers. The popularity of these films shows that there is much more to these books than superheroes in leotards and capes. At the same time, movies based on superheroes also remain popular, helping to engage a new generation of young fans. This engagement might help teachers to accept the presence of a comic in class. Likewise, the efforts of classroom teachers and university-level educators have drawn the attention of mainstream media. For example, National Public Radio's broadcast of *Morning Edition* on April 8, 2005, and a broadcast of CBS's *The Early Show* on March 25, 2005, both featured stories about a Maryland school district's acceptance and promotion of comics in the classroom (Hughes, 2005) as a means to get otherwise disinclined or struggling students motivated about reading. *The Christian Science Monitor* has picked up on the trend as well (see "'Hamlet' Too Hard? Try a Comic Book" in the issue of October 12, 2004). On March 3 of the same year, *USA Today* published an article entitled "Teachers Are Getting Graphic" (Toppo, 2005). This is but a sampling of the many articles that have appeared in the past few years.

Students are doing their part to promote graphic novels as well. Manga, the Japanese equivalent of the graphic novel, is amazingly popular with students (Wilson, 1999). In 2003, when I noticed one of my sixth graders reading a manga, I polled the class. Seventy-five percent of them had read and enjoyed a manga recently and 80 percent knew what a manga was. Informal as they are, those numbers included female students, who flock to manga (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Reid, 2002), and they were taken at a middle school that is not in New York or Los Angeles, but in a tiny town in rural North Carolina. Manga are so popular now, as are graphic novels, that major book chains such as Barnes and Noble give them their own sections.

Of course, to persuade most English language arts teachers, and perhaps you, the reader, to consider graphic novels as serious resources

for the classroom, more convincing evidence is in order than what might be dismissed as a fad or passing spike in a medium's popularity. Research and applied examples would help, wouldn't they? The chapters that follow offer practical ideas and applications from experienced teachers, professors, and education professionals for using graphic novels in conjunction with printed texts you might already be exploring with your students. Many of the contributors presently teach graphic novels in their classes or have previously done so, and they see young people at various levels enthralled in these diverse examples of sequential art narratives. Before reading their fine essays, however, consider this introduction as a glimpse into some of the most salient current research on the utility of comics and graphic novels in education.

An Arts-Rich Education

Recent studies detailing the benefits of an arts-rich education suggest that teachers of English language arts might want to reexamine how they incorporate the arts into their pedagogy. The idea is to remember what John Dewey (1916) said:

> Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. . . . The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. The formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning. . . . All communication is like art . . . (http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/dewey.html)

In other words, a good education—one bound in experience and meaning making—is probably an education that has been enriched with a broad definition of art and culture.

Supporting such a claim is the 1999 report *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*, which found through multiple extensive studies that "learners can attain higher levels of achievement through their engagement with the arts. Moreover . . . learning in and through the arts can help 'level the playing field' for youngsters from disadvantaged circumstances" (Fiske, p. viii). In an era in which closing the gap is of deep import, the study's finding that "high arts participation makes a more significant difference to students from low-income backgrounds than for high-income students" (p. viii) should raise eyebrows.

Champions of Change notes that the arts alter learning experiences in the following ways:

- The arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached.
- The arts reach students in ways that they are not otherwise being reached.
- The arts connect students to themselves and each other.
- The arts transform the environment for learning.
- The arts provide learning opportunities for adults in the lives of young people.
- The arts provide new challenges for those students already considered successful.
- The arts connect learning experiences to the world of real work. (pp. ix–x)

Especially in terms of project-based learning, the study demonstrates clearly that arts enhance learning (pp. x–xii). In terms of policy, the report summary concludes, "We must look to the arts as a vehicle for preparing entrants to the teaching profession" (p. xi); in other words, all teachers need to pay closer attention to the arts. The study shows strong connections among the arts and retention, self-image, and academic progress.

Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development (Deasy, 2002) explores the connections between the arts and literacy and language development. For example, researchers found "that visual art provide[d] a concrete 'metacognitive marking point'" for two male, learning disabled, reluctant readers and may help those already interested in visual arts to be more motivated to read (p. 144). Researchers asking the question "Is teaching reading through art more effective than teaching reading alone?" conclude that their meta-analysis "revealed a positive, moderately sized relationship between reading improvement and an integrated arts-reading form of instruction," although they admit that their sample size was limited (p. 138). Multiple studies in *Critical Links* show that "visual and performing arts can advance students' oral and written verbal forms" and that "the arts and oral and written language share interrelated physical and symbolic processes" (Deasy, 2004, p. 10).

The Comic Book Project and Dual Coding

The Comic Book Project, an after-school partnership between Michael Bitz, Teachers College at Columbia University, and Dark Horse Com-

ics, Inc., illustrates the role of sequential art in enriching educational experiences. Whereas others have successfully shown the appeal and interest to younger students of comics during the school day (Dyson, 1997), Bitz worked with older students as well and in after-school sites. The project was designed "as a way of putting into practice some of the most important educational research of the last decade—that is, the correlation between involvement in the arts and performance in academic subjects," namely, the Fiske and Deasy studies (Bitz, 2004, p.33). Bitz also drew from other studies demonstrating "that children discover meaningful dimensions of their worlds when they can explore them through creative arts, including comic books" (Bitz, p. 575). In the fall of 2002, "733 children at 33 after-school sites in New York city brainstormed, outlined, sketched, wrote, and designed original comic books" (p. 574). The goal was "to build literacy and artistic skills while motivating children not only to attend the sessions but also to take ownership of and pride in their work" (p. 575). Guided by specially trained instructors, students from grades 4–8 (Bitz now has worked with high schoolers as well) used professionally created templates to create sequential narratives in which words and images were in every panel (p. 577) and engaged in workshop activities designed for sharing and critiquing with the aim of completing and "publishing" their own eight-page comics (p. 578–79). Bitz reports that, although many students were familiar with the superhero theme in comics, most of their own personal sequential narratives "were based on the hard reality of living in an inner-city environment" (p. 580). Based on surveys distributed to instructors and students, Bitz also found the following:

- Eighty-six percent of students felt the project helped them improve their writing.
- Ninety-two percent said they liked their own stories as a result of the project.
- Eighty-eight percent said they look to pictures for clues in stories because of the project.
- Ninety percent of instructors felt that their students' writing was improving.
- Ninety percent of instructors felt that, as a result of the project, their students like to write their own stories. (p. 582).

Open-ended questions solicited comments such as "This was the first time I got my kids to write without complaining about it" and "Living in the city, these children see a lot of things that aren't so positive. A project like this gives them the chance to express what's happening

around them" (p. 582). Although students weren't informed of them, the goals of the project aligned with New York State's Learning Standards for English Language Arts, and Bitz's publications explore how each standard was met (p. 584). In examining implications for teachers, Bitz explains:

> Many of the manuscripts highlighted how students corrected and revised their own work, or demonstrated opportunities for instructors to show students where mistakes were made on a small scale (grammar and mechanics) or a large scale (story structure and thematic consistency). Also, one can observe noticeable improvement in writing from the manuscripts to the final comic books—mechanical errors were fixed, story structures were tightened, and character voices were honed. . . . The Comic Book Project seemed to have most marked effect on children with limited English proficiency. . . . According to instructors, these children's manuscripts and comic books represent more writing than they had produced in English class throughout the entire school year. (p. 585)

It is of interest to note that, whereas comic books are most known either for superpowered individuals wearing tights and fighting other equally powered and similarly attired foes or for the goofy and humorous characters who led to the genre's name (first "funnies," then "comics"), many students in The Comic Book Project created works in formats more advanced and more readily recognized as valuable in the English language arts community: authentic texts and autobiographical sketches. Indeed, in this regard, their comics are actually more like graphic novels (with many sterling examples of the form being autobiographical) than comic books.

In addition, English language learners' (ELL) interaction with comics has recently received attention in the *TESOL Quarterly*. Jun Liu reports that low-level students who received a high-level text with a comic strip "scored significantly higher than the low-level students receiving the high-level text only" (2004, p. 235). Although the comic strips that Liu's students used did not help comprehension in all cases, this outcome is still impressive and echoes Bitz's findings that comics can aid ELL populations in certain circumstances. Also worth noting in the Liu study is the talk of dual coding studies by the likes of Gambrell and Jawitz (1993) and Mayer (1999), who "found that words and pictures together produced better recall and transfer than either did alone, and that individual differences in ability were a factor" (Liu, 2004, p. 228). Dual coding is emerging as a theory that will no doubt provide even

more evidence for teachers of English language arts to integrate more sequential art into their classrooms.

With research showing the importance of the arts in so many facets of student development and the interdependency of word and image in the graphic novel, it seems a natural progression for text-trusting English language arts teachers to gravitate toward visual arts to help them ease into more arts-intensive modes of teaching and learning. This book is one attempt to help teachers integrate the visual arts into the curriculum. Graphic novels, after all, are the perfect blend of word and picture, story as text and story as art. As such, they offer important, unique, and timely multiliteracy experiences.

Graphic Novels and Literacy

The bulk of current advocacy for the graphic novel has tried to tie the medium not so much to the beneficial elements of an arts-rich environment, as made clear in the Fiske and Deasy studies (Bitz, 2004), but more directly to notions of models of literacy, elements of pedagogy that teachers of English language arts are more comfortable exploring and, certainly, with which they are more engaged in their everyday teaching. This is a somewhat ironic trend, considering the work of educators with strong "English teacher cross-over appeal" such as Maxine Greene (1995), John Goodlad (2004), Henry Giroux (1992), and Eliot Eisner (1998). These scholars basically continue to say what Dewey seemed to hint at so many years ago: artistic experiences are important in developing literacy and critical thinking skills. This is also a major point of the Fiske and Deasy studies, which may not be familiar to many English language arts teachers. The present collection of essays by teachers overtly applies this line of thinking as well.

To understand thoroughly the promise of the graphic novel as an aid to more conventional notions of literacy, it is important to review what the notion of literacy signifies in contemporary educational talk and practice.

Karen Cadiero-Kaplan (2002) provides an excellent basic summary of literacy research and theories in her article "Literacy Ideologies: Critically Engaging the Language Arts Curriculum." She explains that there are at least four definitive literacies at work in today's classrooms:

- *functional literacy*, defined as having the skills "to be a productive citizen or member of the workforce" (p. 374)

- *cultural literacy*, the idea that there are certain things that everyone should know to be considered educated, competent citizens (e.g., E. D. Hirsch)
- *progressive literacy*, a constructivist approach to creating highly individualistic notions of what learning and living entail
- *critical literacy*, a postmodern (Meacham & Buendia, 1999), radical notion that can be defined as "a literacy of social transformation in which the ideological foundations of knowledge, culture, schooling, and identity-making are recognized as unavoidably political" and in which students engage critically in reading "the world and the word, by using dialogue to engage texts and discourses inside and outside the classroom" (p. 377).

Critical literacy is favored by Cadiero-Kaplan herself and is prominent in the work of Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux and, most notably, Paulo Freire.

Gretchen E. Schwarz tackles this graphic novel-literacy connection directly in her article "Graphic Novels for Multiple Literacies" (2002). Hearkening to the ideals of critical and visual literacy, she explains that "in an increasingly visual culture, literacy educators can profit from the use of graphic novels in the classroom, especially for young adults" (2002, p. 1). Not only do graphic novels promote literacy (Lavin, 1998; Weiner, 2002), but they "offer value, variety, and a new medium for literacy that acknowledges the impact of visuals" (p. 1). Furthermore, Schwarz asserts that "An important benefit of graphic novels is that they present alternative views of culture, history and human life in general in accessible ways" (p. 3), tying the graphic novel to progressive, cultural, and critical notions of literacy. With respect to functional literacy, Schwarz suggests that graphic novels can be used for teaching literary terms and techniques and that social studies is a curricular area in which they are particularly strong and can easily be used across-the-curriculum: "graphic novels can bring new life beyond bland textbooks" (p. 2). Indeed, many graphic novels that are considered at the top of their format deal with political and social issues.

Although Schwarz (2002) gives no concrete examples (the present collection of essays seeks to remedy this problem), she explains that she is aware of some English teachers who make use of graphic novels in their classes and further persuades her readership of their worth by citing graphic novels developed specifically for aiding academics, such as "*McLuhan for Beginners* (Gordon & Willmarth, 1997) and *Introducing Cultural Studies* (Sardar & Van Loon, 1998)" (p. 2). Indeed, National Public Radio has recently brought the graphic novel *Dignifying Science* back into the national spotlight by featuring a broadcast on the work's

excellent educational value and special role in getting female students interested in the sciences (the book details the contributions of women scientists around the world).

Timothy Morrison, Gregory Bryan, and George Chilcoat corroborate much of what Schwarz asserts in their article "Using Student-Generated Comic Books in the Classroom" (2002). They believe that "popular culture is integral to the lives of most middle school students. Use of popular culture can, therefore, diminish the disparity children perceive between their lives in and out of school by legitimizing their after school pursuits" (p. 738; Buckingham, 1998). This line of thinking, of course, fits well into progressive and cultural literacy theories. The authors suggest that teachers tap into this aspect of comics and graphic novels by having students create their own comic books:

> It is evident that comics are familiar to and popular with middle and high school students. The comic is a form of literature these students enjoy. Given the opportunity to create and share their own comic books, students engage in greater literacy exploration than they otherwise would, due to comics' popular and easily accessible format. (p. 759)

Again, the tie to the constructivism of progressive literacy is obvious. The authors conclude by mentioning the students' enthusiasm for the projects and providing a reminder that such activities engage in cross-curricular pursuits by embracing "language arts, visual arts, and content areas" (p. 767).

Education Week has continued the trend of exploring graphic novels as a means of engaging reluctant readers (Ingram, 2003; Galley, 2004). Stephen Cary has published *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* (2004) as further evidence of the medium's effects on TESL/TEFL populations. *English Journal* is coming around to graphic novels and giving some much needed serious attention to their use by practicing teachers. Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher shared their success in using graphic novels as scaffolding devices in their teaching of high school writing (January 2004, p. 19). Indeed, their article "Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School" won NCTE's Farmer Award for Outstanding Writing. We are fortunate to reprint that essay herein and to have them contributing a new essay as well that gives teachers a great structural guide to using graphic novels in a fully textually integrated English language arts classroom. Jodi Leckbee wrote in *English Journal* that graphic novels are great for helping students transcend their apathy for reading (May 2004, p. 21) in response to the posed question "What activity has been most effective in

assisting high school students to read?" More recently (November 2004, pp. 114–18), editor Don Gallo asked librarian Stephen Weiner to formally introduce graphic novels to *English Journal*'s readers in the Bold Books for Innovating Teaching section, and *The Council Chronicle* for September 2005 features two articles on graphic novels and comics. *NEAToday* even got in on the action in February 2005, with Thomas Grillo's article "Back to the Future: How Teachers Are Using Old Favorites to Hook the Newest Generations of Reluctant Adolescent Readers." What's the hook? Comic books, of course.

The hook of comics can be especially strong for boys. In their longitudinal study of male reading habits (*Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, 2002), Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm found that graphic novels are one of the few types of texts that consistently engage male readers. Edgy, engaging, and different (pp. 148–57), graphic novels satisfied boys' overwhelmingly clear urge to explore visual texts. The authors state, "The intense importance of the visual as they engaged with all forms of texts was evident" and " a few engaged readers in this study all described their reading of books and stories in strikingly visual terms" (pp. 151–52). Important to our work in this collection of essays is their assertion that "A challenge here is for teachers to develop ways to assist boys who do not visualize what they read to develop ways of doing so. Otherwise they will not experience the same engagement with written texts that they do with multimedia ones" (p. 152). Graphic novels and comics, mostly produced for and consumed by males, give knowledgeable teachers a means to help show boys that, not only successful readers, but also successful writers and artists visualize as they work. (For other books with testimonials about comics from students and teachers, try Krashen's *The Power of Reading* [2002] and Shelley Hong Xu's *Trading Cards to Comic Strips* [2005].)

Among recent graphic novel proponents, Michele Gorman, a librarian from Austin, Texas, has done much for the format's new positioning in education via her book *Getting Graphic: Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens* (2003). She asserts, "Research done by professionals in the field and real-life experience of librarians have shown that there is one format that covers a variety of genres, addresses current and relative issues for teens, stimulates the young people's imagination, and engages reluctant readers: graphic novels" (2003, p. xi). Gorman joins a rather extensive list of librarians who have been carrying the torch for graphic novels as aids to literacy (DeCandido, 1990; Bruggeman, 1997; Lavin, 1998; Weiner, 2002; Goldsmith, 2003) in their own professional journals and conferences. Indeed, the American

Library Association's Young Adult Library Association presented the theme "Getting Graphic @ Your Library" for Teen Read Week 2002 (Gorman, 2003).

Gorman's text is a teacher-friendly, workbook-like product that features a history of the format, how-to guides for ordering and teaching graphic novels, and activities for teachers and libraries interested in integrating the format into their classes. More important, she offers persuasive facts and down-to-earth ethos to tempt reluctant teachers and librarians into adding the books to their schools' shelves:

- Larry Dorrell and Ed Carol noted an 82 percent increase in library circulation when comics were added to a junior high library (Gorman, 2003, p. xi).
- The current generation "is more comfortable with non-text visual media" = "at ease" with combining words and pictures (p. 9).
- Graphic novels may act as intermediaries from the computer or television to print media (p. 9).
- Graphic novels engage reluctant readers (p. 9).
- Stephen Krashen (1996) has supplied research that the format is beneficial to ELL readers (p. 11).
- Visual messages alongside minimal print help ease frustrations of beginning or struggling readers (p. 11).

Accompanying these facts are charts detailing connections of various graphic novels to literary devices, a section on curriculum integration, and a suggested reading list, complete with accurate "grading" of titles (e.g., M = mature). The book is highly recommended for individual teachers and for schools' professional development libraries, along with Stephen Weiner's *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* (2001).

More on Graphic Novels and Visual Literacy

There are those scholars and researchers in various fields who promote visual literacy as its own distinctive skill. Like the graphic novel, visual literacy is gaining more ground as a viable entity of study and practice in public schools. The International Visual Literacy Association defines visual literacy as

> a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the

> visual actions, objects, and/or symbols, natural or man-made, that are [encountered] in [the] environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, [we are] able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, [we are] able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communications (Fransecky & Debes, 1972, p. 7). (http://www.ivla.org/, 2003)

Mostly, visual literacy has been tied to the fields of graphic design, art, and art history, but, over the last few decades, visual literacy, cultural literacy, and critical literacy have become more and more intertwined. Consider NCTE's recent statement on multimodal literacies (http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/media/123213.htm), which makes it clear that English teachers can no longer disregard the visual. Miles Myers foretold this in 1996:

> English studies should include translations from one sign system to another as an essential part of the curriculum. These should include translating words into action—"acting out" scenes from stories, poems, and dramas—and novels to films, reports to speeches, paintings to descriptions. This means that students in English need to begin to give substantially more attention to various media. (p. 191)

Now we must heed his words more than ever (see Peggy Albers's "Imagining the Possibilities in Multimodal Curriculum Design" in *English Education* [January 2006] for an explication of this Myers quote and more discussion of multimodalities).

The contemporary view of literacy, then, is changing such that texts are no longer considered simply words on a page, but anything in the surrounding world of the literate person. And the literate person is one who can "read" these various texts, whether written or visual, one who can read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Sequential art scholars Scott McCloud (1999), Chris Murray (1997), and Neil Cohn (2003) have explored visual literacy in relation to comics and graphic novels. Cohn espouses a theory of visual language that echoes the underpinnings of critical and visual literacy. By examining sequence images, such as those seen in the panel breakdowns of comics and graphic novels, Cohn believes one can see a "dynamic and hierarchical thought process—just like in language" (www.emaki.net, 2003). Essentially, he says that "'images in sequence' are actually a language . . . the same as words in sequence." Obviously, the graphic novel can offer a rich and stimulating means by which to develop the visual literacy of students. As more research on dual coding develops, sequen-

tial art seems destined to have an even more prominent place in the English language arts classroom.

Lead-in to Case Study

Graphic novels are clearly gaining ground in public middle and high schools. However, texts such as Gorman's are very recent. If students are to gain the full literacy benefits of the format, we need many more practical articles that describe educational experiments and classroom success stories from middle and high school teachers who have used graphic novels. Most articles on graphic novels and the classroom, whether research or applied practice in orientation, come from college professors. Indeed, at the college level, the graphic novel enjoys more of the respect it deserves. What is needed is more evidence from researchers that graphic novels improve literacy skills. These research studies would necessarily be conducted in concert with evidence from teachers who have used the format successfully, but these articles are also still relatively scarce. Although it is hoped that teachers might be convinced by this collection of essays and similar works to try comics or graphic novels in the classroom, more needs to be written to be sufficiently compelling for the most conservative educators.

The section that follows is a further attempt at driving home the practical side of teaching comics or graphic novels in higher education, in summer programs, and, specifically, in North Carolina's public school system. I present a personal case study of my own successes using the format to illustrate how comics or graphic novels can be used to help reluctant or struggling readers as well as gifted readers. My efforts to teach Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986; 1991) to an academically and intellectually gifted eighth-grade classroom are chronicled as a means of documenting the struggles the graphic form still must overcome to gain acceptance. I also explore other activities using sequential art narratives that my students and I enjoyed.

A Personal Case Study

I could provide you with numerous research articles, but, if you are like most practicing middle and high school teachers I know, nothing persuades you like real-life, down-to-earth experiences. That is another reason why the essays in this collection are so valuable: they represent the ideas and, often, the actual hands-on attempts of experienced, respected teachers in various levels of education. But let me take an

editor's prerogative for a moment and go even further. Allow me, if you will, to tell you the role that comic books and graphic novels have played in my own development as a child, as an adult, and as a teacher.

I have been reading comics since I could read anything. My teenage mother read them to me before I was literate because, I imagine, they were cheap and we were poor and because, as a high school dropout, she was probably sick of the more traditional texts she once confronted in school. To this day most of her own reading consists of the chance novel, the Bible, and an occasional magazine, although she has rediscovered joy in the act of reading, and her efforts with comics certainly helped instill in me a love and appreciation of art and literature that has yielded degrees in both disciplines and a strong desire to see them shared with everyone. My first teaching job, in 1999, was at a high school in a suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina, and my toughest assignment was to take a group of remedial readers in a grades 9–12 combination class and mold them into at least partially motivated literates capable of enjoying written work—and passing North Carolina's "gateway" reading test, which they had taken unsuccessfully for the first time in grade 8. The class was a snapshot of typically difficult-to-teach students: 504 plans, IEPs, poverty, drug and gang issues, family and personal traumas (including homelessness and stabbings) made up their day-to-day existence.

Since I was short on supplies to begin with, I was eager to augment my curriculum, and I turned to comics for help. After getting a local vendor to donate more than $200 worth of comics, I began to incorporate them into our everyday lessons. For example, when we read Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty*, I first used comics as complements to the classics, reinforcing the difficult concept of symbiotic relationships and interdependency by pairing the text with a Spider-Man comic in which Spidey fights Venom and Carnage, two alien villains who bond to human hosts, thereby creating symbiotic relationships. The contrast is, of course, that Philbrick's characters share a fairly healthy interdependency, whereas poor Peter Parker experiences the direct badness that symbiotic or co-dependent relationships can entail (see Figure 1.1).

The classroom conversations on good and bad relationships were poignant, in no small part due to the students' ability to connect to the themes and because of the immediate connection to popular culture via comics (remember Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002).

I integrated comics again later in the semester as it became more apparent to me that a lack of role models and a poor sense of connection to the school also plagued my students. The school's mascot was

Figure 1.1. Spider-Man asks Freak and Max if they want to exchange burdens.

an ambiguous abstraction called simply the "Wonder," and the lack of a readily identifiable mascot to accompany the odd name troubled me since I know students take pleasure and comfort in having a school identity. I created an African American superhero clad in the school's colors and whose nemesis was named after the school's rival institution (see Figure 1.2), and I used these icons to help engage my students in creative writing and in gaining an understanding of the concept of characterization.

We watched the superhero spoof film *Mystery Men* and noted the elements of superheroes, an easy enough task since the movie pokes fun at superhero clichés. We then applied our learning to create a group vision of our school hero's origin, powers, gadgets, and adventures. We examined heroes again as we awaited the arrival of Alice Childress's novel *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich*. I created template drawings

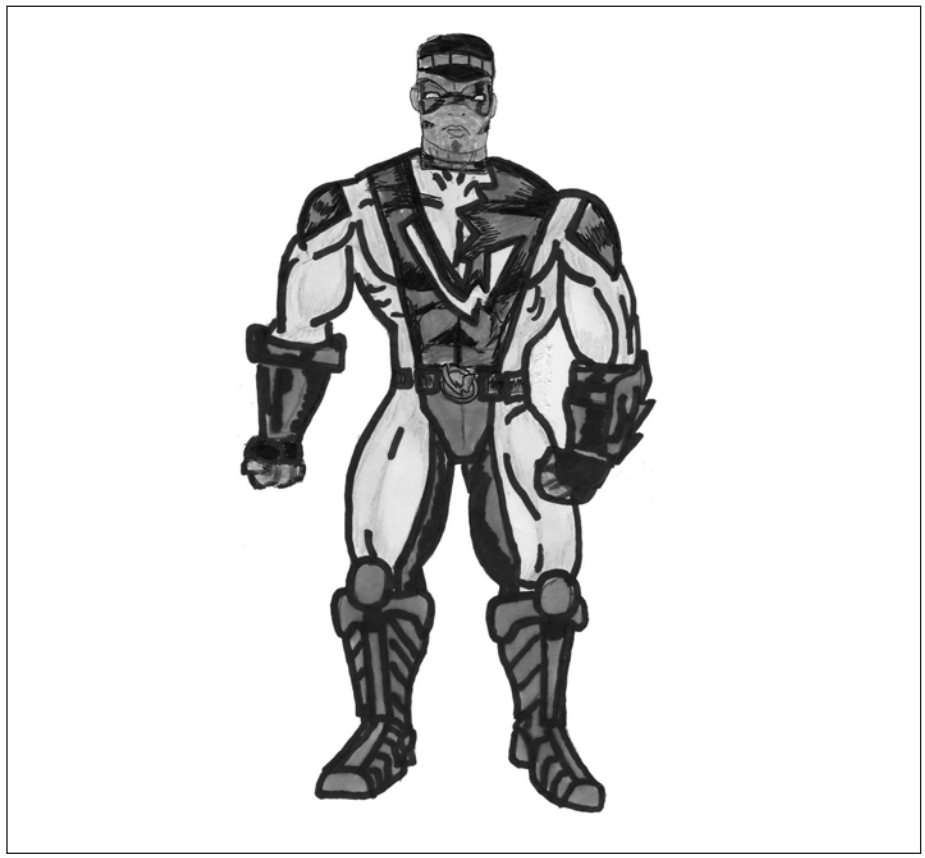

Figure 1.2. A new Wonder superhero mascot.

of a male and female superhero body and asked them to create their own heroes with individual origins, powers, nemeses, love interests, etc. Similar templates can be found in Gorman's text (2003, pp. 42–43). Disappointment and a little shock ensued as two students created heroes with marijuana-inspired powers, but overall, the group engaged well in literary devices (e.g., origin, nemesis), genre studies, and general discussion about "what makes a hero." Students enjoyed the activity and learned several complex concepts that had previously escaped their grasp.

While earning my MA in English at the University of Tennessee, I taught a weeklong course on creative writing and another involving sequential art (a create-your-own-comic-book course) to students ranging from elementary to high school as part of the Kids U summer pro-

gram. Some of the parents remarked that their children had come alive for the first time doing their homework, which was reminiscent of comments from the Bitz studies (2004). Although some students still struggled, those who dug into the course did so with real fervor.

Also while I was at UT, I taught in my English 102 class Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's graphic novel *Watchmen* (1987) as a text representative of late twentieth-century nuclear hysteria fiction and as a prophecy text due to its eerie similarities to 9/11 (massive destruction of Manhattan; a villain who was once supported by the United States and can even be considered a freedom fighter rather than evildoer, depending on one's point of view; the concept of war and horrific events bringing unity). The discussion yielded much evidence that students could engage in critical discourse wrapped around a graphic novel as the central text. This *augmentative* take in conventional curriculum (according to which the graphic novel increases the number of primary texts from which teachers can draw) is one that I hope middle and high school teachers will eventually use with sequential art narratives, as opposed to the more common *supplemental* take (where comics or graphic novels act as secondary extras to more accepted or canonical texts). But I understand—we must start somewhere. Most of the essays in this collection feature graphic novels paired with more traditional texts. It is true that graphic novels can be bridges (Farrell, 1966) to traditional texts. The opposite is true as well, but often what surfaces in the essays is the notion of a variety of texts working together as equal partners.

After finishing my studies at UT, I returned to teaching, as the academically and intellectually gifted specialist at a middle school in rural North Carolina. Once again, I used comics in my curriculum. Just as research indicates that comics and graphic novels can help ELL and literacy-challenged populations, it has also suggested that they can have a positive effect on the lives and learning of gifted students. Mitchell and George (1996), for example, suggest that comics fit well with teaching gifted children about morals and ethics.

In my grade 6 language arts class, I used comics to help students explore formats that are typically outside the realm of genre studies taught in regular classrooms. Furthermore, when other teachers approached me about lack of detail in their students' writing, Spidey and I again teamed up. I taught a personally crafted lesson entitled "The Comic Book Show 'n' Tell," an activity described in more detail in Chapter 10.

However, when I decided to take the leap from using simple, single-issue comics in my lessons to including a complex graphic novel,

I ran into trouble, clearly illustrating the existence of problems that the still-budding format has to overcome to stake a place in education. These are challenging problems that teachers, especially young teachers, who are perhaps those most willing and eager to accept graphic novels as serious texts and worthy classroom resources, must be ready to face.

My attempts to teach *Maus I* and *II* (Spiegelman,1986; 1991) to an academically and intellectually gifted grade 8 language arts class were stifled when a county administrator decided that the books were inappropriate for middle schoolers, (I have since learned of a central Virginia teacher who uses *Maus* in her grade 6 public school class and of many other schools nationwide, both public and private, that use the text.) I was shocked by the administrator's decision. To write a rationale for using these books had never crossed my mind; that was a mistake I made that young teachers reading this could learn from. In my head, *Maus* was such an exemplary text that anyone would have gladly welcomed it in the classroom. For those of you who might want to know what specifically was considered inappropriate, I will tell you what I didn't know to look out for and you can make up your own minds (or discuss it with colleagues) as to whether your community standards would be in conflict with the contents. The culprit was on page 30 of *Maus I* (see Figure 1.3). On this page, the elderly Vladek, Art's father, tells how Art's arm had to be broken for him to be born and how, for a few years, the young Art's arm would pop up. "We joked and called you 'Heil Hitler!'" says Vladek (Spiegelman, 1986).

In his gesticulations, Vladek knocks over his medication and begins to re-count his daily pills. To me, this is one of the most powerful pages in the book, a point where it is apparent that a man who was strong enough to survive the Holocaust is now at the mercy of his own aging body.

Two months after I missed my chance to teach *Maus*, Gorman placed the book (which she does rate as "M" for "mature") on her list of "10 'Safe' Graphic Novels for Even the Most Conservative Libraries" (2003, p. 71), stating, "In spite of the harsh themes, this Pulitzer Prize Award-winning graphic novel is a classic and has a place on library shelves for its literary merit and historical importance" (p. 71). Furthermore, the same text and images that were found unsuitable by my school administrator were recently reprinted in *The New Smithsonian Book of Comic-Book Stories* (Callahan, 2004). I hope this illustrates vividly that I know firsthand how difficult it can be to encourage others to approve some of the ideas offered in this collection. My hope is that, once this book helps you become confident in using the vast educational poten-

Figure 1.3. A panel from Spiegelman's *Maus I* was deemed objectionable by one school administrator.

tial of graphic novels, you will also let it help you win administrative battles that I didn't even see coming.

Later that same school year, I led my sixth graders in creating "how-to" comic books (for example, "how to bake cookies," "how to wash a car") and biographical sequential narratives based on historical figures that were important to them (e.g., The Wright Brothers, Clay Aiken, Kenny Chesney). I couldn't teach the particular graphic novel I had wanted to share with my students, but I would teach my students to produce and publish (for the other grade 6 classes, anyway) their own comic!

Climbing the Hill: Others' Problems with Graphic Novels

This example of "cat and *Maus*" perfectly illustrates the hill that proponents of the graphic novel are still climbing in many areas. Perhaps it is the relative newness of the format or the mature themes addressed by most graphic novels that some teachers and administrators find so unsettling. Who knows? Maybe there is still fallout from Frederic Wertham's infamous 1954 text (now widely debunked), *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which the McCarthy-era doctor explains that comics contribute to social decay by supporting violence and homosexuality. But this seems a stretch. Although plenty of the horror and crime comics on the market in the 1950s would still give conservative parents cause for alarm, Wertham focused too much on the superhero genre, which, at the time, was far from morose or delinquent. Perhaps it is the word-picture association itself that is disturbing. Maybe teachers feel that comics are too "childish" for students (Marsh & Millard, 2000; Weiner, 2004), regardless of evidence to the contrary. The basis of teachers' cautions about accepting graphic novels as classroom material is another area where much research is needed. Until we understand the problem, we cannot ask teachers to accept our solutions. But we can give them as large and practical an arsenal of resources as possible. That is another goal of the book you are reading.

Conclusions

Obviously, more research needs to be conducted on almost every aspect of using graphic novels for enhancing literacy. More quantitative research is needed to show correlations between graphic novels and increased literacy skills. The theory, in other words, needs more practice. More qualitative data are needed as well. As yet, there is no study that thoroughly examines teachers' beliefs and attitudes concerning

graphic novels; we have no clear idea of why teachers might be hesitant to use them. More success stories are needed, particularly via practitioner-based essays detailing use of graphic novels in actual classrooms. Furthermore, personal experience indicates that advocates of literacy and advocates of graphic novels need to come together to further the success of the format and the success of students employing it in their learning. In the meantime, in order to promote most effectively the impressive possibilities of the graphic novel for the English language arts classroom, teachers and scholars must get out the message concerning what research does exist on graphic novels and literacy. Bit by bit, we can expand the Golden Age of the graphic novel in the domain of education. By reading the essays that follow and considering their use in your own classrooms, you are joining the contributors in entering that Golden Age. Enjoy!

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As teachers, we're always looking for new ways to help our students engage with texts. James Bucky Carter and the contributors to this collection have found an effective approach: use graphic novels!

Carter and his contributors tap into the growing popularity of graphic novels in this one-of-a-kind guidebook. Each chapter presents practical suggestions for the classroom as it pairs a graphic novel with a more traditional text or examines connections between multiple sources. Some of the pairings include:

- *The Scarlet Letter* and Katherine Arnoldi's *The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom*
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- Young adult literature and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*
- Dante's *Inferno* and an X-Men story
- Classic fantasies (*Peter Pan, The Wizard of Oz,* and *Alice in Wonderland*) and Farel Dalrymple's *Pop Gun War*
- Traditional and graphic novel versions of *Beowulf*

These creative pairings open up a double world of possibilities—in words and images—to all kinds of learners, from reluctant readers and English language learners to gifted students and those who are critically exploring relevant social issues. A valuable appendix recommends additional graphic novels for use in middle and high school classrooms.

Packed with great ideas for integrating graphic novels into the curriculum, this collection of creative and effective teaching strategies will help you and your students join the fun.

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