

Introduction

*“We’re here for forty-five minutes. Have fun with the time, but don’t even
THINK about taking out any of those comics or graphic novels!”*

—Meryl Jaffe

That is how I used to preface visits to the library or bookstore with my students and children.

In my mind, graphic novels were often violent collections about caped crime-fighters, masked madmen, or fictional friends at Riverdale High School. How did I know this? That’s what the comic books of my childhood were all about, and I hadn’t seen anything different to change my mind. Admittedly, I hadn’t been looking to change my mind. *Johnny Tremain*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Gammage Cup* were just fine for my middle schoolers. These books created worlds of fantasy or historical fiction that made my readers think, while incorporating language in inspiring ways. I realize now, though, that reading lists, like most things in life, can’t remain static. They must be fluid, dynamically bending and adjusting to the time and winds of change.

A few years ago, my children sat me down and passionately argued that in any discussion of literacy, graphic novels had to be included. I reluctantly agreed to read one book of their choice. With the stakes high, I advised them to choose wisely, and they did. They selected Joe Kelly’s *I Kill Giants*, and I was truly blown away. As Kelly’s story opens, the reader meets Barbara, a fifth-grade girl who explains that she kills giants. The thing is, it takes most of the book to determine whether this is a metaphor for something bigger, stronger, and scarier in her life or she actually kills giants. He leaves it to you (and your students) to figure out which is the case.

Katie and I come to you from different perspectives. She began her career in the classroom and is now in academia; I began in academia and am now in the classroom. She is a young, vibrant rising star, and I am a seasoned parent, a school psychologist, and an educator. Although we both came to graphic novels relatively recently in our professional careers, we have become strong advocates for their inclusion in today’s classrooms and libraries.

While Katie and I discuss the movement of graphic novels from comic book shops to the classroom in Part I of this book, there have been three general factors that led us, personally, to include them in our classrooms:

1. There is now a wealth of motivating, high-quality graphic novels (be they fiction, science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, or nonfiction) that lend themselves to content-area classroom use.
2. With the growth of technology and access to the Internet, there is now an increasing need for visual and verbal literacy mastery, emphasized not only in our everyday lives, but also in the Common Core State Standards.
3. Graphic novels, by their very nature, draw the reader into the story, because the reader must construct the story by actively integrating visual and verbal components. This is a highly creative and interactive process, which makes learning more meaningful.

Our Goals

While teaching methods and goals are rapidly expanding to meet the demands of our ever shrinking—and yet expanding—worlds, we hope to empower you with specific tools to meet those demands. Educators are now mandated to address visual and verbal literacies by incorporating multimodal texts and sources, while fostering greater independent, creative, and analytic thinking. To help address these needs and changes, we offer you concrete teaching options in the form of interactive graphic novel suggestions and lesson plans. Graphic novels provide an excellent vehicle to meet curricular standards while incorporating diverse student needs and affinities.

Our goal in this book is to introduce you to today's graphic novels. We explain how they have matured, how they address learning and curriculum standards, and, finally, how they can be taught in your content-area middle-school classrooms. We also demonstrate how graphic novels and our suggested lessons meet diverse student needs featuring attention, memory, language, sequencing, and cognition skills.

How This Book Is Organized

In the first part of this book, we introduce you to the mechanics of today's graphic novels and detail how they have changed throughout the years. We also relate why these books are such effective teaching tools for modern classrooms.

The second part of this book takes you to our four content-area classrooms: math, language arts, social studies, and science. Each content-area chapter:

- ◆ Explains how graphic novels can meet your curricular needs;
- ◆ Provides two types of lessons, each using graphic novels in a different way;

- ◆ Demonstrates what each lesson asks students to do—focusing on attention, memory, language, sequencing, and cognition skills;
- ◆ Shows each lesson’s alignment with the Common Core State Standards;
- ◆ Discusses how graphic novels in our lessons help different types of students succeed in the content-area classroom; and
- ◆ Includes a list of other suggested graphic novels you can include in your content-area classroom.

Please note, however, that the lessons and suggested readings we provide are merely suggestions. We encourage you to expand upon these suggested readings and tweak our lessons to meet your own personal teaching preferences and student needs. And, if you are so inclined, we hope you share your explorations and experiences with these lessons and suggested readings with us at www.departingthetext.blogspot.com. Check the blog for new lessons, graphic novel reviews, content-area classroom tips, conference appearances, and more.