Teacher to Teacher

Ten Graphic Novels for Adult Literacy Learners

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During a National Public Radio interview, Art Spiegelman discussed his groundbreaking Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *Maus* (1986). Yet when asked to comment on the use of cartooning to relate one of the most horrific event's in world history, the Holocaust, Spiegelman turned the question around and commented on the act of reading: "Even in schools, one's taught to read. One's rarely taught to look."

As an educator I am struck, befuddled by Spiegelman's comment. More than twenty years after Howard Gardner's (1983) *Frames of Mind*, in which he discusses the variety of different learning styles particular to each individual also called "multiple intelligences," we still focus on the "verbal linguistic" aspect of learning, failing to teach and honor those who think more naturally from a visual frame of reference, which he terms "visual-spatial." In fact in schools, it seems as though we sometimes force everyone to live in a print text world.

Why? Why are we unable to merge our thinking of reading and image together? If some people think more visually, should we not help foster and nurture this natural reading ability?

Gunther Kress (2003) would say that forcing youth and adult learners to read simply print text is a disservice to the reality of the "communication revolution" happening right now. According to Kress, the movement within this information age – via the screen, the computer, the iPod, and all other forms of multimodality – is similar to the changes in our language and the ways in which we communicated prior to the invention of printing press. In short, we find ourselves in the midst of the information age where the dominance of print text is replaced with the dominance of the image. In this new world, "*The world told* is a different world to *the world shown*" (p. 1).

This is one part of the rationale for using children's books in adult literacy programs. In their description of texts that can be used in the adult literacy setting, Rasinski and Padak (1996) cite texts such as poetry and songs, texts written by students themselves, popular press materials, scripts, dialogue journals, picture books, captioned television and videotapes, scripts, and "how to do it texts." The "major drawback to such texts [picture books] is they may be perceived as childish by adults and older juveniles." One of the approaches that they recommend in overcoming this drawback are that adult learners can read picture books *with* children. But yet another approach is the discovery of the graphic novel genre, where adult readers connect with age-appropriate literature of interest and can do so by utilizing both their print text reading abilities and their visual reading abilities.

This article will present 10 award-winning graphic novels that teachers can use in the adult literacy context.

1. ***Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* by Frank Miller** / ISBN # 1-56389-342-8

Frank Miller's introduction to *The Dark Knight Returns* (1996) describes his first contact with a Batman comic book: "I open it. I look over it. I fall in." Miller's story is one of universality. Over the last 60 years, we have all fallen into the Batman mythology. No matter what culture, what ethnic background or family makeup people are from they are sure to know the story of Batman, the Caped Crusader. For this reason, I recommend this graphic novel to adult readers, for

they can work from what Frank Smith and Ken Goodman (1971) might call a deeper meaning making reading experience:

> linguistic analysis . . . shows that language has two levels – a surface structure – that is, the sounds or written representation of language – and a deep structure – that is, meaning . . . . We distinguish elements and relationships that are not actually represented in the surface structure but are constructed from the meanings that we derive from the hidden deep structure. (pp. 178-179)

According to Smith and Goodman, readers of this graphic novel will fall into this hidden deep structure, for they already know Batman – a determined superhero who at age 7 watched his parents' brutal murder and then vowed his body and mind to ridding Gotham City of nefarious petty thieves and criminals. Readers can then take this familiar deeper understanding and move forward with Miller as he introduces a new Batman, a superhero ten years into his middle-aged retirement from crime fighting. Adult readers will be attracted to this man who has grown wiser with age. His experience is our experience. Danny Fingeroth's (2004) *Superman on the Couch* explains that more than simply identifying with a superhero, over time readers grow distant if they do not see a superhero's human condition as shared with their own:

> Comics writers refer to their characters being allowed "the illusion of change"… We grow older, our friends and relatives grow older – even die, eventually – but the superheroes are always there. If they age at all, it's extraordinarily slowly. (p. 34)

This shared human condition of aging, this illusion of change, best illustrates Miller's reliance on the hidden, deeper structure inherent within readers. Essentially, he is banking on the idea that most readers know Batman, but have dismissed him as a character from their childhood. But now Batman is inextricably whole, linked to a reader's lived experience, for Batman has aged with the reader. Smith and Goodman (1971) note that this attraction to the whole, the understood experience, occurs when readers seek to identify meaning that "either precedes or makes unnecessary the process of identifying individual words [or ideas]" (p. 179). Batman is not what psycholinguists would criticize as a "piece" of a puzzle. He is whole, like the reader, through his aging experience. It is this idea of the whole – the story of Batman connected from childhood to now adulthood – that will most likely invite adult literacy learners into this text.

The visual images that accompany *The Dark Knight Returns* will also be particularly interesting to adult readers. Often acclaimed for their use of color to create mood and emotion, artists Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley have matched the storyline – a return from the darkness and solidarity of retirement – with the rage of Batman's character as he reawakens to a darker Gotham City wrought with a new breed of criminality at its worst. In *Superheroes and Philosophy* Aeon J. Skoble (2005) discusses this tone and mood of the text, as shown through its illustrations:

> By bringing into clearer view the reality of the ethical dilemma of vigilantism, and by exploring the underlying psychological context within which superheroes operate, Miller's story forces us to rethink our understanding of Batman . . . and thus to reexamine our related notions of right now and wrong. (p. 33)

With color, shading, and aged features applied to Batman and his surroundings within Gotham City, Janson and Varley highlight Miller's storyline. Thus, readers will find this link between image and word mesmerizing as the two work cooperatively to create a powerful reading experience that redefines our traditional definition of what a hero is and does. Ultimately, readers are left to question whether or not Batman is a hero.

2. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, by Marjane Satrapi / ISBN # 0-375-71457-X

While not as culturally well-known as Batman, Satrapi's (2003) message may be even more accessible to adult literacy learners because of its simplistic, abstract art. Satrapi herself describes the text as accessible to all readers because it is not a "hocus-pocus story, not a superhero story" but instead a story about the reality of the human condition: "comics is a media through which we can show anything we want. And if it's abstract, it's more real to me" (Slusher, 2005). Satrapi believes that her simple, abstract style offers readers a window of invitation into her story, a window that strips away any confusion that could be garnered from the complexities of the tale she is to tell. Her story is of a childhood during the Islamic Revolution.

Adult literacy learners are thus brought into a world where the characters and their storylines are what Scott McCloud (1993), writer and illustrator of *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, would call "amplification through simplification": "By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (p. 30). This effect is especially welcoming to adult literacy learners because Satrapi's use of language and drawing are complementary. They work together for a greater meaning-making experience, for while her writing is simple and pointed, her depictions are also simple and pointed as they illustrate and further highlight the visual context of their meaning. The words give readers a sense of knowing. The images give the readers a sense of seeing.

This sense of seeing and knowing is evident on the first few pages of *Persepolis* as the author describes the first day the veil was required headwear at school. The reader hears the teacher tell the students to "Wear this!" and then sees the students playing with the veil, as children would, using it as a jump rope, a mask, a shade, a collar and so on, saying things like "It's too hot out!," "I'm the monster of darkness," and "Giddyap!" Satrapi's words and images come together to teach the reader a sense of awareness impossible with just words or pictures alone. If the reader had simply been told that the students played with the veil and echoed their play with the above quotations, the understanding of the veil's significance on that first day might not have been fully realized. The images and the words allow the reader to literally see the significance of telling children to wear something that they don't understand or find value in, thus showing the reader the deep level of irony Satrapi hopes to convey about a child's role in the Islamic Revolution.

This sense of seeing and knowing in reading is currently experiencing a resurgence in adult literacy learning as New Literacies receive more attention. Kress (2003) sees this movement as one related to our 21st century emphasis on image dominance:

> as my framing metaphor of *from telling the world to showing the world* suggests, *what there is to be read* has been undergoing fundamental changes. We are moving into a world in which image will be much more dominant as a public mode of communication. (p. 151)

3. *Watchmen,* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons / ISBN # 7-61941-20204-4

Possibly the most acclaimed graphic novel dealing with the postmodern definition of what it means to be a superhero, *Watchmen* is the award-winning graphic novel by Moore and Gibbons (1986). The story centers on a group called the Crimebusters and a plot to discredit them. For adult readers who are interested in or remember the 1980s, this graphic novel might pique particular interest. During the 1980s, the Cold War loomed larger than ever in the minds of many Americans, a historical weight that had become more serious with the passage of decades. Thus the cultural climate created the need for many of us to redefine what a hero is or might be. *Watchmen* is probably the most deliberate attempt to redefine the idea of a modern hero, making him (or her!) into a postmodern character with strengths, weaknesses, and dualities that all work together to create a distinct, layered identity.

Sondra Perl's (1978) ideas on a "felt sense" in writers directly relates to this text, for as much as Perl set out to show the felt sense in writers, this felt sense is also applicable to readers. In short, readers in the 1980s had a felt-sense that they needed a new type of hero, someone who could answer to the cultural climate of the Cold War – in all of its duality and ambiguity. If we think about the writer and the reader as one in Perl's discussion of this felt sense we can begin to gain an appreciation for what readers during this time needed or felt:

> Writers write out of a felt sense. From the articulating of meaning they anticipate what will come next (future) while they simultaneously feel how what has already been written (past) shapes what they are now writing (present). Thus what they are writing about in the present is structured both by their future sense (where they want the discourse to go) and their sense of the past (what they have written so far). (p. 348)

Adult literacy learners will be particularly interested in this graphic novel either because they lived through or are interested in the 80s, and, therefore, have a felt sense for the cultural climate during that time period. They can or did sense that the "goody-goody" heroes of Americana's past involvement in World War II could no longer hold ground during an era where duality, ambiguity, and shifting meanings framed the world's cultural and political climate. They can then easily dive into this story and its images, allowing the images and feelings of what is of interest to them (either personally or historically) to update or remind them of the historical evolution of the superhero.

Adult readers will also appreciate Moore and Gibbon's efforts to structure the story. They use a multi-genre approach in which each chapter is appended by excerpts from other writings on the story itself (sometimes from the characters themselves), and the content, combined with such appendages, promotes comic book readership toward a more adult audience that can deal with the themes of ambiguity, conflict, and duality already mentioned above. Moreover, because of the multi-genre format, Moore and Gibbons are able to invite more readers into the story, readers who may appreciate other forms of reading besides simply comic panels. For instance, the text uses the genres of newspaper articles, fictional chapters, book introductions and excerpts, manuscripts, letters, psychiatric reports and artifacts, interviews, magazine articles, and random newspaper and magazine clippings.

In short, Moore and Gibbons welcome readers into the story because they support the redefinition of the hero motif and its modern, layered meaning with multiple genres and multiple truths, an approach that helps teach readers the movement and storytelling possible from one modern comic panel to the next.

At the time of its publication in comic book form, *Watchmen* won the Jack Kirby Comic Industry Award in 1987.

4. *Bone* Series, by Jeff Smith / ISBN # 0-439-70640-8

Intended for adolescents and young adults, the *Bone* series (1991—2005) appeals to many adults as well, for who does not enjoy a quest that takes a reader's imagination to a dark, magical forest and then to an encounter with a great cow race? Like *The Simpsons*, this storyline is ageless and draws the reader into a fantasy world both interesting and strikingly similar in its parallels to our own world and its reality. Matt Groening exclaims, "I love *Bone*. *Bone is great*!" Specifically, the storyline follows three cousins after they are kicked out of their hometown of Boneville. An epic in length, this story then guides these characters, whose vastly different personalities are intriguing and complex, into overlapping journeys between self and other, individual, and community. And through some sort of mystical fate, all three cousins are eventually reunited. Yet this is where their quest together just begins, for they find themselves in a series of storylines in which they encounter numerous interesting characters, friends and foes alike. It is through these experiences with new characters and their constant quest to return to Boneville that their goal of finding their way home takes on a larger and larger presence.

This presence is magnified for the reader by the use of color in the more recent publications of *Bone* (2005 – 2006), an art technique that engages struggling readers and helps draw them into the story. The backgrounds behind each panel are thematically colored to match the tone and mood of the scenes and/or characters, and Smith has chosen a milky, smooth technique, thus highlighting the characters and the action in the foreground. The reading experience is then soothed and enhanced because the words and the images correspond so well to each other in terms of the deeper meaning Smith wishes for his readers to gain from each panel. McCloud might refer to this use of color and movement between panels as drawing readers into the subtle aspects that create meaning from one frame to the next.

5. *The Contract With God*, by Will Eisner / ISBN # 0-393-06105-1

With his publication of *The Contract with God*, Will Eisner is credited with coining the term "graphic novel." Initially published in 1978, this graphic novel relates the story of three people on Dropsie Avenue. Frimme Hershe, a pious Jew, loses his daughter, and, as a result, breaks his contract with his creator. Then, a street singer fails to reach stardom due to his dependence on "the bottle." And, finally, a mysterious and dangerous little girl named Rosie schemes her way into the role of a murderess. Also included, in the more recent publications of this graphic novel as a trilogy, are two other stories: *A Life Force* and *Dropsie Avenue: The Neighborhood.*

Eisner's efforts to connect comics with the literature world are what might draw many adult readers to this graphic novel. Essentially, Eisner spent great amounts of time and energy developing both his text and his images, giving them equal weight and their own importance all at the same time, with the hope of leveling out their value to be that of equals rather than that of opposing genres. McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) might comment on how Eisner uses "the gutter" to blend the literature world with the comics world. Here, we should definitely think about Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) idea of reader response. McCloud writes that comic writers believe that one basic idea of reading images is that readers infer their own meaning from panel to panel. The primary example of this is "the gutter." The gutter is the "space between the panels . . . . Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (p. 66). Eisner's gutters are most notorious for being invisible from time to time, for he does not draw the panel-like square boxes we are used to seeing in so many comics. The effect is an over-lapping of image and text where both work together to create meaning throughout the story. The reader is then left to move through the story still using his or her imagination to find single ideas between drawings and text (especially when panels are used), but the stuttered start and stop feeling often sensed during the reading of traditional comic panels is no longer present as the panel lines begin to disappear. The reading experience feels more like a dance among ideas rather than a street lined with stoplights.

In hindsight, this technique worked with readers, and the graphic novel term and genre found its popular culture birthright. Because of its presentation and subject matter, *The Contract with God* truly brought comics into contact with an adult readership that could see beyond what was then (1978) overdone stereotypical and often labeled "adolescent" superhero stories. The graphic novel was born and found itself the focus of adult comics for decades to come. And although many future artists and writers would alter Eisner's original format, they all credit *The Contract with God* with providing them a readership that understood the graphic novel and its significance.

6. *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq*, by Mark Alan Stamaty / ISBN # 0-375-83217-3

Intended originally for child readers, this text (2004) finds itself intriguing to both child and adult readers. It finds duality as well in being set in comic book format, while also being a story that finds its storybook-heartstrings in a more graphic novel tone.

In its seeming limbo between comics and graphic novels, many adult readers will ultimately find that the rich, literary storyline guides the text toward a more graphic novel status. Essentially, the story is nonfiction, a true story, and relates the role of a Baghdad librarian who sets out to save the books of Iraq, especially those books that chronicle Iraq's history as a nation and its people's lives. The trials, tribulations, and sacrifices that the librarian and her friends and family endure to save these books are heroic, and adult readers are sure to see the actions of the characters as similar to those of any superhero from their childhoods. But this time, the heroic characters are living in our world post 9/11, and they are heroic in the face of real-life obstacles that they, with their simple, real-life human powers, must find ways to overcome.

As we can see above, this story appeals to any age reader. This multi-age appeal allows many readers, adult and child, to view this graphic story as an introduction to graphic novel reading. Adult readers can approach this text with an eye toward realizing whether or not the genre of graphic novels appeals to them. The novel introduces readers to panel reading, gutters, conversation and thought bubbles, symbolic significance and image, and graphic novel conventions and styles (action – action panels, scene – scene panels, moment – moment panels, and so on).

Further, this text is a much-needed multicultural addition to anyone's reading list, for the Iraqi people and culture are so often misunderstood or mysterious to young and adult readers. Such readings are sure to help unite a reader's own human condition and compassion to that of a people a world and a war away.

7. *Maus,* by Art Spiegelman / ISBN # 0-394-74723-2

A frame story, *Maus* (1986) sets out to tell the biographical tale of Art Spiegelman's father during the Holocaust. The text, then, essentially opens with Spiegelman arriving at his father's house, and asking to speak with his father about these experiences because he is considering writing a story about them. The story unfolds with each visit to his father and the flashbacks that are generated from these discussions. Adult readers can easily enter the text through this frame story format because Spiegelman's text and graphics take on the idea and images of what it means to be a family member, a friend, and a confidant during and after one of the most horrific events in human history.

The imagery of the Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats also helps adult readers understand the text, for these two choices in characterization are not only obviously antagonistic but also reflective of the story itself. This mirroring of image and text are then complementary, enhancing the story for adult readers. One instance of this takes place when Spiegelman's father, Vladek, moves in and out of his storytelling flashbacks. The black outlined drawings turn into solid black figures, shadows, as the story moves between the past and present, similar to the fading out and in, or the zooming in and out of a video camera.

On a historical note, adult readers may be interested in the text because of its dual historical significance: to world history and to the literature world. Since its worldwide historical importance has been noted above, let us concentrate on *Maus'* significance to the literary world. In the mid-80s *Maus* changed and revolutionized the comics, and for that matter, the storytelling business, proving that comic stories could be sold and well-received as a literary art form capable (or even more capable) of storytelling on the same level as canonical literature. Among numerous other awards, *Maus* was the first graphic novel to ever win the Pulitzer Prize.

8. *Stuck Rubber Baby*, **by Howard Cruse** / ISBN # 1-56389-255-3

Exploding with issues of interest, *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995) deals with the Civil Rights Movement, racial prejudice, homosexuality, abortion, and adoption. Even the images match the intensity of the storyline as they blend, move and transcend each other from page to page, creating anxieties and insecurities for the reader, feelings that match those of the characters as they experience their world. Adult readers who are attracted to historical issues and intense characters would be most likely to welcome this graphic novel into their reading experiences.

In an email exchange, Cruse explains why many adult readers are drawn to the historical nature of the story, particularly adults who lived through this particular time in history and can possibly see autobiographical fragments within the plot and characters:

> From my point of view as the author, my aim was literary. I wanted to explore a character who was wrestling with the kinds of interior demons that I personally wrestled with as an Alabamian born in 1944. Because I was personally affected deeply by observing at close hand (without participating in any useful activism myself) the unfolding of Birmingham's civil rights battles during my high school and college years, the large canvas provided by a novel allowed me to portray a wider world and a broader moral palette than might have been available had I let the narrative be just another individual's "coming out story."

Cruse set out to write a literary text with images, not the other way around. Thus, his efforts are in direct comparison to Eisner's in *A Contract with God*, to tell a comic-based, literary story to adult readers.

More specifically, the story is set in the Southern culture of the 1960s and focuses on, as Cruse mentions, how one man deals with his own sexuality, his parents' untimely death in a car accident, racial prejudice, and adoption. Toland Polk narrates from his perspective years later, reflecting on the world then compared to the world he lives in now. He tells the tale of feeling taunted by his own feelings of difference and "otherness," forced to face all of the above-mentioned issues, making mistakes, and learning from them as he goes along.

Ultimately, and what attracts many adult readers to this graphic novel, Toland must define himself and ask the age-old question: "Who am I?"

9. *Buddha* **Series, by Osama Tezuka** / ISBN # 1-932234-43-8

For adult readers interested in the connections between graphic novels and manga (the Eastern world's term for their artistic version of a graphic novel) Osama Tezuka's *Buddha* series (2003) offers a useful bridge, a connection that presents interested readers with the styles and conventions most associated with Eastern cultures. The varying line styles, panel placement and character facial features are the primary differences between Eastern and Western comic traditions. Thus, the reading experience of Eastern graphic novels can be different for many adult readers accustomed to Western comic traditions.

Beyond the alternative reading experience possible with Eastern manga and graphic novels, adult readers will find that the basic storyline is set in another part of the world, India. At Tezuka's hand, India is beautifully illustrated, and the storyline and the setting work in conjunction to create a sense of spiritual connection between the reader and the Buddha character, drawing readers into the mystical yet historical background of the Buddha and his significance to those who believe in his powers. Whether you believe, however, does not determine your reading experience, for the story is intriguing to anyone interested in learning about human nature's relationship with supreme beings who possess spiritual powers. The story even begins by introducing the reader to the popular mythology of the young Buddha, educating its reader by depicting the birth of the "Blessed One."

Sprinkled with the Buddhist lore surrounding the Buddha's birth, life and death, the fates of the main characters, Chapra and Tatta, are explored in the setting of India's Himalayas. Adventure after adventure, their lives and that of their family and friends reveal the mythology so important to many of the East's basic beliefs. Knowledge of these beliefs and their origins is relevant to many adult readers who value the globalization accompanying our recent technological advancements, striking advancements that have also, as Kress (2003) states, prompted the image dominance movement so familiar to graphic novel readers.

Tezuka's popularity with Eastern readers, most of whom are adults, is legend in Japanese manga and is one reason for many Western adult readers to give this graphic novel a chance. Further, many Western readers might be interested in and recognize Tezuka for his *Astro Boy* (2002).

10. *Blankets*, **by Craig Thompson** / ISBN # 1-891830-43-0

Thompson (2003) set out to tell the story of his own childhood and coming of age. In doing so, his text and his images maturely convey the difficult concepts a young man must deal with as he is confronted with child abuse and strict religious indoctrination. Thus, many adult readers will enjoy this graphic novel for its "coming of age" qualities.

Thompson, spurred on by the popular growth of the graphic novel, further set out to blend the graphic novel genre with that of the literary memoir. Paralleling the memoir with image writing then becomes a unique facet of Thompson's work. Jules Feiffer (2003), a Pulitzer Prize winner and a veteran and well respected comic artist and historian himself, believes that the story is perhaps even more literary than simple print text storytelling:

> In this book, Craig Thompson emerges as a young comics master. In the purest narrative form he tells a highly charged personal story, crammed with pain, discovery, hi-jinx, penance, religious conviction and its loss . . . and along comes self loathing. In this story of family and first love, that which goes awry in life, goes well as art. Mr. Thompson is slyly self-effacing as he bowls us over with his mix of skills. His expert blending of words and pictures and resonant silences makes for a transcendent kind of story-telling that grabs you as you read it and stays with you after you put it down. I'd call that literature. (taken from the cover of *Blankets*)

Specifically, *Blankets* follows Thompson from the age of about 7 to his graduation from high school, and a bit beyond.

Truly the story of young love at the hands of a dark past, Thompson draws the reader into his story through an artistic expression that flows from page to page, creating the feelings of unity that he believes unites the experiences of his life.

Adults who enjoy growing wiser with age and learning from others who do the same will be content to ponder the blank surface of life alongside Thompson: "How satisfying it is to leave a mark on a blank surface. To make a map of my movement----no matter how temporary" (pp. 581 – 582).

In his latest text entitled *Making comics: Storytelling secrets of comics, manga and graphic novels*, McCloud (2006) asks his readers if they want "a reading experience so seamless that it doesn't feel like reading at all but like being there? Populated by characters so vivid they seem as real as the reader's own friends and family?" (p. 1). Each of the ten graphic novels on this list will certainly bring literacy learners into a story, like being there, and it is through the union of image and word that they will dynamically capture the reader's attention in this way. Fortunately, today's adult literacy learners are living and learning in an expanding literary world, one that is beginning to offer them more and more engaging literature that extends our communication revolution. Thus, I present these graphic novels in the hope that more adult literacy learners will find their way to this ever-expanding genre, and experience "how words and pictures can combine to create effects that neither could create separately" (McCloud, 2006, p. 4).

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