

Integrating Graphica into Your Curriculum: Recommended Titles for Grades 6–12

Thanks to the recent proliferation of professional development workshops and books on graphic literature, both for youth librarians and classroom teachers, the question of whether the medium has a place in reading is no longer so controversial. Now conversations have shifted beyond the “engagement factor” and the “acceptance/rationale issue” and have started to focus on best practices and how to integrate comics, graphic novels, nonfiction, and manga into the ELA curriculum.

To that end, I’ve compiled a list of those titles that might feel right at home in the 6–12 classroom. By no means does the list represent an attempt at canon construction, or even a more personal list of “favorites,” but rather an overview of titles that contain significant literary merit and can accomplish multiple curricular goals. That they should hold appeal, both in content and theme, for middle and high school students is, of course, another important consideration.

I’ve intentionally aimed at variety here, particularly when it comes to not over-representing particular creators. Will Eisner, for example, produced numerous landmark works that could just as easily be substituted for the one singled out here, and I encourage educators to familiarize themselves with his body of work. Similarly, there are some titles, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Jeff Smith’s *Bone*, that are so beloved and respected that to include them here would be superfluous. Rapidly joining them, however, are three titles that I’ve noticed slowly but surely forming a kind of mini-canon across the US: *American Born Chinese*, usually taught at middle school; *Persepolis*, a high school text at various grade levels; and

Watchmen, for high school juniors, seniors, and AP classes. With that in mind, let’s start with Gene Luen Yang’s National Book Award nominee and Printz Award-winner . . .

American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang

It’s hard to imagine a graphic work that is better suited for grades 6–12 instruction than this. Its themes of assimilation, conformity, identity, and the price that is sometimes paid for popularity at school can’t help but resonate with students. But that’s just the beginning. Brimming with humor, some of which is merciless in its depiction of Chinese stereotypes, this graphic novel also comprises an artful and exciting retelling of the Monkey King legend. Indeed, by alternating among three separate storylines that clearly parallel each other before he allows them to converge in a surprising, satisfying ending, Yang (himself a California teacher) provides an almost diagrammatic way for students to deepen their understanding of how theme and symbol work in literature. In addition, educators such as Melissa Schieble of the University of Wisconsin–Madison have shown how *American Born Chinese* can be used to introduce critical literacy into the curriculum in ways that are natural and powerful.

The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón

There are, increasingly, many accomplished nonfiction graphic titles that can be integrated into the ELA curriculum, but few if any have the unique advantages of this one. First, it’s based upon a document that itself is not only of historical importance, but also easy to

obtain, thereby permitting your class to study the process of trans-media adaptation. (You can download a copy of the nearly 600-page report from <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.) Second, the terrorist attacks of September 11 are, sadly, still fresh in the memory of many, enabling you to generate ancillary assignments, such as compiling an oral history of that fateful day or conducting other types of firsthand research. Moreover, Colón's art is simultaneously evocative and restrained, and the way that Jacobson has inventively organized the material on a page-by-page, panel-by-panel basis provides an exemplar of how to structure expository text as well as how to use text features and visuals to convey complex information.

Black Jack by Osamu Tezuka

The towering master of manga, Tezuka may have produced better-known creations (*Astro Boy*) or ones that are more sweeping and profound (*Buddha*), but I'm selecting *Black Jack* (only recently available widely in English) for a couple of reasons. First, while manga series, such as the multi-volume *Buddha*, can be overwhelming in scope when it comes to curriculum mapping, *Black Jack* consists entirely of short stories. They do build on each other in a loose way, with the protagonist's backstory revealed bit by bit, but really they are simply gems of the short form, and as such, they fit well with canon works such as those by Poe, Maupassant, or Bradbury. Featuring a Sherlock Holmes-like renegade surgeon (think TV's *House*), each story presents self-contained ethical dilemmas and/or elements of the literature of the fantastic. Moreover, these adventures helped inspire an entire generation of doctors in Japan (Tezuka himself had a medical degree), and so represent a way to speak to the science-minded students in your class. They also provide an object lesson in "science fiction" in its most literal sense through the extrapolation of biological concepts to philosophical or dramatic effect.

A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge by Josh Neufeld

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A wonderful way to incorporate reportage and creative nonfiction in an accessible and engaging way, Neufeld's Web chronicle of post-Katrina New Orleans (supplemented by a gripping prologue) has recently been published by Pantheon, which is both a plus and a minus. While the print version is slightly revised, expanded, and restructured (and sure to prompt the creation of supporting teaching materials), it's the original digital comic that brilliantly uses the resources of the Web itself, through live links to YouTube video and other resources, to create an immersive reading experience.

(You can access the Web comic at

<http://www.smithmag.net/afterthedeluge/>.) In short, are you looking to cover digital literacy, journalism, and the graphic format into your curriculum? Well, this title allows you to do all three at once, robustly and inspiringly. Occasionally, there are instances of profanity, as *A.D.* presents dialogue verbatim, but this should not deter you from seeking out this landmark work (and perhaps using only excerpts as an alternate approach).

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi

Even if you've only heard of *Persepolis*, or perhaps seen the critically acclaimed movie version, you might already have a sense of why it has been so widely adopted for curricular use: it's a text that lives and breathes "cross-cultural understanding," it's a compelling historical document, and it's an engaging memoir of youth, all in one. And of course there's nothing wrong with, and lots of things right about, using Satrapi's account of Iran in the '70s and '80s as a springboard for students to explore their own conceptions of the nation and its people—this year, more timely than ever—and to discuss the commonalities involved in being a young person in *any* culture.

However, I'd like to draw attention to additional aspects of the work that should be of particular interest to ELA teachers. Graphic literature is often looked down upon because it doesn't seem to provide that experience of interiority that even third-person prose

novels produce rather effortlessly—that sensation of being fully involved in events and experiencing them vicariously through a point-of-view character. That’s because in comics, we often see the protagonist as an object in our field of vision rather than subject. Interestingly, though, many of the greatest graphic works are in the first person (*Maus*, *American Born Chinese*, *Blankets*, etc.) and typically compensate for this lack of interiority with strategies that leverage the art in subtle ways to convey the narrator’s mental states and emotions. None do this more effectively than *Persepolis*, which employs a deceptively simple cartooning style in the service of a rather sophisticated and nuanced commentary on the events depicted. To this end, Satrapi uses light and dark (often metaphorically), foreground and background, visual symbolism, repetition, asymmetry, synecdoche, and a variety of other devices. The result is that every page, after having its text read, invites a follow-up reading of the images. Sometimes these underscore or embellish the print text, but often they establish a kind of parallel text that carries the deeper themes. Finally, there are one or two dicey passages in *Persepolis*, to be sure, but this has not stopped inspired teachers from exploring the wealth of opportunities described above.

Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

As the best-selling graphic novel of all time, and the source material for a controversial film, these days *Watchmen*’s reputation precedes the actual text by many miles. For that reason, it’s great to know that many educators are recognizing not only the rich thematic context of this 1980s groundbreaker, but also how it extends themes from canon literature in unexpected and vivid ways. One such educator is Pennsylvania teacher John Weaver, who recently wrote of his experiences using *Watchmen* to address timeless ethical questions for GraphicNovelReporter.com. In addition, this radical reimagining of the cultural archetype known as the superhero is a good place to launch, or continue, an examination of the nature of heroism itself (*Beowulf*, *Henry V*), a topic that

Watchmen explores as it relates to patriotism, planetary survival, and justice. In terms of interiority, mentioned regarding *Persepolis* above, *Watchmen* represents an advance in complexity and, for that reason, may be useful to English department heads and curriculum writers as a follow-up title for students who read *Persepolis* in earlier grades. Not only are there multiple point-of-view narrators, but these first-person texts are also often used in juxtaposition with the visual text. A good example is the very first page of the epic, in which journal entries from a character who is not even present are used in counterpoint to the images. You will also want to keep an eye out for how Gibbons’s compositions create additional layers of meaning, and not just on the panel level, but on the page level, as he strategically places certain panels in the left, right, or center. Note: as you may know, *Watchmen* contains bloody violence and some nudity.

Marvels by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross; ***Kingdom***

Come by Alex Ross and Mark Waid

If *Watchmen* is too intense or “mature” for your students, consider these two titles because, after all, the graphic novel field is now secure enough in its academic and cultural standing that it can welcome the superhero tale back into the fold. Not that these are standard pow-bam slugfests by any means. *Marvels* is a great title with which to teach point-of-view as it revisits key characters and events of the Marvel universe from an “everyman” perspective. *Kingdom Come* is a masterful character study that dramatizes what

happens when central figures in the DC Universe question themselves, their missions, and their values. Although students may be dismayed to read of the deaths of characters such as Lois Lane and Captain Marvel, their familiarity with such characters offers an effective way to build critical thinking skills and to trigger a response to literature by approaching the familiar in an unfamiliar form: students with prior knowledge of these characters, even from other media, can activate that background information to analyze and evaluate how the artists and writers have reinterpreted

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them. (An alternative to both *Watchmen* and these titles is Frank Miller's edgy *The Dark Knight Returns*, a fascinating portrait of Batman in old age.)

Runaways (Volume 1) by Brian K. Vaughan, Adrian Alphona, and Takeshi Miyazawa Tapping expertly and imaginatively into adolescent rebelliousness and anxiety, Vaughan posits a group of teens who come to discover that their parents are, in fact, super-villains. Subversive and yet heartfelt, and with pitch-perfect dialogue,

Runaways is really a work of YA lit masquerading as a comics series. It's also notable for its gay subtext (later in the series, it is an overt theme), which also happens to include the pejorative use of the term "gay" by one of the characters—another teachable moment. As an alternative to this title, consider the first volume of *Ultimate Spider-Man*. Writer Brian Michael Bendis similarly captures the authentic voice of youth, returning the iconic character back to his roots as a troubled teen who must navigate school, romance, finances, and moral issues—but in an updated, contemporary manner.

Barefoot Gen by Keiji Nakazawa

This moving manga account of World War II and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, first published in the early '70s, suggests thematic connections to novel units that may already be in your 9–12 curriculum. These might include works ranging from *The Grapes of Wrath* (a portrait of one family's struggle against staggering adversity) to *All Quiet on the Western Front* (which *Barefoot Gen* echoes in specific scenes, such as the title character carrying the injured for help only to discover once there that he's dead). Curricular connections to nonfiction, such as John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, are easy to make as well, considering that the narrative is based upon creator Nakazawa's real-life experiences. Like the best graphic nonfiction, the author makes use of maps, labels, and footnotes throughout. (You could also build a unit around this title and *The 9/11 Report*, two depictions of devastating national tragedies.) But be "warned": *Barefoot*

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Gen is a no-holds-barred anti-war anthem that is brutally "graphic" in many places and is intended to provoke a visceral reaction in readers. Think Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*. For obvious reasons, this title would also make a fruitful pairing with *Maus*.

The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom by Katherine Arnoldi

A flip-test of this memoir by Henfield-winner Arnoldi might not reveal just how powerful a work this is, but it's a true milestone in

the medium. At age seventeen, the author became a mom, and her experiences raising her daughter while holding down factory and waitress jobs—all the time hoping to attend college—speaks to the dreams . . . and anxieties . . . of teens everywhere, arguably male and female alike. And this is not a feminist manifesto by someone feeling sorry for herself or angry at the world; it's an immensely readable and honest portrait of someone you want to have as a friend. Indeed, the humor and authenticity should enable your class to study that most elusive of writing traits—voice. As far as cartooning style is concerned, Arnoldi employs certain stylistic devices that distinguish this work from others' in important ways, while nonetheless staying accessible to students. For example, she often inserts additional text in the panel borders themselves, almost as if they are neon signs "crawling" around the perimeter, and these serve to highlight themes and ideas not addressed explicitly in the main text. Also, by using Arnoldi's work as a model for the autobiographical mode, you may be able to inspire students to write about their own lives; using the medium as a way of opening up self-expression is similar to what Dr. Michael Bitz has done in his famed Comic Book Project.

Fagin the Jew by Will Eisner; *The Jungle* by Peter Kuper and Emily Russell

Those who interested in the potential of comics to reimagine canon lit in authentic and compelling ways need look no further than these two titles. In Kuper's stunning, impassioned, and expressionistic adaptation of the Upton Sinclair classic, the original text has been

abridged in order to focus its narrative power; as such, you might want to consider this a supplement to, not a replacement for, the original prose novel. With his take on *Oliver Twist*, Will Eisner goes a step further

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and turns Fagin into the point-of-view character, complete with a fleshed-out backstory (and critical deconstruction of anti-Semitism) not included by Dickens. Of course, Eisner left a vast legacy of great graphic novels, so I’m not singling out *Fagin the Jew* as the “best” of these, but rather as a solid starting point for English teachers

unfamiliar with his work.

Blankets by Craig Thompson

I’m following the sole Eisner title on this list with *Blankets* because to me, there are few graphic storytellers who approach his naturalism, expressiveness, and humanism like Craig Thompson. Employing a similar stylistic approach that might be termed the “lyricism of the everyday,” Thompson has created an autobiographical work that speaks directly and memorably to what it means to be a child, adolescent, and young adult. You’ll want to be mindful of the handling of religious issues (a key part of the book), as well as the mild eroticism in the romance that eventually becomes the center of the narrative. Certainly, these topics are found in much literature, including YA lit, but their appearance in visual form can make them problematic, despite Thompson’s treatment of them in a manner that’s consistently tasteful and sensitive. In short, when people want to understand why graphica is worthy of being placed on par with the other arts, this is one of the small handful of titles you give them.

The Arrival by Shaun Tan

You may wonder why I’ve included a wordless graphic novel on an ELA list. Well, for one thing, Tan’s magnificently realized parable of the immigrant experience is a terrific way of proving that wordless doesn’t mean “textless”—far from it, in fact. In purely visual terms, then, *The Arrival* allows your students to analyze story elements, such as mood, pacing, plot, and character development, in a conceptual fashion that they can then transfer to other readings. In addition, Tan’s surrealist allegory provides a platform for discussing issues that may be of particular interest to ELLs and/or students who are recent immigrants. Finally, the wordless format allows you to engage in numerous speaking and listening activities in which students can provide “narrative captions” orally, as an exercise in storytelling.

Unfortunately, I’ve run out of space and there are many other graphic titles that deserve your consideration. But that’s the good news, too: there are simply so many works of graphic literature to choose from. After all, graphica is a medium, not a single genre. Just imagine recommending the top prose titles for 6–12—there’s clearly too much to talk about in a succinct way . . . and that’s a nice problem to have.

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