

Goth Girl Reading: Interpreting an Identity

Comic books and graphic novels: kid stuff, the bastion for bored students stuck in math class, the mortal enemy of English teachers everywhere, right? Media and literacy specialists who wrote to revamp the image of this literature and outlined methods for its inclusion in libraries and classrooms would answer with a resounding “wrong!” (Krashen, 1993; Carter, 2007; Goldsmith, 2005; Gorman, 2003; Copeland, Fletcher-Spear, and Jenson-Benjamin, 2005). Self-proclaimed “recovering comic book geek” and young adult author Barry Lyga would also cheer on these texts. Lyga’s decade-long work in the comic book industry and coauthored book, *Graphic Novels in Your Media Center: A Definitive Guide* (Lyga & Lyga, 2004), indicate as much.

But for teachers unconvinced or unable to incorporate the genre into more prohibitive programs of study, Lyga’s young adult novels, *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl* (2007; heretofore called simply *Fanboy*), and, particular to this study, its sequel, *Goth Girl Rising* (2009), provide a curricular compromise. While neither book delivers the benefits that graphic novels and comics provide to “reluctant readers” (Lyga and Lyga, 2004) or ESOL students (Krashen, 1993), each prose work includes the comic book universe as a central concept for study and affords teachers an opportunity to reference and utilize graphic novels and comic books in combination with these more conventional texts.

In *Goth Girl Rising* (Lyga, 2009), protagonist Kyra Sellers fashions a more stable identity after coming to interpret Gaiman’s graphic novel series, *Sandman* (1991), in a new way. Likewise, readers engaged in

the process of interpretation of the novel act as mirror images of Kyra. As Kyra reinterprets Gaiman, she revises her self. As students examine her transformation, they too gain the skills to reread themselves, learning, as Kyra does, to read texts as they exist in vast webs, not in isolation.

In the novel, Lyga crafts a familiar adolescent backdrop where high school conflicts, strained relationships with parents, and complicated connections to peers take center stage. This familiar milieu and the accessible language facilitate students’ interest and understanding of Kyra’s transformation, which occurs on three levels: the textual, or plot level; the metatextual, or the level that provides us instructions for how to read Kyra’s story; and the intertextual, or the level that links Kyra to characters in the comic book cosmos—specifically the Ur Goth girl, Death, from Gaiman’s *Sandman* series, who also appears in a comic book edition entitled *Captain Atom* (Bates, Weisman, Kayanan, and Tanghal, 1989).

Fanboy Rising

The initial salvo of descriptions in Barry Lyga’s *Fanboy* unnerves readers. Donny Marchetti, a lonely high school boy with a fixation on a bullet and a running list of his high school foes, broods over his parents’ broken marriage, dreads the birth of his stepsister (which will herald the formation of a new family led by the man he calls “step fascist”), isolates himself from most of his peers, and holes up in his basement bedroom. Though intelligent and artistic, as indicated in both text and illustrations for his own graphic

novel, *Schemata*, he stews in his disaffection, thumbing the lonely bullet in his pocket when bullied.

Donny dreams of physical retaliation instead of acting to better his life in rational ways. For some, this “boy with a bullet” representation proves frightening at best, irresponsible at worst. Reading past the stereotype of violent male adolescence, however, allows readers to experience an interpretive rever-

sal, for “Fanboy” Donny Marchetti’s lack of a gun and possession of a bullet mark him as a young man in stasis, armed but unable to shoot.

Enter the second titular character, “Goth girl” Kyra Sellers. Her face is a “thumb dipped in white paint” (Lyga, 2007, p. 39), first glimpsed from across a crowded gymnasium by

Donny as he endures his daily dose of physical abuse at the hands of Mitchell Frampton. Later, a virtual, “near-Kyra” takes shape in cyberspace through her online screen name, “Promethea387.” Embodying the angry voice inside of Donny, she instant messages him to ask one, loaded question: “*Why do you let him hit you?*” (Lyga, 2007, p. 44). Thus begins Donny and Kyra’s friendship, one in which she acts as a catalyst that, like Promethea, the Alan Moore character from whom she takes her screen name, refuses to transform but endlessly shapeshifts. As such, she is not given full countenance and remains true to her online screen name, about which Donny thinks:

In the comics, Promethea was a sort of physical and metaphysical avatar for the nature of ideas themselves. She was the incarnation of imagination, and her purpose [...] was to bring about the end of the comic book universe she inhabited. Sort of a metatextual commentary on the self-destructive cycle of superhero comics or something like that. (p. 47)

Indeed, for much of the novel, Kyra’s puzzling, self-destructive nature works to bring about the end of Donny’s largely inaccessible universe. Her appearance, caustic attitude, unwillingness to open up to Donny in meaningful ways, and the faint scars on her wrists fascinate Donny, who wishes only to blend into his surroundings, not to stand out. Despite these

physical differences, their social detachment connects the pair, their shared disdain for the endless stream of peers focused on blasé things like lacrosse. Their interest in comic books and graphic novels also unites them, and Donny eventually allows Kyra to review pages of *Schemata* so that she can offer feedback. Her blunt criticism and vaulted praise inspire him as he plans to attend a comic book convention in hopes of showing his work to his idol, Bendis.

In this first novel, these commonalities culminate in ways that indicate Donny’s positive movement toward stability and, true to her avatar’s shifting form, Kyra’s slide towards instability, since, by the end of *Fanboy*, Donny has talked to the girl of his dreams, attended a “popular kids” party, gone to the comic book convention, gotten rebuffed by Bendis, and come to understand that not all of his peers are like Mitchell Frampton. He has also lost the bullet but distanced himself from Kyra, who sits brooding on a deserted playground, contemplating death while thumbing Donny’s bullet.

My students, high school teachers interested in adopting young adult literature for their classrooms and teachers-in-training studying crises and resolutions in adolescent literacy, were pleased with Donny’s burgeoning ability to reread his life circumstance in increasingly mature ways. I, however, wondered about Kyra. I felt her behavior made her the perfect candidate to become a solitary girl with a bullet *and* a gun. My students invariably reminded me, this is not *her* story. It is through his own grappling with Kyra’s impulsive behaviors that Donny becomes an agent in his own life, rising up out of the basement and gaining perspective. I conceded, though labeling Kyra a mere cipher continued to alarm me, since the absence of resolution for her character marks her as yet another female put under erasure in service of her male counterpart’s growth. Complicating the propagation of this all too ubiquitous message is the text’s adolescent target audience, many of whom already struggle with enculturated gender roles and do not need another representation of a girl sublimating her identity.

Because Kyra’s tale has no satisfying resolution, I often returned to *Fanboy*, not to reread Donny’s story but to find more evidence of Kyra’s. I wanted to traverse the faint, “dead white” scars on her wrists that are “like a topographical map [with] raised ridges representing mountain ranges built through trauma

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and age” (Lyga, 2007, p. 86). Instead, I found Donny foregrounding his own body as he looks at Kyra’s wrists: “I think of scar tissue on my knee, memento of my mad dash up the stairs when Dad’s old coat goosed my imagination; it’s a senseless dead zone on my body where I can feel nothing” (p. 86). In order to negotiate the terrain of Kyra’s trauma, I had to walk in Donny’s footprints—that is, until the sequel, *Goth Girl Rising* (Lyga, 2009), where Kyra and the wilderness of her scars are mapped out.

Goth Girl Reading

Before reading Lyga’s follow-up, I revisited notable passages in *Fanboy* that describe Kyra: her see-through skin—“chalk [. . .] Kabuki makeup [. . .] Liquid Paper” (Lyga, 2007, p. 87)—the black clothing that covers her for most of the book, the ample breasts she hides but uses to shock at inappropriate moments, the surly girl alone on a playground with Donny’s bullet, thinking about death. I returned also to Kyra’s online screen name, Promethea, that comic book character who functions as a “metatextual commentary on the self-destructive cycle of superhero comics” (p. 47). Finally, I thought about my needs as a reader of *Goth Girl Rising* (Lyga, 2009). I sought to understand Kyra’s behavior, to find some Ariadnic thread that could lead me through the labyrinth.

The term “metatextual” comes up again in *Goth Girl Rising* (Lyga, 2009), when Donny, now a secondary character, explains that “A meta-level [. . .] is when the story comments on itself.” He goes on to say that “[A meta-level] is like the old Sherlock Holmes stories, [. . .] mysteries [. . .] designed to teach you how to read them. You weren’t just watching Holmes solve the mystery—you were also being taught how to solve the mystery of the story” (p. 270). Such a definition dropped into the novel not only explains the term in an accessible manner, but provides an example of it at work. Intertextuality, then, became the golden thread I sought. Reading with it in mind allows readers to connect *Fanboy* to *Goth Girl Rising* and then leads us through the intricacies of Kyra Sellers’s transformation. Kyra is the Holmesian mystery. The stories referenced in the book instruct her how to read and reread her self and, in turn, help us to read her.

At first, Lyga renders Kyra with intensity familiar to readers of *Fanboy* (Lyga, 2007). She is an adoles-

cent dealing with the loss of her mother and emotional distance from her father, her changing body, her sexuality, and volatile friendships. She has just returned from a six-month stay in a mental health facility where she was labeled as “DCHH”: a “Daddy Couldn’t Handle Her” patient. She is, much like Donny at the beginning of *Fanboy*, isolated and angry. She blames Donny for her “incarceration” in the institution, since he resourcefully called her father once he realized that Kyra stole his bullet; she is hell-bent on revenge, especially when she sees that Fanboy is now a well-adjusted student—closer to his mother, step-father, and new baby sister, and, most important, a young artist whose graphic novel has moved from a basement room to a regular school publication. She is no longer the avatar who brings about change through destruction and creation of a new perspective, but rather one who, at least at this point, seeks utter destruction.

For a large portion of the novel, Kyra vacillates. Her best friends, Jecca and Simone, exemplify her gender-role confusion. She makes out with Jecca, wanting to find “a touch, warmth, connection, heat, anything” (Lyga, 2009, p. 25), yet finds her self increasingly uncomfortable with Simone’s promiscuity. At night, she dreams about loving Fanboy, yet she schemes about revenge during her waking hours. One day, she revels in her dark hair, a curtain she can hide behind, and her black clothes that also obscure, but on the next, she shaves her head, dons ElekTrick Sex blue lipstick, and wears all white clothing. She thinks about her mother’s lung cancer and death in agonizing snippets of poetry and snipes hatefully at her father. In several places, she even embodies various allegorical characters from Gaiman’s Sandman series: Death, her her; Despair; and Dream.

Such uncertainty is enough to give the reader whiplash. However, the inability to take a definite shape is not only a hallmark of adolescence but harkens back to the eponymous character from the series penned by Alan Moore, *Promethea* (2000), a character who is both physical and metaphysical, the “incarnation of ideas themselves.” At first, then, the text instructs us to see Kyra as a shape shifter, as someone who may have power to change another’s life as she did Donny’s, but not as someone who can exist as a single embodiment.

Soon, though, the graphic novel and comic book trope begins to give distinct shape to Kyra. In *Fanboy*

(Lyga, 2007), Donny papers his walls with his own drawings and thinks incessantly about showing his work to his idol, Bendis, at the Comic Convention. He has to make this journey and suffer disappointment in order to grow. To evidence this trope at work in *Goth Girl* (2009), Lyga writes several chapters in epistolary style, as letters from Kyra to her favorite graphic novelist, Neil Gaiman. Though unsent and therefore existent in a liminal space, they inform readers of Kyra's innermost thoughts. In an early letter, she writes:

I wish life could be simple like the actual page of a comic book. You look at a comic book page and there are rules, rules that make sense. The page is always the same size. There are panel borders and you know that the art-work goes inside the panel borders. Word balloons. Caption boxes. One panel leads to the next, one balloon to the next, and it makes sense [. . .] It all fits together and if you tried to look at just part of it, it really wouldn't work. You look at the whole thing, though, and you have a little piece of the story. (p. 45)

Beyond illustrating a desire for simplicity and structure, this letter also supplies readers with Kyra's initial understanding of the comic book universe. It is one safely contained, made up of lines and blocks where "everything makes sense." Her definition fits the common "escapist" classification of comic books but also fits her life experience. Losing her mother, attempting suicide, being committed, and struggling to find a place with peers and her father have evidenced that the world is a menacing place where idealistic rules don't matter. But the balloons, boxes, and panels of graphic novels enclose her, keeping this riotous world at bay. In this letter to Gaiman, Kyra's desire for borders illustrates, for the first time, a semi-static young woman who longs for permanence in an increasingly complex adult world. Ironically, though, a belief in these foundational elements also traps Kyra and, at least at first, prevents her from evolving.

In two subsequent scenes, Donny prompts Kyra to reconsider Gaiman's *Sandman* series and her elementary definition of graphic novels and comics. First, he asks her if she knows that Gaiman's entire series was supposed to be half as long. He also sets up a meta-level, telling Kyra that he reread the series with the letters that came after each installment, in particular one to which Gaiman himself replied. Authorial intrusion that crafts a meta-level is not at all something Kyra is prepared for. She thinks, "My head's spinning.

[. . .] I never even thought about Sandman in issue numbers" (Lyga, 2009, p. 179). Kyra read the story as a whole, following one panel to the next, finding comfort in the structure. To think of that structure in any other way sets her reeling. Her ordered reading life cannot be superseded with Donny's rereading.

In another significant moment, Donny and his friend, Cal, offer Kyra a different interpretation of "Brief Lives," an issue within the *Sandman* series. Cal says, "When you read the whole thing, you see all these meta-levels that Gaiman put in there. Like the whole thing in "Brief Lives" where Dream has to go see the oracle [. . .] He's going there to find [. . . Destruction and] it turns out that Destruction is hiding out on the bluff right across from the oracle's temple." Cal begins laughing, to which Kyra replies, "I don't think it's funny." Donny, trying to mediate the interpretive moment, says "It's funny and sad [. . .] It's ironic, Kyra" (Lyga, 2009, p. 271). Cal then asks Donny to talk about whether or not the whole series is a dream. Again, Kyra says she cannot "believe that. The series is real" (p. 273). The new interpretation of a much-beloved graphic novel series is not something Kyra can merely disagree with; rather, she refuses the different analyses altogether, and the anger and confusion born of these new ideas are palpable. She thinks:

Are they right? Did I read the whole series and not get it at all? [. . .] I read it over and over and over again. I took it so seriously, and those two think it's all a dream and that all the sad parts are actually funny [. . .] It makes me angrier and angrier as the day goes on. Because even if they're right, who the hell are they to tell me I'm wrong? (p. 274)

Here, she reinforces her need to see comics as simple, as untouched by the complications of the world, interpreted in one of two ways: right or wrong. She finds stability and reassurance in Gaiman's text, qualities absent from her young life. Donny and Cal problematize her reading and, since she connects heavily to Gaiman's character Death, her own conception of self. Kyra's bewilderment and anger after these conversations prevent her from achieving a new understanding of her self through interpretation. They do, however, pinpoint a crisis for her, a moment in which the panels of the comic book universe are not as self-contained as she once believed.

When Kyra is held in police custody for trying to steal a car, she becomes a captive audience, forced to encounter yet another example of intertextuality.

In this scene, she finally sees beyond her monolithic reading of the Sandman series and the character of Death from the series. One of the few items in her bag after her arrest is a gift from Fanboy—an edition of a comic entitled *Captain Atom* (Bates et al., 1989) in which the character of Death from Gaiman’s Sandman appears. Kyra relates, “The first time I saw it, I thought it looked like a million other dumb superhero covers, but now that I’m actually studying it, it’s sort of different. For one thing, he really looks like he’s straining [. . .]. And for another thing, he’s so tiny compared to the stone and the whole cover” (Lyga, 2009 p. 339). Behaving as a close reader, Kyra reads the comic and then “[flips] back to the beginning and [reads] it again. Slowly this time, paying lots of attention” (p. 340). Then, she reads it a third time before declaring that she “feels like [her] head’s been messed with” (p. 343). She narrates,

I mean, yeah, it’s got some Sandman characters in it, even though it’s a superhero comic. But it’s not like what you normally expect from a superhero comic. And it’s nothing like a Sandman comic, either. It’s this different thing, this different way of looking at the same characters and ideas (Lyga, 2009, p. 343).

Since her mother’s real-world death and her initial, simplified reading of Gaiman’s character Death, Kyra has envisioned death as “cool and mysterious,” the being that “didn’t let [people] get away with shit [. . . who] always told [. . .] the truth [and went] around to people and [smacked] them in the head [to] make them see” (p. 177). She even attempts to embody Gaiman’s Death in the way she dresses, talks, and, at least on one occasion, sees Death as a “blessing” that inspires her to “slit her wrists and get some blessing of [her] own” (p. 343).

In issue 42 of *Captain Atom*, however, Gaiman’s perky, dimpled Goth girl named Death appears alongside another embodiment of death, the “Black Skier,” characterized as the “Race Everyone Runs—and loses” (p. 341). In this installment of the comic, Captain Atom chooses to die so that he can go to see his dead wife, Angela. He must first travel to Purgatory to pay for his sins. Once in heaven with his wife, he wants to stay. Kyra relates that there is “some sort of mystical mumbo jumbo about how Captain Atom can’t stay [but must] return to life to fight another version of Death: This one is a villain called Nekron” (p. 342). Thus, Captain Atom returns to the world to battle,

leaving his beloved behind.

This particular reading event, made possible by Fanboy’s gift of the comic and, ironically, because of her own attempted sin of stealing, provides Kyra with an epiphanic moment in which she is reborn through Death’s changing context. She thinks,

“But what if Death *isn’t* a comfort? Or at least, what if it’s not *just* comfort? What if Death is a bunch of different things, depending? Like sometimes it’s comfort and sometimes it’s just this inevitable conclusion and sometimes it’s ‘Nekron, Lord of the Unliving!’” (p. 344)

The young woman who could only see interpretation as right or wrong now sees multiplicity and possibility:

“It’s Jecca. It’s Captain Atom. It’s Death and Nekron and Morpheus and all of it. It’s Mom. It’s Dad. I don’t know how to put it into words. All those people, all of those characters . . . Connecting. Interacting. Some for real. Some in my head.” (p. 345)

No longer is the comic book universe simple for Kyra. Death jumps Gaiman’s pages and lands in the middle of *Captain Atom* (Moore, Williams, & Gray, 2000). Here, she stands alongside other significations of death that complicate Kyra’s own worldview. As

Kyra encounters and accepts intertextuality as a means to understand texts and her self in relation to them, readers of Kyra’s tale also encounter a meta-level: issue 42 is a microcosm of the larger narrative that surrounds it—the Goth girl’s rise. Captain Atom’s story is Kyra’s, and readers see this parallel at the same time as Kyra.

Like Atom, she must confront her sins against her self and others, accept a different identity, and return to the world where she will fend off her own Nekron—her destructive and suicidal tendencies. At the end of these chapters, Kyra is no longer a faceless Goth girl, a shape-shifting Promethea meant only to decode another character. Though she confesses she doesn’t understand everything she has read or experienced, she accepts responsibility for her crime by starting at the beginning: she finally tells the

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arresting officer her name. In doing so, she becomes a solid figure, made up of atoms and by *Captain Atom*.

The Possible Adventure

The curricular trappings of high school figure largely into our students' reading lives. Oft-taught epics like *The Odyssey* and *Gilgamesh* present students with archetypal journeys that remain abstract and largely inaccessible. As students study other types of canonical texts in their high school English classes, alien language can lock them out and may cause secondary teachers to focus inordinate amounts of time solely on

linguistic features or plot-lines. Standards related to close reading and analysis can easily fall by the wayside, and teachers, frustrated, may assign yet another list of vocabulary words, create end-of-unit tests that ask students to regurgitate memorized data, or, worse, provide canned interpretations for students.

Most horrific are the studies of this "canon as cultural medicine"

philosophy that dominates some curricula. Atkins-Goodson (2009) contended that numerous teachers "have wrinkled their noses at the possibility of using [graphic novels] in literature circles and as independent reading choices." As a result, she said, "we're making our own teaching lives a little more difficult, and we're not doing our students any favor by being the gatekeepers on quality literature. By asserting our own tastes regarding literature, we're not letting our students find their own favorites" (2009). In programs where teachers refuse literatures that could reach pupils and/or stick to an all-classics-all-the-time syllabus, students are unlikely to become lifelong readers or critical thinkers (Bushman and Haas, 2005). In these sorts of programs, reading becomes an activity that takes place in school for teachers and tests, not for students' acquisition of advanced literacy and certainly not as an activity connected in meaningful ways to their lives.

To be sure, countless teachers and media specialists have revised their role as literary "gatekeepers," evolving into literacy experts who provide pathways. They expose secondary students to classics and to contemporary works, and myriad schools have responded to students' voracious appetite for young adult literature and sundry genres by creating and promoting self-select reading programs (Cavazos-Kottke, 2005) or permitting independent reading and creative writing projects. Teachers also actively bridge to the classics, connecting more orthodox literature to texts more tangible for adolescents (Bushman and Haas, 2005).

Using young adult literature like Lyga's *Goth Girl Rising* (2009) allows us to continue this kind of evolution in the classroom. Locating *Goth Girl*'s journey lets us address a typical standard with a somewhat atypical text, and we instill value in the genre of graphic novels and comic books—a twin win. Like other journeyers, Kyra travels from the *nadir*—which, for her, is the mental hospital—to the societal return—a reentrance into her adolescent world's mounting complications and the impending adult world with which she has already grappled but failed. At the end of *Fanboy* (Lyga, 2007), she was unable to channel the grief over her mother's death in productive ways or negotiate a relationship with her father, whom she blames for her mother's cancer. In *Goth Girl Rising* (Lyga, 2009), she eventually tackles these issues and goes home—to school, to her friends, and, of course, to her friendship with Donny. She accomplishes this return not by battling a Cyclops or an angry Scylla of the sea but by overcoming her own monolithic views of graphic novels and comics and rereading the sometime maelstrom of her life circumstance in the resulting context that her increasing literacy provides.

Donny's role as helpmate in *Goth Girl Rising* (Lyga, 2009), especially if placed alongside Kyra's identical role in *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl* (Lyga, 2007), permits teachers to talk about the equalization of a previously one-sided relationship in which Kyra can be read only through her interaction with Donny. Donny's role, while integral, is not primary in the sequel, and Kyra gains new perspective at *Fanboy*'s urging, just as he gained agency via her actions in the first novel. She inspires him to handle rejection at the comic book convention, and he stages a graphic novel intervention that asks her

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to evaluate her reading, even providing her with the crucial copy of *Captain Atom*. This reciprocity, then, removes any sublimation and positions Donny as a key figure who aids Kyra as she travels.

Most important, *Goth Girl Rising* (Lyga, 2009) allows us to introduce intertextual and metatextual levels to students. Kyra's journey, begun but by no means satisfyingly finished at the end of *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl* (Lyga, 2007), finds resolution in her own expanding horizon of experience as a reader. She achieves new understanding of her self through striving to understand texts differently. Advancing her literacy, which includes complicating her previous definition of graphic novels and comic books and rereading Gaiman in a new context, ushers in a new identity for Kyra, who becomes "Promethea unbound" and bound for adulthood. We hope for that same result in our students.

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