



GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE CLASSROOM

Selene Angier | Textbooks.com | Published September 23, 2017

Drafting theses, crafting analytic arguments, and detailing character studies – it’s not just for literature anymore. The rise of graphic novels and comics in the college classroom means students are exploring all the same learned themes we’ve come to prop up and pick apart in the classics – coming of age, the power of optimism, the perils of racism, religious struggles, and everyone’s favorite superhero motif - revenge.

But these are not all your brother’s cape-clad iconoclasts. Sure, defiant defenders are at the center of *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, and *The Dark Knight*, but consider mice, cats, and the Holocaust juxtaposed in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. Or the veiled pint-sized hero of *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi’s childhood memoir set in revolution-era Iran.

Then there’s Alison Bechdel, who won a [MacArthur grant](#) last week, thanks in part to her coming out memoir, *Fun Home*, and the immigrant misfit backdrop of Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese*.

They win Pulitzers. Hollywood vies to adapt (and make millions off) them. And professors are adopting them as textbooks and creating whole courses around them (check out the free online class [“Comic Books and Graphic Novels”](#) on Coursera.)

We caught up with a few college instructors for their take on this non-traditional learning tool as “worthy” literature.

[Watchmen](#) by Alan Moore

“My literature and cultural studies courses are often centered around a theme, and *Watchmen* provides a complex and sophisticated approach to so many of the themes that interest me – the nature of time, the experience of selfhood and subjectivity, randomness vs. design. I select a graphic novel for a class the same way I would select a prose novel: if it’s well made, lends itself towards discussion and analysis, and advances the goals of my course.”

- Eliot Borenstein, Professor of Russian & Slavic Studies at New York University

[Maus](#) by Art Spiegelman

“This engrossing biography of Holocaust survivor Vladek Spiegelman is so much more than ‘just another’ Holocaust story. It combines meticulous historical research by the author – the survivor’s son – to present a lucid history of the Nazi Holocaust that is contextualized within the framework of one family’s pre-war and postwar life. On a further level it documents the author’s – and by extension all successive generations’ – struggle to find meaning and come to terms with such historical devastation.”

- Harold Marcuse, Professor at University of California, Santa Barbara

[Persepolis](#) by Marjane Satrapi

“*Persepolis* works beautifully in the classroom because it is a fine work of art and a compelling introduction to the history of Iran in the late twentieth century. The combination of visual art and memoir is a compelling way for students to learn.”

- Elizabeth A. Wheeler, Associate Professor of English at University of Oregon

[V for Vendetta](#) by Alan Moore

“I routinely came back to [*V for Vendetta*] because what makes it so hard to teach is what makes it exciting and compelling. I would discuss obvious topics with students – political philosophies, such as social contract theory and anarchy – but also explore themes that might be less obvious to students and other instructors. The gender dynamics of the text are fascinating. How is V’s gender produced on the page even though his face is covered and he frequently wears a cape and costume that conceal his body? How does the text provoke questions about post-colonialism and multiculturalism in British society? And how do these lessons from a dystopian past affect how we think about our own sociopolitical futures?”

- Patrick R. Grzanka, Assistant Professor in Psychology at University of Tennessee

[Barefoot Gen, Vol. 2: The Day After](#) by Keiji Nakazawa

“The *Barefoot Gen* series centers on the story of Gen Nakaoka, a Japanese boy who experiences the aftermath of the 1946 bombing of Hiroshima, and Volume 2 of Gen’s story is based on Nakazawa’s personal memories of surviving the bomb as a seven-year-old child. Although *Barefoot Gen* adheres to a cartoonish traditional manga style, I find that students react strongly to its raw depiction of the physical and psychological effects of war. Nakazawa’s dark graphic novel offers a deeply personal perspective on the horrors of war because it is filtered through the subjectivity of memory.”

- Dr. Leandra Swanner, Honors Faculty Fellow, Barrett Honors College at Arizona State University

[Palestine](#) by Joe Sacco

“The journalist Joe Sacco offers in this often-intense graphic novel a troubling perspective on this tragic area of the Middle East that remains ever in the news. As a self-effacing protagonist, the cartooned Sacco brings to the story a prejudiced narrator – with whom the average reader easily identifies – burdened by stereotypical and oversimplified beliefs about Palestinians. The graphic novel’s words and images dash Sacco’s and the reader’s expectations and reveal instead in a

sympathetic light the daily horrors of Palestine and the manner in which political oppression and violence grind the array of characters with whom Sacco interacts.”
- Bill Clemente, Professor of English at Peru State College

Fun Home by Alison Bechdel

“The power of *Fun Home* lies in the intimacy of its message, the brilliance of its formal innovation, and the depth of its literary sensibility. *Fun Home* is a reader's graphic novel. It is about what it means to find yourself in a book, and so it extends its own sense of revelation to the reader. We are entering a new age in comics, an end to the age of embarrassment and a beginning of the age of inclusion, and *Fun Home* is one of the gateways into this new period.”

- William Kuskin, Professor and Chair of Department of English at University of Colorado Boulder

The Book of Genesis Illustrated by R. Crumb

“While my [Survey of World Religions] course had a textbook - Huston Smith’s *The World's Religions* - and a scholarly translation of *Genesis* by Robert Alter from the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, nothing brought home the beautiful oddness and overlooked complexity of this presumably well-known scripture than the art of R. Crumb. When confronted by images and imaginings of the biblical stories rather than the familiar text, students were much more energized to respond and react. Did the Serpent have legs originally? Was Noah drunk? Abraham remarried?”

- A. David Lewis, Ph.D. Faculty Associate at Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences

Stitches by David Small

“I frequently pair David Small’s *Stitches* alongside Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Both are memoirs addressing somewhat similar themes of difficult childhoods. Unlike *Fun Home*, which is a more literary heavy text, *Stitches* has very few words and has a strong cinematic feel. The similarity and contrast of this pairing allows me to get at the wide range of ways comics can make meaning. Small uses the visual composition and metaphorical imagery to capture the emotional experience of being a child. The details of the story could certainly be conveyed in words, but it is his images of fear, aloneness, and wonder - that resonate with a reader, and really allow one to identify with the young David and his experiences.”

- Nick Sousanis, Instructor at Teachers College, Columbia University

Are you an avid reader of graphic novels? Have you read any as part of a college course? Join the discussion on [Facebook](#) or check out our [Graphic Novels](#) board on Pinterest.