

Accepted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

At

The Savannah College of Art and Design

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**Comics in the Classroom: Using Sequential Art to Enhance Literacy**

A Thesis Submitted to the Sequential Art Department  
In Partial Fulfillment for the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Fine Arts  
Savannah College of Art and Design

By

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Submitted: Dec. 2011

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## **Comics in the Classroom: Using Sequential Art to Enhance Literacy**

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Dec. 2011

This paper argues the validity of comics as a tool for teaching literacy in today's modern classrooms. It discusses how comics can help learning readers become literate Americans. It provides teachers definitions of integral terms that must be understood to read and discuss comics. It then uses the Common Core Standards, the most commonly accepted standards for United States public school systems, to talk about an excellent age-appropriate comic. The purpose of this paper is to give teachers a starting point to help reading become more interactive, entertaining, and enjoyable for all school-age students.

## I. Introduction

As of 2009, of the 31 highly developed countries in the world, the United States ranked 15<sup>th</sup> in literacy (Lyne, *Who's Number 1?*). For the richest country in the world to rank in the middle in overall literacy is an atrocity. The following exploration considers a significant aid to literacy -- the use of image to enhance and clarify text -- comics. The Common Core State Standards (Common Core Standards Initiative) are widely accepted educational standards systems currently used in the United States by 44 states. The Core Standards de-emphasize the use of image to aid reading as early as the first grade (Common Core, ELA Standards). In doing so, the Common Core State Standards ignore the benefits of image and illustration in creating meaningful and exciting ways to promote literacy. The term "comic" is widely accepted as the integration of text and image. Here, comics are presented as one engaging solution to mediocre literacy achievement in the United States.

Comics are, and will be examined as, a supplemental medium that can help keep students of all ages engaged and entertained as well as become successful and literate adults in a world where many necessary devices use text and image integration. A series of excellent comics appropriate for early, intermediate, and advanced readers are provided for teachers to use.

The first section defines what it means to be literate in America today. The second section examines the specific components that define a comic. The third section uses the literacy components from the Common Core State Standards to select a series of reading-level appropriate comic books. The information provided offers a framework for teachers

to help build a curriculum that uses comics to create an energetic and effective learning experience for their students.

## **II. The Literate American**

According to the National Institute for Literacy (NIL) there are three prominent types of literacy: prose literacy- the ability to read texts such as newspapers, brochures, and instructional materials; document literacy- being able to comprehend and use texts such as payroll forms, job applications, transportation schedules, maps, and food labels; and quantitative literacy- having the knowledge to perform computations such as balancing a checkbook, completing an order form, or determining an amount (NCES). Each of these tasks is integral to a person's ability to function effectively in society.

The Common Core State Standards, in their ELA guidelines, provide ten reading standards that must be met for a student to be considered "college ready literate" (CCSS, 10). Each of the ten standards correlates to the prominent types of literacy set forth by the NIL. For example, the seventh Standard for College Readiness states, "[students must] integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words" (CCSS, 10). This standard not only relates directly to each of the three categories of literacy set forth by the NIL, but it also supports the argument to integrate comic books into the classroom. Comics are presented in and consist of diverse media. They appear digitally, in newspapers, in periodical form, in narrative format, and online. According to a 2011 study of fourth grade students conducted by the National Center for Educational Studies, students who daily read for fun scored higher on reading assessments than students who rarely read for fun (NCES: Reading 2011, 19).

Within the report, there is no data about what the children are reading. The act of reading, however done, is the important factor in the study.

### **A. The Comic “Stigma”**

Comics are often dismissed as reading material. This stigma with no real basis in fact and largely unchallenged outside the comic industry. It appears to have begun with the research of Dr. Henry Wertham.

Dr. Henry Wertham was a highly respected psychologist during the post-World War II, McCarthy Era. In 1948, he chaired a symposium in association with the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy called “The Psychopathology of Comic Books.” This symposium, attended by many prominent psychoanalysts of the time, attempted to destroy comic books as a medium and succeeded in creating a very negative view of comic books in general. One of the attendees, Dr. Gerson Legman, in the 1948 *American Journal of Psychotherapy* stated, “comic books concentrate on aggressions which are impossible under civilized restraints” (473). Later in the same essay he described the result of the view of this aggression as being “‘educational,’ meaning that instead of fictional violence, real violence will be substituted” (475).

Many of the other attendees of the symposium agreed with this assessment, and cited their own research to substantiate their claims that violence in juvenile delinquency had increased in direct proportion with the spread of comic books in the country. Dr. Marvin L. Blumberg, another attendee of the conference, tried to point to other underlying causes of juvenile violence, saying, “(w)e should offer love and increasing cooperation, thereby reducing the *causes* for hostility. If there is little cruelty in the handling of our children, there will be little need for their revenge and aggression” (490).

In 1954, Dr. Henry Wertham wrote *The Seduction of the Innocent*, resulting in a Senate hearing to discuss the harm comics were doing to the nation's youth and led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority. The Comics Code Authority created by the comic book industry in response to the congressional hearing was intended to let parents know whether the books their kids were reading were appropriate. Each comic produced under the Authority had a printed seal on the front of the book stating that it was approved by the Comics Code Authority. The Authority and its code limited the violence, horror, and sexual themes identified as inappropriate by the congressional committee and laid out in Wertham's book.

### **B. Research and Rescue**

Over fifty years later, the challenge is still to prove comics are not only a literary form but also a tool for literacy. Since 1954, many different studies have shown how the integration of image into text can be extremely beneficial to students. In the book *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*, writers Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith discuss a research project in which three groups of students were presented with a history lesson. Each group was given the lesson in a different format: text-only, text with illustration (like a textbook), and in sequential art form. When tested on the material, the students who read the text-only format scored lower than the group with text and illustration, and the latter group scored lower than those who read the content in comic book format (Duncan Smith, 278). The purpose of this study was to test the viability of comics as an additional learning method for school-aged students.

Dr. Christina Angel, a professor of English at Metro State College of Denver, requires students to use at least one comic for their research for their papers. When challenged, she

refers to a book called *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* by Perry Nodelman. In the book, Nodelman uses examples that take a picture book and separates the words and images and has a series of students tell the story of the pictures, or draw the pictures of the book based on the words. What he discovered was that the students given either task were unable to recreate the book. His conclusion was that the pictures and words are interrelated and only create meaning when juxtaposed (Nodelman).

Dr. Angel has partnered with Illya Kowalchuk, Frank Romero, and Charlamagne LaGreca to create The Comic Book Classroom ([www.comicbookclassroom.org](http://www.comicbookclassroom.org)), an after-school program that teaches the storytelling aspects of comics and encourages elementary and middle school kids to learn reading, writing, and story structure through the medium of comic books. Kowalchuk holds a Masters in Education with a focus on integrating the Creative Arts. Frank Romero is a serious comic fan. Charlie LaGreca, hosts an online comic podcast called Indie Spinner Rack. He holds a comic degree from the Kubert School in New Jersey as well. Their program has been highly received and is endorsed by the Denver Public School district and, with help from the Stan Lee Foundation, will be integrated into the Los Angeles Unified School District this spring.

James Sturm, one of the founders of the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont, wrote an article for the National Association of Comic Arts Educators called, "A Case for Comics" that provides a series of arguments for the viability of comics, not only as an art form, but a tool for literacy. He breaks his essay into seven sections expressing the positives of the comic medium. In section three, titled "Passion", he tells a story about the enthusiasm of students in the Seattle Public School system. He says, "public school teachers I work with tell me that these classroom visits are the most anticipated events of

the year.” In section four, titled “Sequential Courses Enrich Multi-Media Curriculum”, he states that, “sequential art classes offer computer art students the challenge of juggling a multitude of elements and effects without monopolizing limited terminal space.” He characterizes comic artists this way, “sequential art is the original multi-media. Its practitioners must orchestrate several varying elements in order to produce a cohesive whole.” Throughout the rest of the article he gives many additional reasons for recognizing comics as viable educational tools and for integrating them into school curricula including, learning and practicing story structure, the minimal cost to schools, as well as the diversity of the skill set an accomplished comic artist must have including, “life drawing, perspective, design, typography, color, writing, editing, acting. From lighting and costuming to researching a script and finding visual references, creating a comic is like staging your own play” (Sturm, “A Case for Comics”).

All in all, when utilizing comics in the classroom there are many literary-based skill sets necessary to read, understand, and even create a high-quality comic. Applying all three prominent forms of literacy is necessary for reading comics. The student must be able to read prose (prose literate). A comic book is a story. A student must be able to read text that uses non-continuous texts in various formats (document literacy). The text in comics is broken up into word balloons and caption boxes and rarely appears in a long continuous format. A student must also be able perform computations (quantitative literacy) to understand the pacing and timing of a comic based on the amount of panels on a page or even the number of pages that collectively produce the story. Comics are one of the few mediums in which all three forms of literacy are used concurrently.

### **III. Defining Comics...Or Sequential Art...or is it Graphic Novels ...or Graphic Storytelling? It's all of them.**

“Comic” is a term that is used broadly for the creative medium that marries at least one image with words to help explain or define aspects of the image. It is this text-image relationship that is integral in literacy development. Comics are ubiquitous. They are found in magazines, newspapers, on retailers’ merchandising displays, and on billboards. In this examination, comics that include more than one image to tell a story (i.e. comic books, comic strips, graphic novels) are considered literature for use in the classroom. Comic pioneer Will Eisner defined this type of comic as “sequential art” (Eisner, 6).

Sequential art is two or more image panels. No specified page, panel, or story length determines sequential art, as long as there is more than one image. Scott McCloud, in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, gives what is perhaps the most widely accepted definition of comics and sequential art: “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). An aesthetic response is the main goal of comics as a source of information and entertainment. The use of image and text to explain ideas has been used as long as human events have been recorded. Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, points to Egyptian hieroglyphs as early examples of sequential art (12-14). Will Eisner, in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*, cites Chinese and Japanese calligraphy saying, “in the development of Chinese and Japanese pictographs, a welding of a pure visual imagery and a uniform derivative took place” (14). Each of these masters of the medium identifies comics and sequential art as an early and necessary method of communication. What they don’t say is what makes the medium unique.

## **A. Comic Conventions (as in common forms -- not a gathering of geeks)**

What makes sequential art a unique art form is the inclusion of time within the structure of a series of images on the same page. There are three specific tools sequential artists use to create this sense of time. First is the panel or frame; second is the inclusion of text into the image in the form of word balloons, thought balloons, and captions; and the third is closure, also known as timing or the panel-to-panel transition. Each of these tools is used in other mediums, but all three together can only be found in sequential art.

### **1. The Panel**

The panel is defined by its use. A panel is used “to express the passage of time, the framing of a series of images moving through space” (Eisner, 38). A panel in a comic book is used to denote a specific time and the panel next to it shows the next important moment within the context of the story. The time interval can be an instant or much longer.

A comic panel is the frame or space that surrounds an image within a sequential art piece. A typical comic book consists of a series of drawings telling a complete story with a beginning, middle, and end. Whether it is the entire story, or just a particular piece, the author needs to separate the story’s moments. Commonly, a rectangular box around each image creates a comic panel. Will Eisner, used the rectangular panel, and many other creative ways to create the panels.

Eisner was an early innovator in sequential art. His greatest innovations were the choices of the shape, and inclusion or exclusion, of the comic panel. In chapter four of his book, *Comics and Sequential Art* (38-100), Eisner discusses the meaning of the shape of a comic panel and gives multiple examples of how he has used the shape of the panel to create an emotion or enhance the viewing experience. To Eisner, every stroke on the page,

including the panel lines, has meaning. The meaning of each shape of the panel border, each stroke of the panel border, and even the decision to include a border, allows comic panels to have a unique meaning.

## **2. Word Balloons, Thought Balloons, and Captions**

The second convention unique to comics is the word balloon. Toon-Books, the publishers of comics for children under age seven, created a series of books that have a single panel on each page, like that of a children's book. What makes these books uniquely comics rather than a children's picture book is how dialogue is represented visually. In most children's picture books, a faded or eliminated section of the image leaves room for standard text. The text is horizontal, usually black-block or type style lettering with the common grammatical symbols to denote tone, volume, and meaning. Toon-Books uses word balloons instead of standard text, thereby making them pieces of sequential art. A word balloon is typically an ellipse with a slightly curved "tail" tapering toward the speaker's mouth. This simple shape can vary greatly depending on the meaning and tone of the text. For example, if a character is yelling, the balloon might conform to the text. In this instance, it's as though the words are too loud to be contained by the balloon. On the other hand, the words within the balloon can also be very small giving prominence to the white space inside the balloon, thereby denoting a very quiet tone or whisper. The color of the balloon or the words can be changed to denote specific characters or environments. The visual representation of verbal meaning can be enhanced by the use of a proper word balloon shape. For example, someone yelling may have a spiky word balloon. Someone whispering may have a small word balloon with tiny, possibly unreadable, text to show a very quiet or inaudible vocal level.

Colors can imply characters' personalities as well as connect characters to their balloons when they are thinking or talking in another panel. For example, the Marvel Comics character Deadpool has a yellow word balloon with a standard comic font. The "editor" (an unseen personality) also talks to Deadpool. The "editor's" word balloons are white with a typewriter style typeface. The different balloons denote the two characters Deadpool hears in his head. When the two characters are talking to each other, the author also uses a rectangular box rather than an ellipse. This shape difference signals that the words within the square boxes aren't being said, but thought. Before the early 1990s, thought balloons were drawn as clouds with a series of progressively smaller circle based shapes coming out of a character's head. This symbolism showed the character was thinking the text rather than saying it. More recently, thought balloons have become rectangular and are separated from caption boxes by the color and font that match how the character would "say" the text.

Caption boxes are used to give setting and omniscient information. They can take many forms, but are typically rectangular. The information within the caption boxes can also be an explanation by the author that can't be depicted visually, or is required to shorten the story.

### **3. Closure and the Panel-to-Panel Transition**

The idea of closure, or timing, is integral to the medium of sequential art. When timing is used with a comic panel, the combination is uniquely and intrinsically sequential art. In *Understand Comics*, Scott McCloud's chapter on closure starts with a description, "the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). He explains "closure is the agent of change, time and motion" (65). Closure is both natural and

necessary in sequential art. For example, it would take hundreds of individual comic panels to show an apple falling on Sir Isaac Newton's head: each panel would show the apple moving less than a millimeter until it hit. Or, with an understanding of closure it can be done in three panels:

Panel 1: Profile of Sir Isaac Newton sitting under a tree with an apple hanging from the branch directly above his head.

Panel 2: Same picture, but the apple has disconnected from the branch and is halfway between Newton's head and the branch. Vertical lines indicate the apple has come from the tree branch.

Panel 3: The apple in front of Newton's head. He is grimacing in pain. More lines indicate the apple has hit Newton's head and bounced forward.

In this example, the concept of closure fills in the moments between each panel. Due to the apple's placement in the first and second panels, readers can infer that the apple "moved" from the branch to the point between Newton's head and the branch. In reality, nothing expresses the action, but the reader fills in the time and space between the placements of the apple and creates closure.

The Newton example is the simplest of six panel-to-panel transitions McCloud describes (70-72). McCloud orders each transition in terms of time passed and amount of change. For example, his first, moment-to-moment, has the least amount of change making it the simplest to understand the differences between the two panels. His final example is the non-sequitur panel transition. In this transition, there is no relationship between the two images, so readers can't create the closure necessary to make a connection between the two panels making this transition nearly impossible to understand. In *Understanding*

*Comics*, his transitions are ordered in the book according to the amount of closure necessary to understand the images.

First is moment-to-moment. This transition uses a single subject (e.g., a girl) doing something simple (e.g., closing her eyes). In the first moment (panel 1), her eyes are open. In the second (panel 2), her eyes are closed. There is very little time or space difference and therefore needs little closure.

Second is action-to-action. This transition uses a single subject (e.g., a baseball player) doing something big (e.g., hitting a baseball). In the first action (panel 1), the ball is being thrown to the batter. In the second (panel 2), the batter has swung and the ball is moving in the other direction. There is little to no space difference, but the time it takes for the batter to hit the ball is greater and therefore needs additional closure.

Third is subject-to-subject. This transition uses a single scene (e.g., a race), but shows different characters or subjects within that scene (e.g., a runner crossing the finish line, and a person clicking a stopwatch). The subject in panel one is the man finishing the race. The subject in panel two is the person clicking the stopwatch. Even though the subjects are in different spaces, with closure, the reader can assume the person clicked the stopwatch as soon as the runner crossed the finish line. Obviously, the subjects don't have to be human (e.g. an apple and a man rubbing his head).

Fourth is scene-to-scene. The transition uses at least two completely different settings. For example, the first scene can be a man sitting at a bus stop, and the second a bus driver driving a bus. Through closure the reader will expect that the man at the bus stop is waiting for this particular bus driver. Again, the subjects don't have to be people.

The only requirement is two different settings (e.g., a hospital and then a house). Through closure, the reader connects the panels.

Fifth is aspect-to-aspect. This transition transmits an idea regardless of time and space. For example, an artist trying to convey “heat” could show the sun, a man sweating, and a dog panting. Human experience dictates that the sun generates heat (panel 1); the man is sweating (panel 2) and the dog is panting (panel 3). Although the author is requiring the reader to decipher icons, he is using fairly universal imagery to create the idea of “heat.”

McCloud’s sixth and final transition is the non sequitur. For this transition, there is no relation between the two panels at all. Jessica Abel and Matt Madden in *Drawing Word and Writing Pictures* state, “as such, it’s mostly of theoretical interest” (45). They go on to say, “your readers will perform all kinds of contortions to make sense of it” (Abel and Madden, 45). A reader wants to connect two juxtaposed images within the context of the story, so this transition is nearly impossible to create.

Instead of non sequitur, Abel and Madden describe a more useful seventh transition in *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*. They call this seventh transition symbolic. A symbolic transition uses a concept or object completely unrelated to the story to give it meaning (e.g., showing a man tripping and falling in panel 1 and then an image of a broken egg in panel 2). The reader, attempting closure, assumes the egg represents the man’s head and/or body being broken when he hits the ground after he trips. Abel and Madden prescribe this transition in place of a non sequitur because of a reader’s need for closure within the story.

## **B. Excellent Sequential Art**

The variety and use of these three comic conventions gives a sequential artist his or her personal voice within the medium. In a classroom setting, these conventions can be useful in discussing meaning or themes within a story, character development, story structure, and many other aspects of reading. In sequential art, the panel shape may determine the climax of a story; word balloon shape may determine a character's personality, and the closure created by the artist may determine the mood, setting, and themes. Sequential art adds additional depth to literature with the inclusion of image and its analysis aids a teacher's discussion of literary elements in the classroom.

The necessary material for English Language Arts (ELA) and other subjects for school-aged students is laid out in the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards were created "in order to help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school" (*Common Core-Introduction*, 3). The Standards for each covered subject are quite comprehensive. Within the ELA, separate standards are provided for elementary students (kindergarten-fifth grade) and secondary students (sixth-twelfth grade), and then by grade level for each level of students. Forthcoming, a series of analyses of age appropriate sequential art give recommendations on how to present and discuss each in the classroom. Also, each sequential art book analyzed was originally published as a graphic novel, comic, or sequential art piece. None of the analyzed works were translated from another medium, such as a book or movie, but may have been translated into one of those mediums.

The following comic recommendations do not discuss every significant element within a piece, nor is it the only way to discuss a particular sequential art piece. The

analyses simply use the Common Core State Standards as a way of using the literary aspects of each work. At the end of each analysis, other recommended titles for the same grade level are listed.

#### **IV. Recommended Comics**

##### **A. Kindergarten - *Little Mouse Gets Ready* by Jeff Smith**

This short story is about a small mouse putting on people clothes to go to the barn. Simple sentences, repetitive action, and image-to-text relationships make it ideal for an early reader. In this story, Little Mouse carefully puts on underwear, pants, socks, shoes and a button-down shirt. But when Mama tells him, "(m)ice don't wear clothes," he quickly sheds them all and runs off to the barn (Smith, 26). Each page in this book is a maximum of two panels, and that only occurs when Mouse is repeating the same action or finishing an action. The young reader is able to visually complete an action before turning the page. The subject matter, a young mouse putting on clothes, also teaches young readers how to properly dress themselves.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) this book addresses are 2, 3, 4, 6, and 10. (Please see Appendix B, page 11 for a list of the Common Core State Standards for Kindergarteners.) The students can discuss the main topic and details within the text (CCSS 2) by describing how Little Mouse gets dressed and goes to the barn. CCSS 3 can be met if the students can identify Little Mouse and Mama as different individuals and engage heightened language with the characters (CCSS 4). A brief classroom discussion may help student realize that the two events are Little Mouse getting dressed and then jumping out of his clothes to run to the barn. The author/illustrator is Jeff Smith and his roles for the book encompass both author and illustrator (CCSS 6). This book also allows

students to read aloud therefore discussing the meaning of the text and reasoning for the images that go along with them (CCSS 10).

This book allows students to practice their foundational reading skills. The word balloons are placed top-to-bottom left-to-right in reading order, and the text within the word balloons is similar. With only three exceptions, each word balloon is only a single sentence, making it very easy for a learning reader to separate sentences. This technique is unique to the sequential art medium at this grade level. Illustrated kindergarten level books put all the text on the page in the same block, making it difficult, especially for early readers, to understand sentence breaks and to understand dialogue as separate from description. The paneling requires the least amount of closure because the author finishes an action on each page. There is only one scene, Little Mouse getting dressed, so students don't have to identify a new place, describe the imagery, talk about what the author/illustrator did, and so on. It is a well thought out, simple book for the earliest of readers.

Toon-Books has a series of excellent level-appropriate sequential art books for new readers. *Little Mouse Gets Ready* and *Silly Lilly* by Agnes Rosensthiel, and *Jack in the Box* by Art Spiegelman are available at the website [toon-books.com](http://toon-books.com). These books can be read aloud on [professorgarfield.org](http://professorgarfield.org).

### **B. First Grade - *Owly* by Andy Runton**

*Owly* is a dialogue-free comic book and while that might, seem to be a drawback for literacy teachers, it is not. The book is a template for writing and discussing literature. Andy Runton, the author, uses pantomime to tell a story that is both easily understood and read.

The first *Owly* story in Andy Runton's collection is titled, "The Way Home." In this story, Owly meets his friend Wormy. Wormy is lost and sick when Owly meets him. Owly heals him and helps him get home to his parents. When Owly leaves Wormy's home, Wormy joins him, and they become friends and roommates throughout the rest of the *Owly* stories. The plot of "The Way Home" is how Owly heals his own loneliness by helping someone else in need that results in finding a friend, Wormy.

The Common Core State Standards this book addresses are 1-4 and 6-9. (Please see page 11 in Appendix B for a list of the Common Core Standards for Grade 1 students.) The usefulness of *Owly* for the early reader is in allowing a student to interpret and write the story for him or herself, which can encompass standards 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8.

Each page of *Owly* is set up in a three-tier panel making it easy for a reader to follow the standard left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading pattern. The two exceptions both involve Wormy "talking." Talking is used loosely in this context, since the characters don't speak in words, they speak in pictures. Runton's story with use of pictures allows a reader to tell, discuss, or write the story within the pages of *Owly* (CCSS 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10). Just as in *Little Mouse Gets Ready*, each word balloon in *Owly* is a single thought, making the "dialogue" very easy to read and write. Symbols such as exclamation points, question marks, and equal signs are used throughout the story to portray emotion and volume (CCSS 4). When a student is reading the book aloud in a classroom or to a parent (CCSS 10), the use of the illustrations accompanying the symbols permits an easy and personalized interpretation of the symbol's meaning. For example, when Runton introduces the symbols on the second page of the book, we see small birds eating seeds from a dish. Owly emerges from the bushes with a bag in hand and one of the birds warns the others with a large, bold

exclamation point in a word balloon. In the next panel, the birds fly off. The panel where the birds fly gives context to the exclamation point. The reader understands the bird's exclamation point implied, "WATCH OUT!" or "FLY AWAY!" All the reader needs to know is that the bird was telling the others to get away. It's in these ways that *Owly* is read. It is the direct relationship between the pictures and the punctuation in the word balloons that make *Owly* entertaining, easy, and interpretive for young readers.

Runton has put teaching packets on his website for free download at [andyrunton.com](http://andyrunton.com). Everyone can pick up the *Owly* books and view the pictures, read the comic, and discuss the content and themes within each story.

Geoffrey Davis has also written a series of comic books for Toon-Books about two mice named Benny and Penny. *Benny and Penny* is another book of simple lessons for children, wrapped in the context of a fun story about mice. These books can also be purchased from [toon-books.com](http://toon-books.com) or read on [professorgarfield.org](http://professorgarfield.org).

### **C. Second Grade - *Stinky* by Eleanor Davis**

For second grade, the Common Core Standards for reading become more specific and detailed. For example, CCSS 1 for kindergarten says, "(a)sk and answer questions about key details in a text" (11). The first grade CCSS 1 for 1<sup>st</sup> grade states "(a)sk and answer questions about key details in a text" (11). For second grade, CCSS 1 requires the use of "who, what, when, why, where, and how questions" (11). The books selected enable teachers to develop such questions. Eleanor Davis has written and illustrated the comic, *Stinky*, which provides the basis for asking a range of questions.

The Common Core Standards *Stinky* meets are 1, 3, 5-7 and 10. (Please see page 11 of Appendix B for a list of the Common Core Standards for Grade 2 students.) *Stinky* is a

story about a monster of the same name. The story is presented in three simple chapters: 1) Stinky lives in a swamp and his sidekick is a toad named Wartbelly whom is pulled around in a red wagon (CCSS 1) and Stinky meets a child; 2) the conflict that ensues; -and 3) the child forgives Stinky and they become friends (CCSS 3, 5 and 6). Obviously, as a comic, Standard 7 is met because the illustrations give understanding to the characters, setting, and plot. The book is a story about tolerance, misunderstanding, and racism -- large topics for a second-grade student, but presented in a manner that is appropriate for children in second grade (CCSS 10).

Davis is the first sequential artist introduced to break the simple tier structure and explore the possibilities of page layout and panel shapes. Most of her panels are the standard rectangular shape, but she breaks this standard in very specific ways. For example, when Stinky declares his fear of human children, the panel is wobbly and wavy, and a different color palette is used. These two elements combined indicate Stinky's dream or thought. It's this ability to express such concepts within the medium of comics and sequential art that makes comics useful to the development of early readers. The integration of the words and pictures and how they are juxtaposed are unique to sequential art and the comic medium.

Davis also uses variations in the appearance of the text. She changes the boldness, size, and color of the text to indicate different volumes, emphases, and emotions. Each indicates a different way the word is said when read aloud and allows students to see how emotion is expressed so they might gain a better understanding of the story.

Davis also varies the word balloons. She uses different shapes to show confidence, anger, fear, whispering, uncertainty, and surprise. For example, when Stinky falls down the

“bottomless pit” (Davis, 32), he yells “HELP!” In fact, he yells it so loud, it’s not in a word balloon, and it’s bright red. The lack of word balloon indicates volume, and the color indicates fear. She uses the ideas of text as art and text integrated into art to convey emotion.

*Stinky* is an excellent example of the complexity of sequential art. It also shows how a comic can take complex and mature ideas such as intolerance, fear, and racism and make them into a story that can be understood by and discussed with seven- and eight-year-old students. Most students will be entertained simply by the story of a monster in a swamp, and others will mainly enjoy the drawings. But every student will enjoy discussing some aspect of the story of Stinky and the boy. Whether it’s the drawings, the story, the colors, or the design, each element adds a level of understanding to the story as well a different discussion point that relates to the Common Core Standards for this level.

Balloon Toons also does a series of comics for children of this level including, *Zoe and Robot: Let’s Pretend!* by Ryan Sias and *Adopt a Glurb* by Elise Gravel.

#### **D. Third Grade - *Mo and Jo: Fighting Together Forever* by Dean Haspiel and Jay Lynch**

“This is the age where readers are made” (Berglund, interview). Bobbi Berglund, cites third grade as critical for the future success of young readers (Berglund, interview). At this level in the Common Core State Standards, students are asked to “distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters” (3<sup>rd</sup> Grade CCSS 6, 12). Students are asked to read more than one text by the same author and talk about the characters over the course of a series (3<sup>rd</sup> Grade CCSS 10, 12). The students must also recount fables, myths, and folktales from diverse cultures (3<sup>rd</sup> Grade CCSS 2, 12). With

these CCSS expectations in mind, this is the level when superheroes should be introduced to students. Many of today's superheroes are based on heroes from Greek mythology. One of the best examples is Superman.

Superman is an alien from another world raised on earth. He would be indestructible but for a single weakness, kryptonite. His story is a modern retelling of Achilles, the Greek hero. Achilles was born to a nymph who later dipped him in a bath to make him indestructible. The nymph held him by the heel to dip him that heel became the only vulnerable spot on his body. Many other modern-day heroes can be traced to the myths, lore, and folktales from many different cultures. A three-chapter story called, *Mo and Jo: Fighting Together Forever*, also from Toon-Books, fits these same themes at this reading level.

Mona and Joey, the main characters, are brother and sister who are constantly fighting. When given the costume, and one each of the two superpowers, of the town's great superhero, they learn that teamwork saves the day.

As with the books previously mentioned, there is a moral: teamwork gets results. *Mo and Jo* uses a simple panel grid with a few exceptions, including a new type of panel, the inset panels. An inset panel is a panel that is inside the borders of another panel. Insets are generally used to show a different subject at the same moment in time. They are used to show reactions from both Mo and Jo during a large action moment. For example, when Mo and Jo first see the loose balloon, their separate reactions are inset in the panel to show their individual reactions at that specific moment (*Mo and Jo*, 21).

In addition to the strong moral about teamwork, there are many discussion points in this book that relate to the Common Core State Standards, particularly 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9.

The noted Standards can be used as a guide in open discussion with students to enhance their comprehension of this text. (Please see Appendix B page 12 for a list of the Common Core Standards for Grade 3 students.) Since a number of superheroes are simply modern versions of the heroes of ancient myths, folktales, and fables, becoming aware of how the superhero mythos is structured at this age is important (CCSS 2).

Other books for the Third Grade level include *Tiny Titans*, a monthly book by DC Comics, *The Superhero Squad* by Marvel Comics, and two from Toon-Books: *Zig and Wikki in Something Ate My Homework* by Nadja Spiegelman and Trade Loeffler, and *Otto's Orange Day* by Jay Lynch and Frank Cammuso.

#### **E. Fourth Grade - *G-Man* by Chris Giarrusso**

*G-Man* by Chris Giarrusso is a smart, poignant, and childish take on superhero comics. The main character is G-Man, a boy who gains superhero powers after reading a book called *How to Fly*. The book suggests using a magic cape to learn how to fly. G-Man asks his mom where their magic blanket is. When she tells him, he cuts it to cape-size and flies off to join his friends at the park. G-Man is born!

The first collection of *G-Man* is appropriately called "Learning to Fly." It contains an introductory story followed by a series of short stories, some as short as a single page. Each story acts as an episode allowing readers to learn incrementally about G-Man and his town where the super-human is ordinary. It describes his interactions with his peers and quarrels with his older brother and, ultimately, how a hodge-podge team of super-kids defeats the ultimate villain.

The remainder of the first volume of *G-Man* is a series of smaller comics. The most innovative is a page that is a 12-panel grid. Each panel is the same size, giving equal

importance to the information inside the panel. The innovation is that the strip can be read left-to-right and top-to-bottom, or top-to-bottom and left-to-right. The strip is one of the many “Comic Bits” in the book.

*G-Man* is an excellent book that meets all of the Common Core State Standards except for CCSS 9 for Grade 4. (Please see Appendix B page 12 for a list of the Common Core Standards for Grade 4 students.) A discussion can be led about the introductory story. How to summarize and draw more from the story, perhaps about the characters, their daily lives, their “super” world (CCSS 1, 2, and 3), and to compare G-Man’s story to mythology such as Achilles (CCSS 4). Even to aid text-to-image connections by the simplicity of its being a comic (CCSS 7). The book in its entirety opens a whole world of opportunity for the comparison of structure (CCSS 5), perhaps between the setup of the main story in relation to the “Comic Bits” titled “Mean Brother/Stupid Brother” and the differences between points of view since not all of the bits are told from the same character’s eyes (CCSS 6).

It is important at the fourth grade level to begin to understand superhero myths and how the stories express their personal lives. For this reading level, the best introductions to character depth are *Mini Marvels* by Chris Giarrusso and Marvel’s *Adventures* comics which are younger versions of their most popular characters like Spiderman, Thor, Iron Man, and the Avengers.

#### **F. Fifth Grade - *Amelia Rules!* by Jimmy Gownley**

*Amelia Rules!* by Jimmy Gownley is a laugh-out-loud book that also poignantly deals with a child of divorced parents. The book is written episodically and mixes deep morals with the humor of a Warner Brothers cartoon.

The basic plot of the series involves Amelia (a nine-year-old girl) and her recently divorced mother who have moved from Manhattan to small town in Pennsylvania to live with Amelia's aunt. In her new town, Amelia meets a group of kids (the nerds). The stories revolve around the adventures and misadventures of this group of friends who become known as G.A.S.P. (Gathering of Awesome Super Pals), their personal growth, and Amelia's coming to terms with the aftermath of her parents divorce. *Amelia Rules!* is all things funny and gross. A perfect fit for fifth grade.

*Amelia Rules* can be used to meet all of the Common Core State Standards. (Please see Appendix B page 12 for a list of the Common Core Standards for Grade 5 students.) Each chapter in *Amelia Rules!* is part of a larger section in *Volume 1*. Each chapter is titled as its own entity and within each a lesson is learned. There is an overarching theme developed by smaller challenges for each chapter in *Amelia Rules!* (CCSS 2 and 5). The dialogue can be used to expand comprehension and draw conclusions (CCSS 1 and 4). There are numerous characters, settings and events to draw from for discussion of CCSS 3, 7, and 9. Finally, Amelia "books ends" each story with her personal lessons learned thereby allowing the reader to gain understanding with her (CCSS 6).

*Amelia Rules!* can also be analyzed for its use of comic conventions. As covered earlier in *Stinky*, Gownley uses color, size, and shape of panels, text, and sound effects to give meaning to specific scenes and events. In one of the funniest exchanges of the book, the "sneeze-barf" occurs. The result is described with very large green, runny, and irregular letters. Gownley shows the characters' reactions, but, thankfully, not the actual action. Using the specific colors, size, and design of the letters, Gownley does an excellent job of describing the sound, feeling, and volume of what becomes an accidental weapon.

Fifth grade students will thrive on the humor of *Amelia Rules!* and gain valuable lessons on friendships, relationships with parents, and how to think and act a little more grown up.

Top Shelf Comix has a series of books that are appropriate for fourth grade including *Spiral-Bound* by Aaron Renier and *Pirate Penguin vs. Ninja Chicken* by Ray Friesen. These books carry the weight in their action and adventure that students need enjoy as well as the humor they crave.

### **G. Sixth Grade - *Crogan's Vengeance* by Chris Schweizer**

*Crogan's Vengeance* tells the redemption story of a pirate who causes the sinking of a ship and the death of its sailors. "Catfoot" Crogan is a sailor on an English vessel bringing silk to America in 1701. When pirates board his ship, he and his crew join the pirates. As one of the pirates, Crogan plans the capture and looting of a treasure ship, which results in the death of many of its crew and the sinking of the ship.

The cast of characters within *Crogan's Vengeance* represents a wide range of character archetypes. The main conflict is between Crogan and the pirate first mate, D'Or. Crogan is a very clever and intelligent man who tries to atone for his horrible misdeed. D'Or is a man of brute force, pure strength, greed and amorality.

This story is sandwiched between a modern day tale of Crogan's descendants. Catfoot Crogan's story becomes the story of a boy, approximately age ten, who with his friends breaks a neighbor's birdhouse while cutting through the neighbor's yard. The boy tries to correct an injury he caused by doing something wrong. The reader thus finds the moral and the parallel themes within *Crogan's Vengeance*.

The upper grades Common Core State Standards are more general than in the primary grades; therefore, the books provided can be used to meet all Standards with thought and interpretation through a personal application of the Standards to each comic. (Please see Appendix B page 18 for a list of the Common Core Standards for College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing.)

As with previous grades, the Common Core Standards require students to determine a theme or idea from the text (6<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 2, 36). Unlike earlier grades, students must “provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions and judgments” (6<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 2, 36). Creating a summary in this manner makes students think critically about the text without injecting bias into the story.

Students must also analyze word usage in the story: why a particular word was used, how the word was used, and why it is a stronger choice than other possible word choices (6<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 4, 36). *Crogan’s Vengeance* provides the opportunity to consider vocabulary simply by setting the main story 300 years in the past. There are a great variety of characters within the story with different levels of education and moral focus. The characters use different words to express themselves according to their intelligence and station in life. Along with analyzing word use, students can be asked to analyze a series of episodes within the story and how a character changes as the plot moves towards a resolution (6<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 3, 36). Students can also be asked to explain how the author developed the narrator’s or protagonist’s point of view (6<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 6, 36) and to describe how a particular sentence, paragraph, or scene fits into the overall structure of the plot (6<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 5, 36).

In *Crogan's Vengeance*, Catfoot is the catalyst for change and the ultimate resolution. He creates the initial moral conflict and then moves to resolve it as the antagonist, D'Or, embraces his greed. Students can evaluate each line of dialogue or thought and see how Catfoot's defeat of D'Or becomes inevitable.

*Crogan's Vengeance* can be compared to other stories and other literary genre (6<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 9, 37). It can be categorized as an historical fiction, adventure novel, or comic. It is a coming of age story of a young man trying to gain the respect of others and whether he must compromise his morals to do so.

Chris Schweizer creates a story conveying strong moral value that is also very entertaining. He has used this moral element throughout his comics and graphic novels. Oni Press has released the follow up to *Crogan's Vengeance* called *Crogan's March*, a story about a French Legionnaire at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Schweizer's third book in the series, *Crogan's Loyalty*, is about two brothers on opposing sides during the American Revolution. In Schweizer's work with the American Library Association, he speaks regularly about the merits of comics for encouraging reading. *Crogan's Vengeance* has been nominated for both an Eisner Award (Best Book for Young Readers) and an American Library Association award. Other level-appropriate books include, *Anya's Ghost* by Vera Brosgol and *The Return of King Doug* by Greg Erb, Jason Oremland, and Wook-Jin "Hunter" Clark.

#### **H. Seventh Grade - *Secret Science Alliance* by Eleanor Davis**

Eleanor Davis created a smart, intelligently crafted book that is fun for seventh grade. *Secret Science Alliance (SSA)* is a story about Julian Calendar, who is so smart that he is alienated from his peers. He is an "ultra nerd." Thinking he can outsmart his nerdy

image when enrolling in a new school, he finds an unlikely pair of friends, Greta and Ben, and together they form the Secret Science Alliance. The incredible gadgets they create in their “clubhouse” and the sense of self each develops to defeat the evil Dr. Stringer, the dastardliest scientific fraud of all, is engaging.

This story about being yourself and finding true friends includes real science, imagination, and adventure. CCSS 2 asks students to “(d)etermine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text” (7<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 2, 36). The theme of this book is be yourself. It is only when Julian lets his true self show that he discovers real friends.

CCSS 3 states, “(a)nalyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact” (7<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 3, 36). This story is replete with foreshadowing events. The settings seen early in the book all come back and play a pivotal role later in the action and climax of the book. Every panel, word balloon, and transition has a significant purpose.

Finally, CCSS 6 asks students “how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text” (7<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 6, 36). Julian is the protagonist in this book, but both his friends help drive the story along. They all interact with one of the teachers, and each interaction shapes the reader’s personal judgment of both teacher and each of the kids.

Overall, *Secret Science Alliance* is a story about fitting-in and being yourself. The book can help students find some self-confidence through the onslaught of physical, psychological, and emotional changes at this age.

*Maus* by Art Spiegelman is another great book for seventh grade. It is a true story about the author’s dad who was a prisoner in concentration camp during World War II and

how his unwavering self-confidence helped him get through a terrible time in human history.

In addition, Doug Tennapel's book *Ghostopolis* is an imaginative story about redemption and learning how to control your environment, both mentally and physically.

### **I. Eighth Grade - *Bone* by Jeff Smith**

Jeff Smith first started writing *Bone* when he was nine years old. He was given a book by Walt Kelly called *Prehysterical Pogo* and from that point he decided comics and sequential art would be his career (*Art of Bone*, 15). It was then that his three main characters for *Bone* were created; Phoncible P. "Phoney" Bone, Fone Bone, and Smiley Bone. They are white nearly featureless characters that look like a combination of Snoopy, The Smurfs, and Pogo, all of which influenced Jeff Smith (*Art of Bone*, 16).

*Bone* is a comic epic. The main characters are devoid of distinct features that allow any reader to find him or herself in them. Jeff Smith's intentional decision to create his characters this way is one of the beauties of sequential art iconography. McCloud talks about icons in *Understanding Comics* and writes, "the more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe" (*Understanding Comics*, 31). This concept also relates to the Common Core Standards. CCSS 6 requires readers to "analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader create such effects as suspense or humor" (8<sup>th</sup> grade CCSS 6, 36). In *Bone*, the characters are so universal that nearly every person who reads *Bone* connects with one of them which alters how the comic is read and what the reader learns from it.

*Bone* is a great piece to compare and contrast to other texts and to analyze how its structure compares to the meaning and style of other texts (8<sup>th</sup> Grade CCSS 5, 36). *Bone* is

an epic fantasy tale that can be compared to *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien or *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling. It also has underlying themes that can be compared to myths, legends, and the Bible (8<sup>th</sup> Grade CCSS 9, 37). There are dragons, creation stories, even an Armageddon and second coming story.

*Bone* is one of the most honored comics of all time, winning over 35 awards in the United States and abroad. It has been called the “(b)est all age graphic novel yet published” by *Time Magazine* (Arnold, Time.com). While not many comics can compare to *Bone* for its epic nature, its quality of storytelling, and craftsmanship, Marjane Satrapi and Tim Eldred’s books come very close. Satrapi’s comic, *Persepolis*, is an autobiography of her life in Iran during the Islamic revolution. She recounts events about her life and her oppression as a girl and woman in an Islamic regime. Tim Eldred’s book *Grease Monkey* is a series of episodes about an apprentice mechanic in an all female flight squadron whose head mechanic happens to be an ape. It’s a great story about being an outcast and trying to deal with the “in crowd.”

### **J. Ninth and Tenth Grades - *Asterios Polyp* by David Mazzucchelli**

Since many classes in high school are subject and achievement based, they can include students of various ages. The Common Core State Standards reflect this by combining ninth and tenth grades and eleventh and twelfth grades. What follows are those specific ranges. As *Asterios Polyp*, the choice for grades nine and ten, and *Watchmen*, the choice for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, each have layers of symbolism, metaphor, and meaning that can be discussed over the course of weeks and in conjunction with many other informational texts, novels, myths, folklore, and historical documents. The authors’ specific design choices within these texts create even another level of meaning within the text.

Common Core Standard 1 states, “(c)ite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” (CCSS 1, 38). *Asterios Polyp* is a modern retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Asterios Polyp is a Paper Architect in the midst of a mid-life crisis. Throughout his whole life, he has seen things as his way or wrong. When his New York City apartment is struck by lightning, he leaves the city and goes as far away as possible to a town called Apogee. There he gets a job as a mechanic and rents a room from his boss, one Major Stiffly and his wife Ursula. They are the complete antithesis of his previous life, and they immediately accept him into their home and lives. The inference is that his new life becomes the exact opposite of his previous life; the builder and no longer the architect, an employee instead of employer, dependent rather than homeowner.

CCSS 2 for grades nine and ten states, “(d)etermine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text” (CCSS 2, 38). Irony is a central theme in *Asterios Polyp*. One example of Polyp’s irony is his inability to see more than one side of things. Throughout the course of the book, particularly the background story, we see Polyp’s absolute belief in himself. He alienates his co-workers, divorces his wife, and loses his home. Of course, Polyp can’t see that this is his fault. Near the end of the book Polyp loses sight in one of his eyes in an accident. Then his physical vision is one-sided, but because of experience in Apogee, he starts to see other points of view. Irony is only one of the themes in the book and can be discussed at length based on examples throughout the book.

CCSS 3 reads: “(a)nalyze how complex characters (e.g. those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or theme” (CCSS 3, 38). The character Hana Sonnenschein is an example of a complex character. She is a sculptor and works with mostly found objects to create her pieces, which are amorphous and organic. This is in complete contrast to Asterios who loves hard lines, angles and symmetry. Hana becomes the opposing force to Asterios throughout the book, and, of course, his wife. Her character’s motivation is to become recognized, either for her brilliance or her art, but she does it humbly and quietly. Finally, she takes a stand and follows through, even though it means losing a big part of her life. Hana’s decision to divorce Polyp starts his downward spiral and eventually leads to his long journey of discovery.

CCSS 5 asks students to be able to, “(a)nalyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order of events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise” (CCSS 5, 38). *Asterios Polyp* is told in two timelines, the present and the past. The present timeline is presented very logically in chronological order. One event happens after another and each leads to the next. Flashbacks, on the other hand, represent certain character traits of Polyp. They have some chronological order, but it’s not directly linear. Mazzucchelli did this in order to shed light on events happening to Polyp. The back-story, narrated by Polyp’s stillborn twin brother, explains Polyp’s inability to connect with people, and foreshadowed by his inability to connect with a woman at a subway station and ending with an image of Polyp facing away from his wife. The characters are drawn in two very different styles, and she is asking him, “(w)hat makes you think you’re always right?” (*Asterios Polyp*, 41). It can

be argued that the story goes on to disprove this specific piece of dialogue as Polyp grows emotionally throughout the story.

CCSS 9 gets to the heart of this story by requiring students to “(a)nalyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work” (CCSS 9, 38). *Asterios Polyp* is Homer’s *Odyssey* created in the medium of a comic book. The recreation allows Mazzucchelli not only to manipulate the story but also the design. *The Odyssey* is Ulysses’ homecoming story. It’s also a story about identity and exile. *Asterios Polyp* is an examination of one man’s life and his search for his identity. From a design standpoint, this theme is evident even from the cover of the book. The dust jacket exposes the book cover, which only covers half of the hard paperboard cover. Two shapes of different colors with cutouts create the title. Where white comes through both of these shapes, the words “Asterios Polyp” are formed. If either shape were removed, the words would not exist. It’s the overlapping of these two specific shapes that create the title, and the identity of the main character.

Within the content of *Asterios Polyp* and viewed through the context of the Common Core State Standards, there are multiple themes and characters that can be discussed and written about by high school students. It can be discussed in relation to many other literary texts and compared and contrasted to other stories of a similar nature. These grades can also benefit from other comic stories, such as *V for Vendetta* by Allan Moore and David Lloyd and *Grease Monkey* by Tim Eldred. Early high school is also an excellent age for many serialized stories from Boom! Studios, Marvel, DC and Image Comics.

### **K. Eleventh and Twelfth Grade - *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and David Gibbons**

Time Magazine has compiled a list of the 100 “must read” books of all time. The only comic book on that list is *Watchmen*. “Told with ruthless psychological realism, in fugal, overlapping plotlines and gorgeous, cinematic panels rich with repeating motifs, *Watchmen* is a heart-pounding, heartbreaking read and a watershed in the evolution of a young medium” (Lev Grossman, *Time Magazine*). The era in which *Watchmen* was created gives a lot of credence to how it should be discussed. It is a thriller with a strong political theme. It is a story about several has-been retired superheroes, of which only one has superpowers. Comic iconoclast Douglas Wolk describes *Watchmen* as “something evolutionary” (Wolk, 236). *Watchmen* took the medium of comics and made it a formal investigation of what a comic book can be. *Watchmen* is so deeply rooted in the formal aspects of the medium that moving it to another medium doesn’t emotionally resonate with viewers the same way reading the comic book does.

Reading the comic and watching the movie version of *Watchmen* can lead to multiple interpretations of the themes of the text, which are critical to CCSS 7 for eleventh and twelfth grades: “(a)nalyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem, evaluating how each version interprets the source material” (CCSS 7, 38). Producer and director, Zach Snyder tried to create a faithful film adaptation of the comic *Watchmen*. The main plot follows that of the book, but there are some rewrites and omissions that lead many readers of the novel to be disappointed.

CCSS 3 for these grades asks students to “(a)nalyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama” (CCSS 3, pg. 38). Part of the structural beauty of *Watchmen* is how Moore and Gibbons did just that. The

closest thing the book has to a protagonist is Rorschach. Rorschach is one of the currently defunct heroes who comes out of retirement to investigate the murder of a former colleague, The Comedian. His investigation leads to his personal truth that the world is black and white, there is no gray. His story is just one of many in *Watchmen* that has its own themes and morals. It's the intertwining of the characters' biographies and how each of their own moral codes help advance the plot of *Watchmen* that can be discussed in both versions of the story.

Ozymandias asks, at the end of the book, "I did the right thing didn't I? It all worked out in the end" (*Watchmen: Chap. 12, 27*). The answer to this, by Dr. Manhattan is, "(n)othing ever ends" (*Watchmen: Chap. 12, 27*). CCSS 1 wants students to be able to, "(c)ite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain" (CCSS 1, 38). The desired expectation of these two lines epitomizes the uncertainty and mystery that is present throughout the book. After reading *Watchmen* for a second and third time will the weight of the question truly reveal itself to the reader. It's a question of moral uncertainty, a question that looks for a justification of actions, and a question that every person asks: "I did the right thing didn't I?"

CCSS 5 gets to the core of the choices Dave Gibbons made in illustrating this book. It states, "(a)nalyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well its aesthetic impact (CCSS 5, 38)." Dave Gibbons used a nine-panel grid for the page structure of the story. It's the combination and division of this grid that creates the pacing of the story.

When Gibbons combines these panels the weight of the panel multiplies by the number of panels he has combined. For example, many times throughout the entire book Gibbons combines six panels to create a large, impactful moment, but never more than six panels and they are never on facing pages. He uses the device of combining panels very purposefully and rarely until the final chapter. The final chapter opens with six pages that combine all nine panels into consecutive splash pages. They “feel like six unexpected gongs of a clock” (Wolk, 239). The impact is terrifying.

*Watchmen* is, to date, the most formal exploration of the comic book medium and can be discussed and written about in such depth that entire essays could be written about the effect this book has had on the comic industry and the novel industry. *Watchmen* is a book worth discussing. It’s a book worth writing about.

There are many other comics that are complex enough for use with high school students. Frank Miller’s book *The Dark Knight Returns* made as big of an impact as *Watchmen* and is another excellent political and social comic. *Off Road* by Sean Murphy is a coming of age story that helps three friends become closer by setting aside their differences and letting go of their pasts. Finally, Craig Thompson’s *Blankets* is semi-autobiographical memoir about a first love. All of the books discuss adult themes and do include some graphic images and language, but their impact on writing, art, and design cannot be underestimated.

## **V. Conclusion**

The eleven books discussed are not expected to replace any of the books currently used for discussion in a classroom setting. They should be integrated into curriculum. The second section should be helpful for terminology and definitions used while using comics

in the classroom. These terms are an essential part of the medium and must be integrated into how the texts are discussed and written about. In the earlier grades, or any classroom that asks students to read aloud, comics provide many different characters and wonderful illustrations that can be used to help clarify the text being spoken. Provided previously is a reference source for teachers of any aged student and a place to begin their own research into the medium of comics and sequential art to help create functional and literate American Adults. In today's society, to be literate, there is a need to be able to interpret image and text to function. Everything from bathroom signs to cell phones, product labels to computers are based around the integration of text and image. Comics are an integral starting point to this more modern form of everyday literacy. They can also bring clarity, interactivity and entertainment to more traditional forms of literature therefore creating better engagement in the classroom for today's students.

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## **VII. Appendix A**

### **A. Graphic Novel and Comic Book Resources\***

Comic Book Classroom- <http://www.comicbookclassroom.org>

Comics in the Classroom- <http://comicsintheclassroom.net>

First Second Publishing Teacher's Page- <http://www.firstsecondbooks.net/teachers.html>

Graphic Classroom- <http://graphicclassroom.blogspot.com>

Kids Love Comics- <http://www.kidslovecomics.com/index.html>

School Library Journal- <http://blog.schoollibraryjournal.com/goodcomicsforkids>

The Comic Book Project- <http://www.comicbookproject.org>

Your local library may also have a series of age appropriate graphic novels and comics. Also, many of the comics discussed in this paper can be found in most libraries across the United States.

### **B. Higher Education Comic Studies\***

Aurora Community College- <http://www.ccaurora.edu/programs-classes/departments/art/graphic-storytelling>

The Center for Cartoon Studies- <http://www.cartoonstudies.org/>

The Kubert School- <http://kubertschool.edu/>

Minnesota College of Art and Design- <http://mcad.edu/academic-programs/comic-art>

Savannah College of Art and Design- <http://www.scad.edu/sequential-art/index.cfm>

School of Visual Arts- <http://www.schoolofvisualarts.edu/ug/index.jsp?sid0=1&sid1=16>

\*There are many other community projects and after school programs that are not listed. Search "comic programs" in an online search engine for your local area.

**VIII. Appendix B**