How Comic Books Can Change the Way Our Students See Literature:
One Teacher's Perspective

Whenever I meet someone for the first time and tell him or her that I am an English teacher, the response is almost always the same: a shake of the head, a grinned promise to speak very carefully, and a declaration that "English was my worst subject." Though the person's comments are only semi-serious, they are the lingering traces of a once far more palpable dread. I have seen this dread in the eyes and words of my students, and I take their apprehension seriously enough to spend some time, at the beginning of each semester, to find out something about the attitudes they have about reading, writing, and English classes in general. Because I teach at a community college and therefore encounter students close to the end of their formal education, these attitudes are, for better or worse, firmly entrenched. Nevertheless, airing them in my class is useful, for such knowledge not only gives me a sense of their expectations of me, but also reveals something about the origins of these attitudes: their middle- and high school English classes, the places where they first engaged in the formal and formative study of literature. So, as a means of indirectly uncovering these attitudes, I pose this question: "What is literature?"

Their responses vary, though certain remarks are prevalent and consistent from semester to semester: literature makes us think about "big ideas," literature is difficult, literature is boring, literature is something that people have decided was "good" or "important." The tenor of the remarks is both positive and negative; certain students are eagerly anticipating the semester ahead while others are not, having slogged their way through literature classes before. Obviously, the openly negative responses concern me; they suggest that those students have yet to experience how engaging and vital literature can be. But I am ready for this challenge insofar as I have chosen my readings and designed my assignments to attempt to provide this experience. Of my students' comments, however, the one that intrigues and troubles me most is the final one listed. The response interests me in that it reveals my students' awareness of a "canon" (however problematic that word has become) and the sense that certain works are more worthy of serious attention than others; at the same time, the way they express this definition troubles me because it indicates their sense of removal from the processes of evaluation that help establish this canon. In their view, decisions about "literary quality" -- whatever that term might mean -- are made by others, the "they" from which so many important decrees flow.

As teachers of literature, we should not strive to get students to accept without question our own judgments of what constitutes literary merit, for such acceptance inevitably places students in the position of seeing literature as a "medicine" that will somehow make them better people, if only they learn to appreciate it. When students view literature in this light, they resent it, and literary works remain a mystery that they cannot solve. What is more, this goal of simply passing our own judgments along to our students often impedes what should be our primary goal: to encourage students to see themselves as having a voice in the question of what constitutes literary merit by defining reasonable parameters by which to judge a creative work and articulating why and how that work is -- or is not -- within those parameters. Only by helping students achieve this voice do we help them to become active, critical, and engaged readers.

Clearly, a delicate balance exists between passing on our own literary judgments and encouraging our students to develop their own, and this balance is especially precarious in the middle- and high school classroom, where students first need exposure to literature before they can be in a position to argue literary merit. Thus, teachers in these schools are faced with the significant challenge of presenting literature in a way that at once interests students, presents some model of literary evaluation, convinces students that such evaluation is important, and leaves them room in which to develop their own model. Creating such a classroom is not easy, especially when we consider that they will carry the attitudes they form in these early courses for a long time. But several years ago in one of my bolder and more rewarding moves as a graduate student, I lit upon a genre that is an ideal way for middle-, secondary-, and post-secondary school English teachers to accomplish what we need to do more of: energize classes and engage students, teach much needed analytical and critical thinking skills, and -- most importantly -- invite students to develop meaningful opinions about what constitutes literary merit.

What I did was give my students some excerpts from comic books to read. The course was an advanced first-year composition class that I had designed, and the objective for the course was to investigate and analyze popular culture representations of life experiences, ethnic and cultural groups, and historical events. It was my hope that over the semester students would develop a more critical eye toward the representational poetics and motivations of advertisements, television shows, movies, and comics. Many of my students were already familiar with most of these media, though not familiar enough to protect them from surprise. Case in point were the comics. Shortly after we began to discuss John Callahan's "I Think I Was an Alcoholic Waiting to Happen," it became clear that my students were unaware that comics could and did address mature subject matter. In this short, autobiographical comic, Callahan describes, in a very glib, unexpected manner, his alcoholism and the car accident that rendered him a quadriplegic. My students were initially surprised by the tone and focus of the story, one student going so far as to say "This isn't a comic." Such reactions should be welcomed in our classrooms, for as teachers we should never undervalue the ability to surprise our students. Adolescents and teenagers today are surrounded by a diverse and increasingly complex media, and some will often find classroom materials to be dull, irrelevant, or both. But by placing a comic book -- the basic form of which they no doubt recognize -- into the context of a classroom, teachers can catch students off guard in a positive way, and this disorientation has, in my experience, led students to become more engaged by a given work. Though the Callahan piece was a scant three pages long, our ensuing discussion about his tone, use of irony, and characterization of himself easily filled two fifty-minute periods.

The reason for this engagement is largely attributable to the form itself. Unlike more "traditional" literature, comic books are able to quite literally "put a human face" on a given subject. That is, comic books blend words and pictures so that, in addition to reading text, readers "see" the characters through the illustrations. What is more, the interplay of the written and visual is a complicated process; a comic "does not 'happen' in the words, or the pictures, but somewhere in-between, in what is sometimes known as 'the marriage of text and image'" (Sabin 9). Because this "in-between" space is difficult to identify and varies from title to title, reading comic books requires an active though largely subconscious participation on the part of the reader. Such participation has been referred to as "closure," whereby the reader fills in the details of the empty

spaces between the panels, and the result of this process is to "foster an intimacy ... between creator and audience" (McCloud 64, 69). One significant outcome of closure is that readers are able to sympathize and empathize with comic book characters in unique ways, as evidenced by my experience with the Callahan piece.

Since then, I have used comic books in most of my composition classes and all of my literature classes. Before I introduce them, I ask if anyone has read comic books before. Amazingly, nearly every hand goes up. True, many students do not currently read them, but they did when they were younger. What is incredible to me is that this reading was voluntary and enjoyable. As youths we probably weren't given comic books by our teachers or parents; instead, we sought these out on our own and found value in them. But then, along the way, we decided that they were more fit for kids, that they no longer had anything to say to us, that after a certain age -- usually middle school, where students begin that awkward transition to adulthood -- reading a comic book became akin to climbing a tree; you just didn't do it anymore. What happens is that many adolescents begin to see comic books as many adults do: sub-literate, disposable, and juvenile.

But this perspective is grossly inaccurate. Imagine, for example, meeting someone who disdained all film because he was no longer interested in Disney movies and associated all motion pictures with that one narrow genre. Or someone who no longer read fiction because she believed that all books were like the picture books she had outgrown years before. Clearly we would say that these individuals were radically misinformed about these genres. Just as misinformed are people who associate comic books with any one type, such as superhero comics. But many writers and artists have addressed topics relevant to all levels of English classrooms, making comic books an ideal and largely untapped source of enrichment. Though industry professionals and fans have already grown tired of hearing that comics "aren't just for kids anymore," many teachers and students might still be unaware of the maturity and relevance of various comic books. Many middle schools -- particularly those that have adopted a team approach -- have discovered the value of planning interdisciplinary units that approach topics in a more interesting and productive way (Mills and Pollack 304). There are several graphic novels (long comic books, for lack of a better definition) that provide a sophisticated and interesting approach to various events and issues.

For example, there are several titles that would work well in a historical unit. The most popular, no doubt, is Art Spiegelman's Maus I and II , which retells the story of the author's father, a Holocaust survivor. Spiegelman's book is challenging in every sense of the word, from the complexity of his visual arrangements, to the weight of the subject matter, to his brilliant use (and deconstruction) of an extended animal metaphor by which the nationalities of the people involved are represented by various animals. More so than any other graphic novel, Spiegelman's work has entered academia and is taught in various types of courses at colleges and universities throughout the country. For historical units that focus on the settlement of the American West, Texas historian and comic book artist Jack Jackson has several well-researched and vital graphic novels -- particularly Comanche Moon, Lost Cause, and Indian Lover: Sam Houston and the Cherokees -- that retell the conquests from a Native American perspective and provide a voice often missing from more traditional historical texts.

If English teachers are planning units on various social issues for their adolescents and teenagers, there are two titles -- one dealing with AIDS and the other with single motherhood -- that humanize the respective issues and engage their readers. Judd Winick's Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned recounts the author's friendship with Pedro Zamora, a young man who died of AIDS. The hook here for our students (and which should in no way diminish the book's appeal to adults) is that Winick and Zamora were both cast members of MTV's The Real World: San Francisco. But readers attracted to the book on that basis will soon find that it is a moving story about tolerance. Similarly valuable is Katherine Arnoldi's The Amazing "True" Story of Teenage Single Mom , a semi-autobiographical account of experiences with abuse, single parenthood at a young age, lack of family support, and, ultimately, survival. The book does not romanticize the idea of teen pregracy; instead, it provides a harsh look at its realities and underscores the importance of education. As Arnoldi writes in the Author's Note, her "purpose was to help single moms feel worthy to pursue their rights to an equal access to education" (i).

Units on contemporary and important global affairs can be especially challenging due to the level of complexity of the politics involved. In these cases, the need to humanize the conflict becomes even more crucial, and the benefits of comic books' unique form come through clearly in several important works. The best examples are the books of comics journalist Joe Sacco, whose two volume Palestine chronicles the two months he spent moving between the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and Jerusalem. Though he was there in late 1991 and early 1992, the conflicts he depicts continue to persist today. What is most impressive, however, is that Sacco organizes his graphic novel (as he does in his 2000 book, Safe Area Gorazde , which focuses on the war in Eastern Bosnia) around the citizens involved in the conflict. Sacco is interested in bringing to light the voices and faces of those caught in the crossfire of ideology, and the effect of this strategy is to make the incidents much more accessible to readers. Similarly, Joe Kubert's Fax from Sarajevo tells the story of Ervin Rustemagic, a man whose family was trapped in Sarajevo during the war in 1992. Amazingly, Kubert put this book together from a series of sporadic faxes sent to him and others while Rustemagic and his family were under seige. As with Sacco's books, Kubert retells an important chapter in recent history by literally putting faces on the participants, thus offering readers a humanizing account that engages in a unique and powerful way.

A final example of a title that would certainly engage our students in middle- and high school English classes is Neil Gaiman's Sandman , collected in ten graphic novel collections. During its seventy five issue run, Sandman had the distinction of being the only mainstream comic book with nearly as many female as male readers (Bender 117). Describing this marvelous and imaginative series cannot help but be reductive, but in essence it chronicles the lives and intrigues of the Endless, seven siblings who preside over various facets of existence. They include Destiny, Death, Desire, Despair, Delirium, Destruction, and Dream. This last character is the primary focus of the series, Gaiman also interweaves elements of various mythological and religious traditions, history, popular culture, and even Shakespeare. Equal parts fantasy, science fiction, and horror, Sandman appeals not only to adults, but also to a vast number of our students fascinated by these genres. Being both exciting and highly literate, Sandman offers a great deal to teachers and students who are not yet aware of how relevant and mature comic books can be.

Aside from engagement, comic books also help to develop much needed analytical and critical thinking skills. A common goal, regardless of the level we teach, is to help students read beyond the page in order to ask and answer deeper questions that the given work suggests about art, life, and the intersection of the two. Comic books facilitate this analysis in a way unlike more "traditional" forms of literature because in addition to making use of standard literary devices such as point of view, narrative, characterization, conflict, setting, tone, and theme, they also operate with a very complex poetics that blends the visual and the textual, as discussed above. By combining words and pictures, comic books force students, rather directly, to reconcile these two means of expression. Important and analytical questions that I pose to my students are "How would you describe the style of these pictures?" "How does this drawing style interact with the story?" "Why these particular pictures?" "How would a different style change the story?" The answers to these questions are not obvious, and by answering them students begin to see themselves as analytical critics working to assemble and uncover the deeper meaning of a work.

In an introductory literature class, for example, I gave students an excerpt from Debbie Drecshler's Daddy's Girl , a fictional work that follows a girl named Lily through adolescence. What is most shocking about her life--and which is presented from the very start of the book--is that she is being sexually abused by her father. The excerpt I used, "Dear Diary," doesn't directly address this occurrence, but it does allow students to make interpretive conclusions about Lily's life based on Drecshler's visual style and the interplay between word and picture. Forced to look at a relatively confined space with such intensity, students noticed that the panels gradually become darker as Lily's initial enthusiasm at having a diary is undercut by the fact that her privacy has been violated. They also noticed how the direction of Lily's gaze varies throughout the four panels and that in the crucial third panel, where she is responding to this violation, she seems to be looking directly at the reader. Some students interpreted this visual strategy as Drecshler's way of "reaching out" to the reader and building a bridge between him or her and Lily. Students also had much to say about the final panel, where Lily is absent from the frame and all we are given is her diary entry, the banal "You know I just can't think of anything to write these days. The weather's okay, I guess" (10). One student interpreted the composition here as showing how Lily is hiding as a result of her mother's transgression: she is physically missing from the page, and her words don't reveal what she is really thinking. All in all, this activity appeals to me because it forces my students to be more critical viewers. Our students certainly spend much time using their eyes watching movies and television, playing video games, and surfing the Internet. But what we need to do is make sure that their critical faculties are likewise engaged during these activities. Many of my students tell me -- sometimes angrily -- that after one of our class activities they can no longer watch movies or look at magazine advertisements as they did before, and this comment lets me know that I have been doing my job.

But perhaps my primary motivation for using comic books in class is in order to provoke my students to think more deeply about how artistic value is accorded to particular works or genres. As mentioned above, the biggest danger I see in our English classes is the failure to enable and encourage students to define and defend their literary judgments. Comic books make an ideal subject and source for this focus because they give us the opportunity to raise larger questions of literary merit and canon formation, and in the process allow students to understand that all voices -- including their own -- need to be heard in matters of judging literary quality. As Paul Lauter

suggests, "a literary canon is a social construction, -- it changes, and -- people can and do organize to effect such changes" (261). By using comic books in the classroom, we open up a vital avenue of questions concerning what "literature" is, and in so doing we begin to "organize and effect" important changes in several ways.

First, we increase and diversify the voices that our students experience in the classroom and suggest to them that literature may take various forms, even comic books. Such an act is important, for through it we not only expand their reading horizons, but we give ourselves a starting point to discuss the complicated process of literary selection. That is, because comic books are not typically perceived as "literary," they encourage us to step back and ask larger, important questions about canon formation that sharpen critical thinking skills: "What is considered 'literature'?" "What is not?" "Who decides this?" "What are their interests?" Many of our students may not have considered asking these questions before, but as they do, they begin to uncover yet another dimension of literary study. Thus, comic books provide teachers with the perfect opportunity to help create new impressions among our students, and these impressions allow students to understand, ultimately, that "high" and "low" are somewhat artificial designations that historically have had much more to do with prejudice than merit. Second, comic books invite students to participate meaningfully in a classroom discussion precisely because most of them are not already convinced of their literary value. If asked to critically evaluate a comic book, students might be much more forthcoming with their ideas and opinions than in a discussion of a more "traditional" literary work -- Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities or Alice Walker's The Color Purple , for instance. Too often, students perceive such works as occupying a space above their level of thought, and the important question of why or by whom these works were deemed "literary" never comes up. And even if students ultimately reject the idea that comic books are literature, as I am sure that some of them will, they are still formulating an argument for their rejection and thinking about the issue, their own definitions of "literariness," and the work itself in a more critical way than if they simply accepted -- or pretended to accept -- our own views and biases. Finally, by using comic books in class and treating them with the seriousness they deserve, teachers enact a powerful lesson for students about the dangers of literary presumption: do not make assumptions based on the appearance or popular conception of certain works and genres too quickly, for such assumptions deny us access to a wonderful world of literary possibilities. Most of my students are surprised to learn that both film and the novel were once considered "trash" forms and not at all "literary." They are especially surprised about the latter genre, given the fact that most of what they consider to be literature are, in fact, novels. By presenting comic books in an educational context, we demonstrate to our students that they must never dismiss a type of work without fully understanding or searching for its possibilities and merits.

Along these lines, a brief history of comics reveals that inaccurate perceptions of comics -- such as the erroneous idea that they contribute to juvenile delinquency (Sabin 158) -- has given way to far more troubling actions. That is, not only have comic books been subjected to censorship, but they have also suffered from a lack of public support in these attacks. There are many reasons for this situation: the primary audience for comic books are juveniles, and censorship is often carried out in the name of "protecting" young minds; comic book creators and publishers often lack the funds to mount a proper defense; and, most significantly, comic books have a reputation for

being "disposable" and not "real" literature (Hermes 24). Combating such views of comic books--that they were juvenile and unchallenging--was exactly what I had in mind when I made the decision to introduce comics to my students as artistic works that merit serious scholarly consideration. After all, this challenge is exactly what teaching is all about: bringing new understanding and attention to some work that had either been ignored or misunderstood. Unfortunately, judgments based on incomplete understanding are made not only about works of literature, but about people and groups in our society as well, including those of our students who might feel marginalized for reasons of ethnicity, academic preparation, socioeconomic class, or a host of other factors that impact self-perceptions. No doubt some of our own students have, at one time or another, felt unfairly judged on the basis of appearances, and they may find some metaphoric resonance in the plight of comic books in America.

I would be remiss if, at the end of this argument for the importance of developing one's own sense of "literary merit," I did not explicitly state my own: great literature surprises us; it makes us pause to consider people and cultures and ideas and conflicts and dreams and tragedies that we have not yet encountered in quite the same way before. Comic books, in this teacher's opinion, embody and demonstrate this potential. When masterfully created, they reveal our own lives to us, and in so doing they help us to gain some insight into the world around us in surprising ways. When introduced into our middle-, secondary- and post-secondary school English classrooms, they can challenge and engage students in important and vital ways. And if more students enjoy going to their English classes in order to be surprised, challenged to think more deeply, and become more involved in the creation of their own opinions about literary merit, then we, as teachers of English, are fulfilling our implicit promise to make the world a place where readers, writers, and artists can flourish.

Works Cited:

Arnoldi, Katherine. The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom. New York: Hyperion, 1998.

Bender, Hy. The Sandman Companion. New York: Vertigo/DC Comics, 1999. Drecshler, Debbie. Daddy's Girl. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, Inc., 1995.

Hermes, Will. "Drawing the Line: A New Wave of Censorship Hits Comics." Utne Reader November - December 1995: 22-4.

Lauter, Paul. Canons and Contexts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics. 1993. New York: Harpercollins, 1994.

Mills, Rebecca Farris and Judy P. Pollack. "Collaboration and Teacher Change in the Middle School." The Clearing House May-June 1993: 302-5.

Sabin, Roger. Adult Comics. New York: Routledge, 1993.

-- Contributed by Rocco Versaci