Let’s Get Graphic!

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Although the term graphic novel was coined in 1964, it’s still considered a relatively new genre in American high school English classrooms, especially when compared to the literary canon. Conditions are changing, however, as illustrated by Heidi MacDonald’s claim: “The graphic novel category has become one of the fastest-growing at libraries of all kinds . . . (where) the audience of children and teens is growing” (1). The three graphic novels reviewed here would be fascinating additions to any secondary classroom.

Boxers and Saints by Gene Yang
Review by Katherine Hoffman

Young Adult Literature. Yang was a featured speaker at the Secondary Luncheon at the NCTE 2009 Annual Convention in Philadelphia. His journal article “Graphic Novels in the Classroom” explains how graphic novels “bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read” (187). I’ve had great success teaching American Born Chinese to all levels of secondary students, and his newest work seems just as popular; I can’t keep these texts on the free-reading shelves in my classroom.

Yang’s 2013 graphic novels, Boxers and Saints, are companion pieces; each tells the story of the Boxer Rebellion in China from a different perspective. Both books feature narrators who interrupt their own stories to include other stories told to them by mentors, family members, or friends. These stories within the story offer meaningful lessons and powerful insights into the conditions faced by various characters. While there are two separate volumes, they might best be read as one text, since the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This pair of texts would function well in a secondary world literature curriculum to offer multiple perspectives on the same event. Both volumes explore the coming of age of a young person in the time of the Boxer Rebellion in China. In Boxers, Little Bao, who adores the stories he sees in the operas performed at fairs, wants to become a hero, like his father, to defend China from the foreign devils. In Saints, Four-Girl desperately wants to be accepted by her grandfather, but she eventually finds refuge with the Christian missionaries. The protagonists seek out mentors who coach them on their paths of becoming. Little Bao learns kung-fu from Red Lantern, and Four-Girl learns about Christianity from Dr. Won and his wife. Once Bao and Four-Girl have established their foundations, they set out, seeking their futures, armed with idealism and a sense of right and wrong. However, Yang presents them with a world full of many moral gray areas. These texts contain some harsh realities of a nation at war: people are harassed, hanged, and murdered. But the underlying
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thread encourages compassion for others.

There is a significant scene in Boxers where Bao’s friend Mei-wen takes him to the Hanlin Academy Library, the greatest library in China. She says to him, “just think, Bao! We’re surrounded by stories!” and then she proceeds to tell him about Guan Yin, the Goddess of Compassion, the “goddess with one thousand eyes to look for suffering and one thousand hands to relieve it” (280). Yang draws a gorgeous panel of her in a lotus blossom, surrounded by hands with eyes. He echoes this panel in Saints with a portrait of Christ, also surrounded by the hands with eyes, asking Vibiana to “Be mindful of others as I am mindful of you” (158). As usual, Yang’s drawings contain many visual treats, offered through layout, colors, and content. Echoing the theme of Yang’s newest volumes, these texts deserve multiple rereads and would withstand strong literary analysis, just as American Born Chinese does.

Romeo and Juliet by Gareth Hinds
Review by Glenda Daulerio

Gareth Hinds’s illustrated adaptation of Romeo and Juliet is a masterpiece. Even though Hinds’s version of this classic love story is abridged, it stays true to the language of Shakespeare’s original play. In Hinds’s brief note at the beginning of the play, he encourages readers to look for Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter and even points out an especially good example. A point of interest in Hinds’s adaptation is his decision to cast the Capulets as Indians and the Montagues as Africans. In a brief note to the reader, Hinds also explains that he chose a multiracial cast to impress upon his readers the universality of Romeo and Juliet’s theme and that his selection is not intended as a statement about racism or racial conflict.

Hinds’s artwork makes reading this adaptation a pure joy. The characters come alive through Hinds’s artistic portrayal of this classic romance. To depict the rebellious nature of youth, Hinds dresses his younger characters in modernized garb; Juliet wearing a short, red dress and boots when she first meets Romeo. Like Shakespeare, Hinds set the play in Verona. To portray the city accurately, Hinds traveled to Italy to sketch the architecture and streets of the city. While he could not travel back the Elizabethan era, he does a masterful job of re-creating fair Verona.

Read alone or as a companion to Shakespeare’s original play, Hinds’s Romeo and Juliet is a graphic novel that is a must-have for any library or classroom collection. It’s perfect for students who have difficulty reading Shakespeare and for those who simply love to read classics with beautiful illustrations.

Relish: My Life in the Kitchen by Lucy Knisley
Review by Pauline Skowron Schmidt

Part memoir, part cookbook, Relish encourages readers to consider the world of food and examine their relationship with food. While the comic depictions are lighthearted, this text depicts a child dealing with the separation and divorce of her parents, as well as the challenges of living in urban New York City and rural upstate New York.

The graphic tale of Lucy’s relationship with food is entertaining and engaging and will certainly have readers reflecting on their personal journeys with cravings, favorite foods, food aversions, and even “comfort foods.” She examines the inherent role genetics play in these relationships and preferences, and shares specific personal events that she associates with particular foods. This graphic novel would make an excellent mentor text for students to consider when writing a food-based memoir, especially since it’s a relatively quick read.
Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book


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Too Much Verbiage

Tenses left him tense. He knew he was in the present, though it was far from perfect, and he had no knowledge of how it might become plus. He also recognized that the past was behind him, though he was present at the time, and that the future lay somewhere ahead, though he hoped to be present there as well.

Although he considered himself a progressive, he didn’t consider that anything to get tense about. He deeply feared being subjected to the subjunctive, and as for what was conditional and what was not, he had no idea, even if the idea were contrary to fact.

As for the distinction between “If it was . . .” and “If it were . . . ,” the subtlety remained well beyond him, far too far to recall.

Trying to distinguish among infinitives, participles, and gerunds left his head throbbing, though he strongly believed that sometime, somewhere, he had misplaced a modifier of some worth, never, despite his searching, to be repossessed. Further, among his many venial sins was his splitting, nay, shattering, an infinitive in front of dinner guests. His wife never forgave him, though he begged her to, please, if she could, do so.

He never could see the necessity of conjugating. He doesn’t see the need today, he never saw it yesterday, nor will he see it tomorrow. Content to take a tranquilizer and head for bed when such matters arose, he long ago decided to remain in the perpetual present.

—Edmund Farrell
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