Our Novi High School department adopted daily independent reading after a book study of Kelly Gallagher’s indispensable *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do about It*. The only holdouts were my struggling readers (high school juniors reading at a fourth-grade level). They were simply . . . uninterested. Whatever they were getting out of my instruction of reading, they were not gaining any love for it—the one lesson they most needed to internalize.

One day, I brought in my collection of graphic novels and offered them to the class. My hope was pretty simple. As Linda Smetana and Dana Grisham explain in their study of graphic novels as a tier 2 intervention tool, help for low-level readers “needs to provide opportunities for students to feel successful about the act of reading, instilling confidence, which in turn allows them to see reading as enjoyable, furthering their desire to read for pleasure” (184).

It worked! Within a week, a dozen struggling readers had adopted graphic novels as their go-to reading. Several kids read every book in my collection, and a couple of them sought out sequels to some titles. Graphic novels aren’t a panacea, but considering that less than 10 percent of teachers currently use them in the classroom (Smetana and Grisham 185), perhaps it’s fair to suggest that their potential is largely untapped. Loving a book is the first step to loving reading itself.

### The Bone Series
**by Jeff Smith**

Review by Michael Ziegler

The lovely thing about Jeff Smith’s saga is that it bridges the gap between a struggling reader’s abilities and his or her interests. While the storytelling is deceptively simple (a young creature named Bone and two of his companions are tossed from their village and into a mysterious wood where they discover strange creatures, a strong-willed girl and her feisty grandmother, and a villain with surprisingly ambitious plans), it manages to tell an intricate story that has brought adult acclaim as well as praise from YA readers. Kids won’t feel like they’re being handed a child’s story to match their reading level.

The friendly artwork entices struggling readers (who largely rely on appearance to evaluate a text). The story is laugh-aloud funny from frame to frame and builds its mysteries quietly. What seems like a casual read will slowly draw struggling readers in without the heavy demands other graphic novels might require.

### The Scott Pilgrim Series
**by Bryan Lee O’Malley**

Review by Michael Ziegler

This series largely sells itself thanks to a cult-classic film that
remains popular with teens. The film is a joy, but it condenses seven books to a two-hour production. The graphic novels are a great read not only for students who liked the movie but also for any struggling readers who are drawn to stories about people their age and with their interests.

How’s this for appealing to their adolescent interests? In the first half of book one (Scott Pilgrim’s Precious Little Life), readers are introduced to Scott Pilgrim, a 20-something who doesn’t drink, plays in a garage band, and struggles to make sense of his life. He has a gay roommate whose sexuality is treated as normal and not as a melodramatic plot point and a love interest, Ramona Flowers, who proves to have intriguing secrets. Then, in the second half of book one, the reader will discover that to date Ramona, Scott will have to defeat all of her evil exes first—which might still be fine because it turns out he has some musically inclined superpowers. Confused yet? I know; but your students will love it. Its characters are charming and honest about young adult life without ever falling on cynicism.

Flight edited by Kazu Kibuishi
Review by Michael Ziegler

This series performed the best in the role of winning over my two lowest readers. Each devoured all four books in the series that I owned. Sometimes I had to ask them to put the books away to do other work!

Why did they love these books so much? Because they’re filled with short stories by various authors and illustrators told with varying degrees of visual- and textual storytelling. It was an enormous confidence builder for them to be able to wander through a “full-size” text as pleasure readers without feeling overwhelmed. I don’t have to tell high school teachers how powerful it was to see struggling (and formerly alienated) readers speaking joyfully to one another in candid conversations about having a “favorite” story.

The series features a variety of genres and artwork; the stories all use the concept of “flight” as an element but otherwise tell unique stories about diverse characters (from robots to birds to children to aliens). Struggling readers will surely like some stories better than others, but isn’t that the mark of an engaged reader?

Batman: The Long Halloween by Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale
Review by Michael Ziegler

Some of your young readers are going to want exactly what makes graphic novels a mainstay genre: superhero action. For that group, I highly recommend this title, a famous entry in Batman’s storied history by Eisner Award–winning creators Loeb and Sale. It’s a perfect balance for your classroom library, offering a character currently popular in film while telling a story your readers haven’t seen on the big screen. The Long Halloween tells a fairly linear story with a cleanly composed balance between text and visuals (a key to the advantage graphic novels provide over traditional texts). The pages are filled with gorgeously drawn action sequences, and the noir styling of the story will feel...
Graphic Novels to Engage Reluctant Readers

new and fresh to inexperienced readers. Also, since all the characters in The Long Halloween are familiar faces, it draws the attention of reluctant readers.

The Arrival by Shaun Tan

Review by Marlana Solebello

There are few novels that instill in the reader the same visceral experience the protagonist undergoes in the pursuit of a cathartic resolution. This particular graphic novel takes the reader through a visually sublime universe where the reader not only comprehends but also shares in the emotional journey. Tan uses wordless narration alongside an invented array of unknown symbols and imagery to infuse feelings of confusion, strangeness, and bewilderment in the reader. As a unique result of the medium, both the reader and protagonist share in a parallel experience of interpreting meaning in unfamiliar territory.

Through dark and haunting images, mythical creatures, and a dystopian world, Tan illustrates the undaunted courage of the immigrant experience. The story traces a man who is forced to flee his country and leave his family to try and make a new life for them in a strange land. Sepia-toned images create feelings of history and authenticity; the reader is deceived into seeing the images as old pictures discovered in an abandoned wing of some museum. The blend of the familiar and strange is so closely entangled that identification with the protagonist is inevitable and authentic.

The story resembles the adolescent experience of navigating high school for the first time, unfamiliar with the landscape, customs, and even the people who roam the dreaded hallways. While literature is dripping with the blood, sweat, and tears of our past and present, its accessibility and the conversations it inspires in the classroom are often wanting as the students become disengaged. In contrast, The Arrival is appropriate for all reading levels and engages students of various ages. It is also an important text for English language learners as they will find the subject matter relevant and meaningful to their own experiences.

The Arrival is a pivotal addition to young adult literature, which widens the breadth and scope of the classroom curriculum. Teachers are charged with the responsibility of educating students, not just about literary terms and devices, but about the world around them. This novel suggests that empathy is gained from personal experience and from learning about the experiences of others. Although at first all the reader and protagonist see is difference on every sign, face, and creature they encounter, it becomes the similarities that bring them together. The shared experiences of the characters in the novel connect them as humans, just as the reader finds meaning in the shared experience of the journey taken with the protagonist. Students gain compassion for others who are marginalized in society, and who remain voiceless until their stories are told.

Works Cited


Michael Ziegler is in his 16th year as an English and IB teacher at Novi High School in Michigan, where he has served for five years as a Content Area Leader. This is his second year blogging about literacy for the Oakland County ISD, and he was a first-time presenter at the 2016 NCTE Annual Convention in Atlanta. He tweets about all things literary and educational via @zigthinks. Marlana “Marly” Solebello lives in Maine with her wife, Kerry, and her Australian cattle dogs, Sydney and Chaco. She has her master’s degree in English education and has served as an adjunct at Plymouth State University. Marly became a member of NCTE this year.