

Exploring Literary Devices in Graphic Novels

Although the idea of comics can date back as far as the Middle Ages (Sabin, 1996), it's only been within the last 20 years that comics and graphic novels have been more widely suggested as legitimate literature (Connors, 2007; McTaggart, 2008; Versaci, 2008). Following what is referred to as the "Golden Age" of the 1940s, comics were viewed negatively, especially after the publication of Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 (Sabin, 1996; Krashen, 2004; Versaci, 2008). Wertham's study stated that comics were harmful to readers and led to delinquency.

While some negative perceptions still exist, comics have come a long way since the 1940s (Connors, 2007; Versaci, 2008). In 1978, Will Eisner wrote *A Contract with God* (2006), popularizing the term *graphic novel*. In 1992, the graphic novel *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1991) won the Pulitzer Prize. Since then, the medium has grown and developed into its own entity (McTaggart, 2008). Carter (2007) defines a graphic novel as a "book-length sequential art narrative featuring an anthology-style collection of the comic art, a collection of reprinted comic book issues comprising a single story line (or arc), or an original, stand-alone graphic narrative" (p. 1). Essentially, graphic novels use images and print text to engage readers and tell a story. Readers walk with characters and see from their points of view. Print text and images are equally important, both providing essential information to the story.

Using graphic novels in classrooms promotes multimodality—the combination of two or more modes of communication—by using images and printed text to transfer information. Multimodality is valued by many researchers in the field, including Kress (2003), who writes:

We can no longer treat literacy (or "language") as the sole, the main, let alone the major means for representation and communication. Other modes are there as well, and in many environments where writing occurs, these other modes may be more prominent and more significant. (p. 35)

Kress (2003) highlights the importance of multimodality, especially when it comes to visual literacy. Similarly, Schwarz (2007) notes the value of graphic novels and their images when she quotes Burmark, writing: "Welcome to the age of images. The signs are everywhere—for those who can read them" (¶ 2). The overall consensus on defining visual literacy focuses around the ability to create, read, and/or understand visual messages (Burmark, 2002). Providing students with several modes (including visual), in which to give and receive information, offers them multiple ways to make sense of a story. Because of the strong images in graphic novels, they lend themselves to teaching literary devices as well.

Along with promoting visual literacy, graphic novels call on many complex literacy skills to decode images and print text (Butcher & Manning, 2004). Carter (2007) asserts that graphic novels require both visual literacy and critical literacy, as readers to take an active role in reading by questioning the author's motives and analyzing particular viewpoints (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Versaci, 2008). He maintains that graphic novels and comics should be seen as equal partners with other texts and media because they necessitate multiple reading strategies and layers of attention. "Comics give voice to parts of young readers' experience and imagination; they play a key role in cross-media theme development, and they illustrate multiple ways of presenting information—verbal, visual, and graphic" (Heath & Bhagat, 2004,

p. 591). In short, comics provide complex literature that mirrors a reader's world.

Reading Graphic Novels with Fifth Graders

In 2010, I conducted a study with four fifth-grade students to explore the ways they engaged with graphic novels. Together, we discussed two graphic

novels, *The Arrival* (2006) and *American Born Chinese* (2006), in depth. During this study, the students and I discussed the presence and use of literary devices in the graphic novels, and I realized that many literary devices, like point of view and symbolism, are quite visual. Upon reflection, I realized that using these graphic novels to introduce difficult literary devices could help scaffold students to

THE 411 ON COMIC BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

Comic Art is a form of storytelling that uses texts and images to express the mood and action of a story. The four main categories are: cartoons, comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels.

Comic Books use a deliberate sequence of art and text to express a storyline.

Graphic Novels are considered to be comics that have lengthy and multifaceted storylines, like a chapter book. The pictures in graphic novels are as integral to the story as the words themselves.

Manga are Japanese comics that are based on animated films and television shows. Manga includes a broad range of subjects and the stories rely heavily on visual cues rather than text.

Why use comics and graphic novels in the classroom?

Motivate students to read—Children are powerfully attracted to comics and graphic novels; they willingly gravitate toward these books.

Teach literary devices—Readers are required to be actively engaged in the process of decoding and comprehending a range of literacy devices, including narrative structure, metaphor and symbolism, point of view, and the use of puns, alliteration, and inferences.

Teach the classics—Classic novels that have been adapted to graphic novels provide a different way to read the work without altering the characters, themes, and tones.

Promote Critical Literacy—Graphic novels and comics can help explain how language works both for and against people; they enable students to acquire an appreciation for critical literacy.

Support struggling readers—Illustrations provide contextual clues to help students understand the meaning of the written narrative. Visual imagery helps students understand difficult and abstract concepts.

For booklists and additional information on comics and graphic novels:

- <http://www.ncte.org/magazine/archives/122031>
- <http://reviews.libraryjournal.com/category/books/graphic-novels/?ref=menu>
- <http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6312463.html>

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McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

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recognize them in textual readings. By introducing literary devices visually in graphic novels like *Bone* (Smith, 2004), *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006), and *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), I could transition into print-based literary devices, such as those in *Sign of the Beaver* (Speare, 1983), *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990), and *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993).

As our class read print-based novels, we focused on literary devices like point of view, allusion, themes and morals, tone and mood, symbolism, and flashback and foreshadowing—concepts that were often difficult for me to teach and for my students to grasp. Prior visual knowledge from graphic novels, however, strengthened my lessons and advanced my students' understanding. I concluded that educators would profit from looking at comics as transitional, conduit material, a point of view shared by Krashen (2004) and Carter (2007). But Carter also asserts that the opposite can be true. Rather than being just a stepping stone, graphic novels can be sophisticated and challenging texts in and of themselves, serving as tools to teach complicated concepts. When presenting comics and graphic novels as valid options among student reading choices, engagement in literacy will happen.

Graphic Novels and Comics as Academic Resources

Current scholarship promotes comics and graphic novels in libraries and academic settings, citing their potential for engagement, as well as their academic benefits. Research shows graphic novels as successful tools for a “wide range of subjects and benefit[ing] various student populations, from hesitant readers to gifted students” (Carter, 2007, p. 1). My review of current research examines the use of graphic novels and comics to teach content areas (especially language arts), social and cultural issues, and visual literacy. The specific skills required to read a graphic novel as well as their connection to the reader response theory is also discussed.

Graphic Novels across Content Areas

Graphic novels offer possibilities for teaching across content areas. They can be useful as historical literature (Butcher & Manning, 2004). Books

like *Maus I* and *Maus II* (Spiegelman, 1986, 1991) and *Cartoon History of the Universe* (Gonick, 1997) provide visual histories rich with detail and description. *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 1969/2003), an autobiography of an Iranian girl, is required reading at West Point, as it discusses racial and historical issues in Iran (Foroohar, 2005).

Schwarz (2002) suggests comics and graphic novels for science and math classrooms as well, such as *The Cartoon Guide to Statistics* (Gonick & Smith, 1993), which uses cartoon characters and sequential art to teach mathematical formulas and equations. Schwarz also notes the options of studying the graphic novels as art forms themselves. Students examine how images are portrayed by different graphic novelists, just as they might any other piece of art.

Graphic Novels in the Language Arts Classroom

Language arts classrooms are another space for graphic novels. Teaching dialogue could be introduced using a graphic novel, since it is neatly divided into speech bubbles (Schwarz, 2002). Along with dialogue, teachers can take advantage of graphic novels' strong vocabulary (Heath & Bhagat, 2004). Krashen's (2004) research bolsters this idea, noting that by reading a comic book every day, young readers take in about 500,000 words in a year. Krashen notes that the complex vocabulary in comics has a “respectable level of difficulty” (2004, p. 99).

Graphic novels provide other elements valuable to language arts classrooms. In 2005, Graphix of Scholastic created a guide for reading the graphic novel *Bone* (Smith, 2004), listing numerous literary devices that can be taught, such as point of view, theme, and allusion. Graphic novels are also beneficial in exploring tone and mood, using the color and visual cues from the images along with the printed text (Fisher & Frey, 2007). In Monnin's *Teaching Graphic Novels* (2010), a resource for teachers,

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she provides classroom reproducibles, examples, and instructions for teaching literary elements like symbols, foreshadowing, themes, and setting. And Bitz (2010), while helping students to write comics through his Comic Book Project, takes time to discuss other literary elements of comics. Strong vocabulary and literary elements are fundamentals that educators look for when choosing high-quality reading material within every content area. Graphic novels with these elements engage readers and provide opportunities for critical discussions.

Using Graphic Novels to Teach Social and Cultural Issues

Discussions of social and cultural issues take place in any content area, in any classroom. Graphic novels can be valuable in this context, too. Bitz's (2009) Comic Book Project, mentioned above, reflected students' own cultural and social fears and hardships. In addition, many existing graphic novels can be used when teaching social issues, such as homelessness, violence, rape, or incest. *The Tale of One Bad Rat* (Talbot, 1995), for example, depicts these difficult themes (Bucher & Manning, 2004). In another instance, pairing *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850/2009) and an autobiographical graphic novel, *The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (Arnoldi, 1998), helped Carter (2007) create an academic space for serious discussions of teen pregnancy in his classroom. Using cultural criticism as the vantage point and *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003) as the novel, Connors (2007), a high school language arts teacher, created ways for students to deal with tension in cultural differences and find strong connections in previously buried similarities. Using a graphic novel like *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2007) aids in exploring themes of race and stereotypes to support a younger audience. *Lions, Tigers, and Bears: Fear and Pride* (Bullock & Lawrence, 2006)

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and *Herobear and The Kid: The Inheritance* (Kunkel, 2003) are two other titles aimed for young readers that address divorce and death.

Graphic Novels and Visual Literacy

Graphic novels not only attract readers to literature but also require them to use more complex reading skills to interpret images (Schwarz, 2002). As a result, graphic novels can be tools to sharpen visual literacy skills. Jewitt, Kress, Ogborn, and Tsatsarelis (2001) conducted an empirical study of the benefits of using print text and image together in a science lab. They suggest that "visual realization of meaning is important. Learning can no longer usefully be considered a purely linguistic accomplishment" (p. 17). By comparing written and illustrated portions of their lab sheet, they found that each mode gave different information about the lesson. The illustrations reflected students' knowledge of cell structure, while the written work showed an understanding of the lab format. What was provided in illustration could not have been provided in writing and vice versa.

Multimodality is critical in communication, and images are significant not only in classroom settings but in any social format (Kress, 2003). "The increasing demand for a workforce and citizenry that is comfortable with multiple literacies, as opposed to one factory model of literacy, is at least one argument for why comics could have a place in an English language arts classroom" (Bitz, 2010, p. 39). As educators, it is our job not only to meet content standards, but also to prepare students to be citizens of the world. Graphic novels provide opportunities to strengthen visual literacy.

Reader Response Theory and Graphic Novels

When reading images and print text, a reader is allowed some freedom of interpretation (Kress, 2004; McCloud, 1993). This idea can be labeled as a transaction or a "two-way process involving a reader and a text" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). Rosenblatt's theories of reader-response carry over into graphic novels. An argument can also be made that individual experiences in reading, according to reader-

response theory, can also influence educators' text selection (Monnin, 2010). In her resource *Teaching Graphic Novels*, Monnin also provides space for "text potential," which is that "unique meaning created between the reader and the text" (2007, p. 27).

Other educators have followed Rosenblatt's lead. Bakis, a teacher and avid supporter of graphic novels in the classroom, notes in an interview that "In order to understand how to read comics, readers must also pay attention to their own reactions

and contributions to the story as it unfolds" (Hogan & Bakis, 2011). Sipe and Brightman (2009) conducted a study using picturebooks, grounding their methods in reader-response theory. This resulted in the theory that allowing young readers to fill in the gaps at page breaks of picturebooks may enrich meaning making and invite high-level inferencing skills. Another study using *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) concluded that readers respond to graphic novels, noting numerous literary devices

WOULD YOUR STUDENTS ENJOY CREATING THEIR OWN GRAPHIC NOVELS? YOU BET THEY WOULD!

One of the best ways for students to understand a genre is to experience it from the inside out—by creating the genre themselves. Students can gain an architect's knowledge of the literary devices mentioned in the article, as well as the graphic messages that dominate today's media (Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2006; Gee, 2003). In her book *Study Driven* (2006), Katy Wood Ray recommends comic books and/or graphic novels as one of many exciting text forms that students can experiment with.

Want to know how to get started?

First: Immerse the students in the genre. In addition to texts mentioned in this article, consider these funny bone-tickling treasures featured on the *School Library Journal* blog: http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/slj/home/891089-312/comic_relief_thirty-nine_graphic_novels.html.csp.

Next: Allow students the opportunity to discuss the books, focusing not only on what the authors/illustrators are trying to communicate, but on *how the authors are communicating*. Ray suggests that students create charts of the commonalities of structure, tricks, and style across many examples within the genre.

Finally: Get started writing! Encourage students to create (as Ray puts it) "under the influence" of what they've learned from studying the genre. Jarret Krosoczka, author of the Lunch Lady series, starts his projects with a story map. More guidance (and fun) may be found in the book, *Monkey Boy to Lunch Lady: The Sketchbooks of Jarret J. Krosoczka* (2011).

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in both print text and image portions of the graphic novel (Hammond, 2009).

Sipe's (1998) earlier ideas on oscillating between print text and image while reading a picturebook can also be applied to graphic novels. In a graphic novel, both print text and images provide essential information to move a story forward; therefore, the oscillation process becomes more complex. McCloud supported this conclusion by writing that as you are reading a graphic novel, "what you see is seldom what you get if all you are seeing is just ink and paper. In the end, what you get is what you give" (1993, pp. 136–137). A reader must contribute to the story, participate, in order for the story to take place.

Study Background, Method, and Analysis

I conducted my research during the 2009–2010 school year, working with fifth graders from my school. The scholarship of McCloud (1993) and Sipe (1998), supported by previous research on reader-response theory from Rosenblatt (1982),

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triggered my thinking about engagement while reading a graphic novel. I wondered what it might look like to engage in a graphic novel with my students. Comics and graphic novels contain empty spaces between the

panel closures, called gutters (McCloud, 1993). I found that these literal gaps, or gutters, in graphic novels provided ample opportunities for readers to engage and contribute to storytelling. Sipe's suggestion that readers participate in creating a story by filling in gaps is what ultimately informed my research question: *In what ways do readers engage while reading a graphic novel?*

Background to the Study

Our school is a private, parochial school in the suburbs of a mid-sized Midwestern city. The school holds about 570 students, with an average class size of 30. Students are primarily middle class European

American. The 70 fifth graders in the school reflect the school's overall demographics. My students were ages 10 and 11, and the class was half female, half male.

I read four graphic novels during the year. The first two, *Amelia's School Survival Guide* (Moss, 2002) and *Bone: Out from Boneville* (Smith, 2004), were part of my regular class curriculum and also became part one of my data collection and analysis (see Appendix A). They also served as an introduction to graphic novels to my participants. While these graphic novels were not part of the small-group discussions that came later in the study, they provided important vocabulary and background knowledge in reading the two graphic novels this study revolved around: *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006) and *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006; see Appendix A). I used the time teaching *Bone* and *Amelia's School Survival Guide* to keep a teacher-journal in preparation for conducting this study of graphic novels and engagement. This journal, combined with my lesson plans and materials, served as the initial data for my study.

The Participants

I chose four students from the 70 in the fifth-grade class. These students were avid readers and strong communicators. They also actively shared their reading materials with me. Based on these criteria, I felt the students would be comfortable and willing to discuss their reading process in front of me, their peers, and a camera. After receiving parental consent and the participants' assent, I began the study.

Participants were Shannon, Jason, Laura, and Gina (pseudonyms). Shannon is a European American female who is vocal in class and is comfortable challenging the ideas of teachers and peers. This year was her first real exposure to graphic novels. Jason is the only boy who participated in the study and is European American. Jason loves to read and regularly recommends books and series to me. He also expressed great interest in graphic novels, even though he has not had much experience with them. Laura, a European American female, is a little quieter in class but one who seems to be thinking all the time. She is smart, with quiet confidence. Finally,

there is Gina, an African American who is not only an avid reader, but an avid graphic novel reader. Gina is known as the class artist, so the medium of graphic novels speaks to her.

Book Discussions and Interviews

During the spring quarter, I met with my participants as a group twice. Prior to our meetings, I gave each student a copy of *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006) and *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) and a packet of sticky notes. I asked them to read through each book and suggested that if they had time, they reread and use the sticky notes to identify the parts they found particularly interesting, confusing, beautiful, or worth talking about for any reason. The participants had a week to read each book.

My classroom provided an academic backdrop for our book discussions. Both discussions were videotaped, an appropriate visual collection method for a visual literature medium. As students discussed a visual piece of a story, they would often react with their bodies, so video allowed me to capture all forms of engagement, not just verbal ones. Each discussion lasted about an hour.

During our first meeting, we discussed the wordless graphic novel *The Arrival*; during our second meeting, we discussed *American Born Chinese*. I predetermined some discussion questions based on analysis of my class work, but I generally let the students guide conversations with their comments, questions, and marked sections.

Following the discussions, I analyzed the videotape footage and my teacher journal. I then created an outline of our discussion, determining which parts were pertinent to my research question and noting potential themes. Based on this reflection and students' individual contributions to our group discussion, I developed several questions for each student. I conducted and videotaped one-on-one interviews with all four participants, during which I asked the series of prepared questions, as well as follow-up questions when necessary.

Data Analysis

By the end of data collection, I had three major sources of data to analyze. Using Webb's method

of triangulation (Hubbard & Power, 2003), I used my teacher journal, transcripts from two book discussions, and transcripts from student interviews to validate (or not) my reoccurring themes. As I wrote multiple analytic memos of each experience, I simultaneously indexed all that I was seeing and experiencing with my students in order to narrow my focus and identify common themes. After interviews were complete, I began the most intense portion of analysis: re-watching the video footage, taking notes, and highlighting themes throughout all three sources of data.

All of the data collected supported, or at least did not negate, my findings. One prominent theme was the presence of literary devices within a graphic novel. I did member checks, walking my students through my findings and taking notes on their comments, questions, suggestions, and corrections. All four students validated these recurring themes. I used my notes to polish and support my results and, with validation from my participants, began transcribing video footage that spoke to recurring themes and deepening my analysis. After being outlined, tested against the rest of my data, and supported by member checks, one major theme emerged—a focus on literary devices.

Literary Devices in Graphic Novels

As I mentioned, our discussions took place in our classroom. The readers acknowledged that they may have been reading graphic novels differently than how they thought a typical reader would. As Shannon put it, "They [readers] might just be slacking and not really care and not really thinking much about it, like we did, because we kind of had to, because it's our book club and we have to impress the camera." Knowing that they were being used for a study encouraged these students to work harder. Although it was made clear to them that there would be no grades, the readers continually brought up literary devices found as they read.

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These students were used to discussing literary elements in this room with me, so the elements came up naturally in our conversations. It is important to note that although many readers compartmentalize graphic novels and comics into a pleasure reading column, when placed in an academic setting, they became academic.

This was true with the graphic novels we read as a whole class prior to the study. *Amelia's School Survival Guide* (Moss, 2002) served as an introduction to the school year and to the format and parts of a graphic novel. During the reading of *Bone* (Smith, 2004), I took time to focus on literary devices, including point of view. The readers in my study took information from my reading class and applied it during our discussion within the study.

While discussing *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006), for instance, it was Gina who posed the question to the group: "What point of view is this drawn in?" Shannon's answer was, "It can either be third person limited or third person omniscient, because even when you do see him [the main character], you don't see through his eyes, you see him." Thus, these students showed an understanding of point of view and what it might look like in a graphic novel. They also acknowledged changes in point of view as different characters told their stories within *The Arrival*, noting changes in color and facial close-ups as clues:

Shannon: It was hers [the story's point of view] because you see the picture, and she's telling him the story.

Ashley: How do you know she's telling him the story? 'Cause he's [the main character] been telling us the story all along, right?

Shannon: Uh, you see her take out the picture and talk to him. And you see closer up.

Jason: Yeah, the picture's right there, then it zooms, then it zooms again. And then it starts.

Gina: And it's like, a different color, the background.

Laura: It stood out to me, because of the color.

The Arrival's use of framing and color helped participants pinpoint a change in point of view. They

noticed it on their own because of the striking images that grabbed their attention and clued them in to the change.

While reading *Bone* (Smith, 2004), I also taught the concept of allusion. During the reading of *The Arrival*, students immediately clued in to the fact that the entire story alluded to an immigrant's trip to Ellis Island. Shannon explained, "Before I was a little confused, and it was a lot, um, vague. But, um, this we learned about in social studies, so it was really easy to recognize."

Jason chimed in, "Yeah, the Ellis Island!"

"The Ellis Island!" Gina and Laura had made the connection as well.

All four readers agreed that this story was about Ellis Island. Shannon didn't just make a connection, she *recognized* the place, showing how powerful those images are to her.

We discussed many other literary devices with traditional literature during the school year as well, namely, symbolism, mood, flashback, foreshadowing, and jargon. In reading *The Arrival*, for example, the ever-present dragon tail was discussed as a symbol. Shannon noted, "Um, I think it is saying . . . it might be a war . . . or it could just be a symbol of sadness and, like, the economy going bad." The page being discussed was also marked with a sticky note, asking, "Does it symbol[ize] sadness?" (see Fig. 1).

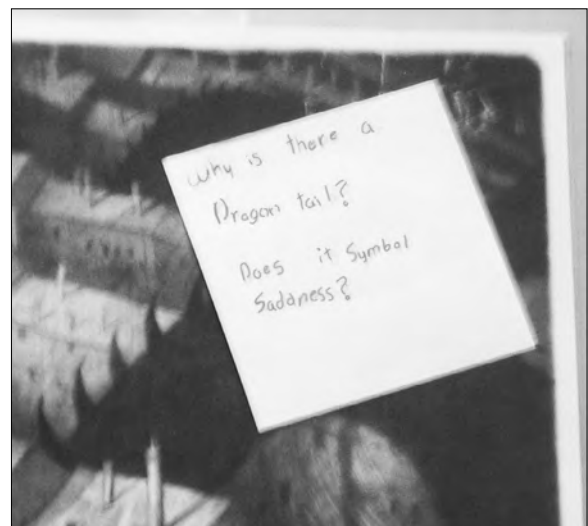


Figure 1. Shannon works to understand symbolism in Tan's (2006) *The Arrival*.

Symbolism continued to be a part of our discussion as we worked with *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006). First we talked about the stereotypical Chinese character, Chin-kee, and what he symbolized. You could see wheels turning in readers' heads as they realized the symbolism. Jason said, "It could be two parts of himself, the American half and the Chinese half." We identified what all of the characters symbolized in the large picture, which led to the moral: be yourself, or as Gina put it in her interview, "You can't take . . . away yourself, because you are yourself!"

Mood was also a very present part of our discussion, especially as we read *The Arrival*. One student asked what the changes in color around the border meant. Jason answered, "Like Shannon said, a little bit of it is like the mood, like the part of the story." The color changes marked changes in mood, giving the readers visual clues as they read the story. In the beginning of the story, the pictures are shaded darkly because the main character is packing to leave. Laura points out that the colors show us, "they're [the character's family] sad that he's leaving." Later in this story, once the main character arrives to a new, safer place, the colors brighten.

Flashbacks and foreshadowing are also present in *The Arrival*. During our discussions, Laura first pointed it out to us:

Laura: This picture, he flashes back to it, in . . . I don't know where.

Ashley: So what is it, specifically, that he flashes back to?

Laura: The hands.

Laura had previously marked this image to share with the group as well (see Fig. 2). Seeing the same image repeated in the story struck her, calling her attention to it. The visual flashback made sense to her as a repeated image, and made the concept easy to understand.

During Shannon's interview, we discussed the foreshadowing images in *The Arrival*. After Shannon "read" some of the wordless story out loud, I asked her why she had left out some details. She said, "If you've read a book, like the foreshadowing . . . they don't tell you every single hint about

what's gonna happen next, they just skip over it. Like, when I said he gave her origami, I didn't say she kept looking at it and looking at it. I just said he gave her the origami, because the origami comes in later." Again, the repeated images in the story drew Shannon's attention. First, the origami was introduced, then the origami bird image was repeated as the main character sends them home to his daughter and eventually makes them for her when she arrives to live with him.

My final example involves Gina's direct (and unprompted) connection between the teaching of literary devices in graphic novels and in print-based novels. Gina pointed out the use of slang and jargon in *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) and connected it to work by Jerry Spinelli and Lois Lowry. During the school year, the fifth grade had read Spinelli's *Maniac Magee* (1990) and completed a mini-lesson on jargon and how and why Spinelli used it. We had also recently finished a lesson with *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) about the specific language the characters use. Gina said,

This is kind of referenced with Jerry Spinelli. Uh, a lot of stuff they say . . . how would you call it, like some slang words? . . . A lot of graphic novels . . . it's kind of like what people actually would say. *The Giver* is kind of more, uh, sophisticated, the grammar, the language. But . . . the *Maniac Magee*, um, Jerry Spinelli, they made it, uh, he made it like actual people talking.

She believed that Spinelli and Yang wrote the way that people actually spoke: "It's actual people

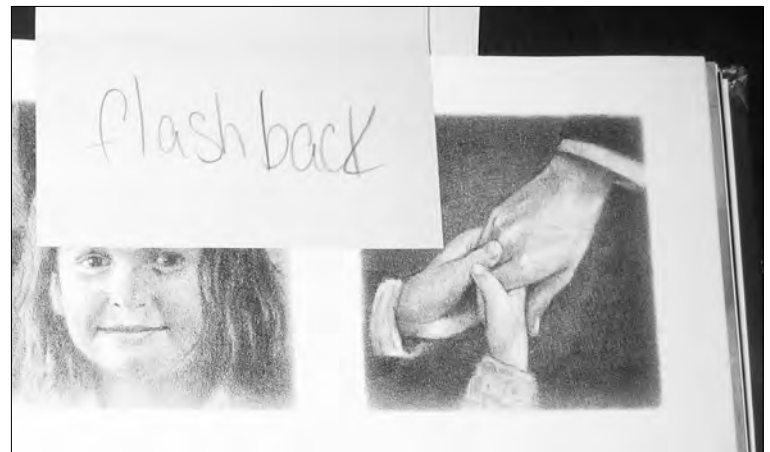


Figure 2. An image helps to clarify Laura's understanding of "flashback."

talking, so there's, there is some, um, slang." *The Giver's* language was much more academic, which was fitting for the purpose. Gina was able to not only pick out a literary element, but also compare and contrast it to the same element in two other print-based novels.

Regardless of how the devices were presented, visually or in print, they were noticeable to the readers in graphic novels. It has been noted that the readers in this study put more effort into their reading than what is typical, bringing these literary devices to light in our discussions. Even so, graphic novels such as those used for this project are rich with elements of literature and can be used to teach these elements as well.

Graphic Novels Support Print-Based Text Understandings

When Gina made the connection between print-based and graphic novels during our interview, I felt like I had struck gold. I began to think about other opportunities where I could partner graphic novels with our texts to increase engagement and introduce literary elements. As Bitz (2010) writes, "There are many connections to be made between comics (e.g., *Maus*) and the accepted cannon of literature (e.g., *Diary of Anne Frank*)" (p. 39). In my own classroom, I already used the graphic novel *Bone* to teach literary devices, such as point of view and allusions. In the year following this study, I integrated *The Arrival* into my whole-class curriculum in order to introduce plot sequence, flashbacks, foreshadowing, symbolism, tone, and mood. These lessons also scaffold students' analyses of print-based novels. In this section, I will share what I have taken from this study to inform my own classroom curriculum.

When teaching *Bone: Out from Boneville* (Smith, 2004), I presented mini-lessons on point of view. We discussed the point of view as third person omniscient as we followed multiple characters throughout the story. This lesson served as an introduction to point of view that the students carried with them the rest of the year. They were able to recognize the same point of view in our print-based

novels: *The Sign of the Beaver* (Speare, 1983), *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990), and *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993). Established through our discussions of *Bone*, the concept became a continuous conversation throughout the rest of the year.

We have also looked at literary allusions within images, such as *Bone's* constant references to *Moby Dick* (Melville, 1851/2011) and similarities to older comics, such as *Uncle Scrooge* (Filipi & Smith, 2008). Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599–1601/2003) is even quoted, when one character, Phoney Bone, attempts to rig a race, saying, "It does sour my plans of amassing a huge fortune and retuning to Boneville in triumph . . . Still, the play is th' thing!" (Smith, 2004, p. 139). As a class, we discuss the presence of other stories and ideas within this story. Allusions come up yet again later in the year while reading Jerry Spinelli's *Maniac Magee* (1990). At this point in the year, my fifth graders are already familiar with the concept of allusions from *Bone* and slide easily into this lesson.

Our final novel for the year is Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993). This novel is full of symbolism, foreshadowing, and flashbacks. In *The Arrival*, these concepts are visual, as referenced above. In print, however, they are abstract and can be difficult for students to identify, so in 2011, I introduced *The Arrival* into my curriculum in the weeks before starting *The Giver*. We began with a mini-lesson to define symbolism, foreshadowing, and flashback. Then, in groups, students took visual notes of the storyline and of examples of symbols, foreshadowing, and flashbacks, eventually sharing them with the whole class.

With some visual background knowledge from a book like *The Arrival*, students were better able to visualize the flashbacks Jonas has in *The Giver*. The novel opens with a flashback, so in the middle of the second page, I stopped reading and asked, "What's going on here?" Immediately hands shot up, and not being able to contain themselves, several students shouted out, "It's a flashback!" This was a vast improvement over past classes' frustration with the confusing beginning of this novel. This year, they began with confidence. Foreshad-

owing and symbolism are other important elements within *The Giver*. All of these concepts came alive for my students by recalling concepts and images from *The Arrival*.

After working with my small group of participants reading *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese* and working with my whole class reading *Bone* and *The Arrival*, I began to see the potential for many more lessons to scaffold into literary devices that I teach to my class. There was a literary device that was ever-present in our graphic novel discussions. In small groups, my students brought up the coloring of the skin in *American Born Chinese*, as yellowed skin is a negative stereotype of Chinese people. We discussed the theme of race in this novel and all of the visual cues bringing race to the forefront of this story. The visuals

of Chin-Kee, the Chinese cousin, helped us to see some of the negative reactions race can bring about. This theme is also present in *The Sign of the Beaver* (Speare, 1983). I would love for students to be able to connect the images from *American Born Chinese* that show more current racism with ones set in the 1800s.

Maniac Magee offers yet another way to use *The Arrival* in discussing mood with fifth graders. We spent a lot of time discussing Spinelli's changing mood and tone as the book switches between parts one, two, and three. By recalling the use of color and shading in *The Arrival*'s mood, we were able to compare those visual changes to the language changes, as the mood swiftly shifts from light and funny to dark and sad at the beginning of Part Three in *Maniac Magee*.

EXPLORING LITERARY DEVICES IN GRAPHIC NOVELS WITH FIFTH GRADERS

ReadWriteThink.org has lesson plans and teaching resources on many of the texts mentioned in this article:

In the **Text Messages** podcast episode "**Teen Identity and Tough Situations**," the host discusses the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* as well as five other recommended titles by a diverse array of authors. In *American Born Chinese*, adolescent readers will love the bright, colorful panels and the humorous story of Jin, the son of Chinese immigrants, who struggles to understand how to fit in at his American school without rejecting his Chinese heritage. Podcast listeners also hear tips to share with adolescent readers before, during, and after reading this fantastic graphic novel.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/teen-identity-tough-situations-30341.html>

Using *The Giver* in this ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan, students discuss the importance of recorded history. This provides context for descriptive writing of students' own history in a lesson that integrates personal writing, research, and literary response.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/memories-matter-giver-descriptive-13.html>

To prepare students for reading the graphic novel *Persepolis*, this lesson uses a WebQuest to focus students' research on finding reliable information about Iran before and during the Islamic Revolution.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/gaining-background-graphic-novel-1063.html>

Resources and research from **James Bucky Carter** was cited in the article. See his work on ReadWriteThink.org here: <http://www.readwritethink.org/about/bio/james-bucky-carter-201.html>.

—Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

Conclusion

While graphic novels can scaffold readers' transitions into different modes of literature or literary elements, I am not advocating for handing a graphic novel to a struggling or reluctant reader in the hope that they will segue easily to traditional, print text later. That fact does not lessen graphic novels' value or academic weight. Graphic novels, like the ones used in this study, stand equally with print-based literature as complex, academically challenging, and rich with literary elements and devices.

The fact that the participants in this study made so many academic connections was no accident. I established an academic setting surrounded by the books they had read for the study and for my reading class. In fact, the readers informed me that they believed they worked harder than the average reader while reading these books in hopes of impressing both me and the camera. The academic setting also made for academic discussions. Jason, one of the participants, explained it this way:

If this is your first graphic novel, you really won't understand it . . . because if you don't know that a graphic novel is pictures and panels, um, showing you the story, while telling you the plot at the same time. If you haven't read a graphic novel before, you won't, you won't understand it as much as everyone else, because some of the pictures show action, and like, um, it shows emotions . . . they wouldn't know to look at the facial expression or what they are doing or what he's surprised about or what he's thinking . . .

Jason's insightful observations show how complicated and challenging he believes a graphic novel can be. But at the same time, he knows the "rules" to reading one, so he understands the story. While there is much to interpret, there are also concrete and academic elements to graphic novels. Even this small study shows that the graphic novel is a powerful medium. Literary devices are not only present, but recognizable to the students of this study with no prompting from me. Imagine the graphic novel's capabilities with a teacher's guidance! This medium will grab your students' attention, help them grasp difficult literary concepts, and visualize those concepts as they scaffold into other modes of reading.

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Appendix A: Synopses of Graphic Novels Discussed in This Article

Moss, M. (2002). *Amelia's School Survival Guide*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Amelia's School Survival Guide walks students through preparing for the start of the school year. Moss talks about how to deal with all types of teachers, sets up quizzes that will tell students what kind of student they are, and gives advice for studying in all subject areas. The pages look like notebook paper filled with notes, thoughts, and funny comments. There are details and comments in every corner. This graphic novel uses primarily text, with visual images as embellishments.

Smith, J. (2004). *Bone*. Columbus, OH: Cartoon Books.

Bone follows three cousins from their initial banishment from Boneville through an epic adventure in a faraway land. The cousins face danger, dragons, and the Lord of Locusts, who is hunting for them. Along the way, the Bone brothers befriend Thorn, Grandma Ben, Dragon, and the creatures of the forest. They all work together to defeat the Lord of the Locusts and his rat creatures, and Thorn eventually takes her true place as queen. *Bone: Out from Boneville* is the first of nine books that make up Jeff Smith's 1300-page graphic novel. Its vivid imagery and strong allusions tell a fictional and fanciful tale to which any reader could connect.

Tan, S. (2006). *The Arrival*. Melbourne, AUS: Levine Books.

Tan's wordless story takes readers through a journey of one man to a foreign and fictional land. He leaves his wife and daughter behind to travel to a new place to find shelter, food, and work. On his journey, he meets several people who share their stories and help him along his way. Eventually, our main character is joined with his family in this new world. Tan's whimsical and, at times, eerie illustrations connect emotionally with the reader. This is a beautifully drawn story of a world full of new and confusing everyday objects that helps readers of any age connect with ideas about immigration, new worlds, and the struggles that come with them.

Yang, G. L. (2006). *American Born Chinese*. New York, NY: First Second.

American Born Chinese is a set of three stories that cross over one another. It includes the old Chinese Fable of the Monkey King who no longer wants to be a monkey; the story of young Jin Wang, a Chinese American; and Chin-Kee, a negative caricature of a Chinese teenager. All of these characters suffer from stereotyping and struggle with being comfortable with their identities. Near the end of the book, the stories overlap and merge together, forcing all of the characters to face themselves, their culture, their identities.