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Monnin, Katie. (2010) *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom*. Gainesville, FL: Maupin House Publishing

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Reviewed by Christina Cicchetti
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Educators of my generation and earlier grew up thinking of comics (we hadn't heard the term "graphic novels") as strictly pop culture, useful only for entertainment, and certainly without merit for educational purposes. Oh yes, there was some acknowledgement that comics might be useful for enticing the reluctant reader, but always with the goal of moving the reader along to better literature as quickly as possible.

And now we have a book devoted to teaching graphic novels in the mainstream literature classroom—to all students, not just reluctant readers—imagine! Yes, times have changed. Not only has educators' thinking changed but, as the terminology shift from "comics" to "graphic novel" implies, the genre itself has undergone significant

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development. As the genre has matured and become a medium for serious literature, so teachers have begun to see the possibilities of the genre for expanding students understanding of media and the relationship between texts and images. The uninitiated may be surprised by the serious topics dealt with in many of the graphic novels Monnin suggests.

In *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom*, Monnin argues that the rise in publication of graphic novels parallels the rise in the world-wide web, another image/text medium. In the 21st century, it is not enough for students to be able to read and interpret texts; they must also successfully read and interpret texts with images. Thus graphic novels provide a rich format for teaching students to understand the interplay between images and text.

Monnin underscores what many educators have come to understand as the value of graphic novels for beginning readers and English-language learners. The images provide a scaffold for the reader, giving a context to the words, greatly aiding in comprehension. Beyond this, however, Monnin contends that image literacy is a skill all its own. She references the literature of media literacy and states that:

During our current communication revolution, the worlds of print-text literacy and image literacy share the stage.... Because of this new, shared literacy stage, today's ELA teachers have the good fortune ... to be the teachers who will redefine what counts as valuable literature, and literacy, for generations to come. (p. xv-xvi)

Thus *Teaching Graphic Novels* is not just a how-to book, but also a call to English Language Arts (ELA) teachers to take up the challenge Monnin sees as inherent in the changing communication styles and technologies of the 21st century.

The Introduction of the book provides a brief history of image literacies in the teaching of ELA. Chapter 1 introduces structure and vocabulary necessary for analyzing graphic novels as literature, while chapters 2–6 focus in on aligning graphic novels with the national ELA

standards published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Each chapter provides 2 to 4 lesson ideas with at least one lesson each for middle and high school grades. Standard areas addressed by the chapters are reading comprehension, reading fiction, reading nonfiction, media literacy, and English-language learners. Monnin provides ELA teachers with plenty of information to help them justify the teaching of graphic novels to skeptical administrators and parents.

Monnin provides helpful handouts and graphic organizers for use with each lesson idea; all of these are helpfully pulled together in appendixes at the end of the book. The handouts, in keeping with the spirit of image literacy, are well laid out and visually attractive. For example, “The Literate Eye” handout features a human eye with different parts of the eye representing various elements of story, such as plot, setting, characters, conflict, climax, themes, etc. Suggested title lists are also provided for graphic novel fiction and nonfiction (misnomers notwithstanding, there is such a thing as “graphic novel nonfiction”). Separate lists are provided for middle and high school grades.

Teaching Graphic Novels will be useful to ELA teachers who are interested in exploring graphic novels with their students. Teachers need not have knowledge of the genre before picking up this book. Anyone familiar with literary analysis will recognize the analytical techniques applied here to the graphic novel. One suggested lesson idea pairs a graphic novel with a traditional text novel. This may be a good way for those new to the genre to get started, enabling the ELA teacher to compare students’ understanding and reaction from one genre to the other. For each book title included in a lesson idea, Monnin provides a short plot summary, author biography, additional interesting information, and a quote from the author. This will be very helpful to those just beginning to explore the graphic novel genre.

Teaching Graphic Novels will be a welcome addition to the library of any ELA educator who is either considering or has added graphic novels to her/his literature classroom.

About the Reviewer

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