

## From Comics to Graphic Novels Or, What Happens When We Share Sequenced Tales?

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We determined some time ago that we wanted to have an issue on the graphic novel, or on the comic book format, because we knew that for some time teachers, librarians, and parents have debated the ways these materials fit within youth culture and, ultimately, what possibilities they have for intergenerational sharing. The “comic” format, with its five-framed story, has long had problems with adults who choose stories to share with youngsters, and comic books have also been problematic in their format and representations of culture. The humor sometimes seems tasteless, the representations stereotyped.

In 2006, Charles Hatfield declared that the “burgeoning, multidisciplinary field of comics study already exists” and described it as a field “open to a variety of approaches” (365). According to Hatfield, the novice in the area would best begin with Scott McCloud’s seminal work, *Understanding Comics*, a book he called “quirky, compulsively readable, and disarmingly ambitious” (369). We would also encourage our audience to preview Scott McCloud’s webpage at [www.scottmcccloud.com](http://www.scottmcccloud.com).

If you don’t have time to make McCloud part of your expertise, we propose some questions to consider as you read the reviews in this issue: First, is there any way to separate the popular culture aspects of comic books from the artistic aesthetics of the paneled storytelling found in such classic picture books as the works of Maurice Sendak? Secondly, how can we fit texts and images together in a sequenced story? And finally, how can we make this work in our discussions of graphic art with our young companions?

Maurice Sendak’s *In the Night Kitchen* is one of several of his picture books containing the comic book format. His illustrated books always held a feeling of rebellious joyfulness, even when the hero’s prospects were grim. In 2008, Jonathan Jones wrote that Sendak’s work sometimes seemed so funny that his audiences missed its biting undertones, and he compared Sendak to graphic novelists Art Spiegelman and Alan Moore or—even better—to eighteenth-century British graphic artist William Hogarth. In their discussion of graphic narrative, Hilary Chute and Marianne DeKoven mentioned the importance of Hogarth’s work as “picture-stories” (768). Graphic novels, they declared, contained “boxes of time” that could address “complex political and historical issues with an explicit, formal degree of self-awareness” (768). Several of Sendak’s picture books fit this description of sequenced stories containing societal tensions.

One way to best understand the link between Sendak and Hogarth would be to explore the current exhibition at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, “William Hogarth: The Painter of Comic

History,” or by visiting [http://www.artble.com/artists/william\\_hogarth/paintings/a\\_rake's\\_progress](http://www.artble.com/artists/william_hogarth/paintings/a_rake's_progress). Hogarth was not an illustrator for children, but he was a brilliant scenic composer who visually depicted his contemporary London, referencing the customs and people of that society and exploiting their materialistic foibles. Jones has argued that Sendak’s pictorial artwork also contained “a rich fabric in references” that fit with Hogarth’s traditions.

How can we fit these two ideas—cultural critique and a naive retelling of events—together? Chute and DeKoven suggest that we consider how the graphic format combines “both high and low art indexes and references” into two separate narratives “that do not simply blend together...but remain distinct” (769). This means double or even multiple readings of a story until we see what it both does and does not tell us. Kathleen Keeney aptly demonstrates this when she tells us in her review of *Laundry Day* that a picture book can be both verbally “quiet” and visually powerful with “actions that speak much louder than words.” We can also use the thoughtful activities found in Jessica Abel and Matt Madden’s *Mastering Comics: Drawing Words & Writing Pictures, Continued* as springboards for discussion. Unlike McCloud’s earlier publication, these authors are showing how to produce a successful sequenced story. Their activities frame the potential reader/artist’s perspective concerning the development of effective framed sequences within a graphic novel. Abel and Madden suggest ways producers consider their potential as storytellers, and, whether we hope to be an artist/author or to remain an audience, their work can give us insight.

We are lucky to have a “think piece” from James Bucky Carter, a scholar/expert in comic book literature. While Carter admits that adults often have troubles judging this category, he asks us to consider the links between all illustrated texts, asserting, “those of us who have interest in comics-and-literacy need to build connections with those studying comics from other angles.” Hopefully, the issues discussed in other pieces will also help us as readers of dual-literacies in sequenced story anticipate the stylistic importance of the novel and picture-story in the graphic novel/animated picture book.

## Works Cited

- Chute, Hilary L., and Marianne DeKoven. “Introduction: Graphic Narrative.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4: 767–82.
- Hatfield, Charles. “Comic Art, Children’s Literature, and the New Comic Studies.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30.3: 360–82.
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