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GRAPHIC NOVELS FOR BEGINNING READERS

Though graphic novels were once the bane of reading educators, a tentative investigation into their efficacy as tools for early literacy development has begun. The studies are slow in coming, though the website Reading with Pictures (www.readingwithpicture.org) is leading the way with fascinating research into many pedagogical aspects of the graphic novel, including reading education. As the march of progress takes its time, however, there are a few commonsense applications we can find for sequential art in this area.

It seems elementary, at this point, to say that comic pages—with their clearly presented, often moment-to-moment depictions of action—create excellent support for reading comprehension. The first things the youngest readers often look to when connecting letters, words, and narrative are the accompanying pictures. Clear, well-honed imagery can even allow these readers to expand the complexity of the narratives they tackle.

Comics, however, show their efficacy at a far more basic level. Although we are conditioned to read from left to right, early readers are still getting this training. With a left-to-right sequence (the action and order of the word balloons within the panel) within a left-to-right sequence (the order of the panels themselves), a comic book reinforces sequence like nothing else.

Beyond the practical, comics have a great power to help young learners build a crucial element of their reading lives. A young reader who sees panels and pages and entire stories of comics that they have successfully read piling up begins to build that all-important new identity as an able and enthusiastic reader. An early study by Linda Smetana suggests that children who read comics show a larger vocabulary and a better understanding of verb tenses than children who do not.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has left the door wide open for the inclusion of graphic novels in their anchor standards for reading for K–5 students. CCSS seems to recommend their inclusion in, for example, the seventh anchor standards for reading (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7), which states that students should be able to “integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.” Beyond that, several other anchor standards suggest graphic-novel components. The goal of the fourth anchor standard

for reading (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4), which asks that students “interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings,” is practically an invitation to call on graphic novels; the strong visual platform inherent in their construction is so conducive to just this sort of interpretation. And the ninth anchor standard for reading (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9) calls for students to “analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take,” which suggests a strong case for adding the visual “text” to these comparisons, creating a whole other layer by bringing an authorial artist’s approach and intention to the mix.

Bringing graphic novels into the classroom, and studying their educational benefits, is still, as mentioned above, relatively untraveled territory. Even the publishers themselves are only beginning to plumb the potential in these areas. Consequently, the list of reading suggestions below is not a long one, though all the books are excellent choices to add to your reading curriculum or library. The classroom activities on p.19 are meant to expand on the literacy-building potential of graphic novels and allow you to develop your own strategies for incorporating them into your classrooms.

Bibliography

Babymouse series. By Jennifer L. Holm and Matt Holm. Illus. by the authors. Random. Individual titles, 96p., paper, \$6.99; lib. ed., \$12.99. 741.5. Gr. 3–6.

This indomitably popular series works well for new readers in part because you won’t be able to keep it out of their hands! With its short, strong, declarative sentences and its knack for keeping kids engaged and returning for more, this ongoing story of a young girl mouse with a hyperactive imagination and a supporting cast of comfortably familiar characters is a great way to keep slightly advanced emergent readers interested and engaged.

Beep and Bah. By James Burks. Illus. by the author. 2012. 32p. Carolrhoda, \$16.95 (9780761365679); e-book, \$25.95 (9780761387213). Gr. 1–2.

In this picture book presented in a sequential art format, two best friends, a robot and a sheep, go on a grand adventure as they try to return a lost sock to its owner. Lots of labeled animals and familiar animal sounds, as well as a high zaniness quotient, will keep emergent readers going strong.

Benjamin Bear in Fuzzy Thinking. By Philippe Coudray. Illus. by the author. 2011. 32p. TOON, \$12.95 (9781935179122); paper, \$4.99 (9781935179252). 741.5. K–Gr. 2.

This story of a bear who does everything in his own slightly

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off-kilter way is told in single-page vignettes, each with its own charming visual punch line, making this easy to work with in small doses and allowing young readers to feel a sense of accomplishment as they move—story by story, page by page—closer to the end.

Benny and Penny series. By Geoffrey Hayes. Illus. by the author. TOON. Individual titles, 32p., \$12.95; paper, \$4.99. 741.5. PreS–Gr. 2.

In this series, brother and sister hamsters tackle issues like sibling rivalry, bullies, and bedtime. The familiar family setting creates a comfortable environment for emergent readers, and Hayes uses simple language to great effect, both for educating and storytelling.

Chick and Chickie Play All Day! By Claude Ponti. Illus. by the author. 2012. 36p. TOON, \$12.95 (9781935179146); paper, \$4.99 (9781935179290). 741.5. PreS–K.

Two chicks entertain themselves by making masks and playing with a living letter, *A*. This spare, simple story is well matched by its large, single-page panels filled with pictures and words, including many repeated phrases. This is a great graphic novel for new readers to start with, as it is the most visually uncluttered title on this list.

Dragon Puncher series. By James Kochalka. Illus. by the author. Top Shelf. Individual titles, 40p., paper, \$9.95. 741.5. PreS–Gr. 2.

This pair of preposterously silly books about an armored cat and a spoon-obsessed monkey who take on a drooling dragon has exactly the sort of absurdist humor that appeals to the early-reader age group. Amid the looniness, big panels and large, handwritten words in both upper- and lowercase letters make for an excellent beginning-reading experience.

Kapow! By George O'Connor. Illus. by the author. 2004. 48p. Aladdin, paper, \$12.99 (9781416968474). PreS–Gr. 1.

This picture book by the dynamic author-illustrator of the Olympians graphic-novel series uses a comic-book aesthetic to tell the story of a boy and a girl who, while playing superheroes around the house, learn a huge lesson about telling the truth. Alternating between images of the children themselves and the heroes they are in their imaginations, this is a great book to encourage reluctant readers to get started and focus on the large, uncluttered words within the speech balloons and captions.

Korgi: Sprouting Wings. By Christian Slade. Illus. by the author. 2007. 80p. Top Shelf, paper, \$10 (9781891830907). 741.5. PreS–Gr. 2.

This standout title is the first in a series about Ivy, a

fairylike girl, and her korgi, a fire-breathing canine, who run afoul of monsters that live in their forest. Like *The Snowman*, below, this is a story told in clear, finely wrought art without words, and for young readers working on slightly more complex sequence and comprehension skills, it is a great step up from Briggs' tale.

Little Mouse Gets Ready. By Jeff Smith. Illus. by the author. 2009. 32p. TOON, \$12.95 (9781935179016); paper, \$4.99 (9781935179245). 741.5. PreS–K.

Big panels with large word balloons and words follow Little Mouse as he gets ready for a trip to the barn by putting on each article of clothing, one at a time, while his mother waits, not so patiently. The longer sentences make this a choice for more confident emergent readers, but words for familiar, everyday objects, like articles of clothing, aid comprehension, and the use of bold type to highlight inflection offers greater clarity.

Nursery Rhyme Comics: 50 Timeless Rhymes from 50 Celebrated Cartoonists. Ed. by Chris Duffy. 2011. 128p. illus. First Second, \$18.99 (9781596436008). 741.5. PreS–Gr. 3.

With 50 classic nursery rhymes—each told in two pages by some of the greatest talents working in the comics art form today—this is a never-ending supply of possibilities. Although some of the interpretations may be too complex for beginners, most feature an easy-to-follow sequence, and because they all follow the original rhymes' texts closely, the loads of familiar words may be a great bonus to burgeoning readers.

Silly Lilly series. By Agnes Rosenstiehl. Illus. by the author. TOON. Individual titles, 32p., \$12.95. 741.5. PreS.

Vivacious Lilly traipses through two books—one pairing days of the week with professions and the other finding activities for each of the four seasons. In addition to its immediately engaging cartoon style and simple, familiar words and sentences, each book tells its stories in episodes of short pages with no more than two panels per page, allowing young readers to finish the book in shorter installments and gain a sense of accomplishment each time.

The Snowman. By Raymond Briggs. Illus. by the author. 1978. 32p. Random, \$17 (9780394839738); Dragonfly, paper, \$6.99 (9780394884660). PreS–Gr. 1.

A boy befriends the snowman he created, and the frozen creature takes him on a journey through a gorgeous landscape of snow and light. Briggs' wordless classic, also adapted into an animated film, uses standard sequential art panels and provides an excellent platform for reinforcing sequence and comprehending narrative.

Common Core Connections

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with recommended graphic novels for emergent readers. You can find more information about the standards at www.corestandards.org.

In the Classroom: Choose a page (or allow the students to choose a page) from either *Korgi* or *The Snowman*. Instruct the students to draw a panel that is meant to fit in the gutter (the space between two panels) that depicts the action that would fit well with the surrounding scenes. The students can do this for each gutter on the page, but they should be limited to a single panel for each gutter. When finished, you can cut up a photocopy of the original page and fit the students' new panels into the sequence, creating a longer and more explicit narrative.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.1.** With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.7.** With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g. what moment in a story an illustration depicts).

In the Classroom: Read through *A Trip to the Bottom of the World with Mouse* with the class. As you go through the pages, have students identify words that are written in an unusual font (either in bold or in a different color than the rest of the text), larger than other words, or within different colored word balloons. Have the students explain why the words appear differently and what that means within the context of the story.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.1.** With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.10.** Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.7.** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.

In the Classroom: Photocopy and, if needed, enlarge a page (depending on whether you're working in small groups or with the entire class) from one of the above titles, blocking out the word balloons in the panels. Hold up copies of the word balloons that have been blocked from students' views (with the "stems" of each removed so the direction of the speaker is not indicated) and have the students decide which part of the dialogue belongs to which character in a panel. Alternatively, you can use a page from a dialogueless title (*Korgi* or *The Snowman*) and create word balloons yourself.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.1.** Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.4.** Identify words and phrases in stories or poems that suggest feelings or appeal to the senses.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.7.** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.

In the Classroom: After reading *Kapow!*, *A Trip to the Bottom of the World with Mouse*, or *Zoe and Robot*, a Benny and Penny title, write a brief script in collaboration with the students. The script should contain keywords from the original book and touch on similar themes. Once completed, read through the script with the students. Option 1: allow the students to draw the script in comic form, writing in the keywords of dialogue in appropriate places. Option 2: select students to play character roles from the original book and have them perform the script for the rest of the class.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.2.** Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.3.** Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.9.** Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in stories.

A Trip to the Bottom of the World with Mouse. By Frank Viva. Illus. by the author. 2012. 40p. TOON, \$12.95 (9781935179191). 741.5. PreS–Gr. 1.

"Are we there yet?" asks a peripatetic mouse on his way to Antarctica only to find that once he arrives, he can't wait to go back home. Using a balance of the flow and symbology of graphic novels and the large, clear illustrations of picture books, Viva makes great use of fonts and colored words, tying several words to specific pictures to support word recognition and make early readers comfortable.

Zoe and Robot: Let's Pretend! By Ryan Sias. Illus. by the author. 2011. 40p. Blue Apple, \$10.99 (9781609050634). 741.5. PreS–Gr. 2.

Zoe builds a mountain of pillows to scale like a world-class mountain climber, but when she invites her robot to play, it

turns out her robot doesn't know how to pretend. Luckily, Zoe has had enough imagination to spare, and thus the lesson begins. A slightly more advanced read, this title from the Balloon Toons line of books features an engaging and straightforward story and loads of word repetition.

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