As graphic novels carry out their manifest destiny, swallowing up the real estate of library shelves and, more slowly, classroom curricula, the final frontier of acceptance may be the book group. The broad themes and splashy visuals often associated with comics might seem innately at odds with the intimate, personal discussions engendered in book clubs, so the challenge for the format is to prove it can fulfill the specific needs of the diversifying book-group market by promoting discussion and fostering social opportunity. How?

• **Depth**—The story, themes and characters should be intricate enough and work on enough levels that discussion can really delve into the narrative and produce a similarly complex and layered experience.

• **Issues**—The material must raise a number of topics to incite a worthwhile discussion that can branch out and explore members’ perspectives and feelings in more personal ways.

• **Occasional Controversy**—Nothing livens up a conversation (or bares inner feelings) like a bit of controversy. Racism, politics, pornography—all subjects that help keep the discourse spirited.

If graphic novels can offer the intellectual and social engagement that traditional books can, what do they offer that a standard novel or memoir does not?

• **Art**—By telling tales through an essential unity of words and images, graphic novels offer a bonus discussion topic by their very nature. How do the images support and emphasize the narrative? Does the style and tone of the art exemplify the voice and structure of the prose? Certain graphic novels are so experimental in design and draftsmanship that your group might not even get around to discussing the story itself.

• **Pairings**—Less time-intensive than books, graphic novels afford the rare opportunity to build a discussion around the comparative strengths and differences of two or more stories. The list of graphic novels below, all widely praised as paragons of the format, will hopefully pique reading groups’ interest as well as serve as a litmus test for what comics can offer. Each entry includes two sample questions to push discussion in the right direction and some of the aforementioned pairings, all in the hopes of offering book (and discussion) lovers a compelling chance to expand their horizons.


In three apparently unrelated tales, Jin faces the casual racism of other schoolkids and its consequences upon his own self-image; Danny endures a visit from his cousin Chin-Kee, a living conglomeration of hideous stereotypes; and the Monkey King of Chinese folklore battles the other gods to attain higher status. The first graphic novel ever nominated for the National Book Award and winner of the 2007 Printz Award, its twisting narrative, ironic tone, classical page composition, and deep, human insights stand alone but could also make an excellent contrast for the straight narrative, epic sweep, experimental art, and deep, human insights of another graphic novel that explores themes of immigration, Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (2007).

• What role does irony play in conveying the book’s message and impact?

• How much assimilation into a culture is the “right” amount? Where does obligation to serve as a fully functional part of a new community end and an obligation to your own heritage begin?


Mazzucchelli delivers an incomparable piece of design, with meticulous attention to every sculptural face and individual font chosen for each character’s speech. Polyp is an academic and architect whose genius reaches its limits the moment he must consider anyone but himself. No other graphic novel communicates the mundane but riveting course of a life so well.

• *Asterios Polyp* is obsessed with the design of art and objects, from architecture to sculpture to dance to watches to cars. But what do the death of Asterios’ twin brother, the discussion of religious faith, and the recurring motif of an unwelcome meteor impact say about the design of overall life? Is the book suggesting a greater design or a complete lack of one?

• Why, with the rest of a character’s life in ruins, do we deem an ending to be happy if love is triumphant? Why does that seem to be the ultimate and only necessary quality to appease our sense of closure and happiness as readers?


In a pitch-black story of a sexually transmitted “bug” that causes severe mutations in a group of small-town teens, the heightened tensions of adolescence are charged with elements

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**Using Graphic Novels in Book Clubs**

by Jesse Karp

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of nightmare exemplified by the highly stylized, drenched-in-shadow atmosphere of Burns’ unique visuals.

- What is the sexually transmitted bug meant to represent? Is it a punishment or an external growth of something buried deep within the characters?
- How does the art help determine the era in which the story takes place? What visual elements make the story so evocative of a particular time?


Bechdel recalls coming to terms with her sexual orientation, a process intensified by her emotionally distant father’s tortured struggle with his own sexual identity.

- Could Bruce and Alison have helped each other through difficult choices by being open with each other or was theirs a doomed relationship regardless?
- How much about our parents’ lives can we ever really know? Would knowing things they kept hidden help us to understand them better or drive an even larger wedge between us? At what point do we stop really knowing who our children are, what they’re like, what they think?


Jimmy trundles through a life of middle-aged desperation and disappointment, until his estranged father appears, which doesn’t improve things. Ware’s compact, hypercontrolled composition and astonishingly precise art lend an air of inescapability to the most depressing graphic novel ever produced (no kidding).

- How does Ware’s unique design sense and page layout contribute to the sense of Jimmy’s life of quiet desperation?
- What is the meaning of the capped man that Jimmy watches and the end he comes to, keeping in mind the significance of capped men to comic books and the children who read them?


Alice, Dorothy Gale, and Wendy Darling come together in later life and retell their adventures the way they really happened: as glorious (and occasionally disturbing) sexual explorations of the most explicit sort. Moore’s literary sensibility and Gebbie’s art (evoking the literary world from which these characters sprang) raise the bar for pornographic comics sky high. Adventurous book groups looking for something daring could do no better than this.

- Moore contends (through one of his characters) that pornography is not graphic sexuality but merely the idea of that sexuality and, as such, should not be held accountable for what is conveyed, even when it is disturbing. Should we consider censoring ideas? Or are some ideas so intense and forceful that they enter another realm?
- Are beauty and intelligence the only things that separate art from pornography? Is Lost Girls pornography? Can art be found in pornography?


Satrapi’s account of the trials of growing up in Iran—including religious oppression, the allure of Western culture, and the Iran-Iraq War—is visualized with art that conveys nuance even as its deceptively simple strokes suggest the perspective of a child. Pair this with Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986), another stunning achievement in sequential art that combines personal memoir with the details of a foreign culture during wartime.

- How might Satrapi’s story differ from that of a young man growing up in the same place at the same time?
- What effect does Satrapi’s deceptively unsophisticated art have upon the narrative? Why did she choose this style?


Science, history, and art all in one, McCloud’s seminal work of comics theory defines the nature and execution of sequential art . . . in sequential art form. Follow it up with the flawless narrative and artistic restraint of Matt Phelan’s *The Storm in the Barn* (2009) to see a prime example of what McCloud is talking about.

- Why, along with jazz music, are comics considered such an inherently American art form? What ties them so essentially to the American character?
- Given that, as McCloud elucidates quite elegantly, sequential art is a valid and subtle form, why have comics (and graphic novels) had such a difficult time gaining respect?


What would a real person be like in order to put on a costume and fight crime? Moore’s answer is as virtuoso a work as the format has to offer, filled with political intrigue, psychological nuance, and innate truths. At the same time, Gibbons’ art refines the potential of the superhero genre, as (to choose but one example) in chapter 5, “Fearful Symmetry,” where the first half is an exact compositional and color reflection of the second half.

- Is Moore suggesting that you must be somewhat unbalanced in order to wield power over others or that wielding that power inevitably makes you unbalanced?
- What are the greatest debts this story owes to its art? How does the art determine the tone of the story overall and the inner state of the characters specifically?

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