

The Comics Revolution in the Language Arts Classroom

An Editor's Perspective

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WHEN I BEGAN IN THE EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING INDUSTRY six years ago, there were no comics in literature and language-arts textbooks. Today comics can be found in many such textbooks, and there are calls for more from English teachers and administrators across the country. As an editor for a popular language-arts textbook, I have witnessed—and participated in—this comics revolution from my editor's cube.

Like many others, I have grown to appreciate the sophisticated, engaged comics being published today. It has been my mission for the last few years to try to get comics into language-arts classrooms by getting them into our textbooks alongside short stories, poetry, and plays. This has not been easy. Along the way, I've had to battle surly comic-store owners, shortsighted fellow editors, and stubborn bosses. And the true enemy: an entrenched cultural bias against comics as a form.

This bias complicated an already difficult process. The amount of material we have to comb through to come up with a single piece of literature we can use in our textbooks is staggering. Much content is off limits: no drugs, no sex (you won't even find kissing in textbooks), no violence (the presence of a gun in a story is enough to knock it out of consideration), no overt religion. The fear of running afoul of a religiously conservative Midwestern school board or, on the other side of the spectrum, of California's pro-multicultural administrators, breeds a fearful editorial culture.

When we actually do find something with "clean content," we have to figure out how it conforms to state standards that, since the passage of the No Child Left Behind act, can often be obtuse and Byzantine. We can end up choosing a short story

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because it is good for teaching the skill of “making inferences” (per Texas’s standards), or a play because it is good for teaching “soliloquies and asides” (per California’s standards). The process often comes down to stuffing some poor denuded short story into a box it should never be forced to occupy.

On top of this, marketing and sales demand “high interest content” and “a wow factor.” It was against such a backdrop that I embarked on my Comics Into Textbooks Project.

To begin, I brought in a collaboration between a cartoonist and a poet called “Cartoon Physics, Part I” and showed it to some of my fellow editors. I am a fan of this piece because it is beautifully drawn but easy to look at—i.e., unthreatening—and thematically profound. It is both simple and sophisticated. It does what comics as a form can do: create something new in the space between the words and the images.

The response was lukewarm. “It’s kinda depressing,” said one fellow editor, but it was unclear whether this was a response to the poem—or to the form. “It looks too cartoony,” said another editor. I had learned my first lesson when pitching comics as literature; for many, the form blocks a clear-eyed view of the content. First it is a comic; then, only then, maybe, it is literature.

But in the world outside of educational publishing the tide was turning. More articles and reviews began to appear in the mainstream press about new types of literary comics. Reviews of graphic novels appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*. Librarians began to order manga and the new graphic novels. Kids responded. At the Donnell Teen Center at the 53rd Street branch of The New York Public Library, I saw kids stretched out on the floor reading comics. One can only assume that language-arts teachers—faced with the crisis in reading and writing—began to glance hungrily at these comics as well. We started to get some calls from teachers and administrators asking for more “graphic texts” (a confusing term if there ever was one).



A panel from “Cartoon Physics, Part I”. Poem by Nick Flynn, art by Josh Neufeld.



The controversial *Sandman* panel with the topless fairies. Story by Neil Gaiman, art by Charles Vess. From *Sandman* #19, ©1990 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

Now I had ammunition. And suddenly, allies among fellow editors and bosses.

Our challenge was now a familiar one: to find comics with content that would be acceptable to the textbook-buying audience: No drugs, no violence, no religion, no sex, no breasts. Neil Gaiman's retelling of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (*Sandman* #19) was nixed due to the topless fairies. Gaiman's "The Wake" (*Sandman* #75) a creative retelling of Shakespeare's life, was out because of pictures of the inside of a bar—a 16th century pub, actually, but still a bar in the eyes of some. Excerpts from Craig Thompson's *Blankets* were rejected because of his critical—if thoughtful and sensitive—treatment of religion. Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese*, a National Book Award finalist, was rejected on account of Asian-American stereotyping—the very stereotypes that the story critiques.

Even when we found comics that met our criteria, there was the question of artistic merit. I looked for comic versions of classic texts and found a multiple-volume comics rendition of *The Iliad*, with scenes of Achilles and Patroclus preparing for battle—"high-interest" material from the student's point of view. But Achilles had lanky hair, a lopsided nose, and a sketchy torso that looked like something drawn by your seat-mate in ninth-grade algebra. Oh shoot. How was the art to look if the comic were going to pass the test of literature? A super-cartoony style was no good. But too stiff and self-conscious was also no good. It looked amateurish. Too superhero-y, also no good. Too cute, no good (yikes, funny animals!). Any of these would turn editors and teachers off. It would not say literature—even though the content was certified literature. Sigh.

The comic-store owners were no help in my search. I was referred to mystery comics with slick noirish landscapes that I knew would not pass the "literary look" test, or historical mysteries with R. Crumb-inspired buxom, bustle-clad Victorian ladies. "No, not right," was all I could say.

I was just about to give up when I found an out-of-print issue of *The Best of Ray Bradbury Comics*, a collection of Bradbury short stories adapted into comics form. Ray Bradbury stories are a staple of middle-school textbooks. The blend of fantasy and pseudo-science is a perfect fit. And Bradbury himself even wrote an intro to *The Best of Ray Bradbury Comics* saying how much he loved comics growing up, and how much his writings were inspired by them.



An excerpt from Derek Kirk Kim's "Hurdles," in *Same Difference (and Other Stories)*. ©2003 Derek Kirk Kim.

"I love the art," said the executive editor to whom I showed the book. I couldn't believe it. Such simple words! But, with those simple words the revolution in our office began. The executive editor chose a comics version of an obscure Bradbury story for one of our textbooks. There it would appear, grouped side by side with several Bradbury prose stories. Comics as Literature. My dream come true.

From there, it was a small step to several other "graphic" versions of Bradbury stories in the book. And a smaller step to using the rich but understated vignettes from Derek Kirk Kim's *Same Difference* for teaching irony, tone, and symbolism; then another small step to using portions of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* for teaching argument and persuasion. The last time a competitor's book landed on my desk, I noted two or three

graphic pieces in the table of contents—ranging from a comics version of the Malinese epic *Sundiata* to a comics account of the Lincoln assassination.

As more writers and artists find their voices in this form, students are gravitating to the examples that speak to them and teachers are seeking them out as way of connecting with students. Textbooks, always slow to respond, are finally doing so as well. As with all revolutions, there are those who will cling to the past, but there is a growing consensus that reading—and writing—comics not only challenges students to see the world in new ways, but also sharpens their understanding of the complex relationship between words and images, an essential skill in the literacy of the future. 