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English 112B

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Off the Page

Unit of Study: the Graphic Novel

Introduction/Why Read Graphic Novels

It seems as though many High School courses are fearful to stray away from their usual canonical works. A form of literature that never quite receives the amount of respect or attention that it deserves is the graphic novel. A graphic novel is usually a collection of previously released single issue comic books, or original content, in one bound collection. Not only are graphic novels an enhancement of the author's intended vision, but they give the reader a better visualization and understanding of the story as well. The format also gives struggling readers a push toward making literature easier, and will hopefully increase their motivation to read more frequently. Graphic novels are also the perfect way to transition to full-fledged novels, or a great companion to other novels, and they can serve as a breather in a course amongst too many canonical works. Graphic novels not only use text, but imagery, time, and space to evoke emotion that couldn't be done with words alone. This unit will captivate students by using a wide variety of genres such as: historical non-fiction, coming of age fiction, dystopian setting, fantasy, and the inevitable super-hero story.

Before the Unit

Before the canonical reading is assigned, you can't assume that everyone in the class has read a graphic novel before. The page layouts, as well as the order in which the panels can be

read may vary from story to story. It is important that students are at least somewhat familiar on how to read a graphic novel; they should know what tools graphic novels use that other mediums can't, as well as how long they have been around in the first place. The text which covers all of this and more is *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud.

Centerpiece/Canonical Work

The main graphic novel which is considered a canonical work of any kind is *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, which will serve as the centerpiece of the unit. The story is historical non-fiction, as it is based on the author Art Spiegelman conducting a series of interviews with his father Vladek concerning being a Jew in Nazi occupied Europe, and how he escaped. One of the more fascinating artistic decisions made by Spiegelman however, was to draw the Jews as mice, and the Nazis as cats. Using *Maus* is the perfect way to show students that a graphic novel can be used to interpret any genre. While some artists can choose to be realistic as possible, one of the most important aspects of the graphic novel is using the page to make the visualization the way you see fit. These images are used to evoke an intended emotion in the reader.

Launching the Unit

After reading *Maus*, students should have a clear perception of how a story can be told through graphic novels. The unit will be launched with an assignment that follows the book, in which students draw a 5 page comic of a historical event which carries the most weight to them. However, students don't have to draw the event as it actually happened, they will have the freedom to interpret the event as their vision, much like Spiegelman did with portraying humans

as animals. For those students reluctant to draw, they also have the option to write a 10 page script of the same scene, complete with panel descriptions, as well as captions.

Extending the Unit

The unit would then be extended by introducing 4 other graphic novels, 2 of which will have assignments.

The second book, *Lost at Sea* by Bryan Lee 'O Malley shows students what contemporary fiction in graphic novel format looks like. High School is a great time of identity crisis, and this will be a story with characters all students could relate to if they ever felt as though a part of them was missing. The book follows Raleigh, an 18-year old girl who is on the verge of graduating High School. The problem with Raleigh, is that she doesn't really have any friends, doesn't know what she's going to do with her life, and one minor detail, she believes her mother sold her soul to Satan for a successful career. Amongst his crisis, Raleigh decides to take a road trip from Vancouver to California; with a group of people she would just consider acquaintances from school. Raleigh told her mother she was visiting California to see her father, and told her acquaintances it was to visit her boyfriend, but she later learns that she is on the verge of recapturing her soul, and perhaps these are the people who can help her do it.

The third book, *the Unwritten* by Mike Carey and Peter Gross, would serve well as a companion piece following any books of the *Harry Potter* series; it is of the fantasy genre, which students should at this point be well versed in. The book follows the character Tommy Taylor, who is the son of a famous author, Wilson Taylor. After his father went missing, Tommy decided to ride off of the success of his father's books, by making money attending conventions, and doing autograph signings. Why is Tommy successful? Because the series of books his father writes is based on him, or at least he shares the same name as the title character. However, once a

villain from the books named Count Ambrosio comes to kill Tommy, he realizes that he may indeed be the real title character after all.

The Tommy Taylor series from within *the Unwritten* is a huge homage to the *Harry Potter* series. However, the context is different as it blurs the lines between the world of reality and that of literature. After reading this graphic novel, students will be assigned to write a compare and contrast essay between *the Unwritten* and *Harry Potter*. The prompt will specifically ask the student to differentiate the realm of reality each book takes place in, the characters, story, as well as narrative structure.

The fourth book, *Sweet Tooth* by Jeff Lemire, takes place in a dystopian setting, and could easily serve as a companion piece to either a utopian or dystopian novel. The story takes place in a world which has been struck by a great plague. All humans are slowly dying of a disease, but there is a breed of hybrid animal/human children which remain perfectly healthy. These children started being born around 10 years ago, which was around the time the plague begun, and is also the age of the story's main character Gus. Gus like all other hybrid children, are being hunted by most humans, because humans believe the hybrids to be the root of the disease, and believe the children's blood to host some kind of cure. The story begins with the lead character Gus trying to find his way to a fabled hybrid preserve.

The fifth and final book in the unit is an inevitable super-hero story. While super-hero stories weren't the very first comic books to be published, students will be the most familiar with them, and they continue to be the most famous genre of the format today. *All-Star Superman* by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely focuses on the iconic title character, Superman. After an incident which causes Superman to fly through the sun (the sun is the root of all of his power), he discovers his powers have been amplified to a whole new level. Unfortunately with this good

news, comes this discovery that the overexposure to sunlight has also given Superman cancer, and he learns that he has a little under a year to live. The man who has all of the power in the world must decide what to do with his final days. Will he be selfish and spend all of his time with the love of his life? Will he try to set the world right before he leaves? What would the world do without him? Only time will tell.

The assignment that coincides with *All-Superman* would be a sustained silent writing. The writing would ask of students what they would do if they had discovered they only had a year left to live. Would they try to change the world in some way or another? Would they continue living their life normally? Is there someone in particular they would like to spend their remaining time with? As a fun bookend to the unit following the SSW students will have an opportunity to watch the animated adaptation of *All-Star Superman*. Students will be able to decide for themselves which of the two they like better, and if they agree with what details the filmmakers had to select and omit to fit it into an 80 minute movie.

Works Cited

- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Northampton: Tundra Publishing, 1993. Print
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986. Print
- O'Malley, Bryan Lee. *Lost at Sea*. Portland: Oni Press Inc., 2010. Print
- Carey, Mike and Gross, Peter. *The Unwritten: Tommy Taylor and the Bogus Identity*. New York: DC Comics, 2010. Print
- Lemire, Jeff. *Sweet Tooth: Out of the Deep Woods*. New York: DC Comics, 2010. Print
- Morrison, Grant and Quitely, Frank. *All-Star Superman Volume 1*. New York: DC Comics, 2007. Print.
- Morrison, Grant and Quitely, Frank. *All-Star Superman Volume 2*. New York: DC Comics, 2009. Print.
- All-Star Superman*. Dir. Sam Liu. Perf. James Denton, Christina Hendricks, and Anthony LaPaglia. Warner Bros., 2011. Film.






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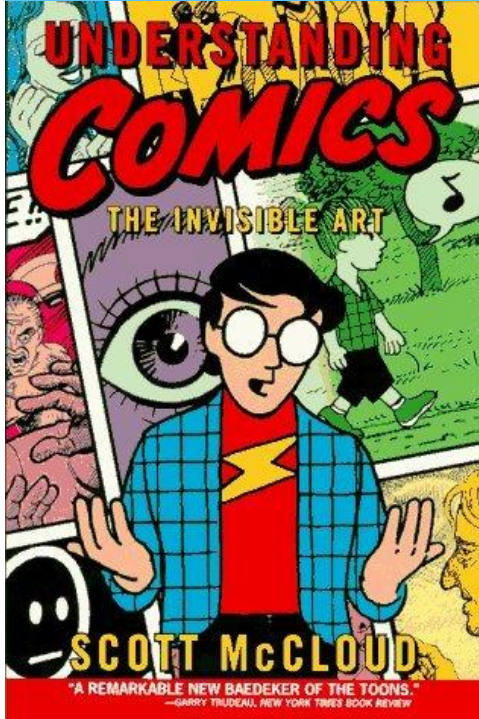
Dr. Warner


Engl. 112B


Why Teach Graphic Novels?

-  Use text, time, space, motion, and especially imagery to convey a story.
-  Graphic Novels can explore a limitless amount of genres.
-  Can serve as a great transition to novels, or as companion reading pieces to novels.
-  Gives struggling students extra motivation to read.
-  A nice break from canonical works.

Before the Unit



 Before the unit, it is important that students realize how to read a comic book, as well as how the origin of comics stretch over thousands of years (starting with ancient wall carvings).

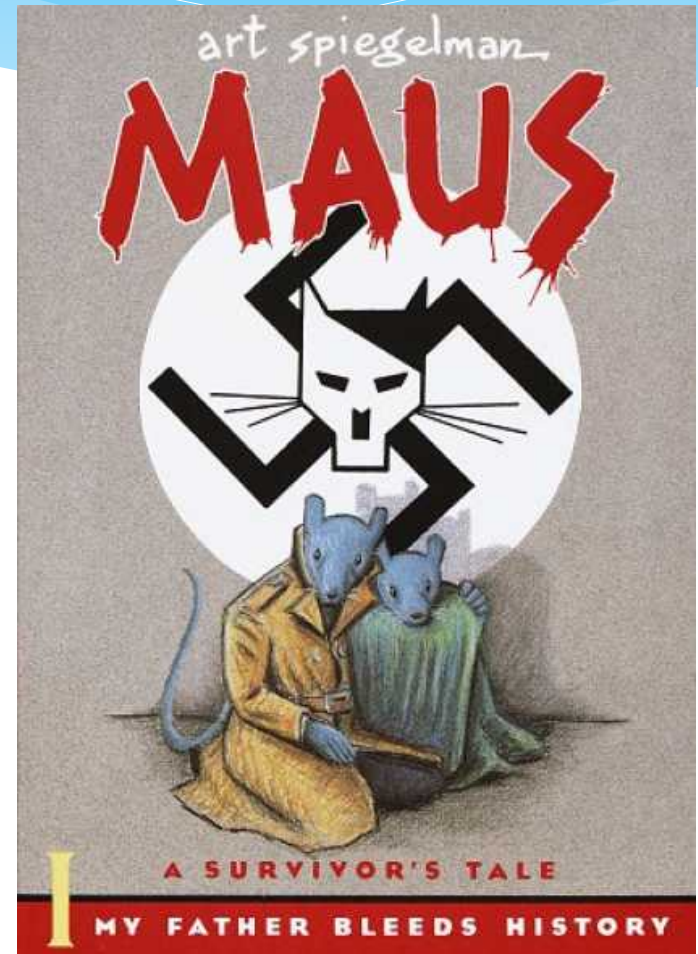
 *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud clearly defines what a comic book is, how to read them, how they were created, and the story-telling tools which exist only in that medium.



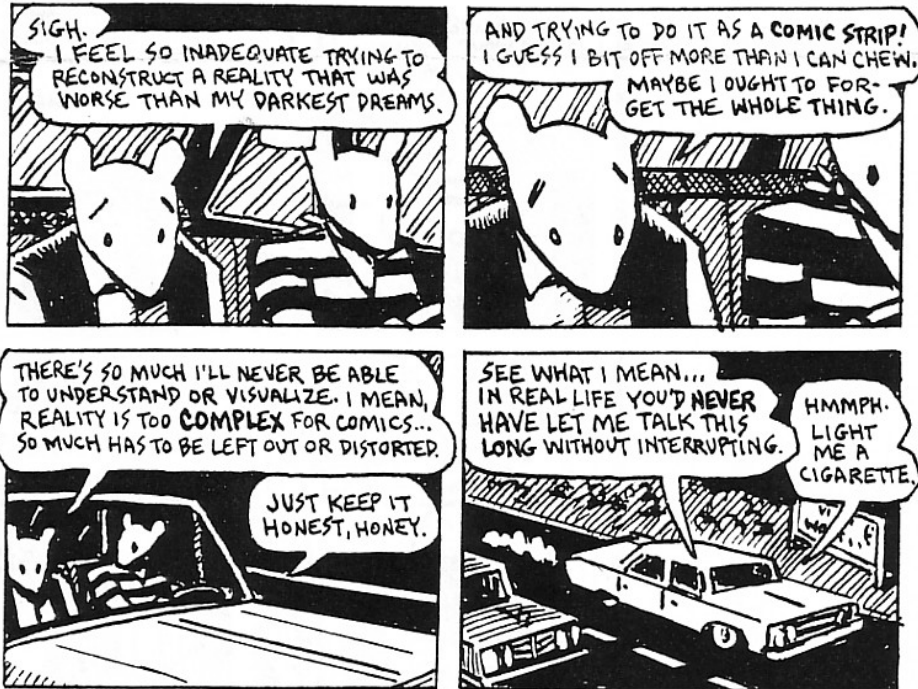
Historical Non-Fiction



Maus: A Survivor's Tale focuses on a series of interviews and flashbacks between author Art Spiegelman and his father Vladek. Vladek was a Jew in Nazi occupied Europe, and this is the story of how he and his wife survived. However, the biggest creative spin is that the Jews are portrayed as mice, while the Nazis are portrayed as cats.



Launching the Unit



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- After reading *Maus* the students will have the choice between two different assignments.
- Write and draw a 5 page comic book about a historical event the way you envisioned it to happen.
- Or write a 10 page script of the same event, containing panel descriptions if you are not the artistic type.

Extending the Unit


I think I have no soul. Logically I think it. I have been thinking it for a long time but now I'm really thinking it. Definitely no soul.



I had a soul when I was little but it's gone now and I have some thoughts as to where it's gone. It all really makes a lot of sense but it's a pain to explain all at once.

Fiction (Coming of Age)

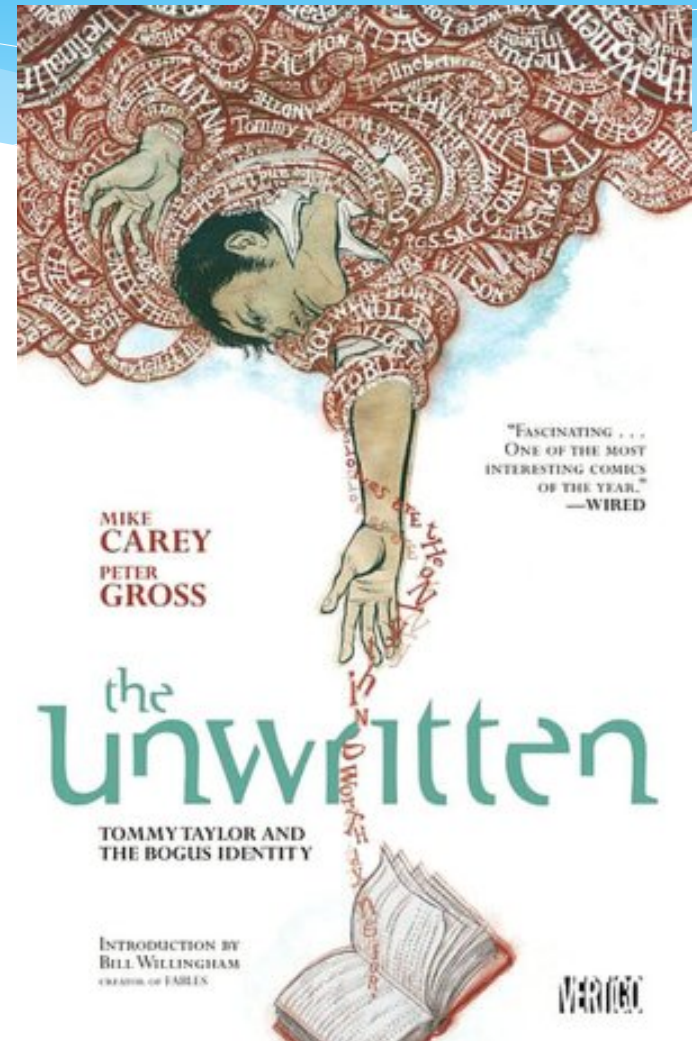


 *Lost at Sea* by Bryan Lee O' Malley (author of the Scott Pilgrim series) focuses on an 18-year old girl named Raleigh. Raleigh is on the verge of graduating high school, has no future plans, has no friends, and believes her mother sold her soul for a successful career. Raleigh impulsively makes the decision to embark on a road trip from Canada to the United States, with a group of complete strangers from her school. Over the course of her trip, Raleigh convinces herself that she is close to the root of all her problems, and can once again capture her soul.

Fantasy



The Unwritten by Mike Carey and Peter Gross focuses on Tommy Taylor, the son of a famous author who feeds off of the success of his father, Wilson Taylor. Why is Tommy famous? Because the title character of a popular book series is based off of him. Tommy believes this all to be just one fun ride, until characters from the literary world cross over into the real world to kill him. Is Tommy Taylor destined to be a hero after all?



Compare and Contrast



* *The Unwritten* would serve as a great companion piece after reading any books of the *Harry Potter* series. The world in which Tommy Taylor comes from pays great homage to *Harry Potter*, so a compare and contrast essay following the readings would leave students with a lot to talk about.

Dystopian Setting

A LITTLE BOY WITH ANTLERS
A BIG MAN WITH GUNS
A WORLD WITHOUT HOPE

SWEET TOOTH

A bizarre and haunting new series
written & illustrated by
the award-winning creator of
THE ESSEX COUNTY TRILOGY and THE NOBODY

JEFF LEMIRE



Sweet Tooth by Jeff Lemire takes place years after a plague has hit the world. The human race is slowly dying of a sickness, and no one knows the cause. The only healthy people in the world are a breed of human/animal hybrid children. However, these children are being hunted and dissected as many humans are trying to find a cause and cure for this plague. The story revolves around a boy named Gus, who wishes only to live long enough to make it to a fabled hybrid preserve.

Super-Hero



All-Star Superman by Grant Morrison, by Frank Quitely features a character who needs no introduction. However, after an incident which causes Superman to fly through the sun (the source of his power), he develops a cancer and has only one year to live. This is a story about how living his final days affects even a super-hero. Will he be selfish? What will the world do without him? How will he prepare?








Sustained Silent Writing



Following the reading of *All-Star Superman*, students will be asked to write an SSW on what they would do with their lives if they discovered they only had one year left to live. Would you tell anyone? Would you live your life any differently than you are now? What would you feel you needed to accomplish in such a short amount of time?

Wrapping Up the Unit

 A fun way to wrap up the unit would be to watch the animated film adaptation of *All-Star Superman*. Students could decide for themselves which version they like better, as well as analyze which details the creative team had to select and omit to fit it into an 80 minute film.



Works Cited

- ☒ McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Northampton: Tundra Publishing, 1993. Print
- ☒ Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986. Print
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- ☒ Morrison, Grant and Quitely, Frank. *All-Star Superman Volume 2*. New York: DC Comics, 2009. Print.
- ☒ *All-Star Superman*. Dir. Sam Liu. Perf. James Denton, Christina Hendricks, and Anthony LaPaglia. Warner Bros., 2011. Film.