

# I Got Graphic!

## Using Visual Literature Works!

Jodi Leckbee

In mere moments, my students are transported to Poland in the 1930s, and they, like the main character Vladek, are witnessing the horror of the Holocaust. They watch helplessly as German soldiers hang a group of men on the street; they experience the fear these family members felt because they are there with them and can see it on the expressions of their faces. I repeat they can see it themselves. This is the power of the graphic novel, compelling visuals that move literature beyond just a simple collection of words into a form of visual literature. My students are reading a graphic novel called *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. The image and the text work together on the page, bringing the complicated story of a man and his father, one comic strip frame at a time, to life.

I discovered the power of using graphic novels in my classroom, not to replace, but rather to enhance the learning of literary analysis for my students. Some educators assume that the art of great writing is diminished by using visual images to convey what authors so successfully accomplish with words. Thematic structure, the use of metaphor, simile, exaggeration, and other literary tools, are not abandoned within a graphic novel, but rather enhanced by the ethical underpinning and multicultural perspective the artist brings to the table. In many of these novels, students connect visually and can relate personally to the archetypes found within the pages.

**Jodi Leckbee** has been teaching for ten years. She is a graduate of Texas Tech University. After teaching Theatre Arts for seven years, she is now an English teacher at Akins High School in Austin, Texas.

### Vladek Spiegelman Time Line

- Vladek meets Anja and they get married
- Vladek moves to Poland to live with Anja's family and work in the factory
- Vladek and Anja have a son Richuev
- The Germans invade Poland
- Anja has a breakdown and Vladek takes her to the hospital for a rest
- The Germans take over Vladek's business
- Vladek is drafted into the Polish army
- Vladek is captured by the Germans
- Vladek escapes to Poland
- He and Anja go into hiding
- They try to escape to America
- They are discovered and sent to Aushwitz

### Did you know?

*Maus: My Father Bleeds History* is the name of a Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel by Art Spiegelman which recounts his father's struggle to survive the Holocaust as a Polish Jew, while also following the author's troubled relationship with his father, and the way the effects of war reverberate through generations of a family.

The author/artist portrays different groups of people anthropomorphically as different species of animals: Jews are portrayed as mice (German: *Maus*), Germans as cats, French as frogs, Poles as Pigs, Americans as dogs, and so on.



### Vladek's Personal Journey

The Book! Here!



MAUS I  
MAUS I

Janelle Bolton 2nd Period

Sample timeline brochure for *Maus*.

Graphic novels, already popular with teen readers, act as a bridge allowing them to transcend the apathy usually felt toward reading assignments. Because many students are not excited by reading, and peer pressure punishes many of those who are, graphic novels have a "cool" factor, and a teen is rarely embarrassed to be seen reading one. In fact, many teens possess expertise in the area of graphic novels, especially manga, and are willing to share their own personal library and knowledge. Letting students teach me about the reading they love has helped me transfer that same enthusiasm to reading response assignments and class discussions. I have also found great success by pairing a graphic novel with other forms of literature to support a thematic unit.

When I teach *Maus*, I am incorporating the novel into a larger unit on the Holocaust. I like using literature and

film to connect with my students. Most students feel this subject matter is far removed from them. Using *Maus* brings them closer to understanding the idea that this kind of crime toward humanity could happen again. After interacting with the graphic novel, the students will present what they have learned in the form of a brochure. The brochure assignment on *Maus* requests that the students write about their own lives, thereby bringing the experience of Holocaust participants directly to them. My intention is to have my students interact with the experiences that the characters in the novel survive in an emotional powerful way. The art of the graphic novel makes this experience visceral and far more intense. The brochure assignment asks them to follow one character as they move throughout the novel as well as compare and contrast themselves to the character. Students will create diary

## PERSONAL JOURNEY BROCHURE MAUS

Follow one character through the novel.  
What happens to them? How do they feel? How is their journey connected to you?

## STEP 1:

Choose a Character  
(Old Vladek, Young Vladek, Artie,  
Mala, Anja)

## STEP 3:

Think about how this character and their life  
might be compared or contrasted to your  
own life.

Follow the rubric as you create your  
brochure.

## STEP 2:

Choose 3 places in the novel to have  
the character create a diary entry. Be  
specific use details from the book. Date  
each entry.

## STEP 4:

Create your brochure. Be Neat and  
CREATIVE!

I must be able to read your writing.

Personal Journey Brochure  
Rubric

Please note how many points you will receive for each section of the rubric!

1. \_\_\_\_ / 5 Brochure has a title with graphic
2. \_\_\_\_ / 5 Cover includes name of student and class period
3. \_\_\_\_ / 15 Back page includes reflection on your own life
4. \_\_\_\_ / 15 Brochure includes a factual time line following that character through the novel
5. \_\_\_\_ / 15 \* includes 3 Diary entries concerning 3 *important* moments in the book
6. \_\_\_\_ / 5 \* includes a quote from the novel that "best" describes that character
7. \_\_\_\_ / 10 \* incorporates graphics and art throughout the brochure
8. \_\_\_\_ / 10 \* is easy to read and interesting to look at artistically
9. \_\_\_\_ / 10 \* has been edited for spelling and grammar mistakes
10. \_\_\_\_ / 10 Overall quality of the work

TOTAL: \_\_\_\_ / 100

## Maus brochure assignment.

entries for their character based on events that occur in the novel. This task requires them to put themselves in the story and give a voice to the pictures they are seeing. The combination of the images in *Maus* and the video I use in class, *Night and Fog*, force my students to visually face the horror of the Holocaust. I stand by the old adage, "Seeing is believing."

When I teach my unit on compassion I use the graphic novel *Family Matter* written by Will Eisner. I like to partner this reading with the novel *Of Mice and Men* by Steinbeck. Eisner, who is considered the father of the graphic novel, coining the term, writes and illustrates honest human stories that can easily win over skeptics that believe that all graphic novels are based on fantasy and superhero formulas. I don't want to diminish the use of superhero comics in an English class; however, what better way to teach the Hero Cycle than by using

actually superheroes? Using superheroes also gives me the opportunity to discuss genre and subgenre with my students. Anyone who believes that all superhero comics are alike just has not read enough comics. There are traditional superheroes, modern superheroes, teen superheroes, teams of superheroes, parodies of superheroes, anti-hero superheroes, and even feminist superheroes. The world of the graphic novel is just as varied as other forms of literature. As English teachers we should read as much of this genre as possible before we can make educated decisions about what is appropriate for our students and our classrooms.

I started down the road of graphic novels by teaching an entire unit using comic books. I set up a gallery of comic book and graphic novel covers around the room. The number of distinct genres found today surprised my students. Just like fiction, graphic novels have many dif-

ferent categories; super hero, fantasy, horror/supernatural, science fiction, humor, crime, real life, historical fiction, myth/legends, non-fiction, educational and manga. Some of these genres are further divided up into subgenres, illustrating the range of material available. But there is more. I haven't even fully opened the door to the world of manga. The manga form of the graphic novel is a phenomenon in well-educated Japanese society, outselling any other form of literature. They have become quite popular in the United States as well and allow a unique opportunity for students to gain a multicultural perspective. Manga requires students to read from the bottom right side of the page to upper left creating opportunities for them to experience reading in a new way. After asking my students to spend time reading several different graphic novel titles, they were given a Multiple Intelligences project to complete on the novel of their choice. With this assignment, I was able to have students think about how graphic novels are written, the art involved in the process and the thought behind the author's intent.

With many standardized tests introducing a visual component to assessment and the overload of visual mediums in their everyday lives, the graphic novel is uniquely poised to tap student's enthusiasm and further their learning. Why shouldn't educators use the power of the graphic novel to help students become better readers and writers? The multidimensional nature of comics and graphic novels allows teachers to think about literature in a new creative way. Exploring the visual world of graphic novels will heighten your students' interest in reading and expand intellectual possibilities rather than contract them. A literary piece, like a graphic novel, is calling on students to use both their analyzing and synthesizing skills, actually requiring more involvement and focus in their reading. Therefore, teaching graphic novels provides educators another way to engage the minds of our students. Not unlike the use of film and music in English classrooms, graphic novels should be acknowledged as a valuable learning tool. Sometimes you just have to see it to believe it. ●

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