

CHALLENGING READING: ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDUCATION WITH CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

STRAND 2: THE MULTI-LITERACY CHALLENGE OF MULTIMODAL LITERATURE

What is a graphic novel and why we need it: A reader's manifesto

Marek Oziwicz, Marguerite Henry Professor of Children's and Young Adult Literature, University of Minnesota



The term graphic novel was coined in 1978 but has gained wider circulation only in the past 20 years. Nevertheless, it remains a contested term in relation to the long established formats, such as the novel, the short story, the picturebook, and the comic. The uncertainty and confusion about the legitimacy of the graphic novel format is reflected in the statements made by authors of graphic novels themselves: Brian Selznick, for example, claims that *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* is “not really a graphic novel” but a combination of a novel, a picturebook, a flip book, and a movie. Another award-winning graphic novelist Gene Luen Yang considers the graphic novel to be a purely marketing term that adds respectability to “comic books that deal with more literary topics.” The authors’ reluctance to acknowledge their own works as graphic novels—as well as their own curious dismissiveness toward the

format—has been reflected by the equally curious and deprecatory treatment of the term by the critics. Scott McCloud, Jessica Abel, Matt Madden and many others have shrugged off the graphic novel as nothing more than another name for comics, useful merely for marketing departments and the non-comics-savvy general public. While the authors may well be more concerned with their actual work than the name of its format, for a literary scholar to collapse the comic and the graphic novel is at best myopic. It overlooks the novelty and unique potential of the graphic novel, and does so with detrimental consequences for tackling the format in both scholarly discussions and educational practice.

In this talk, I offer a working definition of the graphic novel, discuss exemplary works that led to its emergence, and provide a rationale for recognizing the graphic novel as an important and unique format of contemporary literature. I argue that the graphic novel emerged in response to several factors, including the accelerating hybridization of narrative formats that diversified the field previously theorized in terms of a few traditional categories, and a shift in the global literary landscape brought about by the digital era and the “discovery” of multiple literacies. My focus is especially on the largely ignored “novel” part of the graphic novel’s definition and on the challenges of blending the visual and textual narratives into an inseparable whole. The talk is illustrated with examples of contemporary graphic novels and offers a set of tips for identifying key markers of this unique format that can accommodate a wide range of genres.

Marek Oziwicz is the Marguerite Henry Professor of Children's and Young Adult Literature at The University of Minnesota. His research foci include speculative fiction and literature-based cognitive modeling for moral education, global citizenship, environmental awareness, and justice literacy. His *One Earth, One People* (McFarland 2008) won the 2010 Mythopoeic Scholarship Award in Myth and Fantasy Studies. His most recent book, *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction* (Routledge 2015), offers a cognitive history of justice and examines how stories script young people's understanding of key justice issues in the modern world.