

Challenging Genres

Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genre
Volume 1

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This series explores in separate volumes major authors and genres through a critical literacy lens that seeks to offer students opportunities as readers and writers to embrace and act upon their own empowerment. Each volume will challenge authors (along with examining authors that are themselves challenging) and genres as well as challenging norms and assumptions associated with those authors' works and genres themselves. Further, each volume will confront teachers, students, and scholars by exploring all texts as politically charged mediums of communication. The work of critical educators and scholars will guide each volume, including concerns about silenced voices and texts, marginalized people and perspectives, and normalized ways of being and teaching that ultimately dehumanize students and educators.

Challenging Genres

Comics and Graphic Novels

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In the pages to follow, one motif running through my discussion is that *composing* and *creating* are by their nature collaborative, yet we persist in framing creative works as individual, including our tendency to honor works we have deemed individual works above those works seen as collaborative (film, comic books/graphic novels).

Here, I acknowledge that this book is collaborative and cumulative by thanking the following for the many people and situations that have led to this volume:

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INTRODUCTION

A CRITICAL CONSIDERATION OF GENRE

Comics and Graphic Novels in a Multiliteracy World

In the mid-1970s, I was a thin and shy teen living on a golf course and envisioning my life as a golfer, and even a basketball player. I spent many hours practicing on the golf holes closest to my house, along with hoping a female neighbor would come out to walk with me and talk. School was easy for me, but I wasn't particularly engaged in learning. I excelled in math and science (leading to my graduating high school and claiming I was going to major in physics!) and did fine in the humanities, but again, I didn't consider myself a reader.

The summer between my eighth and ninth grades, I was diagnosed with scoliosis, a lateral curving of the spine. The diagnosis was shocking; and also upsetting, I learned that the affliction was more common for girls. It was often correlated with growth spurts that exposed the deformed vertebrae. The summer of 1975 wasn't a good summer for a shy and self-conscious young man trying to fit in and find himself in a rural Southern town.

The doctor explained that I could either undergo invasive surgery (a metal rod inserted in my back with my vertebrae fused together to correct the curving spine that would eventually crush my internal organs if not addressed) or try a relatively new and experimental brace.

My parents opted for the brace (one of thousands of examples that I had wonderful parents). We said it was to preserve my athletic hopes, but we probably all knew that my golf abilities were never going to lead to the PGA. With hindsight, I now know this decision did save my life in a way, but in a way no one could have guessed.

The brace was an amazing device and a torturous one. First, I had to visit the brace maker, who made a cast of my lower torso. Then the brace was fashioned around a solid plastic mold that started at my groin, covered my stomach up to my sternum, and wrapped around my hips and across my lower back. That central plastic girdle had an aluminum rod running along the front and two aluminum rods up the back, all connected with heavy nylon straps—one of which was attached to a plastic pad that was placed directly over the ribs connected to the deformed vertebrae in my spine. The three aluminum rods also were fixed to an aluminum collar with a chin rest and two padded resting points for the back of my head. The collar held my chin up, extending my spine at all times. The straps were pulled tightly—my waste was constricted to 13 inches—all combining to hold my spine nearly straight for 23 of the 24 hours of each day (yes, I slept in the brace for the next four years).

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The device was designed to allow my deformed vertebrae to grow on the underdeveloped sides to produce a relatively straight back by the time I reached full maturity. But the brace wasn't enough. I had to exercise also—including doing hellish sit-ups in the contraption. The first night I tried those sit-ups is one of the most vivid memories of my life. I lay on the floor and then lifted my head about an inch or so before losing strength and having my back and head slammed back into the floor. The brace made the small gestures sound horrible, but it actually was painless. My parents sat on the couch watching—my mother crying and my father laughing. Until I gained enough strength to do the sit-ups, my father would have me perform for other family members (my maternal uncle enjoyed it nearly as much as my father) and anyone who happened to come over.

The brace itself proved to be a serious obstacle to sitting—or being comfortable at all. I to this day sit on the edge of seats and push my chair out, creating obstacles for others in tight spaces (such as the lunch room when I was in school where this necessary posture was a disaster). School desks were a nightmare; my father fashioned me a small contraption to place on the top of my desk (a desktop for my desktop) because I couldn't look down with the brace on and sitting in a desk. Lugging the desk-top desk around didn't help a junior high boy already mortified with his body—especially a body now most noticed for a weird body brace. (The silk shirts, large collars, bell-bottom pants, and long stringy hair didn't help either—but all that did blend in with the others also struggling with junior high fashion in 1975–1976.)

My parents choosing the brace did save my life. To be more accurate, though, that the brace made sitting nearly unbearable saved my life.

I don't remember when I started buying comic books, but I do know that when I was looking for something to do—anything to do—while living most of my life in a body brace, I began standing at the end of the long bar that separated our kitchen and living areas and tracing images from comics I had. Soon, I was reading, collecting, and eventually drawing freehand from comics.

I was a true-blue Marvel Comics addict—although in the 1980s while revisiting my love of comics with students who were themselves comic book nerds, I made the conversion to DC by discovering my favorite comic superhero, Batman—the angst-ridden crusader who often failed his ideals and paralleled my love many years later for Andy Sipowicz on ABC's brilliant *NYPD Blue*.

By the time I graduated high school, I had a well organized and catalogued collection of over 7000 Marvel comics—Spider-Man, X-Men, Conan, Daredevil, and nearly every title published by Marvel in the 1970s. I was an avid reader, artist, and collector—although I am sure at the time I saw no connection between my hobby and school (because in school I was still a math and science nerd, despite my asking for the school to add an art class, which they finally did my senior year—offering it the same period as physics...).

In ninth grade during my woodworking class, I built a large chest for the comics, and I soon took over an extra bedroom in the house where I had the comics organized and safely inside plastic sleeves. I kept a large notebook with every title identified and each issue number I owned listed. One year, my father even took me

to Atlanta, GA, for a huge comics convention (yes, another indication of the wonderful parents I had). My family and I soon spent a great deal of time and money improving my collection. Weekly trips to all the stores in our small hometown that sold comics, scanning the ads in newspapers for comics being sold (we bought 1500 comics one time through such an ad, including a valuable run of Conan comics), and knowing the best place to buy comics on our trips to the beach.

Eventually, it seemed more likely I was destined to be a comic book artist than a PGA golfer—and my parents would have taken either proudly. Throughout high school, I came to enjoy one of my English teachers, Lynn Harrill, who would prove to be a mentor for me when the journey of my life turned to my being a high school English teacher in the room Lynn taught in before moving to administration. (I now teach in Lynn’s former position at the university where I am a teacher educator; and I admit I hope Lynn someday leaves a job that is highly lucrative for me to inherit.)

As a college freshman, I had an epiphany—discovering that I am a writer and a voracious reader. I love words, am driven by them, to them.

After 18 years teaching high school English, I moved to teacher education, and now am amazed at the lengthy publishing history I have accumulated, including many books, articles, poems, Op-Eds, and pages upon pages of those things not-yet-published. It is no stretch to acknowledge the back brace and my love for comics as the fertile ground in which my life as a teacher, scholar, and writer has flourished.

• • •

As an author well known for novels, Barbara Kingsolver (1995) has had many encounters with varying perceptions of genre. “Write a nonfiction book, and be prepared for the legion of readers who are going to doubt your facts,” she writes, adding, “But write a novel, and get ready for the world to assume every word is true” (p. 257).

Kingsolver (1995) discusses the fluid interplay of creation (what she calls making up lies) and truth—a complex concept she covers everything for a simple fact (truth = a stop light is red) to a Universal Truth (“honesty is the best policy”). For Kingsolver, coming to terms with “fantasy and truth” proved to be a transition from childhood fancy to a professional pursuit of art (p. 259).

For teachers and students, considerations of text often include confronting the concept of genre and how the conventions of any genre reflect or challenge T(t)ruth. This book, then, offers an extended challenge to our views of text, genre, and truth through the genres of comic books and graphic novels (although classifying comics as a “genre” is itself controversial for many who argue comics are a medium).

As my brief personal narrative above expressed and models, my life as a teacher, scholar, and writer has come to embody the quest for and arguments about genre. Why do I open a scholarly book with a personal narrative (Nash, 2004)? Scholarly writing must be objective, and the discourse should read as if no person actually wrote the text, the traditional view goes.

Here, in the Introduction, I will explore the foundational groundings of this book—critical pedagogy groundings in the work of Maxine Greene (1995), Paulo Freire

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(1993, 1995, 1998), and Joe Kincheloe (2005a, 2005b); definitions of comics and graphic novels, along with the many conventions within the genre; and a consideration of multiliteracies and how comics/graphic novels fit into our evolving conception of literacy.

“BREAKS WITH WHAT HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED”—SEEKING CHANGE AS AN ACT OF TEACHING/LEARNING

The journeys of two influences on my life as a scholar, teacher, reader, and writer—Adrienne Rich and Maxine Greene—are parallel with my own: Finding comfort and refuge in the traditional literary canon before discovering the oppressive nature of that narrow view of literature and literacy. Rich has written about and demonstrated in her art the naïve acceptance of traditional norms of poetry, even excelling within those norms, followed by a broadening of her artistic and personal selves.

Greene (1995) moves from her similar personal experience to an “argument that we teachers must make an intensified effort to break through the frames of custom and to touch the consciousness of those we teach” (p. 56). I layer onto Greene’s argument the importance of making our classrooms a place where students along with their teachers challenge genre, instead of seeing the teacher’s role as an authority that merely transmits fixed (and distorted) templates of genre to passive students (Freire, 1993). As Greene adds, “[E]ducation today must be conceived as a mode of opening the world to critical judgments by the young and to their imaginative projections and, in time, to their transformative actions” (p. 56).

When the teachers carry all the responsibility for defining genre and selecting text for study (or enjoyment), we are transmitting uncritically social norms to our students. Some who embrace the role of schools as an objective transmission of cultural capital, such as E. D. Hirsch, champion the traditional role of authoritarian teachers and fixed reading lists, such as Great Books. But these practices and imposed texts allow social norms to continue whether they are fair or true, or not.

Yet, Greene (1995) sees a different role for education, an empowering role: “[W]e often feel we can recognize and resist more effectively the hegemonies, for example, of television or popular culture or evangelism or consumerism, the false promises and comforts of American society today” (p. 61). Comics and graphic novels offer teachers the opportunity to expand possibilities within the classroom to challenge genre by representing the “popular culture” Greene recognizes so that students can reconsider their perceptions of cultural assumptions by identifying those assumptions.

“Doctrinaire or explicitly revolutionary literature is not needed when literary works of art have the capacity to move readers to imagine alternative ways of being alive,” Greene (1995) notes, shifting our criteria for selecting text from some imagined qualities within the text to the impact that text has on the reader. Like Rosenblatt (1995), Greene is expanding our views of the reader-writer-text dynamic; therefore, when comics/graphic novels can achieve this broader goal those texts are

as rigorous and important as canonized works. The *value*, then, of the educational literacy experience does not lie solely in some objective qualities of a text (a view perpetuated by New Criticism), but in the dynamic of reader-writer-text.

Greene (1995) blends her call for expanding the *what* and *how* of our approaches to text with the importance of writing our worlds: “It is by writing that I often manage to name alternatives and to open myself to possibilities. That is what I think learning ought to be” (p. 107). So Greene also asks teachers themselves to explore the transformative through transforming their classrooms. As she experienced, conforming to the norms of genre and the fixed canon meant she (and we) do “not have to disrupt” (p. 109).

But our job is not to transmit, not to be the authority, but to be authoritative through disrupting:

And I think that if I and other teachers truly want to provoke our students to break through the limits of the conventional and the taken for granted, we ourselves have to experience breaks with what has been established in our own lives; we have to keep arousing ourselves to begin again. (Greene, 1995, p. 109)

Expanding the genres of our classrooms by including comics/graphic novels, then, we are making decisions to “begin again.”

As Greene (1995) continues, she clarifies that authoritarian views of genre, text, and literature impose onto students implicit messages that their own worldviews do not matter, at best, or are wrong, at worst. Part of Greene’s own “begin[ning] again” involved that realization: “I have not easily come to terms with the ways in which education, too often following the lines of class, gender, and race, permits and forbids the expression of different people’s experiences” (p. 110). As I confessed above, when I had committed myself fully to the world of reading, drawing from, and collecting comics, I never saw that rich literacy experience as something that mattered in school. This chasm between the literacy lives of our students and the normalized literacy of school is a profound failure of schooling:

Many of the alienated or marginalized are made to feel distrustful of their own voices, their own ways of making sense, yet they are not provided alternatives that allow them to tell their stories or shape their narratives or ground new learning in what they already know. The favored ones, in contrast, seldom question the language of dominance or efficiency or efficacy in which they are reared, although they may seek out discourses more appropriate for a shared young culture or for moments of rebellion or adolescent discontent. (Greene, p. 111)

Adding comics/graphics novels is one avenue to opening the dialogue and honoring for students “what they already know” because, as Greene explains, it is “teaching that provokes critical questions around the many modes of literacy, the preferred languages, the diversity of languages, and the relation of all these to the greater cultural context” (p. 111).

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As Rich, Greene, and I did in our lives, students need the opportunity to rise above or expand beyond the Western canon of Harold Bloom (although they deserve to know Bloom's claims) and the cultural literacy arguments of E. D. Hirsch in order to re-see as Greene (1995) reveals:

[I]t took years before I realized that the great tradition...required that I look through the eyes of others and master what was at the time the authoritative way of articulating the world. It came as a shock to realize that what I had believed was universal, transcending gender and class and race, was a set of points of view. (p. 112)

Creating classrooms that challenge genre by identifying the norms and then "break[ing] with what has been established," teachers addressing literacy can offer to students literacy that empowers and not norms that oppress:

As a set of techniques, literacy has often silenced persons and disempowered them. Our obligation today is to find ways of enabling the young to find their voices, to open their space, to reclaim their histories in all their variety and discontinuity. (Greene, 1995, pp. 109, 120)

My call for challenging genre and expanding our view of text, in part through comics/graphic novels, is to see "teaching is indeed for finding openings, if we are concerned that choices be made," Greene (1995) explains, adding, "Both the reading experience and the teaching act are dialectical" (p. 121).

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, CRITICAL LITERACY—"WORKING AGAINST MYTHS THAT DEFORM US"

The grounding of this argument for challenging genre by infusing our literature study with comics and graphic novels includes critical constructivism (Kincheloe, 2005a) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993, 1998, 2005; Kincheloe, 2005b). This grounding establishes a central recognition of my discussion:

[P]roponents of critical pedagogy understand that every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice are politically contested spaces. Shaped by history and challenged by a wide range of interest groups, educational practice is a fuzzy concept as it takes place in numerous settings, is shaped by a plethora of often-invisible forces, and can operate even in the name of democracy and justice to be totalitarian and oppressive. (Kincheloe, 2005b, p. 2)

And from critical pedagogy and critical constructivism comes the essential pursuit of critical literacy.

Before defining comics and graphic novels, I will here briefly consider how critical pedagogy, critical constructivism, and critical literacy inform my discussion and contribute to the sorts of classrooms I envision where children are offered invitations to empower themselves through rich literacy experiences that challenge our assumptions about genre, literacy, and being.

In my discussion, the term *critical pedagogy* (Kincheloe, 2005b) refers to the practices and stances taken by the teacher to provide a learning environment and

opportunity for all students. Critical pedagogy stands in contrast to the dominant assumptions and practices of traditional bureaucratic schooling (most school settings of the twentieth and twenty-first century)—behaviorism, positivism, accountability, and objectivity. I offer this brief outline of some of the central ways in which critical pedagogy presents an alternative to traditional teaching:

- The teacher takes an authoritative stance, not an authoritarian one, in which the teacher exhibits one level of expertise for students to consider for their own evolving expertise.
- The teacher rejects the possibility of an objective stance (Thomas, 2010); instead, the teacher reveals her/his informed stances, emphasizing that students are not expected to conform to those stances simply because the teacher holds them.
- The teacher sees assessment as an opportunity to provide the student feedback in order to support learning, avoiding evaluation, judgment, and labeling whenever possible. The teacher also provides students supportive conditions for self-assessment as well.
- The classroom is acknowledged as a politically contested space, with the teacher and the students holding varying degrees of power as well as negotiating for that power in an environment of collaboration instead of competition.
- Knowledge is viewed as organic, not static, and never value-free. Credible knowledge and stances are evidence-based, but the teacher models for students that all knowledge and understanding is contextual, dependent on time and place. And credible knowledge today may be rejected tomorrow as the evidence changes.
- The classroom is viewed as a workshop where the students are active participants in their learning, choosing their learning with the teacher facilitating. The classroom is a place for risk taking, and all behaviors are as authentic as possible.
- The classroom must be intellectually and physically safe, and the teacher retains responsibility for both, although the ideal classroom includes students who can monitor that safety without the aid of an adult.
- The teacher is not responsible for passing on to students the norms of the culture, but to help students gain the skills to identify, analyze, evaluate, and act upon those norms—particularly if that action calls for change.
- The teacher rejects a deficit view of students as well as a blank-slate view of the human mind. The classroom is not a place to identify student errors, not a place to “fix” students. While the traditional classroom often seeks compliance from students, critical pedagogy requires teachers to foster student empowerment.
- The teacher honors the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor aspects of human learning.
- The teacher recognizes that learning is a social behavior, rejecting traditional concerns for isolation in school.
- The teacher honors intrinsic motivation and avoids the behavioral assumptions of the traditional classroom and Western society.
- The teacher invites students to seek goals that are open-ended, respecting the value of questions (instead of the fixed nature of answer-driven traditional schooling).

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Critical constructivism (Kincheloe, 2005a), as I use the term here, refers to the nature of learning—or more clearly, the theory of learning that I believe is most conducive to an educational setting designed for (and respectful of) free people. Critical constructivism is both a theory of learning and a rejection of behaviorism, as I will use the term throughout this discussion. Critical constructivism, then, encompasses these claims:

- All humans deserve classrooms that honor human dignity and intellectual curiosity. That all humans can learn (as an idealized and often trivialized mantra) is replaced by the recognition that the human condition is a learning condition; in other words, it is not that all humans can learn, but that learning is an inseparable part of the human condition.
- Human learning is contextual, including the given state of any human’s current knowing (that person’s mind, including the biological given of that mind, the accumulated learning of that mind, the broad life experiences that impact the knowing, and the cultural context that informs how that mind views knowing and experiences—all of which are interacting as an organic state that can never be static). Thus, critical constructivism rejects any “blank slate” view of the mind and is highly skeptical of behaviorism’s claims against human agency or free will (although those stances are valuable contributions to a vibrant debate about the human mind, the human condition, and the art and science of teaching/learning).
- Learning is placed in the context of human freedom and empowerment, not as capital in a market, not as a set of discrete skills required of a consumer/worker dynamic.
- Learning thrives in an environment that encourages risk, and then honors the value of both *error* (experiments that do not succeed or emerging manifestations of expertise) and success.
- The role of the student in learning includes student choice, authentic consequences, and learner action—with the teacher providing the context of that action and assuming the role of expert-in-process.
- Exhibits of learning (assessments) are guided by the learner; those learners are encouraged to develop their self-assessment abilities in the context of assessments and evaluations imposed on the learner for external authorities (teachers, mandated assessments).
- Assessment is best when the performances of students are authentic and holistic, instead of analytic testing that asks little of the learner other than marking responses within the parameters determined for them.

Critical literacy (Freire, 1998, 2005) describes the role of literacy in a person’s learning and living; it also guides how teachers implement and view language use in both educational and life situations. Critical literacy encompasses these views of language usage:

- Language is an essential aspect of being fully human, and as such, an essential aspect of human empowerment, freedom, and dignity.
- All humans continually write and rewrite, read and reread the world.
- Children deserve educational experiences that foster their own empowerment through their evolving language.

- What learners read and write are their choices, and students denied those choices are being denied their basic humanity.
- Language usage conforms and works against cultural norms and conventions of language use that reflect power and assumptions by that culture. References to the *grammar* of a language best serve learners and teachers when the term refers to a description of the conventional patterns of the language (as opposed to seeing *grammar* as a prescription for proper language use).
- All language is contextual and political; no human language can be objective.
- Language is both a path to learning and a goal of educational and personal growth by every human.

These critical stances are supported by foundational beliefs found in the work of Freire (1998, 2005). A critical stance is a paradoxical stance. A critical perspective involves an ideology that rejects the static tendencies of ideologies. Thus, both teachers and students who are critical are always vigilant to avoid becoming dogmatic, accepting simultaneously things as they are now and the ever-evolving nature of what we know, perceive, and understand. As Freire (1998) warns while acknowledging the inevitability of subjectivity:

I am not impartial or objective; not a fixed observer of facts and happenings. I never was able to be an adherent of the traits that falsely claim impartiality or objectivity. That did not prevent me, however, from holding always a rigorously ethical position. ... It is an error when one becomes dogmatic about one's point of view and ignores the fact that, even if one is certain about his or her point of view, it does not mean that one's position is always ethically grounded. (p. 22)

As Freire explains here, to claim some fixed and objective argument about a thing called literature is itself a false claim; no objective parameters do or even can exist that distinguish *A Tale of Two Cities* from *Watchmen*, except when that does happen, the distinctions are in fact arbitrary and bound by context and assumptions—and driven by some power structure that may or may not be fair.

So to ask students to reconsider and explore both different types of literature as well as their assumptions about literature and genre is a critical act that is seeking students making new conclusions for themselves—not an act to manipulate students to reach conclusions we have already decided for them. As Freire (1998) adds, “If education cannot do everything, there is something fundamental that it can do. In other words, if education is not the key to social transformation, neither is it simply meant to reproduce the dominant ideology” (p. 110). Here is a critical argument for seeing our ELA classes as opportunities for exploring and discovering literacy, literature, and genre—not places to pass on stale and authoritarian prescriptions for literacy, literature, and genre.

Now, to consider and reconsider the texts we bring to our classrooms and the texts we honor when our students choose them is also challenging our perceptions of writing. In other words, literacy is the interplay of all aspects of human communication—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—and how all of these acts interact. Freire (2005) rejects mechanical views of literacy: “The truth is that writing is not a mere mechanical act preceded by a greater, much more important

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act: the act of thinking in an organized manner” (p. 1). But in school, we have and often do reduce all aspects of literacy to mechanical acts, something the student performs simply to fulfill the prescription of the teacher in order to be compliant, in order to receive credit. And thus, literacy is rendered meaningless for students:

If studying were not almost always a *burden* [emphasis in original] to us, if reading were not a bitter obligation, if, on the contrary, studying and reading were sources of pleasure and happiness as well as sources of the knowledge we need to better move about the world, we would have indexes that were more indicative of the quality of our education. (Freire, p. 45)

And finally, it is my critical argument that viewing literacy as mechanical and fixed, thus making literacy and learning experiences in school “always a *burden*,” is nearly the same as denying our students access to literacy and empowering literacy growth. And Freire (2005) speaks directly to this:

One of the violences perpetuated by illiteracy is the suffocation of the consciousness and the expressiveness of men and women who are forbidden from reading and writing, thus limiting their capacity to write about their reading of the world so they can rethink about their original reading of it. (p. 2)

If our prescriptive approaches to literature, literacy, and genre are closing off those worlds from our students, we are failing them in profound ways. Expanding the literature curriculum to include comics and graphic novels is but one step toward opening that door, inviting our students to embrace and enjoy the most basic aspects of being human, language and freedom.

Literacy practices in traditional settings are not empowering, but indoctrinating, and thus we are not honoring the human minds we claim to value:

[A]s we put into practice an education that critically provokes the learner’s consciousness, we are necessarily working against myths that deform us. As we confront such myths, we also face the dominant power because those myths are nothing but the expression of this power, of its ideology. (Freire, 2005, p. 75)

PLACING COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE CONTEXT OF MULTILITERACIES

In the following section, I will discuss more specifically how we define and view both comics and graphic novels, but first, I want to look at the broad concept of multiliteracies, within which, I feel, comics and graphic novels fit as well as model for our students when they approach text.

Cazden et al. (1996), often referred to as The New London Group, establish the broad traditional view of education and the place of literacy within that:

If it were possible to define generally the mission of education, one could say that its fundamental purpose is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life.

Literacy pedagogy is expected to play a particularly important role in fulfilling this mission. Pedagogy is a teaching and learning relationship that creates the potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation. Literacy pedagogy has traditionally meant teaching and learning to read and write in page-bound, official, standard forms of the national language. Literacy pedagogy, in other words, has been a carefully restricted project—restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language.

This description of traditional views is the context within which comics and graphic novels are generally marginalized. As I will examine more fully in the next section, educators and lay people alike tend to see comics/graphic novels as childish, easy, and frivolous texts.

An argument for multiliteracies, however, calls for a move beyond those traditional norms; “we attempt to broaden this understanding of literacy and literacy teaching and learning to include negotiating a multiplicity of discourses” (Cazden, et al., 1996). Since comics and graphic novels include an assortment of graphics along with text, this genre fulfills the call for “negotiating a multiplicity of discourses.” Cazden et al. also “argue that literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies.”

Both in school and in the broader society, we have a narrow view of reading and text, thus literacy. While comics/graphic novels have been marginalized, the view of text has changed little during the past century despite the changes that have occurred in how we share and transmit information. In the decade and a half since the argument for multiliteracies, we may well see comics/graphic novels as somewhat inadequate as alternatives to linear text on paper since we live in a multimedia world that is often more electronic than paperbound—computers, the Internet, smartphones, and more.

“It may well be that we have to rethink what we are teaching, and, in particular, what new learning needs literacy pedagogy might now address,” explains Cazden et al. (1996). And as we rethink, we must open all the doors to multiliteracies, including the power of comics/graphic novels. In short, “new communications media are reshaping the way we use language. When technologies of meaning are changing so rapidly, there cannot be one set of standards or skills that constitute the ends of literacy learning, however taught” (Cazden, et al.). Reading, text, and literacy, then, are more complex and diverse than we often acknowledge in formal classrooms, and our students know that reality from their lives outside school.

Cazden et al. (1996) recognize that the private and public lives of students include multiliteracies whether or not schools recognize those multiliteracies. We read a rich interplay of video, text, graphics, and audio through a variety of platforms (TV monitors, computer screens, smartphones), and we rarely pause to debate what aspects of that information is text and how that dynamic is (or is not) literacy. That reality of human existence parallels my own experiences as comic book collector in my teens, when I was growing in my literacy but not equating my comics reading and drawing with the literacy expected in school. Thus,

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In relation to the new environment of literacy pedagogy, we need to reopen two fundamental questions: the “what” of literacy pedagogy, or what it is that students need to learn; and the “how” of literacy pedagogy, or the range of appropriate learning relationships. (Cazden, et al.)

The New London Group (Cazden, et al., 1996) embraced a critical literacy and critical pedagogy that acknowledges my argument here for the pivotal role of genre and any student’s perceptions of genre:

Within orders of discourse there are particular Design conventions—Available Designs—that take the form of discourses, styles, genres, dialects, and voices, to name a few key variables. A discourse is a configuration of knowledge and its habitual forms of expression, which represents a particular set of interests. Over time, for instance, institutions produce discourses - that is, their configurations of knowledge. Style is the configuration of all the semiotic features in a text in which, for example, language may relate to layout and visual images. Genres are forms of text or textual organization that arise out of particular social configurations or the particular relationships of the participants in an interaction. They reflect the purposes of the participants in a specific interaction.

In short, the conventions of any genre are socially constructed and then socially reconstructed perpetually by those users of the language. An embracing of multi-literacies in the literacy curriculum recognizes the symbiotic relationship between the evolution of genre and the readers/writers interacting with those genres:

The Redesigned may be variously creative or reproductive in relation to the resources for meaning-making available in Available Designs. But it is neither a simple reproduction (as the myth of standards and transmission pedagogy would have us believe), nor is it simply creative (as the myths of individual originality and personal voice would have us believe)Through these processes of Design, moreover, meaning-makers remake themselves. They reconstruct and renegotiate their identities. Not only has The Redesigned been actively made, but it is also evidence of the ways in which the active intervention in the world that is Designing has transformed the designer. (Cazden, et al., 1996)

To embrace and expand considering and reconsidering genre as a central aspect of literacy pedagogy is a goal of using comics/graphic novels as avenues to empowerment through literacy (I will return to viewing comics/graphics novels as important texts themselves in Chapter Two). Cazden et al. (1996) make this distinction about genre:

Genre is an intertextual aspect of a text. It shows how the text links to other texts in the intertextual context, and how it might be similar in some respects to other texts used in comparable social contexts, and its connections with text types in the order(s) of discourse. But genre is just one of a number of intertextual aspects of a text, and it needs to be used in conjunction with others, especially discourses.

When a teacher asks a student to interact with text, with multiliteracies texts, the student is invited to consider genre—What conventions give the text coherence and how do those conventions match other texts as well as contrast with other texts? Comics/graphic novels, for example, can serve as a basis for these considerations while also being fulfilling reading experiences for students.

In a sense, the traditional views of reading, text, and literacy are naïve because “[i]n a profound sense, all meaning-making is multimodal” (Cazden, et al., 1996). Black type on white paper is no less contextual than a comic book page or a multimedia file on a computer screen. The narrow views of text and reading are in effect arbitrary and made authoritarian only by cultural context; in other words, they are conventional, not objective or static. Meaning transmitted through symbolic representations (whether type in the form of the alphabet, two-dimensional and stylized drawings, or an icon on a computer scene, to name only a few examples) is a dynamic of many points of meaning, such as Rosenblatt’s (1995) reader-writer-text. Multiliteracy acknowledges this dynamic as hybridity:

The term hybridity highlights the mechanisms of creativity and of culture-as-process particularly salient in contemporary society. People create and innovate by hybridizing—that is, articulating in new ways—established practices and conventions within and between different modes of meaning. This includes the hybridization of established ways modes of meaning (of discourses and genres), and multifarious combinations of modes of meaning cutting across boundaries of convention and creating new conventions. (Cazden, et al., 1996)

Comics/graphic novels are established, although marginalized, hybrid texts, combining text, artwork, coloring, and sequenced panels (more on this in the following section).

A commitment to multiliteracies also fits within critical pedagogy. Both critical pedagogy and multiliteracy suffer similar misunderstandings and distortions based on traditional assumptions. Cazden et al. (1996) explains:

Beyond mastery in practice, an efficacious pedagogy must seek critical understanding or cultural understanding in two different senses. Critical in the phrase “critical understanding” means conscious awareness and control over the intra-systematic relations of a system. Immersion, notoriously, does not lead to this. For instance, children who have acquired a first language through immersion in the practices of their communities do not thereby, in virtue of that fact, become good linguists. Vygotsky (1978, 1987), who certainly supported collaboration in practice as a foundation of learning, argued also that certain forms of Overt Instruction were needed to supplement immersion (acquisition) if we wanted learners to gain conscious awareness and control of what they acquired.

Incorporating the literacies of a child’s life outside of school into the classroom, such as acknowledging the value of comics/graphic novels, is not a casual or purposeless venture. Expanding and challenging genres becomes a process of any student’s being and becoming, an avenue to acting on the world instead of being acted upon by the world.

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“Here, crucially, the teacher must help learners to denaturalize and make strange again what they have learned and mastered,” adds Cazden et al. (1996). Bringing a child’s love for comic books into the classroom is not solely embracing a valuable aspect of the child’s life, but a way to ask that child to re-see those comics, to re-see genre, to re-see her/his own emerging literacy. From there, multiliteracy experiences in the classroom support action and change in the student’s life, where texts, reading, and literacy are complex and evolving ways of being.

The literacy classroom I envision is a place where teachers and students together ask these questions:

- What makes a comic book, a comic book? A graphic novel, a graphic novel?
- What does it mean to read? If we read a book, do we read a movie? Why do golfers read putts, and how do we read someone’s face?
- What counts as text?
- What is the difference between the word “black” and a solid black page? Or a pitch dark room?

Maxine Greene (2010) offers her own awareness of the fluidity of these definitions above and later in the Introduction:

Like Herman Melville (and Kierkegaard and Dostoievsky and Camus and Dewey) I object to closed systems, to fixities, to finalities. Definitions of art are always open to questioning. Indeed, an object, an arrangement of sounds or movements, although labeled as a work of art, does not serve as art for the individual unless it gives rise to an aesthetic experience. That means moving from an ordinary, commonplace experience (walking to work, calling a class to order) to an extraordinary experience, one involving perceptions, insights, feelings that highlight details of the surrounding world, and moments of “un-concealment” that reveal unexpected lights and shadows that alter the familiar shape of things.

Now, let’s focus on comic books and graphic novels as a genre, seeking how to understand these forms of literature in the context of what makes them unique and how they overlap with other genres.

OF COMICS, GRAPHIC NOVELS, AND OTHER SORTS OF SEQUENTIAL ART¹

“[H]eroes/lived there, we knew/they all wore capes,” writes Atwood (1998) in her poem “Comic Books vs. History” (ll. 8–10). She continues, “bullets/bounced off them;/from their fists came beautiful/orange collisions” (ll. 10–13). Readers of Atwood’s poem who are also readers of comic books are equally drawn to later lines:

Our side was coloured in
With dots and letters. ... (ll. 14–15)

And,

...the
red and silver

heroes had collapsed inside
 their rubber suits / the riddled
 buildings were decaying.... (ll. 27–31)

Why? These lines trigger comic book readers' awareness of the conventions of comics (superheroes in elaborate uniforms, often in capes; superheroes as invincible or impervious to mere mortal weapons; conventional graphics that express meaning, such as the use of shapes and colors to denote sounds and three-dimensional action; four-color technology on news print) and a possible allusion ("riddled" suggesting The Riddler in Batman's lore?).

Like all genres, comics and graphic novels offer the reader a complex and shifting field of conventions that contribute to the expression of meaning. Also as with all genres, a definition of comics and graphic novels is, for me, a tentative description, and not a prescription of what they should be. So, just what is a comic book or graphic novel?

Let's look at a few definitions offered by leaders in the field of comics and graphic novels—first, comic books:

The format of comics presents a montage of both words and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g., perspective, symmetry, line) and the regimens of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other.... In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When they are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a distinct language—a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the "grammar" of sequential art. (Eisner, 2008, p. 2)

Most often a 6 5/8-by-10 3/16-inch stapled magazine that consists of thirty-two pages plus cover and contains sequential panels of four-color art and written dialogue that tell an original story for entertainment purposes. (Rhoades, 2008, p. 2)

Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence. (McCloud, 1993, p. 9)

And now, graphic novels:

In the middle of the twentieth century, sequential artists moved toward long-form works, broadly called "graphic novels" (a term which can encompass works of nonfiction in addition to works that are truly novelistic). (Eisner, 2008, p. 149)

Ask people about graphic novels and some will say immediately, "Oh, you mean porn." ... Others perceive graphic novels only as gaudy escapism, whether superheroic, fantasy-based, science fictional, or hard-boiled, for adolescent males, all furious spectacle and special effects and little depth or humanity, like their movie counterparts....But graphic novels are not limited to one genre category, or only a few....The word graphic does not have to

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mean disturbing, extreme, and in your face, shown in hard outlines, grotesque caricatures, or lurid coloring....In fact, graphic does not narrow down to drawing and illustration, as in graphics, since some artists create their comics using photos, 3D models, or found objects. (Gravett, 2005, p. 8)

Gravett adds, “So in several ways graphic novel is a misnomer,” and we could say the same for comic book (p. 8).

For the purposes of this book, the definitions above serve well to establish the importance of teasing through the term *genre* and then all the aspects of any genre that we are attempting to understand, such as comic books and graphic novels. It is the teasing through and exploring that is more important than any final definition we might reach. So let’s tease through some of those conventions that influence what we believe about and expect from comics and graphic novels.

Most people who hear the words “comic book” associate the genre with something childish, silly, or funny. Many people still connect comic books with the 1960s TV version of Batman with the dramatic comic book sound effects flashed in word form across the screen—“BATSPLAT!!!” and other campy effects. In fact, the characteristics that make comic books unique are both easily recognized by most of us and at the root of why most people do not take comics seriously. For example, a recent graphic novel of *The 9/11 Report*, adapted and drawn by comic book veterans Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón, often creates negative reactions from readers of all ages. In a course I was teaching, most students were uncomfortable with the comic book style as it contrasted with the seriousness of the topic in the work. For example, the use of “R-RRUMBLE...” in large red letters over the crumbling twin towers was too much of a contrast for the students who viewed the use of the onomatopoeia as comic and inappropriate for the national disaster it portrayed.

Now, the comic book as a genre is distinct from the comic strip, although artists in both forms share techniques. The comic strip is a brief series of panels, possibly even one panel alone, that do tend to be humorous and often appear in print as part of newspapers—although the form is now recognizable to young people as common to online publications viewed through the Internet; the medium through which we view comic strips impacts what we expect since four-color printing on newsprint or higher quality paper is different than an image on a computer screen. Many people throughout the mid-twentieth century referred to comic strips in newspapers as the “funny papers.” Comic strips that most people still recognize include *Peanuts*, created by Charles Schultz, and *Doonesbury*, created by Gary Trudeau. These strips are typical of comic strips in that they use a cartoon or stylized form of artwork and have primarily a humorous intent, from broad humor to more serious forms of satire, whether that satire is directed at the relationship between adults and children or the political world. The comic strip is similar in form and purpose to cartoons, which are comic panels placed into motion. Cartoons have experienced popularity along with the rise of television and include shows such as *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*, and a wide range of Looney Toons. In recent years, cartoons have experienced a television renaissance in shows such as *The Simpsons*, *Rugrats*, and more controversial shows such as *Southpark* and *Family Guy*.

Cartoons and comic strips are common, but often trivial parts of a broader cross-section of all people's lives. When most people look at comic strips, cartoons, or comic books, they see the forms as one genre—not distinct forms with different purposes, tones, and audiences in mind. The comic book is unique in many ways from comic strips and cartoons; however, one segment of the comic book industry is parallel to comic strips and cartoons. That segment of the comic book industry is primarily funny and directed at small children, including classic comics that focus on characters such as Archie, Richie Rich, and Donald Duck. But the comic books that many of us know as comics is a world of superheroes, a world that is powerful and dark; these are the comics that are definitely not funny and not for children, but for young adults and adults.

The superhero comic book shares its origin with comic strips and cartoons; however, the genre of superhero comics is unique. The comic book is sequential art like a comic strip, but the comic book tends to be many pages of panels and is traditionally published as a free-standing magazine, although most comic books appear in serial form, a number of separate books of a connected storyline focusing on a central character or central characters (and these serializations now often give rise to publishers reissuing these storylines as self-contained graphic novels). The 6 5/8-by-10 3/16-inch comic book with the glossy and colorful single-panel cover and the self-contained story inside, originally published on newsprint but more recently printed on slick paper throughout, is the comic book that we recognize as the form we read, collect, and appreciate.

While the comic strip tends to be the work of one artist who writes and draws the strip, comic books tend to be collaborative art forms—one work of art created by several people. A comic book often involves the work of a writer, an artist (usually denoted as a penciller since this artist creates rough sketches in pencil), an inker (who finishes the drawing using a black ink), a letterer, and a colorist. In some cases, artists take on multiple roles in their work, such as artists Todd McFarlane and Frank Miller completing writing and artist duties on many of the comic books they created. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is an example of a comic book creation written and drawn by Frank Miller; while this comic book is heavily the work of one artist, the comic still has an inker and colorist, Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley.

The comic book form has nearly a century of history (see Chapter One) and within that history many of the most recognized comics include superheroes, but the form is varied and complex. The comic book form we will discuss here focuses on the books that include a range of title characters such as Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man. As we will explore further, these characters broadly represent both the male orientation of comic books and the basic types of title characters: Superman (Clark Kent), an alien, has super powers when on Earth that raise him above mere mortals; Batman (Bruce Wayne, originally, although DC temporarily killed Wayne and shifted the role of Batman to Dick Grayson, the original Robin) is essentially a mortal, but has refined his abilities through dedication and extraordinary circumstances; Spider-Man (Peter Parker) is a mortal transformed into having super powers through some unusual event. In recent years, the serial nature of comic books, appearing approximately once

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a month, has evolved into a longer form called the graphic novel, a form that looks like a comic book but is a much extended story that equals the storyline that we would usually find in six or ten comic issues.

Before looking at that history in the next chapter, let's identify the qualities of comics that make the genre recognizable. As mentioned above, comics are driven by artwork, usually a style of artwork that is broadly called cartoons, but can vary greatly. That style involves representing the world through line drawings that outline people, places, and things, first through pencil sketches and then finished with pen and black ink. The comic artist often incorporates a range of representations of reality that run from minimal details, usually associated with cartoons and less serious subjects such as the drawing of Matt Groening who originated *The Simpsons* and his early comic strips such as *Life Is Hell*, to realistic and surrealistic portrayals of reality that are highly detailed and stylized, usually associated with more adult and darker themes such as the artwork by Frank Miller, Todd McFarlane, or Jim Lee (the more contemporary artists of the comic book *type* we associate with classic comic book artists such as Jack Kirby and Will Eisner). The more realistic and surrealistic styles of superhero comic book artists typically exaggerate the body structures of the heroes and other people in the storylines; notable is the exaggerated and arguably sexist representation of female characters, such as Storm of X-Men fame.

Traditionally, comic books are also characterized by their coloring, originally the basic four-color process using black, magenta, cyan, and yellow, but more recently impacted by the coloring possibilities of computers. The distinct black outlining of the artwork and the vibrant colors are classic characteristics of comic book art, along with the muscular and exaggerated body types and movements of the people in those comics. Yet, the most distinct characteristic may be the use of panels in a series over several pages to tell a story. The series of storyboards or panels is driven by the artwork, but comic books also use brief segments of text and the classic dialog balloon to distinguish general narrative from the characters speaking.

Ultimately for teachers and students, coming to know comic books and graphic novels is best found by reading, reading, and rereading them. A wonderful meta-comic book is McCloud's (1993) *Understanding Comics*, which allows the reader to explore the nuances of the genre while reading the genre. Before moving on to a history of comic books and graphic novels, here are some terms (primarily unique to comics or, within comics, having a unique meaning) that help focus a coming to understand the forms:

- Penciller—the primary artist of sequential art who provides the rough drawings for a comic.
- Inker—a secondary artist who draws the final ink outlines of the artwork in comics.
- Colorist—person who adds the coloring to the artwork in a comic.
- Letterer—artists who places the dialogue and narrative in the panels of a comic (once done by hand, but computer-driven as well).
- Panel—usually an outlined box of varying sizes and shapes that define the frames of the sequential art that is comics.
- Dialogue (thought) balloons—the graphic oval with a directional arrow encompassing the lettered dialogue or thoughts of characters in a comic.

- Miscellaneous and even organic graphic signals and icons—comics and graphic novels depend on the reader to recognize lines around a character suggesting motion or the iconic squiggling lines above Spider-Man’s head when his Spidey-sense is activated. While some signals are relatively standard, these graphic messages are often organic, requiring the reader to decode them in the context of the comic itself.

While all of these characteristics are manipulated in many ways by different artists, most comic books share these qualities and this is why a comic book is a comic book. Now, within the world of comics and graphic novels, there is one remaining question: What is manga?

At the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, the resurrection of comics, spurred by film adaptations of comics (which I’ll address in chapters later in this book), was accompanied by a parallel boom in graphic novels and manga (and anime). These nuanced and culturally-bound genres of the larger genre called “comics” (yes, we often use the term “genre” for slightly different distinctions and broad categories) provide an ideal opportunity to understand comics/graphic novels as genres and the concept of genre itself.

Concurrent with the explosion in interest in comics, book stores and the internet responded to the demand by offering easy access to a product that used to be mainly the domain of small groups of fans and collectors (I bought comics in “drug stores,” our colloquial phrase for pharmacies, but was aware that a few comic book stores existed, although usually only in large cities). In chain bookstores now, entire sections are dedicated to comics/graphic novels, but in that same section those book stores denote manga and anime as well—with the manga section often dwarfing the graphic novels section.

McCloud (2006) acknowledges his own contact with manga in the 1980s; working at DC, he discovered a nearby Japanese bookstore where he made his find: “Almost every day, on my lunch hour, I’d rifle through their shelves ‘reading’ the pictures panel-by-panel, right to left, cover to cover” (p. 215). As his personal story reveals, manga is a Japanese comic book form that reads right-to-left, not left-to-right. At first glance, manga has almost all of the same superficial qualities as Western comics, but the form along with a parallel term, “anime,” is unique and it offers us an opportunity to challenge our perceptions of comics/graphic novels and manga itself.

Placing his discussion of manga within the mainstream dominance of superhero comics in the 1980s U. S., McCloud (2006) identifies eight qualities in manga that he felt distinguished it from American comics and came to influence the comic/graphic novel forms we know in the twenty-first century; these qualities include the following (p. 216):

- “Iconic characters”—Manga characters are usually drawn with simple outlines punctuated with distinct emotional expressions.
- “Genre maturity”—Manga includes, according to McCloud, a much broader and more sophisticated range of genres within the form than traditional superhero comics in the U. S.
- “Sense of place”—Details of the environment around the iconic characters are powerful in manga, creating “the ‘masking effect’” (McCloud, 1993, p. 43).

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As McCloud argues as well, manga often worked to include the reader more overtly in the stories than Western comic.

- “Character designs”—Manga incorporates archetypal characters that recur; as I will explore later, some of the patterns in manga helps the form to attract female readers in a way that U. S. superhero comics did not.
- “Wordless panels combined with aspect to aspect transitions”—Manga extends the boundaries, literally, of panel design in comics. Contemporary U. S. superhero comics, such as the artwork of J. H. Williams III, reflect the influence of manga on mainstream comics. This re-envisioning of panel design significantly challenges the reading of comics.
- “Small real world details”—The small details in the panels distinguish Japanese comics from mainstream comics, but *V for Vendetta* from the 1980s reflects a parallel concern for significant panel details that directly contribute to the meaning, mood, or character development of the story.
- “Subjective motion”—Mentioned above, manga is distinct from mainstream U. S. comics in its use of streaked lines to denote motion. Manga includes a more pronounced use of lines that gives the entire panel a feeling of movement, again pulling the reader into the action.
- “Emotionally expressive effects”—Manga significantly focuses on reinforcing the emotional context of the characters through a variety of techniques in each panel, but as noted above, the emotional expression of character’s faces were also important to the form.

While McCloud (2006) believes manga has impacted U. S. comics, and recognizes that the forms exist together now in popular culture, he argues that manga remains more connected to “the sense of audience participation” that is less significant in standard U. S. comics/graphic novels (p. 217). As well, manga has spurred the inevitable overlap of comic books, cartoons, and Internet comics—all of may still remain more distinct within manga than mainstream U. S. comics. The cultural aspect of the distinctions cannot be ignored either. McCloud notes that Japanese culture embraces manga and anime as forms for all ages and people, unlike the linger associations between comics and children in the U. S.

UNLOCKING GENRE—A QUEST, NOT A DESTINATION

During my 18 years as a high school ELA teacher, I made an important transition from imposing my authoritarian knowledge onto students—uncritically participating in the “banking concept” (Freire, 1993) of teaching and learning grounded in behaviorism—to constructivism and then to critical pedagogy, critical constructivism, and critical literacy. How I approached genre reflects that transition well, and here I want to offer an important warning about what a teacher does once that teacher has acquired some level of expertise concerning her or his awareness of genre, comics/graphic novels, and multiliteracies.

As an early career teacher, I spent a great deal of time telling my students the four characteristics of poetry, for example. I followed that by having them choose a poem (I thought having them choose a poem in this process was very progressive

of me) and then write an essay showing how the four characteristics I told them were demonstrated in the poem. Those essays were quite stilted, and in most ways lifeless, inaccurate, and mere drudgery for the students and me.

Although the result of a doctoral program and not gamma rays, my teaching experienced “a startling metamorphosis” not unlike Bruce Banner transforming into the Hulk (and I am purposefully mixing an allusion here to both the iconic TV show of the Marvel character, which changed “Bruce” to “David” for some reason and included the catch phrase, and the comic book). Once I came to understand and honor student-centered instruction, I changed my techniques. When I ventured into poetry, I asked students to turn to two pages I had chosen in their textbooks (one page included a poem, and the other, prose). I asked them to open and then immediately close those pages with only a glimpse of the text.

High school students, not surprisingly, were able to distinguish one as a poem and the other as prose—although they may not have the language or the nuance we eventually want them to exhibit in their own reading and writing. This student-centered start was designed to show the students what they knew in order to start on a journey revolving around a foundational question, What makes poetry *poetry*? Now let’s try something similar here. Who wrote the two poems below?

Buffalo Bill’s
 defunct
 who used to
 ride a watersmooth-silver
 stallion
 and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat

And,

Come slowly—Eden
 Lips unused to Thee—
 Bashful—sip thy Jessamines
 As the fainting Bee—

Considering the audience of this book, I imagine that regardless of whether or not any of us have read the exact poems above, we could identify e. e. cummings and Emily Dickinson because they have unique styles within the genre of poetry.

That stylistic nuance has a place within the comics genre as well. And here is where I begin a warning. First, let me return to my own evolution from comics collector and artist to writer and scholar.

McCloud (2006) acknowledges the typical starting point of mimicking a favorite comic artist, a pattern I experienced in my own life. In junior high when I started tracing comics—leading to collecting, reading and drawing free hand—I began developing my taste in art. When I drew free hand, I gravitated to the artists I admired, Sal Buscema, John Romita, Rich Buckler (interestingly I discovered as an adult that many considered him a mimic artist, himself without a distinct style). As an adult, I rediscovered artists I had found uninteresting as a youth, Barry Windsor-Smith, for example, who I rejected for John Buscema; thus, my paradigms for “good

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art” have evolved, and this is part of my warning: Our goals as teachers of literacy are not tied to fixed ends.

As I transitioned from comics and art to literary novels and becoming a writer, I reverted to the old pattern, mimicking the styles of J. D. Salinger, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and e. e. cummings. As with my art, in my youth I rejected Emily Dickinson, only to return to her as a young teacher and returning once again to mimicry in my own poetry as my poetic style grew from my seeking to understand the styles of cummings, James Dickey, and Dickinson.

Genre and sub-genres in comics/graphic novels, and manga, offer the same patterns and nuances as the more traditional literary genres, serving well to help students explore and refine their literacy through these forms. McCloud (2006) notes that “the superhero genre had its rules” (in other words, genre conventions), “but [Jack] Kirby [a foundational part of the Marvel revolution with Stan Lee to be explored in Chapter one] broke every one of those rules, and doing so, he saved the genre from itself (for a time, at least)” (p. 225). McCloud’s discussion of genre in the context of comics ends with an important argument for recognizing the organic nature of any genre along with our understanding of that genre, and the related sub-genres.

And, thus, my ultimate warning.

My argument for including and honoring the value of comics and graphic novels is not to reach some predetermined performance by students whereby we can show them two comics pages and have them label on “manga” and the other “U. S. superhero comics.” We are not working toward a multiple-choice test on the elements that make a comic, a comic.

Instead, we are adding to our rich literary experiences one more broad category of “text”—comics and graphic novels—because the richer the experiences our students have, the more sophisticated and nuanced their own literacy becomes. In fact, if we can stimulate debates about the nuances of comics, graphic novels, and manga along with their place within traditional views of literature among our students, that lively debate is more valuable than the conclusions any of us may reach.

This book, then, is intended as one part of any teacher’s journey to understanding comics/graphic novels, genre, and multiliteracies. But, I also encourage all readers of this book to dive into comics and graphic novels themselves, along with this book or alone, because a discussion about comics and graphic novels is never reading comics and graphic novels—just as McCloud (1993) notes that his drawing of a painting of a pipe is not a pipe (pp. 24–25).

CHALLENGING GENRES: COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

From the turn of the twentieth century until today, we have had comics in the form of comic strips, comic books, cartoons, and graphic novels as a part of popular culture, but the perception of the genre has primarily remained distorted toward comics being for children, or more directly for boys—and thus insignificant text. In Chapter One, “Comics and Graphic Novels: A Brief History of an ‘Arriviste Form,’” I will outline the history of comics and graphic novels from their beginnings as comic strips to the rise of graphic novels and the explosion of film adaptations of comics and graphic novels.

Chapter Two, “A Case for Comics and Graphic Novels: Taking Multiliteracies Seriously,” will explore reconsidering our perceptions of genre by focusing on the multiliteracies involved in reading comics and graphic novels. A case will be made for including comics and graphic novels in a variety of ways in ELA and other courses. Comics and graphic novels will be discussed as valuable genres themselves as well as companions to other more traditional texts (such as pairing graphic versions of texts with traditional texts). Further, I will challenge views that comics and graphic novels are works best suited primarily for boys and weak students, examining and reshaping our considerations of literacy related to gender and our deficit views of teaching and learning (especially as related to poor, young, and unsuccessful students).

Many people associate comic books with Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man—often because of the film versions of these comics. Chapter Three, “Comics Aren’t (Just) Funny...: Deconstructing Superhero Comics,” will detail the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the superhero sub-genre of comics and graphic novels. I will discuss the mythic power of superhero comics while acknowledging the sexist undertones that run through superhero conventions. This chapter will offer some specific uses of superhero comics, specifically studying Batman and Daredevil in the context of units of study exploring justice. As well, *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* will be used to deconstruct the superhero genre.

Particularly in the last few decades of the twentieth century, comics and graphic novels have grown beyond the classic superheroes. Chapter Four, “Beyond Men (and Women) in Tights: Graphic Novels as Literature,” considers comics and graphic novels outside the superhero genre—works such as *A History of Violence*, *Sin City*, *Locas*, *Palomar*, *A Contract with God*, *Ghost World*, and *American Splendor*. I will include as well graphic novels that are adapted from traditional texts (Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* and graphic versions of works by Franz Kafka, for example).

Comics and graphic novels experienced a boom in the 1980s followed by a decline in the 1990s due to market forces related to collecting. In the 2000s, the film adaptations of Spider-Man and Batman created a broader appeal of comic superheroes and the genres, along with a revitalization of comics and graphic novels. In Chapter Five, “From Panels to the Screen: Comics and Graphic Novels on Film,” I will present expanding our consideration of genre, literacy, and reading by studying both the comics/graphic novels and their film adaptations, including Batman films, Spider-Man films, *History of Violence*, *Sin City*, *I Am Legend*, *American Splendor*, *Ghost World*, and *Road to Perdition*.

While many associate comics and graphic novels with superheroes, the graphic novel form has evolved into a broader genre, including original graphic novels written specifically for young adults (YA) and children. Chapter Six, “Graphic Novels for Young Adults and Children,” will focus on the rise of YA and children’s graphic novels and their use in the classroom, works such as *American Born Chinese* and *The Arrival*.

The Conclusion, “Sequential Art...into the Future,” will outline the continuing struggles associated with infusing our literature study with comics and graphic novels. Those struggles include the influence of market forces on comic books, notably

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through film adaptations, and the linger issues related to gender in the genre. Finally, I will discuss graphic adaptations of scholarly works as a harbinger of the future of the genre.

Eggers (2000) makes an impassioned plea to value comics and graphic novels that speaks to my own appreciation of the genre expressed in the following chapters: “[W]e [should] look at this genre, where art and words are conceived together and inextricably interwoven, not as literary fiction’s half-wit cousin but as, more accurately, the mutant sister who can often do everything fiction can, and, just as often, more.”

ANNOTATED RESOURCE LIST

Carter, J. B. (Ed.). (2007). *Building literacy connection with graphic novels: Page by page, panel by panel*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

This edited volume includes ten practical chapters that help teachers implement graphic novels into the ELA curriculum. The chapters present arguments for incorporating graphic novels broadly along with describing some specific applications of the genre. “There is a graphic novel for virtually every learner in your English language arts classroom,” claims Carter (p. 1) in the introduction, and this sets the stage for a wide range of helpful chapters that any teacher should find useful when learning about comics and graphic novels or hoping to expand their use. See Carter’s related link for lesson plans: <http://www.readwritethink.org/about/bio/james-bucky-carter-201.html>

Cary, S. (2004). *Going graphic: Comics at work in the multilingual classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

“Superman made me a reader,” opens Cary (p. 1). Recognizing the gulf between school reading and his enjoyable, chosen reading, Cary offers a book-length look at integrating comics in the ELL classroom. Cary explains that the book explores using comics to enhance language development and content. This is a practical and informative book designed to support classroom teachers addressing ELL learners.

Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social forces*. New York: Routledge.

This work includes the foundational work by The London Group addressing multiliteracies along with a number of chapters looking at the implementation of the ideas in the seminal work over subsequent years.

Dyson, A. H. (1997). *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Dyson offers a book-length consideration of mining the literacy of children with children composing through the lens of superheroes. This work examines critical literacy, challenges our views of childhood and their literacy, and expands

ideas of children crafting and composing their own original works. Dyson situated her students in their worlds, acknowledging the importance of fantasy and popular culture in children's ways of knowing.

Eisner, W. (2008). *Comics and sequential art*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

Eisner is viewed as one of the masters of the comics field, and this is one of the primary works of the field as well. *Comics and Sequential Art* appeared first in 1985 and was followed by *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* and *Expressive Anatomy for Comics and Narrative*. This 2008 edition is part of a reissuing of all volumes with edits and greater concern taken for the quality of the artwork since the passing of Eisner. Eisner is credited with the term "sequential art," and this work is an excellent insider's view of the genre from one of the giants of the field. In the Foreword, Eisner states well his purpose: "This work is intended to consider and examine the unique aesthetics of sequential art as a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea" (p. xi).

———. (2008). *Graphic storytelling and visual narrative*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

Following his *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner explains, "In this work, I hope to deal with the mission and process of storytelling with graphics" (p. xi). While the first educational work on comics is possibly a sure-fire essential for anyone studying or teaching comics, this second volume may seem to be only for those wanting to write and create comics themselves. But I feel this second educational work by Eisner is very useful as we consider the craft of comics, suggesting how best to integrate comics and graphic novels in our classrooms as part of our quest to teach student to read like writers, mining any text for the craft that writers implement to raise the effectiveness of their expression.

Gorman, M. (2003). *Getting graphic! Using graphic novels to promote literacy with preteens and teens*. Worthington, OH: Linworth.

Gorman offers an introduction to comics and graphic novels as well as "a collection development tool for both school and public librarians" (p. xi). This book offers basic information on the genre along with a listing of a number of comics/graphic novels recommended for the classroom and libraries. Gorman also aids librarians in selecting, shelving, and maintaining a comics/graphic novels collection. A number of practical resources are included in the book.

Gravett, P. (2005). *Graphic novels: Everything you need to know*. New York: Collins Design.

Gravett, who has extensive experience within both the comics industry and mainstream publishing, offers an oversized and visually engaging work that introduces the reader to the graphic novel form by looking directly at 30 chosen works and a number of related graphic novels tied to the anchoring 30. Gravett

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offers excellent definitions, clarification, and historical context for his discussion. The book is divided into 13 chapters, most of which are sub-categories of graphic novels arranged by Gravett. Educators are well advised to read all graphic novels suggested, taking into account that Gravett makes little effort to explore whether or not works are suitable for children and young adults (Chapter 12, in fact, explores pornographic graphic novels). The “In Focus” and “Following On” elements of this work are ideal for educators, as well as enhancing the books value as a gateway into the graphic novel genre.

Groensteen, T. (2007). *The system of comics*. Trans. B. Beaty & N. Nguyen. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

The translators, in the Foreword, describe Groensteen’s work as “a groundbreaking analysis of the operation of the language of comics, offering the most important semiotic analysis of the medium to date” (p. vii). Groensteen offers a semiotic analysis, expanding the rigor, some believe, of Eisner’s and McCloud’s similar analyses of the genre. The translators do caution that English-language readers are likely unfamiliar with many of Groensteen’s examples drawn from European works. Groensteen concludes, “In approaching comics as a ‘system’ I wanted to signify that it constitutes an organic totality that associates a complex combination of elements, parameters, and multiple procedures” (p. 159).

Hajdu, D. (2008). *The ten-cent plague: The great comic-book scare and how it changed America*. New York: Picador.

Hajdu’s work is an extended history of the backlash against comics in the mid-twentieth century. This is a fascinating work about comics and their place in popular culture in the U. S. For anyone interested in the art form and how the country viewed (and still views) comics, this is an invaluable read. Few know about the impact of McCarthy Era dynamics on the comic industry and the people whose lives were changed forever, just as this era impacted Hollywood and political figures.

Kannenberg, Jr., G. (2008). *500 essential graphic novels: The ultimate guide*. New York: Collins Design.

This packed volume literally identifies the top 500 graphic novels for readers. It is well designed and practical, including a top ten for ten genres—adventure, non-fiction, crime mystery, fantasy, general fiction, horror, humor, science fiction, superheroes, and war. The reference section includes several very useful indexes, including categorizing the works by appropriate ages of readers, writers, artists, titles, and publishers. This is an outstanding resource for teachers and for the classroom as a resource for students who want to explore the genre further.

Klock, G. (2002). *How to read superhero comics and why*. New York: Continuum.

Klock explains that he is addressing what he calls a third movement in comics, after the Golden and Silver Ages. His book-length discussion looks at superhero comics in the context of psychology and literary analysis. He also

considers comics as an element of popular culture and cultural studies. In short, this is a discussion of taking superhero comics serious as intentional art, as a genre worthy of the analysis often reserved for traditional text only. See Fleming (2010) for a review of the book.

McCloud, S. (2006). *Making comics: Storytelling secrets of comics, manga and graphic novels*. New York: Harper Paperback.

McCloud has three outstanding books for helping anyone who reads, teaches, or creates comics and graphic novels. This is the third in the series, and here he continues his engaging look at comics, manga, and graphic novels by writing a graphic novel exploring the forms. *Making Comics* is focused primarily on those wanting to be comic book creators, but his accessible and sophisticated discussion is valuable to readers and teachers of the forms as well.

McCloud, S. (2000). *Reinventing comics: How imagination and technology are revolutionizing an art form*. New York: Harper Paperback.

Reinventing Comics is a sequel to McCloud's foundational *Understanding Comics*. He explains himself that this second work is simply a continuation of his own evolving musings about the genre and where the genre is heading. Like all of his three works, so far, this is a graphic novel about comics as a genre.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York: Harper Paperback.

This is McCloud's first and possibly most important work for teachers. Here, McCloud offers nine chapters that carefully introduce novices and veterans alike to the genre of comics. His work is both sophisticated and entertaining, making his work ideal for teachers preparing to teach and for student preparing to read and even create comics. Many, if not most, discussions of comics as a genre refer to McCloud's claims in this work.

Reynolds, R. (1992). *Super heroes: A modern mythology*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Reynolds explores the superhero as pop culture mythological types. In the opening, Reynolds defines the superhero by examining the creation of Superman and Batman. Next, Reynolds discusses the role of the costume in forming the mythology of the superhero. In the third chapter, he looks closely at Thor, Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman. The fourth chapter is very useful for teachers as Reynolds focuses on what he calls three key texts—*X-Men* from the 1970s and 1980s, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Watchmen*. Reynolds concludes by discussing the criticisms of the superhero genre that began to increase in the late 1980s into the early 1990s.

Rhoades, S. (2008a). *Comic books: How the industry works*. New York: Peter Lang USA.

Rhoades, a former executive and publisher at Marvel and executive in mainstream publications, writes an insider's view of the comic book industry.

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That said, this is slightly different than a discussion of the genre. As Rhoades notes, the industry is dominated by two publishers, DC and Marvel, and considering the industry has a distinction from considering the art—notably the power structures, the role of profit, and the influence of other media (such as film) on the comic industry itself: “Comic book publishing is an industry that started by accident in the early 1930s. Nearly eighty years later, comics have evolved from ‘throw-away escapism’ for kids into a multimillion-dollar business encompassing movies, television, music, toys—and, of course, publishing” (p. 3).

———. (2008b). *A complete history of American comic books*. New York: Peter Lang USA.

This volume by Rhoades is more directly valuable to educators than *Comic Books* above. Here, Rhoades provides a detailed and engaging history of the field of comics, but readers should understand that Rhoades skews this history toward the history of superhero comics primarily driven by DC and Marvel. This view of history is augmented by Gravett’s (2005) work above that acknowledges a broader range of sub-genres.

Rosenberg, R. S. (Ed.). (2008). *The psychology of superheroes: An unauthorized exploration*. Dallas, TX: Benbella Books, Inc.

“As an adult,” Rosenberg (2008) explains, “I saw that superhero stories are about morality and loyalty, about self-doubt and conviction of beliefs” (p. 1). This edited volume includes eighteen essays exploring how many well-known comic superhero characters and storylines “illuminate how superheroes reflect—or don’t reflect—what we have learned from psychology” (Rosenberg, p. 2).

Sheyhshhe, M. A. (2008). *Native Americans in comic books: A critical study*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers.

Acknowledging the social stigma associated with comic books, Sheyhshhe (2008) confesses, “I will be the first to admit that comics are a (not-so-secret) guilty pleasure of mine” (p. 1). This is an excellent and useful resource for examining how comic books portray Native Americans. Sheyhshhe concludes this study by explaining that he did not attempt to be exhaustive but “to give readers the tools to identify stereotypes and misrepresentations themselves” (p. 188).

Thomas, P. L. (2008). *Reading, learning, teaching Ralph Ellison*. New York: Peter Lang.

This volume is an introduction to the works of Ralph Ellison. But Chapter Five includes a section on incorporating comics and graphic novels along with works by Ellison. This discussion also addresses some of the genre considerations I am approaching in this book.

Varnum, R., & Gibbons, C. T. (2001). *The language of comics: Word and image*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

This volume includes ten essays that explore the interaction between words and images as forms of expression in the genre of comics. In the introduction, the editors explain the essays grew out of interest in McCloud (1994) as a focal point for arguing with and against the ideas expressed in *Understanding Comics*.

Wright, B. W. (2001). *Comic book nation: The transformation of youth culture in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

“Long before I became a historian, I read comic books—many comic books,” confesses Wright (p. ix). This look at the role of comics in the culture of the U. S. is an excellent companion to histories of comics, such as the work by Rhoades.

NOTES

- ¹ Portions of this section are adapted from my entry on comics in this publication: Thomas, P. L. (2010). Comics and graphic novels. [entry]. In S. R. Steinberg, M. Kehler, & L. Cornish (Eds.), *Boy Culture*, vol. 2 (pp. 319–328). Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press.

COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

A Brief History of an “Arriviste Art Form”¹

Writing about Ray Bradbury’s classic *Fahrenheit 451*, Boxer (2009) observes:

Think back to the original novel. Comic books are the only books shallow enough to go unburned, the only ones people are still allowed to read. Beatty, the fire chief, who seems to have loved books once and whom Bradbury has called “a darker side of me,” explains it all to the hero, Guy Montag, the reluctant fireman. When photography, movies, radio, and television came into their own, he says, books started to be “leveled down to a sort of pastepudding norm.” Burning them isn’t so tragic, he suggests, because they are already so degraded.

In this consideration of a graphic adaptation of Bradbury’s classic sci-fi novel, Boxer is concerned about the inherent *failure* of graphic novels to meet the high standards of the original novel:

Fast forward 56 years to a condensed, comic-book version of the very novel in which comic books and condensations are presented as pap. Surely this is black humor, a resigned joke about the imminent eclipse of books on paper by images, both digital and analog. Except that it isn’t. The graphic novel of *Fahrenheit 451*, with pictures by Tim Hamilton and a condensed text authorized by Bradbury himself, seems quite earnest.

The language and assumptions of Boxer’s critique of the graphic novel *Fahrenheit 451* reveal that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, comics and graphic novels still have much to overcome.

Here, I will offer a history of comics and graphic novels, along with incorporating how the genre has influenced and reflected American culture, pop culture, and adolescents for nearly a century. This chapter is intended as a synthesis of overlapping histories as well as a foundation for later arguments for the value of comics and graphic novels as a genre and for the value of the genre as teachable texts in classrooms settings. But my synthesis poses some problems that I want to address first.

Citing a broad historical overview is problematic for a scholarly work. In many cases, what constitutes general facts may be difficult to clarify. Further, all history is perspective. As Howard Zinn’s scholarship argued, any view of history is shaded by whose perspective the historian honors. For these reasons, I have chosen to focus primarily on three sources for my chapter—the history of comics written by Rhoades (2008b), who as a former publisher of Marvel Comics skews his discussion

to both superhero comics and Marvel; a social history of comics and their place in American culture by Wright (2001), which is an insightful historical work that is far more inclusive than Rhoades' narrow history; and my own knowledge of comics history, which is difficult to tease out from the works I have noted here because I have been a amateur historian of comics since about 1975 when I was 14. Where I directly and clearly depend on sources, I will cite directly, but I also must offer a general indebtedness to the work of Rhoades and Wright, along with other works I will include later, because reading the scholarship and histories of the field has contributed to my own expertise in too many ways to acknowledge directly.

And the history of comics and graphic novels is also a history of commerce—comics and graphic novels are for sale and those who produce them ultimately are impacted by the market. Chabon (2009) acknowledges that comics have wrestled with its identity within that market paradigm—“comics were widely viewed, even by those who adored them, as juvenile: the ultimate greasy kids' stuff” (p. 75). And in the quest for respect, the comics industry made “the effort to alter not just the medium itself,” Chabon explains, “but the public perception of the medium” (pp. 75–76).

As a result of the journey from “greasy kids' stuff” to adult readers (“the holy grail, the promised land”), an irony has arisen; Chabon (2009) argues that “the battle has now, in fact, been won,” the battle for respectability, but he also notes that in the span of time covering that battle “comics readership has declined” (p. 77). Here, Chabon begins to note that the history of comics is about more than economic realities—or the interplay of pop culture and the comics genre (Wright, 2001); it is about how a genre responds to specific audiences, notably children: “Children did not abandon comics; comics,” Chabon argues, “in their drive to attain respect and artistic accomplishment, abandoned children” (p. 79).

The history of comics is a history of “an arriviste art form,” Chabon (2009) explains, thus we are exploring a cultural view of a genre as well as a cultural view of children and adolescents in that the comics industry is often “ashamed of their beginnings” as something primarily for children (p. 80). But Chabon confronts this aspect of the history and growth of comics; he wants comics instead to return to its original audience, children. And his principles for this return offer a solid foundation for the discussion to follow about the history of comics.

To reconnect with and appreciate the original market of comics, children, Chabon (2009) first calls for “*tell[ing] stories that we would have liked as kids [emphasis in original]*” (p. 81). Next, Chabon asks for stories “involving mythology that is also accessible and comprehensible at any point of entry” (p. 81). His third principle endorses the value of “repetition with *variation [emphasis in original]*” (p. 81). And his fourth principle, to “blow their little minds,” reinforces a call for serious art that in some ways may seem to contradict his central premise—because doesn't the literature we traditionally bring into our classes fulfill his call?:

[B]ut a mind is blown when something that you always feared but knew to be impossible turns out to be true; when the world turns out to be far vaster, far more marvelous or malevolent than you ever dreamed; when you get proof that everything is connected to everything else, that everything you know is

wrong, that you are both the center of the universe and a tiny speck sailing off its nethermost edge. (pp. 81–82)

Ultimately, Chabon is asking us all to rethink genre broadly and comics and graphic novels narrowly along with our attitudes and assumptions about children and adolescents. He even asks for more children characters in comics, much like the conventions found in children’s literature.

So let’s turn to this “arriviste art form” for a history of a genre and the culture within which it was spawned.

THE CONTEXT OF HISTORY—HOW DO WE KNOW?

The history of comics is accompanied by a history of arguments about comics and about the history of comics. Internet searches reveal many overlapping discussions of how comics began and why we make distinctions among comic *strips*, comic *books*, and graphic novels. McCloud (1994) includes in his explanation of comics several musings in the beginning about the source of comics, about where the concept of communication with graphics started (along with when humans started communicating with graphics and text). Like McCloud, many consider hieroglyphic writing as the beginning of what we today see as comics, but sequential art, comics and graphic novels, are both an art medium or genre and a form of commerce.

The mixed nature of popular art and popular culture allow us ways in which we can look back at a history and make fairly neat divisions and draw relatively solid conclusions about what and why and how. Rhoades (2008b) acknowledges that comics may be traced to the mid-1800s—*The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* and *Journey to the Gold Diggins by Jeremiah Saddlebags*. But these roots are more about cartooning (the use of drawings to recreate the world, as distinct from using text to recreate the world) than the magazine format we associate with comic books (and the format we later associated with graphic novels, although this format is much less distinctive than the comic book).

Rhoades (2008b) adds “[c]omic books and jazz are often described as being the two uniquely original American art forms” (p. 3), although comics were in Europe before the official start in American in the 1930s. McCloud (1994) is less concerned with where comics began than with noting that the U. S. clearly provided the fertile ground needed for comics to blossom.

Here, I will use the periods designated by Rhoades in order to structure the discussion to follow. Rhoades (2008b, p. 6) discusses several attempts to establish the “ages” of comics history, but settles on these:

- Pre-1933 Victorian Age
- 1933–37 Platinum Age
- 1938–1955 Golden Age (including the sub-category Atom Age, 1946–1955)
- 1956–1970 Silver Age
- 1970–1985 Bronze Age
- 1986–1999 Modern Age (including the sub-categories Copper Age, 1986–1992, and Chromium Age, 1992–1999)
- 1999-present Postmodern Age

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Within each of the ages identified by Rhoades (2008b, pp. 227–229), he also outlines thirteen milestones, which I will expand upon throughout the rest of the chapter but list here for a frame of reference:

- The comic book format as a magazine folded and stapled in a 6 5/8 X 10 3/16 format (although comics are actually a bit smaller today than comics printed until the mid-1970s).
 - The formation of the two giants of the comic book industry, now named DC and Marvel, although the names went through various transformations over the years.
 - The superhero subgenre of comics.
 - The national attack on comics as a corrupting influence on children.
 - The Marvel revolution of comics led by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.
 - Direct marketing of comics to comic-focused specialty bookstores.
 - Comics shifting toward darker themes, topics, and characters, emerging as serious literature.
 - Comics experiencing the rise of intellectual property and branching out into other markets—toys, movies, etc.
 - Speculators creating a boom and bust in the comic market.
 - Comic writers and artists achieving start status and demanding more power and rights.
 - Marvel overcoming bankruptcy and the overall comics industry rebounding.
 - Comics achieving success in films.
 - Comics experiencing an expanded genre with graphic novels and manga.
- “[C]omic books are history,” Wright (2001) contends, and “[a]lthough [comics] are often grouped together with comic strips, the two mediums are not the same” (p. xiii). So we begin the history of comics in the 1930s with the format that is strikingly similar to the comic books most of us know today in the twenty-first century.

PLATINUM AGE (1930S)

The comic book, a self-contained magazine of sequential artwork, grew out of the 1896 publication by R. F. Outcault, *The Yellow Kid*. But Rhoades (2008b) recognizes that the genesis of comic books had a great deal to do with business and little to do with art: “It was just a quick way to make a buck, this reprinting the Sunday funnies” (p. 9). The comic book *format* originally contained collected and reprinted comic strips, contributing to the name “comic book” and some of the confusion today that leads to many people associating comic books with an insignificant genre that is primarily silly and funny. Comic strips as a form and the ability to create publications on newsprint and in mass quantities led to the first comic book, *Funnies on Parade*, the work of Maxwell C. Gaines who along with his son would become two of the most significant forces in the history of comic books: “In 1933, when Gaines devised the first four-color saddle stitched newsprint pamphlet, he invented the format that would become the standard for the comic book industry” (Rhoades, p. 10).

Rhoades (2008b) identifies Gaines establishing the format, sequential art, and four-color printing, but notes that these early products lacked the original work,

superheroes, and a prominent price on the cover—all of which are integral aspects of the contemporary conventions associated with comic books. Also, the association between comics and department stores and pharmacies began with Gaines, who initially put a price on the magazines and sold them directly at newsstands. Next, the market stepped in—and the format sprang up from several different entrepreneurs, including Donenfeld and Liebowitz founding the company that is now DC.

After the first milestone, the comic book format, Rhoades (2008b) details that the business transactions responsible for creating the comic book industry was a long series of coincidences and deals, again more about making money than anything else. The second milestone, the formation of the companies that would become DC and Marvel, evolved within a broad context ready for the comic book genre. Wright (2001) explains that the 1920s and 1930s were a popular culture of “pulp” magazines and genre writers, such as Edgar Rice Burroughs. Wright adds that Tarzan, Buck Rogers, Dick Tracy, Flash Gordon, and the Phantom established themselves in comic strips, suggesting the foundational heroes of comics to come.

From Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) to a number of scholarly considerations of comics and graphic novels (Hajdu, 2008; Rhoades, 2008b; Wright, 2001), we discover that the ground in which comics were born is an ethnic soil enriched by an undeniable American call to prosper. Many of the foundational people in the history of comics have immigrant backgrounds, entrepreneurial spirits, or both. And these cultural themes run parallel to the history of the genre, comic books.

GOLDEN AGE (LATE 1930S INTO THE 1950S)

Detective Comics # 1 hit stands in 1937, and this comic established the earliest beginnings of Detective Comics, later to be simply DC, the first major publisher of comic books. As will recur many decades later for Marvel, DC experienced early struggles with bankruptcy. After surviving bankruptcy, DC added *Action Comics*, which heralded the third milestone identified by Rhoades (2008b), the superhero genre of comic books.

From the late 1930s into the late 1940s, comic books experienced the Golden Age of comics, grounded by *Action Comics* #1, the introduction of Superman by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster. Superman was, in fact, the result of a rejected comic strip and would prove to be a powerful force within the field and within American culture—although Siegel and Schuster fought many years to retain their creative and financial rights to possibly the most recognized character ever invented in any fictional genre. As Rhoades (2008b) notes, “Most historians cite the 1938 appearance of Superman as the beginning of the Golden Age of Comics” (p. 18). Superman embodied the superhero who surpassed humans; he is an alien and represents the classic pattern in comic books of the dual persona—Superman the superhero and his alter-ego Clark Kent, nerdy and bumbling behind his only mask, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses.

The Superman myth and surrounding universe included many of the elements we associate with superheroes, but they also expose some of the most serious weaknesses

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found in comics. Lois Lane, for example, established “a protofeminist character of sorts,” but she “had few admirable qualities from a contemporary male perspective” (Wright, 2001, p. 9). With Lois Lane, comics created an icon of American pop culture, but failed to make any great strides toward the representation of women in literature. However, Wright recognizes Superman fitting into a broader context of American mythology:

Siegel and Shuster, however unconsciously, had created a brilliant twentieth-century variation on a classic American hero type. The most pervasive myth in American culture is that of the Western frontier hero, who resolves tensions between the wilderness and civilization while embodying the best virtues of both environments himself....[T]wentieth-century America demanded a superhero who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven, and anonymous mass society. (p. 10)

Superman’s adventures, Wright notes, also represented a significant tension that would continue within comics for decades—reflecting norms of society versus endorsing societal change through advocating positions that confront those norms. Superman’s early stories often showed him standing with the poor and those in need, and he endorsed the role of government in helping the poor. While Superman also seemed to represent traditional American values—possibly in simplistic and conventional ways—Wright adds,

Superman’s America was something of a paradox—a land where the virtue of the poor and the weak towered over that of the wealthy and powerful. Yet the common man could not expect to prevail on his own in this America, and neither could the progressive reformers who tried to fight for justice within the system. Only the righteous violence of Superman, it seemed, could relieve deep social problems—a tacit recognition that in American society it took some might to make right after all. (p. 13)

Superman proved to be not only a foundational character in the genre but also a blueprint for the political turmoil that would exist for creators of comics within the pages of a medium that relied on the market for survival.

Ultimately, this age was golden because during it comic books experienced simultaneously the success of foundational writers and artists in the field, the introduction and popularity of major characters, and enough financial success to start the momentum toward a genre that remains today, despite many bumps along the way. Succeeding somewhat outside the powerful structures of the early versions of DC and Marvel as comic book publishers, Will Eisner represents the importance of both the creative and economic value of comic books as genre, medium, and market.

Will Eisner (1917–2005) formed Eisner and Iger Studios with S. M. Iger in the 1930s (Wright, 2001, p. 6) and later created *The Spirit*. His own biography is essentially a parallel history to comics since he excelled as artist, writer, and advocate for comics as an art form and a business. “Back when I was learning to love comic books, Will Eisner was God,” writes Chabon (2009), and this praise may

not be hyperbole. Chabon compares Eisner to Orson Wells and argues that Eisner had the unique qualities of being both “labor and management. He was the talent and the guy who had to fire the talent” (p. 131). Similarly, Wright offers this praise:

Eisner seemed to take his comic book work more seriously than many of his peers, placing the Spirit in a gritty noir setting and developing unusually sophisticated characters and innovative sequential art techniques. Eisner’s path-breaking work on the Spirit proved to be a far greater influence on future comic book artists than on most of his own contemporaries, who continued to grind out formulaic superhero stories. (p. 19)

Possibly the most powerful parallel between Eisner’s career and the history of comics is the influence of the market on the quality and nature of the product—how commerce impacted what comics presented to its paying audience. “Sometimes it’s hard, trying to make art you know you can sell without feeling that you are selling out,” explains Chabon (2009). “But you had to eat,” he adds (p. 131). So Eisner’s career and comic books exploded out of the success of repackaged comic strips that often portrayed some of the worst racist and stereotypical images and ideas (Hajdu, 2008, pp. 9–10). And the result is that the earliest comics share with comics today both the best and worst the genre, and the culture, could offer.

Eisner was unique, however, when compared to many of the foundational people of comic books as a genre because he loved and appreciated the art form, resulting in his many educational and scholarly publications promoting and analyzing comic book creation as an art and craft (Eisner, 2008a, 2008b). As Rhoades (2008b) notes, many who made comics successful cared more about the financial benefits, and the earliest years were characterized by blatant copy-cat characters and gimmicks—although DC fought and won an early case to secure some creative rights for the companies (but not the actual people doing the creating) (pp. 22–25).

As the 1930s drew to a close, the success of Superman helped support a budding industry that attracted competition—some healthy and some dubious—and a significant crop of young creative people who would drive the comic book world for the remainder of the twentieth century. Some of the names that will recur throughout this history include Eisner, Siegel, Schuster, Carmine Infantino, Bob Kane, Jack Kirby, and Stan Lee.

“[I]n 1939, DC launched *Superman*, the first comic book title devoted to a single character,” notes Wright (2001, p. 9), and 1939 saw the publication of *Detective Comics* #27, the arrival of Bob Kane’s Batman: “*Detective Comics* signaled a new formula for comic books. Humor was giving way to crime-fighting” (p. 5). Batman shares with Superman the dual personas and the stylish cape, but Batman stands as unique since Bruce Wayne, the man behind Batman’s cowl, is a mere mortal, although he has tremendous financial resources and is driven by a dark desire to enact revenge because of the murder of his parents. The creation of Batman also represents the collaborative and often lost history of how comic characters and ideas are formed. Rhoades (2008b) details a much more complex story than “Batman was created by Bob Kane,” which is the industry line. Nonetheless, Batman soon stood beside Superman as a foundational and significant part of comic book history,

including the long and memorable list of villains and characters in the Batman mythology—the Joker, Robin, and a list too numerous to include here.

Batman certainly benefitted from Superman's success, but Batman was a unique creation, adding "a uniquely surreal quality" to the comic book genre (Wright, 2001, p. 17). Wright believes Batman was strongly influenced by the film industry, adding "the early Batman series had the kind of cutting-edge aesthetic qualities that made it the *Citizen Kane* of comic books" (p. 17). While Batman began as a more dark character than Superman, the Batman mythology experienced many shifts in tone over the years until the mid 1980s when Frank Miller returned the Caped Crusader to his place as a brooding vigilante.

Superman and Batman, along with a growing stable of superheroes—Flash, the Green Lantern, Wonder Woman (the first major female superhero), and Hawkman—would establish DC, under earlier names, as the powerhouse publisher in comics. DC would remain on top until the 1960s with the shift in the industry created by Marvel. The industry heralded sales of hundreds of thousands and even millions of copies of issues, often driven by association with Superman and Batman. And the boom included smaller publishers besides DC (Rhoades, 2008b).

In these early boom years, the ironic success story was "the bestselling superhero of that time was not Superman or Sub-Mariner or Plastic Man," notes Rhoades (2008b), "but a character in a red costume and cape who looked a lot like Fred MacMurray and was nicknamed 'the Big Red Cheese'" (p. 29). This was Captain Marvel, created by C. C. Beck and Bill Parker. Although Marvel's introduction of Peter Parker two decades later would be credited with acknowledging adolescents, Billy Batson, Captain Marvel's mortal double, was "'a kid who could take a shortcut to adulthood when he needed help with a serious problem'" (Goulart qtd. in Rhoades, p. 29).

By 1939 Superman had his own title, and the basic foundation of modern comic books had been established. Superman and Batman represent the idealistic good in Superman and the darkness in Batman, a superhero who has struggled with madness and his own demons. In 1939, the genesis of the next powerful publisher of comic books arrived in *Marvel Comics* #1, including Bill Everett's Prince Namor the Sub-Mariner (who resurfaced years later when Marvel Comics took over control of the industry from DC), the Human Torch, and the Angel. The success of this first issue at the company that would become Marvel allowed the owner, Martin Goodman, to hire some of the talent whose names are recognized today—Joe Simon, Jack Kirby, and Stan Lee.

When Timely (Marvel) decided to have two characters compete in *Marvel Mystery Comics* #8 and #9, this "represented the industry's first major crossover," a comic book standard today that is paralleled by many other gimmicks to boost sales and exploit reader dedication to particular characters (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 31). While this precursor to Marvel did not succeed financially as well as other comics publishers of the late 1930s and early 1940s—such as DC, Fawcett, and Quality—it did provide a launching pad for Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, who like Kirby (Jacob Kurtzberg), changed his name for his career, Lee having been born Stanley Martin Lieber.

The Golden Age of comics drew to a close by the mid-1940s. The era included the introduction of Batman's sidekick, Robin, in 1940; Captain America debuting in his own self-named comic in 1941, the first superhero with such an honor, from the team of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby; and the rise of Will Eisner, with *The Spirit*, and Jack Kirby as two of the giants of the field throughout most of the twentieth century. For example,

The first ten issues of *Captain American*—penciled by Kirby and inked by Simon—are legendary. Kirby's use of dynamic perspectives and cinematic technique exceeded previous boundaries of comic book art. The use of two-page center spreads was a visual device that impressed readers (and comics art historians). (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 34)

With success came turmoil, as was typical of the comics industry throughout the twentieth century. Simon and Kirby garnered success and expected commensurate pay, but when they discovered their "agreement...unheard of in comics at the time" (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 34) was being manipulated, and not in their favor, they left Timely (Marvel) for DC. This clash set up both a conflict between Kirby and Lee as well as launching Lee to the head of Timely at barely 19. Simon and Kirby brought many of their ideas to DC, only slightly revamped, while Lee established at Timely what would later be known as the Marvel Method, a collaborative approach to creating and producing comics (Rhoades, p. 36).

One significant pattern running through the history of comics is how comics reflected cultural norms and pushed against cultural norms. By WWII, comics had already reflected through superheroes American animosity toward (and stereotyping of) Germans (Nazis) and the Japanese. Captain America stood as a clear signal of this trend, but most characters and publishers integrated war elements into many superhero storylines: "Over at DC the comics were generally pro-intervention, while the All-American books were pro-isolation, and Timely was distinctly anti-Hitler" (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 37). Further, much of the talent itself went to war once America entered the fight, including Lee, Kirby, and Simon.

Comic books fed into much of the propaganda of the WWII era, reflecting some of the worst qualities in the earliest comic strips. Again, this may reflect the powers of the market more so than any failures of the genre—a pattern that will recur in the coming decades. But the war years also saw some of the standard elements of the comic book genre emerge—sidekicks for the main superheroes (Bucky for Captain America, for example) and superhero teams (such as the Justice Society of America) (Rhoades, 2008b, pp. 40–43).

The highly successful comics industry had more than superheroes, however. Archie Andrews appeared in 1941, and by 1945, MLJ comics had changed its name to Archie Comics. As well, the 1940s saw the rise of Max Gaines and his son William M. Gaines, with EC (once Educational Comics, but later Entertaining Comics). EC provided an important home for a growing interest in other comics genres—beyond superheroes—and for the birth of *Mad* magazine, which would eventually save EC and William Gaines as well as create one of the most important satire magazines in American pop culture, including its regular use of comics as part of its satire.

CHAPTER 1

Rhoades (2008b) explains that superhero comics experienced a lag in sales so comics sought again a way to attract readers and thus financial success: “Except for three enduring originals—Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman—superheroes had all but disappeared by 1952” (p. 47). Even with the decline of superhero comics, the introduction of Wonder Woman in 1941 established an important moment in the comic book genre. Wright (2001) explains that William Moulton Marston was not like his contemporaries as a comics creator, having a PhD from Harvard and an advertizing background. While the creation of Wonder Woman did represent the first major female superhero, her character and the stories themselves present readers and scholars of comics with many problems (particularly those with feminist concerns):

Marston’s stories often underscored the Victorian assumption that superior female virtues like compassion and empathy were best applied as a restraining influence on aggressive men, not as a means to female self-sufficiency.... Wonder Woman was rooted more in the gendered tradition of progressive social work than in modern notions of feminist self-fulfillment. (Wright, p. 21)

Instead of superhero comics, the market was flooded with highly successful genres, such as westerns, anthropomorphic animals (usually humorous), teen comics (such as Archie), science fiction, jungle comics, romance, war, crime, and horror (Rhoades, pp. 47–55). During the rise of comic books through the 1930s and 1940s, the superhero genre emerged and then waned, with a wide assortment of genres stepping in to help comic books maintain their place in American pop culture, but possibly more significantly in the lives of children and adolescents. That connection with the youth of America created comic books’ financial success, but also planted the seeds for what almost became the end of comics.

The birth and establishment of comics as a successful American genre in the popular culture also exposed a recurring pattern in that same American culture: Adults charging some aspect of popular culture with corrupting American youth. Wright (2001) examines the ideologies endorsed in the comics of the 1930s and 1940s and finds that comics often mixed messages. Comic books reflected a positive view of New Deal ideology, “rarely...questioned the integrity of the federal government or national political leaders,” and predated many mainstream American war sentiments (Wright, p. 24). But on 8 May 1940, Sterling North leveled a charge at comics that lingered throughout the twentieth century: Comics were low-literacy, even damaging the literacy of children, and as a result were simply “looting the piggy banks of children” (Wright, p. 27). Yet, Wright acknowledges that children and adolescents eagerly embraced comics as *for* them: “In a national culture forged by adults for adults, how refreshing it must have been for young people to discover a course of entertainment that spoke directly to them as independent consumers” (pp. 28–29).

The years of WWII continued to reveal the problems that were brewing for comic books in the context of the emerging youth culture in the U. S. While comics remained targeted at children and adolescents, service people were included in the flood of comics on the market. The war also caused a change in the comics work

force: “In 1942 the number of women working in the comic book field tripled” (Wright, 2001, p. 33). But these market changes could not cover the problems exposed by North so DC formed “an Editorial Advisory Board to independently advise and approve the content of all DC comic books so that they met ‘wholesome’ moral standards,” explains Wright (p. 33).

The comic book industry often mixed signals, but during the war, comics sought directly to align themselves with all that was baseball, hotdogs, apple pie, and thus all *American*. As Wright (2001) notes, “[c]omic books consistently portrayed anti-colonial rebellions as misguided threats to the peace and security enforced by Western imperialism” (p. 37). Although Wright identifies liberal politics running through many of the major creators of comics, overall, “comic books looked to unite American people behind their government for the purpose of waging war” (p. 43). While comics were bowing under the weight of market demands and the rising challenge to the moral integrity of the genre, the comic books themselves “[betray] some of the contradictions inherent in America’s wartime experience” (Wright, p. 55).

Comics expanded into other genres, as noted above, while the superhero genre waned, but publishers also began to produce comics explicitly labeled as “educational,” including comic adaptations of what people considered *serious* literature. These shifts were responses to the growing charges that comics were corrupting America’s youth. Yet, the claims against comics tended to focus on somewhat narrow views of poor tastes—which was often true in some of the horror, jungle, and crime genres of comics that were popular—while ignoring how often comics reflected many of the serious flaws inherent in American culture—racism, classism, sexism, and more: “Easily the most violent comic books available, the crime titles also ranked among the most misogynous,” explains Wright (2001, p. 83).

The popularity of comics and the fact that the popularity grew from the comic book industry responding to market demand combined to create the almost perfect storm for the fall of comics entirely. Dr. Fredric Wertham came onto the scene and created one of the most ironic and convoluted attacks on pop culture in American history.

COMICS AS SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT

That the history of comic books is a parallel history of America and American pop culture is possibly no better represented than during post-WWII and the McCarthy Era. The attacks on comic books as low art, as a corrupting influence on children, that began in the 1940s reached a fevered pitch by 1948 when Dr. Fredric Wertham leveled what was seen as a scientific charge against comics. Hajdu (2008) offers a book-length look at *The Ten-Cent Plague* and in his prologue draws this conclusion:

It is clear now that the hysteria over comic books was always about many things other than cartoons: about class and money and taste; about traditions and religions and biases rooted in time and place; about presidential politics; about the influence of a new medium called television; and about how art forms,

as well as people, grow up. The comic-book war was one of the first and hardest-fought conflicts between young people and their parents in America, and it seems clear, too, now, that it was worth the fight. (p. 7)

In both pure histories of comics and more narrow considerations of both comics within society and the view of teenagers at mid-twentieth century (Gilbert, 1986; Hajdu, 2008; Rhoades, 2008b; Wright, 2001), the comic book wars of the late 1940s and 1950s have received a tremendous amount of scholarly and popular attention. Quoting Wertham, Rhoades opens one chapter of his history of comics with, “Badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed—a strain on the young eyes and young nervous system—the effects of these pulp-paper nightmares is [*sic*] that of a violent stimulant” (p. 57). Possibly a bit tongue-in-cheek, Rhoades places this charge made during the Red Scare across from a full-page reprint of a double-sized *Tales from the Crypt* (#39) published the same year as Wertham’s damning book, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). That cover shows three young boys running from a knife-wielding fiend, with a face similar to a werewolf’s and the boys’ faces a perverse blend of horror and glee.

The powerful and wide-scale attack on comics as a corrupting influence on the youth of America, personified in the work of Wertham from the late 1940s into the 1950s, is identified as the fourth milestone on the history of comics by Rhoades (2008b). Rhoades notes that Wertham challenged comics for including graphic violence and claimed that comics incorporated covert homosexual messages. From Batman (and Robin) to Wonder Woman, Wertham argued that comics were veiled endorsements of homosexuality, along with a wide range of other corrupting influences on children. Wertham’s charges, supported by his professional credentials and the existing cultural hysteria of the McCarthy Era, led to the U. S. senate forming a subcommittee and EC receiving the brunt of the attack for their various genre comics that included some of the most popular and graphic titles. Rhoades explains that publishers united and to stem the tide against the industry “developed the Comic Codes Authority to censor their own content” (p. 63).

And as Rhoades (2008b) explains,

The ensuring Comics Code was described as “the most stringent code in existence for any communication media”—although Dr. Wertham described it as “inadequate.” A Comic Code Seal of Approval soon was appearing on the cover of virtually every comic book on newsstands. (p. 63)

The result of the code revealed the power of the market over any power of law. The publishers did not agree on the code, particularly EC, but over time, the seal appeared on virtually all comics, because newsstand would not display them otherwise, and the code stuck, resulting in the cancellation of many popular titles (most notably by EC who resisted the process) (Rhoades; Wright, 2001).

Gilbert (1986) places the debate over comics and their influence on teens within his *A Cycle of Outrage*, which explore America’s panic over juvenile delinquency in the 1950s, ironically a time period in the U. S. that has been popularly portrayed as a golden time some wish we could recapture. Gilbert recognizes that charges against comics were powerful in the context of mid-twentieth century

America: “Yet [Wertham’s] words struck fire in public opinion. They provided an articulate and coherent explanation for the rise of juvenile misbehavior” (p. 91). Not unusual in popular discourse, Wertham’s simplistic claims of *causation* instead of *correlation*—comic violence creating teen violence versus the two phenomena simply happening simultaneously—struck a cord with people because Wertham himself held a PhD and the message *seemed* accurate.

But charges against comics also included claims that the genre corrupted the literacy of children, as well as their moral character: “The comics even caused reading disabilities that he called ‘linear dyslexia’” (Gilbert, 1986, p. 92). Yet, ultimately, Wertham’s popular reception was challenged by other scientists since he conducted much of his research on children in a psychiatric clinic: “Inevitably, other psychologists, sociologists, and social workers faulted his material as impressionistic because it lacked the use of controlled situations or statistical comparisons” (Gilbert, p. 97). After Wertham’s 1948 charge against comics and before his sensational book in 1954, in fact, an entire issue of the *Journal of Educational Sociology* addressed comics and refuted Wertham (Gilbert; Wright, 2001).

Zorbaugh (1949a), in the opening Editorial for the December 1949 issue of *Journal of Educational Sociology*, acknowledges the importance of concern over literacy, but quickly offers a stern caution about the popular embracing of Wertham’s attack on comics: “But when action takes the form of unreasoning condemnation, the setting up of scapegoats, the burning of books and cries for censorship—however much they may be in the American tradition of violent controversy—there is cause for alarm” (p. 193). The journal followed with five considerations of Wertham’s charges and of comic books themselves within the larger concern for reading.

Thrasher (1949) opens the volume by rejecting claims of *single* causes for human violence and crime; then, he takes square aim at Wertham:

Most recent error of this type is that of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham who claims in effect that the comics are an important factor in causing juvenile delinquency. This extreme position which is not substantiated by any valid research, is not only contrary to considerable current psychiatric thinking, but also disregards tested research procedures which have discredited numerous previous monistic theories of delinquency causation. (p. 195)

Thrasher places Wertham’s claims in the context of several single causes identified in the field up until the late 1940s, including poverty and films. The argument Thrasher emphasizes is “[t]he behavior scientist has learned that the causes of anti-social behavior—like the causes of all behavior—are complex” (p. 200). Ultimately, Thrasher does focus directly on Wertham’s argument, concluding: “We may criticize Wertham’s conclusions on many grounds, but the major weakness of his position is that it is not supported by research data” (p. 201). Thrasher ends by suggesting that simplistic attacks on comics may in fact keep people from seriously considering the impact of parents and society on children.

“Are comics bad for children?” opens Frank (1949). This discussion looks at the wide range of responses to comics. First, Frank wonders if comics help or hinder “good reading tastes and interests in young readers,” acknowledging that librarians

are split on a verdict (p. 206). Next, Frank notes that teachers are divided on the value of comics in teaching children to read. Further, comics are considered for aesthetics, and Frank explains another range of those artists deploring comics and those seeing comics as “highly cultivated art in a special field” (p. 207). Comics also raise concerns about their impact on the actual eyesight of children, but Frank admits that even ophthalmologists disagree.

Frank (1949) then turns to a concern closer to Wertham’s main argument—the impact of comics on the psychological well being of children. While Frank provides a much more detailed discussion here than on the earlier topics, the evidence remained mixed, although Frank emphasizes that “[t]he question of *quantity* [emphasis in original] in comics-reading was stressed by several of those interviewed” (p. 210). Frank discounts the impact of comics alone creating juvenile delinquency, including a strong statement Dr. Mandel Sherman of the University of Chicago rejecting the causal relationship between comics and juvenile delinquency.

Frank (1949) ends the article by considering the value of reading comics, discussing the argument that comics are a waste of any child’s time better spent doing something more substantial. Frank argues for the possibility that almost anything done by a child that is valued *by the child* is no waste of time, leading to a few concluding comments lending support to allowing comics to remain a part of a child’s life:

Lastly, it goes without saying that a child who reacts to comics, or to anything else, with acts of violence or delinquent behavior, needs help entirely beside and beyond any scrutiny of his comics-reading. Whether his actions follow a pattern of something he has read, in the comics or in the works of Shakespeare, we need to search deeply for the springs of his behavior - not merely for something to blame it on.... Comics-reading can constitute one—but one among many—ways of satisfying these perfectly normal needs of childhood. (pp. 213, 214)

From North’s 1940 attack on comics to a similar refrain from Wertham in 1948, Schultz (1949) contextualizes the demonizing of comics by noting “the consensus [*sic*] of psychiatric opinion is at variance with Dr. Wertham on the possible effects of comics upon adolescent behavior failed to still his strident call for action” (p. 216). Schultz’s discussion turns to the rise in censorship, banning, and book burning that accompanied the charges against comics. The scope and intensity of book banning and censorship is well documented here, and disturbing, but Schultz recognizes the importance of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs organized national meeting that led to this: “Out of this meeting came the first breath of sanity and reason—the first recognition that bannings and burnings were not the solution” (p. 218). Schultz also recognizes the work of comic book publishers to self-regulate during the hysteria. Echoing Hajdu (2008), Schultz identifies the importance the debate over comics within the larger importance of free speech and the sanctity of text and art in American culture:

The danger of political censorship of course remains. But we are increasingly convinced that the comic book, strident, awkward and comparatively undeveloped as a medium for the communication of ideas and information can

and will be molded into a constructive force for entertainment and education in our society. We are increasingly convinced that the method by which this will be accomplished is in the realm of self-discipline or self-regulation. Thinking men and women will agree that in this direction lies a true and lasting solution. Censorship, bans, repressive legislation, and intemperate indictment of a whole industry for the sins of a few, can do naught but lead us down a dark and dangerous road from which there may be no returning. (p. 224)

Zorbaugh (1949b) shares the results of a study that examined the attitudes of parents toward comics and their children. The study is interesting as it distinguishes comic strips from comic books throughout the survey questions. The wealth of statistics in this study are a detailed snapshot of late 1940s America along with how parents view comic strips, comic books, reading, and children. Zorbaugh draws a few important conclusions. Criticism of comics was found to be complex, but targeted more at comic books than comic strips. Also, criticism of comic books tended toward comics perceived as not for children. “The strongest factor in determining adults’ attitudes is their own reading habits—the more comics the adult reads himself, the more likely he is to approve children reading comics,” explains Zorbaugh (p. 234). The study, Zorbaugh concludes, shows that on balance parents approve of comics, but that a debate does exist, as it should in “a healthy democracy” (p. 235).

Hutchinson (1949) details a significant aspect of the comic book debate, both in 1940s America and today—Should comics be integrated into the classroom setting? The answered offers by Hutchinson includes:

There should be harmony between the child’s on-going life activities and his experiences in the school—new learning always is a continuation or expansion of learning already possessed by the learner. The normal activities of children involve the same subject material that constitutes the school curriculum—geography, history, science, language and other academic areas are present in unorganized form in the day by day activities of children. Reading comics is a well nigh universal out-of-school activity. Instead of being rejected and divorced from school experience, might it not profitably be accepted and related to teaching and learning? (p. 236)

The study showed that comic *strips*, the basis of the study (not comic books), provided teachers with text useful for “each of the conventional school subjects, and for the more common classroom activities” (Hutchinson, p. 238). The study even identified 18 specific strips and their usefulness by appropriate grade levels. Overall, teachers’ experiences with comic strips were positive but not universally so.

While the scholarly and scientific fields pushed back at Wertham and other comic book denouncers, Wright (2001) shows that the popular charges remained powerful and even contradictory. The 1940s and 1950s represented many cultural shifts in the U. S. concerning children and the rise of the teenage demographic, both as an identifiable group and as a part of the larger free market (teens had more and more disposable income, thus they gained power of a kind). Yet, Wright explains that many of the ills found in teens during mid-twentieth century may have in fact

been more traceable to the consumer culture and to the influences of Dr. Benjamin Spock and other pop scientists (similar to Wertham) who began telling parents how to raise children and what problems existed.

But the attacks on comics included narrow views of literacy, intelligence, and class. Marya Mannes in the *New Republic* associated comics with low intelligence, weak literacy, and “the unsophisticated and poorly educated”—even paralleling the reading of comics with drug addiction (Wright, 2001, pp. 90–91). While the scapegoating of comics raged, Wright notes that many strange alliances were formed. Notably, Wertham was a social liberal who found himself supported by cultural conservatives. And as Wright suggests, some of Wertham’s criticisms went unnoticed: “For if his critiques had located the problem of juvenile delinquency in the consumer economy that made comic books possible, he would have found a popular audience far less receptive to his arguments” (p. 107).

One powerful irony was that while the public was condemning comics as corrupting American youth, virtually no one considered the norms that comics were endorsing, norms that today would be viewed as racist, classist, and sexist. Wright (2001) details the rise of romance comics, notably by Simon and Kirby, and the comics’ promotion of the domestic wife who needed a husband and family to be complete. Further, these same comics suggested “[m]en, on the other hand, needed and deserved their independence” (Wright, p. 131). Yet, these stereotypes were never identified in the complaints against the influence of comics.

Underneath the rise in popularity of comics and the backlash against the evolving genre was a political struggle. Wright (2001) notes that many of the creators of comic books were themselves liberal in their ideology while trying to produce a product for an increasingly conservative American culture at mid-twentieth century. Wright adds that many at EC were producing comics far ahead of the cultural conscience; EC was also one of the few publishers to resist the comics code. Harvey Kurtzman is identified as the “conscience of EC,” and he would later shift his political ideology over to *Mad*, which integrated the comics format with social satire (Wright, pp. 143, 146–147).

According to Wright (2001), 1956 signaled the end to the attack on comics, and a new era for the genre was about to happen. Concern over comics was replaced by attacks on movies, TV, and rock-and-roll. For society, the 1950s were a time for teens to assert themselves as a power block of consumers. For comics, the 1950s were a time when the Comics Code appeared to save the industry, but as Wright notes: “The code had saved the industry from public indignation and perhaps even legislated regulation, but what would now save the industry from the code?” (p. 179).

SILVER AGE (MID-1950S TO 1970)

Tracing the distinction between “golden” and “silver” to a letter written to *Justice League of America* #42, Rhoades (2008b) identifies Wertham’s 1954 book as the end of the Golden Age of comics and “September 1956 when DC’s editor in chief Julius Schwartz revived the superhero genre” as the beginning of the Silver Age (p. 70). Rhoades adds, however, that DC’s “revitalizing the genre” was overshadowed ultimately by Marvels’ surge to the top of the industry (p. 70).

The Silver Age of comics saw the rise of a new publisher controlling the industry, Marvel, after DC's publication of *Showcase #4*, re-introducing the Flash, reinvigorated comic books as a genre. Carmine Infantino and Gardner Fox resurrected the Flash, establishing a pattern that would repeat over the next decades each time DC and Marvel felt their position in the industry was in jeopardy. DC's other changes included Green Lantern, Hawkman, the Atom, and the Justice League of America (formerly the Justice Society of America). The boost in the superhero genre was also helped by the success of Superman on TV (Rhoades, 2008b).

The early 1960s also included successful comic genres and titles other than superheroes. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Josie and the Pussycats* debuted in 1962 and 1963 respectively. Gil Kane and other creators in the industry were beginning to influence comics, and many would join artists and writers from the Golden Age to form an expanding field of artists that would start to demand more respect and power in the coming decades. While comics felt revitalized with the threat of Wertham behind, the new challenge to the place of comics in the lives of teens and children was TV, but many publishers began to adapt TV character and shows into comics (Rhoades, 2008b).

EC and a number of other comics publishers—those beside DC and Marvel (who also struggled before flourishing)—found themselves in financial flux throughout the late 1950s. The sought after talent in the industry also struggled through this period, including Jack Kirby and Joe Simon. Kirby and Simon held some lucrative contracts, but felt they were often cheated for their work in Archie, romance titles, and other non-superhero comics.

1958 held an important moment for comics—*Strange Worlds #1* by the creative team of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby; this set in motion the Marvel Age of comics that anchored the second wave of comics popularity:

Kirby decided to make monsters the star of the show. *Strange Worlds #1* (December 1958) was Kirby's first Marvel monster work—and his first joint effort with Stan Lee. Together, they produced bizarre monsters for titles such as *Tales to Astonish*, *Tales of Suspense*, and *Journey into Mystery*. (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 77)

But Lee and Kirby's *The Fantastic Four #1* stood as Rhoades fifth milestone in comics history, "a new kind of superhero" (p. 78):

Despite the fact that the four protagonists of *Fantastic Four* were a stretchable man, and invisible woman, a human torch, and a muscled mound of clay, these characters were beleaguered by everyday problems. They bickered, they worried about money, they behaved like...a family. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby had unknowingly invented a new kind of superhero, a more vulnerable character with human failings—the same traits teenagers could identify with! (p. 79)

Also original to Lee and Kirby's *Fantastic Four* was "interlocking stories" in contrast to each issue being a self-contained story, the norm of the Golden Age. Marvel was also the first comics publisher to develop the *universe* concept that connected not

only stories but also the entire body of characters and story lines throughout the publisher's offerings (Rhoades).

Kirby and Lee's next success was the Incredible Hulk. One of the most noted moments in comic book history, *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (the introduction of the Amazing Spider-Man from the minds and artwork of Lee, Kirby, and Steve Ditko), almost never happened despite Lee's argument for the character. Like the Fantastic Four, the Spider-Man narrative offered a character teens could identify with, a teen superhero (ironically part of the reason, in fact, Lee had trouble selling the idea to Marvel's publisher).

The 1960s and the Silver Age of comics would belong to Marvel Comics with the Avengers, the X-Men, Sgt. Fury, and a growing list of popular and unique superhero comics. The stories were becoming more sophisticated—clearly not intended only for children—and even the creative process was innovative at Marvel Comics where Lee refined a collaborative process to include more power for the artists, providing many comic writers and artists valuable training ground within the growing industry. But the collaborative process also had its downside since some of the foundational creative minds of the Silver Age still argue over who and how many of the top characters of the comics world were created—notably a long-standing debate over the creation of Spider-Man (Rhoades, 2008b).

No historians of the field of comics disagree, however, that the Silver Age established two of the most important people in the comics world—Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, both of whom began in the Golden Age, changed their names, and found their lasting fame cemented in the Marvel Universe. Their overlapping careers, however, has a tragic downside that included a long-standing feud that lasted until Kirby's death in 1994, when Lee felt uncertain if he should attend the funeral (Rhoades, 2008b).

As the comics industry giant, DC, faltered, Marvel redefined the industry with flawed superheroes combining the *super* with the *human* in ways that no DC characters did. But, Rhoades (2008b) notes, DC eventually caught on, and "DC's editor Julius Schwartz presided over drastic changes made to a number of its comic book characters, including Batman in 1964's *Detective Comics* #327" and work by Infantino (p. 88). Rhoades adds that this new rendition of Batman inspired the successful TV Batman of the late 1960s.

Another star at Marvel, Jim Steranko, made his mark with *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Steranko represented a shift, although slow, toward stars in the comics industry, stars who drove the sales of comics as much or more as the content and characters in the comics themselves. Along with the growth of talent at Marvel, Lee proved himself to be an excellent salesman and promoter of his line and brand—creating nicknames for the staff, a fan club, and extended messages in each comic from Lee and other staff. These personal touches went far to move Marvel to the head of the comics industry, leaving DC to play catch up by mimicking Marvel's moves.

Warren Publishing gave rise to horror comics including werewolves and vampires. These comics also were ideal stages for other powerful writers and artists—Frank Frazetta, Neal Adams, Gray Morrow, Archie Goodwin, and Joe Orlando. Marvel

followed suit with *Tomb of Dracula*, *Man-Thing*, *Brother Voodoo*, and *Epic Illustrated* while DC added *Swamp Thing* “as well as pitting Superman against the occasional werewolf or vampire” (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 90).

Another marketing maneuver that also contributed to the artistic quality of comics was DC’s move to making Infantino the cover editor and having Neal Adams draw a number of their covers (Rhoades, 2008b). These productive years for Marvel and a revitalized DC also represented the continuing manipulation of the companies by the change in owners and absorbing of comics publishers by each other and by companies outside the industry. Rhoades also explains that fanzines emerged in the 1960s to reinforce the fan-base of superheroes and comics publishers. The world of the fan and collector would increasingly decide the fate of the comics business and genre, supplanting the role of children and teens as simple consumers of a product.

Underground and independent comics found a footing in the 1960s and 1970s beside the giants DC and Marvel: “The spelling ‘comix’ was adopted to differentiate these publications from mainstream comics. The notion of comic books outside the mainstream was suggested by the headline ‘Comics Go Underground’ on the October 1954 cover of *Mad*” (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 95). Robert Crumb represented a growing fan base and critical appreciation for comics outside the mainstream, signaling another evolution in the comics industry—what many would call another step toward comics growing up.

Despite the innovation of Marvel Comics, such as the rise of African-American characters beginning with the Black Panther in 1966, and the response of DC to Marvel’s success, the Silver Age drew to an end. Rhoades (2008b) identifies several pivotal events that signal the close to this important era in comics history—Kirby parting with Lee and Marvel in 1970, DC editor changes, Batman representing the rise of darker superheroes, Gwen Stacy’s death in *Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (1973), the X-Men being revised in 1975, and the return of horror comics.

The eras of the comic book industry also paralleled popular culture in the U.S. Wright (2001) describes that parallel between the transitions in American culture and the shift from the Golden Age to the Silver Age in comics:

Between 1956 and 1967, an American Cold War consensus engulfed American culture, cracked, and then disintegrated amidst the movement for civil rights, dissent over the Vietnam War, and a youthful rebellion against a variety of authorities and cultural norms. As comic book makers negotiated the often conflicting pressures of self-censorship, political culture, and market demands, a compromise emerged in reluctant superheroes who struggled with the confusion and ambivalent consequences of their own power. (p. 180)

DC stumbled some at the top of the comics industry, but Wright characterizes DC as “the image of affluent America” from the 1950s into the 1960s—with the mainstream comics continuing “to reinforce traditional gender and genre expectations” and to portray “[i]ndividualism and nonconformity” as “equated with criminal activity” (pp. 184, 185).

Some of the cracks in the norms maintained in mainstream comics were found in smaller publishers, such as Dell who started the first comic connected with

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Vietnam in 1962, *Jungle War Stories* (Wright, 2001). Another smaller publisher, Charlton, also joined the Vietnam trend in the 1960s. Along with DC, Dell and Charlton, according to Wright, “seemed determined to assure parents that comic book publishers could act *in loco parentis* to inculcate appropriate values in children” (p. 199). The conservative nature of the comics industry was soon to be shaken out of its complacency by the more radical 1960s, and Wright notes that the comics genre was late to follow the rise of a new adolescent culture as represented by the success of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951 (p. 200).

The Marvel revolution slipped into a void left by the more conservative approaches of DC and other publishers (except some of the progressive work mentioned earlier from EC). The Thing of the Fantastic Four, for example, matched the growing sense of alienation and angst among the 1960s youth, and this was replicated soon by Marvel with Spider-Man. Further, creations from Marvel explored and reconstructed powerful myths of the broader culture:

The Fantastic Four, and the Thing in particular, reworked the formula for comic book superheroes. These were heroes who reconciled the competing imperatives of individualism and communal responsibility. Although the concept was new to comic books, such character types were actually well grounded in American pop culture, since American audiences had historically shown a marked preference for reluctant heroes who defend the community while maintaining a personal distance from society. The classic archetype, of course, is the Western frontier hero, existing on the border between civilization and the wilderness and championing the best qualities of both. (Wright, 2001, p. 205)

These themes and archetypes of narratives were reinforced in the comics genre by the artistic innovations of Kirby and Steve Ditko.

The mainstream canon of literary fiction had opened its doors to Salinger’s angst fiction and even Kurt Vonnegut’s science fiction (Thomas, 2006) throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. Comics followed, although a bit behind its more prestigious literary parent, with sci-fi monster superheroes like Marvel’s Hulk, whose story portrayed “Cold War preoccupations and scientific progress gone horribly wrong” (Wright, 2001, p. 209).

The tension between comic conventions and the growing teen culture that rejected norms was captured in Marvel’s Spider-Man. Wright (2001) notes that Spider-Man’s story included an interesting and unique superhero but also offered young readers Peter Parker, “the first ‘average’ comic book character who was as interesting as his costumed alter-ego” (p. 212).

“Marvel’s introduction of ambiguity into the vocabulary of the comic book superhero,” explains Wright (2001), “fused the disorientation of adolescence and the anxieties of Cold War culture into a compelling narrative formula” (p. 215). The Marvel Universe soon exploded when the formula, themes, and characters matched the changing culture of America in the 1960s—adding Thor, Dr. Strange, Iron Man, X-Men, Daredevil, Captain America, and the Sub-Mariner (nearly all recognizable characters even in the first decade of the twenty-first century).

Lee's impact was powerful, as noted above. Comics grew up as an art form—Lee “instituted a permanent space for creative credits” in each comic book issue, for example—but Marvel's new radical approaches meant the publisher had “to strike an antiestablishment pose without appearing political” (Wright, 2001, pp. 218, 219). Marvel confronted “intolerance and bigotry” with the Black Panther and the X-Men, but “did little to advance feminism,” a failure also found at DC (Wright, pp. 219, 220). The move toward a more radical comic book was often cloaked and self-contradictory, but comics soon became cool and even hip, as demonstrated by popular media noting the interest in comics at college campuses (Wright, p. 223).

In short, comics did begin to expand its thematic range, and they benefitted from broader arguments for the value of all pop art, as personified in Andy Warhol. The black-and-white era of the 1950s was being replaced by an acknowledgement of relative values, and comics reflected the shift, notably at Marvel (Wright, 2001). In the Silver Age, ironically, comics appeared to grow up by acknowledging the social change in its target audience, teens.

BRONZE AGE (1970 TO MID-1980S)

The maturation of comics as a genre had young talent to thank as the 1960s drew to a close, just as another crop of young talent did as the Bronze Age closed in the mid-1980s. Whitman (2001) credits DC for investing in Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams, who shifted comic topics to social issues through a revamping of the Green Arrow and Green Lantern. Whitman explains that “O'Neil had been deeply impressed with the work of authors like Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe. He wondered if something like their ‘New Journalism’ could be accomplished in superhero comic books” (p. 227).

With revisions to the Green Arrow and Green Lantern, O'Neil and Adams created something akin to CNN's *Crossfire*, only in the pages of comic books addressing “racism, poverty, political corruption, the ‘generation gap,’ the plight of Native Americans, pollution, overpopulation, and religious cults” (Wright, 2001, p. 227). The plots included ideological arguments between the superheroes with the Green Arrow on the left and the Green Lantern on the right. Wright notes that mainstream media—*New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsweek*—“all cited *Green Lantern* as evidence that comic books were ‘growing up’ by tackling contemporary issues and concerns” (p. 227).

The Bronze Age in some ways embodied a shift in the people who drove the industry as many historians of comics see the break up of Lee and Kirby as the turning point between eras. Rhoades (2008b) identifies some of the new talent—Adams, Bernie Wrightson, Steve Englehart, Gerry Conway, Mike Kaluta, and Mike Ploog—and the resurgence of superheroes, concern for social issues, another wave of horror comics, and the “onslaught of ‘nonsuperhero heroes’ such as Conan, Kamandi, Swamp Thing, and Dracula” as the defining aspects of the Bronze Age (p. 100).

The Lee/Kirby split meant that Kirby fled to Marvel's rival DC with Infantino hoping Kirby would help DC recover from the punch Marvel landed in the comics battle over dominance in the industry. Kirby was given total creative power, and

he began his *Fourth World* work: “However, Kirby’s *Fourth World* saga was told with a complexity that exceeded what comic readers were accustomed to. Sales were poor, and as a result the books were discontinued in 1973” (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 101).

Lee thrived at Marvel while Kirby eventually left DC to return to Marvel. Lee’s role as a creator decreased as he moved to president and advocate for Marvel and comics, spending much of his energy in the 1970s making public appearances and talks, especially on college campuses. Lee’s writing did play one significant role, however, in the Bronze Age when he challenged the Comics Code in 1971 by “writing a three-issue story arc for *Amazing Spider-Man* # 96–98 that illustrated the dangers of drug abuse”—no less at the request of the federal government (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 103).

When Marvel and Lee challenged the Comics Code with no repercussions and even critical praise, the Bronze Age saw the door opened for a resurgence in horror comics, ironically including the work of Marv Wolfman on Marvel’s *Tomb of Dracula*. But the industry also experienced the influx of other genres as well—martial arts series (bolstered by TV shows and the star power of Bruce Lee), for example. Rhoades (2008b) explains, however, that the comics industry was contracting: “By 1974, there were only six comic book publishers left—the fewest since 1936,” meaning the industry had to make more changes and moves in order to survive and even thrive (p. 106).

Survive and thrive came in the form of revive:

With the publication in 1975 of a one-shot called *Giant-Size X-Men* # 1, Marvel Comics successfully revived the series about a team of mutant superheroes. After a half decade’s hiatus, writer Len Wein and artist Dave Cockrum conceived a story that linked the old X-Men team with a new one that Professor Charles Xavier assembles in a mutant rescue effort. (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 107)

The giant issue led to *Uncanny X-Men* and a huge success for mutant comics from the 1970s into the 1980s. Chris Claremont’s work on the X-Men title is credited with a major part of this success. From that success was spawned Wolverine and ultimately many years later a highly successful transition to film by the X-Men.

A possible paper shortage and a Marvel boom—Rhoades (2008b) paints a bleak picture for DC in the mid-1970s. Infantino, as publisher, attempted to recreate the stable of main titles at DC and to match Marvel, but he also raised the cover price to 25 cents: “DC tried to attract readers by adding more pages, releasing more titles. This growth strategy was heralded as the ‘DC Explosion’” (Rhoades, p. 108). DC, though, fired Infantino and hired Jenette Kahn, who struggled during the volatile years that saw DC drop titles and stagger under the weight of Marvel. Another important moment for DC in the 1970s was a call by Neal Adams for DC “to recognize Joe Schuster and Jerry Siegel as the creators of Superman”—signaling the maturity of comics as a genre that recognized the creators of the art form and not just workers within a popular industry (Rhoades, p. 111).

Marvel gained power but theirs was no less a volatile workspace with the hiring of Jim Shooter, in his 20s, as editor in chief. When Marvel ignored more experienced

staff, they moved to DC who was eager to regain its place in the industry—although Shooter had proved to be quite successful making Marvel ““a juggernaut that commanded close to 70 percent of the comic book market at its peak”” (Roy Thomas qtd. in Rhoades, 2008b, p. 112). Part of DC’s coming success included Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman, both from England. Gaiman gained notoriety with his *The Sandman*, now treasured as a series of graphic novels, and Moore moved to the top of the field with *Swamp Thing*, *V for Vendetta*, and *Watchmen* (today considered a foundational graphic novel). Grant Morrison and Warren Ellis also crossed the ocean for comics work and made similar strong impacts on the industry and DC (Rhoades, p. 112).

Milestone six from Rhoades (2008b) identifies the move to the Direct Market for saving the comics industry as all publishers saw sales eroding by the early 1980s despite the many creative gains of the genre. Comic book stores gained power over sales, replacing pharmacies, thus comic collectors also experienced more control over the field. As Rhoades notes, “The good news and bad news—these comic book stores provided a highly targeted buying audience but at the same time tended to marginalize comics in the public eye” (p. 115). Comic book specialty stores bolstered the industry, but it shifted significantly the audience and redefined the genre. Comics stores were not as accessible or friendly to children and parents as the neighborhood pharmacy had been, and Rhoades explains that many children in the 1990s and later discovered comics only through Saturday morning cartoons and other entertainment, making comics the secondary interest.

While the comic book giants and dwindling minor publishers struggled with profits and distribution, comics became more and more something to be collected—and even a commodity that may be an investment. Once again, the boost in interest and sales would hold the seeds of failure as well. However, DC and Marvel did produce significant ideas in the early 1980s—Marvel’s *Secret Wars* and DC’s *Crises on Infinite Earths*. Comics were about big ideas, creating buzz, and making comics collectable. The result, though, was trouble for publishers and the powers within those publishers, notably Jim Shooter at Marvel (Rhoades, 2008b).

The Bronze Age drew to a close due to the always-present concern over profit, but it also included shifting power among the people running the publishers. Dark Horse rose up as an independent comics publisher and Archie Comics held its ground as Marvel started its journey of being shuffled from owner to owner.

The tumultuous 1970s and early 1980s for the comics industry mirrored the broader culture of the U.S. and America’s youth. Wright (2001) identifies DC’s Green Lantern/Green Arrow comics and Marvel’s Silver Surfer as some of the evidence that the content of comics deserved recognition and praise; they also were connecting with the rebellious spirit in teens and young adults: “Times had changed to such an extent that comic books now garnered praise in the media for questioning old assumptions and challenging established authorities instead of endorsing traditional American values” (pp. 233–234).

Spider-Man worked to fit his liberal leanings into campus and social protests; Batman included parallels to the Weathermen; “[a]lienated superheroes like the Hulk and the Silver Surfer especially empathized with African Americans”; and the

Falcon, an African American superhero, joined Captain America (Wright, 2001, p. 237). Marvel titles including Daredevil, Iron Man, and even Marv Wolfman's *Werewolf by Night* explored controversial social and political issues into the 1970s. But the mix of politics and superheroes didn't translate into good marketing. "Some politically inclined writers like Steve Gerber, Steve Englehart, and Bill Mantlo did continue," Wright explains, "to address social issues in their comic books," such as Gerber's *Howard the Duck* (p. 245).

A wide range of attempts in the comics industry during the Bronze Age experimented with race, gender, war, poverty, and other serious topics. In American society, "[i]ntrospection, existentialism, and narcissism became the marketable commodities in youth entertainment," and Wright (2001) sees this cultural shift fueling the move of comics into a fan-driven genre, one supported by readers who were also collectors (p. 251).

Concurrent with the business ups and downs of the Bronze Age, there existed a creative flux as well. With the call by Adams to acknowledge the creators of Superman and the dependence by Marvel and DC on young talent, comics were moving toward a new era in comic book artists as stars: "The new emphasis on the direct market and the extension of creative incentives helped to create a comic book star system" (Wright, 2001, p. 262). Chris Claremont and John Byrne stood as new stars through their hugely successful X-Men run, with Byrne admitting he focused his work to match the Reagan years' rise of conservative ideologies (Wright).

Another star was Frank Miller, who worked with Klaus Janson to reboot Marvel's Daredevil: "Frank Miller spearheaded a loose movement among comic book writers in the 1980s who worked to deconstruct superheroes while revitalizing them in the process" (Wright, 2001, p. 267). Outside the world of DC and Marvel, another star, Howard Chaykin, emerged with his satirical *American Flagg!*.

Chabon (2009), writing about Chaykin, notes: "In a popular medium that needs to label everyone a journeyman hack or flaming genius god—like the world of comic book art—Howard Chaykin is something else: a craftsman, an artisan of pop" (p. 85). For Chabon, Chaykin represented another important development in the comics genre. Chaykin embodied "[t]he pop artisan [who] operates within the received formulas," thus genre conventions, and who "is haunted by a vision of pop perfection: heartbreaking beauty that moves units" (pp. 86, 87). The craft of Chaykin as embodied in *American Flagg!* confronted and expanded the broader sci-fi genre of traditional fiction, film, and comics/graphic novels: "Other comics creators had written or drawn the American dystopia; Howard Chaykin went and built one," argues Chabon (p. 89). This praise of Chaykin parallels a similar critical acclaim given Margaret Atwood for her *Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel published in the mid-1980s.

Yezbick (2009) notes that Chaykin both incorporates a wide range of subgenres in comics while also satirizing and expanding those conventions—thus Chaykin's *American Flagg!* predated the postmodern shift that would occur in the comics genre through the rise of the graphic novel, specifically in the critical and popular success of Moore's *Watchmen* and Miller's Batman works. Chaykin's craft also gives us insight into the power of the market and large comics publishers like DC

and Marvel; while Moore and Miller received accolades and helped move comics into a higher level of respect, Chaykin remained on the edges and is often ignored except by those within the industry, explains Yezbick, adding that Chaykin also suffers the consequences of genre:

On top of these historical factors, *American Flagg!* was never as marketable as either the *Dark Knight* or *Watchmen*, simply because it eschews the sacred cash cow of American comic-books, the superhero. Miller's crotchety Batman and Moore's outlaw vigilantes were more easily recognizable as comic-book properties because they were superheroes, and therefore, more effectively exploitable within pre-established markets. It becomes much harder, by comparison, to conceptually pigeonhole or commercially appraise the viability of *American Flagg!*'s remediated palimpsest of dystopic Sci Fi, Brechtian comedy, haute pornography, Noir mystery, Classical Hollywood glamour, and "profoundly patriotic" social satire (Chaykin qt. in Schweier). Looking backward, Chaykin recalls that "the audience for comics today is much less interested in these complex themes" (Chaykin in Fary "Part One").

Yet, despite Chaykin's position on the outskirts of the genre, his work confirms that comics have viable artists who consider the creation of comics a *craft*, as argued by Eisner much of his career. The end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Modern Age were fertile ground for this rise in craft, again coinciding with the rise of the graphic novel from Eisner, Chaykin, Miller, and Moore—and many others. Yezbick (2009) explains that Chaykin offers readers a complex and often self-contradictory array of ideologies—often in his use of controversial images and conventions that lead some to label him a chauvinist (among other criticisms):

Chaykin's career before and after *American Flagg!* has continually evinced his conspicuously intelligent, and often un-popular attention to the contradictions and "observed realities" of diverse, realistic gender identities within pulp and comic-book contexts (Epstein). His characters remain "pastiche and fantasies," but their actions and mannerisms, tastes and allegiances, are all clearly keyed to emphasize their authority, agency, and authenticity *vis a vis* inherently fraudulent or hypocritical systems of governance, coercion, and consumption thriving on the shallow thrills and comforts of Presentism (Chaykin qt. in Doane).

Further, Yezbick (2009) identifies that Chaykin expands not only the genre of comics but also the *reading* of comics through Chaykin's purposeful considerations of both page and panel layouts along with challenging and conforming to conventional views of sex:

In developing these overburdened page designs, Chaykin followed a rigorous set of aesthetic rules and narrative restraints that pertain especially to depictions of sexuality and sexual activity (Erickson 73). For the entirety of *Flagg!*'s run and in much of his later work, Chaykin repeatedly emphasizes how he always "had a fun time drawing sex" (Fingerroth 5). Yet, his creative decision to eschew any explicit nudity or intercourse in all the erotic material produced by himself,

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his assistants, or his collaborators on *Flagg!* represents another Chaykin-esque remediation of the classical codes of popular entertainment.

Comics matured in the 1980s in both content and approaches to that content through the medium of sequential art, but many of the leaders of the field were keenly aware, like the rebellious Chaykin, of the power and the dangers of conventions and popular expectations.

Ultimately, Chaykin and the maturation of comics represent for academic and scholarly purposes a chance to show readers and students the craft in a genre. As Yezbick (2009) explains,

Most critics cite Chaykin's heady blend of plot, porn, and pop mythology as the defining defiant theme that made the series "a landmark in comics history, and one of the most iconoclastic and dynamic titles of the 1980s, if not of all time" (Doane).

Chaykin represents the power of purpose and craft—Chaykin talks often of his revision process, attention to detail, and high standards—that makes any genre valuable.

The Modern Age would be indebted to Chaykin, Chabon (2009) explains, because the graphic novel movement—including work by Frank Miller and Alan Moore—found commercial and critical success built on craft established by Chaykin. Thus, the fertile ground created by the rise of the comic book creator as "craftsman, an artisan of pop" ushered in the Modern Age.

MODERN AGE (1986 TO 1999)

"Frank Miller and Howard Chaykin expanded the literary possibilities of the superhero genre," argues Wright (2001), "but it was an Englishman named Alan Moore who produced what was arguably the magnum opus of superhero comic books" (p. 271). The Modern Age began with the rise in star power and the evolution of the graphic novel as a companion genre to comic books. Wright notes Moore's *The Watchmen* and *Batman: The Killing Joke* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* as successful though violent forces in the turning point between eras.

Rhoades (2008b) is ambivalent about making a distinction between the Bronze Age and the Modern Age, but also recognizes Moore's and Miller's role in making 1986 a convenient spot to identify the comic world changing: "These two phenomena had another profound impact on the American comic book industry: they encouraged publishers to shift their comics to a 'darker' tone, often described as 'grim and gritty'" (p. 125). Now comics were literature—Rhoades' seventh milestone in the history of comics—including *Batman: Year One* and "A Death in the Family" (Robin's death by Joker in the *Batman* series) at DC and similar violent trends at Marvel.

Outside the mainstream and the superhero subgenre, Art Spiegelman introduced his "memoir in the guise of a graphic novel recounting his father's struggle to survive the Holocaust" in 1986 as well (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 126). The Marvel innovation of

the 1960s to continue storylines over several issues of a title was finding a new incarnation as the graphic novel. Publishers soon discovered that this longer form of sequential art had marketability. Marvel and DC found that reprinting storylines from the monthly comics titles as graphic novels was viable for both readers and collectors. As well, *Maus* “won a Pulitzer Prize Special Award in 1992, the first comic book to do so” (Rhoades, p. 127).

Part of comic books’ growing pains included milestones eight and nine, as defined by Rhoades (2008b)—comics as intellectual property and the speculators’ impact on the comics industry. Because the publishers manipulated direct marking in order to fuel sales and ignored the essential aspect of collecting rare items (that value is directly correlated with rarity) by flooding the market with high runs of popular issues and instigating gimmicks like variant covers, “[t]he speculator market reached its high point in the early 1990s, then collapsed between 1993 and 1997” (Rhoades, p. 129). Cover prices rose and titles expanded, creating a hobby that was too expensive for the target audience, teens and children, to manage even though fans had some of the best work to admire in the history of the genre.

Wright (2001) identifies the good and bad of the power of fandom and influential comics creators in Marvel’s promoting Spider-Man by handing over the anchor hero of the company to Todd McFarlane (p. 279). Comics experienced a damaging manipulation of the market by speculators and publishers, but the “rock stars” who were at the center of the mess became the names and faces of the genre: “Artists Todd McFarlane, Rob Liefeld, and Jim Lee, writers Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore, and writer-artist Frank Miller became very well known, with dedicated fans who followed their work closely” (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 131).

The power some talent gained through the main two publishers, Marvel and DC, helped the rise of independent labels, such as Image Comics; McFarlane created his own comic hero, Spawn, and his own comic books and line of toys along with Jim Lee, Marc Silvestri and other Marvel artists with Image. Rhoades (2008b) calls this uprising by star artists and writers milestone ten in the history of comics: “Thus, Image Comics launched in 1992, using the star power of its owners/creators [McFarlane, Liefeld, Lee, Silvestri, Jim Valentino, Erik Larsen, and Whilce Portacio] to instantly become the biggest competitor to Marvel and DC in thirty years” (p. 133).

The shuffling of talent and the power of gimmicks to drive sales included DC comics killing Superman in 1992, only to bring him back in relatively short time. The comics market crumbled with the formation of Image and the death and resurrection of Superman: “‘Frankly, I view that particular marketing event as being the greatest catastrophe to strike the world of comics since the Kefauver Senate hearings of 1995,’ spurred by Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*; “‘in my opinion the “Death of Superman” promotion inadvertently exposed to the general public... the “Ponzi Scheme” reality of the market for recent back issue comics” (Chuck Rozanski qtd. in Rhoades, 2008b, p. 136).

The crumbling comics industry experienced a number of business, marketing, and creative ventures to survive. An assortment of alternative comics and imprints such as DC’s Vertigo appeared during the 1990s, while Marvel and DC continued

to battle as well as absorb other publishers. Rhoades (2008b) explains that the struggles all converged into one of the biggest problems to hit comics in its history—“The battle for ownership of Marvel was never about superheroes or fans” (p. 150).

Comics started somewhat by accident when entrepreneurs sought to make easy money from reprinting comic strips, and the 1940s and 1950s came very close to ending the genre from claims that comics were corrupting America’s youth. But the powerful rise of Marvel in the 1960s and 1970s appeared to establish comics as not only a respectable genre, but also a profitable commodity for publishers and collectors. When Marvel slid toward bankruptcy, many felt the end of comics near. Wright (2001) postulates:

Comic books are losing their audience not because they have failed to keep up with changes in American culture but because American culture has finally caught up with them....America at the turn of the twenty-first century has a pervasive consumer culture based largely on the perpetuation of adolescence....In a media culture preoccupied with youth, commercials for investment firms look like music videos, televised sporting events look and sound like video games, and network political coverage can sound like the plot for an X-rated film. Is there a place for comic books in an America that has become a comic book parody of itself? (p. 284)

Rhoades (2008b) looks closely at what he calls the “comic wars,” noting that “[f]or [Ron] Perelman it was never about the comics; it was about the money” (p. 150). And at this critical moment for the comic genre, the power of business was poised to end the status and even existence of Marvel, if not the entire comic book industry. Because films featuring Batman had proved successful, the business world was beginning to look at comics differently, including Perelman. Marvel began to mix with the collectable cards, stickers, other publications, and toys—all with questionable financial moves. The result was “Marvel’s debt was at that time ‘more than the entire comics industry’s sales in 1997 combined’” (Rhoades, p. 153).

A perfect storm of the worst kind began to develop when Major League Baseball went on strike in 1994, impacting baseball card collecting, and the comics boom soon imploded on itself due to overproduction and misrepresenting the collecting dynamic. In December of 1996, Marvel filed for bankruptcy. Rhoades (2008b), who was running Marvel through this turmoil, continued to claim all was well, including Marvel’s publishing of its titles. With the filing of bankruptcy, Perelman left with a significant profit and a new board was formed, hoping to save the company.

By 1997, the “takeover was completed,” and “Perelman and Icahn lost this war,” leaving Ike Perlmutter and Avi Arad in control (Rhoades, 2008b, p. 161). And here Rhoades declares Marvel surviving bankruptcy as the eleventh milestone in comics history. Yet, the Modern Age should not be reduced to the comics war. The Modern Age was the time of Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Alan Moore’s *The Watchmen* (1986), and Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman*. The graphic novel also soon contributed to the movie industry, spurred by Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s *V for Vendetta*, Alan Moore’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Miller’s *Sin City*, Miller’s *300*, and John Wagner and Vince Locke’s *A History of Violence*.

POSTMODERN AGE (1999 TO PRESENT)—WHAT'S NEXT?

The bankruptcy by Marvel had led to releasing Stan Lee from a lifetime contract, although he was doing little directly with the company. Ironically, Lee did work briefly for DC, *Just Imagine Stan Lee Creating....* The Postmodern Age of comics moved into the twenty-first century with Lee making a return to Marvel, and the once-powerful cast of rock star comic creators saw varying degrees of success and failure, along with Image producing crossovers with nearly all of the publishers at the time.

While the comics industry continued to fight and experiment with gimmicks and nearly anything to reconnect with their audience, Rhoades (2008b) and many others saw movies as the ultimate savior of comics, leading it to be Rhoades' milestone twelve in comics history. X-Men, Spider-Man, and Batman saw significant financial and critical success, while Daredevil, the Hulk, Iron Man, and even Superman (after the initial success with Superman films) fared less well but helped maintain the momentum of comics-to-film that remain at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

In 2003, Marvel implemented their own code, oddly enough as Marvel was bold enough in the early 1970s to snub their noses at the Comics Code from the 1950s. But comics and their graphic novel lines were becoming more and more a wide range of works intended for children, teens, and adults. Marvel still struggled with leadership even as their properties flourished in film. But as the financial and business elements continued to evolve, so did the comics genre, leading to the boost in interest in graphic novels and manga (the Japanese genre of comics)—Rhoades' (2008b) thirteenth milestone in the history of comics.

The industry in the first decade of 2000 saw more comic book standards—including the death of Bruce Wayne, Batman's alter-ego, and Captain America, again—but also included some important developments that appear to have solidified the genre for many years to come. Graphic novels and manga filled large sections of chain bookstores, and comics as a genre continues to develop and evolve, including a novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by Michael Chabon, that fictionalizes the early days of comics and spawned several graphic novels about the Escapist.

The first decade of the twenty-first century revealed a comic book world often paralleling the many patterns I have identified in the previous decades of its history, but those patterns also stood beside some significant shifts. DC once again killed a superhero—Bruce Wayne—but gave that tried-and-true (though tiring) a twist: Batman survived because the first Robin, Dick Grayson, was convinced by the superhero community that the world could not lose Batman, and the Batman myth. Of course, the storyline leaves room for Bruce Wayne to return (and he did), and the entire gimmick included a large number of crossovers—Batman appearing in other titles, the entire Batman universe springing up in short-run or one-shot titles—and reprints in graphic novel form.

Subsequently, DC sought a bump in sales by handing the long-running *Detective Comics* to Batwoman, driven by the work of Greg Rucka and popular artist J. H. Williams III. The focus on Batwoman also included a gamble—her

CHAPTER 1

character is gay. This creative and marketing pattern by DC held all that is good and all that is questionable about the comics industry as we move into the twenty-first century.

In this first decade, comics/graphic novels are also found at national conventions for teachers, prominently in a successful TV series (*The Big Bang Theory*), and in the growing displays at bookstores. The history of comics is alive and relatively well in 2010. Wright (2001), writing about the importance of comics and superheroes, notably the New Yorker Spider-Man, in the post-9/11 era, offers a wish with which I concur:

Can comic books continue to balance escapism and relevance in this frightening post-9-11 world? Will superheroes still hold the power to stir our imaginations and inspire our dreams? I hope so. For we need them now more than ever. (p. 293)

So I turn to Chapter Two, to make a case for reading, teaching, and studying comics and graphic novels as serious forms of an enduring American genre.

NOTES

- ¹ Portions of this section are adapted from my entry on comics in this publication: Thomas, P. L. (2010). Comics and graphic novels. [entry]. In S. R. Steinberg, M. Kehler, & L. Cornish (Eds.), *Boy Culture*, vol. 2 (pp. 319–328). Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press.

A CASE FOR COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

Taking Multiliteracies Seriously

“*The world told* is a different world to *the world shown* [emphasis in original],” argues Kress (2003, p. 1). And while this argument is situated in a larger discussion of literacy in the twenty-first century dominated by ever-changing and expanding media, it is an apt focus for my discussion of comics and graphic novels, which combine *the world told* with *the world shown*. Kress opens his book-length consideration of literacy in a new media age with a foundational comment that also serves us well here as we consider a case for comics and graphic novels in the literature offerings of ELA classrooms:

It is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological and economic factors. Two distinct yet related factors deserve to be particularly highlighted. These are, on the one hand, the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen. These two together are producing a revolution in the users and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating at every level and in every domain. Together they raise two questions: what is the likely future of literacy, and what are the likely larger-level social and cultural effects of that change? (p. 1)

The arguments offered by Kress, I feel, support my argument that we have missed the value of comics/graphic novels by ignoring and even belittling them throughout much of the last eighty years as well as the need to include comics/graphic novels in the expanding view of literature and literacy that faces our students.

As I noted in the last chapter, Will Eisner (1917–2005) influenced the comic book genre for many decades from their beginnings as repackaged comic strips (where he began publishing his art as a teen) to his comic book years as the creator of *The Spirit* to his significant graphic novel work in the late 1970s as the form developed and finally to his last years when he became both a scholar and advocate for the comic book and graphic novel genres. He started producing his books about the field and craft of comics in the mid-1980s and continued to revise them until his death.

In the first chapter to *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner (2008a) opens his discussion by detailing the transition comics have experienced both in the quality of the genre itself and the quality of the comic books and graphic novels as printed products, concluding: “Comics continue to grow as a valid form of reading” (p. 1).

Here, Eisner merges the evolving views of “literacy” and “reading” that are expressed by Kress (2003) and are at the heart of my chapter to follow, a case for comics and graphic novels as valuable genres in and of themselves as well as valuable texts for classrooms.

“Comics can be ‘read’ in a wider sense that that term is commonly applied,” Eisner (2008a, p. 1) explains, noting the interplay of text and graphics that constitute the “text” of sequential art. Citing author Tom Wolf, Eisner establishes a premise about comics that fits well into sophisticated considerations of reading among literacy scholars:

The format of comics presents a montage of both words and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g., perspective, symmetry, line) and the regimens of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of a graphic novel is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit. (p. 2)

While unlikely that Eisner knew of the work of Rosenblatt (1995), his awareness of the complexity of reading and interpreting many types of abstract symbols parallels Rosenblatt’s arguments against mechanical views of interpreting text.

Eisner (2008a) recognized that communication depends on symbolism shared between a writer and a reader—with comics the writing thus including art and text. While I will explore next the misconceptions about comics as a credible genre, I want to emphasize here that many people believe the interplay between art and text to be *easier* than text-only reading. To me, scholarship such as Eisner’s refutes that claim. Briefly, let’s consider how sequential art is in fact complex reading.

Reading sequential art involves managing a recursive set of signals, including how to decipher the *sequence* of the “text” included in panels that range from highly organized (read left to right and then top to bottom) to full spreads that abandon the standard panels. The text involved in sequential art includes dialogue and thought balloons as well as a wide variety of words, such as onomatopoeia, included in the panels and across panels. Other graphic signals are also common, such as lettering that reflects the message (dripping blood lettering in horror comics, for example) or manipulation of dialogue balloons to reflect mood. Of course, the art itself conveys meaning with facial expressions, body movement, backgrounds (specific works of art are reproduced in the panels of *V for Vendetta*, for example), and both the amount or absence of details. Another powerful way meaning is conveyed in sequential art is the coloring technique (or the lack of color in the many black and white comics that parallel the use of black and white in *serious* films). All of these aspects of comics and graphic novels are reflected in the credit given the collaborative nature of sequential art with writers, artists, inkers, letterers, and colorists now named in the opening of each comic and graphic novel.

As Eisner’s creative and scholarly works show, comics and graphic novels are sophisticated genres that deserve respect and a place in classroom as works worthy to enjoy and study. And that will be the focus of this chapter, beginning with confronting some of the common negative charges against comics and graphic novels.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH COMICS?

First, there is a story that most people know well—and because they read it in school.

It revolves around a couple. This couple is visited by the woman's cousin. Almost immediately, the husband takes the cousin to meet his lover—a rather bold move. The cousin also soon witnesses his cousin's husband slapping that lover rather violently during an argument. Next the cousin finds himself living near his cousin's long-lost love, but no need to worry because the two are soon reunited.

Much of this story involves the couple committing adultery against each other while the cousin watches the whole sordid affair. In a violent and ironic accident, the wife runs over and kills her husband's lover; the death is gruesome as we learn the lover's breast is torn off when the wife runs her over and races away.

I failed to mention that this lover left dead in the road is also married, and her husband is driven mad by the death of his wife and sets out to shoot her lover; you see, the murderous car is recognizable to everyone in the area. While the distraught husband knows his wife's lover, he is persuaded by that lover that he is not the person driving the car and killing his wife, but that the car does in fact belong, again ironically, to his own wife's lover.

This leads to the distraught husband shooting the recently reunited lover while he lounges in his pool. The couple who has been living lives of adultery throughout this story walk away from the whole violent and illicit affair unscathed. The kind of violent and immoral rot that destroys the minds of teens?

Well, no. This is a fair summary of much of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, called by many the greatest American novel and a staple of the reading curriculum of schools across the U. S. Now, of course, this simplified outline of the plot and characters of the novel unfairly removes the craft of the novel—and supplants the power of the novel to *challenge* the norms it represents (specifically the American Dream).

But my point here is to open our consideration of the value of comics as a genre by asking us all to be realistic about *any* genre, *any* art form. I, in fact, am no fan of *The Great Gatsby*, preferring Hemingway's style to Fitzgerald's, but I do recognize the craft of the work and the weight of its themes. We must, however, not ignore that the women in the novel are called "girls" repeatedly, for example, revealing that all works of art are bound by the context of the writer's culture—and we often choose to ignore some flaws of those things canonized while using those same flaws to keep the marginalized, marginalized.

And before I consider the common complaints about comics/graphic novels, I want to note that all genres, all art, all pop culture, and all media have varying degrees of quality. Many people before me have posed the 5% rule—that about 5% of any art form is high quality with all the rest being questionable. Comics are no different, but should not be discounted because *some* of it is flawed.

In *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know*, Gravett (2005) titles his Chapter One "Things to Hate about Comics." While it may seem odd for Gravett and me to open a defense of comics and graphic novels by exploring everything people say negative about the genre, I think we are justified, as I will show, because most

of the criticism of comics/graphic novels is based on misconceptions and distortions. Before Gravett explores his “hate” list, he refers to John Updike and Goethe for their apparent support of the possibility that “‘a doubly talented artists might not arise and create a comic-strip novel masterpiece’” (John Updike qtd. in Gravett, p. 8). Next, he joins many other scholars and historians of comics by crediting Eisner’s role in the maturation of the comics genre through the rise of the graphic novel, adding that “Campbell says this movement’s goal is ‘to take the form of the comic book, which has become an embarrassment, and raise it to a more ambitious and meaningful level’” (p. 9).

“Embarrassment”? Yes, many people view comics as some low form of entertainment, something childish. As I mentioned in the last chapter, a sit-com of the late 2000’s, *The Big Bang Theory*, portrays the lives of four college professors—three with PhDs—and their stereotypically less-bright-but-attractive neighbor. The show is typical sit-com fare with the main characters all more-or-less reduced to a few standard characteristics, including an India-born character whose character occasionally crosses the lines of cultural sensitivity. In short, the show is popular but riddled with issues that *should* raise our concern in many of the ways people demonize comics, but rarely cast at other forms of popular entertainment and art. As well, again as I noted before, the four college professors are primarily portrayed as nerds, and the key aspects of their boyish nerdiness is their fanatical concern for sci-fi—and comics.

But is the genre of comics/graphic novels truly as simplistic and childish as we have culturally portrayed it? And why do we associate the genre with humor and mainly silliness? Let’s look at some of those criticisms, using Gravett (2005) as a structure for “things to hate about comics.”

“For some people,” Gravett (2005) begins, “opening a graphic novel is like bursting into a cacophonous party where everyone seems to be speaking at once” (p. 10). The problem? Dialogue and thought balloons—the usually oval graphics including what the characters say and think with the directional “tails pointing down to each speaker’s mouth” hovering in most of the panels throughout a comic/graphic novel (Gravett, p. 10). Of course, the balloons in comics are the conventional equivalent to quote marks with some version of “said” in traditional texts using dialogue. I have trouble believing balloons are any more difficult to navigate than the mind-numbing adverbs that lace dialogue in Fitzgerald or the maze of dialogue in Hemingway in which he omits who is speaking, leaving many readers tracking backward until they can decipher who is speaking. In short, learning to read dialogue balloons is no different than coming to terms with dialogue conventions in traditional text—especially when you open a story by James Joyce and he eschews quote marks for dashes.

Marjane Satrapi (qtd. in Gravett, 2005) explains, “‘Like anything new, you have to cultivate your interest. It’s like in opera. You have to go a couple of times to appreciate it’” (p. 10). And the complaint about dialogue balloons leads directly into a second reason to hate comics—they are hard to read. The variety of *text* in comics/graphic novels—including traditional text, artworks, and graphic signals—and the placement of all of those signals require readers to become acquainted with

how to read a comic. This is the most common and surprising comment I receive when I assign graphic novels to college students, many of whom have never read a comic before the assignment. These bright students, many of whom are English majors, admit that the comics are much harder to read than they expected. What they are actually recognizing is that all forms of expression work within and against *conventions* that are ideally shared by both the writer/creator and the reader. Learning how to read comics requires anyone simply to take the time to read a few comics.

Part of the perceived problem that comics are difficult to decipher, thus read, may stem from the term “comic” and the association of comic books/graphic novels with comic strips and its origin in the “funny papers.” Gravett (2005) notes that the genre is not all or even primarily about humor, but he also adds “[n]ever underestimate the low art of mime and foolery to punctuate pomposity and to speak truths in jest” (p. 10). Along with the misnomer “comic” in the name of the genre, comic books/graphic novels suffer the cultural hierarchy of *serious* over *comic* in most of popular and so-called literary arts. Quality has somehow become associated with being dryly serious in Western culture, and comic books being assumed “funny” then take an immediate place below other genres that are seemingly more serious. I will explore these more fully later, but the 16-volume *Cerebus*, by Dave Sim and Gerhard, represents well the power of mixed tones within the medium of comic book conventions. The main character is an aardvark, but the issues confronted by Sim are far beyond childish, and while satirical and often slapstick, the work is ultimately quite serious.

Ironically, the first three “things to hate” address the difficulty or challenges posed by comics, but the next two by Gravett (2005) claim “comics leave nothing for the imagination” and “[t]hey take no time to read” (p. 10). While there are always contradictory views of those things we marginalize, for comics and graphic novels, the genres appear never to catch a break. But let’s consider a comparison—If comics provide too much information to the reader through the graphics, then why are films considered a quality genre? Films fill in far more gaps than comics, which require readers to blend the panels and combine a variety of texts. Again, this claim is misleading and unfair as we do not marginalize other media, pop culture, and art for similar qualities. And as the discussion above about the first three “things to hate” reveals, we can discount the claim that comics are quick reads. As Gravett notes, many people who zip through a comic soon realize that sequential art takes patience and re-reading to understand and appreciate fully. And Rothenberg (2003), about *Cerebus*, adds, “Between Sim’s styles of writing and layout, *Cerebus* is anything but easy to read.”

What about the artwork? My confession as a comic-book nerd for nearly four decades now is that despite my being a writer and lover of traditional books, I have always been attracted to comics for the art *first*. In fact, I was entirely drawn to the artwork in the beginning and realized later that I was also reading and enjoying the stories, the characters, and the larger mythologies of comic book universes. But Gravett (2005) notes “[t]he drawing is the first thing you see and it can put you off if it doesn’t appeal to your tastes” (p. 11). Thus, the artwork in comics is potentially

both a deterrent and an attraction for comic readers and appreciation. The many styles found in comic artwork, then, become another range of multiliteracies with which comics challenge readers. Inherent in the artwork styles as well is the coloring technique (and even the quality and stock of paper being used). From the black-and-white of *Cerebus* to the controversy over the coloring of reprints of Barry Windsor-Smith's Conan run at Marvel in the 1970s, the tone and content of comics/graphic novels are incorporated in the *interplay* of many different *texts*, including traditional type, hand-lettering, onomatopoeia in stylized lettering, artwork, dialogue and thought balloon manipulation, graphic signals (such as lines to suggest movement), and coloring. Reading comics becomes, as Rosenblatt (2005) argues about reading traditional texts, an aesthetic and efferent experience.

"Comics have always used the shorthand of physiognomy," explains Gravett (2005), "the theory that what you look like represents your character" (p. 11). Of course this convention of comics leads to charges of stereotyping (too often a true charge) and oversimplification, but Gravett adds an important comparison: "That is not so different from conventions in theater and cinema," suggesting again that comics are unfairly marginalized when compared to other genres (p. 11). Do comics fall into some traps of stereotyping through graphic representations, such as one-dimensional characters? Yes. But as I will explore more throughout this chapter, the tendency of these flaws (ones shared by other genres not as marginalized as comics) does not discount that some high quality comic book and graphic novel work does exist and does deserve our respect. As Rothenberg (2003) notes, for example, "*Cerebus* may be a comic book, but it would not be out of place in a literature classroom."

Gravett (2005) established that comics are in fact not always or mostly funny, but he also notes that some discount comics because they seem to have shifted too far to the dark side: "It can seem though, in a desire to be taken more seriously, graphic novelists have fixed on very serious, sometimes tragic, subjects"—once again proving that the comics/graphic novel genre can't win for losing (p. 11). This criticism combined with blanket charges that comics are silly reveal that many people fail to recognize a wide range of subgenres within the larger genre of comics/graphic novels. One aspect of the discussion to follow in this book is to outline some essential graphic novels that span as many literary forms as the novel.

Gravett (2005) explores several "things to hate about comics" that relate to the reading of them. One complaint that overlaps with earlier criticisms includes people who cannot grasp how to negotiate the text and the artwork:

Images and text arrive together, work together, and should be read together. There's no one rule, but in some combination you read words and pictures in tandem and in cross reference, one informing the other. It's not so hard, but it is different from reading neat, uniform columns of type. (Gravett, p. 11)

As noted earlier, then, comics do present a challenge to the unacquainted, requiring readers to develop not only a feel for reading the genre but also a personal reading style for approaching comics. I find this point, though a bit redundant in the context of the other items in the "hate" list, important because it allows teachers to

introduce comics to students who are both familiar and unfamiliar with the genre as an avenue to having students consider and *reconsider* their reading processes—and those teachers should revise their own perceptions of the reading process to see that any reading process is unique to each reader, not a set process to be imposed on students.

Another convention of comics that can be off-putting is the use of “graphic devices to add an extra ‘track’ of sound, motion, and emotion to the page,” explains Gravett (2005, p. 11). While lines around a character to show movement or speed are artificial (no such lines exist in the real world), again I argue that these conventions in comics vary little from the burst of lines to show unusual speeds or time travel in film—or the truly unrealistic conventions of soundtracks in film or the sudden breaking into song and dance in musical film and theater.

And this leads to Gravett’s (2005) final point, the most common compliment offered to comics/graphic novels:

Yes, it’s true, comics can encourage even the most reluctant reader, but this backhanded compliment, often from teachers, librarians, and other “cheer-leaders for the cause,” implies that comics and graphic novels are useful primers, stepping stones to literacy, but not worth reading in their own right as “real books” themselves. (p. 11)

Two important aspects of this comment are central to this book. First, incorporating comics/graphic novels into all levels of classrooms in order to fuel the broader literacy of a student *is* one reason to respect the genre. But, it isn’t the only or even best reason. I agree with Gravett that comics/graphic novels prove to be value literature in and of themselves, and for the rest of this chapter, I will explore more fully just why comics/graphic novels deserve our time and respect.

Before moving on, I want to note that I find the comics/graphic novels genre to be a powerful and valuable genre, no less so than the novel or film. But as with any genre, a small percentage of the work rises to the top, and thus deserves a spot in academic and scholarly settings. I will identify how to know that quality and even suggest some of the works included in the best of the genre throughout the following chapters, but here I want to identify briefly what I believe are legitimate cautions about comics (cautions that I will expand upon in subsequent chapters as the concerns fit better the content of those chapters):

- Comics have a long history of sexism and sexist undertones. From the artwork portrayal of women to the actual women characters and even the blatantly endorsement of “a woman’s place” in mid-twentieth century mainstream comics, the genre can be faulted for its sexism—but again, so can many canonized works of fiction. I will explore this concern more fully when I turn to the long-running *Cerebus* in Chapter Four and again more fully in the Conclusion.
- A related concern is the body-type issues that are displayed in mainstream comic artwork, that are seemingly ignored in the content of comics, and that are rampant in all aspects of pop culture from advertising to TV and film. Women and men are drawn in stylized forms that reinforce the worst possible body images—in that they are unlike the actual human form. One notable example is

the transformations of Bruce Wayne into Batman and Peter Parker into Spider-Man; both in clothes are rather normal (with Parker even frail), but once in their uniforms, they suddenly sprout muscles that don't exist in human form. Of course, females are preposterously portrayed in many comics—although almost all women in canonized literature are described as beautiful and film tends to focus exclusively on the beautiful people despite the intentions of the work (note the casting of Kate Winslet as the less attractive lover in the film version of Tom Perrotta's *Little Children*).

- And also like far too much popular media, TV and film included, comics are predisposed to excessive violence with little regard to considering the alternatives to violence. Superhero comics are filled with the endorsed violence of those superheroes; if left unchallenged, these messages are certainly dangerous. Of course, one reason to include comics in the classroom is to confront violence, along with the other issues noted here, so my highlighting these problems is not to discount the use of comics, but to identify the weaknesses that can be used positively in a learning environment.
- When the 9/11 report was released as a graphic novel, by industry legends Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, an interesting controversy over the artwork arose. The *comic* art was challenged by some as beneath the seriousness of the 9/11 attacks, but others noted the depiction of the terrorists appears racist and stereotypical. While challenged as demeaning caricatures, the artwork was in fact meticulously drawn from actual photographs and film footage of the terrorists involved in the attack. The genre of comics artwork has a powerful association with “cartooning,” which carries several stigmas identified already in this chapter. As well, the history of comics, see the last chapter, is marred by legitimate examples of racist and bigoted portrayals of many marginalized people, cultures, and ethnicities.
- What do we do when comics do in fact grow up and explore the sexual side of being human? From *Cerebus* to *Watchmen*, some comics/graphic novels, like film and TV, include graphic nudity and even sex scenes. But with the comics genre, the word “graphic” means both explicit *and* drawn. So what do we do about drawings of nudity, such as the genitalia (although *blue*) of Doctor Manhattan in *Watchmen*, or static scenes of sex, found in both *Watchmen* (in part leading to the film version being rated R) and several issues of the *Cerebus*? In an interview, Dave Gibbons, artist of Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, explains how comic creators addressed Doctor Manhattan's nudity with purpose:

We were very careful about the way we introduced the nudity, though; it didn't happen in the bedroom scene but while the good Doctor was alone in the desert. I was careful to give him understated genitals, like a piece of classical sculpture, too. I'm sure some people didn't even notice he WAS [all caps in original] nude for a page or two and by then, it was too late! (Kallies, 1999)

The added element of drawn explicit scenes can, in fact, be a strength of bringing comics/graphic novels into a classroom setting since the fact of the artwork portrayal offers another entry point to discuss, debate, and explore *texts*, appropriateness of

art (including pop art), and the range of good taste—including the much more problematic area of censorship versus free speech.

COMICS/GRAPHIC NOVELS—SCHOLARLY CREDIBILITY

This seriously is a moment in time for which I have been dreaming all of my professional life, as most of those who worked around me dreamt about but weren't even aware that this was possible. We now, for the first time, we're being recognized, not yet accepted, but we're now recognized in major bookstores and in the rooms of academia—in the academic community. We're now being discussed as a form of literature, and this is what I've been hoping for in all these years,

explained Will Eisner (2004) at the keynote address of the 2002 Will Eisner Symposium. This “recognized, not yet accepted” is key to this chapter because I believe it is past time to accept and ours to move on to value. Yet, even Eisner admitted that the origins of the genre were anything other than a conscious pursuit of art:

Nobody in the medium, working in that medium at the time would think that of it as a medium. No one recognized or accepted the fact that this artwork or this medium; that this strange, marvelous combination of words and images that were laid out in an intelligent sequence was a true art form or literary form, as I like to put it.

But Eisner (2004) believed in the value of comics/graphic novels, citing the rise of Neil Gaiman and Gaiman's success in several genres after his start in comics. While Eisner felt comics were legitimate—“this medium is literature”—he was resigned to the fate of comics being determined by the market and academia:

The future of the medium now hinges—hangs—on the support of the academic world because in order for the medium to grow and mature as it has been, it needs the attention and the interest of people who, in the academic world, are able to dissect it, to discuss it, to recognize it, and to evaluate it, which will establish a standard that young comic artists coming into the field will aspire to.

And now Eisner's Keynote is in the first issue of *ImageText*, a scholarly journal devoted to comics/graphic novels and a statement that Eisner was right—scholarly recognition matters, and it is happening.

A few years after *ImageText* began, Mallia (2007) acknowledges that the history of comics has been dominated by the genre being for entertainment mainly, if not solely—and for children. But Mallia “believe[s] that comics can increase comprehension, along with motivation and interest.” Conducting a literature review and implementing a quantitative study and a follow-up survey, Mallia concludes,

The comics medium can be an important instructional tool that can work within the cognitive domain. The survey...is a basic, exploratory study of the subject, but it has yielded some interesting and heretofore not noted results. It has

begun to prove that comics can actually teach by themselves, and are not just an interesting but redundant insert within an instructional text that utilizes other channels more traditionally associated with teaching.

For my larger argument here, I want to emphasize that comics/graphic novels are valuable as a genre and not simply as a lesser form useful to move students to more credible texts.

Scholarly journals certainly suggest comics/graphic novels are attaining a higher level of credibility, but book-length considerations of the relationship between the genre and philosophy (White, 2009; White & Arp, 2008) also attest to the sophistication of the content of comics/graphic novels. From *Batman* (White & Arp) to *Watchmen* (White), the philosophical implications of comic book mythologies are recognized within academia but also in the broader public in both the comic/graphic novel form and in film.

Comics/graphic novels as *marginalized* art, then, fits into a powerful but ignored argument concerning the value of art in any child's education. Dewey (1934) acknowledged "[a]rt is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing and achievement" (p. 3). And from Dewey's call to acknowledge the value of art in schooling, many educators have echoed that call, including Eliot Eisner and Maxine Greene.

I believe opening our classrooms and expectations of literature and text to include comics/graphic novels fits within the broader argument, based on Dewey, championed by Greene (1995): "[P]articipatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to *see* more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* [emphasis in original] of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed" (p. 123). Greene believes in the power of art to contribute to the imagination of children, a quality often ignored or even suppressed by formal schooling, but also believes that teachers must foster that imagination through teaching children how to interact with and fully appreciate a wide range of art. Comics/graphic novels communicate through integrated types of art, and thus are well suited to fulfill Greene's call when included seriously in the classroom:

It is my conviction that informed engagements with several arts is the most likely mode of releasing our students' (or any person's) imaginative capacity and giving it play....The point is that simply being in the presence of art forms is not sufficient to occasion an aesthetic experience or to change a life.

...To introduce students to the manner of such engagement is to strike a delicate balance between helping learners to pay heed—to attend to shapes, patterns, sounds, rhythms, figures of speech, contours, and lines—and helping liberate them to achieve particular works as meaningful. (p. 125)

When Greene (1995) explains the nuances and diversity of experiences offered by art, seeing how comics/graphic novels fit into those qualities is clear. Comics/graphic novels also work against the power of authority, the oppression of normalcy, and the

mechanistic habits of our schools—all of which are weaknesses Greene believes expanding our students' experiences with the arts can overcome for the empowerment of students: "Surely, nothing can be more important than finding the source of learning, not in extrinsic demand, but in human freedom" (p. 132).

Further, Greene (1995) recognizes that all art shares with comics/graphic novels being marginalized as "mere entertainments, without practical use" (p. 134). I believe that including the comics/graphic novels genre as a significant part of our literacy classrooms, we could approach Greene's argument for "our need to learn a pedagogy that joins art education and aesthetic education so that we can enable our students to live within the arts, making clearings and spaces for themselves" (p. 135). The marginalization of the arts broadly and of the comics genre more narrowly—as outside the canon of established literature—reflects Greene's concern about boundaries that limit instead of empowering. I believe her assertion here applies directly to the need to expand our view of comics as a valuable and powerful genre: "We can no longer placidly limit classroom choices to works ascribed greatness by narrow groups" (p. 136)—such as the literary canon reflected in the Western Canon (Bloom, 1994).

Challenging the canon, Greene (1995) offers a complex message:

My concern over the canon, however, is not solely with our enabling persons to engage authentically and adventurously with a range of artists. I also have exploration of a range of media in mind—not just written and spoken language—vital as that is, being the stuff out of which riddles, poems, and stories are made and through which dreams are told, fictions invented, and novels given form. (p. 136)

And again, the comics genre fulfills possibilities for both exploring more voices—women, people of color, people with diverse and unique histories, a range of sexualities—and multiliteracies. Like Rosenblatt (1995), Greene seeks new texts and art for the classroom along with expanding how we expect students to respond to those texts and that art—including aesthetic as well as mechanistic responses such as New Criticism.

As I have explained earlier, comics/graphic novels are often a part of students' lives beyond the classroom, and like I was, students either directly or indirectly have been taught that comics do not matter as literacy, as art, as part of their worlds. Here, Greene (1995) speaks to that disconnect and our need to close such artificial gaps:

Such separation is also caused by personal innocence or ignorance and by a reliance upon others who are innocent, ignorant, or conditioned by the media. Nor are the arts likely to open themselves naturally to young people who have been systematically demeaned and excluded from what others value as "goods" in their own world. (p. 147)

Comics as a genre making an artistic expression of the world are often already a part of many students' lives, but they need and even deserve time and support in a formal school setting to fully realize the value of the genre, although we must not

simply absorb comics into a mechanistic view of text: “We want to enable all sorts of young people to realize that they have the right to find works of art meaningful against their own lives,” Greene adds (p. 150).

Ultimately, my call for including and valuing comics/graphic novels as a genre fits into Greene’s (1995) vision “to open larger and larger meeting places in schools” (p. 150). Greene even acknowledges the value of confrontational and explicit art, which often creates more barriers to formal classrooms. Comics, in fact, are ideal to Greene’s end: “We must...seek more shocks of awareness as the time goes on, more explorations, more adventures into meaning, more active and uneasy participation in the human community’s unending quest” (p. 151). And I can image this grand adventure being that of any recognizable superhero—and the reader following along through the interplay of words and images.

CREDIBLE GENRE, TEACHABLE GENRE?—COMICS/GRAPHIC NOVELS, A HISTORICAL CONSIDERATION

Just establishing that the comics/graphic novels genre is a legitimate genre does not justify or support including the genre in academic settings, from English courses to history courses to English Language Learner (ELL) settings. Even if and when people in authority recognize comics as a mature and complex genre, Yang (2003) notes, “The educational potential of comics has yet to be fully realized. While other media such as film, theater, and music have found their place within the American educational establishment, comics has not.”

Yang (2003) explains that as soon as comics appeared in the 1930s, within a decade, scholarship and considerations of teaching with comics appeared, in surprisingly abundant numbers. Advocates and detractors started a debate about comics as a genre and about including comics in the classroom that has lasted until today. Yang details that the 1950s were a powerful and negative period for comics—typified by Dr. Wertham’s talks and publications (see Chapter One)—that stunted both the growth of the genre and comics being studied and implemented in classrooms.

Interest in comics and teaching with comics was dormant until the 1970s, Yang (2003) explains. But “[t]he legacy of the 1954 investigation, however, still loomed. Many educators who advocated comics condescended them in the same breath,” adds Yang. The growth of comics that occurred in the 1980s and into the 1990s—the reviving of Batman by Frank Miller and the development of graphic novels through *Watchmen* and *Maus*—helped spark a renewed appreciation for comics as a genre and as worthy of the classroom. By the 2000s, Yang declares, “Many of today’s teachers use comics to encourage the very abilities some educators in the 1940’s feared it would squelch: reading and imagination.”

Yang (2003) contests that challenges to using comics in the classroom (or to allowing children to read and enjoy comics) have been based on issues unrelated to the quality of the genre. In fact, Yang identifies the qualities inherent in comics that he believes make them ideal for the classroom. First, he notes that comics are motivating, citing evidence over many decades of the powerful connection between

children and comics. Next, Yang identifies the visual nature of comics as a powerful educational quality associated with multiple intelligences and multiliteracies.

That comics are spatial, and not time-bound, Yang (2003) argues, is ideal for teaching and learning:

Time within a comic book progresses only as quickly as the reader moves her eyes across the page. The pace at which information is transmitted is completely determined by the reader. In educational settings, this “visual permanence” firmly places control over the pace of education in the hands (and the eyes) of the student.

As well, Yang references evidence that comic books serve well to connect students to concepts and disciplines beyond addressing literacy. Finally, Yang values that comics are a significant part of popular culture, thus a conduit to a critical consideration of the pop culture.

Carter (2007) represents the assertion made by Yang (2003) that comics have reached some level of acceptance and even high regard as both a genre and as a valuable text in the classroom: “With the growing understanding of the importance of critical literacy, visual literacy, and other types of literacy that were once considered ‘alternate,’ more attention has been paid to graphic novels” (Carter, p. 1). Carter also places the value of comics/graphic novels within calls for art and democracy by Dewey. Further, he references successful implementations of comics, such as the Comic Book Project (Bitz, 2004, 2006) and increased use of the genre in ELL settings (Cary, 2004; Ranker, 2007/2008). Comics also support educators addressing critical literacy and visual literacy, Carter adds.

The field of comics/graphic novels and the related scholarship on teaching the genre are both incomplete and emerging, but if we take a historical look over the scholarship and claims both for and against comics as a genre and as suitable texts for the classroom, several patterns emerge that help inform my case made here for comics/graphic novels. Considering a number of published articles from the 1940s until the 2000s, I have outlined below the main themes found when considering comics and teaching comics:

- *Use comics, although they are a lesser genre—especially with weak and reluctant students* (Alongi, 1974; Frank, 1944; Gruenberg, 1944; Haugaard, 1973; Hutchinson, 1949; Koenke, 1981; Schoof, 1978; Wright, 1979). Endorsements of comics for classroom use have carried with them a disturbing caveat—at least disturbing to those of us who appreciate the genre. Wright (1979) explains that comics have all of the literary elements of traditional literature, adding, “By no stretch of the imagination can comic book stories be called great literature” (p. 159). And, “Finally, comic books should never be expected to serve as art or literature,” Schoof (1978) explains, adding, “In a sense, comic books are still nothing more than entertaining junk” (p. 827). While many educators and librarians have advocated for allowing and encouraging children to read comics and for teachers to use comics as instructional texts, the vast majority of that support has come with broad rejections of the genre. My case, however, includes both an endorsement of the genre *and* the use of the genre in classrooms.

As I have noted elsewhere, comics/graphic novels as a genre have a significant amount of high-quality work that should not be trivialized or marginalized because some (even if many would argue “most”) of the genre is of a questionable quality.

- *Creating comics is a powerful activity for students—notably for urban and struggling students* (Bitz, 2004, 2006; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Koenke, 1981; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Schoof, 1978; Williams, 2008; Witty, 1941b). The work of Bitz (2004, 2006) and Dyson (1997) are strong messages about *composing original texts by choice*, especially but not exclusively for children struggling in school (and often in their lives outside of school). Bitz (2006) explains:

The story of afterschool comic book clubs is in many ways a story about afterschool education itself....Students who elect to participate in these programs are encouraged to express themselves and to take risks in what they say, draw, and write. They use creative methods to put their knowledge into practice and application. All of these things occur in the comic book clubs, but they occur in many other afterschool clubs as well: film production, hip-hop dance, slam poetry, and on and on. (p. 18)

Comics represent something that matters to children, and when we support those children as they *create* those things that already matter to them, we are tapping into the critical literacy and democracy that we often claim our education system is pursuing. We must not ignore the importance of students composing those genres that we ask them to read, and the work of Bitz, Dyson, and many others reveal that comic creation is an ideal avenue to authentic composing by our students. To create text is to create self, as Dyson explains: “Their [her students’] literary drama is presented...in the interest of fostering other such dramas, in other classrooms, where superheroes of a human sort are waiting for their cue” (p. 9).

- *Comics are positive influences on children and reflect social norms* (Belk, 1987; Frank, 1944; Gruenberg, 1944). During the assault on comics in the 1940s, several professionals claimed that comics were in fact, on balance, a positive influence on children. That claim was based on the reality that comics often reinforced the norms of American culture (see Chapter One; Rhoades, 2008b; Wright, 2001). Belk (1987), examining the messages in comics related to wealth, concluded, “There is some suggestion here that comic books may have a positive socializing influence on children” (p. 38). Further, Belk acknowledges that the shift he detected in comics during the mid-1980s—“more fallible and human superheroes”—could create another backlash against comics as they turned against the social norms they have historically reflected (p. 38). The dilemma for critical educators is that such endorsements of comics are similar to the mixed messages noted above—teach comics, but they are poor literature. That comics reinforce *uncritically* social norms is both a strength and a weakness of the genre since those social norms may in fact be flawed (consider the racial stereotypes too often present in comics throughout the first half of

the twentieth century or the objectifying of women still common in comics). For critical educators, even comics endorsing norms we believe need changing allow students a window to those norms and to growing as critical readers themselves.

- *Comics are a useful step to other literacy developments by students—notably literacy skills* (Alongi, 1974; Frank, 1944; Guthrie, 1978; Haugaard, 1973; Koenke, 1981; Marsh, 1978; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Norton, 2003; Richie, 1979; Schoof, 1978; Schwarz, 2002, 2006; Sones, 1944; Strang, 1943; Versaci, 2001; Weiner, 2004; Williams, 2008; Wright, 1979). Since many arguments for incorporating comics into the classroom belittle the quality of comics themselves, comics are often portrayed as useful *tools* to some other literacy end—much as we often do to other wonderful and engaging genres. Just as we often teach *The Sun Also Rises* in order to address modernist fiction, point of view, characterization, and a whole host of terms and concepts (with little concern for enjoying a wonderful story filled with interesting and flawed characters), comics are often touted as somewhat limited texts that can help teach literacy skills and (we hope) move students to better texts:

Well-done graphic novels offer teachers another tool to be used in the classroom and can enrich the students' experiences as a new way of imparting information, serving as transitions into more print-intensive works, enticing reluctant readers into prose books and, in some cases, offering literary experiences that linger in the mind long after the book is finished. (Belk, 2004, p. 115)

- *Comics are psychologically and developmentally appropriate for children* (Bender, 1944; Frank, 1944, 1949; Schoof, 1978; Strang, 1943; Zorbaugh, 1949b). One of the more interesting points running through 1940s endorsements of comics was the claim that comics were appropriate for children, that they matched children's interests and needs. From a clinical perspective, many argued that comics, in fact, were appropriate for children, although these claims tended to acknowledge that any popular genre should not be viewed as a monolithic form. As with other genres, whether or not a text is suitable for a child depends on a variety of factors related to the text and the child. What we should note is that there is nothing inherent in the genre of comics that make them inappropriate for children, just as no genre is inherently inappropriate for children (except, of course, a genre designed solely for consenting adults, such as erotica).
- *Comics are well suited to teach critical literacy, especially critical media literacy* (Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Ranker, 2007/2008; Schwarz, 2002, 2006; Versaci, 2001; Williams, 2008). One sign that comics as a genre has turned a corner toward respectability for the genre and for taking it seriously in academic settings is the growing acknowledgement that comics/graphic novels are well suited to aid in the teaching of critical literacy, especially as related to enhancing

our students' critical lens for media. Versaci (2001), who implements comics in most of his courses, notes,

As teachers of literature, we should not strive to get students to accept without question our own judgments of what constitutes literary merit[, but] to encourage students to see themselves as having a voice in the question of what constitutes literary merit by defining reasonable parameters by which to judge a creative work and articulating why and how that work is—or is not—within those parameters. Only by helping students achieve this voice do we help them become active, critical, and engaged readers. (pp. 61–62)

While seeing comics as powerful means to a critical literacy ends still leaves comics as a tool, that argument at least acknowledges a higher level of sophistication to the genre than much of the published pieces did form the 1940s through the 1980s.

- *Comics, popular culture, and multiliteracies are all important elements needed in the classroom* (Berger, 1978; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Gruenberg, 1944; Lopes, 2006; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Norton, 2003; Ranker, 2007/2008; Schwarz, 2002, 2006; Sones, 1944; Versaci, 2001; Williams, 2008). “In an increasingly visual culture,” Schwarz (2002) explains, “literacy educators can profit from the use of graphic novels in the classroom, especially for young adults” (p. 262). Another suggestion that comics are becoming a respected genre is the acknowledgement that they represent popular culture—which fits within a growing belief that pop culture must be regarded more highly itself in the classroom. Cazden, et al. (1996) established an environment that questioned the nature of literacy, and comics/graphic novels have begun to fit well within that expanding acknowledgement and embracing of multiliteracies: “The graphic novel now offers English language arts teachers opportunities to engage all students in a medium that expands beyond the traditional borders of literacy” (Schwarz, 2006, p. 58).
- *Comics help educators acknowledge out-of-school literacies and interests in the classroom* (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001; Frank, 1944; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hutchinson, 1949; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Norton, 2003; Sones, 1944; Versaci, 2001; Wright, 1979; Zorbaugh, 1944). Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) note that schools dictate for students what counts as literacy. Frey and Fisher (2004) explain, “We had observed students actively engaged with anime and manga materials...., although not in sanctioned school activities” (p. 19). As I have recounted about my own literacy and comic book background, children often have vibrant literacy lives that go untapped because teachers fail to acknowledge those literacies, resulting in “many adolescents...begin[ing] to see comic books as many adults do: subliterate, disposable, and juvenile” (Versaci, 2001, p. 63). Further, Frey and Fisher call not only for honoring comics and children’s out-of-school literacies, but also for moving beyond seeing comics as tools for literacy skills work: “[W]e resisted the temptation to focus on remedial skills instruction and instead used popular culture and the media to invite students into school literacies” (p. 24).

- *Comics are a legitimate (emerging) genre* (Berger, 1978; Gruenbrg, 1944; Lopes, 2006; Marsh, 1978; Richie, 1979; Schultz, 1949; Schoof, 1978; Versaci, 2001; Weiner, 2004; Zorbaugh, 1944). In his work on stigma—specifically of comics as a part of popular culture—Lopes (2006) notes that comics have been marginalized “as less than literature and less than visual art” (p. 404). Despite a historical tide against comics, including the devastating attack at mid-twentieth century, Lopes sees the genre rising: “With the recent success of graphic novels [since 2002] catering to both children and adults, and the success of film adaptations of comic books, perhaps normals have finally discovered that the American comic book is a unique and complex art form” (p. 411). The view that comic books/graphic novels are a substantial genre is still rare, however, but my case here supports acknowledging comics/graphic novels as a powerful and sophisticated genre as valuable as any other.
- *Comics are well suited for a variety of instructional settings including art, ELL, and foreign language* (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001; Marsh, 1978; Ranker, 2007/2008; Williams, 2008). Cary (2004) admits, “Superman made me a reader” (p. 1). In his book on incorporating comics in ELL instruction, Cary represents a growing move to identify the value of comics/graphic novels for a variety of educational purposes beyond teaching native language literacy skills and literature. Comics have been used in art courses (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001; Williams, 2008) and in the teaching of French (Marsh, 1978), as well as in ELL classes (Ranker, 2007/2008).

While there is a mixed history of scholarship about comics/graphic novels as a genre and as suitable for the classroom, a case for comics is still fighting against a popular and academic perception that comics are for children and comics are a weak cousin to both literature and visual art. One aspect of comics and the comic universe that shows the quality of the genre, however, is its link to myth.

THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES¹

As I examined above, we have about seventy years of serious considerations of comics as a genre and as suitable text for the classroom. Lopes (2006) offers some insight into the marginalization of the genre due to comics being perceived as mere entertainment, as a product of the lowest expectations of popular culture. Yet, comics and graphic novels both offer the same qualities as other literary and media-based genres, such as novels, short stories, plays, and film. Here, I offer a consideration of comics/graphic novels as narratives speaking to and from our mythological psyches, from our shared biology as explored in the work of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell.

In his examination of the history of comics in the context of American popular culture, Wright (2001) explains “[a]ccomplishing this requires a close and critical analysis of comic book formulas” (p. xv). And here we find where the *universe* of any comics or graphic novel parallels the mythological patterns found in other

more well-regarded literature, film, and other texts—as well as reinforcing some of the most powerful theories of how the human mind works from psychology. “My working definition of *formula* [emphasis in the original],” adds Wright, “is close to that advanced by John G. Cawelti, who summarizes them as ‘ways in which specific cultural themes and stereotypes become embodied in more universal story archetypes’” (p. xv).

Comics and graphic novels are no less serious works of art than other forms of literature in terms of how the heroes, superheroes, villains, and a whole host of characters portray archetypal *truths* that resonate within the unconscious of readers—stemming from those archetypes existing in the dreams and collective unconscious of all humans, as details by Carl Jung and then through the scholarship and popular writings of Joseph Campbell, whose work is more accessible to the classroom.

Throughout his career, Joseph Campbell wrote and spoke extensively about the patterns that myths, religions, tales, and stories of all kinds shared. In his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell identified the hero’s journey. Later, in *The Power of Myth*, an interview conducted by Bill Moyers, Campbell applied his ideas about mythic patterns to popular culture, specifically the characters and narratives in the Star Wars movies. These patterns and that hero’s journey are also seen in the superhero stories of mainstream comic books.

As noted earlier, Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man represent the basic patterns of comic book superheroes. In Campbell’s framework, the traditional hero experiences a standard cycle of the heroic journey. While the journey of the hero is not unique to Campbell and it can be described in many ways, here the journey will be outlined and supported within the world of comic books. The hero’s journey usually begins with some sort of call to that role of hero, often including the hero losing something or someone valuable. Batman is spawned from the murder of Bruce Wayne’s parents, an ordeal witnessed by Wayne as a boy; Spider-Man is created by Peter Parker after the death of his Uncle Ben at the hands of a criminal that Peter himself failed to confront before that criminal kills his Uncle; and Superman finds himself on an alien planet, having lost his entire world and discovering that the new planet renders him superhuman. Heroic adventure sprouted from *loss* is a central aspect of how a superhero is created in Chabon’s (2000) *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, when Sammy and Joe discuss the essential elements of the *why* as they begin to create The Escapist:

“The question is why.”

“The question is *why*.”

...“Only Batman, you know...see, yeah, that’s good. That’s what makes Batman good, and not dull at all, even though he’s just a guy who dresses up like a bat and beats people up.”

“What is the reason for Batman? The why?”

“His parents were killed, see? In cold blood. Right in front of his eyes, when he was a kid. By a robber.” (pp. 94–95)

Once the hero has been called to the heroic journey, that hero often resists the call or doubts himself or herself. The comic world is filled with reluctant heroes, possibly best represented by Peter Parker's persistent fight with himself between his duty as a superhero and his own personal longings. Once the hero commits, that hero usually has some mentor intervene. For Spider-Man, Aunt May provides his sage advice. Superman relies heavily on the support of his earthly family, the Kents, who adopt him once they discover him as a baby on their farm. Batman embodies the hero actively seeking the guidance of experts when he commits to becoming a master detective, but Bruce Wayne also has the butler Alfred Pennyworth as his life-long mentor.

Next, the hero must begin the journey by crossing an initial threshold. In the comic world, that tends to be the first storyline for the hero. Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man all have origin stories, initially told in the first or early issue of the comic in which they appear, but retold throughout the life of the comic book character's run. These origin stories include the superhero having some success at the beginning; for Batman and Spider-Man, that origin includes an interesting twist as these characters have tense relationships with the police, with other people in their lives, and with the public inside their comic universe. Once committed and with an adventure behind them, the hero often encounters some helper. In the legend of Batman, this pattern is most evident with the character Robin. To date, Batman has had three separate Robin sidekicks, including losing Jason Todd to death (with that death reinforcing "the why" identified in the fictional creation designed by Chabon [2000]).

In the traditional hero journey, the quest is linear, moving forward and culminating in some way. In the comic universe, the pattern becomes cyclical. In other words, the comic book superhero tends to be immortal (even when the superhero appears to die, as with the death of Bruce Wayne, the mythos of Batman is maintained by another character, Dick Grayson, the original Robin, assuming the enduring role of the superhero) within the comic universe so the remaining elements of the hero's journey repeat throughout the storyline. However, these elements are still significant in the superhero's journey.

Once the hero overcomes the initial challenges, the journey often leads to a central cave or abyss. For the superhero, that element is often a lair and not a spot of danger. Batman has the bat cave, and Superman, his Fortress of Solitude. Spider-Man's ability to swing from skyscraper to skyscraper parallels the need for the hero to have a place of solitude. The concept of the hero having support is counterbalanced with dangers as well. Batman and Spider-Man appear to have personal weaknesses in their character, unbridled rage for Bruce Wayne and a deep sense of doubt in Peter Parker. Superman has the most famous weakness, kryptonite.

Again, the traditional hero's journey includes a primary challenge, followed by the hero using some additional charm to succeed and return to a homeland. This cycle can include both literal and metaphorical deaths and resurrections as well. Comic book heroes experience these patterns over and over. Spider-Man lost his girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, just as Batman lost his second Robin, Todd, to death.

For all of these superheroes, the ultimate challenges come in the form of supervillains, personifying the hero's challenge in many different forms. The death/resurrection cycle is also common within the comic world. Superheroes can kill their alter-ego by quitting their role or by experiencing a change in costumes, as Spider-Man has done with Venom. Possibly unique to the superhero journey, in fact, is the masking and costumes of the superhero that allow dual existences for these heroes.

These patterns suggest that the comic book holds important motifs of storytelling for any reader. These patterns are portrayed in collaboration among several artists, but the value of the comic book is no less than traditional literature in many ways. That comic books reflect heroic patterns often associated with the human psyche, as detailed by Jung, gives credibility to comics in two ways—both as a genre itself and as one medium for allowing students to explore these mythic patterns as they inform their own literacy and lives.

Rhoades (2008a) notes that Superman has been linked to Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Jesus, revealing the enduring power of superheroes as archetypes (pp. 100–101). Further, Rhoades adds that while we recognize Shakespeare's powerful use of archetypes, we often fail to acknowledge that Shakespeare didn't invent these archetypes and mythical patterns but “based many of his characters on existing fables and myths”—as we often find in comics (p. 102): “‘Superheroes...are contemporary manifestations of the mythological gods of yore, who reflected the tenor of their times as succinctly as contemporary pop-culture obsessions do ours,’” explained *Watchmen* creator Alan Moore (qtd. In Rhoades, p. 102).

Just as I noted above, Rhoades (2008a) traces the power of mythological patterns to Jung. Comics and graphic novels, particularly those exploring the well developed mythologies of the major superheroes, are excellent texts for examining and learning the central aspects of Jungian psychology, a valuable knowledge base in Western culture where much of Jung's (and Sigmund Freud's) theories are incorporated in to a wide range of literary and popular culture.

Joseph Campbell (Jung, 1971), in the Introduction to *The Portable Jung*, explains, “Jung's conclusion, to be developed in his later writings, was that, inherent in the human psyche, there is a patterning force” (p. xiii). This pattern force manifests itself in religion, philosophy, artistic creation, and *the market dynamic*—all of which are found in the comic/graphic novel genre. I am convinced that the serial nature of comics and the cyclic conventions of telling and retelling origin stories along with wholly recreating entire characters and comic universes, especially when these are found in the popular comics, all reveal the power of the collective unconscious and archetypes.

Jung (1971) argued,

The collective unconscious is a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence to personal experiences and consequently is not a personal acquisition.... [T]he contents of the collective unconscious have never been in consciousness, and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity. (pp. 59–60)

And while some may claim that Jung's theories are flawed or debatable, I contend that his ideas lend themselves well to scholarly and academic considerations of texts, including comics. Further, Jung explains the role of archetypes:

[T]he content of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of *archetypes* [emphasis in original].

The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seems to be present always and everywhere....This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents. (p. 60)

Campbell (1988) sees evidence of Jung's theories in religion and art, notably literature and pop culture: "Young people just grab this stuff. Mythology teaches you what's behind literature and the arts, it teaches you about your own life" (p. 11). While Campbell weaves a strong case for the power of myth within film, since comics and film have a great deal of overlap as genres (central of which is the storyboarding of films to guide the shooting of the movie), introducing students to and expanding students' experiences with myth can be achieved with comics/graphic novels when they are afforded the respect they deserve. "The main motifs of the myths are the same," Campbell explains, "and they have always been the same" (p. 22). From the stories of Jesus to the trilogy of Star Wars to the Batman mythos—students can identify the archetypes "secondarily," as Jung imagines, when comics/graphic novels are read, enjoyed, studied, and challenged as art.

A central aspect of Campbell's (1988) work that supports my argument about the value of comics/graphic novels and their incorporation of myth and archetypes is his claim that "[m]yth basically serves four functions" (p. 31). First Campbell refers to the power of myth to spark "awe"— "[m]yth opens the world to the dimension of mystery" (p. 31). And here Campbell suggests that this awe is necessary for a fulfilling life (in other discussions Campbell recognizes that pop culture often replaces religion to support this need). Next, Campbell recognizes that myth explains how the world works, fulfilling a parallel function to science. Third, myth "support[s] and validat[es] a certain social order," representing the distinctions found among what otherwise are very similar myths from culture to culture, adds Campbell (p. 31). Finally, Campbell says myth has a "pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstance" (p. 31).

"Myths and dreams come from some place," Campbell (1988) argues, adding, "They come from realizations of some kind that have then to find expression in symbolic form"—to which I would include comics (p. 32). The theories of Jung and the application of Jung to art are powerful sources for unlocking the value of comics and for guiding how we can bring the genre into the classroom. For example, drawing on Jung, Rhoades (2008a) identifies a list of archetypal characters

that manifest themselves in comic mythologies. Using Rhoades, here are just a few character types with connections to the superhero comic universes:

- *The Hero* is the backbone of superhero comics, typified by Batman and Superman. As noted above, the hero’s journey (Campbell, 1949) reflects the typical pattern of the hero’s genesis, struggles, failures, and resurrections.
- *The Uebermensch* is often translated as “superman” but is better defined as the villain such as the Joker in Batman or Iago in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. As Rhoades (2008a) notes this archetype is the “‘superior man’ who rebels against societal ideals and moral codes,” which is not the type found in Superman (although Batman has found success because his character walks a thin line between the “superman” and the classic hero) (p. 105).
- Labeled *The Last Man* by Rhoades (2008a), this type “is often a weak-willed individual, one who takes no risk, seeks only comfort and security” (p. 105). In comics, this type often serves as the alter-ego cover of the hero, such as Clark Kent for Superman. Comics often manipulate this type, however, with the shifting personae of Bruce Wayne (Batman) and the blurring of the Last Man type with the hero in the duality of Peter Parker/Spider-Man.
- *The Trickster* is a common literary type and archetype, sometimes referred to as the clown. But the jokes are as much deception as humor since the deception is at someone’s expense. In the Batman mythos, the comic twist on the trickster is the Joker and the Riddler, both of whom lift this type to a level of evil that blurs the *Uebermensch* and trickster types.
- *The Eternal Boy*, also the Puer Aeternus, “is typified by immaturity and narcissism” (Rhoades, 2008a, p. 105). As is common in comics, this type is often manipulated in characters such as the resurrection of several Robins in Batman. As with the first Robin assuming the mantle of Batman since the character Batman is eternal, so stands the eternal boy character of Robin.
- *The Wise Old Man* has become a central part of pop culture with Obi-Wan Kenobi of Star Wars mythology (Campbell, 1988), but this type is also central to Batman in the character of Alfred, the butler, who serves as a wise and steadying voice in the lore of the Caped Crusader.

Comics and graphic novels, particularly the superhero subgenre, are rich and complex considerations of archetypes and mythological patterns worthy of a place in our classrooms. But I must caution that I view understanding archetypes and mythological patterns as knowledge that serves as tools to support the literacy of any student—not as goals themselves. If we use comics/graphic novels as we often do more traditional literature as a means to and ends—asking students to identify the types and patterns in the texts in order to test a students recall of that knowledge—we fall prey to Freire’s (1993) warning about the “banking concept” of teaching and learning.

Comics/graphic novels also reinforce our consideration of genre and the elements of genre that support the conventions, such as defining the hero or courage and exploring the notion of fairy tales, fantasy, sci-fi, folklore, and other overlapping subgenres (Rhoades, 2008a, pp. 108–111). In Hillocks’ (1995), the environmental mode is identified as a highly effective strategy for improving the content and

surface features of student compositions. In the environmental mode, objectives are specific, problems relevant to students and the mode of writing are selected, and “small-group problem-centered discussions” are designed to prepare students to compose (Hillocks, pp. 57–58). Comics/graphic novels are ideal texts for creative the environmental mode.

For example, students are prompted to discuss and debate what constitutes a hero or what acts are courageous, including a consideration of Superman as a hero or as courageous (See Hillocks, 1995; Johannessen, 2001). The distinctions and paradigms being explored help students refine how they define terms and concepts, but this process proves effective for improving the quality of students’ original compositions after the debate. I believe the debate, and the open-ended nature of the debate, is pivotal in the power of this activity, but we must not discount that students are debating a topic they care about, possibly because the Superman myth is such a common and enduring aspect of the popular culture; everyone knows something about Superman and his mythology so nearly everyone has a basis for the debate.

Comics matter in the popular culture, and schools’ marginalizing them is yet another not-so-subtle message that those things that matter to children and teens don’t really matter. And how do superhero comics matter? Rhoades (2008a) offers a list of how superheroes resonate with readers, including just a few here:

- Spider-Man’s slogan—“With great power comes great responsibility.”
- Issues of racism, homophobia, bigotry, and oppression in the X-Men universe.
- Elements of justice and revenge in Daredevil and Batman.
- Duality and anger in the Hulk.
- Duality and the idealized virtues humans pursue in Superman.
- The battle between inner good and evil in Batman and Wolverine.

Rhoades (2008a) returns, however, to the power of the market in the art of comics/graphic novels. Referring to a conversation with Stan Lee, Rhoades notes that the Hulk, for example, owes a great deal to Frankenstein, and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but Lee was quick to admit,

“But in the beginning I was just trying to come up with something different that would sell some copies so we could keep our jobs. Guess it proves that if you have a great idea...that people will read what they want into them.” (qtd. in Rhoades, p. 113)

I would revise Lee’s comment to include that people see in art the patterns that join us as humans, a Jungian idea reinforced by all types and genres of art.

One way comics matter, then, is they portray many of the best qualities we already value in traditional literature, but comics may be even more valuable since the genre is tied deeply to the popular psyche and the market of Western culture in ways that can be addressed directly in a classroom setting, giving students opportunities to read critically.

MY CASE FOR COMICS/GRAPHIC NOVELS—GUIDING PRINCIPLES

I am advocating both that comics/graphic novels are valuable as a genre and that teachers should incorporate comics/graphic novels as a significant part of their classes. But my case fits within a larger challenge to how we have traditionally used and viewed all texts in classrooms, whether ELA or other content areas. I believe we have disproportionately reduced most texts to means to some other ends—such as using a novel to teach literary terms or teaching a novel so that students become knowledgeable of the details of that particular novel.

Rarely do we acknowledge text in school the same ways we do in our lives outside of school—particularly the enjoyment of texts. As much of my discussion so far has explained, children, young adults, and adults *enjoy* comics, and when I advocate bringing comics/graphic novels into the classroom, I do not also imply that we should tarnish the enjoyment that readers have for the genre—although we will necessarily use comics in similar ways to other texts in school by discussing the content, topics, themes, and techniques of the art form.

Valuing and Enjoying Text for Itself

So my first guiding principle is that comics/graphic novels offer students a genre that is enjoyable for a wide variety of reasons, many of which that are unique to the genre such as the interplay of text and graphics. To enjoy a text does not exclude analyzing that text, but I believe that comics and traditional texts offer value beyond being a means to some instructional (and often artificial) ends.

Honoring text-for-text's-sake works against our traditional use of texts in academic situations, I recognize. Thus, part of my call for comics as a valuable genre and a powerful resource for teaching is a challenge to how we currently treat text and consider genre. That comics have historically been marginalized and demonized enhance their value for teaching as we can ask students to consider how and why we value one text over another. Instead of directly and indirectly honoring some texts and genres over others, we can ask students to explore a wide variety of texts (traditional literature, comics/graphic novels, film) and determine what counts as *literacy* and how to evaluate the quality of any text—and ultimately to place the value of entertainment within our perceptions of quality.

Rethinking Art and Collaboration

Do we value collaborative art such as comics and film less than singular art? I think that we do, but I also believe that distinction is misplaced. We should question not only that collaborative is less than individual but also that any such thing as individual art exists.

These, of course, are questions we should raise with our students, and comics/graphic novels are ideal for raising considerations of collaboration. But we must also as teachers look carefully at our marginalization of collaboration and idealizing of individual art. While the rugged individual mythology is powerful in American and

Western cultures, that mythos is suspect. Many are familiar with John Donne's "no man is an island," but Western culture appears to believe that excellence often is the result of the solitary and enduring individual (represented by the popularity of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* as a manifesto of rugged individualism for political conservatives).

The history of comics, as I noted earlier, includes the Marvel process in the 1960s and 1970s that acknowledged the collaborative power of comics creation, including Stan Lee listing the artists responsible for making a comic book—writers, pencillers, inkers, letterers, and colorists. This recognition laid the foundation for comic creators gaining the rights to their creations in the 1980s and 1990s, but the history of comics also highlights for us all the *problems* inherent in ascribing responsibility for artistic creations. As a marketable medium and as an art form, comics/graphic novels have always been a genre where collaboration is the norm (even Dave Sim, a possible rugged individual type within the comics genre, includes Gerhard as a minor collaborator for his huge solo project, *Cerebus*).

An interesting entry into the discussion is to browse the 50 Greatest Comic Characters identified by *Empire* online (<http://www.empireonline.com/50greatestcomiccharacters/>). Most of the characters, the vast majority recognizable by almost everyone, even those not familiar with comics, are credited to multiple creators. Why do we marginalize these powerful and even treasured parts of popular culture? One reason is our low opinion of popular culture, as shown in Lopes (2006), and another reason is our disdain for collaboration.

I believe we should honor collaboration as much as individual art, particularly through the comic book genre in the classroom, but I also believe we should confront the assumption that *any* art is individual. Here are a few challenges I see to the concept of individual artist:

- Starting with Rosenblatt (1995) and the writer-reader-text dynamic at the center of making meaning from text, I believe all texts are dependent on multiple people before you have meaning or art—even if the text/art is initially created in some sort of vacuum by a creator. In other words, the solo artist is ultimately dependent on an audience in order for there to be expression or meaning. At the very least, we have collaboration between the artist and the audience—both of which are impacted by the choices made for the medium of expression (such as sequential art for comics).
- The artistic act itself, notably the act of composing, rarely exists in a vacuum. Most writers, artists, and creators work through their creations with some interaction with fellow artists, editors, or a wide range of inspirational sources. To create in isolation is impossible, I believe. Further, related to the broader argument of this book, when an artist creates, he or she is working both within and against conventions that have evolved socially. For example, the comic superhero subgenre has established itself with some clear and popular conventions of what a superhero is, how a superhero story develops, and the like. Even if a solo comic artist wrote, drew, and prepared an entire comic alone, that creation is within a social context including the genre conventions, thus not actually without collaboration.

- The concept of *ownership*, couched in a capitalistic paradigm, is at the center of the discussion about who created what. It is possible that our Western concern with who *owns* a creation distorts that the creation exists and is compelling in some way. I am not sure why a collaborative work such as a film is any less compelling and valuable than a novel, just as I cannot lessen the value of the Batman mythos because hundreds of creative people have contributed to the complex and even convoluted history of an enduring character and narrative. I think it is distorting to wonder who *owns* Batman or to marginalize the creation because many people have contributed to what makes him compelling.

Comics offer an ideal avenue to discuss genre, the conventions of art and expression, and the nature of creation in terms of the solo artist versus collaboration. These considerations can support well our literature goals but also our composition goals as we ask students to practice drafting and collaboration with teachers and peers as part of their writing processes.

Gender and Literacy

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) represent a growing body of research and a growing concern that males are disproportionately struggling in literacy at school:

[Boys] trail girls on almost every literacy measure in every country and culture from which data are available. They are particularly behind when it comes to reading novels and extended forms of narrative fiction—the kind of reading that counts most in language arts classes. (p. xix)

Smith and Wilhelm uncover several key points here, but they are often misunderstood. First, it is true boys tend to appear behind girls in literacy, but that status is dependent on very narrow and specific measures and definitions of reading and text. When we characterize boys as inadequate in their literacy, we must consider how we are defining both literacy and texts. Next, Smith and Wilhelm acknowledge that boys' literacy doesn't match what school values ("novels and extended forms of narrative fiction"), but when we look closely at the types of behaviors boys often do, we see an interest in video games and comics that have serial and narrative elements to them.

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) seek to address the individual needs of any student, but also look carefully at the complex nature of our concern about boys literacy. But when Smith and Wilhelm address the value of engaging material to support boys' literacy: "over and over we heard that the boys expected to be engaged and absorbed by a story in the first few paragraphs" (p. 149). One element of matching engaging texts with boys is visual texts: "There was also a substantial interest on the part of many boys in comic strips, cartoons, comic books, and graphic novels" (Smith & Wilhelm, p. 152). So there is credible evidence that comics/graphic novels as a genre can help assist what many mislabel as a literacy crisis related to boys.

I would add that comics connect with boys' interest in serial narratives and collecting. Boys often read mainstream texts, such as novels, when they are part of a sci-fi or fantasy series. In short, as I experienced myself, boys enjoy the act of

collecting and organizing as much as the reading itself. Since schools often marginalize sci-fi and fantasy genres in similar ways to comics and since teachers often assign reading instead of allowing students to develop ownership over their reading and their texts, that boys enjoy serial works and collecting are ignored by schools.

Gender concerns about literacy are sure to continue to increase as the accountability movement also escalates, but we must recognize that if a gap exists between boys and girls in their literacy development in school (Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2010) that traditional approaches to literacy instruction have dominated the schools in which the gap exists must be confronted. Opening the canon to comics/ graphic novels and rethinking our views of text and genre are likely to address some of the conditions inherent in traditional practices that may be directly connected to the literacy gap we wring our hands about.

While I do accept and even endorse the use of comics/graphic novels to address our concerns about boys' literacy, I also believe we should use comics to question how we teach, assign, and measure literacy. Further, I believe we must not trivialize the use of comics as simply a mechanism to move boys to better literature. Comics/graphic novels are not a boys-only genre and not valuable only because they may help teachers connect better with boys in their literacy development.

Deficit Perspectives—Rich Literacy Experiences

My parallel concern about encouraging the use of comics involves the deficit perspective that is common in traditional school practices and bureaucratic mandates, notably as represented by many programs designed to teach educators about addressing students living in poverty (Payne, 1996). A rich and emerging body of commentary and research is challenging the deficit perspective (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2009; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2006a; Gorski, 2006b; Gorski, 2008; Thomas, 2009), but our tendency to see the weaknesses in students in order to correct those failures—especially related to children of color, poor children, and children speaking a native language other than the language of the school—remains the norm of schooling.

Just as many see comics as a way to entice boys to better literature, many view comics as an easy genre well suited to weak and struggling students as a mechanism for improving literacy skills and for preparing students for more rigorous reading, high-stakes testing, or the work force. As I noted above, I agree that comics are ideal for boys, and I do believe comics offer some outstanding opportunities to address students struggling with literacy and with a new language. But I am not endorsing that these are the only or even best reasons to include comics in the classroom.

Comics/graphic novels are well suited for all students, but I do hope that by changing our attitudes toward the canon we can also change our deficit attitudes and practices to more generative ones (Thomas, 2009)—with comics assisting in that transition.

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My case for comics/graphic novels as a genre, then, is complex—just as I believe the genre itself to be. I believe texts of all kinds have many valuable qualities suitable to the classroom. I do not accept that any one type or genre of text is superior to others or that any person or student must embrace this or that genre. Students need to be exposed to all types of texts and genres, but allowed and encouraged to draw their own conclusions about the value of those texts and genres for themselves—while honoring the rigor of education that also expects them to be able to discuss those texts and genres, along with the conclusions, with some degree of sophistication.

After reading, enjoying, discussing, and debating comics, students should have a more sophisticated understanding—one they can articulate—of the comic/graphic novel genre, and the concept of *genre* itself. But I am not arguing for making all students read the genre or that all teachers and students should praise the genre.

Rothenberg (2003) captures the nuance and value of considering the comics genre in the context of how we consider all texts, focusing on Dave Sim's work revolving around his central character Cerebus:

This balance between story and art is a delicate one. If Sim gives the reader too little story, then *Cerebus* is nothing more than pictures that one can read rapidly (like Japanese comic books, *manga*, which are actually supposed to be read rapidly; hence, no long speeches). If Sim gives the reader too much story, then he is writing a novel. All of this—playing around with text and art, the layout of the book itself, and even some of the characters—places *Cerebus* in another literary category: that of postmodernism.

Comics and graphic novels well placed in the classroom can lead to similar considerations by our students, and I feel they and the educational experience will be better for having included comics and the debate about genre.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY—TEACHING WITH COMICS/GRAPHIC NOVELS, A HISTORICAL VIEW

1940s

Bender, L. (1944). The psychology of children's reading and the comics. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 18(4), 223–231.

Looking at comics as an M. D., Bender associates the reasons children are (in the 1940s) drawn to comics. She acknowledges the importance of fantasy in the normal development of children and sees comics as a healthy outlet for children's fantasies. Bender details some problems that could occur if comics address issues beyond the ability of children to handle, but on balance, paints a positive picture of comics as matching the needs and interests in children. She ends by discussing the major superhero characters of the 1940s, including Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, concluding: "Great adaptability and fluidity in dealing with social and cultural problems, continuity through

characters who deal with the individual's essential-psychological involvement with these problems, and experimental attitude and technique—these are the positive qualities of the comics” (p. 231).

Frank, J. (1949, December). Some questions and answers for teachers and parents. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 23(4), 206–214.

As his title suggests, Frank addresses the variety of opinions and evidence concerning comics—quality of comics as a genre, comics impact on learning to read, eye strain for children reading comics, comics influence on emotions of children, comics and juvenile delinquency, and comics as an empty habit. While Frank acknowledges a variety of opinions about comics, on balance he portrays comics positively and allays most negative beliefs about the genre, concluding, “Comics-reading can constitute one—but one among many—ways of satisfying these perfectly normal needs of childhood” (p. 214).

Frank, J. (1944). What's in the comics? *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 18(4), 214–222.

Frank notes that children widely enjoy and read comics but that many adults find that attraction controversial. Frank details a study that shows a wide variety among comic books, emphasizing that blanket statements about comics are misleading. Comics, Frank explains, reflect topics and genres common in more traditional children's literature. Children enjoy comics because they offer what children find interesting, adds Frank. Frank believes an interest in comics, parallel to an interest in film, contributes positively to a child's overall literacy development—although comics are again portrayed as a weaker genre. Frank concludes that comics meet children's interest in the here-and-now with both topics and language and the only concern Frank offers is “*excessive* [emphasis in original] comics reading” with a focus on the “excessive” and not the comics (p. 222).

Gruenberg, S. (1944). The comics as a social force. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 18(4), 204–213.

Gruenberg's discussion reflects the power and abundance of comic books in 1940s America. Gruenberg offers a mixed message on comics, describing them as a weak genre but noting that many genres (such as film) are unfairly discounted in their early manifestations. Also, Gruenberg identifies the influence of the market over what comics produce, suggesting that with time comics would mature into a credible genre. Gruenberg endorses using comics positively in educational settings and cites several examples of comics having positive messages and important themes.

Hutchinson, K. H. (1949, December). An experiment in the use of comics as instructional material. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 23(4), 236–245.

Describing a study of using comic strips in education, Hutchinson argues for including students' out-of-school interests in school. The study presented

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overall positive results of using comic strips to teach a wide variety of lesson, especially “in special classes and for slow learning pupils in regular classes” (p. 240). The article listed 18 useful comic strips by grade level for educators as well.

Schultz, H. E. (1949, December). Censorship or self regulation? *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 23(4), 215–224.

Schultz contextualizes an endorsement of comics within the criticism leveled at comics by Sterling North and Dr. Fredric Wertham, both gaining a fair amount of fame and notoriety in the 1940s and into the 1950s. Schultz characterizes the revolt against comics as hysteria and wrote vigorously against any efforts to censor the genre. Schultz supported comics both as an endorsement of free speech and of the potential of comics to develop into “a constructive force for entertainment and education in our society” (p. 224).

Sones, W. (1944). The comics and instructional method. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 18(4), 232–240.

Sones begins by placing comics in a line of popular media—film and radio—that have value for teachers. A key point by Sones is the popularity of comics in the 1940s suggests comics deserve serious attention. This article identifies a number of studies and applications of using comics in educational settings, concluding that comics should be used in the classroom. Sones also details a study of using Wonder Woman in the classroom.

Strang, R. (1943). Why children read the comics. *The Elementary School Journal*, 43(6), 336–342.

Strang details a study of what and why children read comics at many grade levels. Strang offers several arguments for and against the use of comics. The study reveals what comics students were reading in the 1940s and why they did so, including a few comments by students who did not enjoy comics. The article concludes recommending moderation and not banning in the reading of comics by children, suggesting that children use comics as they move on to more mature choices for reading and entertainment.

Thrasher, F. M. (1949, December). The comics and delinquency: Cause or scapegoat. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 23(4), 195–205.

Thrasher opens by rejecting claims of *single* causes for human violence and crime, noting that flaw in the claims of Wertham. Thrasher places Wertham’s claims in the context of several single causes identified in the field up until the late 1940s, including poverty and films. Ultimately, Thrasher concludes: “We may criticize Wertham’s conclusions on many grounds, but the major weakness of his position is that it is not supported by research data” (p. 201). Thrasher ends by suggesting that simplistic attacks on comics may in fact keep people from seriously considering the impact of parents and society on children.

Witty, P. (1941a). Children's interest in reading the comics. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 10(2), 100–104.

Witty reports the result of a study identifying the amount of comics reading by children. Interesting in this study from the 1940s is that comics “appear[ed] to be the most popular of *all* [emphasis in original] reading pursuits” by children (p. 103).

Witty, P. (1941b). Reading comics: A comparative study. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 10(2), 105–109.

Witty expands his discussion of a study of the interests of children concerning comics. Witty details a large amount of data on children's reading of comics, but finds no basis for claiming comics are a negative influence on children.

Zorbaugh, H. (1944). The comics—There they stand! *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 18(4), 196–203.

Zorbaugh identifies comics as a new but influential genre in his discussion. In the early 1940s, comics were just over a decade old as a form but were pervasive in American society among all age groups, including being a significant part of military life. Zorbaugh notes that comic characters and language were impacting popular culture. Zorbaugh ends by declaring comics “are here to stay,” thus worthy of our serious consideration (p. 203).

Zorbaugh, H. (1949b, December). What adults think of comics as reading for children. *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 23(4), 225–235.

Placing his discussion in the context of the 1940s controversy over the reading of comics by children, Zorbaugh details a study of adults' attitudes about comics and children reading comics. Overall, the study shows that adults believed comics were suitable for children, but the study, according to Zorbaugh, revealed a healthy debate about the issues. Zorbaugh ends with nothing that many adults, especially those who read comics themselves, support comics but are often concerned with some subgenres of the form, notably adventure comics.

1970s

Alongi, C. (1974). Response to Kay Haugaard: Comic books revisited. *Reading Teacher*, 27(8), 801–803.

Alongi, responding to Haugaard (1973) below, details briefly why teens are attracted to comics, basing her response on Archie comics. This support for comics is typical of the mixed messages educators present about comics since she condones the use of comics while also belittling the quality of comics. Alongi recognizes that comics often have elements attractive to teens—fashion, slang, graphic clues—but she refers to the “stories in comic books... [as] trite and predictable to grownups” (p. 802). This mid-1970s response is well before the rise of graphic novels and the maturation of comics many associate with the mid-1980s. Finally, Alongi notes the contrast between

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the antiestablishment tone in many comics that contrast her uncritical view that “school...functions to promote ‘desirable’ social attitudes and behaviors” (p. 803).

Berger, A. A. (1978). Taking comics seriously. *The Wilson Quarterly*, 2(3), 95–101.

While his discussion conflates comic strips and comic books, Berger offers an endorsement of comics as a genre fighting to overcome early criticisms of the form. He concludes his argument with acknowledging the need to take comics seriously since they are such a popular form within the culture.

Guthrie, J. T. (1978). Research views: Comics. *The Reading Teacher*, 32(3), 376–378.

Guthrie describes a study he conducted to consider the impact of reading comics on the development of reading among strong and weak readers. His study appeared to show that strong readers benefitted from reading comics while weaker readers did not because, he felt, that weaker readers were not on task when reading comics. He ends his discussion with a cavalier, “Is it any wonder that poor readers learn little from comics?” (p. 378).

Haugaard, K. (1973). Comic books: Conduits to culture? *The Reading Teacher*, 27(1), 54–55.

A professor and writer, Haugaard offers her view that since her three sons loved comics and that love led to an increased vocabulary and more reading, comics should find a place in the classroom. Like the response offered by Alongi (1974), Haugaard makes broad negative swipes at the quality of comics and appears to be familiar only with what many would call comics for children (Donald Duck, Casper, Archie, etc.). Haugaard’s response represents the view that comics are useful as a step to better literature and more sophisticated reading, although not a ringing endorsement of comics as a genre.

Marsh, R. K. (1978). Teaching French with the comics. *The French Review*, 51 (6), 777–785.

Marsh explains that scholarship on comics and the teaching of comics is common in Europe, specifying France. This article details the use of comics to teach French, detailing many uses of comics to address language skills. Marsh ends with describing comics as “a powerful additional tool of language instruction” (p. 784).

Richie, J. R. (1979). The funnies aren’t just funny...: Using cartoons and comics to teach. *The Clearing House*, 53(3), 125–128.

Richie criticizes “two-by-four teachers” who focus on textbooks and the classroom to the exclusion of other texts and life outside of school. The article endorses using cartoon and comics and notes that students need first to understand the conventions of the genres before exploring them. Richie believes comics encourage new pedagogy by teachers and small group work,

along with other advantages including critical thinking. The piece ends by arguing for a combination of enjoyment and learning by teachers and students.

Schoof, R. N. (1978). Four-color words: Comic books in the classroom. *Language Arts*, 55(7), 821–827.

Schoof argues for using comics in the classrooms since students are willing and eager readers of the genre. As many endorsing comics do, Schoof belittles the genre while stating they are useful to teach literacy skills. The article lists a variety of activities around comics: identifying characters in comics, analyzing characters by images only, dialect, creating characters, naming characters, students pretending to be characters based on themselves, acting out comics, reversing gender roles when acting out comics, onomatopoeia, and students creating their own comics. Schoof ends by stating that comics are much improved over their beginning, but also offers the caveat that comics are not literature—“comic books are still nothing more than entertainment junk” (p. 827).

Wright, G. (1979). The comic book: A forgotten medium in the classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 33(2), 158–161.

Wright characterizes comics as an enduring genre because all ages enjoy them. Although Wright admits comics reflect the same characteristics of other literary genres, he also states “[b]y no stretch of the imagination can comic book stories be called great literature” (p. 159). Wright does believe, however, that the Comics Code helped the genre improve. Overall, the article endorses using comics with all levels of students with the caveat that weaker students must be monitored when using comics.

1980s

Belk, R. W. (1987). Material values in comics: A content analysis of comic books featuring themes on wealth. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 14(1), 26–42.

Belk conducted a mixed (qualitative and quantitative) study to “examin[e] what certain comic books may tell us about U.S. materialism” (p. 26). Focusing on a limited group of characters—Fox and Crow, Veronica Lodge (Archie), Uncle Scrooge McDuck, and Richie Rich—Belk concludes that comics are potentially a positive influence for reinforcing norms in U.S. culture about wealth. Belk acknowledges the shifting demographics of comics readers, both historically and in the future as well as the growth of Manga comics in Japan and the mid-1980s shift in comic superheroes and the aging readers/collectors of comics.

Koenke, K. (1981). The careful use of comic books. *Reading Teacher*, 34(5), 592–595.

Koenke offers an endorsement of teaching with comics with many caveats, including several characterizations of comics as a weak genre. This brief

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discussion reflects the status of comics in the 1970s before the rise of graphic novels and the maturation of the genre in the mid-1980s. Ultimately, Koenke views comics as a step to better literature and literacy, but not as a valid genre of study itself.

2000s

Berkowitz, J., & Packer, T. (2001). Heroes in the classroom: Comic books in art education. *Art Education*, 54(6), 12–18.

The authors endorse the use of comics in art course. They offer a rationale for the use of comics and a history of the genre. The article includes sample lesson plans and some cautions for introducing comics in the classroom.

Bitz, M. (2006, Fall). The art of democracy / democracy as art: Creative learning in afterschool comic book clubs. *Afterschool Matters*. Occasional paper series, pp. 1–20. Retrieved 25 February 2010 from http://www.robertbownefoundation.org/pdf_files/occasional_paper_06.pdf

Bitz details a study of afterschool comic books clubs in nine cities across the U.S. since the beginning of comic book clubs around 2002. Comic book clubs involve students in writing, drawing, and publishing their own comics. The detailed study suggests some powerful results of the afterschool comic book clubs, most notably their contribution to John Dewey's call for democracy through education.

Bitz, M. (2004). The comic book project: Forging alternative pathways to literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 47, 574–586.

Bitz details an afterschool comic book club in New York City involving over 700 students between 4th and 8th grades. The comics produced included themes about gangs, drug use, and romantic relationships. Artistic patterns in the comics included a “focus on the foreground,” “the use of color to represent characters,” and “pride in the design of their comic book covers” (p. 37). Bitz emphasizes the power of the project, attributed to the power of art, for urban children.

Carter, J. B. (Ed.). (2007). *Building literacy connection with graphic novels: Page by page, panel by panel*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

This edited volume includes ten practical chapters that help teachers implement graphic novels into the ELA curriculum. The chapters explore arguments for incorporating graphic novels broadly along with exploring some specific applications of the genre. “There is a graphic novel for virtually every learner in your English language arts classroom,” claims Carter (p. 1) in the introduction, and this sets the stage for a wide range of helpful chapters that any teacher should find useful when learning about comics and graphic novels or hoping to expand their use.

Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (2004). Using graphic novels, anime, and the Internet in an urban high school. *English Journal*, 93(3), 19–25.

Frey and Fisher open by rejecting the traditional view that struggling and ELL students need worksheets and skills exercises to improve their literacy. Instead, they propose using graphic novels, anime, and other aspects of popular culture (acknowledging the power of multiliteracies) to offer students authentic writing experiences. The project detailed in the article revolves around the graphic novels of Will Eisner. Frey and Fisher note, “Using graphic novels to scaffold writing instruction helped students practice the craft of writing and gain necessary skills to become competent readers” (p. 23).

Lopes, P. (2006). Culture and stigma: Popular culture and the case of comic books. *Sociological Forum*, 21(3), 387–414.

This extensive consideration of stigma, comics, and popular culture is an excellent resource for those teaching comics, especially those who have traditionally viewed comics as a lesser genre. Lopes identifies a theory of cultural stigma and associates that stigma pattern aimed at comics throughout its history with similar stigmas on other aspects of popular culture such as jazz. Lopes identifies that stigma as impeding the growth of comics as a mature genre, although he concedes that in the early 2000s comics seem to be overcoming that stigma to some degree especially through the growth of graphic novels.

Morrison, T., Bryan, G., & Chilcoat, G. (2002). Using student-generated comic books in the classroom. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45(8), 758–767.

This article details students creating comics around Martin Luther King as “a means to an end” (p. 767). The authors believe using popular culture, such as the comics genre, is important in school, but that teachers should be careful not “to require their students to overanalyze the very culture from which they derive so much pleasure and meaning” (p. 758). Students, they feel, benefit from comics creation because the activity is engaging, it allows student creativity, it supports literacy development, and it helps students grow as researchers. Much of the article details the construction of comics, the steps and skills needed to produce the comic.

Norton, B. (2003). The motivating power of comic books: Insights from Archie comic readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(2), 140–147.

Referring to Haugaard (1973), Norton explains that she too is a teacher and mother concerned with the value of comics. Norton details a study she conducted in the late 1990s with using Archie comics in elementary classes. Norton offers three comments based on her research: (1) Comics contribute to students’ “ownership of text” (p. 145), (2) Teaching with comics needs further research, and (3) Literacy teachers need “to rethink the very notions of reading, literacy, and learning” (p. 146).

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Ranker, J. (2007/2008). Using comic books as read-alouds: Insights on reading instruction for an English as a Second Language classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(4), 296–305.

Ranker begins by supporting incorporating students' interests from outside school into the classroom, including popular media. The article discusses using comics for read-alouds in ELL classrooms. Students explore narrative structure through Spider-Man, critical reading from Hulk and Wild Girl, and textual features in a teacher-designed comic. Ranker acknowledges teacher concerns about comics, including the portrayal (and possible endorsing) of violence. Ranker concludes that comics are important as they offer students "opportunities to write, think, and discuss texts as they learn new literacies" (p. 304).

Schwarz, G. (2006). Expanding literacies through graphic novels. *English Journal*, 95(6), 58–64.

Schwarz views graphic novels as an important aspect of reaching beyond the traditional views of literacy. She explains that more and more professionals are recognizing the value of graphic novels. Schwarz offers some insight into some successful uses of graphic novels. Her discussion notes "[n]ew media call for a 'new rhetoric,' one that includes visual as well as verbal understanding and ability" (p. 60). Schwarz recognizes hurdles to implementing graphic novels—issues of appropriateness, lack of the genre being in standards and high-stakes testing, and lack of knowledge about the genre by teachers—but concludes "[s]chools must prepare young people to think critically with and about all kinds of texts" (p. 63).

Schwarz, G. E. (2002). Graphic novels for multiple literacies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46, 262–265.

Opening with her own discovery of *Maus* from a student, Schwarz recommends using graphic novels to address "an increasingly visual culture" (p. 282). Schwarz notes the potential of graphic novels to be appropriate for all content areas as well as addressing literacy concerns. Graphic novels also offer opportunities to increase students' critical literacy, she adds. The article ends with a list of eight resources for teachers concerning comics/graphic novels.

Versaci, R. (2001). How comic books can change the way our students see literature: One teacher's perspective. *English Journal*, 91(2), 61–67.

Versaci argues for the use of comics/graphic novels in order to support students making decisions about literary merit for themselves. Versaci believe students tend to see literary merit as something decided for them, not by them. Detailing several useful comics/graphic novels for the classroom, Versaci identifies many superior works in the genre. While acknowledging the controversial history of comics, Versaci believes comics/graphic novels as a genre have been misunderstood but deserve a place in the classroom and respect as a genre.

Weiner, S. (2004). Show, don't tell: Graphic novels in the classroom. *English Journal*, 94(2), 114–117.

Weiner defines the graphic novel and argues that it has achieved quality status as a genre. Weiner identifies the mid-1980s and early 1990s as a turning point for the genre. Graphic novels have many purposes and offer challenging reading experiences, Weiner adds. The bulk of this article is a listing of a number of valuable graphic novels suitable for the classrooms.

Williams, R. M. (2008, November). Image, text, and story: Comics and graphic novels in the classroom. *Art Education*, 13–19.

Williams advocates the use of comics/graphic novels for a wide variety of educational purposes, including addressing literacy, critical thinking, and art. Williams explains the value in comics while noting the historical marginalization of the genre. Williams details several applications of comics/graphic novels in college and secondary classes.

WEB RESOURCES

Adventures in Genre! (blog)
<http://comicsasliterature.blogspot.com/>

A Bibliography of Comics Articles in the *Journal of Popular Culture*:
http://www.english.ufl.edu/comics/scholars/jpc_index.html

Yang, G. (2003). Comics in education. [Web page]. Retrieved 25 February 2010 from <http://www.geneyang.com/comicsedu/index.html>

NOTES

¹ Portions of this section are adapted from my entry on comics in this publication: Thomas, P. L. (2010). Comics and graphic novels. [entry]. In S. R. Steinberg, M. Kehler, & L. Cornish (Eds.), *Boy Culture*, vol. 2 (pp. 319–328). Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press.