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# Preface

**W**hy won't they read? This is the frustrating question I must have asked myself a million times in my first five years as an English teacher. This root problem naturally led to other concerns about literacy—how to teach students basic writing skills, how to get them to think critically, and how get them to problem solve. I spent much of those years trying to reinvent an approach to teaching literature that would cause students to make personal connections to traditional, classic texts in ways that would motivate them to express themselves with passion. I was somewhat successful, but it took an enormous amount of performance from me during class, and honestly, it just felt phony. I was talking too much and leading them too often to make connections that I saw (or thought they *should* see) in lieu of their own authentic responses.

At the same time I was wrestling with this dilemma, I found myself in a graduate class focused entirely on graphic novels. Never a comic book reader myself, I suddenly felt negative and reluctant to read. I was insulted that I was being asked to read something so seemingly irrelevant. What did Batman have to do with me, a forty-year-old single mother? What could I possibly learn from someone like Alan Moore or Scott McCloud? I was angry and skeptical, as I suddenly found myself in the seats of my own students! After I resigned myself to reading these “picture books” to achieve my grade, I found myself falling madly in love. I discovered that Scott McCloud is funny and intriguing and his *Understanding Comics* (1993) blew me away. I wept while reading *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986) and read *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2004) three times. *V for Vendetta* (Moore & Lloyd, 1988) resonated with me as I recalled aspects of my undergraduate education as a philosophy major: existentialism, Plato's Allegory of the Cave, and the role of the artist in society. Reading as a teacher, I began to take notes on teachable aspects of all of these incredibly inspiring graphic narratives and wracked my brain about ways I could possibly get these novels into the hands of my students. If I was a reluctant, skeptical reader and I converted, the chances were pretty good students might too. Luckily, just at this time, my high school was considering an English 12 curriculum overhaul, so I jumped at the opportunity to create a course that would focus on graphic novels.

This book is the result of my work to develop a graphic novel classroom, an inviting place at school where students like to read and authentic literacy learning occurs. It is the result of my personal reflections on numerous conversations with students, educators, book distributors, bloggers, librarians, and graphic novelists about teenagers, comics, language arts pedagogy, and twenty-first century learning. When I was searching for information about how to teach graphic novels to high school age students, I looked for resources that exhibited how real students responded to graphic novels and how these texts fostered enjoyment, achievement, and English language arts (ELA) skills. Would teenagers actually read these novels? What would they think if they were being asked to read them in school? I sought answers by investigating how teachers like me were using graphic novels in their classrooms and the degree of success they were experiencing.

A number of outstanding resources authored by educators and professionals informed my development as a graphic novel teacher, including Dr. James Carter's *Building Literacy Connections With Graphic Novels* (2007), which paved the way for teachers like me to publicize their experiences teaching comics. His award-winning book is an edited collection of various educators' ideas for pairing graphic novels with classic texts and contemporary young adult literature. Katie Monnin's *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom* (2010) is another great resource loaded with extensive reading lists, classroom activity templates, and an outstanding cross-index of middle and high school graphic novels and themes. Dr. Michael Bitz's *When Commas Meet Kryptonite* (2010) is yet another excellent book that includes instructional ideas for the classroom based on Dr. Bitz's very successful "Comic Book Project" (Bitz, 2004). These scholars, and other talented professionals in the field, have created useful resources for teaching comics and graphic novels to a range of age groups and academic levels, but this book you are currently reading is the resource I was looking for—comprehensive, text-specific with models of teaching and student learning authored by a high school English teacher for fellow teachers. The text-specific nature of this book, its scope, the unique combination of resources, and its demonstrations of twenty-first century learning, along with student commentary and composition, differentiate it from the current resources available. By default, this book is a solid rationale for including graphic novels in any standard ELA curriculum and adds to the ongoing conversation about comics in education.

In our graphic novel classroom at Masconomet Regional High School, I have students coming after class to ask for the next book in the unit because they have already read ahead through the currently assigned text.

Students are blogging about the best book they've ever read or the first or only book they've ever enjoyed reading in high school. Some of these comments are sprinkled throughout this book. Because of graphic novels and a pedagogy based on transactional theory and reader response, I am finally teaching language arts and twenty-first century skills with students who are as engaged and passionate about what they are reading, writing, and creating in multiple media formats as I am. Our classroom is a happy, creative, and productive place where literacy, including visual literacy, is the norm. I hope you find this book useful in creating the classroom you desire, one that includes graphic novels and the one your students deserve.

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Any teacher worth her salt realizes that she is only as good as her mentors. In this respect, I credit my parents first for my work ethic and constantly reinforcing the importance and value of education. Professors

in the graduate education department at Salem State University all deserve many thanks, including Dr. Lisa Mulman, who introduced me to graphic novels and celebrated my successful use of them in the classroom, Dr. J. D. Scrimgeour, who introduced to me to graphic novel memoir, imagery created by words within poetry, and Dr. Ann Taylor, who taught me how to teach writing. Dr. Donnalee Rubin introduced me to the work of Louise Rosenblatt, Sheridan Blau, Kelly Gallagher, and Jim Burke, whose work informs my classroom practice and is evident throughout this book. I can't thank her enough for teaching me about reading and for the resources she has provided for this book.

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