

GRAPHIC NOVELS IN YOUR SCHOOL LIBRARY

JESSE KARP / ILLUSTRATED BY RUSH KRESS



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Jesse Karp

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Rush Kress



AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

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For more than ten years, **JESSE KARP** has been a school librarian at LREI (Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin High School), one of Manhattan's oldest independent schools and a long-standing leader in progressive education. He works with students across the curriculum, from beginning readers to high school students, with all kinds of material, including graphic novels. He regularly reviews graphic novels and picture books for *Booklist* and contributes to the magazine's yearly graphic novel best list roundup; he has written articles for *Book Links* and *American Libraries* as well. He has delivered seminars on the sequential art form at Pratt Institute and Queens College and teaches a graduate course about the history and analysis of the form at Pratt. He has served as a graphic novel panelist at Book Expo America for two years running and served on YALSA's Great Graphic Novels for Teens committee from 2009 to 2012. He cocreated the education webcomic *Dr. Lollipop* and is the author of the young adult novel *Those That Wake*, which is set in Manhattan, where he lives with his wife and two daughters. Please visit his website at www.beyondwhereyoustand.com.

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CONTENTS

PREFACE ix

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xi

PART ONE • THE FORM 1

- 1** What Is a Graphic Novel and Why Should You Care? 3
- 2** How Do Graphic Novels Work? 9
- 3** Disreputable Pictures: A Brief Word about Manga 19

PART TWO • A HISTORY OF AMERICAN SEQUENTIAL ART 29

- 4** The Comic Book 31
- 5** The Graphic Novel 47

PART THREE • ANNOTATED READING LISTS 51

- 6** Preschool through Grade 8 55
- 7** Grades 9 through 12 75

PART FOUR • LESSON PLANS AND ACTIVITIES 105

- 8** Learning about the Form 107
- 9** Graphic Novels for Discussion 117

AFTERWORD 129

FURTHER READING 131

VIII • CONTENTS

REFERENCES 133

DISCUSSION TOPIC INDEX 135

AUTHOR-TITLE INDEX 141

SUBJECT INDEX 145

PREFACE

Why This Book, Anyway?

At Reed College in Portland, Oregon, there is a most unusual library. Student-conceived at the end of the 1960s, and funded and run by students since then, it is a repository for a collection of but one thing: comic books. Standing apart from the Reed College Library, it is called the Media Lending and Loan Library (MLLL) but is better known as the Comic Book Reading Room. It was the earliest effort within the confines of an institute of education to recognize the importance of the sequential art form.

A great deal has happened to both education and the comic book since then; perhaps most surprisingly, an unlikely union between the two and a shared evolution. Many colleges and universities have recognized the production end as a valid form in which to pursue an education and a living. The Savannah College of Art and Design offers one of the top such programs in the country, but far from the only one. The Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art has been devoted exclusively to the study of this form since 1976.

My own experiences as a teacher and librarian bear out the worth of the medium. It will come as little surprise to anyone who works with children and young adults that graphic novels disappear from the library shelves faster than nearly anything else (except, perhaps, vampire novels, at least at the time of this writing) and are the topic of eager discussion when they find their way into classrooms. But I'm not talking just about young kids looking for some fun in a colorful narrative. I'm talking about the graduate students whom I've taught at Pratt Institute and the educators and parents at the Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin High School, where I work. Their fascination with the history and language of this form as a vehicle for education is clear.

Comics have long had a reputation for being disconnected from legitimate concerns; they were supposedly fluffy things, good for a laugh at best, agents of desensitization and proponents of violence at worst. These educators, librarians, and future educators and librarians are uniformly astonished and delighted to discover that the history of the comic book is the history of American culture (and not just popular culture); that the medium's evolution reflects our own cultural growing pains over the last century and defines aspects of the American psyche more trenchantly than any other art form around.

The point of all of this is merely to say that, with much credit to the invention of the term *graphic novel*, sequential art (the form of expression graphic novels are filled with) has become recognized as an art form whose history and production have something to teach us. That sequential art is a focus for education at this point can no longer be debated.

So what's the next step?

Well, the next step is already, fitfully, under way. The graphic novel is no longer just a format that it's suitable to be educated about; it is starting to see use as an actual tool with which to educate. It is not simply the production and history being recognized anymore

either, but the content itself and the way it is conveyed that is becoming part of a curricular infrastructure. Already a mainstay of public libraries and having gained a foothold in school media centers, graphic novels are now finding their way into classrooms, with examples such as *Maus* and *Persepolis* drafted as supplements to history and social studies curricula. Those are two great books, to be sure, but there is so much more potential yet to be tapped.

That's what this book is for. Not the *why* of graphic novels in education, but the *how*: how to use them, when to use them, what to use them for. The key to using the format properly is to first understand it yourself. This book begins by defining the form and separating, as clearly as possible, comic books from graphic novels from manga, then provides a quick primer on the aforementioned why of graphic novels in education. From there, we break down the language and iconography of the form to get a look at its inner workings, to see what gives it such raw power. We'll then go on a quick tour of its history and see how it holds a mirror up to the world around it and, often enough, reveals what is occurring beneath the surface of that world, too.

After that, we'll get to the nitty-gritty: reading lists that will include the classics, the neoclassics, the ones everyone knows about, the ones everyone should know about, and the specialty items that it would be very good to know about. These annotated lists for every grade school age will be highlighted with notes on their specific curricular uses. Finally, I've included a number of lesson plans centered around various works or around the art form itself, for use in a variety of curricula, programs, projects, classes, and courses.

Perhaps you are a school librarian who's beginning a graphic novel collection or maintaining an established one, but you want to expand and see new ways the format can work for you and the teachers. Maybe you're a teacher who believes in the format as a worthwhile addition to the curriculum or is at least willing to give it a try, but you're not sure where to start. You are why this book was written. I have studied the medium for more than three and a half decades, first as an object of personal enthusiasm and later as a reviewer, scholar, librarian, and educator, and I've seen its incredible potential as an art form and a tool of education, a potential springing from its unique position as a nexus of two different forms of expression. The unification of these forms is able to reach parts of readers' psyches and lift their imaginations, interest, and focus to unparalleled heights.

Take advantage of this incredible potential. Use your students' enthusiasm to inspire new heights of investment in their education. That's what this book is here to help you do.

PART ONE

The Form

PERHAPS YOU KNOW WHAT A GRAPHIC NOVEL IS, AT LEAST well enough to get by. How specific do you really need to get, anyway? Suppose a student comes up and says, “Isn’t this just a comic book?” Or a parent demands to know what you’re doing with these things in your library or classroom. Or maybe you want to know what techniques the graphic novel uses to convey its narrative and which cognitive switches are being flipped as a person reads it—the magic of the art form, as it were.

In chapter 1 I will define as completely as possible what a graphic novel is and is not (and sometimes what it both is and is not at the same time), and why it is worth using with kids and even reading yourself. In chapter 2 I’ll get down to the fundamentals of how the form works, its language, codes, and symbols. This will be both a broad overview and an inquiry into the more intricate nuances so that you will be fully prepared to discuss just how and why it is a narrative art just as powerful, in its own way, as prose. Finally, in chapter 3, we’ll make a brief aesthetic and philosophical comparison between American comic art and Japanese manga, which differ in some surprisingly deep and telling ways.

1

WHAT IS A GRAPHIC NOVEL AND WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

THE FIRST THING I'M OBLIGATED TO DO IS INFORM YOU THAT graphic novels are not a genre. A genre refers to content, specifically the style or subject of the writing, such as mystery, romance, or science fiction. Because a graphic novel, just like a novel or a television program or a movie, can tell a story in any number of styles or subjects (and hence genres), a graphic novel is, like other media, a format. The graphic novel's problem in this area comes from its immediate ancestor, the comic book. The comic book has had a long-standing association with a very specific genre, namely the superhero adventure. Although the relation between comic book and graphic novel is still, in many ways, a hazy and ill-defined zone, a quick trip into a local comic store or a quick glance at a comic book rack in a local bookstore will assure you that even the comic book is no longer quite so dominated by crime fighters.

Graphic novels are a format and not a genre. Now that we have that out of the way, we can move on to more concrete definitions.

GRAPHIC NOVELS ARE NOT COMIC BOOKS . . . OR ARE THEY?

Let's be clear right off the bat that even if a graphic novel isn't a comic book, their DNA is so close as to be nearly indistinguishable. What it boils down to is sequential art, the series of illustrated panels that both formats use to tell a story. Sequential art is a related series of images ordered in a sequence so as to create a narrative. The images are generally contained



FIGURE 1.1

A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories by Will Eisner. © 1978, 1985, 1989, 1995, 1996 by Will Eisner. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., and Will Eisner Studios, Inc.

within boxes called *panels*. The sequence of the panels is most often chronological (panel 1: Batman punches the Joker; panel 2: the Joker goes flying through a window), but not always. The imagery within the panels is usually figural art and, often, words appear in the panels, too. The panels themselves are mostly squares or rectangles, but not exclusively. As you can see, as with any other form of creative expression, any definition of sequential art has room for plenty of built-in exceptions. The important thing to hold onto is that sequential art is a sequence of images used to express a story or idea and that it is the form that links comic books and graphic novels inextricably together. But if that's what links them, what exactly separates them?

The term *graphic novel* was coined by comic visionary Will Eisner. Back in 1978 he wrote and illustrated *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, which was a comic book bound in paperback form with distinctly non-comic book content: Jewish life in the New York tenements of the 1920s (see fig. 1.1). Eisner wanted to elevate the form in people's minds and he wanted his work on the shelves of bookstores, where adult readers could find them, and not just on the racks of comic stores, where adult readers would surely *not* find them. So *graphic novel* is, when you get right down to it, a marketing term to make comic books seem more sophisticated or to possess a higher degree of literary merit. And it's a term that worked. Though comic books are starting to find their way into chain bookstores, graphic novels have been there for quite a while, with stores like Barnes & Noble and Borders giving them their own sizable sections. This is also how comic book publishers employ the term these days: to differentiate their comic books, which tend to appeal to specialty audiences, from their graphic novels, which attract a wider market. It will be very helpful to remember that the term *graphic novel* is little more than a business decision. That's okay, though; many of the decisions that have evolved sequential art over the years were inspired by profit-inducing strategies conceived of by men in suits around conference room tables. But make sure to hear what the men in suits are *not* telling you: most graphic novels are really comic books after all—that is, containing not original material, but collected material from monthly comic books.

Most graphic novels produced in this country are published by the two biggest comic book companies: Marvel Comics and DC Comics. But these graphic novels are, for the most part, reprinted collections of comics that have already been serialized on a monthly schedule. Most graphic novels containing original material are produced by the independent comic market or by established publishing houses such as Simon and Schuster, Random House, and First Second. Based on statistics from the Graphic Novel Archive website, of the 12,294 graphic novels that had been cataloged as of 2010, 5,939 (48.31%) of them are collections of previously published material (i.e., mostly superhero graphic novels). A mere 424 (3.45%) contain original, stand-alone material (e.g., *Persepolis* or *Fun Home*). Another 5,645 (45.92%) are defined as serialized graphic novels, most of which are manga collected and translated from the original Japanese material. (Statistics provided by the very helpful webmaster extraordinaire Jeff Bogumil at the Graphic Novel Archive, <http://graphicnovelarchive.com>.) Clearly, the vast majority of what is considered a graphic novel is collected material.

So, are we to distinguish between collections and original works? I'm afraid it's too late for that, since they've all been referred to under the blanket term *graphic novel* since practically their inception. Publishers surely don't want us to make that distinction because it could rob the collections of the extra gravitas and respectability that the term affords them. And we don't really want to, anyway, because it would make cataloging them a nightmare (more of a nightmare, I should say) and such a distinction would likely prove confusing for our patrons, students, and readers. So the term *graphic novel* encompasses books containing sequential art that is either original or collected.

Unfortunately, this still leaves us with the question of whether comics and graphic novels are any different and, if so, how. On the way to a final answer, let's examine some of the common notions on the subject.

Here's a popular one: graphic novels contain more sophisticated, mature, and "worthwhile" content than comic books. Given the facts about reprinted stories, it should be patently clear that this isn't true. If a majority of graphic novels actually contain material from comic books, they can't very well be thematically different in their approach or content from the comics they collect, can they?

Have a look at another generally accepted criterion for distinguishing comics from graphic novels: graphic novels tell a full story from beginning to end, even if it's over the course of several volumes, while comic books have an open-ended continuity that could run on indefinitely. Again, the issue of collections makes this hard to accept. If many graphic novels simply collect a series of comics that are running a potentially infinite story, how could the graphic novels not have that same potential, regardless of whether more of that story is told between two covers? However, there is some truth to the idea that even graphic novels that are collections tend to give a sense of closure to their stories within a single volume. A standard collection of the latest Spider-Man comics (for instance) will tell an arc of story that completes a specific adventure of the character but leaves several overarching themes and elements developing for further issues and collections.

This is, as it happens, an intentional practice on the part of comic book publishers these days. Monthly comic books are written in these six- or seven-issue arcs specifically so that they can be collected and marketed in this way. As I mentioned, the real money is in getting graphic novels to bookstore shoppers and not just to comic store shoppers. In order to appeal to the bookstore crowd, you want to give them the sense that they're getting a full story for their money but also leave it opened enough that if they enjoyed it, they'll come back for the next volume. This is a practice that went into full swing at about the time Marvel Comics really dived into graphic novel publishing (the company was years behind competitor DC in a strong program for collecting its work in graphic novel form). More specifically still, the consistent story and standard can be traced to Marvel's launch of its Ultimate imprint with *Ultimate Spider-Man* (see fig. 1.2). *Ultimate Spider-Man* was a retelling of Spider-Man's origin and subsequent adventures in an updated setting (rather than in the early 1960s, when the character was actually created). Writer Brian Michael Bendis spearheaded a style of comic book writing that told stories within these easily collectible dramatic arcs. The first seven issues of *Ultimate Spider-Man* not only told the story of Peter Parker's transformation into a superhero, but also contained the origin of and showdown with his archenemy, the Green Goblin. By comparison, the original version of this tale in the *Amazing Spider-Man* title published in the 1960s—encompassing just the introduction of the Green Goblin, the revelation of his secret identity, and the dramatic (but not actually final) showdown between the opponents—ran from issue numbers 14 through 40. That's twenty-six issues, featuring a number of other character introductions and narrative elements that had nothing to do with the Green Goblin, published over the course of a little more than two years and, obviously, not written with the intention of collecting them for the bookstore market.

So individual graphic novels tell full stories (or arcs), while individual comics don't. This is, unfortunately for clarity's sake, not a hard-and-fast rule, but it does tend to apply. As should be obvious from the Spider-Man example above, as older comic books are collected into graphic novel form, it's impossible to adhere to this rule consistently.

What, then, is the absolute, incontrovertible distinction between graphic novel and comic book? Well . . . there isn't one. Sorry. But we can get considerably more clear-cut on the issue by looking at matters of physical form.



FIGURE 1.2

Ultimate Spider-Man Volume 1: Power and Responsibility. Spider-Man and all other Marvel characters: TM and © 2002 Marvel Entertainment, LLC, and its subsidiaries. All rights reserved.

Put simply, comic books are floppy and graphic novel are not. Comics are bound with staples and usually run twenty-two pages (though they can run up to one hundred). Graphic novels are bound like novels, hardcover or paperback, and usually run upward of sixty-four pages (though they do sometimes run down to forty-eight pages). Both formats have a range of physical dimensions (though more so with graphic novels) and so we're really better off not bothering with those. There is, to confuse things further, a comic book format known as *prestige*, most popular back in the 1980s and early 1990s. These comics were bound as trade paperbacks and ran forty-eight pages or higher. They were, in many ways, the precursor of the modern graphic novel and are seldom produced any more. It would be fair to say, in sum, that as physical objects comic books and graphic novels can be different, but as an art form they are the same. So, by and large, you are safe identifying a graphic novel with this rock solid, nonabstract, definition of physical form, eschewing the content for means of definition. It is not, as we are about to see, the last time we will need to eschew content to clear the table and make a final statement about what a graphic novel is.

Graphic Novels Are Not Novels ... or Are They?

You will notice that the term *graphic novel* is used even when the material in question is a biography (say, *Persephone* by Marjane Satrapi), current events analysis (say, *The 9/11 Report* by Jacobson and Colon), or a historical record (say, *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel* by Butzer). This has frustrated many because it appears to be inaccurate. A novel is a story, a work of fiction, whereas things such as biographies, current event analyses, and historical records are clearly not fiction. There's been a call from some quadrants to rename the format. Some suggestions I've heard are *graphic format*, which sounds a bit stiff and technical; *graphic book*, which suggests that the content features extreme violence or sexuality; *graphic narrative*, which does not seem to specifically refer to a physical object; *graphics*, which is easily confused with the same term used for images and illustrations; and *sequential art book*, which is a bit unwieldy and probably somewhat on the confusing side for people who haven't heard the term *sequential art* before. A written abbreviation often used, and one I'll be using myself in later chapters, is *GN*, which allows us to both keep the term intact and hide it at the same time.

It's a moot point, in any event. The issue is by and large ignored by the general readership, which would no doubt be confused by a rejiggering now that the format has been so well established and gained such respect under its current name. Whether or not it would even be possible to change the term now that it has been accepted into the cultural lexicon is beside the point.

Let's return to where we started the chapter, with the conceptual. Just as graphic novel is a format (having to do with physical form) and not a genre (having to do with content), the word *novel* should be taken as a reference not to the content of the work, but rather to its physical form. It is, essentially, sequential art with the physical form most reminiscent of a novel, which is to say, bound as a hardcover or softcover book, rather than a comic. If we can accept the idea that the term as well as the object itself is defined by its physical form rather than by its content, then we can all relax and get on with important stuff.

Here it is, then, all in one neat sentence: a graphic novel is a generally complete narrative told in sequential art, bound on sturdy paper without staples.

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

As I said in the introduction, this book is about *how* graphic novels can tie into education, not why they *should*. Nevertheless, I recognize that this isn't a done deal for much of the education world. For the record, and as quickly as possible, let's get the *why* out of the way.

In their seminal *Graphic Novels in Your Media Center*, Allyson and Barry Lyga identify three types of burgeoning readers to whom the format proves a particular benefit:

"Slow visualizers," who have trouble creating mental images from word descriptions (a skill essential to reading) and can be intimidated by long passages of text, benefit from the graphic novel's "visual cueing systems that not only balance the text but also help the student interpret it" (Lyga and Lyga 2004).

"Reluctant readers," who lack motivation to pick up or enjoy books, "don't consider graphic novels to be 'real' books [and so do] not mind reading them" (Lyga and Lyga 2004).

"Visually dependent" students, victims of the all-encompassing visual media that inundates children every day, tend to eschew books because books are too slow moving or have no visual component to keep interest engaged (Lyga and Lyga 2004). Graphic novels, naturally, tend to stimulate interest in these students much faster than books.

In every case, graphic novels build skills, confidence, and desire to move on to other formats and to continue reading just for the sake of enjoyment. There is, of course, an obligation to teach these students to go deeper than the surface image, and graphic novels nurture a form of visual literacy that "goes beyond the presented graphics and looks at the messages, meanings, and motivation behind a visual image" (Lyga and Lyga 2004).

According to Drego Little in "In a Single Bound: A Short Primer on Comics for Educators," the form "appears simple at first but is actually a complex cognitive task" (Little 2005). Three primary phenomena occur, interconnected and overlapping, when reading sequential art. They are:

closure—the brain's capacity to create complete images out of partial ones, to fill in gaps and construct a sequence where none specifically exists

narrative density—the interpretation of the full range of many layers of information that a single panel can convey

amplification—the ability of pictures and words to scaffold one another to support full comprehension (Little 2005)

"Because the images and the words are both working to convey the same story arc, comics provide a type of literacy support no other medium does" (Little 2005). Children who read comics growing up even show a larger vocabulary and a better understanding of verb tenses than children who do not (Smetana 2009). Indeed, countries with high national literacy rates also tend to have a thriving comic culture, one that is respected by adult interest and has authority figure approval, such as Finland and Japan (Little 2005).

With information like this to build on, sequential art gains ever more purchase as a pedagogical tool. In New York, Columbia University's Teachers College has created the Comic Book Project, a program that uses sequential art creation to expand children's interest in reading and story creation. Since the program began in an elementary school in Queens, New York, "it has expanded to 860 schools across the country" as teachers realize that "for kids who may be struggling and for kids who may be new to the English language, that visual sequence is a very powerful tool" (Gootman 2007).

Indeed, in the spring of 2008 the New York Department of Education began a program to train many of the city's school librarians in selecting and teaching graphic novels as a tool to inspire student's interest in reading and literacy.

Yet another application was found in a state school in Northern California engaged in a literacy program for deaf students in 2008. Given that a deaf person's primary means of communication is visual, it seemed a natural fit. Sure enough, the teachers found great success in both building interest in their deaf students and raising comprehension levels because "due to their visual nature, comics and graphic novels provide a context-rich, high-interest story environment for acquiring new vocabulary" (Smetana 2009).

In the face of all this, you may still hear the cry go up that graphic novels are merely "picture books for older kids" and that the visual element simply makes it a reading shortcut and lowers comprehension. A study conducted by Mallia Gorg, however, counters this handily. Gorg represented the same story in three different forms: one as written text, another as written text with a small number of illustrations, and a last version in classic comic book style with sequential panels of art and words. Three different groups of students were presented with one version each and then asked questions to determine comprehension level. The results showed no significant difference whatsoever in the test scores, proving that the comic version was just as effective as the more traditional two in putting across the story and message (Gorg 2007).

The heart of the matter is, perhaps, best summed up by James Sturm, a graphic novel writer and artist and director of Vermont's Center for Cartoon Studies, who noted that "there is plenty of information out there. Google and Wikipedia can provide a biography in seconds. It is stories that give information meaning. Compelling stories make readers want to learn or do more" (Karp 2008).

Graphic novels, in other words, help students invest in their own education.

2

HOW DO GRAPHIC NOVELS WORK?

SEQUENTIAL ART COMBINES WORDS, WHICH APPEAL TO THE intellect, and pictures, which appeal to the emotions, in a way that no other art form does. Unlike picture books, the words and pictures in sequential art coexist in the same conceptual space (the panel) and are joined into a single piece (usually via word balloons). Unlike movies, the words and pictures in sequential art are perceived at the speed the reader desires and with the same sense (visually), and thus have a unique and essential unity in the way the reader experiences them. By joining the intellect and the emotions together as it does, sequential art has a vast and unique potential for creating powerful narrative.

However, to tell a story in sequential art, something vital is required: a sequence. Without the images relating to one another, you may have some interesting things to look at, but you don't have a story any more than you would if you joined unrelated words together. And, like words, the images must relate in a specifically chronological and contextual way. One image must lead into the next and the next, thus creating a sequence. And for a sequence to exist, time must pass, because that's what a sequence is: related incidents occurring one after the other. For "after" to occur, time must pass. That's really the secret of this entire enterprise called sequential art. It is, at its very core, a manner of showing you that time is passing. Even within a single panel, it is often necessary to arrange images in a sequence for this purpose. That's the sequential. The art, of course, is in *how* you make the time appear to pass. It is within this span that expression comes to bear, revealing action, emotion, character, and everything else necessary to a compelling story.

Sequential art has only three tools at its disposal for creating this illusion. These are (1) the gutter (the space in between panels), (2) symbols and codes, and (3) words. Essentially, everything you see in a comic or GN will adhere to one or more of these three techniques, which we will now explore individually and at length.

GETTING YOUR MIND INTO THE GUTTER

Time cannot actually pass within a still image, and if that time cannot pass *within* the panels, then there's only one place left for time to do its business: *in between* the panels. The space in between two panels, be it a vast channel or a nearly invisible millimeter of dark line, is known as the *gutter*. An artist strives to create the perception of passing time by using this internecine space; to, in effect, make *us* create the passage of time within the gutter merely by suggesting that passage in the panels on either side of it.

What's happening, exactly, in figure 2.1? The man jumped, right? Wrong, actually. The first panel within figure 2.1 shows the man about to jump, and the second panel shows him landing. No actual jump has occurred in that sequence, except for the jump you created by following the artist's suggestions. The two panels in figure 2.1 depict a man jumping without actually showing a jump. The gutter is where a skilled artist will make you do all the work. Depending on the skill of the artist, or the effect he is trying to achieve, he can let more or less action or time occur within the gutter.



FIGURE 2.1

What have we got in figure 2.2? There's a man actually jumping, right? Wrong again. A man can't actually jump in still images, no matter how many there are. Figure 2.2 is in fact the same as figure 2.1 with the addition of a middle panel in which a man is frozen in the air. The depiction of the jump here is rather more explicit, and playing with this simple sequence can reveal the artist's motives and perhaps even the nature of the story he's trying to tell. The simpler sequence in figure 2.1 suggests the same jump, but it's a quicker way of showing the action. This leaves room in other places for what the artist deems more important story elements.

Heading further away from the simplicity of figure 2.1, you have figure 2.3. Here, again, is the same jump, but with rather more specific moments depicted. You see not only the jump, but perhaps how difficult the jump is, how agile the man jumping is, how far the two cliff edges are. This takes up more space and conveys more drama and suggests that this story may be more action oriented. Superhero comics commonly feature a high panel-to-action ratio, lavishing space on fisticuffs and giving rather less space to straightforward dialogue, for instance. Little surprise, since superhero stories are, in many ways, about action, and the characters themselves are defined not only by the actions they take, but also by the



FIGURE 2.2

specific ways they take them. You don't imagine Spider-Man engaging in the same kind of fight that Superman does, right? Spider-Man bounces off walls, dodges bullets, spins webs from a distance, leaps in for quick punches and kicks. Superman is an unstoppable force, implacable, warding off bullets by merely standing still and throwing large punches to devastating effect. That says something about the characters, and to define those things, their actions need to be quite detailed. There are other comics, meanwhile, that fill entire pages with dozens of panels of two heads talking. Granted, this is a more experimental, indie-spirited kind of a page composition, but just flipping through the two different styles will quickly tell you how time is intended to pass and thus what sort of a story to expect.



FIGURE 2.3

The panel itself, the actual borders that define the space of the image, are malleable, too. Generally speaking, simple and uncrowded page composition transmits a story most effectively, but there are exceptions. Splash pages (full-page images) are fairly common in action-oriented comics to give an even greater scale or impact. Occasionally a panel effect can be used to transmit subtle nuances. Because the panel borders determine our perception of the space the story exists in, a panel shape like the one in figure 2.4 can alter our sense of distance or time as, here, we have a more thoughtful and majestic tone than the previous “action shots.”



FIGURE 2.4

The story is not just *in* the panels, but just as important, *in between* the panels, not to mention what the very lines of the panels themselves have to say.

But, since I mentioned it, what exactly is in the panels, anyway?

#&@\$\$\$&

Within a single panel of sequential art, there's plenty to see. Even disregarding the figural images, there's often an array of things to interpret. There are words, of course, but before we even get to those, there's a form of language even more rudimentary. If time is to be made to pass within a single panel, if there is any action to be taken, then it is this language that will drive the image, suggest animation to us much as the gutter does in between the panels. These are symbols and codes that function as the specific language of sequential art and have become so integrated into the experience that we generally take them for granted. We take in only the effect of these symbols, just as we don't spend time interpreting a question mark at the end of a sentence.

The most common symbol in sequential art is the word balloon, the white bubble that indicates its speaker with a pointed stem. The balloons are meant to hold words, but still ignoring those words, the balloons themselves can have a variety of meanings. Figure 2.5 contains four sorts of word balloons: (1) a speech balloon, (2) a whisper balloon, (3) a thought balloon, and (4) a shouting balloon. These symbols function such that you don't even need to look inside the balloon to get a sense of what is being expressed.

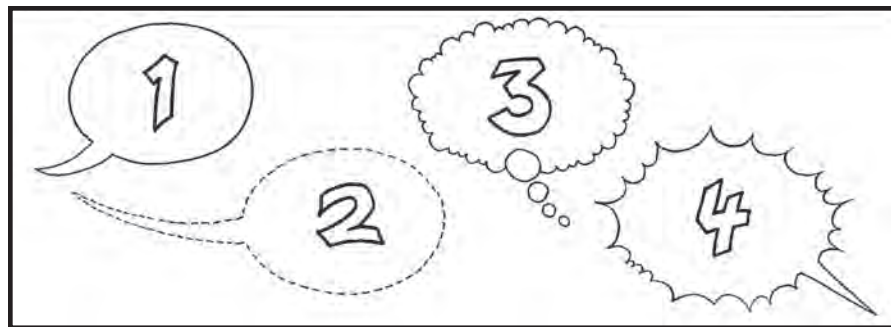


FIGURE 2.5

As I said, the balloons generally contain words. However, other symbols can sometimes express an idea just as elegantly. Put a lone question mark within a speech or thought balloon and you understand what the character is feeling. Put a “&\$#@!” inside a shout balloon and . . . you see where I'm going.

Leaving the word balloons behind, there's still an awful lot with which to work. The most elementary way to convey the passage of time in sequential art is through movement, and if you need to do that in a single panel you've got a few choices. Remember our jumper? Figure 2.6 matches the middle panel from figure 2.2, but this time it has speed lines indicating his progress. The same fellow is making the same jump, but the motion, or speed, lines convey his movement within the single panel, dramatizing the effect of the jump without extraneous panels.

In figure 2.7 we have the same jumper again, this time with the ghosting or doubling effect behind him, showing a detailed progress of his entire jump. This has the effect of hyperfocusing the reader on the action, highlighting it much as slow motion would in film.

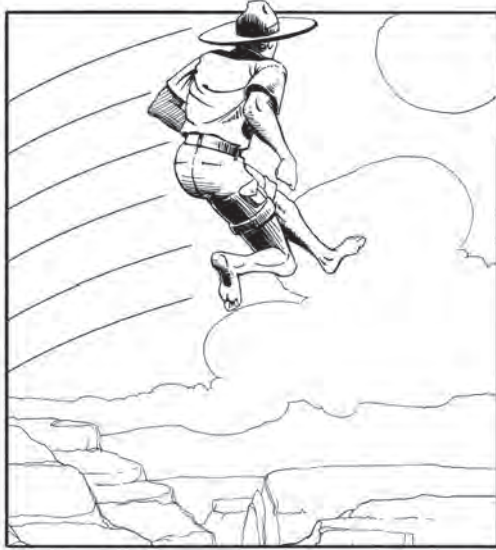


FIGURE 2.6

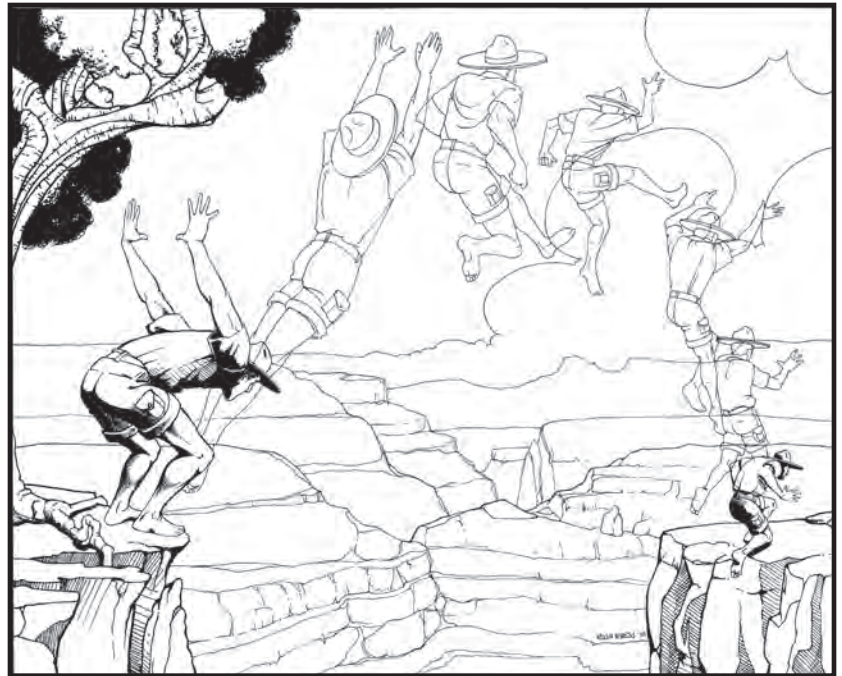


FIGURE 2.7

Going beyond motion, there is a vast array of symbols constructed to give a sense of emotion and conditions. The first panel in figure 2.8 depicts a plate of food. Would you care for a bite of this food? Perhaps you should wait a bit because it's quite hot, as indicated by the heat symbols rising from it. In the second panel, a man hoping for a plate of ice cream or perhaps some cool lemonade after a hot day's work instead finds hot food waiting. How does he feel about it? I'm sure you can tell, even though you can't see his face or hear his words, as the anger lines emanating from him make it plain.

These examples barely scratch the surface of the vast lexicon of symbols and codes used in sequential art. If you think about it, I'm sure you can conjure a few, even if you've barely cracked a comic book in your life. The argument can be made, of course, that sequential art functions solely on symbols. What is an image after all, but a form of symbol? The more obscure the representation is from the actual thing being represented, the more acute our interpretive abilities must be. Take a face, for example. The less specific an image becomes,

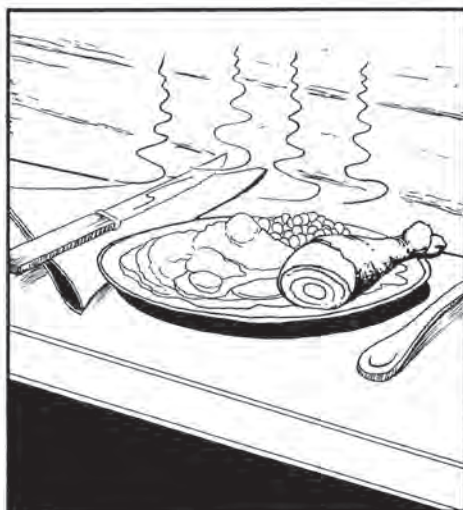


FIGURE 2.8

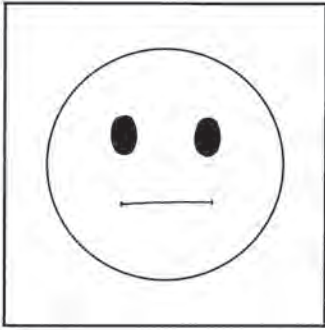


FIGURE 2.9

the more symbolic it appears. The face in figure 2.9 is the most abstract (that is, most obscure from the actual object) way you can possibly reproduce the thing known as a face in symbols and still recognize it, right? As Scott McCloud pointed out in his seminal (and incomparable) *Understanding Comics*, you can, in fact, depict a face still more abstractly. Here's how: FACE (Harper 1994). Letters and words are the most common form of iconography we have, and their symbiosis with images is the power of sequential art.

IF A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS, HOW MANY WORDS IS A PICTURE WITH WORDS IN IT WORTH?

First and foremost, the very presence of spoken words within a panel demands the passage of time. How can a word be spoken unless time is passing? In figure 2.10, the first panel shows us, merely through its use of spoken word, a moment of time passing. The second shows us a longer stretch of time passing, all within a single panel.



FIGURE 2.10

Let's look at the way the words themselves are portrayed. What is being said or thought certainly tells us something about a character, but so does the manner in which it's being said or thought. In figure 2.11, the first panel conveys the thought and feeling. The second panel makes the point somewhat more forcefully—not just in the shape of the word balloon, but also in the font of the letters themselves. Still more dramatic is the sense of isolation, sorrow, and uncertainty conveyed in the third panel, specifically because of the size and lightness of the words within the balloon.

Outside the confines of a single panel, words change and sometimes even create the relationship between images, the very sequence itself. In figure 2.12, the first sequence certainly tells you what's happening, but the second sequence gives a stronger sense of continuity between the panels and heightens the tension of the moment.



FIGURE 2.11

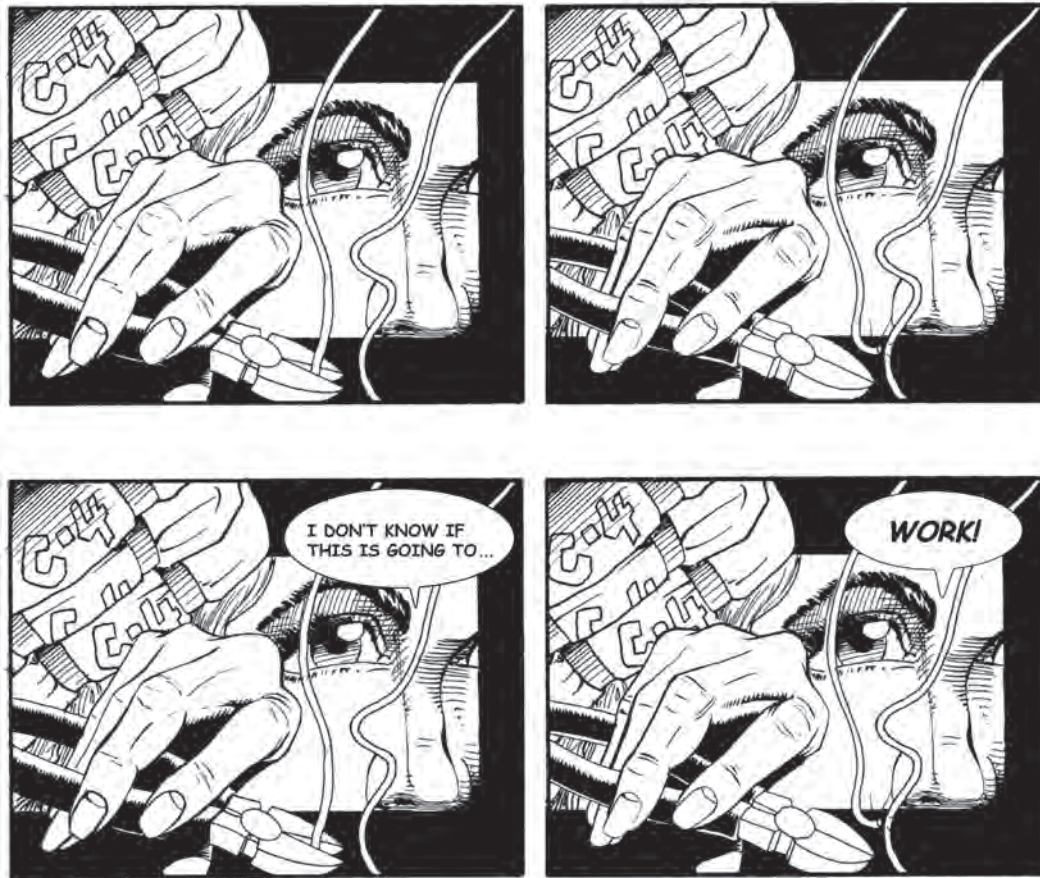


FIGURE 2.12

Subtle shadings are created by making choices about word placement, such as in figures 2.13 and 2.14. The first panel does not particularly cry out for attention to the emotional undercurrents of the situation. The sequence of panels beneath suggests a more noteworthy message.

And that's just the spoken word.

The caption, the free-floating box in the panel that contains narration, has fallen into far less use in sequential art these days. Back in the golden age of the panel, they were as integral to the sequential art experience as the word balloons themselves, panels often crowded with both description and conversation (the old EC Comics of the 1950s are a prime example of this style). As the sophistication of the art has grown, however, storytellers have found that



FIGURE 2.13



FIGURE 2.14

narration, especially that which duplicates the message given by the image within the same panel, tends to bog down the story. These days, images and dialogue function elegantly on their own, in most instances. There are, however, some cases in which the caption remains integral.

The subjective narration of a character depicted within a caption can give a cinematic voice-over quality to a story at the same time that it illuminates character and motive. The image in figure 2.15 is surely made more intense by the narration, more so than it would have been in a thought balloon, as the caption gives a greater sense of removal, disassociation, and omniscience.



FIGURE 2.15

The caption is also still the most effective way of tying images into a sequence when there might otherwise appear to be no connection whatsoever. The first sequence in figure 2.16 may as well not even be a sequence for all the connection it has. But add a single word to the second panel and you have an instant contextual connection, thus illustrating the difference between what is merely art in sequence and what is sequential art.

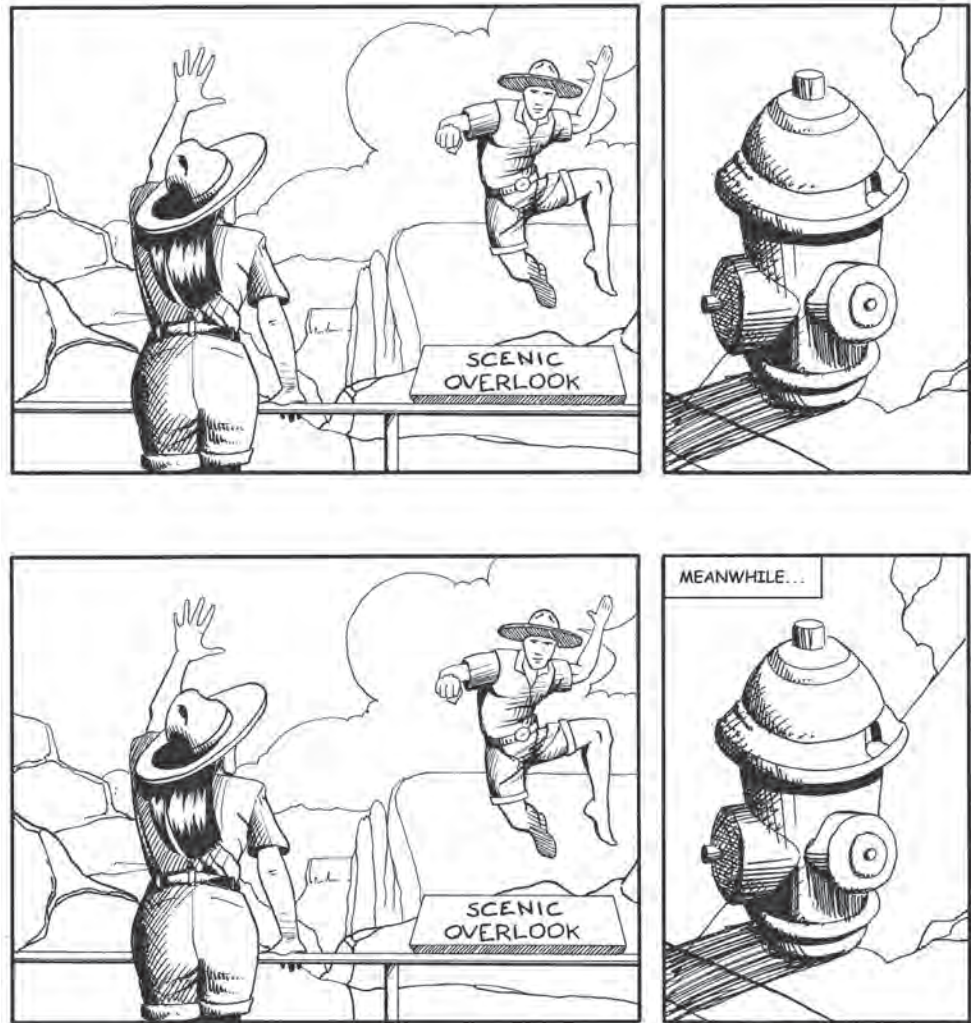


FIGURE 2.16

The gutter, symbols and codes, and words are the three methods that sequential art uses to convey the passage of time and to highlight the storytelling necessities of character and emotion. I'm going to go ahead and say that you will not find a piece of narrative sequential art that doesn't conform to this rule (and, yes, I have come across rare exceptions). But within these three methods is a vast array of possibility, and every culture, to say nothing of every artist, puts its own stamp on the art form.

3

DISREPUTABLE PICTURES A Brief Word about Manga

WHILE THIS IS BY NO MEANS A BOOK ABOUT MANGA, ANY discussion of sequential art at this point in time must involve some consideration of the Japanese form, given its astonishing rise in popularity since 2000. *Manga* (pronounced mahn-ga, *not* mayn-ga) is a Japanese word meaning “disreputable pictures” or “whimsical pictures” and, to be succinct about it, is simply the Japanese version of a comic book. Ah, but even within that straightforward distinction there is room for a great deal of divergence.

Comics have had a long hard climb for widespread respectability in the United States (which they’re still struggling through in many ways). Other cultures have long been more accepting of the form, to some extent because no other culture has seen the form dominated by a single genre like we have (that would be superheroes, a genre mainly associated with children’s interests). France, in particular, has an extensive history of more adult-oriented fare within the medium, referring to the form as “the Ninth Art.” However, no place has it over Japan in this regard. In an astonishing figure, 22 percent of all printed material in Japan is manga. This is no doubt the result of the fact that manga covers a vast range of genres and is aimed at so many different interests and reading levels. There is no shame in cracking one open, regardless of age. Riding the subway in Tokyo, you are likely to see “graying salarymen, twenty-something [*sic*] hipsters, and schoolgirls all paging through a manga” (Pink 2007).

Even in the United States, the power of manga has become undeniable. Between 2003 and 2007, manga sales in the United States tripled (Pink 2007), and between 2000 and 2006, manga went from “a third of the \$75 million graphic novel industry to claiming almost two-thirds of what is now a \$330 million movement” (Thompson 2007). Even given the vast \$255 million rise in the income over six years of the GN industry itself, when it

comes to manga “nothing in the bookstore market has seen that sort of evolution in such a short time” (Thompson 2007).

What, exactly, makes manga so popular with our kids? So many of the animated television programs and video games that children and young adults are consuming are created and produced in Japan; everything from Pokemon to the ever-popular Naruto series. The aesthetic sensibility of the manga, in particular, has become a permanent fixture of the American cultural landscape and a visual language with which kids and young adults feel comfortably familiar. As the manga style of art and storytelling becomes so popular, it’s little wonder that American artists and publishers are beginning to adapt and synthesize it into the production of American comics.

So just what are some of these differences, anyway?

DEATHMATCH: MANGA VERSUS COMICS

Let’s get this obvious one out of the way first. Manga in its original Japanese form is meant to be read from right to left, and is thus designed that way. This isn’t just a matter of the page and panel sequence, but applies to the imagery and word balloons within the panels themselves. Many manga are reproduced in this country with the original sequence intact, and reading them can take some getting used to. While this is a significant difference in form, it does not change the inherent nature of the stories. Indeed, there are plenty of manga reproduced for this country that reverse the original sequence into a familiar left-to-right order, and this has no essential effect on the content.

Comic book and GN content fall into various genres. Superheroes still tend to rule the form around here, but crime and horror are gaining ground and there’s humor, sci-fi, and adult popping around, too, and at least a few examples of pretty much any genre interest you could think of. However, manga focuses genre through the lens of gender and age in a very specific way, targeting not only reading levels and genre interest, but also gender in a clear, intentional manner that American publishers do not. *Shonen* is boys’ manga: action, sci-fi, fantasy, and sports (nearly an unheard of subject in American comics). *Shojo* is girls’ manga and focuses on romance, mystery, and horror. *Seinen* and *josei* are manga targeted at older men and women, respectively (generally college age and up) and reflect this not only in genre choice, but also in maturity and extremity of content. Manga has embraced the divergent demographics of its readership and so has ended up with a wider and more immediate appeal to female readership and to older, more serious adult readers, audiences that GNs are just now beginning to lure at significant rates. One area in which manga flags by comparison is—can you guess?—the superhero genre. Why did the American comic form embrace superheroes so wholeheartedly? The answer is pent up in the history of the form and will be addressed in the next chapter.

What about the stories themselves? On a series-to-series basis, comics are generally open-ended; their stories and characters tend to run on and on until and if a dwindling readership makes it financially inadvisable to continue. Manga series are usually finite, running anywhere from four to thirty volumes, though not as a rule. The point is that a manga series is conceived as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, while comics generally are not.

Those are some all-encompassing ways in which the formats themselves differ. But what about content? The first thing you come to when you open either one is the art, and the

first thing you'll notice is that comics are nearly always in color, while manga are, by vast majority, not. But that's merely the surface.

Although we're starting to see aspects of the manga aesthetic in American comics, there is little mistaking the art style in one for the other. Depending on the genre, manga figural art tends to contain more extreme stylization than comics, the figures being more pliable, elongated, and what many would call "cartoonish," as seen in figure 3.1. The art is, by and large, less literal, if you will, often intended to suggest the emotion of the character or situation rather than the actual appearance.



FIGURE 3.1

Itazura Na Kiss, © Kaoru Tada/minato-pro-Mz-Plan. All rights reserved. Original Japanese edition published in 2008 by FAIRBELL Corporation, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with FAIRBELL Corporation, Tokyo. English translation © 2009 Digital Manga, Inc.

Meanwhile, manga background or object art tends toward realism of an intensely acute variety. Images of guns (as in figure 3.2), cars, trees, buildings, can be so realistic that they border on the fetishistic.

Deeper philosophical differences emerge. Take this action sequence from a comic in figure 3.3 and compare it to the action sequence from a manga in figure 3.4. The panels in the Spider-Man comic depict the pose of a strike, the look on a face at impact. The only sound effects here are the sounds of that impact, and each such impact is highlighted by



FIGURE 3.2

Hellsing Volume 1 (1998).
 HELLSING volume 1 © KOHTA
 HIRANO 1998. Originally published
 in Japan in 1998 by SHONEN
 GAHOSHA Co., Ltd., TOKYO.
 English translation rights arranged
 with SHONEN GAHOSHA Co.,
 Ltd., TOKYO through TOHAN
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 Comics, Inc./Digital Manga, Inc.

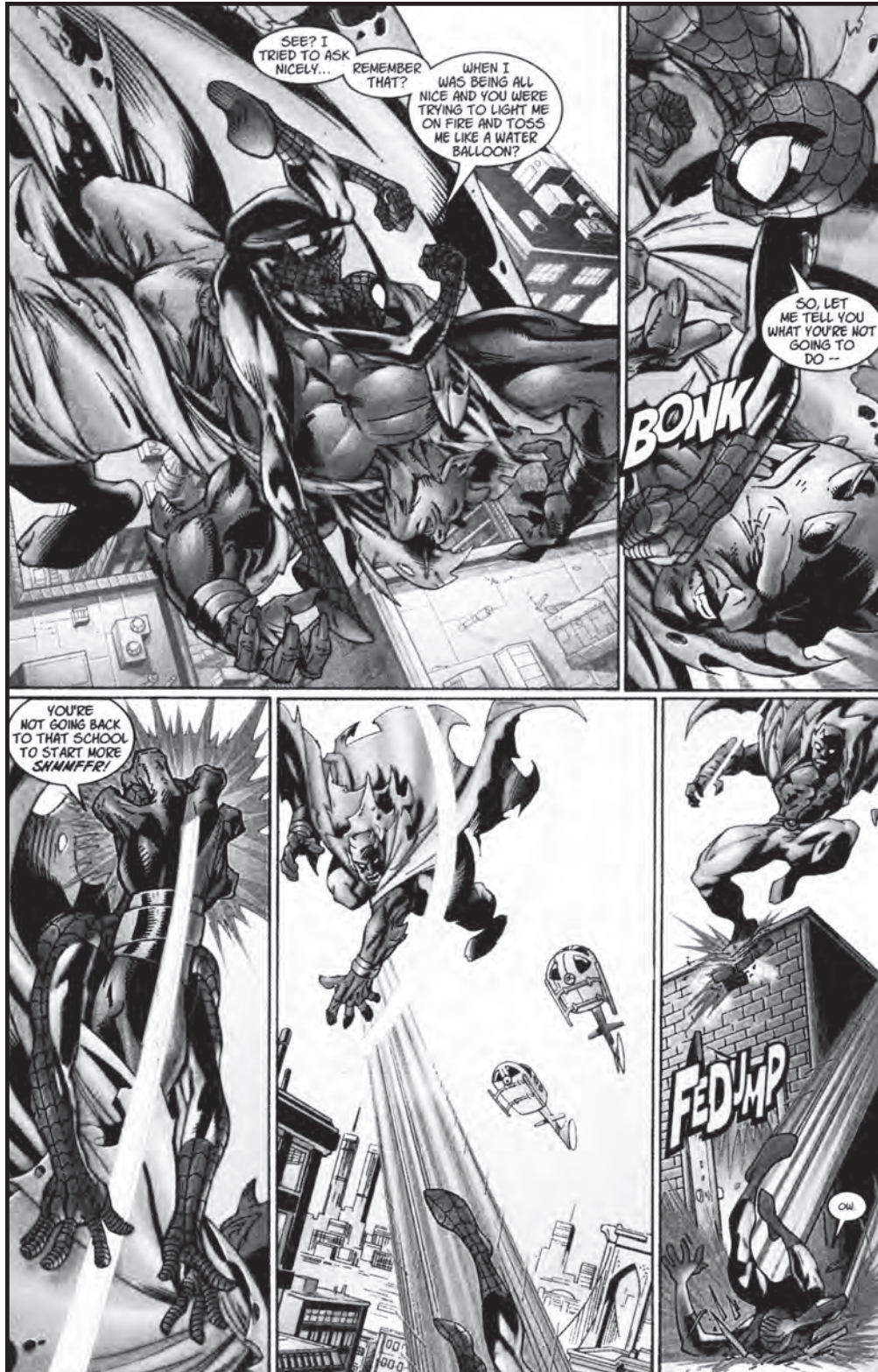


FIGURE 3.3
Ultimate Spider-Man #7. Spider-Man and all other Marvel characters: TM and © 2010 Marvel Entertainment, LLC. and its subsidiaries. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 3.4

Hellsing Volume 1 (1998).
HELLSING volume 1 © KOHTA
HIRANO 1998. Originally published
in Japan in 1998 by SHONEN
GAHOSHA Co., Ltd., TOKYO.
English translation rights arranged
with SHONEN GAHOSHA Co.,
Ltd., TOKYO through TOHAN
CORPORATION, TOKYO. English
translation copyright Dark Horse
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a “flash of light” effect. Even the motion effects, as when Spider-Man is being thrown by his enemy, make it look as though he’s blasting away like a rocket ship. The panels in the manga *Hellsing*, though they certainly contain impact, are about the effort of the movement leading up to it, the motion of the characters, as highlighted both by the riot of speed lines that make figures seem a blur of motion and the sound effects that spring from the effort behind the movements and the sound of air being cut by motion. From these representative examples we can gather something crucial about the nature of the individual media. American sequential art is about action, which is to say the *effect* of movement. Manga strives to capture the action as it happens, which is to say the *movement itself*. Does the American interest in result and the Japanese concentration on process say something salient about the cultures themselves? You will have to be the judge of that.

As we look at the art as a visual language—as we discussed at length in the last chapter—some more extreme differences become evident. This should come as no surprise because symbols and visual codes develop from a culture’s deeper understanding of itself. The more distinct the cultures, the more distinct their symbols. Another whole book could be filled with an analysis of manga’s own codes and symbols. For the sake of a simple example, let’s look at one that points up the more obvious differences between manga and American comics.

Where we tend to let a character’s facial expressions, or the situation they’re in, spell out their emotional condition, manga will often add a descriptive effect. These can be utterly literal, as in figure 3.5.

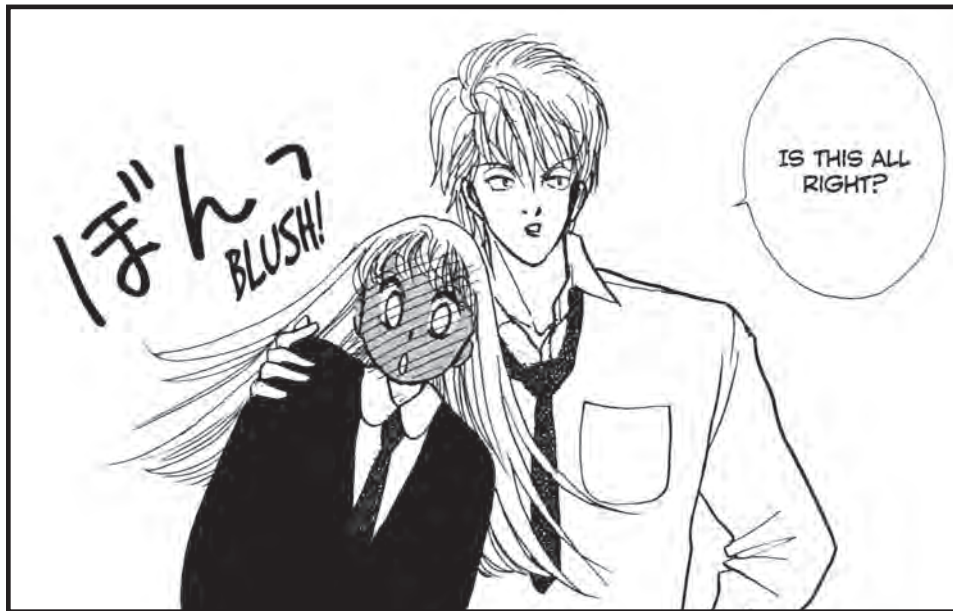


FIGURE 3.5

Itazura Na Kiss. © Kaoru Tada/minato-pro-Mz-Plan. All rights reserved. Original Japanese edition published in 2008 by FAIRBELL Corporation, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with FAIRBELL Corporation, Tokyo. English translation © 2009 Digital Manga, Inc.

They can also be more whimsical, as with the *chibi* version of the face in the second panel of figure 3.6, who is the same character as the more realistic one in the first panel of the same figure. *Chibi* (meaning “short person” or “small child”) are small or cartoonishly extreme versions of a character in the midst of emotional moments or difficult decisions, whose facial expressions or speech reflect the emotional issue at stake.

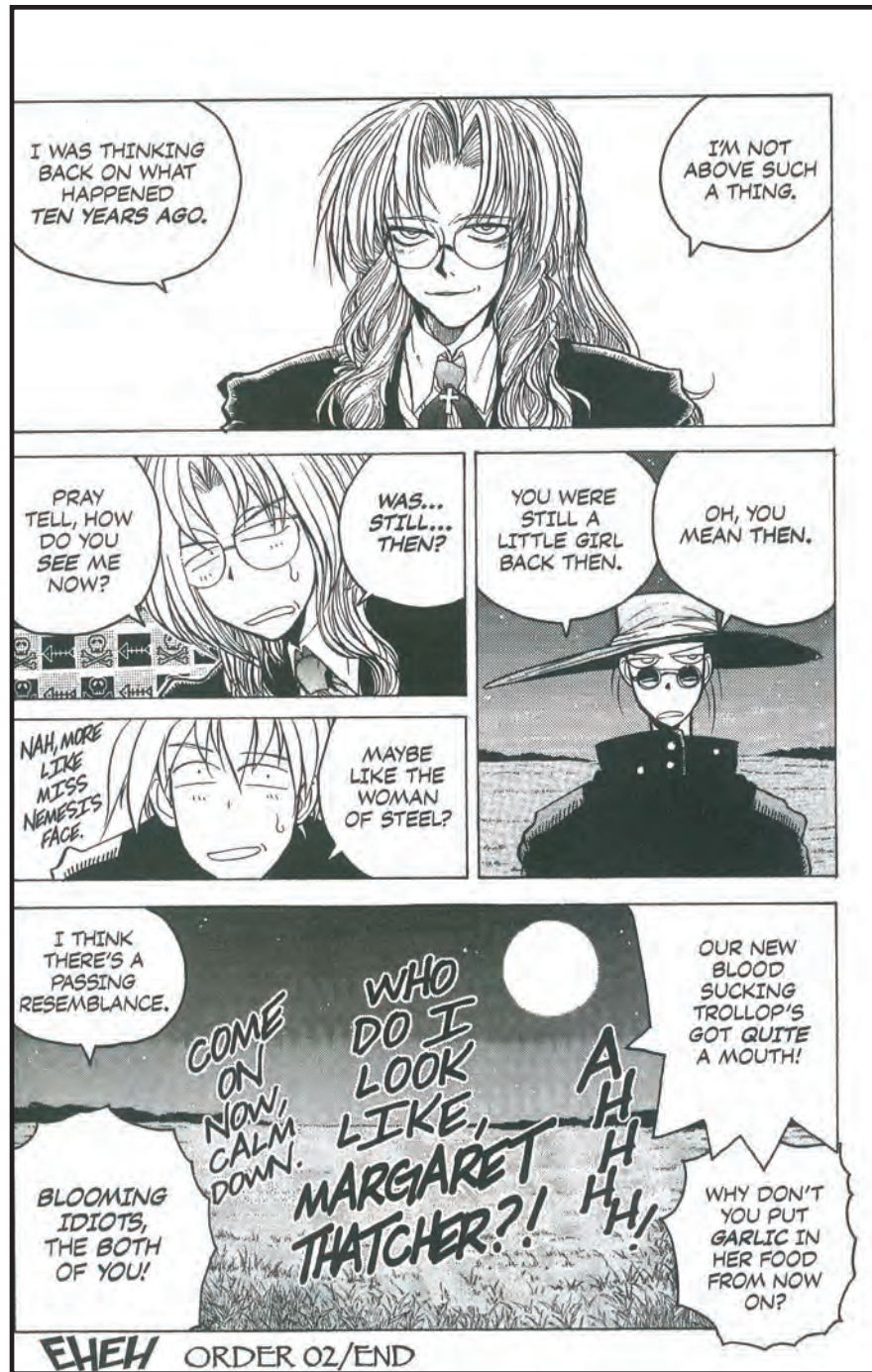


FIGURE 3.6

Hellsing Volume 1 (1998). HELLSING volume 1 © KOHTA HIRANO 1998. Originally published in Japan in 1998 by SHONEN GAHOSHA Co., Ltd., TOKYO. English translation rights arranged with SHONEN GAHOSHA Co., Ltd., TOKYO through TOHAN CORPORATION, TOKYO. English translation copyright Dark Horse Comics, Inc./Digital Manga, Inc.

These are simply two of the codes that manga uses to make the emotional lives of its characters more evident with conceptual techniques, an abstraction playing in the “real world” of the story. This prevalence of abstract or spiritual elements in manga, which are largely absent from comics and GN, again speak to the very nature of the cultures that produce these forms.

American comics favor a cause-and-effect philosophy, a result-oriented style, and they are more literal, more concrete and material oriented in their depictions. As manga favors not the result as much as the path to it, the value of a flowing process, it is also more comfortable with depictions of the abstract or spiritual elements that seem to have little place in comics. These are not hard-and-fast rules that apply to every example within each medium. This area has received little study and so at this time remains largely theoretical. (To my knowledge there has been no work whatsoever examining these deeper thematic concerns in comparison, leaving a crucial area of cultural comparison wide open to the right scholar.)

Manga is a format that is absolutely worth your time to examine more closely elsewhere, as its popularity among young readers demands. Although I will touch on examples of it as we go, it is not our focus here. Sequential art was born in the United States and in many ways is still a uniquely American form. As we’re about to see, its history and evolution reveal significant messages about our own society and culture.

DISCUSSION TOPIC INDEX

A

- art history (comics)
 - Batman: The Story of the Dark Knight*, 56
 - Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman*, 61
 - Casper the Friendly Ghost 60th Anniversary Special*, 56
 - DC Chronicles series, 66
 - EC Archives: Two-Fisted Tales series, 82, 119
 - Marvel Masterworks series, 67, 113
 - TOON Treasury of Classic Children's Comics*, 59
 - Understanding Comics*, 83
- art history (literature)
 - Classical comics adaptations (Shakespeare), 86–87
 - Graphic Revolve Literary Classics series, 66–67
 - The Jungle*, 87–88
 - Kill Shakespeare, Volume 1*, 83, 124
 - Manga Shakespeare series, 87
 - Masterpiece Comics*, 99–100
 - Merchant of Venice*, 99
 - The Odyssey* (Hinds adaptation), 94, 123
 - The Odyssey* (Mucci adaptation), 70, 123
 - Olympians series, 68
 - Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451*, 76–77
 - The Unwritten series, 91–92
- art history (visual)
 - Museum Vaults: Excerpts from the Journal of an Expert*, 83
- arts
 - Epileptic*, 90
 - Set to Sea*, 103
- arts (dance)
 - To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel*, 65

- arts (music)
 - Garage Band*, 93–94
- arts (visual)
 - Adventures in Cartooning: How to Turn Your Doodles into Comics*, 61, 109
 - The Arrival*, 72, 114, 118, 120
 - Batwoman: Elegy*, 98
 - Big Fat Little Lit*, 63
 - Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*, 103, 114
 - Little Lit: Folklore and Fairy Tale Funnies*, 63
 - Little Lit: It Was a Dark and Silly Night*, 63
 - Little Lit: Strange Stories for Strange Kids*, 63
 - Salem Brownstone*, 79, 114
 - Understanding Comics*, 83

C

- careers
 - Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean*, 69, 118
 - Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman*, 61
 - Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 90–91
 - The Homeless Channel*, 100
 - The Jungle*, 87–88
 - Lunch Lady series, 62
 - Matthew Henson: Arctic Adventurer*, 62, 118
 - Re-Gifters*, 78
 - Set to Sea*, 103
 - The Strongest Man in the World: Louis Cyr*, 60
 - Superman for All Seasons*, 82, 123, 127
 - To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel*, 65
- coming-of-age
 - Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean*, 69, 118

- Blankets*, 101
- Buffy Season Eight series, 103–104
- Calamity Jack*, 67
- The Castaways*, 73, 118
- Chiggers*, 82
- The Complete Persepolis*, 98–99
- A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, 92–93
- Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence*, 77–78
- Garage Band*, 93–94
- Ghost World*, 92
- Green Lantern: Secret Origin*, 81
- Invincible series, 81
- Katman*, 85
- Marvel Masterworks series, 67, 113
- Notes for a War Story*, 80
- The Plain Janes*, 78, 118
- Rapunzel's Revenge*, 67
- Refresh, Refresh*, 85
- Re-Gifters*, 78
- Runaways series, 89
- Set to Sea*, 103
- Skim*, 101
- Smile*, 73, 120
- Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane series, 83–84
- The Storm in the Barn*, 68, 118, 119
- Superman: Birthright*, 103, 127
- Superman for All Seasons*, 82, 123, 127
- Ultimate Spider-Man series, 5, 5 (fig. 1.2), 22–23, 23 (fig. 3.3), 76, 123
- X-Men: Magneto Testament*, 97–98, 119
- Y: The Last Man series, 102

D

- dating and relationships
 - American Born Chinese*, 89, 121–122
 - Astro City series, 77
 - Batwoman: Elegy*, 98

dating and relationships (cont.)

- Blankets*, 101
- Chiggers*, 82
- Concrete series, 92
- A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, 92–93
- Fables series, 104
- Ghost World*, 92
- The Homeless Channel*, 100
- Invincible series, 81
- Katman*, 85
- Merchant of Venice*, 99
- Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451*, 76–77
- Re-Gifters*, 78
- Runaways series, 89
- Sandman: The Dream Hunters*, 93
- Shadow Eyes*, 77
- Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane series, 83–84
- Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics from an Unpleasant Age*, 86
- Ultimate Spider-Man series, 5, 5 (fig. 1.2), 22–23, 23 (fig. 3.3), 76, 123
- The Unwritten series, 91–92
- Walking Dead series, 94–95
- Wonder Woman: The Circle*, 87
- X-Force: Famous, Mutant, and Mortal*, 96
- X-Men: Magneto Testament*, 97–98, 119
- Y: The Last Man series, 102

drug use

- Spider-Man Noir* series, 81

F

family issues

- A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge*, 97, 118
- Age of Bronze series, 99, 118
- Amelia Rules series, 64
- Amulet series, 70–71
- The Arrival*, 72, 114, 118, 120
- Astro City series, 77
- Babymouse series, 60–61
- Batwoman: Elegy*, 98
- Beowulf*, 80, 118
- Blankets*, 101
- Book of Genesis*. Adapted by Robert Crumb, 91, 118
- Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman*, 61
- The Castaways*, 73, 118
- The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, 88, 119
- The Complete Persepolis*, 98–99
- A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, 92–93
- Ender's Game: Battle School*, 78
- Ender's Shadow: Battle School*, 78

- Epileptic*, 90
- Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 90–91
- Grampa and Julie: Shark Hunters*, 58
- The Homeless Channel*, 100
- Hyperactive*, 62
- Invincible series, 81
- James Sturm's America: God, Gold, and Golems*, 101, 118
- Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*, 103, 114
- The Jungle*, 87–88
- Kapow!*, 56
- Kill Shakespeare, Volume 1*, 83, 124
- King David*, 90, 118
- Magic Trixie series, 63
- Marvel Masterworks series, 67, 113
- Master Man: A Tall Tale of Nigeria*, 58
- Meanwhile...*, 57
- The Odyssey* (Hinds adaptation), 94, 123
- The Odyssey* (Mucci adaptation), 70, 123
- Olympians series, 68
- Parade (with Fireworks)*, 79, 119
- The Plain Janes*, 78, 118
- Pluto: Urasawa x Tezuka series, 88
- Pride of Baghdad*, 88–89
- Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451*, 76–77
- Refresh, Refresh*, 85
- Runaways series, 89
- Sandman series, 93
- Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow*, 69, 118
- Shadow Eyes*, 77
- Smile*, 73, 120
- Stitches: A Memoir*, 100
- The Storm in the Barn*, 68, 118, 119
- The Strongest Man in the World: Louis Cyr*, 60
- Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics from an Unpleasant Age*, 86
- Superman for All Seasons*, 82, 123, 127
- Swallow Me Whole*, 98
- Toon Books Series, 57
- Ultimate Spider-Man series, 5, 5 (fig. 1.2), 22–23, 23 (fig. 3.3), 76, 123
- The Unwritten series, 91–92
- Walking Dead series, 94–95
- Watchmen*, 96–97, 127–128
- Y: The Last Man series, 102
- Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty*, 85

G

gender roles

- Adventures in Cartooning: How to Turn Your Doodles into Comics*, 61, 109
- Amelia Rules series, 64
- Amulet series, 70–71
- Astro City series, 77
- Babymouse series, 60–61
- Batwoman: Elegy*, 98
- Bio-Graphics series, 65–66
- Bone series, 72
- Calamity Jack*, 67
- Chiggers*, 82
- City of Spies*, 64
- The Complete Persepolis*, 98–99
- DC: The New Frontier*, 79
- The Fog Mound*, 62–63
- Ghost World*, 92
- Grampa and Julie: Shark Hunters*, 58
- The Homeless Channel*, 100
- Kapow!*, 56
- Katman*, 85
- Kingdom Come*, 102, 124
- Korgi*, 57
- Lunch Lady series, 62
- Magic Trixie series, 63
- Orbital, Volume 1: Scars and Volume 2: Ruptures*, 85
- The Plain Janes*, 78, 118
- Rapunzel's Revenge*, 67
- Re-Gifters*, 78
- Runaways series, 89
- Sandman: The Dream Hunters*, 93
- The Secret Science Alliance and the Copycat Crook*, 66
- Shadow Eyes*, 77
- Smile*, 73, 120
- Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane series, 83–84
- Spiral Bound*, 68
- Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics from an Unpleasant Age*, 86
- Superman: Birthright*, 103, 127
- Superman for All Seasons*, 82, 123, 127
- To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel*, 65
- Toon Books Series, 57
- Ultimate Spider-Man series, 5, 5 (fig. 1.2), 22–23, 23 (fig. 3.3), 76, 123
- Walking Dead series, 94–95
- Watchmen*, 96–97, 127–128
- Wonder Woman: The Circle*, 87
- X-Force: Famous, Mutant, and Mortal*, 96

- Y: The Last Man series, 102
Zita The Spacegirl, 60
- I**
- illness
- Epileptic*, 90
 - I Kill Giants*, 94
 - Stitches: A Memoir*, 100
 - The Storm in the Barn*, 68, 118, 119
 - Walking Dead series, 94–95
- L**
- language arts
- Adventures in Cartooning: How to Turn Your Doodles into Comics*, 61, 109
 - The Arrival*, 72, 114, 118, 120
 - Babymouse series, 60–61
 - Batman: The Story of the Dark Knight*, 56
 - Big Fat Little Lit*, 63
 - Casper the Friendly Ghost 60th Anniversary Special*, 56
 - The Fog Mound*, 62–63
 - Grampa and Julie: Shark Hunters*, 58
 - Graphic Spin Fairy Tales series, 58
 - House*, 100
 - Hyperactive*, 62
 - Kapow!*, 56
 - Korgi*, 57
 - Little Lit: Folklore and Fairy Tale Funnies*, 63
 - Little Lit: It Was a Dark and Silly Night*, 63
 - Little Lit: Strange Stories for Strange Kids*, 63
 - Meanwhile...*, 57
 - Owly series, 59
 - Robot Dreams*, 61
 - The Snowman*, 55–56, 107–108
 - Toon Books Series, 57
 - TOON Treasury of Classic Children's Comics*, 59
 - Zita The Spacegirl*, 60
- life skills
- Adventures in Cartooning: How to Turn Your Doodles into Comics*, 61, 109
 - The Adventures of Tintin series, 64
 - Amelia Rules series, 64
 - American Born Chinese*, 89, 121–122
 - The Arrival*, 72, 114, 118, 120
 - Astro City series, 77
 - Babymouse series, 60–61
 - Batwoman: Elegy*, 98
 - Blankets*, 101
 - Bone series, 72
 - Buffy Season Eight series, 103–104
 - Calamity Jack*, 67
 - Captain America: The Chosen*, 97
 - Casper the Friendly Ghost 60th Anniversary Special*, 56
 - Chiggers*, 82
 - City of Spies*, 64
 - Civil War*, 84, 122–123
 - The Complete Persepolis*, 98–99
 - Concrete series, 92
 - Ender's Game: Battle School*, 78
 - Ender's Shadow: Battle School*, 78
 - Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence*, 77–78
 - The Fog Mound*, 62–63
 - Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 90–91
 - Garage Band*, 93–94
 - Ghost World*, 92
 - Grampa and Julie: Shark Hunters*, 58
 - Green Lantern: Secret Origin*, 81
 - Gunnerkrigg Court series, 87
 - I Kill Giants*, 94
 - Invincible series, 81
 - Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*, 103, 114
 - The Jungle*, 87–88
 - Kapow!*, 56
 - Katman*, 85
 - Kingdom Come*, 102, 124
 - Korgi*, 57
 - Magic Trixie series, 63
 - Marvel Masterworks series, 67, 113
 - Master Man: A Tall Tale of Nigeria*, 58
 - Meanwhile...*, 57
 - Notes for a War Story*, 80
 - Omega the Unknown*, 95
 - Owly series, 59
 - The Plain Janes*, 78, 118
 - Rabbi Harvey series, 68–69
 - Rapunzel's Revenge*, 67
 - Refresh, Refresh*, 85
 - Re-Gifters*, 78
 - Robot Dreams*, 61
 - Runaways series, 89
 - The Secret Science Alliance and the Copycat Crook*, 66
 - Set to Sea*, 103
 - Shadow Eyes*, 77
 - Skim*, 101
 - Smile*, 73, 120
 - The Snowman*, 55–56, 107–108
 - Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane series, 83–84
 - Spider-Man Noir series, 81
 - Spiral Bound*, 68
 - Sticky Burr: Adventures in Burrwood Forest*, 59
 - The Storm in the Barn*, 68, 118, 119
 - Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics from an Unpleasant Age*, 86
 - Superman: Birthright*, 103, 127
 - Superman for All Seasons*, 82, 123, 127
 - To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel*, 65
 - Toon Books Series, 57
 - Trickster: Native American Tales*, 69
 - Ultimate Spider-Man series, 5, 5 (fig. 1.2), 22–23, 23 (fig. 3.3), 76, 123
 - The Unwritten series, 91–92
 - Usagi Yojimbo series, 71–72
 - Walking Dead series, 94–95
 - Watchmen*, 96–97, 127–128
 - X-Force: Famous, Mutant, and Mortal*, 96
 - Zita the Spacegirl*, 60
- M**
- mental health
- I Kill Giants*, 94
 - Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*, 103, 114
 - Stitches: A Memoir*, 100
 - Swallow Me Whole*, 98
 - Walking Dead series, 94–95
 - Watchmen*, 96–97, 127–128
- P**
- physically challenged
- Cameron and His Dinosaurs*, 65
 - World's Greatest Superheroes*, 70
- politics
- The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, 94, 118, 300, 96
 - A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge*, 97, 118
 - The Adventures of Tintin series, 64
 - Age of Bronze series, 99, 118
 - The Arrival*, 72, 114, 118, 120
 - Bio-Graphics series, 65–66
 - Bone series, 72
 - Captain America: Truth*, 84, 118, 119
 - Cartoon History series, 80, 118
 - Civil War*, 84, 122–123
 - The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, 88, 119
 - The Complete Persepolis*, 98–99
 - Dark Knight Returns*, 95–96
 - DC Chronicles series, 66
 - Dungeon series, 86
 - EC Archives: Two-Fisted Tales series, 82, 119
 - Ender's Game: Battle School*, 78
 - Ender's Shadow: Battle School*, 78
 - Fables series, 104
 - Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence*, 77–78
 - The Fog Mound*, 62–63

politics (cont.)

- Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel*, 66, 118
The Jungle, 87–88
Kill Shakespeare, Volume 1, 83, 124
King David, 90, 118
Kingdom Come, 102, 124
Laika, 75–76, 118
 Marvel Masterworks series, 67, 113
The Murder of Abraham Lincoln, 79–80, 118
The Odyssey (Hinds adaptation), 94, 123
The Odyssey (Mucci adaptation), 70, 123
Orbital, Volume 1: Scars and Volume 2: Ruptures, 85
Outlaw: The Legend of Robin Hood, 71
Parade (with Fireworks), 79, 119
Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, 76–77
Red Menace, 76, 118
Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow, 69, 118
Superman: Birthright, 103, 127
Superman: Red Son, 95
T-Minus: The Race to the Moon, 71, 118
 Usagi Yojimbo series, 71–72
Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon War Story, 93
Watchmen, 96–97, 127–128
Wonder Woman: The Circle, 87
World's Greatest Superheroes, 70
X-Men: Magneto Testament, 97–98, 119
 Y: The Last Man series, 102
- popular culture
Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman, 61
The Homeless Channel, 100
Houdini: The Handcuff King, 71, 112–113, 118
Hyperactive, 62
 The Unwritten series, 91–92
X-Force: Famous, Mutant, and Mortal, 96
- prejudice
A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge, 97, 118
American Born Chinese, 89, 121–122
The Arrival, 72, 114, 118, 120
 Astro City series, 77
 Bio-Graphics series, 65–66
Captain America: Truth, 84, 118, 119
The Castaways, 73, 118
The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale, 88, 119

- The Complete Persepolis*, 98–99
DC: The New Frontier, 79
 EC Archives: Two-Fisted Tales series, 82, 119
Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence, 77–78
The Fog Mound, 62–63
Incognegro, 81, 118
The Jungle, 87–88
 Marvels, 91
Matthew Henson: Arctic Adventurer, 62, 118
Merchant of Venice, 99
Nat Turner, 90, 118
Orbital, Volume 1: Scars and Volume 2: Ruptures, 85
 Pluto: Urasawa x Tezuka series, 88
Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow, 69, 118
World's Greatest Superheroes, 70
X-Men: Magneto Testament, 97–98, 119

R

- racial/ethnic identity
American Born Chinese, 89, 121–122
The Arrival, 72, 114, 118, 120
 Astro City series, 77
 Bio-Graphics series, 65–66
Captain America: Truth, 84, 118, 119
The Castaways, 73, 118
The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale, 88, 119
The Complete Persepolis, 98–99
A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories, 92–93
DC: The New Frontier, 79
Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence, 77–78
Incognegro, 81, 118
James Sturm's America: God, Gold, and Golems, 101, 118
Kapow!, 56
 Marvel Masterworks series, 67, 113
Master Man: A Tall Tale of Nigeria, 58
Matthew Henson: Arctic Adventurer, 62, 118
Max Axiom, Super Scientist series, 65
Nat Turner, 90, 118
Omega the Unknown, 95
 Runaways series, 89
Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow, 69, 118
The Secret Science Alliance and the Copycat Crook, 66
Shadow Eyes, 77
Skim, 101
Superman: Birthright, 103, 127

- Toon Books Series, 57
Trickster: Native American Tales, 69
 Walking Dead series, 94–95
X-Force: Famous, Mutant, and Mortal, 96
X-Men: Magneto Testament, 97–98, 119
 Y: The Last Man series, 102
Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty, 85
- religion
Action Philosophers! The More Than Complete Edition, 101–102, 118
Blankets, 101
Book of Genesis. Adapted by Robert Crumb, 91, 118
The Complete Persepolis, 98–99
A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories, 92–93
Ender's Game: Battle School, 78
Ender's Shadow: Battle School, 78
 Graphic Revolve Mythology series, 60
King David, 90, 118
Kingdom Come, 102, 124
Masterpiece Comics, 99–100
Outlaw: The Legend of Robin Hood, 71
 Rabbi Harvey series, 68–69
 Walking Dead series, 94–95
 Y: The Last Man series, 102

S

- science and technology
 Cartoon History series, 80, 118
Grampa and Julie: Shark Hunters, 58
Laika, 75–76, 118
Matthew Henson: Arctic Adventurer, 62, 118
Max Axiom, Super Scientist series, 65
The Secret Science Alliance and the Copycat Crook, 66
Sticky Burr: Adventures in Burrwood Forest, 59
T-Minus: The Race to the Moon, 71, 118
- sexual orientation
Batwoman: Elegy, 98
 Buffy Season Eight series, 103–104
Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, 90–91
Ghost World, 92
 Runaways series, 89
Shadow Eyes, 77
Skim, 101
Stitches: A Memoir, 100
- sexuality
 Age of Bronze series, 99, 118

- Batwoman: Elegy*, 98
Blankets, 101
 Buffy Season Eight series, 103–104
 Concrete series, 92
A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories, 92–93
Epileptic, 90
 Fables series, 104
Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, 90–91
Ghost World, 92
The Homeless Channel, 100
Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth, 103, 114
The Jungle, 87–88
King David, 90, 118
Masterpiece Comics, 99–100
 Sandman series, 93
Sandman: The Dream Hunters, 93
Skim, 101
Smile, 73, 120
 Spider-Man Noir series, 81
Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics from an Unpleasant Age, 86
Watchmen, 96–97, 127–128
 Y: The Last Man series, 102
- socioeconomic class
The Arrival, 72, 114, 118, 120
 Bio-Graphics series, 65–66
The Castaways, 73, 118
A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories, 92–93
Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence, 77–78
The Homeless Channel, 100
James Sturm's America: God, Gold, and Golems, 101, 118
The Jungle, 87–88
Katman, 85
 Lunch Lady series, 62
Merchant of Venice, 99
Notes for a War Story, 80
Refresh, Refresh, 85
Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow, 69, 118
Set to Sea, 103
Shadow Eyes, 77
 Spider-Man Noir series, 81
World's Greatest Superheroes, 70
Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty, 85
- T
 terrorism
The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation, 94, 118
Outlaw: The Legend of Robin Hood, 71
The Plain Janes, 78, 118
World's Greatest Superheroes, 70
- U
 U.S. history
The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation, 94, 118
A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge, 97, 118
Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean, 69, 118
The Arrival, 72, 114, 118, 120
 Bio-Graphics series, 65–66
Calamity Jack, 67
Captain America: Truth, 84, 118, 119
 Cartoon History series, 80, 118
The Castaways, 73, 118
City of Spies, 64
A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories, 92–93
 DC Chronicles series, 66
DC: The New Frontier, 79
 EC Archives: Two-Fisted Tales series, 82, 119
Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence, 77–78
Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel, 66, 118
 Graphic Revolve Literary Classics series, 66–67
Houdini: The Handcuff King, 71, 112–113, 118
Incognegro, 81, 118
James Sturm's America: God, Gold, and Golems, 101, 118
The Jungle, 87–88
 Marvel Masterworks series, 67, 113
Marvels, 91
The Murder of Abraham Lincoln, 79–80, 118
Nat Turner, 90, 118
 Rabbi Harvey series, 68–69
Rapunzel's Revenge, 67
Red Menace, 76, 118
Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow, 69, 118
 Spider-Man Noir series, 81
The Storm in the Barn, 68, 118, 119
T-Minus: The Race to the Moon, 71, 118
Trickster: Native American Tales, 69
Watchmen, 96–97, 127–128
- W
 war
 300, 96
 The Adventures of Tintin series, 64
 Age of Bronze series, 99, 118
The Arrival, 72, 114, 118, 120
 Bio-Graphics series, 65–66
 Bone series, 72
Captain America: The Chosen, 97
Captain America: Truth, 84, 118, 119
 Cartoon History series, 80, 118
City of Spies, 64
The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale, 88, 119
 DC Chronicles series, 66
DC: The New Frontier, 79
 Dungeon series, 86
 EC Archives: Two-Fisted Tales series, 82, 119
Ender's Game: Battle School, 78
Ender's Shadow: Battle School, 78
The Fog Mound, 62–63
Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel, 66, 118
King David, 90, 118
Kingdom Come, 102, 124
 Marvel Masterworks series, 67, 113
Marvels, 91
Notes for a War Story, 80
The Odyssey (Hinds adaptation), 94, 123
The Odyssey (Mucci adaptation), 70, 123
Parade (with Fireworks), 79, 119
 Pluto: Urasawa x Tezuka series, 88
Pride of Baghdad, 88–89
Refresh, Refresh, 85
Superman: Birthright, 103, 127
 Usagi Yojimbo series, 71–72
Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon War Story, 93
Watchmen, 96–97, 127–128
Wonder Woman: The Circle, 87
World's Greatest Superheroes, 70
X-Men: Magneto Testament, 97–98, 119
- world history
 300, 96
Action Philosophers! The More Than Complete Edition, 101–102, 118
 The Adventures of Tintin series, 64
 Age of Bronze series, 99, 118
Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean, 69, 118
The Arrival, 72, 114, 118, 120
Beowulf, 80, 118
Book of Genesis. Adapted by Robert Crumb, 91, 118
 Cartoon History series, 80, 118
City of Spies, 64
 Classical comics adaptations (Shakespeare), 86–87
The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale, 88, 119
The Complete Persepolis, 98–99
 EC Archives: Two-Fisted Tales series, 82, 119
 Graphic Revolve Literary Classics series, 66–67

world history (cont.)

Graphic Revolve Mythology series,
60

King David, 90, 118

Laika, 75–76, 118

Manga Shakespeare series, 87

Masterpiece Comics, 99–100

Matthew Henson: Arctic

Adventurer, 62, 118

Merchant of Venice, 99

Notes for a War Story, 80

The Odyssey (Hinds adaptation),
94, 123

The Odyssey (Mucci adaptation),
70, 123

Olympians series, 68

Outlaw: The Legend of Robin
Hood, 71

Parade (with Fireworks), 79,
119

Pride of Baghdad, 88–89

Sandman series, 93

The Strongest Man in the World:
Louis Cyr, 60

Superman: Red Son, 95

T-Minus: The Race to the Moon,
71, 118

The Unwritten series, 91–92

Usagi Yojimbo series, 71–72

Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon

War Story, 93

X-Men: Magneto Testament,

97–98, 119

AUTHOR-TITLE INDEX

Page numbers in bold indicate annotations.

The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation, **94**, 118
300, **96**

A

Abadzis, Nick, **75–76**, 118
Action Philosophers! The More Than Complete Edition, **101–102**, 118
A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge, **97**, 118
Adams, Neal, 48
Adventures in Cartooning: How to Turn Your Doodles into Comics, **61**, 109
The Adventures of Hercules, **60**
The Adventures of Rabbi Harvey, **68–69**
The Adventures of Tintin series, **64**
Age of Bronze series, **99**, 118
Amazing Spider-Man, 44 (fig 4.10)
Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean, **69**, 118
Amelia Rules series, **64**
American Born Chinese, 50, **89**, 121–122
American Splendor, 50
Amulet series, **70–71**
The Arrival, **68**, **72**, 114, 118, 120
Astro City series, **77**

B

B., David, **90**
Babymouse series, **60–61**
Bagley, Mark. *See* Bendis, Brian Michael, and Mark Bagley
Baker, Kyle, **90**, 118
[Batman] *Dark Knight Returns*, 49, **95–96**

Batman: The Story of the Dark Knight, **56**
Batwoman: Elegy, **98**
Bechdel, Alison, 50, **90–91**
Belanger, Andy. *See* McCreery, Connor, Anthony Del Col, and Andy Belanger
Bendis, Brian Michael, and Mark Bagley, 5, 5 (fig. 1.2), 22, 23 (fig. 3.3), 25, **76**, 123
Benny and Penny in Toybreaker, **57**
Beowulf, **80**, 118
[Bible] *Book of Genesis*, **91**, 118
Big Fat Little Lit, **63**
Bilson, Danny, **76**, 118
Bio-Graphics series, **65–66**
Blankets, 50, **101**
Bone series, **72**
Book of Genesis, **91**, 118
Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman, **61**
Bracken, Beth, and Jeffrey Stewart Timmins, **58**
Bradbury, Ray, **76–77**
Briggs, Raymond, **55–56**, 107–108
Buffy Season Eight series, **103–104**
Busiek, Kurt, **77**, **91**
Butzer, C. M., **66**, 118

C

Calamity Jack, **67**
Cameron and His Dinosaurs, **65**
Campbell, Ross, **77**
Camusso, Frank, and Jay Lynch, **57**
Canada, Geoffrey, **77–78**
Captain America: The Chosen, **97**
Captain America: Truth, **84**, 118, 119
Card, Orson Scott. *See* Carey, Mike; Yost, Christopher
Carey, Mike, **78**, **91–92**
Carey, Mike, Marc Hempel, and Sonny Liew, **78**
Cartoon History series, **80**, 118

Casper the Friendly Ghost 60th Anniversary Special, **56**
The Castaways, **73**, 118
Castellucci, Cecil, **78**
Castellucci, Cecil, and Jim Rugg, **78**, 118
Cavallaro, Michael, **79**, 119
Chadwick, Paul, **92**
Chiggers, **82**
Cinderella, **58**
City of Spies, **64**
Civil War, **84**, 122–123
Classical comics adaptations, **86–87**
Clowes, Daniel, 50, **92**
The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale, **88**, 119
The Complete Persepolis, **98–99**
Concrete series, **92**
A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories, 4 (fig. 1.1), 48, **92–93**
Cooke, Darwyn, **79**
Cosentino, Ralph, **56**, **56**
Crime SuspenStories, 39
Crumb, Robert, 48, **91**, 118
Czekaj, Jef, **58**

D

Dark Knight Returns, 49, **95–96**
Davis, Eleanor, **66**
DC Chronicles series, **66**
DC: The New Frontier, **79**
Debon, Nicolas, **60**
Del Col, Anthony. *See* McCreery, Connor, Anthony Del Col, and Andy Belanger
Dembicki, Matt, ed., **69**
Dietrich, Sean. *See* Lemke, Donald, and Sean Dietrich
Dini, Paul, **70**
Ditko, Steve, 42, 45
Dungeon series, **86**
Dunning, John Harris, and Nikhil Singh, **79**, 114

E

EC Archives: Two-Fisted Tales series, 39, 39 (fig. 4.7), **82**, 119
 Eisner, Will, 4 (fig. 1.1), 48, **92–93**
Ender's Game: Battle School, **78**
Ender's Shadow: Battle School, **78**
Epileptic, **90**

F

Fables, 50
 Fables series, **104**
Faradawn (The Fog Mound, v. 2), **62–63**
 Feiffer, Jules, **57**
Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence., **77–78**
The Fog Mound., **62–63**
 Forman, Ari, **93**
Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, 50, **90–91**

G

Gaiman, Neil, **93**, **93–94**
Garage Band, **93–94**
 Geary, Rick, **79–80**, 118
Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel, **66**, 118
Ghost World, 50, **92**
 Gibbons, Dave. *See* Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons
 Gipi, **80**, **93–94**
 Gonick, Larry, **80**, 118
 Gownley, Jimmy, **64**
Grampa and Julie: Shark Hunters, **58**
 Graphic Revolve Literary Classics series, **66–67**
 Graphic Revolve Mythology series, **60**
 Graphic Spin Fairy Tales series, **58**
Green Lantern: Secret Origin, **81**
Green Lantern/Green Arrow, 48
 Gunnerkrigg Court series, **87**

H

Hale, Shannon, Dean Hale, and Nathan Hale, **67**
 Hamilton, Tim, **76–77**
Hansel and Gretel, **58**
 Hatke, Ben, **60**
The Haunt of Fear, 39, 41
 Haward, John. *See* McDonald, John, and John Haward
 Hayes, Geoffrey, **57**
Hellsing Volume 1, 22 (fig. 3.2), 24 (fig. 3.4), 26 (fig. 3.6)
 Hempel, Marc. *See* Carey, Mike, Marc Hempel, and Sonny Liew
 Hergé, **64**
 Hinds, Gareth, **80**, **94**, **99**, 118, 123
 Hine, David, **81**
 Hoena, Blake A., **60**, **62**, 118

Holm, Jennifer, **60–61**
The Homeless Channel, **100**
 Homer, **70**, **94**, 123
Houdini: The Handcuff King, **71**, 112–113, 118
 House, **100**
Hyperactive, **62**

I

I Kill Giants, **94**
Incognegro, **81**, 118
 Invincible series, **81**
Itazura Na Kiss, 21 (fig. 3.1), 25 (fig. 3.5)

J

Jacobson, Sid, **94**, 118
James Sturm's America: God, Gold, and Golems, **101**, 118
Jason and the Golden Fleece, **60**
Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth, 50, **103**, 114
 Johns, Geoff, **81**
 Johnson, Mat, **81**, 118
The Jungle, **87–88**
Justice League of America, 42

K

Kane, Bob, 37
Kapow!, **56**
Katman, **85**
 Kelly, Joe, **94**
 Kibuishi, Kazu, **70–71**
Kill Shakespeare, Volume 1, **83**, 124
 Kim, Susan, **64**
King David, **90**, 118
Kingdom Come, **102**, 124
 Kirby, Jack, 38, 42–44, 48
 Kirkman, Robert, **81**, **94–95**
Korgi, **57**
 Krosoczka, Jarrett J., **62**
 Kuper, Peter, **87–88**
 Kurtzman, Harvey, 39, 39 (fig. 4.7), **82**, 119

L

Laika, **75–76**, 118
 Larson, Hope, **82**
 Lechner, John, **59**
 Lee, Stan, 42–45, 47–48, **67**, 113
 Lee, Tony, **71**
Legends in Exile, **104**
 Lemke, Donald, and Sean Dietrich, **58**
 Lethem, Jonathan, **95**
 Liew, Sonny. *See* Carey, Mike, Marc Hempel, and Sonny Liew
Little Lit: Folklore and Fairy Tale Funnies, **63**
Little Lit: It Was a Dark and Silly Night . . ., **63**

Little Lit: Strange Stories for Strange Kids, **63**
Little Nemo in Slumberland, 32
 Loeb, Jeph, and Tim Sale, **82**, 123, 127
 Lunch Lady series, **62**
 Lutes, Jason, **71**, 112–113, 118
 Lynch, Jay. *See* Camusso, Frank, and Jay Lynch

M

Magic Trixie series, **63**
 Manga Shakespeare series, **87**
 Marvel Masterworks series, **67**, 113
Marvels, **91**
 Masreel, Frans, 32–33 (fig. 4.1)
Master Man: A Tall Tale of Nigeria, **58**
Masterpiece Comics, **99–100**
 Mathieu, Marc-Antoine, **83**
Matthew Henson: Arctic Adventurer, **62**, 118
[Maus] The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale, 49, **88**, 119
 Max Axiom, Super Scientist series, **65**
 McCay, Winsor, 32–33, 34 (fig. 4.2)
 McCloud, Scott, **83**
 McCreery, Connor, Anthony Del Col, and Andy Belanger, **83**, 124
 McDonald, John, and John Haward, **87**
 McKeever, Sean, **83–84**
 McNiven, Steve. *See* Millar, Mark, and Steve McNiven
Meanwhile . . ., **57**
Merchant of Venice, **99**
 Millar, Mark, **95**
 Millar, Mark, and Steve McNiven, **84**, 122–123
 Miller, Frank, 49, **95–96**, **96**
 Milligan, Peter, **96**
 Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons, 49, **96–97**, 127–128
 Morales, Robert, **84**, 118, 119
 Morrell, David, **97**
 Mouly, Françoise. *See* Spiegelman, Art, and Françoise Mouly, eds.
 Mucci, Tim, **70**, 123
The Murder of Abraham Lincoln, **79–80**, 118
Museum Vaults: Excerpts from the Journal of an Expert, **83**

N

Nat Turner, **90**, 118
 Neri, G., **85**
 Neufeld, Josh, **97**, 118
 Nicholas, Jamar, **77–78**
 Nobleman, Mark Tyler, **61**
Notes for a War Story, **80**
 Novgorodoff, Danica, **85**

O

- O'Connor, George, **56, 68**
The Odyssey (Adapted by Gareth Hinds), **94, 123**
The Odyssey (Adapted by Tim Mucci), **70, 123**
 Olympians series, **68**
Omega the Unknown, **95**
 O'Neill, Denny, **48**
Orbital, Volume 1: Scars and Volume 2: Ruptures, **85**
 Ottaviani, Jim, **71, 118**
Otto's Orange Day, **57**
Outlaw: The Legend of Robin Hood, **71**
 Owly series, **59**

P

- Pak, Greg, **97–98, 119**
Parade (with Fireworks), **79, 119**
 Pekar, Harvey, **50**
Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return, **98–99**
Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood, **98–99**
Perseus and Medusa, **60**
 Phelan, Matt, **68, 118, 119**
The Plain Janes, **78, 118**
Plain Janes in Love, **78**
 Pluto: Urasawa x Tezuka series, **88**
 Powell, Martin, **60**
 Powell, Martin, and Victor Rivas, **58**
 Powell, Nate, **98**
Preacher, **50**
The Prickly Peril, **59**
Pride of Baghdad, **88–89**
 Pyle, Kevin C., **85**

Q

The Quitter, **50**

R

- Rabbi Harvey Rides Again*, **68–69**
 Rabbi Harvey series, **68–69**
Rabbi Harvey vs. the Wisdom Kid, **68–69**
Rapunzel's Revenge, **67**
The Ratebit Fiend, **32**
Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, **76–77**
Red Menace, **76, 118**
Red Riding Hood, **58**
Refresh, Refresh, **85**
Re-Gifters, **78**
 Renier, Aaron, **68**
 Rivas, Victor. *See* Powell, Martin, and Victor Rivas
Robot Dreams, **61**
 Ross, Alex. *See* Waid, Mark, and Alex Ross
 Rucka, Greg, and J. H. Williams, **98**

- Rugg, Jim. *See* Castellucci, Cecil, and Jim Rugg
 Runaways series, **89**
 Runberg, Sylvain, **85**
 Runton, Andy, **59**
 Russel, P. Craig, **93–94**

S

- Sakai, Stan, **71–72**
 Sale, Tim. *See* Loeb, Jeph, and Tim Sale
Salem Brownstone, **79, 114**
 Sandman series, **93**
Sandman: The Dream Hunters, **93–94**
Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow, **69, 118**
 Satrapi, Marjane, **50, 98–99**
 Sava, Scott Christian, **62, 65**
 Schade, Susan, **62–63**
 Schrag, Ariel, ed., **86**
The Secret Science Alliance and the Copycat Crook, **66**
Set to Sea, **103**
 Sfar, Joann, **86**
Shadow Eyes, **77**
 Shakespeare, William, **86–87, 87, 99**
 [Shakespeare] *Kill Shakespeare, Volume 1*, **83, 124**
 Shanower, Eric, **99, 118**
 Sheinkin, Steve, **68–69**
 Shepard, Aaron, **58**
Shock SuspenStories, **39**
 Shuster, Jerry. *See* Siegel, Joe, and Jerry Shuster
 Siddell, Thomas, **87**
 Siegel, Joe, and Jerry Shuster, **35, 127**
 Siegel, Siena Cherson, **65**
 Sikoryak, R., **99–100**
 Silady, Matt, **100**
 Simmons, Josh, **100**
 Simon, Joe, **38**
 Simone, Gail, **87**
Simon's Dream (The Fog Mound, v. 3), **62–63**
 Sinclair, Upton, **87–88**
 Singh, Nikhil. *See* Dunning, John Harris, and Nikhil Singh
Skim, **101**
 Slade, Christian, **57**
 Small, David, **50, 100**
Smile, **73, 120**
 Smith, Jeff, **72**
The Snowman, **55–56, 107–108**
 [Spider-Man] *Amazing Spider-Man*, **44 (fig. 4.10)**
 Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane series, **83–84**
 Spider-Man Noir series, **81**

- [Spiderman] *Ultimate Spider-Man* series, **5, 5 (fig. 1.2), 22–23, 23 (fig. 3.3), 76, 123**
 Spiegelman, Art, **49, 88, 119**
 Spiegelman, Art, and Francoise Mouly, eds., **57, 59, 63**
Spiral Bound, **68**
Sticky Burr: Adventures in Burrwood Forest, **59**
Stitches: A Memoir, **50, 100**
The Storm in the Barn, **68, 118, 119**
The Strongest Man in the World: Louis Cyr, **60**
Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics from an Unpleasant Age, **86**
 Sturm, James, **61, 69, 101, 109, 118**
Superman: Birthright, **103, 127**
 [Superman] *Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman*, **61**
The Superman Chronicles, **127**
Superman for All Seasons, **82, 123, 127**
Superman: Red Son, **95**
Superman: The Story of the Man of Steel, **56**
Swallow Me Whole, **98**

T

- Tales from the Crypt*, **39, 39 (fig. 4.6), 41**
Tales of Suspense Featuring Iron Man and Captain America, **43 (fig. 4.9)**
 Tamaki, Mariko, **101**
 Tan, Shaun, **68, 72, 114, 118, 120**
 Taylor, Sarah Stewart, **69, 118**
 Telgemeier, Raina, **73, 120**
The Tempest, **87**
 Thompson, Craig, **50, 101**
 Thompson, Jill, **63**
 Timmins, Jeffrey Stewart. *See* Bracken, Beth, and Jeffrey Stewart Timmins
T-Minus: The Race to the Moon, **71, 118**
To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel, **65**
 Toon Books Series, **57**
TOON Treasury of Classic Children's Comics, **59**
The Travels of Thelonus (The Fog Mound, v. 1), **62–63**
Trickster: Native American Tales, **69**
Two-Fisted Tales, **39, 39 (fig. 4.7), 82, 119**
- U
- Ultimate Spider-Man series, **5, 5 (fig. 1.2), 22–23, 23 (fig. 3.3), 76, 123**
Understanding Comics, **83**

The Unwritten series, **91–92**

Urasawa, Naoki, **88**

Usagi Yojimbo series, **71–72**

V

Van Lente, Fred, **101–102**, 118

Varon, Sara, **61**

Vaughan, Brian K., 50, **88–89**, **89**,
102

The Vault of Horror, 39, 41

Vollmar, Rob, **73**, 118

W

Waid, Mark, and Alex Ross, **102**, 124

Waid, Mark, and Leinil Francis Yu,
103, 127

Walking Dead series, **94–95**

*Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon War
Story*, **93**

Ware, Chris, 50, **103**, 114

Watchmen, 49, **96–97**, 127–128

Weing, Drew, **103**

Whedon, Joss, **103–104**

Williams, J. H. *See* Rucka, Greg, and
J. H. Williams

Willingham, Bill, **104**

Wonder Woman: The Circle, **87**

*Wonder Woman: The Story of the
Amazon Princess*, **56**

World's Greatest Superheroes, **70**

X

*X-Force: Famous, Mutant, and
Mortal*, **96**

X-Men: Magneto Testament, **97–98**,
119

Y

Y: The Last Man series, 50, **102**

Yang, Gene Luen, 50, **89**, 121–122

Yomtov, Nel, **60**

Yost, Christopher, **78**

Yu, Leinil Francis. *See* Waid, Mark,
and Leinil Francis Yu

*Yummy: The Last Days of a
Southside Shorty*, **85**

Z

Zita the Spacegirl, **60**

SUBJECT INDEX

#&@\$\$&, 12

A

action, depiction of
 lesson plan, 108–109
 in manga, 22, 24 (fig. 3.4)
 methods of, 10
 in Spider-Man, 22, 23 (fig. 3.3)
Action Comics, 36, 36 (fig. 4.4)
Adams, Neal, 48
aesthetic elements of sequential art,
 lesson plan on, 114–115
Amazing Spider-Man, 44 (fig. 4.10)
American Splendor (movie), 50
amplification when reading sequential
 art, 7
anger lines, 13 (fig. 2.8)
antiestablishment figure, Superman
 as, 36
Archie comics, 39

B

balloons. *See* word (speech) balloons
Batman, 37, 40
Bayeux Tapestry as sequential art, 31
Bechdel, Alison, 50
borders of panels, 11, 11 (fig. 2.4)

C

Captain America, 38
captions, 16–18, 17 (fig. 2.15), 18
 (fig. 2.16)
closure as characteristic of graphic
 novels, 5
closure when reading sequential art, 7
Clowes, Daniel, 50
collaboration between writer and
 artist, lesson plan for, 110–111
comic book, making of, lesson plan,
 109–110
Comic Book Project, 7–8
comic books
 funnies, 32–33
 golden age of (1938–1955), 35–41

precursors to, 31–32
 in Silver Age (1956–1970), 42–46
 See also graphic novels
Comics Code Authority, 41, 41
 (fig. 4.8), 47–48, 50
comix, 48
*A Contract with God and Other
 Tenement Stories*, 4 (fig. 1.1), 48
Crime SuspenStories, 39
Crumb, Robert, 48

D

Dark Horse Comics, 50
Dark Knight (movie), 50
DC Comics
 artistic style of, 44
 graphic novels from, 6, 48
 in Silver Age, 41
 superheroes in, 36–38
deaf students, 8
Ditko, Steve, 42, 45
Doc Savage, 35

E

EC Comics, 39, 41
Egyptian painting as sequential art, 31
Eisner, Will, 48
 *A Contract with God and Other
 Tenement Stories*, 4 (fig. 1.1)
emotions, appeals to
 in graphic novels, 9
 in manga, 21

F

Fables, 50
Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, 48
faces, interpretation of
 conventions for, 13–14, 14 (fig. 2.9)
 in lesson plan, 109
 in manga, 25, 25 (fig. 3.5), 26 (fig.
 3.6)
Famous Funnies, 34, 35 (fig. 4.3)
Fantastic Four, 42, 44
Felstein, Al, 39

Finger, Bill, 37
First Second (Roaring Brooks), 50
Flash, 38
Funnies on Parade, 34, 35 (fig. 4.3)

G

Gaines, Bill, 39
Gaines, Maxwell, 34
gender
 discussion guide, 120–121
 in manga, 20
Ghost World (movie), 50
ghosting effect and motion, 12, 13
 (fig. 2.7)
Goodman, Martin, 42
Graphic Novel Archive website, 4
graphic novel collections, arrange-
 ment of, 129
graphic novels
 bronze age (1971–1985), 47–48
 as marketing term, 4
 modern age (1986–present), 49
 vs. comic books, 3–6
 See also comic books; sequential
 art
Green Lantern, 38
Green Lantern/Green Arrow, 48
gutter, uses of, 10–12, 10 (fig. 2.1), 11
 (fig. 2.2), 12 (fig. 2.3), 111–112

H

The Haunt of Fear, 39, 41
heat lines, 13 (fig. 2.8)
history curriculum, 117–118, 120–121,
 122–123
homosexuality in Batman, 40
horror and crime comics, 40–41

I

imagery, lesson plan for, 108
immigrants, Superman as, 36
instruction manuals as sequential art,
 110
Iron Man (movie), 50

J

Justice League of America, 42

K

Kane, Bob, 37
 Katzenjammer Kids, 32
 Kefauver, Estes, 40
 Kirby, Jack, 38, 42–44, 48

L

Lee, Stan, 42–45, 47–48, 67, 113
Little Nemo in Slumberland, 32

M

Mad magazine, 41
 manga, 19–26
 action, depiction of in, 22, 24 (fig. 3.4)
 emotions, appeals to in, 20–21
 faces, interpretation of in, 25, 25 (fig. 3.5), 26 (fig. 3.6)
 gender in, 20
 symbols and codes, uses of in, 25, 25 (fig. 3.5)
 Marston, William Moulton, 37–38
 Marvel Comics
 and Captain America, 38
 graphic novels from, 6, 48
 and Image Comics, 50
 superheroes of, 42, 43 (fig. 4.9)
 Masreel, Frans, 32–33 (fig. 4.1)
Maus (The Complete Maus), 49, 88, 119
 McCay, Winsor, 32–33, 34 (fig. 4.2)
 Miller, Frank, 49
 Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons, 49
 motion lines, 12, 13 (fig. 2.6), 22, 23 (fig. 3.3)
 movement, depictions of, 12, 13 (fig. 2.6)
 movies made from comics heroes, 50
 Mutt and Jeff, 32

N

narration, 16–17, 17 (fig. 2.15), 112–113
 narrative density in sequential art, 7
 newspapers, comics in, 33
 novels, graphic novels as, 6

O

O'Neill, Denny, 48

P

panels
 definition, 3–4

development of, 32–33, 34 (fig. 4.2)
 in lesson plan, 109
 malleability of borders, 11, 11 (fig. 2.3–2.4)
 use of in Superman comics, 36–37
 Pekar, Harvey, 50
 perspective (viewpoint), lesson plan on, 113–114
 political cartoons, 32
Preacher, 50
 prestige format, 6

R

The Ratebit Fiend, 32
 realism in manga, 22, 22 (fig. 3.2)
 reluctant readers, appeals to, 7

S

Satrap, Marjane, 50, 98–99
 Savage, Doc, 35
 Scarlet Pimpernel, 35
 secret identities, appeals of, 35–36
Seduction of the Innocent, 40
 sensationalism in comics, 39–40
 sequential art
 definition, 3–6
 lesson plans, 107–115
 as manner of showing passage of time, 9
 tools of, 9
 and visual literacy, 7
 See also graphic novels
 Shadow, the, 35
 Shakespeare, William, lesson plans, 124–126
Shock SuspenStories, 39
 Shuster, Joe, 35, 127
 sidekicks, 37
 Siegel, Jerry, 35, 127
 Simon, Joe, 38
 slow visualizers, appeals to, 7
 Small, David, 50
 social commentary
 in EC Comics, 39
 in Superman, 36
 in Wonder Woman, 37
 speech (word) balloons, 12, 12 (fig. 2.5), 109
 Spider-Man, 44 (fig. 4.10), 45–46, 46 (fig. 4.11), 47–48
Spider-Man (movie), 50
 Spiegelman, Art, 49
 splash pages, definition, 11
 stained glass windows as sequential art, 31

style, artistic, lesson plan for, 114–115
 superheroes
 criticism of, 40
 depiction of action, 10
 in Golden Age, 35–38
 and Stan Lee, 42
 Superman, 35–37, 127
 supervillains, 38–41
 symbols and codes
 in lesson plans, 108, 109–110, 112
 in manga, 25, 25 (fig. 3.5)
 uses of, 9, 12–14

T

Tales from the Crypt, 39, 39 (fig. 4.6), 41
Tales of Suspense Featuring Iron Man and Captain America, 43 (fig. 4.9)
 Thompson, Craig, 50
 time, depiction of, 16–17, 16 (fig. 2.13–2.14), 111–112
Two-Fisted Tales, 39, 39 (fig. 4.7), 82, 119

U

underground comics, 48

V

The Vault of Horror, 39, 41
 Vertigo (DC Comics), 50
 viewpoint (perspective), lesson plan on, 113–114
 violence in EC Comics, 39–40
 visual literacy, 7
 visually dependent readers, appeals to, 7

W

war, 38
 war in comics, 39, 39 (fig. 4.7)
 Ware, Chris, 50
 Wertham, Frederic, 40
 Wonder Woman, 37–38, 40
 word (speech) balloons, 12, 12 (fig. 2.5), 109
 words, depiction of, 14–18, 14 (fig. 2.10), 15 (fig. 2.11–2.12), 112

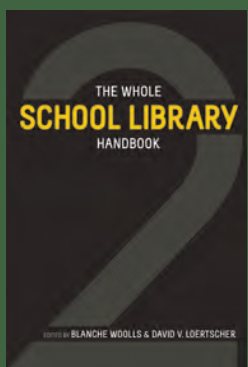
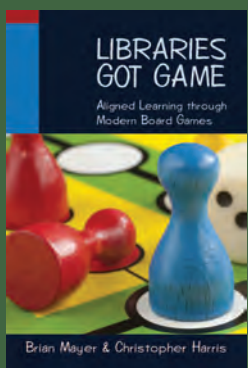
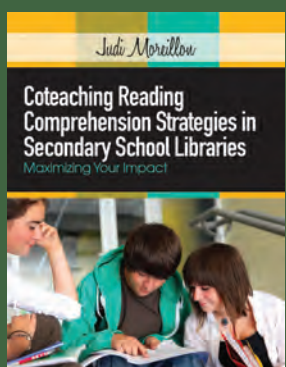
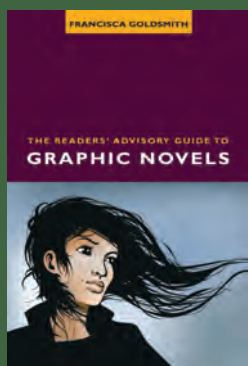
Y

Y: The Last Man, 50
 Yang, Gene, 50
 Yellow Kid comic character, 32

Z

Zorro, 35

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