Graphic Global Conflict: Graphic Novels in the High School Social Studies Classroom

LILA L. CHRISTENSEN

ABSTRACT. Graphic novels are stand-alone stories told in comic book format. In contrast to superhero comic books, graphic novels are more serious, often nonfiction, full-length, sequential art novels that explore the issues of race, social justice, global conflict, and war with intelligence and humor. The visual component of graphic novels supports text comprehension, making the stories accessible to readers at all levels. Graphic novels are extremely popular with teenagers, and using a few selections in the social studies classroom is an enjoyable way to stimulate critical conversations about their world. The author summarizes and suggests discussion questions for nine graphic novels that richly describe political and social conflicts in Bosnia, Palestine, Iran, Sudan, and Holocaust Germany.

Key words: global conflict, graphic novels, racism, social justice, war

Last year, at the insistence of several teenagers in our public library, I read the graphic novel Fax from Sarajevo (Kubert 1996), a true account of one family's struggle to escape the relentless ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. The book was powerful and charged with adventure and suspense, with the text and illustrations working together to transport the reader into the heart of the conflict and the emotions of its victims. It was also highly informative. Much to my surprise, I learned as much about the Serbian/Muslim/Croatian conflict from a graphic novel as I had from newspapers and the nightly news.

It was perfect for a social studies classroom. I began to look for, and have since found, other provocative graphic novels about human survival, even triumph, during World War II in Germany and the more recent conflicts in Israel and Palestine, Iran, and Sudan.

There is very little information available about these, or any other, graphic novels being used in social studies classrooms (except for Maus I and II, which are widely read in studies of the Holocaust), whether they are effective learning tools, or what students think of them. It is also difficult to find reviews of graphic novels that have educational value. However, I strongly believe these books are worth a serious look.

Graphic novels are generally stand-alone stories told in comic book format. The traditional superhero comic books are joined by full-length novels that explore serious issues with intelligence and humor. Because graphic novels are popular with teens, using a few well-chosen ones in the classroom to initiate conversations about racism, social justice, war, and global conflict is an intriguing possibility.

Background Information

The visual component of a graphic novel enhances reading enjoyment and text comprehension, as well as the powers of observation. As Francisca Goldsmith wrote for the American Library Association's 2002 Teen Read Week:

The sequential art within a graphic novel tells germane aspects of the narrative that the words do not. The reader is called upon to understand what is happening in and between the sequences of images (the panels of a graphic novel), as well as have access to the verbal text. . . . The ability to "read" images that portray character, mood, and tone must be developed through experience. (2002)

Sequential art also aids "readers who may not naturally see and experience what they read, whether because of
operative reading difficulties or because of limited language proficiency" (Wilhelm 1997, 138). English as a Second Language and limited language learners, many of whom may be immigrants and refugees from the war-torn countries being studied, are thus able to take part in classroom discussions and contribute their unique insights. As Bomer and Bomer write in For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action:

Unless we make critical conversations available to students, unless we set the discourse in motion in the classroom, we cannot expect children to develop questions and stances related to social justice either now or in the future. (2004, 53)

Graphic novels have strong storylines and exhibit the characteristics of well-written supplemental classroom texts, as established by Daniels and Zemelman in Subjects Matter: Every Teacher's Guide to Content-Area Reading:

• Content that is important or engaging
• People we can care about
• A narrative structure or chronological line
• Places we can visualize
• Danger, conflicts, risks, or choices
• Value, moral, ethical, or political dimensions
• Ideas that reasonable people can debate, dispute, or disagree about. (2004, 53)

Although graphic novels have traditionally been ignored by literary critics, a few exemplary ones that exhibit all of the above characteristics have won notable awards from the mainstream press, particularly Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize for Maus I and II in 1991 and Joe Sacco’s American Book Award for Palestine in 1996.

If Your Class Is Studying the War in Bosnia


Summary

Ervin Rustemagic is a cartoonist and owner of Strip Art Features, located in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Since the beginning of the war, Ervin’s only way to communicate with his friends in America and Europe has been by fax. Kubert, a close friend and fellow cartoonist, compiled the eighteen months of their fax correspondence during which they battled time and bureaucracy to get Ervin and his family out of Sarajevo.

Ideas for Discussion

A recurring theme in this book is the failure of other countries to come to the aid of the Bosnian people. What kind of help did they expect but not receive? What was the U.S. government’s response to the conflict in Bosnia? What is the military, diplomatic, or fiscal responsibility of the United States to countries in need?


Summary

The author, a cartoon journalist, spent nearly four months in Gorazde, a Muslim enclave that had been surrounded by Serbian forces for three and a half years. He tells stories of children maimed by snipers, homes torched, vehicles and workplaces destroyed, running water and electricity gone, roads blocked, Serbians betrayed by their neighbors, and family members missing. The story is bleak, but also funny, rich, and caring.

Ideas for Discussion

Sacco repeats conversations with local residents who condemn the rest of the world’s failure to come to Bosnia’s aid. What is the United States’s policy regarding foreign intervention? Who are the decision makers? Can American citizens, including high school students, affect policy decisions?

If Your Class Is Studying the Middle East


Summary

Because Israel has been an ally of the United States since its formation, we may have heard less of the Palestinian side of the Occupied Territories’ story. Palestine is cartoon-journalist Sacco’s memoir of the two months he spent living and traveling among the Palestinians in 1991 and 1992. Perhaps the best description, and endorsement, for this book was written by Edward Said, an American scholar, professor, and proponent of the Palestinian cause:

There’s no obvious spin, no easily discernible line of doctrine in Joe Sacco’s often ironic encounters with Palestinians under occupation, no attempt to smooth out what is for the most part a meager, anxious existence of uncertainty, collective unhappiness, and deprivation... a life of aimless wandering within the place’s inhospitable confines... With the exception of one or two novelists and poets, no one has ever rendered this terrible state of affairs better than Joe Sacco. (Sacco 1993/2001, iii)

Ideas for Discussion

What are the economic, psychological, or emotional consequences of war or prolonged occupation on adults? Are those consequences different for the elderly and for children? Has the United States been involved in the resolution of the conflict over the Occupied Territories? If so, in what way?


Summary

Satrapi describes the first ten years of her childhood in a privileged, educated, progressive, and political Iranian family and how that life changed in 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution. By 1980, she was required to wear a veil in public, her bilingual school had closed, and she heard frequent conversations about political dissidents who had been tortured, imprisoned, and killed. Boys were given gold-painted plastic keys and told “if they went to war and were lucky enough to die, this key would get them into heaven” (2003, 99).
Ideas for Discussion

The author suggests that boys in the Iranian military came from poorer areas of the country (101). How does this compare with the situation in the United States? Does one socioeconomic group make up a higher percentage of America's military forces? How does internal dissension and government response in Iran compare with what has happened in America during the Vietnam War, in Beijing's Tiananmen Square during the student protests, or in Latin America during its civil wars?


Summary

In 1984, when Satrapi was fourteen years old, she was sent to live with friends in the safety of Vienna, an arrangement that lasted only ten days. Suddenly on her own in a foreign country, she struggled with extreme loneliness, experimentation with sex and drugs, homelessness, and an eventual suicide attempt. As she writes:

I think I preferred to put myself in serious danger rather than confront my shame at not having become someone, the shame of not having made my parents proud after all the sacrifices they had made for me. (2004, 90)

Satrapi was finally able to return home to her family in Iran when she was eighteen, but her struggles were not yet over. The story continues with her subsequent marriage, divorce, and final departure from Iran. As she thinks back on the years of the Islamic Revolution, Satrapi explains the effect of the repressive regime on a young woman:

The regime had understood that one person leaving her house while asking herself: “Are my trousers long enough? Is my veil in place? Can my make-up be seen? Are they going to whip me?” no longer asks herself: “Where is my freedom of thought? Where is my freedom of speech? My life, is it valuable? What’s going on in the political prisons?” It’s only natural! When we’re afraid, we lose all sense of analysis and reflection. Our fear paralyzes us. Besides, fear has always been the driving force behind all dictators’ repression. (148)

Ideas for Discussion

Satrapi did not tell her parents how lonely and defeated she felt in Vienna. Do the children of refugees in America feel guilty if they admit they are having problems in their new country? How is growing up in America different from growing up in Iran? How have the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights contributed to that difference?

If Your Class Is Studying Current Conflicts in the World


Summary

The four Sudanese boys who tell this story were very young when war broke out in their country. As soldiers attacked their villages, often killing whole families, these boys were able to escape by running for their lives into the forest. There they met other boys and together they walked hundreds of miles to the relative safety of other countries. They were orphaned, but determined and resourceful. Of my recommendations, this is the shortest book (thirty-four pages) with the easiest words, but one of the most disturbing stories.

Ideas for Discussion

With one small book, students get an up-close look at a crisis of immense proportions happening today in Darfur, the western region of Sudan. Because of the currency of the topic, there are daily news stories on the United Nations Web site (http://www.un.org/english) about Sudan. Here students can investigate the complexity of international peacekeeping efforts, get involved in research projects, and, with guidance and encouragement, become student activists.

As with all the books discussed in this article, we could ask if America has a responsibility to intervene in the crisis of another nation and, if so, at what point is that decision made? Does the United Nations have any influence on decisions made by the United States?

Another topic of discussion is the young Sudanese refugees who have come to America. What is life like for them here? What have been their most difficult challenges? Do they have a support network?

If Your Class Is Studying the Holocaust and World War II


Summary

Spiegelman tells two personal stories in the Maus books. Artie (the cartoon version of the author) relates the survival story of his parents, Vladek and Anja, Polish Jews who had been imprisoned in Auschwitz. At the same time, and with equal poignancy, Artie reveals the uneasy relationship that has always existed between himself and his father, the miserly and cantankerous Vladek.

Ideas for Discussion

Two issues arise with any discussion of the Holocaust, and both will challenge critical thinking skills. First, can mere words or stories do justice to an event with the magnitude of the Holocaust? Joseph Witek writes, “One powerful school of thought on the Holocaust denies the very possibility of any ethically responsible representation of the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews” (1989, 97). Are some stories too big, too horrible to tell?

Again, there is the question of the effect of war on children. Hamida Bosmajian writes this of Vladek’s and Artie’s relationship:

Disastrous history has a disastrous effect on relationships between parent and
child. Artie will retell his father’s story, but throughout his telling of the frame narrative he avoids the direct articulation of his own pain because he must... consider his pain and deprivations insignificant in relation to the disastrous history of Auschwitz. (2003, 27)

Marjane Satrapi in Persepolis 2 (2004) had survivor guilt. We can assume that the Lost Boys of Sudan may also have survivor guilt. How do they deal with it?


Summary

This fictionalized account is written on the basis of stories of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 that the author heard as a boy. As the ghetto is being burned to the ground, street by street, a gang of boys fights back. They kill German soldiers, one at a time, stealing their weapons and stockpiling them for the last battle they will fight. Yossel, the youngest boy, records the unfolding events in pictures.

Ideas for Discussion

This is a fascinating “what if” story for discussion. As Joe Kubert writes in the introduction:

During the last few years, I’d given thought to the idea of what might have happened if my parents had decided not to come to America in 1926. In 1939, I was thirteen years old, attending the High School of Music and Art, in New York City. In 1939, Hitler invaded and conquered Poland. Two million Jews were swept up in the net of Hitler’s Final Solution. The elimination of all Jews in Europe and Russia had begun with a vengeance.

Between 1940 and 1942, I was still in high school. Wonderful things were happening to me. My dream of becoming a cartoonist was coming true. I was drawing for comic books on a regular basis. ... I was experiencing the thrilling exhilaration of seeing my work published, knowing that hundreds of thousands of people were looking at it....

At the same time in Europe, people were being led into the gas chambers and fed into the ovens. (2003, introduction)

Conclusion

Each of the graphic novels discussed in this article have valuable application in a social studies classroom, but there may be objections to their use. For example, individuals unfamiliar with the format often ask if graphic refers to sexual content. It does not; it acknowledges the artistic representation of the story. Even so, a large portion of the comic books and graphic novels being published today, particularly those written for the young adult (generally male) reader, may contain profane language, sexual content, and the portrayal of extreme violence. The top-quality books recommended herein are very different, but may unjustifiably be classified with the others unless the instructor is adequately prepared and has made the books available for review. It is wise to be proactive, to have read the books carefully, and to write rationales if you anticipate any problems.

These graphic novels all have drama, excitement, adventure, intrigue, humor, and compassion. Most important, they are books about important social and political issues that can be understood and discussed by all reading levels and are in a format that teens love to read. It is a winning combination for both students and teachers.

REFERENCES


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