

Graphic Novels: Books that Matter

by Dr. Rocco Versaci

“Many people tend to dismiss comics as lowbrow and juvenile but, in fact, comics are a complicated format that can express ideas, create characters, address issues, and tell stories in ways unmatched by other forms, such as literature and film. Because comics are both textual and visual. . .they can explore the rich ground upon which these two means of expression collide. In my classes I always try to use at least some comic book material, be it a complete work or an excerpt.”

I teach English at a community college, and so I get to know a great many students who might be classified as “reluctant readers.” They are revealed early each semester when, as a first-day activity, I give all my students a written prompt designed to elicit information about their writing styles and their reading habits. Invariably, the vast majority respond to questions about the latter with some variation of the following: “I don’t really read much.”

Sadly, my students are not unique. Their attitudes about reading are shared by large numbers of students in high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools, many of whom are either uninterested in or intimidated by the books routinely handed to them by people like me in classrooms across the country. My desire to change these attitudes is not unique; like my fellow English teachers, I want my students to embrace the bedrock value of our profession: books matter. As we all know, in order to share this value, students need to be engaged by the act of reading. The trick, of course, is knowing how to foster such engagement.

*Excerpted from **RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: “RHI: Reluctant Readers”*

I have found that one answer lies in graphic novels.

Simply put, these books interest students and get them reading. Being accustomed to a complex visual culture, today's students find the "graphic" part of graphic novels to be very inviting. Students are also surprised and intrigued by the maturity of these books and by the relevance of the storylines to their own lives and to the world in which they live. In addition, reading this "disreputable" material is slightly subversive and allows students to see themselves as readers outside of a sometimes stifling academic setting. All of these factors engage readers and, importantly, provide teachers with opportunities to sharpen their students' analytical skills.

The outcomes are hard to ignore. I am routinely told by our college's librarians that the circulation activity of graphic novels remains consistently high. Anyone with an internet connection and a little time can quickly find other librarians' testimonials to the popularity of the graphic novels in their collections, along with lists of some of the more popular and engaging titles, which are grouped by age appropriateness.

My own firsthand experience has revealed more specific results. In the classes in which I include graphic novels, I have found that students do amazing things: they consult the syllabus and then read ahead, they reread the books, and they read new books on their own initiative. One of my "reluctant readers" recently flagged me down on campus to tell me that he was reading all of the graphic novels (there are many) in our library; he exhorted me to "keep ordering them." Another student e-mailed me from the four-year school to which she had transferred; she wanted to let me know that she had found the graphic-novel shelves in her school library's stacks and that she liked to kill time there, reading between her chemistry classes. My favorite reaction, however, came during a section of freshman composition: We were reading Chester Brown's *I Never*

Excerpted from RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: "RHI: Reluctant Readers"

Liked You, a comic-book memoir of his adolescence. After one particularly active discussion, in which my students had expressed surprise at how such simply rendered words and pictures could move them so profoundly, one student held up her copy and asked, “Are there more books like this around?”

There sure are. So let’s get them into the hands of our students.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Dr. Rocco Versaci is an associate Professor of English at Palomar College in San Marcos, California, where he teaches various composition, creative writing, and literature courses. In addition, he has written about the educational use of graphic novels and is currently at work writing a book about the literary merit of comics.

*Excerpted from **RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: “RHI: Reluctant Readers”*