Manuscript Proposal

Adventures in Graphica:
Using Comics and Graphic Novels in the Elementary Classroom

Submitted by

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I. Tentative Title

Adventures in Graphica: Using Comics and Graphic Novels in the Elementary Classroom

II. Description

In the past few years, the world of education has experienced an explosion of interest in the use of comic books and graphic novels in the classroom. More recently, publishers of children’s literature are beginning to produce a great deal of graphica, finally making the genre more available to the elementary age student. Despite this, many teachers remain reluctant and unsure of graphica’s suitability and function in their instructional block. This manuscript will focus on using comic books and graphic novels to motivate readers and teach comprehension in the elementary classroom. Using comics in the literacy framework offers numerous opportunities to address comprehension, fluency, second-language learner issues, content area learning, vocabulary development, and wide reading. Comics reflect popular culture and offer high interest reading to many low readers who shun traditional texts as well as proficient readers searching for an engaging genre.

The proposed book will focus on current research and professional texts that correlate with and support the use of comics in the elementary classroom. Additionally, the text will cover the history of comics as well as their transformation from their traditional bad reputation to what the NY Times called "possibly the next new literary form." The text will cover ways to locate appropriate comics for the classroom, introducing the genre, and utilizing it for comprehension strategy study, as well as vocabulary development. Specific attention will be given to how the illustrations in comics support meaning making and how the skills gained through use of the genre might be translated to reading traditional texts. Primarily written to address the needs of elementary-level instructors, the book also will be appropriate for support staff, intervention staff, special education instructors, as well as some middle school instructors and media specialists.

III. Outline, chapter summaries, and table of contents

See pages 6 - 9: Table of Contents and Scope
Any research presented in the manuscript will be a culmination of the author’s ongoing personal exploration, which began in 2004, of the educational benefits of graphica. This study includes an abundance of data collected through extensive multiple internet searches and literature reviews. To ensure the manuscript’s timeliness, an updated literature review will be drawn from recent professional texts relating to best practices in reading instruction, as well as articles from professional journals. In addition to findings from professional texts, the author’s on-hand, qualitative-style observations and anecdotes will be applied. Since the data utilized will be drawn from currently available research, no manuscript-specific methodological research study will be required.

Illustrations would include referential clips of comics and graphic novels, as well as photographic representation of students using the genre and their products.

Possibly, side bar matter may be included throughout the manuscript to offer special hints or reminders related to the text.

Appendices will include a list of recommended titles, a reference to useful internet websites, a number of black-line masters, and a list of professional resources.

A bibliography and an index will be provided.

The length of the completed manuscript is estimated to fall between 100 – 150 pages at 12-point font and double-spaced.

See pages 14 – 23: Chapter 1

No real and concise support with the graphica genre seems to exist for the elementary instructor who is searching for direction. The children’s literature market soon will be flooded with the genre, and teacher’s will be seeking assistance in how to integrate it into their classrooms.

Though some of the findings presented in the proposed
manuscript are available through extensive internet web searches and literature reviews, they are scattered and overwhelming. Teachers who are already reluctant to use the genre, and even teachers who are drawn to find out more about it, may not have the energy or time to go through the trouble of wading through such an exhausting amount of information.

Additionally, when the few professional texts regarding best practices in literacy instruction do address the topic in their content, the use of graphica is rarely afforded more than one or two paragraphs.

Finally, when one is able to find guidance for using comic books and graphic novels in the classroom, these resources seem mainly geared toward high school and middle school instruction or library and media specialists. Even then, the genre seems to be applied more to content area learning than reading comprehension strategy instruction.

Only three possible offerings seem to exist. *Going Graphic: Comics at Work In the Multilingual Classroom* by Stephen Cary (Heinemann, 2004, $23.00), though an excellent parallel to this manuscript, was written with the specific target of using graphica to support the ESL learner. In addition to background and research on the genre, Cary offers 25 lessons for using comics to address the needs of the English language learner at various grade levels and levels of fluency.

*Graphic Novels in Your Media Center: A Definitive Guide* by Allyson Lyga and Barry Lyga (Libraries Unlimited, $37.00), offers lesson plans for grades K-12, but appears to be written for the library and media specialist. The authors offer an introduction to graphic novels in the media center and include a lengthy bibliography of graphic novels the reader might explore for inclusion in a media center.

*Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens* by Michele Gorman (Linworth, 2003, $36.95) is another possibility that, once again, seems more geared toward middle school instruction, as well as library and media specialists. The text offers numerous bibliographies of graphic novels for use with students in sixth
grade and up. The author gives details on how to catalog, shelve and maintain comics in libraries, and suggests promotional activities for school and public libraries.

The manuscript *Adventures in Graphica: Using Comics and Graphic Novels in the Elementary Classroom*, will differentiate itself from the previously mentioned titles in three ways. It will be focused on the elementary-school level, it will be written for the classroom teacher, and it will focus on comprehension instruction. The text will fill the current gap in the area of graphica by pulling together much of the current research and information available in a concise way, making it more accessible to the busy elementary instructor, and applying it toward general elementary and comprehension instruction.

VIII. **Target audience**

The manuscript will be written mainly with the elementary-level literacy instructor in mind. However, much of the text’s content will be appropriate for support staff, media specialists, and middle-school instructors.

IX. **Date of completion**

Depending on the date of manuscript proposal acceptance, completion of the project is estimated to be the Fall of 2007.

X. **Author’s resume**

See pages 10 – 13: Resume for Terry G. Thompson
Table of Contents and Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. “You Got Comics?” - How I Got Into This
2. Welcome to the World of Graphica - Book Format
3. Shoring up Semantics - Definitions
4. How Do I Know This is Good for my Students? - Appropriateness
5. Finding a Place for Graphica in the Literacy Block - Incorporating Graphica
6. Before we Continue - Author’s Philosophy

The first chapter will entice the reader to explore the world of graphica by explaining its draw and value to elementary students. Confusions surrounding appropriateness for children, definitions, and how the genre can be incorporated into the classroom will be addressed. The author’s personal philosophy of literacy instruction will be discussed, as well as how graphica correlates.

Chapter 2: Motivation

1. Popularity of the Genre
2. Picture Support and Struggling Readers
3. Engaging Format
4. Entertainment Culture

Chapter 2 will draw the reader’s attention to the motivational value of comic books and graphic novels; including their reflection of current popular culture and ways the genre can feel less threatening to struggling and transitional readers.

Chapter 3: Standards

1. Standards-Based Instruction
2. National Standards: Fun and Engaging
3. Opportunities for ELL Instruction
4. Translating the Transfer

Since many educators will initially see graphica as a dumbing down of reading or too indulgent, Chapter 3 will focus on the case for using graphica to address standards rather than “teaching fluff.” Teaching opportunities that can be fun and engaging will be correlated to national standards. Referrals for additional learning in the area of ELL instruction through graphica will be made. Finally, the author will introduce the idea of translating skills taught through graphica to traditional texts and instructional situations.
**Chapter 4: Embracing Reluctance**

1. Bad Cop/Good Cop: The History of Comics
2. The Value of Light Reading
3. Teachers as Consumers
4. What Research is Telling Us

Chapter 4 will address the reluctance in some teachers to incorporate comics into their teaching repertoire. The transition from graphica as “bad for kids” to a worthwhile media will be discussed as well as the idea that even if some students find it easy, it can still offer value. Teachers will be directed to be responsible consumers of graphica just as they would for any other genre by screening what is allowed in their classrooms. Suggestions of ways to find appropriate comics for the classroom will be made. Finally, a quick literature review of the current research will be included, thus empowering teachers to be able to speak intelligently about the genre to parents, administrators and other staff members.

**Chapter 5: Introducing the Genre**

1. Graphica as a Genre Study
2. Things to Notice and Teach
   - Directionality
   - Lettering
   - Narrative boxes
   - Speech bubbles
   - Lay out
   - Pictures convey the meaning
   - Frames
3. Get in the Gutter

This chapter will offer a way to introduce graphica through an exploratory genre study format. Specific learning areas teachers will want to be sure to address will be included with specific subheadings and examples. The idea of the “gutter” – the white space between the frames where much of the comprehension takes place - will be introduced and explained.

**Chapter 6: Comprehension Instruction**

1. Monitoring Comprehension
2. Mental Images
3. Questioning
4. Determining Importance
5. Inferring
6. Summarizing and Synthesis
Chapter 6 will account for the bulk of the manuscript. It will review the tenants of effective comprehension strategies, while applying them to the use of graphica in the classroom. The case will be made for how the components of graphica both support and require students to monitor their comprehension. Additionally, each comprehension strategy and how graphica lends itself to their instruction will be discussed, along with examples and suggestions.

Chapter 7: Vocabulary

1. How Graphica Supports Vocabulary Instruction
2. Content Learning
3. Abstract, Symbolic, and Concrete Learning

A shorter chapter than the rest, chapter 7 will take a look at several ways graphica lends itself to vocabulary instruction, including the high rate of exposure of readers to new, unknown words and how the picture support offered supports the learning of new words and concepts. Some text will focus on how comics and graphic novels lend themselves to the area of content learning and symbolic learning. As with other chapters, examples and suggestions will be offered.

Chapter 8: Fluency

1. Fluency and Comprehension
2. Text Guides in Comics
3. Reader’s Theater

Chapter 8 will introduce ways graphica can be used to help students recognize and practice reading fluently and the reciprocal value of fluent reading and comprehension. A study of the important text guides that drive fluency in comics will be made and instructors will be introduced to an easy way to use familiar comics to create Reader’s Theater scripts.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

1. A Quick Word of Caution
2. Teaching with Intentionality and Reflection

In the final chapter, readers will be cautioned against the “band wagon” mentality that often overtakes us when something new hits the market. Readers will be encouraged to remember that, graphica is a wonderful resource, but one size does not fit all and care should be taken to ensure that it is used in a supplemental way, supporting ongoing instructional best practices through intentionality and reflection.
You Got Comics?

“Buddy.”

“Buddy, I need you to focus.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Right, Mr. Thompson.”

Feeling my frustration mounting and steeling myself for yet another exhaustive tutoring session with Buddy, I mustered up my calmest, most encouraging teacher voice and repeated, “What were you thinking when you slowed down at that last hard part?”

He was tired. I was tired. The entire universe was tired.

We’ve all had one. You know you have. That one student you just can’t seem to reach. You keep slugging away, sometimes seemingly beyond hope. And despite temptations to give up, you remind yourself that this is why you’re in this profession. This is what you were meant to do. So, you
do what countless educators have done before you. You carry on. You keep at it. You plug away.

Buddy and I weren’t strangers. No, we’d spent lots of time together. One might say we were old chums. Now in fourth grade, Buddy had been on my radar since first grade, and despite my most heroic efforts and some great classroom teachers along the way, I’d never seen him motivated to read.

Yes, we’ve all had one - and Buddy was mine.

As I regained my determination, I redirected Buddy’s attention once again. But something felt off. I didn’t sense his attentiveness as his usual daydreaming. He wasn’t drifting off to his regular dream world. He was intent. And focused. And staring at the cabinet behind my desk.

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes and once again calling on the serenity of my inner teacher, I asked, “Buddy – what are you looking at? What’s got you so distracted today?”

Without looking away from the cabinet, Buddy simply chin-pointed toward the lower shelf and asked, “Is that a comic book?”

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In hindsight, I truly had no idea what I would do with it.

I’ve always been a visual person and, even though I wasn’t a comic book reader as a child, I was always drawn to them. We couldn’t afford extras
like comics when I was younger, but the neighbor kid had tons of them, and I loved those rare rainy days when we couldn’t play outside. Those were the days we got to go over to his house and dig through his comics. Even now as an adult, I can’t resist the lure of a comic book store. Somehow, just being among them makes me feel like a kid again.

So it’s no wonder that, as an adult, I’ve made a habit of ducking into comic book stores, and this visit was no different than the others. I went to the mall that weekend to purchase a birthday gift and ended up in the comic book store looking around. That’s it. Just looking. I never actually BOUGHT them. I just loved digging through them. Besides, the idea of taking up comics as an adult made me feel a bit odd. Admittedly, I was a bit uneasy. Here was a genre I’d longed to understand since childhood, but discomfort kept me from really diving into it.

Then I saw it. One single shelf of comic books set aside for elementary readers. The teacher in me took over. I thumbed excitedly through several of the options and, hastily choosing an issue, made my way to the counter, paid for it, and ducked out of the store.

I wasn’t really sure what I had, but somehow I felt its potential. I remembered how much I wanted to read comics as a youngster and thought maybe – just maybe, I could find a way to use it in an instructional way. Pleased with my purchase, I pored through it over a quick bite at the food court.

I was enthralled, but unsure of exactly how I would use my delightful discovery. I vowed that when I got some extra time I would give it another look from an instructional viewpoint. But you know how it is. Upon returning
to work the following Monday, duty and my hectic schedule called, so I just put my little comic book on the shelf in my office where it would sit for three weeks collecting dust.

Until Buddy found it.

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“You mean that? That up on the shelf?”

“Yeah!”

“Yes, that’s a comic book. I didn’t know you read comic books, Buddy.” What I KNEW, in fact, was that Buddy didn’t read much of anything.

“Well…I don’t…I mean I want to…I…well…can I read that one?”

Now, in my entire time of working with Buddy, I’d never once seen him ASK to read something. And it wasn’t for lack of trying on my part. It was one of those moments where everything just clicks. A teachable moment, if you will, and I’m never one to pass up a teachable moment. I immediately scrapped the plans for the day’s lesson and got the comic book down for him.

A side of Buddy I had never seen before emerged. He actively read and discussed the text, the pictures, and the story line. He was excited! I was excited! And the universe? Well, I like to think the universe was excited for us, too. We had so much fun reading together that I almost didn’t notice that Buddy was 10 minutes late for lunch.
“Wow, Buddy, our time’s up. I’ve kept you too long again and you’re late for lunch.”

And then something downright fantastic happened. Buddy asked if he could take his comic book to lunch with him! To lunch? To lunch? I was beside myself! “Of course you can take it to lunch with you! Just promise to bring it back to me tomorrow, so we can talk some more about it.” We said our good-byes as I ushered him toward the cafeteria and then floated to the lounge to heat up my Hot Pocket - thinking all the while to myself: Yeah, there’s something to this…now I just have to figure out what it is.

But before I could figure it out, something even more amazing was about to happen. You should know that I’m a literacy coach for a K-5 Title 1 school in a suburb of Houston, Texas. I’m also the campus testing coordinator for our state reading test. Needless to say, if you’re a struggling reader and you’re on my campus, sooner or later, you’ll end up getting to know me – and usually sooner than later. It seems Buddy had shown his class our comic book at lunch and it had caused quite a stir.

By the end of the day, three of my struggling 4th grade readers had somehow risked certain fury from their teachers by ditching their classes to make their way down to my office.

Each one without a scheduled lesson.

Each one covert and clandestine.
Each one asking: “You got comics?”

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Welcome to the World of Graphica…

So, it all started with a struggling reader and a comic book, and I’ve been hooked ever since. Knowing and feeling the potential of this genre first hand and so effectively drove me into an action research plan that had me soaking up any piece of information I could find on using comics in the classroom.

It wasn’t easy. The Internet is littered with some useful resources, but the search itself can be confusing and overwhelming - not to mention time consuming. Most of the books in my professional library only barely mentioned comics if they mention them at all, and I had difficulty finding appropriate comics to use in the classroom. Often, when I did hit a gold mine of resources for the genre, the lessons and information were geared toward high school or middle school learners, and I either had to really tweak them or move on to another resource. Along the way, I found some useful resources and some not-so-useful resources. I had to feel my way much of the time and get creative, but I was driven.

Eventually, I settled on a fairly decent pile of useful ideas, pointers, and resources. Part of it is a product of my own meager creativity combined with my working knowledge of best practices in literacy. Part of it is culmination of my search for resources in the area of using graphica with elementary students. Part of it is just good old trial and error. In the past few years, I’ve hit the road becoming known as “that comic book guy” as I’ve shared my insights in workshops, presentations and classrooms, and
along the way, I’ve discovered teacher after teacher just itching to get their hands on this information.

My intent in writing this book is threefold. Initially, I want to give you some background information on the world of comics by offering you some theory, research, and support for using comics. Then I want to share with you some opportunities to apply graphica to what we already know is good teaching. Finally, I want to offer you some resources as you leave this book and continue to further your own learning from what you will start here. Throughout the book, I will share my journey through personal anecdotes, research and connections to the topics at hand. Along the way, I’ll offer hints and suggestions that I’ve found helpful. Ultimately, I hope to leave you with a better understanding of the considerable power to teach and motivate students that can be found in this wonderful and exciting genre.

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Shoring up Semantics...

Life has a funny way of teaching us lessons so clearly sometimes. For months, I’d been speaking about using comics in the classroom and getting a fairly good reception along the way. So, I was floored one summer morning in Chicago when a workshop participant came up to me during a break wanting to share a humorous confusion she noticed. It turns out that during an earlier conversation with a colleague, she had mentioned that she was going to be attending my workshop on comics. Perplexed, her friend questioned what kind of benefit could possibly be
gained by having a comedian in the classroom! Lesson learned: say what you mean.

Truthfully, this dear soul wouldn’t be the only one confused. The genre is referred to in more ways than you can imagine. You’ve got comics, cartoons, manga, graphica, comic books, graphic art, comic strips, graphic novels - and the list goes on! You might get the feeling that you can never feel completely sure you’re “saying it right.” For instance, many comics die-hards wouldn’t hesitate to criticize my use of the term graphica and even my PC’s insufferable spell check won’t recognize it. And just as there are folks out there who would think we were talking about comedians when we say ‘comics’, there are just as many out there who would think we were referring to something far more sinister when we use the term ‘graphic.’ With that said, let’s take a look at the way I define some more common terms in an effort to clarify any confusions you may have and, at the same time, make sure we are using the same vocabulary.

**Cartoons**
This refers to the single box format which has an illustration accompanied by the correlating text underneath. Sometimes cartoons will have speech bubble embedded in the artwork. Often, we see these in humorous form, but their purpose can be multiple, including satirical political cartoons. You probably have one in your email in box right now.

**Comic Strips**
Most of us are quite familiar with comic strips. You’ll remember them from your daily newspaper, but they can appear just about anywhere
including, more recently, online. They generally have 3 to 8 frames that follow a quick, short story line.

**Comic Books**
Most people are familiar with comic books even if they’ve never read one. These little gems are multiple page offerings in paperback and generally issued monthly. They tend to carry the storyline over from one month to the next – often in a cliffhanger format. Comic books are widely known for their representation of popular super heroes, but you would be wise avoid limiting them to just that. Today’s comic books focus on a wide range of storylines that might surprise you.

**Graphic Novels**
Graphic novels follow a format similar to that of comic books, but differ in that they tend to be full length storylines, meaning that they start and end within the same book. Thicker than most comic books, graphic novels are bound like a book and are sometimes offered in hard back. Like comic books, graphic novels cover a wide range of topics and themes in addition to the more familiar super hero storylines. These topics can range from surviving the holocaust concentration camps to the events of 9/11.

**Manga**
Because it is more popular with the middle school, high school, and young adult packs, manga is a form of graphic storytelling that I’m, admittedly, less familiar with. Similar to graphic novels in format, manga tends to use the more stylized Japanese cartooning to represent characters in a surprisingly distinctive way. A quick search online will give you hundreds of examples of manga’s format and style, and the next time you’re in one of the larger bookstore chains, ask to see their manga collection. Many now
have entire sections of their store dedicated to this specific style of graphic storytelling.

You’ll want to note that these definitions represent my best understanding of them at this point, though I feel relatively confident in their accuracy. However, don’t be surprised if you run into someone along the way who would argue with my logic. I tend to prefer simplicity, so in this book, for the sake of convenience, I use the terms comics and graphica interchangeably as catch-all terms to represent and encompass all of the terms above.

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How Do I Know if This is Good for My Students?

You already do. You know your students as readers. You know their interests, their complexities - their worries. You know those kids who are fantastical and those who are more grounded in reality. You know which little ones need a new genre to explore and which ones need a little something tantalizing to boost their interest in reading. In upcoming chapters, I’ll discuss specifically how comics can be appropriate for children and how they can be used to support literacy instruction in your classroom, but for now let’s think about the needs of your individual students. Many of them will find comics valuable, but some won’t care a lick for them.

When Hurricane Rita hit southeast Texas in the fall of 2005, all the members of my extended family were temporarily displaced, and my twin brother’s
family came to Houston to stay at my house. We enjoyed our visit, but the kids began to get bored with none of their belongings here to keep them busy. My niece Megan, just now entering 2nd grade, was knee-deep in a Junie B. Jones phase, so I brought home some extra copies from work to share with her. For my nephew Tyler, a capricious 4th grader, I brought home some of the comic books that were becoming so popular with my own 4th grade students at work. Tyler’s a smart kid with an incredible sense of imagination, and I was excited to share my comics with him. So, you can imagine my disappointment when, after taking a few copies and then skimming the front, the back, and flipping through the pages, he simply muttered, “Huh…”, tossed them on the counter, and went outside to play. In the end, he was more interested in my PlayStation than anything else.

I learned a valuable lesson that day. Just because I had taken to graphica doesn’t mean my nephew, or every kid I worked with for that matter, would. Even though I introduce each different genre with vigor, ultimately, kids choose genres for independent reading based on their own interests and background. In essence, yes, comics are good for your students – but allow for mixed results. For some, they will be nothing more than a passing interest, while for others, comics will be the best thing that happened in their young reading life. When all’s said and done, your students’ reactions to comics will tell you whether they’re good for them. Go with it.
Finding a Place for Comics in the Literacy Block

With little effort, graphica can be easily integrated into much of what you already do. Research is showing us that students who read high-interest, self-selected texts for longer periods of time become stronger readers, so simply allowing comics to be a choice during the individualized reading time in the Reading Workshop can be an easy incorporation. Students will snatch them up, and all you have to do is maybe offer a few mini-lessons on the genre and add titles to your classroom library as you come across them.

Since, comparatively, comic books are fairly inexpensive (most cost around $3.00), collecting enough copies of a title to use with a Guided Reading or strategy focus group can be an inexpensive endeavor. But don’t limit yourself to just comic books; tons of graphica can be found in the daily paper. Do you have colleagues who can’t start their day without their morning coffee and the newspaper? Work a deal with those early risers in your building to collect their comics section each day and you’ve got limitless multiple copies of comic strips to teach with. Have your students clip copies of your class’ favorite titles and collect them in individual binders for independent or paired reading time.

I encourage you to double-check me on this, but it is my understanding that you can make an overhead copy of portions of certain texts and use it during your shared reading time without violating copyright laws. There are restrictions and guidelines to this, and copyright fair use can be quite
confusing, so you’ll want to do your homework in this area. See Carol Simpson’s book Copyright for Schools: A Practical Guide or www.techlearning.com for more direction in navigating the various copyright and fair use issues to ensure that you are within the intent of the law.

Finally, if you haven’t done so in a while, give some of your favorite publishers a look-see. Many makers of your favorite read aloud and guided reading titles, having recognized the power behind graphica, are beginning to offer new and unique titles of their own.

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Before We Continue...

By now, you’ve probably noticed that I’m a driven teacher. I want the best things for my students like most of us do. That goes the same for the teachers I coach. I want learning to be fun and engaging. I’m reflective in my work, and I strive to produce students and teachers who are reflective thinkers as well.

Personally, I avoid “cookie cutter” reading programs or the “sheep mentality” that often sweep over our profession. I hold my calling sacred and choose not to leave the direction of my teaching to some nameless entity. I don’t trust my responsibility to just anyone. I admit that it can be difficult, but I believe in differentiating instruction to meet the needs of my learners. And in all of this, I find that graphica can sometimes fit the bill.
Yes, that's right. Sometimes. Not always. Not in every situation. Graphica is a wonderful resource with a great deal of untapped potential, but I don't use it above all else. I use what works to get the job done and sometimes that's graphica. I use graphica in a supplemental and integrated way - just like I would with any other genre.

So, as you move forward through this text, be aware that I'm only offering you a slice of what I use in the classroom. This book is an attempt to offer you a fine-tuned viewing of what is, for most teachers, an unfamiliar and challenging genre, and I invite you to use it as a resource as you move to integrate graphica into your literacy block.