

LETTER FROM AN EDUCATOR

Too often, we hear that graphic novels are great for reluctant readers with the implication that they will then grow into “real” reading, eventually leaving this method of story-telling behind. As a high school educator for over 25 years, author, speaker, reading specialist, and most importantly, parent, I will offer that rather than simply serving as a steppingstone to “real” reading, graphic novels ignite kids love of reading and also offer a distinct literary experience that engages readers in a different, still rigorous, kind of processing.

- ◆ **Accessibility:** Graphic novels offer built-in literacy scaffolding as images can help make meaning of text. This assists with language learners, reading levels, dyslexia, and more. Additionally, autistic readers will experience the in-depth emotions we see through body language and facial expression. For readers with aphantasia (when a reader is unable to form mental images from text) graphic novels are a must.
- ◆ **Diverse representation:** In the *Junie B. Jones* adaptations, we see wonderful diversity in her classroom, playground, and even on the school bus. In prose, there simply is not enough room to allow for specific descriptions of each child, but in graphic novels, we can see so much in just one panel.
- ◆ **Emotional nuance:** A great example of this can be found in the adaptation of *Junie B. Jones and a Little Monkey Business*. We see and feel the hope of mom and dad when they are telling Junie about having a new baby—holding her hand, the looks on their faces, and Junie’s lack of comprehension. A hilarious addition is the changing expression on Junie’s shoes (croc’s) in the actual shape of an alligator. Over several pages, the croc’s facial expression goes from a smile, to open mouth joy, to a frown, matching Junie’s moods.
- ◆ **Modernized:** The *Junie B. Jones* graphic novels also allow for an entire new generation to fall in love with these stories as we see modern classrooms, fashion, etc.
- ◆ **Text to text comparison:** This is a higher-level reading skill as readers analyze the original prose and the graphic adaptation. Do the images match what the reader had in their head? How do the images complement or supplement the prose?
- ◆ **Inference-making:** The empty space (gutter) between each panel (box of drawing) in a graphic novel makes reading this medium more challenging than prose. The reader must make meaning of how the story progresses through these empty spaces, connecting panel to panel. In prose, the author tells the reader what to understand.
- ◆ **Wordless panels:** Those unfamiliar with graphic novels might overlook or even skip these pages. However, they often add the most to stories. These pages should force the reader to slow down and really analyze what is happening, what the character is thinking or feeling, etc. This forces the reader to make meaning and allows for meaningful individual interpretation of what is happening in that part of the story.

Let’s also not overlook the wow factor of graphic novels and their ever-increasing circulation in libraries, schools, and booksellers. Yes, graphic novels will no doubt engage the reluctant reader, but they offer practice of analytic reading skills for all levels. As an educator, I would never state that graphic novels should replace prose stories, but they are a vital tool in our literary toolbox in schools and at home.

TIM SMYTH

Educator, speaker, and author of the Eisner-nominated *Teaching with Comics and Graphic Novels*