

Back to School? Again!

By Karen Green

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For someone who talks so large about the academic applications of comics reading, I seem to spend a lot of time in high schools....

In April, I paid two visits to the Community Health Academy of the Heights (CHAH), a middle/high school in Washington Heights, here in upper Manhattan. CHAH is a joint project of the NYC Department of Education, the Community League of the Heights, the New York-Presbyterian Hospital, among other organizations, with the goal of training students for futures in health care. I'd been e-intro'ed to a teacher there, Mr. Small, by a long-time friend of mine (the same friend who'd connected me with Marsha Hurstat Columbia's med school), and Mr Small was interested in having me come talk to his ninth-grade class about graphic novels, as part of their unit on substance abuse. After that first visit, I returned the following week to repeat the experience with his tenth-graders.



Have I mentioned that one of the things that I particularly like about being an academic librarian is not having to worry about age-appropriate reading? This was brought quite vividly home to me as I tried to compile a list of substance abuse-themed books to take with me. Hmmmm... *The Alcoholic*? Oh, you mean the book that begins with the groggy protagonist about to have sex with an elderly female midget? Followed in short order by his memories of a drunken homoerotic encounter and then after that with graphically portrayed premature ejaculation? How about Kevin Colden's *Fishtown*? The bleak story of four teens who murder a classmate? The one that opens with a high school girl holed up in a bathroom stall, inhaling fumes from a substance she's burning in tin foil? Oh, OK, what about *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*? They're such a happy trio! Look, they're happily welcoming a teenage runaway to share their stash! Happily throwing Norbert the Nark out a fifth-storey window! Happily infecting each other with gonorrhoea by purposely riding bareback with the same sex

partner!

Yeah, there weren't a lot of wholesome, inspirational stories. I did bring along *Spider-Man: the Death of Gwen Stacy* because of the Harry Osborne addiction plotline, even though I feared it might look a little corny to young 21st-century eyes, and *Iron Man: Demon in a Bottle* to show the toll that life's pressures can take even on a superhero and titan of industry. I added Paul Pope's *Heavy Liquid*, too, as an example of the intersection of substance abuse tales and pure fantasy. And, courtesy of the endlessly helpful members of the COMIXSCHOLARS-L listserv, I'd also compiled a shareable set of bookmarks to some of Ethan Persoff's more appropriate "Comics with Problems".

With a bag full of books and a general sense of what I wanted to say, I entered the school with some trepidation. Nervously, I pulled Mr Small aside and whispered, "You know, here's the thing with comics about substance abuse; they're describing a really sordid situation. And they show exactly what it looks like." He reassured me that the students had just completed a unit on sexually-transmitted diseases, so perhaps I was overestimating how easily shocked they could be.

And so I introduced myself to this room full of 14-year-olds, and asked how many of them read comics. A few hands went up, fans of Spider-Man and Superman and Batman. "Really? That's it? What about the rest of you—not even the Sunday funnies?" (I immediately felt ancient for using the term "Sunday funnies"...) A lot more hands went up. "What about manga? Any of you read manga?" A couple of girls added their hands to the group, which was now the clear majority of the class. Isn't it interesting how, even among teenagers who haven't grown up with categorization, "comics" seem to be interpreted only as superhero comic books?

Once I'd established that we had comics readers in the group, I asked if they knew how many different people could be responsible for making a comic. "The author!" OK, what kind of author? Who creates the story? "Writers!" And who does the pictures? "Artists!" Absolutely. Is there more than one kind of artist? Blank looks. With a little encouragement, and the help of the superhero fans, I managed to get through the concept of penciller, inker, and colorist. Anyone know who else is involved? "Editors!" "Publicists!" (It was startling to me how many students in both classes called out "publicist" as someone who helps create comics. I have to think they've all been watching too many Academy Awards acceptance speeches.) OK, yes, a good editor can help shape the story, no question. But how do we know what the characters are saying? "The writer!" Well, we have "writer" on the board already. How do we see the dialogue? "Those balloons!" Close enough. Soon they knew what a letterer does.



I also wanted to see if they knew how to read a comic; if the conventions of comics storytelling were as universally understandable, even instinctive, as I suspected they were. I drew a speech balloon on the board: what does that mean? "Someone's talking!" I drew a thought balloon: "they're thinking!" I drew a stick figure (I'm no artist), with legs bent to the right and leftward motion lines coming off head and body: "he's running!" I asked about light bulbs and exclamation points over characters' heads, about X-ed out eyes, about sound effects: they knew it all. One of the manga readers even mentioned the drop of sweat on a character's head. I showed them three panels that depicted action and asked them what was happening and how they knew what had occurred between each frame. The notion of the action in the gutters took a moment for them to articulate, but they clearly understood the concept.

Then it was time to look at some comics! I wanted to find a way to categorize them and as I tried to hash that out I started to realize that the presentation I was giving to these students was not significantly different than the one I'd given to the med-school students a couple of months back, nor than I would give to any undergraduate or graduate class I was asked to address. How is the image/text created—what is the nature of authorship? How does one read the image/text? Can one create a typology for these images/texts?



I'm not convinced that the typology part is strictly necessary, but trying to create one was a useful exercise. What separates Gilbert Shelton from Kevin Colden? Stylistically? Qualitatively? Historically? Topically? What message does Harry Osborne's storyline provide? Is it the same as Jonathan A.'s? Is Jonathan A.'s story even trying to send a message? If so, are both targeting the same audience?





Are either as didactic as something like Al Feldstein's and Joe Orlando's 1953 "The Monkey" or "Hooked!"—the latter of which was distributed at methadone clinics in the 1960s? Both of these, especially "Hooked!," are more reminiscent of the purposefully didactic comics commissioned by government agencies, such as the social-reintegration comic provided by Military OneSource or those "Decision" panels from the New York City Department of Health that decorated the subways in the early 1990s (somebody *really* needs to collect and publish those). There's a distinction between cautionary tales and strict didacticism. Isn't there?

My point, basically, is that these are questions as fitting for higher education as for secondary education. How to read something, both as technique and investigation, is a skill that knows no grade level. The point that I return to over and over in presentations like this is that comics represent simply another kind of text to read, with its own set of conventions and grammar. That's what academics do: read texts, with every connotation that phrase evokes.

What was lovely about the CHAH students, of course, is that these were texts they wanted just to read. In both classes, when I started passing around the books, they never made it very far. By the end of the session, all five books had stalled on individual desks, with the five students completely immersed in the story—sometimes, with their classmates peering over their shoulders. Often, these were the students who hadn't raised their hands when asked if they read comics. In one class, as I walked around to collect the books, the young girl who'd been reading the complex and nuanced *Fishtown* looked up, eyes bright, saying, "I think I know what's going on in this story!" and proceeded to give me her interpretation of the story. And really, what more could any teacher want?

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