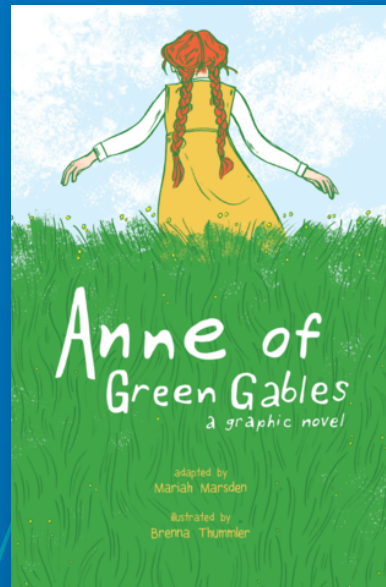
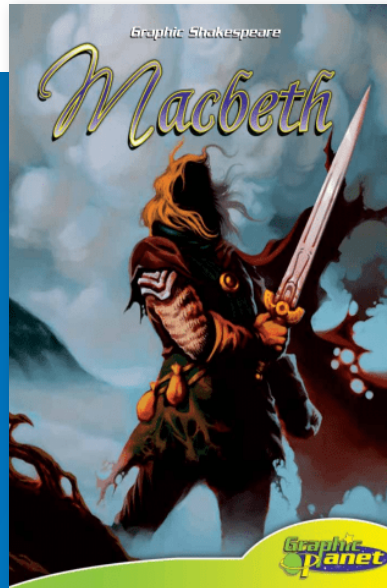




MAKING CLASSIC LITERATURE MORE ACCESSIBLE



COMICSPLUS

Classroom Connections

GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE CLASSROOM

by Paige Brayton

Graphic novel adaptations of canonical literature have gained popularity in classrooms as supplemental tools to aid in teaching the original texts of classic novels and plays. Graphic novel adaptations make literature more accessible to students, which in turn improves literacy through comprehension of original texts and an increase in reading for pleasure. The use of graphic novel adaptations in educational settings is significant because it offers opportunities to re-introduce a variety of classics to modern readers in a new format that may be more engaging than traditional prose.

The practice of adapting literature into other media is as old as civilization itself, as many ancient myths are only known today because they have been adapted for centuries. All modern forms of storytelling that are currently taught in schools [are tied to the practice of adaptation](#). Even the rise of the novel as a literary form was partially sustained by adaptations for the popular stage and other media, or by adaptations of plays and other oral histories into written text. Graphic novel adaptations have been around since 1941, starting with the [Classics Illustrated](#) series, first published by the Elliot Publishing Company. *Classics Illustrated* capitalized on the potential of comic books as educational tools during the Golden Age of Comics by reimagining literary classics with the aim to [honor and embellish rather than replace](#) the books on which they



were based. These types of adaptations have allowed readers to see beloved stories from new angles and provide new ways to access and enjoy literary classics.

While canonical literature is still deemed important in traditional curricula, students often struggle to fully comprehend the language used on their own, for multiple reasons. Canonical texts were most often not originally written for adolescent readers, and modern students don't have experiential knowledge of the historical moments these texts reference. Graphic novel adaptations present an opportunity to scaffold canonical literature for improved reader understanding and engagement. In education, scaffolding refers to a variety of instructional

techniques used to move students progressively toward stronger understanding of concepts and, ultimately, greater independence in the learning process.

Educators have found that [using graphic novels is an effective way to scaffold canonical literature](#) during lessons, because full comprehension of canonical literature requires teachers to sift through not only the textual meaning but also the related historical context. Graphic novels can also be used in the classroom to [teach students how to write](#) by providing a structure that students can use and build upon independently. The dynamic format can also provide a visual vocabulary of sorts for scaffolding writing techniques – particularly dialogue, tone, and mood.

A common practice of educators who teach literature arts is to use a graphic novel version of a challenging text such as *Romeo and Juliet* to scaffold the storyline of the play before reading the original Elizabethan English together as a class. With this type of reading support, students can [fully understand the plot of the story](#) using visual cues and adapted language before engaging with the original language of the play itself.

POP CULTURE & ACCESSIBILITY

Not so surprisingly, but often forgotten, many of the novels and plays taught in classrooms today as part of the literary canon were originally created and engaged with as forms of popular entertainment. The method of teaching adaptations and helping students to adapt



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The graphic novel’s accessible format allows readers of all skill levels into the world of classic literary references that would otherwise only be accessible to stronger or otherwise advantaged readers.”

their own versions of older stories commonly supplements the teaching of a core text. This multimodal approach to comprehension of literature provides a productive platform for better understanding the value of now-classic texts and their cultural relevance, both in the past and present. When studied alongside their adapted texts, graphic novel adaptations provide a unique reading experience offering opportunities for understanding those texts more fully through a valid process of reinterpreting or reenvisioning a source text,

which improves reading comprehension and literacy. Unlike conventional novels, the graphic novel requires readers to recognize the notions of time, intertextuality (which refers to relationships between texts), hypertextuality (which refers to the ways texts are linked to each other), and visual literacy. Despite their popular culture appeal, graphic novels follow in a long tradition of popular art created for mass consumption that also offers educational benefits.

In an [article providing graphic novel recommendations for school libraries](#), Education editor for Yale Center of Dyslexia and Creativity Kyle Redford refers to graphic novels as “the grand equalizers,” stating that “they invite all levels of readers into reading conversations.” Redford comments on the accessibility of graphic novels as appealing to mass audiences because, “since everyone can read graphic novels, everyone can talk about them.” He further states that strong readers enjoy the format as well, and that “it’s always exciting to witness the way that the elitism usually associated with reading sophisticated titles seems to fall away when it comes to sharing love for a graphic novel.” He also believes graphic novels are especially helpful to dyslexic readers because they offer “several different cues to the story. If a reader gets snagged on the vocabulary or storyline of a graphic novel, illustrated pages offer contextual cues to help decipher meaning.”

The graphic novel’s accessible format allows readers of all skill levels into the world of classic literary references that would otherwise only be accessible to stronger or otherwise advantaged readers. Redford emphasizes that “graphic novels are a wonderful way to help dyslexic readers strengthen their vocabulary, build their reading confidence, and foster a love of story.” Graphic novels are even [incorporated](#)



Manga Classics

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The recent rise in popularity of manga in the United States has led to the adaptation of classics into the manga format.”

[into higher education programs](#) due to their accessibility and may often be assigned as classroom texts with the goal to help students develop critical thinking skills that will serve them well in any future path they choose. [Graphic novels may be especially helpful to the reluctant or struggling reader](#) because they offer accessibility through pictures for context, and possibly an alternate path into classroom discussions of higher-level texts. Additionally, the [recent rise in popularity of manga](#) in the United States has led to the adaptation of

classics into the manga format, as seen in the [Manga Classics](#) series, which are accompanied by teaching guides provided by the publisher.

The use of graphic novels has also become increasingly popular in the classroom to engage English language learners (ELLs) by offering a less intimidating way to experience literature than the traditional novel. Engagement with graphic novels prepares ELL students for more traditional forms of reading while simultaneously teaching critical literacy skills. Despite complex elements, the language in a graphic novel is contextualized, acting as a support system guiding the reader through the language learning process. In an [article by educators of high school Deaf students](#), Linda Smetana, Darah Odelson, Heidi Burns, and Dana L. Grisham explain that the experiences of Deaf students parallel the experiences of most second-language learners in that like other ELLs, they have a limited basis in the oral language that they are learning to read and write. Readers derive information from graphic novels by deducing what has occurred between one image and the next and the progression of the story.

“Graphic novels can also be used in the classroom to teach students how to write by providing a structure that students can use and build upon independently.”



ABDO

This style is appealing to Deaf students because their communication systems of ASL and facial expressions are visual. Graphic novels are proven to improve literacy for ELLs because their illustrations provide contextual support and clues to the meaning of the written narrative, help demystify the text, and increase comprehension. Graphic novels further assist second-language learning by providing engaging content in a sequential, logical order. However, graphic novels are not only scholarly and cultural resources for ELL students and all readers, but are also enjoyed for personal pleasure and recreation, [which also improves reading comprehension](#).

[Studies have shown a definite correlation between reading for pleasure and improvements in literacy](#). These studies displayed a higher reading performance among young people who read each day for pleasure for at least thirty minutes over those that did not or read for less time each day. Graphic novels may be more effective at encouraging reading for pleasure because they can be less intimidating to a student. This intimidation and fear of reading is often exacerbated if the student struggles with large paragraphs of text.

Graphic novels are especially welcoming in

this case due to the way text is broken up by visual elements. Once reluctant readers feel comfortable reading graphic novels, they may be encouraged to read a variety of fiction, as [teens who read graphic novels will often read more prose novels than those who don't read graphic novels](#). The correlation between reading for pleasure and reading skill level is especially impactful because [learning is particularly effective when students are in a state of play](#). In turn, readers who are more engaged in the text they are reading will [experience higher reading comprehension](#) because they are motivated to “understand the text content fully and, therefore, process the information deeply.” Readers who are engaged and interested in the subject they are reading will read for pleasure more often and experience improved reading comprehension as a result, which can even be increased by the involvement of graphic novels.

Graphic novels are important entertainment material but are also increasingly used as tools for improving literacy, language learning, and readership for pleasure across a broad audience. With increasing availability of graphic adaptations of classics and contemporary novels, educators should consider including graphic novels in their lesson plans.

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ABDO, Capstone, Classics Illustrated, Manga Classics



Paige Brayton

Paige Brayton is a graduate student in the Writing: Book Publishing master's program at Portland State University who will graduate in June of 2023. Paige received her undergraduate degree from University of Puget Sound, where she majored in Business Leadership and minored in English. Paige is focusing her graduate research on the use of graphic novel adaptations in classrooms and the impact on accessibility. Paige is a PNW lifer and loves spending her free time with her husband, Kyle, who is a high school English teacher, and their spotty dog, Toby.

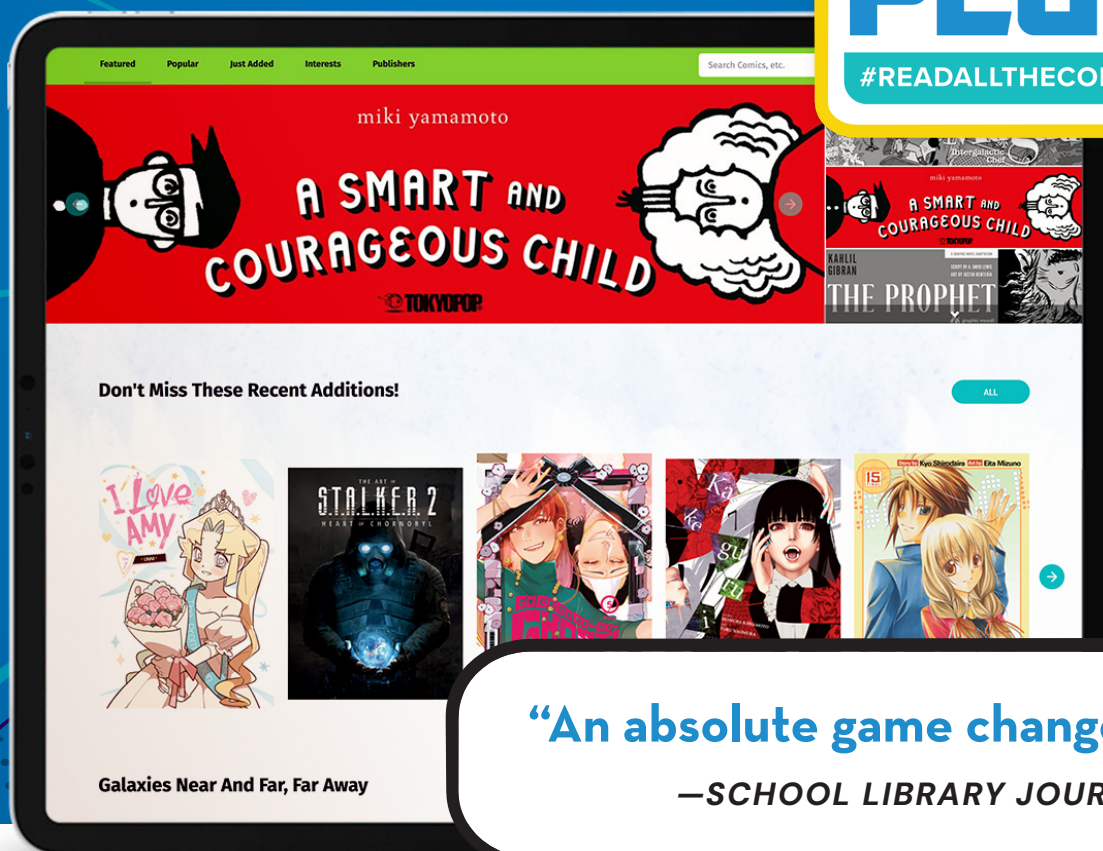
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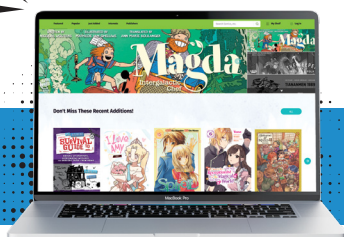
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