

Comix Club: The Origin Story

Combine a new public librarian with a love for comics and a more experienced school librarian with a passion for programming. Add a few kids, some free comic books, and in an instant the popular Comix Club was born!

Three years ago, Jack Baur was a brand new teen librarian at Berkeley Public Library, on his first trip into the perilous world of middle school outreach. On this voyage he met Jessica Lee, the teacher librarian at Willard Middle School, who was looking for a new program to bring to her students. Although Jessica was disappointed to learn that Jack couldn't knit, crochet, or craft, what he did have was a boundless passion for comic books. The two banded together, forming a new dynamic duo dedicated to bringing the love of reading to students throughout Berkeley and beyond!

Together, we have been coordinating the Comix Club for the last three years. This graphic novel discussion group meets weekly during lunch at the Willard Middle School library, and has attracted a large, diverse, and dedicated group of attendees. Every week, members of the club get to take home a new graphic novel, which is then discussed at the following meeting.

Discussion questions are handed out with the books, giving the kids something to think about as they are reading and helping to provide some structure to the often freewheeling conversations. Giving the questions to students in advance of the discussion can also offer a bit of context for some of the trickier parts of the stories.

Why Graphic Novels?

Since our Comix Club meets during lunch as a supplemental program, there are no

Talking Comics Starting Your Graphic Novel Book Club

By Jack Baur and Jessica Lee

requirements about the material matching curricular standards. We are free to select any books that kids will enjoy. Because graphic novels are generally quick reads, students have no trouble finishing a book in time for the next discussion, unlike our experience with traditional book clubs. We are able to meet weekly to discuss a different book, keeping the club both consistent and fresh. Our drop-out rate is incredibly low!

Thanks to the support of the images in graphic novels, a wide range of readers is able to follow the stories and therefore engage in our discussions. Participants in the group have included students with dyslexia, reluctant readers, new English speakers, and children on the autism spectrum, as well as highly gifted students.

This is not to imply that comics are easy reading. Rather, graphic novels use language differently, providing dense dialogue with few filler words. The fact that graphic novels pair text and image can both help students by providing an extra visual framework for the text, and challenge students with complicated page layouts and by exploiting the tension between what is being said and what is being shown.

Most importantly, graphic novels engage the students' minds. Readers get caught up in the story, develop sympathy for the characters, marvel at the settings, wrestle with the themes, and generally relate to them as they would any novel in a literature class—but without a lot of the prodding! Many

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JESSICA LEE is the Teacher-Librarian at Willard Middle School in Berkeley where she has enjoyed playing matchmaker between kids and quality books for the last seven years. In her spare time she raises two rambunctious but highly literate sons.

Additional Resources

Because the world of graphic novels is so large, varied, and occasionally daunting, we have assembled some resources that may help librarians select titles for their book clubs, and their collections in general:

No Flying, No Tights

www.noflyingnotights.com

The classic website was recently relaunched with a steady flow of new content, including reviews, lists, commentaries, and more! Graphic novel reviews by librarians, for librarians.

Graphic Novels and High School English

www.graphicnovelsandhighschoolenglish.com

An online community for teachers using graphic novels in the high school classroom, this site contains lots of information about thinking seriously about comics in an educational setting.

Graphic Novels for Librarians Group

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GNLIB-L>

A very active discussion list full of librarians who are passionate about comics. Join the group and bring any comics-related questions you have; you'll get a response from folks in the know.

Talking Comics Online

Throughout 2012, Jack and Jessica will be sharing even more of their graphic novel book club guides over at the *Graphic Novel Reporter* website! Check them out at <http://graphicnovelreporter.com/content/discussion-guides>.

of our discussion questions are modeled on the basic literary response model of making connections between the text and personal experience or previous reading.

Getting Started

Our club was started with a grant from the California Center for the Book, which offers a free loan of their “Book Club in a Box” materials to California librarians (info can be found at <http://calbook.org/bcb.html>). Their “Comix.@\$#!” set provided us with ten copies of ten titles, giving us ten weeks of programming. We hadn't intended to carry on beyond that, but the immediate popularity sent us scrambling to figure out how to expand to a year-long program.

Initially, we turned to our respective library systems. By mining the collections at both the Berkeley Public Library and the Berkeley Unified School District, we were able to cobble together enough copies of more popular books to keep our club happy for a little while. Librarians who are just starting a comic book club or who want to inject some graphic novels into their existing book club but are put off by the steep expense of developing a collection may want to try this tactic. For our readers, however, it was clear this was not going to be enough.

Building Our Collection

To build our own graphic novel book club collection, we turned to DonorsChoose.org, a crowd-funding organization for

schools. In our experience, proposals that are put in at the end of the calendar year (when big corporate donors are thinking a lot about their charitable giving) will have a good chance at getting funded if you can grow enough local support in your school or library community. Through DonorsChoose.org, we have received ten copies each of fifteen graphic novel titles—a huge help for our burgeoning club!

This points out one of the advantages of collaboration between a school and public library system. By working together, one of us can apply for grants for which the other may not qualify. We have also been able to use the resources of our own systems to purchase books—funds set aside for outreach or programming in the public libraries and PTA grants through the schools. Over the years, what began as a ten-week program has grown to cover an entire school year.

The collection that we have developed is very much viewed as a shared resource. In addition to helping run the club at Willard, Jack has been able to use books from the collection in book clubs at other schools—both within and outside the district—and at the public library. Reaching dozens of teens. Currently, the graphic novel discussion group travels back and forth between two school libraries so that every seventh and eighth grader in both schools gets a chance to interact with librarians over some incredible books.

Our Discussion Guides

We'd like to share some of the discussion guides that we have put together for our Comix Club so that you have a foundation for beginning your own discussion group. These questions were developed with middle school students in mind, but feel free to adapt and use as needed for your environment!

Discussion Guides

All-Star Superman, Vol. 1 by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely

Synopsis: After Lex Luthor tricks him into flying into the Sun to save a sabotaged spaceship, Superman realizes he is dying. He then receives a strange prophecy from the future that tells him that in his final days he will perform some of the most amazing feats of his life. Superman will defend Metropolis until his last breath, but how will he say good-bye to the people he is closest to? Inspired by the off-the-wall, science-fiction-inflected *Superman* comics of the sixties, *All-Star Superman* is by turns thought-provoking, funny, exciting, and moving.

Themes: What it means to be a hero, self-sacrifice, literary dualities.

Content Advisory: Comic book violence, largely of the bloodless variety.

Discussion Questions:

1. Look at the first three pages of the story. What do these three pages tell you about Superman?
2. When Superman tries to tell Lois that he is Clark Kent, she doesn't believe him. On page 49, she says, "What if there really was some part of him that was bumbling, oafish Clark Kent? I just don't know if I could live with that." Why does Lois have a hard time with the idea of Clark being Superman?
3. Why does Lex Luthor hate Superman? Why does he like Clark Kent? How is it different from how Lois Lane feels?
4. Based on the last story in the book, what conclusions can you come to about Superman's humanity? Do either Lois or Lex see the "real" Superman?

American Born Chinese by Gene Yang

Synopsis: A multifaceted story about the pressures of growing up different, told through three seemingly unrelated stories that come together in a dazzling way by the end. In the first, a young Chinese boy runs into conflict with his best friend when he tries to change himself to become cool. Then, a white high school student faces embarrassment when his grossly stereotypical Chinese cousin Chin-Kee comes to town. And finally, after being embarrassed at a party for the gods, the Monkey King sets out to prove that he is "The Great Sage, Equal to All Heaven" in a story borrowed from Chinese folklore.

Themes: Racial stereotypes, changing oneself to fit in, self-acceptance.

Content Advisory: The book confronts some disturbing stereotypes, and talks bluntly about American impressions of Chinese culture. Some jokes about bodily functions.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the stereotypes presented in *American Born Chinese*? How are the stereotypes presented? What do you think the author is trying to say about those stereotypes?
2. On the surface, the character of Chin-Kee is incredibly disturbing as he embodies the worst kind of racial stereotypes. Who is Chin-Kee? What does he represent in the story?
3. How do the three stories relate to each other?
4. In the sections of the story about Danny and his cousin Chin-Kee, the author uses a lot of laughter and applause sound effects that seem to be coming from nowhere. What do these sound effects remind you of? Why would the author use these effects?
5. The Transformer toy in *American Born Chinese* represents the many alterations or transformations the characters go through in order to fit into American society. How do the characters "transform" themselves? How do you transform yourself to fit into the American mainstream?

Anya's Ghost by Vera Brosgol

Synopsis: At first, Anya's troubles are fairly straightforward. She doesn't fit in at her new high school, is embarrassed by her Russian immigrant mother's traditional ways, struggles to get the attention of the boy she likes, and her friendship with Siobahn is flecked with jealousy and anger. Then one day while sulkily walking home, Anya falls down a well and meets Emily, the ghost of a young girl killed ninety years before. With a new, invisible friend, Anya's life is sure to improve... except that the motives of the ghost may not be as transparent as her body is.

Themes: Fitting in within a new culture, frenemies, peer relations, bad influences, body image issues.

Content Advisory: Anya smokes cigarettes! Language, habitual truancy and a teen party with implied drinking and sex.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Anya feel about herself? Do you think her self-criticism is normal?
2. Why is Anya drawn in by Emily so quickly? Did you think Emily was as innocent as she first seemed? Why or why not?
3. Do you know anyone like Elizabeth who seems to have it all? As Anya says, "Everyone else's life seems so much easier." Do you agree with Anya?
4. Do you see any similarities between Anya's relationship with Siobahn and her relationship with Emily?
5. In their final confrontation (pp. 196-199) Emily says some pretty mean things. Are any of them true? Is Emily right about Anya?

***The Arrival* by Shaun Tan**

Synopsis: In this “silent” graphic novel, a man leaves his wife and children to seek a better life in a faraway country. He finds the strange new land confusing and intimidating, but by learning from the experiences of other immigrants he eventually comes to see it as home.

Themes: The immigrant experience, other cultures, being a stranger in a strange land, wordless comics.

Content Advisory: Some scary images, but nothing graphic.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the author tell the story using just pictures? What effect do you think he was trying to achieve by telling the story this way?
2. Imagine that you are in another country, or think about a time you might have visited one. How does the book convey the experience of being in a foreign place?
3. Were you able to “read” the book easily? How does this kind of reading compare to other kinds of reading?
4. *The Arrival* is about a man moving to a new country. What does the country he goes to remind you of? What aspects of the world do you recognize?
5. Why does the man leave his home at the beginning of the book? Why did the other people he meets leave their homes?
6. The book appears to have a happy ending, with the man settled in his new home. What did he do to make himself feel comfortable and safe in this strange land?

***Meanwhile* by Jason Shiga**

Synopsis: A madcap “choose-your-own-adventure” story in which deciding on an ice cream flavor leads to a mad scientist’s laboratory, inviting time travel, alternate dimensions, and, maybe, the destruction of all human life! *Meanwhile* is brilliantly designed, allowing readers to follow branching, multicolored tubes to navigate thousands of different story possibilities. Packed with puzzles and secret paths, this one begs to be reread again and again.

Themes: Problem-solving, quantum physics, learning about responsibility in a mad scientist’s lab.

Content Advisory: Some potty humor and bloodless mayhem/violence. Also the end of all life on the planet.

Discussion Questions:

1. What was your favorite path through the book? How would you represent or map that path?
2. At some point during your trip through the book, you probably found the inventor describing “the Multiple Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics.” Do you think that multiple worlds could possibly exist simultaneously? How does the design of this book relate to that idea?
3. Some people really don’t like this book. What is it about this book that may turn people off? How did you feel about the book?
4. Chocolate or vanilla?

***Persepolis, vol 1: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi**

Note: Persepolis is available as two separate volumes and as a single collected edition. Our club just reads the first volume, though they are encouraged to pursue the more mature second volume/second half of the story if they enjoy the first. In addition to handing out the book, we held an open screening of the beginning of the 2008 film adaptation as an introduction to the history of Iran and as a way of getting the kids into the book.

Synopsis: Author Marjane Satrapi tells of her experience growing up during the Iranian Revolution, the subsequent war between Iran and Iraq, and the rise of the Islamic Republic. Against these tumultuous events, readers get a glimpse of Satrapi’s teenage angst and her struggles to express herself under the burgeoning social repression of the new regime.

Themes: Coming-of-age, becoming self-aware in times of social upheaval, other cultures, freedom and repression.

Content Advisory: The book contains several scenes of rioting in the streets, warfare, and torture. Satrapi’s art style throughout is cartoony and understated, so the violence isn’t terribly graphic, but it does pack an emotional punch.

Discussion Questions:

1. Satrapi says, “Every situation has an opportunity for laughs” (p. 97). What parts of the book made you laugh?
2. At the core of the book is Marji’s family. What is this family like? What is important to Marji’s parents? What kind of an environment do they create for their daughter, despite living under an oppressive regime and through a brutal, prolonged war?
3. What role do women play in the story? How are the roles of the women different from the roles of the men?
4. “In spite of everything, kids were trying to look hip, even under risk of arrest” (p. 112). What acts of rebellion have you done as a teen? In what ways is Satrapi—who grew up during the eighties in Iran—similar to a normal kid in twenty-first-century America?

Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life by Bryan Lee O'Malley

Synopsis: Gleefully oblivious twenty-three-year-old slacker Scott Pilgrim is living the easy life: unemployed, playing with his punk rock band, and dating a high school girl. When the mysterious Ramona arrives in town (rollerblading through his subconscious, no less), Scott is smitten. But his precious little life is thrown into turmoil when he discovers that if he wants to be Ramona's boyfriend he will have to defeat her Seven Evil Exes! Melodramatic, over-the-top action ensues.

Themes: Dealing with the past in a new relationship, honesty, postmodernism.

Content Advisory: Some mild swearing, cartoony violence, alcohol use, and one scene of making out that twelve-year-olds *love* to giggle at.

Discussion Questions:

1. If you were Scott's friend, what advice would you give him? Do you think Scott is doing the right things in the book?
2. How does Knives change over the course of the book? What is different about her at the end?
3. What role does music play in the world of Scott Pilgrim? What does the author do to make you experience the music as a reader?
4. How do the over-the-top fight scenes dramatize the conflict that is going on between the characters? Do you think this is an effective way to tell the story?

Smile by Raina Telgemeier

Synopsis: Twelve-year-old Raina trips and smashes her face into the pavement, knocking out her front teeth. Now she has to add painful dental surgery and orthodontia to the already daunting list of things she has to contend with during her awkward early teenage years.

Themes: Fitting in, navigating middle school crushes, overcoming physical ailments.

Content Advisory: The scene where Telgemeier loses her teeth could skeeve out the squeamish (like Jack), but other than that, this is a lighthearted book suitable for all ages.

Discussion Questions:

1. How would the story of *Smile* work differently in a regular prose novel than it does in graphic novel form?
2. While you may not have had your two front teeth knocked out in an accident, there are probably parts of Raina's story that relate to your own life. Which part seemed the most like your own experiences?
3. What is your most horrible injury?
4. Raina has two different groups of friends: the ones from middle school and the ones from high school. How would you characterize each group of friends? Why does each group treat Raina the way that it does? Can you identify with Raina's struggles to develop lasting friendships?
5. The book is set in the Bay Area. What specific places did you recognize in the pictures? YALS

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