



# GRAPHIC NOVELS

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW

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# Things to Hate about Comics

## Oh, those speech balloons!

I know how those balloons can appear unnatural and unnerving, hovering like Zeppelins over people's heads, floating all over the page, their tails pointing down to each speaker's mouth. For some people, opening a graphic novel is like bursting into a cacophonous party where everyone seems to be speaking at once.

But look again and you will see that they are not all speaking at once. Tune out the babble and tune in to one balloon at a time, so that the drawn figures acquire their voices and communicate, with each other and with you.

Hear them and you'll find that, for a medium without sound, comics adopted an effective graphic solution, one with a long lineage and real flexibility. As well as the lettering forms, the shape, color, and style of a balloon can tell you a lot, from jagged edges for alarm or anger to icicles for coldness.

## Comics are just funnybooks

Never underestimate the low art of mime and foolery to puncture pomposity and to speak truths in jest. But there is nothing inherent to comics that prevents them from tackling whatever subject you like, in whatever style and manner you choose. The medium is not limited; it boils down to the skills and ambitions of the creators. Harvey Pekar had an epiphany when he realized, "Comics are just words and pictures. You can do anything with words and pictures."

## They take no time to read

Slow down, you read too fast, you've got to make the comic last. Comics might look as if they are "movies on paper" but there is no need to read them like a flip-book. Take more time before leaping across that gutter to the next panel or you might just miss something.

I heard of someone who began to read *Watchmen* and when he got to a sequence of several pages with hardly any words, he skipped ahead until he found the next text to read in a caption. If anything, when the words vanish, you need to slow down all the more to decode the purely visual messages in the panels. You can't properly skip read graphic novels; make them last, savor them, re-read them.

## How are you supposed to read comics anyway?

You're not alone. Not everyone has grown up reading comics. Maybe your parents, teachers, librarians, frowned on them and discouraged or prevented you from reading them. Maybe you never liked them yourself as a youngster. You might be an avid book reader but still be genuinely "comics-illiterate."

But don't let your inexperience about comics discourage you or turn into an excuse not to try them. Nobody expects you to leap into enjoying something unknown like ballet or modern art from the word go. We all need ways into unfamiliar territory, so use this book to learn how to read comics and find what appeals to you in graphic novels.

The novelist Philip Roth once described the act of reading a book as like "being in the presence of an alien artifact." For some people, this can be even more true confronted by a graphic novel. *Persepolis* author Marjane Satrapi only came to comics when she was 25. She advised, "Like anything new, you have to cultivate your interest. It's like in cinema. You have to go a couple of times to appreciate it."

## Comics leave nothing for the imagination

While it is true that in comics you are frequently shown what the characters and settings look like, you're still going to need your imagination to help you to read what else those pictures are showing and telling you, and to fill in the gaps as you move from one panel to the next. Luckily, pictures can stimulate the imagination every bit as much as words, as a visit to any art gallery proves.

Don't worry, there are words to read and think about too in almost all graphic novels. There is less space for words than in a novel, so they have to be all the more precise, economic, and should be savored.

Remember the words don't always literally describe or reinforce the pictures; one can clarify and amplify the other, or they can be entirely separate. They can contrast, counterpoint, even contradict each other. Their interaction can shift from page to page, panel to panel, within a panel. Comics will keep your imagination on your toes.

## I don't like the drawing

Hardly anybody makes an instant judgement based on the typeface when you open a prose novel, but the artwork in graphic novels is as varied and individual as the personalities of the artists, almost like their handwriting. The drawing is the first thing you see and it can put you off if it doesn't appeal to your tastes.

Drawing in comics does not have to be realistic or naturalistic. Sometimes, the most technically polished illustration in comics fails to communicate or involve the reader, whereas less "accomplished" drawing comes alive on the page and in your mind, if you give it a chance.

A good deal of the art in mass-produced comics seems to rely on repeating received ideas and formulas and so becomes slick but dead. As a rule, great-looking art can never save a poor story, but rough, even raw art can serve a great story perfectly. It's the story that counts.

## They're so depressing

It can seem as though, in a desire to be taken more seriously, graphic novelists have fixed on very serious, sometimes tragic, subjects. But their books are not all gloom and doom; they're often wonderful, life-affirming stories. And if you prefer to relax, laugh, or escape, there are still plenty of fantasies and comedies to enjoy as well.

## What are all those weird symbols?

Not every graphic novelist chooses to use them, but there is a large cartoon "lexicon" of symbols, "emoticons," speed lines, sound effects, and other elements that can seem artificial and unnatural. They are useful graphic devices to add an extra "track" of sound, motion, and emotion to the page. Several of them are pointed out in the samples in this book.

Just for fun, American comic strip creator Mort Walker came up with some delightfully silly names for some of them: "plewds" for sweatdrops to show anxiety or anger; "squeens" for the spirals to represent confusion; "briffits" for the clouds of dust when someone is running. Don't worry about these symbols. The more you encounter them, the more their meanings will become clear and you will adjust to them.

## Characters are made of cardboard

Comics have always used the shorthand of physiognomy—the theory that what you look like represents your character, much as we make judgments about people from our first visual impressions. Baddies were always ugly, good guys always handsome. That is not so different from conventions in theatre or cinema. But even within these simple codes, it has always been possible for comic creators to find ways to deepen the inner lives of their protagonists, so that they become more complex, contradictory, flawed, and multi-dimensional, more like us. Recent graphic novelists have given us memorable characters like Luba from *Palomar*, Gemma Boverly, and Corto Maltese, as well as the many autobiographical representations of themselves.

## Which do I read first—words or the pictures?

A friend of mine used to have that trouble even with a "simple" newspaper strip. She would read only the text balloons first all the way through, and not understand it. Then she would go back and look only at all the pictures, and still not understand it.

Images and text arrive together, work together, and should be read together. There's no one rule, but in some combination you read words and pictures in tandem and in cross reference, one informing the other. It's not so hard, but it is different from reading neat, uniform columns of type.

Part of the knack of reading comics is being able to enter and move your eyes around inside each panel, the equivalent to one sentence or more. You scan the text every caption box, speech balloon, and thought cloud, moving within from top left to bottom right (unless, of course, it's a Japanese comic that reads right to left!). But you also scan each picture in various directions for cues and clues: where are we? who is speaking or acting? It's a bit like reading a map, diagram, or painting.

Close in and concentrate on what's inside the first panel, then look for the connections to the next panel. You do the same again here, on through the page. Remember, you can look back anytime to check. And yes, you're bound to peek ahead but not too far or you might spoil surprises to come.

## Comics are a great way to get kids reading real books

Yes, that's true, comics can encourage even the most reluctant reader, but this backhanded compliment, often from teachers, librarians, and other "cheerleaders for the cause," implies that comics and graphic novels are useful primers, stepping stones to literacy, but not worth reading in their own right as "real books" themselves.

**So enough already, let's get on with the good stuff!**