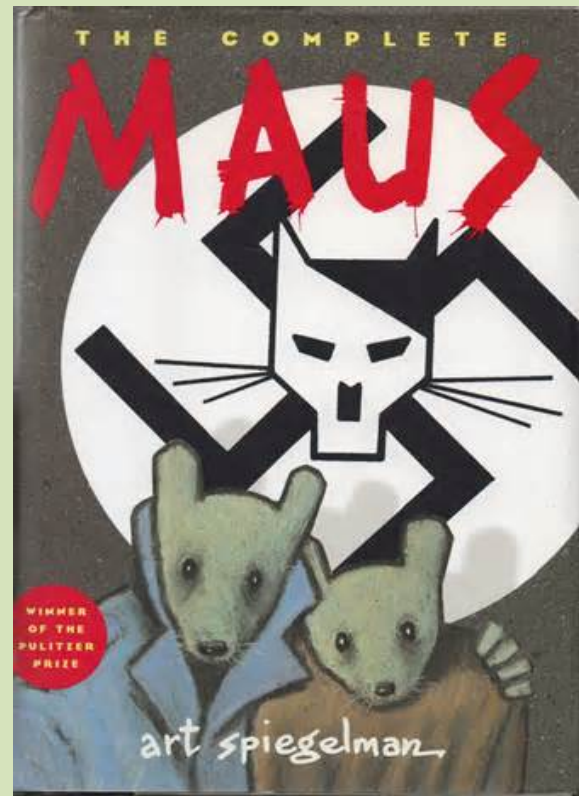
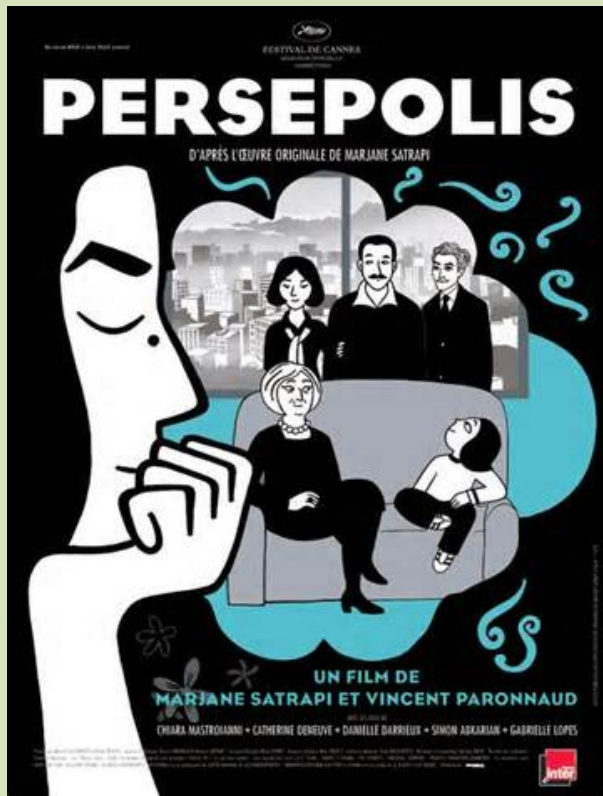


## HOW DO WE TEACH VISUAL NARRATIVE?



Generally speaking, we tend to be pretty selective. Students read lots of *picture* books at the primary grades—we can think of these as visual narratives for very young readers—and high school classrooms will occasionally see a graphic novel on the curriculum, although if truth be told, it is almost invariably one of the two above: *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi or *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. I have probably used graphic stories and graphic novels more than most in a classroom, but the only ones I’ve taught as complete texts are these two. Sometimes an adventurous head of department in a high school will put *Watchmen* on the curriculum, but more often than not they won’t.

So what have we done well?

- We’ve been successful using graphic novels with reluctant readers.
- We’ve helped kids to marry words with visual images and thus improve vocabulary.
- We’ve made reading interesting and even engaging for some kids who have identified themselves as non-readers.

One of the things I’ve learned from comics is that students who don’t consider themselves “big readers” (or even “readers”) can pick up a graphic novel and be eminently entertained by it. They seem to

understand its form better than a traditional novel. As such, they are often more willing to give it the time of day. So, we've helped reluctant readers with graphic novels, especially with ones that are specifically designed to help them.

However, our successes with graphic novels have probably been, at best, "okay" so far. We have made some inroads in teaching them but...

- We have focused on reluctant readers almost exclusively.
- We have told ourselves that academic kids should be fine reading academic books. (e.g. "Why do they need comics?")
- Some of us have not been inclined to teach graphic novels as a genre.

There are a few reasons why graphic novels, stories, and poetry have not been a fuller part of the classroom, and specifically the junior and middle school classroom. On the one hand, it's the product of the attitudes expressed above. However, when taking the time to talk to other teachers, I've found that three rather significant issues are almost always at the centre of why they've been reluctant to teach the form.

- Many teachers readily admit that they don't have any idea of what an appropriate graphic novel for a junior or middle school classroom might be. They know that the content of a graphic novel a junior or middle school student might read at home wouldn't necessarily be suitable for a junior or middle school classroom.
- Teachers also readily admit that even if they did know what titles to buy, they might have a problem convincing parents that the texts chosen could enrich their academically-minded child as well or better than more traditional junior or middle school readers. This is precisely the reason why, at the high school level, a parent will find it strange for me to be recommending *graphica* when the parent has been trying to get their kid to read *The Economist*.
- However, the most frequent reason given by teachers for why they hesitate to put a graphic novel on their course is that they don't understand the genre. "I can teach my kids a novel, or poetry, or short stories, but I don't think I'd know what I was talking about with a graphic novel. I never read them as a kid and I don't really understand how they work."

Strangely enough, this last excuse seems the most reasonable to me. I mean, some internet searches and some asking around should help solve the first issue. With respect to the second, if there was a graphic novel we felt it was important for students to study at a given grade, we'd have plenty of arguments ready for any parent who didn't think we were making a good choice of text. What I think it boils down to is that a lot of teachers don't really understand graphic novels as a genre. I mean...*really* understand them.

That's what's needed then. In order to use graphic novels successfully in the classroom as more than just literacy vehicles for reluctant readers, we need to understand them as a genre worthy of study.