

# Chapter 5

## Using Award–Winning and Award–Nominated Graphic Novels to Support Science and Social Studies Content Knowledge

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this chapter, recent award-winning and award-nominated graphic novels will be analyzed for their content and aesthetics. As both authors serve on book award committees (Notable Books for a Global Society and Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students), they offer unique perspectives on the wealth of graphic novels currently being published. Feedback from various levels of elementary-aged students is shared to offer sample responses. Finally, practical ways for educators to transition students from light and frivolous, fictional graphic novels to those that can immerse them into specific science disciplinary core ideas and historical events are shared.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Graphic novels have been in the hands of readers since 1940. With the emergence of Will Eisner's 'sequential art', *The Spirit*, the graphic novel format was born (Todd, 2015). Today's graphic novels still use sequential art to tell stories and support those stories with the use of semiotic resources and written language to build texts (Pantaleo, 2018). To the reader, the finished graphic novel uses cool pictures illustrated in frames, short bits of text, and symbols to express critical points. With tales ranging from

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traditional superheroes to reimagined classics, graphic novels capture the interest of readers of all ages. Graphic novels offer their readers captivating a cornucopia of choices that include stories of intrigue, drama, perseverance, hope, and, of course, fantasy.

In this chapter, recent award-winning and award-nominated graphic novels will be analyzed for their content and aesthetics. As both authors serve on book award committees (Notable Books for a Global Society and Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students), they offer unique perspectives on the wealth of graphic novels currently being published. Feedback from various levels of elementary-aged students is shared to offer sample responses. Finally, practical ways for educators to transition students from light and frivolous, fictional graphic novels to those that can immerse them into specific science disciplinary core ideas and historical events are shared (NCSS, 2016; NGSS, 2013).

## **BACKGROUND**

In 2019, *New Kid* by Jerry Craft was the first graphic novel to win the Newbery Medal for the “most distinguished contribution to American literature for children” (ALSC, 2021). With this win, graphic novels have gone from the fringe to being contenders for the highest awards in children’s literature. As members of two book award committees, the authors have seen the steady trend of reputable authors and illustrators pursuing graphic novels for their work, either for initial publication or as a re-issue. For example, author Jason Reynolds’ Newbery Honor, Printz Honor, and Coretta Scott King Honor-winning book, *Long Way Down*, was re-released in the fall of 2020 as a graphic novel with Danica Novgorodoff as the illustrator. In 2021, author Ruta Sepetys’ #1 *New York Times* best-selling book, *Between Shades of Gray*, was re-released as a graphic novel, adapted by Andrew Donkin and illustrated and colored by Dave Kopka and Brann Livesay, respectively.

Unfortunately, even with their popularity, in-service and preservice teachers can be hesitant about using graphic novels in the classroom. Many teachers have “limited knowledge or experience related to reading graphic novels” (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, & Frey, 2011, p. 25). A majority of teachers in the previous study admitted that they should know those books and they should consider reading them, especially when they are so popular with their own students. When teachers do not know how to use graphic novels in their teaching, they do not find them to be worthwhile instructional materials (Yusof, Lazim, & Salehuddin, 2017). Furthermore, some teachers are nervous about the pushback they may face from parents and school administration when using graphic novels (Clark, 2013; Mathews, 2011). Moeller and Becnel (2020) found that many educators will self-censor their teaching methods and materials by not including graphic novels in their classrooms.

The authors argue that teachers, looking for ways in which they can engage readers, both fluent and struggling, should turn to graphic novels as tools to foster classroom discussions on difficult topics, enhance conceptual understanding, develop social emotional and interpersonal skills, and to encourage (or establish) a love of reading (Garrison & Gavigan, 2019; Guzzetti & Mardis, 2017). The accessibility of graphic novels makes them beneficial for use with students who are English language learners and/or have learning differences (Fenty & Brydon, 2020; Howard, 2017; Park, 2016).

Helping students develop deep conceptual understanding of traditional text-based classes, like science and social studies, can be challenging. Teachers may choose to supplement their curriculum with outside resources, such as graphic novels. The National Science Teachers Association website noted that “trade books have the potential to enrich and inspire” (<https://www.nsta.org/publications/ostb/ostb2013>).

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