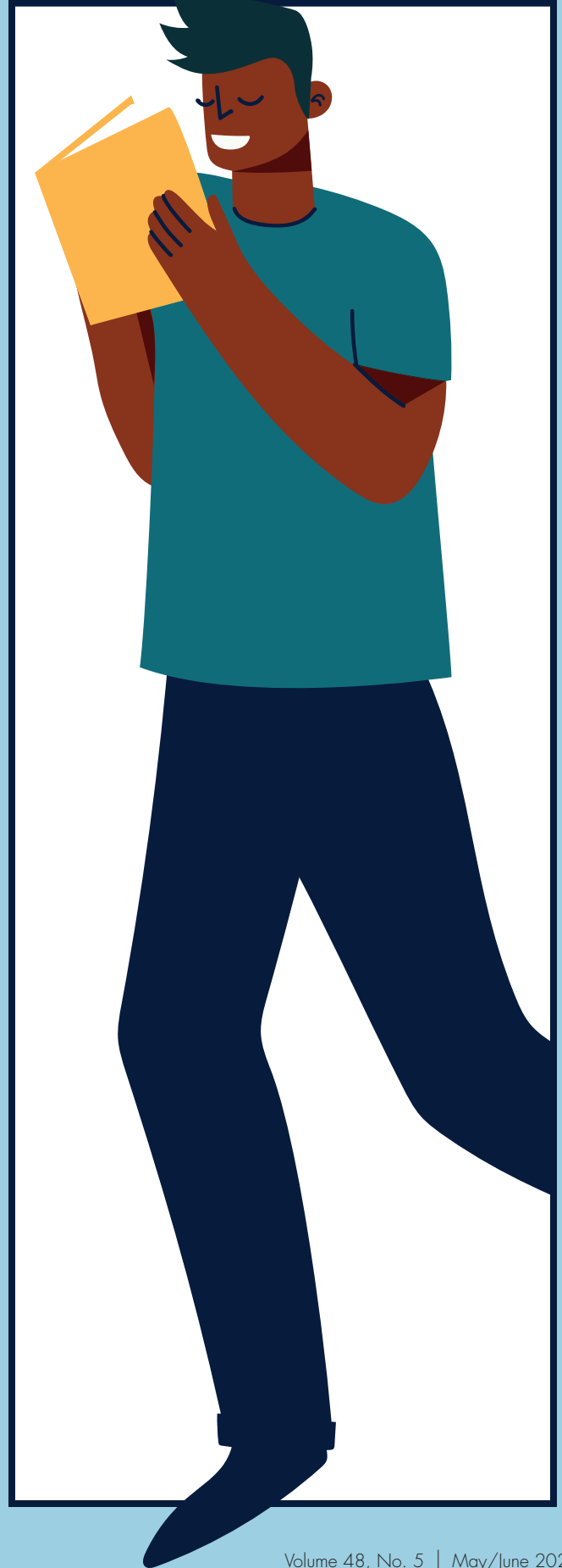


Growing Up Graphically

Coming-of-Age Issues in Graphic Novels

Kasey L. Garrison
kgarrison@csu.edu.au





Introduction

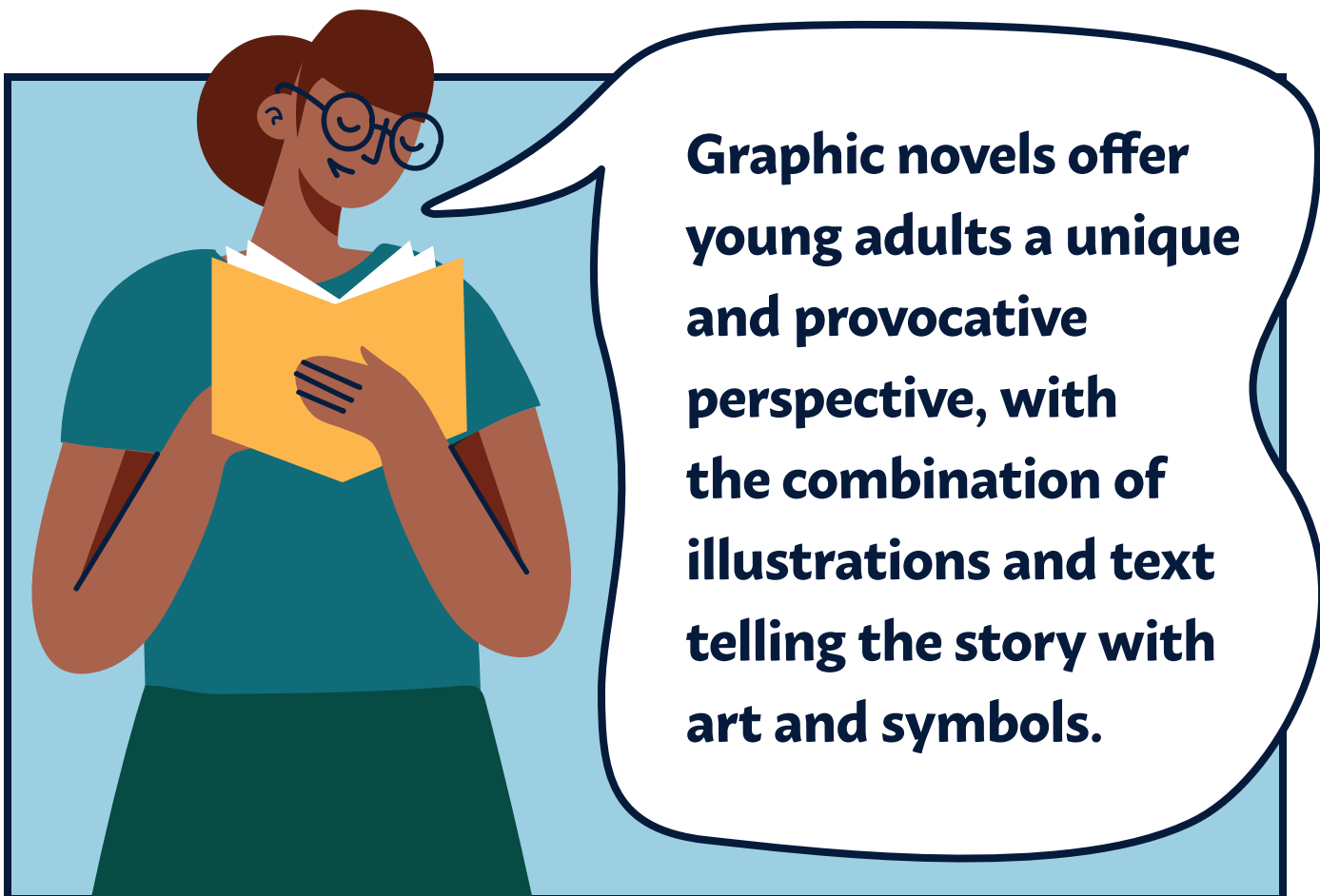
Coming of age has been a quintessential theme in young adult literature since the breakthrough novels of the late 1960s like S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967). These novels started to recount a more authentic experience of growing up than earlier writing, which depicted teen years more like "a Norman Rockwell painting" (Cart 2018, 4). These earlier writings patronized young readers and ignored the confusion of this time, while also missing the opportunity to help support them through it. Thankfully, today's young adult novels offer a more realistic portrayal of adolescence, illustrating the harsh social realities and complexities of the journey into adulthood and giving developing readers some solace and commiseration in the experience.

In addition to traditional formats, there are a wealth of graphic novels, often personal memoirs, addressing the complex issues of growing up and coming of age. Graphic novels offer young adults a unique and provocative perspective, with the combination of illustrations and text telling the story with art and symbols. The focus on visual literacy and symbolism also serves to address diverse learning and reading styles and preferences for young adults, and graphic novels offer clear connections to important curricula and standards.

Alignment to the AASL Standards

Graphic novels are aligned to the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* in many ways. Within the

Explore Shared Foundation, the Think Domain notes that "Learners develop and satisfy personal curiosity by...Reading widely and deeply in multiple formats" (AASL 2018, 38). Integrating graphic novels into collections and teaching resources will support the development of students' visual literacy as well as more traditional literacy skills. Further, Common Belief 4 states that "Reading is the core of personal and academic competency" (AASL 2018, 13). In addition to academic pursuits, school librarians are tasked with developing collections that support students in their own personal development because school librarians know the value of reading and the power of the right book at the right time. That belief goes on to note that "the school librarian supports, supplements, and elevates learners' literacy experience by guiding them



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and involving them in motivational reading initiatives” (AASL 2018, 13). That “elevates learners’ literacy experiences” piece is key to the role and potential of the school library. The combination of text and illustrations in graphic novels can engage readers in a deeper understanding of the story as they use both traditional literacy and visual literacy strategies to read and enjoy the books.

Currently, I am engaged in a project creating a website of young adult graphic novels addressing social justice issues and resources for librarians, educators, and others working with young adults to integrate these titles into their teaching and programs. With my co-researcher Karen Gavigan, we have visited library collections throughout the United States and Australia and identified titles focused on social justice issues around socio-cultural constructs like race, gender, and sexuality. In addition, we have found many of these graphic novels are also profound coming-of-age stories that can bridge cultures and offer young readers a different perspective on growing up. This article explores these books divided into common themes found in this research.

Coming of Age during War

There are many graphic novel memoirs about coming of age during war or a time of political unrest and violence. These titles are often graphic memoirs, told from an autobiographical perspective, where the author and/or illustrator give their personal account of the experience. In the 2013 Mildred L. Batchelder Award Honor book *A Game of Swallows: To Live, To Die, To Return* (2012) and the sequel *I Remember Beirut* (2014), Zeina Abirached shares experiences from her childhood during the Lebanese Civil War in the 1980s. Despite the violence and turmoil happening outside of her

home, Abirached has great memories of her family and their neighbors, sharing stories, making meals, and happily listening to loud music meant to block out the noise of bombs. A similar story is shared in the recent graphic novel collaboration with Victoria Jamieson, Omar Mohamed, and Iman Geddy *When Stars Are Scattered* (2020). This story is about Omar’s experience growing up in a Somali refugee camp with his younger brother who is nonverbal.

Brigitte Findakly and her partner Lewis Trondheim created *Poppies for Iraq* (2017), which tells of Findakly’s youth in Iraq during the 1960s and 1970s and her visits back to Iraq to see extended family after moving to her mother’s native France. The increasing violence in the country and decreasing freedoms of the people are shown clearly in her graphic novel. Two stories from Iran share similar accounts, Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel classic *Persepolis: A Story of a Childhood* (2004) and Parsua Bashi’s *Nylon Road: A Graphic Memoir of Coming of Age in Iran* (2006). Other examples of traditional novels on these themes are available in graphic novel format like *Anne Frank’s Diary: The Graphic Adaptation* (Folman, Frank, and Polonsky 2018).

These insider perspectives give readers a firsthand glimpse into how youth experience the political violence and suffering and how, despite these different circumstances, there are some things about growing up that can be quite similar in any culture.

Gender and Sexuality

Sexuality and gender issues are common themes youth grapple with in traditional coming-of-age novels, and this theme is clearly found in the graphic novel format. One such title was the first graphic novel to win both the Caldecott and Printz Honors in 2015. *This One*

Summer (2014) by Jillian Tamaki and Mariko Tamaki follows tweens Rose and Windy on their annual summer Canadian lake holiday as they eavesdrop on local teens and the teens’ sexual escapades. Rose and Windy’s “transformative summer” plays out against the backdrop of Rose’s parents dealing with a miscarriage and the girls trying to figure out these sexual identity and family issues from their own unique perspectives (Gandhi 2017, 1).

Funded by a Kickstarter campaign, *As the Crow Flies* (2017) by Melanie Gillman is another summer story that tells the story of Charlie, a 13-year-old queer black girl attending an all-white Christian camp where the girls complete an arduous trek through the mountains. Charlie’s journey takes readers through her questions about religion and sexuality.

Tillie Walden is a highly acclaimed graphic novel creator, and her stories like *Spinning* (2017) and *On a Sunbeam* (2018) tackle issues of sexuality and more with authentic voices and images. *Spinning* is a lengthy but intimate memoir of Walden’s teenage years training as a competitive ice skater while dealing with bullying, coming out, and her family’s move from the East Coast to Texas (Cooke 2017).

Another great story in this category is Jen Wang’s *The Prince and the Dressmaker* (2018), the tale of a young prince who hires a talented seamstress to design him beautiful dresses that he wears at night on the streets of Paris as Lady Crystallia. In addition to a cross-dressing tale, this graphic novel is a fun story of friendship, growing up, and being yourself.

Marginalized Groups

Just as there are graphic novels about the LGBTQIA community, there are also some brilliant stories discussing

Integrating graphic novels into collections and teaching resources will support the development of students' visual literacy as well as more traditional literacy skills.

the experiences of marginalized groups based on race and immigration that will inspire discussions with your learners. A classic example is *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (2006), which tackles issues related to Chinese stereotypes, immigration, and fitting in while growing up; it even weaves in some Chinese mythology. Yang's skillful illustrations add quality and imagery to the story that text alone would not be able to convey.

While *American Born Chinese* holds a light-hearted, humorous tone, *I Am Alfonso Jones* (Medina, Robinson, and Jennings 2017) is set against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement and deals with racism and police brutality against people of color. When teenager Alfonso is shot by a security guard mistaking the clothes hanger in his hand for a gun, Alfonso is transported to a ghostly world where he talks to other people of color killed by the police in similar circumstances. He watches how his community reacts to his death with activism and calls for justice. Both

stories give different perspectives on what it means to grow up outside of the dominant, mainstream culture (i.e., white and middle class).

Middle School Age

In addition to coming-of-age stories focused on aspects of the protagonist's socio-cultural identity, there are also some great choices describing the middle school experience. The talented Raina Telgemeier has written and/or illustrated a slew of popular graphic novels aimed at this age range, including *Drama* (2012) and *The Baby-Sitters Club* graphic novel series. Her autobiographical trilogy of *Smile* (2010), *Sisters* (2014), and *Guts* (2019) gives an intimate look at her own life and growing up with anxiety, "a fraught sibling relationship," and extensive dental work due to an accident (Alter 2019, 5). In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, Telgemeier describes how images can express her feelings better than words (Alter 2019), especially with more serious issues like experiencing panic attacks.

Victoria Jamieson is another author/illustrator who writes for the middle school age group with graphic novels including her debut *Roller Girl* (2015), which won 2016 Newbery Honors, and *All's Faire in Middle School* (2017). Both stories follow girl protagonists navigating life through middle school and their unique hobbies, on the roller derby track for Astrid and at the Florida Renaissance Faire for Imogene.

There are some great options with appeal to middle school boys as well with a new graphic novel adaptation of Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover* (2019), illustrated by Dawub Anyabwile, and *New Kid* by Jerry Craft (2019); both feature black boys as protagonists. These high-quality choices will engage readers with their authentic representations of life in middle school.

Best Practices and Resources

Despite the recognized value of using graphic novels for teaching and to engage reluctant readers (Hughes

et al. 2011; Jennings, Rule, and Zanden 2014), many educators still find it challenging to integrate the format into learning opportunities. Thomas Newkirk (2002) noted this is likely due to the absence of visual literacy curricula in pre-service teacher education programs. Luckily, there are heaps of resources available online for support in sharing graphic novels with youth. Since reading in this format is a much different experience than a traditional novel, Michael Pagliaro (2014) created a rubric that gives good tips for how to read, select, and evaluate graphic novels. David

Low and Katrina Jacobs (2018) shared ideas for literature circle roles specific to graphic novels that address important elements like art, space, and coloring. Scholastic's graphic novel imprint Graphix has some great free teaching tools on its website promoting Scholastic titles, including videos with popular graphic novel authors, teaching guides, and handouts (2019). Additional resources are outlined in the "Graphic Content and Challenges" sidebar (below); these resources target important issues relevant to graphic novels and offer selection sources.

Conclusion

This article shared some engaging graphic novels with coming-of-age themes to support young adults going through similar experiences. These titles are often memoirs written and illustrated from the insider's perspective, and so can be especially evocative and powerful in reaching growing readers and helping them to see reflections of themselves through the text and images.

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Graphic Content and Challenges

It is important to consider your audience and community while making graphic novel selections for your school library. For example, a textual reference to nudity in a traditional novel can be a lot tamer and hidden than an illustration of a nude character in a graphic novel. Due to the sometimes "graphic" nature of the graphic novel format, they are often targets for challenges. Here are some useful resources to be prepared for the censors:

Comic Books Legal Defense Fund: <http://cbldef.org>

The Comic Books Legal Defense Fund is a non-profit group dedicated to protecting free expression through comics and helping librarians, educators, and other people promoting this format. They offer legal aid and advice, and include a wide range of useful resources from free webinars to notable case files of challenged comics and graphic novels.

ALA's Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table (GNCRT): www.ala.org/rt/gncrt

Conceived in 2018, the GNCRT is one of ALA's newest groups and includes a ton of useful information on their website like webinars on Banned Books Week since graphic novels are often featured on that list. They also administer the Eisner Graphic Novel Grants for support in developing your collection.

No Flying, No Tights: www.noflyingnotights.com

This well-established website has reviews of all kinds of graphic novels to help support challenges and questions about the inclusion of graphic novels in your collection. Their site also provides good resources to integrate the format in unique ways in your teaching practice.



Dr. Kasey L.

Garrison is a senior lecturer in the Master's of Education-Teacher Librarianship program

and coordinator of the Children's Librarianship Specialisation at Charles Sturt University in Australia. She is a co-awardee of the Carnegie Whitney Award with Karen W. Gavigan for the project "Social Justice in Young Adult Graphic Novels: A Global Perspective." She is the author of the two-part series "What's Going on Down Under? Portrayals of Culture in Award-Winning Australian Young Adult Literature" published in the *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* last year.



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