



Illustration courtesy of Archie Comics



MS.GRUNDY'S RIGHT! YOU CAN TEACH READING WITH...

COMICS

& GRAPHIC NOVELS

Mr. Weatherbee, don't blow your top. It's actually a good thing. **By Samantha Cleaver**

**N**ot so many years ago, comic books in school were considered the enemy. Kids caught sneaking comics between the pages of bulky—and less engaging—textbooks were likely sent to the principal. But now comics, including classics such as *Superman* but also their generally more complex, nuanced cousins, graphic novels, are not only regarded as educational tools by savvy teachers, they are also taken seriously as literature and an art form in their own right. Comic books can be a great way to pique reluctant readers' interest and challenge those students who are fluent in more traditional literature.

When fourth-grade teacher Kathy Campbell asked her class at Fruchthendler Elementary in Tucson, Arizona, what they wanted to study,

# best practice

the response was unanimous: comic books. At the time, Campbell, who works as a volunteer art teacher, didn't know a thing about comics. But after studying Columbia University's Comic Book Project ([www.comicbookproject.org](http://www.comicbookproject.org)), she formulated a plan.

Using the theme "If I were a superhero," her students wrote and analyzed essays that they eventually used to create their own comic books. "They took the written word and pulled it apart sentence by sentence," Campbell says. "They had to investigate how they would transform their writing into character and dialogue." At first, says Campbell, the kids had trouble visualizing their stories, but in the end they produced creative work.

"If we show kids how the written word actually has a visual component to it," she says, "and teach kids how to

think that way, I think they'll become much better writers. Their word choice is much richer, and their creativity is boundless."

## COMICS AND THE NEW MEDIA LITERACY

There's been a stigma against comic books in America, says Wiley Miller, comic artist and author of the Ordinary Basil series, whether because we don't recognize comics as appropriate or serious reading, or because we think other books are more valid. Either way, he says, "trying to dissuade kids from reading comics is silly and juvenile—it hurts kids."

But today, comics are gaining respect in the educational community. "The idea of using comic books as an educational tool isn't new," says Michael Bitz, founder of the Comic Book Project at the Columbia University School of

Education. "What is new is the larger embrace of comics as literature."

There's more desire to bring

facial expressions or imagining what's happening in a description of a science experiment.

Kids are at ease with combining visual and text information, and as new media becomes mainstream, comic books offer a way to reinforce traditional grammar and spelling within a layout that's familiar to kids. "Every year there are new literacies," says Bitz, and "when you look at a comic book, you can see how it's a storyboard for a film, or a Web-based media project. There are connections to media literacy all along the way." Comics help 21st-century kids relate to big themes and topics by tapping into the way students are already learning naturally.

## THE STORY OF MY LIFE

Creating comics brings the writing process full circle. "You're a writer first," explains Miller. "You have something to say. Then, you're an editor—you want to edit as many words as possible—and then you're an artist." That visual orientation doesn't take away from traditional reading and writing skills. "Comics are focused on sequence: First leads to second. You have to imagine the story playing out in your mind, and between the first and second panels there are inferences about the characters."

Bitz was surprised that Comic Book Project students created stories and characters that reflected their own lives, rather than superhero plotlines. Instead of an excuse to draw Spider-Man, the project "became an opportunity to self-reflect," says Bitz, "and explore self-identity."

Moreover, students known for behavior problems during typical reading and writing activities were the most engaged during comic book lessons. "Suddenly these kids became leaders," says Bitz. "They collaborated and started to work together to become part of education, whereas before they were shut out." Creating comic books is an opportunity for kids who struggle with reading to excel because, says Bitz, "it's not about speed. It's about the story and about how creative you can be."

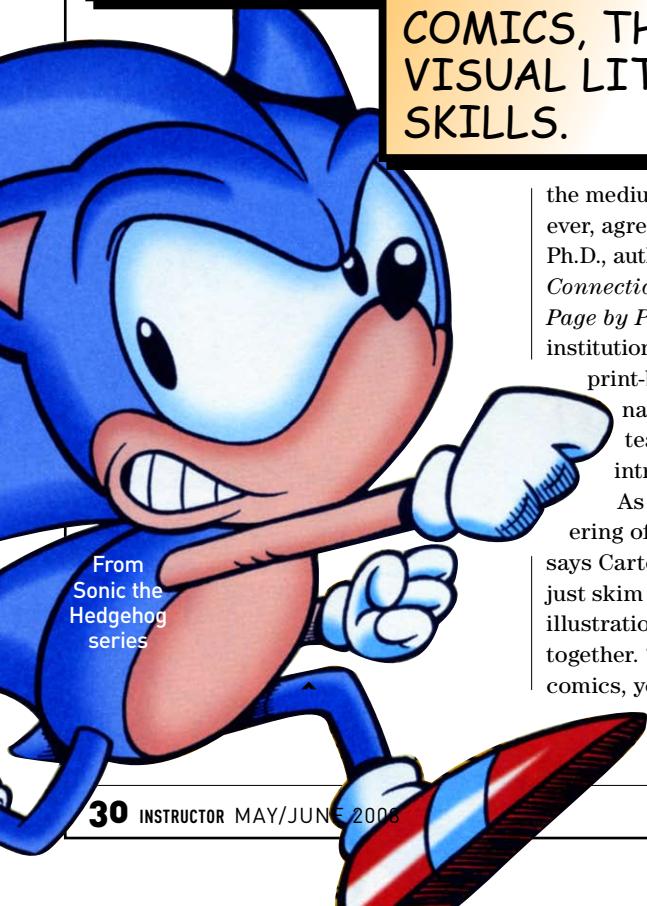
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TRYING TO DISSUADE KIDS FROM READING COMICS IS SILLY AND JUVENILE.

WHEN KIDS READ COMICS, THEY'RE USING VISUAL LITERACY SKILLS.

the medium into the classroom than ever, agrees James Bucky Carter, Ph.D., author of *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*. "The institution of traditional education and print-based education is still dominating, but I see more and more teachers asking how they can introduce comics."

As literature, comics are "a layering of text, visual and pictorial," says Carter. And don't think you can just skim a comic book. The words and illustrations are meant to be "read" together. "As long as you're reading comics, you're using visual literacy skills," says Carter, whether that's interpreting Batman's



From the Sonic the Hedgehog series

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**POW! HERE ARE SOME SUPER COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS TO KEEP KIDS ENTRANCED ALL SUMMER.**

## **Laika**

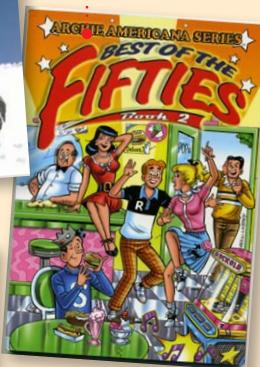
by Nick Abadzis (grades 5+) is a historical graphic novel about a stray dog that joins the Russian space program in 1956 and becomes the first dog in space.



**Archie Americana series and Archie Classics** (grades 5+) brings back Archie, Betty, Veronica, Jughead, and the rest of the lovable gang as they become embroiled in silly hijinks. Watch the gals spar over Archie! See who shows up at the Big School Dance!

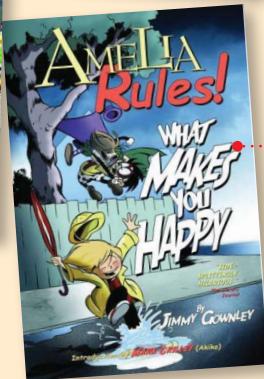
## **Bone series**

by Jeff Smith (grades 2+) is a graphic novel series for the younger set. Marshmallow-like characters wander through a valley full of magic, monsters, and dragons. The supporting characters, including rat creatures who love quiche and the minimalist Ted the Bug, are fun and surprising. Smith's stories are funny, scary, exciting, and memorable.



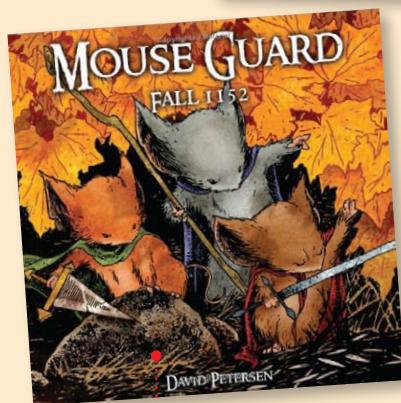
## **Amelia Rules! series**

by Jimmy Gownley (grades 3+) tells the story of a girl who's adjusting to life in a new school while living with a newly divorced mom and young aunt. Amelia and her GASP friends (Gathering of Awesome Super Pals) tell free-spirited stories from a kid's point of view.



## **Sonic the Hedgehog series**

(grades 4+) are zany adventures that echo comic books of days gone by, but with kid-friendly villains, heroes, and predicaments. Each volume contains several stand-alone plotlines.

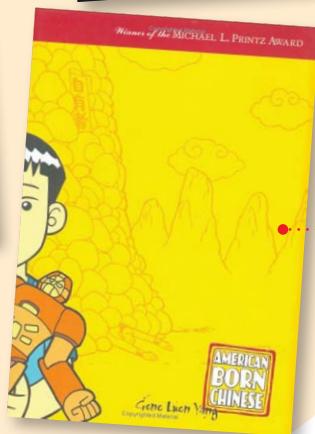


## **Mouse Guard**

by David Petersen (grades 5+) is a graphic novel that will appeal to the hero in your students. Realistically drawn mice defend their home like Knights of the Round Table.

## **American Born Chinese**

by Gene Yang (grades 6+) is a graphic novel with three parallel plotlines: a Chinese folk hero, Monkey King, who wants to rise above his humble roots; Jin Wang, an Asian-American middle school student who struggles to fit in; and Danny, an all-American character. Yang addresses issues of race, stereotypes, and acceptance in this story that was a finalist for the 2007 National Book Award for Young People.



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## COMICS FOR EVERY CURRICULUM

Comics are a way to supplement what you're already studying in class. Use books from the Graphic Classics series ([www.graphicclassics.com](http://www.graphicclassics.com)), which include graphic novels and stories from H. G. Wells to Jack London, to expand on a unit about literature. Working on character development? Try Spider-Man. "The whole mythos of Spider-Man is 'with great power comes great responsibility,'" says author Carter. "That's a great message for kids." In visits to schools, Carter uses Spider-Man as a springboard into discussions about identity with students who are entering adolescence.

You may have to challenge some assumptions before you use comics in the classroom, and make sure that you read every book before you use it in class. Just because a book is a comic doesn't mean that it's appropriate for young students. If you think it will be at all controversial with your class, consider using an excerpt, selecting a different book, or sending a note home to parents ahead of time.

Ready to launch your own comic book study? Here are some memorable projects to end the year, as well as book suggestions that will engage reluctant readers or challenge high achievers over the summer break.

### END-OF-YEAR COMIC BOOK ACTIVITIES

○ Make your last unit of the school year a comic book unit. Have students write an essay about what they did in school this year, and then transform it into a short comic book. Or, if your students are younger or time is short, have kids choose their favorite moment from that school year and make it into a comic strip. Then, compile all their comics into an end-of-year keepsake book, make a copy for each student, and host an author signing before you head out the door for summer. This activity can be made class-specific—make a comic to tell the story of a math lesson

or science experiment, for example.

○ Download student-made comic books at the Comic Book Project ([www.comicbookproject.org](http://www.comicbookproject.org)) and use these books in class. This is good for afternoons when time is running short but you still want a quick, satisfying project.

○ Encourage students to make their own comics over the summer. Give them a template that works for them—a few boxes for younger kids, a small book for older students—and directions to follow over the summer (a theme, instructions for parents, and so on). Remind them that comics can even be about "ordinary" events. When they return, they can share their book with the class. How about a dramatic reading?

○ Use comic books to teach onomatopoeia. Have students flip through comics and identify words that imitate natural sounds, such as *whiz*. Have students experiment with replacing these words with more mundane, descriptive text, such as "flies past." How does this change the story? Have students draw their own panels using onomatopoeia.

Be sure to have students share their work with one another. One of the greatest thrills of comics, after all, is passing on a cherished volume to a friend. □

CONTRIBUTING WRITER SAMANTHA CLEAVER WROTE *SMART & BORED* (MARCH/APRIL 2008).

**WRITING COMICS ASKS KIDS TO BE WRITERS, EDITORS, & ARTISTS ALL AT ONCE.**



▲ From the Bone series

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