

September 2015

Mallory Makes Meaning: How One 8th-grader Made Meaning with a Graphic Novel

Aimee A. Rogers

University of North Dakota, aimee.rogers@UND.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane>

 Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [Illustration Commons](#), and the [Visual Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rogers, Aimee A. (2015) "Mallory Makes Meaning: How One 8th-grader Made Meaning with a Graphic Novel," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss1/3>

Mallory Makes Meaning: How One 8th-grader Made Meaning with a Graphic Novel

Today's young readers have a multitude of choices regarding the genre and even the format they want to read in. One of the increasingly available formats is graphic novels in all genres. Young readers appear to be flocking to this format and even educators are starting to see the value, both literary and educational, of the format as well. Even with the increased reading in and use of this format, little research has been conducted that explores how young readers read in the graphic novel format. This article discusses how one young reader, Mallory (pseudonym selected by the participant), read a graphic novel.

There is very little published research on how readers, especially children, read and respond to graphic novels. There is agreement that "...the format itself creates a different reading experience" (Nel, 2012, p. 450), but few research studies explain exactly what this difference is and how it is experienced, much less the process young readers go through as they read a graphic novel. Even those steeped in the world of comics, including in their creation and reading, are unsure about what occurs during the reading of a comic book. For instance, Eisner (1996) suggests that

In comics, no one really knows for certain whether the words are read before or after viewing the pictures. We have no real evidence that they are read simultaneously. There is a different cognitive process between reading words and pictures. But in any event, the image and the dialogue give meaning to each other—a vital element in graphic storytelling. (p. 59)

This study aims to answer the following question: How do intermediate grade (6th to 8th grade) readers make meaning with texts in a graphic novel format? In addition, this study explored the following three sub-questions:

- What modalities do intermediate grade readers rely on to make meaning with a graphic novel?
- What strategies do intermediate grade readers employ when making meaning with a graphic novel text?
- What do intermediate grade readers know about how graphic novels work?

This article presents the findings for how one young reader, Mallory, made meaning with a graphic novel.

This study used four approaches for gathering information. First of all, while reading *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*, the second book in the popular middle-grade graphic novel series by Kazu Kibuishi, Mallory completed a think-aloud during which she reported what she was thinking as she read. Verbal protocols have been recognized as a valuable way of constructing initial theories or understandings of a process. "[P]rotocol analysis may first contribute to the initial building of theories that represent progress in the understanding of reading. These theories help us chart a course of the work that remains to fill the gaps in this understanding, and protocol analysis serves ably in the second role of focused research tool" (Afflerback, 2002, p. 89).

As completing a think-aloud while reading a book is a unique experience I conducted one practice think-aloud session with each participant prior to the actual think-aloud. This practice session followed the same procedures as the actual think-aloud, which are described below. The only difference was that participants read a different graphic novel during the practice session.

At the beginning of the think-aloud I read the following directions to Mallory. "As you read this graphic novel, tell me what you are thinking as you read. I want you to tell me anything

and everything you are thinking as you read. This thinking can include your ideas about the writing or the pictures or even the layout of the book. Please tell me your thoughts as you have them rather than waiting for the end of the page, section or book. Don't try to explain your thoughts now as we will discuss them when you are finished reading, so just tell me what you are thinking as soon as it pops into your head. Do you have any questions?"

I audio-recorded the entire session and used each participant's selected pseudonym. I made notes on my copy of the book as each participant completed the think-aloud. The purpose of my notes was to record what participants said on each page so that, when I listened to the audio of the session, I would know what page elicited each comment. I also noted any physical actions I noticed the participant doing; these notes included times when pages were read quickly or when a participant flipped back to previously read pages. I did not interrupt the think-aloud unless a significant amount of time had passed since the last comment. I allowed the participants to read for as long as they desired. Mallory chose to finish reading *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*.

At the conclusion of reading Mallory participated in a retrospective think-aloud. During the retrospective think-aloud, the researcher posed questions to Mallory about what she said during her think-aloud; the purpose was to clarify her comments and to gain a more in-depth understanding of her thinking while reading. The retrospective think-aloud was different for each participant, as the questions were based on comments made during the preceding think-aloud. Although the questions and topics were different for each participant, the goal was the same—to understand more fully what the meaning making process was for each participant while reading the selected graphic novel. The questions strove to do a number of things, including, revealing what in the graphic novel may have lead to a comment, understanding what the participant was thinking when the comment was made, showing how the participant came to an understanding that was revealed in a comment, and clarifying comments that were confusing.

The retrospective think-aloud process began during the second meeting with Mallory and concluded during the third and final meeting. Prior to the last meeting, I listened to the recording I made of session two. I focused on noting confusions, intriguing comments, predictions, and other ideas that I wanted to know more about from each participant. The retrospective think-aloud process gave each participant an opportunity to explain their thinking around comments, confusions, predictions, or other responses made during the original think-aloud of *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*. The focus and length of each retrospective think-aloud varied by participant because it was based on each participant's individual think-aloud.

Mallory was then asked questions that were specific to *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*. These questions focused on areas that might be confusing or areas that I, the researcher, sought to focus on as potential sties of meaning-making. Some of these questions were broad, such as, "What do you think is the theme of *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*?" Other questions were narrow, focusing on specific pages or panels. The purpose for asking this set of question was two-fold. First, by asking all the participants the same questions about the text, it provided an opportunity to compare answers and thinking across participants. Second, I was able to identify particular portions of the text that I wanted to hear more about from each participant, specifically how they made meaning with a certain part or whether they could identify and provide explanations for unique qualities of some sections.

Finally, each participant was asked interview questions that focused on themselves as readers and readers of graphic novels. The purpose of this interview was to get a sense of each participant as a reader, with such items as, "Describe yourself as a reader." Additionally, the

questions sought to gauge the participants' ratings of themselves as readers of graphic novels. Finally, I hoped to uncover the participants' feelings about graphic novels in relation to texts in other formats with questions such as, "Some people don't think that reading a graphic novel is 'real' reading. What do you think?" The final interview question, "Is there anything that you'd like to say about participating in this research project?" elicited generally positive comments about participating in the project and the research itself.

The larger study included four other participants. While each participant's responses were valuable and interesting, Mallory's responses were particularly insightful, hence the focus on her and her responses in this article.

Below I present the findings of Mallory's think-aloud, retrospective think-aloud, *Amulet*-specific questions and interview.

Mallory

Mallory was an 8th-grader who was poised beyond her years. She was an avid reader as evidenced by the frustration she expressed during the interview about often having more books that she wants to read than she has time for. She was extremely thoughtful in all of her responses. She was well-versed in current popular young adult literature and also knowledgeable about "classics" such as *Lord of the Rings*. She was able to draw many parallels from the fantasy graphic novel to both *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*.

Mallory does not usually read graphic novels, although she has read the entire *Bone* series, a graphic novel, which is over 800 pages long. She was able to use this experience in her reading of *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*. She often referred to *Bone*, especially when similarities occurred to her. She liked graphic novels, but preferred texts in a "traditional" format because she liked to construct the images in her head. She said, "I don't know why, I just...I have a thing for...umm...the use of sort of description in words rather than in pictures. I like that. I sort of like to do that too, like I am not hugely visually artistic whereas I love to describe things. So I think it's a personal preference that I just like the traditional literature better" (Mallory's quotations maintain the language and grammar used by her).

During the interview, I asked Mallory if she thought that graphic novels offer a different experience from other types of books. She responded, "Yeah, I do, definitely. It gives you like a very...vivid, but preexisting mental image. It leaves some room imagination of like your own mental images, but I think less so than other things."

Think-Aloud

Over the course of about 35 minutes, Mallory read *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse* and completed the think-aloud. She made 63 comments during her think-aloud. A majority (42) of her comments displayed her use of different reading strategies to question and talk to the text.

Modalities. In her think-aloud, Mallory appeared to favor the visual modality, as she referenced information that was only available in the images 28 times. She commented on information only in the text 18 times and information available in both modalities 13 times.

Visual. Twenty-eight of Mallory's comments referred to information presented visually. On page 6 (see Image 1) Mallory commented, "The art around the eyes is really cool because you can tell they are glowing a bit." She was referring to the eyes of the elves. All of the elves are drawn with large, pupil-less white eyes. Instead of a pupil there is a vertical black line that bisects the middle of each eye. The art around the eyes does make them appear to glow. Mallory noted this visual element in her comment.

Image 1:



Text. Mallory referred to information from the written text in 18 of her comments. On page 47, Luger is preparing to use a cannon on the hospital in order to attack Emily. Trellis, the elf prince, says to Luger, “What about the patients? They have no part in this.” Luger replies, “Sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good.” Mallory commented, “It seems that the prince of the elves has some sort of conscience.” The information Mallory commented on is only available in the written text; Mallory used that information to make an inference, regarding a character attribute, that the elf prince has a conscience because he is showing concern for the innocent patients in the hospital.

Both. On pages 116 and 117 (See Image 2), Navin and a slug-like warrior have snuck back into the robot-shaped house via the trash chute in order to reclaim it from the elves. Navin and his companion are making their way up the stairs in order to restart the robots. As Navin is busy working with the equipment, an elf comes up behind him. This information is shown in both the images and the text. Mallory commented, “The elves are on board still.” She integrated information from both the visual and the written in order to determine the presence of the elf.

Image 2:



Summary. Mallory’s comments indicated her ability to access information from the visual, the written text, and from both modalities in order to make meaning with the text. It is important to note that she also demonstrated her use of reading strategies in both modalities.

Reading strategies. Forty-two of Mallory’s comments exhibited the use of some reading strategy, including often questioning the text and, in several instances answering her own questions. For example, on pages 90 and 91 (See Image 3), Leon instructs Emily to find a weapon. She declines the offer of Leon’s sword and asks, “How about this walking stick?” In that case, Mallory asked of the text, “Does she really think that she can fight the elf king/army with a walking stick?” On page 92 (See Image 4), Leon answers Emily’s question. “Very well. It should be adequate for our purposes.” Mallory’s next comment was, “Guess so.” In this instance, Mallory asked a question of the graphic novel and, when she received the answer, a page later she answered her own question. This is an example of Mallory’s interaction with the text. Many

of her comments indicated that she was in a constant “discussion” or interaction with the text, in which she asked questions of it and sought answers. She also made seven predictions, which she looked to confirm or deny as she continued to read.

Image 3:



Image 4:



Graphic novel conventions. There were two instances in her think-aloud when Mallory referred to a convention of the graphic novel. Immediately following the scene described above Leon begins to show her how to use the power of the amulet and how to focus its energy through her walking stick. After many tries and failures, Emily is finally figuring out how to do this. As she does, the amulet activates and begins talking with her. On pages 106 and 107 (See Image 5), the amulet is talking with Emily in her head, and Emily is using the power of the amulet to lift increasingly larger items, including the large log upon which Leon Redbeard is standing. In two panels, Leon has a speech bubble filled with squiggles and no words. Mallory commented, “Why can’t she hear anything the fox is saying?” This is another example of Mallory questioning the text. The conventions of the format allowed her to recognize that Emily cannot understand Leon because no words appear in the speech bubble.

Image 5:



The second time Mallory referred to a convention in her comment, she paired it with another reading strategy, that of making a text-to-text connection. The climax of the book occurs when Emily and Leon engage in a battle with the elves. Luger loses control to his amulet and morphs into a terrifying giant, who forces Emily and Leon off a cliff. Luckily, the house-shaped robot, piloted by Navin, is there to catch them. Navin, controlling the house-shaped robot, continues the fight with Luger while Emily recovers. The house-shaped robot is being pummeled and has lost both of its arms. Emily musters her strength and uses the power of the amulet to bring the house back together in order to defeat Luger, forcing him over the edge of the cliff.

This expenditure of energy is so taxing that Emily faints, which is shown on pages 202 through 205. The four pages are from Emily's perspective. Page 202 is without panels. The top third shows an image of Navin and Cogsley looking concerned. Navin says, "Don't worry! We'll go get help!" The image is in the shape of a flattened oval, or what the scene might look like from the perspective of an eye that is closing. The middle of the page shows a slightly modified image of Navin and Cogsley, but less of them is shown, as if the eye is closing. The bottom third of the page shows just a slit of light, as if the eye is almost shut. Pages 203 and 204 are completely black. The reverse happens on page 205, with just a sliver of the scene (in this case the inside of a room) being shown, then gradually revealed as the eye opens further.

Mallory commented, "It's the same thing. It's from the perspective of the main character when the lights kind of go out." Several things are indicated by this comment. First, Mallory recognized that the panels on these pages are from Emily's perspective. Second, she realized that the "lights go out" when Emily faints. Finally, she made a text-to-text connection to *Sidekicks* by Dan Santat, as a similar scene, using the same conventions, occurs when one of the characters is knocked out. This serves as an example of how graphic novel conventions can convey meaning and how reading graphic novels can "teach" one how to read other graphic novels, just as reading a traditional novel "teaches" one how to read others. Mallory was able to apply her experience with a different graphic novel, which used the same convention, to her understanding of these pages of *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*.

Summary. Mallory's think-aloud was punctuated with demonstrations of her use of reading strategies. She did not hesitate to question the text throughout her think-aloud and, perhaps more importantly, she continuously sought the answers to the questions she posed to the text. This demonstrated how she used questions to monitor her comprehension and to refine, as needed, her predictions. Additionally, Mallory applied reading strategies to information in both modalities.

Retrospective Think-Aloud

Mallory's think-aloud was filled with demonstrations of reading strategies that she used to make meaning with *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*. In her retrospective think-aloud, she did not discuss these reading strategies. Instead she spent a great deal of her retrospection exhibiting her story knowledge and discussing several text-to-text connections that she made in her reading, particularly to *Lord of the Rings*. She also referred to how the visual, the written text, and the graphic novel conventions helped her to understand the story.

Modalities. In her retrospective think-aloud, Mallory referred to information from both the visual and text modalities in order to explain her thinking and meaning making process.

On page 159 (See Image 6), Emily and Leon Redbeard are engaged in a battle with Luger, who has allowed his stone to take control and has morphed into a giant. In her think-aloud, Mallory noted that the color of the stones has changed, and she wonders about the reason for that.

A: You remark that the light from the stone has changed from pink to blue and you wonder if it is a bad thing.

M: Maybe it is the light from his stone that is blue on 159. Yeah, I think it is the light from the other stone that causes this blue green color. I think that it just represents the difference between them and it might represent like a...like a personalization of each...like of how each stone is different...but it could...and how each relationship between stone and stonekeeper is different. But it might also just be a tool so that you can like see which...oh wait no...on 161(See Image 7)...the light that is surrounding her does turn green.

A: And that continues on 162 (See Image 8).

M: Yeah and so I think that does mean that the stone is allowing itself to become evil or something or she is allowing it to become unstable...something like that.

A: Okay. So the change in the stone's color that it is projecting may indicate that it is changing from good to evil?

M: Perhaps, yes.

Although there was some initial confusion regarding whether the stone's color is actually changing, Mallory did eventually identify that the color of the stone changed and she provided a feasible explanation for this. Mallory was tuned into the color of the images, and used this information to add to her initial understanding of the events in the story.

Image 6:



Image 7:



Image 8:



167.

During her think-aloud, on pages 100 and 101 (See Image 9), Mallory hypothesized that the amulet has some heat attached to it. I asked her how she came to this conclusion during her retrospective think-aloud. Emily is learning to use the power of the amulet during these pages.

A: You remark that...or speculate that the amulet must have some sort of heat connected with it. What made you think that or feel that?

M: Oh, umm. It said, 'infuse the staff with the power of the stone. It will help you focus the energy. But it'll burn it like the seeds.' So like obviously there is some sort of connection...if the amulet is able to burn things it probably has some sort of heat because generally when you are burning something it uses heat. Heat is necessary to do it.

A: And is there any way the amulet looks or something that implies heat or...

M: Umm...it's kind of a warm color but I didn't really think about it until I heard that it could burn things.

Mallory appeared to get this information exclusively from the text, as she quoted it at some length. When she was asked directly about the image of the amulet, she conceded that the color that surrounds it could be considered warm, but also noted that she had not recognized this during her reading, or not until she read that it could burn things.

Image 9:



During her think-aloud, on pages 66 and 67 (See Images 10 and 11), Mallory remarked that the amulet was not a good thing. I asked her why she said that, and she responded with: Umm...well...I think it was because she sort of like...well...first of all it turned her eyes red and red eyes are usually like a sign of not good things. And also, he said, 'okay,' like on this other page...umm...he says, 'I can use the stone. But what if you can't control it? What if you hit Leon by accident?' And she says, 'I can do this.' 'Okay, but you have to be careful.' So obviously it has some potential for not being controlled. And also when she like starts to like use the power, Leon says, 'Oh, no,' like in like something bad is going to happen.

I asked Mallory to explain why red eyes are not a "good thing." She elaborated, "Well...usually...I don't actually know, but just in a lot of...umm...like literature and movies and stuff when they want someone to look evil they give them red eyes. I think it has become like a signal."

Mallory's explanation of why she thought the amulet was not a good thing was based on information from both modalities. She paired the visual information of Emily's red eyes with parts of the text to come to the conclusion that the amulet was likely not entirely good. In her explanation, she also exhibited the use of the reading strategies of inference and story knowledge. She inferred that, if Emily is warned to be careful with the amulet, there is potential danger. Mallory also applied her experience with red eyes in other texts, including movies, to determine that red eyes are generally not a signal of something good.

Image 10:



Image 11:



Summary. In her retrospective think-aloud, Mallory continued to demonstrate her ability to access information from both modalities. She made connections between the text and other texts in order to understand the potential meaning behind the changes in color, particularly when Emily’s eyes turn red.

Reading strategies. Although her use of reading strategies was not as prolific as their indicated use in her think-aloud, Mallory still referred to several reading strategies during her retrospective think-aloud.

Graphic novel conventions. A few pages after the scene above, on pages 106 and 107 (See Image 5), Emily is starting to gain some control over the power of the amulet and the walking stick she has decided to use as a weapon. She becomes extremely focused on what she is doing and struggles to maintain control of the amulet. Emily is not aware of her surroundings, and, when Leon tries to talk to her, she either cannot hear him or ignores him. Mallory commented on this during her think-aloud.

A: You say, why can’t she hear anything the fox is saying? How do you know that she can’t hear anything the fox is saying?

M: Well, the fox is...he has a speech bubble, but there aren't any actual words coming out; like it is just squiggles. So generally that means that it is too quiet or just to signify that he is saying something but she can't hear him. So I think that I just said that because of the speech bubble.

Mallory succinctly described what is happening with the fox and his speech balloon. She recognized that the convention of the speech balloon indicates a sound or that something is being said. She also identified that the squiggles within the speech balloon cannot be read and that, in general, this means inaudible speech. She concluded that, even though the fox is talking, he cannot be heard or understood because there are no discernable words in the speech balloon.

Text-to-text connection. Several times during her think-aloud, Mallory referred to other texts, including *Lord of the Rings*. I asked her what she saw as some of the parallels between *Lord of the Rings* and *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*. She replied, "Oh...that was along with the...uhh...necklace and there was like something on it. It's...it's...and one person has to bear it and another person is sort of...that she travels with is kind of wary of it...and then there's sort of a third like renegade type person who...umm...sort of knows more about it than she does. So I just felt like that had some connection." Mallory's knowledge of this familiar storyline may have helped her to understand *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse* and to make predictions about story events and character actions.

Summary. Mallory's text-to-text connection between *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse* and *Lord of the Rings* went far beyond similarities between events in the two texts. Mallory made a connection between characters, or character tropes, in the two books. She also demonstrated her ability to recognize the storyline as common and was knowledgeable of some of the key elements of these storylines, such as the role that power often plays in these stories.

Amulet-Specific Questions

Mallory was able to provide an accurate and detailed summary of *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*. Her summary followed a chronological order and included little details from the story, as well as big-picture events and themes.

Story elements. Mallory labeled *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse* as an action-adventure story. I asked her if she could identify the theme. She responded, "Kind of a story of courage...I guess...and family in some ways, but I don't know if that theme will carry on throughout the rest of the series because it's definitely there in this book, but not necessarily...it might not be in the rest of them, but so like courage and family."

Mallory was able to provide examples of elements of the story's plot, such as rising action and the climax. She indicated that Emily's training and her climbing of the mountain to retrieve the gadoba fruit are instances of rising action. She labeled the battle with the giant elf as the climax of the story. The resolution follows this battle, when Emily and Navin defeat the giant elf and their mother wakes.

Format. Before transitioning to specific elements of the graphic novel format, I asked Mallory some broader questions about format. I inquired how the graphic novel format affected the story of *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*. She replied, "I think it allows the story to have...kind of a very...it...it has a very kind of visual like...it allows it to have like fun visual elements in it. And also...umm...kind of like lets it be a story that doesn't require a whole lot of text or dialogue. Like you can kind of know what's going on without a lot of words."

Graphic novel elements. After Mallory had selected a random page from the graphic novel, I asked her if she could name the parts of the page. She named the following: panels,

speech bubbles, illustrations, page numbers, and “the dividing things between the panels” (gutters).

Panels. I asked Mallory to explain what panels are used for.

M: I think they’re used for point of view and just sort of like being able to show different like parts of the story itself. And you can like show action that’s moving quickly and like jumping from like different like not necessarily scenes, but parts of a scene.

A: How is that done?

M: Well, you can sort of like jump sort of...you can get a sense of like action and abruptness by like going really abruptly from like one point of view to another and like sort of making it...umm...jump around a little bit...like the view of the reader.

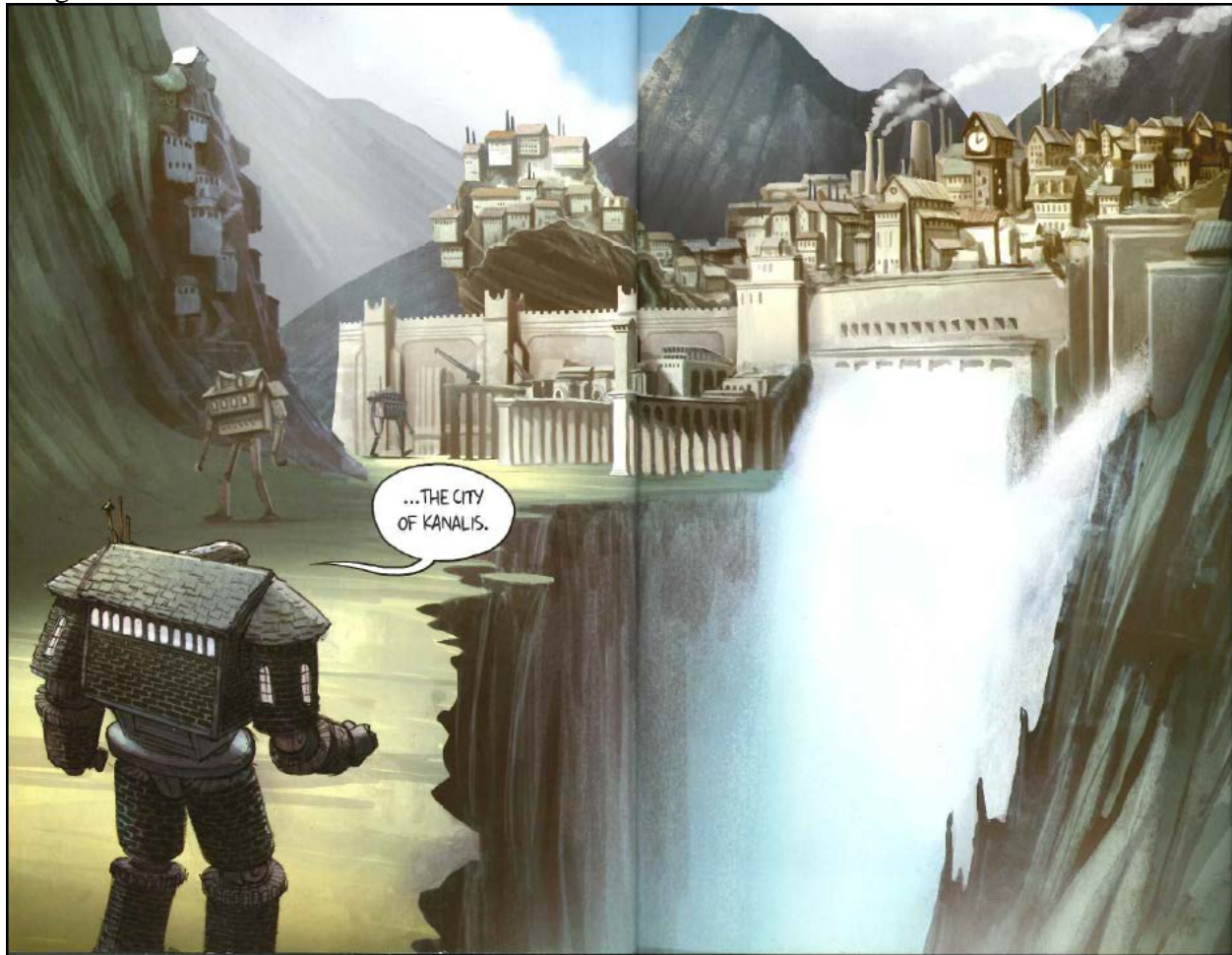
A: How does that happen abruptly?

M: Well...I mean...I think like when if you start out from one distinct point of view and then you sort of move slowly like to an opposite point of view it’s less abrupt and when you like jump to that opposite point of view it can give a sense of just kind of like...like a sort of bumpy ride...kind of...”

I directed Mallory’s attention to pages 22 and 23 (See Image 12). These are the panel-less pages that show Emily and her group, in the house-shaped robot, encountering Kanalis for the first time. I asked Mallory why she thought this page did not have any panels. She answered, “I think it’s to show a wide perspective and also to be able to have a full...kind of like...a full color image, it sort of gives it a very like vibrant feel I think. And kind of an unlimited feel, like it’s not limited by the panels, it’s just like there and it is. More than like with a panel you get a very specific point of view, with this you just get like, this is the city. It’s just kind of there.”

I pointed out to Mallory that the illustrator could have placed a border around the image on pages 22 and 23 and made one major panel. She disagreed, saying, “Yeah, but I think that the reason that they didn’t do that is because when it doesn’t have the border it gives the sense of like...not necessarily infinity, but that it is not...it is huge. It is not able to be contained within these sort of layout type design borders. So even though it doesn’t effect the story it still...it...I think that psychologically it kind of gives this like feel of not being bound.”

Image 12:



I asked Mallory if her reasoning applied to page 171 (See Image 13) as well. Page 171 shows Luger, in giant form, towering over the elf prince. Mallory agreed, stating, “Yeah, because they are trying to show this giant thing and it’s sort of...it’s....like even in the story it’s supposed to be like not...like uncontrollable. So it gives it this like sort of like humongous, uncontrollable feel. I think it’s the same thought applying again here.”

Image 13:



In order to discuss another type of panel layout, I drew Mallory's attention to the panels on pages 61 through 68 (See Image 14). The rooftop battle between Emily and Leon Redbeard and the elves is displayed on these pages. I asked Mallory to describe the panels on these pages. She said, "They're more like...they're not straight. The lines aren't straight. I think that's to show like action and like kind of mania in some ways. It's not like...like it's very action filled. It's all like going crazy and so even the layout goes kind of crazy. So it's like...I think it's just to represent this action and also to like...and umm...movement kind of...cause the scene...cause the actions are jumbled together and so are the panels."

Image 14:



Summary. In this discussion of the panels, Mallory displayed her understanding of some of the different roles that panels play, as well as some of the different meanings indicated by panels. She noted that the shape of the panel can convey a feeling—in this case, mania. She also explored the idea of panels as a means of limiting a scene, so that when panels are removed, a particular scene can appear infinite. Mallory was also conscious of the use of panels as a means of showing different perspectives or changing perspectives.

Gutters. In her labeling of the parts of a graphic novel page, Mallory identified the gutters, but referred to them as “dividers.” I informed her that they are called gutters and then asked her what they are used for. She responded, “I think they’re used to contain the umm panels and show the breaks between the panels because if they’re just kind of like smushed together it’s hard to see that really thin black line. So it just...it makes it easier for you to be like oh this is a panel this is a panel this is a panel. Like you can tell that each panel is separate from one another.”

I then posed the following question, “What happens in the gutters?” Mallory answered, “Umm...not a whole lot, but sometimes they like they’re slanted to show action and sometimes there’s like with that...ahh...with the doctor popping out and being in them. I think they just...they’re not...generally speaking not much happens, but occasionally they are used as a tool to show certain elements of the story.”

I asked Mallory to look at page 115 (See Image 15) and to talk through what is happening, panel by panel, as Navin and the slug-like warrior sneak into the robot house via the garbage chute. Mallory provided a detailed description of what is happening in each of the panels. I asked

her if she could identify where or when the slug-like warrior is climbing up the chute. She did not indicate that this is happening in the gutters, but rather made an interesting point that the slug character is only shown when he is with Navin, who is a main character.

Image 15:



115

I pushed Mallory further on where the action might be occurring within the format of the graphic novel. I questioned, “Could we say that that action, the climbing, happens in the gutters?” Mallory replied, “You could, yeah.” I asked her what she thought of that idea. She said, “It’s kind of interesting. That that’s like the buffer of the act—like...that it’s like the connection...like

the transition of the action as well as the...the...(sigh)...sort of the change or the transition from scene to scene.”

Mallory and I then flipped to pages 118 and 119 (See Image 16) to continue the discussion and exploration of panels.

A: How do you know what is happening in the gutters?

M: Umm...you can sort of infer it, I guess. Because they're in one place and then they're in another so they must have somehow moved to get there.

A: And as you're reading, do you feel like you are making those inferences?

M: I think that they are sort of instant, like instantaneous. As soon as you know what happens in the next you like...umm...it's just sort of like, clearly they must've moved...so...

A: Is there something about the way graphic novels are laid out that allows it to be kind of instantaneous?

M: Umm...maybe the way that one panel just leads into another. I'm not really sure. That's a good question. I don't know.

A: Can you compare the use of gutters or what happens in gutters to anything else?

M: Well, sometimes, like in a TV show it will fade to black and then something else like you'll when you come back it's not exactly the same. So you just have to kind of infer what's happened in that black or like during that commercial or something.

Summary. Mallory struggled to describe, in words, exactly what happens in gutters.

However, she indicated her understanding of the concept through what I would consider a format-to-format connection. She compared what happens in gutters to fade-outs in television shows. This comparison revealed that Mallory understood the workings of gutters. Although she was not sure how the layout of graphic novels leads the reader to instantaneously fill in the gutters, she did reference the idea of context by suggesting that what happens in one panel “leads into another.”

Image 16:



Summary

Mallory was a well-read 8th grader, who is thoughtful about her reading and her thinking about reading. She was a strategic reader, as evidenced through her utilization of a number of reading strategies in her think-aloud. She appeared to view the graphic novel as something she could interact with, as she often questioned the text and even talked back to it. It is likely that these are strategies Mallory uses when reading texts in other formats, as she seemed practiced and comfortable with their use. She often employed the strategy of applying story knowledge developed over her years as an avid reader. She was familiar with many of the tropes presented in *Amulet: The Stonekeeper's Curse*, such as the strained father-son relationship that exhibited between the elf king and the elf prince.

Mallory's previous experience with graphic novels was limited to her reading of the *Bone* series. She applied some of what she learned by reading this series to the reading of the graphic novel in this study. Mallory preferred reading in a traditional format because she enjoys building the mental images that are described by the words in a text. She considered graphic novels to be easy, or "less than" books in a traditional format. Mallory does not believe that graphic novels are suited for a literature course because the limited amount of written text would not lend itself to a study of story, but she is potentially open to the idea of including graphic novels in other types of courses.

Mallory was aware of and able to name most of the parts of a graphic novel. In addition, she was cognizant of the role that most of the parts of the graphic novel played. She initially labeled the gutters as dividers and had not considered the closure necessitated by the gutters, but, when this was pointed out to her, she was open to the idea and eager to apply it to her overall understanding of graphic novels.

References

- Afflerbach, P. (2002). Verbal reports and protocol analysis. In M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, and R. Barr (Eds). *Methods of literacy research: The methodology chapters from the Handbook of Reading Research Volume III* (pp. 87-103) Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Eisner, W. (1996). *Graphic storytelling*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press.
- Kibuishi, K. (2009). *Amulet: The stonekeeper's curse*. Scholastic: New York.
- Nel, P. (2012). Some genus, different species?: Comics and picture books. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 37(4), 445-453.