

Rutgers University, Department of English
Spring 2013

Graphic Storytelling: Exploring Contemporary Comics
(Issues and Problems in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture)

03:350:393
Murray Hall, Room 301
Tues./Thurs., 1:10 – 2:30 PM

Instructor: Tahneer Oksman
Contact: tno3@rutgers.edu
Office: Murray Hall, 036A
Office Hour: Tues., 2:30 – 3:30 PM and
by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In her introduction to *The Best American Comics 2011*, cartoonist Alison Bechdel writes, “Art and language are always in flux, of course, but the somewhat younger mode of comics seems to be in a particularly molten state. Close readers may observe rivulets of lava cooling into new conventions right before their eyes” (xv). In this course, we will read a variety of contemporary comics, mostly from North America, in order to examine how comics can help us rethink genre. Specifically, we will attempt to decipher what graphic narratives can teach us about the assumptions that we make about storytelling conventions, and how contemporary cartoonists play with or breach such conventions. Some forms of storytelling that we will consider through readings of comics of various lengths, including texts commonly referred to as “graphic novels,” are documentary, fantasy, diary, short story, and memoir.

We will focus heavily on the formal complexities of reading visual-textual interactions, with the goal of developing a common vocabulary for thinking, discussing, and writing about comics. We will address questions such as, is there an equivalent, in comics, of what we commonly refer to as “voice” in works of prose? In what ways do comics differ from other media, including film and prose? We will also briefly consider digital comics, and the ways that they force us to rethink the possibilities of the medium.



Alison Bechdel, from Introduction to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*

COURSE GOALS

This course is designed to acquaint students with key theoretical and conceptual issues related to graphic narratives, as well as introduce them to a range of texts composed in this medium. By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

- Recognize and understand key concepts, terms, and theories related to visual rhetoric and specifically image-texts.
- Closely read and analyze graphic narratives.
- Write persuasive and analytical arguments about graphic narratives.
- Discuss the relationship between graphic narratives and other media, as well as the formal relationships between alternative literary forms and genres more generally.
- Have a grasp of the history of American comics, as well as current aesthetic and academic developments in the field.

REQUIRED TEXTS

[Note: All of these books are available at the Rutgers University Bookstore. If you choose to order books from elsewhere, please remember that you are accountable for doing the reading on time.]

Bechdel, Alison, ed. *Best American Comics 2011*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, ISBN-10: 0547333625; ISBN-13: 978-0547333625

_____. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Mariner Books, ISBN-10: 0618871713; ISBN-13: 978-0618871711

Bell, Gabrielle. *Cecil and Jordan in New York: Stories by Gabrielle Bell*, Drawn and Quarterly, ISBN-10: 1897299575; ISBN-13: 978-1897299579

Burns, Charles. *Black Hole*, Pantheon, ISBN-10: 0375714723; ISBN-13: 978-0375714726

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*, William Morrow Paperbacks, ISBN-10: 006097625X; ISBN-13: 978-0060976255

Sacco, Joe. *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995*, Fantagraphics Books, ISBN-10: 1560974702; ISBN-13: 978-1560974703

Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Pantheon; ISBN-10: 037571457X; ISBN-13: 978-0375714573

Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis II: The Story of a Return*, Pantheon; ISBN-10: 0375714669; ISBN-13: 978-0375714665

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, Pantheon, ISBN-10: 0394747232; ISBN-13: 978-0394747231

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*, Pantheon, ISBN-10: 0679729771; ISBN-13: 978-0679729778

Tan, Shaun. *The Arrival*. Arthur A. Levine Books, ISBN-10: 0439895294; ISBN-13: 978-0439895293

REQUIRED SECONDARY READING

(All of these readings can be found on Sakai. There may be readings in addition to those below, which I will post on Sakai or distribute in class.)

Jessica Abel/Matt Madden, "Comics Terminology" (from *Drawing Words Writing Pictures*)

Will Eisner, excerpts from *Graphic Storytelling*

Pascal Lefevre, "Narration in Comics" (*Image & Narrative*)

Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" (*PMLA*)

Art Spiegelman and Hillary Chute, excerpts from *MetaMaus*

Joshua Brown, "Of Mice and Memory" (*Oral History Review*)

Marianne Hirsch, "Mourning and Postmemory" (from *Graphic Subjects*)

Hillary Chute, "Chapter 5: Animating an Archive" (from *Graphic Women*)
 Nancy K. Miller, "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir"
 Douglas Wolk, "Charles Burns and Art Spiegelman: Draw Yourself Raw" (from *Reading Comics*)
 Vanessa Raney, "Review of Charles Burns *Black Hole*" (*ImageText*)
 Greice Schneider, "Comics and Everyday Life" (*European Comic Art*)
 Joe Sacco, "Preface: A Manifesto Anyone?" (from *Journalism*)
 Rocco Versaci, "The 'new journalism' revisited" (from *This Book Contains Graphic Language*)
 Shaun Tan, "Picture Books: Who are they for?"
 Shaun Tan, "Comments on *The Arrival*"
 T.A.G. Hungerford, "Wong Chu and the Queen's Letterbox"
 Christophe Dony, "Moving Between Worlds: *The Arrival*" (*Comics Grid*)

Important note: This course involves adult content. Many readings deal with explicit sexual and/or violent material. If this is an issue for you, you must speak with me privately immediately.

COURSE POLICIES

Students are expected to attend all classes; if you expect to miss a class, please use the University absence reporting website [<https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/>] to indicate the date and reason for your absence. An email is automatically sent to me. Attendance will also be taken in class, and your grade for the semester will be dropped a mark for each absence in excess of two (i.e. three absences, the best grade you could receive for the class is 3.5/B+).

It is essential that you arrive to class promptly and submit all work on time. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out about work you have missed.

Please make sure to turn off ALL electronic devices before class begins.

REMEMBER: Any and all work you hand in this semester must be your own. Whenever you use someone else's words or ideas, you must cite them properly. As a Rutgers student, you belong to a community of scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Rutgers University standards regarding plagiarism and academic integrity will be strictly enforced.

Please do not hesitate to let me know if you have any questions or concerns. I am glad to meet with you to discuss all assignments or any other aspect of the course. If you would like to discuss anything when I am not on campus, I am glad to chat with you remotely via Skype or over the phone.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS and REQUIREMENTS

PAPERS

You will be responsible for **two 5-7 page essays** in the course of the semester. **Papers are due at the beginning of class.** You will receive detailed instructions for these papers. A late paper will be docked one-half of a letter grade for each day it is late. Each paper must be five full pages in order to earn a passing grade. Please do not email me your papers, unless you are requested to do so. This course follows the research guidelines of the Modern Language Association (MLA). These guidelines were most recently revised in 2007 in *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th Ed.).

PARTICIPATION, INCLUDING RESPONSE PAPERS

You are required to turn in response papers on **six different required readings** (these readings should be from different weeks in the semester, and they can be primary or secondary texts). These response papers should be about 300-400 words, and they should be posted on Sakai by **noon on the day before the class in which we discuss those particular texts**. You should also print out your post and hand it in to me at the beginning of class. We will often use these responses as part of our discussion in each class meeting. You should number your response papers--#1, #2, and so forth. These responses will be considered part of your participation grade.

You are encouraged to refer to a particular image or page from the text when composing these response papers. Ideally, the responses will serve to generate ideas; think of them as an opportunity to reflect on the reading and to prepare for the two more formal writing assignments.

Tips for response papers: Do analyze a particular theme, image, or selection from the text. In other words, be specific. Don't just summarize what you've read. Do connect your response to an issue or discussion that we've had in class. You should feel comfortable bringing up a thought or idea that was voiced in class (or on the discussion board) and responding to it. Remember to always credit others by name. Don't generalize or make superficial assessments without providing specific textual evidence. Do use these responses as an opportunity to experiment with your readings of the text or to make connections between different works we've read (extra points for unexpected pairings). Do use MLA-style to cite your sources.

In addition to your own response papers, you are also required to **respond** to your classmates' posts at least **six times** (in different weeks) on the days that you are not handing in a response paper. There is no length requirement for these responses, and you do not have to hand these in.

I will occasionally assign **short, ungraded writing assignments**, which I will also collect in class. These will also count as part of your participation grade. Please be sure to type these up, and always include your name at the top of the page.

Participation in class is an important part of your course grade. Come to class prepared to ask questions, to comment, to fully engage. **You must bring the assigned readings to each class meeting.** If I find that it is necessary, there will be unannounced in-class quizzes. These quizzes will count as part of your participation grade, and they cannot be made up.

PRESENTATION

You will be required to give one presentation at the end of semester on a graphic narrative that is not a required course text, which you choose, read, describe, and present on the last day of class. Use this presentation as an opportunity to explore local comics resources. Part of your presentation should include a narrative of how you came by this particular text.

COURSE GRADE BREAKDOWNS

First Paper	30%
Second Paper	30%
Attendance and participation (includes response papers and all informal writing)	30%
Presentation	10%

READING SCHEDULE (subject to change)

PART I: BUILDING A COMICS VOCABULARY

- Tuesday, Jan. 22** Introductions
- Thursday, Jan. 24** Alison Bechdel, ed. "Introduction" (from *Best American Comics 2011*) (S)
In class exercise: *99 Ways to Tell a Story*
- Tuesday, Jan. 29** Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (chapters 1-4)
Best American Comics 2011, pps. 1-44
- Thursday, Jan. 31** Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (chapters 5-9)
Best American Comics 2011, pps. 45-191
- Tuesday, Feb. 5** *Best American Comics 2011*, pps. 192-end
 ● Abel/Madden, "Comics Terminology" (S)
 ● Will Eisner, Introduction (pps. xv-xvii); Chapter 7 (pps. 69-73); Will Eisner, Chapter 11 (pps. 149-157) (S)
Required informal writing assignment, post on Sakai by noon on February 4th (print-out due in class). Choose two excerpts from *Best American Comics 2011* and compare and contrast them. Your response might answer the following questions. 1. What is each comic about? 2. How would you characterize the form/style of each comic? Explain. 3. Describe what is similar and/or different between the two.

PART II: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND COMICS

- Thursday, Feb. 7** Art Spiegelman, *Maus I*, pps. 1-97
- Tuesday, Feb. 12** Art Spiegelman, *Maus I*, pps. 98-end
 ● Spiegelman and Chute, *MetaMaus*, pps. 111-116 and 118-122 and 145-151 and 175-185 (S)
- Thursday, Feb. 14** Continue discussion of Art Spiegelman, *Maus I*
 ● Pascal Lefèvre, "Narration in Comics" (S)
 ● Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" (S)
- Tuesday, Feb. 19** Art Spiegelman, *Maus II*, pps. 1-74
 ● Joshua Brown, "Of Mice and Memory" (S)
- Thursday, Feb. 21** Art Spiegelman, *Maus II*, pps. 74-end
 ● Marianne Hirsch, "Mourning and Postmemory" (from *Graphic Subjects*) (S)
- Tuesday, Feb. 26** Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis I*, 1-86
 ● Patricia Storage, "A Double Life in Black and White" (S)
- Thursday, Feb. 28** Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis I*, 87-end
 ● David Hajdu, "Persian Miniatures" (S)
 ● Leigh Gilmore, "Witnessing *Persepolis*" (pps. 157-63 in *Graphic Subjects*) (S)

- Tuesday, March 5** Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis II*
- Thursday, March 7** **Paper #1 Due**
In-Class activity: Drawing Comics
- Tuesday, March 12** Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*, pps. 1-86
- Thursday, March 14** Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*, pps. 86-end
- Tuesday, March 26** Continue discussion of Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*
 ●Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women*, “Chapter 5: Animating an Archive,” pps.175-217(S)
 ●Nancy K. Miller, “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir” (S)

PART III: RETHINKING GENRE

- Thursday, March 28** Charles Burns, *Black Hole* (read roughly half)
(fantasy)
- Tuesday, April 2** Charles Burns, *Black Hole* (finish book)
- Thursday, April 4** Continue discussion of Charles Burns, *Black Hole*
 ●Douglas Wolk, “Charles Burns and Art Spiegelman: Draw Yourself Raw”(pps. 336-46 in *Reading Comics*)(S)
 ●Vanessa Raney, “Review of Charles Burns *Black Hole*” (S)
- Tuesday, April 9** Gabrielle Bell, *Cecil and Jordan in New York*, pps. 1-78
(short story)
 ●Gabrielle Bell’s blog (have a look around): [<http://gabriellebell.com/>]
- Thursday, April 11** Gabrielle Bell, *Cecil and Jordan in New York*, pps. 78-end
 ●Greice Schneider, “Comics and Everyday Life”(S)
- Tuesday, April 16** Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde*, pps. 1-97
(documentary/journalism)
 ●Joe Sacco, preface to *Journalism* (pps. xi-xiv) (S)
- Thursday, April 18** Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde*, pps. 98-end
- Tuesday, April 23** Continue discussion of Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde*
 ●Rocco Versaci, “The ‘new journalism’ revisited” (pps. 109-138 in *This Book Contains Graphic Language*) (S)

PART IV: COMICS WITHOUT WORDS?

- Thursday, April 25** Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*
 ●T.A.G. Hungerford, “Wong Chu and the Queen's Letterbox”(S)

Tuesday, April 30
(picture books)

Discussion of Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*, cont.

- Shaun Tan, "Picture Books: Who are they for?" (S)
- Shaun Tan, "Comments on *The Arrival*" (S)
- Christophe Dony, "Moving Between Worlds: *The Arrival*" (S)

Thursday, May 2

Paper #2 Due

IN-CLASS PRESENTATIONS

FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

For links to online articles and other recent comics-related info, 'like' our course Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/graphstorytelling>

SECONDARY TEXTS (selected list)

- Abel, Jessica, and Matt Madden. *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*.
 Aldama, Frederick Luis. *Multicultural Comics*.
 Carrier, David. *The Aesthetics of Comics*.
 Chaney, Michael A., ed. *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*.
 Chute, Hillary. *Graphic Women*.
 Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art*.
 _____. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*.
 Gardner, Jared. *Projections: Comics and the History of Twentieth-Century Storytelling*.
 Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Trans. Bart Beaty.
 Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*.
 Heer, Jeet, and Kent Worcester. *A Comics Studies Reader*.
 _____. *Arguing Comics*.
 Madden, Matt. *99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style*.
 McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics*.
 _____. *Reinventing Comics*.
 Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory*.
 Spiegelman, Art, and Hillary Chute. *MetaMaus*.
 Versaci, Rocco. *This Book Contains Graphic Language*.
 Walker, Mort. *The Lexicon of Comicana*.
 Witek, Joseph, ed. *Art Spiegelman: Conversations*.
 Wolk, Douglas. *Reading Comics*.
 Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation*.

BLOGS AND WEBSITES (selected list)

- The Comics Journal* [<http://www.tcj.com/>]
The Comics Reporter [<http://www.comicsreporter.com/>]
The Beat [<http://www.comicsbeat.com/>]
The Comic Claptrap [<http://comixclaptrap.blogspot.com>]
Midtown Comics [<http://blog.midtowncomics.com/>]
Bergen Street Comics [<http://bergenstreetcomics.com/>]
Jim Hanley's Universe [<http://www.jhuniverse.com/>]
St. Mark's Comics NY [<http://www.stmarkscomics.com/>]
Comic-Con [<http://www.comic-con.org/>]
Fantagraphics [<http://www.fantagraphics.com/>]
Vertigo [<http://www.vertigocomics.com/>]
Drawn and Quarterly [<http://www.drawnandquarterly.com>]
InkStuds [<http://www.inkstuds.org/>]
 Craig Thompson [<http://blog.dootdootgarden.com/>]
 Kate Beaton [<http://beatonna.livejournal.com/>]
 Sarah Glidden [<http://sarahglidden.com/>]
 Guy Delisle [<http://www.guydelisle.com/>]
 Sophie Crumb [<http://sophiecrumb.blogspot.com/>]
 Chris Ware [<http://www.acmenoveltyarchive.org/>]
 James Kochalka [<http://americanelf.com/>]
 Julie Doucet [<http://www.juliedoucet.net/>]