

Introducing a New “Genre” in Literary Education: The “Graphic Novel” in the Classroom

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Review

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Margreet de Heer, Bas Schuddeboom, Willard Mans, *Graphic novels voor de leeslijst*, Stripmaker des Vaderlands/Uitgeverij Personalia, 2018.

“Have you ever asked yourself how it felt for nineteenth-century readers to open a novel and read one for the very first time? Well, you now have the opportunity to live such an experience, for our era too sees the rise of a new genre: the graphic novel!” This is how Willard Mans usually introduces his ideas about the role the graphic novel could play in the classroom. As a teacher, he is confronted every day with students who have lost the habit of reading lengthy books and do not know how to find novels that interest them for their required reading lists. His experience with the introduction of graphic novels in the classroom has convinced him that these books can motivate adolescents to read more and he is now seeing his dream come true: together with national comic strip maker Margreet de Heer and Bas Schuddeboom (editor of the online *Comiclopedia* and *Donald Duck*), he has published a guide that briefly introduces over fifty Dutch graphic novels. The target audience is mainly secondary school teachers, but it could also be helpful for students in making choices for their reading lists. The guide is available both in print (free copies can be obtained in many comic book stores in The Netherlands) and as a free download (<http://stripmakerdesvaderlands.nl/graphic-novels-voor-de-leeslijst/>).

Willard Mans’s statement is challenging, but not unproblematic, because many scholars prefer “comics” or “comic book” to the term “graphic novel.” Some, however, do make a distinction between comics and graphic novels, like Stephen

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E. Tabachnick, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel* (2017), who proposes the following definition:

the graphic novel is an extended comic book freed of all restrictions on form and content and capable of tackling all of the issues that writing and art for adults have always dealt with, using all of the literary and artistic resources available to any writer or artist. (26)

This is also the point of view of the authors of the guide I am here discussing: they consider the graphic novel to be a literary genre as opposed to a medium, characterized by the interaction between word and image. Given the educational context in which the guide is supposed to function – as a supplement to the required reading list – this terminology seems acceptable. And there is also a more pragmatic reason to maintain the term “graphic novel:” in Dutch, the word “comics” evokes a connotation of flat humour and jokes.

Graphic novels voor de leeslijst (Graphic Novels for the Reading List) discusses fifty-five graphic novels, one on each page. At the top of each page we find a picture of the cover, a summary in one or two sentences, some keywords, a representative panel (indicating the content of the book, like a title vignette), as well as information about the publisher, the year of publication, and the number of pages. The main part consists of a longer summary, a personalized review of the work, and two or three questions that could prompt discussion and analysis in the classroom. Finally, at the bottom of each page, we see a series of three or four illustrative panels.

Tabachnick specifies that “the term graphic novel includes not only fiction, but also serious non-fictional historical and political issues, and graphic novels are often autobiographical or biographical” (26). This is precisely what we see in the guide: a wide variety of genres, such as autobiographies dealing with issues like autism, burnout, cancer, mourning, mentally disabled parents, obesity, or religion and the search for meaning. We find the latter theme in Liesbeth Labeur’s *Op weg en reis* (On the Road and Go, 2017), a graphic novel about the dilemmas of a young girl living in the closed world of the Reformed Church, and in Frenk Meeuwse’s *Zen zonder meester* (Zen without Master, 2017), in which the protagonist discovers Eastern spirituality. Other genres that can be found on the list include science fiction and history (World War I and II, colonialism in the Dutch Indies, et cetera), and more humorous ones as well, like stories with a cat or a dog as focalizer. The genre of artist biographies deserves a special remark, as the guide discusses no less than eight graphic novels in which the protagonist is a well-known painter.

Readers can discover the lives of Andy Warhol, Jan van Scorel, Jeroen Bosch, and Vincent van Gogh, or amuse themselves with stories about fictional painters in their desperate search for inspiration. The selection gives a good impression of topics that are popular, not only in graphic novels, but also in contemporary literature in general.

Does the list therefore demonstrate that the graphic novel has evolved as a genre and that it can be seen as being on par with “traditional” books? The very existence of meta-discursive and auto-ironic graphic novels in which the genre is discussed and parodied, confirms this hypothesis as true: *SGF* (the title refers to the initials of the protagonist) by Simon Spruyt (2009) is an example of this phenomenon – it ironizes the discussion on the differences between ordinary comic books and so called “quality graphic novels” by introducing a washed-up comic strip author who sells his soul to the devil to become a “captain of comic strips industry” (een “stripindustrialist,” De Heer, Schuddeboom, and Mans 40).

Overall, this guide has made me very enthusiastic, which is not to say that I do not have any critical remarks. For even if the guide is designed to provide fresh ideas to teachers, it would have been helpful for them if there had been some theory in it. The first problem is one of definition. In the short introduction, the authors describe the graphic novel as being “a multi-layered story, presented in compelling images” (“een gelaagd verhaal, verpakt in dwingende beelden,” 2). They admit that this is not very clear and then add some specifications: the protagonist must experience a transformation and the story and the design must be original and invite the reader to reflect upon it. This means that the graphic novel should raise the same questions as any other form of art, but the broadness of this definition has two important consequences for the selection criteria. First, we find both stories that were originally published as graphic novels as well as adaptations of novels or short stories by, for example, Adriaan van Dis, H.P. Lovecraft, Mohamed El Bisatie, and Ronald Giphart, which, in the latter situation, severely impacts the freedom of the author/artist to express themselves. Second, the graphic novels in the guide present all kinds of word-image combinations, varying from full stories with illustrations to woodcuts without words. The authors of the list indicate this as a problem by asking questions like “Is this still a graphic novel?” (16), or by signalling that a graphic novel stretches the borders of the genre of literature, but they do not formulate answers to their own questions and concerns. Perhaps it is impossible, given the scope of this guide, but some bibliographical references to the works of Jan Baetens or to the aforementioned *Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel* (2017) would have served as a useful supplement, as their work specifically contends with the techniques of storytelling used in graphic novels, the

analysis of word-image relations, and the question whether or not comics and graphic novels can be seen as literary.

This brings me to a second problem: the lack of didactic suggestions. The questions at the end of every presentation are useful, but the authors seem to suppose that every teacher knows how to read a graphic novel, how to make the connection between text and image, and how to interpret their interaction. On their aforementioned website, they say that the graphic novel is unique and deserves a thorough analysis in literature courses, specifically in high schools. I could not agree more, but they do not specify how to perform such an analysis. Passionate yet somewhat hollow qualifications such as “an intimate and colourful glimpse into one of the most difficult periods” (10), “beautifully sketched surroundings in which something spontaneously comes to life” (11), or “the images are very detailed and somewhat detached” (18), do not compensate for this lack, since the authors do not substantiate these statements.

These are problems that can easily be solved, given the existence of the website – why not create a supplement to the guide in which the theoretical and didactic issues are discussed? For the moment, however, let us welcome this initiative that does justice to graphic novels in the classroom, which will certainly contribute to making it more popular within educational institutions. And let us hope Willard Mans will turn out to be right in his assertion that reading graphic novels will make adolescents discover the pleasure of reading.

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