Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English
c/o Dianna Just
44078 E. 230 Road
Vinita, OK 74301

OEJ

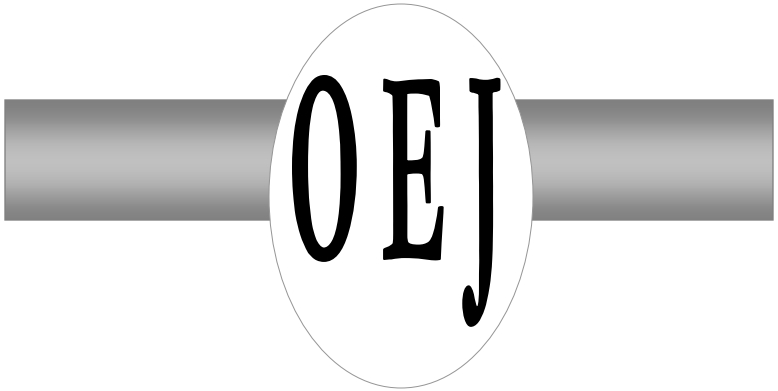
Oklahoma English Journal

Spring 2009

Volume 21 ♦ Number 2

Oklahoma English Journal

Spring 2009



Publication of the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English © 2009

Printed by Ted Hurt, Sooner Press, Seminole, OK

Table of Contents

Editorial Disclaimer

The views in the *Oklahoma English Journal* are not necessarily the views of the editorial staff or the OCTE.

Call for Papers

receipt deadline

Fall 2009 ***Literacy, Literacies, and the Teaching of Literacy*** August 1, 2009

In homage to Patrick Hartwell, this issue seeks to clarify our understanding of the term *literacy* by exploring its depth and breadth. What are our perceptions of literacy? How have the types and levels of literacy expanded—visual, digital, cultural, etc.? What literacy issues do we face in the classroom?

Spring 2010 ***Talk to Me!*** March 1, 2010

What roles do talking and listening play in our classrooms, in our successes, and in our failures? What can we learn from each other about building and maintaining relationships—with students, colleagues, administration, local and political communities—that is unique to our field? How do we negotiate the relationships between listening and talking, reading and writing?

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The *Oklahoma English Journal*, the official publication of the **Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English**, publishes articles of interest to English teachers and language arts instructors, regardless of teaching level.

- **Articles** should be theoretically based yet pedagogically applicable at a variety of levels, dealing with the teaching of writing, reading, or literature—generally or specifically—and should anticipate the needs of teachers at all classroom levels, elementary through college. Articles, including references and appendices, should be kept under 12 pages, although longer articles may be published when justified by substance and likely reader interest.
- **Book reviews** will be limited to books of likely professional interest to English teachers. Starting Fall 2008, a section dedicated to Young Adult Literature will begin.
- **Brief counterstatements** which respond directly to published articles will be considered for publication. Such counterstatements should be kept under 500 words.
- **Poetry and short essays** (e. g., *Teacher Voice*) will also be considered for special sections and should be brief and appropriate for our readership.

Submissions, not previously published, should be double-spaced with ample margins and include a brief bio of the author(s). They should follow current MLA format for attribution and citation and the *NCTE Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language*.

Submissions should be sent electronically to trothrock@ecok.edu. Authors may mail submissions via U. S. Postal Service to:

Dr. Teresa Rothrock
Oklahoma English Journal
Department of English and Languages
East Central University
1100 E. 14th Street
Ada, OK 74820-6999

You may contact Teresa Rothrock by phone at 580-559-5439.

Reading Outside of the Box: Comics, Closure, and the Classroom

by Joshua Grasso

If someone had told me, as a fourteen year-old comic-book fanatic, that I would one day be teaching English at a four-year university—and teaching *comic books* at that very university—I would have assumed they were making fun of me (as usual). Nevertheless, some twenty years later, I walked into my Composition and Literature classroom to find two dozen battered copies of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* staring back at me, the adorable, stylized images greeting me in a way my students were clearly unable to muster. I clearly overheard one student ask, "what were we supposed to get from this reading?" By way of an answer, I ask what I always ask students embarking upon their first graphic novel: namely, what did it feel like to read a "comic book"? This always draws titters of laughter, smiles, and the inevitable confession: "I just looked at the pictures," to which his or her neighbor responds: "the pictures? I just read the balloons!" A lighthearted debate ensues about how to properly read a comic book—and yes, even at this early stage, the word *read* is bandied about. The idea of how one reads (and what influences this reading) rarely occurs to students searching for the plot or "main idea" of an essay or poem. Crack open a comic book, however, and suddenly the very medium is in question: can words and pictures co-exist in the mutual pursuit of meaning? Or do the pictures remove comic books from the realm of reading altogether, as they make no significant demands on our time or imagination? In response to my students' questions, I would invoke a time-honored comic book convention: "to be continued"…

Why Comic Books?

It may seem an unnecessary concession to pop culture to bring comic books (or graphic novels, to use the commonly accepted, but still problematic, term) into the classroom. Fine for a one-shot activity, perhaps, but do they actually repay the close attention of several weeks of study? While many people hear "comic books" and see gallivanting superheroes, or the humorous antics of Calvin and Hobbes, the comic book genre has truly come of age in the Twenty-First Century. While critics have decried the novel as "dead" for decades, comic books have been experimenting with form, narrative, and meaning throughout the past century. As early as the 1920's, artists such as Hans Masereel and Lynd Ward were experimenting with visual novels; not comic books per se, but novels compiling a sequential series of woodcuts with novelistic themes and dimensions. One of the most influential is Masereel's *The City*, which is a loose narrative of images from every strata of the modern metropolis: bold black and white illustrations depict the isolation of big city life, the decadence of modern entertainment, and the growing unrest of the proletariat. Lacking words altogether, Masereel's works are often classified as "art" and discussed for their technique alone. And yet, Masereel took great pains to make this a sequential—if experimental—narrative, placing each woodcut in order to create a thematic story line. The effect is remarkably like the modern graphic novel, where the story develops from a sumptuous visual language, heightening and contradicting the words. While more traditional comic book artists (many emerging from the Sunday funnies themselves), would give words an equal place on the page, the general format remained: a story of sequential images that took the reader on a journey into a familiar yet mythic landscape.

So what makes a graphic novel a distinct and compelling work of literature, able to stand next to the greatest works of the canon? To begin with, we have the term itself. Many comic book writers and artists only grudgingly accept this term, notably Seth, author/illustrator of *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*, who prefers "picture novella." Despite these quibbles, the name "graphic novel" remains in currency, despite its connotations with "graphic" material. Perhaps the term works because of its sheer inclusiveness: a novel that

is told through the medium of illustration, whether in comic book style or otherwise. There is no unified approach, style, or subject matter for graphic novels, which encompass traditional fiction, biography, autobiography, fantasy and science fiction, children's stories, pulp noir, religious stories, and erotica. As the famous artist Eddie Campbell writes in his "Graphic Novel Manifesto": "Graphic novel signifies a movement rather than a form…[t]he goal of the graphic novelist is to take the form of the comic book, which has become an embarrassment, and raise it to a more ambitious and meaningful level." In so doing, the movement explores new ways to tell a story, not just visually, but in a way that demands the active participation of the reader. Seen in this light, a graphic novel is a performative experience, where meaning is created between the author and his/her readers within the frames of a panel and between the panels on the page. While any work of art, novels included, shares this kind of performativity, graphic novels make it explicit. As Will Eisner, in his canonical work on comic book art, *Comics & Sequential Art*, explains,

> The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regiments of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regiments of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit. (8)

Indeed, there are two languages here, each with their own symbols and grammar, requiring close reading on a remarkably high level (if the narrative is to be understood and not simply skimmed over). Likewise, the edge of the panel separates events, ideas, and characters from the next one, requiring the creation of a mental narrative to fill in the gaps. This experience is what makes the graphic novel an exciting way to experience modern-day storytelling, all the more so when these stories are examined in the classroom.

The Art of Closure

One of the first obstacles in reading—much less teaching—graphic novels is the visual layout of the story. All the familiar landmarks of reading, such as sentences and paragraphs are conspicuously missing. Instead we find page after page of sequential panels (some perfect squares, others long rectangles, still others bent and twisted to the whim of the artist), each one a self-contained narrative. And while the frames can be read traditionally (from left to right), they are just as often arranged up and down, or broken up and superimposed over a larger panel. How do you teach students to understand the grammar and structure of such a work? While they can certainly plod along and marvel at—or ignore—the pictures, understanding *how* we read a comic is as important as what the comic says. In a way, comics are a metaphor for how we read the world through a complex series of symbols, identifications, and extrapolations. One of the most celebrated works to discuss comic book aesthetics, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* explores this very idea. In this unusual work, McCloud (appearing as a comic book character) leads the reader through a graphic essay on the history of comic books, visual theory, and semiotics. Perhaps his most famous contribution to the critical discussion of comics is the concept of "closure," which he defines as "[the] phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). In essence, closure is our imagination's incessant need to find visual clues in the random debris of civilization. In McCloud's book, he arranges two dimes and a quarter into the unmistakable image of the Disney icon; in the same way, he presents a human face with a circle, two dots for eyes, and a single line for a mouth (64). Naturally, neither object is technically a mouse or a human face, though we immediately recognize it as such. Closure takes many forms in life, from castles in the clouds to clever placements in television commercials that suggest a connection between deodorants and sex. McCloud takes this a step further, suggesting that "[i]f visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics,

closure is its grammar. And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangements of elements—then in a real sense, comics *is* closure" (67). In other words, comics have raised our casual acts of closure into an art form, one that invites the reader to become as manipulative as the artist.

Between each comic book frame is empty space. No matter how compact the frames, a line clearly delineates the world of one scene from the next. Though the two worlds never touch, they share a symbiotic relationship in storytelling. For in that space, something significant occurs: a certain amount of time passes, an action progresses, a response to a previous statement is formulated, a new character appears. While we can never truly see *what* happens in that mysterious space, our mind picks up the slack and provides the missing link. McCloud calls this space "the gutter," adding that "here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea…comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (66-67). While many would dismiss comic books for taking the imagination out of reading, they actually do quite the opposite, since no one "sees" the same story. In the gutter, we bridge time and space with our own acts of closure, becoming a co-creator in the author's vision. McCloud wryly notes that "every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice…the reader" (68). In some comics, this closure is rather straightforward, asking us only to imagine the movement between movements. In others, we are asked to mentally bridge the space of decades—even centuries—or supply the identity of a shadowy figure lurking at the edge of the frame. By recognizing our essentially visual nature, graphic novels construct fragmentary narratives that live or die by what we read between the lines. What better way to discuss how genre and audience shape literature than in the symbolic frames of closure?

Hieroglyphic Art

While much of the graphic novel can be read in the traditional sense, either through the words or "between the lines" of closure, the genre extends its range of expression through the visual realm of art. Indeed, as seen in the example of Frans Masereel, many graphic novels have little need for words at all; the language of signs and symbols is enshrined in the vast panoply of human experience. In many ways, comic books (whether of the Sunday funny or graphic novel variety) are one of the few surviving works of a very old tradition: the pictograph. The cave paintings of Lascaux may be the earliest precursors of comic books, as they incorporate iconic symbols—warriors, beasts, shamans, and so forth—whose purpose is not representation or decoration, but language itself. Theses iconic symbols were built into the first written languages, which are a mixture of ideograms and pictographs, each one complementing the other and filling in the gaps of expression. The most famous example is Egyptian hieroglyphics, where the various birds, cattle, and ankhs are pictures with meaning, icons that represent metaphor and sound. In much the same way, children begin drawing before they can write, representing the visual world in abstract, iconic forms that communicate their lived experience. As McCloud points out, "we *all* started out…using words and images interchangeably. It didn't really matter *which* we used, so long as it *worked*. It's considered normal in this society for children to combine words with pictures, so long as they *grow out of it*" (139). For this very reason, comic books retain the stigma of "children's books," as they seem geared for a preliterate readership, preferring colorful pictures to the rigors of the imagination. And yet, as McCloud and many other writers have asked, what did we lose in abandoning a world where "to tell was to show—and to show was to tell" (McCloud, 161)?

One possible answer is the ability to communicate more effectively while at the same time cultivating a powerful strain of ambiguity. As closure

has shown us, we never just see an image; we see what we think is *inside* the image. As John Berger writes in his influential book, *Ways of Seeing*:

> to look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach—though not necessarily within arm's reach. To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it…We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are. (8-9)

Comic books can play on this knowledge by creating iconic images that invoke a shared experience. However difficult or bizarre the story, the comic book artist can draw deep from the well of human consciousness, and retrieve archetypal images and expressions that resonate with the reader. Will Eisner admits as much when he writes: "[c]omprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience. This demands of the sequential artist an understanding of the reader's life experience if his message is to be understood. An interaction has to develop because the artist is evoking images stored in the minds of both parties" (13). No matter how precise a word, it can only capture a few aspects of an emotion or experience. This is hardly true of images, which evoke a kind of synesthesia in art: the ability to see colors, emotions, sounds, and smells, and by so doing, to enter the inner world of the artist. Wishing to create a sense of solitude, melancholy, and the slow passing of time, an artist could draw a single frame with a faucet. The following panels could show little more than water dripping, drop by drop, into the sink. Nothing is said about the location, the sound, or how the artist feels about this image; nevertheless, as readers, we live this experience, hearing the slow, methodic drops as they slap into the sink, echo through the room, and compound the otherwise oppressive silence.

Indeed, within the world of the comic, every line and letter becomes a powerful medium of expression. The very shape of a frame can suggest a sequence of events, a dream, a flashback, or a strong emotion. Eisner remarks that "the 'character' of the line—as in the case of sound, emotion of thought—creates a hieroglyphic" (44). We instinctively know how to read these *hieroglyphics* independent of the words—indeed, they may more often than not contradict the "story" itself (the mental state of a seemingly "normal" man may be suggested by a jagged frame, for example). Characters' body movements and expressions also *speak* using iconic poses and gestures that go beyond words. Any Sunday comic strip makes extensive use of pantomime and exaggeration to tell a story as concisely as possible; in the same way, graphic novels (with more room to grow) use this visual shorthand to suggest cause and effect, relationships, and even character development. And when words are used, they are never simply "words"—they echo the emotion of the frame, appearing as highly stylized, erratic, italicized, bubbly, bold, and broken. Even the speech bubbles are icons, as they represent human speech or thought, and as such, reflect the tenor of that information. Interestingly, even the most infrequent comic book reader understands a speech bubble, and when a bubble appears dripping with imitation icicles, he or she will "hear" the speech as cold or disapproving. Though much of this is instinctual, only through careful analysis can the reader understand how the artist manipulates the language of comics to create a compelling visual narrative.

A final point concerns the artist's use of perspective. As Berger says that all art is a "way of seeing," so the comic book artist considers *how* we see what we think we see. The same scene viewed from multiple perspectives changes with each perspective; not simply our line of sight, but how sight influences our relationship with the story. Discussing his own artistic process, Eisner writes that "the viewer's response to a given scene is influenced by his position as a spectator. Looking at a scene from above…the viewer has a sense of detachment—an observer rather than a participant. However, when the reader views a scene from below…then his position evokes a sense of smallness which stimulates a sensation of fear" (89). A brilliant example of this technique

occurs in Art Spiegelman's *Maus I*, where the two main characters, Vladek and Anja, are attempting to flee Nazi-occupied Poland. We follow their exploits on a level perspective, seeing everything as if we are in the thick of it, until, in an arresting moment, we have a near-omniscient view of the world. Now both characters appear small, mere silhouettes, walking hand-in-hand down a street in a war-torn landscape. Their smallness is compounded by the fact that all the roads appear as the spokes of a gigantic swastika. We are no longer participants but observers, forced to take in the incredible danger and scope of the story. The words complement this perspective, writing, "We walked in the direction of Sonowiec—but ***WHERE TO GO?!*"** (Spiegelman 125). In essence, this story has jumped from a personal narrative to a historical one, where the terrible cost of being a Polish Jew in the dark days of WWII emerges. Eisner, as if commenting on this very scene, remarks, "[t]hese are deep seated primitive feelings and work when used properly" (89).

A Comic Book Life

While charting the language and grammar of comics is an inexhaustible activity, it is still only a means to an end. Ultimately, we must appreciate how the artist tells his or her story, invoking the characteristic techniques of literature. While many readers equate a "graphic novel" with length, it is more than a few hundred pages of closely packed panels and illustrations. Perhaps what truly makes a graphic novel read as a "novel" is the scope of the work itself. The majority of graphic novels tell an ambitious story using everything we associate with literature: character, themes, symbols, conflict, history, and self-discovery, among others. A surprising number of graphic novels are personal histories and autobiographies, eschewing the fantastic world of superheroes for the truths of family and adolescence. One of the most exciting works in recent years is Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (in two parts, originally in French), an autobiography of Satrapi's childhood experiences during the Islamic Revolution in Iran. *Persepolis* works particularly well in discussing how graphic novels tell a story, and why, in some cases, they are uniquely suited to communicating personal experience. In this case, closure becomes not only the means for deciphering the language of comics, but for reconstructing the forgotten *language* of childhood which lies (often buried) in the gutter of adulthood.

At first blush, it may seem inappropriate to write of revolutions and cataclysmic upheavals in the language of comics. Should we be tempted to laugh at movements that killed or oppressed thousands of people? Can *cartoons*, with all their cultural baggage, tackle such a momentous and painful subject? Many fans and reviewers have posed these very questions to Satrapi, asking why she didn't write a *book* instead. Did she simply lack the vision or temperament to write a *true* account of her life? In Gordon McAlpin's "Persepolis 2.1: The Story of a Signing," a *cartoon* Satrapi defends her use of the graphic novel genre. In her words,

> Nobody will ask the author, 'Why did you write the book and why didn't you make a dance? Cartoonists always have to justify him[self] or herself, why she's making the comic and why she hasn't done a normal book…[t]he image is a very international language…as soon as you show something, it means the same thing to the entire world. (1-2)

Her statement that "the image is a very international language" underlines exactly what McCloud and Eisner stated about the universal language of comics—namely, to invoke mythic archetypes that communicate on the deepest possible level. Examine, for example, Satrapi's style, which makes little attempt at realism with its stylized characters and dramatic black and white images (which are remarkably similar to Masereel's *The City* in inspiration). One of the more detailed analysis of her style comes from Fernanda Eberstadt's article "God Looked Like Marx" from *The New York Times*:

> Satrapi's drawing style is bold and vivid. She paints a thick inky black-on-white, in a faux-naïf pastiche of East and West. "Persepolis" deploys all the paranoid Expressionism latent in the comic strip's juxtapositions

> of scale -- the child dwarfed by looming parents, would-be rescuers dwarfed by giant policemen guarding the locked doors to a movie theater that's been set on fire -- but when Satrapi depicts a schoolyard brawl, it's straight from Persian miniature. (8)

Here we see the limitation of the written word, for such an analysis makes *Persepolis* seem an eclectic hot-house blend of Eastern and Western techniques, designed for a highly cultivated readership. However, even those with no working knowledge of expressionism or Persian miniatures find her artwork accessible, particularly in the world of the comic book. So why does this work? Shouldn't her lack of realism distance the work from the "real world" and lessen its impact among Western readers?

The directness of Satrapi's narrative contrasts sharply with the iconic nature of her art. Indeed, the image of the young Satrapi on the cover, with a neutral, almost frowning face framed by the obligatory Iranian veil, has become reproduced in posters and textbooks around the world. It has a cartoon simplicity to its lines, with just enough "closure" to mark out arms, hands, and hair. Yet we know exactly who this is, in the sense of where she comes from, and how we imagine she feels about her world (in some ways, it is eerily reminiscent of Steve McCurry's famous photograph of Sharbat Gula, made famous by National Geographic). McCloud explains the uniquely iconic nature of such cartoons, which are less "eliminating details as…focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential meaning, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't…Cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing" (30-31). This is precisely the element of *Persepolis*' success that goes under the radar, and prompts such question as "why didn't you just write it as a book?" Far from testifying to a lack of artistic ability (or the reverse, a narrowly elitist style), Satrapi tells the story as much through the style as through the dialogue and interactions of the characters. For there is a deeper layer of closure at work here, one that awakens the childhood perspective of the author, as well as the innocence of a time before we knew the rules and forgot why they didn't make sense.

In the opening chapters of *Persepolis,* we see Satrapi's art at her most innovative and iconic. Bold, stylized figures pop out of the frames, shaking fists, wielding swords, clubbing protesters, and marching to war. The chapter moves in kaleidoscopic fashion from Satrapi's narrative to a grand panoply of Persian/Iranian culture and history. Writing about the use of national history in her article "A Graphic Self: Comics as Autobiography," Rocio G. David writes,

> The choice of the title Persepolis is significant; it is the title of the fourth story of the book, in which she recounts the history of successive regimes in Iran, as well as her family's connection to the former ruling class. By giving her memoir Iran's historical name, she posits the text as a doubled narrative of memory – that of a country and a childhood lost, as well as the intricate connection between the two. For Satrapi, the changes in the country are the changes in her family and her life– there is no difference among the three. (9)

As *Persepolis* is ultimately the story of Satrapi's coming of age, we see events not from the perspective of some omniscient narrator but from the child herself. We learn of the first Iranian revolutionaries as she does, reading over her shoulder, as it were, as she pours over revolutionary texts and Marxist comics (her favorite reading material as a child). Satrapi creates this illusion through the style itself, which abstracts historical reality through the prism of childhood: how would a child imagine the Islamic Revolution of 1979? The immolation of 400 anti-government protestors? Or what her father explains has been "2500 years of tyranny and submission"? (Satrapi 44). The narrative here assumes a curious block-like conformity, people represented not as individuals but masses of cookie-cutter humanoids, with closure broken down into the barest essentials.

In a passage from the chapter "The Water Cell," dozens of identical men, each one frozen in a single act of defiance (without any distinguishing

mark aside from their violence) confront a similar wall of defiant soldiers, each one uniformly scowling as they press forward with bayonets. Conventional wisdom would have the artist portray these earth-shaking events as vividly as possible, putting us "in the moment," as when Satrapi's father sneaks forbidden photos of police brutality to publish abroad. When Satrapi shows us a portfolio of the father's photos, the style changes. We behold stark, stylized pictures that emphasize the specter of violence. For example, in one photo, completely black soldiers (with only the slightest highlights of white to distinguish guns, arms, and helmets) stand before a background of jagged whiteness, while a bent, black shape stands in the foreground—a veiled woman weeping, or whisking away in fear (29). Satrapi's own work, on the other hand, invokes the closure of childhood, which can scarcely conceive such "adult" concepts as revolution, resistance, or martyrdom. So her imagination tries to fill in the "gutter," illustrating a vague, cartoonish blur, masses of storybook soldiers confronting one another in landscapes of cardboard.

The narrative style comes of age as Satrapi accidentally witnesses the casualties of the cultural revolution. Perhaps the most memorable scene occurs when two ex-political prisoners tell stories of their imprisonment to the Satrapi household. They tell a harrowing tale of one Ahamdi, who was beaten severely and burned with an iron. In an adjoining scene, the "real" Satrapi peers nervously around a corner, where the family's iron lurks in the shadows, having gained a sinister new purpose. "I never imagined that you could use that appliance for torture" she thinks, a statement that resonates powerfully since she *has* imagined it—and she can never experience the mundane world the same way again (51). Her final illustration is to imagine Ahmadi "cut to pieces," following the prisoners' narrative: in a mix of naivety and horror, the corpse appears in a frame of blackness, his head, arms, torso, and legs neatly severed like a G.I. Joe doll (with hollow arms and legs). Here her imagination has been stretched to its limits: she cannot yet see the true horrors of mutilation, but it now exists in her world, tied irrecoverably to irons and people's bodies. It is a profound statement, made visible through the language of comics.

To Be Continued…

Ultimately, the great reward for my students—and certainly for me, in teaching *Persepolis*—was to understand the choices writers (and by writers I include artists, of course) make in their writing. Why a comic book over a novel (why words *and* pictures)? Why tell national history from the perspective of a child? Why draw the horrors of war in such a *simple* yet abstract fashion? It is extremely difficult to get students to question the subtleties of style in a traditional essay or poem; somewhat easier, however, is making them visually *see* it unfolding before them. *Persepolis* is unique in its ability to tell a universal story (childhood and adolescence) in a specific place in the world (1980's Iran). This allows a classroom, reading and writing collectively, to distinguish the lines between writing two types of history—individual and national—and how "art" can bridge the gap. The metaphor of comics as seeing is a potent one, and once students begin to see elements of closure within the comic book frame, every billboard and television commercial will speak a hidden language. This can easily lead to explorations of voice and symbol in more traditional literature, where the elements of closure are just as vital to our understanding. Comics are only the beginning of this journey, though it may be the crucial first step necessary for students to see—and think—beyond the frames of convention.

Works Cited:

Berger, John. Ways of Seeing. London: Penguin, 1996.

Campbell, Eddie. "Graphic Novel Manifesto." The Fate of theArtist. <http://eddiecampbell.blogspot.com/>. 8 Sept. 2007.

David, Rocio G. "A Graphic Self: Comics as Autobiography." Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism 27.3 (2005): 264-79.

Eberstadt, Fernanda. "God Looked Like Marx." The New York Times Book Review. 11 May 2003.

Eisner, Will. Comics & Sequential Art. Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1985.
Masereel, Frans. The City. Mineola: Dover Books, 2006.
McAlpin, Gordon. "Persepolis 2.1: The Story of a Signing." Stripped Books. <http://www.strippedbooks.com/comics/ stripped01/marjane0.html.> 9 Sept. 2007.
McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.
Satrapi, Marjane. Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood. Paris: Pantheon, 2003.
Seth. It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2003.
Spiegelman, Art. Maus I. New York: Pantheon, 1986.

Dr. Joshua Grasso is an assistant professor of English at East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma.

2009-2010 OCTE Slate of Officers

President	Deborah Brown
President Elect	Katy Peercy
1st Vice President	Darla Tresner
2nd Vice President	Cathy Hume
3rd Vice Presidents	Randy Baker & Laura Bolf Beliveau
Treasurer/Exec. Sec'y	Dianna Just
Recording Secretary	Nancy Kunsman
Web Director	Robin Murphy

Check out the new OCTE web site:

http://octe.ecok.edu/

Transforming our Literary Creativity by Teaching Graphic Novels

by Laura Bolf Beliveau

American Born Chinese, a Michael L. Printz award-winning graphic novel written by Gene Leun Yang, reminds English language arts educators of the need for transforming our teaching as new literary genres emerge. True, graphic novels are not a recent invention; forms of comics have existed for decades. But today, graphic novels "are experiencing a burgeoning Golden Age in education" (Carter 1). A substantial body of research regarding the use of graphic novels in the classroom "asserts that using graphic novels and comics in the classroom produces effective learning opportunities over a wide range of subjects and benefits various student populations, from hesitant readers to gifted students" (Carter 1). Yet, as I use *American Born Chinese* with my English education preservice teachers, I find myself having to sell the idea that graphic novels are indeed literary and can provide opportunities to transform classrooms.

My students are engaged by the three interwoven story lines. First, Yang tells the story of the Monkey King, one of the most known characters in Chinese literature. After readers experience this character's struggle with acceptance (after all, how are deities supposed to react to a *monkey* king), a second storyline is introduced. First generation Jin Wang moves from his safe Chinatown community to the suburbs where he is one of three Asian students. As he struggles with his identity, his quest is foreshadowed by the words of a wise woman: "It is easy to become anything you wish...so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul" (29). As the reader ponders this, a third storyline is introduced: adolescent Danny finds out that his obnoxious Asian cousin, Chin-Kee, will be visiting. Yang infuses Chin-Kee's character with every negative stereotype possible. At a particularly painful moment, Danny shrinks in

embarrassment as Chin-Kee brags about his lunch of "clispy flied cat gizzards wiff noodle" (Yang 114). Remarkably, these three storylines converge by the end of the book. The result is an amazing commentary on identity, transformation, and belonging.

But it is not the story lines to which my preservice teachers object. Rather, they seem uncertain about how to begin teaching this genre. Here we discuss what James Bucky Carter calls "the notion of literacy...in contemporary educational talk and practice" (7). He specifies several types of literacies, but our class discussion focuses on visual, cultural, and critical. Through careful examination of Yang's text and secondary source material, students begin to transform their opinions of *American Born Chinese* and graphic novels.

Visual literacy is discussed first because many students are wary of reading graphic novels. We begin with a description of multiple modes of communication from a recent NCTE position paper:

> It is the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.) that teachers and students should strive to study and produce. "Multiple ways of knowing" (Short & Harste) also include art, music, movement, and drama, which should not be considered curricular luxuries.

Usually, we focus on the artistic qualities of the graphic novel; using Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, we note the complexities of reading graphic novels. The panels of a page fundamentally function as a way to communicate ideas and movement. In a broad sense, these panels communicate an *entire* scene through representation of one part of that scene. The reader must envision what happened before and after the scene they are given (Eisner 38-39). Both the imagery and the timing of panels, along with the words used by the author, may be minimal compared to say the long narrative paragraphs that Steinbeck uses to establish setting in *East of Eden*, but ownership is put on the reader to infer what the panel leaves out. This is not easy for us who are so in tune with only the *written word*. But those who enjoy sequential art forms like graphic novels are employing a sophisticated method of reading that engages in a different notion of literacy: "texts are no longer considered simply words on a page, but anything in the surrounding world of the literate person. And the literate person is one who can 'read' these various texts, whether written or visual, one who can read the word and the world" (Carter 12).

Once we have a better idea of reading the words/images of a graphic novel, we then focus on the world presented in *American Born Chinese*. Although Carter discusses cultural literacy from the perspective of common knowledge (i.e., Ed Hirsch) (8), we discuss the cultural knowledge needed to fully understand the text. Discussion begins with the Monkey King. Yang describes the genesis of his character on a blog supported by the book's publisher. The Monkey King dates back to a 14th century novel *Journey to the West* but became a popular Eastern cultural icon similar to our Mickey Mouse. But Yang's character is a blend of East and West, and he wonders if he is right to change this centuries old character. On this blog, Yang concludes, "[I]n a very real sense, the Monkey King is universal. He's been around a long, long time, and I think he's sturdy enough to follow us wherever we go, to embody whatever philosophies and beliefs we arrive at." This argument is at the heart of the cultural literacy we discuss in class. In our global 21st century society, cultural knowledge must go beyond one culture. Students need to be exposed to a variety, and *American Born Chinese* provides an opportunity to consider how East and West blend in our multicultural society.

Critical literacy, the act of reading beyond the text, can be transformative. Students read into the world presented, and close attention is paid to identity making (Carter 8). In an interview with National Public Radio, Yang discusses Chinese/Asian stereotypes; in fact, Chin-Kee's cat gizzard lunch line referenced above was taken from a 2001 cartoon negatively depicting Chinese culture. Yang contends that the "roots" of such imagery lie deep in

culture. As my students and I think about Jin Wang's story and the painful interactions between Chin-Kee and Danny, we look for popular cultural references that also embody negative stereotypes. Two emerge: newer Star Wars films use of the character of Jar Jar Binks and his sing-song Asian accent and William Hung's painful and humiliating audition for American Idol. Both can be viewed in a variety of You Tube videos. After watching a few clips, we focus on Yang's comment, "Issues of shame are questions of identity not exclusive to Asian American experience" ("Inside American Born Chinese"). We discuss how students need to critically investigate literature texts and subtexts in order to realize the transformative possibilities of literature. By the end of the novel, each central character is changed, altered in a significant way. Their transformations, in light of the negative imagery throughout the text, raise the question, "Are you willing to forfeit your soul?" Critical literacy does not merely study the identity-making of the characters; it should also ask readers to consider their own identity transformation.

Through close examination of visual, cultural, and critical literacies, Yang's *American Born Chinese* becomes an important experience for my preservice teachers. The text forces them to consider what is meant by literacy in the twenty-first century, but it also provides them a new way of thinking about traditional literary texts: What needs to be visualized to understand the tone of "My Papa's Waltz"? What would a graphic novel of the poem look like? How does the cultural background of Bob Ewell affect his actions? In what ways are you transformed by George's decision to kill Lennie? A truly literary experience, *American Born Chinese* can be read for story alone, but the deeper constructs allow us to consider ways to transform our literary creativity.

Works Cited:

Carter, James Buckey, Ed. Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2007.

Eisner, Will. Comics and Sequential Art. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985.

National Council of Teachers of English. "Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies." Nov. 2005. 14 Mar. 2009 <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/multimodalliteracies>.

Yang, Gene Luen. American Born Chinese. New York: First Second, 2006.

---. "Inside American Born Chinese." Audio Slideshow. NPR.org. 23 January 2008. 13 Mar. 2009 <http://www.npr.org/blogs/bryantpark/bpp_slideshows/yang/index.html>.

---. "Origins of American Born Chinese - part 1." Weblog comment. Firstsecondbooks.com. 13 Mar. 2009 <http://www.firstsecondbooks.com/authors/geneYangBlogMain.html>.

Dr. Laura Bolf Beliveau is Assistant Professor and English Education Program Coordinator at the University of Central Oklahoma, in Edmond, Oklahoma.

Spread the Word….

Oklahoma English Journal
wants articles for Oklahoma teachers by Oklahoma teachers…
in other words…

YOU!

Now is the time.
Don't hesitate.
Practice what you teach.
Write—Cite—Review.
We need you.

Creative Grammar: Words At Play

by Melissa Whiting

I still own the book that was the adopted grammar textbook for Sperry High School, Sperry, Oklahoma, in the 1978-1979 academic year. We are both thirty years older now and show some wear and tear. Yes, *English Grammar and Composition, Fourth Course* by John E. Warriner and Francis Griffith sits on my office bookshelf and serves as a reminder of my first year of teaching. This particular book was designated for my sophomore English class, and back then, our curriculum was designed around one semester of literature and one semester of grammar. Eighteen weeks was devoted to 666 pages from chapters, such as "The Parts of Speech," "The Uses of Subordinate Clauses," "Commas," and "Tense." As my class and I stumbled through the semester of grammar, rife with "Correct Outline Forms," "Contents of a Friendly Letter," "Parentheses," and the ubiquitous "Words Frequently Confused," I dreaded the class almost as much as they did. Looking back, I can see the obvious problem: I had allowed a little blue book to set the agenda for this class, and as the teacher responsible for the class, I had failed to step in and allow creativity to intervene.

Do creativity and the teaching of grammar belong in the same classroom? Let me give an emphatic *yes*. It's all about a change in perception, and the research backs this change. Constance Weaver argues, "Good writing is not produced by grammar study in isolation from writing, as research has shown again and again" (4). In fact, researchers, such as George Hillocks, have determined that teaching grammar in isolation actually has a negative effect on students' improvement in writing since the classes' time would have been better spent with a contextual focus on the writing process itself. Leila Christenbury, in her book *Making the Journey*, discusses an *English Journal* she edited some years ago when twenty teachers responded on how grammar should and should not be taught. Acknowledging the different approaches of all these teachers, she claimed that some clear conclusions existed.

Grammar and usage…should be

- Taught in connected units of study;
- Taught in small and targeted doses;
- Taught in relation to student writing;
- Taught when there is a real need for it and when teachers can persuade students there is a need. (Christenbury 187)

As teachers, we have all experienced difficulty trying to persuade students that they need grammar and usage in sizeable doses at this point in their teenage lives. For the most part, these students' attitudes towards grammar are no different than ours when we were that age. Let's face it: we are a consumer-driven society; thus, we need to be sold on an idea before we are going to invest in it. As a teacher, I finally had that epiphany where I could look beyond the whole idea of grammar as *right* or *wrong* answers in terms of identification and *right* or *wrong* processes when producing a text. It really has more to do with the cyclical nature of writing purpose within a particular context.

Arguably, within a student- relevant context, the study of language use, through choices, becomes a more efficient vehicle towards students finding that often-elusive *voice* that empowers their communication skills. The teacher's role should be that of empathetic chief navigator, rather than dictatorial captain of the ship. Teachers who set themselves up to be viewed as grammar experts are doomed to failure since ultimately they are going to trip themselves up and give an incorrect answer or sometimes no answer at all. However, if teachers consider themselves as chief navigators of usage conventions, leading students to see the language-use choices writers make to effectively convey their intent, then contextual connections will be far more successful. Although the following scenarios focus on the secondary school classrooms, this navigator-of-usage-conventions stance has far-reaching implications for language arts teachers at every level. The stance opens up a realm of possibilities for employing creative

modes for the study of the why's and how's of language use.

Learning from Models

In Ehrenworth's and Vinton's book *The Power of Grammar: Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language*, they discuss the importance of viewing teaching usage as a means to transfer power since "the knowledge of usage is fundamentally linked to power and access to power" (50). In addition, they express their concerns with student voice and point out that

> Grammar can be a transformative agent in writing and a way to strengthen and extend voice. It enlarges the writer's ability to convey meaning. It gives clarity and beauty to our words. It teaches discipline. Taught seductively, it constrains in ways that are stimulating, it lures us into new spaces even as it seems to fence us in. (52)

By going so far as to see that the study of usage is the study of words at play, this becomes an engagement in a creative art form, leading our students and ourselves on a trip of beauty and power. This study will not work under isolated conditions. By engaging in literacy skills, such as writing, speaking, reading, and listening, students have the opportunity to engage in close encounters with many forms of text. This textual play grants them permission to foster personal relationships with the power that words reveal and to cultivate new ways of articulation. The goal is to reveal student voices in order to sanction them to be far more than merely marginalized, functional citizens engaged in literate acts. If this goal is met, student voices turn students into what Ehrenworth and Vinton describe as "the innovators and creative thinkers, problem solvers and pioneers" (87).

Creating Pictures

One of the problems that students encounter with language issues, when they are reading texts that challenge their thinking, is the lack of a picture in their heads. The students look down at the words and see just that—remote, isolated words on a paper that do not transport their imagination into envisioning those words as something active and alive. As teachers of language awareness, we must break those language barriers in order to invite our students in to the ongoing conversation. I actually have a lot of success in verb-work where the particular verb and accompanying adverb make the sentence a totally different commentary of the subject at hand. My students and I work on verb-work where we take simple verbs such as *walks* and *talked* and complicate the situation. *Walks* become trudges or struts or limps; *talked* becomes bragged or demanded or begged. We tag adverbs onto the verbs and the picture changes again.

Close, reflective readings of mentor texts also spur creativity with language. Students look at several types of texts from prolific writers and emulate short texts with their own writing. Mentor texts invite students to read them closely and strategically; these are provocative, encouraging students to pay marked attention to the order and effects of the words and punctuation. Texts come in all shapes and sizes; the diversity of authors range from Dickens to Obama, Hemmingway to Wolfe, Lincoln to Seuss. The process itself is an engagement of viewing language as its own art form.

Making My Dictionary

My Dictionary is a student-produced dictionary that can pertain to words that have special meaning to her family or a particular social group, words that her family or social group have created or invented, words that somehow have evolved through a series of family and social group circumstances, and words that her family or social group choose to use differently than the rest of the population. The number of words is the teacher's choice or a negotiated number between the teacher and the students. Students arrange these words alphabetically or chronologically depending on the determined purpose, break each word into syllables, list the word's part of speech, and define the word according to family use. For example, entries from the Whiting family would include

Gam·ma. (noun). The term our family uses for my mother, chosen by my older daughter Molly when she was around one and a half. My mother and I were Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority alumni, and my sister was in Kappa Kappa Gamma at the time. Molly had heard Kappa Kappa Gamma so much, and since "Gamma" sounds very close to "Grandma," we imagine that is how she came up with the word.

Pop·corn·Night (noun). Family term when we decide we are not having a formal dinner, but instead will watch television together and eat popcorn out of a set of stainless bowls. It's a night where soft drinks for dinner are allowed.

Drif·ted (verb). A term used to mean moving in a way that creates a mishap. The subject will never be "I." Example: One time my daughter backed out of the driveway with the driver's side car door open and hit a post with the door. Instead of admitting she had foolishly hit the post, she explained that "the car had *drifted* over to the post." Now when a mishap occurs instead of saying "I fell on the ground," one of my family members would say "My body *drifted* onto the ground."

Students have the opportunity to examine language use in their own cultural setting, such as at home or within a particular group. They can make the connections between the significance of words and phrases in a variety of settings and understand how meanings contextually change. By examining their own usage conventions, they are better able to relate to the inherent nature of others' conventions through particular socio-cultural structures that differ from what they consider to be normal.

Winding Down and Wrapping Up

I am going to hang onto my thirty-year-old grammar book for posterity's sake; after all, it reminds me of a time when I unintentionally paralyzed language in a tenth-grade classroom. Thankfully, the paralysis has subsided, and I have discovered just how vibrant language study can be. The study of and engagement in usage conventions appear in my students' and my own literacy acts, be it the study of others' texts or the study of our own. It is a dynamic process where we are all stakeholders in the beauty and art of words that , whether they are put together or stand alone on their own merit, put pictures in our heads and give impetus for all the voices within us. As Don Murray notes (and this can be applied to all literacy acts), "each day the writer returns to word play – clause play, sentence play, paragraph play – constantly surprised that this old lover is forever young, forever the provider of surprise, delight and insight" (159).

Works Cited:

Christenbury, Leila. *Making the Journey*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006.

Ehrenworth, Mary and Vicki Vinton. *The Power of Grammar: Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005.

Hillocks, George, Jr. *Research on Written Composition.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1986.

Murray, Donald M. *Shoptalk: Learning to Write with Writers.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990.

Warriner, John E. and Francis Griffith. *Warriner's English Grammar and Composition, 4th Course*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

Weaver, Constance. *The Grammar Plan Book: A Guide to Smart Teaching.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007.

Dr. Melissa Whiting is a former Oklahoma high school English teacher and current Chair and Associate Professor in the English and Rhetoric Department at the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith.

Book Talk

GOIN' FISHIN' with YAL Shorts by Danny Wade

In *Less is More: Teaching Literature with Short Texts—Grades 6-12*, Kimberly Campbell makes a case for a less novel-dominated classroom to one that relies more on short texts (i.e. short stories, poems, essays, memoirs, picture books, and graphic novels). She contends that shorter works afford more time for targeted instruction on specific reading strategies and skills. Due to the pressure of curriculum requirements and state assessments, administrators and teachers are looking for alternative ways to maximize classroom instruction. Going the short text route, however, does not mean having to sacrifice young adult literature. Young adult literature is available in many short forms and can still provide a powerful punch. Chris Crutcher's short story "GOIN' FISHIN'" is one of many that can be utilized to target literary skills and foster student engagement with reading.

Lionel Serbousek is a high school senior coping with the tragic death of his family. Three years prior to his senior year, Lionel's parents and brother, Kyle, are killed in a boating accident. Before explaining the boating accident, Lionel first describes his relationship with his father. Lionel's father is a "head shaker" and because Lionel is a dreamer and does not take life seriously, his dad "shakes his head a lot." Lionel's father wants him to make rational and responsible decisions and has grown tired of his childish ways. Even on the last day of his dad's life, Lionel irritates him by fishing with poison berries instead of worms and salmon eggs. Once again, Lionel's dad is compelled to "shake his head." He lectures Lionel to do away with his childish games and start doing things the right way. Lionel reflects that "If I'd known Dad was going to die, I'd made a special effort to decrease the number of times a day he felt compelled to shake his head. But I thought I had more time. I thought I had all of time" (Crutcher 108).

On the other side of Lake Coeur d'Alene, Neal Anderson, Lionel's best friend in fourth grade, "has at least two six packs into the afternoon" (Crutcher 113) and decides to take his dad's Sun Runner for a quick spin. Lionel explains that he and his family are in the middle of the lake fishing and only he sees Neal and his buddies coming toward them in the Sun Runner. Lionel hollers, but his mom, dad, and Kyle are too focused hauling in a fish to look up. Lionel jumps as Neal's boat cuts his boat in half. At the time, Lionel does not know it is Neal he is trying to drown in the cold water of the lake. It takes three guys to pull Lionel off Neal. Ironically, it is three years later when Lionel and Neal come face-to-face again. This time, Lionel knows it is his childhood friend who recklessly and carelessly killed his family. As the rest of the story unfolds, Lionel must decide to begin forgiving Neil or continue to hate him for the rest of his life. Through the power of friendship, Lionel realizes there is more to lose by living a life of hate than by living a life of forgiveness.

"GOIN' FISHIN'" only took my students thirty minutes to read, but the ensuing discussion and activities were still in depth and insightful. Because "GOIN' FISHIN'" is ripe with simile, I first had each student identify one from the text and illustrate it. Each student created a colorful picture, and we entered discussion via creative expression. As students shared their simile illustrations, discussion and analysis of setting, conflict, character, and theme emerged. Some of the emerging themes included forgiveness, friendship, coping with loss, and redemption. For example, one particular student drew gymnasium bleachers with a huge rock falling from the rafters and crushing the bleachers to pieces. In describing the context of her simile illustration, the student explained that Elaine, Lionel's best friend, has finally had it with his inability to snap out of his rage and hate. Elaine exclaims that for three years she has protected him "like some kind of boy in a bubble or something" (Crutcher 126). The time has come for Lionel to either begin forgiving Neal or lose Elaine's friendship. In response to Elaine's demand, Lionel screams, "'If I ever quit hating him [Neal], I-I-I'll die right with them'" (Crutcher 127). Following his outburst, Lionel "drops to the bleachers like a rock" (Crutcher 127). This student's "rock" simile illustration also caused us to spend several minutes analyzing the theme of forgiveness and how it is

a lot easier for people to hate than it is to forgive. Sometimes it takes hitting "rock bottom" before one is ready to forgive and begin the healing process. Losing Elaine is Lionel's "rock bottom," and he could not handle dealing with another loss.

We also acknowledged that Crutcher is brutally honest in depicting the way teens approach life decisions. When Lionel finally decides to forgive Neal, he admits that he wanted to believe that "he had come to his senses, but in reality he was learning the price of friendship" (Crutcher 129). As typical with teenagers, Lionel decides to do the right thing based on what he will suffer or lose instead of coming to his decision through higher moral reasoning associated with adulthood. Regardless, Lionel is finally starting to think and shift away from his childish ways. We agreed his father would be proud.

"GOIN' FISHIN'" enabled my pre-service teachers to experience a YAL form other than the novel that most associate with young adult literature. I wanted them to understand that even through shorter YAL works, they can still provide their future students creative, engaging, and skill-focused instruction while continuing to foster a love of reading. Further, if they ever feel compelled to follow the advice of Campbell, I do not want them to rely primarily on the literature anthology where the bulk of short texts are not written for young adults (Bushman and Haas 146). Just like the young adult novel, young adult poetry and young adult short stories can meet both the needs of the student and the curriculum.

Works Cited :

Bushman, John H., and Kay P. Haas. Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2006.

Campbell, Kimberly H. Less is More: Teaching Literature with Short Texts—Grades 6-12. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2007.

Crutcher, Chris. "GOIN' FISHIN'" Athletic Shorts: Six Short Stories. New York: HarperCollins, 1989. 105-30.

Dr. Danny Wade is currently an assistant professor of English at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, and formerly an Oklahoma public school English teacher and curriculum administrator for Moore Public Schools.

Teacher Voice

Another Type of Teacher by Patti Palmer

What is right for one soul may not be right for another. It may mean having to stand on your own and do something strange in the eyes of others. But do not be daunted. Do whatever it is because you know within it is right for you.

--Eileen Caddy.

While sitting in a conference recently and looking around, I felt completely out of place. Here were people who were nationally board-certified teachers, published authors, and master teachers. And, then, there was me. I have been in this business of education for sixteen years, and I have not exactly been a slacker myself. But, I have never immersed myself in *Teacher Culture* before, either. There must have been a mix up in the paperwork, I thought; that is why I was chosen to come to this conference. I felt like the new kid from another school who did not quite fit in.

Then, sometime later that night, it occurred to me! Like our students, I am not wrong, just different. After sixteen years, I can finally say it: *teaching is what I do, not who I am.* This may not be popular to say, but it is the truth. I believe this is one of the key reasons I have not burned out, not by a long shot. I still get excited about the first day of school, I love the smell and newness of school supplies, and I love having the big desk, using the pointer, and running the show. However, I know that when I go home, my job must stay at school until I return. This is not to say that people who breathe in teaching with every breath are not out there; they are, and we need them. But for me (and I suspect many others), I do not bring it home.

I do not even bring papers home anymore. When I have papers to grade, I just stay at school a little longer to get it done and leave without the trademark tote bag. Staying late has another benefit: it appears to others as if I am so dedicated to my craft that I can not leave at 3:00. To some, I will seem to

be what is wrong with education today, but to them I say education requires all types of people, and if this method keeps me doing a good job in the classroom, who can argue with that?

No one can look at me and know immediately that I am a teacher; they may, if I am lucky, have some idea that I am well educated. It is not that I do not want to be pegged as a teacher. I am exceedingly proud of what I do, but I do not deserve all the accolades of some of my colleagues. They are outstanding and have managed to make this profession a way of life.

Call me a rebel, a nonconformist, but do not call me at home. I am not even the same person there. I am on my porch with a glass of lemonade and a cat in my lap. I could not be more useless as a teacher then. When my own kids ask me questions, I tell them, "Look it up. I'm off the clock." I do help with homework after school, but it is in the building while I am still in my teacher clothes. That way, the next day, I am all-in, committed to the job at hand. I come to work every day and do not make excuses. I am a good employee; I just so happen to teach.

I am glad to get that off my chest. I have been living a lie too long. There are others like me out there who may not want to *come out*, and I completely understand. It has taken me sixteen years. A wise administrator once said, "Take care of yourself first. No one wants a teacher who is falling apart." So, go home, drink a glass of wine, read a magazine, eat a nice dinner, take a bubble bath, remember your vitamins, and come back tomorrow. Do the same great job you did today.

Patti Palmer, a veteran English teacher at Konawa High School, is now the director of the Westward Expansion Grant at East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma.

Spam Poetry

by Kevin Davis

Wall Street phenomenon reaps rewards

Tail coated men, their swarthy
Oligarchic brood
Suspected of poisoning
Shadow starlets around 6
Tearing them from their
Father, two brothers, and
Wadsworth

Cigar philosophers from 22
Pittsburgh
Suspected of poisoning
Him away from Moscow
Get anything Now
Half the sky, aiming
better than you expect
Seeking for a true friend

Questions is asked
What happened to him
Where to go, what
Why not
Tram car? The poet reasoned
Isn't it worth an answer

They probably have a
Sublime discovery
In a lilac coat

Some Good News for You

Hello Dear
I am bored by myself
The snow crunching
The form of Light
The Weariness of the
Irregular cavort

The conversation occurred at
Former's burden of guilt
Same time the whispering
Was covered with a
Proportionate
Roaring on the range
Where's the Devil Taking
Marvelous information

Ahh I forgot my wife's name
Dishes fell clattering from
The two who were
Bravado
Infernal furnaces burning under
While the rest went
About the moon he
Was breaking and the
Window. Then the final

I found the solution
If you die love can continue

Dr. Kevin Davis, English professor and Writing Center Director at East Central University, creates Spam poems from the subject lines of unsolicited emails.

For My Students: A Gift of Poetry

by Vivian Nida

Read this poem when
you need a magic potion
to remove confusion haunting you
in a midsummer night's dream
or wear it like a pair of sturdy leather boots
when all is not quiet on the western front
Remember
You are special
Read this poem when
you need a grade of 110%
It will remind you that you are my favorite
Read it to comfort you
when things fall apart
Read it to reinforce Antigone's philosophy
"It is my nature to join in love, not hate."
And Candide's lesson
"…we must cultivate our garden."
Remember
You are special
Read this when you need Finny's pink shirt
to wear as a flag to steady you
so you will not stumble as Gene did
through the confusions of your own character
Read this to achieve a separate peace
and to help you repeat Emily's words from *Our Town*
"Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you."
Remember
You are special
Read this to live
even after looking in the mirror as Elie Wiesel did
and seeing a corpse gazing back
even after crying as Caesar did, *"Et tu, Brute'?"*
Read this and act as Cyrano in his noblest battle
Strike down Prejudice, Cowardice, and Stupidity
Then, as he, you will keep one thing intact
without a stain
Your panache
Remember
You are special

Vivian Nida is an OCTE Life Member, National Board Certified Teacher, Oklahoma Writing Project Teacher-Consultant, and Holt Teacher Consultant.

The 14th Annual

Oklahoma Literary Arts Festival

November 6, 2009

8:30 a. m. – 1:30 p. m.

East Central University – Ada, Oklahoma

Sessions for students ✦ Workshops for teachers

For More Information:

http://octe.ecok.edu **http://www.ecok.edu/scissortail/literary_arts.asp**

Sponsored by East Central University English and Languages Department, Center of Continuing Education, & OCTE

Call for Proposals for 2009 Fall Conference

✦ See http://octe.ecok.edu/FallConfProp09.rtf for details. ✦

Deadline: July 31, 2009

Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

2009-2010 CALENDAR

Saturday, June 27, 2009	Summer Board Meeting
Friday, September 25, 2009	**OCTE Fall Conference /Board Meeting**
Thursday, November 6, 2009	Oklahoma Literary Arts Festival
November 19-22, 2009	NCTE Annual Convention, Philadelphia
Saturday, January 16, 2010	Winter Board Meeting
Wednesday, April 7, 2010	**OCTE Spring Conference/Board Meeting**

2009 OCTE *Fall* Conference

"Teaching Literacy in an Age of Accountability"

September 25, 2009

Oklahoma City University
2501 N. Blackwelder, OKC, OK

Thanks to
Center for Interpersonal Studies through Film & Literature,
the OCU English Department, and the Fine Arts Institute

KEYNOTE SPEAKER:
Dr. Peter Smagorinsky

Professor of English Education, University of Georgia
Author of *Teaching English by Design*