A BOOK REVIEW:

GRAPHIC NOVELS:
A FUN & CREATIVE WAY OF
WRITING AND READING

Reviewed by
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EVERYTHING GUIDE TO WRITING GRAPHIC NOVELS: From superheroes to Manga - all you need to start creating your own graphic works

Mark Ellis and
Melissa Martin Ellis

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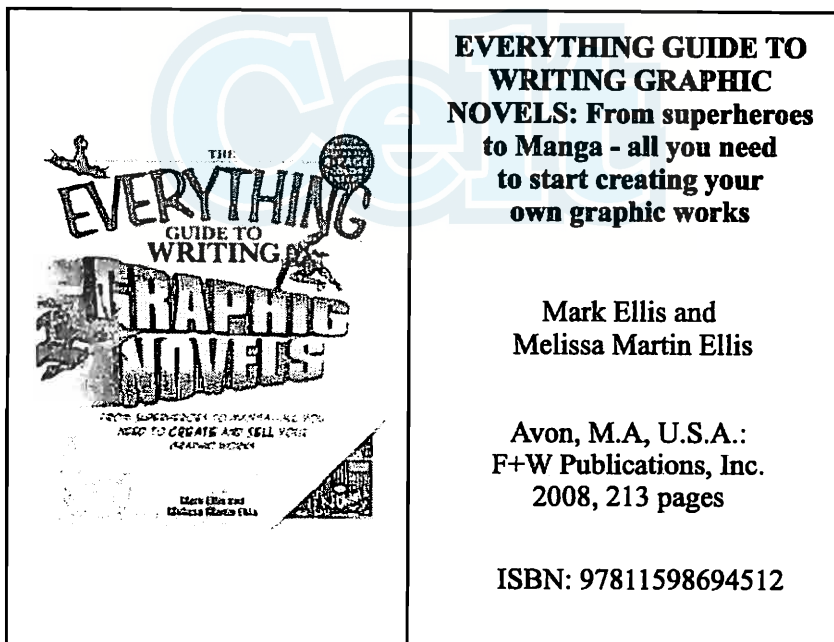
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The 21ˢᵗ century is marked for the vast development of digital media. If before, communicating with people from another country is reached by the sending of letters or making international phone calls, nowadays people can do all of those in one go with the internet. Whether it is writing to people or speaking to them, all can be done at once with a bonus of even seeing who and what the other end is doing. The chatting facilities of e.g. the Yahoo Messenger or Skype make it possible. Similarly, if before students would spend hours of research at a library to find and read books, nowadays some of those same books can be read digitally in their own homes. Yet, Nancy Frey exclaims: "Readers in the 21st century need to be able to analyze what they read and understand the motive of the author and the accuracy of the reading. They need to see themselves as active users, not merely vessels to be filled" (in http://www.educationworld.com /a_curr/profdev/profdev105.sht ml, 2010). To do this, the traditional method of giving books to students to read either inside or outside the classroom, is a fact not to be argued. The problem is, with numerous instant facilities that a student can have now, may make them not patient enough to sit for long hours reading the pages and pages of books assigned by a teacher.

With regards to that condition, it is interesting to note Stephen Cary, a second language learner specialist and author of *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom*, who says that it is important to write "good stories" that "make sense". He explains:

> Seasoned writers know that making sense depends on cohesion and coherence. Each sentence in a story must logically link to the next (cohesion) and ultimately, all sentences must add up to a meaningful whole (coherence). Emerging and inexperienced writers may be unaware of the need for both elements. Other would-be writers may understand the need for cohesion and coherence, but not have the skills -- or the language -- to

> ensure their presence in a narrative.
> (http://www.educationworld.com/acurr/books/books
> 06b.shtml, 2010)

An idea that Cary introduces in his book is the practicing of cohesion and coherence by working with comic strips that are missing one or more of its panels. During panel construction, students would consider a number of items related to cohesion-coherence, which includes topic (subject matter flow) and character continuity (trait maintenance) joke template (setup, elaboration, punch line), pragmatics (socioculturally appropriate forms), tense forms (throw versus threw versus will throw), temporal conjunctions (before, after, when), temporal adverbials (now, two weeks ago, someday), collocations (baggy pants, versus big pants), lexical chains (shoppingmallstore), and antecedent-referent clarity (Lola ate the apple. She ate it.) This means to say that comics seem to provide authentic language learning opportunities for all students. The dramatically reduced text of the comics makes it manageable and language profitable for even beginning level readers. Consequently, reluctant readers can be motivated to increase their comprehension skills and visual literacy. More and more teachers are finding that once-maligned comics, and their big brothers graphic novels, can be effective tools for teaching a multitude of literacy skills to students with a variety of learning needs. Citing Stephen Cary, Linda Starr notes:

> The brain has little time for nonsense. It's a meaning-maker, constantly searching for patterns, connecting bits of new information to old, fashioning wholes from parts and parts from wholes. It's also shamelessly self-centered. The brain makes sense of the world in terms of personal learner needs. Relevant curriculum attracts and engages it....For a number of reasons -- the humor, heroes, movement, pop culture themes, real-world language, novelty, and perhaps, above all, artwork --

comics consistently engage students. (http://www.educationworld,com/ a_curr/profdev/ profdev105.shtml, 2010)

In other words, because the brain has its limitations, when teachers use comics in their teaching, students could attend to the reading and writing activities more and their learning accelerates. Thus, if before there may be the understanding that reading comics is not academic because only lazy students tend to choose this rather then reading a long narrative from a novel, new findings suggest that comics can become an important medium of literature learning in the classroom.

As proof, the International Reading Association (IRA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the MarcoPolo Education Foundation in U.S.A. has offered 18 lessons that use comics to teach such skills and concepts as narrative structure, genre, popular culture, homophones, characterization, even math and poetry, to students in kindergarten through high school. Also the New York City Comic Book Museum offers a complete English curriculum built around comics. Created by Dan Tandarich, a fifth grade teacher in Brooklyn, New York, "C.O.M.I.C.S. Challenging Objective Minds: An Instructional Comicbook Series" focuses on using comics to teach reading and writing to students in grades 5-10. Accordingly, Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, California high school teachers and the authors of *Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School*, say graphic novels -- short novels done in the medium of comics -- also can be an effective means of teaching struggling adolescent readers. "We like to use graphic novels to teach comprehension skills, especially inferencing," Frey (2010) told Education World. Frey continues to state that "Struggling readers have often been told for years that inferencing is about "reading between the line"-- an explanation that often creates more confusion for the reader.

Based on the background above, books on how to teach graphic novels is booming. One such book is Mark Ellis and Melissa Martin Ellis' *EVERYTHING GUIDE TO WRITING GRAPHIC NOVELS: From superheroes to Manga - all you need to start creating your own graphic works*, published in 2008. The authors, Mark Ellis is a novelist and freelance writer whose work has appeared in dozens of publications over the years. His graphic novel and comic book credentials include *Justice Machine, Death Hawk, Doc Savage, The Wild, Wild West, and H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu.* Meanwhile, his wife, Melissa Martin-Ellis is a graphic artist, photographer and writer. She served a three year stint as the art director of Millennium. Together they break down the graphic novel creation process into easy to follow steps, from the creation of memorable characters, intricate storylines, how to illustrate, lay out, and design panels that pop out the dialogues, and even to how to market and promote the product. Mark and Melissa Martin Ellis show how to take the ideas out of one's head and put them onto the page as an important matter. They basically show readers the ropes of the graphic novels industry.

Unfortunately, in the guide book, the authors lay a little too heavily in promoting their own comic books with the lavishly illustrations of more than 100 drawings, which features the full-color examples of Mark Ellis's distinctive graphic style. There are also too many samples of the Marvel and DC comics style that it may not be so great if one is planning to make an Asterix type of graphic novel. Nevertheless, the guide book has successfully shown that writing a graphic novel is not all just fun and games, but it does take on a serious working of not only the drawings but the script writings.

As a lecturer in the Faculty of Letters, I have made use of the book's Chapter 1: How Graphic Novels Came to Be, to explain about the background of graphic novels and how it comes into the area of a popular culture study. As with any other popular culture product, the interest of people may change through time, and thus if nowadays the

Manga comics example from Japan is a popular one, it becomes understandable for why the Americanization of superheroes used to be a great hit during the Depression period of the U.S.A.

The Faculty of Letters in Soegijapranata Catholic University of Semarang, in Indonesia has students who deal with the area of literature, linguistics and the teaching of English language. Coming from that background, Chapter 3: Developing the Concept, Chapter 4: Genres Galore, and Chapter 5: Writing the Script becomes of special focus. After all, students in this Faculty should have innovative ways in expressing their thoughts into grammatically good English type of writing that is accompanied with the plotting of a well-organized story. The process of short story writing, then the panel script writing with the intricacies of detailed narration of what is to be put into each panel of the graphic novels, has become an intriguing activity. The script writing becomes a really important stage, especially if the plan is to write a 100 page novel. Knowing how to pace it and putting it in the right speed needs a good way of script writing.

A sample of the script writing from the graphic novel Death Hawk, with the breakdown, dialogue, and references to the existing art can be seen in page 126 of the book (read the script below). Mark and Melissa Martin say that the scripts are usually taped to the back of the actual art.

Panel 1: CYRE speaks to HAWK, Vanessa in b.g. Ref. Page 23, panel 6.

CYRE (1): "In some unknown manner it appears that Ms. Bouvier has absorbed the properties of the artifact."

(2): "In essence, she has become the artifact."

Panel 2: HAWK draws VANESSA to the stasis tube. Ref. Page 24, panel 3.

CAP (3): "Even my patience had its limits."

HAWK (4): "You can rest in the statis tube 'til we reach our destination.

(5): "My client can sort this out."

Panel 3: Ext.view of PROGENETRIX. The PREREGRINE approaches it, soaring between security satellites. Ref. Page 24, panel 5.

CAP (6): "Progenetrix, the world housing the Biotech corporation was the destination—

DEATH HAWK #2 Reference starts here.

Panel 4: HAWK shakes hands with CRANE. Ref. Page 4, panel 4. Fairly large panel, showing FREYA and the motto BUIDING A BETTER HUMANITY in the b.g. Lots of neg. space.

CAP (7): "And Biotech's CEO, Anton Chane, was my client.

(8): "Biotech builds Mimetic Extraterrana... known in local parlance as "ME"'s... they're up to series 7 now. They're synthetic people. Supposedly perfect people.

(9): "Everyone on Progenetrix looks like a god, and everyone there makes my stomach turn.

Once the script writing is done, the next equally difficult task is the drawing of the characters with the described settings and later on is the coloring itself, which needs special patience in producing an artistic one. Fortunately, the internet can be a big help, because the drawing need not all be done by the artist's hands but some characters can be download and modified using the Corel Draw or Photoshop computer program. It is, however, advised that copyright issues must be upholded. In the case of the panels positioning, students and teachers can download a program called *Comics Life*.

The guide book is really about everything. Not only does it take us to what things are required by the writer, but also the penciler, the letterer, the inker and the colorist. It even goes on to tell us what requirements are needed for cover designing, print production, storage and shipping, advertising, marketing and promotion, distribution and the legalities of creating a graphic novel.

Although once started, a graphic novel writer and artist can develop his/ her own creativity, Mark Ellis and Melissa Martin Ellis' *EVERYTHING GUIDE TO WRITING GRAPHIC NOVELS: From superheroes to Manga - all you need to start creating your own graphic works*, has definitely shown my students that the comics can be made more serious when transformed into a graphic novel. If in comics there may be more illustrations rather than the wordings, in a graphic novel the condition is vice versa. Writing a story has become more fun and more productive. The usually lonely individual task of writing can now be transformed to a result of good teamwork. Once made out, reading the novel with graphics has become more enjoyable. In creating a graphic novel, as a teacher, I find there are ample opportunities to get students to write in what may have been an inference activity. With Graphic Novels, students become more ready to talk about what may have been between the lines of their reading, too. I am happy to have found this guide book. It has inspired me to teach Graphic Novels course to my students, and fortunately, my students now have a better outlook of what else they can become when graduating from the Faculty of Letters!

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