

Borderlands

Worth a Thousand Words

BY JONATHAN HUNT

Consider these two pictures, one of Eleanor Roosevelt riding in a car with her husband and his mistress, the other of Yoko Ono in the studio with the Beatles. You immediately know things about the subjects of the two photographs. You may fill in some of the information with what you have already heard or read about Ono and Roosevelt, but much can be inferred from the emotions captured in these pictures—subtle, nuanced, and complex. You process the visual information quickly, in a fraction of the time it would take to read about it. An extremely skilled prose stylist could communicate all the information contained in the photographs, but not with the same degree of economy.

This is because we process print information sequentially—we can only read one word at a time. We process visual information simultaneously, however: a picture really is worth a thousand words. And because the digital age has bombarded us with a flood of information, there is a premium on communicating more with less. With the increased emphasis on visual literacy, it is no surprise that young adult literature with strong visual elements continues to proliferate at a rapid pace. The last two years (2006 and 2007) saw an unprecedented number of these titles, running the gamut from YA novels with some graphic elements to full-on graphic novels to—surprise—picture books.



pouch. No, I had a purple, blue, yellow, and black eye. It looked like modern art.

Then the white kids began arriving for school. They surrounded me. Those kids weren't just white. They were *translucent*. I could see the blue veins running through their skin like rivers.

Most of the kids were my size or smaller, but there were ten or twelve monster blades. Giant white guys. They looked like men, not boys. They had to be seniors. Some of them looked like they had to shave five or three times a day.

They stared at me, the Indian boy with the black eye and swollen nose, my going-away gifts from Rowdy. These white kids couldn't believe their eyes. They stared at me like I was Bigfoot or a UFO. What was I doing at Reardan, whose mascot was an Indian, thereby making me the only *other* Indian in town?



So what was I doing in racist Reardan, where more than half of every graduating class went to college? Nobody in my family had ever gone near a college.

Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. It was the opposite of me. I didn't deserve to be there. I knew it, all of those kids knew it. Indians don't deserve shit.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLEN FORNEY'S PART-TIME INDIAN



Most novels with graphics played to the middle-school crowd, but one of the very best—Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*—also had strong appeal for high school students. This funny yet poignant novel, winner of the 2007 National Book Award, chronicles Arnold Spirit's pivotal freshman year in both words and cartoons (the latter created by Ellen Forney). The cartoons, a subtle but integral part of the book, do not convey the narrative but rather offer up sly counterpoint. In contrast, Jeff Kinney's bestselling *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, which chronicles Greg Heffley's equally pivotal first year in middle school, features cartoon illustrations that actually further the narrative, a point underscored by its cover tagline, "a novel in cartoons." Novels with illustrations are nothing new—regardless of the degree to which the pictures are integrated—but the cartoons in these two novels take the humor and appeal to another level.

A couple novels of last year *did* feature something new in terms of visual material. *The New Policeman*, Kate Thompson's award-winning story of Irish magic and music, concludes each chapter with sheet music, transcriptions of Irish traditional tunes, the titles of which relate to the preceding chapter in some way. They are a brilliant addition: the musically literate can discern thematic connections between the text and the music, revealing a whole new set of possibilities for the term *intertextuality*, while for reluctant read-

ers the pages of sheet music make a fat fantasy novel much less intimidating.

The Invention of Hugo Cabret, Brian Selznick's innovative feat of bookmaking and storytelling, features illustrations and book design that seem to be an amalgamation of novel, graphic novel, picture book, movie storyboard, and silent film. It deservedly won much and diverse acclaim. First, of course, was its surprising win of the Caldecott Medal for most distinguished picture book. But it also won a spot on ALA's Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults list.

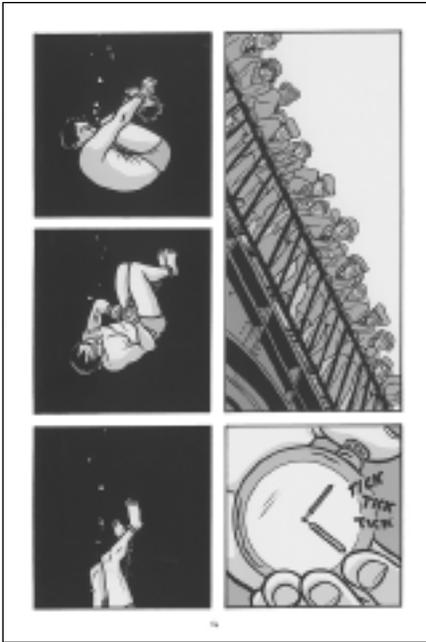
In 2006, it was not the announcement of the Caldecott Medal but rather the Printz Award that provided the high drama at the ALA Youth Media Awards when Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* nudged aside *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing* and *The Book Thief* to take the top prize. (Interestingly, the latter books both featured their own striking and dramatic visual elements: the transition in Octavian's life marked by his scratched-out penmanship and despairing ink blotches and, in *The Book Thief*, the section where Max's stories and pictures are rendered on painted-over pages of *Mein Kampf*.)

In retrospect, it shouldn't really be surprising that a graphic novel won the Printz Award. The graphic novel frenzy had been building for several years as mainstream publishers raced to embrace the medium of comics in order to satiate reader demand, often in the form of imprints devoted exclusively to the format. Roaring Brook's First Second imprint followed up the success of *American Born Chinese* with solid titles such as Gipi's *Garage Band*, Joann Sfar and Emmanuel Guibert's *The Professor's Daughter*, Sara Varon's *Robot Dreams*, and Nick Abadzis's *Laika*, while Scholastic Graphix released new installments of *Bone*, *Goosebumps*, and *The Baby-Sitters Club*.

A pair of new imprints debuted in 2007 with the hope of capturing female manga readers. Minx, an imprint of DC Comics, had a great pair of lead titles in *The Plain Janes* (Cecil Castellucci and Jim Rugg) and *Re-Gifters* (Mike Carey, Sonny Liew, and Marc Hempel), while Yen Press (an imprint of Hachette Book Group, the parent company of Little, Brown), in a bold move, released Keiko Tobe's *With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child* as their debut title. But the most exciting work of the year might have been produced by the collaboration between Hyperion and the Center for Cartoon Studies, which yielded an excellent pair of biographical works—

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More Pictures for
Older Readers



Jason Lutes and Nick Bertozzi's *Houdini: The Handcuff King* and James Sturm and Rich Tommaso's *Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow*.

Still, the latest crop of graphic novels did not produce a stand-out book—that is, not unless you include a couple of books that blur genre lines: picture books for older readers that made ALA's Top Ten Great Graphic Novels for Teens list. Indeed, *The Wall* by Peter Sís and *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan were unanimously praised as some of the very best books of the year. They were certainly the most visible picture books for older readers.

The Wall: Growing Up behind the Iron Curtain, which won both the

Sibert Award and a Caldecott Honor, showcases Sís's signature layering of text and images. It incorporates graphic novel elements in the use of panels to propel the story and also, in the melding of the personal and the political, recalls Art Spiegelman's touchstone graphic novel *Maus*. The memoir recalls his childhood and teenage years when he came to crave political freedom and artistic expression under an oppressive regime, a drive that is underscored by color (and the lack thereof), not to mention the three powerful closing spreads of the young Sís bicycling to freedom on the wings of his art.

In addition to being named a Top Ten Great Graphic Novel for Teens, *The Arrival* was also named to the Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults list. Using surreal imagery in a photorealistic style, with various sepia tones and a handsome book design that recalls an old family album, Tan masterfully evokes the immigrant experience by forcing the immigrant—and, by extension, the reader—to negotiate a foreign culture of strange symbols and images. Tan has acknowledged a debt to Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics*), but while the story clearly uses the medium of comics, it also features the drama of the page turn and feels similar in spirit to the wordless picture books, for younger readers, of David Wiesner and

Barbara Lehman. There was some grumbling when *American Born Chinese* received so much award attention, but *The Arrival* pushes the envelope even further. Can a wordless narrative be literary? It is a provocative question. I believe that, despite the absence of words, a visual narrative can be evaluated for plot, character, setting, style, and theme. I would argue for a broader, inclusive definition of *literary* that suits the information age we live in.

While *The Arrival* was ineligible for the Caldecott by virtue of the award's citizenship and residency requirements, it did win a similarly prestigious picture-book award in its native Australia last year, and one of the Australian honor books was another strong picture book for older readers—Margaret Wild and Anne Spudvilas's *Woolvs in the Sitee*. Both use language and vocabulary to disorient and confound readers. The absence of a recognizable printed language in *The Arrival* simulates total immersion in a foreign culture, while in *Woolvs*, the carefully limited vocabulary (with bizarre spellings) tells an ambiguous story of a young teen in crisis. This picture book demands that readers use their powers of inference to determine what is happening, whether it is really an eerily tense dystopian vision or simply the product of a deranged mind.

So far we have seen that the picture book form lends itself well to memoir, dystopia, and wordless narrative, but it is also suited to—and more commonly used for—poetry, nonfiction, and retellings. James Rumford's *Beowulf*, for example, deftly condenses the spirit of the original tale into a single-sitting reading, using words derived from Old English to mete out a stately cadence for the narrative while adding somber, dramatic ink-and-watercolor panels to capture pivotal scenes. The violence and atmosphere of the story make it more appropriate for—and more appealing to—older readers. Like many retellings, *Beowulf* is particularly useful in the classroom, and the right teacher could work magic with it, using it as a springboard to other versions of the story.

The same is also true of Laura Amy Schlitz's *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!*, which broke novels' nineteen-year stranglehold on the Newbery Medal. In the spirit of the most recent non-novel winners—*Joyful Noise*, *Lincoln: A Photobiography*, and *A Visit to William Blake's Inn*—this collection of dramatic monologues incorporates illustration and book design to enhance its fluid mix of drama, poetry, and nonfiction. But format alone does not a picture book make. *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* is an illustrated book, not a picture book—just as *Hugo Cabret* looks like a novel

but functions as a picture book. *Hugo* is indeed primarily “a visual experience” for a child, as the Caldecott criteria puts it.

In any case, these books—picture books and sort-of picture books for older readers—are at risk of missing their optimal audience. While many bookstores and libraries feature graphic novel sections teens can freely browse, there are no such areas for picture books for older readers, and thus they remain hidden from their most on-target audience. So it falls to parents, teachers, librarians, and booksellers to help these books find their readers. But it can even be difficult for *them* to find the books because of the murky age recommendations of publishers and reviewers. Publishers often adjust the age recommendation on picture books downward, as it would be foolhardy to market a picture book exclusively for middle and high school students—even if they were the best audience. Reviewers often revise the age recommendation upward to more accurately identify a book’s audience, but the disparity can be confusing.

It remains to be seen whether picture books can step out of the shadow of graphic novels, whether they can be marketed in such a way that they can reach an older audience without adult intervention. But it is very clear that the distinction between novels, picture books, and comics continues to blur as authors, illustrators, and publishers experiment with new forms. This, in turn, challenges critics and judges to evaluate their fundamental conceptions of what literature really is and how to assess its quality. There certainly does not appear to be a shortage of books to challenge this year’s award committees. *We Are the Ship* by Kadir Nelson has already received quite a lot of attention, and on the horizon sits the work of three Davids: *The Way We Work* by David Macaulay, an ambitious human anatomy book in the style of his *The Way Things Work*; and *The Savage*, an intriguing collaboration between David Almond and Dave McKean that promises to be a hybrid between a novel and a graphic novel. While a picture really *is* worth a thousand words, there is nevertheless great power in the written word: the symbiotic relationship between the two leaves us much to look forward to.

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