

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 42

Issue 1 *A Planetary Republic of Comic Book Letters:
Drawing Expansive Narrative Boundaries*

Article 18

9-20-2017

Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox. Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults. UP of Mississippi, 2017.

Carlos G. Kelly

Ohio State University - Main Campus, kelly.1327@buckeyemail.osu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Kelly, Carlos G. (2017) "Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox. Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults. UP of Mississippi, 2017.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 42: Iss. 1, Article 18. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1966>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox. *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults*. UP of Mississippi, 2017.

Abstract

Review of Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox. *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults*. UP of Mississippi, 2017.

Keywords

Comics, YA Literature, Narrative, Transmedia, Web-based comics

Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox. *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults*. UP of Mississippi, 2017. 359 pp.

Being the first of its kind should be enough to motivate the purchase of this collection of essays, but if it isn't, read further. This book is distinct from what has come before it, offering comics' contentious history not as the crux of where we are going, but merely as historical footnote to what is happening today. *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults* lays to rest the idea that comics and Young Adult (YA) fiction are lowbrow, evidenced by its stout collection of academic contributors. The introduction demonstrates the strides comics have made in a changing world. Consider how the new Marvel's *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* incorporates Miles Morales, an Afro-Latinx kid as Spidey, illustrating the power that comics and YA fiction have to break with the hegemonic stories of yesterday's nostalgia.

With thorough scholarship on display, one sees just how active this burgeoning field is and how much more academics, and the public alike, must heed it. Perhaps what the introduction does best is provide a map from where the reader may decide their path through the collection. The book contains five sections made up of twenty essays with acknowledgements, an introduction, and a coda rounding out the book's overall depth. Abate and Tarbox designed the book's architecture in order for readers to navigate according to their own interests, providing the necessary signage for a more efficient and comprehensive understanding. Rather than sit here and play spoiler, I will engage with a few essays from the collection.

In Karly Marie Grice's essay, "'What Is China but a People and Their (Visual) Stories?': The Synthetic in Narratives of Contest in Gene Luen Yang's *Boxers & Saints*," she posits that the contest of narratives does not seek a victor; it seeks the balance of opposing narratives, forcing the reader to actively engage in multiple perspectives in order to negotiate the clash between competing histories. Grice analyzes combative interpretations of narratives to demonstrate the complexity in recounting historical identities. Here, Grice introduces us to Scott McCloud's term "gutter," or the space between panels, which acts as a place of "magic and mystery," requiring a more active reader who "attend[s] to the construction of the narrative" (34). Readers of comics must be aware of competing narratives, but they must also manage comic arts' "several [layers] of tension, in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other" (35). Grice continually disproves the notion that comics serve no academic purpose.

Section two of the collection deals with essays that discuss "transmedia story telling . . . examples of hybrid comics . . . [and] graphic novels in adaptation" (10). In Aaron Kashtan's "Multimodality Is Magic: My Little Pony

and Transmedia Strategies in Children's Comics," he supplies the reader with the language to push their understanding, specifically, the language of transmedia storytelling and narratives, which can be experienced across multiple mediums. Kasthan states how children comic readers learn to hold "comics . . . as part of a large[r] transmedia narrative . . ." (115). He later references multimodality, "the simultaneous exploitation of the varying representational capabilities of different media," a process transmedia storytelling utilizes to assist "in building critical media literacy, especially among young readers," (116). Pause and quickly wonder why adult references and jokes exist within children's movies. According to Kashtan, this is not a phenomenon, but part of an overall marketing strategy aimed at children.

Miles Morales comes back from the intro of this collection as the subject of David E. Low's essay, "Waiting for Spider-Man: Representations of Urban School 'Reform' in Marvel Comics' Miles Morales Series." Low concerns himself with how school reform (a politically charged topic) appears within children's literature. He weaves analysis of charter schools with Spiderman, making concrete connections to the rhetoric surrounding school reform. For example: Rio tells her son that it is unlikely he'll win admission to a charter school that denies roughly 94 percent of applicants It is a far cry from the Scantron test item's "open to all students" claim, and more in line with the 7 percent, 5 percent, and 4.5 percent chances that students had of winning a lottery spot in Waiting for "Superman" (285). Through this essay, Low demonstrates how comics can be a tool to explore political rhetoric and to challenge it through multimodal representation/work. As a final teaser (spoiler), Miles waits at a school lottery, where students "win" placement into a charter school, and at the very end his number (42) is selected; Low speaks to the power 42 carries, but you'll have to read to find out.

With that let us consider a new frontier with Joe Sutliff Sanders's CODA, "Whether We Want Them or Not: Building an Aesthetic of Children's Digital Comics." Sanders claims that although the digital medium hosts more creative possibilities, many still format their work as if creating traditional paper comics, seemingly only taking advantage of the wider distribution criterion afforded to digital print. In Sanders's work he references Scott McCloud who states that "at the very least, a digital comic ought to take advantage of the unique 'canvas'" (336). At the beginning was the fight to deem comics worthy of study, but now a new fight has emerged, and that is whether we will continue to see paper comics or more digital adaptations and newly crafted digital comics. Sanders leaves us to ponder this idea, "for all the developments in the field of digital comics, especially digital comics for children, we are still pretty much where we started: not even sure that we really want them" (340).

Beyond its powerful contribution to comics and YA literature, this collection has the potential to move you. Whether you are a scholar interested in representative literature or a comic book buff, a teacher/parent seeking new education methods or an active artist—this book is for you. As an adult you will no doubt engage in these newfound mythos, but don't tread these waters unprepared; consider this book a guide into understanding the complexities that comics/YA literature offer readers.

Carlos Gabriel Kelly
The Ohio State University