

Comics Go to College

Check Out
our Graphic
Scholarship
Collection

The once humble
'funnies' have evolved
into a sophisticated and
diverse method of
sharing knowledge,
one frame at a time.

BY GINNIE GRAHAM



Stewart Brower, OU-Tulsa Schusterman
Library Director, as a character in graphic
scholarship format.

Liz Brower
@annatthing



OU-Tulsa Schusterman Library Director Stewart Brower built the graphic scholarship collection from scratch. The library now has around 130 titles in a range of academic disciplines.

Graduate student Ghazal Ghazi had just submitted a personal narrative in comic strip form to the literary journal *Mizna* when her attention snagged on a new course at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa.

Her piece was published in the April 2021 issue, but that only fueled her enthusiasm for “Comics and Graphic Novels,” a class that was being offered for the first time in the Library and Information Sciences program.

“Even though I had written the piece before I enrolled, the class helped me gain a deeper appreciation of the history of comics and the wide application of their use, as well as how library collections can benefit from having robust graphic scholarship collections,” Ghazi says.

The term “graphic scholarship” was coined by OU-Tulsa Schusterman Library Director and Professor Stewart Brower to describe any scholarly communication or academic research presented in a visual, sequential format. In other words, it looks like a comic strip, complete with speech balloons, motions lines and sound effects.

Brower developed and taught the class this past spring, while building a graphic collection specifically for an academic library.

“Students wanted to see this type of collection,” says Brower. “I knew if I could find graphic scholarship that related to the various academic programs on campus, it would resonate. Very quickly, the collection has become the most checked-out selection of books in the library.”

Brower, who joined the health sciences library faculty in 2007, has always been a fan of comics but began looking at the genre differently as a librarian.

“When I started realizing all this graphic nonfiction existed and it was not something we were collecting as an academic library, I thought it was time we should,” he says. “Eventually, I’d like to see more original graphic scholarship created by graduate students and faculty for programs on our campus.”

Brower started purposefully collecting in January 2021 and now has about 130 titles meant to complement course offerings and inspire future research. The collection offers a visual presentation of knowledge to students in several disciplines, including history, political science, architecture and medicine.

“When you are reading a comic, your imagination is every bit as kicked in as it would be if you were reading a novel. You are just using different parts of your imagination,” Brower says.

For example, anecdotes from patients delivered in comic strip form often give health care providers and students a

more sensory experience than words alone.

A fictionalized narrative of a woman diagnosed with macular degeneration is told in *A Thousand Colored Castles* by Gareth Brookes. The artwork shows what a patient with visual impairments and hallucinations might see.

Probably Nothing by Matilda Tristram describes a pregnant woman going through cancer treatments. *Wrinkles* by Paco Roca recounts the effect Alzheimer's disease has on a family.

"These are things a lot of families go through," Brower says. "I love that authors can use this format to tell a story that is accessible, understandable and approachable."

The graphic format serves equally well for presenting complex academic research, he says. Brower points to *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration* by economist Bryan Caplan and cartoonist Zach Weinersmith. The illustrations include footnotes and source citations.

"It's real research, but Caplan found that the argument was hard to make in text alone," Brower explains. "By using a combination of words and images, he gets his point across. The visual metaphor probably reaches more people than the text."

He admits it's a jump outside the academic comfort zone.

"There is rigor to this," Brower says. "I try to show through these examples that there are tools to the iconography of comics. If you use those tools, you can tell stories with comics."

He says graphic scholarship retains the high standards of academia but embraces a new presentation.

"This doesn't chip away at academic tradition but adds to the options," Brower says. "I want this to be something that brings people together."

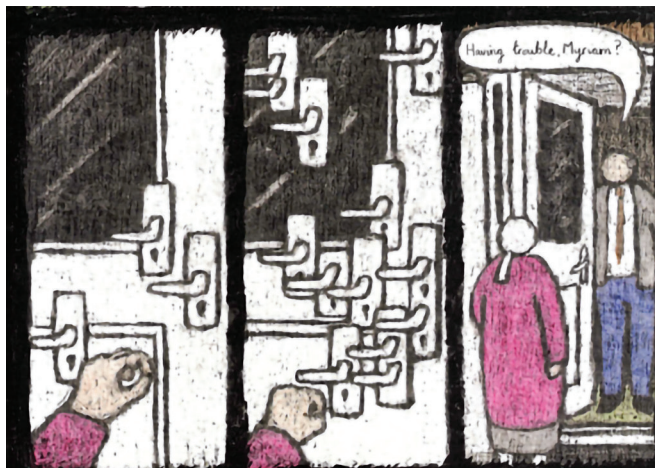
Younger generations are more comfortable with varied platforms for communicating and the fluidity between video, print and podcasting, as well as the shifting uses of online apps, he says. Pop culture acceptance of comics as big-budget movies has also helped shred long-held biases.

"When they started out, comics were low-literacy reading materials. That stigma was there for a very, very long time," Brower says. "This is a form of *visual* literacy. Visual literacies are often not as valued in academic experience."

"But what we are getting into is that visual literacy is crucial for being able to make your mark as broadly as possible, and these skills can be taught in the classroom."

Plans are under way to build studio space in the library, where students and faculty can create graphic works in their chosen fields. The library will be offering a cartooning workshop later this spring to celebrate the opening of the Graphic Scholarship Studio.

"There's a big push in academics for faculty to demonstrate the validity of their work to the real world and people asking, 'How is this going to make a difference in my life?'" Brower



Art is used to not only express how people with macular degeneration have difficulty seeing the world around them, but also how they can experience visual hallucinations. *A Thousand Coloured Castles* by Gareth Brookes, copyright 2017

says. "A lot of those stories can more effectively be told to a general audience in a visual format and still have every bit of the academic research behind it."

"I don't think we necessarily have to have one or the other. I think we can have both."

It's a concept other OU faculty are beginning to embrace.

Karlos Hill, OU associate professor and chairman of the African-American Studies program, worked with illustrator Dave Dodson to create a graphic history format for his book *The Murder of Emmett Till*.

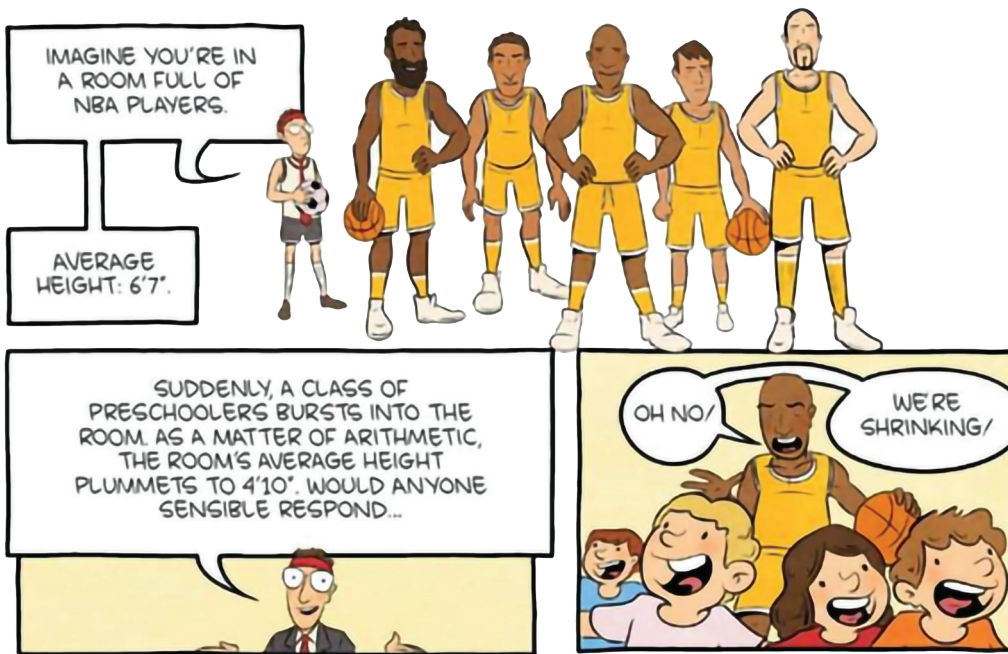
Graphic scholarship was also featured in a project between OU-Tulsa's Urban Design Studio in the Gibbs College of Architecture and the Junior Real Estate Ambassadors Institute last summer. Brower was instrumental in incorporating illustrative aspects into the program.

"Architecture and urban design are visual fields that rely heavily on graphic design, drawings and maps, so much of what we analyze or create can be considered graphic scholarship," says Shawn Schaefer, director of the OU-Tulsa Urban Design Studio.

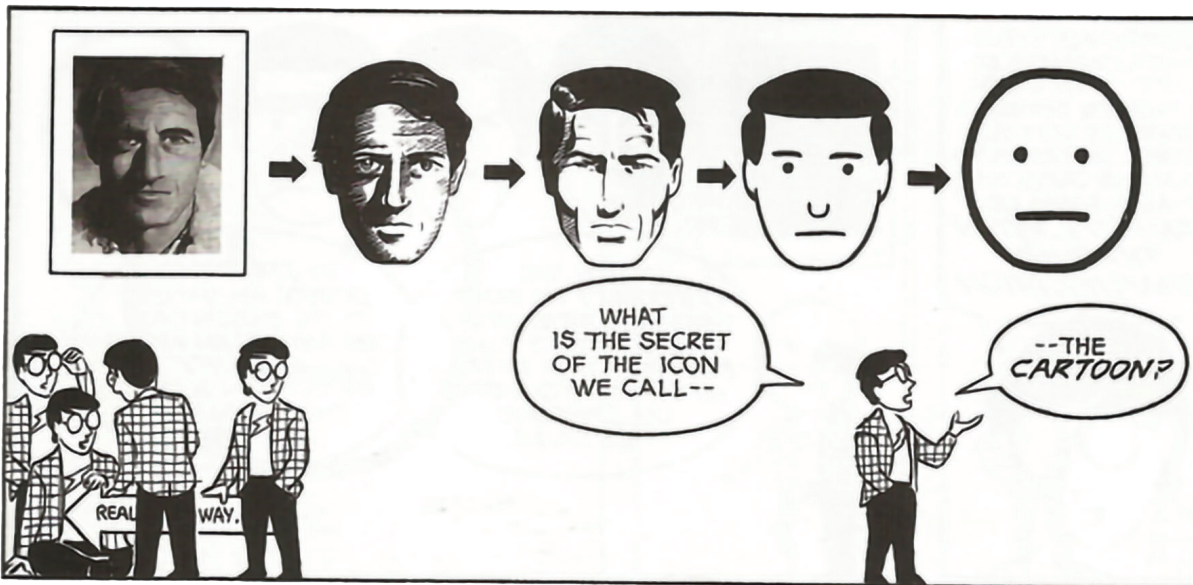
"The urban design students, planners from the Tulsa Planning Office and urbanists from TYPros (Tulsa Young Professionals) helped the students create development timelines of the historic Greenwood District in graphic format and maps for a downtown without Interstate 244," Schaefer says.

The School of Community Medicine at OU-Tulsa has also started using graphic scholarship to better describe certain medical conditions. Brower serves as a guest lecturer in the "Art in Medicine" course taught by Michael Weisz, M.D.

Weisz, a professor of internal medicine, says the medical



Economist Bryan Caplan uses a visual metaphor to support his argument that certain immigration policies would lower the standard of living. From *Open Borders* by Bryan Caplan and Zach Weinersmith, copyright 2019.



Scott McCloud demonstrates how the relative simplicity of cartoons can make them more easily understood and appealing. *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud, copyright 1993

graphic novels remind him of former patients in a migraine clinic he once supervised and the way they used artwork to describe their pain.

“These are patient experiences in graphic form,” Weisz says. “It really gets into your soul when you see it. That’s what I felt looking at these. You get an idea of what the mind is thinking.

“For students, the visual component accesses a different part of their brain to see a disease, illness or problem in a different way than written in a book.”

Because this is a new concept for academic libraries, Brower says there is much to explore.

“I have to realize we are starting something new,” he says. “This is about making certain we are fulfilling a role in getting good information and knowledge out to people.”

To learn more about graphic scholarship and the new collection, visit <https://youtu.be/SyN5Fms703I>

Ginnie Graham is a writer and editor for the Tulsa World.