

Talking Comics with Stergios Botzakis

JASON D. DEHART

APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

An Interview with Stergios Botzakis



Stergios Botzakis is the co-author of *Teach on Purpose!: Responsive Teaching for Student Success*. He is a professor of adolescent literacy in the Theory and Practice in Teacher Education Department at The University of Tennessee, and shares reviews of new titles at <http://graphicnovelresources.blogspot.com>

What a great conversation with **Stergios Botzakis**, literacy scholar and expert on comics. We discussed our history with the comics medium, popular titles, and steps in having students create comics.



Jason DeHart

In February 2021, scholar and comics enthusiast Stergios Botzakis talked with me about comics and graphic novels, his reading history with the medium, and the process of having students respond in comics format. Botzakis is a professor of adolescent literacy in the Theory and Practice in Teacher Education Department at The University of Tennessee. He is the co-author of *Teaching on Purpose!: Responsive Teaching for Student Success*, and has published numerous articles and book chapters on comics and digital media. Botzakis posts reviews of new comics titles at graphicnovelresources.blogspot.com.



Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. Let's start with the question of what you are doing now in terms of teaching comics?

All the responses in my graphic novel class are comics and visuals. So, that has been a new wrinkle I've added. It's been fun. It's been interesting seeing what people come up with. One of my students found this antique scrapbook that she is repurposing to make comics in. I wish we were meeting in person because I want to see that thing. I want to hold that thing because she's making some cool stuff with it. They're all making cool stuff. It's just that hers is this big physical object that'd be really cool to interact with if we were in a place where we interacted with materials. Bitmoji and put parts in sequence, or Canva. I don't know if you know what Canva is, but apparently you can make comics with it. I was like, "All right, I guess you can make comics with a PowerPoint too, technically, but it's not as user-friendly."



Whenever I send something in for review, I find myself going back and forth between using the word comic, and the phrase graphic novel. For you, what's your go-to definition between those two? Or other terms?

I typically go with graphic novel, in general. I think it's easier. I think that's got more currency, although sometimes I slip into comics. I have a hard time with graphica. I get it and people use it, but it also has a different meaning about charts and tables and assorted visuals. That's not all it does. I get it because these books are out there and they're not all novels. Some are short stories. I don't mean to knock on the graphics stuff. I think in the current moment, people seem to know what a graphic novel is and they accept that it's going to have different formats and different focuses, and it's not necessarily a novel. It might be short stories, it might be jokey, or something else. Ideally, I want to call them comics and just have that term, because comics can take on a lot of different formats. It's less academic than sequential art, and many people that make them call them comics anyway. So, that's what I want to say. I get that there's a hierarchy and that people want it to sound more socially acceptable, and comics isn't necessarily that term yet.



Yeah, I see it out there when someone says, "Oh I'm using this graphic novel in class." I see the responses that say, "Don't you mean comic books? Isn't that what you mean?" So, it's almost like people try to view the term "comics" in a lesser way.

Right, and it's derogatory and there's still that element out there. I mean, you see it every once in a while, in interviews, or people write a review and say, "Well, this is okay for this medium. It's still a comic book." It's like damning with faint praise. Like, "This is a good one, but most of the other ones are crap," as if all books are pristine and teachable and noteworthy. That's the thing that gets me about it is that graphic novels or comics are held to a standard, whereas when people are talking about books, they don't mean "all books" because you don't teach all books. This is not to say that all books are considered equal or are exceptional, teachable, or whatever. That same kind of, "This isn't real reading, this isn't substantive." I mean, that's still a burden that YA literature carries to this day. There is always this response of, "Okay, well yeah, you like that book, but it's not a great book. *Hunger Games* isn't a great book." Or, you know, *Number the Stars* or *The Fault in Our Stars* or other examples. Books have to have something to them to make them interesting. Shakespeare's endured for as long as it has because it contains a multitude of voices, of types of humor, of types of language. You can analyze it in any number of ways, and for centuries now there are still no set conclusions, even when readers are hypothesizing about who wrote them. There are all kinds of unanswered questions and that's what makes them endure, and that's kind of how literature works. There are questions in books that you can't answer, or ideas that are ambiguous, or somehow just don't make complete sense in a neat way. So, those are the works that people analyze, that endure, and that are interesting to talk about. Education isn't supposed to be something where, or at least about literature to me, isn't something where you get all the facts and you're done.



There's this illusion that you're going to be "well-read." We imagine a well-read person. You can't possibly be well-read in this day and age because you can't read everything. It's just impossible. I mean, not even if you had absolutely nothing to do except for sit and read all the time. There are just not enough hours in a day. There is such a volume of texts at this point that you can't possibly have read everything. That's something I think we just need to let go of and accept the fact that there are different texts. They're going to fire people up in different ways. They're interesting, they're intriguing. There's substance, there are ideas and issues to deal with. I think that graphic novels are part of that. They do things, and there is sometimes pushback about whether or not they belong in school, and about whether a kid should be reading them because there's this pervasive view of them as garbage or flimsy, or they're just not about interesting or substantive things.

In the U.S., the assumed graphic novel genre are superhero stories. So, with superheroes, there's not anything interesting about it. You can see it with the movies. People sometimes suggest these movies are ruining cinema because they're nothing except for spectacle and dudes punching each other, and outer space, and action drama. As if to say, that's not any kind of way of talking about the human condition. So, that's been the standard-bearer for what people think of as comics and graphic novels.



What about comics in the classroom and the pushback on comics?

I think it's changing because, in the last ten years or so, there's been a huge increase with young people reading graphic novels. I'll be really interested in, say, ten years from now, when some of these people are becoming teachers, getting into positions of authority. When we were young it was kind of an outlier to be a comics reader. It was something you wouldn't talk about or let people know. Then, over time, you'd figure out somebody else was a comic reader and then you'd let your defenses down. Now that space is in more places, whereas that space used to be only in the comic shop in some sense. Now, there are comics everywhere. I even saw a stat, I think yesterday, that in the last year (2021) and the year 2020, the number of adults buying graphic novels has doubled. So, it's not just kids reading graphic novels now. Adults are reading graphic novels, too. It's becoming more and more acceptable.



When I work with high school students and they have a comics club, there's this hilarious statement they make sometimes to each other: You're just trying to be cool and get on the superhero trend. They are saying that someone is going to be cool because they like superheroes. When I was in high school, that would've been the last thing I told somebody. It was a one-way ticket to getting picked on, to getting ostracized. People thought, somehow, that you're not into important books. I think that's changed more and more. It's now to the point where the [*Dog Man*](#) books are a big part of the market. When Dav Pilkey puts one of those out, he sells something like five million copies right off the bat. If you look at the bestsellers and graphic novels for young people, out of the top ten, around seven of those books are *Dog Man* books, and the other two or three are by Raina Telgemeier. There are certain authors that just have a huge footprint, and young people are reading those books, and I don't think they're reading them just to be cool. I think they're reading these books because there's something about comics that do something for them. It's one of those issues

where a million years ago when I was a graduate student, I did my dissertation on adult people and why they read comics.



Yes, I was going to ask you to go there.

I will go there. What I found was that, rather than being struggling readers, they weren't struggling readers for the most part. They were people who were capable readers. I mean, it didn't always show academically, I will say that, but there are people who read, who got something out of books and of reading text, and let you know in terms of analysis or some kind of companionship or mental activity. There was something about comics that attracted them in a way that reading only prose texts did not. I'm not trying to disparage prose texts, but what these readers showed to me is that there were features in graphic texts that just fired these people up. There's something about the combination of words and images that capture their imagination. It captures their interests. It was a positive experience, and that's something that I think, especially in this day and age when visuals are so important with so many screens, is key. Reading is a much different experience than it has been historically where it was only a printed page.



Now, we don't exclusively have printed pages. Print is not the only way to read. Now we have other ways and devices and modes to read it. So, I think people are realizing that if you use different subject matter, not to just disparage superhero comics, but there is lots of subject matter. Nowadays, publishers have figured that out and there are bunches of graphic novel and comics publishers now. Macmillan has [First Second](#) and Penguin has the [Random House Graphic](#) imprint. There are tons of other publishers I could talk about, like [Oni Press](#) or [Top Shelf](#) or Scholastic. They're all hitting in that market, and there are even adult-oriented publishers now for graphic novels. Abrams has one, Pantheon. There is also Top Shelf again, [Fantagraphics](#), and [Drawn & Quarterly](#). There are lots of people publishing graphic novels for older readers and any kind of age range. I think publishers are realizing that there are markets for these books and people are hungry for them.

I think the market grows as the realization comes out that these books are just about superheroes, and it's not just *Archie*. I'm not trying to downplay *Archie* or superhero books, because I read both as a kid and there are parts of those genres and titles that I read and love at the present day, but there are lots of different stories and lots of different people are starring in these texts. It's gotten to a point where representation matters highly. People want to see themselves, and they want

to see others. Now, there are more and more books that show people from different populations, different ethnicities, different genders, different sexualities, different everything. You can find a graphic novel about pretty much any topic at this point. I mean, some might be harder to find than others, or maybe for more niche printers and publishers, but some titles and topics used to be hard to find because they weren't considered mainstream or dominant culture. Now, there are so many titles, and so many people are making comics and finding outlets to share their voices.

If you go to my [Twitter page](#), I tend to say that the golden age of comic books has been said to be in the forties, and I think the golden age of comics is right now, because there's so much out there. I believe that the best time to be a comic reader, in my lifetime, is right now, just because there's so much and you can't possibly read it all. If you have an interest, you got specific interests, it's there. If you have a desire to see yourself reflected in a comic, chances are you will be able to find yourself out there nowadays. When I was a boy, you know I like to do that old man voice. I remember when comics were something I bought at a bookstore. And, you know, and I literally remember the first, maybe two graphic novels, I ever bought were at bookstores. One of them was the first volume of [Maus](#), which came out in 1986. I bought it and it was on the rack next to *Garfield* and *The Far Side* and *Bloom County* and *For Better or For Worse*. Like, newspaper comics.



Such an interesting combination of titles.

Totally, and I had no idea what it was. Honestly, because I was a teenager and I wasn't into the avant-garde comic new wave or the art scene at that point. I was this dorky kid in middle school but I knew I liked comics. I knew that I went to the humor section where the comics were, and there was this book that wasn't like the other books. So, I bought it, and I liked it. *Maus* blew me away because I had never seen a serious story like that. Before that, I'd read superhero comics and, yes, some of them are kind of serious, but there wasn't a lot of variety. Then there was this more obscure book. The author's name is Michael Dougan and it was called, [I Can't Tell You Anything](#). It was a collection of autobiographical comics. It wasn't something like *Maus*, but it was just randomly there one time and I was like, "Oh, this is different than the other stuff. I'll buy that."



Those are some of the books that fired me up and showed me that comics could do different work. Drew Friedman and Josh Friedman had a book called [Warts and All](#). Drew did a style like

pointillism, and it was really intricate and complicated art. He had this obsession with old-time Hollywood, and drew famous people. On the cover, they had all these old dudes with warts all over their faces, which was kind of hideous looking, graphically. To kick it up a notch, the cover was embossed, so the warts were raised. So, it was a bumpy cover. I was like, “This is amazing.”



So, it was topographical.

Oh yeah, it was topographical and graphical. Inside of it there were jokes about things I did not know about yet, like old monster movies. Bela Lugosi was in there, and I knew who he was. But I did not know about people like Tor Johnson, who’s a wrestler, and all these other obscure characters. The book was funny to read, and it was funny to read out loud. I would share it with my friends and we would joke around with that book and it was hilarious. These titles did not make sense together in the bookstore, next to *Garfield*, but back then they were. It was the beginnings of me figuring out that there were a lot of books out there, and then I discovered more niche publishers. This was in the eighties.



There was a black and white boom where like lots of different types of comics were coming out. I mentioned Fantagraphics before as one of the premier graphic novel publishers. They had lots of comics that they throwing out that were interesting to me and I latched onto them. They really showed me, as a reader, the kind of potential that comics had in lots of other ways. When I was little, my parents are both immigrants and we didn’t have a lot of books at home. I don’t think they knew necessarily what to do with young people to prepare them for school. It’s not a knock on them, it just wasn’t their experience. When I got to school, I had a hard time in kindergarten and first grade. Take phonics, for example. I couldn’t sound out a lot of words and, consequently, my reading suffered. There was talk about me repeating kindergarten because I couldn’t make some sounds, but I remember my first-grade teacher had a classroom library, which is important because people find books. She had paperbacks of books like *Peanuts*. I liked Snoopy and Charlie Brown. I also found paperbacks of Spiderman comics.

So, those were the kinds of books that fired me up and helped me kind of be excited about reading. I didn’t really have a lot of experience with children’s literature. It wasn’t until way later in my life when I went to become a teacher that I took a children’s lit class that I even read Dr. Seuss. I had not read *Bridge to Terabithia*, and some of the classics. There were whole swaths of books I

hadn't read. I read Batman comics and Superman comics. I could tell you about those books and characters and they were my alternative way into getting into reading. Nowadays, I think it's less convoluted. More and more, there are readily available books readily available. I know in school libraries and public libraries, graphic novels are some of the most circulated books. We have a lot to think about in the current visibility and acceptability of comics and graphic novels.

Librarians figured out ten to fifteen years ago that these are the books people want. These are the books that are checked out. These are the books that circulate the most. I think of people realizing there's a power here and there's some importance here. These books have something that people are latching onto. So, maybe we should pay more attention to these texts. It's been gratifying to see in my lifetime. As I said, my dissertation was on adult people who read comics and they were outliers at that point. This was in the early 2000s. There is thought of what a comics fan is, like a character in *The Simpsons*. People think a comics fan is always the guy who is bald, has a big beard, and he's the critic who lives in his mom's basement and drinks Mountain Dew. He eats Doritos and he's a misfit. That's the standard-bearer of comic books and graphic novels, and now it's much different. There are still people who have issues with *Dog Man* or Dav Pilkey, but he has clearly found something that kids latch onto. They think his books are funny, and they want more. Between the [Captain Underpants](#), [Cat Kid](#), and the *Dog Man* books, the man is doing something right. I think they're subversive in interesting ways. There's definitely an element of like questioning authority or ridiculing authority that some people don't like, but I think is important.



There's definitely that element of potty humor. My students key into that.

I think that's the lesson about literature or whatever reading material is. It's not all highfalutin'. I think that becomes a niche of its own, and it might have cultural cache with one group. It doesn't necessarily invite readers in. It doesn't necessarily allow for analysis or relatability all the time. I think part of teaching any kind of literature is about getting into the technical aspects, doing the analysis, and doing the deep thinking. There should also be some kind of love or some kind of appreciation. I'm not saying you have to like everything, but you should like something. If that connection comes with a comic or a graphic novel, I'm good with that. If it's poetry, drama, a novel, or nonfiction of any sort, I don't know why we would want to limit it. I think you need a wide variety, and that readers need to see what it is, at least.



You need to have some experience with it to see if you like it or don't. I have little kids and that's one of our rules. If we're eating food and they say, "I don't like this," and they've yet to try it, I respond that you can try it and say you don't like it, but you can't look at it and say you don't like it. You have to try it because maybe you do like it. Some food looks disgusting, but it's actually really tasty and vice versa. Some food looks really good, and then you bite it, and you say, "Ew." I think it's the same thing for books.



It's about engagement, right?

That's the long and short of it. People have to find some hook. They have to find something they're interested in. It could be the topic, it could be the format, it could be the medium. That goes for reading and writing. Some people like to draw, and some people like to tell a story. I think we need to also keep that in mind. We make kids read and write, but not every kid loves to read and write. Yet, we require it. We don't always think about that in terms of art or drawing or being visually productive in some sense. So, how else do you get materials to read if you don't have people out there doing writing? There are so many genres and formats that people can engage in.



That's been harder for me, honestly. I'm currently teaching a graphic novel class and for the first time I'm having people draw their reflections instead of writing out the reflections. I've been really happy with the results. I didn't know exactly what to expect, but people are surprising and creative and interesting. When you give students outlets, some of them are really excited about that. I mean, I'm talking about graduate students, but a lot of them are like, "I haven't done this in forever," and they appreciate it. It's kind of like a novelty but also revisiting something they like to do but weren't required to do, or they let fall to the side. Because, for the most part, that's a whole different discussion about art. As in, whether or not you let people go into the arts and be creative.



I've tried out drawing responses, too, and I had this response from a student one semester: "I don't remember the last time I've looked at paper." I'm not knocking the digital, because I enjoy the ease of digital comics, and the instant access to pretty much to anything that you want, but when everything's so screen-based, it's nice to have a break and that outlet. You have to really have to think about how you represent ideas, too.

It takes time. That's been one of the most striking comments I've gotten. Because we share our art and we talk about it, and I'm doing it, too. It's shaking some of the rust off of me. It takes a long time, and you have to actually be thoughtful. You have to plan. For example, I'm creating in pencil, then I'm using ink, and then I'm adding color. Some of the students are creating digitally and some of them are creating by hand. A lot of them have said it's harder to do than they would have thought. Even if they're manipulating images, they to put the images at the right angle and they have to have the right layer. They're finding that manipulating materials isn't super-easy. It's not just like you can take a picture and add a filter to it and there's a comic. You have to go through other processes to make it work, even in digital formats. So, it's been really interesting to listen to that. I think that's one of the areas that's not as looked at in terms of pedagogy right now. Maybe art teachers or professionals who are looking to teach people to break into art fields are interested, but I think your typical classroom teacher isn't thinking about composing visually. It's relevant, given that now so much is online and you have to compose digitally. So, we should be setting people up for success in those areas, too, I think.



I'm always amazed when I see [Jerry Craft](#) do digital artwork. I've seen [Jason Walz](#) do some drawing. The math, the perspective, and all of those elements that they have to put into the work is amazing. And then Kazu Kibuishi.

He does the [Amulet](#) books.



Yes, *Amulet*. I'm amazed that there are so many details and layers, and I think he's been working on the latest one for a couple years now.

That's the thing that's funny. I heard an interview of Raina Telgemeier about it and she talked about how it took a year and a half to two years to make a book, which then gets published. Then kids read it in 45 minutes and are asking for the next one. She's like, "The next one? It took me two years to make that one. It takes longer than people realize, and it's a popular misconception. Dav Pilkey is very prolific, and maybe it's easy for him, and maybe that's part of his style. But, I also don't think his books are easy. He doesn't just throw those together. He's very thoughtful. The parts of the book are there for a reason. I was



prepared to read them and dismissive because I have this policy for myself. I will try to read what's popular just to see what's what it is and have some currency.

So, I read a *Dog Man* book and I even read some *Captain Underpants* books, which are funny. Toilets and poop only go so far with me, but the stuff with the principal cracks me up, and the boys making the comics cracks me up. With *Dogman*, I was impressed. All around, it was thoughtful. The book has themes and character development, and does interesting work with genre. It plays with your expectations about character, and there are literary references, which are mostly puns and jokes. I appreciate those too, in a different way. I know that there are lots of critiques about it and people who don't like its juvenile humor, but I was really impressed. It's a good series, in my mind. *Dogman* is way more substantive than I thought it has any right to be, in a way. It could just be a fun book and he could still cash checks but it's fun and substantive, and hat's off to him.



I'm with you. We also read *Cat Kid Comic Club* in my classes. I would recommend it because all the things you're saying that he does, he brings into that one. Plus, there's this interesting mixing storytelling. Do you remember the *Heroes Illustrated* magazines where they do like the little stories with action figures?

Oh yeah, yeah.



He does some of that in there. There are scenes where you will like looking at some physical objects, action figures, that he's created. So, there's really interesting mixing. That's one of the things I was thinking about when you were talking about genre. We've seen verse novels now translated into graphic novel format, and all of this creative mixing and translating work that people do.

I have a soft spot for him anyway, because I think the first books of his that I ever came upon were the *Kat Kong and Dogzilla* books. They're done in this Photoshop way, but we're talking like the nineties when these books came out. They were manipulated photos of hamsters and dogs and cats, bit with the plots of *King Kong* and other stories. It's like the original story, except it's a giant cat and mouse in the city of Mouseopolis. There are lots of puns and jokes. I like those classic monster movies. *Dogzilla* is about



a corgi that comes out of a volcano in the city of Mouseopolis, and it's the same kind of approach with puns and jokes. I thought those books were hilarious. Dav Pilkey has found his audience.



Connecting to something you said earlier, I was thinking about finding comics in different places and not expecting them to be there. That takes me back to being a spinner rack kid, finding comics where you can out there in the wasteland of a pharmacy. They really didn't have traction when you and I were growing up. I lived in a small town and there would be the resident comic shop that would be open, and then it would close.

Yeah, I got most of my comics as a kid from a pharmacy in the shopping plaza down from the restaurant my dad owns. I probably became annoying to the people at the pharmacy. On Friday, their magazines would come in bundled up strips of paper or plastic wrap, and they'd break them off and put them up on the racks by hand. So, I knew that's when the comics showed up. So, I'd go and flip through whatever the comics were, and I'd pull out the ones I wanted. I'd try to get the ones in the middle because the ones on the outside got dinged up because of the way that they got handled. I wanted them to be in semi-decent condition so I could keep them reading and they would last. I was at the demand of whatever showed up per week, and based on how many dollars I had. I think a comic when I started buying comics, they were around \$0.50. So, I knew I could throw down two dollars or a dollar, and get two comic books, not counting tax. We also had a supermarket, kind of like a pre-Walmart type of store. It was a department store/grocery store. It was called Lloyd's, in upstate New York. I would go there and look at their spinner rack, and they had multiple spinner racks. They had like three spinner racks. I remember, in the 80s, there was this weird independent publishing boom and there were companies that sprung up, and I'd find a comic called [*Grendel*](#).



Oh, yeah. I remember that one.

They had *Robotech*. They weren't Manga but they were Japanese-inspired. I think they were done in America, but they were using anime as the source material. Now, Manga is everywhere. Suddenly, I started picking up books that weren't just the typical superhero books too, but were still comics. You were still at the caprice of whatever



the store had. Sometimes, you could run into a gas station or a grocery store, and they'd have something. So, you'd find something, beg your parents to buy it for you. I remember I had a few *Mad* super specials. Grocery stores had *Mad Magazine*, which was big for me too. I think the first one I bought some kind of Star Wars spoof on it. As a kid, I was crazy about Star Wars. There was so much humor about various things that I fell in love with *Mad Magazine*. To me, *Dogman* is like *Mad Magazine* for kids because it's the same kind of messages. It's funny and slightly subversive. It pokes holes at authority. In a lot of the *Dog Man* books that I've read, there are jabs at popular media like movies, people on television. Like, all the artifice of it and commerce of it. I think that's important to have, and I think you need that. I mean, if you want people to be critical consumers of anything they need to make critiques and they have to see how critiques are made. I think books do that as a model. So, people might think *Dog Man* is just like a silly book, but it has serious aspects to it.



I just read *Dogman* yesterday with my class.

It's in my head. We just read [*American Born Chinese*](#). So, we're talking about identity and how people are represented and how stories are out there. People are complicated and our relationships are complicated, and representation matters. There are no easy answer, and there is a lot that is bound up in our identities. It's something we have to contend with, when other people are respectful and, if they're not, find ways to either not truck with them or to show them what's going on.



Those are not two books that you put together like *Dog Man* and *American Born Chinese*. You have that complexity because *Dog Man* has the frame narrative. *American Born Chinese* has three narratives going on at the same time, and then you've got the whole subversive satire aspect of it with the way that Gene Luen Yang plays with media.

Oh, yeah.





I'm thinking of that part of *American Born Chinese* with the sitcom idea and you have the *Archie* comics idea presented.

And there's the legend. And the kicker is, not to spoil the whole book, but the fact that there are three stories, but they're really just one story. The reader doesn't know that until you get to the end and then you're like, "What?" Where else could you tell that story except for in a comic? I don't think *American Born Chinese* will work as a cartoon. I don't think it would work as a live action movie because you couldn't navigate the tones in the same way. It's three independent or seemingly independent threads that end up going together. If you did a live action, I think you'd give it away fairly early on, or the effects just wouldn't do it justice. I think as a cartoon, it'd be the same way. I think it'll turn from being satire to be something that people would laugh at in a way. That's one of the sensitive parts I think about that sitcom. Our class was having a good talk, and it's not a comfortable talk because the things that are brought up in that book are racism, and it's casual racism. Ignorance contributes to that and people are hurt in ways that have been accepted culturally for decades, if not longer. There are depictions with the idea of: "That's just how they are" and "that's just this." That's one of the things that's powerful in a book like that. More and more, I think these issues are being foregrounded in graphic novels, and that people are having multiple experiences in life. People come from multiple viewpoints because people are running into issues that dominant culture or dominant viewpoints don't necessarily account for. I think that's a move. You know, that's something I see more and more in the field of comics scholarship. People are looking at voices and foregrounding what is out there.



How do you navigate everything that is published in that field?

I'm in education, so I'm more of a literacy person. I care about teachers and I want to work with teachers about how we use texts. The research looks at how these texts function in schools. How do people read them? How do you teach them? How do you get them? How do you deal with the inherent prejudice educators and supervisors and various stakeholders have against comics across decades of U.S. history where people thought comics as junk culture or junk texts? So, you have to deal with that. Then there's scholarship that's



more focused on literary aspects with analyses of the books, which is more of an English thing. There is also cultural work looking at phenomena, and work in linguistics where scholars are trying to develop a linguistics of comics and understand how people read and engage in the mechanics. For example, how do panels work? How do the balloons work? Are there optimal ways of flow and laying out pages and all that?

There is this amorphous field known as comic studies that envelops all of it, and it's tough to keep track of everything. So much of the work is talking about literature, talking about children's literature, talking about psycholinguistics, talking about linguistics, talking about pedagogy, and issues of representation. I can go to the reading or literacy journals, or middle school journals, or the English or research in specific content areas. Comics are discussed in all of those, so it's really hard to keep track of. I have to make myself a few times a year, usually around conference season or when I'm doing a literature review for an article, sit down at Google Scholar and put in graphic novels and a start date. I just try to see what's there that I'm not familiar with and see what's new because it's not any one place where it shows up.

There are certain people that write a lot about comics and it's a good idea to follow them and use their expertise and their research trajectories. That's one strategy. There is the [*Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*](#) that comes out of England. In my opinion, it's more of a literary type of journal about comics. As an educator, there might not be as much for you in that journal, but other journals publish articles. There is [*INKS Journal*](#), and they publish a variety of viewpoints. Nick Sousanis is a good source. He runs a website called [spinweaveandcut](#) where he compiles syllabi from classes and lots of other resources. That's a really helpful place to keep track. I also have a blog where I read books and post reviews. It's called [Graphic Novel Resources](#). It's at blogspot because I'm old and afraid of change and not going to move it off to a that platform onto something else. There are podcasts that are interesting. Most of them are about superheroes. I mean, honestly, that's just how comics are. There is also Dani Kachorsky's podcast, [Reading in the Gutter](#). It's about education, it's about literacy, and it's on track for educators. Gina Gagliano, who used to be at Random House Kids, has a podcast ([Graphic Novel TK](#)).



How often do you post about new books on the blog?

I publish every five days. It's been coming out since 2009, and I have around 900 reviews at this point. You can search per topic, and look up general topics, like language arts, U.S. history, math, immigration. I have some thematic posts and some organized by authors. I have some things by I try to make it helpful and every once in a while, I'll get some feedback. Gina's is *Graphic Novel TK*. It's a good blog about the publishing side of graphic novels, and she's been a mover and shaker. She was involved at *First Second*, for a long time, and now she's a *Random House* and they were two of the giants, I'd say, with graphic novels. I think the *Random House* a publisher that is geared more towards younger readers, but *First Second* is like for a wide range of readers, from like beginning readers to adults. One of the best places to look is at the [YALSA](#), Young Adult Library Services Association, because they published lots of lists and they have share about lots of books. Because that's one of the hard parts too, is like finding who these, you know who's publishing what graphic novels because there's such a variety.



I mean, you can get used to looking at the publishers and realizing what's on their publishing schedules. I look at a group like *YALSA* because they run, they run through *ALA*, the American Library Association. They're very pretty comprehensive, I would say. I also looked at some of the award lists like the [Harvey Awards](#) and the [Eisner Awards](#). There's always stuff on those sites that, for some reason or another, I have no idea exists in the world. It's a lot to keep track of. That's one of the good things right now is that comics and graphic novels scholarship is all plural and is proliferating. It's hard to keep track of honestly. That's a job in and of itself because there's just so much stuff out there. So, phew.



Do you have any recommended comics titles of late?

I keep telling everyone to read [The Magic Fish](#).



I love the use of color in that book.



Yes, the use of color about the story. It's an all-around beautiful all-around book. Trung Le Nguyen is the author, and I really like that book. It's gorgeous. As you know, I read a lot of graphic novels. I don't get tingles from all of them, but I got tingles from *The Magic Fish*. I'll shout from the rooftops that you should buy any book in the [Nathan Hale's Hazardous Tales](#) series. I love those books, too. I've heard positive feedback from everyone, and reluctant adolescent readers especially. There's just something about that combination of nonfiction and humor that works and people just get drawn into. He has ten books in that series so far and I don't think any of them is a clunker. They're all exceptional.



I also really like the [Slaughterhouse-Five](#) graphic novel adaptation. Growing up, especially in high school, Kurt Vonnegut was my guy. I loved Kurt Vonnegut books, and I probably read all of his novels. I was a little bit hesitant to read the adaptation because it's something near and dear to my heart, but it is written by Ryan North, who's a really smart guy. North has made a lot of really great comics and smart books, in general. He released a choose-your-own Shakespearean Adventures. The Vonnegut adaptation is drawn by Albert Monteys. I wasn't familiar with his work, but they take that book and they make it seem like it was meant to be a comic because they use the format in a way that just highlights everything that's good about comics. I don't love every graphic novel adaptation and I think it's one of those areas that a lot of publishers have latched onto as a cash cow kind of thing because people want to read graphic novels, and people want to teach novels. So, the logic goes that they make them legit and make a graphic novel adaptation. It's like any adaptation. They're not all created equal, and not all of them reflect well or compare well with the source material, but I think this one does. I also recommend Joel Christian Gill's work. I've really liked his book, [Fights](#), which is about his growing up and dealing with his life circumstances. He shares how he dealt with things with violence, for the most part, and had to take up for himself. It's a really powerful book. Maybe part of it is because I'm about the same age as him, so like I can relate to a lot of it. I also think there's a lot in there that just anybody kind of growing up and dealing with kind of adverse circumstances could relate to. It's a really honest and beautiful book.



On that note, I will say thank you, and I always find out about new titles from you. Lots there to explore.

JASON D. DEHART is an Assistant Professor of Reading Education at Appalachian State University and long-time comics reader. DeHart's research interests include multimodal literacy, including film and graphic novels, and literacy instruction with adolescents. His work has recently appeared in *SIGNAL Journal*, *English Journal*, and the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*.