

Trade Book Reviews: Graphic Novels

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Graphic novels have finally started to gain recognition for their literary merits and the opportunities they offer in terms of pedagogy and scholarship. However, as the call for submissions (<https://journals.shareok.org/studyandscrutiny/article/view/1086>) reminds us, there have been long-held tensions regarding their place in the classroom and in academia, with critics often citing graphic novels' lack of complexity. Part of this critique stems from a misunderstanding of what graphic novels are. Like young adult literature, graphic novels are not a single genre. Instead, they are a format that encapsulates a wide variety of genres, ranging from romance to memoir to fantasy. Their variety and their ability to capture the imagination and provide the opportunity to tell a variety of stories make graphic novels a clear fit for the classroom and for all readers. The trade book reviews in this issue offer insight into a small sample of graphic novels available. With ideas for teaching the content and themes and resources for how to approach teaching students how to read graphic novels, these reviews offer some sound suggestions for educators looking for new graphic novels to teach or who are hoping to get started with the format for the first time.

WHEN STARS ARE SCATTERED

by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed

(Published in 2020 by Dial Press)

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A National Book Award finalist, School Library Journal Best Book of 2020, and Kirkus Best Children's Book of 2020 are just a few of the accolades for the absolutely gorgeous 2020 middle grades nonfiction graphic novel [*When Stars are Scattered*](#).

A collaborative writing project between Victoria Jamieson (of *Roller Girl* fame) and Omar Mohamed, *When Stars Are Scattered* tells the story of co-author Omar when he is a young boy in a Kenyan refugee camp. Knowing their father is dead but not knowing about their mother's fate, the boys are taken in by a woman named Fatuma. Omar is a smart young man who has educational aspirations and hopes to one day be resettled in America. He struggles with trying to balance his education and his brother Hassan's health. Hassan hardly speaks and has seizures sometimes.

Omar's story is paralleled with other students' stories. One character, Maryam, has educational goals similar to Omar but has to give them up when she is required to get married early. She is expecting a child later in the text. Another character is Nimo, whose family is approved for resettlement to Canada before Omar and his brother. The graphic novel ends with Omar and Hassan on a plane to America and with a poem by Maryam. The poem begins with the following words: "Those who are lost / look to the stars to / lead them home" (Jamieson & Mohamad, 2020, p. 255).

There are tensions between the past and the future, between self and others, between despair and hope. Although few readers will be able to connect explicitly to Omar's exact struggles, most readers will find resonance in the universal human moments and emotions with which he has to contend.

The text allows teachers and students to move beyond media depictions of refugee camps and the hope of being resettled. Readers benefit from the inner struggles Omar's story reveals. Omar's educational goals are often pitted against the obligation he feels to care for Hassan, providing opportunities to consider the challenges presented to caregivers. In addition, the harsh realities of

the United Nations resettlement process are also shared in ways that illuminate the process for middle schoolers and adults.

The graphic novel form is another aspect of this text worth exploring. As if the storyline is not magnificent enough, the color palette Iman Geddy provides is stunning. With color tones that convey characters' emotions and affect readers' moods, *When Stars are Scattered* is as much an artistic piece as it is a literary one.

Teachers eager to help students gain a working vocabulary of terms used to analyze visual texts may benefit from a piece by Connors (2011), which provides ideas on how to consider aspects such as space and perspective in graphic novels. Teachers may also refer to Scholastic's (n.d.) "A Guide to Using Graphic Novels with Children and Teens" and a blog post "Reading Graphic Novels" (Literacy Today QC) to help their students read texts.

When Stars are Scattered allows for discussions of global and national significance while portraying universal elements of tragedy and hope that bind us all as humans.

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BANNED BOOK CLUB

by Kim Hyun Sook, Ko Hyun-Ju, and Ryan Estrada

(Published in 2020 by Iron Circus Comics)

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Hyun Sook, Ko Hyun-Ju, and Ryan Estrada's [*Banned Book Club*](#) centers around the 1983 student protests in South Korea, an event which co-author Sook lived through during her first year of university. The book takes on several issues, all of which young people find relevant 40 years later. Hyun Sook pursues studies in English literature, which sets her up for her mother's frequent criticisms. Literary adventures are how she becomes involved in the banned book club, which meets to discuss books banned by the South Korean government that could lead to the members' arrests, establishing a personal and social conflict for the new college student. The graphic novel also pits characters against each other, as students and faculty are used by the government to spy on each other. Thus, the reader is left wondering who Hyun Sook and the book club members can truly trust. The book is beautifully illustrated in black and white by Ko Hyung-Jo who includes pages in which all the banned book club members are introduced along with a biographical snippet. The characters' unchanging appearance helps the reader follow their storylines.

Authors Estrada and Kim base their graphic novel on students trying to discover their beliefs in a time when students were required to keep knowledge to themselves. While the events that led up to the student protests are not explained in great detail, the authors do include a few pages of the main events that lead to the silencing of differing opinions. The texts that the banned book club reads are mainly political works, including a curriculum favorite, Paolo Freire's (1968) *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. *Banned Book Club* asks, who decides what gets read? It also shows the power that books have in shaping readers' identities and belief systems. Book clubs require the solitary act of reading to become public, opening readers up to a community of readers, even outside formal learning spaces like classrooms.

I recommend this book for upper-level high school students to read in full; however, even using parts of the text would help students learn about the graphic novel's format. Teachers should teach students how to approach graphic novels, as the reader needs to negotiate between words and

pictures. Scholastic (n.d.) provides a great resource guide with discussion questions and considerations. Book banning has become an impassioned debate in school districts across the US that could be explored through a text pairing of this book and current events. NCTE's (2018) position statement, "The Student's Right to Read," would be an excellent starting point for conversation. *Banned Book Club* can help students understand why books are banned, how students seek out these books despite bannings, and how students seek out knowledge despite oppression.

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SEEK YOU: A JOURNEY THROUGH AMERICAN LONELINESS

by Kristen Radtke

(Published in 2021 by Pantheon Books)

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Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness is a compelling, autobiographical, graphic novel that challenges readers to contemplate the causes and results of human loneliness. Through poetic prose and graphic art, Kristen Radtke calls readers to examine cultural constructions of loneliness, emphasizing the idea that Americans have lost a sense of community even before COVID-19 created required isolation. Mingling bright orange colors with often muted blues, grays, and purples, Radtke’s artwork seizes readers’ attention to her prose and images of people, places and objects.

Arguing from scientific and social perspectives, Radtke graphically explores the historical and contemporary circumstances surrounding human loneliness in its multiple forms. In the first few pages, commenting on the imposed isolation in spring of 2020 brought on by COVID-19, Radtke writes, “Our relationships to each other have shifted so forcibly that I have no reference for how we might acquaint ourselves with one another again” (p. 11). Radtke’s underlying thesis, the destructive effects of isolation, is demonstrated through vignettes revealing the ways people’s psyches work to the detriment of their mental and physical health. For example, if someone feels lonely, perceptions of others as detached and dismissive may enhance feelings of isolation. We may assume that others are closely connected to family members, friends, and community, with insufficient time or energy to spare for the rest of us.

The title of the book emerged from Radtke’s discovery of her father’s interest in amateur radio. The CQ call, the series of internationally recognized Morse code beeps, is employed by radio operators to initiate conversation across radio waves. Over time, English speakers came to interpret this call as *Seek You*. The CQ call invites anyone listening to respond by reporting a handle and location, creating anonymous connections anywhere in the world.

From a discussion of the mythology of the American cowboy to heroes of TV shows with flawed, yet intellectually superior characters, Radtke calls readers to interrogate narratives of

American rugged individualism. Adding humor to the mix, Radtke portrays the female version of this mythology as the “lonely lead” and “lonely supporting character” (pp. 251-252). Illustrating characters as paper dolls, complete with clothing and accessories, reflects the irony underlying the Radtke’s cultural critique.

Scattered throughout the second half of the novel are details of Harry Harlow’s research on family and social connections with rhesus monkeys. Infant monkeys, who were separated from mothers at birth and isolated in cages, exhibited signs of aggression and other antisocial behaviors. Although Harlow’s work has been criticized by anti-animal cruelty groups for his torture of animals, his research results produced knowledge about the negative effects of isolation and neglect on non-human mammals.

In the end notes of the book, Radtke cites her sources, explaining the places from which she gathered data or interpreted photos into her art and language. She acknowledges published works as well as those who have guided her art and prose. Radtke is also known for her acclaimed graphic memoir, *Imagine Wanting Only This. Seek You*, Radtke’s second graphic novel, was shortlisted for the 2022 Carnegie Medal for Nonfiction and was a finalist for the 2021 Kirkus Prize in Nonfiction.

Radtke’s continuous discussion about the treatment of animals in Harlow’s research may disturb younger readers, so teachers will want to proceed cautiously when using this book in the classroom. However, the intriguing artwork and montage of contemporary culture mingled with historical events would enhance class discussion in any secondary school content area. For example, teachers could use this book in language arts to discuss themes of loneliness and isolation. Teachers could design social justice projects, encouraging students to perform community service for people who need others to reach out, such as those in shelters or care facilities. Science and social studies teachers could use sections of this book to address research ethics, the scientific method, and behavioral psychology. *Seek You: A Journey Through Loneliness*, is a hopeful, post-COVID, call to re-connect with others beyond online environments.