

Cartooning History: Canada's Stories in Graphic Novels

In ways that I still find fascinating to decode, comics in their relentless foregrounding ... seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and reshaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures I felt that comics freed me to think and imagine and see differently.¹

Alyson E. King

University of Ontario Institute of Technology

IN RECENT YEARS, historical events, issues, and characters have been portrayed in an increasing number of non-fiction graphic texts. Similar to comics and graphic novels, graphic texts are defined here as fully developed, non-fiction narratives told through panels of sequential art. Such non-fiction graphic texts are being used to teach history in Canada and the U.S., following a trend in using images to allow students to see history in pictures.² Although film and photographs are used regularly in university and high school history classrooms, graphic narratives are becoming more popular and mainstream. Since Art Spiegelman's two-volume biography of his parents, *Maus*, was published in 1992, attention has been given to the creation of historical memory through graphic texts and graphic memoirs (or "autographics" as Gillian Whitlock calls it). More recently, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* has attracted similar attention and is popular in Women's Studies classes. A number of Canadian graphic novelists have rendered history, biographies, and autobiographies into non-fiction graphic narratives, including Chester Brown, David Collier, Seth, Michel Rabagliati, Willow Dawson, Susan Hughes, and Erika Moen, among others. For children, Canada's History Society produces a history magazine called *Kayak*, which makes use of this style, and Scholastic, a

major publisher of children's books and educational materials, has a series of historical graphic stories. Since there are a growing number of fiction and non-fiction books about Canadian history and growing acceptance of graphic texts (both fiction and non-fiction) in the classroom and in libraries, but very little research on those that recount events in Canadian history, attention must be paid to the ways in which the historical memory of Canada is being created in these texts and how they impact university and high school students' historical thinking.

Most research on graphic texts has focussed on reading graphic novels in English classes—and most of this research has extolled the virtues of graphic novels for boys, ELL students, reluctant readers, and deaf students.² Often perceived as easier to read, recent research suggests that graphic narratives require different ways of reading and understanding. Graphic narratives are neither easier nor harder; rather, they are different and therefore require different approaches to literacy.⁴ Gunther Kress' research on multimodal literacy suggests that graphic narratives are similar to the multimedia platforms that students use outside of school.⁵ While there is evidence that multiliteracies skills are developed through the use of social networking sites such as Facebook, as well as graphic narratives, it is not clear how the multimodal nature of graphic narratives are affecting the ways in which we understand Canada's past.

In this paper, I focus on two quite different graphic texts, Chester Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* and David Collier's *Portraits from Life*,⁶ to reflect on the potential of graphic histories in developing a historical consciousness, as well as on how such non-fiction graphic texts may impact historical thinking. Brown's "comic-strip biography" of Riel provides a unique look at Riel's life with all the documentation expected for any well-researched biography. David Collier's style is quirkier, as are many of his subjects. In *Portraits from Life*, Collier tells the stories of Grey Owl, David Milgaard, high jumper Ethel Catherwood, and British psychiatrist Dr. Humphry Osmond (who coined the term "psychedelic"), among others. These two books represent new ways seeing and understanding historical events, while opening the door for discussions of how historical events and figures are portrayed in different ways by different writers. Because of their non-academic, more informal appearance, graphic histories may allow for more critical analysis and historical thinking by history students.

Background: The Stories

Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography, by Chester Brown

Chester Brown tackles a topic that is almost an industry of its own—Louis Riel. His book is subtitled "A Comic-Strip Biography,"

but it is important to note that his book is not a complete biography of Riel; rather, Brown focuses on the period from 1869, when the Hudson's Bay Company sold Rupert's Land to the Canadian government, up until Riel's execution in November 1885. Although Brown takes liberties with some of the details of the story to create a strong narrative, he points out these deviations in the footnotes. For example, in the opening set of twelve panels, Sir John A. Macdonald is portrayed in England negotiating in person for the purchase of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company for 300,000 pounds. Brown's footnotes for those panels state that Macdonald was not in London and that the negotiators were William McDougall and George-Etienne Cartier.⁷ In addition, Brown notes that the actual acreage was not mentioned in the original deal, but that he used the amount that it eventually amounted to, citing both Siggins and Bumstead in his references. In this sequence, Brown clearly establishes Macdonald as opposed to any self-government by the inhabitants of the region and determined to ensure English predominance over the French and Métis by sending William McDougall, an Orangeman who hates the French, to be the Lieutenant-Governor. Brown also portrays Macdonald as quickly sending surveyors to mark out new townships. In his critical review of the book, Dennis Duffy argues that Brown's portrayal of Macdonald "often cheats, in that it attributes a rationalized sequence of intentionality and control to Sir John A. Macdonald that the written record will not support."⁸ Such critiques are valid and can be used with history students to delve deeper into the Riel historical records and mythology. Andrew Lesk has described Brown's portrayal of Riel as a "visual monument that reconceptualises and encourages engagement with [Canadian] history."⁹ Such an engagement, I argue, encourages critical thinking about the ways in which history is constructed, visualized, and remembered. For history students, encounters with a variety of portrayals of national figures, such as Riel, emphasize the contingent nature of history research—there is no single, linear, 'true' history of Canada. As Gee points out, students must understand texts as part of a genre as a way of sense-making, using what he calls:

Intertextual Principle [through which] [t]he learner understands texts as a family ("genre") of related texts and understands any one such text in relation to others in the family, but only after having achieved embodied understandings of some texts. Understanding a group of texts as a family (genre) of texts is a large part of what helps the learner make sense of such texts.¹⁰

The multimodal nature of graphic narratives can help learners develop embodied understandings of the events and stories depicted. Brown's portrayal of Riel is more a symbolic representation of key moments in Riel's rebellions than a linear chronology of events. In this vein,



Figure 1: Interaction between the Métis and English, from *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, by Chester Brown.

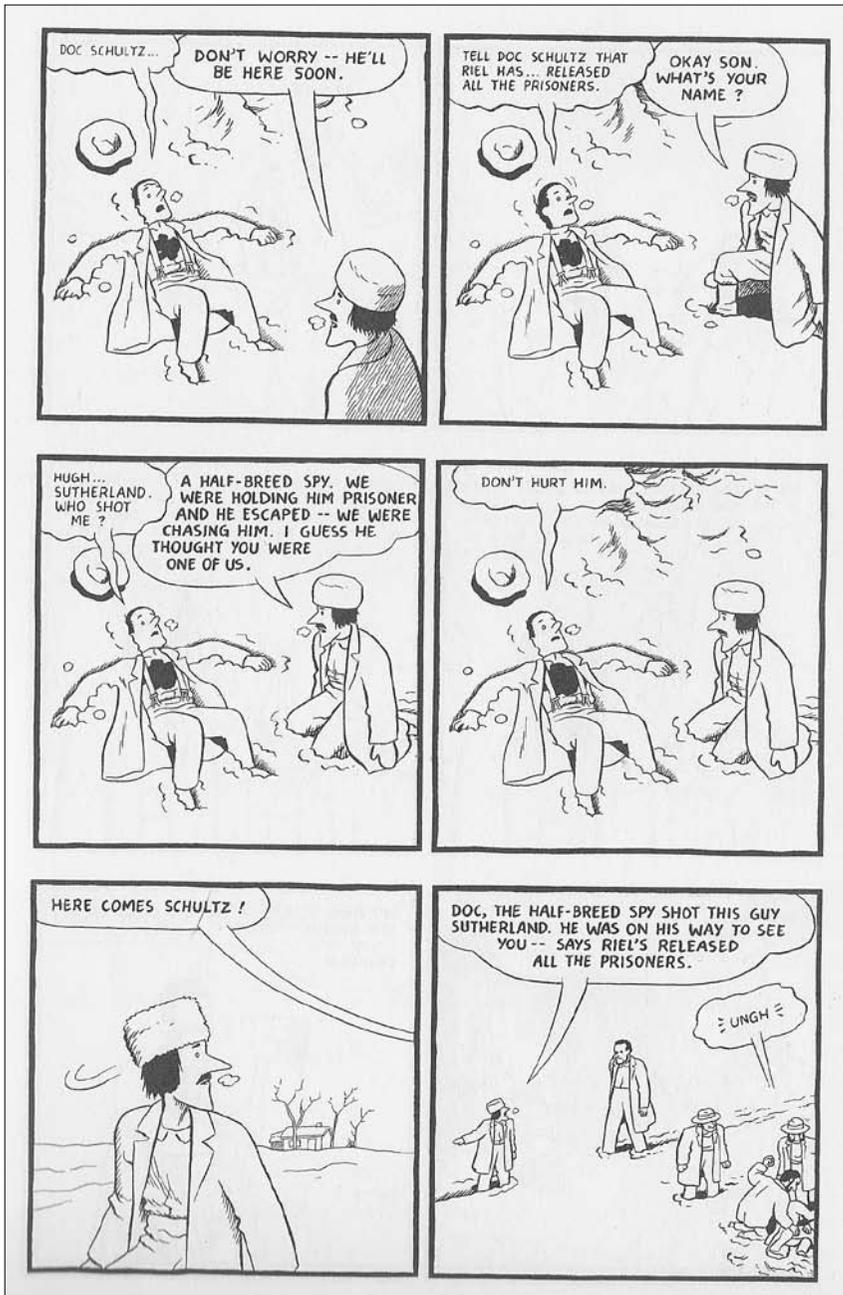


Figure 2: Interaction between the Métis and English (continued), from *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, by Chester Brown.

Lesk analyses Brown's *Louis Riel* "as an allegory of how the ongoing construction of Canadian nationalism, so often tightly connected to the historical remaking of Riel, cannot be finalized."¹¹ The focus is on the concepts and ideas about Riel rather than the biographic facts of his life and the rebellions.

In his 1982 article on the myth of Riel, Doug Owram argues that Louis Riel has been understood in two broad ways: as a symbol of cultural conflict and as representative of a clash of regions.¹² Brown's portrayal of Riel and the events leading up to his execution seem to fall on the side of Riel's mythological standing as a symbol of cultural conflict. As with any myth, there are layers and overlaps with other interpretations. Riel and the Métis are represented by Brown as champions of the rights of those already living in the Red River area. The "Canadians" are largely represented as viewing Riel and his compatriots as "half-breeds" and/or as "French bastards" almost interchangeably—as seen in a two-page spread (Figures 1 and 2). Neither the Métis and Riel nor the Canadians and Macdonald are portrayed completely in one light or another. For example, while Riel's cause is largely shown to be an effort to protect Métis rights in the face of an invading English Canadian force, Riel himself is shown with all his idiosyncrasies—running away from the Canadian forces in the early years, living in the U.S. for several years, accepting money from the Canadian government to go away, having a religious vision of himself as a prophet, and being incarcerated in an insane asylum—not the usual character traits of a traditional national hero.

Portraits from Life, by David Collier

Collier's book is quite different. In it, Collier intertwines his personal story with mini-biographies about lesser-known historical characters. Like Brown, he does not write comprehensive biographies, but rather highlights their moments of fame, portraying his characters with all their idiosyncrasies intact—including his own. At the same time, as Deena Rymhs argues, Collier writes a social commentary focusing on the "dominant values that define particular settings and [the] individuals who do not fit the social norms of their environments."¹³ Collier's choices are probably not well-known figures to the average person. For example, Ethel Catherwood, an Olympic high jumper in the 1920s, is not memorialized in the same way as other female athletes like Barbara Ann Scott or Marilyn Bell. Dubbed the Saskatoon Lily, Catherwood competed in the first-ever women's high jump competition during the 1928 Olympics, but was unable to handle her subsequent fame and fell out of sight amid scandal and rumours. The stories about Grey Owl and David Milgaard are intertwined with Collier's own experiences in tracking down the stories and living in

the same regions as his historical figures. While the stories are more or less true to the historical facts, like Brown, Collier makes use of what he calls "plot devices" to make his stories better. For example, he portrays himself as a couch potato who decides to ski to Grey Owl's cabin in Prince Albert National Park in the middle of winter—some fifteen miles away with wind chills of -80°F . In fact, by the time Collier made the trip to Grey Owl's cabin, he had been a member of his regiment's biathlon team and had competed in the National Finals.¹⁴ The story of Grey Owl is told from Collier's point of view as he told it to the Park's trail crew when he unexpectedly met them in the Warden's cabin. Collier's personal story of his trek frames Grey Owl's story, and the reader sees Collier planning the trip and setting out and meeting up with the trail crew. At this point, he begins Grey Owl's story (Figures 3 and 4).

When Collier tells David Milgaard's story, rather than framing it with his story, he parallels Milgaard's with his own experience of Saskatoon. Note the architecture of the page. On the left hand side of the book, Collier reconstructs Milgaard's story, beginning in 1969 with Milgaard as a hippy teenager hanging out with his friends. On the right side of the book, Collier depicts his own story about living in Saskatoon in the 1990s (Figures 5 and 6). The reader can read each individual story sequentially, or can read them both simultaneously. Like Brown, Collier acknowledges his secondary sources. The details about the murder and Milgaard's subsequent arrest, trial, and appeals are based on two books: one by Joyce Milgaard and the other by Carl Karp and Cecil Rosner. As with all graphic-style stories, Collier boils the facts down to highlight the essential details, clearly creating the sense of a cover-up and tunnel-vision based on stereotypes—with Milgaard as the unemployed hippy and David Fisher (the real killer) as the clean-cut, employed, and married man. Milgaard was convicted in 1969 of raping and murdering Gail Miller in Saskatoon. In 1997, Milgaard was exonerated; until then, he had been Canada's longest-serving prisoner.

Collier's other stories focus on more obscure Canadian figures. On the inside covers, Collier depicts a brief story of Paul Arthur, who created the pictograph signs that we now take for granted. Called "wayfinding," Arthur's pictographs debuted at the Montreal Expo in 1967 (Figure 7). Another little-known historical figure is Humphrey Osmond, who moved from England to Weyburn, Saskatchewan, to work at the psychiatric hospital. Osmond coined the phrase "psychedelic" and introduced Aldous Huxley to mescaline. Finally, in "Becoming Dead," Collier tells the story of his grandfather, Richard Collier, as he reminisces about his life and learns to live with his daughter and son-in-law. These stories add to Canada's historical memory in the nuances and details of everyday life. They are



Figure 3: Considering the trip to Grey Owl's cabin, from *Portraits from Life*, by David Collier.



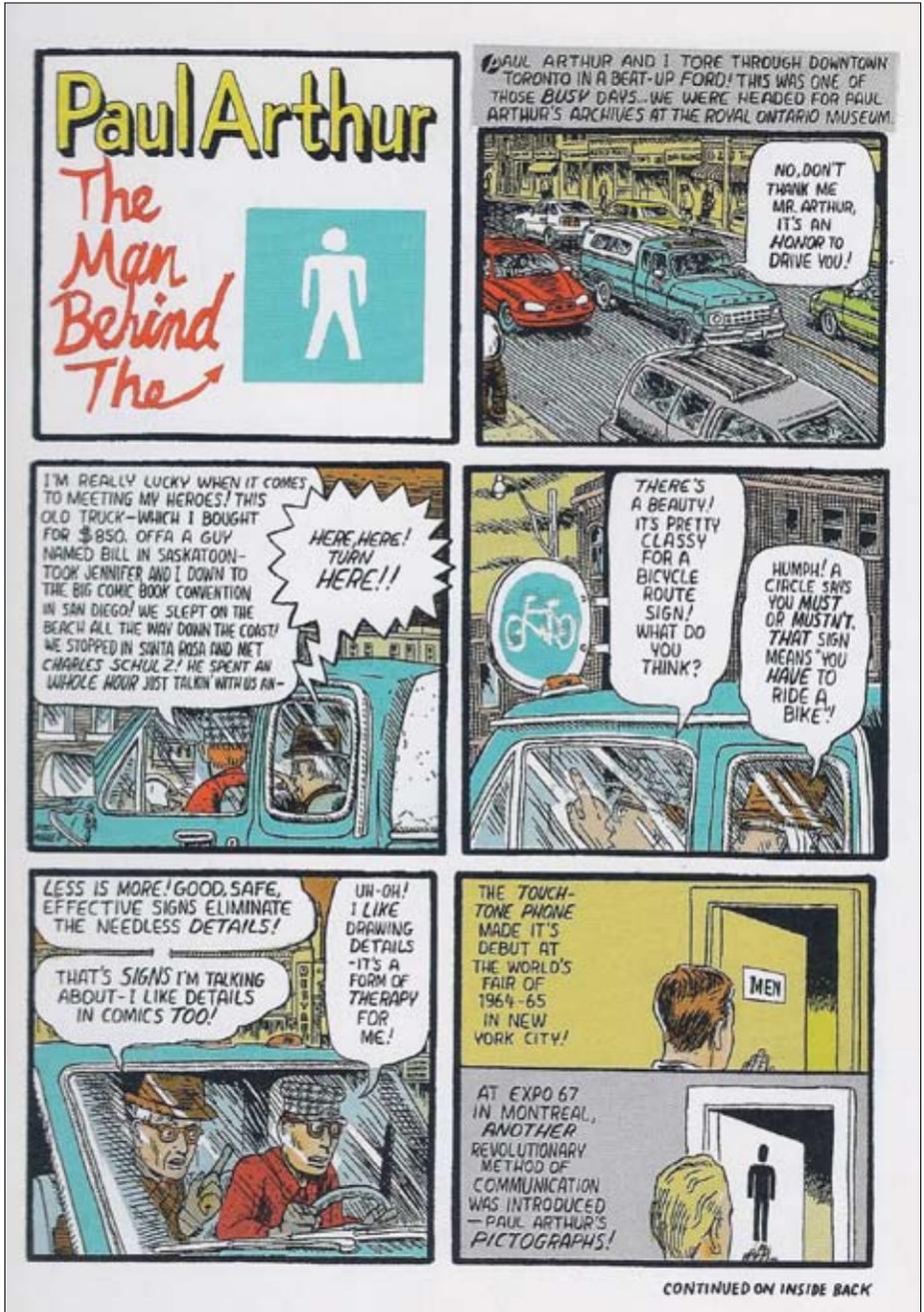
Figure 4: Telling Grey Owl's story, from *Portraits from Life*, by David Collier.



Figure 5: Milgaard's story, from *Portraits from Life*, by David Collier.



Figure 6: Collier's experiences, from *Portraits from Life*, by David Collier.



CONTINUED ON INSIDE BACK

Figure 7: Paul Arthur's pictographs, from *Portraits from Life*, by David Collier.

the stories that many people can relate to—caring for elderly relatives and listening to their stories, the history of the signs we see everywhere today, the recent stories in the news like Milgaard's exoneration, and even Louis Riel's reappearance in the news in February 2010.¹⁵ Although both authors construct their narratives to appeal to an everyday audience rather than the highly educated academics, the multimodal nature of these graphic histories add another layer to the text that requires additional interpretation, as well as new strategies for analysis.

The Art and Words: History in the Graphic Medium

Both Collier and Brown style their stories in the form of alternative comics; there are no superheroes or superpowers or saving the world in these stories. There are no traditional heroes of the Canadian nation. Unlike comics starring Superman and Batman supposedly only for those in childhood and adolescence, these stories have much more depth, both in the art and in the narrative. The characters in these stories are portrayed visually to evoke the essence of their personalities and the period. In both art and content, these stories follow in the footsteps of Art Spiegelman, Harvey Pekar, and Ben Katchor in that they tackle political issues or "the structures that produce social inequities."¹⁶ These graphic texts challenge the traditional stories of Canadian history—those that focus on straightforward narratives of progress, modernization, and nation-building. They bring to light the stories of those who are often relegated to the margins of Canadian history.

In both books, the art consists of black and white line drawings or sketches, with the only colour appearing on the covers, but beyond this basic similarity, the styles are very different. Comic art forces the creator to boil the historical narrative down to its key components in ways that emphasize ideas and challenge traditional narratives. In drawing graphic narratives, many artists use caricature, not for comic effect, but to exaggerate the essence of the person or event that is portrayed. The styles of the two artists are very different, with Collier using more detailed representations, while Brown leans toward spare caricatures. In both cases, the emphasis is on "the telling details"¹⁷ rather than photographic representations. When one reads a graphic narrative, it is necessary to read beyond the surface of the story. In a graphic narrative, the words and images are inseparable. The graphic elements of a story structure the narrative and, at the same time, tell the story in substantive ways. Note here that the graphic elements are more than just the drawings alone; they also include all aspects of the layout and composition—the way the panels are laid out on the page, the way fonts and font sizes are used, the way

spaces are created between the panels, the number of panels per page, and so on. Just as the conventions of prose help to shape the narrative, so too does the graphic organization of the page. As Drucker points out, graphic organization shows “its ideological operation at a meta-level where assumptions create an order of things [with] ‘narrative’ shaping expectations, even outcomes.”¹⁸ This organizational work of the graphic elements can also function as “a primary semantic element in itself.”¹⁹ In one example (Figure 8), Brown offers a 2x3 grid of six panels of approximately equal size, starting with a long shot showing the Mounted Police leaving Fort Carlton. The shot moves in closer with each panel to focus on Riel and Gabriel Dumont’s disagreement, then even closer on each face, highlighting the emotions of each character. By the fifth and sixth panel, the physical separation of Riel and Dumont into different panels also highlights the growing distance and disagreements between the two.²⁰ In another example (Figure 9), in the Milgaard sequence, the shape of the first panel suggests it is actually a speech bubble from the panel to its right, yet this speech bubble includes images as well as words. In a panel at the center of the page, the viewpoint is from behind a member of the parole board, and the viewer is able to gaze over his shoulder as he examines crime scene photos—however, even with only a small portion of his face showing, the sense of shock is clear.

As comics and graphic novels have developed over time, many conventions have become regularized. Text balloons, thought bubbles, panels per page, sound effects through image and words, and so on, have become established characteristics of traditional comic books and are borrowed in graphic narratives of other genres. Similarly, many of these conventions have been adapted from the cinematographic conventions—cutting, juxtaposition of images, and points of view systems²¹ as seen in the Riel sequence above (Figure 8). Even when the graphic elements seem to be used primarily for the purpose of helping the reader to navigate the story, navigation is “always the expression of a set of cultural assumptions and controls; it is a form of telling that sometimes carries semantic content, but always structures its expression within the constraints of presentation.”²² The way in which such narratives are framed and the way subject positions are structured, therefore, allows for ideological, cultural, and historical readings and interpretations of these narratives.²³

Thomas Bredehoft similarly argues that the architecture of the narrative is as important as the narrative itself. The space between panels (the gutters) is usually interpreted as the passage of time or distance. The same size gutter can represent any amount of time (or distance)—the reader must make the connections across the gutter to determine how much time has passed and what has occurred during that period of time.²⁴ In film,

narratives are tied to time-sequentiality; that is, time is “uni-directional and irreversible: time passes, or we pass through time.”²⁵ In other words, images in film move only one direction in time. Language is also uni-directional, making the narrative linear as well. The traditional way of presenting history to students using textbooks is similar. The textbook narrative often omits any sense of uncertainty on the part of the author or opposing viewpoints: events are presented as chronological facts.²⁶ Schools are still influenced by traditional linear models of learning that focus on moving “ever forward toward greater skill until one has mastered one’s goal.”²⁷ David Staley argues that, while there is nothing intrinsically wrong with linear and one-dimensional prose, it is important to recognize that “because of its structural properties, writing shapes our thoughts, organizing our ideas like a template or a filter. When the past is pressed through the template of prose, ‘history’ is created.”²⁸

In comics and graphic novels, this linearity is disrupted, both in terms of narrative and time-sequencing.²⁹ While film and strictly text-based narratives can only move in one direction, comics and graphic narratives can be read forwards and backwards. For example, in the graphic depiction of Riel’s trial (Figure 10), time and causality are sequenced linearly. The layout, however, gives the reader a sense of the distance between the witness and the Crown Prosecutor, who are divided here by the gutter. The solid black background focuses attention on the questions and responses while also creating a sense of the seriousness of the trial. It seems to foreshadow the inevitability of the verdict and sentence in spite of Riel’s belief that he would not be executed even if found guilty. In another example, in the graphic depiction of Osmond and Huxley (Figure 11), the first five panels are linear, but span a longer period of time compared to the Riel sequence. The final panel catches the reader’s eye because it disrupts the linear layout. The two circles inset into the rectangle frame a close-up of Aldous Huxley with his wife and Osmond in the background on either side. The circles echo both the propellers of the airplane and the headlights of the car, focussing attention on different parts of Osmond’s visit. The panel could be read in a linear manner—one circle first, then Huxley, then the second circle; but the eye could also focus first on the central Huxley, then on each of the circles. In a sense, they force the reader to read the images simultaneously—and it does not matter in which order the reader reads it.

The logic of causality is disrupted in a similar way. Normally, causes always precede effects; in comics, the creator can simultaneously portray various points within a chronological or narrative sequence on one page.³⁰ Reading graphic narratives effectively requires the reader not to choose a correct sequence for the images or narrative lines, but to read all the

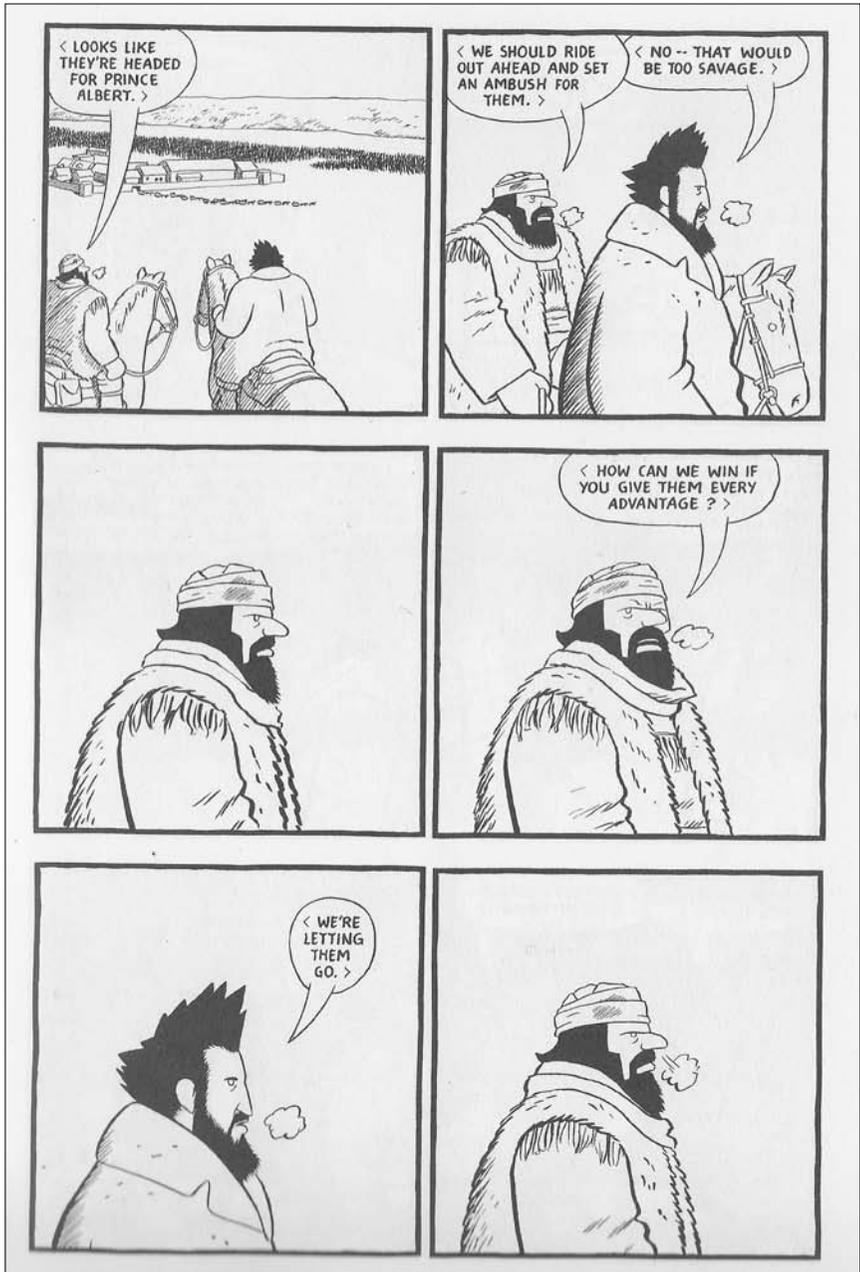


Figure 8: Graphic elements in the story of Riel and Gabriel Dumont, from *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, by Chester Brown.



Figure 9: Graphic elements in the story of the Chief of Police and Crown Prosecutor in the Milgaard case, from *Portraits from Life*, by David Collier.

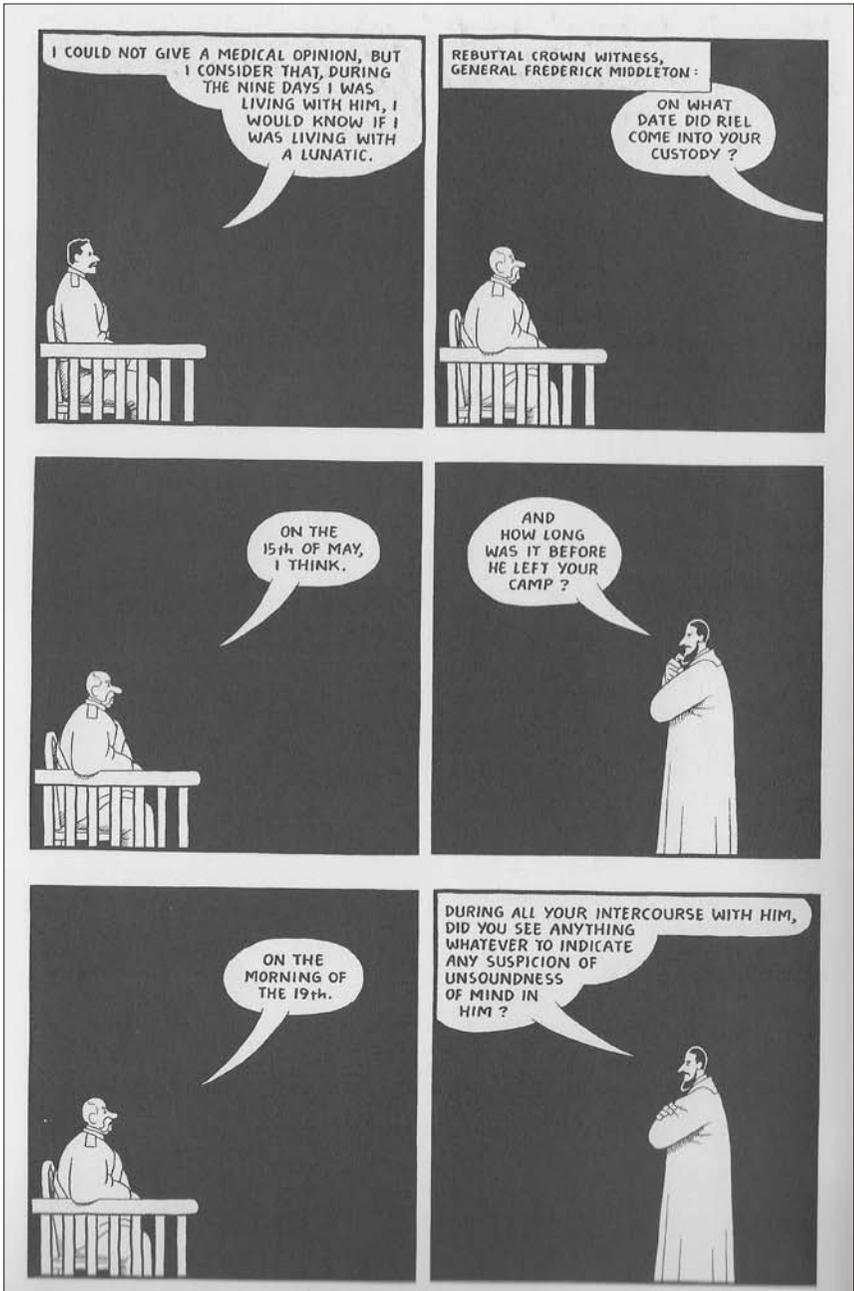


Figure 10: Graphic elements in the story of Riel's trial, from *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, by Chester Brown.



Figure 11: Graphic elements in the story of Osmond and Huxley, from *Portraits from Life*, by David Collier.

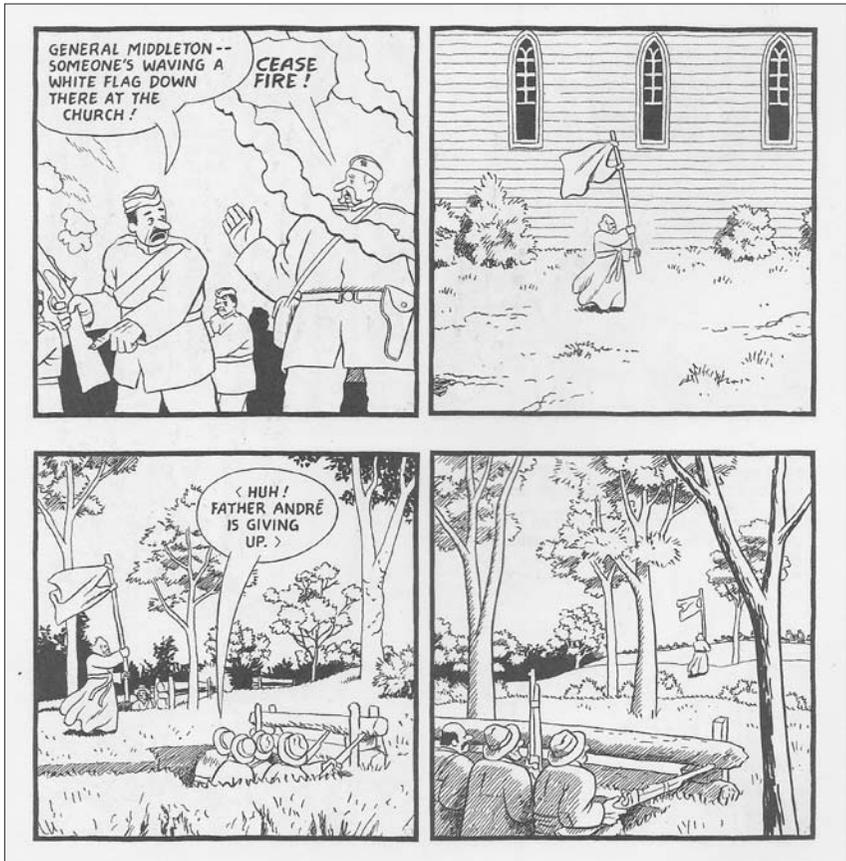


Figure 12: Graphic elements to express modified sound: symbols “<” and “>” denoting French speech, from *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, by Chester Brown.

narrative lines and juxtaposed images simultaneously. For historical narratives, then, a graphic architecture:

opens the door for new configurations of the relationship between chronology, narrative line, and time-sequence. The two-dimensionality of the comics page can be used to allow a single group of panels to be read simultaneously in more than one linear sequence, calling into question the very idea of a single narrative line.³¹

The graphic novel and comic formats, therefore, disrupt and undermine the linear and chronological way in which historical narratives have usually been told.

Sound is important in any story—no less so in graphic narratives. When we read words, we will often hear the words in our heads. In graphic

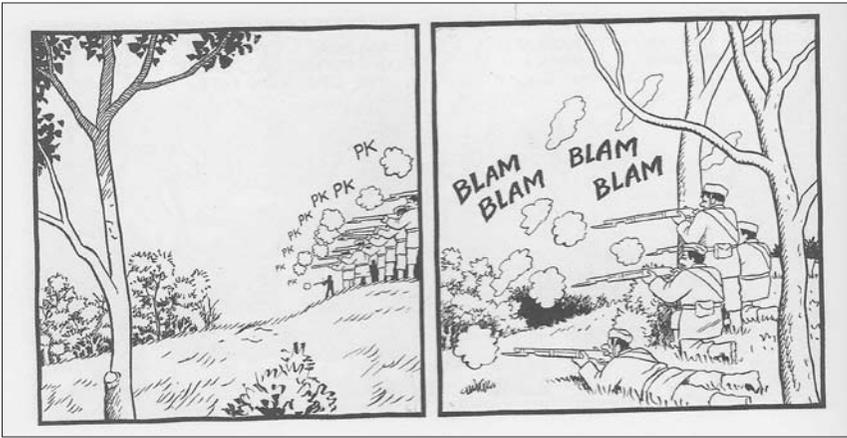


Figure 13: Graphic elements to express modified sound: varying sounds of gunfire, from *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, by Chester Brown.

texts, representing different languages while maintaining the voice of the historical characters and keeping the text accessible is challenging. In *Louis Riel*, the text is all English, but Brown differentiates between French and English by using symbols (“<” and “>”) to bracket around the words spoken in French (Figure 12). Brown also creates a sense of the dialect by using informal English. For example, when Father Richot meets with Macdonald in Ottawa, Richot’s accented English is portrayed phonetically: “and wit’ you, sir. But I’ve ’eard disturbing news t’at you’re sending an army of 1,200 soldiers out to t’e Red River.”³² In addition, sounds other than words are portrayed using both images and text: for example, in *Louis Riel*, from a distance, the guns sound like “PK”. The sound only uses two letters and each gunfire is written in a small font size, suggesting a small, distant sound. Closer up, the guns sound louder, so they are portrayed with a longer word, “BLAM”, and a larger font size (Figure 13). Sound is also indicated by various lines and curves around and near words and images, such as the alarm in the story of Collier’s grandfather, Richard Collier (Figure 14).

Given the variety of ways in which historical events can be portrayed, what does the graphic medium imply for historical literacy and historical memory? Traditional notions of literacy were once related more or less exclusively to competence in reading and writing; more recently, however, an argument for a pedagogy that takes into account not only traditional print and oral literacies, but also visual and multimodal representations, has emerged in the literature. The concept of multiple literacies or “multiliteracies” as conceived by The New London Group highlights the



Figure 14: Graphic elements to express modified sound: text layout signifying alarm, from *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, by Chester Brown.

relevance of new forms of literacy associated with emerging multimedia and multimodal texts and technologies.³³ The proliferation of multimedia and multimodal texts has expanded the ways we read and receive texts and the ways we communicate with each other.³⁴ Reading or writing a graphic text, a text that relies more heavily on images with minimal print text, entails new forms of semiotic processing of the combinations of the visual, audio, textual, gestural, and spatial.³⁵ Creating a visual essay requires students to consider elements of design as they choose the most appropriate features for effectively communicating their message to an audience.³⁶ Design choice and multimodal understanding of the communicative ability of how modes work in concert to communicate meaning asks producers to be critical readers in making choices.³⁷

Traditional approaches to teaching history have tended to smooth out the inconsistencies and rough edges of historical events, but, as Wineburg argues, “[a]chieving mature historical thought depends precisely on our ability to navigate the uneven landscape of history, to traverse the rugged terrain that lies between the poles of familiarity and distance from the past.”³⁸ Wineburg believes that the classical historicist stance is one in which the historian (or student of history) puts him or herself into the mind of the historical figure to envision the world from the perspective of the historical actors in an attempt to transcend time and space. Instead of focussing on the familiar and the sense that the past is really not so distant or different, Wineburg claims it is more important to be shocked by strangeness of the past: studying history should “teach us what we *cannot* see, to acquaint us with the congenital blurriness of our vision.”³⁹ When history is written for children, this blurriness and strangeness is written out of the textbooks. Textbooks tend to speak in the omniscient third-person, which gives the reader the impression of “truth” with no sense of the process of writing history. Because they often do not cite primary sources, textbooks further emphasise the apparently neutral and sanitized version of history many people grow up with. Wineburg’s research on how people (including both students and working historians) learn history also demonstrates that for many teachers, even after experiencing alternatives, the textbook is still seen as the only way of communicating historical narratives.⁴⁰ In addition, there is no reliable method of assessment that can determine student success in using primary source documents or in interpreting them.⁴¹ In an effort to develop benchmarks in history assessment, Peck and Seixas note that the tools for doing history and for thinking historically are not usually explicitly taught by history teachers. Yet, these are the concepts that teach students the process of history: concepts of change, causality, and evidence.⁴² Graphic histories, because they are usually spare portrayals

of events and people, may be less intimidating for students because they appear less academic and because they accentuate only some aspects of the historical events or characters.

Teachers and other practitioners often view comics and graphic texts as a simplified version of prose. Graphic texts need to be seen as a completely different medium than prose; as one that can be used for any genre and can subvert preconceived notions of “good literature.” In his discussion of graphic novels, Scott McCloud argues that “it is a mistake to see comics as a mere hybrid of the graphic arts and prose fiction”⁴³ because the space between the panels leaves room for the reader to interpret and insert him/herself into the storyline. His point holds true for non-fiction graphic texts. Reading is a transactional process and while the author-artist makes assumptions about the context of the reader, the reader also brings assumptions and knowledge to the text. As Rosenblatt states, the transactional approach considers the “particular juxtaposition of signs” and how it affects the reader.⁴⁴ With graphic texts, the signs used are both verbal and visual. Kress argues that the image is overtaking writing as a central mode of communication and that the screen is overtaking the book as the main medium of communication.⁴⁵ In many ways, graphic texts mimic the screen with its panels and gutters. Indeed, some researchers and graphic novel authors have reflected on the relationship between graphic narratives and films, such as Mariko Tamaki, who drew on her training as a playwright when drafting her first graphic novel, *Skim*, and used scripting techniques to communicate the story to her co-creator, artist Gillian Tamaki.⁴⁶

In the realm of history education, when critics claim that “kids today” are not learning history, most often, they are referring to the memorization of dates, people, and events in a strict linear and chronological manner that does not allow for a deep understanding of history. In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, James Paul Gee argues that “human learning is not just a matter of what goes on inside people’s heads but is fully embedded in (situated within) a material, social, and cultural world.”⁴⁷ In this respect, graphic histories highlight the embedded nature of historical knowledge and memory. The construction of graphic texts is such that the physicality of the actions, subjects, and events depicted are placed in the forefront, increasing the potential for readers to experience the events in a way different from straight words. (Of course, this is not to claim that well-written historical narratives cannot do the same, but the most common experience of students is that reading about history is “boring.”) Graphic histories also have the potential to highlight the idea that reading and writing are more than “mental achievements;” they are “social and cultural practices with economic, historical, and political implications.”⁴⁸

Gee further argues that humans are best able to reason on the basis of the recognition of patterns learned through actual experiences.⁴⁹ This theory of connectionism can be applied to graphic histories because of the nature of many conventions used in creating such narratives.

Gee also argues, however, that learning is not so much about content knowledge as about developing multimodal literacies and learning semiotic domains. This is important when considering representations of history through graphic narratives. A content knowledge approach to learning emphasises the memorization of facts, principles, and chronological events, not necessarily in context. Gee describes his “Cultural Models About Semiotic Domains Principle” in this way:

Learning is set up in such a way that learners come to think consciously and reflectively about their cultural models about a particular semiotic domain they are learning, without denigration of their identities, abilities, or social affiliations, and juxtapose them to new models about this domain.⁵⁰

Peck and Seixas point to a similar idea in their criteria for determining topics of historical significance. Historically significant events, people, and developments can be ones that have either (or both) “*deep* consequences, for *many* people, over a *long period* of time,” and/or shed “light on enduring or emerging issues in history and contemporary life or was important at some stage in history within the collective memory of a group or groups.”⁵¹ Given these criteria, historically significant topics need to be understood in cultural context. The graphic history format, with its multimodal structure, can provide a different way of portraying such contexts.

Learning through semiotic domains, however, focuses attention on academic content as “a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices.”⁵² In other words, students learn academic content best through active and critical learning: experiencing the world and thinking about events at a “meta level as a complex system of interrelated parts.”⁵³ Students can purposefully think and reflect on their cultural models of Canadian history by juxtaposing them to new models about the semiotic domain of Canadian historical memory. One way to do so is to use images, in graphic narratives and other mediums such as film. The difficulty is that, as Staley points out, many efforts by teachers to integrate images into their teaching has been more along the lines of infotainment, but visual thinking and spatialization skills are as important for children to learn as linguistic and mathematical skills, as Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory has demonstrated.⁵⁴ Staley states that visualization is more than simply icons or clip art or cartoons; visualization is the information image created to organize, think about, and communicate ideas.⁵⁵ Despite Staley’s dismissal of cartoons, graphic narratives can work

in the same manner as Staley's information image: a well-constructed graphic narrative "invites the viewer to think about the information it organizes" and generate "new ideas or insights into that information."⁵⁶ For the creator of graphic narratives, images can "represent simultaneity, multidimensionality, pattern, and non-linearity with a speed and efficiency that prose cannot capture."⁵⁷

Conclusions: Graphic Narratives as Historical and Social Commentary

The working definition of "21st-Century Literacies" as defined by the National Council of Teachers of English includes the idea that students must be able to analyze and synthesize "multiple streams of simultaneous information."⁵⁸ The usual ways of reading do not work well with graphic texts because they require readers to process both images and words simultaneously. The visual nature of graphic texts also demands that attention be paid to how those with outsider status are imagined and portrayed. For example, the portrayal of explicit material will be more overt as images.⁵⁹ Similarly, because comics and graphic texts often blend caricature-type illustrations and colloquial speech to tell their stories, such texts can provide rich material for insights into understanding racial representations and deeper understandings of the graphic narrative itself.⁶⁰ As Rifas points out, comics and graphic narratives provide evidence of shared assumptions, while at the same time teaching those assumptions to new generations.

Buhle argues that using graphic texts to teach history follows a trend among history students to see history "in pictures."⁶¹ This visuality helps to lend such texts a sense of authenticity.⁶² It also helps students to retain the content because the context is more overt when depicted as images as well as words. Gee notes:

humans are poor at learning from lots of overt information given to them outside the sorts of contexts in which this information can be used. This problem can be mitigated if the learners have had lots of experience of such contexts and can simulate the contexts in their minds as they listen to or read the information. Humans tend to have a very hard time processing information for which they cannot supply such simulations. They also tend readily to forget information they have received outside of contexts of actual use, especially if they cannot imagine such contexts.⁶³

But students also need to have a certain amount of information and context before they are just left to explore complex topics about which they know nothing. Historical literacy and critical thinking are developed when students encounter multiple viewpoints about events and incomplete

narratives. Just as historians make sense of the past using a variety of sources with often incomplete narratives, when students read and interpret such texts, they are also encouraged to make sense of their own identity and the world around them. Wineburg points to the nature of most history textbooks as teaching students to accept historical narratives uncritically. Because elementary and secondary school students are rarely exposed to historical narratives through primary documents or texts that provide multiple interpretations of events, by the time they reach university, such students are only able to summarize and paraphrase rather than analyse and criticize.⁶⁴ Brown's version of the Louis Riel story provides an alternative way of examining and comparing narratives about Riel and his place in Canadian history. There is room in the text for the reader to interpret—the ambiguity in some aspects of the presentation opens a door for teachers to delve deeper into the story; to talk about interpretations; and to analyse the choices made by the author in his presentation of Riel, the Métis, and the Canadians. Whereas students may tend to accept uncritically a story told in an authoritative textbook, the same story told in a less “academic” mode may open the door to more critical analyses. The familiarity many students have with comics, manga, and graphic novels—as well as video games and film—may encourage them to use their media literacy skills and make them open to viewing history as non-linear and non-authoritative. This level of familiarity is made even more concrete when the historical narratives are familiar to the students from contexts outside of the schools, such as Riel's role in the making of Canada and Milgaard's exoneration, both of which still make it into the news.

Graphic texts can also be useful when teaching about atrocities and other difficult topics. Jordan argues that it is important that authors provide a balanced picture of events without overwhelming students with disturbing information.⁶⁵ In the Riel story, the sense of confusion among the Métis caused by lack of information and misinformation is highlighted in ways that force the reader to think critically about the choices that were made on both sides of the issue. In Collier's portrayal of the investigation into Gail Miller's murder and the subsequent arrest of Milgaard, the authorial voice is prominent, allowing the reader some insight into Collier's thought process as he reconstructs the sequence of events and the contradictions in the investigation. This is something that is usually written out of traditional history textbooks. In addition, Adams argues that when authors attempt to represent “the unutterable” (e.g., the Holocaust or bombing of Hiroshima), ambiguity can be used in that representation.⁶⁶ He believes that it may be more effective to disrupt unitary and fixed meanings through ambiguity and obliqueness. This is important since, as Seixas argues, in a multicultural and multinational society, a straightforward narrative of

origins and heroes is not enough: there are too many heroes, origins, and stories.⁶⁷ Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic memoir *Maus* is notable because it uses a level of ambiguity by having animals represent characters. His exploration of his life as the child of Holocaust survivors has received much critical and academic attention and encouraged other authors to publish biographies, life stories, and memoirs in the graphic format. Brown's portrayal of Louis Riel and Collier's stories of marginal heroes are good examples. The figures they focus on are iconic in some ways, but—with their significant flaws and idiosyncrasies—they are not the traditional national heroes.

In her analysis of *Surviving Saskatoon*, Deena Rymhs argues that graphic narratives are transforming the way in which literary forms are viewed. As suggested by Hatfield, these graphic narratives are pushing us to consider “the semiotics of the page, the conjunction of image and text, and the reader's process of interpolation between panels.”⁶⁸ By using graphic histories, teachers and students can reconsider how history is both represented and interpreted. Adams calls this “a visual pedagogy, a means by which the contemporary audience may come to know, or to vicariously experience, past events through narratives that are generated by the juxtaposition of image with text.”⁶⁹ Many authors of graphic texts are also exploring the comic format to revise and revisit “the conventional narratives that inscribe one's political, social, and gendered roles.”⁷⁰ Reading such historical, autographic, and social commentary graphic texts will help students to develop historical literacy, that is, the ability to make sense of historical text. As Zarnowski notes, historians use multisensory descriptions, not just visual information, to make historical accounts richer.⁷¹ Graphic texts work well in this way. Images provide more than straightforward description; they provide cultural context, evoke emotions, and so on. Graphic texts are by nature ambiguous with images, signs, and gutters. For history education, a multiliteracies approach using graphic histories may aid students in developing a richer understanding of history.

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