ESCAPISM ONLY WITH THE ESCAPISTS?
WORKING WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE UPPER-SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

This article presents a scheme of literature work created for a 2nd year Gymnasium class (16-17-year-olds, level B1+ to B2) which centres on activities using *The Escapists*. This thought-provoking, plot-driven graphic novel was inspired by the Michael Chabon novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* and written in 2000. Like the novel upon which it is based, this graphic novel tells the story of comics production from a youth perspective and addresses issues of family, relationships, identity and the search for meaning in life.

This article focuses on classroom work on the level of comprehension and analysis of plot, character, theme and message. It also outlines how students might consider *The Escapists* from a genre perspective, exploring the interplay between words and images typical of the graphic novel format. Ideas for communicative and analytical activities are provided, as well as suggested assessment tasks. Lastly, the article shares student responses to their work with a graphic novel as compared to their usual reading matter.

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"The graphic novel is not literary fiction's half-wit cousin but, more accurately, the mutant sister who can do everything fiction can, and just as often, more."
Dave Eggers (New York Times, Nov 26, 2000)

What is *The Escapists* all about?

The premise of *The Escapists*, a graphic novel by Vaughan et al. published in 2006, is a clever one, as one of my students astutely pointed out, telling as it does a story of comics creators in a comics format. It was inspired by Michael Chabon's 2001 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, in which two 1940s teenagers create a comic book hero for Empire Comics against a backdrop of a world reeling from the aftermath of WWII. Since the publication of Chabon's novel, Dark Horse Comics has been producing comics about the protagonist, the Escapist, and other characters from the book. The story of this particular graphic novel, however, functions as a sequel to the original novel. As well as offering a different spin on Chabon's story, this is an interesting graphic novel in its own right. Set in Cleveland, Ohio, the story tells of three young people –comic book script writer Max Roth, illustrator Case Weaver and letterer Denny Jones – with the shared vision of making a success of their comics venture.

It is the deaths of Max's parents which initially drive the plot: when his father dies, Max gains access to his father's huge collection of memorabilia around a Golden Age comics creation, the Escapist, and decides to resurrect him. With the inheritance his mother leaves him, Max then buys the rights and the three friends set out to follow their comics-related dreams. As the story progresses, they struggle with finances, a publicity stunt which backfires, the hunt for great storylines, big corporate interest in their commercial venture, and dealings with the law. As a story, *The Escapists* has pace and drama but also room for reflection and introspection as all three of the main characters try to escape from the various challenging situations they find themselves in.

What makes this graphic novel suitable for Sek II English work?

This is a character-driven story, meaning students can identify to a degree with the individual situations, concerns and dreams of Max, Case (the woman in the team) and Denny and therefore have certain hopes and expectations as to how the story will play out. The three young people are confronted with typical life experiences of disorientation, chasing dreams and experiencing hardship, bullying, love and loss. This graphic novel can therefore generate serious discussion of issues of family, relationships and identity whilst at the same time offering some levity by means of the illustrated format and glimpses of humour in the telling.

Engaging with this particular graphic novel might also inspire ambitious, committed students to read the original novel by Chabon one day. The two works, though very different in content, style and scope, are perfect companion pieces. At around 550 pages, the novel is of course a long-term project for the future, however, and in the meantime working with the graphic novel is a meaningful alternative in the ELT classroom.

Indeed, graphic novels offer many advantages for engaging classroom work: the visuals provide a motivating stimulus and input on a different level. As not too much language is given, they support the students as they fill in possible gaps, making a story potentially more accessible to beginning readers of literature in a new language. At the same time, with much less textual input to explore in a graphic novel, students are also challenged: finding ideas and language to fill those gaps, describing in detail the setting they see in a panel, or reporting on a character's reaction to some news simply by looking at their facial expression in a certain panel are all activities which require students to deliver, in both content and language terms. This means that although we might more typically connect illustrated story material with younger readers or an easier reading experience, working with a graphic novel can also be made especially challenging for students in a higher level class: it is they who need to supply more language than is on the page, it is they who fill the gaps between what is shown and told, and they who describe the scene, all the time taking the visuals as a starting point. Paradoxically, then, a potentially rather basic or simplistic linguistic resource can actually make students work that bit harder.

The scheme of work – an overview

This teaching unit splits the reading over 5 weeks, with each lesson addressing a different aspect of this graphic novel, and the unit culminating in an evaluation (graded or ungraded). In a graphic novel the pagination is fixed, so the pages noted below will be consistent with any edition of the text.

Figure 1: Cover of *The Escapists*

Lesson	Topic	Section of book
1	Focus on getting to know *The Escapists*	pages 11–34
2	Focus on characterisation	pages 35–65
3	Focus on storyline	pages 66–96
4	Focus on comics style & the related reading experience	pages 97–127
5	Focus on theme & message	pages 128–158
6	Assessment of learning	whole book

In the sections which follow, you will find suggestions on how each of the batches of pages could be addressed in the classroom.

Lesson 1: Focus on getting to know *The Escapists* (pp. 11-34)

In the lesson before this, students have examined the cover and discussed in small groups what they think this graphic novel could be about, before sharing their ideas in class and giving reasons. As a homework assignment, they have read pp. 11-34 independently and made notes in answer to comprehension questions such as these:

pp.11-20 Where is the story set and what is the connection between the first-person narrator and Superman? [Extension: Who are Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster?] Do some research!

pp.13-18 What is the name of the first-person narrator/protagonist? What has happened in his family? What does he find when his mother gives him the key to the basement?

Students then pair up to first compare their impressions of the graphic novel so far and then to share and discuss their answers. Early finishers receive the discussion questions on *The Escapists* as graphic novel (see below) from the teacher and can start collecting ideas.

The teacher leads a discussion in which students share their answers to the comprehension questions before introducing a new task, that of considering *The Escapists* from a genre point of view, using these questions:

Discussion questions:

> How do you like the story so far? Explain your answer.

> How is reading this graphic text different to reading a novel? Explain your answer.

> Compare and contrast pages 12-13, 14-15 and 16-17. What can you say about the

1. page layout (also known as 'mise-en-page')? > Look at the number/shape of panels (= *the frames and what is shown in them*) and the gutters (= *spaces between the panels*)?

2. colour palette and inking? > Which colours are used and to what effect? What shape and form do the letters take? Which words stand out and why?

3. angle and perspective? > Are we looking directly at the characters or from above, below or the side? Are the characters in 'close up' like in a film?

4. use of captions (= *text boxes*) and speech bubbles? > Which aspects of the story are told how and who by?

Before students begin their group work, the teacher introduces language support in the form of relevant vocabulary and structures for discussing graphic novels, see here:

Figure 2: The story begins: Max discovers his father's comics memorabilia (*The Escapists* 2006, 13)

> **Language support**
>
> The two long **panels** on this **page** are placed next to each other. The effect of this **layout** is…
>
> One panel stands out because it has no **frame**. I think this is because…
>
> In this **caption / speech bubble / thought bubble** it says / we learn that…

It will also make sense to encourage students to compare the panels they look at with scenes from films and series, and to introduce and revise the relevant terminology (*long shot*, *medium long shot*, *close-up*).

Students work in groups of 3-4 to analyse and discuss the pages in question in detail.

In the follow-up plenary discussion, the teacher encourages students to share their thoughts, ideas, opinions and interpretations.

Lesson 2: Focus on characterisation (pp. 35-65)

In advance of this lesson, students have read pages 35-65 as homework, perhaps noting any thoughts, reactions, ideas and questions in a reading journal to refer to in class. The lesson can be structured around initial pair or group work on corresponding questions and be further developed with a focus on characterisation in a teacher-led class discussion using the questions below:

› Who are the three characters? What do we know about each of them? (> students could produce profiles, splitting the three across small groups in class)

› How do we learn about them? Is this similar or different to other books you have read?

› Are they realistic, three-dimensional characters? How likeable are they? Explain your answer.

Lesson 3: Focus on storyline (pp. 66-96)

In this lesson students work initially with the comprehension questions for the relevant pages after a picture-based lead-in activity where they are invited to 'spot the scene' (> What is happening here? Which characters are involved? What has just happened? What happens next?). Students go on to review all their reading so far, considering how the plot has developed and how the story might continue and why. They consider which sections of the story are told retrospectively (for example Max filling us in on his back story at the beginning) and which are dream sequences. In a loop back to lesson 1, they explore the use of

the different styles of illustration to tell the different strands of the story, and discuss how far they like the styles and why, as well as ultimately considering the effectiveness of this combinatory approach. Motivated learners could also consider how the different stories reference each other, where they see parallels and extensions.

Lesson 4: Focus on comics style & the related reading experience (pp. 97-127)

In this lesson students engage in more depth with the concept, structure, comics-specific vocabulary and purpose of the graphic novel. Students receive a handout

showing panels from the story and are asked to label the relevant features of a comics page (see language support box for lesson 1).

The class also discuss which information is missing or assumed in the comic genre, in comparison with a novel, novella or short story: What happens in the 'gap' between particular panels? What can we tell from the characters' faces or the visual depiction of a scene that no longer needs to be conveyed in words? As an extension activity, a strong class could be given a passage or chapter of written text from a different work (known or unknown) and asked to consider how they would reduce that text to bare essentials

Figure 3: *The Escapists* 2006, 14

for a comics page. Using material from a classic novel which has been adapted into the graphic novel format would have the advantage that students could compare their own suggestions to an actual adaptation in order to assess their learning.

Lesson 5: Focus on theme & message (pp. 128-158)

After discussing the key questions, students look back over the work as a whole and consider which themes they have encountered. An ideal task here would be a jigsaw activity in which each group of 3-4 students considers one theme in depth and students then regroup to share their findings in mixed groups with one representative each from the theme groups. A final teacher-led discussion asks students to identify whether they can find a message in the story, and to locate the panel or panels which they believe best represents this message. A final, crucial aspect involves finding out student opinions of their reading experience of the graphic novel and this work in particular. Any remaining lesson time can be used for possible questions students have on their upcoming assessment or discussing reviews of the book and/or writing a short individual review.

Lesson 6: Assessment of learning

Student learning on this scheme of work can be assessed in a number of ways, both formatively (by giving feedback for improvement) and summatively (by awarding a grade for a product or performance). More informal but also structured options include quizzes or matching activities where students match the content of speech or thought bubbles to scenes in the story. Formalised testing options offering maximum student production and therefore also increased differentiation include group work with a selection of panels or pages from the graphic novel as 'text extracts' to jumpstart analysis and discussion, while another possibility would be to write a review of *The Escapists* on completion of the unit. My own preferred options are the written test format I used with my students and a second more creative option in which students develop their own comics story.

The formal written test I constructed consisted of the following tasks:

Section A

Look at the page you have been given from *The Escapists* and write answers to the questions which follow. Write full sentences.

1. What is happening in the panels shown? Explain briefly. What has happened in the story so far? Again, explain briefly.
2. How do you think Max/Case feels here and why?
3. Characterise Max/Case as (s)he appears here and throughout the book.

Section B

Write an answer to TWO of the five questions below. Write about 80 words per answer.

1. What themes can you find in *The Escapists*? Where do we see examples of these themes? Which them is most important, in your view, and why?
2. How is reading a graphic novel different to reading a novel? Which one is more enjoyable for you, and why?
3. Which is the most important scene in *The Escapists*, in your view? What makes it important?
4. Would the story of *The Escapists* make a good film, in your view? Why/why not?
5. What message do you think *The Escapists* wants to share with us (if any)?

Students had 45 minutes in total for this test, and the marks available were split equally between language (correct grammar, range of vocabulary, idiomatic language) and content (familiarity with the book, relevance of comments, ideas/interpretation). In Section A students were to use one of two extracts from the graphic novel to interpret and to base their answers on. In section B they were expected to draw their ideas from their reading, learning and discussion of the work as a whole.

With more lessons available (around 10 as a minimum), students could of course produce their own comics creation as a formative or summative assessment of their learning, or simply as a fun extension at the end of the unit. Building

on ideas they discussed in connection with character, relationships, setting and themes in *The Escapists*, they would create a new story world, and drawing on their experience of working with this genre, they would explore how to exploit the interplay between text and images in the new story. Real life comics creation would also be simulated as they would need to assign a script writer, illustrator and letterer, and to decide how to split this work among them whilst still collaborating and exchanging. The product could be created by hand but equally also more professionally using a computer programme, and shared in a combined computer file or printed booklet for the class, or showcased in a gallery set-up in the classroom. Finally, students should be encouraged to give constructive feedback on their peers' work and to reflect on their own creative processes.

Extensions and interdisciplinary work

If a double lesson is available at some stage during this sequence, a debate could be held on the question of whether students consider graphic novels to be 'Literature' with a capital L (and whether this matters and why), or students could create a poster to get adolescents into reading by introducing them to graphic novels as an extension of the comics they will likely have read at a younger age. There are, of course, also plenty of opportunities for interdisciplinary work in the areas of history, art or ICT.

Concluding thoughts

Debate about the merit of graphic novels continues, both in the literary and the educational context. Jeff McLaughlin, himself an academic writing in *Graphic Novels as Philosophy*, freely admits that he often refers to the format provocatively as " 'fat and more expensive comic books' because they are typically just that" (McLaughlin, 2017, 10). This perspective in itself of course offers potentially fruitful material for classroom discussion: Why read graphic novels at all? Comments from my own students ranged from justifiable recreational value ("It's so relaxing and motivating to read and of course to enjoy

a comic in English") to aesthetic awareness ("The combination of pictures and speech/think bubbles are art.").

Graphic novels, then, can do many things. They can offer a relaxing reading experience, can mimic the action and momentum of a film, can make a classic novel more accessible, can amaze with their combination of illustration and text. Most crucially, in my view, a graphic novel "shortens the distance" (McLaughlin 2017, 6). A successful graphic novel invites the reader in. Students engaging with a second language graphic novel can find themselves getting so caught up in the plot that linguistic, literary and artistic analysis become an enjoyable experience even for those who do not consider themselves 'readers' in the classical sense. Classroom work with an exciting, meaningful and beautifully constructed graphic novel like *The Escapists* can be escapism in the best possible understanding of the concept, but it is far from being only that.

Resources

Brian K. Vaughan's website:
https://bkvcomics.com/
Author profile Michael Chabon:
https://www.harpercollins.com/authors/michaelchabon/
Creating a graphic novel:
https://www.pixton.com/ (free)
https://www.storyboardthat.com/comic-maker
For a helpful glossary of terminology relating to comics and graphic novels, see *Studying comics and graphic novels* by Karin Kukkonen (see reference list).

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