CONTENTS

NEW TO TEACHING WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS AND COMICS

Welcome! You may have been a comics reader as a kid, or maybe you are completely new to comics but have noticed students discussing them or carrying them around. A lot of us have noticed that comics hold a special place in the literary landscape of schools. As a form or medium, comics don't get a lot of teacher approval. In fact, some research has found that middle school teachers are afraid they won't be taken seriously if they use comics in their classes.

But, here's the thing: teachers who have brought graphic novels and comics into the formal curriculum have found overwhelming success. Comics provide multiple access points for readers to engage with complex stories in flexible and complex ways.

Ok, enough convincing. You are no doubt here because you want to know how to teach with graphic novels. So let's start with the basics.

■ LET'S GET STARTED

The first step in your journey of teaching with graphic novels must be setting solid learning goals. Are you teaching the hero's journey? Memoir? Small moments? Are you looking for mentor texts for your students to find inspiration or for modeling persuasive essays? For perspective taking? All of these are important and can be taught with comics. For this guide, we will use teaching perspective taking and triumphs as the model, but graphic novels can be used for teaching just about anything.

■ COMICS AS A FORM

You may have noticed the terms "comics" and "graphic novels" being used interchangeably. We are defining comics as a narrative form using verbal and nonverbal elements, in sequence, bounded by page and panel, to tell a story. Of course, anytime you try and define something as complex as comics, there is something missing. In this case, there are wordless comics, single-panel comics, and comics that don't use panels at all. Luckily for readers, authors, illustrators and designers ignore definitions and create their own vibrant and complex pieces of literature. Defining graphic novels is like trying to get a puppy to pay attention while there is a parade of chickens walking by — there is just so much excitement and chaos! The act of defining comics as a form sort of misses the point.

What is important to remember is that just as with all media (print, film, music), any story can be told in comic form. But comics require active, engaged, and recursive reading to make meaning from the layers of written text, images, and sequence.

■ READING GRAPHIC NOVELS

Graphic novels are read from front to back, top to bottom, and left to right — unless the author wants to break those conventions (which they often do!). The other thing you need to know about comics is that every time an author takes up a pen or stylus, they get to do just about anything they can think of to tell a story, as long as they use images. Comics are a lively, active, defying, audacious form of literature to be puzzled through and enjoyed.

Let's get started thinking about the basic design elements. Remember, there are no accidents in graphic novels. Each design element has been thought about, considered, drawn, erased, and redrawn countless times. These elements are much more important in comics than in standard prose books because so much meaning is conveyed using an agreed upon visual language.

Now you have some of the highlights about graphic novels and comics in general. If you want to read more, there are some suggested readings at the end of this guide. You are now ready to join the other folks, so please proceed to the next section, *Not-So-New to Teaching with Graphic Novels and Comics*.
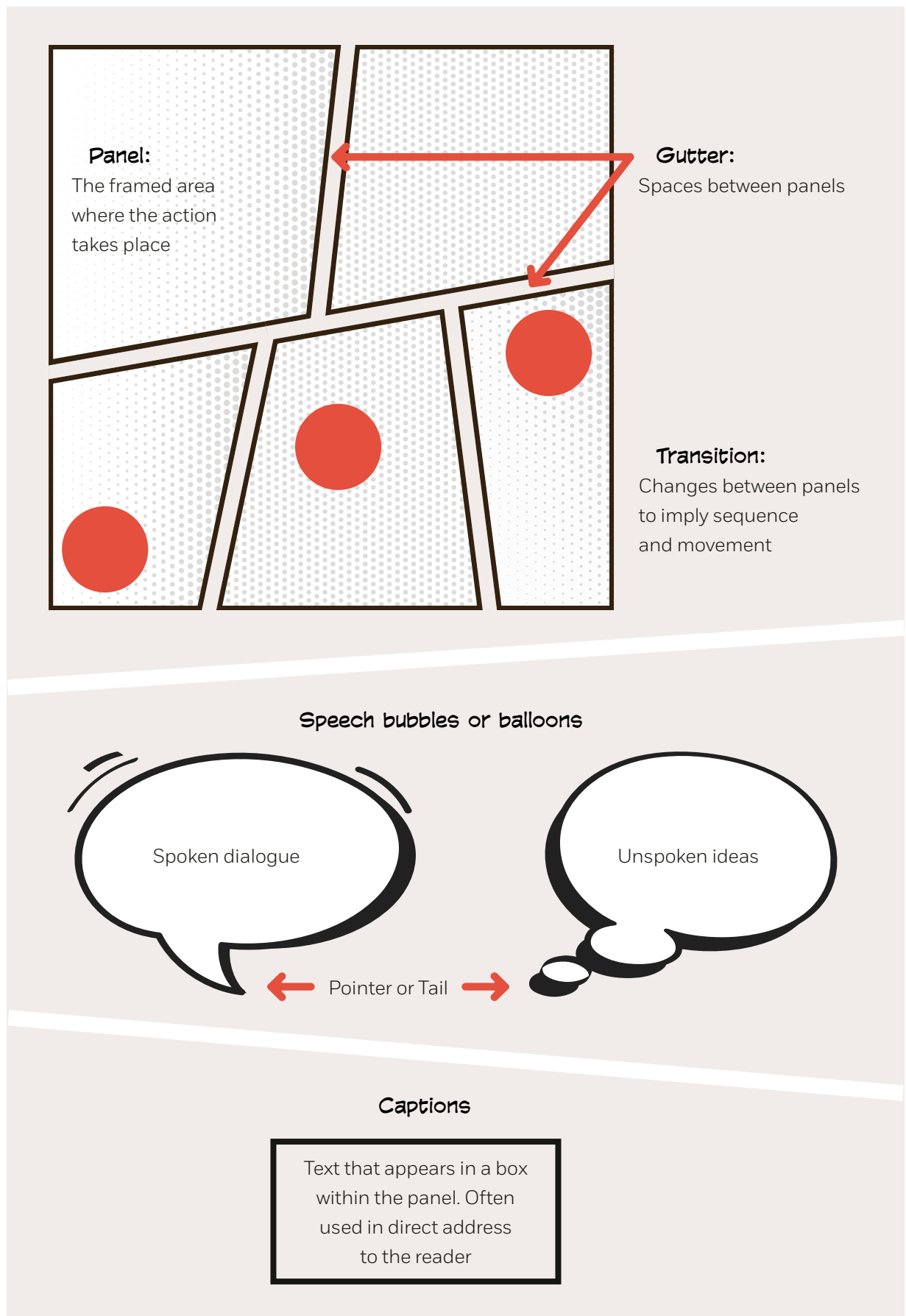
NOT-SO-NEW TO TEACHING WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS AND COMICS

Thanks for joining! We hope you find some new information you can use in your classes. Let's jump right into some important terminology for both you and your students to consider when thinking about and discussing graphic novels.

◼ GLOSSARY

Color* **Also known as hue.*	Color is used to convey mood and tone, distinguish emotional states and clarify or code one character from another. The color palette is the overall impression of the color landscape of the book.
Saturation	Dominance, intensity or purity of the color. In printing, it refers to the amount of pigment used in creating the ink.
Line	A basic building block of illustrations. Lines can express mood and evoke senses, including motion. Lines have style and expressivity from feathery and light to angular and heavy.
Gutters	The space, usually white, between the panels of a comic. The reader imagines the action that links the two static images and transforms them into a single idea. This is where reading comprehension is most active.
Panel	Acts as a general indicator that space and time are being divided. It's usually constructed by a line.
Transition	Changes between panels to imply sequence and movement.
Text/Font	Captions, speech bubbles, environmental text (signs). Look at the font and how the shape of the words is also a visual element.

◼ VISUAL GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Panel:
The framed area where the action takes place

Gutter:
Spaces between panels

Transition:
Changes between panels to imply sequence and movement

Speech bubbles or balloons

Spoken dialogue

Unspoken ideas

← Pointer or Tail →

Captions

Text that appears in a box within the panel. Often used in direct address to the reader

A WORD ON REPRESENTATION IN LITERATURE
IN THE CLASSROOM

It should come as no surprise that there is an over representation of white, male, and able characters in children's literature. Graphic novels and comics are no exception to this historical reality. But, the good news is, you have the chance of changing that! Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, in her article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," provided an elegant metaphor for literature that represented marginalized communities. This is such an important concept because one book can be a mirror for one reader and a window for another. But a truly well-written book can be a sliding glass door for some readers to "become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author" (p. 1).

One element of graphic novels that isn't talked about enough is the added benefit of seeing characters — actually seeing them. It may seem obvious, but seeing characters from different cultures provides another dimension to readers. By bringing graphic novels written by and about marginalized people into the formal curriculum, you are sending a clear message to your students that their histories and stories are worthy of serious study.

ACTIVITIES, DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, AND WRITING PROMPTS

■ PERSPECTIVE TAKING AND TRIUMPHS

Teaching students about taking others' perspectives and understanding the ways others overcome obstacles is a key element to middle school curricula. Graphic novels can be a powerful way to provide students with opportunities to witness and experience protagonists' struggles and triumphs. Heroes can be thought of as part of historically significant events, such as growing up as a refugee or the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans. But there are important perspectives and triumphs in smaller, personal stories as well. Instead of always thinking about heroes as placed "Once upon a time, long ago and far away," teachers can bring more contemporary perspectives into the middle school classroom. These graphic novels will engage students with stories from communities that are often left unexplored. Students must take in all the compelling layers when reading stories in graphic form, including how authors and illustrators communicate emotions, mood, and actions through color, line and using backgrounds to carry more of the narrative weight.

GRAPHIC NOVEL EXPLORATION

We suggest teachers take some time to start students off on the right foot by ensuring they have the skills to comprehend these multi-model texts. Go to your local library (public or school) and get as many graphic novels, spanning as many genres and styles as you can find, and bring them into the class. Make sure each student has a choice to read something that intrigues them.

Make piles of books spread out around the room. Talk to them about the paper, the weight, the color palette, and the style. Have students handle the books, flip through the pages, get a feel for them before choosing.

Also, load them up with sticky notes — because who doesn't love sticky notes?!

Provide the glossary for students to use as a reference tool.

Choose one of the graphic novels they will be reading and use it to model finding and explaining the impact of specific design features. Ask students to review the glossary and find examples in the books they choose. Then, ask them to mark and explain the design element and share their findings with others (this is where sticky notes — LOTS of sticky notes — really shine!). We are using George Takei's *They Called Us Enemy* for our example.

Speech bubbles
Pointed edges show yelling or anger. Police look bored, speech bubble is smooth and regular.

Light & shadow
Police car lights, light on his face from flashlight. Light from the banging on the door. All these are from the government and all mean threats.

Color
Transition to black panel is drastic. It signals the unknown.

They Called Us Enemy (Page 27)

GRAPHIC NOVELS AND DISCUSSIONS

After students have spent some time familiarizing themselves with comic design elements and the meanings they can carry, it is time to dive into the selected texts. We recommend having students choose the book they are going to read from a selection. You can give a short book talk on each while showing the illustrations to get students interested. It is especially important that they see the illustrations.

Once students have the books, make sure they slow down and look for the ways the illustrations are working. Ask them to use those sticky notes again! Finding, identifying, and understanding the ways the written text and illustrations work together is a terrific way to encourage close reading. Using sticky notes makes it easier for students to find the evidence they will need for small group discussions and writing prompts.

Have students tag specific design elements and explain what they mean. Nothing in a graphic novel is accidental, so these design elements communicate something, sometimes multiple meanings.
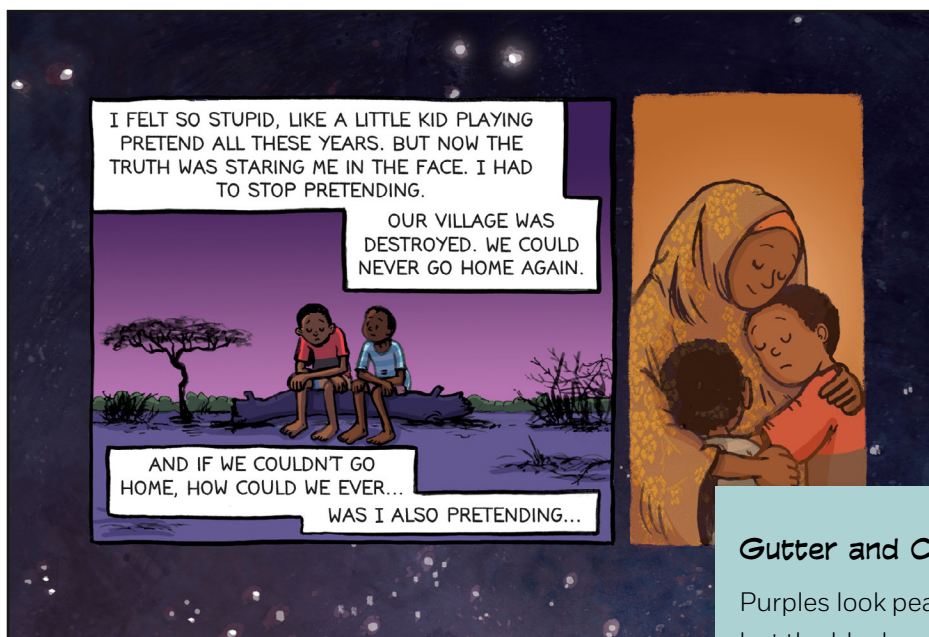

When Stars Are Scattered (Page 93)

Gutter and Color

Purples look peaceful in panel 1, but the black gutters make the entire page dark. The small twinkle of stars makes it seem a little hopeful. In Panel 2, the orange and gold are much more hopeful on the page of darkness. The use of orange for the clothing ties the family together.

Have students tag places where illustrations and written text align, where they diverge, and where one expands the other. Realizing the ways illustration and written text interplay often leads to a greater understanding of the story.

Witches of Brooklyn (Page 27)
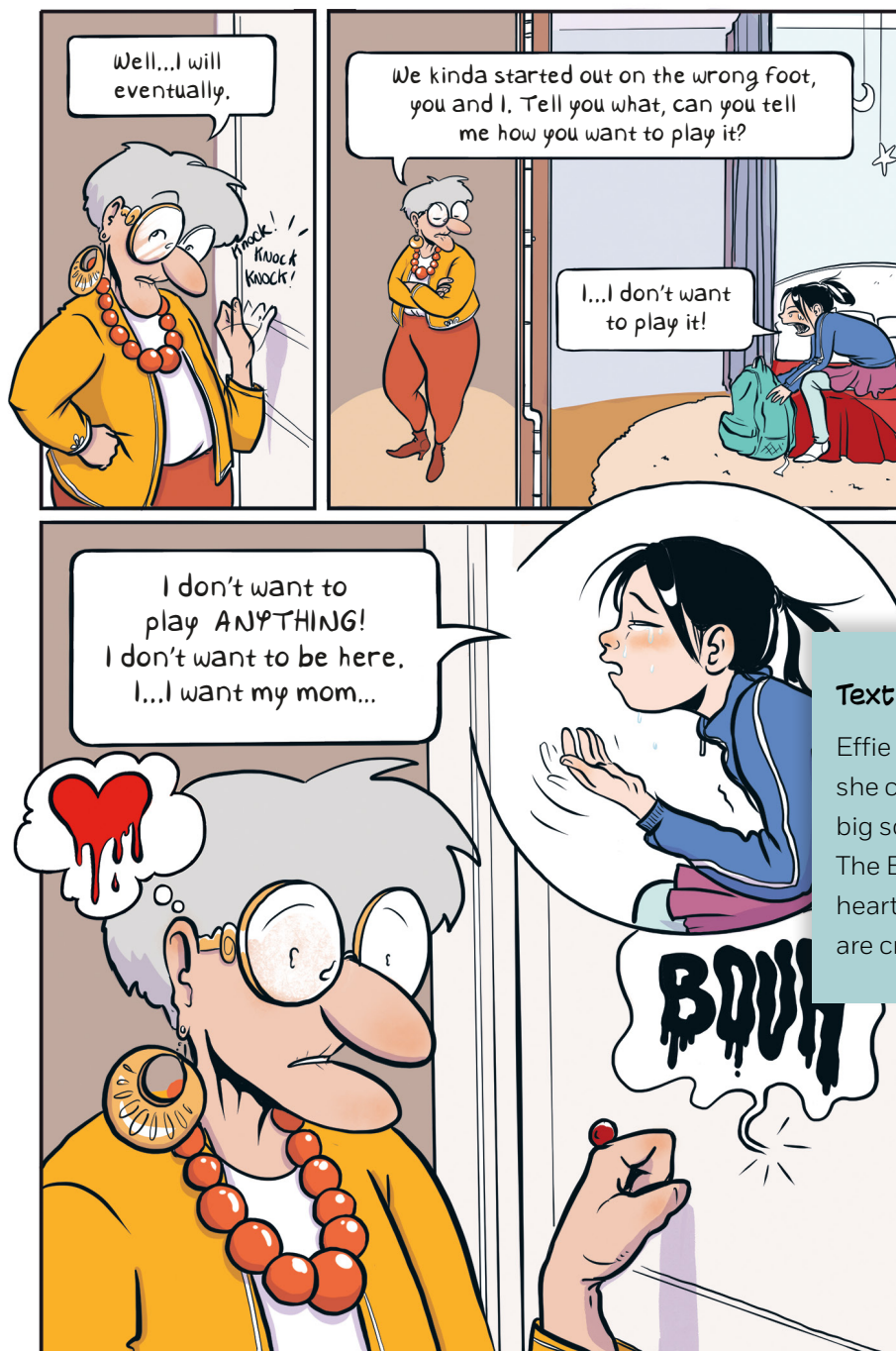
Text and Image Align

Effie is so mad and sad all she can do is make that big sound. She's crying. The BOUH and the little heart both look like they are crying too.

Have students tag transitions. This is an essential and often overlooked element of graphic novels. Authors and illustrators use transitions to set the story's pace — to speed it up or slow it down. They also use transitions to show time passing, emotions, and physical distances. Transitions are often signaled with color or shading changes.

The Magic Fish (Page 28)

Transitions

Two stories connect in these transitions. Mom escaping and promising not to forget, Alera escaping from the old man in the sea. Both are stories of escape and loss.

Transitions and color

From the old man (blue), to the mom's escape (gold), to the mother and son (pink)

■SUGGESTED SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Show something that surprised you in this section of the book. Why did it surprise you?

- Show a design element used to convey an emotion and discuss its effectiveness and why (think about color and line!).

- Show a page that was especially interesting to you. What was it that held your attention?

■SUGGESTED WRITING PROMPTS

WRITE A REVIEW FOR NEXT YEAR'S CLASS

- Draft a plotline and character sketches.

- Write a summary that includes details about the journey.

- Include details about illustrations (color, line, panels) and the ways sequence and transitions worked.

- Include comparisons to other books, movies, shows, or video games to help the reader connect with the book.

- Include whose story is being told (be specific!) and why it is important.

- Include pages or panels that illustrate style.

- Write and rewrite. Draft and redraft.

WRITE A THREE-PANEL MEMOIR IN COMIC FORM

- Select something that happened to you. Write the "original" or the story from your perspective. Then draw the same episode from two other perspectives.

- Create a comic that uses specific design elements. Think about what you want to convey and what you want to say.

- Draw and redraw. Draft and redraft.

CREATE A SLIDESHOW ABOUT HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

- Why is this an important time to capture?

- Why is it important to hear stories from marginalized people?

- How does focusing on a person change our view of history?

- What did you learn that was important or interesting?

A FINAL WORD

We hope this guide has given you some ideas to play with in your own class. Take a new form (comics and graphic novels) and allow yourself and your students time and space to learn and discover in new ways. Bringing graphic novels and comics into the curriculum brings a vibrant new way of seeing stories not often studied in school.

TITLES MENTIONED IN THIS GUIDE

Witches of Brooklyn
SOPHIE ESCABASSE

978-0-593-11927-3

Paperback | Random House Graphic
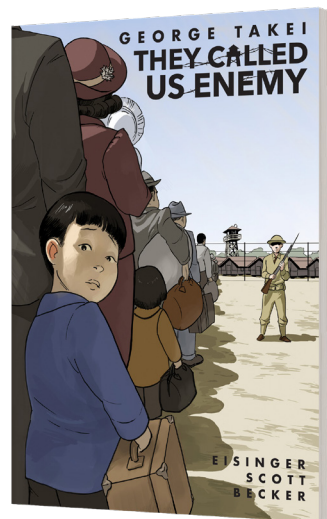240 pages | $12.99 | Lexile: GN320L
Also available: E-Book
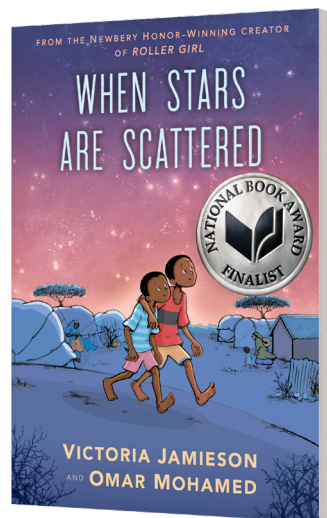
When Stars Are Scattered
VICTORIA JAMIESON and OMAR MOHAMED

978-0-525-55390-8

Paperback | Dial Books
264 pages | $12.99 | Lexile: N/A

The Magic Fish
TRUNG LE NGUYEN

978-1-9848-5159-8

Paperback | Random House Graphic
256 pages | $16.99 | Lexile: HL400L
Also available: E-Book

They Called Us Enemy
GEORGE TAKEI, JUSTIN EISINGER,
and STEVEN SCOTT
Illustrated by HARMONY BECKER

978-1-60309-450-4

Paperback | Top Shelf Productions
208 pages | $19.99 | Lexile: N/A
Also available: E-Book

REFERENCES

Sims Bishop, Rudine (1990). "Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix-xi.

SUGGESTED SCHOLARSHIP

Dallacqua, Ashley K. "Reading comics collaboratively and challenging literacy norms." *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 59.2 (2020): 169-190.

Jiménez, Laura M., et al. "Moving our can (n) ons: Toward an appreciation of multimodal texts in the classroom." *The Reading Teacher.* 71.3 (2017): 363-368.

Matthews, Casey Posey. *Making sense of the gutters: How advanced-level English teachers use graphic novels*. Diss. Cleveland State University, 2021.

Scott McCloud. Reinventing Comics: *The Evolution of an Art Form* (2000). New York. William Morrow.

Scott McCloud. Understanding Comics: *The Invisible Art* (1994). New York. William Morrow.

Visit our website, penguinrandomhouseeducation.com to browse more graphic fiction and non-fiction.