



# GRAPHIC NARRATIVES AND COMIC BOOKS

English 228-001  
Wednesday/Friday 10:10-11:30 am  
Palamountain 201  
Professor Paul Benzon  
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Office: Tisch 327  
Office Hours: Monday 10-11:30am, Thursday 1:30-3:00pm, and by appt.  
Course Blog: <https://gncbf16.wordpress.com/>

## Course Description

In recent years, the genre of the graphic narrative has seen an explosion in creative, provocative literary work—what has in the past been both feared as a threat to “proper” culture and dismissed as a cheap diversion for kids is now widely considered a serious art. Both scholars and casual readers alike have gravitated towards this burgeoning field, as an increasingly important form of literature in our increasingly visual culture.

In this course, we will explore a range of major graphic narratives from the past thirty years, studying how authors intertwine text and image on the page in ways that allow for new approaches to storytelling, new perspectives on social and cultural issues, and new ways of reading. Paying close attention to relations between the visual and the textual, we’ll consider how authors explore questions of history and politics, memory and trauma, gender and sexuality, and time and space in unique ways through this form. Readings may include texts by Scott McCloud, Art Spiegelman, Frank Miller, Alan Moore, Alison Bechdel, Chris Ware, Richard McGuire, and Phoebe Gloeckner.

## Course Goals

In this course, you will

- Gain familiarity with significant authors, texts, techniques, and concerns within the genre of graphic narrative
- Learn to read graphic narratives and comic books closely and critically, paying attention to how various elements of image and text produce literary meaning
- Engage graphic texts with an eye towards larger social, cultural, and historical questions, aided by theoretical and critical concepts and writings
- Participate in class discussions focused on close reading and literary interpretation
- Write thoughtfully and critically about graphic literature in a range of formats and contexts

## Required Texts

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 978-0060976255)

Alan Moore, *Watchmen* (978-1401245252)

Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus: 25th Anniversary Edition* (Pantheon, 978-0679406419)

Kyle Baker, *Nat Turner* (978-0810972278)

Alison Bechdel: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Mariner Books, 978-0618871711)

Phoebe Gloeckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl, Revised Edition: An Account in Words and Pictures* (978-1623170349)

Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (978-0375714542)

Selected other texts available in Course Packet

## Grading

You must complete all of the following course assignments in order to pass the course:

Class Participation	20%
Course Blog	20%
Page Annotation	15%
Analytical Paper	20%
Final Paper	25%

Late work will be marked down one grade level for each class period after the due date (for example, from a B+ to a B for one late day). Extensions will only be granted in the case of an emergency documented by a college dean.

### **Preparation, Participation, and Class Structure**

We will spend our class time each day on a variety of different activities, including but not limited to full-class discussions, small-group discussions, presentations, and in-class writing. While I may occasionally give short lectures, the bulk of our time will be spent talking and engaging together with the course material and with each other's ideas. In order to do this, it is essential that you come to class prepared to address the day's material. This means printing out (if necessary) and completing all reading before class, bringing the reading to class, and being prepared to discuss the reading thoughtfully. You should have interpretations, questions, and responses to share with the class, and you should be prepared to offer these and to be called on in our conversation. The more each of you brings your own thinking to the discussion, the more all of us will get out of class—I encourage you to offer perspectives, ideas, examples, oppositions, questions, and other contributions as much as possible. If you are uncomfortable with speaking in class, please let me know or come see me at the beginning of the semester so that we can work together to make things easier for you.

Although I will rarely lecture, that does not mean that you should not take notes on what the class has to say about the material we are discussing, just as you would in a lecture course. Having a record of the class' comments, concerns, debates, etc., will be extremely valuable to you in preparing to develop topics and arguments for further writing and thinking in the course. More broadly, consistently remaining actively engaged in our discussions, even if only as a listener and note-taker at certain moments, will help you to develop as a critical thinker and writer.

**Laptops and tablets may be used in class only for class-related work such as note-taking, class writing, and research. If inappropriate computer or electronic use becomes a problem for some members of the class, I will revoke permission to use them for the class as a whole. If you have questions about whether a certain use of technology is appropriate or not, please don't hesitate to ask me.**

### **Course Blog**

Over the course of the semester, you will post regularly to a course blog focused on the texts and issues we will be discussing in class. This work will serve several purposes: firstly (and most immediately), it will give us a chance to think and talk critically about some of the course material before we discuss it in class and to gear our discussion towards issues and questions that are important to you or that you are curious about. In giving you the opportunity to bring new material and new areas of concern into our conversation, it will also help you to generate topics, ideas, and arguments for papers.

*Blog Posting.* Note that the blog is located on our independent course website at <https://gncbf16.wordpress.com/>, **not on Blackboard** (although we will use Blackboard for email, papers, and other elements of the course). You are not required to register with WordPress in order to post on the blog, but you must subscribe to the blog so that you receive notifications of new material that I post, and you should include your name or other identifying information in your posts so that we can all follow the conversation online and I can give you credit for your work. The current post will appear at the top of the page—click on the comments link for that post to read what others have written and post your writing.

*Blog Content.* The topics and focuses for your posts to the blog are largely open-ended: while I may occasionally suggest issues or questions for you to write about or approaches you might take, what you focus on will largely be up to you. The blog is a space for us as a group to be reflective about the material we are discussing, and to begin to air initial responses, interpretations, and reactions before we pursue them more fully in class discussion. In this spirit, your posting to the blog should be thoughtful and analytical—you should always ground your writing in quotation and close analysis of our reading for the day including both visual and textual elements, and you should offer interpretations and critical questions rather than summaries or solely personal responses.

Each week on the blog, you should submit **one main post of your own and one response to a classmate's post.** Your main post should be at least 250 words (this is roughly equivalent to one double-spaced typed page—you might write and edit your post in Microsoft Word or a similar program so that you know the length of your post and so that you have a backup of it on your computer). Your response can be shorter than your main post, but should address your classmate's post thoughtfully and substantively—rather than simply agreeing or disagreeing, you should build upon, expand, complicate, or otherwise analytically engage their ideas just as you would in a live classroom discussion. Depending on what is already on the blog when you go to post your main post of the week, you may choose to make that main post a response to a classmate's writing; however, that post should still be at least 250 words, and you should still make a second shorter response post later on.

*Blog Scheduling.* Unless I specify otherwise, each week's main blog post will be due before Wednesday's class (consult the course schedule below for specific details). In order to ensure that everyone has a chance to read comments and absorb the online discussion before we meet on Wednesday, **main posts are due by midnight on Tuesday night. Response posts are due by class time on Friday. Because of the time-sensitive nature of the blog, late posts and responses will not receive credit.**

*Blog Grading.* I will grade your main blog posts on a scale of 1-4 each week. Criteria for each grade are as follows:

### **Grade Characteristics**

- 1 The post is missing, late, or severely underdeveloped, showing minimal engagement with the text and the issues it raises.
- 2 The post is underdeveloped: it meets at least some of the technical requirements of the assignment, but consists mostly of summary or personal response rather than close analysis of or critical thinking about the text.
- 3 The post is successful: it uses textual or other material to make analytical claims, and begins to develop them, but those claims or connections are not fully developed or analyzed.
- 4 The post is exceptional: it uses textual or other material to make thoughtful, original analytical claims and/or connections, and engages and analyzes the issues it raises in independent, in-depth ways.

I will grade response posts on a credit/no credit basis based on your completing them substantively and on time.

### **Annotation**

As part of our work in the early weeks of the course, you will choose a single page or two-page spread from either *Watchmen*, *Maus*, or "I Saw It" to scan, annotate, and write about in a reflection of 3-4 pages (your choice of material should be something we have *not* substantially discussed in class). This assignment is intended to give you an opportunity to engage in close, in-depth analysis of a small

unit of text with an eye towards how graphic elements shape the literary meaning of a text. I will provide more in-depth instructions for this assignment in advance of the due date.

### **Analytical Paper**

You will write a 5-7 page analytical paper in which you make an argument about how one text (either *Nat Turner*, *Fun Home*, or *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*) engages thematic and social questions through form. In this paper, you should develop your argument through sustained close analysis of the text you choose. I will provide more in-depth instructions for this assignment in advance of the due date.

### **Final Paper**

Your final assignment for this course will be a paper of 8-10 pages focusing on one text from the course. The specific topic of your paper will be up to you, although I will expect you to engage some of the large-scale issues of the course and to make an argument in dialogue with other research material. A proposal and working bibliography for this paper will be due earlier in the semester, and we will discuss your topic in an individual conference. You will also submit a draft of your paper for an in-class workshop; these preliminary pieces of the paper will count as part of your overall grade for the paper.

### **Attendance**

You are permitted a total of **two absences** throughout the semester without penalty. For each subsequent absence, your final course grade will drop one-third of a letter (e.g., from an A- to a B+), and after four absences, you risk failing the course. Repeated or excessive lateness will also count as an absence.

If you miss all or part of a class, it is your responsibility to keep up with the work for the course—make sure to follow the syllabus, stay on track with the reading, turn in any written work that was due for the day, and consult a classmate, check the course website on Blackboard, or come see me during my office hours to talk about what you might have missed in class.

### **Office Hours**

I want each of you to be successful in this class. Helping each of you develop as readers, writers, thinkers, and students of literature is important to me, and I want to do what I can to help you achieve those goals and succeed in my class. More importantly, I have a great deal of interest in the material we will be working on this semester, and I would love for you to get the same enjoyment and excitement from it that I do. If you have any questions, problems, or things you want to discuss—about the course, the readings, writing assignments or paper ideas, the English Department, life at Skidmore, future academic or career plans, or anything else at all—or if you simply want to talk more about what we're doing in class, please come see me. I encourage you to think of meeting with me not just as a last resort or something to do when you need help, but as a central part of making your learning more productive, meaningful, and enjoyable. My office hours are Monday 10-11:30am and Thursday 1:30-3:00pm in Tisch Hall 327—this time is set aside for us to talk and for me to help you and work with you. If you aren't free during that time, get in touch with me before or after class or by email and we can set up a time that is more convenient. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you are having trouble or feel you need help, or for any other reason at all.

### **Accessibility**

If you anticipate needing accommodations regarding any element of this course, please come talk with me early in the semester so that we can work together to address these issues. You should also visit the Office of Student Academic Services at <http://www.skidmore.edu/accessibility/index.php> for more information.

### **Academic Integrity**

Independent thinking and writing are crucial elements of both your work in this course and the intellectual culture of Skidmore more broadly. Violating these principles through plagiarism or other academic dishonesty is a serious offense. Plagiarized work will receive a failing grade for the assignment and may result in more serious consequences as well. If you have any questions about citation, attribution, or plagiarism, please do not hesitate to ask me before you hand in your work. For more information about Skidmore's academic integrity policy, visit <http://www.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.php>.

### **Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct**

Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available.

More information can be found at <https://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/> or by contacting the Title IX Deputy Coordinator.

## Course Schedule

The schedule below may change over the course of the semester. I will announce any changes in class and/or via email. It is your responsibility to keep abreast of these changes by attending class, checking your email and the class blog regularly, and contacting me or coming to my office if you have any questions.

### Heroes and Anti-Heroes, or, How to Read Comics

- Wed. September 7      **Course Introduction: Are Comics Serious Literature?**
- Fri. September 9      Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* Intro-93  
**Introductory Blog Post Due Midnight Thursday**
- Wed. September 14    Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* 1-108  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**
- Fri. September 16    Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* 109-210  
Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 94-117 and 185-192  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**
- Wed. September 21    Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* 211-312  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**
- Fri. September 23    Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* 312-end  
Andrew Hoberek, "Is It Literature?," from *Considering Watchmen: Poetics, Property, Politics*  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**

### I Saw It: History, Trauma, Representation

- Wed. September 28    Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, Book I, 1-95  
Art Spiegelman, "A Problem of Taxonomy"  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**
- Fri. September 30    Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, Book I, 95-Book II 74  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**

**\*\*Tuesday, October 4: Art Spiegelman Lecture, 7pm in Gannett Auditorium\*\***

- Wed. October 5      Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, Book II, 74-end  
Art Spiegelman, "Early Maus"  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**

- Fri. October 7      Keiji Nakazawa, "I Saw It"  
 Hillary Chute, "Seeing New," from *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**  
**Annotation Due Monday, October 10, 9am**
- Wed. October 12      **No Class: Yom Kippur**
- Fri. October 14      Kyle Baker, *Nat Turner* 1-59  
 Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton*  
**Blog Post Due Midnight THURSDAY**
- Wed. October 19      Kyle Baker, *Nat Turner* 60-131  
 University of Virginia Special Collections, "A Guide to a Speech and Photographs Relating to Nat Turner's Insurrection" (online)  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**
- Fri. October 21      Kyle Baker, *Nat Turner* 132-207  
 Kenneth Greenberg, Selections from *The Confessions of Nat Turner: Text and Context*  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**

### Memory, Autobiography, Family, Body

- Wed. October 26      Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* 1-86  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**
- Fri. October 28      Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* 87-150  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**
- Wed. November 2      Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* 151-232  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**
- Fri. November 4      Phoebe Gloeckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* xv-119  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**
- Wed. November 9      Phoebe Gloeckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* 120-190  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**
- Fri. November 11      Phoebe Gloeckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* 191-291  
 Phoebe Gloeckner, "Minnie's 3<sup>rd</sup> Love, Or: Nightmare on Polk Street"  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**  
**Analytical Paper Due Monday, November 13, 9am**

## Time, Space, and the Page

- Wed. November 16 Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**
- Fri. November 18 Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**  
**Paper Proposal Due Sunday, November 20, 9pm**  
**Paper Proposal Conferences Monday and Tuesday, November 21-22**
- Wed. November 23 **No Class: Thanksgiving**
- Fri. November 25 **No Class: Thanksgiving**
- Wed. November 30 Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*  
**Blog Post Due Midnight Tuesday**
- Fri. December 2 Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*  
**Response Post Due by Class Time**
- Wed. December 7 **Final Paper Workshop**  
**Paper Draft Due Tuesday, December 6**
- Fri. December 9 Johanna Drucker, "What Is Graphic About Graphic Novels?"
- Wed. December 14 **Final Class: Conclusions, Reflections, Celebrations**
- Final Paper Due Monday, December 19**