

Back to School, Comic Book Style

Because the school year started just over a month ago, I've started thinking about "educational" comics. The quotation marks don't mean I doubt these comics' (cataloged in "Graphics" at the library) educational value. I just want to avoid the big cloud of "boring" that accompanies the phrase EDUCATIONAL COMIC BOOKS. So what do I mean? I only mean comics directly related to what you might learn about in school. So, even though you can learn a lot from Spider-Man, I won't be talking about it here because it probably isn't on the syllabus. Additionally, I won't be writing about Neil Gaiman's Sandman series, even though it's full of literary and historical references--including ones to Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream and the ancient Roman empire--because Sandman isn't specifically about them.

So here we go:

Many fans of the book Fahrenheit 451 were confused—some even upset—by the publication in 2009 of Tim Hamilton's adaptation of Ray Bradbury's classic fantasy/science fiction novel about book burning. Bradbury set the story in a future where books are banned and deep thought is discouraged. A line in the novel makes it sound like Bradbury believes comic books to be shallow, lacking any intellectual value. But later in the novel he has a character, reminiscing about back when books were allowed, says, "Books were only one type of receptacle where we stored a lot of the things we were afraid we might forget," and that television and radio programs could have "the same infinite detail and awareness" of books, but, in the future world of Fahrenheit 451, they aren't being used that way. Bradbury believes content is more important than format. Presumably that belief extends to comic books.

Bradbury's story is set in a possible future. We also have nonfiction comics about the past, such as biographies of J. Edgar Hoover, Anne Frank, and Roberto Clemente. There are also books like Art Spiegelman's Maus, about his Jewish father's experiences during the Holocaust, and Marjane Satrapi's memoir, Persepolis, about growing up in Iran. Both books have won awards, and are sometimes used in high school and college classes.

If you're interested in more recent history, I recommend AD: New Orleans After the Deluge. Despite the name, Josh Neufeld's comic covers people in New Orleans not only after, but before, and during Hurricane Katrina. He tells the true stories of seven people—some of them evacuated, some stayed behind, and together their experiences make captivating reading.

And then there's Kill Shakespeare, but you didn't hear about that one from me.

Robert Mixner is a Reference Librarian at Bartholomew County Public Library.