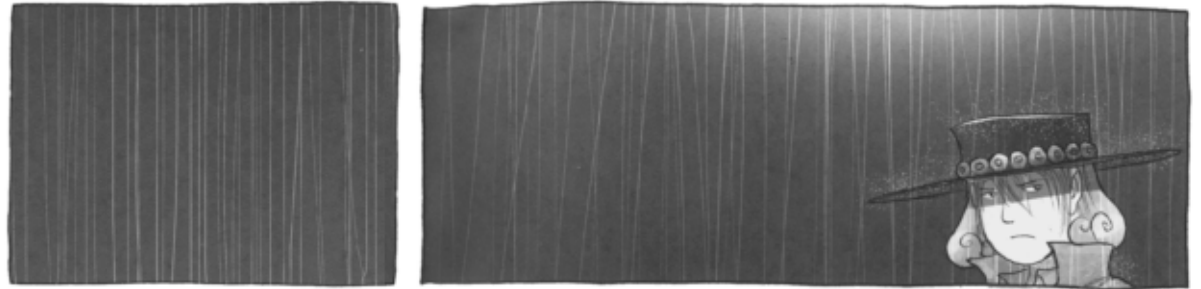


# Reading Lessons

## Graphic Novels 101

By Hollis Margaret Rudiger



**S**mall children read all the time. Hand any preliterate four-year-old a picture book, and she will tell you exactly what is happening on each page by reading what she sees. Even before she can recognize a single letter, the child is able to make meaning from symbols. Unknowingly, she relies on what educators call “prior knowledge” to interpret pictorial clues that are not necessarily realistic representations of what she sees every day. The sun, for example, isn’t a circle with sticks coming out all over the place. And grass is rarely Kelly green, yet a swatch of green along the bottom of a page surely connotes grass.

As the concept of letters and sounds having meaning emerges and words are introduced, suddenly the child begins to believe that she actually *can’t* read, because the squiggles mean nothing; as she gets older, “reading comprehension” means reading words exclusively and means less, if any, emphasis on understanding the nuances of visual images as symbols. An art history elective in high school might revisit visual literacy, or perhaps a computer class on Web design will address the function of white space and organization of nonlinear information, but not every student has such opportunities. No wonder grownups don’t read comics: they don’t know how. And if grownups can’t read comics, they certainly can’t be expected to value them, much less promote them among children and teens.

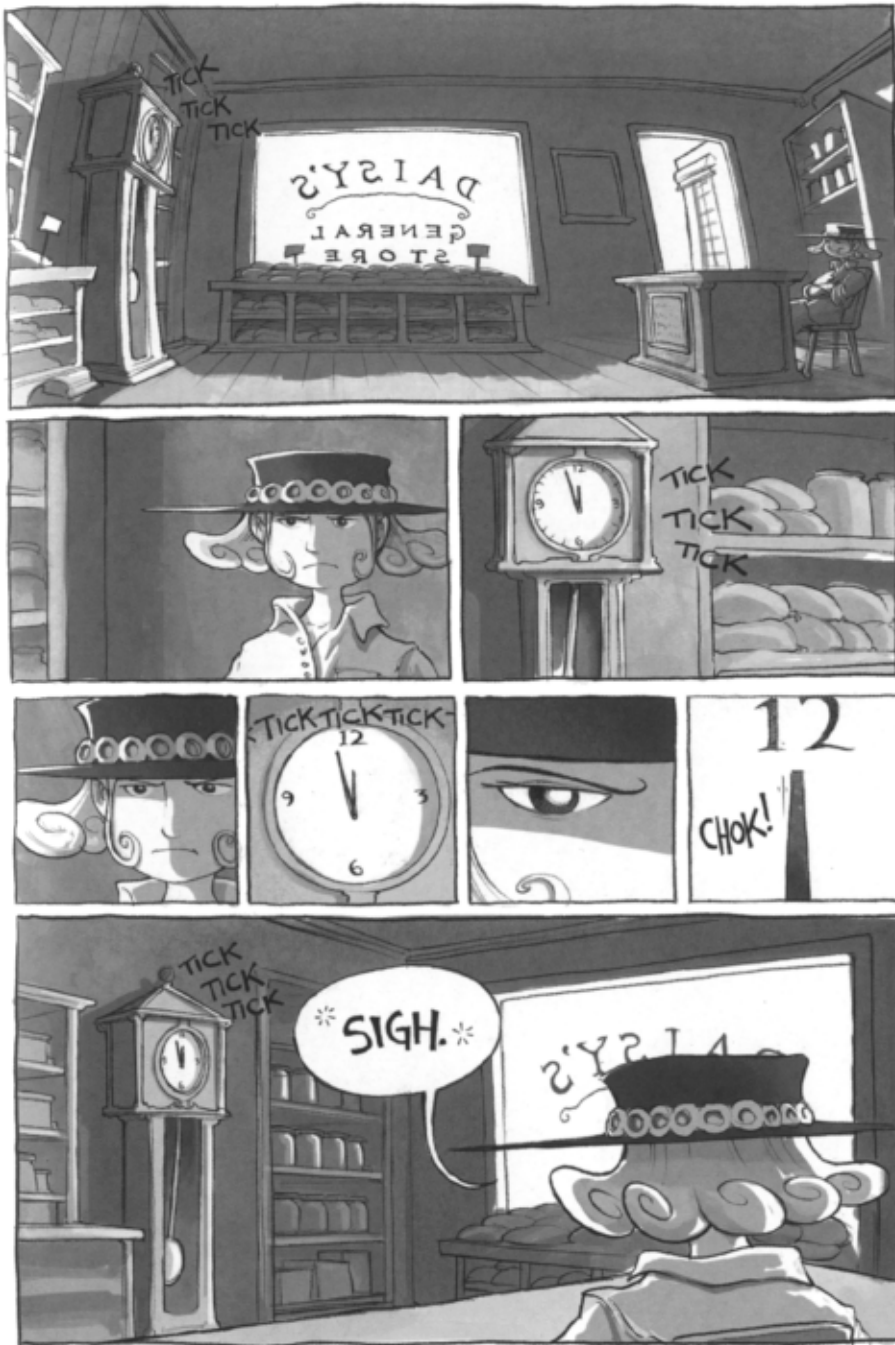
When reading a graphic novel, be like a child. Notice every visual detail. Artists must convey as much information as possible in a limited amount of space, and no pencil stroke is accidental. If a character has long hair, ask yourself why. If there is a rug in a room, and it has stripes, that’s significant. Maybe it provides visual texture and creates an aesthetic response (albeit subconsciously). Or maybe there’s a trapdoor hidden beneath. A good

visual storyteller creates suspense and anticipation through the artwork as much as, if not more than, through the text. If you have read this far, there is no doubt you can handle the text part on your own, so let’s move into the art.

We’ll begin with some basic vocabulary. A *panel* refers to the boxlike “unit” that depicts a single scene in the narrative. Some panels have clear-cut borders, a black line even, and are arranged neatly on the page. Others are more abstract and sprawling, and scenes spill into one another. For this, a basic lesson in reading graphic novels, we will look at the first few panels of *Daisy Kutter: The Last Train* (Viper Comics) by Kazu Kibuishi—a graphic novel appropriate for middle-school readers on up—to see what is happening inside each one. We will also consider what is happening in that space between the panels known as the *gutter*. For it is in that place where your brain, unbeknownst to you, connects each scene, creating movement and action. The writer/artist is counting on you to draw conclusions and fill in what happens in that microsecond of space.

The tiny second it takes for your eyeball to move to the next panel could encompass a minute of action or a month. Many small panels will read more quickly and will suggest action—action that is more important than the narrative details you might notice in a larger panel. Big panels take longer to read and assimilate; your eye naturally spends more time there, looking for as much information as possible. When discussing the efficacy of a graphic novel, fans will often remark on the effectiveness of the pacing, and this refers to the creator’s ability to move you along at speeds that are appropriate for the story.

Now, on to *Daisy Kutter*.



AT LEFT, WE SEE the first page of the book. To begin, what does the layout of the panels tell us? The page is divided up into three horizontally rectangular sections, two large panels at top and bottom, with six smaller panels in between. The two large panels grab and hold your attention; the smaller panels indicate action and movement.

Second, what can we tell about the narrative content? Other than the words *Daisy's General Store* that appear, in reverse, as a part of the set (note the similarity to terms used in theater and film), the only words on the page are sound effects. But there is still much to read. To begin, move your eyes from left to right, just as you would any book, starting from the top and moving down. In panel #1, the character we presume to be Daisy (based on the book's title and the words on the window) appears bored or impatient, signaled by her crossed arms and the large, loud clock that towers over her. The position of the clock on the extreme left and Daisy on the extreme right sets the two up in clear opposition. The section of smaller panels just below provide the majority of the action in this opening scene. The camera alternates quickly between shots of Daisy (whose scowl appears more fierce up close) and the clock, and we are now sure that the clock is the source of her foul mood. So Daisy's mood and the passage of time (or the slowness thereof, as we might guess from the loud "SIGH" in panel #8) are related.

Third, what is the significance of the subtle differences between the top panoramic scene and the bottom one? In the top panel, as though there were an actual camera lens, there appears to be a distortion or a parallax resulting in a kind of fishbowl perspective. We, the readers, are not a part of the drama; we see the scene laid out as though on a stage. There is no physical space where we could be. Note how different the bottom panel is, despite its being a panoramic view of the same scene: the fishbowl effect is gone, and the camera angle has shifted, so that we are now seeing things from Daisy's point of view. We are *inside* the story.

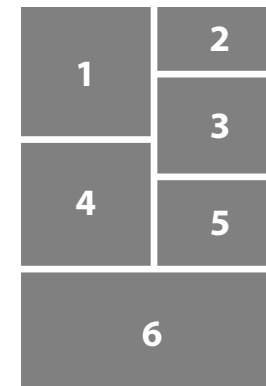
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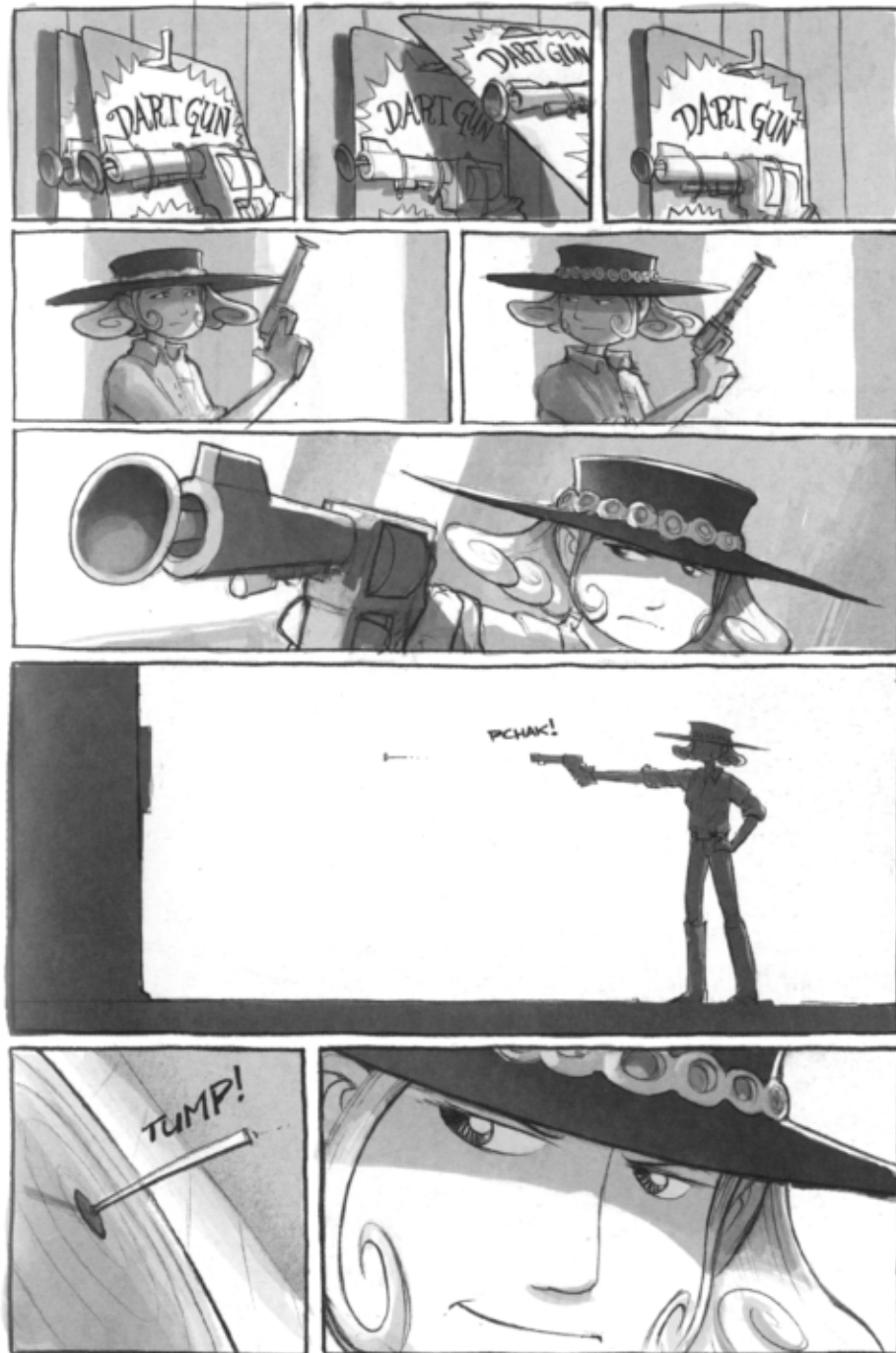


ON THIS SECOND PAGE, start at the top left, as before. Here the panels are laid out more vertically and are staggered rather than marching linearly across the page. In panel #1 we see what appears to be the same clock, partially covered up by some kind of cloth—and if we look closely, we see that it is a shirt. (We assume it was Daisy who put the shirt there. Is time moving too slowly for her, or is she just trying to muffle the noise?) Following the “rules,” we move our eyes to the right. Someone, probably Daisy, is sweeping. Now what? If we continue to follow the rules—i.e., move our eyes back to the left on the same level—we end up back at panel #1. This is intentional and gives the sense that these things—the ticking of the clock and the sweeping—are happening simultaneously. Now, what if instead of following the strict left-to-right rule, your eyes move directly from panel #2 to panel #3, a vertical movement? Does your eye naturally want to follow the broom? Logically, the two broom panels seem closely related. Does it change the meaning of the story so far? Probably not. In this case the purpose of the placement of the first three panels is to make us feel as if no time is passing at all.

Even as an avid reader of graphic novels, I sometimes need to read the same panels a few different ways until it makes sense. That’s OK. It’s disconcerting because we are used to reading only one way, but sometimes, as here, the order of the panels really doesn’t matter. And when it does matter, you’ll know to reverse, and try a different way.

Let’s move down to the next level, where (in panel #4) Daisy is resting her head on her arms at the counter, and then move right, to a close-up of Daisy, still scowling. But something has caught her eye. She is clearly looking at something. We move quickly to see what it is, and there we pause at the large bottom panel that has at its center a bull’s-eye. With its central placement and boldly contrasting concentric rings, the bull’s-eye is the most arresting image introduced so far. Daisy seems to think so, too.





ON PAGE THREE, we return to smaller, more numerous panels. Here there's no ambiguously juxtaposed arrangement of the panels; they are entirely linear and move a lot faster than on the page before, which is no surprise given the higher number of panels in the same amount of space.

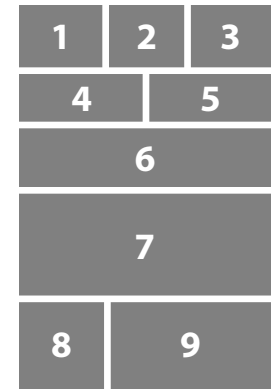
We start with a sequence that, at face value, is almost magical: the toy dart gun seems to move off the hook on its own. But since we still have that curious bull's-eye image in our immediate memory cache, the omission of a visible human agent isn't troublesome: we're sure that it's Daisy who has lifted the dart gun off its hook. By not seeing her right away, we are much more focused on the action than on her character, a change from the first two pages. (The speedy pace—three small panels in quick succession—also distracts our attention, for the packaged plastic dart guns are surely an anomaly in what we thought was an old-fashioned setting.)

Finally, we see the marriage of action and character as Daisy poses like a sharpshooter (panels #4 and #5), aims (#6), and fires (in the long panel #7). In panel #8, the dart hits the target ("TUMP!") in the center of the bull's-eye, and in panel #9, we see, for the first time, a slight smile on Daisy's face. She has gone from bored and restless to pleased with herself, even smug. Her gaze is steely and intense. There is clearly much more to this young woman than keeping shop.



WE'VE READ ONLY three pages of this 153-page graphic novel, and already we have significant questions relating to form and content. Why do the largest panels on the bottom of the page chronicle the shortest amount of time? What does the suction-cup dart gun mean for Daisy's character and for the setting?

I once asked a roomful of English and language arts teachers, novices to the graphic novel format, to read these first pages of



*Daisy Cutter* to me. I had walked them through a few panels and asked them to fill in the remaining details. They were silent. Finally, I realized I needed to be more specific, so I threw out words like *metaphor*, *allusion*, *plot*, *setting*, reminding them that the same vocabulary they use to analyze narrative text could be used to analyze narrative pictures. After a few minutes, they began to shout out ideas that indicated they were very good readers indeed, when they took the time to really *look*. They gathered that the story took place in the “olden days,” and agreed that it was probably supposed to be the Old West (Daisy’s outfit, the sacks of flour, the canned goods). They thought Daisy was pretty but rough around the edges. They disagreed about whether she was waiting for something specific or was just bored. Someone remarked on the geometric shapes that were repeated throughout: the circles and swirls in Daisy’s hair and hat, on the clock face, and on the bull’s-eye; the vertical lines in the panels and shelves and the tall clock. Then another person wondered if it was significant that on the first page we never see a full-body shot of Daisy. And what about those unsettling plastic dart guns? By this point, the room was buzzing. They couldn’t wait to find out if their interpretations were correct, or whether their speculations would pay off, and they were universally intrigued by Daisy as a character.

We walked through several more pages together, and I found I had to do less and less explaining as they became more confident at reading the pictures—which, they realized, didn’t just supplement the story.

They *were* the story.



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