



Raising a Reader!

**How Comics &
Graphic Novels
Can Help**

Your Kids Love To Read!

By Meryl Jaffe

Introduction by Jennifer L. Holm

— A **Comic Book Legal Defense Fund** Publication —



Comics!

Not only are they fun, they're an incredible tool for helping create a genuine love of reading. While the connection of words and pictures at first seems playful, the skills readers develop help provide a practical foundation for other kinds of learning. From verbal and visual literacy to critical thinking and memory, comics are a great tool to give young readers a head start.

In *Raising A Reader*, we'll talk about what comics and graphic novels offer young readers, show what goes into reading a comic, and provide some recommendations for ways to create reading activities for individuals and groups. We'll also give you directions to resources you can look at next.

Here's to comics, and how they'll help your kids love to read!

— Jennifer L. Holm

Comic Book Legal Defense Fund



A non-profit organization protecting the Freedom to Read! We are dedicated to the protection of the First Amendment rights of the comics art form and its community of retailers, creators, publishers, librarians, and readers. CBLDF provides legal referrals, representation, advice, assistance, and education in the furtherance of these goals.

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What Graphic Novels Offer Kids

Visit a visual wonderland.

Imagine a book with scenes of vivid colors or in black and white images, whose textures you can feel escorting you through a story, a life, a world, as short bursts of text and windowed panels and panes lead you through that realm. This is the graphic novel reading experience awaiting you and your kids. It's inviting, exciting, and always engaging.

Graphic Novels provide exciting reading experiences for all kinds of readers.

Graphic novels' short bursts of text (often in **Fun Fonts**) and vivid images are accessible to all kinds of readers and language learners.

For weak language learners and readers, graphic novels' concise text paired with detailed images help readers decode and comprehend the text. Reading is less daunting (with less text to decode), with concise verbiage that highlights effective language usage and vocabulary, and the images invite and engage readers.

For skilled readers, graphic novels offer a different type of reading experience while modeling concise language usage. Because the text has to be succinct, graphic novels model how to efficiently communicate stories, lines, and ideas in short, pithy text.

Graphic Novels by their very nature draw the reader into the story.

With graphic novels, readers actively construct the story as they travel across and down the page from panel to panel, processing the text and images. Furthermore, the vivid images transport readers, making them feel like they're there in the middle of the action. This creative and interactive process makes reading engaging and often more fun.

The quality, quantity, and diversity of kids' graphic novels is simply AWESOME.

With the explosion of technology, communication, and graphic arts, graphic novel illustrations, formats, and story-telling are diverse — appealing to all types of readers. Outstanding children's and young adult graphic novels can be found in an array of genres such as fantasy, science fiction, romance, fiction, biography, and classics. Furthermore, there has been a dazzling burst of nonfiction



graphic novels, making them extraordinary resources for learning about science, famous people, places, and events in and out of classrooms. These books offer a feast for the eyes and mind and are worth a closer look.

Graphic novels and suggested graphic novel reading lists for kids of various ages and grades can be found in local bookstores, comic book shops, libraries, and online. Please visit CBLDF's monthly column, "Using Graphic Novels in Education," for suggestions.

However, if you can't wait for our column, and your favorite librarian is out with the flu, here are a few resources to help:

Booklist	Voice of Youth Advocates
Children's Graphic Novel Core Collection (ALSC)	Good Comics for Kids @ School Library Journal
YALSA Great Graphic Novels for Teens List	No Flying No Tights
Kirkus Reviews	The Graphic Classroom
Library Journal	Graphic Novel Reporter
Library Media Connection	Diamond Comics Bookshelf
School Library Journal	Manga Bookshelf

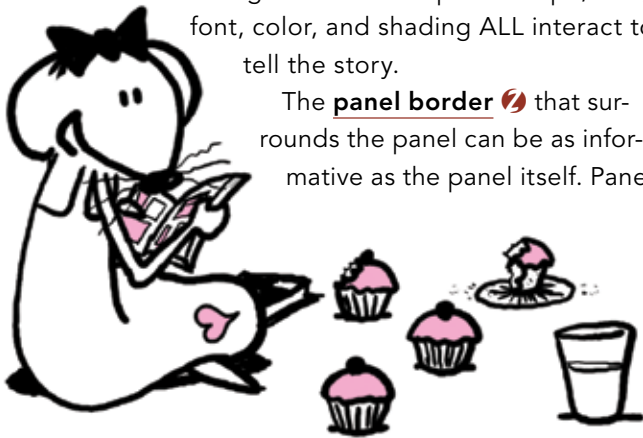
Graphic Novels 101:

When learning to read graphic novels, you have to be willing to slow down. Realize that this is a totally different reading experience. Realize that you will be reading the text and art, all while incorporating the incoming information as you build the story.

Here are the basics:

In graphic novels, the story is broken down and presented in sequential time frames called **panels** 🌀. Each panel contains text and/or images bound within a specific shape — usually a rectangle or box. The panel shape, text, font, color, and shading ALL interact to tell the story.

The **panel border** 🌀 that surrounds the panel can be as informative as the panel itself. Panel



borders help your eye and mind define and focus on each story segment. For example:

- Dream sequences are often presented in panels whose borders consist of dotted or wavy lines.
- Panels conveying tremendous force or energy may have their panel borders interrupted as objects, arms, or feet protrude to show force or movement.
- Sometimes conversation panels are embedded in larger panels to show what is going on both within an intimate conversation while among a larger whole.

The **arrangement of the panels** 🌀 on the page also helps tell the story. Typically, panels are arranged (and read) in sequence from left to right and from the top to the bottom of the page.

In the case of Japanese graphic novels, or manga, panels are arranged from right to left and top to bottom, and this reading order is sometimes preserved in the English language presentation.

There are times however, when the panel arrangement may be more novel. For example:

- A small panel may be embedded in a much larger panel to help relate background information along with important information the authors want you to focus upon.
- Sometimes the panels are arranged left to right from the top to the bottom across a two-page spread instead of one page. This is usually done when there are many important sequences (essential to each other) that can't be broken up with the turn of a page.
- There are also times when the panels are arranged in different configurations — a circle for example — adding details to the story (in the case of a circular arrangement this may be done to show the continuity of the interactions).

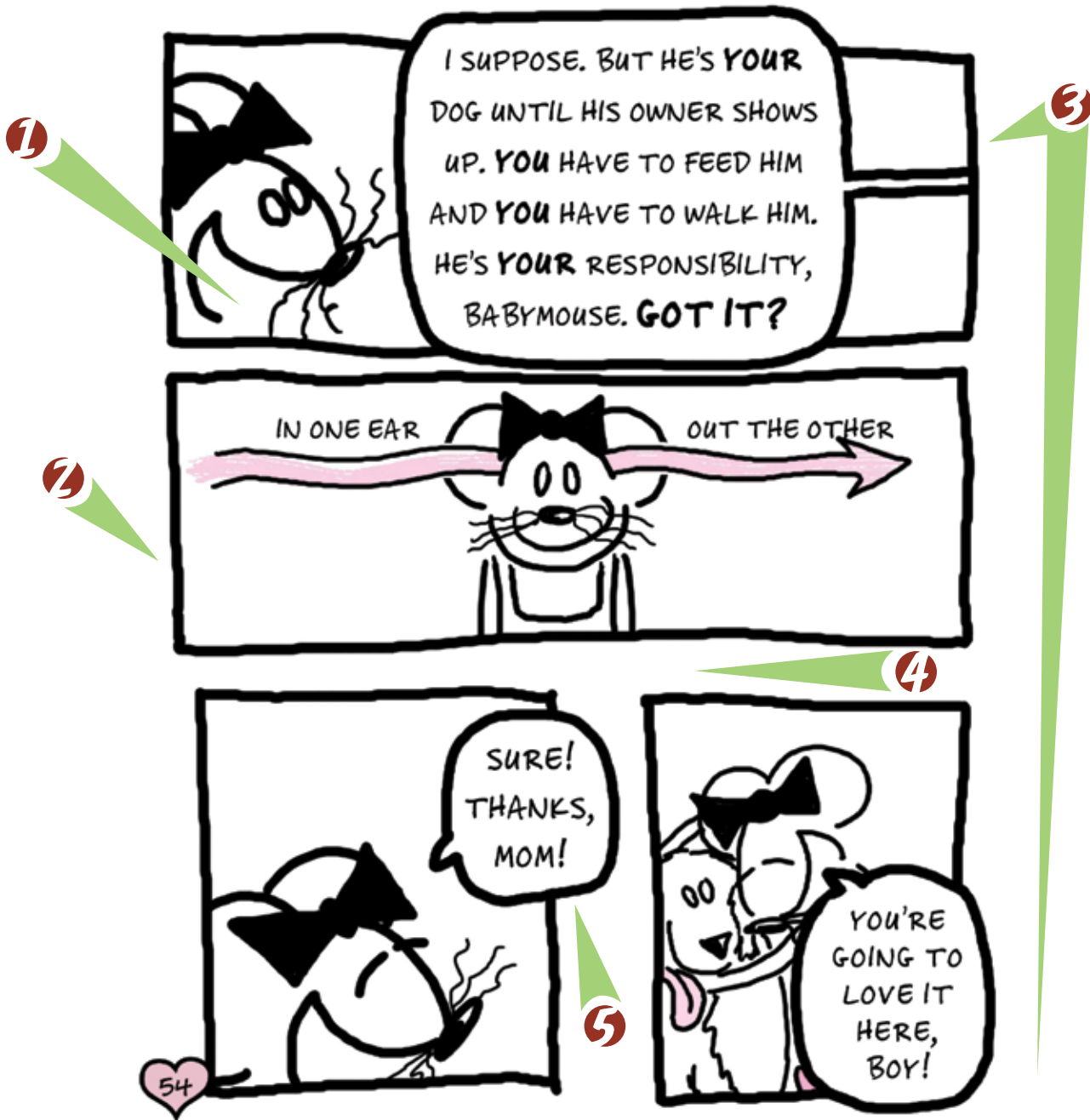
Authors know that if the panel arrangement is too unusual, and the readers' attention is not clearly drawn to the right sequence, it slows the reading (and comprehension) down. Therefore, creators are thoughtful when designing their pages and panel arrangements, carefully guiding their readers' eyes and attention.

Panels are separated by spaces called **gutters** 🌀. The gutters provide pauses for readers to integrate information from the panel just read. Also, even though the panels are sequentially arranged, there are often jumps in time (from nanoseconds, minutes, hours, days, etc.) or jumps between characters, scenes, actions, and/or events. As a result, the gutters allow the reader to pause and integrate what is, and is not, presented by the authors and illustrators.

Balloons 🌀 are typically found inside panels and contain the story's succinct text. The balloons

Creators are thoughtful when designing their pages and panel arrangements, carefully guiding their readers' eyes and attention.

Learning How to Navigate



may contain thoughts, dialogue, and/or sound effects — each frequently relayed in different balloon formats. Below is a list of six different types of balloons (from *Using Content-Area Graphic Texts for Learning*, Jaffe & Monnin, 2012):

- **Staging balloons** inform the readers and set the stage for changes in the plot, character perspectives, conflict and/or setting. These are often set in rectangular boxes, often using a font different from that used for dialogue.
- **Story balloons** tell the story and move it along.
- **Thought balloons** relate a character's thoughts, emotions, and motives. These are typically drawn

with wavy lines or have bubbles connecting the character to the thought.

- **Dialogue balloons** contain text that the characters say aloud.
- **Sound-effect balloons** convey a sense or sound and often contain large, interesting fonts.
- **Balloon-less balloons** are panels that contain text relaying some thought, dialogue, or direction not placed in a balloon.



Creating Reading Dialogues

While the graphic novel reading experience is different from the traditional prose novel experience, graphic novels can be read anywhere and in the same forums. Here's a more detailed look:

Graphic novels for solo story exploration:

This really needs no explanation, but next time you're in a book store or library, look around — you'll probably notice some lucky kid engrossed in a graphic novel. And, if you're lucky enough for it to be your kid, our bet is that s/he won't want to leave before finishing or taking it home.

Graphic novels in read-alouds:

Graphic novels are wonderful read-alouds (to one or many kids), as they invite kids to watch and listen as the story unfolds. There are a number of ways you can use graphic novels in read-alouds:

- Read it aloud much like a prose text. As you read each panel you point to it, allowing the audience to follow along. You may want to change your voice for the different characters, and lower your voice when there is narration or no dialogue. When reading the panels, stop to "take in" and "read" the graphic images as well, commenting on the details that are there to enrich the

dialogue and relate emotions, underlying impulses, and additional story line.

- If your child/student can read, you may want to read this as a play, assigning different roles to different kids and using the illustrations to help with stage directions.

Graphic novels make great book club selections:

Graphic novels have more dimensions for discussion. In addition to the storyline, plot, and characters, groups can discuss:

- How the art (illustration, page design, and/or word fonts) help tell the story while relaying emotions and characters' underlying motives
- How the panel placements help tell the story
- How the use or omission of color affected the story



with Graphic Novels

- How the artwork (style, color, fonts, panel sizes, and shapes) often changes with the story line (for example dream scenes are often shown in panels with wavy lines instead of the traditional solid lines);
- How the text and images work together to guide the reader through the story.
- Why telling this story in sequential art form may or may not have been the most effective way of relaying it.

Graphic novels as multiple literacy dialogues:

Pairing graphic and prose novels together can expand literary and communication skills. Reading these dissimilar formats on related topics helps kids discover how prose and graphic novels can tell the same story differently while evaluating the pros and cons of each medium.

For example, Marvel has a wonderful Oz series that parallels Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Or you can take a graphic novel like *Laika* by Nick Abadzis (First Second Books) about how the Russians race to send the first sentient being (a dog) into space, and pair it with Homer Hickem's *October Sky*.

For more pairing and multiple literacy ideas please check out these resources:

- *Using Content–Area Graphic Texts for Learning* (Jaffe & Monnin, 2012) — a guide for middle school students
- *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classrooms* (Monnin, 2009)
- *The Graphic Novel Classroom: POWERful Teaching and Learning with Images* (Bakis, 2011) — also for high school classrooms
- *Teaching Early Reader Comics and Graphic Novels* (Monnin, 2011)
- *Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books,*



- Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons, and more to Develop Comprehension* (Frey and Fisher, 2008)
- *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel* (Carter, 2007)
- *Graphic Novel Reporter* has teacher links and suggestions
- *Readwritethink.org* (www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/gaining-background-graphic-novel-1063.html)
- Check CBLDF.org for our "Using Graphic Novels in Education" column for monthly suggestions.

Graphic novels have more dimensions for discussion than storyline, plot, and characters.

Graphic Novels and Learning:

Graphic novels are entering 21st century classrooms on all levels, for multiple goals and reasons. Here are a few of them:



Graphic novels empower 21st century learners.

Students are engaged in a verbal/visual communication explosion (infographics; icons on phones, computers and billboards; non-verbal image-driven directions; blogs, texting, and emails). Graphic novels clearly reflect this change. Graphic novels, like infographics, texting, and emails, present essential ideas, dialogue and emotions through concise text and images. They also offer enticing multimedia reading experiences to all kinds of readers and learners.

Graphic novels attract all kinds of readers.

From strong language learners to weak or second-language learners, graphic novels attract readers with incredible art and text that unfolds in a multimedia story experience.

Graphic novels easily answer National Common Core State Standard mandates.

Most states have mandated Common Core State Standards (taking effect in 2014) with the goal to teach students to think more critically about what they're reading, writing, and speaking in language arts, science, math, and history/social studies. Common Core mandates that students employ, evaluate, and compare multiple literacies (with a strong emphasis on non-fiction) utilizing content found in multiple formats and giving reliably-sourced evidence to support their opinions. Furthermore, as noted in Appendix B of the Common Core Standards, "visual elements are particularly important in texts for the youngest students and in many informational texts for readers of all ages." As graphic novels incorporate both verbal and visual literacies and as there are many outstanding non-fiction and historical fiction graphic novels, they are an excellent classroom resource.

Graphic novels reinforce critical thinking in a number of ways.

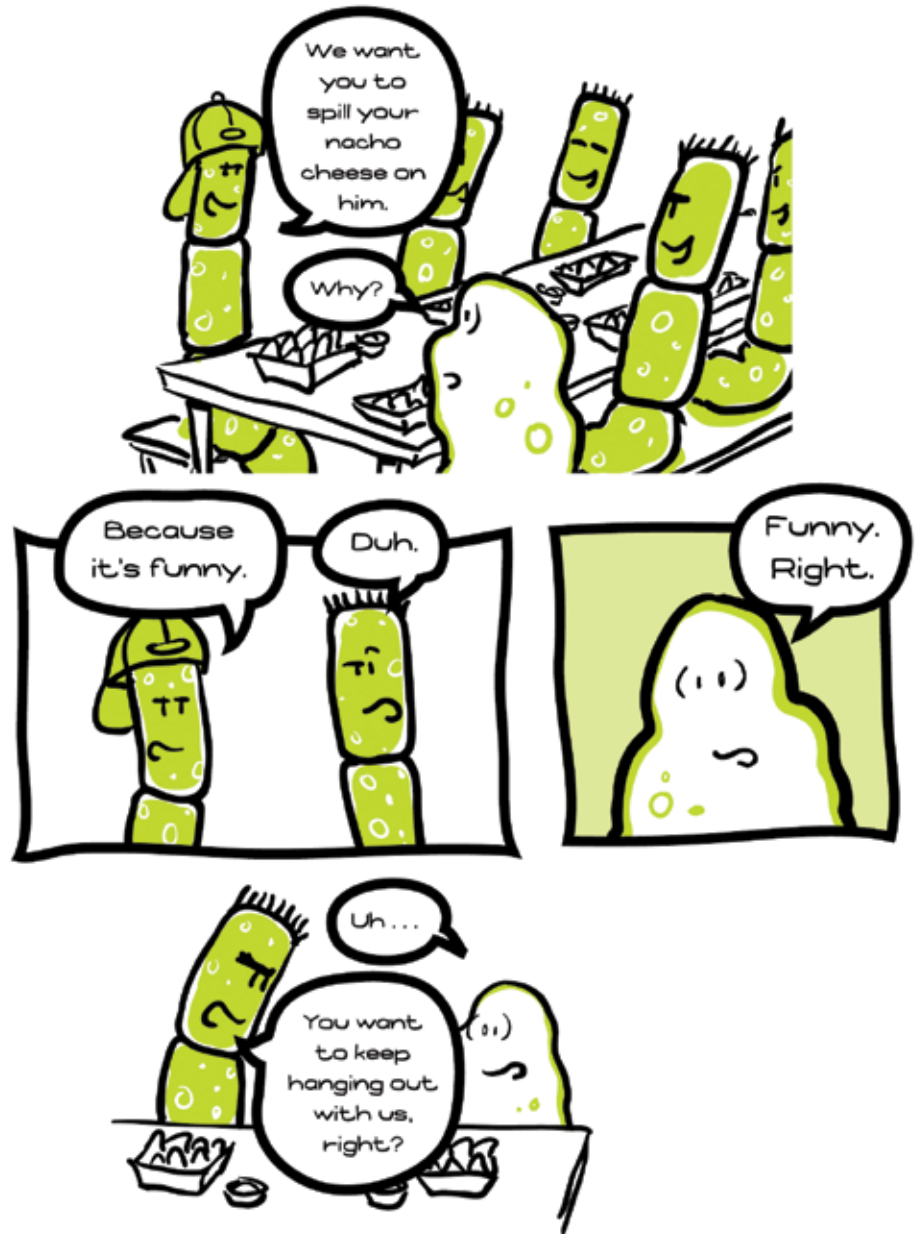
An Awesome Combination for 21st Century Learners

Here are just a few ways graphic novels help meet the new state standards:

- They typically use advanced and concise vocabulary to tell a story while the images help define and reinforce words, with the word-image pairing providing additional memory associations for concepts.
- Reading paired prose and graphic novel texts better reinforces memory of content material, as readers create both verbal and visual memory paths and associations.
- Panel displays and concise text help readers clearly distinguish between main ideas and details.
- Comparing prose and graphic novels provides insight into two very different literary formats, leading to discussions on use of dialogue vs. image vs. sentence/paragraph chapter development. Thus, readers gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of various literary styles, formats, and text structures.
- As the themes, ideas, characters, and events are developed in a visually sequential manner in graphic novels, it is easy to chart their development.
- Graphic novels provide an outstanding means of studying metaphor, as images are often used to develop and reinforce them.

Graphic novels foster and strengthen multiple learning skills essential for success in and out of the classroom.

Attention and attention to detail: Reading and integrating text and illustrations in graphic novels help students slow down as they read and facilitate observation of and focus on details. The short bursts of text empower students who have weak attention skills, helping them focus on language and the unfolding plot while the engaging art holds their attention and draws them into the details.



Memory: Graphic novels pair visual and verbal storylines, creating additional memory pathways and associations. Research shows that our brain processes and stores visual information faster and more efficiently than it does verbal information. As a result, incorporating graphic novels into home and school libraries and pairing them with traditional prose texts is an excellent means of promoting verbal skills and memory.

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Graphic Novels and Learning

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Sequencing skills: Graphic novel panels and their sequential arrangement of page and story visually and verbally break the story into easily recognizable parts. As a result, readers automatically focus on its sequence, reinforcing concepts of beginning, middle, and end. Furthermore, with graphic novels, students can easily chart development of story, character, plot, and themes over time.

Language and language usage: Graphic novels appeal to all language learners and readers. The concise text highlights word usage and vocabulary. The illustrations help define and reinforce vocabulary. Graphic novel selections in classrooms empower and engage all types of learners and readers, and increasing numbers of

second language learners have commented on how reading graphic novels helped expand their vocabulary and grammar skills.

Critical thinking: Graphic novels reinforce critical thinking in a number of ways. Abstract concepts such as inference, metaphor, and social context are often difficult concepts for kids to comprehend. They are usually taught through classroom discussions, which pose a distinct challenge for visual learners, for students with weak language skills, or for concrete learners with weak higher-order cognitive skills. Graphic novels can help by:



- Verbal and visual cues in graphic novels aid comprehension and inference.
- Visual details help explain and reinforce content and abstract messages.
- Visual and verbal cues empower readers to compare and contrast how vital information is presented.
- Metaphors permeate graphic novels, and the visual and verbal pairing makes them more obvious, more concrete, easier to understand, and more relatable.
- Sequential presentation of text and images provides natural opportunities for scaffolding and comprehension.
- Graphic novels' gutters offer natural breaks in which readers can pause to evaluate what they just read, making sure they comprehend events and character motives.
- Information (and story) gaps between the panels require active problem solving as readers extrapolate what is missing.
- Short bits of text make it easier for readers to recognize the main ideas.

Protecting Kids' Right To Read!

There are graphic novels for every reader, but not every graphic novel is right for all readers.

Much like prose, movies, and TV, comics are a huge medium encompassing a wide variety of stories. Just like other entertainment media, parents should be involved in deciding what comics are right for their kids to read.

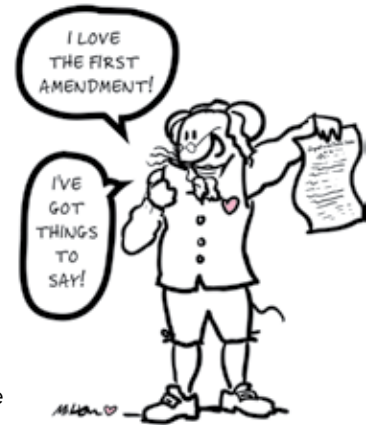
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund works to help parents in this area in a variety of ways. We publish informational tools like this one. We also offer regular features on CBLDF.org, such as our "Using Graphic Novels in Education" column.

One of our signature efforts is our activity as a sponsoring partner of the Kids' Right to Read Project, a coalition of organizations that monitors

and responds to challenges to books in schools and libraries. As part of KRRP, we provide proactive substantive assistance to help keep comics in circulation when they are challenged.

CBLDF believes that parents have a right to choose what comics are appropriate for their children to read, and that all parents should be afforded that same freedom of choice.

To learn more about the CBLDF's efforts to protect the Kids' Right to Read, please visit www.cbldf.org, or ...



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- ✓ Signed Jennifer L. Holm book!

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About the Authors

Meryl Jaffe, PhD, teaches visual literacy and critical reading at Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth OnLine Division and co-author of *Using Content-Area Graphic Texts for Learning*. She used to encourage the “classics” to the exclusion of comics, but with her kids’ intervention, Meryl has become an avid graphic novel fan. She now incorporates them in her work, believing that the educational process must reflect the imagination and intellectual flexibility it hopes to nurture. Meryl hopes to empower educators and encourage an ongoing dialogue promoting kids’ right to read while utilizing the rich educational opportunities graphic novels have to offer. More information can be found at www.departingthetext.blogspot.com.

Jennifer L. Holm is a *New York Times* bestselling children’s author and the recipient of three Newbery Honors for her novels *Our Only May Amelia*, *Penny from Heaven*, and *Turtle in Paradise*. Jennifer collaborates with her brother, Matthew Holm, on two graphic novel series — the popular Babymouse series and the bestselling Squish series. She is also the author of several other highly praised books, including the Boston Jane trilogy and *Middle School Is Worse Than Meatloaf*.



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