## From Picture to Panel: 2009 Master Class on Multimodal Children's Literature

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As teachers strive to meet the ever-changing needs of their students, Hassett & Curwood (2009) suggest that educators consider the demands "of digital media and visual texts within a multimodal culture" (p. 270). "Rather than having simple,

static images paired with standardized alphabetic print, multimodal texts take on dynamically interactive elements, as readers (not authors) choose where to look and how to engage with certain aspects of the text" (p. 271). The growing presence of graphic novels and other multimodal forms of print have teachers asking themselves, "What challenges do multimodal texts pose?" "How are readers' roles altered when interacting with graphic novels?" or "How do we know what are considered "good" texts?"

At the 2009 CLA Master Class in the Teaching of Children's Literature, three creators of children's books—Matthew Holm, Jennifer Holm, and Timothy Decker—and one teacher educator, Linda Parsons, shared their insights about this emerging trend and offered ideas for how teachers can become both fans and ambassadors for graphic novels and other multimodal forms of children's and young adult literature.

Babymouse, the spunky heroine in Matthew and Jennifer Holms's graphic novel series, was born in the Holms family's car. Well, sort of. With no electronic gadgets to occupy their time, the brother and sister team spent car trips to the Jersey shore reading Superman, Spider-Man, and other comic books.

In high school, Matthew began drawing comics for a senior project. Then after graduation, he chose to pursue a career in graphic design and animation. Jennifer moved to New York, where she worked in advertising and became a television commercial producer. Their shared love for comics, and Jennifer's need for a comic



book character she could relate to, are what prompted them to create Babymouse. In what appears to be a grid with three rows of boxes, Matthew and Jennifer work to create a storyboard for each *Babymouse* book. Jennifer writes the text in the bottom row of boxes and describes the actions to be shown in the pictures in the middle row of boxes. Matthew makes thumbnail sketches of the art in the top row of storyboard boxes. This storyboard is scanned into the computer and sent back and forth from the West coast to the East coast until the panels are organized to their satisfaction. Matthew does the art by hand and uses the computer for the final inking.

Black ink is added first and Babymouse's signature pink accents provide the finishing touch.

While some critics claim that students who read graphic novels are "not really reading," Matthew and Jennifer note numerous benefits of this format, especially for students who lack confidence in their reading skills. The font in many graphic novels is usually larger than that found in most chapter books making it more manageable for younger readers. In addition, less text and more visuals cause some students to feel less overwhelmed when initially opening the book. Jennifer states that teachers say graphic novels, like the Babymouse series, are more "approachable" than many chapter books but still socially acceptable. Their students don't feel that Babymouse and her adventures are "babyish." The 96 pages of each Babymouse adventure can be read in one or two sittings. Students have opportunities to practice dialogue and observe how Babymouse's character develops from the time of her introduction in Babymouse: Queen of the World (2005) to her morning AND afternoon practice sessions undertaken in her pursuit to become a figure skating star in Babymouse: Skater Girl (2007). Most importantly, the Holms believe Babymouse fosters a love of reading in children. Librarians tell Matthew they see what children pick up to read and report that the Babymouse books never get re-shelved as they are always checked out.

The characters in Timothy Decker's books assist readers in understanding the cold, damp conditions and raw boredom experienced by an American medic serving in WWI and the growing unrest brewing in the American colonies in 1770. Decker says that he tries to "build stories that work on several different levels simultaneously." He spends "gross amounts of time making little pen and ink drawings and singing to himself."

Decker grew up on a reading diet of *National Geographics* while spending hours watching every possible episode of the television series *Mash* with his older brother. When he was in college, he learned to draw. Now Decker spends his time sitting in a dark room drawing morbid drawings with heavy metal music playing in the background. Decker's goal is to create a picture book that will "suck the children in." After publishing *The Letter Home* (2005), *Run Far, Run Fast* (2007), and *For Liberty* (2009), he believes that a great picture book is deceptively complex with many different layers that readers take and run with. He creates book covers



to grab the reader's attention while offering "little bits of information" to quickly digest. Once inside, readers work their way through the book, investigating on their own, poring over and pondering the detailed drawings. Decker strives to encourage curiosity through his pictures and his sparse text.

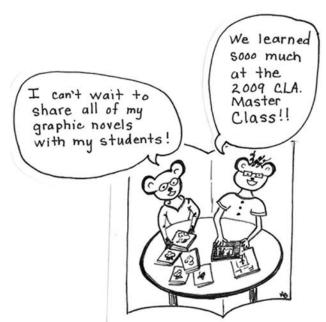
In his books, Decker plays with the context, believing that the words tell one thing and the illustrations another. He wonders how much he can cram in to make the story work and the art "cool" to look at. Decker generates the text first, then reworks the initial 50-page manuscript, boxing the key words as he reads and rereads, to reduce the text to 20 pages of approximately 20 words. Drawing is the hard work, knowing that ultimately a fine balance must be created between text and illustrations. Though he writes about dark and often scary topics, such as war and plagues, Decker believes he presents these difficult topics with honesty and tact having the violence happen "off-stage." Decker constantly asks himself, "How far can I push my readers? How edgy can I be? How sophisticated can I make my storyline?"

As an Assistant Professor at The Ohio State University at Marion, Linda T. Parsons reads graphic novels with her undergraduate students in a course focused on young adult literature. She shared with the Master Class audience the recent journey undertaken with her pre-service teachers when she invited them to read and discuss the 2007 Michael Printz Award winner, *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006). Parsons shared this set of literacy skills to use when reading graphic novels gleaned

from her students' writings and literature circle discussions: 1) When readers engage with graphic novels they need to slow down to allow for processing of the visual aspects of the text. Imagination and visualization take on new roles for the reader. 2) Multimodal texts often include font changes, unique use of color, and facial expressions that indicate tone and mood. These elements require careful "looking" on the part of the reader. One of Parsons' students explained that she enjoyed seeing the characters' emotions, which she believed was something not portrayed visually in standard texts. 3) With the turning of each new page, her students worked to "figure out the reading path." "Is it left to right? Top to bottom?" Parsons' students noted that finding their path was often a case of trial and error. 4) Each new multimodal text demands a different type of visualization placing more demands on the reader, requiring more sophistication. In an article on frequently asked questions about graphic novels, Brenner (2006) states that readers learn to make links between the images and the text and begin reading between the panels. Parsons' students felt graphic novels were less intimidating than traditional novels read by students in grades 4-9 because there is less text with most narration occurring in the evocative graphics and visual images. For these reasons, some of Parsons' students believed that graphic novels are often chosen by boys and struggling readers; others, however, thought graphic novels require more sophisticated reading skills than traditional text and can challenge advanced readers. Reading graphic novels requires different types of skills-including processing the visuals and relating them to the text in order to create meaning—than standard texts.

So are graphic novels considered good literature? Brenner (2006) writes that, "Graphic novels are not and were never intended to be a replacement for prose. Sequential art is just another way to tell a story, with different demands on the reader... they can be as demanding, creative, intelligent, compelling, and full of story as any book" (p. 125). Parsons and her students suggested that graphic novels certainly should be an option in every classroom. They believe that kids understand graphic novels and enjoy them. One attendee remarked that this may be a generational issue in that teachers often find them too challenging to read.

In closing, Matthew Holm explained that with graphic novels, it is the job of the artist to lead the reader. As



he draws, he can "play around" with the action. Some events may take place simultaneously, inviting readers to reread and pore over the pages. It is not uncommon for a graphic novel to receive multiple readings.

Visual literacy is becoming more and more important. Hassett and Curwood (2009) state that teachers "must understand how multimodal texts engender new roles for the reader, as well as new roles for the teacher" (p. 270). They suggest graphic novels and digital media "require complex new ways of coding and decoding image—text relations" (p. 270). It may require a smart, sassy mouse with the pink heart, known as Babymouse, or the delicately-etched soldiers crouched in the French bunkers during WWI who appear in *The Letter Home* (Decker, 2005) that will support students and teachers as they wend their way through these forms of literature.

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