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Tabachnick, Stephen E. (Ed.) *Teaching the Graphic Novel*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, options for Teaching, 2009, 352 p. ISBN: 978-1-60329-061-6

Over 350 pages and a list of thirty-five contributors. That alone should indicate to what extent graphic novels – or comics, quite simply – have penetrated the hallowed halls of academia. Courses that a little more than a decade ago were still considered marginal attempts at lassoing reticent non-readers and increasing lagging student numbers, have now become sufficiently widespread to justify the development of pedagogical tools and approaches designed specifically for the teaching of a formerly reviled subject. A characteristic development is that the articles presented in this collection tend to purposely avoid the question of justifying this particular field to the students. In his “Seven ways I don’t teach comics”, Joseph Witek actually lists as number 3 “I don’t ever apologize for comics” (218). We seem to have now moved beyond the no-win situation where academics who study this hybrid literary and artistic form felt compelled to defend themselves from uninformed, ideologically or morally motivated attacks, and often ended up exaggerating the complexity and value of comics as a reaction. Witek rightly states: “My strategy [...] is to trust that the work we do will implicitly make the case for the mode of inquiry. The primary texts always do an excellent job of arguing for their aesthetic value and cultural significance by themselves” (219).

While the quality and complexity of the articles varies, ranging from serious discussion of specific arguments to fairly general commentary on a personal experience, teachers of comics will find many interesting tips and useful suggestions in this volume. The work is divided in four sections: “Theoretical and Aesthetic Issues”, “Social Issues”, “Individual Creators”, “Courses and Contexts”, and a short final one on “Resources”. Practically all articles deal exclusively with American comics and/or graphic novels, ranging from Spiegelman’s *Maus* to Miller’s *Batman* and to Underground Comix, with the only significant “foreign” presences being Moore’s *Watchmen* (itself a response to U.S. superhero stories) and Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, well-known in the U.S. through the movie adaptation. Franco-Belgian bande dessinée is treated essentially in terms of a course for French as a second-language students, in an otherwise interesting piece by Michael D. Picone offering a personalized overview of material that is not widely available in the U.S. and some advice on the most appropriate work to include in a syllabus. While the collection as a whole deserves to be consulted, we note in particular some interesting interventions such as the one by Charles Hatfield (“Defining Comics in the Classroom; or, the Pros and Cons of Unfixability”), dealing with matters of terminology – a trickier subject than one would think –, a stimulating reflection by Eric S. Rabkin on how comics present the flow of time and on the pace of reading (“Reading Time in Graphic Narrative”) and the useful theoretical considerations offered by Jesse Cohn in his “Mise-en-Page: A vocabulary for Page Layouts”. The

challenges of teaching graphic narratives to students of literature as opposed to students of fine arts are explored with finesse in Alison Mandaville's and J.P. Avila's article "It's a Word! It's a Picture! It's Comics! Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching Comics". In terms of content, however, the social approach appears clearly to garner the most support, and that not only in the section more specifically reserved for "Social Issues", but also in several of the case studies and in the articles recounting actual classroom experiences. Graphic novels can no longer be labelled as simple escapism, as has been the case for so long, and this collection does show quite effectively how the 9th art can be usefully integrated in university curricula and provide the opportunity for constructive discussions and learning experiences. Professors and teachers thinking of introducing graphic narratives in their courses, or of creating a dedicated class for this popular genre, will do well to consult it and profit from the generous advice of its contributors.