

# ILLUSTRATED FICTION

Self-Determined Major Final Project Proposal

First Reader: Paul Benzon

Second Reader: Janet Sorensen

## Introduction

Through my self-determined major, Illustrated Fiction, Skidmore College has enabled me to pave the way for my education in written and visual storytelling, geared towards the young adult. The Illustrated Fiction major combines courses from English, Art, World Language, and Education departments, as well as independent studies that have allowed me to construct my own curriculum. This curriculum focused on exploring and breaking down elements of storytelling such as narrative, world-building, character portrayals across cultures, and other concepts within my sphere of inspiration and creative influence.

The final project pulls together all that I have learned on storytelling for the young adult—unifying my interests and ideologies, technical and artistic understanding of narration, as well as the creative processes and mythologies of established author-illustrators—to create an original graphic novel.

In recent years, the graphic novel has become an artistic movement of its own in contemporary literature, striving for a fusion of both the visual and written world, that allows for a powerful, visceral method of storytelling. This unique combination of art and words traveled from a place of harsh criticism and condescension in the early nineteenth century—when the value of visual storytelling was both degraded and undermined—to a home among children and adults alike, eager to consume stories of a meaningful and subversive nature.<sup>1</sup> Every day the graphic novel format pushes to reflect the human condition, whether it is the vigilante world of *Batman* or the stone-cold reality of *Maus*.

YA (young adult) fiction authors and illustrators, whose works are directed at children

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<sup>1</sup> Jennie R. Davis. *On the Rise: Influences on the Popularity of Graphic Novels Among Readers*.

and emerging adults, have long since latched onto this graphic narrative form. With 21<sup>st</sup> century young adults demanding more inventiveness from visual and written communication, the graphic novel acts as a device to bring diverse and compelling stories to the youth. The YA genre, at first seen as “childish” entertainment, is now molded, through the graphic novel form, into a highly esteemed and imaginative product of contemporary literature.

Graphic novels such as *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, and *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, expose the young adult’s struggle with culture (both of their personal views on culture and societal expectations), along with a sense of self within society. Graphic novels such as *Nimona* by Noelle Stevenson, and *The Princess and the Dressmaker* by Jen Wang, reveal the challenges faced by young adults to retain their voices within oppressive and dismissive societies. These stories of young adults tackle important themes, from love and gender inequality to human connection and the value of friendship, all rolled into the intimate and striking format of the graphic novel.<sup>2</sup> Here, the graphic novel offers a powerful multifaceted, multidimensional medium to voice and reflect the lives and experiences of youth.

Most importantly, this format of storytelling is constantly changing and is sure to remain in demand for decades to come. Authors and illustrators continue to explore and expand our understanding of the medium, relying on that interconnection of words and images to bring about more nuanced, re-invented, introspective tales, that touch the hearts of all players of society, from the very young to the very old.

For my final project, I too will be interweaving words and images, with skills I have acquired through my courses, producing a graphic novel that reflects my personal vision. My

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<sup>2</sup> Fletcher-Spear, Kristin, et al. “The Truth about Graphic Novels: A Format, Not a Genre.” *The ALAN Review*, 2005.

graphic novel will contain elements of storytelling that I have come to love and value in published illustrated works, and have reproduced and reinvented in my own work. These elements include fantasy/magical-realism, the clash of an individual's inner and outer world, and magic as a tool for the individual to see the world and interact with others. I will also be applying technical skills that I have gained, in terms of drawing (perspective, color theory, composition), and writing (storyboarding, dialogue, plotting), and fusing both parts seamlessly in a striking illustrated work.

## **Rationale**

This project is the ultimate combination of my ideas and skills that have matured and evolved throughout the course of my major. Through my intermediate and advanced art courses, I have focused on developing my art style—by sharpening technical drawing skills, as well as rendering from my own imagination—and understanding what materials suit my creative process; giving me the freedom to create my best work. Through fiction workshops I have focused on honing my writing craft: strengthening my voice as a story teller by converting my ideas to full-fledged, engaging compositions. In language and literature classes, I have explored stories of epic, historical experiences and adventures across cultures; learning what makes them valuable to me and my audience.

My independent studies greatly furthered my knowledge on my audience (the young adult) and challenged me to understand and absorb the works of acclaimed author-illustrators. In *The YA Graphic Narrative* (EN371) I studied, in-depth, how much the graphic novel has

accomplished, and what makes it stand alone as a valid literary body of work that contributes to the growing depth of contemporary literature: i.e. what makes certain stories more dynamic and captivating than others, how I can incorporate those into my creative work, and how content can mirror/reflect the thought process and life of the audience. In the *Animated Narrative* (WLL371), which I am currently taking this fall, I focus on East Asian animation and visual narrative: a necessary component of my craft, acting as endless inspiration for my work; allowing me to approach storytelling with complex characters and worlds that push for deeper connection, and more all-round depth in the mind of the youth.

Even outside my core requirements, I have allowed my craft to seep into other select courses that I have taken such as *The Victorian Illustrated Book* and *Language Across the Curriculum-Korean*. In the former, I created my own short-form illustrated book. In the latter, I developed a short-form graphic novel in the Korean language over a longer period, also consisting of original worlds and characters.

In all, throughout my course of study, I have accumulated skills, knowledge, and ideas that naturally lead up to this final project. All of these experiences have given me the tools and creative willpower to successfully complete this final project; this project combines all these skills in craft and creativity into one cohesive piece of work. It draws on my storytelling skills, both visual and written, that I have attained and developed over the years, challenging me to articulate my personal vision on a larger scale; to bring out my inner world full of magic, mystery, and childlike wonder.

## Methodology

This graphic novel is a combination of my ideas and skills developed through the course of my Illustrated Fiction major. In a typical art major capstone, I would be preparing larger bodies of work that simply showcase original artwork, while In an English capstone I would focus on a long-form written novel, that only showcases my writing. However, for my final project, the graphic novel is a reflection of my writing and drawing craft merging; two interwoven components creating a powerful narrative for the young adult, and other readers looking for immersion into an imaginative and childlike universe.

My graphic novel, titled *Vivid June*, spans the life of Juniper Tansy Root (a.k.a. June), a young girl living alone in the remote, drowsy, fictional Old Town. There, she is determined to have an uneventful life, shutting herself away from the rest of the world, meticulous in making her every day a string of repetitions, and ignoring the strange mystical world only she can witness. However, June's isolation comes to an abrupt end when she is forced to move to the city of Deep Waters: A busy, hyperactive island teeming with strange people and even stranger creatures. There, she must embrace the value of connection, and face the magic that she so desperately fears.

*Vivid June* delves into the nuances of loneliness in youth, and the power of connecting, not just with others, but with ourselves. The narrative also focuses on the struggles of being an anomaly within a society, and the importance of believing in things far beyond what we see. These themes of loneliness, belief, challenging assimilation and friendship/connection are significant aspects of the young adult experience, not only in graphic novel format, but in prose, art, and television. Today, more than ever, young adults struggle with loneliness, connecting, and being uplifted in their quest for imagination and uniqueness, in a world that is growing

increasingly more chaotic and fearful.<sup>3</sup> *Vivid June* will be a reminder of the quiet, important things such as human connection, inventiveness, childlike wonder; elements of life that birth revolutionary concepts and ideas, but are constantly disregarded in a world run by adults.

In this graphic narrative, I am creating a childlike visual—the feeling one gets when opening up a picture book, or reading an old fairytale—to tell a story of loneliness, connection, and magic. Much like Shaun Tan mentions in his essay *Picture books: Who are they for?*<sup>4</sup> the medium of the picture book or any form of illustrated work (be it a graphic novel or a short-form comic), at times, carries a childlike graphic that is almost always declared juvenile.

There seems to be this collective struggle among scholars of the literary institution, to appreciate whimsicality within illustrated stories, to see how these imaginative, playful visuals allow for deeper thinking and evaluation of the human experience.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it is that simplicity of narration that can bring to the reader's heart, powerful human emotions. One of the goals in creating my graphic novel is allowing a childlike visual to tell its own story, and deliver that magical simplicity that stays with the reader, young or old. Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and *The Lost Thing*, both critically acclaimed and highly valued for their surreal and imaginative narratives, are fantastic examples of that fusion of playfulness/wonder with depth and introspection.

My process of creating my graphic novel began this summer. It included free-writing a loose plot (to understand the direction of my narrative), sketching out character designs, and jotting down world-building elements. With this brainstorming period complete, I am spending the rest of the fall semester drafting a solid script for *Vivid June*. Although the final products nearly always veer from the initial ideas, this script will allow me to work with a finished story. Having a

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<sup>3</sup> Goosby, Bridget J., et al. "Adolescent Loneliness and Health in Early Adulthood." *Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 83, no. 4, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Tan, Shaun. *Picture books: Who are they for?* 2010

loose story timeline with a beginning, middle, and an end will act as a guide in executing the final pages of the graphic novel with ease.

During this stage, I will be referencing *The Art of Comic Book Writing* by Mark Kneece as I make the script, as well as draft character sheets. This process will be completed by the end of the fall semester (December 20<sup>th</sup>). During the winter break, I will focus on world-building: the laws, magical or otherwise, that govern my invented locations, the type of feeling/infrastructure I want to build, etc. I will also create thumbnails and storyboards for how each scene within the story will unfold, as well as deciding on the layout of the comic. I will be pulling from certain visual stories with rich world-building and well-established fantastical characters, i.e. The storyboards of Miyazaki's *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, and Jason Brubaker's graphic novel, *Sithrah*, behind the scenes on world-building alongside character development.

During this winter break, as I storyboard and plan the layout, I will also be doing in-person studies of buildings/infrastructure, as well as creating a file of references to help craft the setting for *Vivid June*. Here, Scott McCloud's books *Making Comics* and *Understanding Comics* will act as a guide and reference, as I begin mapping out my story's structure and finding balance in both the visual and written aspects of the form. By spring semester, I will be armed with a solidly written script as well as a visual layout of how the comic will flow from beginning to end, and immediately dive into creating the finished final pages of the graphic novel.

In all, the preliminary work (scripting, storyboarding, deciding on layout) will be undertaken during the fall semester and winter break, therefore when spring semester arrives I have a solid guide, and an established end-goal as I create the final pages.

I have decided with my readers and professors, that physically binding the graphic novel on my own, should be left as an option. However, due to the amount of work that comes with



creating a graphic novel, with the aim of no less than twenty-five pages, I would like to get my book bound professionally.

In addition to creating the graphic novel, I would like to have an exhibit space set up, perhaps at the academic festival, within the library or in the Tang Museum, where I can have my original graphic novel displayed. This presentation of my capstone will contain blown-up prints of specific scenes within the story, sketches/images of my work process, and a few physical copies of my book for viewers to leaf through. I intend to immerse the viewer in the world I have created and excite them into exploring my story and its characters. This graphic novel, *Vivid June*, is a stepping stone into my long-term goal of working in illustrated fiction writing and publishing for the young adult audience, pushing me to begin creating original work, and compete in the artistic world with my personal vision.

## Timeline

### End of Fall Semester (November-December)

- 1) Complete written script for *Vivid June*
- 2) Draft character design sheets
- 3) Gather more references, if required, to help with world-building, landscape design, storyboarding and other creative aids

### During Winter Break

- 1) Complete storyboarding (this involves deciding the layout of the graphic novel through sketched thumbnails i.e. how the panels/spreads will look, the sequence of each plot point etc.)
- 2) Study references—highlight and file information I would need in creating the novel (these references are listed in the annotated bibliography).
- 3) Begin drawing mock-ups/sketches of important scenes/landmarks within the novel (this allows me to measure how much time it takes to draw a certain scene, action, or landmark, and make adjustments to the layout).
- 4) Demoing materials that I may use for the final product through more mock-up pages. By the end of winter break, I will have a list of all materials needed.

\*Note: As it is within my personal budget, I will supply the drawing materials used for my graphic novel.

## Spring Semester Schedule

### **January**

- Week 1: Revising/tweaking the script and any layout queries, assembling materials needed
- The remainder of January (Week 2-4) involves penciling the graphic novel, laying down the base drawing upon which ink and color will follow suit

### **February**

- Week 1-2: Finishing up penciling, and revising and mending flawed scenes/removing or adding panels as needed.
- Week 3-4: Quick process of inking the final line-art, replacing any penciling work that is flawed/unnecessary. Looking over the script once more to edit any plot holes and layout disruptions.

### **March**

- Week 1-2: Focus on adding color (finalizing the drawings), and the lettering process (proper placement of word balloons or narrated quotes). Also discussing possible printing/binding options for the novel.
- Week 3-4: Final review stages with readers and professors to add finishing touches. Deciding on display, and presentation of the graphic novel.

### **April**

- Week 1-2: Deciding on any last-minute final production elements.
- Week 3-4: Submit on the 15<sup>th</sup>

\*Note: I will be able to acquire studio space in the art building to work on *Vivid June*

## References

- Brubaker, Jason. *Sithrah*. Coffee Table Comics, 2015-2018.
- Chute, Hillary. "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative." *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 2, 2008, pp. 452–465. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25501865](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501865).
- Davis, Jennie R. *On the Rise: Influences on the Popularity of Graphic Novels Among Readers*.  
A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree, 2004.
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*Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 83, no. 4, 2013, pp. 505–536, 2018.
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- Marjane, Satrapi. *The Complete Persepolis*. Pantheon Books, 2007.
- Miyazaki, Hayao, and Takami Nieda. *The Art of Ponyo*. Viz Media, 2015.
- Stevenson, Noelle. *Nimona*. HarperTeen, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015.
- Tan, Shaun. *The Arrival*. Levine, 2007.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

Abate, Michelle Ann., and Gwen Athene Tarbox. *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults: A Collection of Critical Essays*. University Press of Mississippi, 2017.

In this collection, Abate and Tarbox present critical analysis and insights on the graphic narrative's accomplishment within children and young adult literature. Here, the importance of the youth represented within these narratives is stressed and explored. Abate and Tarbox's collection is geared towards scholars, teachers and avid readers seeking to understand the innovation of the graphic novel—its ability to reflect young adult experiences, emotions and challenges, through a diverse and ever-changing lens.

Baetens, Jan, et al. *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

This book acts as an overview of graphic novel history from the endearing comic strips of *Calvin and Hobbes* to the epic forms of *Maus* and *Watchmen*, it documents the transformation of the graphic novel format, as well as its social and political effects. This book provides my project with a detailed database on graphic novels, how they began and what launched them to become a more meaningful and solid part of the literary world.

Brubaker, Jason. *Unnatural Talent: Creating, Printing and Selling Your Comic in the Digital Age*. Jason Brubaker, 2013.

Self-Published and self-driven, Brubaker tells his experience of creating his first graphic novel (ReMind) and details his growth from fumbling-artist to self-sufficient, indie-publisher of webcomics and graphic novels. *Unnatural Talent* details this journey step-by-step, with a heavy focus on the creative process of self-orchestrating illustrated works, and further building a

creative career.

Hansen, Kathryn Strong. "In Defense of Graphic Novels." *English Journal*, vol. 102.2, pp. 57–63, 2012.

In her article, *In Defense of Graphic novels*, Kathryn Hansen, teacher and scholar speaks volumes the significance of graphic novels as a vital part of literature, not just in entertainment but within the classroom as an educational tool. Not only does the graphic novel provide an inviting blend of word and image, many in the YA genre act as bridges between cultures and perspectives of the youth.

Kneece, Mark. *Art of Comic Book Writing*. Watson-Guptill Publications, 2015.

A general step-by-step guide to scripting and visual storytelling from the Savannah College for Art and Design. It focuses on the 'transforming stage' from idea to the final project. Scripting is a critical skill in creating any type of visual narrative, this book will help me in transforming my graphic novel from script-faze to sequential images. Allowing me to create a more cohesive narrative that can be viewed seamlessly by the reader. I will use this book during the early stages of creating my novel, as well as while revising before its final stage.

Kondo, Robert, et al. *The Dam Keeper*. First Second, An Imprint of Roaring Brook Press, 2019.

*The Dam Keeper* is an original animated short film as well as a graphic novel, created and self-published by Robert Kondo and Dice Tsutsumi. These two artists came together and eventually formed their studio Tonko House, which focuses on creating stories that depict the human condition as a force of awareness and inspiration. During my Fall semester abroad, I was able to

come in contact with the studio during a special exhibition, and was introduced to their production process (how they work, and the reasoning behind their stories). I will be using Tonko House's main work *The Dam Keeper* as both inspiration and reference in preliminary sketches, thumbnails and plotting for my graphic novel.

McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*. Harper, 2008.

Scott McCloud is one of the very few artist-scholars valued in the comic/graphic narrative world. This book is a great asset to my project and I will be relying on it heavily in thinking about engaging storylines, plot and sequential image-making. McCloud breaks down the nitty-gritty parts of world-building and character designing but also focuses on the nuances of telling a great story. I have used this book in previous courses and art programs and will be using it as a reference to keep me grounded in my creative process and guiding me in generating impactful content within my story.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Simon Fraser University Library, 2018.

While McCloud's book *Making Comics*, delves into the nitty-gritty aspects of story and character development within comics, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* focuses on the historical and cultural appreciation of the graphic narrative, and its impact on literature and how we read; a testament to the legitimacy of comics/graphic novels as an art form. This book acts as a resource for me in understanding how we interpret and digest the graphic narrative, and how that connection of words and images has impacted readers and continues to prevail within society and across cultures.

McCranie, Stephen. *Brick by Brick: Principles for Achieving Artistic Mastery*. Stephen McCranie, 2014.

On his extensive online resource for young creatives, called Doodle Alley, McCraine freely shares his knowledge and expertise in making comics and dissects the principles of successful creative processes. His book *Brick by Brick* is a short culmination of his visual essays. McCraine has independently published webcomics for the young adult (including the well-loved *Space Boy*), and not only understands the YA audience but understands how to articulate his vision: transferring ideas into tangible stories and characters. His essays are both motivational and practical geared towards young artists and writers. I will be referencing his short visual essays (in the form of comics) on Doodle Alley (<https://doodlealley.com>) and *Brick by Brick* during the early and mid-stages of my graphic novel.

Miyazaki, Hayao. *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, Studio Ghibli, 2009.

In terms of visual and narrative, the films by Miyazaki (specifically *Ponyo*) are big resources for my final project. Miyazaki, a Japanese filmmaker, is known and well-respected for his ability to build fantastical worlds that immerse the viewer regardless of its disbelieving characteristics. His films act as a source of inspiration and soundboard in building my fantasy laws within my imagined world. His stories hold valuable nuances in character (with characters dealing with deeper issues, mixed with a lighthearted visual) and stories that hold the depth of human emotion and connection. I am studying and exploring in-depth *Ponyo* as well as multiple Studio Ghibli films in my Independent Study course *The Animated Narrative*.



Rousmaniere, Nicole Coolidge, and Matsuba Ryoko. *Manga: The Citi Exhibition*.

Thames & Hudson, 2019.

In *Manga: The Citi Exhibition*, Coolidge collects an array of essays, interviews, and art (from artists, writers, and scholars of manga), dissecting the form of Japanese manga from its origins to its emergence as a global storytelling powerhouse. The book explores how these Japanese storytelling aspects have emerged within western and world-wide visual narratives and integrated to become a key part of the graphic narrative format. Japanese animated/graphic narrative has always acted as an inspiration for my craft and creative process (reflected in the courses of my major), bringing a cross-cultural component that diversifies my perspective and storytelling skills indefinitely. This novel provides me with an in-depth understanding of historical, social, and cultural implications and movements of the narrative format.

Smolderen, Thierry. *The Origins of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay*.

University Press of Mississippi, 2014.

Here, Smolderen explores the history of comics, not just from the typical historian's perspective of defining the format, but mapping out the historical transformations of the form, based on its present state. His creative, interdisciplinary approach to discussing comics, allows for more understanding of how the form of comics has come to be visually innovative and sought after by scholars and creatives. Smolderen's book builds a rich historical reference as I create my graphic novel, keeping in mind how it reflects current social and historical structures.

Tan, Shaun. *Picture Books: Who are they for?*, 2002. (<https://www.shauntan.net/essay1.html>)

---. *Words and Pictures: An Intimate distance*, 2010. (<https://www.shauntan.net/comments1.html>)

With his Award-winning film *The Lost Thing* and his acclaimed graphic novel *The Arrival*, Tan is known for his striking imagination and ability to render the “in-between” of magic and reality; creating worlds and characters far beyond our imagination, and yet mirroring our own human experience. In these two essays, Tan breaks down the controversial aspects of illustrated fiction: its values for both the child and adult, and the importance of illustrated fiction as a mode of connection and communication.