

**Yes, graphic novels are ‘real books’**

by [Lillian Pearce](https://www.michigandaily.com/author/pearcel-umich-edu/)
January 24, 2023

*Courtesy of Lillian Pearce.*

There are [many](https://www.bustle.com/entertainment/the-rig-season-2-cast-plot-trailer-release-date) [misconceptions](https://bookriot.com/comic-book-myths/) about graphic novels, namely that they’re not “real books.” I’ve witnessed both first and secondhand the contempt associated with reading graphic novels, from being directly told that they’re “[for kids](https://stonehamlibrary.org/graphic-novels-are-not-just-for-kids/#:~:text=The%20Library%20has%20a%20new,a%20format%2C%20not%20a%20genre.),” to hearing my friends say they don’t mark graphic novels as “read” on Goodreads because they “[don’t count.](https://www.todaysparent.com/kids/school-age/graphic-novels-real-reading/)” This peculiar disdain is reminiscent of the condescending remarks geared toward readers of [young adult](https://slate.com/culture/2014/06/against-ya-adults-should-be-embarrassed-to-read-childrens-books.html) and [romance](https://thehowler.org/12407/opinions/the-romance-genre-hate-needs-to-stop/) novels — perhaps because of their [largely](https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/08/why-do-female-authors-dominate-young-adult-fiction/260829/) [female](https://wordsrated.com/romance-novel-sales-statistics/#:~:text=Who%20reads%20romance%20novels%3F,reader%20is%2042%20years%20old.) audiences — but is instead rooted in the simple fact that graphic novels are literal works of art. In other words: They have pictures.

Yes, 300-page graphic novels can be read quicker than works of traditional formats, but the time it takes to read a book should not be representative of its quality or merit. In fact, there are many benefits of reading graphic novels for young and old readers alike: According to [Scholastic](https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/raise-a-reader-blog/3-reasons-graphic-novels-can-be-great-young-readers.html#:~:text=One%20of%20them%3A%20That%20graphic,for%20reading%20outside%20of%20class.), they improve reading comprehension, given that readers rely on images and texts to decode and analyze meaning. They encourage hesitant readers to pick up a book and they make complex subjects accessible.

While graphic novels are often looked down upon for their format, it’s their format that draws attention — for better or worse. The [most banned book in 2021](https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10) was the graphic memoir “Gender Queer” by Maia Kobabe, which has been “banned, challenged and restricted for LGBTQIA+ content, and because it was considered to have sexually explicit images,” despite its “18 years and up” [rating](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/01/books/maia-kobabe-gender-queer-book-ban.html), according to an article from the New York Times. Though for some, the combination of text and images is what makes graphic novels illegitimate, for others, it’s what makes them threatening.

In spite of graphic novels’ evident power, it remains one of the least-read genres. A [2018 survey](https://s3.amazonaws.com/WebVault/surveys/LJ%202018%20Graphic%20Novels%20Survey%20REPORT.pdf) titled “Public Library Graphic Novels Survey” led by the [Library Journal](https://www.libraryjournal.com/) found that graphic novel circulation has only seen a minimal uptick in recent years, meaning they are infrequently checked out. No graphic novels made Goodreads’ “[Most-Read Books of 2022](https://booksofbrilliance.com/2023/01/10/goodreads-most-read-books-of-2022/),” and they’re rarely seen on popular platforms like [BookTok](https://preply.com/en/blog/most-popular-booktok-books/%22%20%5Cl%20%22%3A~%3Atext%3DRomance%2C%20fantasy%2C%20and%20young%20adult%2Cthe%20top%20authors%20on%20%23BookTok.). Whether it’s a result of the aforementioned disdain for the genre, or simply a consequence of the reign of [Colleen Hoover](https://www.aarp.org/entertainment/books/info-2022/colleen-hoover-popularity.html#:~:text=But%20it%20doesn't%20stop,far%2C%20according%20to%20NPD%20BookScan.) and other popular BookTok authors and books (which heavily influence our [relationship with reading](https://www.michigandaily.com/arts/books/the-impact-of-booktok-on-the-publishing-industry-and-our-relationship-with-reading/)), it’s clear that graphic novels lack the readership they deserve.

Given the inclusion of illustrations, graphic novels have the ability to convey emotions, thoughts and feelings in diverse ways. Tense moments feel more strained seeing the taut expressions of the protagonist. Lighthearted montages feel more breezy with their easy strokes. Angry outbursts are louder with bright colors and heavy lines. Authors of graphic novels communicate with their readers in two, three, four ways at once.

A favorite graphic novelist of mine is [Tillie Walden](https://www.tilliewalden.com/books), author and illustrator of five graphic novels. Her 2017 work, “Spinning,” is particularly beloved. “Spinning” is an emotional memoir made more touching for Walden’s careful artwork. The story focuses on Walden’s childhood as a competitive figure skater; the purple color palette corresponds to the ice rinks where most of the memoir takes place and to the quiet, cold loneliness of Walden’s youth. Interspersed shocks of yellow incorporate significant warmth associated with specific memories and experiences of Walden, signaling to readers where and when she felt safe, seen and whole. Walden’s particular talent for drawing reveals the same — if not more — intimacy and complexity found in memoirs whose authors specialize in prose. To say that graphic novels are not “real books” is an insult to Walden’s beautiful, emotive memoir, which is as serious as it is illustrative.

Another treasured work, again emotional and stunning, is Trung Le Nguyen’s “[The Magic Fish,](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/602718/the-magic-fish-by-trung-le-nguyen/)” which pays particular attention to a mother-son relationship. Tiến is a Vietnamese-American middle schooler learning about and coming to terms with his sexuality and is simultaneously trying to figure out how to tell his parents. Semi-autobiographical in nature, “The Magic Fish” is heart-wrenching and full of love, which we see in a familial and friendship lens. Intertwined with Tiến’s story is a retelling of Cinderella whose cool, dark artwork style juxtaposes the starry warmth flair of the present plotline. Nguyen’s work provides a laudable example of the graphic novel genre and amplifies the fact that the genre has the power to uplift crucial stories for numerous readers.

It’s time to pack up the unnecessary and baseless scorn for graphic novels — it’s robbing you of great books. Graphic novels are more than their pretty pages (though the talent and work that goes into their illustrations should never be disregarded) and should be praised for their specialty. Whether you’re interested in [gay selkies](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/54776523-the-girl-from-the-sea) or [American history](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/42527866-they-called-us-enemy), there’s certainly a graphic novel out there for you if you give it a chance.

Daily Arts Writer Lillian Pearce can be reached at pearcel@umich.edu