



Beyond Captain America: Using Comics to Define a New Citizenship in Appalachia

Cindy Yeager, Instructor, Hocking College - Perry Campus

Most people aren't surprised when I tell them that I CLEP'd (College Level Entrance Program) out of Freshman English as a freshman at Bowling Green State University by writing my placement essay on Shakespeare's Mac Beth.... until I tell them that my only knowledge of Mac Beth came from the Classics Illustrated comic book my mother had purchased for my brothers and I.

In the 1970's, it was standard operating procedure for my parents to buy about 40 comic books in preparation for another long car trip to one or another of the historical landmarks or battlefields that often made up our family vacations. Not wanting to give up intellect for entertainment's sake, Classics Illustrated often were included along with the Spiderman, Archie and Pals, and Casper the Ghost comic books. When it came time to "choose a work of Shakespeare and analyze it" that early Saturday morning at BGSU, I knew which one I'd use. Though I'd performed in several Shakespearean plays in high school, the one I knew the best had been read over and over again, while in the bathtub, at the beach, or just hanging out under the maple tree in our backyard.

Why did that version of Mac Beth stick with me so? It had been years since I'd picked up a comic book when I wrote that essay. Aside from the obvious humor of telling the story itself (especially to my own freshman English students, who no doubt wish they'd had such a leg-up, once they get in my class!) I've often pondered my attraction to reading comics. When I was reintroduced to the medium through Harvey Pekar's work written under the name "American Splendor", and the 2003 film entitled the same, I began looking more closely at this fascinating medium, in particular in terms of what it offered to adults, and to my own students.

The introduction of such heartfelt pieces as G.B. Trudeau's "**The Long Road Home**," a story of a returning B.D. from the Iraq war, minus a leg, and *Craig Thompson's "**Blankets**," a hefty 582 page epistle described by the New York Times Book review thusly "...beautifully rendered memories of the small brutalities that parents inflict upon their children and siblings upon each other, Thompson describes the ecstasy and ache of obsession (with a lover, with God) and is unafraid to suggest the ways that obsession can consume itself and evaporate" into my Creative Writing class provided me with a beginning language for discussion of the adult graphic novel. The introduction of the service aspect, incorporating work with third graders we had already

met with and agreed to partner with in reading, gave us an avenue for creating our own work.

We began using comics in the science classroom, having children create a comic of the four-stage life cycle of a butterfly. Kids drew caterpillars (larvae) and chrysalis's with thought bubbles above their heads, saying things like "I hope I don't get eaten" for the former and "Man, it's hot in here" for the latter. I know some purists would frown on the anthropomorphism this creates, but for third graders in Ohio who are preparing daily for the grueling Third Grade Reading Proficiency (basically, reading a selection and answering questions with an A, B, C, or D choice, over and over again), it was a welcome relief. The science concepts were reinforced and the drawing was a bonus attraction. I ended up buying numerous comics for the classroom with some Ohio Campus Compact money I'd been awarded for the project, and the teacher informed me that they were the highlight of self-selected reading time at the end of the day.

We later went on to explore local history (an Ohio standard) and to draw examples of what a contemporary superhero might look like and do. Anyone with even an intuitive sense of child development can begin to decipher the biggest gaps in these children's lives by reviewing their superhero creations. Missing fathers, superhero moms, and bully zappers were popular among kids. One student created a "Superhero Babysitter" who is there when Children's Services arrives to "try and put you in foster care." In Appalachia, where local zoning is almost unheard of (based on the loosely expressed notion that "the government has no right to tell me how to live my life") children can live in a crippled up trailer on one plot, and in a brand new double-wide next door. Neither one may have a health-department inspected septic tank, or any reliable source of heat. But, keeping the family unit together is paramount, despite these conditions.

Once I realized the attraction that both adults and children had to reading comics, (and my growing library of graphic novels was a true testament to it) the idea for creating an actual comic book was planted. The long-time service partnership I've had with an Ohio medium security prison, Noble Correctional Institution (NCI), where abandoned dogs are given love and obedience training, seemed an ideal place to start. Men there are involved in the perfect example of service, earning the right to become a dog handler through exhibiting appropriate behavior and trustworthiness, to teach some of the very concepts that they themselves are struggling to learn: patience, discipline, ease. The elementary and middle school kids already support the program at NCI through fundraising, and my Ethics and writing students also participate each quarter in a letter writing communication with dog handlers and through fundraising efforts. Linking these three groups together into the production of the comic seemed logical and almost effortless.

Well, I wish I could say that was the case. As in all institutional settings, NCI has roadblocks set up every step of the way. Gaining permission to use inmates' work has been an up-hill battle. The inmates themselves are more than willing to write off any concern for profit, but the administration continues to feel there are liability issues. Our

way around it, for now, is to write the comic with student illustrators explaining the NCI partnership, without NCI inmates doing the illustration. The story supercedes the source, I guess. Children's comics, Hocking College students' comics and those submitted from local residents will all be reviewed and ultimately included.

Dollar General, one of several "dollar" stores that Appalachians can't live without anymore, provides funding three times a year for literacy projects. The requirements are fairly simple; information can be found at their website. We applied for and received a Dollar General literacy grant to bring forth the production of our locally made comic. So, we're working on that end of the project now. The process has been time-consuming, but worth it. Fourth graders in Ohio have, as a state standard, to study the "factors of production". Next year, a fourth grade instructor has willingly agreed to allow my Creative Writing class back into his classroom to work through the production of the comic book as a sample of this process. Once printed, (around Christmas, we hope) the comic book will be sold, and profits, if any are realized, will be returned to the project for a second issue. My hope is that it will become self-sufficient, but if it doesn't, I'll continue to seek out supportive grant funding to further the work. It has made a difference in our schools, and in my own students' level of enthusiasm and perception of literature, art, and service.

*Thompson's book **Blankets** won three 2004 Harvey Awards (best Artists, Best Graphic Album of original Work, and Best Cartoonist) and two Eisner Awards (Best Graphic Album and Best Writer/Artist).