

Well I would like to start off by putting my comic book and graphic novel background into context. I started collecting comic books before I could even read. The first comic books I ever had came from my local grocery store. Back then I had to have my comic books read to me. I think this is one of the reasons I learned how to read so quickly. As the years passed I became increasingly interested in comic books and superheroes in general. In the fourth grade I went to my first comic book store. The store was called House of Fantasy and it was located right in Lockport. I frequented that comic store for the next few years until it closed in 2001. In the sixth grade I found a new comic book store, Don's Atomic Comics in Cheektowaga. I have been going there ever since, and the volume of product I purchase and read has increased dramatically. Although I had a place to buy comic books, I needed to find some people that were equally interested in the hobby. The internet allowed me to gather insight from millions of people, but I could never meet them face to face. In August of 2006 I went to Wizard World Chicago, my first comic book convention. I met a lot of interesting people and creators but this time they were people I was never going to see again. Finally in April of this year I joined a graphic novel discussion group at a Barnes and Noble. Being in the discussion group is a great experience; it is the best part about reading comic books. It is exciting to discuss what you read and listen to others opinions; it really expands the impact of the medium. Now you know my background, but that is just the launching point for the ideas I wish to present.

The appeal of comic books is as basic as an ancient cave painting. Comic books present a gripping narrative embellished by an artist's hand. You might say that this is no different from a storybook, but it is. A graphic novel or comic book often addresses themes that are way beyond the comprehension a child. Some people will say that even though this is true, comic books do not possess literary merit. This is not true. Imagine if Charles Dickens and Pablo Picasso had collaborated on a creation. In fact Charles Dickens' classic *A Tale of Two Cities* was originally published in a serialized format. The truth is comic books are social commentaries that are often times more accessible to readers than classic literature. If a true graphic novel is created perfectly you should be able to take away the pictures or the words and still have a complete story. That is the general appeal of comics. When I first started reading comic books I only understood the basic concept of good versus evil. I was only interested in the good guy defeating the bad guy and putting him in jail. The only way I can think of illustrating this is through something I heard at a comic book convention. Peter David, the current writer of the *X-Factor* comic book, spoke about the first issue of Marvel Comics. In that book the Sub-Mariner and the Human Torch meet each other in the sky over New York City. They do battle, but the author of this story does not ever explain their motivation beyond the fact that they were unknown to each other. That was the initial appeal comic books held for me. The appeal has changed as I have grown older.

In ninth grade I heard the words; allusion, allegory, internal conflict, characterization, theme and Joseph Campbell. I had a great teacher who taught me that stories were not just plot but so much more. There was a structure and a science that authors took into consideration when they created their masterpieces. Ninth grade English blew my mind. Everything I read from that point on had a deeper meaning, even comic books.

I was no longer interested if Batman was going to put the Joker in jail, but instead the motivations driving Batman. I was inspired by the tragic event, the death of his parents, which created this force of will. I was also interested in the internal conflict occurring within him, the never ending battle between staying outside the law without becoming evil himself. I also began to see the underlying issues of prejudice and discrimination that were prevalent through out the *X-men* comic books. Even Marvel's recent Civil War had themes of privacy and freedom. This was just the beginning. At this point I began looking outside the realm of traditional super hero comic books to even more thought provoking material. It was about a year ago that I began branching out. I read *Maus*, which is a tale of a man's relationship with his father, who is a survivor of the Holocaust. It is marketed as a story of the Holocaust, but when you read it, you discover that it is so much more. I would tell you how it made me feel, but I think that the initial understanding of a work has to take place on a personal level. I also read *Kingdom Come* which is the story of future with out-of-control superheroes. Older versions of Superman and Wonder Woman are forced to police younger generations that lack responsibility. I read both volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. These volumes utilize characters from classic literature, to tell a tale that fleshes out their personalities and enriches their mythology. It also leads readers to the original stories the characters came from. My most recent read was Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, which is on the list of Time's 100 Greatest Novels written since 1923. This is considered by many to be the greatest graphic novel of all time, but I will not make that decision for you. I will say that it is now my favorite graphic novel. It takes place in the United States during the end of the Cold War. The novel is a social commentary on the times and even though it was written nearly twenty-years ago it is very relevant today. Its main theme is the corruption of power. In the book it refers to super heroes but this abuse could occur on any level. It could relate to a government or even the man on the street.

To close I would like to bring up a section from Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*. In that novel the character Faber lays down three requirements for informed thought, quality of information, the leisure to digest it, and the freedom to act on what is learned. Faber did not specify if thoughts had to be written down in novels, plays, essays or poems. The three requirements are easily fulfilled by comic books and graphic novels. Read one and you will find that comic books are more than juvenile tales of good versus evil. They offer thematic elements to those of a higher intellectual capacity as well. Comics deal with thought provoking moral issues that often reflect the world around us.