



# Reading Group Gold

## The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation

by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón

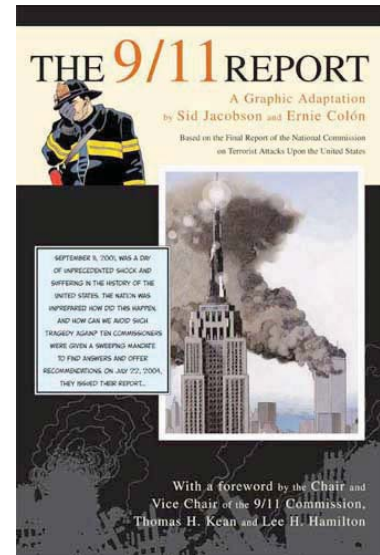
### To the Teacher

That 9/11 has defined our times—indeed, has determined the course of our young century—remains an obvious commonplace. But *The 9/11 Report*, the defining document of this defining event—first published in July of 2004, and quickly a bestseller—has actually been read by far too few of us. Especially in light of the paramount importance of this tragedy—at home and abroad, today and tomorrow—an alarmingly small number of Americans genuinely understand the various findings and recommendations that were put forth in written form by The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.

We cannot let this vast under-appreciation of *The 9/11 Report* carry over to our students, however. Given the complexity of the report, as well as the difficulties inherent in understanding and confronting the 9/11 tragedy itself—and, further, the challenges of grasping the ongoing, worldwide aftermath of this event—teaching aids on this score would seem most welcome. And now, at last, instructors looking to help their students take on such equally crucial and demanding material without resorting to compromise, without settling on a weak abridgement or a mere glossing of the facts, have the perfect volume. *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* affords all of the student-friendly readability and visual gusto of a first-rate graphic novel, while also presenting the conclusions and suggestions—streamlined yet entirely word-for-word—of the actual 9/11 Commission (including the follow-up “report card” issued by the Commission in December of 2005).

This is therefore the most accessible version of the report available anywhere. Like the original, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* is a work of methodical logic, arresting clarity, and enormous import. It’s also brimming with stunning artwork that powerfully conveys the heft, history, insight, and instruction of the initial document. And when we recall that said document runs to more than 500 pages, it becomes clearer still that *The 9/11 Report* is ideally suited for today’s popular graphic-novel form.

The authors of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* must have recognized this ideal fit from the start, for it’s a fit between culture and format as well as between audience and subject-matter. “We’re the most graphically- and visually-oriented society in the history of this planet,” as Ernie Colón, co-creator of this book, has told an interviewer. “Sequential art is a very valuable teaching tool, and it should be used—literally—to get across ideas, history, and complex subjects in every schoolroom...In their producing their report, the 9/11 Commission did all the work; we just quote them, graphically.”



ISBN: 0-8090-5739-5 | 144 pages



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## Praise

“Neither lurid nor simplistic, [this book] presents the essence of the Commission’s work in a manner that, especially in the opening section, is able to surpass aspects of any text-only publication . . . The analysis that follows . . . cuts cleanly to the kernels of important history, politics, economics, and procedural issues that both created and exacerbated the effects of the day’s events. Colón’s full-color art-work provides personality for the named players—U.S. presidents and Al-Qaeda operatives alike—as well as the airline passengers, office workers, fire fighters, and bureaucrats essential to the report. This graphic novel has the power and accessibility to become a high school text.”—*School Library Journal* (starred review)

“A vivid success . . . [A] work that everybody, sooner or later, ought to take a look at . . . Packs a great deal of information within a vibrantly accessible format. It’s brilliant [and] unexpectedly moving. You learn things you didn’t know, and the things you did know suddenly have more clarity and relevance to other things you know.”—Julia Keller, *Chicago Tribune*

“The [book’s] bright, busy graphics and smoke-shrouded ‘Blam!’ captions will reach a wider audience than [did] the 567-page document that inspired this powerful adaptation. . . They manage to turn all the verbiage into dramatic imagery while holding to the essential facts of the day . . . You see the agony and the desperation of the moment, and the images linger as the rest of the sad story unfolds . . . More surprising . . . is how well it turns the long and complicated history of the attacks into the simplest of basic truths—an instruction manual on how the world goes wrong.”—John Allemang, *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto)

“The horrendous events of [9/11] may seem an odd choice for comic-panel treatment, but Jacobson and Colón—known to legions of fans for their longtime work at DC and Marvel Comics—are doing an honorable public service by putting the official report in a form that anyone can understand . . . The captions pack a lot of punch. Reads one, ‘Little effort in the legislative branch was made to consider an integrated policy toward terrorism. All committees found themselves swamped in the minutiae of the budget process, with little time for the consideration of longer-term questions.’ The point is well-taken, even as bin Ladin’s eyes glower from the page . . . A thoughtful—and by no means dumbed-down—approach to events still very current.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“A dignified, carefully accurate graphic presentation of the basic narrative and conclusion of *The 9/11 Report*. It’s quite astounding what the format is capable of conveying. The text is concise and well-organized. The graphics are dramatic and emotional. If there is an agenda, it is that of the 9/11 Commission: to point out the mistakes made leading up to 9/11 and on the day of the attacks—the inadequate resources, the uncoordinated intelligence—and the final report (of December 5, 2005), which gives our nation very low grades in correcting the errors revealed in the commission’s findings.”—*KLIATT*



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## About this Guide

This teacher's guide mainly consists of three sections, all of which appear below: Reading and Following the Written Narrative, Identifying and Understanding the Illustrations as Text, and Supplementary Questions and Exercises for the Class. The first section will help students follow along with the verbal aspects of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*; the second will aid in their appreciation and comprehension its visual aspects. As a widely praised example of the emergent graphic-novel genre—although this is not a novel per se, and not a work of fiction; in fact, it's a work of history—this book relies on both words and artwork, both text and pictures, in equal measure. And so these two sections are respectively focused on those two components. The guide's third section, geared more toward classwide discussions or separate assignments, is meant to further the students' explorations of and reflections on this graphic adaptation—either as a group or as individuals.

## Reading and Following the Written Narrative

1. The four-paragraph passage on page 18 of this book has “Improvising a Homeland Defense” as its headline. What does it mean to “improvise” something? Explain how this word, used in the context of 9/11 and its preceding events, pertains to the security failures of this nation.
2. Review the “National Crisis Management” section in Chapter 1. How much of the initial information given to President Bush about the 9/11 attacks was correct? How much was wrong?
3. Define the following terms and phrases, all of which appear on page 30: “fatwa,” “infidels,” “social and economic malaise,” “the new terrorism,” “terrorism,” “terrorists,” “superpower,” “Muslim,” and “Allah.”
4. At the outset of Chapter 3, we read that the FBI and other agencies did “excellent work” in investigating the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. But we also read, shortly thereafter, that this work had an “unfortunate consequence” on our nation's ability to fight terrorism. Explain why this was the case.
5. Who are the three men who've just been arrested at the top of page 40? And what is “horse”? And why, as we read later in this page, were there “twice as many agents devoted to drug enforcement as to counterterrorism” in 2000?
6. In February of 1998, the CIA was developing a plan to “capture bin Ladin from his primary residence.” Where was this residence? Why wasn't this plan executed? And what was the tragic result (come August of that same year) of our not getting bin Ladin?
7. The word “obsessed” appears in bold on page 47. Who's saying this? Describe this person, and describe his obsession. Pinpoint the various ways in which this obsession manifests itself. (This “bolding” practice is sometimes known as “telegraphing” among comic-book lettering experts. Why do you suppose that is?)
8. Who was Ahmed Shah Massoud? How did (or didn't) he help the U.S. in its quest to capture bin Ladin?
9. Identify and characterize the three “subordinates” described early in Chapter 5. How does each man relate to the 9/11 plot?
10. Why did various Al Qaeda trainees travel throughout East Asia by plane circa 1999? And what was the “Hamburg group”?



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## Reading and Following the Written Narrative

11. How much did the 9/11 attacks cost? How much did bin Ladin and his co-conspirators spend on their plan to attack America? And where did this money come from?
12. Madeline Albright, Secretary of State under President Clinton, is shown telling the 9/11 Commission (on page 62): “We did not have a strong hand to play with the Pakistanis.” What does she mean by this? And how did America’s weak hand, as it were, play into the build-up to the 9/11 tragedy?
13. Explain how Richard Clarke personifies the difficult transfer that occurred between the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, especially regarding foreign policy. Does the attack on the USS Cole, or at least its aftermath, also symbolize this less-than-ideal transition? Why or why not?
14. What is Hezbollah? How was this entity involved in 9/11? What about the nation of Iran? In both cases, explain.
15. Who were the “muscle hijackers” mentioned in Chapter 7? Why were they called this? Describe them; what physical traits, mental characteristics, social or political views, and past experiences did they share?
16. What is a “PDB”? Explain the importance of the PDB dated August 6, 2001; why do some critics of the Bush administration point out this PDB as particularly revealing or indicative?
17. In a panel on page 82, one man tells another: “The CIA . . . plays zone defense. The guys at FBI tend to play man-to-man.” Explicate this metaphor. What does it say about the investigative methods of these two agencies?
18. According to the 9/11 Commission, if Mihdar and Hazmi had been located and apprehended, “the simple fact of their detention could have derailed the plan.” How could 9/11 have been avoided if these men had been caught? Why was nobody in the U.S. looking for them?
19. How is the name “al-Ballushi” literally translated? And how did you, as a reader, discover this?
20. What do we learn in Chapter 9 (and elsewhere) about New York City’s pre-9/11 emergency preparedness? How, if at all, did the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center affect New York’s readiness for 9/11? What is the OEM (created by the Mayor of New York in 1996), and how effective was it?
21. Does this report finally consider the evacuation of the Twin Towers on 9/11 “a success”? Explain.
22. “In the new age of terrorism,” notes the 9/11 Commission at the end of Chapter 9, “they are the primary targets.” Who are “they,” in this case? And how does the Commission think “they” can best be protected?
23. While at an Air Force Base in Nebraska on the afternoon of 9/11, President Bush met with his main advisers via videoconference. What, according to Condoleezza Rice, were his first words to them?
24. Did any Saudi nationals flee the United States before or after the events of 9/11? Why was the issue of whether this had happened a matter of concern? Why, for instance, did the Commission itself look into it?
25. Name the eight advisers whom President Bush termed his “war council.” What task did he originally give this council?



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## Reading and Following the Written Narrative

26. Review the initial conflict within President Bush's circle of advisers as to whether Iraq had "had a hand" in the 9/11 attacks. Who wanted to attack Iraq at this point? Who didn't? And when did the U.S. commence its air strikes upon, and its special operations within, both Taliban and al Qaeda targets in Afghanistan? When was Afghanistan liberated from Taliban rule?
27. Name and explain the "four kinds of failure" that the Commission says the 9/11 attacks revealed.
28. What, if anything, did *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* tell you about CIA/FBI communication and cooperation leading up to the "Y2K" scare? Why did these ties, such as they were, weaken thereafter?
29. In Chapter 12 of this report, the 9/11 Commission describes "the checkered past of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf." Highlight the mixed record of this man, from the Commission's perspective—then explain why the Commission nevertheless believes his government deserves America's qualified support.
30. How does the Commission view the U.S. government's post-9/11 actions concerning Afghanistan, not just those of the President and Congress but also the State Department? Who is Hamid Karzai, and how does the Commission regard him?
31. On page 118, the Commission notes that: "Polls in 2002 found that among friends, like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, only 15% and 12% had a favorable opinion of the U.S. In 2003; negative views among Muslims had spread beyond the Middle East." What connections, in your view, are made and/or suggested over the course of this report between the worldwide decrease in American popularity and the worldwide increase in Islamist terrorism?
32. Define "pork barrel" as the term is used on page 123.
33. List and explain the "five significant changes" that the 9/11 Commission recommends in reference to how America's federal government is organized.
34. Why does the Commission recommend (per page 128) that "the overall amounts of money appropriated for national intelligence no longer be kept secret"? And what reasons do those of the opposing viewpoint have for keeping such funds undisclosed?
35. Finally, why is "strengthening Congressional oversight" deemed so crucial by the Commission among its many recommendations? What larger benefits will follow from adhering to this particular suggestion? And who will reap the rewards of these benefits?



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## Identifying and Understanding the Illustrations as Text

1. This book begins with nineteen headshots. How are the headshots arranged, and why? Who are these men? Where are they from? What has brought them together? Later in the book, we come to learn of a twentieth man—who is he, and why is he not pictured here?
2. Nearly all of the first twenty-five pages in this graphic adaptation have a solid black background. Why do you think artist Ernie Colón chose to do this?
3. More than one reviewer of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* has praised the book's "opening section," namely its timeline format. Explain how this four-flights-at-once presentation is so effective, both graphically and as a narrative. And why are there so many blank spaces in this section? What points are made by this timeline about how our nation's airline passengers (and pilots) succeeded—and failed—at communicating with outside parties on 9/11?
4. Why is Big Ben in the background at the start of Chapter 2? And why is bin Laden shown shaking hands (or about to do so) with various people on at least three different occasions in this chapter?
5. Three separate scenes appear on page 41 (at mid-page; in a horizontal row; with some caption-narration and without dialogue balloons). Identify these flashback-like scenes, and explain why they appear here.
6. Find the six individuals shown (in a sort of "line-up" manner) near the top of page 43? Who do these six people represent?
7. Explain the jigsaw puzzle graphic on page 44. What is being expressed with this visual metaphor? Are there any other parts of this book that you would consider appropriate for such imagery? Where? Why?
8. Look at the illustration of Ahmed Shah Massoud in the lower left corner of page 51. Who's he talking to? What are they discussing? And why is his "body language" translated in a nearby caption?
9. On page 54, we see a photographic image included among all of the drawings and text. What does this photo show us? And how might seeing this particular image in its "real" depiction affect readers (such as yourself) in a special, different, or distinct way? Where else are such photo images, or even video stills, presented in *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*?
10. At the end of Chapter 5, there is a series of illustrations showing certain men trying to "avoid appearing radical." Who are these men? Why are trying to do this? And what, according to the artwork at hand, did these men do in order to achieve their goal? (And did they succeed, in your view? Why or why not?)
11. Consider the pictorial structure—both the execution and layout of the illustrations—on page 65. Some powerful people appear here; why have these people been thus arranged on this page? Which of them is rendered the largest? Why? Do any appear more than once? If so, who, and why? Also, describe the "lighting" of these key figures. How does the coloring of this page non-verbally comment on—or even label—these people? Finally, how do you imagine this page might be interpreted by a person unable to read English? How would the illustrations on this page as well as the composition of those illustrations be visually understood by such a person? Explain.
12. Describe the visual "code" that was sent out to all of the hijackers in August of 2001. Graphically as well as numerically, what does this code depict?



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## Identifying and Understanding the Illustrations as Text

13. What links can you make between how Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is illustrated in this book and how the man called Mukhtar is illustrated? What similarities do you see? Do these men look at all alike? Why, or why not?

14. Look at the face of the FDNY fireman in the middle right panel of page 88, who is staring directly at us (or looking directly outward). What does this detailed rendering of his countenance communicate to you? What's he thinking? Or feeling? How, if at all, are his emotions underscored by his seeming to stare at us?

15. On pages 90 through 95, where both the horror and the heroics that transpired inside the Twin Towers on 9/11 are unsparingly yet sensitively presented, we find few word balloons. In fact, pages 90, 91, and 93 have none whatsoever—nor does page 96, which depicts the concurrent tragedy at the Pentagon. Why do you think the book's authors employ less “dialogue” in these various instances? Why all of this silence?

16. Look again at the illustration on page 107, the first page of Chapter 11. What now-famous imagery is shown on this page? And can you find “Old Glory,” the American flag? Had you spotted it when you first read this book? Explain the importance—symbolic, patriotic, or otherwise—of its rather hidden presence.

17. There's a worldwide map printed on page 115 with several red dots marked on it. What do these dots signify? And where are the dots located? What patterns or trends, if any, do you see among the dots?

18. In his landmark study, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud points out that certain artists working in the comics genre have utilized “effects such as multiple images of the subject, attempting to involve the reader more deeply in the action.” How does this remark pertain to the repeated face (or photo ID) imagery that we find on pages 122 and 123? Did seeing the very same figure depicted more than once on a single page make you study that figure more closely? Explain.

19. Speaking to an interviewer about how he and his co-author created this book, Ernie Colón has stated (to paraphrase slightly): “*The 9/11 Report* is an over-500-page report. Very well-written, but I found it difficult to keep track of. In making our book, we wanted to do what graphic continuity does best—to clarify difficult or complex subjects. Graphic continuity is just another way of telling a story or reporting an event.” Look back over this book, and then single out a few drawings or illustrations that, when coupled with their corresponding word balloons and/or captions, were clarifying in such a way, in your opinion. And explain your choices.

20. In a recent *World Literature Today* article, Stephen E. Tabachnick asserts: “The elasticity of comics makes Jacobson and Colón's adaptation more apt, more suited to our sense of how ‘unreal’ the Twin Towers events were, than *The 9/11 Report* itself. And their adaptation has a diagrammatic quality that makes these fantastic events easier to read about and to understand than might be possible in prose alone.” Would you agree with these claims? Why or why not? And what does the word “elasticity” mean or suggest to you in the above-cited passage? Also, whatever your own views are on this matter, comment on the irony of a comic-book portrayal of history seeming more “real” than a text-only account of the same.



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## Supplementary Questions and Exercises for the Class

1. In their Foreword to this graphic adaptation, Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton say that they hope this work will lead their “fellow citizens to study, reflect—and act.” Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón have expressed similar hopes, too. Having read the book, what actions, if any, have you been inspired to pursue?
2. Before reading this book, what did you know about the attack on the World Trade Center in 1993? Or about the two American embassy bombings in Africa in 1998? Or about the attack on the USS Cole in 2000? Discuss how your knowledge of these events was changed or enhanced by reading this book.
3. This report begins with a chapter entitled “We Have Some Planes...”—referring, of course, to the four commercial aircraft at the center of the 9/11 tragedy. As a class, review the mistakes and oversights—on the part of security officers, intelligence experts, aviation professionals, governmental agencies, and so on—that contributed to these four planes being hijacked.
4. Look at the national flags on page 36. Which flags did you recognize? Which were new to you? Why are these particular flags being displayed? And should “Old Glory,” the U.S. flag, also be shown here? Why or why not? (Note that the locations mapped out on the following page of this book are all within the U.S.)
5. What does the prominent, red-lettered “BLAM!” signify on page 38? And where else in this book did you find such sound-effects lettering? Which of these was the largest, and which was the smallest? (And in both cases, how would you explain the size of the lettering used?) Also, compare the deployment of such lettering in *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* to other works of sequential art that you have read. Did this book, in your view, have more or less sound-effects lettering than a typical graphic novel? Explain.
6. Discuss Mohamed Atta’s alleged trip to Prague. (It’s described briefly in this guide, but you might want to do some extra research into the matter.) When is he thought to have gone there, and for what reason(s)? What evidence has been offered to support the belief that he did in fact make this trip? Does the Commission believe he made this trip? Why or why not? What do you think?
7. Of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers, how many were from Saudi Arabia? Why were so many of them Saudis? As a class, paraphrase and dissect the reasons that are given on page 72 for the large number of Saudis.
8. In the lower left panel of page 80, we see one airline pilot saying to another, “Whatever that means.” Explain the relevance and tone of this remark. What triggered the remark, and to whom—or to what—is it directed? Talk about the attitude as well as the thought-process of the pilot who’s saying these words. Where else in this book do we find real or imagined people commenting on (or even talking back to) the report itself? Pinpoint a few other instances of this, and then compose a short paper explaining whether and how you think the graphic-novel format is especially well-suited for this kind of metanarration.
9. “America had suffered surprise attacks before 9/11,” we read in the “Imagination” section of Chapter 11. As a class, come up with a few examples of such surprises. What is it that sets 9/11 apart in this regard, particularly given the theme at hand (i.e., “imagination”)?
10. On page 110, a large map appears beneath all of the panels—and all of the action—presented here. What does the map show? What is being asserted thematically by using this single map as the background?





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## Supplementary Questions and Exercises for the Class

11. On page 119, there is a detailed list of suggested future actions and strategies called “The Commission Recommends.” How well has the current administration adhered to these tips? Where—and how—could improvement be made? Discuss current events with your classmates when coming up with your answers.
12. “In the years since 9/11,” the Commission notes on page 121, “Americans have been better protected against terrorist attacks. . . . [We’ve been] safer, but not safe.” Yet given “the new terrorism” of this day and age, could the people of this nation (or of any nation, for that matter) be entirely “safe”? Discuss.
13. The final graphic in this graphic adaptation is a report card. Who is being graded here? Who is doing the grading? Where are the marks the highest? Where are they the lowest? And do you think these grades are fair (as in, just or fitting)? What would you, having read this book—and having seen the letter-grade postscript that concludes it—deem the average grade of this report card? Which of the various sub-par markings on this card ought to be brought up to a passing-grade first, in your opinion? Why? Compare your views on this question with those of your fellow students; make a case for the views that you have taken.
14. The late Will Eisner, considered one of the all-time masters of comic book art, wrote a classic “how to” guide called *Comics and Sequential Art*—it’s aimed at both readers and creators of comics. In this book, he ponders the young literary form known as the graphic novel: “The future for the graphic novel lies in the choice of worthwhile themes and the innovation of exposition. Given the fact that, despite the proliferation of electronic technology, the portable printed page will remain in place for the immediate future, it would seem that the attraction to it of a more sophisticated audience lies in the hands of serious comic book artists and writers who are willing to risk trial and error. . . . The future of this form awaits participants who truly believe that the application of sequential art, with its interweaving of words and pictures, could provide a dimension of communication that contributes—hopefully on a level never before attained—to the body of literature that concerns itself with the examination of the human experience.” How do you think *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* measures up to Eisner’s musings about the graphic novel—its future as well as its characteristics, its audience as well as its purpose? Write a short essay that explains your take on this.
15. Looking back to the beginning of this book, we see that the Commission asserts, near the end of Chapter 1: “The conflict did not begin on 9/11.” When did it begin, then? And where? Try to reflect on the full spectrum of events covered in *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* when formulating your answer.
16. Finally, attempt a short work of graphic continuity or sequential art of your own. Caveman drawings, Egyptian hieroglyphics, classic comic strips, today’s graphic novels—this words-plus-pictures style of communicating has been with us for thousands of years. Put your own personal stamp on this age-old yet ever-fresh form of storytelling; be creative. Feel free to base your work on a fictional or nonfictional story of your choosing, either past or present—or, even better, write your own tale. But keep in mind that, as Ernie Colón has noted in an interview: “The essential [aspect of this form] is the left to right, top to bottom [presentation on the page].” And don’t forget to create a cover! Then share your work with your class.



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## About the Authors

Sid Jacobson was the managing editor and editor in chief at Harvey Comics, where he created several characters, among them Richie Rich, and was the executive editor at Marvel Comics. He is the author of two novels.

Ernie Colón, the artist, has worked at Harvey, Marvel, and DC Comics. At DC, he oversaw the production of The Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, Blackhawk, and The Flash.

Scott Pitcock, who wrote this teacher's guide, is a freelance editor and writer based in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He is also a public radio producer, host, and programmer.