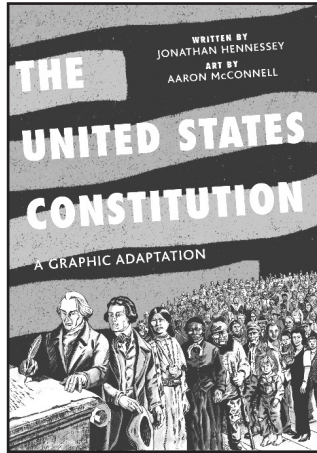


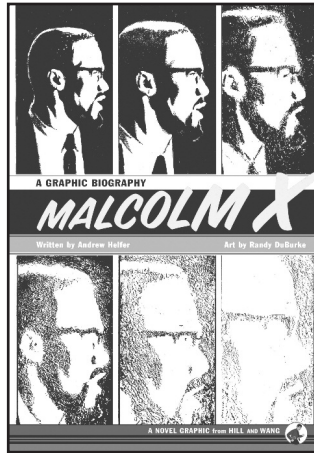


Building Solid Readers

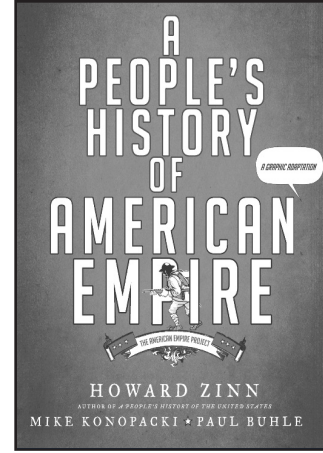
Learning and Literacy Through Graphic Novels



160 pages
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112 pages
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288 pages
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The books included in this guide are:

The United States Constitution: A Graphic Adaptation

Written by Jonathan Hennessey and art by Aaron McConnell

Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography

Written by Andrew Helfer and art by Randy DuBurke

A People's History of American Empire: A Graphic Adaptation

By Howard Zinn, Paul Buhle, and Mike Konopacki

TO THE TEACHER

“We’re the most graphically—and visually-oriented society in the history of this planet,” the renowned comic-book artist Ernie Colón has noted. Quite so. By now, everyone can appreciate the many different screens—from computer monitors to portable DVD players, digital TVs to cell-phone cameras—that our society works with, plays on, looks at, relies upon, or relaxes to.

And when it comes to the printed page—and specifically, to books—our endless appetite for screens might help explain our growing fondness for comics of all sorts: graphic novels, conventional comic books, manga, et al. What is a comic book page, really, but a series of “printed” screens, an arrangement not simply of pictures but of visual panels? (Such panels are, in fact, “windows”—each comprised of its own words and images—that our eyes jump on, dart to, gaze at, and read across, one after another.) It seems very likely, then, that comics will continue to catch on with young and old alike.

Therefore, English teachers and all other educators and proponents of reading and learning should welcome the fact that comics are becoming increasingly popular. For with this popularity has come not only a nascent critical appreciation but also, and just as importantly, a corresponding effectiveness in the classroom. Students love to read comics, in other words—as do many other readers today—and out of this love must grow an increase in literacy. Colón thus continues: “Sequential art

is a very valuable teaching tool, and it should be used—literally—to get across ideas, history, and complex issues in every schoolroom.”

Moreover, consider the following expert from a fine online article written by Brenda Pennella, a Pennsylvania-based fifth-grade teacher: “We, as educators . . . have always known that reading is a series of skills: questioning, visualizing, inferring, predicting, connecting, and responding. . . . With graphic novels, the scaffolding necessary to build solid readers is in the architecture of the genre. The illustrations not only support the text; they are a part of the text. Students are given context clues within the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle expressions, symbols, and actions of the characters within the story. Vocabulary is also supported within the illustrations and text. The framework or grid layout of this art form lends itself perfectly to the predicting strategies needed to reach higher-level understanding in reading comprehension.” (The complete text of this essay is at http://www.graphicnovels.brodart.com/teachers_perspective.htm.)

In that regard, this teacher’s guide presents discussion questions and individual as well as group exercises for three exceptional works of American history rendered in comic-book form: *The United States Constitution* (from Hill and Wang), *Malcolm X* (from Hill and Wang / Serious Comics), and *A People’s History of American Empire* (from Metropolitan Books).

The questions and exercises that follow are individually keyed to each of these three volumes. Thereafter, a final comparison-and-contrast section is offered. The importance, the merits, and the distinction carried by each of these books will be most apparent to those students who can fully and critically set all three works alongside one another, thereby seeing them—and thinking about them—all the more constructively, and maybe even more creatively.

(Finally, given the widespread appeal of the “graphic novel” literary genre in particular, there are many helpful tips and suggestions to be found online for using sequential art in your classroom. One great place to begin your Web exploration in this regard is www.teachingcomics.org, which is the home page for the National Association of Comics Art Educators.)

1. The first images we find in this book are isolated, individual moments—a two-page series of distinct, wordless pictures: a candle, a locked door, an inkwell, etc. What sequence of events is being conveyed? Who are these people? And who are the people we see when we turn the page? How many kinds of people can you find here (as in background, ethnicity, profession, historical era, or social class)?

2. “The Constitution is not just a document,” we read on page 22. “It is also an act.” What does this mean? And who are the “actors” shown in the top and middle panels of the page?

3. Look again at how a “truly direct democracy” is illustrated and captioned on page 28. Did this rendering strike you as comic in any way? Why or why not?

4. Explain the “partial” manner in which American slaves are drawn on page 31 (and elsewhere in this work). At what point are they finally shown “in full”? At what point—historically—was this possible?

5. The narrative box at the lower right corner of page 74 points out a specific way in which the Constitution improves on the Articles of Confederation. Name a few other ways.
6. On pages 54 (in the top panel) and 83 (in the bottom panel), we see two different street scenes, two different renderings of people in public. Why are these two scenes—both set in colonial times—drawn so differently? What moods or mindsets are being conveyed in each?
7. Why do the Legislative, Judicial, and Executive branches play “Rock, Paper, Scissors” at the bottom of page 71? What ideas are being artistically communicated here, both generally and specifically? Also, what is a “hydra”—and why did Alexander Hamilton refer to such regarding our state and federal courts? And finally, what is the only crime mentioned explicitly in the Constitution?
8. A juggernaut-like machine appears occasionally in this book—a large, difficult-to-assemble contraption that must be harnessed by several ropes pulled by several people. Looking back over these pages, where do we encounter this assemblage? What does this great and unruly thing stand for? (See especially page 86, where we read in a speech balloon: “The more you pull, the more stable we will all be!”)
9. What Franz Kafka novel is echoed by Hennessey and McConnell’s explanation of the Fifth Amendment? What rights are granted to Americans by this Amendment? Paraphrase the narrative graphically depicted on page 102, and explain how this Amendment prevents such a narrative.
10. What changes did the 14th Amendment bring to American society? What rights did it ensure, and when did it become law? Why do you think this particular amendment is often “foreshadowed” in these pages? And how is such foreshadowing graphically accomplished?
11. On page 137, we see a young man—apparently about to vote for the first time—walk into a polling booth. He then suddenly finds himself immersed in deadly combat. Explain the logic or argument that is being put forth in the somewhat surreal visual narrative comprising this page.
12. On the final page of this book, a distinction is made between “a perfect union” and “a more perfect” one. Explain this distinction, and then talk about how Hennessey and McConnell’s book—as a graphic rendering of the defining document of our government—fleshes out such a distinction of them change over the course of this book? Explain.

1. This work of graphic nonfiction, perhaps significantly, is presented entirely in black and white. Point out a few instances in the book where you think its black and white illustrations meaningfully reflect—or effectively represent—the racial or thematic colors of black and white. (You might also consider the photographs at book’s end when preparing your answer.)
2. One of the few full-page illustrations in this work is the first picture we see. Who is this man? Describe his pose, his facial expression, his appearance. What is he holding? What do we learn, at the outset, about this man, just from seeing how he is depicted here?

3. The first speech balloon in this book is on page 7: “He looks white, like his mama!” Why might this be important, as the book’s very first line of dialogue, especially given what is being said, who is saying it, and about whom the remark is made?
4. On page 15, we see a montage on the lower half of the page; it’s the first of a few montages employed throughout Helfer and DuBurke’s book. What all is shown here; what is being revealed to us—not just people, but also places, things, words, ideas, activities. Also, what other montages did you find in this work?
5. What is a “conk”? And a “second story man”? And a “hipster”? (These terms all appear in Chapter Three.)
6. On page 33—and earlier in the book, on page 17, as well as later, on pages 74 and 95—we see the image of Malcolm X reflected in a mirror. In each case, with each illustration, describe what Malcolm is physically doing as we see him, and describe whether and how his actions are entirely or accurately captured in his reflection. What does it mean—actually, psychologically, and conceptually—to view, and also to depict, the mirror image of something?
7. Look again at the white people appearing in the bottom panel of page 60. How has this family been drawn, in your view? Stereotypically, comically, unfairly, oddly, accurately, realistically, or otherwise? Explain.
8. Talk about the importance of perspective—that is, one’s point of view, both visually and philosophically—in the panel illustration on the bottom half of page 65. What famous event is Malcolm shown observing? What is his perspective on this event? How has this P.O.V. been graphically shared with us?
9. Chapter Eleven of this book is entitled, “Hajj.” What does this word mean? And why do you think the book switches to first-person narration at this juncture? What effect did this switch have on you, as a reader? And how was this switch underscored visually—that is, how was it accomplished in terms of illustration, and how was it textually emphasized on the page?
10. Why is Malcolm’s face shown amid flames in the lower-right panel on page 97? What appears in the panel just before this one? And how does this preceding image set us up for, or else relate to, the picture in the lower-right corner? Discuss the use of fire as a visual metaphor in *Malcolm X*, especially near the end of Malcolm’s life.

1. One thing that sets this book apart, particularly as a work in the “graphic novel” genre, is its great variety of visual imagery. We find within these pages various photographs, maps, printed-page excerpts, diagrams, posters and poster-like advertisements, newspaper and magazine clippings, political cartoons, and, of course, many drawings both comics-based and realistic. Point out memorable examples of each of these categories.
2. What is meant in this book by the word “empire”? Discuss this key term with your fellow students.
3. Define “ghost dance.” Also, who was Black Elk? What does he mean when he states (on page 17): “The nation’s hoop is broken and scattered”?

4. The phrase “Certain White Men” appears on more than one occasion in these pages. When, and in what context, does the phrase first appear? Who does this phrase signify, both specifically and generally?
5. Eugene V. Debs makes his first appearance in this book on page 22. Who was Debs? Why was he both revered and hated? For what is he best known today? And where else do we encounter him in these pages?
6. Page 28 gives us a full-page illustration of America’s so-called “Open Door Policy,” which is said to hang on “two hinges—military and economic expansionism.” What does this policy mean? How does it work? Where has it been utilized, over the years and across the globe?
7. In the bottom panel of page 33, we see a maid (or domestic servant) waiting on a wealthy white person. It’s a scene that we find more than once in *A People’s History* (although in this case, given the speech balloon appearing at far right, the drawing might be ironic). Where else in this book do we see such an illustration?
8. Explain the origin of the term “yellow journalism,” as detailed in Chapter II. Also, explain why—as we find a bit later, in Chapter IV—“This Machine Kills Fascists” is written upon Woody Guthrie’s guitar.
9. What was the Sykes-Picot Agreement? For whom was the agreement named? What did it achieve? And how, per page 87, was this agreement “essentially codified” by the 1919 Peace Treaty of Versailles?
10. Who was Emma Goldman? Why is she remembered by history? We are “introduced” to her on page 101—but, actually, we’ve seen her name previously in this book. Can you find where? (Hint: It’s on a poster in the “Resistance to War” section of Chapter IV.)
11. This work is presented, both visually and textually, as though its main author, the great historian Howard Zinn, were delivering a lecture. Zinn is our narrator; we as readers are “attending” his lecture. But with Chapter V, we find that Zinn’s own story—his remarkable life—intersects with the very history at hand. The American story, then, includes (however partially) the Zinn story. Discuss how Zinn’s life has informed his arguments and beliefs. How has his biography shaped his personal philosophy?
12. Just above the sequence of five photographs at the bottom of page 121, we read: “Many of our wars were launched on the quicksand of public deception.” Explain what this means, paying particular attention to the “quicksand” metaphor, and also explain how this remark applies to each of the five wars pictured.
13. Who are the two men depicted at the bottom right of page 159? Where have we seen them before in this book (as represented with these very same portraits)? What is each saying about race and the U.S. military?
14. Who are the four girls shown amid flames in the bottom-right panel of page 178? Can you tell who they are, even though they are not named specifically?
15. On page 191, in the “Manifesto of the Wounded Knee Airlift,” we read: “The frustration and disillusionment we may at times feel are only the result of a misunderstanding of our real ability to affect the course of this country’s policies.” And earlier, on page 99, we see a speech balloon along the same lines: “So you see, protest DOES work!!” Where else in these pages did you grasp this message?

16. The exact same unflattering—yet “presidential”—illustration appears on pages 193 and 204 of this book. What is the gist of this self-contained political cartoon? Name as many of the faces and logos in this illustration as you can.

17. On page 203, Zinn asks us, rhetorically, “Was there a connection between Watergate and Vietnam? Of course! It was the same policy.” What does he mean by this? And do you agree with him? Explain.

18. As a reader of this book, and as a viewer of its graphic imagery, account for the “secret agent” (or even “film noir”?) characteristics of the artwork rendered on page 238—the shading, coloring, perspectives, subject matter, silhouetting, shadowing, etc.

19. What did you make of the fact that this detailed, often disturbing (if not downright tragic) record of America’s blood-lust for money and power—that is, its ongoing quest for empire—ends with the words “a marvelous victory”? Did this seem apt, or credible, to you? Or foolish? Or ironic? Or naive? Explain.

1. Thinking about the three visual styles on display in these books—or about the “look” each work exhibits (that is, artistically)—which one employs the most visual repetition? Which uses the most narrative boxes? The most thought bubbles? The most speech balloons? The most sound-effects words? As a class, talk about whether and how these various properties influenced your “reading” of these graphic works. Which book was thus easiest for you to read? Which was the most difficult? Explain.

2. Explain, and give a few examples of, the phenomenon that is “eminent domain.” (It is mentioned on page 192 of *A People’s History* and on page 106 of *The United States Constitution*.)

3. Point out the various faith symbols and religious iconography that appear in all three of these works. What did each of these books have to say, generally or specifically, on the subject of religious belief in America?

4. The media—not just the press, but the broader news and entertainment industries—collectively seems to be more and more present in American life, a subject of greater and greater emphasis. How are the media treated in these three works? Where are they described, celebrated, respected, questioned, corrected, or even vilified?

5. Each of these books deals with race relations (in general) as well as the civil rights movement (in particular). Drawings of both Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Ku Klux Klan, for example, appear in all three books. Write an essay describing what lesson(s) each book taught you on the topic of race.

6. Who is, or was, Lt. Col. Oliver North? He appears on page 228 of *A People’s History* and on page 104 of *The United States Constitution*—but why does he figure (however briefly) into both of these works?

7. All three books depict various scenes of a violent nature: fierce combat, the awful consequences and manifold carnage of war, street- or gang-related atrocities, and so on. As a class discuss both the visual artistry and the layout-oriented craftsmanship that make such illustrations effective or immediate. What makes these drawings—which can sometimes portray very hard-to-look-at subjects—successful? What gives them their power?

8. Explain, and give one or two examples of, the phrase “race to the bottom.” (It is mentioned on page 23 of *A People’s History* and on page 118 of *The United States Constitution*.)

9. Think for a moment about the visual metaphors we encounter in these books—for example, both *A People’s History* and *The United States Constitution* use drawings of donkeys and elephants to suggest, respectively, Democrats and Republicans. What other visual metaphors did you find in these three volumes, political or otherwise? Also, why do you suppose *Malcolm X* employs little to no such metaphors? What does this tell us about that book especially—about its tone, its message, its hero, and so forth?

10. As an independent, arts-related project, select a certain page from one of these graphic narratives that strikes you as especially arresting, vivid, or otherwise well-done (that is, artistically). Then, visually re-imagine it. Try to draw—or at least make sketches of—a whole new way whereby this page you’ve chosen might be visually executed. Finally, share your work with your classmates—and see if they can identify which particular page you chose to re-create.

FOR FURTHER
STUDY

The United States Constitution:

In this video link, the illustrator (Aaron McConnell) explains how he illustrated the book.

<http://us.macmillan.com/theunitedstatesconstitution#video>

A People’s History of American Empire:

“What the Classroom Didn’t Teach Me about the American Empire” by Howard Zinn, narrated by Viggo Mortensen.

<http://us.macmillan.com/apeopleshistoryofamericanempire>

ABOUT THE
AUTHORS

[Jonathan Hennessey](#), a ten-year veteran of the film and TV production industry, is a writer living in Los Angeles. [Aaron McConnell](#) is a freelance illustrator living in Oregon.

[Andrew Helfer](#), as group editor at DC Comics, launched its Paradox Press imprint and the award-winning Big Book series, and worked on everything from *Batman* to *A History of Violence*. [Randy DuBurke](#)’s illustrations have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Mad Magazine*, DC and Marvel comics, graphic novels, and sci-fi magazines.

[Howard Zinn](#) (1922-2010) was an American historian, award-winning author, and renowned activist; his landmark work, *A People’s History of the United States*, first appeared in 1980. [Mike Konopacki](#) is a syndicated cartoonist and illustrator in Madison, Wisconsin; his cartoons are on the Web at www.solidarity.com/hkcartoons. [Paul Buhle](#), a senior lecturer in the History and American Civilizations departments at Brown University, is the author or editor of more than 30 books.

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