

English 290 – Comic Books as Literature

“Comics are words and pictures. You can do anything with words and pictures.”

—Harvey Pekar

Although Palomar's face-to-face classes will be online for the first three weeks, that will NOT be the case with this class. WE WILL MEET FACE TO FACE FROM DAY ONE. In the unfortunate case that there is a Covid outbreak in class and we need to go online for a short time, we will use this Zoom link: <https://palomar-edu.zoom.us/j/94177887997>.

THE BASICS

Course Section #33254

Instructor: Dr. Rocco Versaci ([pronouns](#): he/him/his)

Meeting Days/Times/Place: TTh 2:45 – 4:10pm in Humanities 308

PLEASE NOTE: This class will be taught entirely face-to-face. I will use the Canvas page mainly to post handouts, assignments, and grades.

Office Hours: M & W 12:30 – 1:30, T & Th 2:00 – 2:30 & by appointment.

Office: Humanities 301F (3rd floor, Humanities Building)

Office Phone: 744-1150, ext. 2971

Email: rversaci@palomar.edu

Website: <http://www.roccoversaci.com>

We need to exercise best practices for safety since we're meeting face to face. All students should receive an email from no-reply@cleared4work.com (or a text from 833-635-1086) that links to a daily health questionnaire. Please be sure to fill this out each day before coming to school; students who do not respond will not be cleared to attend campus, and I will be getting daily updates on everyone's status. This email will be sent to your Palomar-assigned email address, so if you don't check that, you need to start. [Click here for more information about this questionnaire](#). In addition, all of us are required to wear masks that fully cover mouth and nose while we are indoors on campus. If we do have a COVID outbreak in our class, we will need to pivot online for two weeks; if that happens (and hopefully it won't), class will take place synchronously via Zoom during our regular class days and times. I will provide a Zoom link at that time.

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT ME

A grandchild of immigrants from Italy, I grew up in the Chicago suburbs and was a first-generation college student. I earned my B.A. in 1989, my M.A. in 1992, and my Ph.D. in 1997. After completing my studies, I joined the English Department at Palomar College as a full-time faculty member, and since that time I have taught various courses in composition, literature, and creative writing. I conduct my classes with a core belief that reading, thinking, discussing, and writing about literature are among the most important things we can do; these activities help us think critically by exposing us to a variety of perspectives and experiences both like and—perhaps more importantly—*unlike* our own. Books—comic and otherwise—were an important part of my life from early on, and they inspired me to share

my passionate belief that reading is one of the best ways to explore and better understand others, the world around us, and ourselves.

REQUIRED BOOKS

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*

Art Spiegelman, *Maus I & Maus II*

Adrian Tomine, *Killing and Dying: Stories*

G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona, *Ms. Marvel: Kamala Khan*

Various short stories and essays, which I will post on Canvas.

“Comics isn’t a genre; it’s a medium.”

—Axel Alonso



Alison Bechdel



Adrian Tomine



G. Willow Wilson

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

Because of the breadth and depth of the global comics medium, we cannot possibly cover all of its variety and histories. I hope that the class encourages you toward further exploration, and fortunately the [Palomar College Library](#) has a HUGE collection of both primary and secondary works about comics. If COVID permits, we will explore this collection, which can be found on the fourth floor of the library.

OUR CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

One of the reasons I love teaching this particular class is because of the sense of *community* that forms, likely because of how much of our creativity we share with each other. To enhance this experience, we will work together to brainstorm some ideas about how we can all stay engaged and learn from each other; we’ll develop these ideas together—which are sometimes called “community agreements”—during the first week of class.

For now, though, I'll mention one foundational principle for all of my courses: respect. Demonstrating respect for one another is essential in all activities, both within and outside the classroom. We should strive to show respect for each other and ourselves, and when we encounter ideas that we do not agree with, we should focus potential criticism on those ideas themselves rather than on the person expressing them. It should go without saying that rude, demeaning, or disruptive behavior will not be tolerated in class. Nor will [microaggressions](#), prejudiced comments, or discrimination. As with other circumstances that might warrant formal action, I will always meet and talk with you before taking further steps.

“It is more important to me to make art that is an honest expression of my life than it is to make pictures that people think are well drawn.”

—John Porcellino



Lynda Barry



Jaime Hernandez



John Porcellino

COURSE GOALS AND GUIDELINES

Course Description: Comic books have commonly been perceived as juvenile, simplistic, and even dangerous. I disagree, and in teaching this class I will operate from the assumption that comic books are a legitimate, complicated, and important form of literature that merits serious study and consideration. In this class we will engage with the unique language of comic books (the complicated interplay of word and picture), we will explore the rich (and controversial) history and culture of this medium, and we will analyze the styles and themes of these literary works in terms of what they have to say about art, our lives, and the lives of others. We will also—I hope—have FUN as we do all of this.

Learning Outcomes:

- Demonstrate the ability to analyze literary texts by using close-reading skills.
- Discern and assess the interconnectedness of literature and human experience, including the ways in which writing defines, shapes, and reflects a culture's history and values through an analysis of the comic book in terms of its unique poetics (the complicated interplay of word and image), the themes that are suggested in various works, the history and development of the form and its subgenres, and the expectations of comic book readers.
- Analyze and interpret historical, social, and intellectual concepts through the study of graphic novels.

Assignments: During the semester, you will complete the following:

- Miscellaneous Homework Assignments, which will include reading questions, short writing/analysis assignments, and a review of a comic or graphic novel.
- Midterm Exam. This will be an exam that you will complete outside of class, and I will give you the prompt/assignment ahead of time.
- Final Project. Each student will create a 10-15 page autobiographical comic book, along with a 5-7 page essay/introduction. In terms of content, your comic must be about you—either a particular episode from your life, a series of events, or an overview of your life thus far. The various autobiographical comics that we read during the semester should serve as inspiration and models for your own comic. In terms of form, your comic should actively explore and demonstrate many of the principles of comic narrative that we have discussed during the semester, not the least of which is substantive interaction between word and image. Your essay/introduction should discuss your stylistic and thematic choices—Why this particular approach? Why this particular story? What comics influenced you and how?

“Comics are a gateway drug to literacy.”

—Art Spiegelman



Art Spiegelman



Ben Passmore



Joe Sacco

Reading: We will read a fair amount in this course—stories, book-length narratives, and critical essays. I have chosen works by cartoonists (some of whom are pictured throughout this syllabus) who demonstrate important principles of comics’ poetics, and who raise the kinds of thought-provoking issues that we expect from literature. In order for our intellectual community to thrive, it is important that you complete each day’s reading assignment and come to class prepared to participate in discussion (listening, reflecting, asking questions, and/or sharing). It is also important that you have the material in hand during class. For the required books, this is pretty straightforward, though if you have any trouble obtaining these titles for whatever reason, please let me know so that I can help solve the problem. For the readings that I post on Canvas, I ask that you have them available during class time—either physical copies that you print (though I wouldn’t recommend this for the color comics, as printing them may prove difficulty and/or expensive) or via a laptop or pad of some kind.

Again, if this poses a challenge for you, please let me know ahead of time so that we can work together to find a solution. If you find yourself having trouble managing your time or completing the reading, please reach out to me, and we will figure things out. Finally, the reading may contain mature themes, language, and situations, and they may challenge ideas you have, and these challenges, in turn, may have the effect of making you uncomfortable. My feeling is that discomfort can be productive, especially if we reflect on *why* something makes us uncomfortable and share those reflections. Just like muscles need to be stressed in order to grow, the same is true of our minds, preconceptions, and biases; only by challenging what we already believe can we move toward critical thinking, and only by thinking critically can we grow individually and as a society.

“One of the things people don’t seem to get is that almost all art, in at least some way, is political. And comics are art.”

—Tara Marie



Alan Moore



Ebony Flowers



Harvey Kurtzman

Attendance: Someone once said that “Ninety percent of life is just showing up.” I want to see you in class, and I want you to enjoy coming so that all of us can learn from each other. If you have to miss class, please let me know in advance, if possible; if that’s not possible, please contact me afterward so that I can let you know about assignments, etc. If you are considering dropping the course, please reach out to me instead so that I can try to eliminate any barriers you may be facing.

Written Work: Your work—unless otherwise noted—should be typed and double-spaced. All papers should be carefully proofread and turned in to me either in class or via Canvas (the method will vary based on the assignment, but I’ll let you know well in advance) by the due dates. I understand that emergencies arise, and all I ask is that you let me know so that we can talk about it and work something out. Again, please don’t give up on the class because you are having difficulties meeting a deadline; reach out to me instead.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is handing in as your own work the work of others. This includes not acknowledging sources (whether print material or from the Internet), copying the work of other students, and collaborating on class assignments which are meant to be individual work. We will discuss plagiarism and how to avoid it throughout the course; in the

meantime, you can take a look at this link about plagiarism on the Palomar website:
https://www2.palomar.edu/dashboard/Plagiarism%20output/story_html5.html.

Grading: Your final grade will be determined by your performance on the following assignments:

Midterm Exam	100
Final Project	
Outline & Sketchbook	20
Script	20
Breakdowns & Pencils	20
Introductory Essay	50
10 – 15 Page Autobiographical Comic	100
Miscellaneous Homework Assignments	100
Participation	50
Total	460 pts.

(Grades will be calculated on a standard, 10-point scale)

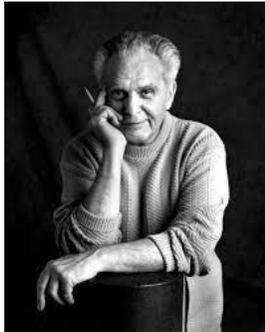
Student Support Services:

There are many resources available for students who find themselves struggling for any number of reasons. These services exist to help you succeed, so please take advantage of them. If you need any help doing this, please let me know.

- Food and Housing Insecurities: Due to COVID, [our food bank services](#) are suspended, but we do have food distributions once a month pending availability. I also recommend you visit [211 San Diego](#) for resources.
- Academic Accommodations: Students who need accommodations should discuss options with your instructor as soon as possible, at a minimum within the first week of class. Appropriate accommodations can be identified through coordination with the Disability Resource Center (DRC), please call (760) 744-1150 ext. 2375 or [click here](#). If you are not sure if you have a disability, please contact DRC as well at drc@palomar.edu.
- Behavioral Health Counseling Services (BHCS): If you are experiencing many stressors, anxiety, depression, and challenges you may want to schedule an appointment with BHCS; they can be reached at bhcs@palomar.edu. They provide short-term mental health services and referrals to currently enrolled students at no cost, [click here](#) for more information.
- Student Support Services: There are many programs on campus you can see if you are eligible for and apply to, such as the [Writing Center](#), [Transfer Center](#), [Career Center](#), [PTK](#), [EOPS](#), [CARE](#), [CalWORKs](#), [FYRST](#), [Veterans](#), [DRC](#), [TRIO](#), [Promise](#), [STEM](#), [Transitions](#), [Pride Center](#), [UMOJA](#), [Puente](#), and for more [click here](#).

Contacting Me: I welcome hearing from you about anything that might be on your mind, both during and outside of office hours! I am incredibly easy to reach; in addition to dropping in during my office hours, you can call my office (and leave a message) or email me, and I will respond quickly. It is very important for professors and students to connect to each other, and I'm looking forward to getting to know you and help you succeed.

“In comics, very little happens accidentally.”
—Will Eisner



Jack Kirby



Will Eisner

SCHEDULE OF READINGS & ASSIGNMENTS (Some readings will be posted on Canvas – see notes below)

Week 1 (2/1)

Course Introductions/Community Agreements

Student Survey Assignment Due (M)

The Comics Form: Words & Pictures

Week 2 (2/8)

The Comics Form: Closure & Transitions

Mark Newgarden & Paul Karasik, “How to Read *Nancy*” (Canvas)

Jaime Hernandez, “Browntown” (Canvas)

Gilbert Hernandez, “Frida” (Canvas)

Week 3 (2/15)

Adrian Tomine, *Killing and Dying*

Week 4 (2/22)

Assign Final Project

Adrian Tomine, *Killing and Dying*

Jaime Hernandez, “Flies on the Ceiling” (Canvas)

Week 5 (3/1)

Autobiographical Comics (all on Canvas)

Lynda Barry, "Lost Worlds"

Dan Clowes, "Just Another Day"

Ebony Flowers, "My Lil Sister Lena"

John Hankiewicz, "A Paragraph by Saul Bellow"

Harvey Pekar, "The Harvey Pekar Name Story," "Hypothetical Quandary,"
excerpt from "Austere Youth" & excerpt from *The Quitter*

John Porcellino, "Barbers I Have Known"

Chris Ware, "Thrilling Adventure Stories"

Week 6 (3/8)

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

Week 7 (3/15)

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

Week 8 (3/22)

Assign Midterm & Script

Outline & Sketchbook due for Final Project (Th)

Art Spiegelman, *Maus I*

NO CLASS ON 3/29 & 3/31 DUE TO SPRING BREAK

Week 9 (4/5)

Midterm Due (T)

Script due for Final Project (Th)

Art Spiegelman, *Maus I & Maus II*

Week 10 (4/12)

Art Spiegelman, *Maus II*

Week 11 (4/19)

EC Comics (all on Canvas)

Harvey Kurtzman, "Rubble"

William Gaines/Al Feldstein & Graham Ingels, "The Orphan"

William Gaines/Al Feldstein & Wally Wood, "He Walked Among Us"

Al Feldstein & Wally Wood, "The Whipping" & "The Guilty"

Al Feldstein & Joe Orlando, "Judgment Day"

Bernie Krigstein, "Master Race"

The Comics Code (1954)

Week 12 (4/26)

Joe Sacco, "The Unwanted" (Canvas)
Kristen Radtke, excerpt from *Seek You* (Canvas)
Ben Passmore, *Your Black Friend* (Canvas)
Superhero Comics

Week 13 (5/3)

Breakdowns & Pencils due for Final Project (Th)
Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*

Week 14 (5/10)

Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*

Week 15 (5/17)

G. Willow Wilson & Adrian Alphona, *Ms. Marvel: Kamala Khan*

Week 16 (5/24)

Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, "From *Muslim Girl*"
Meher Ahmad, "Muslim Girl Superhero"
Winona Landis, "Diasporic (Dis)identification: the Participatory Fandom of *Ms. Marvel*"
Final Project Due (Th)