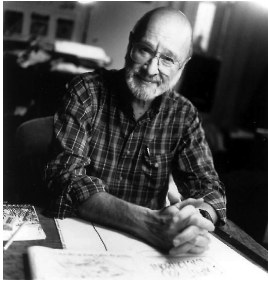


Study Guide *for the* 2009 Richard Gray Visual Arts Lecturer: Jules Feiffer

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JULES FEIFFER is a syndicated comic strip cartoonist and author. The author of the play *Little Murders* and the screenplay for *Carnal Knowledge*, he won an Oscar for his short animation *Munro*. Feiffer's cartoons, which have been collected into nineteen books and ran for forty-two years in *The Village Voice*, have also appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, and *the Nation*. He was commissioned by the *New York Times* to create its first op-ed page comic strip, which ran monthly until 2000. Most recently, he has written several award-winning children's books. An adjunct professor at Southampton College, he has also taught at the Yale School of Drama and Northwestern University, and has been a senior fellow at the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program.

GETTING TO THE CORE:

An excerpt from Jules Feiffer's *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, Fantagraphics Books, 2003.

Comic books. World War II, the Depression, and I all got going at roughly the same time. I was eight. *Detective Comics* was on the stands. Hitler was in Spain, and the middle class (by whose employment record we gauge depressions) was, after short gains, again out of work. I mention these items in tandem, not only to give color to the period, but as a sly historic survey to those in our own time who, of the items cited, only know of comic books.

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So I came to the field (comic books) with more serious intent than my opiate-minded contemporaries. While they, in those pre-super days, were eating up *Cosmo*, *Phantom of Disguise*; *Speed Saunder*, and *Bart Regan*, *Spy*, I was counting how many frames there were to a page, how many pages there were to a story—learning how to form, for my own use, phrases like: @X4#?/; marking for future reference which comic book hero was swiped from which radio hero: Buck Marshall from *Tom Mix*; the Crimson Avenger from the *Green Hornet*

...

There were, at the time, striking similarities between radio and comic books. The heroes were the same (often with the same names: Don Winslow, Mandrake, Tom Mix); the villains were the same: Oriental spies, primordial monsters, cattle rustlers – but the experience was different. As an apprentice pro I found comic books the more tangible outlet for fantasy. One could put something down on paper – hard-lined panels and balloons, done the way the big boys did it. Far more satisfying than the radio serial game: that of making up programs at night in bed, getting the voices right, the footsteps and door slams right, the rumbling organ background right – and doing it all in soft enough undertones so as to escape being caught by that grownup reading Lanny Budd in the next room who at any moment might give his spirit-shattering cry: “For the



last time stop talking to yourself and go to sleep!" Radio was too damn public.

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The typical comic book circa 1937-38 measured about 7 ¼ by 10 1/4 , averaged sixty-four pages in length, was glisteningly processed in four colors on the cover and flatly and indifferently colored on the inside, if colored at all. (For in the early days some stories were still in black and white; others in tones of sickly red on one page, sickly blue on another, so that it was quite possible for a character to have a white face and blue clothing for the first two pages of the story and a pink face and red clothing for the rest.) They didn't have the class of the daily strips but, to me, this enhanced their value. The daily strips, by their sleek professionalism, held an aloof quality which comic books, being not quite professional, easily avoided. They were closer to home, more comfortable to live with, less like grownups.

LESSON PLAN

By Greg Lundberg, Maine East High School, Park Ridge, IL

In the introduction to his book, *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, Jules Feiffer recounts his fascination with early comic books, a fascination not only with plot and character, but also quite literally with the methods of construction of these books. Feiffer reminisces that he studied the Abbie an' Slats strip for "its Sturges-like characters, its Saroyanesque plots, its uniquely cadenced dialogue" (3). At the same time, he was also counting how many frames there were to a page, how many pages there were to a story—learning how to form, for my own use, phrases like: @X4#?/..." (2). (Feiffer also brings up a number of little-known strips from the past: *Little Mary Mixup*, *Alley Oop*, *Wash Tubbs*, *Terry and the Pirates*, and *Jungle Jim*, which may be of some interest to today's students, if only for the way they evoke a bygone era.)

Interestingly, in the last few years, graphic novels have made great inroads into American schools—libraries typically have a "graphic novel" section, and students are regularly checking out and reading the works shelved there. Many such novels have made their way onto course reading lists: Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, and Gene Luen Yang's *American-Born Chinese*, not to mention illustrators Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon's *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, are but a few of the graphic offerings in middle and high school circulation right now. (Peter Kuper's illustrated edition of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is also pretty interesting!) Add to this the current teenage fascination with Japanese-style manga, and it seems that the time is ripe for an exploration—and an appreciation!—of the comic book as a genre.

In this lesson, students will first study, and then create, their own comic book-style spreads.



Essential Questions:

- What special opportunities for storytelling do comic books and/or graphic novels offer? (And, conversely, what might be their limitations?)
- How do authors and illustrators construct comic books and/or graphic novels to maximize story and character impact? Specifically, what are the tools that graphic storytellers have at their disposal to both show and tell stories?
- What makes for a truly extraordinary graphic story?

Goals:

- To study a comic book for its structural and stylistic components;
- To create an “alternative” comic book hero;
- To design a two- to four-page comic book spread.

Materials:

Comic books (new and old) and graphic novels from the library; pen and paper.

Timeframe:

One to two weeks

Process and Procedure:

Part I (Analysis)

1. Make a selection of graphic novels, comic books and comic strips available throughout the classroom; have students sort through them, grabbing one that sticks out for them. Students should spend time examining their choice, identifying the main character, his or her main qualities, both physical and intellectual/emotional.
2. Students should also choose a two to four page section of their work for analysis, paying particular attention to the various techniques the author/illustrator seems to be using. (How does the design of the pages, and the panels within each page, work to move the story forward, reveal the characters’ perspectives, and add emotional character to the story, for example?) They should make notes in preparation for sharing their findings with the class.

Part II (Creation)

1. Students will then select a real person for transformation into a comic book hero, identifying qualities of this person that might be accentuated in the comic book genre. Create a visual and written description of this person.
2. Students will imagine a real-life situation in which this character might be involved, determining how they might represent this situation dramatically in graphic form. What aspects of the situation will they accentuate, and how will they do this graphically? What will each page look like?
3. Students will create mock-ups (the graphic equivalent to the rough draft); they will share these mock-ups with each other, critiquing and sharing ideas.
4. Students will create a final version for display around the classroom.



Assessment:

The assessment will essentially be the two- to four-page comic book spread the students create; this should be accompanied by a description (visual and written) of their “alternative” comic book hero and his/her exceptional qualities, as well as a goal sheet stating their intentions in creating the spread and the techniques they’ll attempt to use to achieve these goals.

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