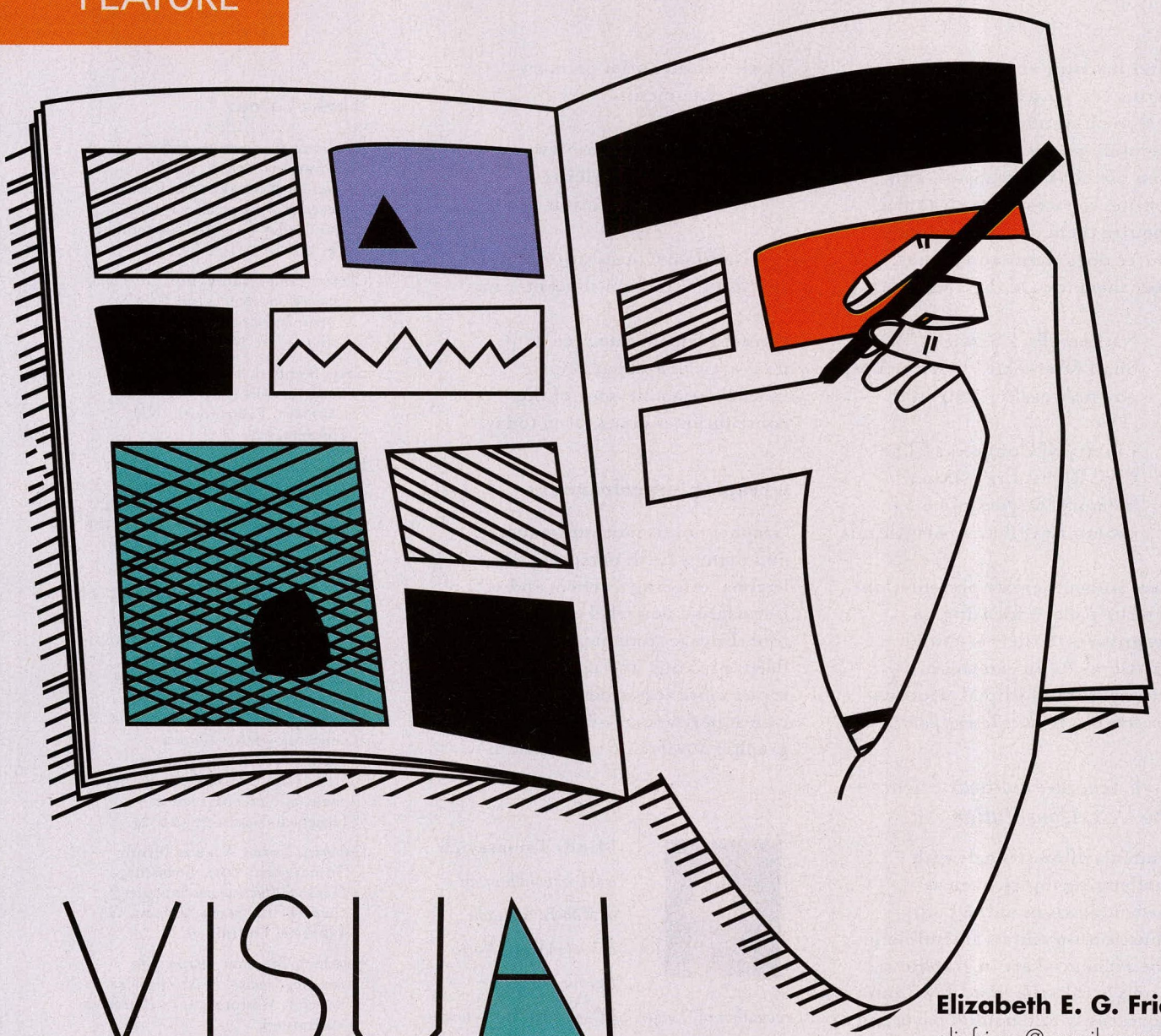
FEATURE



VISUAL NARRATIVES

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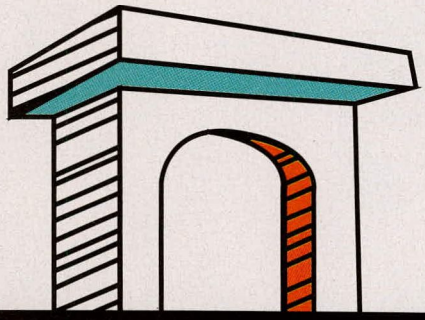
READING AND WRITING THROUGH THE PAGES OF GRAPHIC LIFE STORIES



I ADMIT IT; I USED TO THINK THIS WAY MYSELF. I THOUGHT OF GRAPHIC NOVELS AS A GATEWAY TO "MORE LEGITIMATE" READING—UNTIL, OF COURSE, I SAT DOWN TO ACTUALLY READ ONE.

A Snippet from My Classroom

It happens every semester, without fail. At least one of my students, who are pre-service teachers, will argue, "We (educators) want to get the students away from books with pictures, and up into books with only words."

I respond, "Why?"

The student replies, "The fewer pictures in a book, the harder the book is to read."

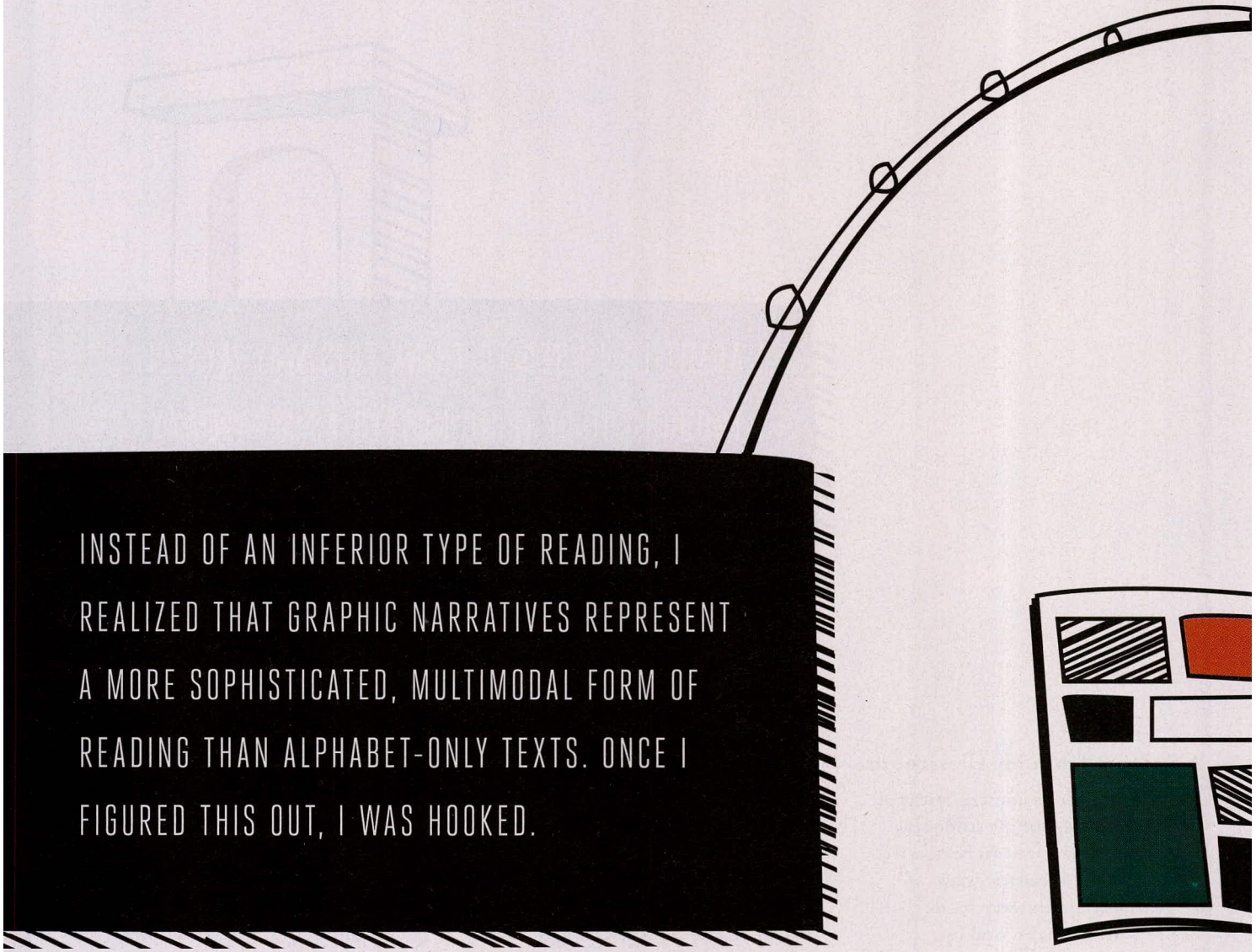
This short exchange is repeated in each children's literature course I teach. In the middle of several months spent inquiring into literature, media, and children's reading, I place a mixed pile of books on each table of four students. Each group's job is to organize the jumbled array of picture books, graphic narratives, novels without images, informational texts, and other books in order "from easiest to hardest." Students must debate their choices with each other within their small groups, and then share their decisions with the class.

As you might imagine, this exercise is an impossible task for several reasons. The most pressing of these reasons is that we don't know who the readers of these books will be. We don't know their language skills, their background knowledge, or their reading preferences, all of which factor in to the challenges that might exist between a specific book and a particular reader. Still, the exercise is an interesting way to bring to light some of the (previously) unchallenged assumptions my students carry about different kinds of books. A prevailing assumption in every group of these pre-service teachers is that books without pictures are the more challenging texts students should strive to be reading. A corollary assumption is that pictures are an aspect of books that readers need to be weaned from in their quest to achieve mature literacy.

My students aren't the only ones who seem to see pictures as either a reader's crutch or a sign of a simpler text. I hear variations of these sentiments all the time, perhaps especially in terms of popular conversations about graphic novels. Most often, I find these perceptions hidden in article titles and other conversations that target graphic novels as books for "reluctant readers." This seems to imply that graphic texts are an inferior type of reading, or something to get young readers interested in books, with the hope that they will eventually move on to more acceptable (read: word-only) texts.

My Own Journey into Reading Graphic Literature

I admit it; I used to think this way myself. I thought of graphic novels as a gateway to "more legitimate" reading—until, of course, I sat down to actually read one.



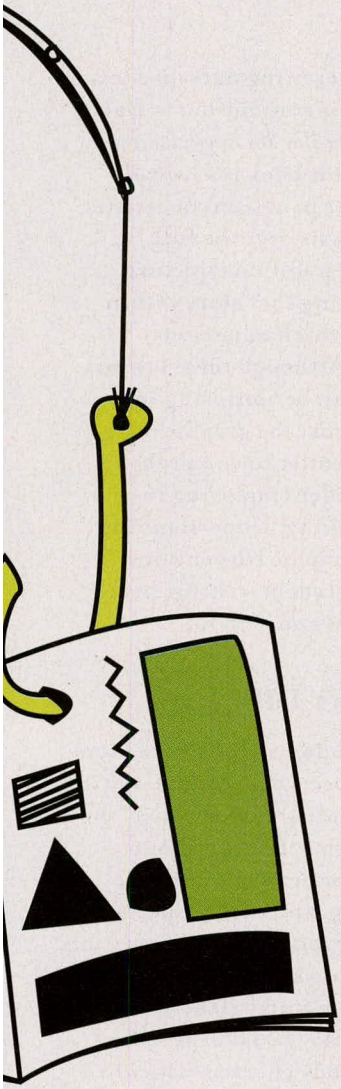
INSTEAD OF AN INFERIOR TYPE OF READING, I REALIZED THAT GRAPHIC NARRATIVES REPRESENT A MORE SOPHISTICATED, MULTIMODAL FORM OF READING THAN ALPHABET-ONLY TEXTS. ONCE I FIGURED THIS OUT, I WAS HOOKED.

I remember this experience clearly. In part because graphic novels were becoming so popular in school libraries, I decided to start reading them along with a professor at my university. I began with what some might consider a "classic" graphic narrative, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. I flew through the comic-style pages, zooming along with seemingly little to stop me. I found myself wondering what the big deal was, and why people liked these books so much. I didn't even understand half of what was going on.

Then it hit me: My wondering was more true than I knew. I honestly didn't understand half of what was going on in the book because I was reading only the words. I wasn't reading the pictures. As I reached for more and more graphic texts, I realized that, like my pre-service students, I prized the word over the picture as both a reader and a teacher.

With a graphic narrative, to read both the words and the pictures, I had to consciously slow down, over and over again. I had to relearn to read, approaching each page differently and developing an appreciation for the way words and pictures worked together. Instead of an inferior type of reading, I realized that graphic narratives represent a more sophisticated, multimodal form of reading than alphabet-only texts. Once I figured this out, I was hooked.

You may have noticed that I often use the term *graphic narrative* to refer to these texts (Chute and DeKoven 2006). As I read these books with my colleague, we puzzled over what to call them. After reading a number of graphic texts, I realized that my favorites weren't novels, per se, but graphic memoirs. Instead of superheroes and imagined characters, I found myself absorbed in books like Art Spiegleman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* and Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. I passed by the shelves of manga series and serials to the "single book" graphic



area, where I discovered memoirs and biographical treasures like Emanuel Guibert's *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan With Doctors Without Borders*, Jason Lutes and Nick Bertozzi's *Houdini: The Handcuff King*, Sabrina Jones's *Isadora Duncan: A Graphic Biography*, Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón's *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography*, and many more. So, another discovery I made along the way was that "graphic novels" aren't just novels. A wide variety of graphic texts are available to suit the tastes of all readers. As time passes, the variety and volume of graphic texts continues to expand.

Graphic Life Stories and Writing

The benefits of graphic texts for reading are relatively well established. Along the many examples of research into reading comics, Stephen D. Krashen (2004) heralded comics and other "light" reading as important elements in developing literacy. Looking at older readers of comics, Stergios Botzakis (2009) described the rich, critical-literacy practices that these texts inspire. Given the substantive body of work supporting graphic texts in reading development, I'd like to shift my focus a bit and address the possibilities of graphic memoirs and writing. (As a side note, it always seems unnatural to separate the deeply interconnected process of reading and writing. My primary goal here is to extend the reading-dominated conversation about graphic narratives to more directly include the work of writing.)

Writing Personal Narratives

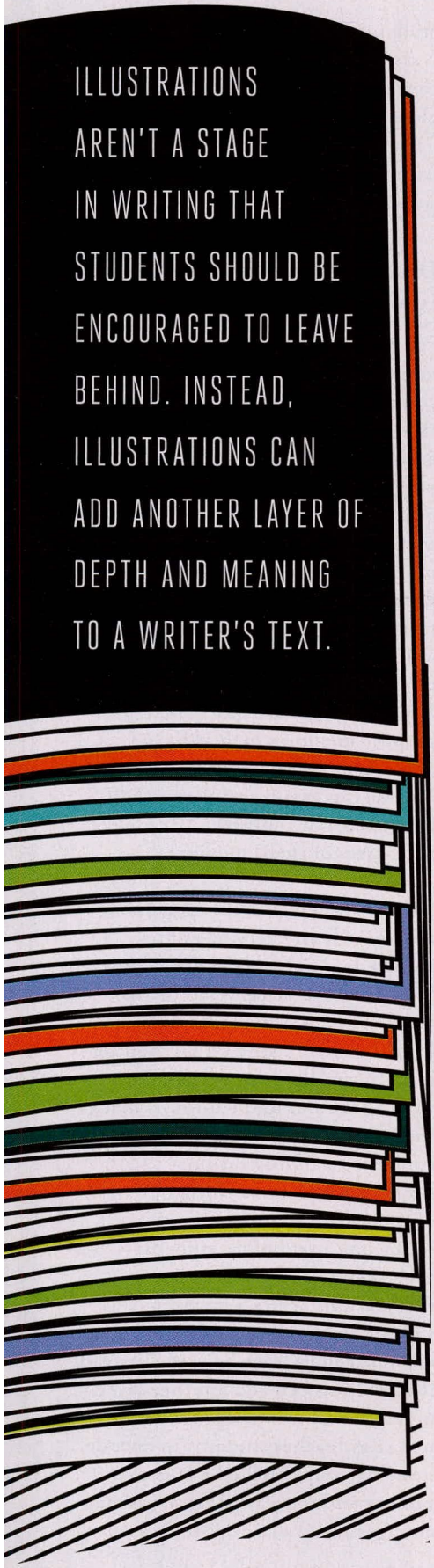
Personal narratives, or memoirs, are a mainstay genre in writing instruction around the United States. Writing personal narratives is expected across the K–12 spectrum. To teach writing, many teachers are using mentor texts as examples of effectively written pieces (Dorfman and Capelli 2007). Graphic narratives have become excellent mentor texts to teach numerous aspects of writing, fitting in alongside picture books as an important element in instruction.

Some teachers and school librarians might be concerned about students seeing these texts as appropriate only for recreational reading. However, if you are worried about graphic narratives being seen as unserious or inferior mentor texts for writers, be comforted by Ashley Dallacqua's finding that her students approached these graphic texts as serious academic tools when they were presented as such in the classroom (2012). With this in mind, I'll share several different ideas for using graphic novels to enhance personal-narrative compositions.

Drawing as a Pathway into Writing

For many writers, drawing can be an important point of entry to composing life stories. We know this is true for many of our younger authors (Horn and Giacobbe 2007), but just as my college students often overlook the complexities of books with pictures for older readers, older writers can also benefit from drawing images as a way into writing. Heart maps (Heard 1998) are a well-known way to start discerning potential personal writing topics. Sharing short excerpts from graphic memoirs such as Raina Telgemeier's *Smile* or Peter Sis's *The Wall* can inspire students of all ages to author their own personal narratives of small moments.

However, these visual experiences are not just an entry meant to inspire text writing. In her recent book *In Pictures and in Words* (2010), Katie Wood Ray explores the importance of using visual mentor texts in writing instruction. Ray, a writing scholar and educator, makes the helpful distinction of teaching students "*into* illustrations" (2010, 15) as opposed to teaching out of them. In a parallel argument to the one I set before students each semester, Ray states that illustrations aren't a stage in writing that students should be encouraged to leave behind. Instead, illustrations can add another layer of depth and meaning to a writer's text. Ray teaches students to decode drawings in published works to understand the way illustrators map changes in time, point of view, or



mood. Pairing a traditional text version of a book with its graphic version might be a way for students to understand how different media communicate the same kinds of moods, more or less effectively.

Literary Elements and the Grammar of Graphic Literature

The grammar of comics can help students enhance their own memoirs in a number of ways. As Scott McCloud points out in his excellent primer, *Understanding Comics* (1993), comics and other graphic texts have their own logic and grammar. However, many of the techniques used in comics are also used in text pieces, and recognizing these techniques can make some attributes of text-only writing easier to understand and envision for ourselves as writers.

In a classroom-based example, Dallacqua (2012) used graphic narratives such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* with fifth-grade students to develop understandings of literary devices like flashback, foreshadowing, symbolism, mood, and more. Although Dallacqua did not focus on the transition to writing, it is not hard to imagine that understanding these techniques in graphic texts could enhance the work of these young writers, as well.

In another example, dialogue is a hallmark characteristic of narratives. Many life stories include dialogue as a way to give the characters voice. Reading a graphic life story is an easy way for students to see how characters have distinctive voices. Although the book is not a memoir, the main characters in Gene Luen Yang's life-narrative *American Born Chinese* are excellent examples to demonstrate dialogue and unique voices. *Smile* provides many panels with inner dialogue, another attribute of effective memoir, using thought bubbles to show us a character's inner voice.

Another interesting narrative text using graphic conventions is Dan Gutman's *The Day Roy Riegels Ran the Wrong Way*. This book is a hybrid, imposing the panels characteristic of graphic texts over the full spreads of a traditional picture book, adopting the "story within a story" approach to personal narratives. Although these layered storylines can be confusing in a text-only book, the graphic texts make them easier to comprehend and to consider employing in personal writing. Understanding and using graphic conventions can enrich student writing, both with pictures and without.

Show, Don't Tell

For some students, one of the more difficult aspects of excellent writing is understanding how authors "show, don't tell" their readers about characters' actions or feelings, time passing, and other aspects of effective personal-narrative writing. In a concrete way, graphic narratives can help us to understand how authors employ facial expressions and other body characteristics to show their readers that a character is, for example, frustrated. We can then help students translate that visual depiction into a description of reddening cheeks, knotted brows, and clenched jaws and fists. Actually storyboarding their own graphic vignette may help students visualize how to *show* a reader with words.

This is not to say that graphic narratives are good only as stepping stones to text-only pieces. Certainly, students could write their own graphic memoirs as examples of personal narrative. The numerous digital design programs for developing graphic texts, some of which are very sophisticated, offer possibilities for composing and publishing student memoirs.

THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT VISUAL MEDIA ARE BECOMING A KEY PART OF THE WAY CHILDREN READ AND WRITE ACROSS MEDIA. THUS, INCORPORATING IMAGES AND DRAWING INTO WRITING MEMOIRS MAKES SENSE AS WE TEACH CHILDREN LITERACY SKILLS.

There is little doubt that visual media are becoming a key part of the way children read and write across media. Thus, incorporating images and drawing into writing memoirs makes sense as we teach children literacy skills.

Graphic Narratives in the Classroom

I have suggested that graphic memoirs are worthy texts to enhance both reading and writing in schools. Due to their relatively recent rise in popularity, many teachers may not have had the opportunity to read or study graphic texts in their teacher-preparation programs. Although I won't argue with the idea that these texts are excellent invitations for "reluctant readers," my hope is that this brief piece presents possibilities for using these texts as exemplars for deepening study and engagement in the memoir-writing process. In a world where visual information abounds, students benefit from knowing how to use visual techniques as a part of understanding and telling life stories. The expanding array of graphic narratives can provide concrete examples of what might otherwise be abstract elements—elements that students can then apply to their own memoirs, whether they are written in pictures or in words.

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Visit <www.ala.org/aasl/slr> to read the research paper, *Exploring Graphic Novels for Elementary Science and Mathematics*, by Suzanne Nesmith, Sandi Cooper, and Gretchen Schwarz.

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