“Must Read” Graphic Novels

Fables: Legends In Exile

This elaborate fantasy series begins as a whodunit, but quickly unfurls into a much larger story about Fabletown, a place where fairy tale legends live alongside regular New Yorkers. Years ago, fables and fairy tales like Jack and the Beanstalk and Cinderella "were a thousand separate kingdoms spread over a hundred magic worlds," until they were invaded and driven into hiding and, eventually, into modern-day NYC. And so, on the city streets we find Beauty and the Beast in trouble with the law and Prince Charming reduced to a broke cad auctioning off his royal title, while his ex-wife, Snow White, rules over the de facto kingdom the fables created. When Snow White's sister, Rose Red, disappears from a blood-soaked apartment, the Wolf, reformed and now the kingdom's house detective, is assigned to the case.

Writer Bill Willingham's dialogue is humorous, his characterizations are sharp and his plot encompasses a tremendous amount of information with no strain at all. The mystery is wrapped up neatly at the end, and readers will find themselves going back to piece together the clues revealed in the art. Thoroughly entertaining, this first compilation is really an excuse to familiarize readers with the Fabletown world and its inhabitants, revealing bits and pieces of the past while setting up character conflicts. Each Fables trade paperback follows a complete story arc within writer Williingham’s world, but should definitely be read in order as character relationships and conflicts are spread over multiple novels.

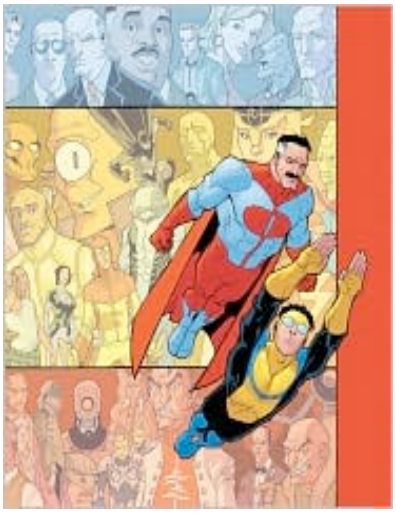
Fables will appeal to both male and female readers alike, though some profanity, sexual innuendo and nudity make this series more appropriate for the upper grades (8+). Readers can bring with them their prior knowledge of the fairy tale characters, and adjust their impressions as they read. There are currently ten books in the Fables series, each retailing at around $10.00.

Runaways: Pride and Joy

Meet Alex, Karolina, Gert, Chase, Molly and Nico - six young friends whose lives are about to take an unexpected dramatic turn. Discovering their parents are all secretly super-villains, together the teens run away from home and vow to turn the tables on their evil legacy!

This unusually clever, fun teen comic is based on the novel premise that parents don't just seem evil, they actually are evil supervillains. Or so some kids find out one night while eavesdropping on a dastardly meeting they take to be a cocktail party. Although the children are each a "type" right out of sitcom land-the goth girl, the brain, the jock, the dreamboat, the shy one-they're also fairly empathetic characters. Brian Vaughan's closely observed dialogue lends them authenticity and pathos as they go through the disturbing realization that their parents aren't just jerks but actually mass-murderers. The plot builds from this initial discovery, as the kids band together, discover they, too, have superhuman powers and engage their parents in good, old-fashioned superhuman fisticuffs. The group goes on the run and discovers their parents have all of Los Angeles in their pockets. It's enough to make a teenager feel more alienated than ever.

The writing is sharp, and Vaughn has a real knack for creating believable characters and revealing who they are through dialogue. The art is clean and colorfully rendered in what is clearly a manga-influenced style. Marvel has these books rated at “12 and up,” and that seems appropriate to me as well. Runaways was a tremendous hit amongst both male and female readers in my eighth grade. Readers will want to read the entire series, as the multi-layered story is peppered with plot twists and cliff hangers. Runaways currently has seven trade paperback editions that retail for $8.00 each. It is also available as two hardcover collections that retail for $35.00 and $25.00 respectively.



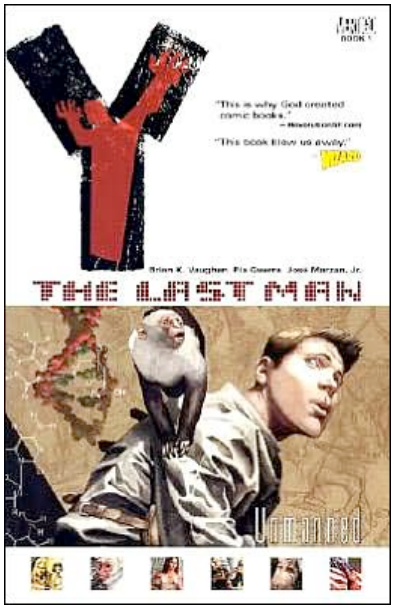
Invincible

Mark Grayson is just like most everyone else his age. He goes to school, struggles with his homework, has a crappy part time job, and sleeps late on weekends (at least until the good cartoons come on). He's really into girls, but he doesn't quite understand them. Oh, and, as of late, Mark seems to be developing super powers.

High school student and the son of Omni-Man, Mark finally comes into his own. With his new costume and burgeoning strength, he will one day be a match for villains on a galactic scale, and already he can hold his own against some intimidating foes. But there are enemies much more insidious, much more threatening, and not all of them wear a villain's face.

The story is compelling, presenting teenage melodrama without a trace of condescension, and even the inevitable superhero-crush-on-a-girl-he-can-never-have subplot receives a fresh spin. Teen readers can find a familiar power fantasy in these pages that feels new because of writer Robert Kirkman's attention to the domestic life that Mark and his father maintain alongside their heroics. Kirkman maintains a careful balance between Mark's teenage melodrama and the saving-the-world-from-yet-another-galactic-super threat story. The characters are fresh and original; unlike the Batmans, Supermans and Spidermans of the comic universe, readers do not come to this text with any prior knowledge.

The writing is layered, and rewards careful attention, as seemingly innocuous characters and events inevitably pop up later in the story with dire – and sometimes disastrous – consequences. Loads of characters and multiple plotlines and conflicts require close reading. The art is colorful and cleanly rendered, and artists Bill Crabtree and Ryan Ottley are deft at portraying emotion and conflict in panels devoid of writing. Stylized violence and some teen themes make this book more appropriate for more mature readers (grades 8+). A huge hit among eighth grade boys in my school, Invincible is available either as a series of trade paperbacks which retail for about $12.00 each, or in three "ultimate" collections, which each retail for around $30.00. While the cost may be prohibitive, I recommend the collected editions, as the story seems to unfold in a more navigable manner.



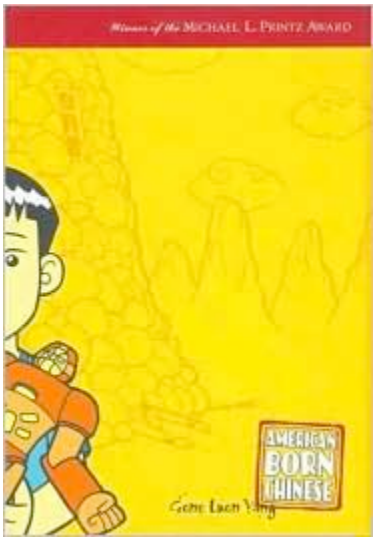
Y: The Last Man

In the summer of 2002, a plague of unknown origin destroyed every last sperm, fetus, and fully developed mammal with a Y chromosome— with the apparent exception of one young man and his male pet monkey Ampersand. This "gendercide" instantaneously exterminated 48% of the global population, or approximately 2.9 million men.

"Y" is none other than unemployed escape artist Yorick Brown (his mother was a Shakespeare buff), and he's seemingly the only male human left alive after the mysterious plague kills all Y-chromosome carriers on earth. Amid the ensuing chaos, Yorick wants to find his sister and girlfriend, but instead, aided by the secretive government Agent 355 and pursued by radicals from the Amazon movement, he goes in search of a cloning researcher who may be able to determine why he survived and who might help to repopulate the world. Yorick must contend with dangerous extremists while hiding his true identity, and search for exactly why he's the only man to survive.

The Vertigo team of Brian K. Vaughan, Pia Guerra, and Jose Marzan Jr. have given readers a rousing story line to get lost in. With clean lines and muted colors, artists Guerra and Marzan invoke a frighteningly believable future; their vision of the surprise and horror to come is so beautifully ordinary, it's entirely convincing - and addictive.

Nudity, bloody violence, and profanity earn this book Vertigo's "mature readers" tag. Y: The Last Man is strictly for mature upper grade students (8+). Its appeal is its fine story, well scripted with dryly humorous touches by Vaughan. There are currently nine trade paperback titles that each retail for about $10.00.



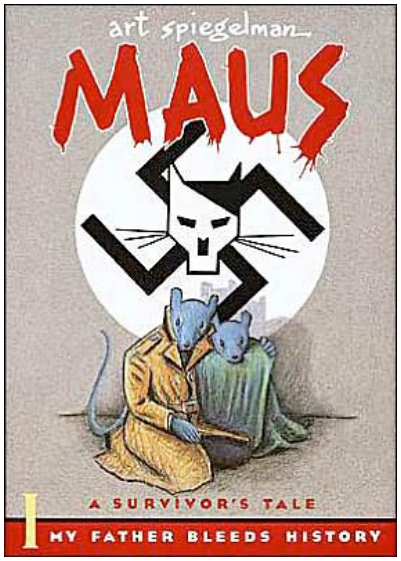
American Born Chinese

Three seemingly unrelated stories blend into a memorable tale of growing up Chinese American. The book begins with the ancient fable of the Monkey King, the proud leader of the monkeys. He is punished for entering the god's dinner party by being buried under a mountain for five hundred years. Second is the story of Jin Wang, the son of immigrants struggling to retain his Chinese identity while longing to be more Americanized. The final story is that of Cousin Chin-Kee, an amalgamation of the worst Chinese stereotypes.

This much-anticipated, affecting story about growing up different is more than just the story of a Chinese-American childhood; it's a fable for every kid born into a body and a life they wished they could escape. As alienated kids go, Jin Wang is fairly run-of-the-mill: he eats lunch by himself in a corner of the schoolyard, gets picked on by bullies and jocks and develops a sweat-inducing crush on a pretty classmate. And, oh, yes, his parents are from Taiwan.

The fable is filtered through some very specific cultural icons: the much-beloved Monkey King, a figure familiar to Chinese kids the world over, and a buck-toothed amalgamation of racist stereotypes named Chin-Kee. Jin's hopes and humiliations might be mirrored in Chin-Kee's destructive glee or the Monkey King's struggle to come to terms with himself, but each character's expressions and actions are always perfectly familiar.

This story's clear, concise lines and expert coloring are deceptively simple yet expressive. Even when Yang slips in an occasional Chinese ideogram or myth, the sentiments he's depicting need no translation. Yang accomplishes the remarkable feat of practicing what he preaches with this book: accept who you are and you'll already have reached out to others. American Born Chinese is a well-crafted work that aptly explores issues of self-image, cultural identity, transformation, and self-acceptance.

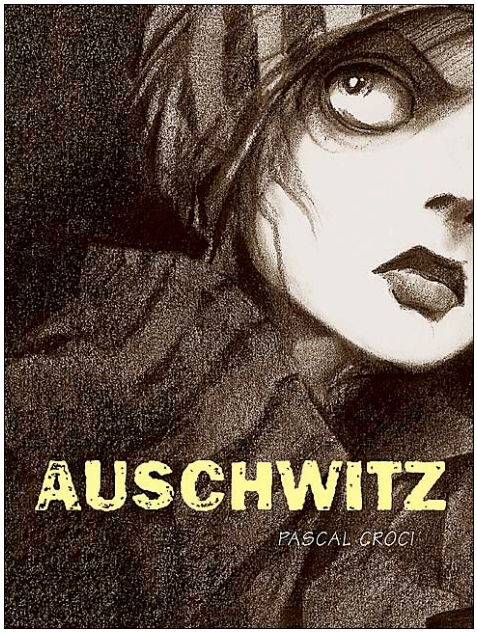


Maus

Told with chilling realism in an unusual comic-book format, this is more than a tale of surviving the Holocaust. Art Spiegelman relates the effect of those events on the survivors' later years and upon the lives of the following generation. Each scene opens at the elder Spiegelman's home in Rego Park, N.Y. Art, who was born after the war, is visiting his father, Vladek, to record his experiences in Nazi-occupied Poland.

The Nazis, portrayed as cats, gradually introduce increasingly repressive measures, until the Jews, drawn as mice, are systematically hunted and herded toward the Final Solution. Vladek saves himself and his wife by a combination of luck and wits, all the time enduring the torment of hunted outcast. The other theme of this book is Art's troubled adjustment to life as he, too, bears the burden of his parents' experiences. This is a complex book. It relates events which young adults, as the future architects of society, must confront, and their interest is sure to be caught by the skillful graphics and suspenseful unfolding of the story.

Readers will quickly pick up on Spiegelman's effective cat-and-mouse personification. This can, however, also detract from the story for readers seeking realism. Why Spiegelman chose to make this artistic decision is a question readers can think about as they navigate the text, as the art – as is true in any graphic novel – plays an integral part in the storytelling. Maus is a deeply layered text which requires close reading. The character relationships are complex, as is the constant flashback / flash-forward style of the writing. The complete story is told in two volumes, which can be purchased separately, or together for $25.00.



Auschwitz

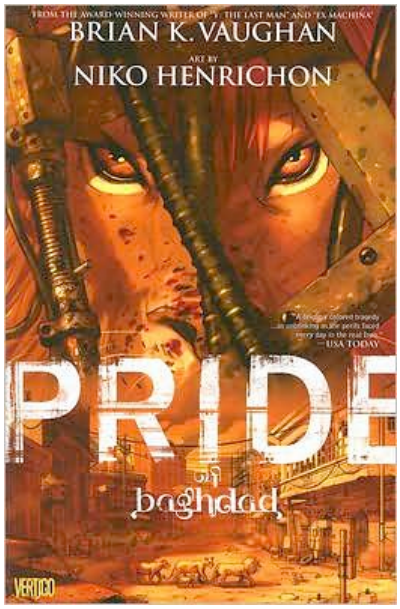
In this gripping graphic novel, artist Pascal Croci tells the horrifying story of the World War II concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Using the fictional story of a couple-Kazik and Cessia-who lose a daughter at the camp and barely survive themselves, Croci depicts the horror and brutality of the Holocaust in grim, searing, black-and-white illustrations. Based on extensive interviews Croci conducted with concentration-camp survivors, this book tells its story with the immediacy and disturbing reality of actual historical events.

Auschwitz is a bleak book that relates the terror of life and death in a Nazi extermination camp. The story opens in 1993, as the Polish couple Kazik and Cessia begin to reveal to each other, after a lifelong silence, their experiences while separated in Auschwitz. Hoping to glimpse his seemingly doomed daughter one last time, Kazik becomes a sonderkommando (a prisoner charged with clearing out the gas chambers after mass killings). He does see her, but her tragic fate remains unknown until Cessia reveals it.

Croci interviewed Auschwitz survivors about their imprisonment, and his realistic and detailed black-and-white art, shaded with somber grays, reflects his extensive research. The depictions of piled, burning corpses in the gas chamber are not for children or for the faint-hearted of any age. But this is recommended for older teens and adults, as a reminder of something that must not be forgotten.

Although Art Spiegelman explored similar terrain with his masterful Maus, Auschwitz is its own creation. Croci's text and character development are considerably sparser, but the frighteningly realistic black-and-white illustrations make this book memorable. I just discovered this book at the NY Comic Con, and the haunting illustrations and gripping and heart-wrenching story make it a must read novel. It is a work stays with readers, its profound imagery serving as a haunting reminder of the persistence of violence and evil.

While the art is far more graphic and realistic than that of Maus, readers may find this text easier to navigate, even with the flashbacks imbedded in the writing. Auschwitz retails for around $13.00, and is deserving of a spot in any library or collection of books, personal or school-related.

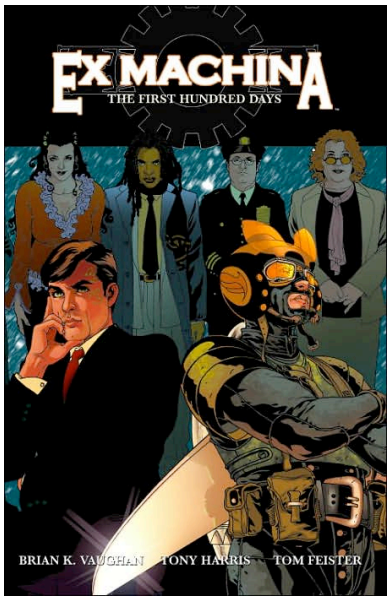


Pride of Baghdad

In the spring of 2003, as a bomb raid ripped through Baghdad, the Baghdad Zoo is hit and a pride of four lions—two females, Safa and Noor; a male, Zill; and a cub, Ali—is freed. With no cage and no keepers, the lions fend for themselves in the war-ravaged city. Having been kept in the zoo, the lions had always dreamed of freedom; once outside, they see the true horror in the world. This truly exceptional graphic novel questions the war in the Middle East, and what freedom really is.

The dynamics that writer Brian Vaughan (Y: The Last Man, Runaways) creates between the two females of the pride are outstanding, and truly reflect how a family could act in this scenario. Illustrator Nico Henrichon's art is simply amazing; each page transports the reader to each scene, making for a strong visceral connection between the reader and the story. The lions are exquisitely developed and evocative characters who will haunt the reader. This is a book to be read on many levels, and it should appeal to a wide range of readers. Designated by the publisher as a book for older readers, there are depictions of violent scenes - including the insinuated gang rape of one of the female lions - though set in the context of war and the fight for survival.

Vaughn’s writing presents a thoughtful allegory about the war in Iraq, with every scene having a deeper subtext. The book succeeds as a graphic novel and as an account of the current crisis. Henrichon's full palette emphasizes browns and grays that evoke the sands of Iraq, while his long brushstrokes and careful attention to detail reflect the precise and minimalist dialogue that Vaughan uses. An allegorical tale with compelling and believable characters, Pride of Baghdad makes it clear that without self-determination, there can be no freedom. This is one of the most important books of 2006; every library should own a copy.



Ex Machina

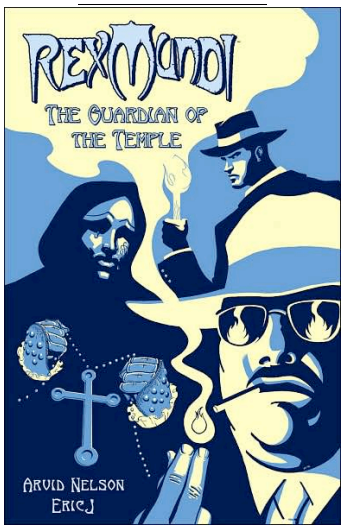
Set somewhere between The West Wing and an alternative future, this tale asks the question: What if the mayor of New York was a superhero? Brian Vaughan (Y: The Last Man, Pride of Baghdad) and answers with intelligence and dash. In classic superhero origin, Mitchell Hundred is just another civil engineer until an encounter with a glowing light under the Brooklyn Bridge gives him the power to talk to machines. Fast forward three years: after a famed stint as a superhero, Hundred has just been elected mayor of New York and must deal with not only the colorful cast of characters that make up his staff but also a host of crises: a PR disaster set off by an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum; a crippling blizzard; and, most worryingly, a serial killer who's bumping off the city's snow plow drivers.

Vaughan cleverly adapts real news stories - New York mayoral politics, the Sensations art scandal - and plausibly fits them into a world where superheroes exist, but are forbidden by the NSA to talk about their powers, while adding surprising twists and turns. Vaughan ingeniously sets up the entire series as overlapping flashbacks to the beginning of Hundred's term and earlier. As the series opens, it's 2005 and something awful has happened, but we don't know what. The book goes on to suggest that the disaster has something to do with the folly of dressing up in a costume and trying to improve the world as a vigilante, or perhaps the folly of dressing up in a suit and trying to improve the world through politics.

The artist’s gritty, charismatic characters give the story further appeal. Ex Machina is half X-Files, half West Wing and 100% genius. The dialogue sparkles, the art beautifully conveys both Vaughan's horror and his humor, and the plot twists will have readers on the edge of their seats. This vastly entertaining first collection should have readers eager to read future volumes.

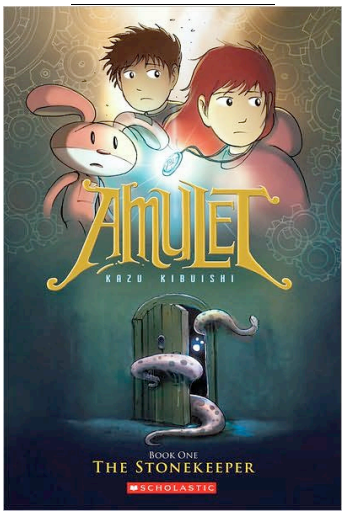
Other Noteworthy Titles

Rex Mundi

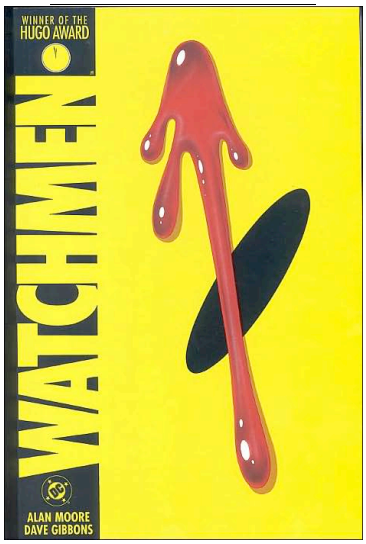
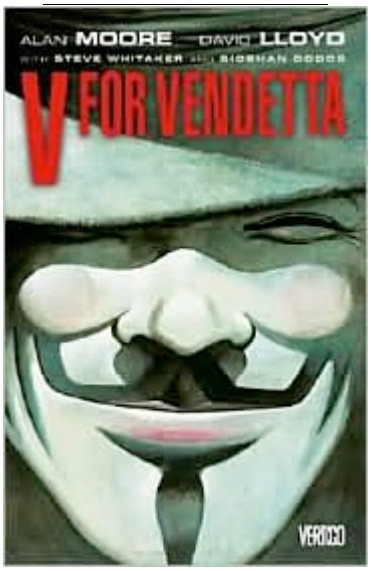


The Hobbit

The Amulet



The Watchmen



‘V’ For Vendetta