CBC

On Writing (And Reading), the GRAPHIC NOVEL

Stefan Petrucha
timetripper@petrucha.com

"Now kids don't have to read them," the gentleman said as he squinted at the covers of my award-winning Nancy Drew Graphic Novels at last year's Book Expo of America.

As someone whose been writing graphic novels since they were called comic books, I found his comment disturbing, but not uncommon. Despite the growth in awareness, and the oft-acknowledged boon comics provide educators striving to get kids to read, some folks still don't "get" them.

Being fortunate enough to also write novels (*Teen, Inc.* from Walker Books and, with co-author Thomas Pendleton, the Wicked Dead series from Harper Collins), I like to believe I'm relatively aware of the distinctions and similarities between the forms. The basic goal of both is the same—to convince the reader they're not looking at words or lines drawn by an artist, but at something imaginatively alive.

Graphic novels accomplish that through words and pictures (panels). Obviously the words have to be read, but, less obviously, so do the pictures. Just as a sentence creates a complete thought, a sequence of panels creates a complete movement through time and space. It follows a grammar similar to that of a shot breakdown in film or TV.
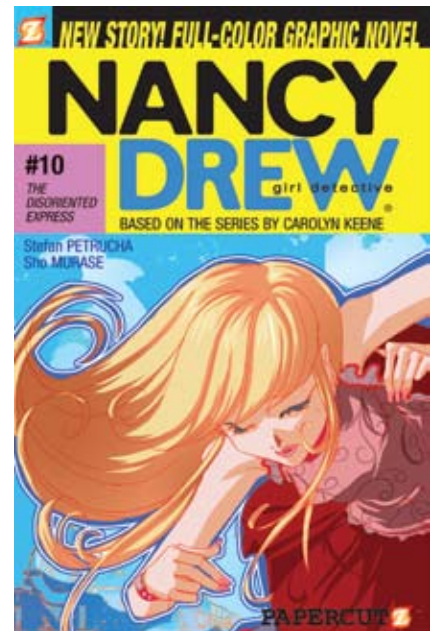
So, yes, I write comics, which leaves some surprised to learn that I don't also draw the pictures. The working process for Nancy Drew goes something like this—I come up with an intriguing and delightful plot
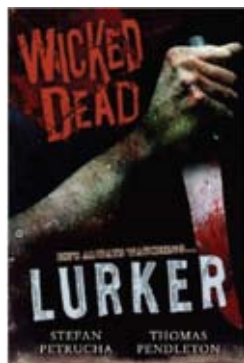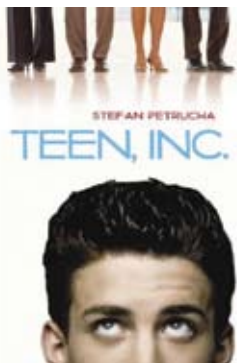
true to the original girl detective's character yet geared for today's reader, which is submitted to my editor.

Once approved, I write what's called a full script, which is akin to a film script, only the pictures don't move. Each picture (panel) is described, and all the dialogue written. For Nancy Drew, a maximum of three to four panels a page works best. Dialogue and captions are kept brief to allow maximum space for the images. The full script is again eagerly read by my editor, and passed into the talented hands of artist Sho Murase. Collectors have been disappointed to discover there is no actual art to be had—all Sho's work is done on computer.

One would think that, in a collaborative medium, what I see on the final page would wind up different from what I originally pictured. Throughout my career though, I've been impressed with how a truly good artist, such as Sho, will deliver exactly what I'm looking for, only more so. The pleasant surprises have always been about how much more the artist brings to the story.

When I first started out, fearful I wouldn't get what I needed from an artist, I'd write very detailed panel descriptions. I've since discovered that a better goal is to keep the descriptions accurate, but minimal, to more easily engage their artistic sensibilities. These days, for instance, I try to imply things like the angle of the image. I figure if I ask for a trembling, sweaty hand on an icy glass of water, I'm going to get a close-up.

They say a picture's worth a thousand words, but it depends on the picture

and the words, no? At least a thousand words can be written about Mona Lisa's smile, but how many pictures can you get out of any given poem by Emily Dickinson? Even so, the various forms—prose, film, TV, and comics—each have their strengths and weaknesses.

Prose, I believe, is best at communicating a flow of thoughts. It's less efficient when dealing with something like fast action. To use a garish example, an explosion, no matter how well written, will always make more of an immediate impression in film. A drawing of an explosion would come second, but a verbal description last.
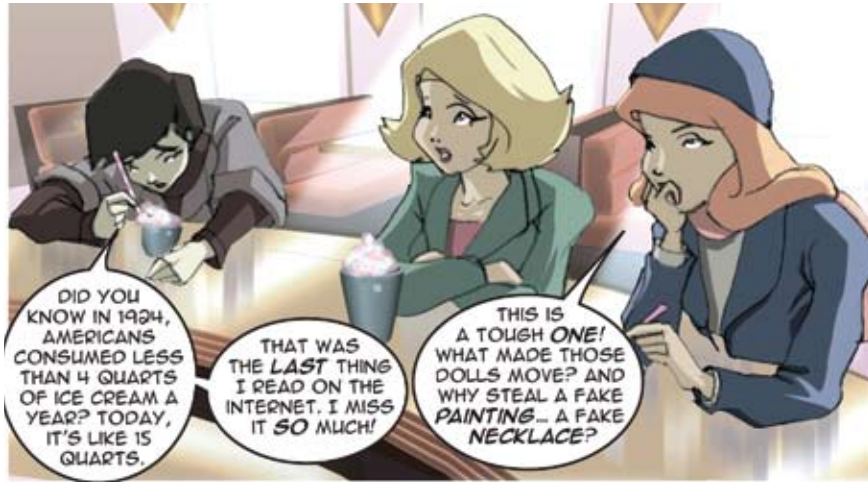
which lies in its combination of words and pictures. Graphic novel readers exercise both their verbal and visual imaginations simultaneously, creating, in their mind, all the sound and movement, for a uniquely intimate experience that sits somewhere between film and prose.

Part of the trick is to make sure that the words and pictures work together to produce that experience but don't duplicate each other's efforts by providing the same information. It's a standard rule in comic writing that one shouldn't, for instance, show a picture of a car pulling out of a driveway with a caption reading "The car pulled out of the driveway," and a character saying, "Look, a car is pulling out of the driveway."

As with every art form, though, rules are made to be broken. In scripting an adaptation of the epic poem *Beowulf* for Harper Collins, with art by Kody Chamberlain, I broke that rule a few times. Why? Well, poetry, by nature, communicates various levels of meaning, so I felt there were times, (as in the example pictured),

Another advantage film has is that an actor can say "the" a million different ways. Dialogue can be made fascinating by the talents of those performing it. In comics, what you read—the words—is what you get. Aside from the aforementioned need to be brief, it can be downright tedious to have page after page of characters talking to each other.

So, in dialogue sequences, I always try to have the characters doing while they chat, from the overt, like setting the fuse on a bomb, to the sublime, like tearing up the last letter from an ex-boyfriend, to the small, like flicking some ice cream off a straw.

This not only keeps things moving, it also plays to the medium's strength,

where having the surface meaning explicit in the images would make it easier for the reader to focus on the more poetic meaning in the words, making the result, I hope, truer to the original.

So yes, graphic novels are there to be read. Is it the same as reading prose? No. Better? Worse? For my money, it depends entirely on the graphic novel or the prose. As for Nancy Drew and *Beowulf*, I prefer to think that rather than people *not* having to read them, now *more* people can.

A writer of novels and comic books for well over two decades, **Stefan Petrucha** *currently scripts the exciting Nancy Drew graphic novels (Papercutz), the first comic book adventures of the iconic girl detective. His all-original stories for the series won a Benjamin Franklin Award for best graphic novel and have sold over a quarter million copies worldwide. He lives in western Massachussetts with his two daughters, Maia and Margo (both of whom he hopes are reading his Nancy Drew graphic novels), and his wife and fellow writer, Sarah. His latest novel is Teen, Inc., from Walker Books for Young Readers, which has received a starred review from School Library Journal and has been optioned for development as a television series. You can visit Stefan Petrucha on the Internet at* <www.petrucha.com> *.*