

Graphics for the Classics: Retelling of Classic Works and Famous Characters in the Graphic Novel Format

by Erin Sterling

Comics are not just for kids anymore. In fact, graphic novels (as they are now called, to allow adults to read them without shame) are now recognized by teachers, librarians, and the public at large to be a valid art form. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman about surviving the Holocaust is often required reading in school. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* offers powerful social commentary about power structures and the nature of heroes. There are many, many wonderful reasons that this format is so appealing; high among them, is how the reading experience is informed differently by the combination of text and visuals. No way is this difference in experience more apparent than in the re-telling of classic works in the graphic novel format.

Graphic Classics: Mark Twain is a collection of a dozen of Mark Twain's short stories and anecdotes that has been interpreted by more than 20 different illustrators. Twain's rhetoric shines through while the art often works to highlight complexities and layers of the work, as with "A Dog's Tale" illustrated by Lance Took in which the role of the ill-treated dog is played by a black woman (Library Journal Review). Graphic Classics is a publishing division that presents great works of fiction through illustrated graphic art. While not all in the series have received stellar reviews, Graphic Classic's **Mark Twain** is one of the highlights. **Graphic Classics: Jack London** is another one, as is **Graphic Classics: Edgar Allen Poe**. Both graphic novels include short stories by the authors that have been illustrated and adapted by a variety of artists. In each case, the visuals do not take away from the rich text, but rather, through the use of different artistic styles, help inform the themes and settings in entertaining and moving ways.

Classics Illustrated is a comic book series that adapted literary classics into comics from 1941 to 1971. More recently, new companies have acquired the rights to Classics Illustrated and have published new adaptations with different artists. **The Wind in the Willows, Classics Illustrated Deluxe**, adapted from Kenneth Grahame's tale by Michael Plessix offers "energetic, colorful depictions" to the classic story and has been very well received (Booklist Review). Do not be fooled by the marketing to tweens and teens—adults familiar with the story from their childhood will find this rendition engaging and touching.

One of the ultimate "classics," Shakespeare was meant for the stage, and I have trouble thinking that he would object to the adaptation of his stories to a graphic novel format. Manga Shakespeare is a series of books featuring manga illustrations with abridged original text. Manga is a popular artistic style of graphic novel with roots in Japan that features "large eyes, incredibly graceful figures, expressive backdrops, and panels to express highly emotional moments." Start with the acclaimed **Manga Shakespeare Romeo and Juliet**, adapted by Richard Appignanesi and illustrated by Sonia Leong and **Hamlet**, adapted by Richard Appignanesi and illustrated by Emma Vieceli. Both alter the setting of the books, with Romeo and Juliet taking place in modern-day Tokyo where the Montague-Capulet rivalry is found through organized-crime rivals, and Hamlet taking place in a cyberpunk world. The setting and artistic representations may feel jarring to those unfamiliar with the manga artwork or Shakespeare out

of 17th century context, but let yourself be drawn into these excellent renditions of Shakespeare to help understand the difficult (but witty) text.

Those more interested in classic non-fiction works might be interested in checking out the graphic adaptation of **The Jungle** by Upton Sinclair, adapted by Peter Kuper and Emily Russell, as well as **Capote in Kansas** by Ande Parks and Chris Samnee. **The Jungle** adapts Sinclair's seminal expose into the meat-packing industry by telling the story of Jurgis Rudkus who loses many people he loves to industrial capitalism and becomes involved with the Socialist Party. An intense novel to begin with, the graphics seem to extend those themes even further. Booklist Review describes the artwork as "Chagall's buoyant Old World fantasias meet the intense expressionism of Munch." **Capote in Kansas** is a fictional telling of Truman Capote seeking a difficult journalistic project, using the events in Kansas as a backdrop to talk about Capote's intense and many-layered character. The book should be read as a supplement to the way Capote set about writing and doing research for his narrative, *In Cold Blood*.

These graphic novels that re-tell classics are not suggested to act as substitutes for the original works, but rather to present a unique and often powerful way of enhancing readers' understanding of those works. Other highly praised classic titles within this format include **The Hobbit: An Illustrated Edition** by J.R.R. Tolkien and adapted by Chuck Dixon, **Bram Stoker: Dracula** adapted by Michael Mucci, and **The Red Badge of Courage** by Stephen Crane and adapted by Wayne Vansant.