



Teaching Controversial Comics

by Anastasia Betts (Graphic Novels 101)



Appropriate Teaching Materials

Appropriateness is a topic that we all struggle with at one point or another, and is not just limited to the world of comics. As teachers we have to make determinations every day on whether *this* image, *this* book, *this* movie, or *this* discussion is appropriate for our classroom. For some reason though, comic books seem to get a bad rap in terms of classroom “appropriateness”.

Comics in the Classroom

It’s true that a lot of comics published for entertainment purposes contain content that is inappropriate for classroom use. I can’t count the number of times that I have read a comic and thought, “This is PERFECT for what I want to teach,” only to get halfway through the book and arrive at a scene that would never pass my district censors. Whenever this happens, I am confronted with a dilemma... how can I use a book that I think is incredibly important for students to study, but that contains some content that my colleagues or parents would find controversial?

A Case Study: *Barefoot Gen*

Let me share an example. *Barefoot Gen* is a ten volume comic series that tells the story of a young Japanese boy who survives the atomic bombing in Hiroshima and the immediate aftermath.

Originally this series was published as a serialized comic in a Japanese boys’ manga magazine. The story is closely based on the early life experiences of the author, Keiji Nakazawa, who lived with his family in Hiroshima and experienced the bombing first hand.

This series is powerful, moving, and emotional. As a more traditional manga, it contains some of the slapstick conventions that take a little bit of time to get used to. Once you have read past the first few pages, however, you begin to get lost in the story of a family with a pacifist father, an older brother that has enlisted in the military to prevent his family from being targeted as “unpatriotic traitors,” the conflict between this father and son, another young son that has been evacuated to the countryside (where he faces starvation), a sister and a brother still trying to maintain some sense of normalcy by attending grammar school, and a mother who is nine months pregnant caring for her preschool aged son at home. Yes, it’s a large, complicated family.

There is so much going on in this book that I can’t even begin to encapsulate it here. It is, I believe, my most favorite comic of all time. In fact, this book has been translated into over a dozen world languages. It is quiet, unassuming, and childlike. Reading portions of this comic is like watching a very clever child’s cartoon: entertaining on the surface, but chalked full of meaning if you begin to peel back the layers.

Problematic Content

Considering all of that, why would I have any problem using it in the classroom? Well for one, there is a lot of cartoon, slapstick type violence. This is actually more a manga convention than anything else, and common to a lot of 1970s Japanese comics. It’s similar to the zany antics of Tom and Jerry or Bugs Bunny – only in the middle of a serious story about people trying to survive a very real war. If you are thinking “wow that’s awkward,” then you get the idea. It seems strange to see characters in the book always punching each other, complete with Batman-style onomatopoeia, like it’s an everyday thing.

That being said, I helped my students get past this by using some of the explanation above, and also by reminding them that this comic was originally printed in a ‘rough and tumble’ boys’ magazine, and so this type of comic action was expected.

Educational Rationale

Next, at the end of the book, the author recounts the experience of the bomb drop and immediate aftermath. Obviously many people die, including members of Gen’s family. It is violent, gruesome, dark, and horrific. I can never read this part of the book without crying. As disturbing as this part of the book is, it’s not difficult from an educational point of view to develop a rationale for teaching it: *We never want this to happen again – and therefore we have to know what happened, in all its tragic detail.*

Problematic Scenes

So what’s the problem? Well, there’s a scene in the middle of the book... school officials (who are angry at the dissent and pacifist attitudes of the family’s father) seek to punish his young daughter. They make her strip down to her underwear, in the principal’s office, and make her stand there while they humiliate her. It’s an awful scene, but so critical to the story. I remember when I first read this scene,

I had already been thinking seriously about using this comic in my classroom. I couldn't wait to start building curriculum and lessons around it.

But when I read this part of the book, I became seriously worried that I would never be able to use the book because parents and administrators, even students, would be so disturbed by it. That being said, I was reluctant to give the book up. I REALLY wanted to use it. I felt the message was too powerful and too important to just abandon. I began thinking of ways I could use parts of the book. Could I excerpt it? Could I just rip out those pages? I felt slightly insane as I tried to come up with ways to get this past my educational "censors". In the end, I decided the scene was too important, too pivotal to the overall story to leave out. I would just have to find a way to get others to believe in the story as much as I did, and then prepare my students as best I could to receive it.

TEACHER GUIDELINES

The example of *Barefoot Gen* is not a unique experience for teachers wanting to use significant, yet controversial, works of comic literature. With that in mind, I've developed a list of steps I follow as a result of my experience with *Barefoot Gen*:

Carefully consider the age group

As a curriculum director, I work with and develop educational content for a variety of ages – from elementary through college. When I first read *Barefoot Gen*, I felt it would be appropriate for upper elementary – 5th and 6th grades – through adult. Before deciding to use a particular book, ask yourself, *Can my students handle this?* For the use of *Barefoot Gen* in particular, I asked: *Are they mature enough to understand the conflict between the oldest son and the father? Are they emotionally mature enough to understand the humiliation scene with the daughter, and the impact that it has on Gen?* These are very important questions. If you have any doubt about the ability of your students to handle such questions, or your ability to present the content effectively, I would steer clear.

Develop a clear rationale for use

I always write a rationale for the use of a book such as *Barefoot Gen*. I want to be very clear about *why* I am using this book and *how* it connects to my broader curriculum. If you teach in a standards based classroom, be prepared to share which standards your teaching of this content will help students achieve mastery of. Your administrators will likely ask you why you can't just use some other *more appropriate*

book. You want to be able to defend your book choice and refute any argument administration might have against its use.

Get approval from administrators in advance

There's a saying... "It's easier to obtain forgiveness than permission". But that's not always true. Try to teach a controversial book without permission and it may be the last time that book sees the light of day in your district. Don't put your book in danger of being banned. It is likely that your district or school has protocols for gaining approval for controversial material. Follow them. If no protocols exist, consider talking to your administrators or department heads and get their buy in.

Involve Parents in the Project

Invite your parents to be part of the journey. Use a back to school night, or open house to introduce the project to them, your rationale for using the book, as well as some significant background or historical information. If the parents are able to understand the importance of the book's message, you are nearly home free.

Have parents sign a waiver or permission slip

Create a permission slip that summarizes the project and questionable content in the book, and invites parents to become more informed. Provide them with websites or links for more information. Make yourself available to answer their questions. Ultimately, ask them to sign a permission slip allowing their student to participate in the study of the book you have selected. For parents who do not want their child to participate, have an alternate book selection ready as well as accommodations for them to attend a different class if necessary.

Create a Parent Book Club

Again, this requires skillful facilitation on the part of the teacher – it could be a blessing or a curse. I've found, however, when it works out, it is a brilliant experience for both parents and students, and provides multiple opportunities for in-class and at-home discussion. Establish a reading schedule and periodic discussion meetings. If desired, do both separate and joint discussions with parents and students.

Preteach, preteach, preteach!

Prepare your students for the controversial content by doing some strategic pre-teaching. In the case of *Barefoot Gen*, mini lessons on classic manga conventions, as well as on sexual harassment (yes we

even teach awareness of that to elementary students), and an understanding of the horrors of war, are in order. For historically based books like *Barefoot Gen*, students will need a series of lessons to increase their background knowledge on the time period and key events. Again, be conscientious about presenting multiple viewpoints to keep students from becoming biased. While *Barefoot Gen* doesn't point fingers, it is difficult to read about the family's experiences and not be critical of the decision to drop the bomb. It is important to make sure that students understand all facets and perspectives of that decisions (i.e. the fear of a prolonged and protracted Japanese mainland invasion resulting in millions of deaths, etc.), so that they can make informed judgments.

Tie your teaching to a service project or community outreach

There are always ways to tie student learning into some type of action project. Whether you are studying superheroes or war, there is something you can do to make the world outside your classroom a better place. In the case of *Barefoot Gen*, get your students involved in the *Hiroshima Peace Project* (of which *Barefoot Gen* is a part). Invite your students to involve themselves in creating awareness about the proliferation of nuclear weapons today. The horror of Hiroshima will never be far away as long as mankind has the ability to launch a bomb with the press of a button. The only way to prevent tragedies such as this in the future is to promote a culture of peace.

Evaluate and reflect

The importance of having students (and parents if you involve them) evaluate and reflect on their experience reading a book like *Barefoot Gen* can not be overstated – especially if you ever plan to teach the book again. Create tools to gather perspectives of the participants and to document the meaningful and significant work that is done as a result of the learning. Consider using a survey to capture useful “sound bites” that can be used in future rationales. Invite students to write reflective journal entries detailing how their participation in the project has changed or impacted them.

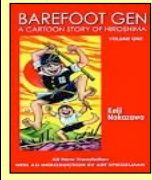
It's a lot to think about, I know. But it's worth it. I have a number of colleagues that avoid books with controversial content. It's just “easier”, they say. It may be easier, but it doesn't make the world a better place. True teaching takes courage and persistence. I hope that my tip list above can help you amass the courage and persistence to teach the controversial content that you believe in.


For homework, check out the film *Barefoot Gen*. You can also look at Keiji Nakazawa's autobiography, and compare it to the *Barefoot Gen* story:

- *Barefoot Gen* (Japanese movie: 1983)
- *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen* by Keiji Nakazawa

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	<p style="text-align: center;">Barefoot Gen</p> <p><i>Barefoot Gen</i> is a 10-volume graphic novel available in both English and Japanese versions. Start with Volume 1, a classic book which is used by peace educators worldwide. Then, go on and try the other nine volumes in the series!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Volume 1: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima</i> by Keiji Nakazawa (2004) \$10 / 1,466 yen
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	<p style="text-align: center;">Barefoot Gen: The Movie (1983)</p> <p><i>One admirable aspect of Barefoot Gen is the lack of finger-pointing. There is far less interest in placing blame than in saying, "No one should ever have to experience this. There must be an alternative to war." The manga has more time to develop this, looking at Gen's father (a pacifist in a very nationalist wartime Japan), and the scorn his family endures as a result.</i></p> <p><i>The manga illustrates how war affects people beyond body counts: how people can turn on one another, how families and communities can be driven apart, how a country's war machine can chew up its young and spit out the bones.</i></p> <p><i>Compared to the manga, the movie only touches lightly on these themes, as it's constrained by its running time from fully exploring them. Still, the message is there: people can endure and survive just about anything. But they shouldn't have to.</i></p> <p>Source: <i>The Critical Eye - Barefoot Gen</i> www.5x5media.com/eye/film/barefoot.php</p>
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