

GRAPHIC NOVELS: AN INTRODUCTION

Chad Corrie

This PDF kicks off a new series of dealing with graphic novels, namely how to create them. Having had some experience with the medium and after giving some talks and presentations over the last few years I thought it would be fun and perhaps beneficial to others if I shared some simple aspects of what goes into making graphic novels in the first place.

The idea is to share a little about each step along the way and provide enough info to help you get a clear idea of what you'll be in store for if you travel this path.

Graphic Novel vs. Prose Novel

Before we get much farther let's look at a question I get asked from time to time and one I think is helpful to evaluation to some degree if you plan on crafting your own graphic novel. That is: "What's the pros and cons of graphic vs. prose novels?"

For those who might not know prose simply means stories that aren't told in a graphic way, that is with tons of pictures used to tell the story. You can still have illustrations in prose books but they aren't the means by which you "read" or experience the story. In prose works you have to read what a place looks like, read who says what and how, and so forth. It's not the same as having all that drawn up for you and all you have to do is read dialogue word balloons, sound effects, and captions.

That being said what are some of the benefits of graphic novels over prose works? Well, for one, you get to tell the story through pictures, making sure readers get a certain view of things if that is important to you as the author. They are also much faster for many folks to read as there is less text to wade through and more pictures to look at. They can be easier to write in that you have less of a set up to convey your ideas (we'll get to that later when we talk about scripts). You can get more story in less pages—that is to say you can have a page in a graphic novel showcase a whole host of things that might take a few pages or more in a prose work—in some cases a whole page could even be condensed down into one panel on a page (more on that in future installments).

What are some of the cons then? Well, for one, you have to work with a few other people to bring your story to reality. This isn't too divorced from the editor relationship in prose works only in graphic novels you're asking another to visually interpret your work, sometimes again and again (more on this later) to bring a final product to pass. You also lose some of the control of the flow of the work—that's to say it's harder to control the speed with which one reads the work as you could with prose writing in which one has the power of punctuation, paragraph breaks, page breaks, and other tools to sort of set the pace or mood for what is being read. Graphic novels lend themselves to being read as fast as the reader can muster and many speed through them without too much of a second thought, which could be good or bad depending on what you want the reader to experience.

Graphic novels, as I stated above, are condensed story telling, that is they are able to take larger chunks of story and condense it into something more bite- sized. When this happens new writers and even a bit more seasoned ones find they have less story than they thought to fill up a set number of pages. The big con, however, is their time constraints. Because you're asking more people to plan in the sand box with you while also asking them to take more time to bring the work to completion.

While it's good to know a bit about the pros and cons of prose and graphic works, ultimately it really comes down to what sort of story do you want to tell. Some stories are better suited to the graphic novel medium than others. Having some pictures and means to share the story more directly, carrying it more strongly in a visual sense over the more traditional text can really make some tales shine. It can also diminish or weaken others. The choice, ultimately, is up to you.

In so far as writing graphic novels go I can't speak for every one who writes graphic novels but I write them in between my other works in a more leisurely pace than some and can get about two sixty four page or one one-hundred plus page book done per month. Much faster than say writing a novel, but that time saved is negated when you figure in that it takes at least one day for each page to be penciled and then another to be inked and then more to be colored and lettered and so it goes so that it could take as much as a year to see something materialize in what took me about two weeks or so to initially write. We'll get more in-depth into these things in the PDFs to come.

Formatting Your Story for Graphic Novels

Once the graphic novel is selected the writer has to make up their mind as to how large their work will be (in page count) and set up their story around that. The page count will serve as a sort of guide to the progression of the story: conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and so forth. This is different than prose work whereas there you look more to word count but since graphic novels are done in a different manner you look now instead toward a page being the method of tabulating how your story is told.

Sometimes this will be preset for you, such as if you wish to write a traditional comic book, which has twenty-two pages of script or if a publisher looks to publish graphic novels of only one hundred and twenty pages. Other times you are left with making up your own mind on the subject. Be aware, though, that it is better to have a number of pages that is divisible by four to make it easier when it comes time to printing it up (if you're going the standard publishing route) as printers operate on the dividable by four rule, having to add pages to the work to make it fit for the print run.

So unless you want to have a some extra material enclosed with your story that goes beyond the script itself, then look to have numbers like 64, 80, 120, 160, and so forth. This does not count the covers of a graphic novel or comic (which you can print on as well and count as four more pages—the front and back of the covers), which are added to the total page count. Again, this is

for traditional printing. If you are looking to do electronic or other forms of publication for your work then you are open to a wider selection of options when it comes to formatting.

So now that we have done over the basic introduction to starting out in graphic novels take a moment and decide what you might be able to do with your story page count wise. Plot and flesh it out according to what numbers you think you'll might need, and play around with some ideas. And yes, you'll find that this is a fluid thing as well—the story condensing and/or taking a little twist here or there as you move forward on your first few ventures. The important thing is that you have a general idea of the borders of your sand box now and that allows us to move ahead into putting the story into center light.

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