Jumping on the “Comics for Kids” Bandwagon
—Naomi Hamer


On 1 October 2011, The Beguiling, Toronto’s landmark comic book store, opened Little Island Comics, a sister bookstore that, in focusing exclusively on material geared to young readers under the age of twelve, claims to be “the world’s first comic book store for kids!” (Little Island Comics). The headline of a *Globe and Mail* article published during the opening week of the store announced that, “At Little Island Comics, They’re Giving Superheroes Back to the Kids” (Dixon).

In this article, Guy Dixon bemoans the dark “adult”
tone and mature content of contemporary comic texts and graphic novels. This new store, he suggests, is a fantasy respite for young people and comic superheroes alike: “There’s a new little store in the Annex where Spiderman and his fellow leotard-clad superhero friends can take a break from the hard, dark times of the last 40 years.” In a similar vein, Matt Demers, on the Torontoist website, uses a folksy tone—one often associated with fantasy narratives for children—to idealize the store as a whimsical space in which families read together: “In the Annex, past Honest Ed’s and just down Bathurst Street, there’s a little island. An island where books spur imagination and parents are welcome to learn right alongside their kids.” The interior design of the store echoes this nostalgic discourse of family literacy and imaginative print-based learning, paradigms that preceded the advent of cellphones and video games: bright colours, small-case lettering on signage, clean sightlines, and low-level display shelves to invite book browsing by young people constitute the primary aesthetic. Not unlike children’s programs at the public library (such as hands-on art workshops, book signings, and other family-oriented activities), public events held at the store also build on this family literacy message. In addition, bookstore staff members offer library services to assist with the selection of comic resources for public, school, and university libraries.

Little Island Comics presents a new hybrid space that combines the eclectic collections of comic bookstores with the design, educational agenda, and curatorial practices traditionally associated with children’s bookstore and library collections. Peter Birkemoe, owner of The Beguiling, highlights the pedagogic agenda behind the new comic bookstore: “People are focusing on how well-suited this medium is to children who are learning how to read, or perhaps learning English for the first time. People who are usually involved with young readers, like teachers, school librarians and parents, are sort of waking up to the fact that comics are perfectly suited for this” (qtd. in Dixon). The eclectic stock of the store reflects its potential clientele of families with young children, adult comic collectors, librarians, and teachers: recent popular comic series such as Bone, translated Japanese manga, vintage comic series such as Tin Tin and Asterix, graphic novel adaptations of classic literature, picture books that integrate comic elements, French-language texts, and a significant number of Canadian comics aimed at young readers are available. A notable selection of its stock includes texts produced by non-traditional publishers of comics, including Canadian children’s book publishers such as Kids Can Press and Groundwood Books.

The recent creation of this comic bookstore for kids reflects changing trends in the production and consumption of comic texts over the past two decades in Canada and internationally. The increased cultural legitimacy of the comic as an artistic and literary form, the changing perspective of the comic as a learning
tool, as well as the current consideration of print texts in the context of (some) adult fears of digital media are all factors that have influenced the increased production of comic texts geared explicitly to young readers by non-traditional publishers of comics. In an article focusing on the burgeoning field of New Comics Studies, Charles Hatfield observes evidence in the United States of “a rising investment in comics among mainstream children’s publishers” and cites the launch of Scholastic’s graphic novel imprint Graphix in 2005 with the reprint of Jeff Smith’s multiple volume series Bone as a stand-alone graphic novel in colour (361). Children’s publishers have also produced a number of picture book–comic hybrid texts, such as Shaun Tan’s The Arrival and Tales from Outer Suburbia, as well as the comic anthology Little Lit: Folklore and Fairytale Funnies, edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, which highlights the work of famed comic and children’s book artists.

In the context of these trends, Canadian publishers have increasingly jumped on the “comics for kids” bandwagon with the production of a number of comic texts across a variety of genres geared at young readers. While these developments may arguably reflect changes in the cultural legitimacy of graphic narratives, they also reveal the continued presence of historically rooted assumptions and nostalgic discourses about young people as readers. This review article contextualizes some key trends that have emerged in the recent publication of Canadian comic texts for young readers and examines how these texts reveal assumptions about both comics and young people’s texts that influence (and often limit) their design, promotion, and critical reception.

The Cultural Legitimacy of the Graphic Novel

While the texts reviewed here are distinct in terms of style and content, they are all underscored by a pedagogic agenda on the part of authors, artists, and publishers. Yet this focus on the pedagogic potential of comics is a departure from the negative perspective of comics historically held by parents, librarians, and teachers. Joe Sutliff Sanders observes a shift in the perspective of comics as an education tool: “The time-honored cliché of a child hiding a comic book behind a text-book is an eloquent image in this sense: comics are understood to come between children and learning” (75). Prior to the publication of Art Spiegelman’s Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale; My Father Bleeds History in 1986, librarians and teachers, as well as publishers and critics of children’s literature, often situated comics within the realm of series fiction and other popular texts. Comics were assumed to be superhero-oriented and cheaply produced for mass market series consumption. In the period since Maus, however, the comic form, particularly through the emergence of the graphic novel, has increasingly gained academic and cultural legitimacy as a media form. Graphic novels such as
Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis*, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, David Small’s *Stitches: A Memoir*, and Chris Ware’s *Building Stories* have attracted scholarly attention, are taught in university courses, and have won a number of awards for text and illustration. Most recently, Gene Luen Yang’s *Boxers & Saints*, a graphic novel boxed set that presents two parallel perspectives of young people during the Boxer Rebellion in China (from 1899 to 1901), was shortlisted for the National Book Award (USA) in the Young People’s Literature category.

In Canada, publications by Drawn and Quarterly, the Montreal-based publisher of alternative comics (producing comic texts since 1990), and the individual works of Canadian comic artists such as Chester Brown, Kate Beaton, Seth, Guy Delisle, and Julie Doucet have achieved international recognition and success for their subversive and countercultural narratives in content and production style. In her article “Drawn from Memory: Comics Artists and Intergenerational Auto/biography,” Candida Rifkind situates her examination of the work of Spiegelman, Seth, and Ware in relation to the movement within the graphic novel toward artistic and academic legitimacy as a form:

Clearly this is a medium experiencing a transition from ignoble beginnings to artistic legitimacy. Whether or not these increasingly respectable comics are a truly popular art form is difficult to determine, however, since the majority of works and cartoonists receiving attention come from the restricted-scale production of the underground and alternative comic scenes, not from the more widely distributed fantasy comics industry associated with superheroes and formula fictions. (400)
Most Canadian comic artists who have been given scholarly attention and designated awards tend to distinguish themselves from the highly commercialized comic industry associated with superhero comics and the large multi-platform franchises of Marvel and DC Comics. In an ironic turn, the Joe Shuster Awards (named after the Canadian-born comic artist best known for creating Superman in collaboration with Jerry Siegel) were initiated in 2004 by the Canadian Comic Book Creator Awards Association to award on an annual basis “Canadians that create, publish and sell comics, graphic novels and webcomics” (“Information”). Many of these awards are designated to the same individuals who distinguish their comic work from the mainstream superhero-oriented comic industry in explicit ways.

Many comic artists and Comic Studies scholars not only define themselves as distinct from mainstream superhero comics but also from the realm of children’s literature and young people’s cultures more generally. Hatfield observes that “the default position for many recent comics researchers has been to reject entirely the link between comics and childhood, as if to jack the form up to some higher standard of seriousness. This is a profound mistake, for the association between comics and childhood is long, complex, and crucial to understanding comics history” (376–77). Comic artists and scholars often aim to legitimate their work by distinguishing themselves from the popular view of children’s texts—a view maintained both within and outside of the academy—as simple and idealized representations, as thinly veiled pedagogic tools, or as popular mass market serials. Moreover, although the term “graphic novel” has gained cultural legitimacy for the comic form in terms of literary and artistic realms, many comic artists specifically define their work as distinct from the graphic novel, viewing it as a marketing term that enables comic producers to sell comics to a broader audience outside of the specialized comic-book realm, members of which may include librarians and teachers.

Conversely, publishers, educators, and award committees continue to cultivate comics for kids as a distinctive category and draw upon the term graphic novel to promote the comic form in its potential educational function. An article in The ALAN Review, a publication of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents for the National Council of Teachers of English, illustrates this emphasis with its definitions of the graphic novel: “The shortest definition of graphic novels describes them as ‘book-length comic books.’ A definition used by librarians refers to them as book length narratives using a combination of words and sequential art, often presented in comic book style” (Fletcher-Spear, Jenson-Benjamin, and Copeland 37). A term originally used by Will Eisner to distinguish his work from comic books, “graphic novel” as defined in this article focuses on its “book” quality in order to distinguish it from previous negative associations.
with the comic form and to emphasize the educational potential of its texts.

**Edutainment and Comics for Kids as a Distinct Category**

In the Canadian context, most comic texts for young readers produced by non-traditional publishers of comics reflect a pedagogic agenda to teach Canadian history, social justice, or environmental issues. Willow Dawson’s *Hyena in Petticoats: The Story of Suffragette Nellie McClung*, John Lang’s *Lone Hawk: The Story of Air Ace Billy Bishop*, and Claudia Davila’s *Luz Sees the Light*—all of which were nominated for the Joe Shuster Comics for Kids award in 2012—exemplify this trend in distinctive ways. As the website for the award makes clear, the creation of a separate Joe Shuster award for “Comics for Kids” illustrates this continued distinction at the level of critical reception between comic texts for young readers and comic texts for a broader audience. The emphasis on pedagogy is central to the criteria for the “Comics for Kids” award, because it “recognizes the works which capture the attention and fascination of young readers, and help to create a passion for life-long reading. Works considered for this award are comic books and graphic novels that are targeted at readers 14 and under” (“Information”). This award description reveals an emphasis on pedagogic aims for literacy and other potential offers for education. Distinct from the other award categories that consider graphic arts, creativity, and merit as primary criteria, the Comics for Kids Award defines the winners as those texts as ones that both “help to create a passion for life-long reading” and “capture the attention and fascination of young readers.” Moreover, the award description describes the committee for the award as distinct from the other awards: “Nominees are selected by a team of educators led by Jennifer Haines, MA, B.Ed., who is also the proprietor of Guelph, Ontario’s The Dragon comic book shop” (“Information”). The chair of the committee runs an affiliated program and resource-oriented website called *Comics in the Classroom*, which aims to connect comics and graphic novels as educational tools in elementary and secondary classrooms across Canada to a particular focus on “reluctant readers.” Unfortunately, with the emphasis on pedagogy in these criteria, the educational merit of selected texts often overshadows the potential of the comic form as a medium for creative innovation.

Claudia Davila’s *Luz Sees the Light* (nominated for the Comics for Kids award in 2011) and its sequel *Luz Makes a Splash* both illustrate this trumping of an educational agenda over the exemplary use of comic as a literary and artistic form. David Buckingham and Margaret Scanlon describe the prevalent “edutainment” discourse in young people’s media texts as “a hybrid mix of education and entertainment that relies heavily on visual material, on narrative or game-like formats, and on more informal, less didactic styles of address”
Both texts in the Future According to Luz series employ the tactics of edutainment, using the comic form to “capture the attention and fascination of young readers” while educating them about environmental issues. In *Luz Sees the Light*, the explicit lesson in the narrative is the promotion of sustainable living with a focus on fossil-fuel dependence through the experience of a blackout. In *Luz Makes a Splash*, the focus is on water conservation through the narrative of a drought that dries up Luz’s favourite neighbourhood park and swimming pool. The education at hand in this text is not only environmental awareness but also the representation of a strong preadolescent female heroine as a model for young readers. The media release for the text from Kids Can Press illustrates this underlying pedagogy with its promotional description of Luz: “Preteens will love the fearless, fiery and resourceful heroine and will find inspiration in her efforts to steer her society toward self-sustainable living” (“Luz”). The text also carries an implicit cultural pedagogy with the representation of Luz’s family and cultural background depicted through a cursory allusion to cultural difference. Her distinctive identity is indicated primarily through the use of Spanish words like *chica*, *abuela*, and *hola*, which are mixed in with the English-language dialogue. This superficial use of Spanish words and catchphrases recalls the commercial franchise *Dora the Explorer*, suggesting that the producers of the comic series hope to gain interest in the text from the similarity between Luz and Dora as spunky, young, Spanish-speaking females.

Part of what distinguishes these texts from many graphic novels for a more general readership is the verbal text that explicitly interrupts the flow of the narrative to provide supplementary information. Over dinner with Luz’s new friend Robert, for example, Luz’s mother lectures them about fossil fuels: “A lot of electrical power comes from stations that burn coal, which is like solid oil” (53). There are few instances in both Luz texts in which the visual narrative is employed as the dominant mode to portray information, a common feature in most graphic novels. In *Luz Sees the Light*, the heavy-handed environmental education agenda is emphasized through the inclusion of an informational bonus chapter entitled “Luz Starts Knowing,” which includes a comic sequence outlining how to make garden compost. In *Luz Makes a Splash*, a bonus chapter illustrates “how to make a water-wise garden” (93). Both the style and the format of this informational, hands-on activity resemble non-fiction picture books and the sidebar activities of textbooks.

The Luz texts constitute one key series from a surplus of comic series for young readers recently published by Kids Can Press, including Bill Slavin’s *Big City Otto: Elephants Never Forget*, Jo Rioux’s *Cat’s Cradle*, and J. Torres and Faith Erin Hicks’s *The Unkindness of Ravens*. Many of these series texts are more stylistically nostalgic than the two Luz titles, with visual references
to vintage comics from the 1940s and 1950s through the use of bright primary colours and fantastic characters and adventures. In comparison, Davila employs two-tone printing for the sequential images (black/mauve in Luz Sees the Light and black/blue for Luz Makes a Splash), similar to many of the graphic novels produced over the past decade that attempt to distinguish themselves from the full-colour printing of glossy superhero comics. The hardcover and small size of the Luz texts, as well as the use of large capital letters for the written elements, resemble texts for early readers and small-format picture books, however, and this format allows for easy inclusion into a classroom or school library collection, indicating the educational agenda at all levels of design.

Teaching History through Graphic Narratives

A number of educators and literacy researchers have addressed the potential for the comic form and particularly the graphic novel as an engaging tool to teach history both at the primary- and secondary-school levels. The use of comics to teach history is not a completely new phenomenon. Since the 1980s, Canadian educational publishers have used the comic form to teach Canadian history, scientific concepts, and the social sciences within the confines of textbooks and non-fiction readers, but the recent focus on the extended narratives of the graphic novel illustrates a shift in the educational realm. In “Getting Graphic with the Past: Graphic Novels and the Teaching of History,” Michael Cromer and Penney Clark argue that the multiple modes of communication offered by the graphic narratives of comic texts lend themselves to critical teaching in history. This trend illustrates the role of comics as a form of edutainment as well as the influential success and popularity of graphic narratives focused on historical figures and events for a broader readership.

Aimed at older readers, Dawson’s Hyena in Petticoats, Lang’s Lone Hawk, and David Alexander Robertson and Scott B. Henderson’s 7 Generations series exemplify the production of graphic narratives with the primary aim to teach Canadian history. The success of texts such as Kate Beacon’s Hark! A Vagrant, Chester Brown’s Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography, and Scott Chantler’s Northwest Passage appear to be the impetus behind the production of Hyena in Petticoats and Lone Hawk as graphic novels for younger readers. But while Louis Riel and others were not produced primarily for pedagogic use (although they have been used in university and high school classrooms), Dawson’s and Lang’s texts, both nominated for the Comics for Kids award in 2011, were explicitly produced to teach young people about historical events and people within or outside of formal educational contexts. In his introduction to Lone Hawk, comic artist Jeff Lemire declares that “[a] few more books like this and kids won’t have to hide their comic books inside
their textbooks much longer; their comics will be their textbooks!” (vi). Compared to the length of comic texts focused on Canadian history for a broader readership, such as *Louis Riel* (280 pages) or the annotated *Northwest Passage* (287 pages), these two historical biographies are presented in the condensed forms of ninety-five pages (in the case of Dawson’s) and ninety-seven pages (in the case of Lang’s). These short graphic biographies reflect assumptions about the attention spans of young readers and the need for omission or abridgement to condense the information.

Dawson’s background includes work on other non-fiction, biographical, and instructive texts, as author/illustrator of *Lilla and Ecco’s Do-It-Yourself Comics Club* and as illustrator of Susan Hughes’s *No Girls Allowed: Tales of Daring Women Dressed as Men for Love, Freedom and Adventure*. This background seems to influence her interpretation of Nellie McClung’s story in a manner that is underscored heavily by an edutainment agenda. Similar to the Luz books and the other texts in Dawson’s body of work, the text educates about Canadian history but also promotes a positive message with the representation of an outspoken, active female protagonist, with a first chapter that depicts McClung as a young girl addressing inequalities and frustrations with the status quo for women and girls. Watson’s style uses thick lines to depict angular, two-dimensional figures and settings using a black and white colour scheme. Dawson uses the visual mode to depict some key information, drawing upon the decorative border stylistic feature of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century illustrations and art nouveau design. The pages in this text, however, are often extremely heavy on verbal text, with an excessive use of expository narrative and dialogue, so that Dawson includes as much historical information as possible within the confines of a ninety-five-page text. On a page that describes the events of 1914–15, for example, there are three text boxes with three to five lines of expository information printed in capital letters, three vertical panels containing up to six speech balloons, and a horizontal panel with a visual image and a text box as a header as well as a chain-linked border flanking the bottom of the page (66). Although we get a sense of McClung’s personal and public experiences, the visual narrative does not necessarily represent her internal emotional or psychological perspective in great depth. Most of the protagonist’s emotional and passionate opinions are represented through dialogue. The educational element of the text is emphasized in an afterword that includes a straightforward overview of the key events of McClung’s life as well as a bibliography of relevant biographical texts.

While the teachable lesson is not as explicit as in the Luz or McClung texts, two other key pedagogies underline Lang’s *Lone Hawk*: a nationalistic agenda that emphasizes military contributions and victories as part of Canadian history and a celebration of a conventional
heroic masculinity in the glorification of Billy Bishop. Indeed, Dawson’s and Lang’s texts, published by the same publishing house and in the same year, present a pair of stereotypically gendered narratives in style and content. These pedagogies are emphasized in Lemire’s introduction to Lang’s book, in which he claims that “[e]ach panel is like a snapshot from the past, giving the reader a window into the history and the exciting story of one of our nation’s greatest war heroes” (vi). This introduction functions as a way to address explicitly how this book functions as an instructive text for young readers while also legitimating it within a Canadian alternative comic culture that targets adult readers primarily.

Compared to the Luz texts and *Hyena in Petticoats*, *Lone Hawk* exemplifies the use of a dominant visual narrative that portrays significant information, using multiple panels in a cinematic manner to convey information. Lang draws upon some of the typographic conventions of the superhero comic tradition, such as the capitalized “FWOOSH,” “CRASH,” and “SHHHK” of a fighter jet grounding, creating a text that intertextually references the narratives related to superheroes and military feats. Compared to Dawson’s visual style, however, Lang’s text employs a realistic naturalism, using a range of grey tones in the depiction of interior settings of houses, the facial details of his figures, and the multiple perspectives from within and outside of the fighter pilot’s field of vision. In reference to Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Jared Gardner comments on the relationship between the comic autobiography and its emphasis on multiple perspectives through multiple modes of communication to challenge truth claims:

The comics form necessarily and inevitably calls attention through its formal properties to its limitations as juridical evidence—to the compressions and gaps of its narrative (represented graphically by the

The 7 Generations books represent a cross-generational narrative of Aboriginal experiences that holds instructive potential for Canadian history and social justice issues.
gutterspace between the panels) and to the iconic distillations of its art. The kinds of truth claims that are fought over in the courts of law and public opinion with text-based autobiography are never exactly at issue in graphic autobiography. The losses and glosses of memory and subjectivity are foregrounded in graphic memoir in a way they never can be in traditional autobiography. (6)

Dawson’s and Lang’s graphic novels present a Canadian Heritage Minute approach to comic biography, using the graphic form for the purposes of edutainment, primarily to educate about those figures and events that schools, museums, and national media have deemed significant. In comparison, Robertson and Henderson’s work in the 7 Generations series, not unlike Bechdel’s work in Fun Home, draws upon visual and verbal modes to reveal a multi-levelled relationship between historical and present-day experiences in the lives of Aboriginal people.

While texts in the 7 Generations series are underscored by a pedagogic message, they draw upon the visual narrative to portray multiple messages and are notably more sophisticated in the resulting disruption to normative Canadian history. Significantly, they situate contemporary Aboriginal life in tandem with historical narratives of smallpox epidemics and residential schools. The 7 Generations books represent a cross-generational narrative of Aboriginal experiences that holds instructive potential for Canadian history and social justice issues. Originally released throughout 2010 and 2011 as a series of four black and white paperback comics, these texts were published in 2012 as a complete full-colour glossy volume, 7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga. The four books focus on the young protagonist Edwin, who must reconcile his family’s past in order to move forward in the present. Beginning with Edwin’s suicide note dated 25 March 2010, the narrative encompasses multiple stories across generations, including those of Edwin’s Plains Cree ancestors at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that of the smallpox epidemic of 1870–71, Edwin’s father’s experience in a residential school, and the more recent story of father-son estrangement and reconciliation.

The 7 Generations series presents an example from an emerging trend of recent graphic novels: non-traditional publishers of comics that depict Aboriginal experiences for young readers. Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas’s Red: A Haida Manga, published by Douglas and McIntyre in 2009, transposes an oral Haida tale into the graphic novel format, and Drew Hayden Taylor and Michael Wyatt’s The Night Wanderer, originally a play commissioned by the Young People’s Theatre in Toronto, was adapted into a graphic novel by Alison Kooistra. HighWater Press is responsible for a number of titles by Robertson and Henderson, including the 7 Generations titles, The Life of Helen Betty Osborne, Sugar Falls, and an upcoming
series of graphic novels based on Aboriginal heroes. In an interview with the CBC, Cree writer Robertson describes his rationale for choosing the graphic novel as a medium through which to tell a story: “The graphic novel is an incredible educational tool. It allows me to reach a broad range of people; sophisticated readers, readers that are hard to reach, those who are reading at a lower skill level, and both males and females. It is engaging and effective” (“Winnipeg”). While this pedagogic agenda is at hand in the visual and verbal narrative of the text themselves, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, a professor at the University of Manitoba, has also written a companion Teacher’s Guide for the series, designed with the purpose of helping secondary-school educators expand upon the pedagogic potential of the text. In a forthcoming chapter in Cultural Memory in Canada, Doris Wolf examines the role of these texts as part of a national project of re-envisioning and truth telling around Canada’s residential school legacy framed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Wolf explores how this series challenges normative narratives of Canadian history as a settler nation, through the representation of the current experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada as complexly caught up in cross-generational histories of colonization. The comic form in this context becomes a significant medium choice for these challenges and disruptions to institutional and national histories and knowledge.

In the final book of the series, entitled 7 Generations: The Pact, the visual narrative conveys these intergenerational connections in a striking manner, one that is distinct from the historical representations of Canadian history in Hyena in Petticoats and Lone Hawk. Near the end of the text, the visual narrative depicts Edwin in a hospital bed with his father sitting vigil beside him. A ghostly image of the body of his father’s brother, Thomas, lying in the snow is pictured above and in parallel to Edwin in the hospital bed (see fig. 1). This visual reference to Thomas’s death, in tandem with Edwin’s attempted suicide, connects the current moment to the memories depicted at the beginning of this final narrative but also to Edwin’s father’s experiences in the residential school system, depicted in the third book of the series, 7 Generations: Ends/Begins. This image links feelings of guilt and isolation visually across relationships and contexts. A text box (narrated in his father’s voice) reads “I THOUGHT I’D ALMOST DONE IT AGAIN, EDWIN” (23). This text box supplements the dominant visual narrative rather than the visual narrative supporting the verbal text. The interconnection between these various narratives from community, family, and personal history are often repeated through visual imagery in the narrative as well as the cover art and other graphic elements of the textual design. For example, the cumulative image at the end of The Pact functions to position Edwin in his current experience among his nineteenth-century ancestors and his own
Figure 1: From *The Pact*, by David Robertson, illustrated by Scott Henderson. © 2011 by David Robertson. Reprinted by permission of Portage & Main Press. 100-318 McDermot Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R3A 0A2.
memories of his childhood. Moreover, this stylized image draws upon the visual mode to consolidate and connect various cross-generational, personal, and community narratives (see fig. 2).

As one of the most striking comic narratives geared at young readers, this series has received more scholarly attention than other award nominees and winners over the past five years. Published by a non-traditional publisher of comics in Canada with pedagogic applications, it seems strange that 7 Generations: Epic Saga was not among the nominees for the Joe Shuster Comics for Kids award. The key reason seems to be the defined target audience of readers from grades nine to twelve. While the bottom of this niche group would fall under the “young readers up to age 14” criterion for the award, the content of these narratives would likely have been deemed inappropriate for younger readers despite the educational merit and the nuanced representation of young people’s experiences. This omission indicates the continued influence of assumptions about the ability of young readers to engage with traumatic narratives of violence, suicide, illness, physical abuse, and sexual abuse, phenomena often experienced by young people themselves. Significantly, these assumptions inform the age target demarcation for this series, while texts about historical military violence, as depicted in Lone Hawk, are deemed acceptable for the Comics for Kids award. Problematically, texts for young readers that address or present challenging subject matter in sophisticated ways tend to be situated outside of the “comics for kids” category, and these distinctions function to sustain deeply rooted assumptions about young people as readers that need to be protected from dangerous content.

The Picture Book–Comic Hybrid Text

Another group of books that are not fully acknowledged in the nominations for the Shuster award consists of innovative texts that may be defined as picture book–comic hybrids. The historical development of the comic book and graphic novel exemplifies a close relationship with the trends and styles associated with the picture book. Moreover, many comic writers such as David Small, Neil Gaiman, and Dave McKean have also written and illustrated picture books or continue to work in both graphic realms simultaneously. As Nathalie op de Beeck argues in a recent article in Children’s Literature Association Quarterly, however, “while we may find much more than common ground between the two genres—indeed, formally one may be said to be a subset of the other—strong philosophical and ideological reasons persist for their separation” (468). Many recently published texts aimed explicitly at young readers often take the form of hybrid visual/verbal texts that draw on the conventions of both picture books and comic texts, but due to these ideological distinctions they may fall outside the limited scope of what may be defined as a “comic for kids.” Fanny Britt
Figure 2: From The Pact, by David Robertson, illustrated by Scott Henderson. © 2011 by David Robertson. Reprinted by permission of Portage & Main Press. 100-318 McDermot Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R3A 0A2.
and Isabelle Arsenaut’s *Jane, the Fox and Me*, published by Groundwood Books, exemplifies the type of hybrid text highlighted by op de Beeck in her article.

Published originally in French as *Jane, le renard et moi* and translated by Christelle Morelli and Susan Ouriou, this text reveals a mixture of picture-book format and extended use of sequential comic art to narrate a young girl’s traumatic experiences as an outcast. While the majority of the book resembles an oversized, hardcover, vertical-format graphic novel in which sequential comic panels predominate, a number of stylistic elements associated with picture books have been integrated throughout the narrative. The most striking is the use of full two-page spreads and full pages to depict wordless visual narratives that convey psychological states and emotional experiences (see, in particular, 26–27, 74–75). The movement between Hélène’s internal and external experiences are mapped through the movement between the muted colour tones of the comic panels and the more richly coloured full-page images with hints of green, blue, peach, and purple that depict her imagined life through reflective identification with Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. When she befriends a fox in reality, a fantasy moment in her real life, the fox is depicted in a bright, solid red colour to contrast with the muted colours of the comic panels.

Interestingly, despite winning the Governor General’s Literary Award for French Language Children’s Illustration in 2013 as well as the identification by the publisher of the intended age range of readers from ten to fourteen, this text was not nominated for the Joe Shuster Comics for Kids award. Instead, both author and artist were winners in the broad categories of 2013 Outstanding Canadian comic book artist and writer (Boyd). I would argue that this categorization has as much to do with the hybrid picture book–comic form of the text itself as with the lack in the text of an explicit pedagogic aim. It would appear that the hybrid visual design trumps the age categorization of young readers. Nevertheless, the focus of the narrative on the emotional trauma of loneliness, bullying, and outsider experiences for readers reveals an implicit pedagogic aim of the text for implied young readers. In a review of this text for the children’s book section of the August 2013 issue of the *New York Times*, Taffy Brodesser-Akner observes that “There isn’t anything revolutionary about this quiet book. . . . [The] magic of a story like this is that it’s a hand stretching from Hélène’s school to ours to let us know we’re not alone.” Despite the trauma and emotional isolation that constitutes the majority of the graphic narrative, Brodesser-Akner’s comment elucidates the element of the text that allows for it to be defined as a text for young people, namely the assumption that young people need a resolution, an assurance of the goodness of the world, or a positive message about friendship, family, or love. Similarly, the publisher’s website describes the text in these terms: “this emotionally honest and visually stunning graphic
Emily’s meeting with the artists who formed the Group of Seven – and in particular with Lawren Harris, with whom she corresponded for many years – was a tremendous revelation to her. In her mid-fifties she now no longer felt alone in her artistic and spiritual quest and, despite failing health, she embarked on a period of extraordinary creativity.

Figure 3: Excerpt from Four Pictures by Emily Carr copyright 2003 by Nicolas Debon. Reproduced with permission from Groundwood Books, Toronto.
Figure 4: Excerpt from *Four Pictures by Emily Carr* copyright 2003 by Nicolas Debon. Reproduced with permission from Groundwood Books, Toronto.
novel reveals the casual brutality of which children are capable, but also assures readers that redemption can be found through connecting with another, whether the other is a friend, a fictional character or even, amazingly, a fox” (“Jane”; emphasis added). Moreover, Hélène’s comfort—obtained from an identification with Jane Eyre—illustrates a form of literary engagement within the text itself that librarians and educators often value.

A number of other texts published by Groundwood Books exemplify the potential for this hybrid picture book–comic form to take on pedagogic aims with a more innovative use of the graphic narrative form. Nicolas Debon’s *Four Pictures by Emily Carr* was nominated for the Governor General’s Literary Awards for Illustration. It also uses the format and the binding of picture books, but with the extended use of comic sequential panels as well as the integration of Emily Carr’s paintings throughout the text as reproductions that inform the comic panels that follow. To chart Carr’s artistic work of the 1930s (see fig. 3), for example, an introductory title page draws upon a picture-book design format for the pairing of written and visual modes. The page includes a short paragraph of written text to introduce the section as well as a visual reproduction of Emily Carr’s oil painting “Scorned as Timber, Beloved the Sky.” The title beneath the painting, “BELOVED THE SKY,” is capitalized and written in bold typeface, referring to the painting and the content of the section to follow (23). The depiction of light in the painting, characteristic of Carr’s work during this period, evokes a connection between spiritual transcendence and experiences within nature. The sequential comic narrative that follows depicts Carr’s spiritual experiences painting in the forest through visual and verbal modes. Later in the text, Carr’s spiritual experiences are depicted through first-person narration in the written text, which is displayed in rectangular text boxes (see fig. 4): “I felt the nearness of God, the invisible spirit inhabiting the leaves of the trees, the rocks under my feet, the clouds in the sky” (28). This written narration is expanded upon through a visual narrative that draws upon Carr’s own artistic style. The three long and narrow sequential panels imitate the vertical emphasis in Carr’s work during this period, exemplified by such works as “Scorned as Timber, Beloved the Sky” and “Blue Sky.” Moreover, Debon’s use of light and colour in the sequential panels is reminiscent of Carr’s use of light and muted colour palette to convey spiritual transcendence and experiences of ecstasy within nature.

In many ways, *Jane, the Fox and Me* is reminiscent of *Skim*, a 2008 graphic narrative for an older audience (ages fourteen and up) by author Mariko Tamaki and illustrator Jillian Tamaki. Also nominated for the Governor General Award for children’s literature, this text pushes the boundaries of the coming-of-age narrative for young people with the layered visual and verbal representation of a Japanese Canadian outsider
girl in 1990s Toronto. More recently, *Harvey* by Hervé Bouchard, illustrator Janice Nadeau, and translator Helen Mixter was the winner of the Governor General’s Award for both text and illustration. Defined as ideal for kids ten years and older, this text also depicts the emotional trauma of a young person through the perspective of Harvey, whose father has died suddenly of a heart attack. Comparable to work by Australian author Shaun Tan, *Harvey* does not use the comic form of sequential art, but the style and content of this text defies the conventions and assumptions that often govern picture books. Paradoxically, these texts tend to win awards for picture books and illustration for young readers but may not be deemed appropriate in content and style for the Comics for Kids category within Canadian comic cultures.

Picture book–comic hybrid texts are among the most innovative texts published in Canada, particularly in terms of breaking down assumptions and expectations about what is appropriate for either young or adult audiences in terms of style and content. While these texts may continue to hold pedagogic potential for young readers, they also present interesting ideas, dynamic narratives and characters, as well as interesting stylistic choices that provide much more than an edutainment venue for readers. The majority of Canadian publishers, educators, and award committees involved in the production of “comics for kids” are long overdue to expand their categories to include more of these hybrid texts, not to mention re-evaluate long-held assumptions about young readers and the limitations of comics for kids produced solely for edutainment.
Works Cited

Naomi Hamer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg and is affiliated with the Centre for Research in Young People’s Texts and Cultures. She completed her doctorate, on the cross-media literacies of tween girls, at the Institute of Education at the University of London in the United Kingdom. Her current research examines media adaptations of picture books with a focus on the form of interactive mobile apps.