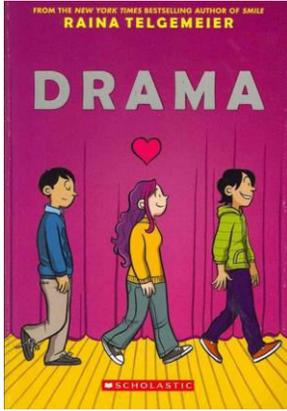


Welcome to **Using Graphic Novels in Education**, an ongoing feature from CBLDF that is designed to allay confusion around the content of banned books and to help parents and teachers raise readers. In this column, we examine books that have been targeted by censors and provide teaching and discussion suggestions for the use of such books in classrooms



Last week, the American Library Association released its list of the most frequently challenged books in America, which included three graphic novels: *Saga* (by Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples) for its explicit sexuality, [Persepolis](#) (by Marjane Satrapi) for its images of torture, and *Drama* (by Raina Telgemeier).

Strangely, while the *Drama* challenges were for being “sexually explicit” the story is set in middle school and has no sex at all in it. Furthermore, *Drama* has received numerous starred reviews and honors:

- YALSA named it one of its Top Ten Great Graphic Novels for Teens,
- NPR recommended it as one of the “Five Great Summer Reads for Teens”,
- It was a Publishers Weekly Best Book of 2012,
- A Washington Post Best Book of 2012,
- A New York Times Editors’ Choice; and
- A Booklist Editors’ Choice.
- *Drama* also received the Stonewall Book Award, and it is a top selling graphic novel in bookstores throughout this country.

The only possible issue one might have with this book is that it has a diverse cast of characters including a few gay teens who either already knew they were gay, or are slowly realizing it. That said, Telgemeier treats this as a non-issue and aside from a few flirty kisses (one of Callie’s lands squarely on her crush’s cheek), there’s little depiction of romantic contact between any characters.

Given this confusion surrounding *Drama* and the increasing number of its bans and challenges we take a closer look at it in this post. We hope to help teachers, librarians, administrators and parents better understand how to use *Drama* in their

homes, classrooms and libraries. For a closer look at *Persepolis*, please read [Using Graphic Novels in Education: Persepolis](#).



OVERVIEW

Drama (recommended for ages 9-14) is a fictional story about seventh-grader Callie, who like most kids her age, wrestles with a pesky, snooping little brother, while navigating middle friendships and school crushes. The interesting thing about Callie is her passion around being on the Drama Club's tech crew and interacting with her friends in the club. What makes this book so special though, is its message to young girls. More specifically, what makes Callie happiest is not being cool or popular or even winning "the boy." Instead, it's working hard on her set ideas, becoming the best stage manager ever of the Drama Club, and refining her voice, her vision, and her skills within that role.

Drama is a funny, feel-good book about navigating the trials and tribulations of middle school. It emphasizes the importance of finding one's voice as well as emphasizing the need for teamwork and consideration. Telgemeier's wonderful moments of school-girl crushes and botches, humor and sensitivity are all relayed through her engaging texts, wonderfully expressive characters and her colorful and engaging visual montages. The art conveys a sense of place, of touch and feel. You can feel the red velvet seats and the pre-show jitters and excitement. You can feel the tension, you can feel the excitement, and you can practically feel the cannon's wet confetti. Finally, Ms. Telgemeier mixes humor, tension, confusion, passion and fun as she tells Callie's story.



SUMMARY

Drama, is set up like a play. It begins with an Overture of musical text flowing from panel to panel ending with three characters entering the stage. It has four Acts that take place begin with the announcement of this term's play, and continues with casting, directing and preparing for opening night. There is an Intermission where we see guests entering the theater as the stage crew works frantically setting the stage, and then an Entracte leading into Act 5 covering the three nights of the play, and the Final Act, detailing the aftermath of the play and its players. While set up like a play, and following Eucalyptus Middle School's Drama Club production of "Moon Over Mississippi", *Drama* however, is more about Callie and her friends than it is about the play. We follow Callie as she navigates her friendships and school crushes while creating a set worthy of Broadway within her middle school's paltry budget.

Act 1 begins with Callie walking home from school with Greg and his (younger) brother Matt. Matt's hoping Mr. Madera will let him operate the spotlights again this year, even after a slight debacle last year. Greg then asks Matt to go on without them because he needs to talk with Callie. He tells Callie he just broke up with Bonnie, and while Greg is upset, she's thrilled and gives him a peck on the cheek. Over the next few days Greg ignores or avoids her and Callie finds out he's back with Bonnie. Callie, feeling confused and rejected, realizes she's got to get over this crush. She gets more and more involved with the drama club, designing the play's sets (including a confetti shooting cannon and a leaf-dropping magnolia tree), and with her friends. At the same time, she meets two twins, Jesse and Justin. Might Justin be her new crush?



There are a lot of things that make this book special. For one, Callie is real-to-life. She fumbles with her hair and checks her breath before talking to Greg, one of her crushes. She later frets whether Justin likes her and finds the courage to ask them out when he fails to do it himself. Then there are her passions. She *loves* stage and set design and can't wait to show Justin, her favorite book of all time, "published in 1932 and reprinted thirty-four times, it includes photographs of Broadway sets and stage design from the nineteen-teens and twenties."

Telgemeier's art is another special facet of this book. The art and text weave the story, alternating between whether the art or text has the stronger voice, while being equally engaging. One outstanding example, however, of Telgemeier's powerful visual storytelling comes as Callie shows Justin her favorite book. In the first few panels Callie leads Justin to the book (as Jesse checks out some manga). Taking it out of its shelf Callie hugs it and then in the next panel we see her and Jesse walking into the book and then sitting on the pages as if they're sitting in the sets themselves, as the book, at least for Callie becomes larger than life.

Then there's Callie herself. Callie's ability to be so swept away in her passions makes her even more endearing and real. We love her quirkiness, her focus, and her determination while we love her vulnerability and cluelessness about boys. Finally, there's her inner strength that is so engaging, empowering and refreshing. Callie speaks her mind and while often insecure and uncomfortable with certain parts of herself, she's fine with the fact that she can't sing, she embraces and follows her ambitions and she never lets her relationships or felled crushes diminish her confidence or her dreams.



Finally, there's Telgemeier's portrayal of diverse characters from the stage crew geeks to the cool kids and jocks. There are kids of all kinds of color and heritage, and all of them regardless of color, background, size or shape are all wrestling with who they are. This, in part, is why a few characters' discoveries or realizations that they are or may be gay are such a non-issue. In fact the characters' announcements that they are or may be gay are the only parts of the story where there actually is no drama.

In short, this is a coming-of-age story as a young teenager learns to follow her passions, navigate friendships and crushes and learn, along with her friends and peers, how to feel comfortable within one's skin while embrace one's strengths, weaknesses, and quirks.

In *Drama*, Telgemeier relays:

- How to be diverse individuals within a group;
- How to follow one's passions and ambitions with gusto and determination, not worrying how it might 'look';
- How to put on a play, from the stage crew's perspective;
- How to accept people who are different; and
- How to navigate middle school friendships and crushes.



TEACHING/DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS:

Plot, Themes, and Values Related

- Discuss and chart the different themes Telgemeier presents in this work.
- Discuss different types of friendships one might have with others. Detail what it means to be a good friend. Discuss the challenges we have in determining and maintaining friendships, and why this is so important.
- Discuss different passions/hobbies your children/students may have and how they might continue to pursue them. Discuss how it may feel when those passions aren't "typical" passions/hobbies.
- Discuss the challenges of being an individual while belonging to a group.
- Discuss the challenges of putting on a theatrical production, working within limited budgets while trying to create the best sets, props and costumes possible.



Critical Reading and Making Inferences

- Telgemeier uses text, image, expressions, body language, and inference to let us know how and what her characters are thinking and feeling. Chart and discuss how she uses and integrates these techniques.
- Throughout the book we see Matt on the periphery and at one point (p. 62) Callie asks her friend Liz, "What is Matt's problem?" What is Matt's problem? Why does he act the way he does and how might he resolve his problem? Why can't Callie recognize his problem? What is Matt's role throughout this story?
- Throughout the book the characters grapple with instances of insecurities and anxieties. Chart and plot the incidents of insecurities and anxieties and evaluate how the different characters effectively or ineffectively deal with them. Brainstorm more appropriate solutions.



Language, Literature, and Language Usage

- Discuss how *Drama* is a cross between a book and a play while being a graphic novel. What literary techniques does Telgemeier use to create this feel.
- After reading through “Moon Over Mississippi” Callie comments on how romantic the script is and how “audiences love a sentimental love story.” Mirko, not quite sure about this responds, “But what about Shakespeare? His most successful plays were tragedies?” Continue this discussion with your students. Evaluate what make the most successful plays and how sentimental love stories and Shakespeare’s works fit into those plays.
- Have students share their own stories of feeling different and/or their stories of trying to fit in. Compare how the stories are told, and chart the words used to relate their challenges and their feelings.



Modes of Storytelling and Visual Literacy

In graphic novels, images are used to relay messages with and without accompanying text, adding additional dimension to the story. In *Drama*, Telgemeier deftly weaves story and background with image, text, and design. Reading *Drama* with your students allows you to analyze, discuss, and learn how Telgemeier uses page and panels, text, and images to relay complex messages. For example:

- Evaluate how she visually and textually creates the “feel” of a play.
- Evaluate and discuss how Telgemeier creates the “feel” of the theatre, of the players and of the drama surrounding them.

- Evaluate and discuss how Telgemeier uses facial expressions, panel size and shape, and page design to create tension (for example on pp. 15-17 as Callie realizes Greg was not at baseball practice as he said he was).
- Compare when Telgemeier uses a full-page single-panel splash versus pages with multiple panels. Chart when she uses single-panel splashes to emphasize key events or separate chapters and slow the reader down to emphasize particular points of the story, and discuss how effective this method is when story-telling with images.
- Telgemeier discusses the importance of color both in the use of contrasting colors to help characters stand out and in creating the right mood. Research primary, additive and subtractive color models. Discuss how different colors evoke different emotions, and how complimentary and reciprocal colors can be used for different purposes (see the resources below).



Suggested Prose Novel and Poetry Pairings

For greater discussion on literary style and content, here are some prose novels about growing up, being a pre-teen/teen, and the challenges of middle school and high school that you may want to read and pair with *Smile*:

- [*Smile*](#) by Raina Telgemeier — an autobiographical coming-of-age memoir where Telgemeier ruminates with humor and honesty on the tumultuous challenges and perils of her tween years: from the trauma of falling one night on her way home from a Girl Scout meeting severely injuring her front teeth, to dealing with boys, earthquakes and the true meaning of friendship.
- *The Baby-sitters Club* series by A.M. Martin, illustrated by Telgemeier -- a popular young adult series about teenagers that has been adapted into graphic novel format.

- *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney — a series about a boy and his struggles in middle school.
- *No More Dead Dogs* by Gordon Korman about theater productions gone wrong. The main plot revolves around a play based on *Old Shep* where the ending has been changed to let the dog live.
- [*Nothing Can Possibly Go Wrong*](#) by Prudence Shen and Faith Erin Hicks. While for slightly older kids (it takes place in high school) the characters in this book are a real and life-like as Callie and her friends.
- *Hereville* a series by Barry Deutsch about another strong-willed girl (Jewish Orthodox) who is different from the other girls in her community.



Common Core State Standards (CCSS):

Following the teaching and discussion suggestions above, *Drama* can be used in classrooms to meet Common Core Standards, as detailed below. Note that this section uses the Common Core Anchor Standards for College and Career Readiness for Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening:

- Key ideas and details: Reading closely to determine what the texts says explicitly and making logical inferences from it; citing specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text; determining central ideas or themes and analyzing their development; summarizing the key supporting details and ideas; analyzing how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of the text.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.3](#)

- **Craft and structure:** Interpreting words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings and analyzing how specific word choices shape meaning or tone; analyzing the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs and larger portions of the text relate to each other and the whole; Assessing how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6](#)
- **Integration of knowledge and ideas:** Integrating and evaluating content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words; delineating and evaluating the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence; analyzing how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the author takes.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.8](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9](#)
- **Range of reading and level of text complexity:** Reading and comprehending complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10](#)



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysWrqAMktc0>— the YouTube video promotion for *Drama*
- http://wn.com/raina_telgemeier — a presentation Telgemeier made at the 2012 National Book Festival about her books and work that demonstrates how she works as she tells her stories, with examples of real-life incidents from an audience of students.
- Raina Telgemeier’s website — <http://goraina.com>

- <http://departingthetext.blogspot.com/2013/01/color-casts-powerful-messages-learn-how.html> - a blog post on learning how to use color with additional links and resources.
- <http://char.txa.cornell.edu/language/element/color/color.htm> discussing color, value and hue, along with color illusions and psychological implications of color.

Meryl Jaffe, PhD teaches visual literacy and critical reading at Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth OnLine Division and is the author of Raising a Reader! and Using Content-Area Graphic Texts for Learning. She used to encourage the "classics" to the exclusion comics, but with her kids' intervention, Meryl has become an avid graphic novel fan. She now incorporates them in her work, believing that the educational process must reflect the imagination and intellectual flexibility it hopes to nurture. In this monthly feature, Meryl and CBLDF hope to empower educators and encourage an ongoing dialogue promoting kids' right to read while utilizing the rich educational opportunities graphic novels have to offer. Please continue the dialogue with your own comments, teaching, reading, or discussion ideas at meryl.jaffe@cblfd.org and please visit Dr. Jaffe at <http://www.departingthetext.blogspot.com>.