

Rewatching *Watchmen*

The book is better than the movie

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About two years ago, in my first week as a reporter for the *New Haven Register*, a teacher in Guilford, Connecticut, a rich suburban town I covered, was suspended for giving a student a graphic novel that her parents found inappropriate. By the end of my first day reporting the story, I learned that the teacher had tendered his resignation, but the school district would not tell me which book had led to it.

The next day the parents of the student, a freshman girl who hadn't done her summer reading, called me, surprised that my article had not identified the book. Unlike the school, they wanted readers to know exactly what work was involved: Daniel Clowes's *Eightball #22*. I went to the parents' home, where they showed me the copy they had confiscated from their daughter. The novel, in comic-book form, featured a series of intersecting stories set in a single town. The student's father described it as "borderline pornography."

I wasn't familiar with Clowes or the book, and looking over my articles now, I'm embarrassed by how I depicted it. At the time, I called *Eightball #22* "sexually explicit"; rereading it later, it became clear it certainly was not (there was some implied sexuality, and one image of a topless woman, but nothing explicit). Working on deadline, I hadn't had time to buy my own copy of the book and read it carefully, so I put more weight on the parents' reactions than on my own analysis. What was so interesting was that the girl's parents—who were split on whether the teacher should lose his job—made sure to point out that they were not the type of people who would get upset about Harry Potter or *The Catcher in the Rye*. They knew that book banning was wrong, but this book, in their eyes, was clearly beyond the pale.

Scanning the high school's list of approved authors for students' summer reading, however, it became obvious that the issue was not the book's content or words, but the pictures. The list included

authors such as Ray Bradbury and Maya Angelou. I thought back to ninth grade, when I read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and the section of the book in which the teenage protagonist, concerned about changes with her genitalia, decides to have sex and becomes pregnant. This was far more explicit than anything in *Eightball* #22. But the parents could not flip through *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, see an image of a breast or a homicidal bunny rabbit, and decide that the work was pornographic, as they had with *Eightball*. Annoyed with myself for initially making the same leap, I wrote a couple of articles noting the awards Clowes has won and the numbers of teachers and librarians using graphic novels for instruction—and I started reading them.

As a child and teenager, I wasn't particularly interested in comics, although I loved reruns of the old live-action Batman TV series, which interspersed comics frames with the action through the use of the famous BAM! and POW! screens. As the Guilford episode shows, comics and graphic novels still struggle for literary legitimacy, and even though several were on my mental should-read list, I had never taken the leap into territory still largely identified with a particular nerd subculture. But comics have been gaining in literary status since the 1980s, and the recent boom in superhero movies has brought attention to the source material. Recent reviews in *The New York Times* have praised David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp*, historical work *The Beats* (by Harvey Pekar, Paul Buhle, and Ed Piskor), and Darwyn Cooke's *The Hunter*. And high-profile authors like Michael Chabon and Junot Diaz have turned to comics as a structuring force in their respective Pulitzer-Prize winners, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008).

So when the story of the fired teacher in Guilford and the subsequent blog uproar finally got me reading graphic novels, I decided to go to the source: author Alan Moore and illustrator Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*. Arguably the most celebrated graphic novel to date, *Watchmen* was first published in 1986 and released as a long-awaited

movie adaptation this year. Along with *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* has been seen as the progenitor of the tortured superhero story, analyzing the psychology that would lead otherwise normal people—only one of the work's heroes actually has supernatural powers—to don outlandish getups and take to the streets to fight crime. *Watchmen* raised the bar for the literary possibilities of comics and has found literary recognition that has so far eluded most of its peers; it is the only comics work on *Time* magazine's list of the best 100 novels since 1923, beating out, for example, *Kavalier & Clay*.

Despite this status as one of the breakout hits of the comic book genre,¹ which, along with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986) and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986, obviously a productive year for the genre), began bringing the form into the mainstream, *Watchmen* has been largely ignored by the academy. The still-developing field of graphic novel or graphic narrative studies has tended to focus on *Maus* and other comic-book memoirs, like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. It's only natural that *Maus* has been taken as a more "serious" text than *Watchmen*, and accorded more critical acclaim and academic study—one is about neurotic superheroes, the other about Auschwitz. But *Watchmen* can offer insights on directions in contemporary fiction as graphic novels continue to grow in status and authors across genres incorporate the tropes of comics. In its negotiation of a media-saturated society through different forms of writing and communicating, *Watchmen* should be read as a key text in the continuing interplay between "high" and "low" culture, popular and literary fiction.

The Novel Within the Graphic Novel

Watchmen was one of the key books to cause writers and readers to coalesce around the term *graphic novel* to denote comics works

¹ If you Google "graphic novel," the Wikipedia entry for *Watchmen* is the second result that pops up (after the Wikipedia entry for graphic novel).

of complexity and ambition, often compiled in longer volumes and printed on higher-quality paper than standard comic books. However, authors and critics continue to wrangle over what to call these works of fiction. Some prefer to stick with the original *comic book* or variations like *comic-book novel*, while *graphic novel* has come into vogue to denote the more “literary” examples of the pictures-and-words genre. In a 2000 interview, Moore said that he considered *graphic novel* to be a “marketing term” dating from the 1980s. Indicating that he preferred just to call the genre “comics,” he said: “The thing that happened in the mid-1980s was that there were a couple of things out there that you could just about call a novel ... in terms of density, structure, size, scale, seriousness of theme, stuff like that. The problem is that ‘graphic novel’ just came to mean ‘expensive comic book.’”²

In a special 2006 issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted to comics, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven suggest the term *graphic narrative* instead of *graphic novel* because the former “encompass[es] a range of types of narrative work in comics.” It is true that nonfiction graphic works—such as memoirs in comic-book form, historical books like *The Beats* and the graphical adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*, and journalistic texts such as John Neufeld’s new work on post-Katrina New Orleans—pose their own generic questions within the memoir tradition, and need different terms to describe their projects. But the genre identifier *graphic novel* ties works of graphic fiction to the evolving definition of the novel and the history of that form, emphasizing the features it shares with the dominant literary form of our day. Hence, I will use both *graphic*

² In the same interview, Moore also disputed the notion of categorizing works into genres, saying, “I’m sure the whole idea of genres in fiction was probably invented by some bored stocking clerk at W.H. Smith, fifty years ago or something like that. That everything has to be pigeonholed and packaged.” See blather.net/articles/amoore/northampton.html.

novel and *comic book* to refer to *Watchmen*. A graphic novel *is* a comic book, although not all comic books are graphic novels.

I may be accused here of conflating the concepts of “genre” and “media,” and to a certain extent I am doing so. It could be argued that the book and movie version of *Watchmen* inhabit the same genre, the science fiction or superhero story, expressed in different media. On the other hand, if we interpret genre more generally, as categories of art that cohere through shared features (an intentionally vague definition), it’s clear that novels and movies have different conventions that inform their reception as works of art. While different media are not necessarily different genres, there is often a correlation between what we define as a genre and the form that it takes. For example, is there a literary difference between a comic book read in installments on low-quality paper, a graphic novel bound in a glossy cover, and a comic narrative read on the internet? While they may be subtle, I think there are important gradations of genre separating these works. As Scout McCloud writes in *Understanding Comics*, his comic book about comic books, “The artform—the medium—known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images.... The trick is never to mistake the message—for the messenger.”³

As a work actively engaging with its own genre and status as a literary production, *Watchmen*’s precursors lie in the earliest examples of the novel, which began appearing in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Like graphic novels, the novel form first had to overcome the stigma of classification as a popular or mass art form before gaining entry into the field of high culture. As William Warner writes in *Licensing Entertainment*, “novels have been a respectable component of culture for so long that it is difficult for twentieth-century observers to grasp the unease produced

³ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 6.

by novel reading in the eighteenth century.”⁴ In the early days of the form, novels faced much of the highbrow criticism that would haunt comic books from the 1950s until today: namely, that they were mindless entertainment that offered no useful morals and could corrupt young people.

To counter these accusations and underscore the “novelty” of the new genre, many early English novels, such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), and Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), used the conceit of a real-life “editor” embedded within the book, attesting to both its truthfulness and its value. In Defoe’s and Richardson’s books, the editor proclaims himself to be merely presenting the journals or letters of the main character, and only with a view, of course, toward the moral betterment of the reader. The preface to *Robinson Crusoe* reads, “The Editor believes the thing to be a just History of Fact; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it,” while Richardson’s epistolary novel begins with dispatches back and forth between several editors and readers praising the work. The action of the story is told entirely through letters, mostly written by the servant Pamela, who manages to maintain her virtue and marry a gentleman. Fielding, meanwhile, used the structure established by these works to satirize them and the novel-reading public. In *Shamela* (1741) and *Joseph Andrews* (1742) he made fun of the logical leaps necessary to believe that Richardson’s character would sit down and write a letter to her parents moments after, for example, a near-rape experience. He also exposed the unreliability of this narrative model by making Pamela a manipulative social climber. And in *Tom Jones*, the editor serves a new function as essentially an additional character, first openly hostile toward the reader, and then, as the book progresses, granting the reader greater admission into his confidence.

⁴ William Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 4.

Watchmen contributes to this long tradition of fudging the mythical line between fact and fiction by introducing in the midst of the main storyline—essentially a murder mystery—a number of supporting documents that shed light on the story and its setting in an alternate-reality 1985, in which Richard Nixon is serving a third term and the existence of all-powerful superhero Dr. Manhattan keeps Soviet aggression at bay. Comics are perhaps uniquely suited to such a structure: by their very nature, they combine various genres and media, privileging both the visual and written elements of a story. As Chute and DeKoven write, “comics is multigeneric, composed, often ingeniously, from widely different genres and sub-genres; and, most importantly, comics is constituted in verbal and visual narratives that do not merely synthesize. In comics, the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread.”⁵ *Watchmen* runs with this idea farther than any comic book did before it, combining and recombining various media, drawing in and tweaking a variety of fictional and nonfictional genres, and creating a dense web of interconnections between disparate characters and events—all of which further the plot and comment on it in the process.

Watchmen starts off “quoting” from another text, the journal of the psychopathic masked crime fighter Rorschach:

Rorschach’s Journal. October 12th, 1985: Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face. The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout “Save us!” And I’ll look down and whisper, “No.” ... Now the whole world stands on the brink, staring down into bloody hell,

⁵ Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (Winter 2006), p. 769.

all those liberals and intellectuals and smooth-talkers ... and all of a sudden, nobody can think of anything to say. (I. 1⁶)

Right from the beginning, the reader asks herself whether the author agrees with the racist, paranoid Rorschach, or whether the ensuing story will disprove his worldview. For a (cough) liberal intellectual picking up *Watchmen*, these opening lines complicate the act of reading, creating a feeling of unease and intrigue. The creators then turn to a staple of genre fiction—and another often-denigrated form—the detective story. Two detectives stand inside the apartment of a murdered man, a crime fighter named Edward Blake, alias the Comedian.⁷ The main thrust of the storyline, to solve the murder, begins. The choice of plot is allusive: Like comics, detective fiction dates from the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and as a genre, it shares the status of being traditionally viewed as lacking literary merit. *Watchmen's* use of a murder mystery is also a nod to *Detective Comics*, the 1930s-era publication that introduced Superman and Batman and gave rise to DC Comics, *Watchmen's* publisher. This is just the first of the work's many allusions to other comics: As a newscaster says later, "The Superman exists, and he's American" (IV. 13).

As soon as the main storyline is under way, Moore makes the first of his major genre innovations, bracketing the first book with an excerpt from the memoir of Hollis Mason, who as a young man

⁶ *Watchmen* was originally published serially, in twelve books, and later compiled into one bound volume. References here indicate first the chapter number (I through XII) and then the page within that chapter. Quotes from the supporting documents that bookend the chapters refer specifically to pages within that work. In the case of this particular quote, movie fans will note how Rorschach's journal echoes Travis Bickle's narration in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, a movie about a vigilante in New York City.

⁷ *Comedian* is, of course, another word for *comic*.

was a superhero called Nite Owl. According to a note superimposed on the page, the excerpt—which is laid out to look like a reproduction of a physical book—is "reprinted with permission of the author." Apart from casting light on the characters' back stories, Mason's memoir, *Under the Hood*, accelerates the plot; after the Comedian's murder, Rorschach turns to the book to look for a motive, noting that Mason "said some bad things about the Comedian in it" (I. 12). From the outset, Rorschach pursues the investigation as though he is dealing with a straightforward murder. When interviewing the former masked villain Moloch—now just an old, ailing man named Edgar Jacobi—Rorschach says, "The Comedian, Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias ... Somebody's killing masks, Jacobi. Somebody wants us dead. Maybe some old enemy. Maybe someone you met in prison. Been running through names. Was it Underboss? Was it Jimmy the Gimmick or the King of Skin?" (V. 24) What he doesn't know is that Moloch, whose back is toward him, is already dead and that Rorschach is being framed for his murder. By revealing the limits of crime fighting and detection in solving the questions posed by the story, Moore shows how far the comic-book genre has come since the early days of *Detective Comics*. In the same vein, *Watchmen's* own radical and nontraditional ending demonstrates that the book and the genre have moved beyond the black-and-white, good-and-evil trajectory of past superhero comics.

The positioning of *Watchmen* within the novel tradition has allowed it and other comics works to achieve mainstream success; at the same time, as Hillary Chute argues in a 2008 article, graphic novels' outsider status has allowed them to play with genre with a freedom that more established literary forms perhaps no longer have:

Because the low literary expectations for graphic narratives have afforded them the space throughout the twentieth century for experimentation with (nonliterary) genres—with which they are

generally associated anyway—graphic narratives model the generic multiplicity that is now such an effective and common textual practice in fiction. (270)⁸

In its diversity of genres and exploration of the border between fiction and nonfiction, *Watchmen* both places itself within the history of the novel and tests the boundaries of the form, establishing itself as a pioneering work of contemporary fiction.

The Media Within the Media

At the same time as *Watchmen* explores and expands the terms of the novel genre, it critiques how forms of writing affect our media-rich lives. Interspersed with the story's action, there are faux-academic articles on nuclear war and ornithology, psychological files, and mock-ups for toy superheroes (in which we see that Rorschach and Nite Owl have been commodified as plastic figurines, though—because the masked crime fighters have been outlawed—they do not receive any of the profits). But most important are the newspapers and other news media that populate the text, both as plot devices and ways to convey information about the current events of *Watchmen's* alternate 1985. The comic-book form allows the authors to signal important developments through images without needing to have characters actively discussing or presenting a news event. As the superhero-turned-billionaire businessman Adrian Veidt (alias Ozymandias)⁹ looks out the window after learning of the Comedian's death, a newspaper headline on his desk announces, "Nuclear Doomsday Clock Stands at Five to

⁸ Hillary Chute, "Ragtime, *Kavalier and Clay*, and the Framing of Comics," *Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2008), p. 270.

⁹ Ozymandias' name itself is a major metatextual clue, referring to Shelley's poem of the same name on the decay of empires. In *Watchmen's* penultimate chapter, Moore offers the start of the key quote: "Look on my works, ye Mighty..." leaving the reader to fill in the summation, "and despair!"

Twelve" (I. 18). Later, in a flashback set in 1963, we see the Comedian reading a newspaper noting, "French Withdraw Military Commitment from NATO" (II. 9). The newspapers that turn up throughout the story—sometimes littering the streets of the book's dirty, dangerous New York City—provide some of the "rich extra-semantic information" that Chute and DeKoven note is a hallmark of graphic literature.¹⁰ They also remind the reader of the role the news and reporters have had in world events, beyond acting as automatic recorders. (In one flashback, we learn that Woodward and Bernstein have been found murdered.) The omnipresence of news sources contributes to the sense of a paranoid, supervised, and mediated society that makes the final plot twist, in hindsight, inevitable.

Running through the work is an ideological battle between two fictional news sources, *Nova* and the *New Frontiersman*. On the left, *Nova* editorializes against superheroes and accuses Dr. Manhattan of causing people to develop cancer, leading him to abandon Earth. On the right, the *New Frontiersman* supports Rorschach after his arrest when piles of the newspaper are found in his apartment. Through the back-and-forth between these two outlets (seen in snippets of TV news interviews and editorials in each paper), Moore demonstrates that a reliance on these sources ultimately leads to greater ignorance of the truth. The truth, however, does not lie somewhere in the middle of the two viewpoints; each is so hyperbolic in its worldview—an edition of the *New Frontiersman* includes a defense of the Ku Klux Klan¹¹—that just averaging the difference between them would be no more enlightening than relying on each separately. Although we often hear a vendor at a newsstand—a recurring minor character—state that he "see[s] every goddamn paper inna world. I absorb information. I miss nothing!" (III. 2), it is clear that he actually understands nothing, despite (or because of)

¹⁰ Chute and DeKoven, "Introduction: Graphic Narrative," p. 767.

¹¹ Presciently, Rorschach's journal and the *New Frontiersman* read a lot like the ultra-right cesspool that is many online commenting forums today.

his overexposure to the media. On the other end of the spectrum, the businessman Veidt manipulates world events and their news coverage, creating a truth that lies far outside what is reported in any news source. His goal is to create a story so huge, as defined by the amount of coverage it attracts, that the entire world will have to pay attention. In his final interaction with the other superheroes, it is by showing them an entire wall of television screens, all reporting on the same manufactured story, that he proves his plan has succeeded. Veidt, supposedly the smartest man in the world, believes that only he has the resources to rise above the day-to-day coverage of Cold War antagonisms, synthesize the different media angles that attack from every direction, and create a new storyline that makes the others obsolete.

Alongside the newsvendor's storyline—perhaps the most direct commentary on the futility of attempting to understand the world through news consumption—Moore and Gibbons present *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a comic book within the comic book that is one of *Watchmen's* more controversial, complicated, and beloved elements.¹² Like the work overall, *Tales of the Black Freighter* demonstrates a superior command of genre through the subversion of its tropes. The *Black Freighter* panels exist side by side with the main storyline, offering commentary on the action. As a teenage boy sits reading the comic book, the vendor talks to him and other customers, including Rorschach's alter ego, a doomsday nut wearing a THE END IS NIGH sign; Rorschach's psychologist, Dr. Malcolm Long; Joey, a cab driver having relationship problems with her girlfriend; and a group of Knot-Tops, the violence-based youth culture that the outlawing of crime fighters has allowed to flourish. The bleak, bloody pirate story offers a sign that *Watchmen*, too, will not offer the superhero's typically happy, heroic ending.

In the world of *Watchmen*, the existence of actual people who

¹² The *Black Freighter* story was cut from the film, to the consternation of many fans; a cartoon version is included with the director's-cut DVD.

have, for a variety of reasons, donned masks and taken to crime fighting themselves—and then had their activities outlawed after a police strike—has led to a decline in popularity for superhero comic books. In his memoir *Under the Hood*, first-generation superhero Hollis Mason reveals that his inspirations to augment his police work with costumed crime fighting were the masked-avenger comics that began appearing in the 1930s and 1940s. But in the era of Dr. Manhattan, superheroes have lost their appeal and pirates have come to dominate the comic-book genre. At the end of Chapter V, Moore includes a chapter from a critical work called *Treasure Island Treasury of Comics* discussing the influence of *Black Freighter* in the comic-book environment of *Watchmen*. The author writes that the role of comic books during the rise of Dr. Manhattan and other masked avengers lent the genre a legitimacy that it lacked in the real 1986: "With the government of the day coming down squarely on the side of comic books in an effort to protect the image of certain comic book-inspired agents in their employ, it was as if the comic industry had suddenly been given the blessing of Uncle Sam himself—or at least J. Edgar Hoover" (*Treasure Island Treasury of Comics* 59). Some of the commentary in this mock-analysis could come from later actual opinions on *Watchmen*. Moore writes:

In terms of critical acclaim and influence upon later books of the same type, *Tales of the Black Freighter* made an impression upon the comic book landscape that remains to this day.... The stories ... are uniformly dark and sinister, balancing metaphysical terrors against an unnerving sense of reality, especially when applied to matters of mortality or sexuality. Readers who came to the series expecting a good rousing tale of swashbuckling were either repulsed or fascinated by what were often perverse and blackly lingering comments upon the human condition.

By linking the *Black Freighter* comic to the newsvendor's storyline and the unreliability of the news media, Moore shows that the news is often as heavily regulated a fiction as the stories on what

would seem to be at the other end of the spectrum: genre fiction about pirates and superheroes. Of course, there is an inherent connection between comics and newspapers through their medium: The first comic strips appeared in newspapers, where they continue to flourish, and both are transitory, disposable media printed on low-quality paper. *Watchmen*, however, highlights the literary connections between these two forms of writing, underscoring the fiction of one and the truth telling of the other. But as soon as the reader might think she has *Watchmen* pinned down as a polemic against the easy manipulation of news sources, the book's final pages—with an assistant at the *New Frontiersman* pulling Rorschach's journal out of the paper's crank pile—complicates this notion with the fact that the truth may be revealed after all. Of course, it would be a truth mediated by the *New Frontiersman*'s editorial slant and probably discarded as a paranoid fantasy, but Rorschach's faith in the newspaper's editors as the “only people [he] can trust” (X. 22) is at least partly vindicated. The proliferation of the media in *Watchmen* implies the fallacy of relying on the news for an understanding of how the world works. But *Watchmen* itself shows that piecing together writing across genres and media can shed light on an overarching truth.

The Movie About the Comic

Following the critical and box-office successes of *Iron Man* and the *Spider Man* franchise—and particularly the 2008 accolades for *The Dark Knight*—the time seemed ripe for a movie adaptation of *Watchmen* that would reclaim it as the *ur*-text of the postmodern superhero. After two decades of anticipation, however, the 2009 movie fell flat. Moore insisted that his name be removed from the credits. Fans of the comic book left with a bad taste in their mouths, and critics panned it. Ticket sales were strong—the \$130 million movie so far has made \$185 million worldwide—but they dropped sharply after the opening weekend, indicating poor word of mouth.

To me, what was frustrating about *Watchmen* the movie is

that it failed in exactly the ways that *Watchmen* the book excels. The novel became a transformative work in the comic-book world in large part because it displays a total command of its genre—one that also incorporates so many aspects of other genres. *Watchmen* the movie had issues with character development, acting, and pacing, but more disappointingly, it failed to bring to life the comic's text and still images in a way that elaborated on the strengths of the original. The combination of visuals, dialogue, and music felt lazy and uninspired. The action scenes were unoriginal, displaying the ultraviolence and slow-down speed-up *Matrix*-style shots we have come to expect from a director trying to be edgy. The music was sometimes laughable; A.O. Scott wrote in *The New York Times* that the sex scene—set to Leonard Cohen's “Hallelujah”—was “this year's hands-down winner of the bad movie sex award.” Even the wonderful opening credits, which showed a deep connection to the history of the comic book genre and quickly conquered the problem of introducing the first-generation Minutemen crime fighters, were scored with what had to be the most banal choice imaginable: Bob Dylan's “The Times They Are A-Changin.”¹³ Unlike the text, the movie seemed as if it had nothing original to say about superheroes or their role in American pop culture—let alone offer a running commentary on the way that the media shape and distort our lives.

Watchmen is certainly not a perfect book: The dialogue can be stilted and the messaging heavy-handed—quotations from Nietzsche, Einstein and the Book of Job as commentary on the modern condition are somewhat obvious—but like many other books, what is important is not so much what the book says as how it says it. We can continue to argue about the literary quality of *Watchmen* and what insight its Cold War–era message may hold for us today, but we must first leave behind the argument of whether we should consider *Watchmen* literature at all. These questions are more than academic: In the

¹³ I realize Moore references many Dylan songs in *Watchmen*, including this one, but it still felt cheesy.

Guilford case, they cost a dedicated and well-liked teacher his job. The genre of the graphic novel is one that necessarily inhabits a hybrid position that allows works like *Watchmen* to push the boundaries of novel writing. As such, graphic novels are not a mere side note or diversion from more “serious” literary pursuits. Instead, they offer an important commentary on innovative ways of representing a visual, media-saturated culture, ways that may become increasingly central to twenty-first-century writing.