Colleen Brown

Persepolis

Reader as Writer

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi gives an interesting look into a girl’s life growing up in Iran amidst the turmoil of the late 20th century. This topic is one that many students would not have learned about in their classes or at home since it happened before many were old enough to walk. A teacher could use this text in any unit about the middle east or in a unit that serves to eliminate prejudice against other groups. However, as it teaches students about the history of a place that would be unfamiliar with, it also shows them another way in which to convey a story with great impact.

I think a lot of people assume that a comic book or a graphic novel is not something to be taken seriously since they frequently deal with supernatural situations that can’t occur in real life. However, they often have messages beyond the events of the story. The story interweaves history with Marjane’s childhood to show how connected she is to the world around her. This makes the story infinitely more relatable to the reader. The reader might have a hard time relating to the plight of Iran but they will be able to relate to a girl growing up and dealing with all of these problems. In Persepolis, the story of Iran unfolds through a mixed media of pictures and words. The events of the story are probably new but it easy for readers to write off violence because they do not see it. If you read that twenty people were killed in a bombing most people would say, “oh how sad,” and then move on. But paired with a picture the image becomes that much stronger and more vivid in the mind. In some sections she doesn’t even use words to describe what is happening but through the pictures you can clearly see it unfold in your mind. For example, on pg. 307-309 the regime raids a party that Marjane and her friends are having and no words are used. For three pages the text is just drawings and you can still picture the panic that they felt when they were discovered, the unease when the police were in the house, and the terror of watching their friends race across rooftops to get away. Then you slowly feel the horror of watching one friend not make it and fall from the roof. In this case the words would have probably ruined the effect of seeing the action unfold.

If I were to write a graphic novel I think that this would be a good model to look at. It shows that sometimes less is more and a simple picture can make all the difference to a scene. In graphic novels it is sometimes what you don’t say that brings the biggest impact for the reader. In a regular novel obviously there is not as much room to do this sort of representation and an author has to rely on the words to get the feelings across. In some books there is room for illustrations and these sometimes do add to the overall effect of the book but generally they are just side notes. In a graphic novel the scenes without words are generally strategically placed to help the effect and to make the biggest impact. I also think that this method had the greatest impact for Marjane’s story because it was so personal. That scene with her friend was what she actually saw so we can place ourselves into that moment with her. A graphic novelist should be able to make scenes personal and write from their own experiences to convey their feelings so that the reader can feel it too.