

## “Radical Empathy: Drawing Political Landscapes in Comics for Younger Readers”

Annette Wannamaker, Professor, Department of English, Eastern Michigan University,  
awannamak@emich.edu

Many in our field argue that reading or seeing authentic representations of characters can help to build empathy among readers, but identification with a character or gaining a deeper understanding of an individual – fictional or historical – is only a first step in developing empathy and encouraging activism. Indeed, some literary critics like Catherine Belsey and Rachel Blau DuPlessis have convincingly argued that conventions of realism, like character identification or conventional narrative arcs, actually may hinder understanding because they work to smooth over the seams of ideology in ways that encourage us to focus on individuals instead of communities and on individual choices rather than on the larger social systems that both manufacture and limit those choices. Empathy that leads to activism must make systems visible; this is “radical” because it requires texts and readers to interrogate foundational ideas, to question the common sense of existing structures, and to map the complex power grid that feeds off of and fuels late capitalism. This is not an easy task.

Frederick Jameson argues that language is not a sophisticated enough tool to use to define or understand late capitalism: “Jameson’s concern is that we cannot cognitively map the current system because our existing models function only at the level of language, dealing in content and theme, and these are inadequate tools for representing the webs, currents, forces, patterns, and scale of late capitalism” (Reynolds 65). If we define radical children’s/YA literature (as described by Reynolds, Zipes, Nel, Mickenberg, and others) as texts that help young readers to understand the larger economic, social, political systems that shape our world and define our roles, then might comics be a more useful form for developing empathy and activism than novels? Are there ways that the visual, tactile, spacial, interactive sign system of comics might be a more appropriate tool for mapping the “webs, currents, forces, patterns and scale” of our current social, political, and economic systems?

This presentation will examine several comics for younger readers that serve as examples that can help explore these and other questions. For instance, the comic *In Real Life*, written by Cory Doctorow and Jen Wang, uses depictions of an MMORPG and character avatars to represent the complex international marketplace of online gaming, in which western game players benefit from the labor (often child labor) of “gold farmers” working in developing nations and “playing” alongside them in virtual spaces. Another example is a comic written and illustrated by Don Brown, *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans*, which is a work of nonfiction that visually links the natural disaster of a hurricane with the manmade disasters created by income inequality, racism, and an indifferent government. These, and other examples, will illustrate ways in which considering the comics form (long used in creating radical texts aimed at adult readers) may help to expand and perhaps complicate our definitions of a radical children’s literature.

Reynolds, Kimberley. *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.