

Common Reading Experience 2010 / Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* Advice for Discussion Leaders

General Advice

- **Avoid Ice-Breaking Exercises:** Do not waste your time and the students' time by reducing the book discussion to a lame series of excruciating ice-breaking exercises. The book *is* the ice-breaker. One thing everyone in the room should have in common is that he/she has read this book. *Talk about the book.*
- **Talk about the Book:** The best thing you can accomplish with this session is to model a simple but fundamental lesson about the college experience: *This is a place where books are taken seriously.* The best way to do this is by showing the students in your session that you personally take this book seriously. Step One in doing this? *Talk about the book.*
- **If You Are Faking It, They Will Know:** Have you read the book closely? Did you get anything worthwhile out of it? Did it address important issues, pose provocative questions, engage with contemporary issues in a meaningful way? If your honest answer to any of those questions is "No," then do everyone a favor and bow out. If you don't care about this book, then you won't convince anyone else to care about it either. In fact, you will probably do active harm by inadvertently sending the signal that college is a place where we waste your time with busy work, forcing students to read stuff that is boring and unimportant, and then spending our time together trying to think of something more interesting to talk about than the lousy assignment.
- **Ask Questions about the Book:** Presumably you *do* care about the book and *do* find it challenging and relevant. Good. Thank you. Read on. Your challenge now becomes communicating this to the students. The best way to do this is probably not through lecturing them about your own opinions and listing off the book's many virtues. Rather, the best approach will be to pose students with many questions about the book, so that in answering these questions they begin doing what they will do throughout their academic careers at Xavier: *They will think critically about and engage actively with books and with other people who care about books.*

Tips for Talking/Asking about *Persepolis*

- **Listen and Respond:** Though you will of course have prepared a game plan and know certain key points you want to make over the course of the discussion, you should not be so focused upon advancing the slide in your mental PowerPoint that you tune out the real feedback that you are receiving from your students. By the time we meet them, our students' B.S. barometers are finely tuned; they know when they are not being taken seriously, and they will return the favor. Therefore, try to observe the following guidelines during discussion:
 - Listen to what students say.
 - Respond specifically to their points.
 - Incorporate their precise words into your response.
 - Generally respond affirmatively, which will put others at ease and encourage them to enter the conversation as well.

- Pose follow-up questions if you are unclear about a response, or, better still, if the response was not what you expected and leads you down new avenues of thought.
- Be open to wandering down those unanticipated avenues, knowing all the while that you will need to redirect the route eventually back to the main path.
- Be open to revising on the spot the order in which you planned on addressing matters, if it seems that the momentum to discuss a certain issue is building.

• **Graphic Novels:** Surely one of the things that first struck you about this book is that it is a graphic novel. Scott McCloud (author of *Understanding Comics*, 1994, *Reinventing Comics*, 2000) is one of the most outspoken recent defenders of “comics,” calling them “**juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.**” McCloud concedes the clunkiness of this definition, but ultimately champions the graphic novel as an art form that has the possibility of making the best use of graphic arts, storytelling, and language (although words, he would say, aren’t essential to the form). **Sequential art, powerful imagery, and well-chosen language:** these are the backbone of a well-crafted graphic novel. What excites McCloud most about the form is its potential for allowing the best of graphic and verbal arts. Artists and audiences have tended not to give graphic novels a chance only because comics have been linked largely to superhero images and childish topics. But modern artists have shown that doesn’t have to be the case.

Most of us are probably not that familiar with this genre, and though some of our students will know it well, many will not. So right off the bat you’ll probably want to gauge opinions about the genre itself. These questions may help you to do that:

- Have any of you read graphic novels before? What attracts you to this kind of book?
- If you are new to this genre, did you find it effective, or did you have a tough time taking “a long comic book” seriously?
- Could you have simply read the text of Satrapi’s story and gotten the same thing out of the book? Or are there any places where her illustrations significantly added to the story’s impact? Any particularly effective illustrations come to mind?

Some key places where you might consider the author’s visual presentation:

- imagining the revolution 15, 29, 40, 42, 89, 102, 115, 116
- images of torture: 51, 52
- memories of life with family and friends: 22, 34, 61, 71, 77, 95

• **Establish the Basics:** Early on establish basic information about the main character and plot. “Who is Marji Satrapi? Where and when does this story take place?” You do run the risk of insulting your students’ intelligence with such rudimentary questions. But this opening approach serves two main functions: 1) It refreshes everyone’s memory about the basics of plot and character—especially useful for students who may have read the assignment several days or weeks prior to discussion; 2) It invites tentative students to enter the discussion by throwing them softballs—easy, straight-forward questions with obvious, correct answers. The most important questions are never easy, nor do they have correct answers. Few students will be brave enough to follow you into the deep water, however, if you do not first let them adjust to the shallow water and remind them how to swim.

• **Move from Facts to Impressions:** After quickly establishing things we know for sure, start branching off into things that are more subjective and open to interpretation. For example:

- How would you characterize Marji's relationship with her father? Her mother? Her grandmother?
- What does Marji value most in each of her family members? What sources of tension with each can you detect?
- How would you characterize Marji's religious beliefs? What do you make of her childhood visits from God?
- What are Marji's early political convictions? How and why do these convictions evolve over time?
- What attracts Marji to the West? What repels her?
- What attracts Marji to the Islamic Revolution? What repels her?
- Despite the historical and cultural distances that separate you from 1980s Iran, does Marji have any adolescent experiences that you can relate to your own adolescence?

These sorts of questions ask students to think critically about the characters and their conflicts, bringing personal intuition to bear upon the discussion.

• **Gradually Pose the Big Questions:** After you have prepared the ground by establishing basics and by testing early impressions, you are ready to swim into the deep water, posing some of the big questions raised by *Persepolis*. Those might include variations on the following, as well as others devised by you and your students:

- What associations did you bring with you to this novel about Iran? What are your sources for information? Did any of your opinions change over the course of the novel?
- Who are Satrapi's target audiences, and what does she want to communicate to them? How do her choices to tell her story as a graphic novel, and to write and publish it originally in French, impact your understanding of her target audiences and messages?
- As a character, Marji ages from 9-14 over the course of the novel. What is life like specifically for a girl during the Islamic Revolution? What are some changes in attitudes and policies toward females under this regime that most affect Marji's sense of identity? Which episodes or illustrations best communicate that?
- As the author, Satrapi first published this book when she was in her thirties. Are there any places where she seems critical of her own behavior as a child? Are there any opinions or actions that she retroactively depicts in an unflattering light?
- Do you see any parallels between the abuses of the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran and the abuses of any other revolutions or regimes before or since?
- What does Satrapi want to say about war, revolutions, families, martyrs, prison?—and where do we see the author making it difficult to come up with easy answers for any of the topics?
- Does this work simply reinforce for readers a western perspective that casts fundamentalists as crazy savages? Why or why not?
- Where do we see subversion of/defiance to the dominant culture throughout the narrative? In what ways does the dominant ideology here work to reproduce itself? Why is it effective?
- Could fundamentalism control life in the United States in this way? Why or why not?

• **Consider binaries:** Considering binaries in a literary work is often a great first step in understanding it—whether for your own reading or with students. It helps identify major conflicts and themes, as well as relationships between characters. One is also ideally positioned to see the work's complexities as binaries break down, split apart, and get complicated in various ways. Here are some of the most important binaries in *Persepolis*:

Persepolis / Tehran	veiled / unveiled
Persia / Iran	Marxists / Islamists
ancient / modern	past / present
age / youth	male / female
East/West	Muslim / infidel, non-Muslim
parents / children	extremist Muslim / moderate Muslim
obedient (daughter, parents, citizens) / rebellious	royal / common
Western pop culture / Islamic culture	wealthy / working class
peace / revolution / war	shah / emperor
God / Marx	life /afterlife
earth / heaven	hypocritical /genuine
protective / over-protective	prophet / soldier / common girl
fight / comply	martyr / victim /non-hero
punish / forgive	truth / lies / bring mistaken
imprisoned / free	Marie Curie / Marji
academic response to war / emotional response	Taji (mother) / father
pacifist / coward	father / Uncle Anoosh
Iran / Iraq	Arabs / Persians
Baghdad / Tehran	defeatist / patriot
life in home / public display	optimism / pessimism
child's view of events / adult looking back	autobiography / memory, fiction (?)
novel / comic book / graphic novel	justice / injustice
literature, art, value / pulp, mere entertainment	simplistic art form / sophisticated art form
sophisticated artist / young , naïve narrative	journalistic reporting / snippets of memory
wood-cut style drawings / depth of emotion, directness and honesty of the memories	

• **Additional questions concerning Satrapi's artistic project:**

- The author's occasional use of swearing: Useful? Why?
- In a few instances the author assures us that "those were the actual words he/she said."
Why the asides? Useful? Necessary?
- Why is the historical background in the Introduction useful?
- Why do individuals write autobiographies? Why does Satrapi?
- Why this medium for her story? What is gained by telling her early life as graphic novel rather than a novel or straight-forward autobiography?
- Is a graphic novel literature?
- What makes a good autobiography? good art?

Here are the chapter divisions in *Persepolis*:

1. The Veil	pages 3-9	10. The Trip	72-79
2. The Bicycle	10-17	11. The F-14s	80-86
3. The Water Cell	18-25	12. The Jewels	87-93
4. Persepolis	26-32	13. the Key	94-102
5. The Letter	33-39	14. The Wine	103-110
6. The Party	40-46	15. The Cigarette	111-117
7. The Heroes	47-53	16. The Passport	118-125
8. Moscow	54-61	17. Kim Wilde	126-134
9. The Sheep	62-71	18. The Shabbat	135-142
		19. The Dowry	143-153

- Why these specific chapter titles? What is suggested as the titles move forward?