MORE WEIGHT

Ben Wickey

a Salem story

A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS AND LIBRARIANS

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A Note on Graphic Novels in the Curriculum

If you're a teacher or librarian reading this guide for *More Weight: A Salem Story*, I applaud your decision to tackle one of the most compelling moments in American history with a graphic novel that does justice to it in all its terrifying complexity. Graphic novels have now been a meaningful part of high school and college curricula for the past two decades, and it is thanks to educators like you. The teaching of comics and graphic novels, especially at the high school level, was initially intended to help facilitate skills for new and reluctant readers (e.g., applying vocabulary, interpreting visual texts, making judgments and inferences), but they have since been recognized as a powerful literary and artistic form to be explored in an academic context.

In both the US and Canada, graphic novels are an explicit part of state and provincial curricula. For the Common Core, students must apply reading standards to a range of literary forms. In K-5, students are expected to analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute "to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text," with graphic novels listed as an example, while the range of text types in 6-12 "includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels" (*Common Core*, 57). As well, since 2021, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Association, which offers its DP program all over the world, has increased the possible graphic novels that can be studied from a handful of well-recognized comics to titles numbering in the hundreds.

More Weight: A Salem Story is a complex, multi-layered examination of a dark period in American history, which makes it ideal for study in a range of senior secondary and postsecondary English and History courses. The fact that it draws upon primary source documents, historical research, and the brilliant imagination of its creator provides a wealth of material for the classroom. The teaching materials for *More Weight* have been put together with this idea in mind. After providing an overview of teaching the graphic novel, it gives advice on reading, outlines major characters and themes, highlights three engaging activities suitable for a range of learners, while also providing questions for before, during, and after reading. After providing an overview of teaching the graphic novel, it gives advice on reading, outlines major characters and themes, highlights three engaging activities suitable for a range of learners, while also providing questions for before, during, and after reading.

More Weight: A Salem Story – An Overview

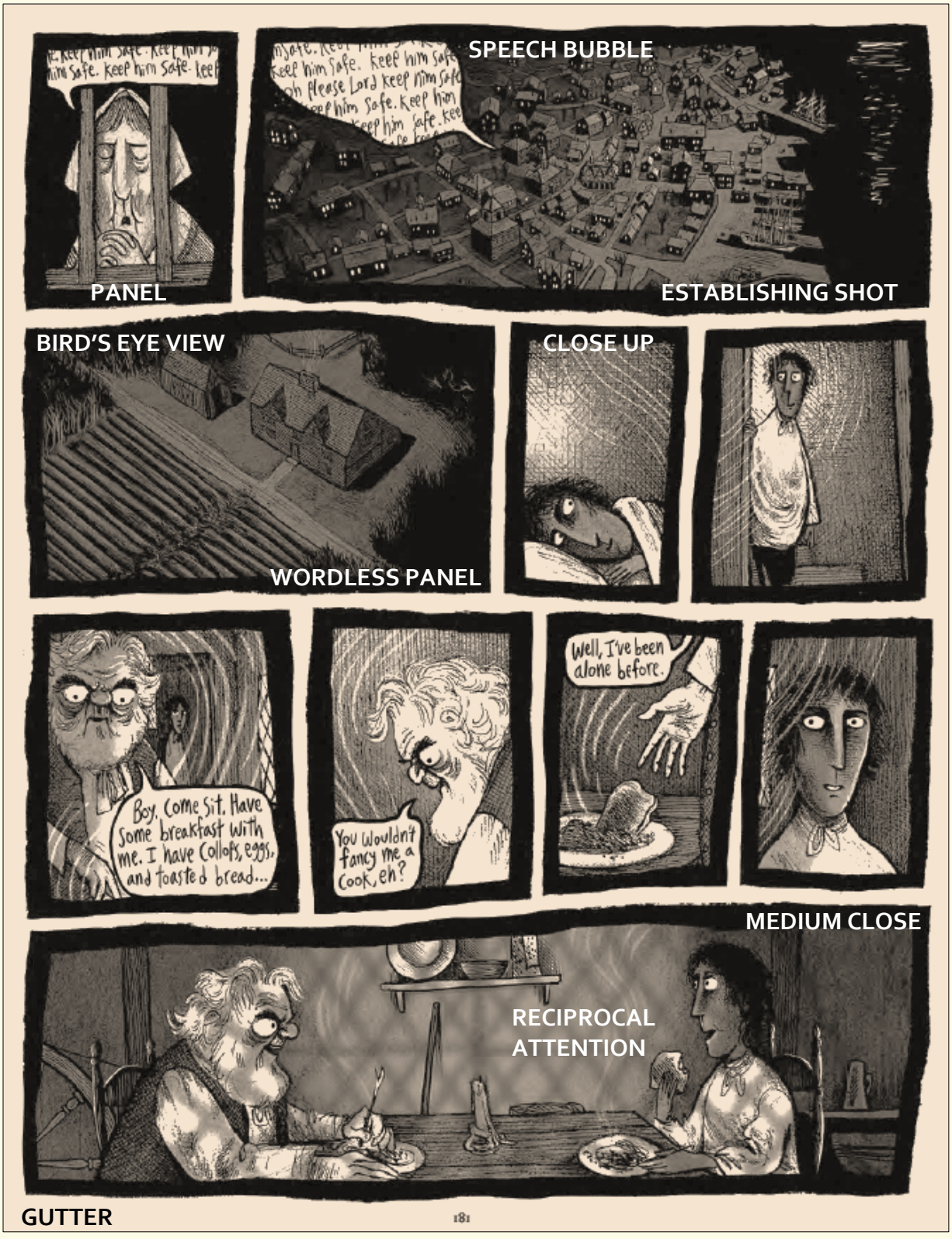
INTRODUCTION

More Weight: A Salem Story is a graphic novel that examines the Salem Witch Trials from a series of different perspectives, with a significant focus on two of the accused: Giles and Martha Corey. Using the framing device of the author's own reflections on Salem, past and present, and moving back and forth between the trials of 1692 and the exploration of the city by Hawthorne and Longfellow in the 1860s, Wickey shows us how the history of one town can reveal the best and worst aspects of human nature. Although it is "A Salem Story," the graphic novel explores how misinformation, fear, and hatred can plant the seeds for tragedy anywhere.

GENRE

One of the fascinating aspects of *More Weight: A Salem Story* involves the question of genre. The graphic novel blends fiction, historical accounts, biography, horror, and the supernatural, all while shifting back and forth between different time frames. It shares features of both the graphic novel and graphic non-fiction, and the merging of genres has the effect of making the story immersive but also difficult to describe. The evidence for this is in its critical reception, with Wickey's approach leading Alan Moore to describe it as "an appalling masterpiece" and Margo Burns to call it a "cinematic panorama of the horrors and legacy of Salem." The juxtaposition of beauty and terror gives the graphic novel a kind of sublime horror that makes it so compelling. An important aspect of teaching *More Weight* to students, then, involves getting them to see how this juxtaposition contributes to our understanding of the story.

Graphic Novels and Their Terminology



Students recognize that graphic novels are read from left to right and top to bottom, but when things are not so clear, it's important to remind them that no two readers of a graphic novel will have the same experience of the text. We dwell on things depending on what catches our attention, and so a reader might linger a bit longer on Martha's extended speech bubble in panel 2 and then move back to panel 1 again to confirm that it is extending her prayer. Others might simply focus on the establishing shot in panel 2 and not even read the speech bubble. Here is a quick breakdown of basic terms used in talking about the structure of a graphic novel.

TERM	DESCRIPTION
PANEL	As the fundamental structures of comics and graphic novels, panels are the frames where the action of the story takes place. When the action is not framed, the panels are said to be "borderless." When there is no dialogue or narration, they are "wordless."
SPEECH BUBBLE **CAPTION BOX**	Character dialogue can be found in speech bubbles. Sometimes the bubbles will be stylized to reflect the tone of the speaker or drawn as a cloud shape to suggest that the words are only thoughts. Caption boxes are distinct from speech bubbles and often found at the top left corner of a panel. In *More Weight*, these are often used to indicate the time and place when and where the events that follow happen.
SHOT	The terms *long, medium long, medium, medium close, closeup,* and *extreme closeup* represent filmic concepts that can be adapted to describe how "shots" in a graphic novel are framed. They account for most of these shots, although there are many others. We see an establishing shot of Salem in panel 2, close ups of Martha and Ben in panels 1 and 4 respectively, and a medium closeup in the final panel. Students should be encouraged to inquire how the different shots accord with the feelings and emotions of the characters being depicted. Close ups, for example, often suggest a particular emotional intensity.
THE GUTTER	The gutter is the most underestimated structure in a graphic novel. It's the space between panels formed by their borders, whether these are to the sides, above, or below the panels. Gutters represent the passage of time between the encapsulation of the discrete moments. It is where meaning is made, since the reader must decide what has taken place between panels. The gutter can represent the briefest of moments, but also months, years, and even centuries. The gutters in between the above panels suggest a passage of virtually no time to a matter of minutes.
EMANATA	Emanata typically involve small lines that "emanate" from a person or object in a comic or graphic novel. They are used to show something that would otherwise be unseen. In the panels above, the smell of Giles' cooking wafts into the room when Ben is lying down and it draws him out into the kitchen.
ATTENTION **(GAZE THEORY)**	In addition to using filmic language to describe the shots that comprise a graphic novel, it is also useful to teach students about the language of Gaze Theory. For example, part of the intimacy of the breakfast between Giles and Ben is established through reciprocal attention, the technique of having two characters look at one another. Other effects can be created through semi-reciprocal attention (when one character looks at another, but they don't look back) or divergent attention (when neither character is looking at the other). Although these terms are often used in the context of feminist film theory, they are also useful outside of this specific context when examining comics and graphic novels.

Other features to explicitly teach students include onomatopaeic sound effects, encapsulation, bleeds, inset panels, and the impact of the author's freehand style on panel construction.

Major Characters

Here is an overview of the major characters we encounter in the graphic novel.

CHARACTER	DESCRIPTION
	Giles Corey (c. 1611-1692) was a farmer who was caught up in the events of the Salem Witch Trials. Giles' wife Martha was first accused of witchcraft and arrested. He initially supported the charges but subsequently defended her, and several factors — his stubborn reputation, hostile relationships with other community members, and the accusations of young women in the Salem Community — led to his arrest. As we see in the graphic novel, his refusal to enter a plea to the charge of witchcraft led him to being pressed to death with stones.
	Martha Corey (c. 1619-1692) was the third wife of Giles Corey, and a devout member of the Puritan community of Salem. Being outspoken about her objections to the witch trials and the antics of the girls who were accusing members of the community, Martha drew attention to herself and was soon accused of witchcraft. She defended herself at trial, but the girls, specifically Ann Putnam, claimed that she was controlling their actions. This led to her being convicted and hanged a few days after her husband's death.
	Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was a major nineteenth-century American writer well-known for exploring the themes of guilt, sin, and morality in his work. As we see in the graphic novel, his ancestor was John Hathorne, a judge at the Salem Witch Trials who gained a reputation for being particularly harsh in interrogating the accused and convinced of their guilt. Hawthorne was haunted by the legacy of his connection to the Witch trials, an idea that is explored in the graphic novel.
	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) was an American poet who was widely celebrated and read in the nineteenth century and remains popular today. He was a friend of Hawthorne's since youth and also fascinated by the events of the Salem Witch Trials. As he and Hawthorne discuss in the graphic novel, Longfellow wrote a verse drama entitled *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms,* which was published in 1868.
	Ben Wickey is an award-winning Massachusetts-born writer and animator who graduated from the California Institute of the Arts. Interestingly, he takes on a role as a kind of character in *More Weight*, introducing us to Salem at the start of the graphic novel and returning at the end to provide a history of what has unfolded since the trials. This approach helps to put the events of the graphic novel into a crucial context, as does the tremendous amount of research presented at the end of the book.

Principal Themes

Important themes emerge over the course of *More Weight*, suggesting that the ideas in the graphic novel have specific relevance in a contemporary context.

- Communities can be destroyed by fear
- Guilt carries with it a legacy
- History does not happen in a vacuum

COMMUNITIES CAN BE DESTROYED BY FEAR

The actions of the young women who swore they were being possessed serve as a profound example of how fear can sweep through a community and begin to destroy it. In a Puritan town where witches were not seen as some abstract concept, but a literal manifestation of the Devil, combined with strong religious beliefs in predestination of the soul, the spread of lies and accusations is an instructive example of how fear can cause irreparable harm. In the age of social media, this is particularly resonant, where an ill-chosen post that spreads fear about someone can have significant and even irrevocable repercussions.

GUILT CARRIES WITH IT A LEGACY

The sections of the graphic novel that take us into the conversations of Hawthorne and Longfellow show us the legacy that guilt carries, especially in the case of Hawthorne trying to come to terms with the role that his ancestor, John Hathorne, played in the trials. There is a clear fascination in Hawthorne's writing with the darkness brought about by guilt and sin, and his sense of guilt is in strong evidence when he comes across the tomb of his ancestor and admits that the specter of John Hathorne has been present since the "boyish imaginations" of his youth. In a contemporary context, the legacy of guilt can influence the ways in which we seek to come to terms with — or avoid — the injustices of our past.

HISTORY DOES NOT HAPPEN IN A VACUUM

Perhaps the most important, recurring theme in the graphic novel is that history does not happen in a vacuum but is a product of things that happen in our own backyards. When Hawthorne and Longfellow walk through the streets of Salem, or Ben Wickey whisks us back to the present to show us the legacy of the Salem community, we can see that history is not an abstract concept. It is the product of the stories, hardships, terrors, and triumphs of communities like Salem whose past shapes our understanding both of its history and of history itself. This is made especially clear when Wickey juxtaposes the scenes of contemporary Halloween festivities in Salem with his reflections on its history – a clear indication of the things we ultimately learn from history and those that perhaps we don't.

Questions for Before, During, and After Reading

The purpose of these questions is to connect students to the text and to show them how previous learning can support their engagement. Developing a pattern of questioning can also lead the student to think about the text long after the lessons are over.

BEFORE READING

1. When you look at the cover of the book, what do you suspect it will be about? What are some clues that you recognize and which ones are hard to decipher?
2. As you flip through the book, you might notice something about the way it uses both colour and black and white. Why do you suppose a writer / illustrator might do this?
3. Much of the story takes place in the past -- in the mid-19th century and in the late 17th century. Have you learned anything about these periods of time either in classes you have taken, books you have read, or films that you've seen? What did you learn?
4. Given the subject matter of the book, what do you think will have been challenging for its author in putting together in presenting it as a graphic novel?

DURING READING

5. What do you see as the importance of the different timelines in the graphic novel?
6. What are some strategies that the author uses to give authenticity to the book?
7. Were you surprised by what ultimately happens to Giles and Martha? Why or why not?
8. Are you surprised by the appearance of the figure on page 407 and the events that follow? In what ways does the story prepare you for this?
9. What do you make of the relationship between Hawthorne and Longfellow in terms of how and why they get along? How do they help us more fully appreciate the story of Giles and Martha Corey and the Salem Witch Trials?

AFTER READING

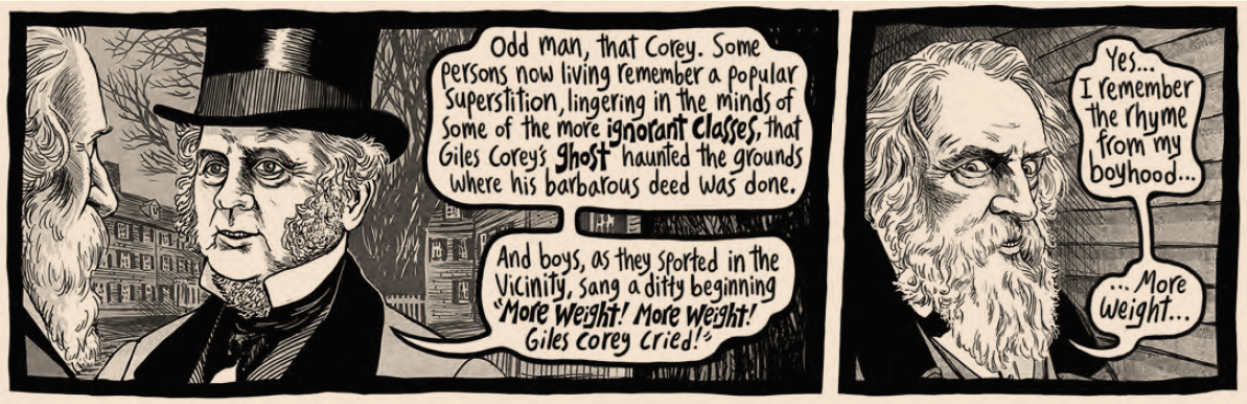
10. What is the most important message that you take away from *More Weight*?
11. Which of the figures that you have read about are you most interested in investigating further? What is it that makes you want to learn more about them?
12. If you could change anything about the graphic novel, what would it be and why?
13. If you were to visit Salem today, what would you want to explore and why?
14. What do you think might have been the perspectives of the girls who accused the various residents of Salem of witchcraft? Why do you think this?
15. In thinking about characters like Tituba and Benoni, what do you see as some of the challenges of researching people of color in history?
16. What is another historical event, or even something that has happened in your own life, that you think deserves the kind of treatment that Wickey applies to the Witch Trials? Why do you think it deserves this, and what would you hope to learn (or share) about what happened?

Top 3 Activities for Teaching *More Weight: A Salem Story*

ACTIVITY 1 – Turning Pictures into Prose

Objective: To have students see the differences between how a short story writer or novelist writes prose fiction and how graphic novelists use words and pictures to tell a story.

Writing and drawing comics and graphic stories is a lot of fun, and it is not uncommon as a teaching strategy to give this as an assessment option for an assignment. Instead of writing an essay or a multi-paragraph composition, students are sometimes encouraged to explore their creative side by turning their learning into comics. However, taking a visual narrative and turning a part of it into prose can be an even more rewarding activity. It can teach students profound lessons about the similarities and differences of what is required by the two forms.



HOW IT WORKS

The teacher divides the class into groups of three students. Each group is given a different three-page sequence in *More Weight* that they have to try and rewrite as prose fiction. The activity begins with each student reading the three-page sequence their group was assigned on their own. They are given five minutes to absorb the contents of the sequence and then ten minutes to take notes. When this is complete, students discuss the notes they have compiled in their group of three, choose a page on which each of them will focus, and then discuss how they might turn the sequence into prose. Students should each be prepared to write 150-200 words each so that they write 450-600 words in total.

Important considerations that they'll have to make in their groups are…

- Who will focus on what page?
- What is the general story arc for their prose fiction adaptation?
- How can they ensure consistency across each of their sections so that the whole thing reads appropriately?

- How will they ensure that one section of prose transitions to the next?
- How will they edit their manuscript once they've generated the text?

A great way for them to start the activity is to summarize what is happening in the three-page sequence in three sentences, one for each page. Once the students have the sentence that summarizes their page, they will be in a much better position to write.

The writing itself should take students the rest of the period. Then, they'll need time during the following period to put their texts together and edit their manuscript. This should allow for the presentation of their stories during the class that follows.

A nice idea in terms of presenting the final product is to have students each read the section that they wrote for their group, with the aim to make the manuscript appear as a seamless whole and not just a patchwork of different texts. Another cool idea is to have each group imagine a different audience for their prose adaptation.

Alternatively, the presentations could focus on students presenting their idea, the process they went through, their top three excerpts, and what they learned about the challenges of writing prose fiction. Indeed, an important part of the teacher's thinking about and reflecting on this assignment should be geared towards addressing the following questions:

- Can students learn from this sequence in *More Weight* to appreciate how much a prose fiction writer needs to visualize, imagine, describe, and make clear to a reader who is trying to understand their work? Can they also more fully appreciate how much information is communicated by comics through visual elements, in addition to the words on the page?
- How can students use language to capture what they see in the artwork and its visual imagery?
- Ultimately, can a graphic novel teach them how to be a better prose writer, and to be more appreciative of both literary forms?

ACTIVITY 2 – Letter to Future Me

Objective: Students prepare questions that they have about the graphic novel prior to reading it by composing a letter to their future selves. Once they read the graphic novel, they respond to the letter by showcasing what they have learned.

When students are first introduced to *More Weight: A Salem Story*, they are going to have a lot of questions. The one person that they probably won't think to ask questions of, however, is their future self. In this activity, the student generates a series of three to five questions that they really want answers to. These could be about either the text and/or context of the graphic novel and should probably follow a preliminary introduction to the story.

HOW IT WORKS

Students must write a letter, approximately one page in length, to their future self. In their letter, they are expected to have the following:

- Proper formatting, including
    - their school address, the date, and then their name and home address
    - an opening salutation ("Dear Future Me…"), the letter itself, and then a closing salutation,
    - their name, with space left for their signature.
- A short intro paragraph that explains the purpose of the letter, treating their future self as a real person.
- Three to five questions they have that they really want their future self to answer.

The intention of the activity is not only to encourage students to develop their own "Before Reading" questions, but to make these questions important to them. Once they have read the graphic novel, students can either reply to their letter ("Dear Past Me…") or answer the questions in the form of a short composition, reflecting on the book's themes of how our perspectives change over time. Depending on the curriculum, teachers may opt to have this activity serve as either a formative or summative assessment.

ACTIVITY 3 – Remembering Salem

Objective: To give students the chance to extend their learning by using their creativity to remember what happened in Salem.

The idea behind this activity is to draw upon the modern-day Salem Halloween framing sections in the graphic novel to ask students the following question:

How would you pay tribute to the memory of Salem after reading the book?

HOW IT WORKS

Once they have finished the story, students are encouraged to brainstorm ways of commemorating, honoring, or even just remembering the events detailed in the graphic novel. Here are some examples of creative projects in which they might engage:

- Designing "collector cards" that commemorate specific characters, places, or events detailed in the graphic novel. The card themselves could contain any information that a teacher would like to see the student research and discover, whether in the story itself or gathered from web or print-based sources.
- Creating a Halloween costume, including a preliminary sketch and final, full-color design, with accompanying writing that explains the student's choices.
- Conceptualizing a sculpture or monument that might honor those who lost their lives during the Witch trials, again with concept sketches, full-colour drawings, and explanations of design choices.
- Inspired by the discussion of Salem's legacy on pages 466 and 467, devising a proposal for ways that present-day Salem can make changes in how it remembers the events of the Witch Trials.
- Rewriting a section of the graphic novel from the perspective of a minor character in order to gain an understanding of their point of view.

Regardless of the activity that a student proposes or opts for, a graphic organizer can be a helpful way to initially set up the activity. In addition, students should be encouraged to engage in both print and web-based research to bring their project to completion.

Once the projects are done, they can be showcased in a virtual tour, in which students present their work on their phones, tablets or laptops. The class divides itself in half, and one group "tours", having conversations with the creators about their research and design choices. Then, the roles switch and the presenters become the tour group.

Other Activities

Salem Cartography

Students use sketchnoting to familiarize themselves with the various locations in Salem, past and present. They use their reading of the graphic novel and additional research to create a labelled sketchnote of the various locales encountered. They use symbols, text, images, arrows, scribbles, doodles, and other markings to become cartographers.

More Weight: Part 2

Students work in pairs to develop a concept for a sequel to *More Weight*, examining the events that transpire in the wake of the Witch Trials. They come up with an overview of their story, complete with a plot, character cast list, and even cover art. They can present this, develop a website, or draft a letter to a prospective publisher with their pitch.

The Missing Page

Students work on their own to create a missing page from the story, one that could fit in seamlessly but might provide important ideas or insights that we don't see in the text. Perhaps the student wants to extend a conversation, develop an idea, or clarify a later action by including the missing page.

The Conversation

With a partner, students select a character in *More Weight* and create a scripted conversation in which one of the partners plays the historical figure and the other plays a contemporary, historical, or fictional character that might have some connection to the persons, places, or events of the graphic novel. The students could have Giles Corey interviewed by one of his descendants, Hawthorne answering questions from one of his fictional characters, or Atticus Finch grilling the judges who presided over the Witch Trials. The conversations have the potential for bringing out some really creative insights!

Close Reading

The teacher pairs up students to look at pages 140-147 in the graphic novel. The students must search for different figures of speech in this section of the book and how they might help the reader to understand how Hawthorne is feeling about his connection to the events of Salem. For example, he uses personification when he talks about a "creeping notion" of having been stained by the events of the Witch Trials. Here, his personification of the idea as "creeping" suggests that it haunts and pursues him, and the "stain" is a metaphor and visual image showing his recognition that he is permanently marked by it.

A Final Note to Teachers and Librarians

This resource is specifically for use with *More Weight: A Salem Story*, but some reading about visual narrative as a literary and artistic form can provide teachers with a foundation for teaching comics in the classroom. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* continues to be the gold standard for an introduction to sequential art. McCloud's ideas help to show that visual narrative can be more fully appreciated when we spend some time examining how it developed in different contexts, what it looks like today, and where it might go next.

Prior to teaching *More Weight*, I would encourage you to ask students about their experiences with comics and graphic novels, even if these experiences are limited to watching big budget superhero films. Students might also be interested to know that *From Hell* by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell was an important influence on the style and content of *More Weight*, and would make a valuable companion text to read alongside/after this one, at least for college-level readers.

Other works that teachers might use to make connections include those mentioned in *More Weight,* like the scholarly / non-fiction books that the author discusses on page 462, as well as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible,* Longfellow's *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms*, Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," or Kimberly Belflower's *John Proctor Is the Villain*.

With more than two decades as an educator, a reviewer of comics and graphic novels for *Publishers Weekly*, and a writer of more than 120 books for children, I am always interested in extending conversations begun in a guide like this one. Educators using this resource in connection with *More Weight: A Salem Story* may wonder what to do if they have further questions about using the book in the classroom. In that case, I welcome teachers and librarians who are looking for advice or support to contact me directly on my website. Enjoy the guide and talk to you soon.

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