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## The pedagogic potential of graphic novels: Empathy and literary awareness in Adrian Tomine's *The loneliness of the long-distance cartoonist* (2020)

### Abstract

The students' competence in reading and interpreting images is often not as developed as we tend to think (Connors, 2012), and therefore, the students' knowledge about iconotexts cannot be taken for granted. Still, within teacher education programmes, iconotexts are often only incorporated in courses on children's literature and for teacher students that will teach in primary schools (Connors, 2012).

Through a close-reading of Adrian Tomine's *The loneliness of the long-distance cartoonist* (2020), I have therefore examined how a metacomic may be used to promote empathy and literary awareness in upper secondary school. In pursuing this research question, I have utilized the theoretical framework of cognitive criticism (Kukkonen, 2013; Nikolajeva, 2014) and metacomics (Cook, 2017; Kukkonen, 2013), in addition to competence aims regarding empathy and literary awareness in LK20.

The analysis suggests that Tomine's book, which is made in the format of metacomics combined with graphic diary, is an apt tool for emphasizing empathy, as "contemporary diaries make visible the intimate and the personal" (Cardell, 2014, p. 3). Graphic diaries are therefore a perfect format for conveying feelings, and a fruitful format to use with young adults in language classrooms, as this may promote chances of expressing feelings and empathy with others. Through various metafictional devices in Tomine's work, the students may also be cognitively engaged in literary discussions, which can make them more aware of the construction and production of the format of graphic novels.

In future research, graphic novels for secondary students should therefore receive more attention both in theoretical and empirical studies, and graphic novels for this age group could also be incorporated more frequently in course plans in schools and teacher education (Connors, 2012).

Keywords: graphic novels, metacomics, metafiction, empathy, cognitive criticism.

## Det pedagogiske potensialet i grafiske romaner: Empati og litterær bevissthet i Adrian Tomines *The loneliness of the long-distance cartoonist* (2020)

### Sammendrag

Til tross for at elever i dag blir sett på som en visuell generasjon, er elevers kompetanse i å lese og tolke ikontekster ofte ikke like utviklet som vi tror (Connors, 2012). I denne studien har jeg derfor undersøkt hvordan en autobiografisk tegneserie kan bli brukt på videregående skole for å understøtte kompetansemålene i engelsk innen empati og litterær bevissthet (KD, 2019). Jeg har utført en nærlesing av Adrian Tomine's *The loneliness of the long-distance cartoonist* (2020), og brukt kognitiv litteraturteori (Nikolajeva, 2014) og metakomikk (Cook, 2017; Kukkonen, 2013) som teoretisk rammeverk.

Analysen indikerer at Tomine's grafiske roman er en blanding av autobiografisk tegneserie og grafisk dagbok, og at den gjennom sine ærlige bilder om fremmedgjøring og tilhørighet er et nyttig verktøy for å stimulere empati i leserne (Cardell, 2014). Gjennom et vell av metafiktive grep i Tomines grafiske roman, er det også et stort potensiale for å engasjere lesere på videregående skole i litterære diskusjoner, noe som kan gjøre dem mer litterært bevisste på dette formatets oppbygning og lek med fiksjon og fakta.

I fremtidige studier bør derfor grafiske romaner for elever på videregående skole få mer fokus, og grafiske verk for denne aldersgruppen kan også bli hyppigere inkorporert i leselister på skoler og i lærerutdanning (Connors, 2012).

Nøkkelord: grafiske romaner, metafiksjon, empati, litterær bevissthet, kognitiv kritikk.

## Introduction

During the last 20 years, perceptions of graphic novels and the comics industry have altered significantly, and graphic novels are now embraced as important tools for reading and learning for reader-viewers of all ages (Connors, 2012; Pantaleo, 2011; Warberg, 2018). However, many author-artists of comics still have an inferiority complex against what traditionally has been conceived as ‘true art’ and thus frequently thematize the relationship between comics and other forms of art, making many graphic novels self-reflective (Del Rey Cabero, 2023).

Some of the reasons why graphic novels have become increasingly popular all over the world may be that they often attract great author-illustrators, contain sophisticated themes, are usually shorter in length than ordinary prose and can be read in one, concentrated sitting (Tabachnick, 2017, p. 2). The latter reason is prominent as students have “profoundly altered reading patterns” (Tabachnick, 2017, p. 2) and sometimes find it challenging to read longer prose. Furthermore, graphic novels, and especially autobiographical ones, are viewed as comprising a particular pedagogical potential for their readers as they optimize reader engagement (Nikolajeva, 2014) and teach “reader-viewers how they ought to be read” (Chaney, 2017, p. 297). The latter is achieved by making the reader-viewers aware of how comics are produced. Through the interaction of verbal and visual elements in graphic novels, they are regarded as well-suited learning material for the visual generation of today, as, for them, “visual experiences carry capital, hence an aesthetic experience” (Barbre et al., 2022).

Even though young people today belong to a visual generation, their visual literacy, here viewed as students’ competence in reading and interpreting images (Watts, 2023), is often not as developed as we tend to think (Connors, 2012). Their knowledge about iconotexts (Nikolajeva, 2014) that interlace “word and image to tell a story” (Connors, 2012, p.72), cannot be taken for granted. Graphic novels often contain advanced literary and visual structures and are “characterized by a unique form of meaning-making and aesthetics that require a complex text and reading competence” (Warberg, 2018, p. 12, my translation). These forms of aesthetic and

literary structures in graphic novels are important to make the students conscious of, as visual literacy additionally can promote critical thinking skills (Pantaleo, 2011; Thompson, 2019). Still, within teacher education programmes, graphic literature is often only incorporated in courses for teacher students that will teach in primary schools (Connors, 2012). Picturebooks for the youngest children are of course important sources for the development of empathy and visual literacy (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Pantaleo & Sipe, 2012), but metafictional graphic novels may also be used for the same purpose for older, secondary school students (Connors, 2012; Nikolajeva, 2014; Pantaleo, 2011). Regardless of age, empathy is a vital skill both in school and in society in general (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

This suggests that graphic novels and the development of empathy in secondary students should receive more attention and that there is a need for more research on the genre of graphic novels for this target group in teacher education (Connors, 2012). In the following, I will therefore examine the pedagogic potential of metacomics as a means of enhancing empathy in upper secondary school students, pursuing the following research question: How can Adrian Tomine's *The loneliness of the long-distance cartoonist* promote empathy and literary awareness for students at the upper secondary school level?

### The new national curriculum (LK20) in Norway

Empathy and literary awareness are both important elements in the new national curriculum in Norway (LK20). LK20 contains a Core curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, [hereafter KD] 2017), which includes main principles and values of education, and new subject curricula in all subjects for years 1-13 (KD, 2019). Both the Core curriculum and the new subject curriculum in English state that the students shall, through literary texts, work on new ways of interpreting and comprehending “different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns”, and also gain an understanding of the fact “that [individuals’] views of the world are culture-dependent” (KD, 2019). Additionally, in the interdisciplinary, across-subject topic called *Health and life skills*, it is stated that learning English “forms the basis for being able to express [the students’] feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions and can provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns [...]” (KD, 2019). This shows the importance of being able to both understand and express one’s own and others’ views and

feelings. Furthermore, one of the core elements in the English subject curriculum is called *Working with texts in English*. Here, the concept of *text* is defined in a wide sense, involving texts that are spoken and written, printed and digital, and graphic and artistic (KD, 2019). In this core element, it is stated that “Working with texts in English helps to develop the students’ knowledge and experience of linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as their insight into ways of living, ways of thinking and traditions of indigenous peoples” (KD, 2019). This core element thus incorporates an emphasis on how literature may aid in the development of understanding and empathy for other people’s ways of living and thinking, which also involves decentering from one’s own views and traditions to those of other people. Decentering is something that furthermore may be related to intercultural competence and cultural empathy (Dypedahl & Bøhn, 2020), which I will return to below in the Theory section.

Beyond the curricular aspects mentioned above, two important competence aims from the core element of *Working with texts in English* after the first year at the upper secondary level in the programme for general studies are “to read, analyse and interpret fictional texts in English”, and “to discuss and reflect on form, content and language features and literary devices in different cultural forms of expression from different media in the English-language world [...]” (KD, 2019). Both of these require a *literary awareness* or knowledge of how literary texts and iconotexts may be read, composed and interpreted.

There exists a plethora of definitions of graphic novels, but for the purpose of this study, the graphic novel is understood as “a self-contained narrative, published as a single volume” (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 11). Autobiographical graphic novels may be used synonymously with metacomics (Cook, 2017) as it alludes to the self-reflectiveness in comics. This self-reflectiveness is distinctly applicable to Adrian Tomine’s *The loneliness of the long-distance cartoonist* (2020), as it is a graphic Künstlerroman, which “explores the life and trajectory of an artist” (Del Ray Cabero, 2023, p. 5) and illustrates and narrates Adrian Tomine’s professional trajectory. Moreover, one can ask if the term “graphic novel” is at all applicable to autobiographical comics, as Chaney does when he states that such texts thematizing the authors’ own lives are in many respects “not technically novels at all” (Chaney, 2011a, p. 5). However, due to the extensive use of the term in the field both in Norway and elsewhere, I will

in this article still utilize the term “graphic novel” and employ “metacomic” as a synonym. In line with McCloud (1993/2016), I recognize that comics terminology may be problematic and difficult to pin down, but I also find that these terminological aspects, as well as the blurred lines between reality and fiction, may be an excellent pedagogic starting point for literary discussions with students. How to use questions regarding what constitutes ‘fictional’ and ‘factual’ texts in classrooms is something I will return to in the Analysis and discussion section.

### Foci and structure of the article

In pursuing the research question, I will first outline the theoretical framework of cognitive criticism (Kukkonen, 2013; Nikolajeva, 2014), metafiction (Waugh, 1984) and metacomics (Cook, 2017; Kukkonen, 2013). Next, I will analyze how Tomine’s novel, through metafictional and metacomic aspects may promote empathy and literary awareness in the upper secondary school classroom, and finally, I will conclude with potential educational implications. Before I do this, however, I will provide some background on the author-illustrator Adrian Tomine and explain the rationale behind using a graphic novel from the field of alternative comics.

### Adrian Tomine and alternative comics

Adrian Tomine is a Japanese-American graphic novelist, who is a critically acclaimed *New York Times*-illustrator and who has written several graphic novels, most notably *Shortcomings* (2007), *Killing and Dying* (2015) and *The loneliness of the long-distance cartoonist* (2020). The title of the latter alludes to Alan Sillitoe’s short story collection *The loneliness of the long-distance runner* (1959). Sillitoe originally utilized *running* as a metaphor for an escape from, and a metareflection on, society, whereas in Tomine’s graphic novel, *running* is substituted with *drawing*, which similarly enables the author-illustrator to escape from, and reflect metafictionally on, the world in general and the comics world in particular.

### Alternative comics

Tomine belongs to the field of alternative comics (Batens & Frey, 2015; Schneider, 2012), a field which started in the 1950’s and 60’s, and which incorporates the works of famous illustrators such as Daniel Clowes, Charles Burns and Art Spiegelman (Singsen, 2014, p. 71).

Writers within alternative comics are typically described by “the supposed absence of superheroes and other mainstream genres” and “genre-splicing” (Singsen, 2014, p. 71). The rejection of the superhero-theme is also evident in that he instead uses an anti-hero (that is himself) as the protagonist, a middle-aged, narcissistic cartoonist, who is often too self-conscious and insecure, and who has made it in the world of comics against all odds. Genre-splicing is a device Tomine utilizes and may be described as “the combination of two or more genres in a way that fragments the fictional reality of the work or violates the norms of the genres employed” (Singsen, 2014, p. 71). Tomine displays a playfulness towards genres and fuses diverse formats such as visual diaries, graphic novels and manga in his works. Manga is the Japanese word for comics and has attracted a large readership worldwide. Tomine successfully embraces both the Japanese and the Western or American cultures and formats, as he blends them together by using black and white drawings in a typical manga-format; three tiers with two panels in each on every page, and fuses this with an all-American theme; a protagonist working his way up from rags to riches. The protagonist is course himself, who has gone from being a lonely victim of school bullying to becoming a successful and famous cartoonist described by reviewers as “The best realist comic today” (p. 15). However, he is distinctly an anti-hero, as Tomine frequently depicts himself in a less-sympathetic, humouristically and brutally honest way, and when describing what it is like to be a well-known graphic novelist, he quotes his peer Daniel Clowe who says: “That’s like being the most famous badminton player” (Tomine, 2020, n.p.).

Alternative comics writers all problematize the relationship between the visual and the verbal and explore “types and levels of narrators, introducing not just irony, but also unreliable storytelling, multiple storytelling, and self-reflectivity” (Baetens & Frey, 2015, p. 149). Aspects of self-reflectivity in these novels may take many forms, such as using a graphic diary form (Cardell, 2014), demystification where one reveals how literature is produced, and through intertextuality, where a literary text interacts with another literary text (Cook, 2017; Genette, 1997). Tomine utilizes all of these devices in his graphic novel *The loneliness of the long-distance cartoonist* (2020), and it may therefore be an excellent example of a metacomic that



shows the mechanics behind literary writing and which metafictionally poses “questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, 1984, p. 2).

This graphic novel is also a *Künstlerroman* which follows the protagonist, through trajectories from his early schooldays as a bullied cartoon-nerd, to his breakthrough as an artist, but also through the ups and downs in his private and professional life as a 44-year-old husband and father of two. Tomine excels when he describes the discrepancy between his desperation for belonging to a (comics) community on the one side, and his longing for being unique and outstanding on the other. This discrepancy, in addition to a sense of failure, alienation, shame and insecurity, are all themes that are highly relevant and recognizable for adolescents.

### The influence of film

In addition to manga, Tomine is also heavily influenced by another visual medium, namely film, and particularly by the famous Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu, who is known for his elegant, simplistic depictions of Japanese families and ordinary people, which also mirrors Tomine’s drawing style and motifs. Like Alfred Hitchcock and Quentin Tarantino, Tomine frequently inserts himself as a character in his works, either as a minor character, or as in this novel, the main character. This technique may serve to explore the sometimes blurred relationship between fiction and reality (Waugh, 1984), and therefore metafiction is an omnipresent aspect both in Tomine’s works and in several of the other author-illustrators’ works within alternative comics.

### Theory

Comics have been used for centuries to create engagement and identification in their readers (McCloud, 1993/2016, p. 212), and scholars have frequently pondered upon why readers often have empathy with, and care about, the literary characters that they read about (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Zunshine, 2006/2012). In her seminal book on cognitive criticism, Nikolajeva (2014) discusses how and why readers become so cognitively and affectively engaged by the works they are reading. Nikolajeva defines cognitive criticism as “a cross-disciplinary approach to reading, literacy and literature” which interrogates “the ways literary texts are constructed to maximise, or perhaps rather optimize reader engagement” (2014, p. 4).



In other words, this literary theory not only focus on the readers, but also on the literary construction and the referentiality, or “the relationship between representation and its referent in the perceptible world” (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 4). I will return to this below under the subsection *Metafiction*.

Cognitive critics have also been preoccupied with the question as to why readers often care about literary characters and why the readers often empathize with them (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Zunshine, 2006/2012). One explanation for this phenomenon is mirror neurons, a concept borrowed from neuroscience, which shows that the brain actually reacts to fictional characters as if they were real persons and can thus better the readers’ comprehension of the real world through reading fiction (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Nikolajeva, 2014). This requires mind-reading skills from its readers, described as “an ability to explain people’s behaviour in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires” (Zunshine, 2006/2012, n.p.). In cognitive criticism, the foci therefore are on the cognitive and emotional engagement readers experience when they encounter fictional characters (Kukkonen, 2013; Nikolajeva, 2014; Zunshine, 2006). Kukkonen argues that:

When considering fictional minds in comics, for example, I take into account the role of facial expressions and gestures in embodied social cognition and what is known as “theory of mind”, that is, our capacity to project another’s state of mind from their looks and demeanor, rather than define normalized verbal and visual signs of “fear” or “happiness”. The clues and gaps in comics prompt our minds to run the schemata of our genre knowledge, to immerse ourselves in storyworlds, or to empathize with characters.” (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 7).

Here, Kukkonen argues that cognitive criticism can aid an understanding of how readers understand and relate to metacomics, and that reader-viewers have their theory of mind activated when trying to interpret what the characters in metacomics feel, experience or think about. Like Nikolajeva (2012) and Zunshine (2006/2012), Kukkonen points to the potential of developing empathy in its reader-viewers. Similarly, Nikolajeva (2012) maintains that:

Fiction creates situations in which emotions are simulated; we engage with literary characters’ emotions because our brain can, through mirror neurons, simulate other people’s goals in the same manner as it can simulate our own goals.[...] [I]n reading fiction we engage with possible outcomes of the fictive situations, including the final desired outcome of the whole story. Cognitive criticism purports that the reason we can engage with fictive characters is because of

the connections between the mediated experience of the text and emotional memories stored in the brain (Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 276).

Nikolajeva here claims that due to our previous emotional and social experience, we as readers and reader-viewers, therefore easily can ‘mirror’ or transfer this experience and these emotions to what the fictional characters are going through.

Several literary scholars have therefore argued that reading fiction, such as graphic novels and picturebooks may aid both the development of empathy (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kølert, 2019; Nikolajeva, 2014) and critical reading skills (Pantaleo & Sipe, 2012). As touched upon above, empathy is also a vital aspect within the field of intercultural communication and can be understood as “trying to understand the world from another person’s perspective” (Dypedahl & Bøhn, 2020, p. 87). These aspects of shifting perspectives and developing empathy for other people’s opinions, ways of living and ways of thinking, are prominent themes in the new curriculum in English, mentioned earlier (KD 2019). The development of empathy, or understanding others’ points of view and feelings, is of course an important prerequisite for human relations, as Kidd & Castano (2013) also advocate: “Understanding others’ mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies” (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 1).

## Metafiction

Classical and metafictional works by Homer, Shakespeare and Cervantes have represented a playful parallel to the more realistic tradition in literature (Inge, 1991), and metafiction has commonly been used as a hypernym for all literature that comments on its own fictionality and is self-reflective (Myklevold, 2017). Metafiction may also be characterized more specifically as literature which “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, 1984, p. 2).

These works of literature usually draw attention to themselves as products of artifice and abandon the notion of realism by making self-reflective remarks about the production and writing of fiction. Metafictional works can also utilize instances of metalepsis, involving a

transgression of the boundaries between “the world of the narrator and the world that he or she describes” (Möllendorf, 2018, p. 1). In line with this, Nikolajeva aptly asks: “If a creator can enter his own created world – is it the world or the creator who is fictitious?” (Nikolajeva, 1996/2016, p. 189). Autobiographical graphic novels often pose these questions through various other means of metafictional devices as well, such as intertextual references to other works, self-reflexive comments on the construction of literature, or the *mis-en-abyme*, often described as a reflection of a reflection (Chaney, 2011b, p. 22), or as a reduplication of images, which shows the textual whole (Möllendorf, 2018, p. 2).

Nikolajeva argues that metafiction is both “daring and disturbing, but It simultaneously takes the most radical step away from convention and didacticism” (Nikolajeva, 1996/2016, p. 206), which may make such literature both exciting and fitting to use in classrooms with adolescents, who often oppose both tradition and didactic approaches or ‘being told what to think’. Therefore, graphic novels, in particular autobiographical ones such as Tomine’s, is often viewed as a genre comprising a particular pedagogical potential for their readers:

No kind of literary text, to my mind, is as metareflective about its own possible value as reading material than graphic novels, and none more reflexive about their own construction as autobiographical graphic novels [...] What I have noticed over the course of some dozen years teaching these autobiographies is how manifestly pedagogical they already are. Indeed, self-reflexivity in autobiographical comic books manifests as lessons. Authors express themselves as *themselves* not just by talking about themselves or even by depicting themselves in exaggerated ways but by teaching reader-viewers how they ought to be read (Chaney, 2017, p. 297).

Chaney here argues that metacomics have a considerable pedagogic potential in that they draw attention to how literary texts are written, drawn, narrated or produced, and thus make the reader-viewers aware of the mechanics behind the genre of metacomics and how they could be read or interpreted. Furthermore, autobiographical comics may be viewed as potentially pedagogic in that they are “especially intimate and therefore highly capable of engendering empathy” in their readers (Køhlert, 2019, p. 19). Through ‘opening up’ of perceived and ‘real’ experiences, the author-illustrators manage to establish rapport with their reader-viewers and make them develop empathy. This development of empathy, and intrinsically the ability to shift perspectives, are important aspects that graphic novels can teach us. In other words, they may

show us “how to see the world in new and different ways” (Køhlert, 2019, p. 19). As mentioned in the introduction, both these aspects, empathy and shifting perspectives, are important aspects in the new subject curriculum of English (KD, 2019) and thus beneficial to focus on when selecting and working with English texts in the upper secondary school classroom.

## Metacomics

Metafictitive devices are perhaps particularly pertinent for the field of comics, which has from the very outset utilized aspects of metafiction. As Inge (1991) argues, “almost from the very start in the comic strip, the cartoonists have practiced self-referentiality and let us know that what they are presenting to us is an artifice and not to be taken as a construct representing reality” (Inge, 1991, p. 2).

Cook labels this self-reflectiveness in comics as “metacomics” and describes the phenomenon in the following way: “[a] metacomical (or reflexive, self-referential, self-conscious, self-aware, or narcissistic comic) is an instance of the more general category of metafiction” (Cook, 2017, p. 257). Cook, building on Jones (2005) and Cook (2012b), makes a list of categories to describe comic metafiction, involving *authorial awareness* (which inserts the author), *demystification* (which reveals the production mechanisms), *reader awareness* (which focuses on the reader/Verfremdungseffekt), *intertextuality* (which builds on and refers to other literary works) and *intermedia reflexivity* (which adds another medium, like e.g. photography) (Cook, 2017, p. 257). However, Cook underlines that these categories should not be seen as exhaustive or mutually exclusive, but as categories that interlace.

As we shall return to in the Analysis and discussion section below, Tomine may also be seen to fulfil several of the other categories that Cook argues define metacomics; *a narrative metacomical* (where the plot involves the production of comics, or other aspects of the subculture of comics), *a self-aware comic* (whose protagonist is self-aware that he is the character in the comic), *an intertextual comic* (whose content interacts with another text), and *an authorial metacomical* (whose plot involves the appearance of the writer, artist, or other creator as a character) (Cook, 2017, p. 257).

## Analysis and discussion

When applying closereading to Tomine's graphic novel *The loneliness of the long-distance cartoonist*, it may be seen to interact with *all* of Cook's (2017) elements mentioned above. The insertion of himself as a character in his graphic novels may be seen to emphasize an authorial awareness and additionally as employing a demystification process in that he depicts many of the production processes behind the comics industry (Cook, 2017, p. 257). By thematizing his own struggles as a cartoonist and the feedback from his cartoon colleagues, the text is furthermore a narrative metacomic and an authorial metacomic, which places the production of comics and the nature of the comics community in its centre. Through relating distinctly to Alan Sillitoe's source text in the title and through depicting feelings of alienation for the protagonist, it is also a highly intertextual comic. Whether the protagonist is self-aware, is arguably not so distinct, as he does not make any explicit references to this. However, as the categories are fluid and sometimes interrelate, it may be claimed that just by being the protagonist and discussing the mechanics and (sometimes lack of) motivation behind producing comics, Tomine as a character provides us with both self-distance and self-awareness. What points to his artistic self-recognition is the description of his rise to fame, including the quotes from his own reviews as "The best realist comic today" (Tomine, 2020, p. 15).

## Literary awareness

The metafictional plot depicts Tomine from a 6-year-old child in school to a 44 year-old author-artist. It is told chronologically and written in a graphic diary form (Cardell, 2014), each entry starting with naming the place and year, for example "Fresno, 1982". This naming of locations and years makes the graphic novel more authentic and 'real' for its reader-viewers (Cardell, 2014). However, as the author-illustrator ends the book with the narrator Tomine starting drawing and writing the book we have just read, it blurs the relationship between fact and fiction even further. As Nikolajeva points out, "[o]ne way to call into question the narrative and its truthfulness is to let the protagonist at the end of the book start (or contemplate) writing precisely the book we have just read" (Nikolajeva 1996/2016, p. 193). The narration of this book is therefore a great example of how to challenge the students in a metafictional and cognitive way, thus making them more literary aware. This may also strengthen the critical

literacy of its readers (Pantaleo, 2011) and is an excellent way of initiating literary discussions with older students concerning the construction and complexity of literary texts. This end scene is a kind of an ‘epilogue’ and therefore a paratextual element, and similarly the book starts with a ‘prologue’, although Tomine does not label it as either a prologue or epilogue. However, the opening sequence *is* a paratextual element occurring *before* the title page, which displays its title, author, publisher, and edition. This ‘prologue’ is thus not part of the main plot, but nonetheless sets the scene for the narration of Tomine’s many challenges in life. To discuss why the text is structured this way, what parts of the text are considered the ‘core’ text, and what impact this has on the readers, is also a good starting point for encouraging literary awareness in the students.

To describe Adrian as a small boy, the graphic novel commences with the diary entry “Fresno, 1982”, where we are introduced to his early school days, and where we understand that Adrian is very passionate about the cartoon business from a very early age, but that he is also alienated and taunted in school. Adrian finds it difficult to make friends; he is misunderstood and feels different from the others:



Figure 1. From *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist*. Copyright Adrian Tomine. Used with permission from *Drawn & Quarterly*.

Little Adrian lacks friends, but even though it seems like he does get a friend towards the end of this sequence, he discovers it was only the teacher Ms. Hanson who had ordered a classmate to go and sit with him in the canteen (p. 10). Due to all this, Adrian detests Fresno from the very beginning. These instances of shame, alienation and loneliness are repeatedly shown throughout the graphic novel with a heart-wrenching honesty, and seem like apt incidents to use with students in class, as alienation and loneliness are something many can relate to and identify with. Readers often can project other people's state of mind from their looks or actions (Kukkonen, 2013), and this scene with little Adrian being laughed at and bullied at school may make them empathize with fictional characters (Nikolajeva, 2014).



## Empathy

The format of metacomics combined with graphic diary is perfect for instilling empathy in its readers, as “contemporary diaries make visible the intimate and the personal” (Cardell, 2014, p. 3). In other words, graphic diaries are a fitting format for conveying feelings in subjective experiences as they “are often concerned with describing brief sensory impressions or preserving the emotional charge of a single moment” (Cates, 2011, p. 220). This also makes it a fruitful format to use with young adults in language classrooms, as this may promote chances of experiencing and expressing empathy with others.

The main plot after the ‘prologue’ starts with the diary entry “San Diego, 1995”. It incorporates a distinct contrast to the bullying in Fresno, as Tomine, feeling self-assured, is on his way to a comics convention. He thinks to himself: “Well, I showed them! I said I was going to be a famous cartoonist when I grew up, and now...here I am!” (Tomine, 2020, p. 15). This self-confidence is, however, rapidly shattered, as he enters the comics convention and is immediately accused by two of his colleagues for “turning into a Dan Clowe imitator”<sup>1</sup> (p. 20), and for becoming too commercial and letting another colleague down through signing with the most famous publishing house for comics called *Drawn and Quarterly* (p. 21). These references to authentic cartoonists and publishing houses in the comics industry, underline the fact that the text is a narrative metacomic (Cook, 2017), simultaneously building up a sense of reality and disturbing it, as we as readers may start to wonder what is fiction here, and what is reality. In the classroom, we can therefore have many literary discussions with students, asking “What counts as a novel?”, “If there are several references to the lives of the author-illustrators, are they still fictional?”, and “May a graphic diary referring to ‘real events’ be seen as a work of fact or fiction, or something in-between?”. Chaney’s argument that since metacomics often include referential claims to the author’s lives, they “are not technically novels at all” (Chaney, 2011a, p. 5) may be discussed in class, and can strengthen critical thinking and comprehension skills in students (Pantaleo, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Clowes is one of the most famous author-illustrators within the field of alternative comics.

Other apt themes in Tomine's text for upper secondary school students on the verge of adulthood, are conflicting emotions and identity struggles. Such themes are thematized at length in Tomine's text, through grappling with what it means being a popular, professional cartoonist, and through the ambivalence of wanting to be alone and having an urge to belong to a group. For example, at a book signing, people are queuing up to get Tomine's autograph and all he thinks is: "God, I just want to be alone". This is immediately contrasted in the next frame where he lies in solitude in a hotel bed and thinks to himself "God, I'm lonely." (p. 54). This sense of loneliness is also prominent in the first part of the graphic novel, with failed human encounters and dating attempts that are humoristically depicted. This makes it an apt graphic novel to work on with upper secondary school students, as it mirrors their fear of failure and rejection, simultaneously with their dreams of recognition and belonging.

This omnipresent sense of insecurity that the narrator displays may therefore instill empathy in the readers, as it is often easy to identify with for adolescents. In the scene where the narrator Tomine does a radio interview in the famous Carnegie Hall on the show *Fresh Air*, this sense of insecurity is particularly present, as a critical alter ego is drawn hovering over him, pressurizing him with thoughts about how millions of people are listening, including other famous people and cartoonists, and how the radio show "is like the holy grail of promoting a book" (p. 83).

### Cultural empathy

In the above-mentioned, highly profiled radio show, the narrator also receives difficult questions from the radio hostess, among these a question about "[I]f the way you draw the glasses is an attempt to avoid ethnic identity" (p. 85), which refers to the fact that Tomine does not reveal the eye form behind his glasses when he draws himself. In order for the students to practice decentering, or "the ability to change perspectives" (Dypedahl & Bøhn, 2020, p. 89), both empathy and cultural empathy are important, and this may be thematized through asking the students possible reasons for Tomine's way of drawing eye shapes, or through imagining how he feels when his surname is constantly mispronounced, for example either "Toe-Meen" (p. 67) or "Toe-Mih-Nay" (p. 68). Tomine tries to correct the latter with "Actually, it's...", but no one bothers to listen to his answer. This ignorance and insensitivity is also grappled with

through other, offensive, racial remarks present in the graphic novel, explicitly when the narrator's delusional stalker calls him "derivative overrated Chinese" (p. 59), and implicitly when Tomine is given a table at a book-signing under a film poster that reads "That yellow bastard" (p. 34). To realize how destructive such comments and instances are for Tomine and for other people with a cultural background, is an important aspect to work on in class, also in terms of the competence aims embedded in LK20, where empathy and shifting perspectives are important foci (KD, 2019). Thus, this graphic novel may create cultural understanding and empathy in readers as it can show the students "how to see the world in new and different ways" (Køhlert, 2019, p. 19).

Most prominently, empathy may be fostered through the scene in the book when the narrator suspects he is having a mild heart attack and has to go to the emergency room (ER). Notably, Tomine shows the importance of this incident by breaking with his regular drawing pattern and singling this scene out graphically through illustrating it on a splash page (p. 144). The splash page often has the effect that it expands the moment (Warhaug, 2018), and at the ER, when he thinks he's going to die, he writes a heartfelt and moving letter to his daughters Nora and May:



Figure 2. From *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist*. Copyright Adrian Tomine. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

Dear Nora and May [...]. By just being yourselves, you let me feel more genuine, unbridled joy than I did in my whole childhood, and you taught me a lot about being less selfish and more open-hearted, and just trying to be a decent person in the world. You forced me to do things I didn't think I was capable of (and I'm not just talking about sitting through "The Greatest Showman"). You did it over and over, every day, and it saved me from a very different life. I'm feeling a little scared and sad right now, but the main thing I'm feeling is: What a privilege it was to play with you, to hold hands and talk with you, to be given the totally undeserved responsibility of caring for you. [...] I wish I could say it a million times now: I'm proud of you, I like who you are, and I love you more than you could ever know. XO, Dad (p. 144).

This is a crucial scene in the book as it forces the narrator to think about the essential things in his existence, and truly shows his genuine love and appreciation for them. It is an excellent example of how both empathy (a father saying goodbye to his daughters) and literary awareness

(a writer-illustrator writing and illustrating a goodbye-letter) can be focused on in the classroom. Although the narrator quickly regrets writing the letter and quickly rips it up to avoid his daughters hearing a “creepy, sentimental voice from the grave” (p. 145), the fact that he thinks he is going to die encourages many existential thoughts about life and death, fate and God’s existence. The graphic diary is therefore a perfect format to convey personal and intimate feelings such as this (Cardell, 2014), which may also create empathy in the classroom. By his frequent use of humour and self-ironic comments, the narrator’s existentialist thoughts are additionally lightened up and not becoming too gloomy, which may make Tomine’s text even more apt to use in the classroom.

After the narrator finds out that he had ‘only’ been having an anxiety attack due to a bad diet and too much stress, he runs home at 4:15 AM and is met with a moving *drawing* from his children on the frontdoor: “Welcome home, Dad” (p. 153). This is a proper drawing by Tomine’s daughters from real-life, something which is noted by Tomine in the paratext before the ‘epilogue’ and described as “Inset drawing on page 153 by Nora and May Tomine”. This use of another medium such as a drawing is an instance of the use of intermedia reflexivity (Cook, 2017, p. 257), which again contributes to blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, as well as heightening the authenticity of comics by using artefacts from real life.

At the end of the novel, the narrator states to his wife that he has had an epiphany now, and that his life, as the nurse in the ER said “is about to change” (p. 159). Although the nurse was referring to his diet and exercise routines that needed to be changed and improved, the narrator also communicates important insight into the ratio of time distributed between his private and his professional life. This health scare has shown to him that it is the family that is the most important to him, and that he has been overly obsessed with – and hiding behind – his drawing business (p. 158). He also realizes that he has been detaching himself from society and become too sensitive towards critique in his professional life, due to this imbalance in his work and private life.

Even so, in the concluding, paratextual epilogue of the book, the narrator can’t sleep, gets up, chuckles, sits down at the drawing table, and starts drawing and writing exactly the same book

as we have just read, beginning with “Fresno, 1976”. His passion for drawing is still evident, and he uses his own experiences in life, both good and bad, as inspiration for his artform. Through the cyclical movement of tying the end together with the beginning of the book, Tomine is creating a metafictional resolution where he distinctly refers to the outside world of comics. This may make the readers and students contemplate further on “the relationship between representation and its referent in the perceptible world” (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 4).

The relationship between the imagined and the real world is omnipresent in the graphic novel, as the narrator even reads his own reviews from actual real-life cartoon critics, for example when he asks colleague Daniel Clowes for a blurb on his new book and Clowes states that Tomine is “the boy-wonder of mini-comics” (p.16). The very ending of this graphic novel is a superb example of this, represented by a mis-en-abyme, or a picture within a picture, as he draws the exact same picture that is on the cover page of the book we have just read.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the numerous metafictional comments and graphic techniques of Tomine’s metacomic make them a playful, authentic and moving format with a high pedagogical potential. The pedagogic potential lies in making upper secondary school students experience empathy and comprehension for others’ thoughts and ways of living, and in understanding that their own worldviews are culture-dependent (KD, 2019). Tomine’s metafictional, self-referential comments, combined with the iconotexts’ ability to convey emotional charge of crucial incidents in life (Cates, 2011), provide excellent opportunities for thematizing both literary awareness and empathy in contemporary classrooms.

Educational implications from the study indicate that metacomics should be incorporated on a larger scale in schools and teacher education, not just with children in primary school, but for the secondary school level as well (Connors, 2012). This also requires that we as educators provide the students with a more complex understanding of how iconotexts are constructed, what they consist of, and may be interpreted as (Warberg, 2018). This is important in order to promote students’ critical and digital literacy (Pantaleo, 2011), to maximise engagement for student readers (Nikolajeva, 2014) and to develop empathy and literary awareness (KD, 2019).

However, more empirical studies regarding the use and effectiveness of graphic novels in classrooms at the upper secondary school level are needed in the future.

## Forfatteromtale

Gro-Anita Myklevold er førsteamanuensis i engelsk ved Universitetet i Sørøst-Norge (USN). Hun har doktorgrad i flerspråklighet, og har publisert flere artikler innenfor dette temaet i relasjon til læreplanverket LK20 og språkopplæring i engelsk-, norsk- og fremmedspråksklasserommet. I tillegg har hun publisert artikler innenfor emner som metakognisjon, metafiksjon, identitet i barnelitteratur og litteraturdidaktikk. Hun har også vært medredaktør på tre fagbøker i språkdidaktikk.

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