Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans

By Don Brown

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina's monstrous winds and surging water overwhelmed the protective levees around low-lying New Orleans, Louisiana. Eighty percent of the city flooded, in some places under twenty feet of water. Property damages across the Gulf Coast topped $100 billion. One thousand eight hundred and thirty-three people lost their lives. The riveting tale of this historic storm and the drowning of an American city is one of selflessness, heroism, and courage—and also of incompetence, racism, and criminality.

Don Brown's kinetic art and as-it-happens narrative capture both the tragedy and triumph of one of the worst natural disasters in American history. A portion of the proceeds from this book has been donated to Habitat for Humanity New Orleans. Drowned City was commended in 2016 by Great Graphic Novels for Teens, a 2016 Robert F. Silbert Informational Book Award winner, and a 2016 Orbis Pictus Award winner.

Drowned City is a graphic novel, which is a different type of literature. Graphic novels are books written and illustrated in the style of a comic book. To be considered a graphic novel, rather than a picture book or illustrated novel, the story is told using a combination of words and pictures in a sequence across the page. This basic way of storytelling has been used in various forms for centuries - early cave drawings, hieroglyphics, and medieval tapestries like the famous Bayeux Tapestry can be thought of as stories told in pictures. Graphic novels contain all of the same literary themes used in classic literature.

The following describe the elements of a graphic novel. While you are reading Drowned City, consider these elements (from A Guide to Using Graphic Novels):

Panels and gutters
Consider the size and shape of panels. How do they fit together? Do they interrupt or overlap with each other? Are there any images without any panel borders at all? The spaces in between the panels -
the gutters - indicate a change: how is time passing, in where you are, or in whom you're looking at or talking to. What do the gutters add to how you understand the story?

Descriptions and word balloons

Think about how the dialogue appears. Are the words different colors? Written with thicker or thinner lines? How would that sound? How about the silence when no one is speaking? Is there any narration or description (words in boxes, but not spoken)? How is that important to how the story unfolds?

Sound effects and motion lines

Sounds set the scene, signal something off scene, and add another layer to each story. Motion lines indicate how characters or objects are moving. What sounds do you see? How are each of the sounds written - does the way it's written reflect what it actually sounds like? What gestures do you see?
Art
Every creator has their own style. Is the art realistic? Cartoony?
What can you tell from the expressions on faces? The gestures and
movement of characters? The background and its details? If there is
color, how does that change over the course of a page? Each chapter?

Summer Reading Assignment
As part of your summer reading assignment, you will keep a response journal as you read. This journal
will be collected by your English teacher and assessed when you return to school. The following
questions are required, and you must answer it in your response journal. Throughout your reading you
will find multiple moments of conflict. There are four primary conflicts:

- person v. person
- person v. self
- person v. nature
- person v. society

In your response journal you should identify and explain which type of conflict is being illustrated in
the text. You are strongly encouraged to complete multiple response journal entries for each of the
four types of conflict. At minimum you should have ten entries in your response journal and at least
one entry for each of the four conflicts.

REQUIRED Questions and Response Journal topics
1. Did you appreciate the visual aspects of this book? Do you think the format of a graphic novel is
more or less effective for non-fiction than for fiction?
2. During and after an emergency, local, state and federal responders have a role to play to keep
people safe and help rebuild communities. Responding to Hurricane Katrina, there were a lot of
missed opportunities. What lessons can be learned from Hurricane Katrina for responders?
3. Drowned City tells the story of Hurricane Katrina through various events that affect the entire
city of New Orleans. How did the author's decision to focus on events instead of personal
experiences influence how you felt about the story he was telling? Would telling personal stories
have had a greater impact? Why or why not?
4. People remember seeing the images and news stories about Hurricane Katrina as it happened.
What was your impression of the events before reading Drowned City? Did that perspective
change after reading the book? Why or why not?
5. Some people in New Orleans couldn’t or wouldn’t evacuate. Would that be an issue for people in your community if an evacuation order was given? Explain your answer. What can individuals and communities do to help people prepare for emergencies?

6. During and after Hurricane Katrina, we see survivors portrayed in the news as helpless victims or non-compliant, aggressive looters. Did Drowned City change your perspective of survivors’ actions? If so, how? If not, why not?

7. Graphic novels use both words and images. Pick a page or sequence from Drowned City and think through what you learn from just words. Then think about what you learn from just the images. Are they telling you the same information, or are they giving you different information? How do they work together?

8. Expressions and gestures are important to how we understand characters. Find an example in Drowned City of a particular expression or movement that you think shows a significant character trait. Explain your thinking.

9. Literary devices frequently featured in graphic novels include point of view, flashbacks, foreshadowing and metaphor. Find an example of two of the literary devices listed below in the graphic novel Drowned City, and explain why you believe they are examples of said literary devices.
   a. **Point of View** is the angle of considering things, which shows us the opinion or feelings of the individuals involved in a situation. In literature, point of view is the mode of narration that an author uses to let the reader “hear” and “see” what takes place in the story.
   b. **Flashbacks** are interruptions that writers do to insert past events, in order to provide background or context to the current events of a story.
   c. **Foreshadowing** is a literary device in which a writer gives an advance hint of what is to come later in the story. Foreshadowing often appears at the beginning of a story or chapter, and helps the reader develop expectations about coming events in a story.
   d. **Metaphor** is a figure of speech that makes an understood, suggested, or hidden comparison between 2 things that are unrelated, but which shares some common characteristics.

10. In graphic novels, details are in the images in the background, character design, clothing and objects. Take a look at Drowned City and see if you can find 5 details in the way a person or object is drawn. What does each detail tell you about the character? The place? The world?
RESPONSE JOURNAL GUIDE

What is a response journal?

A response journal is simply a place for you to write down any reactions you’re having to a text. Reactions can encompass a lot of things: strong emotions, confusion, frustration, insights into your life and the world around you, etc.

This is a forum for you to express yourself. To have your opinion. To wrestle with ideas. Be yourself, express yourself.

What should I write in a response journal?

Response journals should not be a summary. In other words, merely writing down what’s happening in a story isn’t responding to it. Response takes more than that. It takes independent thought and reaction about what you’re reading.

Here are some questions to consider while reading a text:

Why is the author showing me this? What’s his point? What does he or she want me to learn by reading this?

How is this scene/character important to the novel? How would the story change without it?

What’s my opinion about a character and his or her actions in a story? What does a character’s thoughts and actions reveal about them? Why is the author showing me this?

How do I feel right now about what’s happening? What’s making me feel like this?

What is important in the story? Why?

Is the setting important? Why? What does it show?

How does the novel relate to me and my life? Is the novel showing me things that can be compared or contrasted to the world I live in? How? Why would the author do this?

What do I find to be most important about this book? Why? Explain.

What is confusing to me? Why? Try to answer the question yourself.

What is difficult for me? Why? Answer the question.

Write down any passages from the book you find important and explain why you wrote it down and why it’s important.

Are there any lines or passages that strike you as important? Why?

When should I write?

There are no set rules here. Write when you want to say something. Write when you have a strong reaction to something in the text. Or write when you reach a natural break in the book, such as the end of a chapter, page or paragraph.