

# Raina Telgemeier Curriculum Guide and Classroom Resources

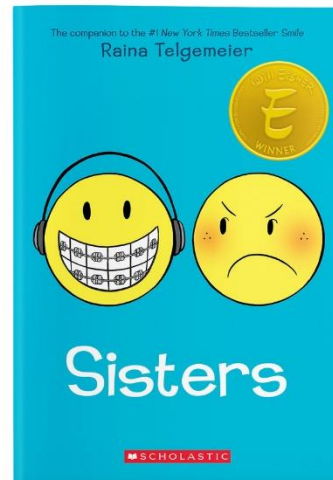
Winner of the 2024 Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers' Literature –

## Raina Telgemeier

Lesson ideas for selected reading: *Sisters* by Raina Telgemeier

Prepared by Laura Raphael, MA, MLIS, Children's Services Coordinator, Tulsa City-County Library

<https://goraina.com/>



When graphic novelist **Raina Telgemeier** discovered the comics page as a child (especially the realistic family strip “For Better or Worse” and the funny adventure philosophy strip “Calvin and Hobbes”), she felt like she’d found her happy place. It took her many years writing and drawing her own independent comics before landing the job of translating the popular ***Baby-Sitters Club*** books into graphic novels – which led to numerous autobiographical and then fictional graphic novels, *Smile*, *Guts*, *Drama*, and *Ghosts*, all #1 New York Times bestsellers and winners of numerous awards. Known for her sensitive portrayals of realistic family relationships, friendships, and the everyday drama of being a young person, Telgemeier is revered and beloved by readers around the world.

## Getting To Know Raina Telgemeier

Reading Rockets put together this extensive video interview playlist with Raina Telgemeier – all videos are between 1 and 2 minutes, perfect for sharing in class!

<https://www.readingrockets.org/people-and-organizations/raina-telgemeier>

 Raina Telgemeier: Growing up with comics	 Raina Telgemeier: Share your smile
 Raina Telgemeier: Happy early years at the library	 Raina Telgemeier: Everyone has a story to tell
 Raina Telgemeier: Illustrated diaries	 Raina Telgemeier: In the characters' shoes
 Raina Telgemeier: Get your feelings and ideas down on paper	 Raina Telgemeier: Filling the reading gap with graphic novels
 Raina Telgemeier: Guts — let's just talk about it	 Raina Telgemeier: From thumbnails to the printed book
 Raina Telgemeier: Picturing a panic attack	 Raina Telgemeier: Figuring out dialogue, pacing, clarity – then inking
 Raina Telgemeier: Practicing mindfulness	 Raina Telgemeier: Creating a sense of place
 Raina Telgemeier: Advice to my middle school self	 Raina Telgemeier: Feedback from young readers

- [Growing up with comics](#)
- [Happy early years at the library](#)
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- [Feedback from young readers](#)

**2016 article in Cosmopolitan, “Get That Life: How I Became a Best-Selling Graphic Novelist”** <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/career/a63918/raina-telgemeier-graphic-novelist-get-that-life/>

“It is an evolving attitude. The more graphic novels that get published, and the more readers that embrace them, the more the general population sees their value. I get dozens of letters a month from parents, teachers, librarians, saying, ‘There’s this kid in my life, and she didn’t read. Then she started reading graphic novels, and now she reads voraciously.’ That’s powerful. Comics are powerful.

“Kids read my books and they feel like I’m their friend. I know they look to me as a role model, and that’s intense. I wish I could have one-on-one interaction with every one of my fans. If I can reassure kids that their real lives and feelings are complicated and we share that in common, that’s wonderful. You don’t need to be extraordinary in order to be recognized for your feelings and feel loved.”

**New Yorker profile from 2016 by Sarah Larson**

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/ghosts-raina-telgemeier-returns>

Telgemeier’s style is plainspoken and sophisticated at once. The dialogue is easy to read; the panels vibrate with comic-strip noises like “shooka shooka shooka,” “VRRRRR,” and “SHOOF!” The characters look like people we might see in the funnies; the landscapes are extraordinary. Her work is emotionally resonant, revealing small, significant moments and making use of silent panels, in which pain, joy, or wonder sink in.

As a child, she liked real-world stuff: in addition to classic stories, a series “about how to be polite to your neighbors, how to talk to your elders, what to do when you encounter a problem. I was really interested in this idea that kids can have problems, too, and here’s how to solve them.” She gravitated toward Judy Blume, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Beverly Cleary. She loved “A Girl from Yamhill,” Cleary’s memoir of youth. “Reading about her actual childhood was just as interesting to me as reading about Ramona’s childhood,” she said. Her favorite book of all time is “Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH,” one of the great rodent-centered works of children’s literature, which, like “Stuart Little” and “The Mouse and the Motorcycle,” is extremely realistic, with a few key exceptions.

## Other Raina Telgemeier Resources

- **Reading and Discussion Guides**

There are several discussion and reading guides to Raina Telgemeier novels other than *Sisters* listed on her website at <https://goraina.com/resources>, including this general discussion guide that can be used with all of her works:

### Discussion Questions for Raina's Graphic Novels



Raina Telgemeier charms readers everywhere with her engaging, artful comics highlighting stories about girls, growing up, and the push and pull of relationships between family and friends. Use these questions to consider what similarities and what differences her books have.

1. Raina adapted four titles in Ann M. Martin's *Baby-sitters Club* series into graphic novels, wrote her own story with *Smile* and *Sisters*, and then turned to fiction with *Drama* and now *Ghosts*. How do you think writing one's own story is different from writing another person's story?
2. When Raina adapted the *Baby-sitters Club* books into graphic novels, she had to make decisions about what the characters looked like and how to depict their surroundings. How do you think she decided what each character looked like and the outfits they wore? What their rooms looked like? Do you think it's difficult to create a picture of a character from someone else's description?
3. *Drama* is a fictional story but also draws from Raina's real-life experiences in theater during her middle- and high-school years. If you had to pick one activity you're passionate about and write a story about it, what would it be? Do you think it would be close to your own life? If you wanted to turn it into someone else's story, what story would you tell?
4. Raina's memoirs, *Smile* and *Sisters*, are both about a specific time in her life, and events that happened while she was growing up. If you had to choose a time period or event from your life to write about, what would it be? Who would you want to help you remember those times?
5. Raina's stories all feature girls as main characters. Are there any girls in your life who could be the subject of stories like the ones Raina tells? Why do you think their stories are interesting?
6. Raina tells the stories of people who may "fly below the radar": kids who are not the most popular in school, or who prefer to stay behind the scenes of a theater production instead of going on stage. Why do you think she likes to tell the stories of these kids? What do you think the advantages of being outside of the major action are, whether it's on a stage, during a game, or in everyday life?
7. Think about the people in your life. Who might have an unexpectedly interesting story? Who do you know who may not be recognized for their talents or personalities?
8. Some comics creators are only writers, or only artists, and then they work with a team of people to create a complete story. When Raina creates comics, she both writes and draws them. When you tell a story, do you think in pictures or do you feel more comfortable with words? If you wanted to tell a story, would you prefer to use pictures, words, or both?



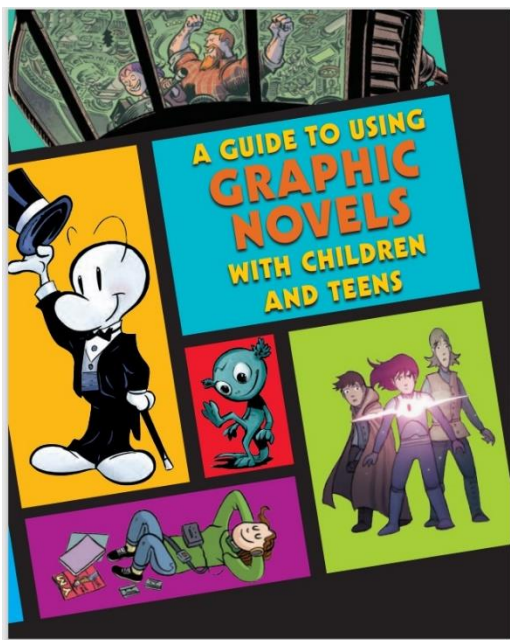
- **Essays by Raina Answering Frequently-Asked Questions**

Under the “Resources” section of her website, Raina Telgemeier has several essays answering some common questions she receives from young readers:

- [Essay: Where Do You Get Your Inspiration?](#)
- [Essay: Writing From Life \(The Good and the Bad\)](#)
- [Essay: How Did You Develop Your Art Style?](#)
- [Essay: How Do You Make a Graphic Novel \(and, Why Do They Take So Long?\)](#)
- [Essay: Advice for Budding Cartoonists](#)

- **Lessons and Curriculum for Teaching Graphic Novels**

There are several good guides related to teaching with graphic novels, including Scholastic’s 39-page “[A Guide to Using Graphic Novels with Children and Teens](#),” which uses Raina Telgemeier’s works (in addition to others) to explain common questions about graphic novels as well as benefits to reading motivation and comprehension in children and teens.



#### What are graphic novels?

In this context, the word “graphic” does not mean “adult” or “explicit.” 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. Graphic novels can be any genre, and tell any kind of story, just like their prose counterparts. The format is what makes the story a graphic novel, and usually includes text, images, word balloons, sound effects, and panels.

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.

The term “graphic novel” is generally used to describe any book in a comic format that resembles a novel in length and narrative development. Graphic novels are a subgenre of “comics,” which is a word you may also hear people use when referring to this style of book.

#### Are graphic novels suitable for the young, and how do I evaluate them?

Some parents, educators, and librarians may associate the term “graphic novel” with content that is not suitable for young readers. Today there is a wide range of titles and, though not all graphic novels are intended for children, there are more titles published expressly for kids coming out every month.

Reviews and roundups of new graphic novels appear regularly in *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Voice of Youth Advocates*, *Library Media Connection*, *Publishers Weekly*, and other journals. By reading these reviews, seeking the advice of trusted colleagues and vendors, and previewing materials prior to circulation, you can build a collection that is suited to your audience.

#### How do graphic novels promote literacy?

**Motivation**  
Graphic novels powerfully attract and motivate kids to read. Many librarians have built up graphic novel collections and have seen circulation figures soar. School librarians and educators have reported outstanding success getting kids to read with graphic novels, citing particularly their popularity with reluctant readers, especially boys—a group traditionally difficult to reach. At the same time, graphic novels with rich, complex



The NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) site ReadWriteThink has a collection of lesson plans worth checking out: [Comics in the Classroom as an Introduction to Narrative Structure](#) as well as a [Comic Creator Interactive Tool](#) for students to create their own graphic novel scenes and stories.

**Comics in the Classroom as an Introduction to Narrative Structure lesson plans:**

<https://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/comics-classroom-introduction-narrative>

**Comic Creator Interactive Tool:** <https://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/comic-creator>

*A terrific tool that helps students think through the elements – from characters to conflict to number of panels per page – to create their own comic!*

Comic Creator



COMICCREATOR

What is the name of your cartoon?

Add a subtitle below.

Who is the author or authors?



## Lesson: Should Graphic Novels Be Used in Schools?

Most educators today see the value of graphic novels for learning and reading motivation, though there are still those who question the place of graphic novels in schools. Using the resources listed above (“Lessons and Curriculum for Teaching Graphic Novels”), as well as students’ own experiences in school, explore arguments both for and against.

1. Introduce the topic with the question: “Should Graphic Novels Be Used in Schools?”
2. As a whole class or in small groups, ask students to brainstorm reasons why some people might think graphic novels are not appropriate for school learning or lessons.
3. Read the selections below from [A Guide to Using Graphic Novels with Children and Teens](#):

**But are graphic novels “real books”? Are they “literature”? Do they count as “reading”?**

### Overcoming prejudices

Some parents and educators may feel that graphic novels are not the type of reading material that will help young people grow as readers. They may cling to the belief that graphic novels are somehow a bad influence that undermines “real reading”—or they may dismiss graphic novels as inferior literature, or as “not real books.” At best, they may regard them as something to be tolerated as a means of motivating the most reluctant readers, who, they hope, will eventually move on to “more quality literature.”

4. Did the reasons you brainstormed match up with this description? Discuss the similarities and differences of reasons. (Use graphic organizer below if needed.)

### Reasons Why Not Graphic Novels in Schools

<i>Reasons we brainstormed:</i>	<i>Reasons listed in Graphic Novel Guide:</i>



5. Brainstorm why students think graphic novels might be beneficial to include in schools. Continue sharing from [A Guide to Using Graphic Novels with Children and Teens](#):

## Fostering acquisition of critical reading skills

The notion that graphic novels are too simplistic to be regarded as serious reading is outdated. The excellent graphic novels available today are linguistically appropriate reading material demanding the same skills that are needed to understand traditional works of prose fiction. Often they actually contain more advanced vocabulary than traditional books at the same age/grade/interest level. They require readers to be actively engaged in the process of decoding and comprehending a range of literary devices, including narrative structures, metaphor and symbolism, point of view, the use of puns and alliteration, intertextuality, and inference. Reading graphic novels can help students develop the critical skills necessary to read more challenging works, including the classics.

On top of the connections to analyzing text, graphic novels inspire readers to understand and interpret information differently from how readers process prose. In a world where young people are growing up navigating narratives presented through websites, video games, television, films, and increasingly interactive media, learning and maintaining visual literacy is a necessary skill. Today's world of stories contains far more than just prose, and readers who are skilled at understanding and being critical of multiple formats will excel.

## How do graphic novels promote literacy?

### Motivation

Graphic novels powerfully attract and motivate kids to read. Many librarians have built up graphic novel collections and have seen circulation figures soar. School librarians and educators have reported outstanding success getting kids to read with graphic novels, citing particularly their popularity with reluctant readers, especially boys—a group traditionally difficult to reach. At the same time, graphic novels with rich, complex



plots and narrative structures can also be satisfying to advanced readers. In fact, graphic novels are flexible enough that often the same titles can be equally appealing to both reluctant and advanced readers. Providing young people of all abilities with diverse reading materials, including graphic novels, can help them become lifelong readers.

### **Reluctant readers**

Graphic novels can be a way in for students who are difficult to reach through traditional texts. Even those deemed poor readers willingly and enthusiastically gravitate toward these books. Readers who are not interested in reading or who, despite being capable of reading, prefer gaming or watching media, can be pulled into a story by the visual elements of graphic novels.

### **Benefits to struggling readers, special-needs students, and English-language learners**

Graphic novels can dramatically help improve reading development for students struggling with language acquisition for various reasons. For example, special-needs students may find that the illustrations provide contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative. Graphic novels can also provide autistic students with clues to emotional context they might miss when reading traditional text. English-language learners may be more motivated by graphic novels, which can help them acquire new vocabulary and increase English proficiency.

6. As in the “against” brainstorming, how did your students’ reasons match up with those in the Graphic Novel guide?
7. Share the printed text (see Appendix for clean printables) and ask students to work in groups to “translate” into their own words what the guide says about the benefits of using graphic novels in school.
8. This is an excellent introduction to outlining and writing a persuasive essay explaining the benefits of graphic novels in schools. For how this might work in the classroom, see last year’s [2023 Zarrow Curriculum guide and resources](#) at <https://www.tulsalibrary.org/mr-henrys-books-educator-workshop-raina-telgemeier> and at The Writing Revolution: <https://www.thewritingrevolution.org/>

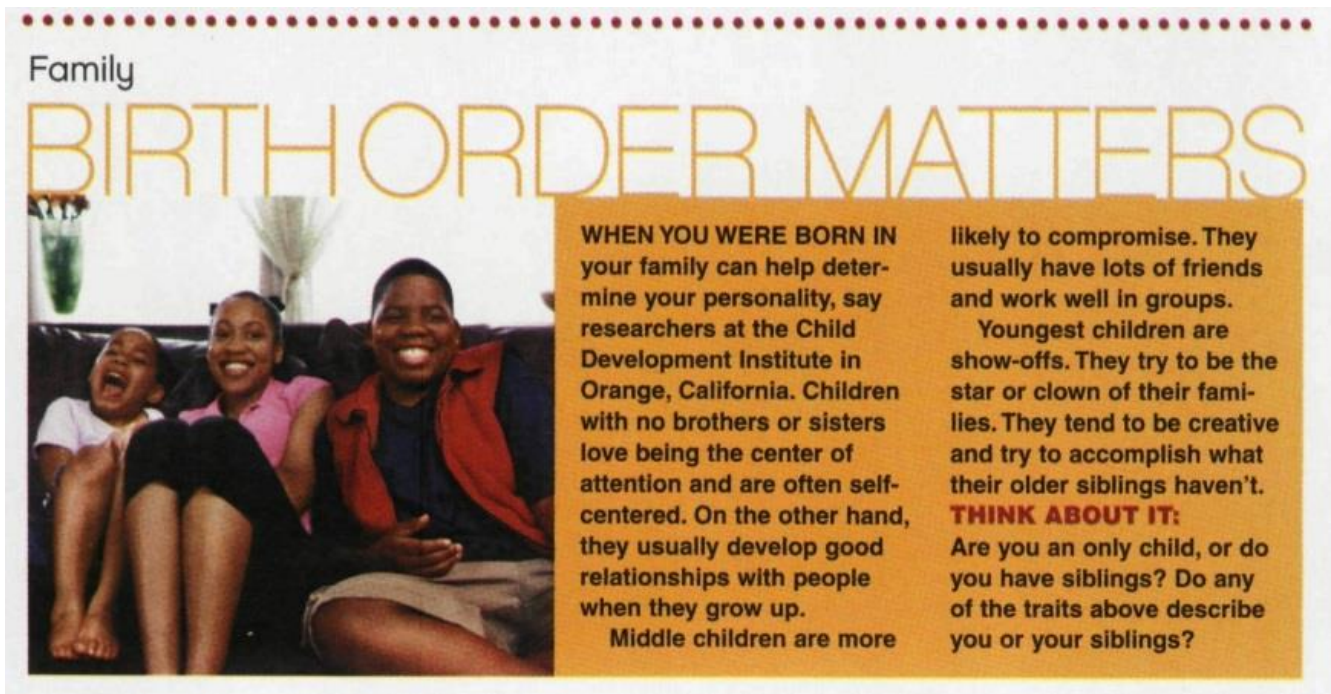
## Lesson: Birth Order & Sibling Rivalry

As a young child, Raina was desperate to have a sister to love and care for, but when her *actual* sister showed up, things were a little more complicated than she expected. Amara turns out to be her own person, with specific tastes and interests that do not always align with Raina's. (Can you say...SNAKES?)

"Sisters" is an opportunity to explore issues of birth order, sibling relationships, and even sibling rivalry.

A few approaches you might consider:

- **Read about birth order and sibling rivalry. List takeaways from the articles, and discuss whether this applies to the sibling relationships in "Sisters."**



**Family**  
**BIRTH ORDER MATTERS**

**WHEN YOU WERE BORN IN** your family can help determine your personality, say researchers at the Child Development Institute in Orange, California. Children with no brothers or sisters love being the center of attention and are often self-centered. On the other hand, they usually develop good relationships with people when they grow up.

**Middle children are more** likely to compromise. They usually have lots of friends and work well in groups.

**Youngest children are** show-offs. They try to be the star or clown of their families. They tend to be creative and try to accomplish what their older siblings haven't.

**THINK ABOUT IT:** Are you an only child, or do you have siblings? Do any of the traits above describe you or your siblings?

### How Does Birth Order Shape Your Personality?

Story by Kendra Cherry, MSEd • 2w

Beware the stereotypes



Other articles to use:

["How Does Birth Order Shape Your Personality?"](#)

["Ten Tips for Dealing With Sibling Rivalry"](#)



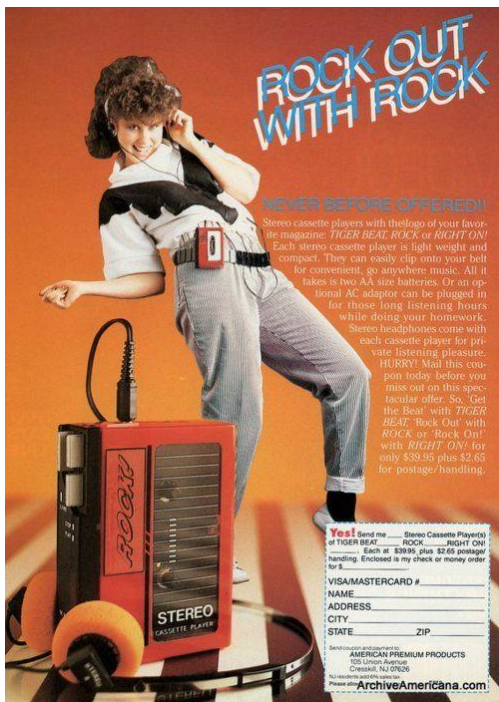
- **Research famous sibling pairs and compare to Raina and Amara in “Sisters.” Think:**
  - Tennis playing superstars Venus and Serena Williams
  - Airplane inventors Wilbur and Orville Wright
  - Prince William and Prince Harry
- **“Build A Perfect Sister for Raina/Amara”**
  - Using what you’ve learned from your research and what you know about Raina Telgemeier, make a list of traits for what would be the “perfect” sister for her – how would she be different from Amara? Make a similar list for Amara – what would *her* “perfect” sister be like?

## Lesson: Early Aughts (00s) Technology

How technology has changed since the 1990s and early 2000s!

1. Ask students to peruse “Sisters” again but *only pay attention to the technology.*
2. List all of the pieces of technology that the characters use.
3. How would this story be different if it was set in 2024 instead of the late 1990s?
4. BONUS: ask students to interview parents or grandparents or aunts/uncles about their first computer, first cell phone, and the first time they used the Internet.

Use early advertisements of the Sony Walkman to explain how they worked and why it was important to Raina:





## Book Reviews: *Sisters*

School Library Journal:

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Gr 4 Up — Telgemeier has returned with a must-have follow-up to *Smile* (Scholastic, 2010) that is as funny as it is poignant, and utterly relatable for anyone with siblings. This realistic graphic memoir tells the story of Raina; her sister, Amara; and her brother, Will, as they take a road trip with their mother from California to Colorado to join a family reunion. The author's narrative style is fresh and sharp, and the combination of well-paced and well-placed flashbacks pull the plot together, moving the story forward and helping readers understand the characters' point of view. The volume captures preadolescence in an effortless and uncanny way and turns tough subjects, such as parental marriage problems, into experiences with which readers can identify. This ability is what sets Telgemeier's work apart and makes her titles appealing to such a wide variety of readers. Not only does the story relay the road trip's hijinks, but it also touches on what happens with the advent of a new sibling and what it means to be truly sisters. Fans of the graphic novelist's work will be sure to delight in this return to the Telgemeier's family drama.

Publishers Weekly:

*/\* Starred Review \*/* In this companion to Telgemeier's *Smile*, the graphic artist writes about her relationship with her younger sister, Amara, using a summer cross-country trip as narrative scaffolding as she examines the contrast between her childhood wish for a sister and life with a sibling she often can't fathom—although Amara seems to have uncanny insight into her. “You ever feel like you just don't fit in?” Raina asks Amara at a family gathering full of contemptuous teenage cousins. “All the time,” Amara replies. “The difference between you and me is, I don't care.” Like *Smile*, it's an alternately poignant and laugh-out-loud funny account of pre-adolescence whose episodes range from small crimes (Raina lying to Amara so she doesn't have to share her art supplies) to acute crises (Amara's pet snake Mango on the loose in the family's VW Microbus). Underneath the immediate problems lies poignant uncertainty about the state of their parents' marriage. Though the artwork draws little attention to itself, Telgemeier's visual storytelling skills are well-honed, and readers will be left wishing for more. Ages 8–12.

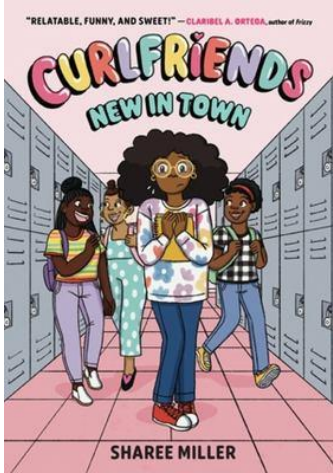
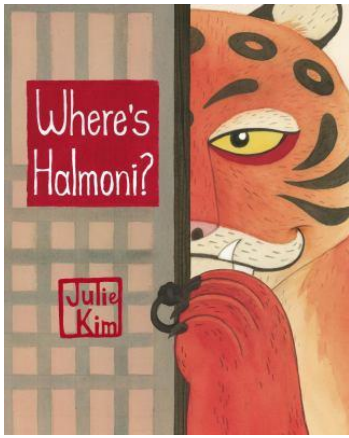
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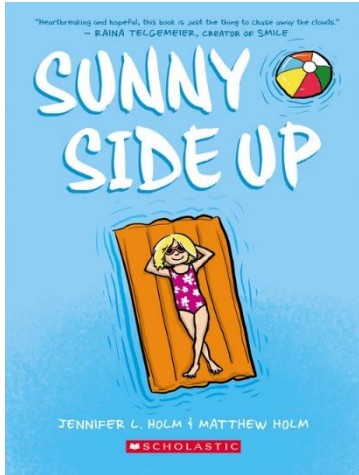
*/\* Starred Review \*/* Two sisters who are constantly at odds take a family road trip that covers more ground, both literally and figuratively, than they expect. After begging her parents for a sister, Raina gets more than she bargained for once Amara is born. From the moment she was brought home, Amara hasn't been quite the cuddly playmate that Raina had hoped. As the years pass, the girls bicker constantly and apparently couldn't be more unlike: Raina spends her time indoors underneath her headphones, and Amara loves animals and the outdoors. The girls, their mother and their little brother all pack up to drive to a family reunion, and it seems like the trip's just going to be more of the same, with the girls incessantly picking on each other

all the way from San Francisco to Colorado. However, when the trip doesn't go quite as planned - for a number of reasons - the girls manage to find some common ground. Told in then-and-now narratives that are easily discernable in the graphic format, Telgemeier's tale is laugh-out-loud funny (especially the story about the snake incident) and quietly serious all at once. Her rounded, buoyant art coupled with a masterful capacity for facial expressions complements the writing perfectly. Fans of her previous books *Smile* (2010) and *Drama* (2012) shouldn't miss this one; it's a winner. A wonderfully charming tale of family and sisters that anyone can bond with.

## Related Titles

If you are looking for read-alikes of Raina Telgemeier's realistic fiction graphic novels that follow adolescents as they handle everyday relationships and issues with family, friends, and schools, check these titles out:

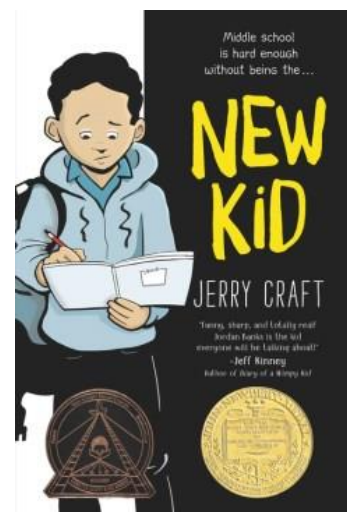
	<p><b>Curlfriends: New In Town</b> by Sharee Miller</p> <p>Eager to make a good first impression at her new middle school, thirteen-year-old Charlie does her best to fit in until she meets a group of diverse Black girls who show her the importance of authenticity.</p> <p><i>Character-driven, thoughtful, family relationships are important.</i></p>
	<p><b>Where's Halmoni?</b> By Julie Kim</p> <p>Searching for their missing grandmother, two Korean children follow tracks into a fantastic world filled with beings from folklore who speak in Korean. Includes translations and information about the folkloric characters.</p> <p><i>Beautifully illustrated – not quite a graphic novel, not quite a picture book. Character-driven and thematic connections about the importance of family relationships.</i></p>



### Sunny Side Up by Jennifer Holm

Sunny Lewin is sent to live with her grandfather for the summer in Florida, where she befriends Buzz, a boy completely obsessed with comic books, and faces the secret behind why she is in Florida in the first place.

*Occupying the same character-driven, everyday relationships and frustrations space as "Sisters."*



### New Kid by Jerry Craft

Seventh grader Jordan Banks loves nothing more than drawing cartoons about his life. But instead of sending him to the art school of his dreams, his parents enroll him in a prestigious private school known for its academics, where Jordan is one of the few kids of color in his entire grade. As he makes the daily trip from his Washington Heights apartment to the upscale Riverdale Academy Day School, Jordan soon finds himself torn between two worlds--and not really fitting into either one. Can Jordan learn to navigate his new school culture while keeping his neighborhood friends and staying true to himself?

*A frequent read-alike for Raina Telgemeier!*



# Appendix: Graphic Novels in the Classroom

From Scholastic's [A Guide to Using Graphic Novels with Children and Teens](#)

## ***Reasons against***

**But are graphic novels “real books”? Are they “literature”? Do they count as “reading”?**

### **Overcoming prejudices**

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### Benefits to struggling readers, special-needs students, and English-language learners

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# Appendix: Character Matchup

## Character Matchup

Pick two characters from different books of Raina's. Think about those two characters and their potential to be friends, and see if you can imagine answers to the following questions:

- How would they meet? Would they become friends?
- Name three things they'd like about each other.
- List something about one character that would annoy the other.
- Describe a joke or secret they would share.
- What would they like to do together?
- What kind of family or friend drama would they commiserate over?
- What kind of music would they like? Would they share a favorite song?
- What favorite book would they want the other to read? Movie to see?

Write about what would happen if characters from different books met.

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