

# Comic Sans

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## Comic Sans

*Chloe Makedad*

Since the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1991, graphic novels have exploded in popularity, subverting expectations of the medium and even working their way into classrooms with all ages of students. Though some may dismissively characterize them as glorified comics, graphic novels span numerous genres and come in a variety of styles, with experts becoming more in tune to their conventions and advantages. Ottaviani and Myrick's *Feynman* and Redniss's *Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie: A Tale of Love and Fallout* are graphic novels serving as biographies of the titular Richard Feynman and Marie and Pierre Curie, respectively. *Feynman* and *Radioactive* are contrasting views of what a graphic novel can be; *Feynman* largely adheres to convention, making use of traditional, medium-specific styles and maintaining a generally linear timeline, while *Radioactive* does away with many norms of the genre. However, though wildly different, both graphic novels make similar use of color and of the medium of graphic novels to craft legitimate biographies.

As Pascal Lefèvre notes in his 2014 publication from *SubStance*, a graphic novel, while sharing many features with other media, “uses those features in unique ways; think of drawing styles..., the way verbal and visual elements are combined (eg., in...balloons), the breakdown...of story elements into distinct panels, and the interaction between individual panels and page layouts” (Lefèvre 14). Lefèvre describes what seems to be an image of the conventional graphic novel, emblematic of a comic but perhaps more literary, a description that fits *Feynman* well. Ottaviani and Myrick utilize a drawing style emblematic of most comics, combine verbal and visual elements through the use of speech and thought balloons, and break Feynman's story into what are usually distinct panels. Occasionally, the distinctness of the panels erode for emphasis, as can be seen on pages 113 through 116, where Feynman and a counterpart are working feverishly on quantum electrodynamics. However, this is more of an exception than a rule. More often, the pages in *Feynman* are structured in a way that guides the reader on how to read them, giving the novel a natural and comfortable flow.

In *Radioactive*, however, the drawing style is much more abstract, text is displayed independent of bubbles, with the speaker being identified by name, and a lack of distinct panels is present on every page, the starkest

contrast when first viewing the two graphic novels. In their 2017 publication in *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, Professor John A. Bateman and collaborators from the University of Bremen write, "...page layout makes a particularly significant contribution to the operation of the medium of comics and graphic novels" (Bateman et al. 477).

As previously noted, *Feynman* follows a traditional approach to page layout. However, Redniss decided to abandon these conventions in *Radioactive*. Each page serves more as a spread and rarely contains any hint of the structure found in panels. It could be said that each spread serves the function of a panel, though the storytelling on each page is different than what is offered in a panel. The lack of structure allows the reader more freedom in how they read and interpret a page. For example, on pages 74 and 75, Redniss draws her reader's eye in two conflicting directions. In a graphic novel like *Feynman*, authors rely on the reader's inclination to read left to right and top to bottom to guide them through a page in the correct order.

Redniss however, exploits this on these pages, placing a large section of text on the left of the spread and a short quote from Marie Curie in the top right side of the spread. This neutralizes the natural route of the eye on the page, allow the reader to choose their path as well as forcing them to take a moment to consider their choice. The quote on the right side of the spread, which reads, "During eleven years we were scarcely ever separated," can be interpreted as an epigraph for the block of text to its lower left or a sign of what is to come later in the novel depending on whether it is read first or last (Redniss 75). Though unconventional, the structure of *Radioactive* still plays a vital role in how it functions as a graphic novel.

The use of panels is more than just an aesthetic choice; continuing with the ideas of Lefèvre, panels are commonly used to depict "the chronological sequence of events recounted in a narrative...and the sequentially arranged discourse cues that allow the reader to construct a timeline for those events" (Lefèvre 15). With its traditional panels, *Feynman* once again adheres to what Lefèvre describes as convention for graphic novels. Though *Feynman* is told as a flashback, with an older Feynman narrating his life story, it otherwise, generally speaking, follows a linear timeline. The book begins with an anecdote about how Feynman's father instilled the curiosity in his son that would enable him to become a successful scientist and ends with Feynman's role on the Challenger Commission, his cancer, and his fascination with Tuva, all events directly preceding his death. The conventional and straightforward panels in *Feynman* help to push the narrative forward seamlessly and linearly, something not seen in *Radioactive* but also not missed. Again, defying convention, Redniss, while telling the Curies' story with a linear timeline, frequently interrupts this main narrative with asides, often connecting the Curie's work to its implications.

One of the most abrupt and perhaps the most functional of these asides occurs in Chapter Six, where Redniss writes, “For a disaster created by multiple, unanticipated failures in a system...sociologist Charles Perrow coined the phrase ‘normal accident’...Such, Perrow contends, was the case...at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant...” (102). Redniss takes a break from the narrative to talk about Three Mile Islands and how it affected local plant life at a crucial and intense time in the story of the Curies. On the prior pages, Redniss describes Pierre Curie’s brutal death, which could also be considered a “normal accident.” Staying connected to her narrative by pointing out parallels in the two stories, this aside serves the functional purpose of allowing Redniss to give her readers a moment to reflect on Pierre’s death, effective even if it may reject convention.

Despite their differences, *Feynman* and *Radioactive* share similarities in both their visual and literary aspect. Regarding their visual components, Professor Ashley Dallacqua of the University of New Mexico writes in her 2012 publication from *The English Journal* that “...in a graphic novel...images are not additions to the story; they are part of the story. Each image in a graphic novel gives important information to the reader and pushed the plot forward” (Dallacqua 65). Dallacqua then emphasizes the importance of color in helping the reader sense the mood of the story at a given point. While *Feynman* and *Radioactive* share almost no visual resemblance to one another, the color use by Ottaviani and Myrick and by Redniss manifests itself in similar ways.

Even when flipping through *Feynman* with no regard for what is on the page, it is clear that the use of color has been calculated. The panels depicting Feynman’s childhood are tinted green, his teen years are orange, and his college years are red. When the book covers his work on the Manhattan project, the colors in the panels are emblematic of the military influence of the project, containing beige and olive green. As the book continues through Feynman’s middle and later life, the colors shift through shades of blue approaching purple. This gradient, almost entirely following the orders of the colors of the rainbow, helps the reader keep track of the timeline in the story and shows when flashbacks occur, but also, as Dallacqua notes, serves a key function in depicting the mood. While color manifests itself in this way throughout the book, nowhere is it more prominent than when Ottaviani and Myrick discuss Feynman’s life during the time following his work on the Manhattan Project. During these years, Feynman struggled with the ramifications of his role in creating the atomic bomb and even struggled to maintain his interest in physics. As Ottaviani and Myrick’s Feynman says, “Physics research had begun to disgust me a little” (Ottaviani 110). While the text works to depict the darkness that Feynman experienced during this period, much more impactful in illustrating the grim mood is the dominance of grey in the panels throughout the section. When Feynman finally begins

finding joy in his work again, the panels start to incorporate more and more color, effectively using color to show the change in mood.

*Radioactive* makes similar use of color to convey mood and emotion. The first twenty-six pages in *Radioactive* are almost colorless, using black and white while detailing Marie and Pierre's lives prior to their first meeting. For both Marie and Pierre, their early lives were bleak. Both experienced immense heartbreak and struggle, reflected in the text and drawings as well as in the absence of color. The first use of color for something more than a word or a transitional page comes on page twenty-seven, when Marie and Pierre first met at a party. Redniss colors the last line of text on this page red, standing out among the other black text and the white background. Flipping the page, the reader is met with an explosion of color. Thick, scribbled lines of orange, yellow, and green surround Marie and Pierre as they appear on the page for the first time. Redniss, with this stark contrast in color use, conveys how Marie and Pierre impacted one another; intellectually and emotionally, they formed a flourishing partnership that gave them joy and success.

Contrary to what may be common perception, graphic novels can do more than just tell a visual story. According to Professor Gretchen Schwarz of Baylor University in her 2006 publication in *The English Journal*, "The graphic novel offers an engaging medium...to analyze information and persuasion in different ways" (Schwarz 61). Schwarz points to how graphic novels have covered topics ranging from American militarism to diversity while still incorporating strong research and references (61-62). Not just for looks, both *Feynman* and *Radioactive* epitomize this type of graphic novel, providing the reader with a thorough biography, albeit in an entertaining and unconventional form.

Both works feature extensive references after the conclusion of the main narrative, with Feynman dedicating pages 253-261 and *Radioactive* dedicating pages 187-193 to their bibliographies. The research includes peer reviewed journal articles, print biographies, and primary sources from Feynman and the Curies, showing that Ottaviani and Myrick as well as Redniss engaged in respectable research to craft these biographies. Further, independent of the medium, both *Feynman* and *Radioactive* are comprehensive biographies of their subjects. Though they incorporate visual art to tell Feynman and the Curies' life stories, these graphic novels do not allow their artistry to override their purpose to educate. Rather, as Schwarz suggests, whether be the use of color, page structure, or narrative liberties, these two works use their artistry to engage and enhance how they tell the stories of their subjects.

Ottaviani and Myrick's *Feynman* and Redniss's *Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie: A Tale of Love and Fallout* illustrate the range of the increasingly popular graphic novel. Though both fall under the same classification, they show the variation within the genre. *Feynman* typically adheres to the

conventions of graphic novels, while *Radioactive* veers from this path. Despite their differences, they both take advantage of the medium to tell their stories and are successful biographies epitomizing what experts find to be effective in graphic novels as educational mediums.

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