

Jessica Abel & Matt Madden. *Drawing words and writing pictures: A definitive course from concept to comic in 15 lessons*. New York: First Second, 2008. 304 pp. ISBN 978-1596431317, \$30.

“Making comics requires creators to think fluidly of words and images, to smudge the boundaries, and to artfully blend the two usually distinct forms of communication into a synchronized whole.”

– Abel & Madden (xiv)

Jessica Abel and Matt Madden’s *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures: A definitive course from concept to comic in 15 lessons* indeed divides the work of creating comics into fifteen concrete lessons. The lessons are broken into explicit steps, each instruction leading to the next. The book and the website’s accompanying examples and exercises are specifically designed for use in the college classroom, although they can also be used by individuals.

Abel and Madden are highly qualified to write this work, as each has a strong background in comics. Abel is best-known for her work *La Perdida*, an account of a young woman who moves to Mexico City. Her work in *Drawing Words* is most similar to her previous work on *Radio: An Illustrated Guide*, a nonfiction work depicting how episodes of the radio series *An American Life* are created. Madden, who is also her husband, has written an earlier work on the use of comics, *99 Ways To Tell a Story: Exercises in Style*, which shows 99 different interpretations of a basic story, using different graphic and storytelling styles. They both teach at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, and used earlier versions of the *Drawing Words* manuscript in their classes.

The text is enhanced by comics, which are used both as another instructional medium and as examples. Concepts are explained in the best way possible, by providing illustrative examples of how to use words and pictures effectively. The images are reproduced in black and orange; the design of the book throughout is quite pleasing and both text and image are easy to follow. The book itself has a long shape that helps it stay open to a particular page while you draw an assignment, although this would be more effective in a spiral-bound edition.

The assignments are provided with specific guidelines on critiquing the results. In a class setting, this helps a group focus on the same key aspects and give critiques that are more informative than “I like it” or “I don’t like it.” In addition, Abel and Madden provide guidance for individuals to objectively self-assess their work. I was impressed by the amount of attention given to individual learners; this opens the book to a wider audience than most textbooks. The accompanying website is another resource for the class, but a particularly helpful feature for individuals. It contains multiple examples of actual student work for each assignment. Hovering a cursor over these illustrations reveals critical commentary from the authors. These comments reveal strengths and weaknesses in each image, and train the individual to look at their own work in the same light.

The book tackles all aspects of comic creation: story development, character design and development, drawing technique, specific pens and tools, penciling, inking,

lettering, corrections, and reproduction. It even includes correct posture and exercises to ease back strain. The text is enjoyable and often humorous.

Abel and Madden's book builds on several classic works about comic creation. The seminal works in this field are Will Eisner's *Comics & Sequential Art* (1985) and *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (1996). Scott McCloud, best known for his ground-breaking work *Understanding Comics*, which explains how comics work, recently published a book based on Eisner's work, titled *Making Comics* (2006).

Eisner's books describe how comics work. They discuss graphic style, storytelling methods, and necessary skills for the comic artist. The emphasis is on how to read comics—an outside-looking-in approach. Eisner's second book provides indirect advice to potential artists. He speaks in generalities, for instance, "The comic maker working in modern times must deal with a reader whose life experience includes a substantial amount of exposure to film." By contrast, Abel and Madden speak directly to the reader, giving explicit instructions. Eisner's work is best suited as an introduction to comic theory, rather than as an instructional text.

Scott McCloud's *Making Comics* is entirely drawn as a comic. It is thematically divided into sections dealing with story, images and panels, context, tools, and business. He covers similar material, describing general ideas that Abel and Madden break down into distinct, linear steps. The strength of McCloud's work is teaching how comics work; Abel and Madden's book tells artists what they ought to do next.

As an artist and avid comics fan, I found McCloud's book fascinating, but overwhelming. After reading the book, I still didn't know where to begin. I found Abel and Madden's book easier to follow because it is specifically tailored to guide the inexperienced person who wants to make comics. Both the structure of the book's lessons and the specific assignments effectively guide the reader through the process of creating comics, working up from single-panel comics to an entire mini-comic. This is not only an effective learning strategy, but produces a respectable portfolio of work upon completing the book.

Drawing Words also differs from *Making Comics* in its design. Although both books use comics as a medium of teaching about them, McCloud's work is exclusively composed of black and white comics. There is little white space, causing the book to feel visually overwhelming.

Abel and Madden break chapters into sections with extensive white space. The addition of a single color, orange, makes the images easier to read while making the page less busy. In addition to the step-by-step style, this judicious use of white space and color creates pauses in the text to naturally encourage trying illustrated techniques.

The book's pedagogical format is clearly intended for classroom use, and it is well suited for this. However, its clarity and the added website material makes it an equally good tool for individuals. No previous experience with drawing or writing is needed, so it fits a wide audience. This book is a helpful tool and interesting read for both those who want to learn to create comics, and those who enjoy studying them.

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