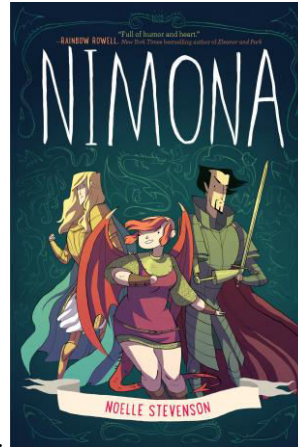


Using Graphic Novels in Education: *Nimona*

By [Meryl Jaffe](#)

Welcome to ***Using Graphic Novels in Education***, an ongoing feature from CBLDF that is designed to allay confusion around the content of graphic novels and to help parents and teachers raise readers. In this column, we examine graphic novels, including those that have been targeted by censors, and provide teaching and discussion suggestions for the use of such books in classrooms.

This post takes a look at *Nimona* by Noelle Stevenson, which has rocked the world of graphic novels for



having been selected as a National Book Award Finalist.

Nimona is an award winning graphic novel about a confident, occasionally snarky, and often inspiring shapeshifter named Nimona who ostensibly serves as supervillain Lord Ballister's sidekick. Lord Ballister is a disfigured knight who must leave the Institution of Law Enforcement and Heroics (after losing his arm in a joust against Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin and becomes the evil scientist. His only goal is to defame Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin, his nemesis, and expose and destroy the underhanded and dastardly deeds of the Institution of Law Enforcement and Heroics. Readers, however, soon find out that nothing is as it seems, not even Nimona. Not even good versus evil. Even more fascinating (and engaging) is that the more we read about Nimona and the more we see her in action, the less we know or understand who or what exactly she is. All we know is that we are constantly rooting for her and can't quite get enough.

Nimona has received numerous awards and recognition, including being recently named a National Book Award Finalist. It was nominated for a 2015 Eisner Award; received starred reviews from Kirkus Reviews, Publishers Weekly, School Library Journal, and the Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books; and has been a New York Times Bestseller. It was also awarded Slate's Cartoonist Studio Prize award. Fox Animation just recently acquired the rights to *Nimona* for a screen adaptation to be directed by Patrick Osborne.



OVERVIEW

Nimona originated as a two-page art-school experiment that expanded into a webcomic that has won numerous fans and numerous awards, including being recently named a National Book Award Finalist. The story is full of wonderfully balanced and baffling contradictions, from its characters, to its settings, to the very story itself. *Nimona*'s story takes place in a world of high-tech weapons and advanced science whose society is run by kings, knights, and the Institute of Law Enforcements and Heroics. It values science and magic and lives by rules. While we don't live in that world, we understand it... until *Nimona* appears and shakes things up.

Reading *Nimona* is like sitting on the world's greatest roller coaster. Throughout the read, we're on the edge of our seats because of *Nimona*'s constant energy and her creative shape shifting, and because of Stevenson's constant twists and turns, and perpetual surprises and contradictions. While it starts off as a story of fantasy filled with chivalry and humor, it turns into an intense story where we learn that nothing is quite as it seems, except the power of love and friendship.

Themes embraced and boldly tackled in *Nimona*:

- Understanding one's "identity" and the identity of others and that identities are fluid;
- The tugs of friendship and rivalry between Sir Ambrose Goldenloin and Ballister Blackheart;
- The powers and perils of standards, rules, and stereotypes;
- The powers and perils of oligarchies, monarchies, and all-powerful institutions;
- The power of love and friendship;
- The need the question rules and standards.



SUMMARY

The story begins as Nimona enters supervillain Ballister Blackheart's lab and introduces herself saying, "The Agency sent me. I'm your new Sidekick." Ballister, however, doesn't fall for this. It's only once he sees Nimona shape shift (into a shark... with boobs) that he has any interest in working with her.



Initially, as Ballister and Nimona plot their misdeeds, *Nimona* appears to be a typical fantasy of magic, knights, mad science and shape shifting. It appears to be a story of the petite, red-headed, shapeshifting Nimona and the evil, dark haired, goateed Blackheart's quest to triumph over the blond, handsome, clean-shaven Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin and the Institution of Law Enforcement and Heroics that he champions. As the story unfolds, however, we realize that nothing is as we assume. Blackheart, for example, believes in science and in rules (which include not murdering or maiming innocents). Nimona, believes evil villains kill people "sometimes" and that, "No one's gonna take you seriously if you're too afraid to kill anyone."



Throughout *Nimona* there are numerous conflicts that drive the story. There are conflicts between Nimona and Ballister (which eventually lead us to question who's the evil villain and who's the sidekick). There are conflicts between Blackheart and Sir Goldenloin as they respectively question their roles and their relationship. While Blackheart and Goldenloin were once close friends, after an "accident" during a joust (where Sir Goldenloin shot off Ballister's arm), Ballister realized that Goldenloin was no friend and that "the Institution had no use for a one-armed hero. I took the only other viable option."



As the story progresses, acts of mischief escalate into battles, and even though Nimona shares pieces of her past, we are no closer to understanding who she is. That, however, doesn't stop us, or even Ballister from finding something really, really endearing about her, even though she is the one who claims to be evil and wreaks havoc all around her.

Nimona is a smart, wonderfully fun romp through friendship and fantasy, expectations, and surprises. For example, Goldenloin's first words in the book are, "Halt, you villains! Unhand that science! While it starts as feeling a lot like Sunday funnies pages, it quickly breaks the mold, replete with witches, poisoned (or at least germ-tainted) apples, jousts, rivalries, tavern brawls, dragons, magic, science, robots, and aliens. Furthermore, Stevenson's art is as unique and quirky as Nimona herself. While the beginning of the book is rendered in somewhat simple tones, hues, and images, by the third chapter we see increasing depth to the images and the color palettes, and by the fifth chapter the images, the designs, the panel layouts take as many risks, jumps, and turns as Nimona herself. Her figures themselves, are quirky. With small, triangular heads, and distinctive gestures. And while Blackheart and Goldenloin live in a world with rules and clear distinctions, Nimona opens it all up to questions, turning everything and everyone into a whole new ball of wax. Finally, while we all love Nimona for her spunk and snark, we also love Blackheart for his never-ending faith in this creature who claims to be evil, but never quite believe.

This book is a great read for kids of all ages. I recommend you take the plunge too. It's exhilarating.



DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

Plot, Theme, and Character Development

- Plot and or discuss how Nimona, Ballister Blackheart, and Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin meet classic and burst classic stereotypes. Discuss how Stevenson draws and writes them so they can do both at the same time.
- Plot and or discuss how Nimona, Ballister Blackheart, and Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin grow together and apart.
- Create a Venn diagram representing how Blackheart and Goldenloin's personalities, likes and dislikes overlap. Discuss the similarities and differences between the two while discussing what makes theirs a solid 'relationship'.
- Evaluate and discuss the Institute of Law Enforcements and Heroics' "personality" and how Ms. Stevenson creates it.



Critical Reading and Making Inferences

- Define “good” versus “evil” and “hero” versus “villain.” Discuss how Stevenson relays these stereotypes and then breaks them.
- Discuss the role of killing and how different characters (Nimona, Blackheart, Goldenloin, and “the Institution”) use and/or justify it.
- Throughout the book, Ballister, Ambrosius, or Nimona discuss either *their* own rules or existing rules. In small groups or as a large class, discuss the pros and cons of setting rules in various communities and circumstances. When is it alright to break rules and when is it not alright?
- Compare and contrast Nimona’s rules to Blackheart and Goldenloin’s rules. In what ways are they different, and why?
- Discuss Blackheart’s plan to expose the Institute. Is it okay to make people sick to expose a greater evil? Brainstorm other possible alternatives Blackheart might have followed.
- Discuss what Goldenloin meant on page 162 when he said, “We assumed she was a girl disguised as a monster, but he’s not. She’s a monster disguised as a girl.”
- Discuss the power of apologies (relating to pages 153-154) and Blackheart’s statement that, “You never said it before... don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I would have forgiven you. Still, it’s a relief I suppose.”



Language, Literature and Language Usage

- Compare and contrast this story to classic stories of knights, chivalry, and fantasy. How is similar to these other works? How is it different? Why is it good to be different?
- Discuss the names Stevenson gives her characters. What might they tell us about the characters? Discuss the power of names.
- Throughout the story, Stevenson often makes interesting (and atypical) word choices. Search for and discuss these word choices. For example:
 - Discuss why Blackheart calls Nimona his sidekick, while Goldenloin calls her “squire.” Why do they use two different terms and how does that help add depth to the story.
 - On page 127, Stevenson writes, “*Do we have an accord?*” Discuss her use of “accord” instead of “agreement.”



Modes of Storytelling and Visual Literacy

- Chart and evaluate Nimona’s choices when shape shifting. Discuss how the Stevenson pairs the image and text when Nimona shapeshifts to help create depth and humor.
- Discuss how Stevenson uses color to help her tell her story. Discuss the palettes she uses for Nimona, Blackheart, Goldenloin, the Institute, the street. How do these color choices tell us about the characters and places?
- Discuss Stevenson’s use of occasional black and white panels. How does this help her tell the story?

- Chart, evaluate, and discuss the use of visual symbolism and stereotypes. For example:
 - The differences in how Stevenson depicts Blackheart versus Goldenloin;
 - The animals Nimona chooses to shift into;
 - On page 25, Nimona's talking about her childhood and Stevenson shows her in a red cape as she tells Blackheart, "*Then one day I was gathering berries in the woods...*" Discuss how/why she looks a bit like Little Red Riding Hood.
 - On pages 53-55, discuss Nimona's transformation choices as she goes from guard to ugly witch with a wormy apple.
- Discuss the veracity of Goldenloin's statement (on page 162) as he tells his boss at the Institute why he couldn't kill Nimona, "You didn't see what I saw. You didn't see her face... What are you going to do? You can't FIGHT her..." Discuss how "seeing a face" adds information that often can't be described.



Paired Reading Suggestions

- *Lumberjanes* by Shannon Walters, Grace Ellis, and Noelle Stevenson about five spunky girls and their adventures (with boys, one awesome counselor, and supernatural beings) while at summer camp.
- [*I Kill Giants*](#) by Joe Kelly and JM Ken Niimura about an eleven year old girl who struggles to face and understand an untimely loss, first through escapism and then gradually through acceptance.

- [*Nothing Can Possibly Go Wrong*](#) by Prudence Shen and Faith Erin Hicks, full of unlikely friendships and wonderfully nuanced characters where science/robotics geeks versus Athletes and cheerleaders bend and shatter stereotypes and expectations in a delightful contest of wills.
- [*Ms. Marvel*](#) by G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona, about a sixteen-year-old girl from Jersey City, New Jersey who becomes the new Ms. Marvel.
- *His Dark Materials* Trilogy by Philip Pullman – about a boy, a girl, alternate worlds and an evil Institution.



Common Core State Standards Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

As this book can be used for middle grades and older, when discussing how this book meets CCSS, I will be using the Common Core Anchor Standards for College and Career Readiness for Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening to help guide interested educators:

- **Knowledge of Language:** Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.3](#)
- **Vocabulary Acquisition and Use:** Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials; demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meaning; acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking and listening at the college and career readiness level.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.4](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.5](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.6](#)
- **Key ideas and details:** Reading closely to determine what the texts says explicitly and making logical inferences from it; citing specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text; determining central ideas or themes and analyzing their development; summarizing the key supporting details and ideas; analyzing how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of the text.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.3](#)

- Craft and structure: Interpreting words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings and analyzing how specific word choices shape meaning or tone; analyzing the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs and larger portions of the text relate to each other and the whole; Assessing how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6](#)
- Integration of knowledge and ideas: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually...as well as in words; delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence; analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.8](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9](#)
- Range of reading and level of text complexity: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10](#)
- Research to Build and Present Knowledge: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based of focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation; gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism; draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.8](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.9](#)
- Comprehension and collaboration: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively; integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally; evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.3](#)
- Presentation of knowledge and ideas: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization; adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4](#)
 - [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.6](#)

Links and Resources:

- Preview *Nimona* here: <http://gingerhaze.com/NIMONA>

- View Stevenson reading a section of *Nimona* as a presenter at The National Book Awards here: http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2015_ypl_stevenson.html - .Vl3GUcpX83g You may want to critique how she reads this aloud and brainstorm other ways to read it aloud.
- For an interview with Noelle Stevenson discussing role of women in comics and film, please visit: <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/07/noelle-stevenson-nimona-lumberjanes-comic-con-eisner-awards>



Meryl Jaffe, PhD teaches visual literacy and critical reading at Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth Online Division and is the author of Raising a Reader! and Using Content-Area Graphic Texts for Learning. She used to encourage the “classics” to the exclusion comics, but with her kids’ intervention, Meryl has become an avid graphic novel fan. She now incorporates them in her work, believing that the educational process must reflect the imagination and intellectual flexibility it hopes to nurture. In this monthly feature, Meryl and CBLDF hope to empower educators and encourage an ongoing dialogue promoting kids’ right to read while utilizing the rich educational opportunities graphic novels have to offer. Please continue the dialogue with your own comments, teaching, reading, or discussion ideas at meryl.jaffe@cbl df.org and please visit Dr. Jaffe at <http://www.departingthe text.blogspot.com>.

We need your help to keep fighting for the right to read! Help support CBLDF’s important First Amendment work by visiting the Rewards Zone, [making a donation](#), or [becoming a member](#) of CBLDF!

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