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# Storytelling in Comics: Who, When, and Where in “Here”

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Graphic novels and comics/short story  
Storytelling exercise

### Who, When, and Where in “Here”

**Abstract:** Richard McGuire’s groundbreaking short comic “Here” (1989) revolutionized storytelling possibilities in comics. It may be used within a short story unit to demonstrate familiar elements of fiction, including setting, plot, and character. Moreover, its inventive use of panels within panels to juxtapose past, present, and future can serve as a model for students’ visual rendering of multiple points in time within a single location.

### Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1c Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

### Procedure:

Have students read before class Richard McGuire’s 1989 comic strip “Here,” which tells the history of the corner of a living room from 500 billion BC to 2033 AD in six pages of six main panels each, all of them but one labeled with a year. Smaller dated inset panels carve up most of these panels into a kind of gallery that presents this same place over multiple moments in time. In other words, in one part of the panel, we might see a mouse in 1999, while in another, a boy plays with a toy dinosaur in 2028. Depending on their familiarity with reading comics, students might need preliminary instruction before being given this reading assignment. For this comic, students will read the contents of each row of two panels before moving down the page to

the next row. Teachers are encouraged to consult cartoonist Chris Ware's excellent commentary on "Here" in *Comic Art 8* (2006), pp. 5-7 (see Materials).

Comics traditionally present space in panels of various shapes and sizes that are arranged in a linear and progressive sequence of successive moments that corresponds to the direction of reading (in the West, from left to right). In "Here," however, McGuire cuts up space and shuffles time, which the reader first encounters in panel five, where a scene from 1922 suddenly frames a snapshot from the main story, which begins in 1957. McGuire switches back and forth between different years in successive panels, presenting us with as many as four different time portals in a single panel. The reader is forced to flip back and forth between panels and pages because of McGuire's jumbled chronology, as characters will suddenly grow up and then return to their childhood. What remains constant is the place, or rather the vantage point, as we view where the corner of the room sits across different centuries and even millennia. The comic is perhaps easier to read than to describe!

Discussion of this comic might begin with a discussion of whose story this is. Who is the protagonist? William (later Billy) is born on the first page, and we see him at different moments throughout his life as the comic moves backwards and forwards and sideways through time. Billy grows, he grows up, he leaves, he visits his childhood home, and he dies, though not necessarily in that order in the comic strip. Students might also be asked to identify other characters as well.

McGuire's readers have to grapple with his story's jumbled chronology and its effects, so "Here" presents rich possibilities for exploring plot. You might begin by asking students whether "Here" has a plot (or plots). Talk about what happens and how we know that it happens. Students will need to use the year labels within the main panels and inset panels to piece together, for instance, the chronology of Billy's life. It's worth considering effects (visual, narrative, and thematic) of McGuire's nonlinear plot as well. For instance, a boy plays with a toy dinosaur in panel 21, and we see the toy's real-life counterpart from some 100 million years earlier in that very space in the next panel, while a character in 1986 seems to laugh at McGuire's joke ("HA HA HA"). Alongside plot, students might also be asked to consider the place of tense in McGuire's comic strip. What's the past, the present, and the future in such a story without a stable point of reference in terms of time?

Setting is, of course, central to the story. Even as we move vertiginously through time in "Here," we remain anchored in place, though that space itself undergoes transformations. Students might be asked to discuss the house as a sort of character, like Billy himself, with a definite lifespan. We see the construction of the house (in 1902), its changing furnishings and appliances over the decades, a house fire, and the house's eventual demolition in 2030.

After students have explored such topics as character, plot, and setting in the strip, ask them to draw a few panels of their own version of "Here." They might add on to McGuire's story, or they could choose a real-world setting of their own, whether it's their classroom, their bedroom, or another location. Encourage them to visualize this place over the course of time—not just within their lifetime, but across many lifetimes, and even over the life of the planet. Tell students that it doesn't matter if they can't draw. Have them pick a place and show us what's

happened, is happening, and will happen there in a few panels. A longer version of this assignment (like a six-panel page) could be used as a formal assessment if desired.

**Materials:** Chris Ware, “Richard McGuire and ‘Here’: A Grateful Appreciation” (see PDF; taken from *Comic Art* 8 (2006): 5-7; Richard McGuire, “Here” (see PDF; taken from *Comic Art* 8 (2006): 8-13).