

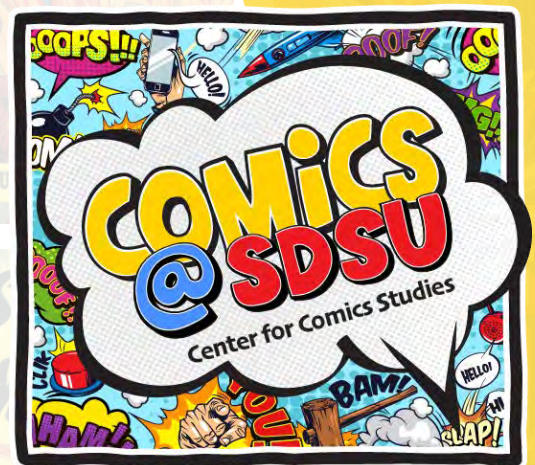
SDSU CENTER FOR COMICS STUDIES

The Sketchbook

for Teaching Comics and Social Justice

LESSON PLAN FOR:

"Burmese Moons"



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Why This Comic for Social Justice?



"Burmese Moons" by Sophie Ansel and Sam Garcia

The graphic novel "Burmese Moons" chronicles the now-familiar formula that corrupt governments have used to oppress so many peoples throughout history and around the world: People demand their rights, those in power view this as a threat, the narrative is spread that those calling for liberty are dangerous to the entire nation, and soon the people whom the government is supposed to serve become enemies of the state.

These so-called enemies become subject to the harshest of human punishments, without any illusion of due process. While we have seen this pattern repeated many times throughout human history, Ansel and Garcia have gone beyond due diligence in their immersion in the culture and lives of those they are chronicling. Their effort brings the story and characters to harsh reality.

Instead of the usual lesson on the history of oppression, readers are strapped in to witness the real world consequences not only of ethnic cleansing, but also the indomitable spirit of people who refuse to have their bonds and traditions broken.

While it is extremely difficult to bear witness to the unfathomable suffering of the characters, it serves as a necessary reminder to find empathy for every living human, and fight to overthrow oppression wherever it may occur. Thazama's plight represents marginalized people's struggle for dignity, connection, and the simple right to exist.

This graphic novel reveals the real world consequences not only of ethnic cleansing, but also shows the indomitable spirit and strength of people who refuse to have their bonds and traditions broken.



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About the Creators



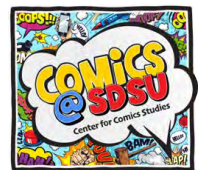
Sophie Ansel

Sophie Ansel is a French author who utilizes a variety of media to highlight environmental and human rights issues. Since 2005, Ansel has been investigating and reporting on stories from Burma, where she spent five months living amongst the Rohingya people and learning about their struggles. Returning to Burma and surrounding regions over the course of several years, Ansel also visited the refugee communities in neighboring countries like Thailand and Malaysia, where she met Habib. Habib helped Ansel deepen her understanding of the prosecution and suffering the people faced. In 2011, Ansel began campaigning to bring international attention to the ethnic cleansing and abuses. She lived several years in Southeast Asia and has worked as a filmmaker and TV journalist directing pieces in Burma, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Sophie Ansel is a rare writer and documentarian of great courage and integrity, willing to fully immerse herself into the plight and suffering of marginalized peoples to unearth their truths and report them to the world. When not advocating for human rights through her work in VR, film, graphic novels, books and radio, Ansel directed and produced the films Guardians of the Kingdom along with the Sundance and Emmy-awarded film, Chasing Coral. These projects generated awareness for environmental impacts of whale hunting and climate change.



Sam Garcia

Born in Gavà, Spain in 1978, Sam Garcia inherited his love of indie comics from his father. This passion carried him through 15 years as a graphic designer in the comic book industry. The process of publishing his first book, "Bonjour Paris," ultimately led him to take up cartooning fulltime. In 2009, he met publisher Thierry Joor and author Sophie Ansel, quickly establishing a meaningful working partnership. Their book, "Burmese Moons (Lunes Birmanes)," was first published in 2012 in France by Éditions Delcourt. Upon receiving fast and broad critical acclaim by the public and critics alike, it was published in the U.S. by IDW in 2019. On the subject of working with Sam, Ansel stated "I would never imagine having a better work partner who dedicated his fire, passion, attention fully alive for almost 3 years...What he does with his pen is more than drawing, he is actually one of those rare magicians who give life and emotions to the characters so that they reach your heart." Sam Garcia currently resides on the island of Menorca with his wife and three children, creating video game illustrations and designs under the name "SamCube."



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Discussion Questions



Discussion Questions:

1. The story opens with Thazami's grandfather relaying the history of the Zomi people via the art of oral traditions (see below, pages 7-8). What impact does systemic ethnic cleansing have both on the people who are exterminated and those who seek accurate historical knowledge? Also, using examples from the text, what is the power of one's voice when they have nothing else?



2. Does the graphic novel format of “Burmese Moons” enhance your understanding of the story? In your opinion, how does the format compare to reading about them in a traditional non-illustrated text?
3. Identify two additional countries or peoples that have suffered similar systemic oppression. Do some research and then write at least two key elements that exist within every system of oppression. What can we learn from the way these stories go throughout history?

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Discussion Questions



Discussion Questions Continued:

4. Explain in your own terms the danger that global media represents to the corrupt Burmese government. What role can reporting information play in fighting oppression?
5. The many acts of violence are depicted with almost cartoonish air movement motions (see example below). Does this imagery further or lessen the impact of the acts? Explain your answer.



6. What factors or inherent personality traits contribute to the people's will to live despite attempts to break their minds, bodies, and spirits? What's the attitude towards those who choose servitude or self-termination over imprisonment?
7. On the other side of the human spectrum, we have the military personnel and rogue criminals enacting the torture. What factors, including morals, beliefs, and fears, allow them to behave this way? Expand upon your thought process.

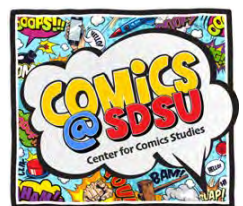
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Discussion Questions



Discussion Questions Continued:

8. What does the idea of democracy represent for the people of Burma?
9. Throughout the book, many internal factors, intrinsic in the human spirit, are illuminated that cannot be physically taken from the people: Hope, faith, dreams, memories, integrity, dignity, family connections, legacy, tradition, standing together, and education among others. What unseen “power” do these concepts hold in the case of people who are being physically, economically, and culturally broken? What role do they play in maintaining the human spirit as the body is broken or extinguished?
10. “One day, justice will be done” (see below, panel from page 188). In this instance, do you believe justice has or will be done? What does “justice” look like in cases of ethnic cleansing i.e., will traditional due process and accountability suffice? Explain your reasoning.



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Activities and Assignments



Activity #1:

“Burmese Moons” is an important but emotionally taxing story. Once you’ve finished reading, spend at least five minutes journaling your thoughts and feelings.

Activity #2:

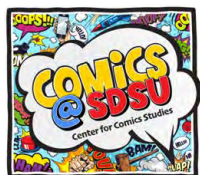
Refer to the biographical information about “heroes and leaders” on page 46. Have students create their own galleries highlighting two or three activists, either using digital media or creating original artwork. Discuss in class why students included the activists they chose.

Activity #3:

“The entire world just sees us as illegals,” says Thazama when he’s in Malaysia (page 163). Use this quote as a springboard for a writing exercise. Students should compose an op-ed or other short-form essay that outlines how refugee settlement policy should be addressed. Prompt them to consider policy from a human rights standpoint per the emphasis in “Burmese Moons.”

Activity #4:

Illustrator Sam Garcia uses a lot of purple, pink, blue, and orange, invoking either beautiful memories or waking nightmares, depending on what is happening in the story. Pick three or four colors from a medium of your choice to develop and illustrate a setting. Is this a real or imaginary place? What made you choose it? Share your work within small groups.



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Further Reading



Read-Alikes:

Aldeguer, Hélène. "After the Spring: A Story of Tunisian Youth." San Diego, CA: IDW, 2019.

Hermans, Anaële. "Green Almonds: Letters from Palestine." St. Louis, MI: Lion Forge Comics, 2018.

Ruliffson, Jess. "Invisible Wounds: Graphic Journalism." Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2022.

Spiegelman, Art. "The Complete MAUS." Harlow, UK: Penguin Books, 2003.

Takei, George. "They Called Us Enemy." Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2019.

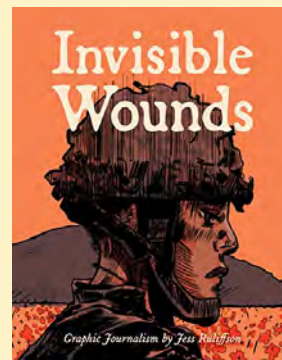
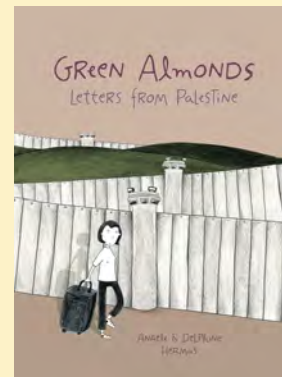
Further Resources:

Garcia, Sam. About "Burmese Moons," 2019.

Habiburahman & Sophie Ansel. "First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks." New York, NY: Scribe U.S., 2019.

Spoilerverse Interview of Sophie Ansel – "Burmese Moons," March 13, 2020.

Yamahata, Chosein & Anderson, Bobby. (Eds.). "Demystifying Myanmar's Transition and Political Crisis." Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, ProQuest Ebook Central.



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About the Educator



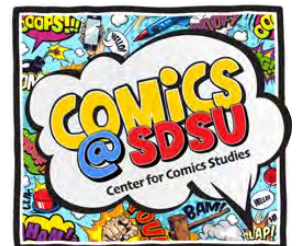
Moni Barrette is a career public librarian who expanded her expertise in libraries, comics, and relationship building through her role at Comics Plus for LibraryPass as the Director of Content Management and Publisher Relations.

As co-founder of the nonprofit Creators Assemble, President of the American Library Association's Graphic Novel & Comics Round Table, and adjunct lecturer at SDSU, she is dedicated to promoting learning through the use of comics and popular culture.

A 2023 Eisner Awards judge, Moni frequently attends comic conventions, hosts industry networking events, and helps librarians and educators implement comics and tabletop role playing games into their learning spaces.

In her spare time, Moni loves hanging out with her husband, daughters, and poorly mannered rescue dogs. She can often also be found hunting for ghosts in creepy old buildings.

The Center for Comics Studies, drawing on support from the SDSU President's Big Idea program, commissioned this Sketchbook at the suggestion of the [Graphix Project](#).



*Formatted and edited by Jenifer M. Glor, SDSU MA student (History)