

SDSU CENTER FOR COMICS STUDIES

The Sketchbook

for Teaching Comics and Social Justice

LESSON PLAN FOR:

"On a Sunbeam"



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Why This Comic for Social Justice?



"On a Sunbeam" (2018) by Tillie Walden

This story takes place in a science-fiction setting in which all characters are either female or nonbinary. This lets the novel pose fascinating questions about the nature of leadership, friendship, relationships, conflict, and discrimination in a context very different from our own.

"On a Sunbeam" fosters empathy for those in non-heterosexual relationships by allowing readers to observe these relationships from the inside, through moments of humor (Mia's fumbling attempts to communicate her attraction to Grace) and drama (the tension that arises due to work situations between Char and Alma, who are at once romantic partners, co-workers, and superior/subordinate in the ship's crew).

The novel is matter-of-factly multi-ethnic and multi-racial. People with various degrees of power in institutions, and partners in romantic relationships, are presented as being of diverse backgrounds. Diversity in this vein is not key to the plot, but is a core aspect of the setting.

"On a Sunbeam" upends some problematic conventions of pop-culture science fiction genre. The novel's protagonists ride in a spaceship, but they are neither turbolaser-shooting galactic pillagers nor nigh-infallible representatives of a superior civilization meeting benighted burlap-wearing aliens. The crew of the Sunbeam restores aging space habitats, for use or for historic preservation. There are moments of violence in the novel, but Walden invites us to contemplate both the consequences of violence and the circumstances that cause it to arise.

The novel poses fascinating questions about the nature of leadership, friendship, relationships, conflict, and discrimination in a world of female and nonbinary characters



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About the Comic



"On a Sunbeam" is a graphic novel in the social science fiction genre. The story follows young Mia in the present as she begins work as part of the crew of the habitat-restoration ship Sunbeam, and through flashback during Mia's school years as she embarks on a relationship with her fellow student Grace. The novel culminates in a perilous mission by Mia and her Sunbeam friends to reunite Mia and Grace.

The art style in "On a Sunbeam" places iconic characters against backgrounds that include representationally drawn interiors, beautiful and wild planetary surfaces, and wistfully beckoning starscapes. In "On a Sunbeam," Walden often confines whole pages to hues of a single main color – magenta, blue, green – to great effect.

The combination of a relatively flat artistic style, young characters, and thematic heft puts Walden in conversation with current creators such as Raina Telgemeier, Gene Luen Yang, and Brittney Williams. "On a Sunbeam" also invites comparisons to shōjo manga, and the yuri and yaoi subgenres, for style, pacing and panel composition.

**Love, friendship,
and coming of
age among a
beautifully-
rendered
background of
stars and a
universe of
imagination**

Tillie Walden states:

"The inception of 'On a Sunbeam' came from my perpetual disappointment and boredom towards any story set in space. At the beginning, Sunbeam was just called 'Space Book.' I spent almost a year just thinking about it before I actually started drawing it. I went into it with no plan. My initial goal with Sunbeam was to create a version of outer space that I would want to live in. So of course that includes tons of queer people, no men (did you notice?), trees, old buildings, and endless constellations..."

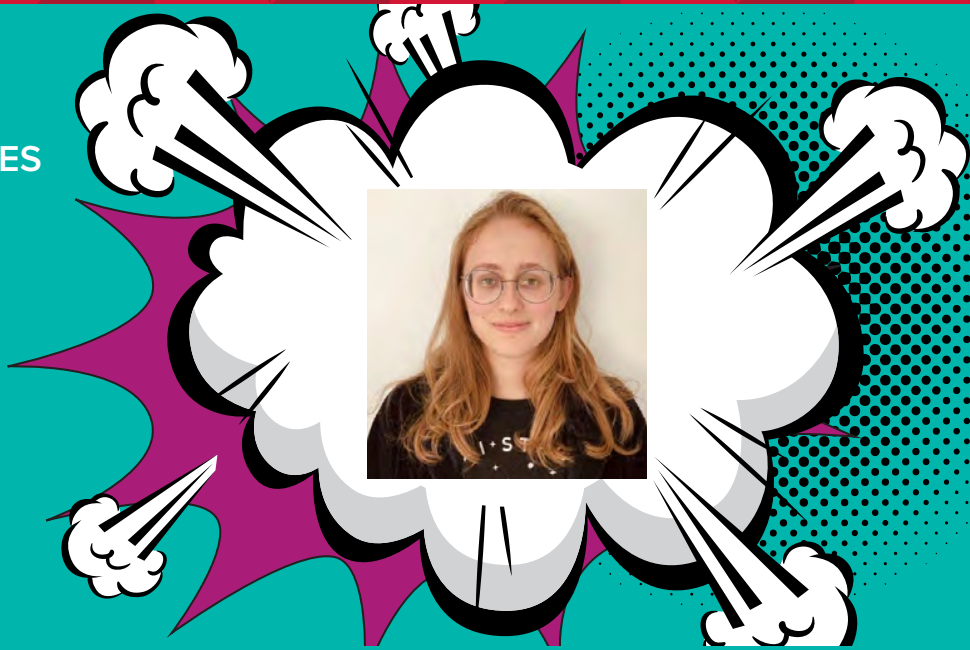
(<https://www.onasunbeam.com/about> [Oct 2022 website capture])



*"On a Sunbeam" is still available from author for free online as of Jan 2024 at: <https://www.onasunbeam.com/>.

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About the Creator



Tillie Walden was born in 1996 in San Diego, California and spent her childhood in New Jersey and Austin, TX.

After graduating from the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont in 2016, Walden began publishing as a comics creator with the works "The End of Summer" (2015), "I Love This Part" (2015), and "A City Inside" (2016).

Walden's career took off with the release of "Spinning" in 2017. "Spinning" is a memoir that explores Walden's childhood as a competitive child ice skater, and her growing understanding of her sexual identity as a lesbian. "Spinning" won the 2018 Eisner for Best Reality-Based Work.

Subsequently, "On a Sunbeam" won the 2018 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Graphic Novel/Comics, and her recent work "Are You Listening?" took home the 2020 Eisner for Best Graphic Album – New Material.

In 2022, Walden embarked on a new direction, partnering with Robert Kirkman at Image on "Clementine" –a work set in the world of Kirkman's "The Walking Dead" series.

Themes that figure prominently in Walden's work include relationships between women, found family, dealing with profound loss, and the uneven, looping road of self-discovery.

Walden continues to create comics, and also teaches now at the Center for Comics Studies in Vermont.

Multi-award-winning creator who explores relationships, loss, and the search for self across genres



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Discussion Questions



1. In "On a Sunbeam," Walden focuses on the human rather than technological aspects of her world. However, science fiction, far-future moments are present throughout. How is the tone of the book shaped by the techno-organic elements of the scifi setting, such as the fish-like spaceships and Lux vehicles? How does technology impact education, work, and lives of the various characters?
2. Ell is a rare nonbinary main character in the story. They also choose not to speak. How do other characters relate to Ell? What forms of prejudice and danger are faced by Ell in the narrative? How does Ell confront, avoid, overcome, and/or come to terms with these difficulties? How would you describe Ell's character and role in the novel?
3. What are some pages in which color or its absence are used in striking ways? How does Walden use color to convey story, character, or emotional state? (For example, the broad expanse of blank page to the right of Grace and Mia on p. 147 suggests the possibility of a limitless future.)
4. The novel often shows the characters at play. What forms of play do we see in "On a Sunbeam"? How does Walden appeal to our senses beyond sight (such as touch, hearing, smell) through her depiction of play? How do games and sports support plot and characterization in this story?
5. The most obvious difference between "On a Sunbeam" and our world is the lack of male characters. How does this deliberate omission influence plot, storytelling, and character development? What do we learn about authority, conflict, friendship and romantic relationships in the context of female and nonbinary characters?
6. Walden states, "I drew a lot of this comic while staying in Tokyo, Japan...I would look out my window at snowy Tokyo while I drew. It was exciting, not only because I was alone, but because the final chunk of the story is really about finding a way through a place that is foreign and mysterious, and I was feeling that hard as I wandered the streets in Japan" (<https://www.onasunbeam.com/about> [Oct 2022 website capture]). What is the role of 'wayfinding' and cartography in the book? How do directional and relational 'lostness' intersect? Have students identify passages in the novel that are visually disorienting. How does Walden use the comics medium to evoke being unsettled and emotionally lost? What are the keys to finding one's path?
7. A common trope in adventure comics since the Golden Age has been 'the beautiful woman who serves as the object of, and reward for, the arduous quest of a male protagonist.' Does Mia's search for Grace repeat or upend this trope? How does Grace exercise agency in "On a Sunbeam"?
8. How does the third act of the novel (the trip to The Staircase) bring together threads from earlier in the novel? Where do the characters find themselves at novel's end? How have the characters grown and changed? What do you imagine is next for these characters?

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Activities and Assignments



Activity - #1

The novel has three major settings: Cleary's School for Girls, the ship Sunbeam, and The Staircase.

In student small groups, explore these settings for the following parameters:

- Leadership
- Prominent characters
- Purpose
- Particularities/secrets/factions
- Built environment
- Visual design (including color palette)

Afterward, have the students answer the following:

- What role does your group's setting play in Mia's characterization?
- How do elements of the comics medium contribute to the "feel" and story impact of the setting?



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Activities and Assignments



Activity - #2

Two romantic relationships are at the heart of "On a Sunbeam." What do we learn from the single pages below about the relationship between Char and Alma (p. 77) and Mia and Grace (p. 146)? Pay attention to figure rendering (posture, facial expressions), color palette, what is framed in the panels, sequence of panels, sources of tension, and resolution of tension. Note that both pages include panels with no background details. What role is played by these panels on their respective pages?

Background for p. 77 (bottom left): The crew of the Sunbeam rehabilitates aging deep-space habitats. Before p. 77, new crew member Mia wandered into an unstable part of an old religious structure which collapsed. Char is the captain of the Sunbeam. Alma is Char's second-in-command, and generally oversees the rehabilitation work.

Background for p. 146 (bottom right): Mia and Grace are schoolmates. Mia asked Grace out to the big dance at the very last minute, and has been rushing around trying to prepare a memorable date experience.



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Activity and Assignments



Activity - #3

The Bechdel Test is set forth in Alison Bechdel's 1985 "Dykes to Watch Out For" comicstrip. This is a very important early lesbian-centered comics project. (original Source located at: <https://lithub.com/read-the-1985-comic-strip-that-inspired-the-bechdel-test/>)

Invite students to read and examine the below comic strip. This can be an individual or small-group assignment. Afterward, have students address the following questions: How might "On a Sunbeam" be understood as a thought experiment in response to the Bechdel Test? Are there losses and gains compared to other science fiction narratives with which the students are familiar?



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Further Reading



Writeups.org, although it has roots in tabletop roleplaying games, it is a superlative resource for information on a variety of comics and pop-culture characters and settings.

The entry for "On a Sunbeam" includes character profiles and setting information. It could be very useful for educators (but please explore after reading the comic!):

<https://www.writeups.org/on-a-sunbeam-comics-profile/>

Aboutet, Marguerite, and Clément Oubrierie, "Aya" (2005-2010 in French; 2012-2013 in English translation)

Bechdel, Alison, "Dykes to Watch Out For" (1983-2008)

Gerlach, Neil, and Sheryl N. Hamilton, "Introduction: A History of Social Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 30, no. 2 (July 2003), pp. 161-173.

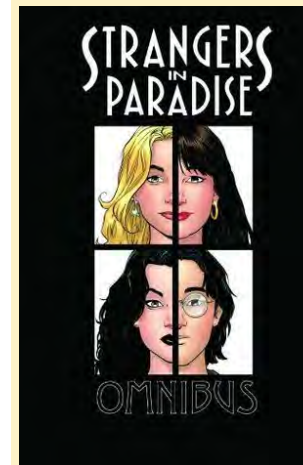
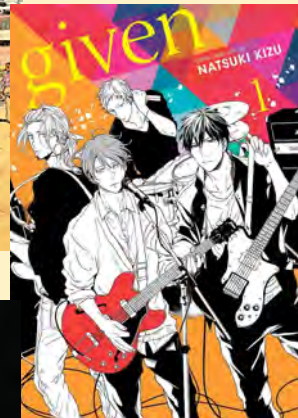
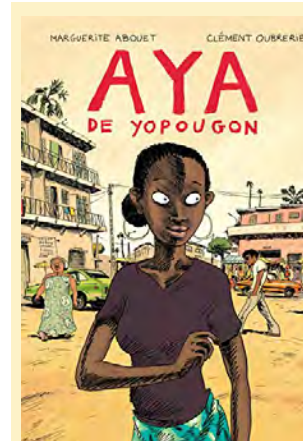
Gregory, Roberta, "Bitchy Butch" (1991-1999)

Kizu, Natsuki, "Given" (2013- in Japanese; 2020- in English)

Moore, Terry, "Strangers in Paradise" (1993-2007)

Vaughan, Brian K, and Fiona Staples, "Saga" (2012-2022)

Walden, Tillie, "Spinning" (2017)



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About the Educator



Van Tarpley is a Lecturer in the History Department at San Diego State University.

He teaches Ancient and Modern World History, Early US History, and Comics and History.

Van trained in Russian History at Indiana University as well, and his interests include Imperial Russian exploration of “Asian Russia,” religion, and of course comics.



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

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