THE GREAT GATSBY: A GRAPHIC ADAPTATION
BY NICKI GREENBERG
Eva Gold, ETA Executive Officer

Last year Melbourne author and illustrator Nicki Greenberg published her graphic adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (Allen & Unwin). When one of the classics of literature and English teaching is adapted into a different form, teachers rush to see how it can assist them in making the original text more accessible or, for some, more appealing to their students.

Appeal was not an issue for Nicki Greenberg. She has loved the novel since studying it in her Year 12 literature class and a few years later decided to undertake this labour of love, her tribute to Fitzgerald’s work: “I felt strongly involved with the characters and the places where their stories played out. They were almost like real people whom I had known, and whose ghosts drifted around the edges of my memory.”

Nicki describes her process of composition:

I began with preliminary chapter summaries, scene breakdowns and character sketches and some time later I started to work seriously on the Gatsby adaptation. It was by far the longest and most complex project I’d ever attempted.

I went about it methodically — and somewhat bloody-mindedly. Up every morning before six to do an hour and a half before going to the office where I work as a lawyer, and another few hours’ work on a Saturday morning. The routine was important — it meant steady progress, and it got me into a reliable groove where I didn’t have to worry about whether inspiration would come or not — it just did.

When I began the roughs, I had two main ideas of how I wanted the book to work. The first idea was that the frames of the comic were to be old sepia photographs arranged in an album. I wanted the book to evoke the sense of nostalgia, beauty and loss that pervades the original novel, and also to immediately transport the reader to that period in time by presenting the book as an artefact of the period. The second idea was that the characters would be imaginary creatures rather than humans. I wanted their physical forms to literally embody Fitzgerald’s exquisitely drawn characters, so that a reader would understand a great deal about each character just by looking at them. I wanted their histories, their motivations and personalities to be expressed in the shape of their physical forms: in Nick’s shy antennae and soft body, the lift of Daisy’s dandelion head on her slender neck, Jordan’s languid tentacles, I wanted to make their physical attributes illuminate the intangible “series of successful [or not-so-successful] gestures”. Fitzgerald drew his characters with such subtlety and clarity and truth, that I feel as if a human embodiment just wouldn’t do them justice. In my mind, the characters of *The Great Gatsby* have become archetypes, gone beyond a simple human actor.

In interpreting the story, I took a related approach: the images do not give a simple recital of the story, but visually interpret the novel’s physical and emotional landscapes: Daisy’s face appears in the clouds over the water; guests tumble on a sparkling wave of champagne at Gatsby’s party; Dr Eckleburg’s eyes silently shift their gaze. These images are integrated with original text from the novel.

Fittingly for the defining novel of the Jazz Age, I like to think of this interpretation in jazz terms — as an energetic and entertaining, but also thoughtful and subtle, ‘arrangement’ of the original piece of music. And I would like it to inspire readers to visit — or revisit — the original book with fresh and curious eyes.

Once the roughs were finished and I was happy with the general shape of the ‘arrangement’ I had to translate my pencilled characters to a coherent final style that would work in pen and ink. My first attempts weren’t so much sketches as obsessively and minutely detailed drawings, using hair-fine nibs. I realised pretty quickly that this style would not work for what I planned to be a 250-page book (which ended up as a 300-page book). It was so densely detailed that I felt the reader would get bogged down in the complexity of each picture. What’s more, it would have taken me 20 years to render 1500 individual drawings in that style. So I simplified it, and brought it more into line with my usual comic style which is probably best described as line-oriented. Most importantly, I wanted the characters’ faces to be very expressive, while using a minimum of pen strokes. I strongly believe that the most effective expressions are the most simply drawn, and that overdoing it detracts from the reader’s ability to empathise with the character. Fitzgerald did it so elegantly and so economically with words, and I wanted to be guided by the same principle for my pictures. I wanted to capture and present what was essential.

Nicki goes on to explain her thinking behind her representations — the way she wanted to express her emotional engagement with the text through her drawings so that she would be offering an “interpretation of the heart”. Her interpretation of Gatsby is intended to convey his magical, glittering, preposterous image. She writes:

*Gatsby is a self-made enigma, a mystery deepened by its contradictions. He is simultaneously heartbreakingl*
sincere and utterly fake, noble and corrupt, glamorous and gauche. His form is inspired by the seahorse — a gorgeous, impossible-looking animal that seems to have been put together from bits of other creatures.

Nick Carraway, on the other hand, is simply drawn, so “we can get behind his eyes” and relate to him. A smaller, soft invertebrate, his antennae alive to moral vibrations, Nick is more receptive than the others but uncertain and easily swayed.

The women are drawn with such variety bringing to light their very different characters. Nicki obviously finds Daisy quite enchanting. Her flightiness, weakness and elegant appeal is captured in the long sinuous lines of her body, and the rich feathery lightness of her head make her the original air-head. She is at once vulnerable and corrupt. For those wanting to chart the development of the character, Nicki has provided a series of drawings on her blog <http://nickigreenberg.blogspot.com/2007_10_01_archive.html> as well as some comments about the character of Jordan <http://nickigreenberg.blogspot.com/2007_11_01_archive.html>. Myrtle is a wonderful portrayal — her crass sexuality expressed in a proliferation of nipples on her more than abundant bosom, an extravagant mouth and a single central eye desperately on the lookout for anything that takes her fancy. But it was little Pammy that captured my heart — an incongruous blend of Daisy’s delicacy and Tom’s brutishness. A bizarre testament to the inexorable logic of genetics.
The graphic representations offer teachers a rich resource for exploring areas of the novel that students find elusive. One of the most difficult aspects of *The Great Gatsby* for them to understand is the notion of the unreliable narrator. This is particularly so as Nick is such a believable and engaging character whose honest attempts at understanding Gatsby and whose inclination “to reserve all judgements” until the story is played out, tend to be in tandem with the reader’s. So as a narrator, Nick is already fairly unintrusive and the open and natural style of his third person narration has the effect of aligning his voice with that of the implied author. The film (Jack Clayton, 1974) intensifies this problem as its realistic mode tends to remove rather than underscore layers of ambiguity in its realisation of characters and dialogue for the screen.

In her graphic adaptation of the novel, Nicki Greenberg has considered this issue and sought to resolve it in an interesting way. A close study of the double page spread (pp. 4–5) focusing on Nick’s introduction to Gatsby — “Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book ... my interest in the abortive sorrows and shortwinded elations of men.” (Penguin 1983 p. 8) — can lead students to appreciate the constructedness of the narrative and hence question the reliability of Nick’s judgements.
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It’s probably best to approach these tasks in small groups or pairs as the discussion that can arise will assist students in fuelling and clarifying their ideas.

Read the original text and then pages 4 and 5 of the graphic adaptation.

1. Find any images or references to construction of story, character or ideas in:
   - the original text
   - each ‘photograph’
   - the motif of the photograph album.

2. How effective is the motif of the photo album as a shaping idea for a graphic adaptation of The Great Gatsby? Consider such notions as framing, collection and series or sequence.

For those who have not seen old photo albums in their own families, you could refer them to the following images on the internet:

- <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/india/a6d1b.jpg>

3. Choose one of the ‘photographs’ and argue why it could be considered as emblematic of the novel as a whole.

4. What correspondences or echoes in text and image arise when the pages are read across the double-page spread rather than down each page?

5. Construct a table in which you compare ways the novel and graphic text construct the role of the narrator, and the way he tells the story of The Great Gatsby.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of narrator</th>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Illustrator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selection of details</td>
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<td>Interpretation of events</td>
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<td>Attitude to characters</td>
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<td>Description of self</td>
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<td>Distance from narrative</td>
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You may find other points of comparison as well. The table should help you answer the question:

To what extent do you find Nick Carraway a reliable narrator?

Another particularly helpful section of the graphic adaptation is pages 304 and 305: “And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world ... tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms further ... And one fine morning” (Penguin 1983 p. 188). These pages offer opportunities for focusing on the significance of the novel both in terms of its themes and its place in American and world literature.

Read the original text and then pages 304 and 305 of the graphic adaptation.

1. Choose two ‘photographs’, identify their correspondences and consider the ways in which these highlight the themes of the novel.

2. Identify those aspects of the graphics that relate to the specifics of:
   - Gatsby’s story
   - the United States as a nation (history and geography)
   - the world as a whole.

3. On the basis of your discoveries and your reading of Fitzgerald’s text, argue for it being valued as a (if not the) great American novel.

4. In a class forum discuss whether or why the novel could be said to express universal values.

Adaptations are being used increasingly by English teachers as comparisons with the original to clarify, question and offer a particular (sometimes subversive) reading of aspects of texts. Graphic adaptations have the added advantage of appealing to visual learners and those that find the written daunting. Most importantly though, students’ experience is necessarily limited by their time on earth and any enrichment of context can only enhance their understanding of the human beings and the world they live in. Adaptations offer them other models of interpretation against which they can make their own judgements.

Nicki Greenberg will be appearing at:

- Sydney Writers’ Festival as part of the Schools Program at the Riverside Theatre, Parramatta, Tuesday 20 May, 10.50am and leading a workshop, 12.30pm–2pm (max 30 students), Graphic Storytelling, an illustration workshop that investigates the comic art form and the devices used in writing graphic novels
- Sydney Theatre at Walsh Bay, Wednesday 21 May, 10.50am, where she will again be hosting the Graphic Storytelling workshop. For more information visit the Sydney Writers’ Festival web site <www.swf.org.au>
Nicki Greenberg, with her bold illustrative style, retells F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic The Great Gatsby in a brilliant, innovative graphic novel. In the exquisitely realized setting of 1920s New York, a throng of fantastical creatures play out the drama, the wry humour, and the tragedy of the novel. Nicki Greenberg is reverently faithful to the plot, mood, and characterization of the original and brings to life the glitter, the melancholy, and the grand and crumpled dreams of Fitzgerald's unforgettable characters. Gatsby fever won't break until Baz Luhrmann's new adaptation opens this week, but this fifth film version of F Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel raises an interesting question: what makes a good adaptation, anyway? Why does Stanley Kubrick's The Shining merit documentaries in its own right, and Stephen King's The Shining end up forgotten among the made-for-TV mini-series? What should we hope for or fear from Luhrmann's take? Adapting a novel or short story into film is a lot translation turning words on a page into the language of movies: angles, actors and i