

# Another *Fever Year*? Making sense of pandemics with a historical graphic novel

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## Abstract

This qualitative study highlights how children's literature can serve as a springboard for discussing current events while making connections with a similar historical event. Undergraduate students enrolled in children's literature courses read the graphic novel *Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918* and discussed the parallels between the book and the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings indicate strong text-to-self and text-to-world connections between the events of the flu of 1918 highlighted in the graphic novel and those of the COVID-19 pandemic. Connections included restrictions and closures, mask mandates, vaccine development, medical theories, and theories of spread. Information dissemination and consumption was a prominent theme.

**Key words:** graphic novel, historical fiction, pandemic, children's literature, discussion, literature circles, text connections, COVID-19, Spanish Flu, Flu of 1918

## Introduction

We can all remember where we were when the world shut down because of the novel coronavirus COVID-19. On 19 March 2020, we were enjoying Spring Break, when we received a message from the university extending Spring Break 1 week while they determined next steps. Little did we know, we would not see our students (or each other) in person for the rest of the semester. In the initial days, perhaps we thought it was a minor inconvenience that would only last a few weeks or maybe we immediately recognised the significance of the situation and anxiously anticipated the hardships that were to come. Regardless of our initial reactions, none of us escaped the influence the COVID-19 pandemic had on our everyday lives.

Beginning in 2020, COVID-19, 'the pandemic', coronavirus, restrictions, closures, mask mandates, vaccination status, and social distancing became part of our everyday conversations. In most circles, not a day passed without some reference to the pandemic. As university professors, we navigated the sudden shift

to online learning in spring 2020, then to hybrid learning in fall 2020 and spring 2021, and finally a return to face-to-face instruction in fall 2021, with social distancing and mask protocols in place. We witnessed the college students we teach grapple with the pandemic's impact on their educational experience, as well as their social lives.

During the spring 2021 semester, we taught four sections of a children's literature course at Texas Christian University (TCU), a private liberal arts university. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how university students enrolled in children's literature courses used the graphic novel *Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918* (Brown, 2019) to discuss and connect with the current COVID-19 pandemic. We were particularly interested in how children's literature might serve as a springboard for discussing current events and the insights and connections participants shared when analysing and discussing the graphic novel.

## Children's literature as a springboard for discussion

The many benefits of children's literature are well documented. Sharing books can be a catalyst for building a community of learners and a way to ignite students' curiosity about new topics, ideas, and ways of thinking (Serafini and Moses, 2014). Britt et al. (2016) highlights the benefits of using children's literature to explore and support social-emotional learning. Children's literature can offer comfort to readers who see characters dealing with trials (Sullivan and Strang, 2002) and offer a dress rehearsal for understanding challenging circumstances (Pulimeno et al., 2020) Readers may also learn coping strategies from characters in the books they read (Roberts and Crawford, 2008).

### *Making connections with children's literature*

Comprehension can be strengthened if students are able to make connections between the text and their lives, the

world around them, or other texts (Anderson, 2004; Harvey and Goudvis, 2007; Keene and Zimmerman, 2007; Stone, 2013). Studies also indicate students' comprehension increases when they make connections to their schema (Anderson and Pearson, 1984; Irwin, 2007; Morrison and Wlodarczyk, 2009). Since there were many parallels between *Fever Year* (Brown, 2019) and COVID-19 we anticipated many opportunities for students to connect to their prior knowledge as well as deepen their understanding through discussion—key features of reading comprehension (Harvey and Goudvis, 2017).

### Graphic novels

Graphic novels are an increasingly popular format of children's literature, in part, because their multimodal use of text and image that mirrors that of our media-dominated society (Schwarz, 2006). Once dismissed as too simplistic and as 'second-class texts', graphic novels have been gaining traction as tools for reluctant readers because they offer 'substantive material for thinking and analysis' (Botzakis, 2010, pp. 60–61). Graphic novel readers must consider how meaning is conveyed across modes including written text, visual images, and elements such as colour, line, size of panels, speech balloons, and organisation.

Graphic novels have been used in recent years to explore multimodal complexities (Connors, 2015; Kwon, 2020; Low and Jacobs, 2018; McClanahan and Nottingham, 2019; Smith and Pole, 2018), encourage empathy and compassion (Basinger, 2014; Chisholm et al., 2017), and learn about historical events or people (Bosma et al., 2013; Clark, 2014; Clark and Camicia, 2013). Historical graphic novels may provide opportunities for readers to attend to information of the past as well as make personal, emotion-related connections (Chisholm et al., 2017). Exploring the multimodal elements and the information presented in a graphic novel with others allows students to discuss their interpretations and consider multiple perspectives, ultimately increasing overall understanding (Dallacqua, 2020; Low and Jacobs, 2018; Smith and Pole, 2018).

### Another Fever Year?

*Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918* (Brown, 2019) is a graphic novel published in the fall of 2019—ironically, before the COVID-19 pandemic even began. Using text and images arranged in panels, *Fever Year* effectively communicates the facts and emotions surrounding the events of the Flu of 1918, from the rapid and

sometimes unpredictable spread of the flu to the medical and societal reactions to the pandemic. After reading *Fever Year* ourselves, we were intrigued by the many parallels between the Spanish Flu, as the flu of 1918 was sometimes called, and COVID-19. We intentionally selected this graphic novel with the hopes that the opportunity to respond to and discuss the text with peers would make space for students to process their own experiences of living through an historical event themselves.

### Study context

Participants in this qualitative study were undergraduate students at TCU. Students were enrolled in one of four sections of a children's literature course taught by the two researchers. They represented a variety of majors and classifications (e.g., 1st year undergraduates to 4th year undergraduates). Most were enrolled in the course to fulfil a humanities credit for the required core curriculum.

Throughout the course, students learned to analyse how children's authors married text and image to create meaning. We noted the use of colour to create mood; how illustrators used space to draw the reader's eye to particular focus point in the illustration, and how they used perspective to communicate emotions (Pantaleo, 2017). For instance, in *The Recess Queen* (O'Neill, 2002), the bully atop the slide appears larger than life, while the rest of the children cower beneath the slide—looking small, timid, and nervous. Students noted the author's use of dialogue and character actions to communicate emotions. Characters who whispered dialogue with bowed heads and shifting feet were identified as nervous or scared while others who shouted directions with hands on hips were identified as confident, bossy, and determined. Characters' eye movements were examined, as the simple illustrative decision to draw the pupil at the front, back, top, or bottom of the eye leads the reader to draw conclusions about the character's emotions.

The course focused on using children's literature as conversation starters about important, but sometimes challenging topics. Throughout the course, students read and discussed four children's novels, including one graphic novel, *Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918* (Brown, 2019) in small groups. As they prepared for the book discussion, students identified 10 panels or pages from the graphic novel to analyse and discuss. For each identified panel, they wrote about how the text and images worked together to convey meaning. They also identified at least one connection they made to the text and posed at least one question. This prep work ensured students read the text with intention

and that they were prepared for the small group discussions. In preparation for the graphic novel reading, students read and discussed an article (Smith and Pole, 2018) focused on the complexities of graphic novels and the importance of attending to the words, images, and design elements. A class session provided students with comic conventions, the history of graphic novels, terminology, variances in speech balloons and reading order, and how different graphic novelists use colour, space, perspective, and the combination of words and illustrations to convey the message. We also read aloud a recently published picture book, *And the People Stayed Home* (O'Meara, 2020), to show how one person wrote about the early months of COVID-19 to reflect on the pandemic and encourage others. With knowledge about analysing images and words, nuances of reading graphic novels, and how individuals reflected on the current pandemic through writing firmly in place, we believed the graphic novel *Fever Year* (Brown, 2019) offered powerful images and text that might prompt students to reflect on emotions, experiences, and connections between their own experiences and those living through the Flu of 1918.

**Data collection.** Data collection occurred in April 2021 when students read, analysed, and discussed *Fever Year* (Brown, 2019). At the time of the study, the students had experienced an abrupt shift to virtual learning in the spring 2020 semester and an option to return to face-to-face courses with mask and social distancing mandates in fall 2020 and spring 2021. Most students opted for the fact-to-face format, though a small percentage selected the online course

delivery option through Zoom. The online option was also available to students who were quarantined due to COVID exposure or to those awaiting test results. At the time of the *Fever Year* discussion, the roll-out of vaccinations was underway in the United States, but not yet available to many of these healthy young people. Masks were still required in all university indoor settings and social distancing practices were still encouraged though difficult to enforce outside the university classroom, especially among 18–25-year-olds. Figure 1 captures the COVID-19 events that impacted participants, as these events occurred before and during this study.

Fifty-six students agreed to participate in this study though all students read the book and engaged in the small group discussions. Those who did not consent were grouped together, and their conversations were not recorded. The findings below are drawn from a total of 15 small group discussions that were audio recorded and later transcribed and analysed.

**Data analysis.** Data were analysed using constant comparative methods (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). First, we read through and discussed three of the 15 transcripts. We used open coding to name interactions we noticed in the transcripts. In this first round of analysis, we coded *connections, analysis of text and image, how children might respond to the text, author's purpose, and posing questions to the group*. The richest and most frequent data were the connections students made between COVID-19 and the Flu of 1918.

For the second round of coding, we drew upon a priori codes of text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-

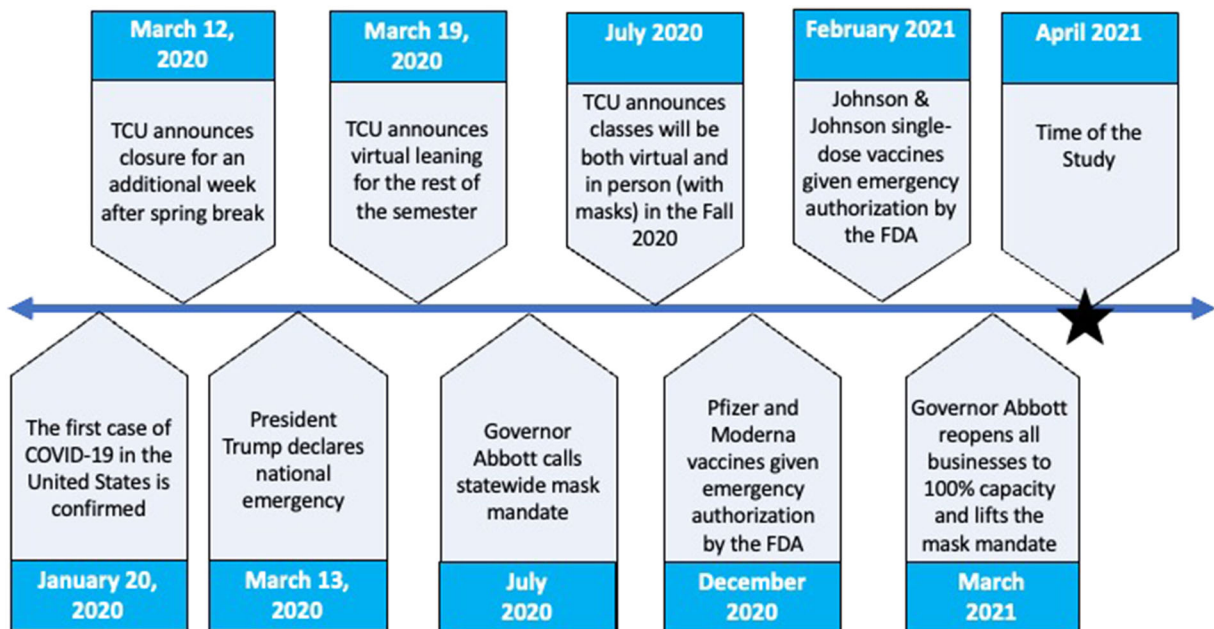


Figure 1: Timeline of events related to COVID-19 that impacted TCU students



text connections (Keene and Zimmerman, 2007). We coded each connection with a secondary code to capture the specific focus of the connection. For instance, we noted text-to-world connections about masks, virus spread, public reactions, and overwhelmed hospitals. We identified 25 text-to-world subcodes and 17 text-to-self subcodes. Text-to-text connections were less common in the transcripts; we theorise because children's books on pandemics were rare.

For the final round of coding, we identified the most frequent codes and captured each transcript example under that code. After reading all the examples, we added a summary statement for each code with key examples. Those summary statements became the themes of our findings, which we outline below.

### Similarities between the pandemics

Across all 15 small group discussions, students made numerous connections between the events of the Flu of 1918 and the current COVID-19 pandemic. Students noted the similarities between the use of and responses to masks, the theories of virus spread, medical theories and treatments, and the development of vaccines. The book was a catalyst for making connections, and in some cases, processing the historical events of 2019–2021 (Britt et al., 2016).

An overarching theme of the findings was the notion of strikingly similar events between the two pandemics, what students often referred to as 'history repeating itself'. Even though *Fever Year* was published in 2019 before the outbreak of COVID-19, the parallels between the events of 1918 and those unfolding in 2021 were numerous and ironic. Students started to refer to some of these parallels as 'strange but true'. A student noted,

*Whenever I was reading it, I felt like this book could have been written about COVID, like every time it said 'Spanish flu' or 'influenza', if it was switched out with COVID, it would still make complete sense. Everything that was said in the book I was like, okay, that is happening right now.*

Another recalled calling her mother and saying 'This is a book that was written like way before COVID, ... and now over 100 years after, and we're kind of in the same place and figuring out the same things'.

Still another dismayed, 'I feel like the entire point of the studying history in general is to learn from your past, and then we literally are doing the same thing ... and seemingly not as well'.

These comments, and the ones that follow, align with existing scholarship on using historical graphic novels as a means to learn about historical events

(Bosma et al., 2013; Clark, 2014; Clark and Camicia, 2013), the impact of making connections with a text (Anderson, 2004; Chisholm et al., 2017; Harvey and Goudvis, 2007; Morrison and Wlodarczyk, 2009), and how discussing graphic novels with others can increase overall understanding (Dallacqua, 2020; Low and Jacobs, 2018; Smith and Pole, 2018).

### Students' initial reactions to the pandemic

On 20 January 2020, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in the United States near Seattle, Washington. Thousands of miles away, students at TCU continued their spring semester under normal procedures. When students left for spring break March 4, 2020, no one knew how the virus would spread, nor did they grasp the accelerated and exponential transmission. When President Trump declared a national state of emergency on 13 March 2020, TCU administrators made the decision to extend spring break a week while they figured out next steps. A year later, *Fever Year* was the catalyst for students' recollections of their initial reactions to the virus. As they shared their connections to the text and noted panels and pages they analysed, students recalled where they were and what they were doing when they heard about the nationwide shutdown. Each of the connections were prompted by a specific page or panel or by their peers' observations, connections, or questions. For example, one student noted,

*'On page 32, it's talking about how all the movie theaters, the concert dance halls, the schools, how they were all closed, and I was like, 'oh my gosh that's so interesting because everything literally closed for us, too'. It was wild'.*

In the beginning of the pandemic, many students thought the COVID-19 virus would not impact their lives and throughout the *Fever Year* discussions reflected on their naïve understanding of the magnitude of the virus initially. They made comments like, 'At the beginning of the pandemic, it was like, OK it's isolated in China and specific places' and 'that [page] kind of reminded us of COVID, because it started out in China and people were saying, 'Close everything', [and] 'It should stay there', but it's definitely gone worldwide and it became, basically, a worldwide enemy'.

Some recalled the moment they heard about closures in the United States. As 19–25-year-olds, they often took their cues from the adults in their lives. One recalled,

*I remember being in South Carolina for a volleyball tournament last year and I called my dad, and I was like 'They just canceled the tournament, they've cancelled*

*the rest of our season'. My dad's like, 'Don't even worry it's gonna be like two weeks', and I was like, 'Yeah everyone is just overplaying this', and then, little did I know ...*

Another shared this reaction,

*I remember when my mom came into my room and told me that spring break had been extended. She was telling me how bad it had gotten in China and that they had started closing schools there. And I thought, oh they will never do that in America. And now looking back on it, I think that that was so stupid. I really only thought it would last two weeks.*

Comments like these capture the power of using graphic novels to serve as springboards for discussion—allowing students to process their experiences through a collective reflection.

### *Similarities in restrictions and closures*

Students expressed amazement about the similarities between the restrictions and closures that unfolded during both pandemics. The cooperative roles of the text and illustrations in *Fever Year* sparked many text-to-world connections for the students. Brown's use of space, colour, and text placement prompted students to reflect on the restrictions and closures of 1918 and those they were experiencing in 2021. Twenty times they commented on these text-to-world connections.

Particular pages prompted discussion of specific images and use of space and colour which often led to a personal or world connection. They analysed the deliberate decision of the graphic novelist to use the span of two pages to depict a lone man standing on the streets in an empty city. One student noted, 'This shows that the whole city behind him was empty, not even lights or trash or cars or anything is in the streets. The city life has completely stopped, and that was kind of how I felt'. They likened the scene to what was unfolding in major cities in the U.S. like New York, Austin, and their own hometowns scattered across the country, saying that some major metropolitan hubs had become 'like ghost towns'.

The pages of *Fever Year*, particularly those depicting restrictions and closures generated discussion about the initial and then varied responses across the world and the country. Specific pages were noted in the discussions, such as page 32 with 'closed' signs over a theatre and school, and page 36 illustrating the job losses due to closures. Students from California, Washington, and Oregon compared their states' initial and ongoing stance with those in Texas. One group reflected,

*We were saying that the governments of all the states had so many different mandates and rules. Like here in Texas we've been open for months versus in Oregon. I have a friend from Oregon, where all the restaurants are still closed and everything is locked down, so you can't really do anything. And it's crazy how different states have such different policies. It's cool to see it reflected in the book about how different states also had different policies back then.*

Students processed the events of the COVID-19 pandemic as they grappled with and reflected on their own experiences. They expressed dismay, 'Obviously our lives have stopped, but the time has kept going. It is such an odd time to be living in'. Consistent with the research findings of Chisholm et al. (2017), students were not only learning about a historical event through the graphic novel reading and discussions, they were also making emotional connections.

### *Reactions to mask mandates*

Despite the difference of 100 years, the use of masks was a key mitigation strategy for both the Flu of 1918 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students expressed surprise that the simple face mask would play a key role in trying to slow the spread of the diseases but would also spark strong reactions from some individuals. Reading *Fever Year* helped them understand the use of masks in 1918. Brown used three consecutive panels to illustrate a man looking at a mask, putting on the mask, and finally wearing the mask (p. 56). The associated narration box includes the text, 'On October 24, the city passed an ordinance requiring the wearing of masks'. Multiple groups referenced these panels during their discussion with phrases like, 'you can see how dramatic he is', 'he almost looks angry', 'I thought it was very relatable', and 'wearing a mask felt so foreign'.

Referring to another *Fever Year* panel (p. 59) that depicted people tearing off their masks when the mask mandate 'ended at noon on November 21', a student shared this analysis and connection:

*... these people look just so overjoyed and so done with the mask and I feel like that can relate so much to how people are feeling a year later, and I bet they were feeling the same way 'cause this did last a really long time. So, I just feel like you can really tell on their faces that some even seem upset or mad that they had to wear it in the first place, so just all the different emotions and different perspectives that people have going around this flu and you know pandemics.*

Students identified the parallels between the events in *Fever Year* and those they were living in 2021,

particularly related to mask mandates. They had become accustomed to wearing masks, but the book prompted them to reflect on the progression of the mask mandate. One student explained, 'when [the mask mandate] came out, I was like "Masks? Who wears masks?"' Another added, 'Yeah, and now our life *is* masks. We're so accustomed to it now that we really don't think twice about it. If you're going somewhere you think "Oh I have to bring a mask."' They tried to make light of the situation by bringing some humour to the conversation, 'Oh I love how in my college graduation photos I'm going to have a mask on my face!'

### Grappling with the magnitude of the viruses

Overall, reading and discussing another pandemic helped students grapple with their limited experiences with national and worldwide catastrophes. Blissfully unaware prior to COVID-19, students reflected, 'And so obviously before COVID happened, I had no idea how fast something can spread because we had never lived through something like that'.

#### *Understanding how the viruses spread*

The rapidness and ease with which both viruses spread was an important topic for these students. Twenty-eight times the topic of virus spread entered their conversations. Students noted their mistaken beliefs that the COVID virus would respect country borders. Discussing a two-page spread that depicted how the Flu of 1918 'jumped over No Man's Land to both sides' during World War I, one group member reflected,

*That [page] kind of reminded us of COVID, because it started out in China and people were saying, you know, 'Close everything', like 'It should stay there'. But it's definitely gone worldwide and it became, basically, a worldwide enemy. So, it kind of, you know, it doesn't respect any borders. Everybody has to fight it. So, yeah, we thought that that was a good panel.*

Students collectively wondered how the Flu of 1918 could have spread so rapidly given that leisure and business travel at the turn of the century was not as prevalent as with the current generation. Discussions about travel by air and boat captured students' attention. A student from California recalled a cruise ship docking in their home state that caused the rapid

spread there. 'What started out with "10 people on a boat" ended with "the whole state shut down."'

#### *Reflecting on the Viruses' impact on individuals and communities*

Trying to understand the numbers of individuals affected by the 1918 flu and COVID-19 was a focal point for some groups of students. One student noted she 'glossed over the numbers' when she read them, but Brown's use of images and text brought the numbers to life. The two-page spread (pp. 80–81) states 'About 650,000 Americans and about 50 million people died worldwide ... One-third of the world had been infected'. The pages include illustrations of many people with one-third of them coloured grey. The vast number of individuals described and visually represented on these pages inspired this student to look online at the COVID-19 count and compare with the flu of 1918. The student shared some of the data with the group and reflected, 'The worldwide [count for the flu was] 50 million, and we're almost at 3 million, and so that's like 47 million more people, and that just shook me'.

The magnitude of the virus' impact on overwhelmed hospitals, their personnel, and supplies was referenced 14 times. For example, pages 23–25 prompted discussions, as the words state there were not enough nurses or enough space for the beds in the wards. The illustrations show sick individuals climbing into their own hospital beds and even the beds placed on the hospital porch. Page 62 highlighted the lack of nurses, as the nursing staff remained the same even when 'the number of patients doubled, tripled, quadrupled'. Students with family members in the medical field or who were studying to be nurses themselves made text-to-self connections, sharing stories of overwhelmed hospitals through the eyes of doctors and nurses.

Relatedly, the significant loss of life captured students' attention. In particular, Brown's depictions of rows of hospital beds, civilians digging graves, and entire two-page spreads depicting the number of lives lost. These visuals offered students a tangible and understandable representation of the magnitude of the 1918 pandemic. A nursing student highlighted the up-close view of the impact of the COVID-19 virus, 'At the hospital where I am for my clinicals, they had a Christmas tree [with] these white ribbons that people have put on for their loved ones who have died of COVID since the pandemic started. When you go and see the ribbons one by one, it really puts it into perspective'. Students also noted the kindness and generosity of organisations and individuals as people



worked together during both pandemics. Brown's depiction of individuals volunteering to fill nursing positions and clothing factories ceasing regular production to make masks prompted students to reflect on the ways they saw communities rallying together. They discussed how 'regular people had to step up' and 'how the whole community had to play a role' during both pandemics.

## Public reaction to the viruses

It wasn't just the specifics of the two pandemics that provided fodder for discussions, it was also the public's reactions to the illnesses, the mitigation strategies, and the 'messaging' from public officials that generated rich conversation among the students. Students wondered about and reflected on the range of public reaction to masks, theories of spread, medical theories related to treatment and prevention with those experienced by the public in 1918.

### *Navigating the dissemination and consumption of information*

Initially, there was a lot of uncertainty about how the COVID-19 virus was spreading. Students discussed the role media played in the dissemination of information and the overwhelming and often conflicting information presented about how the virus spread initially, both in the book and in their own lives. Many comments related to the dissemination and consumption of information, including how they tried to navigate the overwhelming and often conflicting pieces of information they received, particularly related to masks, theories of spread, medical theories and treatments, and public reaction were included in this category. Students repeatedly made comments about being astounded by the amount of information available through various media sources, including social media, especially when the information was conflicting and in particular at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. One group explained, 'We have so much media and so many people always trying to get information, it just elevates the chaos'. They also grappled with knowing who to trust, an experience that was shared by people dealing with the flu of 1918.

*Everybody has an opinion about COVID-19, and everybody's opinion is different—from parents to doctors to political figures—like everybody has their own opinion. And it's kind of interesting to see on that page [referring to *Fever Year*] how everybody in that time also had their own opinion.*

They noted the connection between *Fever Year* and the current pandemic that influential people have powerful roles in how information was disseminated. Discussing *Fever Year* offered students the opportunity to reflect on and process how both pandemics were handled by government officials. Students also spent some time processing the mixed message they received about masks, at least initially:

*It is weird to think about, but at the very beginning, like March and April [2020], when were told not to wear masks because we had to save the PPE for hospital workers because everyone was running out of it. I think that is such an interesting thing because it was such a small period of time because then it veered to 'oh we all have to wear masks all the time', but for a very short period of time, it was 'oh please do not wear a mask, and if you do obtain a mask, give it to hospital workers'. It was kind of a luxury. It reminds me of how in this book they are running out of hospital beds and running out of materials.*

### *Exploring the prevention and treatment approaches*

The *Fever Year* discussion generated a lot of talk about the public's desperation to find a cure or to try anything to stop the spread of the deadly viruses. The graphic novel illustrated the public's willingness to try outlandish cures for the flu and preventative measures to stop the spread such as 'burying children in onions' and 'shoving salt up their noses'. They compared these frantic attempts of 1918 to those of 2020:

*I mean it just shows how desperate people were to try and find a cure. That one woman buried her child in onions ... I'm just like, 'oh my gosh', but then again, people did that now. I mean, they were drinking Clorox, so that's kind of worse, but I guess, it makes you do crazy things.*

Still others reflected on treatment techniques for COVID symptoms:

*It made me think about how everyone was putting online all these different remedies to try like how you can burn an orange to get your smell and taste back. It made me chuckle to think about how people make up anything loosely based on science to try to fix it.*

A sense of awe and some reflective humour about the situation added to the reflections. One student

joked about measures they took during the initial COVID-19 outbreak, 'Opening mail, everyone was like "Wash your hands before and wash your hands after. Don't put it on the counter! ... Lysol all the packages!"'

Many connections were made throughout the reading and discussions as students noted similarities between their own experiences and the information they were reading. Scholars note the increase of comprehension when connections are made (Anderson, 2004; Harvey and Goudvis, 2007; Morrison and Wlodarczyk, 2009), and these quotes illustrate how students continued to connect with the ideas in the text as they shared their own memories.

### 'I Don't Want to Relive It'

We entered this project with great anticipation for the ways in which students might use the graphic novel to reflect on their own experiences of a similar historical event. Discussing the connections between the events of 1918 presented in *Fever Year* and those they were experiencing gave students space to grapple with the impact the pandemic had on their mental health. Students used words like 'depressing', 'exhausting', and 'dark' to describe how the virus affected individuals, not just physically, but mentally. Interestingly, even though this experience offered students a chance to make connections, discuss the similarities, and process the events of the two pandemics, some students found the content too close to home. As one student noted, 'I don't want to read about a pandemic, personally. I am still kind of getting over this one'.

There was a sense of acceptance of 'this is the era we're in' but also a tone of 'but once we get out of it, we don't want to think about it again for a really long time'. One student shared this sentiment with the group stating,

*I just didn't like reading it right now because it was kind of like reliving everything that's happened this year, because, every single thing that happened here I could somehow relate to, and it was kind of like going backwards and I wasn't really wanting to do that.*

Another student reflected, 'I'm just not looking forward to when our kids are doing a high school project, and they are like, "Mom can I ask you ...? [about the COVID-19 pandemic]" and I'm like "No. Google it. I don't want to talk about it."'

This finding was puzzling and interesting. We chose this book because we were fascinated by the parallels between the flu of 1918 and COVID-19. We thought giving students the opportunity to process their experiences of COVID-19 through a book discussion with

peers would benefit them, as they could learn about a historical event while making connections between their lives and those reflected in the graphic novel (Clark, 2014). And for some, it did benefit them. For others, though, the experience of the pandemic was still too close, too real, too recent, and too raw.

This finding prompts us to consider how students might receive (or reject) books that shine a blinding reflection on a topic that is too personal or too recent for them. This finding reminds us to carefully consider how teachers might lend support to students when the topic hits too close to home.

### Closing thoughts

None of us have escaped the effects of COVID-19, but each of our experiences add richness to the understanding of the events of the past few years. This study explains how children's literature can serve as a springboard for conversation about and sense-making of events that impact our daily lives. TCU students in this study used the graphic novel *Fever Year* to not only learn about a historical event, but also discuss and process their own feelings about the pandemic they had been living through for over a year.

We notice the intentionally chosen book as 'stimulant[ing] children's power of observation, reason, memory and imagination, broadening the range of experiences, compelling the readers to reflect on their behaviours, and find out possible solutions to their troubles while providing entertainment'. (Pulimeno et al., 2020, p. 18). Not that there were easy solutions in the midst of a pandemic, but the opportunity to hear others say, 'I felt that too' or 'Can you believe people in 1918 went through the same things as us?' offered these college students a space to reflect on and process their experiences.

The graphic novel format required students to linger over the panels and consider how the author used text and illustrations to share information (Smith and Pole, 2018). We intentionally provided opportunities throughout the semester for our students to become familiar with multimodal texts. We spent months reading and analysing picture books, and we then explicitly taught them about comic conventions and the graphic novel complexities. Students were prepared to read a graphic novel and could talk about the information presented through panels using correct terminology. Thus, students' discussions illustrated their new insights about the Flu of 1918 and the connections they made to the current pandemic.

Much has changed in the world since April 2021 when our students participated in this study. Restrictions have been lifted, people have resumed face-to-face education and activities, and the COVID-19



pandemic is no longer part of daily discussions. We wonder how a subsequent reading and discussion of *Fever Year* with students might differ from these findings, what insights students might now have as more information has emerged, and how the passing of time might affect students' connections and what they choose to share.

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