

## Task for *Ubby's Underdogs: Heroes Beginnings*

### An analysis of the visual elements

#### The constructed world of the graphic novel

Most of the depicted characters in *Ubby's Underdogs* are human although the ape Medinga also plays a significant part in the story. Each of the characters has a distinctive and stable identity which is reinforced by their actions throughout the story. Similarly, each of the major characters has a distinctive set of attributes. For example, Sel is good-hearted but can be somewhat childish, while Gabe is impulsive and acts without thinking things through.

Of all the characters, Sai Fong is probably the only one with symbolic attributes. Panels on page 147, for example, show her appearing to Ubby eyeless, like a prophet with arms outstretched in the shape of a crucifix. The panels contain a mix of narrative and conceptual processes. Often a sequence of frantic action depicted through vectors of movement (what a character does) or perception (what a character is looking at) is followed by a panel containing a conceptual process such as an image of the Underdogs standing in a group and offered to the viewer for contemplation. These images contain no vectors and have the effect of slowing the action of the story. The artist has done little to create a realistic setting for his story. Occasionally a street scene or the interior of a house will be sketched in but many of the panels simply feature the human participants. However, where a backdrop is important (e.g. the explosion at the end of the jetty) the artist provides a graphic representation of this event.

#### Roles and relationships

Most of the panels show the characters (depicted participants) in medium shot. The reader/viewer is invited to follow the action of the narrative but the artist has not tried to create any intimacy between the viewer and any of the characters. Similarly, the images do not promote contact between viewers and characters.

The characters are offered to the viewer as participants in a fast-moving action narrative. However, relationships between characters are often emphasised. For example, the Underdogs are often shown side by side in a group, emphasising their solidarity as members of a gang (p. 10). Again, when Ubby admits defeat (p. 65), the gang members gaze disconsolately at her back as she hangs her head. Interestingly, two of her friends, Gabe and Quick, look out beyond Ubby to make contact with the viewer. Perhaps the meaning here is a question from these characters: 'What do we do now?'

Power relationships are indicated on the vertical axis: in the bottom two panels on page 64 the viewer looks down from above at a downcast Ubby as she walks to her mother's house, and on page 31 Paul Donappleton is shown looking down in a position of power at Yupman Poe and presumably also at the viewer.

The colours in *Ubby's Underdogs* are vibrant, reinforcing the energetic action of the story. However, the use of colour also has a narrative purpose. For example, when Mulli meets the War Crown Spider's gremlin to seek help the extreme darkness of the page creates an atmosphere of brooding danger and evil. Again, the colour is defused in the sequence when the ghost of Samuel Donappleton appears.

### **Composition**

In *Ubby's Underdogs: Heroes Beginnings* verbiage is incorporated as part of the visual image and is contained in speech bubbles. The verbiage and the picture must be read together for the reader/viewer to make sense of the story. Occasionally, as in the panel at the top of page 27, verbiage is contained in its own box, separate from the image. This is a complementary arrangement in which the words play the important role of communicating a lot of information quickly. Each panel in the story represents a pulse of information. The weighting and placement of different visual elements manage the viewer's attention.

The panels are tightly bound by the margins and are arranged in a conventional time sequence, moving from left to right and then down and so on. The verbiage is also arranged from left to right and usually, but not always, the first speaker in the panel is on the left. Verbiage is arranged vertically so that if one of the speakers makes two utterances in the one panel, the speech bubbles proceed as a dialogue.

The images carry meaning on their own, often interpersonal meanings to show relationships between characters, so that a sequence of panels can show characters in different positions in relation to each other and this can also work to position the viewer. The images are generally centred with characters arranged around a central focus but sometimes the image is iterated with characters arranged in a row for the viewer's contemplation.