



PAWCASSO

Remy Lai

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Recommended for 8 to 12 year olds

Summary

This is the warm, funny, relatable and timely story of shy introvert Jo and Pawcasso, the coolest canine in town. Every Saturday, Pawcasso trots into town with a basket, a shopping list and cash in paw to buy groceries for his family. One day, he passes eleven-year-old Jo, peering out the window of her house, bored and lonely. Astonished by the sight of an adorable basket-toting dog on his own, Jo follows Pawcasso, and when she's seen alongside him by a group of kids from her school, they mistake her for Pawcasso's owner.

Through a series of misunderstandings, Jo finds herself living an increasingly stressful double life as her web of lies leads to unexpected new friendships and Pawcasso becomes an internet sensation. But when his new-found fame sparks a conflict that threatens to tear the town apart, Jo must tell the truth and potentially lose the wondrous new life she never knew she wanted.

Author Style

Remy Lai cleverly braids themes of community and belonging, dealing with conflict (including online divisions), popularity, absent parents and dog poop. Featuring a truly adorable dog, this book is gentle, charming and accessible – and the perfect vehicle to study graphic novel theory in order to develop critical skills such as understanding, interpreting and analysing visual and written texts.

Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application

Before reading

Before opening up *Pawcasso*, look at the book's cover and consider its title and illustration. Is there something unusual about the dog in the image? Does the title, *Pawcasso*, remind you of anything or anyone? Is Pawcasso likely to be the dog or the human? What sort of story do you expect here? Will it be funny or serious? Will it be a novel or a graphic novel? What element or elements on the cover helped you answer these questions?

Opening pages

Open the book and read the two pages before the Title Page. Why do you think Remy Lai decided to include these pages before the story begins? Before answering, think about how these pages made you feel just before the story began.



Elements of comic strip fiction and graphic novels

- Read pages 4 and 5 of *Pawcasso* and with your finger trace the direction that you read the story. Did your finger trace a letter Z? If it did that's good because that is how many comic strip fiction and graphic novels are meant to be read. If it didn't, go back and see if you can re-read the pages using the Z-shape. Did the story make more sense this time?
- For older students: not all graphic novels are read left-to-right. Research the term 'Manga' and explain how those books are meant to be read.
- Artists can use **lines and shapes** to communicate other ideas in a story, too. Turn to page 24 and look at the lines that trail behind Pawcasso after he is let off his lead. What do these lines tell us about his speed? Now look at the large panel featuring a freshly washed Pawcasso on page 37. What do the star shapes around his body tell us about how clean he is? Can you find other examples like this in the story?
- Sometimes **sounds** can be shown using words and **visual techniques**. One example of this is on page 27 where the word 'SLAM!' is in a special frame with multiple sharp edges, suggesting that the sound is loud and sharp. Can you find other visual ways sounds are presented in *Pawcasso*?
- **Onomatopoeia** is when words sound like their meanings – for example 'PLOP!' or 'SLAM!'. Graphic novels often feature onomatopoeic words in a different way to the other text on the page. For instance, they are often presented in a different font, size, colour and can be in ALL CAPS. How many examples of onomatopoeic words can you find in *Pawcasso*?
- The term **panel** is used in graphic novels to describe each sequential image and its accompanying words. Panels are often similar in size but can be bigger or smaller at points as a special way to tell the story. Turn to page 43 to see an example. Why do you think Remy Lai decided to make the panel featuring Pawcasso on a pedestal the largest on the page? Can you find other examples of changing the size or shape of panels to help tell the story anywhere else in *Pawcasso*?

- Panels in comics are often, but not always, framed with a thin, straight black line that forms a box, square or rectangular shape. So, **frames** are the borders around panels.
 - Look at page 110 to see a frame that is not a thin, straight, black line. Why do you think Remy Lai used this kind of frame for this particular panel?
 - Sometimes panels don't have a frame at all. Turn to page 50 and the top image of the children running with Pawcasso. How does not having a frame in the top panel change the mood of the image? Can you find other examples in the story where she has left a frame out and think of reasons why?
 - Turn to page 75 and look at the framing here. Three images are framed and overlaid on an unframed image. Why do you think Remy Lai did this here? [Hint: does it have something to do with the passage of time?]
- A **gutter** is the blank space between panels. This space is often, but not always, thin. Gutters help us understand the transition from one moment to another in a story. Turn to page 26 and describe what happened between the gutters in the bottom three panels.
- Look closely and see if you can work out the difference between **speech balloons** where Jo is speaking out loud and when she is thinking to herself.
- Remy Lai is great at **expressing emotions visually**. Turn to page 124 to see how Jo's eyes change when she is surprised by the growing number of people who have signed the petition. Can you find other examples in the book where emotions are shown visually?

Bringing it Together

Now that you know about panels, frames and gutters, try creating your own short story in a comic format. The story can be about anything you like, but it should include simple text and feature at least six panels.

Further Questions for Older Students

What do you think Jo learned during the story? Before answering the question, think carefully about the sort of person she is at the beginning (for instance, how does she feel about herself, friends and family?), the sort of person she is at the end of the story (how have her views changed?) and the characters or events that occurred during the story that caused this change.

Literature

A metaphor is a literary device that imaginatively compares two things that are different but have some similarity. Can you think of how the fighting between the Duchamps and the Picassoes might be a metaphor for something in real life? [Hint: war – whether civil or international, political disputes, intense sporting competitions] What do you think Remy Lai might be saying at the end of the story about resolving disputes? How does the question 'If love comes from the heart, does hate come from the brain?' relate to this idea? Does social media – in the form of the online VIP forum and the Dog with Basket petition – help resolve the dispute in the story or enflame it?

About the author

Remy Lai studied fine arts, with a major in painting and drawing. She was born in Indonesia, grew up in Singapore, and currently lives in Brisbane, where she writes and draws stories for kids with her two dogs by her side. She is also the author of the critically acclaimed *Pie in the Sky* and *Fly on the Wall*. Follow Remy on Instagram @rrremylai. www.remylai.com



In the author's own words

'I was racking my brain about what to write for my third book when my editor suggested I write a dog book, since he knew I love dogs. He had also seen some of the short comics I made about one of my dogs called Poop Roller.

'I wanted to write about a dog who is heavily inspired by my dog, but I needed more than a story about a dog who rolls in poop – because, a story that does not make!



'I also didn't want to write about a dog who performs heroic feats like saving kids who fall in wells because that's all been done, and my Poop Roller is hardly heroic. I love him hugely, but I really, really would not rely on him to save me from mortal danger since his most amazing feat so far is his persistence at begging for snacks.



'Then I remembered a statue of a dog carrying a basket that I once came across in Stones Corner, Brisbane, and I realised that this is an amazing feat! Not to mention super adorable.

'Pawcasso being a supawmodel is very similar to Poop Roller. He's so pretty.'

- Remy Lai