

## Beyond superheroes: comics get serious.

by Stephen Weiner

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IN 1986, GRAPHIC NOVELS appeared to be ready to break into the mainstream. That year, Pantheon released Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a holocaust survival story, and DC Comics published *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, both sophisticated, much promoted superhero books aimed at adult readers. The breakthrough never came in 1986, but it is happening now. Graphic novels have never been hotter, due primarily to many high-profile books published during the last several years. In 2000, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan; The Smartest Kid on Earth* and Joe Sacco's nonfiction book on Bosnia, *Safe Area Gora de*, found almost unanimous critical acclaim, and there has also been growing interest in graphic novels from those working in other media. Kevin Smith, who writes some of the best of the current superhero stories available, made the comics industry the focus of his 1996 movie, *Chasing Amy*. Last year, Michael Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, used the early comic book industry as its backdrop.

Most of the attention, however, is the result of the graphic novels themselves, whose subjects have expanded beyond standard comic book material. Instead of limiting themselves to the superhero genre, many graphic novels are now concerned with conflicts often found in more accepted forms of literature. Academic programs on comics and graphic novels have also been spawned, giving the form a new kind of critical approval. The impact of Spiegelman cannot be overlooked. After *Maus* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, cartoonists saw, perhaps for the first time, a growing mainstream readership for graphic novels.

### Coming to terms

The term graphic novel was coined by veteran cartoonist Will Eisner in 1978 while trying to pitch a collection of stories told in comic book format to a trade publisher. The term has come to mean a sophisticated story told between two covers, usually a 64-, 128-, or 176-page book, as opposed to a collection of comic strips in book form or classic comic books. The term can also refer to nonfiction narrated in the same format. A similar but different kind of publication is the "trade paperback," a collection of episodes in comic form that attempts to tell a complete story within the boundaries of the ongoing series, such as *Spiderman*. The trade paperback, considered a "cousin" to the graphic novel, is one measure of the field's growing acceptance.

Over the past two decades, the field of graphic novels has changed dramatically as American cartoonists have studied Japanese and European cartooning. Also, several foreign graphic novels have been translated into English. Some titles have found their way into libraries, but most have not. For the purposes of this article, commonly collected comics such as Charles Schulz's "Peanuts," or Herge's "Tintin" will be excluded, although they are enjoyed by adults as well as children.

### Who's who

Today's readers of graphic novels are different from those of 20 or even ten years ago. The appeal to adolescent power fantasies remains, but other interest has broadened considerably. Several contemporary series appeal to women and girls, possibly a result of the Japanese and European influences, where comics are more widely read. There is also a significant readership among adults who have a nostalgic attachment to the comics format but remain open to new kinds of stories told in comics form.

While the largest American publisher remains DC Comics, there are several small presses making inroads with literate and entertaining books, e.g., Drawn & Quarterly, Highwater, Topshelf, Dark Horse, Viz Communications, Cartoon Books, and Abstract Studio. Libraries should be sure to collect the giants of graphic novels, such as Spiegelman's *Maus* (Pantheon), Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (DC, 1993), and Jules Feiffer's *Tantrum* (Fantagraphics, 1977), the story of a middle-aged man who refuses to grow up.

### Kinds of graphic novels

The Superhero Story involves a character such as Superman, who is familiar to most readers, but in a tale that wouldn't be successful in the monthly series because it explores some strange aspect of a normally sanitized character. A good example is Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 10th anniversary ed. (DC Comics, 1997), in which a moody Batman, at 50, emerges from retirement to save Gotham City once again.

The Human Interest Story covers a broad range of subjects and is similar to what one might find in regular fiction. A fine example is Dan Clowes's excellent *Ghost World* (see p. 57), which focuses on two teenagers as they face life choices following high school graduation.

Manga are Japanese comics that are an outgrowth of anime (Japanese animation). The artwork resembles cartoons rather than the representational "action figure"

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models that are the basis of the visual aspect of the superhero comic book. A good example is Tezuka's historical narrative *Adolf* (see p. 57). Quite a bit of manga has been translated into English.

Nonfiction are not novels but still narrative in nature. They range from Larry Gonick's *Cartoon History of the United States*, rev. ed. (HarperCollins, 1991) to Harvey Pekar's poignant experience with cancer in *Our Cancer Year* (Four Walls, Eight Windows, 1994).

Adaptations or Spinoffs contain stories of well-known characters, such as Luke Skywalker, adapted to graphic format. A solid example is P. Craig Russell's *Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book Stories* (NBM, 1997).

Satire questions our political system or social mores. Break-out underground artist Robert Crumb's work epitomizes the use of satire in the comic format.

### Collecting graphic novels

Most librarians have shied away from embracing the graphic novel format for a couple of reasons. Mainstream comics have been viewed as a forum for male power fantasies. However, it is possible to build a credible graphic novel collection that does not focus on violence and sexual exploitation. The other reason that librarians have been hesitant to collect comics and graphic novels is because reading comics is an acquired skill. In prose, readers read from left to right. In comics, the visual aspect guides the process. Thus, readers follow pictures as opposed to sentences, which takes some practice to master.

Over the past decade, however, children's and young adult librarians have made an effort to introduce a wider variety of graphic novels into their collections; their impulse is fueled by the high readability of the books and reinforced by the high circulation. However, those buying for adult collections have not made similar efforts for their readers, perhaps because the term adult, when associated with the comic book industry, has often referred to pornographic materials. This definition no longer holds: owing to the more mature work produced in graphic novel form, adult doesn't necessarily mean pornographic but may refer to philosophical and emotional content aimed at adult and mature teens. You can be sure adults are reading these books: Diamond Distributors, the largest distributor of graphic novels in the United States, grossed over \$86 million on graphic novels, comic books, and trade paperbacks combined in 1999, and its research reveals that the average graphic novel reader is 29 years old. Diamond Distributors offers a special purchasing program for libraries ([www.diamondcomics.com/](http://www.diamondcomics.com/)

[bookshelf/ordering.html](#)).

### Selecting graphic novels

If your library has as one of its goals to build a community of lifelong readers, then collecting graphic novels might well dovetail nicely with the mission. Be forewarned that censorship, both internal and external, is an issue. Staff censorship--driven by bias about the comics medium--is much stronger than external censorship.

Finding graphic novels, a difficult task in past years, has gotten easier. As they have gained in popularity, these books have been picked up by large distributors and are reviewed in library trade journals.

Librarians interested in graphic novels should visit a local specialty shop in order to learn more and see the books firsthand and make sure that the store carries the kind of book you want your library to collect. To locate a specialty store, call the Comics Shop Locater Service (888-266-4226).

Otherwise, turn to bibliographies. One example is D. Aviva Rothschild's *Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide to Book-Length Comics* (Libraries Unlimited, 1995), which annotates over 300 graphic novels. [Two other options are written by the author: *100 Graphic Novels for Public Libraries* (Kitchen Sink, 1996) and *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* (NBM, 2001), which includes a collection development supplement in the library edition, ISBN 1-56163-285-6.--Ed.]

This year, two meetings can also help expand your collection development expertise. At the Public Library Association (PLA) meeting, a morning panel on March 16, *Superheroes and Beyond*, will offer an overview of issues relating to libraries collecting graphic novels. Also, on June 14, 2002, the paperback committee of the Young Adult Library Services division of the American Library Association will present *Getting Graphic at Your Library* in a preconference. This day-long meeting will cover issues related to graphic novels in libraries, with prominent comics creators Art Spiegelman, Neil Gaiman (*Sandman*, *American Gods*), Jeff Smith (*Bone*), and Coleen Doran (*A Distant Soil*) in attendance.

### When you've got them

Graphic novels are cataloged in a multitude of ways. Some libraries place them in the comic strip section. Others have a separate section similar to many video or audiobook collections. Graphic novels may also be integrated into the fiction section or the appropriate nonfiction section. Some libraries cross-catalog graphic novels in an effort to attract

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readers to several areas of the collection. If you are starting a collection, it may be better to group the graphic novels together in order to draw attention to them.

Many graphic novels come in paperback only. For that reason, some libraries reinforce the books or actually rebind them prior to circulation. Because of their high circulation, the books often need replacement, which makes weeding a fairly easy task.

If you do purchase a substantial graphic novel collection, you will want to let your patrons know about it. Consider dedicating time and resources to presenting the books in displays. Some libraries shelve graphic novels face out. Still others have a permanent graphic novel display. Author programs are also a possibility.

The books included in this bibliography are intended to support adult and academic collections, although there may be some overlap with the YA collection. The books express adult issues or demand adult cognitive abilities to comprehend. Although several of the books contain some sexual element, none focuses on graphic sexuality. If these books were movies, they would fall in the PG-13/R range. Stars [\*] refer to core titles.

### ON THE ART

--Robbins, Trina. *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women's Comics from Teens to Zines*. Chronicle Bks. 1999. 142p. ISBN 0-8118-2199-4. pap. \$17.95.

In this handy book, comics historian Robbins focuses on comic strips and books created and drawn by women. Abundantly illustrated.

--Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. Phaidon. 2001. 240p. ISBN 0-7148-3993-0. pap. \$29.95.

Sabin's interpretive history of the comics medium is well researched and presented. He traces the history of comics from the 12th century to contemporary graphic novels. The many illustrations are well chosen and illuminate the text. (LJ 4/1/97)

--Spiegelman, Art & Chip Kidd. *Jack Cole and Plastic Man: Forms Stretched to Their Limits!* Chronicle Bks. 2001. 144p. ISBN 0-8118-3179-5. pap. \$19.95.

This book combines an essay about the creative, chaotic, and ultimately tragic life of cartoonist Jack Cole written by Spiegelman and originally appearing in *The New Yorker*, with numerous illustrations representing Cole's cartooning career. While this book will naturally interest Spiegelman's

readers and students of comics history, its creative design will draw in new readers.

### SERIES

--Eisner, Will. *The Spirit Archives*. Vol. 4. DC Comics: Warner Bros. (Archives). 2001. 224p. ISBN 1-563897-714-8. \$49.95.

Eisner's *The Spirit* was a model for adventure comics when it appeared in the 1940s and continues to be influential to this day. The "Archive" series reprints stories from several superhero comics originally published in the 1940s, in full color with contributor's notes. These well-produced volumes will appeal to a variety of comics readers. Other "Archive" series include "Batman," "Superman," "The Green Lantern," and "Blackhawks."

-- \* Gaiman, Neil & others. *The Doll's House*. Vol. 11. DC Comics: Warner Bros. (Sandman). 1991. ISBN 0-930289-59-5. pap. \$19.95.

Gaiman's "Sandman" series was one of the major successes of the 1990s, mixing history, mythology, and fantasy in a manner numerous readers had never encountered before. This particular volume, *The Doll's House*, articulates why godhood exists. Collect the series if you can.

--Giardino, Vittorio. *Loss of Innocence*. NBM. (Jew in Communist Prague, Vol. 1). 1997. 48p. ISBN 1-56163-180-9. pap. \$11.95.

This charming and sad book recounts the childhood of Jonas Finkel, whose father is incarcerated for no apparent reason in 1950s Prague. Told in clear, understated illustrations, this book exemplifies the type of human interest graphic novel that has been available overseas for years. Also from NBM: *Franz Kafka's Give It Up! And Other Short Stories* (illustrated by Peter Kuper). (LJ 5/1/97)

-- \* Moore, Terry. *I Dream of You*. Vol. 2. reprint. Abstract Studio. (Strangers in Paradise). 1996. 208p. ISBN 1-892597-01-2. pap. \$16.95. Moore tells of three codependent friends:

Katchoo, explosive and unpredictable; Francine, nurturing and innocent; and David, who enters their lives with a dark secret from Katchoo's past. While the comics field is notably shy of strong female creators, more and more of the work today appeals to female readers even though it is written and drawn by men, because they are trying to explore, understand, and articulate the female psyche. This series is perhaps the best example of that trend.

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-- \* Smith, Jeff. *Ghost Circles*. Cartoon Bks. (Bone, Vol. 7). 2001. 160p. ISBN 1-888963-08-5. \$26.95.

Smith, a cartoonist in the tradition of Charles Schulz and Chuck Jones, has crafted a humorous adventure story enjoyed by all ages. Here he continues to tell the epic story of the exiled Bone family. Other books in the "Bone" series are *Out from Boneville*, *The Great Cow Race*, *Eyes of the Storm*, and *The Dragonslayer*. Also recommended from Cartoon Books is Linda Medley's *Castle Waiting: The Lucky Road*.

-- \* Tezuka, Osamu. *Adolf: A Tale of the Twentieth Century*. Viz Communications. (Adolf). 1996. 264p. tr. by Yuji Oniki. ISBN 1-56931-058-0. pap. \$16.95.

Tezuka was one of Japan's foremost animators, and this is considered to be his masterwork. A historical narrative of epic proportions, *Adolf* tells the story of three people named Adolf, one being the Nazi dictator. The art is playful, counteracting the serious tone of the narrative. "Adolf" is a finite series, following the characters from early childhood until death. The other titles are *An Exile in Japan*, *The Half-Aryan*, *Days of Infamy, 1945*, and *All That Remains*.

### SINGLE VOLUMES

--Bendis, Brian & Mark Andreyko. *Torso*. Image Comics. 2001. 280p. ISBN 1-58240-174-8. pap. \$24.95.

Bendis is one of the hottest writers in the comic book field today. This book tells of Eliot Ness's (*The Untouchables*) experiences as he becomes police chief of Cleveland and his search for America's first serial killer. Also recommended is Bendis's follow-up, *Fortune and Glory*, describing his attempts to sell *Torso* in Hollywood.

-- \* Brown, Chester. *I Never Liked You: A Comic Book*. Drawn & Quarterly Pubns. 1994. ISBN 0-9696701-6-8. pap. \$12.95.

Brown's depiction of the adolescent need to find a place in society is deadly accurate. Readers will recognize much of their own adolescence in this apparently autobiographical story. The book's cinematic design effectively draws the reader in, making this essential reading.

--Clowes, Daniel. *Ghost World*. 4th ed. Fantagraphics. 2001. 80p. ISBN 1-56097-427-3. pap. \$9.95.

Becky and Enid are best friends as high school ends. However, Enid's vague desire to attend college and Becky's relationship with Josh drives them apart. Clowes masterfully depicts late teenage angst and isolation and

delivers a story with the subtlety of prose fiction. *Ghost World* was adapted into a successful movie in summer 2001.

--Eisner, Will. *A Life Force*. DC Comics: Warner Bros. 2001. 144p. ISBN 1-56389-789-X. pap. \$12.95.

"What is the meaning of life?" Jakob Shtarkah asks as he rescues a cockroach. This mature novel from comics master Eisner focuses on Shtarkah's attempts to realize fully his life after turning 60. The Great Depression is the backdrop for this unexpected and unconventional novel.

--Lutes, Jason. *Berlin: City of Stones*. Drawn & Quarterly Pubns. 2000. 212p. ISBN 1-896597-29-7. pap. \$15.95.

This first volume in a projected trilogy is set during the waning days of the Weimar Republic and focuses on Kurt, a journalist, and Marthe, an art student. Lutes has a feel for the personal and political turmoil in Germany following World War I. The illustrations are subtle and meditative.

--Madden, Matt. *Odds Off*. Highwater Bks. 2000. 96p. ISBN 0-9665363-9-8. pap. \$14.95.

Pre-med student Shirin is frustrated by her relationship with Morgan as well as by her attempts to get into medical school. As her goals become clearer, Shirin is able to see beyond her daily life and so makes critical choices. The black-and-white illustrations nicely support the text. Another recommended book from Highwater is John Porcellino's *Perfect Example*.

-- \* Moore, Alan & Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. reprint. DC Comics: Warner Bros. 1995. 416p. ISBN 0-930289-23-4. pap. \$19.95.

Moore and Gibbons have crafted what many feel is the ultimate superhero story. In a world where Richard Nixon was never impeached, superheroes were outlawed, with the exception of Dr. Manhattan, a human atomically powered and employed by the government. When Dr. Manhattan disappears, it brings all the "normal" superheroes out of hiding, and humanity must face the ways that superpowered individuals could truly change the world as we know it.

-- \* Sacco, Joe. *Palestine*. Fantagraphics. 2001. 288p. ISBN 1-56097-432-X. pap. \$24.95.

A "comics journalist," Sacco has worked for *Newsweek* and received a Guggenheim Fellowship after publishing *Palestine*. This nonfiction book details his experiences during visits to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Information is presented in a clear, articulate manner on a

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critical topic. Also recommended is his *Safe Area Gora de: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-95*.

--Seth. *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*. Drawn & Quarterly Pubns. 2000. 176p. ISBN 1-896597-31-9. \$24.95; pap. 1999. 163p. ISBN 1-896597-06-8. \$12.95.

This bittersweet autobiographical tale tells of Seth's attempts at maturity as he drifts in and out of relationships while searching for information about "Kalo," a mysterious cartoonist who placed a piece with *The New Yorker* in the 1950s. While readers might squirm at Seth's self-delusions, the conclusion reminds us of the redemptive power of art.

--Sturm, James. *The Golem's Mighty Swing*. Drawn & Quarterly Pubns. 2001. 120p. ISBN 1-896597-45-9. pap. \$12.95.

This book focuses on a traveling Jewish team in the early days of baseball. Artist/writer Sturm delivers a bittersweet tale that should appeal to baseball fans in a manner similar to Eliot Asinof's prose history, *Eight Men Out* (Holt, 2000. reprint).

--Talbot, Bryan. *The Tale of One Bad Rat*. Dark Horse Comics. 1995. ISBN 1-56971-077-5. pap. \$14.95.

This story relies on the children's tales by Beatrix Potter and focuses on Helen, an incest survivor. Helen uses Potter's life as her guide and visits places that had significance to the author. When she lands a job at an inn once visited by Potter, Helen gains the strength to confront her abusers and successfully move on with her life.

-- \* Thompson, Craig. *Good-bye, Chunky Rice*. Top Shelf Prods. 1999. 128p. ISBN 1-891830-09-0. pap. \$14.95.

Inseparable friends Chunky Rice (a turtle) and Dandel (a mouse) part because Chunky longs for a life of adventure, and Dandel is overcome with longing and loneliness. The drawings are playful and confident, and the book is revealing and deep. This book is a real find. Other recommended books from Top Shelf include Tom Hart's *The Collected Hutch Owen*.

--Tomine, Adrian. *Sleepwalk: And Other Stories*. Drawn & Quarterly Pubns. 1998. 112p. ISBN 1-896597-12-2. pap. \$12.95.

Tomine is a master of pseudorealistic stories in the tradition of short story writer Raymond Carver. This understated, black-and-white collection should satisfy fiction aficionados in any medium.

--Ware, Chris. *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. Pantheon. 2000. 380p. ISBN 0-375-40453-8. \$27.50.

Winner of the Guardian's First Book Award, this multilayered book about protagonist Jimmy Corrigan's search for his real father is difficult but rewarding. The drawings are deceptively simple: the reader is drawn into Jimmy's world only to find the visual disorientation reflects his state of mind and experiences. (LJ 11/15/00)

### WEB RESOURCES

--Topica [www.topica.com/lists/GNLIB-L](http://www.topica.com/lists/GNLIB-L)

This is an electronic discussion list about graphic novels in libraries. There is invaluable information on collection development and cataloging issues, as well as informal reviews. To join, send an e-mail to [gnlib-l-subscribe@topica.com](mailto:gnlib-l-subscribe@topica.com).

--Links to Comics and Graphic Novel Sites [my.voyager.net/~sraiteri/comicslinks.htm](http://my.voyager.net/~sraiteri/comicslinks.htm)

This excellent resource links to library graphic novel web pages, pages of graphic novel publishers, as well as pages of comic book creators.