

## Graphic Novel

Charles Hatfield

Nowhere has the fissure between adult-sanctioned and self-selected children's reading been more boldly marked than in regard to comics, an internationally popular form that has often been seen as the province of amoral profiteers rather than a domain of children's literature. If comics have at last "arrived" as a children's genre, then this new acceptance has been spurred by enthusiasm for the graphic novel, the bulwark of comics' recent claims to literariness.

The term "graphic novel" has fuzzy borders and origins. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines "graphic" as "of or pertaining to drawing or painting," and "novel" as "a long fictional prose narrative," but the phrase "graphic novel" means more than the sum of its parts. Although the equation, minus the requirement of prose, is not far off the mark, the term's popular usage more closely reflects a desire to ditch the troublesome word "comics" than it does any semantic nicety. Perhaps because "graphic novel" is the kind of phrase that might be independently coined in different times and places, it has three main origin stories. The better-known story centers on Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978), among the first books to bill itself as a "graphic novel," and certainly the first self-styled graphic novel by a veteran comics artist with a strong reputation (who, though

credited with legitimizing the term, knew he had not created the genre). Yet *Contract* is not a novel per se but a short story cycle centered on a common locale. While it is the most celebrated of the candidates for "first" graphic novel, its novelistic character is doubtful, and that fundamental uncertainty has stayed with the genre since. From the start, then, the phrase represented less a precise analogy to the literary novel than a bid for status.

Another, lesser-known origin story centers on fan historian Richard Kyle, who, around 1964–65, began using the phrases "graphic story" and "graphic novel," a practice encouraged by a fanzine to which Kyle contributed, Bill Spicer's *Graphic Story Magazine* (from 1967). It may also center on George Metzger, whose underground-style comic *Beyond Time and Again* (1976) billed itself as a graphic novel two years before Eisner's *Contract*. (Regarding the disputed origins of the term, see Harvey 2001.) In the years after Eisner, myriad other publications that had not originally been billed as graphic novels came to be remembered, and sometimes republished, under that tag. At the start, none of this publishing activity had children or children's books in mind.

The term "graphic novel" describes neither a discrete literary genre nor a specific publishing format. Rather, it denotes a sensibility: an attitude taken toward comics. As cartoonist-historian Eddie Campbell (2001) has said, the acceptance of the term "embod[ies] the arrival of an idea." This "idea" aligns comics with a literary aesthetic, a seriousness as expressed by readers

who come from multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives, including those who see in comics a form deserving literary recognition; aesthetes interested in comics as a species of visual art; confirmed participants in comics subculture, for whom the term offers a way of talking about their interests without needing to go on the defensive; publishers and booksellers, for whom the graphic novel is promising new turf for commercial exploitation; and proponents of children's reading, who may see in comics either an emergent genre, perhaps even the linchpin of a new visual literacy, or the welcome return of an old genre. The "graphic novel" label is not so much a single mindset as a coalition of interests that happen to agree on one thing—that comics deserve more respect.

Respect for the genre may derive from standards that presuppose artistic autonomy from the marketplace: literariness, aesthetic delectation, or avant-garde experimentalism; or, respect might be conferred by the market, wherein artistic creation is assumed to be subject to and legitimized by the test of popularity. In some instances, advocates of the graphic novel are contrarily driven by both standards—that is, by both a Romantic assertion of the individual artist, in spite of any commercial considerations, and by a desire that comics should participate, in the noisiest way possible, in the larger free-for-all of mass culture. These competing interests have found common cause only because comics, morphed into graphic novels, have become recognized as a "serious" form. This consensus has come just in time to align with other trends in our

culture, including abiding concerns about children's putative illiteracy, the hyping of "new" visual literacies, and growing anxiety among publishers about the decline in book-reading. Together these factors have legitimized comics as a new focus of publishing in general, and children's publishing in particular.

Given the long-standing exclusion of comics from children's literature, the recent touting of the graphic novel as a children's book genre is paradoxical and ironic. The world's most popular and influential comics have always been rooted in ideas about childhood, and they have had millions of child readers. For comics to arise now as a newly recognized children's genre—against a neglected backdrop of comics for and about children that spans Wilhelm Busch, R. F. Outcault, Winsor McCay, Grace Drayton, James Swinnerton, Harold Gray, Hergé, André Franquin, Crockett Johnson, Osamu Tezuka, Carl Barks, Leo Baxendale, John Stanley, Charles Schulz, Hank Ketcham, Tove Jansson, Quino, Warren Kremer, Bill Watterson, and countless others—requires an act of historical amnesia. If interest in the graphic novel has resolved the long-standing border dispute between comics and children's book publishing, it has done so, arguably, at the cost of eliding the very history of children's comics.

In the United States, the comic book was father to the graphic novel. For more than half a century, comic books, as developed in the early to mid-1930s, were America's definitive medium for long-form comics narrative. Unfortunately, this medium, which at the outset was frankly mercenary in character, attracted



moral panic and public opprobrium, coming to a head in the early 1950s. The comic book industry reacted by collapsing into severe self-censorship. The Comics Code, adopted by most comics publishers from late 1954, was a desperate, rearguard move by the publishers to shield themselves from the consequences of their own carelessness—for the comic book business was a benighted one, unable or unwilling to follow the curve of its development by making honest distinctions between children's and adult comics. In the early 1950s, *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* had sat on newsstands alongside Grand Guignol horror and titillating romance comics, all of them accessible ten-centers tossed together higgledy-piggledy in a generative, arguably subversive, stew. In response, a massive and censorious moral campaign—in which children's publishing professionals, teachers, and librarians played no small part—served to corner the comic book medium, damp down its troublesome vitality, and confine it to the margins of the culture, where it languished (Beatty 2005; Hadju 2008; Nyberg 1998).

Other factors were involved too: the mushrooming influence of television; the destabilization and shrinking of magazine distribution; and falling profit margins brought on by prices stubbornly fixed at what, it was assumed, a young child could afford. This perfect storm of factors wounded the medium practically beyond mending, and memories of the million-selling comic books of the glory days (the 1940s to early 1950s) quickly dimmed. This postwar furor was not confined to the United States, but was mirrored by moral panics

elsewhere, for example, in Canada, Britain, and Western Europe (Lent 1999). In America, recovery from this tempestuous period would be long, strained, and never quite complete.

When recovery came, it did so, ironically, due to developments in areas from which young children were pointedly excluded: the hippyesque hedonism and radical ideological fury of underground comix, which vented a long pent-up reaction against comics' self-censorship; the growth of a connoisseur culture via a network of comic book shops for older hobbyists, which depended on a specialized distribution system known as the *direct market*; and the resultant rise of alternative comics for adults. Together these factors nurtured an ethos of individualistic, at times radically Romantic, self-assertion among comics artists, as well as an intense sense of belonging among members of the subculture—that is, fans (Hatfield 2005). With its roots in these decidedly adult venues, the graphic novel's recent emergence as a work for children is paradoxical.

The example of Jeff Smith's series *Bone* (the inaugural offering in Scholastic's Graphix line) underscores this paradox. *Bone* was published by Graphix between 2005 and 2009 in nine volumes. Yet the series, comprising one epic fantasy story, had previously been published by Smith's own imprint, Cartoon Books, over some thirteen years (1991–2004). A small, self-publishing outfit, Cartoon Books depended on the direct market's unusual trade terms—essentially, a subscription system. Cartoon Books released *Bone* first as a series of traditional comic books (fifty-five issues,



1991–2004), then as a series of trade-paperback compilations (nine volumes, 1993–2004), and finally as a single 1,300-page volume (2004). In essence, Smith and company were able to gain traction by taking advantage of the direct market's specialized distribution apparatus, which served to bring to market independent, small-press comics as de facto heirs to the underground. *Bone* was thus a "children's" comic birthed in an underground tradition, and, as such, enjoyed the loyal support of comic book hobbyists with an ideological commitment to individual self-expression and "creators' rights." The series has since sold millions worldwide, in sixteen languages, and its Graphix editions have been very successful. *Bone* thus clearly demonstrates the process of moving from esoteric comic book fandom to mainstream book-trade success. Its republication by Scholastic marked a signal moment in the emergence of graphic novels for younger readers.

Besides shifts in readership and reading habits that may be affected by making novel-length comics available to children, the fact that we now pay serious attention to comics at all is important. Genres, after all, are socially as well as aesthetically founded; therefore, changes in reception are changes in genre. Inasmuch as graphic novels are now being recognized inside the borders of American children's literature, a new genre is being willed into existence. This is not to say that children's comics have never existed until now, but rather that graphic novels *as a genre of American children's book publishing* are just now coming into their own. Consider the launching of publishing programs

like Scholastic's Graphix imprint, Papercutz (2005), First Second Books (2006), and TOON Books (2008); librarians' initiatives such as the Young Adult Library Services Association's "Great Graphic Novels for Teens" program (2007); the plethora of recent books designed to facilitate collection development (e.g., Lyga 2004; Pawuk 2007; Weiner 2005) or classroom teaching with comics (e.g., Cary 2004; Gorman 2003; Thompson 2008); and literacy learning initiatives such as The Comic Book Project (2001) and the Maryland Comic Book Initiative (2004). Such attention is a new phenomenon for comics in the United States.

Granted, the graphic novel ideal may hide as much about comics as it discovers; for example, it gives us no way to understand or value vintage comic strips and panel cartoons. This may explain why so many comics enthusiasts, among them cartoonists, editors, publishers, and curators, dislike the "graphic novel" label. No matter: the phrase helps get things done. Witness this introductory pitch from a 2007 pamphlet for Scholastic's Graphix line:

Graphic novels are hot! No longer an underground movement appealing to a small following of enthusiasts, graphic novels have emerged as a growing segment of book publishing, and have become accepted by librarians and educators as mainstream literature for children and young adults—literature that powerfully motivates kids to read. (Crawford and Weiner 2007, 13)

Clearly, the graphic novel represents for children's publishing a way of eliding the controversies that once



clung so stubbornly to the idea of children reading comics. What has changed is not so much the comics themselves (though projects like *Bone* are something new) as their positioning in children's culture. After all, comics-reading has never been strictly an "underground movement" appealing only to "enthusiasts." Even novel-length comics are not new: witness the European album tradition, or collected Japanese manga. But what has emerged from the underground movement—from the discourse of enthusiasts—is the graphic novel ideal as a way of conferring legitimacy on comics. The genre's new invocation of literariness has served to bring comics into the fold of children's publishing. Although it is the product of an underground and disreputable subculture, the graphic novel has, ironically, negotiated for comics a new visibility as a children's genre.

If the graphic novel ideal in some ways effaces the history of comics, it also, potentially, opens new possibilities for appreciating comics and comics history from around the world. Graphic novel culture, besides representing myriad interests, also represents a dovetailing of traditions drawn from myriad centers of comics worldwide. Yes, the label "graphic novel" is American in origin, but not nearly everything now touted as a graphic novel hails from America. The American graphic novel market is part of a global circulation of comics that has served to educate readers in many countries. Readers of English-language comics are increasingly aware of European comics, even those produced by small presses and avant-gardists—an

awareness fostered by North American publishers of graphic novels such as Drawn and Quarterly, Fantagraphics, and NBM. Even more obviously, consider the assertive exportation of Japanese manga in many markets, including East Asia, Latin America, and Western Europe, where manga is said to have as much influence as it has had in the United States—which is considerable. Indeed, manga constitute a new "mainstream" in the marketing of comics; they are largely responsible for the recent mushroom growth of graphic novel sections in large U.S. bookstore chains.

These myriad traditions come from cultures where the label "graphic novel" has had little or no impact—where indeed the idea of the graphic novel has not been necessary. After all, francophone *bande dessinée* albums and collected Japanese manga preceded the Anglophone graphic novel culture. Yet such comics have been and will continue to be claimed as part of the creative inspiration for graphic novels in English. They are commonly included in the artistic family, if not the immediate historical lineage, of the graphic novel genre. Eisner, "father" of the genre, claimed as inspiration the so-called woodcut novels of the Depression era, such as Lynd Ward's *Gods' Man* (1929), which were part of an international genre of graphic narrative launched in Western Europe with the seminal works of the Belgian Frans Masereel (see Beronä 2008). More recently, other American artists such as Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware have taken an interest in the pioneering graphic albums of the Swiss Rodolphe Töpffer (1820s–1840s), claimed by many scholars, particularly



in Europe but also increasingly in the United States, as the architect of modern comics and even of graphic novels (Juno 1997; Kunzle 2007). Today, some would cite the pioneering manga of Osamu Tezuka and his successors as another source of inspiration for graphic novels (one can see this debt in, for instance, Scott McCloud).

If, as Jorge Luis Borges observed, artists create their own precursors, then it is safe to say that the past of the graphic novel is continually being re-created and extended, not in a way that obeys a strict historiography, but in an unpredictable accumulation: a continual layering of precursors and inspirations that takes in a huge range of cartooning and comics originally far distant from today's graphic novel ideal. The graphic novel has been independently invented or anticipated in multiple nations and cultures; work conceived without graphic novels in mind has since been claimed as part of the genre's inheritance. The eclecticism of the graphic novel, then, extends not only to what is being made available, often across national boundaries, today; it also extends to the very history of the genre, which is no history and all comics histories at once. Positing something as a forerunner or early example of graphic novels is a radical act of reframing that has become common: a move that historically decontextualizes but also makes possible the discovery of new lineages, new lines of influence, and, ultimately, new histories.

The graphic novel ideal may yet provide us with ways of taking varied historical traces and international

influences seriously, of exhuming and reviving interest in old comics, of awakening awareness of comics across cultural borders, and of discovering the rudiments of an international visual language. Hopefully, we will see in the years ahead much more historical and critical work on the traditions and lines of influence that have fed into the contemporary graphic novel for children. The acceptance of the graphic novel promises not only the continuing creation of splendid long-form comics, but also the historiographical recovery and critical appreciation of a vast, complex, too-little-studied international narrative tradition for younger and older readers alike.