
In the Studio: Visits with Contemporary Cartoonists. By Todd Hignite. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006.

Reviewed by Jan Susina

Comics and graphic novels have clearly come of age. They are everywhere—libraries, bookstores, and classrooms. With comics, there is something for everyone, from Jennifer and Matthew Holm's *Babymouse* series for young children to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The appearance of Chris Ware's multiple covers for a single issue of the *New Yorker* to comics appearing in weekly installments in the *New York Times Magazine*—which is quite an accomplishment given that the paper of record still refuses to publish Sunday comics—to the 2005 critically acclaimed traveling art exhibition "Master of American Comics" suggest that not only have comics come of age, but they have become respectable. However, it is fair to say there are still plenty of comics that provide the plots for the some of the more cheesy blockbuster films that can be found playing at your local metroplex as well as those more challenging ones that will not see distribution beyond your local comic bookstore.

Comics are both high art and popular culture, visual and verbal art, including readership that crosses between children and adults. They seem to be everywhere these days, especially in the hands of child and adolescent readers. Charles Hatfield's comprehensive essay review, "Comic Art, Children's Literature, and the New Comics Studies," is an excellent source of critical information

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and scholarship for those working in children's and adolescent literature who want to explore the intersections of comics and children's literature and culture.

In the Studio, which collects the interviews that Hignite, the founding editor of *Comic Art* magazine, supervised is another excellent book to add to the growing body of scholarship on comics. Hignite and the artists he interviews use the term "comics" to refer to comic books, newspaper strips, gag cartoons, caricatures, woodcut novels, and illustrated books. This collection could have appropriately been subtitled "What We Talk About When We Talk About Comics." It provides the reader with the wonderful opportunity of listening to established cartoon artists discuss their own work and their literary and visual influences as they pull out and share examples of the visual stuff that clutters up their work spaces and imaginations and frequently comes out transformed into their comics. Hignite selected a limited group of nine major contemporary American cartoonists—Ivan Brunetti, Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, Robert Crumb, Jaime Hernandez, Gary Panter, Seth, Art Spiegelman, and Chris Ware—and talked with them at length about their art. It would have been helpful to have a couple of female cartoonists included, such as Lynda Barry, Phoebe Gloeckner, or Alison Bechdel. While one might quibble about the selection of cartoonists included in this collection, they are significant and have interesting things to say about comics. This series of interviews makes a great companion to either Ivan Brunetti's

edited *Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories* (Yale UP, 2006) or Harvey Pekar and Anne Elizabeth Moore's *The Best American Comics: 2006* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006). One can read the comics in those two outstanding compilations and then move on to the extended discussions of comics by their creators in Hignite's volume. However, like any good comic, the interviews collected by Hignite are much more than words. What makes *In the Studio* exceptional is the abundance of illustrations from the artists' sketchbooks, published or unpublished work, or their personal collections. These cartoonists show the toys, magazines, album covers, posters, and book jackets that have inspired them. What comes through in these interviews is that these artists have deep appreciation for, knowledge about, and massive personal collections of comics from the earlier in the twentieth century. These are the kids that started reading and collecting comic books as kids. They began to copy them and never gave up. While there are excellent collections of critical essays by scholars examining the image-text dialogue at the heart of comics and graphic novels, such as Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester's *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (Mississippi UP, 2004), it is more immediate and revealing when the artists themselves discuss their own texts and goals. The interviews focus on the tools of the trade and discuss how these artists survive economically and artistically as comic book artists. Given the autobiographical nature of most of these artists' texts, interviews seem a very natural

way to explore their meaning. These interviews read like a visual counterpart of the long-running *Paris Review* interviews with writers. Not only are they accomplished artists, but they are also articulate and self-aware critics of the comic medium. It is revealing how Jaime Hernandez, best known for *Love and Rockets*, explains his appreciation of Bob Bolin's work in *Little Archie* and how it affected his writing. Seth acknowledges deep appreciation for the "quiet everyday humor" (216) of John Stanley's *Marge Little Lulu* or Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*.

These artists discuss other visual influences as well. Robert Crumb notes the importance of Peter Brughel and Hieronymous Bosch. He recalls how he refused a request from an Austrian gallery that wanted to exhibit his work along with Brughel: "I said, 'no, no, no—the comparison would start to reveal all the weakness in my work'; he added, 'He's the best—nobody ever topped him as far as I'm concerned' (13). Not surprisingly, Charles Burns talks about the appeal of the Aurora monster model kits and Tops Chewing Gum cards featuring characters from the TV series "The Outer Limits." Ivan Brunetti addresses both the importance of Wassily Kandinsky's painting "Tente" as well the "mathematically precise compositions" of Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy* (279) to his work.

The interviews explore other art projects in addition to comics. Crumb talks about his new book-length project and provides illustrations of his adaptation of the *Book of Genesis*. Maybe it's a stretch from Mr. Natural

to God, but maybe it isn't. Gary Painter, who is best known for his *Jimbo* series as well as his designs of the set for the TV series "Peewee's Play House," discusses his light show collaborations with Joshua White, who created the original psychedelic light shows for the Fillmore East. In addition to the interviews with Crumb and Daniel Clowes, the other standout interview is with the brilliant Chris Ware, best known for *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*. Like many of the comics that these artists create, the interviews are highly autobiographical and self-revealing. Ware praises Frank King for his *Bobby Make-Believe*, a sort of midwestern version of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, done before King created *Gasoline Alley*. Ware also introduces a fan letter that Charles Schulz wrote to King, calling him "the best comic strip artist working today," and "the only one who really understands the medium." (237). Ware's knowledge of the history of comics is vast. He has shown his expertise in his editing of a *McSweeney's* issue (Volume 13, 2004) devoted to comics whose dust jacket features his "metaphysical defense" of comics (237), which is alone worth the cost of the journal. In his interview, Ware touches on Rodolphe Topffer, credited as the inventor of the comic strip; children's book illustrator Richard McGuire, who he considers to be "one of the best artists in the world" (250); and the outsider artist Henry Darger, whose Chicago apartment Ware was able to visit before it was dismantled. According to Ware, Crumb's "A Short History of America" is "the greatest

comic strip ever drawn,” adding that he steals from it “probably more than any other single page” (259).

This collection of interviews is an absolute treasure and deserves to be shelved next to Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (HarperCollins, 1993) and Chris Ware’s astonishing *McSweeney’s* volume devoted to comics. For anyone interested in comics, *In the Studio* is an important source of visual and verbal information about how and

why comics work and what motivates their creators to produce them.

Work Cited

Hatfield, Charles. “Comic Art, Children’s Literature, and the New Comics Studies.” *The Lion and Unicorn* 30 (2006): 360–82.

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