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What Is a Graphic Novel?

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Source: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 81, No. 2, Graphic Literature (Mar. - Apr., 2007), pp. 13-15

Published by: University of Oklahoma

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40159289>

Accessed: 23-08-2015 10:50 UTC

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artist came as close to poetic perfection as George Herriman (1880–1944), author of *Krazy Kat*, which appeared in newspapers from 1913 until the author's death. Like few others, Herriman developed his own "voice" both in his written and visual language to create a work beloved by some of the most highly regarded artists and intellectuals of the time. Gilbert Seldes, cultural essayist par excellence, praised it in his now-classic 1924 book *The Seven Lively Arts* as "the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America to-day."

Herriman used the core dynamic of his three principal characters—lovesick Krazy Kat, brick-throwing Ignatz Mouse, and dutiful Offica Pup—like a sonnet form, endlessly riffing on the characters' relationships to get at something profoundly tragic and funny about life. One full-page Sunday strip from 1937 exemplifies the many beauties of *Krazy Kat*. Over the course of several panels, Krazy seeks seclusion under a tree and begins writing in a diary. Little hearts bubble out of its pages as she does so. She speaks to herself in the oddball patois that is one of the strip's hallmarks. "I are alone," she says, "Jetz me . . . an' jetz my dee-dee diary." She puts the diary under a rock and incants over it, "Now beck into sigglution, witch only these kobbil rocks, this blue bin butch-the moon an' the dokk, dokk night know. An' they won't tell-you is illone." The final panel, stretching the width of the page, shows all the other characters reading the book after she has left. In a single page, Herriman creates not a traditional poem but its comic-art equivalent. It has playfulness about both the language ("dee dee diary," "dokk, dokk night") and the images (the background changes from panel to panel though the foreground remains consistent). It also examines great themes like love (those little hearts) and existentialism ("you is illone"). But the essence of the work, called the "gag" panel in this context but akin to a sonnet's final couplet, appears at the end. Herriman bursts the illusion of aloneness and privacy, emphasizing our existence in a community. And it's funny, too. Most important, he communicates this through a wordless image. Impossible in any other medium, here we see an example of cartoon poetry in its purest form.

The comic-book craze that began with the introduction of Superman in 1938 did about as much harm as good for the medium. While massively popularizing the comics' language, cheap comic books also commodified it, leading to a stultification of the form as a mode of personal expression. It wouldn't begin to develop its full

## What Is a Graphic Novel?

EDDIE CAMPBELL

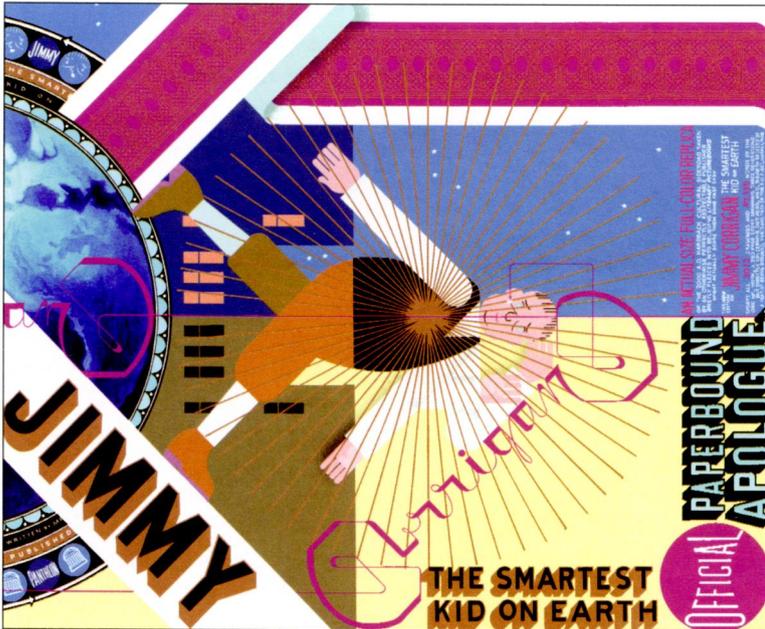
The term *graphic novel* is currently used in at least four different and mutually exclusive ways. First, it is used simply as a synonym for comic books. For instance, I recently read of an "eight-page graphic novel" that I myself once drew. Second, it is used to classify a format—for example, a bound book of comics either in soft- or hardcover—in contrast to the old-fashioned stapled comic magazine. Third, it means, more specifically, a comic-book narrative that is equivalent in form and dimensions to the prose novel. Finally, others employ it to indicate a form that is more than a comic book in the scope of its ambition—indeed, a new medium altogether. It may be added that most of the important "graphic novelists" refuse to use the term under any conditions.

In other words, confusion reigns. However, what is clearly observable is that reaching for a new rubric for the medium as it is now practiced coincides with a large shift in aesthetic outlook. The hallmarks of this new position include a respect for the authorial voice, the longing to establish a permanent bookshelf of great works in a popular art that was previously never more than "throwaway," and a deeper sense of the medium's history than previously prevailed.

It is my belief that, long before the constituencies of the graphic novel have finished arguing among themselves, the strategies that have been devised for long-range pictorial reading will contribute significantly to an emerging new literature of our times in which word, picture, and typography interact meaningfully and which is in tune with the complexity of modern life with its babble of signs and symbols and stimuli.

*Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*,  
by Chris Ware

The graphic novel that has set the standard for the genre, Chris Ware's magnum opus follows the comically cruel adventures of a not-very-smart, no-longer-a-kid Jimmy Corrigan as he searches for his lost father. For more about this title, see page 29.



potential until the 1960s, when a group of West Coast cartoonists began independently publishing comic books and selling them “underground” in head shops and record stores. Robert Crumb became the most famous member of this movement. Though he would go on to become comics’ most brilliant polytechnic, constantly changing styles and subjects, his early work remains his most popular and the closest to what can be called comic poetry. “Freakout Funnies Presents I’m a Ding Dong Daddy,” a two-pager that appeared in the premier issue of *Zap* in 1967, exemplifies the psychedelized free-form style of the underground era. Wordless except for the onomatopoeia of “Snap!” “Bonk!” and “Pow!”, it depicts a big-footed young man having an epiphany on the street. Ecstatic, his mind blown, he runs around hitting his head against the wall, eventually working himself up into such a cosmic frenzy that he explodes into stars. Captured in a thought bubble, the stars dissolve to emptiness as our man from the beginning returns to a state of ignorance. Like the best linguistic poetry, “Ding Dong Daddy” uses the comics language of the past (superhero and gag comics) in radically new ways to express something profound about the culture of its time.

The comics didn’t begin to emerge from the “underground” until the 1980s. *Raw*, a magazine edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, became one of the main factors in the shift. Emphasizing works closer

to self-aware “art” than salacious entertainment, *Raw* asserted itself as comics for grown-ups rather than merely “adults.” Among the many brilliant pieces to have appeared in its pages, Richard McGuire’s “Here” (1989) stands out as one of the most influential works of comics poetry ever published. Its method of using comics to split time into multiple layers that can be read simultaneously still has the shock of the new. It begins as a pregnant woman stands in her living room and announces to her husband, “Honey, I think it’s time.” Fixing the “camera” to the same location, McGuire begins jumping back and forth in time by generations, then centuries, then millennia, exploring the past and future of a single location in space. He does this in six pages by setting smaller panels inside larger ones, which are all labeled with a year, so one begins to read multiple timelines simultaneously, each with its own narrative. Using similarities of composition, movement, and language, McGuire ties it all together into a fluid comment on the nature of time using a form unique to comics.

The youngest comic-book poet of this survey, Anders Nilsen (b. 1973), has been gaining a major reputation among the comixenti for his simple, enigmatic, and memorable work. One of his most interesting recent pieces appeared in the excellent biannual anthology series *Mome*, published by Fantagraphics books (reprinted here on pp. 16–23). The fall 2005 issue included Nilsen’s short work “Event.” The design couldn’t be simpler. Page 1 contains a single gray square with a black border, the size of a postage stamp, accompanying the text, “What you said you would do.” On page 2 a slightly smaller square broken into quadrants of different hues sits over the text “Your reasons for not doing it: stated.” Page 3 contains a larger, dun-colored square over the word “Unstated.” It continues like this, using squares of varying sizes and quantities to represent time, people, events, and consequences affected by and resulting from this original, unnamed inaction. A comics poem with a twist ending, the last panel switches its core geometry to feature red concentric circles over the label “Anxiety experienced every time you think back to this experience for the rest of your life.” While lines like that will not win over any old-school poets, as a whole the work reads as a fascinatingly clever minimalist visual poem. The words and pictures are totally dependent on each other to convey the meaning of the work, which reads as a compressed, playful examination of regret. In sum, it is a graphic poem.

Culturally, at least, serious-minded comic artists have much in common with traditional poets. You could describe each the same way: an underappreciated author who spends years working on a thin volume to be published by a barely surviving independent press for a small, cultlike audience. Until recently, the difference could be measured in the level of respect accorded one over the other, at least in the United States. Comic artists, regardless of their subject matter, have traditionally hovered in the artistic hierarchy somewhere above

pornographers but below children's book authors. But that seems to be changing. There are more comic poets today than at any time before, thanks to the comic medium's explosive growth in the last five years. Like traditional poets who work at the cutting edge of the English language, these artists create the pathways that others will follow.

*New York City*

## The "Woodcut Novel"

A Forerunner to the Graphic Novel

CHRIS LANIER



IT SOUNDS QUIXOTIC to create a book without words, but beginning in the late 1910s, several artists did precisely that. Their books, sometimes called "woodcut novels" or "novels in pictures," don't dispense with character, theme, or plot. Instead of sentences and paragraphs, however, they use a sequence of images (typically executed in a woodcut or wood-engraving technique). The effect is something like a silent film stripped of its intertitles.

The genre's most prolific practitioner, the Belgian anarchist Frans Masereel (1889–1972), set the stage for these mostly leftist works. They are dramas of class struggle, of the degradation and the thrill of urban life. Masereel in particular had a visual poetry that lifts his work beyond mere agitprop; his masterpiece, *Mon Livre d'Heures* (1926), fairly vibrates with Whitmanesque metaphysics.

The wordlessness of the form abetted its content, allowing the books to traverse the nationalist boundaries of language and even the class boundaries of literacy. The "woodcut novel" became an international enterprise, attracting artists from Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Canada, and the United States.

The most ambitious "woodcut novelist" in America was Lynd Ward (1905–85). His first book, *Gods' Man*, sold quite well, despite being published the week of the 1929 stock market crash. (The ensuing depression era would provide him material for several woodcut novels to come.) The genre became successful enough to spawn its own parody: *He Done Her Wrong* (1930), by the cartoonist Milt Gross (1895–1953). The main ideology put forth in its story (about a bumpkin woodsman making his way to the Big City) is the polemic of slapstick.

In retrospect, the political aims of the "woodcut novel" seem as willfully utopian as Esperanto. Regardless, its visual rhetoric is still alive and vital in the work of some contemporary graphic novelists, particularly those of Peter Kuper and Eric Drooker. And the wordless format continues to build bridges between international artists: to mark the year 2000, French comics publisher L'Association released *Comix 2000*, a compendium of 324 wordless comics stories. The artists hailed from twenty-nine different countries, but between the covers of that book they were all speaking the same tongue.