

A **graphic novel** is a book made up of comics content. Although the word "novel" normally refers to long fictional works, the term "graphic novel" is applied broadly and includes fiction, non-fiction, and anthologized work. It is distinguished from the term "comic book", which is generally used for comics periodicals.

Fan historian Richard Kyle coined the term "graphic novel" in an essay in the November 1964 issue of the comics fanzine *Capa-Alpha*.<sup>[1][2]</sup> The term gained popularity in the comics community after the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) and the start of Marvel's Graphic Novel line (1982) and became familiar to the public in the late 1980s after the commercial successes of the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1986 and the collected editions of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986 and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* in 1987. The Book Industry Study Group began using "graphic novel" as a category in book stores in 2001.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Comic Versus Graphic Novel

The term *graphic novel* is contentious. From the 1970s, as the field of comic studies was first emerging as an academic discipline, scholars and others have attempted to define the word *comics* and to generate a critical terminology appropriate to support that definition. The debate over so-called graphic novels touches upon this complex situation. For many, the word *comics* denotes a periodical for children, published on a weekly or monthly basis, sold at newsstands or in speciality comic book stores, often with pages devoted to advertising and, when intended for younger readers, competitions and puzzles. In contrast, *graphic novel* is usually taken to mean a long comic narrative for a mature audience, published in hardback or paperback and sold in bookstores, with serious literary themes and sophisticated artwork.

However, these distinctions are somewhat spurious, as comics are found in all shapes and formats, appeal to many different groups and age ranges, and encompass a huge variety of genres and styles. Moreover, graphic novels are often not original publications but rather repackaged collections of serially published comics. While some material is produced especially for the graphic novel market, bookshops and libraries make no real distinction, so the term *graphic novel* often serves no serious descriptive purpose. It may perhaps be more properly understood as a marketing term intended to resituate comics for an audience uncomfortable with or embarrassed by the associations that surround them (i.e., that a reader of comics is juvenile and subliterate). The extent to which the term signifies a difference in style or form from comics is negligible, but it must be noted that texts that are originally intended for publication in book form sometimes take advantage of the possibilities for a longer narrative, different formats, and superior paper quality, which can be seen as an argument for preserving the distinction between comics and graphic novels.

The argument is further complicated by the fact that the supposed need for the term *graphic novel* grows out of what might be considered American and British cultural prejudices. No equivalent term is required in continental Europe or in Japan, where the acceptance of comics as both an art form and a literary mode is unproblematic. In Europe, and especially in France, comics, or *bande dessinée* ("drawn strips"), have long been collected in high-quality albums, with themes and styles appropriate to a mature audience. This adult comic culture has coexisted very comfortably with comics for children, with no supposed contradiction in terms. In Japan

a huge proportion of the population routinely reads comics (called *manga*), which achieve a dizzying variety of genres and themes. The emergence of the term *graphic novel* must therefore be understood in terms of the cultural attitudes that shaped it.

## From Comic Strips To Comic Books

The term *comics* derives from the so-called funny pages that were found in late 19th- and early 20th-century newspapers. In the United States these [comic strips](#) were first published as separate entities when the modern-format comic book was born, in the 1930s. In Britain at about the same time, publications featuring illustrated text stories slowly gave way to comic strips and then to comic books in their own right. At that time the humour [genre](#) started to give way to action, crime, and [fantasy](#) books. These combined to create the superhero [genre](#), which came to dominate the American market. In Britain war, sports, and [science fiction](#) were most popular. However, even though comic books diversified in terms of content, their association with humorous and juvenile entertainment persisted, so the term *comics* stuck (and is commonly used as a singular noun to refer to the medium). The appearance of underground comics by the likes of [R. Crumb](#) in the 1960s brought with it a new term—*comix*—denoting X-rated and taboo content that responded to the counterculture movement. Although such work was clearly adult-orientated, it was also distinguished from the mainstream by its distribution and its material quality. Underground comix circulated via “head shops” (stores that sold [marijuana](#) pipes and other drug paraphernalia) and independent bookstores, rather than via newspaper stands. The paper comix were printed on was sometimes cheaper, and the printing quality was variable.

## The Academic Study Of Comics



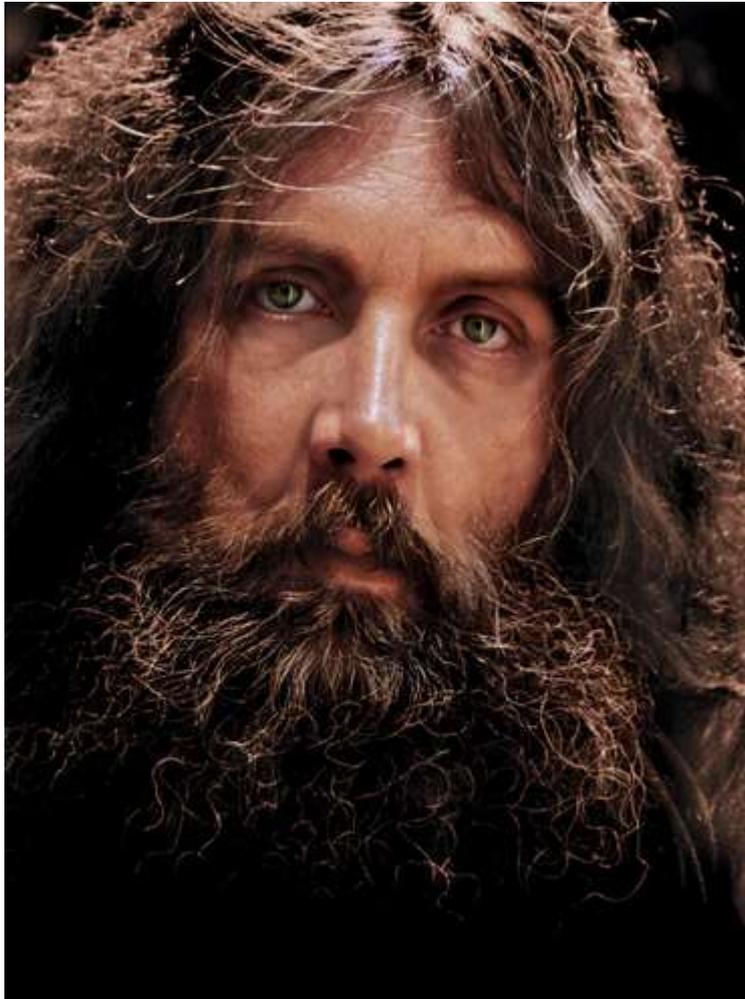
In the 1970s there was a groundswell of academic interest in comics, and many of these commentators celebrated the work of Crumb alongside [Winsor McCay](#) and [George Herriman](#), [comic strip](#) creators from the early 20th century. They also sought to validate the importance of comics by delving into the prehistory of the medium, finding a lineage of word-image texts that evolved from cave paintings, Egyptian [hieroglyphs](#) and Mayan carvings, [illuminated manuscripts](#), the [Bayeux Tapestry](#), early [woodcut](#) printing, the [serial](#) illustrations of [William Hogarth](#) and [Rodolphe Töpffer](#), and the engravings of [William Blake](#). Töpffer, a 19th-century Swiss artist, was particularly important, and he is often described as the father of the modern comic. Hogarth, an 18th-century English broadsheet satirist, anticipated the funny pages in the late 19th century with visual techniques that would become comic conventions. In the early 20th century, film was influenced by comics, and woodcut novels by the likes of Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward (themselves partially influenced by German [Expressionist](#) cinema, and perhaps vice versa) were [precursors](#) of the graphic novel.

Within this larger historical [context](#), comics can be seen both as an ancient medium that combines words and images, two of the primal building blocks for communication, and as a modern medium that continues to develop and evolve. By the last quarter of the 20th century, the term *comics* had suddenly become anachronistic. In 1985 [Will Eisner](#) used the term *sequential art* to describe the medium in his influential book *Comics and Sequential Art*, and in 1993 critic Scott McCloud offered this definition in his book *Understanding Comics*: comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an [aesthetic](#) response.” This academic interest was paralleled by a growth in production of comics for adults in Britain and the United States. As cultural critic Roger Sabin

explains in his book *Adult Comics* (1993), there had always been comics for adults, and adults had always gained enjoyment from comics regardless of the material's supposed audience, but in the late 1970s those children who had embraced the comics boom of the 1960s were now older and sought more realistic and mature comics. The major American comic publishers responded with more violent material and, sometimes, more intelligent comics—many of them in the form of books and albums, mimicking the marketing of comics in Europe. These were the immediate precursors of what would come to be known as graphic novels. The emergence of this format was supported by the birth of the direct-sales market (specialty comic shops), which helped to formalize a culture of fandom around comics and revealed the presence of an audience of readers with high [disposable income](#) who could therefore be relied upon to buy these new expensive books. This move away from the newsstands created new possibilities, not just in terms of format but with regard to content. The once strict censorship of the Comics Code Authority—an industry group that policed depictions of sex and violent content in mass-market comics—lessened and ultimately became irrelevant to most publishers and consumers.

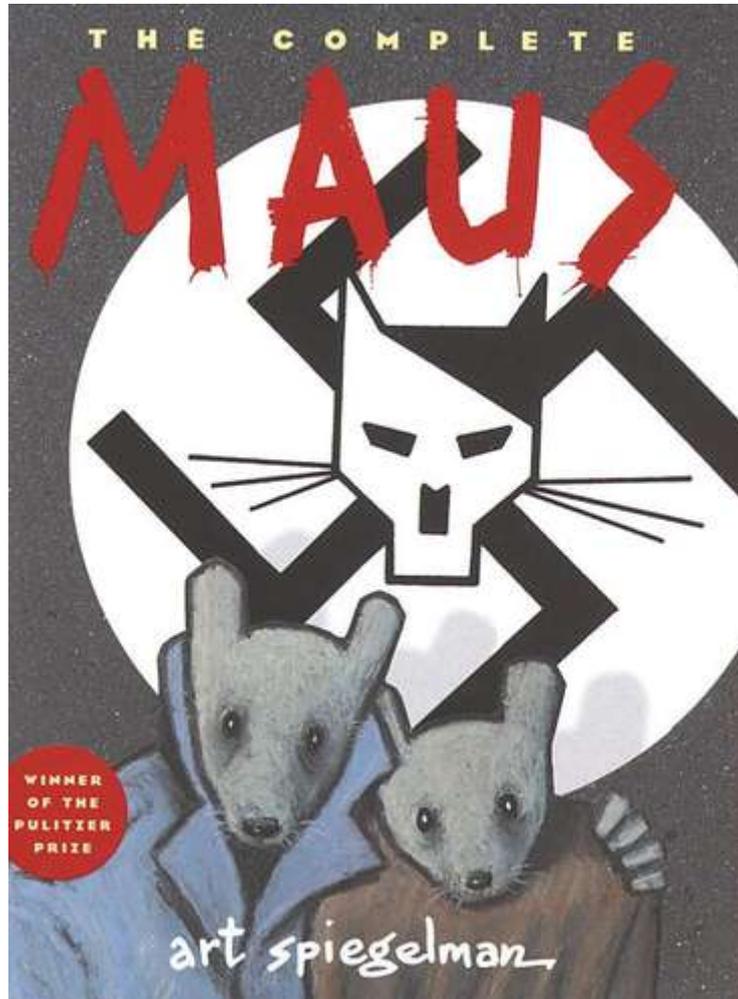
## The First Graphic Novels

While it is almost impossible to identify any one text as the original graphic [novel](#), many hold Eisner's *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* (1978) to be one of the most important early examples of the graphic novel in the United States. Books like Eisner's made clear the demand for more sophisticated comics, and the result was something of a boom in so-called adult comics in the mid- to late 1980s, which was centred around three works: [Frank Miller's](#) *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), [Alan Moore's](#) *Watchmen* (1986–87), and the [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning *Maus* (1980–86) by [Art Spiegelman](#). The defining attribute of each was a formal control of the medium—which is to say, a highly sophisticated degree of control over the use of panel transitions, layout, and so on to achieve certain narrative effects—coupled with artistic [innovation](#) and a literary quality in which the authors announced their individual style.



Alan Moore. *Jose Villarrubia*

These factors alone made these books seem like something new and distinct from mainstream comics, but it is important to note that *The Dark Knight Returns* (which imagined an aging [Batman](#) emerging from retirement) and *Watchmen* (a [Cold War](#)-era commentary on the archetypal “super team”) were firmly situated in the superhero [genre](#) and that Spiegelman’s work was deeply indebted to [R. Crumb](#) and the underground comix of the 1960s. Other than the format and the media hype that grew up around them, there was very little that was new about these books. Indeed, it was the mainstream media that gave the term *graphic novel* such currency, with press attention focusing on the notion that these books were materially different from the comics that children read. In fact, all three of these books had originally appeared as [serial](#) publications in comic or [magazine](#) form. It was the assumption that comics were merely for children that created the confusion. From its inception, it may be argued, the term *graphic novel* has served less to elevate the medium of comics than to [denigrate](#) it further by enforcing a [hierarchy](#) based on format alone rather than one based on substance, form, or quality.



Cover of Art Spiegelman's *The Complete Maus* (1996). Courtesy of Random House

## The Graphic Novel Grows Up

The turn of the 21st century proved to be a golden period for comics and graphic novels. Indeed, the production of comics in book form and the subsequent exploitation of the freedoms associated with the book market saw the emergence of a wealth of material, such as *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) by [Chris Ware](#), *Persepolis* (2000) by [Marjane Satrapi](#), *From Hell* (1991–98) and *Lost Girls* (1991–2006) by Alan Moore, with artwork by Eddie Campbell and Melinda Gebbie, respectively, and *Y: The Last Man* (2002–08) and *Pride of Baghdad* (2006) by Brian K. Vaughan, with artwork by Pia Guerra and Niko Henrichon, respectively. These comics, along with a host of other artful and literate publications, have gained recognition and awards well beyond the sometimes insular world of comic fandom. They have also achieved something comparable to the complexity and density that can be achieved in a novel while transcending the novel format's limitations with artwork that is an integral part of the medium rather than merely being illustrative of the plot. Other models are appropriate too. Brian Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland* (2007) attempts to draw closer association with theatre, with the text becoming a site of performance, whereas some of Alan Moore's comics, such as *The Birth Caul* (1999) and *Snakes and Ladders* (2001), explore psychogeography and take on a lyrical, poetic form in an onerous celebration of the power of interwoven words and images. There also has been a huge

influx of creative talent from outside comics, from such fields as contemporary art and [graphic design](#). Andrzej Klimowski's *The Depository* (1994) and *The Secret* (2002), for example, seem close to 21st-century versions of the [woodcut](#) novels of Masereel and Ward, and his *Horace Dorlan* (2007) sits somewhere between those woodcut novels, [Franz Kafka](#)'s novels and stories, and [Paul Auster](#)'s *New York Trilogy* (1985–86). These seem to be at once graphic novels, yet not quite comics, creating a further level of [ambiguity](#).



Marjane Satrapi, 2008. *Kevin Winter/Getty Images*

The creation of the direct-sales market, the acceptance of comics and graphic novels into bookshops, and the expansion of academic debate sparked a period of huge creative innovation, but it is a period that might leave the term *graphic novel* behind. Moreover, the appearance of Web comics during this period presented a potential challenge to graphic novels. With Web publishing allowing more creative freedom than ever thought possible, comic creators were faced with options: would they still be drawn to the possibilities for longer narratives in book form presented by the graphic novel, or would Web comics, which tended toward shorter narratives, encourage a return to serialization, this time through the medium of the Internet rather than the comics page? Whatever the case, comics and graphic novels were in a state of flux in the first decade of the 21st century, with a rapidly changing marketplace and furious growth in critical and academic attention shaping the manner in which these terms were understood

## The Future Of The Term

The misuse of the term *graphic novel* is evident, with journalists, libraries, and bookshops making firm distinctions between comics and graphic novels on a highly questionable basis. While recognizing that the term *comics* is a relatively new label applied to this most ancient and misunderstood of mediums, there is also much resonance and value in the name. While it might seem somewhat strange to label an entire medium on the basis of its association with one genre (humour strips), it should be borne in mind what an appropriate label it is, particularly given that the words *comic* and *comedy* are etymologically related to the Greek *komos*, a word associated with the Revels, a time of humorous and subversive transgression. Comics are fundamentally about the coming together of word and image, as well as panels on a page, and, given their traits of exaggeration and links to caricature, they are well suited to parody and satire, giving them a subversive undercurrent. For this reason *comics* remains a rich term, while *graphic novel* contains the suggestion of distaste for the supposedly childish nature of comics and is a term that holds more significance for those marketing comics to bookstores than it does for comics readers and scholars.