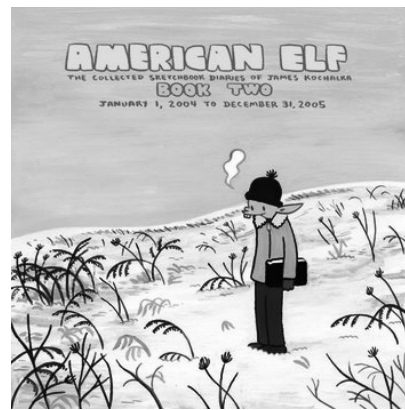


# panel discussion

THE BEST GRAPHIC NOVELS OF 2007 by Aaron Ragan-Fore

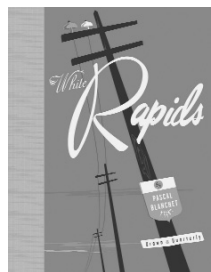
Perhaps it's the modern inheritance of an art form originally designed to be bundled up with yesterday's newspaper and tossed to the curb at the end of the week, but comic books are always in such a gosh-darn hurry. The growing mainstream acceptance of graphic novels as legitimate cultural commentary has led to an explosion of quality material, and the taste of the current trend is rarely out of the mouths of the nerderati bloggers, convention attendees and guys who dress up as Stormtroopers before they want to sample next month's flavor. So here's a little garden of roses the comics fan on your holiday shopping list might want to stop and smell: 2007's best graphic novels.



Alt-comix mainstay James Kochalka has been grinding out single-panel autobio strips, a sort of realistic *Family Circus* with more swearing, for nearly a decade. **American Elf Volume 2** (Top Shelf Productions, \$19.95) collects cartoons based on two years of Kochalka's daily life, as he flirts with his wife, coddles his toddler and drinks with his pals. Reading some average shlub's visual diary may sound excruciating, but Kochalka's deft lampoon of his own life produces a heartwarming, weirdly self-effacing narcissism. Even Kochalka's style of real-life characters depicted as cutesy-pie animals endears itself to the reader after a couple weeks' worth of strips as the style offsets the honesty of the artist's human interaction.

Another comic using animals as human stand-ins is the the mono-monikered cartoonist Jason's **I Killed Adolf Hitler** (Fantagraphics Books, \$12.95), a surreal time-travel story of a 21st century professional hitman hired to, well, kill Adolf Hitler. The usual spate of time travel paradoxes ensues, including the requisite Führer-in-modern-times shenanigans. But all the sci-fi and history business is really just a scaffolding upon which Jason constructs a poignant morality play detailing his assassin's relationship woes, in which time travel serves as a metaphor for memory and change. The WWII setting and anthropomorphic actors make it difficult to resist comparison to Art Spiegelman's earnest *Maus*, but Jason keeps his tongue planted firmly in cheek.

**White Rapids** (Drawn & Quarterly, \$27.95), Pascal Blanchet's lush sophomore effort, also uses history as a template for an intimate story, the abbreviated life cycle



of a Québécois company town. Each page is composed like a stylishly snappy 1950s travel ad, probably making this the most visually stunning graphic novel of the year. Blanchet's strictly structured artistic toolbox only serves to underscore the creative skill he employs in advancing the narrative. The book's formalism compares favorably with Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*, but while Ware focuses on the foibles of humans, here it is the town of Rapide Blanc itself that takes center stage.

It's no accident that Eddie Campbell's **The Black Diamond Detective Agency** (First Second, \$16.95) reads like a movie treatment. The graphic novel is adapted from an unfilmed screenplay, and Campbell brings to vivid, snarling life this Victorian tale of gang warfare and Old West-style retribution in the streets of 1899 Chicago. A must-read for history-minded fans of nonfiction author Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City* or of cinematic fare such as Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*.

Sticking with the retribution theme, 2007 featured a new compendium of the work of the eccentric, abusive and mostly forgotten 1930s cartoonist Fletcher Hanks, titled **I Shall Destroy All the Civilized Planets!** (Fantagraphics Books, \$19.95) after a line of particularly purple dialogue uttered by one of the book's villains. Most of the stories in this volume feature revenge at the hands of two of Hanks' bizarre, Dali-esque do-gooders: Stardust, an outer space "Super Wizard," and Fantomah, the skull-faced jungle goddess. These are comic books in their unfiltered, prewar form, a superheroic fever dream, the sort of deliciously salacious stories that made Mom chuck all the comics out when Junior left for college. In Hanks' cosmology, bad guys aren't sent packing to prison; they're changed into melting icicles or eaten by gargantuan spiders. Sure, it's garbage, but it's madcap, wish-fulfillment silliness garbage.

In every way Hanks' superheroes are ridiculous, the Eisner Award-winning first volume of **All-Star Superman** (DC Comics, \$19.99) by dream team creators Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely is sublime. Superfans turned off by the darker turn of recent superhero comics or by the moody, emo posturing of *Superman Returns* can take solace in this heartfelt, off-kilter little book that practically demands its reader recognize why the character has not only endured but thrived as the quintessential American icon through seven decades and countless reinterpretations. The titular Boy Scout is here presented as dynamic, decisive and passionate, a truly Super Man, the sort of friend you wish you had in real life. This is fun Superman, Ur-Superman, the Saturday morning Superman you wish you could have carried with you out of the *Superfriends* cartoon and into adulthood. Plus, what can beat Jimmy Olsen running around in goofy disguises?



## the rest of the best

**THE ESCAPISTS** by Brian K. Vaughan (writer) and Jason Shawn Alexander, Eduardo Barreto, Philip Bond & Steve Rolston (artists). DARK HORSE COMICS, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$19.95.

Comic book writers writing about comic book writers may sound boring, but then, most comic book writers don't foil crimes in their spare time. The fictional world created in Michael Chabon's fantastic novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* is brought lovingly to life by Vaughan and company.

**THE LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN: BLACK DOSSIER** by Alan Moore (writer) and Kevin O'Neill (artist). DC/WILDSTORM COMICS, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$29.99.

You might need a scorecard to keep all the characters straight, but it's worth it. The third volume of Moore's instant classic continues as a super-team

composed of fictional characters from across British literature defends the Crown against threats both mundane and magical.

**THE PERRY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP: THE TRIAL OF COLONEL SWEETO AND OTHER STORIES** by Nicholas Gurewitch. DARK HORSE COMICS, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$14.95.

If David Lynch wrote *The Far Side*, it'd probably look a little something like this. Not for the kiddies, unless your kiddies are really, really twisted.

**PHONOGRAM: RUE BRITANIA** by Kieron Gillen (writer) and Jamie McKelvie (artist). IMAGE COMICS, 2007. PAPERBACK, \$14.99.

Trendy urban wizards waging ancient wars on the dance floors of U.K. raves? Sold.

**SCALPED, VOL. 1: INDIAN COUNTRY** by Jason Aaron (writer) and R.M. Guéra (artist). DC/VERTIGO COMICS, 2007. PAPERBACK, \$9.99.

A new "Native American noir" entry in Vertigo's near-monopoly of thinking-people's comics follows an undercover FBI agent infiltrating the corrupt tribal police of a South Dakota reservation.

**SOCK MONKEY: THE INCHES INCIDENT** by Tony Millionaire. DARK HORSE COMICS, 2007. PAPERBACK, \$9.95.

Gadzooks! Victorian stuffed animals fight a pesky swarm of ants for control of their home. Charming in a macabre, Edward Gorey sort of way, and perfect for all ages.

**Y: THE LAST MAN, VOL. 9: MOTHERLAND** by Brian K. Vaughan (writer) and Pia Guerra & Goran Sudzuka (artists). DC/VERTIGO COMICS, 2007. PAPERBACK, \$14.99.

Wunderkind creator Vaughan's taut, post-apocalyptic sci-fi espionage series continues as hapless last man on earth Yorick Brown finally learns what killed all his fellow bearers of the Y-chromosome. — Aaron Ragan-Fore