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A Graphic Literature Library

By Andrew D. Arnold

The concept of the "graphic novel" crystallized 25 years ago with the publication of Will Eisner's "Contract with God." [Part 1](#) of TIME.comix's special anniversary coverage looked at the history, controversy and current status of the graphic novel. This week I present a list of 25 books that form a basic graphic literature library spanning the last 25 years. Following this are some reader's reactions to Part 1.

A Graphic Literature Library

These 25 must-read books, in alphabetical order, span the last 25 years of graphic novel making. All are still in print, and can be found at online bookstores and well-stocked retail outlets. This is not intended as a "best-of" list, as many excellent books could not be fit into a list of 25. Instead, it is meant as a guide for creating a well-rounded library of adult-level material that reflects the history, diversity and current trends of graphic literature.

Berlin: City of Stones by Jason Lutes (Drawn & Quarterly; 2000)

Lutes has a clean, clear style in both his drawing and writing that make him deceptively easy to read as he explores personal stories unfolding in a turbulent period in history. A projected multi-volume series following the lives of citizens in Weimar-era Berlin, the promise of this first installment

suggests "Berlin" will be a major work of historical fiction.

Boulevard of Broken Dreams by Kim Deitch (Pantheon; 2002)

Ted Mishkin, an early animator, has a problem. Is his creation, the mischievous, bi-pedal cat Waldo, actually real? Mishkin thinks so, and it drives him insane in this darkly delightful novel. Deitch, an underground comix pioneer, has a style that combines the quaintness of antique toys with the woes of modern life. [Full Review](#)

Buddha by Osamu Tezuka (Vertical, Inc.; 2003)

The key founder of the Japanese comics style, the creator of Astro Boy helped turn an entire nation into comics fans. Though it first appeared in Japan in the early 1970s, Tezuka's imaginative version of the life of the Buddha has only now appeared in English. "Buddha" exemplifies Tezuka's playful style and deeply humane themes in a work for older audiences. [Full Review](#)

A Contract with God by Will Eisner (DC Comics; 1978)

This book defined the term "graphic novel," though it actually consists of four short stories about life in working class tenements. Eisner, already a pioneer thanks to his "Spirit" series of urban adventures, here introduced the concept of an original trade paperback containing serious, drawn literature.

The Dark Knight Returns by Frank Miller (DC Comics; 1986)

This black comedy version of Batman's latter days remains one of the best selling graphic novels of all time. Along with Alan Moore & Dave Gibbon's "Watchmen," it redefined the concept of "superhero," and helped spark the first wave of "serious" interest in comics.

David Boring by Daniel Clowes (Pantheon; 2000)

Best known for "Ghost World," thanks to the movie version, Clowes' "David Boring" is a more sophisticated novel of a guy in search of a woman while the world may be ending. Part of the "second generation" of comix creators, Clowes' flair for offbeat characters and sly humor has no peer.

Epileptic vol. I by David B. (L'Association; 2002)

France rivals Japan in its serious attitude towards graphic literature. One of the new generation of French artists, David B.'s huge memoir uses his brother's struggle with epilepsy as the key to examine family dynamics, social history and the artistic impulse. It's as gorgeous to look at as it is satisfying to read. [Full Review](#)

Flood by Eric Drooker (Dark Horse Comics; 1992)

One of just a few pantomime comix artists, Drooker's first book, recently reprinted, consists of several short stories focused on the urban experience. In spite of their lack of words, his images have a strong political charge and sensitive emotionalism depicted through intense graphic design.

From Hell by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell (Top Shelf; 2000)

Alan Moore, who became famous for his sophisticated superhero tales, put all of his considerable comic-writing skill into this re-telling of the Jack the Ripper murders as a mystic ritual covered up by the Queen. The mediocre movie version suffered particularly from its lack of Eddie Campbell's masterful black and white images that perfectly conjure up the fog-shrouded streets of gaslight London. [Full Review](#)

The Golem's Mighty Swing by James Sturm (Drawn & Quarterly; 2002)

Sturm's ode to a Jewish team during the early barnstorming days of baseball looks like old sepia-toned bubblegum cards laid out to tell a story. Through it he explores the way the Old World adapted (with difficulty) to the New. A fascinating spin on baseball as a metaphor for America, Sturm gives us a story with the heart and drama of a great ball game. [Full Review](#)

Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth by Chris Ware (Pantheon: 2000)

The most perfect novel yet seen in this format, Ware innovates in form and in content to create a uniquely American story, both tragic and gut-splittingly funny. Neither smart nor a kid, Jimmy reunites with his long-lost dad, finds him a great disappointment, and discovers an African-American sister he never knew about.

Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer: The Beauty Supply District by Ben Katchor (Pantheon; 2000)

Although Katchor's long-form "Jew of New York" better qualifies as a graphic novel, I prefer his collected strips in the "Julius Knipl" series. Freshly released in paperback, this third volume contains more of Katchor's picture-poem odes to non-existent urban districts and fantastical people like the radiator musician.

Louis Riel by Chester Brown (Drawn & Quarterly; 2003)

Through this interpretive biography of a 19th-century Canadian rabble-rouser and mystic — with every deviance from recorded history carefully detailed in footnotes — Brown explores themes of abuse of authority, madness vs. religious exaltation and the nature of objective truth. That he tells it in the style of big-nosed comic strip characters makes it all the more remarkable. [Full Review](#)

Maus vols. I + II by Art Spiegelman (Pantheon; 1986)

This history of the Holocaust as experienced by the author's father remains the best-known graphic novel ever published, and a major watershed in the "legitimizing" of the art form. The only graphic novel ever to win a Pulitzer, it also stands among the best works of Holocaust literature in any form.

Nightmare Alley as adapted by Spain (Fantagraphics Books; 2003)

William Lindsay Gresham's 1946 novel of the midway gets the noir treatment by underground comix veteran Spain. Graphic novels don't have many adaptations from other media (except for embarrassing movie tie-ins) but this creepy, sexy freak show is one of the best. [Full Review](#)

One! Hundred! Demons! by Lynda Barry (Sasquatch Books; 2002)

A long-time weekly strip artist ("Ernie Pook's Comeek"), Barry created this all-original book from her own experiences. Labeled an "autobiofictionalography" it contains perfect-pitch memories of the awkwardness of adolescence in the form of short vignettes. [Full Review](#)

Our Cancer Year by Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner (Four Walls Eight Windows; 1994)

A pioneer in the form of autobiographical comix, Harvey Pekar and his "American Splendor" series recently became the basis for a hit independent film. This is his most serious and longest work, written in collaboration with his wife and drawn by Frank Stack, and is a deeply moving portrait of a family in crisis.

Palomar by Gilbert Hernandez (Fantagraphics Books; 2003)

For fourteen years "Love and Rockets," one of the most influential comix series ever created, included Hernandez' tales of a fictional Mexican border town called Palomar. All these stories have now been collected into a 522-page book that combines the convoluted absurdity of a soft-core soap opera with Lorca's depth of character and Faulkner's sense of place.

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon; 2003)

It couldn't be more prescient or unexpected: a comix-style memoir by a woman who grew up during the Iranian revolution. Totally unique and utterly fascinating, Satrapi's simple style reveals the complexities of this veiled-off world. [Full Review](#)

The R. Crumb Coffee Table Art Book by R. Crumb (Little Brown & Co.; 1997)

Crumb's impact on his field, as well as his longevity as a crucial artist, rivals that of Picasso. The closest he ever got to a long-form graphic novel was an early work, "The Big Yum Yum Book," but his short pieces remain the reason for his influence. This is the only single-volume collection that spans his entire output, including psychedelic freak-outs, blistering social satires and naked autobiography.

Safe Area Gorazde by Joe Sacco (Fantagraphics Books; 2000)

Sacco brings journalism to comics in this oral history of life in the beleaguered Bosnian city of Gorazde during the Balkans crisis of the 1990s. Along with his previous series "Palestine" and his latest book, "The Fixer," Sacco has almost single-handedly created a vital non-fiction graphic sub-genre.

Sandman: Season of Mists by Neil Gaiman and various (Vertigo; 1994)

This particular volume of Neil Gaiman's extremely popular "Sandman" series best exemplifies why it crosses boundaries of genre and gender appeal. When handed the keys to hell, Morpheus, the king of Dreams, contends with his immortal siblings — including punky sister Death — as well as characters from mythology, literature and history.

Stuck Rubber Baby by Howard Cruse (DC Comics; 1995)

A novel set in the South during the 1960s, "Baby" tackles both the civil rights movement and the complications of being gay at that time. It's a moving work featuring people — Southerners, blacks, and gays — who don't get much serious attention in this medium.

Summer Blonde by Adrian Tomine (Drawn & Quarterly; 2002)

Tomine is comix's tartest short story writer, exploring the bleak lives of aging West Coast Gen-Xers. Newly reprinted in paperback, this collection of his work includes a story of a woman who makes desperate prank phone calls to the booth outside her window and another about a sad obsession over a blonde shop girl. [Full Review](#)

Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud (Perennial; 1993)

The first and best of its kind: a book-length essay in the form of comix. McCloud's theories on why and how comics work are told with wit and imagination in this critically important book that has shaped the way many people think about the medium.

Readers Respond

Last week's [column](#) filled the TIME.comix mailbag like never before. Here are some letters from readers, edited for brevity and clarity.

Why the Prejudice?

Your most recent article left me to wonder exactly why creators like Art Spiegelman and critics like yourself are so very desperate to disassociate themselves from the superhero genre of graphic novels.

It is a medium where you can mine the everyday life struggles of both people born in Peoria or on the planet Krypton. Where you can use repetition of images to convey the ennui of a life most ordinary or break the inked panels to express the heroism that we all have in our souls under the most trying circumstances. Mr. Spiegelman's "Maus" certainly accomplish that, and so has the most recent issues of "The Fantastic Four," although the two may say it in different ways and by different shades of subtlety. In the end, a graphic novel is just an easier way to say "a large volume of printed storytelling expressed in a series of sequential, hand drawn illustrations." Trust the public to make the distinctions, based solely on the quality of the material.

William Cheung
Jersey City, NJ

As a Librarian I wrestled with the nomenclature and found that "Graphic Novel," although flawed and imprecise, is the best term of a bad lot. I doubt the discussion will ever end (look at how the term "Science Fiction" is still debated, and embraced or shunned, i.e. over Margaret Atwood), but I think the war is over and we are stuck with "Graphic Novel" for better or worse. So, as much as I sympathize with Art Spiegelman and his desire not to be shelved next to Marvel's books, he is just wrong. Of course some Graphic Novels have a "seriousness of purpose," as he says, that superheroes or some manga don't have. Novels like "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay" or "Fortress of Solitude" have a seriousness of purpose that the latest Clive Cussler or Robert Ludlum doesn't have. Still they are all novels. Spiegelman seems to be making the same mistake that people who won't consider comics and Graphic Novels seriously make (I realize he really knows better) by associating a type of content with the form.

Steve Svecz
Librarian
Warren-Trumbull County Public Library
Warren, OH

Librarians Take Offense

I've enjoyed reading your column in the past and looked forward to reading your take on the 25th anniversary of the graphic novel. Unfortunately, I froze up at your opening sentence. You may be referring to one incident in the course of your research but you have done a disservice to librarians. For the past several years, librarians have been strong promoters of graphic novels. School and public librarians across the country have added graphic novels to their collections; Comics and graphic novels have been the subject of many programs at state, regional and national library conferences and workshops. Publishers have welcomed the growth of the library market. The opening of your column was an effective attention getter. I just wish you had found some other way to introduce your exploration of the current state of the graphic novel than slamming a group of the format's strongest

supporters.

Jeffrey Gegner

Senior Librarian - Popular Materials Specialist

Hennepin County Library

Minnetonka, MN

TIME.comix responds: The intention of the opening anecdote was only to exemplify the on-going challenge of "graphic novel" as a term and a form, not to disparage librarians. Here are some internet resources, provided by a librarian reader, on this growing market: [Graphic Novels in Libraries](#), [Comic Books for Young Adults](#), [The Librarian's Guide to Anime and Manga](#) and [Graphic Novels for Public Libraries](#)

What the Future May Hold

Micha Hershman's comments about shojo manga driving the expansion in the bookstores are accurate and can be proven by looking at the BookScan GN charts. However, given the 2004 publishing plans of some of the bigger manga houses (TokyoPop-500 titles, Viz- 400 titles) and the fact that major publishers are getting on the bandwagon, we just may live up to our industry's history of putting out too much of a good thing and thus creating an implosion. I believe this is an area you might want to look into to temper the somewhat rosy outlook for GNs. Never have I seen a better chance for GNs to become a part of the landscape in libraries, bookstores and the public's awareness. I just hope we don't blow it.

Michael J. Martens

Vice President of Business Development

Dark Horse Comics

Milwaukie, OR

The First What?

There were, predictably, some objections to the anniversary concept of the article, pegged to the use of the term "A Graphic Novel" on the cover of Will Eisner's "A Contract with God." Here is one such example:

I have no. 909 of the 1,500 copies of the first edition of Eisner's "A Contract with God." It is a handsome hardback book. No dust jacket. And nowhere on the cover or title page or, even, in Will's introductory remarks does the term "graphic novel" appear. Since the publication of this seminal work, the term "graphic novel" has come into more widespread use than it enjoyed then in 1978, and in subsequent editions of the book, apparently insinuated itself onto the cover. But it wasn't there on the first edition; so the first appearance of "A Contract with God" did not, ipso facto, inaugurate the

use of the term "graphic novel." The term "graphic novel," as it applies to the "long form comic book," was originally coined in November 1964 by Richard Kyle in a newsletter circulated to all members of the Amateur Press Association. The term was subsequently modified and used by Bill Spicer in his "Graphic Story Magazine" (a usage Spicer gained Kyle's approval for in advance). The first time a "long form comic book" was identified as a "graphic novel" was the 1976 publication of "Beyond Time and Again," by George Metzger, where the term "graphic novel" appears on the title page and on the dust jacket flaps. There had been other efforts at "graphic storytelling" before. Eisner mentions the work of Lynd Ward [creator of the wordless novel "Gods' Man" in 1929] in his introduction, for instance. Milt Gross did an entire narrative in pictures with no words: "He Done Her Wrong" in 1930. Gil Kane and Archie Goodwin produced "His Name Is Savage," [a book-length comic,] in 1968. "A Contract with God" gathered all of these narrative strategies together between the covers of a single publication — and set the pace for those who would follow. Will Eisner has, without question, done more to advance the medium of comics than just about anyone. But he didn't invent the graphic novel form; nor did he coin the term (as he would be among the first to acknowledge).

R.C. Harvey

Champaign, IL

TIME.comix responds: For the record, Will Eisner confirmed with TIME.comix that the words "A Graphic Novel" appeared on the cover of the paperback edition of "A Contract with God," but not the hardcover, which had no dust jacket. The paperback was published in 1978 simultaneously with the hardcover, says Eisner, with a larger print run. In fact Eisner acknowledges that the term "graphic novel" had been coined prior to his book. But, he says, "I had not known at the time that someone had used that term before." Nor does he take credit for creating the first graphic book. Eisner admits that, "I can't claim to have invented the wheel, but I felt I was in a position to change the direction of comics." TIME.comix' argument is that Eisner's book, published outside the comic book system and pretty clearly the first comix work deliberately aspiring to literary status, by having the term on the front cover, crystallized the concept of a "graphic novel." But the matter is clearly open to debate.

TIME.comix returns in two weeks. Watch for the 2003 ten best comix list coming on December 19!

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