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Drew Friedman’s comics and illustrations have appeared in many publications, including *Time*, *The New Yorker* and *Sluts & Slobs*. His books include *Warts and All*, *The Fun Never Stops!* and the *Old Jewish Comedians Trilogy* (which will be completed in late 2010 with *Yet Even MORE Old Jewish Comedians*). A comprehensive collection of his celebrity portraits, *Too Soon?*, will be released this year as well.

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Ben Schwartz

Introduction

A year or so ago at The Grove, a mall in Los Angeles, I rode down the escalators of its three-story Barnes and Noble bookstore. Two teenage girls, 13 or 14, stood in front of me, discussing a key issue of the day:

Girl #1 Then what's a graphic novel?

Girl #2 I can't believe you don't know what a graphic novel is. A graphic novel is *serious*. Comics are *funny*.

Now, I by no means regard that exchange as definitive. That mall tweens debate what to call comics at all, now that is a definitive moment. How comics got to be a hot topic—to the Hot Topic crowd, and Oscar voters, Guggenheim committees, public librarians stocking comics sections, major book-review outlets, and on their own *New York Times* best-seller list—is what this book is about.

And if I may, I can't believe I don't know what to call "graphic novels." Or at least, I wish I knew a term that covered cartoon fiction, graphic non-fiction, picto-novellas, tone poetry funnies, autobiographical comics, or doodles with words. Funny or not, I just call them comics. As far as the type discussed most in this book goes, I call it literary, or "lit" comics.

This anthology covers critical writing, thinking, and a little cartooning from the years 2000–2008: specifically, September 12th, 2000 through 2008. September 12th, that’s the day Pantheon released Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* and Daniel Clowes’ *David Boring*. From that point on, literary comics expanded in distribution, access, and public interest to their current status.

2000–2008: I suppose there’s an obvious joke to make about comics arriving as serious reading in the George W. Bush Era. Then again, President Barack Obama is a known collector of *Conan* and *Spider-Man* comics. One of our contributors, John Hodgman, attained heroic status in comics criticism circles (well, everywhere, actually) by personally challenging the President’s nerd credentials at the 2009 Washington, D.C. Radio and Television Correspondents’ Association dinner. The President may have most of the Washington press corps whipped, but not us.

2000–2008: If you jump from Brian Doherty’s opening piece from 2001, “Comics Tragedy,” to the 2008 HeroesCon New Art Comics panel moderated by “blogger” (a word we didn’t have in 2000) Tom Spurgeon, and publishers Sammy Harkham and Dan Nadel, you’ll see what happened. Doherty extols Ware and Clowes, but doubts that lit comics could ever supplant the superhero in the public’s mind as what comics are. By 2008, Harkham and Nadel explain their decision to self-publish their non-literary art comics because, in the wake of Ware and Clowes and the lit era, publishers simply saw no market for non-lit comics.

To clarify, September 12th 2000 is a “tipping point” (another popular phrase from this era). Certainly, Clowes and Ware didn’t invent the literary comic. Just as certainly, cartooning post-September 12, 2000 is not dominated by Clowes-Ware imitators. But, as another one of our contributors, the novelist Rick Moody, points out, “... it’s with the advent of Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) that comics and comic artists became unavoidable in literary circles.”

True, but it wasn’t obvious to everyone. The month following *Jimmy Corrigan*’s release, on October 17th, 2000, Alan Moore told Blather.net’s Barry Kavanagh what he hoped to accomplish with his *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*:

...if you do stuff out on the margins it actually makes no difference whatsoever to the broad sweep of comic book culture. Like, *Maus* is never going to make any impact at all upon mainstream comics, because it was done outside the mainstream, it was in the margins. I just thought I’d like to do some cool stuff in the mainstream that is still progressive and forward-looking enough to actually be valid and worthwhile material but do it in the margins so that it can have an impact and hopefully can in some small measure go towards regenerating the currently dismal medium.

Moore wasn’t putting Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* down. It’s a book he admires. He simply noted that it had no effect on the mainstream comics of 2000—i.e., superhero comics. And he was right. What no one, including Moore and Doherty, saw coming was a) that lit comics, once on the “margins,” and profoundly shaped by *Maus*, rapidly expanded their audience and b) that what was then “mainstream,” superhero comics sold in comic-

book shops, was irrelevant to that expansion. That is, in 2000, lit comics looked like a luxury to the direct-sales world (i.e. comic stores), bundled along each month to the superhero shops as a speciality-within-a-speciality. Post-2000, they found their way to the rest of the world, benefiting from new distribution (D&Q via Farrar, Straus, and Giroux; Fantagraphics via W. W. Norton; and Pantheon Books, a division of Random House), and attention everywhere from *The New York Review of Books* to the Whitney Museum.

To lit comics of this era, *Maus* is everything: a model of creative ambition, length, serious of purpose, marketing, critical perception, design, and publication strategy. In *Maus*'s day, and indeed until recently, cartoonists rarely received the large advances that allow prose authors the time to complete their books. A Will Eisner, independently wealthy by the 1980s, could treat his late-career cartooning the way other retirees chose to travel or perfect a golf game. But few cartoonists had this luxury. Spiegelman's solution, publishing *Maus* serially in *RAW*, was embraced by the majority of lit cartoonists who pre-serialized their novel-length comics, usually in their own solo comics.

Today, with publishers offering sizable advances in the wake of so many mainstream lit comics successes, cartoonists are able to create major new books directly without going through serialization—although many others still find pay-as-you-go serialization a necessary (or convenient) way to work.

The first volume of the *Maus* collection debuted in 1986, the same year that DC Comics began releasing, in serialized form, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Both books were huge crossover successes, especially once they were collected into book form the following year. Unlike *Maus*, which opened up the lit comics genre to general audiences, their long-term effect was to further seal off the direct-sales stores from the mainstream world.

Indeed, as of this writing, in a Comicbookresources.com interview dated September 9, 2009, Marvel editor-in-chief Joe Quesada dismisses the idea of a lit comics, or "original graphic novel," approach for Marvel at all, as a bad business model. He's right, too. Superhero fans get what they want in serialized long-running continuity. It's taken movies and animation, the true home of the superhero today, with a new talent pool's take on the genre, to creatively reconnect superheroes to mainstream audiences. Have superheroes ever looked better than in *Spider-Man 2*, *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man*, *Hancock*, or *The Incredibles*?

Since 2000, lit comics have entered the real mainstream of American culture. *The New Yorker*—whose weekly circulation tops any best-selling superhero comic's monthly sales—has embraced the lit aesthetic, with frequent covers and interior illustrations by Clowes, Ware, Adrian Tomine, Seth, and Ivan Brunetti, and occasional narrative comics by Ware, Robert Crumb, and Spiegelman. Charles Burns has illustrated every cover to date for the literary magazine *The Believer*, and the libertarian magazine *Reason* has run dozens of opinion and journalism pieces by Peter Bagge in comics form. In *The New York Times*, Marjane Satrapi writes op-eds, Alison Bechdel writes reviews in comics form, and yes, Ware, Seth, and Jaime Hernandez appeared as Sunday cartoonists—a rarity in that newspaper's history. The Whitney Museum, Guggenheim Fellowships,

the 2005 Masters of Comic Art show that toured nationally—as the ladies on the escalator could tell you, it’s the clumsily named “graphic novel,” the idea of the self-contained literary work of cartooning, that’s changed the game.

September 12, 2000 reminds one of several pop-culture pivots. In 1967, *Bonnie and Clyde* validated a decade of subculture and New Wave filmmaking from the U.S. and Europe to a mass audience. In 1953, Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* arrived, mainstreaming a generation of heated postwar New York intellectualism and *Partisan Review* café debate into one of the great novels of the 20th Century (according to James Atlas’ *Bellow: A Biography*). Jackson Pollock’s 1940s abstracts, the 1914 Armory Show, 1986 hip-hop crossover hits like the Beastie Boys’ *Licensed to Ill* and Run-DMC’s *Raising Hell*—aesthetically, they have little, no, nothing in common. Commercially, critically, they rewrote the *public perception* of what was, until that time, subculture. In the case of Ware and Clowes, 25 years of lit comics—from *American Splendor* and *Love and Rockets*—went mainstream “overnight,” as well as the work of 1920s American lit comics pioneers Frank King and Harold Gray.

Since 2000, comics recall the cinema of the 1960s and ’70s. New and vital works appear with surprising regularity, accompanied by a rediscovery of the medium’s history, and classic works. Publishers invest money in serious biographies and histories and critical works. In the ’70s, you could go into a bookstore and buy a volume of essays on genre directors like Howard Hawks or art-house masters like Federico Fellini, histories of the Marx Brothers, or a book-length interview between Alfred Hitchcock and François Truffaut (the inspiration for *Eisner/Miller*, excerpted here).

After September 12th, 2000, the greater publishing industry took notice. The appearance of Michael Chabon’s best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* that same September helped, too. Works by Will Eisner, Seth, Chester Brown, Lynda Barry, Satrapi, Phoebe Gloeckner, Tomine, Kim Deitch, David B., and Bechdel received hardcover releases via major publishing houses or their distributors. New audiences found comics they had never read by King, Gray, Yoshihiro Tatsumi, Milton Caniff, and E.C. Segar. Nor were they read as nostalgia. They were marketed and sold as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway are today, as classic reading. Even Charles Schulz, the most famous cartoonist of the century, has been reinvented, transformed from mass-market pop icon to his current status as postwar intellectual, on par with J. D. Salinger, Joseph Heller, Bellow, or John Updike.

Histories and biographies and critical writings of comics found a golden age of their own: David Michaelis’ *Schulz and Peanuts*, R.C. Harvey’s *Meanwhile...*, Gerard Jones’ *Men of Tomorrow*, David Hajdu’s *The 10-Cent Plague*, Bob Levin’s *The Pirates and the Mouse: Disney’s War Against the Counterculture*, Blake Bell’s *Strange and Stranger: The Worlds of Steve Ditko*, Mark Evanier’s *Kirby: King of Comics* (precursor to his long-in-the-works full biography of Kirby), Donald Phelps’ *Reading the Funnies*, Douglas Wolk’s *Reading Comics*, Dan Nadel’s *Art Out of Time*, David Kunzle’s *Rodolphe Töpffer: The Complete Comic Strips*, and the University Press of Mississippi’s *Conversations With Comic Artists* series. A small industry of critical and historical journals found readers, from *The Comics Journal*’s continuing 33-year run to *Comic Art*, *The Imp*, and

TwoMorrows Publishing's line of monographs, book-length interviews, and historical magazines. Blogs like Tom Spurgeon's *The Comics Reporter* and Heidi MacDonald's *The Beat for Publishers Weekly* review and report on the industry, as well as sites like *Comics Comics*, *Jog the Blog*, and *Newsarama*. Bob Andelman's ongoing *A Spirited Life* blog allows him to continue researching Will Eisner after publishing his biography of the cartoonist.

The book you're about to read hopes to serve as a primer for this renaissance. If that's what it tries for, there's a few things it doesn't do. It is not a guide to the Top 10, 20, or 100 cartoon masterpieces You Need to Read. Houghton Mifflin's annual *Best American Comics* anthology and Ivan Brunetti's two-volume anthology of graphic fiction for Yale do that quite nicely.

Indeed, while the reviews reprinted here were originally intended as consumer guides, I chose them for the insight their authors bring to the medium via specific books. If some of the great works of cartooning done in the last few years aren't represented here—Joe Sacco, Burns, the Hernandez Brothers, Gary Panter, Lewis Trondheim, Ben Katchor, Brunetti, the *Kramers Ergot* scene all come to mind—it's because this editor couldn't find a great piece about them, not because they and others lack merit.

There is also the misleading title of this book to consider—*Best American Comics Criticism*. I owe the reader an apology, as several of our authors are not American. Immigration being the hot button political issue it is, I realize I risk angry protests over space that should have gone to American critics. Like so many employers with low-paying, unrewarding work, I've simply found that not many Americans actually want the job.

Context

As to the sections, three pieces set the table for us circa 2000. First is Brian Doherty's spot-on summation of the state of the art at a time when lit comics still found themselves chained to their large dumb friend, the superhero. Paul Gravett follows, explaining the mysterious gap of lit comics between 1987, the year of *Maus*, *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and 2000—a key piece in understanding why comics didn't find mainstream access after 1987 and why Ware and Clowes did. Then, R. Fiore offers two essays and a reflective note for this collection from his three-decades-long running *Comics Journal* column, *Funnybook Roulette*. Fiore's "Moment of Noise" and "Make Me a Liar" look at the comics of 9/11, and how cartooning dealt with that seminal event—or didn't. Fiore's three points of view here evolve with the incredible pace of post-9/11 events, and explain perhaps why comics fared no better in clearly defining that day for us than movies, television, fiction, or theater have. As Harold Ross once said, "These are not Ho-Hum times."

History

If that's where we are, a selection of historical books follows, with a focus on something new in comics history—the impact of fans. In comics, the line between fan and

professional (cartoonist, critic, publisher, archivist) is etched in sand. Compare that to movies, sports, or any other going concern dependent on fans—comics fans cross the line into professional ranks regularly. Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow* excerpt, "American Boys," describes the first-wave fan base that created Superman. Specifically, Jones focuses on those tragically unsophisticated American boys from Cleveland, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, who lost control of their creation in 1938 and immediately tried to redress that mistake.

Seven decades later, that redress is the subject of our excerpt from U.S. District Judge Stephen G. Larson's 2008 ruling in the Siegel v. Time-Warner copyright case, a landmark legal and historical ruling for the comics world. David Hajdu's *Ten-Cent Plague* reveals another side of fandom, a generation later, when 1950s anti-comics crusades turned fans into easily manipulated book-burners for culture-warring adults. As Hajdu's book came out, riots around the world over Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammed actually caused more instant mayhem and fatalities than photos of Abu Ghraib prison torture, revealing Hajdu's history as relevant as today's headlines.

This section on fans concludes with "High Standards," excerpted from the cartoonist Seth's 2005 novella, *Wimbledon Green*. Seth's study of a classic comics collector is fiction, not academic criticism. But this excerpt, featuring the fictional comics critic Art Stern, perfectly depicts a critical epiphany, if you will, a moment that a generation of us raised on superhero comics went through upon realizing just how much this medium had to offer and how little we knew.

Appraisals

As this literary generation has come to co-opt the public perception of comics, so has its aesthetic. A reevaluation of comics as a whole goes on, and the Appraisals section captures that, starting with Will Eisner. Eisner's career stretches back to an era where he could truthfully introduce himself as the publisher who passed on Superman. His is also the name most closely associated with the term "graphic novel," mostly because he himself so closely associated himself with the term "graphic novel." Since his death in 2005, Eisner's career has been assessed and reassessed. One reason for that is Eisner no longer stands alone as our only "graphic novelist." The company he's in includes many of the artists discussed herein, from Ware and Burns to King and Satrapi. Offered here are three points of view: First, Eisner and his most accomplished student, Frank Miller discuss the impact of *A Contract With God* from their book-length interview *Eisner/Miller*, conducted by Charles Brownstein. Douglas Wolk's astute critical assessment of Eisner and Miller's creative bond follows, excerpted from his canon-challenging *Reading Comics*. Finally, Eisner's biographer Bob Andelman interviews cartoonist Howard Chaykin, an admirer of Eisner to a point, but one with a less idealized take on Eisner's self-promotion and place in comics history.

Conversely, cartoonist Steve Ditko received more widespread discussion in this period than anytime his long career, which began in 1953. British talk show host Jonathan

Ross produced and hosted *In Search of Steve Ditko* (2007), which debuted on national television in the United Kingdom. In 2008, Fantagraphics published Blake Bell's widely reviewed *Strange and Stranger: The Worlds of Steve Ditko*. Yet, in 2009, the public knows Ditko's creations better than his name, perhaps due to his refusal to be a public figure. He won't be interviewed, photographed, nor, in his ninth decade, does he work with traditional publishers or their distribution networks. Still, Ditko's imagination fuels the billion-dollar multi-media *Spider-Man* franchise, and his philosophical embrace of Ayn Rand and Objectivist philosophy give voice to his greatest post-Marvel creation, Mr. A—the basis for Rorschach in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*. A full transcript of Alan Moore's interview with Ross opens the Ditko section. Indeed, given Rorschach's central role in *Watchmen*, the book can be fairly read as a referendum on Ditko's absolutist worldview, which Moore discusses at length. An opposite view of Ditko comes from indie comics founding father Peter Bagge, who immersed himself in Ditko's work for a rare venture of his own into the Marvel Universe. A magazine editor commissioned Bagge to write a hoped-for glowing essay on his Spider-Man experience. Instead, Bagge gave them "Spider-Man Sucks," and the editor politely asked him to air his views elsewhere. This essay eventually appeared in the 2006 print edition of *Comics Comics #2*.

The final word on Ditko, at least here, is given to critic Donald Phelps. Phelps has written on comics since the 1950s, in national magazines and in his own collections *Covering Ground* and *Reading the Funnies*, and most recently in *The Comics Journal* and *Comic Art*. Phelps' 2004 Ditko piece presents a brilliant cataloging of Ditko's expressive formal innovations, so much so you wonder if Ditko has an equal in this area outside of George Herriman.

In 2008, publisher Idea and Design Works (IDW) began the second attempt at reprinting the complete *Little Orphan Annie* by Harold Gray (the 1980s attempt faded from weak sales). Its current success could only have come in the lit era, when computer technology brought reproduction costs down so drastically and Gray can be reintroduced as actual reading, not as nostalgia or merchandise for the *Annie* musical. For my own contribution, I reprint my 2008 piece on Gray from *Bookforum*. The "graphic novel" is often sold as a modern invention. From *Little Orphan Annie's* 1924 debut, Gray offered complex narratives, and controversial ones to be sure, which he then repackaged as hardcover books. If the ladies on the escalator debated just what "graphic novels" and "comics" are, Gray's dire tales challenged his 1920s audience's insistence on calling comics "the funnies."

Jeet Heer follows with "Drawn From Life," his groundbreaking biographical piece on Frank King, easily the most dramatically revived cartoonist of the period in the *Walt & Skeeze* series from *Drawn & Quarterly*. Alongside Gray, King was a central figure in the development of narrative comics. Yet, in recent years, his body of work wasn't even known to his own family, much less the reading public. In this single piece, Heer reintroduces King to a greater degree than the very private King ever allowed at the height of his own celebrity.

An equally dramatic piece of history comes from critic and cartoonist Sarah Boxer.

She presents the first serious reading of *Krazy Kat* creator George Herriman's work in light of the (relatively) recent discovery that he was Creole, not Caucasian. Why is his race so important? If only one could find an aspect of American life where race doesn't matter. The discovery has launched comics on its own "birther"-style dispute, with those who argue the 1880 census report is false and that Herriman was Caucasian. For comics history, discovering that the 20th Century's greatest prewar cartoonist—arguably the greatest—is Creole, equals Jackie Robinson's arrival in major league baseball or the final proof of Thomas Jefferson's African-American family. Boxer takes this fact and revisits Herriman with a close reading—a rarity in itself in Herriman studies—of the strip Gilbert Seldes famously called "the greatest living work of American art yet produced." With Boxer's reading, we begin to see the only non-white vision in the golden age of the comic strips.

The late John Updike, and it's still unsettling to write those words, approved our use of "Thurber's Art" a few months before his death in January 2009. In 1929, James Thurber's anti-illustration, modernist "scrawl" — "doodles," he called them — challenged the finely crafted drawings championed by his fellow *New Yorker* artists and editors working down the hall from him. At that time, *The New Yorker* staff saw itself as the rebels of the cartooning world for their sleek, sophisticated, single-panel, single-dialogue-line format.

Then Thurber's doodles came along and upped the ante on them in a way that no one's matched since. Thurber proved that a visual premise and raw emotion are all you need. That, as Ivan Brunetti has written, "The very genesis of the cartoon, paradoxically, is its own end goal." Thurber's revelation, and the critical imprimatur publishing in *The New Yorker* gave it, paved the way for a generation of Blechmans, Feiffers and Schulzes to follow and the Gary Panthers and Jeffrey Browns of today. Eighty years later, his aesthetic dominates both the *New Yorker's* single-panel artists and the most compelling of today's cutting-edge, art-comics anthologies, *Kramers Ergot*. If his writing has slipped from sight, Thurber's cartooning remains a vital force.

Updike's fellow *New Yorker* contributor, frequent cover artist Seth, flips the Thurber paradigm for us in his assessment of cult favorite John Stanley. If Thurber offered a deceptively crude line and emotionally rattling humor, Stanley—best known for his *Little Lulu* comics—offers a polished style in the deceptively simple-minded genre of kids comics. Thurber's genius was obvious from the start: Stanley...not so much. Seth excavates Stanley from the dime bins of Toronto comics shops in his *Comics Journal* piece "John Stanley's Teen Trilogy" (updated for this volume), and currently designs the *John Stanley Library* for his publisher, Drawn & Quarterly.

Looking back, Jonathan Franzen's 2005 introduction to *The Complete Peanuts: 1957–1958* stakes out a safe high ground in the growing debate over Charles Schulz's expansive legacy. Schulz' death was a generational watershed. Not only in one of the great entertainers of the World War II generation leaving us, but also for those lit cartoonists whose work is so much more profoundly shaped by him today than that of previous generations. Schulz's minimalist art dominates newspaper gag strips out of necessity—how else could they survive today's market? Lit cartoonists embrace

Schulz out of choice. To them, he's as an artist offering an inspiring philosophical and intellectual example, unprecedented, and (for the most part) unmatched, in cartooning.

Thus, publication of David Michaelis' 2006 biography, *Schulz and Peanuts*, was understandably a highly anticipated event. Michaelis' scholarship was championed by John Updike, Bill Watterson, Chris Ware, and in the interests of full disclosure, myself. Still, the book's portrait of Schulz generated an unprecedented level of public debate over a cartoonist. Schulz' oldest son, Monte, answered *Schulz and Peanuts* with a 35,000-word rebuttal in *The Comics Journal* (joined by several critics appearing here, R.C. Harvey, R. Fiore, and Jeet Heer). *Who* Schulz was is the crux of that debate. *What* Schulz was, an artist first and foremost, is the subject of Jonathan Franzen's essay. Franzen makes an assessment he is uniquely qualified to give on Charles M. Schulz—as artist to artist.

Daniel Clowes discusses another of our key humorists, Will Elder. *MAD* magazine publisher Bill Gaines considered Elder *MAD*'s defining voice long after Elder left. He remains a primary influence on Crumb and the baby-boomer underground, and the man J. Hoberman called our “most acute chronicler of mid-20th-century American pop culture.” Like Eisner and Schulz, a reassessment of Elder reveals him a full partner to Harvey Kurtzman in their work, not simply executing Kurtzman's ideas as other artists did. Between Clowes' nuanced appreciation and Gary Groth's interview with Elder later in this volume, one hopes this view will take hold.

One of the lucky breaks of this period was the founding of the only magazine to rival *The Comics Journal*, Todd Hignite's *Comic Art*. Ken Parille's extensive study of *David Boring* appeared in 2005's *Comic Art* #7. It's offered here as an example of just how many layers of thought exist in a great work of cartooning, an explication of Clowes that nearly goes panel-to-panel in showing the multiple layers of his storytelling.

Donald Phelps follows with essays, first on Lynda Barry, still strong after three decades of cartooning, and Phoebe Gloeckner, winner of a Guggenheim Fellowship and currently teaching at the prestigious University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

When recounting that conversation I witnessed between the tweens on the escalator, I've been asked more than once, “Really? That happened?” Yes, it did, and hopefully, Phelps' look at how these two artists dealt with their teen years will make clear that, yes, the comics audience is changing drastically.

Closing out this section is Dan Nadel's “What Went Wrong With The Masters Show.” Most of us who attended the show debated *who* should be in it. Nadel took a step back and asked much more. In *Art Out of Time*, his collection of overlooked, idiosyncratic cartooning talents, Nadel offers the first formal redress of the established cartooning canon in a generation. In his piece on the “Masters” show, Nadel asks “Why? Why? Why? Why?” like a toddler on his first trip to the zoo. Nadel's is an assessment of the assessment process, what we're valuing in comics, even where we should value them. His questions get to the heart of the show, its mistakes in how to use cultural institutions in pursuit of cultural respect, and the built-in biases of both the public and the show's curators.

Reviews

A happy by-product of serious literary quarters taking notice of comics is that they hire serious literary types to review them. *Bookforum* alone published David Hajdu, Timothy Hodler, Jeet Heer, and Chris Ware. Ware offers a unique perspective on David Kunzle's *Rodolphe Töpffer: The Complete Comic Strips*. Töpffer invented the form we call comics, or what he called "*histoires en estampes*," which Kunzle translates as "engraved novels," or "graphic novels." Ware is the artist most closely identified by the public with the current lit renaissance, but also one who has nearly equaled his cartooning accomplishments by editing, designing, and curating vital historical projects such as *McSweeney's* Vol. 13, *Krazy & Ignatz* series, the *Walt & Skeexix* series, and museum shows like *Uninked*. Who better to discuss the man who invented comics than the man so often cited as reinventing them?

The New York Times also made a point of hiring important writers to review comics, including Rick Moody, Dave Eggers, John Hodgman, and in a turnaround, cartoonist Alison Bechdel, who reviewed a prose novel for them in comics form. Moody's review of David B.'s *Epileptic* for the *Times* is an excellent example of the way lit comics entered the literary world's conversation. Moody also presents French cartoonist David B.'s achievement in a specific light, as the artist who brought cartooning its first autobiographical intellectual history, or *bildungsroman*. That is, European literary tradition presented in a uniquely American medium.

Frequent *Times* contributor John Hodgman is perhaps most familiar to readers for his almanacs, as a "resident expert" on *The Daily Show*, and a series of popular television commercials. All of this, sad to say, is the type of day job needed to support his career as a comics critic. The essay that appears here concerns the seminal Jack Kirby and his Fourth World books. Inspired by the popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy on 1960s college campuses, Kirby intended his Fourth World to expand comics narrative with multiple monthly titles telling one epic tale from several angles. After weak sales, DC Comics unceremoniously cancelled the line before Kirby could finish. A few years later, Eisner issued *A Contract With God*, proving Kirby correct in suspecting readers wanted more out of comics. Here, Hodgman considers Kirby's Fourth World and its lasting impact on two current epics, Eric Shanower's *Age of Bronze* and Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra's *Y: The Last Man*.

R.C. Harvey's *Meanwhile...: A Biography of Milton Caniff*, remains his major contribution since 2000, but hardly his only one. Here, he discusses a subject as far removed from *Steve Canyon* as one can get, Alison Bechdel's remarkable *Fun Home*, her memoir of coming out as a lesbian and her father coming out to her about his own past. Harvey looks at Bechdel's work, but he also uses it as a case study in reviewing comics itself and the specifics of reviewing stories told in words and pictures.

In Rick Moody's review of David B., he writes "It's not at all uncommon now for readers of literature to admire Chris Ware or Julie Doucet or Joe Sacco or Joe Matt with a partisan vigor formerly reserved for renegades like Kurt Vonnegut or Richard Brautigan." By 2008, the king of partisan vigor remains Joe Matt, the comical

memoirist who inspires more debate than any cartoonist not currently drawing the prophet Muhammed.

What divides readers? ? Matt barely touches the usual laundry list of culture war flashpoints (politics, religion, violence, sex). He leads an incredibly dull existence spent in rented rooms collecting rare comic strips, Pez dispensers, and pornography—masturbating (although that is never shown, thankfully). Detractors deride Matt as pointless and depressing. Supporters champion him as a brutally honest comedian (I've come around to the latter opinion, for the record). But no single critic holds all these views, which is why I'm handing Joe Matt over to the Customer Reviews department of Amazon.com. The posted reviews of Matt's *Spent* (seven, as of this writing) represent exactly the ongoing partisan vigor Moody describes, with a passion few cartoonists inspire.

This section concludes with a study of C. Spinoza's *Pacho Clokey* by the critic Nate Gruenwald. In 2001 or so, I found this booklet stuffed into a back spinner full of minicomics and Xeroxed 'zines at Los Angeles' Meltdown Comics (it's still available online from Robot Publishing). When I first saw it, I thought I had stumbled on a self-published mini-monograph by this Gruenwald, discussing a lost masterpiece, *Pacho Clokey*.

Ho, ho, ho. Instead, I found myself the victim of what I now believe a cruel hoax, a satire of the ponderous overreaching comics criticism that has come to be somewhat common in this period. If *Wimbledon Green* deflates the modern comics fan, *Pacho Clokey* does the same for us critics. I have never met the author, who chooses to remain anonymous, nor am I so inclined to meet him. I present it to you now as evidence of what the comics critic endures.

Interviews

A selection of interviews closes this volume. David Hajdu's *Bookforum* profile of Marjane Satrapi captures a cartoonist beleaguered by the racial, gender, and cultural biases only an Iranian female cartoonist would face post-9/11. As much as Frank King's revival, Satrapi's success could only come in this period. Had her books been thrown to the pre-2000 direct-sales shops, she would be nearly anonymous in the States. Instead, in a post-lit-comics world, Hajdu finds Satrapi struggling with international literary fame after presenting a welcome, non-hateful image of Iran and the Islamic world.

Darrell Epp's 12,000-word interview with Chester Brown, which runs online at his site *The Two-Fisted Man*, is excerpted here to focus on Brown's non-fiction epic, *Louis Riel* (2003). Epp brings out not only the historical sources of Riel, a 19th Century Canadian revolutionary, but the vital themes that dominate Brown's writing: politics, psychiatry, and religion. Epp offers one of the more complete discussions of not only this book, but any comics masterwork yet done.

At 55, Gary Groth still manages to hold the title of *enfant terrible* of American critics. The founding editor of *The Comics Journal* in 1976, he brought high standards and an unforgiving critical voice to a medium that before him had known mostly

fanzine coverage. As a critic, Groth's style is pugnacious, to say the least. When this book was first pitched to him, he asked me if I really thought I could fill a whole book with good writing on comics (and sent me a copy of his own essay, "The Death of Criticism"). Hopefully I've convinced him...if not, I'm sure I'll read about it.

That said, no one writing on comics history researches long without going to a Groth interview. Schulz, Spiegelman, Crumb, to recent conversations with Ivan Brunetti and Frank Thorne, his interviews remain the bedrock of comics history for the last 30 years. Herein, examples of his range: Yoshihiro Tatsumi, Will Elder, and Kim Deitch. In each, Groth discusses their breakthrough moments, where these artists became the artists we know: Tatsumi's championing of *gekiga*, Elder's seminal *MAD* work, and Deitch on the works that have given him one of the great third acts in comics history.

Finally, we end on two conversations. First, at the 2005 Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art Festival (MoCCA), author Jonathan Lethem interviewed Daniel Clowes. Two remarkable contemporaries, in this meeting they realize they were also neighbors with mutual friends, managing to nearly cross paths several times in Berkeley and New York. Fortunately, a video camera was available when they finally did meet. Here then, for this literary era of cartooning, a conversation between a cartoonist fundamentally influenced by the novel and a novelist fundamentally influenced by cartooning.

And last, the New Art Comics panel from HeroesCon 2008, a public discussion moderated by blogger Tom Spurgeon of *The Comics Reporter*, featuring publisher/cartoonists Sammy Harkham (*Kramers Ergot*) and publisher/editor/writer Dan Nadel (PictureBox, *The Ganzfeld*, *Art Out of Time*). Nadel and Harkham discuss a constant of the comics universe, one that perhaps brings us full circle to the era Brian Doherty describes, the futility of selling art comics to superhero fans. The unique problem they face, however, is selling *non-literary* art comics in a market dominated by the breakthrough of September 12th, 2000. I include it as a reminder that this evolving period isn't over, and the ladies on the escalator aren't finished with this topic yet. Nadel and Harkham are publishing the latest wave of American art-comics, and as far as that genre goes, it feels like 2000 again. ★