



From Mickey Mouse to Maus: The Comic Book Is Dead; Long Live the Graphic Novel!

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Abstract: Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse and Art Spiegelman's Maus are archetypal comic book and graphic novel characters, respectively. Commencing with a brief history of the comic book and then the introduction of the graphic novel, discussion moves to the differences, in both appearance and content, between the two formats. Young readers, who spurn comic books as boring and expensive, now embrace graphic novels, initially because of media tie-ins, adaptations of popular works and ready availability in bookshops and libraries. Today, it seems that original graphic novels for children will assist in the process of moving from Mouse to Maus, with the accompanying sophistication and attractiveness.

Key words: comics, graphic novels.

Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse and Art Spiegelman's Maus seem similar: mice appearing in narratives in a series of connected illustrations. The former, however, featured in comic books read by children – which seem to be in terminal decline – and the latter in graphic novels for older readers – which are growing in popularity and acceptance. The aim of this paper is to chart the fall in popularity of the one and the corresponding rise of the other, as well as the consideration of the differences between the two which could account for the change.

Without going into prehistoric wall paintings, Egyptian tomb art, tapestries or even nineteenth century popular illustrated literature, it can be stated that the comic book as it is known today originated in the USA in the 1930s. These comic books – to use the American term, although they are not books – are separate publications of sequential, narrative art, which is usually, but not always, accompanied by text.

In those early days, comic books featuring superheroes like Superman and detectives such as Dick Tracy sold millions of copies each month, mainly to young boys. After World War II, returning American GIs also read this material: after years at the front, it seemed that they really did not want to curl up with a copy of *War and Peace*.

The landscape changed, however, with the advent of television in the early 1950s. Young readers, still the main purchasers of comic books, began to watch the box in the corner showing its grainy black and white programmes, meaning that sales slumped. To arrest this slide, a new market was courted: adolescent boys. So, funny animals and even some superheroes were replaced by violent crime and horror comic books – followed soon after by



a public backlash, led by psychiatrist Dr Frederic Wertham and the publication of his *Seduction of the Innocent* (Wertham, 1954), which controversially linked comic books with juvenile delinquency. The result was the restrictive Comics Code, which led, equally quickly, to the disappearance of many of the best-selling comic books of the time.

The industry was never the same again. Bland comic books for children were still readily available in newsagencies in the USA, Europe and Australia but, for older readers, so-called ‘underground comix’ came into being. The ‘x’ in ‘comix’ not only differentiated this new type of material from kids’ fare, but also indicated that much of the content was, to use the American term, ‘X-rated’, that is, for adults only. The underground comix, unaffected by the Comics Code, containing topics like politics and sex, and featuring work by Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton and a young Art Spiegelman, were sold in ‘headshops’, in which hippies bought drug-smoking equipment and psychedelic posters.

This phase in the saga lasted only a few years. A more mainstream publication for older readers followed which, like the underground comix, was owned by the creators of the work, and it was sold in the now-popular specialist comic shops, and then in bookshops, but not in newsagents. This publication was the ‘graphic novel’, a term first used in a 1964 comic industry newsletter and forgotten, and which Will Eisner gave his newly-completed comic book, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (Eisner, 1985), and who tried to make it sound sophisticated when offering it to a publisher – who turned it down, anyway. Really, though, the graphic novel format appeared in 1929 in Belgium with the first Tintin volume, as well as with Asterix from 1959.

Some regard the use of the term ‘graphic novel’ to be a marketing ploy – to dissociate it from kids’ stuff and link it with serious literature – and a bibliographer of comic books scoffed: “Graphic novel’ is the new pretentious word for ‘Comic Book’. Most aren’t even novels” (Weiner, 2010: 128). Moreover, this term, like ‘comic book’, is inherently confusing, as many graphic novels are nonfiction, covering topics like history and biography.

There seems to be a real difference between the two formats, however: most would agree that a graphic novel has a longer narrative than a comic book; is bound in book form with higher-quality (usually glossy) paper; and is likely to have a more sophisticated approach to artwork, subject, plot and characterisation. Additionally, graphic novels often deal with ‘bigger’ topics, like current events in Iran or the Balkans, and with some complexity.



So, bearing these criteria in mind, there are obvious differences between Disney's comic book Mickey Mouse (who first appeared in 1928) – funny but basically meaningless adventures printed on poor-quality newsprint – and Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (Spiegelman, 1986), which dates originally from 1972 – which deals with the Holocaust and father/son relations in book format, and won a special Pulitzer Prize. Indeed, Spiegelman's definition of a graphic novel as "... a comic book you need a bookmark for" (Fingerroth, 2008: 3) summarises at least the physical differences between the two formats.

The reasons for one's fall and the other's rise can be explained in context. Comics are read less today by young boys because they have cable television, computer games, the Internet and phones to entertain them, but the process began decades earlier with the invention of black and white, then colour, television, followed by home video, and arcade and other games. Currently, the comic books that are available, apart from the venerable *Phantom*, are tie-ins, either with movie franchises ('Star Wars') or TV series ('The Simpsons'). Little is original or innovative.

There was another factor at work, as well – the financial. Between 1936 and 1961, an American comic book cost ten cents. By 1981, the price had risen five-fold to fifty cents – and this for children whose pocket money, even then, would only have been a dollar or two a week. Despite that increase, newsagents could make more money selling more expensive magazines, so the space given to comic books was reduced. Compounding the problem, publishers discovered that they could sell fewer copies of more expensive comic books for older readers and make more money (Wright, 2001).

In contrast, graphic novels – which appeal to adolescent boys and young men who read comic books when young and still enjoy the visual approach – are frequently original, innovative, sophisticated and well-executed, and their reading audience has more money to spend on their favourite publications. The characters are not necessarily new – witness the success of the Batman story *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, 1986) – but are brought to flawed life. New titles, from *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, 1986) to *Bone* (Smith, 2005), appeal to readers who may not appreciate the printed word – as well as to libraries, which will stock them but not comic books.

There is, as always, more to the story than this. It was mentioned earlier that both Tintin and Asterix appeared well before the term 'graphic novel' was coined. Copies of both



series have been found in libraries where their comic book counterparts have never been allowed. There seem to be two reasons for this discrepancy: firstly, Tintin and Asterix are European and, therefore, supposedly more sophisticated than their American comic book cousins, especially given the careful researching of the former; secondly, their formats were more ‘booklike’, with glossy covers and high-quality paper. It is possible, it seems, to judge a comic book by its cover – especially when it is a graphic novel. To prove that these series are still taken seriously, one need only think of *Tintin in the Congo* (Herge, 1946) and the attempt in Belgium this year to have the 80 year old work banned for being racist.

Today, graphic novels are welcomed in libraries for three important reasons: they are claimed to foster literacy, which is threatened like never before; to motivate reluctant readers; and to attract new (mainly young) clients to libraries. In fact, apparently some libraries have reported the quadrupling of their Young Adult circulation by stocking graphic novels (Serchay, 2008). Perhaps comic books would have fulfilled the same tasks, but they were never given that opportunity.

Furthermore, a number of graphic novels have won mainstream awards, although the Pulitzer Prize awarded to *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986) remains the most prestigious. For example, *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, 1986) won the Hugo Award for best science fiction novel, *Sandman* (Gaiman, 1989) the World Fantasy Award and Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) the Michael L. Printz Award for children’s and young adult literature, the only graphic novel to have done so, which was the case, also, for Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* (Ware, 2000) and the Guardian First Book Prize. It is apparent, then, that the format has won approval with judges, as well as with critics and reviewers.

This scenario is made more complicated by the addition of a different sort of graphic novel, the Japanese equivalent, known as *manga*. Given the world-wide popularity of Japanese pop culture, from the ubiquitous Hello Kitty to the anime of Miyazaki like ‘Howl’s Moving Castle’, it is not surprising that *manga*, in either Japanese or American versions, have made their mark. Again, they are ‘foreign’ and exotic and, certainly in the editions that are found in Western countries, nicely presented – just like graphic novels.

Graphic novels have cemented their place in the pop culture world, too, because of the number of movies based on them, such as ‘V for Vendetta’ and ‘Sin City’, although almost all were aimed at adult audiences. To return the compliment, the film-to-graphic novel adaptation has been popular, also: witness ‘Star Wars’ and ‘Indiana Jones’,



especially. Furthermore, multi-media tie-ins have become increasingly noticeable: the Twilight saga and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (Gaiman, 2002) began as novels, became successful movies, and then were turned into graphic novels. Additionally, many classic adult novels have been adapted to the graphic novel format in order to find a new audience, examples ranging from *Frankenstein* to Spain's own *Don Quixote*.

In fact, the popularity of adaptations and tie-ins between media has led to the rebirth of comic-like material for children – but, of course, it is expensive graphic novels for young readers which have taken over, to a very large extent, from comparatively cheap comic books for that age group. Few of these graphic novels, however, are original: they are such classic children's works as *The Wind in the Willows* and Hans Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*; best-selling series like the Babysitters' Club and Nancy Drew; recent best-sellers like the Artemis Fowl series and the above-mentioned *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005); and versions for older readers of such television series as 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'. All these tick the graphic novel boxes, as it were, because they are well-produced, colourful, glossy and attractive-looking. Of course, they are published by multinational companies, sold in bookshops and stocked in libraries. These newcomers have succeeded, then, where the old-fashioned comics could not.

Ironically, given librarians' decades-long suspicion of graphic novels and their predecessors until comparatively recently, many works which are obviously not graphic novels are being labelled as such and shelved with them in libraries. Examples include not only picture books for older readers – like Raymond Briggs' venerable *When the Wind Blows* (Briggs, 1982) and Shaun Tan's recent *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006) – which, at least, is understandable, but also books with very few illustrations. Tan's even more recent *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (Tan, 2008) is a borderline case, and would have been considered, until recently, a picture book.

There are two possibilities here: either the librarians concerned do not know what a graphic novel actually is, and think that any work with both text and pictures is likely to be one, or they do know, but want as many volumes as possible to be shelved as graphic novels because they would then be more likely to be borrowed by young readers. Knowing librarians as one does, the second option is the more likely.

However, an increasing number of original picture books in graphic novel format are appearing, amongst them Brian Selznick's Caldecott Medal winner, *The Invention of Hugo*



Cabret (Selznick, 2007) – although its creator disputes it – and Australia’s popular Captain Congo series. The publication of such works is important, for it indicates that there are original works for children in this format, and not just adaptations and tie-ins. It is hardly surprising that children would prefer to read an attractive graphic novel than a drab comic book and, as Wright stated: “America at the turn of the twenty first century has a pervasive consumer culture based largely on the perpetuation of adolescence. Young children acquire tastes in entertainment... formerly reserved for their older siblings” (Wright, 2001: 284).

Until comparatively recently, then, it could be said that most visual literature was aimed at the very young with picture books, and at adolescents (and adults) with graphic novels; now, the boundaries have blurred, although in Fingerroth’s canon of the best sixty graphic novels (Fingerroth, 2008), only one is even purportedly for older children, the above-mentioned *When the Wind Blows* (Briggs, 1982). Still, perhaps the wheel has turned full circle for older children: instead of just staring at their screens – television, computer or phone – they might pick up even more frequently the graphic novels which seem to have replaced their parents’ much-loved comic books. Anecdotally, too, it seems that girls, seldom great readers of comic books, have embraced the graphic novel, attracted by the sophistication of both the appearance and the content. Although Mickey Mouse might have passed on, his rodent replacement, Spiegelman’s *Maus*, seems to have spawned a whole new world of even better material for young readers.

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