

Drawing Power*

By Bob Thompson

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I've wandered into an alternative universe, and I'm trying to decide if I want to stay. The setting is the lovely, old-fashioned library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, in midtown Manhattan. The event is a gathering called "SPLAT! A Graphic Novel Symposium." I'm here because the organizers have promised to lay out, in the course of a single day, "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Graphic Novels."

What I want to know is: How did this formerly ghettoized medium become one of the rare publishing categories that's actually *expanding* these days?

"SPLAT!" seems a perfect place to start looking for answers.

Sponsored by the New York Center for Independent Publishing, it's crammed with influential cartoonists, editors, agents, librarians, marketing types and book-sellers. There will be talk of literary comics, autobiographical comics, Web comics, kids' comics, comics in libraries, comics in schools and much, much more. By day's end, my head will be buzzing with new knowledge on subjects ranging from the distribution revolution that helped make the graphic novel boom possible to the Manga Invasion from Japan.

Above all, "SPLAT!" is filled with enthusiastic voices.

What is a graphic novel?

"It's a perfect synthesis of artwork and literature!"

When will graphic novels come into their own?

"We seem to be in a golden age of comics publishing right now!"

And yet . . .

To a lifelong Prose Guy, whose idea of a good time involves a comfortable couch and a book full of nothing but words, the graphic novel galaxy can still feel far, far away.

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Yes, I *know* comics can be ambitious and aimed at adults. Art Spiegelman's "Maus" made this indisputable two decades ago, and there has been plenty of impressive work done since. But I can't help wondering, even as I begin to explore the rise of what's sometimes called "sequential art," if I can ever overcome my personal bias toward prose.

Maybe Scott McCloud will help me sort this out.

I've been looking forward to the final "SPLAT!" offering, in which the man billed as "one of the great theorists of comics" will be holding forth. McCloud made his name 15 years ago with "Understanding Comics," a groundbreaking deconstruction of the cartoonist's art that itself takes the form of a 215-page graphic novel.

It's not really a novel, of course.

"Graphic novel" is "a goofy term," McCloud tells his listeners. "The first graphic novel that got a lot of play was Will Eisner's 'Contract With God.' The thing's an anthology. The next graphic novel that got a lot of play was 'Maus,' and it's a memoir. There are very few graphic novels that are actually graphic novels.

"What they are is a publishing shorthand that says: big fat comic with a spine—and people get that."

Now McCloud is taking audience questions, and here comes one that seems aimed in my direction.

What about those still-numerous naysayers, he is asked, who resist the idea that books filled with word balloons should be taken as seriously as pure prose? Isn't there a way to educate those annoying old fogies—perhaps through some kind of "adult literacy campaign for comics"?

Sounds good to me. After all, isn't education what I'm here for?

McCloud offers a different perspective. Some people will *never* get it, he says.

"And it's okay. They'll die."

'A WHOLE LOT OF LITTLE SEESAWS'

It's easy to forgive McCloud a bit of coldblooded glee at the rising status of his art form. All you have to do is think back to how utterly unappreciated it was—in this country, at least—when he was launching his career a quarter-century back.

"We have to remind ourselves once in a while just how incredibly fast this has all happened," he says. It hasn't been that long since trying to interest American publishers in graphic novels was "beating what looked like a dead horse." Suddenly, seven years ago, "the horse opened its eyes. And then, like 7,000 horses came over the hill."

The numbers bear him out.

In 2001, the first year it started tracking them, the pop culture business Web site ICv2 reported a total of \$75 million in graphic novel sales in the United States and Canada. By 2007, that total had quintupled, to \$375 million, and graphic novels had gained their reputation as one of the few growth areas in publishing. As

a result, every publisher in New York—they may be late adapters, but they're not blind—seemed to be scrambling for a piece of the action.

What happened?

A lot of things, I will discover. Best-selling ideamonger Malcolm Gladwell famously argued that you can often find a single, crucial “tipping point” to explain such a change. But “SPLAT!” panelist Bob Mecoy—a New York literary agent who has found himself selling more and more graphic novels over the past few years—says that a better image, in this case, would be “a whole lot of little seesaws” tipping one after another.

“Maus” was an early one, Mecoy says. Few would disagree.

A few days after “SPLAT!” I find myself splashing through the rainy streets of SoHo toward the place that particular seesaw began to tip. I've got an appointment to meet Art Spiegelman's wife and collaborator, Francoise Mouly, in the same building where, 28 years ago, they launched the influential cartoon journal *Raw*, in which Spiegelman's masterpiece first appeared.

Mouly is a voluble woman in her early 50s who, despite having left France for New York in 1974, retains much of the charming accent she arrived with. She mostly wants to tell me about her new publishing venture, Toon Books, a series of elegantly produced comic tales aimed at beginning readers. But her crowded studio feels like a museum of avant-garde cartooning—a blown-up cover of a *Raw* anthology dominates the back wall; a lovely old oak case holds “mechanicals” and color separations used eons ago to prepare work by the likes of Robert Crumb and Charles Burns for publication—and inevitably, the conversation slips into the past.

“There's a generation that grew up with *Raw*, which is strange for me,” Mouly says, “because I'm like the old lady of comics!” As the art editor of the *New Yorker*, she is now in a position to pay her artists well. But she can recall a time when “the rewards were too few for anybody but insane people to actually want to be cartoonists.”

Raw was created in large part to give these cartoonists, Spiegelman included, a place [where] their work could be seen. “Maus” was first published as a series of small booklets hand-glued into the magazine.

For those who haven't encountered the finished version, I can only urge you to check it out yourself. Attempts at description—“father and son angst,” “Holocaust survival,” “Jews as mice and Nazis as cats”—can't begin to convey the uncannily moving effect of Spiegelman's blend of words, pictures, intense themes and self-deflating humor. Published in two volumes by Pantheon, in 1986 and 1991, “Maus” made bestseller lists, won a 1992 Pulitzer Prize and established that a graphic novel could qualify as great literature.

What it did not immediately do, however, was help *other* graphic novels achieve similar commercial and literary prominence. As Mouly points out, some 15 years would pass between the publication of the first “Maus” volume and the beginning of the graphic-novel boom.

In the meantime, she and Spiegelman had a daughter and a son. And as the parents watched their children's very different progress toward reading, the seeds of Toon Books were sown.

"With our daughter," Mouly says, "you could hear the little wheels turning and the light bulb went up and boom, she was reading. With our son, you could hear the wheels turning—and nothing was happening."

They knew what to do, "which was to keep reading with him and make sure that reading is a pleasure." And they learned that what really held his attention was comics.

Spiegelman read him classics such as "Little Nemo" and "Krazy Kat." Mouly, who speaks French with her kids, read from the wide range of children's comics available in France. "It made me very aware," she says, how much they can be "a magic bullet at that moment." Comics give beginning readers a visual narrative to hold on to, "a thread through the labyrinth" that she thinks is even more important for children who *don't* have parents reading to them.

There was a supply problem, however.

American comics were now geared almost exclusively toward teens and young adults. "Oddly, as the medium grew," as Mouly and Spiegelman explain in the Toon catalogue they wrote together, "kids got left behind."

The couple's first impulse, in looking to correct this, was not to launch a line of books themselves but to work with an established company. Mouly says she shopped the concept "to every children's book publisher in town." Over and over, she was told: It's a great idea, but it won't work.

Why not?

It seems that an important seesaw hadn't yet tipped.

Bookstores need to know where to *put* things, Mouly explains. And publishers didn't want cartoon books aimed at beginning readers because "they didn't exist as a section in the store."

'THE "ULYSSES" OF COMICS'

Confession time: When I started on this self-education project, I'd barely read any graphic novels. It wasn't that I opposed the things on principle. It was just that—somewhat snobbishly—I didn't put them in the same category as *real* books.

Oh, I'd read "Maus" and been amazed by it. Much later, I read the similarly lauded memoir "Persepolis," by Iranian exile Marjane Satrapi, which vividly personalizes the tragedy of the Iranian revolution. But most graphic novelists remained just names to me, if that.

"I hear you're interviewing Adrian Tomine! You're so lucky!" a younger colleague burst out one day. Lucky indeed. I'd never heard of the guy 24 hours before.

Tomine turns out to be a gracious, articulate 30-something who has been drawing comics in some form or other since he was 4 or 5 years old. He offers himself

as an example of the personality type drawn to “alternative” cartooning—i.e., work outside the superhero or funny pages mainstream—before there was money in it.

“If you talk to a lot of cartoonists,” he says, you’ll find “some sort of chaos or unsettled nature to their childhood,” be it divorce (as in his case) or just “moving around a lot.” Drawing comics “is so clearly some psychological way of taking life and ordering it into little squares that you can control.”

His latest collection of little squares, “Shortcomings,” carries a blurb from novelist Jonathan Lethem that compares Tomine’s “mastery of narrative time” to that of short-story goddess Alice Munro. It’s a complex fictional stew of relationships and ethnicity, and while I don’t quite buy the Munro comparison, I’m captivated nonetheless. Tomine is published by a small but highly regarded Canadian outfit called Drawn & Quarterly, and I soon find myself bingeing on some of their other authors.

I find a lot to like. When I ask myself *why*, however, it’s not easy to put the answer into words.

Take “Exit Wounds” by Israeli cartoonist Rutu Modan. An improbable love story built around a man’s disappearance after a terrorist bombing, its “spare, affecting lines and charged dialogue add up to a tragicomic take on family and identity,” according to The Post’s reviewer. Fair enough, but most of that description could serve a prose novel just as well. What haunts me is the way Modan’s lonely, angry lovers lock gazes across empty distance.

Or take Guy Delisle’s “Pyongyang,” a graphic memoir of his stint as an animator in totalitarian North Korea, and Joe Sacco’s “The Fixer,” a journalistic portrait of war-traumatized Sarajevo. As best I can tell, what elevates these very different nonfiction accounts are the same things that work in good, first-person prose: sharp-eyed observation, strong storytelling and a narrator who functions as the reader’s guide. What seems different is the literal immediacy of the graphic versions. Within seconds, they can pull you into strange worlds.

At Tomine’s suggestion, I read a graphic novel on another subject that I’d never, ever have expected to be addressed in this medium. Chester Brown’s “Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography” is a painstaking retelling, complete with footnotes, of the life of a “charismatic, and perhaps mad” 19th-century rebel against the Canadian government.

Talk about strange worlds! I’d never encountered Riel before. Brown makes him unforgettable.

Mid-binge, I realize that I should be setting aside my Drawn & Quarterly stack in order to prepare for an interview at Pantheon, the mainstream publisher most closely associated with quality graphic novels. My Pantheon to-read pile includes David B.’s “Epileptic,” Charles Burns’s “Black Hole” and—on the very top—Chris Ware’s “Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth.”

Legendary book designer and Pantheon comics guru Chip Kidd, the man I’m scheduled to meet, was responsible for acquiring Ware’s book. He told Pantheon’s sales force it was “the ‘Ulysses’ of comics.” Hyperbole? Perhaps. But I know that

Ware is a huge talent. I also know that I really, really should read “Jimmy Corrigan” before I talk to Kidd.

So what’s stopping me?

Well, I’ve noticed that Kidd has written a couple of novels himself. And by novels, in this case, I mean novels *without* pictures.

I pick up his latest, “The Learners.” It’s not “Ulysses,” but it looks pretty good. Guess which book Prose Guy settles down with.

THE DISTRIBUTION FIX

John Shableski thinks graphic novels are Elvis, and he’s not shy about saying so.

Shableski, 45, is an ultra-enthusiastic graphic novels marketer—favorite phrase: “How cool is that!”—for Diamond Book Distributors, based in Timonium, Md. Before joining Diamond last year, he was an ultra-enthusiastic graphic novels marketer at Brodart, a wholesaler to libraries. Before that he was a radio guy, and he’s fond of music-business analogies.

“I always compare this to the beginning of rock-and-roll,” he says. Tiny studios like Sun, Stax and Motown started cranking out “really great music” that forced the big boys to sit up and take notice. The same thing happened with independent comics publishers like Drawn & Quarterly, Fantagraphics and Dark Horse, which put out enough “really good books” to help rouse publishing’s sleepy giants.

Yet putting out good books wasn’t enough, Shableski explains over a grilled cheese sandwich at a Timonium diner. Other seesaws had to tip before the mainstream really woke up—and libraries were one of the earliest.

Shortly after he got hired at Brodart in 2003, he recalls, his boss handed him a stack of graphic novels (“Maus” and Mike Mignola’s “Hellboy” among them) and said, “The libraries are asking about this stuff. I need you to figure this out.” Naturally, Shableski started talking to librarians. Among the first was a Brodart consultant named Katharine Kan.

By phone from her home in Panama City, Fla., Kan, who’s 53, tells me she’s been an obsessive comics reader since she was “like, 6 years old.” Her parents didn’t mind, she says, because she read so many other things as well.

In the late 1980s, when libraries carried few comics of any kind, Kan had a job as a young adult services librarian in Hawaii. Amid constant complaints about “losing boys as readers around 10 or 11,” she persuaded her boss to let her introduce Spider-Man, Batman and the like to the collection. Middle school boys began clustering around her desk. Soon she was branching out to Neil Gaiman’s “Sandman” series and Stan Sakai’s “Usagi Yojimbo.”

Other librarians were discovering the comics effect as well: They saw both interest and circulation rise when they started adding graphic novels to their collections. In 2002, Michael Pawuk, a young adult services librarian from Cuyahoga County,

Ohio, helped organize a day-long program called “Get Graphic @ Your Library” as part of the American Library Association’s summer conference.

“It was one of the best days of my life,” says Pawuk, who helped recruit graphic novelists Spiegelman, Gaiman, Jeff Smith and Colleen Doran to talk to his information-hungry colleagues.

A few years later, Shableski left Brodart to join Diamond Book Distributors. In effect, he was jumping off one tipping seesaw and climbing on another, throwing his weight behind the effort to get more books with word balloons into bookstores.

And therein lies a complex but crucial tale.

To someone outside the business, it isn’t obvious why selling graphic novels through bookstores should have been a particular problem. Hey, you put the things in your catalogue and send your reps around to chat up the booksellers, just as you would with any other books, right?

Wrong. Because until a few years ago, most comics publishers weren’t in the habit of selling to bookstores *at all*.

There were a few exceptions (Gaiman’s “Sandman” was one). But for the most part, these publishers—from the superhero factories DC and Marvel on down to the literary independents—were used to dealing with what’s called the “direct market,” meaning specialty stores devoted exclusively to comics. Mostly these stores featured “floppies” (individual comics), but they carried comics with spines as well.

At the time graphic novels first showed signs of booming, the direct market was monopolized—as it is today—by a single company: Diamond Comic Distributors. If you wanted to sell to comic stores, you had no real choice but to do so through the distributor’s phone-book-size monthly catalogue. What’s more, comics acquired through Diamond could not be returned. This meant that regular bookstores—accustomed to a distribution system under which they could send back unsold product—wanted nothing to do with them.

Recognizing this structural difficulty, Diamond itself started a separate book distribution arm and began hiring people like Shableski. But many comics companies chose to channel their bookstore efforts through mainstream publishers, who had more experience with bookstore distribution.

As manga stormed across the Pacific from Japan, for example, Simon and Schuster began distributing the No. 1 North American manga publisher, Viz, while HarperCollins made a deal to distribute rival Tokyopop. Among the independents, Drawn & Quarterly joined forces with Farrar, Straus and Giroux, while the Seattle-based Fantagraphics signed up with W.W. Norton.

“I don’t think we would still be in business without the Norton deal,” says Eric Reynolds of Fantagraphics—though he notes that the rise of the Internet as a distribution channel helped a great deal, too.

Shableski agrees that the distribution revolution was huge. But if you ask him to name the biggest recent change in the landscape, he points immediately to one more tipping seesaw.

“It’s the major publisher involvement,” he says. “Not just distributing, but creating original stories.”

‘ONE OF THOSE MOMENTS’

Mark Siegel personifies major publisher involvement. But this comes as a surprise even to him.

Siegel is the editorial director of First Second Books, a subsidiary of Macmillan, with offices in Manhattan’s Flatiron Building. Not that long ago, he was an illustrator, designer and graphic novel true believer with big ideas but little hope of turning them into reality.

“I had these three sheets of paper I was carrying around, called ‘A Vision for Graphic Novels in America,’” he says, thinking back four years to when he first encountered his current employers. “I was dreaming, basically.”

Simon Boughton, who runs Macmillan’s Roaring Brook Press, was one of the executives who heard Siegel’s pitch. “It was one of those moments when you have a trend in the marketplace,” Boughton says. Graphic novels were poised to jump “from being a niche business into being a mainstream publishing business.”

But to make that jump, “you need a creative vision.” And here was Siegel, offering one.

Like Mouly, Siegel grew up in France, which broadened his thinking about what is possible in comics. A cornerstone of his vision involved tapping into “a highly international talent pool,” though with a strong American element. He also wanted to emphasize quality, target books at all different ages and offer “the best possible home for creators.”

One creator he offered a home was Gene Luen Yang, whose “American Born Chinese” went on to become a 2006 National Book Award finalist—the first graphic novel to be so honored—and to win the American Library Association’s prestigious Printz award for young adult literature. Other early titles included Grady Klein’s “The Lost Colony” series (“An Asterix for America”) and J.P. Stassen’s “Deogratias,” an intense evocation of the Rwandan genocide.

First Second gets high marks among most of the graphic novel types I talk with. But I also hear some criticism, which comes in two basic categories:

The first: It’s too commercial.

The second: It’s not commercial *enough*.

Two years after the imprint’s launch, it remains a work in progress. What drives a publishing business, Boughton says, “is not categories, it’s individual books.” And however many quality titles one publishes, there’s always a need for “a success that moves the needle.” Hence the hopes both he and Siegel place in “Prince of Persia,” due out this fall. Based on a popular video game, soon to be a Disney film, it has, Boughton says, “a lot of mass market chops.”

Meanwhile . . .

Around the same time Siegel was dreaming his graphic dream, a young woman named Janna Morishima got herself hired at Scholastic, the children's book powerhouse, as "basically a glorified receptionist." She, too, developed a vision of the graphic future.

"I just got it in my head that we need to start a comics imprint at Scholastic," Morishima says.

Before long, she and her boss, David Saylor—who shared Morishima's interest and was well aware of the industry buzz—had collaborated on a memo proposing just that. As part of this effort, Morishima "made a pilgrimage to Forbidden Planet" and asked the folks at the famed New York comics emporium what they would recommend for an 8-year-old boy. They mulled a bit, then pointed her toward "Bone," an all-ages comic series that was successfully self-published for years by its creator, Jeff Smith.

Starring three blob-like cousins (they look like refugees from "Pogo" who've stumbled into "The Lord of the Rings"), "Bone" manages to come off as simultaneously epic and funny. And from a children's publisher's point of view, it has a crucial advantage over most independent work: It lacks the edgy adult content—explicit sex! graphic violence! alienation!—that scares off parents. Scholastic used a colorized, nine-volume version to launch its new Graphix imprint in 2005.

There are now 2.5 million copies in print.

Meanwhile . . .

Bob Meco, the agent who offered the "whole lot of little seesaws" metaphor to explain the graphic novel boom, was hopping onto the publishing seesaw himself.

Meco started his agency in 2003, after spending a quarter century "on the editor's side of the desk." In the early 1990s, as editor in chief at Avon, he'd gotten his own graphic novels education when he published a Spiegelman-edited series called Neon Lit. But that was almost a decade before the boom, and as an agent, he assumed he'd be peddling prose.

One day, however, he was approached by a couple of pediatricians who said: "We want to do the next 'What to Expect When You're Expecting.'" Visions of perpetual sales danced in his head. What could he do, he asked himself, to make the project appeal to the visually oriented young?

BINGO! GRAPHIC NOVEL!

Meco's pediatricians ended up getting cold feet, but never mind: He soon found other graphic novels to sell. "Walking around and talking to anybody who will talk to me," he found that "all the commercial publishers were saying: Yeah, we should be doing this." But they didn't know how to talk to cartoonists. "Nobody knew how to get in."

Four years later, helping them has become close to half of Meco's business.

Simon and Schuster asked his advice about graphic novels for kids, and he ended up selling them on a historical series called "Turning Points" (a version of the "We

Were There” books I loved as a child, in which fictional boys and girls wind up in the middle of historical events). He’s the agent working with John Wiley & Sons to repackage Shakespeare plays as manga. He has even dipped his toe into politics: Crown is doing a graphic take on this year’s presidential campaign, to be called “08,” by cartoonist Dan Goldman and Michael Crowley of the New Republic.

Summing up, Mecoy unearths a gardening metaphor.

Graphic novels are all about “hybrid vigor,” he says. That’s what you get when you cross two plants and the combined version “grows bigger and faster than either one of them.”

‘HEARTBREAK SOUP’ MEETS ‘FASHION HIGH’

A few weeks into this project, I’m reading absolutely nothing but big fat comics with spines, and my inner Prose Guy is getting cranky. For one thing, they’re too darn *short*. I love being immersed in a narrative for days at a time, but even the fattest comics don’t take more than a few hours to read.

Please, please, can’t I take a break and dive into the new translation of “War and Peace” or, at the very least, curl up with the latest Venetian mystery by Donna Leon?

Nope. My stack of graphic novels keeps getting higher. And some are good enough to make my prose itch disappear.

By the end of “Blankets,” Craig Thompson’s lovely memoir of childhood and first love, I’ve forgotten its form and simply bought into the characters and the story. Cyril Pedrosa’s “Three Shadows” tugs at my parental heartstrings with every swirling image of a broad-shouldered father fighting to save a small, doomed child.

To my surprise, I find myself wondering if Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli’s version of Paul Auster’s “City of Glass” might be *better* than Auster’s original. To borrow the words of my smart brother-in-law, who lent me the adaptation, its “visual representations of intense states of mind” greatly magnify its emotional force.

And then there’s Gilbert Hernandez’s “Heartbreak Soup,” a collection of everyday stories set in a fictional Central American hamlet called Palomar. Hernandez’s work is part of a long-running Fantagraphics series called “Love and Rockets,” created with his brother Jaime. I like it for the same reason I got hooked on Armistead Maupin’s “Tales of the City” when the San Francisco Chronicle first serialized it: It’s an addictive soap opera, replete with humor and heart.

All this reminds me of another tipping seesaw that, over the past couple of decades, helped pave the way for the graphic novel boom. Scott McCloud describes it in three words, with a lengthy pause between each:

“Comics. Got. Better.”

Which is certainly true.