

## I

## Introduction

JAN BAETENS, HUGO FREY, AND STEPHEN E. TABACHNICK

Through thirty-five original chapters written by the leading researchers working in the field today, this book provides a new literary history of the formation and development of the graphic novel. In addition, it provides a state of the art analysis and points toward the future development of the graphic novel. The work is a contribution to American Studies because its focus is on the analyses of the different steps that, for now well over a century, writers, artists, publishers, and critics have taken to make works of text and image for adult readers in the United States. However, the generous editorial parameters and purposeful intellectual ambitions of *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel* mean that we are able also to underline a number of important international aspects, including accounting for influential works originating in Canada, the United Kingdom, francophone Europe, and Japan. At the time of publication, the idea of a world literature for the graphic novel is gaining momentum, and it is on this subject that an essay in the collection closes the present volume.

What remains fascinating and complex about, and meriting immediate interest in, the graphic novel is that it is commonly understood in three distinct ways. First, graphic novels are perceived as a significant aspect of comics and literary history, indissolubly linked to a shift in status of comics from a low, minor cultural form to a very respectable one, a development primarily occurring in the 1980s, but with antecedent and continuation. The history of the contemporary graphic novel in the twenty-first century developed through literary publication and distribution in bookstores, or online retailers, rather than as a form of contemporary art for exhibition, albeit significant shows have taken place at several international galleries. Second, the graphic novel is a specific medium of the comic form, which displays a number of prototypical features that can be read, compared and analyzed. Third, “graphic novel” is also a contested term among scholars, critics, and creators, with it being

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often dismissed as pretentious or unhelpful, while all the while broadly also understood along the two lines suggested above. In the body of this introduction, we will unpack each of these aspects of the meaning of “graphic novel” further and describe how they shape the framing of this collection and its contributors’ work.

As a work for a series associated with literary history, the first understanding of the term “graphic novel” outlined above gains real pertinence. Generally speaking, graphic novels are intimately associated with a historically specific change in comics: the upgrading of the form through the 1970s and 1980s, the making of comics “not just for kids,” and the continued expansion of this process in the twenty-first century. Since at least the 1940s, writers and publishers and readers have used different words to designate comics that are in some way different to the action, adventure, crime, sci-fi, and superhero serials of the interwar and immediate postwar periods. Interchangeable terms to designate this material have also included “picture novel,” “picture story,” “sequential art,” and so forth. Through the 1970s, and particularly the 1980s, largely thanks to its use by Will Eisner for his work of 1978 – *A Contract with God: A Graphic Novel* – the term “graphic novel” emerged to provide some stabilization of the previously more fluid semantic conditions. Thus, “graphic novel” has stuck as a label and concept and is often interpreted to describe the revolution in comics that witnessed a significant change in types of work, expanded readership groups, and, most importantly, a new and significantly higher cultural status.

The history of the graphic novel is organized in this collection through three broadly linear chronological parts: developments prior to the breakthroughs of the 1970s and 1980s, analysis of the key period of change associated with the formal birth of the graphic novel, and, finally, subjects pertaining to works and trends of the early twenty-first century. Many creators span much of the time period covered by the entire work, while others are themselves collectors and historians of works from the earlier periods. Each of our contributors has been open to the ways in which periodization of history is contingent on interpretation, while also acknowledging nuance and complexity in a form that not only depicts history (as a subject in graphic novels) but also uses historical data (citation of literary/visual tropes) as an energizing force. Next, one should underline that at present no really agreed historical periodization of the graphic novel is an accepted plausible truth, whereas comics more generally in the United States have the “golden, silver, and bronze” age framework in place. On this ground alone, as editors, we have preferred conventional chronology as it allows readers to gain a sense of

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long historical change, while also for the first time we can really underline a tripartite story for the graphic novel of sites of anticipation, emergence, and dominance. To repeat, however, every scholar sharing in the work shows an adept understanding to analyze across the three periods, finding web-like connectivity between times and places, and never taking for granted the underlying historical meta-story of the “progress of graphic novels,” even though at present such a schema of the rise and further rise of the graphic novel is plausible.

If historical anachronism poses a problem for historians of the deeper past, then new events that are too fast to capture in the time it takes to analyze and explore thoroughly for academic purposes are the special curse of the historian of the present day. For example, during the making of this collection and too late to commission new reflections, significant major new graphic novels have quickly reflected on social-political catastrophes and disputes. In Europe, remarkable accounts have responded first to the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre (see Luz 2015, 2017) and during the writing of this book memories of, and recovery from, the Bataclan Massacre (November 2015) are charted by Fred Dewilde (2016). In the United States, the Trump presidential campaign stimulated a biographical work by Ted Rall (2016), while even more recently, after the election result, Françoise Mouly, Nadja Spiegelman, and others have responded to the election of Donald Trump through the creation of *Resist*, a free comics protest publication and graphic-design campaign tool kit. At the time of writing, in the fall of 2017, the novelist Salman Rushdie has configured the elected president through the metaphor of “The Joker” – the Batman villain. These are all works of critical importance that future historians will no doubt discuss but which we cannot do further in this printing of *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel*. For now, let us add that they confirm that the graphic novel is a key medium for the processing of political and personal narratives and that “events” such as the horrors of international terrorism, or polarized national political division, are typical subjects in the contemporary medium, to which we will return further in this introduction. Furthermore, it is through the remediation of narratives and images of these types of event that their collective memory becomes fixed in public interpretation or contemporary debate. Events (sadly, truly terrible events for the victims in the case of the terror attacks) prompt new work, while the work itself engrains, memorializes or acts on the public sphere.

The first part of the collection begins with Denis Mellier’s analysis of the first text-image works of the eighteenth century and their relationship to the early novel, a distinctive analysis in the field, not least for its preference for

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the word novel over that of “graphic,” and concludes with fascinating analyses of the underground comix and its outgrowths, contributed by Jean-Paul Gabilliet on Robert Crumb and Paul Williams on Jules Feiffer and his contemporaries. Each scholar contributing to the unearthing of this deep archeology of the medium is at pains to avoid anachronism and teleology. What each of these contributors consistently collectively shed light on is that there are antecedents and signs of later developments that only become explicit in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Thus, both Denis Mellier and Barbara Postema indicate in their respective contributions how works and debates on text and image in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, foreshadow subsequent developments. As Postema astutely notes, works of silent comics of the 1930s continue to shape contemporary practice, such as in the publications of the contemporary Canadian, George A Walker. It is also the case that adult-oriented long-length works were published and critically admired before the 1980s, standing out already from the daily newspaper strips, published as one-shots or reprinted as single volumes. Titles such as the first collected *Krazy Kat* (Herriman, 1946) or a little later Harvey Kurtzman’s *Jungle Book* (1959) and Jean-Claude Forest’s *Barbarella* (1966) plausibly represent not so much the undergrowth of where comics meet literature as being isolated samples of work very similar to that with which we are familiar today. Paul Williams’ fascinating contribution on the 1970s, which concludes Part I, underlines just how messy periodization and the past can be by showing the multiple roads directed toward the full breakthrough of graphic novels into the public consciousness.

While the 1980s are a turning point in comics, and critical to our subject, surprisingly little has been published specifically on that era. The collection therefore starts to fill one of the major lacunae in the field by returning to detail this period (Part II: 1978–2000).<sup>1</sup> To summarize a little further here, it is regularly acknowledged that 1986 and much of the later 1980s and early 1990s was when graphic novels became a commercially significant and critically recognized new literary phenomenon. As many readers will know, it was in 1986 that Spiegelman’s first book-length volume of *Maus* was published by Pantheon in New York (by Penguin in the UK) and that just months apart DC Comics published as a single book-length edition Alan Moore and Dave

<sup>1</sup> Authoritative histories of the use of terms such as “graphic novel” are offered by R. C. Harvey (2001), while Stephen Weiner (2012, 2017) has provided a number of invaluable studies. We would also recommend works on the evolution of comics from contributors to this volume Jean-Paul Gabilliet (2013) and Paul Williams and James Lyons (2010).

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Gibbons' *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. These were the spear-tips of significant evolutions in commercial and underground comics-making. Thus, *Maus* had already been printed in serial form through Spiegelman and Mouly's experimental comics magazine, *Raw* (1980–1991), and earlier elements had also featured in underground comix (e.g., in *Funny Aministrals*; and *Short Order Comix*). Alongside serializing *Maus*, *Raw* provided a space for the publication of historical, international, underground, and independent strips. It was a proving ground for a generation who would in the years that followed move from short strips in *Raw* to longer graphic novels: Mark Beyer, Charles Burns, Chris Ware, Ben Katchor, Kim Deitch, Richard McGuire. Before *Watchmen*, Moore had himself gained attention with "Swamp Thing" comics for DC, and in the UK he had part-published *V for Vendetta* (with David Lloyd) in an independent adult comics magazine, *Warrior*. Also at DC, Frank Miller was a talent who had made the action superhero strip *Daredevil* rival any competitor. This upgrading of genre comics was itself strongly influenced by the American publication of the French sci-fi magazine *Heavy Metal*, which introduced anglophone readers to the work of Moebius and Bilal in several previously unknown francophone publications originally developed in Europe in *Métal Hurlant* and *À Suivre* magazine (see also Labarre 2016). But, beyond the roots of what Roger Sabin in his *Adult Comics* (1993) identified as the "big three" of Spiegelman, Miller, and Moore, the 1980s were also shaped by Robert Crumb's revival in activity (via *Weirdo*), the emergence of autobiographical writer Harvey Pekar, who featured frequently on national television in this decade (*The Letterman Show*), and Marvel's original one-shot series. The same decade witnessed the repeated Hollywood-indie reinvention of comics, *Flash Gordon* (1980, directed Mike Hodges), *Popeye* (1980, directed Robert Altman), and horror comics, *Creep Show* (1982, directed George R. Romero). It was also the decade that saw the super-commercial Indiana Jones titles which evoked the action comics of the 1930s and were heavily inspired by Hergé's Tintin books, something the director acknowledged when promoting his films in France (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981, directed by Steven Spielberg). These are a significant corpus of films that further indicate a popular return to comics, prior to the emergence of the graphic novel. It is also worth underlining briefly that by 1986 the comics fanzine-cum-academic journal, *Comics Journal* (Fantagraphics, Seattle) was entering its ninth year of production. It included some of the best historical writing, including on the idea of the graphic novel and small circulation independent comics, and more generally waved the flag for all kinds of comics, national and international.

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We would also note that it was through the same period – more or less synchronous and following *Maus*, that the basic academic groundwork for our present collection was developed. A small industry of guides and collected interviews with newly prominent graphic-novel writers and artists pointed out time and again the developing trend for adult, serious, titles. In the space between journalism and academia, individual writers instigated serious sociological and literary approaches to adult comics in works published by large and influential academic presses. Thus it was, in 1989 in the United States, that Joseph Witek's *Comics as History* (1989) was first brought out by the University Press of Mississippi. Subsequently, they developed many further works, complementing strong existing lists in Film Studies and American Studies. Just shortly afterwards, in 1993, Roger Sabin first published the aforementioned *Adult Comics* for Routledge.<sup>2</sup> For what it is worth, it was a work that also fitted into that house's sustained support for Cultural Studies, interdisciplinary critical works on the borders of sociology and literary studies, strongly influenced by "French theory," which was reaching a high point in the humanities at this juncture. Twenty years on, much has changed. On the one hand, Theory, French Theory, Cultural Studies, and Literary Studies, are fighting rear-guard actions against quite traditional forms of literary and political history writing, and the expansion of higher education in the latter decades of the twentieth century has been buffeted by both crude economic realities and neoconservative elitism. On the other hand, inside the faculties and the publishing houses that serve them, comics, graphic novels (and the newer more capacious but therefore indistinct term "graphic narrative") is one of the few sites of growth and expanded publishing. The University Press of Mississippi's pioneering work has continued successfully and has been joined by many other esteemed houses, including, of course, Cambridge University Press, the world's oldest scholarly publisher of titles in English. Since the 1990s, it is also the case that the major scientific literary periodicals have engaged with the field and given space to it in publication of individual articles and thematic works. The students who began their own academic careers in the late 1980s today teach classes on *Watchmen* and *Maus* to students who

2 It is also the case that important scholarship that took comics seriously was evolving through the later 1960s and early 1970s. Thus, one must point out work from Pierre Couperie and Maurice C. Horn (1971 [1968]), David Pascal (1972), David Kunzle (1970), as well as in a subfield of linguistics, semiotics, Umberto Eco. The recent collection edited by Ann Miller and Bart Beaty, *The French Comics Theory Reader* (2014) includes a number of classics available for the first time in English language translation.

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identify that period as part of literary history quite as relevant as a Faulkner or a Fitzgerald, a Poe or a Thoreau. As our Bibliography indicates, many of the influential works in the field were authored by the contributors to this book. While many of the first generation of scholars worked on graphic novels alongside several other intellectual interests (journalism, literary studies, poetics, sociology, political and cultural history, and film), it is also noticeable that those just a few years younger are today able to publish and teach with almost a unique focus on graphic novels and comics.

The chapters collected on the 1970s–2000s herein set out to analyze the famous figures and their works from the period (Eisner, Spiegelman, Moore, Clowes, Gaiman). In addition, the contributions of Ben Noys on punk and comics (Chapter 15) and Fabrice Leroy on Italian and francophone works of the 1970s and 1980s (Chapter 16) add, for the first time, critical analysis of the deeper cultural environments from the period. As noted, a strong part of the emergence of the graphic novel was external to the United States, coming from British, Japanese and francophone traditions. For many key figures in comics and graphic novels at the time, it was these external forces that were the real signs of the potential for a new kind of comics. For instance, it was when Harvey Kurtzman was discussing French comics in 1987 that he perceived the change of graphic novels taking place. He admired Spiegelman's *Raw*, but he did not see it as sustainable, commenting prophetically, "Somebody will come along, a publisher will come along, who'll be hot for comics, or he'll hire an editor who's hot for comics and he'll break new ground" (Kurtzman 1987, 149).

Part III of the collection discusses the works and trends of the twenty-first century. As several contributors acknowledge, many creators do not sit comfortably in any one period, their lives and works crossing the borderlines we have set up for editorial organization. Nonetheless, distinctive new trends are reviewed here. New author-star creators have broken through: particularly, Joe Sacco (see Miller's discussion, Chapter 24), Marjane Satrapi (see Reyns-Chikuma and Lazreg, Chapter 25), Chris Ware (explored in detail by Kuhlman, Chapter 31), Chester Brown, Joe Matt, Seth, and Michel Rabagliati, who are discussed collectively in Bart Beaty's analysis of Québécois publishing, associated with the Drawn and Quarterly house (Chapter 26). Similarly, Justin Hall situates Alison Bechdel and her hugely successful graphic novel, *Fun Home*, in relation to a long history of underground LGBTQ comics, an interpretation that serves only to underline the importance of her work and the potential of the graphic novel to act as a host medium for themes once repressed in the literary and comics mainstreams (Chapter 18).



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Technological form as well as content is a significant shaping feature of the twenty-first-century graphic novel. In particular, the use of digital platforms to distribute and read new works has been an emergent trend, perhaps starting with Spiegelman's own CD-ROM edition of *Maus* (1994) and certainly more fully announced with *Meta-Maus* (2011) – a virtual museum of the original work that opens up multiple information sources on the work, at the least slowing any kind of standard linear narrative engagement. As Crucifix and Dozo explain in their contribution on e-graphic novels (Chapter 35), figures such as Chris Ware, Ben Katchor, and Richard McGuire are all working under the sign of new technology. In this important contribution, the authors also underline that the wider comics field has been always nostalgic for the authenticity of the past but that twenty-first-century makers are all the while pioneering how new media interact with old, where new kinds of reading, including touching screens while reading, is in play.

While new ideas of time and space on the page are clearly shift-shaping thanks to technology, more traditional notions of politics, power, and geography have also been significant for the contemporary graphic novel. The general idea of world literature has been subject to significant discussion around themes of neo-imperialism and postcolonialism. While that debate has been occurring in our field, the success of Marjane Satrapi's work in English translation has opened up publishing and readership groups to "foreign" works in translation. At the time of writing, this continues to be the case, and at present no sign is yet to emerge as to a crisis in the graphic novel (see Ball, Chapter 36). Yet, if we learn anything from history, it is to take nothing for granted. Both in the United States and around the world, popular culture and comics (so important also for graphic novels) are subject to mass media-inspired moral panics or sectarian attack. The full implications of digitalization of print culture are clearly also yet to play out fully on literary publishing houses who support the graphic novel, and one can expect inevitably more technologically driven change. Moreover, state intervention in educational structures to withdraw funding or reorient funding risks a curtailing of humanities and arts education – the very spaces where researchers and students are today engaging with graphic novels. The future is uncertain, but this collection does document an (albeit slow) set of success stories for graphic novelists and the pleasures and ideas they deliver to readers. Time will tell as to whether future readers will read our work and that of our contributors as a depiction of a lost creative Golden Age or simply the beginning of new achievement.

As we underlined in the opening paragraphs of this introduction, it is also the case that the graphic novel is a specific, and independent, kind of



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comics – in short, a medium in its own right that is worthy of analysis. As one can infer from our historical exposition, graphic novels feature content that is registered for and semantically valiant for adults. In particular, autobiography, history, news reportage, historical fiction – these are some of the dominant concerns. The propensity for autobiographical material has also meant that graphic novels are often painstakingly produced by one creator working as a combined author-artist, where words, image, layout, and other design features all work to communicate a unique message. However, autobiographical graphic novels are also frequently read because the stories included in them are representative of far more than any one individual's experience. The combination of historical and political themes woven through autobiography or eyewitness testimony raise both culturally specific myths – stories that matter for readers and their social community – and also touch on our understanding of universal concerns. It is on this basis that a significant number of chapters in this collection are organized through either work dedicated to a single author-artist, or author-artist team, or through analysis of how graphic novels have come to stand as significant conduits for the expression of specific cultural communities. Thus, chapters here include detailed analysis and contextual discussion of autobiographical/witness creators Art Spiegelman (discussed by McGlothlin, Chapter 13), Marjane Satrapi (by Reyns-Chikuma and Lazreg, Chapter 25), and Joe Sacco (explored by Miller, Chapter 24). Equally, essays have been commissioned to explore the important communitarian role of graphic novels for Jewish Americans and Jewish communities in Europe and Israel (Tabachnick, Chapter 27), Latino and Hispanic Americans, African-American minorities (Aldama, Chapter 19), and LGBTQ community graphic novels (Hall, Chapter 18). However, it is also important to understand that, as each of our scholars appreciates, authorship and community readership are open categories that flow between each other. Graphic-novel writers without significant reader groups are of no real interest, while social change itself is propelled and documented through artistic and literary forms, for the past thirty years or so commonly in graphic novels. In light of the impact of Spiegelman's *Maus*, it has also been common to discuss that and comparative works under the sign of either Trauma Studies or Holocaust Representation Studies. Much important work has been developed here, and the critics who first "found" *Maus* were vital in its consecration as a major work of late-twentieth-century culture (notably, but not exclusively, Dominic Lacapra [1998] and James Young [2002]). In this collection, we take a more Halbwachsean approach (see Halbwachs 1980) in that we see history as functioning for the social

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needs of present-day collective group identity formation and hence have not organized contributors around representations of events (see also above on our understanding of “events”), but rather the author–social meaning dialectic outlined above. One may add that this combination of works that “tell what the author knows” (the personal, the intimate, diarist-like work) and voice a narrative of deeper social-political resonance parallels precisely two of the currents identified in McGurl’s recent history of American literature and creative writing, more generally: *The Program Era* (2011). Again, in this too, graphic novels are different from comics. In these graphic novels, the personal and the collective are explicit whereas typically in comics political or social discourses are implicit, coded, generated through overrepresentation (white, male, heterosexual, Western) or underrepresentation or near invisibility (fewer women characters, negative or racist portrayals of minorities, nationalistic in tone). Of course, such matters are also often much more nuanced, and one should not expect older cultural forms to be any more progressive than today. Clearly, comics always also included a social consciousness (notably in EC Comics on the Korean War and Civil Rights), wove together arguments from different points of view to achieve a kind of “balance,” and included socially rich materials such as the political-satirical funny animals in Walt Kelly’s Pogo comics, to name some important examples. In addition, it is also quite clear that contemporary graphic novels have no absolute fixed political point on a left–right spectrum or should go unquestioned by readers for their message or implications.

If base narrative content is important in defining the graphic novel, then so too is material form: page length, publishing format and distribution networks. The graphic novel’s long-length, full, flexible narrative tracks work very differently from the necessary repetition of serial forms of the comics. Thus, graphic novel storytelling systems work in long arcs and are imagined and consumed as such without the need for either repetition or cliff-hanger activity. In breaking with B-literature genres of comics, the graphic novel has also escaped from the realms of linguistic cliché: the writing, the words on the page being far freer and more sophisticated than in, for example, the romance or war comics once so cleverly satirized in examples of 1960s pop art (Frey and Baetens 2018). Size – narrative length – matters also for the potential for visual storytelling. For the visual aspect of communication, long-length works in single graphic novels allow for intricate and varying layout patterns on pages, or double pages, and, for that matter, also for claustrophobic repeated design techniques that can hypnotize a reader. This is significantly different from the newspaper serials where the page/space was often just three panels but the potential storyline