Comic Art, Children's Literature, and the New Comics Studies

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At Comic-Con International's annual Eisner Awards ceremony in San Diego during July 2004, Pulitzer-winning author (and new-fledged comics creator) Michael Chabon gave a keynote speech about comic books and children. Speaking to the comic book community, Chabon declared victory in the struggle to elevate the comics medium and its reputation among adult readers, noting, "More adults are reading better comics than ever before" ("Greasy"). However, Chabon's real subject, which he decried, was the medium's abandonment of children; this action is fueled, he argued, by an arriviste's sense of embarrassment over its origins. Chiding the industry for forgetting young readers, Chabon ended by envisioning a new sort of comics for children, "truly thrilling, honestly observed and remembered, richly imagined . . . [comics] *about children*" [Chabon's italics] ("Greasy"). He issued a call to arms, urging the comic book industry to pass on the love of the medium and, as the adage goes, pay it forward.

Despite its admonitory tone, Chabon's speech earned a warm ovation, perhaps because his remarks distilled years' worth of comic-book industry punditry. In fact, the gap between comic books and today's children has long been a source of concern among professionals—certainly within the transatlantic, English-language comics business. Many creators, within and outside of the comic book-specialty market, have sought to bridge this gap: witness the sporadic touting of "all-ages," which is the preferred euphemism for children's, comics within comic book shops, or the presence in mainstream bookstores of such high-profile projects as Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's *Little Lit* series (launched in 2000 for HarperCollins). In comic shops, the prospect of reaching children offers hope, realistic or otherwise, that the medium can extend their appeal beyond the thinning ranks of a dedicated fandom.

In short, anxious talk about comic books "for" children has been in the air for years, in belated recognition of the way comic shops have generally excluded the young; similarly, they have marginalized girls and women, a once crucial readership that is now neglected. This concern for "children's comics" within the industry has been stoked further by a timely sense of opportunity. Just as comics publishers are trying to reach younger readers, so gatekeepers in children's publishing are now re-approaching comics. Children's book professionals in the United States have evinced a sudden enthusiasm for the form. Many examples of this interest can be found. One is a rising investment in comics among mainstream children's publishers; *Little Lit* and Scholastic's new graphic novel imprint "Graphix" are the vanguard examples. Launched in 2005, Scholastic's Graphix imprint published Jeff Smith's acclaimed, nine-volume fantasy series Bone, which was first published from 1991–2004 as an independent comic book, in a new color, graphic novel edition. (fig. 1) Another is the burgeoning interest in graphic novels among librarians.[1] A renewed concern for comics' place in education, as shown by books such as Stephen Cary's *Going Graphic* (2004), as well as media coverage of a comics curriculum pilot announced by the Maryland Department of Education in early 2005 reflects this new attention. Finally, and from my viewpoint the most important, there is an increasing attention to comics by children's literature and culture scholars.

Traditionally, children's literature scholars have treated comics for and about children in a sweeping manner without a sustained interest; this lapse has sorely impoverished the field. This approach is at last starting to change, as children's literature scholars are showing a new and unprecedented curiosity about comic art. Take, for example, two recent blips of recognition. First, *Horn Book's* first ever article on graphic novels, which was Julia Michaels' survey of the field (May/June 2004). The second is the inclusion of a chapter on comics in the recently released *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (2005). Both trade, to some extent, on the form's lingering notoriety, its reputed feistiness and sensationalism. Though unstintingly positive, Michaels' article bears the facetious title "Pulp Fiction," while the *Norton* section begins with a throat-clearing recap of comics' reputation for crudeness and ephemerality, which is happily balanced by an astute recognition of the form's complexity. These are important, albeit tentative, acknowledgments. Michaels, focusing on current work, reflects the new enthusiasm for comics among librarians and booksellers. The *Norton,* by contrast, neglects recent work, but takes a long historical view; it extends the kind of deeply researched perspective one sees in, for example, Bettina Hürlimann's landmark *Three Centuries of Children's*
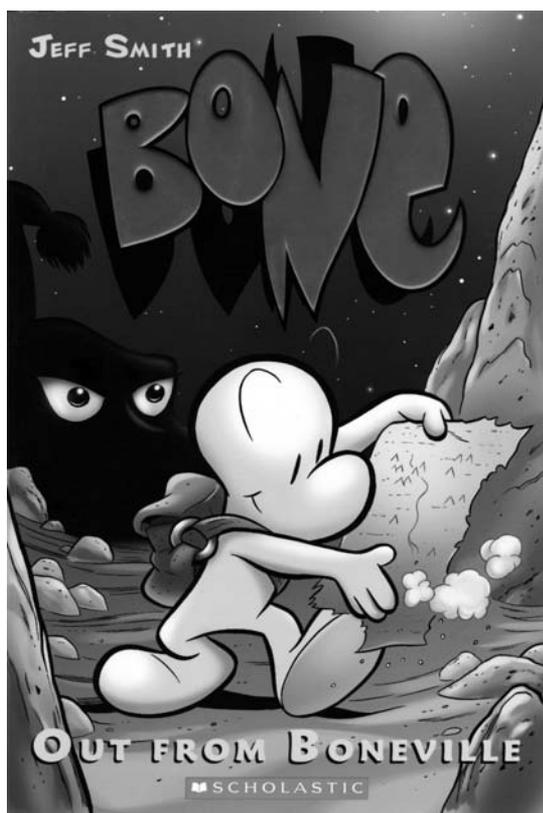
Figure 1. An acclaimed blend of humor and epic fantasy, Jeff Smith's *Bone* **is the flagship of Scholastic's graphic novel line, Graphix.** *Bone*® **is copyright © 2006 by Jeff Smith.**

Books in Europe (1959), but without Hürlimann's ultimately disapproving tone. Sadly, the *Norton's* selection is too cursory to leave a coherent impression; it offers only tidbits, rather than sustained examples.

The new interest in comics among Anglophone children's culture scholars is most clearly shown in the growth of relevant conference activity. For example, in February 2006 the University of Florida hosted a conference on "Comics and Childhood" (the Fourth Annual UF Conference on Comics), which was a welcome and historic move. This signal event followed comics-themed Modern Language Association panels sponsored by the MLA's Children's Literature Division in 1997 and the Children's Literature Association in 2005, as well as sporadic comics-themed pre-

sentations at other conferences in the field since 2000. From all these, we may infer that sustained comics study is at last on the table for children's literature scholars.

This is not to say that stakeholders in children's literature have entirely neglected comics up to now. From the 1940s to the mid-1950s, a brief torrent of professional writing focused on comic books' putative impact on children's reading habits and reading skills (Nyberg 8–17). This wave of commentary, much of it adversarial, resulted from the then mushrooming popularity of comic books as children's texts. Teachers and librarians, as opposed to academics, dominated this trend, casting comic books as a serious challenge to school curricula, traditional literature, and literacy. Polemical in nature, such writings tended to neglect or summarily condemn comics' visual/verbal nature; recognitions of comics' hybrid form were few and almost always pejorative or dismissive, positing the comic book as a preemptor or threat to literacy, or at best a crude primer for "real" reading. Common themes to such articles were discussions of ways to wean young readers from (self-selected) comics to (adult-selected or at least approved) literary texts.

Full treatment of this literature is beyond the scope here (see Nyberg; Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*). This trend is best exemplified by the work of May Hill Arbuthnot, a key figure among children's librarians and reading pedagogy, who joined the comic book fray in the late 1940s and addressed comics in her seminal textbook *Children and Books* (1947). The treatment of comic books that emerged in her revised 1957 edition, which was the first to have been produced after the onset of the comic book industry's self-censoring U.S. Comic Code in 1954, is damning; it consists of a cautiously approving take on Fredric Wertham's incendiary anti-comics study *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) and a discussion of whether children who avidly read comics can come away "undamaged" (585–86). Arbuthnot's essay serves as a time capsule of then-current concerns about comic books, distilling the main tenets of more than a decade and a half of alarmed discourse, much of which drew on metaphors of addiction and contagion. One finds this anxiety played out over and over.

For years after, the conversation about comics among children's literature professionals continued to be framed this way, if comics were considered at all. After the late 1950s, the educational literature on comics fell to a murmur, until the 1970s when teachers began guardedly endorsing comics as a means of reaching the "reluctant" or disabled reader; this is an endorsement still founded on the assumption that comics' visual/verbal nature makes them easier to read (Hatfield, *Alternative* 35–36). More optimistic reappraisals of comic book *content*, as in the work of British

scholar Nicholas Tucker in the 1970s, were carefully hedged; they wrote of comics as having "their place" and fulfilling a "supporting role" in children's reading (86). Despite the more than fifty comics-themed citations in Linnea Hendrickson's *Children's Literature: A Guide to the Criticism* (1987), one finds few by children's literature experts that consider the comics as anything other than a "problem." Hendrickson does cite key comics research from other perspectives; an example is articles in the *Journal of Popular Culture* starting in the late 1960s. One finds even fewer that question the guiding assumptions of the early studies: that comics at best play a developmental role in the reading life of children, that they are by nature "easy" reading, and that the images in comics function either as crutches or distractions to the novice reader and are of little value in themselves. Only recently, since the rise of the graphic novel, does one find considered treatment of the comics form, as such, within reference works on children's literature. For example, *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English*, edited by Victor Watson (2001) includes several relevant entries. *Children's Books and Their Creators*, edited by Anita Silvey (1995), notes the recent growth in "more sophisticated" comics; puzzlingly, it ends by repeating the old saw that comics are attractive because they are "nondemanding" (159–60). To date, the best treatment of comics in such reference works is in the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, edited by Peter Hunt (2004), which has substantial essays by Katia Pizzi and Denis Gifford.

Clearly, there have been cursory attempts to position comics vis-à-vis children's literature. Unfortunately, until recently the sustained aesthetic study of comics *alongside*, rather than in contra-distinction to, children's books has been neglected. This represents not simply a blind spot in the field of children's literature studies, but arguably one of those constitutive absences around which the field has built itself. This is unfortunate given that comics are a lively, diverse global phenomenon that is strongly associated with childhood. For reasons having nothing to do with ease or simplicity of reading they ought to have a more prominent place in children's literature studies. In fact, comics can make for dense, complex reading. Yet, despite these signs of change, comics continue to serve for many as a convenient Other, one whose very otherness makes it useful as a means of distinguishing children's literature from the general swirl of hyper-commercial children's culture (which Literature is presumed to stand above somehow, in a position of authenticity and resistance). Even those prepared to concede the aesthetic interest of some comics understand that invoking the idea of "comic books" vis-à-vis "Literature" gives them a shorthand way of talking about issues of value and distinction.

This tendency emerges in, for instance, two recent articles that concern the very nature and direction of children's literature criticism as a field, both of which invoke comics without actually talking about them. In "The Future of the Profession," Jerry Griswold provocatively argues that "the time has come to begin separating . . . children's reading from children's literature," to distinguish the field of Children's Literature from "the new field of Childhood Studies" (241). At the same time, aware that such a move may be construed as reactionary, Griswold carefully establishes his credentials as a progressive who has fought to expand the canon of acceptable, teachable literature. With hindsight he muses:

> While it may be difficult for young scholars to believe this, there was a time when literary studies were narrowly confined to canonical works, and any attempt to widen that canon was resisted as an attempt "to get comic books into the classrooms." (241)

Tellingly, Griswold encloses his remark about "comic books" within scare quotes, distancing it to an extent from his own views while acknowledging its clichéd nature. He also attempts to stake out, delicately, a position somewhere between a too-radical "democratizing impulse" and an older, ossified conception of canonicity, even as he leans toward a traditional vision of literature as such. Kenneth Kidd, in his own subsequent effort at disciplinary self-examination questions this vision, suggesting that Griswold's position stems from an anxiety about professional status: "If we write only about comic books or the Teletubbies, [Griswold] implies, we'll forget *The Odyssey* and lose scholarly face" (Kidd 149–50). Again, the remark about comic books is distanced from Kidd's own position by virtue of being attributed to another (in this case Griswold). My point here is not that either Griswold or Kidd is to be faulted for taking up a position on a controversial issue, nor that they are somehow unkind to comic books (in fact neither is arguing about comics per se), but to show that, rhetorically, the "comic book" has traditionally served, and to an extent still continues to serve, as a kind of last glaring example of the unassimilated and unassimilable, a marker of the boundary between literature and mere "reading." Even one, who is, by his own admission, uninterested in policing that boundary, Kidd recognizes the rhetorical potency of the comic book as a limit example.

Now, however, children's literature criticism is awakening to the possibilities of comics, not simply as a boundary marker, but as an artistic field of intrinsic interest. English-speaking children's literature scholars are in effect catching up to contemporary comics scholarship, which is growing by leaps and bounds.[2] In fact, a burgeoning, multidisciplinary field of comics study already exits; it is a field as yet unresolved and inchoate

in its self-image, but fruitfully open to a variety of approaches, which are indeed unresolved in all the best senses, just as comic art remains a fundamentally unresolved and boundary-straddling form.

This field of comics study, though long-lived enough to have produced several generational cohorts, has only begun to register on the radar of established academic study; new or prospective researchers may as yet find themselves without a reliable compass when making their first forays into the field. The potential for confusion or misunderstanding is great. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* recognized the field in 2003 with Paul Buhle's "The New Scholarship of Comics." Unfortunately, Buhle's characterization of the field, while optimistic, is misleading and thinly researched; he short shrifts recent work in favor of bald generalizations about comics study as a nostalgic indulgence. Buhle says little about the growing number of conferences and publications devoted to comics, the interdisciplinary character of the field, or its encouraging diversity.

Comics scholarship is not as easily compassed as Buhle would have it. The field's sudden rise stems, in part, from the overturning of many limiting assumptions behind previous study, an overturning accomplished by the sheer weight of accumulated evidence. No longer must we start from the assumption that comics are quintessentially American, that they are just more than one hundred years old, that their defining characteristics are crystal clear, or that they consist only of a handful of shopworn genres. No longer do we assume that the field is easily mapped and at best constitutes an interesting detour in the history of popular fiction or graphic art, something worth perhaps an hour's lecture, but no more. Instead, we are in a position to appreciate the breathtaking variety of comics as an international and truly interdisciplinary field, and to recognize that, in terms of that larger field, most of us are novices earning our way toward the Socratic definition of wisdom, that is, recognition of just how much we don't know.

Comics study is, in fact, an accelerating endeavor that supports four annual conference events in the United States alone. The longest running is the programming block within the "Comic Art and Comics" area at the national Popular Culture Association Conference. This area, founded in the 1970s, comprises a loose knit, but ever-renewing group of devoted comics scholars (a de facto community within the larger PCA). The "Comic Art and Comics" group is eclectic; its research methods range from sociology to media studies to literary theory. More recently, three comics-centered conferences have arisen to encourage a still wider range of approaches. The Comic Arts Conference, founded in 1993, is now hosted each summer by Comic-Con International, which is the nation's largest

comics convention. The International Comic Arts Festival (which I serve on), was founded in 1995 and is held each fall in the Washington, D.C., area. The University of Florida Conference on Comics was launched in 2002 and is held annually in Gainesville. Each conference has its own thematic slant, admission process, and distinctive character; yet, they have in common a commitment to interdisciplinary approaches and diversity. Unfortunately, so far only the Florida conference has engaged childhood as an explicit theme.

These conferences have driven, and in turn are driven by, an increase in published scholarship. Central to the field is the biannual *International Journal of Comic Art*, founded in 1999, published and edited by pioneering communications researcher John A. Lent. *IJOCA* is a small-scale, no-frills journal, but it is also the only academic periodical in the field; magnet-like, it has drawn a range of veteran and emerging scholars. Its international editors include experts from almost forty countries, while its advisory board is a roster of comic's luminaries. A typical issue runs more than 300 pages. *IJOCA* arose to fill the vacuum created by the loss of the triennial *Inks: Cartoon and Comic Art Studies* (1994–97), to date the only academic periodical on comics published by an American university press (Ohio State University Press). *Inks*, a graphically splendid, but fatally under-supported journal edited by Lucy Shelton Caswell, still stands as a high-water mark for the presentation of academic writing on comics. *IJOCA*, however, offers a greater range of material—an almost dizzying range, in fact, embracing various methodologies and outlooks. Readers are urged to consult its informational website. Besides *IJOCA*, and the long-lived but spottily edited *Journal of Popular Culture,* academic writing about comics has appeared in such benchmark journals as *Word & Image*, *PMLA,* and *Mosaic,* and, thanks to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), an even wider range that I will not list here. Refereed online journals have begun to cover the field, notably *Image [&] Narrative,* which is based in Belgium, and the more comics-specific *ImageTexT*, which is based at the University of Florida under the editorship of the groundbreaking Donald Ault. *ImageTexT* boasts a roster of advisors famed in literary and cultural studies and is the most promising recent development in the field.

These academic publications are, to an extent, informed and complemented by the many non-academic periodicals about comics. While most such periodicals are unabashedly commercial and thus of limited value, there are several magazines that regularly include essential research. In the United States, the most indispensable of these is *The Comics Journal*, an award-winning veteran of the small press, which in its scrappy, pugnacious way has changed the critical discourse about comics for a generation of

readers. The *Journal* has shaped the creation of a comics canon (and, predictably, fueled ongoing and contentious debate around same). *The Comics Journal* serves as a necessary reminder that academic comics study derives from a vast, heterogeneous tradition of popular writing about comics, one that includes, of course, the still-mushrooming discourse of comics fans. Such fan writing arose most prominently from organized science fiction fandom, spinning off from the hectographed and mimeographed science fiction fanzines of yore. Decades of fanzine production have led to a near flood of price guides and professionalized 'zines, including some of real scholarly interest. Currently, these include *Comic Art, Hogan's Alley*, and the more fan-oriented, but still impressively inclusive, *Comic Book Artist*. Informal fan discourse, on the other hand, is now most at home in the rapid-response environment of the Internet, which has also been, unsurprisingly, a godsend for comics bibliographers as well as a bottomless source of diversion with its myriad news sites and blogs. Academic study draws from, and to a degree depends on, this enormous fund of fan material, including such Internet resources as the ever-growing Grand Comics Database, a communal project that aims, grandly indeed, to index every comic book ever published. Yet, as it consolidates and, to a degree repurposes such fan scholarship, academic study also offers opportunities for greater methodological rigor, a new kind of critical attention, and a wider relevance.

One of the challenges facing academics who study comics is this very pool of fan literature, which, besides being of variable quality and trustworthiness, is often of uncertain provenance, tough to find, and just as tough to maintain in research collections. Another challenge is the unavailability of even vintage comics themselves; readable examples tend to be out of the common reach due to their ephemeral nature and paraliterary status, which are qualities familiar to students of children's literature. Unfortunately, much significant material remains closeted away in the troves of private collectors, which makes it relatively hard to get at. Happily, though, many comic strips, comic books, fanzines, and other comics-related items are now being conserved in academic libraries, most notably those at Michigan State University, Ohio State University, and Bowling Green State University. In addition, bibliographical resources for comics study are growing. Especially useful is John A. Lent's vast, four-volume international bibliography of comics study (1994–96); it is now supplemented by three new volumes updated through 2000 (2003–05) with further volumes projected. Searchable resources online now supplement such printed resources; two crucial examples are Michael Rhode and John Bullough's compendious "Comics Research Bibliography" and Gene Kannenberg, Jr.'s "Comics Scholarship Annotated Bibliographies."

The challenge of laying a bibliographical foundation is being met by fans and academics. Another challenge, one addressed quite successfully during the past decade, is that of working toward a shared formalist vocabulary for the interpretation of comics: their formal elements and signifying practices. This challenge has been met by a range of works, the most important is Scott McCloud's seminal and oft-debated theoretical comic *Understanding Comics* (1993), which has kick-started a vital, ongoing conversation about comics among both academics and fans. It is commonly used as a textbook. More than any other book, *Understanding Comics* sparked the new comics studies. McCloud followed the lead of Will Eisner's essential texts: *Comics & Sequential Art* (1985) and *Graphic Storytelling* (1996). But McCloud trumps Eisner in scale and technique, making comics not only the subject, but also the vehicle of his analysis. Populist yet intellectual, *Understanding Comics* is quirky, compulsively readable, and disarmingly ambitious; it came as a major intervention in the way readers talk about comics.

In the wake of McCloud, comics study has embraced a new formalism. A notable academic example that, in effect, sidesteps McCloud is David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000), a philosophical study that positions comics relative to fine art and seeks to unknot the aesthetic problems posed by the form: caricature, visual sequencing, and the graphic rendering of speech and thought via balloons. Carrier comes to comics as a formal aesthetician unburdened by a fan's investment in comic book tradition; his text serves as an engaging contrast to work in the McCloud/Eisner vein. However, his disengagement from current comics also lures him into some dubious claims, such as, that comics, in contrast to Old Master paintings, are by nature transparent, that is, immediately understood by the general viewer. Most dubious of all, he argues that comics have not undergone significant formal changes or innovations during the past century. Despite this, Carrier is provocative and useful. Also notable is a trend toward viewing comics as a form of visual literature open to the same kinds of theorizing as, say, illuminated or concrete poetry. This promising movement is most convincingly embodied in Gene Kannenberg, Jr.'s essays on comics form. In particular, Kannenberg's essay "Graphic Text, Graphic Context: Interpreting Custom Fonts and Hands in Contemporary Comics" in *Illuminating Letters: Typography and Literary Interpretation,* edited by Paul Gutjahr and Megan Benton (2001), signaled the opening of comics study to the growing interest in visually marked literary texts.

Formalist studies of comics invite a sustained interchange with picture book theory. Leading works of picture book criticism—here I think of Perry Nodelman's *Words about Pictures* (1988) and Maria Nikolajeva and Carole

Scott's *How Picturebooks Work* (2001)—reference comics but tentatively; they acknowledge their kinship to picture books but do not consider how comics challenge traditional picture book aesthetics (Hatfield, "Narrative" 95–97). Here children's literature scholars may have much to learn from comics scholars and vice versa.

Such formalist study, of course, begs historical questions, and indeed the route to the new comics studies first had to be paved by historiography that cleared away the limiting assumptions of past scholarship. The most liberating works of academic comics history are the two volumes of art historian David Kunzle's magisterial two-volume *The History of the Comic Strip* (1973, 1990), a mammoth excavation of pre-twentieth century European work that effectively puts the lie to the long-lived claim that comics are uniquely "American" in origin or character. Defining comics as popular and topical graphic narratives available in mass-produced editions, Kunzle starts with fifteenth-century broadsheets and exposes the ways in which comics have inevitably been intertwined with the history of political violence, revolution, and atrocity. His project is grand and his acuity unmatched. While students of children's culture may find little in Kunzle to engage them specifically (he effectively debunks the notion that comics arose out of childhood), his *History* has become the polestar of academic comics research. Whereas practitioners, such as McCloud, have had the greatest impact on our sense of comics form, Kunzle has done more than any other researcher to expand the field's historical compass. McCloud, by the way, cites Kunzle fervently. Extending Kunzle's project, *Forging a New Medium* (1998), edited by Belgian scholars Charles Diereck and Pascal Lefèvre, offers an international study of the crucial transformations in comics during the nineteenth century. Not coincidentally, it also marks an increasingly promising spirit of collaboration between European and American scholars.

Besides history, another foundational element in comics study has been a focus on audience. Central here is the research of Martin Barker, arising from British cultural studies. Of particular note is Barker's last book-length study of comics, *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (1989), which closely examined prior ideological critiques of comic books. In tune with much of Barker's work, it calls into question the notion of reader "identification" and other presumptions of media effects research. Barker is especially interesting on periodical genre comics, which, he argues, are not simply formulaic but rather shaped by an implicit pact between audience and creators, in which the audience shares a tacit understanding of the genre and participates, as it were, in the game. Barker notes that such comics often center on the idea of adult authority and offer child readers

a means of enacting at least a limited resistance to adult power. The most important scholar to challenge the censorious assumptions of the 1940s and 1950s, Barker has brought comics study in line with the larger study of media and audience.

In the wake of Kunzle and Barker and infused with the new formalism after McCloud, comics study grew throughout the 1990s, a trend most clearly embodied in the University Press of Mississippi's commitment to the field. Since the late 1980s, Mississippi has offered a varied series of comics-related books, many of them under the editorial guidance of pioneering popular culture scholar M. Thomas Inge. Among the most notable of these books are Inge's own *Comics as Culture* (1990), a collection of essays treating comics as key contributors to American popular and literary culture; a reprinting (1991) of *The Comics*, Colton Waugh's seminal popular history of the American comic strip, first published in 1947; the two halves of Robert C. Harvey's aesthetic history of American comics, *The Art of the Funnies* (1994) and *The Art of the Comic Book* (1996); Amy Kiste Nyberg's indispensable *Seal of Approval* (1998), the first responsibly researched account of the controversial Comics Code; and Bart Beaty's recent *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (2005), a revisionist study of the reformer most often blamed for the postwar anti-comics furor that led to the Code. Though quite different, all of these titles concentrate on twentieth-century American comics and contribute to the ongoing popular project of rewriting and filling in American comics history. Inge encapsulates the tradition of writing on comics as part of American folk life and popular literature. Harvey digs into comics history with the reverential minuteness of a fan and practitioner who has done ample primary research. Both follow the example of Waugh, himself a cartoonist and enthusiast, whose direct access to the comic strip business made *The Comics* a trove of professional lore. Nyberg, in contrast, steps back from appreciation, digging into the archives to challenge commonplaces about the nature and impact of the Code. Beaty questions further; he thoughtfully reexamines the career of the much-despised Wertham whose testimony in a U.S. Senate hearing in 1954, to his dismay, spurred the development of the self-regulating Code. Positioning Wertham within the social and intellectual movements of his era, Beaty casts him, not as the censorious bugbear of fan lore, but as a progressive, deeply committed cultural critic. Together this handful of disparate books serves to deepen the historical narrative and sharpen our appreciation of American comics.

The Mississippi line goes farther. Most inspiring to literary students of comics was Joseph Witek's *Comic Books as History* (1989), an early study of nonfiction comics including Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Harvey Pekar's

American Splendor comic book series started in 1976. Witek's was among the first, perhaps the first, academic study to focus unapologetically on underground comix and their descendants as wellsprings of literary art. It was also the first book from an academic press to narrow its attention to a specific literary topic within the comic book field, rather than trying to offer a sweeping overview of all comics. A model of concision, Witek's project acknowledged its limits while pointing to the possibilities of a larger, more expansive field.

More recently, Mississippi has published *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (2001), edited by Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons, which is an essay collection with a formalistic and semiotic emphasis that smartly extends its reach to international comics and includes work indebted to European comics theory.[3] An essential volume, *The Language of Comics* places comics study squarely within the larger domain of word and image studies. A contrasting, yet equally important, offering from Mississippi is Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester's recent anthology of early scholarly writing, *Arguing Comics* (2005), which is a clearinghouse of critical, in many cases non-academic, commentary by public intellectuals from Gilbert Seldes to Clement Greenberg to Marshall McLuhan. Heer and Worcester have provided a one-stop compendium of comics discourse prior to the advent of academic cultural studies; in essence, they have done us the favor of putting into one package many key writings that until now have ended up being photocopied in homegrown course readers. Just as essential is Mississippi's "Conversations with Comic Artists," series of books consisting of interviews with cartoonists, which began in 2000 with Inge's *Charles M. Schulz: Conversations*. The "Conversations" series includes Robert C. Harvey's book on Milton Caniff (2002); Donald Ault's on Carl Barks (2003); D. K. Holm's on R. Crumb (2004); and Jason Whiton's on Mort Walker (2005). These volumes are treasure troves of history, anecdote, and reflection, the Schulz and Barks volumes particularly so for students of children's culture.

Mississippi has also delved into reception and audience studies, most notably by reprinting Barker's seminal history of the 1950s British anti-comics campaign, *A Haunt of Fears* (1992), and, more recently, with Matthew Pustz's participant-observer study of the comics hobby, *Comic Book Culture* (1999). Pustz, drawing on audience studies à la John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, distills an aforementioned trend, the study of readers; in essence, *Comic Book Culture* explores both the commonalities and the conflicts among comic book fans. Unfortunately, the book has been neglected, perhaps because many of its academic readers, having themselves participated in fandom, may have found its characterizations of fans too

familiar, or even patronizing. Pustz's air of willed detachment reflects the uneasy double-consciousness that tends to afflict fan-scholars of fan culture ("yes, I am a comic book reader," he finally confesses). Nevertheless, *Comic Book Culture* says much of interest about fandom, in particular about valuation and taste distinctions among fans. It examines how fandom creates a culture of connoisseurship and, in effect, urges the development of a specialized comics literacy (which, of course, then influences comics' content). As the most sustained academic study of comics fandom to date, *Comic Book Culture* merits more attention than it has received.

Beyond Mississippi, the comics studies field is rapidly growing and thus difficult to map. One notable strain consists of work by academic historians who regard the comics as indexes of mass culture, with or without attention to the artistic and literary dimensions of the form. Some of this work enacts reflection theory, seeking to use comics en bloc, or overt trends in comics anyway, as primary sources to support sweeping arguments about political and social change. This trend is typified by William W. Savage, Jr.'s *Comic Books and America, 1945–1954* (1990), reissued with the added supertitle *Commies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens* (1998). Savage regards comic books between the end of World War II and the adoption of the Comics Code in 1954 as a barometer of "the concerns, preoccupations, and beliefs of [postwar] American society" (112), in particular concerns about the atom bomb, Communism, and the Korean War. His text is brief and its arguments frustratingly underdeveloped. Despite the inclusion of five engagingly bizarre comics stories reprinted from the late 1940s and early 1950s (about which Savage says little), the book does not offer much that is revelatory.

Bradford W. Wright, in his recent *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001), takes Savage as inspiration, renewing and deepening his approach. As its subtitle makes clear, Wright's book seeks to appeal particularly to scholars of youth culture; however, readers expecting a critical interrogation of childhood or adolescence as such will likely be disappointed. The axial idea here is that comic books constitute "a uniquely exaggerated and absurdist expression of adolescent concerns and sensibilities" (Wright 284), but the argument would benefit from critical attention to the social construction of "adolescence." Wright does go Savage one better by paying stronger attention to specific examples; he also takes pains to acknowledge individual artistic sensibilities. Regrettably, though, Wright reinforces fandom's emphasis on the superhero genre at the expense of others, especially in his later chapters; one looks in vain for any acknowledgment of underground comix post 1967 and their descendants, surely important aspects of youth culture. Wright's interest

wanes when comic books enter the era of direct distribution and niche marketing, as if a more specialized comic book culture, à la Pustz, does not serve his interests in comics as a reflector of mass opinion.

For all that, *Comic Book Nation* serves as an engaging point of entry. Wright funnels much information already familiar from popular comic book histories yet takes a wider cultural perspective than generally seen in such accounts. One useful way of approaching Wright might be to read him in parallel with Gerard Jones' popular *Men of Tomorrow* (2004), a richly detailed, well-substantiated historical narrative about the origins of comic books. The book reads like a novel, and, indeed, occupies a space midway between Wright's overview and Michael Chabon's fictional re-inhabiting of comics history, the novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2001). Both Chabon and Jones lovingly conjure the teeming, multiethnic milieu of early twentieth-century New York City, the crucible of the comic book industry.

More interesting than broad reflection-theory studies are historical projects that explore, in concrete ways, how comics are enmeshed in specific commercial and institutional contexts. Ian Gordon's essential *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890–1945* (1998) does this while pursuing a larger thesis: that comics contributed to the commodification of American culture, encouraging consumerism and dreams of upward mobility. Building on a solid historical foundation, Gordon essays such large-scale topics as class identity, racial stereotyping, and commercialized leisure, yet also displays a keen understanding of visual narrative form and sheds particular light on pioneering comics practitioners. He effectively straddles the presumed divide between historicist and formalist perspectives, all while supporting a larger argument regarding modernization and commodity culture. *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture* is so far the best academic book to date on the rise of the American newspaper strip.

For many, of course, "comics" means superheroes. Notwithstanding the recent blossoming of work in other genres, to many observers superheroes still comprise the kernel identity of contemporary American comic books. Indeed, superheroes have exerted a strong centripetal pull on comics study, just as they came to dominate mainstream comic book production from the 1960s onward. Though overemphasized in fandom, the superhero represents an opportune area for academic study: the genre is long-lived, its ur-texts now eminently accessible to scholars, and its very nature conducive to intertextual study under the aegis of postmodern theory. Moreover, as icons of childhood and adolescence (of boyhood especially), superheroes hold much potential interest for scholars of youth culture.

Despite all this, there have been few noteworthy academic books on superhero comics as such. Several studies of the superhero have appeared

in response to the genre revisionism of the late 1980s, but those that focus exclusively on comics are patchy, at times shoddily edited, and misleading insofar as they collapse comics history entirely into the history of superheroes (egregious examples are McCue and Bongco). The first and still most helpful single-author study of the genre is Richard Reynolds' *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992), an intriguing text that unfortunately does not quite jell as a book. Given its subtitle, one might expect a Jungian/Campbellian archetypal reading of "mythic" elements in superhero tales, by now one of the commonest strategies for interpreting and conferring status on the genre; Reynolds, however, only gestures in this direction and never sets forth a clear working definition of mythology. The book is neither archetypical nor focused on a specific theory of genre, and thus lacks coherence. That some of Reynolds' points are stimulating—especially his insights into comic book continuity—makes one long for a more sustained follow-up study.

Much work on superheroes deals, not exclusively with comics, but with the myriad incarnations of the characters in various media. This has sometimes been a plus. A seminal text in this vein, which treats comic books as a privileged but by no means exclusive point of reference, is the essay collection *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media* (1991), edited by film/media scholars Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio. This volume, born of the frenzied Bat-mania in the wake of Warner Bros.'s first *Batman* movie in 1989, ranges widely, embracing diverse methods (historical, economic, formalistic, and ethnographic) and perspectives (academic, fan, and practitioner). It demonstrates a sophisticated approach to superheroes and their mythoi as intertextual phenomena, examining fandom, marketing, and the narrative techniques of comics and film. Andy Medhurst's controversial essay on Batman and camp provides an unprecedented exploration of homoeroticism in the Batman mythos. Medhurst's essay, which upholds queer readings of the character (and, by implication, all superheroes), epitomizes the book's emphasis on audiences as active and engaged, rather than passive and easily manipulated. When coupled with a popular illustrated history of Batman, *Many Lives* provides an excellent introduction to its subject.

Scott Bukatman, a media theorist and art historian, follows the lead of *Many Lives* in his *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (2003), a compilation of essays on spectacle in popular culture. Among these essays are meditations on the tormented physicality of superheroes and on the urban metropolis as super-heroic milieu, both important contributions. Will Brooker, in his book *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (2000), explicitly follows Pearson and Uric-

chio, offering a history of Batman focused around four key moments: the World War II era; the censorious 1950s (here extending Medhurst's queer reading); the campy, Pop-Art 1960s; and the graphic novel era, post 1986. Brooker is an engaging, provocative guide and resource.

Continuum, publisher of *Batman Unmasked*, seems drawn to superhero study, as evinced by two recent titles that straddle the academic/popular divide. Both focus on comic books per se and reference Richard Reynolds. The more recent of the two, by long-time comic book scripter and editor Danny Fingeroth, is the more populist: *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (2004). Personable and chatty, Fingeroth offers a psychological perspective on such topics as the dual identity trope and the superhero as orphan, leaning on his own intuitions as a storyteller. Continuum's other offering, Jeff Klock's *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (2002), is the brashest book about superheroes to date; it is an unabashedly literary reading of "revisionary" superhero narrative (post 1986) in terms of Harold Bloom's concepts of misprision and the anxiety of influence. Klock, who bluntly dismisses both cultural studies and archetypal criticism, has a certain hell-for-leather bravura; unfortunately, he is slavishly beholden to Bloom and too tortuously ingenious in his gushing readings of certain comics. Klock ignores non-superhero comics, vacuuming out history in such as a way as to reinforce, yet again, the misconception of comic books as contiguous with superheroes. Still, the book's application of theory to superheroes is refreshing; it would have been unthinkable in the 1980s. One hopes for further work that sustains such passion while incorporating solid historical research. After all, the superhero tale remains complex and crucially embedded in youth culture. May Klock serve as a roadside flare to further study.

The future of comics study—including the whole range of genres, traditions, and cultures worldwide—holds out much promise. Formalism, aesthetic criticism, history, audience studies, wide-ranging cultural studies, practitioner perspectives: clearly this emergent field covers much ground, and scholars of children's literature have much to gain from engaging it directly. Yet there remains a critical blind spot in comics scholarship, for, just as a lack of sustained attention to comics has so far impoverished children's studies, so, conversely, and just as unfortunately, the lack of a theoretically informed perspective on childhood detracts from comics studies. The default position for many recent comics researchers has been to reject entirely the link between comics and childhood, as if to jack the form up to some higher standard of seriousness. This is a profound mistake, for the association between comics and childhood is long, complex,

and crucial to understanding comics history. Just as histories of children's literature are impoverished without acknowledgment of seminal comics work by, for example, Hergé, Carl Barks, Osamu Tezuka, and Charles Schulz (some of the most popular storytellers of the twentieth century), so too any history of comics that cannot own its debt to such children's authors is bankrupt. The fields of comics study and children's studies are, in short, overdue for a critical rapprochement.

Sadly, childhood is now the unacknowledged elephant in the living room of comics scholarship. Thierry Groensteen, a leading French scholar, is one of the very few with an unabashed aesthetic interest in comics to reclaim childhood as a subject of, indeed foundation for, comics study. Closing a paper delivered to the "Comics & Culture" conference in Copenhagen (2000), Groensteen asked why scholars do not simply admit that comics study gives them a warrant to revisit childhood. Far from rejecting the link between comics and children, Groensteen says, we should "lay claim to it," and acknowledge that we are "probably doing nothing more than holding out our hands to the kids we used to be" (40–41). His point is well taken. From a children's literature perspective, studying comics in connection with childhood need not mean consigning the form to second-class status; nor need it mean denying the achievements now being made in comics for adults, many of which draw upon the iconography of children's comics or re-approach childhood from critical and subversive perspectives (e.g., R. Crumb, Lynda Barry, Phoebe Gloeckner, Marjane Satrapi). Comics about children often approach the most challenging of issues. Just as there is a symbiotic link between children's reading and adult literary production, as Juliet Dusinberre demonstrated in *Alice to the Lighthouse* (1987), so too is there a generative two-way traffic between children's comics and the recent development of alternative comics for adults, one anticipated by Charles Schulz's melancholy yet universally beloved *Peanuts* and R. Crumb's corrosive underground reexamination of childhood icons. Out of this traffic has come, since the 1970s, a strand of autobiographical comics that plays out the confusions of childhood in provocative, unsentimental ways.

Unfortunately, the recent reevaluation of comics in the United States has, to some extent, been based on a denial of childhood and childishness. Popular journalism, review criticism, and academic study have all partaken of the idea that "comics aren't just for kids anymore"—a cliché that has circulated with teeth-grinding regularity since the late 1980s. This has led, belatedly, to an anguished realization that most comic books are not for children *at all*, and a concerted effort among comics professionals to reclaim child readers (cue Chabon's speech). This effort informs the various "all-ages" series recently distributed to comic shops, many of which

unfortunately suffer from rank sentimentality, as well as such mainstream efforts as *Little Lit*. Despite this, comics scholars in the United States, armed and inspired by the recent growth of comics for adults, have been leery of owning the special connection between comics and children's culture.

Conversely, children's literature scholars have not acknowledged comics as a foundational element of that culture. Whereas comics scholars, many unaware of the range and provocativeness of children's literature studies, have not yet re-embraced childhood, children's literature scholars have been slow to put aside assumptions about the Otherness of comics vis-à-vis the literary tradition. In light of escalating interest in image/text study, we may, at last, reasonably hope for a change—that is, for a critical handclasp between comics study and children's literature. Such a reconciliation could rewrite the very boundaries of both fields.

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Notes

[1] Librarians are at the vanguard of the new interest in comics. Indications include the ongoing presence in Voice of Youth Advocates of Katharine Kan's review column "Graphically Speaking," launched in 1994 and appearing regularly since 2002; the 1999 founding of the email list, "Graphic Novels in Libraries" (<http://lists.topica.com/lists/GNLIB-L>); the focusing of the ALA's Teen Read Week 2002 on graphic novels; the proliferation of instructional materials and websites for graphic novel librarians; and the increased attention paid to comics by, e.g., *Library Journal* and *Publisher's Weekly*.

[2] The following overview focuses on Anglophone, specifically North American and British, comics scholarship. Obviously, the characterizations here may not apply equally to other cultural contexts; however, the field's budding internationalism promises to benefit scholars everywhere.

[3] Much comics theory hails from Europe: see, e.g., Baetens and Lefèvre; Peeters; and Groensteen, *Système*. Morgan and Hirtz give a bibliography of francophone criticism to the mid-1990s.

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