

Introduction: *Niche Envy*



Doug Nufer, Focus Editor

While non-graphic novelists agonize over the ways books are bought and sold, graphic novelists seem to have it made. The basic 24-page comic book is easier to print and sell than the basic prose unit; and, far from being subject to ridicule if they publish themselves, comics artists are expected to print their own work. Not only does the direct connection between creation and publication give graphic novelists creative freedom, the serial form in which comics traditionally appear also provides an opportunity that non-graphic novelists should envy: rather than wait a little eternity to be chosen by some publisher, the artist can do the work and put it out, one comic book at a time. Maybe an imprint like Fantagraphics, Drawn and Quarterly, or Pantheon will reissue a series of comics as a perfect-bound collection. If not, big deal.

Like non-graphic novelists, graphic novelists typically command the widespread neglect of even the most avid consumers of the arts. And yet, an edition of 5,000 copies (priced to fly at three dollars a piece) for an unknown graphic novelist must look good to small press writers with their lifetime supply 1,000-copy print runs, let alone to big press “flops” whose books are summarily shredded. Moreover, the concentration of comic books and/or graphic novels in specialized markets and their relative readability creates a community where everyone who makes comics can keep up with what everyone else is doing. While non-graphic novelists make excuses for not getting around to *Infinite Jest* or *House of Leaves*, are there any graphic novelists who aren’t familiar with *Maus*, *David Boring*, *Nowhere*, *Berlin*, and *Artbabe*, who don’t know that Jimmy Corrigan is the Smartest Kid on Earth or what Julius Knipl does for a living?

Not that the comics world is a paradise of a subculture, where everybody loves or even

tolerates everybody else, where respect for other artists (and from other fields) overwhelms petty jealousy, and where the integrity of hand-crafted production can only be enhanced by the onslaught of full-scale capitalization. While many may bask in the glory of recognition of mainstream publishers and bookstore chains, I miss *Raw* magazine and wonder why [*à suivre*] was not to be continued, after all.

Even the label “graphic novel” is somewhat controversial—more successful as an industrial genre designation than as an aesthetic distinction. Use it interchangeably with “comic book” or “comics” (the old newspaper strips went on at graphic-novel length to tell their stories), and you risk throwing Jessica Abel in bed with Charles Schultz, Robert Crumb with Milton Caniff with Julie Doucet with Alan Moore with Chantal Montellier, and you would still be left to wonder what to do with a non-fiction graphic novelist like Joe Sacco or a graphic novelist-but-not-draftsman like Harvey Pekar.

This issue’s focus mostly defines “graphic novel” as a comics fictional narrative that goes on for more than a few pages. Some contributors went through the individual comics in order to review the books that were later made from them; others review books that have been out for a few years or survey the development of comics publishing. And, finally, while it’s tempting to use the occasion of a focus on graphic novels to indulge in a pastime more often associated with non-graphic novels, to formulate some sort of canon, I see no reason to bring that sort of pretentious condescension to a field whose artists and followers function well enough without it.

Doug Nufer and his friends used to run around pretending they had escaped from various D.C. war comics. So what if a few mailboxes got blown to bits by cherry bombs—that’s a small price to pay for truth, justice, and the American way.