theories and methodologies

A Nice Neighborhood

JARED GARDNER

WHY COMICS? IS A CELEBRATION OF ALL THAT HAS CHANGED BOTH IN COMICS AND FOR COMICS OVER THE LAST GENERATION, WRITTEN BY the person most qualified to host the party. Indeed, our being where we are today owes a good deal to Hillary Chute, who began her career writing some of the field's most intelligent and informative reviews and interviews and went on to write two of the most influential books in comics studies, *Graphic Women* (2010) and *Disaster Drawn* (2016). I first met Chute when she was working on her dissertation, and although the decade between us placed me in the role of outside reader on her committee, she was already leading the way forward for all of us in the field.

I give a copy of this book to all my colleagues who feel like twenty-first-century Rip van Winkles, wondering how "comics" went from a pejorative description of everything the university militated against to a topic about which their students were genuinely passionate. And I return to *Why Comics?* anytime I have a crisis in faith about my decision to devote so much of the last fifteen years to this medium. Finally, as my department prepares to launch its course Introduction to Comics Studies, I am confident this book will play a vital role in introducing my students to a world of comics that is still unfamiliar to most of them.

This last point, however, gets to the recurring quibble I had with the book, a quibble that grew, by the time I reached its conclusion, into a more substantial quarrel with the blinkered view that comics studies has largely maintained. After all, the students new to comics studies entering my classes will have encountered one (Art Spiegelman's *Maus*) and maybe another (Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*) of the texts central to *Why Comics?* But if they are already regular comics readers, as roughly half of them will be, their experience will have been dominated by comics—*Calvin and Hobbes*, Web comics, young-adult comics, manga—that are largely unacknowledged by this book and by comics studies as a whole.

The book's subtitle is *From Underground to Everywhere*, but the reality is that comics are not spreading nearly as far as their reputation

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and visibility suggests. The growth of San Diego Comic-Con and Chute's account of her time there might indicate otherwise, but my own recent visit to the event quickly revealed the relatively small place set aside for comics at the gala that bears its name. For the industries that occupy the most prized real estate on the convention floor, "comics" has become a shorthand for "pop culture" and its fans, as well as a cheap research-and-development department for future television shows, movies, and video games. While comic-book properties are more visible than ever on screens large and small, very few of those adaptations have translated into increased sales for actual comics.

Within the academy, there are of course signs of growth: more classes, scholarship, journals, and book series dedicated to the medium than ever before. And, undeniably, a form once largely ignored is now not only accepted but even embraced by many of the institutions (universities, museums, *The New York Times*) that once turned up their noses at it. But while this belated appreciation has opened up space in formerly hostile venues, the actual growth of comics is not to be found in the comics showcased in those institutions or in *Why Comics?*

As evidence for the "everywhere" of her title, Chute cites numbers from 2015 showing that North American sales of comic books and graphic novels had risen twenty-two percent over the previous year.[1] Those numbers certainly help correct the portrait of an industry often described as being in crisis, reminding us that while sales have indeed been bleak for monthly periodical comic books and for the direct market (the comics shops that specialize in periodical comic books), the traditional and online bookstore marketplace for comics has grown significantly. However, diving into the numbers offers us insight into the true "everywhere" of comics today—and the provincial neighborhood of comics studies.

The growth of the bookstore market is firmly grounded in the rise of the "graphic novel," which for the purposes of such calculations includes both trade paperback collections of periodical comics like those published by Marvel and DC *and* the kind of self-contained original graphic novels that are most likely to be taught in comics classes and featured in *Why Comics?* The graphic novel has provided a life raft for the industry, now that best-selling periodical comics—once the backbone of the industry—regularly sell fewer than 100,000 copies. The benefits of the graphic novel to the industry are now fully baked into the overall market, a market that is cooling, as reflected in *The New York Times*'s decision to drop its best-seller list for the medium in February 2017.[2]

The neighborhood of comics where Chute (and most of comics studies) lives is reserved for the alternative, independent, and art comics that rose to cultural prominence with the successful marketing of the graphic novel. This is a neighborhood with little patience for superhero comics (indeed it historically defines itself in opposition to mainstream comics), where the comics are artisanal and the cartoonists are auteurs (anything resembling the divisions of labor that have historically defined the commercial comics industry can be grounds for eviction). It is an extremely nice neighborhood in every respect, and there is no better introductory guidebook to its environs than *Why Comics?* But living in a nice neighborhood with smart and talented neighbors can make one forget that the neighborhood is not in fact the world.

There was a brief moment in the early 2000s when it seemed as if this neighborhood was growing so fast it might soon expand into the domain of traditional book publishing. Following the success of *Maus* (1986), published by Pantheon (an imprint of Random House and, after 1998, part of the Bertelsmann group), respectable publishers that previously would never have associated with the form began to publish graphic novels. For example, Houghton Mifflin added the annual

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series Best American Comics to their lineup in 2006 and the next year published Bechdel's *Fun Home*, which would go on to become one of the most successful original graphic novels after *Maus*.

In retrospect, however, 2007 looks like the year the graphic novel peaked, and many of those traditional publishers have pulled back steadily from comics for reasons that become clear when we look at recent sales data. In 2017, for example, Houghton Mifflin sold roughly 43,000 graphic novels,[3] but *Fun Home* alone accounted for almost 33,000 of those sales. That same year, Pantheon sold 87,000 copies of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003–04) and 63,000 copies of *Maus* (combining in both instances sales of individual volumes and sales of the two-volume collections). Nothing else in Pantheon's impressive lineup—which includes several of the books central to *Why Comics?*, such as Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* and Charles Burns's *Black Hole*—sold even 5,000 copies that year (Beat Staff). While *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home* were all first published over a decade ago, they remain among a tiny handful of frequently taught texts in the precariously small canon of the comics classrooms, which account for most of these sales.[4] None of these traditional book publishers have produced any titles after 2007 that have cracked the canon or generated the kind of sustained sales the way *Maus*, *Persopolis*, and *Fun Home* have.

In one significant area of comics, however, my narrative of retrenchment does not hold up: comics and graphic novels for children and young adults. One cartoonist in particular, Raina Telgemeier, in 2016 sold "a staggering 1.3 million copies for $14.4 million dollars in sales. To put that in context," Heidi MacDonald writes, "nearly 5% of all dollars generated by *all* graphic novels listed (all 21k of them!) are coming from the pen of one woman." In 2017, Telgemeier's publisher, Scholastic, was the top publisher of graphic novels for a third straight year, selling 2.7 million copies, "up an incredible 42% from the 1.9 million last year" (MacDonald). By contrast, the top four mainstream comics publishers *combined*—Marvel, DC, Dark Horse, and Image—sold fewer than two million titles in the bookstore market that year.

We can draw a few conclusions from this dive into the data. First, comics really aren't "everywhere," and the comics most central to comics studies are going nowhere fast. I do not deny that the comics Chute focuses on are worthy of study; many of the works she discusses are among my personal favorites. But only in our friendly little neighborhood of alternative comics and in the nascent scholarly field of comics studies can we convince ourselves that this version of comics is growing. More troubling for the future, the canon that comics studies established more than a decade ago has not changed. The ongoing popularity of undergraduate comics classes guarantees that *Fun Home*, *Persepolis*, and *Maus* will sell well for decades to come, as will a few others, such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1986; DC's second-best-selling title for 2017), Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993), and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006). But no book published in the last decade has come close to entering the curricular canon.

Second, comics studies as a whole remains largely oblivious to the world of comics for children and young adults, by far the fastest-growing demographic in the field. Tomorrow's comics readers will not have grown up with superhero comics or with these comics' alternative siblings. Along with *Calvin and Hobbes* and Web comics, they will have read Telgemeier, Jeff Smith's *Bone*, and Kazu Kibuishi's *Amulet*. Sales to children and young adults provide pretty much all the positive news in the data Chute cites as evidence of the growth of comics, and yet the works they read merit no discussion in the book. Manga (Japanese comics) makes an appearance in *Why Comics?* solely in relation

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to the 1970s series *Barefoot Gen*, a semiautobiographical account of the bombing of Hiroshima. Yet manga has been arguably the most dynamic force in attracting new American audiences to comics in the past generation; and while manga sales in the United States are off their 2007 peaks, they have been extremely strong in recent years (up twenty-nine percent in 2016 from the previous year).

My point is not that *Why Comics?* should account for all of comics, a vast, global, and diverse medium. Rather, we should be honest about how select the neighborhood we celebrate as comics is. If comics are indeed everywhere, we are nevertheless interested in a very specific here—a pantheon that has evolved through and continues to be nourished by an intimate relationship with the academic humanities. This is nothing to be ashamed of. After all, emerging fields in the humanities have historically cultivated small elite canons, as the example of film studies reminds us. Auteur theory played a vital role in the acceptance of film into the American academy in the 1960s, and while the theory would be challenged and critiqued vociferously, its basic principles and the canon it produced remain deeply etched into the curriculum of the field more than a half century later.

That the select group of comics is all but closed to new members speaks to the limited possibilities for growth in these straitened times in the academic humanities, but it also reminds us of the dark side of canon building: for every text that enters the pantheon of auteurs, many future works will be turned away for not being "teachable" in conversation with that canon. Today we are far less comfortable than our forebears were about such judgments and the inevitable exclusions that accompany them. Where our predecessors relished their priestly power to cull cultural chaff, such gatekeeping runs afoul of the impulses that helped usher comics into the university in the first place. Thus, instead of acknowledging this work of canon building we tell ourselves and our students that what we are presenting to them is comics *tout court*, not a narrow slice of comics curated by a small cadre of connoisseurs and scholars.

Perhaps this explains why, as I read *Why Comics?*, I found myself having occasional flashbacks to the work of my undergraduate thesis adviser, William Pritchard. Having already set himself against the rising tide of theory in 1975 by denouncing the "hermeneutical mafia," in 1980 Pritchard cemented his commitments with the publication of *Lives of the Modern Poets*. The book meditates on the interrelation between the biography and literary style of nine poets. Chute would likely balk at being associated, however loosely, with a self-proclaimed "old-fashioned humanist" (Pritchard, "Hermeneutical Mafia" 607), as Pritchard would in being put into conversation with comics studies. But there is something resolutely "old-fashioned humanist" about Chute's work and about much of comics studies as a whole, even if the marked differences between the works and authors they study obscure the resemblance. While the questions Chute asks—Why queer? Why punk? Why sex?—would have been unrecognizable to Pritchard and the New Critics who trained him, her methodology would be familiar.

Unlike Pritchard, however, Chute often draws her biographical insights not only from deep knowledge of the work but also from personal knowledge of the artists. In this respect she more closely resembles Hugh Kenner, a decade Pritchard's senior. Studying modernism with Kenner was like studying modernism with an actual modernist, so intimate were his relationships with his subjects and so fierce was he in their defense. While Kenner, unlike Pritchard, maintained a skepticism of biography as an interpretive tool, he took seriously the charge given to him by Pound: "You have an obligation to visit the great men of your time" (qtd. in Tremblay 60). With Chute one never feels a sense of "obligation." These cartoonists are truly her friends,

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and spending time with them has been for her both personally and intellectually rewarding, as the book's dedication makes clear.

I am not accusing Chute of anything untoward. Everything critical I say about *Why Comics?* is a charge I would level against many in my field, including myself. I too count cartoonists among my friends, and our friendships have enriched my life and scholarship even as they have surely limited what I am able to say about contemporary comics. Is there a danger of living in such a small neighborhood (so far from everywhere) with such interesting and sensitive people, when one's role as critic and scholar is to subject their creations to the kind of rigorous inquiry that all too often bruises feelings and even reputations?

Given Kenner's unwillingness in seminar to discuss Pound's fascism, and Chute's unwillingness in *Why Comics?* to acknowledge the racism and misogyny of Crumb's underground comix, the answer is clearly *Yes*. Many others have addressed Pound's fascism and Crumb's racism and misogyny, and so long as critical and even adversarial approaches and methodologies are allowed to develop, the danger posed by some critics' personal ties to their subjects can be contained. Because Chute owns her position throughout *Why Comics?*, much good comes from the intimacy she nourishes and extends to her readers. And in these dark days for our broader enterprise, some good can even come from reviving the intimacies and pastoral shepherding of the old-time humanities. In exchange for the harsh insights of the critical gaze, we gain rich, colorful insights into the energies that give life to our subjects' creative and intellectual community. In the long run, we need both, but comics has spent enough time in the cultural stockade and has earned the chance to grow hale in Chute's compassionate embrace.

The big unanswered question at the end of *Why Comics?* is, What next? Now that the *what* and the *why* of comics have been answered, the time is ripe for comics studies to enter a new phase. Do we dismantle the canon before it ossifies completely? Do we undo the methodology—a hybrid of formalism, auteurism, and cultural studies—that has carried the young field this far? Is there a clear next chapter for comics studies that will compensate for what we lose if we leave the comforts of this select neighborhood behind?

Or maybe this is a fine place to stay. After all, comics studies has arrived, with appropriately comic timing, at precisely the worst possible moment. Earlier academic fields (film studies, for example) benefited from Cold War boosterism and the dramatic expansions sparked by the GI Bill and the baby boom. Today, comics studies is probably as big as it is going to get, as growth in the humanities is everywhere limited by declining majors, skeptical administrators, and a broader disinvestment in cultural inquiry. The number of comics courses, especially at the lower level, will continue to grow, as English departments seek out new opportunities for increasing enrollment to compensate for lost majors. But few departments of comics studies will be created, and few faculty members will be hired to devote themselves exclusively to teaching and research in the field. We will remain for the most part a general education discipline, mostly teaching students who will have a chance to take one or two courses in the field, occasionally encountering comics in other courses the way my generation encountered film.

Houghton Mifflin and Pantheon can count on continued sales of *Fun Home* and *Maus*, since our canon is unlikely to change much anytime soon. But while there is reason to regret the lost pathways that different timing might have opened up to us, this is still a pretty great place to be. Those of us who came of age a generation ago could never have imagined it. Thanks in no small part to Chute, we are deepening our relationships with a medium that demands an intimacy

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unique among narrative forms. And we are celebrating the cartoonists who allow us to live here in the first place. Our expectations have diminished, to be sure, if we measure the field against the theory wars and imagined grand stakes of those who entered the academy in the previous century. But with Chute leading the way, it all seems charged with the potential of the intellectual salons of our historical past and with the most meaningful relationships of our personal present. Not too shabby—much like our friendly neighborhood of comics.

Notes

1. In 2017 sales fell five percent in bookstores and ten percent in comic-book shops, and estimates for 2018 suggest a flat year.

2. The loss of the *Times*'s coverage of sales in graphic novels was a big blow to many in the industry. The paper did compensate in part by increasing its coverage of the form with a new feature, Graphic Content, for which Chute is one of the columnists.

3. This number represents the sale of graphic novels that appear among the top 750 titles recorded by Nielsen BookScan (Beat Staff).

4. The Open Syllabus Project provides some hit-or-miss insights into which books are taught most frequently (opensyllabusproject.org); obtaining reliable and comprehensive data is a challenge.

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