



GRAPHIC NOVELS HEAR THE SOUND OF CANON FIRE

by Peter Gutierrez

Is Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (W.W. Norton) of historical import but aesthetically dated? Is Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby* (HarperPerennial) overrated—or underrated?

Such questions, which echo perennial attempts in other media to identify “all-time bests,” are being raised with increasing frequency in graphic noveldom. There seem to be three forces behind this trend: a) the reader's need to navigate the nonstop proliferation of titles; b) the academic study of the medium; and c) the desire by libraries, and perhaps independent bookstores, to determine the core collection that absolutely must be on their shelves. In short, debate about the best GNs ever is no longer just a fanboy activity.

Ah, but then who is passing these judgments? As Adam Staffaroni, speaking on the topic at the Northeast Modern Literature Association conference in February, notes: “Artists, publishers, critics, and academics all have an influence on what the canon of comics and graphic novels will eventually encompass. There will, over time, be more cross-pollination of ideas between these groups, but for now their criteria are too separate for any to offer up a credible canon.”

Still, one has to start somewhere, and if middle to high schools are indicators of cultural acceptance, I've noticed them embracing *American Born Chinese* (First Second), *Persepolis* (Pantheon) and *Watchmen* (Warner Books). No surprises there, but that's a fairly small canon, isn't it? A few years ago I tried to persuade Scholastic to create reading assessments for GNs and to use the Eisner Awards to identify suitable titles. Why? Well, to start with, they have widespread credibility in the field. Second, the Eisners don't simply represent corporate self-congratulation over the industry's biggest sellers. This year's winners, for example, include plenty of titles from DC/Vertigo, also Drawn and Quarterly's *Exit Wounds*, and even self-published works.

But even the Eisners committee struggles to “keep up”: awards for nonfiction weren't even given until a couple of years ago, so where to look for canon fodder before then? More problematic is the way that the medium often wrestles with how to define itself conceptually. After all, major awards aren't just given for GNs, but for comic book series and even collections of comic strips. This has led many, including myself, to adopt the academic-sounding “graphica” as a catch-all term. With this in mind, the Best American Comics series (Houghton Mifflin) might be used to build a short-form canon, introducing a wider audience to work by folks like Ivan Brunetti and David Heatley (and, we hope, spurring readers to seek out the indie presses that have been publishing such talents for years.)

In addition to awards and anthologies, there are also many new surveys of the field by librarians and academics. In the former category, and geared toward young readers, is Michele Gorman's *Getting Graphic* (Linworth). In the latter, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* by Rocco Versaci (Continuum) is wonderfully far-ranging. Although it doesn't consciously aim for canon construction, that's an inescapable byproduct, with the usual suspects out in full force: *Eightball* (Fantagraphics), *Palestine* (Fantagraphics), *Sandman* (Vertigo/DC), and *Blankets* (Top Shelf).

The ultimate reference along these lines is probably *500 Essential Graphic Novels* by Gene Kannenberg (Collins Design). It's an impressive achievement by any measure, both comprehensive and, with its genre organization, intuitive to use. Even here, though, some inclusions are apt to spark as many arguments as they resolve. When you think of the adventure genre, Carl Barks's seminal *Duck Tales* (Gemstone) might not spring to mind, but it makes sense. However, what about Andy Runton's cute-as-a-button *Owly* (Top Shelf)—and does Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* even qualify as graphica? Interesting choices, and probably canon-worthy, but there's something odd about seeing them listed alongside the samurai epic *Lone Wolf and Cub* (Dark Horse).

Such results indicate the limitations of even the best canon-establishing efforts, and can make one skeptical of the whole enterprise. As Karen Green, who developed the graphic novel collection at Columbia University, points out, “Isn't the whole idea of a ‘canon’ kind of outdated anyway? If you go into any comp-lit department in America, you're going to get hammered with authors who are considered canon-busters. Is it still a useful concept? What does it actually contribute to the discourse of comics?”

I agree—to an extent. Because although the “death of the canon” is nothing new, it would sure be nice if graphica could first achieve the cultural recognition of prose literature before the notion of consensus is dismissed as unnecessary. **F**

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