

THE NEW SIGN ON THE CLUBHOUSE DOOR: “NO GROWN-UPS ALLOWED”

by Peter Gutierrez



If you're like me (read: old), you'll probably find this trend amusingly ironic... After decades of arguing that the graphic format was *not* a kids-only medium, apparently now the opposite case needs to be made: that more comics—and graphic novels and manga, too—should be created, promoted, and celebrated for the oft-neglected pre-tween audience.

Among the many signs of this movement is the Kids' Comic Con, now in its third year and growing steadily. Another is the first annual Nick Magazine Comics Awards, which include a graphic novels category along with fun stuff like the “grossest thing in comics” (my money's on Wolverine's back hair) and whose winners will be announced on March 17. A third is Abrams' forthcoming *The TOON Treasury of Classic Children's Comics*, edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly and collecting overlooked gems from the '40s through '60s.

One intended result of the anthology, Mouly told me, is that “people will realize that what was done in comics fifty years ago is among the best children's book literature.” Of course serious comics aficionados will be familiar with some of the master cartoonists included, such as Basil Wolverton (*Powerhouse Pepper*: Fantagraphics, 978-1-56097-148-1) and George Carlson (*Jingle Jangle Comics*). However, much of the actual work such luminaries did for kids is known by reputation only, thereby necessitating this kind of editorial archeology.



But why should this be the case, especially given how children's books from the same era manage to stay in print? Mouly cites the ephemeral nature of comics printed on cheap paper and long-held prejudices against the medium. “When you are talking about children's literature you have to take into account the role of the librarians and gatekeepers. Certainly the [picture books] that have become classics were vetted, recognized, and praised by reviewers and critics...and that never happened with comics.”

Today, of course, it's a different story. Many accomplished comics for kids, such as *Bone*, enjoy wide acclaim. Still, which lesser-known titles should youngsters be steered toward? I asked Janna Morishima, director of Diamond Books' Kids Group, and Chris Duffy, senior editor of *Nickelodeon* magazine (and member of *The TOON Treasury's* advisory board) to provide some examples. They named too many worthy names to mention, but here are several whose representative works are published by North American indie presses: Tony Millionaire (*Billy Hazelnuts*: Fantagraphics, 978-1-56097-701-8); Debbie Huey

(*Bumperboy and the Loud, Loud Mountain*: AdHouse, 978-0-9766610-1-6); Jef Czekaj (*Grampa and Julie: Shark Hunters*: Top Shelf, 978-1-891830-52-5); Eleanor Davis (*Stinky*: RAW Junior, 978-0-9799238-4-5); and ongoing series such as Kiyohiko Azuma's *Yotsuba&!* (ADV, 978-1-4139-0317-1), the Sardine adventures by Guibert and Sfar (*Squarefish*), the *Clone Wars Adventures* (Dark Horse, 978-1-59307-243-8) as well as the multi-genre “Kids Manga” line that UDON is about to launch.

Of course there are a bunch more that I could add. Certainly as Jimmy Gownley's best-known work migrates to Simon & Schuster this spring, he'll gain a far larger audience. And that will drain some of the pleasure I get when I put *Amelia Rules!* (Renaissance, 978-0-9712169-2-1) in the hands of unsuspecting adults and watch their faces light up.

But hold on—is that necessarily a *good* thing, that adults love these books?

I tend to think yes, but the argument can be made that kids deserve their own graphic literature that speaks to them exclusively. In a way, this is the same issue that's at the heart of the recent controversy surrounding the Newbery, with its detractors claiming that the award undoubtedly reflects the year's best children's books...that is, for middle-aged “children.”

When I asked Morishima to comment on this point, she was quick to acknowledge that there's nothing wrong with adults gravitating to kids' comics the same way they take to young adult novels. “However, there is value in comics that are specifically aimed at kids,” she adds. “Children are not little adults; their brains are fundamentally different and constantly developing. Cognitively, a seven-year-old is different from a ten-year-old, so there [should be] different types of books aimed at [them]. Right now, comics publishing aimed at kids tends not to be that nuanced. So I look forward to the day when there are comics editors exclusively dedicated to the children's market—that may mark the time when comics publishing is no longer a small subset of the overall book market, but is an equal partner with prose publishing.”

Amen to that. In the meantime, I'll keep swiping graphic novels from my discerning nine-year-old whenever I need some nuanced belly laughs. **F**

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