

## NOTE TO READERS

In August 2000, I was sitting in a room at The University of North Florida for my first faculty meeting. New to the school and to Florida, I looked like the newcomer I was. In weather better suited for Equatorial Guinea, I was still walking around sweating my brains out in jeans, oxford, and Doc Martens. On the other hand, Brad Simkulet, the teacher who sat next to me that first day, screamed Florida: sandals, shorts, t-shirt, sun-blonded hair. He was also funny, snide and subversive, and went out of his way to make me feel like I belonged there. Safe to say, I liked him immediately. I certainly remember Brad fondly for his generosity, even though he left for the West Coast and bigger and better things at the end of that year. However, I recall Brad specifically here because he first introduced me to graphic literature.

I don't remember the context for the conversation, but Brad suggested I read this book *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman. A comic? About the Holocaust? And Nazis are cats and Jews are mice?...Now, I had just completed ten years of higher education in literature. And in all that time, I had never seen a comic or graphic novel on a syllabus, never read a scholarly article that referenced them, and cannot even recall them coming up in any of those innumerable, interminable college conversations about books. Heck, even as a kid, I had read only the occasional comic book. So it's safe to say that I bought *Maus*, not because of scholarly interest or because I thought such a book could possibly be successful (I mean, a beast-fable comic about the Holocaust?), but instead I bought it because Brad said I should. Raise a glass to peer pressure...

Motivation aside, by the time I finished *Maus*, I was hooked. It was an amazing, brave and captivating book, unlike any I'd read before. In the ensuing months, I went about following a 'trail' of such texts: from *Maus* to Moore's *Watchmen* to Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* to Satrapi's *Persepolis* to Eisner's *Contract with God* to Clowes' *Ghost World* to Thompson's *Blankets*, and so on and so on. It's a trail that, as a reader, I'm still following today. But I distinctly remember thinking, before I'd even finished *Maus*, "This would be really cool to teach." So, for the first literature course of my second year, I inserted *Maus* as the last text we'd read. I confess that I pitched it to students as a "treat": a fun (easy?) carrot to dangle in front of students, if they worked hard on all those dense poems, Shakespearean dramas, and literary short stories we'd read during the semester.

Instead, what both the students and I discovered was that *Maus* enabled them to learn more about literature, what constitutes the literary, the art of reading, and the processes of critical thinking than any other text we'd read. It wasn't that *Maus* was "fun" or "easier," or that it was forbidden fruit. For students, as for me, this text tapped into something deeper.

Having taught courses on graphic literature for ten years now, I'm convinced that part of this 'something deeper' is our rich graphic lineage. Our earliest preserved stories, like the cave paintings at Lascaux, are graphic. Our Western alphabet—based on the Phoenician alphabet—is originally pictorial (and economic): A's represented (and counted) oxen or cows; B's women or households; C's camels, and so on. The most popular language on Earth today (and one of the oldest) is Chinese, a pictographic language. Philosophically, for centuries Platonic thinkers have postulated our world as a world of images and representations, just as Jung countered Freud by postulating archetypes as our foundational psychology. More recently, cogni-



tive scientists have delved into graphic processes central to all our minds, what Steven Pinker calls our “shared understanding of the truth”: the way our “thoughts are anchored to things and situations in the world.”

But it’s that world in which we live today that provides another attractive exigency. Unless you live under rocks, you are bombarded with visuals 24/7/365. Symbols, logos, ads: graphics, both subtle and explicit. Whether savvy political commercials saturating the media to seek our votes, product commercials that seek our money, or news media that seek our trust and belief, a distinctly graphic discourse runs through our culture. We construct ourselves graphically in this new media too. Whether we did it through MySpace or Second Life, or do it now through Facebook or Match.com or Instagram or Pinterest, evolving social media encourage us to (re) present “who we are” in a significantly graphic way. So thinking critically about graphic texts, learning how to read them, and even working to produce them ourselves are (not to sell it too hard) perhaps survival skills for the 21st century.

My students and I are not alone in our compulsion for reading, studying and enjoying graphic texts. Comics and graphic novels have never been more culturally popular. Despite drooping sales in the publishing industry as a whole, graphic novels and comics sales continue to rise each year. Specific publishing trends suggest that this is not a passing fad. Within

graphic novels and comics publishing, for instance, the children’s graphic novel is the single fastest growing sales demographic. Additionally, digital comics sales/downloads have doubled just since 2010. This spring, webcomics server ComiXology announced that it has downloaded more than 50 million comics since launch, with 10% of that coming in December 2011 alone. And in the theatres, graphic novels and comics provide the substance for hit films and franchises. From *Spider-man* to *The Dark Knight*, *Shrek* to *The Avengers*, comics and graphic novels provided the source for about one out of six top grossing films of the 2000s.

Academic and scholarly circles are investing as well. In the U.S., there are no less than five museums dedicated to the preservation and study of comics and graphic novels. Research libraries at Yale and Columbia host significant special collections of such texts, as does the Library of Congress. Graphic novels and comics have been the focus of numerous Modern Language Association panels and publications during the last decade. It’s hard to find a college that is not teaching a course on these texts in one or more of its departments. Several respected colleges, including Cal-Berkeley, Savannah College of Art and Design and Emerson College, now even offer entire degree programs in studying and/or producing these texts. And again, other specific trends suggest that this development will continue. Since 2000, at least 55,000 dissertations and theses on graphic literature have been written and accepted in American colleges and universities. This certainly indicates a future in which scholars increasingly embrace, study, teach and publish on graphic texts.

All of this is not to denigrate the written word, whose power and beauty has rightfully been a focus of work, enjoyment and study...not least of which, in the pages of *Fiction Fix*. However, the current *Fiction Fix* issue par-

ticipates in this growing and important graphic discourse: one that recognizes that word and image are correlated; and one that recognizes that a genre that marries word and image on the page is a genre worthy of attention and appreciation. And in this issue, there are several and sundry examples from this genre that are particularly worthy.

“Postcards from the Hecatombs” offers an epistolary pastiche, while “The Clown Genocide” offers a series of woodcuts that channel Albrecht Durer via John Wayne Gacy (or vice versa). “In Need of a Hand” is a travelogue, murder mystery, romance, and a story of self-awareness; it is also, ultimately, none of these things. (Read it. You’ll see.) And “My Life in Gadgets” interrogates those ways in which we construct ourselves graphically and technologically, and then proceeds to participate in just such a construction.

Each of the texts in this issue possesses the power and talent to get a new graphic reader started down a trail that *Maus* started for me over a decade ago. I hope they do. And if you come to this issue an experienced and committed reader of graphic literature, then I hope the texts in this issue intrigue and impress you, giving you evidence that the future of this genre is bright and diverse. Thanks to all the contributors to this issue for sharing your work with me, just as I’d like to thank all the (new and old) readers of *Fiction Fix* for supporting the enterprise. Thanks to the editors of *Fiction Fix* for trusting me to work alongside them for this issue (a decision they must surely regret). They do an incredible job, and they do it passionately. And lastly, to Brad...wherever you are and whatever you are doing, man: thanks.

— **Russell Turney**