

Throwing the Book at Cartoonists

“I respect the hell out of cartoonists, because they have to be good at two entirely different art forms, each of which takes a lifetime to master.”

-Novelist Myla Goldberg

In the world of alternative comics almost everyone is an *auteur*, who both writes and draws his or her work, and most of those people come from backgrounds in art. It's a much more plausible scenario for a student at the School of Visual Arts to pick up a copy of *Optic Nerve* and start thinking about the possibilities of comics as an art form than it is for anyone to drop out of the Iowa Writer's Workshop after reading *V for Vendetta*, shaking his fist and saying, “Fuck this literary *bullshit*--I'm gonna be a *cartoonist!*” Maybe this is just because everybody in the world likes to think he could write if he just gave it a try, whereas pretty much anyone can tell you at a glance whether or not you can draw. Or it may have to do with status; it is still much less prestigious to write comic books than to write short stories or novels, mostly because your career choices as a writer of comics are to write either 1.) stories you'll probably have to publish yourself that no one but your friends will ever read or 2.) stories about Thor. Perhaps for this reason, the writing in comics is still subjected to far less stringent critical scrutiny than the art, even though it is the more indispensable element of the work. Ultimately comics are a narrative art; a great story with inadequate illustrations can still be considered a flawed

masterpiece, but a bad story beautifully illustrated is a waste of everyone's time and talents.

Of course drawing is essential to a good comic, but “drawing” in comics doesn't necessarily mean naturalistic rendering. The fetishistic admiration for competent drawing among fans and critics—“chops”--has blinded a lot of them to real artistry. Thus Frank Cho can be considered a “better” artist than, say, Tom Hart or Sam Henderson simply because he is technically the more accomplished draftsman. But look at Tom Hart's blobby little guys, full of rage and pathos, or Henderson's spastic, pop-eyed figures flailing their wiggly arms in hysteria or exasperation. Contrast these characters, imbued with such personality and life, to Cho's exquisitely rendered women, gorgeous as centerfolds, expressionless and empty-eyed, cartoon Olympias without humor or character. This fixation on “drawing” is a little as though the *New York Times Book Review* was praising authors' faultless spelling and grammar. Which is not to say that crude drawing is by definition better than polished; there is a difference between unconventionality and incompetence (although artists in all media strive to disguise the latter as the former). Roberta Gregory's drawings are crude because they're expressionistic, the whiplash scrawls of crude emotions like humiliation, bitterness, and lust; Aline Kominsky-Crumb's drawings are crude because that's the best she can do.

The standards for writing in comics, on the other hand, are far lower than in the mainstream literary world. Comics authors are too often rewarded with critical acclaim as much for their ambitions as for their achievements, congratulated just for *trying* to

produce “serious” work--even if that work is the kind of clichéd, derivative fiction, abstruse academic exercise, or warmed-over journal material that would get more or less diplomatically beaten out of apprentice fictionists in any undergraduate writing workshop. Adrian Tomine is an excellent cartoonist, but if he were working in prose instead of panels he would be regarded as a minor minimalist, a footnote to that trend’s vogue twenty years ago. Craig Thompson’s *Blankets*, much overpraised on its release, is an unexceptional bildungsroman with narration that seems transcribed verbatim from high-school journals. Many of Harvey Pekar’s stories are not true stories but the sorts of anecdotes, observations, and snippets of dialogue that a writer might jot down in his notebook for later use in finished work. And there are a surprising number of cartoonists who seem ignorant of basic, Comp-101 lessons that ought to be second nature to anyone who writes for a living—Show, Don’t Tell, Omit Needless Words, the rules of Aristotlean dramaturgy. Chester Brown, one of the best writers in comics, during a period of artistic floundering between the Ed and Playboy stories, inexcusably foisted off on his readers a story about the writing of his last story, a lameassed metafictional dodge that many a novice has tried and failed to get away with. He simply didn’t know any better. Seth once drew a great short story about coming across an electronic birthday card still tinnily signing “Happy Birthday” from inside a garbage bag on the street, but ruined it and insulted his readers by explaining, “It was both hilarious and poignant.” Wow! You’re right! Gosh, thanks, Mr. Sensitive Artist dude!

Of course it’s not fair to talk about “writing” in comics only in terms of storytelling, dialogue, or prose style; writing in comics is more than a matter of words.

It's easy to show that Alan Moore or Lynda Barry are great writers simply by quoting their prose, but less easy to explain why Jason or Brian Ralph, whose comics are wordless, are too. (Although, interestingly, even Rorschach's or Maybonne's monologues look too fulsome printed out on the page, divorced from their accompanying illustrations. The catalytic effect of imagery on text seems to be similar to that of music, which can make song lyrics that would look trite on paper pierce the heart or soar.) Decisions like composition, panel size, and pacing all constitute the "writing" of a comic; Alan Moore's match cuts and Chris Ware's excruciating *longueurs* are as integral to their work as the jarring metaphors and wildly varying tone of postmodern literature. And there are some things that can be more deftly and beautifully done in comics than in any other medium. In John Porcellino's *Perfect Example* (arguably the best novel about adolescence ever written, period) the main character goes into the garage to get out the lawn mower, where the words "garage smell," hang in the air, evocative of a long paragraph's worth of subtle, nostalgic odors. The elegance of this takes my breath away.

Nonetheless, at the risk of sounding like a snobby smartypants, I'll insist that comic writers still need to learn the craft of writing and immerse themselves in book books as well as comic books. An education in writing and the liberal arts is not just a bonus, good for getting literary references and recognizing artistic allusions. It's not really necessary to know that Dr. Manhattan's perception of time in *Watchmen* is similar to Billy Pilgrim's in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or that Page 14 of the first issue of Ivan Brunetti's *Schizo* is an updating of "Suburb" from Georg Grosz's *Ecce Homo*; this is really no more than a game of Bachelor-of-Arts Trivia. The point is to have read enough

to know the difference between good writing and bad, and to know enough about art, philosophy, history, religion, politics, psychology, biology--in short, about the world—that you to have something to say. Walter Bagehot wrote that “the reason why so few good books are written is that so few people who can write know anything.” Hence the disproportionate number of comic books about twentysomething slackers with troubled relationships as opposed to the number about, say, Palestine, Weimar Berlin, or Louis Riel. This is not to advocate that anyone who writes comics should hit their parents up for \$100,000 to buy an English degree.¹ But if comics are ever going to be taken seriously as a literary medium, comic book writers ought to know Dickens as least as well as they do Ditko, just as comic artists should study Gray’s anatomy as well as Kirby’s.

Of course once you’ve mastered all the technical aspects of your craft, there still remains the larger problem of becoming an *artist*, someone whose perceptions are truthful and interesting and worth sharing. In his academic novel *Straight Man*, Rick Russo speaks a taboo truth known to anyone who’s ever been in a writing workshop: “very often the flaws in a story are directly traceable to flaws in the author.” Joe Matt’s issue of *Peepshow* about making a porn video mix tape isn’t embarrassing because it’s about making a porn video mix tape; it’s embarrassing because he shows no insight into his own behavior--he simply records the process as obsessively as he mixes the tape. (The most revealing moment in the issue is when Joe fawns over his cat, who flees, and his cloying affection turns to petulant anger.) A story can be worth reading even if its

¹ I went to a prestigious writing program and its main benefit was that, almost twenty years later, some of the people I met there will still pick me up at the airport.

protagonist fails to learn anything, but not if its author does. At best, this kind of story can be a diagnosis; at its worst, it's only a symptom. The same painful truth applies to any other art, including drawing: it's evident from Frank Cho's art that he's looked at a lot of girls, but it seems equally clear that he's never really seen one. This is more than an artistic failure. Some rare ones among us, like John Porcellino, seem to be born artists, with keener eyes or more sensitive nerve endings than the rest of us, but most of us have to become artists the hard way, through what we witness and suffer and learn. "I can help you learn to reveal your soul through your voice," Megan Kelso's singing instructor once told her, "but I can't guarantee that you have a soul worth revealing."