

# Graphic Novels

## A New Art Form

by Chris Schlupe, Editor,  
Ballantine Del Rey

**A**t this point, it should come as no surprise that one of today's fastest growing categories in book publishing is that of the graphic novel. Partly because of this rapid growth, there is a great deal of confusion and uncertainty as to what exactly constitutes a graphic novel and where (if at all) graphic novels fit into our greater literature. In this essay, I'll try to explain how we publishers define the term; I also certainly hope to show why this blossoming category is exciting readers, especially *young* readers, and how it's opening up the world of books to a whole new generation of bibliophiles.

What are graphic novels and where did they begin? The truth is that graphic novels have been around—in one form or another—for many, many years. Most people associate the graphic novel with comic books, and that is indeed how the form got its start (although the form has greatly matured and expanded since then). Traditionally, graphic novels were nothing but a series of comics gathered together and bound into long book form—a practice that started in the U.K. in the 1870s. Since then, generations of Europeans have grown up with the form, with the most well-known early examples being *Tintin* and *Asterix*. While graphic novels have been around in this country, too, they weren't officially recognized as such—and didn't really start getting much attention from mainstream readers—until 1978, when Will Eisner published his groundbreaking *A Contract With God*. Eisner's book, although it was filled with pretty pictures, was unquestionably meant to be read along the lines of literature. With this more serious goal in mind, Eisner sought to establish some distance between his own work and traditional comics. He therefore came up with the idea of pitching his work as a

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“graphic novel” in the hope that it wouldn’t be dismissed outright by traditional trade-book publishers. Eisner has been quoted as saying that while pitching the book to an editor at a big New York publishing house, “a little voice inside me said, ‘Hey, stupid, don’t tell him it’s a comic or he’ll hang up on you.’ So I said, ‘It’s a graphic novel.’” Sadly, the gambit failed, and Eisner was still turned down by the big publisher. A smaller publisher did end up accepting his work, and *A Contract With God* became the first book to arrive on shelves with the term *graphic novel* printed on its cover. The designation has stuck ever since.

These days, big publishers are finally catching up with the smaller houses. The number of graphic novels on bookshelves has skyrocketed, and so have sales. In fact, if big publishers were initially slow to accept graphic novels as a serious art form, the category’s impressive sales numbers have caused many a grim publisher to reconsider the merits of the visual narrative, and I believe we’re all better served as a result. I can look to no better source than John Updike, an author who once harbored dreams of becoming a cartoonist. In 1969, he declared, “I see no intrinsic reason why a doubly talented artist might not arise and create a comic strip novel masterpiece.” Thankfully, his words ring true today. There are masterpieces to be had.

As an editor, I tend to divide the graphic-novel field into three subcategories: superhero comics, popular entertainment, and literary fine art. Although I have no quantifiable evidence, I *suspect* that, as they mature as readers, those who enjoy graphic novels tend to follow a natural progression from reading about superheroes to reading the popular entertainment graphic novels to reading the more literary works. While there are examples of great works in each of these subcategories, I tend to prefer the graphic novels at the literary/fine-art end of things (as do most “big” publishers). If you look at the works that have really helped to established graphic novels as a serious field, you’ll find some of my favorite examples of what makes the visual narrative so compelling: Art

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Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus*, Marjani Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, among others.

To understand graphic novels in a comprehensive sense, it's important to start at the beginning—with superhero comics. Most graphic novels from this subcategory are simply collections of previously published periodical material put into long book form. (Think serialized comics, such as Superman, Batman, Spiderman, X-Men, and so forth. Interestingly, most of these properties have also been made into movies, which surely helps to lure young readers to the graphic-novel aisles.) Companies such as Marvel and DC Comics have always been very strong in this subcategory; in the last decade or so, other companies have entered the field to push comic graphic novels into worlds that are decidedly less superhero oriented. On the whole, however, there's a real "genre" feel to these comics, and readers tend to be younger than those who read, say, *Maus*. I single out as particularly noteworthy two superhero graphic-novel releases. Both originated in 1986 (by anyone's standards, a banner year for the graphic-novel industry), and both are considered real masterpieces. The first is *The Watchmen*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Gibbons. *The Watchmen* was the first superhero comic book to present itself as serious literature, a move that did much to popularize the adult-oriented graphic-novel format. Set in an alternate 1985, where the U.S. is edging toward nuclear war with the Soviet Union, *The Watchmen* was one of the first graphic novels to present superheroes as real people with depth, as people possessing normal personal issues and perhaps not-so-normal ethical dilemmas. *The Watchmen* was so well accepted that it was the only graphic novel to appear on *Time* magazine's list of the "100 best novels from 1923 to present." Another graphic novel from the year 1986 (and the one that first made me realize that not all graphic novels were schlock) is *The Dark Knight Returns*. In this work, set during the Cold War, Bruce Wayne (who is now 55 years old and retired from his Batman days) is drawn back into the maelstrom that was once his life. The art is beautiful, the writing is pristine, and I couldn't imagine the story being told in any other format. For lack of column space, I'll

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quickly move on to graphic novels that fall into what I term the *popular entertainment* subcategory. To be honest, this is more of a catch-all group for those graphic novels that don't fall decidedly into the "superhero" or "literary" groupings—but it's also today's fastest growing subcategory. In many ways, this group presents a perfect marriage of the comic and the literary traditions of graphic novels. Although you'll find work that hearkens back to traditional comics, when you look closer, you'll often find that the words and messages aren't quite as they first appear. There's generally a real subversive quality to the art and writing that resonates with today's youth. Much of this subcategory is published by the myriad small presses out there (and there are *many*), which essentially amount to fly-by-night operations. As the field continues to grow, however, look for standouts to rise above the crowd. Recent examples (which have subsequently moved on to big publishing houses) include the anthology of artists in *Flight* (edited by Kazu Kibuishi); *Elk's Run* (written by Joshua Hale Fialkov and illustrated by Noel Tuazon); and Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* (which was even made into a movie).

Finally, we come to the cream of the crop (at least in my humble opinion): the literary graphic novels. Perhaps the greatest known graphic novel of all time is Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, in which the author/illustrator recounts his father's struggle to survive the Holocaust as a Polish Jew. A winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Spiegelman's work incorporates stunning symbolism with biting prose. *Maus* truly is a masterpiece, one that can be read on a number of levels. (By the way, *Maus* came out in 1986, with *The Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. I told you it was a banner year.) Another example is Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, the story of a young Iranian girl's life under an Islamic Revolution. When one reads the words, coupled with Satrapi's evocative drawings, it become nearly impossible to imagine her story told in any other way. The same goes for Joe Sacco's *Safe Zone—Goradze*, a graphic novel about war in Eastern Bosnia. Of this graphic novel, *Publishers Weekly* said, "It is difficult to look away and impossible to forget." On the other end of the spectrum is Harvey Pekar's *American*

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*Splendor* work, which seeks to take mundane life and make it worthy of readers' attention. For that, Pekar has been compared to Dreiser, Dostoyevsky, and Lenny Bruce. Alas, there are far too many others to include here, but trust me, the list is growing.

For me, the real thrill in working with graphic novels is the chance to see a new art form coming into its own. We live in a world where media are combining at rates previously unimaginable. I love prose—that's why I first got into publishing. I appreciate the time and effort it takes to sit down with a good novel, and I appreciate the depth of experience that I gain from doing so. I also love the immediacy of the visual arts. In some ways, the combining of art and prose is a natural marriage. This is something that makes sense to young readers of today, and I think it partly explains why graphic novels have taken off in popularity.

Something else is at work, too. There are great artists doing great work in the field. This is the cutting edge of book publishing, as well as a growing field of art where the true masters are just rising to the surface, and I can't wait to see what they do next. As you might have imagined, graphic novels are also a lot of fun.

#### **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Chris Schluep *is an editor at the Random House Publishing Group, where, among other things, he acquires graphic novels. Some of his more recent graphic novel projects include* *Flight by Kazu Kibuishi, et al.* *and* *Ego & Hubris: The Michael Malice Story by Harvey Pekar.*

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