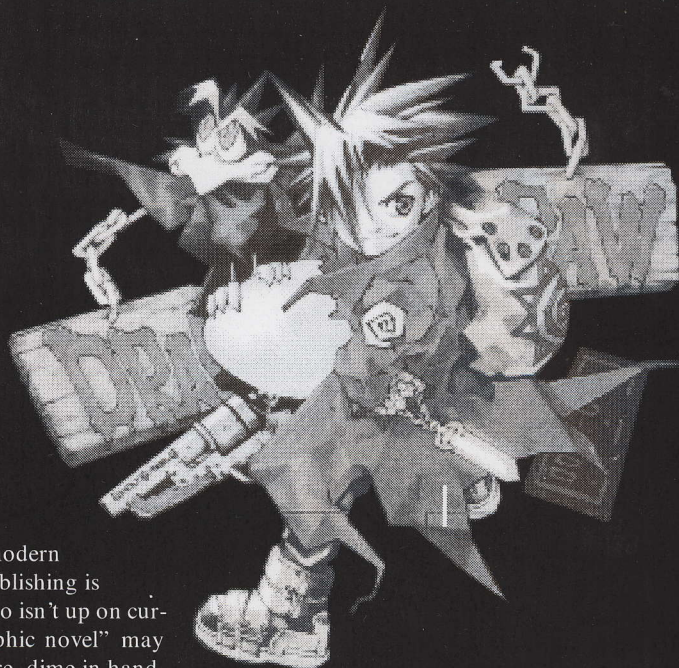


GRAPHIC EXAMPLES

Comics Come of Age



BY MARLENE SATTER



Diversity is the hallmark of modern society, and graphic novel publishing is no exception. To someone who isn't up on current trends, the phrase "graphic novel" may conjure images of going to the candy store, dime in hand, for the latest epics depicting Wonder Woman, the Flash, or the Justice League of America. Or Archie and Veronica. Or even Casper, Baby Huey, or Little Lulu and Sluggo.

Okay, so maybe that's dated. However, while some things stay the same, others change—drastically. What was once a secret indulgence, hidden from parents and teachers, is now a \$100 million market, complete with hard covers, high prices, and (shudder!) respectability. Readers remembering lazy summers in the company of the Jaguar and Green Lantern, or school endeavors to pass off the Classics Illustrated version of *The Black Arrow* as book report material, will find that the world has changed. Now one can find everything from the Tick to—Proust and Buddha?

Yes, even Buddha, in a particularly charming manga version of Siddhartha's coming to the world and to enlightenment. But maybe backing up a step is in order here. Those unfamiliar with the genre will want to know, at least, what manga is—and maybe what graphic novels are, too.

Manga, or Japanese comics, cover almost all subjects and age groups. They are such hot sellers in the West that many dealers say they can't keep them in stock, despite the fact that graphic novels require more display space. Manga are translated and often modified for the American market (in their original form, they're read back-to-front; some publishers, notably Tokyopop and Viz, issue some of their English-language versions back-to-front to avoid potential continuity problems and to preserve the integrity of the original artwork).

Manga is big on "cute," even for serious themes. The cover of *Revolutionary Girl Uten—Volume 1: To Till* (Viz Communications, Inc., 0-56931-713-5) boasts a very cute pink-haired girl with characteristically huge eyes; however, inside the book's covers, she proves to be more than a match in a duel. "If you don't want danger," she says to a male friend, "don't fall for me." And cute or not, manga has become so popular in this hemisphere that *The Rising Stars of Manga* series (Tokyopop, 0-59822-246) offers would-be manga-ka (manga artists) a chance to audition their brands of cute and not-so-cute to the audience at large; competitions offer the prize of publication in one of the *Rising Stars* anthologies.

Graphic novels, which can include manga, are generally defined as book-length comics. Some may remember early Dark Knight graphic novels of the '80s, in which Batman's "tragic hero" persona carried far more angst than in '50s comics. (Batman appears in a new graphic novel this year, termed "Batmanga" by its CNN reviewer due to its authorship and design by Kia Asamiya.) Graphic novels, by the way, are not exclusively American or Japanese. The art form is alive and well in European and Latin American countries as well, and has spawned many movies, like *The Road to Perdition* and *From Hell*. Manga has spawned numerous anime features too, including the popular *Spirited Away*.

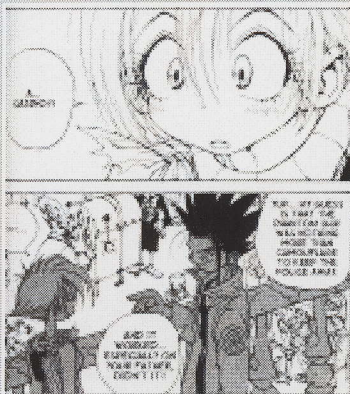


Despite lingering questions over their legitimacy (in the '50s, their pictorial layouts of violence and moral dilemmas had parents, teachers, and Congress aghast), graphic novels have come of age. One major indication of new respectability is the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman; one can hardly find a subject more serious than the Holocaust, or recognition more legitimizing than a Pulitzer.

Releases run the gamut from social responsibility to sheer entertainment. Black-and-white offerings from three different publishers examine very serious societal issues—the turmoil between Israelis and Palestinians (*Portraits of Israelis and Palestinians*, by Seth Tobocman, Soft Skull Press, 1-887128-83-2), the September eleventh tragedy (*9 of 1: A Window to the World*, by Oliver Chin, Frog, Ltd., 1-58394-072-3), and the Middle Eastern conflict (*Johnny Jihad*, by Ryan Inzana, NBM/ComicsLit, 0-56163-353-4). Each of these takes a serious and gifted look at the world's troubles.

Cartoonist Tobocman produced his book as a way to explain to his Zionist parents why he went to Palestine for the summer of 2002 to teach art to children. His point—that one cannot tell a person's heart by his appearance—is made in a series of stark and eloquent sketches accompanied by poignant text.

9 of 1 is remarkably insightful in the post-9/11 world. Its premise is that, in the wake of the tragedy, a high school teacher asks his class to interview people they don't know, so they can learn to see other points of view. The resulting commentary is about community as much as diversity, and

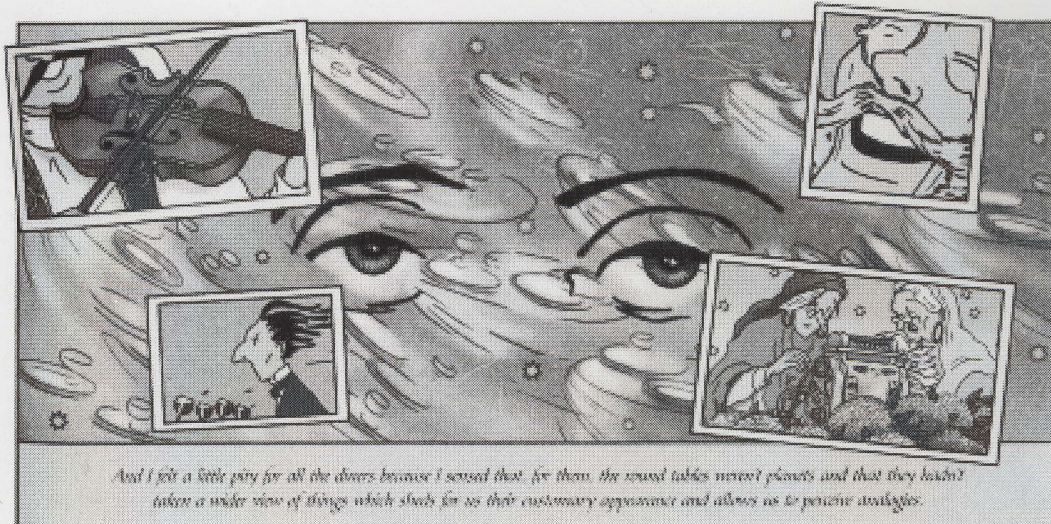


points out that what people have in common far outweighs their differences. The illustrations are open and cleanly drawn with bold lines, evoking the image of an open American society even as it relates tales of misunderstanding and common ground.

Johnny Jihad tells the story of an American-born teenager from Trenton, New Jersey who is transformed from disaffected, rebellious teen into Jihad warrior, first for Osama Bin Laden and then for the CIA. The artwork is dark and shadowed, even sinister, filled with jagged black, ominous in the extreme—excellently suited to its subject matter.

Individual character development is also a popular theme of graphic novels. Take, for instance, *Brooklyn Dreams*, written by J. M. DeMatteis and drawn by Glenn Barr (Paradox Press, 1-4012-0051-6). This compilation of previously published comics into one volume has as its hero another disaffected teen—or, perhaps more accurately, the adult into whom he has grown. The adult Vincent Carl Santini narrates his growing up, beginning with the waif of a dog that for one brief shining





moment gave the child Carl something in common with his explosive Italian father. His mother made him give up the dog, and, says Carl, “the thing that’s stayed with me all these years . . . is this: My father was as devastated as I was.”

Brooklyn Dreams works beautifully as a graphic novel, while it may have been difficult to follow as individual installments, owing to the adult Carl’s habit of digressing as he tells his story. It is, however, a story well worth following, as Carl survives to find enlightenment. The black-and-white artwork is truly extraordinary; Barr shows his gift for different styles to convey different feelings and moods.

Sometimes the transition to book format appears out of balance because the story lines are overshadowed by the brilliance of the art. An example is *Quimby the Mouse*, by F. C. Ware (Fantagraphics, 1-56097-485-0). The hard cover is utterly spectacular, combining cartooning with ornate baroque flourishes and gold trim, and the artwork inside (a mix of color and black and white) is diverse, well executed, and beguiling, but the plots are perhaps not so comfortable in such a grand setting. Another Fantagraphics offering, the softcover collection of *Krazy & Ignatz*, drawn by George Herriman and edited by Bill Blackbeard (1-56097-529-6), serves more as historical document and commentary, providing strips of the cat-and-mouse duo from 1929 and 1930.

The irreverence and outrageousness that readers expect from alternative comics are

alive and well in many publishers’ lines, including, appropriately enough, Alternative Comics, whose anthology *Rosetta* (1-891867-22-9) offers artwork in styles ranging from highly detailed renderings to Simpsons-like characters to the very simplest line drawings. The message content varies wildly, too, covering social issues such as the military-industrial complex (Megan Kelso’s “The Warrior Queen”) and World War II (“The Seven Sweet Spoonfuls of Understanding” by Miriam Katin).

As in the scandalous volumes of the ’50s, graphic representations of sex and violence still abound, and can be found in the sword-and-sorcery *Artesia* series by Mark Smylie (Archaia Studios Press, Artesia, 1-932386-00-9, and *Artesia Afield*, 1-932386-02-5), about a woman warrior who is born a witch but chooses the possibility of death in battle rather than on a witch’s pyre; and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* by Alan Moore, Kevin O’Neill, Ben Dimagmaliw, and Bill Oakley (America’s Best Comics, 1-56389-858-6). These are full-color, full-length tales drawn lush in detail and told in intense adventure, however improbable. The heroes of neither are wholly likeable. Artesia, a king’s concubine with a lust for battle, is ruthless yet often indecisive; the Gentlemen, while they have heroic tendencies, also have such severe character faults as drug addiction, rape, theft, and unbridled violence. They are compelling characters nonetheless, and the intricate detail in these books will keep readers coming back for more.

Smylie has created a whole mythology to go with Artesia’s world; it is complex and rich. His drawing style, too, is suited to the chainmail the soldiers wear, and to the heroine’s wonderful hair—wild and wavy, often caught in tight braids. A self-taught artist, he works with lots of inked lines that give an armored feel to the pages—yet the goddesses who intervene on Artesia’s behalf

