

# Comic Books Versus Graphic Novels

The Differences,  
The Schism  
and The Future

BY RAMON GIL

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# Abstract

Since the debut of Superman in 1938, superhero stories have dominated American comic books. Nevertheless, in the past decade, original graphic novels have emerged as an almost separate medium, offering various genre reading far beyond masks and capes. An era ushered in by Will Eisner with the term graphic novel, which he coined and first used to describe his book "A Contract with God" (Baronet Press, 1978), Followed by Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer-prize-winning "Maus" in 1980 (Pantheon Books) The flood gates have been widening ever since. The difference is not only in content but also in the diversity of the creators, the art styles, the physical formats of the books, and the production, business, and distribution models through which they are made. However, where did this new movement come from? How was influenced by the comics and comics makers of old? Why is there a separation, if any, and what does the future hold for these two camps?

This study will explore the answers to the above questions through research and interviews with some of the key players and experts in the field, including the origin of comics themselves; the different artistic movements that may have led to today's work, and the possible reasons for the divide between comic books and graphic novels. This work will also try to prognosticate on the future relationship for and between both industries.



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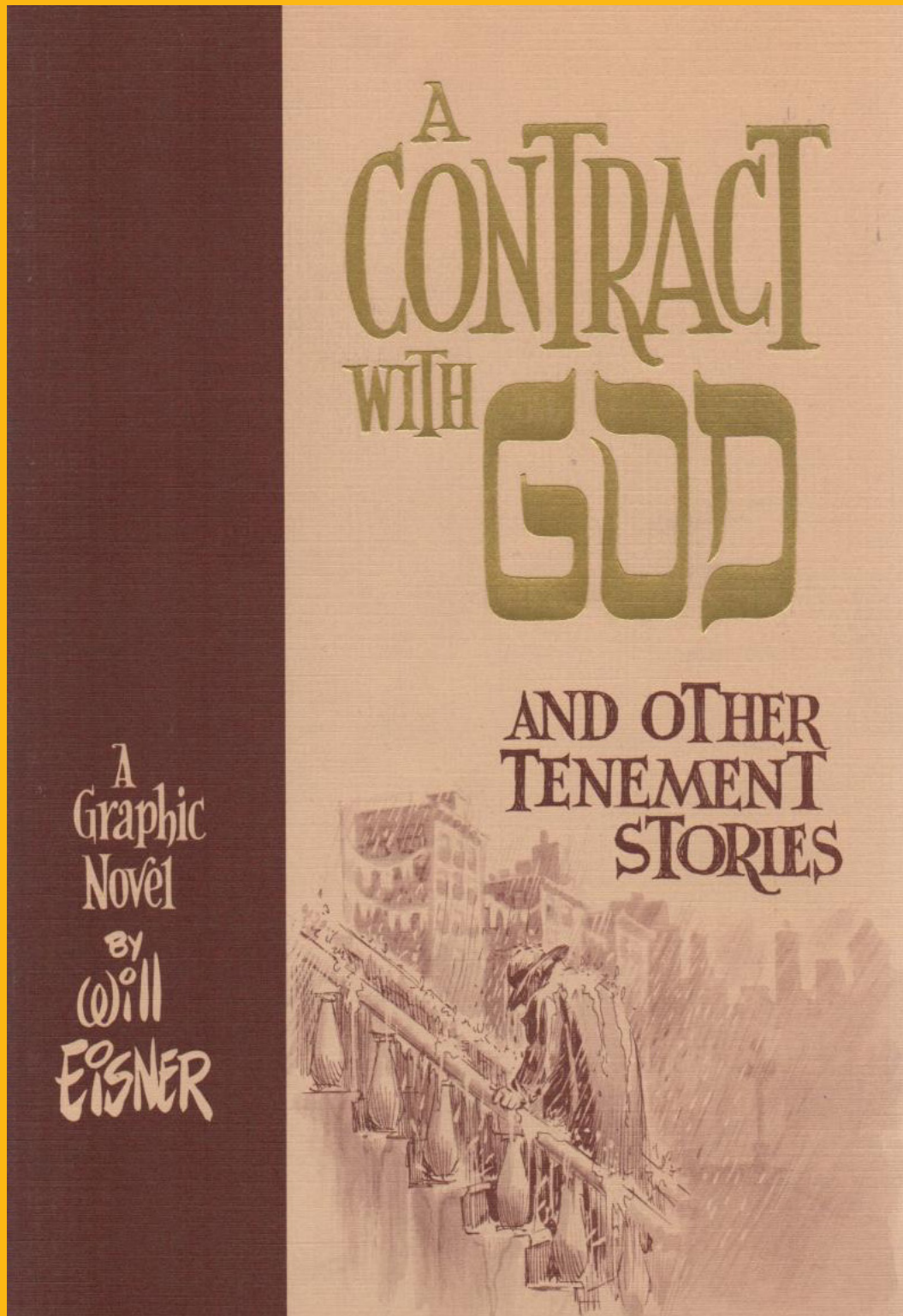
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*FIGURE 1: Will Eisner's "Graphic Novel" who used the fancier sounding term to better entice publishers.*



# Comic Books Versus Graphic Novels

## The Differences, The Schism and The Future

### INTRODUCTION

In 1978, Will Eisner (b.1917), a prominent and highly esteemed cartoonist who was active for over 40 years, coined the term “graphic novel” while trying to sell his comic “*A Contract with God*.” The reaction was mixed from the comic book industry, and for a long time, the difference between comic books and graphic novels could not be pinned down as many practitioners disagreed on the value of comics as an art form. However, in the last twenty years, a new format has gained a popularity that better fits the term. Whereas comic books were episodic 24-page



FIGURE 2: Will Eisner

periodicals, graphic novels tended to be self-contained books, often more than a hundred pages. Comic book genres tended to stick with adventure, science fiction, and superheroes; graphic novels ran the gamut, including memoirs, slice of life, coming of age, and dramas. The audience, too, was different. Comics tended to cater to young males, while graphic novels were popular with everyone else, especially young women. Lastly, comics were usually found in specialty or comic book shops, and graphic novels are increasingly more and more visible in traditional bookstores.<sup>1</sup>

What this paper is describing is not a change in the industry or a seismic shift as much as it is an evolutionary offshoot. The comic book industry pretty much remains unchanged, though its continued existence is often in doubt. The graphic novel, while new, is the child of the much older book publishing industry. Indeed, the business model is the same as that of traditional authors, with the creators owning the work and receiving a royalty for licensing their stories.

As a result of this schism between the two formats, there seems to be an unintended, if not natural, self-segregation between the two communities. It could be because the creators for each are much like their audiences. Alternatively, it could be that there are some us versus them thinking. True, there have been creators crossing back and forth over the last decade, but whether that is a progression or a temporary trend remains to be seen.

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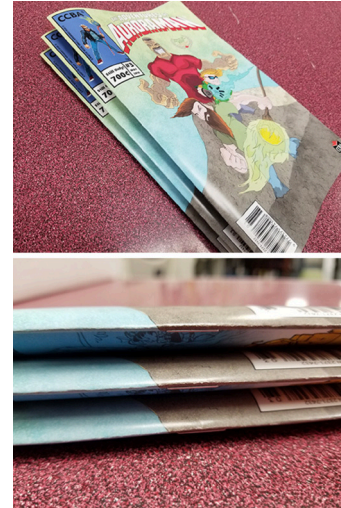
<sup>1</sup> Wiater, Stanley and Stephen R. Bissette, *Comic Book Rebels*, Donald Fine, 1993



## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMIC BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS.

There are several characteristics that separate the two. The most obvious is the publishing format. Comic books tend to be pamphlets held together by staple, whereas graphic novels are either hardbound or paperbacks with spines. The former usually have less than 45 pages or so. Whereas the latter are upwards of 60 pages. Comics books tend to have episodic adventures, while graphic novels have self-contained stories. Comics are usually published by “comic book” companies, while traditional book publishers put out graphic novels.

Mark Siegel (b.1967), an award-winning author and illustrator, describes the differences in perception of the two genres. He understands comics as a “medium” like film or radio, while “graphic novel” and “comics” are categories within that medium.



**FIGURE 3:** Traditionally, comic books are “saddle-stitched” pamphlets bound by staples.

*“If you ask different people, you will get slightly different answers. Some people are super militant about the differences. For me, comics are a medium. So when you say comic, it’s generally the comic form, paneled and has word balloons. A graphic novel has become a publishing category. It doesn’t have to necessarily be a novel, but it includes fiction, non-fiction, and memoirs. It uses the comic form, but it has a spine like a book, not a pamphlet. Typically, when you say comic, that’s usually a pamphlet. That’s how I gauge it in a very practical way.”<sup>2</sup>*

When the term “graphic novel” started getting more popular, it was considered by many notable creators as a pretentious attempt to elevate the medium into an art form. Among these detractors were *Watchmen* writer Alan Moore<sup>3</sup> (b.1953), *Sandman* writer Neil Gaiman (b.1960),<sup>4</sup> both award-winning, internationally recognized comic creators and author Daniel Raeburn<sup>5</sup> who writes extensively on the topic of comics. But it has taken four decades to make that elevation a reality. Pulpy magazine-format publications using glossy covers but cheap interior paper were the mainstays for most of the 20th century. They featured illustrated stories usually light in literary merit. But more recent years have seen

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4 Bender, Hy. *The Sandman Companion*. Vertigo, 1999

5 Raeburn, Daniel. *Chris Ware*, Yale University Press, 2004

the rise of more serious content and sturdier printing formats like paperbacks and hardcover books. The former are also mostly available in comic book shops, while the latter can be found in traditional bookstores. Lastly, comic books targeted young white males while graphic novels, depending on genre, seem to appeal to everyone



**FIGURE 4:** Longer in length, graphic novels usually have spines and are either "perfect bound" and sometimes have hard covers.

else—the result of decades of a more homogenous United States population and readership. The recent surge in graphic novels correlates with increased visibility of ethnic and gender diversity. However, despite the divergence, most practitioners refer simply to themselves as comics creators regardless of which format they use, so maybe the difference is just the length and biding.<sup>6</sup>

Writer Evan Marshall (b.1956) gives a definitive history of the term “graphic novel” as it relates to comics.

*“The term graphic novel is said to have gained popularity in 1978 with the publication of Will Eisner’s A Contract with God. Still, comics and graphic novels have been around for a long time. In the early 1900s, publishers collated comic strips into albums, while others published novels based on comics. Pulp magazines full of adventure plots and high-quality illustrations took flight in the US in the post-World War One period, adding to the country’s love of illustrated stories. Superman, of course, brought the genre into the mainstream in 1938, and comics have been a mainstay ever since.”<sup>7</sup>*

6 Marshall, Evan. “The Rise of Graphic Novels.” *Evan Marshall*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.evanmarshall-agency.com/the-rise-of-graphic-novels>

7 Marshall, Evan. “The Rise of Graphic Novels.” *Evan Marshall*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.evanmarshall-agency.com/the-rise-of-graphic-novels/>



**FIGURE 5:** Petroglyphs (etchings) from Utah's Nine Mile Canyon created by the Fremont and Ute peoples between A.D. 600 and 1300.





# The History of Comics



**FIGURE 6:** Egyptian hieroglyphics used pictograms (pictures as symbols) to communicate stories.

## PRECURSORS

Even before recorded history, there have been many examples of sequential art. Meaning visual depictions of events in a way that tells a story within the context of time. Whether they be cave paintings showing hunters and their prey or Egyptian hieroglyphics depicting a royal coronation, or even hand-drawn illustrations on old medieval texts, all these examples and many more, tell stories.<sup>8</sup>

*“Storytelling using a sequence of pictures has existed throughout history. One medieval European example in textile form is the Bayeux Tapestry. Printed examples emerged in 19th-century Germany and in 18th-century England, where some of the first satirical or humorous sequential narrative drawings were produced. William Hogarth’s 18th-century English cartoons include both narrative sequences, such as A Rake’s Progress, and single panels. The Biblia pauperum (‘Paupers’ Bible’), a tradition of picture Bibles beginning in the later Middle Ages, sometimes depicted Biblical events with words spoken by the figures in the miniatures written on scrolls coming out of their mouths—which makes them to some extent ancestors of the modern cartoon strips.”<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Tundra, 1993

<sup>9</sup> Wong, Nico. “History of Chinese comics: lianhuanhua,” *Nico Wong*, January 20, 2008, <http://nico-wong.over-blog.net/article-15817717.html>

A few publications in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and even earlier, show us early versions of sequential visual storytelling. Even then, the power of integrating words with pictures was recognized as an effective tool to communicate and better retain ideas.

## POLITICAL CARTOONS

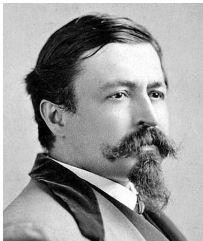
Another step in the evolution of comics was the political cartoon. Often a one-paneled illustration of some idea or message that favored one political view or the other.

*“Developed in England in the latter part of the 18th century, the political cartoon was pioneered by James Gillray, although his and others in the flourishing English industry were sold as individual prints in print shops. Founded in 1841, the British periodical Punch appropriated the term cartoon to refer to its political cartoons, which led to the term’s widespread use.”*<sup>10</sup>

Derived from the French word “Carton,” which was the thick cardboard-like paper used to draw humorous illustrations on, these cartoons quickly became an often-used tool to inform and sway the masses who were not very literate, to begin with. Nevertheless, most cartoons were accompanied by a short caption, and eventually, dialogue.<sup>11</sup>



**FIGURE 7:** Political cartoons used word balloons to help tell a narrative.



**FIGURE 8:** Thomas Nast, often credited as the father of the American cartoon.

Practitioners like the famous editorial cartoonist Thomas Nast (b.1840) showed readers and publishers alike the ease of communicating ideas through words and pictures. A little humor and irony in the cartoons also helped.

*“Thomas Nast (1840-1902) was a political cartoonist considered to be the Father of the American Cartoon... Known as ‘The President Maker,’ Nast’s persuasive, and sometimes scathing cartoons proved crucial in influencing the nation’s vote and affecting the outcomes of six presidential elections between 1864 and 1884.”*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Appelbaum, Stanley and Richard Kelly, *Great Drawings and Illustrations from Punch 1841-1901*, Dover Publications, 1981

<sup>11</sup> Author unknown. “Cartoon: Not Just for Kids,” *Miriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/cartoon-definition-evolution>

<sup>12</sup> Author unknown. “Illustration History,” *The Norman Rockwell Museum*, <https://www.illustrationhistory.org/artists/thomas-nast>

## THE WORD BALLOON

Perhaps the key element that truly separated comics from prose and picture books was the use of word balloons. It is this innovation that bound words and pictures together. This is where the interaction and integration of the two entities happened.

*“One of the earliest antecedents to the modern speech bubble was the “speech scrolls,” wispy lines that connected first-person speech to the mouths of the speakers in Mesoamerican art between 600 and 900 AD.”*<sup>13</sup>

Dialogue was the seed that would give birth to modern comics. Prose books asked the reader to imagine a scene or environment and picture books illustrated the visuals for the reader. However, comics showed people those scenes from moment to moment in a way that people had never seen before—blending both words and pictures so that each was crucial to the other. Time was now an element in the telling of a story in print.<sup>14</sup>



**FIGURE 9:** Early Mesoamerican art showed wisps of symbols coming from the mouths of people, representing speech.

## NEWSPAPER AND COMIC STRIPS

A form of information dissemination adopted from Europe and China, broadsheets, and later newspapers, was the means by which most people received their local news and news of the country and the world. Nevertheless, it was also a business, and the more people read a particular newspaper, the better for that publisher.

*“America and the comic strip were made for each other... All the main ingredients were there, developing and evolving over centuries in many societies and cultures, waiting for the right combination of time, place, and cast.”*<sup>15</sup>

When publishers realized the power of humorous illustrations to sell newspapers, the comic strip was born. Why sell only to the highly educated when one can sell the masses too by way of cartoons? By the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most major newspapers featured a page of strips many referred to as “the funny papers.”<sup>16</sup> Publishers William Randolph Hearst (b.1863) and Joseph Pulitzer

<sup>13</sup> Hull, Kerry Michael. “Verbal Art and Performance in Ch’orti’ and Maya Hieroglyphic Writing.” 2003. Texas U, PhD

<sup>14</sup> Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. Basic Books, 2005

<sup>15</sup> Robinson, Jerry. *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art*, Dark Horse Book, 1994

<sup>16</sup> Reitberger, Reinhold, and Wolfgang Fuchs. *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium*, Studio Vista, 1971



FIGURE 10: Newspapers often relied greatly on the "funny paper" section to increase sales.







**FIGURE 11:**  
William R. Hearst



**FIGURE 12:**  
Joseph Pulitzer

(b.1847) were notorious for their competitiveness when it came to readership numbers.

*"When Hearst and Pulitzer openly fought each other for cartoons and cartoonists, Outcault included, the term "Yellow journalism" was born. Sensationalism in order to sell newspapers."*<sup>17</sup>

Eventually, publishers realized that they could make even more money by reprinting the cartoon strips into stand-alone publications. They already had the presses, paper, and content, after all. Moreover, these new "comic books" sold out quickly. Comics were so popular with the masses; it was said to be almost like "printing money." A nice new source of income for newspaper owners. Soon, the practice of creating and filling the demand for original content for these "comic books" became a cottage industry in itself. Studios sprang up all over New York City, eager to supply cartoon strips using the fruits of low-paid writers and artists. Thus the practice of work-for-hire was born. A situation wherein a writer and/or artist produced stories and relinquished all ownership of it in exchange for monetary compensation.<sup>18</sup>



**FIGURE 13:** Considered to be the first true American comic book, Famous Funnies was a color compilation of syndicated cartoon strips.

17 Robinson, Jerry. *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art*, Dark Horse Books, 1994

18 Wiater, Stanley and Stephen R. Bissette, *Comic Book Rebels*, Donald Fine, 1993

*"Here's the situation. We've got an industry that nobody knows how many people are employed in, with a high percentage of freelancers willing to cut each other's throats, that has trained its workers to struggle for 10 years before being able to make even a modest salary. Are some workforces past the point they can unionize? Because I think I found a candidate."*<sup>19</sup>



**FIGURE 14:** A typical comic studio or "bullpen", circa 1930s

Since the 1930s, most comics were produced by creators on "work-for-hire" contracts. Meaning they got paid for whatever work they did for the company and owned none of it. The company did. At the time, artists and writers had little choice. It was the 1930s depression, and they needed the steady money. Unfortunately, if a character or property became popular enough to generate more income through merchandising and other media (radio, books, tv, movies), the original creator got no share in the bonanza. Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel sold Superman to National Periodical (DC) for \$130.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Johnston, Rich "After Chelsea Cain and Chuck Wendig – Will Comic Creators Unionize?" *Bleeding Cool*, October 18, 2018, <https://bleedingcool.com/comics/chelsea-cain-chuck-wendig-comic-creators-unionize/>

<sup>20</sup> Kirkman, Robert. "The Trials of Superman." *The Secret History of Comics* (video), AMC, 2017

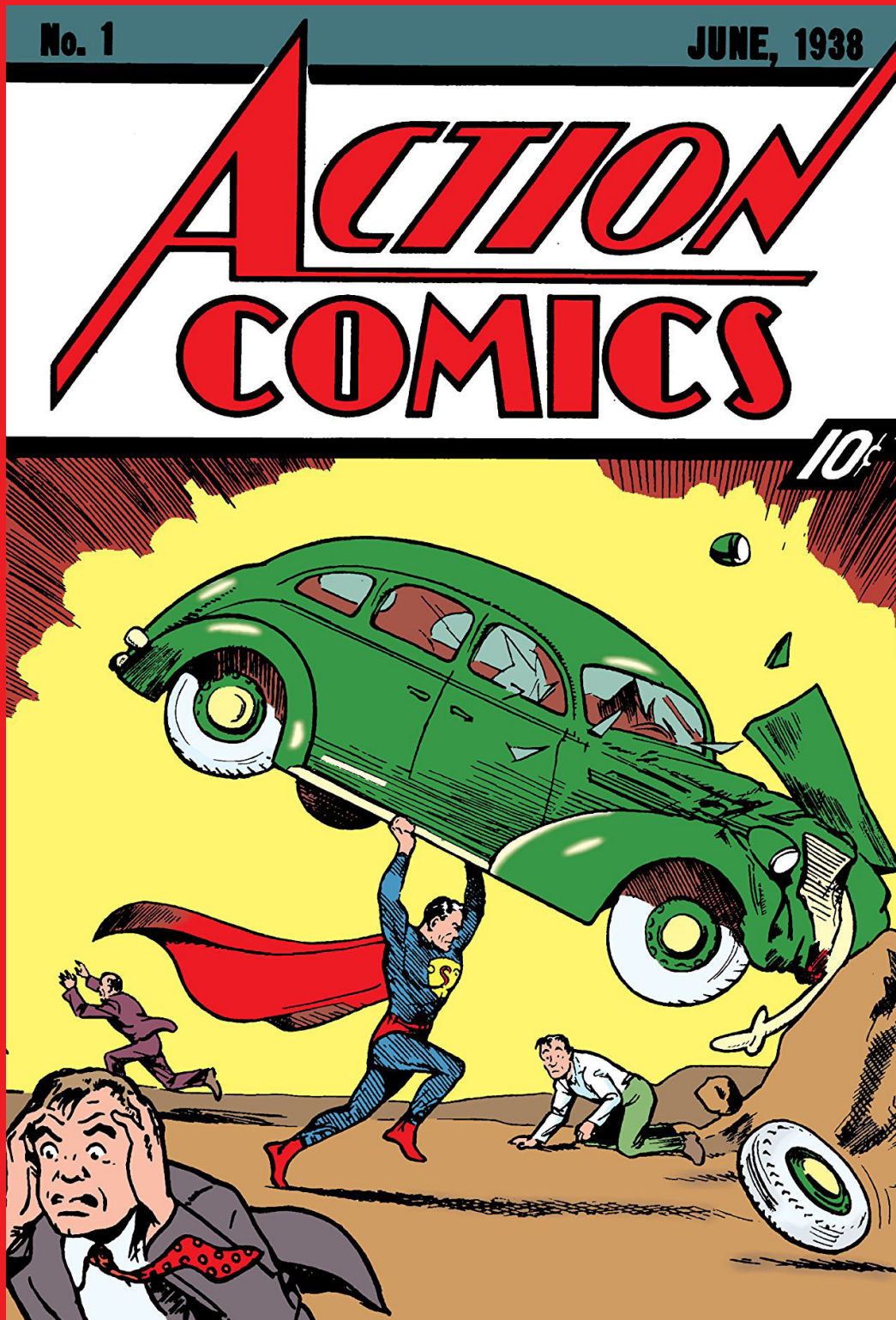




**FIGURE 15-23:** Throughout the thirties, comics evolved from compilations of syndicated cartoon strips to original content often with humor or adventure stories.



FIGURE 24: Action Comics featured the debut of Superman, ushering in the age of superheroes.



## The Birth of a Medium



**FIGURE 25:** Comic books were a cheap, portable and disposable form of entertainment for soldiers.

### COMICS GO TO WAR

Just in time for World War II, National Periodical Publications published *Superman* (1938). The creation of two young men from Cleveland, writer Jerry Siegel (b.1914) and artist Joe Shuster (b.1914). Perhaps it was because of the escapist nature of the book or the eugenics message of a superman; the character was so popular that other superheroes soon followed. Batman, Captain Marvel, Captain America, and others were flying off the newsstand shelves along with traditionally humorous titles like *Richie Rich*, *Baby Huey*, *Dot*, *Casper the friendly ghost*.<sup>21</sup>

While funny animals entertained legions of kids, superheroes entertained other kinds of legions. Comic books were a cheap and easily disposable form of entertainment for soldiers overseas.<sup>22</sup>

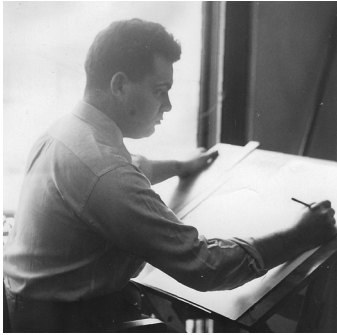


**FIGURE 26:** Superman writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster sold their all rights to their creation for \$130.

<sup>21</sup> Benton, Mike. *The Illustrated History: Superhero Comics*, Taylor Publishing, 1991

<sup>22</sup> Milzarski, Eric. "This is why WWII troops are to thank for the rise of comics," *We Are the Mighty*, November 17, 2018, <https://www.wearethemighty.com/troops-comic-books-wwii>.





**FIGURE 27:** Comic legend Jack Kirby was prolific for decades.

## MASKS AND TIGHTS

With the popularity of Superman soaring, Superheroes became the order of the day throughout the first half of the 40s, artists like Jack Kirby (b.1917), considered to be the greatest comic artist of all time, producing adventure stories starring Captain America, The Human Torch and the Sub-mariner. Many of whom were fighting Nazi even before America entered the war. For many of these young artist (often Jewish), it was their contribution to the war effort. But this heyday of costumed adventures would be short-lived.<sup>23</sup>

## READERSHIP SHRINKS

The end of World War II saw a decline in sales. As the soldiers came home to build homes, families and generally restart their lives, the demand for cheap portable entertainment diminished.

*"The Magazine publishing industry is beginning to look back to the 'good old days' the gold plated years of 1942 through 1945 when any printed matter between covers found an eager audience and seemingly limitless market... The comics magazines are being rapidly demobilized along with soldiers, sailors and war plant workers who were their most ardent adherents."*<sup>24</sup>

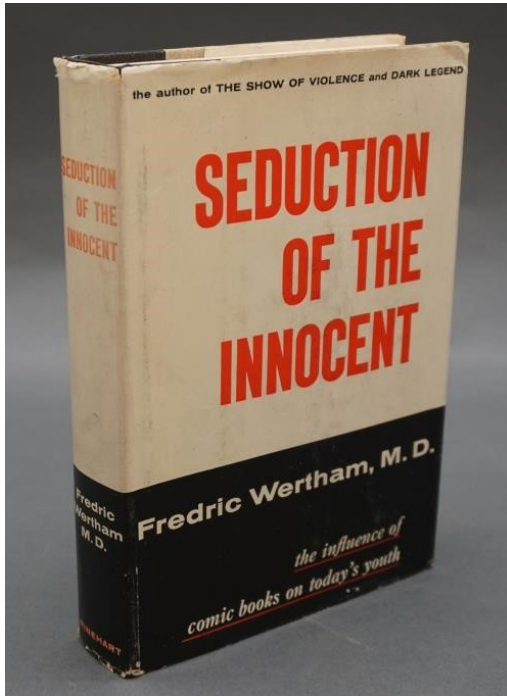


**FIGURE 28-30:** With post-war sales dwindling, publishers turned up the steam.

<sup>23</sup> Benton, Mike. *The Illustrated History: Superhero Comics*, Taylor Publishing, 1991

<sup>24</sup> Author unknown, Advertising, *Wall Street Journal*, June 3, 1946

As a result, publishers tried to boost sales by making the comics even more alluring to younger audiences. Thus crime and seduction became the norm in comics, not unlike the pulp novels that had been around for decades before.<sup>25</sup>



**FIGURE 31:** The book that launched a senate inquiry into the effects of comic books on children.

## BACKLASH

Unfortunately, this created a backlash in the form of Fredric Wertham (b.1895) and his book *Seduction of the Innocent*. Juvenile delinquency was a growing problem, and comics were an easy scapegoat. In a panic, the industry created the Comics Code Authority. A form of self-censorship that despite its existence, or because of it, did not help sales at all.<sup>26</sup>



**FIGURE 32:** Frederic Wertham

*"Prior to Seduction of the Innocent, comic book sales were at an all-time high, with an estimate 70-150 million comic books being sold per month. After the book came out, the industry was fighting for survival."*<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Chute, Hillary, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*, Harper, 2017

<sup>26</sup> Kraft, David Anthony. "Jerry Perles," *Comics Interview* #43, 1987

<sup>27</sup> Elmore, Tom, "Nerd History (w/ Tom Elmore): Seduction of the Innocent -The Book That Almost Destroyed the Comic Book Industry," *Nerd Nation Magazine*, August 4, 2017, <https://nerdnationmagazine.com/2017/08/04/nerd-history-w-tom-elmore-seduction-of-the-innocent-the-book-that-almost-destroyed-the-comic-book-industry/>



FIGURE 33: Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* helped bring in a new age of superhero comics.



## Growing Pains



FIGURE 34-36: Considered the Silver Age of Comics, the sixties took comics to new heights.

### MARVEL MAKES WAVES



FIGURE 37  
Marvel's Stan Lee

In the sixties, superheroes were coming back into style. DC Comics' *Justice League* was rising in sales, prompting rival Timely Publishing (Eventually Marvel) to launch their own super-hero team book. In a swan song effort to make his mark in the comics industry, Stan Lee (b.1922) created the Fantastic Four, and unlike the superheroes that came before them, they fought and bickered amongst themselves. This made the book an instant hit to the disillusioned teens of the sixties. Lee followed this up with Spider-man, who couldn't pay his bills. Then the Hulk, who wasn't a hero but a hated monster. For the first time, there were characters who were flawed and had real-life problems. A new generation of comics readers couldn't get enough.<sup>28</sup>

### DC GOES DARK

In 1970, a young artist by the name of Neal Adams (b.1941) took it even further. Taking up art chores on DC's *Batman*, he brought the "dark" back into the Dark Knight. Along with Dennis O'Neil (b.1939), Adams injected race and drug use into the plotlines of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*. Moreover, DC introduced its first African American superhero, Black Lightning, drawn by

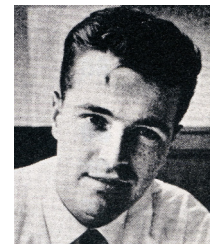


FIGURE 38:  
Neal Adams

<sup>28</sup> Daniels, Les. *Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics: MARVEL*, Henry N Abrams, 1993



DC's first African American artist, Trevor Von Eeden (b.1959), himself just a teenager.<sup>29</sup>

Stories got grittier, more sophisticated, and more mature. New creators, eager to make their marks, were breathing new life into the work. Berni Wrightson (b.1948), Elliot S. Maggin (b.1950), Gene Colan (b.1926), Steve Gerber (b.1947), and many more.

## THE UNDERGROUND



FIGURE 39: Zap, a pioneer in "underground comix."



FIGURE 40: Robert R. Crumb

Starting in the 1960s, a new breed of creators were producing work outside mainstream comic book companies. Robert Crumb (b.1943) was producing highly psychedelic stories with his book *Zap Comix*

and Dennis Kitchen (b.1946) began publishing *Mad Magazine*, while not underground, was highly influenced by these alternative storytellers in subverting traditional "funny books." Will Eisner, who had years later abandoned comics, was shocked by these new artists who revered him. Nevertheless, eventually seeing the value in them, Eisner was later inspired to create his opus - "A Contract with God."<sup>30</sup>

## THE BRONZE AGE

During the 1980s, the industry was booming. Sales were higher than they had been in previous decades, and there seemed to be a new independent comic publisher every month.<sup>31</sup>

*"When he flew over Metropolis back in 1939, he was merely a mild-mannered reporter with amazing superpowers. Now Clark Kent is back, but as the Yuppie of Steel. When he is not chasing stories as a star journalist for the Daily Planet,*

29 Centeno, Giovanna. "A Very Brief History of Comic Books," *BookRiot*, October 9, 2020, <https://bookriot.com/a-very-brief-history-of-comic-books>

30 Wiater, Stanley and Stephen R. Bissette, *Comic Book Rebels*, Donald Fine, 1993

31 Kirkman, Robert. "Image Comics: Declaration of Independents." *The Secret History of Comics* (video), AMC, 2017



he writes novels, attends evening parties, and shares his inner feelings - Can we talk - with his friend and colleague Lois Lane. His super body has been redrawn along Rambo lines to reflect the iron-pumping fad of the 80s.”<sup>32</sup>

This resurgence could be partially be attributed to a new generation of creators who were taking comics into new directions. Creators like Frank Miller (b.1957), Alan Moore, and Neil Gaiman. Another reason was the perception that comics could become an “investment.” The auction



**FIGURE 41:**  
Frank Miller



**FIGURE 42:**  
Alan Moore



**FIGURE 43:**  
Neil Gaiman

prices of golden age comics like the first issue of Superman lead many fans to believe that comic collections would be worth a fortune someday.<sup>33</sup>

## NEWSSTANDS VS. SPECIALTY SHOPS

With this surge in popularity, comic publishers saw a new opportunity to make more money. Newsstand sales were always a risk since unsold inventory could be returned and had to be refunded - a standard arrangement for books and magazines. However, with the growing number of comic book specialty shops,



**FIGURE 44:** Under standard distribution deals of the time, comic publishers were obligated to buy back unsold comics from newsstands making the allure of comic shops (the direct market) even more enticing.

<sup>32</sup> Henry, Gordon, “Bang! Pow! Zap! HEROES ARE BACK!” *Time Magazine*, October 6, 1986

<sup>33</sup> Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. Basic Books, 2005

**FIGURE 45:** Access to newsstands, markets and convenience stores allowed young children to easily buy and read comics. It was a recruitment and distribution model that the industry took for granted.







**FIGURE 46:** Comic book specialty shops were not as numerous as other retailers. When the industry started distributing exclusively to these points of purchase, new readership began to decline.

publishers could sell their books directly to these small retailers outright with a no-return policy. Hence the term “direct market.”<sup>34</sup>

*“In the comic book direct market, orders from the distributor are usually non-returnable, which puts huge pressure on retailers to not over-order titles that might not be salable (prices for recent back issues of most comics are near zero), but not under-order on titles that might end up being sleeper hits. Even small miscalculations can be the difference between a good month and catastrophe.”<sup>35</sup>*

The problem was that speculating on comics was a bubble. When collectors realized that their 20 copies of *The Death of Superman* were never going to be considered rare or valuable, the bubble burst, and the industry collapsed. In 1994, half the people working in the industry lost their jobs. Many independent publishers simply disappeared.<sup>36</sup>



**FIGURE 47:** Collectors would buy “event comics” by the dozens which made them far from rare.

34 Magnett, Chase. “Why You Can’t Sell 1,000,000 Comics in the Direct Market” *Comic Book*, June 14, 2019, <https://comicbook.com/comics/news/comics-direct-market-sales-analysis/>

35 Salkowitz, Rob. “As Comics’ Direct Market Struggles, A Surprising Publisher Rises” *Forbes*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2019/01/18/as-comics-direct-market-struggles-a-surprising-publisher-rises/#3dfc0c7233a6>.

36 Magnett, Chase. “Why You Can’t Sell 1,000,000 Comics in the Direct Market” *Comic Book*, June 14, 2019, <https://comicbook.com/comics/news/comics-direct-market-sales-analysis/>



**FIGURE 48:** Before the 80s, most comic readers were children, half of them girls.

## WHERE HAVE ALL THE CHILDREN GONE?

With most retailers no longer carrying comics, the industry's ability to recruit young new readers had become nonexistent. Eight-year-old kids had no easy access to comic book shops the way they did newsstands, supermarkets, and convenience stores, making the crash of 1994 even more devastating. The second half of the 90s saw the shuttering of hundreds of comic book shops.<sup>37</sup>

## THE SHRINKING (AND GROWING) AUDIENCE

When the mainstream comics industry abandoned distribution through newsstands and convenience stores for direct market specialty shops, it lost its ability to recruit new young readers. Unlike Seven-elevens and local supermarkets, specialty comic book shops are not usually easily accessible by young children. Because of this, superhero comics have been stuck with the same readers that they had in 1991. These same readers have been getting older, forcing publishers to make their content more mature and often darker. They are also getting fewer. Not just from the loss of interest but also from old age and death. It has been 30 years.<sup>38</sup>



**FIGURE 49:** As a comic fan aged, their taste matured and often eventually lost interest altogether.

37 McMillian, Graeme. "How the 90s shook the comic book industry." *Hollywood Reporter*. November 13, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/why-90s-was-volatile-decade-comic-book-history-1160883>

38 Allen, Todd. "Who killed the newsstand comics market?" *The Beat*, January 4, 2012, <https://www.comics-beat.com/who-killed-the-newsstand-comics-market/>





**FIGURE 50:** By the end of the 90s, most fans and readers of comics were older and mostly men.

*“When you put all that together, it paints a stark picture. Superheroes represent a declining share of the fastest-growing segments and channels of the comics market. They still dominate in single-issue sales in comic shops, but both single issues as a format and comic shops as a channel represent a much smaller and shrinking share of the overall market than has been the case in years’ past.”*<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, since the nineties, mainstream comics have been trying to hang on to the same aging readership it was left with when the industry collapsed early in the decade. As a result, storylines have become more adult, darker, catering to the increasing age of the loyal fans who were still left.<sup>40</sup>

*“Comic stores are getting hammered from two directions. First, sales of the graphic novel categories that comic stores are best at are shrinking across channels. Neither Marvel nor DC has been putting out comics that are capturing the public imagination for the past couple of years. Collecting them into graphic novels isn’t making the content any more appealing. As a result, sales of superhero graphic novels are plummeting.”*<sup>41</sup>

However, there is a silver lining, while sales of traditional superhero comics are declining, non-superhero graphic novels are starting to gain popularity.

39 Salkowitz, Rob. “As Comics’ Direct Market Struggles, A Surprising Publisher Rises” *Forbes*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2019/01/18/as-comics-direct-market-struggles-a-surprising-publisher-rises/#3dfc0c7233a6>.

40 MacDonald, Heidi. “Report says 25% of comics readers are over 65,” *The Beat*, September 30, 2010, <https://www.comicsbeat.com/report-says-25-of-comics-readers-are-over-65/>.

41 Salkowitz, Rob. “As Comics’ Direct Market Struggles, A Surprising Publisher Rises” *Forbes*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2019/01/18/as-comics-direct-market-struggles-a-surprising-publisher-rises/#3dfc0c7233a6>.

**FIGURE 51:** "The Dark Knight Returns" by Frank Miller helped usher in increasingly mature and hyper-violent content which appealed more to contemporary creators and comic fans alike.





*"While the traditional comic shop market has experienced sales declines over the past 12 months, there has been remarkable growth in overall sales through traditional book retailers, including chains like Barnes & Noble, independent bookstores, online retailers, and mass-market retailers like Target who have given increased space to the category, particularly in its kids' section. Over the past 12 months, unit sales of comics and graphic novels have increased 6 percent, continuing a pattern of more than five years of robust annual growth."*<sup>42</sup>

## SALES GIMMICKS

Another possible contributor to the decline of direct market comics is the promotional gimmicks used by publishers. Holograms, cross-over events, and variant covers have become the tools of the trade for boosting sales, albeit artificially and temporarily. There is now also the practice of writing six-issue story arcs, which are great for combining into trade paperbacks but not so much if the reader wants a self-contained story or if you have to hunt down the next issue to follow a storyline.<sup>43</sup>



**FIGURE 52:** Films like 2000's "X-men" helped bring superhero popularity back to Hollywood.

## THE MOVIES

With the turn of the century, movie technology had advanced enough making it easier for filmmakers to capture the special effects needed to tell superheroes stories. While many movies are based on comic books and graphic novels, the big box office receipts usually belong to big-budget superhero flicks. Ironically, while superheroes in film and TV are more popular than ever, superhero comics are not. Going to a theatre is the norm for almost everyone. Going into a comic book shop, not so much.<sup>44</sup>

*"Disney and AT&T are probably not losing too much sleep over this. The worldwide box office of a single, average-grossing superhero blockbuster feature is as large as the entire comics publishing industry, and the profits on mega-hits like Avengers: Endgame or Joker can buy and sell the entire book and periodical market several times over. Genre comic creators will see a bigger paycheck from an unexercised media option than they will from a best-selling comic book, and*

<sup>42</sup> Gottlieb, Mark. "The Rise of Graphic Novels: Insights and Tips for Aspiring Graphic Novelists." *TCK*, July 6, 2019, <https://www.tckpublishing.com/graphic-novels-insights-tips/>

<sup>43</sup> Koolander, Hoju. "10 awesome comic book gimmicks of the 90s," *The Retro Network*, 2019, <https://theretronetwork.com/10-awesome-comic-book-gimmicks-of-the-90s/>

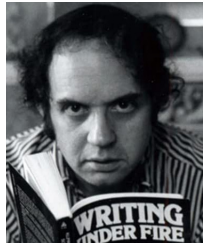
<sup>44</sup> Harper, Kyle. "What the Rising Popularity of Graphic Novels Can Tell Us About Mixed Media Content." *Skyword*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.skyword.com/contentstandard/what-the-rising-popularity-of-graphic-novels-can-tell-us-about-mixed-media-content/>



most artists on popular titles can earn more on commissions and sales of originals than they'll get in royalties from reprints and trade collections.”<sup>45</sup>



## ALTERNATIVE COMICS



**FIGURES 53 & 54:** Harvey Pekar was famous for his autobiographical "American Splendor."

Meanwhile, the counter-culture movement known as "underground comics" that started in the sixties was now more popular than ever. Along with others, writer Harvey Pekar (b.1939) depicted life warts and all with his self-published autobiographical series *American Splendor*. Often humorous and sometimes risqué. It was from this environment that the next step in comics' evolution would emerge.<sup>46</sup>

"Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a graphic memoir about his relationship with his Holocaust-survivor father published in full in 1991, was a critical hit, and in 1992 Spiegelman was awarded the Pulitzer prize."<sup>47</sup>

After Eisner's *A Contract with God*, there wasn't another viable graphic novel again until Art Spiegelman's (b.1943) *Maus*. While this book won a Pulitzer Prize, the first-ever for a comic, it would be another decade before graphic novelists would start making their marks. But there were many who were working on it.<sup>48</sup>



**FIGURE 55:** Inspired by underground cartoonists before him, Art Spiegelman was about to break barriers.

45 Salkowitz, Rob. "Surprising New Data Shows Comic Readers Are Leaving Superheroes Behind," *Forbes*, October 8, 2019, [https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2019/10/08/surprising-new-data-shows-comic-readers-are-leaving-superheroes-behind/?fbclid=IwAR3ZElyXj8apMwG3\\_Cnr\\_YJS\\_7x-D76d7ThHZSXH-c5zn7cIWfxV2AzgkFg#103b0e6b4d68](https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2019/10/08/surprising-new-data-shows-comic-readers-are-leaving-superheroes-behind/?fbclid=IwAR3ZElyXj8apMwG3_Cnr_YJS_7x-D76d7ThHZSXH-c5zn7cIWfxV2AzgkFg#103b0e6b4d68).

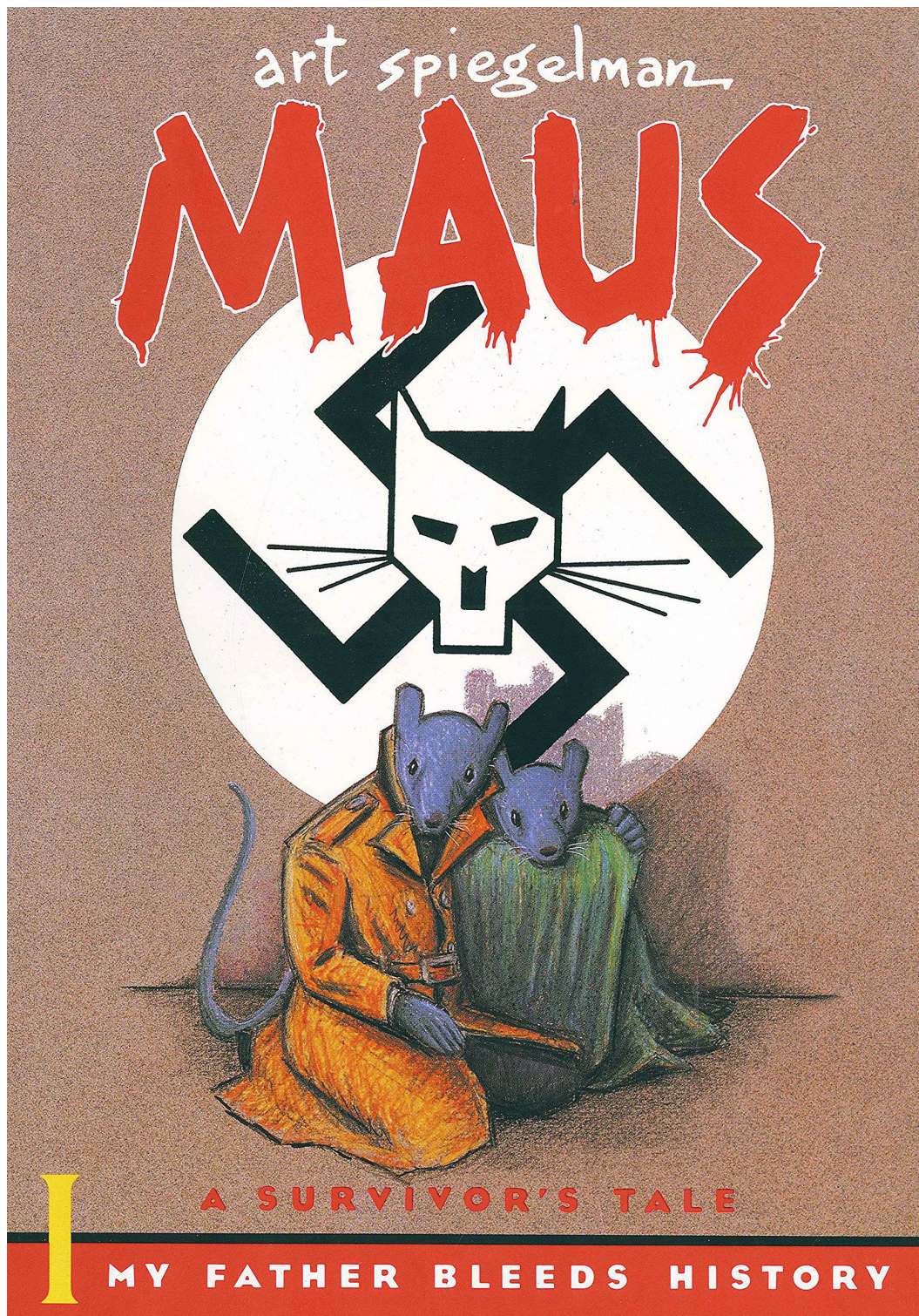
46 Estren, Mark James. *A History of Underground Comics*. Ronin Publishing, 1974

47 Barnicoat, Becky. "The graphic novel's spectacular rise: from kids' comics to the Costa prize" *The Guardian*, November 23, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/23/graphic-novel-spectacular-rise-costa-prize>

48 Gravett, Paul. *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know*, Harper, 2005



**FIGURE 56:** Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *MAUS* brought new found respect to comics and graphic novels, but not increased sales for the industry as a whole.





*"The success of Maus was something of a false dawn," said comics historian Paul Gravett. "The comics industry thought mainstream publishers were finally going to wake up to comic books, but it didn't happen. Publishers didn't know how to market them. Instead, there was a gradual creep."*<sup>49</sup>



**FIGURE 57:**  
Stan Sakai



**FIGURE 58:**  
Jeff Smith



**FIGURE 59:**  
Wendy & Richard Pini

## YOUNG GUNS

Throughout the 90s, a few creators were defying tradition by publishing their creator-owned comics. Stan Sakai's (b.1943) *Usagi Yojimbo*, Jeff Smith's (b.1960) *Bone*, and Wendy and Richard Pini's (b.1951)

*Elfquest* were great examples. Image Comics, formed by a group of popular and rebellious creators who had defected from Marvel, began publishing books while letting creators retain ownership. Furthermore, there was Kevin Eastman (b.1962) and Peter Laird's (b.1954) *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. What started out as a self-published comic book sold one copy at a time is now a multi-million-dollar franchise that has spawned movies, cartoons, and countless toys. The comic book version of the American Dream for many young creators. The fact that these creators continue publishing today is a testament and proof that "creator-owned" comics were the future and that work-for-hire was not the only way to a career in comics.<sup>50</sup>

*"Far too many young creatives are fan-boys or fangirls just happy to get work to get on the treadmill and feel lucky not to fall off. But everyone falls off. It's only a matter of time. This career path rarely ends well."*<sup>51</sup>

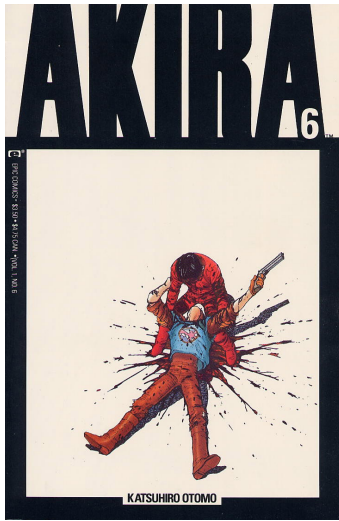


**FIGURE 60:** A common rite of passage for many aspiring comic creators was the portfolio review.

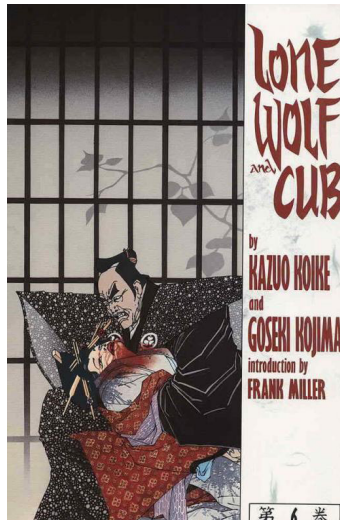
49 Barnicoat, Becky. "The graphic novel's spectacular rise: from kids' comics to the Costa prize," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/23/graphic-novel-spectacular-rise-costa-prize>

50 Wiater, Stanley and Stephen R. Bissette, *Comic Book Rebels*, Donald Fine, 1993

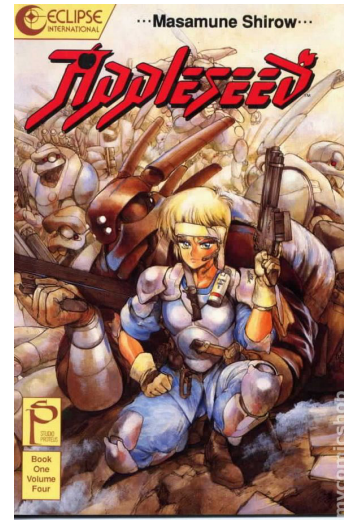
51 De Blieck Jr., Augie. "Seriously, Don't Be a Comic Book Artist. Just Don't." *Pipeline*, October 18, 2018, [https://www.pipelinecomics.com/seriously-dont-be-a-comic-book-artist-just-dont/?fbclid=IwAR3DYZg5l3eer-dAfEHT1cQl6dVXztXxQDo-xCnZLQNfb8oKmyk6\\_w1ecFQ](https://www.pipelinecomics.com/seriously-dont-be-a-comic-book-artist-just-dont/?fbclid=IwAR3DYZg5l3eer-dAfEHT1cQl6dVXztXxQDo-xCnZLQNfb8oKmyk6_w1ecFQ)



**FIGURE 61:**  
Akira by Katsuhiro Otomo



**FIGURE 62:**  
Lone Wolf & Cub by Kazuko Koike



**FIGURE 63:**  
Appleseed by Masamune Shirow

## THE JAPANESE INVASION

Another burgeoning movement was the popularity of “Manga” in the eighties. Comics imported from Japan, like *Akira*, *Lone Wolf & Cub* and *Appleseed*, translated and republished here in the US. The range of genres was much more expansive than American comics and appealed to both boys and girls.<sup>52</sup>

*“That’s the future of comics: young girls and boys who have no interest (at least not yet) in superhero stories featuring their parents’ heroes. Variant covers and gimmicky events catering to legacy readers are just a band-aid on a gaping wound affecting an industry that can’t figure out how to save itself from the same destructive publishing patterns that have dragged the biz down for decades.”*<sup>53</sup>

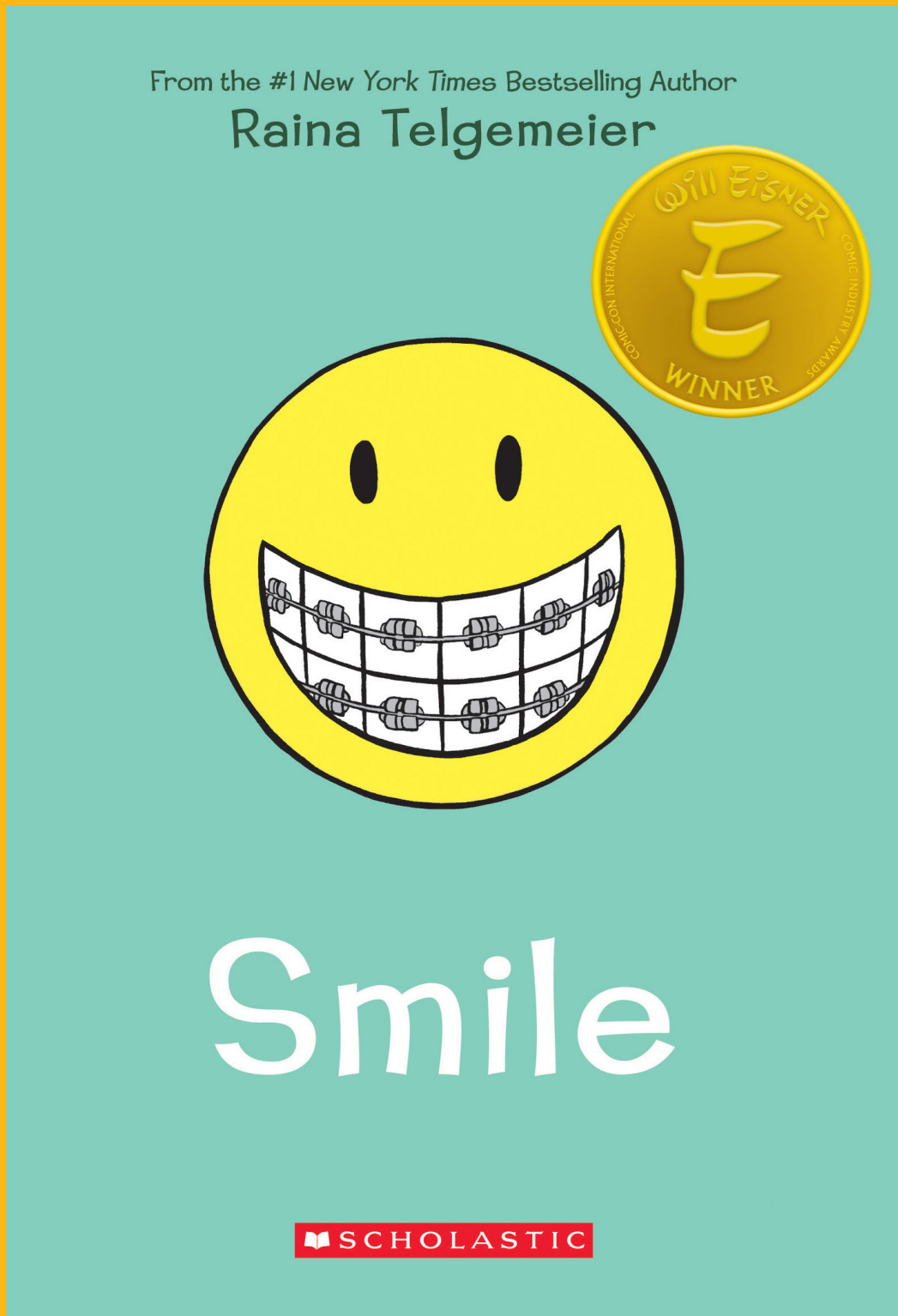
There were thousands of kids who read Manga but not American comics due to its cross-over appeal. The stories dealt with relationships, coming of age, romance as well as adventure, and science fiction. This generation of much more diverse readers would give rise to what comes next.

<sup>52</sup> Centeno, Giovanna. “A Very Brief History of Comic Books,” *BookRiot*, October 9, 2020, <https://bookriot.com/a-very-brief-history-of-comic-books/>

<sup>53</sup> Avila, Mike. “Behind The Panel: I Have Seen The Future Of Comics, And It Is Raina Telgemeier” *Syfy*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/behind-the-panel-i-have-seen-the-future-of-comics-and-it-is-raina-telgemeier>.



**FIGURE 64:** The record breaking sales and popularity of Raina Telgemeier's "Smile" showed traditional book publishers there was money to be made in original graphic novels for young readers.



# Comics Today

## AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

At the turn of the century, a few books came on the scene that showed traditional book publishers that there was significant money to be made in comics. Raina Telgemeier's (b.1977) *Smile*, Dav Pilkey's (b.1966) *Captain Underpants*, and Marjane Satrapi's (b.1969) award-winning *Persepolis* were very profitable books for authors and publishers alike. Since then, the format has seen a boom fueled by young adults and the grade school market. While mainstream comic book sales remain on life support, the children's graphic novel market is growing by leaps and bounds.<sup>54</sup>

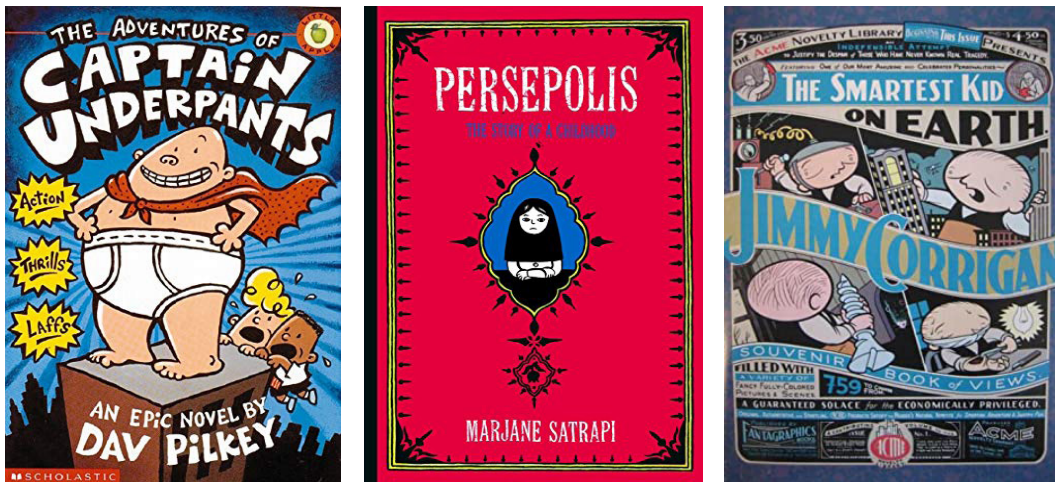


FIGURE 65-67: Graphic novels for kids and young adults were soon proliferating on book shelves.

"Although there has long been academic opposition to comics—and in earlier years the tacky material sometimes warranted some suspicions—sheer excellence eventually broke the ice. Acclaimed books like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1987) have spurred academic interest in comics, which opened many doors for the medium. The 2000s brought a slew of new classics as traditional publishers put out much-lauded, award-winning titles like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), Raina Telgemeier's *Smile* (2010), and Jimmy Corrigan: *The Smartest Kid on Earth* by Chris Ware (2000)."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Chute, Hillary, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*, Harper, 2017

<sup>55</sup> MacDonald, Heidi. "How Graphic Novels Became the Hottest Section in the Library," *Publishers Weekly*, May 3, 2013, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/57093-how-graphic-novels-became-the-hottest-section-in-the-library.html>

What also helps the viability of the graphic novel is its long shelf life. Whereas serialized comics were printed with limited numbers and were only available for a short period of time, making it difficult to follow a multi-issue story arc, a graphic novel was usually a self-contained story in one volume.

*“What’s interesting about the other book models is that it’s like the Hollywood blockbuster: it’s either huge or it dies on the spot. Graphic novels aren’t like that. If they stick, they can keep selling and selling and selling. They have this really long tail. But it’s not a quick money scheme; it’s more of a long-term investment.”*<sup>56</sup>



**FIGURE 68:** Webcomics on the internet made content distribution easier and less costly but not any more profitable.

## THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Along with the new millennia came new technologies that would forever change the comics world. The internet gave way to free and easy online distribution. Now anyone could get their comic seen by millions of people. Webcomics were immediately embraced by a new generation of cartoonists, if not by more traditional ones. Many a series that built its audience online have since been published traditionally. However, while the proliferation of free online comics has grown, it has been a struggle to make it a living. Online ads were the income generators for early creators, but that seems to have waned. Today, a few webcomic platform companies are still trying to figure out how to turn a profit.<sup>57</sup>

56 Terrill, Marshall. “The Rise of Graphic Novels: Award-winning author and illustrator Mark Siegel to lead discussion on format, facilitate storytelling event with artists.” *Humanities@ASU*, February 14, 2017, <https://humanities.asu.edu/rise-graphic-novels>

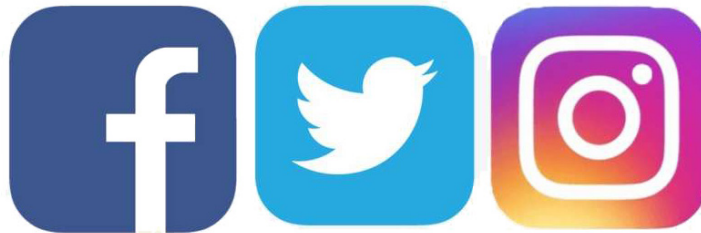
57 Greffe, Michael. “Making money with webcomics,” *The Art Institutes*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.artinstitutes.edu/about/blog/aipod--making-money-with-webcomics>.



**FIGURE 69:** Digital printers allowed small runs, bringing down the cost of producing comics immensely.

Another technology that came later was “print-on-demand.” Whereas traditionally, one had to print thousands of copies using off-set printers, the maturing of digital printing made it possible to print as little as one copy of a book. Hence the term “print-on-demand.” One can literally order exactly the amount of books one wants or needs. No more and no less. Albeit at a higher cost.<sup>58</sup>

The third member of this triad of technology that has propelled the art form forward is electronic media. Now, promoting one’s work to the masses can not only be virtually free, it is also easier. Moreover, the tools are as varied as they are plenty. Online ads, search engine marketing, blogs, podcasts, email campaigns, not to mention the old-fashioned “Press Release” though now electronic. Additionally, social media has various options like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, and TikTok. There seems to be a new platform every six months. Not to mention the vast number of websites dedicated to comics-related news are always hungry for content.<sup>59</sup>



**FIGURE 70-72:** Social media became an easy way to promote one’s comic work. No big marketing budgets or staff required.

<sup>58</sup> Mohin, Andrea. “As comic book industry grows, smaller publishers learn to adapt,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/08/business/lion-forge-oni-merger.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Lombardi, Marc. “Social media and marketing in comics,” *Pop Culture Uncovered*, April 18, 2017, <https://popcultureuncovered.com/2017/04/18/social-media-and-marketing-in-comics-part-1/>





**FIGURE 73-81:** Some of today's comic book stars (Top left to bottom right) Alison Bechdel, Sebastian Kadlecik, Jamar Nicholas, Khary Randolph, Marjane Satrapi, Mariko Tamaki, Raina Telgemeier, Chris Ware and Gene Leun Yang.



**FIGURE 82:** Multicultural cosplayers at the Fashion Institute of Technology's Diversity Comic Con.

### WITH EQUALITY COMES DIVERSITY

With this new accessibility came new diversity. No longer were a few homogeneous gatekeepers deciding what the public sees and reads. Now anyone can create, post, publish, and promote their comic regardless of race, gender, socio-economic background, or skin tone. With traditional barriers to entry gone, creators of all backgrounds are now able to make comics resulting in a much more extensive and more diverse pool of talent that the industry scouts from. For the first time in history, comics have become truly colorful! <sup>60</sup>

*"Indie comics broke new ground in the 2010s in large part because they better represented their readers, with a focus on themes of diversity and inclusion, which in turn fostered more diversity and inclusion in the industry."* <sup>61</sup>

Comics and graphic novels of all cultural backgrounds can now be found. Stories featuring Latino casts, Asian characters, Middle Eastern superheroes, and, of course, Black protagonists are now the norm. The latter example having its own term.

*"Afrofuturism will see a bumper crop of comics and graphic novels, including the first offerings of a new line devoted to Black speculative fiction and reissues of Afrofuturist titles from comic-book houses like DC and Dark Horse."* <sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Bacon, Tom. "Diversity in Comics: It's time to change the conversation." *Geeks*, 2017, <https://vocal.media/geeks/diversity-in-comics-it-s-time-to-change-the-conversation>

<sup>61</sup> Horne, Karma. "The 12 most influential indie comics of the decade." *Syfy*, December 15, 2019, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/the-12-most-influential-indie-comics-of-the-decade>

<sup>62</sup> Robert Ito, "Beyond 'Black Panther': Afrofuturism Is Booming in Comics." *New York Times*, February 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/07/books/afrofuturism-comics-graphic-novels.html?action=click&-module=At%20Home&pgtype=Homepage>



## RECOGNITION, AT LAST

The Dwayne McDuffie (b.1962) Awards, named after the founder of Milestone Comics, the first Black-owned mainstream comic book publisher, have honored works like *Leon: Protector of the Playground* by Jamar Nicholas (b.1963), *Quince* by Sebastian Kadlecik (b.1979) and *The Shadow Hero* by Gene Luen Yang (b. 1973).<sup>63</sup>

This new diversity has resonated with this new diaspora of readers. Books that would have been hard-pressed to find their audiences 20 years ago are now able to find the previously marginalized people they represent.<sup>64</sup>

*"Slowly, steadily, the comic book had cast off its superhero costume, climbed off the kids' shelf, and nestled in among the heavyweights."*<sup>65</sup>



**FIGURE 83:** Milestone founder and publisher, Dwayne McDuffie

## THE RETURN OF THE CHILDREN

For the first time in decades, children are buying comics again. Or at least graphic novels like *Captain Underpants* and *The Babysitter Club*. Like the girls' and



**FIGURE 84:** Graphic novels for young readers is the fastest growing segment in publishing today.

young adults' market, this is a whole new area of growth. Moreover, what's great about the children's market is that after they grow up and possibly stop reading graphic novels, a whole new generation comes in right after them. Publishers don't even have to necessarily produce new content for them. Thus the shelf-life of a self-contained graphic novel is tenfold that of a serialized episodic comic book.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Dwayne McDuffie Award Winners, *Good Reads*, 2019, <https://www.goodreads.com/award/show/33674-dwayne-mcduffie-award>

<sup>64</sup> Dern, Zachary. "Diversity in Comics: What's been done and what needs to come." *Huffington Post*, June 7, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/diversity-in-comics-whats-been-done-and-what-needs\\_b\\_5933b75fe4b0649fff211a07](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/diversity-in-comics-whats-been-done-and-what-needs_b_5933b75fe4b0649fff211a07)

<sup>65</sup> Barnicoat, Becky. "The graphic novel's spectacular rise: from kids' comics to the Costa prize" *The Guardian*, November 23, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/23/graphic-novel-spectacular-rise-costa-prize>

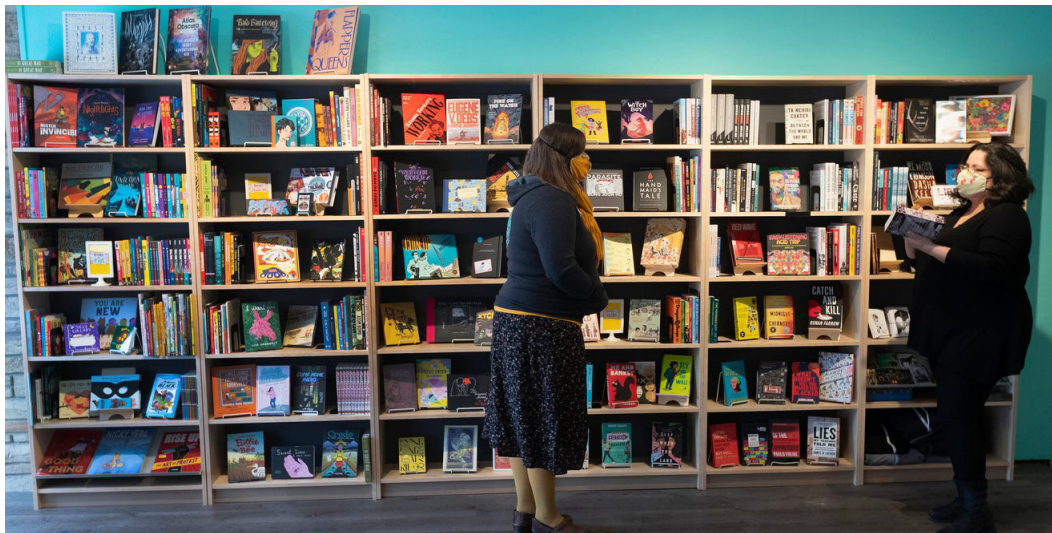
<sup>66</sup> Burnett, Matia. "What are the kids reading? The booming business of children's graphic novels and comics," *Publishers Weekly*, November 8, 2016, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/71982-what-the-kids-are-reading-the-booming-business-of-children-s-graphic-novels-and-comics.html>



*“There is a whole new audience emerging for comics and graphic novels; these readers are younger, they are more diverse, and they are getting their books from a much wider range of channels than we typically think of for comics,” said Kristen McLean, industry analyst for NPD Books. “This is also a very interesting category when it comes to cross-over and media tie-ins from across entertainment, including film, toys, and gaming. We have seen this category grow for a few years now, and we have no reason to think it’s just a flash in the pan.”*<sup>67</sup>

Like the new generation of creators, the new generation of readers is much more diverse. And today’s books reflect that. A Dwayne McDuffie award, given out to comics that champion diversity, can spell instant success for a creator.<sup>68</sup>

*“While comic shops tend to focus on longtime fans - often older readers who grew up on and collect superhero comics – mass-market bookstores sell to everyone, including younger readers and those outside of traditional comics fandom. Consequently, the books that are selling in bookstores are, generally, not superhero-oriented. According to Bookscan data shared at the conference, kid-oriented comics and graphic novels account for a whopping 41% of sell-through at bookstores; Manga is 28%. Superhero content is less than 10%, down 9.6% year-over-year.”*<sup>69</sup>



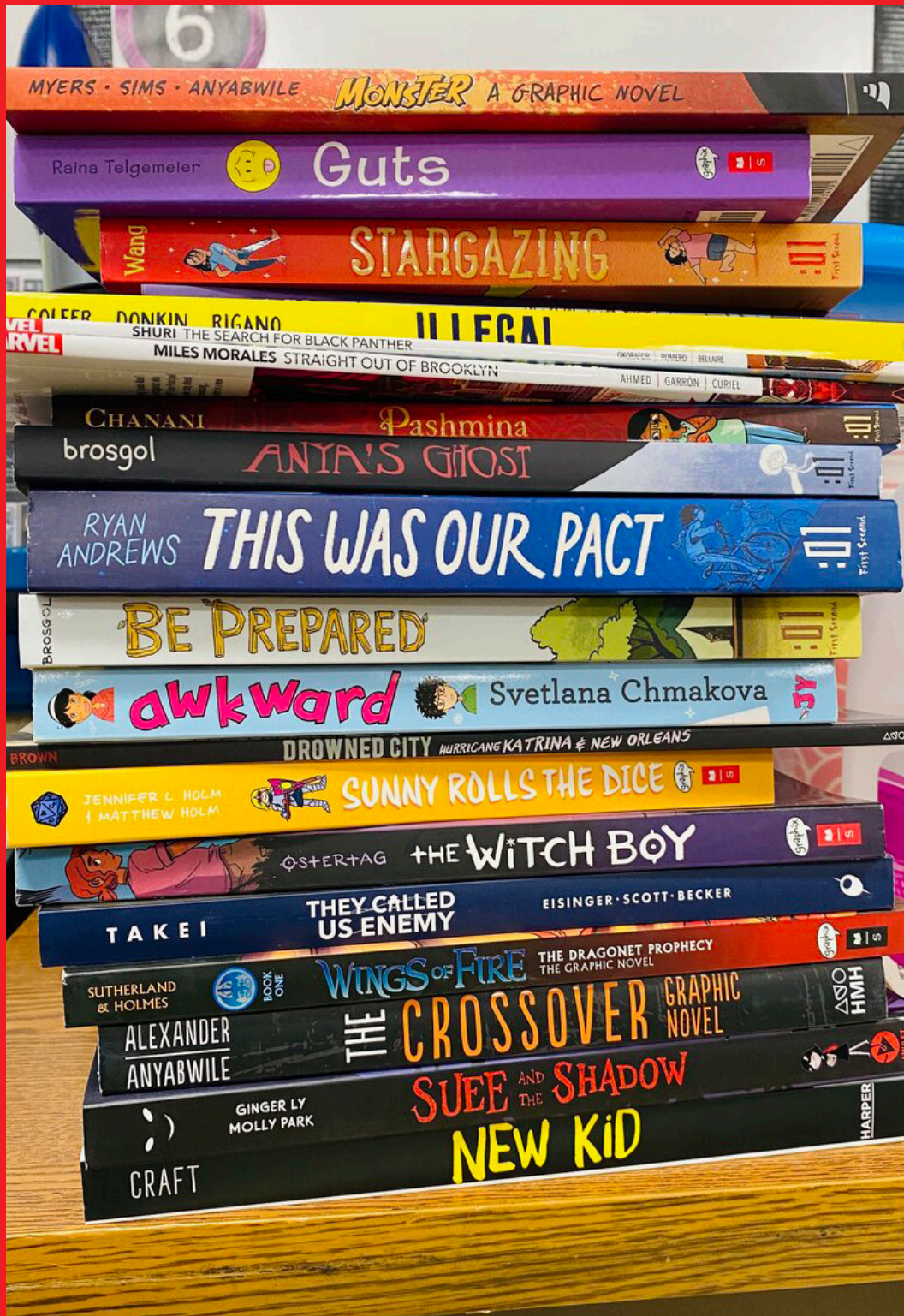
**FIGURE 85:** Many bookstores have expanded their comics and graphic novel sections.

67 Riley, David. “Comics and Graphic Novels One of Highest Growth Categories in Publishing, Reports NPD.” NPD, October 6, 2017, <https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/2017/comics-and-graphic-novels-one-of-highest-growth-categories-in-publishing-reports-npd/>

68 McMillan, Graham, “Diverse Comic Book Nominees Unveiled for Dwayne McDuffie Awards,” *Hollywood Reporter*, February 10, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/diverse-comic-book-nominees-unveiled-863727>

69 Salkowitz, Rob. “Surprising New Data Shows Comic Readers Are Leaving Superheroes Behind,” *Forbes*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2019/10/08/surprising-new-data-shows-comic-readers-are-leaving-superheroes-behind/>

FIGURE 86: The range of choicees for graphic novels is wider than ever and still growing!





While the nineties saw the maturing of comic content to cater to aging readers, the new millennium has seen the return of children's comics—the original core audience of this medium. *Smile, Captain Underpants*, and countless others have spawned a second comics industry of self-contained books, which we now call graphic novels. Published by traditional book publishers and distributed through traditional bookstores and school book fairs.<sup>70</sup>

## LIBRARIES



**FIGURE 87:** Libraries are also contributing to the boom in comics readership.

Another factor that has been fueling the success of graphic novels is the advocacy of librarians. While most of these gatekeepers of books disapproved of comics as respectable literature for decades, a new generation of library professionals grew up reading comics.

*“A huge breakthrough for both librarians and publishers came in 2002 during a particularly memorable American Library Association panel at which Gaiman, Spiegelman, Jeff Smith, and Colleen*

*Doran introduced the medium to a rapt audience of librarians. The support in the library community was a huge revelation, recalls Pawuk, who helped organize the panel. ‘It was just a unique day. Neil told me that he was surprised to find librarians who were willing to learn and take it from there and run it with it.’”*<sup>71</sup>

In fact, many libraries have realized that graphic novels are the most often checked-out material on their shelves. Recognizing the potential of comics as a teaching tool has not gone unnoticed by folks in education either.<sup>72</sup>

*“We’re moving into an age where there’s a visual literacy that can go as deep and as substantive as prose literacy. People are being raised to think both visually and verbally. The graphic novel does those two things, and the dance of those two produces an experience.”*<sup>73</sup>

ic-readers-are-leaving-superheroes-behind/?fbclid=IwAR3ZElyXj8apMwG3\_Cnr\_YJS\_7x-D76d7ThHZSXH-c5ztn7clWfxV2AzgkFg#103b0e6b4d68.

70 Middaugh, Dallas. “What we know about 2018 Graphic Novel Sales,” *Publishers Weekly*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/79818-what-we-know-about-2018-graphic-novel-sales.html>

71 MacDonald, Heidi. “How Graphic Novels Became the Hottest Section in the Library,” *Publishers Weekly*, May 3, 2013, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/57093-how-graphic-novels-became-the-hottest-section-in-the-library.html>

72 Gagliano, Gina, and Alison Wilgus. “Libraries with Robin Brenner,” *Graphic Novel TK*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/graphic-novel-tk/e/60942075>

73 Terrill, Marshall. “The Rise of Graphic Novels: Award-winning author and illustrator Mark Siegel to lead discussion on format, facilitate storytelling event with artists.” *Humanities@ASU*, February 14, 2017, <https://humanities.asu.edu/rise-graphic-novels>



## BOOK PUBLISHERS JUMP IN

The few publishers who took a chance on graphic novels early on have been joined by others in the industry. In the last few years, every member of the top five has formed graphic novel divisions in their companies to capitalize on this growing medium. A promising sign for creators indeed.<sup>74</sup>

*“Graphic fiction is at a high point commercially and critically. ‘The Man Booker recognition for Sabrina will do something for the intellectual credibility of the graphic novel,’ says Fordham. The nomination marked perhaps the most significant moment for the genre since Art Spiegelman’s Maus won a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992.”*<sup>75</sup>



Raina Telgemeier’s *Smile* ushered in a new age of graphic novels that were not only creator-owned but followed the more traditional book deal that authors have been getting for more than a century. They own it, they license the publisher to print and distribute it, and they get an advance and royalties on profits. While not as steady as work-for-hire projects, they did get to own it. What’s more, cre-

**FIGURE 88:** Unlike most superhero comics, graphic novel creators like Raina Telgemeier retain all rights to their work.

ators now had more control over what stories to write and how they wrote them. No longer were they limited to superhero, sci-fi, and adventure books targeted towards young men; they could now write romance, drama, memoirs, and children’s books. And that’s not all; the gates are wide open. Many genres popular with prose books have yet to be explored by graphic novels. It is a new frontier.<sup>76</sup>

*“Guts was the bestselling book in America that week. Not bestselling graphic novel, bestselling BOOK.”*<sup>77</sup>

74 Gagliano, Gina and Alison Wilgus. “Publishers with Annie Koyama,” *Graphic Novel TK*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/graphic-novel-tk/e/54246689>

75 Chilton, Martin. “The rise of graphic novels, from Sabrina to To Kill a Mockingbird” *The Independent*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/sabrina-graphic-novels-booker-prize-to-kill-a-mocking-bird-a8604136.html>

76 Centeno, Giovanna. “A Very Brief History of Comic Books,” *BookRiot*, October 9, 2020, <https://bookriot.com/a-very-brief-history-of-comic-books/>

77 Avila, Mike. “Behind The Panel: I Have Seen The Future Of Comics, And It Is Raina Telgemeier” *Syfy*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/behind-the-panel-i-have-seen-the-future-of-comics-and-it-is-raina-telgemeier>.

The creators of *Smile*, *Persepolis*, and Mangas like *Naruto* or *Full Metal Alchemist*, are once again speaking to a demographic this industry hasn't seen in huge numbers since the fifties. Namely girls. Not only have girls always been more avid readers, but they also are now discovering graphic novels. Whereas Marvel and DC catered mostly to boys with power fantasies, these new books appeal to everyone, but especially girls. A seemingly whole new market for this medium.<sup>78</sup>

*"Women represent a growing cross-section of buyers, purchasing more than one out of every three comics and graphic novels sold over the past 12 months in the mainstream market, 37 percent overall. Buyers in the 13-29 age group account for 57 percent of purchasing of comics and graphic novels overall, with 21 percent being women and 36 percent being men."*<sup>79</sup>

### THE JOURNALISTS

The fact that Spiegelman's *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize forced the news media to take another look at this "disposable" medium. Many news outlets now include comics when doing reviews. In fact, *The New York Times* created a separate bestsellers list for graphic novels. The industry magazine *Publishers Weekly* created a new section devoted to comics and graphic novels. Not to mention the proliferation of journalistic websites devoted to comics and pop culture has boomed.<sup>80</sup>



**FIGURE 89-91:** Ever since *MAUS*, the comics industry has been featured more in the news.

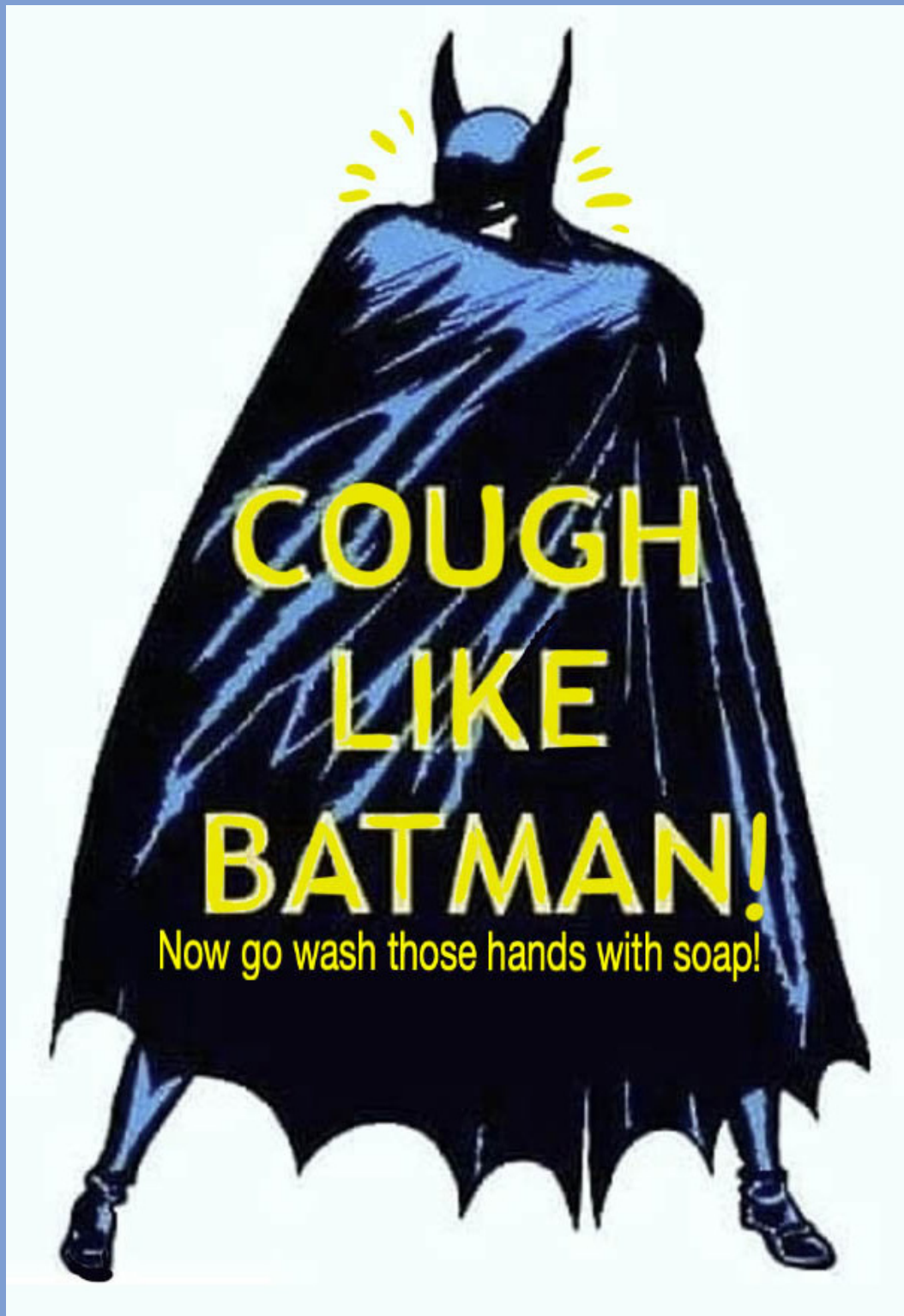
So now that we can see the difference between the two industries, we will try to predict whether or not these two movements of the same art form have a future together or will they stay apart with perhaps one form fading from existence.

<sup>78</sup> Middaugh, Dallas. "What we know about 2018 Graphic Novel Sales," *Publishers Weekly*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/79818-what-we-know-about-2018-graphic-novel-sales.html>

<sup>79</sup> Riley, David. "Comics and Graphic Novels One of Highest Growth Categories in Publishing, Reports NPD." *NPD*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/2017/comics-and-graphic-novels-one-of-highest-growth-categories-in-publishing-reports-npd/>

<sup>80</sup> Gagliano, Gina and Alison Wilgus. "Media Outlets with Petra Mayer," *Graphic Novel TK*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/graphic-novel-tk/e/65535465>

*FIGURE 92:* The COVID pandemic has profoundly affected the comic and graphic novel industry.





## State of the Art



**FIGURE 93:** With most retail stores closed during the pandemic, the industry took a big hit.

It's 2021, and the COVID pandemic has brought to light many of the strengths and shortcomings of the comic book industry:

- The fall of mainstream comics and the rise of original graphic novels as a business and artistic movement.
- The small but growing amount of cross-pollination of creators between the two movements.
- The changes in the demographics of readers
- The possible paths that can help mainstream comics and, possibly, bring the two communities closer together.

### **FALL OF THE FLOPPIES**

The industries are in flux. Mainstream or periodical comics, known colloquially as “floppies,” are experiencing a shrinking market and near-stagnant sales, whereas the graphic novel industry is booming. However, in both arenas, the children’s market seems to be growing the fastest.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Riley, David. “Comics and Graphic Novels One of Highest Growth Categories in Publishing, Reports NPD.” NPD, October 6, 2017, <https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/2017/comics-and-graphic-novels-one-of-highest-growth-categories-in-publishing-reports-npd/>

Another factor affecting this divergence is access.

*“One reason the trade book industry is still thriving despite the pandemic closing down so many physical book outlets, is that there are established online places to buy books (yes, mostly Amazon). But the floppy industry relies pretty heavily on the “direct market” which we all know is a shrinking retail footprint and very niche. (AC) So obviously the comics industry will have to find a way to pivot in the next few years.”<sup>82</sup>*

It doesn't help that the price of a typical (periodical) comic book cannot compete with other forms of entertainment.

*“The value proposition for a 32-page comic (which is often only 20-24 pages of story and art, plus ads and editorial pages), priced at \$3.99 or \$4.99, just isn't there in a world where everyone carries the entirety of Disney's film and TV output on their phones for \$6.99/month.”<sup>83</sup>*

Despite these disadvantages, many believe the mainstream comic book is here to stay. It might not look the same ten years from now, but it will still be here.



*“Contrary to popular opinion, I see the periodical sticking around in some capacity. Nostalgia is always in and out of vogue, and the collectors' market will always be lucrative because the hardcore superfan has money.”<sup>84</sup>*

Comic readers are not only fans but are often collectors as well. Not

**FIGURE 94:** Despite lockdown, collectors are pretty devoted to their favorite comic book titles.

unlike vinyl record aficionados, comic collection fills the nostalgic need of many grown readers. Though whether or not these aging fans are replenishing from one generation to the next remains to be seen.

<sup>82</sup> A. Colvin, Email interview, November 30, 2020

<sup>83</sup> C. Ryall, Email interview, November 30, 2020

<sup>84</sup> S. Bond, Email interview, December 2, 2020

*“Comic book readers are certainly more likely to also be collectors. There’s an aftermarket for graphic novels, but it’s fairly small — whereas the comic book back issue market is worth at least nine figures annually. Comic books are the magazines that people keep, and some of them (though by no means all!) do legitimately increase in value and hold that value over time.”<sup>85</sup>*

Moreover, these collectors are often pretty passionate about their hobby.

*“Well, there’s an addiction to the weekly pick up and completion for floppy readers. I’ve worked in comic book stores and in every store the “hold box” is quite an important part of the business plan. It’s a thrill to have the weekly fix met. For retailers, it’s satisfying to fulfill this need, but the audience must be shrinking. The graphic novel industry meanwhile, seems to be somewhat connected to libraries and literary review journals.”<sup>86</sup>*



**FIGURE 95:** Most comic book shops have “hold boxes” for their regular customers.

While the profits in mainstream comics are a mere shadow of what they used to be in earlier years. There are still profits.



**FIGURE 96:** With shrinking sales, comics may be less worthwhile for larger publishers.

*“So it’s not that comics aren’t profitable is that they’re not profitable enough for certain large entities. When you start scaling it down, if you’re talking about a comic at the end of the year generating \$100,000, you know a hundred, hundred fifty thousand dollars in profits, I don’t know. I mean ask you, would you work for \$150,000 to do something you love? I mean if you’re a corporation you wouldn’t waste your time on that, right? But the reality is that not all production is going to be coming at the corporate level.”<sup>87</sup>*

<sup>85</sup> J. Jackson Miller, Email interview, November 4, 2020

<sup>86</sup> T. Hart, Email interview, November 1, 2020

<sup>87</sup> S. Carpenter, Personal interview, December 1, 2020



## CREATORS CROSSING OVER

As older creators fade from the spotlight, younger generations of writers and artists, perhaps used to the “gig” economy, more and more seem to be embracing both categories given the chance. There are economic, artistic, and marketing advantages to doing both. It’s a slow trickle for now, but the numbers are growing.

*“OGN publishing is a different kind of business, only really open to publishers who can provide a pay advance to keep a creator going drawing a 120-page book for half a year; the number of those opportunities is limited. So you don’t really see the same creators doing both.”<sup>88</sup>*



**FIGURE 97:** Increasingly, creators from both sides of the aisle have been going back and forth.

Another reason for the resilience of comic books is that it offers creators more immediate rewards both creatively and financially. A graphic novel can easily take two years to produce and see print. In contrast, a 24-page comic book can be re-released in a few months.

*“New creators will no doubt still do print periodicals—the format is much less of a costly barrier to entry than having to produce a book that is*

*100+ pages—but publishers are gonna continue to move more and more to complete graphic novels in print. The serialized nature of comics won’t go away, but the pricey comics that offer a 5-minute read printed on shitty paper is just bound to continue to lose traction.”<sup>89</sup>*

Another incentive is marketing and money. Serialized comics can promote a compiled trade paperback down the road and provide some income as the author completes the full-length graphic novel.

*“The Direct Market publishers do need the cash flow from monthlies. It’s there — why not take it, especially when the monthly comic book also serves to advertise the later collection, creating buzz for the release?”<sup>90</sup>*

However, that begs the question, are creators of comic books also making longer graphic novels? The answer is yes, but it’s not quite a wave or surge but more of a trickle at this point. But most agree that this will increase in the future.

88 J. Jackson Miller, Email interview, November 4, 2020

89 C. Ryall, Email interview, November 30, 2020

90 J. Jackson Miller, Email interview, November 4, 2020



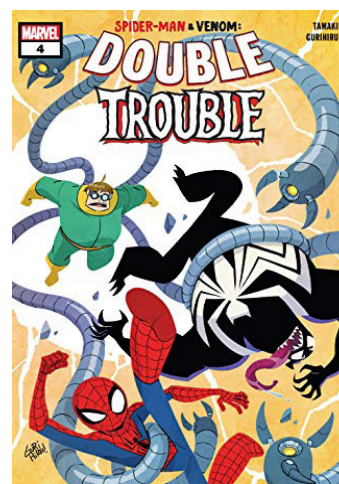
**FIGURES 98:**  
Shawn Martinbrough

*"But I do see more and more comics creators crossing over to trade."<sup>91</sup>*

However, the cross-overs are not necessarily permanent.

*"Shawn Martinbrough, he's known for floppy comics and I don't think that he's going to quit floppy comics altogether."<sup>92</sup>*

And not just in one direction, but in both. Gene Leung Yang of *American Born Chinese* has written *Superman*. *Nimona*'s Noelle Stevenson (b.1991) also does *Ms. Marvel*, and *Skim* author Mariko Tamaki (b.1975) has worked on *Spider-man*.



**FIGURE 99-101:** Some creators from the graphic novel industry have done mainstream superhero work, an attempt by some comic book publishers to gain new readers.

Nevertheless, there is a divide—hopefully a shrinking one.

*"I think the creators of superhero comics likewise are those who grew up reading superhero comics and want to play with those beloved characters, or maybe make their own in the same spirit as those from their childhood. Nevertheless, I don't think creators like Raina Telgemeier, who is the person everyone looks to as maybe the biggest success story in the past decade as far as graphic novel sales go, came up reading superhero comics to the same degree. But as far as looking at a similar Venn diagram like with the readers, I think the overlap in creators is much greater than in the readers. After all, storytellers like to tell stories no matter the format."<sup>93</sup>*

91 A. Colvin, Email interview, November 30, 2020

92 S. Carpenter, Personal interview, December 1, 2020

93 C. Ryall, Email interview, November 30, 2020



**FIGURE 102-105:** Today, graphic novel readers come in all shapes, colors and sizes.





## THE READERS

While there is some question as to the longevity of comic book customers, there is little doubt that the bulk of today's readers are in original graphic novels. Currently, the direct market is not doing a good job of recruiting new fans, and access to the product is limited, especially during the current pandemic. In 2019, sales of superhero titles fell 10% in bookstores and 15% in comic book shops.<sup>94</sup>

*"I think the readers of serialized comics are, by and large, the older end of the readership; the people accustomed to hitting the shop every Wednesday for the latest chapter. But, that's not a habit younger readers have developed. They get their complete graphic novels via Scholastic book fairs or bookstores."*<sup>95</sup>

Comic book shops are fewer and farther in between, making it hard for kids to access. And when they are accessible, they often cater to older customers rather than potentially more long-lasting young ones.



**FIGURE 106:** Some retailers have learned to adapt.

*"The comic book shops need to have another space that is attracting kids because the comic shop just is not attracting kids in the numbers they need to."*<sup>96</sup>

Though some are more optimistic about comic books shops (direct market)

*"If Marvel and DC are selling Comics at Walmart and Target (I) actually think over the long haul it's going to help comic book shops. Because what's going to happen is people are going to read all the stuff there and then they're going to go to the comic shop. 'Where else can I get comics?'" "Oh, I heard there's this thing called the comic shop."*<sup>97</sup>

Nevertheless, there are some actual indications of hope.

*"My projections for September 2020 comics orders, the first possible since March, indicate unit orders for comic books have actually gone up. This isn't surprising and tracks with what I've heard from many retailers. Consumers have a lot of income that isn't going to travel — and with the convention scene down, a lot of collectors have been funneling their business back into shops."*<sup>98</sup>

94 Salkowitz, Rob. "Surprising New Data Shows Comic Readers Are Leaving Superheroes Behind," *Forbes*, October 8, 2019, [https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2019/10/08/surprising-new-data-shows-comic-readers-are-leaving-superheroes-behind/?fbclid=IwAR3ZElyXj8apMwG3\\_Cnr\\_YJS\\_7x-D76d7ThHZSXH-c5ztn7clWfxV2AzgkFg#103b0e6b4d68](https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2019/10/08/surprising-new-data-shows-comic-readers-are-leaving-superheroes-behind/?fbclid=IwAR3ZElyXj8apMwG3_Cnr_YJS_7x-D76d7ThHZSXH-c5ztn7clWfxV2AzgkFg#103b0e6b4d68).

95 C. Ryall, Email interview, November 30, 2020

96 S. Carpenter, Personal interview, December 1, 2020

97 S. Carpenter, Personal interview, December 1, 2020

98 J. Jackson Miller, Email interview, November 4, 2020

## THE SOLUTIONS

There are many ideas on how to save periodical comics. Some, no doubt, better than others. From seeking more distribution through traditional bookstores and supermarkets, focusing more on younger readers, and diversifying the character to appeal to wider audiences. Another idea is to move towards a business model closer to that of traditional publishers.

*“This would involve a fundamental shift in how the comics industry treats IP, though. The goal of basically all comics publishers is to create IP that they can then exploit in other media, so they want to own all rights. The goal of trade book publishers is to publish books. Occasionally we secure media and merch rights, but that is by far the exception. Perhaps the real downfall of the floppy industry is that it doesn’t view comics as its end product?”*<sup>99</sup>

# KICKSTARTER

**FIGURE 107:** A new source of income, marketing and distribution for many comic creators are crowd funding platforms like Kickstarter.

Another relatively new resource for writers and artists, especially independent ones, is Kickstarter. Not only does it help raise money for creative and production costs, but it also does pretty well in helping with promotion and distribution. However, this also requires more gumption on the part of the creator.

*“Crowdfunding. You just need to show up and do the work. That’s the problem with corporate comics. There’s no vision and no accountability. What’s really required to make a comic book: no fear.”*<sup>100</sup>

Less is more. The store shelves are too crowded with mediocre products. As it is, fresh new voices have a hard time breaking out, and people are buying less due to the lack of quality content.

*“Making less, and making the books better—more story pages, better production values, and cover stock and maybe even a larger size—help the value proposition quite a bit.”*<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> A. Colvin, Email interview, November 30, 2020

<sup>100</sup> S. Bond, Email interview, December 2, 2020

<sup>101</sup> C. Ryall, Email interview, November 30, 2020

# Interviews

ANDREA COLVIN

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, GRAPHIC PUBLISHING  
LITTLE, BROWN BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

*While Original graphic novels (Scholastic, Random House, First Second) seem to be on the rise, what do you think the future of periodical comic books (Marvel, DC, Image) will be? Where do you see the floppy comic book industry in 10 years?*

Before I get to the question, just want to point out that you've listed imprints (more or less) of major houses that publish graphic novels, but there are LOTS of houses publishing OGNs not under GN imprints (Dial, Algonquin, S&S, a whole slew of RH and Harper imprints, and of course Little, Brown). So they are not just seeing it as its own category, but sometimes just as another storytelling format. Which is way different, IMO, from how the floppy industry views what it does—as very distinct from everything else out there.

I can for sure say that however, the floppy comic industry looks like in ten years, it will not be at all like what it looks like today. One reason the trade book industry is still thriving despite the pandemic closing down so many physical book outlets is that there are established online places to buy books (yes, mostly Amazon). But the floppy industry relies pretty heavily on the “direct market” which we all know is a shrinking retail footprint and very niche. You can walk into a B&N for a cookbook and end up buying a graphic novel, but when you go to a comics shop you go for one reason. And probably on a Wednesday. Anyway, I haven't seen any data on how comics shops are weathering the pandemic, but I can't imagine they're doing well.

So obviously the comics industry will have to find a way to pivot in the next few years, or they won't be here in ten.

*Is there a huge divide between the creators and readers of graphic novels and comic books and if so, do you see more mixing of the two groups in the future? What do you think that would look like?*

There is somewhat of a divide in both. First creators: the art and storytelling (and therefore creator portfolios) that the comic industry favors are very different from what the trade book (graphic novel) industry favors. Comics industry: mainstream art, superhero storylines (or at least highly adventurous), pay by the page, the publisher owns all rights. Trade industry: “literary” art, more realism in storylines, traditional book deals (advance against royalties), the creator owns the copyright.



Obviously, there are diversions (Image) and crossovers, but that's the general lay of the land.

Readers: lots of comics readers have been doing it since they were kids, and are now deeply involved in characters and storylines they've been following for decades. We also know that taking comics characters and storylines to other media (MCU) does not convert new readers to the source material. Trade GN readers are often younger (kids GNs still are the fast-growing segment in publishing and the publishers you mentioned in question 1 do almost entirely kids GNs), drawn to contemporary realism (superheroes and even fantasy are tough sells in this market), and stories that teach them something, or mean something, or have a point of view.

I'm not sure if there will be a diverging of the reader population, but I do see more and more comics creators crossing over to trade GNs.

*What do you think are the fundamental characteristic differences between creators and readers of floppy comics and graphic novels?*

I think I answered this one above.

Do you have any suggestions or ideas to bolster the floppy comic book industry? Start acting more like the trade GN industry. Publish full-length books that can be sold in bookstores and online, let creators own their stories, stop relying on superheroes (or even super fantasy/sci-fi like Saga and Monstress, which are some of the only breakouts in that industry in recent years). This would involve a fundamental shift in how the comics industry treats IP though. The goal of basically all comics publishers is to create IP that they can then exploit in other media, so they want to own all rights. The goal of trade book publishers is to publish books. Occasionally we secure media and merch rights but that is by far the exception. Perhaps the real downfall of the floppy industry is that it doesn't view comics as its end product?

**CHRIS RYALL**

PRESIDENT/PUBLISHER/CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER  
IDW PUBLISHING (2004-2020)

*While Original graphic novels (Scholastic, Random House, First Second) seem to be on the rise, what do you think the future of periodical comic books (Marvel, DC, Image) will be? Where do you see the floppy comic book industry in 10 years?*

It's always hard to predict anything related to the comics industry with any accu-

racy...but of course, that never stops any of us. I think in ten years, despite all the various predictions to the contrary, print comics will still be a viable part of the business.

But I don't think stapled, 32-page comics will be. I'm sure they'll still exist in some form, but the dominant publishers are and will be those who give people comic content in the ways they want to consume them now, not in ways that just echo the past. The value proposition for a 32-page comic (which is often only 20-24 pages of story and art, plus ads and editorial pages), priced at \$3.99 or \$4.99, just isn't there in a world where everyone carries the entirety of Disney's film and TV output on their phones for \$6.99/month.

But I also don't think comics are or will be competing one to one with streaming services. Reading has always been a more limited pursuit compared to TV or film, and will likely cater to the same kinds of audiences who love vinyl: people who don't mind paying a bit more for a nicely appointed edition. The disposable nature of periodicals (I just can't bring myself to call them "floppies") will move even more to digital, and print will offer nice, or deluxe, or at least complete, story collections.

New creators will no doubt still do print periodicals—the format is much less of a costly barrier to entry than having to produce a book that is 100+ pages—but publishers are gonna continue to move more and more to complete graphic novels in print. The serialized nature of comics won't go away, but the pricey comics that offer a 5-minute read printed on shitty paper is just bound to continue to lose traction.

*Is there a huge divide between the creators and readers of graphic novels and comic books and if so, do you see more mixing of the two groups in the future? What do you think that would look like?*

I think the readers of serialized comics are, by and large, the older end of the readership; the people accustomed to hitting the shop every Wednesday for the latest chapter. But that's not a habit younger readers have developed. They get their complete graphic novels via Scholastic book fairs or bookstores or comic book stores, and that's what they expect—a complete story. So I think there's a broad overlap in the readers of either format but the overlap is, like I say, the part of the audience accustomed to reading comics in serialized form. Which sales patterns continue to show just isn't the future.

I think the creators of superhero comics likewise are those who grew up reading superhero comics and want to play with those beloved characters, or maybe make their own in the same spirit as those from their childhood. But I don't think creators like Raina Telgemeyer, who is the person everyone looks to as maybe

the biggest success story in the past decade as far as graphic novel sales go, came up reading superhero comics to the same degree. But as far as looking at a similar Venn diagram like with the readers, I think the overlap in creators is much greater than in the readers. After all, storytellers like to tell stories no matter the format.

*What do you think are the fundamental characteristic differences between creators and readers of floppy comics and graphic novels?*

Just what I said above: I think to some degree, the readers who don't read monthly comics but do read graphic novels are those out of the habit of buying serialized comic chapters—either they never developed that habit, or they aged out of it, or they don't have a convenient comic shop near them. Creators tend to let the kinds of stories they want to tell dictate the format as much as they do the marketplace.

*Do you have any suggestions or ideas to bolster the floppy comic book industry?*

Make less of them and make them better. When I was running IDW, I used to ask editors who pitched, say, the next Transformers series, “why does this book need to exist?” If it's just because there's now a hole in the schedule and you're filling it, well, that's not compelling reason enough for that book to become a thing. All publishers are guilty of this, of course—making as many books as the market will bear. And I get why—there are lots of people employed due to publishing decisions—but I also think that just making the maximum number of books people might be apt to consume is only going to lead to consumer burn-out. Especially in a pandemic, and coming out of it, just throwing 20-part crossovers at consumers is more likely to drive them away from the habit entirely more than it is to hook them. Making less, and making the books better—more story pages, better production values, and cover stock and maybe even a larger size—help the value proposition quite a bit. Realize that comic fans are more and more like vinyl fans—they'll pay more for the same music/comic story in a nicer, deluxe package.

## **SHELLY BOND**

**FREELANCE EDITOR AT LARGE**

**FORMER EDITOR AT VERTIGO (DC COMICS, 1993-2016)**

**FORMER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF BLACK CROWN (IDW, 2017-2020).**

*While Original graphic novels (Scholastic, Random House, First Second) seem to be on the rise, what do you think the future of periodical comic books (Marvel, DC, Image) will be? Where do you see the floppy comic book industry in 10 years?*



Contrary to popular opinion, I see the periodical sticking around in some capacity. Nostalgia is always in and out of vogue, and the collectors' market will always be lucrative because the hardcore superfan has money. Of course what's intriguing to me about the "floppy" is that it's pretty cheap to make, and if done well, is a very satisfying reading experience. The zine and small press landscape is burgeoning right now thanks to crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter. There's nothing more exciting or more liberating to an ancient editing fossil or a young artist than to be able to publish one's own work; getting to control your own idea/production without corporate shackles saves everyone time and drama. Of course, this means that it's a competitive field and there are a lot of amateurs out there. But that's always the case in the arts, especially in comics. Editors just need to be discerning about where they place their imprimatur. Call me a paper purist: the DIY culture is where the serious creators lead and shine.

*Is there a huge divide between the creators and readers of graphic novels and comic books and if so, do you see more mixing of the two groups in the future? What do you think that would look like?*

I don't see a huge divide between creators of periodicals vs. graphics novels. I think comics creatives are driven to express themselves on paper (or plastic, but I still prefer the smell of paper...). However, there's a huge difference in how they're assembled which affects readers even if they're unaware of the craft. The way a 5-issue miniseries is structured, for instance, with page turns, turning points, character arc building and cliff hangers are very different than the pacing of a graphic novel, which might have a similar page count but a very different rhythm. It becomes a wildly different reading experience. The lure of a hardcover with a spine and the literary credence is tempting, but ultimately the story itself should dictate the format.

*What do you think are the fundamental characteristic differences between creators and readers of floppy comics and graphic novels?*

There's still a tendency to label comics readers as old fashioned and see superhero readers as stereotypes. But when you actually hang out in a comic shop or go to large conventions, you realize how much the industry has diversified. We're living in an age where everyone is a geek or a superfan of something. The 21st century has been much more accepting of nerds of all kinds as the pop culture landscape has expanded with its bloated media ripoffs and tie-ins. Which is why for me, telling a story on paper with a chain of talented writers-artists-letters-colorists-designers is still the greatest art form of all. The choice of medium is as important as a character's name or weapon, or the shift in color temperature from scene to scene.

*Do you have any suggestions or ideas to bolster the floppy comic book industry?*

Crowdfunding. You just need to show up and do the work. That's the problem with corporate comics. There's no vision and no accountability. What's really required to make a comic book: no fear.

**TOM HART**

**CARTOONIST AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
THE SEQUENTIAL ARTISTS WORKSHOP**

*While Original graphic novels (Scholastic, Random House, First Second) seem to be on the rise, what do you think the future of periodical comic books (Marvel, DC, Image) will be? Where do you see the floppy comic book industry in 10 years?*

I dunno! I always thought it was a bit strange. It's a strange industry; the direct market, etc. I like floppies, thin stories, etc. But the non-returnable periodical model is a strange one.

Of course, the current graphic novel boom which puts everything between \$25 hardcovers is strange too, and unsustainable to my eyes, but maybe I don't see properly. I know I can only afford a few books a year at that price point.

*Is there a huge divide between the creators and readers of graphic novels and comic books and if so, do you see more mixing of the two groups in the future? What do you think that would look like?*

Is there? I hadn't noticed. I think everyone wants to be in long-form graphic novels.

*What do you think are the fundamental characteristic differences between creators and readers of floppy comics and graphic novels?*

Well, there's an addiction to the weekly pick up and completion for floppy readers. I've worked in comic book stores and in every store the "hold box" is quite an important part of the business plan. It's a thrill to have the weekly fix met. For retailers, it's satisfying to fulfill this need, but the audience must be shrinking. The graphic novel industry meanwhile, seems to be somewhat connected to libraries and literary review journals.

*Do you have any suggestions or ideas to bolster the floppy comic book industry?*

Allow returns. Change the three month ahead ordering process.

## JOHN JACKSON MILLER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR,  
FOUNDER AND CURATOR OF COMICHRON.COM,  
THE WORLD'S LARGEST PUBLIC DATABASE OF COMIC SALES FIGURES.

A thought upfront: the term “floppy” is best not used in an academic paper as it is considered a derogatory term by many (though certainly not all) in the field, including myself. It’s disrespectful for the format which created the industry and on which it depends. I could see using it once but I would otherwise stick to “periodicals” and “comic books.” (Comic with gummed spines aren’t very “floppy” anyway!)

It’s sort of like when e-books were all the rage, and you saw references to “dead-tree publishing.” It’s fine to note the term is out there, but nobody would claim to be in that business.

*While Original graphic novels (Scholastic, Random House, First Second) seem to be on the rise, what do you think the future of periodical comic books (Marvel, DC, Image) will be? Where do you see the floppy comic book industry in 10 years?*

It’s impossible during the pandemic to predict far at all, but the periodical market was stable before and shows every indication of continuing to be. My projections for September 2020 comics orders, the first possible since March, indicate unit orders for comic books have actually gone up. This isn’t surprising and tracks with what I’ve heard from many retailers. Consumers have a lot of income that isn’t going to travel — and with the convention scene down, a lot of collectors have been funneling their business back into shops. We’re seeing several very popular releases, including for a number of new properties. That’s very reassuring.

As to ten years down the line? Comics and graphic novel sales through comics shops grew over the course of the 2010s, even adjusted for inflation, and periodical sales held fairly steady in there with a big bump in the middle of the decade. Comic books still make money for publishers, and they make even more unreported money for retailers, through the markup of issues in collector demand — and comics play the role they always did in the production cycle, helping publishers and creators to make money on a project while it’s being produced. As long as those dynamics continue, periodicals will remain one of the drivers of the business.



*Is there a huge divide between the creators and readers of graphic novels and comic books and if so, do you see more mixing of the two groups in the future? What do you think that would look like?*

You have to distinguish between original graphic novels — never serialized — and collected editions of periodical comics, which represent the lion's share of what we consider "graphic novels." OGN publishing is a different kind of business, only really open to publishers who can provide a pay advance to keep a creator going drawing a 120-page book for half a year; the number of those opportunities is limited. So you don't really see the same creators doing both; it's more of a play for those companies who exist mostly in the bookstore space, where paying advances is part of how they regularly do business.

I have written some original graphic novels myself for mainstream direct market publishers, but they've been children's titles of 60 pages each, which is about the most work I'd be willing to do without getting some kind of advance. There may be heavy-hitter creators who could bargain for big advances to go away and create a 180-page graphic novel without serialization — but in general, the Direct Market publishers do need the cash flow from monthlies. It's there — why not take it, especially when the monthly comic book also serves to advertise the later collection, creating buzz for the release?

There may be some kind of hybrid possible where advances do come into play — but it's just hard to see them becoming widespread in the Direct Market when serialization still works. Honestly, prose novels — many of which were serialized before collection in the 19th and early 20th centuries — might be in a different position themselves if serialized fiction still existed.

*What do you think are the fundamental characteristic differences between creators and readers of floppy comics and graphic novels?*

As noted, the creators of OGNs aren't really contract workers for the most part, called on to write for this project or that one — they're doing their own thing, and have some in with a publisher that leads to a deal that puts food on the table. Since they're on their own, they're usually creating their own vision or universe, and not working in another (though I've done OGNs for Disney, which is a different and not uncommon situation). There's a lot of pressure involved on the promotional side, in that there's really just one release date to an OGN, as opposed to a serialized comic which can be advertised for months at a time while it's coming out; you only really have one big chance to grab people's attention. Likewise, for retailers, they're dealing with what is sometimes an unknown quantity — it's easier to take a risk on a \$3.99 first issue than to go straight to stocking a \$24.99 OGN.

On the readers' side, comic book readers are certainly more likely to also be collectors. There's an aftermarket for graphic novels, but it's fairly small — whereas the comic book back issue market is worth at least nine figures annually. Comic books are the magazines that people keep, and some of them (though by no means all!) do legitimately increase in value and hold that value over time. That's just sort of a bonus: if our audience was digital-only or graphic novel-only, there'd be a whole subculture cut out.

*Do you have any suggestions or ideas to bolster the floppy comic book industry?*

Right now, the problem is that following the pandemic and the split of DC comics from Diamond, we don't have adequate data about the releases on the market. Retailers need to know the sales levels of titles in order to find opportunities to bolster titles that are doing better in other places. Collectors, meanwhile, are better protected when they have accurate information as to what's really scarce and what's not. Ours was a relatively transparent business for decades, and it needs to be again.

A lot of other ideas for periodicals aren't as good as they sound. Mass returnability reduces the revenue available to publishers, making comic books less attractive, and creates waste. There's a reason the nonreturnable market totally replaced the newsstand one: it was more efficient for everyone involved. There have been limited returnability initiatives, and also over ship plans, used as tactics to bolster certain titles' sales; that's fine in moderation.

Other schemes, like printing on newsprint in order to lower prices, are fanciful -- missing the facts that most consumers demand better now, and that price resistance among periodical customers has really never been that impactful an issue. Prices haven't risen as fast as most people think they have, and when we do see price reductions, they don't always result in better sales. When DC dropped from \$3.99 back to \$2.99 for part of a year a decade ago, one of its executives told me it was "the most popular and least successful thing we ever did."

**STANFORD W. CARPENTER, PHD**

**CULTURE ANTHROPOLOGIST**

*Stanford conducts ethnographic research with an archaeological sensibility while using comics, memes, the spoken word, and writerly things to communicate with a surrealist vibe. Co-creator of the forthcoming NPR Affiliate podcast Brother-Story and the Correspondent, an ethnographic and journalistic take on comics, culture, and the lives of the people who create and consume them. He is on the*

*advisory boards of Abrams ComicArts' Megascoppe Imprint, the Black & Brown Comix Arts Festival.*

Stanford: Okay. So yeah, so you're basically doing a thesis on comic books versus graphic novels.

*Ramon: Yes.*

Stanford: So, are you doing it as like a production centerpiece, audience centerpiece...?

*Ramon: Audience and creator.*

Stanford: Audience and creator, okay. So, I mean one of my takes on this is, so I mean, your first question, "Why all the original graphic novel has been on the rise?" "What do you think the future of creator comics would be?" Who you should've thought to become industry in 10 years? Well, I think that one thing that's really interesting when you start talking about graphic novels versus comics is acknowledging that they are produced very differently, right? And you know, so in my research, I look at you know, I look at the three corners. I look at production, circulation and consumption. Production, how something's made. Circulation, how it's distributed out to people. And then consumption is also audiences, right? And I tend to come at food production first. I mean, but the one thing I think is really, you know is really interesting is that you know, graphic novels are skew, you know. Comic books are unique media form. First of all, a graphic novel in terms of their orientation or comic books is skewed more towards books and book publishing norms. Whereas the floppy comics lean more towards the magazine type periodical norms, right? So I actually don't see, I see them as overlapping but and sometimes competing but not necessarily competing. Because those people who would you know, people are not walking in and saying, a lot of the people who are buying the periodicals are buying them at comic shops, right? And they're getting and the comic shops are selling graphic novels now but so far the companies, for the most part, have kept the floppies separate from the production that trade paperbacks in the graphic novels.

*Ramon: And it seems to me like the graphic novels at the comic book shops are selling are still very much superhero oriented like trades, collected trades.*

Stanford: Yeah.

*Ramon: As opposed to the kind of stuff you will see coming out of Barnes & Noble, coming out of First Second and Scholastic and Random House.*

Stanford: Exactly. And that takes you to distribution. So each of enjoys a very dif-



ferent distribution system, right? And no distribution system is pure; let's start with that, right? But I think that if you reach a point where 90% of your product is in one, even if it's a little is like set, if you reach far like 75% or more of your product is going to a single distribution system, that is your primary distribution system. Right? So the primary distribution system, right, for graphic novels it's a Barnes & Nobles. It's also independent bookstores.

*Ramon: Yes.*

Stanford: You know what I don't hear enough? I actually think it's interesting because I don't feel like we're hearing enough conversation about what's happening at independent bookstores in relationship to graphic novels.

*Ramon: True.*

Stanford: And especially because an independent bookstore is it's like a comic book store for books, you know. And when I say like a comic book store for books is that they are very community center. The comic shop is a community hub. If you look at the way a comic shop makes its money, it's not making its money off of a single product. It's making its money off of bringing people, a group of people, in on a regular basis and gain and to spend on multiple product lines. You know, if you take away, you know, I mean so like I look at First Aid Comics back pre-pandemic, you know, they did a lot of their business around the time when they were hosting game nights.

*Ramon: Yeah, it happens here too.*

Stanford: Yeah. So, I think that's the other thing is that is that they is they both have a very different kind of, they actually have a different customer base, right? Yeah. So there's this community that goes to the comic shop and that's distinct from the community that's going to the bookstore. And it's not to say that people go to, that there's no overlap, right? But I'm talking about habitually on a regular basis. The person is going the comic shop is usually going there once a week, right? You know, I don't know exactly what the numbers are for Barnes & Nobel but I think it's very interesting to note that like, so pre-pandemic, I know a lot of scholars that had a Barnes & Noble that they would go to and they were go to the coffee shop and sit there and read and write stuff like that, right? So they're going to that place regularly and they're not going more so than going to the comic shop. And they said that they do both they actually see them as sites for a completely different type of interaction and with that a different kind of purchase, right? But yeah, I do think that as far as like in 10 years and like the immediate future, I do think that there's going to be a lot less of Marvel and DC invested in floppy comics as a percentage of what they put out, right? But I don't think that if so if comics, if floppy comics drop by 20% in terms of the percentage of what

they put out, I think that what's going to happen is you'll see maybe a 10% drop at the comic shop. So, because what's going to happen with the diversification and with Marvel and DC, which I think are completely different entities from all the other comic book companies, right because of the size and access to other forms of media for properties and their positioning of comics within their property line. I think that that it's not entirely mean about, "Oh they're going to send less comics to comics the shops. Let's say well, they will send less comics to the comic shop, but I think that what's also going to be happening is they're going to be expanding the amount of stuff that they send. Like increase in the numbers of what they send to the comic book stores or not comic bookstores, let's just say bookstores in a form of graphic novels etc., and in other areas, right? I think you're going to see Marvel and DC selling. It's not going to be going back to the old the old system where they're selling at new stands stuff like that. But they're going to start, I think they're going to start forming alliances specifically Taylor's that have their own distribution systems. And by that, I mean Target and Walmart. So with Target and Walmart, you can you know, they have their own distribution hub. So, what you could do is you could probably bundle. Bundle your comics to go to like four distribution hubs, you know, as little as four distribution hubs with Walmart and get it distributed from those distribution hubs to all of their locations, right? And the barrier to doing that for a publisher is really how much you have to create to meet that type of demand, right? So, I wouldn't surprise me if we have one comic book company do airing exclusive arrangements with Walmart and another one doing exclusive arrangement with Target, you know. And that's what I think is going to happen. I think that it's just not that they're going to be distributing less to the comic shops. The comic shops are going to be seen as one area of multiple areas where they're going to be sending a book, right? I think that that is actually the extent to which they send less to the comic shops is going to benefit the comic shop, it's going to benefit all the midsize and small and small presses and independent publishers because they're going to fill the void. I think that ultimately, I think that the future of a comic book shop is going to be doubling down on community. It's not going to be just on selling comics. It's going to be on like on more events. Like, I'm seeing already in Chicago. I'm seeing comic shops working with small local conventions. Like First Aid Comics is like super involved in Pocket cob, which is next weekend, right? I think you're going to see like a Graham Crackers doing programming at a local museum or with the local, in fact, First Aid used to do, you know pre-pandemic, used to do stuff with the Harper Theater. Where so for example, they actually had me come in and host a preview know the first screening of "Black Panther", right? So, I came and I hosted the people and what is the people would have to buy their tickets at the comic shop and when they bought the ticket at the comic shop, they purchase a package. And so the package would come with a couple of "Black Panther" comics. And they had their name, like there's like the "Wakanda" package, there's the "Vibranium" package, there's a heart-shaped herb package. And each one came with a different set of like collectible swag and but everybody got a copy of I think it

was “Black Panther” # 4, and that was their ticket to get in. So they showed up and they show the copy of “Black Panther” # 4 and then they let them in. And then I helped emcee the event and I lead a discussion afterward and we all watch together. And of course they sold out. They did the same thing for “Captain Marvel” because I hosted the “Captain Marvel” one. And then they did one for “Godzilla”, you know. But I see those types of things that’s going to become much more the focal point for the comic shop. It’s going to be taking advantage of community and taking advantage of these events. And I think that the products that they’re going to sell are going to be a little different that they’re going to have more space to do stuff with the smaller companies. And you know, and I think that what that the people who purchased the floppy comics are going to be the people who are very much in love with the form and are very much interested in seeing what the new comic is and by new I mean like that independent thing put out by, you know, put out by Stacy Robinson, right?

*Ramon: They say it’s going to be like a specialty or premier item. Is that what you’re thinking of...?*

Stanford: It’ll be, yes. It’ll be a specialty or a premier item and it’s going to be something that’s also going to have a lot more independent people involved. Because right now it is become, within the past two years, so much easier to create a comic on your own. Like what do you, I mean you get an iPad Pro or have a laptop for the Cintiq, you know, I mean you basically have all of your publishing app everything you need to publish a comic, you know or to produce a comic you could do, you can actually do for a \$1,000, right?

*Ramon: Yeah.*

Stanford: And then the stuff that you already, a lot of stuff you already need for other stuff. So you invest a couple thousand dollars in like your toys and then now print on demand as such that you can easily print up your comic. So, that’s what’s going to happen. And I think that some are going to actually it’s going to be almost an art gallery bottle, right, where you’re going to start seeing a lot more “Archie” special edition comics coming out. Like I could see comic shops working with art galleries, I could see comic shops. I think that’s what’s going to happen. I think there’s going to be a lot of comic shops are going to close but what’s ultimately going to happen is there’s going to be a specialty market and I think it’s going to be healthy because you’re going to have people who are going to come in, who are willing to spend a lot more.

*Ramon: Now, that’s sort of begs the question of me because usually experimental comics, artsy comics, are usually coming out of the graphic novel community. Whereas the floppy audience wants the same superhero stuff, I mean these guys almost abhor any changes to their superheroes.*



Stanford: Well, here's the example that I bring up, I bring up the black [inaudible] of arts conference here in Chicago, it was at Chicago state. And First Aid put up a booth there. And they only brought comics for that audience, they sold out. Because the people who went to that conference a lot of the librarians and they walked out with just piles of books, right? And so, the experimentation that you're going to...

*Ramon: But would you should say librarians, well are purposely look for a variety whereas the typical superhero comic book fan wants the same thing as before.*

Stanford: Yes, and no. What I'm saying is I'm articulating the diversification of the lines of the things that are being sold at comic shops. So I think that with the independent and the small pressed shop you're going to get a lot of superhero stuff, right? And one thing is it's also really interesting is like they look like black independent comics, indigenous independent comics, a lot of the Latin independent comics, a lot of them tend to still be superhero stuff because what they're experimenting with ultimately is a different type of representation, all right? So, you're going to see that there. But what I'm really talking about is what's going to fill in the gap for like as Marvel and DC start to put less there, right? And I'm looking at, I mean others things I'm looking at like First Aid actually makes and Graham Crackers, they both make a lot of their money with their participation in comic conventions as well, right? Where they set up at a comic convention, they'll sell a whole bunch of units are as well. And it's not that they make enough money out of a comic book convention to stay open, but they're making their money some of the money at the comic conventions, some of their money to the signing but you shouldn't talk about to the diversification of lines.

*Ramon: Yeah.*

Stanford: And I see them as doing much more community stuff and that's what's going to be sort of natural outgrowth of as the pressure on them is going to be to figure out how do they monetize the community of people that are coming, right? And I think that that's going to give them a more diversified product line. I think what's interesting about what's happening in the bookstores, and this is also a price point becomes really interesting, is that in spite of all the stuff that were talking about in terms of specialty some I think one of the biggest problems with floppy comics right now is price.

*Ramon: Yeah, definitely.*

Stanford: You know it's...

*Ramon: You're paying five dollars for like 15 minutes of entertainment.*

Stanford: Right. I mean we like to measure our entertainment in hour-long units. And so with that you're really talking about 20 dollars an hour for entertainment.

*Ramon: Yeah.*

Stanford: And there's not the value proposition isn't there. But I think that's also where the independent stuff becomes really interesting, right? When you start getting some of the independent comics I think what you're going to also see is you're going to see black-and-white comics. What I think is interesting about "Walking Dead" is that "Walking Dead" still carries a color comic book price, right? But it's ultimately has a production cost of a black-and-white comic. But "Walking Dead" could turn a profit selling their books for 75 cents apiece. So, I do think that you know and also when you start looking at some of the graphic novels you don't necessarily see the same types of experimentations in the graphic novels that you do in the floppy comics. And just being in conversation with and seeing how some of the graphic novels publishers go about it. So like you've got a place like Abrams where what they're doing with their comics" artist is they are managing their graphic novel production the way you manage like novel production like regular novels, you know. The contracts are structured where people are getting paid like they're not getting paid for each page they send back, they're getting paid for like this much, this much, then advance...

*Ramon: They got advance and royalty on sales. Yeah.*

Stanford: Exactly. And so but what's interesting about that and having a chance to kind of see the inner workings of that through to some of my other affiliations is that they actually do take into consideration whether a comic is black and white or color.

*Ramon: Yeah.*

Stanford: You know because their process is they do a complete P&L, profit and loss, of the book and within that day they're like, "Okay, well, we'll do this book, but we won't do it if you want it, but it's got to be in black-and-white", right? That's the irony. That's the one thing that the floppy comic lacks. You don't see the floppy comics coming in saying, "You know what we need to go back to this older production process because it's cheaper". Like if you look at these five-dollar comics, right, there beautiful painted comics which have the highest cost of production.

*Ramon: Yeah.*

Stanford: And so I think there's going to be a greater consideration around that. I

think that there are going to be some that are going to come out, they're going to be almost like many art books that are going to sell for a lot. But I also see having more and more independence coming in. I think a lot of them are going to start doing things like saying, "You know what I'm going to do a black-and-white comic because I can make my money off of it", right? And that all fit within diversification. I think that ultimately that's the thing. It's going to be a much more the comic shop is by necessity become a much more diversified space.

*Ramon: Okay, cool.*

Stanford: Yeah. Oh, you had a couple other questions. One is the divide between creators and readers of graphic novels.

*Ramon: So we've established with what you've already talked about the production of the two different medium.*

Stanford: Right.

*Ramon: You've talked about what do you think floppies are going in a couple of years? So what do you see is the difference between the two communities whether it be the creators or the audience?*

Stanford: Well, what's interesting is that it's almost like an Apple-Microsoft thing. I think that you're going to have much larger numbers of people purchasing their comics at book stores and retail outlets like Walmart and Target. You just have to make them available there, right? And I think the Walmart and Target thing is still going to be floppy comics. I mean like that ultimately what a lot of like Marvel and DC are going to send there. In fact, there's also experimentation because Kevin Greivoux was part of a group of people that got their stuff placed at Walmart and they got a whole bunch. They didn't sell anything. It is an independent comic creator. They didn't sell anything to the comic shop.

*Ramon: What genres were they selling?*

Stanford: It was a western story it was "Bass Reeves", they had that one and they also had a superhero comic there's like either four or six, no there's four comics that they sold and each one was a different genre. I don't know what the final sales were on them, but it happened during the pandemic. But what I think is interesting is that you know, when you start getting into the reader. So it's like the bookstores are going to actually do the better job of getting young readers, right? Because there's still a space and you know, it's still a space where like, you know, as a kid you can show up there with your mom, you can be four years old and you can get your mom to buy something off the shelf. That's actually what's hurting the comic shops. The comic book shops need to have another space



that are attracting kids because the comic shop just are not attracting kids in the numbers they need to.

Ramon: Every once in a while I see a comic book shop that also sells toys and I think that's the secret. It's because then the kids come in for the toys and they see the comics. But I think a lot of comic shops, the one that disassociate themselves from children.

Stanford: Right.

*Ramon: And historically up until the '90s it was children that bought comic books, you know. It was kids, you know, like preteens...*

Stanford: Right.

*Ramon: ... maybe some teenagers.*

Stanford: That's true. And the comic shops actually back then, I mean the comic shops grew out of head shots, which were definitely not teenager, right?

*Ramon: Yeah.*

Stanford: You know part of it is that they just are that they differ in market so much, right? Is that you should not have quite [inaudible] the direct market is not designed to be a children's, a distribution system to reach children.

*Ramon: Yeah.*

Stanford: And so...

*Ramon: Which I think is a mistake.*

Stanford: The mistake isn't investing in the direct market. The mistake is disinvesting in other markets.

*Ramon: Yes, absolutely.*

Stanford: So, I think that as these other markets fill up it's actually going to benefit some of the comic shops. Because they don't generate new readers, in the numbers they need to, but it's a new readers if Marvel and DC are selling Comics at Walmart and Target actually think over the long haul it's going to help comic book shops. Because what's going to happen is people are going to read all the stuff there and then they're going to go to the comic shop. "Where else can I get comics?" "Oh I heard there's this thing called the comic shop". I mean that's how like a lot of people that I know got in the comics. They started of reading the com-

ics their parent bought them at the drugstore, the Piggly Wiggly, you know.

*Ramon: I guess the only problem that I see with that is, number one, the most of the comics I mean, they're beginning to create books targeted towards children, but for the most part, I would say that the comic of Marvel and DC are putting out are not geared towards children and like you said that price point is not for children either.*

Stanford: Right?

*Ramon: It's not like the kid can ask "Can I buy this comics for a dollar or even two dollars?" It's \$4.99. It's \$5.99, you know.*

Stanford: But I actually see a couple of things moving against that. I'm looking at what DC is doing with doing more digital comics. I think that we're looking at a landscape where you're going to be able to get like an eight-page "Batman" story. You're going to get an eight or a nine page "Wonder Woman" story digitally. And then there's going to be a, "Oh, can I go out and go into that specialty spot?", right?

*Ramon: And who do you think is the audience for this eight-page story?*

Stanford: I think it's going to be very much a catch as catch can. I'm actually not a huge fan of digital comics. But what I do recognize is that comic shops do really well with people second exposure to comics. They're not good at being the first exposure. And so...

*Ramon: That makes sense.*

Stanford: And so as there's more stuff available digitally that's going to you know, I mean because what it is you need to be is again it's about introducing people. I mean, I think the only thing is interesting is that the graphic novel market at Barnes and Noble is it's very different. These are you know, these are books that might be anywhere from 80 to 800 pages, right? You know, and I think that the answer is more graphic novels as graphic novels start to even more diversify with what they're going to be offering, I think that's also going to be very interesting for comics. Because I also look at something else we're not talking enough about is what's happening in education. So, I taught my first college level comic class in like 2004, right? 2003- 2004. The thing I thought was interesting is here I am teaching a comic class at Johns Hopkins, right? And I'm getting all these students who never read a comic before reading comics, right? And I'm looking at their majors. None of them are majoring in art. They're like most of the majors were like Anatomical Kinesiology and stuff like that. I mean it was just like it was different types of or biomedical engineering or political science, right? But be-

cause they were reading this comic in class there's a certain point, I remember like one time I said, "You guys have to make a comic." And they were like, "We're not comic artists." We don't have to do this". "Why are we doing this"? And I just looked at them, I remember I was just facing the board. I was just kind of scold them and I was like, "Do you want a grade?" That's all I said. "Do you want a grade?" And everyone's like, and then I pause for a second I was about to try in softer about what I said and they part of like, "Oh, yeah, let's make a comic" But the thing is the fact that they're encountering it in that setting meant that they were processing what a comic book was very differently. And that's why I think these other cultural institutions getting involved, it changed the way people are processing the information, you know. You're reading, you know, you're reading "Moby Dick" and "Watchman" when you start reading those things next to each other you start to regard them differently. You don't see them as like trash literature that you just toss out, right? And I think that's also just American society recovering from the comics" code, you know. And it's easier to have that recovery happening in graphic novels because graphic novels never had the comic code authority put on them, right? And graphic novels have also taken on some much more adult topics.

*Ramon: Yes.*

Stanford: But then they also taken, they take down the gamut. They're like the most adult topics and the most children center topics. And so I think that the graphic novels and comics are going to run parallel and they're going to have a lot of overlap. But I don't think that the days of the, I just, I feel like the floppy comics are kind of like cockroaches, right? They're never going to be at the top of the food chain at all. But they're going to be the ones that survived the nuclear winter.

*Ramon: How would you describe creators who do comics, floppy comics and creators who do graphic novels?*

Stanford: I actually think that the more time goes on there's going to be less difference between the two. I think that what it's going to be is, I'm going to sit down, I want to work on a graphic novel. But you know what? I know that by working on this graphic novel, I'm going to do my Brother story graphic novel that's going to come out in two years. If I want people to see Brother story in action, I'm going to put together like an eight page comic and put it in the shop somewhere, put it in an anthology with somebody else's other stuff, right? So I think it's going to be about exposure. It's going to be more marketing considerations. I actually see an interesting reversal where you're going to have somebody working on a graphic novel and what they're going to do is as they're working on the graphic novel, they're going to probably going to take like an eight-page portion of it and then just give it like a different and then add another



four pages of different content to it and put it out to prime the pump.

*Ramon: Right.*

Stanford: It will have just a little bit of difference, you know. Because I see a lot of people talk, a lot of the people that you're seeing like, so look at what's happening with like back to Abram's because so because I'm on the advisory board for the Megascopes imprint, right? So I'm seeing how this stuff is going through. A lot of people are involved in creating this stuff like Shawn Martinbrough, he's known for floppy comics and I don't think that he's going to quit floppy comics all together. Looking at David Walker, right? He's shifting to doing a lot of graphic novel stuff, but he hasn't completely abandoned floppy comics. There's an immediacy to a floppy comic. You can turn that production over and you know, getting something out to people in a month as opposed to waiting two years. I don't think the people are going to look to floppy comics to make the same kind of money, but I don't think that they need to, you know. I mean it explained why it is that a Marvel and DC are going to pull out, right? Because if your Disney because that's really who owns Marvel, right? You know, why are you going to spend money to make 10 million dollars, which is what Marvel might make you right at the end of the year, when you can create a movie and make a billion dollars? One, it just to get you a seat at the table at the tax office for writing a big cheque. The other is the GDP of a small island.

*Ramon: All right.*

Stanford: So it's not that comics aren't profitable is that they're not profitable enough for certain large entities. When you start scaling it down, if you're talking about a comic at the end of the year generating \$100,000, you know a hundred, hundred fifty thousand dollars in profits, I don't know. I mean ask you, would you work for \$150,000 to do something you love? I mean if you're a corporation you wouldn't waste your time on that, right? But the reality is that not all production is going to be coming at the corporate level. And even now what do corporations look for in terms of like if Marvel and DC are trying to tell who they want to hire to do the next "X-Men" book, they'll look at people who are making independent comics. So, it used to be you broke in by having a portfolio, then it was by doing interesting [inaudible]. Now you break-in by making a comic. So people are going to build a break-in by making a comic and make a little money along the way. And some people are going to say, You know what Marvel and DC is not going to pay me more than \$100,000 for this book and I can make \$85,000 off this book and own it myself. And they're going to keep doing it. I think that you're always going to have the floppy comics. The question is for how long or how big that market is going to be? I think the future is going to see the graphic novel eclipsing the floppy. Why? Think of it this way. If I teach a class, if you're going to teach a comic class, right? You know and say your class has, say you might have one class, oh,

I've talked to Julian [inaudible] just earlier today and he is a class with like 400 students in it. He's not having them buy a floppy comics, he's having them either get digital comics or is having them buy graphic novels. Because graphic novels have ISBN numbers, you can actually order them through a school bookstore, right? "Watchman" and "Maus" are making a lot of money in sales to colleges and universities. If you look at what happened with "March", "March" made a crap ton of money selling to libraries, colleges and universities. One of their big gets was Michigan picked it as their book for all their freshman to read at multiple institutions. That was tens of thousands of units. I think there's more upside the graphic novels than floppy comics. But the floppy comics have a slightly different appeal. The floppy comics appeal to immediacy and there's some arty things that you can do in a floppy comic and I think it's going to run the gamut from people putting together a little ashcan additions for like a dollar or less just to get people to see their characters to people doing these little art experiments for people going to be literally spending \$50 for like a 20-page comic but it's going to have like freaking gold in the ink. And I just see that kind of gamut being run because the other thing I think is interesting is that graphic novels are more about being or more about reading and the periodicals are more about collecting and are more art or actually much more art center. You know, look at all those different types of ventricular covers and you know, people did a lot of play going on there. Right now, it's very corporatized. But like I said, let Marvel and DC pull out and create space on the shelves for the smaller operations to occupy.

*Ramon: That's going to be interesting, yeah.*

Stanford: And it's going to become a healthy niche. So yeah, I think that the other thing that people are not realizing about graphic novels is that because there's a lot of them are being sold in these large operations, Barnes & Noble is a really large operation, right? Yeah. They are actually not very accessible to independent creators. Like if you're an independent creator, if you're going to sell something to Barnes & Noble or through Walmart, if you're going to sell into Walmart, you're going to have to be able to print up fifty, sixty, a hundred thousand units just to get a couple in each store. And then he have to ask yourself how many individuals can come up with that type of lire?

*Ramon: Well, you could do Ingram?*

Stanford: In theory you could, right? But I think that over time there's going to be less and less space for that. Its relative accessibility. There's some people that are going to find their way in, right?

*Ramon: Why?*

Stanford: There's not going to be as many spots. And let's face it you're going to

be competing for Real Estate with much bigger entities. They are able to throw money at problems in the way that you can't. So, what will happen is you and small entity are going to end up partnering with a bigger entity to get into the biggest entity. And so, and I think that's what's interesting about the comic shop. And like the independent bookstore similar in that way. They can sell on it. They can actually turn a profit on a small scale. And there is going to be a demand for people to turn a profit on a small scale. If you decide to do your own comic today, I mean, do you think that you're out the gates going to have enough money to print up a hundred thousand copies, which would be the minimum to be able to get it into the book stores? And then what just yesterday they just announced a big book merger. Was it Penguin and Random House who are talking about merging and that'll be like 34, that that'll be over thirty-four percent of the market share. Do you think that that entity is going to be pushing super, super hard to get have lots of independent people, independent novelist and graphic novelist to get their stuff in the store or they going to team up with Disney that can give them exactly what they want, exactly what they need to then distribute to their outlets.

*Ramon: I guess it depends on the gatekeepers at the publishing houses.*

Stanford: It does and the capacity of the creators. So, that's the thing that we're also talking about its capacity. Marvel and DC has so much excess capacity that they can do things that nobody else can do, right? If Marvel and DC they can front a million dollars to make 10 million. I mean, I don't know about you, but if someone said, "I can give you 10 million dollars if you can come up with a million dollars tomorrow", I'd just be, I don't have the capacity to do that, right?

*Ramon: Right. Yeah.*

Stanford: But a Marvel or DC has the capacity to do that. They can they can literally pull it out of like pocket change because there's an organization that is set up with those types of cash reserves. So that's why I see and you know, and when you see an independent making their way into these spaces, right? Like I said earlier the independent teams up with someone bigger than they are to have the capacity to then hook up with the bigger system. So that's kind of my...

*Ramon: No, I get it. I get it. It's nice because you're answering all my questions in a more narrative or in the more conversational format rather than just you know. Because I'm looking at my questions and we've pretty much covered pretty much all of them already in this conversation.*

Stanford: Well, that's right it would be better to talk about it because if I were to answer these questions, I probably giving you just a couple of sentences for each one and I figured you probably needed more than that, you know. Do you have any suggestions for ideas to bolster the floppy comic book industry?

*Ramon: I think you have already covered a few.*

Stanford: Yeah.

*Ramon: Yeah.*

Stanford: It's going to become more community-centered, more on dead space then the diversification of the product offerings even within the notion of a floppy comic, right? I mean, we also don't talk about just how broad the possibilities are for a floppy comic and I think an exploration of that like I said some at smaller price point, some at larger price points. Some that are more art center, some that are just being put out as lost leaders for other product and other spaces. So yeah, I mean I keep thinking back to the olden days when they had these gatherings of people like comics they call them comic conventions.

*Ramon: I remember those.*



## Conclusion

**"YOU ARE THE FUTURE OF COMICS."**

**- JACK KIRBY, 1992**

The comic industry is in upheaval. Not only is the industry changing, but the COVID pandemic has greatly affected, if not catalyzed more change. Based on the information gathered, here are some prognostications.

### **MAINSTREAM COMICS**

As the current readership dwindles, periodical comics will do so as well. Both Marvel and DC now call themselves "Entertainment" companies rather than comic publishers. As it becomes apparent that there's more money in other media and not in publishing "floppies," they will scale back and maybe just license out the comics part of their activities to smaller publishers.

### **INDEPENDENT COMICS**

While the big players may not see worthwhile profit in single issue comic books, many independent creators and self-publishers still do. The barriers to entry are minimal and the chance to hit it big and own all of the property are a possibility, though not a common one. But that dream inspires many.

### **GRAPHIC NOVELS**

The children's and young adults' market will continue to grow as more and more people, including educators, realize the appeal and utility of graphic novels and the comic art form in general. As genres widen and more adults make these books part of their reading lists, more and more book publishers will jump on the bandwagon. Many already have.

### **CREATORS**

Graphic novelists don't often work in mainstream comics but several mainstream creators do dabble in graphic novels. And more will continue to do so. The creative satisfaction is the same if not more so and the market trends and financial rewards cannot be ignored.

### **READERS**

While there will always be mainstream comic book readers (and collectors), they are increasingly less in number. Buying and selling floppies will probably become a niche market but those who occupy that niche are usually pretty loyal and passionate.

Not all, but many readers of graphic novels, though indoctrinated as children, will continue to consume this sequential art form as more diverse genres and creators enter the market.

The industry is changing and ten years from now it may still look familiar but will, in all likelihood, be altogether different. I usually believe that change is good. I believe these changes will be so too and as a creator myself, I plan to do what I can to make sure things go well.

**- Ramon Gil**

# Biography

Ramon Gil  
Bachelor of Arts 1991 - General Art  
California State University Long Beach, California

Ramon has a love for comics and a love for teaching. He has written (and sometimes drawn) over 20 comic books, comic stories and graphic novels and has penned several articles and moderated a number of panels and workshops on the topic. He is the organizer of Diversity Comic Con at the Fashion Institute of Technology where he teaches and he is the founder of The Comic Arts Workshop, a virtual school for aspiring graphic novelists. Born in the Philippines and schooled in California, he now resides in New York with his wife and two children.

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# Documentation

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Comic Books  
Versus  
Graphic Novels

The Differences, The Schism  
and The Future

By Ramon Gil  
BA - Art, California State University,  
Long Beach

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Master of Arts in Illustration  
In the Graduate School of the  
Fashion Institute of Technology

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