

A. Edward Newton Book Collection Award

Mai Pucik, '06, 4/3/06:

Identity Crises (and the lack thereof) in Sequential Narrative

Allow me to skip around the preamble, cut to the chase, and provide you first of all with the Meaningful (read: “meaningful”) and Deep (“of arbitrarily variable profundity”) personal history behind my choice of topic. It goes like this: my mother is Vietnamese, a French-era bourgeoisie who escaped to Smith College right before the war. My father was an anti-Soviet dissident who met my mother in New York, a city that shaped their lives but which I have never lived in. I was born in Michigan, learned to read Japanese in a Tokyo pre-school, spent a few middle-class democrat years in an East Coast college town, and was then dumped in a traditional Swiss-French style classroom on the first day of seventh grade, speaking no French other than the words for, “Hello, I can’t speak French.”

It may come as no surprise that I live with an identity crisis always at bay. It lives, it lurks, and I ignore it completely; my life is such that my cultural history and upbringing is vitally important, and yet seemingly almost never relevant to why I am, what I am. I have always been a great reader – reader of a great many books, rather than a reader who is great - but the standard novels and biographies that I read growing up never seemed to address cultural heritage from a truly multicultural perspective. They were always about young people torn between one parent’s heritage and the other’s, or frustrated by their immigrant grandparents’ refusal to conform to the society they wanted to live in.

Since I and my parents have never been particularly torn about the place of our myriad cultures in our lives, none of these stories ever seemed to apply to me. Perhaps it’s for that reason that I edged first towards science fiction and fantasy, and then to comic books. If the protagonist of the book I’m reading has a crisis of identity that I’m never going to concern myself with, it might as well be about his arachnid-based superpowers or the fact that her father is a supervillain as anything else.

Once I discovered sequential narratives, I started to realize that I’d not just found an entertaining form of escapism but a budding genre of art, and one that I felt I could get a real handle on. I’ve always wanted to be a writer, not an artist, a director, or much of anything else, but have often been troubled by a very visual mind that I wasn’t sure how to apply to pure prose – or even poetry or drama.

Sequential art and graphic novels offer all kinds of narrative possibilities that you couldn’t find anywhere else: the exhilarating teamwork of combining one’s writing with another’s visuals, the constant mixing of references, the variety of subject matters yet to be explored in the form, the chance to create movement in the placement of still images and captions on a page. One day, I hope to write stories in this genre myself, and explore the questions of identity that have never been satisfied for me in reading. Maybe, in doing so, I’ll be able to add to some other reader’s collection.

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TEENAGE ANGST WITH A TWIST.

1. David, Peter, and Todd Nauck (illustrator). *Young Justice: A League of Their Own*. New York: DC Comics, 2000.

One of the lightest stories in this collection, *Young Justice* is about a group of teenage sidekicks – Robin, Superboy, Wonder Girl, and a host of other memorable characters – and their bid to form their own heroic identities by creating their own team separate from their mentors. Like many of the books here, this one was acquired by sneaking it from my brother's shelf.

2. Lee, Stan, and Steve Ditko (illustrator). *Marvel Masterworks: The Amazing Spider-man, Volume 1*. USA: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003.

In this set of old stories, a classic of this genre, Lee and Ditko explore their subversive teenage hero that became an ubiquitous American icon in his original, swinging sixties context. The tales are campy, dated, and all together too alliterative, but have a mesmerizing power that's hard to explain. As far as identity crises go, Peter Parker's constant angst is amusing enough, but more so is the fact that of his two creators, one is also the mind behind – of all things – the Hugh Hefner cartoon *Striperella*, and the other is a reclusive Ayn Rand objectivist who hasn't spoken to the press or been successfully photographed in more than thirty years. It may come as no surprise that the team broke up in mutual disgust after thirty-nine issues.

I bought this collected paperback edition at a Barnes and Noble, though I only remember this because it's the only chain that offers these deluxe reprints at a price that I can afford.

3. Vaughan, Brian K., Adrian Alphona (illustrator) and Takeshi Miyazawa (illus). *Runaways: Teenage Wastland*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2004.

In contrast to the stories above, *Runaways* is a funny but incredibly dark and cynical look at teenage life. All teenagers think their parents are evil, but the six protagonists of this story discover that theirs are really murderous LA crimelords. I first collected the issues bound in this edition in pamphlet form from the comic book store, before buying the combined digest for reading convenience.

NOT AS SIMPLE AS THEY SEEM.

4. Jenkins, Paul, and Mark Buckingham. *Peter Parker, Spider-man: A Day in the Life*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2001.

I don't remember where I bought this, though I believe it was at some anonymous corporate store; I do remember that it was the book that proved I was into American sequential art for the long run, as I transitioned from reading one creative team's stories about one superhero (for more on that, see my last entry), to reading several other team's stories, to – finally – the full range of narratives available in the genre. Paul Jenkins and Mark Buckingham here present a sequence of short stories not about Spider-man, but the man behind the mask, and how he reconciles his life, his woes, and his search for love with his heroic responsibilities.

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5. Eisner, Will. *A Contract with God: and Other Tenement Stories*. 1985. USA: Kitchen Sink Press, 2000.

In the movies, the Oscar awards are named after a fictional conceit. In comics, the premiere awards of the industry are called the Eisners, and this graphic novel – often considered the very first in modern American terms – might very well demonstrate why. In the titular story, a religious man whose daughter Rachel comes to an early and terrible end questions the entire basis of his spirituality and responds to his grief by remaking his entire persona. I bought this novel on Amazon, after reading some of Eisner's shorter stories online.

6. Ohba, Tsugumi, and Takeshi Obata (illustrator). Trans. Pookie Rolf. *Death Note Volume 1*. USA: VIZ Media, LLC, 2005.

Light Yagami is a brilliant but bored high school student who acquires a mystical artifact that will let him change the world – so far, that sounds like every contemporary fantasy manga in existence. The twist to this one: the artifact is a notebook that will kill anyone whose name is written on its pages. With that simple change, our plucky teenage hero is a psychopath – or is he?

I bought the first volume of this series on the recommendation of a friend of mine on livejournal.

7. Watsuki, Nobuhiro. *Kenshin le Vagabond Volume 1: Kenshin dit Battosai [Rurouni Kenshin]*. France: Glénat, 1998.

This is the first book here that I collected on my own, without parental guidance – way back in 1999 from a Swiss store *bandes dessinées*. It's a translated Japanese manga about a former assassin in the early Meiji period of Japan, searching for a peaceful identity in a world that has no purpose for him, but still contains many people who would hunt him down for revenge. At first glance it's melodramatic, silly, and defies most of the laws of physics in its battle scenes, which is why it might come as a surprise to discover its savvy political commentary and philosophy of civic responsibility.

LET'S GET POLITICAL.

8. Bendis, Brian, and Alex Maleev (illustrator). *Daredevil: Out*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2002.

Matthew Murdock, also known as Daredevil, is a hero with two disabilities: he's blind, and in his movie 2003 he had the misfortune to be played by Ben Affleck. This recent story ignores both these elements in favor of a trickier moral tangle: what do you do when your night-time heroism as a vigilante is a conflict of interest with your dayjob as a criminal lawyer? Bendis and Maleev skillfully paint the portrait of an unflinchingly upright human being forced to take legal and moral shortcuts in the name of what he believes is ultimately best for protecting the people around him.

I collected this novel and its many sequels (Bendis and Maleev stuck together for more than four years at 22 pages a month) at Showcase Comics in Bryn Mawr.

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9. Cooke, Darwyn. *DC: The New Frontier Volume 1*. New York: DC Comics, 2004.

DC Comics is infamous for regularly restarting its heroes' storylines to bring them up to date with the modern world. In this two-part series (the first came from a New York City Barnes and Noble; I haven't yet found the second part), Darwyn Cooke went back to an earlier timeline for Superman, Wonder Woman, and a host of other, more obscure superheroes, setting them against the backdrop of McCarthyism, Korea and the French-Vietnamese War.

10. Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons (illustrator). *Watchmen*. USA: DC Comics, 1995.

Considered to be one of the seminal American graphic novels in existence, *Watchmen's* premise is based on the Juvenal quote that titles it: "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodies?*" Who Watches the Watchmen? The best answer we get in this story is, "no one:" not a pleasant answer when the best superheroes are dysfunctional, the worst are willing to commit genocide for their ideals, and the most diligent of all is a faceless psychopath.

This was one of the first novels I put in my collection, mostly because I stole it from my brother. He noticed a few months ago, so I expect it will be stolen back shortly.

11. Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. 1973 (vol. I), 1986 (vol. II). USA: Pantheon Books, 1996.

I almost feel like I'm cheating for including this one here, since it's pretty much a staple of high school and college English studies – or as close to one as a graphic novel can get. But that's for a reason, because the seeming flatness of Jewish people drawn as mice and Germans as cats is really the blank affect of trauma and of permanently shattered identities.

I grew up on this duology (which might explain certain things) and purchased this lovely collected edition on Amazon (home of all good collected editions) when our two little paperbacks fell apart.

12. Hergé. *The Blue Lotus*. Trans. Leslie Londale-Cooper and Michael Turner. Boston: Little, Brown, 1994.

I also grew up on this Tintin adventure, but never really appreciated it until I learned about its backstory. Written in 1936, the story is dated by most standards, but it was a genuine watershed for the writer, and one of the key narratives on his transition in identity (and Tintin's) from Rexist fascism to a position not quite as left as socialism.

NEW JERSEY OCCASIONALLY CONTRIBUTES TO LITERATURE.

13. Beatty, Scott et al. *Batgirl: Year One*. New York: DC Comics, 2003.
14. Brubaker, Ed, Greg Rucka, and Michael Lark. *Gotham Central: In the Line of Duty*. New York: DC Comics, 2004.
15. Dixon, Chuck et al. *Robin: Year One*. New York: DC Comics, 2002.

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16. Miller, Frank, and David Mazzuchelli. *Batman: Year One*. New York: DC Comics, 1988.

In case you were wondering, New Jersey is the home state of Gotham City, which is (really) not actually New York. Only three of these four stories are part of the same, loose-knit series, but all of them tackle, in their own ways, the tensions between personal identity and personal responsibilities – to a family, to a legacy, and to an entire city. Now-superstar Miller's rendition of Bruce Wayne's first year is probably the most famous, but I'm endlessly fond of *Robin* and *Batgirl*'s retro-but-sophisticated looks at, essentially, growing up juggling two families (and looking cool in front of the other kids while you do it). *In the Line of Duty*, meanwhile, begins the story of Gotham City's Major Crimes Unit, endlessly dedicated and always faced with the problem of having been made redundant in their own city by a single man in a bat suit.

These books were collected over a period of several years between at least three retail stores, but I'm not sure which was which.

IT'S NOT CHEATING IF YOU SQUINT.

17. DeFalco, Tom. *Comics Creators on Spider-man*. United Kingdom: Titan Books, 2004.

One of the reasons I'm mainstream enough to want to write superhero comics is that I'm interested in the vaguely bardic tradition of taking an old story and running with it – and how that translates to the hip, corporate 21st century. Tom DeFalco, Spider-man major-leaguer (there's an oxymoron) in his own right, interviews a bunch of fellow writers and artists about their cumulative forty-year experience. I discovered at the end of my sophomore year that I didn't hate postmodern theory as much as I claimed to when I found myself arguing with the creators about stories they'd written.

18. Schultz, Charles. *The Complete Peanuts: 1950 to 1952*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2004.

The first-ever strip of Schultz's masterwork sums up its entire ethos in four panels. As a young, pre-school Charlie Brown wanders by, two older children sitting on a stoop comment: "Well! Here comes ol' Charlie Brown! Good ol' Charlie Brown yes, sir!" This is followed up once he has passed with, "How I hate him!"

Peanuts was a long-running (nearly eternal, in the minds of my generation and those of my parents') comic strip rather than a single graphic novel, but I count the first collection here because it taught me so much about narrative elegance and the simplicity of line. Also, once upon a time, Schultz's mini-epics of eternal self-flagellation and confusion were subversive.

This book was a gift last year from my mother, who used to keep old, yellowing paperbacks of Snoopy's adventures in the bathroom.

MOSTLY JUST BIZARRE.

19. Bendis, Brian, and Michael Gaydos (illustrator). *Alias Volume 1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2004.

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These days, the scuttlebutt goes that Mr. Bendis earns about a thousand dollars for every finished page of a comic he writes. Twenty-two pages per issue, five or six comics a month – that's some gossip-worthy math. And a lot of it is due at least in part to this moody, unflinching, but essentially warm look at a woman who decided she wasn't fit to be a superhero, and completely failed to become a seedy private investigator instead.

I don't know what Michael Gaydos' salary is.

20. Gaiman, Neil et al. *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes*. New York: DC Comics, 1991.

On a purely literary level, I'm not sure there's much I can say about this book that someone at the library hasn't already said, given that as long as I've been here the Sandman graphic novels have been perpetually checked out, forcing me to eventually buy a copy of this first one on Amazon.com. Historiographically, though, I can mention that the Sandman's inspiration and visual design is based upon Wesley Dodds, mystery man of the forties who ran around in a three-piece suit and a gas mask (truly classic fashion). However, since this "new" Sandman is one of the Endless, created at the beginning of time, Gaiman cunningly weaves a story in which Dodds was inspired in a dream to start his crimefighting by a character created decades after himself. It's that kind of in-and-out potential of the genre that interests me in comics.

21. Herriman, George, and Bill Blackbeard (editor). *Krazy & Ignatz 1929-1930: "A Mice, a Brick, a Lovely Night"*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2003.

I picked up my first ever *Krazy Kat* book from an anonymous Borders bookstore, on the long-distance recommendation of Bill Watterson (creator of *Calvin and Hobbes*). One of the strangest things I've ever read, it's the eternal love triangle of Krazy Kat, in love with Ignatz Mouse, who rejects her in favor of harassing Offisa Pup, who always wants to protect the oblivious Kat. The backgrounds change, the one-page stories are elliptical at best, but the main characters' identities never change – it's sequential, and it's narrative, but mostly it's just strange.

22. Slott, Dan and Juan Bobillo (illustrator). *She-Hulk: Single Green Female*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2004.

Jennifer Walters: She-Hulk. Is she defined by her creation as sex-bomb counterpart to her cousin, Bruce Banner? Is she a gamma-green party girl, or a mousy-brilliant lawyer? Does it really matter, so long as Slott continues to write her in absurdist legal comedies wherein ghosts, teenage supervillains and Spider-man in a chicken suit all play important roles in the plot? Probably not. Completely insane, and yet one of the smartest books on this list.

It was also the most traumatizing to acquire, as I had to scrounge it out of a stereotypical comic book store in Albuquerque, trying not to feel the gaze of bombastic bunny girls and half-naked en-mammared androids staring at me.

23. Vaughan, Brian K., and Pia Guerra (illustrator). *Y: The Last Man – Unmanned*. New York: DC Comics, 2003.

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On that note, here's a plot for pornography: a mysterious plague kills all the male mammals on Earth except for a wimpy escape artist named Yorick (his sister's name is Hero) and trained helper monkey, Ampersand. Mysterious and usually attractive women pursue him around the globe as he tries to find his stranded fiancée. It's actually a savvy, tongue-in-cheek political comedy which happily tackles issues of race, gender, and malleable identity head-on, so it's fitting that I bought it at the Bryn Mawr comic book store my sophomore year.

SUMMING UP.

24. Mignola, Mike. *Hellboy: The Right Hand of Doom*. Milwaukee: Dark Horse Books, 2000.

Hellboy is a devil, originally bred to bring chaos and destruction to the world, but raised instead by a benign paranormal expert who discovered him in World War II. Now he spends his life protecting people from demons superficially just like him, with a working man's completely blasé approach to all the weird things in his life. When faced with a crisis of identity in discovering his true origin, Hellboy responds to the problem just like any of us would: he punches giant worms in the face.

This is another part of my collection that comes from Showcase Comics in Bryn Mawr, the store where an employee once told me that they provided a community service. You see, they keep the local kids too poor to buy drugs.

25. Straczynski, J. Michael, and John Romita Jr. (illustrator). *The Amazing Spider-man: Coming Home*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2001.

Of all the stories here, this is the one closest to my heart, because it started my adult interest in comic books. While I'd always been happy to read my parents' Tintin comics or buy the occasional manga, once I nabbed this novel from my brother's collection, I was hooked. The bombastic, edge-of-your-seat action was a big plus for my sixteen-year-old self, of course, but mostly I was fascinated by the confidence, introspection, and humor with which this nerdy, luckless guy – who thought and acted more than a bit like I wished I could – grappled for the meaning of his self and his identity in the face of truly bizarre and world-shaking revelations about his powers and his history. When Peter Parker declares, “It doesn't matter what I came from so much as what I do,” that was a manifesto that I could stand by.

Now that I've gained interest in graphic novels as something to write, instead of just read, I've come back again and again to this story to admire the smoothness of Straczynski's writing, and the elegance with which Romita Jr.'s art moves the reader from page to page (his grasp of body language alone is to die for). After twenty-plus rereads, the story has yet to lose my attention, and that's the highest praise I know how to give.