

JELLY ROLL MORTON'S

VOODOO CURSE

WHAT WAS IT THAT SHADOWED "MR. JELLY ROLL", NUMBER ONE HOT BAND LEADER OF THE TWENTIES, WHEN HE MOVED TO NEW YORK AT THE PEAK OF HIS POPULARITY AROUND 1928? IN MAY, 1933, AFTER YEARS OF BEING ON THE SALES, MORTON SAT DOWN IN FRONT OF A MICROPHONE AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS AND BEGAN TELLING HIS LIFE STORY TO FOLKSONG COLLECTOR ALAN LOMAX. BEGINS WITH NEW ORLEANS MORTON KNOW ALL ABOUT THE WORKINGS OF VODOO, AND IN HIS OWN WORDS HE DESCRIBED HOW THESE MYSTERIOUS FORCES WERE USED TO BRING ABOUT HIS DOWNFALL.....



WHEN I WAS A YOUNG MAN, THESE HOODOO PEOPLE WITH THEIR UNDERGROUND STUFF HELP ME ALONG. I DID NOT FEEL GRATEFUL, AND I DID NOT REWARD THEM FOR THE HELP THEY GAVE. NOW, WHEN EVERYTHING BEGAN TO GO AGAINST ME, THOSE UNDERGROUND STREAMS WERE RUNNING AGAINST ME TOO.



I WAS IN THE MUSIC PUBLISHING BUSINESS. EVERYBODY WAS WRITING ME FOR BANDS AND FOR MUSIC AND FOR RADIO PROGRAMS, AND I HAD MORE WORK THAN I COULD DO.



I BUMPED INTO A WEST-INDIAN GUY WHO WAS FOOLING AROUND WITH THE MUSIC PUBLISHING BUSINESS IN AN OFFICE SO SMALL YOU COULDN'T TURN AROUND IN IT.



ROBERT CRUMB.
OPENING PANELS FROM "JELLY ROLL MORTON'S VODOO CURSE."

Graphic Fiction: The Craft of Comics

By Conger Beasley Jr.

Essay Review:

An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories, edited by Ivan Brunetti. Yale University Press, 2006.

It was the Sunday comics page in my local newspaper with its bold splashes of color back in the far-off 1940s that first caught my eye. The adventure and daring-do that seethed around the featured characters drew me in even deeper—Dick Tracy, Steve Canyon, Terry and the Pirates, Smilin' Jack, Prince Valiant. I perused each feature, taking my time, reading and rereading the copy encapsulated in the balloons, savoring the style of the drawings, segueing from one to the other, marveling (though I didn't know why) at the manner in which text augmented cartoon and vice-versa.

Sadly, it took only a few minutes to canvas the comics section, and then it was over for another week. Sometimes I saved the section to look at later in the privacy of my bedroom, but the thrill was gone, the initial (sweet) feeling of entering a different realm from the ordinary one I inhabited every day dissolved like a Technicolor dream. Long before movies and TV, the Sunday comics page initiated me into a free-form fantasy that charged my imagination and sent it tumbling through an ether devoid of conventional gravity.

Comic books came next. At the age of 12, in 1952, I discovered EC comics—*Tales From the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, *Frontline Combat*, *Two-Fisted Tales*, and a funny new issue called *MAD* that satirized the complacencies of the 1950s. The artists who drew the covers and the features that appeared in these publications became my heroes: Jack Davis, Wallace Wood, Harvey Kurtzman, Bill Elder, John Severin, Jack Williamson—a partial listing, at best.

The cartoon form always has had a specific American appeal. The fact that it's a hybrid form, part word, part picture, an amalgam

of both—an emulsion of both—may have something to do with it. It can be read and viewed at the same time, word melting suggestively into image, image bulking concretely into word. Given this hyperextension of forms, I would add to the definition by saying that it's more like a hieroglyph, a distillation of thought and style, a numinous rune that's not only instantly identifiable but suggestive of multiple layers of additional meaning.

Most bookstores today, from the big chains to the diehard independents, stock graphic works. Somebody must be buying something, or else the shelves wouldn't be cluttered with so many new titles. The majority of these are bland and inoffensive, recidivist in subject matter, tiresome retreads of *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Superman*, *Batman* . . . so different in tone and feeling from the underground comix of the 1960s, which, fueled by sex, drugs, and political protest, blazed onto the national scene in the works of raw, original, uninhibited talents such as R. Crumb. In every town in America back then, some boy or girl hunched over a drawing board committing his or her anarchic and prurient fantasies to paper. The ban on so-called salacious books by authors such as D.H. Lawrence, Anaïs Nin, and Henry Miller had been lifted earlier in the decade, and graphic scenes of sex and violence suddenly appeared in publications everywhere.

What was outlawed back then is fully legal today, and writers and artists can go full tilt in any direction they want. The contribution that cartoon graphics made to this process—I'm thinking of the EC line of comics, particularly *MAD*—played a major role in liberating both mainstream literature and cinema from the middlebrow hang-ups of the 1950s.

Indeed, in the wake not only of this massive censorship meltdown, but the accelerated visualization (via TV and the movies) of pop culture, graphic comics are suddenly everywhere—hailed and acclaimed, cutting edge and comforting fluff, purchased and presumably “read.” And not just by the average teenager who haunts the racks looking for something nasty and hot, but old guys like myself, looking to reconnect with their adolescent years.

Indicative of this trend is the recent publication by Yale University Press of *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, & True Stories* that showcases representative work from legendary 1960s standbys such as R. Crumb, plus a raft of fresh new talent.

Ivan Brunetti, himself a graphic artist, edited the book and provides an informative introduction. "When we merely look at comics," he says, "they seem to exist as architectural entities, static aggregates of geometric and organic forms. But when we begin to read them, we enter their world . . . and suddenly characters, situations, and emotions are seemingly animated in our mind's eye. . . ."

"At the purest level," he continues, "comics are not an assembled series of images, but intuitively constructed sequences of images. Panels on a page (and even within an entire story) are connected into a unified whole, and each panel seems to exist in a latent state inside all of the other panels."

What we took for granted for so long, what we didn't have to explain because we didn't know how to explain it, what was as easy for us to understand as breathing in and out has now become an arena for serious discussion and analysis. Michigan State University and Yale University libraries, just to mention two, have major comic collections. Florida State University offers Comics Studies as part of its English department curriculum, and so on. Once ridiculed and dismissed, cartoon art has entered the mainstream—not only the economic mainstream as in the case of Frank Miller's recent fabulously successful *300*, a graphic work about the intrepid Greek warriors who held off a zillion Persians at the battle of Thermopylae—but the readership mainstream, ordinary guys and gals who thrill to the stories and the bright, catchy images that illuminate the pages.

To his credit, Ivan Brunetti keeps it simple by identifying in his introduction the impulses that compel us to want to create this kind of art. He insists that it all begins with doodling. "Cartooning," he contends, "is a transmittal of thought and soul through a codified, highly refined system of, essentially, doodles." Confronting a blank sheet of paper with a pen or pencil, making a mark here, rounding a

curve there, putting in a pair of eyes, suggesting a possible backdrop with the outline of a tree . . . does the hand lead the mind, or vice versa? Impossible to say. The two certainly work in conjunction—pushing-pulling, teasing-tempting—to develop the unique word-picture language that is the essence of the comics form.

Many of us have tinkered at some time with the medium, especially during adolescence. Back then it was easier to try to draw something—some illustration of the life around you—than it was to try to formulate a description of it in words. Artists and composers seem to be able to utilize their respective crafts at an earlier age with more alacrity and skill than writers (the exceptions being verbal wunderkinds such as Thomas Chatterton, John Keats, and Arthur Rimbaud). It usually takes a long time to evolve into a writer; you have to acquire the language as well as the facility for calling it up before you can actually concoct a memorable story or poem.

I drew my heart out when I was 12 and 13, filling reams of paper with sketches, faces, animals, objects, action scenes, the majority cribbed from my favorite comic-book stories. I just didn't have the talent. I could render a recognizable facsimile of whatever it was I called up in my mind, but that rendering lacked originality and style. And without originality and style, without the ability to meld words and objects into a coherent, lapidary image (into a deeply personalized "signature" of sorts), I couldn't create a decent cartoon. I had friends who could. They made it look easy. They made it look fun . . . so personal and expressive, so utterly cool and detached.

Lo these many decades later, I have Ivan Brunetti's graphic-fiction anthology in which to revel in the variety of fabulous talents that grace its pages. He includes several of the graybeards, early masters of the genre, such as George Herriman (*Krazy Kat*), Crockett Johnson (*Barnaby*), Frank King (*Gasoline Alley*), Otto Soglow (*The Ambassador*), and Lyonel Feininger (*The Kin-der-Kids*), who flourished in the 1920s and 1930s.

Another of the book's strong points is the generous sampling of younger practitioners who are redefining the craft at the same time they are perpetuating the high standards laid down by their

predecessors. The reigning quintet of veteran, first-rate graphic artists working at the moment seems to be, in my opinion, R. Crumb, Bill Griffith, Joe Sacco, Art Spiegelman, and Chris Ware. Waiting and ready, loaded with ideas and talent, are comparative newcomers such as Seth, Carol Tyler, Jaime Hernandez, and David Collier.

The presiding genius of contemporary American cartoon art is still the inestimable R. Crumb. He is generously represented in this publication by several stories, among them "Uncle Bob's Mid-Life Crisis," a classic rehash of the fretful, neurotic, autobiographical diatribe he made famous in the 1960s; plus a haunting, absorbing, nonfiction story of jazz legend Jelly Roll Morton and the voodoo curse that may have ended his life prematurely.

Equally effective is a 12-panel wordless sequence by Crumb entitled "A Short History of America." The work depicts the urbanization of a chunk of generic landscape from bucolic countryside to a congested cityscape of streets, traffic, communication wires, and franchise joints. The panel-by-panel representation of "progress" is inexorable and familiar to all of us who have seen our neighborhoods and hometowns fall victim to the effects of growth and development.

Carol Tyler is a remarkable visual artist with a keen sense of color and a gift for caricature, and a delightfully loopy talent for storytelling. "Gone" concerns a bizarre woman who lives in a house full of curios and mementos that may or may not be worth something. The text has a funky, off-beat rhythm that neatly matches the odd, cluttered, streaky colors of the drawings. Reading between text and drawing induces a strangely hallucinogenic effect.



CAROL TYLER.
PANEL FROM "GONE."

Another first-rate artist is Jaime Hernandez. His contribution, “Flies on the Ceiling: The Story of Isabel in Mexico,” recounts the flight of a young woman across the border in search of a solution to a mysterious pregnancy (the result, apparently, of an unholy tryst between herself and Satan) that torments and bedevils her.

At home in the USA, she considers getting an abortion, but the fury of her family at the mere suggestion of such a blasphemous deed sends her reeling into the unknown. In Mexico, she meets a lonely, older man with a young son whom she joins up with in an effort to establish a viable surrogate family. In a gripping sequence, Isabel gives birth to a lizard and realizes that despite the warmth and affection the man and his son feel for her, she has been cursed

by Satan and will never be able to live a normal life.

Hernandez’s line drawings are clear and precise. The juxtaposition of the heavy black silhouettes and stark white intervals are remarkable. The composition of the characters and the backgrounds within the panels are carefully thought out, well-balanced, enhancing the effect of Isabel’s plunge into debilitating madness.



JAIME HERNANDEZ.

PANEL FROM “FLIES ON THE CEILING:
THE STORY OF ISABEL IN MEXICO.”

Seth is a Canadian artist whose work decorates the dust jacket of the anthology. He is represented by a long excerpt from a recent book entitled “It’s a Good Life If You Don’t Weaken.” He is easily one of the most cinematic of the artists represented in the anthology, utilizing long, fluid, tracking shots to depict the path of a nerdy corporate type as he walks home from work through a wintry afternoon.

The story is rendered in a cool, limited palette—white, blue, and black. The drawings are simple and clear. The protagonist wears

a hat and overcoat; pupilless eyeglasses give his face a vacuous expression. He carries a briefcase resembling an old-fashioned doctor's valise. The blue tones, stark white backgrounds, and solid black highlights subtly but effectively convey the mute, oppressive feel of a place (Canada) where winter—and life—are serious concerns.

As the panels glide by, the story becomes more surrealistic. The seemingly innocent walk becomes a journey into the man's past, which Seth conveys through a judicious blend of pertinent text and bland, expressionless colors. The piece is so fluid and low key it sneaks up on you. At first, nothing appears to be happening; the businessman gets off a bus and walks through a familiar neighborhood. He meets a boy who might be a reincarnation of his own childhood self. People shout at him along the way for no apparent reason, their voices distant and disembodied. He recognizes a few perfunctory landmarks—houses, silos, a swing set, a water tower.

He finally arrives at his destination, which turns out to be a drab, anonymous, blue-walled motel with black doors presided over by a slatternly woman with tousled hair who hands him a room key. "We've



SETH.
PANEL FROM "IT'S A GOOD LIFE
IF YOU DON'T WEAKEN."

been expecting you," she says. By keeping it quiet and low-key, Seth admirably conveys the melancholy disconnect between a man enveloped in the cocoon of his own empty life and the dreary, spiritless angst of the larger life around him.