

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF COMICS

An introduction

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I love comics. Since I was a kid I've harboured a passion for comics. I remember being mesmerised by the coloured pages, describing brilliant adventures of brightly-clad heroes fighting for truth, justice and the American way.

Reading comics made me believe in miracles but then I grew up and I realised that people didn't share my love for comics. They couldn't or didn't believe in miracles. They even said comics were bad for you. Comics were only for people who couldn't read properly - that's why libraries didn't have them - because books were for clever and comics for stupid people.

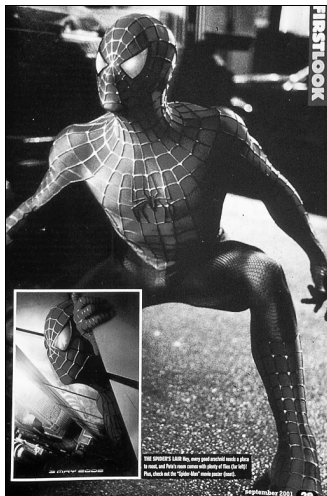
The sad truth is a teacher told me this. I'm sure she meant well but her advice came from a misplaced sense of duty and a lack of knowledge.

My aim is to provide an insight into comic book literature and legitimise the treatment of comics as a literary and artistic medium worthy of a modicum of equality in the world of popular literature.

Comics have gone mainstream. By mainstream we mean that comics have transcended the boundaries of marginalised literary and artistic obscurity and have attained immortality by joining the world pop culture. And you can blame it all on the movies.

I'm sure you've heard of it and you might have seen it; **Spider-Man** broke box office records across the world, as movies go it has reached the status of pop classic (and will undoubtedly be bought by the Western Cape Provincial Library Service [WCPLS] if by some chance you missed it at the cinemas).

But besides the impressive box office records, this movie,



unlike most, was told before in another medium. It started in a brightly-coloured book with poor quality paper and told the simple story of a young man bitten by a radioactive spider who is subsequently bestowed with great power and even greater responsibilities. It emblazoned itself in the hearts and minds of Americans for over 50 years.

Now it is our turn to hear the stories.

Soon there will be others. Superman, Batman, X-Men and Blade, are a few of the more popular ones, but do you know of Hellboy, The Incredible Hulk, Daredevil, Rising Stars or the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen? You might not, but the public knows. They might not have known prior to 16 May 2002 (the premier of the **Spider-Man**), but they do now. And as librarians it is our job to know too. We have to know because that is the best way to serve our community needs.

A definition

Like all other mediums (film, books and paintings are just a few examples of different kinds of mediums) it has its own set of rules and conventions. These govern the creation of works within the medium of comics. But what are comics?

'Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer' (McCloud 1994:9). And as the creator of this definition suggests, it's quite a mouthful. The most important in this definition is



'sequential art'. (See glossary of terms on p 22.)

Sequential art is pictures in a sequence that tell a story, basically imparting a message in graphic and literary form, or in other words, tell you about a man that dresses in a bat suit fighting crime.

That's the message that the medium conveys. However, comics are not limited to telling stories about the adventures of spandex-clad heroes, but have run the gamut of literary genres. The lesson here is never to mistake the message for the medium (McCloud 1994:6).

Graphic novels are much easier to define. Think of a graphic novel as a book told in comic book form; it has a beginning, middle and an end.

In contrast, comic book trade paperbacks are a collection of story arcs of serialised comic books into a graphic novel format. Comic trades are a creation of our modern age and mass consumerism.

A brief history

The idea of sequential art is very old. The Bayeux Tapestry is a 230-foot long tapestry that details the Norman conquests of England in 1066.

Read from left to right, it depicts the events of the conquest in a chronological order.

In the late 1700s with George Washington as president of the fledgling United States of America, single panel drawings, part political satire, part entertainment and part social commentary were published in newspapers.

Jumping ahead a few decades to 1890 in New York City, two newspaper moguls, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst competed for the hearts, minds and readers on the streets of New York. Both realised that the best way for them to achieve this was to make their newspaper appeal to the rapidly-growing working class, the papers sold more when the readers could relate to the contents.

Joseph Pulitzer fired the opening salvo, by publishing a comic strip drawn by RF Outcault. The modest drawings depicted scenes of city life with a strong satirical edge and in the middle of it all was a child, 'androgynous, bald and with a look both quizzical and wise in the midst of the slapstick social commentary' (McCue 1993:9).

The child was dubbed The Yellow Kid

and is credited to be the first recurring comic strip character. With sales skyrocketing Pulitzer and Hearst solicited more artists who created comic strips. These strips are the forefathers of modern day comics. Comics ultimately owe their existence to an American newspaper war.

This was merely the tip of the iceberg...

To cash in on the economic feasibility of comics, publishers reprinted comic strips in a magazine format. Most of the comics published up to 1922 were reprints. In that year, a comic called **The Funnies** was the first to print original stories. This trend caught on and soon publishers were hard at work recruiting writers and artists to create fantastic stories.

Perhaps the most significant event of the time (1930-1940) was the launch of two comics called **Detective comics** and **Action comics**, which launched Batman and Superman respectively, into the hearts and minds of an emerging first world nation.

A brief history of the ages

What followed, historians and scholars of comics have called the Ages of Comics - a period when certain values and/or styles were the measurement for what was contemporary (similar to the Renaissance or Baroque periods in art history, the Ages are to comics).

There are three Ages of comics: the Golden Age, the Silver Age and the present, as yet unnamed but what writers and artists have begun to call the Modern Age.

The Golden Age

The Golden Age was a period of breathtaking vision characterised by the brilliance of writers and artists who literally created comics from the ground up. The subject matter was diverse and unique. Superheroes shared the same pages as spine-chilling horror stories, space adventures and fantasy journeys.

What was indeed a Golden Age came to an abrupt and sudden end when major proponents from social and political spheres (out of, what one hopes was misguided attempt at civic duty) violently denounced comics as a scourge on the minds of the youth.

The man to single-handedly deal the comic book medium a terrifying, almost fatal blow that can still be felt today, was renowned psychiatrist, Frederic Wertham, a contemporary of Senator J McCarthy, who at the time was leading a witch hunt on so-called communist activities of creative minds of the time.

In his book, **Seduction of the innocent** and subsequent public hearings, Wertham demonised comics and all those involved in the industry.

The end of 1954 signalled the death knell for the Golden Age of Comics.

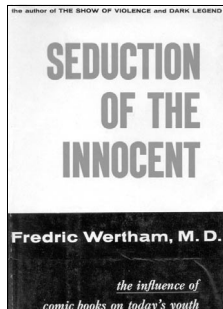
Wertham's witch hunt drove many fledgling publishers into bankruptcy. The young comic book industry realised that it had to regulate itself before state controls were put in place. As a result of this, the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) was created to regulate the contents of comics. The CMAA created the Comics Code, a list of criteria that has governed content in comics since 1954. Although the code has been re-written and amended to allow for societal changes, it is still in effect. (In September 2001, however, Marvel comics withdrew from the CMAA, dropping the code from all their creative output.) (Cotton 2001:16.)

The Silver Age

In the interregnum that followed the end of the Golden Age, characters became two-dimensional, preachy and stale. The subject matter espoused wholesome family values, that at times didn't gel with the style of the comic. Fans at the time were disappointed at lacklustre comics.

Thankfully a revolution was brewing. A silent revolution that started with a re-creation of an old hero, The Flash, sent ripples through the industry and fans. Comic creators realised that they could create something new within the restrictions placed upon them, by giving the old characters a new look and a nicer, friendlier image. Comics were cool again.

Superman and Batman had never been more popular with Batman taking the lead. Adam West's campy Batman



television series was a hit and comics stamped its first mark on the popular culture of the time.

But the Silver Age ended as silently as it began and comics lost its populous voice. The squeaky clean stories had no relevance in the tumultuous times of the late sixties and early to mid seventies and eventually lost its social appeal.

There was, however, a company that had its birth in the sixties and found a small but loyal following during this period. The Silver Age saw the birth of the Fantastic Four and Marvel Comics.

The companies

There are three major comic book companies in the States that have shaped the course and history of comics. These companies have very distinct visions for their works that is obvious in all their publications.

Although there are other smaller and larger companies that have revolutionised the face of the comic book medium, I will limit myself to a few.

DC Comics

Or simply called DC, is the oldest and largest comic book company in the US. DC's output can only be described as 'user friendly', - comics that are contrived to appeal to a majority. But by no means is this a slight to DC's creative output, this company has created some of the most iconic characters in comic book history and have been at the forefront of creating comics.

And it does help if you own two of the most recognised comic book characters ever created. And just who are they? Superman and Batman, of course.

Marvel Comics

Marvel was the brainchild of the prolific Stan Lee.

An iconic figure in his own



right, Lee has created or co-created some of the best bankable superheroes ever: Spider-Man and X-Men.

Whereas DC preferred quantity with quality a close

second, Marvel built the house with quality. Marvel Comics established a connection with fans through its innovative styles and relevant story ideas that still exists today.

Image comics

The most influential event in recent comic history was the creation of Image comics. Its creation in 1992 heralded a change in the status quo of comic book publishing. By no means the youngest comic book company, Image was formed by seven artists from Marvel's hottest comics. Fed up with among other things, low pay and creative control, Jim Lee, Todd McFarlane, Mark Silvestri, Jim Valentino, Rob Liefeld, Erik Larsen and Whilce Portacio founded Image.

DC and Marvel predicted an early death for the company but by the end of 1992 Image was the number one selling comic book company in the world. Image was the first to use digital coloring in their comics, they pioneered the idea of creator-owned work (prior to this all characters created were owned by the comic book company), created cheaper production techniques and raised page rates for creators.

Wizard Magazine

Not a comic book company or a magazine for itinerant spell casters, **Wizard magazine** is a newspaper for comics. It was started ten years ago by Gareb Shamus, an unrepentant comic book fan and reports on all and any news in the comic book industry.

Wizard magazine eventually led to Wizard Entertainment, a publishing company that not only owns **Wizard** but a slew of magazines, and smaller publishing concerns. Not bad for a company that started in someone's basement.

Wizard has a firm hold on the pulse of the comic book industry, and has the dubious pleasure of being one of the prime resources for this article. It is available in South Africa for the modest price of R75.00 and a very good buy for those interested in the comic book industry.

Current trends

The word is Renaissance. It just about encapsulates what has occurred in the comic book industry in the last 12 years. It describes the redefining of ideas and crea-

tive energies that have paved a new way, a new Zeitgeist for comics in the new millennium.

The 1980s had a lot to answer for, like bubble pants, big hair and Ronald Reagan. We in South Africa had bigger fish to fry, so you're off the hook for not knowing what was going in comics back then.

Comics in the 1980s were dominated by two pivotal figures. They created what most fans and writers consider the only original works for that entire decade. These two gentlemen are none other than Frank Miller and Alan Moore.

If their names sound familiar it's possibly because the Library Service managed to buy their epoch defining works for libraries in the late 80s early 90s. Both DC publications, viz **Batman: the Dark Knight returns** and **Watchmen**.

Miller and Moore took their respective antagonists into the deepest, darkest recesses of the human psyche, exposing their weaknesses, pathologies, fears and violent tendencies. Their works echoed the social and political feeling of the time and painted a bleak picture of the future. The fans loved it.



In an introduction to **Justice league America: Midsummer's nightmare**, comic book writer Grant Morrison summed up the 80s with these words: 'It was good while it lasted (the 80s) and yielded two authentic masterpieces in Miller's **Dark Knight returns** and Moore and Gibbon's **Watchmen**, but what began as an era of bold experimentation and adult themes soon grew tired and repetitive, ... the

decade... became characterised by a relentless tide of unsmiling, uptight mental cases in trenchcoats. The new "heroes" were deranged psychos, mother-fixated perverts and cold-eyed killers, barely distinguished from the villains they so callously dispatched with a dazzling array of brutal weaponry. There was a growing feeling among readers and creators alike that something had been lost...' (Morrison 1996:7).

Readers' disillusionment reflected in low sales and less output by comic companies. By the beginning of the 1990s, the comic industry was ripe for a renaissance. And it all started with **The Flash**, again.

When Mark Waid became the regular writer of the **Flash** comic book, little did he know that he would start the renaissance. Waid's perspective on the superhero genre was simple. He told solid, character-driven stories focussing on the man behind the mask but always reminding readers they were dealing with a hero.

The fan reaction was awesome.

Flash became a sleeper hit and propelled Waid into the upper echelons of comic book writers. The creative shift was a necessary one in order to move away from the legacy of the 80s.

Formation of Image comics (1992)

The formation of Image proved to be the 'Big Two' (Marvel and DC) that independent comic book companies could give them a run for their money. Image revolutionised the industry in the 90s and helped push independent comics into the comic book mainstream.

DC creates an adult line (1993)

DC Vertigo specialises in comics written specifically for an adult readership. DC employed hot new British writers, gave them creative freedom and left them comic code free. The result was and still is some of the best award-winning comics in history.

Movie (2000)

This is the comic that started it all. The X-Men is the number one selling comic in the States, month after month. It outsells even Superman and Batman. If not for its success, Spider-Man would probably have never been made.

Manga's (Japanese comics) influence

The success of the X-Men comic can be put down to three things. Firstly, an extremely large fan base; secondly, intriguing relevant stories written by the best writing talent in the industry; and thirdly and most importantly, Joe Madureira's successful fusion of Japanese Manga and American style comic art. The resulting fusion created a new commercial art style that had until then only been seen in the East. Madureira's style swelled the fan base to even larger proportion which undoubtedly contributed to the success of the X-Men movie.

The British invasion (1992 to current date)

British comic writers have consistently showed up their American counterparts. Whereas British comics (such as **2000AD**

and **Judge Dredd**) are not just limited to superhero's, American comics tended to be more about superhero's until a group of brilliant British writers proved that different literary genres could be explored within the medium of comics. The British writers brought a literary sensibility to American comics that has become an integral part of current comic book culture.

The British writers, among them Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, Warren Ellis, Grant Morrison, Mark Millar and Garth Ennis, have created new visions for comics.

New editor-in-chief of Marvel

Marvel comics have always been light years ahead of DC as far as their content was concerned. Although this allowed writers and artists creative independence, it could never consistently ensure economic viability. Historically Marvel comics could never reconcile the two. So the company always relied on its golden titles, like X-Men and Spider-Man to keep the company in the black. But some unfortunate creative choices made by the editors and managers, left Marvel in a very precarious position. Bankruptcy loomed on more than one occasion.

In September of 1998, Marvel hired two freelancers, Joe Quesada (editor-in-chief) and Jimmy Palmiotti, bought and renamed their comic imprint to Marvel Knights and gave the two freelancers free creative reign. By 2000, the Marvel Knights line was as popular as the mainstream Marvel line, reconciling the economics and creative aspects of a comic publishing company.

Cross medium pollination (1999 to current)

When Joe Quesada needed help revamping some of the old Marvel characters, he realised he needed a person with a different perspective, and called good friend, Kevin Smith. Kevin Smith, writer and director of films **Clerks**, **Mallrats**, **Chasing Amy** and **Dogma**, started a very successful twelve issue run as writer for the comic **Daredevil**.

Smith brought the different perspective so sorely needed. It didn't hurt that the fans loved the idea of an independent film director writing comic books. Subsequently, Marvel comics have never had a more productive year, both creatively and economically.

But Smith wasn't the only one to bring a 'fresh perspective'.

Writer, director and creator of the

Babylon 5 television series, J Michael Straczynski found a home at Image comics, where he created a brilliant comic series called *Rising stars*. As a result of his excellent work on *Rising stars*, Straczynski was offered Spider-Man, which had all but lost its fan base, a death sentence in comics. Straczynski's ideas struck a chord with fans and the groundswell began in earnest.

Josh Whedon, creator and writer of the television series *Buffy the vampire slayer* and *Angel*, brought his vision to Dark Horse comics, where he writes a comic dark vampire/horror comic called **Fray**.

Kevin Smith, after completing his run on **Daredevil**, resurrected DC character Green Arrow from comic limbo and propelled the comic to number one. Kevin Smith will be returning to Marvel and will

hand over Green Arrow to **New York Times** best-selling novelist Brad Meltzer. (WCPLs has copies of his book in stock, if anyone is interested.)

The implications are quite plain to see; comics are moving into the mainstream and creators and artists from different mediums feel that they can successfully cross

mediums, without fear of being creatively stifled or stigmatised.

There finally is something for everybody. It is a very exciting time for the comic book medium, the boundaries are being challenged everyday with each new comic published and the end result is a comic or comic trade you can thoroughly enjoy.

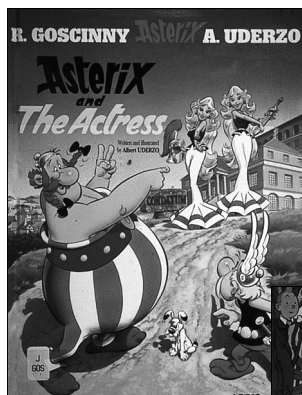
The WCPLS view

There is as far as I know, no reason why you shouldn't have a comic trade paperback in your library. Some libraries (like Fish Hoek) have even created item class numbers for them and specific ways of maintaining these trade paperbacks. Luckily there seems to be no problem with libraries buying their own, it's the readership choice so their decision to buy what they want is ratified by the public demand.

Public demand is possibly one of the most

important reasons that has led to the current trend in WCPLS' acquisitions of trades, or lack of acquisition. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that no comic book material is being bought for libraries by WCPLS. We've

all seen the **Asterix**, and **Tintin** comics and the **Disney** comic adaptations. As well as a small number of **Judge Dredd** comics. What I am saying is that, not the right type of comic book material is being bought. The right type in this case is



comic book material that is written for a general audience like Superman, Batman and Spider-Man. In going through past records from the 90s onwards and speaking to books reviewers and 'parties in the know' about policy relating to comic books material, I've managed to spot the following:

WCPLS initially bought comic trade paperbacks on an intermittent basis, for the most part Batman and the aforementioned Watchmen as well as some other DC titles (V for Vendetta, Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told). The quantities bought were quite moderate (mostly for the Metropole) but they were popular mainstream titles.

Then larger amounts of non mainstream works were bought. These large quantities coupled with an uninformed choice of titles (by today's standard, those non mainstream titles can be considered alternative and thus have very little mass appeal) led to copies being returned to general stacks as redundant stock and a very vocal public who complained about the content, language, et cetera.

This resulted in a halt to the purchasing of all graphic novels and trades. It was later reconsidered and resulted in a standing order that all graphic novels were to be brought to management meetings, to be checked for content and then approved for

book selection. This took place in the mid to late 1990s.

Some graphic novels and trades had made their way into WCPLS, but were kicked out during preliminary selection. When we speak about comics, comic trade paperbacks and graphic novels, we are talking about a different medium to books. A comic trade or graphic novel might look like a book but it is not. It is a different medium and should be treated as such. CDs and videos have covers, trades do too. Fish Hoek Library has devised a way to collect and maintain their collection of comic trade paperbacks in such a way as to maximise its shelf life.

And the entire policy shift came about because of public reaction to what was a poor choice of comic book material and misunderstanding about the nature of comics.

This suggests to me a need for selectors to be re-educated as regards comics, comic

book trades and graphic novels. There is a world of information that most librarians are not aware of and in fairness, must be taken into account when evaluating comics' validity as a medium for being on our shelves.

Conclusion

Comics as a medium, has gained a bad image among readers in South Africa based upon preconceived ideas of what comics supposedly are. These ideas are spread by a small minority that view comics as less than literary with no aesthetic or creative substance. This blatant elitist attitude toward this medium is unfair and unwarranted and ultimately born out of ignorance.

As librarians I fear we tend to forget that we have a responsibility to our public, for it is our public that creates our popular culture, and if we (librarians, reviewers and critics) ignore the vox populi, well then whom are we serving?

The comic book medium is here to stay. The possibilities for its uses are endless for a society that needs to promote a culture of reading and literacy.

We approached management for their comment and publish Deputy Director Liesel de Villiers' response:

All titles purchased are selected by means of a democratic process at book selection meetings and a category exists for the purchase of comic trade paperbacks.

Due to limited funds and the cost of the comic trade paperbacks these titles are usually not selected. Another problem that we are faced with is the binding and durability of these books in a public library environment.

A glossary of terms

Comics

When I talk about *comics* I refer to the comic book medium. The medium of comics encapsulates all possible examples. For instance, in your **Cape Times Madam and Eve** is a comic strip, an example of the comic medium. The Superman comic you see in CNA, is an example of this comic medium.

A comic means far more than just Madam and Eve or Little Lotta or Casper the friendly ghost, it describes a specific medium where all these works exist within.

Trade paperback

It has a specific size and tend to be a little less expensive than a hardcover book.

There is a profound understanding to the word trade paperback when it is used to describe anything related to a comic.

A comic book trade paperback describes a collection of previously

published serialised comic books collected in a single volume.

So comic book companies would take issues 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 of a specific comic book series, like Superman, collect them and reprint and publish them in a single volume.

The tricky part is that we can refer to a hardcover version of a trade paperback as a trade paperback.

Graphic novel

Graphic novels are novels told in a comic form, with a beginning, middle and end.

Sequential art

Is an image or set of images that are linked by a common idea and/or story.

Comics Magazine Association of America and comics code

The CCMA is a non-governmental organisation that 'regulated' content in the

comic book industry in the US. If a comic, like Batman was considered to be free of any bad content, it was then published with a comic code.

Manga and Anime

Manga is the Japanese word for comic. Japanese comics have a particular artistic and thematic style that is immensely popular and utterly unique.

Anime is the Japanese word for animation, which also has a unique artistic style which is fairly evident to see in television shows like Pokemon, Digimon, Dragonball Z and Robotech.

The appeal is the dynamic, kinetic style that Japanese artists have given their works. This style is very pleasing to the eye and utterly eye-catching.