

A Comics Studies Reader

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Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, eds
A Comics Studies Reader
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If comics are everywhere today, including in university reading lists and teaching, and if many efforts are made to make critical and theoretical thinking on the medium (for comics are not just a genre), both inside the field and in the broader field of intermediality studies, there is still a crucial lack of good text books and readers on a cultural practice whose importance can no longer be reduced to the margins of the literary and cultural system.

Heer and Worcester's collection is more than an excellent attempt to fill in this gap. Of course it does not offer the ultimate selection of what is worth reading and studying, and one can always regret certain absences (no Benoît Peeters, for instance, although his theoretical commitment to comics is as strong as that of his regular accomplice Thierry Groensteen, here rightly represented by two essays) as well as certain presences, but this survey of some thirty major contributions of the last two decades is in almost all respects an example of what serious scholarship should be.

The editorial work accomplished by Heer and Worcester is simply impressive. Not only have they managed to gather material that is challenging, well-written, well-thought and that should enable a big leap forward in comics theory and criticism, but the two authors have also succeeded in giving each text the necessary space and context. The essays, often selected from longer works, are long enough to develop an in-depth reflection on the medium, and they are all most interestingly introduced and organized at the level of the whole book. Heer and Worcester have distinguished four sections (after an introductory essay by Thierry Groensteen, on the difficult cultural appraisal of the genre): one on the history of the medium, one on its formal characteristics (this section stands for the semiotic and neosemiotic approach of comics which has always proven crucial to a better understanding of the medium), another one on issues of narrative and identity (this section is quite indebted to cultural studies, which has been cross-fertilizing comics studies since almost a decade now), and finally a section that blends close-reading and cultural criticism (with fascinating analyses of works by

Krigstein, Ware, and Spiegelman). Each of these sections has many surprises for the reader: first of all, a concise but clever introduction by the editors, who are able of putting forward the real stakes of the specific approach illustrated by the essays, second a broad choice of great texts, very diverse in time and space (some of the texts had already been published in the 1980s; not all texts are US based or US oriented; the selection includes also two articles from *Image (& Narrative*, by Roger Sabin and Pascal Lefèvre), and last but not least, the many discoveries that even well-informed readers can do in this anthology. Depending on each reader's specialization, the names of the authors to discover may vary, but every reader of this book is sure that some fifty percent of what he or she will find between the covers is really new material.

Finally, it is also good to notice that the authors use a very broad definition of what comics are, without getting lost in fashionable debates on comics versus graphic novel, which may create an elite ghettoization of a certain type of comics, and without taking sides in the discussion between those who prioritize the notion of intermedial blending (comics as a word-and-image medium rather than as a form of sequential art) and those who don't. This liberal approach is healthy and the quality of the texts gathered in this book proves that it is the right one. *A Comics Studies Reader* will soon prove an indispensable publication for all those interested in the field, the pioneers as well as the latecomers.

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