Arts and Leisure: The big battle - It's edge versus respectability as graphic novels go mainstream

by Peter Rowe

Look, on the horizon! Is that a bird ... a plane ... or perhaps the final comics crisis? Is this Armageddon for artists, Gotterdammerung for graphic novelists?

GRAPHICS AND CULTURE - Graphic novels -- essentially comic books with an extended narrative -- are continuing to gain fans, and respectability. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. In the 20th century, comic books endured congressional hearings and parental condemnation. The industry, like Plastic Man, always bounced back. The 21st century, though, has ushered in a relentless new foe: Respectability.

"We need some of that air of disrepute," said Tom Spurgeon, editor of The Comics Reporter, an online site. "I think that it retains a little bit of a cool factor that way."

Bad news, then. Graphic novels - essentially comic books that tell an extended narrative - continue to gain fans. Even among, alas, the cultural elite.

Still, graphic novels haven't totally sold out or abandoned their original fan base. Douglas Wolk, the author of "Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean" (Da Capo Press, $23), argues that some comic book fans cling to the outdated notion that they are rebels, immersed in an underground art form: "Nobody understands us! We're outcasts, we're the weird kids! Some day they'll understand!"

Wolk's rebuttal: "You know what? They understand."

Blame the graphic novel.

DRAWING THREE ACES

The trouble began 21 years ago. Between 1986 and '87, a trio of graphic novels carved deep cracks in the wall between comic books and mainstream culture.

"Batman: The Dark Knight Returns" was the first, and perhaps the least startling. All Frank Miller did was take the old tale of Bruce Wayne's alter ego, add despair and blend well. Miller's Batman is a graying warrior, and it's uncertain whether this superhero can stop crime - he can't even stop his ego-driven clashes with Superman.

"Dark Knight" was largely ignored outside the comic cognoscenti. Not so "Maus," published later in 1986. The first of two volumes, Art Spiegelman's work was revolutionary for its subject - one family's experience during and after the Holocaust, a harrowing account complete with murder, rape, suicide - and approach. Borrowing a page from George Orwell, Spiegelman transformed his characters into animals with human emotions.

In 1992, "Maus" won a special Pulitzer Prize. That was the first and, to date, only graphic novel to ascend such official literary heights. But some argue "Maus" was followed by a greater work. In early 1987, "Watchmen" concluded its 12-issue run, delivering an epic murder mystery, Cold War melodrama and probing, skeptical examination of superhero-worship.

In 2005, when Time constructed a list of the 100 best English-language novels since 1923, Ayn Rand didn't make the cut. Neither did John Irving. But Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons did for "Watchmen."

High culture's battlements had been breached. The New Yorker signaled this defeat by printing a cartoon of a man asking, "Now I have to pretend to like graphic novels, too?" "Liking" is not required. Some, though, insist that awareness is.

"Anyone described as 'well-read' would have to be at least familiar with a core sample of all the varieties of literature including poetry, essays, novels, short stories and nonfiction," said Andrew Arnold, Time's comics critic from 2002 until early 2007. "So there should be no reason to exclude graphical literature as well.

"Exactly which books constitute the canon of graphical literature can be debated, but 'Watchmen' and 'Jimmy Corrigan' should certainly be on the list."

Oh my. This story was progressing so peacefully and then someone mentioned Chris Ware's "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth." Those are - pow! sock! bam! - fightin' words.

AVALANCHE OF COVERAGE

During a recent telephone interview, Wolk pronounced himself ready to rumble.

"I wanted to start some arguments," he said, explaining why he wrote "Reading Comics."

He's in luck, especially given his field. For starters, the whole "graphic novel" notion is one minefield after another. People argue about the term itself - "the $20 word for comics," Wolk said - and when the first graphic novel appeared.

Was it 1978, with the paperback edition of Will Eisner's "A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories: A Graphic Novel"?

Or 1895, when R.F. Outcalt's "The Yellow Kid" began his run of loosely connected adventures in The New York World?

Or sometime in the 11th or 12th centuries, when the Bayeux Tapestry used pictures and words to tell the tale of William the Conqueror?

Or, wonders Scott McCloud, the author of "Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art," were the ancient Egyptians the medium's pioneers? Inside the tomb of Menna, circa 1300 B.C., pictures and hieroglyphs tell a tale of farming, harvesting and tax-collecting. (As ripping yarns go, Menna's tale was no "Dark Knight.")

Then there's the question of whether "graphic novels" are literature. Support for this position has come from an unexpected and unequivocably mainstream source: The New York Times.

"It used to be a joke, that The New York Times might cover something someday," said Spurgeon of The Comics Reporter. "Now, it seems like every other week. ..."

Entertainment Weekly regularly reports on graphic novels, as did Time until critic Arnold's resignation in March. The New Yorker occasionally takes note of the medium, too, but has proven a tough sell. Here's Peter Schjeldahl, writing about the late Will Eisner, the iconic figure for whom the industry named its annual awards:

"Eisner created a masked-crime-fighter comic book, 'The Spirit,' in his youth; he was not a modest man, but

legions of admirers forgave him that, as they forgive his work's cornball histrionics. Rooted in German Expressionism but more reminiscent of MAD-type burlesque than of George Grosz, his characters rub their hands, tear their hair, and, if they happen to fancy something, slaver."

But attention, even critical pans, are cherished by a crew that is accustomed to indifference.

"There's been a real avalanche to mainstream coverage in the last, oh, five years now," Spurgeon said, "and all the bells and whistles that come with it."

"They are not literature in the same sense that they are not painting, in the same sense that they are not cooking," said Wolk. "Really, the crucial thing about comics is that they are drawn, the world filtered through an artist's eye and hand."

In fact, few "graphic novels" feature distinguished writing. There are exceptions - Joe Sacco's nonfiction work, such as "Palestine" and "The Fixer," contain tough, sometimes lyrical, prose. But in graphic novels, words are enhanced, even completed, by visuals.

At its heart, this is not a literary form.

"I don't see how prose competes with comics," Spurgeon said. "That's like video competing with music."

But it is a storytelling form. Which brings us back to "Jimmy Corrigan," Chris Ware's 384-page opus, the 2001 Guardian Book Award winner and hailed by The New York Times Book Review as "arguably the greatest achievement of the form, ever."

Visually inventive, "Jimmy Corrigan" tells the story of a hapless Chicagoan, his crude - and usually absent - father and his abusive grandfather. This is not a "comic."

Wolk, the graphic novel enthusiast, calls Ware "a brilliant artist." Wolk, the would-be rumbler, notes that "Jimmy Corrigan" is studded with stylistic references to "Peanuts" and "Krazy Kat" and other classic strips. "Whatever else they did," Wolk said of these earlier works, "every single strip was meant to give pleasure. (Ware) dangles the idea of pleasure out, snatches it away and slaps you for wanting it."

But is the artist required to give pleasure?

Graphic novels exist in a broad range of genres: humor, romance, suspense, political satire, soap operas, horror, porn, Japanese manga, nonfiction journalism. In 2006, Publishers Weekly reported, 2,800 new titles were published. For the first time, graphic novels surpassed standard comic books in sales, $330 million to $310 million.

"The days when publishers aimed at only 15-year-old boys - or 50-year-old men who are shopping for their inner 15-year-old - those days are over," said Calvin Reid of Publishers Weekly.

Reid cited five reasons for the growth:

1. The Japanese invasion. Manga, which has delved into adult topics for decades, is the fastest-growing segment of the market. Of last year's new titles, more than 40 percent were manga.

2. Chain book stores. Barnes & Noble, Borders and others now stock graphic novels.

3. Librarians. "A new generation of librarians grew up with the underground comics of the '60s and '70s. To them, a graphic novel is just another book."

4. Hollywood. Multiplexes are stuffed with movies based on comics or cartoons - "Fantastic Four," "Spider-Man 3," "The Simpsons." Tentatively scheduled for next year: "Watchmen."

5. The Internet's retailing reach. "Comics are now available to people who don't have comic shops near them."

Surely, though, there must be some Americans who insist that comic books - even gussied up as "graphic novels" - are hopelessly lowbrow?

"I don't think there are any serious holdouts in mainstream culture," Reid said.

Tom Spurgeon hopes this isn't true. He takes comfort in the fact that comics often ignore trends that have swept the society at large.

"There's not any 'Grey's Anatomy' equivalent in comics," he said. "Not an 'American Idol.'"

For Spurgeon, graphic novels require words, images and attitude.

"If there is a little bit of shagginess to it," he said, "it retains its edge as an art form."

Graphic novel starter kit: 10 to read

By Peter Rowe

Let's say you're new to graphic novels. Let's say you're sucked into a conversation on this very subject. Finally, let's say you're a daredevil. (But not The Daredevil.)

Relax. To bluff your way through this ordeal, just cite these seminal works:

1. "The Spirit," (1940s), Will Eisner

In the 1940s, Eisner (1917-2005) combined clean lines, bold colors and realistic characters to escape the comic book industry's superhero ghetto.

His "A Contract With God" (1978) is often cited as one of the first books sold as a "graphic novel." But we prefer this earlier series about a hero sans superpowers.

"The Spirit" has its problems - Eisner's treatment of Ebony, an African-American boy whose intelligence is not quite obscured by his thick Southern patois, borders on the condescending. At its best, though, "Spirit" is two-fisted and sophisticated.

2. "Batman: The Dark Knight Returns," (1986), Frank Miller.

In 1986, Frank Miller radically reimagined one of comic book world's central myths. "Dark Knight" gives us an aging, angry, alienated Bruce Wayne, a figure of tarnished nobility caught in an apocalyptic struggle with villains and heroes.

3. "Watchmen," (1986-87), Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons.

Edward Blake, a retired costumed crime-fighter, is murdered - and the ensuing investigation delves deep into the secrets of a band of superheroes. Gibbons' artwork is seductive and strangely familiar, but the real star is Moore's intelligent, suspenseful, rapid-fire storytelling, set in an alternative America engaged in Cold War brinksmanship. Stumbling upon "Watchmen" is like walking into your first Hitchcock; you emerge spellbound and grateful.

4. "Maus, A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History," (1986), and "Maus II:, A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began," (1991) Art Spiegelman.

Even before receiving a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992, "Maus" had expanded the discussion on comics and art. Only a great artist could take a family tale about the Holocaust, and - persuasively, brilliantly - recast it with mice, cats and pigs.

5. "Buddha," (1974-1984), Osamu Tezuka.

A manga pioneer and devotee of Walt Disney, Tezuka (1928-1989) may be best known as the author of "Astro Boy." But his skill at juggling moods - silly, profound, erotic, violent - is given a sensational workout in this epic. Originally published in Japan, "Buddha" was republished here in eight volumes, an 1,884-page biography that blends history, philosophy and only a few purely fictitious episodes.

6. "Daniel Boring," (2000), Daniel Clowes.

Bizarre and sly, this three-part tale follows the title character's search for his father and true romance. Oh, there's also his attempt to wait out the end of the world.

Clowes is perhaps better known for "Ghost World," but "Boring" is the more daring work. The narrative, dreamy and deadpan, gives equal weight to every plot development, from disappointing sexual encounters to

World War III.

7. "Jimmy Corrigan, or the Smartest Kid on Earth," (2000) Chris Ware.

Relentlessly downbeat account of Jimmy Corrigan, who is - as numerous critics have noted - neither a kid nor very smart. He is a put-upon sad sack whose hunt for his father ends in a curdled victory, Jimmy reunited with a bitter, petty old man. But Ware is a breathtaking artist and designer. This book has to be seen. Read? Not so much.

8. "Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood," (2003), Marjane Satrapi.

A warm yet sad account of growing up in revolutionary Iran. Satrapi, now a resident of Paris, produced this book as a member of L'Association, a now-defunct band of French guerrilla cartoonists. In her sure hands, the personal becomes political - and bittersweetly universal.

9. "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic," (2006), Alison Bechdel

Hear that deafening roar? That's the buzz surrounding this hand-drawn memoir. Bechdel, author of the continuing series "Dykes to Watch Out For," grew up with a discontented mother and a closeted gay father who ran a funeral home. Thanks to Bechdel's humor and love for her family, "Fun Home" takes a grim tale and turns it into something strangely hopeful.

10. "American Born Chinese," (2006), Gene Luen Yang.

Like "Fun Home," "ABC" is a coming-of-age tale. The artwork? Evocative. The dialogue? Priceless.

Teacher: "Class, I'd like us all to give a warm Mayflower Elementary welcome to your new friend and classmate Jing Jang!"

Jin Wang: "Jin Wang."

Teacher: "Jin Wang! He and his family recently moved to our neighborhood all the way from China!"

Jin Wang: "San Francisco."

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