

Of Comics and Continuums

By Karen Green

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Yes, I know. That should be *continua*. Get over it.

Instead of obsessing over Latin declensions, let's get to this month's subject—and we'll start by asking a good question: If you're a high school student gearing up for a college career, how best to prepare? How about taking a course on...graphic narrative?

That's an option for high-school juniors and seniors who attend the Pre-College Program at Barnard College (Columbia's slice of the Seven Sisters). One of the one-week intensive courses they offered in Summer 2010 is "Reading Graphic Narrative," taught by Columbia University graduate student Patricia Akhimie. The course's goal is to help students learn "how to read and talk about graphic narrative," on the assumption that these are skills that will make them "better readers, better writers, and better able to think critically not only about comics, but also about all kinds of texts." Yeah! That sounds right.

Patricia had first popped up on my radar over two years ago, when she started submitting book-purchase requests for various graphic novels. Good ones, too. *B.P.R.D.... Jack of Fables....* keeping me honest on series where we'd fallen behind. So when I heard from her, asking to bring her class to the library for a look at items from our Rare Book and Manuscript Library that related to comics, the history of sequential narrative, or the history of book illustration...well, that was pretty exciting. Of course, I have no real connection to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library but, happily, our curator of rare books, Jane Siegel, just happens to be a comics fan. In fact, if you recall my description of the origins of our collection, she is the rare book librarian with the youthful passion for the Silver Surfer. So I forwarded the message to Jane, and she ran with it, as you'll see below.

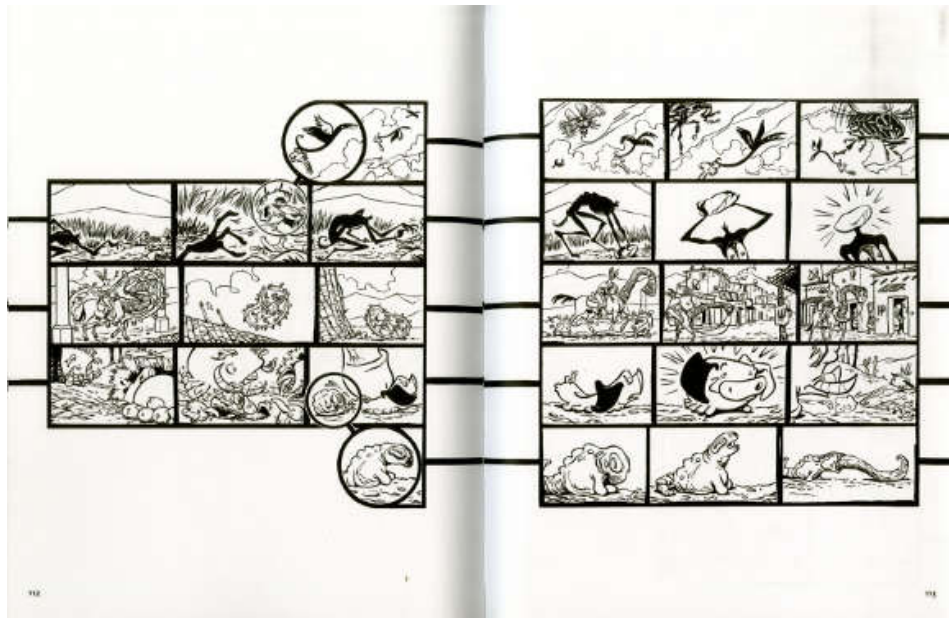
Patricia, who already holds an M.F.A., is pursuing a Ph.D. in Renaissance-era English literature, specifically examining "conflicting ideas about social difference (particularly race and gender)...during the moment of England's increasing engagement with the wider world." How does that tie in with comics? Not stylistically or formally, perhaps, but thematically. Essentially, the questions that intrigued Patricia in her early comics reading are still driving her, albeit in a different context. She describes the epiphany of making an early transition from the homogenous world of Archie's Riverdale to the Pinis'*Elfquest*: "I saw something really different—interracial couples, biracial children, and a fantasy adventure that involved both men and women. Way better!" A nice example of the evolution of scholarly inquiry, often rooted in topics that interested us when young.

Patricia had structured the class to include comics reading, theory, collaborative learning via a class wiki, field trips, and guest speakers. Required texts were portions of *Understanding Comics* and the Pekar-edited *Best American Comics 2006*. Students visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in conjunction with their reading in Scott McCloud, which gave them both some nice critical theory to apply to their comics reading as well as their art appreciation, and also an opportunity to draw the kinds of parallels between traditional fine art and comics that I talked about when I described my own connections between medieval studies and comics. They also read *How I Made It to Eighteen*, topped by a visit from Tracy White herself.



FROM McSweeney's

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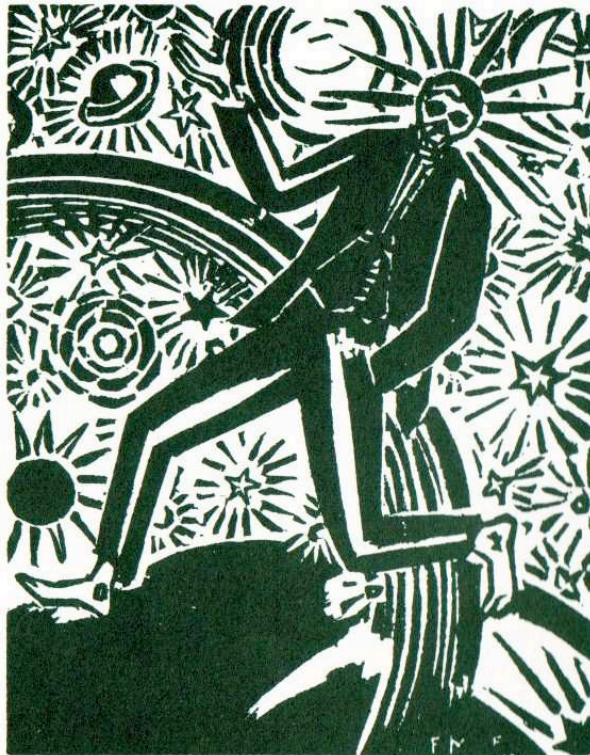


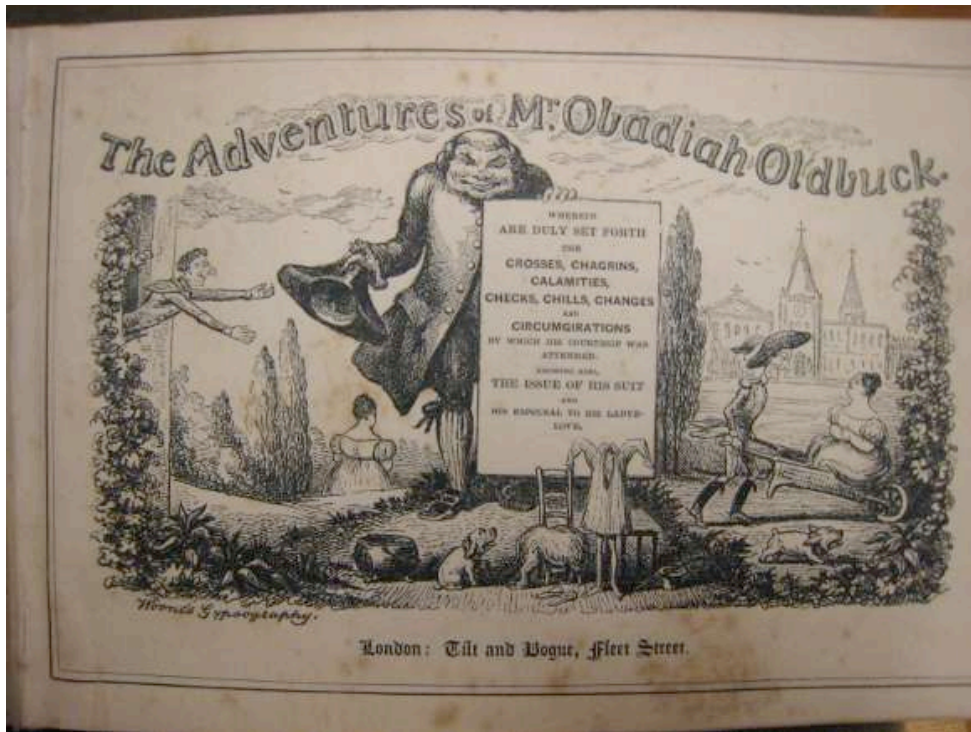
Because of the abbreviated nature of the course, reading—and teaching—the entirety of *Best American Comics 2006* wasn't feasible. "I wanted to be careful not to open any cans of worms I couldn't fully address in the time allotted," Patricia noted. "Thus, I tried to choose a few pieces that were more difficult or controversial, but steered clear of some of the most difficult or provocative pieces"—acknowledging that, in a longer class, "those are the pieces that I would be most excited to teach." So, she included Kim Deitch's wrenching "Ready to Die," his description of meeting, and attending the execution of, Virginia death-row inmate Ronald Fitzgerald. Not included by this measure, though possibly as tempting to her as it is to me, was Lloyd Dangle's "A Street-Level View of the Republican National Convention," which illustrates the arrival in NYC of the Republican Convention delegates, and their reception by protesters. Another comic on the reading list was Rebecca Dart's formally elegant "Rabbithead"—impossible to excerpt and still do justice, though dammit I'm gonna try—which brings the reader along through continuously expanding concurrent plotlines. Content, form, genre—all the right notes got played. Patricia included "Complacency Kills," a piece of reportage by comics-journalist Joe Sacco, following a specific Mobile Assault Platoon in Iraq, as well as a politically-infused piece from *World War 3 Illustrated* called "Nakedness and Power," by Seth Tobocman, Terisa Turner, and Leigh Brownhill. How to tell a story, how to construct a page, how to convey one's passion, how to engage one's readers—there were endless possibilities in the ten comics Patricia assigned. How to craft a graphic narrative, and how to read one—not to mention why one ought to.

As Patricia put it, "Comics are a great way to teach-by-doing literary critical analysis. I ask students to bring certain concepts to bear—genre, say—and explain how a comic draws on, bends, or abandons that concept. This gives students a chance to articulate arguments not only about what genre a comic might exemplify, but also about genre itself—about that category and its usefulness in literary analysis." You might say: well, yes, but you can do all that with traditional literature. True. But, as Patricia noted, "In terms of preparation for a college career: this reading material is less intimidating for students to dive into. Comfort-

level is key in introducing high-school students to seminar-style discussion. I've found that comics evoke a pretty immediate response from students, perhaps because they have the sense that we are working outside the standard canon." This sounds a little familiar; it's rather like public librarians' arguments for including graphic novels in their collections: they serve as a gateway to literacy. And so it is here, but this gateway is a few steps higher up the path: a gateway to critical theory.

Now let's get back to the good stuff! Jane Siegel invited me to the Rare Books presentation, but I was able to stay only for the first half-hour. I wanted to see what she'd chosen to bring, and had no reasonable expectation for just how rich her choices would prove to be. First, some early wordless woodcut novels: Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel. Keep in mind, now: these were from Rare Books, so these weren't recent reprints but the actual originals. These students got to *hold* a 1922 self-published French edition of Masereel's *My Book of Hours*. Most squeal-worthy, for me, however, was the casual discovery on the riches-laden table of an 1841 London edition of Rodolphe Töpffer's *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*, which Jane told me she'd acquired as a complement to the graphic novels collection. This, to me, was a spectacular example of how general collections (the circulating collection) and special collections (rare books) work hand-in-hand to provide the richest and most diverse possible resources for our community of scholars.





Jane also had a pile of assorted comic books that had come in a gift from the Jonathan Zeitlin Comic Book Collection, an assortment of 1950s and 1960s titles that had been given to Columbia back when we still had a library school—so, clearly, the connection of comics and academics was not a new one. "House of Secrets" #10 (June 1958) lay there on the table next to "The Invincible Iron Man" #1 and "Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner" #1 (both May 1968). Not, alas, impeccably preserved in Mylar, these copies showed, rather, the love of their former owner, but nevertheless gave the students a vivid sense of Silver Age style.

The coolest stuff on the table, I thought—though your mileage may vary—was the collection of books Jane had brought to fulfill Patricia's request for items that related to the history of sequential narrative and of book illustration. Jane, who has the enviable task of buying artists' books and other curios, clearly had had a great deal of fun when choosing these. One fragile, paperbound volume, the ca. 1810 *Watt's songs for children*, she'd bought just because it *looked* like a comic book, although she knew it wasn't really. Filled with brightly-colored, illustrated songs of spirituality for pious children, laid out in panels, Watts' book had a feel similar to an Edward Gorey volume, likewise a contested element of the comics canon, or a medieval Bible moralisée.



Another innovative children's book employing unusual technology is the 1910 *Nur für brave kinder* (Only for Brave Children). In twelve double-page spreads, it tells a series of stories in verse on one page, while the opposite page has an illustration that, with the pull of a tab, morphs the beginning of the story into its outcome. About it, Jane had remarked, "I have a completely unthought-through theory that there's a precedent in children's books for all interesting advances in commercial publishing, so I figured I should rummage around for a children's book, and everyone likes a moveable book." Indeed. Below, a story of a toupéed man's unfortunate visit to the monkey house (original, transition, and final):



But the real discovery of the day for me was a recent artist's book, Suyeon Kim's enchanting 2009 volume, *A line*. Kim's use of wood and linoleum cuts, as well as her wordless story, tie her to a tradition that runs from Frans Masereel straight through to Eric Drooker—though, as Jane notes, Kim's story is sweeter—but the continuous paper sheet of her book, folded like an accordion, is all her, and her publisher's, own. (Seriously: click on those last two links. People in the rare books reading room kept coming over to see this for themselves.) *A line* tells the folkloric tale of a blind fisherman and his dog; the line that connects them to each other, the sea, and their livelihood; and the mystical transformation that binds man, dog, bird, and fish; sea and land and sky. The art itself is magical, with wood-grain giving texture to sky and sea, and flashes of red and yellow on man and dog highlighting their final transformation and indelible kinship.



So how do these children's and artists' books fit with the history of comics? That's a complicated question with a highly-contestable set of answers. Without doubt there is a continuum that exists in the history of graphic, sequential narrative in which art and illustration, picture books, and comic books and graphic novels have their place, but how each relates to the other and where each is situated on the family tree is subject for debate. Which is the purpose of a college education, is it not?

Perhaps I should give the final word to Patricia: "The historical aspect—historicizing comics by placing them under the rubric of graphic narrative—is particularly empowering for high-school students. Getting a chance to see, think about and talk about the *uses* and the *models* of graphic narrative in various periods and for different societies and sub-cultures within those societies allows students to talk about the politics, the social function, of comics and, of course, of all texts."

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