



Little Island Comics Goes to University!

— Andrew Woodrow-Butcher

To the best of my knowledge, Toronto's Little Island Comics is the only shop in the world dedicated exclusively to comics for children. In May 2014, I had the pleasure of attending the conference for the Association for Research in Cultures of Young People at Brock University on behalf of Little Island Comics. For the conference, we created a display of a wide variety of contemporary and classic graphic books for kids and spent the day sharing our experiences and expertise as specialty children's booksellers with interested scholars.

Comics have long been seen (in the Anglo-American world, at least) as inherently juvenile, despite the diversity of styles and subject matter within the medium. In the 1990s and the early 2000s, in the wake of the publication of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning, two-volume book *Maus*, booksellers, critics, and the reading public began to speak differently about the medium. Although the term "graphic novel" itself

was coined decades earlier, it gained currency during this period. On the one hand, the new, warm reception of comics in literary, educational, and academic circles was a breaking down of barriers, a once-misunderstood medium taking its place as the Ninth Art. On the other hand, the deployment of highfalutin phrases like "graphic novel" recreated and reinforced unfortunate distinctions between "high" and "low," "serious" and "pop," "literary" and "pulp."

This post-*Maus* historical moment—the Rise of the Graphic Novel (capital R, capital G, capital N)—produced a paradoxical platitude, one that continues to be reproduced: "comics aren't just for kids anymore!" First of all, this popular notion proposes that comics were once "just for kids," which was never the case. But I think it is also interesting that at the same time as article after article marvelled at the maturity and literariness of "graphic novels," graphic narratives in books for kids were still merely "comics." Although



Figure 1: Little Island Comics logo.

Maus may have been admitted as a cultural object worthy of academic and pedagogical scrutiny, the same was not true for “Calvin and Hobbes.”

Happily, the landscape continued to change. In 2005, Scholastic launched their Graphix imprint with the reissue, in full-colour, kid-friendly editions, of Jeff Smith’s multivolume *Bone*. *Bone* had not been conceived of as a work for children specifically and, indeed, contains several elements that may be considered impolitic for kids’ books (most notably, cigar smoking). The huge popularity of *Bone* with

young readers caught the attention of publishers, creators, and booksellers, and it serves as a convenient marker for the beginning of the recent kids’ comics boom.

Since 2000, The Beguiling Books & Art, a renowned comic shop that has operated in Toronto for more than a quarter of a century, had been developing a library services business. Because they are often scrutinized by the public on the basis of their images alone and because they carry still the stigma of being “low” culture (i.e., works that cannot possibly have



Figure 2: Little Island Comics in-store display.

redeeming literary or artistic value), comics present many challenges for teachers and librarians. At the same time, as comics for young people were booming and demand for these material in schools and libraries was increasing, more Japanese comics (manga) were being translated and made available in English than ever before. Japanese comics in particular were and remain a huge hit with young people, not only because many of them are fast-paced and richly emotional but also because they are supported frequently by other media forms such as anime or video games. North American comics have been traditionally regarded as suspect material by North American libraries; Japanese comics were regarded so all the more. Cultural differences in representations of the body, sex, and sexuality, as well as different ideas about age appropriateness, meant that comics had become a minefield of difficult-to-curate content, and few librarians had specialist knowledge in this area. Over time, The Beguiling assembled a team of booksellers to address these issues, working consultatively with librarians to curate titles in this popular category.

As such, more comics for kids were being produced, and a team of kids' comics experts had been assembled. It is against this backdrop that Little Island Comics emerged in 2011, spun off from The Beguiling Books & Art. Until the creation of Little Island Comics, The Beguiling carried everything that may have been considered comics for kids in a corner section of the shop. So much material—and so much wonderful, exciting, and popular material—was increasingly being published in this category, however, that the kids' shelves at that store were fit to burst. Jeet Heer, writing in the *National Post* on 17 May 2002,

reported Beguiling owner Peter Birkemoe as explaining that his shop is “a store with an agenda” and that he has “pursued the Beguiling aesthetic to a real extreme in that [he’s] trying to get anything that is even peripherally comic book-oriented. . . . There are two conflicting forces, both of which are good for the store: The desire to have a strong aesthetic stands in competition with the desire to have everything.”

Little Island was born in part because of this big-tent understanding of what constitutes a comic. Equally important, however, was the idea that this material deserves to stand on its own and in its own (kid- and parent-friendly) context. Separating out the children’s material from the comics for grown-ups allows us to explore connections and interactions that might be strained in a traditional comic-book shop. For example, we maintain a selection of picture books at Little Island, revelling in the blurry lines that separate that form from what some people would consider comics. Are the works of Maurice Sendak or Mo Willems comics? We are happy to claim them.

The kids’ comics boom continues with no signs of abating, and new genres may be emerging already. Raina Telgemeier’s two middle-school graphic memoirs, *Smile* and *Sisters*, are both on the *New York Times* bestseller list as I write this (as is her middle-school fiction *Drama*). Other childhood graphic memoirs intended for a juvenile readership have followed hers;

examples include Jimmy Gownley’s *The Dumbest Idea Ever* and Cece Bell’s *El Deafo*. The hybrid comic–novel format popularized by Jeff Kinney’s *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* has since been used by Rachel Renée Russell in her *Dork Diaries* and its sequels and in indie cartoonist Jeffrey Brown’s recent *Star Wars: Jedi Academy* and its sequels. In addition, a range of first graphic readers—the comics answer to *Dick and Jane*—is now available, including such series as James Kochalka’s *Johnny Boo* and most of Françoise Mouly’s brilliant Toon Books imprint. In a time when many proclaim the death of print, it is exciting to work in an area that is expanding!

I am eager to see what the next five years will bring in the world of comics for kids. In the past two years, we have already seen two beautiful graphic novels win Governor General’s Awards (Isabelle Arsenault’s and Fanny Britt’s *Jane, le renard et moi* and Mariko Tamaki’s and Jillian Tamaki’s *This One Summer*).¹ The legitimization of comics, especially kids comics, has been and remains a long process. At the same time as we acknowledge that comics draw on centuries of visual grammar and literary tradition, connecting the medium to the past and its canons, we can also acknowledge that they complement the multimodality of new media in pairing words and pictures to create meaning.

We can be sure that comics are for kids sometimes, and for adults sometimes. There is no “just” about it.

Note

¹ These Governor General's Award wins are not without problems. Literary awards like these are structured to acknowledge excellence in visual art or in text, presupposing that these facets of comics are extricable from one another. In both of the cases I mention

above, the artist won the award for illustration (the very word asks us to imagine some other, primary thing, a text that is being illustrated by pictures); their collaborators went unacknowledged.

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