
Loving Comics in *Neil the Horse Comics and Stories*

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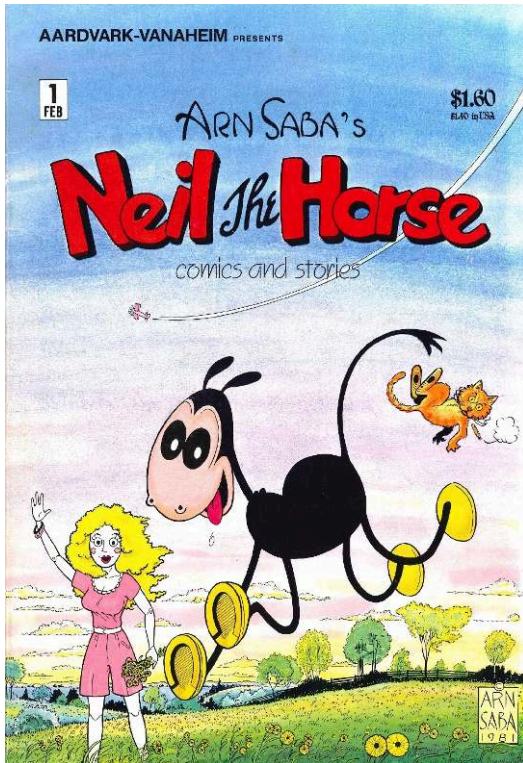
Loving Comics in Neil the Horse, Comics and Stories

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Introduction

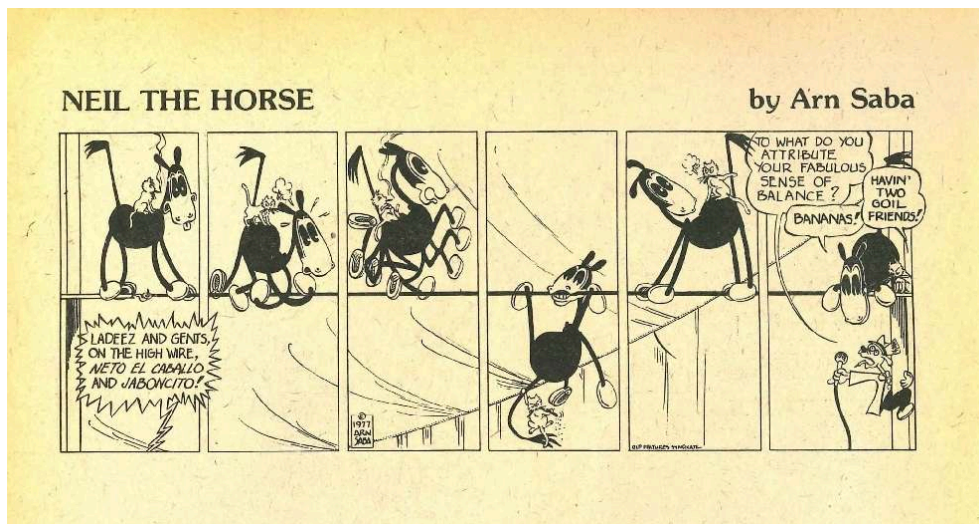
- ¹ *Neil the Horse* #1 (February 1983, picture 1) opens with one of Katherine Collins's earlier comic strips from 1977 that was first published in local newspapers (picture 2). The opening strip follows Neil walking a tightrope with Soapy on his back. Neil's circus act is not perfect, he struggles and almost falls, but he makes it to the other end. "To what do you attribute your fabulous sense of balance?" asks a breathless journalist, an anthropomorphic dog. "Bananas!" answers Neil (stage name: Neto al Caballo). "Havin' two goil friends!" adds Soapy (stage name: Jaboncito).



Picture 1. Cover of *Neil the Horse* #1 displaying the comic's three main characters. (SABA, Arn (COLLINS Katherine as)., *Neil the Horse* #1, Aardvark-Vanaheim, 1983).

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- These stage names emphasize the performativity of the strips but also the gritty reality of entertainment work. Poupée, who does not appear in this brief strip but is present as one of the “two goil friends” Soapy attributes the act’s success to, is often seen struggling with making a living in the ruthless world of showbiz. Finding a suitable job and fitting in are recurrent concerns in *Neil the Horse*. They mirror and perform the commercially unviable essence of the unusual comic in the context of the 1980s direct market in the US.



Picture 2. A *Neil the Horse* comic strip from 1977 published in *Neil the Horse* #1 (SABA, Arn (COLLINS Katherine as)., *Neil the Horse* #1, Aardvark-Vanaheim, 1983).

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- 3 The 1977 strip is in many ways emblematic of the fortunes of *Neil the Horse*: confounding categories, recalling older comics while remaining a child of its times. It also reveals possibilities of what comics can be. *Neil the Horse* is about loving comics, whereby the comics author is also a comics fan. From the mid-1970s until 1982, Collins (then Arn Saba) wrote and hosted more than fifty shows on comics for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, including a radio program on comics and cartoonists titled “Comics: The Continuous Art”. She was also the resident comics expert for the “Morningside” program. The interest in comics history and the potential of the medium voiced in these programs also underlie the deceptive frivolity of *Neil the Horse*.
- 4 The 1980s can be framed as a transformative decade for comics, one that set in motion the problematic claim, already prevalent in the 1970s, that comics had “grown up” (COSTELLO and CREMINS, 2021). Rereading *Neil the Horse* offers us many opportunities for challenging and nuancing such narratives of growing up. While such nuance is not new to comics studies (see PIZZINO, 2016; WILLIAMS, 2020), it can be further teased out through turning to the phenomenon of *bedephilia* or loving comics. Considering different forms of loving comics that go beyond nostalgia and uncritical fannishness can help unveil tendencies that might have been left behind in the process of growing up, and can even expand our understanding of the medium.
- 5 During the 1980s, the “second wave of organized comics fandom” (BEATY, 2012, p. 154) was wielding a strong impact on the comics produced. The figure of an author who was also a fan was therefore not unusual. However, the kinds of comics *Neil the Horse* paid homage to were unusual, far removed from the world of superheroes. For Beaty, the second wave “was more backward looking than was the first,” glorifying the superheroes of the self-proclaimed golden age of comics (BEATY, 2012, p. 154). It furthered “the general development of organized comics fandom, creating most of its important institutions including comic book specialty stores, comic book conventions, fan magazines, comic book price guides, and even publishing houses” (ibid.). Paul Williams goes further to connect the “1970s Big Name Fans” to the “novelization” impulses and experimentation of the 1970s and 1980s (WILLIAMS, 2020, p. 185).
- 6 In tracing the reworkings and curations of the comics archive in the contemporary graphic novel, Benoît Crucifix emphasizes the paradox inherent in reprinting the ephemeral strip as a book and how contemporary comics makers play on such paradoxes of remembering and glorifying comics, as in the case of Cole Closser’s *Little Tommy Lost* and certain pages of Sonny Liew’s *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (CRUCIFIX, 2020, p. 134, 151). *Neil the Horse* offers us a prehistory of this “moment of the archive” (CRUCIFIX, 2020, p. 134). This prehistory, one of several possible narratives, is marked by *bedephilia* and the related acts of selection, discursive incorporation and homage. . Further, with its combination of comics (gags, strips) and stories (long form comics, illustrated stories) and nonnarrative forms such as paper dolls, songs and dances, *Neil the Horse* pushes against the literariness that has marked the graphic novel and distinguishes it from mainstream comics (PIZZINO, 2016; BEATY and WOO, 2016; WILLIAMS, 2020). However, *Neil the Horse* also foreshadows the practices of graphic novelists in its tendency of historicizing comics as well as the medium’s material and experimental scope. In some ways a graphic novel almost *avant la lettre*, it struggled with the limits of a one-shot novel. In her “Note From the Publisher” to *Neil the Horse* #1, Denise Loubert explains how the original project to publish a longform comic of 60

to 80 pages was replaced by a publication divided across several issues because Collins's project just kept on growing.

- 7 Published by Dave Sim and Loubert's Aardvark-Vanaheim press, and later Loubert's Renegade press, *Neil the Horse* shared catalogue space with the likes of Sim's *Cerebus* and Bob Burden's *Flaming Carrot*. It can, at first blush, be categorized alongside the North American alternative comics that reconfigured mainstream tendencies and tropes dominated by DC and Marvel, even though alternative comics is in itself a grey category in many respects (WILLIAMS, 2020, p. 185-186; see also GABILLIET, 2009, p. 64-84). While *Neil the Horse* fits in with the move towards greater authorial freedom and experimentation, it stands out in its brand of experimentation: it replaced superheroes with funny animals and children's comics as a measuring rod. It went further in its conscious celebration of comics not made for adult, male comics readers. While target readership and actual readers are two different phenomena, *Neil the Horse* probably attracted readers hailing from the fuzzier areas of predictable likes and dislikes that were divided according to gender and age (comics for children, comics for male adults etc.). John Porcellino, author of the mini-comics *King-Cat Comics and Stories* has frequently acknowledged the lasting influence of *Neil the Horse*, which is also reflected by his incorporation of "comics and stories".
- 8 At this moment of relative comics legitimation, reading *Neil the Horse* floppies and the recent collected edition (COLLINS, 2017) that reconfigures a selection of *Neil the Horse* material raises several essential questions regarding what comics can be, the flexibility of the comics form, and its interactions with other popular media, especially those involving sound and performance. Arguably, the central question raised by *Neil the Horse* is about bedophilia or loving comics, specifically old, whimsical, quirky and unabashedly childish comics. A source of inspiration, comics and picture stories from the 1930s and 1940s, acquire a new life in *Neil the Horse*. The publication's quiriness is in itself a reflection of the window of opportunity offered by the 1980s direct market as well as the limits of such opportunity.
- 9 The first section of this article examines the role of playfulness and childish elements such as the funny animal (an often childlike figure molded to appeal to children). The second section elaborates on the childishness associated with comics and its gradual effacement in comics production and in scholarly comics discourse, where the childishness of the medium is rarely discussed on its own ground. It also highlights the transgenerational appeal of *Neil*. I then examine the hybrid form of *Neil the Horse Comics and Stories* and focus on the role of intermedial connections and media memories (see AHMED 2019) of romance and musicals. In *Neil the Horse*, Collins does not directly transpose these forms, she reworks them and often infuses them with poignant (or self-deprecatory) reflections: the romance is always impossible and ephemeral, the dancers are self-aware of their performativity.
- 10 The inclusion of these unusual elements can be seen as a comment on comics-making, pointing towards ignored masters and precursors but also drawing connections with other media. Collins creates her own archive of comics worth remembering and emulating which resemble the children's comics of her youth. She also engages with musicals, the golden age of which was already all but buried, to establish connections with other marginalized, popular fare that also relies on performance and a certain degree of frivolity.

Playfulness: countering the mainstream

- 11 In the 1980s, the decade that was so crucial to comics legitimation, the appreciation of comics remained streamlined, with works like *Neil the Horse* filtered out because they did not appeal to what had become the average comics reader (adult male). Such a filtering is, in retrospect, somewhat ironic given that the contemporary graphic novel has become an outlet for many experiences that can be classified as marginal.
- 12 The dancing and the light, playful humor in *Neil the Horse* evoke the *Witz*, the romantic concept Thierry Smolderen turns to for explaining the kind of comics humor originating in Rodolphe Töpffer's works (SMOLDEREN, 2014, p. 48; see also AHMED, 2021¹). Smolderen describes the *Witz* as relying on "the poetics of an empty center [...] a free and capricious way of creating things out of thin air and in an almost weightless state" (SMOLDEREN, 2014, p. 48). *Neil* shows how this "poetics of an empty center" connects both comics and musicals, as does the appropriation of minstrelsy. Such carefreeness masks the labor of entertainment and has ties with the hectic practices of vaudeville, especially minstrelsy, to which funny animals are intimately connected. For Nicholas Sammond, funny animals are minstrels, albeit *vestigial* ones, "carrying the tokens of blackface minstrelsy in their bodies and behaviors yet not immediately signifying as such" (SAMMOND, 2015, p. 3).²
- 13 The dynamics of the *Witz* allow *Neil the Horse* to speak to both children and adults, to choreograph the *Neil* stories in a way that seems as effortless as Astaire and Rogers' dances, with a superficial lightness that captures the complexity and fragility of human relationships and the constraints and mechanisms of the entertainment world. Layers of tension between surface and performativity and essence are incarnated by the *Neil the Horse* comics, as suggested by the more romantic stories and strips, as well as by the song and dance sequences that inevitably play on surface and depth. The superficial playfulness and frivolousness—Neil's main aim in life is to eat bananas, Soapy is regularly drunk, and Poupée faces the struggles of adult life and tries to dance them away—mask strong engagement with comics and love for comics through the simultaneous presence and deconstruction of childish and performative elements. The harmonious coexistence of two almost opposing kinds of funny animals—the childlike Neil and the grumpy Soapy enacting adult vices—aptly captures this reconciliation of diverse elements of comics production: the childish and the mature (often childishness reversed but also self-conscious and self-deprecating). The diversity of this cast of characters in turn reflects the scope of potential readers.
- 14 Even though anthropomorphic animals are nowadays commonly associated with children's culture, they have a varied and rich visual history. They are, for instance, satiric and for adults in nineteenth century caricatures and illustrations, such as *Les Métamorphoses du Jour* [*Metamorphosis of the Day*], by Jean-Jacques Grandville, who also illustrated *Aesop's Fables*. Satire and fables on one hand, and children's literature on the other, are the two storytelling traditions Thierry Groensteen categorizes animal comics under (GROENSTEEN, 1987, p. 10). In *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America*, Les Daniels discerns in funny animal comics a "dual impulse" of "rural nostalgia and economic necessity" or the need to make a living in a new, hostile environment (DANIELS quoted in CREMINS, 2016, p. 147). A comparable, underlying clash with capitalist mentality also haunts *Neil the Horse*. Daniels points out how in the 1930s, as more and more funny animal comics were being produced, a certain kind of rural

America was gradually fading out. Recalling Walter Benjamin's observation that "animals are receptacles of the forgotten", Cremins adds that "funny animals are not only about what we think it means to be human, but also about the nature of memory itself" (CREMINS, 2016, p. 148). Through their close connections with animation, funny animals also play on, and with, simulated movement and repetitive action, of breathing impossibly anthropomorphic life into drawn lines. Indebted to animation but thriving in paper panels, Neil and Soapy embody diverse histories of the drawn animal in the service of entertainment: as the "classic" funny animal, Neil bears a resemblance to the earliest versions of Disney's Horace the Horse, barring Horace's yoke and also generally walking on all fours instead of his hind legs. He is the opposite of the grumpy Soapy, helplessly prone to adult flaws, much like the funny animals of alternative and underground comics (Cerebus) but also, eventually the mainstream, such as Marvel's Howard the Duck.

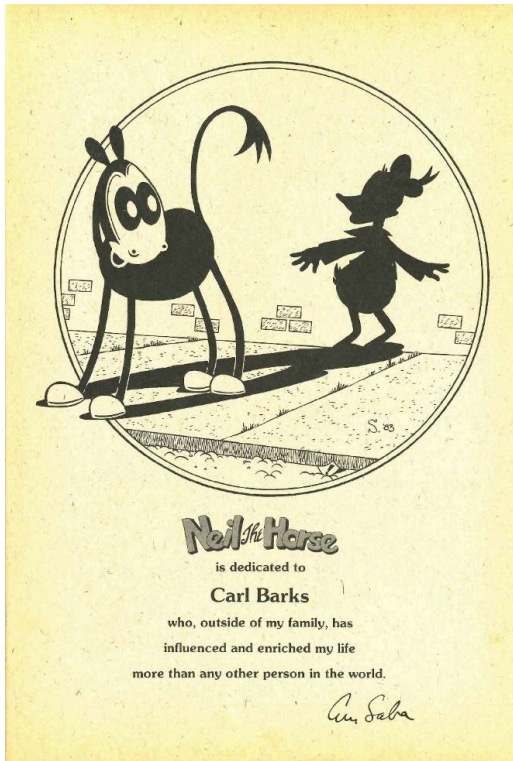
- 15 *Neil the Horse* is then not the mere receptacle, but the active weaver of many kinds of memories around comics-making and comics reading; memories that were self-conscious, conjuring comics on the verge of sliding into oblivion, or already forgotten, often as children's fare. *Neil the Horse* was not only activating memories of children's comics but also the role of childishness (both as a moment of playfulness and freedom and as a potential slur on the medium). In its bedophilia, Collins's *Neil the Horse* embraced and performed a love for all that was "childish" but also idiosyncratic about the medium. To the extent that, as the epithet "comics and stories" suggests, even the notion of comics itself spilled over into other forms of narrative and performance.

Childishness and *Neil the Horse* as a transgenerational comic

- 16 According to historian Carolyn Steedman, children are not metaphors but personifications with increasing affective power "because there became available more and more ways of *seeing* their similarity with adults, and of apprehending them as part and as extension of the adult self" (STEEDMAN 1995, p. 18). Referring to a corpus of texts from 1780-1930, Steedman suggests that, "[t]he figure of the child, released from the many texts that gave birth to it, helped shape feelings, and structure feeling into thought" (19). Such a figure of the child imbues recent comics creation. Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, for instance, visualizes the process by channeling nostalgia and laying the complex workings of comics bare through the implicit figure of the child comics hero, the child Jimmy imagined himself to be, the actual child that he was (as were his father, grandfather and great-grandfather), and the childishness he never grew out of.
- 17 Contemporary graphic novels, such as Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* and Emil Ferris' *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* activate a nostalgia for forgotten, often ephemeral comics and childhood reading of comics, questioning the presumed childishness of comics while riding the graphic novel wave. Jimmy and Karen have imbibed comics fandom in different ways. What they share is a weirdness, an outsider status that marks most of the *Neil the Horse* stories. The recuperation of the figure of the child, childhood memories (of comics reading) and childishness inform both graphic novels to different extents. A similar structure of feeling is put to work in *Neil* as it playfully reactivates the implicit figure of the child. Yet, while masquerading as escapist and funny, *Neil*

incorporates realistic and reflexive undertones. Benoît Crucifix and I have discussed how polygraphic styles are mnemonic (AHMED and CRUCIFIX, 2016, p. 283). Style can also function as a (fannish) homage. This fannishness—which overlaps with childishness—is palpable in *The Smartest Kid on Earth* interludes in the graphic novel and Jimmy’s actions, daydreams and fears. In Emil Ferris’ *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, the protagonist, Karen Reyes, whose diary we read, and who draws herself as a were-girl, is a different kind of comics fan. A budding artist, she reproduces the cover pages of horror comics that were famously decried as being unsuitable for children. She also adapts the conventions of pulp genres—such as crime and horror—to narrate and work through her life and also to piece together the mysterious death of her upstairs neighbor. Comics-making and comics history are full of child readers, real and imagined. They are imbricated in a strange tango with comics legitimation that marks the many lives of *Neil the Horse*: most notably its run with Aardvark and Renegade and its recent collection and republication with Continuum.³

- 18 In *Neil the Horse* #7, a letter signed Anthony F. Smith mentions how the writer, “a big fan,” shared and converted a friend, who in turn shared the comic with her son of 2 ½ years. “Neil is now [...] his favorite person.” “We are always especially ‘appy to ‘ear zat our comic ees ze success wis’ *des enfants*,” gushes Poupée in her reply and calls on other readers to share stories about children reading *Neil*. “The Pony Express” for issue #6 likewise showcases a pair of letters by a six-year-old girl and her mother. Poupée is delighted and adds a special request: “we would like to get more letters from *children*, or ze parents of children.” *Neil the Horse* is “an ‘all-ages’ comic,” Collins affirms and adds that “Sometimes I say it’s a children’s comic for adults” (DUEBEN 2017a).
- 19 Correspondingly, although *Neil the Horse* was published in black and white, the signature style of alternative comics of the late 1970s and 1980s, one of the earlier longer *Neil the Horse* stories was published in color in *Charlton Bullseye* (vol. 1, no. 2, July 1981). The series included a mix of superhero and funny animal comics. Some early *Neil the Horse* comics and illustrated stories were even published in Robert Nielsen’s *Canadian Children’s Annual* and the *1980s Comics Annual* by the same press, Potlatch. While *Neil the Horse* shares many similarities with funny animals, especially Carl Barks’ *Donald Duck*, to whom Collins dedicates her *Neil* work (picture 3), and to family comics in general, it also has close affiliations with girls’ comics.



Picture 3. *Neil the Horse* #1, dedication. (SABA, Arn (COLLINS Katherine as). *Neil the Horse* #1, Aardvark-Vanaheim, 1983).

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- 20 The colors are pastel and varied in the *Charlton Bullseye* story, which narrates how Neil, Soapy and Poupée’s tour of another universe malfunctions and they crash-land into a world where everything is soft and being hard is a crime. The three friends are soon jailed for “failing to meet common standards of softness” and sentenced to be “unstitched, unstuffed, and re-filled with 100% corrective new fibres.” Being excluded and even punished for not belonging are recurring concerns in *Neil the Horse*. The friends are saved through a quaint twist: the corporal who accompanied them to jail secretly longs to be a tap dancer – a dance impossible on his soft planet. He releases the friends and Poupée grants the corporal a dance when he starts singing the Quebecois singer Marie-Lynn Hammond’s song, “Soft on You”. Love saves the day and the comic ends with a song and dance.
- 21 The outsider status of the main characters is complemented by the outsider status of the comic. Earlier *Neil the Horse* issues promise a return to color but this promise remained unfulfilled in both the Aardvark-Vanaheim and Renegade publications. *The Complete Neil the Horse* also eschews colors, which could have enhanced Neil’s appearance as a transgenerational comic. Nevertheless, *Neil the Horse* shares features of crossover fiction. As Sandra Beckett reminds us, crossover fiction is far from new given that older genres and storytelling forms such as fables and fairytales were often told to mixed audiences (BECKETT, 2009). While it might be going too far to suggest that *Neil the Horse* has something of the timeless, it does incorporate multiple temporalities, especially comics times, in its combination of old and new tropes: the child-friendly Neil coexists with the sarcastic, bad-humored Soapy.

- 22 That Poupée is simultaneously doll and human is jarring, far more so than Neil's and Soapy's anthropomorphism. Poupée's dollhood uncomfortably alludes to female objectification and the mechanical essence of the character and even the means of producing and disseminating the comics the character finds herself in. She is a human-doll in a comic otherwise dominated by anthropomorphic animals. Her ambivalence as a living doll mirrors the comic's transgenerational audience. While dolls are for children, specifically little girls, the adult world is not unfamiliar with dolls (as sex dolls, collectors' items or decorations). The blond, buxom Poupée reflects a male fantasy so familiar to the comics world and popular culture in general while being very human in her actions and desires. She is also the paper doll that readers can copy and dress up in the costumes of other comics heroines (but also, in *Neil the Horse #2*, Rosie the Riveter, drawn by Trina Robbins). Like most of *Neil the Horse*, Poupée slides between objecthood and humanity but also between adult and children's, and girls', worlds.
- 23 The concept of childishness is problematic yet intriguing. Denigrated in childhood studies for the ridicule and incompleteness it associates with children, such negative connotations acquire a different twist in comics: in charting the break away from the constraints and low standing of children's culture, looking at figurations of childishness can help us acquire a fuller understanding of the role played by such characters in comics history and the ways in which comics are perceived and critiqued. For this, childishness, as far as comics are concerned, needs some unpacking and operationalizing. Childishness is not only the tendency of being immature or childlike. It implies behavior and thinking that need to be grown out of. It involves adult romanticization of what it means to be a child: inhabiting a world imbued with play and unfettered imagination, running on value systems different from those of the adult world. Many of the elements that had to be left behind or reworked in the process of comics growing up into graphic novels can be considered childish; childishness and pulp, for instance, overlap in their purported simplicity and contrast with adult literariness, which in turn harks back to the denigration of comics as material for the dumb, the illiterate or for children.
- 24 Recent scholarship has examined the many children in comics as well as the role of childhood itself (see, for instance, GORDON, 2016; CHANEY, 2016; SAGUISAG, 2018; MEYER, 2019). Although in the course of the twentieth century readerships became increasingly fragmented on the basis of age, gender and genre, child characters in comics have often catered to the broadest readership possible, the so-called family audiences. This is especially true for American newspaper comics but it can also hold for certain European comics which eventually gained a cult following, such as Hergé's *Tintin*, the leading character of which strikes, in many ways, the perfect balance between childhood and adulthood.
- 25 Julien Baudry mentions the "affective logic" involved in fannish comics histories, as in the case of the "Frenchifying" narrative members of SOCERLID built around Alain Saint-Ogan's comics (BAUDRY, 2012). This Frenchness also contains a considerable degree of wholesomeness that is part of the package of connotations tied to child and animal comics protagonists. Such connotations are at least partially a result of the adult idealization of childhood, relegating it to a nostalgic, idealized space. The presence of children and childish attributes in comics reinforces affective connections to the medium and enhances the nostalgic gaze cast on it, which sometimes, but not automatically, translates into a legitimizing movement: for, in addition to popularizing

comics and sometimes also influencing storylines, fans helped preserve them and contributed to their legitimization.⁴

- 26 In addition to the comics memory work of the stories themselves, another kind of engagement with comics history and legitimization unfolds through the “Great Women of Ze Comics” paper doll series (*Neil the Horse* #1-6, picture 4), which celebrates the diversity of female comics characters across several decades of comics history, going as far back as Mama Katzenjammer. Underscoring how the comic was worth preserving instead of cutting up or throwing away, earlier issues instruct the reader to photocopy the page instead of cutting the comic (see AHMED, 2021). Poupée admits in the first issue: “I am not usually to stand around een ze underwear. But zis ees special. Ze comics are like ze show business, zat zere are ze many great women of ze past, ‘oo are make me very inspire” (#1). Through these dolls, Collins offers a radically different perspective of comics history. She pays tribute to the many female comics characters, irrespective of genre. These pages bring together a variety of female comics characters, such as mothers and seductresses, that wouldn’t conventionally be classified as “great women”. Attracting both female and male readers (as affirmed by reader contributions in the forms of letters, dress designs and other art), *Neil the Horse* is one of the few comics of its time to run paper dolls, often costume designs for Poupée and occasionally other characters she encountered. Most of these are drawn by Barbara Rausch, who had collaborated with Bill Woggon in his iconic *Katy Keene* (1949-1961) and later, *Vicki Valentine* (published by Renegade Press, and briefly introduced in *Neil the Horse* # 11) and who would also work on the *Barbie* franchise. Encouraging fans to draw dress designs (see COLLINS, 2017, p. 48-49, 101-105) was a practice popularized by Woggon. Although the series only ran for six issues, paper dolls remained regular features in *Neil the Horse*. They, like the letter columns and lyrics and art contests, provided occasions for interaction with a readership that also included other comics artists. Gilbert Hernandez, for instance, sent in some designs for Poupée through Luba (#12). The inclusion of paper dolls, associated with girl’s comics, to tell a history of comics highlights the roles of feminine, girlish and childish elements, as well as the role of play and fan interaction to reconsider comics and their past.
- 27 Most notable of these memories are the girls’ comics, for which paper dolls are in many ways emblematic. The many girls’ comics that had appeared in the 1940s and 1950s in the US would start dwindling and disappear through the 1970s and early 1980s (see ROBBINS, 1999). Romance comics sales had already been declining in the mid-1960s. The continuing decline in comics sales in general during the mid-1970s disproportionately affected publications for female readers in the US and in the UK (see ROUND, 2019, p. 20). Even though *Katy Keene* was revived in the 1980s and continued for several years, most attempts to revive girls’ comics, which went beyond the romance genre, were unsuccessful. Trina Robbins recalls how Marvel ended up cancelling her short-lived girls’ comic, *Meet Misty*, because of insufficient sales. Poor sales were not due to a lack of enthusiastic readers—female and male—but due to the refusal of comic book stores, the main, and male-oriented, channel for selling comics, to display material for female readers (ROBBINS, 2017, p. 141, 143; GIBSON, 2015, p. 170). This gender bias worked at all levels: girls and women rarely preserved their comics, let alone actively collecting them and establishing a discourse around them, which eventually resulted in the general writing out of girls’ comics and girl readers in comics histories. Comics work by Trina Robbins, Barbara Rausch and Denise Loubert went

against this grain to reintroduce the forgotten girls' comics and the paratexts surrounding them.



Picture 4. *Neil the Horse* #6: The final instalment of "The Great Women in Comics" series. (SABA, Arn (COLLINS Katherine as). *Neil the Horse* #6, Aardvark-Vanaheim, 1984).

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"It wasn't just comics, it was anything and everything": romance, song and dance

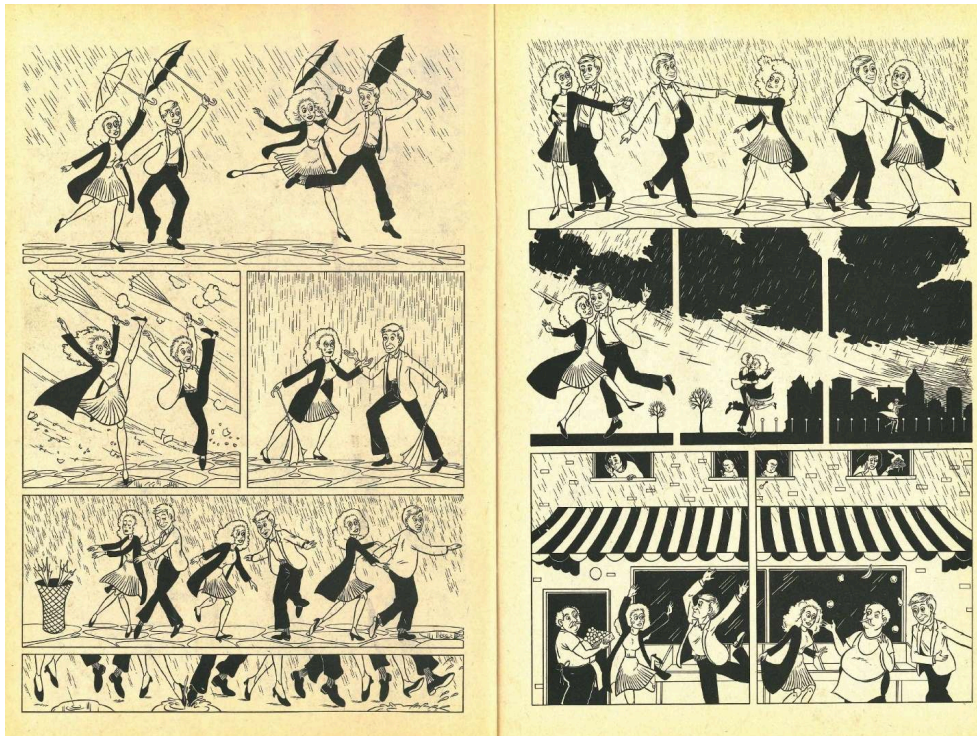
- 28 *Neil the Horse* argues for a certain diversity of characters and content and hybridity of form that is often left out of the definition of comics and is sometimes recuperated by graphic novels. It is a hybridity that is associated with girls' comics which often combined comics with magazine-like diversity of content (GIBSON, 2015, p. 24) but also children's comics. The hybrid nature of *Neil the Horse, Comics and Stories* was also applauded by the readers: the illustrated stories, the songs, the dances, and of course the paper dolls. Collins underscored the importance of such a mix that reminded her of the comics she'd read in her youth:

The comic books didn't have just stories in them, they would have paper dolls and puzzles and features where readers could send in pictures they had done and songs with music that had nothing to do with any story. This was because I had grown up reading not only American comic books but British comics, as well. At the time I was growing up, Canada still thought of itself as essentially a British country. I would get *Rupert the Bear*, for example, and I would also see a lot of the British weekly comics. I loved *Tiger Tim*. They were a real potpourri of anything you could imagine that would entertain a child. That was my model. That it wasn't just comics, it was anything and everything. (DUEBEN, 2017a)

- 29 Such a variety of comics forms and paratexts imbued with a love for specific comics that were for children clashed with the alternative comics scene.
- 30 All of the *Neil the Horse* issues were edited by Loubert, first through Aardvark-Vanaheim, and then through Loubert's own Renegade Press. Founded after her separation from Sim, Renegade only survived a few years (1984-1989). Loubert believed in giving free rein to the artists she published, placing their preferences over economic viability. The experimentation permitted by Renegade is an important indicator of all that comics could be. Unsurprisingly, Loubert was told that including the six-issue-long illustrated story, "Neil the Horse in Old New France" had not been a good idea (#7). But Loubert remains convinced that the story was only to Collins' credit. She emphasizes, "What you see is Arn's story, not mine".
- 31 "Neil the Horse in Old New France" is set in the early days of Canada's colonization. It opens with the arrival of two hundred potential wives for the male population of Quebec. The worldly Poupée, who insists that "Nobody 'as select me! *Toujours c'est moi qui fait la sélection*" and refuses to follow the prudish chaperon's many instructions and classes, stands out immediately (#1). Also standing out are the drunk Soapy, who did not catch any mice on board, and Neil who, with his bloated belly, is loaded off on a stretcher, and set amongst the proud, strong horses that had already disembarked before him. The three friends move into the only tavern available instead of following the other women to the convent. They are naturally the source of all sorts of scandals and chaos and eventually leave, essentially out of boredom. The recurrent theme of not fitting in was also a feeling shared by Collins, who transitioned from Arn Saba in the early 1990s. As Saba, Collins was regularly attacked "for not being 'masculine' enough" (COLLINS, 2017, p. 352). After transitioning, Collins encountered even more hostility (DUEBEN 2017b).
- 32 A *Neil the Horse* t-shirt advertisement in issue #10 explains the slogan: "Neil, Soapy, and Poupée want to encourage more Singing, Dancing, and Idealised Romance in everyday life." While the singing and dancing enacted a certain degree of frivolity, Poupée's romantic encounters were hardly ideal. This is already evident in the unromantically titled "Video Warrior", which began in issue #4 (August 1983) and continued until issue #7 (April 1984). "Ah - Romance! It is a subject close to my heart. It is also one I haven't seen enough of in comics," writes Loubert in her customary note preceding the comic. Just like many other readers of girls' comics, including Robbins and Rausch, the longing for such comics is palpable. During Renegade's short publishing life, Loubert published an anthology of romance comics called *Renegade Romance*, which ran art and comics by, among others, Robbins and the Hernandez brothers. It, too, remained a short-lived venture. Such attempts were not only seeking the revival of specific comics genres; they were also attempts to reclaim more space for girls and women in the comic book world. Later, in the 1990s, Loubert would publish, together with Neil Gaiman, the cheekily titled *How to Get Girls (Into Your Store)*. A *Friends of Lulu Retailers Handbook* (see BRANDMUELLER). Tips involved not staring, changing the posters, and displaying comics girls could be interested in.
- 33 In *Neil the Horse*, and precisely through Poupée, romance is almost eternally present and unattainable. In "Video Warrior," the elfin Prince, although handsome, is anything but gentlemanly: his first act after Poupée's back is turned is to pinch her bottom (#4). This is hardly different from the bystander who calls "Hey, Blondie! What's your hurry?" as Poupée rushes to the video game center to seek help for the wounded prince. Alien to

the concept of love, Prince Gwyn just wants to “have a good time” and is constantly pushed or kicked away by Poupée. He does not refrain from grabbing Poupée whenever he can, mistaking her friendly gestures as innuendos and is shamelessly drunk in the third episode (issue #6). By the time Gwyn learns what love is (#7), a disillusioned Poupée realizes that she cannot live in his world and must go home: “I am always wait for ze love to ‘ang on to. But life ees not like zat. Every’sing ees always take away. [...] Eef I wait for somes’ing sure, I weel wait forever.”

- 34 Poupée’s romances are regularly doomed, abrupt and with no hope of a long-lasting relationship. “Video Warrior” and all of Poupée’s romantic encounters follow the pattern of what Janice Radway calls “failed romance,” the polar opposite of “ideal romance” and rejecting the “*inevitability* of the deepening of ‘true love’ into an intense conjugal commitment” (RADWAY, 1991, p. 162, italics in the original). Although Poupée also strives “to find a man who will appreciate her for herself alone” (p. 179), the only inevitable element in Poupée’s relationships is their ephemerality. Crucially, however, Poupée’s story is not one of seeking eternal or conjugal commitment as is already evident in her first appearance in “Old New France”. According to the women interviewed by Radway (who did not enjoy failed romance), ideal romance offered escapism and possibilities for “dealing with some of the consequences of patriarchy without also challenging the hierarchy of control on which it is based” (RADWAY, 1991, p. 216). In contrast, Poupée’s short-lived and unsuccessful, Poupée’s romantic encounters result in her self-affirmation. They often occasion dancing duets which, like Fred Astaire’s performances, display awareness of their staged essence.
- 35 Perhaps the most surprising element of the comic was the inclusion of dances and songs, complete with musical scores (often written by Collins herself). This was in keeping with the comic’s slogan, “Making the World Safe for Musical Comedy,” which brought back elements such as songs that could have been found in some children’s and girl’s magazines but were relatively rare in contemporaneous comics fare. This media memory of musical comedy, especially from its golden age (1940s and 1950s), highlights intermedial connections between comics and performance, song and dance that are often overlooked: *Neil the Horse* doesn’t merely reference musicals, or remediate them; rather, it incorporates the form and its history and makes it interact with comics forms and history (see AHMED, 2019). Such an interaction is embodied by the Fred Astaire Tributes (*Neil the Horse* #11 and #13), which thematize the performativity of entertainment and its brief overlaps and frequent clashes with reality. In incorporating elements that were quite unusual for the times, *Neil the Horse* goes through considerable pains and existential peril to shed light on all that comics can be: short-lived gags, visual reveries, dance sequences, musical comedy. Its layering of allusions and meaning coexists with simplicity and frivolity—primarily through humor, especially slapstick, and dancing—enabling it to speak to a diverse set of comics readers.



Picture 5. Dance sequence with Poupée and Fred Astaire in *Neil the Horse* #11: "The Frank Astaire Tribute" (SABA, Arn (COLLINS Katherine as), *Neil the Horse* #11, Renegade Press, 1985).

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- 36 The dances are important instances of media memories at work: the comics remember the musical and transform both in the process (picture 5). Astaire and Ginger Rogers, for instance, are often performing on stage in their films, using dance to express their ambivalent emotions towards each other. The physical chemistry and synchronicity are not always paralleled by straightforward or idealized romance. There is a down-to-earthedness and self-awareness that frames and clashes with the act of breaking out into dance (in itself built on a tension between joyful, seemingly carefree expression and rigorously choreographed and rehearsed movements). Astaire and Vera-Allen similarly enact and disrupt the nuclear family in the *Three Little Words* dance, "Mr. and Mrs. Hooper at Home" (1950): the idyll of family life is questioned through the actors' generally cheerful dance steps which unfold, like many other dance routines, on a stage within the film. Astaire plays Bert Kalmar the vaudeville performer and Tin Pan Alley songwriter and Vera-Allen plays his wife, Jessie Brown. After having cleared the table by shoving everything in a drawer, tossing around a baby doll and displaying several steps of marital conflict and joy, Astaire and Vera-Allen break through the walls of their flat and whirl off stage. Such playful lightness that remains loaded with meaning is comparable to the arabesque movement of the romantic Witz discussed above.
- 37 The Fred Astaire tribute issues, *Neil the Horse* #11 and *Neil the Horse* #13 took a record amount of time to finish. They include forty-one pages of "all-dance stories" and an essay by Collins introducing Astaire and his work. The closing remarks of the second tribute inadvertently show how Astaire is connected to *Neil the Horse* in spirit:
- 38 Every time one sees an Astaire dance number, one is beguiled and amazed all over again. He constantly re-awakens emotions and reveals fresh visions. He gives us a picture of ourselves as we would like to be: gracious, sweet and lithe. He manages to

make us feel that the cares, and disappointments, and brutality of life, can be transcended through cheerfulness, energy and lightness of spirit.

- 39 The poetics of the empty center (the logic of the *Witz*) reveals the emptiness of the pursuits and exigences at the center of modern life.
- 40 These close ties to media that are often dismissed as sentimental and women's fare run parallel to the kinds of comics Collins promoted through *Neil the Horse*. The interaction with the musical highlights the extent to which Collins was willing to form unusual, even out-of-fashion, connections. Such interaction is not without nostalgic undertones, since the musical, like the comics *Neil the Horse* paid homage to, had been relegated to the margins of the cultural landscape. The love for comics discernible in *Neil the Horse* stretched and played with the medium's affiliations with other entertainment forms.

Bedephilia in *Neil the Horse*

- 41 Drawing horses, as Emma Hunsinger recently reminded us, has been a bane for artists, and a source of enduring fascination, as evinced by the endearingly disproportionate horses of the Lascaux caves. Horses are “uniquely and unexpectedly disproportional”: “Their legs are thinner and longer than you'd expect them to be [...] Their torsos are enormous compared to those legs” (HUNSINGER, 2019). As I have tried to show above, the simplified horse that Neil is, with spindly legs,⁵ suction-cup-like hooves, rounded torso and head, hides a similarly complex negotiation between reality and the cartoonish forms: the poetry of the imagination and the harshness of modern, capitalist life.
- 42 The diverse formats, frivolous, endless strips, announced by the ultimate aim of “making the world safe for musical comedy,” catered to many potential comics readers that had been ignored by existing comics. *Neil the Horse*'s hybridity of material and expansion of connections with musical comedy demonstrates a bedephilia that depends on a broader understanding of comics, far beyond what it was being streamlined into by the 1980s—a streamlining that unfolded through experimentation and demonstrated a strong predilection for adult comics. In articulating a love for comics exhibiting childishness and frivolity, *Neil* argues for looking at comics through different lenses.
- 43 *Neil the Horse* was always falling short of attaining commercial success in real life. But this is also what makes it an important indicator of a bedephilia that was broader, more playful and, almost ironically, more libertine than the policed realms of comics fandom and publishing.
- 44 In a reply to a reader's congratulatory letter that discerns an “anti-some'in tone” in *Neil the Horse*, Soapy refuses to specify what the comic rebels against: “posonally I'se suspicious a' everyt'in” (*Neil the Horse*, #10). Like the earliest Mickey Mouse and the more niche Krazy Kat and Ignatz, *Neil* was clearly against authority, symbolized by the police cars bearing the slogan “to harass and to restrict” and the ineffective police officer Clancy. It was, by extension, against established order that tends towards repression. We can extend this line of thought further. As Soapy reminds us in the final issue of *Neil the Horse* (# 15), Collins's comics symbolized comic strips rather than being actual comic strips. In its reflections and experimentation with the comics form, *Neil the Horse* was most likely also rebelling against the established order of what comics had become in the 1980s: serious, oriented towards the adult male, stamping out all the fun and games

and variety.⁶ In reworking existing comics idioms into forgotten ones, commenting on the former through the latter, Collins makes the old relevant. A move, or a gesture that is recurrent and sometimes even integral to the contemporary graphic novel (see Benoît Crucifix's discussion of gestures of transmission in *CRUCIFIX*, 2020, p. 13). *Neil the Horse*'s mode of bedophilia brought back elements that were too easily dismissed as childish and non-serious but that were—and are—an integral part of comics history and form. Through *Neil the Horse*, Collins expresses her love for comics, extending to comics that are not only for children but that can be enjoyed across boundaries of age and gender. This love extends the limits of what we have come to assume that comics can be.

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NOTES

1. In this forthcoming publication, I focus on *Neil the Horse* and suppressed comics memory, emphasizing the comic's engagement with genres such as girls' comics and funny animal comics that are often jetsam in the high tide of comics legitimation. I also elaborate on the figuration of entertainment work and comics-making as entertainment work.
2. As Brian Cremins points out in his chapter on funny animals, the influence of minstrelsy has already been noted by Christopher Lehman and Jeet Heer (CREMINS, 2016, p. 147).
3. Of course the very fact that I am writing about *Neil the Horse* is because Collins' work was recently acknowledged (through the Doug Wright awards, for instance) and *Neil the Horse* was reprinted. The privilege of a reprint, however curated, is not offered to many out-of-print and all but forgotten comics.
4. It is perhaps then unsurprising, but still ironic, that comics children and funny animals often, albeit irregularly, provide the forms for comics prizes. The very first comics festival, Lucca Comics and Games, started giving out Yellow Kid awards from the 1970s onwards for a few decades. The Angoulême festival which began in 1974 gave out Alfreds (Saint-Ogan's penguin companion for Zig and Puce) for a few years during the 1980s. Since 2008 the Angoulême prize takes the form of a funny animal-like creature, Lewis Trondheim's Fauve.
5. Legs that were much admired by *Rupert Bear* artist, Alfred Bestall in his letter published in "The Pony Express" of issue #3.
6. It also maintained certain distance from the underground as suggested by a comic-advertisement for *Neil the Horse* where Soapy asks Neil: "You've trashed th' *undergrounds*! Or... did dey come dat way?" when he sees the mess left behind Neil to find a comic for a customer in their comic shop (COLLINS, 2017, p. 51).

ABSTRACTS

This article examines the love of comics or bedephilia discernible in Katherine Collins's *Neil the Horse Comics and Stories*, a short-lived comic from the 1980s. It interrogates and contextualizes the "childish" elements of the comic, its bridging of children's culture and adult culture through focusing girls' comics and funny animal comics. It also discusses the comic's interactions with musicals. Situating the comic in the "maturing" scene of 1980s North America, this article shows how *Neil the Horse* expresses a love for comics that were often left out of the mainstream and its alternatives; it reached out to a relatively mixed audience and an all but forgotten group of comics readers that often steered clear of the abundance of superhero comics.

Cet article s'intéresse aux manifestations de la bédéphilie dans *Neil the Horse Comics and Stories*, de Katherine Collins, un comic book éphémère des années 80. Il examine et contextualise les éléments « enfantins » du comic, et la façon dont il relie les cultures des adultes et des enfants en empruntant aux comics pour jeunes filles et au genre des *funny animals*, les animaux anthropomorphiques. Ce texte s'intéresse également à la façon dont le comic interagit avec la comédie musicale. En replaçant *Neil the Horse* dans le contexte d'une bande dessinée américaine des années 80, de plus en plus « adulte », cet article montre que la série exprime son affection pour des comics négligés à la fois par le mainstream et par les éditeurs alternatifs. Elle s'adresse à une audience relativement hétérogène et à un groupe des lecteurs alors presque oubliés, qui, pour l'essentiel, ne s'intéressait pas aux super-héros.

INDEX

Keywords: graphic novel, fandom, alternative comics, funny animals, childishness, paper dolls, musical comedy, song, dance, romance, letter column

Mots-clés: roman graphique, bédéphilie, édition alternative, animaux comiques, enfance, comédie musicale, chanson, danse, courrier des lecteurs, romance

Subjects: Aardvark-Vanaheim, Renegade, Conundrum, DC, Marvel

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