

## ESSAY

# Catching up on comics

What to read in order to get the big picture on graphic fiction

By Jeremy N. Smith

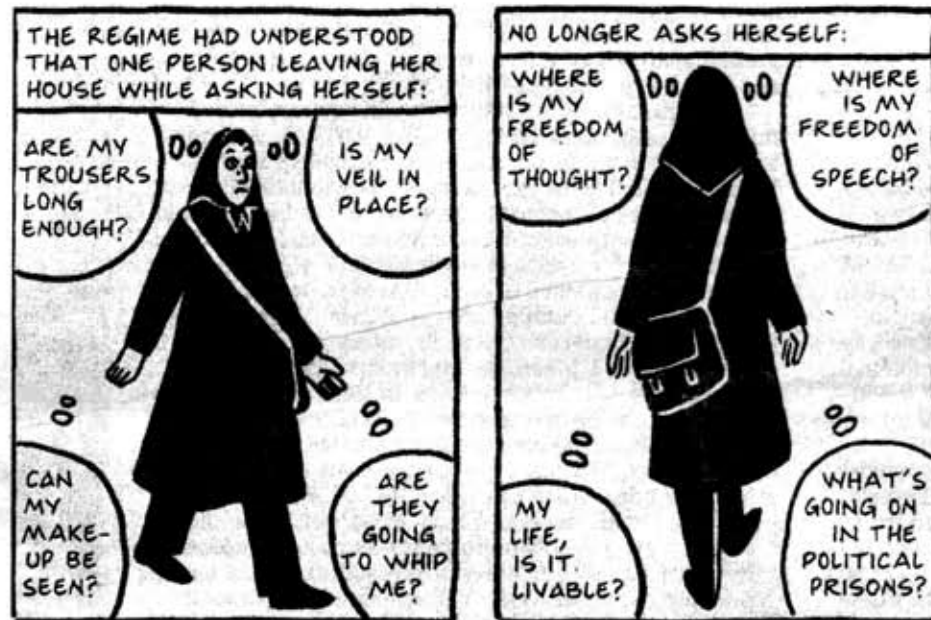
In the March 1958 issue of *Venture Science Fiction* magazine, Theodore Sturgeon offered what the Oxford English Dictionary recently canonized as Sturgeon's Law. Sturgeon was a 40-year-old science-fiction writer weary of having to defend his form to others. For two decades, he said, he had suffered "attacks of people who used the worst examples of the field for ammunition." So much science fiction was so bad, these critics complained. In their estimate, 90 percent of the genre was worthless.

Sturgeon's Law (the author originally called it his "Revelation") is simple and irrefutable: At least 90 percent of *everything* is worthless. By extension, then, "The existence of immense quantities of trash in science fiction is admitted and it is regrettable; but it is no more unnatural than the existence of trash anywhere," Sturgeon wrote. Furthermore, "The best science fiction is as good as the best fiction in any field."

Depending on your point of view, Sturgeon was an optimist, a pessimist, an apologist, or the most succinct opponent ever of intelligent design. In any case, his insight bears application to another popular, once-much-maligned art form: comics. Today critical consensus is that anyone who categorically does not read comics will miss great literature. Based on a sample size of the first eight years of this millennium, of the 50 best books of fiction and non-fiction narrative published each year, as many as three or four may be graphic. Every third year or so, one of the best five will be a comic book. In 2000, it was Chris Ware's "Jimmy Corrigan." In 2003, it was Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis." In 2006, it was Alison Bechdel's "Fun Home."

At least that's my must-read list. Like science fiction, comics are a subject any reader must approach with some apprehension because, however much you care, other people care much, much more than you. Here the corollaries come crashing down on Sturgeon's defense strategy. If someone who bypasses all of one medium or genre, masterpieces included, has bad taste, much worse may be the taste of those so devoted to a single form that their artistic diet is 90 percent trash. Far fewer the number of science-fiction fans besieged by critics than innocent friends of those fans pestered remorselessly to read "Dune" or "Red Planet" or "Battlefield Earth."

Douglas Wolk, author of "Reading Comics," seems to sympathize. "A lot of the people who hit their local comics store every Wednesday think of comics readers as some kind of secret, embattled



Panels from Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis 2"

Illustration courtesy of Marjane Satrapi

fellowship: a group with its own private codes that mark its members as belonging and everybody else as not belonging," he writes. "It's a stupid and destructive mind-set for any number of reasons, the biggest one being that it means you have to buy into an entire culture, or at least come up with a reason that you're not really buying into it, to enjoy a comic book." As long as messengers and medium are indistinguishable to outsiders, graphic novelists endure the overweight, ill-kempt, surly, sarcastic Comic Book Guy on "The Simpsons" as their stand-in.

Wolk's publisher bills the book as "the first serious, readable, provocative, canon-smashing book of comics theory and criticism." But there is no canon, only cantons: one for superheroes and supervillains, and one for science-fiction alternate realities; one for daily funny-page protagonists and one for objects of political satire; one for the anti-heroes of underground-cum-alternative comix and one for post-apocalyptic dystopias and their discontents; one for memoirists; one for novelists; one, even, for reporters. These different kinds of comics have as much and as little in common as your 6th-grade diary and last Thursday's Wall Street Journal and "Moby Dick" and "The Audacity of Hope." All, however, share a narrow shelf in the typical chain bookstore.

What readers new to graphic novels

need is patience and an open mind, friends whose tastes they trust, or a cheat sheet. "Reading Comics" won't work. However critical, Wolk writes most often as a chatty insider. Five years ago he contributed 13 columns to a comics Web site in the guise of "Jess Lemon, an undergraduate of indeterminate gender," he discloses, then reprints in full his favorite of these columns. Before Page 80 of this 400-plus-page work, he is arguing, "Comic books are awesome." What follows is an eight-page, bullet-point list of specific examples, starting with, "The sound effects in Howard Chaykin's early '80s science fiction satire *American Flagg!*"

Anyone entirely ignorant of comics trying to catch up on the present scene can do so faster and more felicitously by reading Peter Schjeldahl's "Words and Pictures," published in *The New Yorker* and available online. Wolk subtitles his book "How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean," but others have addressed these questions with greater rigor and insight, most comprehensively Scott McCloud, author of "Understanding Comics" and "Reinventing Comics." Better still as a beginning are two recent anthologies encompassing the past century of comics in this country: "McSweeney's Quarterly Concern," No. 13, and "An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories." Together they collect samples of the work of almost 100

cartoonists.

Applying Sturgeon's Law and the basic math of probability, we could say the chances of someone's being better than worthless at writing and drawing are not 1 in 10 but 1 in 100. There are and have been few enough of any single category of cartoonists in this country that one can, once interested, read almost all of them. Ten of the 30 men and women in "The Best American Comics 2007" also appeared in the inaugural 2006 anthology. Many of the same practitioners, past and present, appeared in McSweeney's and "An Anthology of Graphic Fiction," as well as "Masters of American Comics," the catalog of an exhibition of the same name organized by the Hammer Museum and The Museum of Contemporary Art, both in Los Angeles.

Nor, besides daily or weekly comic-strip creators, are these writers and artists particularly prolific. "Cartooning takes a really, really long time and is hard, lonely work," Ware wrote in his introduction to "The Best American Comics 2007." How really, really long? At least three pieces in that volume are from 10 years earlier. One story covers forced displacement during war; the war was World War II. Another discusses how a city coped with sudden flooding. The city: Louisville. The year: 1937.

A friend of mine—a talented cartoonist—sometimes makes his living as a high school substitute teacher. He writes and draws comics based on his experiences, and he often works, if you will, at work. The kids are fascinated to see someone creating. They ask what he is doing, and he says drawing. They ask what he is drawing, and he says comics. Comics! they say. Then they ask if he's read manga.

Manga is another category of comics. They originate in Japan and read to me like slow-motion, hyperstylized, Saturday morning children's cartoons, except with graphic sex and violence. Teenagers adore them. Last October *Wired* magazine estimated worldwide manga sales exceeded \$4 billion.

My friend doesn't read manga. These books are incomprehensible to him, just as the kind of alternative comics he writes are to his students. So an already-tenuous connection—adult and child, teacher and student, visitor and permanent resident—ends. The tragedy of Sturgeon's Law is not that, at best, a mere 1 in 10 works of art and literature deserve our attention. The tragedy is that we will never agree on which ones.

Jeremy N. Smith writes about books and comic books.