



# Partners in a Dance

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**Philip Pullman** on his enthusiasm for the graphic novel.

## Philip Pullman on his enthusiasm for the graphic novel

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A graphic novel is any work that grown-ups would be ashamed to be seen reading if it were called a comic. Children, of course, aren't shamed by the same things, and read comics quite cheerfully without feeling the need to call them anything but that. In fact, the term graphic novel is rather like erotica, which is the fancy name for something else you might feel a bit shifty to be caught with.

Is there really a difference, though? Roger Sabin, in his **Adult Comics: An Introduction** (1993), says graphic novels are 'a definable category of comic - a longer than usual work, in book form, with a thematic unity'. So Tintin is, but Dennis the Menace isn't; Peanuts isn't either, but Batman might be. The comics form - the narrative related in a series of pictures in frames, with the only words being dialogue in balloons, thoughts in bubbles, and the occasional caption or sound effect - is the same whether the work is several hundred pages long or only four frames in a daily newspaper strip: it's only length, binding, and 'thematic unity' that make a comic into a graphic novel. Personally, I'm getting a little tired of the term. It's the form itself that's interesting, the interplay between the words and the pictures, and I'd be happy to call them comics and have done with it.

But defining the form, however slippery it might be, is easier than persuading people (grown-ups, I mean) to take it seriously. I think the reason for that is paradoxical. Comics are both easier and harder to read than conventional prose, and people who are good at reading **Middlemarch** or **Tom's Midnight Garden** don't like to feel disdainful of the medium while they're being puzzled by the message. Not at the same time, anyway. If all the comics had the moral seriousness of Art Spiegelman's **Maus**, or the narrative complexity of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' **Watchmen**, there wouldn't be a problem; we could study them with the appropriate sombreness of demeanour and not be embarrassed about it. But they will insist on being fun as well, which is difficult, and some of the best are difficult as well as fun, which is impossible.

The comics form becomes 'difficult', it seems to me, at the point where the pictures force you to read the words more slowly than you want to. Comics that are easy, on the other hand, let you gulp down the words as quickly as you like, and don't allow the pictures to contradict them. Here's a recent example:

The **Judy Picture Library** (for girls? it explains helpfully on the cover) is a curious survival from an earlier and less sophisticated age. It's reminiscent both in content and style of the old **School Friend** or **Girl's Crystal** of the 40s and 50s. The interesting thing here is how dominant the words are. The pictures in this story, 'Wee Slavey's Christmas Mystery', are as dutiful as little Nellie herself; they know their place. The caption is what gives it away. When a caption is in the past tense, the story thinks it's being told in words, and that the illustrations are only incidental. When a caption is in the present tense, the story acknowledges the importance of the pictures, because the present is the only tense

pictures have. But here the words are in charge, and everything is designed to make reading them easy.

Raymond Briggs' **Father Christmas** of 1973, the first of his great series of stories in the comics format, is also easy to read, but in a much more subtle and powerful way. The balance between words and pictures is achieved with a perfect sense of pitch: the pictures are integral and dominant, but the words that are here are all essential, because they contribute what the pictures alone couldn't: quite simply, a human voice.

Another matter that **Father Christmas** raises is that of quality. People who talk about picture books - teachers, students, librarians - tend to come to them from a word-centred experience rather than one familiar with the making of pictures. They know whether the texts are good or not, but there's often a tentativeness in what they say about the artwork, an unwillingness to commit themselves to an opinion about whether one picture is better than another, or why. One shining exception here is Jane Doonan, whose **Looking at Pictures in Picture Books** is a superb introduction to the business of thinking about how pictures work.

And in **Father Christmas**, the pictures are not only integral to the story-telling method, they are also good pictures. They're full of witty detail - we can all see that - but witty detail could still be badly drawn and clumsily finished (or, worse, badly drawn and then given a deceptive and inappropriate gloss of very high finish). These pictures are done so beautifully that the eye lingers or returns time and again for the sheer pleasure of looking at the forms and the colours, and the delight of seeing how the effects are achieved: the old man's eyes, for instance - simple dots throughout most of the story, then at the end, when he's making cocoa and filling his hot-water bottle, drawn as little double lines. How simple, and yet how effectively it makes him look tired and full of sleep.

The comics form - what we might call the grammar - settled down quite early on, and once it had settled there was no need to change it, because it worked so well. Readers of the first great comics, those of Winsor McCay (**Little Nemo**) or George Herriman (**Krazy Kat**), would have felt perfectly at home with the pages of **Father Christmas**. The relationship between word and picture is the classic one.

When Shirley Hughes produced **Chips and Jessie** in 1985, on the other hand, she was doing something quite different. She put a past-tense prose narrative on the page with comic-style pictures, complete with speech balloons.

When I first saw this, I was so enchanted that I stole the idea wholesale, and my own **Spring-Heeled Jack** and **Count Karlstein** were direct imitations. The best way to produce this kind of thing, of course, is to do the whole of it, pictures as well as words. Thanks to Shirley Hughes' single overall vision, **Chips and Jessie** has a unity and playfulness I admired greatly; and I was keen to achieve something similar myself, but I couldn't draw well enough. I can only salute the two artists I worked with, David Mostyn and Patrice Aggs, for their endless patience and skill, but it isn't an entirely satisfactory way of collaborating: one person has to be in charge, and the other has to subdue their own individuality to some extent to fit in with the demands of the first.

In the field of 'pure' comics, there are two classics no-one should ignore. One is Tintin. The work of Hergé is so familiar it's easy to overlook how good it is, but it bears endless re-examination.

According to Harry Thompson in his informative and intelligent **Tintin: Hergé and his Creation** (1992), Hergé was once asked which, out of the thousands of frames he had drawn, he thought the best. This (from **Red Rackham's Treasure**) was one of the two he chose. The other was the second frame on page 38 of **The Crab with the Golden Claws**. Thompson says 'Hergé liked them both so much because in one frame they encapsulate an entire sequence of events, advancing the plot rapidly and explicitly'. One way this picture moves the story forward involves a basic point of comics grammar: if the characters move as the eye does in reading, from left to right, they won't contradict the flow of the text. Hergé discovered that quite early, and re-drew some of the panels in his early stories to take account of it.

The other classic no-one should ignore is more recent. Art Spiegelman's **Maus: A Survivor's Tale**, parts I and II (1987-92), tells the true story of how the author's father and mother survived the horrors of Auschwitz. One of the things that make this book instantly memorable is Spiegelman's decision to depict the Jews as mice and the Germans as

cats, with other groups similarly distinguished: the Poles are pigs, the Americans dogs.

In doing this, Spiegelman took two enormous risks. One was that making the humans into animals might trivialise the appalling events he recounts. The other was more subtle. Cats kill mice: that is their nature. We don't regard them as evil, because they can't help it; that's what cats do. But is it in the nature of Germans to kill Jews? Is that what Spiegelman is saying? That question hovers over the book until it's dispelled by the sheer moral power of the tale. No, that's not what he's saying; he's saying that people kill other people. What the depiction does is allow him to show at a glance things that would take much longer in prose. For instance, Anja the wife, in disguise as a Pole (with a pig mask) is betrayed by her long mouse-tail; and in this haunting picture, the two little mice on the ground can't see what we, from our higher viewpoint, can; that they are walking right into the very heart of danger.

(Incidentally, the past-tense caption here is justified, because it's spoken by one of the characters, so it functions like a first-person voice-over in a film.)

**Maus** is a triumph. Horrifying, humane and brilliant, it is like nothing else in print or image.

Finally, there appeared last year the best introduction to the informed study of comics that I have seen. It's called **Understanding Comics**, and is written and drawn by Scott McCloud; drawn, because the book is itself in the form of a comic. McCloud's point is that comics are capable of expressing anything, and to demonstrate it, he couches his whole argument in the form. It works splendidly.

Anyone looking for evidence of intelligent life on the planet Comix need look no further. McCloud is a superb companion and guide to the delight available in this place where words and pictures come together to dance, but the most important thing a reader needs is simple curiosity and the willingness to look. Those who try will find their efforts richly rewarded.

#### **Book details:**

**Adult Comics: An Introduction**, Roger Sabin, Routledge, 0 415 04418 9, £40.00

**Watchmen**, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, Titan, 1 85286 024 3, £11.50

**'Wee Slavey's Christmas Mystery'** (no author named), D C Thomson & Co Ltd, Judy Picture Story Library for Girls

**Father Christmas**, Raymond Briggs, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 02260 6, £9.99; Puffin, 0 14 050125 8, £4.50 pbk

**Looking at Pictures in Picture Books**, Jane Doonan, Thimble Press, 0 903355 40 X, £8.50

**Chips and Jessie**, Shirley Hughes, Bodley Head, 0 370 30666 X, £5.99

**Spring-Heeled Jack**, Philip Pullman, ill. David Mostyn, Transworld, 0 440 86229 9, £2.50 pbk

**Count Karlstein**, Philip Pullman, ill. Patrice Aggs, Transworld, 0 385 40048 9, £8.99; 0 440 86266 3, £2.99 pbk

**Red Rackham's Treasure**, Hergé, Methuen, 0 416 92540 5, £6.99; Mammoth, 0 7497 0463 2, £3.99 pbk

**The Crab with the Golden Claws**, Hergé, Methuen, 0 416 60500 1, £6.99; Mammoth, 0 7497 0350 4, £3.99 pbk

**Tintin: Hergé and his Creation** Harry Thompson, Hodder, 0 340 52393 X, £17.95; Sceptre, 0 340 56462 8, £5.99

**Maus: A Survivor's Tale, Part I**, 0 14 017315 3, **Part II**, 0 14 013206 6, Penguin, £9.99 each

**Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art**, Scott McCloud, HarperCollins, 0 06 097625 X, £14.99

*Also: Graphic Account: The Selection and Promotion of Graphic Novels in Libraries for Young People*, edited by

Keith Barker, The Library Association Youth Libraries Group, 1993

**Philip Pullman** has both written and illustrated his next book. It's the first volume of a fantasy trilogy - **His Dark Materials, Volume One: Northern Lights** - to be published in July by Scholastic.

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