

“EVERYTHING YOU CAN IMAGINE IS REAL.” AN INTRODUCTION TO GRAPHIC NOVELS

The title of this collection comes from the artist Pablo Picasso, a visionary who created comics of his own design way back in the early 1900s. These comics were recently featured in an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2010. But in this modern age, most comics books and graphic novels are still not given the recognition they deserve. Like early movies before them, graphic novels have been derided as cheap, and subpar, not fine art. But as Chris Ware, a prominent author included in this collection, points out in an interview with *The Paris Review*, graphic novels have the ability to “make drawings seem to come alive on the page and make the visual connections between moments across pages and even chapters concretely explicit, which is a very different experience from looking at page after page of gray text”(Jeet, 2014). Through color, movement, lines, and lettering, these works invite the reader into a vivid world that the novel itself can not always convey.

One of the earliest graphic novels I ever read was Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. It was so engrossing I could not put it down. My father noticed how smitten I was with the novel and began bestowing upon me books from the series *The Best American Comics*. I would start reading on Christmas morning and finish the hefty book by that very evening. I checked out all of the anthologies I could from our local library.

I started collecting comic books and graphic novels because of the brilliant worlds they could create with such few words and simple doodles or complex panels. They conveyed the human experience with simple gestures—an arm reaching out, a desperate look, a child skipping and a economical use of words to convey a message. Graphic novels are the epitome of “Show, don’t tell.” They are visual poetry.

I started my collection with large anthologies that allowed me to sample many different styles and dive headfirst into this graphic world. They introduced me to a variety of artists, but only gave a small flavor of each artist’s work at large. With this incentive, I would further explore styles that stuck out to me. I was particularly drawn to very fastidious designs, like those of Craig Thompson and Chris Ware. Other writers I was drawn to for their writing skills, such as the graphic novelists Adrian Tomine and Harvey Pekar.

To me, the treasures of the collection are Craig Thompson's *Habibi*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Chris Ware's *Building Stories*. Thompson visited the Middle East and chronicled his research for *Habibi* in another short graphic novel, *Carnet de Voyage*, and his effort to get a flavor of the rich culture comes through tenfold in his use of Arabic script and enchanting drawings. The story itself is also breathtaking and manages to twist and turn so much that the reader could never guess the end result. In a different vein, *Maus* is based on a true story, Spiegelman's father's experience as a European Jew in the Holocaust, and for this reason it is a very important story to tell. Spiegelman doesn't settle for simply drawing his conversations with his father, but transports his audience back to 1940s Europe where the Nazis are cats and the Jews, mice. Finally, *Building Stories* turns the genre on its head by presenting the reader with a series of stories in different packages that the reader must put together to form his own narrative. Each book is elegantly designed and stands as an example of the genre at its best—exceeding expectations and telling stories in innovative ways.

I hope to continue to expand my collection, looking both to the past and the future when deciding which pieces to splurge on. It's important to include those who paved the way for today's prodigies—the Winsor McCays, Will Eisners, and Jack Kirbys of the present. But as the field continues to diversify, pieces that tell stories of underrepresented populations and often overlooked narratives deserve attention and respect. I would also like to cement my collection's foundation by including current masters of the form such as Daniel Clowes and Charles Burns.

To me, this collection of books is just as important as my series of E.L. Doctorow novels or my small collection of contemporary poetry. I am always impressed by the transporting quality that comics have—be it to the Middle East in search of an old friend in *Habibi*, to China to reflect on the past in *Forget Sorrow*, or to another world entirely in the series *The Sandman*.

Comics also have the ability to depict intimate relationships in fairly banal circumstances. Craig Thompson's book *Blankets* is a semi-autobiographical tale that depicts his first love in Wisconsin. *Fun Home* is a tale of coming of age in a small Pennsylvania town with dysfunctional parents. Something about the human condition comes across in an immediate and gut-wrenching way in the hands of these artists.

Whatever the story, graphic novels are an important tool to use and continue to return to as a reader. Every hand is different, every line is different. Some are polished, some are crude. Regardless, they represent a genre of work that is unmatched by the novel due to its extraordinary ability to

condense what novelists say in words into a single image, expression, or panel.

Source:

Heer, Jeet. "Chris Ware, The Art of Comics No. 2." *The Paris Review*, Fall 2014.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Berry, Lynda. *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2014.
Lynda Berry is a well known contemporary cartoonist who has been teaching a class on comics at the University of Wisconsin for the past several years. Her own style is simple, whimsical, and often childlike. *Syllabus* is a compilation of her lesson plans, drawings, and wisdom that gives the reader insight into her process and confidence to begin drawing themselves.
2. Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007.
Some of the most touching graphic novels are those that are autobiographical. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel turns the pen on herself to tell the story of her complicated relationship with her gay-closeted father. Through her drawings of the family's ornate house, vacations to the Village in New York, and her discovery of the LGBT section of her college library, Bechdel paints a portrait of her sexual awakening as she comes to grips with her father's hidden feelings.
3. Brunetti, Ivan. *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.
Ivan Brunetti's compilation serves as a stellar introduction to the world of graphic novels. He includes a diverse exerts from artists ranging from Chris Ware's beautiful *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, to Robert Crumb's *Uncle Bob's Mid-Life Crisis*, to Daniel Clowe's piece *Gynecology*, and a more spare work, *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*, by the artist Seth. The pieces Brunetti has curated depict a new breadth of talent and show a diversity in the way these artists have chosen to tell stories.
4. Chabon, Michael. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. New York: Random House, 2000.
Chabon's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* stars two Jewish cousins who create an anti-fascist superhero, the Escapist, on the eve of World War II. While Chabon's novel is fictional, it could be the story of many comic artists during the 1930s and the 1940s trying to succeed in the business and depict the world around them.
5. Crumb, Robert. *R. Crumb: The Complete Record Cover Collection*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.
Robert Crumb is known for his distinctive style and often mature themes. He has illustrated *The Book of Genesis*, *Fritz the Cat*, and comic strips for Harvey Pekar. Crumb has also created record covers for hundreds of artists, and his career in records started in 1968 when a friend

named Janis Joplin asked him to create art for her record, *Cheap Thrills*. Crumb didn't like psychedelic music very much, but he particularly liked an old recording of hers singing "hillbilly" music that he enjoyed because of his love of old folk recordings. The collection serves as a reminder of how graphic artists have continued to contribute to pop culture and other forms of media.

6. Davis, Eleanor. *How to Be Happy*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2014.
Eleanor Davis's collection *How to Be Happy* begins with an order: "Write a story. A story about yourself. A story about your life. Now, believe it." It is with this simple demand we begin a journey through a handful of tiny snippets of different people's lives—new parents who have fallen out of love, a bus driver with a Mexican wife who was orphaned as a child, a dead fox, and even the tale of Adam and Eve. Through illustrations which range from simple, black and white doodles to others filled with brightly colored foliage and people, Davis captures the disappointments and rewards of the human experience with a playful optimism.
7. Gaiman, Neil. *The Sandman Vol. 1: Preludes and Nocturnes*. New York: DC Comics, 1991.
Preludes and Nocturnes begins the descent into Neil Gaiman's fantastic, vivid world of *The Sandman*. It follows the adventures of the character Dream as he encounters a host of odd creatures and tries to recapture objects taken from him when he was mistakenly imprisoned. *The Sandman* was a pioneer in the graphic novel industry, as it was acclaimed early on and was one of the first graphic novels to be featured on The New York Times Best Sellers List.
8. Gorey, Edward. *Amphigorey Also*. Hong Kong: Condon & Weed, Inc., 1983
Edward Gorey is one graphic artist who served as a precursor to current day professionals. His whimsical touch makes his austere subject matter come to life. Take for example, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, a series of illustrations devoted to children suffering grisly deaths set to an AB rhyme scheme.
9. Hergé. *The Calculus Affair*. Paris: Casterman, 1956.
Hergé is yet another author who is a precursor to many modern graphic novelists. His Tintin series, starring a Belgian boy named Tintin and his loyal dog Snowy, follows the two as they become mired in different plots and heists, and eventually prevail over the villains.
10. McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Northampton: Tundra Publishing, 1993.
Told in the form of a comic, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* gives the layman insight into the world behind the comic strip and why it deserves respect. McCloud writes about the importance of sequence, color, texture, and paneling in this very specific manner of storytelling and how these choices ultimately affect the reader.
11. Pekar, Harvey. *American Splendor and More American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar*. New York: Random House, 2003.
Harvey Pekar is the everyman of graphic novels. Originally a file clerk and handyman from Cleveland, Pekar began writing vignettes of his daily life with encouragement from Robert Crumb. These stories would eventually become his famous work *American Splendor*. While other graphic artists chose to explore new countries or worlds, Pekar was content with

reflecting on his own life and the results are both comical and poignant.

12. Rudahl, Sharon. *Dangerous Woman: The Graphic Biography of Emma Goldman*. New York: The New Press, 2007.
Sharon Rudahl's work *Dangerous Woman* demonstrates the strengths of the graphic novel as biography. She depicts different events in Goldman's life that many people are not aware of. She was a radical anarchist, but she was also abused as a child and forced to marry a man she divorced a year later. Through the graphic novel, Rudahl is able to convey Goldman's life effectively and concisely, as opposed to Goldman's own biography, which is over 900 pages long.
13. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Paris: L'Association, 2003.
Another autobiographical piece, *Persepolis*, tells the story of a young Satrapi coming of age in Persia during the 1979 Revolution. *Persepolis* was later made into an animated movie of the same name, and exposed many young Americans to a time period that is not frequently taught in history class—the fall of the Shah of Iran. But more importantly than that, Satrapi gives readers a taste of the revolution's effects on her everyday life—having to wear the veil, flushing wine down the toilet to hide from the authorities, hiding her love of punk music, and how her close knit family changes as a result of the new era.
14. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus*. New York: Pantheon, 1973.
Art Spiegelman's masterpiece *Maus* deserves to be taught as part of World War II history curriculum in high schools. He introduces his father's experience during the Holocaust by painting the Nazis as cats and their Jewish victims as mice. It is a haunting work that thrusts the reader directly into the world of innocent people fighting for their lives.
15. Thompson, Craig. *Habibi*. New York: Pantheon, 2011.
Craig Thompson's graphic novels are always heartfelt, but with his novel *Habibi*, which is the Arabic word for sweetheart, he adds a layer of sophistication to his work by exploring a story between two protagonists in the Middle East. His intricate drawings with Arabic script woven into them tell the tale of an unorthodox friendship between two child slaves.
16. Tomine, Adrian. *Shortcomings*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2004.
Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings* is a meditation on relationships. It's protagonists are a young Korean-American couple with a relationship that seems to be falling apart at the seams. Ben's girlfriend Miko doesn't trust him and thinks he has a thing for younger, white women. Ben denies this but they continue to drift farther apart and Miko's prophecy comes true. The novel doesn't take sides but sets the stage for an interesting conversation about the intersection of love and race.
17. Ware, Chris. *Building Stories*. New York: Pantheon, 2012.
Building Stories is thus far Chris Ware's magnum opus. It is unlike any other graphic novel. The piece comes in a large box containing fourteen packets of varying sizes. Some are newspapers, others are book sized, and some are little rectangular packed. They are all part of the same story but they are out of order and not necessarily continuous, forcing the reader to seek out the story

from himself. As always, Ware's work is graphically stunning, filled with primary colors and beautiful type, but *Building Stories* shows Ware is not just a master of graphic design, but also a master of storytelling, even if his style is unorthodox.

18. Yang, Belle. *Forget Sorrow*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.
Belle Yang's autobiographical tale begins with an explanation of her given name, Xuan, which means "Forget Sorrow." In the novel, she returns to her parents house after being stalked by an ex-boyfriend. Looking for solace, she begins listening to her father's tales of his life in twentieth-century China and begins to bridge the gulf between herself and her parents that existed during her childhood.
19. Lee, Stan and Steve Ditko. *The Amazing Spiderman Nos. 1-10 & Amazing Fantasy No. 15*. New York: Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc, 1962.
Spiderman is one of the all time classic Marvel comic superheroes and this collection show why. Recolored and lettered, the illustrations in these stories literally fly off the page with the fabulous colors, devious bad guys, and prominent lettering. It's easy to see why these stories entertained generations of readers and served as inspiration for modern day artists.
20. McCloud, Scott and Bill Kartalopoulos. *The Best American Comics 2014*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.
Another more recent anthology of the best work of the industry. Part of The Best American Series, this book comes out every year curated by different artist at the top of his or her game working as a graphic novelist. *The Best American Comics* is a visual tapas of new artists and styles that tell all sorts of stories ranging from a story about Berlin and its dark history to a series of blue water color drawings with a phrase beneath it to an awkward teenage confession of love. This series never disappoints and is a great way to discover new work.

WISH LIST

1. Braun, Alexander. *Winsor McCay: The Complete Little Nemo*. Los Angeles: Taschen America, 2014.
Winsor McCay's groundbreaking early twentieth-century comicstrip *Little Nemo in Slumberland* has inspired many graphic artists for generations to come. It depicts a little boy exploring different places in "Slumberland," only to wake up from his fantastic dream in the last strip. The colors and attention to detail in McCay's drawings are unparalleled.
2. Bunjevac, Nina. *Fatherland*. New York: Liveright Books, 2015.
This graphic novel surveys the affects of the destruction of Yugoslavia. Nina Bunjevac's *Fatherland* tells the story of Bunjevac's Serbian father who was both an alcoholic and a Serbian nationalist turned terrorist. Bunjevac's mother took her daughters away from him when Bunjevac was only two, so *Fatherland* is an attempt to understand the shadow of a

man Bunjevac never knew herself—he died building a bomb when his daughter was four years old.

3. Burns, Charles. *Black Hole*. New York: Pantheon, 2005.
In *Black Hole*, Charles Burns combines the surreal with mundane life of a teenager. Teenagers in a small town begin contracting a suspicious disease that causes them to sprout tails and other odd growths. The story continues as these mutations force the kids into seclusion. Told in black and white, the illustrations are striking and unlike any other tale of adolescence.
4. Clowes, Daniel. *The Complete Eightball 1-8*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2015.
Daniel Clowes is one of the most highly respected graphic novelists working today and this collection brings together his entire *Eightball* canon. Many of the stories are crude but they also serve as stinging commentaries of contemporary life. Two of the stories, *Art School Confidential* and *Ghost World* went on to become cult movies.
5. Gallant, Gregory. *It's A Good Life If You Don't Weaken*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2003.
The first novel of the artist Seth (Gregory Gallant) is an autobiographical one that fits into the theme of this collection nicely because the plot of his story revolves around his fascination with the work of a New Yorker cartoonist from the 1940s named Kalo and how Seth's obsession with the man begins to affect Seth's personal relationships. The book also ends with a sampling of Kalo's actual work.
6. Sacco, Joe. *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2000.
Joe Sacco picks political subjects that are not always covered in the world of comics like the Israeli-Palestinian relations depicted in his work *Footnotes from Gaza*. In *Safe Area Gorazde*, Sacco delves into the gruesome war of the 1990s and the horrors the people of Bosnia endured based on interviews he conducted with survivors of the war. Like *Maus* before it, the book sheds light on the story of a group of people told on their own terms.