

JAMIE —
GOOD TO TALK WITH YOU.
Richard
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THE FUTURE OF "COMICS"

BY RICHARD KYLE

The 1964 column that introduced "Graphic Story" and "Graphic Novel"

First there were the comic strips. They were called comic strips because they were comic and they were strips. And even when a lot of them stopped being comic they didn't lose the name, tradition being what it is

Then there were comic books. They were called comic books because of the comic strips and because they were at least partially comic—and in the idiom of the publishing business—they were books.

But the comic book stories were still called strips, although they weren't. Then a lot of the comic books stopped being even partially comic, or deliberately so, anyway. That didn't make any difference, they were still called comic books and they still published strips. After all, they were still pretty cartoony, you had to admit, and the stories were for kids and you had to have a name for 'em, so what difference did it make.

Then, Charles Biro, the editor at Lev Gleason Publications, who began his work on *Daredevil* and *Boy and Crime Does Not Pay* in the wildest and wooliest tradition of the comic book, became gradually interested in the field as a medium for serious writing, and directed his magazines toward an increasingly older audience. Ultimately, under his editorship, Lev Gleason Publications issued *Tops*, a *Life-size* magazine which not only printed original stories in the comics format, but also adapted material from current adult books as well. It was aimed toward a young, but wholly adult, audience. *Tops*, for a variety of reasons, failed. But it was a sincere attempt to bring the "comic book" out of the juvenile field. And—with all its faults—a promising one, neither comic, nor cartoony, nor poorly written, nor for children.

A little later, the E.C. magazines came along. Ray Bradbury, a writer of quality, allowed his stories to be adapted to the "comic book" format. Bernard Krigstein, a fine artist, treated the "comic book strip" as a genuine art-form, and with such stories as "The Master Race," he showed with genius what its future might be. Harvey

Kurtzman, editing and writing the company's war magazines, brought an authenticity and realism and great artistic creativity to some of the stories that no child could have appreciated—but which would have electrified many intelligent adults, if they'd permitted themselves to read "comic books."

However, in the state of almost universal literacy in which we live, to be able to read is no longer an honest-to-goodness status symbol. Like the automobile, it is commonplace, and few people, any more, need to look at the pi'tures to figure out what the little black bugs mean. Consequently, there is little shame attached to the reading of comic strips themselves; the shame, these days, is the frequent—almost universal—childishness of the contents, which only devoted and understanding enthusiasts can overlook.

Today, there are signs the "comic book" is, finally and permanently, about to burst out of its lonely isolation as a trivial form of sub-literature for retarded children like ourselves and take its place in the literary spectrum, between the extremes of the wholly symbolic and the wholly real. Historically, the trend has been in this direction. Tomorrow, the range of our literature will vary from the short story to the novel to the illustrated book and magazine to the serious "comic book strip" to the serious animated cartoon to the motion picture to the live theatrical drama.

Comics fandom is one of these early signs of course. Successful publications such as *Drag* and *CARtoons*—"comic books" in everything but name—which are selling to a somewhat older audience, and at a considerably higher price than the standard comic book, are another (for no adult publication can be established as long as it is distributed and displayed with the juvenile magazines) The increasing use of "comic book" techniques in serious illustration is also significant. But—as always—the most important of all signs is an economic one. As John McGeehan pointed out in our October issue, comic [over]

books are no longer an important source of revenue for the retailer. They're also a headache for the wholesale distributor, consuming almost as much time in handling as they make in sales. Many distributors have ceased to supply the retail stands by title, sending out a random bundle of twenty-five or fifty comics instead. With the competition the magazine rack faces from the other entertainment media these days, the situation is bound to get worse. The only solution for the comic book publishers is to increase the price of their magazines. Obviously, the juvenile market does not have the money to compete with the *Playboy* or *True* or *Argosy* or *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* or *Analog Science Fiction* adult market. But to reach that market and its money, adult stories will have to be published in those "comic books."

As I read such stories as "Killer Hunt," in *Capt. Storm* and admire the art of Joe Kubert, and re-read the Kurtzman and Krigstein stories in the old E.C. magazines, and as I think of *Fantasy Illustrated's* forthcoming "comic book strip" adaptation of Ray Bradbury's story "The Pedestrian"—which has opened, by the way, as a highly lauded play here in Los Angeles—I cannot help but feel that "comic book" and "comic book strip" are not only inappropriate and antiquated terms with which to describe

these genuinely creative efforts and those of the even more fully realized productions which are bound to come, but are also terms which may easily prevent the early acceptance of the medium by the literary world.

Charles Biro coined the word "illustrories" to describe his attempts at adult "comic book strips." E.C. coined "picto-fiction" for a somewhat similar effort. But I believe there is a good word, already in the dictionary, which does a far better job than either of these. My Merriam-Webster defines "graphic" as "of or pertaining to the arts (graphic arts) of painting, engraving and any other arts which pertain to the expression of ideas by means of lines, marks, or characters impressed on a surface."

So, in future issues of *Wonderworld*, when you find me using the terms "graphic story" and "graphic novel" to describe the artistically serious "comic book strip," you'll know what I mean. I may even use them on some that aren't so serious.



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