REVIEWS

African-American Classics, Tom Pomplun and Lance Tooks (eds) (2011)
Mount Horeb, WI: Eureka Productions, 144 pp., $17.95. Paperback
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The Silence of Our Friends, Mark Long, Jim Demonakos and Nate Powell (2012)
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There is a rich history surrounding the content and aesthetics of comics as they relate to issues of African Americanness, including the use of caricatures and stereotypes in early mainstream comic books, the rise of black protagonists and superheroes in the 1960s, the impact of the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements on the comics industry, the increased awareness of social justice and the politics of race during the 1970s and 1980s, and the founding of Milestone Media. At the same time, graphic narrative has been used to draw attention to the black America outside of the medium, providing overviews and histories that are accessible to a broad, and in many ways younger, audience of comics readers. Two recent publications devoted to the African American experience are Tom Pomplun and Lance Tooks's African-American Classics (2011) and Mark Long, Jim Demonakos
and Nate Powell’s *The Silence of Our Friends* (2012). Each offers a unique take on the history of race in the United States – or in the case of Pomplun and Took’s edited collection, multiple takes – and does so with an awareness of how that history resonates up to the present day, where the United States has its first African American president.

*African-American Classics* is number 22 in a series of ‘Graphic Classics’ volumes published by Tom Pomplun’s Eureka Productions, which also includes collections devoted to the horror, science fiction, Western and adventure genres, as well as to specific authors such as Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry, Bram Stoker and Robert Louis Stevenson. The contributors to these editions adapt classic works of literature into comics form, many giving a highly personal interpretation to the short stories or poetry that make up each volume. Some of these adaptations are faithful to the original text, while others use their source as a mere springboard into wholly unconventional retelling of the story. An example of the latter in Pomplun and Took’s volume is Masheka Wood’s comics adaptation of James Edwin Campbell’s poem ‘De Cunjah Man’, Stan Shaw’s illustrated version of Langston Hughes’s ‘The Negro’ and Mac McGill’s single-panel handling of James Weldon Johnson’s short poem ‘The Reward’. (In this volume, at least, poetry has been an opportunity for artists to get more creative, and less ‘loyal’, in their adaptations.)

Yet most of the 23 contributions in *African American Classics* more or less adhere to the original narrative intent and tone of the authors. Some of the most outstanding, and more ‘faithful’, adaptations in this collection include Alex Simmons and Trevor Von Eeden’s ‘Two Americans’ (by Florence Lewis Bently), Tom Pomplun and Kyle Baker’s ‘On Being Crazy’ (W. E. B. Du Bois), Christopher Priest and Jim Webb’s ‘Lex Talionis’ (Robert W. Bagnall) and Alex Simmons and Shepherd Hendrix’s ‘The Goophered Grapevine’ (Charles W. Chesnutt). But even in some of the more straightforward adapted pieces, the artists find a way of putting their own mark on the story and using their styles to enhance or accentuate the tenor of the original work of literature. For example, Arie Monroe’s stripped-down, cartoony style underscores the humour inherent in Zora Neale Hurston’s short dramatic work *Loving and Jawing*. And in an adaptation of another Hurston short play, *Filling Station*, Milton Knight uses exaggerated, over-the-top art to bring out the comedic hyperbole – men fighting over who gets to change a woman’s flat tire and motorists debating which state, Alabama or Georgia, is better – that takes place at a country gas station.

Two of the most notable pieces in the collection, however, are adaptations by one of the book’s co-editors, Lance Took. He provides graphic translations of Alice Dunbar Nelson’s short story ‘A Carnival Jangle’ and Frances E. W. Harper’s ‘Shalmanezer!’, and in his contributions he demonstrates his keen abilities to interpret and even transform classic texts. Took is perhaps best known for his graphic novel *Narcissa* (2002), or the four-volume series *Lucifer’s Garden of Verses* (2004–2006), but he also has an extensive history adapting classic works of literature, contributing to earlier
Graphic Classics collections, including the volumes on fantasy classics, Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain (in the latter, graphically translating Twain’s ‘A Dog’s Tale’ to reflect the African American experience). In both the Nelson and Harper adaptations, he juxtaposes word and image in a non-traditional manner, balancing the text-heavy core of those stories – Toook’s contributions, more than in the others, retain much of the original wording – with complementary visuals that bring the narratives into sharp focus. It is as if the African American writers are looking over Toook’s shoulder, retelling their stories while he puts pictures to words.

This volume of Graphic Classics could almost be titled ‘Harlem Renaissance Classics’, in that well over half of the adapted stories, poems and dramas were written by artists associated with that cultural movement. Among the many writers represented from that period are James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Ethel M. Caution, Effie Lee Newsome and Zora Neale Hurston. (On its website created for this volume, http://www.graphicclassics.com/pgs/gc22.htm, Graphic Classics provides brief biographies on all of the anthologized writers and the artists that adapt their work.) And of the authors in the collection who did not define themselves during the 1920s and 1930s – e.g., Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles W. Chesnutt, James Edwin Campbell and Leila Amos Pendleton – all are precursors to the Harlem Renaissance and figures who helped pave the way for this literary flowering. Indeed, of all the authors adapted in this collection, few published anything after the 1940s. African-American Classics might have been strengthened with more of a historical balance – perhaps including one or two adaptations of nineteenth-century slave narratives or even works from authors making their marks after 1950 – but such inclusions come with their own challenges (e.g., adapting a long slave narrative into shorter comic form, or problems of obtaining permission rights for more contemporary authors). Regardless, Pomplun and Toook deliver a remarkable collection of graphic interpretations, treating classic African American writing not as literary artefacts, but as living texts that continue to speak to new generations.

The same could be said of the Civil Rights Movement in The Silence of Our Friends, written by Mark Long and Jim Demonakos, and illustrated by Nate Powell. The graphic novel demonstrates how race relations in the United States, even in – or especially in – Obama’s America, is an ongoing project whose past constantly informs the present. As Long makes clear in his ‘Author Note’ that appears at the end of the book, the events recounted in The Silence of Our Friends are based on Long’s own experiences growing up in Houston, Texas, in the late 1960s. Much like his fictional counterpart in the graphic novel, also named Mark, Long moved from San Antonio to Houston when he was eleven years old. His father was a television reporter – much like Mark’s father, Jack, in the book – and covered the race beat, and in particular reported on the heated civil rights protests taking place in the Third Ward, historically known as Houston’s ‘ghetto’ and home to Texas
Southern University. And also much like the graphic novel’s Jack, Long’s father became friends with an African American activist who helped to protect him from angry black protesters, suspicious of any white faces among their ranks, and who shared with him a disgust with racism and a desire for racial equality.

Yet *The Silence of Our Friends* is not a memoir, nor is it a strict historical account of the events, local as well as national, that Long witnessed in 1968. The writer simply used certain events from his past as a basis for the plot, weaving his narrative from those facts and letting Nate Powell (winner of both an Ignatz Award and an Eisner Award) flesh out the story from there. As Long states in a February interview in *The Daily Texan*, he, Demonakos and Powell wrote *The Silence of Our Friends* in the ‘Marvel style’, plotting (and not scripting in detail) the book’s outline as a set of instructions, thus allowing the artist more freedom in visualizing the story. The result is a moving tale of southern race relations in the late 1960s that is both anchored in history and narrated through a variety of compelling narrative strategies.

The core of the action surrounds events that take place on Wheeler Avenue, one of the main streets in Houston’s Third Ward. One night Larry, Jack’s activist friend and a professor of law at Texas Southern, allows his two children to ride their bicycles to the general store to buy a treat. On the way back, Larry’s daughter is struck by a redneck in a pickup truck hurling racial epithets out the window. In protest, Larry organizes the Third Ward community to block off Wheeler Street, long known as a dangerous thoroughfare, and during this event, the Houston police instigate a riot, leaving one of their officers dead by friendly fire. The friendship between Jack and Larry, already strained due to Houston’s deeply ingrained racial divisions, is further tested during the trial that follows.

Yet, while the actions on Wheeler Avenue drive the plot, it is the visualizing of cultural artefacts, sprinkled throughout the graphic novel, that truly animates the story. Long, Demonakos and Powell include a variety of happenings, interactions and actual news events that give us a full sense of race relations in the South during this time. Children casually use racist language, echoed from their parents, in playing their innocent games. The news broadcasts graphic violence, taking place both at home and abroad. Individuals look suspiciously at their neighbours at any crossing, however slight, of the race line. Families watch socially conscious programmes on their televisions, such as NBC’s *I Spy* (1965–1968), and then open their doors to friends steeped in prejudice and racial animosity. All of these illustrated scenarios create an atmosphere rife with intolerance and remind us how recently such attitudes defined our culture.

Contextualizing these events, the main plot and the incidentals is the plight of Jack’s legally blind daughter, Julie. She attends a special school for the handicapped, and although she appears occasionally throughout the graphic novel, there are two instances where the narrative is focused specifically on her. Near the very beginning of the book, we see her learning how to use a braille typewriter and helping a fellow student, who is deaf, sound out a *Richie Rich* comic book. Julie’s
story appears once again at the very end of the graphic novel, when she successfully learns to type out her name in braille. However, her success is overshadowed by an announcement in the school that Martin Luther King, Jr, has just been shot. By using a blind child as a framing device, and a young girl who attempts to break barriers and nurture communication, the authors are sending a sobering, and perhaps mixed, message on both racial relations in America and our hopes of rising above that contentious history.

What both *The Silence of Our Friends* and *African-American Classics* provide are glimpses into the past, black literary history and the fight for civil rights, and how these events continue to resonate into the twenty-first century. They reveal the richness found in the African American experience, and they also demonstrate that the United States is largely defined by these social struggles, that a white-washed America – figuratively as well as culturally – is an aberrant and even a dangerous construct. Both of these comics remind us of, and present to a new and younger audience, William Faulkner’s oft-quoted phrase from *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), a novel written after the diminution of the Harlem Renaissance and at the dawning of the Civil Rights Movement: ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past’.