
There is no denying that comics studies has gained a foothold in higher and secondary education. Not only are instructors increasingly including graphic novels as texts in their literature and culture classes, but more and more educators are developing courses specifically devoted to some aspect of comics studies. This phenomenon brings with it fresh pedagogical challenges and raises a number of intriguing questions. How does one define “comics,” and what are the potential problems and inherent baggage with terms such as “graphic novel,” “visual literature,” and “graphic narrative”? What texts are most appropriate to use in the classroom, given the age and intellectual contexts of the student audience? Which comics or graphic novels provide the most interpretive challenges for both the students as well as the instructor? Are there particular themes, genres, or specific authors that should populate the syllabus, or should the class focus generally on comics as a broad medium? What comics are most commonly used in the classroom, and along with that, is there a loose, evolving, or de facto canon of graphic narrative that one could reference (and should there even be one)? What critical comics-related sources may be available as secondary material for the particular graphic novels included on the syllabus? For both the practiced and the first-time instructor of comics in the classroom, these are just some of the issues raised when confronting this hybrid medium.

One way of addressing such questions, of course, is to rely on a supplementary text that addresses these matters, such as a reader that covers a wide range of comics-related criticism. Up until recently, there was no such work by multiple authors that offered a broad range of topics and perspectives (the closest was Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbon’s The Language of Comics: Word and Image [2001], but that book was more limited in its focus and appealed more to scholarly professionals). But with the publication of Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester’s A Comics Studies Reader, we have a possible answer to this classroom, as well as general reader, dilemma. Their reader—comprised of twenty-eight contributions, all but one of which is reprinted from various books, journals, and magazines devoted
writings that introduce the topics and debate surrounding the medium and purports to be, according the press’ website, “ideal for classroom use.”

The book begins, appropriately enough, with Thierry Groensteen’s essay, “Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?” The piece, first published in 2000, can be excused for its soul-searching quality, its questioning of critical practice and decrying the marginalization that comics have historically undergone, both in the culture at large and especially within academia. When Groensteen first framed his argument, few considered comics a viable form of sophisticated narrative. And in many ways, this essay lays the cultural groundwork for many of the fascinating readings contained within A Comics Studies Reader. However, there is a potential problem with beginning the collection in this way. One can only point out academic small-mindedness and bemoan the lack of respect graphic novels have received for so long—echoes of film studies from the last century abound—before such complaints become hackneyed, and at this point in time, the fights over comics’ legitimacy have, more or less, already been fought. Yet, as most of the essays in the reader demonstrate, or accept as a premise, comics studies is now an established and well-respected field of inquiry, or at the very least, it concerns a medium whose scholarly acceptability should be beyond question. This being the case, the tone of Groensteen’s opening grievance clashes with that of most of the book’s other contributions, including the selection from Groensteen’s own groundbreaking work, The System of Comics. Jeet and Worcester would have done well to have contextualized this critical imbalance.

The bulk of A Comics Studies Read is divided into four sections, each of which orients the reader to a particular aspect of comics studies. The first, “Historical Considerations,” is the most diverse of the sections and includes selections from a variety of comics historians and scholars. In many ways, this is the most successful of the sections, providing a substantive overview of the history and critical facets surrounding the medium. It begins with David Kunzle’s discussion of Rodolphe Töpffer and his central place in comics’ aesthetic development. It also includes a selection from Fredric Wertham’s notorious Seduction of the Innocent, a book that helped to instigate the most insidious and damaging crusade against comic books, led to the censorious Comics Code Authority in 1954, and helped to mark the trajectory of American comic books for the next three decades. Other contributions in this section are from noted comics studies scholars, including M. Thomas Inge (the links between Charles Schulz and F. Scott Fitzgerald), John A. Lent (the debates over comics from an international perspective), and Peter Coogan (on defining the superhero).
The next two sections, “Craft, Art, Form” and “Culture, Narrative, Identity,” provide varied ways to approach to the medium and grist for any student or scholar of comics studies. Selections from Groensteen, Charles Hatfield, Pascal Lefèvre, and Joseph Witek (the only original contribution to this collection) stand out as enlightening exercises in aesthetic scholarship or readings of comics as a narrative form. The third section includes several insightful examples of what can be done with comics and cultural scholarship: e.g., Roger Sabin’s discussion of the British cartoon character, Ally Sloper, as one of the first comics mass-media sensations; Martin Barker’s discussion of the British teen magazine, Jackie, and the problematic questions surrounding romance comics; and Bart Beatty’s take on autobiographic comics and the role they have played in the establishment of the medium’s legitimacy.

After the collection’s earlier discussions of historical, formal, and cultural approaches, Jeet and Worcester combine all of these methods by turning their attention to exercises in close reading. This final section, “Scrutiny and Evaluation,” is made up of illustrative (literally) examples devoted to singular texts, some of which could certainly qualify as landmark works. Two of the most striking contributions include Thomas Andrae’s reading of Carl Barks’s Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge comics—arguing against previous criticism claiming that these works are riddled with imperialist rhetoric—and Gene Kannenberg, Jr.’s, examination of Chris Ware’s unique melding of image and text. Yet the most ambitious essay in this section, and one of the most impressive in the entire reader, is a study of Al Feldstein and Bernard Krigstein’s classic story, “Master Race” (originally published in the first issue of EC Comics’ Impact, April 1955). The authors of this piece, John Benson, David Kasakove, and Art Spiegelman, provide a highly detailed panel-by-panel discussion of this eight-page comic, focusing on the language of this visual medium and revealing the richness to be found in such an analysis. (Curiously enough, this is about the only contribution in A Comics Studies Reader not written by professional academics or comics scholars, aptly demonstrating that the ivory tower is by far not the only place where serious comics studies flourishes.)

Jeet and Worcester do an admirable job of providing readers with a sampling of the best that comics studies has had to offer so far, but at the same time they also include a few questionable choices. There are several contributions in this collection that are too narrow in scope or are so specialized that their potential application is sorely limited. In these instances, one wonders if almost any example of comics studies writing would have sufficed—e.g., essays from the journals ImageText and International Journal
of Comic Art or selections from the many examples of comics scholarship in monograph or periodical form—and could easily take the place of what Jeet and Worcester chose to include. This raises the question, Why did the editors choose the essays that they decided to include? And this question naturally leads to others: What is the purpose of a reader? How should one be composed? For what audience is this collection intended? If, as the book’s page on the University Press of Mississippi’s website suggests, this text is “ideal” for the classroom, then how would all of the essays in this reader resonate with the students or function within a syllabus? Some would naturally fit in, while others—maybe even the majority of the book—may sit outside a particular classroom’s purposes. In other words, every educator will have a different approach to teaching comics, privileging different writings and examples of scholarship, and as such, would create his or her own “reader.” If the instructor has to pick and choose selectively the parts of a published reader that are the most appropriate for his or her classroom—similar to ways that one picks and chooses which texts to include with a big, expensive anthology—then why not just cull from a variety of different sources and create your own reading list? This is not too difficult for educators with good libraries at their fingertips. This being the case, one may wonder why Jeet and Worcester have created a reader of this sort, one that (even indirectly) purports to cover an entire medium. If every person’s own reader is different, then what is the point of publishing a reader in the first place? Couldn’t individuals do the research and just find the important or most significant (to them) essays and books and chapters on their own?

Of course, a response to this criticism is that educators, especially those new to comics studies, would need to know where to look, what texts provide the richest possibilities, and what approaches may be the most productive. So in this way, Jeet and Worcester’s reader is certainly useful. It introduces several significant writings to individuals who might not otherwise know about them, especially readers who are unfamiliar with the medium. Despite its limitations, its (in some cases) debatable selections, and its uncertain audience assumptions, A Comics Studies Reader serves as a practical introduction to comics and the formal study surrounding them. Pulling from some of the best resources that are so far available, Jeet and Worcester have set an example of what broad-based comics studies can be and, in essence, have laid down a challenge to future scholars of graphic narrative.