

**The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches.**

Ed. Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010. 328 pages.  
\$29.95 paper; \$29.95 electronic.

**Yiddishkeit: Jewish Vernacular and the New Land.** Ed. Harvey Pekar and Paul Buhle. New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2011. 240 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

**Jewish Images in the Comics: A Visual History.** Fredrik Strömberg. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2012. 424 pages. \$26.99 cloth.

**Superman Is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way.** Harry Brod. New York: Free Press, 2012. 240 pages. \$25.00 cloth; \$11.99 electronic.

Over the past eight years, there has been a flurry of scholarly interest in comics and Jewish identity. In that time, there have been no less than eleven studies published

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on this topic, including Simcha Weinstein's *Up, Up and Oy Vey! How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (2006), Danny Fingeroth's *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (2007), Paul Buhle's *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of an American Art Form* (2008), Arie Kaplan's *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (2008), Joël Kotek's *Cartoons and Extremism: Israel and the Jews in Arab and Western Media* (2009), Thomas Andrae and Mel Gordon's *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero, from the Creators of Superman* (2010), and my own guest-edited special issue of *Shofar* on Jewish comics in 2011, besides the various biographies or interview collections focusing on a specific Jewish creator or group of creators. All of these texts have in common a desire to define Jewish comics through a series of critical interrogations, either explicitly stated or indirectly expressed. Are comics Jewish because of their content? Can a comic be considered Jewish even though its artists are not? Conversely, just because a writer/illustrator is Jewish, is the output necessarily defined as Jewish art or literature? And even if the creators are Jewish, what kind of experience—religious, cultural, observant, or secular—most qualifies as Jewish? These questions are posed in four recent titles, each engaging with the representation of Jewish history, identity, and cultural issues through comics.

Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman's edited collection, *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches* (2010 in paper; a cloth edition, no longer available, was published in 2008), comprises thirteen critical essays as well as interviews with two artists, Miriam Katin and Miriam Libicki, and an original short comic by Libicki, "Jewish Memoir Goes Pow! Zap! Oy!" As the editors state in their introduction, the focus of the collection is on the major creative trends, critical developments, and creators defining the Jewish graphic novel. Baskind and Omer-Sherman's choice of the graphic novel rather than comics in general as their locus of discussion reflects how academic engagement with the mixed image-text medium has privileged long-form narratives, particularly those treated with a level of gravitas. The vast majority of the texts discussed in this collection are books that one would expect to find on course syllabi and under examination in scholarly journals and monographs: Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978), *To the Heart of the Storm* (1991), and *Fagin the Jew* (2003); Jules Feiffer's *Tantrum* (1979); Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale (I: My Father Bleeds History* [1986] and *II: And Here My Troubles Began* [1991]) and *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004); Joe Kubert's *Yossel: April 19, 1943* (2003); James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* (2001); Joann Sfar's *The Rabbi's Cat* (2005) and *Klezmer: Tales of the Wild East* (2006); Katin's *We Are on Our Own* (2006); and Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006). Essays by Laurence Roth, Jeremy Dauber, Josh Lambert, Lisa Naomi Mulman, Erin McGlothlin, Paul Eisenstein, and Marla Harris—over half of the book's critical makeup—examine Spiegelman, Eisner,

and Sfar. These three authors are certainly canonical in Jewish comics studies and comics studies more broadly, but they are also well known in Jewish American and ethnic literary studies. In this respect, the volume is particularly useful for educators teaching courses on the graphic novel or seeking recommendations to include in their literature courses.

While Baskind and Omer-Sherman's strategy offers a focused study of one particular kind of graphic expression, it does not represent the range of comics as a medium, which includes newspaper daily strips, editorial cartoons, monthly or semi-monthly periodicals (comic books), and self-published minicomics. To their credit, however, the editors have included essays about creators who receive less attention from scholars, such as Brad Prager's piece on Kubert and Roxanne Harde's study of Sturm, as well as Ariel Kahn's and Alon Raab's essays on Israeli artists. Cheryl Alexander Malcolm's discussion of the Holocaust through the lens of the X-Men comics (1963-present) stands out as the only contribution to engage with traditional superhero comic books, historically viewed as disposable commodities for popular consumption. Given that the American superhero genre was largely defined by Jewish artists—Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, Bob Kane, and Kubert, to name a few—it is surprising that the genre receives so little attention in this collection. That being said, the texts and topics covered in *The Jewish Graphic Novel* are all significant, and Baskind and Omer-Sherman make a valuable contribution to the discussion of Jewish comics.

Whereas Baskind and Omer-Sherman offer academic engagement with a mixed image-text medium, Harvey Pekar and Buhle's *Yiddishkeit: Jewish Vernacular and the New Land* (2011) is itself a comics collection that narrates early Jewish American history. The volume does not focus on Jewish comics per se; rather, comics become the de facto means through which many Jewish illustrators (for example, Peter Kuper, Sharon Rudahl, and Neil Kleid) visualize the Ashkenazi experience in the United States. At the same time, not all artists in this collection are Jewish, as is the case with Spain Rodriguez, whose illustrations run throughout. The result is a text that implicitly asks, "What constitutes a Jewish comic?" The volume covers many of the facets defining early Jewish culture in America and is divided into four chapters. The first focuses on the emergence of Yiddish culture and includes sections on the history of Yiddish literature, its poets, and the early Yiddish press. The second chapter concerns Yiddish theater and film. Here we find the complete text of Allen Lewis Rickman's *The Essence: A Yiddish Theatre Dim Sum* (2011), an exploration of Yiddish language and theater described as "99 [and] 44/100% nostalgia-free" (91), along with one- and two-page strips on the Yiddish stage, Rudahl's comics adaptation of the film *Green Fields* (1937) (itself adapted from the theater [1916]), and stories about the actors Moishe Oysher and Zero Mostel. The last two chapters of the book, on Yiddish expressions in popular culture and recent revivals of Yiddish art forms, underscore the lasting impact of

Yiddishkeit in modern American culture. One of the key texts in the last section is “President’s Day,” originally published in Pekar’s *American Splendor* (1976-1991 and irregularly from 1993-2008) comic book in 1988. In this comic, Pekar (along with his long-time artists Joe Zabel and Gary Dumm) recounts his love of classic Yiddish literature, his criticism of Isaac Bashevis Singer, and his preference for the work of Isaac’s brother, Israel Joshua Singer. *Yiddishkeit* was one of Pekar’s last works in progress before his death in 2010, and it attests to the growing sense of ethnic rootedness apparent in his later comics.

Fredrik Strömberg’s *Jewish Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (2012) offers a broader engagement with Jewish identity in comics. In many ways, this book is a follow-up to his earlier work, *Black Images in Comics: A Visual History* (2003), where he explores the ways in which African Americans (Strömberg prefers the broader designation of *black* figures) are represented in the medium by black and nonblack artists alike. He takes a similar approach to Jewish images: “I want to see how Jewish culture has been portrayed (positively and negatively) in comics in general, by Jewish as well as gentile creators” (9). He divides his text into eleven chapters: Jewish images as they relate to history, culture, anti-Semitism, the Shoah, Israel, Jewish celebrities, the golem, comics culture, “superjews” (Jews and the superhero genre), kosher comics (comics that engage with Orthodoxy), and Jewish characters. Strömberg’s is a rapid-fire survey of the Jews in comics (and Jewish comics), and while he covers a lot of ground, he does so at the expense of in-depth analysis. His coverage of the material lacks the kind of sustained critique found in Baskind and Omer-Sherman’s collection, yet he nonetheless provides a broader and more inclusive discussion. Intermingled with brief examinations of such literary creators such as Eisner, Spiegelman, and Sfar are discussions of Jewish images in mainstream titles, creator-owned series, alternative comics or graphic novels, Golden Age series, popular newspaper strips and editorial cartoons, Japanese manga, Franco-Belgian comics, Tijuana bibles, and obscure Jewish-related titles. One might fault Strömberg for his cursory approach to the material, but true to the book’s subtitle, he does provide a wide-angle, panoramic visual history of the Jew(ish) in comics.

In his epilogue, Strömberg considers a question that a number of scholars in Jewish or ethnic comics studies have addressed: “Are there discernible traits specific to [American superhero] comics made by Jewish artists?” (393). Judiciously, Strömberg concludes with a “no,” believing that the visual markers imposed on Jewishness cross ethnic, religious, cultural, national, and temporal boundaries, although he does argue that the tradition of Jewish humor in the United States uniquely stamps many of our most notable comics. Here his assessments are somewhat in line with those of Harry Brod, author of *Superman Is*

*Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (2012). In his introduction, Brod directly confronts the question of the Jewish quality of a text, arguing first that “one should be able to see that Jewish themes or ideas are central to the work” and second that “one should be able to see some line of transmission by which the creators could have come into contact with these Jewish elements, accounting for the possibility of their presence in the work” (xxii). In his readings of Jewish elements in comics, Brod resists the kind of analysis that tends to “pick any random tangential detail and blow it up out of proportion to claim that a story is Jewish” (xxiii). While Brod makes no reference to particular scholars, one may think of earlier studies such as Weinstein’s *Up, Up and Oy Vey!*, a text that, some have argued, tends to posit Jewish influence and signifiers without always making a persuasive case. Brod digs into the Jewish roots of certain tropes, genres, and conventions that have come to define comics, but he does so more judiciously.

The subtitle of Brod’s text suggests a focus on superhero comics, but his analysis extends far beyond that genre. He begins where one might expect him to—“Superman as Supermentsh” is the title of the first chapter—but then quickly branches out into other topics related to Jewish American identity and comics. Brod persuasively juxtaposes the so-called high art of Marc Chagall and the speculative writings of Isaac Asimov with the pulp-inspired work of Siegel and Shuster. Brod briefly traces the trajectory of comics in the 1950s and 1960s (in chapters on post-war culture and the rise of Marvel) in light of Jewish concerns and influences, assesses the impact of Yiddish language and humor on the works of Harvey Kurtzman, Will Elder, and the creators of *Mad* comics (1952-55) (and later the magazine [1955-present]), and speculates on the Jewish links found in the works of Eisner, Kubert, and Spiegelman. In “From the New World Back to the Old,” one of his most perceptive chapters, he focuses on European and Israeli creators, especially Sfar, Rutu Modan, and the Actus Tragicus collective. A professor of philosophy and humanities, Brod brings to his subjects a measured and reasoned analysis that is not only persuasive but also highly entertaining and even humorous. Brod approaches the material not only as a researcher but also as a lifelong fan of comics. Thus, *Superman Is Jewish?* offers a rich and informative study of Jewish comics, ethnic comics, and comics studies accessible to a diverse audience.

These recent works on Jewish comics attempt to straddle the line separating academic discourse from comics fandom. While each approaches its subject from a different angle—Jewish comics as literature, Jewish history as comics, Jewish image as signifier, and Jewish culture as Jewish comics—they all testify to a growing trend in comics studies: investigations into the ways that particular

communities are determined by and largely determine the visual narratives that surround them. Together, they serve as a helpful resource for both fans and scholars looking for a range of ways to study, teach, and enjoy Jewish comics.

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