

Jewish Comics; Or, Visualizing Current Jewish Narrative

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Over the past several years, there has been rapidly growing interest in Jews and comics—not comics of the Groucho Marx, Woody Allen, and Jerry Seinfeld variety, but those as presented on the paneled pages of the newspaper funnies, comic books, and graphic novels.¹ In the past four years alone, there have been no less than seven titles devoted exclusively to the history and analysis of Jews and comic art, and these books do not even include the many recent comics-related texts with substantive portions devoted to specific Jewish authors.²

¹“Graphic novel” is a term that is not without its problems, but I am using it here not only because of its widespread common use, but also to distinguish it from comic books as a publication format or delivery system. In this sense, “comics” applies to the medium as a whole, regardless of the form it takes (e.g., the editorial cartoon, the single-panel gag, the newspaper comic strip, the comic book, and the graphic novel). Furthermore, I use “graphic novel” to refer to long-form comics—as opposed to the typical American comic book which runs 32–36 pages—regardless of genre. This could include long works of fictional comics that are “novelistic” in scope, collected issues of previously published comic books or strips, comic memoirs, comics-based journalism, and even expository comics.

²Recent books devoted solely to Jews and comics include Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (Baltimore: Leviathan Press, 2006; Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2009); Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York, Continuum, 2007); Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman, eds., *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Paul Buhle, ed., *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of an American Art Form* (New York: The New Press, 2008); Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008); Joël Kotek, *Cartoons and Extremism: Israel and the Jews in Arab and Western Media*. Trans. Alisa Jaffa. (Portland, OR: Mitchell

Part of this interest can be read as an outgrowth, or the natural consequence, of scholarly studies in Jews and popular culture. The past decade has seen a number of significant studies that highlight the presence, and even the essential contributions, of Jews in a variety of popular media.³ Comics, the argument goes, is one of those mass outlets—along with television and Hollywood films—in which Jews could not only thrive, but also largely define according to particular ethnic themes and sensibilities. This nascent interest in Jewish comics and graphic novels can also be linked to another recent phenomenon, a broader scholarly focus on comics and the ways in which they represent ethnoracial identity.⁴ Many of these analyses have not only chronicled the history

Vallentine & Company, 2009); and *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero, from the Creators of Superman* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2010). Other works with significant portions on individual Jewish comics artists include Joe Simon, with Jim Simon, *The Comic Book Makers* (New York: Crestwood/II Productions, 1990; Lebanon, NJ: Vanguard Productions, 2003); Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*. Rev. ed. (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1997); Arie Kaplan, *Masters of the Comic Book Universe Revealed!: Will Eisner, Stan Lee, Neil Gaiman, and More* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006); and of course the University Press of Mississippi's "Conversations with Comic Artists" series, which includes volumes devoted to Stan Lee (2007), Art Spiegelman (2007), Harvey Pekar (2008), and Daniel Clowes (2010).

³For a sampling of recent titles on Jews and popular media, see Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians* (Cambridge, MA: PublicAffairs, 2002); Vincent Brooks, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Sandler, *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); David Zurawick, *The Jews of Prime Time* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Paul Buhle's three volume *Jews and American Popular Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006).

⁴Paralleling the increased attention in Jew and comics, there has been a flowering of titles related to other particular ethnic communities and comics, or multi-ethnic comics in a broader sense. Some of the most notable studies and anthologies include Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); Fredrick Stömberg, *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2003); Michael A. Sheyahshe, *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: 2008); Frederick Luis Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); Jeff Yang, Parry Shen, Keith Chow, and Jerry Ma, eds., *Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology* (New York: New Press, 2009); Frederick Luis Aldama, ed., *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); Damian

of racial and ethnic caricatures in American comic strips, comic books, and film animation, but they have also explored the relatively recent rise in ethnic ownership of the comic image, i.e., how traditionally marginalized writers and illustrators have become more a part of the comics industry and have thereby exerted more control over representations of their own ethnic communities.

In terms of Jewish Americans, this involvement in the industry has been in place since the comic book's inception. As comics historian Arie Kaplan points out, Maxwell "Charlie" Gaines (né Max Ginsberg) put together what many consider the first American comic book. In 1934, he, along with his friend Harry L. Wildenberg, persuaded Eastern Color Printing to collect the comic strips that had previously been published in Sunday newspapers, print them in half tabloid size and distribute them first through chain department stores, then when that proved successful, sell them on newsstands. There had been earlier attempts to collect and distribute comic strips in magazine form, but this was the first time anyone had done so on the retail level and not as a promotional giveaway.⁵ The result was *Famous Funnies*, and as critics such as Kaplan, Danny Fingeroth, and Paul Buhle have pointed out, thus began the Jewish association with comics and their shaping of the medium. Indeed, many of the early pioneers of American comics were Jews, including Jerome Siegel, Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, Bill Finger, Jerry Robinson, Joe Simon, Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, Larry Leiber, Gil Kane, Will Eisner, Jules Feiffer, Will Elder, Harvey Kurtzman, and Joe Kubert. This brief list of artists and writers created, or famously illustrated, most of the memorable characters of the 1930s and 1940s, including Superman, Batman, Captain America, the Guardian, the Boy Commandos, the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, the X-Men, Iron Man, the Green Lantern, the Spirit, and Sgt. Rock. And editors such as Stan Lee, Mort Weisinger, Julius Schwartz, William Gaines, Al Feldstein, and Harvey Kurtzman put their indelible stamp on most of the significant comic books coming out of the industry's leading publishers: DC Comics, Marvel, and EC Comics.

One of the reasons for this Jewish dominance in the comics industry is due in large part to the occupational opportunities, or lack thereof, in the first half of the twentieth century. As both Kaplan and Fingeroth have pointed

Duffy and John Jennings, *Black Comix: African American Independent Comics, Art and Culture* (New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2010); and my own edited collection, "Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narrative," special issue, *MELUS*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2007).

⁵From *Krakow to Krypton*, pp. 2–3.

out, most of the prominent and “respectable” fields where artists and writers could express their creativity—such as magazines, newspaper strips, and advertising—were closed to Jews at the time, or at least difficult to enter, due to antisemitism, both overt and subtle. So those with backgrounds and training in the illustrative arts were limited to the less desirable, and more lowly regarded, jobs where there was no discrimination, such as in pulp magazines and comic books. According to Al Jaffee, one of *Mad* magazine’s legendary artists, only the rare “super-Jew” could break through into newspaper strips and magazine art, and for everyone else, they were confronted with the gentleman’s agreement:

In a lot of firms, there was an unwritten policy that no Jews need apply. . . . You went in and you sat down with your portfolio and the message came through clearly, especially when you ran into very nice people who would say, “Look, your work looks pretty good and I wouldn’t mind taking you in, but there’s a policy here. We don’t hire too many Jewish people.” . . . But the comic-book business did not discriminate. In fact, a lot of the comic-book publishers were Jewish, so the opportunities for getting work [were there], because you got rid of that one big bugaboo!⁶

Will Eisner put it more bluntly when he pointed out that comics was “a medium that was regarded as trash, that nobody really wanted to go into.” And explaining the overriding presence of Jews in the industry, he states, “There were Jews in this medium because it was a crap medium. And in a marketplace that still had racial overtones, it was an easy medium to get into.”⁷ According to this understanding of history, the Jewish presence in comics was not only a fortuitous accident, but a culturally defining one as well.

However, such readings are not without their detractors. Ben Katchor, a frequent contributor to the *Jewish Daily Forward* and author of the comic strip *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer*, is not entirely comfortable with the assertion that Jews have been among the most prominent innovators in comics. He states that this understanding of comics

is a simplification of history made by people who think that comics were invented in 1938 by Siegel and Shuster [the creators of Superman]. The best American

⁶Quoted in Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, pp. 28–29.

⁷Charles Brownstein and Diana Schutz, eds., *Eisner/Miller: A One-on-One Interview Conducted by Charles Brownstein* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2005), p. 211. For a fuller discussion on the socioeconomic and discriminatory issues surrounding Jews in the comics industry, see Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, pp. 27–31, and Fingerroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, pp. 25–29.

newspaper comic strips artists at the early twentieth century—Chester Gould, Windsor McCay, Harold Gray, and George Herriman—were not Jewish. . . . If there was some vital connection between Jews and comics, why were there so few comic-strips in the Yiddish press?

Katchor admits that many Jews were involved in the creation of American comic books in the late 1930s and 1940s, but he believes that the subject matter at the time—e.g., superhero, detective, and funny animal comics—was more of a liability to the medium than an asset. He agrees with Eisner, stating that comics was “the lowest level of commercial art open to the children of immigrant Jews,” but his assessment of their contribution stands in stark contrast with that of recent critics who highlight the Jewish presence in early comics: “These people set picture-stories [Katchor’s preferred term for comics] back a hundred years and turned comics into a low-level commercial art-form directed at children and adolescents. It’s taken sixty years to shake off the stigma they imposed upon comics.”⁸

Katchor’s critique raises a series of intriguing questions. First: if, contrary to what critics such as Kaplan, Fingerroth, and Buhle have argued, Jews were not the primary driving force behind early comics, then what makes an emphasis on Jewish comics so special? Here, we should make a distinction between comics as a medium—an emphasis that Katchor is apparently making—and comic books as a specific form, or package, of delivery and marketing. There is no question that many Jews were involved in the development of the comic book as a consumable cultural product, but what Katchor seems to be suggesting is that the distinction between the comic book and the comic strip is more fluid than many would care to admit. After all, the first comic books were nothing more than previously published strips collected together in magazine form. This being the case, arguing that one community of individuals is largely responsible for the existence of a cultural phenomenon—American comics—is dubious at best. This kind of critical analysis runs the risk of essentializing a narrative form according to nation or ethnicity, such as arguing that the novel is English or that trickster tales are African American. It is the kind of assertion, according to Laurence Roth, that “has become the hallmark of the ‘sociopolitical’ approach to interpreting the Jewish presence in American popular culture.”⁹ In observing that Jews have contributed greatly to the his-

⁸Ben Katchor, e-mail message to author, July 6, 2006.

⁹Laurence Roth, “Drawing Contracts: Will Eisner’s Legacy,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 97, No. 3 (2007): 465. Roth cites as examples of this problematic approach Paul

tory of comic art, one must resist the temptation to define the medium solely or even primarily through this involvement. Such an interpretive stance can lead to a nostalgia that privileges a false, or at least a biased, understanding of history. For example, almost every recent book on Jews and comics has taken as its critical springboard Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), a novel inspired and largely informed by the Golden Age of comics and its wealth of Jewish creators. What is more, Chabon has lately become the "high literary" darling of comics fans and writers, contributing commentary, forewords, introductions, and endorsements to a variety of comics-related media. This is not to take away from the significance of Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, an engaging narrative that adeptly incorporates the early history of American comics into its fictional world. But it is curious how so many studies have referenced the novel as a way of almost legitimizing their projects.

A second question stemming from Katchor's assertion runs thus: What *exactly* is Jewish about comics? In addition to the "career" argument—that the contributions of so many Jews to the inception of the comic book *in effect* makes it a special case—some have pointed out that specific Jewish sensibilities and experiences have defined American comics. Some, such as Kaplan and Mel Gordon, have argued that Jewish humor—its Yiddishisms, its sarcasm, its self-mockery—was a defining feature of such artists as Harvey Kurtzman and *Mad* magazine's other "usual gang of idiots" (as its regular contributors have been called), and that their legacy led directly to the Underground Comix movement of the 1960s and to contemporary Jewish artists such as Art Spiegelman, Daniel Clowes, and Kim Deitch.¹⁰ Others have read the superhero genre as having direct roots to the Jewish experience.¹¹ According to this approach, figures such as Superman, the Thing, the X-Men, and even the goyish Captain America can be best understood through a Jewish lens. The origins of Moses, passing and assimilation, the legend of the golem, the Diaspora, Kabbalism, the history of Israel, the Holocaust, Old Testament scriptures, and former Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion are just some of the facets of Jewish

Buhle's work on Jews and Hollywood and Andrea Most's study of the Broadway musical. He asserts that "one needs to avoid the old trap of simply arguing for the special case of Jewish writers or the special status of Jewishness within cultural products" (p. 465).

¹⁰See Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, pp. 73–74, and Andrae and Gordon's *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman*, pp. 14–23, for discussions on Jewish humor and its links to comics.

¹¹The best examples of this are Weinstein's *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!* and Fingerot's *Disguised as Clark Kent*.

experience that have gone into the construction of superheroes. The problem with such an approach is that it runs the danger of being applied too freely and in ways that stretch credibility. It is one thing to see in Superman's origins, a child sent in a vessel from a doomed people and adopted into a world where he must hide his true identity, a retelling of the Exodus story. It is something else entirely to read Thor, a superhero straight from Norse mythology, and his ill-fated romance with human Jane Foster as an analogy to marrying outside of the tribe. One may also fall into the trap of reading with ethnic blinders, of only seeing the "Jewish" parts of a comic and ignoring any other possible similarities and influences. Such a prejudiced approach to comics could then lead to legitimizing only those interpretations that best fit your schema.¹²

Still another question—or series of questions—generated by Katchor's objection relates not only to Jews and comics, but also to Jewish cultural production as a whole. How specifically do we define Jewish literature, Jewish art, Jewish film, and Jewish music? Must it have a Jewish "sensibility"? And what exactly is that sensibility? Is it primarily Ashkenazi, or would it also accommodate Sephardic and Mizrahi temperaments? What do we do with comics created by Jews but that have little or no Jewish cultural or religious content? For example, Jewish-born Trina Robbins inserts practically no noticeable ethnic subject matter in her *GoGirl!* comics. Conversely, how do we read comics with clear and overt Jewish content, but which were created by non-Jews? The latter is a question that could easily apply to Robert Crumb. He is married to the self-consciously Jewish cartoonist, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, has collaborated with her on *Weirdo* and *Dirty Laundry Comics*, and is often seen as possessing a Jewish sensibility (his fascination with strong Jewish women is almost legendary). What is more, his most recent work, *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*,¹³ is a complete graphic adaptation of the first book of the Torah and has garnered much attention in the Jewish press.

¹²I am reminded here of Ozzie Freedman's dilemma in Philip Roth's short story, "The Conversion of the Jews." In trying to understand why Jews, according to Rabbi Binder, are so special, he recalls his family's obsession with picking out Jewish names as a way of finding meaning. "Then there was the plane crash. Fifty-eight people had been killed in a plane crash at La Guardia. In studying a casualty list in the newspaper his mother had discovered among the list of those dead eight Jewish names (his grandmother had nine but she counted Miller as a Jewish name); because of the eight she said the plane crash was a tragedy." Philip Roth, "The Conversion of the Jews," in *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), pp. 141–142.

¹³R. Crumb, *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

Instead of attempting to pinpoint the “Jewish” in comics and graphic novels, we would do well to heed the advice of Danny Fingeroth, who, in his study of Jews, comics, and superheroes, concludes that the connection is one that, “when looked at directly, almost disappears. One has to look at it from the corner of one’s eye to catch a glimpse of something that, by its nature, evades detection.”¹⁴ Such an approach would certainly provide a more complete understanding of Jewish comics in all of its manifestations. It would allow for the work of early comics artists, with the “masked” ethnic identities of their superheroes, to be set alongside more overt Jewish creations such as Marvel Comics’ Kitty Pryde of the X-Men (and possibly the X-Men’s sometimes nemesis, Magneto), Benjamin “the Thing” Grimm of the Fantastic Four, the Israeli superheroine Sabra, the fortune-seeking adventurer Dominic Fortune, and the gunslinger Two-Gun Kid; DC Comics’ Colossal Boy of the Legion of Super-Heroes, the Justice League’s Atom Smasher, and the golem-inspired vigilante Ragman; Howard Chaykin’s Reuben Flagg in the *American Flagg!* series; and Al Wiesner’s “man of stone” superhero, Shaloman (an inanimate rock who comes to life whenever someone cries out for help, “Oy vey!”). Given a more expansive definition of Jewish comics, readers could better appreciate the comedic roots of *Watchmensch* (2009), Rich Johnston and Simon Rohrmüller’s parody of Alan Moore’s classic take on the superhero genre, *Watchmen*. Furthermore, it would provide the tools to explore the critical crossroads of identity, adaptation, and metafiction with Michael Chabon’s hero, The Escapist: a comic-book character created (by two fictional Jewish artists) in a traditional novel, that spawned a comic book series published by Dark Horse Comics (whose hero had the gentile-sounding name, Tom Mayflower), that subsequently led to a comic-book mini-series called *The Escapists*, about a Jewish writer who buys the rights to recreate the hero . . . much as Chabon’s fictional Kavalier and Clay did originally.

Indeed, the diverse nature of Jewish comics becomes even more apparent in its graphic novel form. Along with the groundbreaking and prolific work of Will Eisner—e.g., *A Contract with God* (1978), *The Dreamer* (1986), *A Life Force* (1988), *To the Heart of the Storm* (1991), *Dropsie Avenue* (1995), *Fagan the Jew* (2003), and *The Name of the Game* (2003)—there is Milt Gross’s wordless Yiddish humor-inspired masterpiece from 1930, *He Done Her Wrong: The Great American Novel (with No Words)*, Jules Feiffer’s “novel in cartoons” *Tantrum* (1979), as well as more recent works such as Peter Kuper’s *Stop For-*

¹⁴Disguised as Clark Kent, p. 155.

getting to Remember: The Autobiography of Walter Kurtz (2007), Neil Kleid and Nicolas Cinquegrani's *The Big Kahn* (2009), and James Sturm's ethnic-inspired *The Golem's Mighty Swing* (2003) and *Market Day* (2010). Episodic narratives make up a sizable proportion of Jewish comics, as we find in Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* stories, Steve Sheinkin's *Rabbi Harvey* books, Ben Katchor's Julius Knipl strips, and Evan Dorkin's *Dork* collections and *Fun with Milk & Cheese* (1997). And there are also instructional comics that provide histories of the Jewish people—for example, Stan Mack's *The Story of the Jews: A 4,000-Year Adventure* (1998) and David Gantz's *Jews in America: A Cartoon History* (2002, rev. ed., 2006)—J. T. Waldman's graphic adaptation *Megillat Esther* (2006), as well as child-friendly comics such as *Mendy and the Golem*, which uses adventure stories to teach ethical lessons.

Stories of the Holocaust are plentiful, many of them memoirs. Following Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (Vol. 1, 1986; Vol. 2, 1991) was Joe Kubert's *Yossel: April 19, 1943* (2003), Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* (2004), Martin Lemelman's *Mendel's Daughter: A Memoir* (2006), Miriam Katin's *We Are on Our Own* (2006), Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006), Dave Sim's *Judenhaus* (2008), Eric Heuvel's *The Search* (2009) and *A Family Secret* (2009), and the first book in Carla Jablonksi and Leland Purvis's trilogy, *Resistance* (2010). There are also many examples of Jewish gangster and crime comics, including Brian Michael Bendis's *Goldfish* (2001), Howard Chaykin's erotic thriller *Black Kiss* (2002), Judd Winick's twelve-part maxi-series *Caper* (2003–2004), Joe Kubert's *Jew Gangster: A Father's Admonition* (2005), and Neil Kleid and Jake Allen's *Brownsville* (2006). And while these Holocaust and crime narratives tend to define the ethnic self through specific events or even occupations, there are other artists whose works are, to varying degrees, ambivalent when it comes to Jewish identity. These include the comic books, graphic novels, and caricature art of Daniel Clowes (author of *Wilson* [2010] as well as the *Eightball* comic book series which generated *Ghost World* [1997], *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* [1997], *David Boring* [2000], and *Ice Haven* [2005]), Bob Fingerman (creator of the *Minimum Wage* comic books as well as author of *White Like She* [1994] and *From the Ashes* [2010]), Kim Deitch (*The Boulevard of Broken Dreams* [2002], *Shadowland* [2006], *Alias the Cat* [2007], and *The Search for Smilin' Ed* [2010]), and Drew Friedman (*Any Similarity to Persons Living or Dead is Purely Coincidental* [1989], *Warts and All* [1990], and *Old Jewish Comedians* [2006]).

While male authors largely populate the superhero realm, many Jewish women have defined their work through a more confessional mode. These personal, at times autobiographic, comics include Ariel Schrag's high school

chronicles, *Definition* (1997), *Potential* (2000), and *Likewise* (2009); Vanessa Davis's risqué *Spanish Rage* (2005); Miss Lasko-Gross's *Escape from "Special"* (2007) and *A Mess of Everything* (2009); Aline Kominsky-Crumb's graphic memoir, *Need More Love* (2007); Miriam Libicki's *Jobnik!* (2008), and Sarah Glidden's *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* (2010)—the latter two being perspectives of Israel through American eyes. Finally, there are those who represent Jewish identity from different international perspectives, such as the French comics artist Joann Sfar—*The Rabbi's Cat* (2005) and *Klezmer: Tales of the Wild East* (2006)—Italy's Vittorio Giardino (his three *A Jew in Communist Prague* volumes), Israel's Rutu Modan—*Exit Wounds* (2007) and *Jamilti and Other Stories* (2008)—and the Actus Tragicus Comics Collective (of which Modan is a member), a group of Israeli artists that has published such works as *Flipper 1 & 2* (2000), *Happy End* (2002), *Dead Herring Comics* (2004), *How to Love* (2007), and graphic adaptations of five stories from Israeli writer Etgar Keret, *Jetlag* (1999).

The focus of this special issue of *Shofar* is broad and inclusive, reflecting the diversity found in Jewish comics.¹⁵ The essays and reviews that follow approach comics not only in terms of their ethnic content or the degree to which they display a Jewish sensibility (however that might be defined), but also regarding their engagements with the Old World, religious tradition, cultural legends, historical events, ethnic identity, urban spaces, assimilation, and the teaching of these various topics. Some of the authors discussed are self-consciously aware of themselves as cultural and/or religious Jews and create their narratives accordingly, others are less sure about representing their ethnic roots. The first contribution, appropriately enough, is a study of the legendary Will Eisner, one of the most influential comics artists in history and considered to be, if not the father of the graphic novel, then the one who popularized the form. In her essay, Lan Dong focuses on Eisner's autobiographical comics and how he combines both fiction and life writing as a way of examining social prejudice. History of a different sort is the subject of Wendy Stallard Flory's study. She provides a close reading of Erich Heuvel, Ruud van der Rol, and Lies Schippers's Holocaust narrative, *The Search*, especially as an effective educational resource introducing students to the *Shoah*. Robert G. Weiner follows

¹⁵The bibliographic citations for this special issue follow the usual *Shofar* format, but they also reflect the citation guide as proposed by the Comic Art and Comics area of the Popular Culture Association, which can be found at <http://www.comicsresearch.org/CAC/cite.html>. As such, and when necessary, distinctions are made between a comic's writer—designated as (w)—and artist (a), and even between a comic's inker (i) and penciller (p).

this pedagogical analysis with a survey of perhaps the most influential Jewish legend in mainstream comics: the golem. In his essay, he examines the many uses of the golem in the Marvel Universe, especially as given form though the Hulk, the Thing, and the aptly named character, the Golem.

One of the leading figures of the “British Invasion” of American comics in the 1980s, Neil Gaiman, is the subject of Cyril Camus’s critical examination. He argues that although Gaiman is known primarily for this acclaimed DC Comics series, *Sandman*, there is a side of his work that gets relatively little attention. Beginning with Gaiman’s outsider status—being an Englishman currently living in America, being a Jew raised with an Anglican educational background—Camus looks at the ways in which the author’s comics become intertextual links to, and at times even rewritings of, Old Testament narratives. Nicole Wilkes Goldberg and James Goldberg are also interested in how Jewish comics artists rewrite or reimagine the past. In their essay, they read Joann Sfar’s *Klezmer: Tales of the Wild East*, as a subversion of the kind of nostalgia found in a lot of Jewish cultural production, especially those works that emphasize a more conservative continuity with the past and its perceived traditions. My own contribution to this special issue brings us back to Will Eisner, this time focusing on the author’s views of American ethnic relations in a broad sense, not only as it relates to Jewishness. Specifically, I look at the ways in which the recurring visual themes in *Dropsie Avenue* underscore the process of assimilation—and the dynamics of becoming “white”—and how they contribute to Eisner’s neo-naturalistic, if not outright cynical, retelling of the melting pot myth. Next, Hye Su Park provides a bibliographic overview of the criticism surrounding Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. Given the abundance of writing on this groundbreaking graphic memoir—perhaps the most referenced comic in academia—Park’s is an indispensable resource that not only describes the trends of the current scholarship, but also suggests unexplored directions for future studies. Finally, readers will find two original works of comic art that were created especially for this special issue. Eli Valley, whose work appears regularly in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, contributes a six-panel commentary on the Jewish presence in superhero comics. Also, Al Weisner provides an original illustration of his signature hero, Shaloman. Their efforts illustrate—quite literally—the full potential of Jewish narrative art.

Taken together, all of these essays, the original illustrations, and the various reviews that follow, offer a useful introduction to Jewish comics and the criticism surrounding them. What is more, the authors’ diversity of topics and of critical approaches illustrates the rich potential of this ever-growing field. As such, this special issue of *Shofar* stands alongside other recent contributions to the scholarship on ethnicity and comic art, not only as it relates to

Jewish culture, but as it intersects with that of other communities as well. Perhaps most important, it draws our attention to the fact that the history and the significance of Jewish narrative is more than mere words on a page. Will Eisner once observed with regret that his own graphic novels were relegated to the comics or the young adult sections of bookstores. He believed that his work, and that of others producing a more visually based literature, could stand alongside the books of such writers as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Cynthia Ozick. If the scholarship over the past several years—including the current issue of *Shofar*—is any indication, then it would appear that Eisner's is a wish whose time has come.