

**Gardner, Jared. 2012. *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. \$80 hc. \$24.95 sc. \$24.95 e-book. xv + 220 pp.**

DEREK PARKER ROYAL

Executive Editor, *Philip Roth Studies*

To claim today that comics are not a part of our academic discourse is to ignore the volume of scholarship published over the past two decades. A simple perusal of any well-stocked bookstore (physical or virtual) or of university press catalogs will show an emergent body of work on the formal system of comics, comics and narrative theory, pedagogical issues surrounding the graphic novel, the history of comics, comics and history, comics and other forms of visual narrative, gender/ethnicity/race in comics, comics and life writing, the political import of comic art, and of course, general overviews of comic studies. In addition to those with an already rich history concerning graphic narrative, such as the University Press of Mississippi and McFarland, a growing number of publishers facilitate scholarship in comic studies and even devote entire series to the medium.

One university press recently entering this arena is Stanford, with Jared Gardner's *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling* as an inaugural volume in its new "Post 45" series. This line of texts (according to the Stanford University Press website) is devoted to popular and avant-garde US culture after the Second World War; in that regard, Gardner's book, with its early emphasis on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century entertainment, both does and does not fall within the series parameters. However, this is certainly not a liability for the text. Even though almost half of the study concerns pre-World War II cultural history—clearly falling outside of the stated emphasis of this series on the postwar—Gardner productively uses this context to establish many of the larger arguments he makes concerning more contemporary comic narratives. Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of *Projections* lies in the author's juxtaposition of comics with film, arguing not only how the history of each greatly informed the development of the other, but how both art forms share common parentage.

The first two chapters of the book, "Fragments of Modernity, 1889–1920" and "Serial Pleasures, 1907–1936," are arguably its critical high points. They not only focus on the dynamic relationship between the two emerging media but, perhaps more significantly, underscore the interactive nature of early-twentieth-century comics. What largely gave rise to the popularity of such strips as *Happy Hooligan*, *Mutt and Jeff*, and *The Gumps* was what Gardner calls the "transmedia

conversation" (46) among daily newspapers, early cinema, and an increasingly savvy advertising industry. Readers became enmeshed in the comic strips because, according to Gardner, the narratives permeated their daily lives in multiple ways—e.g., they read the daily strips, they watched the movies based on the comics, and they shared these engagements with friends and family—binding the audience so that it felt impelled, and was certainly urged by creators and publishers, to participate (through writing letters, buying newspapers, and attending movies) in the ongoing narratives. As Gardner points out, long before the letters page of contemporary comic books, fans were encouraged to comment on what they read and, in the process, to help shape the very product of their consumption.

This emphasis on an energized and participatory fan base, heavily invested in the various manifestations of popular culture, informs Gardner's subsequent discussions of comics in America as they evolved from individual strips into pamphlet or magazine form. For example, he highlights the science-fiction fandom roots of the superhero genre as it took off in the years immediately preceding World War II, the cult of the "fan-addict" surrounding William Gaines's EC Comics in the 1950s, and Marvel Comics' efforts to nurture a hip "insider" reader identity (largely orchestrated by Stan Lee) through a shared philosophy and an expanded narrative universe. Gardner also anchors his analyses in those phenomena that have by and large determined the trajectory of American comics, such as the reactive efforts of censors and critics in the 1950s (including Fredric Wertham) and the resulting Comics Code Authority, as well as the counteractive art generated by the underground comix of the 1960s and 1970s. In part, *Projections* is a historically conscious work that follows the contours of the medium, at least from an American perspective, from its turn-of-the-century roots to its current manifestations in new media technologies.

However, the last chapters of the text rely less on chronological developments and more on close textual readings. The results are mixed. In "First-Person Graphic, 1959–2010," Gardner begins with a discussion of Marvel Comics and its revolutionary impact on comics readership, but then quickly moves into an analysis of autobiographical comics and its "legitimizing" comics or the graphic novel as a literary form. In fact, Gardner devotes significantly more pages to the "autobiographix" (Diana Schutz's phrase) of creators such as Robert Crumb, Aline Kominsky-Crumb (Gardner excludes the hyphenated part of the name), Justin Green, Art Spiegelman, and Alison Bechdel than he does to the significance of mainstream comics, superhero or otherwise, during this same period. The result feels imbalanced.

While no one would argue against the import of autobiography and memoir in the comics medium, especially in its contemporary manifestations, it is nonetheless unfortunate that Gardner would spend more time focusing on texts that already receive much attention in academia—how many syllabi already include *Maus* and *Fun Home*?—than he does on mainstream comics. (Perhaps it is telling that the two blurbs on the back of the book come from scholars

specializing in what could loosely be termed “alternative comics.”) This is especially curious given the book’s earlier emphasis on popular entertainment and “transmedia conversations.” While he does discuss the significance of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century popular strips, Gardner gives noticeably little attention to popular or mainstream comics after the 1960s. And, curiously enough, it is with current mainstream comics where we find our best examples of “transmedia conversations.” (Notice, for example, the ever-increasing ways in which film and television draw heavily from superhero franchises, and how the trajectories of those comics’ storylines are likewise affected by their translations into, and receptions in, other media.) What is more, Gardner’s move seems to be part of a larger trend in contemporary comics scholarship: the reluctance, or inability, of those in literary studies to make sense of and appreciate mainstream, especially superhero, comics. Indeed, the most serious and insightful treatments of superhero narratives have come not from English professors, but from those in history (Bradford W. Wright’s *Comic Book Nation*, 2001), political science (Matthew J. Costello’s *Secret Identity Crisis*, 2009), American studies (Matthew J. Pustz’s *Comic Book Culture*, 1999), philosophy (Harry Brod’s *Superman Is Jewish?*, 2012), communications (Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith’s *The Power of Comics*, 2009), popular culture studies (Jeffrey A. Brown’s *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, 2001), journalism and general media studies (Peter Coogan’s *Superhero*, 2006, and Gerard Jones’s *Men of Tomorrow*, 2004), and from the creators themselves (Danny Fingeroth’s *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 2007).

Gardner is on more impressive, and more original, ground in his final chapter, where he devotes critical space to three significant contemporary practitioners, Chris Ware, Kim Deitch, and Ben Katchor, the latter two having received relatively little scholarly attention. His treatment of these creators is framed by the theme of archiving, of how they turn back to the popular culture (comics as well as music, film, television, and advertisements) that preceded them and incorporate that history into the narratives they construct. In this way, the phenomenon of “collecting” is not restricted to fanboys (and girls) completing their own comic book collections, but also includes the efforts of artists who catalog, arrange, and make sense of the media fragments that influence their work.

This almost self-reflexive emphasis on the medium itself is an appropriate ending point for Gardner, who wraps up *Projections* with a brief discussion of recent comics-related films, the promise of social media, and the cultural impact of the computer screen (be it on desktops, smartphones, or tablets). Coming after his foray onto the well-trodden grounds of autobiographic comics, this is an effective way to end his analysis, bringing Gardner back to his book’s greatest strength: its awareness of the comic page as a space for reader choice and interaction. As he concludes: “Comics, in the end, is defined less by its formal properties . . . than by an invitation to the reader to project herself into the narrative and to project the narrative beyond the page” (193). Demonstrating this characteristic with both a broad knowledge of popular media and a keen historical awareness, Jared Gardner’s *Projections* provides yet another building block in the growing body of

comics studies scholarship. While this text will resonate primarily with academic audiences—and not only in literary or comics studies, but with scholars of media and popular culture as well—its readability and straightforward analyses should make it attractive to a general readership as well.