Songs in the Gutter: Writing and Authorship in American Comics

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Writing and Authorship in American Comics
by Jonathan Smith
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Finding the Way to Stories

One of the things it [fiction] does is lead you to recognize what you did not know before... A very good book tells me news, tells me things I didn’t know, or didn’t know I knew, yet I recognize them—yes, I see, yes, this is how the world is. Fiction—and poetry and drama—cleanse the doors of perception. All the arts do this. Music, painting, dance say for us what can’t be said in words. But the mystery of literature is that it does say it in words, often straightforward ones.

-Ursula K. Le Guin

Over the past several months I have explored ideas about authorship in comics and my position in the medium as I have developed a pitch for a graphic novel set in the fictional community of Waynes Creek, which lends its name as a working title for the project. Waynes Creek explores grief, community, gender enforcement and masculinity through a story about a young man returning home after the suicide of a childhood friend-turned-abuser. At its heart it is a story about a man trying to bridge the impossible distances of time, death, and isolation to understand someone who has hurt him, and to understand himself.

For a long time my practice has been grounded in meditative observationally rooted drawing. This evolved to include a long running practice of short, reflective, diaristic comics. The following is a synthesis of the things I’ve learned in my attempt to navigate the distance between those short autobiographical glimpses and longer narrative fiction. In particular, the unique attributes of comics with the potential to “cleanse the doors of perception” and evoke reflection in comics readers.

Diverging Paths

“Authorship” is a surprisingly fraught subject in the realm of comics. It is a complicated issue and requires some familiarity with the history and conventions of the medium and its divergent traditions. Waynes Creek and its companion diary comics come out of the American alternative comics tradition, as opposed to American mainstream comics. While I generally prefer alternative comics the difference between the two is not primarily one of quality. Many innovative, fun, beautiful comics have been issued by mainstream publishers, and alternative comics expos are often littered with self-indulgent drivel. I should know, having made a fair amount myself. Due to the differences in publication, distribution, and audience between these traditions they have evolved different creative conventions and
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priorities, so it is worth having a look at their history before going further.

Many comics experts name Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer as the first proper cartoonist in the sense that he created stories using a combination of sequential images that worked in concert with text, but others, like Scott McCloud, identify much older sequential visual narratives like the Bayeux Tapestry as comics.\(^2\) What counts as a comic and when they begin is an interesting topic, although tied up with less appealing attempts to legitimate the form by establishing pedigree. However, our concerns are primarily about the differences between mainstream and alternative comics in America, so we will start with the Comics Code.

The popular adoption of the Comics Code in 1954 is a landmark event in the life of American comics, and is discussed with detail in many books and journals focusing on the history of the form. We need not delve too deeply into the history and context here. Briefly, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s book *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) galvanized growing outrages that blamed crime, horror, and science fiction comics for the moral decay of children. This opposition of comics culminated in a series of Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency in that same year. To avoid government regulation, the Comics Code Authority was formed. Submitting to the Comics Code Authority was voluntary but a comic book without the CCA stamp of approval would not be able to get advertisers and most drugstores and grocers (the primary comics retailer at the time) would not stock them. As a result, the CCA emerged as a de facto censor, which all major publishers accepted. A clearly defined set of rules was established: comics were for children, they must support the dominant social order and moral conventions, etc. Creators either followed or rebelled against these new rules, forcing two divergent paths for American comics moving forward: the mainstream and the alternative.

The two different traditions have dramatically different methods of production, publication, and distribution. Mainstream comics are generally made by a collaborative group of creators with specialized roles who do not own the rights to their work. A writer, artist, colorist, and letterer are all coordinated by a supervising editor. Sometimes the art is divided even further into roles like pencilers, inkers, senior artists and assistants etc. This division of labor has the benefit of much faster production compared to alternative comics, along with the social and creative benefits of collaboration. Considering the time and labor that goes into the production of a single page of a comic compared to the speed with which a reader experiences it, the increased production speed can be a real boon. Stories are serialized in “runs” and published as frequently as weekly or bi-weekly and were sold in drugstores and supermarkets but are now almost entirely sold in a direct specialty market of comic book shops. The flimsy, magazine style staple-bound comic books are published every few weeks and compiled and republished as longer, sturdier, collections called “trade paperbacks.”

Since they are created by groups of artists who do not own the intellectual property, the relationship readers form with particular creators is typically less important than one might think. While some readers will develop an interest in following particular creators’ work, generally speaking the mainstream market is driven by characters rather than their creators. This means the characters need to be easily identifiable, salable, and narratively reliable: another reason the bright and iconic designs of superheroes have done so well. Their stories, created by many different teams of people over years will have exciting high stakes stories that rarely change the character themselves. Batman can be relied upon to be the same at the end of an adventure as at the beginning. When characters are changed in mainstream series it is often a big sales driving event and the characters do not go through an internally driven arc, there isn’t

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\(^2\) McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 12-13

**Opposite:** Cpt. America no. 1, Joe Simon & Jack Kirby

**Above:** CCA stamp of approval.
Captain America was an evil double, and the real Steve Rogers was trapped in the Cosmic Cube. When the average non-comics-reader imagines comics as being inherently about the mythic struggles and good-versus-evil melodrama of superheroes or similar sorts of bright fantastical stories it is because of how the CCA shaped the mainstream market and how entire genres and legacy franchises adapted to that environment. Everything outside of that admittedly monumental silo can be described as Alternative Comics. Alt Comics, Comix, Independent Comics, Art Comics, Auteur Comics, Creator-Owned-Comics. There are character development, there is a passing of a heroic mantle. Literally, the person under the mask changes, either because of a sales-pushing death, retirement, or unseen betrayal. These changes are often done in a way intended to cause controversy amongst readers and drive up sales. For instance, in a 2017 event series Secret Empire, Captain America was revealed to have been a double agent for Hydra all along. These seemingly earth shattering developments rarely leave lasting changes, and the characters reliably return to what is expected of them. They return from the dead, they were mind controlled, it was an evil twin, etc. That bad
a lot of different ways of referring to comics that fall outside of the dominant publishing model favored by Marvel and DC. First, they tend to be produced by just one person or a very small group of people, similar to a traditional prose novel. They are much slower to produce but creators have far more creative agency and that creative authority is typically valued by readers. Second, in both visual forms and content alternative comics tend to try to distance themselves from the mainstream. This can mean sparse, simply drawn art, or art and stories that are intentionally crude, or ugly. Contemporary alternative comics matured out of the Underground Comix movement which was a part of the 60s counterculture and rebelled against CCA controlled norms by creating comics that were ugly and messy where the mainstream was clean and polished, and depraved where the mainstream was moralizing. Art Speigelman, author of the monumental holocaust narrative *Maus*, said of the underground comic need to grow up:

What had seemed like a revolution simply deflated into a lifestyle. Underground comics were stereotyped as dealing only with sex, dope and cheap thrills. They got stuffed back into the closet, along with bong pipes and love beads, as things started to get uglier.  

Decades later, alternative comics still tend to try to distance themselves from their mainstream counterparts in how they are produced and published. Art that subverts standard expectations of beauty or technical impressiveness is, if not the norm, not uncommon and the works that are beautiful, and there are many, do not aspire to the muscles and tights and bright toyetic aesthetics of the mainstream. By experimenting with a broader range of visual styles and content alternative comics define themselves in opposition, or at least reaction, to mainstream comics which tend to have a very identifiable look that artists try to conform to.

Just like with the mainstream, creative priorities are not decided in a vacuum and production is at least partially informed by publication and distribution conventions. Although many of the classics of the Alternatives, like Art Speigleman’s *Maus* (1980-1991), or Dan Clowes’ *Eightball* (1989-2004) were initially serialized before being collected into larger books, increasingly the goal for many aspiring Alternatives creators is a self contained graphic novel. There are a lot of reasons for this difference in publishing convention. A property managed by a corporation and produced under different creative teams is most profitable if it continues in perpetuity, and a single artist working alone will generally want to have a self-contained story with more defined boundaries. Similarly, the Alternative market is growing and finding a place on the shelves of non-specialized bookstores so they are increasingly published in longer complete formats to better work on a classic bookstore shelf, and can often aspire to similarly literary trappings as opposed to the magazine model of mainstream comics.

Although graphic novels are increasingly successful in the traditional book market, many alternative comics are still published in a serialized zine and mini-comics formats. John Porcellino’s 30+ year King-Cat series is a good example, and although few bookstores carry them small press art books, zines, and mini-comics continue to be an indispensable element of the alternative comics market, many being bought directly from creators over the internet or at alternative comics expos. Finally, in recent years an increasing trend of alternative anthologies inspired by a publishing convention popular in Japanese manga are being launched through crowdfunding platforms, possibly further changing the face of print publishing for alternative comics. While the focus of this study has been on print publishing, the way the internet has changed...
how comics are produced, disseminated, and consumed—the evolution of new markets and reaching new readers—cannot be understated.

**Auteur Theory and Conflicts of Authorship**

Who is the “author” of a collaborative project? Should the writer receive primary credit for a comic dominated by visual storytelling? These are questions that have importance beyond the pride of the people making comics but have serious legal and financial consequences.

For many the appeal of alternative comics is rooted in the creators’ ability to enact their singular vision, free from adhering to a house-style or browbeating editors, and retaining ownership and investment in their own work. The term “Auteur Comics” is occasionally used for these comics with a single creator with a particular style or perspective valued by their audience, as Douglas Wolk explains in his book *Reading Comics*:

> The style-first mandate for art comics means that their primary value for their readers is as a work of their creators’ hands—an idea that tends to be called “auteurism,” by which comics readers mean something rather different from what film critics of the ‘50s and ‘60s meant when they referred to “auteur theory.” The creator of a comic—the person who applies pen to drawing board or (lately) stylus to digital tablet—is its author, and comics produced under the sole or chief creative control of a single person of significant skill are more likely to be good (or at least novel enough to be compelling and resonant) than comics produced by a group of people assembly-line style—under the aegis of an editor who hires them all individually. This naturally coincides with the observation that a comic owned by its creator is more likely to be stylistically adventurous than one produced on a work-for-hire basis for a publisher who owns all the copyrights.4

While it is an inexact adaptation from the idea within film criticism that a director with a dominant style and control over a collaborative medium like a film is its primary author rather than the scriptwriter, Wolk’s usage of the term has some merit considering the value alternative comics place on the lone

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4  Wolk, *Reading Comics* 31

**Left:** The Eternals, Jack Kirby.

creator’s authority in the context of the entire medium. However, in his 2011 New York Comic Con presentation “The Auteur Theory of Comics,” Arlen Schumer makes the argument that there is value in reserving the term only for artists—like Jack Kirby—working in a collaborative context who have had a significant effect on the finished product:

So too can the Auteur Theory of Film be accurately applied to the “Marvel Method” of comic book authorship, innovated by Lee, who gave his artists (originally and primarily Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko) anything from a typed synopsis of a story to a verbal springboard of an idea—the equivalent of the screenplay in film—and the artists drew out/plot[ed]/staged/paced the story visually to fill the page count given, using two-dimensional versions of the same tools and devices a movie director uses to craft a film: casting, editing, lighting, sound, choreography—after which Lee would add the dialogue and captions to the artists’ work.

Schumer continues to make the case that this more closely adapted usage of auteur theory is more useful in addressing conflicts of authorship that parallel questions of authorship between a screenwriter and a film’s director. Merchandising, collectables, licensing, and increasingly film adaptations have proven to be essential to the prosperity of the mainstream comics tradition, but because of their approach to authorship many artists, who can arguably be said to have had a bigger role in creation of these popular franchises than writers and editors, do not receive appropriate profit for their labor. Schumer recounts a selection from an interview with Marvel’s Stan Lee, on the balance of labor in his partnership with Kirby:

“I would tell Jack the main idea that I wanted, and then we would talk about it, and we’d come up with something. I would give him the outline for the story. As we went on, and we had been working together for years, the outlines I gave him were skimpier and skimpier. I might say something like: ‘In this story let’s have Dr. Doom kidnap Sue Storm, and the Fantastic Four has to go out and rescue them. And in the end, Dr. Doom does this and that.’ And that might have been all I would tell him for a 20-page story. If the book was 20 pages long, I’d receive back 20 beautifully drawn pages in pencil which told a story. Jack would just put in all the details and

everything. And then it was—I enjoyed that. It was like doing a crossword puzzle. I get the panels back, and I have to put in the dialogue and make it all tie together. So we worked well together that way for years.”

In spite of this glowing report from Lee, he would go on to testify in opposition of the Kirby estate in a legal battle for ownership/copyright with Disney and to this day the estate of Jack Kirby and many other artists have not directly benefited from the extremely successful Marvel films.

At the heart of this all too common conflict is a question of what it means to “write” a work of art that is not entirely verbal, and may in fact not include any text at all, and who deserves the title of author. Beyond issues of money and accolades it prompts questions about storytelling, and how the marriage between words and images in comics actually works.

5 Schumer, “The Auteur Theory of Comics”
6 Lee, Schumer “The Auteur Theory of Comics”
I wish I knew for certain all this was worth it.

I wish I didn't second guess everything so damn much.

I wish I could tell if my efforts are any good, or good for the world, or even good for me.

I wish I had a donut.
**How Comics Work**

My degree project was to put together a pitch for a graphic novel. This involved writing, visual development, and the eventual full production of a complete 40-page chapter. Before I could do that, I had to learn how comics work, or at least how I work with them. Having spent a couple years making short, unprecious, diary comics, I developed something of a voice and style but felt I was stagnating and my work lacked consistency. Continuing my practice of diary comics, while working on this larger book, I’ve been experimenting with different methods of writing and drawing while refining my thinking about the form. What follows are three attributes of writing for comics that I found of particular note while trying to cross the distance between short autobiography and longform narrative fiction.

**Lyricism in Comics**

Excluding a couple messy and uninspired short stories, I entered the medium through lyrically grounded diary comics. Running parallel to the Waynes Creek pitch, I’ve made 30 small diary comics exploring my voice as a writer and artist. These comics joined a collection of roughly 200 similar short autobiographical comics that I have published online and in small press print collections. In the vocabulary of comics, they could be called “strips” since they are rarely longer than 4-6 panels and although they share consistent themes and content, there is not a continuing narrative between them. The diaristic form suits a meditative, direct approach to drawing, and supports a poetic approach to writing.

I propose that the term “lyrical” is more apt for describing comics with poetic priorities, because a poetic comic is more than a verbally constructed poem. The word/image relationship in comics is similar to the lyric/music relationship in songwriting. Typically, the script of a comic with lyrical attributes would disappoint as a stand alone poem. The text is necessary, but insufficient. The panel drawings provide a complementary element, but they are not illustrating text which could succeed without them. Instead they work in concert. They are indivisible.

Just as there are many ways in which a poem can be successful there are many ways a lyrically oriented comic can work, but there are two qualities of the form that are most important. First, is pacing. Comics are not exactly prose and not exactly poetry but they can be akin to both. Alternating between periods of verbal and visual action, periods of “silence” and rest, the scale and framing of panels emphasize the form’s kinship with music and poetry. The second quality is the capacity of a poem or a lyrical comic, through brevity and effective writing and visuals, to evoke in the reader more than it says literally on the page. Conjuring this sort of resonant response is challenging, but the form has a rich potential for this because of its interweaving of visual and verbal communication, and its inherent reliance on pacing and tempo in panel layouts.

As an example, here are two pages from different autobiographical comics. The first is “Mr. Boat’s Miracle Cure” from a 1980 collection of Harvey Pekar’s long running autobiographical comic *American Splendor*. Drawn by underground comix titan R. Crumb, it is visually dense, narratively self-contained as a vignette in twelve identically sized panels, and the dialogue sounds very naturalistic, demonstrating Pekar’s talent as a keen observer and reproducer of speech and behavior.

*Above:* R. Crumb partners with Harvey Pekar in *American Splendor*
Compare that with the second example taken from Julie Delporte’s This Woman’s Work (2017). Delporte’s page is much less packed with visual and written information, it is written in a first person diaristic voice with looping cursive letters, and the drawings have a similarly direct, sketchbook-like quality to them. Delporte creates a more lyrical experience through visual and narrative spaciousness which invites the reader to inhabit the scene presented with their own memory and imagination. Pekar’s, being less lyrical, is more readily experienced as an outsider witnessing a story.

Pacing, Composition, and Targeted Narrative Units

Having worked on small, unprecious, minimally narrative comics grounded in a personal practice of meditative drawing and journaling, I was unsure how to approach writing a longer cohesive narrative. So I began reading about writing, particularly Stephen King’s aptly named writing focused memoir On Writing (2000), and Anne Lamott’s Bird by Bird (1994), to develop an approach to writing a manuscript. The number one thing I learned is that it is best to explore a story instead of trying to map it from the beginning by plotting it out. This means just writing and not worrying too much about knowing what it is about, the major themes, storylines that need to be emphasized, etc. Once that first exploratory draft is finished you can take a step back and have a look at the shape of the thing and decide how to set up its boundaries and what can be cut and what should be reinforced. This is better than plotting out a story in outlines from the start because it allows the story to surprise you as you discover it in the same way that you cannot make a good map of a place from a distance. You have to go there.

During the second draft the process diverges from writing prose. When it is time to start refining a story for a comic the necessary formal structures of the medium begin to exert themselves. This means composing a story, not just writing it. Comics are not exclusively—or even primarily—verbal so a lot of “writing” and composing can involve long stretches of “silent” panels. The composition of visual elements—panel layout, pacing of textual elements, etc.—can often be more important than the verbal elements and many artists rely heavily on visual sketching early on in their “writing” process. Below are three examples of writing approaches that target different narrative units, around which an author composes their story.

The first is the panel-by-panel approach. This seems to be more commonly used in alternative comics than in mainstream comics and is well suited for longer narratives and is the approach I used for writing Waynes Creek. This approach is built around the single panel, followed by the next one and so on, rather than the entire page. Moments represented in panels are shifted here and there to accomplish more interesting compositions on the page or to achieve a better effect when turning over to a new spread, but in general the story moves smoothly from one panel to the next. This method of composition is good for graphic novels, like Eleanor Davis’ The Hard Tomorrow (2019) because it is not concerned with fitting into a strict page count structure or resolving some kind of action on a page by page basis. This can foster a more sweeping feeling to how the story unfolds.

A panel-by-panel method can work very well when there is an undefined limit to the length of a story. For most mainstream comics, as well as artist-produced mini comics and zines, the story has to be told
GOOD MORNING, MISS PHYLLIS! I'M COMING IN!

HI MISS PHYLLIS, IT'S HANNAH, REMEMBER ME?

OH, OH NO.

HA HA, YOU DON'T LIKE IT? I DID IT MYSELF!

ON YOUR DAR, ON NO YOUR HIR.
It is questionable if such a staccato approach would work as well in a more somber prolonged narrative, but it works very well here. *Fantasy Sports* is only 56 pages long but because each page contains some sort of satisfied action, it does not feel especially short. It is worth noting that the physical dimensions of the *Fantasy Sports* books are much larger than most comics and this plays into Bosma’s ability to fill a page with enough panels to reach a satisfying resolution of action without it feeling overcrowded.

While the first approach I described targets the panel as its primary narrative unit around which it composes story, and the second builds within the more strict confines of an immutable page count, this third one targets each page as its own distinct narrative unit. The Panel-by-Panel method says, “X thing happens in this panel, then Y in the next panel,” and so on with the boundaries of the page and the overall book as only secondary factors. The Staple Method says, “X and Y things happen in this story which has to be 24 pages long,” and fills in the spaces presented by that puzzle. The third method, or Page-by-Page method, says, “X thing happens on this page,” and composits a rising and falling action that fits into that single page. There are a lot of ways to compose a story for comics, many variations of which I have not included in this sampling, but these three examples demonstrate the importance of the structures, the narrative units, around which comics are built.
Jonathan Smith

Closure and The Secret Power of Comics

The final attribute of how storytelling in comics works is what Scott McCloud calls in his book Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (1993) the power of “Closure.” McCloud defines closure as, “the phenomenon of observing the parts and perceiving the whole,” or reading across the gutters between panels. We rely on closure all the time in our mundane lives, and it is essential to the magic of comics. The reader becomes an active participant in the story through their imaginative investment in the gutter.

My goal with the Waynes Creek project has been to make the best use of this active role that the reader plays to foster moral imagination and empathy. The story I am trying to tell is about a young man returning home following the apparent suicide of his childhood friend-turned-abuser. As he struggles with if, and how, to grieve he is drawn into an investigation into the man’s life and death and eventually comes to terms with much of his own pain and a better understanding of this person who has cast such a shadow over his life. It is a story about love, empathy, grief, and the mechanics by which masculinity is constructed and enforced. My main strategy in reinforcing the relatively active role readers play is to strike a balance between narrative obscurity and clarity, and use a lightly lyrical tone and pacing to evoke a kind of emotional resonance and cognitive spaciousness that the reader can inhabit without getting lost. As an example, prolonged phone conversations where the driving elements are unheard by the reader provide an opportunity for them to fill in the blanks. The reader, primed by their own experience and the magic happening in the gutter, can imagine the other half of the conversation based on what is said by the character who has dialogue verbally written. Part of the goal is to create these imaginative opportunities frequently and in small simple ways so that their effectiveness is not undermined by the reader thinking about them too hard. It is all about finding the balance between clarity and obscurity.

The Power of Stories

Finding my way from diary comics to a fictional graphic novel has been a fruitful challenge. I expect to soon pitch Waynes Creek to publishers, as well as pursue shorter narratives I’ve begun to discover along the way. There’s a lot of work ahead of me, but I feel more equipped to do it. I’ve learned a great deal about what it means to write a story for comics and how a reader animates it. I’ve learned a great deal about authorship, how much “writing” is done non-verbally, how it works, and why it matters.

Above: McCloud inhabits the gutter in Understanding Comics
AARON...

YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND. I AM SO SORRY. I-

I-

I - WRFF!

Jonathan Smith
...so yeah, things have been kind of strange.

Uh-huh...
mhmm...
I’m sorry...
I’ll be home soon.
Just a couple more days.
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