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CROSSCURRENTS

MAUS

C U L T U R E

From DC and Marvel to the latest wave of serious graphic novels, the comic book has come of age

by Peter Swanson

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It was nearly a decade ago that *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*—Art Spiegelman's now classic graphic novel about his parents' survival of the Holocaust—won a special Pulitzer Prize and made the world safe for adult comic books everywhere. Strange (and legitimate) as that moment was, for me the revelation came when I witnessed my grandfather in his reading chair on Christmas Day in 1993, halfway through *My Father Bleeds History*, the first book of the two-part *Maus* series. It was like seeing an eight-year-old surrounded by well-thumbed copies of Trollope's Barsetshire novels.

Spiegelman and his adult comics were no flash-in-the-pan. The marketers at Random House clearly think the time has come for expanding the readership of comics formerly known as "Underground"—that is, the comics movement that sprang from the political turmoil of the sixties and seventies and produced such series as *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* and *Zap Comix*, among countless others. Chip Kidd, book designer and editorial director of Random House's Pantheon Graphic Novels, went on a nationwide tour last fall with two of his star artists—Chris Ware, author of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, and Daniel Clowes, author of *David Boring*—both of whom had previously published at Fantagraphics Books, the premier comics-only publisher of graphic novels. Also on the Pantheon roster are Spiegelman, Ben Katchor (*The Jew of New York*), Matt Groenig (*Love Is Hell*), and Raymond Briggs (*Ethel & Ernest*), completing a frontal assault on the shelf space of general-interest bookstores. This past September Fantagraphics brought out *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995*, by Joe Sacco, who won an American Book Award for *Palestine*, his first book-length effort at what he calls "comics journalism." And forthcoming from Johns Hopkins University Press is the scholarly *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, by Bradford Wright.

Discussed in this essay:

***Comic Book Nation:
The Transformation of
Youth Culture in America***
by Bradford W. Wright
Johns Hopkins
336 pages, \$34.95

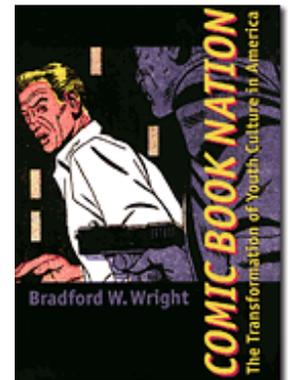
***Safe Area Gorazde:
The War in Eastern Bosnia
1992-1995***
by Joe Sacco
Fantagraphics
240 pages, \$28.95

It seems there's a movement afoot to class-up comic books—both adult comics, by moving them out of the ghetto of specialty stores and sci-fi racks, and kids comics, by giving them a significant place in our pop-culture canon. I do not doubt for a moment the artistic merits of many of the books and writers in the comics field, adult or otherwise. What I wonder about is this sudden bid for legitimacy. If some of these upstarts find themselves lodged between the Styrons and the Tans on the big people shelves, will they still talk to the superhero comics?

On the occasions that I have been asked whether I am a comics fan, I have always stated flatly that I am not. Assuming that the interrogator wanted to find out if I read superhero comics, I would picture immediately a bespectacled, twitchy post-adolescent in a Green Arrow T-shirt rifling through the stacks in a closet-sized store, or maybe one of my childhood friends, hidden behind a cityscape of catalogued comics, easing out a plastic-encased rare issue, the one in which the Thing finally battled the Hulk.

Yet the truth is, as a child I was a devotee of *Mad Magazine* and *Asterix and Obelix*, and an outright addict when it came to *The Adventures of Tintin* by the Belgian author and illustrator Georges Rémi, better known as Hergé. Tintin, boy reporter, both heroic and super, was also the antithesis of the superhero: almost featureless except for his trademark cowlick, he had no special talents besides practicality and bravery, and no haunted past (although he did have a superhero outfit: a nifty pair of *plus fours* he apparently lived in). But the world in which Tintin existed—with its lush realistic scenery, its banana republics, secret cults, ancient curses, runaway trains, and rocket ships—made up for any blandness Tintin himself might have exhibited. By the time I owned and had memorized each adventure, I was driven, like a junkie, to hiding the books about my own house, in hopes that I would lay off them for a while, only to discover them anew months later.

Still, despite this childhood affliction, I considered myself relatively healthy compared to those friends of mine saddled with dependency on DC and Marvel. Not only were they forced to spend all their money and devote all their bedroom's limited space to collecting crucial issues, I secretly knew that they would never get a date. In the preface to *Comic Book Nation*, Bradford Wright states that his book represents a lifetime of research. One picture shows Mr. Wright as a child-academic, memorizing story lines, deconstructing the *Fantastic Four*, pondering the fate of *Silver Surfer*. Such preparedness has paid off in his first book, a dry but cogent argument for the influence of comic books on American culture in the twentieth century.



Wright's assertion is that comic books—like the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, like TV sitcoms—played a central role in the development of our national character, that they invented us as we invented them. Hugely influential narratives, like the *Superman* saga, created archetypes and promoted ethics that informed our pre-World War II culture. With his regular-guy job and can't-get-the-girl meekness, Superman hid his steel, and however fascistic he might have been subtextually, he contributed as much, if not more, to Americans' ideas of the heroic common man as did a Steinbeck or a Capra.

Wright charts the flourishing comic-book industry along such lines, injecting myriad examples of the ways in which comic books, long seen as the bubble worlds of adolescent fantasy, in actuality were aligned consistently with the current issues of the day. Thus Peter Parker, better known as *Spider Man*, agonizes about which side to take in a campus-revolt story line from 1969, and in 1947 *Captain Marvel* battles the pointy-headed Mr. Atom and is able to lock him away in a lead prison, from where Mr. Atom vows to escape, as children everywhere cower under their school desks.

Ultimately, the history of comic books is the history of calculated attempts to wrest adolescents from their allowance. Wright does a good job examining the one-upmanship of competing comic-book companies and the attempts those companies made to ride the ever-shifting tastes of the adolescent consumer. I enjoyed, as much as anything in the book, some of the names of characters that didn't catch an audience: Wonderman, whose particular kryptonite was a lethal lawsuit filed by DC for copyright infringement; or Deadman, not only dead, but an ex-circus performer; or the short-lived Asbestos Lady. And just as DC cornered the early comics market with adolescent fantasies of transformation and hidden strengths, Marvel upped the ante in the 1960s by introducing superheroes who also battled anxiety and isolation, and the kids reached farther into their pockets.

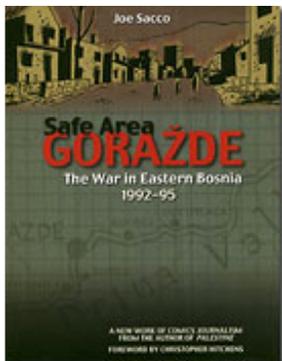
While Wright limits the scope of his study to titles aimed at the adolescent mainstream, there is much that is telling in his book about the recent trend toward adult-oriented comics. The leap that Marvel comics took in the sixties by exploiting the notion that superhero skills, while very useful at thwarting crime, tend to alienate the superhero from

the rest of society, was a leap toward a more mature narrative. *The New X-Men*, which debuted in 1975, introduced a complex regiment of asocial crime-fighters. Such characterizations moved the industry toward more ambivalent heroes and toward a writer-as-auteur sensibility, and created a burgeoning fan-base, with comics conventions and specialty stores, that replaced what had been the general readership—the kid in the drugstore with a dime to burn.

Along came stars such as Frank Miller, who in 1986 re-imagined the character of Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*, creating a series of comic books so popular they were grouped and issued as a pricey graphic novel to be sold in bookstores. Miller's revamped *Batman* forged a bridge that not only took the character from the camp of Adam West's TV portrayal in the late sixties to Michael Keaton's troubled knight in Tim Burton's violent, gothic blockbusters of the late eighties and early nineties, but also proved that fans would shell out much larger prices for comic books. The year 1986 also saw the debut of Alan Moore's *The Watchmen*, a limited series (also packaged as a graphic novel) that upped the ante for mature comics. Wright calls *The Watchmen* an "obituary for the concept of heroes in general and superheroes in particular." One of the heroes depicted in Moore's alternate universe must wear his Nite Owl costume to overcome impotence, a nice summation of what seems to be at the root of the superhero psychosis. A mirror had been turned on the conventions of the comic-book narrative. Just as the films *Pulp Fiction* and, to a lesser degree, the *Scream* trilogy unpacked their own genres to allow an aging audience continued and approved access to pulp entertainment, comic books became increasingly self-reflexive to sanction an audience that was older, yet unwilling to let go of its adolescent fixation.

I'd have been curious to see how Wright would have categorized the Underground Comics movement and its recent forays into the mainstream, such as the Pantheon titles. Are adult graphic novels, with their increasingly expressionistic and jarring panels, their nihilistic story lines, and their alienated protagonists, simply the logical extension of a superhero mystique already characterized by detachment and impotence? Are they merely hip reads for an already juvenilized culture, not wanting to give up its childhood? Or is comic-book art opening up and building upon new narrative forms in the way Spiegelman did with *Maus*?

Spiegelman challenged the notions of what stories a comic book can tell, employing surrealistic, comic-book fantasy elements in his nonfiction account of his parents' Holocaust experience—Jews, for example, are drawn as mice, or else people wearing mouse masks; Nazis are cats; the French are frogs. These renderings add a distance and an allegorical frame that elevates his narratives to fine art. Try to think of another medium that could have mixed those elements better, or even with any semblance of success. Movies? A novel? The artifice would overwhelm a film and be all but lost in prose.



Joe Sacco employs no such tricks in *Safe Area Gorazde*. Sacco was a visiting journalist in the almost exclusively Muslim enclave of Gorazde over a period of four-and-a-half months in late 1995 and early 1996. He interviewed many of that besieged city's citizens, then recounted their stories and chronicled their continuing existence under Serb terror. His meticulous ink drawings remind me of Spiegelman's with their confident lines and evocative use of light and dark, but the faces Sacco draws are another matter. Detailed and expressive, they stare out of the panels and off the page, reminding me of Robert Crumb's faces—not the rubbery parodies and devil women, but the lived-in and realistic faces Crumb draws of jazz musicians and street people.

The closest a character comes to the cartoonish is Sacco's portrait of himself, always drawn in the same outfit, facial proportions a little out of whack, wearing glasses that blank out his eyes. Although he is present throughout the book, his self-portrayal suggest that he is not the story; he's just another awkward journalist. I was reminded of my childhood hero Tintin, himself ostensibly a reporter, composed of a few simple lines suggesting a face, surrounded by a carefully delineated world.

From *Safe Area Gorazde* by Joe Sacco

At 240 pages, it took me awhile to warm up to *Safe Area Gorazde*. Accustomed to comics having more of a cinematic story arc, I kept waiting for one to kick in. It was a little like settling into one's seat at the multiplex for the latest Hollywood no-brainer and being shown *Frontline*. But little by little, Sacco layers details—of his experience, of the history of the former Yugoslavia, of survivors' tales, but most importantly, of what he saw. Not only does Sacco render brilliantly the crater-pocked streets of Gorazde, the faces of amputees in bombed-out hospitals, the uniforms of the Serb military, but he draws in detail the design on the package of the ubiquitous Drina cigarettes and the hairstyles of the girls he meets who ask him to bring Levi's 501s from Sarajevo.

Such accumulation of exact visual detail pulled at me. Comic books, unlike movies or television, let the consumer choose when to cut from image to image, and I found myself lingering on certain of Sacco's more horrific drawings of Serb atrocities. Soon, those images were haunting me. I finished the book shaken and slightly embarrassed to realize that I had finally gained a decent understanding of the Balkan situation—and I had gained it with a comic book in my hands.

Maybe comic books originally created heroes who could transmogrify, and stretch, and fly, because no other medium could do it so well. Since then, film has caught up with and swiftly surpassed comics as the eye-candy of choice. No one I know wasn't mesmerized by the admittedly bone-rattling effects in the otherwise hokey *The Matrix*. And comic-book adaptations have become giant business: a film version this past summer of *The X-Men* shocked analysts by raking in more than fifty million dollars its opening weekend, and deservedly so. Director Bryan Singer finally got a comic-book film right. His (by industry standards) subdued blockbuster was a fan's film—a superhero's origin tale devoid of camp. This year also saw the art houses descended upon by the flying Wudan warriors of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, characters who, before the advent of wire-bound stuntwork and digital wire removal, were probably better suited to a comic-book page.

With movies becoming more like comics, perhaps comic books can return the favor and encroach on the terrain left open by an increasingly effects-driven movie industry. "In a world where PhotoShop has outed the photograph to be a liar," Spiegelman has said, "one can now allow artists to return to their original function—as reporters." *Safe Area Gorazde* was as good a documentary as I've experienced in any form in a long time, and certainly the only

Faces of terror in Sacco's *Gorazde*

comic book I've come across since *Maus* that I would recommend to my grandfather.

On the back of *Little Lit: Folklore and Fairy Tale Funnies*, a new anthology for children edited by Art Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly, is the quip, "Comics—they're not just for grown-ups anymore!" It sums up the current situation perfectly. Despite the adolescent culture we've backed our way into over the past half-century, there is still a critical prejudice in favor of adult material over children's material. The consensus among most people, including those who dole out TV awards every other week, is that *The West Wing*, a silly fantasy for adults, is a more intelligent show than *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a witty allegory of adolescence. As I survey the new landscape of adult comics—and much as I admire the achievements of Spiegelman, Sacco, and the rest—I nevertheless hope there is still room for comic books about mutant vigilantes. I hope the talented artists don't all migrate away from genre writing, looking for greater prestige on the display tables. In the meantime, I'll enjoy the new respectability afforded to comic books in general. Maybe I'll take Tintin with me on the train. Everyone will think I'm smart.

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