



Arresting development: comics at the boundaries of literature,

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Arresting development: comics at the boundaries of literature, edited by Christopher Pizzino, Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 2016, 231 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1477309773

As comics have received numerous literary awards, found their way into museums, peer-reviewed journals and medical schools, countless academic and non-academic outlets assert the form's newfound legitimacy. However, despite what appears to finally be a truth universally acknowledged, Christopher Pizzino, in his book, *Arresting Development: Comics at the Boundaries of Literature*, questions the seemingly foregone conclusion. He recognises that much of this discourse on comics places the form on to a developmental trajectory, a '*Bildungsroman*' narrative, which declares comics as finally 'grown up,' while implicitly placing all that has come before into a childish, inferior category. Furthermore, as Pizzino insists, how many times can a form be declared 'grown up' before it seems the critics protest too much? Pizzino thus does not take for granted comics' so-called newfound identity as 'no longer for kids' in his book, but rather focuses on how the status of comics affects contemporary creators: he asks, 'how is illegitimacy made visible within the medium?' (51).

Pizzino divides the introduction to his argument between the two opening chapters of his book:

the first chapter surveys and critiques the existing discourse that has structured a great deal of thinking about comics in the United States, those already conversant with the state of comics studies may find the material in this chapter familiar (but not, I hope, entirely superfluous). (16)

In this first chapter, then, 'Coming of Age,' Pizzino offers a brief history of comics, linking comics' status as once 'for kids' and now 'grown up' to the anti-comics crusaders of the mid-century. He writes '[b]y the early 1950s, comic books had become a primary target for concerns about juvenile delinquency in particular and about the condition of postwar youth in general' (25). Thus, the fate of comics would be tied to its maturity. Even the phrase 'graphic novel' serves as one more way to announce comics' newfound adulthood, and yet 'does little to challenge the grounding assumptions of mid-century anti-comics crusaders' (32). Pizzino reveals how easily we as readers and scholars take for granted the belief that comics are now grown up, and utilise this narrative to assert their legitimacy, placing comics into a developmental pattern, forgoing questions of status.

Whereas the first chapter documents comics' continued state of 'growing up', Pizzino's second chapter defines his argument: comics creators are directly affected by the illegitimate status of the form and this illegitimacy is expressed in their art, a concept he refers to as 'autoclasm' or 'self-breaking' in which they directly resist the very terms by which they have been judged (48). Autoclasm, Pizzino writes, 'arises, in part, out of comics creators' resistance to the *Bildungsroman* discourse' (49). He argues that the autoclasm of the comics creators offers a way of seeing comics in comics-specific terms; in particular, this practice deliberately avoids classifying the form as an additional iteration of postmodernism. Pizzino believes that 'theories of postmodernism have too readily collapsed the category of legitimacy into that of ideology' (66), and thus as critics we do not ask how status impacts, and is depicted in an art form. He further resists critics who would declare comics part of a modernist tradition. The point for this critic is that autoclasm works 'on the problem of illegitimacy in comics-specific terms and an expression of unwavering loyalty to the medium as such' (69). Autoclasm captures the creative expression of the status of comics on the page, and the deep investment and love for the form the creators work within.

Pizzino offers four case studies of ‘autoclasm’, beginning in the third chapter of his book with Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*. Miller is able to ‘consciously ... appropriate the medium’s despised status as his central theme’ and he uses the character of Batman as ‘a way of talking about the condition of comics’ (79). Batman is a ‘highly stigmatized and conflicted figure’ (80) that represents the medium and its contested status. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, ‘Miller thus expresses not a maturity that could answer the stigma of illegitimacy, but, as it were, illegitimacy in its mature form – self-aware, ideologically mobile, wary of co-optation, and rich in visual and thematic possibility’ (98). Miller’s work is not ‘mature’ because it has somehow moved beyond comics of old, but rather because it addresses comics as comics.

From Miller, Pizzino turns to Alison Bechdel in one of the most compelling readings of *Fun Home*, a comic often celebrated and elevated by its sequence of literary references. However, Pizzino does not read Bechdel as the next step in a literary tradition, inevitably separating it from comics history and form. Rather, he suggests ‘[t]o read *Fun Home* for the literary references ... is not unlike concealing a copy of *Playboy* behind more respectable reading material (or claiming that one reads it “for the articles”)’ (118). While the literary references drew many readers, ‘[t]o embrace the work as a comic, however, is to understand this glamour [the literariness] as merely one – and perhaps not the most compelling – of its distinct, often complicated pleasures’ (133). Despite all the literary celebration for Bechdel, *Fun Home* should be experienced as a comic that loves comics.

Directly referencing the space between panels and the space comics have occupied, the fifth chapter, which features Charles Burns, is entitled ‘Rolling in the Gutter.’ Pizzino declares, ‘nearly every aspect of his [Burns’] work, from his subject matter to his shading technique, evokes some aspect of comics’ cultural status’ (135). Burns’ *Black Hole* visualises comics illegitimate status, ‘[b]y associating infection with the genre of horror, he further conjoins the corporeal to the discursive. Bodies physically and socially marked as other become synonymous with a comics genre in which such bodies often appear’ (153). The very dirty nature of comics that defined the form, as one that was in the gutter, Burns contends with on the surface of the page and on the surface of the bodies of his characters in *Black Hole*.

Finally, Pizzino explores Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez’s *Love and Rockets*, which considers the disposable form and destructive act of reading comics. Pizzino asserts there

is a strong sense that the fragility of comics, and the looming destruction attendant on the very act of reading them, can be made powerfully manifest, and that comics are sufficient to address their own and the world’s threatened condition, however violently self-opposed the tactics needed for such a task. (178)

Depicting the disposable nature of comics, *Love and Rockets*, draws upon a history of the form as one that was circulated, destroyed by reading, and burned during the anti-comics crusades. Even today as the circulating economy of comics has shifted to that of collectible, the unresolved traumatic history of comics returns like the repressed on the page.

The great strength Pizzino’s work is his challenge to the *Bildungsroman* narrative, wherein he asks us to re-see the history and the discourse of comics from new perspectives, redefining the story of comics. I recommend *Arresting Development* without reservation as the close readings of the comics in this book offer new insights that would not have been gained without the concept of autoclasm, a way of seeing comics *as comics*. Furthermore, Pizzino’s narrative of the history of comics challenges the *Bildungsroman* model that has dominated the discourse, a story I myself have utilised

countless times teaching comics and celebrating what I have too often declared as their newfound status.

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