



The French comics theory reader, edited by Ann Miller and Bart Beaty, Leuven, Belgium, Leuven University Press, 2014, 334 pp., US\$80.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-9058679888

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The collection is the result of a successful Kickstarter project, which launched in March 2015. Upon launch, Newlevant had already gathered all the materials for the book, and was raising funds to pay the artists for their work and for printing costs. As a collection driven by a single editor with no publisher attached, *Chainmail Bikini* is not filtered through multiple viewpoints. There was no vetting on the project other than Newlevant's choices, meaning that the chosen pieces reflect the ideas and artists that she wished to see. It reached its goal within three days, demonstrating the appeal of the collection. The use of non-traditional publishing modes and the editor's dedication to diverse voices means that the collection, while put together by Newlevant, successfully reflects a much broader cross-section of the gaming community. The stories reflect the games, gamers and experiences many individuals have faced.

The opening story, 'A Certain Kind of Story' by Molly Osterag sets a beautiful tone for the collection. The captioning throughout the comic speaks generally, talking about the stories one reads in childhood: 'The hero lived here in a kind of hibernation, waiting for her story to begin' (2). The images that accompany the description of the traditional hero narrative are a young woman's journey discovering the LARP community. The contrasting of the classic hero's journey with personal experience creates a lovely balance: while everyone's story is unique, the experiences are shared. The final story, 'Pocket', is a simple single-page series of images of the powerful impact of *Zelda* and *Pokémon* on children, written and illustrated by Carey Pietsch. These two pieces, one with a clear narrative line and the other as a series of isolated moments, provide effective bookends to an anthology of comics of varying lengths, narratives and complexities. The collected works vary widely, but maintain a nice clear focus on the importance of women in game spaces.

Newlevant's collection of numerous voices and moments create a patchwork of women's gaming culture. While an interesting cross-section, it is frustratingly brief moments in each writer's world, limiting the amount of investment the reader can make. The collection is a powerful tool to gather women's voices 'at a time when our presence in gaming culture is consistently marginalized' (Introduction). Yet, it does not provide space for depth or exploration in any of the artists or stories. *Chainmail Bikini* provides an important challenge to norms in gaming culture, as many voices and stories show the diversity of games and gamers.

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The mere mention of French theory brings to mind thoughts of split subjects, signifiers and definitions of postmodernism. However, *The French Comics Theory Reader*, edited by Ann Miller and Bart Beaty, which collects essays translated from French on comics from the past 50 years, provides only a passing mention of the theories that dominated humanities departments for so long. The massive text does not dwell on so-called high theory, but

features more applied visual/textual understanding of the comics' page, history and industry. Through close analysis of the form, this edition travels through the long Franco-Belgian tradition, as distinct from the American production and studies of comics. In order to best cover the dynamic history of this mighty edition, the editors have split the book into four sections, including 'Origins and Definitions', 'Formal Approaches to the Study of Comics', 'French Comics Criticism', and 'Reading the French Comics Industry'. I will provide a short overview of each section in this review, although due to space limitations, I cannot engage or capture the voice of each of the 25 essays from this volume.

The first section provides historical background and offers multiple interpretations of the term 'comics', or as they are known in the Franco-Belgian tradition, 'bande dessinée'. The debates contained in this section, remind readers of the near inability to capture the identity of the comics medium itself as each author purports their own idea of comics. Jean-Claude Glasser begins this unit with an origin story as it were, where he explores the emergence of the term 'bande dessinée'. Gérard Blanchard follows, considering the expansive history of stories in images travelling from ancient Egypt to the birth of Christianity, lingering over the Phylacteria of the Medieval era and moving into printing and typography. Blanchard's tour of the history of stories in images provides a useful place to begin thinking of comics as a visual form and Francis Lacassin's subsequent essay reflects on a dictionary definition of comics. After Lacassin's reflection is Thierry Smolderen's 'Graphic Hybridization, the Crucible of Comics' where he asserts comics' hybridity – a form that is 'an audiovisual stage on paper' (58). Thierry Groensteen's essay appears after Smolderen and he suggests that while comics are a heterogeneous form, often difficult to define, there is specificity to the form as a visual narrative. Responding to Groensteen, Sylvain Bouyer opines in his following two essays that there is nothing specific or essentialist about comics, despite Groensteen's urgings to think of comics *as* comics. Indeed, Bouyer believes '[t]he essentialist tendency is deceiving itself by constructing and sustaining the mystery of "comics as comics"' (76). However, Groensteen's second essay, following Bouyer's two essays, rejects these 'relativist' approaches that Groensteen accuses Bouyer, Smolderen and others of taking. While there is no conclusion to be made here on what makes comics *comics*, these interpretations of the definition of comics and the challenging responses theorists offer one another on the subject, capture a small fraction of an even larger debate that has yet to settle down.

Shifting from defining comics, to interpreting comics, the second part of the collection surveys semiological readings, including a focus on the surface of the comics page and the depth of these previously imagined flat surfaces. Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle's essay, stresses the spatio-temporal form of comics. Pierre Sterckx in his fascinating essay studies the difference between comics and painting. He states that '[p]ainting, framed, hung on the wall, no longer moves, cannot move, and it is through its static figuration that it holds meaning, *arché* [origin]. Comics, on the other hand, cannot keep still ... In the end, it [comics] topples over and rips open the painting' (143). Jacques Samson thinks through the pictorial representation of comics in his essay. Groensteen, in his third essay in the collection, uses non-narrative comics to once again consider what makes comics *comics*, centring on the visual. Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre end the section with two co-authored essays: the first on the hybridity of comics, and the second on the paratextual material of comics. These close readings stress that comics is a visual form, and must be understood as such.

Following the semiological interpretation of comics, the third section offers theoretical interpretations of comics. One example being Harry Morgan and Manuel Hirtz's powerful reading of (the American comics' author) Jack Kirby's depiction of the apocalypse in his *New Gods* series. This is one of the strongest sections of the book, as the close readings provide

valuable examples of interpretation, especially for a class on comics. Included in this section are three very distinct readings of Hergé's *Les Bijoux de la Castafiore* by Michael Serres, Benoît Peeters and Serge Tisseron. Each author provides an analysis of this popular text and, situated in the same volume, offers examples of the generativity of a comic for critical inquiry.

Finally, section four considers the growing field of comics studies and the comics industry. The articles reflect on the manner in which industry and scholarship have become intertwined: the esteem garnered by the field of comics studies has thus propelled the publication of new albums. Conversely, the publication of new books has led to more writing in the field of comics studies. Luc Boltanski explores the expansion of the field of comics studies in this section and Pascal Ory, and Barthélémy Schwartz think through the production of the form of comics from the early production of magazines to the shift to high production albums. The authors remind readers that the 'comic book' as we know it in the United States – as a cheap story printed on newspaper – was not the same in France, where much higher quality paper was used and the works were often printed in hardback. This closing section of *The French Comics Theory Reader* underscores the unique history of the Franco-Belgian tradition of comics.

Enough good cannot be said about the massive editorial undertaking of this necessary volume in English language comics scholarship. My only wish, if a second edition were to be published, is that the editors might provide an extended introduction. In addition to a longer critical introduction, I would also ask for a short introduction to each author and their work before each essay begins. This would be a major task, but one that is always useful when engaging with a 'reader' that is so expansive. In the age of Google, it is very easy to look up the authors, but due to the fact that so much of what has been written is still in French, for a non-francophone speaker it would benefit the understanding of the texts to be provided with short one-page introductions to each essay and a critical and expansive introduction by two of comics' major thinkers.

As I stated before, this monumental edition offers much to the realm of comics scholarship in English. The volume's expansiveness is one of its many strengths, because whether one is teaching a course on superhero comics, underground comix, or the Franco-Belgian tradition, this book can and should be utilised. I am hard pressed to find flaws with the editorial work here. It is an excellent collection of essays, curated by two top class comics scholars. Those reading this review will already know the individual work of these two authors along with their previous translations of French comics theory. Included in this list, Bart Beaty with Nick Nguyen translated Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* as well as Thierry Smolderen's *The Origins of Comics*, Ann Miller previously translated Groensteen's *Comics and Narration*. The editors have chosen some of the best articles by French scholars and theorists. This is essential reading for anyone studying comics and I recommend this collection to anyone interested in comics as an art form or for scholarly purposes without reservation.

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