Not Funnies

By Charles Mcgrath

You can't pinpoint it exactly, but there was a moment when people more or less stopped reading poetry and turned instead to novels, which just a few generations earlier had been considered entertainment suitable only for idle ladies of uncertain morals. The change had surely taken hold by the heyday of Dickens and Tennyson, which was the last time a poet and a novelist went head to head on the best-seller list. Someday the novel, too, will go into decline—if it hasn't already—and will become, like poetry, a genre treasured and created by just a relative few. This won't happen in our lifetime, but it's not too soon to wonder what the next new thing, the new literary form, might be.

It might be comic books. Seriously. Comic books are what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal—and if the highbrows are right, they're a form perfectly suited to our dumbed-down culture and collective attention deficit. Comics are also enjoying a renaissance and a newfound respectability right now. In fact, the fastest-growing section of your local bookstore these days is apt to be the one devoted to comics and so-called graphic novels. It is the overcrowded space way in the back—next to sci-fi probably, or between New Age and hobbies—and unless your store is staffed by someone unusually devoted, this section is likely to be a mess. "Peanuts" anthologies, and fat, catalog-size collections of "Garfield" and "Broom Hilda." Shelf loads of manga—those Japanese comic books that feature slender, wide-eyed teenage girls who seem to have a special fondness for sailor suits. Superheroes, of course, still churned out in installments by the busy factories at Marvel and D.C. Also, newer sci-fi and fantasy series like "Y: The Last Man," about literally the last man on earth (the rest died in a plague), who is now pursued by a band of killer lesbians.

You can ignore all this stuff—though it's worth noting that manga sells like crazy, especially among women. What you're looking for is shelved upside down and sideways sometimes—comic books of another sort, substantial single volumes (as opposed to the slender series installments), often in hard cover, with titles that sound just like the titles of "real" books: "Palestine," "Persepolis," "Blankets" (this one tips in at 582 pages, which must make it the longest single-volume comic book ever), "David Chelsea in Love," "Summer Blonde," "The Beauty Supply District," "The Boulevard of Broken Dreams." Some of these books have titles that have become familiar from recent movies: "Ghost World," "American Splendor," "Road to Perdition." Others, like Chris Ware's "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth" (unpaged, but a good inch and a quarter thick) and Daniel Clowes's "David Boring," have achieved cult status on many campuses.

These are the graphic novels—the equivalent of "literary novels" in the mainstream publishing world—and they are beginning to be taken seriously by the critical establishment. "Jimmy Corrigan" even won the 2001 Guardian Prize for best first book, a prize that in other years has gone to authors like Zadie Smith, Jonathan Safran Foer and Philip Gourevitch.

The notion of telling stories with pictures goes back to the cavemen. Comic-book scholars make a big deal of Rodolphe Topffer, a 19th-century Swiss artist who drew stories in the form of satiric pictures with captions underneath. You could also make a case that Hogarth's "Harlot's Progress" and its sequel, "A Rake's Progress," were graphic novels of a sort—stories narrated in sequential panels. But despite these lofty antecedents, the comic-book form until recently has been unable to shed a certain aura of pulpiness, cheesiness and semi-literacy. In fact, that is what a lot of cartoon artists most love about their genre.

There was a minor flowering of serious comic books in the mid-80's, with the almost simultaneous appearance of Art Spiegelman's groundbreaking "Maus"; of the "Love and Rockets" series, by two California brothers, Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez; and of two exceptionally smart and ambitious superhero-based books, "Watchmen," by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, and "Batman: The Dark Knight Returns," by Frank Miller. Newspapers and magazines ran articles with virtually the same headline: "Crash! Zap! Pow! Comics Aren't Just for Kids Anymore!" But the movement failed to take hold, in large part because there weren't enough other books on the same level.

The difference this time is that there is something like a critical mass of artists, young and old, uncovering new possibilities in this once-marginal form, and a new generation of readers, perhaps, who have grown up staring at cartoon images on their computer screens and in their video games, not to mention the savvy librarians and teachers who now cater to their interests and short attention spans. The publicity that has spilled over from movies like "Ghost World," originally a graphic novel by Dan Clowes, has certainly not hurt. And there is much better distribution of high-end comics now, thanks in part to two enterprising publishers, Drawn and Quarterly in Montreal and Fantagraphics Books in Seattle, which have managed to get their wares into traditional bookstores, not just the comics specialty shops. Some of the better-known graphic novels are published not by comics companies at all but by mainstream publishing houses—by Pantheon, in particular—and have put up mainstream sales numbers. "Persepolis," for example, Marjane Satrapi's charming, poignant story, drawn in small black-and-white panels that evoke Persian miniatures, about a young girl growing up in Iran and her family's suffering following the 1979 Islamic revolution, has sold 450,000 copies worldwide so far; "Jimmy Corrigan" sold 100,000 in hardback, and the newly released paperback is also moving briskly.

These are not top best-seller figures, exactly, but they are sales that any publisher would be happy with, and several are now trying to hop on the graphic-novel bandwagon. Meanwhile, McSweeney's Quarterly, a key barometer of the literary climate, especially among the young and hip, has devoted its entire new issue to comics and graphic novels, and the contents are virtually a state-of-the-art anthology, edited and designed by Chris Ware. Dave Eggers, the editor of McSweeney's, told me, "I'm just trying to show how hard it is to do this stuff well and to give it a little dignity."

The term "graphic novel" is actually a misnomer. Satrapi's "Persepolis" books (another installment is due this summer) are nonfiction, and so, for that matter, is "Maus," once you accept the conceit that human beings are played, so to speak, by cats, dogs, mice and frogs. The newest book by Chester Brown (who drew the cover for this issue of The Times Magazine) is a full-scale, 200-plus-page comic-book biography (which took five years to research and draw) of Louis Riel, who in Brown's native Canada occupies roughly the position that John Brown does here. Nor are all these books necessarily "graphic" in the sense of being realistic or explicit. (When I mentioned to a friend that I was working on an article about graphic novels, he said, hopefully, "You mean porn?")

Many practitioners of the form prefer the term "comix," with that nostalgic "x" referring to the age of the underground comics, which were sold in head shops along with bongs and cigarette papers. Scott McLoud, the author of a very helpful guide (in comic-book form) called "Understanding Comics," prefers the slightly pretentious term "sequential art." Alan Moore, creator of "The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen," likes "big expensive comic book"; Spiegelman is partial to "comic book that needs a bookmark."

But for want of a universally agreed-on alternative, the graphic-novel tag has stuck, and it received something like official sanction a year and a half ago when Spiegelman and Chris Oliveros, the publisher of Drawn and Quarterly, persuaded the book-industry committee that decides on subject headings to adopt a graphic-novel category with sev-

eral subsections: graphic novel/literature, graphic novel/humor, graphic novel/science fiction and so on. Afterward, Spiegelman turned to Oliveros and said, "I think we've just created the state of Israel—one great big boundary dispute in one little corner of the bookshop globe."

The center of this dispute—the comic book with a brain—is a somewhat arbitrary and subjective place, not unlike pornography in Justice Stewart's famous formulation (you recognize it when you see it). But a few generalities may be hazarded. First of all, the graphic novel is not just like the old Classics Illustrated series, an illustrated version of something else. It is its own thing: an integrated whole, of words and images both, where the pictures don't just depict the story; they're part of the telling.

In certain ways, graphic novels are an almost primitive medium and require a huge amount of manual labor: drawing, inking, coloring and lettering, most of it done by hand (though a few artists have begun to experiment with computer drawing). It's as if a traditional novelist took his printout and then had to copy it over, word by word, like a quill-wielding monk in a medieval monastery. For some graphic novelists, just four or five panels is a good day's work, and even a modest-size book can take years to complete.

Like a lot of graphic novelists, Marjane Satrapi begins with a prose script and then begins to sketch it out, lightly and loosely, in pencil. "When I've done that, then in my brain my book is finished," she said from Paris, where she lives now. "The problem is that only I know what it looks like. For you to see it, then I have to drudge. It's a very, very long process."

Such labor demands a certain obsessional personality and sometimes results in obsessional storytelling. What all graphic novelists aspire to, however—whether they start with words or with an image or two—is a sense of motion, of action unfolding in the blank spaces between their stop-action frames. They spend a lot of time thinking about how the panels are arranged and the number of panels it takes (or doesn't) to depict a given amount of narrative. Most of these effects are meant to work on us, the readers, almost subconsciously, but they require a certain effort nonetheless. You have to be able to read and look at the same time, a trick not easily mastered, especially if you're someone who is used to reading fast. Graphic novels, or the good ones anyway, are virtually unskimmable. And until you get the hang of their particular rhythm and way of storytelling, they may require more, not less, concentration than traditional books.

The graphic novel—unlike the more traditional part of the comic-book universe now being celebrated by fiction writers like Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem—is a place where superheroes have for the most part been banished or where, as in "Jimmy Corrigan" and "David Boring," they exist only as wistful emblems of a lost childhood. There is also little of that in-your-face, cinematic drawing style developed by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and other pioneers of the action comic. Most of the better graphic novelists consciously strive for a simple, pared-down style and avoid tricky angles and perspectives.

The graphic novel is a man's world, by and large, though there are several important female artists (not just Satrapi, but also Lynda Barry, Julie Doucet and Debbie Drechsler). And to a considerable extent it is a place of longing, loss, sexual frustration, loneliness and alienation—a landscape very similar, in other words, to that of so much prose fiction.

A number of graphic novels are set in a kind of nostalgialand, like Ben Katchor's mythic, time-warped Lower East Side or the mid-50's small-town Canada of the artist who goes by the name Seth (his real name is Gregory Gallant). Many more are set in the slacker world—the skanky Washington Heights neighborhood of Doucet's "My New York Diary," the coffee-shop Portland and East Village sublet of "David Chelsea in Love," the diners, card shops and apartment complexes of Adrian Tomine's West Coast—where people are always hooking up and breaking up and feeling both shy and lousy. It's the pictorial equivalent of Nick Hornby's "High Fidelity."

A considerable percentage of the new graphic novels are frankly autobiographical. They are about people who are, or who are trying to be, graphic novelists, and they all follow, or implicitly refer to, a kind of ur-narrative, which upon examination proves to be, with small variations, the real-life story of almost everyone who goes into this line of work.

As most graphic novelists themselves will gladly tell you, you have to be a bit of a weirdo to want to purse this odd and solitary art form. Julie Doucet, one of the most promising of the younger graphic novelists, found the life so hard that she flat out quit. "It was killing me," she said over the phone from her studio in Montreal. "Trying to make a living from it—I could never stop, never have a break. I was doing it all the time."

For those who do stick with it, the career of the graphic novelist can seem less a choice than a compulsion. The process of becoming one goes something like this: First there's a conversion moment, which happens at a remarkably young age, usually when the artist is still in grammar school. To put it simply, he falls in love with a comic strip—fairly often it's "Peanuts"—and then with comics in general. Soon he's copying them, and then he's generating his own. In high school, where this artist, a nerd, most likely, and an outcast, is unrecognized for the talent he is, cartooning becomes a refuge, a way to work out revenge fantasies and occasionally even a modest claim to fame.

More of the same in college or art school—if he even bothers with formal training. Cartooning is now an obsession, a visual diary in which the artist records every detail of his personal life, with a special emphasis on his sexual fantasies and his usually excessive masturbation, and then at some point, if he is lucky, he figures out how to turn all this rage and depression and thwarted energy, all those pages and pages of sketches and drawings, into storytelling, into a portrait of the artist as a young man. The benign version of this progress is Chester Brown's sweet and innocent-seeming novels "Playboy" and "I Never Liked You"; the dark, self-loathing, porn-addicted and parodic version is Joe Matt's "Poor Bastard," which was recently optioned by HBO.

If some of this sounds familiar, it is because it is also the story of R. Crumb, so memorably laid out in Terry Zwigoff's 1994 documentary, wherein we learn that Crumb grew up not just in your basic unhappy family but in a spectacularly dysfunctional one, and that as a child he was sexually aroused by Bugs Bunny. Crumb dominates the brief history of the graphic novel the way Cimabue dominates Vasari's first volume of "Lives of the Artists"—as both an inescapable stylistic influence and a kind of moral exemplar. (Crumb is now 60 and lives in the south of France.) Almost every aspiring graphic novelist now goes through a Crumb period, and some never entirely outgrow it: the cross-hatched line and bare light bulbs; the big feet, knobby knees, hairy legs and whiskery faces; the big breasts and even bigger behinds; the flying drops of perspiration (and other bodily fluids). It's a style as recognizable in its way, and as powerful, as Goya's or Brueghel's. Equally powerful is Crumb's example as someone who takes comics seriously as a form of self-expression and is unafraid to pour everything of himself into them. "Without Crumb, I really, honestly, think comics would have come to an end," Chris Ware says. "I think we all have his voice in our minds: 'You really want to do that? Are you sure you really want to do that?'"

The other overwhelming figure is Art Spiegelman, who to the comics world is a Michelangelo and a Medici both, an influential artist who is also an impresario and an enabler of others. As one publisher told me, "Art is just as important as he thinks he is." He, too, fits the Crumb paradigm: childhood fascination with comics (in his case with "Inside Mad," a paperback Mad Magazine anthology that he persuaded his mother to buy for him when he was 7), precocious development (as a teenager he was drawing for his weekly paper in Rego Park, Queens, and publishing his own magazine, Blase) and deep immersion in the history and lore of comics. He had another asset: a case

of uncorrectable ambylopia, or lazy eye, that makes if difficult for him to see in three dimensions. ("So cartoons really did seem real to me," he says. "Maybe more real.") After dropping out of SUNY Binghamton, he went to work for the Topps bubble-gum company, of all places, which had a small art and design department. If you are a parent of a certain age—or the offspring of such a parent—you have Art Spiegelman to thank for Wacky Packs and the Garbage Pail Kids.

Off and on, Spiegelman was with Topps for 20 years, but all the while he was working on his own comics. He went through the obligatory Crumb phase and then, under the influence of some obscure experimental filmmakers, found himself more and more interested in formal and technical issues. His strip "Ace Hole, Midget Detective" was a noir detective parody deliberately designed to unravel; "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" was a one-page piece in which almost nothing happens. At this point, Spiegelman says, he was on a path that led to becoming a gallery artist. Instead, he changed direction and set about trying to tell a story.

The result was the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Maus," originally a three-page strip in a comics anthology called "Funny Aminals" (sic) but ultimately a two-volume story about Spiegelman's relationship with his father and his father's experiences at Auschwitz. "Maus" draws on a lot of Spiegelman's structural experiments and incorporates a number of subtle design elements, like having the shadow of a swastika fall almost undetectably across a page, but its great innovation—unmatched and possibly unmatchable—was in its combination of style and subject. Somehow the old cartoon vocabulary—the familiar imagery of cats and mice—made the Holocaust bearable and approachable, strange and yet familiar. It would be almost impossible to overstate the influence of "Maus" among other artists. Marjane Satrapi, for example, says that it was "Maus" that opened her eyes to the possibilities of the graphic novel—that in effect created her as an artist—and the same is true for many others.

Installments of "Maus" began appearing in the early 80's in a magazine owned and published by Spiegelman. This was Raw, which he founded in 1980 with his wife, Francoise Mouly (who is now the art editor of The New Yorker), and which is his other great gift to graphic novelists. Raw was originally meant to be a one-timer, a showcase for all the art that, with the collapse of underground comics a few years earlier (owing mostly to a legal crackdown on stores selling drug paraphernalia), had no other outlet. The first issue sold out, and subsequent issues kept rising "phoenixlike," Spiegelman says. "We finally decided to make it a biannual, because we weren't sure whether that meant twice a year or every other year."

Raw came out until 1991, published from Spiegelman's studio, a loft in SoHo that is also a kind of haphazard museum of comic-strip history and memorabilia, and it helped revive the careers of some older artists, veterans of the underground period, and showcased the work of many more new ones, most of whom found their calling and their inspiration from studying its pages.

Spiegelman, 56, has been such an ambassador for comics over the years—lecturing, promoting, writing articles—that to some extent his own productivity has suffered. His first solo comic book since "Maus," called "In the Shadow of No Towers," comes out in September, and for much of the spring he was happily working on the proofs in his cluttered and smoke-hazed studio. (Like the old-time comic-strip artists, Spiegelman is an unapologetic chain smoker, a genuine two-pack-a-day man.)

"In the Shadow" is a collection of broadsides he began publishing after the attack on the World Trade Center, just blocks away from where he lives. The broadsides are designed in the fashion of old newspaper funny pages, and they incorporate some of that old funny-page storytelling. (When Spiegelman wants to show himself and Francoise quarreling, for example, he draws it in the style of a Maggie and Jiggs strip; there are also allusions to the Katzenjammer Kids, Krazy Kat and Happy Hooligan.) An unhinged Spiegelman is a major character—paranoid, unshaven, a butt always in his mouth—and

eventually he suffers a kind of nervous breakdown, convinced that the world is about to end any minute.

Many of these broadsides were so politically charged and so stridently opposed to the Bush administration that mainstream American papers were reluctant to print them; they appeared mostly in England and in Germany. Spiegelman has put them all together now in a big album-size book, along with several full-size reproductions of old comic-supplement pages, and the result, he says he hopes, is a kind of palimpsest in which the layers reflect and comment on each other, in which world history and personal history collide.

The book is also, inevitably, a working diagram of Spiegelman's own feverish, hyperactive imagination—a place in which comics and reality, present and past, are all but indistinguishable. He works on two desks, side by side, one 19th-century, as he likes to say, and one 21st. The first is an old-fashioned drafting table, and the second is a computer; in between, there is a scanner. He can sketch something by hand and then refine it on the screen, or do it the other way around. By the time he is finished with a piece, he says, he can no longer tell the difference between what is computerized and what has been done by hand.

By general agreement, Chris Ware, 36, and Daniel Clowes, 43, are Spiegelman's two most important discoveries. Clowes, who fits the classic profile (broken home, comics obsession, friendless, dateless adolescence), is the author of, among other works, "David Boring," an unsummarizable novel in which a dweebish guy's fetish for big-bottomed women leads to his being shot twice, and the better-known "Ghost World," about two punkish high-school girls trying to cling to friendship even as the onset of sex and adult responsibility seems to drive them apart. "Ghost World" the graphic novel is even better than "Ghost World" the movie. The dialogue (the best parts of which are unprintable here) has a Salingeresque poignancy, and the artwork is washed in a bluish-green tint that suggests a TV on the blink—exactly right for these lives in which much of the color has been drained by a crippling irony and hyper self-awareness.

Ware (abandoned by father, snubbed by classmates, discovered comics in grandmother's basement) is best known for "Jimmy Corrigan," easily the most beautiful and most complicated of all the new graphic novels. The story of a sad-sack 36-year-old Chicagoan ("a lonely, emotionally impaired human castaway," as he calls himself) who is briefly reunited with a father he has never seen before, "Jimmy Corrigan" is laid out in wide, delicately colored pages in which the panels are sometimes large and painterly and sometimes resemble circuit diagrams. There are dream sequences, flashbacks (especially to the Chicago 1893 Columbian Exposition and the domed pavilions), and even home-assembly projects—models of a farmhouse and an old-fashioned zoetrope to be cut out and pasted together. Some pages are crammed with information; in others, nothing happens except the passage of time, quietly punctuated by a little cough or a sigh.

Ware lives with his wife, a teacher, just outside Chicago in a small stucco house that is itself a little Corriganesque. There is a tiny upstairs studio overlooking the yard; in other rooms, there are a piano, some banjos, an old-fashioned Victrola and a collection of Edison cylinder recordings. (Ware is an old-music enthusiast, and in his spare time he edits and produces a magazine called The Rag-Time Ephemeralist.) I went there to see him recently, and as it happens, the artist known as Seth was visiting for the weekend from Guelph, Ontario.

They both resembled their characters a little. Ware is a taller, handsomer version of the bullet-headed Jimmy Corrigan. Seth, 41, looks like a zootier version of the fedora-wearing protagonist of his novel "It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken," about a young man obsessed with old New Yorker cartoons. His hair is brilliantined and swept back; his glasses are old-fashioned black horn rims. Even though it was a warm Saturday in May, he was wearing a suit and tie, and when we went out for a late lunch, he put on a

topcoat, fedora and a pair of leather gloves.

They were spending the day doing what graphic novelists apparently always do whenever they get together—talking about graphic novels. Ware, even though he is more successful and esteemed than just about any of his peers (his work has been shown at the Whitney Biennial, and he is the subject of a scholarly monograph coming from Yale University Press this fall), occasionally sounded like Samuel Beckett's idea of a graphic novelist. "This is just an incredibly inefficient way to tell a story," he said, and he explained that earlier in the week he had been working on a strip in which he had decided there could be no narration. "It involved maybe 8 to 10 seconds of actual narrative time," he said. "But it took me three days to do it, of 12 hours a day. And I'm thinking any writer would go through this passage in eight minutes of work. And I think: Why am I doing this? Is the payoff to have the illusion of something actually happening before your eyes really worth it? I find it's a constant struggle and a source of great pain for me, especially the last day when I'm inking the strip. I think, Why, why am I doing this? Whole years go by now that I can barely account for. I'm not even being facetious."

Seth nodded and returned to an earlier theme of his—the idea that cartooning is something the artist gets "tricked" into. "I think the impulse to cartooning comes as a compensation when you're young for the fact that you're unhappy," he explained. "So you start cartooning to create a fantasy world. That impulse is what makes you draw, and for me it made me draw enough that by the time I was in my 20's, I was tricked into being a cartoonist. It was too late then to start anything else."

But maybe because they were only talking, not working, they didn't seem all that glum, and they went on enthusiastically about the subject that seems to preoccupy all graphic novelists—their "rhythm," or the way their panels work on the page.

"It's like music," Ware said. He explained that when he is working, he first does quick sketches of what each panel should be like. "I never think of it as words," he said. "It's individual pictures, and it feels like a memory. When I think about it, it replays itself in my mind over and over, almost like a little melody or something. As I'm working on it, I'll read through the strip hundreds of times. It's like I'm writing a piece of music, and I'll keep playing it over and over in my head. And I'll realize that that didn't sound right or that didn't feel right or that's insincere or that movement seems staged or acted somehow. So I'll have to add or subdivide or do something. And then all of a sudden, it will click, and it will seem like a real thing happening."

"It's the medium we're stuck with," Seth said, "even if it seems a completely inappropriate medium to have chosen to tell a serious story." He thought for a second and added, "Though it's probably a less wildly inappropriate medium than it was 10 years ago"—by which he meant that now, at least, it's possible for a graphic novelist to make a living.

Joe Sacco's name came up while I was in Chicago, and Seth said: "He's definitely an oddball cartoonist, because he has very excellent social skills. He goes out into the world and deals with people. In fact, of all the cartoonists I know, when I'm around Joe I get the least impression that he read all this junk as a kid. He seems relatively free from all that genre material."

This is only partly true. Sacco, who is now 43 and in person much better looking than the geeky guy with the big lips and the blank eyes who is his comic-book stand-in, was born on Malta and spent the early part of his childhood in Australia. He wallowed in plenty of comics there, and when he moved to this country at the age of 12, he became an instant convert to Mad magazine. Later, he went through a serious Crumb phase, drawing strips like "Oliver Limpdingle's Search for Love," which is pretty much summed up by its title. For a while, Sacco even drew romance comics.

But in high school and again in college (the University of Oregon at Eugene), he was popular, well adjusted and a good student. His passion in those days was journalism,

and he settled on cartooning only after failing to find a decent job doing anything else. In the mid-80's, he worked briefly as a reporter for The Comics Journal, a magazine that covers the comics world, and that experience emboldened him to show the editor, Gary Groth, an epic Vietnam comic he had been working on. "Gary pretty much destroyed my hopes for it," Sacco says now. "At that point, I decided I should learn how to write a one-page story." Eventually he had enough of them for a comic book, and they were published by Fantagraphics in a six-installment series called "Yahoo."

Sacco's real breakthrough came in 1988, when he accompanied some friends of his, a rock band called the Miracle Workers, on a European tour. "In some ways, I started behaving journalistically again," he recalls. "I began taking notes and writing down every word people said." "In the Company of Long Hair," a journal of the trip in comics form that appeared as part of the "Yahoo" series in 1989, marked the first appearance of the familiar big-lipped Sacco figure (though in this version he still has shoulder-length locks, not the buzz cut that turns up later), who is sometimes taking part in the action but more often just observing it, and of the familiar Sacco method, which is to use a cartoon style to document something that actually happened.

He refined this technique with "More Women, More Children, More Quickly," a story told from his mother's point of view about the Italian and German bombing raids on Malta during World War II that required him to interview her and to recreate historical settings and events. "Palestine," Sacco's account of several trips he made to Palestinian towns and refugee camps in the West Bank, was what first brought him a wider audience and serious attention in 1995. But his masterpiece is "Safe Area Gorazde," which came out in 2000 and recounts four trips Sacco made to Gorazde, a U.N.-designated safe area during the Bosnian war, where the mainly Muslim population endured three and a half years of siege by the Bosnian Serbs.

Sacco (who has done journalistic comics for this magazine) claims not to have a conscious style; his work, he says, is a "combination of knowledge and limitation." But his pages have become less and less cartoonish over the years—to the point where they now verge on a kind of realism, especially when depicting interiors and street scenes. This is partly accidental (Sacco studied mechanical drawing in school and says that he draws buildings and vehicles more easily than people) and partly the result of a reportorial passion for accuracy. Most graphic novelists keep sketchbooks; Sacco takes photographs and tape-records his interviews. His work subtly employs certain comic-book conventions— for example, in showing emotion (facial expressions are often slightly exaggerated) or in structuring a narrative. (In a chapter of "Safe Area Gorazde" describing a character's arduous trek through a forest, he deliberately draws the figure walking left—against the traditional flow of a comics page—to create a sense of slowness and difficulty.) At the same time, there's a documentary quality to books like "Palestine" and "Safe Area Gorazde" that is often more effective and affecting than "real" documentary. His scenes never seem stagy, the way filmed "recreations" so often do, and his people, verging ever so slightly on caricature, have an immediacy that talking heads on a screen seldom achieve.

Sacco typically spends weeks indexing and cross-referencing his notes and then writes out an entire story before starting to draw. "I think you have to do it that way for nonfiction," he says. "You have to be systematic. You can have a fictional character grow on the page and kind of lead you around, but that won't work for what I'm doing. I want to be a window on something." Sacco is currently working on another Palestinian project, a book about the town of Rafah, which he expects will take several years to finish, but he thinks about someday returning to made-up stories. "I'm not sure I'll be able to keep doing this," he said. "All the traveling, all that extra work. There was a point a couple of years ago, just after 'Gorazde' came out, when if it hadn't done well, I think I might have folded. You can't eat on just good reviews. And now I sometimes ask myself, When I'm 60, do I still want to be traipsing around refugee camps?"

One solution to the drudgery of cartooning is to get others to do it for you. Companies like Marvel and D.C. essentially produce comics on an assembly line: one person thinks up the story, someone else draws it, another inks it, yet another colors it and so on. Most graphic novelists tend to be dismissive of such products, but a couple of people have emerged from the factory system and attained something like auteur status—as writers whose comics are worth paying attention to no matter who draws them. Neil Gaiman, creator of the enormously successful "Sandman" series, is one such figure; another is Alan Moore, creator of "Watchmen," "From Hell" (a story about Jack the Ripper) and "The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen."

Moore, who is 50, looks like a comic-book character. He has a long beard, shoulder-length hair and likes to dress in black. He also dabbles a little in the occult. Moore lives alone in Northampton, England, where he was born and grew up, and is a famous recluse. "I'm a stranger to the other end of the living room," he likes to say. Moore actually draws perfectly well. (His early strips, like "Roscoe Moscow," a detective parody, are more than passable Crumb knockoffs.) But in the early 80's, when he was a young man struggling to support himself, a wife and a baby, he realized that he couldn't draw fast enough to keep up with his deadlines. He decided to become a writer instead and began sending out scripts on spec.

From the beginning, Moore's scripts were extraordinarily detailed, not just plot summaries but panel-by-panel blueprints, and this made the artist's job much easier. Here, for example, is the script for just a single panel from an unpublished work called "Belly of Cloud":

> IN THIS FIRST SMALL PANEL ON THE BOTTOM TIER WE CHANGE ANGLES SO THAT WE HAVE PART OF THE HEAD AND SHOULDERS OF THE ANGEL IN THE BOTTOM RIGHT FOREGROUND, FACING SLIGHTLY AWAY FROM US TOWARDS THE NEAR LEFT BACKGROUND AS SHE TAKES THE CIGARETTE FROM HER MOUTH AND EXHALES BLUE SMOKE. . . . LOOKING BEYOND HER WE CAN SEE THE YOUNG MAN AS HE SITS THERE IN HIS POST-COITALLY OPEN SHIRT, SMOKING HIS OWN CIGARETTE AND JUST GAZING AT HER WITH A LOOK OF STRICKEN PITY DAWNING IN HIS EYES.

Moore is a tireless researcher; when he took over the moribund "Swamp Thing" series from D.C. in the early 80's, he read botany books, listened to Cajun music and studied the geography and ecology of the Louisiana bayous. Of all the graphic novelists, in fact, Moore may have the purest and most inventive literary imagination. He also writes poetry and has published a novel (the old-fashioned kind, without pictures). His "League of Extraordinary Gentlemen," which is far more interesting than you would ever guess from the movie, is an extremely clever literary pastiche of Victorian England in which all the characters (even the prime minister, Plantagenet Palliser) are taken from other Victorian novels—Bram Stoker's "Dracula," H.G. Wells's "Invisible Man," Stevenson's "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" and Jules Verne's "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," to name just the most obvious. Right now, he is working on a pornographic graphic novel, "Lost Girls," in which the main characters are the Alice of "Through the Looking Glass," now known as Lady Fairchild and a laudanum-addicted lesbian; the slightly repressed Mrs. Harold Potter, nee Wendy Darling, from "Peter Pan"; and the randy Dorothy Gale, from "The Wizard of Oz."

Moore was kicked out of school at 17 for using and selling LSD. "It was a fair cop," he says now, meaning that he deserved to be expelled. "The headmaster called me a moral health hazard, and he was probably right." But the headmaster also took steps to make sure he couldn't get into any other school, and Moore, who says he is still "embittered by the entire educational system," became a fierce and ambitious autodidact.

Part of his education was comic books, at first black-and-white English ones (which he says "were just something we had, like rickets") until, in the early 60's, at an open-air

market, he came across full-color American comics. "I related to them very strongly," he says. "They were about America, which seemed to me to be like the future, like science fiction. Even without those fantastic characters, the whole country seemed to me an exotic landscape, like the Emerald City, and those comics lifted me right out of the streets I grew up in."

He added: "We all live, you know, on a kind of fictional planet—the place we have with us ever since we started listening to stories. We spend a lot of time in these imaginary worlds, and we get to know them better than the real locations we pass on the street every day. I think they play a more important part in our shaping of the world than we realize. Hitler, for example—we know he read a lot of Bulwer-Lytton. Osama bin Laden used to read quite a lot of Western science fiction. That's why comics feel important to me. They're immense fun as a game, but there's also something more serious going on."

How good are graphic novels, really? Are these truly what our great-grandchildren will be reading, instead of books without pictures? Hard to say. Some of them are much better than others, obviously, but this is true of books of any kind. And the form is better-suited to certain themes and kinds of expression than others. One thing the graphic novel can do particularly well, for example, is depict the passage of time, slow or fast or both at once—something the traditional novel can approximate only with empty space. The graphic novel can make the familiar look new. The autobiographical hero of Craig Thompson's "Blankets," a guilt-ridden teenager falling in love for the first time, would be insufferably predictable in a prose narrative; here, he has an innocent sweetness.

The graphic novel is also good at depicting blankness and anomie. This is a strength of Daniel Clowes's, and also of 30-year-old Adrian Tomine, who may, incidentally, be the best prose writer of the bunch. (He became an English major at the University of California, Berkeley, because the art department had no use for representation, let alone comics.) His young people, falling in and out of relationships, paralyzed by shyness and self-consciousness, might be unendurable if depicted in prose alone. Why would we care? But in Tomine's precisely rendered drawings (which owe something to Clowes, something to the Hernandez brothers and maybe even a tiny debt to the painter Alex Katz) they take on a certain dignity and individuality.

The graphic novel is great for stories of spookiness and paranoia, as in David Mazzucchelli's graphic adaptation of Paul Auster's novella, "City of Glass," where the panels themselves become confining and claustrophobic, or in Charles Burns's creepy "Black Hole," a story about a plague spread by sexually active teenagers. ("Black Hole" is still unfinished, and some graphic artists talk about it the way people talked about "Ulysses" back when it was appearing in installments.) And of course, drawing as it does on the long tradition of comic and satiric art, the graphic novel can be very funny.

In fact, the genre's greatest strength and greatest weakness is that no matter how far the graphic novel verges toward realism, its basic idiom is always a little, well, cartoonish. Sacco's example notwithstanding, this is a medium probably not well suited to lyricism or strong emotion, and (again, Sacco excepted) the very best graphic novels don't take themselves entirely seriously. They appeal to that childish part of ourselves that delights in caricature, and they rely on the magic, familiar but always a little startling, that reliably turns some lines, dots and squiggles into a face or a figure. It's a trick of sorts, but one that never wears out.

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