How Comics Work
A 1BUW Production

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The "One Book" movement started in 1998 at the Seattle Public Library, and over the past fifteen years numerous cities, communities, and universities have also undertaken group reading programs aimed at fostering connections and promoting reading. For the Fall 2019 ONE BOOK UW (1BUW) we have selected an anthology of Indigenous history comics: This Place: 150 Years Retold (Portage & Main, 2019). This booklet introduces 1BUW participants to the form of comics to encourage discussion of how This Place works as a visual-verbal text.

How to Cite this Booklet


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Go to uwinnipeg.ca/1B19 for a digital version of this booklet.
Welcome to Comics Studies

Yes!
It's actually a field of research and scholarship.

Comics have been around for over 100 years and studied for almost that long.

The Yellow Kid (1896) early newspaper strip
Superman (1938) Action Comics #1
Maelstrom of the Northern Lights (1941) Canada's first superhero

A breakthrough in academic comics studies came with the 1986 publication of Art Spiegelman's Maus.

Maus changed popular perceptions of what comics can do: it tells a Holocaust story based on his father's experiences, and shown that comics are a vehicle to tell serious stories.

In Canada, Chester Brown's Lewis Reel published in 2003 showed how comics can combine scholarly research with popular culture to bring history to life.

Today, comics and graphic novels are an important form of storytelling, from history to autobiography to fantasy to science fiction.

The more we study comics, the more we learn about how they work. Learning key concepts and terms enhances how we read and talk about comics.
Myths about COMICS

Myth 1: Comics are for kids!

Myth 2: Comics are all about superheroes

Myth 3: Comics are just a gateway to real literature.
**FACT 1:** Comics are for everyone!

Comics are a form, just as prose or poetry or film are forms. We can think of them being like a container that artists can fill up with as many different ideas, stories, characters, settings and genres as they can imagine!

**FACT 2:** Not all comics are about superheroes

There are some great superhero comics and, they’re often how people first encounter comics but there is a whole world of comics beyond superheroes, including those termed “alternative” or just “alt” comics, that we associate with the idea of graphic novels.

**FACT 3:** Comics require multiple literacies & advanced comprehension skills

Comics are a “hybrid” or “multimodal” form, meaning they blur the boundaries between pictures and words and between visual and verbal systems of making meaning.

There is a lot of work for the comics reader as they must decode each sign system individually & in relation to each other.

University of Windsor professor and comics scholar, Dale Jacobs says, “If we think about comics as multimodal texts that involve multiple kinds of meaning making, we do not give up the benefits of word based literary instruction but strengthen it through the inclusion of visual and other literacies.”
Comics come in many shapes and sizes. The four main types of comics are:

**Comic Strip**
which was traditionally printed in newspaper, is just a few panels long, with the panels laid out in one or more rows.

**Digital Comic**
which is a broad category including COMIC STRIPS or COMIC BOOKS produced and distributed digitally, as well as those produced and distributed in print and digitized for electronic publishing.

**Comic Book**
which is usually a couple of dozen pages long, with new issues in a series published on a regular schedule.

**Webcomics**
are a specific genre of DIGITAL COMICS, usually posted serially on a regular schedule.

**Graphic Novel**
which is a long-form comic, and either collects previously published COMIC STRIPS, COMIC BOOKS, DIGITAL COMICS, or WEBCOMICS, or presents an entirely new story.

A QUICK NOTE ON TERMS: COMICs (with an s) is the form, like poetry or prose or film. COMIC (without the s) is the adjective to describe something lighthearted or humorous. Not all comics are comic. A COMIC (with an article in front of it) is a work in the form of comics. A GRAPHIC NARRATIVE is a complete work of either fiction or non-fiction (the line is often blurred) in the form of comics. Simple right?
But... What is a Comic?

Lots of people, including academics and comics creators, have tried to define comics. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud, who creates comics, calls comics "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."

This is a bit of a mouthful, but it gives us some useful terms - juxtaposition, images, and sequence. At the same time, it leaves out some important details.

As Charles Hatfield, Professor of English at California State University, Northridge, points out, one of the defining features of comics is the tension between text and image on the page.

In this, comics is part of a long tradition of graphic storytelling, which as Camille Callison, Niigaanwegamik Sinclair, and Greg Bak note, is the oldest form of writing in North America, by Indigenous peoples who used it to communicate amongst themselves, with nonindigenous peoples, and with entities such as animals, spirits, and other relations.

So, roughly, comics is an art form that conveys meaning through the combination of text and image and through the juxtaposition of those image-texts in sequence.

Who Does What?

**Writer**
Writes a script of the comic, including dialogue, captions, and a description of the images and page layouts. Sometimes these descriptions are pretty specific, and sometimes they are pretty vague.

**Artist**
Creates the comic's images in black and white and lays them out on the pages of the comic. Sometimes this job is broken up into the Penciler, who draws the images, and the Inker, who goes over the Penciler's art in black ink adding shading and depth.

**Letterer**
Takes the Writer's dialogue and captions and fits them into the artist's images, usually in speech balloons and caption boxes. Some letterers develop special lettering for specific characters or for the emotional effect.

**Colourist**
Adds colour to the Artist's images.
Remember how we said comics are a form that can contain many genres? Even comics based on real events can play around with established genres to tell their stories. So what are common comics genres today?

Superhero comics - individuals with extraordinary abilities fight injustice and save humanity from villains, but are also plagued by their own demons or early trauma.

Coming-of-age comics - focus on a young person growing from adolescence to adulthood, often through tests and challenges, and their social, psychological, and sexual development.

Historical comics - draws from the past, even the recent past, often combining history with other genres such as action, war, western and adventure comics.

Graphic biographies - comics about a real person, but drawn by other people or person, that tell all or a part of their life story.

Horror comics - creates feelings of unease, fright, and terror through depicting uncanny, supernatural, unexplainable, or gory experiences. The imagery is often creepy and haunting.

SF (science fiction) comics - imagine a future or other alternate world that may be either utopian or dystopian, or a combination thereof.
COMICS ANATOMY

Comics have "four" basic elements
(but watch out, not all comics have these!)

Panel: Single drawing or frame containing one unit of action,

think of them like "stills" in film

or "frozen moments" in photography

Speech balloon: Contains the verbal text, may be spoken dialogue or thoughts. The lettering and shape of speech balloons can tell us a lot about-

~ Caption or Narrative Box ~

Not inside the panel but on top or bottom, equivalent to a film voice-over.

GUTTER

We're going to come back to this because it's *super important,* the gutter is the strip of blank space (sometimes white, sometimes black) between each panel.
Terminology

Hey!

That was my last cookie!

I'm so hungry...

They looked for a way out...

Emanata

Onomatopedia

Thought balloon

Boundaryless panel
Scott McCloud describes "cartooning as a form of amplification through simplification. When we abstract an image through cartooning, we are not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential meaning, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't." (30).

For example, let's look at the photograph of Annie Bannatyne that Scott B. Henderson used as a reference for his representation of her in "Annie of Red River" in This Place. Henderson's rendering of Bannatyne's face falls somewhere in the middle of a continuum between what McCloud calls the "realistic" and "iconic".

This raises the question, though, about what happens when we turn an historical figure like Annie Bannatyne, who lived within a particular historical and cultural context, into a non-specific, generalized figure. What is lost? What is gained? Different stories require different levels of abstraction, from photorealistic art to stick figures, and those different levels of abstraction can tell us something about the message that comics creators are trying to convey.
Comics Styles

There are so many comics styles, how can we categorize them?

Well, there are a few general terms that we can use as shorthand.

CLEAR LINE STYLE

Made famous by Herge, the Belgian creator of Tintin, is characterized by strong, clean lines, with no crosshatching, flat bright colours, detailed backgrounds, and a tendency towards cartoonish (more iconic) figures.

RATTY or ROUGH LINE STYLE

Associated with 1980s underground comix creator Gary Panter and picked up by punk and feminist cartoonists such as Canadian Julie Doucet, tends to be messy, dense, raw and expressionistic than CLEAR LINE.

MAINSTREAM STYLE

Recognizable from popular mainstream comics books, such as superhero comics, tends towards a naturalistic, though often exaggerated representational style, with bright colours and a balance of light and shadows.

MIXED-MEDIA STYLE

Comics that combine hand drawing and digital technologies, and sometimes also documents, objects, and/or photographs to produce layered, textured, haunting and surreal visual narratives.

Definitions

Expressionistic art styles that favour subjective rather than realistic representations of the world often distorting reality for emotional effect.

Naturalistic art styles that attempt to represent the real world as we see it.
Layout
is the placement of panels or images on a page.

Breakdown
the division of the plot into separate incidents, moments, or narrative beats, each of which is illustrated in one panel.

# Grid
panels arranged in regular boxes on a page.
- Grids can be regular or typical (always the same number of panels on a page) or irregular or atypical (varying number of panels on a page).
- Grids divide into rows or tiers of horizontal panels or columns of vertical panels.
Layouts

When cartoonists break a regular grid, they're asking readers to pay special attention to an important moment in the story.

Splash Panel
a large panel that may take up most of or all of a page.

Inset Panel
a small panel inside a larger one.

Spread Panel
one panel goes over two pages.
In comics, "CLOSURE" describes the mental work done by the reader to build a coherent narrative out of a sequence of images. As Karin Kukkonen, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Oslo, puts it, "your mind creates connections between the individual panels, by drawing inferences about how the action in the one can relate to the other" (10).
Comics scholar Scott McCloud, who pioneered the theory of comics closure, describes 6 different types of transitions that make use of CLOSURE (McCloud 70-72), each of which requires increasingly more work on the part of the reader:

**Moment-to-Moment**
Transitions require very little mental work from the reader.

**Action-to-Action**
Transitions feature the same subject progressing from one action to the next.

**Subject-to-Subject**
Transitions move from one figure or object to another within the same scene, while moving forward in time.

**Scene-to-Scene**
Transitions move the reader across time and/or space.

**Aspect-to-Aspect**
Transitions show us different perspectives of the same scene.

**Non-Sequitur**
Transitions put two apparently unconnected panels next to each other, requiring significant mental effort from the reader to make sense of them.
REFERENCES


Further Reading


Quick Quiz
Answer key available at uwinipeg.ca/1819

-Anatomy of a Comic-

1. __________
2. __________
3. __________
4. __________
5. __________
6. __________

SPASH: _______________________
SPREAD: _____________________

Adapted from Jess-Smiley.com
Everyone is welcome to these public events featuring Indigenous comics creators, artists, and writers.

- **Sept. 26 @ 4:00-5:30:** 1BUW Launch Reception 2M70
- **Oct. 21 to Fri. Oct. 25:** 1BUW Writer in Residence Jennifer Storm
- **Oct. 23 @ 7:00-8:30pm:** "Redrawing the Past, Reimagining the Future: Indigenous Comics Today." Panel discussion featuring Jennifer Storm, AliceRL, Chelsea Vowel, & Scott B. Henderson.
- **Oct. 29 @ 2:30-3:45:** Public Lecture by writer Katharina Vermette Leatherdale Commons
- **Friday, Nov. 8 @ 12-1:30pm:** 1BUW Book Club with GMB Chaminick, "Drawing Indigenous History" 1C11
- **Nov. 29 @ 9:30-3:00pm:** 1BUW Final Symposium Keynote speaker: Graphic Novelist David Alexander Robertson on "Truth, Representation, and Reconciliation in Comics." 2M70

*Watch for call for presentation by students, instructors, and UW community members: we want to hear about your experiences and responses to This Place: 150 Years Retold!

**Alice RL** is a professional Illustrator and Art Teacher based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The non-binary, transgender, Ojibwe artist draws from their experiences and cultural teachings and melds it with a signature palette of bright, playful hues to create stunning juxtapositions of human brutality and emotion with hope and whimsy. Their range of projects include game and comic book art, digital and traditional illustration and graphic design.

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