

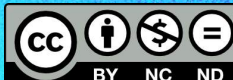
How Comics Work

A IBUW Production



Written by Candida Rifkind & Brandon Christopher

Illustrated by Alice RL



1BUW BLURB

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



Nelvana 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 shows that
comics are a vehicle to tell serious stories.



... cats
don't come
across so
great in
this book

In Canada,
Chester Brown's *Louis Riel*
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.

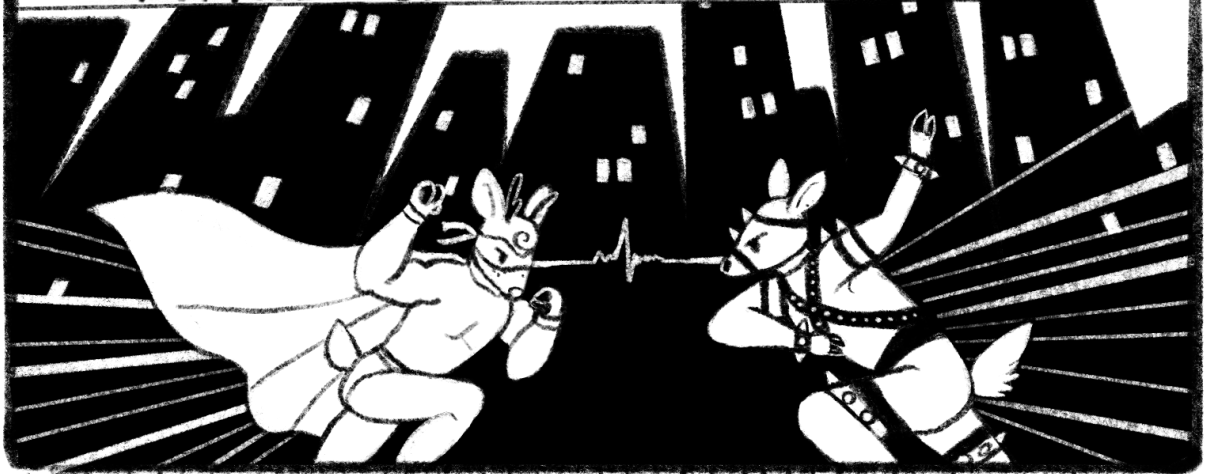


Myths about COMICS

Myth 1:
Comics are
for kids!



MYTH 2: Comics are all about superheroes



Myth 3: Comics
are just a gateway
to real literature.



Lets Debunk some of these **MYTHS**

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 literacy instruction but strengthen it through the inclusion of visual and other literacies."

Defining & Studying Comics



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.



Comic Books

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



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.

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, Niigaanewidam 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.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Tundra Publishing, 1994.

Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

Callison, Camille, Niigaanewidam Sinclair, and Greg Bak. "Making Use of the White Space: The Mazinbiige Indigenous Graphic Novel Collection at the University of Manitoba." *Comics and Critical Librarianship: Reframing the Narrative in Academic Libraries*. Eds. Olivia Piepmeier and Stephanie Grimm, Litwin Books, 2019

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.



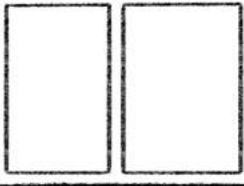


COMICS ANATOMY

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-



! TONE!

~ Caption or Narrative Box ~

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



Usually outside the panel action.

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



Bleed (image runs off page), Also, full bleed image runs off page on all sides



Speech balloon

Panel/frame

Gutter (space between panels)

Narrative box/voice over

Emanata

Onomatopoeia

Borderless panel

Thought balloon

Cartooning

from
Realistic to Iconic

Cartooning is the technique used in comics

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

associated with 1980s underground comic 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.

RATTY or ROUGH LINE STYLE



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.

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.

MIXED-MEDIA STYLE



Definitions

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

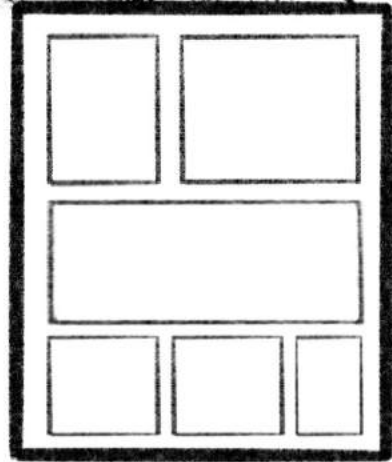
Naturalistic art styles that attempt to represent the real world as we see it.

COMICS GRAMMAR



Layout

is the placement of panels or images on a page.

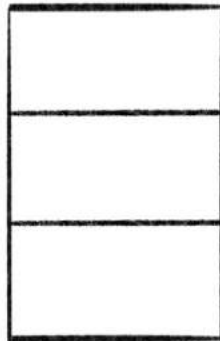
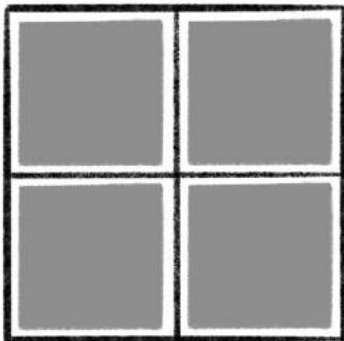


Breakdown

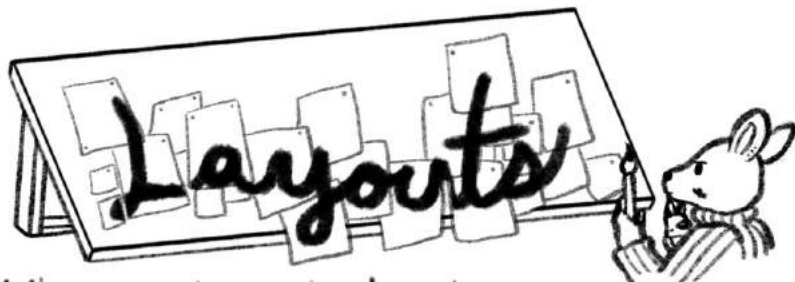
the division of the plot into separate incidents, moments, or narrative beats, each of which is illustrated in one panel.



Grid



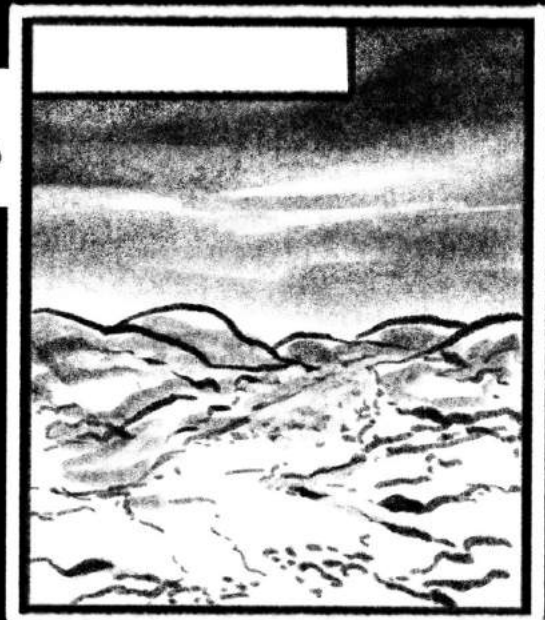
panels arranged in regular boxes on a page. Grids can be regular or typical (always the same number of panels on a page) or irregular or atypical (varying number of panels on a page). Grids divide into rows or tiers of horizontal panels or columns of vertical panels.



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.



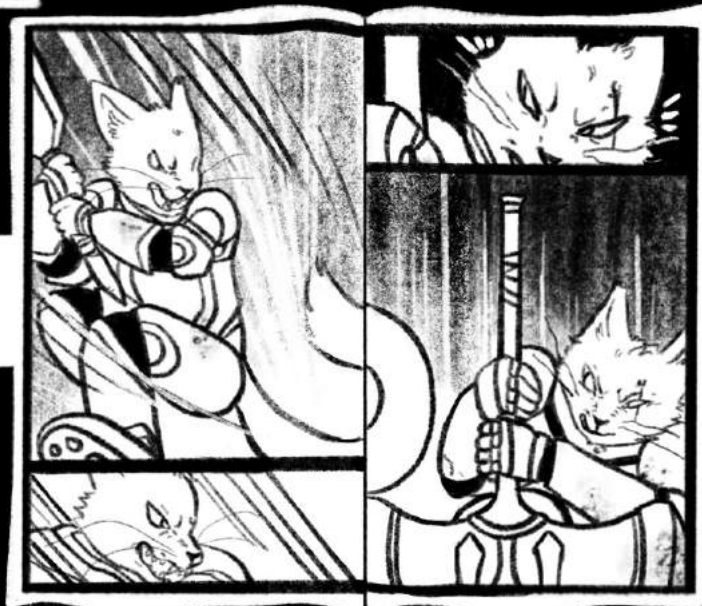
Inset Panel

a small panel inside a larger one.



Spread Panel

one panel goes over two pages.



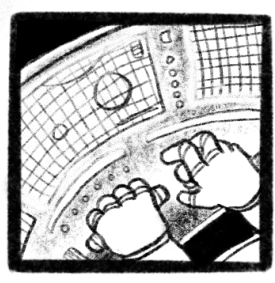
CLOSURE



... I need closure...

In Comics Studies "closure" means something different!

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).



Kukkonen, Karin. *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

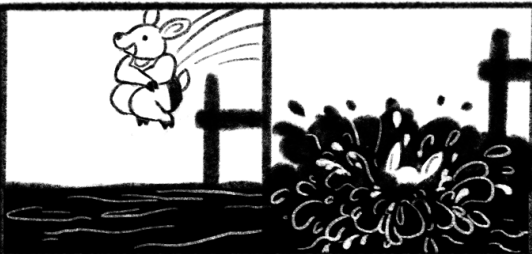
Comics scholar Scott McCloud, who pioneered the theory of comics closure, describes 6 different types of transitions that make use of CLOSURE (McCloud 70-72), each of which requires increasingly more work on the part of the reader:



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

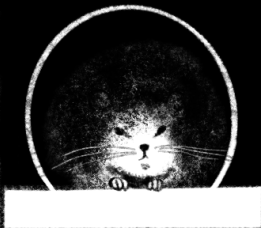
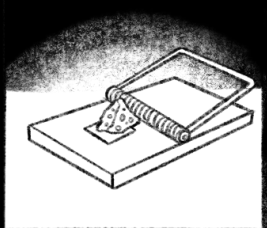
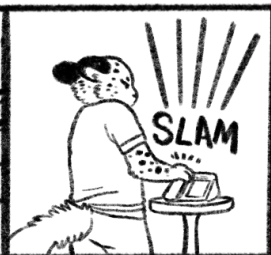


SUBJECT-TO-SUBJECT

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.



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Further Reading

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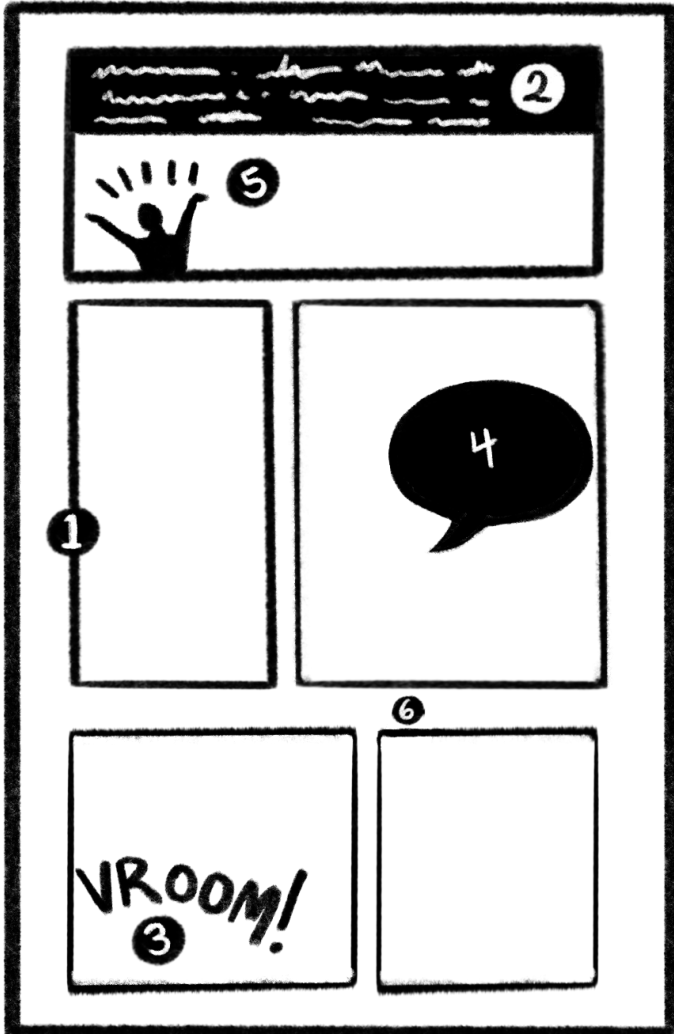
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Quick Quiz

Answer key available at uwinnipeg.ca/1B19

-Anatomy of a Comic-



1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

SPLASH: _____

SPREAD: _____

Adapted from Jess-Smiley.com

IBUW Fall 2019 Events

(check the website for rooms!)

Everyone is welcome to these public events featuring Indigenous comics creators, artists, and writers.

Sept. 26 @
4:00-5:30:
IBUW Launch
Reception
2M70

Oct 21 to Fri. October 25:
IBUW 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
Katherena Vermette
Leatherdale Commons

Friday, November 8 @ 12-1:30pm
IBUW Book Club with
GMB Chornichuk:
"Drawing Indigenous History"
1C11

Nov. 29 @ 9:30-3:00pm:
IBUW 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, Qjibawe 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.



Candida Rifkind is a professor in the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg, where she specializes in comics, graphic novels, and Canadian literatures. For more: www.candidarifkind.com.



Brandon Christopher is the Chair of the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg. His research and teaching focus on early modern drama, on adaptations of Shakespeare and his works in contemporary culture, and on comics and graphic narratives.

uwinnipeg.ca/IB19

