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MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 52, Number 4, Winter 2006, pp. 1014-1027
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2007.0004>



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Charles Hatfield. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005. xv + 182 pp.

Bradford W. Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (with a new post-script).* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003. xix + 344 pp.

Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds. *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics.* Denmark: Museum Tusulanum, U of Copenhagen, 2000. 247 pp.

Jan Baetens, ed. *The Graphic Novel.* Leuven: Leuven UP, 2001.

Robin Varnum and Christian Gibbons, eds. *The Language of Comics: Word and Image.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001. xix + 222 pp.

Daniel Raeburn. *Chris Ware.* New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. 112 pp.

Deborah Geis, ed. *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust.* Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2003. x + 192 pp.

There is a "Comics Scholars' Discussion List," housed at the University of Florida, which also holds an annual comics conference every spring. There are peer-reviewed journals devoted to comics, such as the *International Journal of Comic Art*, which began in 1999 (and is hard to find), and *ImageText*, which began in 2004 (and is readily available online). There are the two recent, enthusiastic articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about comics in the academy (the first, from 2002, is by James Sturm, who is the founder of the National Association of Comics Art Educators and the director of the Center for Cartoon Studies; the second, from 2003, is by Brown University's Paul Buhle—and despite its zeal about the invigorating possibilities of studying comics, it was met with outrage by the comics scholars list for not granting the contributions of their community sufficient gravitas).¹ And while attention to the possibilities of comics is clearly growing, there are not yet many compelling book-length studies of comics from within the academy.²

While academic publishing on comics is on the rise, the most useful recent texts are still, by and large, anthologies that are yet spotty, and not-always-easy-to-locate works published abroad, where the academic study of comics has a more established and serious history.³ Charles Hatfield's 2005 *Alternative Comics*, a sustained critical study of the contemporary comics form, aims explicitly to address that gap. He claims in his introduction that "comics are clearly in the process of being repositioned within our culture," and he surely intends his own book to be part of the repositioning (xi).

Alternative Comics opens on a promising note as Hatfield describes his critical approach, which he correctly remarks has been missing from book-length studies. "This study views comic art primarily as a literary form," he writes. "This is not the only productive way comics can be viewed, but it is an important and thus far neglected way. . . . At the core of this book is an interest in comics as a narrative form" (xiv). As such, Hatfield notes his interest in the kind of formalism that studying comics invites: "alternative comics invited a new formalism," he asserts, noting a page later that watershed studies by comics authors themselves (such as Scott McCloud's 1993 *Understanding Comics* and Will Eisner's 1985 *Comics & Sequential Art*) have also "given rise to a new, or newly self-conscious, breed of comics formalism" (x, xi). Ultimately, however, despite his admirable inclusion of aesthetic considerations in a field that has been more interested so far in socio-historical angles on comics, Hatfield could elaborate with more precision some of the fascinating themes and tropes he suggests to explain the narrative power of comics.⁴

Hatfield defines "alternative comics" in his introduction as those comics that can trace their origin or motivation to the countercultural

underground comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which inspired work that "[flouted] the traditional comic book's overwhelming emphasis on comforting formula fiction" (x). He sees today's alternative comics as "driven by the example of underground comix"—a movement that launched such luminaries as R. Crumb and Art Spiegelman—but that ultimately, after the dwindling of the underground in the mid-to-late 1970s, "cultivated a more considered approach to the art form, less dependent on the outrageous gouging of taboos" (x). Hatfield's first chapter further parses his terminology—including an overlong, and by now quite commonplace, rejection of the publishing term "graphic novel"—in which he also walks us through a brief history of the underground and then the evolution of the direct marketing of comics to specialty shops. That out of the way, Hatfield next turns to an enticingly-named chapter called "An Art of Tensions: the Otherness of Comics Reading."

The basic concepts elaborated are good and useful. Hatfield calls attention to the surface texture of a comics page: he suggests that we may view the comics page as *planche*, the French term that denotes "the total design unit rather than the physical page on which it was printed" (48); he claims comics exploit "*format* as signifier in itself" (52); he highlights the materiality of the page (64); he points out how comics in particular may suggest that there is no "right" way to read the page (65); in sum, he moves over a range of issues about how comics manipulate space and the representation of time with sophistication. However, the structure he offers—a theoretical discussion peppered by numerous case studies—often feels oppressively schematic, and he ends the chapter with an unnecessary list of bullet points. There are too many examples, and there is not enough elaboration of the key critical concepts as such.

Hatfield's most sustained analysis in the book is in the next chapter (his only on a single author), which looks at the work of Gilbert Hernandez, best known for his work in the brilliant ongoing serial comic book *Love & Rockets* (1981–1996; 2001–present). While Hatfield effectively demonstrates the complexity of Hernandez's comics narratives, his own reading of Hernandez's texts offers more plot analysis than interesting readings of form. His point appears to be that the work is complex, and that the form, primarily because of the particular transitions between panels, insists on the social connectiveness that the story portrays in the fictionalized Central American community of Palomar. The argument is that form and content are mutually appropriate—as in "Gilbert developed a distinctive repertoire of techniques suited to the kind of stories he wanted to tell" (71); and "Hernandez's handling of form responds to the dramatic demands of his narrative" (76)—but his analysis would be stronger here with

a deeper discussion of what he calls, in his previous chapter, the "otherness of comics reading."

In his two subsequent chapters on autobiography—a hugely valuable focus—Hatfield aptly establishes a central and interesting problematic (one that was brought to public attention with the taxonomical fallout in the wake of *Maus*'s publication). "Autobiography," he writes, "has become a distinct, indeed crucial, genre in today's comic books—despite the troublesome fact that comics, with their hybrid, visual-verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of 'nonfiction'" (112). This statement is certainly correct, and it is one of the reasons that comics can do the work of historical representation, challenging dominant versions of history, so well. Yet instead of highlighting the power of comics to call attention to discursive structures and how we understand them, Hatfield's next sentence would seem to detract from one of the medium's most forceful possibilities: "They can hardly be said to be 'true' in any straightforward sense," Hatfield writes of comics works (112). Well, why not? Inasmuch as written autobiography, or any other text, for that matter, can be "true," comics can be "true"—it is only that drawing is obviously created by an interpretive, subjective hand. Drawing, as a system, is not necessarily less true than other systems of representation. Hatfield's discussion of what he calls "ironic authentication," then, which he defines as "the implicit reinforcement of truth claims through their explicit rejection," could be more potent, were he to analyze comics more broadly in terms of forms of cultural representation (125). His focus, too, on what visual self-portrayal accomplishes for the author, as in his discussion of "self-objectification," could be more usefully expanded to include more on what it gives us as readers (115).

Ultimately, *Alternative Comics* feels reactive to the problem Hatfield establishes early on when he describes how comics works are slotted and guided by the publishing industry in a bid for acceptance. This book, so self-conscious about its work of repositioning comics, seems ambivalent concerning its intended audience. Its tone is often condescending, as if it is addressed specifically to students, or as if it is assuming that its readers know nothing about comics at all; Hatfield also offers some guidelines for other academics approaching comics. This book is most tantalizing when it explains, unpacks, or repurposes critical language to describe the often fascinating narrative movement of comics, but its formal readings are bookended by somewhat bulky socio-historical discussions of marketing, which can make the book feel choppy. Its large size suggests its bid to appeal to a non-academic audience (a worthy pursuit), while inside it laments the lack of academic attention to comics.

In *Comic Book Nation*, now in its second printing with a new postscript, historian Bradford Wright deftly avoids the belabored, alternately defensive and celebratory prose that comics scholars have sometimes seemed inclined to adopt. Wright's subject is focused and clear: he writes only on comic books, which became a distinct entertainment medium in the 1930s, and he writes only about popular commercial comic books. His interest is in the notion of comics—before rock 'n' roll, before television—as the first medium to appeal directly to youth culture. Wright, taking a wholly different tack than Hatfield—and writing from a different field—notes upfront: "Mine is not an aesthetic history of comic books" (xvii).⁵ What we get here is a lucid, chronological, well-researched scholarly cultural history that is most useful and interesting in tracing how comic books were aligned with the "common man" at their inception (and it feels more appropriate than in Hatfield's book that here we get, in Wright's last chapter, a large section on direct marketing). While many often make easy claims for the "populist" status of comics, Wright thoroughly unpacks just how populist comic books were at their inception and throughout the post-war era and beyond.

Superman, the creation of two second-generation Jewish immigrants from Cleveland, debuted in 1938 in the first issue of *Action Comics*, and Wright immediately puts this superhero in the context of the Depression.⁶ As Wright notes, "Twentieth-century America demanded a superhero who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven, and anonymous mass society"(10). Enter Superman, who was cast by his creators as a "champion of the oppressed" (11). To wit: in his first storyline, Superman saves a falsely accused prisoner from a lynch mob, produces evidence that frees an innocent woman on death row, and defends a woman about to be beaten by her husband. In the second issue of *Action Comics*, Superman crushes a conspiracy involving a US senator, a lobbyist, and a munitions manufacturer who wish to embroil the United States in a foreign war. He then ends the fraudulent Latin American war by informing the belligerents that they have been manipulated by greedy American industrialists (11).

Wright's pithy (and sometimes amusing) summaries of hundreds of comic book storylines comprise one of *Comic Book Nation's* central strengths. And in this opening chapter on Superman, any reader would be struck by how proximate the early storylines feel to today's socio-economic climate: an episode on automobile safety in which Superman destroys a car factory for using inexpensive materials reminds one of the famous recent GM recall; an episode about uncovering worthless stocks is reminiscent of the Enron scandal; and yet another addresses urban ghettos (Superman says to a convicted

juvenile delinquent: "It's not entirely your fault that you're delinquent—it's these slums—your poor living conditions") (12). Wright points out how these stories, so rooted in realistic problems, were a political, social indictment suggesting the common man could not expect to prevail on his own in this America (13). Yet, as he also points out later, once the Superman titles established the efficacy of the superhero industry, comic books, which served the New Deal, rarely questioned the federal government as much as they did the machinations of local politics.

Wright's chronicling of the period in which comic books came out in full force against America's enemies in World War II is particularly captivating. He recounts the incredible popularity of comic books (in 1942, there were fifteen million comic books sold each month) and also how they contributed to the war effort both as a part of G.I. culture and by boosting patriotism at home (the cover of March 1941's *Captain America*, for instance, drawn by Jack Kirby, shows the titular hero punching Hitler in the jaw—an image that also makes its way into Michael Chabon's fictional account of two wartime comic book creators in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*.) Wright uncovers both ostensibly positive aspects of the comic book culture in this period—such as the fact that it displayed anti-Nazi sentiment before the US became directly involved in the war—and its negative side, such as in its imperialist "jungle comics," which Wright notes showed the white hero "at its ugliest" and displayed "powerful racial anxieties" (36, 37). Here we can see Wright's general approach: tracking a rich history, in a measured, critically-distanced tone, he shows the progressiveness—and the complexity—that we may not automatically grant comic books, but he never shies away from documenting how they mirrored some of the worst, least redeemable qualities in American culture.

Comic Book Nation moves us forward chronologically, in neat sections with titles such as "Reds, Romance, and Renegades: Comic Books and the Culture of the Cold War, 1947–1954," up through 1992. Wright documents the success of comic books in their Golden Age, how they came under attack by those who viewed their popularity with children as corrosive, their retreat under a censorious industry content code, their renewed success on college campuses with a new wave of sensitive superheroes, their response to social upheaval and civil rights. One can only wish that Wright had written more extensively on *Mad* (later, *MAD* magazine), a major cultural force in the twentieth century, that gets short shrift here. The genius of *Mad* is that it was popular and commercial—Wright's criteria—and also deeply subversive, sending up both its own comic book conventions and the sanitized cultural conventions of the 50s and early 60s.

Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics (2000), edited by Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, is the first of three extant literary anthologies on contemporary comics—the others are Jan Baetens's *The Graphic Novel* and Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons's *The Language of Comics*, which both came out in 2001. All of these collections are uneven, and *Comics and Culture* perhaps the most so. A selection of papers from a conference of the same name given at the University of Copenhagen in 1998, the introduction is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book. The editors commence by debating the question of what comics *is*, a debate that does readers the service of showing, essentially, how useless the debate is. To quote:

An ongoing feature in the history of comics research, as well as in the articles in this anthology, is the question of how to define the term "comics." On the one hand, it seems somewhat strange that the definition of the actual phenomenon studied within the field of comics research is a recurring matter of dispute, embracing rather different, and sometimes incompatible, definitions. On the other hand, it is an obvious, and necessary, question to consider and it is becoming even more relevant with the emergence of new, interactive media. (10)

I believe that the word "productive" could easily replace "strange" in the sentence quoted above. One problem in comics scholarship is the need to delimit the object of study, the medium of comics. This leads to debates that sometimes feel as if they are going nowhere: it is not so important to *define* comics, to construct an excluding box around the medium (this is comics and this is not comics) as to write well about what we consider comics can do, and what work they are accomplishing through various properties peculiar to the form. Part of the urgency of the debate, however, is linked to the problem of acceptance. Some, as Magnussen and Christiansen note, want a definition that would open up what our cultural connotations do not normally lead us to consider comics to actually be "comics" (they note that some consider the Bayeux tapestry and vessels from the classic Mayan period as comics).⁷

The best essays in the anthology are those that deal directly with modern comics as such, such as Ole Frahm on the heterogeneous signs of comics, Donald Ault—the owner of the comics scholars' list mentioned at the beginning of this essay—on Carl Barks and Jacques Lacan, Pascal Lefèvre on comparing comics formats, and Roger Sabin on Scott McCloud's second book, *Reinventing Comics*. Thierry Groensteen—whose 1999 book *Système de la Bande Dessinée* (*The System*

of Comics), translated from French, will be published by Mississippi in February 2007—offers a direct, useful essay titled "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?" Groensteen's answer is four-fold: first, because the medium of comics is an example of crossbreeding; second, because its story-telling ambitions are seen as sub par; third, because it is connected to caricature; and fourth, because it seems to propose a return to childhood. The most fascinating aspect of Groensteen's piece is the emphasis that his writing appears to place on an erotics of reading: describing the "medium-related pleasure" of comics (which is distinct from either "story-related pleasure" or "art-related pleasure"), he notes that it is "related to the rhythmic organization in space and time of a multiplicity of small images"; he later speaks of what a reader experiences "when he plunges into the world of small pictures" (39, 41). Ultimately, though, this compelling description of reading has a disappointing final emphasis: he links it to "the little boy's fantasies of freedom and omnipotence" and ultimately comments, "All of us here in Copenhagen, delivering our clever papers, are probably doing nothing more than holding out our hands to the kids we used to be" (41). *Comics and Culture*, while one struggles in places to connect its various dots—and it hits some odd notes—is a nonetheless interesting collection that is valuable for its international scope (United States, Denmark, Germany, France, Scotland, Greece, Belgium, and England).

The Graphic Novel, also based on the proceedings of a conference—in this case, on the Graphic Novel, hosted by the Institute for Cultural Studies at the University of Leuven in Belgium in 2000—has a similar international mix of scholars, including Ole Frahm (also in the Copenhagen volume), Sue Vice, author of the book *Holocaust Fiction*, and Mario Saraceni. Unlike the other two edited collections reviewed here, *The Graphic Novel* pays sustained and interesting attention to *Maus*, and it opens with a valuable section titled "Trauma and Violence Representation in the Graphic Novel," which is comprised of essays on Spiegelman and on the well-respected French comics author Jacques Tardi (*C'était la guerre des tranchées*). In his introduction—appropriately titled "Transatlantic Encounters of the Second Type"—Jan Baetens lays out a truly interesting and important fact. "In the United States," he writes:

the genre of the graphic novel . . . Is not yet fully recognized as a serious artistic practice. In Europe, more specifically in Belgium and France, the situation is quite different: comics have been more or less canonized during the last two decades, but the very term of "graphic novel" remains frequently misunderstood, as was shown by the frequent confusion between graphic and gothic novel during the preparation of the conference. (7)

This "terminological and linguistic confusion" (as Baetens puts it), is likely productive: Americans should be more aware of the European formats, such as the typically forty-eight-page album, as Europeans ought to be aware of the efficacy of emerging American genres (7).⁸ Baetens, I believe, may be setting up a straw man argument when he writes that the European view is more inclined towards "the search for and the use of a new visual logic"—I can think of plenty of American cartoonists who search for this with astonishing results—but the nice thing about the volume is that "there is no strong need to promote and defend the medium," in Baetens's view, despite some international glitches, and thus there are many valuable close readings throughout (8).

The Language of Comics: Word and Image takes up the debate that *Comics and Culture* outlines in its introduction, but, going beyond the first collection, it stages this debate—what is comics?—in a sustained, coherent way as a volume. Varnum and Gibbons offer a straightforward introduction that situates their interest as the divide—or, alternately, the lack of a division—between word and image in comics (they provide a very brief and not unhelpful gloss of the historical parameters of this debate going back to Horace and *ut pictura poesis*). They note comics can either be seen as a single, integrated system of signification or as a hybrid system of word and image. The editors avow the inspiration provided by McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, confessing that that book provided the impetus for their own, and that McCloud is the most quoted writer in the volume. Specifically, "McCloud posed the central problem—whether comics is a hybrid or an integral medium—which we undertook to investigate. . . . From our point of view, the most significant contradiction in *Understanding Comics* is that McCloud treats comics as both a partnership of separate elements and a unique language" (xiii, xiv). I'm not sure that this has to be a contradiction, but the essays proceed from this starting point.

A range of authors weigh in, refracting this question through their own comics specialties and/or interests. David Kunzle, a historian who is the author of two magnificent volumes on the history of the European comic strip (1450–1825; 1826–1895), opens the volume with a discussion of the 1880s French wordless (or pantomime) strip *Chat Noir*, basically showing what comic strips can do without words (he ends with a discussion of German wordless strips, essentially comparing wordlessness in France with wordlessness in Germany). David Beronä writes on important wordless novels of the twentieth century, which were known as "novels in pictures," "pictorial narratives," or "woodcut novels" in the interwar period in which they became famous in the United States. As with Kunzle, Beronä demonstrates the complexity of the "wordless" narratives, in fact

showing that "wordless comics are not as disassociated from text as generally regarded"—especially since many of them actually did present words within panels; many artists, as he discusses, used "carefully placed texts" in their work (32, 20). Further, Beronä quotes W. J. T. Mitchell: "'Pure' visual representations routinely incorporate textuality in a quite literal way, insofar as writing and other arbitrary marks enter into the field of visual representation" (38–9, *Picture Theory* 95). N. C. Christopher Couch follows up on this word/wordlessness focus of the book by writing an informative essay on what is generally considered America's first comic strip, R. F. Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* (otherwise known as *The Yellow Kid*), tracking the emergence of words and captions in this strip as they were dictated by the demands of the Sunday paper.

Perhaps, though, it is R. C. Harvey (author of *The Art of the Funnies* and *The Art of the Comic Book*) who throws himself with the greatest passion into the debate that the book locates in McCloud: while McCloud sees that the definition of comics must include sequence (hence evaporating single-panel cartoons from the picture), Harvey retorts that the copresence of the verbal and the visual is the fundamental aspect: "It seems to me that the essential characteristic of 'comics'—the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives—is the incorporation of verbal content" (75). Yet Harvey's chosen location to duke this out—the gag cartoon—becomes boring when he loses sight of the debate he starts out with and winds up giving an informal history of the *New Yorker* and Harold Ross's vision for captioned cartoons.

The approach that strikes me as the most commonsense is the one outlined by Frank Cioffi, who writes of the "word-image gestalt" and the "tantalizing open-endedness" that is the space in between word and image in comics (100, 99). Cioffi quotes Ben Katchor, a cartoonist well-represented in this special issue, who claims that he is "deeply engaged by the conflict between words and images" and, further, "I always think of song when I think of comics. Both are abstract words set to concrete things—a picture or a particular sound" (105–106). On Robert Crumb, Cioffi shows how the celebrated cartoonist has an obvious anarchic humor, but also humor that "often derives from the breakdown of the word-image nexus" (115). Cioffi's overall take on Spiegelman is the same; *Maus's* entire project, in one sense, is word-image disjunction, with its animal metaphor, and while this creates a distancing effect, Spiegelman's sketchy style in *Maus* "renders the work lisible: it forces readers into an active role" (117). Other notable contributions include Baetens's description of a seminal work of French comics theory, Philippe Marion's 1993 *Traces en cases*, a book rife with invented jargon like "mediagenius" and

"graphiateur" (the agent responsible for making comics, not to be confused with an author or narrator). Baetens is this volume's sole contributor from the strong Franco-Belgian school of comics theory, which is mostly semiotics-inspired, and while a non-French speaking American might find herself jealous that "In Europe . . . comics theory is often much more abstract than in the United States, where the very practice-oriented work of Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics*) is so dominant," Baetens's gloss on at least Marion's work makes it sound fairly awful (147).

The last essay in *The Language of Comics* turns us to Chris Ware, one of the most influential American cartoonists today. Gene Kannenberg Jr. argues that in Ware's meticulous, intricate, design-heavy work, text reads as an image. It makes perfect sense that comics proposes, as has already been discussed here, that the page itself becomes a visual-literary totality, as Kannenberg also asserts (177). Yet the argument that Ware blurs text and image, as the essay claims—and here it finds company with Daniel Raeburn's *Chris Ware*—doesn't seem to account for what is interesting in comics.

Raeburn's text is slim, part of Yale's "Monographics" series, and it opens with an essay, "Building a Language," followed by sixty-one beautiful color pages representing Ware's work, in the corner of which Raeburn typically writes a small paragraph alerting readers to key critical elements or features of the work. After one moves past Raeburn's smug tone and annoying asides which, largely, participate in the needless romanticization of Ware as a person (the two are friends), Raeburn makes several nice points: "a comic strip is literally a map of time," he writes, for instance (11), a well-put formulation that is supplemented by a productive and interesting emphasis on comics as it relates to music (which we also saw in Katchor's commentary). In seriously considering the form of comics, many have cast about for structural parallels with another medium to help describe the work of comics. Poetry, which Raeburn mentions, makes sense because of the suggestive, incredibly condensed nature of the comics form, and its attention to rhythm. Yet music, in its layered composition, may be even more apt, and Raeburn calls attention to the similarity of a work that is paneled (comics) and one that is syncopated (music). This is Raeburn's most promising point, and it is an idea that Ware shares. Yet, as with Kannenberg, Raeburn, in assessing Ware, posits the blurring of words and pictures as a value in and of itself, a move that I do not believe necessarily gets us anywhere: "Although comics are composed of words and pictures, they are both of these things at once and therefore neither" (17). It seems to me that comics usually offers both words and images, and that how words and images interact on the comics page as separate, often nonsynchronous

elements that do not necessarily blend is the key to the narrative *frisson* that the best comics works offer. While the separation and stratification of words and images—and the policed value systems and sharp genre distinctions based on this division—is, as someone like Mitchell documents in his brilliant *Iconology*, often specious, at the same time, comics is a powerful medium because of its layering of narrative tracks, visual and verbal, that do not always blur but can maintain their difference.

Ware is certainly one among a group of comics authors who easily merit an actual monograph in addition to a mostly image-based "monographics." A more significant academic book focused on a single author is Deborah Geis's collection *Considering Maus*, which reprints six strong essays from the *Maus* academic canon, and bookends this selection with two new pieces that broaden the range from *Maus* studies to Spiegelman studies (the first offers a look at Spiegelman's underground work and his illustrated edition of Joseph Moncure March's poem *The Wild Party*; the second is an interesting consideration of his 1994 CD-ROM *The Complete Maus*, which will soon become more easily available when it will be reissued with copies of his forthcoming book project *MetaMaus*).

Geis makes a solid case for *Maus*'s importance in her introduction, noting that *Maus* "has been canonized in the popular, scholarly, and alternative presses" and correctly pointing out that "In an almost unprecedented manner, *Maus* has generated an interest across a variety of disciplines" (6). (At Rutgers University, where I teach, I have noted that it is regularly taught in five different departments.) Geis has done her homework, and she pulls out some interesting references in her introduction, both from Holocaust studies and from the sometimes esoteric realm of comics itself—such as sketchbook pages of Spiegelman's reprinted in *The Comics Journal*. The only thing lacking from the volume—which includes important essays by Nancy K. Miller, Michael Levine, and Alan Rosen that have become classics in the field of *Maus* criticism—is illustrations; it is the only book among those discussed here that does not "quote" from its primary sources by offering a panel or page. That this book, the first academic collection on a single cartoonist, was published, while not unexpected, is a good sign for comics scholarship, signaling the important notion that "there will always be more to say," as Geis puts it, on the best comics works.

Notes

1. Many on the list wrote letters to the *Chronicle*, one of which was published in the June 17, 2003 issue.
2. So far, the most worthwhile texts to academics have not necessarily been academic texts per se; *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud's 1993 work of comics theory in the medium of comics, for instance, as Varnum and Gibbons note, "may have prompted more scholarly discussion on comics than any other book in the English language" (xiii). As McCloud does in his book, here I use "comics" with a singular verb. Other useful texts include Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) and *Graphic Storytelling* (1995), and John Carlin's "Masters of American Comics: An Art History of Twentieth-Century American Comic Strips and Books" in the recent *Masters of American Comics* exhibition catalog.
3. While the University Press of Mississippi has long published books on comics, such as Joseph Witek's important 1989 *Comic Books as History*, and M. Thomas Inge's 1990 *Comics as Culture*, in recent years they have increased their comics studies output.
4. For instance, we see throughout the book the overuse and underexplanation of the term "radical" to describe comics affirmatively.
5. Wright takes a stance here that I believe is misguided—and adopts a tone that is not uncommon to many who write on comics—when he asserts in the same section of the introduction, "While I am familiar with a number of theoretical approaches to 'decoding' the meaning of popular texts, I find few of these very compelling. . . . While popular culture certainly merits close scrutiny, I believe that there are pitfalls in analyzing something like comic books too deeply" (xviii). This assertion seems to work in tandem with Wright's insistence in his otherwise very valuable concluding section, "Notes on Sources," that we should not forget that comic books are fun. I believe close scrutiny and fun do not have to be separate enterprises; furthermore, Wright's note on fun, in the last paragraph in the book, seems redundant: his book speaks for itself as a fantastic example of a scholarly book that is also fun.
6. Superman later became the first comic book character to merit his own title; Wright reports that DC Comics, the publisher of *Action Comics*, subsequently launched *Superman* in 1939.
7. Scott McCloud is one such famous American cartoonist and comics theorist who, as the editors and authors in the collection mention, has called for scholarship to turn attention to so-called "ancient comics" (200).
8. Lefèvre clearly explains the importance of different formats in *Comics and Culture*.

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