

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT!

JEWISH LITERATURE

Identity and Imagination

MODERN MARVELS

Jewish Adventures in the Graphic Novel

Essay by Jeremy Dauber

ATRAN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF YIDDISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE,
AND CULTURE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Presented by Nextbook and
the American Library Association



MODERN MARVELS

Jewish Adventures in the Graphic Novel

Jeremy Dauber

Back when he was on Saturday Night Live, Adam Sandler used to do a skit called “The Hanukkah Song,” where he would sing about all the celebrities no one knew were Jewish (“David Lee Roth lights the menorah, / So do James Caan, Kirk Douglas, and the late Dinah Shore-ah.”). If Sandler were to write a similar tune about comic books, he’d have his work cut out for him. Superman? The Last Son of Krypton was the brainchild of two Jewish men from Cleveland, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Batman? The handiwork of Bob Kane and Bill Finger. The Marvel comic book characters who have made their way to a multiplex near you—the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, the Hulk? The products of Stanley Lieber and Jacob Kurtzberg’s imaginations (better known as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby).

More than two million Eastern European Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States between 1880 and 1920, just in time to participate in the great explosion of American popular arts: film, radio, vaudeville, sports, and eventually television. One of the most powerful of these new cultural institutions was the periodical press, both in Yiddish and in English. Publishers like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, determined to reach as many readers as possible, transformed the newspaper, introducing new features like advice columns, full-color photo sections, and, of course, the comic strip.

The strip, whose visual nature and often simple plot and language allowed both children and those with limited English to enjoy them, introduced a new set of cultural heroes: the Yellow Kid, the Katzenjammer Kids, Li’l Abner, Little Nemo, and Krazy Kat, to name just a few. Some of the cartoons were, in the style of the single-panel political cartoon or satire popularized by Thomas Nast, stand-alone works of art, but others, like *Terry and the Pirates*, were serial strips, in which the narrative continued from one day or week to the next. Newspaper publishers, seeing the possibilities for additional revenue, worked with newly established packaging houses to put comic strips together into collections—“comic books”; from there, it was a small step to writing original material for the books themselves. By the 1930s and ‘40s, many of the great comic book heroes had come into being: most famously Superman and Batman, but also Captain America and The Spirit, and a host of others in what became known as The Golden Age of Comics.

Of course, America isn’t the only country that’s jumped on the comic book bandwagon. The addictive, eye-popping combinations of words and pictures appear in different forms around the world. Japanese teenagers and adults alike read *manga* on the subway; in the Spanish-speaking world, *fotonovelas* and *historietas* are immensely popular; in Italy, you’ll



MODERN MARVELS

find *fumetti* on sale. Still, it's probably fair to say that American comic books are among the most influential in the world, and that the graphic novel started largely as an American experiment. And like many of the great American experiments of the modern period, this one was incalculably shaped by the Jewish-American experience of the twentieth century.

Many of the major creators of the Golden Age of Comics were Jewish. This is in part a coincidence of history: Immigrant children, many of whom were excluded from pursuing the so-called "higher arts," came of age just as the comic book industry was emerging. But maybe that's more than a coincidence; maybe it's a sign of how in tune these writers were with the aspirations and the anxieties of other Jewish Americans. Comics like *Superman*, *Batman*, and *The Spirit* feature all-American heroes with no marks of ethnicity, heroes always anxious about keeping their "secret identities." They are also fantasies of super power, in which one individual can right the world's wrongs in the name of "truth, justice, and the American way." Isn't that the Jewish dream of how assimilation works? Or, in the words of one of the characters in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*: "What, they're all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself."

By the postwar period, comic books were reaching new heights of popularity among American youth—so much so that they generated their own backlash among conservative cultural critics. Dr. Frederic Wertham's 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, luridly warned parents of the glorification of violence and sexuality in comic books; perhaps his most notorious charge was his insistence on the homoerotic nature of the relationships between superheroes and their sidekicks. Congressional hearings were called, and the major comic book companies, concerned about being shut down by legal fiat, agreed to censor themselves through the creation of the Comics Code Authority. As a result, for much of the '50s and '60s, comic books were, generally speaking, creatively static.

By the late '60s, though, the emerging countercultural trends that were affecting so much of American society were beginning to affect the comic industry as well. On the East Coast, writers and artists such as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby were creating a new series of superheroes with greater psychological complexity who lived in recognizable surroundings and circumstances; when Peter Parker worriedly took pictures of his alter ego, Spider-Man, to pay the bills, he did so in Manhattan, not Metropolis or Gotham City. On the West Coast, the medium was moving even further: Artists who had cut their teeth drawing controversial cartoons for their college newspapers or humor magazines were moving to the Bay Area to turn on, tune in, drop out, and draw underground comics, or "commix," as they sometimes called them. The far more diverse group of writers and artists that emerged included, most famously, R. Crumb and Art Spiegelman.

The underground comics eagerly tackled themes and topics that mainstream comic companies like Marvel and DC would never touch, like sex, religion, and politics. Though their eagerness to gore sacred cows, in retrospect, often seems like unsuccessful street theater, or even pornography, underground comics did break new ground in suggesting that the medium could both treat serious matters and serve as a forum for personal and autobiographical expression. Some of this trickled down to the mainstream comics companies in the 1970s: Both DC and Marvel began, in their superhero stories, to take on



MODERN MARVELS

contemporary social issues like racial inequality and drug abuse, occasionally bucking the Comics Code to do so.

It took one of comics' earlier pioneers—Will Eisner—to bring together all of the disparate strands of comics history to create the new medium of the graphic novel. Eisner had left the comics industry after *The Spirit* ended its run, in 1952, to pursue a lucrative career in advertising, using his skills at graphic art to create compelling ad imagery. But Eisner's abandonment of the field was also the result of his frustration with the limitations of the comics industry or, more precisely, his sense of the limitations of the comic book audience. He claimed that he always thought graphic art was capable of expressing more complex and meaningful stories. Seeing the critical and commercial success of the DC and Marvel comics dealing with social problems, Eisner realized there was a new generation of readers, and felt that he could publish work that lived up to his high expectations.

The result, 1978's *A Contract With God*, is notable for a number of reasons. Though it is generally referred to as "the first graphic novel," it may be more accurate to characterize it as a novella and other stories. Still, the use of the words "novella" and "stories" signifies an important shift; these are works of literature, with themes, fully developed tropes and symbols, nuanced characters. The works are set in a discrete time and place, the world of Eisner's childhood—the immigrant Jewish Bronx. Though most of *A Contract With God*, including the title story, is not directly autobiographical, there is enough memoiristic detail there—and certainly in other works of Eisner's, like *To the Heart of the Storm*—for it to be considered an inescapably personal statement, the work of an individual writer who happens to write in pictures in addition to words.

At a time in American Jewish history—the late 1970s—when American Jews were sufficiently comfortable with their identity to tell their stories confidently to a mass audience, the graphic novel showed how a medium could be adapted and used to accomplish that goal. In the approximately quarter-century since the appearance of *A Contract With God*, the graphic novel has blossomed as a medium. Superheroes have gotten into the action as well, and writer/artists like Frank Miller have used the freedoms the form provides to create compelling and provocative re-evaluations of classic superheroes.

The graphic novel format has lent itself to a host of uses. It's become a way for writers and artists from all over the world to focus on questions of history, nationality, and ethnicity: Take, for example, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, which describes the author's experiences growing up in Iran during the Islamic revolution; Yoshihiro Tasumi's *Abandon the Old in Tokyo*, a gritty look at urban life in the Asian capital; Joe Sacco's "graphic journalism" covering his time in Gorazde (*Safe Haven Gorazde*) and the West Bank (*Palestine*); or Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which combines the riveting testimony of a survivor with his son's powerful questions about his responsibility to preserve that memory. The medium has also inspired conventional novels and stories by writers like Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem, to name just two. Funny, really, how those so-called funny books can end up, after this long history, being so serious after all.

Will Eisner, *A Contract With God* Trilogy: *Life on Dropsie Avenue*

Will Eisner was one of the relentless inventors of the comics industry. During the late '30s and the Second World War, he produced the comic strip *The Spirit*. While breathlessly reporting the adventures of his masked crime-fighting detective, Eisner



MODERN MARVELS

smuggled in cinematic visual techniques and groundbreaking methods of storytelling and characterization. And when he left the field after the war to focus on commercial art, he revolutionized the use of cartoons in advertising, and in his lectures and books, became one of the earliest theorists of the burgeoning medium called "sequential art." It's not for nothing that comicdom's highest honor is called the Eisner Award.

But Eisner, in the future, might be best known as the creator of the graphic novel. *Contract With God and Other Stories* (as well as the slightly later works included in the collection, *Dropsie Avenue* and *A Life Force*), established new benchmarks in the use of sequential art to tell meaningful and personal stories. In the title story, Frimme Hersh has managed to escape anti-Semitic Eastern Europe because of his virtue and his ability to make a contract with God, which he writes on a stone: good behavior for happiness. This happiness is made tangible in the form of an adopted daughter, Rechele, a foundling he raises as his own. When Rechele dies of a sudden illness, Frimme Hersh declares himself free of the contract, and transforms from a pious Hasid into a stereotypical slumlord—complete with shaven face and non-Jewish mistress. Unsatisfied, he eventually seeks a kind of return, and asks the rabbis at his old synagogue to draw up a new contract. Still, things don't end well. God seems to provide despair, at least existentially speaking, if you violate the contract, and agony if you keep it.

This, then, is one kind of Jewish American story: tenement life as a place of dreams denied, promises broken, and suffering triumphant. It's a mood that pervades many of Eisner's works: *Dropsie Avenue*, a history of one Bronx neighborhood's rise, decline, and potential rise once more, is a story told almost entirely through lurid tones and pictures. The story is built on a horrific event: A child is accidentally burned to death, a fate echoed at the end in the dynamiting of the Avenue's last tenement with a legless Vietnam veteran-turned-drug dealer inside it. The Avenue's history, in Eisner's retelling, is filled with horrors, from corruption to gang violence to prostitution to drugs to interethnic strife to the Prohibition-era equivalent of a drive-by shooting. Eisner's bold and gritty visuals, at times reminiscent of German Expressionist art, similarly picture the world precariously perched on the shadowy border between reality and nightmare: They seem, somehow, real—and frighteningly more than real at the same time.

This is not to say that Eisner is unrelentingly nihilistic or despairing. Like many who lived through the Great Depression, Eisner is struck by the tenacity of the American community—and particularly the immigrant Jewish community—to continue in the face of great suffering. In *A Life Force*, Eisner describes tenement dwellers, who "remained holding fast to their beachhead simply because they had only just arrived from other, more hostile places [and] carried with them the tabernacle of a life force they hardly understood." In chapters like "Izzy, the Cockroach and the Meaning of Life," the graphic novel's main protagonist, Jacob Shtarkah (Yiddish for "strong man"), wonders whether there is anything to life in the Great Depression beyond sheer animal survival. Shtarkah, seeing a cockroach clinging to life, soliloquizes: "Well, there are only two possibilities! Either, man created God . . . or, God created man! If . . . man created God . . . then, the reason for life is only in the mind of man!! If, on the other hand, God created man, then the reason for living is still only a guess! After all is said and done, Who really knows the will of God?"

Though Eisner grew up in New York City and went to high school in the Bronx, none of the works in the trilogy are, strictly speaking, autobiographies. But all of them are drawn



MODERN MARVELS

from Eisner's personal experience and from his reflections about a time and a place long gone. *A Contract with God and Other Stories* shows the changing demographics of New York neighborhoods and the Jews who inhabited them more powerfully than any academic monograph. Eisner's visuals (based on both memory and research), with their realistic depictions of the appearances, styles of dress, behavior, and speech of the tenement dwellers, help us to re-imagine a vanished world. In reading the various stories, one is reminded of how this work was published just two years after Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*. That book had its share of photographs, but Eisner's drawings bring that world to life in perhaps an even more powerful way.

Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale*

If early critics of the graphic novel questioned its ability to take on serious topics, *Maus* put those concerns firmly to rest: Its first volume was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award and, with the publication of the second volume in 1992, the work won a Pulitzer Prize. *Maus*, whose first section is subtitled "My Father Bleeds History," is an artist's story of his father's experiences during the Holocaust, but also, inevitably, becomes about the larger story of the Jewish experience in Europe in that nightmarish period. Like the best works of modern Jewish literature, *Maus* expertly balances the personal and the communal.

Spiegelman's ability to render vast amounts of complex information in clear, visually arresting forms and layouts, and to express stark and existential despair in the sharp lines and deep pools of his inks are prominently on display in *Maus*. But the book's most striking visual feature is the identification of ethnic or national groups with different types of animals. The transformation of Germans into cats and Jews into mice provides an eloquent, unspoken illustration of the archetypal and racial nature of the Holocaust: Spiegelman's provocative decision to include a quote from Adolf Hitler at the beginning of the work—"The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human"—shows the contours of the conflict while suggesting precisely how wrong the ideas behind it were. But Spiegelman's animals are also a sharp response to an earlier generation of Walt Disney-type comics, whose more restrictive approach to the capacities of the graphic medium consisted of a virtual menagerie of animals who, generally speaking, provided a light and sunny version of human society. Spiegelman's first versions of the story that became *Maus* appeared in a work ironically titled *Funny Aimals* (sic).

In *Maus*, Spiegelman confronts a decades-old debate over the possibility of representing the Holocaust in art and even in historical testimony: How does one best respond, as an artist and a person, to the claims made by the millions of murdered and to an event that taxes the possibilities of recording it, much less re-imagining it? *Maus* makes clear that the stakes are not only national, or universal, but personal as well. In telling the "survivor's tale" of his father, Vladek, with whom he has a conflicted and complex relationship, he also must grapple with how that relationship is shadowed and shaded by the ghost of Richieu, the brother he never knew who perished in the Holocaust, and by his mother Anja's suicide. (One of the few appearances of human forms in the text is in the story-within-a-story called "Prisoner of the Hell Planet," where the eponymous prisoner is not Vladek or Anja, but Art himself, sentenced by his mother's suicide to a life suffused with pain and trauma.)

Looked at this way, *Maus* becomes a "survivor's tale" not just of Vladek, but of Spiegelman



himself; the book is one of the foundational texts in what has since become known as "second generation" Holocaust literature, wherein writers like Spiegelman, Thane Rosenbaum, Melvin Jules Bukiet, and other children of survivors attempt to make sense of their own lives through the event that most powerfully affected that of their parents. Few works about the Holocaust in the last thirty years have been so influential, and remain so powerful.

Ben Katchor, *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer: Stories*

Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer may not, in the technical sense, be a "graphic novel." It began its life as a series of strips in the English-language Jewish newspaper *The Forward*, and still bears the hallmarks of its origin: With the exception of the final story, "The Evening Combinator," there is rarely continuity between one page and the next, except in the form of the protagonist, who wanders and discovers as he goes.

What he discovers is unlike anything else in the history of the graphic novel, and arguably in Jewish literature. A casual reader might, for a brief moment, mistake Katchor's work for an intensively researched re-creation of vanished institutions, companies, jobs, and individuals of the great decades of Jewish New York. But only for a brief moment. It soon becomes clear that Knipl is walking the streets of a New York that, though familiar, never actually was, one that boasts travelogue theaters, Holy Pocket Leagues, hairstyle reports, saliva storage tanks, pretzel addict asylums. . . . The list of Katchor's inventive creations goes on and on.

Katchor delights in thickly described urban scenes and the big-shouldered men and *makher*s who populate those scenes—especially big-shouldered, the way Katchor draws them. It's somewhat reminiscent of the great works of Jewish-American literature of the '50s—what Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* might have been if it were crossed with the pathos of Bernard Malamud's short fiction. But, as Michael Chabon points out in his introduction to the book, Katchor's style of invented memory probably owes its largest debt to the Argentine writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges. Katchor's rough illustrative style—the heavy contrast in black and white, the doubled and tripled lines that provide many of the characters with a shimmery air of unreality—only accentuates the impression that we are wandering, along with Knipl, through a dream of a city.

Describing Katchor's work in this way, though, carries its own risk: overlooking the fact that it's very, very funny. We can't confuse the solemn musings of those pretzel addicts and hairstyle reporters, after all, with Katchor's own deadpan, dead-on voice, deeply attuned to a classic Jewish sense of the absurd. Maybe the joke would be lost on the licensed expectorators of Katchor's world, or the members of the Department of Civil Remorse, but not on the rest of us. A *knipl*, in Yiddish, is technically a knot; but it's used idiomatically to mean a nest egg, and that's what Katchor's remarkable work is: a hidden treasure, filled with unexpected pleasures.

Harvey Pekar, *The Quitter*

Harvey Pekar may be the most famous graphic novelist you've never heard of: In the past few years, a movie based on his comic book and graphic novel series *American Splendor* drew raves at Sundance, and, even before that, he was a regular guest on David Letterman's late night talk show. Funny, since the ironically titled *American Splendor* celebrates precisely



his obscurity and repeated failures. As Pekar regularly tells his readers in the first-person autobiographical monologues that make up most of his graphic novels, things haven't gone particularly well for him: a dead-end filing job, the frustrations of freelance writing, a lack of success with the opposite sex—all made worse by his misanthropic approach to other human beings.

Unlike Eisner and Spiegelman, Pekar writes only the scripts and provides the roughest of sketch breakdowns. Pekar's many artistic collaborators, most notably R. Crumb, have followed the lead Pekar sets for them: They generally revel in portraying him as the living incarnation of the sad sack, the schlemiel, the loser, the intellectual crank, an amalgam of the worst features of Jewish stereotypes in the post-Woody Allen era, with few of the redeeming qualities. But Pekar himself is not a cartoon, and his scripts, which may be the most detailed and nuanced autobiographical explorations in the graphic novel world today, tell a different story.

As he has moved from simple collections of *American Splendor* comics to full-fledged graphic novels, Pekar has grown correspondingly ambitious about exploring his own story, and *The Quitter* is a case in point. In an unflinching retelling of his life story, Pekar reveals himself to be the child of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, whom he loves and who love him, but whose inability to understand American culture—and their American child—causes significant problems for young Harvey. Pekar is disillusioned with the Jewish socialist idealism expressed by his mother and the old country traditionalism exemplified by his father. Rather, it is his own failure to become a next-generation immigrant success story that holds his attention.

In *The Quitter*, he attempts to explore, describe, and puzzle his way through this mystery. Along the way, Pekar is not shy about sharing with us his intellectual and physical gifts (his photographic memory, his talent for subtle jazz criticism, his skill at fighting), and Dean Haspiel's graphics nicely complement Pekar's efforts: His Harvey looks very little like the shambles shown to us by Crumb and others. But these accomplishments can never satisfy Pekar's need for praise, his certainty that he will never get it, and his corresponding tendency to quit trying anything when he feels it's not going well. Is this rooted in his parents' seeming inability to praise him? Possibly, in part; certainly, the graphic novel's action reaches its climax when, after Harvey quits college, a series of events culminates in a fistfight with his father and cousin. But Pekar puts most of the blame on some perverse tendency within himself—a tendency that he can never fully understand, merely chronicle and worry at.

Joann Sfar, *The Rabbi's Cat*

Joann Sfar differs from the previous four graphic artists in a number of important ways. He is the youngest of the five (born in 1971); he is the only non-American of the group (he is one of the most prominent French graphic artists); and he is the only one with a Sephardic Jewish heritage, on which he draws in some of his work (though his mother was an Ashkenazic Jew). But there are similarities between them nonetheless.

Sfar's work, like Spiegelman's, draws on the tradition of the talking animal, though here, the eponymous rabbi's cat is not an artist's animalistic representation of a human being, nor (as in some Jewish legends) a human under some transformative spell. In Sfar's work, the rabbi's cat is a cat, with cat instincts and cat desires, though it's certainly also an allegorical



MODERN MARVELS

stand-in for human beings, with its constant philosophical questioning, its burning desire to know, and its jealousy for the rabbi's daughter Zlabya, its owner, which can only be called sexual. (Sfar's sensuous and playful drawing style, which provides delightful counterpoint to some of the more serious discussions in the work, is particularly resonant here.) The cat's capacity for speech, magically abnormal as it is, does not make it human; but it does allow it to enter human society.

Once the cat can talk, it can—and does—begin to tell lies. But not only lies: The cat, whose Jewish identity is a matter of some debate in the novel, argues in a fashion that could be referred to as Talmudic about what exactly God wants from people and how and why obeying Jewish law is worthwhile. The book resolutely refuses to provide an answer as it moves between Algeria and Paris, traditional myth and modernity. In one section, we meet the rabbi's cousin, Malka of the Lions, whose connection with at least one lion has rendered him a mythic figure whom even the Algerians tremble at; in the next, the rabbi, who has traveled to Paris to meet his son-in-law's family, finds his nephew Rebibo, who has thrown over his Jewish identity to make money street-performing as an Arab.

No one in the book quite manages to find a comfortable resting place, metaphorically or otherwise. The cat loses its ability to speak early on, and its struggles to return to its former glories are a constant refrain in the novel. The rabbi, who struggles with the challenges of the modern world, has an ancestor named Sfar who may be Jewish or Arab (or perhaps both, in the same way that the rabbi's cat is both animal and human). And *Zlabya*, who has married a Parisian rabbi, cannot decide if she is happy with the Jewish identity of her Algerian childhood or if she could somehow transform herself into a Parisian woman.

All of this doubt, this uncertainty, is rendered in a flowing style, verbally and visually, which disguises nuance under ostensible simplicity. The lush colors and bright palette Sfar employs throughout the graphic novel, as well as his ability to shift from caricature to realistic depiction—sometimes even in the same panel—illustrates how artistic style can accentuate theme, how the languages of fairy tale, philosophy, and even social history can stand side by side.

Background Literature

The following scholarly and literary works were referenced in the essay and are recommended for those who would like to explore the themes and subjects discussed in greater depth.

Will Eisner, *Will Eisner's Shop Talk*

Will Eisner wasn't only a masterful writer and artist; he was a craftsman as well, and there's nothing master craftsmen like better than talking to each other about their quirks, talents, and creative processes. In this series of interviews with other comics giants—including major Jewish figures like Jack Kirby, Joe Kubert, and Harvey Kurtzman—Eisner shares memories about life in the early days of the business, and gives tips to readers and artists alike.

Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*

In this intensely readable, popular history of the rise of the comic book, Jones focuses mostly on poor Jewish kids with colorful dreams: most notably Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, whose creation of the Man of Steel went largely unappreciated and almost entirely unrewarded for decades.



MODERN MARVELS**Stan Lee, *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee***

One of the foundational figures in American comics tells his own story. Stanley Lieber created or co-created characters like Spider-Man, the X-Men, and the Hulk, helping to usher in what he called "The Marvel Age of Comics."

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

Still the best single-volume introduction to comic book art as a medium that brings words and pictures together in an entirely new, and different, way. McCloud, a talented writer and graphic artist himself, leads the reader nimbly through theoretical issues, technical minefields, and a splash of historical context in a graphic novel form that's both fun and intensely informative.

Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution*

When the counterculture took to comic books—and vice versa—the results were provocative, infuriating, hilarious, and eye-opening. Rosenkranz's lavishly illustrated history of the period and its major figures, including R. Crumb and Art Spiegelman, is not for the easily offended or the faint of heart, but is required reading for anyone wanting to know how comics got serious.

Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde*

Sacco calls his work "graphic journalism," and in his presentation of the lives and fortunes of the residents of a small town in eastern Bosnia located inside a UN-designated "safe area," the word "graphic" carries both of its distinct meanings. Not for the faint of heart (or stomach), Sacco's almost photorealistic pictures and his rendition of the townspeople's voices leaves an indelible image of one of the most important crises of the 1990s—and one that many Americans only followed in the vaguest of outlines.

Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (volumes 1 and 2)

Satrapi's faux-childlike drawings—big round faces, simple expressions, almost stylized backgrounds—are instrumental in giving the impression of a world seen through the eyes of youth. But this "story of a childhood" is hardly light or juvenile: Satrapi's memoir of life before and after the Islamic Revolution is both a history lesson and a passionate political argument, as we witness the travails of herself, her family, and her friends.

Yoshihiro Tatsumi, *Abandon the Old in Tokyo*

Tatsumi is Japan's master of the graphic art form; he was responsible for inventing the term *gekiga*, a kind of more substantive, dramatic version of *manga*. In this collection of stories, some written for children, some for adults, he illustrates, through rich if bleak illustrations, the loneliness of city dwellers. Optimism is not a strong feature of Tatsumi's stories; but to his many ardent admirers, they express a dark, realistic truth.

Recommended Reading

The following works of literature also explore the theme of graphic novels in Jewish literature are recommended for those who are interested in continuing to read and discuss books on this theme.

Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*

Chabon's Pulitzer-prize winning novel is quite simply the best work of fiction ever written about comic books. But more than that: in telling the story of two young men who set out to conquer the world of funnybooks, Chabon has rendered, in his beautiful descriptions and indelible characters, a whole world of early twentieth-century American Jewry, from its immigrant communities to its avant-garde outskirts.

Will Eisner, *The Plot: The Secret Story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*

Eisner's final work is his most historically detailed engagement with his Jewish heritage. In his retelling of the history of the notorious anti-Semitic forgery, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Eisner once more thoroughly debunks the scurrilous charges of Jewish conspiracies the work



MODERN MARVELS

contains—while at the same glumly chronicling the failure of all the previous debunkings. A sobering, but important, work by a master.

Aline Kaminsky-Crumb, *Love that Bunch*

Aline Kaminsky-Crumb may be best known as the wife of groundbreaking graphic artist R. Crumb, but she's an important creative force in her own right. In this collection of her stories, drawn from personal experience and her own imagination, Kaminsky-Crumb gives a raw, psychologically charged perspective on what it was like growing up a Jewish girl in the baby boom era, when old attitudes were giving way to new experiences.

Jonathan Lethem, *The Fortress of Solitude*

The title itself—taken from Superman's Arctic refuge—alerts us to the central role comic books play in the worldview of one of America's best-known younger novelists. But within the novel, which features the ebbs and flows of the friendship between a Jewish and an African-American boy in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Boerum Hill, comic books are a medium that everyone can understand: different kids come together to pore over their four-color pages.

Harvey Pekar, *American Splendor*

If *The Quitter* is the story of Harvey Pekar's early life, *American Splendor* contains a series of Pekar's reports from the world of adulthood: and, to judge from the stories he writes, it's not the prettiest place to be. Pekar's lacerating studies of his world and himself are hardly glamorous; what makes them splendid, the book's ironic title notwithstanding, is the acuity of his eye and the wisdom in his pen.

Joann Sfar, *Klezmer: Tales of the Wild East*

Sfar's project after *The Rabbi's Cat* turns from North Africa to Eastern Europe, and from talking cats to traveling musicians: specifically, klezmer musicians, who play at Jewish weddings, bar mitzvahs, and the like. Sfar's story of the fortunes of one klezmer band—its formation, its violent destruction, and its slow reconstitution—are, in some ways, his attempt to tell the story of the Eastern European Jewish community of his mother's family.

James Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*

What if the Golem played baseball? In this graphic novel, the large, haunting figure who takes the field for the barnstorming Stars of David in the 1920s isn't actually the mystical animated clay figure of Jewish legend. Who it actually is, however, and what happens as a result of the masquerade, says much about American history and American hatred in the first decade of the 20th century—and gives a new tweak to an old folktale in the process.

J.T. Waldman, *Megillat Esther*

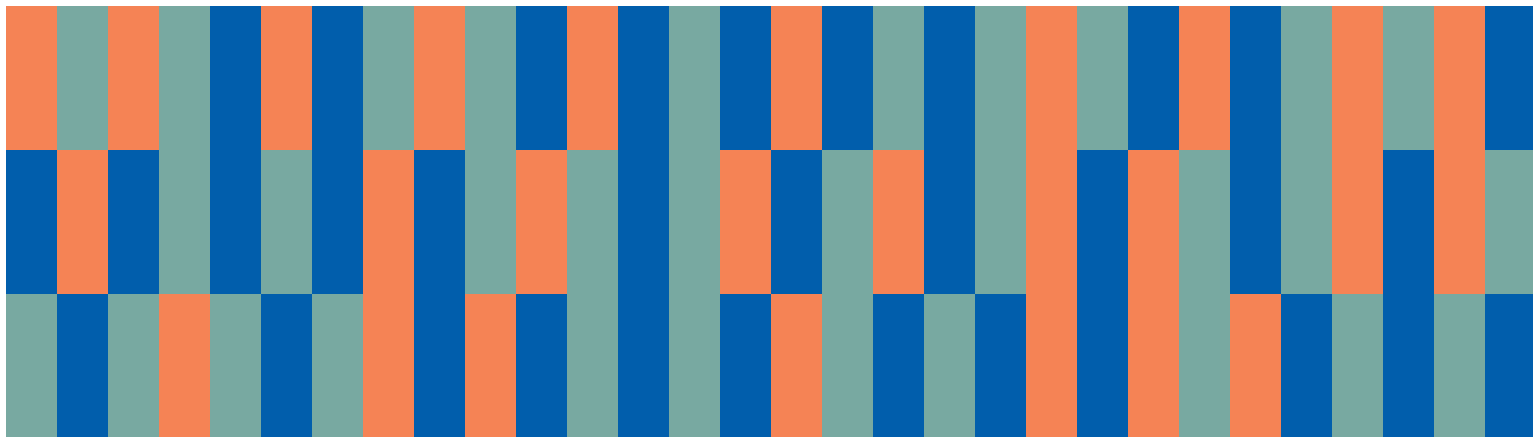
Megillat Esther, the scroll of the book of Esther, has a plot that sounds like it's ripped from the pages of a comic book: the Jews on the verge of annihilation, the heroes seemingly coming out of nowhere to save the day, the evil villain's plan turned on himself. J.T. Waldman decided to turn this from metaphor to reality, and has produced an adaptation which manages, somehow, to be both traditionally faithful and eminently modern.

Jeremy Dauber

Jeremy Dauber is the Atran Assistant Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture at Columbia University. He graduated from Harvard College and did his doctoral work at Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. His first book, *Antonio's Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Jewish Literature*, was published by Stanford University Press. He was also the project director of the National Yiddish Book Center's "Great Jewish Books" project and has given lectures on Jewish literature around the country. In addition, he writes an on-line column on television and movies for the *Christian Science Monitor*, for which he received an award from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists in 2003.



We are always looking for the book it is necessary to read next. SAUL BELLOW



www.ala.org/publicprograms
www.nextbook.org