

ARGUING COMICS: LITERARY MASTERS ON A POPULAR MEDIUM. Edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. 208 pp. \$22.00, paper.

Reviewed by Louis Phillips

Panel One

Andrew Sarris, reviewing the latest Batman movie for the *New York Observer* (26 June 2005) openly confessed to his readers that he was never a comic book fan:

I never got into the habit of reading comic books, even though I was and remain an avid follower of newspaper comic strips. I don't claim any profound reason for this cultural inconsistency. Perhaps it's because comic strips have always been part of something larger in real life, whereas comic-book characters dwelt by themselves in Neverland.

The problem with Sarris' reasoning is that there has always been intermarriage between comic strips and comic books: many books started out first as strips, and numerous strips were spun off from popular books. However, I readily admit that we read comic strips in newspapers differently from the way we read strips brought together in the comic book format. Some comic strips in newspapers are shorthand versions of almost forgotten Saturday morning movie serials: we get stories and situations in bits and pieces, and we carry them about in our heads until the next installment (of "Dick Tracy," "The Phantom," "Tarzan," or "Prince Valiant") appears. Comic books are usually complete unto themselves: step right up, no waiting.

In *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*, one of my favorite critics—Robert Warshow—states flat out in "Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," "I know that I don't like the comics myself." However, most of the name writers included in this collection—E. E. Cummings, Umberto Eco, Marshall McLuhan, Dorothy Parker, Gilbert Seldes, and so on—do like comics, or at least are fans of one or more particular strips. (Parker and Annie Russell Marble are the only women represented, which is not surprising, for the comics seem a distinctly male arena. Just enter your local comic book store and count the number of women present.) Parker's short piece is, as she announces, "A Mash Note to Crockett Johnson," and if you are young you probably have no idea what Crockett Johnson's Barnaby looks like. It is indeed a shame that the editors did not choose to include, or could not include (rights and permissions fees being so outlandish), examples of some of the comics written about.

Panel Two

Manny Farber's first essay titled "Comic Strips" (there are two) opens by asserting, "Comic strips are not what they used to be." I suspect that writing *about* comic strips isn't what it used to be, either: once the politically correct college professors, armed to the teeth with Derridean and Lacanian nonsense, get hold of the strips, elemental joy fast disappears into the quicksand of Freudian/gender-bending/queer-theory bias. One of the strengths of *Arguing Comics*, however, is that the editors mercifully steer clear of academic essays that toss around words such as *hegemonics* and *rearticulation* as if they were \$100 chips in a no-tenure-barred game of Texas hold 'em. The contributors are fairly well known (though not all are "literary masters" as the book's subtitle claims) and, for the most part, write for a general audience. I am not sure, however, what impact many of the essays and articles will have on any reader who has not already spent many happy hours in the company of Krazy Kat, Pogo, Orphan Annie, and Classic Comics.

Unfortunately, editors Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester have muddied the waters by conflating comics with all manner of illustrated storytelling and pictorial novels—for example, Thomas Mann's introduction to Frans Masereel's *Passionate Journey: A Novel Told in 165 Woodcuts*. I suspect Mann's essay is included because a Nobel Prize winner supposedly lends respectability to the project, but for me a novel told in woodcuts is not a comic per se. This anthology would have been stronger and more useful if it had truly concentrated on comics—the word used in its title.

Mann's is not the only dubious entry. "C. L. R. James on Comic Strips" is not about comics but about pop culture in general; so, too, Irving Howe's "Notes on Mass Culture." James is likely present—twice!—because editor Worcester has written a book about him (*C. L. R. James: A Political Biography*), but the James pieces are the weakest contributions of all—not even historically important. In "Letter to Daniel Bell" James writes, "There is expressed in strips not only gangster and police activities of people like Tracy and others, but also the lives of the great masses of people, the things they like to do." What would Daniel Bell reply to such obviousness?

Harold Rosenberg, an important art critic, is represented with an article about Saul Steinberg. I too admire Steinberg's "superb penmanship and the complex intellectual nature of his assertions," but what is he doing in an anthology about "arguing comics"?

Editorial overreaching to achieve intellectual respectability is not an attractive sight. Why not include an essay on Picasso?

Panel Three

The trouble with reviewing anthologies, even the best of them, is that rarely will one reader like all the writers or works included. One person's anthology—a gathering of flowers—is another's nosegay.

Panel Four

Sometimes this anthology gives off an aura of “Hey! Look at me! I’m an intellectual and I am paying attention to comic strips, those lowest of the low, the untouchables of popular culture.” Leslie Fiedler’s 1955 “The Middle against Both Ends” opens this way: “I am surely one of the few people pretending to be an intellectual who can boast that he has read more comic books than attacks on comic books. I do not mean that I have consulted or studied the comics—I have read them, often with some pleasure.” Gee. Imagine a college teacher and critic getting pleasure from a comic book! I’d bet such rare men enjoy movies and baseball, too.

Heer and Worcester arrange the essays and articles chronologically, starting with Sydney Fairfield’s excerpts from “The Tyranny of the Pictorial” (1895) and concluding with the best thing in the book, Umberto Eco’s “The Myth of Superman” (1962). Although I think it valuable to have ready access to early historical comments on comic strips, the material as presented here is too haphazard, with too many gaps for coherent insight to emerge. (Why nothing in depth on *Brenda Starr*? On *Wonder Woman*?) A sideshow atmosphere is present: “Step right up, laydeez and gentleworms, to see LITERARY MASTERS DISCUSSING COMICS!” This reader is amused, bemused, and curious, going from exhibit to exhibit—from Nobel laureate to poet (Cummings is wonderfully entertaining on *Krazy Kat*), from art critic to “autodidactic scholar”—but leaves the tent a bit hungry for new insight into comics about how they work, grow, and seduce.

If you are a true comic book fan you’ve been here before; if you are not a fan, then I wonder whether you will get much out of this book at all. Delmore Schwartz, for example, does a wonderful vaudeville turn on the failings of *Classic Comics* (without once mentioning the creator of the line, Albert Lewis Kanter, who changed my life), but it’s a bit like watching a man with a cannon destroying a flea. Was it really worth so much effort to point out that *Classic Comics* had not done justice to the actual literary works? When I read nearly one hundred of them in my early teens I was no genius, but even I knew that much.

Arguing Comics provides painless access to essays and articles that were widely scattered, but with sharper focus it could have been so much more stimulating. Eco’s essay gives off genuine excitement and sparks—writers who wish to learn about the strategies of narration could do worse than study its insights on “Superman”—but the work was originally published in 1962, which is much too early to conclude an anthology that, according to the publisher’s description, charts “the long-standing cultural conversation that the comics sparked.” I mean, on 19 June 2005 comics history was made when the *New York Times Book Review* covered Garry Trudeau’s *The Long Road Home* on its front page—perhaps a first for a newspaper that does not even print comic

strips. Surely, some ideas formulated between 1962 and today could and should have been added to the conversation.

The editors could have considered Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the development of the graphic novel; Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, a novel about two comic book artists; or Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*. The argument about comics, even if limited to "literary masters," did not stop in 1962.

