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Chronicling Five Decades: A Review of *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics: A Critical Survey*

UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics: A Critical Survey, Nicola Streeten, Palgrave Macmillan, 274 pages, e-book ISBN 978-3-030-36300-0, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36300-0

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This article is a review of *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics: A Critical Survey* (2020) by Nicola Streeten. The book contributes to the literature on women cartoonists and feminist comics in Britain from 1970 to 2019. Streeten undertakes a study of cartoons, pamphlets, posters, postcards, long-form comics, and magazines by individual artists and collectives. In doing so, she studies both the product and its means of production. It seeks to decipher a feminist humour in the language of comics. The work has an underlying current of cultural materialism and hopes to contribute to the tradition of Robbins, Atkinson, and Chute. Through its methodological interventions, it plays an essential role in archiving feminism, comics, and humour.

UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics: A Critical Survey (Streeten 2020; **Figure 1**) is a historical-formalist overview of British feminist cartoons and comics through their means and technologies of production and distribution. The book is structured into seven chapters, including an introduction, four chapters dedicated to a decade-specific study of comics and cartoonists, and a conclusion. In the introduction, the author clarifies that the incorporation of cartoons, posters, and comics in the book has been done according to the logic of a 'language of comics,' especially since the first few decades of the 20th century had no definitive shape of comics as a form or a medium. The book is an investigation of British comics through the lens of humour theories and feminist literature. Each chapter is temporally placed in the decades from 1970 to 2019 and studied in three parts: means of production, style of humour, and case studies. Pieces studied include individual artists, collectives, and other feminist texts in the visual language of comics. The author is able to create a comprehensive record of feminist comics, women cartoonists, and collectives in the fifty-odd years documented.

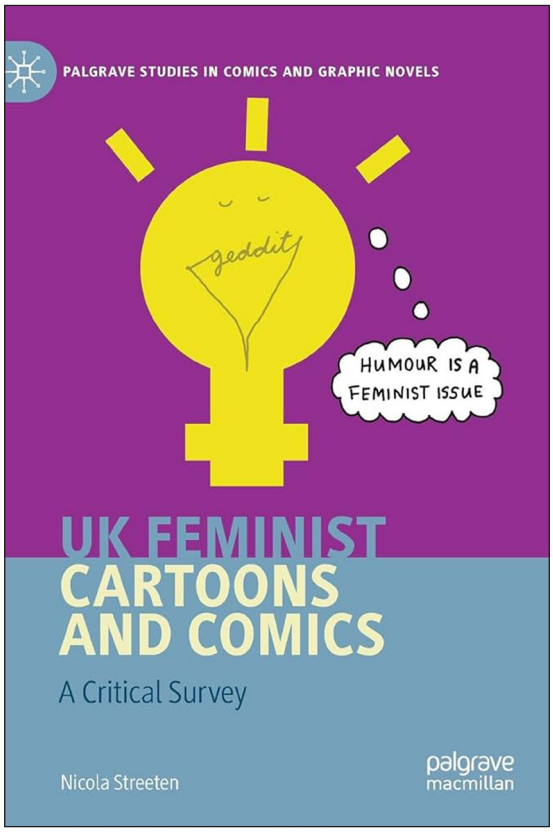

Figure 1: Cover of Nicola Streeten's monograph *UK Feminist Cartoons and Comics: A Critical Survey* © Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Chapter two is an explanation of Streeten's methodology. She undertakes a formalist study of comics but places their production in a historical context. Her contribution lies in her methodology. She employs formalism through the lens of gender to reduce its essentialist tendencies. While this may appear tricky in the beginning, the author makes a convincing case for its application. Streeten hopes to contribute to the gap in the literature on gender and British Comics. She places herself in the tradition of Trina Robbins, Diane Atkinson, and Hillary Chute. However, she departs from the last in redirecting the question of feminism and comics through humour rather than trauma. Streeten gives a theoretical overview of humour through theories of superiority, relief, and the political import of incongruity. She studies each through the lens of feminism and builds a visual language of feminist humour. The simultaneous and conversant study of both feminist comics and women cartoonists makes this possible.

Chapter three is placed in the second-wave feminism in Britain in the 1970s. Feminist cartoons and cartoonists were stereotyped as ugly, angry, and humourless, which the author correctly connects with Sara Ahmed's work on the 'feminist killjoy' (2010). Digging deeper into the stereotype reveals that the 1970s were characterised by a feminist humour that channelled anger. Streeten provides archival insight and anecdotes throughout the book and, in doing so, shows the complementary nature of personal politics and academic research. In fact, this methodology is characteristically feminist. This chapter analyses pamphlets, cartoons, and posters. It studies works produced by collectives like the Women's Liberation Workshop, Red Women's Workshop, *Spare Rib*, and individual artists like Jacky Fleming. It shows how women cartoonists networked through models of friendship and community solidarity. The works produced in the 1970s maintained a consciousness-raising style that was typical of second-wave feminism. Space and resources were created so that feminist movements that would otherwise not get mainstream attention could be provided visibility in the medium of comics. It worked as alternative documentation of comics *and* feminist activity in Britain.

An interesting conclusion that Streeten draws is the discovery of a 'language of sight' in a conversation with cartoonist Jacky Fleming (2020, 82). She defines it as anger channelled into the language of comics, indicating that feminist comics of 1970s Britain tended towards radicalising form and content. This tendency is something very peculiar to the comics journalism that would arrive around two decades later. It can contribute to understanding the evolution of the medium and the tendency of comics for the radical.

Chapter four is about the 1980s, which were marked by an increased visibility of feminist cartoons and cartoons by women. The author's study of comics vis-à-vis their means of production in the decade shows that they were building on the collectivism of the 1970s. The author acknowledges the role of Thatcherism and Britain's neoliberal economy. Affordable printing, unemployment benefits, and availability of readers' reviews meant that women's cartoons gained even more visibility. The economy of the 1980s allowed ease of production (mainstream and alternative) even as the same economic model posed its challenges. The chapter looks at the work of Maggie Ling, Fanny Tribble, and Paula Youens and their emphasis on the crisis in feminist identity. It also studies independent radical magazines like *Trouble and Strife*, *Everywoman*, *Feminist Arts News*, and *Shocking Pink,* the collective publication Cath Tate Cards, and cartoonists Cath Jackson and Kate Charlesworth. Shaped by the political environment of the decade, comics in this period were built on a feminism of difference. Race and sexuality had begun to figure in their networks. As opposed to the 1970s, the 1980s were marked by the impossibility of having an umbrella women's liberation movement that could singularly represent all gender concerns. According to the author, the fractions within this feminism of difference found an outlet in a humour of relief characterised by vulnerability, self-deprecation, and the 'abject' as an aesthetic strategy. Community building became more robust as comics *and* their network enacted identity politics. This difference is also reflected in the evolving language of comics studied in the chapter.

In Chapter five, the jump from the 1980s to the 1990s is marked by a shift from Kristeva's 'abject' to Bakhtin's 'grotesque.' The decade's economic policies and practices showed a subtle change from collectivism to individual entrepreneurship. British feminism was in a heavy dialog with popular culture. The institutional interactions of capitalism and technology in the economic and political climate of the decade raised the question of rising commercialisation of female empowerment and anti-feminism in Britain. At the same time, unemployment benefits in the same state allowed women cartoonists to pursue comics. The author studies artists Lucy Sweet, Lorna Miller, and Rachel House, as well as collective zines and publications, including *Harpies and Quines, Girlfrenzy,* and *Fanny.* Aesthetically, comics were dominated by exaggeration, hyperbole, and confidence. Works of the period make a case for grotesque as transforming the *medium* of comics. Comics had a self-reflexive autobiographical voice that resonated with the vulnerable humour of the 1970s. There was an intimacy with the reader that preceded the first long-form comic in Britain.

So far, incongruity and contradiction as an aesthetic had stuck to comics. This aesthetic lingering raises the larger question of when a creative form develops

dialectical tendencies. Although not explicitly framed as a question, the answer may be found in the placement of the form of comics in a contingent political and economic context. The author appears to suggest that one way of addressing the question lies in comics as cultural and material texts, arising out of particularities and representing the same.

Chapter six studies the first two decades of the 21st century. By the end of the second decade, women cartoonists and feminist comics had gained mainstream visibility. The author observes the transformation of the collective as it became a part of Britain's creative economy. Feminism was markedly commercialised and consumed. However, grassroots activism in the previous decades continued in a digital form. The focus of this chapter is on feminist comics as tragicomedies or the inclusion of an element of tragedy with humour. Even though mainstream comics featured women cartoonists, feminist comics were more voluminous in the alternative industry. This alternate presence indicates the persistence of an order of collectives and grassroots networks. The chapter studies the feminism of the language of comics in graphic novels, the grassroots activism of the digital age, and the transformation from comics collective to community. It looks at the communities of Laydeez do Comics, Graphic Medicine, and the work of British women graphic novelists. It makes an interesting remark about the promise of autobiographical graphic novels, which were in sync with the feminist tradition. Simultaneously, we see an academisation of comics in the form of forums and graphic medicine. It was partly because of the ease of access to university education and the diverse range of academic courses offered.

While feminist comics were still not profitable, the DIY impetus had given way to neoliberal economic practices. The author makes an interesting comment on the commerce and aesthetics of cute as a category in the work of Simone Lia. She explains it as a paradoxical response that signifies both intimacy and commodification. It is explained as a change in broader production, circulation, and consumption practices. The 2000s were marked by sharper feminist thrusts on the body, race, and religion; for instance, Muslim feminism in the work of Asia Alfasi. The question of difference in feminism found an experimental creative expression that influenced the form and medium of comics.

In the conclusion, the author talks about the permanency of documentation and its inaccessibility for women. Feminist practices in comics relied on infrastructure created by feminist platforms. The book is an exploration of humour and illustrates how comics use humour strategically within the feminist cause, simultaneously archiving humour as a weapon. This power was asserted by women cartoonists even as the stereotype of humourless ugly feminists ran rampant.

Streeten's book contributes to the literature on comics studies with feminist frameworks.[1] This would include Trina Robbin's massive repertoire of women cartoonists and Chute's *Graphic Women* (Chute 2010). Streeten's book uses a lesser-used but essential methodology that functions as a necessary intervention. Thisreview attempts a two-pronged critique of the book. First, while the book acknowledges differences in feminism, it also necessitates a separate study of the creative work produced through these differences and how they managed to dictate a hierarchy within progressive feminist networks. Otherwise, Comics Studies does not go beyond accepting well-acknowledged fault lines. The second point addresses a slight and only hiccup: the placement and curious coming together of philosophy, psychology, and literary theory in the introduction. The simultaneity of three separate thoughts (even though necessary) can become slightly confusing for the reader. Too many theories distract the reader from the otherwise smooth narrative of the production and content of women and comics. The undertaken gendered study is a carefully crafted contribution to the history of comics.

The book creates a niche log of feminist comics and women cartoonists and serves a three-fold contribution to archives. First, as stated, it contributes to the account of humour and the evolution of its idea in the backdrop of the question of gender in the past fifty years. Second, it is a contribution to British comics. It comments on the masculinist politics of the archive and the archiving process. It is resolved by the author's methodological intervention in connecting comics in their form, content, and means of production with the broader social reality of gender inequality. It does so by undertaking a grounded and detailed study of women cartoonists and their networks, thereby contributing to the third and last archive of feminism at the grassroots. Humour played an essential role in the various expressions of feminism, one of which was the massive work done by women collectives, publishers, and cartoonists. Often, these works also documented protests and events that were not picked by mainstream channels.

Another related question raised in the book is the advantage of clubbing feminist comics and comics by women cartoonists as the subject. As initially pointed out, the commonly done formalist analysis of comics skips out on questions of production. Streeten brings together product and production, creating a necessary feminist intervention based on cultural materialism. She looks at both the language of comics as a product and the various economic and social production setups that made it possible.

[1] Sandra Cox's *Intersectional Feminist Readings of Comics: Interpreting Gender in Graphic Narratives* (2022) has a similar thrust. However, it looks at individual comics in one part and cartoonists from the historically marginalised sections of USA and Canada in the second.

In choosing to club the two together, Second-Wave feminism's "personal is political" finds academic expression in a work that the author correctly refers to as a genealogical project.

Additionally, the author's personal politics are in line with the methodological intervention of the book. The author mentions her personal and political investment in the project and the connections she made with women cartoonists and collective artists. It is comparable to how women cartoonists networked to facilitate feminist comics production and distribution. The book is a study of the feminist archive in the larger picture through both popular culture and imagetext. It also points out the intersectionality of feminism and the subsequent dialectical relation of difference and consolidation. In her detailed case studies, it is this precise underpinning that finds consonance with the jagged aesthetics of comics.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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