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REVIEW

Context is Everything: A Review of Comics Studies: A Guidebook

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***Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, edited by Charles Hatfield and Bart Beaty, Rutgers University Press, 326 pages, 2020, ISBN 9780813591414.**

This article is a review of *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, edited by Charles Hatfield and Bart Beaty (Rutgers University Press, 2020). This volume, ranging over the broad themes of Histories, Cultures, Forms, and Genres, provides an introduction to some of the major debates in comics studies. The review maintains that in the attempt to embrace a wider context, an opportunity has been missed to challenge and refresh traditional narratives. It can be argued that a single volume guidebook may not be the best place to undertake such a major reinvention of comics studies.

Keywords: collected editions; comics studies; scholarship; scholarly communications; publishing

According to Peter Webster, author of *The Edited Collection: Pasts, Present and Future* (2020), edited collections “have been suspected of incoherence as volumes – of being no more than the sum of their parts”. (‘Writing’ 2020) While Webster makes a case for the academic vitality of edited collections, it is clear that editors do not have an enviable task, even when they have set clear parameters from the outset for the sake of the volume, the contributors, and the readers. Reviewers for that matter are not to be envied: are we to take the volume as a unified whole or to treat those ‘parts’ as if they are independent critical essays?

Comics Studies: A Guidebook (Hatfield and Beaty 2020; **Figure 1**) sets out to provide an introduction, “an overview of comics studies that sketches the contours of the field and spotlights core critical issues” (p. 1). Its Table of Contents is organised according to thematic section headings familiar to comics studies single volume

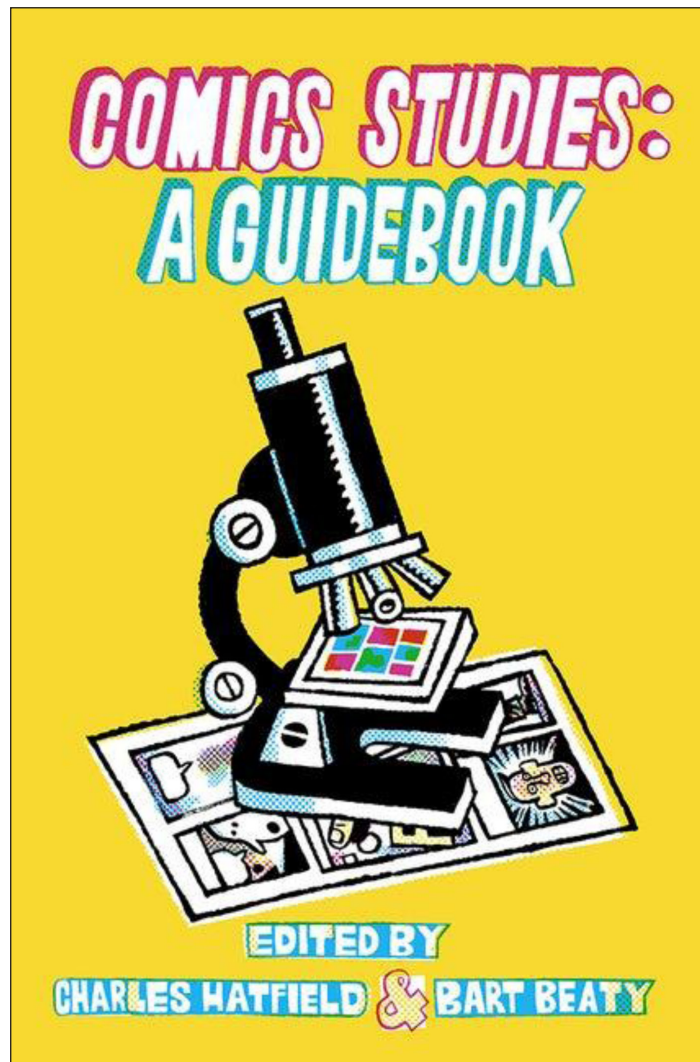


Figure 1: Cover of *Comics Studies: A Guidebook* (2020) © Rutgers University Press.

editions, including histories, cultures, and forms. (see Heer and Worcester 2008 as one example) Hatfield and Beaty add a 'Genres' section. These section headings are wide enough by design to accommodate both the variety and specificity of the chapters included. Not uncommonly some essays could fit comfortably under a number of chapter headings: for example Frenchy Lunning's on Manga (ch. 5) in the Histories section of the Guidebook could have easily been placed in the Cultures and Genre Sections according to the brief definitions provided by the editors in the introduction.

Volumes with such loose frameworks, trying to cover so much ground, are easily taken to task for what is not included. This loose framework can be so broad as to form “a sum of its parts” approach, as Webster would have it, and illustrates the major challenge for introductions to comics studies in an edited collection (or Hatfield’s and Beaty’s “first stop”, (p. 1) and Heer’s and Worcester’s “starting point” and “springboard” (p. xii): “A number of ambitious books have sought to cover comics studies in a single bound, yet it remains difficult to map this vast and spreading field”. (Hatfield and Beaty 2020 p. 1). Indeed, these difficulties cannot be answered in single, edited volumes of essays, not just because of the multi-disciplinary nature of comics studies with its new voices and new technologies, but also the ‘old’ voices not admitted to the traditional recitations of ‘guidebook’ level information in the charting of comics histories. These traditional or standard recitations raise the issues firstly of whether or not the volume ‘coheres’, and secondly how readers are being ‘guided’.

The title should itself be instructive: this is a guidebook for comic studies, as noted above by the editors “a first stop”. To be sure, there are chapters here which provide a good starting point to understanding the art of comics, not surprisingly to be found in the Forms section: Cartooning by Andrei Molotiu (ch. 11), Design in Comics: Panels and Pages by Martha Kuhlman (ch. 12), and Words and Images by Jan Baetens (ch. 13). The volume also offers essays which include some of the standard histories relating to the evolution of Comic Strips (by Ian Gordon, ch. 1) and Comic Books (by Charles Hatfield, ch. 2) in the Histories sections. Moreover, there is much to learn here of the various comic types (I will not use the word ‘genre’ here-see below): the usual suspects, including Superheroes (by Marc Singer, ch. 14, and dotted throughout other chapters), Manga (by Frenchy Lunning, ch. 5 and some coverage in ch. 16, Girls, Women, and Comics by Mel Gibson), Franco-Belgian comics (by Bart Beaty in European Traditions, ch. 4), The Graphic Novel (by Isaac Cates, ch. 6); and the not so usual, including children (by Philip Nel, ch. 9) and romance (considered in ch. 16 as above). In addition, there are chapters on the Comics Industries (ch. 7 by Matthew P. McAllister and Brian MacAuley) and Digital Comics (ch. 17 by Darren Wershler, Kalervo Sinervo, and Shannon Tien), much needed essays of a practical and business nature.

So, on the face of it, the sum of the parts does impart some basic information on aspects of comics, the subject (s) of comics studies. But the first part of the title must be considered: Does the volume provide information on comic studies, its history, background, methodologies etc? This may appear to quibble; certainly the various topics and issues covered here are what makes up comic studies. But comics studies as an academic discipline is so new that its origins and methods are of equal importance for consideration, maybe even more so at a time when “the grand narratives” (Hatfield and Beaty 2020 p3) are being challenged. Benjamin Woo’s essay on Readers, Audiences, and Fans (ch. 8) offers some introspection on comics studies: how much it owes to “dedicated” fans who “did the yeoman’s work in documenting the corpus, attributing authorship, and interviewing people...” (p. 118).

In a sense, the editors do provide some of this analysis primarily in the parameters they set out in their introduction. They make the point that “there is always a risk that rehashing the grand narratives will hide other riches, that too great an emphasis on the famous and oft-exported will blind us to local scenes *and* to a larger, fuller world, one of diverse narrative art traditions” (p. 3). Having admitted that risk, they acknowledge that “for practical reasons, we have centered this book on (broadly speaking) Anglophone comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels, yet we seek to situate those genres within the greater context of world comics” (p. 2). The Anglophone focus is identified up front which is fair enough. The addition of world comics as a greater context while accepting the risk implies that the editors want to have it all ways, adding to the difficulties they themselves have identified.

Further into the Introduction they maintain “up front that this Guidebook repeats certain grand narratives that seems important to grounding our sense of Anglophone comics” (p. 4). The early work in comics studies went a long way in tracking histories and origins, albeit of mainstream and for the most part U.S. comics. The re-iteration of the standard grand narratives across chapters, especially those found in the Histories section, begs for subjecting their Anglophone focus to more rigorous analysis; in other words, prying open those narratives by admitting to the diversity of voices missed.

For example, these traditional historical narratives of the evolution of (US) comics, from 'The Yellow Kid' through superheroes to *Peanuts* (or *Calvin and Hobbes*, *Doonsbury* et al; see ch. 1–2) show their age by precluding an understanding of a richer, more complex process in the trajectory of US comics. This is curious given the editors' statements in the Introduction. For they did not need to squeeze the world of comics into one volume, but could have discovered a myriad of voices right within the Anglophone (really the book's largest focus is the US) world, voices commonly excluded from the 'grand narrative'.

This focus is largely down to the grand narratives almost exclusively referencing the mainstream media or mass media, major newspaper titles for example, ignoring the hinterlands, local or community newspapers. Such newspapers, for example African American newspapers like the *Philadelphia Tribune*, may not illustrate the 'mass' in mass media, but they do demonstrate that comics as media have always attracted a diversity of voices (webcomics did not 'discover' this diversity), and that US comics even of a certain era at least were not just all about superheroes. For example, not mentioned within the narrative is the African-American embrace of comics, including Ollie Harrington's *Dark Laughter* (1935) (later retitled *Bootsie*) and *Jive Gray* (1941–1951) or Jackie Ormes's *Dixie to Harlem* (1937) the first strip by a black female cartoonist (Goldstein 2019).

As a newly-minted comics studies doctoral student in 2019, I had the opportunity last year to see the Library of Congress' chronological exhibition, *Comic Art: 120 years of panels and pages* (LoC 2019–2020). Comics such as *All-Negro Comics* (1947) and *Twisted Sisters Comics* (1994) were all new to me. They should not have been, but even as a comic neophyte, not a fan at all, even I had imbibed the traditional narratives. The true, 'alternative' history or comic movement, was not actually restricted to the 60s and 70s (as covered by Roger Sabin in *Underground and Alternative Comics*, ch3). It was happening much earlier, alongside the 'mainstream': the history of those others who contributed but were outside the traditional narrative.

Mel Gibson in her chapter *Girls, Women, And Comics* (ch. 16, problematically located in the Genre section, which refers to "types" or "subfields" of comics

according to the editors in the introduction) maintains “though comics have often been wrongly identified as an exclusively masculinist field, close attention to its history reveals that comics for girls and women have played a significant role in the medium’s development. Such comics have often been innovative and arguably formed part of the mainstream” (p. 241). Why ‘arguably’ though, and why is this chapter in the Genre section? Why not in Histories? The impression created by this placement is that the subject matter is ancillary, adjunct to the grand narratives created ‘arguably’ by those of a different background.

Theresa Tensuan’s chapter, *Difference* (ch. 10), explores comics that “delineate the ways in which cultural expectations are encoded in the form’s visual idioms and narrative conventions” (p. 141). The choices made in this volume, and in most recitations of the comics’ traditional narrative, also reflect cultural expectation as well as social position (see Woo p. 119, quoting Pierre Bourdieu). Do these reflections arise here because of the admitted albeit limited Anglophone emphasis, or with the addition of the world comics context while still identifying them, as well as other non-mainstream voices, as adjunct to that emphasis?

The risk incurred not only affects the treatment of Anglophone comics, but also ‘world’ comics, the coverage which is uneven in execution and which does not entirely embrace the world much outside of the customary focus on Franco-Belgian and Japanese (in much the same way that the usual canonical titles appear and reappear, for example- *Fun Home* (2007), *Jimmy Corrigan* (2006), etc).

While Manga is allocated a chapter to itself (in Histories, not in Genres), European comics make due with just one chapter. This is not to say that there are not some interesting bits of information here, especially in the corrective the chapter provides to the usual trope, at least from US and UK creators, that comics receive more respect in France: “In 2014...a working group, *the Etats generaux de la bande dessinee*, had been created to investigate the conditions within the French comics industry. Their 2016 report was dire: 36 percent of comics creators lived below the poverty threshold, and 53 percent of comics authors earned less than the annualization of the minimum wage” (p. 53). This is reminiscent of a recent similar UK survey of comics creators, including the following results: “The average overall income from sources

directly or indirectly related to comics production in 2018/19, was £10,299, and 66% of respondents made less than £5,000 from their comics production in 2018/19" (Berry 2020). The grass is not necessarily greener.

The Genres section seems a bit of a mixed bag of essays. This impression is partially owing to the use of the term 'genre', in this volume and in comics studies research at large: it is one of those terms for which there seems to be no set definition. A major debate itself is whether comics as a whole are a genre or a type of media or a format or maybe a combination of all of these (a debate not covered in the book, or even discussed in the Introduction; see Labarre 2020, as an example of such a consideration). If comics are to be accepted as a genre, the placement of Digital Comics (ch. 17) is problematic: shouldn't it be in Forms? Aren't they just comics in a different format? Girls, Women, and Comics (ch. 16) is problematic as well as a genre, even as a type of media, for exactly the reasons Gibson maintains herself: comics by and for women should not be considered outside of the mainstream narrative. Yet, here they are, outside the 'Histories' of the volume, although Manga (ch. 5) is located there. This placement is additionally confusing owing to Gibson's coverage of shojo manga in her chapter, maintaining that "shojo manga, comics for girls, have helped to mainstream Japanese comics worldwide" (p. 248). Superheroes (ch. 14) a type of comic which usually dominates the mainstream narrative is an intriguing inclusion in this chapter given the placement of the Manga chapter, as well as that of The Graphic Novel chapter.

All of this is to say that I was confused by the Genres section, and the loose framework indicated by the broad headings contributes to this confusion. The editors' brief descriptions of each section heading do not dispel the confusion: there is not much attempt at specifying what is meant by Histories or Cultures or Genres. For this reason, I am not convinced that the volume is more than a sum of its parts (although those parts are informative in places), that it coheres around well-defined themes that provide an adequate basic understanding of comics. More importantly, there is a missed opportunity not only to refresh the grand narratives of Anglophone comics, but also to redefine the basic information that would guide new comics scholars and readers. It appears that some of the parts at least are here; they just need to be woven into a new narrative.

Therein lies the problem: the single volume collected edition, at least that seeking to represent the knowledge of a given topic, is not the best vehicle for doing such major work as redefining, maybe reinventing the grand narratives, the very basis of comics studies. I began this essay by saying the editors do not have an enviable task, even and perhaps especially from practical perspectives. I have been a contributor of such essays and know the considerable challenges for editors and publishers, not the least being the time it takes to collect and publish completed essays. I have seen such volumes take years in the making with original objectives falling by the wayside. In the hard sciences, as Peter Webster observes, little attention is given over to monographs and collected editions, largely because by the time a book gets to publication, science has moved on ('Writing' 2020). Social sciences and humanities may have a different attitude, but when the academy and canons are under scrutiny as they are now, publishing such volumes as representative of comics in this instance may need to be reviewed. Webster talks of the obligations of community: the creation of new narratives should be numbered among those obligations the scholarly community owes to itself.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Editorial Note

The author is currently working on her PhD dissertation under the supervision of a team that includes the editor-in-chief of this journal. This article was externally reviewed prior to acceptance. The editorial process complied with the guidelines on ethical editing and research established by the Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE) and the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO).

Comics Studies: A Guidebook can be purchased directly from Rutgers University Press at <https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/comics-studies/9780813591414>.

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