



Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature

By Charles Hatfield

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In the 1980s, a sea change occurred in comics. Fueled by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's avant-garde anthology *Raw* and the launch of the *Love & Rockets* series by Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario Hernandez, the decade saw a deluge of comics that were more autobiographical, emotionally realistic, and experimental than anything seen before. These alternative comics were not the scatological satires of the 1960s underground, nor were they brightly colored newspaper strips or superhero comic books.

In *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Charles Hatfield establishes the parameters of alternative comics by closely examining long-form comics, in particular the graphic novel. He argues that these are fundamentally a literary form and offers an extensive critical study of them both as a literary genre and as a cultural phenomenon. Combining sharp-eyed readings and illustrations from particular texts with a larger understanding of the comics as an art form, this book discusses the development of specific genres, such as autobiography and history.

Alternative Comics analyzes such seminal works as Spiegelman's *Maus*, Gilbert Hernandez's *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories*, and Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. Hatfield explores how issues outside of cartooning—the marketplace, production demands, work schedules—can affect the final work. Using Hernandez's *Palomar* as an example, he shows how serialization may determine the way a cartoonist structures a narrative. In a close look at *Maus*, *Binky Brown*, and Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, Hatfield teases out the complications of creating biography and autobiography in a substantially visual medium, and shows how creators approach these issues in radically different ways.

Charles Hatfield, Canyon Country, California, is an assistant professor of English at California State University, Northridge. His work has been published in *ImageText*, *Inks: Cartoon and Comic Art Studies*, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, the *Comics Journal*, and other periodicals.

See the author's Web site at www.csun.edu/~ch76854/.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This critical study is written for people who take comics seriously. Hatfield, an assistant professor of English at California State University, successfully establishes a historical and theoretical framework in which graphic novels can be considered "literature." He begins with the 1960s comix movement, when people began creating graphic fiction that improvised on personal and social themes, and he shows how that artistic impulse has continued to develop. Along the way, he confronts the kind of serious questions that accompany the birth of a new genre of literature, examining Gilbert Hernandez's use of extreme temporal and thematic shifts in *Love & Rockets* and Harvey Pekar and Art Spiegelman's use of exaggerated cartoons to present tragic real-life experiences. Insights into these issues emerge from a sometimes exhausting survey of critical theory and an invigorating close reading of important comics. Hatfield recognizes the real-world limitations of alternative comics and graphic novels, but he also sees their potential for stimulating readers' appreciation of life. It's hard to imagine anyone coming away from this book without new insights, a deeper respect for comics as a challenging artistic form and sharper reading skills to use when enjoying new comics.

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From [Booklist](#)

An outgrowth from the underground comics of the 1960s, alternative comics took shape in the 1980s in such serial publications as the Hernandez brothers' *Love and Rockets* and the anthology *raw*, edited by Art Spiegelman, whose *Maus* later ratified comics as a literary form. Hatfield shows how the movement rejected mainstream comics by snubbing old genres; developing such new ones as autobiography, history, and journalism; employing a wider range of graphic styles; and incorporating international influences. After an overview of the movement, Hatfield focuses on some seminal works in detailed, lucid readings of such milestones as Gilbert Hernandez's *Palomar* and Justin Green's *Binky Brown*, as well as autobiographical comics by Harvey Pekar, Robert Crumb, Daniel Clowes, and others. Knowledgeable and erudite, Hatfield makes a compelling case for at least the comics he examines as worthy of serious attention. If his jargon occasionally makes hard slogging for nonacademics (such as when he discusses theories anent the comics-reading process), anyone interested in investigating comics as a serious literary form could find no better starting place. *Gordon Flagg*

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From the Inside Flap

An exploration of the potential for self-expression found in groundbreaking comics and graphic novels

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Cecil Atkins:

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