

CRIME & MYSTERY

INTERNATIONAL
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HOW GRAPHIC CAN A MYSTERY BE?

Films such as *Sin City* have brought the graphic crime novel back to the public by bringing out the gothic qualities of comic art on the silver screen. But will readers of non-graphic crime novels appreciate the change?

THE RECENT ISSUE of *World Literature Today* devoted to graphic literature (March–April 2007) brings to mind a number of recent efforts in the mystery genre. Graphic novels have never been as popular in the United States as in other countries—particularly Japan—suffering in the public mind from their association with comic books. Perhaps Americans still hold reading in too much reverence—regardless of the junk our children may read, we insist on admiring the fact that they are reading. Many Americans associate comic books with childhood and adolescence, considering them mindless entertainment incapable of carrying the significant adult themes one would expect to find in the novel. A few hardy souls (such as those in the March issue) have argued that this is not true, that the possibility of sophisticated psychology and powerful themes are waiting to be exploited in the graphic novel. However, these voices have largely been crying in the wilderness, as only a few graphic novels have managed to give these assertions credibility.

The situation is similar to that suffered by the “western.” Dime novels sold by the millions in the second half of the nineteenth century. Film storytelling had its beginning in the United States with *The Great Train Robbery*, and the western genre prospered until at least the 1970s, when cultural changes undermined its premises. Yet it was rare that a western novel or film received praise as anything more than mere entertainment. This is not to say that deep themes and serious issues are not addressed in films like those by John Ford or Anthony Mann, or in novels by Owen Wister or Louis L’Amour. Yet, the few respected westerns, like *High Noon*, *The Searchers*, and *Unforgiven*, have had to overcome the initial suspicion that they weren’t quite art, swimming as they are in an ocean of shoot-em-ups.

Graphic novels also suffer from a similar prejudice: that they are just comics, that they aren’t quite art, that, even after the pop artists—especially Roy Lichtenstein—made us see the art in comics differently, “comics” usually aren’t drawn well enough to qualify as “real art,” and the stories are assumed to be unsophisticated.



LEFT: Tom Hanks in *Road to Perdition*.
BELOW: Viggo Mortenson and Ed Harris in *A History of Violence*.



Commentators make much of the *Spiderman* comics and the ways in which they reflect adolescent anxieties, and the recent films using this superhero have been huge successes. A few works, like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, are regarded as breakthroughs, but the prejudices against the graphic forms are still strong even in the area of what is largely an entertainment genre, the mystery.

There has been, of course, a long tradition of crime stories presented in comic books. Most of the superhero comics, from those featuring Superman and Batman to *The Crow*, present crime stories of some sort. Lawrence

Treat (1903–98, born Lawrence A. Goldstone), one of the founders of the Mystery Writers of America, was a pioneer in the 1940s of the police procedural style of mystery, publishing seventeen novels and over three hundred short stories. He also dipped a toe into using graphics for mystery purposes by authoring the *Crime and Puzzlement* series (beginning in 1981), in which drawings of crime scenes to be “investigated” by the reader provided the clues to the solution. Treat did not draw the illustrations himself, and these could not really be considered novels. Although the books delighted puzzle-mystery fans of all ages, they are often shelved with the juvenile books. Another interesting graphic series by Rick Geary takes famous crimes of the past as its subject. The *Treasury of Victorian Murder* series covers in detail the cases of Lizzie Borden (of “forty whacks” fame), Mary Rogers (who became “Marie Roget” at Poe’s pen), Madeleine Smith (the Scottish poisoner), the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln and James Garfield, H. H. Holmes (a serial murderer known as the “Beast of Chicago”), and, of course, Jack the Ripper. Geary has also illustrated a number of adaptations of classic literature, though he is most well known for the strange combination of cheeriness and creepiness with which he invests his re-creations.

Recently, the graphic crime novel has received more attention, however, by exploiting on film what is natural to the hyperbolic art of the comic strip: its gothic qualities. Exotic angles, operatic emotion, and dark shadowings seem totally appropriate to the noir style of crime story. Storyboards, which often resemble sketches for a comic book, are created in the preproduction of most films so that the camera operators and directors can visualize the composition of the shots in preparation for the shooting. Good graphic novels can serve as storyboards that establish a tone and distinctive look for a film, and there are many recent examples of Hollywood using them.

One of the most distinctive-looking films in recent years was *Sin City*, based on the series of graphic novels by Frank Miller. It combined three stories from Miller’s series that explored the moral bankruptcy of Basin City, out-noiring noir. Miller co-directed the film with Robert Rodriguez, and Quentin Tarantino was credited as a special guest director. Miller’s *300*, a graphic novel about the battle of Thermopylae, has recently been completed as a film and is being released this year. *Sin City 2* and *Sin City 3* are in the works as well. Previously, Miller was involved in the sequels to *Robocop* and *The New Adven-*

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tures of Batman, which was praised for its revisioning of the comic-book hero.

Another film that brought attention to the graphic novel on which it was based was *A History of Violence* (2005), directed by David Cronenberg. Filmed in a more naturalistic manner than *Sin City*, it nevertheless revealed its graphic-novel origins in the style of many shots, particularly in the choreography of the violence. John Wagner (the writer) and Vince Locke (the artist) were the creators of the original graphic novel, though the script for the film was freely adapted by screenwriter Josh Olson. Locke is known for the violence in his work. He first became popular for his drawing of *Deadworld*, which had a zombie storyline. Wagner, who was born in the United States but moved to Scotland as a child, had previously created the character of Judge Dredd, a supercop of the future. Sylvester Stallone played Judge Dredd in an undistinguished 1995 action film, earning a nomination for a “Razzie” award (worst actor of the year).

The Road to Perdition (2002), starring Tom Hanks and Paul Newman, might just be the most successful film based on a graphic crime novel. It received six Academy Award nominations and won the Oscar for cinematography. Max Allan Collins, the author of the novel, is one of the most versatile and prolific working authors in the mystery genre. He has written an unbelievable number of original novels, novels based on television series (*CSI*, *Dark Angel*, and others), and screenplays, leading many to wonder if he sleeps. Because he was writing the stories for the comic strip *Dick Tracy* from 1977 to 1993, Collins wrote the novelization of the Warren Beatty film (1990) as well, which emulated Sunday comics sections deliberately by using the limited bright colors of the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Author Frank Miller on the set of *300*; Bruce Willis as John Hartigan in *Sin City*; director Zack Snyder and Gerard Butler, who portrays Leonidas, discuss a scene on the set of *300*.

PHOTOGRAPHS: 300 COURTESY OF WARNER BROS. PICTURES / SIN CITY COURTESY OF DIMENSION FILMS

newspaper inks. The artist who brought *Road to Perdition* to the printed page was Richard Piers Rayner. Collins went on to write two sequels, *Road to Purgatory* and *Road to Paradise*, filling out the story of his characters. Interestingly enough, these sequels were not graphic novels but conventional prose novels.

There is no question that the use of computer graphics is utterly altering the making of films today, and it is possible that the recent successes of graphic novels as films will cause the tail to wag the dog, producing even more incentive to create graphic novels. On the other hand, the readers of crime novels seem quite satisfied with nongraphic novels, something perhaps indicated by Collins's switching his *Road* series to straight prose. Authors are jealous about the control of their ideas, and there is usually friction between authors and artists or authors and film directors. Once, during a discussion of graphic novels at a meeting of international crime writers in Spain, a writer questioned whether a graphic novel deserved to be called a novel at all. Paco Ignacio Taibo II shouted out, "No borders!" Perhaps it is a noble ideal

to grant authors no limits of form, but how that works in the real world is another matter. The readers of crime novels seek their particular pleasure in the text and in the images they create in their minds. This may change, but we should remember that though the motion picture and television probably lopped off the bottom tier of readers and killed much of the pulp fiction, it did not destroy the crime novel, even in many of its most repetitive genre forms. Graphic crime novels have appreciative and even devoted readers, but they persist, nevertheless, at present for most of the mystery reading public as exceptional things, interesting in their curiosity.

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