ForeWord Reviews

CULTURE

Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel
Stephen Weiner
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Graphic novels have risen high on the book sales chain, attracting both critical acclaim (read Pulitzer) and marketing success ($100 million in sales). How did comic books, once looked down on as something to be feared and discouraged, develop into such a respected literary form? The author, who has also written The 101 Best Graphic Novels and contributed to Library Journal and School Library Journal, has produced a brief but pithy and fascinating history that includes as much information on social development as it does on the metamorphosis of the once-lowly comic book-itself a transformation of the comic strip into longer stories-into the respected graphic novel.

Tracing not only the development of artwork and heroes in comics, Weiner also examines the influence of McCarthyism and the doomsayers of the 1960s. In post-World War II America, superheroes no longer were needed to fight the enemy; as their roles shrank and became redefined, comics departed substantially from their earlier subject matter. During this transition, for example, EC Comics (once Educational Comics) took on a new persona-one could almost call it a secret identity, as it left behind its formerly boring stories meant to teach. The new Entertaining Comics became downright subversive, with gruesome horror tales that attracted teens in droves. During this period, MAD moved from comic book to magazine status to evade the Comics Code (voluntarily instituted by the Comic Magazine Association of America) and avoid the specter of federal regulation of comic book content.

Distribution, too, played an important role. Once sold in spin racks in drugstores and stationery stores, comics gradually moved into conventions and specialty comic book stores, where they were sought out by fans who had grown up reading comics and still loved them as adults. Underground comics (or comix, as the author calls them) had a harder time; they were sold in head shops until fear of censorship drove them even further underground.

The underground comix exerted a powerful influence, however, and as artists and writers began to crave longer, book-length expressions for their work, hardcover graphic novels developed. Weiner gives the reader a rundown on some of the most influential early works,

including Neil Gaman's Sandman, and illustrations of numerous art styles. He also demonstrates the ways in which graphic novels have managed to cross over into mainstream bookstores and to find mainstream readers-an interesting process. He has included a bibliography at the end, so that the serious reader can do further research.

Engagingly written, this book provides excellent insight into the growth of a twenty-first-century phenomenon.

Marlene Satter