



The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture

By Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith

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A comprehensive introduction to the comic arts

From the introduction by Paul Levitz

"If ever there was a medium characterized by its unexamined self-expression, it's comics. For decades after the medium's birth, it was free of organized critical analysis, its creators generally disinclined to self-analysis or formal documentation. The average reader didn't know who created the comics, how or why . . . and except for a uniquely destructive period during America's witch-hunting of the 1950s, didn't seem to care. As the medium has matured, however, and the creativity of comics began to touch the mainstream of popular culture in many ways, curiosity followed, leading to journalism and eventually, scholarship, and so here we are."

The Power of Comics is the first introductory textbook for comic art studies courses. Lending a broader understanding of the medium and its communication potential, it provides students with a coherent and comprehensive explanation of comic books and graphic novels, including coverage of their history and their communication techniques, research into their meanings and effects and an overview of industry practices and fan culture.

Co-authors Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith draw on their own years of experience teaching comics studies courses and the scholarly literature across several disciplines to create a text with the following features:

- Discussion questions for each chapter
- Activities to engage readers
- Recommended reading suggestions
- Over 150 illustrations

- Bibliography
- Glossary

The Power of Comics deals exclusively with comic books and graphic novels. One reason for this focus is that no one text can hope to do justice to both strips and books; there is simply too much to cover. Preference is given to comic books because in their longer form, the graphic novel, they have the greatest potential for depth and complexity of expression. As comic strips shrink in size and become more inane in content, comic books are becoming a serious art form.

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Editorial Review

Review

"[The Power of Comics] includes a broad range of topics, from the history of comic books to comprehension of the medium, to creators and fandom.

As a textbook, it succeeds in content, scope, and execution. The chapters are well laid out, have thoughtful questions at their ends, and several chapters end with very practical examples of analysis that serve as models for students. Chapters also reference a broad range of experts...which further validates breadth and depth of this growing scholarship.

Overall...the book — including the theory chapters — is reasonably good for a "first textbook on comics," and I would imagine it will fast become a standard text for those sorts of classes."

- Neil Cohn, *The Visual Linguist*

"Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith's *The Power of Comics* is an impressive, accessible, and multifaceted tome on comics. From the creation process to the reading process to fandom to scholarship to comic history and more, Duncan and Smith pound away topic after topic in enjoyable prose with numerous examples, pictures, charts, and other supplemental material to reinforce their discussions. I have used *The Power of Comics* as a text for a comic book course and found that though students lament that it's not a comic book (a la Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*), they most certainly take extensive value from it. McCloud's text is useful and a great compliment but even McCloud notes that his book is just the opening volley on discussions about comics, whereas Duncan and Smith further develop that discussion some fifteen years after the publication of *Understanding Comics*. Their chapter topics, overall approach, and extensive use of scholarship and academic jargon broken down into layman's terms really do allow for neophyte and fanboy alike to fully understand the "power of comics." Indeed, instructors looking to venture into the world of comics or think about pedagogical approaches to using comics in any type of classroom would do well to make personal use of this book."

-**Lance Eaton**, *NEPCA Journal*, the online publication for the Northeast Popular/American Culture Association

"Comics are a powerful learning and teaching tool. That's obvious to many teachers, a lot of whom have had great success reaching their students through graphic books. And while grade schools and middle schools have been on the forefront of using comics in the classroom, they're also a fantastic resource at institutions of higher learning. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith have written the book on how to teach the history, impact, importance, and cultural significance of comics at the university and college level. Their book, *The Power of Comics*, delves deeply into the teaching of comics at the higher level and offers other professors a structure for setting up their own intensive comics courses, whether they be an Intro to Comics or something more specific."

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"When invited by various departments at my university to give a lecture on comics, I refer to a standard set of references that includes Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art and Graphic Storytelling*, Scott McCloud's, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Robert C. Harvey's *The Art of the Comic Book*, Roger Sabin's *Adult Comics: An Introduction*, David Kunzle's *The History of the Comic Strip* (both volumes), and more recently Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Paul Gravett's *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know*, Ann Miller's *Reading Bande Dessinee*, and Thierry Groensteen's *System of Comics*. During these lectures, I am often asked about an introductory textbook on comics that pulls together

many of the ideas from these valuable resources. Up to this point in time I did not have a single recommendation, but now I can direct them to this new volume by Duncan and Smith, who are right-up-front about the objective of their book in the first line of their Preface — "This is a textbook about comics."

The layout of this book is well-matched to today's visually astute student. It provides a good balance of text and image and is divided into 13 chapters, including topics such as "Comic Book Creators," and "The Comic Book Industry." What is immediately evident from the layout is the explicit educational focus on the material. Each chapter opens with a thought provoking or, in some instances, amusing excerpt from a group of esoteric authorities including literary critics, historians, poets, and theorists, followed by a short anecdote related to the topic. Chapter objectives are stated plainly with an assertive heading that reads, "In this chapter, you will learn." For example, in the chapter, "Comic Books and Ideology," two of the four objectives include "the concept of ideology and the reason for exploring its function in society"; and "some ways in which comics creators have taken up social causes in opposition to prevailing ideologies." There are over 150 black and white illustrations to clarify the various concepts and historical references. Another feature is their choice of illustrations that not only include familiar classics but also a rich variety of contemporary comics by David Lapham (*Stray Bullets*), Seth (*Palooka-Ville*), Craig Thompson (*Blankets*), and others. Additionally, visual interest is kept alive with boxed sidebars broken up into "Profiles" and "Discovering" sections that include more detailed information related to the topics. Examples include profiles of comics creator Jack Kirby and DC Executive Editor Karen Berger, as well as essays such as the "Discovering: Milestones in the Development of Comics Art Studies," and "Discovering: Comic Book Advertising."

What I found especially provocative were the "Discussion Questions" and "Activities" sections at the end of each chapter that frame the topics into constructive learning models that encourage critical thinking. I found these elements particularly useful and a credit to each author's understanding and presentation of the material and concepts, in addition to their obvious teaching skills. The recommended readings in each chapter are separated into "Comics" and "Scholarly Sources," with helpful annotations for further investigation.

Finally, an extensive glossary is provided from terms conveniently displayed in bold throughout the text. A useful bibliography and an index prepared by Randy Scott, noted Michigan State University comics bibliographer, are also included, as well as information about their website (www.powerofcomics.com), that hosts supplementary resources and essays that are not covered in the print copy.

The content of this book is well rounded, providing a clear understanding of the culture of comics, including the history, industry, media, and process behind comic books. The authors demonstrate a thorough knowledge of comics from a popular and theoretical perspective. Their interest and enthusiasm for this material is evident in their informative and lively tone. Although the authors admit the minor coverage of international comics in this volume, with only one short chapter covering this topic, their book serves its purpose. ***The Power of Comics provides a solid introduction to comics with a distinct educational perspective that will hopefully become a standard text for students to expand their awareness of comics in our culture.***
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"Most, if not all, books on comic books are analytical, scholarly interpretations of the comic book medium or they are coffee table art books replete with many images. However, few of these books stand out as a useful textbook in a college class on comics. *The Power of Comics* is certainly one of the first books in which its main focus is to be used in a classroom.

The glossary and recommended readings are a critical part of the book's success because many books like this do not include such components. But, the best component to this book may be the discussion questions throughout the book. These questions are an articulate and practical way to promote discussion in the classroom.

If teaching a class on comic books or even teaching a specific graphic novel in your class, this is an excellent book to facilitate your teaching."

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About the Author

Dr. Randy Duncan is a co-founder of the Comic Arts Conference, the nation's first annual academic conference devoted solely to the study of comics. He also wrote the entries on Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Will Eisner and other comics-related topics for the *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*.

Dr. Matthew J. Smith is professor of Communication at Wittenberg University where he regularly teaches Comics Studies courses.

Paul Levitz is a former President and Publisher of DC Comics and has written for many of DC's major comic books series, including Superman and Justice Society. His story Legion: The Great Darkness Saga was voted one of the top 20 best comic stories of the last century by readers of The Buyers' Guide.

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