

Book Review of *Children's and Young Adult Comics* by Gwen Athene Tarbox



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When considering children's and young adult literature, it is easy to lump comics and graphic novels in with the other books. Graphic novels that fall under the umbrella of YA take on many of the category's characteristics. They feature young adult protagonists and are about topics that are relatable to young adults. Additionally, it might be tempting to conflate the histories of young adult literature and comics/graphic novels into one, integrating what is known about comics history within the history of young adult literature. However, as Gwen Athene Tarbox's (2020) [*Children's and Young Adult Comics*](#) illustrates, these categories have much overlap and intersection but are also distinct in many ways. Specifically, this book seeks to provide:

Students, scholars, and general readers with an overview of the significant historical, cultural, and critical concerns related to children's¹ comics, with a particular focus on how comics creators have sometimes mirrored developments in children's literature and have sometimes introduced innovations in the comics medium that have been subsequently adopted by authors of mainstream children's and YA literature. (p. 6)

In addition to this goal, Tarbox includes information on how to read and study comics and graphic novels.

Targeting this broad readership is intentional, since the book is part of the Bloomsbury Comics Studies Series, which aims to serve as “an exploratory bridge between specialist and student”

¹ The author sometimes uses “children's comics” and “children's literature” to signify both children's and young adult literature.

(Royal, 2020, p. ix) by taking on “a more democratic approach to comics studies” (p. ix). Rather than assuming specialized knowledge of comics and graphic novels, the series is written with both general readers and comics scholars in mind. In order to achieve this, Tarbox takes a straightforward approach to her subject. Over the course of five chapters, she lays a foundation starting with a historical overview and then moves on to the cultural impact on comics as well as their critical uses. While some scholars who are well-versed in comics history, terminology, and analysis might find this book rudimentary, it is a thoughtful and approachable introduction for beginning researchers and for comics readers who want to know more about the category.

After an opening chapter where Tarbox (2020) establishes comics' relationship with and place within children's and young adult literature, she offers a historical overview of the comics. This examines both the history of children's and young adult literature along with the history of comics, which provides a sense of how these histories overlap while also showing their distinct origins. When describing early comics, Tarbox uses Richard Fenton Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* as an example not just of the first comic to achieve breakout popularity but also how comics have long spoken to audiences of different age groups. For instance, the comic included in the book shows a chaotic scene that would intrigue younger readers while also including social satire and commentary that would be recognizable to older readers. This history also addresses the tension between comics and mainstream children's literature, due in part to the collaborative nature of comics creation as well as perceptions of the inferior nature of comics' content. The criticism against comics leads to the anti-comic crusade in the 1950s when the now-infamous book *The Seduction of the Innocent* by Frederic Wertham alerted the public that reading comics could lead to moral decay. While this period in comics is a complicated one, Tarbox concisely explains how Wertham impacted the comics industry, including the creation of a Comics Code that banned certain content. In order to show the Code's impact on comics, Tarbox opts “to highlight some of the key features of mid-to-twentieth-century children's comics” (p. 31) by analyzing *Archie* comics as well as the *Peanuts* comic strip. This examination offers an engaging and thoughtful look at these comics while bridging the gap between the start of the Code and the later explosion of comics and graphic novels, which coincides with similar growth in children's and young adult literature.

The third chapter considers how society and culture have influenced comics. Using sessions at the National Council of Teachers of English conference as a guideline, Tarbox identifies three topics to address in this chapter: the need for diversity in children's and YA comics, the interaction

between fans and creators, and the concerns related to censorship and age. While these topics have been ones often discussed among English teachers, librarians, and other stakeholders when it comes to children's and YA literature in general, thinking about them from a comics' lens allows readers to focus on how comics in particular have addressed these issues. As with the rest of the book, comics are centered rather than at the periphery of the conversation, which encourages readers to think about how comics might be uniquely situated in relation to these concerns.

In "Critical Uses," Tarbox (2020) continues to move more into how to read and analyze comics. The chapter's opening considers scholarly themes and topics specific to young adult and children's literature in general, such as how adult authority plays a factor in shaping literature intended for younger readers. However, the chapter soon pivots to considering form specific to comics, for while children's and young adult comics tackle content found in literature, the medium presents different means and opportunities for addressing this content. Besides the fact that "analyzing comics involves the consideration of 'how texts do thing' - how they are structured in order to generate meaning and to create a specific range of responses" (p. 79), studying comics demands that scholars become knowledgeable "with the way visual rhetoric operates in the comics medium" (p. 79). To introduce readers to these concepts and skills, Tarbox includes six case studies in closure, braiding, wordless comics and image/text relationships, focalization and point of view, line style and color, and manga. These different elements are vital to reading and analyzing comics beyond a basic level, and these case studies provide mini classes on how to identify and make sense of these elements and styles.

The book culminates with a chapter on key texts within different popular categories, such as adaptation, historical fiction and nonfiction, memoir, and fantasy. While the title of the chapter is "Key Texts," Tarbox goes beyond a mere laundry list of books and instead provides description and some analysis of the texts she highlights, which include Ian Lendler and Zack Giallongo's *The Stratford Zoo Midnight Revue Presents Romeo and Juliet*, Nathan Hale's *Treaties, Trenches, Mud, and Blood*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The analysis utilizes the concepts from the case studies in the previous chapter, which allows readers to call upon their new knowledge and apply it to different books.

Children's and Young Adult Comics has a lot to offer, particularly for comics readers who want to learn more about the form and people interested in comics scholarship. Tarbox capably balances her obvious knowledge about comics with her ability to explain the information and make

it accessible for novices. As series editor Derek Parker Royal (2020) acknowledges in his preface, “while there is no shortage of scholarly studies devoted to comics and graphic novels, most assume a specialized audience with an often-rarefied rhetoric” (p. ix). Throughout the book, Tarbox uses minimal jargon and explains the terms and concepts that she does use. Additionally, her thought-provoking explanations and investigations into different comics and panels encourage readers to think about the potential for comic analysis and to try this analysis themselves. Even skeptics of comics’ scholarly potential might find themselves convinced by Tarbox’s observations and arguments. Another strength of *Children's and Young Adult Comics* is its concise nature. With five chapters plus some helpful backmatter including a glossary, index, and resources for readers who want to read more about comics scholarship, the book clocks in at just 186 pages. This makes it a perfect text to use in a course focused on comics and graphic novels or a course on young adult or children’s literature.

The limitations to *Children's and Young Adult Comics* conversely stem from some of its strengths. Since the book is so succinct, there is little space for multiple examples and deeper explorations and explanations of the valuable topics addressed. For instance, more analysis akin to what Tarbox does for *Archie* and *Peanuts* in the historical overview chapter would be welcome. Similarly, the topics addressed in the chapter on social and cultural impact are so vital and multifaceted that they could each be a chapter or even a book in and of themselves. Another drawback is the limited number of figures included. Since comics include both visuals and text, more visual examples would be welcome. Both the length and the lack of visuals likely stem from publisher specifications, and Tarbox skillfully navigates these challenges by packing a lot of information into a small space and by offering relevant, rich descriptions in lieu of being able to include panels themselves.

In terms of use, this text would serve as a strong introduction to comic studies and analysis, and there are several audiences who could benefit from reading it. Researchers and educators who want to write or teach about comics but have limited academic experience with the form would find this text beneficial to their understanding and ability to communicate about the medium. As someone who has written about comics in the past, I wish I could have had Tarbox’s book as an introduction so that I was more knowledgeable in my analysis.

Another audience who would benefit from *Children's and Young Adult Comics* is students and general readers who want to learn more about comics. As mentioned above, the user-friendly

explanations and the compact nature make it ideal for undergraduate or graduate coursework in the fields of children's literature, young adult literature, or comics and graphic novels. Students could easily read the chapters or even the subtopics within the chapters to get some necessary background and language to use when reading. Additionally, general readers can easily read the book or, in the case of the later chapters, use it as a resource to understand comic-specific terminology or to find examples of texts in different categories.

While it might seem contradictory to have a book that speaks to novices and experts alike, the *Bloomsbury Comics Studies Series* seeks to do just that, and *Children's and Young Adult Comics* mostly succeeds in that regard when it comes to experts. Given the variety in comics, it is possible that some experts might not have encountered some of the texts that Tarbox discusses. Additionally, Tarbox's background on the history of comics and the explanations for the different medium-specific concepts could prove a helpful quick resource for scholars who need to reference these ideas or explain them to others who do not have deep background knowledge.

To conclude, *Children's and Young Adult Comics* is a useful book for those interested in comics, particularly when it comes to teaching about comics or analyzing them further. Although it is not, nor does it seek to be, a comprehensive academic overview of comics, it serves as a perfect introduction to the medium for readers who want to learn more, and it can be a helpful resource for scholars who need a quick reference for the background and foundational concepts.

REFERENCES

- Royal, D. P. (2020). Preface. *Children's and young adult comics*. Bloomsbury Academic.
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