

Howard Cruse
Narrative and Gender Issues

TRUE STORY:
IT WAS 1969.
SOME FRIENDS
AND I HAD
DROPPED **ACID**
THAT NIGHT
AND SPRAWLED
ON THE GRASS
OF CENTRAL
PARK FOR A
TINY TIM
CONCERT.



ARH 680
Literature of Art

Stephen Smith

The twentieth century saw the development of a number of new art forms. Arguably the three that have contributed most to the human expression of narrative have been the motion picture, the video game and the comic strip. Like all new art forms it has taken time for these genres to be accepted into the canon of art history. Few question anymore whether or not the motion picture is a legitimate art form while the video game has yet to receive this inevitable elevation. The comic strip has only recently begun to be accepted by the artworld. The artists of this medium that have proven to be the most palatable to the gatekeepers of high art are unquestionably those who deal with the same kind of issues that are often addressed by more established art forms. One of the few comic strip artists that is now being recognized as a true fine artists is Howard Cruse. Cruse is a master storyteller who often deals with gay-themed, and often deeply personal issues without ever losing his sense of humor or faltering in his draftsmanship.

When asked if he agreed that the comic strip, and particularly the graphic novel were no longer being marginalized by the artworld Cruse stated that:

That greater acceptance these days is undeniable. Comics-creation courses are now included in the curricula of many art schools and in the art departments of mainstream colleges and universities, where graphic novels are also likely to be studied as literature. Pages from my comics have been included in a number of major museum exhibits featuring comics and graphic novels, and the *New York Times Book Review* regularly reviews new graphic novels.

In addition he remarked that this has changed considerably since he was in college at Birmingham Southern in the 1960s. He continued:

These examples represent a major turnaround since my own youth, when I had to change my art major at Birmingham-Southern because there was no respect at all for cartooning in the BSC art department and the existence of comics would never have been acknowledged in the *Times Book Review* unless they were the subject of some book that was examining them as a cultural phenomenon rather than legitimate art works themselves.

The acceptance of the comic strip into the realm of high art has some art historians praising it as a superior means of storytelling. Particularly the graphic novel, when executed by someone with Cruse's talent, can create a narrative that is expressive beyond what can be achieved with just text. A number of treatises have been published in recent years championing this art form. As a rule they have been aimed at fans of the genre, as in the case of Scott McCloud's popular *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, but today there are more attempts to understand the comic strip as a serious vehicle of expression on par with other media long accepted as high art. Rocco Versaci wrote in his 2008 book, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*, that, "Comic Books are a worthy subject for literary study in that they are every bit as complicated, revelatory, and relevant as more accepted types of art."¹ Versaci believes that the graphic novel has proven itself to be similar to other narrative traditions, particularly the traditional novel. But the comic strip is also a visual art form. It holds a place somewhere between literature and art and is really a genre of its own. As Cruse notes with his remarks about the newfound acceptance of the medium, there is a place for the comic strip in both museums and libraries.

Howard Cruse is a Southern writer whose formative years in Birmingham have influenced his storytelling in a way that might not have developed if he were raised in a different environment. When asked about his upbringing Cruse admits:

It goes without saying that having the Civil Rights conflicts explode in Birmingham during my high school and college days played a big role in motivating me to explore racial issues and the nuances of unconscious bigotry in *Stuck Rubber Baby*. And being submerged as a child and teenager in the unchallenged homophobia of the South's conservative

¹ Versaci, Rocco, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2008), 183.

religious outlook generated much of the passion that went into *Stuck Rubber Baby* as well as in *Wendel* and my five-page comic book story “Jerry Mack.” Beyond those examples, rebellion against the oppressiveness of being a preacher’s kid in the South had led to many satires on the quirks of religion over the years.

Yet at the same time he is reluctant to acknowledge that there is a particular Southern voice. It is true that in this age of mass communication that regionalism is something that may be being lost.

As an open and unabashed champion of homosexuality rights Cruse has often used sexual and gender themes in his work. His 210-page graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby* has been regarded by critics as “an honest and straightforward piece of modern fiction about sex of all sorts and uses the story of one charming but confused boy in the South to represent so many struggles that it moves way beyond being a gay rites of passage story.”² Though *Stuck Rubber Baby* is very much a story of homosexuality in America it is also a grand narrative with all of the qualities one would expect from any sophisticated work of literature. Cruse has long dealt with homosexual issues having founded a publication called *Gay Comix* in 1980. *Gay Comix* is a continuation of the underground comix tradition of the 1960s even using the alternative spelling of the word comics with an x. Cruse is one of the few survivors of the underground comix genre along with such notable artists as Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton. The common denominator of these particular artists is their superior draftsmanship, something that was rare in the field.

² Gene Kannenberg, *500 Essential Graphic Novels* (New York: Collins Design, 2008), 207.

Cruse was able to break free from the underground tradition and managed to be accepted by more art-driven comic publications like *Heavy Metal* magazine, gay-oriented magazines such as *The Advocate* and even high art venues. In 1990 he had his work featured in *Artforum International*. It was a combination of his drawing skill, storytelling ability, and homosexual themes that made his work tolerable to publications that might not have taken other comic strip artists as seriously. In this way Cruse has been a major contributor in the transformation of the comic strip from pop culture to high art. “For much of this century the word “comics” has had such negative connotations that many of the comics’ most devoted practitioners have preferred to be known as ‘illustrators,’ ‘commercial artists,’ or, at best, ‘cartoonists.’”³ Today the stigma associated with the genre is all but gone.

More and more the field of comic strips has come to the attention of serious art critics and aestheticians alike. In his 2002 anthology, *The Comics Since 1945*, Brian Walker writes, “Humans have a basic need to communicate and cartoons are one of the most effective means of self-expression. When words and pictures are blended together successfully, they can tell stories, state opinions, or convey feelings in a simple, direct way.”⁴ Howard Cruse’s work is a clear example of this. His narratives can be short, simple insights leading to a humorous punch line or complicated storylines with character development and a myriad of themes. Comparing the work of an artist like Cruse to the simple action and juvenile drama of many mainstream comic books might tempt one to separate the field into two different art forms entirely. But this would be a mistake.

³ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 18.

⁴ Brian Walker, *The Comics Since 1945* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002), 327.

Certainly the majority of comic strips lack the profundity of Cruse's work but this is the nature of all the various mediums. Only a small percentage of paintings or movies rise to the level of high art but this certainly doesn't imply that these are not legitimate art forms.

Scott McCloud, in his attempts to establish an aesthetic theory to the comic strip has divided the genre into four subcategories. He refers to these as the four "tribes" of comic strip creators. The "classicists" strive for excellence, hard work, mastery of craft, and the quest for enduring beauty. The "animists" believe in putting content first, creating life through art, and trusting one's intuition. The "formalists" are concerned with the understanding of, experimentation with, and loyalty to the comics form. And finally he "iconoclasts" are involved with honesty, vitality authenticity and unpretentiousness. They are primarily interested in putting life first.⁵ These four tribes correspond roughly to Carl Jung's four proposed functions of human thought. The classicists represent sensation, the animists represent intuition, the formalists represent thinking, and the iconoclasts represent feeling.⁶ By McCloud's definition Cruse would span all four of these categories. It is this complexity that has lead to the wide appeal of the artist's work and acceptance by an audience that might never have considered the comic strip as legitimate art.

In his summery of *Stuck rubber Baby* Gene Kannenberg writes "It's easy to read *Stuck rubber Baby* lightly, and get swept away by the sometimes soap opera style plot, but the ease of reading is underpinned by Cruse's superb control, his mastery of the craft of comic-book storytelling, and his comfortably cuddly linework—no one can make a

⁵ Scott McCloud, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 232.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

character look quite so bright-eyed and naïve as Cruse.”⁷ It is this humanity that raises Cruse’s narrative to what one might expect from a traditional novel. Despite the artist’s reluctance to acknowledge a distinct Southern voice there is a resemblance to other writers like Pat Conroy and Flannery O’Connor that comes throughout in his storytelling. Though it is his pervasive humor that differentiates Cruse from the typical writer of the Southern voice and shows his allegiance with other comic strip artists. When asked which particular writers have influenced his narrative Cruse says:

I couldn’t begin to list all of the authors who had a big impact on me at various times. A few who come to mind easily were: Mark Twain; A. A. Milne; Dr. Seuss; L. Frank Baum; James Thurber; Booth Tarkington; Richard Matheson; Washington Irving; Earl Stanley Gardner; Robert Penn Warren; Allen Ginsberg—high-brow, low-brow, the list goes on and on. And, of course, there were all of those anonymous authors who wrote Hardy Boys books under the name “Franklin W. Dixon”!...And I haven’t mentioned the cartoonists, as opposed to regular authors, who had a big impact. That would *really* beef up the roster! Playwrights were important, too.

As far as his visual art influences Cruse cites Salvador Dali and the pop artists of the 1960s. He doesn’t see the underground commix movement as part of pop art but rather a different genre entirely. Scott McCloud has made connections between the work of the Italian futurists and Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* and comic strip art. Here the earlier artists attempts to capture motion in a single image can be seen as an attempt at a narrative. In the case of the pop artists Cruse notes that they “used comic book imagery in a context-less, distancing manner for ironic effect. It made for interesting cultural commentary, but it wasn’t ‘sequential art.’” Though there may be a narrative in many representational paintings they will always be limited in a way that the

⁷ Kannenberg, *loc. cit.*

multi-paneled comic strips are not. The comic strip artist is free to explore a number of different and interconnect storylines due to the nature of the medium. The addition of text creates a hybrid art that adds to this narrative nature. “Words can take even seemingly neutral images and invest them with a wealth of feelings and experiences.”⁸

Beyond how Howard Cruse uses his medium to tell a story there is the nature of the stories he chooses to tell. The artist was open and public about his homosexuality at a time when this was far from typical. “By the time they are 45, 26 percent of women have had some homosexual experience, whereas about 50 percent of men have.”⁹ Though only a small percentage of these men will come to define themselves as homosexual the level of denial and dishonesty in demonstrated by the marginalization of homosexuality can be troubling. Great advancements have been made in the last quarter of a century as far as the acceptance of gays into the mainstream and Howard Cruise has been a major influence on this phenomenon. The artist’s *Gay Comix* appealed to an audience that might not have had much interest in homosexual issues. This publication was bought by fans of comic books and underground comix in particular. People were attracted to the storytelling and artwork and not necessarily the theme. By 1995 when he published *Stuck Rubber Baby* homosexuality was seen as much less of a taboo. “Cruse’s gentle humor, his gift for human observation, and the wholesome rounded drawing style all serve to make the content of this book widely acceptable at the time it was published and expanded the graphic novel’s audience.”¹⁰ Though the main character is gay and this is

⁸ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 135.

⁹ Wayne R. Dynes, ed. *Sociology of Homosexuality* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1992), 191.

¹⁰ Kannenberg, *loc. cit.*

instrumental to the plot of the novel the nature of Cruse's storytelling appealed to a mainstream audience who, upon reading the work, would come to empathize with the protagonist. The work won Cruse "Best Graphic Novel" from the United Kingdom Comic Art Awards, the Prix de la Critique and several other prestigious literary awards.

When asked how his openness about his sexuality has affected his career the artist stated:

It's opened many doors because honesty in art always jacks up that art's voltage. The deepening of my comics that resulted from my coming out of the closet professionally and addressing the gay experience forthright brought me more respect from my readers and my cartooning peers. In other words, I began being taken more seriously as an artist once I stopped being evasive about my sexuality. No doubt I would have gotten more mainstream jobs if I weren't openly gay, but fortunately for one's morale, one rarely knows when an offer that would otherwise have been tendered goes unoffered because of homophobia. And many mainstream art directors *did* continue to give me assignments after I became open about my gayness, which speaks well for their respect for diversity.

This statement gives insight into the nature comic art community. In general people in the field are tolerant and nonjudgmental. Possibly this is due to the fact that many of them have come through art schools where homosexuality would have been common. Also in the field of underground comix sexuality was openly expressed with few, if any, reservations. Primarily good storytelling is respected in the field and sincerity is essential in achieving this goal. Subsequently Cruse might have had an easier time of coming out so honestly than he would have had he been working in another field.

"The most immediate effect of the [gay rights] movement upon the masses of gay men and lesbians...was a new sense of pride, an honest affirmation of a personal, emotional life, a sense of relief at not having to always hide or apologize, and a new

claim (or reclamation) of the symbols of masculinity.”¹¹ Today, unlike in previous generations, the homosexual lifestyle is nearing mainstream. It is more socially unacceptable to discriminate against gays than it is to be gay. Even mainstream conservatives accept homosexuals as just another American subculture. It is only the most extreme right wing or religious zealot who still takes issue with the lifestyle. This was not true when Howard Cruse began publishing *Gay Comix* in 1980. The very existence of such a publication, which would have been sold along side Spiderman and Archie in comic book shops, certainly contributed to the mainstreaming of the homosexual identity.

From a narrative standpoint the comic strip, and particularly the graphic novel, can be seen as an important twentieth and twenty-first century art form. It involves the combination of storytelling and illustration that can express a wide range of emotions or be used to make political statements. Howard Cruse has used the medium to achieve both of these objectives. When he began his career he focused on humor with characters such as Barefootz and fell comfortably into the genre of underground comix. Even in these early days the artist was unusually open about his personal life and use of psychedelic drugs in a way that showed a rare inner courage. When he started to focus on themes of homosexuality he never hesitated to tell the truth with such an unpretentious and humorous style that his art appealed to audiences that might not have ever been exposed to what Cruse has to say. But it is also his skill as a draftsman that makes the artist so attractive to many who are simply fans of the comic strip. Talent is respected above all in the field. Howard Cruse has been instrumental in bringing a neglected art form into the realm of high art. He has also used his narrative skills to expose his readers to a segment of society that has been traditionally marginalized. Beyond the quality of the work itself these two accomplishments should forever reserve Howard Cruse a place in the canon of major American artists.

¹¹ Barry D. Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*. (Boston, Massachusetts, Twayne Publishers, 1987), 97.

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