Page 2:
Osamu Tezuka
Shin Takarajima
(New Treasure Island)
detail, 1947
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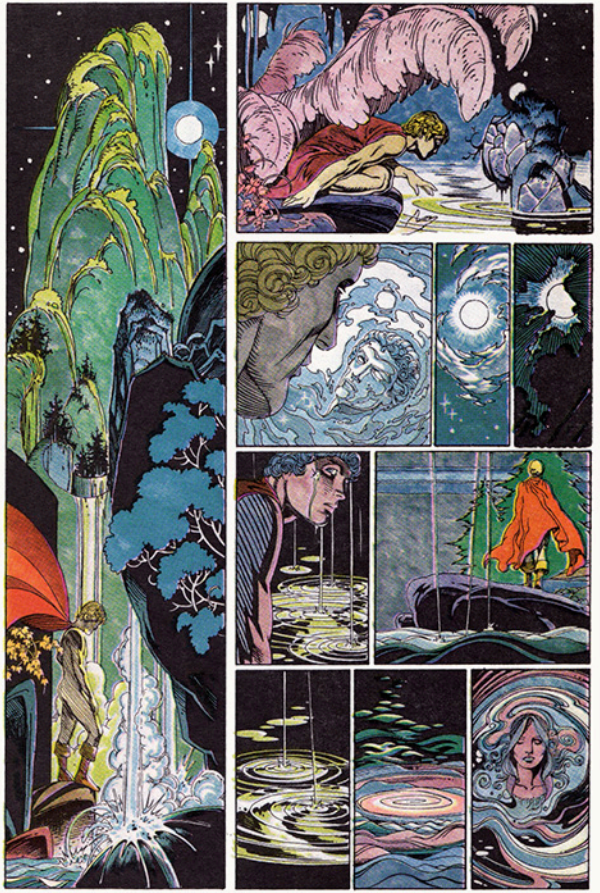
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OPPOSITE
P. Craig Russell
The Avatar and the Chimera, *Imagine* #2 • 1978

Russell ostentatiously displayed his interest in art nouveau design, as his neoclassical-looking characters move through settings straight out of Mucha or Parrish. Russell has gone on to make a life's work of adapting classic operas as comics, as well as tales by Oscar Wilde and others.

ABOVE RIGHT
Howard Chaykin
Starbuck, *Star Reach* #4 • 1976

Chaykin used the freedom of the alternative publishing format to experiment with complex black-and-white page layouts and patterning, and with a looser inking style featuring strong solid blacks and whites influenced by Alex Toth. Here he creates a rhythm of strong contrasts and patterns for a visually involving "push-and-pull" of values across a regular grid. There are also hints of earlier illustrators' work, such as the adventure imagery of Howard Pyle and the glamorous images of J.C. Leyendecker.



identifying them as "ground-level comics."[1] The work was not subject to Comics Code censorship, and the artists often included nudity, sex and violence that would not be allowed at the major publishers. *Star Reach* offered the added benefit of leaving copyright ownership of all original material in the hands of the creators.

Most of the new generation of younger DC and Marvel artists appeared in *Star Reach* (and Friedrich's 1978–1979 follow-up *Imagine*), including Starlin, Smith, Howard Chaykin, P. Craig Russell and Frank Brunner, as well as Neal Adams. Lee Marrs, of the Underground Wimmen's Comix Collective, had several stories in Friedrich's publications, making Star Reach Press one of the rare sites where mainstream and Underground met.

Howard Chaykin, who had begun as an assistant to Gil Kane on *Blackmark*, had recently graduated to a series of his own for DC, in the increasingly popular sword-and-sorcery and sci-fi fantasy genres. Writing as well as drawing his *Star Reach* material, Chaykin developed the sort of wisecracking, swashbuckling, semi-serious heroes (set in retro/futuristic worlds) that would become his trademark. His Cody Starbuck is a dashing space pirate, and Chaykin took advantage of the censorship-free environment to push the character

With Robial in charge of the graphic design, Futuropolis reconceived the comic book as aesthetic object, rather than an interchangeable and often disposable commercial product. They broke with the restrictions of the standard album format, publishing in a variety of shapes and sizes, and introduced limited-edition portfolios of signed prints by *bande dessinée* artists.

In 1974, Futuropolis published its first original comic—also in black-and-white, 30 × 40 cm format—*La veritable Histoire du Soldat Inconnu*, written and drawn by Jacques Tardi. *Soldat Inconnu* was a breakthrough work for the twenty-eight-year-old Tardi, who would prove to be one of the most popular and influential French artists for decades. Its dark, hallucinatory story is set during the First World War: a writer of trashy novels wanders through a nightmarish world in which his own vulgar creations torment and attack him, reality and fantasy becoming indistinguishable.

The distinctive tone of Tardi's work—moody, cynical and irrational, but with an underlying humanism—is communicated by the personality of his graphic style. The gestural, yet precise line work in his meticulously detailed settings contrasts with his particular style of caricature: the haggard elongated mugs of his hapless heroes, the skeletal grotesques of his villains and the slit-eyed imperiousness of his femmes fatales.

In 1976, Tardi created two original albums introducing the character Adèle Blanc-Sec, a crime writer who solves supernaturally tinged mysteries in pre-First World War Paris. (A pterodactyl menaces the city in *Adèle et la Bête*, a demonic cult in *Démon de la Tour Eiffel*.) In the spirit of *romans-feuilletons*—popular late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century serialized novels—as well as the much-loved Belgian comics of the fifties and sixties, especially *Blake et Mortimer*, the Adèle series became a long-running success for the large publisher Casterman.

Tardi represented a new sensibility, blending old and new. He was able to move between adult *bande dessinée* and more old-fashioned entertainments while maintaining a consistent artistic identity: "(My) work is somewhat in



Jacques Tardi
Le Démon de la Tour Eiffel (DETAIL) • 1976
For the first part of his career, Tardi stuck almost exclusively with period pieces, from his harrowing depictions of the trenches of the First World War to the *romans-feuilleton pastiches* of his *Adèle* series. His feeling for the past, and for specificity of location and ambience, is seen in the detail and atmosphere of his painterly Paris street scenes, while his ornately patterned interiors recall Vuillard (filtered through Tardi's sense of oppressive, overripe decadence).



the tradition of the Belgian *bande dessinée* that I read as a kid, but loosened up, you see, more free," he said. "And it constitutes a sort of bridge between that Belgian *bande dessinée* and the more graphically liberated *bande dessinée* produced today."[7]

COMICS AS HIGH ART: OUTLIERS AND HARBINGERS

While the European comics scene moved steadily into the realm of adult and auteur creations, certain artists experimented with more rigorously artistic, even rarefied, uses of sequential art. Two books stand out as outliers, whose existence remained, for the time being, at the far fringes of the worlds of comics, *bande dessinée* and *fumetti*.

In 1969, Italian author and illustrator Dino Buzzati published *Poema a Fumetti*, a modernized version of the Orpheus myth that combined Buzzati's evocative text with drawings in a variety of styles; sometimes the relation of image and text is closer to that of an illustrated book, while in other instances he breaks his page into a decidedly "comics" format of sequential images. *Poema a Fumetti* received critical attention on the strength of its author's literary standing, but was considered to be a novelty and did little to foster a general acceptance of comics as an art form.

British-born artist Martin Vaughn-James had drawn several strange, surrealistic comics in the early seventies, published in tiny print runs by a small Canadian press. In his 1975 "visual novel" *The Cage*, Vaughn-James pared his narrative technique down radically: one picture per page, carefully composed as double-page spreads, accompanied by blocks of text, some literary, others clinically descriptive.

Resolutely uncommercial, without animate characters or plot, *The Cage* depicts, in precise line drawings, a series of buildings, interiors and street scenes falling into decay or being destroyed by mysterious calamities. The images evoke a deep sense of anxiety and unease: that the well-ordered, architectural solidity of our man-made reality contains the seeds of its own destruction or that its elaborate structures hide some ominous mechanism.

Obscure as it was, *The Cage* had little immediate influence on the wider world of comics, but over the years it has held increasing fascination, especially for Francophone avant-garde comics creators and theorists, who are more often willing to engage with its abstract and formalist qualities.

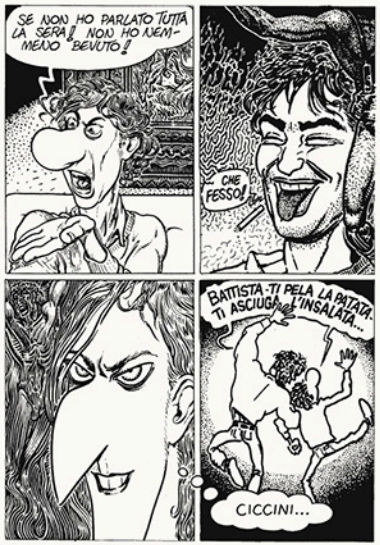
Martin Vaughn-James
The Cage • 1975
This challenging "visual novel," as Vaughn-James called it (before the term "graphic novel" was widely used), has no "characters" per se, but its plunging perspectives put the reader in a subjective position. Its austere, disturbing sequences present a rigorously fundamental exploration of the basic formal elements of comics' visual narrative.

Pazienza was the most prodigious talent of this new generation. His series *Pentothal*—published in *Alter Alter*, 1977–1980—chronicled daily life in Bologna during the 1977 student protests and their aftermath. Pazienza's work, like that of Crumb and Shelton, embodied a generational zeitgeist. Pazienza's next series, *Zanardi*—in which slice-of-life humor often abruptly crosses the line into sudden violence in the adventures of three aimless teenagers—indelibly expressed post-1977 disillusion and frustration in Bologna.

Pazienza's energetic and elastic artwork slips from realism to cartoony exaggeration, often incorporating pop culture imagery. He mastered comics' inherent ability to intermingle realism, fantasy, social commentary and transgressive humor, while remaining accessible and engaging. Unfortunately, it was not only in his work that Pazienza embodied the desperation of the era; he died in 1988 at the age of 32 from a heroin overdose.

The other members of the *Cannibale/Frigidaire* collective were generally more formalist, in tune with the postmodern cynicism and ironic eclecticism of the times.

In *Snake Agent*, Stefano Tamburini took an old American comic strip (*Secret Agent X-9*, drawn by Mel Graff in the 1940s and fifties), re-lettered it and

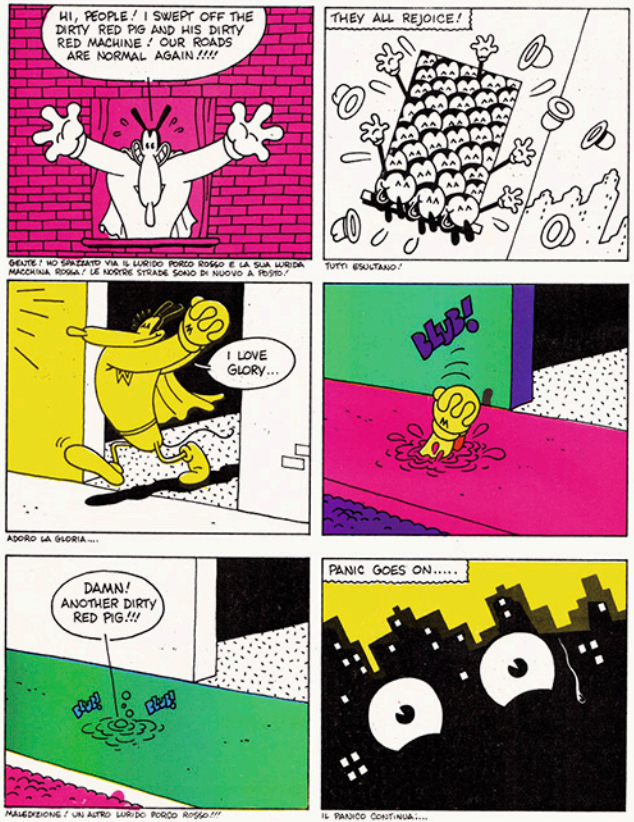


RIGHT
Andrea Pazienza
Zanardi: La Prima delle Tre • 1984

Pazienza was influenced by American Underground comics, and *Zanardi*, with its trio of amoral Bolognese teenagers, was a *Furry Freak Brothers* for the nihilistic, disillusioned Italian youth of the 1980s. "The principal characteristic of *Zanardi* is emptiness," the artist explained, "an absolute emptiness that permeates every action."[1] The darkness at the story's core was leavened by Pazienza's astonishing graphic inventiveness, as seen in the lively variations of markings, the fluid intermingling of the fantastic and the realistic, and the expressiveness of his characters. Despite the violence and despair of Pazienza's subject matter, he was in the end a great humanist storyteller and chronicler of his times.

OPPOSITE
Massimo Mattioli
Panic in the City Starring Superwest, Frigidaire #10 • 1981

In the guise of creating a funny, animal superhero comic for children, Mattioli playfully foregrounds both the abstract qualities of the page and the bizarre minimalism of the genre through touches such as the rectangular window full of dimensionless identical iconographic faces in panel two, with its undifferentiated "they," or the personification of the panicking city with cartoon eyes in panel six, and the abstract use of selective rather than descriptive color. With his flat, arbitrary patches of bright primary colors, Mattioli turns the *fumetti* page into a Mondrian-like color grid.





Lorenzo Mattotti
Fuochi • 1985

Modern art painting styles operate in Mattotti as expressive language, not ironic citation (as with Igort and other members of the Valvoline group). Especially striking is Mattotti's use of color as both emotional and narrative element. The only real precedent for these qualities can be found in the recent work of Alberto Breccia (see p. 108).

having completed the images. While echoes of modernist painting styles are visible, Mattotti transformed them into a personal language with which to tell a deeply felt story.

Mattotti's work suggested that comics was a unique space in which techniques that were no longer cutting edge in fine art could renew their power by allying with a sequential narrative form. This attitude would be imparted to younger artists who published with Valvoline, such as Francesca Ghermandi and Gabriella Giandelli. It was an expansive and engaging use of the medium that would position these artists to participate in an increasingly international comics art movement in the 1990s.

SPAIN: *LINEA CHUNGA* AND *NEOTEBEO*

In Spain, the period from the late seventies through the eighties was one of newfound freedom, and it unleashed energies after the death of the dictator Franco in 1975 and the end of his nearly forty-year reign. Long dominated by the juvenile *tebeos* (a generic term derived from the hugely popular children's weekly *TBO*), Spanish comics began to show signs of rebellion toward the end of the Franco regime. The satirical *El Papus*, established in 1972, was similar in tone and aesthetic to the French *Hara Kiri*. *El Rrollo Enmascarado* was founded in 1973 by a group of Barcelonan underground artists, and in 1974, the journal *Star* began to give Spanish readers a look at American and European Underground comics. With the coming of democracy, the floodgates opened, and comics played a major role in the newly liberated culture, leading to an unprecedented boom in comics production and innovation.

Carlos Giménez had been a major figure in Spanish comics before the death of Franco, working in the western, adventure and science-fiction genres. Now, Giménez turned to autobiography to explore suppressed themes of life under a repressive nationalist dictatorship. *Paracuellos* (1977–2002) and *Barrio* (1977), published in *El Papus*, were based on his postwar childhood and adolescence, while *Los Profesionales* (1981–1985) recounts his early career as a comics artist. Giménez is a master storyteller, whose classic graphic style ranges from gritty realism to appealing and expressive exaggeration.

Comics reflecting social reality and everyday life in the new Spain became one of the most popular genres in the many adult comics journals springing into existence. The journal *Besame Mucho* (the successor to *Star* after it folded in 1977) offered material such as *La Noche de Siempre* by Montesol (Javier Ballester) and Ramón de España, a romantic comedy of manners among young urban Barcelonans, drawn with a casual, un-fussed cartooniness.

Other new magazines, such as *Totem* and *1984*, were devoted mainly to imports of French, Italian and American comics, focusing on science fiction and horror. But the major trends in Spanish adult comics were illustrated by the two most important journals of the period, *Cairo* and *El Vibora*.

El Vibora, founded in Barcelona in 1979 by editor Josep Maria Berenguer, exemplified Spain's post-underground, Punk/alternative tendencies in the spirit of Italy's *Frigidaire* or the American *RAW*. The magazine connected with the youthful energy of urban life, offering a wide range of reality-based content. A tone of sleazy, lowlife grittiness —the so-called *linea chunga* ("crappy line") aesthetic—prevailed in the work of artists such as Nazario Luque, Alfredo Pons or Marti (Marti Riera). Javier Mariscal peopled his breezy stories of nightlife adventures with cartoony animals, rendered in a style at once scribbly and stylishly modern. A punked-out version of the *ligne claire* was practiced by creators such as Max (Francesc Capdevila), whose *Peter Pank* was one of *El Vibora*'s most popular series. International artists



Kevin O'Neill
cover, *2000 AD* #1 • 1977

With a "free space spinner" burst and boasting a rehash of the twenty-seven-year-old *Dan Dare* title, the cover to the first issue of *2000 AD* belied the profound impact the magazine would have on British and American mainstream comics.

11

MAINSTREAM REBELS IN THE U.S. AND U.K.

2000 AD AND THE REBIRTH OF SCIENCE FICTION

In the 1980s, the slow maturation that American mainstream comics had been experiencing over the previous decade took a dramatic leap forward, thanks in large part to the infusion of a crop of ambitious young writers harvested from the fertile ground of British science-fiction comics anthologies. Like the 1970s anthology *Star Reach*, these anthologies lacked the inhibitions of the Comics Code, freeing creators to pursue more sophisticated themes. Paired with the American trend toward longer, more involved stories, this led to a new focus on the craft of writing for the comics medium as a literary pursuit in itself, rather than simply a frame on which to hang the art.

Just a decade earlier, British comics had been largely stagnant. Alongside the traditional humor anthologies, a glut of imperialistic adventure stories dominated, largely in the mold of Dan Dare, Frank Hampson's noble space adventurer, who had made his debut in *Eagle* in 1950. Dan Dare inspired countless imitations over the next twenty years, with little growth save that of specialization, as anthologies sprouted to focus on increasingly narrow adventure niches. Propagandistic war stories, lacking sophistication or insight, were particularly common.

In the mid-1970s, when Kelvin Gosnell, the competitions subeditor at IPC (International Publishing Corporation), first proposed the idea of a new anthology of sci-fi comics, his employers were clear in their response: "Science fiction is dead." Given the dwindling interest in adventure stories, along with the brief lives of *Star Reach* and other U.S. science-fiction comics anthologies, this seemed a reasonable conclusion. However, Gosnell had his eye on an upcoming Hollywood space opera that he correctly guessed would spur a new sci-fi fad worth capitalizing on. He was able to persuade the publisher, and so the first issue of the new magazine hit stands in 1977—the same year that *Star Wars* birthed a new generation of science-fiction fanatics. Anticipating that the resurgence would be short-lived, IPC gave the anthology the futuristic title *2000 AD*, on the erroneous assumption that

something of a surprise to all concerned, the superhero genre, in decline since the late sixties, was back. This reinvigoration did not come from adding more social relevance or realism to the costumed characters' world (as in O'Neil and Adams's *Green Lantern*), or by upping the cosmological stakes à la Kirby's *Fourth World*. Instead, Claremont built on the keys to Marvel's earlier success by deepening readers' involvement in the relationships between the heroes via longer and more complex stories and an extended cast of characters.

Much of mainstream comics soon followed Claremont's lead, a move that helped bring writers' contributions into focus; eliminating the restraint of contained stories gave writers much more freedom to explore wide-ranging plots and evolving characterization rather than requiring every story to end very nearly in the same place it started. However, these lengthier stories also accentuated the "collectability" of comics, as readers now needed to possess entire runs of a title in order to understand the plot. While the simultaneously burgeoning direct market made such collecting a more accessible hobby, the increasing complexity of the stories had the opposite effect; as each series' backstory became more convoluted, the barrier to entry for new readers rose steadily higher, helping to cement mainstream comics' fandom as an insular subculture.



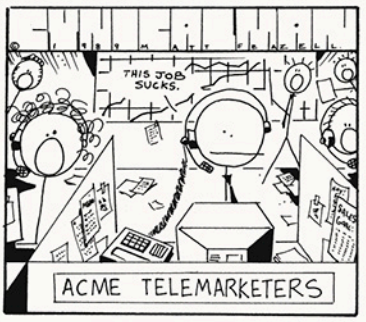
RIGHT
Chris Claremont (WRITING)
Dave Cockrum (PENCILS)
Frank Chiaramonte (INKS)
The Uncanny X-Men #101 • 1976

After piloting an out-of-control space shuttle through solar radiation, Jean Grey makes her first appearance in the incarnation of Phoenix. The fact of Jean Grey's death underscored the mortality—and hence the humanity—of the superheroes. However, Jean Grey's eventual resurrection turned out to be the first of many, a pattern repeated with any number of characters, ultimately making death a trivial thing within mainstream comics in general.

OPPOSITE
Howard Chaykin
American Flagg! #2 • 1983

Chaykin's visual style emphasizes strong page design—always structured around narrative purpose—over loveliness of rendering, and he made particularly exciting use of "sound effects" as a graphic element. Chaykin incorporated constant media commentary from TV news announcers (the rebels' chief weapon is a pirate cable station), establishing a postmodernist vision of the future as parody of the present.





Matt Feazell
Cynicalman • 1989
Cynicalman discovers the consequences of exercising his freedom. Feazell gives his simple stick figures personality through off-kilter facial expressions, as well as hats, ties, and other suitably comical accessories.

Distribution took a new turn in the mid-1980s, with the first large meeting of Newave creators at the 1984 Chicago Comic-Con, an event that Feazell describes as changing "the whole sense of scale of the small press."[3] Suddenly mini-comix creators weren't lone artists toiling in isolation—there was an entire community, providing support and encouragement, spurring a proliferation of new independent works, which would continue through the nineties and into the present day. Along the way, however, mini comix became simply mini comics, the rougher aspects of their aesthetic being largely obviated by improvements in photocopying technology, as well as by the advent of personal computers and desktop publishing.

ALTERNATIVE NEWSPAPER COMICS

The evolution from Underground to alternative in the mid-eighties was also reflected in a number of comic strips syndicated in alternative newspapers. Several of these strips proved culturally and artistically influential, developing the talents of important cartoonists, as well as influencing the tone of mainstream newspaper comics.

While comic strips continued to appear in the pages of most American daily papers, the format had been in decline since at least the 1960s. Artistically, the visual power of the strip had been drastically reduced due to the smaller allotment of space that papers gave to each strip, while the dominant role of television in American culture had weakened the comic strip's importance as serial entertainment. Many newspaper strips continued to amuse and

Bill Griffith
Zippy the Pinhead • 1986
Griffith's cynical affection for the absurdities and excesses of American pop culture and politics, expressed through the maniacally intense character of Zippy, bridged the gap between counterculture and mainstream, as the strip made the leap from Underground comics to wide syndication in daily newspapers.

entertain and the field deserves consideration unavailable within the scope of this history, but since the 1960s, only a handful had broken through into the popular consciousness: Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* (1970–present) and, later, Bill Watterson's *Calvin & Hobbes* (1985–1995) were notable examples.

The irreverent, surreal and often "sick" humor of Underground comics made some inroads in mainstream papers' comics sections. Bill Griffith's *Zippy the Pinhead* made the move from the Underground press to the King Features Syndicate in 1986, bringing Griffith's offbeat, cynical humor into the unlikely forum of the mainstream comics pages; at the time of writing, it is still being successfully syndicated. Gary Larson's *The Far Side*, a single-panel gag strip first published by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1980, became hugely popular on the strength of Larson's inspired absurdism until Larson retired in 1995. *The Far Side* single-handedly sparked a revival of the single-panel format; among the many strips that emulated its understated outlandishness, Dan Piraro's *Bizarro* was a particularly worthy heir. The explosion of countercultural newspapers had been an important incubator for the Underground comics of the 1960s. By the late seventies, there was a relatively stable nationwide network of weekly alternative papers that welcomed cartoonists who fit their calmed-down but still irreverent tone and progressive politics.

Lynda Barry's *Ernie Pook's Comeek*, which began appearing in the *Chicago Reader* in 1979, was an offbeat, diary-like series about awkward adolescent girls. The intimate authenticity of Barry's dialogue and observation, and the unpolished expressiveness of her drawing were qualities she would bring to her graphic-novel work in coming decades.

Life in Hell was a minimally drawn strip that expressed creator Matt Groening's cynical humor through characters such as the morose rabbit Binky and the fez-wearing gay couple Akbar and Jeff. *Life in Hell*'s presence from 1980 in the *Los Angeles Reader* led to Groening's opportunity to create the animated television series *The Simpsons*. Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For*, created in 1983 and syndicated mostly in LGBT periodicals, was a comedic soap opera that recaptured, at the level of subculture, the importance of the comic strip as shared communal touchstone, especially for a group that was at that time excluded from mainstream media representation. Like Barry, Bechdel would become one of the most important graphic-novel creators as venues for alternative comic strips died out.





years of *Peanuts*' fifty-year run. The strip—and its sensitive protagonist's "inferiority complex"—burrowed deep into the popular consciousness and reemerged in the alternative comics of later decades: an issue of *RAW* in 1990 featured Robert Sikoryak's *Good Ol' Gregor Brown*, a parody of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* featuring the persecuted giant cockroach Gregor in a Charlie Brown zigzag shirt. Certainly Ware's pudgy, hairless Jimmy Corrigan is a visual and emotional variation on Schulz's iconic loser. Charlie Brown's depressiveness is only one aspect of Schulz's monumental achievement, of course, but as cartoonist Brendan Burford put it, "More than any other cartoonist, Charles Schulz gave a new generation permission to explore a deeper set of emotions, and look inward."[2]

Some self-referential comics of the era were less morose. Dylan Horrocks's *Hicksville*, originally serialized in his *Pickle* magazine and released as a graphic novel in 1998, satirizes this depressive side of cartooning and presents a fanciful utopia for the comics-obsessed: a tiny New Zealand town in which all the residents are erudite comics readers and have collected mythical "lost" serious works by the great comic book artists (as well as the unknown comics of Pablo Picasso) in the town library. Weaving this fantasized comics



OPPOSITE
Charles Burns
Black Hole #6 • 1998

Along with Ware and Clowes, Burns epitomizes the increasing graphic sophistication of alternative comics. Burns makes extensive references to comic books of the 1950s and sixties and has honed his black-and-white artwork to jewel-like perfection. His schematization of illustrative conventions, such as the feathered shading of the hair and faces, becomes an almost abstract element. *Black Hole*, Burns's breakthrough graphic novel, employs horror-comic imagery as a metaphor for adolescent angst and alienation. The meticulous graphic care that Burns gives to this deceptively pulpy material becomes part of its postmodernist content.

RIGHT
Dylan Horrocks
Hicksville • 1998

Like many of his American contemporaries, New Zealander Horrocks imbues the subculture roots of his chosen medium with a deeper meaning but he uses a lighter, more playful tone than Burns, Ware or Clowes. In *Hicksville*, Horrocks takes the premise of what he terms the comics medium's "history of frustration, of unrealized potential" as a springboard for fantasy, creating a charming little village in which every citizen is either a cartoonist or a devotee of the art. At the annual costume party, the entire history of comics is represented.

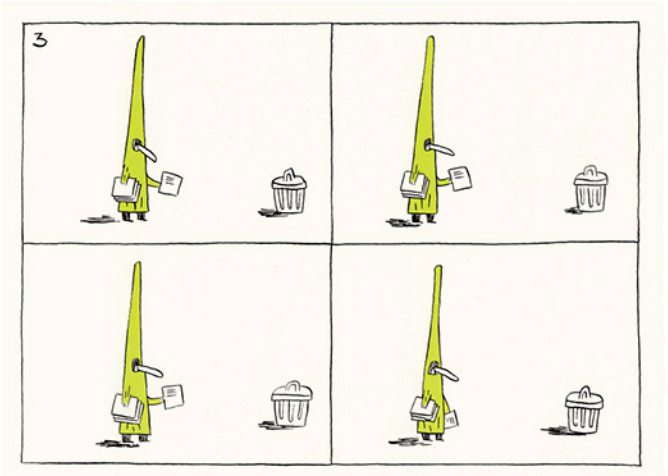
Mahler (Nicolas Mahler)
Bad Job • 2004

Mahler uses the simplest of means to create his odd world and characters, deriving from the traditions of humorous gag strips as well as Underground and outsider art. The eccentricity and minimalism of his style are inseparable from his humor, which is often based on failure, frustration and monotony, as in the "hero" of *Bad Job*'s futile attempts to hand out a leaflet.

qualities: *Peanuts*, of course, but also Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy*, Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*, Carl Barks's work on *Donald Duck* and *Uncle Scrooge*, and John Stanley's comic book version of Marge Buell's *Little Lulu*. Many strips that had long been critically ignored were resuscitated: the Hernandez Brothers have championed Hank Ketcham's *Dennis the Menace* and the *Little Archie* comics by Bob Bolling and others, while the death of creator Bil Keane in 2011 prompted an unexpected outpour of praise for his long-running panel gag *The Family Circus*. Where Crumb and other Underground cartoonists had rediscovered the 1920s "bigfoot" style, the nineties and 2000s have seen a "big head" revival.

The cartoony style has been employed with varying degrees of irony. American Ivan Brunetti's comics used a cute, simplified style for angry, envelope-pushing dark humor. Spanish cartoonist Max's *Bardín el Superrealista*, created in 1997, combines classic gag humor with cerebral debates over metaphysics and aesthetics, full of references to Buñuel and Dalí, as the title character bickers with his fellow intellectual bohemians and a variety of spiritual beings. German Ulf K.'s series of wordless stories featuring the character *Hieronymus B.* (who also first appeared in 1997) displays a gentle, whimsical humor, maintaining its sweetness despite references to Kafka and surrealism.

Other artists embrace a sort of somber minimalism that makes use of cartoony styles as counterpoint to melancholy content, often employing slow pacing in contrast with the frenetic pace that might be expected from comic strips. The Norwegian cartoonist Jason draws his characters as anthropomorphic dogs in stories characterized by a kind of quiet despair, such as



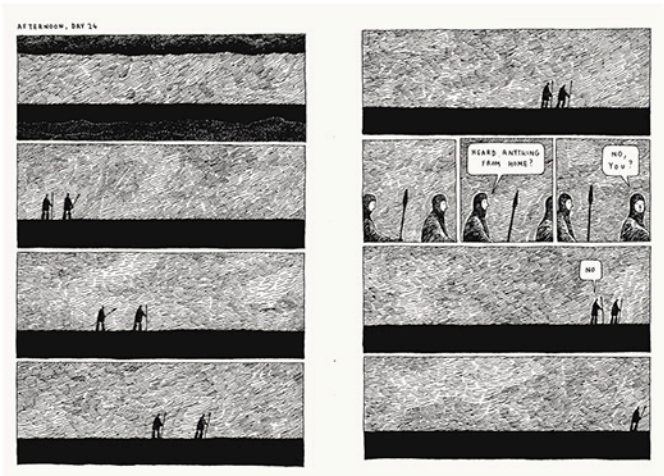
Tom Gauld
Guardians of the Kingdom • 2003

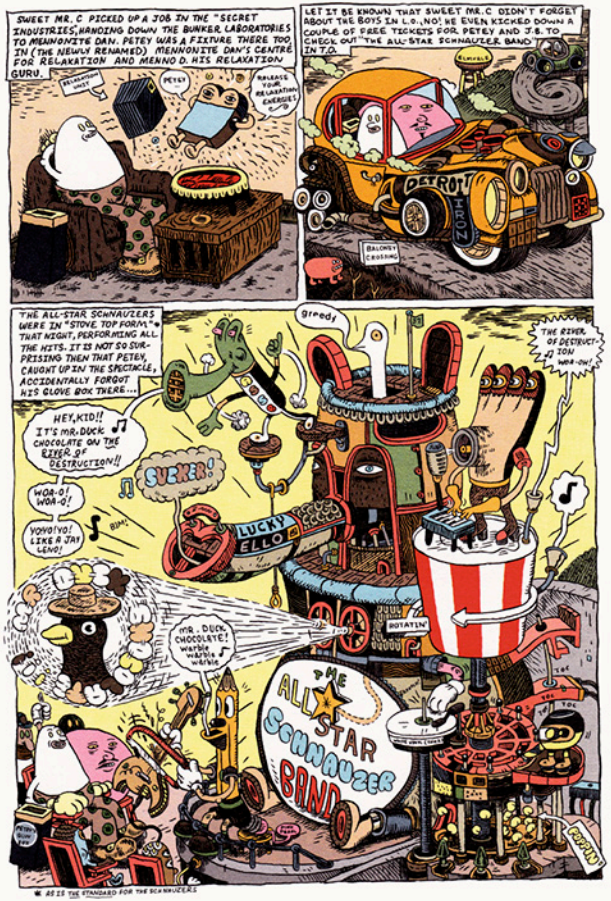
A pair of hapless soldiers guard the border between two vast empty expanses in one of Gauld's existentially humorous comics. The minimalistic approach to narrative is matched by the unassuming dimensions of the mini-comic format in which *Guardians of the Kingdom* was published. Stylistically, Gauld does not draw heavily on classic comic strip vocabulary; his art is dense and heavily cross-hatched and his characters are anonymous-looking, often almost featureless; their inexpressiveness adds to their vulnerability as they are buffeted by fate and human misunderstanding.

Hey, Wait (2001), which follows its canine protagonist through a damaged life following an adolescent tragedy. Even in well-plotted thrillers such as *Why Are You Doing This?* (2005) or *I Killed Adolf Hitler* (2007) Jason continues to use cartoony animals as characters while sustaining a subdued, heavy mood.

Austrian Mahler (Nicolas Mahler) uses a different kind of cartoony style—looser brushwork and stick-ish figures with huge, protruding noses—but a similar minimalist sensibility to express his pessimistic humor. Stories such as *Lone Racer* (1999), about a washed-up race-car driver and his drinking buddies, or *Bad Job* (2004), a series of wordless strips about a hapless leaflet distributor, are comedies of uneventfulness, awkwardness and disappointment.

Scottish cartoonist Tom Gauld is another master of this type of minimalist gallows humor, creating a somber atmosphere through cross-hatched backgrounds and figures drawn as featureless, small-headed slabs. His characters—whether cavemen (*Hunter & Painter*), medieval soldiers (*Guardians of the Kingdom*) or Biblical figures (*Goliath*)—are hapless everymen; they speak in contemporary rhythms and face contemporary social dilemmas or timeless existential ennui.





Marc Bell
There is No Escape!,
Kramers Ergot #4 • 2003

Bell, one of the artists published by nineties alternative publisher Highwater Books, clearly owes much to the retro-Underground style of Robert Crumb (as well as to Crumb's own 1930s comic strip inspirations). Bell uses this cartoony idiom, however, to create an entirely personal, absurd-poetic world, without the rebellious shock tactics of the sixties and seventies underground. After the demise of Highwater, Bell's work appeared in the definitive 2000s alt-comics anthology *Kramers Ergot*.

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NEW FORMS, NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW AUDIENCES

The state of American comics in the early twenty-first century presents a certain paradox. On the one hand, the breadth and variety of comics production seems at an all-time high, as does the translation and distribution of works across language barriers. The acceptance of comics as an art form by younger generations bodes well for the future. With the rising stature of the graphic novel, the "mainstream vs. alternative" division is fast becoming obsolete, as "alternative" graphic novels often reach a broader readership than do superhero comics. But on the other hand, the medium seems to be in a perpetual state of flux as regards formats, methods of distribution and "media" in the physical sense of the term. The fast-paced and disorienting set of transitions from stapled periodicals to the graphic novel (itself an ambiguous concept) and to the multiplicity of new electronic formats makes the shape of comics' future especially uncertain.

THE DECLINE OF SERIALIZATION AND BIRTH OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL MOVEMENT

The influence of Fort Thunder and Highwater Books on indie artists and small presses was evident in the early years of the new century. Numerous anthologies sprang into being, ranging from Fantagraphics' handsomely mounted *Mome* to the Portland, Oregon-based mini-comic collection *Papercutter*. A host of small, artistically oriented presses were launched, including Buenaventura Press, PictureBox, Koyama Press, AdHouse Books and Sparkplug Books. *Kramers Ergot*, an anthology edited by Los Angeles-based cartoonist Sammy Harkham, picked up where Jordan Crane's *NON* had left off, in both content and packaging, completely reconceiving its format with each issue. Its fourth issue, published in 2004, constituted an assertive declaration of the attitudes and aesthetics of this new generation of cartoonists: a phone book-sized anthology that included Highwater and Fort Thunder artists as well as many other indie comics newcomers. The primitivism and "Cute Brut" styles that characterized the New England avant-garde groups was its dominant mode.

Slice-of-life, character-based fiction in the vein of Clowes, Ware, Abel and Tomine carried on as well. Both Harkham and Crane published their own solo

released his *xkcd* under Creative Commons license, which allows his fans to translate the comics and release them on noncommercial mirror sites, resulting in translations into Spanish, French, Russian and other languages.

This breaking down of barriers—between languages, between genres, between physical forms, between reader and creator—may well be the defining legacy of webcomics as a movement, even as it has already been supplanted as the most cutting-edge technology. As portable devices and e-book formats carve out larger portions of the publishing marketplace, comics creators are already experimenting with new ways in which to make comics and get them into readers' hands. How this will change comics as an art form remains to be seen.

RIGHT
Jenn Manley Lee
Dicebox, book 1: *Wander*, part 7: "Pots And Pans" • 2002–present

Lee is highly attuned to the way visual choices in body language, gesture and even wardrobe play a role in drawing out the subtleties of personality and emotion. In that light, she develops fully realized fashions and textiles to clothe her characters according to their own personal tastes, and uses a sophisticated system of color symbolism to guide her choices. "Color functions as an organizing principle throughout *Dicebox*," says Lee, "not only for character interactions, but for story structure, mood, and pacing. Each character aligns to a particular color, which correlates to particular seasons, elements, and story segments, among other factors."



OPPOSITE
Dylan Meconis
Family Man, chapter 2 • 2006–present

Half Jewish by birth, Christian by upbringing and currently struggling with a bout of atheism, Luther Levy finds himself teaching theology at a remote university where he is drawn to Ariana Nolte, the school's oft-disappearing librarian. Not quite a prequel to Meconis's smart vampire farce *Bite Me*, *Family Man* is a complex tale of the politics of theological scholarship, religious and familial duty (not necessarily distinguishable from each other) and werewolves. Meconis sets his work in 1768, and draws with obsessive attention to period detail.

