To Allude or To, Like, Not by Joe Sutliff Sanders

Posted to Comics Forum, April 13, 2012
http://comicsforum.org/2012/04/13/to-allude-or-to-like-not-by-joe-sutliff-sanders/

Last semester, I taught an advanced course on children's comics and picture books, one of those courses we find ourselves teaching because we have more questions than we do answers. From years of studying critical commentaries on the form of comics and the form of picture books, I had arrived at a very respectable, highly informed position from which I could no longer say anything coherent on the subject. Naturally, that meant I was ready to teach it.

Our readings that semester were far-ranging, and I will maintain to my dying gasp that our great breadth of inquiry was the result of our eclectic thirst for knowledge, not because the captain had been clinging to a broken rudder since the moment his ship set sail. As a result, we covered territory I found familiar as well as territory I was still trying to map. And not surprisingly to anyone else who has ever tried this "strategy" of teaching, it was while we were crisscrossing what was, to me, the familiar and the unfamiliar that one of my many excellent and engaged students, a young man named Tyler Brown, pointed out that there were hidden depths in one of the most well-charted areas.

Brown wrote his final paper on a book that frequently falls in and out of favor in comics circles: Mark Waid and Alex Ross's *Kingdom Come*. His topic was decidedly old fashioned: what allusions does the book make? It's the kind of question that a comics scholar would never ask, nervous of echoes of *The Anxiety of Influence* or otherwise unfashionable scholarship. But as Brown and I worked on where he might go with this topic, an interesting pattern came to light, one that I had noticed but never thought much about before my student populated it with his examples. *Kingdom Come*'s most obvious allusions are biblical: it quotes Revelation, names a villain Magog, puts a funny hat with ram's horns on said villain's head, titles itself after a phrase from the Lord's Prayer, and so on. But the book's most common allusions are to low-brow culture: *Fat Albert*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, 1960s pop music, and, of course, comics. Indeed, Brown came to the conclusion that the biblical allusions did little more than emphasize the book's apocalyptic tone, but the allusions to low-brow culture, he began to sense, meant something more significant. With the end of the semester looming, he had to wrap up his inquiry, ending with the theory that perhaps these low-brow allusions say something about how comics readers are eager to read backward through allusions to inform themselves about the history of popular culture.

I like that idea very much—after all, it's flattering to think of me and mine as people who are looking for excuses to learn—but it's probably an untestable theory. Nonetheless, the more I allowed myself to think about the decidedly unfashionable question that drove it—namely, what allusions do comics make?—the more I was convinced that there is a pattern here that says something about comics and how they're read. The examples of comics making allusions to low-brow culture are too many mention here—I've just finished work on an essay about how Urasawa invokes and revises Tezuka in *Pluto*, to pull one suggestive example out of my hat—so what I'd like to do for the rest of this brief post is to start with this tentative given (that comics often allude to low-brow culture and rarely allude to high-brow), sketch out some of the ways we

1

might think about the allusions popular comics tend to make, and then suggest some ways of explaining what the patterns of those allusions mean.

It might do, considering that this question arose from a course on comics and picture books, to begin thinking about allusions in comics by contrasting them with allusions in picture books. Both are media that rely on word-image combinations, and both rely on sequential readings to make meaning. But one of the few important differences between comics and picture books is that the latter make allusions to high art with some frequency, while comics do so only rarely. There are many examples of picture books pointing off-screen to famous paintings, but in the interest of space, I'll cite only one study exploring such high-brow allusions in picture books. In an essay published in 2000, John Stephens highlights allusions to van Gogh's *Vincent's Bedroom at Arles*, *The Chair and the Pipe*, and *Starry Night* as well as Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* and *Gentleman and Girl with Music* in addition to Bosch's *The Crowning with Thorns* and perhaps even Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*…and that's just in one picture book, Allen Say's *Emma's Rug*! If one picture book (indeed, a picture book created by someone who began his career in comics) can happily include so many high-brow allusions, why don't comics?

It's possible that the difference between the allusions made in comics and picture books is traceable to a widely noted difference in the role the two forms are perceived to play in literacy. It is generally taken for granted (see for example a recent essay by Mel Gibson) that picture books are understood by the wider populace to be a noble step on the road to literacy, whereas comics are either a threat or a short-term distraction on the way to real books. But the abundance of low-brow and scarcity of high-brow references in comics would connect to that observation from an odd angle. The perception of comics' relationship with literacy seems to be one imposed from without, by people invested in the teaching of literacy looking at the popularity of comics from the outside. But if the surplus of low-brow allusions in comics is connected to comics' supposed opposition to literacy, then the allusions are in comics because the comics creators themselves feel that comics are opposed to literacy; that is to say, the perception of comics as anti-literacy comes from without, but the choice to privilege low-brow allusions has to come from within. From the picture books angle, this makes a certain amount of sense: picture book creators profit from contributing to the perception that their wares are essential to literacy, and including high-brow allusions would make sense for creators making money by selling children's books to parents who want to recognize picture books as imbued with the aura of the educative, as Good For Children. It's not unlikely that comics creators know they are perceived by a larger public as contributing to an art form that hinders literacy, but I balk at the notion that, aware of that perception, comics creators embrace it.

But then again, there is something…delinquent about the kinds of allusions comics prefer. By preferring low-brow allusions, comics seem to be inviting readers to thumb their noses at high-brow culture. Think back to *Kingdom Come* as an obvious example. Whereas its multiple biblical allusions feel respectful toward the source text, borrowing its authority almost gratefully in order to mirror the apocalyptic tone of late scripture, the more common low-brow allusions have the air of metafiction, of a technique that doesn't add to the unity of the book's tone, but that makes a joke of unity and artistic integrity. When the neo-fascist Bat-bots of Waid and Ross's dystopia chase after the characters of *Fat Albert*, the text must be seen as inviting readers to pop out of the awe-struck narrative tone of the rest of the book in order to smirk at the odd allusion. The

metafictionality of the allusions, then, especially as compared with the biblical allusions, feels downright disrespectful to Literature-with-a-capital-L: the unity of the story is interrupted to give the audience the old wink-wink, nudge-nudge, a giggling allusion that is more self-indulgent than it is an addition to the crafting of the story. The biblical allusions bear fruit for the story's apocalyptic tone, but the other allusions pointedly threaten it. This does seem to be evidence of comics creators going out of their way to make their tales anti-literary, to locate some of the pleasure for knowing readers in the fracturing of good, respectful storytelling.

So one angle of this realization about allusions in comics is that comics still cherish low-brow allusions above high-brow; but the fact that we can find some prominent high-brow allusions in a book like *Kingdom Come* is also a sign that the habits of comics may change. One reason that we can expect more high-brow allusions from comics in the future is that the format of comics is changing. Because of the booming popular of the trade format comic (sigh… "graphic novel") at the expense of magazine-style floppies, readers have and are encouraged to develop a different relationship with the story between the suddenly sturdy covers. Some very provocative scholarship on picture books has pointed out the relevance of the fact that from the beginning of the twentieth century, picture books were designed to endure and reward repeated re-readings (Nathalie op de Beeck's *Suspended Animation* is the best recent treatment of this topic). As a result, picture books have for nearly a century featured detailed drawings with hidden delights, a red balloon in the background of a story about a gorilla going to sleep, a hidden deer in the background of a picture book about Anansi the spider, and so on. But comics, which were originally designed to be ephemeral objects, were magazines, to be read through a limited number of times before they simply fell apart. But with the widespread popularity of the trade format, narratives could be written for a comic book that would tolerate multiple re-readings. And if it was going to tolerate those re-readings, a comic really ought to reward re-readers for returning to the story again and again. Therefore, *Kingdom Come*—I bought my own copy, in fact, as a hardback issued by the Science Fiction Book Club—is emblematic of a new kind of comic, one written with an eye to the kind of shelf life that had previously been more common for picture books than comics. That kind of book needs to have something in it to reward readers for re-reading, and allusions to high-brow culture are more likely to make sense on later readings than are allusions to popular culture, which is by definition more temporal. Therefore, there's a good reason to expect comics to behave more like picture books in the future.

I'll close by fending off the inevitable argument that there are many comics of the past, even before the blossoming of the trade format, that make allusions to classic rather than pop culture. Of *course* there are comics that have high-brow allusions. In fact, a great deal of the work of Gilbert Hernandez makes a point of alluding to high-brow literature and visual art, and comics have a long tradition of adapting classic literature…which isn't really the same thing as making an allusion, but it's close. Still, even in the work of, say, Hernandez, the high-brow allusions appear alongside—indeed, to my mind, they're dwarfed by—allusions to punk music, popular wrestling, and (surprise surprise) comics. And that seems to be the pattern through comics, to maintain the right to make high-brow allusions but revel in the nerdy glee of low-brow allusions. It's an unfashionable question to ask, this question of what allusions a book makes, but in the case of comics, it's a provocative question with surprising answers. And those answers may well change dramatically in the coming decades.

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