



From Comics Fan to Children's Publisher

By Jason Low

I was not a reader when I was young, but I became one in middle school when I discovered comic books, my first true love. John Byrne's X-men and Frank Miller's Daredevil were a couple of my favorites. The best comics presented well-drawn, compelling characters and stories that dealt with issues like racism, heroism, sacrifice, loyalty, and good versus evil. Comics utilized sequential art, presenting the world visually. This is what I responded to most as a kid.

My fascination with comics led to art school, where I was an illustration major at Parsons School of Design in New York City. Parsons marked the end of my comic book fanaticism, replacing it with museums and art history classes. After college, new media and Web design brought me to Lee & Low Books, where I have experienced all facets of children's book publishing and the running of a family business.

I thought I had grown up and left comic books behind, but sometimes the past has a way of finding you when you least expect it. In the last few years comic books have been making inroads into traditional children's publishing. Being a former comic book fan, I was eager for Lee & Low to tell a story in this way. I served as art director for *Around the World*, written by John Coy and illustrated by Antonio Reonegro and Tom Lynch (Lee & Low, 2005). This title utilizes a comic book look and feel to tell the story of a pick-up basketball game that is played simultaneously in 10 different countries and cities.

Around this time Lee & Low started to receive graphic-novel submissions. For this reason, I felt it necessary to acquaint myself with graphic novels being published today. I immediately saw that these books were not the same animals as the ones I grew up with. Books like *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon, 2003), *The Rabbi's Cat* by Joann Sfar (Pantheon, 2003), *The Tale of One Bad Rat* by Bryan Talbot (Dark Horse, 1994), and *Blankets* by Craig Thompson (Top Shelf, 2003) all address sophisticated topics, and while reading them I was moved by how seamlessly graphic novels express angst, love, tragedy, fantasy, and confrontation in a poignant, organic way.

Many if not all of these books were published for adults. They have crossover appeal for teenagers and young adults, but the new graphic-novel imprints recently established by the children's book publishing industry bring something new to the table. Graphic novels such as the 2007 Printz winner *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (Roaring Brook/First Second, 2006) are now being published specifically for teenagers, with crossover appeal for adults.

Graphic novels are the latest addition to our arsenal of storytelling formats, but it will take time for children's book publishers to master this new language. Experience in publishing picture books does not equal expertise in how to make sequential art. Graphic novels are substantially more work to create than a picture book. (An entire 32-page picture book could conceivably fit on three pages of a comic book.) Editors, art directors, and illustrators looking to pursue graphic novels have to allow for a steep learning curve before they will be able to produce good graphic novels. We speak from experience with this last thought as our efforts to publish our first graphic novel have been challenging to say the least.

Statistically, many boys fall into the category of reluctant readers, and educators have told me that boys gravitate toward graphic novels, just as I was drawn to comic books as a kid. Besides reading manuscripts that we consider for acquisition, I now read every day—everything from biographies to fiction and nonfiction, fantasy, science fiction, and even the occasional comic book. The reading of graphic novels can lead to becoming a reader, period. I am living proof. 

Jason Low is publisher of Lee & Low Books. Lee & Low's first graphic novel, *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty*, will be released later this year.

real, a girl named Thorn turns out to be a princess, and the land is threatened by rat creatures. Appealing to boys and girls alike, Fone Bone's adventures are beautifully rendered, gripping, and often funny. Also see the other books in the series: *Out from Boneville* (Scholastic/Graphix, 2005), *The Great Cow Race* (Scholastic/Graphix, 2005), *Eyes of the Storm* (Scholastic/Graphix, 2006), *The Dragonslayer* (Scholastic/Graphix, 2006), *Rock Jaw* (Scholastic/Graphix, 2007), *Old Man's Cave* (Scholastic/Graphix, 2007), and the upcoming *Treasure Hunters* (Scholastic/Graphix, August 2008).

The Boy, the Bear, the Baron, the Bard. By Gregory Rogers. 2004. 32p. Roaring Brook, \$16.95 (9781596430099); paper, \$7.95 (9781596432673).

Gr. 4–6. This wordless story looks like a picture book but works just like a graphic novel. The plot includes all the characters in the title, as a modern-day boy chases his wayward soccer ball and is transported to the times of *the* bard, where he experiences a series of causes and effects that are both unlikely and delightful. The GN panels range from quite small to encompassing full pages, contributing to the varying pace of the narrative.

City of Light, City of Dark. By Avi. Illus. by Brian Floca. 1993. 192p. Orchard, o.p.

Gr. 5–8. This black-and-white graphic novel is framed around a mythlike story about the change of seasons. A young boy and girl work to help save their city and discover more about themselves in the process. Strong female characters and a sprinkling of Spanish in the narration (one character is bilingual) distinguish the story. The drawing style could readily be used to discuss literary techniques like tone and mood.