



Ten of the Best: Graphic Novels

By *Richard Hill*

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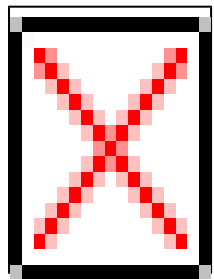
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Clive Barnes chooses his top ten titles.

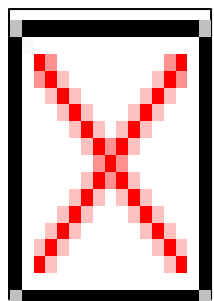
?Here?s a list that?s a mixture of the best of the current crop of graphic novels and some older ones that stick in my mind. There?s fiction and non fiction, original material and adaptations and retellings, reflecting the range of material available in this format. And they?re all in print.?



In the Night Kitchen

Maurice Sendak, Red Fox, 978 0 09 941747 7, £5.99 pbk

I remember using this for story times as a young librarian. What drew me to it was its dreamlike quality, enhanced by its chanting text. Naked Mickey falls out of his bed into a vast kitchen, where three Oliver Hardy-like bakers persuade him to climb a giant milk bottle so that they can mix ?Milk in the batter. Milk in the batter. We bake cake and nothing?s the matter.? Sendak renders the story largely in comic strip panels, a technique that gives the bizarre business a cinematic reality, and somehow makes it even more disorienting. A jaw dropper. (3+)



The Snowman

Raymond Briggs, Puffin, 978 0 14 050350 0, £6.99 pbk

Arguably, Raymond Briggs first showed the potential of the comic strip format for the picture book, later picked up by fellow luminaries like Quentin Blake and Shirley Hughes. It?s a hard choice among his many titles but why not this wordless wonder, which shows the capacity of pictures alone to tell a story and whose mixture of humour and pathos, embodied in the clumsy and vulnerable solidity of the Snowman himself, is so brilliantly realised, not least in the moment that the Snowman effortlessly and joyfully takes to the night sky hand in hand with his boy creator. (3+)

The Adventures of Ook and Gluk, Kung Fu Cavemen from the Future

Dav Pilkey, Scholastic, 978 1 407 12388 2, £8.99 hbk

The new time travelling series from the Captain Underpants team continues the under-the-desk-lid cartooning of its predecessor. Only when faced with 20 or so graphic novels whose techniques derived from superhero comics, did I realise how refreshingly unpretentious, inventive, funny and reader friendly Pilkey is. The unsophisticated black and white illustrations not only give budding comic writers grounding in the basics, they demonstrate that you don't need great drawing skills to have a lot of fun with the format. (8+)

Slog?s Dad

David Almond, ill. Dave McKean, Walker, 978 1 4063 2290 3, £8.99 hbk

This second collaboration between Almond and McKean features a gem of a short story, once more about the loss of a father. McKean?s separate parallel pictorial narrative, which opens and closes the book and appears in sections throughout, sometimes anticipating Almond?s text, gives the reader an access to Slogger?s grief and his means of seeking reassurance and hope that the narrator of Almond?s story, sympathetic but matter-of-fact Davie, never can. McKean?s empathy with the story is remarkable, enhancing the reader?s experience and taking it in new directions. The result is stunning. (9+)

Good Dog, Bad Dog

Dave Shelton, David Fickling Books, 978 0 385 61825 0, £9.99 hbk

The canine combination of diminutive detective Bergman and massive McBoo blunder their way through a series of capers that gleefully ransack every cliché of police and detective fiction and cinema. This is only one of the DFCLibrary, which originated with the late lamented DFC comic and which the irrepressible (thank the lord) David Fickling has now published in separate volumes. Amongst the pile of new graphic novels which I received, the six titles in the DFC Library, while very different from each other in style and content, stood out for their originality, illustration and production. Don?t miss any of them. (9+)

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

Adapted by Alan Grant, ill. Cam Kennedy, Barrington Stoke, 978 1 84299 568 6, £8.99 pbk

This is in the list for two reasons. It?s one of the better representatives of a huge class of graphic retellings of the classic novels. And I have a soft spot for this kind of comic because it was through the American ?Classics Illustrated? in the 1950s that I discovered adult stories like **Ivanhoe** that I would never have read in the original. Grant and Kennedy come with good references in the comic world and treat Stevenson?s original with care, although the monstrous appearance of Hyde might be overdone. This follows the same team?s adaptation of **Kidnapped**. (9+)

The Little Prince

Joann Sfar, trans. Sarah Ardizzone, Walker, 978 1 4063 2544 7, £15.00 hbk

This classic children?s and cult teenage book, with its quirky conversations and philosophical musings, isn?t an obvious candidate for a graphic novel. And Sfar doesn?t make it any easier for himself by sticking rigidly to a six panel page format. However, so skilled is he at varying point of view and colouring within the panels and so inventive with his characterisation, that it works. Perhaps the greatest recommendation of this version is how far removed it is from Saint-Exupéry?s own illustrations: its bright, sometimes garish, colours and the distorted features of its characters burn away some of the sentimental gloss of the original. (10+)

Skim

Mariko Tamaki, ill. Jillian Tamaki, Walker, 978 1 4063 2136 4, £9.99 pbk

Kim, the 15-year-old narrator of this subtly written and brilliantly drawn slice of teenage life in a Canadian girls? academy, finds discomfort in her parents? broken marriage and an uncongenial school life. While she chooses her own temporary outward identity as Wiccan and Goth, the reader comes to understand her intimately as a friend. The life of home and, particularly, school is palpably real, darkened and complicated by the suicide of the boyfriend of one of her classmates. Even at my distance of age and gender, the troughs and peaks of adolescent emotion, the shifting friendships, and the ache of impossible love, are all too familiar. (13+)

I See the Promised Land

Arthur Flowers, Manu Chitrakar and Guglielmo Rossi, Tara Books, 978 9 38034 004 3, £11.99 hbk

The unlikely partnership of African American writer, Bengali traditional artist and Italian designer, while remaining true to the social and political background and course of Martin Luther King's life as a civil rights campaigner, translate it into a heroic mythical sphere. Rossi cleverly combines Flowers' text, itself a mixture of the oral and the literary, with Chitrakar's striking tableaux, to pay tribute to the universal nature of the struggle of a man who, beside Ghandi and Mandela in the twentieth century, transcends the merely political. (14+)

Palestine

Joe Sacco, Jonathan Cape, 978 0 224 06982 3, £14.99 pbk

Joe Sacco has a rare collection of talents: the objectivity and incisiveness of a political and historical commentator; the empathy of a human interest reporter; the commitment of a human rights activist; and the narrative and pictorial skill to bring everything together in a compelling story which convinces the reader that they are in the thick of the world's trouble spots. He not only informs, he pricks the conscience. There is no better way to find your way into the complexity of a situation like Palestine, and become aware of what it means for those caught in it. (14+)

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian, and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

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