

political gaps that otherwise might not be presented to middle school and high school-aged students. At the same time, it reveals several corrections to some of the historical misinformation that otherwise busy adults might not stop to discover. If, historically speaking, comic books have been used to amuse while simultaneously (and even surreptitiously) setting forth certain ideological views, then Gantz's cartoon history of Jews in America lives up to this tradition. *Jews in America* is visually appealing, factually accurate, and a valuable addition to the shelf of the scholar of comics and ethnic studies.

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Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature. Charles Hatfield. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005. xv + 182 pages. \$50.00 cloth, \$20.00 paper.

The term "alternative," when applied to any art form or entertainment medium, automatically creates a binary distinction from the "mainstream," with borders that are often difficult to define; for example, popular music fans frequently and heatedly disagree over what qualifies a particular band as "alternative." Criteria for "alternative" may include economic/commercial, stylistic/aesthetic, generic, ideological, or historical considerations. In terms of comics, however, the parameters for "alternative" may be more easily defined. Few entertainment media have been as dominated by a single genre (superheroes) as American comic books, and none are so limited to a single, specialized means of distribution (the comic specialty shop). The fact that comics are also known more as a collecting hobby or subculture than as an artistic medium also contributes to the definition of "alternative." Hatfield argues that while alternative comics resist or parody the formulas

and conventions of their mainstream counterparts, they also embrace the serialization and episodic form that is bound to the medium's means of distribution.

Hatfield examines a wide range of underground comix from the 1960s and 1970s and alternative comics from the 1980s and 1990s, devoting special attention to Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and especially Gilbert Hernandez's *Heartbreak Soup*. The author acknowledges that although many alternative comics "are wretched, and the subculture from which they spring is admittedly an ideological rat's nest, alternative comics have also been the seedbed of much that is vital and transforming in the comics field" (xiii). *Alternative Comics* is a valuable work that lays the foundation for further study, most notably in regards to the impact of serialization and the comic book marketplace on creators' choices of format, style, and content. Hatfield also helps us understand the uniqueness and literary value of graphic narratives.

Hatfield begins with two chapters that set up a critical and historical framework for the discussion of recent works. The first chapter provides a historical materialist analysis of the emergence of direct-market distribution through the rise of underground comix and comic specialty shops. Hatfield argues that the unique circumstances of the current comic book marketplace have had a direct impact on stylistic and narrative choices. The next chapter identifies several key tensions unique to the art form itself. Hatfield also shifts and modifies Scott McCloud's concept of the simple image/text dichotomy. Hatfield classifies the key tensions as "word vs. image," "single image vs. image-in-series," "sequence vs. surface," and "text as experience vs. text as object." Later chapters provide close readings of specific creators' works: most notably, Hernandez, Spiegelman, Pekar, and Green. Other creators, like Chris Ware, Gary Panter, Robert Crumb, Jason Lutes, Julie Doucet, Harvey Kurtzman, and Joost Swarte, receive minor attention as exemplars of the medium's narrative "tensions." Though Hatfield resists the formation of a comics "canon" in his introduction, his choices here seem particularly canonical—most of these creators are known by the general population, and most

have received academic attention. However, Hatfield provides a highly original close reading of the use of photography in *Maus*. The chapter on autobiographical comics is also noteworthy in highlighting the importance of that genre to the alternative comics movement.

The attention given to Gilbert Hernandez, however, appears to be the most significant, as Hernandez has received the least critical attention of the creators discussed. Hatfield focuses primarily on Hernandez's ambitious multivolume work *Palomar*, and spin-offs focusing on his most popular character Luba, such as *Poison River*. Hernandez's *Heartbreak Soup* stories, which were serialized in the Hernandez Brothers' anthology *Love and Rockets* over the course of thirteen years, expose the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of the method of serialization chosen by most comic creators. In addition, Hernandez's work exemplifies how stylistic choices, based largely on filmic techniques like "close-ups" and "depth of field" (described as "post-cinematic cartooning" [73]) combine with a focus on community, race, and history to create a definitively alternative comic.

At times, Hatfield seems to struggle with a sense of audience. Part of his intended audience is academics, to whom he makes the argument that alternative comics are indeed a form of literature deserving greater attention. For this group, he assumes a lack of familiarity with both the individual works and the art form as a whole. But another part of his audience is the comic fan or avid graphic narrative reader, who has distinctly different requirements. During his discussion of Hernandez's *Human Diastrophism*, Hatfield warns readers of "a big spoiler" regarding the graphic novel's conclusion. I found this moment interesting and quite telling: would an essay on, for example, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* need to warn readers of "spoilers" when discussing Septimus Smith's suicide? However, the concept of "spoilers" is an essential part of the language of comic fandom, especially in the comics online community, where failure to warn of such revelations can lead to considerable abuse. This tension over audience emerges more distinctly in the discussion of the history of the comic marketplace. In that chapter, Hatfield does not assume his audience has prior knowledge of the marketplace, let alone that

they plan their week around the release of new comics on Wednesdays. He therefore goes into great, valuable detail about how this idiosyncratic means of distribution works. However, this chapter lacks a much-needed, extensive discussion of the term “comix,” used historically to distinguish underground comics from the mainstream.

Because alternative comics is an “emerging literature”—emerging in terms of both attention from scholars and mainstream popularity—Hatfield acknowledges that “this study is but a progress report from one who is working as fast as he can to keep abreast of a rapidly accelerating field” (xv). Indeed, much has changed even since this book’s publication. Pekar’s *American Splendor* is now put out by mainstream publisher DC Comics’ Vertigo imprint, and Hernandez has increased his presence with that same publisher through his recent graphic novel *Sloth*, while also continuing the independently-published *Love and Rockets* series with his brothers. In addition, Spiegelman has again achieved mainstream success with his 9/11 graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Yet Hatfield’s study does not fall apart under the weight of new developments. Most notably, his focus on autobiographical comics as the dominant subgenre of alternative comics predicts the recent popular and critical success of works like David B.’s *Epileptic* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. *Alternative Comics* serves as an important early step in the academic study of this particular genre, and readers should look forward to seeing Hatfield and others build on this work in the future.

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