

Back to School

By Karen Green

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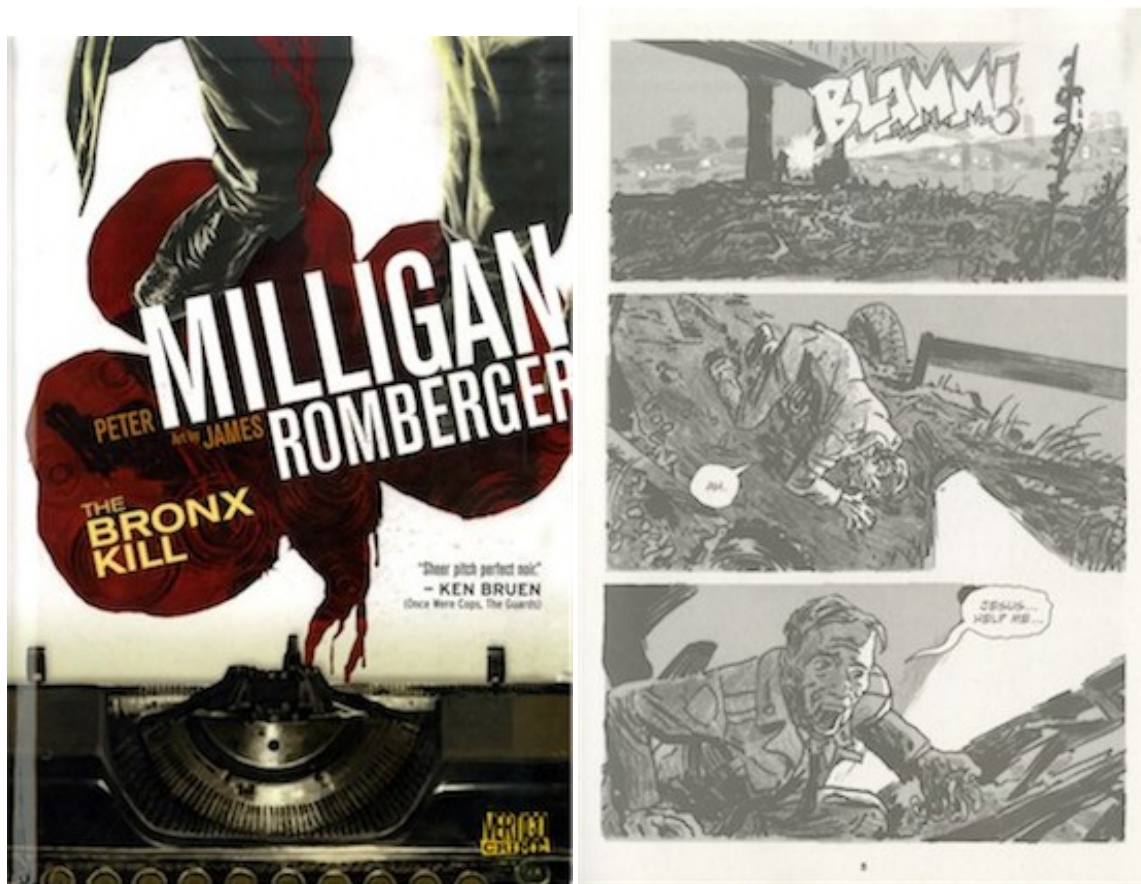
I've written more than a little on what comics can do for the academy. But what can the academy do for comics? Or, at the very least, for comics creators?

Back in the Spring semester of 2007, when Art Spiegelman did his "Comics: Marching into the Canon" course here at Columbia, I got to know one of the students in the class, an artist named James Romberger. James was enrolled in Columbia's School of General Studies, working on a B.A., and once he learned that I was beginning to develop a graphic novels collection here—I was about a year and a half in on building it at that point—he became a frequent drop-in visitor to my office. He brought me a copy of *Seven Miles a Second*, for which he'd done the art (and for which his wife, Marguerite Van Cook, had done the intense, almost hallucinatory, coloring):



Do you know the book? It's the story of the astonishing David Wojnarowicz, created, in part posthumously, from his own writing. It's not a pretty story, although in its way it's absolutely beautiful: an AIDS-infected former street hustler who becomes an artist and activist, traces the story of his youth in the febrile landscape of 1970s and 1980s Manhattan.

A couple of weeks ago James stopped by again, to give me a copy of his latest book, *The Bronx Kill*, created with the writer Peter Milligan for DC's Vertigo Crime imprint. This has a very different feel from that of *Seven Miles a Second*, being a more traditional, not to mention fictional, story and drawn entirely in black and white—with frequent use of a grease pencil for shading, inspired by Alex Toth's similar technique.

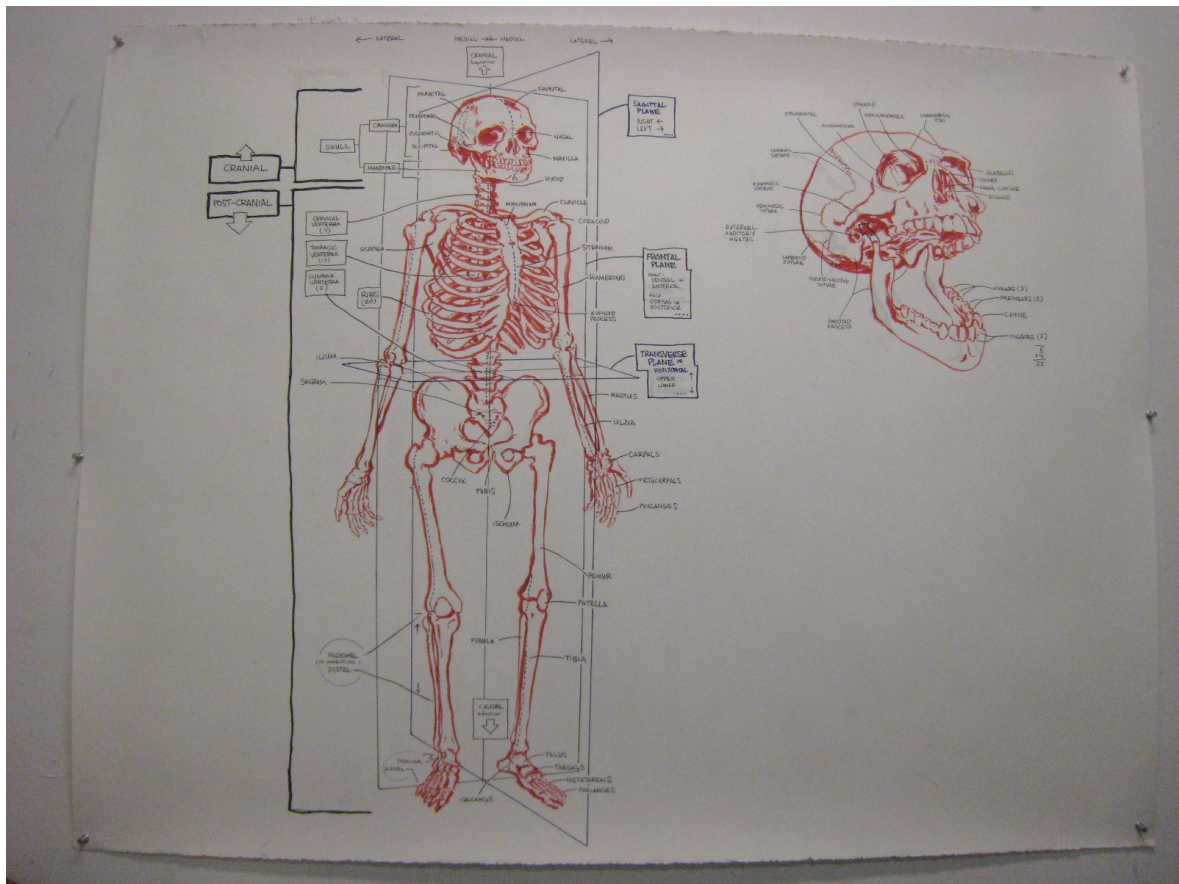


It occurred to me that I'd never even asked James, in all our conversations, what had made him decide to come to Columbia for a degree and what effect that was having—or that he hoped for it to have—on his work. So I swung by his studio for a conversation....

"I discovered, at a certain point, that, since I'd never had college humanities...I didn't have

the language" to write critically about comics. Not that he really wants to do a lot of comics criticism; "I prefer to apply these ideas to my own work." This isn't James' first academic exposure: he'd spent some time at the Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute and he'd done an Associates Degree in Theatre Arts at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (theatre offered "the closest to the kind of storytelling I wanted to do" he remarked, and that program's coursework had a huge effect on his work for *The Bronx Kill*, "in the way those characters interact and converse...it's very straight, cinematic storytelling"—though he believes "the trend in comics toward imitating cinematic technique can only go so far"), but he wanted a more formal grounding in the humanities.

I asked James about the courses he was taking; what had stood out particularly? At the risk of sounding too much like a commercial for Alma Mater, I have to report that he said we offered "an incredible level of education; almost every class I've taken has dovetailed, so I can carry one train of thought from one class to another." One of his current classes is Forensic Osteology, taken to satisfy his science requirement, and the first draft of a project to graph human skeletal structure hung behind him on the wall of his studio as we talked.



He was particularly impressed by the professor for this course, Jill Shapiro; "the most dedicated professor I've ever had...because so many students in the class had unique areas of knowledge, she created individual exams for each of them." His own major is Visual Arts, but his courses have run the gamut of the creative arts, from writing courses like Structure and Style ("we had to write a short story using two 'mentor texts;' I used Jay Cantor's *Krazy Kat : a novel in five panels* and Jane Austen") to courses on French New Wave cinema,

featuring films like Jean Vigo's *L'atalante* ("in film, you need a certain amount of people to be able to tell the story," while comics are a much more autonomous, closed world. "I have such admiration for those who take a project from start to completion") to David Damrosch's *Portrait of an Artist, on artists in literature* ("I was the token artist in the class"). For Damrosch's class he did a paper comparing Daniel Clowes' *Ice Haven* to Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, two tales featuring unreliable narrators: "both offer room for meta-storytelling; ...you have to understand the conceptual underpinnings." He expressed his enormous respect for the Visual Arts faculty as well, which gives him access to established artists with clear and individual styles, such as Kara Walker and Kiki Smith.

In his search for his own voice, James has fought some battles about the nature of artistic authorship as well. You may recall I talked a little about this in my column on the Tamakis' *Skim*. James was on the same panel as Jillian Tamaki when I asked the question about the convention of listing the writer's name first in the credits, and what artists think of that practice. As I mentioned in that column, a well-known editor in the audience claimed this was fair because a book's concept came from the writer. I reminded James of that conversation, and he laughed. He described the way authorship used to be handled at Marvel, where Kirby or Ditko would first plot the stories, and then Stan Lee would fill in the captions and balloons. "Stan Lee is quoted as saying it was like 'filling in a crossword puzzle.'" James also noted that "in most cases, the artist gets paid more than the writer," adding "Why would you want to do comics if you're going to be a second banana?"

His latest tussle has been with DC over how creators are credited on book spines. Traditionally, the writer alone is listed on the spine, although both writer and artist are on the front cover. On the Comics Journal Message Board late last summer, James bemoaned the trend, due to the consequences of bookstores shelving books spine out (the politics of getting one's cover displayed are complex indeed), which essentially renders the artist invisible to audience and critics. Ng Suat Tong picked up James' point in a piece for the Comics Reporter in the context of the rise of the star writer, at least in superhero comics. This debate—in which James triumphed, at least insofar as the Vertigo Crime series is concerned—came home to the library recently when James emailed me about the author's name on our library-bound graphic novels. A four-way online conversation ensued between James and myself as well as a cataloger and our bindery chief, about how creators are credited in the catalog (comprehensively) and how they are represented on a spine (minimally, as this tends not to be the preferred means of discovery for most of our readers).

And, speaking of the stacks, how does our collection, um, stack up? Has he made any new discoveries there? Is it having an influence on his own work?

"The collection is fantastic; there's so much going on." (Blush.) Some recent discoveries are the *Kramer's Ergot* anthologies (I gave up *KE7* to him, which I had been hoarding in my office) and Carl Barks: "his drawing and storytelling are perfectly smooth." James noted the influence that Roy Crane and Hal Foster had on Barks, whose animal characters have "faces and expressions based entirely on reality." As we spoke he pulled out volume after volume of Crane, Foster, Barks, Krigstein, Kirby from a bookshelf in one corner of his studio—among others: Frank Santoro's *Storeyville* ("beautifully drawn but not slick...emotionally driven"); Gary Panter's *Jimbo in Purgatory* (a mixture of Dante and Alice Cooper and Boy George "stomped on every page" using the full page, as comics intended); Jaime Hernandez' work ("fabulous...emotional storytelling...he built a world, a complete structure that you can believe in").



In his studio, in addition to the forensic osteology work, there was an amazing painting of our library stacks (which I instantly coveted), and a stack of massive sheets of paper from his "not of" series: laying the paper out on the floor and wielding a wet brush laden with black ink, he lets the brush go where it will, stopping when it begins to feel too intentional. "No up, no gravity, no framework," he said as he described the process; "It's about the physicality, not inert like my usual close work. It's like blackspotting in comics [i.e., using spots of intense black to move the eye on the page]." He noted that in his usual work, which he inks himself, "inking restricts the movement, it locks down the drawing," and these "not of" works are an attempt to break out of that restriction.

All this—the courses, the library, the artistic exploration—contributes to his primary goal: to become "better equipped; to find my own voice." And isn't that really the goal of any good liberal arts education? Thrilled we could help, James.

Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.

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