

# Thirteen on a Match

By Karen Green

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I've spent so much time trying to make inroads for comics and graphic novels in traditional academic departments at Columbia, that I completely forgot another natural constituency: our [School of the Arts](#). So it was a pleasant surprise indeed to get an unexpected email this past summer from [Tomas Vu-Daniel](#), Columbia's LeRoy Neiman Professor of Visual Arts and artistic director of the university's [LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies](#). The big news: he was teaching a class on the production of a graphic novel, and wanted to know if he could bring his students to the library for a tour of my [exhibition](#) and a discussion of the history of the medium.

Well, *yeah*.

Vu-Daniel describes the course, "From Drawing into Print," as having as its objective an exploration of the graphic novel as a medium for creating art. I got the chance to meet his class three times, at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the Fall 2010 semester. Our first encounter was a brief introduction: we swung past the exhibition, checked out the collection in the stacks, and I pulled out some titles to demonstrate the diversity of genres and the breadth of artistic scope the comics medium provides. I was invited into the print center at the halfway point to look at the students' work and suggest books they might want to take a look at, and then invited back at the end to see the finished products. The students were a very mixed bag; there were MFA candidates in the School of the Arts' Writing and Visual Arts programs mixed with undergrads from a variety of disciplines—Political Science, English and Comparative Literature, Anthropology. Some were already comics readers, some were already comics creators, some were new to the medium. What impressed me most, on that midpoint visit, was the individuality of their styles and their visions.

After it was all over, I asked Vu-Daniel some questions.

*What's your own history with comics and/or graphic novels? That is, how long have you been interested and whom do you read?*

When I first moved to America, I only knew a few English words. I started reading comic books to better engage with the new language I had to learn. For me comic books allowed me to translate the English words from the visual imagery which I could relate to. Growing up in Vietnam during the War, I was exposed in a very real way to a lot of the fantastical and haunting themes in comic books and graphic novels. I think for this reason the visual imagery resonated with me very early on. I remember most distinctly [Akira](#) by [Katsuhiro Otomo](#). Many of the themes and imagery from Otomo's series and from other graphic novels of this genre still influence my work to this day.

*What made you decide to create this class?*

I have been fascinated by comic books and graphic novels for a very long time. I thought "From Drawing into Print" could take on that format and tradition: printmaking and bookmaking and drawing are technical components we teach in most of the printmaking classes here, so I really wanted to use the capacity we have for making to look at a contemporary and exciting creative process. We wanted to engage students with visual and narrative possibilities and the results were staggering.

*Did you have to seek any kind of approval for the course, or were you given complete freedom?*

The class was created under the umbrella of Drawing into Print, which is a class I created to fill a niche in the curriculum. The class can change: it engages drawing and the translation of image into multiples, but the specific task of the semester can change.

*How do you see the class fitting into the School of the Arts'--and the university's--curriculum?*

I wanted to bring another element into a printmaking class, a genre specificity that would take the class beyond technical fundamentals and really challenge students to become visual authors. We had students from many departments, creative writing, political science, anthropology and their work reflected their interests. This interdisciplinary approach is what the visual arts can do, engage a different part of the curriculum and mutate it into a new form.

*Did you select the students or did you accept anyone who was interested?*

We interviewed each student on the first day of class, had them draw a bit and talk about it with us. We wanted to take the students seriously, their interests, motivations, desires, and to have them take the class seriously. We had a great variety of students and they all rose to the occasion.

*What would you do differently in the future, and why?*

I think the class should be a year-long class; the progress the students made in a semester was staggering, I can only imagine what a year could bring.

Indeed.

The assignment was for each student to create a short graphic story—unlike, say, the Stanford Graphic Novel Project, where the goal is for all the students to collaborate on a single long-form story. At semester's end, the stories would be combined into an anthology, and the unifying theme was "thirteen." Why thirteen, I asked Vu-Daniel on the final day of class. "Because there were thirteen students."

Fair enough. So how did the class rise to the challenge? Here are a few of the students I got to speak with in-depth on that final day.

Ayo Alston-Moore is an undergrad in the English and Comparative Literature Department. She's had a peripatetic life, however, and her story was inspired in part by a Bosnian friend she'd made as a child, while in school in Germany. Her friend was a survivor of the war, and helped Ayo learn German, so there's a connection to language and translation. But once Ayo's family moved back to the States, she lost track of her friend for over a decade, only reconnecting at last thanks to Facebook (thanks, Mark Zuckerberg!). I got so caught up in the story that I completely forgot to ask Ayo what the story's connection to "thirteen" is.

Her story consists of doubles upon doubles: two fluid glyph-like figures—inspired by a [Basquiat exhibition](#) she saw at the Brooklyn Museum—search for a dragon and their search is juxtaposed with her memories of the German school and her long-lost friend. The figures represent the duality of existence, as well as the fluidity of language. I remember once hearing Salman Rushdie in conversation with Edward Saïd, and Rushdie noted that growing up bilingual opened up infinitely more possibilities for puns—translation itself is like another form of wordplay, I suppose.

Ayo mentioned, on the final day of class, that she had been influenced by Aubrey Beardsley and Lynd Ward, as well as David Mazzucchelli's graphic novel adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. It's interesting that her influences are either wordless or examples of adaptation, another form of translation. A week or so after the class ended, she emailed me with additional thoughts, "I forgot whether or not I mentioned this, but the idea of placing two seemingly unrelated stories together came from the French author Georges Perec's memoir *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (W, or the memory of childhood). It's brilliant. I would call it a work of genius and a huge influence on how I will approach my work from now on. He has a story about the island W, an island where sports are praised and it seems great at first but it slowly get creepier and creepier. He alternates every other chapter between this and what he remembers of his childhood -- his mother sending him away before the Germans took over Paris and growing up confused about his heritage. In the end it all comes together and...I guess I'm strongly recommending that you read it!"

Nathan Catlin is a graduate student in the Visual Arts program of the School of the Arts. His sad sack of an Everyman is a character he's been drawing since 2005. The connection to "thirteen" was via the idea of unluckiness. After the surreal introduction of his [schlemazel](#) in the first panel (I love the snake saying, "too easy"), he depicts a series of vignettes that require no words to convey the inevitable outcome. The first panel of each has an image that serves as a title, indicating exactly how his hapless skull-face kid (the skin of his face has actually been crunched up) will suffer. Nathan said he's not really reading others' work, but he does like the pure line of *Love and Rockets*. He's inspired as much by *Seinfeld* as by any current cartoonist, and one can see how his character is sort of George Costanza meets Beavis.

Patricia Sazani is an undergraduate in the Anthropology Department. Her story, "Point Conception Saints," presents two bag-headed adolescents on the day one turns thirteen. The birthday boy has been given a gun, and the story traces the wanderings of the two friends, and the casual hell-raising of childhood. It's a very personal story: the characters appear to be boys, but one was based on Patricia's little sister. The town of [Point Conception](#) and the characters' school ([La Purisma](#)) are both real, near Patricia's own California hometown. The boys' covered

heads are a literal manifestation of how unformed children still are at that age, although I love the allusion hinted at in one panel, with the bags sporting the words "Milk" and "Honey"—the mindless self-endangerment of these boys in the Californian land of milk and honey.

Patricia's line is very simple and clean, but powerfully evocative. The strange, television antenna-like foliage, the religious imagery, the unexplained arm cast—they create a kind of dream Eden, in which the snake peacefully co-exists.

Kevin Tang, a graduate student in the School of the Arts' Writing program, also tells a story evocative of his hometown, in this case, a neighborhood in Taiwan called Treasure Hill. He depicts a scam in which a father gets his son to steal cell-phones, then calls people in the contact list claiming the phone's owner has been kidnapped, in hopes of getting some kind of ransom. Kevin himself was a target of this con, although, happily, unsuccessfully. His story's connection to "thirteen" is somewhat nebulous: 13s are tucked in everywhere, like clues, as in the apartment number here. The story is a grim one, but the neat detail of Kevin's art and the realistic tone of the characters' dialogue draw the reader in. He cites Adrian Tomine, Marjane Satrapi, and Craig Thompson as favorite comics artists, but manages not to look like any of them.

Abby Walworth is a Barnard undergrad, studying Political Science and Human Rights. She's been reading a lot of *Scott Pilgrim* and has been inspired by the hero's quest, and the story's combination of the adventurous and the mundane. Her story, however, draws on a very different tradition: the Mesoamerican myth of [Popol Vuh](#). She frames the story in the modern day: 13-year-old twins, a brother and sister, fly to Guatemala and are transformed into the [Hero Twins](#) of the Mayan tale. They are confronted with an unpleasant array of demons—with even more unpleasant names, given graphic and unpleasant incarnations here—and put to a series of tests. I was reminded of Nina Paley's wonderful animated retelling of the Ramayana, [Sita Sings the Blues](#), though Abby hadn't seen it.

Avi Presencia is an undergraduate studying English and Comparative Literature, and an exuberant consumer of the library's graphic novel collection. I ran into him a week or two into the semester with his arm full of comics, among them Charles Burns' *Black Hole*, which influenced his own use of blackness in his story. But he had a more literary inspiration as well, in James Joyce's epic *Ulysses*, a work awash with symbolism. Avi's story relates the memories of a boy who is falling asleep and he opens with images of thirteen symbols, which return in the narrative to mark transitions in the progress of the boy's dream. Quoting Joyce means quoting nearly the whole of the western literary canon—appropriate for a student at one of the last American schools to offer a Great Books curriculum—and the layers of reference are thick and complex. Avi wanted to explore the question, "What is organic consciousness?" and the medium of comics, which draws upon such a wide range of brain functions, is as good a platform for that exploration as any.

Chris Jehly's work was, perhaps, the densest and most challenging of the batch I saw that final day of classes. Chris is a graduate student in the Visual Arts program, and his artistic medium of choice heretofore has been graffiti, but he knows comics. He mentioned Sam Kieth and Jim Woodring—but also the Chicago Imagists [Jim Nutt](#) and [Gladys Nilsson](#). He found it challenging, nonetheless, to adapt to the mechanics of creating comics. Perhaps more than any of the others

here, Chris' story suffers from excerpting: it is a complex tale of a zombie dolphin, Amelia Earhart's zombie plane, Mogdyte priests who worship fennel, and a shark who's assimilated into the spirit world in the form of a 1930s cartoon character. His connection to "thirteen" was thin but strong: it's the inverse of thirty-one, "a number that follows me around," and which appears in various places in the narrative. You'll have to wait for the book.

There's no thematic summary I can make about the work produced by Vu-Daniel's class. I was struck by the range of influences and inspirations: James Joyce, Mayan folklore, Georges Perec, 1970s art movements. This seemed appropriate for a university course on creating sequential art. Just as artist [James Romberger](#) had commented to me on the role a liberal arts education could play in his own approach to creating stories, so too here did there seem to be a way for literary and artistic classics to bubble through into comics. But, happily, not limited to this: Vu-Daniel's students each managed to create something personal out of their cultural touchstones. They were asked to channel influences and innovation into a specific form—like the circumscribed creativity of a sonnet—and exercised both intellect and imagination in the process. This seems to me to be a useful exercise, not to mention a skill worth having. Perhaps, someday, the standard freshman composition course will include the option to use the array of talents comics requires.

And on a slightly different note: the gallery Exit Art (10th Avenue and W 36th Street) has mounted an amazing show, [Graphic Radicals](#), that celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of Peter Kuper's and Seth Tobocman's political art and comics magazine, [World War 3 Illustrated](#). It is an amazing testament to the power of art and wonderful fodder for a host of potential courses. I've been twice already and still haven't managed to take it all in. It's running through the first week of February, and I strongly encourage you to go check it out and feel the surge of righteous anger.

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