Building Blocks

By Karen Green

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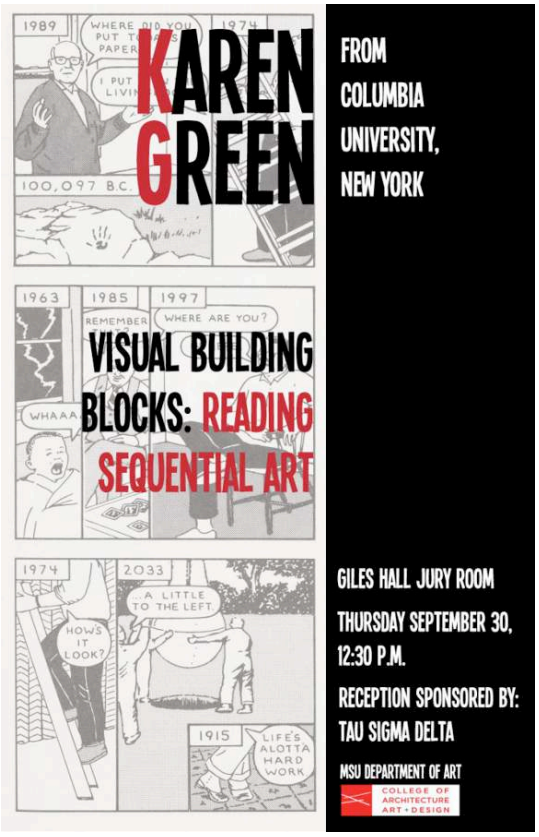
I'm back in Mississippi—yes, again!—even as I write this. This time I'm here to talk to a group at Mississippi State University in Starkville (Go Bulldogs!), a campus with considerable charm and someextraordinary talent.



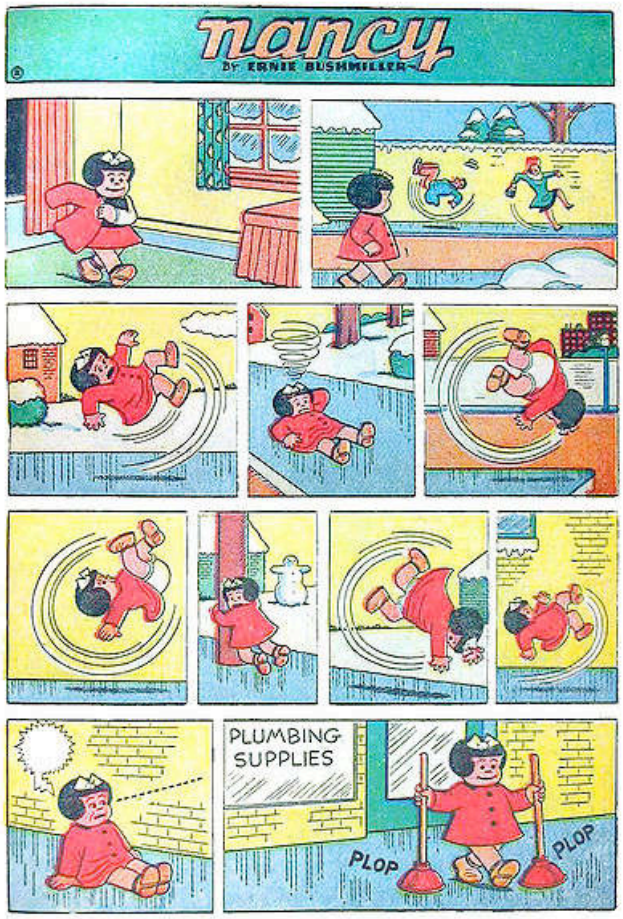
I came to Mississippi State at the invitation of Professor Benjamin Harvey, in the most recent instance of fallout from that talk I gave to the Mississippi Library Association two years ago. Ben was following the tweets of Amanda Clay Powers, a reference/social media librarian attending that talk, and was inspired to introduce a graphic novels course, "Art of the Graphic Novel," as a result. He and I gradually got to know each other online and the idea of coming to talk to his students evolved. This is how connections are made in our brave new world!

As Ben is in the Department of Art, and his class has a mix of art and architecture students, he asked if I could relate the talk in some way to architecture in comics. I wasn't sure I could, actually, so we eventually decided that the topic would be more metaphorical—the building blocks of comics, so to speak.

How to encapsulate that, though, especially as I myself have no experience creating comics,

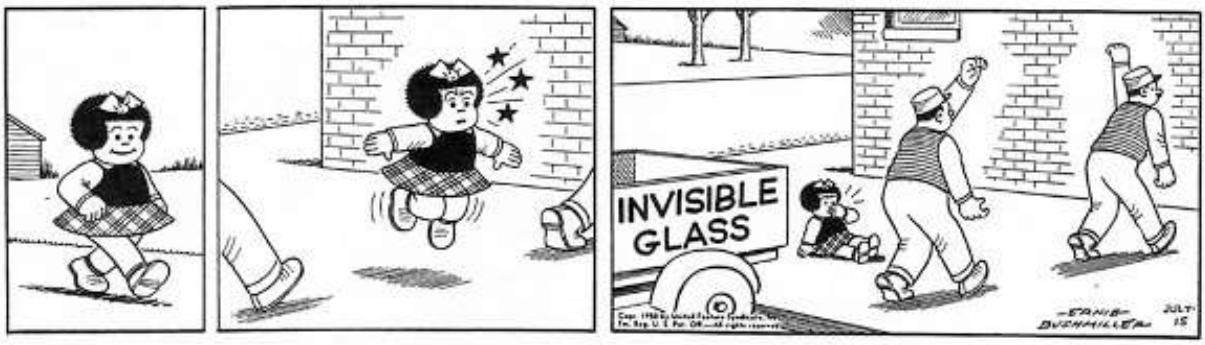
only reading them? Well, I started by putting up the image from the talk's poster* that you see above, taken from Richard McGuire's "Here," in RAW vol. 2 no. 1. I love this comic for how it takes the conventions of comics-telling and turns them inside out in the service of its multi-layered, non-linear story. Can you fully appreciate what he has done without knowing what came before? Well, you can, in the sense that you can read and enjoy it. But just as there's a difference between liking a Cubist painting for itself and appreciating it as an innovative departure from the figural art that preceded it, it's useful to understand the conventions McGuire was subverting.

So, to start, I brazenly ganked ideas from a talk I heard Art Spiegelman give to librarians a couple of years ago, in which he used Ernie Bushmiller's "Nancy" as a tool for understanding the visual grammar of comics. I asked my own audience about Bushmiller's technique as I put up a couple of "Nancy" strips and, comics readers or not, everything was clear to them.



The conventions of comics are, for the most part, conventions the reader understands instinctively. You don't *need* to take a class to do so…but the inspiring minimalism of Bushmiller's strip construction will be further expounded in a forthcoming book by Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy: the Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels*. Three panels were usually all it took for Bushmiller to tell his story. Small touches are marvelous, like the four panels in the third row of that Sunday strip, in which Bushmiller gives us one panel of Nancy clinging to a pole to stay upright, which both illustrates what's going on in between the other three panels and also gives the reader a brief respite from the procession of slips, like a director inserting a lull for the viewer in an action film. I also like the

middle panel, below, in which Nancy is literally lifted off her feet by her impact with the invisible glass.



To go on a slight tangent: most people—including myself!—like to differentiate comics from, say, illustrated books by saying that in comics there is a complete interdependence of images and text. Both of these Nancy comics, however, are completely without dialogue. In a way, this links them to the wordless woodcut novels of Masereel and Ward, although the subject matter isn't quite the same, nor likely the audience. But both Bushmiller and his loftier predecessors took advantage of a reader's ability to put a series of images together and build a story from them—perhaps the essential characteristic of graphic narrative.

How is it, though, that we create these stories—that we, in effect, build them, together with the cartoonists? It's almost impossible even to address that question without invoking the concept of closure from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*.

Comics panels capture moments in time and, based on the juxtaposition of these moments, the reader completes the story. Look at the first two panels McCloud provides. Seeing the brutal attack in the first panel followed by the anguished cry ringing out over a peaceful nighttime city in the second, the reader creates a narrative and invests in it as much or as little action as needed to make sense of the story. And the reader does this over, and over, and over again, for as many panels as there are in succession.

Although it's difficult to say without sounding self-aggrandizing, I had actually come to this very conclusion before I ever read *Understanding Comics*—it came to me while watching the film version of "Sin City." I really hated that film. And the moment I hated most was when Hartigan was smashing in the head of the Yellow Bastard. Over and over and over again, I saw that head being pounded into the floor. The Foley artists must have smashed a truckload of watermelons to get those sickening, squelchy sound effects.

And as I endured this endless scene, I thought to myself, "You know, in the comic, this is just a single panel. And I can look at it as long or as short a time as I want. I can fill in sound effects or not. I HAVE CONTROL. I'm an active participant—as opposed to this film, where I am at the mercy of the director." This was an extremely satisfying epiphany. And because I am a trained academic and a pedant, I referred to the space between the panels not as the "gutters," that being a technical term unknown to me at the time, but as the "interstices." Ever

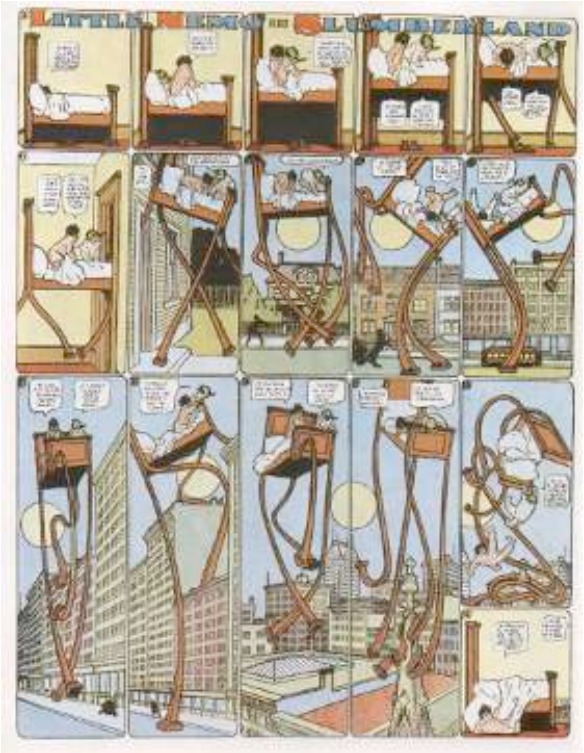
since reading McCloud, however, I say "gutters."

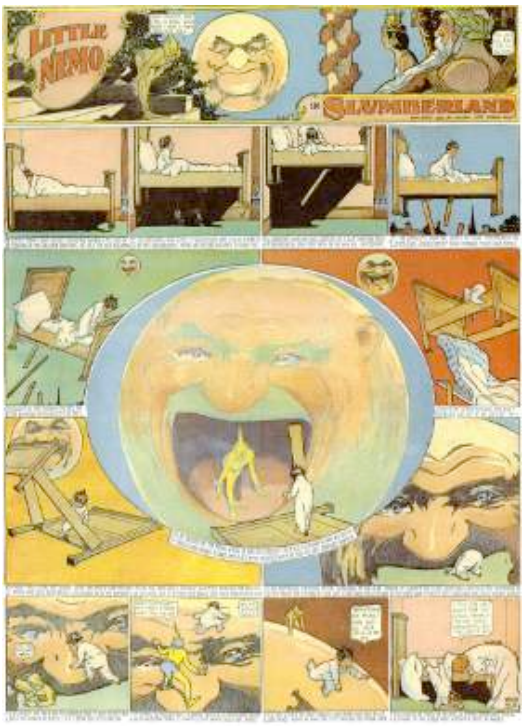
After talking about pages and panels, including individual elements like the < a href="http://blambot.com/grammar.shtml" target="_blank">varieties of speech balloon for conveying the mental state or decibel level of the speaker, I turned to another aspect of the building blocks of comics: the roster of creators. Superhero comics tend to be the best for illustrating the various roles that go into creating a comic—writer, penciller, inker, colorist, letterer, possibly cover artists (I used *All-Star Batman & Robin, the Boy Wonder* as my example, for those of you scoring at home). I think it was one of the students in the audience who observed that, in art, the value of a painting can suffer if the entire work isn't by a single Master—if someone from the "School of…" did the crowd in the background, for example. In comics, crediting all the creators has become increasingly routine (a departure from earlier days). I suspect that this collaborative model is more common in superhero comics than in other genres because DC and Marvel had the stables of talent to fill all those roles as well as a demand for product that made the assembly-line model viable. (Please educate me to the contrary in the comments!)

But think how different it is for independent cartoonists, without the support of a large corporation. They sit at a desk or a drafting table, write and draw their story, maybe add some color by hand or with a computer program—the end-product is almost artisanal. I met an inker recently who maintained that creators who write, pencil, ink, letter, and color their own work are "control freaks." Well, maybe. But it's also possible that independent cartoonists don't have access to a network of other creators with whom they can share the burden.

This isn't to denigrate the collaborative model. As Kate Fitzsimmons put it recently in *Publishers Weekly*, "The DC and Marvel Universes are one of the most fascinating and multi-faceted experiments in collaborative storytelling ever to see print." Or possibly just, "ever." Think of the hundreds of creators who have tackled a character like Superman since Siegel and Shuster. There's not really any analogy to this in the other arts. Writers, directors, and producers may change in long-running television shows, but the characters have to age with their actors (with the possible exception of *Doctor Who*). This history of creators associated with a given story is part of the building blocks of the medium as well.

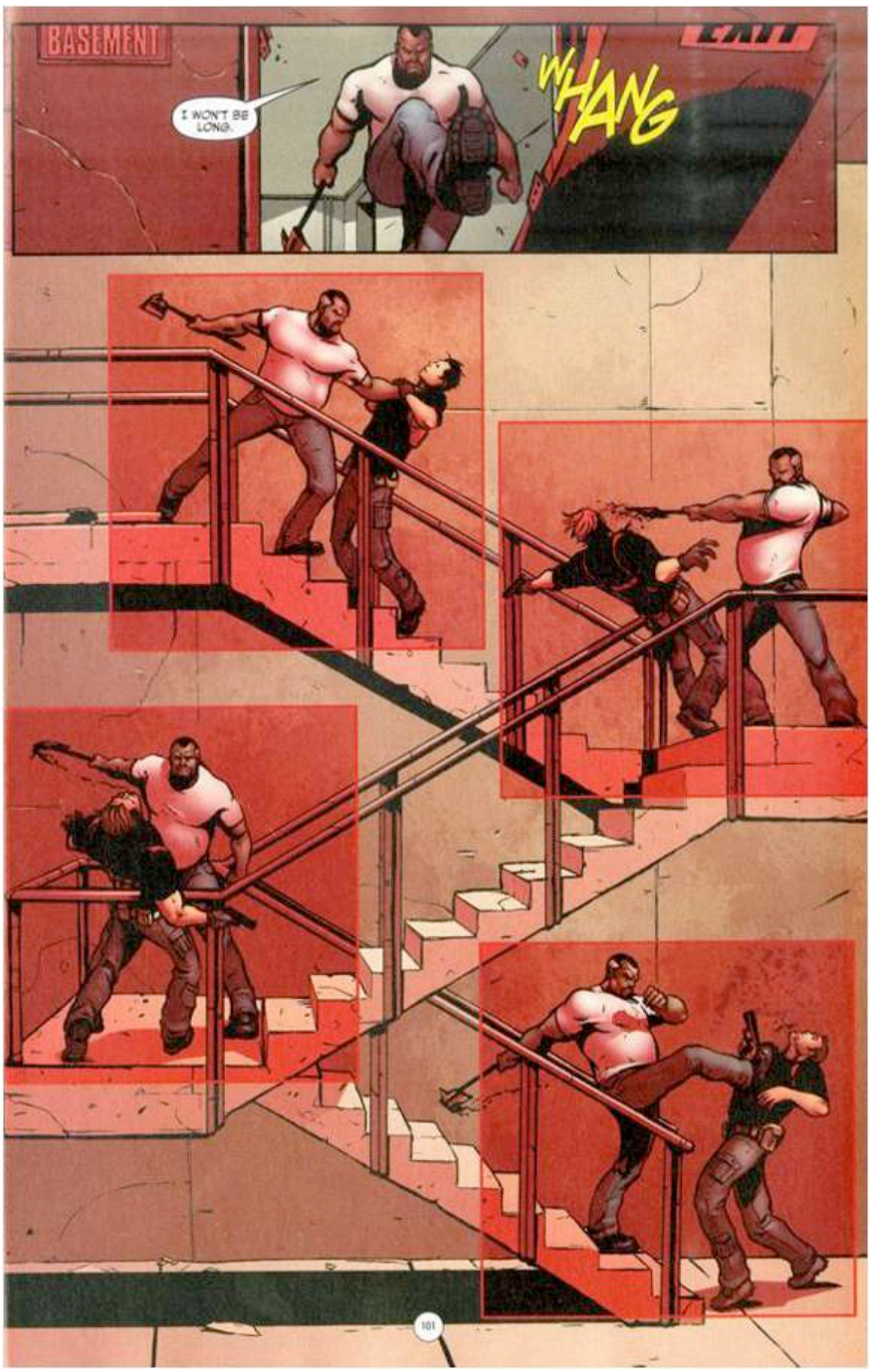
Getting back to the physical construction of comics, though, I turned to how layout contributes to narrative, and I couldn't think of a better example than Winsor McCay. This past spring, I was at a talk given by Jules Feiffer, and he noted how humbling it was for cartoonists to accept that the greatest genius in the history of their medium worked over a century ago. While McCay's strips may have been one-trick ponies in the sense that the same gag was repeated over and over and over (Nemo wakes in his bed in the end! The dreams were caused by Welsh Rarebit! Oh no, Sammy's going to sneeze again!), he used the execution of that gag for endless experimentation.



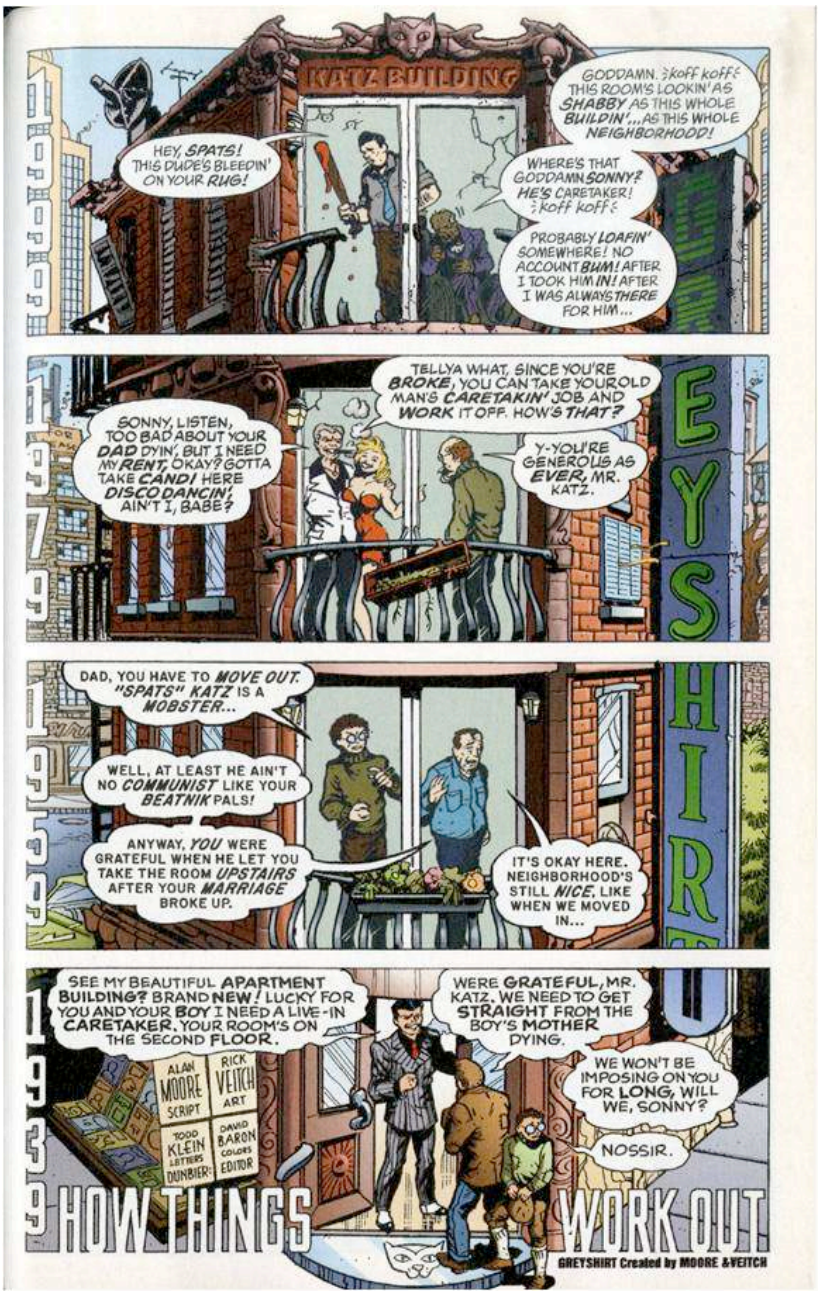


I suppose the classic example of McCay's manipulation of layout is the walking bed strip from "Little Nemo in Slumberland," in which the panels lengthen along with the legs of the bed (above left). I'm also partial to the way the moon bursts through the grid of the panels in the second strip, though, and how its roundness impinges on the borders of the other panels as if it would break through again. I had Ben bring one of the Sunday Press reprints of Little Nemo, and there was an audible gasp when I lifted it up and opened it. Seeing Little Nemo "life-size" gives a better sense of how a reader could almost disappear into the story, and how the panel layout could affect that immersive experience.

Returning to the architectural motif, and hoping to show how layout can effectively convey a story that spans time, I showed them a page by Lee Garbett from *The Highwaymen*.



The protagonist, Able Monroe, busts down the door in the top panel and proceeds to thrash his adversary all the way down the stairs. Garbett brackets the isolated elements of this beat-down by superimposing a transparent red panel over each stage of the match-up. Several events over time are presented simultaneously, but the reader knows by placement, by coloring, and by logic, that they are not happening simultaneously in time.



An even more complex and sustained example of layout across time can be found in the wonderful "How Things Work Out" from *Tomorrow Stories.* Here, the layout conveys space and time across six decades and up four floors. Moore and Veitch begin the tale of small-time crook "Spats" Katz in 1939, starting him out in crime on the ground floor, so to speak, and depict his journey up in time and down in health and prosperity until 1999. The condition of the building, its sign, its tenants, and its environs change in each panel, and the story can be read across its eight pages by decade or top to bottom (or vice versa) on each page. The connection of "story," as in tale, and "storey," as in floor, could not be more explicit.

And so, as I talked about experiments in both simultaneity and conveying spans of time in a fixed space, I came back to the image I'd started with. McGuire wants to tell a story that covers hundreds of millennia, and he has six pages to do it in. He wants to tell the story of a point in space across an almost infinite span of time. How does he do it? By overlaying panels: embedding one within another within another. We know how to read a linear strip with ease—this happened, then this happened, then this happened; it never even occurs to us how we're doing it. Can we do the same with "Here"? How long do you have to look at it before you figure out what McGuire's doing? The carefully labeled years on each panel make it clear what's going on—so then it becomes a matter of trying to understand *why*he's layered certain panels over others, or chosen the sequence that he has. The fourth panel, with its four successive years of housework, underscores the endless repetitive nature of such chores. The handprint in the first panel, the first sign of man, precedes the proud homesteader of 1901 putting down his mark as well. Time jumps back and forth between 500 billion years BC and 2023 AD with the unreliability of memory, while the brain gradually pieces together the progression from wilderness to Indian village, to massacre, to white settlers, to suburbia and beyond.

It's both effortless and challenging to read "Here," and it gives the brain a real workout. But then so do all comics. The right side of our brains deals with visual organization and the left

side of our brains deals with text and analysis. The simple act of reading a comic—even something so simple as a Nancy comic, with its limited text—engages both sides of your brain in a way unlike anything else other than, perhaps, a subtitled film.

Wrapping up the talk, I asked the question "What comes next?" The web offers possibilities few take advantage of; too often, web comics are simply web-accessible versions of print comics. Josh Neufeld, in the original, web version of *A.D.*, included links to the places and people and items he drew (then had to re-think the approach after getting a book contract). Rob Berry's "Ulysses Seen," an online graphic novel adaptation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, uses a Joyce scholar to create a reader's guide for each page of the story. By clicking on any page, the reader goes to context and gloss for that page.

Meanwhile, the possibilities are endless, bounded only by imagination. Recently, I saw a blog post about something called the National Parks Infinite Photo. You zoom in and the photo pixellates out into hundreds of photos, like a Chuck Close portrait, and then into just a few, until you've gone so deep you're back at a single photo. Then the process begins again. What are the possibilities for story-telling? How might you take a story down a hundred different paths, focusing deeper with each step?

There really are no limits any more. Graphic narrative that started, perhaps, with cave paintings at Lascaux can now use more elaborate technologies to tell more complex stories…but, as Richard McGuire proved, you can tell a pretty complex story with just a pen and paper. The same basic building blocks apply.

*thanks to Emily Jones!

And, in other news, things to put on your calendar in October:

Rob Berry and the "Ulysses Seen" team will be on a panel at the Irish Arts Center on Thursday, October 7th:30-8:30 PM, at 553 W 51st St, NYC. I'll be moderating.

This weekend is New York Comic-Con! Lots to see and do—and I'll be on two panels on Saturday, October 9th: "Comics, Graphic Novels, and Manga for Adults" at 3:00 PM and "Special Topics in Graphic Novel Librarianship: A Roundtable" at 4:00 PM. Both are in room 1A17.

Chris Claremont and Paul Levitz will be in conversation at Columbia University, in the third in a series of talks sponsored by the Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies: "Jewish Influences & Themes in American Comics." Come join us on Wednesday, October 13th, at 8:00 PM, in 614 Schermerhorn Hall (campus map).

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

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