

Words and Music... er, Images

By Karen Green

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I know I've brought this up before, and lord knows it's been hashed over to hell-and-gone by everyone from bloggers to scholars to industry professionals, but let's all say it together one more time: comics tell a story via sequential art in which text and images are inextricably intertwined. (Well, except when there are no words. But let's not cloud the issue, eh?) Will Eisner put it succinctly, in his book *Comics & Sequential Art*: comics are "the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea."

That seems pretty straightforward, right? Not such a challenging concept? I mean, that the words can't exist without the images or the images without the words? Not so difficult to comprehend? Not too arcane? And yet . . .



In January of 2008, Groundwood Books released a graphic novel called *Skim*, written by Mariko Tamaki and drawn by Jillian Tamaki. The Tamakis are cousins from Canada, although Jillian now lives here in New York. In October, *Skim* was nominated for the Governor General's Literary Award, a hugely prestigious Canadian prize (*Skim* was nominated in the Children's Literature category, which is grounds for an entirely different, and parenthetical, rant; see below). Or, to be more precise, Mariko Tamaki alone was nominated. Because she is the writer. Of a graphic novel.

Sigh.

Jillian Tamaki was thrilled for her cousin, of course, but couldn't help feeling a little, well, disappointed. In November, Chester Brown and Seth, among Canada's Finest Kind in the medium of comics, wrote a letter to the Canada Council, in an attempt to get Jillian Tamaki the recognition she deserved. As they pointed out, "[I]n graphic novels, the words and pictures BOTH tell the story, and there are often sequences (sometimes whole graphic novels) where the images alone convey the narrative. The text of a graphic novel cannot be separated from its illustrations because the words and the pictures together ARE the text." The letter's supporting signatories included Lynda Barry, Daniel Clowes, Julie Doucet, Art Spiegelman, Adrian Tomine, Chris Ware, among half a dozen others.

The Governor General's awards have several categories: fiction, poetry, drama, non-fiction; only the children's literature is split into text and illustration. I guess I can understand that—for children's literature. I'm not convinced that *Skim* actually IS children's literature, of course: is it *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* or is it *A Catcher in the Rye*?



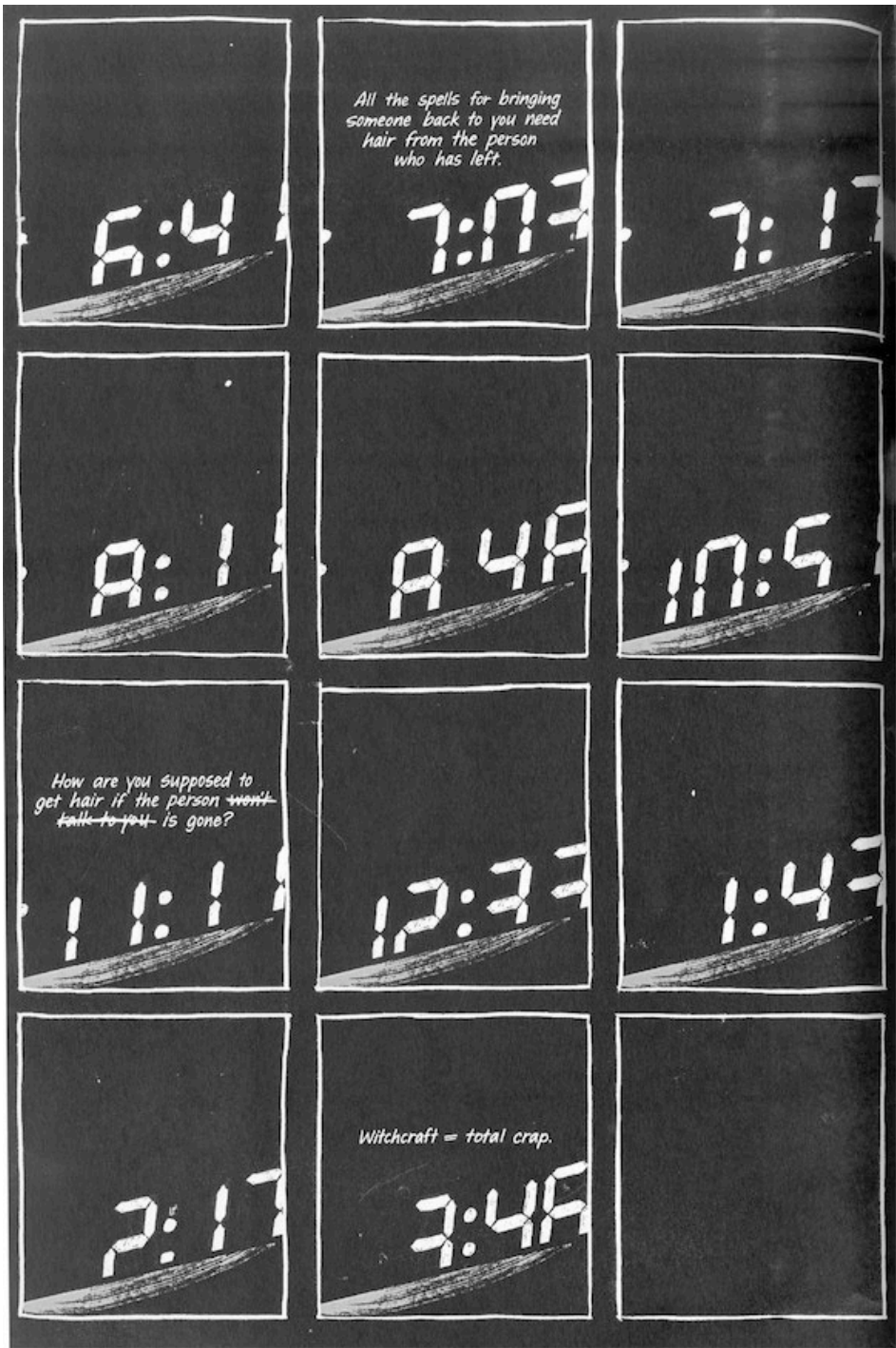
(I tend to think it's the latter, given the distinctive and genuine voice of *Skim's* protagonist, which reminded me keenly of Holden Caulfield—and I see I'm not the only one. *The New York Times*, however, reviewed it in its children's book category—perhaps because it is about a teenager? I was curious, after noting this, as to how *A Catcher in the Rye* was reviewed back in 1951. I found a review in *The Nation* which began, disdainfully, "Echoes reach me of the popularity of 'The Catcher in the Rye.' Why has this unpretentious, mildly affecting chronicle of a few days in the life of a disturbed adolescent been read with enthusiasm by Book-of-the-Month Club and lending-library adults ordinarily concerned with fiction as a frivolous diversion or as a source of lofty, incontrovertible platitudes?" and concluded "...though always lively in its parts, the book as a whole is predictable and boring." The reviewer seems as perplexed by adults' interest in a book about an adolescent as many are by adults' fascination with the Harry Potter books, but the issue is subject matter, not audience. The reviewer at no point assumes that this is a book written for children.)

OK, that was a long digression. Sorry. Back to the interdependence of words and images in this medium of comics.

As I thought about the split that the Governor General's awards had imposed on Mariko and Jillian Tamaki, I found myself thinking about music, another collaborative medium in which the lines between the various contributors can be blurred. When, say, the Oscar for Best Song went to "It Might as Well Be Spring," from the 1945 musical *Oklahoma!*, it went to both Richard Rodgers (music) and Oscar Hammerstein II (lyrics). You can't really separate the two, can you? When "Not Ready to Make Nice" won the 2006 Grammy for Song of the Year, the award was given to the three members of the Dixie Chicks plus Dan Wilson, all listed as songwriters—because writing that song was a group effort. (The Tonys finesse this a bit, the sneaky devils, giving a separate award for score and for libretto.)

But you see my point, yes? How was the creative process that went into creating *Skim* any different than, say, George and Ira Gershwin creating "I Got Rhythm"?

Last September, Jillian Tamaki was part of a Howl! Festival panel on graphic memoir, called "Inside Out: Self and Society in Comic Art." That evening, she talked about the process of sending story and art back and forth between Toronto and New York, evolving the story gradually, mutually. During the Q&A, I remarked to the panel, many of whom were primarily artists, that writers are always listed first in the credits for a book. Did that bother them? Mostly, they feigned outrage, joking. An editor in the audience defended the practice, however, maintaining that the writer comes up with the story. Well, maybe. Maybe the idea for the story. But does every writer plan exactly how the story will be shown—or does that function often fall to the artist? What does the artist contribute to the actual narrative?





My mom is officially pissed about her candelabra, which is officially broken.



She says she is not up for any family medical dramas.



Last year my dad had his first and second heart attacks. He and my mom are separated.



My mom says the heart attacks just turned my father into a cream puff.

My dad says my mother is a cold cynical woman who has no appreciation for a broken heart.



Mom says there's no way Dad's heart is broken.



Even if your father, who is an Aristotle, had a heart it couldn't be broken. Your heart is a muscle.

My parents = serious issues.



My dad signed my card with an ugly happy face that I am scribbling off.

Me = serious issues.

Click either image to view full-size, side-by-side

When Mariko wrote what became the page on top, she may well have asked Jillian to indicate the passing of time in a sleepless night. But what about the page and a half just below that? Who decided to juxtapose Skim's narration of the dissolution of her parents' marriage, of her family, with the quotidian task of making, eating, and cleaning up dinner? What does that juxtaposition add to the mood of the story, the depiction of Skim's inner life, the way in which life goes on after even the most traumatic event? How much of the narrative thrust depends on what the reader gleans from that contrast?

Do you know *Freakangels*? It's a weekly webcomic, written by Warren Ellis (in the UK) and drawn by Paul Duffield (in Australia), that re-imagines the eerie children from *Village of the Damned* as 20-somethings in a post-apocalyptic London. Each Friday, a new 6-page installment is uploaded. Take a look at this installment, for chapter 35. Three of the six pages have no dialogue; the narrative is carried entirely by the artwork. How much of that was planned by Ellis, how much conceived by Duffield? Does Ellis plan each page and panel meticulously, or does he write out general narrative and dialogue and leave it to Duffield to apportion out into six pages. I don't know. Does it matter? If *Freakangels* were nominated for an award...is Ellis the sole awardee?

Earlier this week, I was chatting with Nick Sousanis, a new friend who, as a doctoral student at Columbia's Teachers College, has submitted projects in the form of comics. I told him a little about what I was writing about, and asked if it was possible to determine what comes first, words or images. His response: "I don't know." He pulled out some papers from a bag and showed them to me—the rough plans of the visual layout and script for the next comic he was working on. In the script, the paragraph describing the opening image began with these words: "Something about flatness."

I like that. "Something about flatness." Both vague and evocative. Nick, of course, is artist *and* writer on his projects, so perhaps "something about flatness" will mean more to him than if he sent it off to another artist. Because...what does one do with "something about flatness"? If an artist received that instruction and interpreted it in his or her own way, is Nick still the sole author of that passage? What if the artist's interpretation ends up changing the way Nick conceives of his story in the first place?

While Nick and I chatted about words and images, he reminded me of the 1983 article Alan Moore wrote about the evolution of *V for Vendetta*, included in the Vertigo edition of the graphic novel. Moore describes his circuitous path through the development of the story: from transvestite terrorism to a 1930s pulp adventure to a futuristic political thriller. The title was proposed by editor Dez Skinn before the story had even been hashed out. Artist David Lloyd came up with the Guy Fawkes imagery that gelled Moore's thinking, and Lloyd also mandated that there would be no thought balloons or captions. Moore describes long phone calls with heated arguments between writer and artist over plot developments. So, if one were to identify the "author" of *V for Vendetta*, how could one in good conscience say it was only Alan Moore?

But why am I writing about this in a column about comics in academia? Well, when teaching in any discipline, it helps to define terms, so that all involved have a structure on which to build their thinking. But the real reason this interests me is because we have a phrase for this kind of event in the ed biz: we call it a "teachable moment." At my Comic-Con panel, there was a lot of talk about visual literacy, about growing faculty awareness of comics as something that can be taught. I think that academia has not simply an opportunity here, but an obligation. *Skim's* nomination represented a profound misunderstanding of an entire

medium, on the part of a cultural institution. We can help stop that from happening again.

Now *there's* something to sing about.

All images from *Skim*, Groundwood Books, 2008; pages 22, 106, and 9-10, respectively.

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

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