

...Mea maxima culpa

By Karen Green

Thursday May 1, 2008 09:00:00 am

*Our columnists are independent writers who choose subjects and write without editorial input from comiXology. The opinions expressed are the columnist's, and do not represent the opinion of comiXology.*



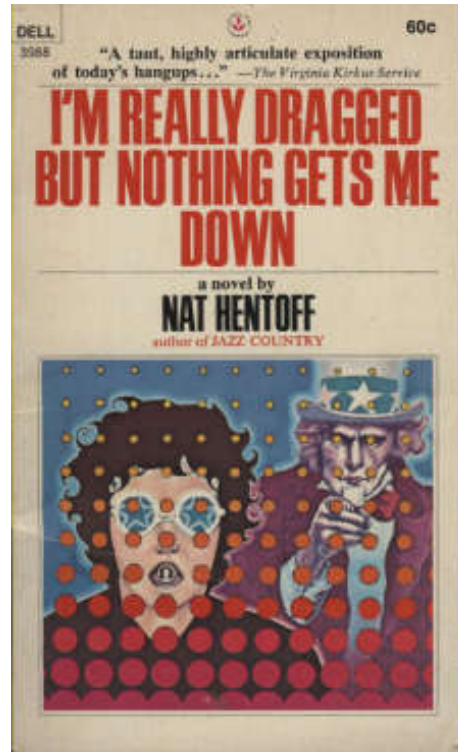
"My fault, my fault, my most grievous fault." During a month in which the Pope visited my town, it seems only fitting to take a confessional tone. (All right, so I'm not Catholic—but I'm a medievalist, and I know Latin. So there.) This is a story about my preconceptions and prejudices, and how Shelly Bond taught me a lesson.

I had been hearing about the Minx line of comics from people. Mainly DC Comics people, but people nonetheless. I had been given a copy of *The PLAIN Janes* but hadn't [ahem], you know, READ it. I knew the title had been well-reviewed but it just seemed like, well, public library material. (*Oh, yeah: I went there.*) Let's just say, it seemed like something that was appropriate for tweener girls, and that didn't seem to fit the profile of what I was collecting for Columbia.

Then Shelly Bond, the terrific DC editor, very generously sent a package of eight titles from the Minx line to me at my office—some were already published and others were forthcoming.

I picked up the book on the top of the pile, *Burnout*, by Rebecca Donner and Inaki Miranda, and opened it up. This was the page that met my eye:

Well, THAT caught my attention. I sat at my desk and read it all the way through. Then I picked up the next book in the pile, *The New York Four*, because it was written by Brian Wood (and drawn by Ryan Kelly). I mean, who doesn't like Brian Wood? And who doesn't love New York? So I read THAT all the way through. And then I began to think.



When I was a teenager, which—as I will never cease to remind you—was before most of you were born, there was a novel that I really loved: *I'm Really Dragged But Nothing Gets Me Down*. It was written by Nat Hentoff, who was mostly famous for being the jazz critic for *The Village Voice*. He wrote the book in 1968, but I was reading it in the early 1970s. It tells the story of Jeremy Wolf, a high school senior who was dealing with some big questions: accepting or defying the Draft, race relations, the generation gap as embodied by the relationship between him and his father. It's a short novel—almost more of a novella; it runs 128 pages in my 60¢ 1970 Dell paperback. I must have read this book a dozen or more times when I was a teenager. I didn't care that it was written by Nat Hentoff—I didn't even know who Nat Hentoff was—I cared that it spoke to me.

Columbia has a copy of this novel in the Barnard College library. Yale has it, too, and Cornell. A lot of universities have this in their collections. Does it matter that the protagonist is a teenager? No. Does it matter that the author is Nat Hentoff? Well, maybe. Does it matter that the story covers issues that are important to an 18-year-old? Depends on the issues. Does it matter that it's well-written? Hey, absolutely!

So I started to think about the Minx titles I'd read so far. *Burnout* looks at the consequences of the breakdown of the nuclear family as well as the uneasy dialogue between conservatism and the preservation of the rural working class. Does Danni, the

protagonist, develop a crush on a boy? Yes, but Jeremy Wolf develops a crush on a girl in the Hentoff book, too, and that's certainly not a deal-breaker. And Jeremy doesn't—as Danni does—have to deal with the object of his affection being the child of his parent's new significant other, I'll tell you what. Welcome to the New American Family.

Miranda draws the story in rich shades of grey, which mirror the absence of absolute black-and-white in Danni's own life. Will her mother be able to protect her from the abusive man who's joined their family? Should she support her tree-spiking boyfriend or her logging-family best friend? Should she abandon the cause she's taken up once she learns that she could have the FBI on her tail? Danni can't answer these questions herself and has no one at all to help her.

During the recent New York Comic-Con, I had the incredible privilege to sit on the Friends of Lulu panel on Women in Comics. Shelly Bond was on that panel, too, which was brilliantly moderated by Abby Denson, and, when discussing the themes in her work, Shelly noted that she had wanted the Minx line to tell real stories for girls: "not just about shopping—or about shopping for boys—but stories with real gravitas." I believe she's succeeded.



*The New York Four* is another such example. Riley Wilder is a freshman at NYU, held on a tight leash by intellectual parents who have already given the boot to her older sister, Angie, for reasons unspecified. Riley's a bit of a loner—she prefers to text anonymous online friends than actually talk to anyone—but she falls in with three other young students on her first day, and encourages them to join her in a job testing PSATs and SATs...a job that requires a weekly psychological assessment. The book's story and its art completely get the New York milieu (it's filled with boxes of "NY 101" tips and trivia) and the detail of the drawings not only make the characters and the city come alive but subtly evoke the complexity of Riley's own internal world.

As I read these books, getting drawn into the stories and the art, I found myself thinking

about other books I read, when I was even younger than in my Nat Hentoff era. Don't we all have certain sacred texts that barely survive innumerable, loving readings and re-readings? Books that don't merely entertain, but that serve to provide us with role models and give us a haven for necessary escape? When I was quite young, the books that filled that function for me were Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, P.L. Travers' four books of Mary Poppins stories, and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and *Eight Cousins*. Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and *The Little Princess* were only about half-a-level down from the sacred core. Those stories—all written for young girls, more or less—taught me morality, integrity, and how to deal with adversity. They exercised my mind and my spirit. I still re-read them frequently. And every single one of them is in the Columbia University Libraries.

What do those books and the Minx titles have in common? On the surface, not a lot. My stories all took place at some point between the 1850s and the 1930s. Not a lot of text messaging and cell-phone use back then, and the clothing was quite different. But they all tell compelling stories that speak eloquently to girls on one level or another. I don't know if the Minx titles will stand the test of time like these others. I do know it's unlikely that many of those titles made it into academic libraries when they were first published; they had to prove their right to belong. Reading the Minx titles, I saw no reason to make them wait quite that long.

*Editor's note:*

*For more on Brian Wood's The New York Four and Brian's thoughts on Minx, listen to our recentpodcast interview with him. iTunes users can use the Chapters menu to skip to the discussion; other users can fast forward to 20:26.*

*And, for more on the Friends of Lulu, listen to our recent podcast interview with Valerie D'Orazio and Marion Vitus.*

Images:

Danni yearns for feeling.

Rebecca Donner (story) and Inaki Miranda (art)  
*Burnout*, Minx 2008, p. 5

Nat Hentoff

*I'm Really Dragged But Nothing Gets Me Down*  
Dell 1970, cover

Riley searches for her place in her world

Brian Wood (story) and Ryan Kelly (art)  
*The New York Four*, Minx 2008, p. 30

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

*Comic Adventures in Academia is © Karen Green, 2010*