A Comic of Age

By Karen Green

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Hey! Do I get to take credit for this?

Nah. Probably not. It's the Zeitgeist.

OK, well, let's just say I'm liking the Zeitgeist.

A couple of months ago, I went to a one-time seminar on comics, held here at Columbia, and I fell into conversation with a senior named Rachel Lindsay. She was preparing to graduate from the American Studies program, and for her senior thesis...she had created a graphic novel.

Needless to say, I was intrigued. How had this come about? What process did Rachel have to undertake in order to get it approved as a senior thesis project? What might it mean for comics at Columbia?

I spoke both with Rachel and with her thesis advisor, Professor Maura Spiegel, a professor in the English Department who has used graphic novels in her own courses. Rachel had taken Professor Spiegel's "Introduction to American Studies" course in her freshman year and had enjoyed the way the class had crossed genres, from Betty Boop to Jacob Riis to King Vidor's The Crowd to...comics. She hadn't been particularly immersed in comics, growing up—she'd liked "Calvin and Hobbes," and read random Simpsons and Batman comics, as well as her father's Classics Illustrateds, most memorably one on Teddy Roosevelt. Spiegel mentioned that Rachel's father had said he'd taught her how to storyboard when she was 4 years old, but he didn't reveal why.
How do these things percolate in the human brain? Rachel found herself drawing a comic for her school paper at Yorktown (NY) High School, simply for artistic expression and a desire for the easiest way to communicate with readers. Writing a high school comic didn't seem so difficult, she noted: "Everything is already stereotyped for you; it's acceptable to riff on that. It's already a kind of ridiculous life experience that people have accepted."

But Spiegel's class made her think that a comics senior thesis was something she could do. She had hoped to get admitted to Art Spiegelman's Columbia course, "Comics: Marching into the Canon," which was offered during her sophomore spring semester, but hadn't made the cut (there were only 14 slots available). But she kept writing and drawing in a journal, and thinking about comics and reading comics. Coincidentally, her arrival at Columbia coincided with the birth of our graphic novels collection, so there was an increasing variety for her to choose from.

Rachel's journal began as a chronicle of the college experience and in her first couple of years was dominated by little snappy, one-liner anecdotes. As her college career wound on, the entries trended towards the crazier and more personal, and she began to wonder how much of this she wanted to reveal, about either herself or the other people in her life. "I wasn't sure how much distance I had from the experience yet to process it."

But this kind of memoir fit well with Spiegel's own work on memory and narrative and so, although a memoir was less of a traditionally academic exercise for an American Studies senior project, the notion of comics as "a new lens to look at experience" enabled her to make her project "a uniquely American experience of me." And, as Spiegel noted, the choice played to Rachel's strengths, to her "remarkable knack for capturing a specific ephemeral moment, rather than a narrative moment."
Rachel and Spiegel worked closely together. They discussed topics—should the story be more thematic? Should it compare academic discourse with that of the ad agency where Rachel was interning? In the end, nothing produced the kind of work both women were happy with, so Rachel dipped into her journals and drew her life at Columbia, from roommate issues to internships and, as her time at the university wore on, to struggles with emotional and psychological issues. In a way, Spiegel functioned as an editor, as individual vignettes went through iteration after iteration, with Spiegel often saying, "I don't think you've quite got it yet."

Rachel's drawing style fluctuates as each part of the story changes in tone. She and I discussed her simplistic, comic-strip style, and she noted that she was trained in more representational styles, but that she prefers to convey her thoughts this way. We talked about Randall Munroe's webcomic, xkcd, which tells its stories very effectively with stick figures, but can kick out the artistic jams when the story requires. Nicholas Gurevitch does a similar thing with the Perry Bible Fellowship. Dinosaur Comics tell profound and hilarious stories with the same, unchanging cast of characters in the same, unchanging positions. (This is a game we can all play—what are your examples?)

And Rachel plays the game well. A visit to an elderly relative in a nursing home is rich with detail, but a page detailing her own diagnosis of bipolar disorder is as thin and brittle as her own fragile emotional state:
Spiegel had her own comments on Rachel's style. "She has a natural sense of what a vignette is," she remarked. "Her facial expressions are so precise," she added, referring to the job search story above. Spiegel felt Rachel knew how to position the reader: "comics rely on the reader to be able to put it together; there's an enormous trustfulness that is so fully expressed in the comics."

The comic was not a stand-alone project, however. Rachel had to write a paper to accompany it, in which she talked about her own personal history with comics, and why this medium was essential to her ability to express her ideas. Spiegel admitted that the American Studies program might have preferred a bit more contextualization—perhaps some observations on where her project fit in terms of coming-of-age stories in American letters—but, "she spoke with great clarity in the voice of an artist...a simple authority which spoke a lot to me." Basically, it all worked. "In English studies, there is a real, fairly widespread exploration of using first-person narrative in English classes. This isn't random or accidental; it's coming out of work that's being done in the field."

What does this mean for Rachel? She came to Columbia hoping to be a professional comics artist; that ambition has changed, more from pragmatism than anything else. But she will continue to draw, continue to keep a journal, and will see how she, and herself as character, evolve in the working world. I asked her about webcomics, and she wrinkled her nose a little, admitting a preference for the feel of a book in her hands, but acknowledged that the web gives any artist a platform from which to gain as small or large an audience as the work merits.

And what does this mean for American Studies at Columbia? Well, Spiegel related how Professor Andrew Del Banco, the director of the program, in a meeting with juniors preparing
to think about their own senior theses, held up Rachel’s finished product and exclaimed, "See? We do allow creativity!" Who knows what will be produced next year, or the years after that?

So…can I take credit for it? Does the Columbia graphic novels collection provide material for professors like Maura Spiegel (and others—there are others!) to use in courses, for students like Rachel to read and gain inspiration from, and create an environment in which we get senior theses in comics format? Well, I'm going to say yes. Obviously. Sure, it's in the Zeitgesit, but even the Zeitgeist needs a little helping hand, doesn't it?

And it's not just happening at Columbia. In April I got an email from Eric Braden, a senior at Texas Tech, who was working on a graphic novel for his honors thesis there, and who had some questions for me on the academic status of comics. There have to be more than just these two. Who else is out there? I'd love to hear from you!

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In a slightly tangential but potentially related sidenote, the Columbia graphic novels collection, co-presenting with Jim Hanley's Universe will be hosting its very first speaker next week: please come spend "An Evening with Dame Darcy" in Butler Library, room 523, Wednesday June 10 at 5:30 PM. We'd be delighted to see you there! Email me at klg19@columbia.edu if you have any questions.

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

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