Classic Comix Classix

By Karen Green

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Earlier this week, I got an email sales pitch from a publisher that sells graphic novel adaptations of classic literature. There are several such publishers, so I don't think I'm putting anyone on the spot by saying that it was a dreadful sales pitch. What made it so bad, you might ask?

I'll tell you: it didn't mention even a single artist.

There was a long list of famous authors (sans their respective book titles), accompanied by ISBNs for ease of ordering. Not an author included was one who would be missing from the Columbia Libraries; indeed, many of them have entire courses built around their work. And, of course, that's the thing—we have those authors in our collection. So what is it that makes this line of graphic novels worthwhile? Why should I add these versions of those classic works to our collection? I believe it's the artists' work. But the mailing offered no clue as to who the artists were.

Ordinarily, when I get a solicitation that's of no real interest to me, I just delete it. But the thing was, there was no information to judge whether this was of no interest to me or not. I found that frustrating. So I wrote back, remarking on the absence or artists' names and adding:

"The unique quality of the graphic novel format is that the authors are both the writers and the artists, but you indicate only one aspect here. As a potential buyer, I focus as much on the artist as the writer. With adaptations of classics, where the writer is a wholly known quantity, the identity of the artist is even more important."

Then continuing: "If the artists are not well known [...] or if you don't provide examples of the art, then I don't have any motivation to purchase your titles. Without knowing what added value the art brings, then a graphic novelization of a work of classic literature just feels like a dumbing-down project to me. I don't buy graphic novels just because they're graphic novels; I buy works that convey some sort of significant literary, artistic, and/or cultural value."
Man, I sound like kind of a pompous jerk, don't I? But, really: I was trying to help! What would make me want to buy the books on this particular publisher's list? To offer a comparison, I don't buy a lot of Papercutz titles, because the majority of their list seems directed at an audience younger than mine, but I certainly buy titles such as Peter Kuper's interpretation of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* or Gahan Wilson's take on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*. In fact, I seek out adaptations by artists I already have in our collection, because I want to build out my holdings of their work. No one has to convince me that we should have titles by H.G. Wells, for example, but I'm not buying a graphic adaptation because it's a work by H.G. Wells. I'm buying it because Rick Geary is the artist, and he's smart and talented and will probably have an inventive approach to a familiar work.

Allow me to offer another comparison. When I was a little girl and had to go to the pediatrician, there was always a lot to read in the waiting room. Stacks of *Highlights* magazine (oh, Goofus and Gallant, how I loved you), picture books…and Bible comics. In retrospect, this seems, well, a little odd, and an interesting reflection on the doctor himself, but what do I know—maybe it was par for the course in the 1960s Midwest. I actually spent a lot of time with the Bible comics. If I recall correctly, they were mostly New Testament comics—I seem to remember trying to figure out this Jesus fellow. Their purpose, I suspect, was to help people like me figure out this Jesus fellow. Or, in other words, to spread the Word, not to entrance me with the nuance and sophistication of the visual storytelling.
Contrast that with the *Book of Genesis Illustrated by R. Crumb*. Crumb uses the text of the Bible as, um, religiously as did those Bible comics, if not more so, but the story is told through the unique vision of a specific, well-defined artist. This isn't just the Book of Genesis, this is *Crumb's* Book of Genesis. Whether it is the distinctively solid build of his women, or the Apocalyptic, vaguely 9/11-ish depiction of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, this is the work of an *auteur*—to steal a term from film studies—not an anonymous staff artist. Reading Crumb's Genesis isn't simply about the story, it's about Crumb's vision, his execution of that vision, the way the work fits with the rest of his body of work, and a host of other avenues of analysis. It becomes a locus for discussion.

I've added titles to our collection, in fact, based solely on the artists' reputations, not on the original author at all. Here's an example: we don't buy a whole lot of Mormon texts or history for our library—the New York Public Library actually has a huge collection that we don't try to replicate—but Mike and Laura Allred created a three-volume graphic novelization of the Book of Mormon, called *The Golden Plates*, that is so lovely to look at that I didn't think twice about acquiring it. In *The Golden Plates*, the intent is both to spread the word and to convey an artist's vision, and I'd no more keep that out of the collection than I would a book of medieval religious art.
The invisibility of artists—whether by their names being left off book spines, or the convention that always lists the writer first in the credits, or by the art getting disregarded or ignored in book reviews of graphic novels—has been taken to a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* by companies like Bluewater Productions, a publisher that churns out topical biographical comics. I have yet to see any press coverage that mentions the actual creators of these graphic biographies of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and Sarah Palin and Oprah Winfrey—even the comics-friendly *New York Times*, interviewing Bluewater president Darren G Davis, omitted any mention of the creators, either writers or artists.

In a graphic novelization of a well-known work, the question almost becomes one of adaptation versus translation. The artists of those Bible comics from my childhood adapted the Greatest Story Ever Told, but what a great comics artist does is translate the familiar prose from its original medium into its new one. Film, of course, has been doing this for over a century. No one would mistake Jean Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête*, with its eerie living gargoyles and human candelabra holders, for a children's story, or even the equivalent of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*. Cocteau took a story and transmitted it through his own artistic eye, making it something new, something different, something rich and strange. Likewise, in the case of, say, Peter Kuper's "translation" of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the pages are Kafka AND Kuper, the text, the images, and even the page layout combining to transform it, to create a new way of viewing and understanding the story.
There's actually an entire scholarly discipline, related to philosophy and linguistics and comparative literature, known as "translation studies." Different languages don't match up slot A to tab B; language is often a reflection of a national culture, which is why translation can be so challenging. One can try to translate word for word, or one can translate for sense, attempting to use the idioms of the new language to convey the sense of the original. In a way, those Bible comics seemed to choose the first option, a direct and sometimes uninspired word-to-image correlation, whereas inventive cartoonists often exercise the latter, using their skills to transform the static prose into the dynamic visuals of their craft. (You can practically watch the process develop before your eyes, in real time, with Rob Berry's adaptation of James Joyce, "Ulysses Seen.") It seems to me that there's material for a course in there somewhere, one in which students read the prose originals and the graphic novel adaptations, and then consider the mechanics of that translation, trying to understand or even recreate the process that led to certain artistic choices.

A somewhat related course is already being taught. One day, in our graphic novels stacks, I met Dr Adam Newton, chair of the English department at Yeshiva University. He told me about a course he was teaching called "Extraordinary Victorians": students read The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen and then go back and read Arthur Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker, H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, H.G. Wells, and a little Ian Fleming and Scott McCloud for genre and format context. They even read selections from Steampunk Magazine to get a deeper sense of what Dr Newton refers to as "Victorian afterlife," the reception and interpretation of Victorian culture in modern culture. Now that's a course that's doing some serious examinations of translation—not literal, in this case, but in a truly creative fashion.

This, then, is why I found that email pitch so frustrating, and felt I had to offer feedback. I heard back from the publisher, as it happens. He said that he was, in fact, very proud of the
artists involved, and mentioned some distinguished names. But he had wanted to keep the message…short. He kept it so short, however, that it prevented me from taking any real interest in his titles. Am I going to sit down with this list and search on ISNBs to see if the titles use artists I want to add to my collection? Sadly, dear reader, I am NOT. If I were only interested in adaptations, perhaps I would buy these titles without any additional information. But I am interested in translation—and that message got transferred (there’s a Latin pun there, folks) right into the trash folder.

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