

Interview with Art Spiegelman
Christopher Monte Smith – Indie Bound

You've been writing and illustrating comic books since the first flowering of alternative comics in San Francisco in the 1960s. What is it about the art form that satisfies you? Are there things that you can do in a comic book that you can't do in any other art form?

Art Spiegelman: Comics are a narrative art form, a form that combines two other forms of expression: words and pictures. Like any other medium, it's "value-neutral." There've been lots of rotten novels and paintings, and zillions of rotten comics. But in the hands of someone who knows how to use their medium, great things can happen. Good comics make an impression that lasts forever.

The new book, which you edited with your wife, Françoise Mouly, is called *Little Lit*. It presents a selection of fairy tales and folklore. Why fairy tales?

The tales are kinetic, filled with transformations. There's a lot to draw and to see. Fairy tales and folklore have withstood the test of time, offering archetypal themes and memorable situations. We wanted to do a book for all ages, that could hold the interest of very young children and grown-ups. Children recognize their own experiences in the paradigms presented in fairy tales. Girls might feel that they're true princesses in disguise, and that their extraordinary sensibility would allow them to feel a pea under 20 mattresses. Incorporating this "canon" of shared stories and types into one's way of thinking is a necessary first step toward literacy. Besides, fairy tales are in the public domain, and, more to the point, there are so many different kinds of tales from the goofy to the mystical, there was bound to be some story that could appeal to the diverse group of artists we invited into the book.

When you, Art Spiegelman, sit down to create a comic book, what comes first? The pictures or the words? An idea or a character?

A standard 32-page kids' picture book is a happily controlled format in which to investigate graphic possibilities. You've got all this room to explore an idea, and it's not necessarily heavy on language. It's a haven. With comics, I figure it out from the inside out. I certainly wouldn't try to be condescending. My assumption is that you have to amuse both the kid in the lap and the person who owns the lap, and not do short shrift to either side of the equation. Comics can be hard to learn, but they're a self-teaching machine. That's why kids can learn from them.

Are you a big reader of comic books in general? What work by a comic book artist is your earliest inspiration? Your most continuing inspiration?

Both Françoise and I learned to read by reading comics. We sacrificed our own prized comic book collection to our kids, Nadja, now 13, and Dashiell, who's eight, so that they could learn to read from them as well. All four of us have expanded to reading "chapter books" and are now avid readers, but still treasure our stacks of comics.

These fairy tales [in *Little Lit*] have lasted all these hundreds of years because they don't try to gloss things over; they aren't demographically written to whatever our notion of political

correctness is at the moment. Kids may not have a lot of experience, but they've got a wealth of very complex feelings and emotions and ideas running through their heads. In *Little Lit*, there are touchstones that I wish I'd had access to when I was little. Comics help prepare you for the world.

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As far as children's book authors go, William Steig is my hero. My kids have enjoyed all of the Roald Dahl books a lot. I'd have to mention that Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* was really an especially big hit with Dashiell . . . so was *Curious George*.

As for adult books, I liked Kafka when I was growing up as a kid. I read Kafka. That was important to me. Faulkner. See, I can't tell how things influenced me. I can tell I read these things and they stayed with me. Vladimir Nabokov stayed with me, Gertrude Stein stayed with me. Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain stayed with me. For philosophers -- well, I read a lot of existentialism when I was in high school, that helped shape me. You see, it becomes a problem when you talk about influences because I think there's lots of stuff that I just picked up as stray strands, you know. It's hard to know.

What do you think the future will be like for comic books?

When I first introduced Françoise to classic American comic strips, she told me she was struck by their "conviction and innocence." *Little Lit* pays homage to that era by including "Gingerbread Man," a 1943 comic about a runaway cookie by Walt Kelly, the creator of Pogo and an artist on the Walt Disney classic *Fantasia*. If it's a good story, kids won't think of it as an artifact. Our children Nadja and Dashiell are fans of classic comic characters like Betty Boop, Little Lulu, and Krazy Kat. When something is good, it can stay alive, it doesn't matter what the style is.

Reflection Prompt:

This interview goes in several directions. Choose a few of the following questions when writing your reflection.

- Spiegelman claims that all art mediums are "value-neutral." What does that mean? Do you agree?
- Spiegelman states that he finds fairy tales very important, and he often draws on them for *Little Lit*. Do you agree with him? Explain.
- He has a hard time pinpointing which books most influenced him. Can you think of a book that most influenced you? Explain either what the book is and how it influenced you or why this is difficult to do.
- The last statement in the interview is, "When something is good, it can stay alive, it doesn't matter what the style is." Do you agree? Explain.

Work Cited

Smith, Christopher. "Interview with Art Spiegelman." *Indie Bound*. Print.