

# Understanding Comics *good read*

by Leslie J Furlong

Carter Scholtz wrote that no art form can grow and prosper without being supported by a body of criti-

**BOOKS**  
*Understanding Comics*  
Scott McCloud  
Kitchen Sink

cism. While the name probably doesn't mean a lot to most people, what Scholtz said is true, especially for a medium like the comic strip,

which, like other commercial art forms (a term that is becoming the rule rather than the exception), relies on the vote cast by the consumer to guide its direction.

Comics haven't been given a fair shake as an artistic medium. Every time someone says that comics are being accepted by adults, that comment is usually prompted by the release of some insipid movie based on a strip character. It's the same as saying that music has no artistic integrity unless a song has a video to accompany it. This is why Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is such an important book for the medium.

Other books have been written about comics, some concerned with their history (Kurtzman's *From Aargh! to Zap!*) while others dwelled on the creative process (Eisner's landmark *Comics and Sequential Art*). With *Understanding Comics*, McCloud

takes the next step and deals with the act of reading a comic, breaking it down into a number of stages.

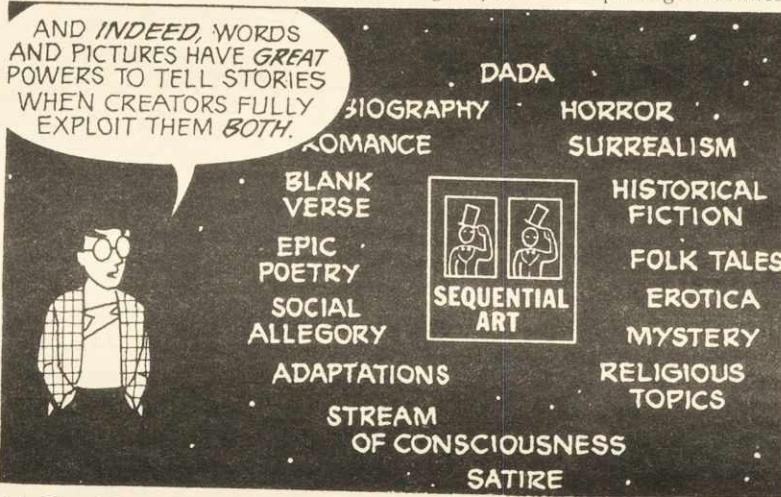
One of the first things that

definition reveals the form without attaching to it any type of content or genre, something the casual observer is guilty of while equating all comics

comics that readers have taken for granted. Using both literary and film criticism as building blocks for his theories, he discusses the variety of methods from across the world for representing time and motion. There are also surprisingly insightful sections dealing with what happens in the gutters (the spaces between the panels) and the use of iconography and its relation to reader identification. Separate chapters also deal with the use of colour, the emotional content in the line, and the creative process in general.

Perhaps the most admirable aspect of this 216 page book is that it is presented in the medium it is discussing. You could write a book in prose form about comics as easily as you could about film, but a book about comics in comic form, as well as a film about films, gets the point across without unnecessary delays in interpretation.

This is simply the best book of its kind. That it is the only book of its kind is disappointing, but if *Understanding Comics* leads to other serious books on comics, it will have done more than any other for the medium.



McCloud does is set forward his quite defensible definition of comics, and in doing so makes two important observations. The first is that the

with juvenile literature. The second is that the reader can now recognize certain works of art as being comics, from even before "The Torture of Saint Erasmus" (c.1460) to long after William Hogarth's "A Harlots Progress" (1731), without Batman or Garfield appearing even once.

McCloud then goes on to concern himself with the conventions of

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