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Drawing Expansive Narrative Boundaries*

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Christopher Pizzino. *Arresting Development: Comics at the Boundaries of Literature*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2016.

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Abstract

Review of Christopher Pizzino. *Arresting Development: Comics at the Boundaries of Literature*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2016.

Keywords

comics studies, the graphic novel, marginalized comics, coming of age, autoclasm

Christopher Pizzino. *Arresting Development: Comics at the Boundaries of Literature*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2016. 231 pp.

The comics genre, often perceived as a form of “lowbrow” culture meant for adolescents, has been historically marginalized and considered distinct from “highbrow” genres such as literature. And despite a recent shift in how the public responds to comics, in part due to the increase in critical attention paid to this media as it became an established genre, they still maintain the stigma that they are easy to read and comprehend. Addressing the problem, Christopher Pizzino, in *Arresting Development*, calls for the dissolution of the “ubiquitous truism that everyone already knows how to read comics” and argues against the idea that the genre’s form and content are simplistic (15). In doing so, Pizzino successfully presents a historical examination of the contemporary comics period, which he identifies as the late 1970s to the present, in order to highlight comics creators’ “active, complex, and deeply fraught” contestation of the notion that comics are trivial (4).

The preliminary chapters of *Arresting Development* assess the critical response to comics as an emerging form of media in the early twentieth century. The book pays particular attention to the mainstream’s dismissal of the “medium’s maturity” (25). Chapter one offers a survey of the “regulation that affects the condition of comics” and an analysis of the “developmental concepts” typically utilized in comics discourse (22). As an introduction for newcomers to comics studies and a refresher for returning readers, Pizzino examines the mainstream bias against accepting comics as a genre by problematizing established print media’s development of the criteria for media legitimacy in the 1900s. He later transitions into his core discussion of how the graphic novel disrupts this bias against comics by introducing the concept of *Bildungsroman* discourse. Pizzino emphasizes the importance of *Bildungsroman* discourse in comics studies by contending that it shapes the ideology that the graphic novel is responsible for legitimizing a formerly “despised medium with little to no credibility as an art form” (30). Chapter one’s overview of the history and terminology of comics studies forms a productive segue for chapter two’s discussion of how comics creators respond to the genre’s subjugated status within the American context. In particular, chapter two signals Pizzino’s contribution to the field by expanding on his definition of the term “autoclasm,” which he interprets as “present when an image effects a kind of self-breaking, as if it is designed to work against itself” (48). He then draws a connection between autoclasm and *Bildungsroman* discourse by asserting that the former “arises, in part, out of comics creators’ resistance to” the latter (49). Thus, the collaboration between the first two chapters forms a successful, extended introduction in which

chapter one surveys the historical scope of contemporary comics and chapter two establishes Pizzino's concentrations within the field.

Arresting Development's historical recount format in chapter one evolves into a series of brief analyses of individual comics in chapter two, a structural change that effectively prepares readers for Pizzino's larger case studies in chapters three, four, five, and six. As opposed to developing a generalized monolith of comics creators' approach to addressing stigma, Pizzino provides four in-depth case studies of notable creators, each individual having a "career [that] began in the late 1970s or early 1980s and took shape during the era of the graphic novel" (12). These case studies on Frank Miller, Alison Bechdel, Charles Burns, and Gilbert Hernandez highlight instances in which significant works produced by these creators respond to questions of the genre's legitimacy and the privileging of the graphic novel over comics. A notable example of Pizzino's method for using case studies to examine "the ongoing problem of cultural illegitimacy" (193) occurs in chapter four. This chapter's case study of Bechdel primarily focuses on her 2006 memoir *Fun Home*. Pizzino identifies the "multimedial" approach (107) of the text as both a "turning point" (108) for wider recognition of Bechdel's work and the source of critical uncertainty as to whether or not the text should be classified as a comic. Pizzino utilizes *Fun Home* to call attention to the issue of the mainstream celebrating a comics creator's work by lauding it as different and "literary" unlike other comics. He argues that this perspective that comics and literature are distinct from one another reflects the assumption that comics are incapable of the level of complexity expected from the literature genre. Pizzino close reads individual panels in *Fun Home* and assesses Bechdel's previous work to examine aspects of *Bildungsroman* discourse present in mainstream attitudes towards *Fun Home*. The author then concludes that the text exemplifies "the [comics] medium's history and its cultural struggles" by utilizing a complex structure, thus prompting Pizzino's call for audiences "to proceed to read this comic as a comic" (133). By utilizing a case study format in which he "reads" the material of these four creators, Pizzino successfully models the process in which contemporary scholars can renegotiate the relationship between literature and comics, demonstrating how the latter are genres worthy of study.

Arresting Development is a critical resource for humanities scholars working to destabilize the highbrow-lowbrow relationship between literature and comics in the mainstream. Additionally, Pizzino's critique of the graphic novel's privileged status in *Bildungsroman* discourse, coupled with his study of autoclasm's role in combatting stigma of the comics genre, reveal the historical and current factors contributing to the debate of whether or not comics constitute a legitimate genre. *Arresting Development* is an excellent point of connection between previous and current scholarship of the contemporary comics era—a

project that encourages scholars to embrace the complexity of what it means to read and study comics.

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