

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 42

Issue 1 *A Planetary Republic of Comic Book Letters:
Drawing Expansive Narrative Boundaries*

Article 20

9-20-2017

Tom Spurgeon and Michael Dean. *We Told You So: Comics As Art*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2016.

Rachel R. Miller

The Ohio State University, miller.4442@osu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Rachel R. (2017) "Tom Spurgeon and Michael Dean. *We Told You So: Comics As Art*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2016," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 42: Iss. 1, Article 20. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1969>

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Tom Spurgeon and Michael Dean. *We Told You So: Comics As Art*.
Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2016.

Abstract

Review of Tom Spurgeon and Michael Dean. *We Told You So: Comics As Art*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2016.

Keywords

Comics studies, history; alternative comics; journalism

Tom Spurgeon and Michael Dean. *We Told You So: Comics As Art*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2016. 696 pp.

With his tape recorder wheels spinning out on tales of 3 a.m. typesetting sessions and odes to the X-Acto knives buried in the carpeting of Fantagraphics Headquarters, Tom Spurgeon, aided by Michael Dean, compiles an exhaustive oral history of the independent comics publishing behemoth Fantagraphics Books in *We Told You So: Comics as Art*. As the former editor of *The Comics Journal*, Fantagraphics' in-house rag of biting comics criticism, Spurgeon's insider access affords him the opportunity to lend flesh (or reams of copy paper) to a period of comics history whose trajectory and importance still evades comics scholars. Boasting high quality reproductions of ephemera and one-shot adulations from a roster of the publisher's star artists, *We Told You So* promises detailed, first-hand accounts of how the independent publishing house survived four precarious decades. Yet this volume is not merely a flippant snapback, as the title might suggest, or a midnight-oil-defense of the comics form. Spurgeon and Dean's oral history, rather, is an opportunity for Fantagraphics Books to pay extended homage to, well, themselves, as the tastemakers and trailblazers who built a renegade publishing force based on the idea that comics were in fact art and literature.

Beginning in 1954, the year Fantagraphics Books co-founders Gary Groth and Mike Catron were born, this oral history quickly speeds ahead to the 1960s when Groth is cutting teeth (and fingers) as an editor pasting together issues of his zine, *Fantastic Fanzine*. In 1975, Groth would team up with Catron for a Rock 'N' Roll Expo to which they pin their dreams of financing their gonzo-fueled publishing endeavors. The first three chapters of *We Told You So* manage to make a linear narrative out of the primordial stew of boyhood fanzines, office supplies siphoned from day jobs at *The Comics Journal*, and ad-hoc-frat-houses turned office spaces overrun with cute interns, pet rabbits, and temperamental men. The history then begins to double back on itself for installments that include the trifecta of lawsuits filed against *The Comics Journal* by Michael Fleisher, Alan Light, and Rich Buckler, which lasted for the better part of a decade (1979-1986). The call to go west at the end of chapter three is delayed until chapter five, which literally bears a title swiped straight from a scene in Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous*: "Off the Roof Into The Pool." Next come the nineties, when Fantagraphics gained renown in Seattle with Peter Bagge's *Hate!*, Daniel Clowes's *Eightball*, Roberta Gregory's *Naughty Bits*, and the reprinting of R. Crumb's work with *The Complete Crumb* series. *We Told You So*'s written presentation of this decade echoes the viewing of VHS footage, given that series of events and scenes are "played" for the reader, then rewound and played again. More than four chapters bear a nineties timestamp before date keeping is abandoned entirely as the publisher enters the twenty-first century. Brimming with photographs, correspondence, clippings from *T CJ*, panels

from the publisher's flagship titles, and even distribution ads, each chapter of *We Told You So* bears out disorder, often privileging innumerable recapitulations of Groth's unhinged working hours and the internal squabbles and tantrums of the Fanta offices' frat-house customs. However, more prescient discussions of the publisher's contentious relationship with artists, as well as Groth's and Thompson's lifelong conversations about comics that served as the company's backbone, are only supporting acts in this oral history. As Groth explains, when the late Thompson entered the company as co-owner, the two started talking about comics, which became "a conversation that never ended" (53). While eavesdropping on Groth's and Thompson's medium-defining conversations might have been one of the particular pleasures of the over 600-page transcript, those conversations become mere background noise to the inside jokes, squabbles, and anecdotes about problematic office behavior.

With its size, heft, and confrontational Clowes-drawn cover, *We Told You So* demands that the reader take it seriously as a definitive history, even as a gag reel of comics geek caricatures pour over *Pogo* issues or gawk inside the cage of the "World's Greatest Cartoonist" on the cover. Because of these digressions and extensive meditations on the material conditions of the publishing house, which reinforce Fantagraphic's trademark brand of acerbic, deprecating, shoe-string masculinity, this oral history ends up directing its gaze inward, becoming inaccessible to those who are not a part of the Fanta inner circle. Readers are not invited into a fully realized scene or movement, as they are in other infamous oral histories like *Please Kill Me*, Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's history of punk music. Rather, *We Told You So* spends its energies on mythologizing and defending the publisher to a seemingly small group of comics insiders. For readers who already know that comics are art, the transcript becomes taxing in its lack of structure and a sort of "all-roads-lead-to-Fanta" shaping of artists' testimony. Additionally, for readers who have never considered the possibility that comics might be art, this oral history does not afford easy entry points.

The discussions of those artists who made Fantagraphics into a publishing force, for instance, are often anecdote-less statements of fact squeezed in between tales of financial instability and industry beefs. The inception of *Love and Rockets* is reduced to Groth's assertion that he liked Jaime's work more than Gilbert's in issue one, and his somewhat vague assessment that, "even with the science-fiction trappings, it was about the relationships, which were so naturalistic . . . there really was nothing like it that had been done in comics" (88). Although Los Bros Hernandez are periodically mentioned and haunt almost every photograph from conventions to company party shots, they are only featured in one small section, "The Varieties of *Love and Rockets*," nearly 300 pages into the volume. The explanation of how exactly *Love and Rockets* fit Groth's vision of comics-as-literature feels displaced, particularly as it also comes after a three-page meditation

on shooting parties held in the woods behind the publisher's Seattle offices. Similarly, comics journalist laureate Joe Sacco first appears in the role of journalist (without the "comics") detailing the lawsuits levied against *The Comics Journal* in the mid-70s, but then disappears for another fifty pages until he reappears working in Fanta's promotional offices.

We Told You So is not the *Please Kill Me* of comics histories, though it does try to be. Rather than addressing itself to the reader, the "you" of the history's title, the book seems to speak more directly to its core cast of bad boys, ex-lovers, and friends. But the volume is not without moments of magic that transport the reader to a vision of comics' liminal, rowdy young adulthood through the cache of inside jokes, petty squabbles, and accounts of yesterday's parties. There are certainly stories worth digging for—such as Groth's reflections on book formatting and his final comics-as-art monologue—depending on how deep your love or obsession for the minutiae of publishing operations runs. Overall, *We Told You So* succeeds in dramatizing the tensions and limitations of composing a history about yourself, as that history runs the risk of becoming more for yourself than for anyone else.

Rachel R. Miller
The Ohio State University