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An Unexpected Life Through Comics: An Interview with Ben Katchor

Abstract

This interview conducted with Ben Katchor takes readers on a journey through his life, work, and different eras of comic strip and comic book creation. Katchor shares with Frederick Luis Aldama his origins as a word and drawing storyteller as well as his trials, tribulations, and successes throughout the latter 20th century.

Keywords

Comics studies, biography, comic strips, comic practitioner

An Unexpected Life Through Comics: An Interview with Ben Katchor

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Ben Katchor has elevated the comic strip to new aesthetic heights. This strikes the reader almost immediately upon their first encounter with his voluminous work—from his strips in the *New Yorker* or *Metropolitan* to those that make up long and complex narrative arcs as collected in book format such as *Cheap Novelties: The Pleasures of Urban Decay* (1991 and reissued in 2016), *Julius Knipl, Real-Estate Photographer* (1993), *The Jew of New York* (1998), *The Cardboard Valise* (2011), and *Hand-Drying in America: And Other Stories* (2013). Katchor is a creator who observes life in all its detail then thinks carefully before laying down his lines, so carefully, in fact, that he moves directly from mental image to inked line, sidestepping any penciling. The result: comic strip storytelling artistry at its best. With each line and shade of gray color wash he breathes life into his narratives by working within and radically against sequential storytelling convention. We recognize characters and built landscapes, but do so in vitally new ways. His twisted perspectives and oddly balanced geometric shaping of urban landscapes and disproportionate bodies, along with an oft-abundant verbal presence, propel his stories forcefully forward, but always asking us to pause, soak up, and tilt ever so slightly our perspective, thought, and feeling about the world we live in as we move from panel to panel and story to story. As Bob Levin astutely observes of Katchor's style, taken as a whole it conveys "his off-kilter world view" (176).

As we follow Katchor's different characters (usually loners and men) and their journeys through urban spaces, he creates compelling, multilayered, sophisticated narratives that open us to new ways of perceiving, feeling, and thinking about the world—especially parts of the world ignored and discarded. In *Cardboard Valise*, as we journey through a fictional storyworld known as Outer Canthus, we learn, for instance, how the "gnawed remains of 5,000 broiled lamb chop dinners" are turned into "one artificial wool men's sports jacket" (36). And, on another occasion the discovery of a discarded Band-Aid leads to a series of inferences about its wearer; it is ultimately swept under a counter to become an artifact that will prove at a future time that "warm-blooded creatures, much like ourselves, once inhabited this city" (62).

Katchor is acutely interested in the minutia of life. With great acuity he probes how humans interact with objects—especially those discarded and laid to waste. In this way, one might liken Katchor's storytelling artistry to authors like John Dos Passos and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who measured the pulse of life at the social margins and waste heaps. Katchor's microscopic probing into the off-kilter

everyday particulars of the vitality of existence at the margins of urban life brings readily to mind James Joyce's *Ulysses*. As Bob Levin sums up Katchor's work: "Steeped in humanity, tickled by poignancies, it soars toward ulimates [sic], then descends obliquely, embracing us with unseen, heavily mittened hands" (174).

That Katchor would become one of our great comic book storytellers—the first comic strip artist awarded a MacArthur Fellowship and a recipient of the Guggenheim, for instance—was not obvious. Born and raised within a modest, working class family, he knew well the hard work of helping the family make ends meet. From an early age, he loved art and literature. After high school, he attended Brooklyn College where he contributed illustrations while on staff for the college newspaper, *The Kingsman*. From there he began to pursue his passion of visual-verbal storytelling. In the 1970s he created a typesetting graphic print shop where he produced the graphic magazine *Picture Story*. In the 1980s he published in Art Spiegelman and François Mouly's *Raw*, gaining him some international notoriety. In 1988 he began to publish his weekly strip "Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer," identified by the novelist Michael Chabon as "the last great American comic strip," in the *Jewish Daily Forward*. He also contributed strips and panels for *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and the architecture and design magazine *Metropolis*. His strips have been collected and published by a number of big east coast publishers and translated into multiple languages. In 1999, his comic opera "The Carbon Copy Building" (inspired by his one-page color strips that appeared in *Metropolis*) was awarded an OBIE for outstanding off-Broadway stage production. As Bob Levin nicely sums up: "What Katchor's work is, is a triumph of the imagination" (174). Today Katchor lives in New York City, where he continues to create his dynamic comic strip stories and teach at The New School, Parsons.

Frederick Luis Aldama: So why don't we jump right in, starting with your early life and comic books.

Ben Katchor: I discovered comic books growing up in Brooklyn, New York, as the child of a father from Warsaw, Poland and a mother of Russian immigrants. My father moved in the East European immigrant circles of New York and I was dragged along. I was fascinated by the drawings in comic books. As a small child I began making my own picture stories and comics.

Born in the US in 1910, my mother grew up in New York during the golden age of newspaper comics—not comic books. So, her idea of comics was Frank Willard's *Moon Mullins* (1923-1921) and George McManus's *Bringing up Father* (1913-2000). She thought they were great. I had a few friends whose parents were college educated and who thought that comic books were a bad influence. These friends were forbidden from

reading comic books. This certainly wasn't the case for my mother who had a positive association with comic strips. When it came to my father, he didn't judge them as either good or bad, he just thought of comic books as a strange, American phenomenon. He immigrated to New York and didn't know about the European history of comics. He was part of a Yiddish language world; his native language was Yiddish. His politics were very far to the left. He subscribed to the Yiddish language Communist newspaper, *The Freiheit*.

More than anything, my parents liked that I was involved in drawing and writing. They both encouraged me to study art and literature.

FLA: As a kid, what comics caught your eye in terms of style and story?

BK: All of the early Marvel comics that you'd find on newsstands in the early '60s. Those by Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby stood out. Along with my friends I was quickly becoming a connoisseur of the drawing. I was especially interested in the drawing and less in the story lines. This was a time when I began to participate in the early comics fandom that was developing all over the country through fanzines. With friends, I published my own fanzine.

I was never interested in creating superhero comics. I did create some detective comics. But when I was in second grade, Golden Books put out an American edition of Hergé's *Tin Tin*. Hergé and the work of Chester Gould and Harold Gray in the Sunday comic strip section of the *Daily News* were more interesting to me than superhero comic books.

FLA: This was a historical period when you couldn't take classes on comic book creation.

BK: As a child, I just imitated the formats of comics as I found them. Comics were, of course, not taught in school. In the early '70s when I entered college, it still wasn't possible to study comics. So, in college I took courses in the Art Department and the English Department. I wondered why these disciplines were separated in school as I had this childhood understanding of how text and image could function together. I couldn't see myself participating in the New York art world, as the idea of expensive one-of-a-kind objects being sold to affluent customers didn't appeal to me. I was drawn to popular forms of storytelling as seen in TV and film (as a child I tried to make some short films), but comics were cheaper and easier to make. Super-8 film was pretty expensive in those days for a child.

FLA: Some scholars have argued that Jewish publisher Max Gaines and creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, for instance, created comic books during the height of the Great Depression.

BK: That history has since been revised. The involvement of Jews in the invention of the comic book format has been highly exaggerated. The superhero and adventure comic books in the 1930-40s with their action-packed adventure stories aimed at children or teenagers were a step down from the more sophisticated work that was done in newspaper strips. The fact that many of the people working in early comic books were Jews is beside the point, as they were simply adapting forms of pulp fiction and adventure comic strips that existed in the American mainstream. In any case, most Jews had nothing to do with comic book production. The great comic strips being made were by creole artist, George Harriman (who was attuned to the Yiddish-language influence on American-English) and Scottish-Canadian-American, Winsor McCay. While Harry Hershfield was born to Jewish immigrant parents and created interesting newspaper comic strips, the field was not dominated by Jews.

FLA: In 1975, Art Spiegelman's and Bill Griffith's *Arcade*, *The Comics Revue* published underground comic creators and in 1980 Art Spiegelman with François Mouly published *Raw*. Both seem to be important moments in the growing of a readership for the kind of work you began publishing.

BK: The models I was looking at were the underground comics and *Arcade* was publishing really interesting work that provided new models for creating text/image stories for adult readers.

By the 1980s I was self-publishing fanzines and later *Picture Story Magazine* where Art Spiegelman saw my work. There was a store downtown in Soho that carried small circulation zines that took my work on consignment. By then I was aspiring to create some kind of literary/art comic strip. I wanted to bring together what I thought were the most interesting ideas in figurative art with the most interesting literature that I had been exposed to. I wanted to write serious fiction but in comic-strip form. There was a very small audience for alternative comics at that time and comic shop dealers would look at *Picture Story Magazine* and wonder what it was. They didn't recognize it as comics, nor would most of their customers.

FLA: When do you think you found your audience, or your audiences found you?

BK: In 1988 when I started doing the weekly newspaper strip, *Julius Knipf, Real Estate Photographer*. Russ Smith, publisher of the Baltimore City Paper, moved to New York to start an alternative weekly paper called *The New*

York Press. He wanted to commission original comic strips by local cartoonists. I had never thought about working for newspapers. In the '80s, there were only a few interesting weekly newspaper strips being made by Lynda Barry and Matt Groening. Even though it seemed to be a completely moribund form, I went ahead and tried to do a weekly strip. And that's where I found a readership—a readership that would never go into a comic shop. Readers would tell me that they weren't particularly interested in comics, but liked my strip.

FLA: Penguin, Pantheon Books, and Little Brown & Co. have published your work in book format. Is there something about your work that lends itself to being collected and then published within larger narrative book formats? Many authors create stand-alone comic strips. Yours work sequentially to create bigger story arcs.

BK: The old daily newspaper strips would also run strips that told stories that would go on for months. In those days, they were not collected then published in single volume books. People just read them every day, then had a recap of the week on Sunday, and then the story moved ahead.

My strips were almost always self-contained weekly episodes. I didn't think any modern-day reader would have the memory to follow a story that went on from week to week. But once these stories were collected in book form, they did produce a strong sense of a fictional world, the city that the character Knip lives in. Reading a hundred or so stories in one sitting allowed the reader to piece together a bigger picture.

FLA: You've published in newspapers, with *Drawn & Quarterly*, and with big east coast publishers like Penguin, *Metropolis Magazine*, and Slate.com. Today, many comic book creators use the Internet to create audiences and distribute their work.

BK: When I began publishing, it was in the old media world controlled by a few big publishing companies that dominated the bookstores. With the rise of the Internet it quickly became redundant for weekly newspapers to run syndicated strips because the same strip would be in other websites; none of the newspapers paid enough to have exclusive rights to the strip. Some of the monthly strips I did for *Metropolis* were put online; only subscribers had access to all of them.

Today, I post my monthly strips online where a few thousand followers can see it. For those who like the printed object, they might buy the collected work when it's made into a book. Figuring out how to produce comic strips online is a very complicated matter because it all has to be subsidized by something and the old forms of advertising don't seem

to work. If you put up a pay wall, people will just go look at something else. So I think the Internet can help build an audience and then hopefully some of those readers will want to buy a printed book or some other physical object.

The model of newspapers and magazines was to sell advertising. But now the connection between content and advertising has been separated with the advertising following you and your browsing history. If you open up Google, it's going to give you ads for things that you have been looking at. The ads will follow your profile. So the old newspaper/magazine and advertising equation no longer applies.

FLA: In 2000, you won a McArthur. You were the first cartoonist to do so. Do you think this changed the perception of your work and of cartoonists generally?

BK: Receiving a McArthur grant and getting books reviewed in literary journals all helped validate the form. But the mainstream perception really began to shift with the publication of Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986). *Maus* and the publication of books by the cartoonists associated with *Raw* helped influence people to revisit the form of comics as a potential literary art form. It showed young writers and artists that they had options; that they could become a cartoonist instead of a painter or novelist. You have to remember that choosing to become an alternative cartoonist would be considered, by most people, career suicide—no apparent audience, no apparent publishers, no apparent income. Even in the world of commercial art, cartoonists were the lowest paid. The critical attention given to *Maus* and the serious alternative comics of that time also began to validate the art form in the academy—for whatever that's worth. Almost every university has at least one class in comics now.

FLA: From idea to execution, what's your creative process, Ben?

BK: Ideas come from my observations in the world and the culture. It's like being a sociologist. I want to understand how the world works and all the things in it work. I think to myself how can I change this world or how I can understand why it is the way it is. Then I figure out how to come up with an entertaining way to express these discoveries. I begin with writing and then begin to visualize the idea. And because I've worked most of my life coming up with a new story every week on deadline, I'm used to spending every waking moment thinking of ways to go from idea, to a piece of writing, then to a page with images and lettering.

FLA: You seem to gravitate toward characters whose kinesis of consciousness takes place in and through their interactions with urban spaces.

BK: The strip “Knip!” is set in an invented city and involves all of my memories and dreams about New York, the city I was born into. Later, in my imaginary travelogue strip, “The Cardboard Valise,” each week I’d invent a new country and culture for my characters to visit. The strips in *Metropolis Magazine* were about the contemporary, built world. They reflected more of the world I live in. Like a model train layout, it’s a scale model of my idea of the world that allows for play and exploration. In this sense, while the urban experience is important, I’m not conducting urban anthropology. I’m creating a completely make-believe thing. In my work the world becomes malleable. There are no physical or economic limitations. As in dreams so too in my strips, I can do whatever I want in the fictional rebuilding of the real world.

FLA: You created musicals, winning an Obie for a comic book opera.

BK: Theater predates print; it’s one of the first places where text and image came together as an art form. The actor’s body posture and movement along with the props create a stage picture. And when the actor opens his or her mouth, there’s text. We see the same going on in comics, except it’s not done with living people; it’s a graphic notation of this imaginary event in text and image. In my plays I use projections of my drawings, bringing the theatrical form even closer to a comic strip than most people suspect. I can work in theater and comics because they share this common ground of using image and text. The thinking and materials in theater are not that different from making a comic strip.

FLA: Your work is filled with humor, exploration, history, memory, urban architecture, memory, and Jewish identity. Can you speak to this latter ingredient in your work?

BK: If you asked an orthodox Jew they’d say I wasn’t Jewish at all. But every Jew is different. I think of myself as being more of an Internationalist. As I mentioned at the beginning of the interview, I’m the child of someone who was raised in a Yiddish-speaking Jewish culture in Eastern Europe. This is a circumstance that I didn’t choose. One is born into these things. Because my father was more of an Internationalist, he didn’t force me to live or work in Yiddish. So while I identify with Jewish culture that comes from Eastern European traditions, I grew up with a secular connection to Yiddish language and culture.

FLA: Philip Roth resisted being pigeonholed as a Jewish author.

BK: I think “Jewish” is a nebulous term. One needs to qualify it for it to mean anything: 1930’s Communist Jew, or 1950’s orthodox, or an orthodox Jew from Mexico, and so on. There are Jews everywhere in the world. They all have different religious and political affiliations. They eat different foods. They sing different songs. So one has to be more specific than just identifying me as a Jewish cartoonist. I am a son of a Communist from Warsaw who grew up speaking English in New York in the 1960s and ‘70s and so on. We would need to add a lot of qualifiers to “Jewish” for it to mean anything.

There are people who want to divide everybody up into these neat groups for nationalist, religious or patriotic reasons. But that’s a complete fallacy. It doesn’t exist. Nationalities are all made up. We just happen to be where we are. Before the popular press existed, most people didn’t even know what country they lived in. Farmers or peasants didn’t know what country they were in until somebody came over and told them.

FLA: Looking back at your long career, how might you characterize your work and your journey, Ben?

BK: It’s hard to look back at it as a piece of history. My work was created in its own time, moment, and place. When I started in the early ‘80s there were sixteen or so people making alternative comics. Even though it wasn’t a business at all, or something that would lead to a lucrative career, it was possible to do, as it was cheap to live in New York at that time. Today there are thousands of people making alternative comics.

FLA: Are you optimistic about the future of comics?

BK: I think this diagrammatic image-text thing that happens on a page is a rich art form. But it takes time and work to read a complicated diagrammatic comic strip—unlike, say, watching animation. At one point when the animation technology became cheaper and more accessible, many comic book artists began to dabble in animation. Almost every cartoonist I know does some animation now. But audiences have come back to print. Young people who grew up in a digital media world seem to enjoy the physical qualities of comics on paper.

Tastes and creative practices have a way of cycling back. They go out of favor as a mass medium, and then they come back as an experimental art form of some kind. While I can’t predict the future of comics, the fact that text-image work has been driving popular culture, whether in the form of theater, animation, film, or comic books, these are forms that are not going away—how people will afford to live to make this work, have air and water to sustain themselves, is another question.

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