

Whitney

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and a staff artist/writer for the New Yorker.

Comic non-fiction narrative and journalism is not a new medium. In 2010, Sarah Glidden travelled the Middle East to report on the refugee crisis with the Seattle Globalist. She told her story through one character Sam using Sam's own words – appearing in speech bubbles – accompanied by watercolor drawings that personalize the story, moving it from an “issue” to storytelling, depicting the very personal struggle of refugees.

The Nib, founded in 2013, consists entirely of comics, many of which depict journalistic and non-fiction stories. To date it has published more than 2,000 works and released a 300-page book of its best entries.

While comic journalism is fast becoming part of mainstream “serious” art, there still seems to be a disconnect between our expectation of humor and innocence in “comics” and the “comic” narrative of something that is not funny. In response to what Glidden calls this the “naming problem,” some within the field distinguish between “comics” and “comix” in order to suggest that the straightforward narrative is about something “real” rather than imaginary. The word also conveys the idea of a co-mixture, combing two things that seem not to fit together.

Maus is doubly disturb-

ing – first, because there is nothing funny about the topic – and second, because Spiegelman chose ironic anthropomorphic animal depictions – the Jews drawn as mice, the Nazis drawn as cats. But as I study my own reaction, I must admit that the genre is compelling in its historical truth, made deeply personal, a story made more complex because it sits in the contemporary framework of a comic. In the *Shadow of No Towers* (2004) – Spiegelman's response to 9/11 – is even more disturbing but very powerful – visually confrontational.

On the positive side, from the standpoint of a (humorous) comics lover, Spiegelman also edited an archival prize – The TOON Treasury of Classic Children's Comics which anthologizes hundreds of classics – Clifford; Dennis the Menace, Little Archie, Uncle Wiggily, Pogo, Fox and the Crow, Little Lulu, Captain Marvel and Donald Duck.

In it, John Scieszka, National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, introduces Spiegelman's anthology. “I always loved that about comics, that they could, and usually did, take a turn for the weird that wasn't anywhere to be found in school textbooks. Why is there a guy in an old-fashioned, long-legged striped bathing suit who can take his head off his shoulders? Why not? ... two talking frogs in straw boaters. Sure ... Frankenstein playing a tuba? ... Captain Marvel enters a world where surrealism

is the norm? Heck, yeah, that's what comics can do.”

Perhaps it is the surrealism that makes the contemporary “comic” look out of place in telling a serious narrative – perhaps that whiplash double-take with which I read *Maus* – is the point. The real-life experiences of Vladek and Anja reflect the surrealism of bleeding history – all the more powerful perhaps because the story does not seem to “belong” there – or anywhere, for that matter, because the truth is so horrific. Maybe that is the most poignant aspect of life stories that are beyond belief. You need them NOT to fit – so we are jolted awake by them.

Part of the power of comics journalism is that it is still novel and unfamiliar to many people. When the mind faces the unfamiliar, it sparks attention and garners extra energy in order to focus on the strange. Robert Mankoff wrote: “Each cartoon needs the right amount of wrong.” If there was not something “wrong” with the picture, or the scenario, then the cartoon would somehow not “speak.” The cartoon literally emerges from some other place that is not logical or linear, like the disjointed non-verbal filmstrip that is the room of the right hemisphere of the brain.

Quincy Whitney is a career journalist, author, historian, biographer, and poet and a lifelong New Hampshire resident. Contact her at quincysquill@nashuatelegraph.com or quincy@quincywhitney.com.