

## Comics are the Future: Transformative Storytelling through Sequential Art

Intro:

Graphic narratives have exploded in publishing, with “graphic novel” readership surging, a catch-all trade term including graphic journalism, memoir, literary fiction, comics poetry, and other hybrid forms. Comics tell stories across multiple genres—some might still think of sci-fi (superheroes) as dominant in comics, but what our panelists here today have published represent examples in the diversity of genres, including short stories, political cartoons, historical fiction, Afro-futurism, memoir, zines, comics essays, and the vast potential of translated comics from global publishing communities.

I’m the reviews editor at *Publishers Weekly* where we place comics (often called graphic novels, but in fact much of the boom in publishing is driven by graphic memoir and either narrative or instructional graphic nonfiction) reviews directly within our general adult trade (and children’s publishing) reviews pages.

But, while comics creators and fans have often been put on their heels defending comics “as literature,” seeking validity within the publishing industry and critical / academic spaces—they are, *as literature*, different.

That is what this panel is about—the power of that difference, and its electrifying future potential.

Comics are distinctive from prose, poetry, or other forms. And defining what it is that comics and graphic novels do that’s so different would take more than one panel’s length of time—it’s a seminar’s worth of study. Still, we’ll get into it here. Will Eisner coined the term “sequential art” in 1985 to describe art aligned in a sequence to tell a story—though it must be caveated that innovation from that premise in comics has turned out narratives that are non-chronological, collaged, or otherwise playful and

circuitous in form. But a basic point is that graphic narratives are not simply illustrated stories, however the art and words are configured on a page, they create an interplay of art and text, where the reader is asked to engage with the alignment of elements on the page, to fill in gaps, and to read drawings with or without textual accompaniment.

It's a form that's seductive, I think, to storytellers because there's so much room to innovate, collaborate, and borrow/remix from art, film, videogames, and other visual and interactive medium.

We have a panel designed here with talented creators and experts in the field to speak to just what makes comics so cool, so electric with potential—and why as readers and creators/writers, AWP as a community should learn more from this jumping off point about this burgeoning form.

Graphic narratives are regularly published as trade releases from indie, mainstream, specialty and academic publishers as well as in print/online literary magazines and other online forums, but rarely represented at AWP in panel programming. There's a need and gap in the AWP community space around this rising, creative form that this panel aims to fill, and will do so with engaging panelists. The panel will bring together a diverse racial, gender, and LGBTQ group incl. creators and academics. I'm stepping back to allow each to introduce themselves and what their newest projects are through showing you the work; this is a visual medium, so here's a chance to experience it in real time.

### **Visual presentations:**

Each panelist will share examples of their comics on projector screen, and may “read aloud” from the work, or may speak more generally about the themes and inspirations for the artwork. However the work is shown, these examples allow the audience members to “read the art” along with any text; for some, if you're not familiar with comics, take in how your eye follows movement, or what clues you get from art vs. text, or what different panel arrangements (or absence of panel definitions) does in guiding your eye.

These are deliberate choices made by the creators, much like how poetry is arranged on a page / enjambment.

### **Sample Discussion Questions:**

What affordances do comics have that allow you to tell certain kinds of stories in new ways?

What do you see as the future of comics—or more broadly, the future of literature and the place of comics/sequential art in that landscape?

Are there storytelling challenges that drawing pictures has surmounted – or what new challenges do they create?

Who are your influences? Who do you point to as newer / next gen work you find inspiring?

You've all worked in different forms: zines to graphic novels, short stories to memoir, gag comics/political humor to prose novels. Tell us more about how these works inform each other.

How is time a factor? When are comics expedient and when do they slow down the reader-or creator?

Do you feel you still have to defend comics as a legitimate literary form? Why and how, or where and to whom? (And more broadly, why defend the concept of legitimacy in art)?

Let's get technical: what are your tools, how do you play or remix tools and medium in your work? What do you see in how others work that informs your approaches?

*Other questions to be generated based on panelist presentations.*

*Q&A with audience to follow*

## **Panelists:**

**Megan Kelso** was born in Seattle '68. She began making comics in the '90s. Kelso has since published three books. In '07 Kelso became the first woman to do a weekly comic strip for NY Times Mag. In '20, she created an 85-foot-long comics mural, which was installed at Climate Pledge Arena.

**Dr. Charles Johnson**, University of Washington (Seattle) professor emeritus, MacArthur fellow, and the author of 27 books, is a novelist, philosopher, essayist, literary scholar, short-story writer, cartoonist and illustrator, an author of children's literature, and a screen-and-teleplay writer.

**Robyn Jordan** is a cartoonist and illustrator based in Seattle. For the past decade+, she has self-published mini-comics. She also makes images and illustrated stories for clients such as The Nib, Mutha Magazine, BRIGHT Magazine, Narratively, The Stranger, Seattle Art Museum, King County Metro, SEIU and The Seattle Weekly. She has an MFA from Parsons The New School for Design. She's a long-time, part-time public school art teacher, and lives with her partner, child, and elderly pug

**MariNaomi** is the author and illustrator of the SPACE Prize-winning graphic memoir Kiss & Tell: A Romantic Resume, Ages 0 to 22, the Eisner-nominated Dragon's Breath and Other True Stories, the upcoming Turning Japanese, and their self-published Estrus Comics. Their newest book is I THOUGHT YOU LOVED ME.

## **Moderator:**

**Meg Lemke** is the Graphic Novel Reviews Editor at Publishers Weekly and Editor-in-Chief at MUTHA Magazine. She chaired comics programming at the Brooklyn Book Festival, curated events for the French Comics Association and PEN America, and was an editor of PEN Illustrated. She lives in Brooklyn, and Seattle is her hometown.

