



Book Reviews:

Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin. By Pierre Assouline. Translated by Charles Ruas. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

God of Comics: Osamu Tezuka and the Creation of Post–World War II Manga. By Natsu Onoda Power. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and His Revolutionary Comic Strip. By Nevin Martell. New York: Continuum, 2009.

By: **Craig Fischer**

Abstract

Three recent books—Pierre Assouline's **Hergé**, Natsu Onoda Power's **God of Comics** and Nevin Martell's **Looking for Calvin and Hobbes**—aspire to be comprehensive, accessible biographies/critical studies of their subjects, though these books vary widely in quality.



PROJECT MUSE®

Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin, and: God of Comics: Osamu Tezuka and the Creation of Post-World War II Comics, and: *Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and His Revolutionary Comic Strip*
(review)

Craig Fischer

Children's Literature Association Quarterly, Volume 35, Number 3, Fall 2010,
pp. 320-324 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2010.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/396491>

Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin. By Pierre Assouline. Translated by Charles Ruas. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

God of Comics: Osamu Tezuka and the Creation of Post–World War II Manga. By Natsu Onoda Power. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and His Revolutionary Comic Strip. By Nevin Martell. New York: Continuum, 2009.

Reviewed by Craig Fischer

Two or three weeks before Christmas, my friend Beth asked me to go to the local comics shop with her. Beth's eight-year-old son Beckham had put manga on his Christmas list—manga are the Japanese comics published in paperback and available at every chain bookstore and comic store in the United States—but Beth knew that some manga is extremely violent and sexually explicit, and she wanted my help in finding a book appropriate for Beckham. We ended up buying two books for him: the first volume of Hiromu Arakawa's *Fullmetal Alchemist* (a moderately violent but well-told fantasy tale) and a volume of Kiyohiko Azuma's *Yotsuba&!* (an all-ages comedy). I also recommended that Beth pick up Jason Thompson's *Manga: The Complete Guide*, a comprehensive survey of manga titles rated for quality and age-appropriateness. I realized, though, that Thompson's book, which came out in 2007, is already out of date. There's been hundreds (if not thousands) of manga volumes translated into English since then,

including such acclaimed books as Osamu Tezuka's *Black Jack* and Naoki Urasawa's *Pluto*.

And then I wondered: what other books out there, besides Thompson's, guide parents in their purchases, and guide librarians when they order manga and other types of comics for their collections? What books give teachers the information they need to incorporate comics into their classrooms? It seems to me that there's a dearth of solid, introductory-level critical texts about the comics medium as a whole and about important cartoonists in particular, though perhaps this situation has begun to improve. Three recent books—Pierre Assouline's *Hergé*, Natsu Onoda Power's *God of Comics* and Nevin Martell's *Looking for Calvin and Hobbes*—aspire to be comprehensive, accessible biographies/critical studies of their subjects, though these books vary widely in quality.

Pierre Assouline is a Parisian journalist and author whose previous books include biographies of writer Georges Simenon and photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. Undoubtedly, Hergé is a more widely read writer than Simenon and a more popular visual artist than Cartier-Bresson. The twenty-three book-length comic adventures that Hergé wrote and drew (with a cadre of uncredited assistants) about the boy reporter Tintin between 1930 and 1976 still command a worldwide audience in the tens of millions. An example of Tintin's clout: Steven Spielberg and Peter Jackson are collaborating on a Tintin movie, and it takes these two cinematic powerhouses to equal Hergé's singular impact and popularity.

In his introduction, Assouline writes that he took on the project because Hergé's heirs gave him total access to the artist's papers and files. This caught my attention; I've read several books on Hergé, and I was hoping that Assouline's unprecedented access to the Hergé Foundation archives would result in new revelations, but not so. In large measure, Assouline's *Hergé* is a well-written recapitulation of facts already presented in various sources (most notably for U.S. audiences, in the documentary *Tintin and Me* [2003], which aired as a program in the PBS series *POV* in 2006). All the chronicles of Hergé's life, including Assouline's, focus on the same formative influences, including his love for the Boy Scouts, his early work for the Catholic newspaper *Le Vingtième Siècle* (*Twentieth Century*, edited by conservative priest and Hergé mentor Norbet Wallez), his friendship with Chinese artist Chang Chong-Chen, and his two marriages. Rabid Tintinophiles may not learn anything new from Assouline's *Hergé*, but his book functions as a fine introduction for neophytes interested in the artist's life.

The most striking aspect of Assouline's book is his willingness to label Hergé a Nazi collaborator. During the German occupation of Belgium, Hergé drew *Tintin* for the French-language collaborationist newspaper *Le Soir* (*Evening*), and after the war he was briefly in danger of being ruled an *incivique* (a "noncitizen") by a postwar military court because of his participation in Axis media. (After the war, 55,000 Belgians were found guilty of collaboration, with a tenth of

these receiving capital punishment or life imprisonment.) Assouline argues that Hergé made poor moral choices during the Occupation and, more surprisingly, remained close to the *incivique* crowd after he was exonerated by the courts:

Whatever the facts, he always managed to find extenuating circumstances for those defeated by the liberation. [Journalist and convicted collaborator] Robert Poulet would say that Hergé was generous toward the *inciviques*, those who were banned and disgraced but whose integrity he believed in. Hergé's generosity toward them was greater than people would believe. He helped not only his friends, and friends of friends, but also individuals whom he did not even know. His reputation as the Samaritan of collaborators in distress spread beyond the borders. (115–16)

Assouline's biography gives us a portrait of a very complicated, very flawed Hergé, which seems to be the truth about the man. I'd recommend *Hergé* to anyone interested in *Tintin* and Belgian comics in general, as well as historians of the *incivique* period.

Natsu Onoda Power's *God of Comics* is about Osamu Tezuka, who is called the "God of Manga" by fans and whose incredible post–World War II popularity established manga as both an artistic means of expression and as a business. Like Assouline's *Hergé*, *God of Comics* covers all the requisite peaks and valleys of its subject's life. Power discusses the influence of Walt Disney on Tezuka's cartooning, the unexpected success Tezuka had with early comics like *New Treasure Island*

(1947) and *The Lost World* (1948), and the first appearance of Tetsuwan Atomu (or Astro Boy, as he's known in the United States) in 1952. (Early in their careers, both Hergé and Tezuka created massively popular characters, and both later found reader demand for new Tintin and Astro Boy stories a straitjacket—though Tezuka ignored these demands and went on to create works more adult and ambitious than anything Hergé ever attempted.) Like Assouline, Power avoids hagiography and is direct in her evaluations of different facets of Tezuka's career. A chapter on Tezuka's contributions to animation ends with the following judgment: "Despite his deep love for animation, Tezuka was not always successful at it, commercially or artistically. Some regard Tezuka's influence on Japanese animation as negative rather than positive: he is responsible for much of the money-saving (and quality-compromising) techniques in TV animations, which mark them as a 'low' form of entertainment as opposed to 'art'" (138). Power calls the God of Manga on his mistakes.

God of Comics is less a chronological biography than a survey of concepts that unlock Tezuka's oeuvre: Power's chapters are organized around critical ideas rather than the facts of Tezuka's life. One chapter explicates Tezuka's "star system"—his tendency to use the same characters over and over again, even in radically different stories, as if they were movie actors instead of endless malleable drawings. (The "star system" allowed Tezuka to save time on character design, while serving as an in-joke for long-time fans: "Hey look! Astro Boy has a cameo in

Black Jack!") Chapters are devoted to Tezuka's contributions to *shojo* manga (comics for girls) and *seinen* manga (experimental, violent, and sexual comics aimed at young adult males). My favorite is chapter 3, "Movie in a Book," where Power claims that Tezuka was heavily influenced by the visual aesthetics of Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s and, beginning with *Metropolis* (1949), began to incorporate "a more solid vocabulary of 'cinematic techniques'" into his manga (54), specifically the deep focus cinematography of movies like *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which inspired Tezuka to stage action in his comics panels on all planes, from the extreme foreground to the remote background. In making this point, Power brings in historical evidence (post–World War II Japanese film magazines) and the ideas of film theorist André Bazin, and briefly *God of Comics* becomes more scholarly than introductory. Most of Power's book, however, stays on the *gaijin* (beginner) level and is a helpful guide to the career of the most important comics artist who ever lived.

Though not as influential as Hergé and Tezuka, *Calvin and Hobbes*'s Bill Watterson is probably the best American newspaper cartoonist of the past twenty-five years, and he deserves a better book than Nevin Martell's *Looking for Calvin and Hobbes*. No doubt Martell had a hard time researching his subject. Since retiring *Calvin and Hobbes* in 1995, Watterson has become a near-recluse who refuses interview requests, incentives to return to the strip, and requests to merchandise the *Calvin and Hobbes*

characters. (The urinating Calvin stickers so common on the back of pick-up truck windows are bootlegs.) Denied contact with the cartoonist, Martell resorts to packing *Looking* with interviews with other people, some of whom are close to Watterson (his lifelong friend Richard West, his editor Lee Salem) and offer genuine insights into Watterson's life and art. Too many of Martell's interview subjects, however, are included just because they're celebrities who share Martell's love of *Calvin and Hobbes*, but folks like *Lio* cartoonist Mark Tatulli and comedian Patton Oswalt have little to say except predictable encomiums about the "wonder" and "energy" of Watterson's strip. Astonishingly, Martell also spends pages writing about those celebrities who *refused* his interview request, including author David Sedaris ("I have never in my life read a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip" [12]) and *American Splendor* comic-book author Harvey Pekar (who "didn't feel as though he could contribute" [12]). Why do we need to hear about Martell's investigatory dead ends?

The organization of *Looking* generally follows the trajectory of Watterson's life, though as he writes about the *Calvin* years, Martell also catalogs the elements of the strip in detail. He mentions such Watterson jokes as Spaceman Spiff, Chocolate Frosted Sugar Bombs, and "the Noodle Incident," but he never dives below the surface to discuss the quality of Watterson's line or the timing of his gags. (I didn't learn any new facts or interpretations from Martell's summary of the strip.) In chapter 10

Martell brings his book to a supposedly rousing conclusion by finagling an interview with Watterson's mother, but I couldn't get past how this tactic (save the big interview for last!) was shamelessly ripped off from Michael Moore films like *Roger and Me* (1989) and *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). And while Mrs. Watterson seems like a sweet lady, I'm afraid she doesn't have any earth-shattering insights to share about her son either. When asked about Watterson's decision to retire *Calvin* after ten years, Mom replies, "I knew he was ready to go on. You want your children to be happy and to be satisfied with their lives. So if that's what he needed to do, then that was fine" (223). What's not fine, however, is Martell's treatment of this interview as some kind of journalistic coup.

The most annoying aspect of *Looking* is Martell's bloated, cutesy writing. At the end of chapter 5, describing the moment when he learned that Watterson's brother has declined to be interviewed, Martell writes, "Argh. Dang rabbit! Curses to the trickster god Loki! I keep getting close, but not close enough. That Watterson is a one [sic] wascally wabbit" (117). *Looking* ends with a dopey list of "Random Tidbits You Might Like To Know But Which Didn't Make the Book" (but which really *did* make the book—funny, huh?) and the final item on the list is "I love cupcakes and I'm hungry. Mmmm . . . cupcakes." Argh, indeed. The time he spent writing *Looking* might have been better spent baking cupcakes. This is a book that I can't recommend to Beckham, Beth, or anyone; librarians, teachers, and curious parties should seek out Assouline's

Hergé and Power's *God of Comics* but avoid looking for *Looking for Calvin and Hobbes*.

Craig Fischer is an associate professor of English at Appalachian State University, where he teaches courses on film and comics. His articles have been published in the *Comics Journal* and the *International Journal of Comic Art*, and he served on the executive committee of the *International Comic Arts Forum (ICAF)* from 2005 to 2007. Currently, Craig blogs with scholar Charles Hatfield at www.thoughtballoonists.com and is serving as a judge for the comic industry's 2010 Eisner Awards.



***Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films.* By M. Keith Booker. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010.**

Reviewed by Kathy Merlock Jackson

In *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*, University of Arkansas English professor M. Keith Booker revisits familiar material. The author of *Drawn to Television: Prime Time Animation from The Flintstones to Family Guy* and *May Contain Graphic Material: Comic Books, Graphic Novels, and Film*, Booker understands animation and the child audience and lends his expertise to uncovering the subtext of the Disney oeuvre. In his "Personal Prologue," Booker writes, "I am, among other things, a professional academic film scholar and, yes, I should admit up front that I am an unrepentant leftist egghead intellectual. But I'm also a dad, and I've come to understand that the complexities and responsibilities associated with being a parent to kids who watch movies need to be dealt

with by all parents, eggheads or not, and of whatever political persuasion" (xiii). The persona of Booker as intellectual-father permeates his analysis. Often written in first person, the book provides a highly personal reading of Booker's and his three sons' responses to Disney films and particular elements in them, such as music, magic, racial and gender roles, humor, or effects.

The book is divided into five chapters. In the first, Booker considers the feature animated films that Walt Disney oversaw, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *Jungle Book* (1967), released the year after Disney's death. In the second, he assesses the studio's output after Disney, including "the virtual wasteland in the production of children's animated film" (37) until the release of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989 sparked a renaissance. The third chapter addresses Disney's relationship with Pixar and foray into digital animation, and the fourth considers Disney's competitors, especially DreamWorks, which Booker regards as farther to the left than Disney and slightly more subversive. Booker concludes with a chapter titled "The Politics of Children's Film: What Hollywood Is Really Teaching Our Children." Throughout, he emphasizes that children's films can have a "profound effect at the level of promoting certain fundamental attitudes and basic expectations concerning what the world is like and how one should live in it" (175).

Much of the book consists of Booker's synopses of films and his and sons Benjamin's, Skylor's, and Adam's opinions of them, but the book is