

# Comics, Graphic Novels, & the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike

Peter Werbe

a review of

*1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike*. Graphic History Collective and David Lester. Between The Lines (2019)

Although the term graphic novel may seem used simply to gussie up what many would call a comic book, the phrase generally describes a publication with more serious content than what you find in Marvel's superhero tales of *Captain America*, *Iron Man*, *The Hulk*, *Spider-Man*, and the rest.

Graphic novels harken back to the 1920s, but hit their stride as serious literature in the 1980s with the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, about the Holocaust, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, which became the grimmest Batman film, and *V for Vendetta* written by Alan Moore, among others.

The history of this literary form has many facets even including early pornography, but it is distinguished from comic books in that they aren't periodicals like the *Adventures of Superman*.

David Lester's compelling chronicle of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike falls into the graphic novel form since use of the term encompasses non-fiction as well. Lester is a collaborator with the Graphic History Collective, which describes itself as "a group of activists, artists, writers, and researchers passionate about comics, history and social change."

Besides doing the writing and art for *1919*, his third such undertaking of a graphic novel, Lester is the guitarist with the rock duo, Mecca Normal. His image for the theme of "I Will Not Obey!" appeared on the cover of our Spring 2019 edition. See his site at [davidlesterartmusicdesign.wordpress.com](http://davidlesterartmusicdesign.wordpress.com) for all of his art and music.

Comics, the name itself suggests something less serious, are often portrayed as down scale literature, or worse. In the 1950s, there were televised U.S. Senate hearings into the comic book industry investigating whether horror, crime, and superhero comics contributed to what was seen then as second only to the communist menace—juvenile delinquency, as youth crime was designated.

Less sensational comics like *Donald Duck* and *Archie* did not fall under scrutiny, but they didn't take up some of the progressive themes that were tucked into ones such as *Tales from the Crypt* which was the real target of right wing senators.

Another sub-genre comic series, *Classics Illustrated*, was a popular publication that ran from 1931 to 1971 featuring adaptations of great literature such as *Moby Dick*, *Hamlet*, and *The Three Musketeers*. Many parents and educators were pleased that kids were reading these comics rather than *The Chamber of Chills* and *The Tormented*, hoping that seeing the classics in an easily accessible form would lead them to reading the original versions. It's not clear whether their hopes were realized.

But this leads to a consideration of Lester's book. Eric Thomas Chester, who writes in this issue about the Winnipeg strike and whether a generalized version is still something workers can use in their battle against capital, suggests reading in addition to the graphic novel, historian David Bercuson's 1990 *Confrontation at Winnipeg* to get a fuller and more detailed account of the strike.

Certainly, the more we know about history the better, but what do readers take away from historical accounts? Usually the broad outlines of a subject and perhaps a few details of importance. Lester's art, however, brings the anger, the joy, and the effect of defeat in a manner that non-fiction words alone cannot. To be sure, this can be found in fictionalized works of history that appear without illustrations and depend upon an author's writing skills and the reader's imagination.

Some of the images Lester has drawn are taken from historic photos of the Winnipeg events including the one presented here of a trolley car being overturned. You would think that an actual photo would convey the scene much more so than its representation, but in Lester's graphic portrayal, you can almost feel the anger and the solidarity among the workers that led to this direct action.

In other illustrations for 1919, Lester creatively conjures them up undoubtedly after reading historical accounts and which make the passion and determination of the strikers come alive. So, there is a loop between the two formats making both relevant.

And, just as Chester contends, the general strike isn't something relegated to working class nostalgia, but rather to create a sense of confidence that it is a tactic that can be part of today's struggles.

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