Preface

The subject of this book—comics—is named on a false assumption: that comics themselves are necessarily comical or funny (thus, "the funnies"). And as a form, comics has been plagued by a series of critical misconceptions and misunderstandings that have only served to compound the error of the name: that they are directed primarily at juvenile audiences; that they are easy or transparent reading; that they are, if not beneath contempt, certainly not worth notice from those whose job it is to determine what is, indeed, worthy of notice.

The effects of these misapprehensions of the comics form are clear. Until extremely recently, there were few serious attempts to study comics, either formally or historically. There have been periods when some comics creators experienced fame and even riches for their work (the 1920s and 1930s, for example), and there have been times (the first decade of the twentieth century, the late 1940s) when hysterical responses to comics prevailed. But for the most part, the art of sequential comics remained a culturally, critically, and commercially undervalued form throughout the first century of its existence. And while there have been periods when comics readers have been taken seriously (Hollywood's recent engagement with comics fans is the most obvious example), those who have found unique readerly pleasures and communities around the comics form (in all its forms) have been largely treated with suspicion or derision by those who have accepted the premises that there is nothing worth looking at in comics.

To be fair, there have been benefits to the cultural and scholarly neglect of comics. By only sporadically being profitable and almost never being respectable, comics has been left to develop its own language and its own unique relationship with readers, often for long periods, with few or no attempts to make the form respectable—to do for comics what Hollywood sought to do in the 1920s: "to kill the slum tradition in the movies" in order to create an "art" that would "meet the ideals of cultivated audiences."[1] As Gilbert Hernandez

(*Love and Rockets*) put it in 2001 when asked whether he found comparisons to Gabriel García Márquez flattering:

> I'm on the fence about this one. . . . When we are old men, we want to see new, young comic artists whose work is taken as seriously as any novel. . . . On the other hand, the comic books are in their own neat, kitschy, junky world that is unique to comics. We like that too. We like that it's outlaw. You can't repair comics, you can't hang them in a museum and say, "This belongs next to the Mona Lisa." It's the whole squirrelly factor, like early punk: There is the sense that this is bad, and we want it to be bad.[2]

Indeed, when students ask me if I see comics being accorded the same seriousness in the university as film or the novel (both formerly disparaged popular narrative forms), I respond in the negative. As Hernandez suggests, hanging a comic in a museum or bringing it into the university does not "repair" what is essentially unique about the form—qualities that, at least in part, work against all attempts to take the gutter out of comics and make of it a respectable form for respectable audiences.

Of course, the fact that my students today even ask such questions, or that Hernandez can wrestle with being compared to García Márquez, or that the *New York Times* (which for over a century studiously ignored the phenomenon of the comic supplement) now reviews graphic novels with almost the same seriousness they accord to "proper books by proper writers"—all of this attests to how much *has* changed in recent years.[3] Not that most comics creators are getting rich and famous (and in fact all signs point to the shrinking market for comics in the twenty-first century) or that comics readers are suddenly being taken seriously (aside from once a year at ComicCon in San Diego, when Hollywood takes them very seriously indeed). But suddenly comics are showing up in places—museum walls, academic and literary journals, classrooms and university presses—that would have been unimaginable even a generation ago (and a half-century ago would have been clearly read as a sign of the apocalypse). This book is in part an attempt to understand how things developed in this way, what it might mean, and what lessons there might be to learn from comics for the future of storytelling in the twenty-first century. But doing so necessarily requires doubling back to the beginnings and retracing a history of comics and their readers across several different forms—from illustrated magazines and newspaper comic supplements through graphic novels and webcomics, a story of more than a century of comics creating and reading that will necessarily be marked by gaps and omissions—gaps and omissions that other studies whose goal is to provide a comprehensive history of the various forms and mediums in which comics have operated can fill in masterfully.[4]

But this is a story about gaps and omissions, from beginning to end, and it seems only right, or at least inevitable, that it be told elliptically. Comics bring together different semantic systems (figural, textual, symbolic) into a crowded field where meaning is both collaborative and competitive—between images, between frames, and between reader and writer. One visible space where this always-uneasy negotiation takes place is in the gap between the panels, or the "gutter." As Scott McCloud has influentially suggested, the reader must at every panel work actively to bring "closure" to the space between frames.[5] Even in the most simplistic narratives, the reader imaginatively fills in this space with the "missing" action.

Of course, the space between the panels is not the only place where readers are summoned to take on an active role in filling in gaps. Of all narrative forms, comics are in many respects the most inefficient, a form that depends as much on what is left out as on what is included—and a form that depends on an active and imaginative reader capable of filling in the gaps in time. As a form that works with traditionally incommensurate systems of meaning—text and image—to tell its story, it also requires its readers at every turn to make active decisions as to how to read the two in relationship to a larger narrative. As I will argue in what follows, we might take the comics out of the cultural gutter, but we will never take the gutter out of comics—both the literal formal element that marks the gaps and ellipses between panels and, as I will use the term more metaphorically throughout, the larger and often less formally explicit gaps that everywhere define how comics tell stories.

Gaps and discontinuities are vital to other narrative forms as well, especially since modernist experiments in the novel and painting exploded the once ideal seamless plot or canvas. Certainly it is hard not to see intimate connections between the formal experiments with the novel by Joyce or Faulkner and the fragmentary, looping narratives of modernity that I will discuss in Chapter 1. But they are also fundamentally different, in at least one respect. Behind the modernist novel's break with linear time, traditional plotting, and other conventions of the nineteenth-century realist novel is always the prototype of the realist novel itself. Just as modernist poetry's breaking of the iamb required an iamb to break, so the experiments of the modernist novel are always a *choice* not to make use of available unities and coherences. Comics creators—while faced with an array of choices at every turn—have never had the possibility of developing tools and techniques that would allow them (as Hollywood cinema would do after 1920) to efface the gaps (the structural "gutters"), to suture the cuts and obscure the apparatus. Such acts of "suture" have *never* been available to comics.[6]

In fact, the differences extend in ways that complicate any temptation to map too readily the formal properties of comics, a form which of course emerges, like modernism, with the turn to the twentieth century, to high modernism itself. After all, in many respects, we can understand that the novel is accorded the cultural prestige of an established art form only after the modernist turn and the embrace of gaps, discontinuities, and the visibility of the representational apparatus. These same characteristics have often been precisely what have marked comics—always bound by visible gaps, discontinuities, and apparatus—as all that is antithetical to art. Indeed, the qualifiers "comic book" and "cartoon" have become (and to a large degree remain) synonymous with everything that is opposed to the cultural prestige that the modernist novel achieved in the early decades of the last century.

Forced to live in and with the gutter, comics must negotiate at every panel with the reader. Consider, for example, the dense apparatus with which Chris Ware opens his graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). Despite a promise of "ease of use," the "editorial" apparatus becomes increasingly conscious of just how *un*easy is the relationship with the reader. In his "general instructions" to the reader, Ware feels compelled to rehearse "some basic premises," "before attempting a thorough apprehension of the complete work."[7] We are given a "test" focusing on two images drawn from Ware's earlier *Quimby the Mouse* series, featuring a sadistic mouse and a lovelorn cat head named Sparky. After identifying the basic shapes—mouse, hammer, cat head—the reader is then asked whether she sees "a) two mice and two cat heads in two boxes next to each other, one raising a hammer above his head, the other striking a cat head with a very similar hammer, or b) one mouse and one cat head, portrayed at two very similar points in time, the result of comparison being the impression of the same mouse striking the same cat head with the same hammer?" In asking the question, the "editor" must acknowledge that there is in fact no "narrative" between the images in the two frames save what the reader *chooses to agree* to assign to it. Ware's complex apparatus is by no means entirely disingenuous, as any reader will attest who has struggled with the book's intricate weave of melodrama, history, icons, and the fragments of daily life. Neither, however, is it a uniquely postmodern meditation on the form. As I will discuss in the final chapter of this book, Ware's theories and practices derive in no small measure from his study of the radically new relationship that the first comic creators and filmmakers negotiated with their audiences, and the celebration of both the formal *and* cultural gutters out of which the comics began.

Indeed, that is where we begin and where we end—with the intersections between film and sequential comics, two new narrative forms born together

at the end of the nineteenth century and increasingly bound together again in the early years of the twenty-first century. In between, Hollywood cinema will go its own way, while comics will continue to explore the unique affordances of a form that depends inevitably and irrevocably on a participatory relationship to its readers. However, as I argue (sometimes implicitly and other times quite explicitly), just as there are benefits to comics' inability to escape the *cultural* gutter, as Hernandez suggests, so too benefits accrue from a century of comics' artists living in and experimenting with the *formal* gutter, both literal and metaphorical, that defines the narrative apparatus. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the history of comics and its readers offers a treasure chest of experience, cautionary tales, and possibilities for engaging with new narrative media that, in ways simultaneously like and profoundly different from comics, will always depend on and privilege an audience not only projecting its own storytelling into the text but also always potentially picking up a pen (or the laptop or video camera) and creating the story themselves. This is the tale of how comics creators have engaged with their readers, how readers have responded to the demand that they project themselves actively into comics, and how this history helps us imagine the future of storytelling going forward.

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Before turning to what is a plausible scene of origins for the modern comic form (and, as it turns out, for film as well), I must pause to acknowledge the origins of this project and those who have nurtured it along the way. In many ways, this book began several years ago with an invitation from Michael Moon to share my nascent thoughts on comics and seriality, at Johns Hopkins University and then at the English Institute. The questions and suggestions I received at those two events—and most especially from my much-missed teacher Eve Sedgwick—encouraged me to imagine this book.

In the intervening years, I returned to the world of comics that I had forced myself to turn away from in college. Fortunately I found myself teaching, starting in 1999, at the Ohio State University, home of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum. Lucy Caswell, Jenny Robb, Susan Liberator, Marilyn Scott, and the rest of the remarkable staff there have supported my work from the beginning and have made the library feel in every way like a second home.

When I first started serious work on this book I was tentative, for reasons this preface describes, about sharing my goals with my colleagues. From the start, however, the response has been supportive in ways I could have never imagined. My three chairs during the long gestation of this project—Jim Phelan, Valerie Lee, and Richard Dutton—have been unflagging in their support, including providing me with the funds to hire the research assistant of my

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Thanks to my parents, Susan Gardner, Bruce Brooks, Andrew Gardner, Trebbe Johnson, Myrna Hewitt, and John Hewitt, for letting me share my fascination with this form (and for *not* throwing out my comic books). Everything I do is indebted always to the lessons I learned early from my godparents, Natsu and Percy Ifill.

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Finally, to my dearest, Eli and Gideon, to whom this book is dedicated. Thank you for showing me that the only things worth doing are the things we do for love. No father on the planet is more proud of his children, or more grateful to them.