

Eddie Campbell's (Revised) Graphic Novel Manifesto

There is so much disagreement (among ourselves) and misunderstanding (on the part of the public) around the subject of the graphic novel that it's high time a set of principles were laid down.

1. "Graphic novel" is a disagreeable term, but we will use it anyway on the understanding that graphic does not mean anything to do with graphics and that novel does not mean anything to do with novels. (In the same way that "Impressionism" is not really an applicable term; in fact it was first used as an insult and then adopted in a spirit of defiance.)
2. Since we are not in any way referring to the traditional literary novel, we do not hold that the graphic novel should be of the supposed same dimensions or physical weight. Thus subsidiary terms such as "novella" and "novelette" are of no use here and will only serve to confuse onlookers as to our goal (see below), causing them to think we are creating an illustrated version of standard literature when in fact we have bigger fish to fry; that is, we are forging a whole new art which will not be bound by the arbitrary rules of an old one.
3. "Graphic novel" signifies a movement rather than a form. Thus we may refer to "antecedents" of the graphic novel, such as Lynd Ward's woodcut novels but we are not interested in applying the name retroactively.
4. While the graphic novelist regards his various antecedents as geniuses and prophets without whose work he could not have envisioned his own, he does not want to be obliged to stand in line behind William Hogarth's Rake's Progress every time he obtains a piece of publicity for himself or the art in general.
5. Since the term signifies a movement, or an ongoing event, rather than a form, there is nothing to be gained by defining it or "measuring" it. It is approximately thirty years old, though the concept and name had been bandied about for at least ten years earlier. As it is still growing it will in all probability have changed its nature by this time next year.

6. The goal of the graphic novelist is to take the form of the comic book, which has become an embarrassment, and raise it to a more ambitious and meaningful level. This normally involves expanding its size, but we should avoid getting into arguments about permissible size. If an artist offers a set of short stories as his new graphic novel, (as Eisner did with *A Contract with God*) we should not descend to quibbling. We should only ask whether his new graphic novel is a good or bad set of short stories. If he or she uses characters that appear in another place, such as Jimmy Corrigan's various appearances outside of the core book, or Gilbert Hernandez' etc. or even characters that we do not want to allow into our "secret society," we shall not dismiss them on this account. If his book no longer looks anything like comic books we should not quibble as to that either. We should only ask whether it increases the sum total of human wisdom.

7. The term graphic novel shall not be taken to indicate a trade format (such as "trade paperback" or "hardcover" or "prestige format"). It can be in unpublished manuscript form, or serialized in parts. The important thing is the intent, even if the intent arrives after the original publication.

8. The graphic novelists' subject is all of existence, including their own life. He or she disdains "genre fiction" and all its ugly clichés, though they try to keep an open mind. They are particularly resentful of the notion, still prevalent in many places, and not without reason, that the comic book is a sub-genre of science fiction or heroic fantasy.

9. Graphic novelists would never think of using the term graphic novel when speaking among their fellows. They would normally just refer to their "latest book" or their "work in progress" or "that old potboiler" or even "comic" etc. The term is to be used as an emblem or an old flag that is brought out for the call to battle or when mumbling an enquiry as to the location of a certain section in an unfamiliar bookstore. Publishers may use the term over and over until it means even less than the nothing it means already.

Furthermore, graphic novelists are well aware that the next wave of cartoonists will choose to work in the smallest possible forms and will ridicule us all for our pomposity.

10. The graphic novelist reserves the right to deny any or all of the above if it means a quick sale.

Eddie Campbell, from The Comics Journal Message Board – 2005

Eddie Campbell

Interviewed by Dirk Deppey

excerpted from *The Comics Journal* #273



Panel from *From Hell* (©1989, 1999 Alan Moore & Eddie Campbell)

Anyway, getting back, another aspect of the whole graphic-novel era: I don't think there ever is any point in arguing whether something is or isn't a graphic novel. I think anyone who's going to talk about it should lay out the rules at the outset. Rule one: We don't argue about whether something is or isn't. Also, Rule two: There's no point in arguing about what was the first one. I get so sick of that. [Deppey chuckles.] As soon as the world conceives the comic strip, the next step is automatically the long-form comic strip. Like for instance, in *Punch* magazine in 1850, Richard Doyle did a series of one-page things about these characters he'd invented called Brown, Jones and Robinson. Now, he left *Punch* that year, and five or six years later he put out an 80-page book called *The Foreign Tour of Brown, Jones and Robinson*. I don't think there was any great imaginative idea in inventing the long-form comic strip. As soon as the comic strip exists, automatically, "Why don't we do one that goes on for 100 pages?" It would have invented itself if somebody hadn't done it. No big deal. No prize, no medal.

DEPPEY: Well, the term has always struck me as a term of convenience, to separate it away from the gaudier stuff, the greasier kid stuff. "Now I'm going to create a graphic novel."

CAMPBELL: To the people immured in comic-book culture, the only thing that makes it a graphic novel is that it's longer. But there's much more going on in this new evolutionary model. For instance, around 1970 I picked up Harvey Kurtzman's *Jungle Book*, which was published in 1959. I remember this was the first time I ever thought to myself of a comic having an authorial voice, the voice of an author. It wasn't Marvel Comics' *Jungle Book*, it wasn't Uncle Creepy's *Potboiler of Hideous Horrors*; it was Harvey Kurtzman's. There was an author here, his name was above the title. This was the first time I'd ever come across this in a comic. Choir of angels singing, holy trumpets, epiphany, etc.

DEPPEY: You did an interview with Milo George for *GraphicNovelReview.com*. At one point, you were talking about the separation of the graphic novel from the rest of the comics industry, and you rounded up by stating, "I propose that we just accept that comic books are now about superheroes. The reason for this strategy is that it really has now become too difficult to try and change the public perception. If we want to use the graphic vocabulary of the comic book to create something else, let's call it something else, and I believe that we'll come to realize that the vocabulary we're talking about is actually very limited and we can start enlarging it. The best works that we have are already doing it."

CAMPBELL: This is a growing thing. Since I wrote that manifesto last year, I've been trying to enlarge upon it or get down to specifics and actually work out a theory, because there's so much nonsense written on this. There are so many people out there talking rubbish. I think if we're going to use it, we must mean something by it, and we must separate it from what I call "comic-book culture." Now, for instance, comic-book culture consists of, as we were talking about before, periodicals with issue numbers. It consists of arguing about whether an artist was a better penciler or an inker. The outside world doesn't know what we're talking about. It's about a credit line with six names on it, a six-name credit on a 20-page comic book. Does it take six people to make a comic book? Within comic-book culture it does.

DEPPEY: It seems to me that any discussion about the nature of the graphic novel will be problematic precisely because it's defined from a negative. It's, "We're not that."

CAMPBELL: And to somebody wrapped up in comic-book culture, Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware probably look a little pretentious, because that's where they're arguing from. You know those Idiot Guide books? I see there's an Idiot's Guide To Creating A Graphic Novel.

DEPPEY: Yeah, I actually picked that up a couple of months ago.

CAMPBELL: As though we need any more idiots doing it. [Laughter.] We've got enough idiots in here already.

DEPPEY: I don't necessarily have a problem with idiots creating graphic novels; you never know what they're going to come up with. The problem with this specific book was that it's pretty much restricted to explaining, "Here's how other people have done it, and so here's how you should, too."

CAMPBELL: I think that's a problem, because as I was saying earlier, part of the new regime is that there are no answers, there is no How Do You Get In. You have to create your own way. In comic-book culture you show your portfolio at a convention. Go up to Marvel Comics and ask for a tryout story. In the era of the graphic novel, it's a totally unexplored landscape. I would say that anyone who is truly ready to do a "graphic novel" will already have solved the problem of "how to team up with a writer," which I notice is one of the headings in there. That belongs to comic-book culture. By that, I don't mean that there's only one person involved in a graphic novel. If you don't have the strength of attraction to attract the artist that you need to you, then you're definitely not ready.

Let's separate the ideas. We have two completely separate evolutionary models here. One is away over here on the right-hand side, and one is away over here on the left. There is no line down the middle. Different objects may be closer to one than to the other. For instance, take that magnificent fellow, Neil Gaiman. Neil Gaiman's Sandman is not as close to the graphic novel polarity as his Mr. Punch. Sandman's probably hovering somewhere in the middle. I thought it was interesting, something I was talking about, the

authorial voice. In the latest editions of the Sandman books, I noticed Neil Gaiman's name up along the top there, as Neil Gaiman's Sandman. It's taken some getting there, but it finally got the author's name on the top of the book. And any artist who's ever worked on that, I think, he or she knew full well they were doing so as Neil's guest. Neil is the author of those books. Doesn't mean he's the only person working on them, any more than David Bowie's the only person working on one of David Bowie's albums.

Now, instead of arguing about how many pages make a graphic novel, we should be looking at, "Does it have the sensibility of this new era?" People argue about *His Name Is...* Savage or [Jim] Steranko's *Chandler* or McGregor's *Sabre* as the first graphic novel. I think it's kind of irrelevant because they belong so completely to the mentality of comic-book culture that it's a pointless argument. With a view to separating the question of merit, may I add that they're fine books; I have them all.

DEPPEY: The definition starts out as basically a term of convenience, and only gains weight after examples occur. People make graphic novels and say, "This is what I mean." Then this guy over here does it and that guy over there does it. By comparing them, you can create a continuum.

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DEPPEY: But just to play devil's advocate, when you start trying to define away the graphic novel, you're doing the same thing. You're kind of puffing up your own chest and saying, "Ignore that guy in the underwear over there. I'm what's important around here."

CAMPBELL: But remember, I said earlier that I think a failed graphic novel is a much less interesting thing than a good comic book. I'm not implying that it's some badge or medal that you can award. I think we're just talking about different models. For instance, when I do *Bacchus* I do comic books, if I do *Fate of the Artist*, I'm taking a stab at the graphic novel. *From Hell* is a graphic novel. I think we should be talking about ideas, and that was my proposal, that we start by talking about the graphic-novel sensibility, and what the key marks are that help us understand what that is about. We all know what comic-book culture is. It has its great moments: We love Kirby, we love Miller's *Daredevil*, and we're not saying the graphic novel isn't comics. It's all comics; it's a newer, more involved idea of a comic. That's all it is.

DEPPEY: A different permutation of the same metalanguage.

CAMPBELL: Yeah. Another thing I picked up recently in that book Raeburn did on Ware, quoting Spiegelman on another aspect of the new sensibility. Spiegelman said, "In order for comics to go forward, they first have to go back." This is another aspect of the new sensibility: this respect for the pioneers of comics -- I mean the old ones.

For instance, Walt and Skee-zix. Gasoline Alley is reprinted, but it's dressed up lovingly by graphic novelist Chris Ware. Now, the book has been assembled and produced within the sensibility of the graphic novel. To take that and say, "Yes, but this is daily strips," and then file it in the library in the humor section next to Garfield is not a productive thing to do. You would take Walt and Skee-zix and file it with the graphic novels because it belongs to that sensibility.

DEPPEY: But it seems like you're imposing a modern definition of something that... I don't think Frank King really considered the question.

CAMPBELL: No, I'm not saying it is a graphic novel, because the graphic novel doesn't exist. "Graphic Novel" is an abstract idea. It's a sensibility, it's an advanced attitude toward comics. We're interested in this, we're less interested in that. Put that over there, put this over here. Doesn't mean that everything over here is a graphic novel, I'm just saying that the culture of the graphic novel respects this, respects that, admires that and venerates this other thing. The graphic-novel sensibility is more interested in Frank King than it is in Jim Steranko, whereas comic-book culture is more interested in Jim Steranko than it is in Frank King. And Paul Gravett's new book, *Graphic Novels*, in fact manages to survey the entire history of comics, but from the position of a graphic-novel sensibility, which is to say that all the emphases are now different compared to any history that may have been written 40 years ago, and the angle of foreshortening has caused a lot of stuff to be obscured from view. For instance, all the stuff that Arlen Schumer celebrates in his *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art*. Do you see what I'm saying?

DEPPEY: Yeah. Basically, if we're going to take a term of convenience like this, let's at least make it convenient to our aims.

Eddie Campbell, Interviewed by Dirk Deppey, excerpted from The Comics Journal #273

"I really think I know as much, if not more, about drawing comics as anyone in the business. I think Snoopy is as good a comic character as any that's been invented. So's Charlie Brown, Linus, Lucy, and Peppermint Patty. But I'm no Andrew Wyeth; I'm no Leo Tolstoy. We're restricted by what we are. Our medium will always hold us back. The same way as a burlesque comedian can never be Hamlet."

Charles Schulz quoted in Twisted Image #6 [re-quoted in TCJ #123 p81]