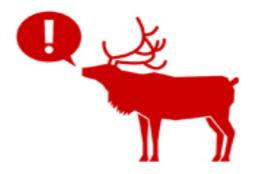# ADRIFT IN THE URBAN MAZE

by Dan Hassler-Forest

Ahrens, Jörn and Arno Meteling (eds.). *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*. New York, Continuum, 2010. ISBN 978-0826440198. 288 pages.

Throughout its history, the comics medium has maintained such a central and defining relationship with urban environments that it is surprising how little published scholarship addresses this intersection directly. Both comics studies and urban theory have emerged in recent years as dynamic and widely-discussed academic fields that have attracted scholars from a broad variety of disciplines. The publication of an edited collection dedicated entirely to the relationship between comics and the city was therefore a long overdue and much-needed addition to both fields' scholarly resources.

As the first major academic book dedicated to this specific topic, *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence* certainly offers a wide variety of critical perspectives. The sixteen contributors to the volume discuss the work of well-known comics authors like Alan Moore (who appears repeatedly) and Will Eisner, as well as more obscure figures like Jacques Tardi and Enki Bilal, who will be unfamiliar to all but the most dedicated connoisseurs of European comics. This diversity works well in a collection of this kind, as it supplies a nice balance between comics familiar to most readers alongside discussions of works that will be intriguing new discoveries to many.

A similarly broad approach governs the collection's overall structure as well, grouping individual essays together into five sections with broadly conceptual titles such as "Retrofuturistic and Nostalgic Cities" and "Locations of Crime." Of these five, "Superhero Cities" is the only section that brings together more than three essays. While most of these sections articulate specific themes that are relevant and worthwhile for the volume's topic, it is also difficult to identify a logic that defines them in anything other than the broadest of concepts relating to comics and cities.

The introduction, written by co-editors Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling, offers no clues as to how or why these specific sections were defined and organized to lend structure to this collection. The introduction in fact does little more than describe the relationship between comics and the city in rather general terms, and subsequently summarizing the individual sections' essays one by one. A more detailed discussion of the editors' reasons for focusing on these five topics would have strengthened the book's sense of cohesion enormously, and could have helped the reader understand how to make sense of the volume's overall structure.

This problem of a seeming arbitrariness is aggravated by issues of style and consistency that plague the volume throughout. The majority of the contributors are German, including both editors, and many of the essays as well as the introduction are in bad need of a further revision by a good copy editor: the many instances of awkward phrasing, non-idiomatic turns of phrase, and frequent long and impenetrable paragraphs will pose a severe challenge to many readers. This applies as well to the many redundancies and inconsistencies in referencing quoted sources, and a sometimes wildly divergent tone, ranging from the drily academic to the overly colloquial.

As maddeningly inconsistent as the collection can be in style and tone, the assembled collection of contributors is simultaneously homogeneous in a way that regrettably confirms one of the more unfortunate prejudices in comics studies, as all but one of the sixteen authors is male. The general absence of a female perspective is one of a few baffling oversights in such a broad-ranging collection of essays, especially because gender and race (another topic left sadly unexplored) have in recent years been central issues both in comics studies and in urban theory.

Indeed, *Comics and the City* gives a perspective on both fields that is disappointingly Eurocentric, with an all but exclusive focus on English-language and francophone comics. While it may seem unfair to criticize a collection like this for what it fails to include, the volume's ambitious title and wide-ranging approach to its topic do promise more than this blinkered view of what basically amounts to an all-male, all-white world of comics authorship and readership. For instance, the complete absence of an author like Marjane Satrapi is quite telling in this regard: her widely read *Persepolis* seems like an essential text for a collection like this, but it is not referenced even once.

A similar kind of male-centered stodginess defines many authors' use of urban theory, with a tendency to lean quite heavily on an older guard of continental philosophers: Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas, Georg Simmel, and Fredric Jameson are by far the most frequently cited authors, placing the volume's theoretical emphasis rather strongly on an overly familiar and fairly predictable humanities perspective. While this rather classical approach is clearly an important core element for a volume such as this, the interdisciplinary nature of these intersecting fields does clearly invite a larger variety of theoretical perspectives. Especially disappointing is the relative paucity of scholars from fields such as human geography, sociology, or globalization studies, where some of the most exciting academic work both in comics studies and in urban theory is currently being done.

These criticisms aside, there are certainly some very worthwhile scholarship to be found scattered throughout this collection. The first section in the book, entitled "History, Comics, and the City," is perhaps the book's most compelling and consistent grouping of essays. This is in part because its focus on Western comics' historical origins at least partially justifies the focus on European

and American urban contexts, as the authors bring to bear a largely Benjaminian perspective on early comics, an approach that works well with both the objects discussed and the late-19th century period. Jens Balzer's perceptive writing on representations of urban life in Outcault's "Yellow Kid" comics, which first started appearing in 1895, is particularly good, contributing valuable new research to comics historiography.

The second section, "Retrofuturistic and Nostalgic Cities," makes for a slightly jarring transition from the preceding section, grouping together three essays that give detailed analyses of comic books that foreground their cities' ambivalent sense of pastness. The prolific Henry Jenkins, easily the most widely recognizable authority in the book, contributes the first and best essay to this section, finding a welcome balance between textual analysis of a trio of primary texts on the one hand, and a broader engagement with fantasy representations of futuristic cities on the other. The other two essays focus rather exclusively on their objects of analysis, limiting their accessibility and appeal substantially for readers unfamiliar with the works they discuss.

"Superhero Cities" is the only section than contains four essays, starting off with William Uricchio's "The Batman's Gotham City™: Story, Ideology, Performance," a beautifully written analysis of one of comics' best-known cities. Uricchio's compulsively readable paper however adds surprisingly little to the conclusions the author reached over two decades ago in *The Many Lives of the Batman*, the collection he co-edited with Roberta Pearson way back in 1991. Like the three other essays in this section, quite a lot of time is spent describing the often byzantine complexities of superhero continuity and cross-media franchising, but the essay ends without fully developing a strong conceptual point. This problem is even more evident in Jason Bainbridge's essay on New York City and the central position it has maintained in the Marvel Universe, especially from the Silver Age onward. While informative about Marvel's history, the reader is continually sidetracked by endless examples from superhero comics, while the essay's more theoretical elements remain strikingly underdeveloped.

Section four, "Locations of Crime," marks the point in the volume at which the relationship between the section titles and the essays they contain becomes somewhat tenuous: the section's first essay, on Will Eisner, presents a formalist analysis of the comic legend's visual style and its indebtedness to the vaudeville tradition. Most of this essay is purely descriptive, often in vaguely worded phrases such as this: "These lighting effects eventually take on a kind of tangible form" (194). The essay's references to Eisner's urban setting remain superficial, and its implied connection to the section's theme of criminality is never explained.

Finally, "The City-Comic as a Mode of Reflection" groups together three very disparate essays that connect in different ways to the section's obliquely worded title. André Suhr's essay is one of the

most explicit attempts to engage directly with the conceptual relationship between comics aesthetics and the city, and his analysis of Antoine Mathieu's "Acquefacque" books includes panels that vividly illustrate his main points. Andreas Platthaus's comparison between Carl Barks's well-known comics city of Duckburg and its German version "Entenhausen" is one of the volume's rare instances of cross-cultural intersections, though the author ultimately limits himself to broadly phrased descriptions and a series of highly debatable value judgments.

Therefore, while comics scholars will certainly find valuable research in this collection, *Comics and the City* still constitutes something of a missed opportunity. The essays' limited engagement with contemporary urban theory makes the book eminently skippable for those working primarily in urban studies, and the sometimes arbitrary-seeming collection of sections and essays will frustrate readers looking for a coherent and clearly structured textbook on the subject. Instead, Ahrens and Meteling's edited collection is best described as a well-meaning but maddeningly inconsistent publication on a topic that begs to be explored in more breadth as well as depth.