

#7: Best Graphic Novels

Contributed by Jesse Thompson
Monday, 10 September 2001

You read them as a kid, maybe even collected them like a maniac, afraid to miss an issue. You may have thought you outgrew them, but don't fool yourself, they're always with you. Comics are one of the great art forms of the 20th century, and while most of it really is trash, there are some truly awe-inspiring works out there. The Top 7 Graphic Novels is either a confirmation of what you're been reading recently, or else a reminder list of what you need to catch up on/revisit.

What is a graphic novel? It is sometimes just a collection of comics, bound together, but we're going to use the strictest definition here: a graphic novel is a self-contained series of comics, bound into one or more volumes. The difference, is that the first definition is just a reprint of various issues, and if we were going to do that, you'd see Daredevil: Born Again and some Sandman and Swamp Thing on the list. That, however, would be more like a 'best comic series' and that is not this. Here you are, then, the finest graphic novels ever put out.

Marvels Busiek/Ross

It's a bit in the vein of Watchmen, but it's still very much in its own niche. This is the story of Marvel origins, as told through the lens of a photographer, and what really sets it apart are the stunning paintings by Alex Ross, one of the all-time greats.

Sin City Frank Miller

It's hard to choose one Sin City collection as the best of the bunch, so I'll take the safe route and pick the original, although every one you will pick up is brilliant, especially That Yellow Bastard and The Big Fat Kill. In yet another evolutionary movement, Frank Miller went all black & white, and redefined how shapes move and blend through perspective and compact use of lines and shading. Oh, and it's all action, baby.

Kingdom Come Waid/Ross

Here's that Ross kid again, showing us how it's done. Another great storyline with Ross art on it, this is somewhat akin to Crisis on Infinite Earths in its epic scope. There are deep issues addressed, and we're treated to a futuristic view of Superman, Wonder Woman and the whole gang, as they age. The self-reflexive epilogue is priceless.

Batman: Year One Miller/Mazzuchelli

Going in the opposite direction of Kingdom Come, this book looks at Batman as a rookie, with all the kinks and roadblocks he would have faced. The best part is watching Commissioner Gordon start out, along side Bats. It's so good, that Darren Aronofsky has always wanted to make it into a movie--and is! Look for the film next year, written by Miller himself.

Magebook 1-3 Matt Wagner

Speaking of evolution, watching the art in this series evolve is like watching Mozart learn piano. Wagner starts out as a raw artist with promise, and ends up as perhaps the finest colorist in the business. This is a modernized re-telling of the King Arthur legend, and has so much imagination, it nearly outclasses its predecessors. The original series was 15 issues, put into three graphic novels.

Watchmen Moore/Gibbons

Simply the best writer even to pen a comic, Alan Moore changed the world of comics forever with this book. This is the story that asks, 'what if superheroes really existed, and we saw them around us?' Trust me, no one else has ever answered the question with such insight and brilliance before or since. Rumor has it that Brian Singer (X-Men movie director) has plans to film this.

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns Miller/Jansen/Varley

The first thing you'll notice is that although Frank Miller wrote and drew this himself, I also credit Klaus Jansen, his inker, and his wife and colorist Lynn Varley. This is because both had such an impact on the final product, that they can't be overlooked. Take one look at one of the full-page drawings in Dark Knight and you'll know what I mean.

What does this book mean to the comic industry? Everything. This is the book that did it all: it inspired the Batman movie, revitalizing the comics-on-screen paradigm, it changed the way comics stories are told and drawn and laid out, it brought the name Batman back from the underground, and it created a renaissance in international interest in comics.

The story, the artwork...every little aspect of the book is as good or better than anything else that's been done. With the release of the four part series, Frank Miller ascended from top of the comics world, to a recognized genius and was finally acknowledged as the pioneer that he had always been (see: Daredevil, Ronin, and everything else he's touched).

There may be a better writer out there (Alan Moore) and better artists (Bill Sienkewicz, Alex Ross), but no one has even combined the two disciplines on anywhere near the same scale as Miller has, and Dark Knight is Miller at his very best.

It's such a shame to me to not have Nexus on this list, that I may have to do a list in the future, devoted to ongoing series. What you have on this list, are basically mini-series, and the list is dominated by Frank Miller, with a couple of appearances by Alex Ross, as well. If you need reinforcement of the impact of the artists and writers on this list, just take a look at the Unbreakable DVD, which has a great featurette on it about the world of comics. Your favorite not on the list? Shout it out in the forums.