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Drawn from the Classics: Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works

Susan Kirtley

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Drawn from the Classics: Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works

Susan Kirtley

AS AN ACADEMIC researching comic art, I am frequently called upon to visit schools and libraries to speak to the value of reading comics for a variety of readers and age groups. At one such visit to a nearby elementary school recently, I was asked about the value of comics adaptations of literary classics by one concerned instructor. “Isn’t that just dumbing them down?” queried the teacher. *Drawn from the Classics: Essays on Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works* provides an excellent response to such a question. Series editors Stephen E. Tabachnick and Esther Bendit Saltzman argue that comic art adaptations, “when studied alongside their adapted texts, provide unique opportunities for understanding those texts more fully as well as offering a unique reading experience in themselves.” While I stumbled through a considerably less articulate version of this sentiment during my presentation, *Drawn from the Classics* forcefully makes the case that comics adaptations are not simply a “dumbing down,” but rather a valid process of reinterpreting or reenvisioning a source text, and these adaptations are valuable in and of their own right. **[End Page 528]**

The editors assert that the “inspiration for this collection is the idea that adaptations are not parasites on their adapted texts, but that they are in a symbiotic relationship with them. The adapted text and its adaptation(s) are at once intimately related and separate and unique entities.” Furthermore, they contend, “by bringing together the fields of graphic novel and adaptation studies, it is hoped that this collection will help advance both of these fields,” and I would agree that the fields have much to offer the scholar when read in concert. The anthology itself is directed at a wide audience, from more “general readers” who watched “cinematic adaptations” to academics, as well as “high school and university teachers,” and the tenor of the articles reflects this wide audience, with some taking dense, theoretical approaches with others aimed at a broader readership utilizing less academic methodologies. As the editors suggest, while individual studies of particular comics

adaptations do exist, this book is the first larger collection to take on the topic as an extended focus from numerous points of view, and thus fills an important gap in current scholarship.

The book is organized into a preface and introduction by editors Tabachnick and Saltzman, followed by sixteen short chapters from contributors, a bibliography, an index, and a section with information on the contributors. The chapters are not organized around a certain style or theme, but rather are listed chronologically according to the publication date of the original source texts (with Homer's *Odyssey* taking first position and Ray Bradbury positioned as the final subject of study). This structure, while intended "for ease of use," can be confusing given the different publications dates of the adaptations, and it might be jarring for the reader moving between the widely varying styles of the pieces. The editors' preface and introduction provide excellent overviews of the fields of Comics and Adaptation Studies, and the bibliography would be a useful starting place for neophyte scholars in both fields.

Given the collection's stance as a reclamation of comics adaptations, it is somewhat surprising that the editors make the choice in the introduction to divorce the "graphic novel" from "traditional comics," stating:

although the graphic novel grows out of the traditional comics, it embodies a depth and subtlety that was previously unavailable in the comics because of those comics' commercial constraints on both content and form, limited production values, and lack of a serious audience. Even though the graphic novel is based on the traditional comics, it is so different in these respects that it amounts to a new literary/artistic form. **[End Page 529]**

This division reinforces the legitimacy of what Bart Beaty describes as "the gentrifying term" "the graphic novel" ("Introduction." *Cinema Journal*, 50.3 [Spring 2011], 106–10), which the editors distinguish as being "so different" as to merit...

all at once." Just so, it is a measure of the success of *Tense Future* that it fashions an idiom—theoretically alert, ardent with sharp distinctions—that strives on every page to be equal to the historical record as well as the temporal canvas of its subject. During the past few years a number of unusually fine books on modernism have appeared. As we see from the very outset of this one, which stages its own personal theater of indebtedness, the necessity of acknowledgment of any kind can easily swell to becoming an impossible task. Not so here. Merely by virtue of the alertness of its scholarship (we conclude by citing an article by Marilyn Ivy on the hapless pacifist position of Japan to outwit war's trauma through preparing for the next war) *Tense Future* fully deserves to be included among the very best studies of modernism that we have. From now on, no time apart from violent war, no modernism without trauma.

TERRY CAESAR
Crockett College

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Stephen E. Tabachnick and Esther Bendit Saltzman, eds. *Drawn from the Classics: Essays on Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2015. viii + 283 pp. Paper \$45.00

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2715 North Charles Street
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[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



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