

David Collier's *Surviving Saskatoon* and New Comics

Since the 1992 publication of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus*, a two-volume graphic narrative that explores the author's inheritance as the son of Holocaust survivors, comic books have attracted renewed attention. Recent film versions of *V for Vendetta*, *Ghost World*, *Road to Perdition*, *American Splendor*, and *Sin City* reflect a growing interest in alternative comics. Distinct from the superhero tradition that has dominated the comic book industry, alternative comics originated in the 1960s and 70s as a primarily underground form. This new strain of independent, creator-owned art saw "an unprecedented sense of intimacy" in the authors' approach to their subject matter, an intimacy that "rival[led] the scandalous disclosures of confessional poetry but shot through with fantasy, burlesque, and self-satire" (Hatfield 7). The personal tenor of these comics would coalesce into "New Comics," the next wave of comic art that followed in the 1980s and 90s. Inheriting the cross-genre tendencies of the underground comics before them, New Comics have persisted in pushing the relatively open boundaries of the form, branching into autobiography, biography, political documentary, reportage, and historiography. Like their predecessors, this body of literature exhibits a strong interest in marginal identities and the social values that engender difference.

One of Canada's most noted comic-book artists, David Collier has written several book-length graphic narratives since Robert Crumb first published Collier's comic strip in 1986. His work has also appeared in such mainstream venues as the *National Post* and *The Globe and Mail*. Blending life writing with social commentary, Collier's comics are interested in the dominant values that define particular settings and in individuals who do not fit the social

norms of their environments. Many of his graphic narratives combine autobiography and biography. *Portraits of Life*, for instance, resurrects marginally important figures of the past such as Ethel Catherwood, an Olympic high-jumper in the 1920s who fell out of the public eye; Humphry Osmond, a psychiatrist who coined the term “psychedelic” while working in a psychiatric hospital in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, and who gave Aldous Huxley his first experience with mescaline; and Grey Owl, an English gentleman who, posing as an indigenous conservationist, became one of the most well-known hoaxes of the twentieth-century. His characters tend to be curious public figures. In the process of tracing their lives, Collier often reflects on his own past experiences alongside those of his protagonists.

Collier’s *Surviving Saskatoon* is a comic book retelling of the David Milgaard story. Convicted in 1969 for the murder of Gail Miller, Milgaard was Canada’s longest-serving prisoner before his exoneration in 1997 (Collier n. pag.). *Surviving Saskatoon* returns to the 1969 murder while musing on Saskatchewan’s social tenor at the time of Milgaard’s conviction. Milgaard is an outsider who defies the normative values of his conservative prairie setting, and his difference, Collier emphasizes, makes Milgaard vulnerable to suspicion. Alongside his reconstruction of Milgaard’s story are Collier’s autobiographical reflections on his time in Saskatoon. A lone wanderer in this peculiar cultural landscape, Collier examines Saskatchewan’s construction of the outsider, making a political argument about the perceptions and prejudices that wrongly imprisoned Milgaard. Collier explores his experiences in Saskatoon in a way that parallels Milgaard’s treatment as an outsider. New Comics’ interest in alterity and in the dissolution of the heroic ideal emerges in *Surviving Saskatoon*’s focus on the outsider—a position occupied by Milgaard, Collier, and later, Saskatchewan itself, as a stagnant political entity struggling with out-migration, economic depression, and an identity still dependent on its settler past.

The Praxis of New Comics Literature

While traditionally denied critical attention, comic art is undergoing considerable reappraisal as a literary form. The introduction of the term “graphic novel” into literary parlance (although its popularity is recent, the term was first coined in 1978 by Will Eisner) signals an increasing recognition of comic art as a sub-category of literature. Yet many creators and long-time critics of comic books look askance at the term graphic novel. Charles Hatfield argues that “graphic novel” is a misnomer, an “all-purpose tag” for a

vague new material object (5). Not all such comic volumes follow a novel's typical progression in their length or structure; instead, they are often assemblages of sketches first published in serial form. That comic works are non-fictional would also preclude their classification as novels. Hatfield points out the curious irony that the term graphic novel legitimates a once lowbrow form: "[T]he novel—once a disreputable, bastard thing, radical in its formal instability—is here being invoked as the very byword of literary merit and respectability" (5-6). As Pierre Bourdieu has argued in his discussions of material culture, artistic taxonomies are related more to the tastes of social classes than to inherent values of the art object.

With their reputation as a mass-produced, lowbrow medium, comics have traditionally been looked upon as cheaply-produced throwaways (Sabin 8). The packaging of *Surviving Saskatoon* evokes this conception of the pulp comic book: produced with low-quality materials, the thin, "handmade" booklet costs \$4.50. According to Roger Sabin such low-cost packaging explains "why comics have been relegated by the hip art world to the status of 'found objects' and 'trash icons'" (3). He further observes how these perceptions have come to affect the status of the comic book author, remarking that "comic creators have never been represented as 'artists,' and have historically been left open to exploitation: not uncommonly, they remain anonymous while the characters they have created go on to become household names (everybody knows who Superman is, but how many people can name its [sic] creators?)" (3). Given its history, the comic book might be an apposite genre for exploring alterity: seen even by its creators as "an abject art form with its own worldview" (Worden 898), this medium maintains a self-consciousness about its identity as an outsider to conventional art.

While hierarchies of high/low art have affected the reception of comic books, one also needs to distinguish among the various types of comic art within a robust, vast industry. Hatfield points out the curious identity of alternative comics in relation to their surrounding company:

Because alternative comics de-emphasize heroic fantasy (the market's bedrock genre), they are unfortunately marginalized even within the marginalized field of comic book fandom. By that field's peculiar standards, their core readership is considered highly specialized. The position of alternative comics is therefore fragile—though they continue to serve mainstream comics practically, as a seedbed for new talent, and rhetorically, even ideologically, as an abiding and convenient Other. (30-31)

Alternative comics are uniquely positioned: while they are a subset of a specialized branch of literature, the space between them and the spate of

superhero comics with which they share the medium is not collapsible. In the contexts of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, Gay Liberation, and more recently, the War on Iraq, alternative comic artists used their medium to engage social issues. Wimmens comix, which appeared in the 1970s, not only challenged social constructions of gender, but provided a feminist response to the male-centred fandom and formula of comic books. Alternative comics have long served as a vehicle of political protest. New Comics continue in this tradition by broaching political issues or challenging the structures that produce social inequities. Collier, like many of his contemporaries—Scotland's Eddie Campbell and Lower East Side New York's Ben Katchor, for instance—locates his work in working-class environments, following the social realism of Cleveland's Harvey Pekar in the 1970s. In sharp contrast to their more mainstream counterparts, New Comics are interested in the beautiful losers, those whom the industrial world has shortchanged and whose realities erode faith in a superhero. One may make the case, as Matthew Wolf-Meyer does, that the superhero comics differ in ideological content by traditionally upholding capitalist values. Wolf-Meyer looks at superhero comic books with an eye to “the sorts of narratives that they disallow” (502). Despite a pantheon of American superheroes who attempt to tackle such social problems as crime and poverty, these comics typically depict a utopia “attempted and failed” and ultimately “retain the status quo while appeasing the proposed conservative ideology of [their] readers” (511).¹ Wolf-Meyer points out, for instance, that the “Justice League [the team of superhero figures that includes Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman] has never acted against the United States government in its forty year history” (502).² The different ideological stance of New Comics, by contrast, calls into question hegemonic values, prompting readers to re-examine their real worlds and those relegated to their margins.

Framing Milgaard

While Collier takes the well-known story of Milgaard's wrongful imprisonment as the apparent focus of this graphic narrative, he offers a different telling than one might expect. Interspersed with Collier's social commentary about Prairie culture and its othering of those who do not conform to its ideas of normative society is Collier's personal account of small-town Saskatchewan life, a life that is “still tough . . . if you're outta the mainstream” (Collier n. pag.). Often self-revealing, Collier's musings on his experiences in this setting form the antithesis of a heroic narrative. Shortly following

his first arrival in Saskatchewan in 1984 after quitting animation school, Collier depicts himself frequenting unemployment centres. Jobless, he returns to Ontario with his last bit of money. His next attempt at living in Saskatoon occurs six years later after quitting the army. Living parsimoniously, he makes money selling “landscape drawings” or, more precisely, sketches of oil wells to a national newspaper. His is the story of the down-on-his-luck artist struggling to live meaningfully in a contradictory and inhospitable environment.

Collier’s narration flits back and forth between two storylines: “Saskatchewan ’69,” which tells the story of Milgaard’s wrongful imprisonment, and “Milgaard and Me,” which recreates Collier’s time in this setting more than 20 years later. These two narrative layers are mapped spatially onto the text with the left page developing Milgaard’s story and the right page, Collier’s. This design invites the reader to contemplate the meaning at the seam of both narratives. The “biocularity” that Marianne Hirsch observes of comics’ verbal-visual planes of meaning is taken one step further by Collier, who has us read back and forth between two protagonists. Milgaard and Collier—the two “protagonists” of this text, the two Davids—are figures whose lives are more pathetic than heroic. Collier depicts his struggle eking out a living in Saskatoon after quitting animation school and leaving the army. Milgaard, too, is an unlikely hero. The chain of events that follows his wrongful imprisonment—attempted escape, a police-inflicted gun-wound, depression—is not the material of the typical comic book. Writing against the grain of the superhero tradition, Collier draws attention to social injustices in the real, not just fictional, world and ultimately calls into question his reader’s values.

“Saskatchewan ’69”

“It’s hard to believe now but at one time hippies were out of the ordinary, shocking even,” Collier opens this graphic narrative, “and when true evil appeared as it inevitably does, they were the first to be blamed in Saskatchewan ’69” (Collier n. pag.). With these framing remarks, Collier sets up his context—the Prairies in the late-1960s, where the hippies are a marginalized subculture. In the foreground of the first panel appears a young, longhaired David Milgaard (fig. 1). Behind Milgaard are a strip mall and passing motorists looking back at him with sneers on their faces. Collier asks: “Is it the space that breeds taciturn-type people? Maybe it’s just too cold to roll down the window, but whatever the reason, in Saskatchewan



Figure 1

assholes don't yell from cars: but if they did: 'Get a haircut you freak!'" (n. pag.). Deferring to the well-worn idea of the land determining the character of its inhabitants and to the stereotype of Prairie people as laconic, these comments mark an unexpected shift of focus from Milgaard's story of wrongful imprisonment to Saskatchewan's social character. Collier continues: "Saskatchewan remains pretty progressive politically—the first socialist government in North America was elected here in 1944 and the first Medicare system on the continent was in place less than twenty years later, but on a personal level it's a conservative place" (n. pag.). The accompanying image depicts a typical Saskatchewan family seated in their living room—a painting of a moose commanding the background—with their unwelcoming faces turned toward the reader (fig. 2). Here, Collier places the reader in the position of the outsider, an unwitting intruder peering at the unwelcoming glances of the family members. An observer of Canadian social landscapes and the cultures that form within them, Collier assumes within this graphic narrative a

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Figure 2

refrains from providing cues sufficient to signal the shift in narratives. One might link the confusion produced by the shift in narratives to the fragmentation peculiar to the form itself. The explicit challenge posed to the reader at the start of *Surviving Saskatoon* may be a commentary on the comic book genre—on the reader’s wresting of coherence from an inherently fragmented form. Hatfield explains: “The fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes, and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixable” (xiii-xiv). The comic book reader is called to interpolate the space between panels, to endow each sequence, Scott McCloud argues, “with a single overriding identity [that forces] the viewer to consider them as a whole” (73). The space between the panels, called the gutter, continually demands of the reader this subtle, almost imperceptible, interpolation. “Here in the limbo of the gutter,” McCloud describes the reading experience at the basis of comics, “human imagination takes two separate images and

stance characteristic of his other works. His interest in *Surviving Saskatoon* is in Saskatchewan’s social conservatism and its treatment of the outsider.

While the two protagonists’ experiences are to be read as interconnected, the split narrative makes for a disjointed and even confusing reading experience. The comic book opens by introducing Milgaard in his small-town Prairie setting, alluding to the scapegoating that will produce his later conviction. The following page depicts an unidentified man stopped by two Mounties on a deserted street for jaywalking (fig. 3). It is not until a few pages into the book that the reader learns that this second figure is Collier’s avatar. The shift from the first narrative to the second is at first disorienting; one reads the second page thinking it to be a continuation of Milgaard’s story from the page preceding it. Collier



Figure 3



Figure 4

transforms them into a single idea” (66). In joggling the reader in such a way, then, Collier perhaps consciously calls attention to the unique operation of the comic-book genre and the different way of reading it demands.

Collier’s face is turned away from the reader in all of the panels on the second page: their ambiguity invites the reader to assume that the figure is Milgaard (fig. 4). The initial conflation teased out by this design is, I think, not accidental: Collier is interested in developing the continuities between Milgaard and himself. Paradoxically, Milgaard is an “everyman” whose ill fate and misperception by a general public who doubted his innocence for over 20 years are treated as the outcome of social prejudice. While Milgaard’s wrongful imprisonment is an extreme, exceptional instance of the law’s mishandling of authority, the point to be drawn from his story, perhaps, is that if a naïve sixteen-year-old can become so demonized, then others might easily be similarly constructed. The two RCMP officers who bully Collier for jaywalking and ask, “Are you FROM Saskatoon?” show the continued operation of insider and outsider roles. Moreover, this interaction suggests how easy it is to end up on the other side of the law. The reader becomes witness to the antagonism generated by ideas of inclusiveness.

Throughout the rest of the graphic narrative, Collier flits back and forth between the two storylines, setting up his autobiographical account as a counterpoint to Milgaard’s story. The one narrative informs and deepens the other. Collier’s eye is turned to the prosaic details that texture these two lives. He casts himself as a wanderer who occupies the margins of Saskatchewan society. Following his initial encounter with the Mounties, he continues to perceive his difference from others. The two plots parallel each other at a few points. Not long after Milgaard and his friends—before setting off on a joyride to Saskatoon—have their car battery stolen, Collier’s car battery is stolen. Indignant, Collier enumerates other ways that this province has wronged him, recalling how his first girlfriend was lured away by someone from Saskatchewan. This affront deepened years later when the same happened with his first wife. His mother’s savings, he also recalls, were fraudulently stolen by a man from Saskatchewan. These personal losses suggest—albeit somewhat playfully—how Collier has also been victim to the same place as Milgaard.

The parallels between Collier’s autobiographical account and Milgaard’s story are the result of careful management of the space and page, as well as an intricately woven narrative. Other subtle connections emerge. In the courtroom following his guilty verdict, Milgaard as he is escorted away to

prison asks his mother, “[W]ill you bring me some comic books?” The era in which Milgaard’s story takes place—the late 1960s and the peak of the hippie movement—was also a crucial period for alternative comic artists, some of whom would later inspire Collier. Such artists as Robert Crumb—whom Collier names as an influence—emerged at the end of the 1960s underground era and carried over in the 1970s and 80s punk movement with transitional publications like Spiegelman’s *Raw* magazine. These earlier artists, Bob Callahan points out, experienced an artistic renaissance in the company of younger punk artists. Collier was part of the punk scene when he began as a comic artist. Though obviously characterized by different sensibilities, the hippie and punk movements shared a decidedly anti-corporate attitude. Sabin points out that while the later New Comic artists “were not part of the ‘grand political project’ like the hippies before them . . . they were commonly counter-cultural within the context of the 1980s and 90s” (178). The cultural and historical setting of this work creates a metanarrative that speaks to the development of the comic genre itself. Collier and Milgaard belong to cultural movements that were both pivotal to the development of alternative comic books. The countercultural stance of both movements is perhaps a further convergence of the two protagonists.

Milgaard, however, is hardly a serious political radical at the time he is convicted of the murder. He is a kid out on a joyride, “just farting around” (Collier n. pag.) the evening he ends up in Saskatoon. In the interim before he learns he is suspected of the crime, he finds a job selling magazine subscriptions in British Columbia, his innocent, youthful appearance noted as an asset for the position. When he sees himself on a wanted poster, Milgaard eagerly turns himself in to the police station to clear up the perceived error. Additional details question Milgaard’s identity as the murderer. Rehearsing the skeleton of facts and reconstructing the crime scene visually as well as textually (fig. 5, 6 and 7), the narrative here makes a foray into the detective novel and true-crimes writing. The killer was right-handed, while Milgaard was left-handed. The distance that Milgaard was supposed to have travelled to the murder scene was too great to have been covered in the calculated time span. As Collier rehearses the possible sequence of events that would have made Milgaard the murderer, travelling to the crime scene from the point where Milgaard and his friends got stuck in their car, he asks incredulously, “Didn’t anyone at that trial try covering this distance?” (n. pag.)

Not only did the plausibility of Milgaard’s identity as the murderer appear to go unquestioned, but so did the trail of sexual assaults that led to the

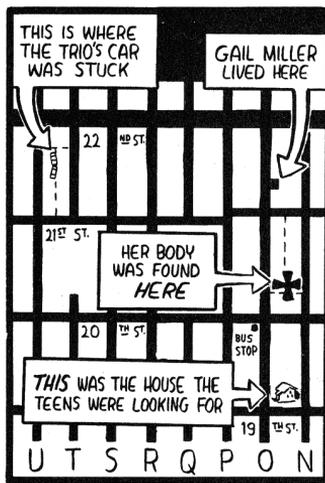


Figure 5

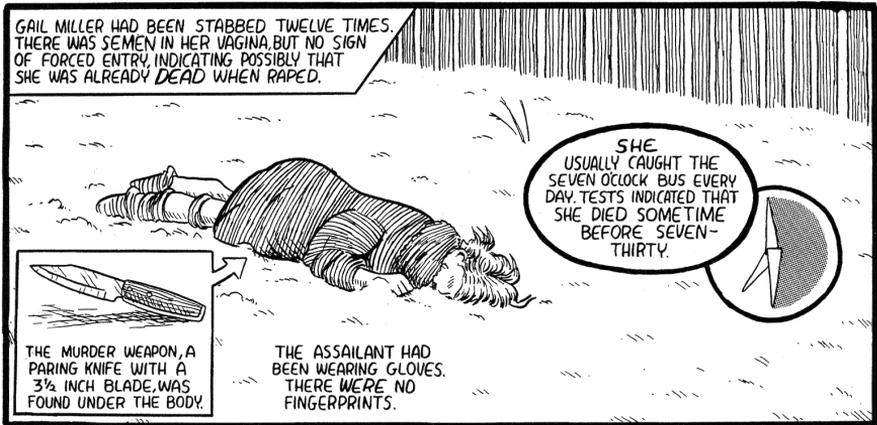


Figure 6

FISHER RAPED WOMEN IN CITIES ACROSS THE PRAIRIES. HE WAS CAUGHT WITH HIS PANTS DOWN IN WINNIPEG. IN SASKATOON, THE SITES OF THE ATTACKS HE PLEADED GUILTY TO IN 1971 AND THE LOCATION THAT GAIL MILLER'S BODY WAS FOUND IN.

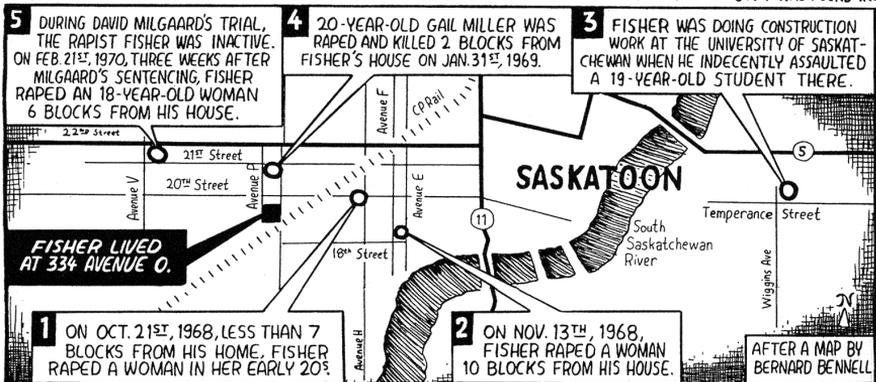


Figure 7

house of Larry Fisher. The actual murderer, Larry Fisher, is the antitype of Milgaard, “a clean cut, polite, hard-working construction worker with a wife and daughter, the type of man the police—if not the majority of people in the province—could relate to” (Collier n. pag.). Fisher is part of the normative culture, an accepted member of the larger community who are confounded when they discover his cold-blooded impulses. “I grew up next door to Larry Fisher in North Battleford!” a barber tells his client. “He always had girlfriends or he was married. I don’t know why he had to do that to all those women” (Collier n. pag.). Underneath the surface appearance of domestic normalcy, Fisher is a vicious serial rapist and murderer.

As Collier wanders through Saskatchewan, he notices Free David Milgaard stickers around the city landscape. Saskatchewan emerges as a culture of contradictions. The most obvious contradiction is the province’s socially conservative nature, a conservatism incongruent with its political progressiveness—its identity as the “first socialist government in North America” and the birthplace of Medicare. The city appears to be indifferent to injustice, evidenced by Collier’s Saskatoon friends Irene and Warren, who are intractably convinced of Milgaard’s guilt despite evidence to the contrary. Further contradictions emerge in Collier’s experiences. Although he is intimidated by the RCMP for jaywalking, all the cars in traffic stop for Collier the moment he approaches a curb (fig. 8). “This is a car town,” he remarks. “Whenever I walk I feel I’m being looked upon with a mixture of pity and amusement” (n. pag.).



Figure 8

Collier is sensitive to people on the outside throughout this graphic narrative, reflecting on the relocated Aboriginal urban population of Saskatoon streaming in from reserves, and depicting an encounter with a neighbourhood woman named Anna coming back from the food bank improperly clothed for the prairie winter. Collier witnesses the dissolution of a socialist vision. With no rent control, residents are squeezed out of their apartments. The once egalitarian impression Collier had of the city, where the “rich and poor lived side by side,” now seems only to underline and deepen such disparities. “Right next door to poverty-stricken ol’ me,” Collier remarks as he strolls through his neighbourhood, “lives a reasonably well-off judge!” (fig. 9). Milgaard, it is also implied, was a victim of such economic inequities. His lawyer’s competence is called into question when Collier’s understatement describes him as “the best counsel legal aid would buy” (n. pag.).



Figure 9

The legal system receives the greater part of Collier’s scrutiny in this graphic narrative. Coerced witness testimony produced Milgaard’s arrest and conviction. When later evidence emerged indicating that Milgaard might not have been the murderer, the legal establishment colluded to protect itself. Fisher’s wife came forward to the police in 1980 stating that she suspected her husband of Gail Miller’s murder. Despite substantial evidence pointing to Fisher, David Milgaard remained in jail. For Milgaard, life within the prison was filled with similar injustices. Maintaining his innocence, he was seen as refusing rehabilitation and subjected to punitive measures within the prison. An institutional transfer relocated Milgaard from

the prairie to Dorchester Penitentiary in New Brunswick. Placed in a new context where no one knew him, Milgaard was made to endure, as a convicted sexual offender, the intimidation of other inmates. Hopeless, Milgaard escaped from prison, but upon his discovery by police, sustained a permanent gunshot injury even though he had surrendered unarmed (fig. 10). Eventually medicated for depression, Milgaard continued to spiral downward until DNA testing cleared him of his charges almost 30 years after his conviction (fig. 11).



Figure 10

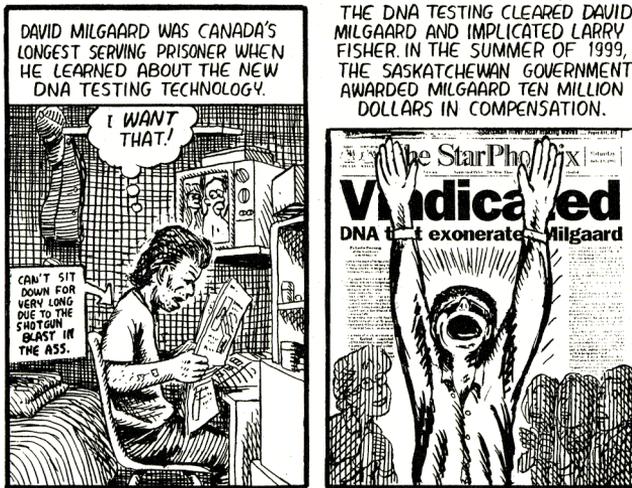


Figure 11

Characterized at first as an inhospitable, even adversarial place working against the text's two protagonists, Saskatchewan emerges at the end of this graphic narrative as a pathetic figure. With the rupture of the socialist dream, Saskatoon sees an increase in poverty and class-related crime. Littering a residential street are signs petitioning against child prostitution. Observing this city at this historical juncture, Collier remarks: "I predict that some unique culture is gonna get in the 21st century here—in the meantime, though, this community has some serious problems to work out, especially here on the 21st street 'stroll.'" (n. pag.). Drugs, prostitution, and vagrancy define the social reality of Saskatchewan in the late-twentieth-century (fig. 12).

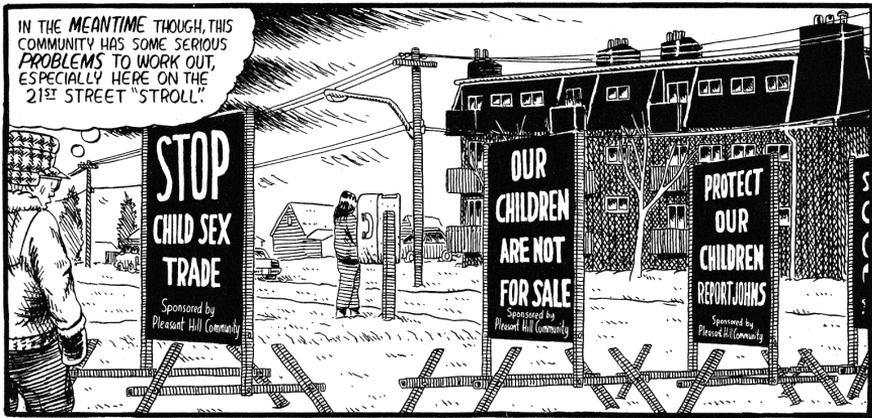


Figure 12

Saskatchewan as Collier finds it is a worn and weary place awaiting renewal. "When I first registered my car in Saskatchewan, I checked the box marked 'settler's effects,' which made it sound as though we got here by covered wagon," he remarks with amusement (n. pag.). The antiquated terminology reflects a community still living in its past. Interestingly, a similar conception appears in the Tragically Hip's reflection on the Milgaard story, "Wheat Kings," a song that opens with an image of stillness where "All you hear are the rusty breezes." The public's response to Milgaard at the discovery of his innocence is summarized in the cautionary statement, "you can't be fond of living in the past," but the song describes a dream of being locked up in a "dead and stark" museum "where the walls are lined all yellow gray and sinister / Hung with pictures of our parents' prime ministers." Despite

a desire to forget the more blighted parts of its history, the province is still living in the past.

Saskatchewan, at the time Collier observes it, is a dying place, with the “highest rate of out-migration in the country” (n. pag.). Collier asks what will become of this marginal political entity, a place on the periphery of the nation’s awareness. Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh respond to this apparent figuring of the Prairies in the national imagination:

It has been possible to believe that the Canadian prairies have ended, or at least that time has ceased to pass here, judging by representations of the prairies in much literature and popular culture, and that we are permanently frozen in a rural, agricultural scene alternately coloured by the grainy, sepia tones of the Dirty Thirties or by the romanticized, golden glow of a nostalgic small-town sunset. (4)

Representations of the Prairie in literature and popular culture have deferred to the same static conception, a “vision of prairie history that is at once frozen at a particular moment . . . and is also over” (Calder and Wardhaugh 7). Countering this perception, Calder and Wardhaugh ask how “writers, creative and scholarly, [are] representing the prairie, and what . . . these representations mean” (4). Collier, as an outsider to and observer of this setting, enters into dialogue with existing conceptions. While he does not disturb these stereotypes, he extends his reflection to the treatment of the “other” in this particular social and political context. His interest goes beyond the idea of geography as determining the character of a people; instead, he ponders how communities are drawn in this place and the role that exclusivity, fear, and provincialism play. Challenging social conservatism, Collier involves his reader in a larger criticism of the criminal-justice system, a system that few interrogate. As an indication of the public’s antipathy toward prisoners and its trust in the justice system, Stephen Harper’s 2006 election platform pledged to get tougher on crime, promising minimum and mandatory prison sentences for certain offences and proposing to end the release of prisoners after they have served two-thirds of their sentences. Milgaard exists outside the fictional world. Collier ultimately exposes the cruel face of social conservatism—a culture of insularity and fear that resonates in our current historical moment.

In his telling of Milgaard’s story—an event that has become part of a national consciousness—Collier writes an altogether different work than one might expect. Exploring his time in Saskatoon alongside that of his protagonist, Collier arranges these two registers so that they interact and inform

each other continually. The autobiographical register of this work points to the contributions graphic narratives are making to life writing. These innovations prompt the necessary recognition that graphic narratives are more than just gaining acceptance with the literary establishment, but are vitally transforming how we think of literary forms. Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven point out that this new genre is “absorbing and redirecting the ideological, formal, and creative energies of contemporary fiction” (768). Pushing our understanding of the process of representation, comic literature prompts us to perform different readings, to train different interpretive senses. In Charles Hatfield’s description, this body of literature invites a “new formalism” (x), one which prompts consideration of the semiotics of the page, the conjunction of image and text, and the reader’s process of interpolation between panels. Critical conversations concerning graphic narratives have become less about arguing their value and place among other literary forms and more about how, in an era in which we are flooded with image and digital media, we might begin to read differently. Comic art offers a burgeoning literature whose different approaches to representation can offer important reconsiderations not only of history and marginal figures from the past, but of the process of interpretation itself.

NOTES

- 1 A case in point is Marvel Comics’ *What If?* series, in which each issue examines an alternate possibility to that depicted in any of Marvel’s other comics. Inevitably, the alternate version ends in disaster, commonly with the death of the hero. This common pattern clearly presents the point that things are meant to be as they are, and that the alternative is likely to be unpleasant.
- 2 While alternative comics are often seen as sharply breaking from their superhero counterparts, the history of superhero comics is more complex than this polarity might suggest. Many superheroes are outcasts. Spiderman is a vigilante constantly pursued by the police and blamed for the crimes of his foes, while struggling to eke out an existence as a freelance newspaper photographer. The X-Men, a super-powered group of mutants, are consistently viewed by the American government with suspicion. Superman, Bradford Wright points out, emerged in the Depression as a “champion of the oppressed” (10). Wright goes on to argue, however, that many superhero comics became less questioning of the federal government after the New Deal. During World War II, comic books often demonized America’s enemies. Increasingly deployed in service of government politics, superhero comic book narratives became less sensitive to social-cultural problems and,

instead, became outlets for racial anxieties (Wright 37). A number of comic books from the 1940s onward, Hillary Chute summarizes, began “mirror[ing] some of the worst, least redeemable qualities in American culture” (“Decoding” 1019).

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