

# The Popular Culture Studies Journal Interview with RANDY DUNCAN

WITH NORMA JONES

## About Randy

Randy Duncan, Ph.D., is a professor of Communication at Henderson State University. He is a pioneer in the study of the comic arts and continues to lead the way in how this area is being examined:

- Co-founder the Comic Arts Conference, the nation's first annual academic conference devoted solely to the study of comics. This conference runs alongside Comic-Con in San Diego and is in its 24<sup>th</sup> year as a staple of annual programming.
- Co-author of the *Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (in its second edition) at [powerofcomics.com](http://powerofcomics.com)
- Co-editor of *Icons of the American Comic Book: From Captain America to Wonder Woman*
- Co-editor of *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*
- Co-author of *Creating Comics as Journalism, Memoir and Nonfiction*

What were the early days of the Comic Arts Conference like?

The first year of the Comics Arts Conference we had only a handful of panels and very modest attendance for our one-day event. However, it is still one of the high points of our soon to be 25-year history. The

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1&2

Copyright © 2016

presenters for that conference included some really extraordinary people: Will Eisner, Bob Harvey, Scott McCloud, Leonard Rifas, and Steve Bissette. If you wanted to have substantive debates about comics in 1992 that was a pretty good group to bring together.

There was a wine and cheese reception the evening before the conference. There were only six or seven of us there and we watched Scott and Bob engage in a friendly – but lively – debate about whether or not a comic had to have more than one panel to qualify as comics. The next morning Bob showed up with a single panel cartoon, he had drawn the night before, depicting a series of juxtaposed actions in a sequence. But I don't think Scott was convinced. I think the debate continued for years after that.

The other thing that comes to mind from that first year is that Scott gave a slideshow presentation with excerpts from a book that was soon to be published – *Understanding Comics*. We didn't have the expression OMG in those days, but that was definitely the look on our faces as those few of us in the audience exchanged glances with each other.

After that first year the conference grew steadily. When we celebrated our tenth anniversary with a “Will, Scott, and Bob Ten Years Later” panel the room was packed.

*The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture* (Continuum, 2009) stands as one of the first textbooks in this area. What early challenges did you and co-author Matthew J. Smith face with the book and the study of comics in general?

Years before we published *The Power of Comics*, I had sent out a few queries and talked to editors at conferences. There was no enthusiasm for an introduction to comics studies textbook. When Matt and I merged the books we had been preparing separately our first challenge was

convincing a publisher it was a good idea to publish a book for a course that did not actually exist yet.

Continuum (now Bloomsbury) wanted to be at the forefront of what they believed would be a rapidly developing field of study. They had already published comics scholarship by Will Brooker, Geoff Klock, and Danny Fingeroth. It did not take much to get Continuum to buy into our “build it and they will come” vision.

The next challenge was the scope of the book. Continuum was cautiously enthusiastic. We had to create a text within a fairly conservative word count. We decided to focus on comic books in the U.S., but many of our observations about form would apply to virtually all comics.

In the first history chapter, we discussed comic strips as one of the roots of American comic books. Then, we had a chapter that gave brief overviews of numerous national comics traditions. Even with our relatively narrow focus, there was so much history we had to skim over and so many talented creators we never mentioned. For the second edition, published in 2014, we got a few more pages to work with, and Paul Levitz joined the writing team to revise and expand the history section.

The Comic Arts Conference just celebrated its 24th year as part of the Comic-Con International programming. Do you feel that the study of comic arts has gained a new sense of legitimacy in academia? In other words, how have we grown as a field of study in and within popular culture?

The field of Comics Studies is not yet at a point where we can take for granted acceptance throughout the academy. I have heard many recent stories about comics scholars having their publications or research agendas belittled by colleagues or administrators. However, to invoke MC Hammer, we are at least “too legit to quit.”

We have established strong beachheads in terms of journals and conferences. In the last decade of the twentieth century, it was pretty much just the Comics Arts Conference and then ICAF (International Comic Arts Forum). The number of new comics-specific academic conferences that have been created in the twenty-first century is astounding. And perhaps more importantly, comics scholarship panels are regularly accepted at long-established conferences such as MLA (Modern Language Association) and NCA (National Communication Association). The recent formation of the Comics Studies Society gives the concept of a Comics Studies field a concrete, institutional presence.

Not all universities are hostile or even resistant to the presence of Comics Studies. Henderson State University has supported my teaching and research for decades. Recently, we created a Comics Studies Minor. There are now a handful of U.S. universities with similar minors or certificate programs. I think we will see a slow but steady increase of such programs in the coming years.

We are seeing more scholars engage with comics in their examinations. Also, the second edition of the *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach* was released just last year. As such, as a field of study, where do you think we are headed? Where would you like to see us headed? What are some future challenges?

Growing a field that has no discipline to call home will, for some years to come, be a difficult journey. It is not a path for the faint of heart to travel.

There are probably still many tenure and promotion committees that consider comics scholarship to be a mere sideline – not to be valued the same as a professor’s “real” research agenda. For most comics scholars,

the majority of their teaching load is comprised of the courses traditional to the particular disciplines in which they received their degrees. For many academics, simply getting to teach a comics course is a rare treat. That was true for the first twenty-five years of my teaching. Now that we have instituted a Minor in Comics Studies, I teach at least one comics course each semester.

As we struggle to get the tangible benefits of acceptance – such as promotions, grant funding, etc. – we can strengthen the institution-wide support for Comics Studies by evolving from being a multidisciplinary field into a truly interdisciplinary field. That means initiating collaborative projects with colleagues in various disciplines. These kinds of collaborations will educate people about the nature of comics scholarship and create allies that might serve on committees that make decisions about those tangible benefits.

In *Critical Approaches to Comics*, you and co-editor, Matthew J. Smith, offered several ways to approach the study of comics in terms of form, content, production, context, and reception. As this field is growing, what are some new ways, in terms of theories and methodologies, you think we can approach comics? How might we generate new theories in this area?

In the U.S. some of the pioneering comics scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s came out of Media Studies and Communication departments. As a communication professor, I would like to see a resurgence of work that uses communication approaches to study comics.

There are scholars from rhetoric programs who are doing some wonderful work with critical theory approaches, but I would also like to see communication scholars resurrect some old school approaches. For example, perhaps an anthology of essays applying Kenneth Burke's

theories to comics. I think I floated this idea with you and Garrett Castleberry years ago. You and Garrett need to put together that proposal and submit it to the *Routledge Advances in Comics Studies* series that I edit with Matt Smith.

I think interdisciplinary collaborations are going to be one of the best means of generating new approaches to studying comics. Pascal Lefèvre points out that the scope and diversity of comics is such that we risk slipping into dilettantism when we our scholarship ventures beyond our familiar methodologies and the comics traditions of our native culture. Pascal is a strong advocate for teams of researchers collaborating across borders and cultures. He believes such an approach will not only generate innovation, but also clarity. Working individually, we can sometimes allow ourselves to be a bit fuzzy about the methodology we have devised, but when you are part of a research team you feel more pressure to be precise and clear.

You also work with comic book artists in your publications. For example, the second edition of *The Power of Comics* was co-authored by Paul Levitz, with an introduction by Mark Waid. In many areas of media studies, we do not reach out to the artists and producers. Also, your new book, *Creating Comics as Journalism, Memoir and Nonfiction* (Routledge, 2015) was written to help readers develop and create graphic nonfiction stories. How has engaging with comic book artists and developing content to help new artists informed your studies. Are you also creating graphic stories?

I am definitely not an artist! All the valuable advice for artists in *Creating Comics* comes from one of my co-authors – art professor David Stoddard.

Years ago I did some writing for an APA (amateur press alliance) and I got to collaborate with some pretty talented artists, including Davey Jones (not the Monkee), John Dennis, and Rafael Rasado. Rafael drew the recent *Giants Beware! And Dragons Beware!* graphic novels.

As for engaging with comics professionals, I have been very lucky in that respect. Over the years I have had the opportunity to become an acquaintance, and perhaps even a friend, to some of the some of the most talented, and nicest, people working in comics in North America – Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, Trina Robbins, Paul Levitz, Mark Waid, David Mack, and others.

Sometimes, I met them at cons, and sometimes, I did not get to know them until they visited the HSU campus. Every spring for the past couple of decades, we have had at least one comics creator on campus (Joe Sacco, Eric Shanower, GB Tran, Colleen Doran, etc.). My classes and the Comics Club have talked to dozens of comics creators by phone (Denny O’Neil, Paul Levitz, Paul Gulacy, Cullen Bunn, Kelly Sue DeConnick, etc.).

These interactions have been valuable for me as a scholar; it can be useful to have one’s theories grounded by people who engage in the practice. They have been absolutely inspirational for some of my students. This past spring we had an embarrassment of riches – Scott McCloud, Andy Warner, and Sonny Lieu were all on the Henderson campus. I’m afraid my students got spoiled. I had to keep telling the sophomores that it wouldn’t be like this every semester.

*Creating Comics* and the second edition of *The Power of Comics* were just released last year. What is next for you?

Matt Smith and I are in the process of shepherding a big, really big, book to press. It is *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies*, and it is the story of

how many individual enthusiasms and efforts coalesced into an academic field.

The main essays are written by respected comics scholars, such as Ann Miller, Henry Jenkins, Gert Meesters, Ian Gordon, Julia Round, and Chris Murray. Charles Hatfield provides a thought-provoking introduction. Many of the people who are written about, the pioneers of the field, provide their own perspective on the past and speculations about the future in sidebars. We have sidebars from David Kunzle, John Lent, Wolfgang Fuchs, Maurice Horn, Tom Inge, and more. It has been exciting to read the work as it has come in.

We hope *Secret Origins* will be valuable for graduate students who want to learn about the seminal works in the field. It should also help professors put together reading lists for said graduate students. It could become one of the first stops to make when putting together a literature review, for example. We also hope that such a history will help Comics Studies be recognized as an established field of study.