

Why Aren't Comics Funny Anymore?

Panel Discussion moderated by Charles Brownstein, 2-9-17

C. Brownstein: Thank you so much. Thank you all for being out here this lovely evening and before we begin I would like to take a moment to acknowledge our host, particularly the fine work of Karen and Charlie for opening up this new page in comics at the university and hopefully this the first of many events to come. So let's have a round for them for this fine evening. I'm Charles Brownstein. You can see some of the work of the Comic Book Legal Defense fund on the screen, and as you came in you might have seen that we have some magazines there for you, showing what the fund's most recent work is. Diana is showing it off for you. If you didn't grab one, please feel free to take one on your way out. We are located here in Portland, just downtown, and working to be a significant contributor to the community and defending the rights of all of us in this outstanding medium.

As we look at the question of what comics are today, we are privileged to have panel of creators that come from a broad spectrum within the field. I'd like to start by introducing MK Reed. MK, seated at the end, is the author of several significant books for young adult readers, most recently working on science oriented comics for First Second. My personal favorite is on the screen here, Americus with Johnathan Hill, which is the story of a book ban that dives deep into the personal value of intellectual freedom in a community. It's this terrific piece of work and we're thrilled to have her joining us this evening.

Seated beside MK we have Mark Russell, who is most recently at work on the Flintstones for D.C. Comics and he has managed to make this the most subversive comic book happening in the country right now. He is also the co-author with Shannon Wheeler of God is Disappointed in You and Apocrypha Now, an example of which you see on the screen. Welcome to Mark.

Diana Schutz is a legendary editor of the comic book field who has worked with every major contributor to the field in the English language over the last thirty plus years. On the screen you see one of her finer collaborations with Frank Miller in 300, but if you want to know the real story of how comics work, and more importantly, what the people behind the scenes are like, take Diana out for a glass of wine afterwards.

Last but not least, we are proud to also have Shannon Wheeler, the New Yorker cartoonist and acclaimed creator of Too Much Coffee Man, co-creator with Mark Russell of the God is Disappointed in You books and soon to be author of Things My President Says, since we have a prohibition on certain profanity in this room, which are the illustrated tweets of Donald Trump. So take a look for that coming this summer. So welcome to all of our panelists. Thank you. Now

the first question is one that actually we on the panel have for you, so I would like to see your hands and your reflections on what is it that you think of as comics. What do comics mean to you? What are they? Charlie, I'll start with you. What's your association? You're a recent convert. So what do you associate with comics?

Charlie: Well the first thing I think of with comics is those things in the newspaper, that have been in the newspaper for a hundred years, the comics section. After that, I think of Marvel and D.C., you know Batman and Superman and then the great Marvel heroes, like Thor and Spider man.

C. Brownstein: And somebody else in the crowd. All right, what are comics to you?

Audience: Well look, I grew up on Calvin and Hobbes. So, you know, just having art that's not only just light hearted but also can teach us something in a fun, nonthreatening way.

C. Brownstein: And how many here would tend to agree with that? How many's first exposure to comics was in the newspapers? And how many beyond that first exposure went on to comic books? And how many beyond that first exposure went on to graphic novels? And how many in this room started reading comic books as a child? And how many started reading comics as an adult? And how many are actively reading comics right now? So, I see we have so many people that are so lucky that you're not reading comics right now, because there's so much to discover. So, I would like to speak to our panelists about some of these different categories. Let's start with the comic strip. We have a Charles Schulz cartoon, Peanuts probably the most iconic of the American strips. Diana, what would you call the qualities of a comic strip, both in terms of story telling and in terms of how it uses the medium?

Diana: Oh boy. All right, well actually this slide is one that I sent to Charles and I use it in my own courses. I teach Comics History at Portland State and a Comics Art and Literature course at Portland Community College and the thing about this particular strip, and strips in general, is they're restricted. Comics is all about space, the final frontier, and the newspaper strip is restricted to three or four panels and as they grow smaller and smaller and smaller in the newspaper to this tiny little bit of space, the cartoonist has to do something ... he or she has to evoke a reaction in a very small amount of space. In this particular case, in four panels we have the classic narrative arc. We've got the setup, the conflict ... he's sleeping on my piano, the climax and the resolution and what's brilliant about this particular strip and Charles Schulz in general is that he took the limitations of the medium of comics that is they're silent and they're static.

So in order to express movement, you have to do it visually because comics don't move. In order to express sound, you have to do it visually because comics are silent and he took those limitations and made a joke out of it, which to me, that's brilliant. He has such a small number of lines to evoke such a major

reaction, and comic strips are these concise, concentrated form of comics. I guess that's what strip does for me. It packs it all into a tiny, tiny little space that's probably the hardest type of comics to do, but you could probably speak better to that.

C. Brownstein: Well, and you can see in other examples that you provided how the strip cartoonist plays with these limitations. We have an Ernie Bushmiller Nancy strip, Anything Can Happen in a Comic Strip, where he's playing with the grammar by virtue of how the figures move in space, but the other strip you provided us, Diana, this Calvin and Hobbes daily strip describes one of the central conflicts I think of the careers of people like Diana and myself and Shannon where when we came into working in comics professionally, the comic strip was this low art. It was regarded as this low value speech and this is something that is particularly dogged probably the second most common form of comics, which is the comic book and this has evolved dramatically over the last century.

You see an early issue of Batman, illustrating the earliest adventures of this iconic comic book character and something that probably more of you are familiar with, the more contemporary X-Men comics, but beyond the superheroes, there is this entire realm of expression in comic books that moves into more personal stories, the likes of which you see in comics like Eightball, but Daniel Klaus, and a more contemporary example, Saga, by Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples, uses the science fiction genre to describe what it is to be a family.

What we're seeing here is comic books can encapsulate anything, but what goes into making them? Mark, you're making a significant name for yourself in the work that you're doing over at D.C. Comics. I'm wondering if you can describe for the audience the process of comic books and some of the limitations and the grammar that goes into it.

Mark: Sure. The biggest limitation and the biggest learning curve I've had working, especially for a Big Two publisher, is that your creativity is never really your own. It's always a collaboration with two or more people and you have to be willing to sort of let go, let God, you know? You've got to be willing to accept that there's only so much you can do as a writer and be able to turn over to the artists and the editors and trust that they're not going to debauch your vision. I think it also helps, at least in my experience because my experience is very limited, that if you don't know what you're doing, I think it's better to come in sort of not knowing what the bad habits are in comics, not knowing what everyone else has done before so that you seem fresh and original just by reason of your own ignorance.

C. Brownstein: Does that square with your experience, Diana, of editing comic books?

Diana: Oi. Yeah, sure. Look, the writer is ... sorry ... the writer is really at the heart of things. Whoever is creating the story is where it all starts. Traditional comic

books tend to be made as a group process. That's the diplomatic term. Assembly line is really more the proper description. We have a writer, a penciler, an inker, someone who does the lettering. These days that's kind of a typist, sorry. Then a colorist. So it's the fragmentation of a job that used to be done entirely by one person. In large part, that's because publishers want to make more money more quickly now, so they parcel out all the different jobs and as a result of that, now we've grown up into an industry that has comic book writers, comic book pencilers, and so on. It's this fragmented process which is supposedly held together by the publisher and the publisher's representative who is the editor who is caught between a rock and a hard place because not only is the editor the publisher's representative but if he or she has half a brain, they are also the creator's representative. So there's the business demand and the creative demand and that person has to juggle both and kind of tie it all together.

Mark, you were saying at dinner that there were things that when you're writing stuff that seem to just go through as if no one has read it and balloons are badly ... you don't want to have a balloon that covers up somebody's face, for instance. Somebody needs to be not asleep at the wheel for that sort of stuff.

Mark: Right. It's [inaudible 00:14:05] continual frustration.

Diana: And yet your Flintstones is great.

Mark: Thank you.

Diana: So somehow it's-

Mark: Like most things in my life, you just chip away at all the things that are wrong until it seems right. I think that's really what the process is when you're collaborating. You each have your own visions or your own ideas of what should be in there and they sort of collide or they don't completely mesh, but then you just sort of chip away at it until it does it. For me, writing ... that's the way I write, too. I don't write so much as I rewrite. My initial stories are usually pretty bad, but like a sculptor, I just sort of chip away at the parts that don't look like David and eventually I end up with ... not to compare myself with Michelangelo, but I end up with something that resembles David.

C. Brownstein: Beyond the comic book and speaking of chipping away over time, the revelation of the graphic novel in the 1970s took all of the formal dynamics that we've been discussing so far and wrote it very large. Here on the screen, you see two examples that Diana had edited, including one by Will Eisner, Last Day in Vietnam. Will Eisner championed the graphic novel form and he envisioned a world where comics would move beyond what he called the cycle of pursuit and vengeance that he saw in superhero comics and that one day we would have a creator like MK Reed that would not be bound to making her living telling those stories about mutants beating the hell out of each other, to quote Will Eisner.

MK, I'd like you to speak to the process of somebody that is coming into comics with that vast canvas, and not necessarily tied to the editorial processes we've been discussing so far.

MK Reed: Well, it kind of depends on which thing I'm doing because I've done a number of different projects and I've been doing a serial now that ... it's wizards instead of mutants, but there's some punching and they are punching giant robots so it's kind of relevant. I grew up reading newspaper strips and Archie and then as a teenager, I wasn't that into X-Men or most things that were happening in the 90s. Then when I went to college, I discovered this whole library that never existed in any of the public libraries back then of graphic novels and I want to say Craig Thompson's *Chunky Rice* was a really transformative book for me when I was a college freshman because it was just doing something so different from everything else I had seen. So I kind of grew up a little bit reading comics, but mostly reading very thick and impressive sounding books for a high schooler. I thought I was going to be a prose writer and then I found myself drawing very bad looking comics, but becoming familiar with the language of working on them and I happened to come into it at this time when things were not 24 page issue every month or an eight issue mini series of 200 pages. So I just kind of did a couple pages here and there, or one page experiments and eventually figured out how to do a 150 page book and kept going from there.

C. Brownstein: Now, you have to unpack a statement like that, I figured out how to make a 150 page book. For most of us, 150 pages sounds like a daunting thing we'll never do in our lifetime, so I'm not going to let you get away with that. What does that mean?

MK Reed: I did mini comics and they kept getting longer. Then I did four that kind of related to each other that were something like ... I don't know, I think they were like 30 pages. Some of them were a little bit longer and I had a big thing that had width to it that I had to figure out how to put a spine on it and onto shelves. Getting to a part of my career where I'm not writing about punching things is very weird and along the way I've written about teen girls who hang out after school and fight and romance and the history of paleontology and how the globe is going to collapse with weather. It's terrible.

C. Brownstein: Speaking of collapsing, when I was speaking to Shannon Wheeler before this program, he yelled at me because he said, "You know, you've neglected the most important kind of comics," so I want you to yell at me in public about what I've neglected here, Shannon.

Shannon Wheeler: There's a narrative in a single panel comic and I think that each panel has a ... it's creating a good single panel comic, creates a story that precedes the image and something in your head that's following the image and there's dialog. It's a narrative. It's a climax and resolution, as Diana put it. How did it start? The setup, conflict, climax, resolution. I think you can see that a little bit in the strip comic.

C. Brownstein: You've distilled that over a career that begin in college newspapers and then went into self publishing. What were the storytelling lessons of reduction that inform your creative work?

Shannon Wheeler: I met a cartoonist from the New Yorker and I said, "How do I get in the New Yorker?" And he said-

Audience: That was the creative?

Shannon Wheeler: This is where it started. I'm getting there. This is the setup. He said, "Send me some of your stuff." Then he said, "Okay, you want to do single panel comics?" Then he said, "well, yeah, these aren't very funny, but if you want me to I can send them up." And I was like, "Uh, yeah, I guess." He said, "Or, if you want to send them to me, I'll critique them and I'm happy to work with you on this." He was really harsh where he would just say, "I guess you've never studied humor," or "this is just not funny," or "you really need to go work this one differently." He put me through all these changes of, screw you, I've read your stuff, it's not that good. I had all that internal stuff that I had to let go of and kind of let him tear me down and redefine and rebuild how I was looking at comics and how I was looking at single panel comics and that's when I started thinking about a single panel as narrative.

It was interesting. It was a neat way to be torn down. To allow yourself that trust of having your ego torn down and then trying to rebuild up, seeing what's left, which is nothing and then rebuilding from there.

Diana: I have a question for you, because the first work of yours that I read was Too Much Coffee Man, and that's long form comics and they're funny but they're also depressing and beautifully drawn. To go from sort of whatever it was, 24 page issue of a comic and then however many issues of that comic and to kind of compress all of that into single panels, aside from just wanting to be in the New Yorker, what else kind of fuels that? How do you do that?

Shannon Wheeler: It's easy. It's like what Mark said, you have an idea and that's your kernel. Then when you're doing a 24 page comic, you can explore that idea from all these different angles. You build the setup and you have your payoff on page eight or whatever with little gags here and there and when you're working a single panel comic, you just are taking out every adjective and adverb and simplifying it down and really saying, "Okay, what is this idea?" Best case scenario, it comes to you as a flash where you are just playing with these images of Moses getting the commandments and you're just thinking okay, this is kind of a contract with God as these ten commandments and I thought, well, contracts there's going to be some fine print. Okay, where's the fine print? It's going to be the pebbles that are trailing behind him. That's just sort of your logical train of thought and if you're doing that as-

Audience: [inaudible 00:23:58].

Shannon Wheeler: Illogical? Maybe logical isn't the right work. Mark, I've watched him work on things and having an idea that drives it I think is ... to me that's where it's coming from is the concept first and then it's just pudding that you're putting in a bowl and whatever the shape of the bowl, that's where the idea fits.

C. Brownstein: Is that true for you, MK and Mark?

Mark: Yeah, the bowl changes as I work on it, for me. What I end up with is usually a lot different than what I started out with. Yeah, I have a very sort of central concept. I don't really try to force it to stay too much within that. They asked me to send solicitations for the comics I'm writing usually three months in advance.

C. Brownstein: What's a solicitation?

Mark: A solicitation is like a short, two or three sentence description of what the comic is going to be about and they send it to the-

Audience: You have to write your own solicitations?

Mark: I don't have to. I just do it because they ask me to. I don't know any better.

Audience: That's the publisher's job, not the writer's job.

Mark: But they're always wrong.

C. Brownstein: Just to translate this into layman speak, this is as if Michael Bay had to write the TV guide listing for the Transformers. Not to compare you to Michael Bay, I'm sorry, but it was the first thing that came to mind.

Mark: It doesn't matter who writes them. It's an act of futility because usually by that time what I've written is radically changed from what I told them I was going to write, so very misleading because at some point you turn the story you're writing over to itself and you're not forcing them to conform to your will. You're allowing the things to happen within the story that are organic or that need to happen to serve the central idea. So I think that flexibility is ultimately a responsibility if you're really truly serving the idea that you're trying to convey.

C. Brownstein: MK?

MK Reed: This past week I've been working on an issue of my wizard book and I work with another writer on it, too and I end up doing the dialog after he kind of breaks down the pages and we started out writing an outline for the issue a couple months ago that fits into the whole arc and then he goes through and gets every panel down and everything and then I kind of have torn out whole parts and kind of just go, "You're not getting two double page spreads for fancy things or more words. It needs to be a scene about these two characters because we never resolved that three issues ago." So plans change and projects change, too.

C. Brownstein: Now, I'd like to get to the real meat of this panel, which is why aren't comics funny and why are comics funny and the thing about comics that isn't readily apparent when you're reading them is how laborious a medium it is. Diana discussed this somewhat in the limitations in the Schulz strip. We are a silent medium and we are about space and we are about being concise. It isn't simply telling a joke. It isn't simply drawing a funny image it is all of those things, plus timing, plus understanding the reader. So to a certain degree, making a comic funny is much, much more difficult than telling a good joke in a bar. I would like to ask the panelists, all of whom use humor to great effect in your work, how do you make it translate? Most of us, we tell a joke in a crowded room and nobody laughs at us and that's humiliating. It's got to be far worse on the page. How does it work? Mark?

Mark: Oh. I usually just start with the darkest, most depressing thing I can think of and try to think, well what makes it not so bad, or what's the darkest thing I suspect is true about the world and how can I say it as quickly as possible? It usually turns out to be funny. I find that as a rule, the more you condense things, the funnier they get. So be concise. George Saunders has a brilliant quote. He said that humor is the truth faster than you expected it. That's what I try to do. What do I really think is disturbing and true and real about the world and how do I express it in such a way that people are going to feel like a bandaid has been pulled off them when they read it. That's pretty much ... I like to envision like a meteor striking the earth and thinking that my words are like the meteor and I want it to create as big a crater as possible using the smallest rock I can make.

Diana: I just want to jump in here for a minute because I have a question for you, Mark, once I'm done with this little blah, blah. One of the reasons, to my mind that comics are less funny than they could be is the comic book industry is kind of dichotomous. There's the mainstream weekly pamphlet industry and then there's the graphic novel industry and the mainstream monthly pamphlet industry is owned by corporations. Disney, God Corp., owns Marvel and Warner and whoever Warner is currently affiliated with owns DC and they have many, many lawyers to prevent you from doing anything remotely funny. So how do you get away with being funny with the Flintstones? Mark doesn't own the Flintstones. Hannah Barbera owns the Flintstones. They licensed that to Warner who licenses it to DC who allows Mark to write this comic and the fact that he can get away with being funny at all is mind-blowing.

C. Brownstein: In the issue I read last night, Fred Flintstone said to Barney, " We committed a genocide." How do you do that?

Mark: I think I mostly get away with it because nobody's really watching. It's like I'm on the USA network at 3 o'clock in the morning, so I get a little more latitude. I think my niche at DC has been I'm not the guy you hand the keys of a Lamborghini to. I'm the guy you hand the keys to the broken down Volkswagen bus to. Flintstones were just sort of vitamin pills when I took them over. They weren't really a functioning living, breathing franchise. I also did an adaptation

of a comic from the 70s called Pres, which was for all intents and purposes dead, so they don't really care. They don't care if I smash it into a wall or if I run over three children. It's not like I'm writing Superman or Batman, where there's a thousand rules you have to abide by when you're writing it, so it's a lot easier to be funny. It's a lot easier to take chances and I think that's the key to humor, or writing a funny comic because you have to write like nobody is reading.

C. Brownstein: Now, Shannon, we're all sitting around talking about words. The average comic book artist will spend at least a day creating the page of the comic that you read in charitably under a minute. You're supposed to read it that quickly. That's the way the pace flows. We're sitting around talking about words and our theory of jokes and you're the guy that actually needs to put it down on the page and spend a day of your life taking that script and making it work for the audience to read in ten seconds. Is what we said ... does that all ring true to you or is there something else that we're not describing that you have to put into action when you're making the joke work on the page from a script?

Shannon Wheeler: Yeah, but keep in mind that my drawings are pretty crappy, so I can bang out 20 or 30 of these in an hour or two.

C. Brownstein: But you're evading the question.

Shannon Wheeler: Is there something not being taken into account? When you're drawing, one bit of advice that I was given is if you want to make a funny gag, you want to put the funniest word last, which makes no sense. It's a silly thing. For me, in the drawings I want there to be pathos and I want there to be a feeling of like this is a real person and like Mark taking the Flintstones or something, when it is funny, it feels real and that's to me when comics are working really well, is when it has that resonance and it's something that has really come from inside of you. That's something that's really hard to describe or to quantify and put down to paper. You know when it's working and you know when it's not, too. You know when you're faking it.

C. Brownstein: MK and Mark, as you're writing for artists, what is the empathetic process that you put yourself through in determining what instructions you're giving them as you're developing your script?

MK Reed: A little bit depends on the artist. I usually know who I'm working with ahead of time and I will ask them sometimes how much information they want, but I tend to just kind of describe what needs to be there and the gist of the construct that needs to be going on around the characters and then give them free reign for everything else and then just try and kind of get the character motivation and emotional thoughts in there as well so they can let them walk around and cry when they need to.

C. Brownstein: Do you ever, as a writer, write out a little storyboard for the artists?

MK Reed: I have, but they almost always come up with something better, so then I just started letting them do that and it seems to be working out fine. If it's something super technical and I'm really set on I might do it, but it's never really been the case that they're not capable of doing the spacial reasoning.

Mark: I'm relatively new to comics. I've only been in it for a couple years and when I started, like I said, I didn't really know what I was doing, so I think I was a really horrible writer to work with for an artist because I would cram a page with seven panels and there would be three crowd scenes and doing these things that were driving artists crazy. It would take them a lot of time, not realizing what I was doing. I figured one drawing takes as much time as the others. Now that I know a little better, I like to imagine that I'm sort of in the Milgrim Conformity Experiments, where there's a man in a white lab coat, sayign "No, go ahead. They'll be fine." And asking me to shock the hell out of the guy in the next room and I have to empathize, not really knowing what they're going through, but sort of trying to guess at how much of a shock they can take, which is difficult because I write comics that are largely about the dangers of mob mentality and sometimes require sort of big, epic scenes, but I try to limit myself on those that I know are shocking the artist past the redline and just administer nice, low shocks as much as possible.

C. Brownstein: Now, speaking of epic scenes, we have an epic crowd here this evening and I would like to not monopolize our conversation and invite any questions or comments from the audience. Yes?

Audience: Why aren't comics funny anymore?

C. Brownstein: Why aren't comics funny anymore?

Mark: Well, I think anymore is just kind of the key word there. There used to be there were lots of funny comics and you don't see them as much anymore and I think one is because it's hard to be funny, so it doesn't lend itself to the conveyor belt process that was described earlier and I think also, comedy is tragedy plus distance, which Mel Brooks once said, "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into a sewer and die." I think we all sort of feel like we're in the sewer right now, so it's hard to be funny about that. The tragedy is too close to us I think at this point, so it's hard for people, but I think in a way, that's kind of the time when you need comedy the most because it's aspirational at that point. It's a way of saying we are bigger than the crisis that confronts us because we can laugh at it.

Shannon Wheeler: That's the only way of dealing with it. I'm reading ... now I'm slogging through 30,000 plus every day more of Trump's tweets, trying to put together this book. Every day I will pick one or two that he's done that day and then I'll go back and read through 2016, but it's processing for me. I feel like I'm dealing with it better than a lot of my liberal friends that are crying every night in the bar. I'm kind of into this.

Diana: I also like to suggest a formal reason. There are a lot of historical reasons as to why comics are less funny than they started out as being, but in terms of comic books or long form comics, the way they're structured, the reader really has a lot of impact on how they're read. In other words, a good joke requires timing. The comic who tells the joke, who pauses just for a second before delivering the punchline and gets you laughing, the comic who is telling that joke controls the timing entirely. With comics and with long form comics, it really doesn't work that way. The reader has a certain amount of control as well and this is part of the job of the comic's artist is to try to get the reader to read the way he or she wants them to read the book in the time, to zip through this sequence and slow down with that sequence and it's really, really hard I think to control the timing enough so that the reader kind of is in sync to land on the joke when you want them to land on the joke.

I think there are actual formal space reasons, again space, that tend to weigh against how easily comic books can be funny. When there are comic books that are funny, there's something really special going on there. On the other hand, my ex-husband says I'm entirely humorless.

C. Brownstein: MK?

MK Reed: I think there's also been sort of a stigma that comics are for kids. It's in the headline of every article that is so surprised that a book could be serious that there was a pendulum shift for a while where we're in the Times now. We're getting reviewed in proper newspapers and things like that. I worked in a comic book store ten years ago in New York City right off Union Square where there's the farmer's market and everything and every week we'd have people coming in and they'd want that book they read about in the Times. It's a graphic novel and if you called it a comic book, they would correct you, despite you being the person who worked in the comic book store. It's kind of finally gone back the other way where people are like, "It's kind of a dumb term and we can just call it all comics again."

C. Brownstein: There was an adolescent sensibility. I'm not a kid.

MK Reed: Yeah, this is serious.

C. Brownstein: Absolutely. Other questions in the audience or comments in the audience? Yes.

Audience: Just to follow up on what you guys are saying, I'm just kind of curious, do you guys think demographics are shifting in terms of the audience of comics? I'm looking at my own kids and they don't really read comics like I did when I was a kid. So a lot of this stuff seems to be written for a more serious-

C. Brownstein: How old are your kids?

Audience: Ten and 14 and they're not comic readers. Society now has video games, the internet. This for me was entertainment when I was a child, but i don't see it quite the same for them, so I was wondering if you could see the shift in terms of the seriousness of the subject matter and the audience you're writing for is kind of changing the humor aspect of some of this?

Charlie: My audience is getting older every day because I write for myself. I don't have a good sense of audience, but you're hitting an audience, Mark.

Mark: Yeah, I think that's a pretty accurate observation. I think that the humor, and it has helped me because I'm able to write something that's funny for somebody who is in college or older because I know it's not an eight year old flipping through my Flintstones comic and reading about genocide. One time, I was in a store and I saw a bunch of Star Wars action figures. I was like, oh that's cute, I remember those from when I was a kid. Everyone flipping through the Star Wars action figures was a middle aged man and it was the most depressing thing I ever saw. I started to worry about that happening to comics. I think that we always need to make sure that we're doing something to serve new generations coming through and something needs to be written, but I think your observation is pretty on the money in that the audience is not primarily six to 12 year olds anymore. It's college, adult, young adult and above.

C. Brownstein: But MK, a lot of your audience is, so how do you deal with that problem?

MK Reed: I don't know. I just kind of put stuff out and people who are following my stuff-

C. Brownstein: Let's put it another way. How do you make science comics not taste like vegetables?

MK Reed: I'm not a scientist. [inaudible 00:44:32] brought me in and they were like, "We want to do educational comic books, but we don't want them to be terrible educational comic books." So they really stressed making them entertaining and humorous and I've done other books for them, so they knew I could bring jokes to it. I don't know if they ended up getting exactly the book they thought they were going to get, but I tried to make it funny and I think it stuck. The other ones I have done have been pretty humorous for them, too. It's so weird because the industry is so different now than it was ten years ago. There's more breadth for younger readers and for female writers. I remember when I was working and Buffy Season 8 was coming out in issues and that one Wednesday, there would be a lot more women in the store than any other given day in the month. They were there to get Buffy, not anything else, but that's okay. They were just getting in and getting out and it was kind of a weird story that's not funny. They did their best.

Diana: I'd like to suggest that there are in fact a lot more women and girls reading comics now, certainly than when I was growing up and I'm the oldest person on this panel. When I was growing up, I was the only little girl I knew who was

reading superhero comics. Now, my nieces are the ones who are recommending graphic novels ... and they're ten and 12, and they're recommending graphic novels for me to read. The girl readership, specifically the young girl readership, has grown tremendously, in large part I think because there's so much variety being offered now that was not being offered even 10 or 15 or 20 years ago, you know.

MK Reed: Yeah, I think Raina Telgemeier's books have been out for about ... I want to say Smile has been out for maybe seven years now.

Diana: And it has been on the New York Times Best Seller List for that long?

MK Reed: Yeah. The really cool thing to think about is that if you were ten when Smile first came out and you got it then, you're 17 now and if you're really into comics, you have so much cool stuff to read and you're going to start applying to art school this coming year and in four years, you're going to be pitching stuff.

Shannon Wheeler: My class has a wide range, which is really nice. It's usually about half women. I'm teaching at PSU, Creating Core Comics. I'm teaching people to do comics in a single page and I think that if you can learn how to draw comics into one page, then you can expand that out into a graphic novel or condense it down to a single panel. I think the principles are all there for expansion and contraction. Not only is it half women, but there's also a wide age range where there are returning students that are 60 years old that are coming in. It's an oddly more varied group of people than I had ever seen before in my life. In a way, yeah, it has infected mainstream. I don't know how to get your kids to read them, though. With my kids, I just gave them comics that were around the house and then they started reading ... they would just grab things and then they asked me about how babies are made and they told me some stuff and I was like, "Where did you learn that?" And they were like, "Oh, in your comic." And they were showing me something that I had written, which is bad.

C. Brownstein: I have one more audience question. Go ahead.

Audience: The other end of the question for the panel is why aren't comics tragic anymore? When I was growing up, it was Frank Miller's Dark Batman, Watchmen, [inaudible 00:49:08], a movie about the holocaust. What happened?

Shannon Wheeler: I'm doing a book on Trump. I don't know. What more do you want?

C. Brownstein: Diana, I know you've got an answer for this.

Diana: No, I'm stumped. Really. I'm trying to think of some current tragic comics and I'm coming up kind of short.

C. Brownstein: I mean, there's the Walking Dead. The whole world is over.

Diana: Are zombies tragic?

C. Brownstein: Well, the Walking Dead is about killing your neighbors, fundamentally. Anyway, does anybody else have-

Audience: [inaudible 00:49:50].

C. Brownstein: Yeah, well that's true. There are things like Roz Chast who mixes humor and tragedy. Her memoir, *Why Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant*-

Diana: And certainly there are a ton of memoir comics. There's an entire range of medical memoir stuff out there because everybody has their cancer experience and they're drawing it for all to read. There's certainly that. Art Speiglman isn't the only one who has handled the holocaust.

C. Brownstein: *Fun Home*.

Diana: Yeah, Tom Hart's memoir about losing his daughter that came out last year, *Rosalee Lightening*.

Audience: That is just ... I was in tears on that thing.

MK Reed: They're still out there.

Audience: That was the worst book ever.

C. Brownstein: It's a beautiful book. A big piece of this, though is that these things are no longer the remarkable exceptions that they were at the time that they came out. When *Mouse* came out, there was nothing else like it that addressed this experience in this medium. When *The Dark Knight Returns* came out, nobody else was using this kind of corporate mark to describe what was happening in society in an allegorical way. Once the dam burst, it gave permission for generations to follow and produce this work. So I do think that the work is still being produced. Folks in the room had talked about *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel. Roz Chast is another one who had come up. It's out there, but it's no longer the lone voice in the darkness.

I think that brings us to a good capstone question, responding to what Charlie had mentioned at the beginning of our program, which is that humor often is the light in the darkness and we're now at a point where I think we're all feeling a certain amount of uncertainty no matter where we are in politics or in our lives or whatever the case might be and one of the things that great fiction does is it gives us the tools to imagine the future and I think that one of the obligations that everybody working in the communications field has is to provide a little goal on the horizon for people to strive for, to reach for, and so I'd like to ask our panelists in closing what it is that you feel comics, whether it's

your own work or whether it's comics as a whole, can offer us in this moment where we need to imagine better to get through this moment that we're in.

Shannon Wheeler: Well, there's a passage in the Gospel of Thomas, which I think really means a lot to me when I work and I think is really it kind of expresses my philosophy of how I try to write, because I write a lot of stuff that's politically oriented or socially conscious, but there's a passage that says, "Your heart can save you if you let it change the world. The world will destroy you if you don't let it change your heart." I think that's really for me what comics or really any sort of writing does. It's a conversation between you and the world and what you both can do better.

C. Brownstein: Well, thank you all for coming out to this first of hopefully many events here and thank you to our hosts. We appreciate your kind attention.

Speaker 8: Well, thanks everybody for joining us this evening and thank our amazing panel for a really compelling conversation. I mentioned beforehand that we had some comic books that folks were going to be able to take home with them, but you all aren't going to be the only people to take things home with them. We have some lovely parting gifts for our panelists.

Diana: Really? After feeding us?

Speaker 8: Yeah, absolutely. Yes, Holy Cross hospitality. Dr. Eifler has volunteered to be Vannah.

Mark: I've moderated hundreds of panels. Nobody's ever given us a parting gift, so thank you.

Speaker 8: And then I think I'll let ... right. Diana just said if you have questions that you didn't want to ask in front of the whole group and would like to stay afterward and talk to our panelists, they'll be available for a few minutes to answer your questions, and now Vannah will explain-

MK Reed: He never gets to talk.

Speaker 9: So, one of Diana's Facebook friends said, "Wait, I make funny comics." And sent a bunch and they need to be an anecdote to your panel tonight. So what we did was we put a big yellow Post-It note on 20 chairs underneath. So I'm going to invite you to look underneath your chair and if you have a yellow Post-It note, you get a funny comic. You can look at chairs around you that nobody is sitting in and just come up and get a funny comic.

How did we do?



If you rate this transcript 3 or below, this agent will not work on your future orders