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How Lust Was Lost: Genre, Identity and the Neglect of a Pioneering Comics Publication

Robert Hulshof-Schmidt
Portland State University

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Robert Hulshof-Schmidt

How *Lust* Was Lost: Genre, Identity, and the Neglect of a Pioneering Comics Publication

In 1950, comic book publisher St. John released a self-proclaimed “Picture Novel” titled *It Rhymes With Lust*, a 128-page digest sized book written by the pseudonymous Drake Waller (in fact the team of Arthur Drake and Leslie Waller). Their story blended the romance and crime genres popular in comics of the day and featured art by St. John stalwarts Matt Baker (pencils) and Ray Osrin (inks). An unusual publishing experiment, *It Rhymes With Lust* can arguably be considered the first graphic novel, but is seldom recognized as such. In this paper I will explore the novel’s overlooked place in comics history, and examine key reasons for this omission.

1. The Birth and Boom of Romance Comics

The legendary team of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby are generally credited with creating the first romance comic when they pitched the anthology *Young Romance* to Crestwood publishing for its Prize Comics imprint in 1947 (Nolan 29). Flagging sales in the post-War years had comics publishers eager to find the next big thing. When tales of enormous *Young Romance* sales circulated in the industry, everyone was eager to jump on the trend. Nolan notes that no other genre saw such a quick glut, detailing the romance boom: “The first 57 issues were published over a period of 21 months since the first ... appeared in late 1947. In the second half of 1949, however, 256 romance issues were published by 22 companies who dreamed up 118 titles” (43). Publishers Quality, Fox, and Timely all joined the boom with gusto. Two companies, however, are generally considered the finest in terms of quality, innovation, and collectibility: Prize, who started it all, and St. John.

2. A Brief History of St. John Publishing

Archer St. John started his publishing career with newspapers in the Chicago area. He followed in the footsteps of his older brother, Robert, who became famous for publishing stories that helped derail Al Capone. The younger St. John moved to New York City during World War II, initially working as advertising manager for Lionel Trains. He purchased a press and paper supply and began his own publishing enterprise. In 1943 and 1944 he published 17 issues of *The Flying Cadet*, an airplane enthusiast magazine that included essays, photos, and some comics.

Benson describes the paper shortage during the war, and observes that a variety of comics during 1944 and 1945 changed their publication offices to “The Flying Cadet” using St. John’s business address. He surmises that this was a way for St. John to share his paper supply while earning some additional money from the collaborations (77). The experience apparently inspired him to join the industry, and by January 1947 comics with a St. John logo began to appear on the racks. St. John licensed a number of properties (notably Mighty Mouse) and published a number of western, crime, and horror comics, setting up an in-house writing and art studio.

St. John was an entrepreneur at heart, always interested in finding ways to beat the competition. He experimented with digest sized comics and discount reprint books and published the first 3-D comics. When romance boomed, St. John gradually added the genre to his output, relying heavily on innovative writer Dana Dutch and established penciller Matt Baker. Two writers interested in pitching a new approach to comics decided that St. John was the best place to start.

3. The Birth of the Picture Novel

Arnold Drake and Leslie Waller met in Chicago while attending college on the G.I. Bill. Both aspired to work as novelists or screenwriters, and they frequently shared ideas and plots. As Hajdu details, they noted the large number of men who had been comics readers while posted

overseas during the war and thought that a sort of bridge between comics and pulp novels might appeal to them. He quotes Drake, “Our goal was to create a kind of Warner Brothers low-budget film-noir action-romance on paper, in words and pictures” (164-5).

Concerned that being known as comics writers might derail their long-term goals, they assumed the pen name Drake Waller. They drafted a four-page project summary and sent it to St. John. He was intrigued, and agreed to publish the picture novel, although he offered no contract or advance. What he did offer was his established imprint and one of the most talented romance pencillers in the business.

4. The Peerless Penciller

Matt Baker was born in suburban Pittsburgh in 1921. A congenital heart condition kept him out of the War. He followed his passion for drawing and moving to New York City and receiving an art degree from Cooper Union. He was hired by Iger Studios in 1944, where his speed and skill quickly landed him significant jobs drawing covers and pencilling features, notably for Fiction House and Fox (Schelly 67). Baker was notable as one of the few African Americans working in comics at the time, a significant detail that merits further analysis later in this paper.

Baker was noted for his ability to draw attractive, realistic women. Amash interviewed Al Feldstein, another Iger alumnus, who observed, “I learned a lot just by watching him inking his figures, penciling – I learned a lot about drawing the female figure. He was spectacular.” and noted that many women drawn by the studio in the mid-40s took on the “Baker style.” (156)

Baker left Iger in 1948 to go freelance, working most closely with St. John. The publisher gave him significant work on his new romance books – and even employed him part-time as art director – seeing a perfect match between Baker’s talent and the demands of the genre. As Pruitt

notes, Baker took advantage of romance characters and settings to explore his interest in fashion and his desire to present more sophisticated layouts (4). When work began on *It Rhymes With Lust*, art duties fell to Baker and his regular inker, Ray Osrin. Accounts differ as to whether Drake and Waller collaborated directly with Baker (Schelly 67) or the work was “set up by the publisher” (Amash 52). What is clear, as Hajdu details, is that St. John felt Baker was the perfect fit for the project and the writers were thrilled with the results (167).

5. The Brief Life of the Picture Novel

It Rhymes With Lust was published in mid-1950, selling for 25 cents like the pulp novels of the day. It features the story of a down-on-his-luck newspaperman, Hal Weber, who moves to Copper City at the suggestion of his old flame, Rust Masson. Rust is a scheming, manipulative woman, intent on using Weber to help solidify the empire that she acquired from her recently deceased husband. Weber struggles with his conscience and the powerful influence that Masson has over him. He falls in love with her step-daughter, Audrey, who helps him make the right choices as Copper City explodes with criminal action. Drake and Waller crafted a fast-paced plot filled with intrigue and twists, and Baker and Osrin rendered it in spectacular form.

St. John was apparently cautious about the project. Hajdu quotes Drake’s frustration, “Our publisher loved it, but he didn’t love it enough to promote it” (168). Without serious promotion, a number of factors kept newsstands from giving the book prominence. Although it had comic-style art – complete with panels, captions, and word balloons – it was black and white and barely half the height of a standard comic. It was also priced much higher than the ten cents most comics buyers expected to pay. As a novel, it was unusual in its presentation and relatively short on pages. Neither fish nor fowl, the picture novel sold poorly and was not given another print run.

St. John clearly decided the experiment was a bust and moved on with regular production and other experiments. Baker returned to his regular art chores, and Waller ended his brief flirtation with the comics industry. Drake also left the business, but returned in the early 1960s, eventually landing at DC where he co-created the Doom Patrol and Deadman. Neither the comics industry nor traditional publishers would attempt anything like *It Rhymes With Lust* for nearly 30 years, making it an anomaly but also clearly a pioneer. Despite this fact, comics scholarship almost completely overlooks the first graphic novel.

6. What Is A Graphic Novel?

As with much of comics scholarship, the matter of definition is a significant problem for graphic novels. While scholars are comfortable applying the label to a wide variety of publications – including non-fiction, short-story collections, and reprints of serialized works – no standard definition exists. Even Baetens and Frey, whose explicit purpose is to introduce readers and scholars to the form, reject a “general definition” (7), instead providing several pages of contextual analysis. They offer four “levels” of analysis – form, content, publication format, and production and distribution – describing each in great detail while arguing that the graphic novel is something qualitatively different than comics (8-19). Other writers, such as Sabin and Hoppenstand, who consider the graphic novel a format of comics, rely on similar components. Perhaps the most succinct description is DeCandido’s “a self-contained story that uses a combination of text and art to articulate the plot...similar in content to a novella.” (50)

By all these standards, *It Rhymes With Lust* is unquestionably a graphic novel: it is a long-form, fictional story; it is told in words and pictures; it was published, distributed, and sold as a single entity. Nonetheless, it is largely ignored by studies of the form¹, which largely point to comics pioneer Will Eisner’s 1978 work *A Contract With God*, as the first graphic novel,

occasionally affording a footnote to Richard Corben's 1976 *Bloodstar*, which used the phrase on its jacket. Gabilliet's authoritative history of American comics gives a nod to Gil Kane's work in 1968 and 1971 as serving "at the forefront" of the graphic novel movement (166), not mentioning any earlier efforts. Pinkley's brief history of graphic novels for librarians qualifies the work's status with "possibly the first iteration" (2); Schelly's history of comics more dismissively avers that "some consider" it so (67); even Baker's biographer, Amash, says that "the point is debatable" (51).

7. Obstacles to Acknowledgment

What keeps *It Rhymes With Lust* from being recognized as a pioneering work, the first in a now-thriving format? While it is difficult to assign a specific cause, four significant factors come into play: genre, artistic merit, timing, and racial politics.

Although romance comics were once a significant part of the industry, accounting for over 25% of publication between 1949 and 1955 (Nolan, 1), they receive little love from scholars and – with rare exceptions – little attention from collectors. Thus far Nolan's 2008 overview remains the only book on the subject and scholarly papers are rare indeed.² Schelly's thorough overview of comics in the 1950s devotes only one of its 227 pages to romance comics (16), with rare mentions after that buried in publisher-by-publisher overviews. Curiously, Nolan herself maintains that the "lack of attention to four-color love is understandable" (4). It is notable that, in her efforts to redress this lack of scholarship, Nolan completely ignores *It Rhymes With Lust*. She devotes over five pages to St. John's romance line, two of which focus on Matt Baker, but never discusses their intriguing experiment (55-58, 80). In this environment, it is not surprising that *It Rhymes With Lust* has difficulty getting recognition.

The genre challenge is directly related to potential rejection of the book based on perceptions of its merit. The story itself is a classic potboiler, a fascinating tale but not one that would typically be judged highly on its literary merits. A review of the 2007 Dark Horse reprint describes the novel as “more curio than classic” (Raiteri 65). As Beaty observes, comics studies is a relatively new discipline, for which “consecration as a legitimate art form has not come easily, and the academic study of the form is still marginal” (107). This places context around the academic neglect of a work that falls into the margins of even fan-based study and discussion.

It is also a victim of the tendency in scholarly circles to focus on what Steirer refers to as “auteur” comics (272-3). Matt Baker has become a collectible, respected artist in recent years (Amash, 65), but *It Rhymes With Lust* does not fit into the auteur model as it is neither a “single-authored, non-genre work” nor produced “outside of traditional production constraints.” (Steirer 272) In an emerging, sometimes apologetic discipline, *It Rhymes With Lust* does not lend itself easily to serious study, despite its pioneering placement. This elitism is a shame, since including the picture novel in the scholarly discourse about graphic novels would allow for a more thorough analysis of the format, its evolution, and its diversity.

As an anomalous work, *It Rhymes With Lust* also gets lost in the turmoil of comics at the time of its publication. It appears at the zenith of romance publishing, which dropped off more than 50% after its second year and tapered down to a few titles published by a handful of companies by the time the genre was only five years old. Crime and horror comics dominated the stands and the conversations of the time. The social and political fallout of these genres, culminating in Dr. Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*, U.S. Senate hearings, and the imposition of the Comics Code remain the focus of much scholarship relating to early 1950s comics. Per Lyons, “it is hard to say whether Drake and Waller’s ambitions for the ‘picture

novel' would have been realized had the climate for mature-themed comics not been so hostile.” (467) While I would argue that many other factors contributed to the failure of *It Rhymes With Lust* in the market, the hostile climate that Lyons describes certainly receives most of the attention in modern comics scholarship.

The picture novel actually lends itself to inclusion in discussions of this history. Hajdu's book – an excellent review of the publishing history and socio-political climate of the pre-Code 1950s – gives the best overview of *It Rhymes With Lust*, neatly identifying its fit in the increase of mature themes in sequential art and demonstrating its significance in a way that others have so far neglected to do (164-8). Matt Baker's work was also included in Wertham's diatribe, with the doctor including the artist's famous cover rendering of the Phantom Lady as an example of “sexual stimulation” (ninth page of unnumbered center section).

Baker's own history and identity almost certainly contribute to the lack of attention the book receives. Baker was an African American in a predominantly white industry, drawing attractive, often provocative images of white women. Comics creators were largely unknown by the buying public, and Baker's complex situation made him unlikely to promote his work. Of the hundreds of people making comics in the 1950s, Schelly is only able to identify five African Americans in a sidebar dedicated to their contributions. Matt Baker was by far the most prolific and long-lasting (67-9). Artist Al Feldstein, who worked extensively with Baker during his time in the Iger studio, provides some insight into the role race played in his work.

He was a rare phenomenon in an industry almost totally dominated by white males. However, he was extremely talented, and it was his talent that overcame any resistance to his presence based on racial bias. But I feel that Matt, personally, was acutely aware of the perceived chasm that separated him from the

rest of us. And it may be that because of that perceived problem there is little known about Matt Baker, aside from his stunning artwork. (Amash 38)

These sentiments are echoed in over two dozen interviews in both Amash and Benson. Matt Baker is described as a quiet, hard-working, enormously talented man; none but Feldstein, long-time inker Ray Osrin and occasional studio partner Frank Giusto offer any other observations. Baker also died in 1959, just after St. John went out of business, leaving behind few details about his private or professional life. Until Amash and Benson independently demonstrated their sincere interest in his work, Baker's family refused to share any information about him (Amash 96).

It is difficult to assess how much race plays into the neglect of Baker's longest work, but it was clearly a factor in how he lived his life and how much information about him was available during and after his working years. Ironically, Baker is also largely absent from works devoted to African American history. Finkelman devotes only a single entry to any comics contributors (headed "Cartoonists"), leaving him out entirely. Even Howard and Jackson's survey of African-American characters and creators gives Baker fewer than three lines, buried in a biography of Jackie Ormes (31). The relationship between the African-American community and the comics industry is an area of serious interest and growing scholarship. Discussion of Matt Baker as a significant creator – and illustrator of the first graphic novel – is worth deeper analysis in this context.

8. Recognition

Published in small numbers by a small, long-defunct company, with art by a team best known for romance work, the picture novel *It Rhymes With Lust* has a hard time getting attention in the growing discipline of comics studies. Dark Horse comics issued a reprint in 2007,

allowing significantly more people to experience the novel, although sales of this edition were not substantial. The reprint came at the instigation of Arnold Drake, who wanted the work to receive its due as “the first graphic novel.” (Schutz) Despite the work’s significant historical position, a variety of factors in the comics industry and comics scholarship contribute to its ongoing neglect. Perhaps its best hope for recognition rests with its extraordinary illustrator. Increased interest in Matt Baker’s art as influential and collectible, combined with a recent surge in biographical information about him, may open the door to more thorough inclusion of *It Rhymes With Lust* in the comics canon.

Notes

1. An extensive survey of scholarly books and articles – including Baetens and Frey, Gabilliet, Hoppenstand, Kannenberg, Nolan, Sabin, Weiner, and Williams and Lyons – found no mention whatsoever of *It Rhymes With Lust* or its creators.
2. A search of Ebsco’s *Academic Search Premier* for their subject term “Comic books” yields over 7,000 hits. A search for their term “Romance comic books” yields only ten, over half of which are also about other genres.

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