



Growing Up (and Raising Kids) with Comic Books

VIVEK MENEZES

LIKE MOST INDIAN PARENTS IN THE 1970S, MINE WERE COMMITTED OPPONENTS to the reading of comics. Books (and some few pre-approved magazines) were meant only for edification, to help us to climb the ladder of aspiration. Reading (like every other aspect of our lives) was required to equate directly to self-improvement. In this scheme of things, the lurid world of comic books had no place. Regarded at best as a cut above cigarettes, they were inextricably associated with guilt and guile, and remained something to be sampled surreptitiously.

Naturally, this meant that the whole lot of us were diehard comic book freaks, and would remain so our entire lives. Our long afternoons in those tantalizingly interminable days before television's ubiquity were spent burrowed under piles of Tintins and Asterixes, Indrajal and Amar Chitra Katha, innumerable Commandos and Archies. This was a time when ancient, dog-eared copies of *Mad* magazine were passed around like prized artifacts, and I recall ransacking my grandparents' dusty library shelves to leaf through decades-old issues of the venerable *Punch* just for its deft, often-wicked cartoons.

Viewed from our multi-screened era of incessant distraction, those years were a kind of golden age for reading in our lives. That experience of undisturbed immersion in words and illustrations — in an unhurried age before cellular phones and



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 (left) Vivek's neighbours' child – comics paraphernalia now show up everywhere. (right) Vivek Menezes and his kids – (from left to right) Arjun, Nayan and Rohan – who are growing up on a reading diet that includes a healthy dose of comics.

All photographs by Niju Mohan.

media overload – profoundly affected our entire generation of now-middle-aged readers and writers. Since then, it has been wonderful, and perhaps not so very surprising, to witness waves of top-notch writing come out of India to dominate best-seller lists across the Anglophone sphere.

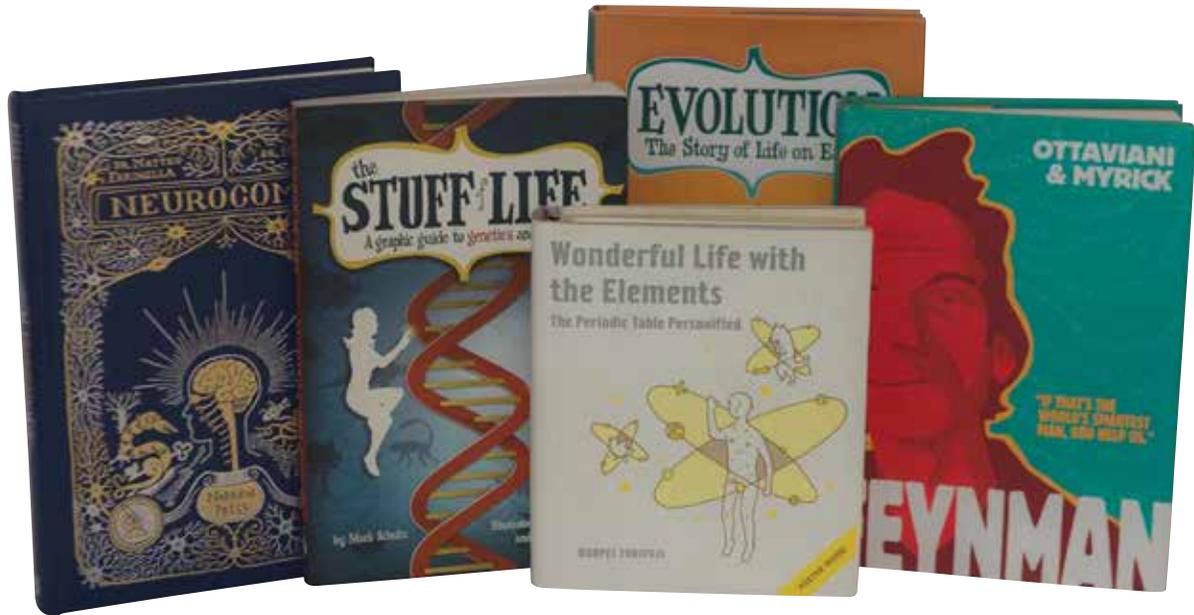
No less impressive – and considerably less expected – has been the deft escape that comic books have made from the back rooms and bottom shelves of the library hierarchy, leapfrogging directly into the realm of high art. Once only a guilty pleasure, now comic books wield real gravitas. And this brings us to the curious dilemma faced by every Indian who grew up in the 1970s, and now raises his or her own children. What is going to be the family policy? What role do comic books play in a child's upbringing and education?

The Archie Andrews View of America

Looking back now, I realize it was Mario Miranda who kick-started my lifelong love of sequential art. His bright illustrations enlivened my Bal Bharati readers and the Goa drawings in particular were a big part of my childhood, with archetypal landscapes peopled with familiar characters from my own life: solemnly suited elders, formidable matrons, vampish single ladies and portly priests. Those lovingly detailed drawings have never failed to bring a smile to my lips. It is only as an adult that I learned from Mario himself that his major early influences were comic books imported from the USA in the 1940s and '50s.

By the time I was 13, my surreptitious trysts with comics had become a sustained obsession. Now came a stroke of fate: my father took on a work assignment in the USA and my parents, younger brother and I decamped to New York just in time for me to enter high school.

Nobody was more excited than I. Heavily prepped by stacks of comics, I knew exactly what to expect. Archie-fed delusions that dating and frequently kissing girls



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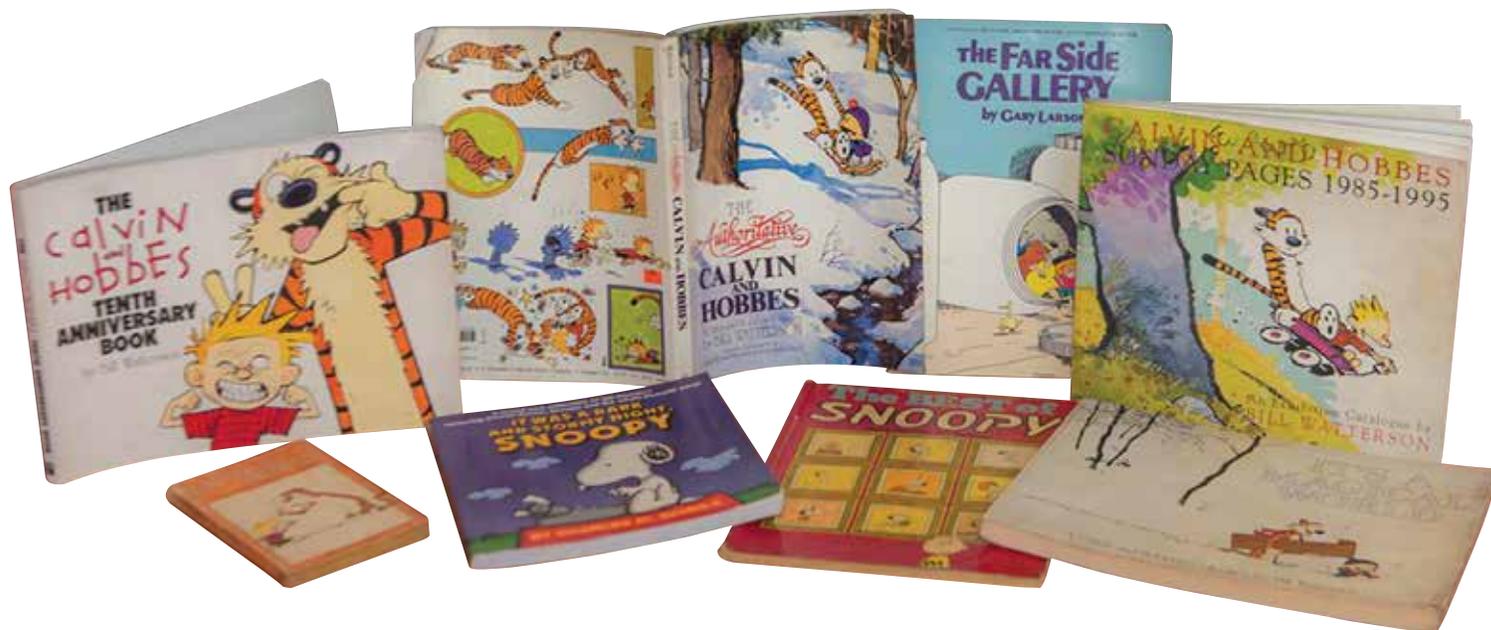
There's a whole lot of excellent books out there that provide learning in a graphic form, which children are usually happy to read, and more likely to retain.

went along with high school filled my mind, along with dreams of a car and a fat allowance. I was especially excited to eat the manna-seeming Hostess Twinkies, and acquire a personable family of “sea monkeys” – both advertised enticingly in so many comics of the day.

And so my sojourn in the USA started off as series of terrible, crushing disappointments. 1980s' American high-schoolers grimaced Goth attitude, and everyone thought Archie was lame. My parents had a good laugh about providing wheels, eventually giving me a second-hand ladies' bicycle. It turned out I was far too embarrassed and self-conscious to even talk to the girls. Then I discovered sea monkeys were actually microscopic brine shrimp, and Twinkies were otherwise indistinguishable from sugared Styrofoam. Nothing was what I expected. Life sucked.

Comics came to the rescue, in what has been a recurring pattern in my life. Whiling away long hours alone in the school library, I somehow discovered the *New Yorker* magazine, and quickly became hooked on its mix of novella-length stories, drawings and cartoons. Years of scouring *Punch* from my grandparents' shelves in Bombay were a perfect lead-in to falling in love with Saul Steinberg's noodling, Charles Addams mordant satire, and the *New Yorker's* signature non-sequitur cartoons – so unfunny they're hilarious. In a pattern that persists today, I began to look forward to each week's issue, flipping through to all the cartoons before starting on the text.

Sometime in 1982, a whimsical, herring-addict penguin became a permanent character in the syndicated, counterculture-minded newspaper strip, *Bloom County* by Berkeley Breathed, and I was immediately hooked. Still foundering in a new, utterly foreign country, I found myself relating strongly to the clueless, naïve Opus the penguin who muddles through life fuelled by pure optimism. Watching me return to check the cartoon out every day in the paper, the school librarian turned me on to *Doonesbury*, the Garry Trudeau strip that has mirrored and skewered American political life so effectively through the years. This is when I learned just how useful the comics medium can be – it's simply a fact that I learned more of what is truly valuable about the US from *Doonesbury* than from any school or college classes. So it became clear to me that comic books could convey really meaningful content in a few short panels, that punchlines could go right alongside pulling no punches.



When high school ended in 1986, I shifted rapidly from undergraduate college in the us to graduate school in the UK and then my first job in France. By now *Calvin and Hobbes* and *The Far Side* were also fixtures in “the funny pages”, and I had become a dedicated and lifelong subscriber to the *New Yorker*, putting aside whatever I was doing, wherever I was in the world, to flip through the cartoons the moment an issue arrived.

It was while living in Paris that I discovered that comics were a very adult genre in France, it was de rigeur for hipster intellectuals to carry around expensively-produced bandes dessinée, hard-cover comic books printed on art paper, with all kinds of sophisticated themes. Somewhat ironically, it was only then that the New York-based comics compilation *Raw* came to my attention. Produced by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, these were a groundbreaking and visually eye-popping series of collected graphic stories – including many from France – but from the beginning, the standout contribution was *Maus*, the serialized, stylized Holocaust memoir drawn by Spiegelman. The moment I first read it, there was no doubt at all in my mind – a vital corner had been turned for comics. It was clear *Maus* was one of the most compelling things I had ever read, one of the greatest achievements in art I’d ever encountered. It pushed the envelope wide for the genre.

When the floodgates creaked open after *Raw* to a steady torrent of new directions, experiments and narrative voices in comic books, I was waiting eagerly and have steadily devoured it all: Joe Sacco’s spectacular conflict journalism, Shaun Tan’s wordless eloquence, the stream of memoirs from Marjane Satrapi to Alison Bechdel, the triumphant return of Robert Crumb (most memorably with *Genesis*), and the evolution of manga to spectacular cinemascope. And now, inevitably, there has followed the development that is most heartening to me and other children of 1970s’ India: the rise of homegrown, “desi” comic books.

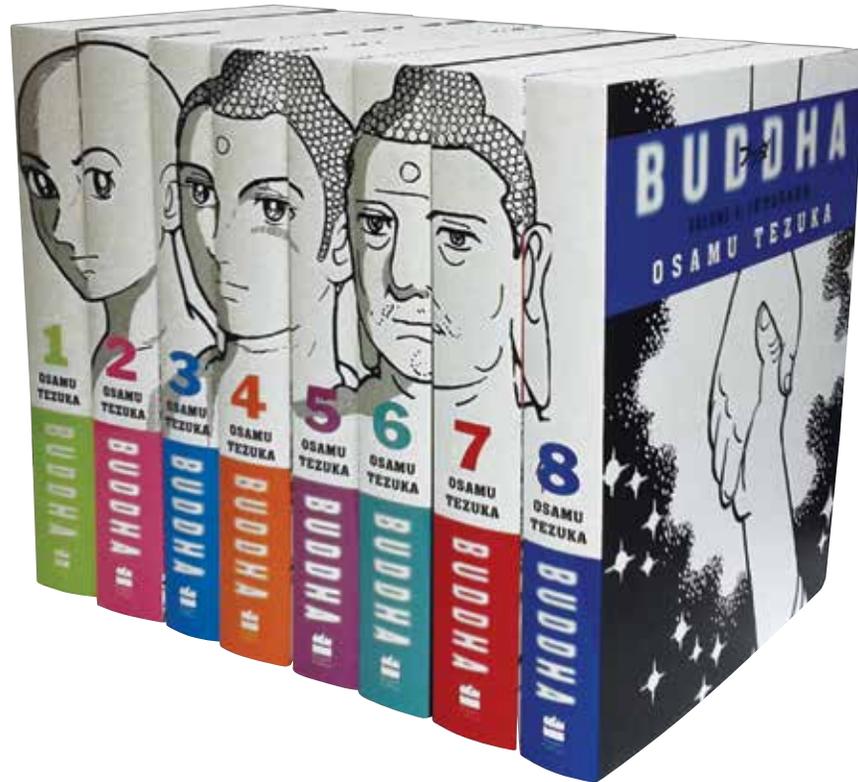
The Great Leap Back to Goa

Ten years ago, I made a calculated leap back to my ancestral Goa after more than two decades studying and working abroad. Now married with two sons (a third was born in 1998), I have found my prevailing concerns are not very different from my own parents’ three decades ago in pre-liberalization India.

3 Funny-pages fixtures such as *Calvin and Hobbes* and *The Far Side* have introduced young people to the wonder of comics.

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Osamu Tezuka's biography of the Buddha in eight volumes was the portal through which the Menezes children discovered the world of comics.



But first I became aware that intriguing new currents were stirring in Indian publishing, and comic books were part of the most interesting developments. I found Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* – with its pitch-perfect portrayal of slacker, middle-class Indian preoccupations. It immediately reminded me of all-time favourite novel, *English, August* by Upamanyu Chatterjee. Of course I was an instant fan.

But nothing compares with the heart-stopping impact of my first encounter with *Kari*, Amruta Patil's admirably experimental graphic novel about a young woman adrift in Mumbai's transition to "world city".

From first look, I was blown away by Patil's cheeky visual quotations and confident, painterly style. As a comics lifer, I was quickly convinced that this was a groundbreaking graphic novel worthy of the finest pioneering efforts in the genre: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and other landmark, genre-making comics from *Raw*. I looked up everything I could about the author and was shocked to find indifferent, even hostile reviews in the Indian press. It is only much later that I learned Spiegelman too faced confusion and disdain when he first drew war stories with cat and mouse protagonists. *Kari* was panned by magazine writers who couldn't understand it, but like *Maus* eventually found its audience nonetheless, and now is rightly accorded cult-like status.

If the Indian comic books scene was producing world-class artists like Amruta Patil, I was determined to follow the desi genre as assiduously as I had in the West. While it is true *Kari* remains sui generis for me, many riches have followed, from the spectacular slew of tribal-art-driven books from Tara Books, to Navayana's mesmerizing *Bhimayana*, terrific anthologies from Blaft and Pao, and Patil's own lush, lovely *Parva*.

Comics for the Next Generation

But what about my children? Could comic books and graphic stories play a role in iPad-infested lives? Would they be for entertainment or education? Amar Chitra Katha seemed an obvious bet; I did a writing assignment for the media house that now owns the comic book imprint, secured a complete collection as part of my payment, and for around a month my boys were waist-deep, wading steadily through the

comics of my childhood. But then what? Now what?

The answer has come in a flood of new books and additions to our groaning bookshelves, starting with Osamu Tezuka's eight-part Buddha biography. While barely a manga aficionado myself – though Blaft's hysterically funny *Stupid Guy Goes to India* books are favourites – I bought the first five volumes in a second-hand bookstore in Bangalore/Bengaluru en route to a long family vacation in Coorg, and placed them on our rented villa's shelf. To my lasting surprise and pleasure, each was picked up in turn by my oldest son (then 11) who raced through the lot in a couple of days, and immediately started clamouring for the rest of the series. Then his younger sibling (just seven, and comparatively not such a keen reader) did the same. Now this was something to think about. There was no way either would have read a fat (let alone eight-volume) biography of Gautama Buddha if it hadn't been presented to them in comic book form. At that moment the light bulb went on for good.

Today graphic books play a central, valuable and irreplaceable role in my children's reading and cultural lives. What is more, comics are often my first "go-to" option when introducing them to a new topic, or supplementing their school requirements. Thus *The Manga Guide to Physics* has greatly leavened my oldest son's hard slog through the ICSE curriculum, and *Wonderful Life with the Elements: The Periodic Table Personified* has been a real godsend that has given chemistry "a friendly face". Most recently, the Wellcome Trust's fantastic *Neurocomic* has been the best possible study aid to biology lessons about the brain.

My 10-year-old too has found himself taking leaps ahead in his curriculum thanks to books like Mark Schultz and the Cannon brothers' ingenious "graphic guides" *Evolution* and *The Stuff of Life: A graphic guide to genetics and DNA*. Mesmerized by the utterly wonderful "archicomic" *Yes is More* (which showcases the architectural-engineering feats of Bjarke Ingels) he is already very interested in architecture and design. Every day or two, he consults the information-packed pages of *Go: A Kidd's Guide to Graphic Design* by Chip Kidd.

Meanwhile, all of us have learned a great deal from graphic biographies of people like Richard Feynman (Jim Ottaviani and Leland Myrick) and Isadora Duncan (Sabrina Jones), Sigmund Freud (Corinne Maier and Anne Simon) and Marie and Pierre Curie (Lauren Redniss). And to my great pleasure it is now the six-year-old youngest in the family who eagerly scans the mailbox every day for the *New Yorker*, and who reserves the right to open the issue first. Naturally, he flips through the pages seeking the comics first, only the comics.

In a family library that includes *The Decameron* and *Kama Sutra*, it's interesting that it is a few comic books that are off-limits to the kids, the graphics pushing content into the "not until you are older" category. This includes several French books, including the otherwise interesting and educative *Kiki de Montparnasse* (about a famous Parisian character), and highly ironically, the straightforward, completely unabridged and unaltered text of *Genesis*, illustrated by Robert Crumb. Who knew the bible was NSFW?

Many other meatier and heavier graphic books await my trio: the utterly brilliant *Logicomix*, which compresses a college degree's worth of information about the foundational quests in mathematics, Joe Sacco's profound enquiries into the nature of violence, even the original *Maus* (somehow that has not drawn them in yet). More and better is sure to come, but one thing is already certain: this section of our book collection will just keep on growing.