

Mark Beyer's *Raw* Roots

By Jeet Heer

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Celebrated by the world at large as an artist able to grapple with public tragedies such as the Holocaust and the September 11th terrorist attacks, Art Spiegelman has a more interesting reputation among his fellow cartoonists, who admire him not just as a creator but also as an editor. Spiegelman will be talking in Toronto on Friday at the Festival of Authors Festival. Most likely, the audience will query him about his best-selling books *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

While both these works are immensely popular and much praised, Spiegelman's has had an equally large impact through his thirty year career as editor, during which time he's constantly scouted out new talent, pushed fellow artists to become more ambitious, kept unjustly ignored figures in print, and in the process reshaped the world's understanding of comics.

I got a sense of Spiegelman's global impact when I was traveling in Israel this summer and met up with a group of Tel Aviv cartoonists who work together as the Actus collective. The Israeli cartoonists downplayed any indigenous roots for their work and emphasized their debt to *Raw*, a brilliant graphic showcase edited by Spiegelman and his wife Francoise Mouly from 1980 to 1991.

It is natural that editorial work of Spiegelman and Mouly is largely a trade secret, appreciated mainly by the comics cognoscenti. Editing is an odd profession, both important and thankless. Like all great editors, Spiegelman and Mouly have performed an essential taste-making task, testing out new work with their own refined palate and offering deeply informed guidance to the public.

Spiegelman and Mouly's editing is an outgrowth of their intense historical consciousness, their awareness of how comics have evolved and where they need to go. To understand their achievement, they themselves have to be placed in an historical context.

Spiegelman started cartooning in the 1960s, and was a younger member of the baby-boomer cohort that published lewd and rude comics in the underground press. As the artistic kid brother of Robert Crumb, Spiegelman appreciated the liberationist agenda of the original undergrounds, the way they opened the door to personal expression. Yet he quickly grew tired of the fact that liberation for most artists simply meant telling dirty jokes about body functions and dope. To use a Yiddish word that he's fond of, Spiegelman is a born kibitzer, a constant advice giver who likes nudging his friends in the right direction. He performed some of his best early kibitzing as co-editor of *Arcade* (1974-76), a short-lived magazine that showed what underground comics could be when artists were prodded to do more than just fart around.

When Spiegelman teamed up with his wife Francoise Mouly in 1980 to do *Raw*, his anthology making acquired a new sophistication. Born in France, Mouly had a European appreciation for craft values and a cosmopolitan sensibility. With Mouly at the helm *Raw* constantly pushed the limits of print technology (featuring ever-

changing formats and paper stock) and was noticeably alert to new work from Europe.

As editors, Spiegelman and Mouly are like racing touts who always bet on the right horse. A large number of their artists have gone on to do important work: Ben Katchor, Gary Panter, Sue Coe, Charles Burns, among others. To a large degree, the cartooning renaissance of the last twenty-twenty years is an outgrowth of *Raw*.

The cartoonist Mark Beyer, who has a new book out called *Amy and Jordon* (Pantheon), offers a good example of the editorial acumen of Spiegelman and Mouly. Born in Pennsylvania in 1950 and a former inmate of a reform school, Beyer combines the primitive urgency of outsider art with the subtle attentiveness to decoration found in European toy design.

Throughout his career, Beyer has been helped along by Spiegelman and Mouly. Beyer's first published work was in *Arcade* in 1976 and he later became a fixture of *Raw*. Spiegelman also helped Beyer find a weekly gig at the New York Press, where his work has been most often found. In between *Arcade* and *Raw*, Mouly helped Beyer self-publish his early strips.

It was at Spiegelman and Mouly's Manhattan apartment that Beyer discovered his artistic influences: George Herriman, the creator of Krazy Kat; Lionel Feininger, the expressionist who dabbled in the Sunday funnies; the unvarnished primitive doodler Rory Hayes. "[Spiegelman's] loft is like a comic art library," Beyer once told an interviewer. "Books piled literally to the ceiling – and he has high ceilings!"

Beyer's work centres around two recurring characters, Amy Tilsdale and Jordon Levine, who look like lumpy rag dolls and behave like the characters in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, constantly badgering each other for their inadequacies. Living in a dingy New York apartment, they suffer an endless torrent of urban indignities: an overbearing landlord; a sink full of dirty dishes, a kitchen teeming cockroaches and other scabby insects, streets filled with drug addicts and criminals. And when they try to escape for the fleeting pleasures of a day on the beach, they are harassed by nasty teenagers and scabrous sea-creatures. Beyer's skills in capturing the verminous and squalid make these unpleasant experiences all too real.

Although they've been roommates for two decades now, Amy and Jordon don't do much to help each other survive in their hostile universe. While Amy is a fussbudget and busy-body, Jordon is even worse: lazy, selfish, quick to anger, lacking in generosity and mean to children. At its most intense, Amy and Jordon strips capture the suffocation of living in a close space with someone you don't care for.

Described in these terms, Beyer's work sounds too painful to endure. Surprisingly, this is not the case: Obsessive and tightly focused as they are, the Amy and Jordon strips are also bleakly hilarious and life-affirming. Part of their power comes from sheer repetition. Appearing week after week in the *New York Press*, Beyer's strips were a testament to how strong life is even in the face of a hostile environment.

Like so many other newspaper features, comic strips are not about giving us the "news" as in offering the habitual pleasures of re-iteration and redundancy. Week

after week, Charlie Brown is insulted, Beetle Bailey goofs off, Dagwood Bumstead runs into the mailman, Amy and Jordon fend off threats to their existence.

Within this treadmill cosmos, pleasure comes in the form of seeing what new variation can be wrung out of the old formula. In this area, Beyer is a genuine master: he's done hundreds of Amy and Jordon strips, each one of which plays with the horizontal format.

Decorative ingenuity is constantly on display, with panels reinvented as: triangles, circles, cones and waves. Describing the comic strips of the early 20th century, Coulton Waugh noted that they rarely made any "pretense at depth" but rather were willing to settle for a "flat, sensible world of their own." This "strong, two-dimensional appearance" gave the classic strips "a sort of stylized, textile-design effect." The same is true of Beyer: not chasing after the optical illusions of perspective and depth, Beyer patterns each strip into a unique unit.

"The horizontal rectangle becomes part of his ongoing problem to solve." Spiegelman noted when we chatted about Beyer's work. "Its strength has to do with its bulldog determinedness to keep plugging away at the same impossible situation without ever being able to escape it."