



The Best American Comics 2016

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“There’s something thrilling about seeing people invent new ways to tell their story. To me, it’s proof that the art form of comics is healthy: it lives and grows and reinvents itself. It’s alive!”

—Roz Chast, from the Introduction

FEATURING Lynda Barry, Kate Beaton, Cece Bell, Geneviève Elverum, Ben Katchor, John Porcellino, Joe Sacco, Adrian Tomine, Chris Ware, Julia Wertz, and others

Roz Chast, guest editor, was born in Brooklyn, New York. Her cartoons began appearing in *The New Yorker* in 1978. Since then she has published hundreds of cartoons and written or illustrated more than a dozen books. Her memoir *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and a 2014 National Book Award Finalist.

Bill Kartalopoulos, series editor, is a comics critic, educator, curator, and editor. He teaches courses about comics at Parsons and at the School of Visual Arts. He lives in Brooklyn, New York. For more information please visit: on-panel.com.

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From Reader Review The Best American Comics 2016 for online ebook

David Schaafsma says

So collections like this are invariably uneven and of course skewed to the taste of the editor whose choices we are dependent on. Last year's chooser, Jonathan Lethem, was disappointing to me. I was hopeful about Roz Chast as editor this year but also suspected she would choose more mainstream stuff, as she is an older artist working with *The New Yorker* for decades. But I like her work a lot, and I was pleasantly surprised to find a blend of (kind of) mainstream or at least well known stuff with things I might term more experimental. I knew quite a bit of it from my reading of the last year, but it was nice to revisit it.

My favorites, all stuff I knew: Adrian Tomine, an excerpt from *Killing and Dying*; Chris Ware, an excerpt from *The Last Saturday*; Keiler Roberts, *Powdered Milk* Vol. 14; Richard McGuire, *Here* (excerpt); Ben Katchor's stuff, Joe Ollman's "Shut Your Piehole, Johnny Pinetop," and GG's *Don't Leave Me Alone*. My absolute favorite was probably Ollman's fictional piece (check him out!) and runner-up Keiler Roberts's memoir comics, but there's a lot of good stuff here, stuff Beto Rodriguez, Cece Bell. . .

But I also liked new stuff I didn't know that I look forward to reading more into such as Gabrielle Bell's *The Dishrack* and Lance Ward's *Adults Only*. Better than "uneven"; mostly good, this year!

Raina says

I like to read this every year to take my temperature on the current comics scene. It's an imperfect method, but sometimes I discover new stuff I like, so at least that's a win.

As with the last couple of volumes of this, all of the things I was really into I'd either read already or were from zines or other things I might have a hard time getting ahold of.

The thing that's still ringing in my brain is from the very first page of the Foreword, by Series Editor, Bill Kartalopoulos:

There is no "mainstream" in comics. . .

The larger book publishing industry still operates on a mass scale and can still be called a mass medium, but mainly by aggregating a large number of smaller audiences (including the audience for graphic novels). Relatively few individual books reach a truly mass audience. Television and film remain mass media, though their delivery systems and platforms (and therefore their content) are rapidly changing in response to new digital networks and technology. Video games are certainly a highly inventive and lucrative mass medium. And the Internet is the biggest global mass medium ever invented by humans.

If there are any comics today that *are* mass media, and therefore "mainstream," they might be comics like these: [image of an Allie Brosh poop sequence]

It's completely true that there are an extreme few books that truly reach a "mass" audience. That's why people need finding aids and tools and ::cough cough:: Librarians and booksellers who specialize in knowing

the landscape of the publishing industry to help them find their next great read. It's an articulation of something I think we all already knew, but for me, it reframed things just enough for me to look at things in a new way.

Great choice for reading during short breaks at work.

Sara says

This series is always fun to read and find some new writers/artists to look into. And such a variety of styles, lengths, subject matter, format - demonstrates the range of graphic novels/comics.

Jenna says

What a pleasant surprise! I've dabbled aplenty in the Best American [insert literary genre] [insert year] anthologies, but never before with comics. I had mixed feelings about picking this up, as I've read a lot of comics lately and have been dealing with some silly guilt about limping across the finish line of my annual reading challenge fueled by the energy gel of heavily illustrated books. However, I felt my brain stretching as I read through this anthology, and this reminded me that there is not necessarily a qualitative distinction between books with or without visual elements; both have equal potential to challenge and enlighten.

I figured that if I were to explore an anthology like this, what better guide than Roz Chast, this year's editor, who proved an excellent Beatrice to my Dante on this journey and well worthy of my appreciation and trust. Many of the comics in this book had elements of the emotionally raw, unflinching, plain-spoken, laid-bare quality of *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant*, and its dark and fleeting hints of humor as well. Roz's brief introduction (I call her Roz now) is also as excellent and funny as you'd hope, and it's preceded by a useful, concise history of comics as recounted by series editor Bill Kartalopoulos.

As with any anthology, there a couple entries I didn't read or care for, but I was surprised at the percentage of the contents that I found truly compelling. I ended up adding a number of previously unfamiliar authors and works to my TBR and library hold lists. Chast includes comics from contributors who are very diverse in terms of visual style, demographics, and means of distribution, from the relative stars of *Drawn and Quarterly*-published volumes to new or outsider artists who share their work through self-published zines and blogs. Some comics are featured in entirety, but when excerpts are used, the editing is very well executed and allows the reader a tasty contextualized glimpse of what that longer work offers (though I was usually left wanting more of it!).

Since it's the holiday season, it's worth mentioning that a couple volumes of this series would make an enjoyable and inspiring gift for the artists and graphic novel/comics readers in your life! Be aware that many of the comics have adult content, so you may want to preview before gifting. Although there are also excerpts from work suitable for quite young readers: again, the beauty of this anthology is its inclusionary eye for quality and talent above all other factors! Enjoy!

Stewart Tame says

The Best American Comics volumes are always worth reading. Not everyone will agree with the term "Best", but these are certainly all interesting. It helps to think of it as equivalent to the difference between literary fiction and the average SF (or whatever your favorite genre happens to be) anthology, or the typical Oscar nominee versus a typical Summer blockbuster. It may not be what you usually read, but there's a certain level of quality and artistic achievement that's apparent whether it fits your personal definition of "Best" or not.

Roz Chast is the guest editor for this volume. While I appreciate the idea of rotating guest editors, I'm not sure how much it does for the series. Yes, each volume has a different feel to it, but it's difficult to say how much of that comes from the guest editor's taste and how much is due to the fact that different stuff gets published every year. I suppose, at the very least, it helps to preserve the sanity of the various editors by not subjecting them to a constant grind. And I suppose it helps to prevent favoritism from having much impact on the contents. Still, it's not like you can easily point to any story in here and confidently say, "Yes, that's definitely a story that everyone could predict only Roz Chast would have chosen."

Some of these stories--Adrian Tomine and Joe Ollmann, for instance--were familiar to me, but I was happy to read them again. Some of them--Gilbert Hernandez, for one--are things I've been meaning to read and just haven't gotten to yet. And there are some--Alex Schubert and Lance Ward, at the very least--that I need to read because the excerpts in this book are top notch.

In all, this is a high quality anthology that lives up to the promise of its title, as long as you don't take the word "Best" literally.

Edwin Arnaudin says

177 pages through Roz Chast's selections, I was convinced she'd curated the best Best American Comics yet. Adrian Tomine, Chris Ware, Drew Friedman, Marc Bell, Keiler Roberts, Joe Sacco, Cece Bell and more had all delivered while Kate Beaton had just raised the collection's bar a notch nighter.

Then came Casanova Frankenstein's messy, difficult to follow sketches, and with ten more pages left of unappealing content, I went ahead and skipped to the next author. Though Lance Ward's offering is a bit long, Geneviéve Elverum's "Blanket Portraits" are lovely to gaze upon yet low on substance, and I'm not convinced Char Esmé's and Lauren Poor's bizarre false flyers qualify as comics, things rebound well from there, especially with another terrific round from Ben Katchor.

Now, off to request larger works by the above success stories from the library.

Andrew says

Well, I'm getting better at this! (Or maybe these were just more mainstream choices) But I had already read a good chunk of these and I'm familiar with more than half of the cartoonists.

As usual, I think these are good books to pick up from a library because there's just a nice diverse selection. Nothing really popped out to me as super awesome, and I don't feel compelled to seek out work by any of the new-to-me artists here. That being said, it was still a pleasant read.

Nick says

[[comedic government surveillance and political humour, unique perspective of government spooks watching a woman go to a corner store] (hide spoiler)]

Matthew Funke says

I'm so proud of Taylor-Ruth :") I read it in one sitting, it was a Christmas gift for me.

Lisa says

This is my favorite Best American Comics collection! Thanks to Roz Chast.

Alan says

This is my third encounter with the "Best American Comics" series, and—just as in previous years—The Best American Comics 2016 is a powerful blend of the well-known and obscure, of styles ranging from clean-cut to chaotic, of artists from North America ("American" does not mean from the U.S. alone. Here, it means there are comics from *both* countries—the U.S. and Canada—although there are still no entries from Mexico or points farther south).

All of the comics in The Best American Comics 2016 have passed through at least two filters—series editor Bill Kartalopoulos and then this year's editor, Roz Chast (whose own work includes the impressive graphic memoir *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*). The only missing elements are the big names—the slick house brands, like Marvel and DC, that are easy enough to find elsewhere anyway.

One quick complaint: I'm not sure whether it was my aging eyes or reproduction issues, but I did have a harder time reading the finer details in many of these, something that wasn't a problem for me before.

Standouts for me this time started with the lead story, "Killing and Dying," by Adrian Tomine—about parenthood, improv, and always saying the wrong thing; Anne Emond's wordless "The Swim"; the near-photographic quality of Drew Friedman's "R. Crumb and Me"; kids and their contrariness in "Powdered Milk, Vol. 14" by Keiler Roberts (I could *hear* the giggles of the child calling her mother into the bedroom to announce, "I want some privacy"). Joe Sacco's chilling offscreen dialogue in "Milk" ("What can we conclude from the fact that she does not correspond to any signal?"). Hell, we're only about a third through and I might as well be listing 'em all—or almost all, anyway—so instead I'll stop there, with the acknowledgement that I'm short-changing quite a few artists by doing so.

In The Best American Comics 2016 there are, as Chast says in her Introduction,

stories by people you'll probably know, and people that I hope you will discover, as I did. There is traditional storytelling, and also comics that are unlike anything I'd ever seen, but that still work. I've included a mix of visual and narrative styles. I like variety. Also, there's something thrilling about seeing people invent new ways to tell their story. To me, it's proof that the art form of comics is healthy: it lives and grows and reinvents itself. It's alive!

—p.xviii

And I have no argument whatsoever with that assessment.

Angela says

This should really be called Best American Indie Autobiographical Adult Comics That Are Not Graphic Novels or Ongoing Comics like *Saga*.

I was pretty disappointed; there was a very heavy weighting towards autobiographical zine-style web comics, many with just okay craft (in other words, ugly drawings :/). I find that whole sub-genre incredibly self-indulgent and boring. Like, dudes, we can aaalll draw shitty drawings about how we feel shitty sometimes - or (EVEN WORSE) felt shitty once when we were teens (OMG PLZ NO MORE ABOUT HOW EMO YOUR TEENAGE YEARS WERE). Aagh. I feel like an asshole, since the autobio comix are often "pour your heart out about your gritty mental health issue", and so it feels especially mean to dislike it. BUT I DO.

I think there's more to the craft of comix than just panel pacing and panel structure. The actual art inside, the dialogue, and A PLOT!

Even the relatively better-crafted stuff, like the comic by Adrian Tomine, was centered around an excruciatingly painful family dynamic (stuttering, deluded daughter trying her hand at amateur standup while cancer-ridden mom is super supportive and cynical dad is frustrated and NOT supportive). That was one of the better ones - there was a lot of skill in how Tomine unveiled the dynamic, and the drawings were great. But I was, by the end of the book and having read N more similar emo-gutter-porn, like, JEEZ IS THERE ONLY ONE SETTING ON THIS THING?

Dov Zeller says

This was a nice compilation with a thoughtful intro, but also I'd read a lot of the stuff in it already. And it wasn't clear to me why there was so much work in here that had been published in 2014 (such as an excerpt from Porcellino's *The Hospital Suite*, *El Deafo*, *Syllabus* by Lynda Barry, *Bumf* by Joe Sacco, *Here* by Richard McGuire, a story from *Happy Stories About Well-Adjusted People* from by Joe Ollmann, and Ware's *The Last Saturday...*). I guess by 2016 they mean 2014 and 2015. But it was a bit frustrating that I had already read more than half the book.

And, well, I know the Foreword starts out "There is no 'mainstream' in comics" these days, but still, a lot of the stuff in here is about as mainstream as comics get I think, and there were long excerpts of fairly mainstream accessible works (thankfully, at least in the MA public library system), and I would have enjoyed it more if there were fewer long excerpts of more mainstream comics and a bit more work by lesser known or

not quite as available stuff.

All of that said, it's still an enjoyable collection and great to see Roz Chast's tastes.

Things I hadn't read before?

Wendy, by Walter Scott, which I am still trying to figure out how I feel about. Here's a review I really enjoyed (contextualizes Scott's work rather Wonderfully) <http://www.tcj.com/reviews/wendy/>.

Liana Finck's "All the Paintings Here Agree", which I thought were great!

Fashion Cat by Alex Schubert, which is published in Vice https://www.vice.com/en_us/contributor... (as far as I can tell, there's no Fashion Cat book out). It's funny and enjoyable, but the humor and narcissism is a bit violent and bleak for my taste.

And the Kate Beaton...well...I don't know if I've read these particular Broadside Ballads before, but I don't recall having read them, and in any case, I'm glad they were in here. I love her work a lot. Here's one that was in the anthology: <http://www.harkavagrant.com/index.php....>

Work by Sophia Zdon, Lance Ward, Dave Lap, and GG, artists I don't think I've read before, whose work I will look out for.

Glad to see Chast editing this and appreciate the book she put together a lot. And am looking forward to checking out some of the "Notable Comics" at the end.

Mycala says

I wanted to like this more than I did. Also, I was confused that Lynda Barry's "Syllabus" (which I adore!) was in here under 2016 when I recall reading it in 2014. Loved "The Last Saturday" by Chris Ware. Liked Dissident Years by Nina Bunjevac. "Blanket Portraits" was beautiful. The rest of the stuff to me was either unmemorable or left me cold. I can appreciate the work that goes into graphic novels, but some stories are just not for me. Your mileage may vary.

Hannah Garden says

Dag this may be the best Best American Comics yet.
