

PICTURE IT! A CELEBRATION OF COMICS, COMIC BOOKS, AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

TEEN READ MONTH

TELLING STORIES
WITH WORDS
AND PICTURES:
A BRIEF HISTORY

Comics are known and loved throughout the world by persons of all ages. No other format combines the visual and literary art forms in such a provocative way. The reader must consider both words and pictures, which are made for each other in this format, to fully appreciate and understand the story.

IN THE BEGINNING:

European cave paintings from as long as 32,000 years ago are the earliest known examples of pictorial art. The first true writing of a language has been traced to the ancient clay tablets of civilizations in Mesopotamia (the Middle East), approximately 5,000 years ago. Storytelling which combined both words and pictures took many more millennia to occur.

THE CIVILIZATION OF THE PICTURE:

In their book *A History of the Comic Strip*, authors Pierre Couperie and Maurice C. Horn write, “the civilization of the picture is a nineteenth-century phenomenon.” That is when printing technology reached the point where pictures could easily be incorporated with text into mass-produced publications. The technology led to a profusion of European “picture-stories,” widely disseminated through newspapers and books. These are the forerunners to the modern comic strip.

THE FIRST COMIC STRIPS:

Switzerland’s Rudolphe Töpffer has been credited with creating the first comic strip in 1827, although this was more of a picture-story. America’s own *Hogan’s Alley* by R.F. Outcault—featuring the first comic character superstar, The Yellow Kid—is also credited as the first comic strip, since it used cartoon balloons. However, authors Couperie and Horn believe the first modern comic strip appeared on December 12, 1897 in the *New York Journal*. That’s when cartoonist Rudolph Dirks debuted *The Katzenjammer Kids*. A Duke University Libraries exhibit on the First Comic Strips explains Dirks’ work included all three primary components of modern day comic strips: 1) character continuity, 2) sequential panels or pictures, and 3) speech within the picture enclosed in a balloon.

THE FIRST COMIC BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS:

Modern comic books had their beginnings when newspaper publishers began to repurpose their comic strips in print collections. *Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics* was the first publication “that a modern reader would instantly recognize as a comic book.”

What was the first modern graphic novel? According to a November, 2003 *Time* magazine column, Will Eisener’s 1978 *A Contract with God* gets the credit. “Graphic novel” is a term used to describe book-length comics. The term had been brought up by comics fans in the 1960s, but Eisener used the term when pitching *A Contract with God* to publishers. The publisher that accepted the work put the words “A Graphic Novel” on the cover. A new book format was officially recognized.

READY! SET! READ!

Find a variety of enticing graphic novels at the Great Graphic Novels for Teens website from the American Library Association: www.ala.org/yalsa/ggnt

VISIT NIE.NEWSOK.COM FOR MORE INFORMATION, ACTIVITIES, A COMICS VOCABULARY, AND RECOMMENDED READS TO START YOUR PICTURE IT! ADVENTURE.



* The scroll in this 14th century woodcut is one of the first appearances of a cartoon balloon.



* The Yellow Kid, an Irish street urchin, was the first famous American cartoon character. His popularity in *The Daily News*, beginning in 1896, profoundly affected the fortunes of rival newspapers in New York City. He was the first to demonstrate that a comic strip character could be merchandised profitably.



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