

## Topic Page: [Comics](#)

Definition: **comic** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Magazine consisting of stories told by means of strip cartoons with 'balloons' containing the characters' speech. Comics evolved from the comic-strip in the 1930s, and cover many subjects - from war and science fiction to school and family life. A tradition of adult, politicized, subversive and often erotic comics, along with explicit graphic novels, has established itself during the latter part of the 20th century.



Image from: [Many fictional crime fighters who first appeared... in Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment](#)

Summary Article: **comic strip**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

combination of cartoon with a story line, laid out in a series of pictorial panels across a page and concerning a continuous character or set of characters, whose thoughts and dialogues are indicated by means of "balloons" containing written speech. The comic strip form can be employed to convey a variety of messages (e.g., advertisements).

### History

Elements of the form can be found in antiquity, where Vergil in the *Aeneid* describes a tapestry that retraces the events of the Trojan War. The Bayeux tapestry, from the Middle Ages, retraces the hostilities leading to the Battle of Hastings. Narrative strips, usually in the form of woodcuts, became a popular medium for the expression of religious and political ideas during the Reformation.

The immediate ancestor of the newspaper comic strip was the cartoon, especially popular in the late 19th cent. In the 18th and early 19th cent., the cartoons of William Hogarth and Thomas Rowlandson regularly included balloons; continuity was utilized by Rowlandson in his *Tours of Dr. Syntax* (1812–21). In France, Rudolph Töpffer, a contemporary of Rowlandson, created albums of long, rambling strips. In the late 19th cent. the strips of Christophe (Georges Colomb) were published throughout the country in pamphlet form. The first strip with a regular cast of characters was Wilhelm Busch's *Max und Moritz* (1865), which appeared originally in periodicals and later as separate publications. The first British strip with a recurrent character was *Ally Sloper*, by Charles Ross and Marie Duval (1867–76); Tom Browne's *Weary Willie and Tired Tim* reached the British public in the 1890s.

### American Comic Strips

During their early days comic strips were published exclusively as weekly features in the Sunday supplement of American newspapers. The term "comic strip" in its strictest sense now refers to a syndicated newspaper feature that appears daily in a single row of three or four panels, together with other comic strips that form a page, and is printed in black and white, except on Sunday, when it appears in two to four consecutive rows and is printed in color in the comic section.

Although there is evidence of comic strips appearing in American newspapers as early as 1892, it is the year 1896 that commonly marks the birth of the genre in the American press, with Richard Felton Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* as its first true representative, appearing in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. The popularity of *The Yellow Kid* resulted in an immediate increase in the *World's* circulation and paved the way for succeeding comic strips.

Rudolph Dirks, in the *Katzenjammer Kids* (1897), was the first to make consistent use of a sequence of panels to tell his stories. With the creation of such pioneering strips as *Happy Hooligan* (1899), by Frederick Burr Opper, Charles (“Bunny”) Schultze's *Foxy Grandpa* (1900), Outcault's *Buster Brown* (1902), and James Swinnerton's *Little Jimmy* (1905), all the essential components of the comic strip (e.g., regularity of cast, use of sequence of panels, and speech-balloons) were refined and securely established.

In 1907 Bud Fisher created the first successful daily strip with his *Mutt and Jeff*. With syndicates distributing plates of their comic features to many newspapers, the characters acquired national readership. The enormous influence of comic strips on the public was first demonstrated by “Buster Brown” fashions early in the 20th cent. It was evidenced later in the century by the proliferation of “Peanuts,” “Doonesbury,” and “Garfield” products; many comic strip characters have also made the transition to television, film, and the theater via animation or live actors.

Adventure and suspense had been elements of comic strips since Charles W. Kahles's popular strip *Hairbreadth Harry* (1906), but they appeared in the form of burlesque. In 1924 Roy Crane, with *Wash Tubbs* (later retitled *Captain Easy*), was the first to add these features to a strip in a strictly dramatic format. Some of the earliest examples of this new genre—invariably drawn in a more realistic style than the early “funnies”—were *Tim Tyler's Luck* (1928), by Lyman Young, *Tarzan* (1929), first drawn by Harold Foster, and *Buck Rogers* (1929), by Phil Nowlan and Dick Calkins. These led to such classics as Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy* (1931), Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates* (1934), and Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* (1934), and culminated in the most consciously artistic strip of all, Harold Foster's *Prince Valiant* (1937).

## International Comic Strips

Many American comic strips were published in Europe, where for a long time their popularity hindered the development of European contributions to the strip form. John Millar Watt's *Pop* (1921), aimed at an adult audience, was one of the first daily comic strips in Britain and was eventually published in U.S. newspapers; another British strip to reach a large American audience was Reginald Smythe's *Andy Capp* (1957).

*Tintin*, created by the Belgian artist Hergé (Georges Remi) c.1930, emerged as the most important French-language comic strip of the 20th cent.; it continued to enjoy an international readership into the 1990s. The leading French comic strip of the succeeding generation has been *Astèrix* (c.1965), set in ancient Gaul; created by René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo, it is noted for its verbal wit. The first Italian comic strip appeared in 1908. Italian strips proliferated after World War II; Guido Crepax's *Valentina* (1965) has won acclaim for its visual artistry.

## Ideological Slants

Some comic strips have proved effective vehicles for political messages: *Little Orphan Annie* (1924), by Harold Gray, extolled free enterprise and conservatism, while the satirical *Pogo* (1949), by Walt Kelly, aimed barbs at the enemies of liberalism. Uninhibited political and social satire has been the hallmark of *Mad* (1952), a monthly magazine of original strips that parodied contemporary comic strips.

Satire and intellectual humor made some strips favorites with adults and university students. Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1906) and George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (1911) were forerunners of these, and they led in turn to Al Capp's *Li'l Abner* (1934), Kelly's *Pogo*, Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*

(1950), Johnny Hart's *B.C.* (1958), Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* (1970), Berkeley Breathed's *Bloom County* (1980), and Gary Larson's *The Far Side* (1980). Trudeau's *Doonesbury* directly lampoons political figures and controversial current events. Some newspapers refuse to run the strip when it touches on contentious social issues; others regularly run it in the editorial pages instead of in the comics section. Another controversial strip, *The Boondocks* by African-American cartoonist Aaron McGruder, which began widespread syndication in 1999, features black characters and displays a cynical, confrontational attitude toward political and social issues.

## Comic Books

In the 1930s renewed interest in book-length strips, of the sort produced in Europe in the 19th cent. by Töpffer and Busch, led to the modern comic book, a magazine printed in color and aimed primarily at a juvenile audience—unlike comic strips, which are intended for the entire family. At first comic books reprinted entire episodes of newspaper strips, but eventually they evolved their own characters, e.g., *Superman* (1938), by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Batman* (1939), by Bob Kane, and *Captain America* (1941), by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. In the United States adventure, crime, and war comics eventually elicited complaints from parents, teachers, and clergymen about the portrayal of violence in a product intended for children. In 1954 publishers formed a Comics Code Authority to administer self-censorship standards, thus averting government action.

## Modern Trends

Beginning with the pop art movement of the early 1960s, comics have been appropriated in the works of Roy Lichtenstein, Kenny Scharf, Art Spiegelman, and others. At about the same time, underground comics, aimed primarily at an adult audience, began to be published. Their controversial humor is directed at such diverse topics as sex, violence, politics, art, and music. Erotic comic strips found a place in some alternative publications; Robert Crumb's lewd, finely drawn strips, which have included the adventures of Fritz the Cat, his most famous character, attracted a limited but enthusiastic readership.

Meanwhile, the superhero genre, which first flourished in the mid-20th cent. in such characters as Superman, Captain Marvel, and Wonder Woman, was revived in later strips with, for instance, the surreal chiaroscuro of Steve Ditko's *Spiderman* and, further afield, in the multimedia antics of such characters as the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and the *Power Rangers*. In addition, the 1960s and subsequent decades saw the international popularity of comic strip clubs and associations, whose members collect vintage strips, write critical studies about them, and publish the results of their research in specialized journals.

Book-length fiction in comic strip form has acquired a sizable adult readership in Japan, in the “novelas” of many Spanish-speaking countries, and in the wide variety of “graphic novels” now popular in the United States. In the United States, the genre is considered by many to have begun with Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) and continued in the 1980s with autobiographical strips written by Harvey Pekar and drawn by R. Crumb and others. The form flourished in the work of Frank Miller, known especially for the pioneering superhero variation *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), and the English writer Alan Moore, particularly in his *V for Vendetta* (1982–86) and *Watchman* (1987). The graphic novel achieved considerable notice in the early 1990s with the publication of Spiegelman's *Maus*, a strip about the Holocaust that originally appeared in the American Jewish press, where it generated controversy for its treatment of such a serious subject in comic strip form; Spiegelman won a Pulitzer Prize (1992) for the *Maus* books. Among the other practitioners of the graphic novel form who have

achieved notable success in the United States during the early 2000s are Chris Ware, Marjane Satrapi, Daniel Clowes, and Joe Sacco.

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