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RAW

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RAW

Raw magazine (published from 1980 to 1991) was the premier English-language showcase for avant-garde and international comics in the 1980s and a harbinger of the graphic novel boom of the early 21st century. It was coedited by future *New Yorker* art editor Françoise Mouly and her husband, veteran underground cartoonist Art Spiegelman, whose seminal graphic novel *Maus* was first serialized in *Raw*. *Raw* promoted the idea of comics as a serious adult literary and artistic form by publishing

formally innovative contemporary comics, translating the work of established international cartoonists, and reprinting works by early 20th-century artists. Its wide-ranging subject matter and styles highlighted the medium's versatility, and its attention to design and printing brought an art-world sensibility to comics. Moreover, through its forays into book publishing, *Raw* influenced the developing concept of the graphic novel as an artistically and commercially viable form.

Raw magazine emerged from coeditor Mouly's experiments in printing and her burgeoning interest in comics as well as from Spiegelman's work with the underground quarterly *Arcade* (1975–1976) and his dissatisfaction with existing venues for publishing comics for adults. Before the former architecture student Mouly discovered *Arcade* and met Spiegelman, she had searched in vain for the English equivalent of European magazines like *Pilote*, *Spirou*, and *Métal Hurant* that featured comics. After moving from France to America and marrying Spiegelman in 1977, Mouly learned printing at a Brooklyn Vocational School while doing freelance coloring work for Marvel Comics. She bought her own printing press, and shortly afterward, Mouly began publishing an annual Soho map that subsidized her other early projects under the "Raw Books" imprint. As the genre-oriented sci-fi/fantasy magazine *Heavy Metal* began to publish French comics in English translation in the late 1970s, Mouly likewise set out to introduce European comics to an American audience. Despite Spiegelman's earlier frustrations with editing the underappreciated *Arcade*, by January 1980, Mouly had persuaded him to work on at least one issue of a new magazine of comics, graphics, and illustrated writing.

Though *Raw* would explore the intersection between comics and other visual and literary arts, its primary intent, according to Mouly, was to show how good comics could be. *Raw* was meant to fight the prejudice against comics as lowbrow and ephemeral. Besides highlighting comics as a serious medium, the magazine was also intended to bridge cultural and artistic gaps by bringing together artists and writers from around the world under one umbrella.

The first volume of *Raw* (issues #1–8, 1980–1986) focused on showing a wide range of visual work that hadn't been published before. It emerged as a highbrow and experimental counterpoint to the more entertainment-oriented *Arcade* and Robert Crumb's low-art underground *Weirdo* (1981–1993). *Raw* also nurtured a new generation of alternative cartoonists, many of whom were faculty or students at New York's School of Visual Arts, where Spiegelman taught. Other contributors were associated with the avant-garde Collective for Living Cinema in Lower Manhattan, where Spiegelman lectured on comics. The magazine drew some of its talent from veterans of underground comics, though *Raw* used their work sparingly and went beyond the familiar underground content of sex, drugs, and violence. *Raw* also introduced American readers to high-quality work in translation by prominent international cartoonists. Moreover, throughout its run, *Raw* reprinted a judicious selection of comics from the turn of the century through the 1940s.

The early *Raw* presented contributors' work to its best advantage through an innovative format and impressive production values. The first eight issues, printed in runs of 3,500 to 7,500 copies, were oversized (10½" × 14¼") and used quality paper to showcase the artwork. At a time when Tribeca's Printed Matter was first bringing widespread attention to publications made by artists, *Raw* emerged as an art object in its own right, with hand-altered covers, varied paper stocks, and extras like tipped-in comic booklets and trading cards. Full-color covers were painstakingly created using elaborate hand-cut color separations, and the cover for issue #3 won a 1981 *Print* magazine design certificate. Through 1986, *Raw*'s large format and attractive presentation encouraged short visual experiments over extended narratives, with the notable exception of Spiegelman's epic Holocaust memoir *Maus*, serialized from issue #2 (1980) onward.

Following the release of its third issue, in 1982, *Raw* began to publish a series of "Raw One-Shots," stand-alone forerunners of today's graphic novels, with a body of work by individual magazine contributors in various formats. These books, printed

in editions of at least 2,000–3,000 copies, featured comics or illustrated prose pieces and gave special attention to the work's physical presentation. The one-shots were sold through bookstores and not just comic shops, increasing their circulation and promoting comics in mainstream publishing.

With the 1986 publication of the first collected volume of *Maus* by Pantheon Books, Spiegelman and Mouly began their joint partnership with commercial publishers. Pantheon and later Penguin continued the *Raw* One-Shots, but Spiegelman and Mouly lost some of their creative control as they had to conform to industry production standards. Pantheon's reprinting of material from the first three issues of *Raw* in *Read Yourself Raw* (1987) brought a retrospective note to the dormant magazine, but *Raw* was revived by Penguin in 1989 after a three-year hiatus.

Even with Spiegelman and Mouly still at the helm, *Raw* was a very different magazine under Penguin. Because of large-scale commercial production, its print runs increased dramatically, starting with 40,000 copies of the first issue. *Raw* was reduced to a digest format, but it also grew in length to 200 pages, allowing it to show more work by more artists and reorienting it toward longer narratives, even though not many artists were making long-form comics yet.

Despite *Raw*'s expansion and its mainstream distribution, it ended its run in 1991 after three issues with Penguin and the publication of volume two of the collected *Maus*. In just over a decade, however, *Raw* had shown that comics should be taken seriously, and that comics could memorably and distinctively present long-form narratives. The magazine launched Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize—winning *Maus*, the most critically acclaimed graphic novel to date, which demonstrated that comic books could be great works of literature. Moreover, *Raw* introduced the work of many of today's most respected comics artists, from Lynda Barry to Chris Ware, to a larger audience. *Raw* is also widely acknowledged as having inspired the widespread interest that brought comics and graphic novels into bookstores, libraries, museums, and classrooms by the early 21st century.

Internationally, *Raw* and *Maus* encouraged a broadened approach to comics that moved beyond genre fiction. In retrospect, *Raw* fulfilled its mission of bringing together likeminded creators to demonstrate what was possible in making and publishing comics, and it validated their work as part of commercial culture.

See also: *Maus* (2, 3); Spiegelman, Art (2, 3, 4).

Further Reading

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—Michael W. Hancock