

David Kunzle. *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. xii + 207 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-57806-948-4.



Reviewed by David Spencer (University of Western Ontario)

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Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker (Salve Regina University)

Töpffer and the Art of the Comic

When I first opened the package containing this work, the title struck me as "Oh, oh, here we go again." Let me clarify what I mean. In recent years, there have been a number of publications dealing with the concept of first and many of them have landed on my desk for the purpose of review. So, I treated this work with a bit of suspicion and was quite prepared to place it in the pile of works that claimed to tell the story of the first radio broadcast, the first television broadcast, the first photograph—oh well, you get the idea. But then I opened the package and began a reflection on my haste to judge. What we have here is David Kunzle's beautifully detailed work on the life and times of a self-assured, eclectic individual who took some creative inspiration from the great English artists William Hogarth and Thomas Rowlandson and spiritual inspiration from none other than the influential German philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Before I examine the content of this book, let me commend the designers at the University Press of Mississippi who crafted what is singly one of the most attractive looks I have seen in publishing in a great number of years. The 207 pages are all 8.5 by 11 primarily in black and white with the exception of the cover page title, which is lightly colored in blue accompanied by the subject's name in a much darker shade of the same. The rest of the cover content consists of drawings by the subject of this book. That's right, one only need look at the cover to know what is coming inside. And what is inside is a treat to the eye and the mind.

Kunzle who has written on comic art in the past faced a significant challenge in taking on Rodolphe Töpffer. However, he succeeds magnificently, never forgetting to place Töpffer clearly in the realm of the day, which allows us as readers to have a complete picture of the subject, both physical and philosophical. Through the pages, which

by the way are delivered in double column text, the secret of this man's all-too-brief life unfolds in front of us in a methodology rarely seen in North American historical writing--which demonstrates that Kunzle is a little more than just informed when it comes to the best traditions of European storytelling. And that is what Töpffer's life is, a journey through time and space in the early years of the nineteenth century, long before Richard Outcault introduced New York City newspaper readers to a series of multi-paneled tales featuring The Yellow Kid.

As one discovers the life of a man who was at one time a novelist, a critically acclaimed painter, the founder of a male boarding school at which he taught, and a university professor, the life and times emerge in several works, such as *Le Docteur Festus* (1846), *Les Amours de M. Vieux Bois* (1837), *Monsieur Pencil* (1840), *M. Cryptogame* (1845), and *Festus* (1846). These books are treated as a biographic and historical journey, which makes the reading a pleasure as opposed to a trial. However, that observation is not intended to diminish the work, which is one of significant academic achievement.

It would be interesting to speculate on the potential output of Töpffer's work had he not died so unexpectedly in his late forties, a death that was regarded as tragic even in the turbulent times in which he lived. His Europe was embroiled in a number of military and social revolutions that emerged out of the Enlightenment, and autocrats were determined to prevent these actions from becoming as widespread as they feared. For someone such as Töpffer, the cauldron that became European politics in his life also provided him with the platform he created to espouse social criticism through his drawings. He had taken advantage of the educational opportunities afforded to him during the decade he spent in Paris before returning to Geneva, his home, in 1820. It was his pursuit of knowledge and his cynicism about the world in which he operated that encouraged him

to seek out like-minded individuals, such as the revered philosopher Goethe.

So I have spent some time describing the merits of Töpffer's upbringing and Kunzle's scholarship, which deserves being praised. Now let us take a look at some of the things that I feel could have been improved. Let us not forget that one of the problems of undertaking a review is to step back from the work being reviewed and to remind oneself that this is another author's work, not yours. But a few things do stand out. Previously I had mentioned the fact that the text is laid out in a double column format. To squeeze in the appropriate amount of dialogue, this proved to be an impediment to me. The Times Roman font is most effective but the size is not. For those of us who have spent a lifetime in front of microfilm machines and now computer screens, the noble assistance of a magnifying glass is almost a must. However, let us place this complaint in the perspective it deserves.

Of more significance is the editorial treatment of the captions. Töpffer was a true Swiss soul with a French first name and a German family name. However, the language of the work is nearly exclusively French. There is no problem with that unless you want to read the original captions. A decision was made, it would appear, that the captions needed a summarization as opposed to a strict translation. As a Canadian media historian, I regularly have to work in both of our official languages, one in English and the other in French. Perhaps I am being a big selfish, but I felt that a direct translation of the captions would have been a strong point in the book. I could read most of the captions, but not all. Some did not reproduce well and others appeared to have blank spots. In a few cases, the summaries were only mildly close to the original French, a fact that I found distracting.

In the final analysis, Kunzle has made a significant contribution to the study of comic art, a field that is gaining more and more popularity

among both arts students and history students around the world. It has been a long time coming. As Kunzle points out, the study of comic art will allow the student to peek into a world that has long passed but one which can reveal tales that only illustrations can provide. This book deserves an exalted place in the classrooms around the globe where the whole flavor of the human experience, past and present, can be felt.

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