

graphic novels

On April 21, 1954, the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, a unit of the Judiciary Committee, turned its attention to comic books. Yes, comic books. Over three days of heated testimony, one would have assumed that kids' desire for comics was ruining the country, sending crime rates through the roof. Your tax dollars at work.

The nation's youth were at risk, the committee reported, and it blamed the comic industry, with its focus on crime and perversion. One pamphlet introduced at the hearings called the industry "racketeers of rot" and continued, "It is hard to know what satisfaction they find in exposing millions of children to the moral poison which is the formula of a great many comics." The comic industry, under fire, responded with a draconian comic code of self-censoring that was even more restrictive than the infamous Hayes Code established for motion pictures in 1930.

I had never heard any of this until recently, with the publication of David Hadju's *The Ten-Cent Plague*, an examination of the paranoia surrounding comics in the mid-1950s. But it got me to thinking of how far I have come since I devoured Archie comics back in the late 1970s. While you can still buy single issues of DC or Marvel comics

EVEN THE LITERARY SNOB IN ME GREW TO ENJOY AND ADMIRE THESE UNCONVENTIONAL WORKS OF ART **BY MARK LUCE**



of your favorite superheroes, there have been creations the last 20 years that are more literary, more experimental and more geared toward adults — graphic novels. At first, the snobby book critic in me was irritated by the whole notion of "graphic" novels. And then I read one. And then another ... and another.

It wasn't the kids' stuff I had imagined, several of these books were exceedingly well written and exquisitely drawn. It didn't take long for me to get hooked, and my admiration for the works progressed to the point where I teach graphic novels in both high school and college English classes.

So, to re-awaken that flashlight-under-the-covers feeling of being just a little naughty, I am providing you with a few titles to remember just how fun it is to read books with pictures.

"*The Watchmen*" by Alan Moore. Arguably the greatest graphic novel, this book examines a world where authority has gone mad, and superheroes have been banned. Amazingly rich in struc-

ture with questions of authority and power, the novel simply blew me away.

"*V for Vendetta*" by Alan Moore. The film was OK, but the novel will impress you with its vibrant characters, lush literary allusions and flat-out rollicking plot, which involves a charming vigilante taking on a repressive government.

"*Sin City*" by Frank Miller. About as dark as it gets, it's a seven-volume series filled with vice of all stripes. Absolutely a treat to read the hard-boiled prose, and the film version sticks surprisingly close to the original. However, it's not for the weak of heart.

"*Dark Knight Returns*" by Frank Miller. This Batman might be older and more vulnerable, but his dark side in this gem got rid of the dorky associations of Adam West and returned to Batman's complicated, isolated ways. Deliciously nasty.

Happy reading.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he reads old Batman comics to his sons.

GOLFDOM (ISSN 1526-4270) is published monthly (12 issues per year) by Questex Media Group, Inc., 306 W Michigan Street, Suite 200, Duluth, MN 55802. Corporate office: 275 Grove St., Suite 2-130, Newton, MA 02466. Accounting, Advertising, Production and Circulation offices: 306 W. Michigan St., Suite 200 Duluth, MN 55802-1610. Subscription rates: One year \$39 (U.S. and possessions), \$59 (Canada and Mexico) and \$89 (all other countries). Air expedited service is available in countries outside the U.S. and Canada for an additional \$75 per year. Current issue single copies (prepaid only) \$5 (U.S. and possessions), \$7 (Canada and Mexico) and \$8 (all other countries). Back issues (if available, prepaid only) \$10 (U.S. and possessions), \$14 (Canada and Mexico) and \$16 (all other countries); add \$6.50 per order shipping and handling for both current and back issue purchases. Periodicals postage paid at Duluth MN 55806 and additional mailing offices.



POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to GOLFDOM, P.O. Box 1268, Skokie, IL 60076-8268. Canadian G.S.T. Number: 840033278RT0001, Publications Mail Agreement number 40017597. Printed in the U.S.A.

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