

‘I like the word “comic” because life is ridiculous’

Teaching the graphic novel, an interview with Nathan Trantraal

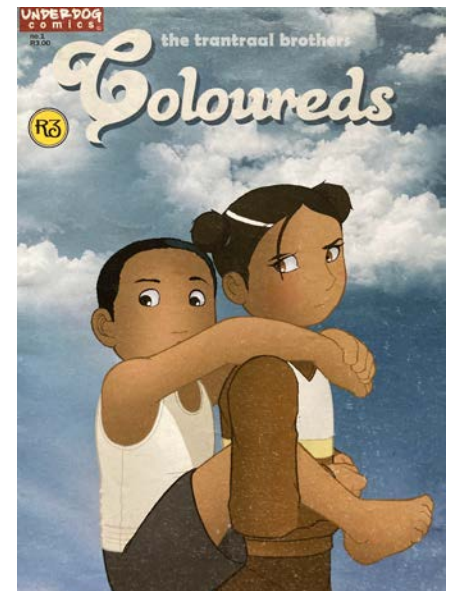
By Koni Benson

Koni Benson is a lecturer in the Department of History at the University of the Western Cape working in the areas of gender history, urban history, public history and oral history. Her research is on collective interventions in histories of contested development and the mobilisation, demobilisation and remobilisation of struggle history in southern Africa’s past and present.

Since 2006 Koni Benson has co-produced life histories of people engaged in political struggles against displacement and to demand land and public services. She is an unusual university historian as she is committed to creative approaches that link history, art and activism, and works with student, activist and cultural collectives in southern Africa on people’s history projects. She has recently published a comic book, drawn from her PhD thesis, called *Crossroads: I Live Where I Like*, on women’s

organised resistance to forced removals. You can read the review on page 58. Here she interviews one of the illustrators, Nathan Trantraal.

Koni: When we first met in 2010, you were working on incredible comic books on scrap paper at home, and now, a decade and four books and three newspaper columns later, you are teaching Kaapse Afrikaans and the graphic novel in the School of Languages at the University currently known as Rhodes. I am curious about your journey into this role and what it has been like. How did you get involved in teaching graphic novels (and is that even the right word or term)?



Nathan: I personally prefer comic books. Graphic novel sounds too grandiose to me, like a taxi guard who calls himself a sliding door operator. >>



Comic books matter about as much as any other art does. Which is to say it matters a lot.

How did you get involved in drawing comic books?

My older brother André wanted to make comics. He started reading *The Adventures of Tintin* that he got from the library and became almost obsessed with them. I liked to draw, but for me it was more about hanging out with him. He was the one who felt that I was gifted in some way, and because of how I am, I just kind of thought, ‘Cool, let’s do this then.’ We were both very young when we made that decision, he was 17 I think, and I was 14. I know he had just finished high school and I had just started. It really consumed our lives from then.

I wonder if the choice to call them graphic novels or comic books is different for fiction and non fiction? For me, graphic history seems like the best current option when speaking about works of history which are non-fiction. It’s still not quite right, because that term also gives the impression that it is graphic, history, and not history in a graphic or comic book form. Same for comic history. It doesn’t sound right when it’s not a history of something comical at hand... Are the connotations different for novels/fiction done in a comic/graphic form? Because the comics you have written, such as “Stormkaap: Drome Kom Altyd Anders Om Uit” and “Coloureds” are funny and contain humour but are also about very serious, not-funny contexts and life experiences.

I’m always apprehensive about labelling things. I mean, why are comic book people talking like marketing people anyway? You label things so that the shop owner knows which shelf to place it on. Those labels are almost always an over simplification of the thing it is supposed to describe. If it’s in panels and it tells some form of a story it’s a comic book to me. I like the word “comic” because life is ridiculous. And even if the word comic has this connotation that ties [it] to comedy, to me that’s appropriate. Because the best comedies aren’t funny all the time. Take TV shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Thick of It*. Those are probably the two funniest comedy shows I’ve ever seen, and they never fail to depress me.

From creating comics, to teaching comics - how did you get involved in teaching comic books?

I got into teaching the course, the same way as I do everything else, I sort of tripped and stumbled into it. Originally, I was only supposed to teach a Kaaps course, but then I said a little too much one day to our section head, and now I’m sitting teaching both a Kaaps and a comics course, in between pulling out my hair.

Haha, of course! Were you surprised at the reception? How has the course and the study of comic books been received in the world of literary studies/academia?

I’ve been surprised by the enthusiasm and curiosity around the course. Although I think now that maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. The Rhodes MA in Creative Writing’s graphic novel course is really a first of its kind in South Africa, and I think academics are naturally intrigued by novelty, curious to see what new avenues of research the study of comics might yield. This year [2020] I have only

one student, as it is the pilot, and I think we are both constantly wondering how long we will get away with this. While comic books are one of the most punishing mediums to work in in terms of workload and the patience required, it is also one of the most colourful and exciting mediums. I know it must be fun. If it wasn’t, I can’t imagine why anyone would bother to put themselves through the stress of finishing a book. It makes novel writing seem easy. My co-workers are probably perplexed most of the time when I try to explain what we’re doing. But it’s been a very supportive environment regardless.

Do you think it is possible to study comic books without drawing on a range of academic disciplines? In other words, do you think that disciplines even make sense when it comes to writing and studying comics?

It does. My approach to thinking about the comic book is to view it exactly the same as teaching any other language. Except here we are engaging with a pictorial language. So, there is a lot to think about around the linguistics of images, and a lot of research has been done on the subject as well, but a lot of principles are still vague or undefined. So, part of it is looking at that, and trying to contribute to the way we think about the “science” of comic book creation, in the same way we would think about writing a novel in English or say Afrikaans.

What is your approach to teaching? How did you design the course, what needed to be considered?

When I designed the course, I naturally looked at what has already been done. The University of Dundee offers an amazing comics course for instance, and I looked at how we could incorporate some of what they’re already doing. In terms of teaching, I



think the first thing that I had to define what exactly I wanted to teach. I knew it wasn't drawing itself. But instead to look at how things function within the discipline. Why do Japanese artists favour speed over craft? Why do the French prefer to work in such a slow, detailed way? Why was the photo comic so popular in South Africa in the 80s? And why was the Italians' approach to photo comics so drastically different from that of South African comics?

What are some of the key texts you have used to explore these questions?

The course is divided along comics cultures. We look at manga culture (Japan) from Osamu Tezuka's adaptation of *Crime and Punishment* to *The Ghost in The Shell* (Masamune Shirow), *bande dessinée* [also referred to as Franco-Belgium comics], *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Julie Maroh), the works of [French cartoonist, Jean Miraud, who uses the pseudonym] Moebius and of course South African comics like *Souvenir* (Jason Geland and Daniel Hugo), *Kaptein Duiwel, Ruiters in Swart, Dungeon Quest* (Joe Daly). So, we look at how these different methods developed and this gets us to the point where we can look at the history behind it all. Art is never created in a vacuum. It's always a reaction to a moment in time. We also look at underground comics, *Fun House* (Alison Bechdel), *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi), *Woman World* (Aminder Dhaliwal), *Kindred* (Damian Duffy adapted from Octavia E. Butler's novel) and popular American comics. And there is just a big component that focuses on reading these books and enjoying them, and trying to understand why you enjoyed them.

Why novels and not histories?

This is a creative writing course, so luckily we do not have to make that distinction. If it's written its literature. If

it's literature we get to pick it apart and see how it works.

What are some of the tools or texts that enable you to do that?

Definitely books like *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud has to feature. You can't really talk about comics unless you've read it, or you could, but it would be foolish to do so. Fred Lente's *Comic Book History of Comics* is also another invaluable resource.

Do you assign your own work? If yes, which works? If no, why not?

I do. I didn't know if you're allowed to do that. But how do you talk about South African comics without getting into the Trantraal Brothers? Impossible, really. I use *Coloureds*, *Crossroads* and *Stormkaap*. I would use more of our own stuff, but that's all I have copies of.

You need an archivist! Jokes aside, you are right, the Trantraal Brothers are seminal to South African comics. Tell me more about where you see the context of South Africa coming in for you in working on and teaching about comics?

Comics have a long history in South Africa. Although the market is quite small, there are some of the hardest working artists working in the medium that I've seen anywhere. And there is an upside to the fact that the market is so small; it just means that we have not defined yet what a South African comic book should be. Once a mainstream is established then people will create work that fits into that stream. If we can create a mainstream that is based on good stories and not cookie cutter formulas then we could have something brilliant. South Africans certainly have the stories.

Why does the graphic novel or stories in comic book form matter?

Comic books matter about as much as any other art does. Which is to say it matters a lot. Creative writing to me is one of the simplest forms of people expressing themselves in ways that can resonate, even beyond the author's intentions. Comic books saved my life growing up. They gave me refuge away from a very grey world. That's my personal answer. The academic answer might be something to the effect of: It's a growing form of art that is gradually being recognised more and more in all the major spheres of the publishing industry. Random House recently started a graphic novel imprint. Comic books are being nominated for major literary awards like the Man Booker [Prize] and comic artists like Chris Ware are carrying big exhibitions on their own. It's an art form that's deeply connected to the modern moment. It's visual. It's evolving and changing, and it gets people to read who are intimidated by literature with a capital L.

Amen to that. Thank you Nathan. I look forward to hearing how the course, and your own art, undoubtedly continue to evolve.

Nathan Trantraal is a poet, cartoonist, translator, playwright, screenwriter, short story author and columnist. He was awarded the ATKV Woordveertjie for poetry in 2014; the Ingrid Jonker Prize for poetry in 2015; the Jan Rabie/Marjorie Wallace prize for a comic in 2018; the SALA award for Poetry in 2019; and has been nominated for a Sikuvele Prize for Journalism (*Body of Work*). His work has been exhibited in Cape Town, Munich and Amsterdam and his comics have been published in various South African newspapers. He is currently a lecturer at Rhodes University at the School of Languages, where he specialises in Kaapse Afrikaans and the graphic novel. 