Picturing American Stories: An Interview with Ben Katchor

Derek Parker Royal

One of the first things you notice when reading the work of Ben Katchor is its particularity. His comics are filled with eccentric characters who find themselves in off-beat encounters with reality. What is so ironic about these encounters is that they are set in the mundane, everyday world that is anything but atypical. Looking into an abandoned store window, leafing through the magazines in a chiropodist's office, and listening to the surrounding conversations in a neighborhood restaurant are activities in which any of us could engage. Yet, while most people would let these experiences flow right through them, never giving them a second thought, Katchor's protagonists use them as springboards into philosophical reflections, historical observations, and mystical reveries. A hotel façade is transformed into the history of urban America, a bed of lettuce generates speculations on leisure, and the sounds of digestion become keys to a higher, more spiritual reality. This is the kind of world we find in the picture-stories of Ben Katchor.

And this is what Katchor prefers to call his art: “picture-stories.” Although trained in classical art within the Western tradition—having graduated from Brooklyn College and briefly attending New York’s School of Visual Arts—Katchor has made a career out of wedding his art to storytelling. Not content in being a “mere” painter, he has chosen to tell stories through his drawing, creating elaborate narratives that no easel could contain. “Comics,” as he reveals in our conversation, is an ambiguous label that comes with its own historical and cultural baggage. “Picture-stories,” on the other hand, more accurately describes his creative intentions and gets to the heart of his medium. His picture-stories have
appeared in a variety of outlets, from freebie newspapers such as the New York Press to industry publications such as Metropolis (a magazine of architecture and design), from the New York Jewish Forward to national wide-distribution magazines such as The New Yorker and Harper’s. Over the past twenty-five years these strips have accumulated and taken the form of larger collections and novellike works, published as Cheap Novelties: The Pleasures of Urban Decay (1991), Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer: Stories (1996), The Jew of New York (1999), The Beauty Supply District (2000), and most recently, The Cardboard Valise (2011).

Although Katchor’s base of operation is the picture-story, he is nonetheless active in other media and occupations. He has worked in music theater, collaborating with Mark Mulcahy in such productions as The Slug Bearers of Kayrol Island and A Checkroom Romance and Moritz Eggert in There Was a Building, or, The 58th Street Boiler. In addition, he regularly gives lectures and coordinates artist workshops in both the U.S. and Europe. His accolades include a Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and a fellowship at both the American Academy in Berlin and the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. He taught part-time at the School of Visual Arts, has been the Harman Writer in Residence at Baruch College, and is currently an associate professor in the School of Art, Media, and Technology at Parsons, The New School for Design.

Figure 1. Image from the cover of Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer: Stories (Little, Brown, 1996). © 1996 Ben Katchor.
Interview with Ben Katchor

Despite his heavy workload, Katchor was kind enough to find the time, over several sessions, to talk with me about his work, his literary and artistic influences, the history of the comic strip, his views on comic art and its links to American identity, and the ways that technology and the economy are affecting his medium. This conversation began over the telephone in the summer of 2006, was carried on sporadically via e-mail over the next few years, and finalized in January 2011. Our topics of discussion developed over time, and as they evolved, Katchor revealed to me the philosophies and aesthetics underlying his unique art.

Derek Parker Royal: How do you see yourself as an artist or cartoonist working in contemporary America? Do you think of yourself as a Jewish writer?

Ben Katchor: I see myself as being very marginal to the culture. I think that there are only a few thousand people in the U.S. who would be interested in my work. I don’t think of myself as a Jewish writer. The history of the Jews is a small part of my cultural make-up, mainly appreciated as history. My father was born in a traditional religious family in Warsaw at the end of the nineteenth century, and so I was exposed to the Yiddish language, music and East European food as a child and young man. My father was a utopian socialist and so tried his best to discard Jewish traditions of organized religion and observance from his life. So, for the first twenty years of my life, I had this direct connection to East European Jewish culture of a very particular sort. Through my education in American schools, my literary taste was shaped by English-language literature, some written by so-called Jewish writers, but most not. I wrote one strip in Yiddish, as an exercise, but never considered working for a Yiddish-language audience. My taste in picture-making was shaped by studying world art, particularly the Western figurative tradition, mainly work by Christians, Protestants, and Pantheists. So, although I have these familial connections to old-world traditional Jewish culture of a particular sort (nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Warsaw), those connections are very tenuous and not a tradition I’m consciously trying to uphold. So, national or ethnic identity (like patriotism) is for people who are afraid of being judged for what they are making of their own life and want to ride, in a mob, on the coattails of their supposedly venerable ancestors. Racial identity is just a dangerous fantasy.

The word “Jewish” without a long string of qualifiers and explanations is a totally nebulous term, except to an ignorant anti-Semite who thinks he knows exactly what it means.

DPR: How does your cultural background come out in your comics?

BK: It comes out through historical references, linguistic usage, but mainly through first-hand observation of what I see around me. I’ve also written and drawn a lot
about the functioning of the market economy as it developed and into the present. As I've always lived in cities and building those subjects are central to my work.

**DPR:** There are some authors who primarily define themselves by their ethnic backgrounds, and then there are others who just do not like that label. Do you think that “ethnic” can be a little limiting and too restrictive of a term?

**BK:** These terms mean nothing beyond a marketing device or jingoistic obfuscation of what’s really going on. It’s like a desperate film producer latching onto a literary property to give his work a veneer of quality. In any case, ethnicity and nationalism are nineteenth-century inventions of despots and deluded artists.

**DPR:** What, if anything, do you make of the fact that many of the innovators in American comics were Jewish? Not only are there writers such as you, Jules Feiffer, Art Spiegelman, Trina Robbins, and Sharon Rudahl (just to name a few), but there are also earlier artists such as William Gaines, Jack Kirby, Harvey Kurtzman, Will Eisner, Stan Lee, and of course, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.

**BK:** If you’re referring to the popularization of comic books around 1939, most Jews at that time had nothing to do with comics. The people who were involved with early comic books were particular youngsters with an interest in American pulp fiction and pop culture. Superman is a reworking of Doc Savage. The dominant visual influence was the newspaper adventure strips of Dick Calkins (Buck Rogers, 1929) Alex Raymond (Flash Gordon, 1933). Most of the early comic-book writers and artists started as teenagers with little education. I like to think that the more common impulse for Jews at that time was the one taken by Saul Bellow, a near contemporary of Siegel and Shuster.

Because of all the chauvinistic Jewish cultural boosting of Superman, etc., some people believe that comics were invented in 1939 by Siegel and Shuster. The best American newspaper comic strip artists at the early twentieth century—Chester Gould, Windsor McKay, Harold Gray, and George Herriman—were not Jewish, and the tradition goes back to at least the early nineteenth century in Europe. The man who ran the King Features syndicate, Moses Koenigsberg, was Jewish, but the best cartoonists were not. In any case, if there was some vital connection between Jews and comics, why were there so few comic strips in the Yiddish press? For the most part, Jews had to leave the Jewish cultural milieu in order to make comics. The quality of work that appeared in these early comic books—a low level of commercial art directed at children and adolescents—set the comic strip back 100 years. Yiddish humor had a great effect on the American entertainment business, but more in humor writing, film, and vaudeville than comics. The Yiddish socialist/communist milieu of New York, with its wholesale distrust of American culture, spawned the satire of Kurtzman and Feiffer. This one specific aspect of Jewish culture *did* have an influence on comics in
the 1950s. It took sixty years to shake off the subliterate/artistic stigma the early comic books imposed upon the form, and for that we can thank Robert Crumb and Bill Griffith, whose work starting appearing in underground newspapers in 1968-69.

**DPR:** So you don’t consider yourself a Jewish graphic artist?

**BK:** No. I just say I live in New York city, I write in English and draw in a style inspired by Nicolas Poussin.

**DPR:** Have you ever felt any pressures from the Jewish community? And I’m thinking in particular of your book *The Jew of New York*. Was there any kind of reaction or any kind of expectation that you perceived, maybe from yourself, or maybe from critics or outside readers in the way you were representing the various characters, primarily Jewish, in nineteenth-century Manhattan?

**BK:** Other than a few historians, most people have no idea of what sort of Jews were living in New York City in 1830. Most of those Jews, if you were able to identify them as Jews, were further removed from old-world Jewish culture than I am today.

Mordecai Noah, who’s at the center of *The Jew of New York*, was the first professional Jew in America. To jump-start his floundering political career he dreamt up the idea of founding a Jewish state on Grand Island in the Niagara River. He claimed that he was being directed by God, but, in fact, it was largely a real estate scam. Somebody else of that time could say he was of Hebraic extraction and not make much of it. He was somewhat delusional and carried ethnic identity to an insane length. But, on the other hand, he was willing to accept anyone who said they were Jewish into this “Jewish State,” including the American Indians who were supposedly one of the lost tribes of Israel. Noah had the most widely inclusive idea of who might be considered a Jew.

**DPR:** How did your readers react to the book and these kinds of issues you address?

**BK:** Many readers enjoyed it, rabbis recommended it as a bar mitzvah gift, but it has as much to do with theater and the beginnings of the market economy in America as with Jewish American history. It was a comic strip that I created for the English-language *Forward* in New York. The editors didn’t want to run the weekly strip I was doing at the time, *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer*, because they felt that it was not specifically Jewish. So I said, “Well, I’ll come up with a strip that’s specifically Jewish.” And I called it *The Jew of New York*.

**DPR:** So that was the birth of your graphic novel?
BK: Yes, at that time I was struggling to make a living doing comic strips. My main goal was to evoke the atmosphere of Jacksonian New York, with all of its strange obsessions, and the exotic nature of Jews in New York City at that time.

DPR: Well, in *The Jew of New York* and in your other strips like *Julius Knipl*, you have a series of interesting characters, and they find themselves in absurd and even grotesque situations. It’s fascinating. Given the diverse mixture in these strips of yours, do you see yourself as a socially conscious comic artist, or a politically conscious writer?

BK: Well, I don’t think you can avoid being a political artist. These things are just there whether you plan them or not. I’m not a political cartoonist in that sense of drawing cartoons about current politicians, but all of my strips question why the world is set-up as it is and not another way, and that’s political. I’m not attacking current political stupidities. My strips are more of an analysis of situations. Ev-
Everyone can read it and enjoy it. No one will pick up my strip and say, “Well, this is a biased left-wing political cartoon.” They just don’t know where it’s coming from until they’ve read it and by then, it’s too late. Hopefully, they’ve understood it and had some sort of revelation.

DPR: When I first encountered your work was when I was living in New York in the 1980s. And I would always pick up the New York Press, and there I would see your strips. That was definitely an independent, maybe even alternative, paper. Would you consider yourself, let’s say, an alternative comic writer, an inheritor of the underground cartoonists of the 1960s and 1970s?

BK: Well, I’ve also worked for Condé Nast.

DPR: And that’s the other end of the spectrum.

BK: And I now mainly work for an architecture/urban design magazine called Metropolis. Those alternative weeklies were an outgrowth of underground newspapers and featured weekly comic strips. It’s where Matt Groening and Lynda Barry started their strips. They had miniscule editorial budgets. They were read mainly for horoscopes, comics, sex advice columns, and classified ads.

DPR: Well, what kind of role do you see for publications like that, alternative or underground papers, and then the comic strips in them, in today’s culture?

BK: Recently, most of those weeklies have dropped their comics even more. The comics in daily newspapers are a moribund vestigial form of syndicated comic strip not worth preserving. We’re seeing the severing of comics from newspapers for the first time since 1895, when The Yellow Kid began.

DPR: Do you think that alternative or independent publications, and the comics that go along with them, are migrating or finding a different audience online? Has the Internet sapped a lot of the potential audience for those kinds of publications?

BK: For good reasons, the Internet will bring about the end of mass-market printing. Ecologically, print is a disaster; culturally it was available only to people with the capital to underwrite it. Since the advertising base of newspapers and magazines may soon be gone, comic-strips artists, like journalists, will have to find a new source of income. To move print comics online doesn’t seem to be taking advantage of the technological possibilities of digital imaging, sound, and motion. It may all end up having to be subsidized by taxes on the sale of material goods or nonprofit educational institutions.
DPR: Well, you have your website. How has the Internet changed your work?

BK: It’s more digital imaging that’s changed the way I work. About a year ago, I began drawing on a Cintiq—a digital drawing board. It made no sense to digitize images on paper, once a decent physical drawing interface was invented. I have access to a vast picture and text archive 24/7. Since there’s a lot more to read and look at online, the visibility of my strips has decreased. People would pick up one of those weekly newspapers because they were looking for an apartment and, by chance, they would come across my strip. The online world is the ultimate in specialty publishing, where you can look up the blog that’s exactly what you want to read about. At the moment, I make most of my living from teaching, not from selling reproduction rights for print or online publishing and that’s how most writers have always subsidized their work.

DPR: In your art, whether it is in print or online, do you find yourself writing for a specific audience or a specific community?

BK: I write and draw out of an obsessive need to make poetic sense of the world. The readers who stumble upon my work share this need, and so it’s quite utilitarian. There’s no shortage of senselessness that needs explaining.

DPR: I think you’re on target when it comes to your audience and the kind of interest people find in your strips. Your comics are filled with eccentrics, and your characters are fascinated with minutiae and the non sequitur. How do you come up with your ideas for the various story lines? I’m thinking, for example, of your strips *The Shoehorn Technique*, *The Cardboard Valise*, or especially the various strips in *Julius Knipl*.

BK: How do I do it?

DPR: Yeah how do you come up with these offbeat ideas?

BK: Inspiration driven by the necessity of a deadline. There’s always some kind of structure, some form I want to write about that week or that month. I try to give my strips some kind of form. I start off with some nebulous idea, then I try to narrow it down to what it really is or what it’s about. That’s sort of how it works. Most of my ideas come from extrapolating upon an observation. When you work in a serial form, you can’t think about how it’s done. It’s just like asking someone who makes pizza, “How do you do this every day? How do you get this taste?” There is a kind of formal requirement in my mind that I have to match every week, or surpass, a kind of poetic form. Some weeks it’s more inspired than others. But that’s the way serial writing works. I mean, everything I do goes into print. I don’t get to put it away if it’s not completely successful. On the other hand,
because I do so many strips, I arrive at a high number of successful ones. I come up with ideas that I wouldn’t have come up if I produced less material.

DPR: Well a lot of your work is individual one-shot strips, but there are some, like for instance, the storyline of *The Jew of New York*, that you’ve carried out in a
novelistic way. Do you think more in terms of longer story lines or just one-shot strips?

BK: My main interest in the picture story is the short form. I mean, I think in a page you can do a lot. It's a really concise form. In one panel you can reveal your worldview, in two panels you can comment on that view, and in eight, or nine panels, you can set up a complex dialectic. Originally, The Jew of New York ran as a weekly strip. Each page was a self-contained episode. So even if you weren't following the entire story, you'd hopefully be entertained by that week's episode.

DPR: When you were conceiving The Jew of New York, did you think that it would end up being a long novelesque work?

BK: It was invented week to week, with only a vague idea of where it was going. It ran in the Forward for fifty-two weeks. Then I went back and expanded upon elements that were hinted at but not fully developed in the original series. So, it became a book by accretion. The Jew of New York is one of the longest strips that I've done. Most of my strips begin and end in single-page. My most recent weekly strip, Shoehorn Technique, is also kind of a vaguely connected narrative. But again, each week's episode functions as a self-contained story.

DPR: Do you have any plans now of collecting your work on Shoehorn Technique into a longer book, like you did with The Jew in New York?

BK: Hopefully, all of my strips will be collected in book form. A collection of The Cardboard Valise was published in March 2011. Next will be the Metropolis series, then Hotel & Farm and eventually Shoehorn Technique. I have only a year's worth of Shoehorn Technique and I've put it aside to work on other projects.

DPR: A lot of your work takes place in an American setting, whether it's New York or otherwise. To what degree do you consider your work and what you do as defining American or Americanness?

BK: It's more East Coast urban culture than American. America is this vast place I know very little about. I have always lived in an East Coast city. Although New York is becoming a strip mall like the rest of the country, it's the Asian and Latin American influences that make it bearable. With the exception of a few major cities, the rest of the country feels pretty alien to me.

DPR: Even though they seem to be American or East Coast urban settings, there is something almost detached about your settings, as if they're in another time and another place, divorced from the current events that surround us today.
BK: My series in *Metropolis* magazine deals specifically with contemporary architecture and urban design, and it’s been running for more than ten years. Those stories are definitely set in this time.

DPR: Do any recent cultural events or political events—current issues like, for instance, arguments surrounding American immigration—find their way into your work?

BK: Those are not current issues—they’re endless variations on a theme. My series, *The Cardboard Valise*, is about an American’s obsession with the exotic qualities of foreign cultures, mainly as they exist in his mind. I’m not interested in competing with the superficial drama of the evening news.

DPR: Not like *Doonesbury*, in other words.

BK: No, definitely not.

DPR: How much of an impact has the underground comics of 1960s and ’70s had on your own work?

BK: I grew up reading comics, and then in the ’60s when I saw underground comics, it confirmed my feeling that you could write and draw serious fiction in the comic-strip form. I kept coming across things as a kid, such as Edward Gorey and a few *New Yorker* cartoonists who did extended picture books and I saw that the possibility was there to do something of more substance than I found in the comic books I read as a child. The best of the underground cartoonists, Robert Crumb and Bill Griffith, seemed as subtle and complex as the prose fiction I was reading.

DPR: You mention Crumb and Griffith. Who are the other influences when it comes to your art? Not necessarily underground comic artists, but any artists.

BK: Probably early European figure draftsmen: Poussin, Rembrandt. That’s what I was attracted to in art school, the tradition of Western figurative art. Once I discovered the larger Western tradition, cartoonists were no longer a model for me. The way I draw is the result of aspiring to work in Western figurative tradition.

DPR: So at what point in your career did you think, “I’ll try my hand at cartooning”?

BK: I always drew comics as a child, and I published them in fanzines. I stopped doing that when I went to college and studied painting. At some point I realized that being a painter and showing in galleries did not appeal to me. I loved the
Figure 6 (pp. 236-37). A full-page story in Metropolis magazine entitled "The Decorative Impulse." Originally appeared as a single color image.

© 2001 Ben Katchor.
idea of art made for reproduction as opposed to the “original” hanging on a wall. In the back of my mind I had this perfect print form that I knew as a child; this form that everyone could afford to buy and take home. I aspired to make paintings with the narrative content of a short story, and as there was this ready-made form—the comic strip—that allowed me to combine both impulses. I simply returned to what I knew as a child.

**DPR**: Will Eisner said at one point that he felt that he wanted to be a writer and a painter. But he felt like a mediocre painter and like a mediocre fiction writer. However, in the medium of comics, he could combine his mediocre talents into something he could excel in. Do you feel the same way?

**BK**: I don’t buy that theory. A successful comic strip needs a strong literary sensibility coupled with a matching visual sensibility. I think when you have a weakness it shows up in that combination. I think every writer should draw and every draftsman should write. The continuum between pictures and words should be reestablished. The text is constantly corrected by the image, and the image is corrected by the text. When a comic strip really fails, it fails on both counts.

**DPR**: What are your thoughts on the cross-fertilization between comic art and other mediums, for instance, between comic books and film, or between comics and painting, or comics and traditional novels? Because there have been a number of films over the past several years that have been adaptations of comic books. And then you have comics inspiring Michael Chabon’s *Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, and then that novel spawning a new comic book series.

**BK**: Each form has its own qualities and demands. Because prose fiction doesn’t deal with spatial drama, an adaptation into film or comics has to completely invent this spatial drama. When those spatial qualities are extraneous additions, the film is a failure. The adaptation of comics into film usually dispenses with the handwriting of the artist—the one element that’s at its core. Adding the element of motion in a meaningful way to a static form is also a difficult thing to pull off. It’s usually a case of a desperate businessmen/artist hoping to leverage some quality and reputation of a successful work of art into a second product. The result is usually a watered down, ill conceived mess.

**DPR**: What about the way that other media have informed comics, or even how comics have influenced other kinds of narrative, like film or novels?

**BK**: Eisner was highly influenced by film and in some ways brought the storytelling in his early strips up to the level of sophistication found in film of the time. That same 1940s film sensibility made his later work seem very limited and melo-
dramatic. Alain Resnais was influenced by the freedom of storytelling structure found in early newspaper comics to rethink the conventions of film. The low cultural stigma attached to comics made them appealing to “fine art” painters.

**DPR:** What do you think of comics as literature? For instance, I work in the academy and I teach, and many times I will use comics or graphic novels in my literature classes.

**BK:** Comic strips can be as poetic and literate as anything I’ve read in prose fiction or poetry. The technique of combining text and images goes back to theater and went on to cinema. It was only in those archaic forms of writing and drawing that a purification of disciplines took place in the academy and that purification lead to a sterility that doesn’t exist in the worst comic strips.

**DPR:** What are some examples of comic writing that, you think, are the best, that stand out?

**BK:** One of my favorites is a cartoonist who worked in England named John Glashan. He did a strip in the Observer called *Genius*, as well as many other things. They are highly literate and they’re beautifully drawn. Peter Blegvad, who lives and works in England, did a long-running strip called *Leviathan*. It ran in the *Sunday Independent*. It’s pure visual and literary poetry. The concrete visual dimension gives his text a depth and meaning it would not otherwise have. Bill Griffith’s picture-stories, *Zippy the Pinhead* and others, are perfect expressions of the surrealist sensibility. They produce effects that even the French surrealists couldn’t achieve, because they were either writers or picture makers, but rarely both.

**DPR:** What do you think of the current state of comic art today? At times you reside in France, so maybe another way of asking the question is this: What is the state of comic art in the United States, compared to the state of comic art in Europe?

**BK:** I’m only in France for the summer. We’re in the midst of a golden age of handmade comics. It may be a reaction against computer-generated art and boring 3D animation. On the other hand, the literary recognition that comics have received has given people a license to do long and boring fake-literary-feeling graphic novels. Previously, comic strips had to be at least mildly entertaining and sometimes reached the level of art. Today we have people trying to make art, and foregoing the entertainment value, and the result can be reminiscent of the worst literary fiction or the most pretentious poetry. Overall, there are more things being published and more people trying to do serious work in the comic-strip form than ever before.
Figure 7 (pp. 240-41) A full-page strip in Metropolis magazine entitled "The Call of the Wall." Originally appeared as a single color.

Image © 2003 Ben Katchor.
DPR: Where do you see your work now? You mentioned your current work on *The Shoehorn Technique*. What else are you working on?

BK: Well, I’ve done four shows for music theater in the last few years. They’re collaborations with the composer/singer Mark Mulcahy. I write the libretto and design projected images that serve a scenic and storytelling function. Historically, theater is the first place in history where words and pictures were put together—the stage pictures combined with the words uttered by actors. Some early European proto-comics were just an attempt to record that kind of synthesis. There is definitely a basic connection between those forms. Picture-stories are the pre-cinematic method of notating theatrical events. Today, most people who want to tell picture-stories go into film, because there’s something of an industry and you may be able to make a living. There’s the glamor assorted with living actors and movie stars. But the thing that interests me about this handmade form of the picture-story is *handwriting* as an extension of the written word. I’m interested in the cultivation of an autographic voice that’s the physical expression of my thought.

DPR: You refer to your work as “picture-stories.” Do you prefer “picture-stories” over “comics” or “graphic narrative”?

BK: Picture-story seems like a more descriptive term, and that’s what they are called in German. Comics, or comic strips, is American term that came about with newspaper comics where a lot of the strips were intended to be humorous. In France they’re just *bande dessinée* or strip-drawings. Mine are more like “comic-tragedy strips.”

The problem with the term “comics” is that if someone asks, “What do you do?” and you say you make “comics” they’ll think *Garfield*, not John Glashan. Then you’re forced to explain what you mean by comics. But if I tell people I make “picture-stories,” they have no idea what I’m talking about and they’ll ask, “What do you mean by that?” And then I can show them.

DPR: Then you can draw a picture. And we’re back to the ambiguity of words like “picture-stories,” “comics,” and “Jewish.”

BK: I will explain to them what a picture-story is. But, you know, these terms, like “Jewish” need a lot of defining to have any meaning, otherwise it’s just a slogan, maybe racist slogans, or a jingoistic slogans, like “I am an American” or “I am a Jew.” They don’t mean too much.

DPR: Some have argued that this emphasis on ethnic identity, the hyphenated identity, is very American, an American obsession that you don’t find this in other places around the world.
BK: Polish Jews I know who immigrated to France from Eastern Europe before World War II became very French. They spoke French. They began eating French cuisine, and so, culturally, adopted many of the aspects of the French culture of 1930s. Today, in this very small world, there are young people living in France who are more involved with American pop culture than I am. So in some ways, you can say they are more American than I am. I think that today, everybody invents their own “ethnicity” and everybody is their own little country, and no one can speak for much more than what’s going on in their own kitchen. Anything more than that is just nationalistic baloney. It doesn’t mean anything. It could mean enough to go to war, but it does not mean anything really. It just means slogans and generalizations. I don’t know if you’re going to get people in the world of comic strips who feel these strong ethnic identities in their work. I think there’s too aware of a world culture of visual storytelling.

DPR: That’s one of the differences between what goes on in the American academy and what goes on in the world of art. Those who create the works that we discuss and teach, as professors, may not be concerned with defining or pigeonholing what they do. Especially when it comes issues like ethnicity. Take, for example, one of the first questions I asked you: “Would you consider yourself an ethnic or Jewish writer?” Maybe you do, maybe you don’t. Because on the one hand, you have someone like Toni Morrison who has said that she considers herself more of an African American writer than an American writer. And then you have Phillip Roth who absolutely dislikes the term “Jewish author” and will get rather defensive about that. So I think that’s something that those of us in the academy are more concerned with than the authors themselves, at least to some degree.

BK: There’s a history or a story behind the work, but it’s a very particular story. So just saying “I’m a Jewish American writer” doesn’t tell you much. To me, it means almost nothing. To my father, a Yiddish-speaking Jew born in Warsaw, the comics he saw me reading as a child were the epitome of American culture regardless of the fact that they might have been made by the children of Eastern European Jews. They were written in English, were full of violent imagery and so had a frivolous American quality to them. To a Hasidic Jew, you’re either a free Jew or an observing Jew. And if you’re a free Jew, you’ve gone your own way outside of the Jewish community. When it comes to language, you’ve got to clarify these terms and make them more concrete—and that’s where pictures come in.