

# viewpoint

## Some comics that made me and some comics that I made

I was seven years old when I read my first comic book. *Asterix and Caesar's gift* has never really ranked amongst my favourites in the long-running French children's comic book series but the impact it had on me at the time was nothing less than life-changing.

Asterix is, of course, the name of the main character in the comic about the humorous adventures of a diminutive warrior and his friends. I remember being quite annoyed by this little man with the outsized yellow moustache who seemed quite determined to monopolize everyone's attention – my own and that of the characters with whom he shared the story pages. You see, despite the fact of there being no ambiguity whatsoever when it came to who the protagonist of the story was – it was obviously the character whose name appeared in nearly all of the titles of the series – I refused to accept that this could be the case. I had already made up my mind that the main character of the book must be Asterix's best friend, Obelix.

Even though he was clearly brave, Asterix was short; his shortness made him vulnerable. Obelix was big and strong, seemingly invincible. It, therefore, made perfect sense to me that Obelix should be the hero of the story and not some bewhiskered little man.

I was born in Bishop Lavis on the Cape Flats at the beginning of the last full decade of apartheid. Like most black and brown families living under white minority rule we were poor. My father had a short fuse and he liked to drink. He was a bit of a bully and would reach for his belt at the slightest provocation; my mother was not exempt in this regard, but with her he preferred using his fists, rather than his belt. As a result my siblings and I were happiest when he was not around, which was most weekends at first; then for weeks on end; then for months at a time; then, a few years after I finished high school, he stayed away for good. My mother believed, for the longest time, that she could change my father, a romantic delusion that is not without precedent.

*Asterix and Caesar's Gift* was not simply the first comic book that I read, it was also amongst the first three books that I would borrow from the local public library, sparking a great and lasting relationship between myself and this indispensable social institution. Even in recent, slightly more prosperous years, when I have been able to afford to buy books as opposed to borrowing them, I still visit the library, as one might a beloved former teacher.

The other two books that my seven-year-old self borrowed from the library on my very first visit could not have made much of an impression on me because I do not remember anything about them at all, except that I can confidently say they were not comic books. Because when I opened my very first comic I instantly fell in love with the medium. It was just wonderful. I could not believe that someone could produce picture after picture with such extraordinary precision; characters, backgrounds, foregrounds, word bubbles, captions, panel borders, all created with a loveliness and an exactitude that I found utterly captivating. Even more extraordinary, when you read these little pictures one after the other, they came together to tell a story. How magical was that? I loved the gorgeous often inspired use of blocks of colour throughout, here bright and bold, there a little more subtle and subdued. I loved everything about Asterix. Everything except Asterix himself.

It was really a bit ironic because I should have realized that I had much more in common with Asterix than with Obelix; I was small; I was clever (I had stood

second in class in Grade 1); I thought of myself, as a lot of children do at that age, as being utterly fearless. But Obelix was big and seemingly invulnerable. He could not be hurt. It is not hard to see the appeal that might have for a child whose father, the person who was supposed to protect him, was instead a looming, unpredictable, violent presence in the house.

At this point I could go into some of the reasons why my father was the way that he was. He was angry because he, like everyone who was not white in South Africa, was kept in a more or less permanent state of cowed submission, of constant humiliation. He was angry because even though he excelled at his work – he was essentially a self-taught diesel mechanic – he earned substantially less money than his white colleagues. He was angry because South Africa at the time was a patriarchal society, across gender, class and race lines, and anger expressed through violence was a normal part of being a man. But that's a story for another time.

As I got a little bit older I came to a somewhat different understanding of what constituted power. While I was sometimes bullied on the playground by boys that were slightly older and much stronger than I was, the balance of power was turned on its head inside the classroom. I excelled academically in primary school and always stood either first or second in class. I received many diplomas. I was seen as the brainy child by everyone in my school and in my neighbourhood. I could see that the strong, tough boys who did not end up in prison or addicted to drugs or drink invariably ended up either unemployed or in dead-end jobs. By contrast people expected that I would have a bright future and go on to be rich and successful. It now seemed to me that it was better to be clever than to be strong.

Shortly after I had discovered Asterix I discovered Tintin. Not at the library in Bishop Lavis, but at the library in Westridge, an area of Mitchell's Plain, where we had moved in 1988. The Tintin books would remain my favourite books for the rest of my childhood. While Asterix was a short man, Tintin was a mere child and I am not at all sure why, back then, I thought the latter better qualified for the routinely dangerous job of adventure story hero. I should mention that I had, in the meantime, grown rather fond of the Asterix comic series as well, their protagonist included.

I discovered American superhero comics when I was twelve or thirteen years old. Around this time I had begun to feel that I had outgrown the comics of my childhood. Those stories seemed unsophisticated, puerile even, compared to the complex, intricate storylines that were typical of many of the Marvel and DC comic books. Old, outdated European comics could not compete with the vitality and ingenuity of American superhero comics, where handsome men with enviable physiques and transcendent gifts wittily explored neuroses while vanquishing deadly foes alongside beautiful, indomitable women with a comparable talent for banter, clad in skin-tight outfits. Above all, these comics made me feel older and cleverer. They were the cigarettes of a mildly rebellious youth.

I discovered Maus when I was sixteen or seventeen. An argument with my younger brother Nathan over something trivial had resulted in a physical fight breaking out in the bedroom that we shared. My brother began to cry and my father stormed inside the room, threatening to beat me up. I couldn't believe my ears: the person who had bullied me my entire life was implying that I was a bully! Enraged, I stormed out of the house. I walked, for a few moments, in a blind fog of rage and self-pity. Then I decided to head to the library by Mitchell's Plain train station, just so I had somewhere to go to. The library in my area, Westridge, was quite near our house, but I needed to blow off steam and the train station was only about three kilometres away from where I lived.

At the library, as I wandered amongst the shelves, distracted by the books around me, I could feel the anger inside me slowly start to subside. It went away completely when I picked up a book, no bigger than a diary and, with respect to contents, no less personal and intimate. Though I did not initially think that the artwork was beautiful -- I thought it was crude, rather poorly drawn -- I was nevertheless hooked from the very first page. Maus is the memoir of a Holocaust survivor in comic book form but it is also about the difficult relationship between a father and son. It is a book that manages to be both very dark and very funny.

As I got older I would go on to read many more great comic books by great cartoonists and these would gradually come to replace the American superhero comics in my esteem. I will mention just a few other comic books that I expect will always remain on my bookshelf: *It was the war of the trenches* by Jacques Tardi;

*Palestine* by Joe Sacco; *Logicomix* by Apostolos Doxiadis, Christos Papadimitriou, Alecos Papadatos and Annie Di Donna; *Ethel and Ernest* by Raymond Briggs; *Jimmy Corrigan* by Chris Ware and *Embroideries* by Marjane Satrapi. These works, by these supremely gifted cartoonists, have inspired me greatly and I enjoy rereading them from time to time.

I first started making comics when I was in primary school. I would carefully cut in half blank A4 pages that I removed from the centre of my school notebooks. Then I would staple these pages together so that they made a little book. Using pencil, pen and colouring pencil, I would then draw and write on the back and front of each page, basically making up the story as I went along. They were mostly stories about American soldiers fighting mutant monsters. It was hard work for a nine year old. I sold these little books, each one an original work of art, for peanuts. Possibly literally. But it made me inordinately happy that my classmates wanted to buy the comics that I created, so I did not care so much about money. It is, of course, an attitude shared by many artists and one I think that has not always served us well.

My brother Nathan and I started making comics together when I was in my final and he in his first year of high school. We had always drawn together, since we were little, lying stretched out on the carpet in our bedroom, sketching away like mad. We decided we would become comic creators when I was seventeen going on eighteen and my brother all of fourteen. That was in 1997, which is to say seven years after the release of Nelson Mandela and three years after the first democratic elections had taken place in South Africa. The comics we ended up creating would end up being quite different from the ones that, at that time, we set out to make.

Back then our dream was to make the type of comics that we liked, which were American comics, superhero comics. We had it all figured out:

Step 1: We would work really, really hard and create an irresistible new superhero. Something really high-concept, something edgy and brilliant. The materials we needed were cheap enough so that even we, poor kids from a township on the fringes of Cape Town, South Africa, could just about afford them: pencils, erasers, pens, cheap printing paper.

Step 2: We would write and draw comic book stories about this new hero.

Step 3: We would send the comics away to a publisher, preferably Image Comics in the US.

Step 4: Sit back and watch the money and accolades roll in.

Needless to say it didn't work out quite that way. Inventing an irresistible new superhero was harder than it seemed and we eventually gave up on trying. But that did not mean that we were giving up on making comics.

The first book that I read that I thought was truly great was *The hobbit*. I was maybe fourteen or so when I read it. But the first great novel concerned with a more quotidian, less imaginary variety of experience that I read, that I thought was truly great, I read when I was eighteen years old. That book was *The remains of the day* by Kazuo Ishiguro. It is written in a distinctive style – dry and succinct – so I was quietly pleased, impressed with myself that I managed to figure out what the word 'prose', meant and why the person on the back of the book thought Kazuo Ishiguro was really good at writing it. But I think I have always just been partial to a literary tearjerker as well. After I finished *The remains of the day* I read every book that Kazuo Ishiguro had written up until then – I think his most recent offering had been *The unconsolated* - and I loved all of them, except for *The unconsolated*, likely because it represented such a stark departure from his preceding novels.

Over the years I would read and discover many more great novels by many more great authors. I read Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and in doing so experienced what it was like to inhabit a dream while being fully awake. I read Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* and witnessed as obscure pre-colonial and early colonial history came into focus with a startling clarity that one would more readily associate with a great documentary film, than a novel. I read Dostoevsky and he facilitated an introduction to an unarticulated shadow self. I discovered that the great South African writer Nadine Gordimer considered Ivan Turgenev to be the greatest of all Russian writers. I read some of his books and was elated to discover that Turgenev employed gorgeous prose to write beautiful sad love stories. And as I mentioned earlier, those are two things that I like.

We struggled to get published. We pounded every pavement. We approached practically every magazine and book publisher in Cape Town that we thought might be interested in publishing a cartoon or a comic book. Our mother, a domestic worker, supported us on meagre wages. But in 2003, nearly six years after I'd left school, long after we'd given up on our plan to get our superhero comic book published in the US, our first serialized cartoon appeared in a major Cape Town newspaper. It was a detective story and it lasted a whole month before it was cancelled. We were devastated but undeterred. It would take five more years, living in abject poverty, on the verge of homelessness, before our first comic book was published. It was a comic book about rugby, the most popular sport in South Africa, after football. It is written in Afrikaans and Kaaps, the latter of which is my first language. It sold just over a thousand or so copies, which was, needless to say, pretty disappointing.

The public libraries of Bishop Lavis and Mitchell's Plain, and later, Bellville and Cape Town, had helped me to obtain the first-class education that was denied to me as a brown child growing up in Apartheid-era South Africa. The world of books had always been a refuge to me, whether I found it in adventure comics or superhero comic books or literary romance. I realized, of course, that the more I was reading the more I was learning. But for me learning was secondary, an additional benefit, because I read for entertainment, for pleasure. Reading was a drug that made me stronger, not weaker. The truth is, while, as a child, I always saw school as a place where you went to learn things, I never really saw the library like that. For me the library, a place that most of the children that I knew only ever visited if they had a school project that forced them to, was a wonderful place.

Our second comic book, *Coloureds*, was published in 2010. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the term Coloured does not have the same meaning in South Africa that it has in the US. In South Africa, it is used only and specifically to refer to people of mixed-race descent. Having said that, it is not considered an entirely unproblematic term and there are many who find it offensive. As a Coloured person myself I use the term interchangeably with 'brown'. It is also spelled, somewhat arbitrarily, with a capital 'C'.

*Coloureds* was a very popular comic book that sold well even though it is only twelve pages long. If you need help understanding that, think of it as a short animated film. The comic deals with serious issues, like child hunger and alcoholism and domestic violence, but I think the dark humour inherent in some of the situations depicted in the story alleviates the dismalness. The popularity of *Coloureds* opened many doors for us. We have written and illustrated weekly comic strips in regional and national newspapers in South Africa. Our comic art has been exhibited in Cape Town, Germany and the Netherlands.

My younger brother, Nathan, discovered, ten years ago, that he had a latent gift for language. He has since written several poetry collections in his mother tongue, Kaaps, has won several major South African literary awards and has been translated into Greek and French. I myself have recently received awards recognition for the series of children's books that I have written and illustrated. And last year not one but two works of graphic non-fiction to which we made creative contributions was finally published in the United States of America.

I do not know if public libraries, of the physical variety, have a future. I do not know if the libraries of today will end up like those types of ubiquitous stone churches that we all know: lonely and melancholic, quiet and unvisited. I am concerned about the effects of austerity, of the impact of the attention economy on our reading preferences and habits. What I do know is that public libraries will forever remain an enduring example of what can be achieved when a civic institution is allowed to function without the distorting influence of the interests of capital.

André Trantraal is a writer, translator and political cartoonist from Mitchell's Plain and Bishop Lavis in Cape Town. His upbringing, as well as the unequal social conditions brought about living at the peripheries of the Mother City, would heavily impact how André uses his artistic mediums as political tools to verbalise the lived experiences of those at the receiving end of structural and historic violence. Using his interdisciplinary skillset he has written and illustrated children's books, comic books and newspaper cartoons, many of these in his mother

tongue, Kaaps. André has been able to poignantly capture a visual record of Coloured identity, community and the struggles that stem from addressing oppressive socio-political and cultural structures. André has translated poetry, as well as a middle grade novel by the American author, Jason Reynolds. He has been nominated for four literary awards and has won three.

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André Trantraal

*Main Road*

*Claremont*

*7800*

*Cape Town*

*South Africa*

*Email: [atrantraal@gmail.com](mailto:atrantraal@gmail.com)*