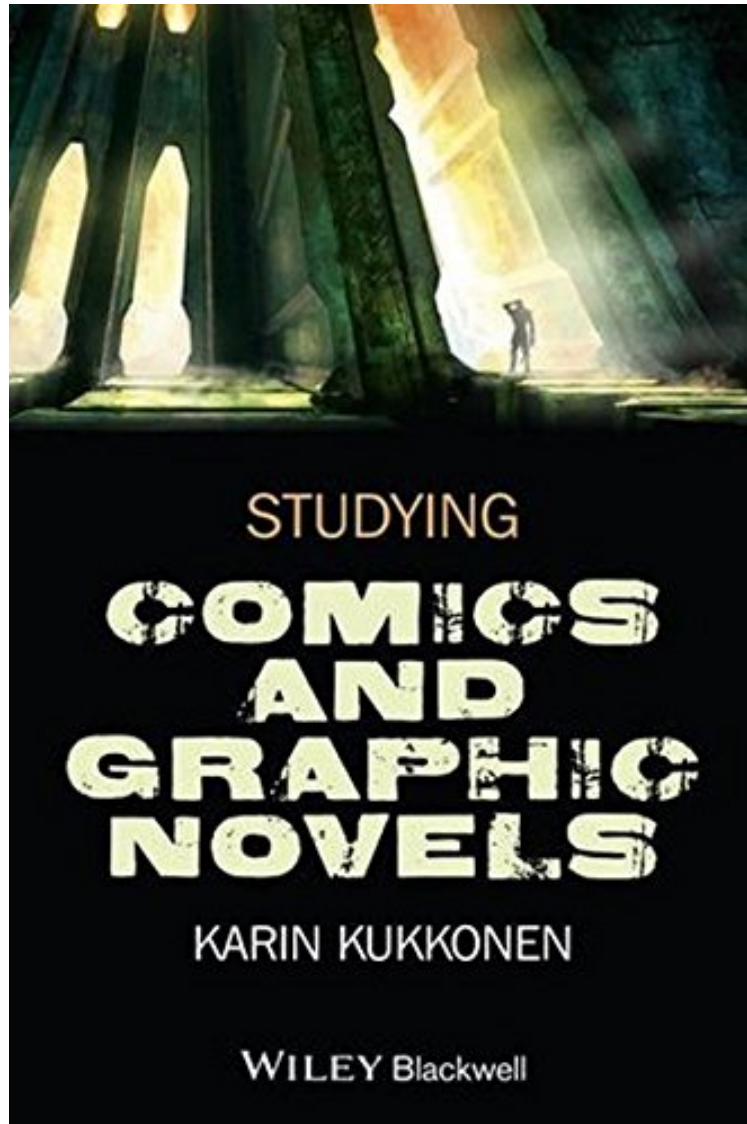


Studying Comics and Graphic Novels

Karin Kukkonen

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Karin Kukkonen : Studying Comics and Graphic Novels before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Studying Comics and Graphic Novels:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A DISAPPOINTING BOOK WHICH FAILS AS EITHER TEXTBOOK OR ACADEMIC STUDY By David Keymer I wish I liked this book more than I do, which is not much at all. Given the popularity of graphic novels and other forms of comics today, it is probably not at all a bad idea to have a textbook that can help students understand how to get the most out of reading them. Unfortunately, this is not the book. Though old by now (published in 1994), Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is a

much wiser choice, especially for novice scholars (college students). Kukkonen is a postdoctoral research fellow at St. John's College, Oxford. This is her second book on reading comics to come out this year. The other, from University of Nebraska Press, is *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* (2013). I suspect there is considerable overlap between the books, with *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* written for a scholarly audience and this book as a classroom textbook for courses on reading comics. Both books espouse a cognitive approach to reading comics, but Kukkonen doesn't spell out clearly enough what makes a cognitive approach unique or especially helpful in the reading. But even stating that the book employs a cognitive approach points to a serious deficiency in this book. The language employed in it promises a grander structure, and more profound insights, than the book actually delivers. In the introductory chapter, she promises "a guided tour of six approaches to comics: semiology, narratology, cognitive approaches, history, cultural studies and gender studies, and psychoanalysis." Yet most of the conclusions she reaches could have been reached without any of that: and for the most part, they're mundane. They don't need a fancy superstructure. Kukkonen probably knows a great deal about comics, but her knowledge doesn't yield much here for the fledgling student of the medium. And the inflated language she uses gets in the way. Just throw the terms "homodiegetic" and "heterodiegetic" at a college sophomore and see what reaction you get. Each chapter concludes with suggestions for a class activity, a short (300-500 words) writing assignment and longer essay. But the suggestions are lame, soft pitches to a hardball hitter. I do not see that they would either stretch the student's capacities or lead a student to greater knowledge of the subject. Kukkonen's book fails as a textbook, especially for novices in the field. It draws on postmodernist icons like Freud, Lacan, Barthes and Eco, and buzzwords like postmodernism and gestalt without establishing a clear enough reason that they should be applied or that they produce insights different than could be achieved without them. The prose is turgid, the ideas unremarkable, and the teaching aids flaccid. To top it off, the comics illustrations are relatively few and don't convey at all the incredible richness of the field - just a few examples: why not show a R. Crumb cartoon sequence, rather than merely talk about them? I know she says she restricts the study to English language comics but since she mentions Asterix le Gaulois, why not also Tin Tin? And it would have been nice to see at least a reference to the creators of truly original American comic strips like Pogo, Peanuts, Calvin and Hobbes, and Bloom County. If you're going to list other books to read, why not gems like these as well?

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Kapow! By Melanie Gilbert

Studying comics and graphic novels, writes author Karin Kukkonen, is no laughing matter. She analyzes a wide range of material covering political, social, personal and mythical genres: Art Spiegelman's Holocaust memoir "Maus"; Alison Bechdel's lesbian-feminist reflections in "Fun Home"; the King Arthur tales in "Prince Valiant"; as well as the more commonly-known comics of Batman, Superman and Donald Duck. I enjoyed reading this book even though I agree with other reviewers that the paperback and Kindle prices are outrageously high and will limit the market appeal to the textbook audience. In fact, Dr. Kukkonen's Introduction states, "(this book) is designed to provide you with all the knowledge you need for studying and analyzing comics on a university course." The ridiculous pricing is a reflection of that narrow demographic (remember buying college textbooks that cost almost as much as the course itself? Or a professor's self-published work that was required reading for their class?). Wiley-Blackwell is a scientific, technical, medical and scholarly publishing business. Given that their target market for this work is also a captive one, they can price a boutique book at a designer price. Works like this - a thesis turned into a course syllabus by way of a 177-page book - should really be downloadable open source material. Although well written and provocatively argued, for a more affordable analysis of comics, check out Scott McCloud's work including, "Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art," instead.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Textbook Approach to Literary Analysis of Comics

By William Carpenter

Studying Comics and Graphic Novels by Karin Kukkonen is a college-level textbook describing the basics of how to do literary analysis of comics and graphic novels. There are chapters about close-reading comics, narration, autobiographical comics, graphic novels, the history of comics, and alternate approaches to the analysis of comics. The book introduces a technical language for this analysis and has extensive references, notes, and a glossary and index. The book is quite academic in tone with language like "autographic agent" and "narratological." Unfortunately the comics discussed are reproduced in a quite small size and in black and white, which makes it difficult both to read dialogue and to follow her analysis of the use of colors. She forces her analysis into certain categories, such as semiotics, narratology, and cognitive approaches, that seem more conceptual than useful. The author sadly neglects single-panel comics, such as "The Far Side," and web-comics. There are a number of minor grammatical and factual errors. Each chapter ends with suggested class exercises and essay topics, some of which are quite interesting and complicated. However she always suggests an essay length of 300 - 500 words, which seems a woefully inadequate length both to the topics and to the college-level writing. I did enjoy her chapter on the history of comics and was pleased to see the discussion of William Gaines's unsuccessful fight against the Comic Code adopted in 1954. This was an interesting and lively chapter.

This introduction to studying comics and graphic novels is a structured guide to a popular topic. It deploys new cognitive methods of textual analysis and features activities and exercises throughout. Deploys novel cognitive approaches to analyze the importance of psychological and physical aspects of reader experience Carefully structured to build a sequenced, rounded introduction to the subject Includes study activities, writing exercises, and essay topics

throughout. Dedicated chapters cover popular sub-genres such as autobiography and literary adaptation.

A much-needed textbook that provides an analytical toolkit to bring to bear on the complexities of comics as narrative art and cultural practice. It is both rigorous and reader-friendly: the case-study approach encourages an active application of the conceptual framework that is carefully built up. This book is a real asset for all students of comics. Ann Miller, University of Leicester
Karin Kukkonen's *Studying Comics* provides the reader with the tools necessary to transform themselves quickly from a comics reader to a comics scholar, capable of engaging graphic narratives from a broad range of approaches and ready to engage in this dynamic and emerging field of study. This is a smart introduction that takes both its readers and its comics very seriously indeed, while always remaining lively and accessible. Jared Gardner, Ohio State University
From the Author *Understanding the Complex World of Comics*