

Nonfiction Comics

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The cartoonist Will Eisner used to say that there are two kinds of comics, entertaining and instructional. Over time, he speculated, instructional comics would become the more popular of the two, as teachers and everyone else finally figured out that comics convey information more efficiently than ordinary prose. Eisner passed away in 2005 but presumably would have regarded the past decade's outpouring of graphic nonfiction as confirming his thesis. Artists and/or writers as stylistically and thematically diverse as David Axe, Peter Bagge, Alison Bechdel, Paul Buhle, Guy Delisle, Sarah Glidden, Larry Gonick, Sabrina Jones, Peter Kuper, Didier Lefèvre, Josh Neufeld, Nate Powell, Ted Rall, Joe Sacco, Marjane Satrapi, and Osamu Tezuka represent only a tiny fraction of a much larger community of cartoonists who are using words and pictures to craft histories, biographies, memoirs, and travelogues. Even a motivated fan of the medium would find it difficult to keep up with the recent torrent of serious-minded books by cartoonists. As a result of their collective efforts, librarians, educators, book critics, and booksellers are far more attuned to the nonfiction comics category than ever before.

Nonfiction cartooning often, but not always, leans in a leftist direction. The fact that a "contrarian" text like Ilan Stavans and Lalo Alcaraz's *A Most Imperfect Union: A Contrarian History of the United States* has been published by Basic Books testifies to the genre's progressive tilt as well as its newfound mainstream viability. A few years ago a project like this would have appeared from a comics publisher or small left press. Now it comes in hardcover with glossy paper and high-profile endorsements from the likes of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

The book's creators share a similar sense of humor and make an effective team: Ilan Stavans teaches Latin American history and literature at Amherst College, while Lalo Alcaraz is an editorial cartoonist and the creator of *La Cucaracha*, the first nationally syndicated daily comic strip that reflects a Latino perspective on current affairs. Their first collaboration, *Latino USA: A Cartoon History*, was also issued by Basic Books. Stavans has written novels, political histories, and children's books, and has edited numerous anthologies; his artistic collaborator excels at caricature, favors foregrounded figures over detailed backgrounds, and is good at finding ways of inserting as much text as possible onto every page without overwhelming the visuals.

The book itself is aimed at general readers rather than specialists, and it covers a vast swathe of historical terrain, from pre-European agriculture to Trayvon Martin. As a result, its treatment of specific episodes and controversies is often brisk if not hurried, and some readers may feel cheated by the jaunty quality of the discussion. It is difficult to imagine that anyone would regard this book as the final word on anything. In the acknowledgements, Stavans references some of the authors who have influenced his approach, and for the most part they are the kinds of writers who are known for deploying broad brushstrokes, such as Doris Kearns Goodwin, Charles C. Mann, George Packer, and Howard Zinn. That said, the book usefully zeroes in on certain key themes in U.S. history, such as the provisional nature of historical knowledge, the persistence of racial divisions, the gulf between myth and evidence, and the role of popular culture in expressing and sharpening political debate. These themes surface again and again even as the pages move from the agrarian eighteenth century to the technological marvels of the twenty-first. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the book is the way in which hand-drawn avatars for Stavans and Alcaraz regularly turn up to tell jokes and break the fourth wall. Some of their punch lines are a bit stale but others provide a welcome note of deconstructive sarcasm. A witty, critical-minded, but scattershot survey of U.S. history, *A Most Imperfect Union* would probably make a more appropriate gift for a bright high school student than a grad student who labors in the archives.