

By Tony Kiendl  
 ■ The Dakota Student  
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Despite their disreputable background, comic books are currently enjoying a newfound respect. Formerly the realm of greasy little brats and nerdy collectors, the brightly colored short stories have grown into a challenging and progressive art form.

With the strict categorizing and boring commerciality of much of pop-culture these days, the masses can now feast their MTV-glazed eyes on a plethora of unpredictable culture hidden between the seemingly innocent pages of comic books.

The American boom in comic book production comes on the heels of the medium's expansion in other countries. It was not long ago that America found itself playing catch up in a field that it spawned. The French took the genre to new heights more than two decades ago, and in handsome volumes introduced a wide variety of styles to the art form.

The French have a high regard for the books. In January, thousands of people migrated to a comic book, or "B.D. album" (literally, comic book), fair in Angoulême, France. It was a government subsidized art event, which in France means prestige.

The Japanese were inspired by the elegant French B.D.s, and as a result have created an avalanche of Japanese comics. Comics, or "manga" in Japanese, are reportedly more popular than moviegoing in Japan. Many of these comics were formed as part of an underground movement, and feature a distinct visual style.

The recent Japanese work has created a generation of American artists who initially imitated the successful Japanese strips, but have since gone on to ignite today's wonderful, self-

# THE NEW LOOK in Comic Books



GREG MOYLE SAGEBRUSH U. OF NEVADA, RENO

mutating comic industry. Unlike other cultural industries, there is a fabulous and almost total lack of organization in terms of style. Ideas are shared by artists in an unprecedented fashion, creating an intense creative climate.

Also unique to the comic industry is the tug-of-war between larger and small comic companies. Unlike today's popular music industry, the giant companies do not suppress the smaller groups' products — they just fire back with something just as challenging.

It is a credit to the comic book industry that it can accept a wide variety of styles, mediums and belief systems and continue to thrive. This new genre of art and literature is capable of consistently rewarding the reader. And reward it does, with permanence of value, excellence of form and lasting effect.

## To start your collection:

**Love and Rockets:** Written and drawn by Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, *Love and Rockets* is an odd book, if for no other reason than its use of a loopy, elliptical narrative scheme that owes as much to Gabriel Garcia Marquez as it does to the *Archie* comics of the 1960s. Each issue offers three to four anecdotal stories. Gilbert's work follows a soap-opera course through the lives of various oddballs and schemers. While Gilbert's art is shaggier and more amateurish than his story sense, Jaime's illustration is as clued-in as his dialogue, mixing the punk style and pop-art giddiness. Jaime's stories center around two young women, Maggie and Hopey, who socialize, work, romance and rock n' roll in an anonymous barrio community.

**Black Orchid:** Created by newcomers Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, the heroine of *Black Orchid* shares the name of an early 1970s crimefighter. In the opening issue of the new series, a costumed crusader is promptly killed off by a yuppie crimelord. The new *Black Orchid* is a greenhouse-bred clone grown by the original *Orchid*'s lover, a botanist who no sooner greets the infantile plant/woman before he, too, is beaten to death. The new *Black Orchid* sets off to trace her past and avenge her creator's death. More than just a fish-out-of-water story, *Black Orchid* gets at the root of the lost and alienated.

**The Watchmen, Saga of the Swamp Thing:** For book-length entertainment, pick up one of these compilations: Alan Moore's epic *The Watchmen*, with visuals by Dave Gibbons, is the virtual textbook for the modern-day adult comic. It is sad, funny, thrilling and may renew your faith in life itself. *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is nearly as good, featuring genuinely spooky stories from the bayou.

■ Casey Seiler, *The Daily Northwestern*, Northwestern U., IL

## BOOK REVIEW

### Tyler's latest a breath of fresh air

By Katrina Brown  
 ■ The Daily Texan  
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The worst accusation one can make about Anne Tyler's new novel *Breathing Lessons* is that its structure is a tad reminiscent of a bad TV sit-com — perhaps *Gilligan's Island*. That show's characters were always trying to get off their island, but never did, no matter what they tried.

The same ideas are at work in *Breathing Lessons*. Tyler explores the frustration and failed expectations found in family and marital relationships. Her characters realize their various predicaments, but never manage to get off their "islands."

*Breathing Lessons* follows a day in the life of Maggie Moran, a sweet, klutzy, middle-aged woman who meddles too much in the lives of her family and friends.

In the one chronicled day, Maggie and her husband, Ira, are on their way to the funeral of Maggie's best friend's husband. Along the journey up and down Route One, Maggie manages to alienate her best friend, bumble an attempt to reunite her son and his ex-wife, and, on several occasions, nearly destroy her own marriage. Every one of her schemes is an endeavor to correct her past mistakes. Maggie never succeeds,

however, and she hates herself for her failures.

Tyler does a marvelous job in illustrating Maggie's world — set in Tyler's hometown of Baltimore. During Maggie's journey, an incredible array of characters are introduced through her memories. Each member of Maggie's circle of family and friends has a complex, but always fascinating, set of quirks.

Tyler's bizarre anecdotes make *Breathing Lessons* a pleasure to read. Humor, she proves, is an effective way to show characters' faults.

One downfall of the novel is that sometimes it is too obvious. Tyler uses effective symbols, but they tend to be overdone and overexplained. This can make *Breathing Lessons* tiresome at times. But the symbols do show how people are victims of time. As they get older, the same ghosts of failure keep popping up, and opportunities for new direction are fewer and farther between.

All in all, *Breathing Lessons* is great reading, giving witty insight into how normal people (not those with sordid lifestyles, all too common with best sellers) deal with each other on the big Route One of life. Although Tyler's road has plenty of bumps, the fascinating details make the trip worthwhile.

## Hostels are a big money saver when traveling this summer

By Sheri Metzler  
 ■ Oregon Daily Emerald  
 U. of Oregon

If you are a student who is interested in traveling around the United States this summer but never seems to have the necessary funds, youth hostels are the answer.

Hostels are an inexpensive way to travel that also provide ideal settings for meeting new people from other countries. Betsy Ragland, office manager of American Youth Hostels Inc. (AYH), describes hostels as "a network of budget accommodations set up for travelers to meet other travelers." Prices for a night's stay at a youth hostel range from \$4 to \$10, she said.

Begun in 1909 by a German teacher who wanted to bring his students out to the country, hostels have been widely used ever since. "The goals of a hostel are recreational and educational, to provide a better understanding and peace in the world," Ragland said.

In this country there are no restrictions to those who want to stay in a hostel. The term "youth" simply applies to "young at heart," Ragland said, as people of all ages stay at hostels. Most travelers who stay at hostels are between the ages of 18 and 35.

Office assistant Diane Sontag said that hostels are a "self-help situation." The hostel provides travelers with

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— DIANE SONTAG

blankets and pillows, but the hosteler must provide his own sheets and usually his own food. Some hostels also feature kitchen facilities.

"Hostels are shared everything," Ragland said. Hostellers share kitchens, bathrooms, common lounge areas and sleeping rooms. Men and women sleep in different dormitories with bunk beds, though some hostels have rooms for families and couples.

Sontag, who is an avid hosteler, considers the prices and the wealth of interesting new people to be the main appeal of hostels. "Nowhere else can you talk politics or share stories with other people in that type of situation. It's a nice way to bring people together."

Hosteling is also very safe, according to both women. "It is a supervised situation," Sontag said.

Interested travelers can contact the national AYH office: American Youth Hostels, P.O. Box 37613, Washington, D.C., 20013.