

LOCAL, STATE & REGION

THE SERIOUS SIDE OF COMICS



Southern Oregon University class tackles the social science of a very American literary medium

BY RYAN PFEIL
Mail Tribune (Medford)

There are panel discussions, and then there are *panels* discussions. Over the past several months, Southern Oregon University associate professor and Communication Department chair Erik Palmer has been focused on the latter through his COMM 218 class: “Comics: Culture & Politics.”

It’s a class that uses social science as a filter or framework for understanding comic books, especially related to topics like equality, gender and race.

“This course examines comic art relying on the theoretical and methodological approaches by which mass media have been formally studied in the 20th and 21st centuries, including media effects, audience reception, cultural studies, feminism, ethnic studies, political economy and more,” the SOU 2020-21 course catalog says of the class.

The four-credit course fulfills a social science requirement for students. Most comic studies courses look at the art medium from a literary or aesthetic perspective, Palmer said. His class, taught for the first time with the intent of a return next year, has a different tack.

“My interest, which is much less common, was to think of comics as a phenomenon within the domain of social science, which also aligns a little bit more closely to where I am as a scholar,” Palmer said.

You can’t fully detach from the literature and art that goes with the comic book territory, Palmer said, but the class is more focused on thinking about topics such as how the art medium functions and the commentaries it offers of society.

Art imitating life, basically. Or maybe it’s the other way around.

“There’s always a debate, and this comes back to the social science of comics,” Palmer said. “Do comics reflect underlying trends in society, or do they set an agenda and shape and influence trends in society? It’s really hard to know the answer, but one of the things we can see in mainstream superhero comics is that questions of gender and identity have been explored through the filter of science fictional, superheroic stuff for quite a long time, and increasingly.”

Palmer taught a similar course at Portland State University around 2010 while he was an adjunct professor. It was a one-off that he wouldn’t revisit until years after he first came to SOU in 2012. Former Medford resident Susan Kirtley has taught comics studies courses at PSU, too.

Palmer first taught his class at the SOU’s Honors College in 2019; a trial run, of sorts, he said.

“It went pretty well, so that led me to conclude that we should have kind of a regular version of the course for other students,” Palmer said. “And so this is the first time that this precise articulation of this course has been taught at SOU.”

Student Bart Tveskov is a longtime fan of comic books and has considered going into the industry as an artist. “I was stoked about this option, the idea of it,” Tveskov said.

Tveskov’s father is also a longtime fan of the

medium, fond of Marvel’s X-Men and DC’s Legion of Superheroes. He introduced Tveskov to superhero comics with some classic X-Men titles, too. Later in life, Tveskov became a fan of DC’s Young Justice and Blue Beetle, along with Image Comics’ science fiction opus “Saga” and a handful of web comics published online.

SOU also offers a comic book art class, which Tveskov has taken.

Week to week, Palmer’s class will focus on a particular topic, reading some comics and scholarly articles on the subject, with class discussions over Zoom and group chat.

“There’s a lot of good discussion between students in the Zoom chat,” Tveskov says. “Everyone’s very opinionated about the different things, and everybody brings a lot different perspectives to it, which I think is fun, too.”

Some conversations among classmates can get pretty charged, Tveskov adds, but they have all been constructive.

Assignments include students making some comics of their own, all responses to prompts.

Key works the class analyzed included Marjane Satrapi’s “Persepolis,” an autobiography about growing up in Iran during the 1970s, “March: Book Two,” also an autobiographical work, that is one of a multipart series about John Lewis, the late U.S. congressman, and his work during the civil rights movement, and Frank Miller’s “The Dark Knight Returns,” a highly influential book, stylistically and content-wise, from the 1980s.

“I know that I’m a very visual learner, just in general, so I think that using comics as a medium for learning is a really cool way to make some of these topics more accessible to people who might otherwise not be able to engage with it,” Tveskov said. “Visual learning can be really useful for a lot of people who struggle with heavy academic papers and things like that.

From that point of view, I think it’s really good.”

Recently, the class also got a taste of the medium’s business side. Ted Adams, an SOU alumnus and co-founder of IDW Comics, which prints titles that include “Transformers” and popular horror series such as “30 Days of Night” and “Locke & Key,” joined the class for a Zoom chat March 2. Adams also spoke about the longtime relationship between comics and politics, using the example of a famous Captain America issue cover that shows the Marvel hero punching Adolf Hitler. The first book to ever feature the hero, it was published months before the U.S. entered World War II.

“The idea that a comic book publisher would take this fairly strong political stance and have his character be launched by punching Hitler it’s not what we think of today as such a sure thing,” Adams said. “Really, from the very beginning, (comics and politics) have intersected.”

He continued with additional early examples of other popular superheroes depicted in ads for war bonds. Adams also touched on racist stereotypes depicted in some early issues and the lesser-known genre of comics that were explicitly anti-war stories.

“I can’t say enough good things about Ted and about alumni like Ted,” Palmer says. “His presentation had so much intricacy.”

Palmer says the class is coming back. He thinks the eventual opportunity to do it in person will make it even better.

“It’s been a great experience for me,” Palmer says. “And hopefully a bright spot in (students’) year of COVID.”



Terry Richard/The Oregonian file

A gray whale dives off Depoe Bay in this photo taken during a past whale watching tour. The pandemic has put a damper on Oregon’s whale watching season this year.

Whale makes rare appearance in the Columbia

By The Oregonian and the (Eugene) Register-Guard

A whale where? A California gray whale was videotaped last week in the lower Columbia River between Ridgefield, Washington, and Willow Bar.

While a rare occurrence that far upriver, biologists say it’s not unheard of, since young grays are year-round residents offshore and March is migration month from Alaska to Mexico. When last seen, this one was headed back downriver.

Whale watching season kicks off in late March, but Oregon Parks and Recreation will not hold its usual activities during this year’s Whale Watch Week due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The week is traditionally held during spring break, but because of COVID-19, volunteers will not be stationed at watching sites this year. The whale watch center in Depoe Bay also is closed, but visitors are encouraged to still enjoy whale watching on their own while staying socially distanced from others and following state COVID-19 guidelines.

“We urge visitors to explore parks close to their homes and to respect the communities they visit,” Oregon Parks Director Lisa Sumpston said in a news release.

The spring whale migration starts in late March and lasts into June, and most viewing sites managed by the state are open, with reduced services in some locations. A map of whale watching sites is available at Oregon State Parks official whale watching webpage, <http://bit.ly/2OJLDTA>.

TODAY

Today is Monday, March 15, the 74th day of 2021. There are 291 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On **March 15, 1965**, President Lyndon B. Johnson, addressing a joint session of Congress, called for new legislation to guarantee every American’s right to vote. The result was passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In **44 B.C.**, Roman dictator Julius Caesar was assassinated by a group of nobles.

In **1493**, Italian explorer Christopher Columbus arrived back in the Spanish harbor of Palos de la Frontera, two months after concluding his first voyage to the Western Hemisphere.

In **1964**, actor Elizabeth Taylor married actor Richard Burton in Montreal; it was her fifth marriage, his second. (They divorced in 1974, remarried in 1975, then divorced again in 1976.)

In **1972**, “The Godfather,” Francis Ford Coppola’s epic gangster movie based on the Mario Puzo novel and starring Marlon Brando and Al Pacino, premiered in New York.

In **1975**, Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis died near Paris at age 69.

In **1985**, the first internet domain name, symbolics.com, was registered by the Symbolics Computer Corp. of Massachusetts.

In **1998**, Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose child care guidance spanned half a century, died in San Diego at 94.

In **2019**, a gunman killed 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, streaming the massacre live on Facebook. (Brenton Tarrant, an Australian white supremacist, was sentenced to life in prison without parole after pleading guilty to 51 counts of murder and other charges.)

Ten years ago: The Syrian civil war had its beginnings with Arab Spring protests across the region that turned into an armed insurgency and eventually became a full-blown conflict.

Five years ago: In a major reversal, the Obama administration barred offshore drilling off the Atlantic Coast. Dallas Seavey won his third straight Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in a record time of 8 days, 11 hours, 20 minutes, 16 seconds.

One year ago: The Federal Reserve took massive emergency action to help the economy withstand the coronavirus by slashing its benchmark interest rate to near zero and saying it would buy \$700 billion in treasury and mortgage bonds. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that gatherings of at least 50 people be canceled or postponed for the next eight weeks. President Donald Trump called on Americans to stop hoarding groceries.

Today’s Birthdays: Actor Judd Hirsch is 86. Jazz musician Charles Lloyd is 83. Rock musician Phil Lesh is 81. Singer Mike Love (The Beach Boys) is 80. Rock singer-musician Sly Stone is 78. Rock singer-musician Howard Scott (War, Lowrider Band) is 75. Actor Frances Conroy is 68. Rock singer Dee Snider (Twisted Sister) is 66. Model Fabio is 60. Rock singer Bret Michaels (Poison) is 58. R&B singer Rockwell is 57. Actor Chris Bruno is 55. Rock singer Mark McGrath (Sugar Ray) is 53. Rock musician Mark Hoppus is 49. Actor Eva Longoria is 46. Rapper-musician will.i.am is 46. Rock DJ Joseph Hahn (Linkin Park) is 44. Rapper Young Buck is 40.

—Associated Press

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