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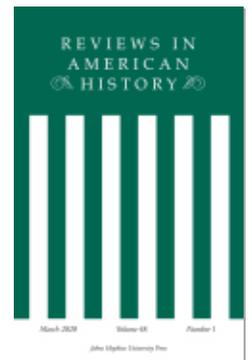
Graphic History and the Art of Collaboration

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GRAPHIC HISTORY AND THE ART OF COLLABORATION

Neil M. Maher

Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, *Moonbound: Apollo 11 and the Dream of Spaceflight*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2019. vii + 248 pp. Notes. \$19.95

To be totally honest, I agreed to write a review of a graphic history because I thought it would let me get some work done while being a good parent. Since we had our second child four years ago, I have constantly struggled to carve out time for research and writing while also teaching and putting out administrative fires. Here was a chance to sneak a work assignment into our bedtime reading rotation, and I knew both kids were game. My seven-year-old son had recently discovered comic books, and his younger brother was always eager to follow his lead. They were also already somewhat familiar with the story, since I had recently published a book about the Apollo program and 1960s grassroots politics. It was perfect; they could learn about history and I could start thinking about the review, while in bed. The first night seemed promising, when just before Armstrong and Aldrin set foot on the moon my seven-year-old proclaimed it a “great story” and his brother chimed in that he liked the pictures.

My sons unwittingly hit the nail on the head when it comes to the way historians think about graphic histories. For the most part, those reviewing such books focus their analysis on the story and whether the narrative is complex enough, includes enough voices, and covers enough historical ground. If they then turn to the graphics side of the genre (and “if,” rather than “when,” is the correct term here), reviewers explain, as my four-year-old son did, that they “like the pictures” by deploying overused adjectives such as “gorgeous,” “rich,” and “stunning” to describe the artwork.¹ Reviewers rarely analyze those images and almost never place such analysis in dialogue with their assessment of the history. Historians tend to do the same in their own research and writing, at least according to my experiences during an eight-year stint as graphics editor of an academic history journal. Authors loved to submit essays peppered with maps, photographs, and artwork that illustrated arguments made with other textual materials, but rarely analyzed the images themselves as sources in their own right.² When it comes to graphics and graphic histories, it seems,

historians tend to think deeply about the story while passively enjoying the visual culture that carries it along.

Such an approach is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it ignores the inherent interdisciplinarity of the genre. Graphic history is by definition a collaboration—of two distinct disciplines, of text and art, of words we hear in our head and images we see with our eyes. Focusing solely on the textual side of this partnership ignores an important part of story, and thus shortchanges our understanding of both the specific history being depicted and this type of scholarship more generally. Such dismissal also limits the history profession's reach. For at least a generation, students have increasingly encountered history in visual form, whether in the classroom or on the Internet, while the post-secondary-school public continues to abandon the historical monograph for documentaries, image-driven blogs, and the History Channel.³ Sales of graphic books, in contrast, are booming.⁴ Some historians, having seen the writing (and pictures) on the wall, have jumped on this bandwagon, including two of my colleagues who have published graphic histories in the past two years alone.⁵ Publishing houses have followed suit, with Oxford University Press and Hill and Wang recently establishing their own graphic history book series.⁶

What follows here is one small step towards re-centering graphics within graphic histories. It builds on my sons' bedtime review of *Moonbound: Apollo and the Dream of Spaceflight* by placing the book's artwork into conversation with its history, which in this case unfurls in eighteen chapters that alternate between two parallel narratives. One thread tells the chronological history of the Apollo 11 mission, beginning with the lunar landing and proceeding through the astronauts' first steps on the moon, their long journey back home, re-entry into Earth's atmosphere, and splashdown in the Pacific Ocean. These chapters are short, straight-forward, and narrative. Interspersed between this familiar tale are more thematic chapters dedicated to the science and technology of spaceflight. Here, author and illustrator Jonathan Fetter-Vorm uses individuals to convey complex ideas. Astronomers Kepler, Galileo, and Newton explain how planets move; engineers Wernher von Braun, Robert Goddard, and Konstantin Tsiolkovksy describe rocket design and propulsion; science fiction writers, including Francis Godwin and Jules Verne, convey early notions of space travel; and astronauts, including Deke Slayton, illustrate the physiological dangers of transporting human bodies to the moon and back. These chapters are longer, more wide-ranging, and cover a much deeper past.

The artwork in *Moonbound* both complements and reinforces this two-story approach. For the Apollo 11 narrative, Fetter-Vorm has drawn realistic scenes rich in detail. The buttons, levers, and switches of the lunar lander's console are technologically accurate; the astronauts' spacesuits correctly sport American flags on the left shoulder; even the Sea of Tranquility's crater-pocked moon-scape bears an uncanny resemblance to the real deal. In stark contrast are the

graphics for the book's second storyline, which introduces the scientists and technologies that made Apollo possible. In these chapters, it is not the details that matter, but the big ideas, and to express them Fetter-Vorm efficiently packs the pages with more panels, more character development, and more action, movement, and energy. A giant Kepler stands on the moon to imagine looking back at Earth; a broken down car floats in space to illustrate that gasoline cannot burn without oxygen; and an astronaut rides a horse, lance in hand, to slay a dragon in order to depict the moon landing as a cultural quest. These two alternating aesthetics, one factual and the other fanciful, succeed wonderfully in visually transporting the reader between these two important stories.

So do the book's colors. For the Apollo 11 story, Fetter-Vorm teamed up with colorist Laura Martin, who has brightened the *Avengers*, *X-Men*, and most recently the *Black Panther* franchises for Marvel Comics. For *Moonbound*, she juxtaposes the pitch black of space and the grays of the moon's surface with bright blues inside the Apollo 11 capsule, a perfectly drab olive green for mission control's rows of computers, with splashes of red, yellow, and gold across the astronauts' spacesuits and along the exterior hardware of the lunar lander. Fetter-Vorm contrasts such vividness by assigning a single, muted color to each thematic chapter. The astronomers are beige, the rocketeers a mustard yellow, and NASA's engineers are always light blue. This softer palette provides visual breaks between the two storylines, helps the reader keep track of the numerous players in the moon landing's pre-history, and subtly indicates a shift back in time, whether it be to Galileo's early 17th century or to von Braun during World War II. Finally, near the end of the book, as the thematic storyline marches forward into the 1960s, Fetter-Vorm combines both narratives and their characteristic coloring within a single chapter covering the day of the Apollo 11 launch.

The color-coded storylines in *Moonbound* each required different historical research. For Apollo 11's narrative, Fetter-Vorm scoured NASA's extensive photographic collection, its treasure trove of oral histories, the astronauts' written accounts, and, most importantly, the mission transcripts, which provide much of the dialogue for this story.⁷ "NASA was great because there's a document for everything," he explained in a recent interview. "There's a memo that lists when the astronauts had their gloves on and which gloves they had on."⁸ Fetter-Vorm translates such details directly into his artwork, and provides footnotes for readers interested in tracing his archival steps. For the more thematic chapters on the science and technology of spaceflight, he consulted an impressive array of key secondary sources by historians of science, historians of technology, and space historians, as well as the original writings of scientists such as Newton, science fiction writers like Verne, and engineers including von Braun. The result is high-caliber historical research that is both extensive and deep.

Yet, by relying on sources generated by the likes of Verne and von Braun, not to mention NASA's all-male astronaut corps, *Moonbound* tends to lapse into a parade of "great white men." For instance in the book's first one-hundred pages, women appear in only four panels and are depicted stereotypically as mothers, wives, and homemakers.⁹ Fetter-Vorm later attempts to correct this by dedicating short portions of two thematic chapters to the fascinating stories of Jerrie Cobb, one of thirteen female pilots who in the early 1960s underwent the same medical examinations as the Mercury astronauts, and Margaret Hamilton, one of NASA's few female engineers during the Apollo program. Fetter-Vorm treats African Americans similarly; for the most part they are relegated to two pages, one that quickly recaps the *Hidden Figures* (2016) story of African American female computers Katherine Johnson and Mary Jackson and a second brief synopsis of the protest by civil rights leader Ralph Abernathy at Cape Canaveral on the eve of the Apollo 11 launch. Fetter-Vorm acknowledges this critique, admitting in the same interview that he was insecure at first about "telling a story that was almost exclusively about white men," but then goes on to blame NASA for discriminating against women and people of color. "I realized that that was not a problem of the story; that was a problem of the history."¹⁰

But the history of Apollo 11 is comprised of many histories that Fetter-Vorm has chosen not to depict. Surely, more space could have been dedicated to women like Cobb and men like Abernathy (there were others), or to the discrimination that women and minorities faced within NASA and the aerospace industry overall. Room could also have been found for the cheers of millions of ordinary, everyday people who watched the launch live on TV, or for the concerns of approximately 50 percent of Americans who opposed spending \$20 billion to land two men on the moon when there were so many pressing problems back on Earth. Missing, also, is the history of Apollo's broader cultural context, which during the tumultuous summer of 1969 alone included the Manson murders in Los Angeles, the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam, and the Woodstock Music Festival in upstate New York, which took place a mere three weeks after splashdown. By omitting these other actors and their stories, *Moonbound* sidesteps the new history movement and instead harks back to what historian Asif Siddiqi has called the "celebratory and internalist" thread within space history.¹¹

The book also eschews academic analysis in favor of a more popular narrative. Fetter-Vorm is a deeply engaging and insightful guide through each step of the Apollo mission, at one point even inviting readers to the Apollo 11 astronauts' final breakfast before countdown. The menu? Steak and eggs, like every spaceflight since Alan Shepard's 1961 Mercury mission. It is only in the book's short "Epilogue" that *Moonbound* hints at arguments. Two panels illustrate this point. In the first, Fetter-Vorm draws two buckskin-clad fron-

tiersmen, holding rifles and wearing gold-plated space helmets on the lunar surface, to argue that the moon landing was the next phase in America's Manifest Destiny, or, as he tells it, "a chance for America to reenact its origin story." Several pages later, these Daniel Boones have been replaced by a dummy SpaceX astronaut driving Elon Musk's candy-red Tesla convertible in outer space. In case these visual tropes are lost on readers, the caption reads: "for the vanguard of the new space age, the race to the moon is a contest for market share" (pp. 234, 239).

Fetter-Vorm's narrative talents, of which there are many, will appeal to the book's intended audience of space enthusiasts, graphic history aficionados, and those interested in learning a great deal about the science and technology of spaceflight. This is a wonderfully entertaining and educational book for these readers.¹² But it will no doubt raise questions for academic historians. Why does *Moonbound's* artwork shy away from historical arguments? How can the pages be filled with so many white men who peered through giant telescopes, flew fast jets, and built powerful rockets? Where are the other histories from the 1960s era that shaped the history of Apollo 11? The answer is not that Fetter-Vorm is incapable of producing more analytical, inclusive, and broader graphic histories. He did exactly this in *Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War* (2015), which begins with a moving depiction of an ordinary Union soldier dying at the Battle of Fort Sumter from wounds inflicted by friendly fire. The historical complexity and analytical nuance of this opening scene sets the tone for the rest of the book. "The first wounds of the Civil War were self-inflicted," we read under an image of the Confederate flag being raised above the fallen fort. Then, in a final reference to both the dying soldier and the horrendous war to come, we are told, "There's no painless remedy for a trauma like this."¹³

Moonbound lacks the same complexity and nuance, I would argue, because Fetter-Vorm chose not to collaborate with an historian, as he did with *Battle Lines*. For that project he teamed up with historian Ari Kelman, whose previous award-winning book explored the meaning and memory of the Civil War, and together they developed the book's storyline, decided on its organizational structure, and no doubt discussed, debated, and compromised on the text and images that made their way into the final product.¹³ *Moonbound* had no such partnership, nor did Fetter-Vorm's first foray into this genre, which was titled *Trinity: A Graphic History of the First Atomic Bomb* (2012). Like *Moonbound*, *Trinity* sticks to the facts, focuses on well-known scientists—in this case Robert Oppenheimer—and never treads far from the history of that first bomb.¹⁴ There are benefits to these sorts of graphic histories; they tell great stories and avoid getting bogged down by the academic bogeymen of historiography, methodology, and theory. But without such close collaboration between artist and historian, the history side of graphic history can become flatter with respect to characters, contexts, and the ideas it depicts about the past.

None of this crossed my mind when I climbed back into bed with my two sons to finish reading *Moonbound*. Instead, I wondered if we would get through the second half of the Apollo 11 story, past the brief moonwalk, the long journey back home, and the celebratory splashdown in the middle of the ocean. My younger son was still riveted by the pictures, and he was right. They were all those clichés—“gorgeous,” “rich,” and “stunning”—but also extremely imaginative, deeply thoughtful, and surprisingly efficient at conveying complex ideas, subtle emotions, and key connections across huge swaths of time, all of which are often lacking in run-of-the-mill monographs. My older son continued to focus on the book’s “great” story, at least until his loose front tooth, which he had been wiggling with his tongue for a week, popped out of his mouth right when Armstrong and Aldrin re-entered Earth’s atmosphere. He was right, too. The narrative of humankind’s efforts to leave their home planet in order to set foot on another celestial body is one of the most enduring, primal, mythic stories ever told. Yet I wanted to explain to my boys that without collaboration, without a partnership between the artist drawing the pictures and a historian steering the story towards complexity and nuance, the history in graphic histories can fall short. But there wasn’t time; I had to help my seven-year-old rinse his mouth out with salt water.

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1. For this essay I examined nearly one dozen reviews of graphic histories in academic history journals and found only one that analyzed, in detail, the artwork of the book being reviewed. For that one review, which was written, quite tellingly, by an historian who specializes in visual culture, see Joshua Brown, review of *Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War*, by Ari Kelman and Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, in *American Historical Review* 123, no. 5 (December 2018):1597–1599. For examples of reviews that refrain from analyzing the artwork in graphic histories see, Eric Arnesen, review of *March*, by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, in *American Historical Review* 123, no. 5 (December 2018): 1597–1599; Thuy Linh Nguyen, review of *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt: Empire, Disease, and Modernity in French Colonial Vietnam*, by Michael G. Vann and Liz Clarke, in *American Historical Review* 123, no. 5 (December 2018): 1600–1602; Louis A. Perez Jr., review of *Che: A Graphic Biography*, by Spain Rodriguez and *Cuba: My Revolution*, by Iverna Lockpez and Dean Haspiel, in *American Historical Review* 123, no. 5 (December 2018):1602–1603; Mary N. Layoun, review of *Footnotes in Gaza*, by Joe Sacco, in *American Historical Review* 123, no. 5 (December 2018): 1604–1605; Paul Buhle, “History and Comics,” *Reviews in American History* 35, no. 2 (June 2007): 315–323; Van Gosse, “Heroes and Villains: Picturing the IWW,” *Reviews in American History* 34, no. 1 (March 2006): 57–63; and Yael A. Sternhell, “Reimagining the Civil War,” *Reviews in American History* 44 (2016): 581–587.

2. I served as the graphics editor of *Environmental History* from 2007–2015, and during that time had to constantly encourage, cajole, and demand that authors think more analytically about the images they were using in their essays.

3. For a more thorough discussion of this trend, see Paul Buhle, "History and Comics," *Reviews in American History* 35, no. 2 (June 2007): 315.

4. As far back as 2005, Amazon.com proclaimed that production of graphic novels "has enjoyed the fastest-growing sales of any category of book in the U.S. over the last four years." See <https://www.amazon.com/Graphic-Novels-Everything-Need-Know/dp/0060824255> (accessed November 26, 2019).

5. These colleagues include Andrew Kirk and Ari Kelman. See Andrew G. Kirk and Kristian Purcell, *Doom Towns: The People and Landscapes of Atomic Testing: A Graphic History* (2017); and Ari Kelman and Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, *Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War* (2015).

6. On the emergence of a graphics history trend see, Trevor R. Getz, "Getting Serious about Comic Histories," *American Historical Review*, 123, no. 5 (December 2018): 1596–1597.

7. Fetter-Vorm mentions one exception regarding this dialogue, explaining that the recorder for the Lunar Lander malfunctioned during the Apollo 11 mission. While he therefore had to use his own imagination to reconstruct some of the dialogue between Armstrong and Aldrin, he was able to also rely on the radio transmission recordings of the mission, which included dialogue between the astronauts. For this discussion see Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, *Moonbound: Apollo 11 and the Dream of Spaceflight* (2019), 244.

8. Alex Dueben, "'It Became an Obsession': An Interview With Jonathan Fetter-Vorm," *The Comics Journal*, 13 September 2019, <http://www.tcj.com/it-became-an-obsession-an-interview-with-jonathan-fetter-vorm/> (accessed 20 November 2019).

9. See Fetter-Vorm, *Moonbound*, 16, 17, 75, & 106.

10. Dueben, "'It Became an Obsession,'" 9.

11. Asif Siddiqi, "American Space History: Legacies, Questions, and Opportunities for Future Research," in *Critical Issues in the History of Spaceflight*, eds. Steven J. Dick and Roger D. Launius (2006), 479. According to Siddiqi, this thread has a "romance with the power and progress inherent in technology" and "eulogizes and defies a few important men."

12. Ari Kelman and Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, *Battle Lines: A Graphic History of the Civil War* (2015), 8 & 10.

13. See Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (2013). The book won Columbia University's Bancroft Prize in 2014.

14. Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, *Trinity: A Graphic History of the First Atomic Bomb* (2012).