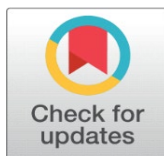
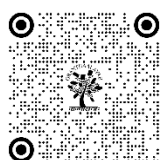


# A HISTORICAL AVANT-GARDE: FORM AND AFFECT IN THE WORKS OF MARJANE SATRAPI

Vikram Singh Nirwan<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>University of Delhi, India**DOI**[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.6133](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.6133)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of the graphic novel from its post-comix roots in the mid-1980s into a serious literary medium, led by founding figures like Art Spiegelman, Alan Moore, and Frank Miller. It argues that the form's maturation was driven by a crucial synthesis of sophisticated, "adult" content and deliberate formal experimentation. Platforms like RAW magazine championed artistic diversity, while creators broke from the Comics Code Authority to explore complex themes of history, autobiography, and politics. This shift was further enriched by transnational dialogues, particularly with British and European artists, which challenged domestic comic traditions and encouraged greater cultural openness. This development is exemplified in the work of Marjane Satrapi, whose graphic novels serve as a primary case study. The analysis details how Satrapi masterfully adapts formal elements from the rigid grids and "historical avant-garde" style of Persepolis to the fluid, diary-like layouts of Embroideries to match the specific emotional and historical weight of each narrative. By examining this trajectory, the paper concludes that the graphic novel's legitimacy as a serious literary form was secured through this dynamic union of ambitious content and an evolving visual language.

**Keywords:** Graphic Novel, Marjane Satrapi, Formal Experimentation, Autobiography, Sequential Art, Post-Comix, Narrative



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The mid-1980s marked a pivotal moment for sequential art, as the graphic novel began to emerge from the shadow of the underground comix movement to forge its own distinct literary identity. This paper argues that the medium's maturation was driven by a crucial interplay between evolving content and deliberate formal experimentation. Moving beyond the formulaic or purely satirical, artists began to tackle "adult" subjects, history, autobiography, and complex political realities that required a new visual language. Platforms like Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's *RAW* magazine became vital seedbeds, championing eclectic styles and sophisticated storytelling that stood in stark contrast to mainstream comics. Concurrently, creators like Alan Moore and Harvey Pekar demonstrated the potential for serialized narratives to explore mature themes and the quiet drama of everyday life.

This evolution toward personal and historical narrative finds a quintessential expression in the work of Marjane Satrapi. Her graphic novels, including *Persepolis*, *Embroideries*, and *Chicken with Plums*, serve as a primary case study for how an artist can meticulously tailor formal elements from her "historical avant-garde" drawing style to her fluid panel layouts to create a uniquely affective and resonant experience. By examining this trajectory from post-comix innovation to Satrapi's nuanced works, this paper will demonstrate how the graphic novel solidified its place as a serious literary form through the powerful and inseparable union of what is told and how it is shown.

## 2. THE GRAPHIC NOVEL MOVEMENT

The publication of graphic novels by Art Spiegelman, Alan Moore, and Frank Miller who are deemed as the founding figures of the graphic novel. After the end of the comix era, its effects were still apparent in the publication of adult comics. For instance, *RAW* was a comics anthology started in 1980 by a French designer and publisher Francoise Mouly, in *RAW*, Spiegelman serialized *Maus* from 1986 to 1991. *RAW* acted as a platform for post-underground artists to publish original and new work.

"It provided a space for younger artists to get themselves known to new readerships (such as the New York arts and literary scene and noncomic readers first interested by *Maus*), and when Spiegelman's work became famous, his editorship provided an imprimatur of quality for those who had featured in *RAW*. The magazine encouraged a belief in eclectic artwork and published pieces of differing styles that showed off the diverse possibilities of graphic narrative." (Baetens)

*RAW* showcased the adult comics of tomorrow and acted as a major seedbed for the graphic novel movement. "It brought a new style, it was keen of graphic experiments, and it pioneered many new forms of storytelling, a crucial element that established a clear difference from both comics and comix, in which storytelling was either highly formulaic or subordinate to excessively crude style or thematic content." (Baetens)

Similarly, Alan Moore's work at DC Comics on *The Saga of the Swamp Things* elevated it from a simple horror comic to a work more challenging for adult audiences. The 29th issue of the series published in 1984 included violent plot material and dropped the Comics Code certification. It was then rebranded as "Adult Suspense", making it the first comic series by a major publisher to be openly marketed without the Code. Moore also wrote a romance issue where the Swamp monster falls in love with the heroine and makes love to her, the issue 34 (1985) "...broke all sales records and provided a radical departure for comics... [to] narrate the before, during, and after of the monster and girl's surreal intercourse." (Baetens) Moore and his illustrator Stephen Bissette used several issues of the comic for showcasing experimentalism and modernism. They integrated several references to graphic narrative traditions like art style similar to posters and fantasy-fiction illustration or the psychedelic theme harking back to swirling artwork by creators like S. Clay Wilson.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Conventional page layout and drawing style in *American Splendor* (1976) (left); Minimalistic and stark drawing style in *Love and Rockets* (1981) (right).

Moore and Spiegelman both were experimental in their respective versions of comics. On one hand, where Mouly and *RAW* were working to raise the standard and intellectual quality of the preceding comix, Moore, on the other, explored how to develop comics culture and readers beyond the present status quo. Besides Moore, other comics were innovating within the serialized structure of publication with newer content, art styles, and real-life characters. *American Splendor* and *Love and Rockets* came out as titles with sophisticated material and visual styles for adult comics. Harvey Pekar started publishing his diary-style accounts of life in Cleveland in 1976 but it got popular in the 80s. He reported

on his daily life experiences and was published in a graphic novel-like anthology in 1986. The subject of the comics concerns the everyday life of Pekar in Cleveland, Ohio, for example, the title of the first chapter of the first issue is "How I spent my summer vacation: 1972". It focused mainly on small moments and observations rather than an overarching plot. It shows Pekar's clerical job at a hospital and his relations with his coworkers and patients. His personal life and his relations with friends and family, other stories showing his struggle with mundane issues like his car, money, health, etc. *Love and Rockets* by the Hernandez brothers was a post-underground strip published in 1981. It narrates the lives of young, mainly female characters. "Both titles share an interesting localism embedded in a strong sense of place and its subculture – post-industrial Cleveland for Pekar and suburban punk Southern California and Central America for the Hernandez brothers." (Baetens) Both the titles, compared to traditional comics, have slow, almost boring narratives that are often repetitive for the regular readers who have followed its long episodic runs. Such titles provide sophisticated melodrama by focusing on people and places rather than the immediate narrative of fantasy or adventure. Like long-running soaps and sitcoms, they garnered loyal readerships in US and UK but could not gain the wider recognition that the one-shot graphic novels by Spiegelman, Miller, and Moore did. Although these comics had themes and art styles suitable for adult comics, the long serialization did not provide the same accessibility as a one-shot graphic novel.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Other superheroes gathered around the dying Captain Marvel, *The Death of Captain Marvel* (1982) (left); 1950s drawing style and page layout in *A Sailor's Story* (1987) (right).

<https://readcomiconline.li/Comic/Marvel-Graphic-Novel/Issue-1-The-Death-of-Captain-Marvel#50>

[https://cafans.b-cdn.net/images/Category\\_61526/subcat\\_177254/a1g.jpg](https://cafans.b-cdn.net/images/Category_61526/subcat_177254/a1g.jpg)

Jim Starlin's *The Death of Captain Marvel* published by Marvel in 1982 is another example of a graphic novel that twisted the set comics formula. It presents a story of a superhero in a human battle against cancer who is coping with his mortality (fig. 1). It was also one of the first comics to be marketed as a graphic novel by a major comics publisher. Another example is Sam Glanzman's *A Sailor's Story* (1987) set in World War II where he served in the US Navy. He drew in an old-fashioned realist style and used conventional layouts that were popular in the 1950s (see fig. 2). It shows the adaptability of the graphic novel to tell personalized stories and explore historical themes. *The 'Nam* is another graphic novel set around the theme of war, published in the 1980s. It claims to narrate the monthly experiences of troops in real-time, it "...achieves a sense of the horror of war, the naivety of young soldiers, and the friendships they develop. It also aimed at historical accuracy and in one early issue, a short, more formally framed and drawn section provided a balanced and fair description of the causes of the conflict." (Baetens)

As we discussed above, the underground comix movement and a figure like Robert Crumb emerged against the backdrop of the counterculture movement of the 1960s. Thus, cultural movements and trends act as foundations for new genres of literature and artists to emerge and thrive. Like other genres of literature or any other form of media, graphic novels also developed into more diverse versions of themselves and started addressing increasingly complex issues in a variety of ways. A literary text comes in direct conversation with culture by addressing history and politics of the times. Therefore, some titles gained more recognition because they were reflecting the deeper public trends of the period.



"Historian Peter Novick suggests in his groundbreaking *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* that it was the 1970s and 1980s when the United States collectively started to remember and publicly discuss the meaning and legacy of the European genocide of the Jewish community. Spiegelman's work became a major part of that wider discussion and gained attention through its central themes. The 1980s marked significant international commemorations and anniversaries, including the fortieth and fiftieth years after the Second World War and the Holocaust." (Baetens)

Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* also addressed political concerns during the late cold war period in America. Miller satirized Ronald Reagan's media image as a cowboy-style hero who could cut through "bureaucratic red tape and liberal baloney to speak to the people and address their concerns." (Baetens) The British invasion of American comics in the 1980s led to a major shift when writers like Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, and Neil Gaiman to name a few wrote comics with more mature storylines and moved away from the superhero genre. Comics created by the British writers targeted mature audiences which helped American graphic novels to break into international markets. After the success of *The Swamp Thing* and *Watchmen*, DC actively recruited British writers to repeat Moore's success. Other than US and UK, the big three graphic novels were published in continental European countries through translations, *Maus* was translated into several European languages and its Polish version was controversial because of Spiegelman's portrayal of the Polish as pigs, while *Watchmen* was translated by a well-known writer Jean-Patrick Manchette into French. Besides British, French comics were also being integrated into the American comics culture as *RAW* began to publish the works of French artists in the later 1980s. A French magazine named *Heavy Metal* was launched in 1977 which however failed to catch on. An interaction was established between the American and European artists when "Spiegelman working with Mouly provided a bridge to European comics, while Moore had developed his unique angle on U.S. comics from his vantage point of coming out of the UK..." (Baetens) These trans-national interactions enlarged the space for creation because the outsiders were free to innovate and not follow the rules of the domestic comics tradition, they had more independence than the assembly line employees hired to dish out comics mechanically. "All these influences started appearing roughly at the same time and were discussed publicly alongside the new graphic novels. As such the graphic novel became associated with greater cultural openness than comics, and it was through dialogue with outside, sometimes prestigious partners that the graphic novel enhanced its institutionalization." (Baetens)

The 1990s and 2000s brought in works by artists belonging to diverse cultures, and artists were now consciously creating serious and mature works like non-fiction. The consolidated version of *Maus* was first published in 1991 and Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1993-1995) set the tone for the coming years, which was, the mingling of the personal and the historical. The graphic novel opened to women writers like Alison Bechdel and Marjane Satrapi, and the theme of "international politics/reportage/autobiography" also became very strong. Spiegelman wrote in his *In the Shadow of No Towers* that he was overwhelmed by 9/11 and found himself at the "faultline where World History and Personal History collide."

As a universal statement, experimentation is at the center of graphic novels. Graphic novelists try to experiment with formal elements of Comics such as drawing style, narrative, page layout, grid, and sequentiality to create a personalized medium suited for content that is subjective and autobiographical. The drawing style is perhaps the most important formal aspect of a graphic novel employed to create a personalized and recognizable aesthetic. Satrapi uses a high contrast drawing style with clear boundaries, her drawing style is balanced between realistic and cartoonish making it distinctive and recognizable. Contrarily, superhero comics employ similar kinds of drawing styles that are instantly recognizable but not distinctive, comic books do not require unique visual styles because the nature of the content is largely similar. The unframed panels used by artists like Will Eisner where characters and speech balloons are not bound in outlines lend the narrative a fluid sense of time, a dreamlike quality, and scenes appear to merge into each other. Contrarily, Satrapi and Spiegelman use framed panels with well-defined boundaries, an easy-to-read grid structure that is better suited for the autobiographical content. Satrapi's use of framed panels and conventional grid structure is to focus on the story rather than convoluted sequence; it lends her narrative order and a controlled sense of time and events. Despite the differences between graphic novels and superhero comic books, both genres follow the universal rule of sequentiality, the juxtaposition of images in a sequence. The images arranged in grids are read from top to bottom and left to right which leads to the sequential reading of the juxtaposed images and text.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Grid-like panels with well-defined borders (Left), Ancient Persian imagery, or "historical Avant-Garde" (Right). *The Complete Persepolis* (2007)

Satrapati experiments with the overall aesthetic of her graphic novels according to the type of story and content. *Persepolis*, *Embroideries*, and *Chicken with Plums* feature varied page layouts, panel designs, and panel sizes to suit their narrative, although, the drawing style remains constant throughout the three graphic novels. In *Persepolis*, the panels are tightly packed in rigid outlines to create a sense of control over the narrative, almost every panel has narration along with clearly outlined speech bubbles. She creates a visual vocabulary by drawing crowds in symmetrical patterns. Her drawing style resembles ancient Persian miniatures, murals, and friezes, she draws public protests and gathering in symmetrical formations of bodies. Her style locates itself along a continuum of Persian art or as Chute calls it "historical avant-garde". Satrapati uses a realistic, eye-level perspective to evoke a sense of realism through her panels as opposed to the dramatic perspectives conventional comics use. The use of solid black and white as panel backgrounds create an oblivious setting for the action and especially black panels evoke a sense of tension and contingency. No strict time markers are used; the story takes place in a vague period before the break out of the Iran-Iraq war. The only definite time marker is Marjane's age, she is seven years old in the first section of the book and a teenager in the latter part, which adds to the autobiographical aspect of the text. On primary examination of its form, *Persepolis* does not drastically veer away from comics. Although, it uses the fundamentals of sequential art (iconic abstraction, sequentiality) well to build a personalized and an affective narrative. It differentiates itself based on story, narrative and visual vocabulary. The visual style of *Persepolis* is central to its functioning by creating an affective history rather than an official one.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Full-page panel and narration with no boundary (Left), the resemblance with picture journals (Right). *Embroideries* (2008).

*Embroideries* (2008) is a stark departure from the taut and meticulous aesthetic of *Persepolis*, it is about an after-lunch gathering of women who discuss sexual politics in postwar Iran. It is not a continuation of *Persepolis* but offers a glance into the private lives of women in Iran. The content is largely casual and humorous but also reveals grave insights about the lives of women through several stories. Satrapi does not use grid-like panels here, the page layout mostly contains a single scene not bound by an outline. The narration also appears to be scribbled casually, again, not bound by an outline, the overall aesthetic resembles a picture diary more than a graphic novel. Most of the discussion takes place in a dining room but flashbacks and cutaways are roughly drawn. Unlike the serious action of *Persepolis*, the minimal use of black here highlights the casual treatment of the content. The thesis statement of *Embroideries* is uttered by Marjane's grandma, "To speak behind others' back is the ventilator of the heart." (Satrapi, 20) The most meticulously drawn element of *Embroideries* is the faces and facial expressions of all the women. For example, two consequent pages show merely the faces and their various facial expressions while gossiping. The formal choices are shaped around the confessional content of the text, and the flowing page layouts, panels, and casually scribbled narration add to it and demonstrate the versatility of graphic novels.

Figure 5



Figure 5 Two pages merely with faces and facial expressions. *Embroideries* (2008).

Figure 6

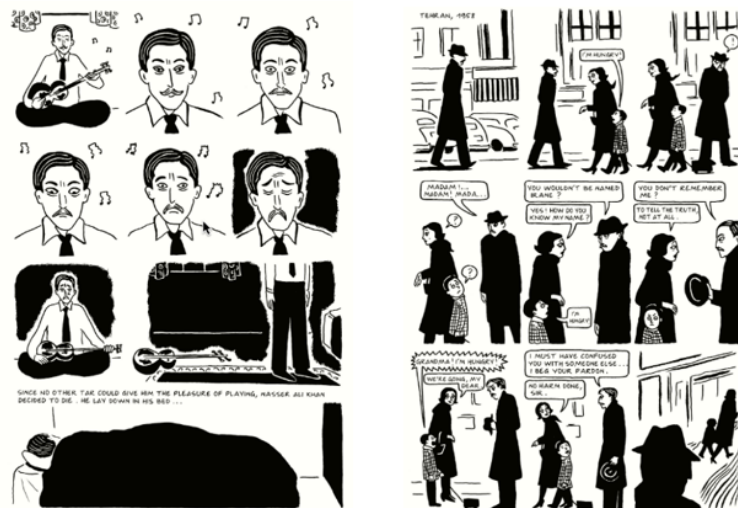


Figure 6 Nasser's introduction (Left), 3x3 grid-like panels (Right), *Chicken with Plums* (2009).



*Chicken with Plums* (2009) has more in common with *Persepolis* than *Embroideries*, it is set in the late 1950s Iran post-1953 CIA-backed coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, and his plans to nationalize Iranian oil. It is about a musician and Satrapi's great uncle Nasser Ali Khan, who loses all his motivation to stay alive after losing his beloved Tar (a stringed musical instrument). Satrapi coalesces personal history with public history as it refers to another important period in Iranian history. Set against the backdrop of political disillusionment in Iran, Satrapi presents a deeply personal story of loss and individual trauma. The overall aesthetic of *Chicken with Plums* aptly suits its poignant content and the period it is set in. The panel layout is a clever mix of symmetrical grid-like panels and full-sized panels mostly not bound by outlines which impart the narrative an impression of flexible temporality. The grids are arranged in a 3x3 or 3x4 arrangement (fig. 5), Satrapi has used a series of full-sized panels that divide the graphic novel into chapters, it shows Nasser having lost all his motivation to stay alive or to socialize. He keeps repeating "NO, I JUST WANT TO DIE." but his words are not taken seriously. The use of blacks is also abundant here like in *Persepolis*, to depict memories and flashbacks. The black backgrounds provide the panel its shape, almost all the panels with black backgrounds have rounded edges which impart the narrative an appearance of old picture albums or postcards with withered corners. As Nasser approaches his end, he starts getting delusional, he sees his mother, and the angel of death Azrael, these hallucinations are reflected with more blacks and minuscule use of white. Nasser's facial expressions are drawn with the utmost care, he is mostly depicted as grimacing in sadness, pain, or anger. It is safe to say that although shorter in length, *Chicken with Plums* is the most aesthetically pleasing among the three and employs comic-book conventions to their fullest.

Figure 7



Figure 7 Panels with rounded corners (Left), heavy use of blacks to denote delusion and reveries. (Right), *Chicken with Plums* (2009).

Another key aspect of graphic novels is the strong presence of a narrator, the narrator is present in graphic novels, both verbally and visually, whereas, in comic books, the story seems to tell itself without the intervention of a visual narrator. Autobiographical graphic novels feature a visual narrator or graphiateur who appears on the paper as a drawn self-image representing the autobiographical 'I' and the visual narrator also allows for multiple versions of the same narrator as seen in *Persepolis*. As mentioned before, the primary aim of Comics and graphic novels is to tell stories and the foremost feature of Graphic novels is the type of content, not aimed to be humorous or slapstick but serious in the subject matter. Graphic novels are based upon lived experiences, conflicts, traumas, psychological unrest, wars, displacement, etc. As Jan Baetens writes, "Content matter is "adult," not in the sense of pornographic, but in the sense of serious and too sophisticated - or simply uninteresting for a juvenile audience..."

"Many graphic novels are autobiographical or semiautobiographical, and several of them claim to be documentaries, reportage, or history. Let us underline: the three best-known graphic novels, which do not belong to the dystopian superheroes genre, definitely have an autobiographical foundation. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–2003, for the original French version), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) are all personal

memoirs, even if the main character is not necessarily that of the “narrating I.” Let us recall that Spiegelman’s story is about his parents as much as it is about Art Spiegelman; also, Bechdel’s account has a double protagonist, *Fun Home* being about the coming out of both daughter and father; and the hero of *Persepolis* is not only Marjane Satrapi but also the whole generation of Iranians (girls, women, boys, and men) exposed to the essentially male, theocratic violence of the Islamic Revolution.” (Baetens)

The interplay of form and content provides the graphic novel its distinct expression that elevates it above the conventional comic book. For example, the narratorial ‘I’ or the drawn self-image represents the autobiographical ‘I’ on paper which becomes a mouthpiece for the unrest and issues around it. The visual narrator initiates a multitude of discourses, Satrapi’s autobiographical characters talk about several issues like education, gender, violence, death, war, theocracy, etc. Therefore, the autobiographical imparts theoretical complexity to the comics medium and manifests itself as a distinct genre that deals with complex and grave issues. The graphic novel has rescued the comics medium from being written off as easy, escapist, or low-brow literature that primarily caters to juvenile audiences.

In conclusion, the emergence of the graphic novel as a significant literary form was driven by two interconnected factors: a turn towards serious subjects like history and autobiography, and a corresponding experimentation with the medium's formal language. The post-comix movement, building on the rebellious spirit of its predecessor, saw pioneers like Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, and Justin Green legitimize “adult” content, moving beyond superhero conventions to explore complex themes of ethnic identity, conflict, and psychological unrest. This thematic maturation demanded a more nuanced visual vocabulary. The formal elements of sequential art the gutter, bleed, and panel structure evolved into a sophisticated toolkit uniquely suited for this new depth. As trauma theory suggests, traumatic memory is often fragmented, non-linear, and intensely visual, resisting simple verbal narration. The graphic novel's form is perfectly positioned to represent this “unclaimed experience,” using its visual and sequential nature to mimic the ruptures and affective states of trauma. From Eisner’s foundational narratives to the modern canon, the form has been continually molded by the demands of its content. Marjane Satrapi’s work exemplifies this synthesis, employing a controlled visual style to narrate personal and historical trauma, thereby demonstrating the medium's profound capacity to give shape to experiences that might otherwise remain unrepresentable. This powerful union of form and content solidifies the graphic novel's unique position as a vital medium for portraying the complexities of human experience.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- Eisner, Will. *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac, Poorhouse Press, 1985. Print.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. William Morrow Paperbacks, 1994.
- Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. Internet resource.
- Baetens, Jan, and Hugo Frey. *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Tabachnick, Stephen E., editor. *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Crumb, R., Artist. *Zap comix. No. 0, The comic that plugs you in*. October. 1967.
- Green, Justin. *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. San Francisco, Calif: McSweeney's, 2010. Print.
- Jackson, Jack. *Comanche Moon: A Picture Narrative About Cynthia Ann Parker, Her Twenty-Five Year Captivity Among the Comanche Indians - and Her Son, Quanah Parker, the Last Chief of the Comanches*. San Francisco: Rip Off Press, 1979. Print.
- Eisner, Will, and Scott McCloud. *A Contract with God: And Other Tenement Stories.*, 2017. Internet resource.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus*. Pantheon Books, 1992.
- Pekar, Harvey, et al. *American Splendor*. Dark Horse Comics, 1997.
- Hernandez, Gilbert. *Love and Rockets*. Titan Books Ltd, 2007.



- STARLIN, JIM. *Death of Captain Marvel*. MARVEL COMICS, 2021.
- Glanzman, Sam, et al. *A Sailor's Story*. Marvel Entertainment Group, 1987.
- Spiegelman, Art. *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Pantheon Books, 2004.
- Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. Pantheon Books, 2007.
- Satrapi, Marjane. *Chicken with Plums*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009.
- Satrapi, Marjane. *Embroideries*. Jonathan Cape, 2008.