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Joel E. Vessels. *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010. xii + 305 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-60473-444-7.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

Drawing France examines debates over the use of caricatures, cartoons, and comics in the construction of “Frenchness” across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Joel E. Vessels forewarns readers in the introduction, his book is not so much a cultural history of the *bande dessinée* (BD) as “it explores the shifting political and cultural place of the image and BD through a rough combination of social discourse, governmental policy and popular culture” (p. 14). What Vessels seeks to explain is how cartoons were transformed from an scorned, censored, and illegitimate form of culture to become an official medium of Frenchness itself, monumentalized in the establishment of the Centre National de la Bande Dessinée de l’Image (CNBDI) in Angoulême in 1991. Vessels provides a broad historical overview to the topic, and he is most successful in the final chapters.

The opening chapter sweeps quickly across the nineteenth century, touching on *journaux illustrés* or the illustrated popular press, ranging from the late eighteenth-century “Images d’Epinal” colorized broadside prints of Jean Charles Pellerin to anti-Dreyfussard cartoons in *Le Figaro* and illustrations in *journaux illustrés* for children at the turn of the twentieth century. The centerpiece of the chapter examines political responses to *la poire*, “The Pear” cartoons and illustrations that satirized the July Monarchy published in Charles Philippon’s *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari* during the 1830s. Although Philippon was legally convicted, fined, and briefly imprisoned for his lampooning of Louis-Philippe, the “pearification of the king” (p. 28) became an enduring caricature of the French monarchy, widely imitated by other illustrators and instantaneously recognized internationally as a symbol of the French government. Vessels next addresses the Great War era, noting the rise of prewar illustrated satirical magazines like *L’Assiette au Beurre* and early comics for children such as *Zig et Puce*. The big comics threat to French identity in the postwar era, he emphasizes, came from Opera Mundi publisher Paul Winkler. In the late 1920s, Winkler began to distribute a number of popular American comic strips in French periodicals such as Mandrake the Magician, Popeye, Pim Pam Poum (The Katzenjammer Kids), and Guy l’Éclair (Flash Gordon) and, in the 1930s, he created the weekly children’s comics magazines *Le Journal de Mickey* and *Robinson*. The political reaction against American comics was extreme, he asserts, with both the Catholic right and Communist left decrying the imbecility of comics and responding with their own children’s publications, *Cœurs Vaillants* and *Mon Camarade* respectively, although none of these *journaux enfantines* achieved the popularity of Winkler’s comics.

Not too surprisingly, the Vichy era represented a historical nadir in French comics with its emphasis upon wholesome youth culture and the banning of imported American mass culture, although some children’s series, like *Fanfan La Tulipe*, continued to straggle along during the period. Genuine innovation in comics revived with the Liberation, however, most notably in an illustrated children’s double-album called *La Bête est morte!* This comic book recounted the story of Occupation and Liberation through anthropomorphic animals in which Germans were wolves, the English bulldogs, Americans buffalos, Russians bears, and the French a variety of cute creatures including chipmunks, rabbits, sheep, frogs, owls and bees. When it came to combating the insidious influence of comics upon

French youth, however, the Commission Interministérielle de l'enfance délinquante (CIED) picked up where Vichy had left off. The Commission attacked BDs for immoral and pornographic content that, it claimed, would lead to juvenile delinquency and crime, but more generally it sought to remedy the nefarious influence of Americanization upon French republican values. The political result was the 16 July 1949 law, which subjected youth publications to strict governmental oversight. It has been continually revised over the subsequent decades and remains in effect today.

Yet, as Vessels recounts, such a political move turned out to be a rearguard action. Far from squelching the comics industry, the 16 July Law provided French publishers with guidelines for creating their own product lines. While some comic strips like *Tarzan* were suppressed in the short term, from the 1950s forward an overhauled *Journal de Mickey*, renewed Franco-Belgian series like *Tintin*, and entirely new French weekly comics like *Pilote*, more carefully tailored their content and flourished. The law also had the unintended effect of making it easier to publish and distribute comics and photo-illustrated weeklies for adults, whose content was not subjected to the same regulatory restrictions as publications intended for youth. French intellectual aficionados of comics increasingly came to view themselves as cultural arbiters of the medium in a manner similar to the way they had appropriated American jazz and cinema. In 1962, the Club des Bandes Dessinées (CBD) was founded, quickly renamed the Centre d'étude des littératures d'expression graphique (CELEG), proclaiming the *bande dessinée* to be the "ninth art." In the 1970s and the following decades, French BD artists pushed cultural limits of satire, fantasy, and experimental comics in such periodicals such as *Charlie Hebdo*, *Métal Hurlant*, and the independent publications of L'Association. By the 1980s, comics were undeniably a major cultural force in France and, under Minister of Culture Jack Lang, the medium received official recognition. Vessels appropriately titles the epilogue "A *Sous-Produit Littéraire* No Longer," as he emphasizes the success of comics in France as demonstrated by the annual festival in Angoulême that enshrines illustrators and series with its *Grand Prix*, the numerous commissions, centers, and libraries dedicated to the conservation of comics, and the collaborations between the Louvre and other regional museums with publishing houses to mount comics exhibitions.

Vessels is most successful in these final chapters of *Drawing France*, for they reveal a political and cultural dynamic of push and pull between commercial publishers and governmental sanction that ultimately secured the place of comics within France. Unfortunately, the first half of the book is not as strong in this regard. This may be due in part to his adoption of a kind of political repression model, in which a variety of governments and political parties engage in a battle of officially sanctioned culture against insolent, degraded and foreign cartoons. Vessels gives the impression that government censorship and anti-Americanism played a determinant role in suppressing the emergence of a particularly French notion of comics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What that assumption neglects is the impressive clout of the French commercial popular press during this period and how the reading public readily embraced this new form of mass culture. However heroic individual publishers like Philipon or Winkler may have been, a much larger popular press created a mass readership for *canards* and *journaux illustrés* in the nineteenth century and for newspapers and magazines that regularly featured cartoons and *bandes dessinées* in the early twentieth century. The book also does not consider the place of comics within an emerging visual culture across this period, from the physiognomies of Daumier, the metamorphoses of Grandville, and sketches of Parisian types to the nascent modern visual technologies of photography, dioramas, and early cinema. Defending "Frenchness" cannot alone sufficiently explain, for example, the advent of *Bécassine* from within the Catholic press before the Great War, the appearance of *Journal de Spirou* in the late 1930s, or the popularity of that decidedly French take on the cowboy hero, *Lucky Luke*, immediately following WWII.

Granted, Vessels has embarked upon a major undertaking by charting the contentious rise of comics in France across two centuries. The scale of the project forces the author to take the approach of an overview in which the playing out of larger events can only be punctuated with illustrative examples. Yet the particular political approach Vessels has applied assumes that the official guardians of culture

were the ones to determine what was or was not French culture. A complementary political perspective from below, one that includes commercial publishers, writers, and a mass readership, is needed as well in order to explain how the French themselves played a formative role in defining “Frenchness.” Without it, the antecedents to the success of French comics in the late twentieth century remain something of a historical mystery.

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