

Canon or common? *Sandman*, aesthetics and literariness

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The comic book is dead – long live the graphic novel! These words might make a fitting epitaph for the British-American comics industry's development during the twentieth century. During this time the discourse around comics publishing and the books themselves have undergone a series of aesthetic, commercial, conceptual and cultural changes. This talk will explore the move towards bookishness and literariness in contemporary British-American comics, using DC Vertigo's *Sandman* series (Gaiman et al, 1989-present) as a case study.

Sandman is best remembered for its mythological content and literary allusions, and these elements have allowed it to claim its place as a canonised graphic novel by both academics and fans. This paper compares the discourses that surround the comic and reflects on both text and paratext to draw out some of the contradictions that emerge when we approach graphic novels as solely literary artefacts.

It begins by revisiting the launch and original run of *Sandman* (1989-1996) as the flagship title for DC's Vertigo imprint back in the 1990s. Vertigo contributed to the cultural revaluation of comics as graphic novels by placing an emphasis on the author function and offering a critical and aesthetic distance from DC's other publications. It counters the literary paratexts around *Sandman* by exploring its visual elements: considering the multiplicity of these (collage, multiple artists) and arguing that this matched the diversity of the comic's content and raised its critical profile. It extends this examination to *Sandman: Overture* (2013-15).

It argues that *Sandman* enacts the particular status struggles of the collaborative comics medium against the 'graphic novel' brand. It concludes by mapping its findings back onto the processes and changes at work in comics today, and reflecting on what this means for definitions of cultural worth, the performativity of the author function, and our understanding of artistic creation and ownership.

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