

Edward Ousselin
Western Washington University

Vessels, Joel E. *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*. Jackson, MI: Mississippi UP, 2010. ISBN 978-1-60473-444-7. xii + 305 p.

The author examines the evolution of *les bandes dessinées*, or "BD," against the backdrop of French political history. The conclusion is a familiar one: BD have developed into a popular art form that has not only gained widespread critical recognition, but that holds a special place within contemporary French culture. In that sense, the study of BD provides an exceptionally broad pathway toward a better understanding of French cultural patterns. What makes this book interesting and innovative is on the one hand its longer historical reach within France (stretching back to the *Monarchie d'Orléans*, 1830-48), and on the other its focus on the various forms of resistance encountered by the graphic art form during the stages of its development. The current critical and even governmental acceptance of BD, acclaimed as they are for their sophisticated blend of text and images, was not pre-ordained. As the author of *Drawing France* shows, they have only recently been widely perceived as both artistically valid and quintessentially French—after having been long decried as stultifying American imports that lowered French schoolchildren's literacy standards.

Joel E. Vessels makes the case that the origin of BD can be traced back not just to the Swiss cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer, but also to the political caricatures that proliferated in France during the reign of Louis-Philippe. In the first chapter, the author's discussion of Charles Philipon's famous "Les poires" visual sequence, during which the king's head gradually metamorphosizes into a plump pear, links early examples of graphic political satire to what would become a sequential art form. The second chapter transitions somewhat abruptly to the twentieth century, and Vessels establishes a pattern of comparing the domestic evolution of BD (with examples such as Christophe's *La famille Fenouillard* or Saint-Ogan's *Zig et Puce*) with American influences, including the hugely popular *Journal de Mickey*. While they were generally categorized as a form of light entertainment mainly intended for children, BD nonetheless became the object of much criticism from both the Catholic right and the Communist Party, due to their presumably deleterious effect on young minds. This level of convergent criticism was "the result of the larger contest between the left and the right over the right to speak of and for the cultural patrimony of the nation during the tumultuous years of the run-up to World War II" (71).

That French cinema and theater flourished during the dark years of the German Occupation is both paradoxical and well-known. Vessels argues that the Vichy Regime "might also have saved" (73) BD in France. With competition from American comic strips eliminated, the domestic production of BD was encouraged, especially if it contributed to the dissemination of *Pétainiste* ideology: "there were a

number of examples of the medium ... utilizing its conventions and forms to press the message of the National Revolution to France's youngest citizens" (93). The postwar years brought an end to paper shortages and to some forms of censorship, allowing BD to flourish during the period dominated by "la tradition franco-belge". However, Vessels shows that government intervention was never absent, and that cultural policy alternated between watchful oversight and outright banning of some BD. The fact that BD gradually became accepted as an artistic medium for adults as well as children is partly due to the ever-present threat of censorship, and to the countercultural aura that BD thus tended to acquire. The belated governmental embrace of BD in the 1980s by Culture Minister Jack Lang did little to change an art form that no longer bore the stigma of mindless entertainment. In his study of the interaction of BD and governmental policy, Vessels discusses more recent developments, such as the role played by BD during the 2002 presidential election and the bitter controversies over the publication of political satires that depicted the prophet Muhammad (2005-06). Throughout his study, the author provides a lucid account of how an initially denigrated graphic medium became established and naturalized within French culture.

One minor quibble is that there is an insufficient number of illustrations for a book devoted to BD. The more serious problem is that this well-researched study is unfortunately marred by large numbers of glaring typographical errors and stylistic infelicities: "Fountainbleu" (xi); "Françoise Rabelais" (3, 237, 292); "Legend Napoléonienne" (19); "hebdomaire" (42); "journaux l'enfantine" (62-65); "provisoir" (76); "principle" instead of "principal" (78, 81, 108, 129, 137, 148, 227); "journals l'enfantine" (82); "autorités des occupation" (83); "l'Ideel Fanfan" (97); "idée éducatif" (121); "journaux illustrée" (127); "Lang spat out" (185); "François Mitterand" (throughout ch. 6); "idée d'France" (211); "Dessin de Presse et d'Humor" (217); "tend to not surprisingly predominate" (218); "It's very openendness, the ability to apparently forever imagine" (234); "the principle political cartooninst" (239); "one of the most intellegent supporter's" (247); "équivant" (272); "journals d'hebdomadaire" (274); "qer février 1950" (278); "La Vent Aux Mineurs" (288). To this list, which is by no means comprehensive, should be added the indiscriminate capitalization of French titles, as well as the use of word-for-word and therefore misleading translations: "Propositions of law" (144); "Keeper of the Seals" (146). A scholarly work merits higher levels of editing and proofreading, especially when published by a university press.