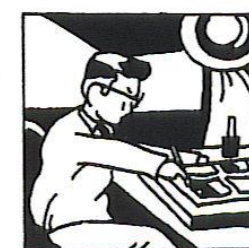
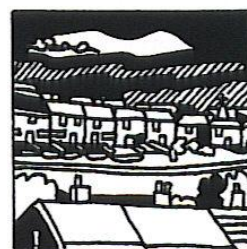
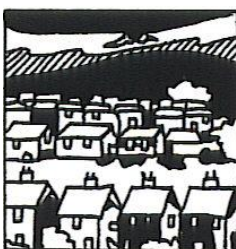
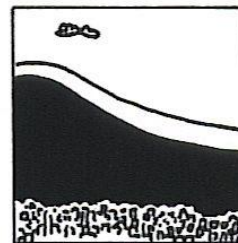
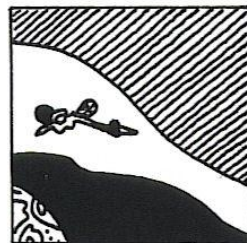


# **The Making of Slow Fiction**

MIKE WELLER'S RECURRENT DREAM BETWEEN 1949-50



This essay in two parts is based on a talk given by Michael Weller to the Research Institute for Media, Art and Design (RIMAD) at the University of Bedfordshire, October 7 2009.

THE MAKING OF SLOW FICTION

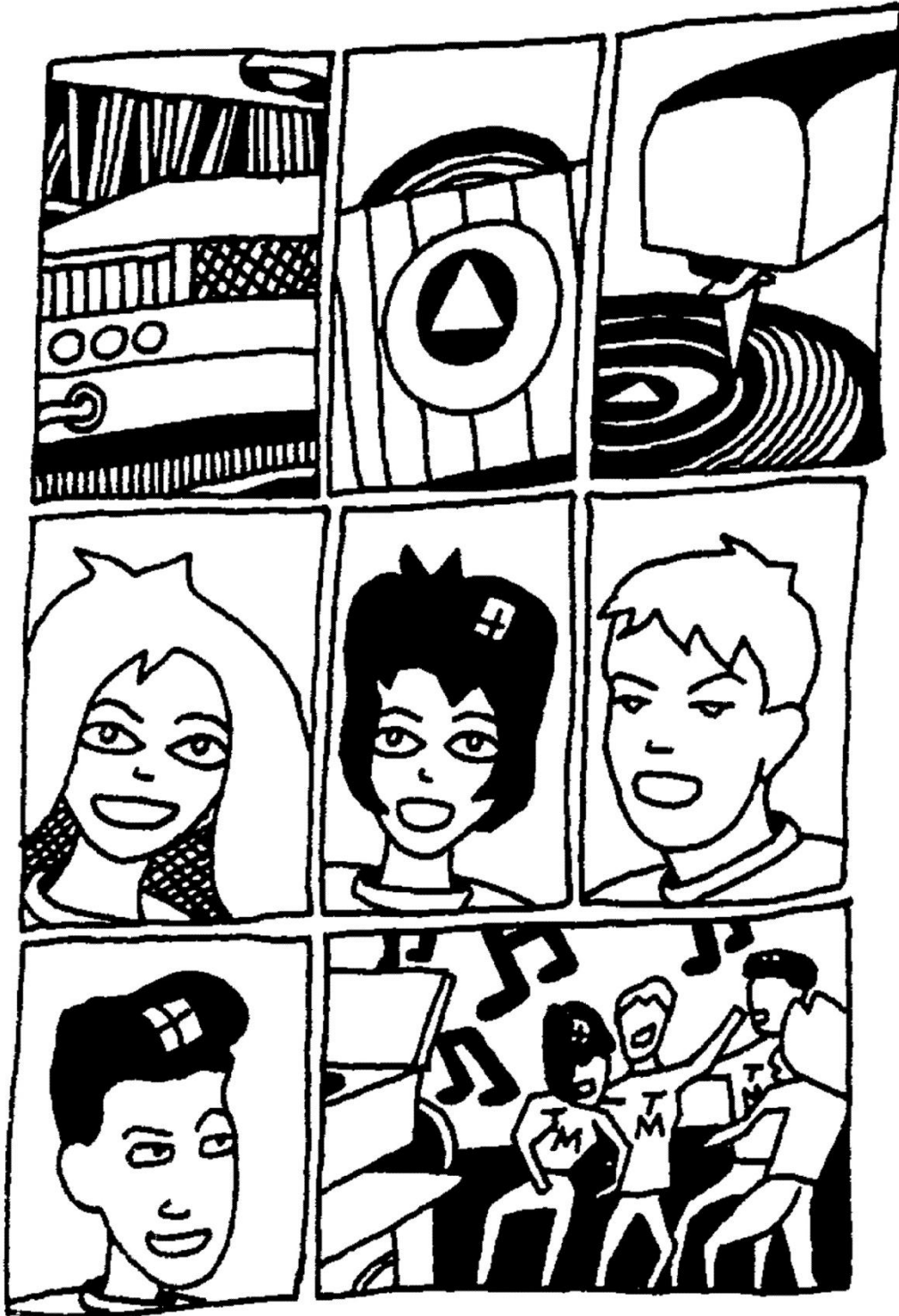
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February 2012 PDF

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# RUN-IN GROOVE



(Above) two graphics appearing in 'Island of Dreams' & 'The Man Who Drew Too Much' from *Space Opera: The Artist's Book* (Michael J. Weller, Visual Associations, 2000)<sup>1</sup>

## **The Making of Slow Fiction Part 1**

### **Brief background to verbal-visual practice**

Autobiographical cartoon-strips were a sub-genre of 1960s US underground comix. Twenty years after their initial appearance in the UK the 'autobiographical comic' became synonymous with an adult comic book genre promoted through booktrade and wider media as the 'graphic novel'.<sup>2</sup>

My 1970s and 1980s comix and zine<sup>3</sup> cartoons ran to two, three, four pages at most. A good format for short narrative sketches with illustrated dialogue, social satire and comic humour. I tried longer comic-book stories (standard twenty-four and thirty-six pages) during this period but they weren't satisfactory. Story-structures succeeded but balance of caption, script, panel-layout, page-design unit and artwork didn't match conventions of professionalized comic-book art. Yet I was driven to paint a bigger picture on a wider canvas. I despaired at the thought of producing and sustaining illustration for pages and pages on end. By the same token I resisted the idea of dropping a story into the hands of a professional comics artist or fan artist to illustrate. I wanted to resist vertical divisions of labour if possible.

My discomfort with the division of labour in UK creative writing practice and book production was formed through several years experience as a production

assistant in the advertising and publicity sector of an international stationery firm and several more years as print buyer for a Ghanaian and Nigerian client-based advertising agency.<sup>4</sup> Finished-art studios were the factory production line for executive copywriters and creative ideas people - visualizers. The commercial studio workplace, usually a small business partnership with skilled staffers and highly skilled contracted freelancers (letterists, illustrators, photographic retouchers) became a hands-on site where creative copy and graphic design layouts were fed for type mark-up, paste-up and keyline artwork for mechanical reproduction. Finished art needed a supply of prints processed by photographic lab workers before being passed on to typographic foundry compositors. Before technological change in forces of mass media production from hot metal to electronic (provoking protracted UK printworkers dispute in the 1980s), organized workers completed the production process with printers block (for letterpress) or finished camera-ready copy (lithographic). The division of labour was so cut, closed and dried, a studio technician's suggestion for improvement to copy, design or layout would be met by visible disdain, or if surreptitiously acted upon, taken as gratis by editorial executives, often without credit or acknowledgement.

This had been my British experience of creative work and I wanted to turn it upside-down and inside-out with Space Opera. Poetry and poetics of the visual and verbal were energizers. Drawing and lettering comic panels is an absorbing occupation as well as being labour intensive. But no matter how inimitable and unique a drawing style, quirky comic line doesn't always sell to sixteen-year-old boys buying graphic novels. To many male adolescent minds a taste for the eclectic may be interpreted as gay and pretentious. Comic-book subculture is built around story arcs and pictures drawn by comic-book artists schooled and trained through years working in definitive US comic-book formats. Until *2000AD* weekly

and its larger-than-life Judge Dredd character there hadn't been a future in the UK for artist-fans. Brit artists had copied American comic-book house styles to professional standards since boyhood, knowing one day their labours may be rewarded by paid work.

Historians of the form argue there was a 'British invasion'<sup>5</sup> of talent to the US. But I doubt many fan-writers and artists of the 1970s would have expected future commissions to come from USA's premier industry giants Marvel and DC and be sold to Warner and Hollywood. US comic-book production is arguably a horizontal division of labour between executive publishing corporate and combine skills of scripter, co-plotter, writer, penciller, inker, letterer, colorist, editor, and editor-in-chief or "ranch foreman". Along with this model of production the notion of comics *auteur* has found currency, bringing parallels with movie director and film-making closer.<sup>2</sup>

I enjoyed the larger-than-life creator-led characters of old British newspaper strips (Rupert Bear, Andy Capp, Rip Kirby, Garth, Modesty Blaise, Flook, etc) and the ritual of serial-reading days, weeks, months - years even, morning, midday and evening editions. Here the genre of pin-up, adventure, sci-fi and fantasy, humour, western, detective, spy thriller, social and oblique political satire, sport, romance, gag cartoon, could all be found on one page; the most popular bound into yearly collections along with the best of Carl 'Giles' or a Ronald Searle collaboration with *Punch* humorists. The newspaper strip accommodated diverse approaches to writing and drawing for cartoon-strips. The older 'Sunday Funnies' newspaper supplements in the United States laid the basis for an aesthetic of comic strip as serious art form.<sup>6</sup>

Boys' and girls' comic paper weeklies in the UK also contained serials running for months. Christmas annuals were printed on thick quality paper with colour sections. The strips may have been less-satisfying shorter stories but the annuals themselves could be treasured as mass-produced artist bookworks. The Rupert Bear annuals were most certainly of this quality.

In the US only those first wave US underground comix artists who'd already worked in defined figurative cartoon or comic-book styles, or were prepared to increase their artwork labour time would make the professional grade. By developing commercial graphic techniques to meet demands for detailed cleanline work, new audiences who'd grown up after the undergrounds became consumers of prestige format connoisseur comic-books and perfect-bound graphic novels. There was a European market in the Netherlands, Belgium, Scandinavia, Spain, Italy for such work, and especially in visual and pop-culture film-friendly France with its academy interest in classic newspaper strips, comic books, and its own subsidized homegrown *Bande Dessinee* cultural industry.

I was fortunate to receive early encouragement and great support from late friend and Architectural Association (AA) teacher Robin Evans (I wasn't a student at the AA) to extend pioneering Beckenham Arts Lab work and ideas into dimensional exhibition and installation. My comic strip work, however, was not intended for exhibition on gallery walls. They needed to be read. Despite the UK art school-led Pop Art boom of the 1950s, comic art itself never found a formal educative niche in Britain until the 1990s. Even then 'cartoon workshops' and 'Understanding Comics' courses were a mix of funding via corporate-backed, quango-led sponsorship in association with local authority agencies and local sponsors - or extra-curricula in further and higher education sectors.

## **The making of Space Opera**

I wanted to tell my own story about working in an industry where comics publishing supply meets demand for photographically-detailed, albeit stylized realisms in fantasy subgenres. A commercial artform for highly professionalized graphic reproduction styles. I needed to be gay and pretentious. Move out and find space to tell my own comic book (his)tory. I needed a singular place and found a niche with visual-friendly modernists associated with the Association of Little Presses (ALP). These practitioners were survivors of 1970s ‘poetry wars’ between the British poetry establishment and avant-garde writers. Writers of the ‘British Poetry Revival’, or “British poetry renaissance”, as Dorset-based David Caddy<sup>7</sup> editor of international magazine *Tears in the Fence* prefers to name this poetry and little press practice.

I’d heard of Bob Cobbing’s Writers Forum since the days of the British Arts Lab movement. ITMA, a small southeast London poetry publisher affiliated to the ALP re-aquainted me with Cobbing and his New River Project for printing books by ALP publishers. A seemingly insignificant but empowering moment occurred when Cobbing asked me if I’d like to contribute to PALPI (ALP’s serial listing catalogue) by producing a design for the cover. I signed my (cartoon? illustration? image? cover art?) to find it removed when printed. On questioning Cobbing as to why my signature had been erased (this was common practice in my early experience of illustration and commercial advertising art), he asked me to turn to

PALPI No. 26's introduction - a short discourse in *poetics*. The cover was credited to 'MJ Weller'. Designated *a design*. Among London avant-garde writers this meant *poem*. I'd produced a visual poem. I was free from divisions of artistic and mechanical labour carried as baggage for twenty-five years.

The story of how avant-garde British writers and poets organized their own printing, publishing, performance and bookfairs was a practical inspiration. I began my Space Opera epic in 1996. Space Opera's framework is personal biographical story as background to approaching millennium. Starting point for subframes within the main framework is character-picture of a fictional writer and his artwork-collaborator at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century England.

I needed to tell a larger-than-life story in grand heroic style. A metafiction. Picture-library Sexton Blake and Billy Bunter yarns, Dennis Wheatley's pre-James Bond espionage tales, and especially his supernatural thrillers of conflict between occultist heroes and Satanists, were an inspiration in how to produce entertaining fiction.<sup>8</sup> The political and religious beliefs of some individual writers were best suspended if their fiction was to be enjoyed as popular literature. More grist to fantastic endeavor was CS Lewis's explicit Christian allegory and sophisticated storytelling on similar themes of spiritual warfare, influenced by London Blakean poet and fellow "Inkling" Charles Williams. Less famous and less formally educated than Oxford storytelling colleagues CS and JRR Tolkien - Williams was nevertheless employed as an academic in Oxford on recommendation of Lewis. A former student of the occult himself Williams remained a believer in white and black magic, spiritual enchantment, the power of love and female goddess-muses.<sup>9</sup>

Supernatural fantasies, William Morris's communist fantasies, scientific romance – these Gothic storytelling themes marketed in fantasy, horror and SF genre forms had been popular since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Many related titles remained in print and were available on UK newsstands, up to and during the 1970s and 1980s, along with prolific turnout by Michael Moorcock, Richard Allen, Peter Cave and other poplit paperback writers. Four-hundred-page neo-Victorian novels and short, snappy, laddish, suedehead youth subculture pulps may seem like anachronisms thirty years later with consumption of psycho-slasher movies, interactive downloads and user-dominated social networking platforms. The older material, however, remained popular with young readerships in an era when both modernist Beatles and the 'punk explosion' had already been, done and gone.

This is my own coming-of-age tale. In *Space Opera* I fictionalize a shop stocking pop-culture in a dark corner of southeast London's suburbia as 'Johnny's Newsagent'. Behind Johnny's counter are the *Daily Worker*, forbidden extremes of pin-up magazines for men, sensational-looking Dennis Wheatley pulps, Mary Millington's glamour model sex fantasies, limited edition queer, kinky and bizarre hand-drawn sexual fetish publications (and below counter, hardcore photo-pornography produced by local amateurs), science fantasy, William Burroughs' cut-up texts *Dead Fingers Talk* with a luridly painted drug-fiend cover, military machine partwork mags, World War II paperbacks including those with photo-insets of Nazi death camp atrocities, US horror and mythological flying men superhero comics; Hugo, Verne, Shakespeare, Dickens, Melville and Twain adapted for comic-book *Classics Illustrated*.

On the periphery of both popular and literary artist-writers, I absorbed the

very different work of Mervyn Peake and Wyndham Lewis. Very different again and closer to the Beats in the beginning was Jeff Nuttall - who I'd been introduced to through Bob Cobbing and Bill Griffiths. In his final book of essays *Art and the Degradation of Awareness* (Calderbook, 1999), Nuttall comes close to some of the views on aesthetics expressed by Wyndham Lewis. Cobbing and Nuttall's work was of a composition not found anywhere else. Cobbing called it poetry although it differed from contemporary radicalization of poetic text as verbal form produced by 'Revivalists' of the Cambridge school. The late Bill Griffiths actively practiced verbal & visual poetry, essays on poetics, catalogues, the Mottram archive.<sup>11</sup> No cheating, dodging or evading issues with these guys. Divisions of labour separating publishers, editors, writers, letterists, pencillers, inkers, illustrators, printers - those churning out 'Poetry' with a capital 'P', contemporary English novels, genre fictions and comics - were confronted by London 'Brit Revivalists' with an even greater churning out of scrawls, doodles, marks, cartoony drawings & illustrations, calligraphy, hand-lettering, biro, felt-tip, pencilled and crayoned colourings, messed-up grammar, syntax, misspellings, erasures (occluded & non-occluded), image-like texts, text-like images, and non-linear structures represented by chaotically mixed typographical depictions. Stitched, spiral-bound, laced or stapled. Duplicated or photo-copied. Sometimes overinked and overprinted. You could feel the energy of pages seeping into toner-covered fingers. All homemade. Defied verbal and visual definition in print or reading. And was it sound, music, noise in performance? Pitching and trading of product turned over with empty beer glasses of silver coin in upstairs pub function-rooms and draughty conference halls. Dozens of questions can be asked about the quality of the poetry - 'Revivalists' pointed to answers being found in archaic Aristotlean discourse. Here was a practical guide to aesthetics, poetics and politics of little press poetry, its relations of production, distribution and exchange. Worlds away from genre comic

book artists and writers – a world turned upside-down and inside-out in terms of divisions of labour - but close cousin to small press cartooning, comics and DIY zine production – modes which Eric Mottram theorized as *Towards Design In Poetry* (Writers Forum, 1977) and Jeff Nuttall pioneered as practitioner.

### **Space Opera – work in progress 1996-2000**

In Space Opera I create four conceits for my storybook. The first is a biographical conceit. I wanted to paint a social, political and religious satire of 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain in a globalized world as it considers millennium celebrations. I needed four Mike Weller characters situated near top, middle, bottom and rock-bottom of political society. Mike Weller (1) is Michael John Weller or MJ – ‘Mick’ to his coterie of pals, suburban Roman Catholic grammar-school boy, Oxford-educated, very successful author of award-winning trilogy of contemporary baby-boomer English novels beginning with *The Doomed Boy* featuring protagonist anti-hero (and subcharacter) named Mike Weller. Character (2) is successful illustrator and artist Mike Weller who made name for himself making rock star graphics for album sleeves and music television. Mike Weller (3) is unemployed & paranoid conspiracy theorist, self-published maker of unhinged science fiction fantasies and comic zines living on a hellish sink estate in South London. Mike Weller (4) is cartoon subcharacter based on (3) created for electronic graphic novels by auteur character Nick Muir.

The second conceit is one of *mise en scene*. Once upon a social reality, before secondary education, the four Wellers were one and the same person. The suburbs

Wellers grew up in a set in a slightly displaced England of the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In this 'other' Great Britain – an “Island of Dreams” (see first opening graphic) - four decades of national Socialist governance are followed by 1980s and 1990s revolutions of neo-liberal privatization by the global Earth Corporation. Free-market capitalism combined with nation-state new communism. A New Reality implemented through the agency of Earth Corporation high street one-stop Kid Doctor Clinics (KDCs).

A third conceit is making up fictional writer Eduard Mogilowski, who along with writer-artist character Nick Muir (see second opening graphic) is link to stories-within-story interplay of Space Opera's dramatis personae and subcharacters.

Character Eduard Mogilowski is Lithuanian Jewish émigré orphan arriving in East London just after the century begins. Christianized and communist, he grows up with a gift for storytelling, selling work to between-the-wars British pulp magazines. With avant-garde artist character Graham Cratchett down on his luck, now looking for paid illustration work as 'Gatch', the pair create first English superheroes – The Cosmic Crusaders . Mogil and 'Gatch's *Cosmic Tales* contain allegorical tropes of 1930s supernatural fantasy with a cast of subcharacters. McQuigly, an eccentric Scottish scientist commander of the Cosmic Squad's underground laboratory. The evil Duke of Hell's satanic villains acting as secret agents on earth from Dis. Pin-Eyed Ferryman of myth escorting the dead. Ten imagined realms, from the brutally real to the beatific, ruled by Seven Guardians of Life and Civilisation from planet Neptune, with divine guidance by God and three Archangels. Intrigues opened by a mysterious Nine-Notched Key to the Universe - closed to Satan's supernatural legions by an elaborate numerical system of kabala-like complexity. Thus begin fantastical adventures of Mogilowski's Cosmic

Crusaders' – Fay Fairweather, Audrey Neal, Bill Piggott and Maurice Schwaffer, and their Commander of the Cosmic Squad, Professor Fergus McQuigly.

Eddie Mogul (as Ed Mogilowski later becomes known) retires from writing this fantasy to become publisher of popular magazines in tangential Britain of 1940s and 1950s. In this world character Mike Weller joins Mogilowski's Mogul Studios as junior artist in early 1960s.

In Space Opera the Cosmic Crusaders durability lasts through to the 1960s when young comics artist Nick Muir writes strips for Ed Mogul's music paper *Record Fun* featuring children of original superheroes as Teenbeat Marvelettes<sup>1</sup> - subcharacters at home with Britpop's music scene under PM Hugh Gaitskell's leadership of this imagined Britain. Nick Muir becomes a leading graphic novelist after his start at Mogul Studios and both Cosmic Crusaders and Teenbeat Marvelettes subcharacters – Simon Schwaffer, Gerald Piggott, Shirley Winsmere and Amanda Hughes fade into obscurity.

Mike Weller's fictional autobiography begins in 1986. This is my fourth conceit. Weller finds himself with entire life work of Ed Mogilowski. Typescripts, published comics and magazines, Gatch's artwork, Muir's artwork. Everything.

Was an unemployed comic artist named Mike Weller – approaching middle-age, on-the-sick, living in Penge and ripe for alteration - Mogilowski's intended choice of legatee? What is Weller meant to do with the legacy? Allegorical quasi-religious escapist nonsense of the kind his underground comix artist alter-ego Cap Stelling held below contempt. Is it a cruel joke?

For ten years fictional Weller scrutinizes the eleven large boxes of material before leaving them in the attic of his ageing parents' house in English suburban Beckenham. It isn't a joke. The boxes have transformed him. In 1996 Mike Weller decides to bite the bullet left him to write, draw and self-publish "Flight to Neptune", a sci-fi comic-strip set in the 1930s using Mogil & Gatch's Cosmic Crusaders subcharacters.

But who is this Mike Weller? Where is he exactly? And what is the nature of the realit(ies) he lives in? Why does he feel as if he is a character in somebody else's fiction?

Space Opera developed from this premise and its four conceits with several encouraging portents. Bob Cobbing agreed to print the pamphlets under the aegis of his New River Project. A creative writers' group The Scribblers at Studio Beckenham was attracting interest and funding – and from the beginning of 1997 I was able to test reactions through public reading of Space Opera as work in progress and display its graphics content. The Studio Scribblers experience was rewarding through adopting a performance persona of live storyteller to receptive audience. Arts Council of England Lottery-funding of The Scribblers anthology *On the Shelf and Off the Wall* vol. II meant I was able to extract a section of Space Opera for inclusion.

Another rewarding aspect about The Scribblers enterprise was finding a new literary audience, albeit a localized one, most of whom knew little about comics, didn't buy much science-fiction, had never sat foot among subcultures consuming massed racks of slipstream paraliterature, flying men comic-books and cult videos, or other merchandise available at emporiums like the UK's Forbidden Planet (in

some ways a suburban back-to-the-future ‘Johnny’s Newsagent’ of sweets, toys, sundries and sci-fi horror bigged up for 21<sup>st</sup> century metropolis malls).

The Space Opera pamphlet series ran to twelve issues between 1997-1999 and one year later collected and self-published in perfect-bound paperback limited edition volume, *Space Opera: The Artist’s Book*. Produced initially with Beckenham’s Scribblers, Writers Forum attendees in mind, and launched from Zybooks website. The story ends with fictional Mike Weller successfully re-creating Mogil & Gatch’s Cosmic Crusaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Mike Weller is rewarded with a sense of self-discovery, a newly and fully integrated personality, and self-penned identity as both writer and written. Artist and subject - author and authored into a paradise of created writing.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> In Space Opera fiction, second graphic is depiction of character Nick Muir's first published drawing of subcharacters the Teenbeat Marvelettes, enlarged from 'Run-in Groove,' first appearing in character Ed Mogul's magazine *Record Fun* 1962.
- <sup>2</sup> *Adult Comics*, Roger Sabin (Routledge, 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> *Fanzines*, Teal Triggs (Thames & Hudson, 2010).
- <sup>4</sup> Because of less developed print technology available in 1960s West Africa, line illustration became necessary as substitute for photographic half-tone in much advertising. Line drawings were commissioned from Anglo-centric artists in the UK (including myself). The sensitive issue of whether to use crossline shading or mechanical tints to depict 'black' or 'colour' was controversial, twenty years before issues of 'political correctness' became part of public discourse. Depiction of multiculturalism using 'coloring' & 'shading' in line and tone is now acceptable in most illustration, advertising, pop music idents, comics, etc. Controversy on depictions used in 'cartoon' continues to re-emerge. A topic parodied in *Space Opera: The Artist's Book*.
- <sup>5</sup> BBC TV's Comics Britannia Season, BBC Four, September 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> *a history of the comic strip*, Pierre Couperie and Maurice C. Horn (Crown Publishers, New York, 1968).
- <sup>7</sup> Editor's public address at 25th birthday celebrations for *Tears in the Fence* magazine, September 2009.
- <sup>8</sup> Horrors and Menaces to Everything Decent In Life: The Horror Fiction of Dennis Wheatley, Gina Wisker in *Creepers: British Horror & Fantasy in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Clive Bloom (Pluto Press, 1993).
- <sup>9</sup> *The Inklings – C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Their Friends*, Humphrey Carpenter (HarperCollins, 1978).
- <sup>10</sup> *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson (Methuen, 1981),
- <sup>11</sup> *The Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths*, edited by William Rowe (Salt Publishing, 2007).

# (HIS) STORY OF ENGLISH SUPERHEROES



## IT'S THE POWER, MAN



(Above) two chapbook covers from *Slow Fiction: twenty-three tales 2001 -2010* by Michael J. Weller (Home'Baked Books)<sup>1</sup>

## The Making of Slow Fiction Part 2

### The 'Fast Fiction' scene

'Fast Fiction' was the name of both a small press comics series and subcultural scene in 1980s UK.

Fast Fiction enabled a post-punk generation of British comics artists to regularly self-publish without professional or stylistic restraints and sell copies of small scale efforts at conventions, marts, market stalls and through mail order. The Fast Fiction scene enabled me to experiment, making pamphlets of both illustrated and non-illustrated fiction and reinvent as writer, poet and storyteller in addition to cartooning.

Several of Fast Fiction's leading comic artists were inspired by the model of *ligne claire* or clear-line style – the Franco-Belgian work of Hergé and his famous *Tintin*. Other key influences were France's *bande dessinée* or drawn strip industry; Art Spiegelman's bookwork showcase *Raw* based on US classic strip-cartoon as ongoing experimental artform, and punk's do-it-yourself (D-I-Y) publishing ethos. Underpinning this aesthetic framework was retrospective appreciation for production values of British juvenile weeklies *Eagle* comic and *Look and Learn* magazine. These influences and successful 'Fast Fiction' experiments by young British

cartoonists were main drivers behind Peter Stanbury and Paul Gravett's stylish and beautifully-designed *Escape* showcase magazine.

This approach to clear/clean-line style and extended drawing of book-length strips led to a marketing trend for feature-length 'graphic novels'. Yet from the same generation of small pressers Newcastle's *Viz* emerged. *Viz* magazine successfully revolutionized formats learned from DC Thomson's Dundee-based children's comic weeklies. Hilariously funny and hugely influential on later performers of British broadcast comedy (as if *Film* or *Radio Fun* comics of earlier generations had inspired Norman Wisdom's and Arthur Askey's comedy routines - rather than the other way round). *Viz* magazine was funny bone to *Escape* magazine's style i-D.<sup>2</sup>

A reinvention of location for my creative work was necessary as earlier comics work was being viewed as particular to recession-linked 1970s Britain and I continued to lampoon social and political upheavals of the 1980s in expressive styles of art.

I ploughed a different furrow on the 'Fast Fiction' scene to both *Viz* and *Escape* magazines by producing experimental political science fiction zine *1988* in 1979-80 and affiliating myself to generation of *Jamming & Youth Kick* poets as well as cartooning like crazy for *Chainsaw* punkzine. By the end of the 1980s I was producing weekly lampoon *Blunderworld* as 'Mickie' for British communist weekly *7 Days*.

At the beginning of the 1990s I wrote and drew a serious 'uncomic' poem in response to Jamie Bulger's killing - *The Boys Are Back In Town*. Printed by Bob Cobbing's New River Project the title received a great deal of small press attention.

Since the beginning of the 1980s I'd made notes and sketches for an extended project featuring an English comics artist who created superheroes - the Cosmic Crusaders. Not only were costumed superheroes an anathema to small press comics subculture, but also the antithesis of social realist and political satire I'd become well-known for.

Leaping from the open upper window of an artistic comfort zone presented itself as both appealing and challenging. In the plot my Mike Weller character was living in a socially and politically tangential Great Britain (rather than an escapist graphic novel fantasy world) to create his superheroes and supervillains. This work would include self-parody and wider lampoon. It may even be more ambitious than this – a satire on the twentieth century from the pen of a comics artist working from a southeast London council tenancy.

My 'space opera' had begun.

### **Background to the making of Space Opera: The Artist's Book**

Twelve Space Opera pamphlets were published between March 1997 and December 1999. The publications were generally well-received by the British and Irish 'alternative' or 'underground' comics community.

The UK small press comics scene of the Nineties, with its mix of self-publishing artist-writers and zines of graphics criticism developed from the Fast Fiction scene. The 'grunge explosion' and D-I-Y attitude inspired Mike Kidson and Luke

Walsh's Liverpool *Zum!* to self-publish. Oxford's *Caption* organized annual summer events at the university. *Battleground*, *Bugpowder* and *The Review Sheet 2* were other print-based periodicals for 'alternative' comics following *Zum!* and *Caption* initiatives. Publications featured essays, opinion pieces, peer reviews with extensive pictorial reproductions and generous page extracts from subscribers' small press submissions. *Bugpowder* began the move to online profile. In transformation from paper and print to web formats, small press cartooning bore strong similarities to small press poetry developments in Britain and Ireland. Peter Ashton's web development [BugPowder](#),<sup>3</sup> like academic [BRITISH-IRISH-POETS List](#),<sup>4</sup> became hub of news, reviews and discussion. There are other cultural and practical similarities and distinctions between respective small press poetry and comics communities of interest as well as social and academic ones. In promotional practice poets hold readings and bookfairs – cartoonists and comics fans hold conferences & conventions (cons), exhibitions and trading marts.

Content and aesthetics, however, are as different as means of production, distribution, promotion and exchange share similarities. Much had changed since 1960s counter-cultural days of Jeff Nuttall's pioneering Writers Forum poetry-c(art)oon hybrids. Poetry to many comics fans means high pretentiousness. A comic bookstore browse or Forbidden Planet shopping expedition are unlikely to be pleasurable or rewarding experiences for poets. There have been exceptions on both sides of the small press coin. Ben 'Out to Lunch' Watson among poets. Hunt Emerson among comics creators. Watson performed with the late SF & comics bookseller Paul 'Gamma' Gamble. Emerson included visual poems in 1970s Birmingham Arts Lab publications and was one of a growing cohort of former 'underground' British artist-writers - Bryan Talbot another - who went on to produce books or 'graphic novels' available outside direct-market or specialized

comic bookstores (eg London's Gosh!, Nottingham's Page 45). Emerson's and Talbot's comic bookworks can be found shelved in 'Humour' or 'Graphic Novel' genre sections of high street booksellers. Little press producers of zines and pamphlets, comics and poetry – photocopied or professionally perfect-bound, rarely find privileged entry into trading promotions, media attention or shop window display.

There had been a brief love affair between serious English literary culture and popular graphic novels during the first wave of 'comics for adults' success in the 1980s. The affair was short-lived and few titles emerged outstanding from this coupling in the UK. Raymond Briggs' cartoon-strip biography of his working class parents *Ethel & Ernest* (Jonathan Cape, 1998) didn't make the shortlist for a 1999 Man Booker prize, reportedly because of its pictorially illustrative form and content. This decision can be interpreted as the end of a decade-long flirtation, (as opposed to serious relationship) between Britain's literary and popular visual book cultures. Even JK Rowling's phenomenally successful Harry Potter books were published as non-illustrated texts for children (of all ages), suggesting the tide was turning in the UK against literary fashion for adult comics or 'graphic novels'.

The Space Opera pamphlets were given encouraging reviews during their months of production in the UK small press section of commercial comic-book trade journal *Comics International*.

But I felt the work needed lifting from subgenre status within comics subculture to a form situated outside insular locality and comics, although I wasn't sure why, or how, or exactly where to. Space Opera had been read at Beckenham Studio with Bromley Arts and Apples & Snakes-supported Scribblers - sampled in part for their

anthology; performed as storytelling at Bob Cobbing-led Writers Forum workshops with its younger generation of attendees. After favourable all-round responses I decided to organize the twelve pamphlet partworks into a work of serious intention – an ‘artist’s book’.

One advantage of affiliating an imprint to the Association of Little Presses (ALP) was receiving printing advice in the organization’s regular newsletters & inserts. This included professional printing firms with reasonable rates, recommended by members who’d ventured into self-published perfect-bound books. Most ALP members were familiar with the pejorative label ‘vanity publisher’ directed at their efforts. Many writers, artists, poets, simply refused to react to, or simply ignore uninformed accusations of unmediated self-promotion. Critical engagement with social, political and aesthetic concerns, such as full control of means of self-production and artistic freedom from ‘mainstream’ publishing restraints were generally welcomed. Powerful arguments had been rehearsed for years among dedicated artists and writers that sometimes self-publishing was the *only* option for difficult, radical and innovative works.

Once again the portents were good for a limited edition artist’s book of the collected Space Opera. I felt there was enough interest at Writers Forum, Scribblers, even among a few readers in the comics and science fiction subculture, to produce a small run of fifty copies. The combined partworks added up to a book four-hundred pages in length. The telephone-directory size of a Japanese manga collection. I liked the directory-volume idea. Space Opera as directory of Mike Weller’s schooldays, student life, and work as comics artist. So large the book required installation in physical *space*.

Another arts web innovator Ghanda Key had recently launched a hosted artists' booksite online - [Zybooks](#).<sup>5</sup> Key's main intention was to encourage interactive creative online bookworks with an international profile. Zybooks began to circulate an e-newsletter. *Space Opera: The Artist's Book* also took on the appearance of a paperback manual for making ebooks of the future, as well as being directory of 'alternative comics' experience. With the considerable skills of Key, Space Opera 'the bookwork' was launched from Zybooks website in September 2000.

### **Depiction of 'truths' and fictions after 9/11**

Mike Weller's early career in British 'underground comics' and the counter-culture is mercilessly lampooned in Space Opera.

Weller's alter-ego Cap Stelling comix-artist character is "England's answer to R. Crumb". Character 'Mike Weller' has subsequent working life in dead-end jobs, dole, living on Sinkmoor Estate Penge - writing unhinged illustrated superhero sci-fi fanzines.

In Space Opera 'Weller' is characterized by graphic novelist character from his past, Nick Muir. One 'Mike Weller' character had been certified insane in a fictional trilogy of books by English novelist, 'MJ Weller' – then drawn as paranoid cartoon character in Nick Muir's graphic e-novels like something out *The Simpsons* – but without its subject's permission or knowledge.

The drama of what happens when ‘Mike Weller’ finally reads Michael John Weller’s three novels, identifies himself as their fictional subject, and confronts author MJ as *character* is drawn out as *Space Opera*’s denouement. With ‘Mike’ finally writing graphic novelist auteur Nick Muir into his “*Space Opera*” as *his* ghost writer and ‘MJ’ as writer-in-residence at a futuristic health clinic - author Michael J. Weller completes a tetralogy of books expressing a poetic fantasy life growing up and living in England from the Festival of Britain to the Millennium Dome. With *The Doomed Boy*, *Island of Dreams*, *The Man Who Drew Too Much* and finally Mike Weller’s own *Space Opera* – living author and fictional character-subject become one.

2000’s *Space Opera: The Artist’s Book*, neither novel nor graphic - autobiographical or otherwise, yet combination of all elements - an illustrated book more uncomic than comic – the work was seemingly unmarketable as anything other than a strange and obscure bookwork.

It most certainly was not going to be competition for Chris Ware’s 380-page *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid On Earth* (Jonathan Cape, 2001). This award-winning US graphic novel was knowingly steeped in the tradition of full colour American newspaper cartoon art. Appreciated and celebrated in the US by a connoisseur readership of classic popular graphic work-in-progress in Chicago weekly *New City* and Ware’s self-published *Acme Novelty Library* - *Jimmy Corrigan* was promoted in the UK as something of a publishing event in early 2001. It was the first graphic novel to be considered by Britain’s liberal arts media as serious literary work for over a decade.

The first person to introduce herself to me by email, expressing interest in *Space Opera: The Artist's Book* was London-based international arts practitioner, Natalie d'Arbeloff. Natalie had also been inspired by the freshness and enthusiasm of the '80's Fast Fiction scene. She'd introduced her alter-ego cartoon character 'Augustine' to Fast Fiction readers as comic booklets at the time and online for David Miller's Kater Murr poetry press – Pireaus series in the '90s. D'Arbeloff had established herself as a printmaker in the 1960s and written textbooks on applied art. D'Arbeloff is a dual American and British citizen, significant pioneer of the 'artist's book', as well as being a writer, theorist, painter, self-publishing small-presser, published humorist (*The Joy Of Letting Women Down*, Robson Books, 2000), Mac-user, teacher and comic-strip creator. She was also developing projects using web formats. D'Arbeloff had been among the first artists to produce a [comprehensive website, blog, and archive of virtual online artwork](#).<sup>6</sup> With older artworks in collections of some of the world's most prestigious institutions, d'Arbeloff continues to be enthusiastic lay entrant to competitions organized by Britain's national media (she joint-won the first *Guardian* Mary Stott women's journalist prize in 2007). D'Arbeloff's uneven practice - working within, through, and against strata, suggests activity of an itinerant 'rhizomath'.<sup>7</sup> This rhizomatic approach may have potential for new and inspiring models of practice. Multiple sites in which work can be traditional, modern, postmodern and elusive to categorization all at the same time.

## **myspace opera**

Space Opera had been conceived, worked through, and completed before the tragedy and aftershock of September the eleventh 2001. What was a storyteller to do with

characters, superheroes and villainous subcharacters in a milieu seemingly beyond political irony and satire?

I decided to continue with Mike Weller's Cosmic Crusaders as characters in further writings, introducing new characters situated in more traditional social reality. Having felt 'drawn out' illustrating Space Opera's black and white graphics several years up to publishing first pamphlet "Ultimate Legend" in 1997, I had little motivation to produce more comics. Besides, drawing and hand-lettering energies were reserved for tackling a visual interpretation of *Beowulf* encouraged by the late Bill Griffiths.

In October 2001 I wrote small-scale 'Fanzine Fiction' imagining new-generation 'Cosmic Crusaders' – now 'The Invincibles', written under character Mike Weller's pen with one or two 'spot' drawings and vignettes to break up text. Space Opera's imagery had contained a milieu of conspiracy theories and extremism characterized by larger-than-life superheroes and supervillains, envisaged by myself as a metafictional conceit through creation of writer and artist characters Eduard Mogilowski, Gatch, Nick Muir, Sid Muddleton. The milieu of life after 9/11 with its multiple truths, fictions and conspiracies - contained as prescient unhinged political satire in Space Opera - needed new form if characters and subcharacters invented for Space Opera and the 21<sup>st</sup> century were to continue fictional life.

With two further bookworks *Beowulf Cartoon* and *The Secret Blue Book* in preparation over the next four years and pursuing performance gigs with other types of written and scored works at London's pub-function poetry hubs – I sensed the need for retreat from graphic novels and the comics scene. I was booked for several London gigs in second wave 'British Poetry Revival' following Bob Cobbing's

death in 2002. The imaginary of Space Opera still remained part of my creative productivity. I didn't plan to reprint another edition but needed to continue my story after events of 9/11. The Beckenham Scribblers writing group, which had listened to Space Opera's first sounding with such encouragement, enthusiasm matched by welcome book orders finally wound up in 2003 – displaced from the now disused Beckenham Studio to a communal flat on a southeast London housing estate.

Open source free software and commons-use technology became readily available in the Noughties. The notion of poetics within machine coding, celebrated by digitally active poets like [John Cayley](#)<sup>8</sup> and [Brian Kim Stefans](#)<sup>9</sup>, had been joined by popular social networking sites and free-to-use blogging templates. With embedding codes ready-written and programmed, all that was necessary was electronic cut n' paste. The only aesthetic downside was off-the-peg net art began jockeying for juxtaposition with on-screen commercial drivel. Concern of older practitioners that 'pure' poetry and art may be infected by the virus of rogue advertisement or embedded product placement was simply treated by younger practitioners as disregard. Ignore junk-slime pop-ups on MySpace.

I began using MySpace, Google Blogger Beta and WordPress to create a 'fic' or 'lit-blogosphere'. Space Opera could have second life here. Access to technology was facilitating an ability to print at home via desktop PC and long-hand stapler (beloved by Bob Cobbing for kitchen-table collation). A subsidiary self-publishing imprint, Home'Baked Books was conceived. With previous professionally produced books I'd bought print via self-trading imprint Visual Associations. The four perfect-bound books I'd produced between 1999 and 2005 - *Harriet Staunton: A Victorian Murder Ballad*, *Space Opera: The Artist's Book*, *Beowulf Cartoon* (in association with Writers Forum) and *Three-Part The Secret Blue Book* – fundamentally different in

concept and genre were a bookwork tetralogy in themselves and marked the end of a personal epoch – myspace opera.

### **The making of ‘Slow Science Fictions’**

I’d tried film-making in the days of Beckenham Arts Lab but never been a stills photographer. A digital camcorder felt like a new tool I could happily place among pens, inks, brushes, crayons, water paints and electronic typewriter.

For my self-published printed chapbooks, I prefer using font writer with personal word processor. Typescripts pasted up and master pages photo-copied at high street printers. Copied again as pages on desk top printer. This method would determine publication of new series extending Space Opera themes into the 21<sup>st</sup> century - ‘Slow Science Fictions’.

Twenty-years since Fast Fiction and beginning of my Space Opera story - I thought it appropriate to name my new series ‘Slow Fictions’. Besides, I was not interested in claiming genre - comics or otherwise - for the new series. I added ‘Science’ to the generic title as it fitted new technologist inventor character I’d made up - Alpha Zee.

Slow Science Fictions (SSF) began at the end of 2006 with issue one “Mike Weller’s Cosmic Crusaders”. Four differentiated WordPress blog titles: ‘3World in 4Time’, ‘Earth Corporation’, ‘Slow Fictions’ and ‘Addingcombe’ were opened to complement printed prose stories. Added text, image and video gave work online presence in fic-blogsphere. Formats include YouTube aesthetic ‘mini-movies’ (out-

of-focus at times and complete with essential wind-noise!), digital photographs and still-to-motion seconds-long ‘videographs’ using VideoPress. Pioneering UK small press comics weblog BugPowder and its online review journal TRS2 remained encouraging about this project although drawn comics content was minimal and I was using digital photographs as visual cover design. From angle of comics-based reviews there remained a sense that Michael J. Weller was still writing and producing work akin to unhinged prose science fiction.

By the time SSF issue twenty-one “The Marriage Of Heaven and Hell” was published I realized the series had lost much of the UK small press comics community. Despite Dublin-based comics critic John Robbins’ supportive inclusion of entire work for his [small scrutinies](#)<sup>10</sup> weblog, there remained a sense the work would be lost to my niche audience unless some reductive comics angle could be found.

But I didn’t want to introduce a comics angle simply to accommodate UK comics small press. It was ten years since I faced exactly the same problem with completion of Space Opera and genre constraints in comics subculture. I wished the series free, not only of subgenre, but territorial comics and genre fiction itself, including science-fiction. As a rhizomath I needed to shift plateau.

### **From SFF to Slow Fiction**

I happily read myself out of ‘comic angles’ and ‘science-fictions’ with slow fiction performance writing on Spring 2009 ‘psychogeographical’ tour of London’s pub-function room poetry hubs.

‘English contemporary novelist’ character MJ featured in Space Opera is mashed with other Weller alterities in storytelling, genre-collage, social satire, political cartoon and sense of poetic that makes up wellerverse of 3World in 4Time.

I created character Michelle Yvonne Jolly, author of twenty-three successful stories featuring subcharacter schoolboy magician Billy Crombie. Broad literary parody and growth of writing and reading groups (fictionalized as The Nibs) from 1997 onwards - I wished to include as social satire in my universe-based plot, structured on three elements: -

- 1) self-contained segments
- 2) loose continuity plot
- 3) cohesive plot linking each of the twenty-three fictions

SSF was to run to twenty-three issues like stories of character MY Jolly’s book creation, Billy Crombie. I decided to stop at issue twenty-one after the tour, abandoning formal series titling – plural ‘science fictions’. Issue twenty-two “#22 Kid Cartoons Parts I & II” did however maintain reference to SSF in its numbering. Numbering and pagination was important to Space Opera and continuity was required. The twenty-second issue was completed with additional coda title “Now Here’s A Tale With A Happy Ending” in October 2009. Slow Science Fictions reached an informal end with issue #21 and formal closure with issue #23 “Now Here’s A Tale...”

The tales have undergone a process of transformation into *Slow Fiction: twenty-three tales 2001 – 2010* with ‘Character & Scene Guide’ to assist readings.

*Slow Fiction* as printed boxset is intended to be a bookwork installation. Web-format online variations in existing fic-blogsphere addenda and possible e-book versions of work with multiple comment threads could allow *Slow Fiction* to grow as work of collaborative [textmaking](#)<sup>11</sup>.

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Portrait of the artist as character Cliff of Albion, drawn by author, digitally reproduced from coloured pencil image. “It’s The Power, Man” cover depicts character Samuel L. Poitier, digitally sampled from image of Luke Cage – *Power Man and Iron Fist*, Vol. 1 No. 74, © Marvel Comics Group, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> British comic art developments of this period are explored in illustrated detail in *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, Roger Sabin (Phaidon, 2001)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bugpowder.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=BRITISH-IRISH-POETS>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.zyarts.com/zybooks/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nataliedarbeloff.com/>

<sup>7</sup> For philosophical use of term ‘rhizome’ see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *a thousand plateaus* (Athlone Press, 1988)

<sup>8</sup> <http://homepage.mac.com/shadoof/net/in/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.arras.net/fscIII/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://smallscrutinies.blogspot.com/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://textmaking.blogspot.com/>