Interview with Tom Spurgeon
Published in *The Comics Report* #1 (2015)

TOM SPURGEON*: I want to begin by asking you about your teaching. You're a comics educator, but not one tied to a specific institution. The kind of comics education that you do, entirely freelance, do you have a "year"? Do you have a set calendar you count on?*

GREG STUMP: I kind of do. I have one class per quarter I teach at Seattle University. I'm a writer in residence for Seattle Arts and Lectures. That ends in June each year. Then I have a little bit of teaching scattered through the summer. Right at the moment, I have my days more or less to myself.

So are there times on the calendar where you're slammed, or is it this spaced out all year round?

I think during the Fall and Winter it's the busiest. That's when I'm teaching both at Seattle University and in the public schools. That's three to four days a week.

It just kind of depends. Some things are really regular, where it's a given that I'll be there each year, and then others will fall through and I'll need to scramble to pick up another class somewhere else… it's not as stable as I'd like it to be, to be honest. It's better than it has been in the past.

I think of you in the late '90s having maybe or two classes during a year, but it seems like you're much more involved now, and that you work for a variety of programs.

I have five or six non-profits I work through at different points of the year. One of them is the Richard Hugo House – the writing center here. It's right in my neighborhood. And a few other places like the Frye Art Museum and the Pratt Fine Arts Center.

A long time ago when I started teaching it was mostly outside of the

public school system. I would be teaching after school or on Saturdays. At a certain point I just started to get frustrated with that. I realized I could have much greater effect if I could get into the schools and work with kids that weren't self-selecting to be drawing comics.

By the end of the school day, I think that a lot of students, even if they want to do comics, have been sitting down all day and to ask them to sit some more and try to concentrate instead of running around seems counterproductive. So I started to try and do it more like a residency. That's been the most rewarding of all my teaching experiences, I think. I work with a language arts teacher and show up as a guest in the class one day a week, maybe four or five periods out of the day, and reach everyone instead of just the fanatics or the kids who get stuck in some extracurricular program against their will.

I work at a middle school in [Seattle neighborhood] Queen Anne teaching all the sixth graders about comics as part of the language arts curriculum. You don't have to worry about just reaching kids who are super into drawing. You have kids that might be into it if they have someone to guide them through how to make comics.

How are the kids different now?

I don't think the superhero stuff is a big part of their mindset at all. When I first started teaching I had mostly just boys in the class, with maybe a couple girls. I don't think there's that gender disparity anymore. Nowadays you might get more boys if you have a class outside the school system, more boys might sign up than girls. But the opposite may be true as well.

I don't think there's any resistance to graphic novels as a form of storytelling. In my first years of teaching there was that perception that comics were a boys' thing and had to be about superheroes, but I think the popularity of manga kind of changed that. It broke down that divide a little bit.

When you work in the context of a language arts program, how do they define your value to them? Like if I'm an angry parent, and I storm in to complain that my kid is learning to make comics in this course, how is your presence explained and defended?

What I would say is that not everybody does well with linear writing. When you put together a story from visuals, it's a little more intuitive in terms of how we see our everyday reality. That's true for everyone, but maybe especially for kids that have autism or dyslexia. I think comics can be both a bridge to writing well and a form of storytelling in and of itself, with its own grammar.

When I teach really little kids, like five-year-olds, they can understand a story in three-act structure even though they can't write out a story in words. They can figure out how the pictures tell that story. It sort of prefigures… predates? It's prior to learning language – storytelling through pictures feels to me like an almost primal activity, like the way a kid will bang on something just to get the satisfaction of hearing the sound it makes.

I also think that it makes sense to teach comics because the culture is getting more visual and by making a comic a student gets to engage in that way of communicating but without the overstimulating and addictive aspects of digital tools. Everyone is going to need to be more visually literate in the future but I don't think we've thought much about how to teach that as a society.

Disillusioned Illusions *seems like it draws on your literary interests and background. I remember talking to you years ago, just the way office mates talk, and you have a pretty serious prose history.*

Oh, yeah. I considered getting a degree in philosophy at one point. I read a lot of philosophy and theory and literature in college, and I probably read as much outside of class, on my own, as I did the reading I was assigned in class. I wound up majoring in journalism and English.

I never really thought about being a writer, though, because my

background was solidly in comics. I think there's a certain, maybe you need a certain level of confidence in writing prose, that I didn't quite have, to think you stand a chance as a capital-W writer. So I just tried to shoehorn what I was learning into what I already knew how to do. That's why this book may be so text-dependent – it's my attempt at writing prose but through this other form.

Are there other cartoonists you feel pay attention to language the way you do?

STUMP: The obvious example would be Dan Clowes. He writes narrative captions with the same kind of sophistication that you would find in a prose novel. That's one that jumps off the top of my head. He's a little too obvious, in a way. Edward Gorey might be another example of someone with a literary approach that had a big impact on me.

But I would actually look at it from the other direction, and point to someone like Donald Barthelme, who would often incorporate found imagery in his texts. He would do these things in his writing where he would write visually in a way that seems startling if you've never encountered that before. One of his short stories is just this dialogue between two unnamed characters, and then he inserts a black rectangle into the text and they start commenting on it. When I read that it might have led me to think that I could do something similar, but in comics form rather than prose.

I never thought it would turn into what it did, though. I just started writing those *Disillusioned Illusions* characters when I was doing a weekly comic strip. When that weekly comic strip got cancelled, I didn't have a creative outlet anymore so I just kept going with these characters in my sketchbook and it snowballed.

Now Barthelme is an inspiration for you in terms of humor as well, right?

Oh, yeah. He has this really dry sense of humor that if you don't know to look for it, you might miss it entirely. He had a lot of cachet in the

'60s and '70s because he was published fairly often in *The New Yorker*. I think he had a superficial influence on a lot of writers that I don't know was that great of an idea. They took the absurdity of what he was doing, but weren't providing it with the same depth underneath. Barthelme was a serious student of philosophy and theory. [laughs] This makes it sound like I'm aligning myself with him. His influence was maybe a bit problematic because some writers just wanted to work with the absurd elements and he makes it look easy and fun. But I'm not usually a fan of absurdity for the sake of absurdity, without a satirical purpose or something a bit more serious under the surface.

I want to talk a little bit about your work more generally. I consider you a very funny cartoonist, but your work is very idiosyncratic, very much your own. I wondered, then, how naturally you feel you're been able to make comics that you find funny. How much of a learning curve was there to express your very specific sense of humor in comics form?

That's a hard question to answer. [pause] I know when I was a kid I wanted to be a comic strip artist, like *Bloom County* or *MAD* or something. Then somehow I got sidetracked into wanting to be an editorial cartoonist, which I did very seriously in college and even high school. Eventually I encountered underground comics and that sent me off on a totally different direction.

Do you remember who or what you saw from that world?

I think it was seeing *Hate*. I remember a friend of mine who was listening to the same music I was listening to: a lot of what was on Sub Pop and Touch and Go and those types of labels. And this friend of mine explained to me that you could kind of compare the comics scene to the music scene, in that you had these independent labels putting out material that was more subversive, more out there. He had a big stack of alternative comics that he lent to me. I sat down and read them all in one sitting because I had never seen anything like that before.

I think it was *Hate*, especially, and also *Eightball*. I was kind of confused by *Eightball*. It was when Clowes was doing “Like A Velvet Glove Cast In Iron” and I couldn't get… back then you couldn't necessarily find the back issues in the right order. I would read #6 and then #9 and then #3 and it would feel bizarre. [Spurgeon laughs] Then again, part of what I liked about it was that it was unlike anything I'd seen before. Somehow just getting a slice of that story, and not being able to read the ending right away, just made it even more terrifying.

You mentioned Peter Bagge. It's 25 years of Hate *this year, so I've been rereading a lot of his earlier material. It's amazing how relatively sophisticated the writing is, just the prose itself. Sometimes you read older comics you find that at the time you were reading it for the promise of it as well as its reality. That* Hate *material would be good dialogue work and really tight stories right now. Same with something like Studs Kirby. A lot of his stuff would be. Not a lot of writers that sharp back then.*

He had a really efficient storytelling structure as well. The dialogue was funny, but it wasn't just that. He had this intuitive sense of how to pace a story and parcel things out… what gets lost in a format change from comic books to graphic novels is the compression of the narrative structure. You don't have to fit things into 24 or 32 pages. He was an expert at packing a lot of story into one episode of comics. It would be a very satisfying thing, and it never felt like some long, bloated experience that would never end. I feel that happens in graphic novels sometimes, where there isn't that restraint.

You mentioned you were doing the Disillusioned Illusions *characters… you know, I'm going to ask you forgive me the broadness of some of these questions. The work is really peculiar, and I think it thwarts certain lines of questioning. [Stump laughs] I almost don't want to pry it open. Maybe as a first line of questioning you can tell me about the initial iconography. How specific is the reference here? Should I know these outlines, know of an outline like this…? How did that end up in a weekly strip?*

How did I take the vase and faces and make them characters?

Yes. I don't know if they're an allusion to a certain set of lines I should know.

It's based on that famous Edgar Rubin image where you can't look at it and see both of those things at the same time. And so if you take it apart, the illusion has been destroyed.

At the time, I was trying to be clever about it. I was thinking if you could see both images at the same time it would destroy the illusion and also the fourth wall of the narrative. So the characters would be self-conscious and talking about all of this, and the visuals and the content would complement or relate to each other in that way. And then I was also playing around with the double meaning of the word disillusioned – not only were they talking about being in a comic, but their conversations were pretty cynical and defeated-sounding as well.

But to be honest, the main reason I gravitated towards it is that when you're doing a weekly strip you need something in your wheelhouse that you're comfortable pumping out. Something you can crank out without a lot of time spent on the drawing if you get up against the deadline. I thought if there was a week when I couldn't think of a great idea right away, this simple template would allow me to focus on the writing and all I'd have to draw was a few things I'd already mastered, and it wouldn't take that long.

That makes it sound like I was being kind of lazy. But I realized that not everyone would want to read something like that every week [laughter] so I'd do it once or maybe twice and then I'd return to doing something more that was more visual. I never tried to push it so that people would get sick of it. That's the interesting thing about expanding it into a book is that you have to completely commit to that idea. So at that point I just started to push it as far as I could.

Let me ask that, though. What was the thinking that led you to do a book? What made you think this concept could possible lead to a few

hundred pages of comics? [Stump laughs] There's a self-criticism in the work of this being a book, so is that maybe it? Did you know when you were going to keep going, and if that wasn't, what made you think about 300 pages.

If you had told me in advance that it was going to balloon to 300 pages, I might not have done it. It was fun to write in my sketchbooks. I wrote what turned into the book in my sketchbooks for about a year.

The final product isn't exactly Hal Foster, Greg. How do the roughs compare to the final art on this one?

I just mean that I was scribbling it with a Crayola marker in my sketchbook to get my writing down in a form that no one else would've been able to decipher. And then once I had a rough plan I could do a more polished version of the page later on. When you don't have a plan, you only have your intuition to guide you. I never thought it'd be this long, but once I got going I felt like I'd climbed so far out on a limb that I needed to climb out even farther so that the limb would bend down to the ground.

So was there at a point you realized the scope of what you were trying, but still thought, "Keep going"?

I definitely took breaks. I worked on this in chunks. Something would happen and I would lose all of my momentum. Part of that is just trying to fit drawing comics around a teaching schedule. One of the things I was thinking of while I was doing it is that I couldn't figure out what I could compare it to. That was satisfying, to think that I was working on something that, in a way, hadn't been done before.

ou got my vote there, Greg. It certainly stands out.

Then later on you realize that there's probably a reason this hasn't been done before [Spurgeon laughs]. Maybe it's not the greatest idea in the world. You know what I mean? By the time I thought about it in those terms, I felt I had to keep going. Being stubborn can be both good and bad.

Working with this kind of visual iconography spread out over this many pages… I really perked up when a new visual element was added. WHOA. Whoooooaaaa. Even something like the sky or the cigarette butts, it's like this gutwrenching moment. How did you practice restraint in how many visual elements to bring to bear – how did you make those decisions, like when to use a new visual element? Did you back away from some?

Boy, that's a good question. One of the rules I had when making the book is that I had to be able to do it in a coffee shop. I knew I didn't want to draw this at home.

No, no, no, no, no. You would not want to. [Stump laughs] You might not survive that.

I wanted to have a bit more freedom. When you start drawing comics, and especially when you start using a brush, you need your drawing table there – and I use a lightbox on top of that. I wanted to make doing this book a little more portable. So I couldn't use a brush to draw any of it, but I could use a pen and a circle template. If you look closely at the rotary phone in the book, you can tell that the circular elements are drawn with a template. So that was something where I was like, "Okay, I can draw this phone really simply if I have my template with me." A cigarette is also really simple. So it's kind of like I was giving myself aesthetic constraints and that helped determine the content of the books. I don't know. That's such a good question.

So when you added the cigarette butts… was the iconography refined at any point?

I don't remember. The gestation part of this graphic novel feels a bit more in my past. I know that I didn't want to have any characters that didn't look like that general silhouette profile, so the only thing I could do was make it smaller or bigger. Right? Then I imagined what would happen if they brought in a kid, and then the other version of that would be someone bigger, like the God of the book. I don't know. [laughter] Those were the only two things I could see doing. I

suppose I could've done an inversion with a white silhouette, but I didn't think about that at the time.

We're going to make a lot of people roll their eyes now because I want to ask about the lettering. The writing is so key because it's put on such a specific platform because of the limited nature of the visuals. But it also, because there's so much of it, become a dominant visual itself.

This is going to sound funny, but while I've liked your lettering in the past, I think of you as being really idioysncratic in terms of the choices you make there. It's really funky-looking, your lettering. I would never think of it as one of your craft strenghts. It's energetic and fits this frantic mode in which your work sometimes exists, but it doesn't seem like it's something that can carry a wide range of effect. I've never thought of you as a guy would get a gig lettering an image comic.

Right. Right, right, right.

So were there specific challenges in the lettering given their role as a visual and given their dominance on the page?

It wasn't so much a conscious thing. I think that I got a lot better at lettering over time just through sheer repetition doing a feature called "Illustrated Letter Of The Week" for [Seattle alt-weekly magazine] *The Stranger*. I did that feature for about three or four years. I would write out the content of a letter to the editor and then I would draw something that went along with it.

Just in the course of doing that feature I improved a lot because I had a limited space and I really had to make it clear. These were very specific words that were someone else's words, so I wanted to make sure I was representing them correctly. Just being forced to do that weekly feature for years made my lettering a lot stronger in a real trial-by-fire way.

Having improved, and doing a book that doesn't have a lot of graphic elements to it, I realized as I went along that I really needed to step up my game because the lettering stands out that much more. There's nothing else around, as you just said. So what is there, what's left, has a big spotlight on it.

How much did you wrestle with the text in terms of the way it might dominate a panel? Did you worry that some panels would be so text-driven that there would be too much text? Was there a lot of paring down?

Yes. Some of that would happen just in the act of drawing the word balloon — you might rewrite the text a little bit to make sure everything fits inside the word balloon without there being so many words that it becomes unreadable. You don't want the lettering to dominate the panel too much visually, and there's a point at which too many words interfere with the way the panel looks. You can't have more than a third of any panel be word balloon text without it starting to overwhelm the visuals.

There are a few points in the book that have a lot of lettering that maybe doesn't actually need to be read – it just has to be seen. The joke being that one of the characters is going on and on and on, just babbling. And then the next page is even more of the same. You don't have to read all of it unless you really want to – or you might go back and re-read it more carefully later on. The point is that the character won't shut up. If you want to read all of the word balloons, you can, but you just need the gist of it to get the joke.

I did a lot of rewriting, kind of like you're saying, as I lettered. Generally when I'm doing a word balloon I'm aiming to make the middle section of the text a little bit wider than the top or the bottom – the way you arrange the words, the middle line winds up being the longest. And unless you want a lot of hyphenated words, which is distracting in a comic, you have to choose words at the end of those lines that kind of fit there. So you have to make substitutions as you're going along in a way that may change the original text.

Refresh my memory: is the entire book either six panels or three landscape panels per page?

It is six panels per page for long stretches. It changes for some sections and then it'll go back. I think it's a six-panel grid for virtually all of the book, but when there are a lot of characters it shifts to a three-panel grid – the panels need to be wider in order to fit all of the characters into a scene since the “shot” always stays the same.

In some ways I was inspired by Jeffrey Brown's graphic novels because he uses that six-panel grid almost exclusively in *Clumsy* and *Unlikely*. There's a nice rhythm that comes along with that. It can seem monotonous and simple, but I think it's the perfect number.

Because it's humor, how much of what is being said here, either humorously or not… are you as down on the idea a big piece of art as it seems reading the text. One theme that comes out for me is that the entire effort is ridiculous. [Stump laughs] Fundamentally, you have to keep doing all of these ridiculous things just to keep your effort going. How much of this is a manifesto, how much of this comes out of you if we get you a little tipsy? Why do you hate art, Greg?

It's kind of what I already said about *Hate*. There used to be more discipline. A graphic novel like *Black Hole*, collecting ten separate issues of a comic, it kind of earns the right to be that long in a way. The issues can be enjoyed as self-contained efforts. I think some cartoonists haven't cut their teeth on short pieces enough before they try a longer work. It shows, for me, just in the sense that I don't have a lot of patience for the long graphic novels. Whereas a graphic novel like *Maus*, there's so much work that went into that book and it's not even that long. It's not fair to compare everything to *Black Hole* and *Maus*. But I feel like this important step has been skipped just because the market prefers this longer work.

I always felt that Ben Katchor and Peter Blegvad and Lynda Barry, they have these really gem-like short pieces that don't get the credit

they deserve like… it's hard to name the one graphic novel that's the example of everything I find wrong.

C'mon, Greg!

I don't want to pick the wrong one. I didn't like *Asterios Polyp* as much as I liked Mazzucchelli's short pieces even though I admired it. Reading *Rubber Blanket,* I was just immersed in the comic. I wasn't overwhelmed by it.

I only picked that one because it's good and I generally like his work! Tatsumi would be another example – I love his stuff, but the short pieces stand out for me so much more than *A Drifting Life*, which I read but don't even really remember at all.

It's a difficult with this work as satire to tell if you were criticizing excess or the foundational idea. This feels like an entire universe pressing against the idea of longform art, and in that way doesn't feel like a criticism of excess. There's a manifesto aspect to this, a philosophical aspect to this, that goes beyond a criticism of overreach and bad decision-making. So I wondered how deep your criticism went.

My problem is I like to have it both ways. Communicating this idea through a humorous work, you can express what you want to express without actually having to sign your name to the bottom line of that opinion.

I can see both sides of the issue. I don't want to do a manifesto. David Shields has this book, *Reality Hunger*, which presents fiction as it's practiced today as a waste of David Shields' time. [Spurgeon laughs] I can see his point but I also don't completely agree at the same time, either. You know? I want to have my cake and eat it too, I guess, when it comes to being really adamant about it.

I think sometimes when I read graphic novels I miss the experience of reading a comic book, where it was more distilled, maybe less pretentious and maybe more satisfying. People weren't as intent on

making a grand statement. I think as a result you get a little bit more spontaneity and experimentalism. That's not to say there aren't a lot of great cartoonists working right now. I'd just like to have that older venue in addition to graphic novels and longer works.

I was to ask about this book's path to publication. You gave me a self-published version of this book a couple of years ago.

Oh, yeah.

And at the time you told me you wanted to find a literary prose publisher to handle it. How did you end up at FU Press. That's a very interesting placed to end up.

I wanted it to come out from a small press that specialized in fiction, or Fantagraphics. I worked at Fantagraphics, and know Gary, and that's the stuff that made me want to do underground comics in the first place. But I also thought it might work at a small publishing house that had never put out a graphic novel before.

There was one other place I thought was going to publish it, but it fell through for reasons I never totally understood.

Why FU Press as opposed to Fanta proper?

STUMP: [Associate Publisher] Eric Reynolds was the first one over there that liked it. I heard through you that [former, late co-publisher] Kim Thompson liked it but considered it too esoteric to publish. On the other hand I never got an official rejection. Every time I saw [co-publisher] Gary [Groth] I would bring it up. He would go, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. It looks interesting." But it never went further than that.

When they announced they were starting up the Fantagraphics Underground line, I contacted Gary the next day. It seemed to me like the same sort of material that they were creating that line for – something that they liked and wanted to publish but there wasn't really a good market reason for it, because it was idiosyncratic or more avant-garde or something. Though in a weird way I actually

think my book is kind of accessible. [pause] Or, I don't think it's inaccessible.

Are you worried about it finding its audience?

I have no idea. The thing I like about it coming out from FU Press is that there's no grand expectation for it. If you just come across this book without anyone trying to shove it down your throat via a marketing campaign, you might be more perplexed. It might make the book seem more mysterious. You might ask, "What the fuck is this thing?"

I don't know if that's a great strategy, sales-wise. [laughter] I'm just glad it came out from Fantagraphics because to me that's the place I wanted to be published. And coming out as one of the early books from this other line is kind of exciting. I think there's a bit of wistfulness in that line for the very thing I'm talking about, when underground comic books were still being published regularly. Remember *Nurture The Devil?* That kind of thing would never be published in a graphic novel now, but back then you could publish it as a comic and not necessarily lose money on it, or if you did it wouldn't be enough to lose sleep over. I like that sort of thing because it's not so calculated about trying to appeal to people. It's a genuine… it's there because the artist felt compelled to make it, whether it has an audience or not. I've always been attracted to that.

I have no idea if people will read this book. It's almost like you have to have it heavily recommended to you by someone you trust.

It strikes me as the type of book one person might give to their entire Christmas list one year.

I need that one person to get behind it and make it their mission to shove it into people's hands. I think that's probably true. I always liked that aspect of music, too. The bands that I liked were bands that didn't have big following, but you'd go to a show and the people that were there were fanatical about it. That would make all the difference. It would be more thrilling because you knew every single person that

was there would be excited about it. As opposed to having hundreds of people there and none of them care that much and are already somewhere else mentally.

Are there Greg Stump super-fans? [Stump laughs] Hey, you've been cartooning for a long while now.

I get e-mails every once in a while that make me think there are a few people out there. I don't think it's enough to make a career out of! You want more than just a handful of people. Every so often someone will write to me about something I did years and years ago that's just stuck with them. It's like someone writing to you about a dream that you had years ago and forgot about until they reminded you.

Do you have a connection to the new cartooning Seattle? You moved there during the last few years of the last cartooning Seattle. Do you have an opinion on the Intruder *people and the other cartoonists around now? Is it weird to watch Seattle become a cartooning destination again?*

I think it's been great to watch. I think there was a real lull here between those two periods. The two coolest things are the Short Run Festival, which hasn't even been around for more than three or four years – just having that festival has brought in a lot of people into making mini-comics that, without this venue, wouldn't be doing it. That's pretty remarkable. The other thing is this 'zine named *Dune* that Max Clotfelter organizes. It's produced each month in one night at Cafe Racer, and he picks it all up at the end of the night, makes a publication out of it and distributes it back to the artists the next time. The interesting thing about it is, on one page you'll see someone like Dave Lasky, and the next page might be someone where this is the third comic they've ever drawn. There's something about the spontaneity of it that's really appealing. That's a neat format for making that happen. It's only a handful of people that will see this 'zine – maybe 50 to 70. But it's there for you if you want to participate, and I don't think you can always know what the impact of something like that might be down the line.

The mini-comics aspect of the scene here, before this new generation showed up, it just seemed depressing. I had completely stopped self-publishing minis because I didn't know what I'd do with them once I was done. But in the last few years I've returned to it and it's reminded me how satisfying they are to make. My friend Kelly Froh works almost exclusively in minis and has built an audience for her comics on that format alone.

I once tried to describe the hopeless made-up aspect of working in comics 20 years, particularly if you didn't make them. I said it was like being a carny [Stump laughs], and you couldn't really explain to your friend like even what the hell you did. And their parents, your parents' friends? Forget about it. Do you have to explain your teaching gigs anymore? Because what we were doing 20 years ago should have ended badly, that just seemed like a TV movie that ends with something on fire. What is semi-legitimacy like, Greg?

I think it makes you feel better on a psychological level. I remember trying in vain to explain to people why one would want to pursue comics as a vocation, and you don't have to do that anymore. The main issue is that now it's just more expensive to live here. Even though there's new energy, enthusiasm and credibility, in that same timespan the town has experienced this big shift in the class structure. It's a completely different obstacle. The reason why someone would try to live in a city and not work at some overly-demanding job and try to focus on making comics… there's more legitimacy to that, as a life choice, but it's trickier to do here now. The reason I picked Seattle as a place to live was partly because of Fantagraphics but also because I didn't think it would turn into San Francisco. Thanks to Amazon and a couple of other companies, it has.