



A Calling In Comics

**Interview with
Calvin Reid**

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KENNEALLY: A timeline for the evolution of American comics publishing since the 1980s tracks to the career of journalist Calvin Reid as tightly as any superhero's outfit. A coincidence? Definitely not.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

From 1987 until his retirement in January, Calvin Reid reported on all aspects of comic publishing as a writer, editor, and podcaster at *Publishers Weekly*. Over that generation, Reid covered the artists and their audiences, the comic books, and the comics business.

Milton Griep, founder and CEO of comic B2B site ICv2, has hailed Calvin Reid as a key figure in the growth of the graphic novel, a publishing format increasingly critical to the industry. Total comics and graphic novel sales to consumers in the US and Canada in 2021 climbed to more than \$2 billion, 70% above sales figures for 2019. Sales of graphic novels, driven by manga, were nearly \$1.5 billion, or about three-quarters of the total.

Calvin Reid joins me now from New York City to reflect on his calling in comics. Welcome to Velocity of Content.

REID: Thanks for inviting me, Chris. It's always good to talk to you.

KENNEALLY: We are looking forward to this very much, Calvin Reid. It's your story. It's the story of the way the industry has changed as well. Today, every major New York City publisher has either a dedicated graphic novel imprint or a focus line that publishes graphic novels. The format is a key contributor to the trade book sector for publishers and for bookstores. Do graphic novels get the credit they deserve for keeping this industry in the black?

REID: I think they do now. I think it's hard to ignore the impact that the category is having on the bottom line. My pitches to my bosses back in the day, back in the '80s when I first started working at *Publishers Weekly*, was always the business side. The cultural side obviously was important to me, but I didn't pitch it as, oh, we need to do this because it



has literary value, even though it did. I pitched it as a business proposition. *PW* is ultimately a business magazine. It's a trade magazine. So my pitch was always that this is what we do. This is an emerging book category. We live in a hyper-visual culture. Comics are as American as apple pie. They need to be in the format that we cover.

I think if you look around now, the fact that the business side of comics is acknowledged, as well as the literary side – yeah, we see it at the awards. We see it – as you mentioned, all of the imprints. The hirings are going on. So I would say while there is still work to be done about comics being embraced across the culture as a broad spectrum of kinds of storytelling, I think the publishing industry understands that this is an important market, and it's only growing.

KENNEALLY: And it's growing, as you say, but adaption – sorry.

(pause for rephrase)

And it is growing, as you say, but adoption of the book format came slowly, starting in the late 1970s with works from Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, Ron Wimberly, and other pioneers, and then accelerating with the rise of non-superhero comics. You've credited librarians and teachers especially for picking up on the graphic novel format. What role did they play?

REID: Obviously, librarians are just a key player in the culture. Books, reading – this is the stuff that moves civilization from one generation to the next. Librarians have always been important. They're the key to making sure we understand how we got to now. They help teachers get us from one generation to the next. I think another key element that people sleep on about librarians – they're early adopters of technology. I came on the scene as technology became more and more in the publishing industry in the early '90s, of course, with the introduction of the internet and the World Wide Web. Librarians and fans as well – the internet was another one of the powerful influences on changing comics. We'll put it that way.

Of course, librarians picked up on it. I think librarians of a certain generation – I'm 71 now. I grew up at a time when teachers and librarians didn't have a whole lot of respect for comics. You really weren't expected to read them. Nobody wanted you – I mean, you could read them for fun, for kids. As I always like to say, comics were for kids and stupid people.

But we've moved beyond that. Librarians were the first to realize and understand it, especially the generation that had come through, say, the '60s and the '70s, underground comix, some of the early books that you mentioned by Will Eisner, the alt-comics



revolution that took place in the late '70s and into the '80s. They realized that there were other kinds of comics. They realized, as I did, that comics are a medium. They're not a genre. Storytelling in all of its ramifications can be done in comics.

So librarians were just key in getting them in front of kids, getting them in front of teachers, and also understanding that comics is a multi-genre phenomenon. It's not just one genre. In this country, superhero comics have kind of dominated. Nothing wrong with superhero comics, but there's more out there than that. That's the wonderful world we're living in now in North American comics.

KENNEALLY: In Europe and Asia, Calvin Reid, comics are integrated into the general bookstore market. They're sold as books along with other kinds of books. The US, until recently, was an outlier. That difference influenced everything, from contract standards around copyright to royalty payments. Tell us why the shift from monthly comics to the book format meant a better deal for authors and for artists.

REID: It's a better deal for everybody. This is not to say that the book publishing industry doesn't have its own issues. But the book publishing industry is set up in a different way than the conventional comics industry. When I say that, I'm talking about the world of, let's say, the big two, Marvel and DC, the world of comics shops, the direct market comics shops – you know, the local neighborhood shop that sells, or used to sell, primarily periodical comics, which, of course, is what the American comics industry up until the late '70s and into the '80s was. It was a periodical. It was a magazine industry, basically. American comic books are actually magazines that come out monthly.

But the book trade offers longer stories, obviously – more complex story, different kind of storytelling. When you're talking about Marvel and DC, you're talking about licensed characters. Authors don't really own their own copyrights. They work for a fee. They work for rates. They don't really get royalties. Now, that's changing as the industry becomes more a part of the book industry. But the book industry has agents. You have copyright ownership. You have a broader distribution. Let's face it – comics, graphic novels, whatever you want to call it, they're things to be read, and the readers are in bookstores.

So the book trade had a tremendous impact on the business side. They also were able to deliver a wider variety of storytelling of all kinds, because that's what it does. And the comics industry – and I don't want this to sound like I'm trashing it, because they are evolving, too – the direct market store was too much focused on one genre, because it was kind of developed to do one thing. So it's changed. And the book industry is changing because of the comics industry. It's all good. (laughter)



KENNEALLY: In 2020, Calvin Reid, *New Kid* by Jerry Craft won the Newbery Award, the first graphic novel to win that prestigious prize. *New Kid* is representative of how graphic novels have led to diversified content and diversified readership. Calvin Reid, what did that Newbery win mean to you?

REID: Him winning the Newbery, that was the culmination of a whole lot of years. Those of us in the business, we know Jerry Craft. Jerry Craft – he’s a visionary artist – creator guy. He started a comic strip called *Mama’s Boyz*, because he didn’t see any comic strips out there, or not enough of them, aimed at a Black readership. He was a self-publisher before it was cool. Now, the industry in many ways is driven by self-publishing. He was doing it when it meant a pile in books in the back of your car and taking them to every comics festival. There wasn’t print-on-demand publishing. There wasn’t this kind of stuff going on.

So seeing Jerry Craft recognized for his storytelling was the caper to a long career. He started in the ’90s, I think, with *Mama’s Boyz*. It was the caper to his literary skills. But for the rest of us, it’s like we know that this guy moved through every part of the business to create comics that addressed a Black readership, and also by addressing a Black readership, creating content open to all Americans. The Newbery – it was like the cherry on top of his publishing sundae.

KENNEALLY: Can you reflect on the role, Calvin, that you and *PW* have played in welcoming and supporting graphic novels?

REID: Well, I was saying earlier, I retired, sort of. I’m still editing stuff for *PW*. I’m a freelancer now. And I appreciate all of the outpouring, the support, the claps on the back. As I tell my wife, Jodi (sp?), I like getting a pat on the back. That makes me feel good. I love this medium.

But I was able to do this because of *Publishers Weekly*, because I worked at the foremost platform for book publishing and bookselling in the world – certainly in North America, but really *Publishers Weekly* is an international publication. So much of what was inspiring about comics, as you mentioned, is taking place in other parts of the world. So there was a model for me to draw on and to use *Publishers Weekly* to introduce it. Everything that I have tried to do – I was a liaison. I was using *Publishers Weekly* to do my job and to do what *Publishers Weekly* does, which is make the trade aware of what’s available and the markets that are out there. So I accept all the accolades on behalf of *Publishers Weekly*

KENNEALLY: Well, we are happy to give them to you, and sort of by default to *PW*. But let me ask a question that really is just for you, Calvin Reid. What’s next?



REID: I told somebody today that what's next is for me to chill for a minute, because I don't have a deadline every five minutes. But I've got some things in mind. I want to actually do some work on them instead of just talk about them. I'm continuing to edit the Fanatic, which is *PW*'s twice-a-month comics and pop culture newsletter. I'm going to do that for an indeterminate, continuing amount of time. I'll stay on the More to Come podcast. We're going to continue to do that. But I may do some writing. I used to be an artist. I'll say that. And maybe I'll reclaim my time as an artist. We'll see how that goes. So I've got some things that – we'll find out what works out. But thanks for asking.

KENNEALLY: You bet. Well, I didn't expect you were going to tell me you weren't going to do much, because I knew you'd keep busy.

REID: I've got some ideas. (laughter)

KENNEALLY: That's right. Calvin Reid, best wishes and thanks very much for joining me.

REID: Chris, thank you for having me on and for making me feel like a big shot. I appreciate it. (laughter)

KENNEALLY: All right. Well, that's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to our program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me.

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