Feldman who set loose the imp of chance." Only once in a while does a phrase run off the tracks, as when, in a Bartók finale, "Brass play secular chorales, as if seated on the dented steps of a tilting little church."

Even in the riveting chapter dealing with Soviet music under Stalin, Ross's prose and point of view remain at a certain remove, though he aptly portrays an era when writing funny chords or obscure sonnets could earn you a bullet in the head, and the humiliation of artists was a state concern at the highest level. Ross lets Shostakovich get exercised in his own words, recounting the composer's anguish when in 1948 he was forced to recite a public apologia for "decadent formalism" or one of the other aesthetic capital crimes: "I read like the most paltry wretch, a parasite, a puppet, a cutout paper doll on a string!"

Ross has keen antennae for ironies: the Central Intelligence Agency secretly funded an avant-garde music series; Broadway show-tune writer Stephen Sondheim studied with 12-tone high priest Milton Babbitt (who himself wrote a musical comedy—unproduced); in Hollywood, Schoenberg was friends with George Gershwin and Harpo Marx. Recalling a more deadly irony, Ross reminds us that Stalin and Hitler were unusual politicians in that they were passionate and knowledgeable about the arts. This is the reason they felt obliged to murder so many artists. The weary conclusion to draw, I suppose, is that when modern rulers seriously turn their attention to the arts, artists better run.

The Rest Is Noise commits some sins of omission and commission, but this is a book concerned with the big picture. In that it's a splendid success, thorough and well researched, eminently readable, with a sense of storytelling hard to find in books of music history. Seven years into a new century, it's time to start toting up the last one, and Alex Ross has proved himself the right person to provide some perspective on this "abundant, benighted" era. He consistently connects classical music to the life of creators and of cultures, and so conveys as few writers do the human reality of the music. As Charles Ives put it, "Music is life."

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IN BRIEF

ARTS & LETTERS

Drawing an Audience

READING COMICS: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean.
Douglas Wolk. Da Capo Press. 405 pp. $22.95

AN ANTHOLOGY OF GRAPHIC FICTION, CARTOONS, AND TRUE STORIES.
Edited by Ivan Brunetti. Yale Univ. Press. 400 pp. $28

Comics lost most boyish readers to video games and MTV decades ago. Since then, the audience for comics has consisted primarily of college-to-middle-aged males interested in tales about grown men punching each other. But that readership is broadening to include women, children, and other Johnny-come-lately fans, thanks to a wave of movie adaptations (*Sin City, Ghost World*) and award-winning books (*Persepolis, Fun Home*). These readers are less interested in Snoopy than in psychologically realistic stories, and are less captivated by episodic superhero yarns than by book-length literary comics—graphic novels.

To find its bearings, this new audience may seek a critic's handholding and a greatest-hits anthology, available, respectively, in Douglas

***Maus*, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel about his father's Holocaust experiences, renders in black and white a story of complex grays.**

Wolk's essays and Ivan Brunetti's collection of American alternative comics. Alternative comics, a comic-book genre roughly analogous to independent films, have been gaining popularity since Art Spiegelman published the first volume of *Maus* in 1986. A memoir about how Spiegelman's father survived Auschwitz, *Maus* showed that comic books could handle weighty themes as well as literature could.

Great comics—such as *Maus,* which depicts the Jews as mice and the Germans as cats—can wake us from the way we habitually see the world. This is because the artist's style itself can suggest an entire worldview. Frank Miller, on whose work the movies *Sin City* and *300* are based, produces slats of rain that are, in Wolk's description, "cruel, freezing splinters of ink and light." Chester Brown, author of the blackly humorous series *Ed the Happy Clown,* draws with "a poker-faced, almost ascetic approach, with the tone of an eccentric but very patient explanation."

While a work of literary fiction may succeed by executing certain conventions beautifully, the thrills comic books offer derive from their curious imperfections. Wolk, a music writer, presents comics as kitsch pop-cultural products. His book, part history and part commentary, sometimes reads less like a critical treatise than like anthropological field notes from a comic-book convention. He frequently comes off as a fan rather than a critic, but he does provide a kind of surrogate adolescence spent in dank shops stocked with trading cards of naked warrior-princesses and coffin-like boxes of *X-Men* back issues.

To enjoy reading comics, Wolk suggests, you must appreciate the medium's offensive surprises, flagrant silliness, bad exclamatory writing, and burps of onomatopoeia. His collection includes discussions of comic-book authors such as Grant Morrison, a psychedelic genius who has claimed that aliens abducted him in Kathmandu. Similarly, cartoonist Brunetti's anthology includes many countercultural artists whose aesthetic resembles that of his own main work, a misanthropic comics series called *Schizo* that depicts the author stabbing himself in the eye and beheading and raping the planet Earth.

The last half of Brunetti's book, however, includes artists of a more literary bent, such as Daniel Clowes and Chris Ware. This gives the collection as a whole the feel of a bildungsroman, gradually increasing in maturity and sophistication as it moves toward the end.

What if this sophistication represents a threat to the genre rather than a natural evolution? Because comics traditionally have been a pulp medium, they've been able to portray the world with a liberating strangeness, unconstrained by taste or codified literary standards. The effort to reach a mainstream audience may accomplish what no supervillain ever could: It may gentrify the comic book.

Take, as an example, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home,* a graphic novel-memoir recounting the

author's relationship with her father, a closeted gay man. *The New York Times* named it a notable book of 2006. The tale, which is not dissimilar from a heavy-handed *New Yorker* short story, caters to the taste of readers who wouldn't otherwise like comics. While great comic artists, like great painters and filmmakers, enrich their medium with a paradigmatic visual style, Bechdel's stiff illustrations merely reiterate the text. It's a comic book with closed-captioning. Brunetti's anthology, in contrast, shows how visually sophisticated the strangest American comics can be.

—***Ken Chen***

The Cold Eye

CHIC IRONIC BITTERNESS.

By R. Jay Magill Jr. Univ. of Michigan Press. 273 pp. $25.95

In September 2001, when the call went forth to chasten the ironic impulse in American life, it seemed, well, rather ironic. The nation had been attacked by apocalyptic fundamentalists, and media commentators were blaming the likes of Jerry Seinfeld and Bart Simpson. *Time* essayist Roger Rosenblatt wrote, "The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequence of thinking that nothing is real . . . is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace." *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter predicted "the end of the age of irony."

Six years on, such pious prescriptions have proven "disastrous," in the view of R. Jay Magill Jr., a writer and illustrator and the former executive editor of *DoubleTake* magazine. If our political leaders had spiked their worldview with a dose of irony after 9/11, perhaps they'd have sensed blunders in the making. How ironic, then, is a war on terror that produces more terrorists. Or U.S. officials' depriving people of rights and liberties to prove that America is a bulwark of democracy.

In fact, it's the "critical tool" of irony that can help address the societal ills for which irony is often blamed: selfishness, civic apathy, hypocrisy, self-absorption, the loss of "our sense of proportion and self-restraint and humility." Magill's "big, happy irony family"—which encompasses the ways we "express intentions through language [that] are frequently askew of their literal meaning"—includes satire, so formidable in its power to scold while also amuse.

Magill draws a vital line between the thoughtful ironist and the sarcastic slacker. And he places the ironic citizen at odds not only with the religious conservative, but also with the cynic, who assumes the world is hopelessly "brutish" and who "has given up entirely on performing a social role." (The book's title plays off philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's observation that "chic bitterness" is the favored style of cynics just out for themselves.)

The ironist, by contrast, believes that society can be improved. To be effective, though, this reformer must remain true to self, shielded from phoniness by ironic detachment. As essayist Randolph Bourne wrote in 1913, "The ironist is ironical not because he does not care, but because he cares too much."

The mutual distrust between people who are ironic and people who are not is at least as old as Socrates, whose pretense to ignorance for the sake of revealing truth offended the forthright Aristotle. Magill deftly traces the evolution of intellectual thought about irony, parsing Kierkegaard, Hegel, Nietzsche, and others, and he mulls the achievements of some of the great practitioners of our day, including the ultra-self-reflexive author Dave Eggers and Stephen Colbert, creator of a pompous television alter ego. (Very little is said, though, about how blacks, Native Americans, and others have refined ironic humor to cope with injustice and skewer their oppressors.)

Magill does chronicle how both sensibilities—the one that seeks godly certitude, and the other that tweaks it—have been woven into America's intellectual DNA from the beginning. One grandson of the great colonial fire-and-brimstone preacher Jonathan Edwards was Timothy Dwight, a gifted political satirist. Two centuries before *The Onion* began publication, Philip Freneau was zinging Federalists with his own hilarious fake news stories. The ironic tradition