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Beautiful Stories For Ugly Children: Word/Image Interaction in Illustrated Fiction.

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CHAPTER I

1.2 The Beautiful Stories For Ugly Children: a brief introduction.

The *BSFUC* are a collection of illustrated stories created by Dave Louapre and Dan Sweetman, author of the texts and illustrator respectively, and published by American publishing house Piranha Press, “an imprint of DC Comics from 1989 to 1994, which was a response to the growing interest in alternative comics. The imprint was edited by Mark Nevelow, who instead of developing comics with the established names in the alternative comics field, chose to introduce several unknown illustrators with an eclectic and diverse line of experimental graphic novels and stories. Unusual for the time, Nevelow succeeded in getting DC to agree to contracts giving creator ownership to writers and artists.”¹ Another internet source specifies that “Piranha Press was DC's first attempt at constructing a "mature readers" brand of serious pictorial fiction. It was also the first DC imprint to allow for creator ownership.”²

Among an overall number of about 30 projects published by Piranha Press, the *BSFUC* probably represented the most complex and durable: the whole collection covered a three year span, from June 1989 until September 1992, for a total of thirty issues in the run³ (and a couple of anthologies published separately⁴), a low amount if compared to those reached by mainstream comics, nevertheless relatively high if we consider the short life of its publishing house. Despite this, the collection immediately received positive reviews and soon became an outstanding example of the less known graphic novel subgenre, gaining the status of ‘cult series’ amongst underground comics fans.

Unfortunately the *BSFUC* have never been reprinted since 1992, and more than fifteen years apart from the last published issue they became desirable collector’s items for those nostalgic readers who missed the whole series or some of its numbers, nevertheless they still exert a strong charm even on those new hosts of enthusiasts who lately discovered them by chance or by hearsay. In fact it is thanks to these people that much information about the *BSFUC* can still be found on the web. With the exception of a handful of sites dedicated to comics reviews, a concise but reliable page on Wikipedia, and a site which

¹ From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piranha_Press.

² From <http://dccomicsartists.com/dchistory/piranhapress.htm>.

³ See appendix on pp. 62-63 for the complete list of titles.

⁴ Namely “A Cotton Candy Autopsy” and “What if this were Heaven, wouldn’t that be Hell?”.

offers a general retrospective on the wide DC Comics catalogue, the data about the *BSFUC* are mostly based on fans' personal accounts, amateur pages, forums, a Facebook fan club, and perhaps on comments and ratings posted alongside the description of volumes' conditions in order to sell them on sites like E-bay and Amazon. The most recent web links related to the *BSFUC* concerns a stage adaptation of some of the stories made in 2009 as a co-production between Hardcover Theater and Workhouse Theatre (two American independent theatre companies)⁵, and an interesting interview with Dave Louapre broadcasted in December 2008 and February 2009 by The Onomatopoeia Show, a Canadian online radio podcast dedicated to the world of comics⁶.

However it is strange to notice that the official site of DC Comics makes no mention either of the Piranha Press or of the *BSFUC*. Thus the only 'trustworthy' source of information about the series seems to be the official site run by the authors themselves: a site which has been created recently and has not been updated since October 2006, though. The domain is more a showcase to promote new projects (such as *BSFUC*'s animations) and an occasion to keep in touch with old and new fans by updating them on upcoming events than a complete and thorough retrospective on the stories. Nevertheless the site actually represents the long-awaited answer from the creators to the uninterrupted and yet growing interest of the public, and a positive sign both for those who still hope to read new material from the artistic duo and those who are still waiting for the *BSFUC* to be republished. Consulting the official site one is still unable to obtain more detailed information about the series rather than those reported by other amateur pages. Here is the original text with which the two authors introduce themselves and their work.

"Dave Louapre and Dan Sweetman have known each other since high school and have been working together as a creative team since college. Their first collaboration, a weather machine, failed miserably. Their second, a photon-driven "death ray," actually made the weather machine look like a success. It was at this point that the pair turned to comics, producing a one-panel strip called The Wasteland, which ran in the L. A. Weekly and Fangoria magazine, to name but a couple. Well, actually, to name both. While unable to control cloud patterns or rain death from above, The Wasteland proved a valuable tool in confusing the masses and getting attention, albeit very little.

Soon, Dave and Dan expanded their ideas into a series of self-produced illustrated stories, which they sold on consignment in local book stores. This led to a quasi-lucrative deal with upstart D.C. Comics imprint Piranha Press, where the happy go lucky duo found a home for the next three years creating Beautiful Stories for Ugly Children, turning out a story a month and gaining a respectable level of positive media response from the likes of MTV, Mother Jones, Sassy, and The Nation. In its first year, Beautiful Stories garnered five

⁵ From <http://www.workhousetheatre.org> and <http://www.hardcovertheater.org>.

⁶ From <http://www.cartoongal.com>.

nominations for the coveted Eisner award – a comics industry biggie. Unfortunately, this happened to be the year that the computer tallying the ballots blew up (or something like that – we were never really clear on what actually happened), and the awards were cancelled. That luck has followed Dan and Dave ever since. Boo-yah!

Beautiful Stories stopped publishing in 1992 when the entire Piranha staff was struck by a meteorite on their way to the welfare office. Dan and Dave both entered the realm of Hollywood, with Dave writing screenplays as penance for killing all those people in a past life (he still maintains that playground had no business being so close to what he thought was the road), while Dan has become a top storyboard artist in the industry, working closely with the likes of Mel Gibson and Sam Raimi (not the actual people, just their “likes”), and even doing some second-unit directing on *Spiderman II: Electric Boogaloo*.

The sorry pair is currently manufacturing animated shorts adapted from the Cotton Candy Autopsy stories that were published under the BSFUC umbrella and are posted on this very site. They are actively seeking a republishing deal for Beautiful Stories, and are currently in discussions, yet again, with good-hearted humans trying to bring BSFUC to the big incredible world of television.

May God have mercy on their souls!”⁷

As a matter of fact, far from contradicting themselves and thus according to the ironic style of the biographies that precede each story, Louapre and Sweetman provide an introduction that if on one hand does not reveal any plausible explanation neither about the ‘making of’ of the *BSFUC*, nor about the way the two authors worked together, on the other hand it gives away some interesting cues about the origins, the nature and the public response of the collection to linger over in the following paragraphs and chapters.

A possible cue concerns Louapre and Sweetman’s first work *The Wasteland*, that, due to some common traits shared with the later artistic collaboration such as moods, subjects and style, can be easily considered as the direct predecessor of the *BSFUC* and provides a basis to better understand their context and their communicative code.

From another point of view, constant references made by the authors about the universe of comics may raise the legitimate question whether the *BSFUC* are indeed a comic or a literary work of illustrated fiction, since neither official nor amateur sources seem to set this argument straight.

Lastly, a third cue concerns the explicit influence of the American mass culture of the 90s on the fictional world recreated by the stories, an assumption that in the next chapter will allow us to consider the *BSFUC* as a complex ‘idiolect’ other than a representative ‘product of its time’, where comics, literature and cinema merge together and are supported by crossed references that cover and go across a vast and intricate universe of knowledge.

⁷ From the BSFUC official site <http://www.beautifulstoriesforuglychildren.com>.

1.2 General features.

Each issue of the *BSFUC* is generally composed by a preliminary one-page section used by the authors to report acknowledgements and introduce themselves with a short, always different - and presumably false – biography (see images 3-4) written in the third person, followed by the illustrated story itself, a section whose overall length varies from thirty-one to thirty-nine pages, excluding the covers and two final pages reserved to advertisings. Worthier of attention is the length of the text which, compared to that of earlier stories, was increased from issue number twelve to issue number eighteen. This fact seems to be ascribable to the increase of particulars and accuracy paid to the structure of the story, including the development of longer plots and more articulated characters. Nevertheless layout proportions of textual and visual parts remain quite the same and they usually maintain a ratio of one half written page to one fully illustrated page approximately.

The covers are colour-printed and paged according to two different types of layout: the first type (see image n. 1) - used from issue n. 1 to n. 18 - produces a central frame which portrays the main subject of the story and a vertical band on the left on which is printed the Piranha Press logo, but never displays the title of the issue; the second type of layout (see image n. 2) is used from n. 19 to n. 30 and is more ‘structurally free’: if on one hand the lateral band is generally maintained, on the other hand the covers are entirely occupied by a coloured illustration, and the title of the story – which is paged alongside the names of the authors – is written each time with a different font.

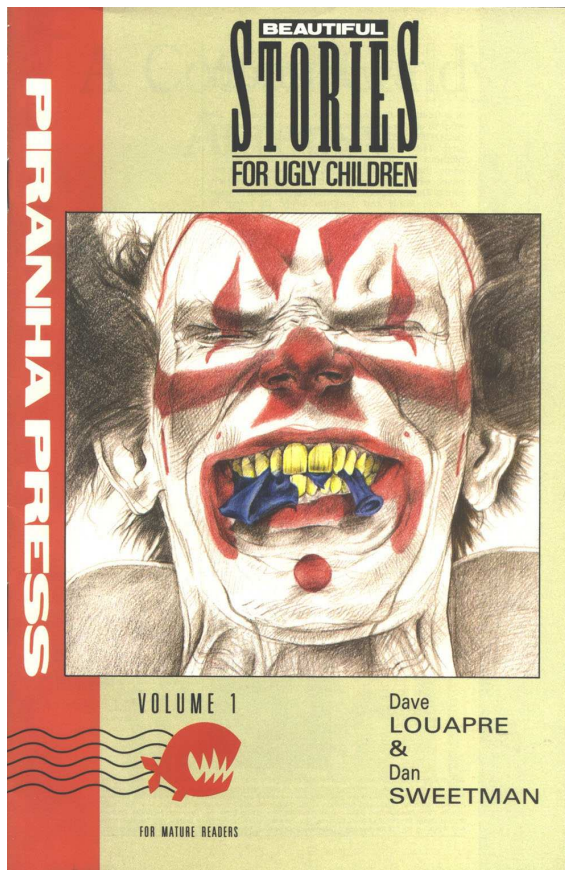


Image n. 1: *BSFUC* issue number 1 cover.

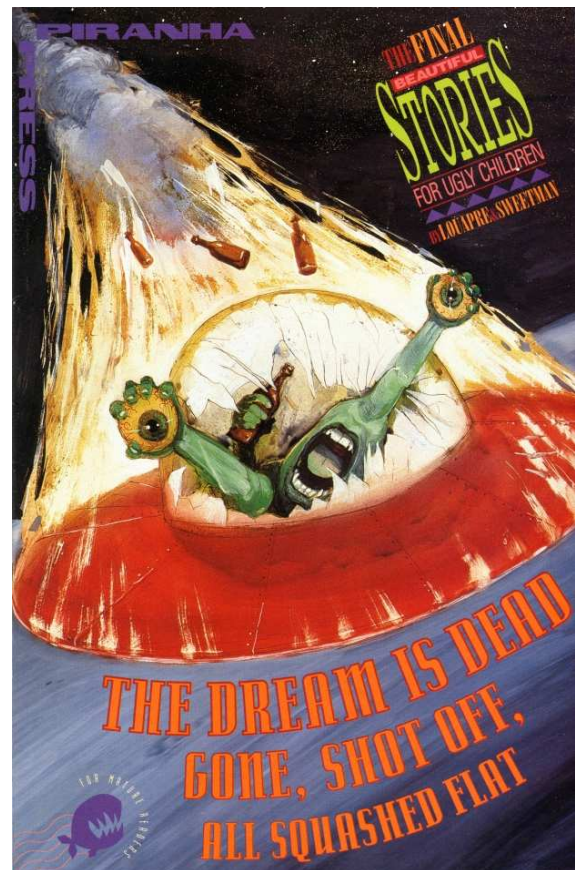


Image n. 2: *BSFUC* issue number 30 cover.

The contents are always printed in black-and-white, and do not follow a standard layout. The space dedicated to both texts and illustrations may vary according to the length of the story and the size of the drawings, thus, from issue to issue – but also from page to page – each number of the *BSFUC* is highly differentiated from the others, to a point that to an inattentive observer consecutive issues may seem to belong to a different series or to be created by different authors. Of course this feature is deeply magnified by Sweetman’s artistic skills. His capability to cover a wide range of illustration techniques and his masterful employment of drawing tools (from inks and charcoal to watercolours, from pencils and nibs to paintbrushes) make the stories unique, and give them always new and unexpected nuances of tone depending on the subjects they depict and their moods.

Textual parts are always digitally printed except for issue n. 6, ‘Happy Birthday To Hell’, whose text is directly handwritten beside the drawings, probably in order to imitate or recreate the page of a diary (see image n. 5), and for issue n. 23, ‘Tiny, Slimy, Writhing