

Review Essay: Story Without Words

Trena Houp

Kuper, Peter. *Sticks and Stones*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004.

With *Sticks and Stones*, Peter Kuper reveals why he is a significant figure in the field of visual storytelling as he presents this wordless narrative, a “picture story of epic proportions” (Kuper jacket). This wordless book is part of a larger tradition of graphic narratives that began when Frans Masereel “established an historical precedent for modern graphic storytelling” when he published his first novel without words in 1919 (Eisner *Graphic Storytelling* 1). *Sticks and Stones*, like the wordless texts of Masereel, Lynd Ward, and Otto Nückel, deals with serious issues and substantial themes. This book chronicles the rise of an empire and tackles issues of birth and death, and war and peace while it presents a “cautionary tale for our present-day world” (Kuper jacket).

Sticks and Stones opens with images of a volcano, which ultimately generates the story’s main character. The reader sees this character mature, and when he meets other people, they begin to construct a city. With a little opposition, the main character assumes the role of leader of this civilization. Then, these people discover the existence of a rival civilization, which is shown in color instead of the muted black and white stencil of the original civilization. This presentation of color symbolizes the cultural differences of the two empires as this empire is dominated by wood, or sticks, not stone, and has fire, games, and music. Soon, however, the people of the stone world decide to attack this empire. The only person to object to this declaration of war is imprisoned for his disobedience.

Trena Houp is a PhD student at the University of Florida whose research focuses on visual rhetoric and children’s literature. Currently, she is working on an interdisciplinary project dealing with wordless texts, including picture books, comics, graphic novels, woodcut novels, and other forms of visual narratives.

The stone people descend upon the stick city and use stones and fire to destroy the buildings. The people of this world are enslaved, but remain defiant, which is evident when one of the conquered people refuses to sing for his new master and is taken to prison. Subsequent images reveal the stone ruler's abuse of the land as well as his power. Ultimately, his civilization is punished for this behavior as a deluge of rain strikes the city. As his subjects perish in this flood, the stone leader offers precious stones to the dark sky, but a flash of lightning reveals he is not so easily forgiven, and eventually, he too succumbs to the rising water. Only two people, the two who were imprisoned, survive this flood. So, the story ends on a positive note as the two people, one from each of the civilizations, embark on a journey together, presumably to create a new empire.

Throughout *Sticks and Stones*, Kuper utilizes conventional comics techniques to present a story that, while at times cinematic, goes beyond the visual. Kuper succeeds in creating a powerful narrative that fits nicely with Maurice Sendak's idea of "quicken- ing," which "suggests something musical, rhythmic and animated." According to Sendak, "quicken- ing" is "the genuine spirit of animation, the breathing to life" of the images, a quality which Sendak considers essential in books that primarily tell their stories through pictures (Sendak 3). Due to this "quicken- ing," it is not surprising that there is a flash animation version of the story as the book itself seems animated.

Wordless stories like *Sticks and Stones* are quite complex. As Will Eisner states, "images without words, while they seem to represent a more primitive form of graphic narrative, really require some sophistication on the part of the reader" (Eisner *Comics and Sequential Art* 24). Therefore, although this text is composed only of images, it is not, and should not be, a fast read. Readers must focus attention on every detail to experience the full impact of the narrative. Kuper acknowledges this when he says, a reader can sit and read a wordless book, flip through it, but "it needs to have a return experience" because with "a wordless book, there's a read you get if you go through it, and there are reads that are about seeing other details" (Spurgeon). Kuper's *Sticks and Stones* is certainly worth the time and effort needed to see all its details.

Works Cited

- Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Tarmac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985.
- . *Graphic Storytelling*. Tarmac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1996.
- Kuper, Peter. *Sticks and Stones* (animated flash version). 2004. 28 Mar. 2005
<<http://www.randomhouse.com/crown/kuper/>>.
- Sendak, Maurice. *Caldecott & Co.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988.
- Spurgeon, Tom. "In Depth: The Peter Kuper Interview." *Graphic Novel Review*. 2004. 28 Mar. 2005. <http://www.graphicnovelreview.com/issue3/pkuper_interview.php>.