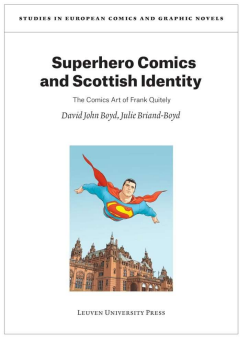
‘Superhero Comics and Scottish Identity: The Comics Art of Frank Quitely’, by David John Boyd and Julie Briand-Boyd

Review by metaphrog



Superhero Comics and Scottish Identity: The Comics Art of Frank Quitely by David John Boyd and Julie Briand-Boyd is a weighty tome, exploring aspects of Scottish identity, refracted through the prism of superhero comics and the life and work of Frank Quitely.

The authors are academics, interrogating Scottish identity from the perspective of a Scottish-American and Breton team. Their investigation is rich in historical depth and comprehensively researched. Identity is a fascinating subject and ideas of what Scottishness means are necessarily complex. The authors recognise this complexity and even embrace it to draw out the nuanced approaches an artist brings to their craft. Here they use highlights from Frank Quitely’s work to illustrate what being Scottish can mean and how the artist brings aspects of their Scottishness to images and stories.

Assembled in three parts, and eight chapters, including an extensive interview with Frank Quitely, the book limits its interrogation of Scottishness to a post-devolved position, pre-pandemic and before the referendum for independence. Still, the historical and sociological ideas at play are important and speak to a social awareness and a reluctance to accept any fanciful romantic notion of

Scottishness.

Beginning with *Batman: The Scottish Connection* (written by Alan Grant) and moving through Frank Quitely's career, from early parody strips for *Electric Soup*, right through to his work as an established artist in superhero comics, discussing his role as a local and global artist, the authors use art as a vehicle to explore ideas of Scottish identity, drawing their thesis from ideas applied to landscapes, like the River Clyde (in *Flex Mentallo*) or Skye (in *Batman*), and in portraiture: where the artist recalls the drinking men he used to see in Glasgow's poorer areas and the stray nostril hairs in his father's nose, and how these humanising details informed his approach to his work on *The Kelvin Hall Clown* (2019), *Lex Luthor*, and other portraits, with pores, blackheads and scars brought to the surface and rendered in stark contrast to his beautiful *ligne claire* drawing style.

Observing that he works obliquely and self-reflectively, avoiding cliched Kailyard or shortbread-tin notions of Scottishness, the book looks at international influences, from manga creators like Katsuhiro Otomo, and from European comics, particularly the classic *bande dessinée* of Moebius, as well as local artists, Dudley D. Watkins and James Turnbull, and architectures, such as the buildings of Alexander "Greek" Thomson in Glasgow's south side, and people that have inevitably informed the artist's life and work.

Over the last few decades Scotland has had an unusually large influence on American superhero comics. Following in the footsteps of Alan Moore (the first comic writer living in Britain, in Northampton to be precise, doing prominent work in American comics), Scottish creators like Frank Quitely and Alan Grant, Grant Morrison and Mark Millar, have been quietly busy adding a certain edginess or social realism to works published by America's largest comic publishers, Marvel, DC, Vertigo and Image. Alan Grant is credited with providing a start for many Scottish artists and writers, first in *2000AD* and then with DC comics in America, while *2000AD* itself is responsible for bringing a harder edge and social awareness to comic stories.

Deliberate underfunding of such fundamental things as education, art and health care has taken its toll on society, particularly in Scotland, and the creation of poverty has inevitably brought with it health problems, social problems, such as high unemployment and poor job security, along with issues including crime, low

self-esteem and addiction. Glasgow is a patchwork of affluent and deprived areas and social factors play an increasingly significant part in what it means to be Scottish. The Thatcher years and continuing austerity are highlighted in the book. And social conditions are used to explain or contextualise, at least in part, the Gorbals Vampire story and the artist's treatment of it.

What does it mean to be Scottish? Who are we? In the light of devolution but no independence, suddenly these become quite big questions, fraught with tension. Where does the tension come from? Being colonised or unable to govern itself has implications for any country.

The monograph touches on the existence of sectarian division briefly, with particular reference to the Glasgow pub bombings of 1979. In the interview, talking about his childhood experiences, the difference between religions is observed as quite subtle: one family has a relaxing Sunday while another has to polish their shoes.

And while the book doesn't delve back to Picts and Gaels, or discuss later influences from Angles, Britons, and Vikings, Quitely brings up many of the historical elements that feed into contemporary Scottishness, in the conversations that form the interview. And Professor Alan Riach, of Glasgow University, is cited listing the many people, from various countries, contributing to modern Scottish society and noting "that icons of Scotland, the Saltire, like the tartan, have become richer, more complex, more problematic than before", importantly noting "the contradictions of defining Scottishness and its tartan-like multiplicities".

In a tradition following John Byrne and Alasdair Gray, and sharing their hopefulness for Scottish independence, Frank Quitely believes in the transformative power of art. Along with his frequent collaborator Grant Morrison they have encoded ideas of societal change in the stories they create using some of the most iconic characters in the public eye. Why can't other people see the way things are? Grant Morrison wonders. It's a fight for justice and for good.

The telephone booth trope of masking or unmasking the superhero identity is so common now that it has almost become invisible, yet it hides within itself layers of meaning. Who are we? What makes us who we are?

The authors contend that masks and layers and identity are intertwined in our modern world, and they draw parallels with the creators of Batman and

Superman, and their masked superheroes echoing the masking of their Jewish origins. Antisemitism was rife in American society, and newspapers and magazines commonly printed antisemitic articles and cartoons. It was understandable that many people chose to mask their identities by adopting new names or adapting their existing Jewish name to fit a more American-ised or Anglicised norm in a new world. Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, whose fathers were born Mikhel Iankel Segalovich and Julius Shusterowich respectively, were keenly aware of this. While Bob Kane, the writer and artist who, along with Bill Finger, created Batman, was born Robert Kahn. The idea of a masked hero grew, in part, from this masking of their Jewish identities.

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The book is filled with ideas and interesting nuggets. A favourite was Simon Critchley's idea that the clown recontextualises laughter using humour in response to finitude and the impossibility of authenticity.

The authors observe Quitely's application of a very self-aware, Scottish sense of humour to his work in comics but perhaps generously, and rather tenuously, ascribe intentionality when examining the motives for his earliest work in the local community – and while he naturally values art and respects the importance of making a difference locally, it is far more likely that the work he did was the work he got, and international fame and global commissions all came later.

With the academic or scholarly language in use this book is rigorous, occasionally using a thousand words to describe a picture, testament to the thoroughness and thoughtfulness the authors have applied. Maps are filled with "cartographic signifiers" and the multiplicities of Quitely's Scottishness are flexibly rendered as an "intersection". And, while there is much here for comic fans, occasionally the authors get a little bogged down in the details of individual serialised comics' synopses. Quitely's innovative work on *We3* is rightly lauded and serves as an excellent example of space time comics.

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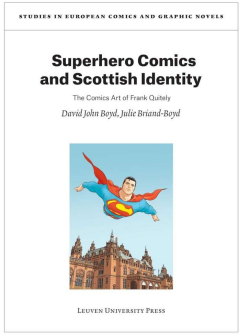

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