DOMINICK GRACE

COLLECTING, PRESERVING, HOARDING: *WIMBLEDON GREEN* VS. *THE GREAT NORTHERN BROTHERHOOD OF CANADIAN CARTOONISTS*

CANADIAN CARTOONIST SETH (born Gregory Gallant) is not only a creator but also a collector and preserver of comics. He was instrumental in bringing the work of Canadian cartoonist Doug Wright back into print and has worked on numerous reprint projects, such as Fantagraphics' complete reprinting of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* (1950-2000) and Drawn & Quarterly's reprints of the work of John Stanley. He also comments extensively on cartoonists from the past in interviews, and his *Forty Cartoon Books of Interest: From the Collection of the Cartoonist "Seth"* (2006) offers an eclectic selection of comics, both obscure and well-known, that he finds interesting. His interest in comics and collecting is also evident in his first major work, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996), which documents his quest to learn more about the (fictional) Canadian cartoonist Kalo. His interest in older comics is also documented by his fellow cartoonist Joe Matt in *Spent* (2007), which depicts Matt and Seth vying to purchase a rare collection of old Canadian comics. As Daniel Marrone notes, the "scene has the archetypal heft of a vaudeville routine: two collectors arguing over the right to own a rare book."

This turning to the past, coupled with Seth's deliberate choice to create a persona for himself by dressing in fashions of the past and even living in a house in which modern conveniences are invisible, has led commentators to associate him and his work with nostalgia, despite his own efforts to resist that definition. In an interview in 2009, for instance, Seth told Robin McConnell that he hated the word "nostalgia": "I don't think that 1920 was a better time than now. That's a very complicated argument. I'm labelled as

nostalgic mostly because my characters are looking backward. I thought, Why is that nostalgia? They're not always looking backwards with a golden glow." Another interview with Vince Cherniak further clarifies his complex sense of how the past informs the present: "I agree with the famous Faulkner quote: 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.' That certainly couldn't be truer for me. It's alive for me. Not alive like the present though. Not locked in amber . . . but having the appearance of permanence." Indeed, when one examines his depictions of nostalgic figures, including avatars of himself, nostalgia never comes off as unproblematic.

Two of the works in which both his interest in comics and collecting and the importance of negotiating the past are central concerns are *Wimbledon Green: The Greatest Comic Book Collector in the World* (2005) and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (2011). Despite numerous differences, both of these books explore the complex dynamics and competing motivations of comics collecting, the former from the perspective of collectors who wish to possess and the latter from the perspective of artists who wish to preserve. In *Wimbledon Green*, for example, Seth depicts comic book collectors not merely as oddball eccentrics but also, almost without exception, as at best grotesque and all too frequently emotionally damaged, governed by pettiness, mean-spiritedness, amorality, and monomania. In *GNBCC*, on the other hand, the primary focus is on cartoonists (mostly invented ones), with the narrator reminiscing about the work of past cartoonists and lamenting how—even in this whimsical fantasy of a Canada in which comics have historically been far more highly valued than has actually been the case—the reality does not correspond to his reminiscences. As revealed in the final pages, the idealized picture that the narrator has painted is mostly untrue, as the Brotherhood clearly functions more as an imagined community of artists than as a vital and vibrant community. Both books, therefore, critique the comics world, most caustically for the detrimental effects of the collectors' mentality, as hoarding books removes them from circulation and therefore from an audience, but also for the nostalgic idealization of comics that informs the narrator's perspective in *GNBCC*.

Wimbledon Green especially skewers the nostalgia of comic book collectors. *Wimbledon Green* is in part a whimsical adventure story, notably in its central narrative section, in which several collectors engage in a James Bond-style pursuit in search of a copy of the (fictional) first issue of *Green Ghost*, the most elusive comic book ever published. It is also in part a medi-

tation on the meaning and value of the past, notably in the eponymous character's reminiscences about his childhood. However, it is also a tart satire of the deification of the past and its artifacts that lies at the heart of the collectors' mentality. Theoretically motivated by a common love of the comics medium, as reflected in the founding of the idealistically-intended Coverloose Society, the collectors depicted here are instead motivated as much (or more) by pettiness, jealousy, and cliquishness as they are by a genuine love of comics.

We repeatedly see the collectors' relentless pursuit of artifacts from the past in terms that undermine any sense of nobility or higher purpose. For example, a central element is the collectors' pursuit of two comics holy grails: the Wilbur R. Webb collection of some 900 Golden Age comic books and the possibly mythical first issue of *Green Ghost*. There is much whimsy in this, but it overlays a trenchant, if implicit, commentary, as the idea of there really being any inherently superior value to artifacts of the past is undermined. This is reflected most overtly in the quantification of value in monetary terms and in the collectors' desire to squirrel away their artifacts in impregnable fortresses, in effect removing them from the world. Significantly, the Webb collection and the first issue of *Green Ghost* remain absent, but they would have been hardly less absent had any of the collectors got hold of them and stored them away in a vault.

Wimbledon Green's account of the transaction that yielded him the Webb collection is also rife with rationalizations of rapacious dealing—even before the underhanded skulduggery surrounding the auction of the books once they have been acquired. Green defends himself against accusations of having robbed Webb with an impressive series of excuses: Webb contacted *him*, as if reaching out to a dealer means that one gets what one deserves. "I was a dealer of old comics—not a charity worker," Green asserts, as if apprising an owner of the value of his property is somehow charity rather than ethical business, which certainly seems to be what one would expect in a "scrupulously honest and above-board" deal, as Green claims this was. "He received a fairer treatment from me than he could have expected from any other member of my august community"—that is, Green merely cheated him less egregiously than someone else would have done, which is a variation of the "someone was going to do it, so it might as well have been me" excuse. "He wished to sell the comics and was more than satisfied with my offered price" of $8,000—as of course he might be, if he did not know what

the books were actually worth. And finally, though $8,000 might sound low "for such quality merchandise" (note the word choice here: Green, the supposed comics lover, actually thinks of comic books as products), "many key books sold for less that 100 dollars in those heady days," a statement that may be true but in no way addresses the larger question of how much more than $100 many other key books might have been worth. Indeed, a recurrent motif in the book is Seth's depiction of items from Green's collection, with their monetary value a key datum, and only one of which—the rare *Canker-worm of Care*—is valued at under $100. Only three are valued at under $1,000, most are valued at five-figure amounts, and one (the first issue of *Miss Mystery*) is valued at $130,000. Furthermore, $8,000 for 900 or so books averages less than $10.00 a book.

For all his absurdly detailed knowledge of comics, then—an ability to determine year of publication from staple placement, for instance—Green is depicted as motivated principally by the economic value of comics rather than their aesthetic value or an inherent appreciation of the past. Indeed, in another amusing comment on the collectors' mentality, the "High Standards" section critiques several variations of comic book collectors—from crass market speculators to "men of poor taste seeking out old comics in a vain attempt to buy back their childhoods," as enumerated by comics critic Art Stern. Stern initially perceived Green as an exception to this general rule of the comics collector until the devastating day he saw his idol eating a bucket of fried chicken while reading a stack of current, "crummy superhero comics." To Stern, then, Green is just like every other fanboy: full of pretentious claims about the depth and value of comics—old comics, anyway—but really nothing more than a consumer for whom the comic book is no more or less of an object of value than a leg of chicken. Green has feet of clay—or, at any rate, hands of grease. So much for the high ideals of the comic book connoisseur—well, other than Art Stern, who, we are meant to infer, sees himself as the one genuinely noble soul.

That Seth draws Stern as resembling his own self-depiction is significant in this regard, especially when one considers that the other Seth analogue in the book, Jonah, is Seth's self-aware parody of himself and the book's clearest instance of a critical commentary on the nostalgic impulse of the collector. Jonah resembles Seth not only because of his appearance and his adopted name (which also has a biblical resonance) but also because he has authored several chapbooks on earlier comics work (akin to Seth's *Forty*

Cartoon Books of Interest). Unlike Seth, however, Jonah has not worked to bring old comics back into print but has instead contributed to the loss of the past. All of the collectors in *Wimbledon Green* are to some extent hoarders, who are only interested in possessing comic books so that they can lock them away, but Jonah is the epitome of this sort of possessive nostalgia. He has even plundered libraries—public repositories of the past—to build his collection, which he keeps locked away in a secret cellar. Most telling is his use of counterfeiting as a way of getting away with theft. Jonah often simply swipes books from other collectors, stores, or libraries, but in some instances, usually involving rare and valuable books, he attempts to conceal his theft or at least defer discovery by creating deceptive fakes "using a computer and his excellent forging skills." Jonah then "slabs" these forged duplicates (sealing them in a transparent Lucite case) and switches them for the originals. Jonah's forgeries might go undiscovered for years, as collectors know that removing such cases will decrease the monetary value of their property.

Here we see the tools of collecting used against collectors. A slabbed book is of course an unreadable book, as the container preserves it indefinitely at the cost of rendering it inaccessible. This is a remarkable literalization of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's observation that the object that is valued as a possession rather than for its use becomes "devoid of any function" and is merely "part of a collection"—an "object" rather than the thing itself. Slabbing a comic thus represents an outright collision between the book as an object with a specific use and the book as an object with a specific value; in other words, use and (economic) value cannot coexist. However, if one can counterfeit a book sufficiently convincingly that one cannot tell that it is a counterfeit without unslabbing it, what does that say about the fetishization of the object? There is no observable difference between a real and a fake slabbed book. The value of the object resides, therefore, as much in the mind of the observer/owner as it does in the object itself. The slabbed book is, in effect, the image of the constructedness of nostalgia. What collectors really value here is not the past but rather their possession of a piece of the past.

Ultimately, *Wimbledon Green* is very much about the absence of a core to the nostalgia of comics collecting. The sequence in which Green loses his memory is particularly instructive, as it makes him not only happier than he has been at any other time but also a better person. Stripped of the obses-

sion with owning the past, he can only face forward. When his memory returns, it is significant that the first thing he does is steal Jonah's collection, much of which was itself stolen. He empties Jonah's secret basement stash, and it becomes another one of the lost artifacts that dominate the book. For a book about collectors and their putative interest in preserving the past, this is a book in which a remarkable stress is placed on what is lost rather than what is gained. As Baudrillard notes, collecting depends on a paradox: "the object attains exceptional value only by virtue of its absence." *Wimbledon Green* therefore seriously questions the value of nostalgia chiefly in its caustic depiction of Jonah.

GNBCC only occasionally touches on collecting, but its focus on comics as artifacts is significantly different. Whereas *Wimbledon Green* presents a cynical picture of collecting, *GNBCC* presents an idealistic, if equally whimsical, perspective on preserving. The Brotherhood is itself, of course, a sort of preservation society; its headquarters, a tour of which constitutes the bulk of the narrative, exists primarily as a repository for relics. The other major building toured in the book is an archive for preserving comics. Seth notes the similarity between this archive and Dylan Horrocks' repository of unknown comics in *Hicksville* (1998), although the repository in *Hicksville* remains unknown to the world at large and has not led to a world in which comics are more valued. In *GNBCC*, on the other hand, the archive remains a publicly accessible space—albeit only after arduous travel. Rare comics may be hard to access, but they are accessible.

In contrast to the missing Webb collection or the first issue of *Green Ghost*, for instance, *GNBCC* presents as the first extant Canadian comic book a (fictional) 1760 work called *General Fox* (produced by the historically real George Townshend), of which only one copy exists. Far from being a best-seller or literary game-changer, Townshend's privately-published pamphlet was effectively lost and forgotten. A single surviving copy was found in 1910, but it was not recognized for what it was—the first Canadian comic—until 1965, and it was not widely acknowledged as such until 1971. Its significance is not that it started a trend but rather that it represents an obscure and unknown antecedent—the sort of thing that languishes in obscurity until the right collector finds and identifies it. Rather than its existence being the *cause* of the popularity of Canadian comics, its celebration, study, and republication is the *effect* of the popularity of Canadian comics. Without an already-existing vibrant Canadian comics community, one might suggest,

the work would never have achieved classic status. Furthermore, although discovered by collectors and nominally the property of one (Dr. Scarcity Brown), the book is not held privately but instead stored in the GNBCC's northern archive building. A facsimile edition has also been printed, so both the original, collectible artifact and an inexpensive, widely-available facsimile of it are available either for study by those willing to make the northern trek or for purchase by those who wish simply to read it.

Whereas in *Wimbledon Green* rare and valuable comics—designed as items of popular consumption—have been metaphorically swallowed up by a handful of collectors, in *GNBCC* we are instead presented with a model of collecting that focuses on preservation for the public good and with public access. Admittedly, even in *GNBCC* the idea of collecting as commercial, if not obsessive in nature, is present. For instance, the GNBCC itself is to some extent a repository of cheap commercial junk for sale, and that some books are valued as much as objects of monetary value as works of art is evident in that the final observation the book makes about Henry Pfefferlaw's (fictional) book *The Great Machine* is that "an original edition goes for good money on eBay or AbeBooks." Nevertheless, in *GNBCC* preservation and aesthetic appreciation can coexist—the commercial value of Pfefferlaw's *The Great Machine* can coexist with its status as a literary classic. While I would not go so far as to say that *GNBCC* represents the ideal of collecting—Seth is too conscious of the variable quality of comics and their creators to be an idealist—while *Wimbledon Green* represents the reality—Seth loves comics too much to condemn collectors, though he can satirize them—the two books do offer complementary images of how the love of comics can serve to preserve and disseminate comics or devolve into a destructive model of hoarding.