

# Comics Can Save The World!

## A Conversation with Françoise Mouly

SUSAN KARWOSKA

*Françoise Mouly has been art editor of The New Yorker since 1993. She was the founder, publisher, designer, and co-editor, along with her husband, cartoonist Art Spiegelman, of the pioneering avant-garde comics anthology Raw, where Maus, Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning comic book on the Holocaust was first published. This spring, Mouly launched the first three titles of Toon Books, her own imprint of hardcover comics for emerging readers by well-known writers and artists, including Spiegelman. Three more titles are to be released this coming fall. Toon Books follows Mouly's successful earlier series, Little Lit, featuring comics for kids by star writers, children's book artists, and cartoonists. Born in Paris, Mouly moved to New York in 1974. In 2001, Ms. Mouly was named chevalier in the order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication. She and her husband live in Manhattan with their two children. This interview took place February 21 at the Raw offices in New York City.*



Françoise Mouly. Photo by Sarah Shatz.

**Susan Karwoska:** You've published comics for children before, with the Little Lit books. What's different about this new series you are publishing, Toon Books?

**Françoise Mouly:** One of the most distinctive differences is that the Little Lit books were meant for all ages. We wanted to do a collection of strips that could appeal to a very young child but could also appeal to an eight- or ten-year-old or even to an adult. With the Toon Books we were building from there and also narrowing it down to a very specific moment in childhood development where you enter into school, where you enter into literacy. What we set out to do was to share our love of books, of books in general, of the printed object.

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*Susan Karwoska is editor of Teachers & Writers magazine.*



A page from Maurice Sendak's *In The Night Kitchen* (Harper Collins, 1970). ©1970 Maurice Sendak.

**SK:** Is the process of publishing comics for kids different from publishing them for adults?

**FM:** With adults, as long as the work is clear you can ask the reader to follow along with something that may be unfamiliar. With comics for kids, the artist has a somewhat different task. He has to be just as clear, maybe even more so, but he shouldn't presuppose, "Oh well, they'll know what I mean."

In the Toon Books we go out of our way to intertwine the two spirals of the visual and the word narratives. First of all we vet the vocabulary to make sure to use words the kids know or would be able to decipher. When there's a word that they don't know, we subtly illustrate it in a way to allow them to learn that

word. And then so much information is carried in the facial expressions, in the staged play, that you don't need the words to understand that part of the story, so you can use the words to carry something else. It's like writing a symphony. You don't have the oboe and the violin play the same score because you don't need to. Here you have many instruments and they complement each other to create a very textured story.

**SK:** Would you say this intertwining of the verbal and visual narratives is the main difference between illustrated children's books and comics?

**FM:** It's a very big difference. In illustrated books, the way they are traditionally done for young children, there's often a redundancy between the text and the pictures. In children's book publishing, I found out, editors often make themselves look at the manuscript without looking at the visual treatment or the pictures. They feel that that's the best way to assess the literary value of the book. If they accept the story the way it is written, then they will go and pair it with an illustrator, so by the time they think about the visual flow of the story a number of decisions have been made already. Whereas I start with a much rougher treatment of story and character and then, with the artist, work endlessly on how to tell the story, the visual breakdowns.

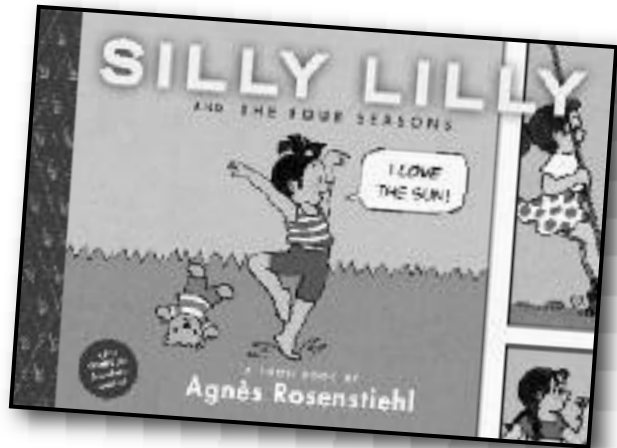
When I developed the Toon Books series, I wanted to make use of my access to the best artists and the most creative ideas and talents and stories. For the most part what I'm interested in is a narrative artist—someone who has a story to tell and has a visual means of expression. And most of the time this will be a cartoonist, a comic strip artist. It's not the same thing as an illustrator. If you look at most of the classic children's books, whether *Eloise*, or *The Cat in the Hat*, or Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*, or *Make Way for Ducklings*, or *Olivia* by Ian Falconer, those are visual narratives. Those are not paragraphs of text that have been vetted and then given to

an illustrator. Those are artists telling stories.

**SK:** William Steig's books for children work this way as well. I loved reading them to my kids—the pictures are wonderful and the language operates on so many levels.

**FM:** Steig is also an artist who was given free rein, and you get a completely different kind of story when you let the artist express himself.

What is shown is different if it's the artist who writes the story.



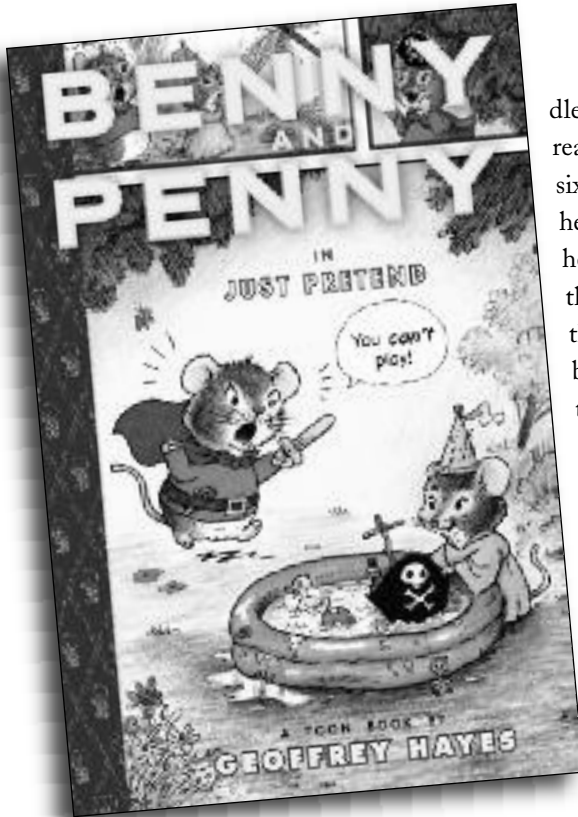
Toon Books title *Silly Lilly and the Four Seasons*, by Agnès Rosenstiehl. ©2008 RAW Junior, LLC.

**SK:** Putting comic books in the schools would seem like the ultimate subversive thing to do in this day and age when so much in education is geared toward test results. It has been shown, though, that teaching kids creative writing can help them achieve the very goals that the testing is designed to measure. It does this in a way, however, that makes it much easier for them to retain because it moves them, excites them. You are making the claim that bringing comics into the classroom can offer the same benefits, so why do you think there's such resistance to doing this?

**FM:** There's a misunderstanding, I think, about literacy, and part of it seems to be cultural, and seems to be rooted in a distrust of the visual, and in a distrust of pleasure. The problem with comics is that comics are fun, and that's why educators and parents and congressmen—there were congressional hearings against comics!—were so afraid of them. There's a suspicion of anything that kids like, and that includes rap music and rock and roll, and comics. There is a kind of unspoken but very influential assumption that if kids like something it's probably not good for them, and that if it's educational it should taste like bitter medicine. But I think there is just as much reason for optimism, because there is a new generation of parents that is more open-minded because they've had first-hand experience with comic books, so that they're not as afraid.

**SK:** Michael Bitz, founder of The Comic Book Project, said in an interview that reading and writing comic books also teaches kids sequencing, and character development, and the mechanics of writing, and other such skills. It uses a different form to do it, but the kids are still learning those things.

**FM:** Well that's the thing. One of the reasons I've gotten so passionate about publishing comics for children is that I really do believe comics can save the world! It sounds like an exaggeration to say that but it's at least a guiding idea. First of all, with comics you get an easier point of entry into the book, into literature, because you have that guiding hand that takes you through the story, so you get all of the mechanics, as Michael was pointing out. You get reading left to right, from top to bottom, in a way that is intuitively apprehensible. You get the fact that a story has a beginning, a mid-



Toon Books title *Benny and Penny*, by Geoffrey Hayes.  
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dle, and an end, so for example when I was reading a one-page comic strip with my six-year-old son, after one or two comics he's saying, "Oh, I want to read *this*," and he's pointing to the punch line that is in the lower right-hand corner. And all of the sudden I'm stopped dead in my tracks because I realize that *he's* just realized that the story has an arc and that it lands here, on what we call the punch line, and that's such a profound lesson!

When I'm reading *Benny and Penny* with kids in schools, all of them do the same thing: They look at the cover, they get something from the title, they get something from the image, and they see the characters. The first chapter provides the introduction, the exposition, and the setting; the second chapter is the dilemma and the conflict writ large; and the third chapter is the resolution leading to the punch

line. In the end everything that has been spelled out in these moments comes together. The kids not only experience this, but as soon as they are finished they are actually leafing back and they are finding those moments. Why? Because in a written book it's harder to remember where things happened. In a visual book you immediately go back, "Oh, I liked *that* moment, I liked *that* moment." Because the comic book is a map, it's a diagram of the story, as well as the story itself. And the teachers have told me that's all they ever want; that when the students finish a story they talk about it, re-read it, re-inhabit it.

**SK:** Do you find, when you talk to the teachers, that they have a sense of whether this also translates into the kids' written work?

**FM:** Oh, absolutely. Because it dovetails right into their inner storytelling. It's a way of giving architecture to their world. Putting them in touch with another individual's mode of expression of a story prompts their own story-making; I've seen this when I take these comic books to schools. In fact, what Michael Bitz has seen, and what most people who do comics with kids have seen is that the kids' first response is often, "Oh, I want to do my own story!" Because one of the things that the kids perceive, and this is a really important, crucial thing, is that this is made by *somebody*. This is done by a human being. The drawing shows the hand of an individual. And because *they're* making up a character, so *you* could make up a character too. One of the things my husband [Art Spiegelman] has said is, "I learned to read from comics, and the minute I understood that comics were made by humans—as opposed to robots, say—I wanted

to be a cartoonist.” Also, when kids read these books, they’re driving, they’re in control, and that gives them a direct connection to wanting to make their own books, thinking, “I could do this!”

Once you remove that barrier saying, “Oh no, you can’t use comics in the classroom,” to bring something that the kids are so eager for is such a gift!

**SK:** You presented this series at the American Library Association mid-winter meeting this year. What was the response of the librarians at this conference?

**FM:** That was such a pleasure! The books were so well received! It completely surprised me the extent to which the librarians are ahead of the game. They knew that comics were great for kids—they had one question and one question only: which comics? It is the librarians who are now at the forefront. And then it is the educators and the teachers. I’ve been talking to [Dr. Nancy Grasmick] the Superintendent of Schools in Maryland, and she has a “comics in the classroom” initiative, and she’s actually adopting the Toon Books to give her students in first and second grade. It’s fantastic! And the teachers are so eager, because once you remove that barrier saying, “Oh no, you can’t use comics in the classroom,” to bring something that the kids are so eager for is such a gift!

I don’t want to pretend that all comics are great and any comic you give your kid is great. Comics can change the world and comics can be literature—that’s still controversial to say—but no medium in and of itself is a magic bullet. There are plenty of bad books out there!

**SK:** But somehow with comics the content gets confused with the medium in a way that we’ve moved beyond in other art forms.

**FM:** You can hardly imagine now what it was like for Art to go around to publishers in New York and propose a comic book about the Holocaust. It was so, so controversial.

**SK:** Because how can you put those two things together...

**FM:** They slammed the door! A comic book about the Holocaust? How dare you? How dare you? It wasn’t just that, oh, this is inappropriate. It was such an anathema. To such an extent that he was turned down by every publishing house in New York. Twenty-six rejection letters. And the only way that *Maus* got published—we’d published it in *Raw* but the only way it got published as a book—was that we knew the art director at Pantheon, and we said, your house turned us down and you *can’t* turn us down. This is an important book! So we went in through the back door. The shifts that have come about since the publication of *Maus* are momentous! It’s hard to even remember how it was back then.

But I also feel that something is getting lost here. In this enthusiasm for the legitimacy of comics it’s now being put in another ghetto, but now it’s the ghetto of the museum, and of cultural legitimacy, where it’s becoming something only for hip college students. Which is fabulous! Which is wonderful! Again, I dreamed about this, so I couldn’t be more pleased, but it’s leaving behind a natural constituency for

Kids love comics, and it's good for them: why not use this? When you fall in love with a comic you fall in love with a printed object, you fall in love with a book, you fall in love with reading. End of story! After that, you basically have kids who love to read, and then all doors are open.

comics. I realized, my God, I spent thirty years of my life trying to make the case that comics are not just for kids anymore, and I did to some extent. What my husband and I did had an impact, and now comics are taken seriously; Art won the Pulitzer Prize for *Maus* and now there is a National Book Award for comics; and museums and bookstores welcome them, but there are no comics for children!

Starting Toon Books has allowed me to address this.

**SK:** What responses have you gotten to the books from kids?

**FM:** When I'm in a school, I listen to the kids reading the books I've brought and you can hear them struggling to decode the words at first, but within a page or two they are all over the book and reading it together and making the voices of the characters as they are reading, which is unheard of at that stage of development because usually they can't know what is being said until they've sounded it out. With comics they are actually able to get visual cues, so that when they are reading "Go Away!" in *Benny and Penny*, they know how to say it from the size of the type, from the size of the word balloon, and from the expression on the boy's face. They don't read, GO AWAY, they read GO AWAY!! So all of a sudden they've gotten to the other side of reading.



A panel from the Toon Books title, *Benny and Penny*, by Geoffrey Hayes. ©2008 RAW Junior, LLC.

The comics are just a means to an end, and the end is the information content, not just the mechanics of reading. The mechanics, in and of themselves, are hollow. If there is nothing for the kids in the reading of a book—if it doesn't deliver pleasure, excitement, empathy with the characters, and so on, if kids are given the deadening kind of readers that my son was given—then why on earth should they want to read?

It is important to expose kids to books that they could like. That should be the first step. I mean, kids love comics, and it's good for them: why not use this? When you fall in love with a comic you fall in love with a printed object, you fall in love with a book, you fall in love with reading. End of story! After that, you basically have kids who love to read, and then all doors are open.

For more information about Toon Books, visit [www.Toon-Books.com](http://www.Toon-Books.com)