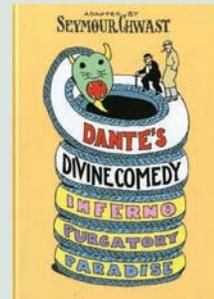
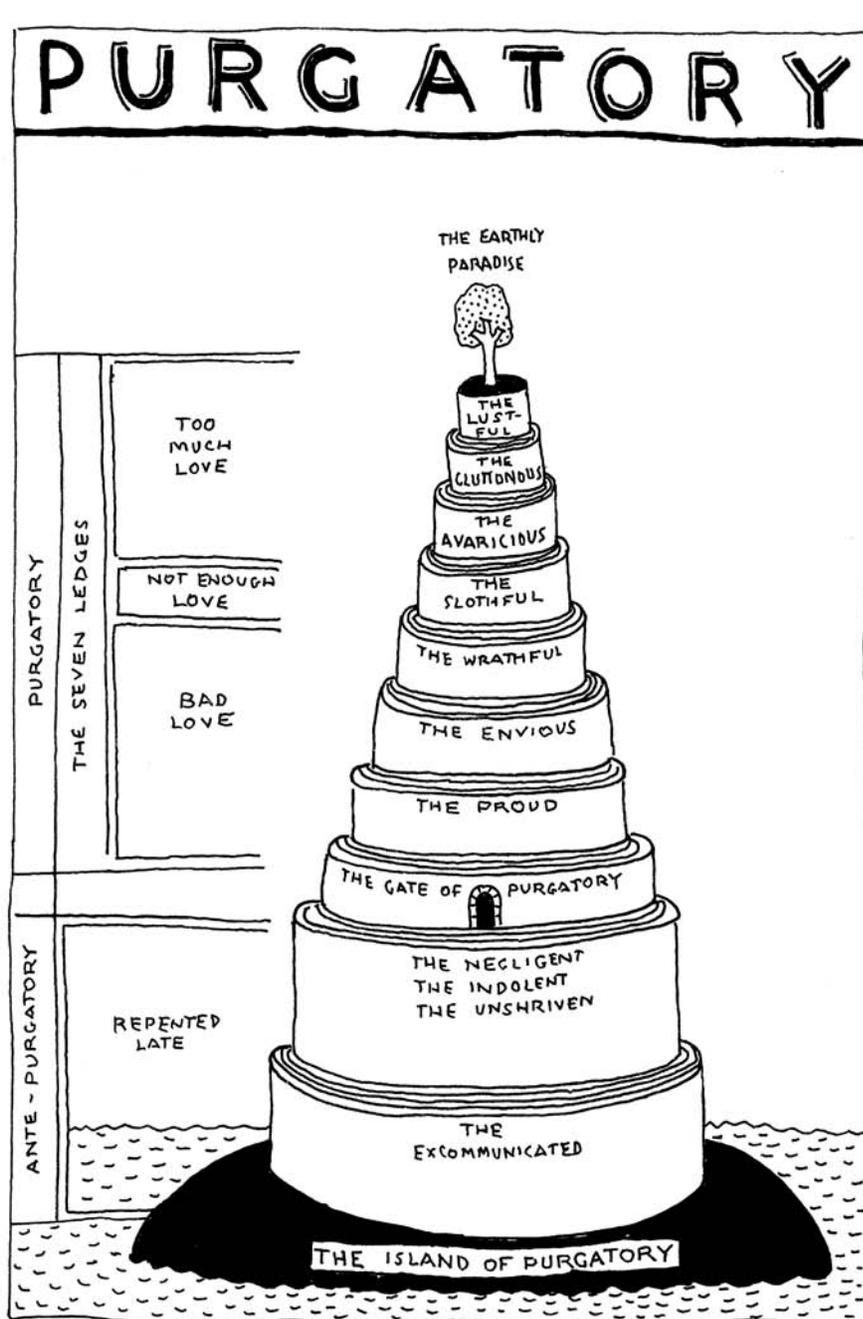


# HELL RAISER SEYMOUR vs. DANTE



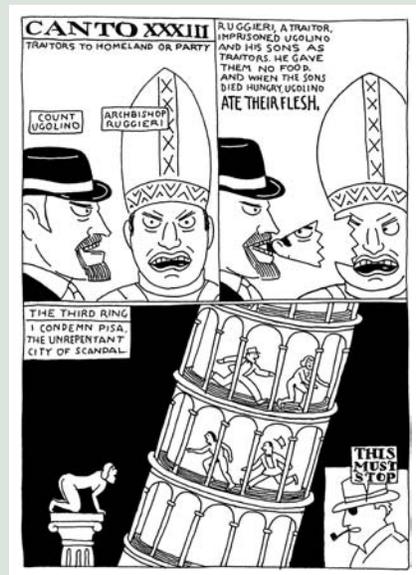
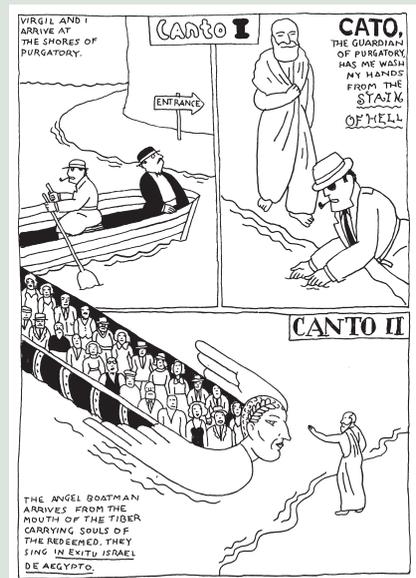
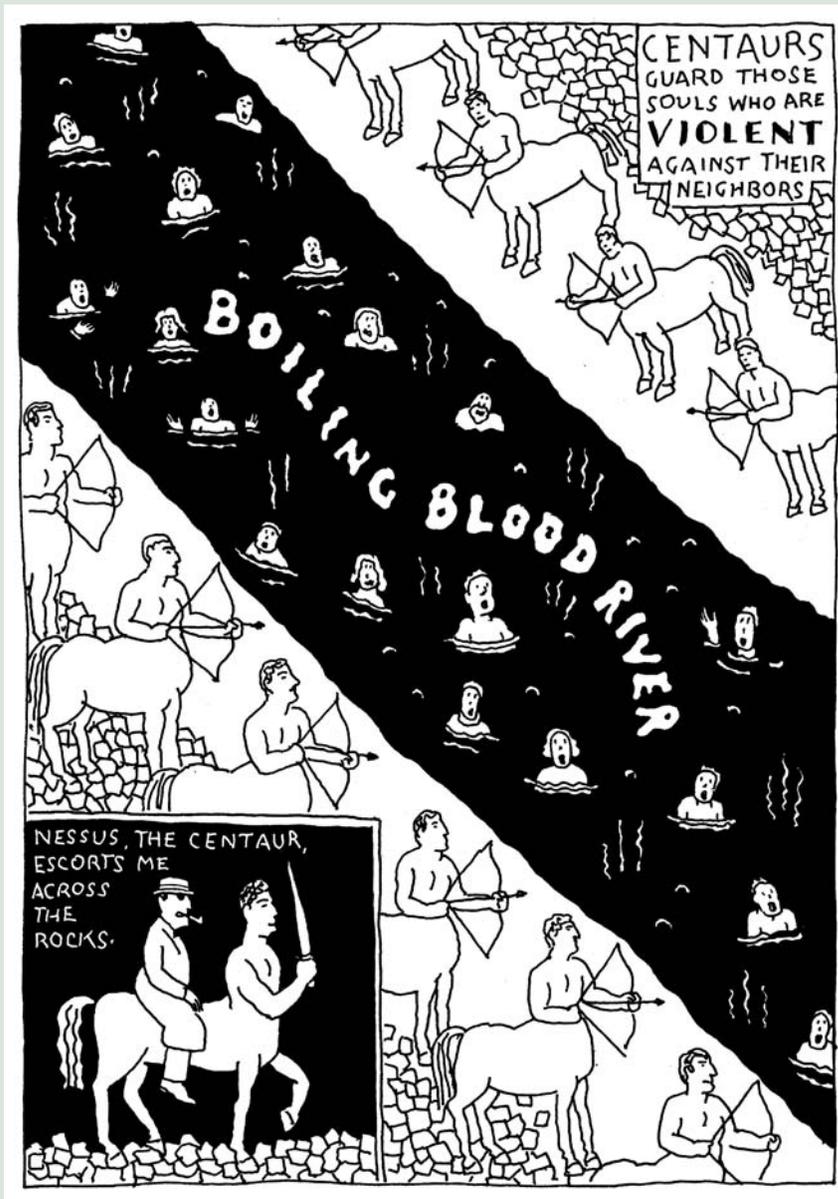
**DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY**  
adapted by SEYMOUR CHWAST  
Bloomsbury  
£16.99/\$20

DESPITE HIS COUNTLESS ARTISTIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS spanning over sixty years, notably over 30 plus children's books, Seymour Chwast (b. 1931) never created a graphic novel. He came close with the 1987 pictorial novella co-authored with Donald Barthelme titled *Sam's Bar: An American Landscape*. And he did various picture books, like his very first 1954 *The Book of Battles* and 1985 *Happy Birthday Bach*. But attempts at wedding himself to this popular, if saturated genre, has remained unrequited. Until now, that is; proving that perseverance – and talent – pays off.

With Milton Glaser, Chwast founded the pioneering Push Pin Studio and altered the practice of American illustration in the late 1950s by prefiguring postmodernism and influencing psychedelia and retro movements. A relentless media maven, he has tackled and conquered every visual art form from illustration to comics, from animation to sculpture, and more.

#### Chwast's heaven

I'd call him the "Restless Renaissance Rebel" (essentially because I like the alliteration, but he is that in spades). Chwast does not let fashion or trend govern or thwart him. He has had a consistent aesthetic but he isn't a slave to tried-and-true stylistic mannerisms. He doesn't always like to taste new food, but he will try any kind of art or design. And for many years he's dipped into the classics for fun and profit, like his hilarious condensation of *War and Peace* to one comic page, published in *The New York Times Book Review* a decade ago.



Given that he always keeps a movie running on the TV when he's working – which is most of the time – Chwast is surprisingly very well read, if only to find opportunities for adaptations. So when he read Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* to create a satirical information graphic for the Book Review that diagrammatically showed the descent into Hell, he realised this book was ready-made for his drollery.

Ergo, his first graphic novel – the first of three, including *Canterbury Tales*, which is scheduled to be published next year – is the hellarious adaptation of this fate-of-man and triumph-of-the-spirit epic illustrated in comic form, *Canto by Canto* (with a healthy helping of human excrement spread thick throughout Lucifer's kingdom).

Pushing that image aside for the moment, it is safe to say that Dante's hell is Chwast's heaven. He is never more at ease than with pen in hand, making black and white pictures (and lettering too). Imagery flows from him like blood from a freshly opened vein. Chwast is a natural comics artist and his deviously child-like scrawls are packed with inherent wit; his sketchy characterisations are pregnant with expression. In this adaptation, a noir-ish Dick Tracyesque, trench-coat wearing, pipe smoking Dante

treks through the *Inferno*, *Purgatory* and ultimately *Paradise*, led by the mustachioed Virgil in a bowler hat, spats and carrying a walking stick. Along the way he encounters the evil minotaur (in a wrestling suit) guarding the ravine of broken rocks; the well-endowed centaurs guarding the Boiling Blood River; and the teeming masses of serpents attacking the sinners. And speaking of sin, watching Dante and Virgil walk over the faces of sinners poking out of the ice of a frozen lake could be a lesson to us all.

#### Allegorical mission

We all know the pitfalls of Hell. And many of us have read (or more to the point, were forced to read, which was its own kind of hell) Dante in high school. But Chwast's version is not your grandmother's *Divine Comedy*. While it does bear a spiritual relationship to the Communist cartoonist, Art Young's *Inferno*, an adaptation set during the American Depression-era, where polemically all the devils are tormenting wicked capitalists, Chwast's is much less ham-fisted in its allegorical mission. Moreover, for those of us who can't help but contemplate the hereafter (there's got to be a better world than this, right?), Chwast's version manages to provide a little needed nod to hope.

It is tempting to suggest that this condensation is "Dante for Beginners" (or Dummies, if you prefer), but nay, 'tis not proper to speak of it as such. While this is perhaps the most accessible *Divine Comedy*, it is far from being a whittled down version. Its verbal concision and graphic reduction imbues this Dante with all the modernity necessary to be a twenty-first century tale. Chwast has succeeded in making this classic into something timely and just as vital today as it has ever been – and more engaging. As Dante's great-great grandfather, Caccia Guida says from *Purgatory* "You will be banished from your beloved Florence but you will gain fame when you return to earth." That goes double for Mr. Chwast.

—Steven Heller

