
Little Nemo in Bookland: Interview with Peter Maresca

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October 15 marks the 100th anniversary of the most celebrated comic strip in the world, Winsor McCay's "*Little Nemo in Slumberland*." To honor McCay's creation, Peter Maresca has published and edited a book of mega proportions: *Little Nemo in Slumberland - Splendid Sundays*, with full-size reproductions of the original color Sunday strips created from 1905 to 1910. Here, Maresca talks about his desire to document these rare strips before they turned to dust.

Heller: Your Winsor McCay book is one of the most ambitious, and passionate, documents of an artist's life work. Publishing McCay's original *Little Nemo in Slumberland* pages at their full Sunday broadsheet newspaper size is unprecedented.

Since you published it yourself, I'm assuming it was both too expensive and too difficult for a mainstream publisher to tackle. Why did you decide to take this on, and how did you manage to pull it off?

Maresca: I really had no choice. I could see these wonderful pages deteriorating more each year. Soon, it will be impossible to pick up the paper safely, to see this work as the creator intended it to be seen. Imagine if Van Gogh had only worked in chalk on sidewalks. Somebody would have to come in to pour on the sealant, or at least take some good photos.

And I really had no excuse; I had some money saved up, the day job was less than half time, and I had developed a modicum of Photoshop skills, enough to get the job started. Pulling it off was something else again; although once I got started, the inertia moved it along.

I had been peripherally involved with comic reprints for about 25 years, but I had almost no idea what it took to actually make a book. I relied heavily on my friendships with artists, designers, editors and other small publishers to help me fill in the blanks. Thank heaven for their patience along the way or this thing would have crashed and burned early on.

Heller: Self-publishing, even in this computer age, has a pejorative: “it’s not good enough for mainline publishers so I’ll do it myself.” But it also implies that professional publishers are unable to do ambitious things. What response have you had from the mainline publishers?

Maresca: Self-publishing started a revolution in comic books in the 1970s. The underground had content that no publisher would touch, so these drug-crazed rebels figured they could do it themselves. That opened the door to other artists and writers who were able to crack the Marvel-DC monopoly through smaller, independent publishing efforts of a less controversial nature. So it’s not so much the ambitious projects that established publishers stay away from, but anything different—anything that strays from the established patterns.

It’s true most “self-published” material is not ready for prime-time, but much is just lacking in what the publishing elite see as “commercial potential.” Actually, I had mostly positive response from editors at the major publishing companies that were shown my “Splendid Sundays” mock-up. “I sure want one of these, but there’s no way I could get something that big distributed.” The economics of marketing and distribution precludes publishing small print runs by large companies. Although there was one publisher who, upon seeing the finished book asked, “Why didn’t you bring this to me?” He did not remember turning the project down six months earlier.

Heller: I’ve heard purists say that one can only appreciate a comic page in its original state. Are you a purist?

Maresca: I’m a purist in the sense that I think it is essential to understand the comic strip in its original and intended form. It’s like seeing a wild animal with only pictures or movies. You need to see the original pages, or at least a good facsimile, to comprehend the meaning of comic strips, what that experience was about, and why the old broadsheet pages are unique. Context is important with all art, and to the extent that you can replicate the original feel, particularly with something as ephemeral as newspaper comics, you can better appreciate the work. But it’s just as important to understand the scope and breadth of an artist, or a genre for that matter, so quantities of smaller or less accurate reproductions provide essential reference. So purely speaking, I like both.

Heller: Your book is reasonably priced for an object of its scope; are you taking a bath? In other words, are you subsidizing it, or are you aware that once the cognoscenti learn of this book, it will become an instant classic that may command higher prices later on?

Maresca: I won’t be taking a bath, maybe a quick shower. Pricing is always difficult—at least that’s what I was told. Suggested prices ranged from half to almost double the current price. I knew there was a certain group that would pay just about anything, but wanted to make it accessible as well. Pricing it at a dollar a page seemed right, since the real tear sheets go for \$60-200 or more, and this number fit a standard formula for costs versus retail, so we went with that. Like anything else people like, the price will go up when out of print—some of the older, smaller reprints can cost more than this book. But again, there are only a limited number of people who will pay the premium. As far as me personally subsidizing the project, no, not if you don’t count labor.

Heller: How difficult was it to obtain these pages, then photograph or scan them so you get the quality you want in the reproduction?

Maresca: I had been collecting Nemo and other strips for about 30 years, upgrading as I went along. So I had access to the best pages, although some had some damage and all were yellowed. Scanning was done in two pieces at 600 dpi, then assembled and restored. This was the tricky part.

First a decision had to be made to go with either the pure-white proof-sheet look, or the realistic, collector, yellow-and-tape-and-all feel. Since the whole point was to recreate the original newspaper experience, I tried to imagine what a new four-color newspaper page would look like a hundred years ago. Color correction was done to display bold, but not garish colors, clear but somewhat muted lines. I scanned different blank sheets of newsprint to use as background for the strips. Restoration was limited to repairing holes, tears, stains and other degradation from time and mishandling, but natural blemishes such as blurred ink, off-register colors and imperfections in the pulp paper were left intact. Some pages took as long as 20 hours of work, the average was five or six hours from scanning to final file to get the imperfect ideal needed for the book.

Heller: Graphic novels are on the rise as a literary commodity, and comics are coming back—maybe not in newspapers but in other venues. Given that, what does Winsor McCay offer the comics artist, writer and designer of today?

Maresca: Aside from the intrinsic beauty and genius of Little Nemo, McCay's work offers a sense of history, of origins. To look at this work and realize that the comic strip as mass medium was less than a decade old, it is astounding to see the amount of innovation coming though on nearly every page. For sure, McCay was a superb draftsman, able to bring detail and perspective to his drawing in a way so few can, but he was also one of the first to comprehend the possibilities of graphic storytelling and expand those possibilities on a weekly basis. His innovative use of panels, word balloons, colors, perspective and point-of-view influenced—directly or indirectly—hundreds of comics that followed.

Those creators who have studied McCay know what one man did before there was an established formula for the medium, how he simultaneously broke rules and created new ones, and have used this heritage to expand the form further. And, to get back to the “publishing” arena, it is important to note that for all the modern accolades, *Little Nemo in Slumberland* was far from the most popular comic strip of its time.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, Second Edition and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).