

4 Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby*: How 'Gay Is the New Black' Discourses Shape the White Gay Imaginary

4.1 A GROUNDBREAKING WORK

When Howard Cruse started writing his graphic novel, *Stuck Rubber Baby*, in 1990, he was already a groundbreaking gay cartoonist or, as fellow gay cartoonist Eric Orner puts it, “a founding father – kind of the Ben Franklin of gay storytelling in comics” (Cruse and Orner 88). After he had included a gay story line in his otherwise non-gay underground comic strip, *Barefootz*, in 1976 (Cruse, *Headrack* 11), he became the editor of the first gay comics anthology, *Gay Comix*, in 1979 and publicly came out as gay in the process (Cruse, *Headrack* 28). Incidentally, it was this volume that first inspired a young Alison Bechdel to draw lesbian comics (Bechdel, *Indelible* 9). It would again be Cruse's work, this time his comic strip, *Wendel*, about a young gay man and his lover, friends, and family, which was published in *The Advocate* during the 1980s, that influenced Bechdel in her decision to create a stable cast of characters for her own comic, *Dykes To Watch Out For* (Bechdel, *Indelible* 60). The wide circulation of both *Gay Comix* and, even more so, *The Advocate* ensured that Cruse was well known among gay people in the U.S. as an out gay creator of funny, lighthearted comics about gay issues.

While *Stuck Rubber Baby* continued Cruse's focus on gay lives, it was otherwise a radical departure from his earlier work. For one, it was much, much longer than anything that Cruse had previously drawn. When Cruse first conceived of *Stuck Rubber Baby*, the graphic novel format was in its infancy. Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978), the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987) had established important precedents in reaching a wide audience with book-length comics tackling serious sub-

ject matters. However, *A Contract with God* was a collection of short stories rather than an actual ‘novel’ and both *Maus* and *Watchmen* had first been published in a much shorter, serial format and had only been compiled into books at a later point in time. Drawing a comic that was over 200 pages long and would all be published at once was almost unheard of in the early 1990s. Accordingly, Cruse encountered tremendous difficulty in securing funding for the four years it eventually took him to draw his graphic novel (cf. Cruse, “Long and Winding”). The novelty of Cruse’s endeavor with *Stuck Rubber Baby* is expressed in a last-minute publishing decision to reduce the size of the book so that its outward appearance would resemble a novel more than a comic. In a letter he wrote in 1993, Cruse traces the thought process that went into this decision, “The larger size is obviously better, but it virtually guarantees that the book will never find a place in the fiction section of most bookstores, whose shelves often cannot accommodate books of a greater height than 9-1/4”; but if it’s placed in the humor section next to *Garfield*, browsers for fiction will never discover it” (“Long and Winding”). In the mid 1990s, a graphic novel like *Stuck Rubber Baby* still had no obvious place in the literary production of its time, even though Will Eisner had already started to use the term “graphic novel” “in a more commercial context, to sell *A Contract with God* (1978) to publishers” (Chute, “Comics as Literature?” 453) in the late 1970s.

Stuck Rubber Baby’s greater length also allows for greater complexity. The story line is much richer, more textured, more serious, heavier than any of Cruse’s previous work. *Stuck Rubber Baby* is a coming-of-age story set in a fictional Southern city in the early 1960s. It tells the story of Toland Polk, who attempts to fight his growing realization that he might be gay by getting involved with Ginger Raines. While both Toland and Ginger are white, Ginger is involved in the Civil Rights Movement and leads Toland to question many of the racist and cis_hetero_sexist assumptions he grew up with. After several close brushes with deadly violence and after accidentally fathering a child with Ginger, Toland finally finds the courage to come out as gay.

Stuck Rubber Baby’s greater seriousness as compared to *Barefootz* or *Wendel* also finds its expression in the comic’s drawing style. Cruse himself remarks that he had to “shake [his] cheery approach to designing characters (clearly inappropriate for this book) that had become ingrained during [his] long tenure on the *Wendel* strip” (“Long and Winding”). He often used photographs of actual people “to short-circuit (or at least inhibit) the unconscious importation of old stylistic habits from *Wendel*” (“Long and Winding”). The result is a much less cartoony and much more realistic drawing style that uses massive amounts of cross-hatching for shading and “recreates the visual details of life in the South

during ‘Kennedytime’ with a staggering archival fidelity. [...] the painstakingly rendered parking meters, textile patterns, vintage appliances and record sleeves are woven into a meticulous backdrop that allows us to believe in and surrender to the story completely” (Bechdel, “Introduction” n. pag.).

Stuck Rubber Baby was published in 1995 by Paradox Press, a division of DC Comics. Whereas DC Comics is a large mainstream comic book publisher best known for its superhero fare, Paradox Press was expressly established to publish non-fantasy graphic novels. *Stuck Rubber Baby* was released to enormous critical acclaim, winning “Eisner and Harvey Awards in the U.S., a Comics Creators Award in the U.K., a *Luchs* Award in Germany, a 2007 *Saló del Còmic de Barcelona* Award in Spain, and a 2002 *Prix de la critique* at the Angoulême International Comics Festival in France. *The Comics Journal* also included *Stuck Rubber Baby* among its listing of the ‘100 Best Comics of the Century’” (Cruse, “About”). Despite being a critically successful release by a mainstream publishing house, *Stuck Rubber Baby* never quite became the commercial sensation that *Maus* had been and that *Fun Home* would later become. Cruse states, “When *Stuck Rubber Baby* came out, it was pretty much ignored by most of the mainstream press. It did get some reviews here and there, but, for example, it did not get a review in the *New York Times Book Review*. The book had a hard time breaking through to readers who might be interested who didn’t already know my work from the work I had done in the gay community” (Seven). Commentators have attributed this relative lack of commercial success to *Stuck Rubber Baby* being ahead of its time both with regard to its format as a graphic novel (Heller et al.) and with regard to its controversial subject matter (C. Camper and Bechdel, “Introduction”). The fact that it was re-released in 2010 with new cover art and a new introduction by Bechdel speaks to the comic’s enduring appeal and the continued resonance of its central themes with audiences fifteen years after its original publication.

4.2 A WINDOW SEAT TO HISTORY?

Before I delve into my analysis, I would like to clarify *Stuck Rubber Baby*’s relationship to real-life events because my analysis will, at time, engage with questions of historical plausibility. I would like to show from the start that historical plausibility is something the graphic novel actually tries to achieve so that it only makes sense to analyze it with respect to the historical circumstances it seeks to portray. Cruse himself has commented extensively on this question. As to the ac-