



An Interview with Artist, Author and Illustrator Miles Hyman



By [Olivia Snaije](#)
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La Lectrice/the Reader for Télérama, Miles Hyman

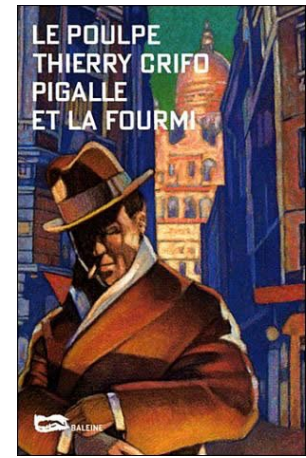
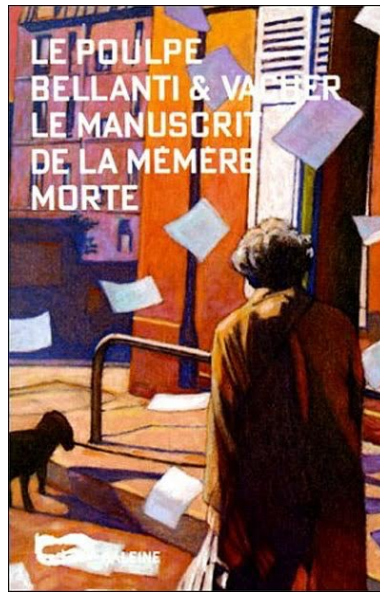
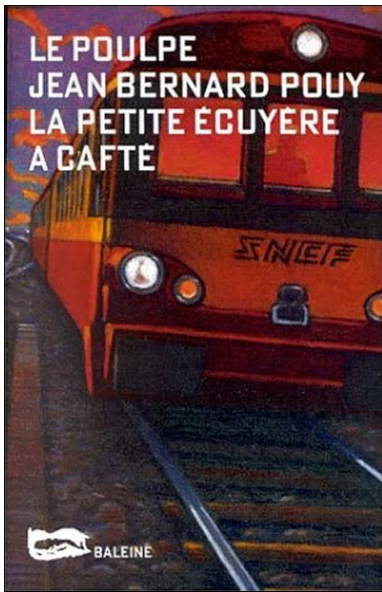
A native Vermonter, Miles Hyman lives and works in France and is an artist, author and illustrator. He creates images for book covers and magazines, and illustrates and

writes graphic novels, working on both sides of the Atlantic with publishers and the media including Gallimard, Actes Sud, Denoël, Casterman, FSG, Knopf, Viking, Chronicle Books, *Libération*, *Le Monde*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker* magazine. He is also the grandson of the author Shirley Jackson, and in 2016 he adapted her spine-chilling masterpiece, the short story "The Lottery" into graphic novel form. This month, the graphic novel *[Le Coup de Prague](#)* (The Prague Coup), he co-authored with Jean-Luc Fromental was published in French, inspired by the time Graham Greene spent in post-war Vienna researching the film script for *The Third Man*. Hyman kindly answered questions about his grandparents, his work, and his sense of aesthetic as an American living in France:

I read that both your paternal grandparents were obsessive book collectors, with an estimated 100,000 books. Did you grow up around books?

Yes indeed, and I certainly remember those books! They left quite an impression on me. There were all sorts; from scholarly works about myth, ritual and history to recent titles my grandfather would have reviewed for *The New Yorker* where he was a literary critic in the 1950s and 60s. The more mainstream literary works were mixed in with thousands of hard-boiled detective novels, as my grandparents were also great consumers of pulp fiction. They were complex people, at once scholars and vigorous mid-century bon-vivants; both loved jazz and a good cocktail party!

As a child I recall being struck by the sheer abundance of books in my grandparents' house, shelved along the walls, standing in piles here and there, covering tabletops. My grandfather passed away when I was eight years old and most of those books subsequently ended up at our house in Vermont. The important ones took up residence in the bookshelves in our living room. The others went to the old wood barn behind the house, transforming it into a dark grotto of dime-store thrillers where for years I would play surrounded by tattered paperbacks by Mickey Spillane, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, illustrated with harrowing covers that would inspire me in years to come when I had the opportunity to design covers for the French detective series *Le Poulpe*.



Although she passed away when you were three, was your grandmother, Shirley Jackson, very present in your life—was a conscious effort made for her to be remembered and her work known by her grandchildren?

My father was always fairly discrete about his mother's work, figuring that we'd discover it on our own when the time came. Most of the conversations about my grandparents would focus on their habits and traditions, their boisterous social lives and the colorful anecdotes surrounding their parties and poker games. I do remember that he would occasionally read to us from her lighter fiction, such as her domestic stories, collected in *Raising Demons* and *Life Among the Savages* -- entertaining riffs on family life, permeated with that wry 1950's humour that is so characteristic of her work. As a child, I remember being thrilled by my grandmother's short story "Charles" a fictionalized anecdote about my father's mischievous antics as a young boy. In retrospect, I expect that story appealed to me for other reasons: it seemed to open a window onto what daily interactions between my father and his own parents might have been like, and as a young person this was infinitely fascinating to me. Perhaps that short story encouraged me, very early on, to see how fiction could bring otherwise inaccessible events to life, giving them a sort of imaginary substance.

But much of Shirley Jackson's fiction is not for children and so I read most of that in high school and university where I majored in Literature . As I began to be more and more interested in the fine arts, literature remained a strong element in my work. I suppose it's not surprising that I would ultimately be drawn to illustration, a format

that would conveniently allow me to explore one passion through the exercise of another. My first books for [French comics publisher] Futuropolis were French graphic adaptations of great literary works by famous English-language authors, not to mention collaborations with living French-language writers like Marc Villard and Philippe Djian. It would take me some time, however, before I felt I was ready to illustrate my grandmother's fiction...



The Lottery, Miles Hyman

Had you always wanted to illustrate “The Lottery”?

The idea of illustrating "The Lottery" came to me years ago, but I hesitated for quite a while before taking on such an ambitious project, and did so for several reasons: every literary style has its own characteristic pace and rhythm, and my grandmother's mastery of these elements always struck me as being particularly effective -- and consequently difficult to illustrate or adapt successfully without putting those qualities in jeopardy. In the case of "The Lottery", her use of language is so meticulous, the story is so well put together that I felt that any "meddling" with the narration might alter the way the story is experienced by the reader. Jackson treads the line between reality and fantasy with tremendous dexterity; as a result I knew that a successful adaptation of my grandmother's work would depend on depicting her stories' physical events with a great deal of care. As an illustrator, I struggled for years trying to find the right balance between what my images could show and what needed to remain hidden in order for the ambiguous nature of her writing to remain effective.

As I started to work on graphic novel adaptations of books like Jim Thompson's *Savage Night* and James Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia*, I began to see how "The Lottery"

might work very nicely as a graphic novel. This format allows for a tension and proximity with the action of a story that enhances the narrative's dramatic qualities considerably, and by making careful use of composition and lighting I felt I would be able to avoid giving away too much of the story's secrets, the narrative elements that make the infamous ending so powerful.



The Lottery, Miles Hyman

Was this the first graphic novel you adapted on your own? Did it make you want to try your hand at writing?

Indeed "The Lottery" was my first "solo" adaptation of a work of fiction and I greatly enjoyed myself in the process. This project made me want to write my own script for a graphic novel and I've started several projects since then that I hope will be completed in the months and years to come. This being said, I would always want to alternate between adaptations of existing works and original projects of my own. I find the exercise of adapting a short story or novel into this unusual visual format we call "comics" infinitely stimulating, and wouldn't want to set that aside for anything in the world.

How do you go about the research for your comic books, does it involve a lot of reading? Could you give a few examples of books that you have worked on and the process?

The most important research in any adaptation is the original text, and ideally I feel that knowing that original work by heart is important. I tend to like novels that use the full palette of literary tools available to a writer, fiction where the main storyline

lays atop a foundation of abstract themes and symbols. It is important that the images resonate as fully as possible with the literary style they are meant to illustrate. For instance, in the case of James Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia* I felt that the novel explores (and implicitly deplores) post-war America's relationship to female beauty, idealized on the one hand, victimized on the other. And in much the same way as a writer would use a recurring theme in fiction, I try to do the same with my drawings. For example, Betty Short's ghastly "smile" in death becomes a visual leitmotif at specific points of the graphic novel adaptation. Throughout our book we see a recurring presence of conspicuously smiling women—characters, billboards, etc.—a haunting, recurring trope that stands in ironic juxtaposition to the brutality of this violent culture, while at the same time reminding us of Bleichert's growing obsession with the young victim and her murderer.

But besides reading and re-reading the books my adaptations are based on, as well as other books by the same author, I also spend considerable time doing visual research—consulting archives, watching films that might evoke the same places, periods or atmospheres, searching out old documents and photographs that might give added density and subtlety to my images.



Le Dahlia Noir by Miles Hyman, Matz & David Fincher Rivages/Casterman/Noir

You have just illustrated a comic book about Graham Greene when he was researching his screenplay for *The Third Man*. Did you read much of Greene's work as part of your research or were there other books involved as well?

I read Graham Greene during my studies, and I went back and read several of his books while preparing for *Le Coup de Prague*; books like *Our Man in Havana*, *The End of the Affair*, etc. Having learned a bit more about Greene's life and

preoccupations (thanks to long conversations with Jean-Luc Fromental who wrote the masterful script for *Le Coup de Prague*) I was able to re-read his work with renewed interest, as his books contain powerful autobiographical elements. Understanding Greene is key to understanding of *The Third Man*, both the screenplay and the corresponding novella.

But I also watched several times Carol Reed's film *The Third Man*, with the understanding that Greene had told a very personal tale through the film's screenplay. Of course I knew that the visual landscape of *The Third Man* –a monument of the Film Noir genre, which I encourage everyone to see at least once— would necessarily be referenced throughout our graphic novel. Even if there are only a few direct graphic allusions to that film in our book, I wanted the reader to feel that Greene was living a visual experience in *Le Coup de Prague* that would be reflected in the film he was in the process of writing during that 1948 stay in bombed-out Vienna.

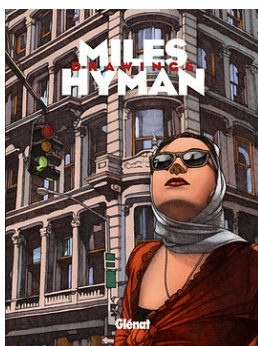
You mentioned in an interview that your first projects in France were illustrating John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. What was it like as a relative newcomer to adapt English-language texts that had been translated into French?

I was careful to choose novels that had been faithfully translated –that was an important consideration from the outset. It was essential for me to know that the spirit of those literary works was intact. The translation of *Manhattan Transfer* was of perfectly good quality and I felt that my graphic adaptation was built on a solid text.

The Secret Agent presented an interested challenge, however, and much of that has to do with the way Conrad wrote and how his particular style translates into French or into any language. As a Polish immigrant writing in his third (and by some accounts his fourth) language, Conrad's use of English is unique; brilliant of course, there's no debate about his mastery of English, but there is a very particular cadence to his phrasing and something overly formal about his vocabulary that makes his writing unlike any other I can think of.

This very slight stiffness in Conrad's prose makes up part of the writer's style and can't be "fixed" in translation without removing part of what makes his work so recognizable. I also believe that this unusual quality allows for much of the novel's dark, ironic humour to succeed as well. So as I was preparing my adaptation I couldn't help but feel that, in the case of the original Gallimard translation, this very slight stiffness had been altered to make the prose seem more fluid, more comfortable, more natural. This slight "improvement" took away some of the awkward charm and magic of Conrad's original text.

So I was thrilled to learn, as the project began to take form, that a new translation of *The Secret Agent* was about to be published; an entirely new French version of the novel for the Pléiade edition of Conrad's works by translator Sylvère Monod. This second translation was careful to capture that unusual, slightly offbeat music that permeates Conrad's writing, and so I felt that my graphic adaptation had at last found its proper translation and the project was able to move forward thanks to Monod's brilliant new French version of Conrad's novel!



Did you find that your sense of aesthetic was different from a European one when you first arrived, and how has your aesthetic evolved living here?

That was certainly true. From the time I enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts to my first illustration projects, it was clear that the aesthetic culture that had influenced me was quite different than that of my peers. I was mostly self-taught, having spent most of my time since high-school studying literature but also music, architecture and archaeology (all of which ended up playing roles in my illustration work). As a young artist from Vermont I spent the first ten years of my professional life working

in Europe and my style certainly evolved and changed enormously during that period. Then I moved to Los Angeles where I spent most of the 1990s, working regularly for US clients which allowed the pendulum to swing back to what one might call a more "North-American" aesthetic. However during those years in California I remained in close contact with French and European clients and this meant that I continued to develop a sort of hybrid, trans-Atlantic approach to illustration.

Having now been back in France since 2002 I can say that all of those experiences have shaped my current style, and continue to do so. I like to think that my aesthetic approach continues to progress and evolve, and that it will do so indefinitely.

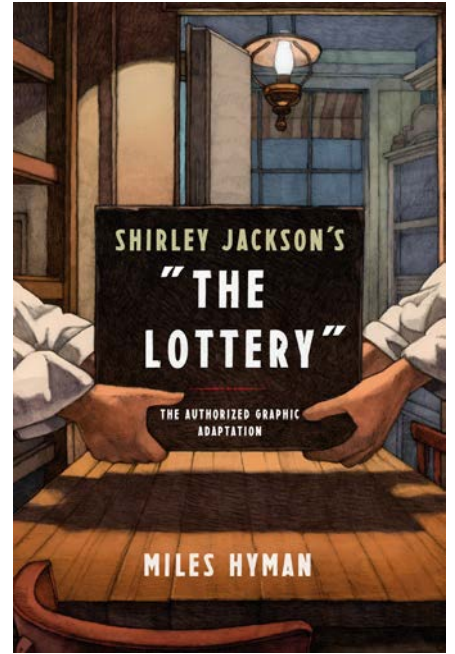
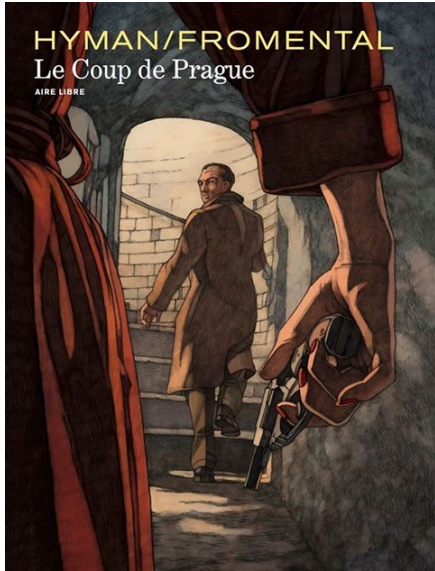
For authors and artists who write and illustrate comic books, France and Belgium are the place to be. Do you feel your career would have been very different had you remained in the US?

That's almost certainly the case, yes. In fact I imagine that, had I stayed in the United States, my work would probably have taken on a very different form altogether, but I can only guess what that might be. In the most general sense I tend to find work in the US more tightly structured, less interested in an illustrator's "voice" than in their technique and skill. Creatives in France tend generally to be more drawn to individual creativity, style and the ability to address original topics with a unique voice. But I try to avoid making generalities.

In some ways the question of where one works is less and less important as publishing becomes increasingly trans-national. I've noticed that the borders between French and American comics are becoming more porous as a result. Like many of my European peers, I follow US comics with great interest and admiration. Authors like Chris Ware, Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, Art Spiegelman, or even newer artists like Emil Ferris are powerful influences on European artists.

Another factor worth mentioning is the intensely social nature of our profession here in Europe where, between gallery exhibits, festivals and book-signings, authors and artists are regularly in personal contact with one another, not to mention with their readers. I find this face-to-face exchange quite refreshing and stimulating, and it

contributes to a far more integral part of our professional lives here in France, and Europe in general.



Olivia Snajje

Olivia is a journalist and editor and manages the editorial content for Bookwitty in English. She is based in Paris.

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