

MAKING COMICS

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One browsing through the pages of Linda Barry’s *Making Comics* (2014) will be mesmerised at the book’s format and content and, at the same time, will be invited to step outside his or her flesh and blood body and become reinvented through lines or sticks which, at a certain point, they will become “live wires” (Barry, 2014: 30-31). At first glance, the (comics) book might not transmit the craving wish to read it from cover to cover, especially if the readers have nothing to do with drawing or the genre of comics. Yet, comics have a long history, specialists and practitioners supporting the multi-faceted tenets of this medium: multisensory, entertaining, educational, humorous, cinematic, witty, narrative, with much dedicated literature. In other words, take a moment to pause and indirectly look through the author’s pages and artwork.

The reader will find a multimodal literacy lesson in Barry’s pages, where she speaks about “hearing” the first line of the comics panel, she instructs the readership to fold the paper into a “16 panel page with caption areas” and recollects “the floating feeling making lines on paper” as a child (Barry, 2019, Preface). Mills and Unsworth (2017) use this vehicle for the communication of the different modes of understanding a written text, including speech, gesture, written language, music, mathematical notation, drawings, photographic images, or moving digital images. The textual-visual interaction is omnipresent in the book (course book, to be more precise) through constant challenges launched towards the readers (mainly her students) to grab a pencil and more or less coarsely start drawing simple representations.

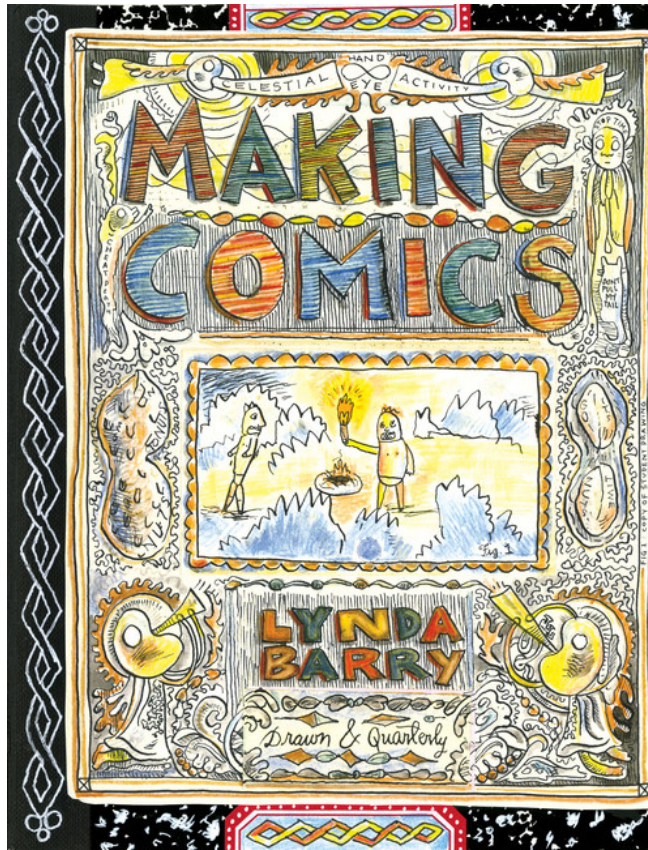


Fig. 1 *Making Comics*, Lynda Barry (front cover)

This undissimulated dialogic communication launched towards the book's readers clearly emerges from the coloured pages with hardly a white spot, entirely doomed to pigmentation, on which the textual layer nests, often in free, shapeless format, as the writer is not in favour of using speech bubbles, the essential element of a comic strip. Actually, the comics' identifiable features – dialogue balloons, sequenced panels, gutters, captions, onomatopoeia – are almost totally effaced, partly because it is a pedagogical publication and information ought to be transmitted as accurate as expected, and partly because of Barry's personal *uni*-verse of comic-making. The visual and the scenic aspect of the book rely on iconic signs which, regardless of their simple appearance, trigger multiple interpretations.

The honest confession offered by the cartoonist who revealed starting drawing in order to meet lines and stories she had possessed since childhood, englobes her professional creed in a unique manner. It seems this is her lifetime job and, undeniably, she could not have done anything else. Sketching and drawing are the two coordinates which decide on proportions, colour, shapes and figures, all enlivened by the art weapons to be at hand before opening this guide: pens, pencils, brush pens used for creation. The drawings emerging from these instruments help Barry launch a continuous invitation to open communication as these images express – through anthropomorphised and zoomorphised shapes – ideas, inner thoughts, feelings, or a range of emotions.

Referring to human representations, McCloud (2006: 61) outlined the same common strategy, saying that “a few lines is all it takes” to “create a human being”.

Departing from this instructional advice to practitioners, we can no longer prolong our curiosity and the most natural enquiry emerges: *Who is, actually, Lynda Barry?* She is a MacArthur award winning artist who teaches Interdisciplinary Creativity at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; also a painter, cartoonist, illustrator, writer, playwright, inspirational speaker, and the list may continue. *Making Comics* (two Eisner Awards) was released in 2019 and, together with *What It Is* (Eisner Award for Best Reality Based Graphic Novel and R. R. Donnelly Award for literary achievement) *Picture This* and *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*, critics claim that these four graphic novels are highly appreciated for their instructional and practical purpose. Barry is the creator of *Ernie Pook's Comeek*, an underground comic running for three decades, first published in 1979 and loosely based on the author's childhood where playtime meant very often ignoring mother's calls to leave the playground and come home. Drawn and Quarterly is the long-time publisher of the four bestselling books and of Barry's comic strips, reissued as *The Greatest of Marlys*. The noodle-handed girl with ponytails not only does she embody the western child in the 70s, but she also resembles every child who creates playful moments out of nothing.

Lynda Barry's hand-drawn course *Making Comics* or "the self-help book of the year" according to The New York Times (2019, last cover) is a syllabus for students who want to indulge in idiosyncratic activities pertaining to comic strip making in the most natural way. Perhaps the very word 'syllabus' brings to mind the rigour and stiffness from scholastic years, which is definitely not the case here, as the author conveys art-based information using a 'mild' narrative voice (one can almost imagine her voice sound) in order to arise her students' curiosity and actively engage them.

Making Comics – an (un)common practice course on art and not only, which is well worth a browse if not indulging in a thorough reading experience (What a loss!) is waiting for its readership. You do not need (unless you want to) a sketch board and a pencil, simply (be) open to 'a different sort of interaction with text' (Kirtley, Garcia & Carlson, 2020: 13), to autobiographical contemplations sustained by vivid drawings, an extension of Lynda Barry's (2019: 14) own identity, overtly adding that "making comics saved me many times".

Lynda BARRY, (2019), *Making Comics*,
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