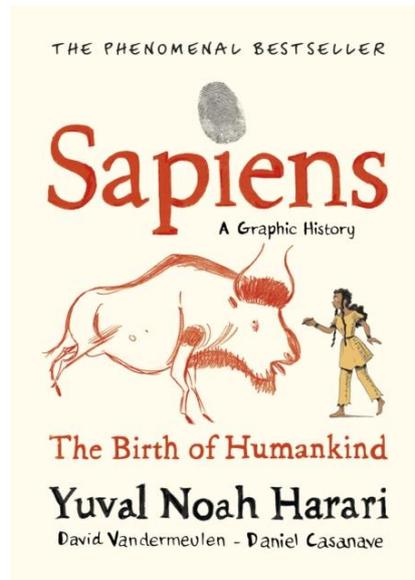




Sapiens: A Graphic History by Yuval Noah Harari, David Vandermeulen & Daniel Casanave

[Non-Fiction]



In which I write about some advantages of comics in education, including their role as *aides-memoire*.

SAPIENS examines the development of our singular species through its Cognitive, Agricultural and Scientific Revolutions from small bands of independent, multi-skilled hunter-gatherers to interdependent specialists cooperating in our millions by inventing shared fictions like laws, myths and money – essentially our skill at telling stories.

I consider its original prose the most important non-fiction I've ever read – thrice.

Harari is a consummate, convivial storyteller, bringing order and context to the complex with a lot of lateral thinking and deftly plucked comparisons in order to illuminate what could otherwise remain opaque. Here he is joined by collaborators Vandermeulen and Casanave in transforming SAPIENS into an even richer entertainment with *additional* insights, using properties and devices unique to comics. Already astonishingly accessible given the density of ideas, a wall of prose remains an indigestible wall of prose to so very many, so how does the medium of comics help learning?

Firstly, giving physical room to a single sentence allows it to linger, to breathe; to be absorbed.



When set apart within the pictorial space which a comics panel affords, that sentence commands even more attention. And when a longer, complex sequence of observations, extrapolations, arguments and conclusions are bound into a coherent sequence of images, readers can focus on each element, follow the logic, then digest the whole before moving on.

Furthermore, making that sequence visually distinctive from others renders it both more memorable (therefore invaluable!) and easily identifiable for future reference. Take the Green Monkeys scampering in reaction to their own warnings, respectively, of an eagle overhead or a lion on the ground. The initial point made is that humans aren't the only animal with a vocalised language. 20 pages later Harari observes that humans aren't unique in telling porky pies, either: some Green Monkeys have learned to shriek "Watch out a lion!" to send their fellows scampering up a tree and leave the liar free to wolf down food left lying on the ground. It's far, far easier to find the first sequence again if you're looking for monkeys rather than the word 'monkey' within hundreds of pages of prose text; it's even handier for more complex concepts like shared fictions which weave their way through *Sapiens'* narrative. We'll be returning to that in a second!

Meanwhile, more quick advantages to comics: images can make a succinct point which the prose no longer has to belabour; images can not merely illustrate but also illuminate ideas; and they can act as demonstrations, as in the entirety of Scott McCloud's brilliant UNDERSTANDING COMICS comic. In *SAPIENS*, for example, retailers and customers down a multicultural market begin communicating not in words but in icons, effectively demonstrating that pictures are a universal language.



The medium of comics is perfect for such parallel narratives which can be dropped in visually without impeding the flow of the primary thread, including maps (more maps everywhere, please!), and a game of Top Trumps. Yes, absent from the original prose is a spread of Top Trump cards so we can compare *Homo Sapiens'* vital stats at a glance with those of our fellow Hominins – whose extinction affords the opportunity for a few choice speculations about how we might have viewed the world politically and religiously had we not killed all our cousins. Along with most of the world's megafauna.

From parallel narratives to alternative narratives: instead of Harari addressing us directly throughout in the prose, he's found here in conversation with an array of experts both real and imagined. One witty example is the police Detective gathering evidence with which to convict *Homo Sapiens* of the wholesale slaughter of the world's most massive animals as it moved across the map. This variety of speakers further breaks up the narrative into those bite-size chunks which are again more easily referred to later: "Oh, I remember who narrated that bit: I'll flick back and look out for her!" That a clearly imaginary superhero is our guide through shared fictions is the icing on the proverbial cake.