“You can write anything graphically,” Jennifer Murvin told us. And she is in a position to know. Not only does she write what she calls “graphic narratives” herself, she teaches a course on them at Missouri State University—a situation that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. But both popular and scholarly interest in graphic literature are exploding like the superhero battles that rage across some of its pages. Missouri is right at the forefront of this creative surge.

For instance, Missouri creators are...

- Writing “scripts” that are then illustrated by artists—like Patricia C. McKissack of St. Louis, award-winning writer of children’s books, who together with her husband Frederick L. McKissack, Jr. and illustrator Randy DuBurke published her first graphic novel this year: Best Shot in the West, the true story of African-American cowboy Nat Love.

- Illustrating the scripts of writers—like Gerry Kissell of Springfield, web and marketing designer, painter, sculptor, comic book artist—and former U.S. Army combat medic, which served him well for Code Word: Geronimo, a 2011 graphic novel version of what was known at that time about the Osama Bin Laden commando raid, written by retired Marine Captain Dale Dye and his wife, Julia.

- Drawing the art for mainstream comics—like Terry Beatty, the Kansas City cartoonist who in January 2012 became the artist for the Sunday episodes of King Features’ classic strip, The Phantom.

- Having their text-only novels converted into graphic novels—like Laurell K. Hamilton of St. Louis, whose first three books in her New York Times-bestselling Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter series have been transformed by Marvel Comics.

- Pioneering the use of comics in pre-college classrooms—like Chris Wilson, computer and technology teacher at the John Thomas School of Discovery in the Nixa Public School District, who not only uses comics extensively in his own teaching but is nationally recognized as an authority as a public speaker and “editor-in-geek” of his website resource for educators, The Graphic Classroom.
Doing the whole shebang—writing and drawing the entire work—like Kevin Huizenga of St. Louis, whose renown is growing beyond national into international for what the Washington Post calls his “poetic explorations of the profound,” all through ordinary events like unloading groceries, watching a sunset, and struggling with insomnia. In this passage from Ganges #4, published by Fantagraphics in 2011, suburban dad Glenn Ganges has been thinking that it “seems like five million years since I crawled into bed”—haunted by a book about geologists he read earlier that evening:

It’s no accident that our examples range through so many different types of stories: historical adventure, fact-based speculation, costumed crimefighting, fantasy/horror, and tales of daily life. Yet among today’s burgeoning graphic narratives, there is much more.

“We now have graphic essays, graphic short stories, graphic journalism,” said Jen. “In 2009, R. Crumb did a graphic Book of Genesis. There are graphic memoirs like Harvey Pekar’s American Splendor. I think of graphic narrative as a medium, a way of communicating. It is sequential pictures put together to create meaning. You can do anything with it.”

Jen calls her course “Introduction to the Graphic Narrative.” The term “graphic novel,” although it has become widespread since it first surfaced in 1964, does not cover the variety of work being created.

“I use the term ‘graphic literature,’ or just ‘graphic lit,’” said Cliff Froehlich, director of Cinema St. Louis, who writes about the graphic lit scene in St. Louis. “You could call it ‘comics’ too, but that’s always been a misnomer, because that implies it’s always funny.”

Also, the relationship between comics, comic books, and graphic novels is fluid. Some graphic novels do begin life as full-blown books. However, some begin as comic books or comic strips. Many strips, whether printed in newspapers or published only on the internet, tell an ongoing story that is later collected into books. Comic books, usually appearing once a month, tell ongoing stories that have been planned out by their creators to fill a set number of issues to complete a full tale. Such story arcs are often collected into
books, just as Charles Dickens first published his novels in monthly installments. Graphic lit scholar Douglas Wolk put it this way: “What’s the difference between ‘comics’ and ‘graphic novels’? The binding.”

Ensembles and soloists

Though most text-only literature has one author or at most two co-authors, it is not unusual for graphic lit to be created by an entire collaborative team of writer, penciller, inker, colorist, and letterer.

“This system evolved out of the early days of comics, when the goal was to quickly crank out as much as possible,” said Cliff. “Pencillers literally pencil the art. Somebody else comes behind them and does the inking. This can be a transformative process—I’ve seen the same pencils inked by two different people, and the result has an entirely different aspect. Coloring used to be done by hand; it’s all done on computers nowadays. Letterers physically write the words for the word balloons and captions.”

Even in the earliest commercial days, though, “there was always precedent for a comic artist working solo,” Cliff said. “At least at the outset of every strip, there would be one person doing everything. This continued with the underground comics of the ‘60s, which migrated into what are known now as ‘alternative’ comics.”

A Missouri creator who usually works solo is Matt Kindt. A resident of St. Louis suburb Webster Groves, he is one of our state’s most published makers of graphic narratives.

“When I start a new work, I think, how can I tell my story in a way that hasn’t been told before?” he told us. “That’s easier to do in a graphic novel, because there are less of them. People haven’t explored the medium as much as novels or movies. There’s more unexplored territory as to how to tell a story.”

We talked in depth with Matt, Jen, and three other Missouri graphic storytellers: Brian Rhodes of Cape Girardeau, who creates a weekly webcomic, and the team of Clifford Shull of Richmond and Robert Scott Driskell of North Kansas City, who dream of publishing a graphic novel trilogy. They gave us insights on how they create their new realities in the world of graphic literature.

Matt Kindt

A boy who can’t stop growing and ends up as tall as a skyscraper. A photo editor who switches back and forth between two realities—one of them terrifying—every time he falls asleep. A female pirate whose story parallels that of a World War II spy. They come to life in the thoughtful, surprising, and poignant narratives of Matt Kindt.

“I like to take pulp concepts,” Matt said, “and find something in there that’s unique. The idea of a giant man is ridiculous on the surface, but what would it really be like to live that way? Spies—what would it be like to be a single mother and a spy in World War II? I want my readers to read something they’ve never thought of before.”

Born near Buffalo, New York, Matt moved to Missouri when he was 6 and grew up in Lexington, St. Louis, and Webster Groves. He graduated from Webster University, where he met his wife. The couple stayed and are raising their daughter in Webster Groves. “My job is the kind you can do anywhere.” He also teaches comics creation at Webster University and has taught at Star Clipper Comics and COCA Center of Creative Arts in University City.
Unlike the usual route of breaking into publication with comic strips or comic books, Matt’s first commercially published work was a full-blown graphic novel—*Pistolwhip*, which he co-created with Jason Hall, published in 2001 by Top Shelf Productions. He had, however, been self-publishing long before that through “mini-comics.” These are printed in small runs at a photocopying shop, folded and stapled by hand, and distributed in the mail, at comics conventions, and through local comics shops.

“I did about 600 pages of minicomics first,” Matt said. “I was just trying to go through the process and figure it out. I didn’t want to approach a publisher until I felt I was ready.”

Now, he said, “Comics are paying the bills. It was a slow process. Each book sold better than the last as I built up an audience. At some point, the publishers said, ‘We already know we’re going to sell this many so we can give you this much of an advance.’ I’m writing for DC Comics, too [on their *Frankenstein Agent of S.H.A.D.E.* series]. I still do illustration work if I like the project. I teach because I think it’s important to teach kids comics.”

Last May, Matt embarked on his first foray into comic books—*Mind MGMT*, published by Dark Horse Comics. In 24 pages each month, a journalist is enmeshed in “weaponized psychics, hypnotic advertising, talking dolphins, and seemingly immortal pursuers.” Matt is enthusiastic about the different experience that a monthly schedule provides. “For a graphic novel,” he said, “I have an outline and I do the whole book. Then I read it all in one sitting, see how it works, and go back to make any changes. For *Mind MGMT*, though, I’m doing it in pieces. There is a four-month gap between when I write an issue and when it comes out in stores. By that time, my plan may be different because I’ve thought about it for a few months. It’s a riskier way to write. This is a three-year project and I know what that 36th issue is going to be, but I may be a different person by then.

“It’s the same thing with the reader. You’re thinking about the story for longer than the half hour it takes to read it—wondering what will happen, trying to predict. With one big book, you would read it and be done. You get a little more attached to a work when you’re thinking about it over the course of a year. It gets you hooked to come back.”

**Where to find Matt’s work**

*Mind MGMT* is available in comics shops and bookstores. Matt’s novels are available in bookstores and online including from his own website, [mattkindt.com](http://mattkindt.com). They include *Pistolwhip, Mephisto and the Empty Box, The Yellow Menace, Super Spy, Two Sisters, Revolver, The Tooth*, and *3 Story: The Secret History of the Giant Man.*

**Matt recommends**


- *The Sixth Gun* – by writer Brian Hurtt and artist Cullen Bunn of St. Louis, an ongoing monthly comic book, collected so far into three volumes; Oni Press. “A supernatural western—pulp fun stuff!” The first issue was distributed for free; here is [a downloadable PDF](http://mattkindt.com/).
Jennifer Murvin

Thirteen-year-old Johnny is fed up with his grandfather’s constant stories about their Chickasaw heritage. Then he’s mysteriously blasted into a time travel adventure to live firsthand the Chickasaw Nation’s history. Like in Quantum Leap, Johnny finds himself assuming the identity of people in the past—a tribal leader’s son, a Confederate soldier, and even his own great-grandfather, as he learns about the Chickasaws’ triumphs and their unconquerable spirit even through tragedy.

Jennifer Murvin created Johnny’s Chickasaw Adventures right out of college with Layne Morgan Media, a small press in Springfield (the company has since switched gears into video games). The series was made for the Chickasaw Nation as a project for educating their children. Jen wrote the scripts; the artist was Tom Lyle of DC Comics and Marvel Comics. The first book in the 12-book series, The Journey Begins, was a finalist in the Independent Publisher Book Awards in 2005 for multi-cultural young adult fiction. “Pretty amazing for a little comic book!” she remembers.

Jen’s second series was Stories of the Saints with Springfield’s Arcadius Press (now defunct). For each saint, Jen decided to focus on a few key incidents rather than cover a lifetime in 18 pages. To hook her young readers, she used dramatic storytelling techniques. St. Patrick’s story, for instance, begins as the young man desperately races to reach a ship to escape Ireland where he has been a slave for six years. He then tells the sympathetic sailors his story in flashback. “It was very cool that the books were all drawn by different artists, so each book had a very different look,” Jen said.

Jen’s most recent narrative was Pharoah Hatshepsut, a historically informed fiction about how Egypt’s only female pharaoh rose to power, created in 2009 for McGraw-Hill’s World History Ink series.

Originally from Los Angeles, Jen received her Master of Arts in English from Missouri State University in 2008 and joined the faculty as a full-time instructor in 2009. Along with teaching six courses in the English department, she is editing the 2014 edition of the department’s annual journal, Moon City Review. “Every year we publish a different themed journal reflecting the interests of that year’s editor. Mine will be on graphic narratives.” Also, she is mulling over a possible collaboration with the university’s art department to work with students on a graphic piece about the history of downtown Springfield.

Jen’s “Introduction to the Graphic Narrative” is a writing course. “Everyone writes a script, either a graphic short story or a graphic essay. After we workshop it, the student takes the final script to an artist.” Jen knows from having written more than 30 comic books exactly how that process works.

“The scripting includes full panel descriptions, with the number and layout of panels, scene descriptions, setting, body positioning, expressions, and at times even colors,” she told us. “You name it, we try to write it to guide the artist.”
“What's so fun and surprising about this medium is that the artists will often put their own ideas into the book, changing things or doing something they find would really enhance the moment or the story in some way. Getting the pencils back from the artist was always the most exciting day of the process!”

Where to find Jen's work
Volumes 1 through 7 of Chickasaw Adventures are sold in their original comic book format on the Chickasaw Nation's website. Pharaoh Hatshepsut is available from McGraw-Hill. Used copies of Jen's works, including the graphic novel collected versions, show up online on sites like Amazon Marketplace, Alibris, and eBay.

Jen recommends
▪ City of Glass – Adapted in 1994 by Paul Karasik and David Mazzacchelli from the original 1985 novel by Paul Auster, exploring identity, reality, and madness under the guise of detective fiction.

Brian Rhodes
Little does Mike know that going to the unemployment office after he’s been fired from his job as a TV and bridge repairman is going to revolutionize his life. But standing in line with him is a ninja named Stu. It’s the beginning of a firm friendship and wild adventures updated every Tuesday on the internet in the webcomic Mike and the Ninja.

As Brian Rhodes chronicles the exploits of Mike, Stu, their allies such as the enigmatic “delivery girl” Renee, and their nemeses such as the Hired Goon Association, he gleefully plays with science fiction and action/adventure tropes in stories that are exciting, funny, and warmhearted.

Brian is the full-time webmaster of Southeast Missouri State University, his alma mater. He also freelances billboards and illustrations, and does free web work for groups such as Cape Comic Con. He grew up in the area, in New Wells, a tiny town 20 miles north of Cape Girardeau.

Mike and Stu sprang into life when Brian was a sophomore in high school, but for several years they often languished in cyber limbo, sometimes for months at a time, as Brian dealt with priorities such as college.

In 2008, Brian took up the series in earnest. “At the time, I was really into the study of webcomics as a viable source of income. I put together a plan for myself, and decided I would pick up Mike and the Ninja again,” he said. “The income idea hasn’t worked out, but that’s okay, because I enjoy just making the comic.”

Mike and the Ninja does sometimes appear in print, when Brian self-publishes the collected pages as books using the print-on-demand service Lulu. “You just upload a PDF of the interior of your book and a separate PDF of the cover, and put a price on it. You can print one book at a time. It’s perfect for a small operation like mine.”

Brian draws each week’s full page of panels by hand, first in pencil and then in ink. He scans the art, saves it as a jpg, and uploads it to his website.
The adventure on which Mike and Stu are currently embarked will be their last. Next summer, Brian is bringing the series to a natural finale. There will then be three story arcs, each collected into a book.

Brian has several ideas for where to go afterwards. “An action/adventure space drama with superheroes. Something with talking animals—I’ve had pets my whole life. A comic that involves dodgeball—when I was in high school I was a big dodgeball player.”

Brian says that despite the inevitable learning-curve flaws of Mike and the Ninja, he is very proud of it.

“I can go back and read the first two books and thoroughly enjoy them. They’re fun, they’re humorous, thoughtful at times, the stories flow nicely, the artwork gets better later on—there’s definitely a lot there to appreciate, as the creator or as a reader,” he wrote in his blog. But he wants to end the series “at a creative high, rather than dragging it out” and move on, using all his accrued experience.

“At first I was just going week to week,” he remembers. “It turned out okay, but for future projects I’m going to have a plan. That’s definitely one of the things I’ve learned!”

Where to find Brian’s work
His website, mikeandtheninja.com, for both the weekly updates and the collected volumes.

Brian recommends
• How to Make Webcomics – book by Brad Guigar, Dave Kellett, Scott Kurtz, and Kris Straub; Image Comics, 2008. “This was my bible. Any time I needed advice, I went to this book.”

• Evil Inc. – daily webcomic by Brad Guigar about a group of supervillains who have started a corporation so they can carry out evil legally. There are six collected volumes of “annual reports.”
Clifford Shull and Robert Scott Driskell

“The Year is 2056, only 10 years after the Tech Wars…. Hard times have engulfed the world…. Troy Gillus, an ex-mercenary tormented by his past, has been contracted to stop a highly intelligent and equally deadly android created by Dr. Rowin, the same doctor who first saved humanity and then nearly destroyed it.”

This is the concept of Angel of Mercy, a graphic novel series that doesn’t exist yet. But there is no doubt it will, say Clifford Shull and Scott Driskell, the boyhood friends who have dreamed up this tale that will probe concepts of faith and morality in the context of dystopian science fiction.

“We really want to create something relevant,” said Scott. “Graphic lit is so young as an art form that a lot of people don’t get that it can be intelligent, emotive, and meaningful. Sometimes you want to rip your hair out. ‘No, this isn’t ‘Comic Number Three,’ it’s more than that!”

“We are creating familiar characters using archetypes that can be expanded upon,” said Cliff. “Not to give too much away, but the archetypes we chose are the soldier and the angel.

“There are references to Dante, Leonardo DaVinci, A Tale of Two Cities… We have a love for literature and philosophy, and we’re using that in the books. It’s action, but we’re trying to make it intelligent action that pays homage to the classics.”

Cliff and Scott grew up in Richmond east of Kansas City, and have been bouncing ideas and stories off each other since they became fast friends in fifth grade. “Cliff was the new kid,” said Scott. “I walked up to his desk and said, ‘Hey, I’m the class clown!’ We started playing chess—we’re nerds, what can I say?”

Angel of Mercy was born four years ago during a four-hour-long car ride. “At first we thought of it as a movie script, but with both of us having kids, we didn’t have the option of going to the coast,” said Scott. He now lives in North Kansas City less than an hour’s drive from Richmond, where Cliff still lives.

The pair have no delusions about the business side of graphic novels. They do not expect to make a dime from their vision or to be quitting their day jobs—Cliff with Layered Technologies, Scott with City Bank. They will self-publish in order to have total creative control. Because they are both writers and not artists, they must raise funds to pay the artistic team they are assembling.

“We went through 90 artists before we found what we wanted,” said Scott. The penciller and primary artist is Emmanuel Xerx Javier, a freelance illustrator in Manila, Philippines. The colorist is Clint Cearly, a digital artist in Fort Worth with numerous game titles under his belt including Magic: The Gathering. Cliff and Scott are looking for a letterer. “We haven’t had any money to give these guys,” said Scott, “but they are so attached to the project, they’ve told us, ‘Dudes, we’re on standby!’ That’s been amazing to us.”
At this point, the whole three-novel arc is in place. “We finally just locked ourselves into a hotel room and finished off the entire story,” said Scott. “By the time we were done our eyes were melting into our skulls. But it was really worthwhile!” The pair are set to take their plans up a notch by the end of September, when they will launch a new website and start a campaign with the “crowd funding” platform Kickstarter.

“We know our Kickstarter campaign could go flat,” Scott said. “But if that happens, we’re going to fund Angel of Mercy out of our own pockets.

“It’ll take a lot longer. But this is going to happen. No matter what it takes.”

Where to find out more
Website: angelofmercy.us
Email: askus@angelofmercy.us
Facebook Page, YouTube video, and Kickstarter draft.

Cliff and Scott recommend
▪ Watchmen – A 12-issue comic book series by writer Alan Moore, artist Dave Gibbons, and colorist John Higgins; DC Comics, 1986-87. This seminal work questions the concept of superheroes in an alternate reality fraught with contemporary fears.

More Missouri resources
▪ Your local bookstore, comics or gaming shop, and public library. The first time you browse your library, ask a librarian where to look, says Christopher Durr, teen and technology coordinator at the Kirkwood Public Library. Libraries are still figuring out where to put graphic lit, and each one is likely to be different. For the past two years, Chris has served on the committee of the Young Adult Library Services Association (a division of the American Library Association) that compiles an annual list of Great Graphic Novels for Teens. “Kirkwood has separate sections for graphic novels in our children’s and teens’ areas. The adult graphic novels all go in the art section under 741.5, the call number for sequential art,” he said.

▪ Cape Comic Con – Cape Girardeau’s annual April convention at the Osage Centre: three days of professional comic book artists and publishers, with gaming tournaments and more than 100 tables of comics and merchandise.

▪ The Graphic Classroom – Chris Wilson’s resource for teachers and librarians to help them stock high quality, education-worthy graphic novels and comics. “The Best Comics for Your Classroom” section on the site contains a full review for each featured comic by Chris or one of his hand-picked team, so it’s also a fine source of ideas for reading for pleasure. The national website Graphic Novel Reporter did an in-depth interview with Chris in which he talked about his teaching ideas, and how comics changed him—not as a child or teen, but as an adult—from a reluctant into a passionate reader.

▪ Kansas City Comics – Resources on the Kansas City community, including comics creators, shops, and special events.

▪ Ink and Drink Comics – St. Louis collective of independent writers and artists who publish themed short story graphic literature anthologies twice a year.

▪ Mid-Missouri Comics Collective – Columbia-based group of comics creators and enthusiasts. The website is a splendid source of resources not only for the Columbia region but throughout Missouri about comics creators, stores, libraries, university courses, local comics history, and more.

▪ Rock the Library – Chris Durr’s blog, featuring illustrated posts on topics such as “Figurative language in graphic novels” and “How to talk graphic novels like an insider.”
A mini timeline of graphic literature

The idea of telling stories through sequential art goes back to Paleolithic cave paintings. The Egyptian Book of the Dead, Mayan codices, the Bayeux Tapestry, William Blake’s Rake’s Progress—all tell their stories through pictures. In the U.S., though, it was the association with “the funnies” that at first caused graphic literature to be eyed severely askance. “For the longest time, graphic narratives were not seen as part of the ‘canon,’ not a valuable and respected form of literature,” said Jen Murvin. Here are milestones in the march of graphic lit from Benjamin Franklin to the present day.

1754 – In his own Pennsylvania Gazette, Franklin creates the first editorial cartoon in an American newspaper, an illustration for his editorial urging the colonies to present a united front.

Late 19th century – American newspapers begin publishing strips of sequential cartoons.

Around 1900 – The terms “comics” and “comic strips” become common to describe newspapers’ storytelling cartoons. Since not all such cartoons are funny, the terms are almost immediately misnomers. But they stick.

1933 – The first true comic book? At least one viable candidate for the first object that a reader today would instantly recognize as a comic book appears—Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics. This collection of previously published newspaper strips is sold on newsstands.

1938 – Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster of Cleveland, makes his debut in Action Comics. For good and ill, superheroes will become inextricably linked with American graphic lit.

1947 – In Japan, Osamu Tesuka publishes New Treasure Island and kickstarts the development of modern manga—Japanese graphic novels. The highly prolific and influential Tesuka will be dubbed “the god of Manga.”

1954 – Psychiatrist Frederic Wertham writes the bestselling Seduction of the Innocent arguing that comic books are a serious cause of juvenile delinquency. To ward off consequent attacks by the U.S. Senate, a consortium of leading comic book publishers establishes the Comics Code Authority to voluntarily self-censor their work.

1960s and ‘70s – Comics go underground with artists who publish on their own or with small presses so they can create content forbidden by the Comics Code Authority. Many use the spelling “comix” to separate their work from mainstream newspapers and children’s comic books. (The CCA dribbles out of existence in 2011.)

1964 – The term “graphic novel” is used for the first time, by Richard Kyle in a newsletter from the Comic Amateur Press, to discuss comics with a serious artistic purpose.

Late 1970s – The use of “graphic novel” becomes popular.

1986-91 – American artist Art Spiegelman publishes his graphic novel Maus, based on his parents’ experiences of the Holocaust. In a wrenching take on cartoon animal tropes, he pictures Jews as mice, Nazis as cats. Maus wins the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and is a watershed—“the key text that brought legitimacy to the form,” says Jen.

Post-2000 to the present – Graphic lit is on a roll. Public libraries add it to their shelves; colleges create courses; big-name publishers seek out new titles. According to the pop culture industry news site ICv2, U.S. and Canadian sales of graphic novels rise from $75 million in 2001 to $375 million in 2007.

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