I think I was fated to hear about Will Eisner, a seminal figure in twentieth-century comics. As a leading comics artist, he was the first to (1) coin the term “graphic novel” in defining lengthier tied-together comics, (2) more fully integrate story with art in ways that were unprecedented for the period immediately preceding what has come to be termed the Silver Age of Comics, (3) demand artists’ rights for things like licensing and ownership, and (4) consistently produce quality and diverse work for over seventy years. Eisner was also a major influence on comics artists coming out of and influenced by the underground comix movement such as Art Spiegelman, Denis Kitchen and Kurt Vonnegut, as well as newer contributors like Scott McCloud, Batton Lash and (Brazilian) Monteiro Lobato, among numerous others.
2. As a presenter at the 2005 Comic Arts Conference, which was part of the International Comic-Con in San Diego (Comic-Con), I gained the additional opportunity to watch a documentary-in-progress from co-producers Andrew D. and Jon B. Cooke (the Cooke brothers) and Ben Tudhope (Will Eisner: The Spirit of an Artistic Pioneer) and the prototypes for a three-part documentary series by Brazilian filmmaker Marisa Furtado (Will Eisner: Profession: Cartoonist), as well as to sit in on the “Tribute to Will Eisner” panel – the first of what is intended to be a recurring Comic-Con event – moderated by Mark Evanier and showcasing Michael Uslan (movie producer), Paul Levitz (of DC Comics), Mike Richardson (of Dark Horse Comics), Lash, McCloud, Kitchen (of Kitchen Sink Press), and Jim Warren (of Help! Magazine). The picture included here is a still frame from Furtado’s series.

3. I have no doubts that Furtado’s Will Eisner: Profession: Cartoonist (see further down this review), once it claims American distribution, will become a staple for those doing anything with comics, especially if focusing on Eisner and his work. However, while Kitchen talks about Eisner losing his six-year-old daughter to leukemia in Furtado’s series, Ann Eisner talks about it in the Cooke brothers and Tudhope’s Will Eisner: The Spirit of a Pioneer, which features an actual reel of the Eisners’ daughter (courtesy of Ann Eisner). Eisner’s daughter may well have been the inspiration for the title story in A Contract with God (1985), in which Eisner relates Frimme Hersh’s downfall after his adopted daughter, Rachele, “fell ill. Suddenly and fatally” (no page no.). During the “Tribute to Will Eisner” panel, Kitchen said how when he reread Contract with God, he saw Eisner’s pain over his daughter’s loss similarly expressed in Frimme’s heartache. More important, as Vonnegut explains in Will Eisner: The Spirit of an Artistic Pioneer, “What Eisner did which was so radical, was to introduce genuine agony.”

4. An interesting choice in the Cooke brothers and Tudhope’s documentary, of which the first forty-five minutes of an anticipated hour and a half piece were previewed at the 2005 Comic-Con, is Editor Kris Schackman’s use of an extreme blow-up of Eisner’s signature to wipe the different comics images from Eisner’s strips. More creatively, in one montage, he includes a panel that shows live boxing while the other panels reflect cartoon boxing sequences. Also, the Cooke brothers and Tudhope used a lot of footage from the 2004 Comic-Con, which includes shots of fans, the Convention Center, and Will Eisner. In a somewhat ironic scene, especially for me (2005 marking my first Comic-Con), Eisner hands Craig Thompson the Will Eisner Award for Blankets (2003). To color in the story of Eisner, you hear the voices of Eisner (recently deceased); Michael Chabon; Adrian Tomine; Peter Bagge; Kyle Baker; Peter Kuper; Trina Robbins; Jack Kirby (from an Eisner Shop Talk audio tape); Spiegelman (filmed from the 2002 National Foundation for Jewish Culture, where he presented Eisner with a lifetime achievement award); Milton Caniff (from an Eisner Shop Talk audio tape); Joe Kubert (from an Eisner Shop Talk audio tape); Kitchen; Michael T. Gilbert; Vonnegut; Stan Lee; Gil Fox; Sergio Aragones; C.C. Beck (from an Eisner Shop Talk audio tape); Harvey Kurtzman; Ann Eisner; and Peter Kuper.

5. One of the many strengths in Furtado’s three-part documentary series, Will Eisner: Profession: Cartoonist, is the mix of American and Brazilian voices that
highlight Eisner’s influence on an international scale. Mostly focused on *The Spirit*, Furtado takes the viewer on a journey that transposes geopolitical borders and goes further than the Cooke brothers and Tudhope’s *Will Eisner: The Spirit of a Pioneer* in adding greater depth to Eisner’s influence on the comics industry. Where both documentaries animate some of Eisner’s sequences, a fun aspect in Furtado’s series is the sound accompaniments to the comics clips. Additionally, in the second and third parts, though Eisner’s brother, Julian (or Pete), does not speak, he nonetheless adds presence by sitting next to Will.

6. Originally shown in Brazil and showcased in thirty-eight countries around the world, the 2005 Comic-Con has the distinction of being the first to preview the films in the U.S.A. In the first, subtitled *The Dream*, Furtado shares similar information as the Cooke brothers and Tudhope’s *Will Eisner: The Spirit of a Pioneer*: Eisner’s comics contribution to his high school newspaper (what differs is that Furtado includes an image of Eisner from his 1935 Clifton High School yearbook; in the Cooke brothers and Tudhope’s documentary, Eisner mentions the title: “G.O. Activists”), Eisner’s business partnership with Jerry Iger (Eisner & Iger, Ltd.), the introduction of comics inserts in the News-Herald in 1939, Eisner’s inclusion of film tropes in his comics (Spiegelman says in Furtado’s documentary, “What *The Spirit* aspired to was not the clichés of comics, but the clichés of films.”), and Eisner’s introduction to underground comix artists at the 1971 New York Comic Art Convention (Eisner talks about how “they were using comics as
literature,” which made him appreciate for the first time the comics medium’s potential).

7. In *The Dream* specifically, Furtado fleshes Eisner out more by talking about his early inspirations (including Jerry Robinson, the original *Batman* creator who also introduced the Joker), the burgeoning influence of Eisner’s comics in Brazil (and Europe when *The Spirit*, which ceased in 1952 as a result of price inflation during the Great Depression, was reprinted by Kitchen Sink Press in the 1970s), Eisner’s comics contributions for Pentagon training manuals in World War 2 (titled *Joe’s Dope*), and other miscellany about Eisner’s life (of special interest is a photo of him in *The Spirit* costume). Brazilian cartoonist and *Gib* (comics serial) publisher Mauricio de Sousa, first published *The Spirit as O Espirito* in 1943, and he and Eisner became good friends. Part of the appeal, as Iger explains, was Eisner’s deliberate choice to “incorporate [*The Spirit*] logo in the story.” Framing Eisner’s life in this first part are Eisner, Iger, Lobato, de Sousa, Ziraldo (cartoonist), Álvaro de Moya (journalist), Lailson (cartoonist), Bill Sienkiewicz (cartoonist), Kitchen, Spiegelman, Jano (cartoonist), Lucy Caswell (of Ohio State University’s Cartoon Research Library), Ann Eisner, César Lobo (illustrator), François Shuiten (cartoonist), Jal (cartoonist), Gual (cartoonist), and Jotabé Medeiros (journalist).

8. In the second part, subtitled *Spirit*, Furtado includes footage from the University of Massachusetts’ 20th anniversary of *The Spirit* (Nov. 1998) and images of Eisner as a baby (also seen in the Cooke brothers’ and Tudhope’s documentary) and child; talks about the contexts of the Great Depression, Eisner’s story influences (among them, *Krazy Kat* and *Popeye*), and his relinquishment of shares in Eisner & Iger, Ltd. to create Will Eisner Studios, Inc.; spotlights Eisner’s projects outside of *The Spirit* (specifically, *A Life Force, A Sunset in Sunshine City, The Dreamer, New York: The Big City, City People: Notebook, To the Heart of the Storm, Family Matter*, and, from de Moya, *Life on Another Planet*); and touches on the Eisners’ move from New York City, NY to Tamarack, Florida. Here, Eisner, Kitchen, Tom Inge (of Ralph-Macon College), Spiegelman, de Sousa, Edmundo (journalist), de Moya, Caswell, Ann Eisner, Medeiros, Angeli (cartoonist), Guazzel (cartoonist), Jal, Gual, and Sienkiewicz.

9. Finally, in the third part, subtitled *Master Class*, Furtado includes footage of Eisner talking about his father (whose portrait is shown) and images from World War 2, and talks about Eisner’s teaching at New York University (NYU)’s School of Visual Arts, the intellectualism of the 1930s resulting from the infusion of short stories (these dealt with general themes of fear, power, anger, joy, threat, surprise and deviousness that influenced the thematic elements in Eisner’s stories), Eisner’s artistic techniques (for the feathering he learned from famous 1930s illustrator Charles Groback, Eisner is specific about using #3 Kalinksy sable brushes), and his comics adaptation of Melville’s *Moby Dick*. According to Eisner, he intentionally designed the splash pages that preceded *The Spirit* stories as plot summarizations. In this concluding chapter, the following people share their histories with Eisner: Eisner, Inge, Caswell, Spiegelman, Sienkiewicz, Kitchen, Jerry Robinson (of the Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate), Ota (editor of *PS Magazine*), de Moya, and Schuiten.

10. In addition to Cooke and Tudhope’s documentary-in-progress and Furtado’s series, the 2005 Comic-Con featured a “Will Eisner” panel. Here are some brief
perspectives: “There were three people who changed my view of the world,” Warren shared, “And Will was one of them.” McCloud echoed the sentiment: “The way [Eisner] looked at things influenced the way I look at things since.” In Levitz’s view, “[Eisner] was a role model in so many different ways from just a brush in his hand.” For Richardson, “[Eisner] is the example I will always aspire to.” Uslan, focusing on Eisner’s business acumen, explained, “Will knew what he wanted. He was fair.” Bash talked about how he was fortunate to learn from Eisner (and Harvey Kurtzman) directly at NYU’s School of Visual Arts. Before the panel’s close, Kitchen, recipient of the 2005 Defender of Liberty Award, said, “From the beginning [Will] was supportive” of the Comics Legal Defense Fund.

11. As for me, who is still green, I am pleased to have learned about Eisner and his contributions to comics through the interesting and insightful documentaries presented at the 2005 Comic-Con: the brothers Cooke and Tudhope’s Will Eisner: The Spirit of a Pioneer; Furtado’s Will Eisner: Profession: Cartoonist.[9]

12. Notes


[2] Lobato received the Medal of the Order of the Southern Cross for his work translating Brazilian classics into comics; see Marisa Furtado’s Will Eisner: Profession: Cartoonist: The Dream.


[4] In the production credits, she lists her full name as Marisa Furtado de Oliveira.


[6] I wish to acknowledge David Glanzer, Marketing and Public Relations Director of Comic-Con International, for e-mailing me this image (credit: Marisa Furtado).


[9] To find out how to contribute toward the production of the brothers Cooke and
Tudhope’s documentary-in-progress, e-mail Andrew Cooke at acooke@montillapictures.com. If you want to contact Furtado about either purchasing a copy of her three-part series (not yet in distribution locally) or to find out how to get a screening of them, e-mail her at marisafo@uol.com.br.

© 2005 Vanessa Raney (all rights reserved). This essay is the intellectual property of the author and cannot be printed or distributed without the author's express written permission other than excerpts for purposes consistent with Fair Use doctrine. The layout and design of this article is © 2005 ImageTexT (all rights reserved) and cannot be reproduced without the express written permission of the editor.