Memoriam for Will Eisner (March 6, 1917 - January 3, 2005)

by Charles Hatfield

1. Will Eisner, dean of American comic book artists and father of the contemporary graphic novel, died on Monday, January 3, of complications resulting from a quadruple heart bypass. Eisner was 87 years old, and had recently completed the latest in his long string of graphic novels (The Plot, to be published by Norton this coming spring).

1. With Eisner's passing, the world of comics has lost a breathtaking artist/writer, indeed one of its most gifted and thoughtful practitioners -- as well as one of its most gracious, articulate and effective teachers and ambassadors.

2. Summing up Eisner's career and gauging his impact, without hyperbole or cliché, are difficult tasks. His resume is huge, a sort of Sisyphean boulder which he (far from being overburdened by it) carried, or rather happily batted around, with the certain grace and easy, good humor of one who knows that his work is important but who would rather focus on future possibilities than trot out a litany of past accomplishments. As a speaker Eisner was an engaging and profoundly affirming presence: those of us who got to witness him in action multiple times (at comic conventions, public lectures, and academic conferences) never stopped being amazed by his endless energy and the ever-newness of his work.

3. Speaking personally, in all my meetings with him I never got over my gushing, tongue-tied sense of gratitude for his anecdotes, for his talent, and for the living connection to comics past that he represented.

4. Now that connection is gone. It remains for others to rehearse Eisner's resume, which we'll be doing again and again in the months ahead:

- Pioneering comic book creator (from 1936 onwards).
- Crucial contributor to the Quality Comics Group (in the early 1940s).
- Author of the innovative syndicated feature The Spirit (1940-1952), the zenith of Golden Age comics, as formally inventive and generative in its field as Citizen Kane was in film (an old analogy but true).
- Standard-bearer for instructional comics, through his company American Visuals (circa late 1940s through 1972).
- Among the first artists of his generation to ally himself with the underground and alternative comics press (from the early 1970s onwards).
- Pioneering comic art instructor at the School of Visual Arts, and author of two acclaimed textbooks on the subject (1970s-80s).

5. As a glorious capper to all of the above, Eisner earned his greatest fame and had his greatest creative satisfaction during the prolonged "Indian summer" of his career, from 1978 onwards, as the foremost proponent of the modern graphic novel. Starting with A Contract with God (1978), Eisner produced graphic novels and themed story collections at a daunting pace, from seminal work like A Life Force and To the Heart of the Storm...
to his recent works *Fagin the Jew* and *The Plot*. The most telling of his recent works are those that openly testify to his heritage as a Jewish American, exploring Jewish culture, the experience of first-generation American Jews, and the impact of anti-Semitism. (These concerns will continue in *The Plot*.)

6. Eisner, in short, was a dynamo, constantly generating new books and new stories and tirelessly promoting the potential of comics. His presence was energizing, his optimism (healthily tempered by a canny realism) always encouraging. The increasing presence of comics in mainstream literary culture -- in academia, in libraries and in bookstores -- owes much to Eisner's work: not just his crusading, but also, and more importantly, the fund of excellent work that he himself produced.

7. Since Eisner remained prolific and innovative right to the very end of his career, and always seemed a model of vigorous good health, his passing comes as a truly unexpected loss. The world of comics is going to miss him, and the promise of new work from him.

8. Readers are urged to check out *The Spirit Casebooks* for Eisner's best early work: post-war *Spirit* stories full of graphic wit and ingenious design, a mesmerizing, inky atmosphere, and, of course, the humaneness and good humor that distinguish even the saddest of his tales. Then see his graphic novels *A Contract with God*, *To the Heart of the Storm*, and *Fagin the Jew* for a sense of his later, and for him defining, work, the stuff he produced on his own, unbidden by commercial necessity and often achingly personal.

9. It's good, good work.

10."Masterful" is the word we're looking for.