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The Daily Heller: Thomas Woodruff Conjures the Life Force of a Feral Child

By Steven Heller
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Seven years in the making, the pictorial opulence of Thomas Woodruff—Chair Emeritus of the Illustration and Cartooning Departments at the School of Visual Arts—pervades the imaginative world of *Francis Rothbart: The Life of a Fastidious Feral* (Fantagraphics). It is what Woodruff calls a “graphic opera.”

The 300-plus pages of visual delights follow a feral boy raised by magpies and other forest fauna in a bewitched woods. Throughout the course of his adventure, Francis is repeatedly

struck by lightning, which leads him to have eccentric otherworldly talents. These talents are carelessly abused, however, “leading to his ultimate destruction by the same natural world that once nurtured him.” Think of it as a Garden of Eden and Evil, perhaps.

The text is entirely composed of hand-drawn type and letters, and written mostly in rhymed verse. The “opera” is exquisitely drawn and painted, alternating between monochrome and color, and recalls a paradise lost that ranges in tone from

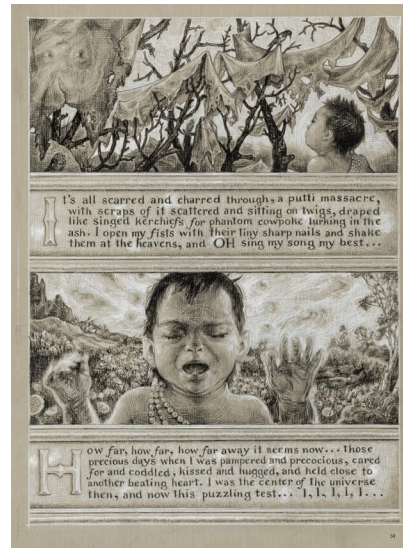
wonderful to wicked. Since there is not a minimalist artistic bone in the artist's thoroughly tattooed body, I asked Woodruff to paint as complex and vivid a word picture of Francis' mystical world as he could.



To give life to Francis' experience, all of Woodruff's 300 originals were on view at the Vito Schnabel Gallery in New York (see the installation here). Let's say it was ... intense!

I call what you've done the Sistine Chapel of graphic novels, for all the detail and time you've invested, and for its incredible allegorical power. What inspired you to devote so many years and so much heart to this project?

I thought about doing a "graphic opera" for a long time. For 20 years I was working with all the amazing faculty I encountered and assembled as Chair of the School of Visual Arts Cartooning and Illustration department, and I realized that creating a piece like this could be a true solo Gesamtkunstwerk!—sans actual music, of course. Using drawing and painting, storytelling, prose, poetry and design, I could create a complete world. The challenge was too irresistibly formidable for me not to try to take on the form. I knew I had the skills and discipline to attempt it; I questioned my stamina throughout, but I did indeed complete it!



This is an epic in a literary sense. Did you know from the outset where this odyssey was headed? Had you written it in your mind before putting pen to paper?

I pretty much had a fairly complete outline of the narrative years before I sharpened the first pencil. (Fun fact: I went through about 100 electric pencil sharpeners before the task was complete.) The story would be a bit retooled along the route, but the bones were all there. The exact specific text was written and rewritten to work within the spread designs, and to align to the rhythm of the sections of the whole piece. Some parts have little text, some pages are nothing but verse.

I actually thought of it as a puppet show in the very beginning.



Who are the Rothbarts? Where did that name come from? And what is their meaning and significance in your world?

Francis' name is a bit of a clue in the narrative. I had been doing a lot of research on St. Francis, including visiting Assisi and the caves where he dwelt in Italy. The painting of him receiving the stigmata by Bellini at the Frick Museum has been one of my favorite works of art since I first saw it as a teenager. As an impressionable and innocent Catholic child, the legendary lives of the saints were very powerful to me. Francis was the one who talked to the animals benignly.

Rothbart is the dark sorcerer from "Swan Lake" who has the animals (i.e., swans) do his bidding, and are under his control. I have seen the Tchaikovsky ballet many, many times. A good production with the right soloists is a mind-bender. I felt it was a good yin-yang combination for the main character. He also is based on Sabu (Dastagir), the Indian actor who in the 1930s and 40s played many half-naked hapless young fellows.

Both Francis and Rothbart inhabited strange landscapes in my mind, filled with rocks and grottoes, mist, lightning, and rumblings.



Why is Francis left on his own, like Moses in the bullrushes? Is there a spiritual or demonic turn in the making?

I have always had a fascination with the stories of feral children. Some are beasts, some savants, some saviors. The orphaned child has long been a trope in picaresque narratives (great for comics, novels and operas). In contemporary fan fiction lingo, they would call Francis a "woobie."

I'm sure there is a reason for birds—including hummingbirds, sparrows and the magpies—being so central. But I'm at a loss. Can you guide us through the most symbolic elements of your story, without giving it away?

I enlisted the magpies for major supporting roles to collect the shiny things for the protagonist's fanciful frocks. The hummingbirds were cast as a wry reference to the "Madama Butterfly" famous chorus, and sparrows are the most vulnerable of birds, so they were poignant players to use in the drama. Don't forget the raptor! Of course, a bit of a Ganymede reference there. The albino fox ticks many boxes in the Symbolist lexicon. There are symbolic associations with every critter I chose, I suppose. Even the flowers I included carry deep associative meanings. The reader should bring all their own interpretations and feelings, and let them poetically resonate as one absorbs the dense cross-referenced pages I made.

Don't feel you are "at a loss"; this story should just be looked at, and then felt.



Would you categorize this novel as a fairytale on steroids?

One of my favorite German Romantic painters, Philip Otto Runge, is also the author of the classic fairy tale 'The Juniper Tree.' I have always found the writings of English mythographer and art critic Maria Warner inspirational. A mythic tale will hopefully speak to the soul in myriad ways. But I don't really think of this work as a fantasy; I am too rooted in allegory, with a twist of lemon.

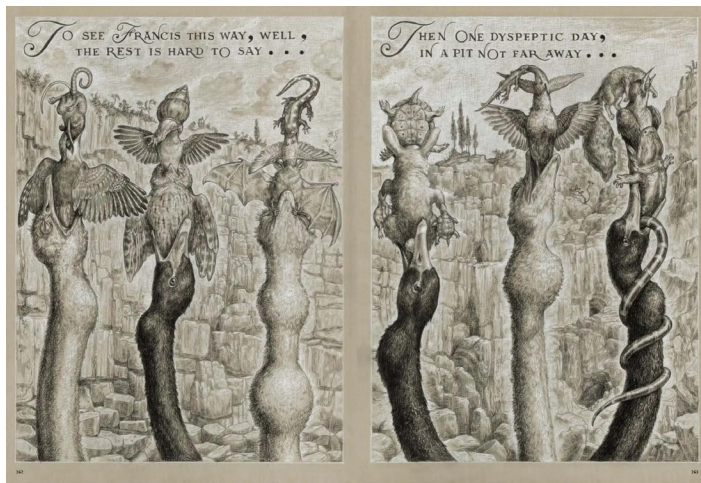
When the townsfolk arrive in their festival costumes, they recall designs by Bosch, Beaton, Windsor McKay and Adrian; so the "look" is within fairytale parameters. I hope what happens then is a surprise. This is intended as a tale for adults, but using a lulling, familiar vocabulary.



It is kind of extravagant the way you dress Francis in pearls and render his speech balloons as though they were elaborate frames. Your paintings, generally, are masterpieces of flourish. What is the role of "the ornate" in your work?

I always have felt it important to design images that are complex. I adore the ridiculous rigor of the ornate. That was hard, having grown up

aesthetically during the height of Minimalism, but indulging in the flourish is kind of badass and contrary, and it sure is fun for me to do. To quote a lyric from Leonard Cohen, "I want ornaments on everything." Some associate the decorated mis-en scene with a queer sensibility, and I guess I'm guilty as charged.



I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the virtuosity of your lettering. This is not by any stretch the comics style. What was your motivation for such typographical intensity?

When I started to study tattooing closely in the 1990s, I found I loved drawing letters. I have several great old books of hand-drawn fonts. Through a lot of practice, I got good at it. The whole book is really a document of my love of *drawing* everything, including the words!

I can't do it in ink very well, though; I am best at really shaping the letterform arabesques in pencil. The majority of the work was made with carbon and white charcoal pencils on a toned handmade paper. This process needs to be fastidious, a trait I do share with Francis. And perhaps foolishly in terms of time, I wanted everything to be done by hand.

The lettering does refer to classic early comics (all that punctuation!) as well as silent movie dialog cards, sideshow banners, game boards,

greeting cards, Victorian penmanship art, and other assorted esoteric typographic genres.

Francis is feral, insofar as he lives with other species within nature. Am I wrong to sense a feeling of hope, unity with nature, rather than the apocalypse we believe as a species is on the horizon?

I hope there is hope.

This is not to ignore the irony and humor running through this story. I love stumbling on the idea that Francis shits on a grid and a spiral (a feral designer?). Where does that image derive?

There are many points in the narrative where I wanted to coolly normalize things that have become taboo subjects: defecation, a boy's first unexpected erection, animal mating (as well as other matings). I hope my frankness won't be off-putting to adult readers, or that they focus too much on the salacious or scatological. It's part of nature, and therefore appropriate in art. As Rodin said, "To the artist, there is nothing ugly in nature."

Francis is compulsively neat, and a visual type ... how else could he take his dumps, but in well-designed patterns?



You include a *divertissement*, a section devoted to the beauty and mystery of stones and rocks. You break from your otherwise monotone format into lush crystal colors. Why?

I have always been a fan of the 19th-century nature mystics who believed that every flower and tree holds a certain human sensibility or spirit that is a remnant of a remembered paradise.

The shift in the narrative from black and white to color is not unlike Dorothy entering Munchkinland. The “Legends” sequence to me is a *divertissement*, with its roots half in tonalist landscape painting and half in technicolor Hollywood films. The color “Fashion Plates” were inspired by the color fashion show sequence in the film *The Women*. These brief, swift switches in style and mood are also the stuff of most grand operas, where there are often abruptly inserted ballets and/or orchestral musical intermezzos.

Francis meets feral girls in his world who dress him as they would a young sister. What do they signify?

Twins have as much power as ferals in the fabulist vocabulary, but because there are two of them, they could be bullies. They are anti-feral in their appearance, but there is that secret tribal language they share! I needed some sort of adorable civilized villains of the piece. The Diane Arbus twins, later co-opted by Kubrick in *The Shining*, were in the back of my mind.

As he gets older, Francis adds to his repertoire of experiences (he accepts eaters and the eaten). I don’t want to give away the story, but how far does he come to “civilization”? And what would you call “civilization”?

As I write in the text, Francis tried his best. He abused his gifts, but hey, who doesn’t? He never comes as close to civilization as he would have liked, due to the misunderstandings of both. The townsfolk are more guilty than he, which is, unfortunately, one of the oldest stories of all.

For those whose only wish is for acceptance, the hope of a happy ending is usually just the ersatz stuffings of unrealistic fantasy.

I’m happy to say, I’ve been drawn deeply into your vision. But as a final question, tell me what we, who take part in your world, should take away—feeling, knowing, learning?

I wouldn’t want to really say that there is a “moral.” The world is more complex than that, and I hope the book reflects that. Over the seven years it took to complete this work, so much transpired. Even things about my vision have changed. I have always felt that good art should give the viewer/reader the luxuriant room for reflection and contemplation. To quote again from the end of the text:

“Tall tales make fears small. They help us to manage: To get the sweeping done, the dishes washed, to rest soundly, then rise and shine the silverware.”

