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First & Fifteenthby [Kat Avila](#)

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Publisher**Villard Books**<http://www.villard.com>**Credits**

ISBN: 0-345-47559-3

Creators: Steve Powers

Grade: 8

It's art that needs to be performed to be appreciated; it needs an audience to be fulfilled. What art doesn't? But like a play script, Steve Powers's ***First & Fifteenth: Pop Art Short Stories*** won't truly come alive until there are people standing around receiving the gift of the panels, using his stories as a springboard for their own stories of the 'hood.

His presentation combines the bold communicative strengths of graffiti and traffic and commercial signs. He experiments with them to go beyond a single dimension of information, to tell a story. Each of the eight "one-act plays," a metaphor Powers uses, fits into a larger picture. This picture could be immense, but the life of a pitiful, slightly overweight middle-aged "superhero" cookie-cuts the beginning and end, thereby limiting the geography to a particular time and space.

There is no cinematic flow; the full-page and double-page panels follow one another like a slide show. The show

reminds me somewhat of a kamishibai street-storyteller with his picture boards.

The book's final urban tale "Endzone Dancer" is the most visually engaging. The "cutout" of a cloud with human arms lifts our slumped-over superhero up, up, and away. I also like the inset panel a few pages later showing a man with his hands open releasing the cutout of a blue pigeon. Against a sunny yellow background, all sizes of cutouts of blue, black, and red pigeons fill the sky.

At first glance, ***First & Fifteenth*** looks like another graphic design book with simple line art painted in from a child's palette of primary colors. Then, your mind recognizes sequences and a narrative emerges. Whether the stories are compelling or not is not as important as *how* they are being told. The reader is either going to absolutely love this book or hate it, get it or not get it.

I wondered if Powers's graphic novel experiment couldn't be employed with more dramatic material, such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, for more emotional impact, where the contrast between the frivolity of a pop/commercial style and horrific content would create a dissonance accentuating the latter. This is where ***First & Fifteenth*** succeeds, in getting the reader to rethink the communicative potential of graffiti and signs and how stylistic mimicry of such graphic forms could be manipulated for storytelling.

Written: October 29, 2005

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