



Howard Cruse.
Photograph by Connor
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Howard Cruse.

Cruse, Howard (b. 1944)

by Robert Kellerman

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Howard Cruse is one of the most prolific gay cartoonists presently working in the medium. Since coming up in the underground comics scene of the 1970s, he has contributed to general magazines as well as gay and lesbian publications and has also completed an important graphic novel.

A preacher's son raised in Alabama, Cruse was born on May 2, 1944. He attended Birmingham-Southern College, where he earned his B. A., and the University of Pennsylvania, where he enrolled in graduate school. He moved to New York City in 1969 and entered the world of underground comics as a means to, as he put it, "experiment freely while exploring myself without inhibiting editorial constraints."

His cartoons appeared in such publications as *Dope Comix*, *Bizarre Sex*, *Heavy Metal*, *Blab!*, *Crazy Fangoria*, and *The Village Voice*, among others. One of his best-known early works was the strip *Barefootz*, whose namesake character reflected late 1960s and early 1970s counterculture.

After coming out as a gay man, he founded and contributed regularly to *Gay Comix*, an annual publication of gay and lesbian cartoonists that had its first issue in 1980. A collection of Cruse's short comic strips and stories from the 1970s and 1980s was published by St. Martin's Press in 1987 under the title *Dancin' Nekkid with the Angels*.

Cruse reached a much wider audience when the national gay and lesbian newsmagazine *The Advocate* began publishing his serial strip *Wendel* in 1983 on an irregular basis; it eventually became a weekly feature.

At the center of the strip was Wendel, a young gay man, and the plotlines detailed his relationships with his lover Ollie, his gay-positive parents, Ollie's son and ex-wife, and various other friends and family. A funny, often moving strip, *Wendel* explored a variety of gay and lesbian issues until its end in 1989, when the editors of *The Advocate* changed formats and eliminated comic strips from the magazine.

With the end of *Wendel*, Cruse was encouraged by friends in the comics business to approach Paradox Press, an imprint of DC Comics (home of *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Wonder Woman*) about creating a large work for them. This resulted in his largest project to date, a 210-page graphic novel that took him four years to write and draw: *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995).

This novel sets a young white man's coming out story against the backdrop of the 1960s civil rights movement in the American South. Cruse's complex narrative, large cast of characters, and sure sense of time and place allow for a serious exploration of issues of identity and prejudice (sexual, racial, and political), as the coming out story is juxtaposed against Ku Klux Klan rallies and murders, freedom marches, and the response of both black and white Southern churches.

The painstakingly conceived and executed *Stuck Rubber Baby* has been hailed, like its predecessor Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (1986), as a breakthrough work in establishing the graphic novel

as a serious literary and artistic form rather than simply a comic strip.

In the aftermath of the attack on New York City on September 11, 2001, Cruse returned to a project he had thought about for years, an "illustrated fable" based on a story by Alabama composer Jeanne E. Shaffer. *The Swimmer with a Rope in His Teeth* was published in 2004.

Cruse and his partner Eddie Sedarbaum moved from New York City in 2003 to North Adams, Massachusetts, where they were married in 2004, after celebrating 25 years together as a couple. Cruse continues cartooning, developing web sites, and working in computer graphics.

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About the Author

Robert Kellerman holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.