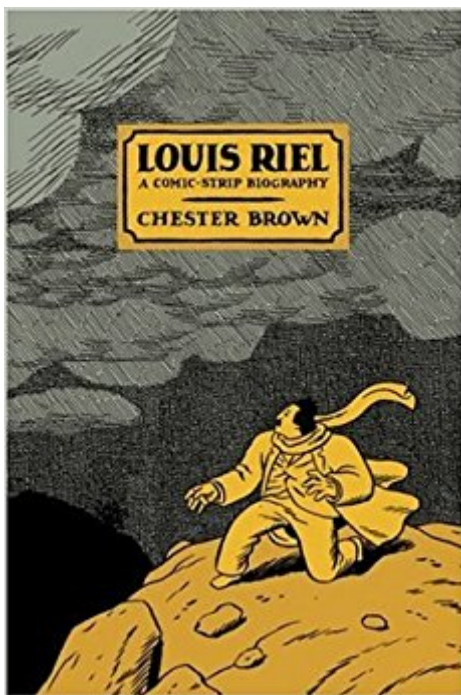


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# Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography



## Synopsis

"It has the thoroughness of a history book yet reads with the personalized vision of a novel."

Time Chester Brown reinvents the comic-book medium to create the critically acclaimed historical biography *Louis Riel*, winning the Harvey Awards for best writing and best graphic novel for his compelling, meticulous, and dispassionate retelling of the charismatic, and perhaps insane, nineteenth-century Métis leader. Brown coolly documents with dramatic subtlety the violent rebellion on the Canadian prairie led by Riel, who some regard a martyr who died in the name of freedom, while others consider him a treacherous murderer.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Brown's exploration of the life of a [...] 19th-century Canadian revolutionary Riel is a strong contender for the best graphic novel ever. Over five years in the making, Brown's work is completely realized here, from the strikingly designed two-color cover to the cream-colored paper and pristinely clear drawings. The story begins in 1869, with the sale of the independent Red River Settlement area of what's now Canada to the Canadian government. The area is inhabited by the French-speaking Métis, of mixed Indian and white ancestry, who are looked down upon by the Canadians. Riel is bilingual and becomes a de facto leader for the Red River Settlement, demanding the right for them to govern themselves within Canada. Not surprisingly, this request is denied, and the conflict is set in motion that ultimately consumes Riel's life. Brown doesn't deviate from a six-panel grid for the entire book, telling his story in a cartoon realism style reminiscent of *Little Orphan Annie*. And while the book concerns imperialism, empire, nationalism and the chaos

that results, Brown maintains a still, almost silent atmosphere. He brilliantly renders a lengthy courtroom sequence by setting figures against a black background, heightening the tension of the events by employing minimal effects. Even the battle scenes are subdued. All of this will hook readers' minds and eyes, but never tell them what to think or feel. Instead, Brown calmly lets his story unfold, making the reading process deeply affecting. This is an ingenious comic and a major achievement. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Brown, better known for such outre projects as his scatologically surreal *Ed the Happy Clown* (1989), now tells the story of a controversial nineteenth-century Canadian political figure in comics. A charismatic leader who championed the cause of the half-French, half-Native Canadian metis community in their rebellion against the English Canadian government, Riel was hounded into religious fanaticism and madness before being hanged for treason. For his nonsensationalistic treatment of this momentous life, Brown adopts an intentionally flat drawing style reminiscent of 1930s comics (Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie* was a key visual influence) and a straightforward storytelling approach based on six square panels per page. These prove perfectly suited to his heavily researched, extensively footnoted subject matter. Although a folk hero in Canada, Riel is largely unknown by Americans, many of whom will be fascinated to learn that their northern neighbor country also cheated and exploited native peoples. Comics artists have tackled history before (see Larry Gonick's *Cartoon History* series) but seldom as artfully and intelligently as Brown does here. Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Here's the plot (Americans, watch out for spoilers. Canadians, don't worry. You learned all of this in grade school.): In 1885, Ottawa confronted a serious uprising by Metis (the "half-breeds" in French, not polite) and other Catholic, French-speaking settlers in what is now southern Manitoba, on the Red River (the boundary between Minnesota and North Dakota, further south). At the time there were no provinces west of Ontario, but Ottawa had big plans and - according to Chester Brown's interpretation - sparked a crooked land rush to attract English-speaking settlers out west to screw the Metis out of their excellent farmland. The Metis rebelled under the banner of a crazy visionary named Louis Riel, who received direct instructions from God. This was a long way from Ottawa, and the English had no way of projecting their power that far west to

crush the rebellion and keep the Metis from seceding and forming a little Ukraine for themselves in the middle of the Wheat Belt. So the money guys in the East realized that this was their chance to get federal backing for what would become the Canadian Pacific Railroad. They persuaded Ottawa that if the tracks could be laid quickly, they could get redcoats out there in force. And lo, it happened. The brilliant Chester Brown renders this conflict with restraint. Too much restraint. Is it a slam to mention that Brown is Canadian? Everything happens in six panels to a page. It is minimalist and beautiful, but we sometimes wish he'd blow out a battle scene or another highly emotional moment to at least a half page. It seems as though he's striving for a journalistic sort of objectivity in the scenic depiction, while the larger narrative is completely tilted towards the Metis and against the federals. But that is a quibble. Like a fine sonneteer, Brown accepts the restrictions and still succeeds. There is something eerie and convincing about a long-distance gun battle in the snowy woods where the sounds aren't BANG! and KAPOW! but PK .. PK .. PK.

This is Chester Brown's magnum opus. He meticulously researched the history of Manitoba and Canada in order to write the story of Louis Riel, who was either a patriot or rebel villain, depending upon your point of view. The art work is decent & sparse (Chester's style), but the story is just fantastic. I wish for two things here: (1) that more writers produced histories in comic form -- it's a fantastic way to tell a story and I think that it is a wonderful education tool (2) that Chester Brown would get more recognition.

Chester Brown's *À Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* is an interesting historical novel about Louise Riel, a 19th Century Canadian politician who helped found the province of Manitoba, advocated for the rights of the Metis (an aboriginal group descended from First Nation peoples and Europeans), and who led armed revolts against the Canadian government. I confess to being one of those U.S. citizens who does not know much about the history of Canada and so most of the material in this historical novel was both new and interesting to me. Brown's graphic style is both sparse and visually interesting and he uses it to tell a good story in this book. Riel was apparently mentally ill for at least part of his life which may account for the sometimes inexplicable decisions he makes in the course of this narrative. Brown is a dispassionate narrator throughout the book and, for the most part, there are no clear villains or heroes. There are some amusing sections as well in this generally tragic tale.

Granted, I am not absolutely fascinated with this aspect of Canadian history, but this book was a

pretty interesting insight into the mind of a disturbed, but well-meaning and determined individual. The art was very Sunday-news-comic style, but slightly darker, which was appropriate for creating the atmosphere of the saga.

Most of the previous reviews have touched upon how well this book has covered its subject matter and there is no disagreement here. A few mentioned the artwork but not enough. Brown's work is astounding. In the introduction to *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, Brown mentions the influence of Herge's Tintin and Harold Grey's Little Orphan Annie on his work and his wondrous black and white, six panel pages are truly an homage those great comics he cites. For both story and artwork, five stars are too little for Brown's beautiful comic-strip biography. This book belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in either history or graphic novels/comic strips.

This is a great read, fascinating glimpse at an enigmatic figure. A page turner with decent notes at the back (don't you wish movies explained all the liberties they took with their stories?) My only gripe is its readability. This edition is a rather compact trade paperback. It's easy to carry around and read on the streetcar, but that comes at the sacrifice of panel size. You might be squinting at some of the more detailed panes. I would still recommend this book.

I've read all of Mr. Brown's books: he's never let me down. That said, of all his work, this is probably my favorite book: not only is it a step away from his usual themes (something a frequent reader can appreciate), but it's also a solid and beautiful account of Louis Riel's story, a character I had no previous knowledge of before reading this book. Highly recommended.

The artwork is interesting but not all that compelling. The story is centered around a completely delusional character whose visions of an apocalyptic future seem to drive him mad.

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