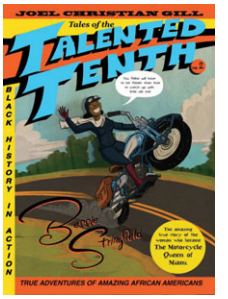
Joel Christian Gill uses a palette reflecting the historic era that he writes about.

Drawing Black History



Graphic novels bring forgotten stories to life

By Rich Barlow

Photograph by
Jessica Scranton

HOME TO ABOUT 50 MIXED-RACE descendants of a freed slave, Malaga Island off the coast of Maine seemed an oasis of racial harmony in 1912. But then the state, lobbied by ostensible "reformers" who claimed that residents were living in poverty—and perhaps tempted by a land grab too good to pass up—evicted the islanders. The majority who complied were the lucky ones. Those who held out were netted in the nascent eugenics fervor: declared feebleminded, they were confined and in some cases castrated.

Despite an official apology from Maine's governor in 2010 and a radio documentary about the case, Malaga's story might have remained little known but for Joel Christian Gill (CFA'04). His graphic anthology *Strange Fruit*, published last year by Colorado-based Fulcrum, uses comics to tell the stories of African Americans whose contributions and sufferings occupy fringes in the country's historical memory.

In addition to the Malaga story, the nine tales in *Strange Fruit* include those of Bass Reeves, a black lawman in the Old West so adroit at nabbing bad guys that some historians think he may have been an inspiration for the Lone Ranger; Richard Potter, America's first stage magician, who became rich, and not coincidentally, passed as a white man, revealing only on his deathbed in 1835 that his mother had been black; and Henry "Box" Brown, a Virginia slave who escaped to freedom in 1849—by mailing himself to Philadelphia in a cramped crate, emerging after a 27-hour ordeal by wagon.

"This is not just the history of black people," says Gill, associate dean of student affairs at the New Hampshire Institute of Art. "This is our history. It's American history." Gill is working on a biography of Bessie Stringfield, the black "Motorcycle Queen of America," who rode across the United States solo several times in the 1930s and '40s. Gill has already published a standalone graphic biography of Reeves, *Tales of the Talented Tenth*. (The absence of women's stories in *Strange Fruit*, Gill confessed on the PBS show *Basic Black*, was an oversight born of "male privilege.")

Reviews for *Strange Fruit* were positive. The *New York Times* recommended it as a gift last Christmas, commending its "thoughtful reflections" and "pointed text....At a moment when racial inequities have ignited this nation, Mr. Gill offers direction for the road ahead from the road behind."

Laura Jiménez, a School of Education lecturer, who researches the ways that readers engage with graphic novels, says *Strange Fruit* should be used in social studies and history classes for its premise "that we, as Americans, can look beyond a single set of heroes and see a rich tradition of greatness in any culture. This is a pretty radical notion, and I think Gill delivers with this book."

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Jiménez also admires Gill's artistry, noting his "use of full, rich color in his work. His palette underscores the sort of historic era that he writes about." In telling the story of Marshall "Major" Taylor, a fin de siècle cyclist who was America's first black sports champion, Gill varies the skin tone in his pictures of Taylor's family, even though they all were related. "You'd be surprised at how often illustrators color characters of similar races...the same color," says Jiménez. "As if there is a single color grade for any group of people."

Gill's drawings reflect his quest for authenticity; his Bass Reeves is wiry, he told NBC News, because a Wild West marshal spent hours in the saddle and didn't have much time to eat. And the artist's imaginative use of symbolism came to bear as he sought an alternative in his books' text bubbles to the N-word, which he thinks conjures different things for different people. Instead, he drew a picture of a minstrel in blackface to convey the racist slur. That a picture, reflecting a well-known prejudice, can sub for a vile word demonstrates the power of comics, Gill says; they allow him to "imbed in these symbols that sort of hieroglyphic history that you can't do with...a regular book."

Forsaking Painting for Comics

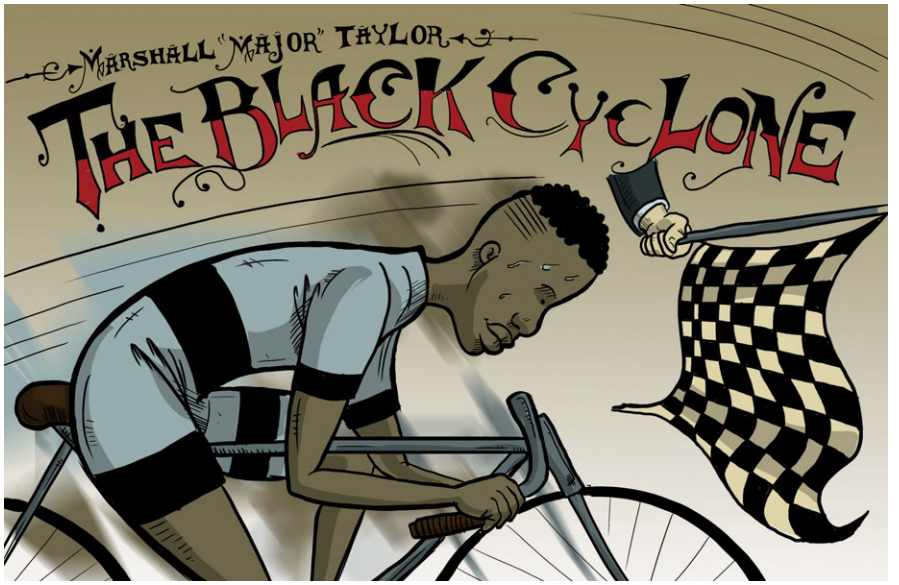
Here are some little-known facts that this chronicler of little-known facts shares about himself: his father died when he was young, leaving Gill to be raised by a single mom in Virginia, which makes him bristle at one reviewer's suggestion that omitting women from his book is misogynistic.

"It took me until I was probably a teenager to realize that people didn't think women could do things," he says. "A woman taught me how to fight. Everything I learned in life, I learned from a woman."

He grew up loving comics; his studio in a converted garage at his rural New Hampshire home is filled with boxes of old X-Men, Preacher, and other superhero tales.

Gill studied graphic design as an undergraduate at Roanoke College, and fell in love with painting after taking a class. He came to BU to pursue an MFA in painting, but as the father of four young children, he recalls, he was so broke that he faced an eviction proceeding the same day as his thesis presentation. The University rescued him with a scholarship that covered the rent.

The most memorable comment on his work at BU, he says, was a single sentence, a critique by teacher John Walker of a painting of some now-forgotten subject: "You had poetry here, and you



Bicycle racer Marshall "Major" Taylor (top right), was the first black champion in any sport. Henry "Box" Brown (bottom) escaped from slavery by mailing himself to Philadelphia.

f—ed it up." The CFA professor of art "was absolutely right," Gill says. The remark instilled in Gill a firm work ethic that keeps him refining his artwork to this day.

An African American who'd felt perfectly safe in his hometown and hadn't experienced racism in Boston, Gill says he was startled when someone warned him to avoid certain neighborhoods considered racist. Pondering this after graduation, he painted a series of self-portraits inspired by lynching photos he'd seen. The paintings depicted him with a noose around his neck, but holding the frayed end of the rope, symbolizing his freedom from the fear that plagued his ancestors but with a nod to lingering racial prejudice. Cued by Billie Holiday's lynching-protest song "Strange Fruit," Gill titled his paintings *Strange Fruit Harvested: He Cut the Rope*. A friendly observer commented, "It seems like your paintings are trying to tell stories, and they're failing."

That got him to thinking about his first love, comics, and how their blending of pictures and words might help with the storytelling. He admired works like the Pulitzer Prize–winning graphic novel *Maus*, cartoonist Art Spiegelman's account of his father's survival of the Holocaust, drawing Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. "I think comics can reach most people in a way" other media cannot, Gill says.

Before they were gathered in anthologies, Gill's comics were used by a political campaign in Belize. In 2011, after the opposition party in the Central American nation approached him, Gill contributed some political cartoons that ended up on billboards and in a TV commercial. (The party using his cartoons lost.)

By that point, he had already begun to research hidden moments and people from black history, fed by stories he'd heard at comics conventions. "There's that whole idea that...history is written by the victors," he says. "I think that history is not necessarily written by the victors. I think history is written by people who actually look for the truth." The work ethic imbued by Walker came in handy as he began *Strange Fruit*. He worked on the book off and on for five years, while completing his Bass Reeves bio took nine months of full-time work.

As media interest in *Strange Fruit* picked up, Gill created the comic #28daysarenotenough, documenting his objection to the designation of February as Black History Month. "People don't need months. They need to just be equally represented in history, across the board."

If that happens, he told NBC, it could fulfill a dream: "I want lots of little white kids to read the story of Bass Reeves and say, 'I want to grow up to be like Bass Reeves.'" ■

WEB EXTRA See a gallery of Joel Gill's work at bu.edu/bostonia.