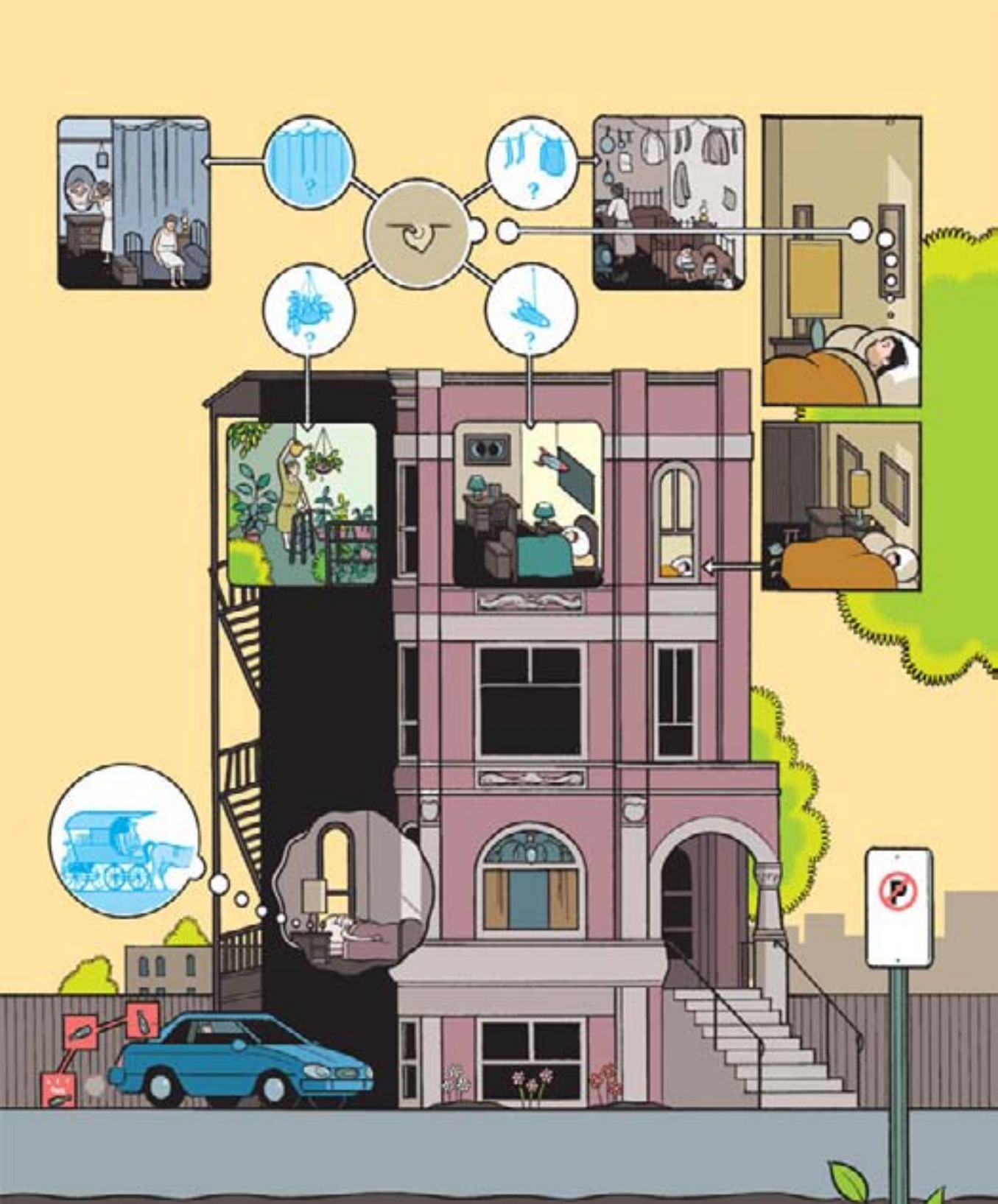
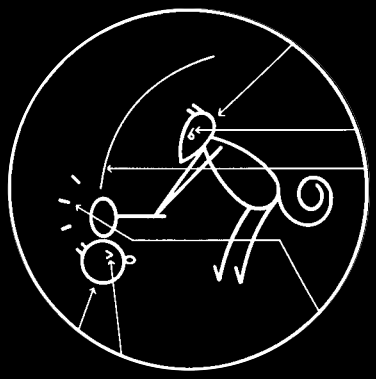
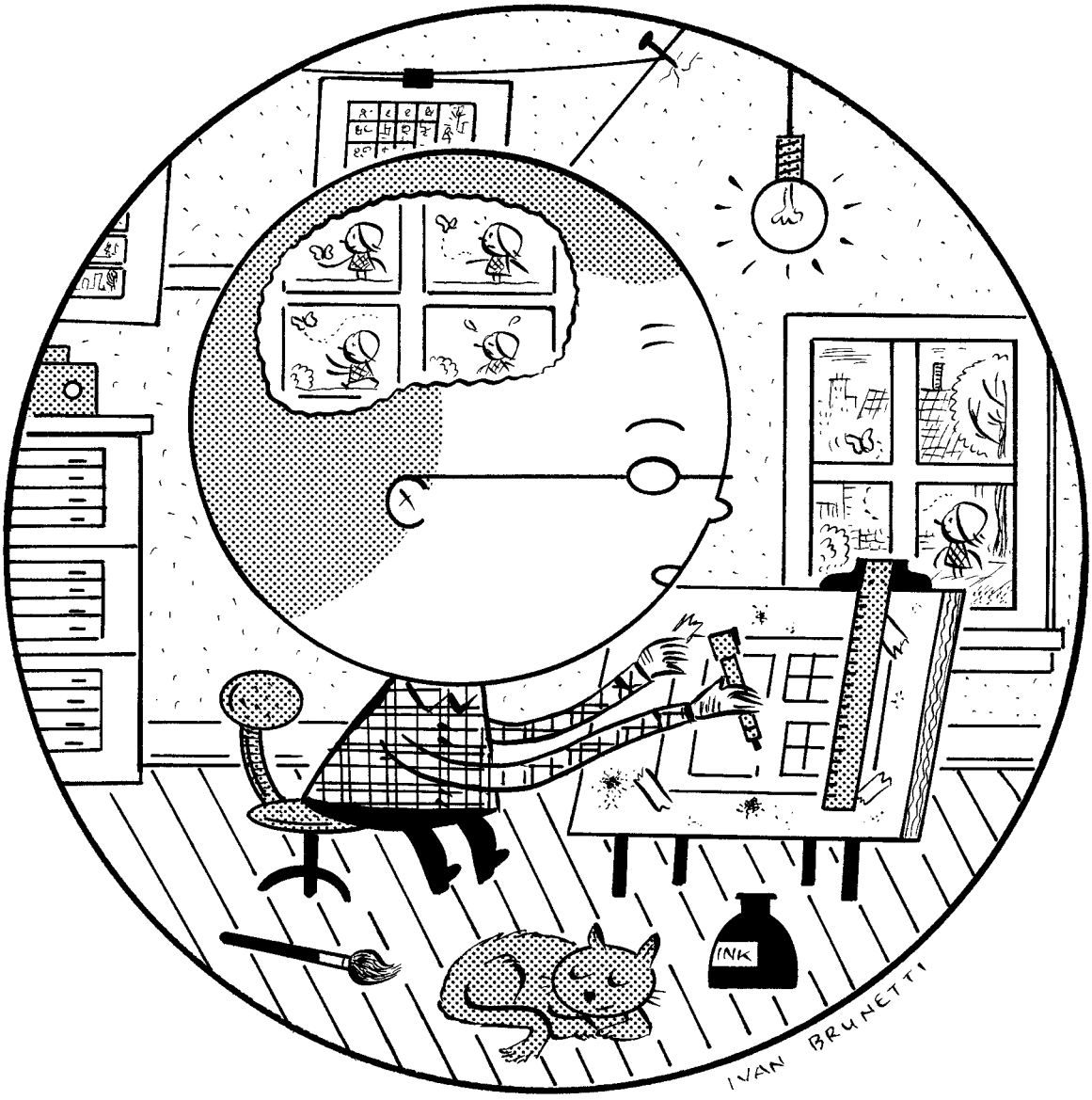


THE COMICS OF CHRIS WARE
DRAWING IS A WAY OF THINKING

Edited by David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman

The Comics of Chris Ware




INK
IVAN BRUNETTI

The Comics of Chris Ware

Drawing Is a Way of Thinking

Edited by David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman

University Press of Mississippi *Jackson*

Publication of this volume was made possible in part through grants provided by Dickinson College and Bryant University. The editors would also like to thank Meredith Milnes, Ellie Cutler, Shannon Kobran, and Tristan Deveney for their help and hard work and special thanks to Alec Thibodeau, for keeping us covered.

Frontis: *Portrait of Chris Ware* by Ivan Brunetti. © 2010 Ivan Brunetti.

www.upress.state.ms.us

The University Press of Mississippi is a member of the Association of American University Presses.

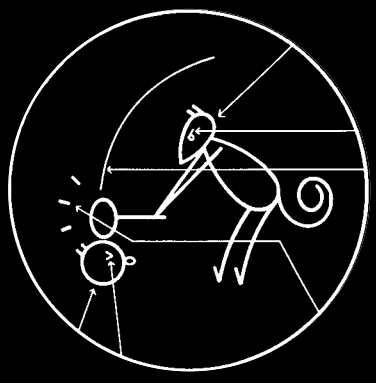
Manufactured in the United States of America

First printing 2010
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The comics of Chris Ware : drawing is a way of thinking / edited by David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-60473-442-3 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-60473-443-0 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Ware, Chris, 1967—Criticism and interpretation. I. Ball, David M., 1976– II. Kuhlman, Martha B.
PN6727.W285Z63 2010
741.5'973—dc22 2009033755

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

For Cara
For Nicholas



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Introduction: Chris Ware and the "Cult of Difficulty"

MARTHA B. KUHLMAN AND DAVID M. BALL

Reading Chris Ware's comics for the first time can be a disorienting experience. Why does the hardcover edition of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* have such an enigmatic and ornate dust jacket? Where exactly are the author's name and the title of the work, and what is the purpose of the cover's intricate diagrams and cutout instructions? The curious few who unfold the cover are rewarded with a map that is comprised of panels of varying sizes and orientations with abrupt shifts in scale, offering a world-historic vision of multiple generations and transatlantic connections between Irish immigration and the Middle Passage (see plate 1). Arrayed on the page with a dizzying visual intensity, these tiny scenarios are punctuated cryptically by conjunctions and phrases such as "Thus," "But," "And So" and traversed by a network of arrows and lines (dashed or solid) that operates according to an initially inscrutable logic. If this seems too daunting, turning to the endpapers reveals "General Instructions," followed by an "Introduction" and five sections that culminate in an exam, all rendered in painfully tiny type that requires preternatural vision or bringing the book so close to your face that it almost touches your nose.

As the cover warns us, what we have here is definitely "a bold experiment in reader tolerance," and many will not have the time, interest, or patience for it. Put simply, this volume is not for them. But for those readers who, fascinated and challenged by the worlds that Ware has constructed, seek to gain new points of entry into his comics, this collection offers a range of multidisciplinary perspectives that we hope will inspire lively discussions and open previously unexplored avenues for research. This volume offers the first such sustained critical analysis of Chris Ware's already prodigious body of work, yielding a varied, provocative collection of essays that spans multiple approaches and orientations—from literary theory to urban studies, disability studies to art history, critical race theory to comics history—in order to better understand and illuminate Ware's graphic narratives.

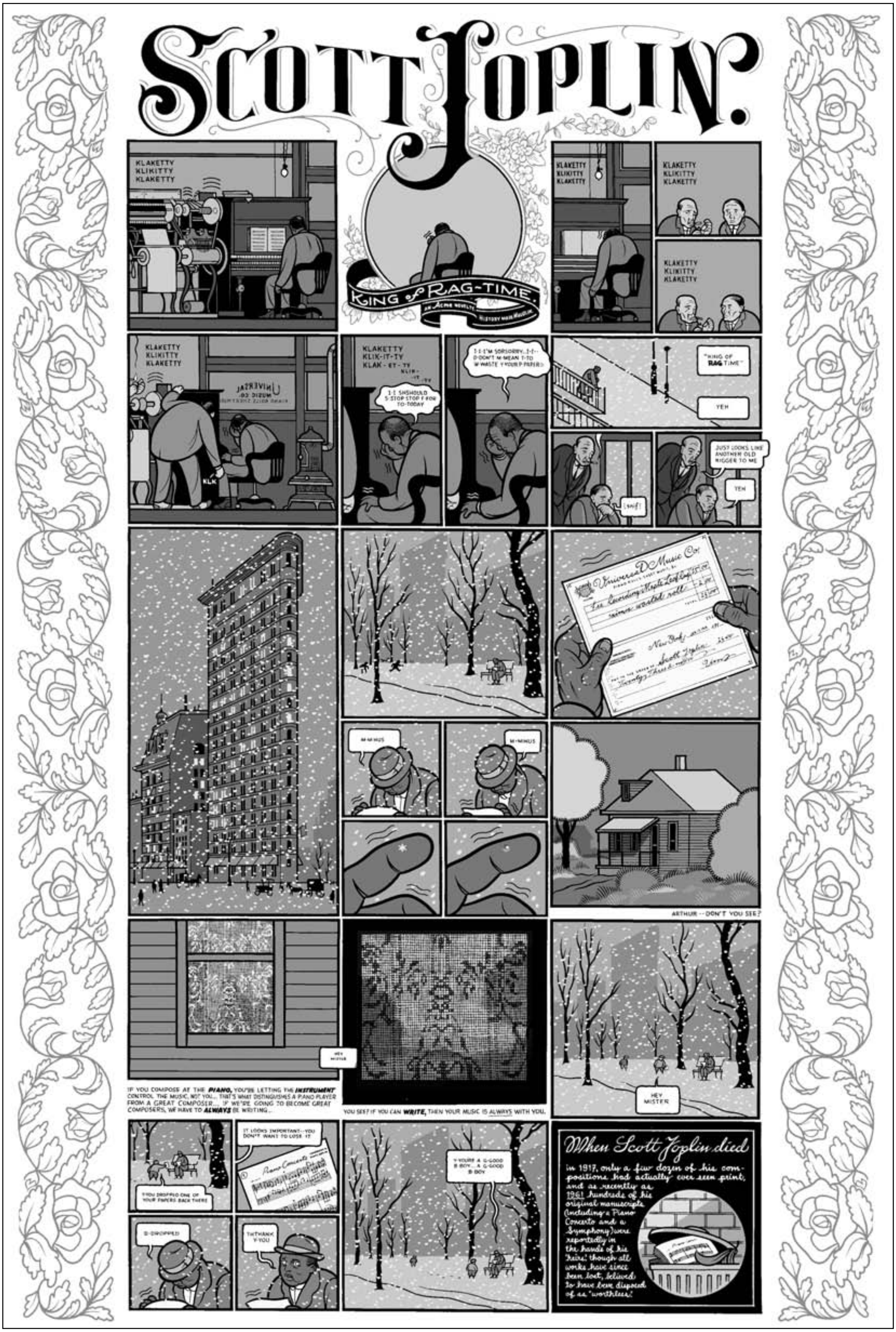
In his 2004 cover story for the *New York Times Magazine*, "Not Funnies," Charles McGrath predicts that comics are the next new literary form and praises *Jimmy Corrigan* as "easily the most beautiful and most complicated of all the new graphic novels."[1] Writing one year later in the *New Yorker*, art critic Peter Schjeldahl identifies Ware as belonging to a "cult of difficulty" that has always characterized avant-gardes, from the cubist experiments of Picasso and Braque to the obscure erudition of Eliot and Pound.[2] These comparisons would undoubtedly embarrass Ware, but Schjeldahl and McGrath are

not alone; Ware's work has also been likened to the fiction of Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, John Barth, and the "high modernism of [Franz] Kafka."[3] In interviews and critical essays, Ware himself has a decidedly literary bent, including references to Ernest Hemingway, Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Nabokov, and Gustave Flaubert in his explanations of the tone and structure of his comics.[4] There are also marked similarities between Ware's work and the contemporary experimental fiction of Dave Eggers, whose memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, published the same year as *Jimmy Corrigan*, begins with front matter that contains a scale rating the author's sexual orientation and a preface to the preface titled "Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of this Book."[5] In the field of literary studies, Ware's work has already made a powerful claim for scholarly consideration and inclusion in course syllabi.

Yet literary references alone fail to account fully for the multidisciplinary reach of comics generally and Ware's work in particular, which draws significantly from the fields of fine art, architecture, design, and entertainment culture. Among his artistic influences, Ware cites Philip Guston, who championed a representational style late in his career contrary to the fashion of abstract expressionism, much in the same way that Ware resisted Clement Greenberg's aesthetics when he was a student at the Art Institute of Chicago.[6] Joseph Cornell, the solitary surrealist of Astoria, Queens, is another of Ware's favorite artists.[7] The melancholy charm of Cornell's idiosyncratic shadow boxes and his nineteenth-century aesthetic of the penny arcade are felt keenly in the meticulously orchestrated panels of Ware's comics, which are reminiscent of the wooden compartments in a typesetter's case. Louis Sullivan's modernist architecture and unapologetic use of ornamentation provide another source of inspiration for Ware, who frequently describes comics as an architecture of visual information that aligns seeing and reading.[8] Likewise, Ware's interest in ragtime and the ferment of musical innovation at the turn of the American twentieth century—Scott Joplin figures prominently here—gives him unique insight into composition and form across disciplines and media (see fig. I.1). Although the individuals in this diverse grouping of creative influences are quite distinct from one another, they all test the limits of their respective disciplinary conventions, unsettling their audience's expectations.

Situating Ware within this multidisciplinary, avant-garde framework foregrounds how his work exposes and manipulates the language of comics in ways that demand a great deal of the reader and test the representational possibilities of the medium. Fortunately for Ware, his interest in drawing comics in the early 1980s coincided with genre-testing experiments by other artists in the field. In 1995, Art Spiegelman described the situation of comics as "hav[ing] already shifted from being an icon of illiteracy to becoming one of the last bastions of literacy. If comics have any problem now, it's that people don't even have patience to decode comics at this point. [. . .] I don't know if we're the vanguard of another culture or the last blacksmiths."[9] Spiegelman and Ware share a common interest in the craft of comics; Ware's consummate graphic design is painstakingly rendered by hand, not on a computer,[10] and likewise requires patience to "decode."[11] As the co-editor of *RAW* magazine with his wife, Françoise Mouly, Spiegelman helped to cultivate a vanguard in comics by bringing together American and European artists who otherwise

Fig. I.1. Ware has a long-standing interest in ragtime music and instruments. Chris Ware, Reginald B. Robinson, and Frank Youngwerth, "Lake Street" (Amsterdam: Oog and Blik, 1999).


SCOTT JOPLIN.
KLAKETTY KLIKITTY KLAKETTY
KING of RAG-TIME.
KLAKETTY KLIKITTY KLAKETTY
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KLAKETTY KLIK-IT-TY KLAK-ET-TY KLIK- -IT -TY
I-I SHSHOULD S-STOP STOP F FOR TO-TODAY
I-I-I'M SORSORRY... I-I-- D-DON'T M-MEAN T-TO W-WASTE Y-YOUR P-PAPER
"KING OF RAG TIME"
YEH
[SNIF]
JUST LOOKS LIKE ANOTHER OLD NIGGER TO ME
YEH
ARTHUR -- DON'T YOU SEE?
HEY MISTER
IF YOU COMPOSE AT THE PIANO, YOU'RE LETTING THE INSTRUMENT CONTROL THE MUSIC, NOT YOU... THAT'S WHAT DISTINGUISHES A PIANO PLAYER FROM A GREAT COMPOSER... IF WE'RE GOING TO BECOME GREAT COMPOSERS, WE HAVE TO ALWAYS BE WRITING...
YOU SEE? IF YOU CAN WRITE, THEN YOUR MUSIC IS ALWAYS WITH YOU.
HEY MISTER
Y-YOU DROPPED ONE OF YOUR PAPERS BACK THERE
IT LOOKS IMPORTANT--YOU DON'T WANT TO LOSE IT
D-DROPPED
TH-THANK Y-YOU
Y-YOU'RE A G-GOOD B-BOY... A G-GOOD B-BOY
When Scott Joplin died
in 1917, only a few dozen of his compositions had actually ever seen print; and as recently as 1961 hundreds of his original manuscripts (including a Piano Concerto and a Symphony) were reportedly in the hands of his "heirs," though all works have since been lost, believed to have been disposed of as "worthless."

could not find a place for their experimental or unconventional work within mainstream comics publishing. Ware's first exposure to the magazine in 1983 was formative: "I could tell immediately that it was something wholly different [. . .] and sophisticated in a way my Nebraska brain at the time simply couldn't understand. [. . .] It rearranged my mind about comics forever."[12]

Through *RAW*, Ware was exposed to the work of comics innovators such as Charles Burns, Gary Panter, Kaz, Richard McGuire, Ben Katchor, and Spiegelman himself, all profound influences on his artistic outlook and career.[13] Upon reading the first installments of *Maus*, Spiegelman's acclaimed narrative of his father's experience in Auschwitz, Ware decided to "try to do comics that had a truly 'serious' tone to them."[14] Ware's encounter with Richard McGuire's strip entitled simply "Here," which appeared in *RAW* in 1989, was a similarly formative moment. The manner in which McGuire narrates the history of a single space through many millennia using nested panels to represent, in Ware's words, "multigenerational oppositions that are at once trivial and poignant," is an apt description both of McGuire's comics and Ware's mature work.[15] *RAW* demonstrated that conspicuously "difficult" comics could be taken seriously and served as a formative introduction into alternative comics for Ware.

Like Spiegelman, Ware also finds inspiration in the visual language of an earlier generation of comics artists from the early twentieth century and has been an instrumental catalyst in reissuing their work.[16] One can discern affinities between the surreal dream sequences and detailed landscapes in Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and the fantasy sequences in *Jimmy Corrigan*, with the fundamental difference that in Ware's reinterpretation there is no redemptive moment of awakening.[17] George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* is also an essential reference for Ware's early character Quimby the Mouse, both for the guiding narrative of unrequited love between a cat and a mouse and for the visual jazz of his inventive page layouts. Frank King, author of the long-running comic strip *Gasoline Alley*, is another of Ware's favorite cartoonists, and *Jimmy Corrigan* can be understood as an ironic update of King's poignant father-son narrative.[18] Seen broadly, this involvement in the renaissance of early twentieth-century newspaper comics marks a shift made by many graphic novelists of the current generation away from the more conventional history of multiply authored superhero comics in publishing houses such as DC and Marvel, and toward a focus on the artistic legacies of earlier individual comics artists such as Rodolphe Töpffer, McCay, Herriman, King, and Cliff Sterrett.[19]

In a more contemporary vein, Ware's comics are frequently discussed and taught in conjunction with a younger generation of artists who are reinventing the medium of comics. While the visual styles of such artists as Seth, Daniel Clowes, Adrian Tomine, Joe Sacco, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel, to name a few, are quite distinct, they all employ a degree of formal complexity and share some thematic concerns with Ware.[20] There is a simultaneously self-reflexive and self-deprecating quality to the representation of collecting in Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (2003) and Ware's ongoing "Rusty Brown" narrative. Like Ware, Clowes and Tomine offer an ironic view of adolescence and romantic disappointment that succeeds in being both detached and deeply felt in *Ghost World* (1998) and *Shortcomings* (2007), respectively.

Although Sacco's *The Fixer* (2003), Satrapi's *Persepolis* series (*The Story of a Childhood*, 2004; *The Story of a Return*, 2005), and Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) all differ from Ware in that their work is centered in autobiography and nonfiction, all four artists are concerned with representing how the traumatic past, whether on a personal or historical scale, interrupts and determines the trajectory of lives in the present.

Taken together, this generation of artists and writers is charting new directions in contemporary graphic narratives, both in terms of their formal innovations *and* in the complexity of their subject matter. Indeed, for all of Chris Ware's conspicuous difficulty and abstraction, at the heart of all of his work is a layered, nuanced, and richly rendered sense of place and experience. The vertiginous diagrams in *Jimmy Corrigan* correspond with the conflicted and involved genealogies his novel attempts to delineate, his entangled layouts visually reminding the reader of the entangled and unresolved legacies of diaspora and race relations in contemporary America. Likewise, the architectural complexity of "Building Stories" reflects Ware's meditations on architectural space in everyday life, as much as his painstaking reproductions of discrete temporal moments in "Rusty Brown" mirror the simultaneous banality (and occasional flashes of painful beauty) in his characters' largely mundane lives. Experimentation is thus a means of conveying experience in Ware's comics—a point he often emphasizes in his interviews and essays—producing one of the most simultaneously complex and moving collections of work in contemporary comics.

Life and Works

Franklin Christenson Ware, who publishes most consistently as "Chris Ware" but whose work has also appeared under the monikers "F. C. Ware" and "C. Ware" and pseudonymously under "George Wilson," was born on December 28, 1967, in Omaha, Nebraska. Both Ware's mother and his grandfather worked for the *Omaha World-Herald*, and exposed him at a young age to the newspaper art department, drawing classes at a local art museum, and the newspaper comics Ware's grandfather would receive from United Features Syndicate.[21] From his narratives exploring familial bonds in early childhood (*Quimby the Mouse*) to the setting and visual palette of 1970s Omaha ("Rusty Brown") and the very flatness of the landscapes characteristic of his aesthetic, Ware's Midwestern background is apparent throughout his work.

Ware first pursued formal training in the fine arts at University of Texas at Austin and began work as a cartoonist for the student paper. His first comic strips for the *Daily Texan* were published from 1987 to 1991, demonstrating an early interest in formal play with comics conventions. Characters are drawn placing text above their own heads or reaching across panels to affect their future selves. Ware on occasion would compose as many as twelve different comics for the various plates used to print a single issue of the *Daily Texan*, providing continuous narratives and alternate conclusions for those readers intrepid enough to compare differing versions of the same day's newspaper.[22] While Ware has dismissed many of these early efforts as embarrassments, elements of his mature work first begin to surface here.[23] Ware's Herrimanesque duo of Quimby the Mouse and Sparky the Cat, his hapless potato-shaped nar-

rator who would later re-emerge in the pages of *RAW* and *The ACME Novelty Library* 3, and Jimmy Corrigan, the eponymous hero of Ware's breakthrough novel in 2000, make their first appearances in the *Daily Texan* strips. The core sensibilities of Ware's graphic narratives—generic play, formal inventiveness, the incorporation of commercial art and aesthetic paradigms from earlier eras of American popular culture, and a prodigious visual imagination that consistently blurs the line between high art and mass culture, epistemological queries and irreverent humor—all emerge in a nascent form in these first years.

However, Ware's career began in earnest when Spiegelman, seeing one of Ware's comics in the *Daily Texan* next to a review of *Maus* in 1987, offered him four pages in *RAW*.[24] A sophomore at the University of Texas at Austin at the time, Ware would eventually publish two pieces for *RAW*, the first of which, "Waking Up Blind," follows the self-flagellant, slapstick adventures of a potato-shaped protagonist as he struggles to keep his eyes in his head, only to gouge them out again once he sees himself in the mirror.[25] Drawing on the antic energy of early twentieth-century cartoons, vaudeville, and film, "Waking Up Blind" exhibits a minimalist's interest in form and spatial relations, sending its character careening across the page in a manner reminiscent of the indignities later suffered by Sparky at the hands of Quimby. Ware's second piece for *RAW*, "Thrilling Adventure Stories/I Guess," juxtaposes a digressive, autobiographical essay about Ware's childhood against a pastiche of golden-age superhero comics, intertwining a confessional story of familial and racial tension with a more conventional representation of derring-do and heroic rescue (see plate 2).[26] Already we witness Ware's homage to the history of comics in his skillful rendering of the texture and visual energy of 1940s-era work as well as a critical and ironic distance from the generic conventions of that same idiom. The resulting composition demonstrates the arbitrariness of many of the conventions of the comics medium while telling a story with a great deal of emotional resonance, anticipating the more complex compositions to follow.

In 1991, Ware's move to enroll at the Art Institute of Chicago marked a major transition in his career, and although he was ultimately disaffected with the school's biases against narrative and realistic representation, the range of his art historical knowledge continues to inform his work. The exposure afforded him in *RAW* led to his own serialized comic with Fantagraphics, the first volume of which appeared in 1993 under the title *The ACME Novelty Library*. Notable for its heterogeneity, the first three volumes of *ACME* develop three separate story lines: Jimmy Corrigan, Quimby, and (for lack of a better term) "potato guy," respectively, each appearing in radically different visual styles, even down to the shape and size of the bound comics themselves (see fig. I.2). Subsequent issues of *The ACME Novelty Library* contained an even more accelerated display of creativity and variety, offering newly running gags like "Big Tex" and "Tales of Tomorrow" while developing the ongoing story of Jimmy Corrigan. Concluded in *ACME Novelty Library* 14, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* took over seven years to complete and appeared in novel publication in 2000 to widespread acclaim. It was followed by two book-length collections of the *ACME* material—*Quimby the Mouse* in

Fig. I.2. "Potato guy," tumbling down stairs in a slapstick manner much like Quimby in later comics, is one of Ware's first characters. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 3 (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1994), 29.

2003 and the exuberantly titled *The ACME Novelty Library Annual Report to Shareholders and Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book* in 2005.

Compiling and reorganizing a good portion of the serialized work through *The ACME Novelty Library* 15, these volumes are nonetheless difficult to categorize. None of these projects is wholly discrete from the others (Quimby appears in *Jimmy Corrigan* and vice versa, both make appearances in *The ACME Report*), nor does any offer the conventional assurances of a stable text. Many serialized episodes featuring Jimmy Corrigan were excised from the novel publication, which itself is conspicuously fragmented and draws attention to its own discontinuities. The *Quimby* and *The ACME Report* hardcover volumes are loosely held together by essays that wind throughout their respective books and serve only obliquely as a kind of ligature for episodic comics around common themes. Given these qualities, it would seem insufficient to classify either under the label "graphic novel." As such, Ware's oeuvre offers unique challenges to the literary critic, the art historian, and the comics theorist alike, providing a complex array of texts to interpret and consider. (For a full discussion of the editorial decisions made to address these concerns, see the appendix, "A Guide to Chris Ware's Primary Works" at the end of this volume.)

Ware's works-in-progress—"Building Stories" and "Rusty Brown"—offer similar challenges and rewards, pursuing many of the leitmotifs present in the earlier work, while also breaking new ground. "Building Stories" explores the intersecting lives of tenants in a Chicago townhouse, placing *Jimmy Corrigan*'s guiding theme of missed connections between the several male generations of a single family within an architectural context, all the while exploring the relationships between individuals and their lived spaces. "Rusty Brown" is likewise proving to be a capacious project, one that is taking shape to be Ware's most ambitious narrative to date. What began as the abject adventures of an ardent comics collector now has radiating spokes that address the failed writing career (and science fiction musings) of Rusty's father, Woody, the growing distance between Rusty's decaying adulthood and his childhood friend Chalky White's ascent to middle-class respectability, and the tortured coming-out of Chalky's daughter, Brittany, among other plot lines. In one narrative strand, Ware represents one day in each year of the life history of his seemingly minor character, Jordan W. Lint, attempting to picture his worldview at the age in which it is narrated, an almost Joycean project to map consciousness (see plate 3). While neither of these novels-in-progress has neared its final form, they yield tantalizing glimpses into the next phase of an already prolific career.

In addition to Ware's comics publications, he has also earned a reputation as a creative and generous editor, essayist, and artistic collaborator. Two important collections of contemporary comics, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (2004) and the *2007 Best American Comics*, are his projects, and he served as a guiding force in the reissues of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* and Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*.[27] Ware's admiration for Herriman is apparent in his involvement with an effort to republish *Krazy Kat* as *Krazy & Ignatz*, a multivolume series that Ware has designed.[28] His own collection of King's strips also comprise an important part of the reissued volumes of *Gasoline Alley* under the title *Walt and Skeezix*, a collaboration, with editors Jeet Heer

and Chris Oliveros, that features Ware's contributions as cover artist, designer, and editor. He has exhibited his work at the 2002 Whitney Biennial, the 2005 Masters of American Comics exhibition, and the self-designed 2007 solo exhibition at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and has curated a show at the Phoenix Art Museum on the painting, sculpture, and graphic work of contemporary graphic novelists like Seth, Kim Deitch, and Gary Panter (see plate 4). In collaboration with National Public Radio's Ira Glass, Ware helped to illustrate and design *Lost Buildings*, an elaborate DVD on the preservation of Louis Sullivan's architecture, in addition to producing multiple animations for the televised version of Glass's "This American Life." Moreover, his work has appeared on book covers and movie posters and his essays and book reviews have been published in *Virginia Quarterly Review* and *Bookforum*. Commensurate with his importance in the field, two volumes of Ware's sketchbooks have also been published, giving a fascinating, and often confessional, window into his creative process and the early genesis of many of his most enduring creations. For all of these reasons, Ware promises to be a major and enduring figure in twenty-first-century art and literature.

Not that Ware perceives himself in this way; doubtless he would dismiss this praise as exaggerated or pretentious. In interviews he seems somewhat incredulous and abashed by his success. But by any measure, his work has found admirers inside and outside of the comics world. Ware has won over twenty Harvey and Eisner awards in the 1990s and 2000s in the categories of production, coloring, and lettering. When *Jimmy Corrigan* won the American Book Award (2001) and the Guardian First Book Award (2001), readers who had never picked up a graphic novel, much less a comic book, suddenly took notice and the book sold over one hundred thousand hardcover copies.[29] Since then, both *The ACME Novelty Library* and *Jimmy Corrigan* have continued to earn the adulation of critics, including the best graphic novel and the critics' award at the Angoulême festival in France (2003), the United States Artist Grant (2006), and the VPRO Grand Prix from an international board of comics experts (2008).

Ware among the Critics

Despite this long and complex résumé, for many years Ware was a cult figure primarily known only within the comics community.[30] After the publication of *Jimmy Corrigan* in 2000, however, his work began to attract sustained scholarly attention. It is not surprising that these initial essays tend to focus on formal aspects of Ware's work, given the labyrinthine complexity of his comics. In the first academic essay published on Ware in 2001, Gene Kannenberg Jr. analyzed the way in which "text reads as image" in Ware's early *ACME Novelty Library* comics, much in the same way that visual literature does, thus challenging the traditional text/image dichotomy in comics criticism.[31] His formal approach demonstrates how Ware's text operates on multiple levels—narrative, metanarrative, and extranarrative—and frequently undermines the visual content of the comics to represent conflicting emotions and ironic commentary. This ironic undercurrent pervades Ware's comics, whether we consider "Thrilling Adventure Stories/I Guess" from *RAW* or the faux advertisements in *The ACME Novelty Library*, which function as dark parodies of

advertisements in golden-age era comics books and Sears, Roebuck and Company catalogues and "undercut the utopian optimism promised by advertising and entertainment."[32]

Belgian critic Jan Baetens also highlights the structural qualities of Ware's comics, focusing specifically on the role of constraints in Ware's limited palate and use of simplified forms to create "a multi-layered, poly-sequential reading and writing."[33] This minimalist aesthetic, which he likens to Otto Neurath's international visual language of "isotypes," directs the reader's attention to relationships and patterns that operate at the level of the page layout. Baetens compares the non-linear chronology and repetition in Ware's comics to the fragmented narration of the French *nouveau roman*; in both cases, a repeated phrase or image becomes a "narrative generator" that signals a shift in the storyline. Most recently, Thomas Bredehoft discusses how *Jimmy Corrigan* subverts the reader's expectations by including two- and three-dimensional diagrams and objects "in order to defamiliarize or challenge our habit of understanding the narrative line as pervasively linear and sequenced in time."[34] Bredehoft situates the zoetrope and other entertainments in *Jimmy Corrigan* in relation to the work of seminal authors in visual studies such as Rosalind Krauss, Martin Jay, and Jonathan Crary in order to demonstrate how the history of photography and the moving image is subtly woven into the text. For Bredehoft and Baetens, the most revolutionary aspect of Ware's comics is their non-linear and yet highly organized composition.

Other critics have stressed the literary qualities of Ware's work and developed parallels and comparisons from this quarter. Writing in 2003, Brad Prager expands upon Ware's representation of "modernity's troubled relation to the past and to progress" by situating *Jimmy Corrigan* within the modernist tradition of Kafka and Freud.[35] Central to Prager's argument are the connections that he develops between Walter Benjamin's Marxist critiques of commodity culture and the alienation evident across multiple generations of Corrigan fathers and sons, both from each other and from their surroundings. Myla Goldberg, in a 2004 essay, finds similarities between the daring prose collage of John Dos Passos and the heterogeneous combinations of narrative and children's "activity pages." Further expanding upon the modernist frame of reference, she compares Gertrude Stein's use of repeated words and phrases to emphasize the texture of language to the recurring motifs in *Jimmy Corrigan*.[36] In his 2006 article, "The Shameful Art," Daniel Worden argues that shame, intimacy, and gender melancholy—familiar tropes from masculine modernity—are the governing principles behind the McSweeney's comics anthology edited by Ware.[37]

Daniel Raeburn's monograph *Chris Ware* (2004), the first book devoted solely to the artist's work, provides valuable biographical and historical context for understanding the development of Ware's artistic production and includes reproductions of his early comic strips, sculptures, and various design projects. This lavishly illustrated volume helpfully juxtaposes some of Ware's primary source research materials for fonts and advertisements to his designs for lesser-known works, such as his covers for *The Ragtime Ephemeralist*.[38] Raeburn's introductory essay offers significant insights into how Ware himself understands and articulates the underlying structure of his comics. To elucidate the mechanisms behind his work, Ware invokes the analogies of

music and architecture. He likens the process of creating comics to the act of composing music; in both cases, the artist is concerned with "tak[ing] pieces of experience and freez[ing] them in time."[39] Inspired by Goethe's dictum that "architecture is frozen music," Ware explores the relationship between comics, music, and architecture in projects such as "Building Stories," serialized in the *New York Times Magazine* and *The ACME Novelty Library* 18. For Ware, word and image are inseparably entwined in his creative process; he does not begin with a script and then create the images as an illustration. Rather, his compositions are improvised and developed on the page: "Writing and drawing are thinking. We're told in school that they're skills but that's wrong. Drawing is a way of thinking. It's a way of seeing."[40]

Critical Approaches to the Comics of Chris Ware

The essays in this volume take Ware's claim that "drawing is a way of thinking" as an imperative, building significantly upon this growing scholarly genealogy and offering a broadened frame of reference from multiple disciplines and strains of critical inquiry. Our intention is to place Ware's work in as diverse a set of contexts as his own wide-ranging interests and influences demand, collecting the work of both established scholars and emerging voices in comics criticism.

In our first section, *Contexts and Canons*, historian Jeet Heer considers how Ware, like Spiegelman and others, has participated in reshaping the canon of comics history. Heer argues that Ware is inventing his own comics ancestors through his work as an editor and book designer, championing artists who engage in formal experimentation or focus on everyday life, such as Rodolphe Töpffer, George Herriman, Frank King, and Gluyas Williams. Jacob Brogan takes up the question of canon formation from a different angle, arguing that Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* is an attempt to re-imagine the position of the superhero in American comics without granting it a central or otherwise foundational role. Brogan claims that Jimmy Corrigan's struggle to come to terms with his father serves as an allegory for the author's anxiety over the enduring influence of the superhero in comics histories. In his essay "The Limits of Realism," Marc Singer analyzes Ware's rejection of realistic figure drawing in his own comics and takes a critical view of his promotion of memoir, autobiography, and realistic fiction in his anthologies, defending the very tradition Brogan reads as imprisoning. Finally, David M. Ball examines the persistent rhetoric of failure throughout Ware's oeuvre, locating this impulse in a longer American literary genealogy that valorizes literary prestige over popularity. Ball argues that Ware's self-abnegation becomes a cipher for his ambivalence about comics' newly found role as literature, reviving anxieties around canon formation that have taken place in American literature and literary history before him.

The three essays that comprise *Artistic Intersections* approach Ware's comics from the perspectives of art history, comparative literature, and graphic design. Through her close reading of "Our History of Art," Katherine Roeder studies how Ware's comics version of art history reveals his fundamental ambivalence toward high art and the institution of the museum, at the same time that he has been celebrated by many in these arenas. Despite Ware's pro-

found knowledge of art history, Roeder points to the tension between Ware's suspicion of the art world and his familiarity and ease with its conventions. Martha Kuhlman considers Ware's comics from a perspective informed by French comics, specifically an experimental collective known as Oubapo. For both Ware and Oubapo, the concept of the workshop or factory becomes a key trope as they self-consciously create an avant-garde form of comics that embraces experimentation in the medium and about the medium. Lastly, Isaac Cates asks us to rethink the traditional emphasis on sequentiality in comics theory and proposes a poetics of the diagram that draws upon information theory in order to offer a new approach not only to understanding Ware's comics, but also to contemporary comics more broadly. Ultimately, Cates shows that understanding Ware's comics as diagrams allows us to see how they function as puzzles to be solved.

The prominence of Chicago in Ware's works, particularly in *Jimmy Corrigan* and the "Building Stories" series, emerges in Daniel Worden's and Matt Godbey's essays in a section titled *The Urban Landscape*. Drawing upon the essays of figures as diverse as Louis Sullivan and Walter Benjamin, Worden focuses on the importance of *flânerie*, mechanical reproduction, and ruins in Ware's representations of architecture in *Lost Buildings*. Worden points to Ware's critique of the impersonal, homogenous, and stultifying qualities of the International style popularized by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and contrasts this with Ware's understanding of architecture as the impetus for a renewed aesthetic sensibility and connection to the outside world. Godbey locates "Building Stories" historically in the Chicago neighborhood of Humboldt Park, a site that reveals Ware's concerns about the process of gentrification and the effects it has on the architectural and human terrains of the city. Reading "Building Stories" in the context of current debates about gentrification in Chicago and other major U.S. cities, Godbey interprets Ware's graphic narrative as a critique of gentrification and a defense of urban historic preservation.

In the first essay in the section *Reading History*, Joanna Davis-McElligatt discusses how Ware's comics engage questions of caricature and racism in comics history and American history writ large. She argues that *Jimmy Corrigan* constitutes an incisive critique of the myths of American national identity, asking us to think about historical and familial connections between European immigrants and black slaves. Ultimately, she reads *Jimmy Corrigan* as a counter-narrative to traditional and often inaccurate histories of immigration in America. Shawn Gilmore's essay also concentrates on *Jimmy Corrigan*, analyzing the complex juxtaposition of the public history of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the private history of the Corrigan family. Gilmore demonstrates how the graphic narrative weaves together a distanced, historical perspective that relies primarily on an iconic mode of representation with a more personal register that reflects Jimmy's subjectivity. Lastly, Benjamin Widiss reads *Quimby the Mouse* through the autobiographical criticism of Philippe Lejeune, examining the connections between the slapstick antics of the Quimby comics and the autobiographical essay woven throughout the volume. Through his analysis, *Quimby the Mouse* emerges as a multilayered disquisition on the interlocking categories of self, artwork, and time.

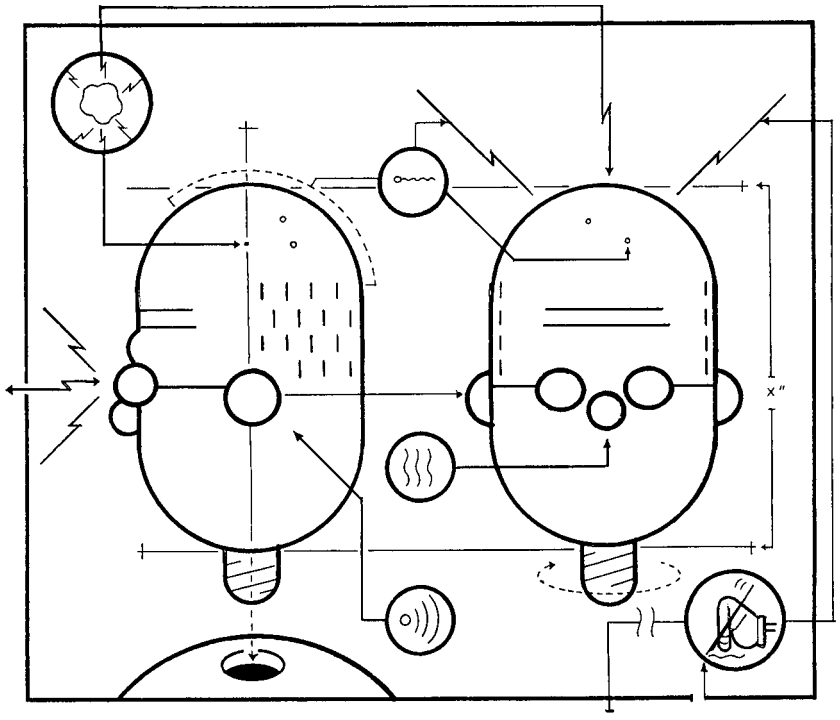

Fig. I.3. The complicated complexes of the artist. Chris Ware, Self-Portrait, 2002.

The quotidian world is a central concern in Chris Ware's work, and the three essays that comprise the final section, *Everyday Temporalities*, focus on different aspects of time and ordinary experience: temporal regression, the everyday experience of disability, and structures of memory. In "Chris Ware and the Pursuit of Slowness," Georgiana Banita analyzes Ware's work in terms of its deliberate fascination with slowness. Invoking Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome, Banita interprets the slowness of Ware's narration as symptomatic of his profound resistance to contemporary consumer culture. Margaret Fink Berman discusses the ways in which Ware represents the young woman with a prosthetic limb in "Building Stories," arguing that she is situated within an aesthetic of the ordinary, thus demystifying her physical difference. By imagining the disabled experience as not radically different from the daily rituals of the other inhabitants of the building, Ware opens a space for the protagonist that Berman terms "idiosyncratic belonging." In "Past Imperfect," the last essay of this section, Peter Sattler considers how memory is constructed in "Building Stories." He analyzes the interplay between episodic, experiential, and narrative memory and explains how Ware's work produces an intricate layering between these strands.

Collectively, the reach of these widely varied approaches to Chris Ware's comics demonstrates the range and generative heterogeneity of his oeuvre. They also respond to an imperative already inherent in comics' multiple modalities: to think nimbly and creatively across conventional disciplinary boundaries. In this respect, these essays echo a growing number of scholars and comics creators who have argued for a more sophisticated "visual-verbal" literacy commensurate to the specific demands and unique qualities of graphic narrative, Chris Ware's among them.[41] We hope that this volume en-

riches and expands the challenges and rewards of reading Chris Ware's comics, proving that enjoyment of and critical thought about graphic narratives are mutually sustaining activities. Voices in the arenas of graphic narrative and the academy have much to learn from one another in the years ahead, and we trust that the essays and viewpoints collected here will advance that emerging dialogue.

Notes

1. Charles McGrath, "Not Funnies," *New York Times Magazine*, July 11, 2004, 24+.

2. Peter Schjeldahl, "Words and Pictures: Graphic Novels Come of Age," *New Yorker*, October 17, 2005, 162.

3. Myla Goldberg, "The Exquisite Strangeness and Estrangement of Renée French and Chris Ware," In *Give Our Regards to the Atom Smashers! Writers on Comics*, ed. Sean Howe (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 205; Brad Prager, "Modernism and the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *International Journal of Comic Art* 5.1 (2003): 195.

4. See Gary Groth's interview with Ware in the *Comics Journal* 200 (1997): 119–71. Ware also created a witty cover for the *Virginia Quarterly Review*'s "Writers on Writers" special issue (fall 2006), which included a fanciful and encyclopedic tour of the history of literary influence, including such gems as "Johnson on Sterne," "Austen on Johnson," and "Coleridge on Opium." Ware also includes two Nabokov quotes as epigrams to his introduction to *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004).

5. Dave Eggers and Ware are very much intellectual interlocutors: Eggers has written appreciatively of Ware in *Masters of American Comics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 309–16 and in the *New York Times* ("After Wham! Pow! Shazam!" November 26, 2000), and Ware has appeared multiple times in Eggers's ongoing *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, edited a comics anthology appearing as the thirteenth number of *McSweeney's*, and painted a mural on the façade of Eggers's Writers' Resource Center, 826 Valencia, in San Francisco.

6. See Ware's article "Philip Guston: A Cartoonist's Appreciation," *McSweeney's* 13: 85–91 and the second page of "Apologies, etc." (Omaha: Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, 2007), Ware's self-authored exhibition guide to his 2007 show at the University of Nebraska.

7. Ware created a curio cabinet inspired by Joseph Cornell; to view a photograph of his artwork, see Daniel Raeburn's book, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 50. Ware has in his living room "a shrine of sorts to honor Joseph Cornell and the unique, inventive, private life that Cornell shared through his art." See "Nobody Special: An IMP Special Report," *The Imp* 3 (1999): 16.

8. See the collaborative project "Lost Buildings," created by Chris Ware, Tim Samuelson, and Ira Glass. Published by *This American Life*, WBEZ Chicago, 2004.

9. Art Spiegelman, quoted in Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123 (2008): 460.

10. See Jan Baetens's article, "New = Old, Old = New: Digital and Other Comics following Scott McCloud and Chris Ware," January 1, 2001, and January 18, 2009. *Electronic Book Review*, January 1, 2001. http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/webarts/graphic (accessed January 18, 2009). Even though Ware's comics may appear to be computer generated, Baetens argues that his artwork is actually more sophisticated than what McCloud predicts for the future of digital comics in *Reinventing Comics*.

11. The discrepancy between the amount of time it takes to read Ware's comics and the amount of time it takes to create them is staggering. In the article "Not Funnies," by McGrath, Ware describes working on a wordless comic: "It involved maybe 8 to 10 seconds of actual narrative time. But it took me three days to do it, 12 hours a day" (46).

12. Interview edited by Bill Kartalopoulos, "A *RAW* History," *Indy Magazine* (winter 2005). http://64.23.98.142/indy/winter_2005/raw_01/index.html (accessed January 18, 2009).

13. Groth interview, 128.

14. Ibid., 127.

15. Chris Ware, "Richard McGuire and 'Here:' A Grateful Appreciation," *Comic Art* 8 (2006): 5–7.

16. Groth interview, 164; Todd Hignite, *In the Studio: Visits with Contemporary Cartoonists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 238.

17. John Carlin, Introduction to *Masters of American Comics*, ed. John Carlin, Paul Karasik, and Brian Walker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 162.

18. Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2007), 353.

19. See Raeburn, *Chris Ware*; and Hignite, *In the Studio.*

20. McGrath, "Not Funnies," 26; Chute, "Comics as Literature?" 459; Peter Schjeldahl, "Do It Yourself: Biennial Follies at the Whitney," *New Yorker*, March 25, 2002; and Carlin, Introduction, 163.

21. Chris Ware, "Apologies, Etc." (Omaha: Sheldon Memorial Gallery, 2007), n.p.

22. Interview with Chris Ware conducted by the *New Yorker*, archived at the "ACME Novelty Archive" Web site. http://www.acmenoveltyarchive.org/media/audio/Ware_NewYorker_061127.mp3 (accessed June 26, 2008).

23. Most notable among this disavowed early work is Ware's science fiction satire *Floyd Farland: Citizen of the Future* (Forestville, CA: Eclipse Books, 1987), now out of print.

24. Groth interview, 128; Kartalopoulos, "A *RAW* History."

25. See vol. 2, no. 2, 1990, redrawn and reprinted in *ACME Novelty Library* 3: 20–21.

26. See vol. 2, no. 3, 1991, reprinted in *Quimby the Mouse*, 39–41.

27. George Herriman, *Krazy and Ignatz*, 8 vols. to date (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2000–present); Frank King, *Walt and Skeezix*, 3 vols. to date (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2005–present).

28. Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 353–54; Hignite, *In the Studio*, 238.

29. McGrath, "Not Funnies," 26.

30. Groth interview, 119.

31. Gene Kannenberg Jr., "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image, and Visual Narrative Strategies," In *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 175.

32. Kannenberg, "The Comics of Chris Ware," 195.

33. See Jan Baetens, "New = Old, Old = New," and his essay "Comic strips and constrained writing," *Image & Narrative* (October 2003). http://www.imageandnarrative.be/graphicnovel/janbaetens_constrained.htm (accessed January 18, 2009).

34. Thomas A. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 885.

35. Prager, "Modernism and the Contemporary Graphic Novel," 205.

36. Goldberg, "The Exquisite Strangeness," 205.

37. Daniel Worden, "The Shameful Art: *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, Comics, and the Politics of Affect," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 894.

38. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 23.

39. Ibid., 25.

40. Chris Ware, quoted in Daniel Raeburn, "The Smartest Cartoonist on Earth," *The Imp* 1.3 (1999): 9.

41. Marianne Hirsch, "Editor's Column: Collateral Damage," *PMLA* 119 (2004): 1212.

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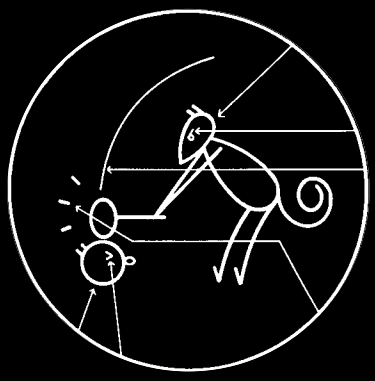
Contexts and Canons



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Inventing Cartooning Ancestors: Ware and the Comics Canon

JEET HEER

In 1990, Chris Ware, then a twenty-two-year-old student at the very beginning of his career, made a pilgrimage to Monument Valley, Arizona, in order to investigate the life of George Herriman. Author of the classic strip *Krazy Kat*, which ran in a variety of newspapers from 1913 until the cartoonist's death in 1944, Herriman used the otherworldly desert landscape of the region as the ever-shifting backdrop to his comics. Along with the adjacent area of Coconino County, Monument Valley inspired the dream-like lunar landscape that made *Krazy Kat* a rare example of cartoon modernism. Eager to learn more about the sources of Herriman's artistry, Ware felt he had to see the landscape of jutting buttes and flat-topped mesas that the earlier cartoonist had so creatively incorporated into his work. This hajj to the Southwest was an early manifestation of Ware's interest in the history of cartooning, a persistent fascination that has been much more than an antiquarian passion and has had a profound influence on Ware's body of work.[1]

Throughout his career Ware has constantly evoked cartoonists from the past, particularly the newspaper cartoonists of the early twentieth century and the pioneering superhero artists of the 1930s and 1940s.[2] These references have taken many forms, ranging from sly visual allusions to outright declaratory celebrations. A quick inventory would include the early Ware story "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess" from 1991, done in a style closely mimicking that of Superman co-creator Joe Shuster; the cat/mouse dynamic of the *Quimby the Mouse* stories, borrowed from the anthropomorphic love triangle at the heart of *Krazy Kat* (where the feline lead character has an unrequited passion for an irascible rodent); the many ironic references to Superman, sprinkled throughout *Jimmy Corrigan*, that serve as a fantasy counterpart to the bleakness of the main story; and the unusually oversized dimensions of some of Ware's books, such as the *Quimby the Mouse* volume and *The ACME Report*, which recall the full newspaper-size Sunday pages by cartoonists like Winsor McCay and Frank King in the first decades of the twentieth century.[3]

Ware's deep and abiding love of old comics is also evident in his numerous reprint projects, where he has used his own strong sense of book design to bring new attention to works like Herriman's *Krazy Kat* and Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*.[4] To date, Ware has designed and co-edited four volumes of *Gasoline Alley* (under the umbrella title *Walt and Skeezix*) as well as ten vol-

umes devoted to *Krazy Kat* (under the title *Krazy and Ignatz*). Aside from this editing and design work, he has also written extensively about the history of comics in a variety of venues, ranging from *Bookforum* to a museum catalogue published by the Library of Congress.[5]

On one level, Ware's engagement with the history of comics shouldn't be surprising. One would expect poets, novelists, and painters to be similarly connected with the traditions of their respective art forms. Yet there is a significant difference between how a cartoonist relates to the history of his or her craft and how practitioners of more traditional arts are shaped by their aesthetic heritage. If poets, novelists, or painters try to educate themselves in the history of their respective genres, they can draw on a vast repository of institutional knowledge housed in libraries, universities, and museums. Until very recently, cartoonists didn't have access to anything comparable in the history of comics: monographs, library collections, museum holdings, and reprints were few, haphazard, scattered, or incomplete. The Canadian cartoonist Seth, whose passion for old comics matches that of his friend Chris Ware, once noted that most cartoonists have to educate themselves in the history of comics by scrounging through used book stores or gleaning whatever information they can from the few general histories of the art that are available.[6]

This essay will examine Ware's work as a comics historian, paying particular attention to his book designs. My contention is that in restoring artists like King and Herriman to the public spotlight, Ware is engaged in an act of ancestor creation, of giving a pedigree and lineage to his own work. In other words, Ware's book designs are a form of canon formation, a way of filling in the gap of missing archival and historical material and creating for comics a sense of a continuous tradition and lineage. Before going further, I should note that I've worked closely with Ware on many of these reprint projects, co-editing three of the *Walt and Skeezix* books and writing introductions to four of the *Krazy and Ignatz* books. Therefore, although I am not speaking on behalf of Ware, my account is informed by my many conversations with him on these topics.

Ware's work as a historian and designer significantly overlaps with his thematic concerns as an artist. In *Jimmy Corrigan*, the hapless protagonist goes on a search for his missing father, and in the course of the narrative, a larger family history is revealed. In Ware's historical research, he has sought artistic forebears and in doing so has created a kind of artistic genealogy. Rusty Brown, the main character in Ware's novel-in-progress, is an avid collector whose narrow-minded acquisitiveness often takes on a pathological intensity.[7] Ware's knowledge of collectors comes from first-hand experience since he has become a major collector and interacted with other collectors in the course of his self-education as a comics historian.

In trying to understand the role that the history of comics has played in Ware's work, it is important to bear in mind that he is following a familiar pattern. Innovative artists often invent their own ancestors as a way of giving a pedigree to their work. There is a sense in which Franz Kafka invented Charles Dickens and T. S. Eliot invented John Donne.[8] Prior to Kafka, Dickens was read as a popular entertainer who specialized in heart-warming picturesque tales. Kafka's fictions and comments on Dickens recast the Victorian

novelist as the dark writer of claustrophobic allegories such as *Bleak House*. Similarly, Eliot remade John Donne, largely relegated to the status of a literary curiosity, into a major precursor to modernism. In the field of comics, Ware has engaged in a comparable rewriting of history by offering a new reading of past masters. Challenging the standard view of comics history, which has highlighted the work of realist illustrators such as Hal Foster, Milton Caniff, Alex Raymond, and Jack Kirby, Ware offers an alternative canon that prizes cartoonists who practice either formal experimentation or focus on everyday life, such as Rodolphe Töpffer, George Herriman, Frank King, and Gluyas Williams.

What these artists have in common is that they can all be understood as significant precursors to Ware's own artistic practice. Of course, artistic influence is always a complex, reflexive relationship: an artist is shaped by the past and in turn creates new work that throws the past into a fresh, unexpected perspective, and Ware's initial attraction to particular artists sprang out of aesthetic interest rather than identity creation. Yet it's not entirely accidental that the artists Ware loves the most are the ones who most closely mirror his own practices. For example, Ware's belief that cartoonists should aim to draw images that are iconic in their simplicity rather than possessing illustrational density can be linked to Töpffer's theories. For Töpffer as for Ware, comics are not a form of drawing that tries to mimic reality but rather a form of visual shorthand that uses images to tell stories, with narrative speed favored over representational accuracy.[9] Ware's use of the full comics page as a cohesive unit owes much to the Sunday page designs of Winsor McCay as well as Herriman and King. Ware's affinity with King's *Gasoline Alley* is best described as a matter of tone and mood. Unlike the broad burlesque gag humor or melodramatic bluster of other newspaper comics, King's strip had a gentle, reflective, nostalgic tone as it followed the daily lives of a Midwestern family over many decades.[10] This focus on the quotidian has strongly influenced Ware's own attempts to register minute, commonplace events in his comics. Gluyas Williams, another largely forgotten cartoonist that Ware cherishes and wishes to bring back into print, worked in the same vein of quiet domestic humor as King.[11]

Thus, Ware's archival and revisionist design work seeks to change how his favorite comics are perceived. Before Ware, *Krazy Kat* was celebrated largely on literary rather than visual grounds, and *Gasoline Alley* was generally regarded as a dated and sentimental comic strip. By lavishing his attentions on them, Ware is trying to change their status as cultural artifacts, making them precursors to works like *Quimby the Mouse* and *Jimmy Corrigan* and linking these earlier creators with the cadre of alternative cartoonists who have emerged in recent years, such as Seth, Dan Clowes, and Ivan Brunetti. This linkage between the past and present can be seen clearly in the issue of *McSweeney's* Ware edited, which includes a photo of Frank King, an article about George Herriman, and other gems from the past nestled amid a bevy of modern cartoonists.[12]

In searching for ancestors in earlier comics and recasting the history of comics to highlight work that is similar to his own, Ware is part of a larger effort by like-minded cartoonists of his generation. Art Spiegelman, a mentor who offered Ware an early national venue in *RAW*, has often written on com-

ics from the past and sought to resurrect selected masters, notably Harvey Kurtzman and Jack Cole.[13] The Canadian cartoonist Seth staked out a claim to the tradition of *New Yorker* cartooning, Canadian comics, and Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* (in the last case, designing a multivolume series that parallels what Ware has done with King and Herriman).[14] Chester Brown, another Canadian cartoonist, creatively appropriated the style of Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie*.[15] In effect, Ware belongs to a cohort of contemporary cartoonists who are doing innovative work in the present while rewriting and re-mapping the history of comics.

To understand why Ware and his fellow cartoonists are rewriting comics history, it is important to put their work in a historical context. While cartooning has a history that goes back to the earliest days of print (if not further), the main tradition of mass-market comics only coalesced in the late nineteenth century when American newspapers, borrowing from European traditions of illustrated satire, started publishing cartoons with a recurring cast of characters as a regular feature. These early comic strips, notably the *Yellow Kid* and the *Katzenjammer Kids*, often featured rambunctious children engaged in near fatal violence. With their broad physical comedy, these comics owed much to vaudeville and the popular stage. The first newspapers that published comics, put out by press barons like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, were widely despised as sensationalistic and vulgar by polite society. Because of their contents and their venue, the early comics were immensely popular but also disreputable.[16]

To a large extent, this legacy of mass-market popularity and concomitant social disdain applied to comics for much of the twentieth century, even as they became a fixture in most daily newspapers. Consider the fate of the most artistically accomplished of the early comics, Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* (which ran from 1905 to 1913 and was revived from 1924 to 1926). While McCay's strip was loved by millions and earned him a regal salary, it rarely received any critical attention at the time and was quickly forgotten after it stopped appearing in newspapers. This oblivion was so complete that McCay's family was willing to allow the original art to be destroyed and scattered after the cartoonist's death in 1934.[17] In his lifetime, there were a few haphazard collections of McCay's comics but these reprinted only a small fraction of his work and quickly fell out of print. In effect, McCay, although a key figure in the development of comics as an art form, created work that was as ephemeral as the newsprint on which it was printed.

What was true of McCay could be said of many other lesser cartoonists. For decades, newspaper comics remained an evanescent art form: even when strips were republished in book form, these reprints were invariably incomplete, often without dates, or published in cheap comic books or paperbacks that were only slightly more substantial than their original newspaper incarnation. These reprints were occasionally augmented by popular histories, often written by cartoonists themselves, which tended to be informal and anecdotal.[18] The inherent impermanence of newsprint was reinforced by social snobbery. In his controversial book *Double Fold*, novelist Nicholson Baker shows that American librarians, disdainful of the type of vulgar publications and indifferent to the artefactual value of visual forms like comic strips, sys-

tematically destroyed their physical holdings of newspapers, preferring to preserve these documents as microfilm.[19]

In opposition to the disdain of comics by the official custodians of culture, a group of amateur historians (or, more colloquially, "comic strip fans") emerged in the 1960s. Working under the banner of nostalgia, these fans sought to preserve the yellowing newspaper pages that libraries were destroying. Chief among these comic strip preservationists was Bill Blackbeard. Born in 1926, Blackbeard grew up reading the adventure comic strips of the 1930s, notably *Mickey Mouse*, *Terry and the Pirates*, and *Dick Tracy*. In 1968, horrified by what he would one day describe as a "holocaust of national newsprint archives," Blackbeard established the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art, a nonprofit organization that would take from libraries any newspapers they wished to discard.[20] Blackbeard quickly acquired a massive and extensive collection that would include more than 2.5 million clippings and tear sheets as well as more than 75 tons of newsprint. Without the effort of amateur historians and collectors like Blackbeard, almost all the old newspaper comics of the early twentieth century would have been lost or, at best, available in the imperfect form of microfilm.

Starting in the 1970s, Blackbeard used this collection as the raw material for his extensive editorial activities, resulting in the reprinting of more than two hundred books of such old comic strips such as *Krazy Kat*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Wash Tubbs and Captain Easy*, and *Tarzan*. Perhaps the most significant book that Blackbeard had a hand in producing was *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics*, co-edited with Martin Williams and released in 1977.[21] A significant early example of comics canon formation, this book would influence how a new generation of readers saw the history of comics. Its virtues included the fact that it was extensive and well selected; almost all the major American newspaper comics were represented, and the excerpts were some of the best examples of the comics medium.

Among the many young readers who were impacted by this book was the teenage Chris Ware, who read it in the mid-1980s as he was trying to educate himself on comics history. Particularly important for Ware was the fact that he first encountered Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* Sunday pages in the *Smithsonian Collection*, which led him to start searching for other examples of King's work. Because King had only been featured in a few out-of-print volumes that contained only a fraction of his production, Ware started collecting newspaper clippings, thus beginning the path that would lead him to co-edit the *Walt and Skeezix* volumes. In retrospect, the books Blackbeard was editing in the 1970s and 1980s can be understood as a halfway house between the earlier period of haphazard reprintings and the more extensive reprint volumes that Ware would undertake in the early twenty-first century. Blackbeard's volumes aspired toward archival completeness, often covering the entire run of a strip, and he would provide historical background in his erudite introductions. In that sense, his books served as a model for the volumes that Ware would later edit.

But there are significant differences between Blackbeard's projects and subsequent work by Ware and others. Before the rise of easy digital reproduction, in the 1970s and 1980s, Blackbeard wasn't always able to restore his old

newsprint comics to a perfectly readable condition. Moreover, the production and design values on these books were sometimes slapdash, perhaps due to the fact that some of the publishers came out of amateur fan publishing. Finally, there was the selection of comics to reprint. Motivated in part by nostalgia, Blackbeard gravitated toward the adventure strips he loved as a boy (*Terry and the Pirates*, *Wash Tubbs and Captain Easy*, *Tarzan*) and gave less attention to the cartoonists who dealt in domestic themes (notably, Frank King, Clare Briggs, and Gluyas Williams). To be sure, Blackbeard did edit a series of *Krazy Kat* books in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but these were the exception to his general preference for adventure strips drawn in a realistic illustrational style. In his choice of strips to reprint, Blackbeard was also responding to market conditions: most of his books were sold in comic book specialty stores, which catered to fans of adventure and fantasy comics.

When Ware started investigating the history of comics in the mid-1980s, he was inevitably influenced by Blackbeard's pioneering research. But Ware also approached these old comics with a different sensibility. Since he had no nostalgic memories of reading these strips when they were first published, he looked at them with an artist's eye as a source for inspiration and ideas. The importance of the *Smithsonian Collection* in shaping Ware's sense of the past can't be overstated. By the 1970s, Frank King was a virtually forgotten figure. Much more so than Blackbeard, comic strip fans of the 1970s had a somewhat one-sided sense of history: they tended to be aging nostalgia buffs who wanted to reread the adventure stories of their youth. They doted on Hal Foster's anatomical accuracy in *Prince Valiant*, Milton Caniff's cinematic storytelling in *Terry and the Pirates*, and Alex Raymond's flowing drapery in *Flash Gordon*. What these fans tended to dislike and ignore were the cartoony artists who told stories that were funny, warm, and human: E. C. Segar's *Popeye*, Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie*, Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*, and Herriman's *Krazy Kat*. Because it was eclectic and wide-ranging, the *Smithsonian Collection* challenged this narrow view of history.

In reading the *Smithsonian Collection*, Ware was taken by a *Gasoline Alley* Sunday page comic where the main characters Walt and Skeezix, a father and his adopted son, go for a walk in the woods (see plate 5).[22] This page is a mood piece in comics form, wistful with autumnal emotions. Ware would often pay homage to this page in many of his own compositions where he used the imagery of fall and falling leaves to evoke the transience of human life (see plate 6).[23] Readers of *Jimmy Corrigan* won't be surprised that Ware was attracted to *Gasoline Alley*. Just as *Jimmy Corrigan* tells the story of a son's search for his father, *Gasoline Alley* presents the other side of the coin: a father's fear of losing his son. As I discuss in the introductions to the first two volumes of the *Walt and Skeezix* series, cartoonist Frank King was deeply anxious about his relationship with his son because he and his wife had experienced a stillbirth during her first pregnancy.[24] For this and other reasons, *Gasoline Alley* in its early decades was a comic strip thematically focused on the relationship between a father and son. In the strip, bachelor Walt Wallett adopts a foundling he names "Skeezix." Yet throughout the course of the serial, Walt worries about losing his son. The dominant mood is tender apprehension, a tone that Ware himself would borrow in his own work especially when representing

domestic life. It's this quiet tone and focus on ordinary life that made *Gasoline Alley* such an appealing model for Ware.

Aside from the resonant father/son theme, *Gasoline Alley* taught Ware much about narrative. During the course of the strip, Skeezix and the other characters grow older. This real-time aging distinguished *Gasoline Alley* from other comic strips and comic books, which tended to be set in an eternal present, as Umberto Eco notes.[25] Skeezix is discovered as an infant in 1921, becomes a school boy by 1925, goes on his first dates by 1935, lives on his own by 1939, and finally becomes a soldier by 1942. The dimension of time, especially as it unfolds in a growing family life, would become a recurring concern for Ware, becoming visible in the multi-generational sagas of *Jimmy Corrigan* and "Rusty Brown."

In 2002, Chris Oliveros, head of the publishing house Drawn & Quarterly, approached Chris Ware and myself to work on a series of books reprinting King's work. In the summer of 2003, I went on a trip with Ware and Oliveros to meet Drewanna King, the grand-daughter of the cartoonist. Fortunately for us, it turned out Drewanna was devoted to her family's history. She was an avid genealogist and pack rat, and her basement was jammed with King memorabilia: original art, photos, diaries, and letters. Among other things, Drewanna owned the original woodcut-style Sunday page that Ware had been so fascinated by when he first read the *Smithsonian Collection*. With great generosity, Drewanna shared not only her family treasures but also her memories. Meeting her convinced us that we could write about King's life at length in a way that would enrich the reading of his comic strips. King was essentially an autobiographical artist, so facts about his life deepen our appreciation of his art.

Because of the abundance of family material provided by Drewanna King, Ware decided to organize the introductory editorial material in a way that captured the cartoonist's domestic life. King had been an avid photographer and often used his family photos as inspiration for his published drawings. The family theme of the strip suggested that it might make sense to present the introductory material as a family album. Our goal for each *Walt and Skeezix* volume is to create an integrated whole. My introductory material is woven in seamlessly with the other elements of the book: the design, the photos, the comic strips, and the historical notes are provided by Tim Samuelson, a distinguished architectural historian.[26] The effect we're hoping to achieve is something like a house of mirrors. Ideally, readers should be engaged by the story of Walt and Skeezix, and then see how the tale reflects aspects of King's life as seen in family photos and diaries. Tim Samuelson's historical notes provide another angle of reflection and place Walt and Skeezix in the context of King's era.

Once, while talking about what he hoped to do with the series, Chris and I came up with the idea that one way to describe the *Walt and Skeezix* books is to compare them to Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.[27] This novel is comprised of a long poem (written by a fictional poet), a introduction by an untrustworthy narrator, and an even stranger explication of the poem, concluding with a sly index. The glory of *Pale Fire* is that all these elements play off each other to create a disorienting whole. While the *Walt and Skeezix* books are much

more sober than *Pale Fire*, the aim is to make each book as multi-layered as a modernist novel. *Pale Fire*, as Ware once suggested to me, is an ideal book for a cartoonist to study because cartooning is a hybrid art, and Nabokov was a master of mixing disparate elements into a single book. The *Walt and Skeezix* books are very much a collaborative project, but the idea of creating the book as an integrated whole came from Ware.

Aside from the editorial material, the design elements of the *Walt and Skeezix* books deserve attention. First of all, these books have a similar look and feel to the first *Jimmy Corrigan* hardcover. Placed next to each other on a bookshelf, the design of these volumes bears a striking resemblance to the *Jimmy Corrigan* cover: all of these books are oblong, with dust jackets in muted colors (highlighting pink and yellow); in each book, the space on dust jacket is thoroughly exploited, displaying art on both the inside and outside. The various sections of the book (the introduction, the reprint of the daily strips, and the historical notes at the end) are distinguished by their paper stock: white paper for the editorial material and an evocative yellow, suggestive of old newspapers, for the reprint sections.

While the *Walt and Skeezix* books are designed to elevate an unfairly neglected comic strip, the *Krazy and Ignatz* series has the more specialized task of getting readers to take a closer look at a much celebrated artist. Since at least the early 1920s, when critic Gilbert Seldes singled out *Krazy Kat* for praise, George Herriman's work has been unique among comics in having an audience among intellectuals, writers, and fine artists. Prominent fans of *Krazy Kat* include Joan Miró, Jack Kerouac, e. e. cummings, and Umberto Eco.[28] Prior to Ware's work, *Krazy Kat* had been sporadically reprinted: Henry Holt released an early selection in 1946, distinguished by an exuberant essay by e. e. cummings.[29] In 1969, during the nostalgia boom, Grosset & Dunlap issued another selection that was heavily steeped in the pop art aesthetic of the period, with *Krazy Kat* presented as a Jazz Age precursor to psychedelic posters.[30] More substantially, Abrams published a third selection in 1986 that was augmented by a lengthy and well-researched biographical essay by Patrick McDonnell, Karen O'Connell, and Georgia Riley de Havenon.[31]

Bill Blackbeard made the first systematic attempt to reprint *Krazy Kat* in its entirety between 1988 and 1992. Working with designer Dennis Gallagher, Blackbeard released nine volumes that gave readers a chance to read nearly a decade's worth of Herriman's early full-page strips. The design for these books was simple but elegant, with scenes of the main characters on each cover. Each volume was augmented with biographical introductions and historical annotations. Unfortunately, this series ended well before all of Herriman's full-page *Krazy Kat* work was reissued.[32]

In 2002, Blackbeard revived the *Krazy and Ignatz* series in collaboration with Ware as the designer through the publisher Fantagraphics. In designing the new series, Ware made a number of significant changes: instead of having a uniform logo, he uses a new typeface on each cover. Rather than reprinting images from Herriman's strips on the covers, he chose to foreground bold shapes and colors (because the strip revolves around a love triangle between a dog, a cat, and a mouse, Ware often uses triangular shapes on his covers). And thanks to the wider availability of digital technology, Ware included many

more photographs and examples of Herriman's original art in this series than in prior versions. Because Herriman was a collector of Navaho rugs, Ware also used design elements inspired by Navaho art in the five volumes reprinting the *Krazy Kat* serial from 1935 to 1944.

Compared to Dennis Gallager's earlier series of covers and, indeed, even Ware's own work on *Walt and Skeezix*, the covers on the *Krazy and Ignatz* books don't emphasize the characters as much. Although Krazy, Ignatz, and the other denizens of Coconino County do appear in Ware's covers, they are often very small, rather like the figures in many of Ware's own *Quimby the Mouse* strips. In an interview with Todd Hignite, Ware explained why he was willing to mimic Frank King's art style but took a very different approach when designing the books that reprint George Herriman: "I tried to make it look as much like King's typography as I could (as opposed to the *Krazy and Ignatz* books with Fantagraphics where I'm applying a different design sense to every cover), because I want [the *Walt and Skeezix*] series as much as possible to appear as if it was of King's own devising; I think this sensibility applies more readily to King's work than to Herriman's. Besides, I'd never presume to pass off a mark of my hand as one of George Herriman's. I think King, however, who used countless assistants, wouldn't mind in the least; his concern was for readability and story, I believe."[33]

Ware's comments on the different approaches he took to the two series reveal his thoughtful approach to design. In both cases, he considers what makes the artist unique and how the design can best highlight those aspects of the work. In King's case, the design calls attention to *Gasoline Alley* as a family chronicle. In Herriman's case, Ware emphasizes an underappreciated aspect of *Krazy Kat*: the bold design of these full-page strips. While *Krazy Kat* has often been celebrated as a literary work, Ware's book designs focus attention on Herriman as a visual artist, again subtly re-writing comics history by making it clear that the narrative energies of comics can't be separated from graphics.

Aside from these differences, there are a few similarities between the two series. In both cases, Ware is trying to present old comic strips in a dignified format that resembles literary book publishing, while paying tribute to the origins of newspaper strips as ephemeral printed matter by including yellowed paper in the hardback editions. In both series, he tries to situate the comics in a historical and biographical context, although this is easier to do in the case of *Walt and Skeezix* thanks to the existence of an extensive family archive. And in both cases, he is dealing, as an artist, with strips that speak to his own thematic and formal concerns as well as to those of many of his cartooning contemporaries.

In surveying Ware's engagement with comics history, it is clear that this is more than a hobby or a form of moonlighting for him. As is the case for artists such as Art Spiegelman, Seth, and Chester Brown, Ware's effort to retrieve and recuperate earlier comics is a pursuit intimately connected to his own artistic practice and should be appreciated within this larger historical context. Connected with the work of these artists are the activities of fan historians like Bill Blackbeard and the rising generation of academics who study comics. As graphic novels like *Jimmy Corrigan* have gained a foothold in the

larger culture, there is also an increasing awareness of the historical tradition from which they emerged. Chris Ware represents not just the future of comics but also its past; indeed, the burden of his work is to show that the past and future are tightly bound together.

Notes

1. For Ware's account of this trip to Monument Valley see Dylan Williams, "An Interview with Chris Ware," *Destroy All Comics*, November 1, 1994, 11–12.

2. For earlier accounts of Ware's engagement with the comics history see Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 5; and John Carlin, "Masters of American Comics: An Art History of Twentieth-Century American Comic Strips and Books," in *Masters of American Comics*, ed. John Carlin, Paul Karasik, and Brian Walker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 158.

3. Chris Ware, "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess," in *RAW* 2.3 (New York: Penguin, 1991); Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003); Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005).

4. *Gasoline Alley*, which like *Krazy Kat* is both a daily and Sunday newspaper strip, was created by King in 1918 and continues to this day, although the original cartoonist retired in the late 1950s and died in 1969.

5. Chris Ware, "Strip Mind," *Bookforum*, April/May 2008, 45, 58; Chris Ware, "Frank King's Gasoline Alley," in *Cartoon America: Comic Art in the Library of America*, ed. Harry Katz (New York: Abrams, 2006), 162–67.

6. Seth, in conversation November 22, 2008. Among the books that are frequently cited by cartoonists as providing a sense of history for their craft are David Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c.1450 to 1825* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) and *History of the Comic Strip* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Maurice Horn, ed., *World Encyclopedia of Comics* (New York: Chelsea House, 1976); as well as various books by Thomas Craven, Coulton Waugh, Bill Blackbeard, and Martin Williams cited below.

7. Rusty Brown's antics as a collector are a recurring theme in many pages of Chris Ware's *The ACME Report*. See particularly pages 15, 63, 85.

8. On Kafka and Dickens, see Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 291; on Eliot and Donne see Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2003), 28–29.

9. Töpffer's aesthetic theories are extensively discussed in David Kunzle's *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

10. For *Gasoline Alley* as a reflection of everyday life see my introduction to Frank King, *Walt and Skeezix: 1921–1922*, ed. Chris Ware, Jeet Heer, and Chris Oliveros (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2005).

11. Gluyas Williams (1888–1982) was a prominent early twentieth-century American cartoonist. A frequent contributor to the *New Yorker* magazine, he also did a long-running (1922-1947) newspaper panel about the daily life of a suburban family; it ran under a variety of rotating titles like *Suburban Heights*, *Difficult Decisions*, and *The World at Its Worst*.

12. Chris Ware, ed., *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004).

13. For Spiegelman on Kurtzman, see Art Spiegelman, "H. K. (R.I.P.)," in *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories*, ed. Ivan Brunetti (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 57–59; for Spiegelman on Cole, see Art Spiegelman and Chip Kidd, *Jack Cole and Plastic Man: Forms Stretched to Their Limits!* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001). In his strips about the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath, Spiegelman frequently mimicked old comics such as *Krazy Kat* and *Little Nemo* and reprinted samples of these earlier works. See Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

14. *The Complete Peanuts* series, published by Fantagraphics and designed by Seth, was started in 2004 and will eventually encompass twenty-five volumes. See Seth's comments in Todd Hignite, *In the Studio: Visits with Contemporary Cartoonists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 213–14.

15. Chester Brown, *Louis Riel* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003). See also Jeet Heer, "Little Orphan Louis," *National Post*, November 6, 2003.

16. On the controversial nature of early comic strips, see the essays by Sidney Fairfield, Annie Russell Marble, and Ralph Bergengren, rpt. in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*, ed. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 4–13.

17. John Canemaker, *Winsor McCay: His Life and Art*, rev. ed. (New York: Abrams, 2005), 253–54.

18. Among these popular histories were Thomas Craven, *Cartoon Cavalcade* (New York: Simon, 1943); and Coulton Waugh, *The Comics* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

19. Nicholson Baker, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York: Random House, 2001). As Baker acknowledges, the destruction of newsprint had many motives, including the desire to limit storage space.

20. Bill Blackbeard, "The Four Color Paper Trail: A Look Back," *International Journal of Comic Art* 5.2 (2003): 209.

21. Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams, *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (New York: Abrams, 1977).

22. Ibid., 109. This page originally ran in the *Chicago Tribune* and many other newspapers on November 11, 1930.

23. See the "Rusty Brown" page in Ware, *The ACME Report*, 60. Also see the additional final pages in the paperback edition of *Jimmy Corrigan*.

24. For the family dynamics of the King family, see my introduction to Frank King, *Walt and Skeezix: 1923–1924*, ed. Chris Ware, Jeet Heer, and Chris Oliveros (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006), 31–44.

25. Eco discusses how at the beginning of each new adventure Superman starts at the same place as the opening of the previous story. See Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," in Heer and Worcester, *Arguing Comics*, 146–64.

26. Tim Samuelson is the subject of the *Lost Buildings* DVD and book that Ware created with radio host Ira Glass in 2004.

27. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Putnam, 1962).

28. See Jeet Heer, "The Kolors of Krazy Kat," in *Krazy and Ignatz: A Wild Warmth of Chromatic Gravy: 1935–1936*, by George Herriman, ed. Bill Blackbeard (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2005), 8.

29. George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*, intro. by e. e. cummings (New York: Henry Holt, 1946).

30. George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*, intro. by e. e. cummings (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969).

31. George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*, ed. Patrick McDonnell, Karen O'Connell, and Georgia Riley de Havenon (New York: Abrams, 1986).

32. The main cause of the *Krazy and Ignatz* series faltering was that the publisher ran into financial difficulties in the early 1990s and eventually went out of business.

33. Chris Ware quoted in Hignite, *In the Studio*, 238.

Masked Fathers: *Jimmy Corrigan* and the Superheroic Legacy

JACOB BROGAN

Throughout Chris Ware's oeuvre, the role of the superhero in contemporary comics remains a constant concern. Popular discourse tends to construe superheroes as the forefathers of all new comics texts, a belief that clearly troubles Ware. His work sometimes seems to toy with the possibility of effacing the superhero outright, whether through symbolic murders or spectacles of debasement. Ware's novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* approaches the problem in a subtler way, establishing a parodic connection between the figure of the superhero and the eponymous protagonist's long-absent father. This parallelism enables Ware to stage the ambiguities inherent in his work's relationship to its own supposed paternity. A psychoanalytic investigation of the way fatherhood is represented throughout the novel reveals the sometimes oppressive pressure superheroes seem to put on the comics medium as a whole. Ultimately, it also allows Ware to explore alternative genealogies, looking beyond the absolute primacy of the father and rendering ambivalent his work's relationship with the putative influence of the superhero. Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* thus imagines the space between personal and familial history as the ground for new comic historiographies.

An Immature Medium?

The difficulty is that these new historiographies must come to terms with the relative intractability of the earlier versions of themselves they contest. Ware's published comments suggest that while he acknowledges the role superheroes play in his work, he is critical of the way these figures characterize perceptions of his chosen medium. In the introduction to the volume of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* that he edited, Ware notes, "Comics are the only art form that many 'normal' people still arrive at expecting a specific emotional reaction (laughter) or a specific content (superheroes)."[1] Though the universal validity of this claim is increasingly dubious (due in part to the attention paid to graphic novelists such as Art Spiegelman, Ware, and others), it is undoubtedly the case that the ghosts of these prejudices continue to haunt the popular reception of contemporary comics. The title of Dave Eggers's *New York Times* review of *Jimmy Corrigan*—"After Wham! Pow! Shazam!"—testifies to this fact.[2] Any progress that comics make toward criti-

cal acceptance is cast as a turn away from the superhero, a movement that is seemingly never complete and that informs the reception of each new graphic narrative.

This Sisyphean impasse finds a striking analogue in what might be described as the frozen temporality of many superhero narratives. Umberto Eco has characterized this timeless state as the "oneiric climate" of the superhero, a kind of storytelling in which "what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy."[3] Despite their seventy-odd years of ostensibly continuous narrative history, characters like Superman and Batman never age and always eventually return to a kind of fundamental narrative stasis no matter what happens in a given story. Even as the larger narrative contexts of these characters have gradually transformed, this framework allows them to maintain the illusion of fixity. Histories of change, development, and evolution are thereby suppressed, contributing to the image of the superhero genre—and its readers—as trapped in a perpetual adolescence.[4]

Ware's important early text "Thrilling Adventure Stories/I Guess," first published for *RAW* in 1991, evidences a simmering irritation with such perceptions (see plate 2). Setting word against image, "Thrilling Adventure Stories/I Guess" superimposes a reflection on the narrator's mundane childhood experiences over the images of a superheroic action story.[5] Noting that the narrator speaks of a youthful passion for superheroes, Gene Kannenberg Jr. suggests that the story is ultimately about the boy's inability to subsume the subtleties of real experience under the categories of his fantasy life.[6] At the same time, "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess" is also a metadiscursive lament on the reading public's tendency to associate all comics with a single genre. Here, a realistic confessional narrative is subsumed into the image repertoire of the superhero, its beats and revelations co-opted in the service of a wholly different tale. At the level of the visual, the narrator's recollections are effectively boiled down to the point where only his childhood reading habits remain in view. In this text Ware toys not merely with his work's understanding of itself, but also with how it is received. His apparent fear is that readers will see his work as an extension of superhero narrative, irrespective of its actual content.

A frustration with this persistent misrecognition is staged with similar ire on the back of the paperback edition of *Jimmy Corrigan*. In lieu of an explanatory blurb, Ware offers a twenty-three-panel narrative in his spare style, describing the journeys of the putative "Copy # 58,463" of the very book that the potential reader holds. After being printed in China, the book is taken—first by boat and then by truck—to a "Barnes Ignoble Superstore" in the United States. When a clerk in the store attempts to file the book under *W* in the literature section, after traversing Tolstoy, Updike, and Vonnegut, a mustachioed older man snatches it from his hands. Expressing a sentiment Ware seemingly holds to be disgracefully universal, the manager remarks, "*Look!* . . . This is a 'graphic novel' . . . *graf*fik *noh*vel . . . it's *kid's lit* . . . you know—superhero stuff . . . for *retards!*"[7] There is a degree of cheekiness to this sequence, especially when one comes to the end and finds that the entire business has been set up as a parody of ads encouraging the "adoption" of third world children. Likewise, a circular stamp noting that *Jimmy Corrigan* was the

winner of both the American Book Award and the 2001 Guardian First Book Prize serves as a smirking reminder that this text has earned respect in spite of its form. Further, this stamp presents an ironic twist on the Comics Code Authority's "Seal of Approval" that once graced the covers of virtually every mainstream comic book.[8] On the one hand, it suggests how far comics have come since the Comics Code Authority's effective dissolution, while, on the other hand, it serves as a pointed reminder of the lengths the medium must go to validate itself if it is to be acceptable to a wider audience.

The anxieties expressed in this scene are very real. First, the manager's painful, deliberate pronunciation of the term "graphic novel" suggests that this term, one engineered to disentangle the medium's more "respectable" offerings from their supposedly vulgar origins, fools no one. Indeed, one need only look to the graphic novel section of a real Barnes and Noble to find that offerings by superhero publishers DC and Marvel Comics dwarf works like Ware's in availability. Second, the juxtaposition of the graphic novel to the superhero genre produces a bridge between them that construes both as synecdoches of a larger climate of juvenility. According to this logic, comics have not matured and perhaps never will. Moreover, the manager's address to the clerk contains a guarded threat, suggesting that anyone who tries to distinguish between the form and its most prominent genre is also "retarded." The preponderance of articles proclaiming "Comics Grow Up!" continually reinscribes this perception, even as the articles themselves claim to refute it.[9] What such titles suggest is that even as the medium "grows up," it remains haunted by both its own childishness and that of its audience. Indeed, the phrase itself can easily be misread, taken as an imperative along the lines of, "Hey, comics! Grow up already!" rather than as a constative claim that "Comics *have* grown up." Some, like Douglas Wolk, suggest that we avoid the problem altogether by simply speaking as though the medium has matured, even as we seek to complicate the belief that it was ever wholly childish to begin with.[10] Others have attempted to turn the problem on its head, treating the connotation of juvenility as a resource.[11] For Ware, however, no easy circumventions of the problem are forthcoming, necessitating a search for alternative solutions that is enacted on virtually every page of *Jimmy Corrigan*.

The Death of the Superhero

The first way out of the perception that comics are a fundamentally infantile medium is the symbolic death of the superhero. Early in *Jimmy Corrigan*, the novel's eponymous protagonist spots a caped man dressed in the costume of a superhero on a ledge across from his cubicle. The two wave to one another, and then the latter jumps, landing facedown on the sidewalk below. At first a crowd gathers around the body, but they eventually depart, leaving the colorful corpse to rest alone on the otherwise dreary street (14–16). Among those who briefly linger by the body is a man carrying what appears to be two large art portfolios, perhaps a stand-in for the cartoonist himself. It is tempting to read this figure's passing interest as indicative of the attitude the book as a whole will take toward the superhero—the brief acknowledgment of a dead form. The idea here is that, given time, the genre will kill itself off, becoming nothing more than an object of obscure interest.

However, the corpse is a mere allegorical counterfeit, a substitute by which the novel sacrifices the superhero in effigy. Pages after the initial incident, Jimmy notices a newspaper that describes the accident. Its headline begins, "'Super-Man' Leaps to Death," a promising alternative to the claims of newfound maturity cited above. Yet the paper continues, "Mystery Man Without Identification Falls Six Stories in Colored Pantaloons; Mask / Definitely not the Television Actor, Authorities Say" (30).[12] Thus, even within the narrative, the effacement of the superhero is doubly a failure. Not only is it not the real thing, it is not even the actor—a man who has, as we will see, already played a central part in the narrative—who stands in the place of the real thing. Sending the doppelgänger to his death thereby reveals itself as ineffectual mockery. Joseph Litvak observes, "*Mocking*, as the term suggests, involves both derision and mimicry, or involves derision *in* mimicry."[13] Here, the inability of the "authorities" to identify the body entails a failure to properly imitate the original, arguably voiding any attempt to debase it. In positioning itself as the witness to the superhero's suicide, the novel succeeds most clearly at unveiling its own reluctant fascination with the figure it ostensibly opposes.

With this in mind, one notes the way that both Jimmy's gaze and the narrative's attention linger over the body, even after it has been abandoned by others, staying with it until an ambulance arrives to remove the remains (17). There is an air of eternity to this moment of captivation, the absence of any lexical indicator of time's passage leaving the sequence's temporal flow ambiguous.[14] Further, at several points, the window out of which Jimmy looks functions as a second frame within the frames that make up the page. Generally speaking, the division of panels is the most basic unit of time's passage in comics, meaning that these frames within frames engender the segmentation of time unto itself, indefinitely prolonging each moment. Time is not arrested here—arrows clearly indicate the movement from one panel to the next—but its pace and the reader's place in it are rendered uncertain. Together, these factors leave both Jimmy and the counterfeit superheroic corpse he contemplates suspended in the oneiric climate of the superhero. As Eco notes, most real change in superhero comics risks being revealed as the product of fancy or dream.[15] It is the stable body of the superhero that fascinates here, while its death is like some imaginary tale or "What If?" scenario, a reverie from which *this* narrative must eventually awaken. Like Jimmy, the novel cannot quite bring itself to look away, entrapped as it is in this timeless temporality. What *Jimmy Corrigan* must find, then, is not a new instrument of assassination, the bursting shell that will at last pierce the superhero's skin, but a new way of seeing.

Parody and the Law of the Father

Such a fresh perspective might well be found in parody. Judith Butler has argued that efforts at parody take root in the parodist's identification with his or her object. The point is ultimately a simple one: to parody something, one must be able to stage one's relation to it, but this relation must itself be staged in such a way as to leave the precise nature of the connection uncertain.[16] Parody might thus be understood not as a mere spectacle of denigration, but as a process of disruption. Its power derives from its ability to

unsettle regimes of correspondence and non-correspondence, similitude and difference. Butler's formulation provides a tidy summation of the ambiguities at work in *Jimmy Corrigan*'s reconsideration of the superhero, a reconsideration organized, as we will see, around the ambiguous connection between the figure of the superhero and Jimmy's father. This is a practice that promises to implicate *Jimmy Corrigan* within the discourse that it critiques, helping to make ambivalent the narrative's relationship to the superhero.

In *Jimmy Corrigan*'s opening pages, the young protagonist attends an autograph-signing event held in honor of an actor known for playing Superman on television. When Jimmy's mother arrives on the scene, the actor offers to take her out to dinner as soon as he gets "off work" (2). Later, the man goes home with the two and spends the night with Jimmy's mother. This act of seduction establishes a foundational correspondence between the superhero and the father, even as it begins to disrupt the pristine image of conventional heroism. The actor becomes a bridge between the two figures, offering both a visible stand-in for Jimmy's absent paternity and a tangible manifestation of his fantasy life. Supporting this association is the way the actor's face appears, albeit masked, in full in a panel, as he remarks, "Hello, son" (2). He is one of only three characters not patrilineally related to Jimmy to be shown in this manner, a fact that literally draws him into the Corrigan genealogy. That he can be fully represented only so long as he remains masked implies that it is precisely his embodiment of a fantasy that allows him to emerge in the visual register of the text. Made anonymous, he becomes a template onto which Jimmy's patrilineage will be projected. This effect has a disruptive consequence of its own, making it perpetually unclear whether it is the father who is the model for the superhero, or the superhero who is the model for the father.

Throughout the novel that follows, associations between these two figures ping-pong back and forth. When Jimmy meets his long-absent father, for example, he is told to sit down until the elder Corrigan gets "off work," explicitly echoing the actor's initial attempt to proposition Jimmy's mother (2, 36) (see fig. 2.1). Ware projects this remark over a presumably fantasized image of Jimmy looking on as his father has sex with an unknown woman who is almost certainly his mother. His father's imaginary grunts are inscribed directly beneath this real remark, suggesting a crude double meaning to the suggestion he has yet to "[get] off work" and producing a degree of formal continuity between the father of fantasy and the father of fact.[17] This superimposition of word and image—not so unlike the formal strategy at work in the earlier "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess"—has the further effect of retroactively portraying the Superman actor as the violent father of an overdetermined primal scene. Seemingly triggered by the phrase "[get] off work," the narrative's descent through a series of placeholders and stand-ins into fantasy suggests that it was, figuratively speaking, Superman who first slept with Jimmy's mother and Superman who has stood in the imaginary place of the father all along.[18]

Complicating matters is the fact that Jimmy's own largely renounced sexuality is entangled in his identification with the superheroic father. Earlier, in the opening episode, Jimmy dons a handmade mask before a mirror, suggesting a fundamental identification with the superhero as the guarantor of his

Fig. 2.1. On their first meeting, Jimmy and his father mirror each other in a sequence that gives way to a fantasy of the primal scene. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 36.

own self-image. In Jacques Lacan's memorable phrase, this disguise becomes the "armor of an alienating identity," the means by which the totality of his own body is made visible to him.[19] That is, in the complete image of himself that a child sees in the mirror, his self-identity is constituted through a reflection that is never fully his own.[20] Our concrete reflections are, in a sense, figures of our paternity, the person or persons that precede us and bring us into being. For Jimmy, this illusion of optics is literalized—he becomes whole by taking on the role of the character that holds the vacated position of his absent father. The narrative consequences of this identification become clearer the following morning, when the actor sneaks out before Jimmy's mother wakes, hands Jimmy his own stage mask, and tells Jimmy to explain that he "had a *real good time*" (3). A few minutes later, Jimmy's mother appears in the kitchen, only to be confronted by the spectacle of her now-masked son, who, in a panel that rhymes visually with the actor's own early appearance, parrots the words he has been told to convey. The as-yet unrepresented primal scene is hereby prefigured as the confirmation of Jimmy's self-identity. In the process, he simultaneously assumes the position of the superhero and his mother's lover. If Jimmy's imaginary self-image is doomed to failure, it is precisely because he can never fully embody this role, barred from filling it by

the prohibitive structures of the incest taboo, structures that psychoanalytic thought equate with the father's law. Simply put, Jimmy can never fully be the figure he emulates because to do so would involve initiating a forbidden relationship with his mother.[21]

The paternal gift of self-identity thus comes at a price, the renunciation of Jimmy's own desire. Throughout the novel, he is trapped in a sort of perpetual adolescence, able to satisfy his longings only through his masochistic fantasy life. This is a conceit that makes him a perfect double for the supposed readers of superhero comics, or, even, for the comics medium itself.[22] One episode finds him recording the sounds that surround him as he sits in an urban park. He records first the song of a bird, then the passing of an airplane, and finally the brief conversation of a pair of lovers (94–96). The first two items serve as reminders of the famous mantra, "It's a bird; it's a plane; it's Superman!" By connection, then, the boyfriend of the female speaker, a man she calls "the most wonderful guy I've ever met," might be understood as the third member of this ecstatic sequence. Superheroes, the formulation goes, are those who are loved as well as those whose desire can be returned by another. For Jimmy, however, the identification with the superhero is always an identification with something that is itself other, something that guarantees the coherence of his own desires even as it presents them as perpetually distant from him.[23] He has only the image of what it is to be a sexualized adult, but lacks the understanding of what it means to truly be grown up.

We can read Jimmy's alienation from his sexuality, and perhaps his alienation in general, as an allegory of the status of comics. As Ware's own remarks suggest, the prominence of the superhero genre in comics metonymically configures the medium of which it is a part as "kids lit [. . .] for retards" (back cover). Jimmy's protracted adolescence would then stand in for the ongoing failure of the medium to grow up in the eyes of the larger reading public.[24] This is not merely a problem of reception, but also of production. So long as it is the superhero that provides an experience of self-coherence, Jimmy cannot come to terms with desires that are his own. Comics, likewise, are effectively barred from becoming something other than what they ostensibly have been. This is a sort of "paternalistic pedagogy," a mode that, as Eco puts it, "requires the hidden persuasion that the subject is not responsible for his past, nor master of his future."[25] Superheroes here function as the limit of the comics medium's aspirational horizon, a point that they always approach, but can never surpass.

Thus, the superhero is a perverse Freudian father-of-enjoyment, that monster of the psyche that takes all pleasure for itself and offers none to its progeny. In *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud tells the story of the members of a primitive horde who are forbidden by their father to take any of the women of the tribe as their own. Frustrated, they eventually kill and eat the paterfamilias.[26] Once this act is complete, their ambivalence about their father, whose strength and power led them to love him, overwhelms them with guilt. This in turn prompts them to take the formerly external prohibitions of the father into themselves, producing a psycho-sexual code of renunciation that ironically reanimates the prohibitions they once struggled to overcome.[27] One need not take this psychoanalytic myth at its word to acknowledge its explanatory force. The law of the father represents the internalized expression

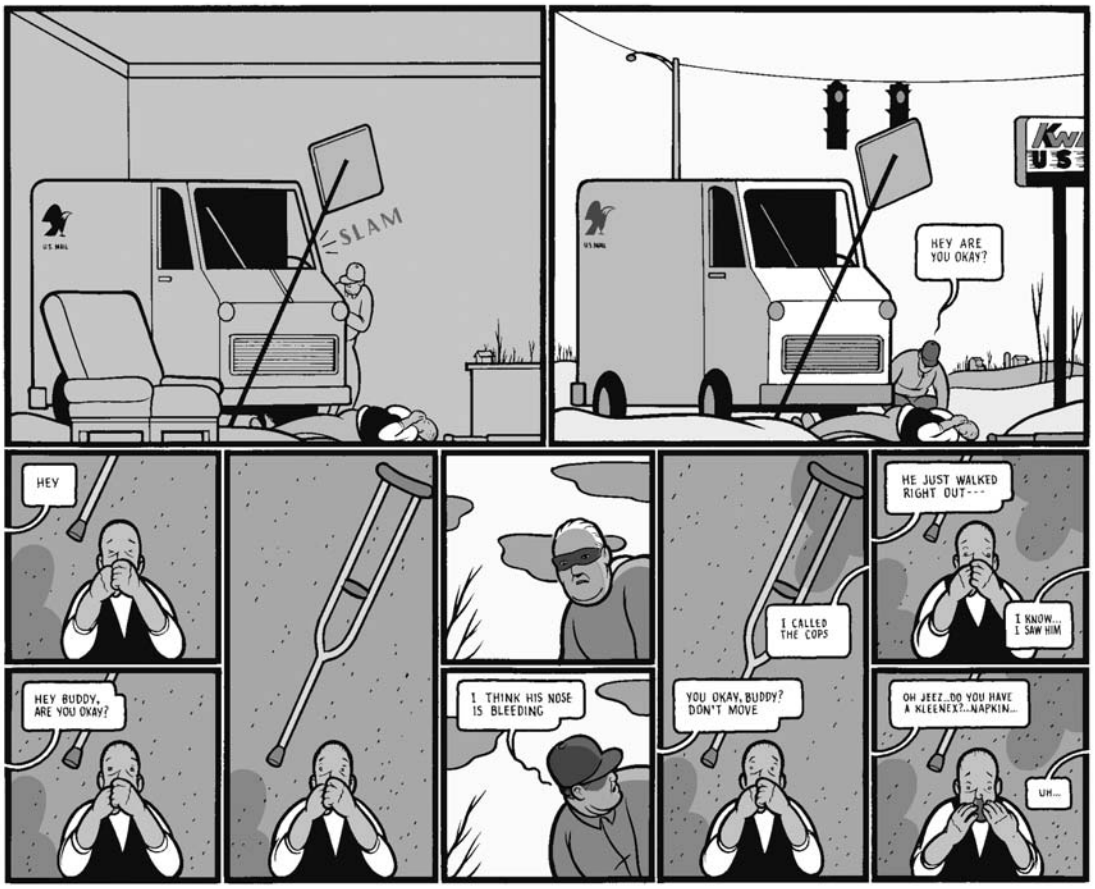


Fig. 2.2. Hit by a mail truck, Jimmy briefly imagines that the driver is an aged superhero. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 97.

of our ambivalence toward those who shape us, the coupling of our admiration for what they offer with our irritation at that which they prohibit.

This ambivalence is very much at work in the way *Jimmy Corrigan* occasionally takes up the possibility of the superhero as savior or protector, exploring the projected image of an ideal father only to refute it. In an episode that comes roughly a quarter of the way through the book, Jimmy is hit by a mail truck and knocked to the ground (see fig. 2.2). For a single panel, the truck's driver, seen from Jimmy's supine perspective, is replaced by an image of the masked actor, his hair now white and his face rounded. On the following page—compositionally a nearly exact horizontal and vertical mirror of the first—the driver is pushed out of the frame by Jimmy's father. Clearly out of breath, the older man huffs, "He's mine . . . He's . . . hmf . . . hff . . . ." (98) (see fig. 2.3). The moment is at first striking for the willingness of Jimmy's father to claim the boy he abandoned, offering the possibility of reconciliation in and through crisis. This doubling suggests a more positive understanding of the here literal mirroring of the father and the superhero. Simultaneously, however, one might read something more sinister into the comparison. James's inarticulate gasps hearken back to the grunts of Jimmy's earlier fantasized primal scene. In this light, James's insistent assertions of paternal

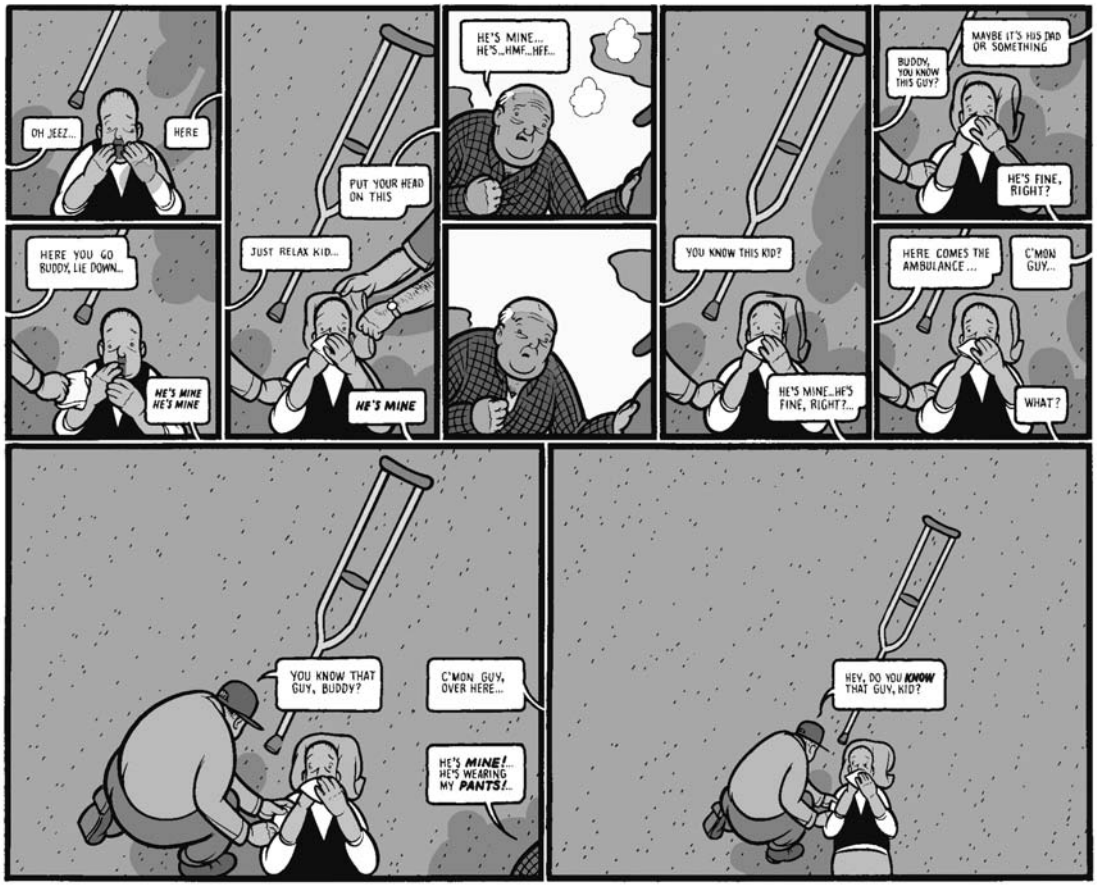


Fig. 2.3. Jimmy's father lays claim to his son, taking the place of both superhero and driver. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 98.

ownership—"He's *mine!* . . . He's wearing my *pants!* . . ." (98)—can be understood as expressions of the father's law. That is, they repeat the way that Jimmy's acknowledgment of his paternity traps him in a structurally inferior position. The superhero is thereby configured not only as a salvific figure, but also as the signifier *par excellence* of filial restriction and constraint.

If so, one of the novel's projects may be to undermine the force of this law through parodic iteration. Shortly after Jimmy's initial encounter with his father, the elder Corrigan's car is stolen, a fact that Jimmy meekly points out. As is often the case with such moments of catastrophe in the narrative, the immediate consequences of the theft do not play out on the page. Instead, the narrative diverges into one of Jimmy's fantasies in which he speaks of the incident to an unseen child: "*Scared?* Ha ha . . . oh *no* I wasn't scared. Because if I *had* been I never would have met your *mother* and then we would never have had *you*" (49). The theft of James's car, an episode of real paternal impotence, thus opens the possibility of Jimmy's own fantasized sexual potency, even as it points to the limited horizon of his own idea of maturity.[28] In the process, it also puts him in the position of the father, his normally reticent speech replaced by a surprising loquacity. In assuming the role of the father, he has become, though in fantasy alone, the master of a discourse that once eluded him.

However, this project of fulfilling the superheroic father's place is doomed to fail, undermined by its redeployment of the very logic it seeks to disrupt. Paternal power intervenes in Jimmy's fantasy in the form of a tiny, portly Superman who appears at the window. This event derails Jimmy's narration and inspires him to describe not what ostensibly happened, but what is happening, forcing him to shift from a "How I met your mother" story to an account of the man on the windowsill.[29] With the loss of his discursive mastery, Jimmy's fantasy spirals out of his control, and Superman grows massive, lifting the house and then tossing it back to the earth. Jimmy's dream son is seen for the first time, his limbs scattered around the upended house. Here we learn that the now-fragmented child's name is Billy, a telling fact given nearly every previous member of Jimmy's patrilineage has been named James. Through *Jimmy Corrigan*'s expansive narrative, the familial circumstances of each of these men enclose them, such that the name they share increasingly comes to seem a prison. What this child represents, then, is the desire for a future that makes a radical break with the past, one that quickly descends into vaudevillian tragedy. To seek a new name is, up to a point, to seek a new law. Yet the conditions by which this law is authorized are precisely those of the prior law, allowing it to return with a vengeance, as the violent intrusion of the superhero suggests. Indeed, it is no accident that "Billy" is the diminutive of William, the name of Jimmy's paternal great-grandfather. Even the seeming break Jimmy makes from his past therefore reinscribes an already-written narrative of parental authority. Here we must also recall Butler's observation that insofar as parody begins in identification, it sometimes fails to engender a final disassociation. Unable to achieve true rupture, the successful parodist must work from inside that which is parodied.

Genealogies, Familial and Superheroic

Seemingly aware of this necessity, Ware finds a more productive strategy of resistance to the superheroic legacy through genealogy. *Jimmy Corrigan*'s investigation of the real complexities of family history finds its purest form in the book's consideration of the giving of names. On two separate occasions, medical doctors refer to Jimmy as "Superman." The first occurrence, coming after Jimmy's accident with the mail truck, is all but unprompted. Largely forgettable in and of itself, the incident seems to be the product of little more than bedside banter.[30] The second incident is more clearly occasioned by the Superman sweatshirt that Jimmy borrows from his father and wears after the latter's own ultimately fatal car accident. In both cases, the pleasures of identification might be read as reparative acts. If Jimmy's problem is one of alienation from his own image, this casual act of renaming offers him a new relation to himself. Jimmy, always an inferior and belated copy of the father's ideal image, is invited to occupy the place of the too-perfect surrogate. The point is not that this rechristening sets him free, only that, as we will see, it helps ease the burden of family history. Where the act of naming has previously proceeded from father to son, these doctors suggest the possibility of a less linear structure of relation and inheritance.

Further layers of complexity are evident in the Superman sweatshirt that inspires the second naming. Though borrowed from Jimmy's father, the shirt

is actually a gift from his adopted daughter, Amy. Indeed, so too is the "#1 Dad" shirt that Jimmy uncomfortably appropriates earlier in the text, both of them Father's Day gifts (343). This revelation serves as an important reminder that the appearance of superheroism—or, for that matter, paternity—is bestowed, not a given. Whatever powers the family's symbolic structures of prohibition and control possess, they do not simply precede us. Thus, the force of the father—the mask he wears—is in part the gift of the child, his own empowered identity the product of various exchanges and relations between fathers and their progeny.

As we learn in one of the novel's many investigations of Jimmy's ancestry, Jimmy's great-great-grandfather was also a doctor. Although this man does not appear in the novel aside from miniature panels in the book's opening diagram, he effectively returns in the place of the two doctors with whom Jimmy interacts. Three generations of Jimmy's ancestry are thereby elided as two wildly distant moments of family history are brought into contact with one another through a doubling that only the reader can recognize. The name "Superman" is evoked only to facilitate this exchange. Its central place in conventional understandings of the comics medium demonstrates the significance of this transaction, but the word itself has no real significance of its own. Superheroes, and the concerns Ware's work expresses about them, can be understood as the ground on which farther-reaching historical inquiries are built. If superheroic fantasy is inescapable in comics—or the popular perception thereof—then fantasy itself must be turned to other ends.

A possible approach is evident late in the text when Amy leads Jimmy through a set of pictures from the familial past they never shared. As they are removed from the jumbled boxes that contain them, each photograph neatly fills a comics panel (323–26). These recovered moments are thereby brought into the passage of time in the present, their spatialization animating them in relation to both their presentation and contemplation. Amy's boxes are thus proto-comics, pure formal potentiality always awaiting retemporalization by means of her selection and presentation of them. This reinsertion of the image into the stream of time is the past's reincarnation, its rebirth in a new form through its contextualized reception. Significantly, three different registers are co-implicated here: first there is Amy's productive present in which she tells a story through the juxtaposition and narration of images. Next is the past that is reanimated by it. Last is the future reception of the text, represented here by Jimmy's largely mute responses to the images Amy shows him. Interestingly, Jimmy is implicitly figured as a reader of comics, noting at one point after a temporal ellipsis of indeterminate length, "But when I grew up I guess I sorta stopped reading them. [. . .] I-I wouldn't r-really r-read them n-now . . . u-unless the art was good" (329).[31] If Amy and Jimmy both bore each other here, it is because their distinct, almost accidental reflections on comics have the character of narrated dreams—important to their subjects as they are dull to everyone else. Strictly speaking, this sequence is not liberating for any of its participants. Instead, it points to the potential of comics to intervene in and rearticulate the very historical processes from which they emerge.

Amy's plastic approach to family history suggests the possibility of break-

ing with the singular historiographic trajectory that the superhero tends to impose on comics, even if it can never fully leave the superhero behind. *Jimmy Corrigan* seems here to call for a more general form of genealogy that would account for the causal connections that stretch between various forms and figures rather than a simple genealogy of the superhero. Under the aegis of such an approach, the goal would not be to exclude the superhero, but to show what an excessive focus on it has already excluded. Formally speaking, Ware's cartooning in *Jimmy Corrigan* works to model and redouble the complex genealogies toward which its plot aspires. Through the novel's examination of the father, the superhero is shown to represent but a solitary point in time. Far from holding a single story in place, the work of genealogy—like the work of cartooning—can manipulate this seemingly singular node, putting it into new relations of meaning and constellations of causation. Jimmy's father is a far different man when seen through Amy's eyes than his equation with the superhero would suggest, less a potential tyrant than a benevolent co-parent. His inheritance of this other role is a product of the flexible attitude toward the past that Amy's accidental cartooning enables. Time's stable flow, Ware reminds us, is an illusion of the operations of closure by which we connect each moment to the next. What Ware offers, then, is less a precisely articulated solution to the problem of the superhero than a portrait of the superhero's own endless entanglements.

The paradigmatic example of this technique's potential is a two-page spread that appears near the text's conclusion. Showing Amy alone in the hospital after her father's death, the page suddenly opens up to reveal the process of her adoption. Then, in a series of short strips connected by arrows, time telescopes in a variety of directions, showing how Amy came to be where she is (see plates 9 and 10). This diagram's purpose—if it can be reduced to one—is to reveal that Amy and Jimmy actually share a common ancestry. Her grandmother is the illegitimate child of Jimmy's great-grandfather and his African American servant. In the process of revealing this information, the diagram opens the novel to moments otherwise lost to its multi-generational narrative: a flower pressed in the pages of a Bible, a plain grave in a military cemetery. These relics of the past can appear only through the folding of time that comics make possible, multiple passages turned into and over one another like sheets of origami paper, producing from them a wholly new shape that at once interrupts and celebrates the passage of time.[32]

Comics may not, in the final instance, be able to fully disassociate themselves from the legacy of the superhero. Indeed, though representations of superheroes and their stand-ins are all but absent from the book's closing pages, Ware's last image poignantly reiterates the rich ambivalence that has echoed throughout the narrative. Opposite the words "The End," Ware shows, in miniature, a young Jimmy carried through the air by an aged Superman, snow falling all around them (379). For all its frustrations, the superhero returns here as a figure of relief, the very familiarity that makes it the medium's curse providing a final comfort in the wake of the novel's many un-recuperated losses. Perhaps the best comics can do is take advantage of their own formal resources, unveiling forgotten histories and mislaid things, until this consolation is no longer needed.

Notes

1. Chris Ware, "Introduction," in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004), 11.

2. Dave Eggers, "After Wham! Pow! Shazam!" *New York Times Book Review*, November 26, 2000, 10–11.

3. Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," in *The Role of the Reader*, trans. Natalie Chilton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 114.

4. In a significant argument to the contrary, Geoff Klock has sought to make the case that superhero comics have grown increasingly self-reflexive over the course of the past three decades. This process of maturation is, Klock asserts, the result of their efforts to grapple with the influence of their generic forefathers. While Klock's claims are more compelling than some of his critics are willing to acknowledge, Ware's problem seems to be how to escape the *perception* of influence rather than influence as such. See Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

5. Chris Ware, "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess," rpt. in *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003), 39–41.

6. Gene Kannenberg Jr., "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image, and Visual Narrative Strategies," in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 183–86.

7. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), back cover. All further references to this text will be indicated in parentheses.

8. Established by the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954, the Comics Code Authority maintained a strict set of guidelines regulating "appropriate" content for comics publications. Distributors refused to circulate titles unless they featured the Authority's "Seal of Approval" on their covers. For a condensed history of the Comics Code see Amy Kiste Nyberg, "Comic Book Censorship in the United States," in *Pulp Demons*, ed. John A. Lent (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 42–68. For a more expansive account see David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, 2008).

9. An article in the *Morning Call* newspaper opens with just such a headline, noting, "Comics Grow Up . . . and So Do Their Readers." Brian Callaway, "Comics Grow Up . . . and So Do Their Readers," *Allentown (PA) Morning Call*, November 10, 2008, B6.

10. Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2007), 1.

11. Susan M. Squier, for example, has argued that comics might provide a resource for disability studies insofar as they "unsettle conventional notions of normalcy and disability." See Susan M. Squier, "So Long as They Grow Out of It: Comics, the Discourse of Developmental Normalcy, and Disability," *Journal of the Medical Humanities* 29.2 (2008): 71–88.

12. This headline is a reference to the death (and presumed suicide) of actor George Reeves on June 16, 1959. Reeves played Superman in the 1950s television series. Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1998), 97–99.

13. Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 61 (Litvak's italics).

14. I draw the term "lexia" from Gene Kannenberg Jr., who uses it to describe any linguistic element in a panel. See Kannenberg, "The Comics of Chris Ware," 178.

15. Eco, "The Myth of Superman," 114.

16. Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," *Social Text* 52/53 (1997): 266.

17. This panel, the fifth and last on the page, is also notable in that panels one and two and panels three and four mirror one another, demonstrating an uncanny resemblance between Jimmy and his father. Breaking this pattern, the fantasized sex scene implies that, despite the visual resemblance between the two men, something belongs to the father that is yet denied to the son (36). As Daniel Raeburn shows in his monograph on Chris Ware's work, this doubling of father and son is repeated on the dust jacket of *Jimmy Corrigan*'s hardcover edition. When the jacket is properly folded, half of Jimmy's face merges with that of his father. Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 69.

18. Importantly, the correspondence is, first and foremost, a formal one, arguably existing below the level of the naïve Jimmy's fictional consciousness. Moreover, in this light, Jimmy's vision of murdering his father on the following page might be understood as a futile attempt to re-contain the knowledge that here bubbles to the surface of the narrative through the conjunction of these two figures.

19. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 78.

20. The mirror may be the most primal form of a panel sequence in comics, the passage of time at once staged and denied in our encounter with the reflective frame.

21. Jimmy's fantasy of sex with Amy, his adopted sister (and, as we eventually learn, blood relation), arguably repeats this otherwise impermissible act in a more acceptable form (333).

22. It bears noting that for Eco sexual renunciation is a mark of the classic superhero's oneiric condition. Eco, "The Myth of Superman," 115.

23. In a telling slippage, Jimmy displaces any discontent with this superheroic/paternal stand-in onto the woman, muttering, "*Ha ha* Bitch," as he replays his tape of her admission. Misogyny here rears its head as one consequence of the failure to come to terms with the superhero's centrality (94).

24. *Jimmy Corrigan* as a whole is too capacious and complex for such an approach to be a total one. Accordingly, my account can only point to one of the many problems at work in the novel, not a fantastical solution to the novel as a whole.

25. Eco, "The Myth of Superman," 117.

26. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1950), 175–76.

27. Ibid., 178.

28. From the start, the novel couples parental power and potency with the automobile, as it is at a car show that Jimmy and his mother meet the actor who plays Superman.

29. It bears noting that the tiny man at first resembles an action figure, suggesting that Jimmy's dream of successfully realized adulthood is defeated by a recognition of the resemblance between this reverie and the submerged desire for maturity present in childhood play.

30. One might note the way the doctor links Jimmy's mysteriously injured foot to the superheroic mythos, asking, "How'd you do *this* one—leaping tall buildings in a single bound again?" (128). Jimmy's bound foot offers a reminder of Oedipus's punctured feet and establishes a further connection between barred superheroic desire and the Oedipal constellation.

31. On the dust jacket of *Jimmy Corrigan*'s hardcover edition, Ware shows that Jimmy is still a collector of comics, indicating his claim that he no longer reads comics is likely a product of his embarrassment (dust jacket).

32. *Jimmy Corrigan*'s hardcover dust jacket literalizes this practice, at once unveiling further complexities to Jimmy's genealogical descent and making them disappear into the folds of the paper itself (dust jacket).

The Limits of Realism: Alternative Comics and Middlebrow Aesthetics in the Anthologies of Chris Ware

MARC SINGER

The thirteenth issue of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, published in the summer of 2004, captures the precise moment that comics took over the world. The dust jacket (see fig. 3.2 pages 30–31), an elaborately structured comic written and drawn by guest editor Chris Ware, chronicles the tribulations of a lonely cartoonist who, under pressure to meet a looming deadline, decides his comic strip "doesn't need a punchline at all! I mean . . . *life* doesn't have a punchline, *right?* Maybe I should just *stop*, let it end where it is. . . ." Thanks to a timely divine intervention, the cartoonist follows through on his idea and soon his readers are praising the strip for its lifelike rhythms and its realistic lack of resolution. "Who woulda thought," the cartoonist muses, "that in less than *one week* comic strips would supplant painting, sculpture, and movies as the world's dominant artform?" In short order, the cartoonist is living in palatial surroundings, beloved by an adoring public and hounded by mobs of female admirers, all because he has introduced realism into his strip, now inventively titled "Life of the Seated Cartoonist" (see fig. 3.1).[1]

While Ware presents these developments with considerable irony (the seated cartoonist, dissatisfied with his overnight success, ponders painting still-life watercolors until he remembers that non-sequential art no longer holds any value in this parallel aesthetic universe), they are closely matched to the project of the anthology they envelop. By dedicating an issue of the influential, innovative literary quarterly to comics, Ware and *McSweeney's* founder Dave Eggers advance the idea that comics are "increasingly recognized as the cutting edge of visual and literary culture"—perhaps not quite the world's dominant art form, but closing in fast.[2] And while the comics assembled within *McSweeney's* 13 display a variety of styles from sardonic humor to grotesque horror, a majority of pieces strive for some form of realism, ranging from documentary journalism to psychological character study to confessional self-revelation. A later volume also edited by Ware, *The Best American Comics 2007*, is even more heavily weighted toward autobiography and realistic fiction. Ware may jokingly exaggerate the cultural impact of realistic comics on his dust jacket, but his anthologies—especially the introductory essays that outline his selection criteria and his vision of the medium of comics—promote realism to the exclusion of many other modes of comics

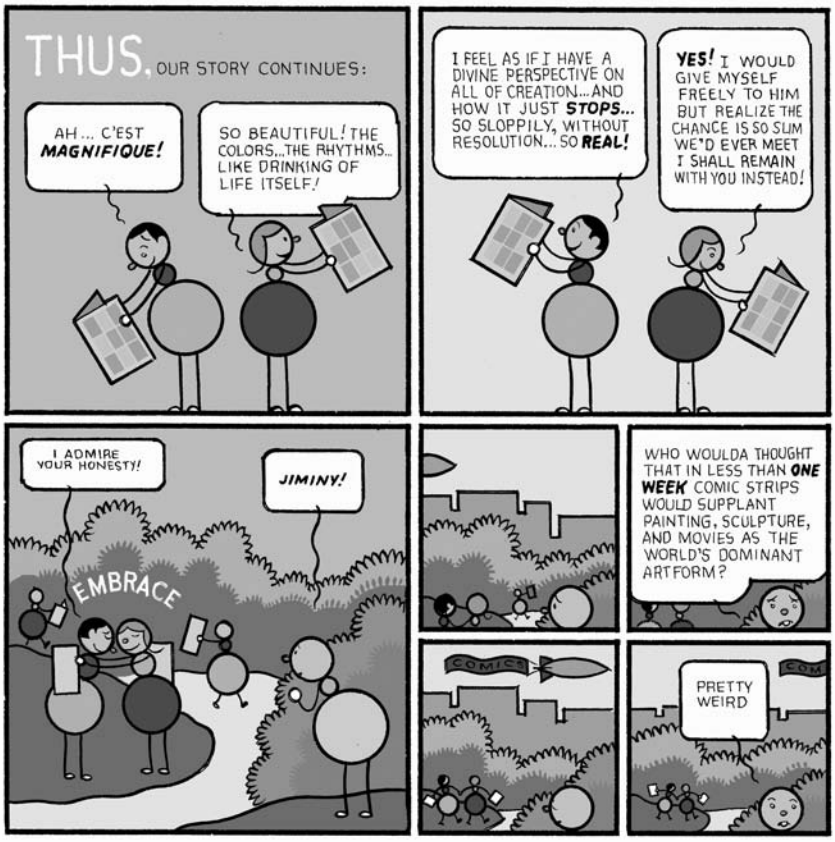
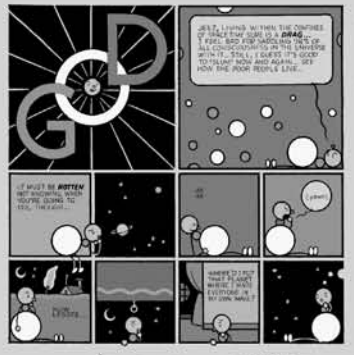


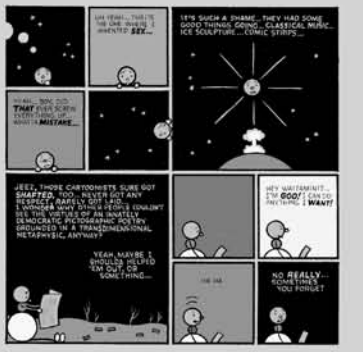
Fig. 3.1. How realism saved comics. Chris Ware, "God," detail. *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco, McSweeney's, 2004), dust jacket.

writing. In so doing, they also sustain some of the hierarchies of literary and artistic value that have long marginalized comics. Ware's fastidious avoidance of popular genres and his privileging of conventionally "literary" modes of writing perpetuate traditional, arbitrary divisions between high and low culture even as he seeks to position comics between the two. Ware's groundbreaking anthologies are key participants in the construction of comics' increasing cultural legitimacy, yet they consistently reinforce many of the same assumptions and values—favoring the literary, the textual, the realistic—that denied comics such legitimacy in the first place.[3]

Ware's preference for the realistic can be traced to his roots in the alternative comics movement of the 1980s and 1990s. This movement, as noted by Charles Hatfield in the eponymous *Alternative Comics* (2005), was inspired by the underground comix of the 1960s and 1970s and nourished by the comic book specialty market that emerged in the late 1970s. Unlike either the undergrounds or the mainstream superhero comics favored by the direct market, however, alternative comics renounced familiar genres in favor of formal experimentation, graphic and generic diversity, and the belief that comics could pursue the highest artistic ambitions.[4] Aspirations to realism have always been an important part of those ambitions. Hatfield cites "the exploration of searchingly personal and at times boldly political themes" as one of the distinctive features of the movement and adds, "Autobiography,

Pages 30–31:
Fig. 3.2. Chris Ware, "God," *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco, McSweeney's, 2004), dust jacket.



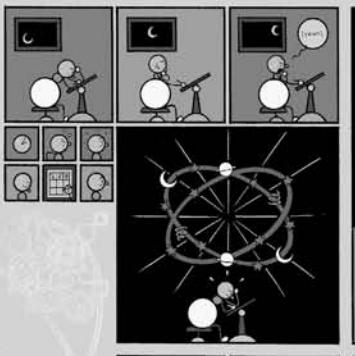


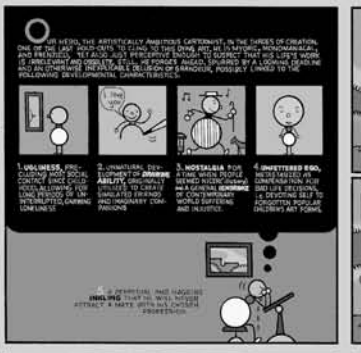
CHARACTER QUALITY CONCERN ENTERPRISE ACCURACY

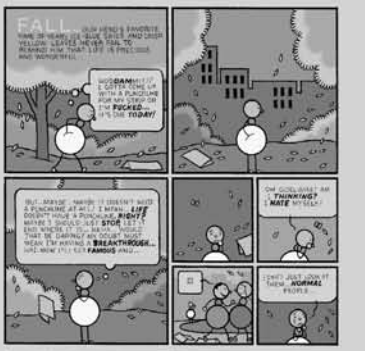
Mc Sweeney's Quarterly 13

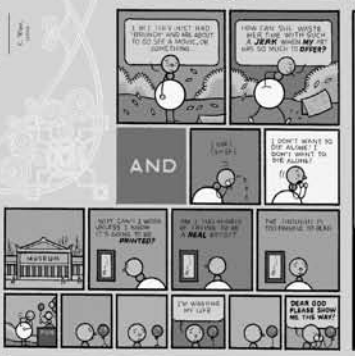
INCLUDED WITH THIS PAPER: A *FREE* 264 PAGE HARDCOVER

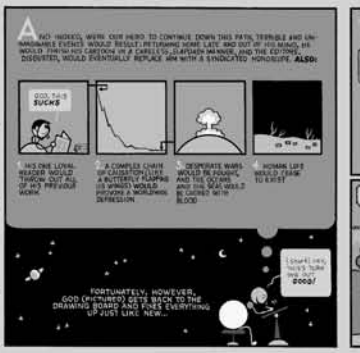
COMIC SECTION

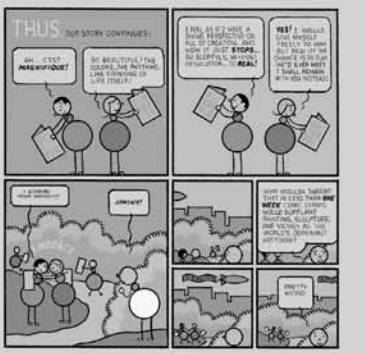


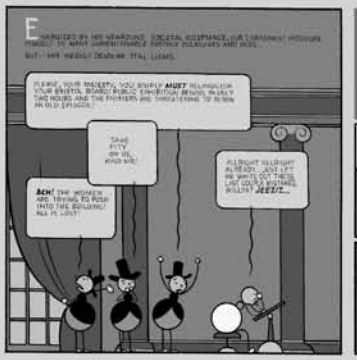


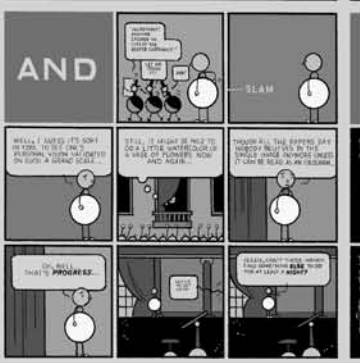


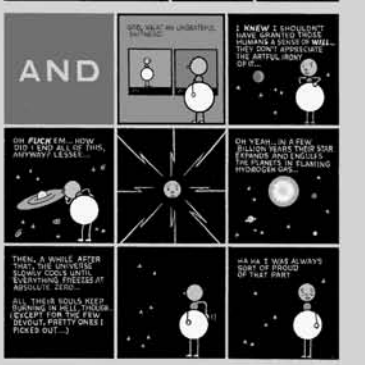


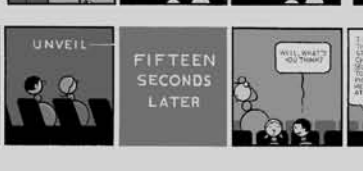


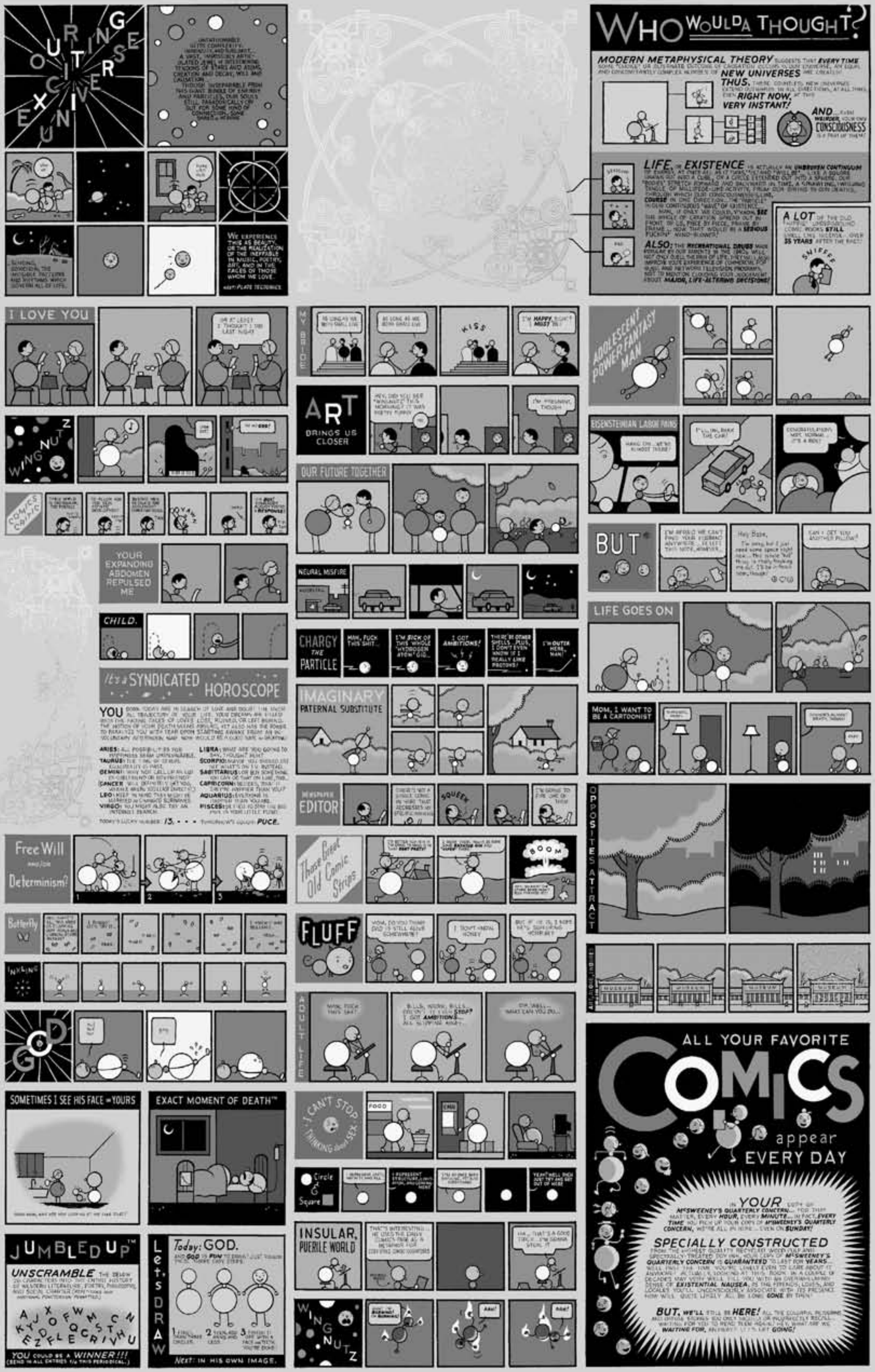











WHO WOULDA THOUGHT?
MODERN METAPHYSICAL THEORY
NEW UNIVERSES
THUS,
RIGHT NOW,
VERY INSTANT!
AND...
CONSCIOUSNESS
LIFE, or EXISTENCE
ALSO:
A LOT
SNIFFF
I LOVE YOU
MY BRIDE
KISS
ART BRINGS US CLOSER
ADOLESCENT POWER FANTASY MAN
WING NUTZ
COMICS CRITIC
OUR FUTURE TOGETHER
EISENSTEINIAN LABOR PAINS
BUT
YOUR EXPANDING ABDOMEN REPULSED ME
NEURAL MISFIRE
LIFE GOES ON
CHILD.
CHARGY THE PARTICLE
It's a SYNDICATED HOROSCOPE
YOU
ARIES:
TAURUS:
GEMINI:
CANCER:
LEO:
VIRGO:
LIBRA:
SCORPIO:
SAGITTARIUS:
CAPRICORN:
AQUARIUS:
PISCES:
TODAY'S LUCKY NUMBER: 13.
PUCE.
IMAGINARY PATERNAL SUBSTITUTE
MOM, I WANT TO BE A CARTOONIST
NEWSPAPER EDITOR
SQUEEK
OPPOSITES ATTRACT
Free Will and/or Determinism?
Those Great Old Comic Strips
BOOM
FLUFF
Butterfly
INKLING
GOD
ADULT LIFE
SOMETIMES I SEE HIS FACE IN YOURS
EXACT MOMENT OF DEATH™
I CAN'T STOP THINKING about SEX
FOOD
Circle & Square
ALL YOUR FAVORITE COMICS appear EVERY DAY
in YOUR
SPECIALLY CONSTRUCTED
BUT, WE'LL STILL BE HERE!
JUMBLED UP™
UNSCRAMBLE
YOU could be a WINNER!!!
Let's DRAW
Today: GOD.
Next: IN HIS OWN IMAGE.
INSULAR, PUERILE WORLD
WING NUTZ
BAM!

especially, has been central to alternative comics."[5] He traces this interest in autobiography to the work of Harvey Pekar, who "established a new mode in comics: the quotidian autobiographical series, focused on the events and textures of everyday existence."[6] Joseph Witek observes that this emphasis on the quotidian distinguishes Pekar's comics from their predecessors in the undergrounds; he suggests Pekar's style "is closer to the realists of prose literature than to anything that has appeared in comic books before."[7]

Witek's claim that Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and other "masters of American realism" constitute "the wellsprings of [Pekar's] homegrown aesthetic" should indicate the extent to which comics artists and critics alike have framed the realism of the alternative comics movement in literary rather than visual terms.[8] Indeed, Witek acknowledges that the artwork in Pekar's comics is often "crude," unsophisticated, not "conventionally 'realistic'"—with the stylistic descriptor placed in quotes, as if to signal that the comic's realism lies in areas other than visual convention.[9] This description highlights a tension within realism itself, between its ability to recreate the semblance of reality and its interest in exposing other truths that lie beyond mere appearance. W.J.T. Mitchell identifies this tension as a contrast between illusionism, the "simulation of the presence of objects, spaces, and actions," and realism, the "capacity of pictures to show the truth about things [. . .] offering a transparent window onto reality, an embodiment of a socially authorized and credible 'eyewitness' perspective."[10] Mitchell's use of "realism" muddies the distinction, however, as *both* "illusionism" and "realism" are important elements of the realist style in literature and the visual arts. According to art historian Linda Nochlin, this style seeks "to give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life."[11] Nochlin distinguishes between realism's traditions of faithful simulation and honest observation, characterizing them as, respectively, *verisimilitude* and *objectivity*, sincerity, or authenticity.[12] For many creators and critics of alternative comics, however, authenticity of observation takes precedence over verisimilitude in graphic representation—and, perhaps because comics are a visual medium, they tend to associate illusionism exclusively with visual representation, preferring to evaluate and praise their works' realism in predominantly narrative and literary terms.

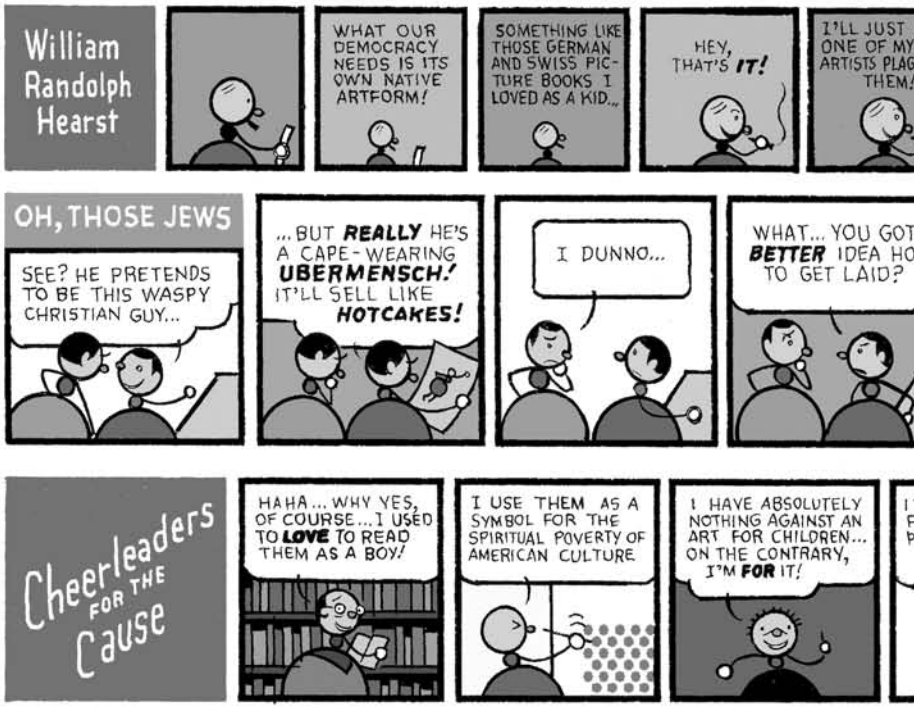
Ware, one of the foremost figures to emerge from the alternative comics movement, recapitulates this aesthetic in his anthologies, most notably in the introduction to *Best American Comics 2007*. Although he exalts comics for their capacity for mimetic representation, which he contrasts against the rise of conceptualism in the twentieth-century visual arts, Ware generally favors narrative authenticity over visual verisimilitude. He says the qualities he is "regularly looking for from art and literature" ultimately boil down to "telling the truth"; he defends the "preponderance of autobiographical work" in contemporary comics as "a necessity [. . .] both for the artists and the medium" if they are to learn "how to express real human emotion"; he argues that autobiographic self-expression "is a necessary step towards understanding what communicates and works in a medium"; and he claims the contributors to his volume have all developed individual styles "with the aim of getting at something new or, more precisely, real."[13] To accommodate the experimental,

decidedly non-illusionistic work of Gary Panter, C. F. (Christopher Forgues), and the Paper Rad collective, Ware suggests these artists allow for "very strange yet oddly real associations and feelings."[14]

With a sufficiently flexible definition, the realist label can be made to fit any artist, and Ware inevitably bestows it as a term of high praise. However, this label masks a series of uncritical and misleading elisions: *Best American Comics 2007* conflates mimetic representation with quotidian realism, quotidian realism with autobiography, and both modes of writing with "telling the truth." Autobiography poses a particular challenge in this regard; while it may appear to offer the most honest and authentic representations, in practice it can also prove the most deceptive. As Hatfield cautions, autobiographies depend as much on fabrication as on fact, and "what passes for frankness in comics must be a matter of both subjective vision and graphic artifice, a shotgun wedding of the untrustworthy and the unreal."[15] Nor is this equivocation unknown to comics artists. Hatfield cites comics by Daniel Clowes, R. Crumb, Gilbert Hernandez, and Harvey Pekar that subvert, exploit, or ridicule this inevitable slippage between truth and artifice; Ware's own "Corrigenda" to the semi-autobiographical *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* acknowledges "the chasm which gapes between the ridiculous, artless, dumbfoundedly meaningless coincidence of 'real' life and my weak fiction—not to mention my inability at knitting them together."[16] Yet his anthologies equate autobiography, honesty, and realism without question.

He instead reserves his skepticism for visual verisimilitude and illusionism. In his introduction to *McSweeney's* 13, Ware claims, "the more detailed and refined a cartoon, the less it seems to 'work,' and the more resistant to reading it becomes."[17] Ware elaborates on this judgment in comments to Daniel Raeburn: "Fundamentally you're better off using ideograms rather than realistic drawings. [. . .] There's a vulgarity to showing something as you really see it and experience it. It sets up an odd wall that blocks the reader's empathy."[18] While these comments reveal much about Ware's artistic decisions in his own comics, the *McSweeney's* introduction extrapolates his stylistic preference for simplified icons and symbols into a general renunciation of realistic art. Raeburn makes this renunciation explicit with his own gloss on Ware's comments, adding, "Realism is fine for telling tales about jut-jawed good guys in tights who sock dastards, but it is too explicit for anything emotional. It bullies the readers and their emotions, turning sentiment into sentimentality. Just as the old saw holds that in writing fiction you should show, not tell, in comics to show too much is to 'tell' too much."[19]

Although Raeburn eschews "realism" as a whole, he only targets realism in art, contrasting it with the literary variety; writers of fiction are supposed to favor dramatization and detail over exposition and didacticism, but comics artists must avoid overburdening their images lest the images themselves become didactic. Acting as Ware's interlocutor, Raeburn claims that realistic drawing and writing are antithetical, associating realistic pictures exclusively with the superhero adventures he and Ware decry. Ironically, some superhero boosters make the same association, though with approval rather than scorn; in *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art* (2003), Arlen Schumer reserves his highest praise for the naturalistic figure drawing of Neal Adams and his imi-



tators.[20] Whether laudatory or dismissive, such arguments tend to overlook the idealized and exaggerated anatomies, outré settings, and heroic subjects that would more than disqualify such comics from realism in the visual arts.[21] The realism Raeburn derides is the illusionistic tradition of Neal Adams and Alex Ross, not the social observation of Alison Bechdel or Joe Sacco. While these traditions may be separated by their emphasis on different components of realism, the determining factor for Raeburn seems to be their occupation of different genres—superheroes versus autobiography, realistic fiction, and reportage—that aspire to different levels of authenticity and have traditionally commanded radically different kinds of cultural capital.

Ware, too, misses no opportunity to distance the selections in his anthologies from superheroes and other popular genres traditionally associated with comics. This is a classic rhetorical strategy of the alternative comics movement, which has long defined itself against the fantasy, action, humor, and superhero genres that dominated the North American comics market at the time of the movement's emergence in the early 1980s. Hatfield writes, "Rejection of the corporatist 'mainstream' gives the post-underground alternative scene everything: its raison d'être, its core readership, and its problematic, marginal, and self-marginalizing identity."[22] Witek incorporates this oppositional stance into his own arguments, with many of his claims for the value of nonfiction comics predicated on their evident departure from "brightly colored breakneck fight scenes between cosmos-spanning power figures with the fate of the universe at stake"; the hyperbolic description re-creates many alternative comics artists' derision for the fantasies they reject.[23] Although Ware frequently incorporates superhero characters into his own comics, such as "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess" and *The ACME Novelty Library*, his

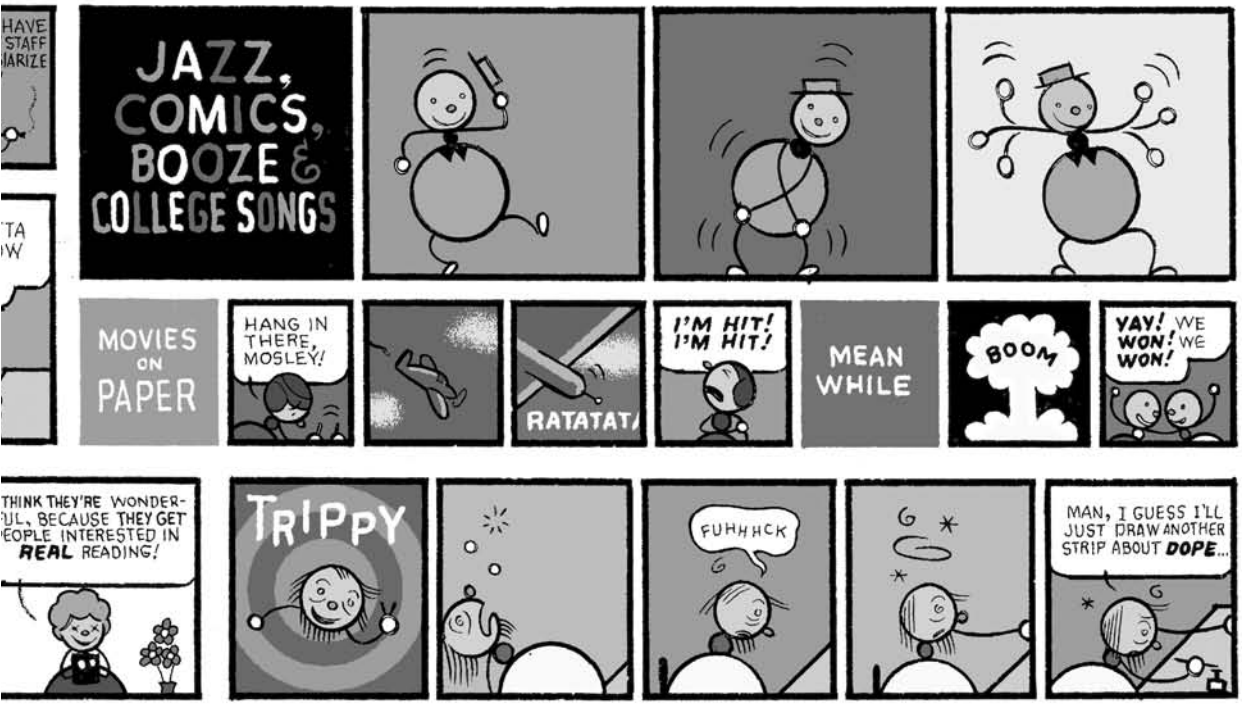


Fig. 3.3. Ware satirizes postwar intellectuals' disdain for comics. Chris Ware, "Comics: A History," *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004), 11.

anthologies cannot disavow them often enough. *McSweeney's* 13 holds the commercial genres at arm's length both in Ware's comics contributions (one of the strips on his dust jacket is called "Adolescent Power Fantasy Man"; others poke fun at formulaic newspaper gag strips) and in his introduction, where he swears off any responsibility for those fellow contributors who refuse to follow suit: "none of the 'words-only' authors invited to contribute were asked to write about superheroes and their childhoods, though nearly all of them did."[24]

Ware faces no such embarrassments in *Best American Comics 2007*, which excludes superhero comics not simply for their generic features but also for their most common mode of production. Ware claims: "The traditional, commercially established mode of 'scripting' a story and then simply illustrating it does not admit to the endemic potential in comics to literally imagine and see on the page, to say nothing of plumbing areas of imagination and memory that, I think, would otherwise be left inaccessible to words or single pictures alone."[25] Understandably, he privileges comics created by a single writer-artist, another key element of the alternative ethos that values comics as avenues for self-expression by a lone creator.[26] He goes far beyond this prioritization, however, when he implies that prose, single images, and even comics created through the collaborative division of labor are all somehow less able to access certain "areas of imagination and memory" than comics produced by a single writer-artist. Ware extends the division of labor of commercial comics to extreme lengths, separating these comics into their component words and pictures as a means of denying them the same capacity for expression, meaning, and depth—if not excluding them from full consideration as comics.[27]

Having dismissed the commercial genres, Ware also separates his chosen

milieu from the world of fine arts. This time, however, the separation is not entirely voluntary. The *McSweeney's* introduction tallies the humiliating judgments Ware's instructors at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago made about his decision to create comics; in the comic-strip history of comics that runs parallel to his prose introduction, and acts at times as a visual commentary on it, the same page shows a Benday-dotting Roy Lichtenstein type who boasts that he uses comics "as a symbol for the spiritual poverty of American culture" (see fig. 3.3).[28] By the time of his *Best American Comics* introduction, however, Ware seems almost grateful for this expulsion, treating it as a fortunate fall that exempted comics from the abstractionist and conceptualist bent of twentieth-century art. In Ware's telling, modernism and its successors "all but stomped out the idea of storytelling in pictures," with comics the lone holdout; he even goes so far as to imply that the anti-comics crusade of the late 1940s and early 1950s was some kind of retribution for daring to tell lurid stories in an age of abstraction.[29] He regards comics as a locus, if not a haven, for mimetic and narrative art "during a period that art historical naysayers and doomsdayers sometimes label as suffering a 'crisis of representation.'"[30] If the academy has rejected comics, it is the academy's loss.

The earlier *McSweeney's* introduction draws subtler distinctions between painting and comics art. After he argues that excessive visual detail hampers our ability to read comics, Ware states that "the real art resides" in "the tactility of an experience told in pictures outside the boundaries of words, and the *rhythm* of how these drawings 'feel' when read"; he further claims the comics artist's style is "expressed in how their characters move, how time is sculpted."[31] Although he relies heavily on figurative, analogic descriptions borrowed from music and the plastic arts, his emphasis on rhythm, motion, and time suggests that, much like Scott McCloud, Ware believes the art of comics inheres in its ability to represent time through the juxtaposition and arrangement of multiple images. This complicates his *Best American Comics* dichotomy of referentiality and conceptualism, indicating that comics are different not simply for representing the world mimetically but for representing it through multiple images that combine to form a unified narrative, a major difference of form as well as content.[32] Ware, in positioning alternative comics between popular culture and the fine arts, has also raised, however indirectly, the intriguing possibility that comics could occupy a middle space between representation and abstraction—or a space that lies outside this binary entirely, neither beholden to referentiality nor bound to reject it.

Unfortunately, *Best American Comics 2007* devotes more energy to situating alternative comics between the popular and the elite and condemning both, a maneuver strikingly reminiscent of the postwar middlebrow critics of mass culture as described by Leslie Fiedler in "The Middle against Both Ends" (1955). Fiedler notes that these critics were as suspicious of modernist literature as they were of the comics, leading him to conclude, "The middlebrow reacts with equal fury to an art that baffles his understanding and to one which refuses to aspire to his level. The first reminds him that he has not yet, after all, *arrived* (and, indeed, may never make it); the second suggests to him a condition to which he might easily relapse [. . . and] even suggests what his state may appear like to those a notch above."[33] The middlebrow critics are not a perfect match for Ware: modernist and postmodernist art can hardly

be said to baffle his understanding, and he does not reject "the intolerable notion of a hierarchy of taste, a hierarchy of values" as Fiedler maintains the anti-comics crusaders did.[34] Quite the opposite, his anthologies reinforce the same hierarchies and stereotypes that denied comics any cultural capital in the past and caused Ware so much grief at art school.

In *McSweeney's*, Ware laments that "the associations of childhood and puerility are still hard to shake" for many cartoonists—but he hastens to add, "Not that the art itself shouldn't be blamed" for creating these associations, since "the accumulated world-dump of comics is piled high with nonsense."[35] Both his dust jacket strips and his introductory history of comics portray comics as a crass, despised, ephemeral, hopelessly commercialized medium; even God himself proclaims that cartoonists "sure got shafted."[36] Daniel Worden has observed how this sense of shame at comics' vulgar history permeates the anthology, providing a common aesthetic for the contributors and defining the book's audience.[37] It is also so common to Ware's own work that, in his preface, Ware's friend Ira Glass quips, "Comic book artists often seem to think of themselves as marginal figures. I'm sure somewhere in this issue of *McSweeney's* Chris Ware is bemoaning how no one pays attention to comics, how they're not taken seriously, how they're seen as children's art."[38] One page later, Ware is doing just that. His issue of *McSweeney's* presents comics as an abject, shameful art form even as he castigates the art world for viewing it the same way.

Best American Comics 2007 is even more equivocal in its simultaneous defense and defensive belittlement of comics. Ware justifies the preponderance of autobiography in alternative comics (and in his anthology) by announcing that "comics have entered their late adolescence as art/literature" and by declaring autobiography "the most facile and immediate way" for novice artists to learn to write emotions.[39] Some context might help illuminate these curiously backhanded arguments: Ware is defending autobiographical comics against a perceived slight in a *New York Times* review by John Hodgman, who writes, "For all the admirable effort to allow comics to tell different types of stories, there is also a creeping sameness to many of these comics: black-and-white, semi- or wholly autobiographical sketches of drifting daily life and its quiet epiphanies [. . . and] sometimes the epiphanies are so quiet as to be inaudible."[40] Hodgman's criticisms, although delivered with considerable sympathy, suggest some alternative comics have settled into a monotony that contravenes their own ethos; a movement that, according to Hatfield, prides itself on generic diversity has reached the point where "the appearance of bracing 'honesty' runs the risk of hardening into a self-serving, repetitive shtick."[41]

Perhaps the worst sting, however, is landed when Hodgman, after summarizing one particularly inert story by Jonathan Bennett (reprinted in *Best American Comics 2007*), yawns, "This is when I tend to reach for the pile of superhero comics."[42] Hodgman, tongue firmly in cheek, refuses to respect the hierarchies of taste maintained in Ware's introductions and in the world of North American alternative comics in general; the fact that these comics do not feature superheroes is no longer sufficient reason for Hodgman to ignore his feeling that many (though by no means all) of these epiphanic comics are "kind of boring."[43] Ware's response is not to refute the charge but to reassert

the hierarchy. He reanimates the dismissals of his art school years with his claims that comics have entered their late adolescence—perhaps a marginal improvement over childhood, which Ware associates with superhero and humor comics—and that they have focused on autobiography out of convenience and a lack of any better ability to express emotion. If these defenses seem patronizing, even counterproductive, at least the hierarchy of taste they maintain places Ware's alternative comics in the middle: Hodgman's superhero comics are sent back to the bottom of the pile.

Ware's anthologies reinforce this hierarchy through their selection and categorization of comics artists. Both volumes skew heavily toward various forms of literary realism or life writing: epiphanic fiction, autobiography, diary comics, dream journals. These genres account for anywhere from one-third to one-half of the comics in *McSweeney's* 13 (depending on how border cases like Daniel Clowes's aggressively, ironically mundane "The Darlington Sundays" are classified).[44] The trend is even more pronounced in *Best American Comics 2007*; with the absence of historical comics artists like Rodolphe Töpffer, George Herriman, or Charles Schulz (all featured in *McSweeney's*), well over half of the artists have produced autobiographic or realistic comics, and autobiographies alone account for more than a third of the collection. Ware further calls attention to this narrow range by grouping his selections together by genre and style, exacerbating the impression that his collections are governed by only a few modes of writing.

Nowhere is Ware's tendency to promote autobiographical comics—and to pigeonhole alternative comics artists in a handful of genres—more apparent than in his handling of women artists. Of the thirty-two comics artists included in *Best American Comics 2007*, just nine are women. (Two are the wife and daughter of underground comix legend R. Crumb.) *McSweeney's* 13 is even less inclusive, with women accounting for only three out of thirty-seven artists. In response to complaints about this lack of representation, Ware wraps up his *Best American Comics* introduction with a rather prickly defense of his selection process, stating, "I am not of the cut of the cloth to check an artist's genitalia at the door," and dismissing "those who still feel compelled to tally points for one or another chromosome"—typical reversals that seek to shift the blame onto anyone who wants to address issues of gender exclusion, based on the old fallacy that acknowledging gender difference is itself a form of discrimination. He adds, "Nor in the case of this book did I go out in search of a couple of hermaphrodites to even out the score," further trivializing any objections to the scarcity of women in his collections. Ware confronts charges of exclusion more directly when he says he chose to include "work that [he] found to be the most interesting, honest, and revealing to be published in the past year, and that collection, as it turned out, included comics from the pens of both sexes."[45] The detached posture and passive language ("as it turned out") imply that Ware and then series editor Anne Elizabeth Moore were truly gender blind in their selections and pleasantly surprised with the equitable result.[46]

A look at the contents of *Best American Comics 2007* tells another story. Of the nine women Ware included, eight are grouped together, consecutively, in the autobiography section, even though Lynda Barry's strip *Ernie Pook's Comeek* is not autobiographical. The ninth woman, Miriam Katin, also works

in autobiography but is wedged between two other Jewish comics artists, Sammy Harkham and Ben Katchor, in a different but equally claustrophobic category. The selections barely acknowledge that women create comics in other genres beyond autobiography. Moore's appended list of the "100 Distinguished Comics" published during the eligibility period includes history, biography, fantasy, fiction, and experimental comics by women such as Andrice Arp, Megan Kelso, Linda Medley, Danica Novgorodoff, and Becca Taylor, among several others, yet none of them made the cut in a collection that nevertheless has room for four David Heatley comics, three Ivan Brunetti strips, and the entire Crumb family.[47] While the small number of women may reflect the relative paucity of female creators in North American comics as a whole, this stark gender segregation is Ware's handiwork—most likely an unintended consequence of his disproportionate emphasis on autobiography, which remains the genre of comics with the most prominent and prevalent work by women. Ware and Moore's ostensibly gender-blind selection process only perpetuates this ghettoization. The partitioning need not be malicious or deliberate, merely the most extreme example of a foreshortened vision of comics that focuses on "honest and revealing" work above all else—and naïvely equates those characteristics with their most obvious forms of expression in autobiography and quotidian realism.

Ware offers a different explanation of his aesthetic preferences in *Best American Comics 2007*. Contrasting the recent boom in comics with the rising popularity of prose fiction in "an increasingly urban and industrial nineteenth century," he contends that in the past, "as geography, communication, and society became more tight-knit, individual perceptions and expression began to standardize."[48] Ware summarizes a complex but widely accepted argument that the technological and social innovations of modernity and the second industrial revolution instituted universalized, ever-shrinking scales of time and space, providing the world, for the first time, with a common frame of reference.[49] Ware then makes his boldest claim when he asserts that this process of universalization "is more or less exactly the inverse of what's been happening in comics for the last few years [. . . and] even a casual flip-through of the pages of this book will demonstrate a highly individual approach by each and every artist."[50] He positions alternative comics as running counter to modernity itself.

Ware's thesis is admirable for its ambition, its scope, and its neat encapsulation of the changes wrought by modernity, but it also prompts a few immediate objections. First, modernity is hardly as exclusively homogenizing as Ware suggests; the same period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that saw the attempted regularization of time and space also produced modernism's highly personalized, idiosyncratic, fragmented modes of perception and artistic representation.[51] Second, and more important to understanding Ware's aesthetic criteria, his claim that "each and every artist" in his anthology has a "highly individual approach" is belied by the comparatively narrow range of genres and art styles he has selected for inclusion. Although plenty of exceptions exist, too many of the *Best American Comics* contributors present diaries, autobiographies, or quotidian realistic fiction, or draw in the same loose, deliberately unpolished do-it-yourself aesthetic, for Ware's claim of universal individuality to be more than hyperbole.[52] The

majority of his contributors work within a set of generic and stylistic conventions as well defined as the commercial narrative techniques he rejects.

He may nevertheless be onto something when he locates his contributors within an aesthetic of the individual. Some of the selections, such as Sammy Harkham's imagination of life in a nineteenth-century shtetl or Dan Zettwoch's record of the 1937 Louisville flood, sketch entire communities while others, like the free-associative experiments of C. F. and Paper Rad, abandon realistic narrative entirely. Most of the stories in *Best American Comics 2007*, however, are stories of individual dilemmas, individual epiphanies (or the lack thereof), individual artists or their surrogates lost in their own individual perceptions. Ware is not incorrect to place this emphasis on individual experience in opposition to the more social focus of nineteenth-century fiction, but he seems unaware that it is hardly limited to comics. Christopher Lasch bemoaned the popularity of confessional literature in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978), excoriating it for its self-indulgence.[53] Contemporary realistic fiction has prompted similar critiques: George Packer notes, "Recent American literature reflects this triumph of private life. The writing that has had the greatest influence in the past two decades [. . .] is a breakfast-table realism, focused inward on marital complaints, childhood troubles, alcohol, sex, general self-loathing and dissatisfaction."[54] By way of example, Packer cites Ware and Moore's sister series, *Best American Short Stories*; had he written this passage seven years later, he could just as easily have cited *Best American Comics 2007*. The stories Ware and Moore have selected do cultivate an individual approach, not in their shared styles but through their common retreat into interior life; and Ware's introduction does hint at the privatizing aesthetic at work in these comics even if he does not acknowledge that such an aesthetic exists. This undercuts many of his claims for comics' revolutionary break from prevailing aesthetic standards—for while they may challenge the postwar visual arts' focus on abstraction and conceptualism, his selections fall perfectly in line with postwar American literature's taste for the confessional and quotidian. Ware has simply exchanged one set of canonical standards for another.

He is hardly the only writer to impose the literary world's preferences for realism and autobiography onto comics. The practice is perhaps best exemplified by Charles McGrath's *New York Times Magazine* article on graphic novels. Published almost simultaneously with *McSweeney's* 13, the article both recognizes and enables comics' newfound respectability, yet it also conflates a single mode of writing with an entire medium as McGrath evaluates the graphic novel in the narrowest of literary terms. After quickly dismissing popular genre fiction from consideration, McGrath asserts that the "better" graphic novels—"the comic book[s] with a brain"—inhabit "a place of longing, loss, sexual frustration, loneliness and alienation—a landscape very similar, in other words, to that of so much prose fiction."[55] Ignoring the diversity of his own interviewees, who range from comics journalist Joe Sacco to superhero auteur Alan Moore, McGrath celebrates anomic alternative comics precisely because they conform to the generic preferences of contemporary literary fiction—preferences for realism, interiority, self-reflection, and, above all, autobiography. He also reduces all autobiographical and semi-autobiographical comics to a single "ur-narrative, which upon examination proves to be, with

small variations, the real life story of almost everyone who goes into this line of work."[56] This is a story of obsession, social ostracism, "usually excessive masturbation," "rage and depression and thwarted energy," a story so formulaic that by article's end McGrath has boiled it down to formula twice more and used it to sum up the lives of Daniel Clowes and Chris Ware: "broken home, comics obsession, friendless, dateless adolescence."[57] While lauding these stories as the most literate, artistic, intelligent style of comics, McGrath confines them to a single plotline as predictable and trite as anything produced by the superhero factories of DC or Marvel Comics. His article exceeds even Ware's *Best American Comics* introduction in its penchant for reinforcing the value judgments of the same cultural establishment he claims graphic novels are supplanting, beginning in the second paragraph when he states, "If the highbrows are right, [comics are] a form perfectly suited to our dumbed-down culture and collective attention deficit."[58]

Ironically, those judgments no longer hold the same sway over much of the literary world. Authors of considerable skill and acclaim were challenging the privileged position of memoir, autobiography, and realistic, epiphanic fiction well before McGrath and Ware attempted to translate that privilege over to comics. Colson Whitehead dissected the formulaic repetitions, pandering metaphors, and always-muted epiphanies of the "Well-Crafted Short Story" in a 2002 *New York Times* book review; just a few weeks earlier Michael Chabon, writing the introduction to a volume of *McSweeney's* devoted to popular genre fiction, described his exhaustion with "the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story" in brutally Darwinian terms, lamenting the generic dominance of "the moment-of-truth story that, like homo sapiens, appeared relatively late on the scene but has worked very quickly to wipe out its rivals."[59] Chabon and Whitehead both observe that quotidian realism is a genre like any other, with as much potential for rigid formulas and tired conventions as any of the popular genres Ware and McGrath dismiss. If literary fiction is, in fact, on the wane, as McGrath speculates in his first paragraph, already on its way to becoming a niche genre for a shrinking audience, it seems counterintuitive that he and Ware should promote comics that adopt the standards and the genres that reign over its decline.

For all that Ware positions himself, in comics and in print, against art instructors, book reviewers, and other cultural gatekeepers, his anthologies are less interested in exploding the gatekeepers' hierarchies of taste than they are in ascending within those hierarchies, both by duplicating the conventions of more legitimized art forms and by distancing themselves from the kinds of comics that once earned the highbrows' scorn. Ware situates the alternative comics in his anthologies as a new middlebrow, fleeing from the demotic excesses of superheroes and funny animals while razzing the ossified conventions of the visual arts (and, simultaneously, recreating the ossified conventions of literary fiction). Like Fiedler's middlebrow, Ware's anthologies rail against both high and low culture, but they do so in the interest of recycling rather than denying the culture's value judgments. They also advocate limited ranges of aesthetic ambition and generic production for mature, sophisticated, culturally legitimated comics.[60] With their claustrophobic categories, their recirculated hierarchies, and their renunciation of both the fine arts and

popular culture in favor of a homogenous and derivative middle ground, *Best American Comics 2007* and *McSweeney's* 13 do not reflect the full diversity and potential of comics; they only affirm that Ware's vision of alternative comics no longer offers much of an alternative.

Notes

1. Chris Ware, "God," in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004), dust jacket.

2. Daniel Worden, "The Shameful Art: *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, Comics, and the Politics of Affect," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 892.

3. Thierry Groensteen discusses the assumptions that have delegitimized comics, including, notably, fears of "the corrupting power of the image," suspicion of fantasy or escapism, especially when it is presented visually, and a mistrust of comics' hybrid nature, which violates Western culture's long-standing separation of text and image. Thierry Groensteen, "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?" trans. Shirley Smolderen, in *Comics & Culture*, ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2000), 35–36.

4. Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), ix–x.

5. Ibid., x.

6. Ibid., 109.

7. Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 128, 132.

8. Ibid., 132.

9. Ibid., 126.

10. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 325.

11. Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971), 13.

12. Ibid., 19–21, 31–40. Nochlin also argues that realism, contrary to its claims of objectivity, does not and cannot offer a transparent window onto reality (14–15).

13. Chris Ware, "Introduction," in *The Best American Comics 2007* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), xvii–xviii, xxi.

14. Ibid., xxi.

15. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 114.

16. Chris Ware, "Corrigenda," in *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), endpapers.

17. Ware, "Introduction," *McSweeney's* 11 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2003).

18. Chris Ware, quoted in Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 18. Ware is far from the only comics artist to claim that iconically simplified art increases reader empathy and identification; Scott McCloud makes a similar argument in chapter 2 of *Understanding Comics* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink, 1993); and Art Spiegelman describes *Maus* in similar terms in Joshua Brown, "Of Mice and Memory," *Oral History Review* 16.1 (1988): 91–109. However, some scholars have challenged this association, arguing that iconic style does not determine reader involvement: see Jonathan Frome, "Identification in Comics," *The Comics Journal* 211 (1999): 82–86.

19. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 19.

20. Schumer also makes the questionable argument that Adams's expressive anatomical realism was a necessary precursor for superhero comics to tackle more complex and realistic subjects, quite the opposite of Ware's and Raeburn's separation of the two. Arlen Schumer, *The Silver Age of Comic Book Art* (Portland, OR: Collector's Press, 2003).

21. Charles Hatfield, review of *The Silver Age of Comic Art*, *International Journal of Comic Art* 6.1 (2004): 352.

22. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 111.

23. Witek, *Comic Books as History*, 127.

24. Ware, *McSweeney's* 12 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2003).

25. Ware, *Best American*, xix.

26. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 16, 18.

27. Ware's logic cannot support his own preferences: if he applied this principle across all genres of comics, then the work of critically reviled superhero writer-artists such as Todd MacFarlane and Rob Liefeld would possess more of comics' "endemic potential" than that of alternative comics pioneer Harvey Pekar, who never illustrates his own scripts and always collaborates with an artist.

28. Ware, *McSweeney's* 11.

29. Ware, *Best American*, xix–xx.

30. Ibid., xxii.

31. Ware, *McSweeney's* 11.

32. The *Best American* introduction does note that the pre-modernist narrative art of altarpieces and tapestries was frequently sequential. Ware, *Best American*, xix.

33. Leslie Fiedler, "The Middle against Both Ends," *Encounter* (August 1955), rpt. in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, vol. 2 (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 428.

34. Ibid., 428.

35. Ware, *McSweeney's* 11.

36. Ibid., dust jacket.

37. Worden, "The Shameful Art," 893–94.

38. Ira Glass, "Preface," in *McSweeney's* 7 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2001).

39. Ware, *Best American*, xviii.

40. John Hodgman, "Comics Chronicle," *New York Times Book Review*, June 4, 2006, 18. Ware does not cite Hodgman by name, but he refers to "a June 2006 roundup of various recent comics" and quotes Hodgman's review. He also neglects to mention that Hodgman praises several comics in the epiphanic style, including two by C. Tyler and Kevin Huizenga that are excerpted in *Best American Comics* 2007.

41. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 114.

42. Hodgman, "Comics Chronicle," 18.

43. Ibid.

44. Worden notes that the anthology's thematic range is also "remarkably homogenous," with most of the selections drawing on "a common tradition in comics that centers on intimacy, shame, and masculine melancholia." Worden, "The Shameful Art," 892, 893.

45. Ware, *Best American*, xxiii.

46. David Foster Wallace explains the selection process for the *Best American* series in his "Introduction" to *The Best American Essays 2007*, ed. David Foster Wallace (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007). The series editor—in the case of *Best American Comics 2007*, Anne Elizabeth Moore—culls the submissions down to roughly 100 finalists. The guest editor—in this case, Ware—chooses which pieces will be published in the anthology.

47. Anne Elizabeth Moore, "100 Distinguished Comics from August 31, 2005, to September 1, 2006," in Ware, *Best American*, 328–30.

48. Ware, *Best American*, xx, xxi.

49. See, for example, Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 11–15; and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell, 1990), 260–83.

50. Ware, *Best American*, xxi.

51. See Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*; and Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Brad Prager has observed that Ware himself works in a modernist mode. Brad Prager, "Modernism in the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *International Journal of Comic Art*. 5.1 (2003): 195–213.

52. Dave Eggers identifies many of the hallmarks of this style, currently ascendant in alternative comics, in his catalogue for a 2008 gallery show of such works. He cites their lighthearted tone, scrawled writing, uncorrected spelling, "casual, even sloppy" drawings, "loose draftsmanship," and their "intimate and disarming" ethos. Unfortunately, he declines to give a name to this affected unaffectedness, choosing (in a fitting example of the style) to title his exhibition and catalogue "Lots of Things Like This." Dave Eggers, "Lots of Things Like This," in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 27 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2008), n.p.

53. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1978), 16–21. Hatfield has

observed how Lasch's arguments underwrite many common critiques of autobiographical comics. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 129–30.

54. George Packer, *Blood of the Liberals* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 390.

55. Charles McGrath, "Not Funnies," *New York Times Magazine*, July 11, 2004, 30.

56. Ibid., 30.

57. Ibid., 30, 33.

58. Ibid., 24.

59. Colson Whitehead, "The End of the Affair," *New York Times Book Review*, March 3, 2002, 8; Michael Chabon, "The Editor's Notebook," in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 10 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2002), 7.

60. Other anthologists do not prescribe Ware's realist aesthetic; *The Best American Comics 2008* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), assembled by Ware's friend Lynda Barry and new series editors Jessica Abel and Matt Madden, displays a very different mix of styles and a marked predilection for humor, fable, and fantasy.

Chris Ware's Failures

DAVID M. BALL

Why bother taking the time to read this? Aren't there better things you could be spending your money on? Isn't there something worthwhile you could be doing right now? This is the immediate reaction we might expect from Chris Ware at the thought of a critical volume of essays devoted to his work. Indeed, he had much the same reaction when first informed about the 2007 Modern Language Association roundtable on his comics that served as the origin of this present collection: "I must say, I'm not sure whether to be pleased or terrified that my stuff would fall under the scrutiny of people who are clearly educated enough to know better. I'd imagine that your roundtable will quickly dissolve into topics of much more pressing interest, or that you'll at least be able to adjourn early for a place in line at lunch, etc."[1]

Ware's readers and fans have come to expect this characteristic self-abnegation in all of his public performances and publications, an insistent rhetoric of failure that imbues everything from Ware's interviews and critical writings to the layout and packaging of his hardbound, book-length publications. Ware artfully edits the least flattering portions of reviews on the inset pages of paperback editions of *Jimmy Corrigan*, informing his readers that the volume they hold is both "weighed down by its ambition" and "nearly impossible to read."[2] Ware's self-written catalogue for his 2007 solo exhibition at Omaha's Sheldon Memorial Gallery appeared under the title "Apologies, Etc." and lamented the collection's "unerringly inexpressive" contents (see plate 4).[3] The exterior band of Ware's hardcover *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (the title itself devaluing the contents of the book to the realm of the sub-literary) is graced with a prolix apologia promising that readers will be "gravely disappointed by the contents of this volume" and offering a long list of other functions the discarded book might serve: "A Disappointment * A Used Book * Trash * A Cutting Board * Food for Insects and Rodents * A Weapon * Fuel * Attic Insulation * The Focus of an Angry Review * Recycled Wood Pulp in the Paper of a Better Book * Something to Forget about on the Floor of Your Car * A Tax Shelter for the Publishers."[4] Even the very barcodes of Ware's works rarely appear without a self-flagellant quip or reminder to the book's purchasers that their time and money could be better invested elsewhere.

Both casual and scholarly readers of Ware have puzzled over the prevalence of such expressions of insufficiency and uselessness, examples of which are legion in his work and permeate his entire career, from Ware's disavowals of his earliest strips to the latest volume in his ongoing serialization of *The*

ACME Novelty Library. This rhetoric of failure appears both paratextually—in places such as dust jackets, publication information, and author biographies that customarily codify and reinforce the text's value as a signifying tool—as well as narratively, in stories that routinely revolve around themes of anomie, humiliation, and despair.[5] For some, this abnegation is nothing more than the outward manifestation of a self-effacing author, part and parcel of comics artists' carefully constructed personae as neglected outsiders in a harsh and uncaring world.[6] For others, this unrelenting return to narratives of futility and human suffering reveals a morbid fascination with stories of loss and meaninglessness. Douglas Wolk summarized this view in his *Reading Comics* with a chapter titled "Why Does Chris Ware Hate Fun?" There he writes that Ware's comics "have an emotional range of one note [. . .] forc[ing] his readers to watch his characters sicken and die slowly, torment (and be humiliated in turn by) their broken families, and lead lives of failure and loneliness."[7] Ware's rhetoric of failure, according to this unreflective critique, thinly masks the bravura pretensions of a graphic genius, acting as a kind of false consciousness behind which he can shield his genre-defying approach to graphic narrative. While all of these explanations reflect certain truths about Ware—he is in fact exceedingly modest, does focus his creative energies into a worldview indelibly inflected with angst and existential terror, and frequently does disavow the scope of his ambitions behind self-effacing remarks—at the same time these readings (Wolk's most prominent among them) unnecessarily restrict the interpretive possibilities of Ware's texts to mere personal (and by implication, perverse) predilections. In doing so, they obscure a broader literary understanding of the work of Ware's rhetoric of failure and the role it plays in his attempts not only to write comics with the texture and sophistication of literary fiction, but to have them treated as such.

In this essay, I argue that the rhetoric of failure is one of the means by which Ware negotiates his attempts to place comics in the literary canon. In doing so, he is reinhabiting a much older American literary tradition, one that begins as early as the mid-nineteenth century. American authors have long cultivated a self-conscious rhetoric of failure as a watchword for literary success, effectively transvaluing the meanings of success and failure in reference to their own writing. This represented an effort, among other objectives, to establish a concept of literary prestige in an era of the bestselling novel. By spurning commercial success and romanticizing the neglected artist, American authors began to classify the literary itself in opposition to mass culture, a definition adopted and amplified by subsequent generations of readers, critics, and literary theorists. In American literature, Herman Melville serves as the archetype for this rhetoric, writing in his famous review essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" that "it is better to fail in originality, than to succeed in imitation. He who has never failed somewhere, that man can not be great. Failure is the true test of greatness. And if it be said, that continual success is a proof that a man wisely knows his powers,—it is only to be added, that, in that case, he knows them to be small."[8] Writing in a time of expanding literacy, especially among newly leisured and monied women readers within a broadening American middle class, American authors for the first time had to distinguish their aspirations from a growing mass audience at the same time that they nonetheless sought economic viability and sustainable readerships.

It was the conflicted desire to both capture and renounce this mass audience that first gave birth to a rhetoric of failure-as-success among American writers, what would become a guiding and lasting paradox of celebrated literary failure. We can witness this same rhetoric in Nathaniel Hawthorne's strange boast to be "the obscurest man in American letters" and his corresponding disparagement of the "d——d mob of scribbling women [among whom] I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed."[9] In their conspicuous division of popularity from literary value and celebration of failure as an exclusive province of (male) literary writers, authors such as Melville and Hawthorne inaugurated a discourse that would be elaborated throughout the American literary canon among both authors and critics.

Chris Ware, I argue, recognizes this literary historical trajectory—he illustrates and cites from "Hawthorne and His Mosses" in his 2006 cover illustration of the "Writers on Writers" special issue of *Virginia Quarterly Review*—using this canonical divide between literary value and popularity to navigate his own ambivalences about comics' status as high art. On one level, Ware is keen to establish comics as a medium that can both embody the psychological complexity and epistemological difficulty of literary texts and cultivate thoughtful and discerning adult readers. Yet, Ware is also attentive to the fact that his chosen medium remains closely bound to the expectations and audience of adolescent literature, a popular cultural foundation that the rhetoric of failure would conventionally disown. Ware's own rhetoric of failure must then negotiate comics' rise to the status of "graphic narrative" while not abjuring their mass-cultural appeal, calling into question the popular/prestigious divide that continues to vex both literary scholarship and comics theory.[10] "If one wants to tell stories that have the richness of life," Ware states, "[comics'] vocabulary is extremely limited. It's like trying to use limericks to make literature."[11] In equal turns embracing and repudiating the mass cultural foundations of comics, both acceding to and having serious misgivings over comics' rise to the status of literature, Ware's rhetoric of failure maps his characteristic ambivalence toward the very notion of "graphic literature."

High and Low in the Comics Library

In the December 1997 issue of the *Comics Journal*—four years after the first number of *The ACME Novelty Library* was published, but well before he had emerged as a figure outside the consideration of the comics community—Chris Ware designed a cover and appeared in a long-form interview in the pages of a periodical explicitly founded to promote comics as high-art cultural treasures. On the cover, Ware depicts a "youth library" housing only comics and populated by some of their most recognizable creations: Charles Schultz's Charlie Brown, Rudolph Dirks's Hans Katzenjammer, Richard Outcault's Yellow Kid, and, in the left foreground, his own Jimmy Corrigan (see fig. 4.1). Displaying his characteristically encyclopedic regard for comics history and inscribing himself within this exalted genealogy of comics icons, Ware at the same time ruthlessly parodies comics as a medium, displaying a laughable taxonomy on the library's shelves under the category of "Art." Structured like a nineteenth-century ladder of progress, Ware divides graphic narra-

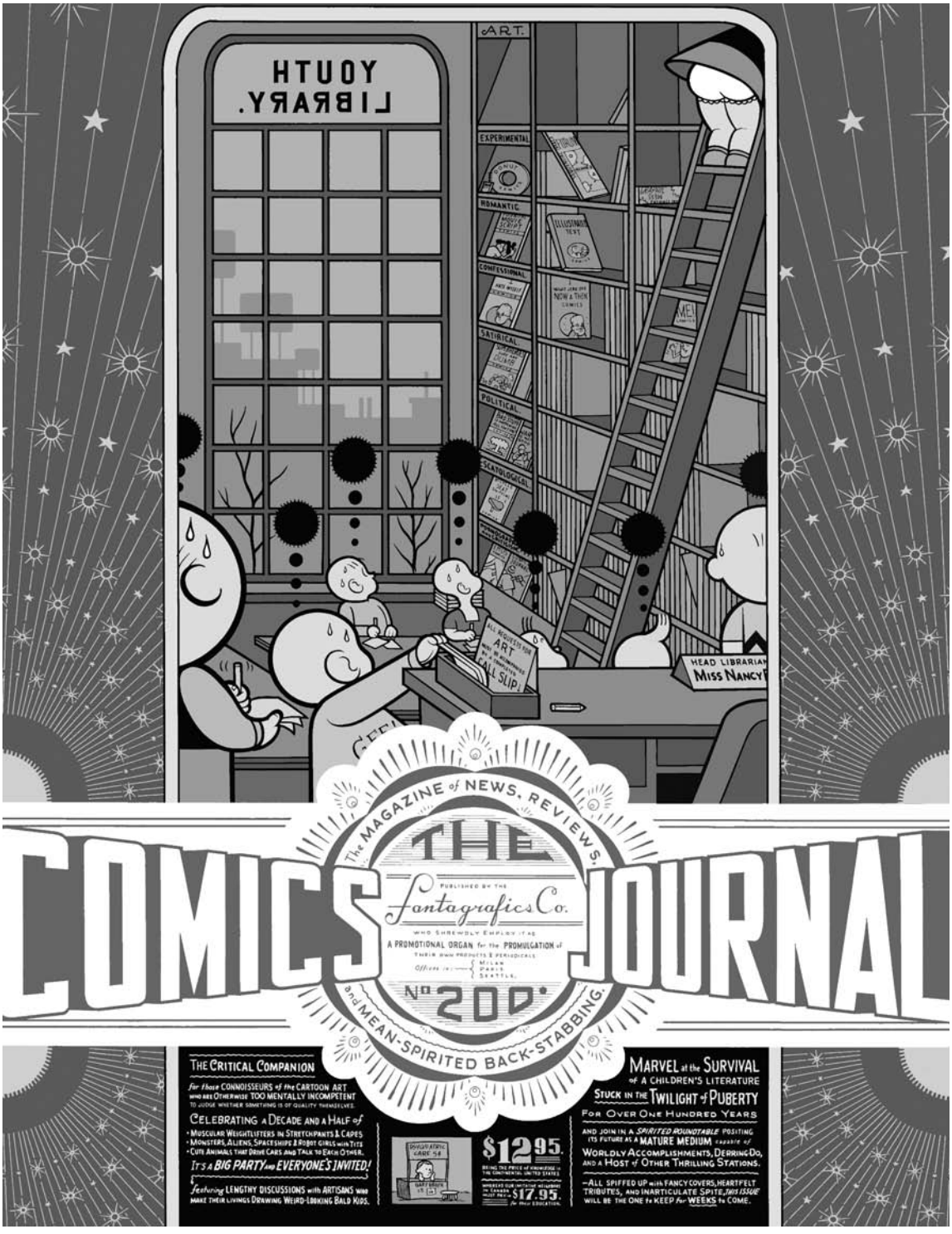


Fig. 4.1. Ware's comically futile comics library. Chris Ware, *The Comics Journal* 200 (1997), cover image.

tive into the descending genres of "Experimental" (the appropriately shaped *Donut Comics*), "Romantic" (*Potential Movie Script Comics*), "Confessional" (*I Hate Myself Comics*), "Satirical" (*Superheroes Sure are Dumb Comics*), "Political" (*Did You Know Bad Stuff is Happening All the Time? Comics* and *War is not Good Comics*), "Scatological" (*Bicycle Seat Sniffing Comics*), and finally the joint category of "Pornographic and Criticism" (shared by the visually mirrored *Eros Comics* and the *Comics Journal* itself). In part, this corresponds with the journal's reputation for scathing reviews of mainstream comics production and its aspirations to have a small cadre of comics artists recognized as worthy of the regard given to fine artists and literary authors. Yet Ware does not spare himself from this withering critique, caricaturing himself on the covers of three successive volumes in the "Confessional" row: *I Hate Myself Comics*, *I Might Jerk Off Now and Then Comics*, and *ME! Comics*. Even amidst the patently uninspiring content of this library, Ware nonetheless prevents any reading from taking place, the spectacle of Nancy's visible underwear rendering the thought bubbles of the assembled "youth" opaquely black. It seems that the adolescent urge and the prurient gaze that dominates the bottom rung of his comics ladder of progress win the day over whatever more noble motives might animate the well-meaning readers in Ware's "youth library." Try though they might, the allegorical embodiments of the comics reader are unable to elevate themselves to the realm of the literary.

Wryly satirizing the stated mission of the *Comics Journal* to promote "the best the art form has to offer, particularly those comics which are fulfilling reading material for adults," the accompanying text serves as the second half of this diptych of comics ambivalence:[12]

The Comics Journal - The magazine of news, reviews, and mean-spirited back-stabbing. Published by the Fantagrafics [*sic*] Co. who shrewdly employ it as a promotional organ for the promulgation of their own products & periodicals. The critical companion for those connoisseurs of the cartoon art who are otherwise too mentally incompetent to judge whether something is of quality themselves. Celebrating a decade and a half of

- Muscular Weightlifters in stretchpants & capes
- Monsters, aliens, spaceships, and robot girls with tits
- Cute animals that drive cars and talk to each other.

It's a big party and everyone's invited! Featuring lengthy discussions with artisans who make their livings drawing weird-looking bald kids.

Marvel at the survival of a children's literature stuck in the twilight of puberty for over one hundred years and join in a spirited roundtable positing its future as a mature medium capable of worldly accomplishments, derring-do, and a host of other thrilling stations. All spiffed up with fancy covers, heartfelt tributes, and inarticulate spite, this issue will be the one to keep for weeks to come.[13]

There are none involved in the production, transmission, and consumption of the magazine—editors, subscribers, readers, even Ware himself—who remain unscathed by this uproarious send-up of self-promotion.[14] At the time, Fantagraphics served as both the publisher of *The ACME Novelty Library* and the *Comics Journal*, and Ware's interviewer, Gary Groth (pictured at the bottom of the composition as Schultz's Lucy sitting behind her iconic lemonade-stand-cum-psychiatrist's-couch), was both the magazine's editor and

Ware's. While the cover image represents a lending library that transcends the realm of the commodity, however parodically, the text reintroduces the mass-market milieu in which comics remain ensconced. Despite Ware's and the journal's manifest desire to elevate comics to the status of the literary, the cover complicates an easy negation of comics' conventional associations with the mass readership in which it first emerged in America, beginning with the newspaper circulation wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ("The Yellow Kid" being at the center of these newspaper wars) and extending through the hegemony of superhero genre comics since the late 1930s.[15] Ware reminds us that the ascendant "alternative" comics and graphic novels so vigorously promoted in the pages of the *Comics Journal* are equally implicated in, and susceptible to, the influences of mass culture.[16]

The ironies of commodification are even present in the pages of the journal itself where, in the mode of the faux advertisements for commercial goods in *The ACME Novelty Library* that falsely promise consumer bliss, Ware designed a page selling a freestanding cardboard display for his *ACME Novelty Library* volumes. Originally constructed for use in retail stores, the display has "gracious pockets [that] hug each issue of the series with the same care a proud female marmoset would give to a new litter," the advertisement promising that "this gargantuan monstrosity will surely fill that previously undefined void in your unsaturated existence. HAPPINESS IS ONLY $150.00 AWAY!"[17] An advertisement for an advertisement, a promotion for the promotional organ, the floor display transacts the very "promulgation of their own products and periodicals" so vehemently mocked in the *Comics Journal* cover.

This keenly perceived ambivalence for commercial success, coupled with Ware's pained awareness of the comics as a medium ineradicably bound to the commercial, could be understood as the guiding motif of his entire oeuvre. In the *Comics Journal* interview, Ware consistently parries Groth's insistent denigration of the "media bath" and "pop culture pap" of his and Ware's childhoods, highlighting the importance of mass-cultural resources in literary authors such as Flaubert and Tolstoy and pointing toward the origins of the novel and the now-canonized American musical traditions of jazz, ragtime, and the blues from within a popular-cultural frame.[18] Indeed, the very omnipresence of the ACME Novelty Library—the name Ware has given not only to the fictitious producer of his comics, but now that he self-publishes his own work, the actual name that appears in his Library of Congress data—reminds Ware's readers that his texts are also commodities: bought, sold, exchanged, appreciating or depreciating in value irrespective of their form or content. Ware's publications simultaneously seek to fascinate and infuriate collectors with their variable sizes, editions, serialized iterations, and cut-out dioramas that encourage readers to alternately destroy and preserve (or, in doing both, purchase multiple copies of) the text and subsequently showcase them in their own personal floor display.

In his novel-in-progress "Rusty Brown," Ware's exploration of main characters who are at the same time fanatical, if pitiable, comics collectors only extends what has been a long-running metatextual meditation on comics' status as mass-market materiel. In the childhood scenes that constitute a large portion of *The ACME Novelty Library* 16, Rusty carries with him a Supergirl action figure that serves as both a security blanket and erotic fetish. The

doll ensures Rusty will be the target of the other children's abuse while also anticipating his later mania for collecting and preserving the lost totems of his traumatized childhood. While such totems relive these early failures, they also remind Ware's readers of the mass-market superhero comics that stand as uncomfortable forebears to his own work, much in the same way Jimmy's Superman sweatshirt haunts the second half of *Jimmy Corrigan*.[19] Collecting is thus both the agent of Rusty's precipitous decline in adulthood—in *The ACME Report* he is playing with his collectibles, often wretchedly naked and in tears, amidst a rapidly deteriorating home life—and a reminder of comics' ties to commercial exchange.[20] In a miniature series titled "The Adventures of the G. I. Jim Action Club," where Rusty publishes a fanzine in order to defraud his friend and fellow collector Chalky White out of his collectibles, Rusty falsely assures Chalky, "You know I'm not in it for the *money* . . . I'm more interested in the artistry of the piece."[21] Here the high-art potentialities of the comics medium so clearly prized by Ware serve merely as abject exchange, Rusty's act of authorship serving as nothing more than a thin veil for commercial activity.

True to form, Ware both evinces and performs this dialectic between artistry and commerce in his own role as author. In *The ACME Report*, Ware has one of his fictional personae, George Wilson—an alias Ware reserves for his self-described "crass hackery which I feel was altered enough from my original 'idea' (if there was one) that I don't want my name on it"—pen a faux scholarly history of the ACME Novelty Company.[22] Buried in its footnotes is a meditation on Ware's own name that states: "Though some researchers have suggested 'Ware' to possibly be a surname, the word literally means 'commodity' in English, and, I believe, the Letterer [a figure Wilson posits as the 'true' author and guiding founder of ACME] also intended it to be read as such."[23] Down to the multiple resonances of his name, Ware repeatedly reminds us that the specter of the commodity inheres in his comics despite their high-art and literary aspirations.

Viewed broadly, Ware aligns this mass-market/high-art tension within the comics medium to the rhetoric of success and failure, respectively. The figure of George Wilson, both as a commercial hack and a hapless researcher of the ACME Novelty Company, is one such gesture. Wilson's exhaustive and laughably inept effort in the introduction to *The ACME Report* (he suffers from nervous exhaustion in the waiting room of the company's headquarters) can thus be read as one such noble failure. Wilson's failed introduction is also a layered homage to other celebrated literary failures. In correspondence, Ware has called Wilson the "Ishmael character" of *The ACME Report*, a reference to the exceedingly meditative and scholarly narrator of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.[24] Charles Kinbote, the brilliantly mad and obsessive literary critic in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, is another explicit literary reference evoked in Wilson's labyrinthine introduction.[25] Both Ishmael and Kinbote serve as figures of the admirably foolish metatextual narrator, characters whose love for letters both sustains and destroys them. Wilson's failed attempts to tell the story of ACME can thus be seen as a literary heroic act of reading, however quixotic, a similar exegetical task asked of Ware's own readers as they strain their eyes to navigate the sinuous and demanding introduction. Failure is similarly the hallmark of all Ware's most iconic characters—Quimby

IT TAKES HEALTHY NERVES . . . TO FLY THE MAIL AT NIGHT

• (Top) CAPT. WETLESS KAYWOODIE has flown the night air mail over 150, 000 total miles for The United States Postal Service. It takes *healthy nerves* to hang up a record like that!

• (At Right) – Capt. Kaywoodie joins a fellow pilot W. J. Needlerhoffer behind the trash dumpster at Newark Airport for a chat, and a "noseful." "It's just the sort of pick-me-up that I need to really get the job done," Kaywoodie says.

• (Above) COMING DOWN -- After a long night's flight, Capt. Kaywoodie is still wired up like a Christmas tree, gliding his plane straight down towards the runway, bypassing it entirely and crashing into a suburban swim club full of children. Fortunately, Capt. Kaywoodie escapes uninjured, and is bright and snappy on the job the next morning. "I owe it all to *Success*," he says. We agree.

ALWAYS AT LEAST 78% PURE...

Success is made from finer, MORE EXPENSIVE crank than any other popular brand. That's what gives it its smoother, cleaner "hit". Success never tires you out or makes your inner nose lining bleed.

STEADY FLIERS TURN TO SUCCESS®

"It's a steady grind, all right, living up to the tradition that the mail must go through," says Capt. Kaywoodie. "Of course, it's a bit easier now, with some of it getting burned or dumped every once it a while, but the pressure's still on."

"That's why whenever I stop for refueling I always make sure I take a full snort of nose candy, just to help me get through the night. It keeps me plugged until I have to think about getting that big thing back down on the ground."

"And that's why I choose *Success* over any other brand of toot. *Success* never ruffles or jangles my nerves that way those other, less reliable brands do."

And how. That's why *Success* is rapidly becoming the choice of professionals worldwide, from policemen to firemen to emergency medical workers. Other "cokes" might include such additives as animal tranquilizers, calcites, and shredded fiberglass, but we guarantee *Success* always to be at least 78% pure. And that *really* makes the difference.

"I can take one, two, sometimes three loads of *Success* a night and my employer can't tell a thing," says Capt. Kaywoodie. "I do the work of ten men, and still feel great when I get off work at eight."

You bet. But don't take *our* word for it. Start snorting *Success* today and see for yourself.

So smoothe. So sure. So ... *Success.*

SUCCESS® BRAND SNORT

Available at finer druggists and grocery outlets everywhere.

the Mouse's violently ambivalent loves, Jimmy Corrigan's perpetual social awkwardnesses, Rusty Brown's unremitting loserdom—who despite these manifest failings are nonetheless drawn to engage readers' sympathies.

The flip side of this celebration of, and self-identification with, heroic failure is the thoroughgoing disavowal of success. Like the rhetoric of failure, this literary suspicion of success has an equally long history in American letters, one origin of which is Ralph Waldo Emerson's lecture "Success," first delivered under that title in 1851. Almost exactly contemporaneous with Melville's celebration of failure, Emerson writes: "*Rien ne réussit mieux que le succès*. [Nothing succeeds like success.] And we Americans are tainted with this insanity, as our bankruptcies and our reckless politics may show. We are great by exclusion, grasping, and egotism. Our success takes from all what it gives to one. 'Tis a haggard, malignant, careworn running for luck.'"[26] If failure was the touchstone for an emerging literary elite in America in the mid-nineteenth century—a move mirrored by the contemporary generation of comics artists championed by Ware who aspire to write graphic narratives with the emotional and epistemological depth of literature—success represents the grasping, acquisitive disposition that has equally defined the American character from its earliest history.[27] Ware renders a starkly literal representation of this suspicion of success in his advertisement for "Success Brand Snort" in the opening pages of *The ACME Report* (see fig. 4.2). Here Ware parodies the rough masculinity of cigarette and alcohol advertisements that equate self-poisoning with rugged individualism, narrating mail pilots' use of methamphetamine on the job (with predictably disastrous results) to "do the work of ten men, and still feel great when I get off of work at eight."[28] Yet it is not drug culture that is the target of Ware's satire so much as the idea of success itself, relentless commercial activity as opposed to intellectual and literary sensibilities, which is here and elsewhere conflated with reckless consumption and figured as a dangerous and debilitating addiction. "Start snorting *Success* today," the advertisement promises, "and see for yourself. So smoothe. So sure. So . . . *Success*."[29]

Understanding this larger literary historical treatment of celebrated failures, where success is viewed as antithetical to artistic aims, allows us to better understand the counterintuitive thrust of Chris Ware's omnipresent rhetoric of failure. In the same 1997 *Comics Journal* interview with Gary Groth, Ware states: "You have to have high standards. [. . .] You have to be self-critical. [. . .] It's an honest feeling of failure most of the time. But it's about the only way you can keep a clear view of things."[30] Rather than senseless self-deprecation or morbid fascination, failure becomes a kind of artistic vision, part of a larger tradition of American authors' persistent invocations of the rhetoric of failure to convey their highest aspirations for literary success. From Herman Melville's claim that "failure is the true test of greatness" to Henry Adams's self-identification with the "mortifying failure in [his] long education" and William Faulkner's eagerness to be judged by his "splendid failure to do the impossible," such rhetorical gestures have occupied the center of canonical claims to American authorship and authority.[31] This rhetoric is particularly recognizable in Ware and his peer comics artists precisely as they aspire to literary sophistication, recapitulating a move made by American novelists and essayists before them.[32] Thus even despite Ware's critical

Fig. 4.2. An advertisement for "Success Brand Snort." Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), 2.

Pages 54–55:
Fig. 4.3. Chris Ware, "Writers on Writers," special issue of *Virginia Quarterly Review* (2006): cover image.

CAVEMAN WALKIN' ALONG
AND I'M HUNGRY AND I'M COVERED WITH HAIR
THUS DID OGG PERISH...
HOMER on THAT ORAL TRADITION
...AND, WITH THIS, HE STRUCK AENEAS IN THE GROIN, JUST WHERE THE HIP TURNS IN THE JOI-
HEY YOU'RE NOT WRITING THIS DOWN, ARE YOU?
HM?
HEY
OH NO
NO, WOULDN'T THINK OF IT
STEP STEP STEP
BECAUSE YOU MIGHT SCRIBE A WORD OR TWO BUT YOU'LL NEVER CAPTURE THE MAN, SEE? YOU'LL NEVER GET HOMER, UNDERSTAND?!
PLATO on HOMER
"YOU REALLY SHOULD HEAR HOW PERFECTLY I RENDER THE ILIAD, SOCRATES..."
"OH YEAH, ION? I BET..."
"...YOU MEAN LIKE THE WAY YOU RENDERED THAT STABLE BOY LAST NIGHT?"
HA HA HA HA HA
AND
OY... THESE LATE SHOWS ARE REALLY DOING ME IN... IT WAS SO MUCH EASIER WHEN I ONLY HAD THE MATINEES TO DO AND I COULD WORK ON THE NEW DIALOGUES AT NIGHT...
SHAKE SHAKE
OH, WELL... IT'S BETTER THAN A DESK JOB, I GUESS...
PAPYRUS SIGNING
Today: III to V PM
ARISTOTLE
"The Poetics"
"Thoughtful"
"Lengthy"
THIS WAY
To PLATO'S NEW DIALOGUE
THE CAVE II:
BACK FROM THE SHADOWS
SOLD OUT
sigh
MAYBE I SHOULD JUST SELL THE RIGHTS TO EURIPEDES
VIRGIL on Aeneas
VIRGIL, YOU HATH WROUGHT ART FROM ARTIFICE AND BLOOD FROM MARBLE HERE...
WELL, I...
NO, REALLY...THIS'S HOT STUFF... HOT STUFF...
YOU THINK MAYBE YOU CAN PLAY UP THE WHOLE ROME ANGLE A BIT MORE, THOUGH?
IT'D BE REALLY GREAT IF YOU COULD
SURE SURE... YEAH, I'LL SEE WHAT I CAN DO... YOU BET...
MATTHEW, MARK and LUKE on JESUS
HE SAID "HELL"
NO, HE SAID "HADES"
HE DID NOT... I DISTINCTLY RECALL HIM SAYING "GEHENNA"!
DID NOT!
DID SO!
DANTE on HADES
JIMINY, VIRGIL... Y'MEAN HOMER AND ARISTOTLE AND PLATO AND ALL THOSE OTHER GREEK GUYS ARE STUCK DOWN HERE FOREVER JUST BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T CHRISTIANS?
YES, MY SON, 'TIS—
WAIT...
WHAT'S A "CHRISTIAN"?
Chaucer on JESUS
ACH, NOT AGAINE!
IN DESCRYBING THE FYLTHEY DOINGS OF MYNE SINNING NUNS ONCE MORE HATH MYNE OWNE FLESHE BEENYE ROUS'D TO LUSTE... FOUL DEVILS, WHAT NOW DOEST I DO?
SHORTLY
huffity huf huf huf huf
WIPE WIPE WIPE
OH HEAVENLIE FATHER PLEASE FORGYVE ME...
AND.
BUCKLE BUCKLE
OKAY... NOW... WHERE WAS I?
Cervantes on SOMETHING ALTOGETHER ELSE ENTIRELY
...IN LAST YEAR'S NESTS THERE ARE NO BIRDS THIS YEAR.
I WAS MAD... BUT NOW, I AM IN MY SENSES... I WAS "DON QUIJOTE OF LA MANCHA"
BUT NOW...

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successes and strong sales figures, despite his insistence on the mass-cultural and inexorably commercial nature of the comics medium, the rhetoric of failure continues to hold sway over his notion of the possibility of a "graphic literature."

Misadventures in Literary History

Chris Ware offers one of the most visible representations and embodiments of this literary rhetoric of failure in his 2006 cover illustration to the *Virginia Quarterly Review*'s special issue titled "Writers on Writers" (see fig. 4.3).[33] Conceived as a study in literary influence, with contributions from contemporary writers who were asked to incorporate literary forebears as characters in their stories, the issue is adorned with Ware's wraparound cover that offers a comically brief history of literary influence from the prehistoric era to James Joyce. In the manner of his thumbnail histories of comics and fine art, "Writers on Writers" is at once encyclopedic and parodic, demonstrating a commanding knowledge of its subject and a patent desire to hold that same subject to a playful ridicule.[34] It is also a catalogue of literature as a confrontation with failure: the authors of the gospels debating the accuracy of their transcriptions of Jesus's words, a blind Milton with a recalcitrant amanuensis, Dickens contending with a deadline, and Dostoevsky in chains (see fig. 4.4). All of these failures at the same time anticipate subsequent literary achievement, be it the long exegetical tradition generated by the gospels' internal inconsistencies, Milton's seminal poetic achievements such as *Paradise Lost* subsequent to his blindness, Dickens's innovations in prose fiction and prodigious output as a result of his serial demands, or Dostoevsky's towering novels composed after his exile to Siberia. Dispute, misunderstanding, and suffering are represented throughout as the preconditions of literary production.

Another of Ware's allegories of authorship confirms his treatment of failure as a generative device for literature: his Superhero/God figure that appears in a silent, cyclical narrative that wraps throughout *The ACME Report*.[35] Ostensibly the narrative of an unredeemed egotist, one who destroys everything he touches (in one episode he tears the fuselage off a plane in flight to "save" a young girl as his consort), this figure also evinces two distinct moments of authorial creativity. The first comes in prison, where he scratches out, with a nail, his entire narrative in miniature on the prison walls. It is a consummate Wareian moment, endlessly referring to his own act of authorship as he turns the narrative mirror of his own comics in upon itself, one instigated (like Dostoevsky in chains, or Dickens chained to his desk) by the author's abjection. The second act of creation happens at the very beginning of the narrative's cycle when his protagonist, doomed by immortality to outlive the human relations in his life (and, by the logic of the narrative, having ingested bite by bite the entire universe he had previously created), idly punches holes in the surrounding blackness that become the stars of a new world. Both acts of creation are the consequence of failure and its attendant suffering.

They also, in their rewriting of already-written narratives, speak to a larger struggle attendant on every other author figured in "Writers on Writers": they are all tellers of twice-told tales, all haunted by anteriority. Cursed by

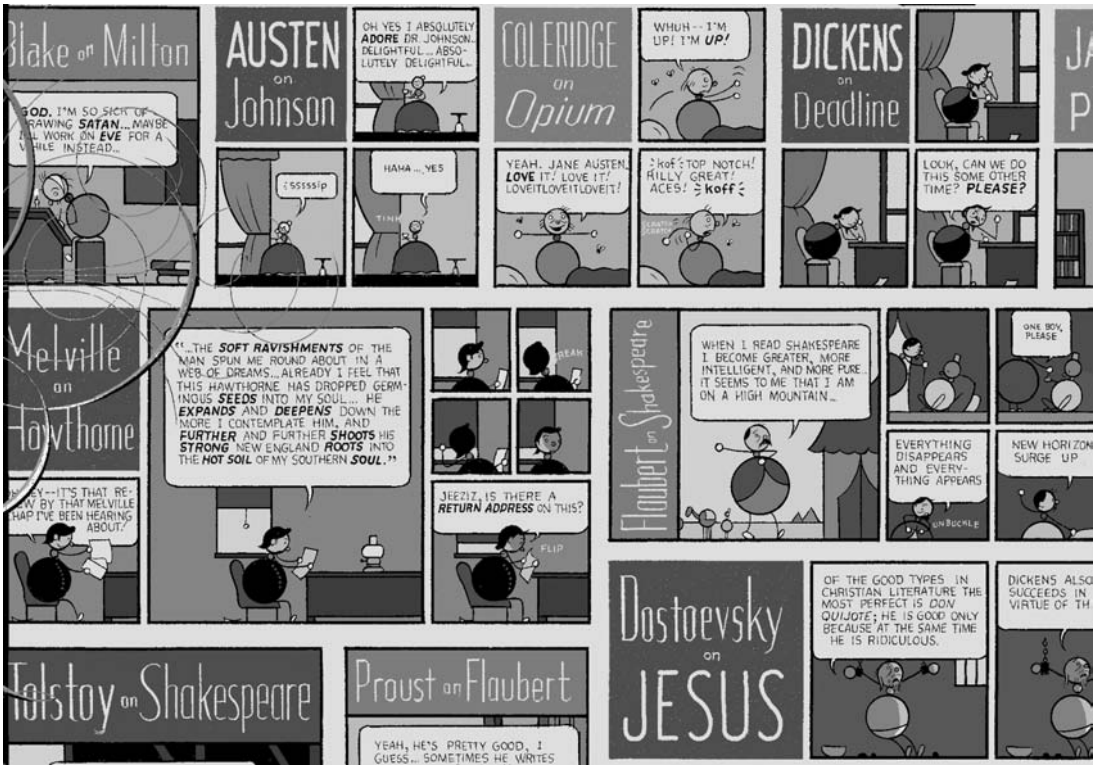

Fig. 4.4. An excerpt from Ware's condensed history of literary history and influence. Chris Ware, "Writers on Writers," detail, special issue of *Virginia Quarterly Review* (2006): cover image.

repetition, literally consuming the world he creates, the writer perpetually contends with an already-written universe.[36] In rewriting literary history as a romance of failure, a failure each author is doomed to repeat for themselves, Ware writes his own fascination with failure into a longer trajectory extending from Greek antiquity to literary modernism. Yet this defining failure in the urge to create anew is also always a noble failure, establishing a fraternity of esteemed authors who struggle heroically against the demands of their art and the mass culture that exerts its pressures upon them. When they aren't confined to their respective garrets, in chains, or condemned to hell—those remaining authors not shown at work over their desks are frequently bedridden (the blind Milton, the mad Cervantes, the opium-addled Coleridge)—they are subject to the equally confining pressures of the literary marketplace. Plato exhausted by presenting his Dialogues as pantomime shows, Virgil beholden to his imperial patrons, Shakespeare exasperated with his actors for missed lines, Dickens held captive by his serial deadlines—each specter of the literary marketplace takes shape alongside these more conventional images of suffering attendant upon the act of writing.[37] Yet the very intrusion of the marketplace in this mock literary history points toward Ware's acknowledgment of its dialectical force and the generative role it has in the production of art, his sense of the literary never wholly unbound from the forces of economic exchange.

Indeed, what holds true for literature in Ware's thumbnail history also holds true for the history of comics, as evidenced by an analogous compo-

sition first completed for his 2004 *McSweeney's* comics anthology. From a prehistoric cave artist clubbed to death for missing a deadline to Rodolphe Töpffer's outrage at the piracy of American copyright law, Ware's comics history documents the medium's development amidst stultifying market pressures. All three episodes also picture the comics artist in Ware's habitual pose: clenched miserably over his easel, his life doomed "to decades of grinding isolation, solipsism and utter social disregard," as Ware writes on a facing page of *The ACME Report* titled "Ruin: Your Life Draw: Cartoons!"[38] Ware pictured this same miserable cartoonist on the cover of his exhibition catalogue *UnInked* surrounded by caricatures of happy creators in other media (sculpture, theater, song, balloon animal artistry), singling out the comics creator for especial suffering.[39] These narratives of misrecognition, abjection, and abandonment imagine a history whose progress is repeatedly thwarted by an uncaring or unimaginative audience, one intent on reducing the medium to its lowest common denominator. Ware pictures various "cheerleaders for the cause" who demean the medium in their praise: a professor avers, "I used to *love* to read them as a boy!"; a Roy Lichtenstein stand-in opines, "I use them as a symbol for the spiritual poverty of American culture"; and a librarian gushes, "I think they're wonderful, because they get people interested in *real* reading!" (see fig. 3.3). To an enthused reader who states, "Comics are now, like, a respected language, with an aesthetic grounding all their *own!* [. . .] They address topics like the holocaust, spirituality, notions of identity, and sex! *Plus* they win Pulitzer Prizes . . . and *Harvey* Awards!" Ware imagines nothing but thoughtless disregard: "Don't ever bother me *again!* I'm trying to get to the top level of my *Superman* video game!"[40] What held true for Ware's comics readers in his lending library on the cover of the *Comics Journal* applies to comics artists themselves in this later history. The work of comics-as-literature is repeatedly confined to and constituted by the reality of comics-as-commodities. Yet this is equally true for literature and fine art; an emerging comics avant-garde shares with these other conventionally privileged media the desire to transcend the commercial, and the failure to completely do so. These failures taken together—the failure to transcend mass culture, the failure to produce texts liberated from the weight of previous authors, the failure of a medium doomed to misrecognition and neglect—are all integral parts of Chris Ware's sense of the literary.

The reward of reading Ware's rhetoric of failure remains the ability to perceive his work as an extension of a long literary tradition *and* as a theorization of that tradition's ambivalences and anxieties. Locally, this allows us to see Quimby's vaudevillian violence as an engagement with early twentieth-century American popular culture, Jimmy Corrigan's ignoble failures as part of a tradition of American authors' literary losers from Melville to Nabokov, and Rusty Brown's ruined life as homologous to the author's own quest for literary prestige. Seen more globally, remaining attentive to Ware's rhetoric of failure allows us to appreciate his work within a broader literary context. In a contemporary moment in which graphic narratives are aspiring to the canonical status of literature, Ware posits that the history of comics as a mass-cultural medium reflects similar translations undergone by the literary canon. Chris Ware's "failures" are one mechanism of this translation of comics into literature.

Notes

1. Chris Ware, e-mail to the author, September 1, 2007.

2. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, paperback ed. (New York: Pantheon, 2006), endpapers.

3. Chris Ware, "Apologies, Etc." (Omaha: Sheldon Memorial Gallery, 2007), n.p.

4. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), front cover.

5. For an analysis of the signifying role of paratexts, see Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

6. For an analogous moment, one among many, see Art Spiegelman's claim that "[by being] forged in a crucible of humiliation and trauma, cartoonists are made, not born. . . . The young misfit must escape into fantasy and/or develop a rarefied sense of humor to survive." Art Spiegelman, *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), n.p.

7. Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2007), 347.

8. Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, vol. 9 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, 13 vols. to date (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1968–present), 247–48.

9. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Preface," in *Twice-Told Tales*, vol. 9 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat et al., 23 vols. to date (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962–present), 3; Hawthorne, January 19, 1855, letter to George D. Ticknor in *The Letters, 1853–1856*, vol. 17 of *The Centenary Edition*, 304. For analogous moments of such an insistence on the separation of prestige from popularity in the writers of the American Renaissance see, for example, Melville's October 6, 1849, letter to Lemuel Shaw and June 1, 1851, letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne in *Correspondence*, vol. 14 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, 138–39, 190–94; and Henry David Thoreau's October 28, 1853, journal entry on his receipt of the 706 unsold copies of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* in *The Journals of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1984), 459–60. The irony of Hawthorne's declaration in his 1851 preface that no author would dispute his claim as "the obscurest man of letters in America" is that his contemporaries were in fact eager to make such a claim, each distancing himself from a suspect popularity and cultivating instead a chorus of male prestige in an era of the women's bestselling novel.

10. An outline of this theoretical genealogy would include Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; rpt., New York: Continuum, 2002); Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1961); Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (1970; rpt., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (1974; rpt., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). This putative divide between high art and mass culture has increasing come under critical scrutiny, one important example being Michael North's *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Comics theorists, in their seemingly endless debates about the relative value and role of early newspaper comics, the superhero genre, and large publishing houses like DC and Marvel vis-à-vis independent and alternative comics, have widely ignored these analogous debates in conventional literary scholarship.

11. Chris Ware qtd. in Chip Kidd, "Please Don't Hate Him," *Print* 51.3 (1997): 43.

12. Mission Statement of the *Comics Journal*, February 25, 2009. http://www.tcj.com (accessed October 25, 2008).

13. Chris Ware, cover illustration for the *Comics Journal* 200 (1997).

14. Ibid.

15. For an analysis of Ware's editorial role in republishing early twentieth-century comics artists like George Herriman and Frank King, see Jeet Heer's essay in this volume.

16. Here, and throughout his oeuvre more generally, Ware's cultivation of a coterie audience, am-

bivalence toward mass culture, and relentless citationality can be regarded as an extension of literary modernist aims and anxieties within contemporary graphic narratives. For a more in-depth look at these literary historical stakes, see my "Comics against Themselves: Chris Ware's Graphic Narratives as Literature" in *Contemporary American Comics: Creators and Their Contexts*, ed. James Lyons and Paul Williams (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, forthcoming).

17. Chris Ware, advertisement, *Comics Journal* 200 (1997): 103. True to form, Ware adorns even this display with the rhetoric of failure, noting in his instructions to the comics retailer the "many wonderful features is [*sic*] has to offer, such as weakness of structure, flammability, and recyclability." See http://acmenoveltyarchive.org. For an analysis of this display, see Martha Kuhlman's essay in this volume.

18. Chris Ware and Gary Groth, "Understanding (Chris Ware's) Comics," *Comics Journal* 200 (1997): 119–71.

19. For an analysis of Ware's ambivalence toward superhero comics, see Jacob Brogan's essay in this volume.

20. See Ware, *The ACME Report*, 2, 15, 63, 69, 85, 87, 90, 95, 101. The focus on Rusty's and Chalky's collectibles, as opposed to Jimmy's disavowed comic collection in *Jimmy Corrigan*, itself represents a further remove of comics into the realm of the commodity.

21. Ibid., 2.

22. Chris Ware, February 2004, qtd. in http://www.kempa.com/blog/archives/2004_02.html (accessed October 25, 2008). The attribution to Wilson can be found in his "Special Note to Librarians." See Ware, *The ACME Report*, 68.

23. Ware, *The ACME Report*, 19.

24. Chris Ware, e-mail to the author, January 25, 2009.

25. Ware discusses *Pale Fire* explicitly in his essay on Richard McGuire. Chris Ware, "Richard McGuire and 'Here:' A Grateful Appreciation," *Comic Art* 8 (fall 2006): 6.

26. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Success," in *Society and Solitude*, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Douglas Emory Wilson, 7 vols. to date (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971–present), 146.

27. For a fascinating history of success and failure in nineteenth-century America, especially with regard to economic history and bankruptcy law, see Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

28. Ware, *The ACME Report*, 2.

29. Ibid.

30. *Comics Journal* 200 (1997): 124–25.

31. Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," 247–48; Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. Ernest Samuels (1918; rpt., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973), 164; William Faulkner, *Lion in the Garden*, ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968), 238.

32. Daniel Worden in his "The Shameful Art: *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, Comics, and the Politics of Affect," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006), makes an analogous claim for Ware's turn as editor, stating "that the intersection of intimacy, shame, and gender melancholy provides an avenue for this anthology to make a case for the artistic merit of comics" (894). Indeed, authorship is exclusively gendered male in the "Writers on Writers" composition discussed below (with the one exception of a tea-sipping and giggling Jane Austen), a bias perpetuated in many places throughout Ware's oeuvre. See, for example, his 826 Valencia mural depicting male desire as creative force, reprinted in Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), back cover. For a critique of this impulse in Ware's editorial work, see Marc Singer's essay in this volume.

33. Chris Ware, cover illustration, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Special Issue: Writers on Writers (2006).

34. For these parallel thumbnail histories, see Ware, *The ACME Report*, 6–9, 24. For a more thorough analysis of Ware's "Our History of Art," see Katherine Roeder's essay in this volume.

35. This storyline can be traced by reading pages 1, 3, 44–55, 57, 60, 76–77, 96, 100–1, 104, and the endpapers of Ware's *The ACME Report* in succession.

36. The oedipal narrative in Harold Bloom's account of misprison, which privileges the primal

struggle between "strong poets [who] make [poetic] history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative spaces for themselves," has dominated critical discussion of influence and anteriority in literary history. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5. A systemic, and to my mind more persuasive, account of this tension located in a reading of language rather than the author's psychobiography can be found in Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd ed. (1971; rpt., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 142–65. Fittingly, such claims about language and the literary writ large *as* citation are themselves not unique. Compare Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality," in *Letters and Social Aims*, vol. 8 of *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E. W. Emerson, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–04); and Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence," *Harper's Magazine* (February 2007): 59–71.

37. The flip side of this coin is equally telling: scenes of pleasure (Chaucer's guilt-ridden masturbation, Flaubert's pederasty) are shown to be moments of self-satisfaction or willed expropriation.

38. Ware, *The ACME Report*, 25.

39. Chris Ware, ed., *UnInked: Paintings, Sculpture, and Graphic Works by Five Cartoonists* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 2007), front cover.

40. Ware, *The ACME Report*, 24.

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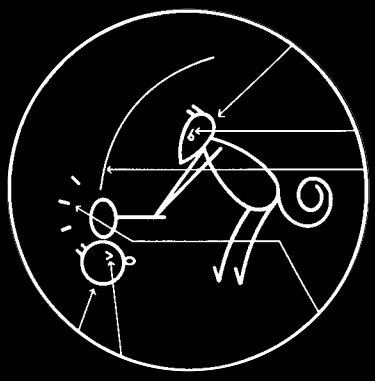
Artistic Intersections



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Chris Ware and the Burden of Art History

KATHERINE ROEDER

As the recipient of significant accolades from the fine art establishment, Chris Ware is in rare company in the comics field.[1] In 2002, Ware became the first comic artist ever to be invited to exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial.[2] He was the subject of solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 2006 and the University of Nebraska's Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery in 2007. He has gallery representation and, in 2007, was asked to curate a show for the Phoenix Museum of Art.[3] Yet a close reading of "Our History of Art," a sequence that appears among the opening pages of *The ACME Report*, suggests his complicated and contentious relationship to his art historical roots.[4] First produced for the Whitney Biennial as *The Whitney Prevaricator*, the work's original title is itself a provocation. Does Ware believe himself to be the sham artist, mistakenly included in the exhibition, or does the Whitney Biennial itself, standing in for the greater art world establishment, propagate the greater fraud? Chris Ware paradoxically stakes out an outsider position in relation to the art world, when it is evident that his art historical references are well informed and his work is increasingly exhibited in prestigious galleries and museums. This essay describes this ambivalence as it is overtly thematized in his work and explores how his advocacy for a greater awareness of comics informs his critique of traditional art histories.

"Our History of Art" is a series of episodes spreading across four pages in *The ACME Report*, spanning from the Paleolithic to the Contemporary Age (see plate 7). The use of a personal pronoun in the title raises the question of whose history is being told, implying that all histories are ultimately stories informed by the specific interests and prejudices of their tellers. Within this small but dense space, Ware questions the validity of existing art historical models by juxtaposing history, false history, and counter-narratives. Further examination of the formal design and content of these pages reveals a critique of the evolutionary model of art history as well as attempts to insert comics into that dominant narrative. Ware repeatedly employs classic artistic tropes within these panels, including the alienated and insecure artist, the modernist grid, the primal site of the drawing table, and the terror of the blank canvas. He uses repetition and pattern to point toward the cyclical nature of history and art movements.

Ware foregrounds his art historical fluency in these panels while simultaneously disavowing it. Tellingly, his most incisive criticism is of high art's tendency to prettify ugly truths, though he also levels this criticism at himself. He accomplishes this with a small comic within a comic, the red-hued "City of

Gold." On the page devoted to the Enlightenment, the mini-comic recounts the slave trade, reminding viewers that many great works of art were the cultural byproducts of devastating social and financial systems. In Ware's own work, the abundance of decoration and visually harmonious design elements hold the potential to distract from the discordant and emotionally wrenching content of the narrative, a defining characteristic throughout his oeuvre. The "City of Gold" segments make visible an aestheticizing of historical oppression and violence that takes place not only within the traditional trajectory of art history, but also in the history of cartooning and within "Our History of Art" itself.

Writing in the third person in *The ACME Novelty Library* 17, Ware addresses his unease with the art historical establishment directly: "Though admittedly trained as an 'artist,' he never felt entirely at home in the generally approved setting, fashion and didactic charter of that particular industry."[5] Despite his discomfort with the world of "high art," his knowledge of art history is vast and omnipresent. It is on display in his footnoted appreciation of Philip Guston in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 and in the references to Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Masaccio found in his sketchbooks, scattered among the drawings of strangers, buildings, and everyday objects.[6] There is a tension between Ware's professed insecurity about the art world and his familiarity and ease with its conventions. His disavowals of art history and its critical apparatus are incisive because they are grounded in familiarity, while the criticisms he levels serve to draw attention to contradictions and complications within his own work.

Ware's discomfort with the high art academy dates back to his negative experiences at art school. In his book-length monograph on him, Daniel Raeburn describes how Ware was discouraged and mocked by instructors at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.[7] Given Ware's dissatisfaction with his own art education, it comes as no surprise that the high school art teacher he depicts in his serialized novel-in-progress "Rusty Brown" is laughable and ineffectual. However, the artist reminds us that all his criticism is ultimately self-directed by naming the frustrated art teacher "Mr. Ware" and giving him an appearance remarkably similar to other self-portraits by the artist. Pudgy, balding, and middle-aged, Mr. Ware is introduced to readers of *The ACME Novelty Library* 17 sitting in his classroom drawing a rude caricature of a fellow teacher, who happens to be Rusty Brown's father. Mr. Ware's interactions with students reveal an unsatisfied and emotionally stunted man. He is a frustrated artist whose creative output consists of mean-spirited cartoons about his colleagues and highly derivative paintings. Mr. Ware's artwork, which can be seen in *The ACME Novelty Library* 16, resembles a pop art pastiche of Roy Lichtenstein, Ed Ruscha, and comics iconography.[8] The paintings are accompanied by a painfully pretentious treatise, full of jargon and critic-speak. Yet, when Mr. Ware draws the reader's attention to his time-consuming technique by noting, "Where Lichtenstein employs a mechanical technique to make his 'dots,' mine are all done by hand—each row takes about one to five hours to complete . . . look closely and you'll see!," one can't help but be reminded of the labor-intensive quality of Chris Ware's own work.[9] As always, Ware's critical eye is unsparing. He manages to skewer artists, cartoonists, art teachers, and himself with this single character. A close reading of the classroom scene

in which Mr. Ware comically models for his drawing class (which includes Chalky White's sister Alice) suggests both Ware's mockery of art pedagogy as well as his knowledge of art historical precedents.

A still-life arrangement in the center of the classroom features a bicycle wheel propped up on a chair and flanked by a tall jug and a red apple. The display recalls Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, the pivotal occasion when the artist affixed a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool to create his first "readymade."[10] Duchamp's elevation of ordinary objects as art questioned traditional art-making practices, including the still-life tradition, and redefined common understanding of the art object. A bulletin board on the room's left wall posits the same question that Duchamp's readymades posed nearly a century ago, asking "What is art?" in jaunty yellow and red type. The apple has even more associative properties, the most obvious being the allusion to the "forbidden fruit" of the Genesis narrative, fitting for Mr. Ware, given his inappropriate thoughts regarding his female students, especially new student Alice White, whose distinctive red sweater matches the color of the apple. The apple is also evocative of the work of René Magritte, who used it as a motif throughout his career, as in *The Son of Man* (1964), where a floating apple obscures the face of Magritte's anonymous bourgeois businessman. It fills the canvas in *This Is Not an Apple* (1964), a painting that combines image and text to draw attention to the instability of language, a theme which preoccupied Magritte, as evidenced by his most famous painting, *The Treachery of Images* (1929), also known as *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Ware's interest in Magritte is not surprising, given his exploration of communication failure and the inadequacy of language in works like *Jimmy Corrigan*.

Ware has alluded to Magritte on other occasions. The first volume of *The ACME Novelty Date Book* contains a comic wherein Ware tries to reconcile what makes comics a distinct medium. Within the comic, he draws a blackboard featuring a drawing of an eye next to the word "eye," with an asterisk noting the reference to Magritte. He writes, "There's a big difference between 'seeing' and 'reading,'" before noting that comics are "something that is both seen and read simultaneously."[11] Magritte has proven to be a useful artist for cartoonists attempting to explain the significance of the interrelationship of word and text. Scott McCloud uses *The Treachery of Images* in his text *Understanding Comics*, a landmark treatise on the medium.[12] Ware's reference to Magritte thereby conjures an alternative history of art, one in which the problems posed by Magritte are just as compelling as those raised by Duchamp.

Whereas Duchamp took art down a path away from narrative, as did Picasso and Pollock, Magritte's interests align more closely with those of Ware. Although Magritte was interested in visual language, he also painted objects in a realist manner, demonstrating during a period dominated by abstraction that realism was still capable of making viewers rethink their expectations. Just as words form an essential component of the composition in Magritte's painting, words are given equal visual weight on Ware's pages, as in several instances in the art class sequence in which the passage of time is conveyed through a solid blue panel with white lettering containing the words "shortly" and "anyway."[13] Lettered sound effects are also used here in stark contrast to the archetypal "kapow!" and "blam!" of Golden Age superhero comics; in-

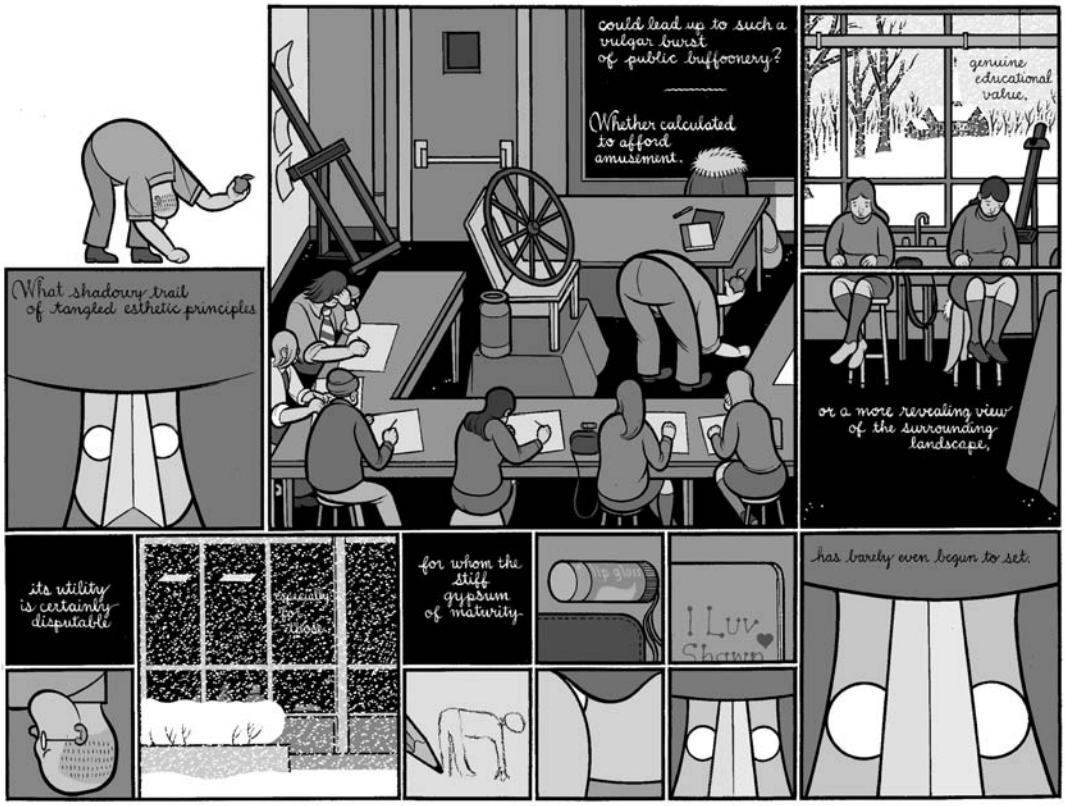


Fig. 5.1. In this episode of "Rusty Brown," Chalky White's sister takes drawing lessons from a disaffected art teacher named Mr. Ware. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 17 (Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2006), 35.

stead, the artist injects the page with the everyday sounds of the "k-chnk" of a door opening, the shuffling and tidying of papers, and the placement of a Styrofoam coffee cup upon a desk. The use of such anti-sound effects dovetails with Mr. Ware's paintings, in which words like "pow" and "blam" are coupled with question marks, thereby deflating their rhetorical power. The inclusion here of small auditory details works to quietly convey the soundtrack of an utterly ordinary, banal day in high school. Like Magritte, Ware is attuned to the strangeness of ordinary life.

Mr. Ware himself models for the students; he picks up the apple and moves through a series of poses in a sequence reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge's sequential photographs of human locomotion.[14] On the adjoining page, in the upper left corner, we see Mr. Ware at his most ridiculous: bent at the waist with his rear in the air facing his students (see fig. 5.1). Rather than reading each panel sequentially from left to right, Ware demands that the reader look more closely in order to understand the narrative of the page. The text leads us through the image, moving first across the upper two-thirds of the page and then across the lower third, which like the upper register is further subdivided in two. The third and largest panel anchors the page, providing a bird's-eye view of the art classroom. The last two panels of the upper register form one image, employing the polyptych as a device in comics that dates back to the early twentieth-century comic strips of Winsor McCay, showing Alice White and another female student working on their sketches as snow falls

softly outside. Ware divides the panels at the point where the desk on which the women are drawing should be, so that the gutter running between the two panels also reads as their drawing table. The entire page demonstrates Ware's command of whole-page design as well as his propensity for showing a scene from multiple viewpoints. We see the art classroom from a position standing in the snow outside the school, from Mr. Ware's contorted pose as he peeks up Alice's skirt, from Alice's perspective as she puts pencil to page to draw the figure, and, finally, the view the students have of their teacher, of his face upside down and looking through his legs while his tie dangles in front of his head. This last image is repeated three times, bringing a syncopation to the page; as the visage of Mr. Ware becomes ever more abstract and grotesque, the viewer is alerted to the true nature of his character, his artistic posturing serving as a mere façade that allows him to leer at pretty young girls.

Ware's attention to all-over page design and his obsessive eye for telling details reveals itself slowly over time. A viewer could be forgiven for glossing over such fine points during an initial reading of the comics. Yet it is for this reason that Ware's artwork is more amenable to a museum setting than those of some of his colleagues. When his drawings are isolated from their original context and placed on a gallery wall, it allows the viewer the space to deliberate upon the intricacies of each individual drawing. Daniel Raeburn expresses a common criticism about exhibiting comics in art institutions: "Comics do not belong under the track lighting of SoHo anyway. Comics may be a visual art, but they are an art of writing. Extracting a page from a comic book and putting it behind glass is like cutting a paragraph from a short story and framing it."[15] Raeburn is correct to argue that something is lost when comics are isolated from their original reading context; however, such statements discount the visual impact of comic art, dismissing its connections to art historical antecedents by privileging its relationship to literature or by establishing comics as a separate medium altogether. Comics are not produced with the museum viewer in mind, just as altarpieces lose their liturgical context when exhibited in an art gallery. However, it is shortsighted to think that there is nothing to be gained from this new viewing experience. By placing comics in a museum, visitors are encouraged to think about how comics relate to the broader history of art and to make visual connections across mediums. Ware himself questions the place of comics in museum settings: "Recently, many exhibitions and museum shows have presented walls of comic strip originals as 'art' to the viewing public as yet one more proof of comics' ascending legitimacy. [. . .] But does framing and hanging something up on the wall automatically make it art? Actually who cares?"[16]

Despite Ware's objections, however, art museums have nonetheless been accorded cultural authority in our society. As a result they play a role, as Ware acknowledges, in legitimizing comic art in the eyes of a larger public. Ware's discomfort with the art establishment becomes most apparent when he himself is afforded institutional power, a trend evidenced most clearly in his turn as guest curator of an exhibition titled *UnInked: Paintings, Sculpture, and Graphic Works by Five Cartoonists*. He writes in the first paragraph of the exhibition catalogue (which he also edited): "Comics, with rare exception, are a visual language, one composed of pictures intended to be read and distributed

as mass-produced objects, not scrutinized individually as one might carefully peruse a painting or a drawing."[17] Such statements appear to argue against the usefulness of exhibitions such as the one he was asked to curate. Despite his misgivings about displaying comics in museums amidst paintings and drawings, Ware accepted an invitation to exhibit his work at the Whitney Museum of Art in 2002.

Ware's ambivalence toward the art establishment's interest in comics was apparent in his contribution to the Whitney Biennial. Ware created a poster for the biennial that calls to mind a full-color newspaper broadsheet. The title, *The Whitney Prevaricator*, is drawn in the style of a newspaper masthead. According to the header, it is published biannually and contains "all your favorites . . . art historical quips and gags," phrasing which draws attention to high art's proclivity for taking itself too seriously. Applying the terminology of comics to high art compels the viewer to consider how language and presentation, be it a newspaper broadside or a white box gallery space, shapes our perception of what is and is not art. The poster further states that it is "a light diversion from the larger problems of will, consciousness, and cultural aspiration," further reinforcing the culturally prescribed roles of the comics as breezy entertainment, standing in opposition to the museum as temple to high seriousness. The page design acts as a nod toward comic art history and the role of newspapers in the development of the medium. Additionally, the broadsheet format is useful in that it allows Ware to position himself outside of the museum; rather than a participant in the exhibition, he has taken on the role of reporter.

Ware repeatedly questioned the soundness of including his work in the biennial art exhibition, a view apparently shared by Peter Schjeldahl, who called it "a show in which 'art' is moot except as a catchall for objects and activities that aren't clearly something else or—as in the skilled but self-absorbed comic strips of Chris Ware—are too cool to ignore. (Like television advertisers, this Biennial pants after the youth market.)"[18] Ware heads off such critics by continually offering up his own skepticism about his position in the art world, writing on one occasion that "[his] work has appeared, inexplicably, in the Whitney Biennial of American Art in 2002."[19]

In *The Whitney Prevaricator*, art history is told through a series of comic strips. The poster is faster paced and more concise than the version found in *The ACME Report*; it lacks the three large panels that help unify and propel the narrative of "Our History of Art." Excluding the larger panels allows Ware to confine the story to one page and better preserve its resemblance to the comics section of a Sunday newspaper. The panels are given individual headers to distinguish the stories of different individuals and movements. It is a logical organization in that most art histories are organized around the competing narratives of individuals and groups. The sections are also differentiated by color choices; reds, blues, and earth tones predominate. The color choices are intentional, as Ware reveals when he writes in a text panel under the header "Did you know . . ." that "the Dark Ages, Mannerism, & Post-Modernism are all *pretty much the same thing!* It's *true!* These 'cool' or 'intellectualized' eras are systemic codifications of the previous 'warm' or 'emotional' discoveries which preceded them!" (8). Here Ware uses simple words, heavily-punctuated with exclamation points in the rhetorical style of "fun facts," to convey his fa-

miliarity with aesthetic theory and a history of formalism that dates back to Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl.[20] By drawing on the conventions of comic strip dialogues and advertising copy, Ware implies that there are more direct ways of talking to viewers about art, implicating art institutions and critics for being overly didactic and alienating their audiences. So as to make his point visually as well as verbally, he employs cool colors such as blue tones to indicate the cerebral movements like postmodernism, while warm colors and earth tones indicate the "emotional" periods such as the Renaissance. The cumulative effect is to suggest the comics section of the Sunday newspaper, featuring an array of comics by multiple authors. However, the stylistic integrity of the page gives away the fact that this is the product of a single artist and that the individual stories tie together to create an overarching narrative about the development of Western art.

The differences between *The Whitney Prevaricator* and "Our History of Art" as it appeared in *The ACME Report* are not insignificant. The Whitney piece begins during the classical era, while the longer version originates in the Paleolithic. It is noteworthy that Ware expands backward to include prehistoric art, as several comic historians discuss the cave paintings at Lascaux as being the first examples of sequential art.[21] His indirect reference to comic scholarship thereby locates comics at the center of the history of art. In the expanded version, the story unfolds over four pages, three of which feature large central images composing more than half the page, all of these images being absent in the original poster. Lastly, there is a full page devoted to the citizen-artist-consumer of the future in the style of his recurring title, "Tales of Tomorrow." These additions create a more far-reaching narrative, ambitious in its scope as it moves from prehistory all the way into the future.[22]

Ware uses repetition and symmetry to unify the entire sequence. The artist, for example, appears to be the same man (the artist is always male) throughout the series. His physical appearance remains consistent, with his oblong face, button nose, worry lines on brow and under eyes, and a disproportionately pear-shaped body. Period dress is the only marker that distinguishes him from one epoch to the next. The similarities are most evident in the three large central panels where the artist is shown in the same pose, sitting down to work with a drawing implement in hand, facing the terror of the blank page. The first large panel shows a caveman sitting on an animal carcass, preparing to sketch on a stretched animal skin. The second large panel shows a typical seventeenth-century Dutch artist in his studio, complete with a cabinet of curiosities, a still-life display, as well as a globe and a wall map, all of which invoke the prosperous Dutch trade which fueled their active art market. The third panel shows an artist of the future, outfitted in a space suit and attached to oxygen tanks. Numerous compositional parallels also tie the three images together. All three men draw with a quill pen and ink pot, despite the fact that they are anachronistic tools for both the caveman and the man of the future. All three are working in a sheltered, protected area while a view to the larger world lies just behind them, reinforcing the idea of the artist as observer.

The cave dweller's abode looks out onto a chaotic scene of violence and rape with a volcano exploding in the distance, none of which has any noticeable effect on the artist, who is uninspired in spite of all the activity occur-

ring just outside his cave. The seventeenth century appeared to be a safer time, and the view out the artist's windows shows merchants wandering the streets. The only danger to be seen is a man stepping into a puddle and a banana peel lying ominously in the alleyway, waiting for someone to take a fall. The inclusion of the banana peel, that staple of vaudeville routines and gag cartoons, interjects a comic sensibility into the narrative by reminding viewers that slapstick humor, like the aesthetic impulse, is ever present. To the right is a water view, and a sailing ship is seen in the distance, gesturing toward the dangers of life at sea and reinforcing the importance of trade and commerce to the period's art market. The first scene shows many people in the background, fewer people are depicted in the second scene and no other humans can be seen out the window of the third large panel, indicating the increasing isolation of modern life. Human presence is merely suggested by the lights in distant buildings and aircraft floating by. Billboards command viewers to eat, buy, and watch, suggesting that the act of viewing, whether it be directed at television or cultural artifacts in a museum, is just another form of consumption. We watch as the artists' physical conditions improve over time: the caveman works amidst animal carcasses, apple cores, and excrement, while the seventeenth-century Dutchman has fresh bread, a jug of wine, and a chamber pot at his disposal. Lastly, the man of the future is connected to a series of tubes that evidently manage his physical needs for him. And yet, regardless of their creature comforts, all three men are creatively blocked, suggesting the timeless anxiety of the blank page.

Ware privileges the act of drawing, as opposed to painting, as the primal site for the creative impulse. Once again, his unfailing eye for small details is on display, as in the skull that acts as an inkpot in the first large panel and is repeated in the second, where it can be found on the top level of the artist's cabinet of curiosities, waiting to be taken out and used in a memento mori still life. Other details form a connective thread through the composition; for example, a Greek artist chisels a woman in marble, the same sculpture later appears as a model for Mr. Mannerism (though by then her arms have broken off, à la the Venus de Milo). A miniature version of the statue appears in the Dutch artist's *wunderkammer*. Later, in the modernist art sequence, artists are shown working from live models who are posed in the same position as the statue. Visual repetition lends unity to the overall page design. It also emphasizes the continuing importance of history to art by alluding to the fact that Renaissance art and Mannerism were heavily indebted to the re-discovery of antiquities from the Classical era.

As with any history, Ware's own interests and proclivities color the narrative. As previously indicated, drawing predominates as the medium of choice. The archetypal cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer even makes an appearance in the strip titled "Nobody Likes Me," where in an attempt to impress Goethe he decides to "combine two disparate fields of civilization into one . . . that sort of trick is all the rage at the moment . . . lessee now . . . aha! *I* know . . . I'll mix up art and literature . . . *That'll* get his goat!" (7). Thus Ware is able to interject a key figure from the history of comic art into the narrative. While Töpffer is beginning to receive more recognition, as evidenced by the two recent volumes devoted to him published by David Kunzle and reviewed by Ware for

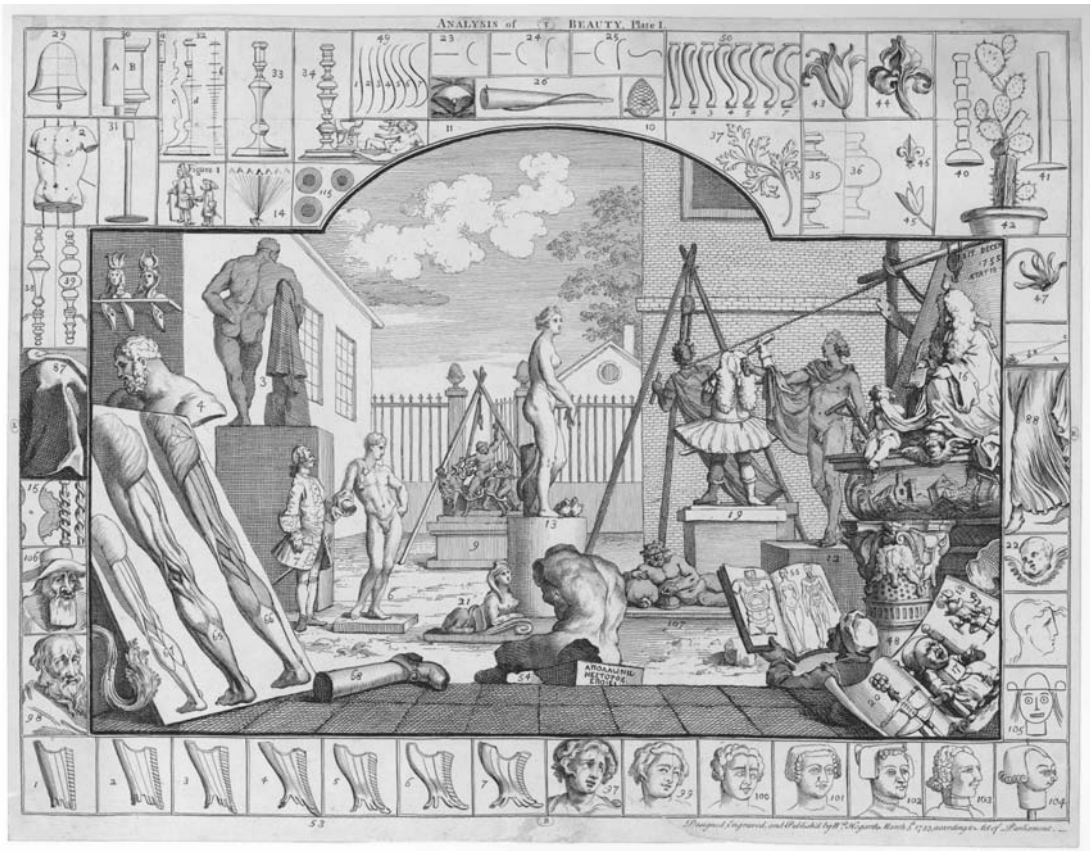


Fig. 5.2. In the first plate from William Hogarth's influential treatise on aesthetics, Hogarth reduces the human form to its essential recognizable components. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, Plate I (London: J. Reeves, 1753).

Bookforum, the artist is noticeably absent from any major art history survey text.[23]

Ware's personal canon of art historical antecedents is idiosyncratic and diverse, ranging from William Hogarth to René Magritte and Philip Guston, yet the influence each has on his artistic production is evident. Eighteenth-century British artist William Hogarth is an obvious choice for a cartoonist, given his background as a satirist and his innovative use of the print medium to create sequential narratives. According to John Carlin, Ware keeps an image from Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty* at home on a wall near his drawing table.[24] *The Analysis of Beauty* was an illustrated treatise on aesthetic theory in which Hogarth described six principles that individually contribute to an object's beauty: fitness, variety, regularity, simplicity, intricacy, and quantity. Such qualities permeate Ware's artwork, from the disarmingly simple figure designs to the intricately detailed page compositions featuring various shapes and forms to lend the page visual interest, combined with the repetitive use of particular images which work to unify the overall page (see fig. 5.2). The engraved plates accompanying *The Analysis of Beauty* are similar to designs by Ware in that they are dense, detailed works that demand close looking and reward careful consideration. Plate 1 features a large central scene in which a man in contemporary dress stands in a courtyard contemplating ancient

statuary. Smaller panels depicting a range of drawing techniques border the image. As if they were extracted from a drawing manual, the small panels contain everything from simple line drawings to complex portraits rendered three-dimensional by shading and modeling. The composition mirrors that of "Our History of Art," which includes smaller panels of varying sizes that surround a large, central image.

Not only do Ware's aesthetic interests dovetail with those outlined by Hogarth, the earlier artist also shares Ware's contempt for art establishment's elitist tendencies. His treatise was dubbed a "war on connoisseurs" because it was purposefully devoid of pretentious language and jargon. Hogarth designed the work to appeal to the emerging market of middle-class art patrons: "Hogarth took strong exception to the academic view that a study of the works of the masters could be a substitute for a study of nature. His criticism of the connoisseurs was that they were too concerned with 'manners,' and thus with a mannered view of nature, whilst he was concerned with a 'direct' view of nature; he deplored artificiality and custom."[25] Ware is similarly distrustful of the current art establishment and its insistence on maintaining hierarchies of taste, especially those that relegate comics as a medium to a sub-artistic level.

Ware's distaste for contemporary art is evident in "Reductio ad absurdum" (Reduction to the absurd), whose very title suggests Ware's belief that modern art has lost its way, becoming increasingly removed from the project of revealing nature and bogged down by theoreticians. The bicycle wheel that was found in Mr. Ware's art class re-surfaces in the fourth panel of this minicomic. A Duchamp stand-in puffs on a pipe (channeling Magritte) while declaring; "I'm going to stop making 'art' completely and just occasionally screw stuff together, since nothing much matters, anyway" (8). The Whitney poster similarly ends on a cynical note. The bottom panel contains a comic strip called "They Love Me," which opens by positioning the viewer on the outside looking into a brightly lit gallery space. The exterior scene is significant; Ware once more positions himself as an outsider casting a critical eye on art world dealings. The next panel is an interior shot of a man on a cell phone at the "Tony Baloni Fine Art" Gallery chatting up a potential customer. His initial appeal to his client could just as easily be the come-on of a drug dealer—"I got some new stuff I think you might be interested in . . . *yeah*, real crazy shit, yeah," (8)—while the name of the gallery (Tony Baloni, which rhymes with phony baloney, also calls to mind the word "tony" as in "posh" and "baloney" as in "hogwash," implying an art gallery dealing in posh hogwash) also signals to the viewer that his intentions may not be entirely pure.[26] The art dealer pitches his hot young artist as a commodity, offering his client the potential to get "in on the *ground floor*" (8). The following panel, which appears only in "Our History of Art," is called "Post modern Post mortem" and it is another damning comment on contemporary art and theory. Instead of working at a drawing table or easel, the artist is at his laptop, muddled by the theories of Lacan and "Daridas (sp?)" (8). Of course, Ware himself uses a computer to color his drawings, demonstrating yet again his ability to direct criticism at himself as well as others.

Despite the digs at modernist and postmodernist art and theory, Chris

Ware has expressed enthusiasm about Philip Guston, the abstract artist who returned to figuration in the mid-1960s. The fleshy, mottled, raw forms that fill Guston's canvas have little in common with the precise geometric forms and flat areas of color that predominate in Ware's finished work. However, Ware's published sketches reveal that he is just as comfortable working with a freer, looser drawing style. Like Hogarth, Guston was not always appreciated in his own time, and art critics such as Hilton Kramer attacked him for using recognizable subject matter.[27] Ware's appreciation of Philip Guston in *McSweeney's* 13 is both an ode to Guston's reclamation of figuration and a rejection of the type of art criticism propagated by Clement Greenberg and his followers, which dismissed any work deviating from the goal of attaining aesthetic "purity" through medium specificity—criticism that would by its own standards devalue the narrative art found in comics. Though Guston's critical reputation has since been resuscitated, and Greenbergian modernism is no longer ascendant, Ware still feels the need to make the argument for Guston's importance.[28]

Close examination of Ware's art and writing reveals skepticism toward both art criticism and art museums, which work in collusion to legitimate art historical narratives. In his 2002 text *Stories of Art*, art historian James Elkins begins by relaying a classroom exercise: he asks his students to produce a map of art history as it appears to them. He describes some of the more inventive efforts before conceding that, "needless to say, drawings like these can't fully describe the shape of history. They are too simple, and besides, most of us don't normally think in diagrams. Drawings and diagrams are unfashionable in art history, because they are too neat to represent the real truth."[29] Ware's "Our History of Art" is in many ways a similar project. He uses simple forms and diagrams to convey complex ideas about how history is shaped and whom it benefits. Elkins acknowledges, "The exercise is simple but it isn't simpleminded: it can help dislodge the weight of pedagogy and uncover a sense of art history that is closer to the way the past is imagined, felt, and used [. . .] Otherwise art history is just a parade, designed by other people, endlessly passing you by."[30] By inserting comic art into the narrative, Ware questions the ways in which academic scholarship continues to privilege certain forms of art-making at the expense of others. Ware is uniquely positioned to do so, having been welcomed into the very institutions that his work critiques. He has found multiple avenues to accomplish this task: by curating his own exhibitions, by publishing book reviews and articles about the underappreciated artists who were meaningful for him, and by creating comics like "Our History of Art," Ware continues to rewrite art history.

Notes

1. Roxana Marconi, *Comic Abstraction: Image Breaking, Image Making* (New York: Museum of Modern Art; London: Thames & Hudson, 2007). Contemporary art museums are becoming more interested in comic art as evidenced by the Museum of Modern Art's 2007 exhibition, *Comic Abstraction*. However, by their emphasis on artists who appropriated comic art forms as a means of cultural critique, while simultaneously excluding any practicing cartoonists, the MoMA exhibition reinforced, rather than surmounted, the high-low divide.

2. Lawrence Rinder, *Whitney Biennial 2002* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2002).

3. Chris Ware, ed. *UnInked: Paintings, Sculpture, and Graphic Works by Five Cartoonists* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 2007).

4. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005). All further references to this text will be indicated in parentheses.

5. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 17 (Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2006), copyright page.

6. Chris Ware, "Philip Guston: A Cartoonist's Appreciation," *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004), 85–91; Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Datebook* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003), 115; Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Datebook, Volume Two* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2007) 83.

7. Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 12.

8. Mr. Ware's pop art paintings can be found in Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 16 (Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2005), 36–37.

9. Ibid., 37.

10. Duchamp would later distinguish between untouched objects, which were deemed readymades, and common objects which he altered slightly, as in this example where he fused the wheel to the kitchen stool. Such altered objects were referred to as "assisted readymades."

11. Ware, *The ACME Novelty Datebook*, 40.

12. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink, 1993), 24–25.

13. For discussion on how text reads as image in Ware's work see Gene Kannenberg Jr., "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image, and Visual Narrative Strategies," in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 174–97.

14. Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 17, 32. Muybridge also appears in Ware, "A Short History of Cartooning," in *The ACME Report*, 24, and his exhibit at the World's Columbian Fair shows up in *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 278.

15. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 17.

16. Ware, "Preface," *UnInked*, i.

17. Ibid.

18. Peter Schjeldahl, "Do It Yourself: Biennial Follies at the Whitney," *New Yorker*, March 25, 2002, 98.

19. Ware, *UnInked*, editor's biography.

20. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. Marie D. Hottinger (1915; rpt., New York: Dover, 1932); Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, trans. Evelyn Kain (1893; rpt., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

21. Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse, 1985), 101.

22. The other changes to the *Whitney Prevaricator* include the addition of a strip called "Post Modern Post Mortem" as well as a sixth installment of the red-hued "City of Gold" strip and a sequence called "I Love Myself," which follows "They Love Me."

23. David Kunzle, *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); David Kunzle, *Rodolphe Töpffer: The Complete Comic Strips* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Chris Ware, "Strip Mind," *Bookforum* 15.1 (2008): 45, 58.

24. John Carlin, "The Real Comic Book Heroes," *TATE Etc.* 9 (2007). http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue9/realcomicbookheroes.htm (accessed February 25, 2009).

25. Richard Woodfield, "Introductory Note," in *Analysis of Beauty*, by William Hogarth (1753; rpt., New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1974), i.

26. Tony Baloni Fine Art might also reference the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, which established its reputation by championing Keith Haring, an artist who regularly incorporated graffiti and comics into his work.

27. Hilton Kramer, "A Mandarin Pretending to be a Stumblebum," *New York Times*, October 25, 1970, D27.

28. Peter Schjeldahl, the same critic who was so disparaging of Ware's inclusion in the Whitney Biennial, was among those who revised their opinion of Guston. Schjeldahl writes, "Reliving it, I understand both why it took me more than a decade to come around to late Guston and why I now regard that work as the most important American painting of its time." See "The Junkman's Son: A Philip Guston Retrospective," *New Yorker*, November 3, 2003, 102.

29. James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 11. Elkins has been a professor in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1989. Chris Ware attended the Art Institute from 1991 to 1993.

30. Elkins, *Stories of Art*, 11.

In the Comics Workshop: Chris Ware and the Oubapo

MARTHA B. KUHLMAN

In order to delve into the complexity of Chris Ware's work, I would like to begin by pausing to consider a composition by the Dutch artist Joost Swarte because it demonstrates something fundamental about Ware's structural approach to the medium of comics. This composition, titled *The Comix Factory*, appeared in December 1980 as the cover of the second issue of *RAW* magazine, the independent and avant-garde publication edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly.[1] The cover is significant not only because Ware's work would appear in *RAW* ten years later, thus bringing him into the fold of other experimental and international comics artists, but also because this particular image had a lasting influence on the development of his own unique aesthetic.[2] By representing the comic strip as an elaborate theater set with the characters waiting for their cue, putting on makeup, and learning their lines, Swarte's cover exposes the mechanisms behind the form, and alludes to processes that artists typically conceal (see plate 8). The depiction of the comic strip as a constructed medium invites the viewer to pry it apart by posing some basic questions: How is it put together? According to what rules? And what happens backstage that we do not get to see?

Ware's focus on the formal properties of the medium suggests his affinities with artists in the wider field of French and Belgian comics, although these connections have been largely unrecognized despite the fact that he is relatively well known among comics scholars and cartoonists from these countries.[3] To shed some light on these matters in a comparative context, I will discuss Ware's comics from a perspective informed by the French literary tradition, specifically, Oulipo (*L'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*) and Oubapo (*L'Ouvroir de Bande Dessinée Potentielle*), which stand for the Workshop of Potential Literature and the Workshop of Potential Comics, respectively. For both Ware and Oubapo, the concept of the workshop or factory becomes a key trope as they self-consciously create an avant-garde form of comics.

By indicating parallels between Ware's work in *The ACME Novelty Library* series, *Jimmy Corrigan*, and Oubapo works, I show how formal experimentation in the medium and about the medium offers another point of entry into the labyrinth of Ware's graphic narratives. Ware and the French artists I discuss deliberately foreground the formal constraints and possibilities of their chosen medium by positing comics as a kind of game, implicitly and explicitly. Moreover, their works share an ironic edge and specifically critique mass-

manufactured comics and consumerism more generally.[4] I am not suggesting a direct line of influence between Oubapo and Ware; in fact, the French group ultimately claims Ware as an "anticipatory plagiarist" rather than the reverse.[5] Nonetheless, there are a number of intriguing similarities underlying their respective artistic projects, particularly in their common emphases on craftsmanship and artistic integrity.

Into the Comix Factory

Oubapo has its origins in Oulipo, an organization founded in 1960 by writer and mathematician Raymond Queneau, scientist François Le Lionnais, and others.[6] The basic premise of Oulipo is that by subjecting literature to different types of constraints and possibilities, the author is able to use these generative devices to create new literary forms. In their embrace of intersections between mathematics, puzzles, and literature, the group eventually expanded to include such writers as Italo Calvino, Georges Perec, and Jacques Roubaud. The practitioners of Oulipo saw themselves as workers tinkering in a factory of language, much like Swarte's stage set, introducing an air of play and mischief into the literary enterprise. As Georges Perec puts it, "literary history seems deliberately to ignore writing as practice, as work, as play," all concerns Oulipo would directly address.[7] To cite just two famous examples of Oulipo texts, Queneau's *One Hundred Trillion Poems* (*Cent mille milliards de poèmes*) consists of ten sonnets whose individual lines can be intermingled to produce 10^{14} possible poems and Georges Perec's lipogram novel, *A Void* (*La Disparition*), incredibly manages to avoid using the letter "e."[8]

Oubapo, founded in 1992 at the instigation of comics theorist Thierry Groensteen, takes the concept of the constraint and applies it to the medium of comics.[9] From the beginning, the group had literary connections; two introductory essays to the first Oubapo journal were written by Oulipo members.[10] Moreover, adopting Oulipo methods was a strategic bid for artistic credibility and aligned the movement with the avant-garde in order to make a conscious break from the public perception of mass-market comics and comics as solely "entertainment for children."[11] It is also significant that Oubapo arises in the independent Parisian publishing house L'Association, which, as comics historian Bart Beaty notes, "radically restructured the popular conception of the comic book" in France by "[breaking] with both the corporate and generic model of comics production in the 1990s."[12] These books immediately looked different from the colorful, large format comics of the Tintin/Astérix variety, which L'Association member Jean-Christophe Menu derisively refers to as "48CC" (48 page albums with a cardboard cover).[13] Instead, the publisher prints on heavy paper, favors black and white comics concerning more complex and sophisticated themes, and uses simple, elegant covers not unlike respected French literary publishers such as Gallimard.[14] Oubapo includes Jean-Christophe Menu, Jochen Gerner, Lewis Trondheim, François Ayroles, and Étienne Lécroart (among others), and L'Association has published four volumes of their journal, *Oupus*, in addition to several full-length works and stand-alone projects.[15]

Given that the mission of L'Association is to establish an avant-garde pedigree for comics, similar to *RAW* magazine, Oubapo is an ideal incubator

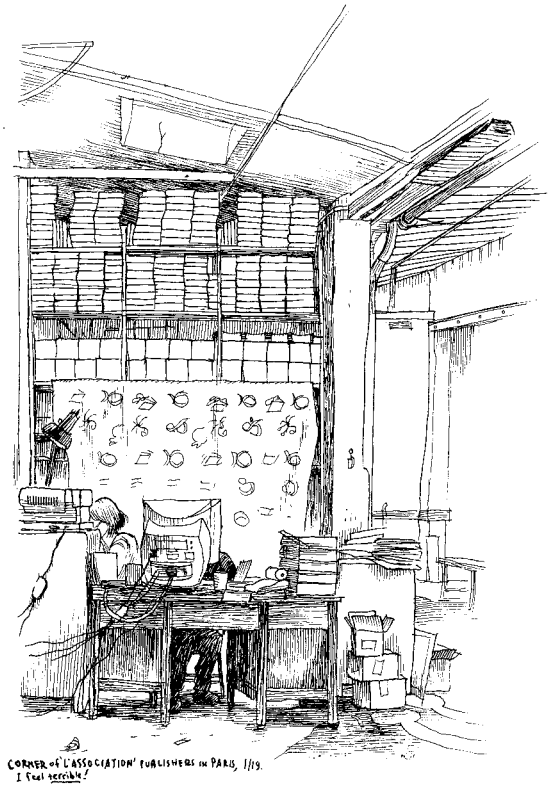


Fig. 6.1. The offices at L'Association, Paris. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Datebook: Volume Two* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2008), 78.

for experiments in comics. They opted for the word *ouvroir*, from the full version of the name (*L'Ouvroir de Bande Dessinée Potentielle*), which sounds much more antique than the more conventional *atelier* and has the connotation of a women's sewing circle or a workroom in a convent.[16] This is a somewhat satirical appropriation, since there is only one woman in the group (Anne Baraou), and Oubapo works tend to display a ribald sense of humor. The group retains, however, a sense of collective enterprise in its explorations of the comics medium. Menu, the most outspoken theoretician of the group, argues that "comics already are a kind of constraint, which is why Oubapo is not so different from the comics that we [in L'Association] make."[17] As is the case with Oulipo, their goal is to "twist or subvert the codes of the traditional *bande dessinée*."[18]

Turning now to Ware, we can already discern a number of compelling intersections between his projects, the mission of L'Association, generally, and that of Oubapo, specifically.[19] First of all, Ware also distances his work from mainstream comics—most notably in the American context, superhero comic books—even while he uses this material for his own satirical purposes.[20] As an editor for the comics issue of *McSweeney's* and *Best American Comics 2007*, Ware is a key member of a new generation of alternative comics artists including Ben Katchor, Seth, Adrian Tomine, Ivan Brunetti, and Daniel Clowes.[21] Although these artists work in a diverse range of styles and subjects, they share an interest in bringing a level of artistic seriousness to the medium. Additionally, as with publications by L'Association, there is an emphasis on craftsmanship in Ware's irregularly sized issues of *The ACME Novelty Library*, which span a variety of dimensions and require extraordinary feats of printing.[22] In fact, the entire *ACME Novelty Library* project can be understood as an expansion of Swarte's *Comix Factory* or the notion of the Oubapo workshop. This connection is especially apparent in the "ACME Novelty Library Freestanding Cardboard Display," intended to hold the variously sized issues of this comic. The cardboard factory represented here is charmingly whimsical and yet unsettlingly grim, bustling with gears, pulleys, and conveyors.[23] In the upper story, mice lasso word "balloons" that float beneath the ceiling, stamp them onto the panels, and add text according to the instructions of a rodent-foreman. Meanwhile, another stream of mice are unceremoniously executed, dumped into carts, then nailed onto panels and assembled into pages—a cruel scenario masked by cheerful colors and an attractive display.

Ware revisits the trope of the factory in *The ACME Report* in a slyly self-referential history of the ACME Novelty Library Company. The author of this document, George Wilson, an excessively pompous researcher, promises to

deliver "the first, and probably only true history of the Company, from its surprising beginning with the Original Letterer, through the cultural revolution, up to the present day's CEO and Chief Draughtsman, F. C. Ware."[24] The emphasis on the "Letterer" is noteworthy, since Ware does, in fact, draw all of his fonts by hand and has won numerous awards for his lettering.[25] As Daniel Raeburn relates, Ware "performed the exercises from old hand-lettering manuals and copied fruit, cigar and cosmetics labels in order to attain a proficiency, then a fluency, in the increasingly antique art of hand-lettering."[26] In a sharp satire of mass-produced comics, Ware develops an exquisite contrast between the solitary and painstaking work of the individual letterer and the massive, bureaucratic edifice depicted in the comic. An impressive two-page spread offers the viewer a cutaway view of the company rendered in black and white, which is comprised of rooms of draughtsmen, thirty storerooms of comics, a printing machine, an art gallery, numerous dutiful secretaries, a tennis court, and an intimidating waiting room (where the unfortunate researcher has paced for hours, unable to gain admittance to the secrets inside).[27] This representation reinforces the impact of the "history" as a wry, self-reflexive gesture because the researcher is ultimately excluded from the "secret" comics experiments within, although the reader has access to them in the pages of the book. But how these experiments "work," or what they might mean, is another question entirely.

The Mechanism of the Constraint

In 1997, Jean-Christophe Menu declared Ware an honorary member of Oubapo on the strength of his experimental work in *The ACME Novelty Library*: "Ware emphasizes the possibilities of the medium with as much brio as playfulness. In a sense, he is an Oubapien who, against all expectations, does not know it, because constraints (narrative or formal) seem always very present in the functioning of Ware's work."[28] Jan Baetens, a renowned Belgian critic, has also drawn attention to the importance of constraints in Ware's comics and describes his work as a form of "multi-layered poly-sequential writing and reading in which the reader has no right to play freely with the author's arrangement of material, but must scrupulously follow it to slowly discover the myriad relationships on the page itself."[29] To understand how these relationships are structured, we need to understand the principle of the constraint and how it applies to the experimental aspect of Ware's comics.

The innovation of Oulipo is that by inventing specific rules and limitations, or constraints, practitioners could open up new vistas in language and literature. As Marcel Bénabou writes, the constraint "forces the system out of its routine functioning, thereby compelling it to reveal its hidden resources."[30] One can make a parallel claim for comics as well, although the fundamental building blocks of the medium are different. For Oulipo, constraints operate at the level of an individual letter (like the lipogram novel, *A Void*), a word, a line (in Queneau's sonnets), or a larger semantic unit such as a stanza, paragraph, or chapter. Since one of the defining features of comics is sequentiality, individual panels on the comics page can be reconceived as pieces of a puzzle that the artist can manipulate; thus, reshuffling the panels according to specific patterns is one method of creating Oubapo constraints.[31] The other

main difference from Oulipo is that we must consider the interplay between words and images in comics; these two semantic tracks can work in accord with each other, or, as is often the case in Oubapo experiments, they are deliberately contrasted to create ironic or jarring effects.[32]

In Groensteen's introductory essay to *Oupus* 1, the first work to discuss the operations of Oubapo in detail, he identifies two classes of constraints: one is *generative*, that is to say, a comic is created from scratch based upon specific limitations; the second is *transformative* and alters existing material according to a given rule.[33] Within the generative category, *iconic restriction* refers to comics that suppress one integral element in order to produce the graphic equivalent of a lipogram. Ayroles deftly employs this rule to humorous effect. The first episode of his comic "Faux Trinity" (Feinte Trinité) consists entirely of a simple three-by-three grid of panels, each with one word balloon oriented in a different direction depending upon the speaker. The exercise includes the caption: "To counterbalance the numerous examples of mute comics, François Ayroles proposes a blind comic, 'in anticipation of comics without words or pictures,' he explains."[34] Ayroles's highly self-referential example of iconic restriction excludes what we normally expect to find in comics: images. Instead, the comic is reduced to a series of word balloons that are pointed in different directions, depending on the speaker: "Papa! Papa!" "What is it, boy?" "Does God exist?" "Ask your mother" "Mama, Mama!" "Yes, what is it?" "Does God exist, mama?" "I don't know, dear." A speech balloon directed from the heavens concludes the metaphysical discussion: "What about me? No one is asking me?"[35]

Menu cites an example of iconic restriction in *The ACME Novelty Library* that is a comic composed of a six-by-six grid of identically sized panels with the same blue lamp stand in the center.[36] The comic never directly represents the speakers; instead, the dialogue takes place outside of the frame and the lamp becomes a symbol of the tumultuous changes that one family experiences over a number of generations as they move from house to house, and the children move into their own apartment.[37] Ware uses iconic restriction to connote loss and alienation, especially in a number of comics, collected in *Quimby the Mouse*, that concern Ware's ailing grandmother. Only empty interiors are represented while the dialogues between Ware and his grandmother, or Ware's own narration, are diegetic.[38] In *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware uses this same technique to conceal the faces of female characters (with a few exceptions), in order to convey Jimmy's lack of rapport with women.[39] While Ayroles uses the device to playfully question the existence of God, Ware, whose direct inspiration in this case is Richard McGuire's comic strip "Here," uses this absence to emphasize his characters' sense of loss, alienation, and melancholy.[40]

Out of Sequence

Perhaps most intriguing are the constraints that disrupt sequentiality, since these rules radically transform our basic perception of the ground rules of the comics medium. Two further subcategories under the general rubric of generative experiments are multilinearity (*la plurilecturabilité*) and random sequence (*la consécution aléatoire*), both of which are applicable to Oubapo's

and Ware's comics. Groensteen describes "acrostic" strips, which can be read as one vertical strip in connection with several horizontal ones; more complex versions of this model, realized for the Oubapo project *Oubapo Vacations* (*Les vacances de Oubapo*), can be read both left to right and top to bottom, in a grid.[41] Due to the exigencies of the constraint, however, the narrative possibilities of these experiments are relatively limited. Longer, more elaborate projects include Lécroart's *Vicious Circle* (*Cercle Vicieux*), which is a thirty-page palindrome comic about a mad scientist and his assistant who construct a time machine in their laboratory. Exactly halfway through the book, one unique panel signals the shift to a narrative sequence that is the mirror opposite of the preceding section.[42] At the farthest end of sequential experimentation is the Oubapo game *Scroubabble*, an example of *random sequence*, in which the pieces are individual panels from five narratives in different styles; the object of the game, as in Scrabble, is to devise comprehensible sequences on a grid rather like a crossword puzzle.[43]

Ware has been consistently interested in comics that violate the reader's expectations of sequentiality from his early *ACME Novelty Library* strips in the 1990s to his most recent productions. In *Quimby the Mouse*, a collection of strips from 1990 to 1993, the aforementioned strips concerning Ware's grandmother do not at all follow a left-to-right, top-to-bottom logic; arrows lead around the pages pursuing different tangents of thought and memory. Other strips resemble a rampant assembly line or Rube Goldberg device gone wrong, again evoking the metaphor of a comics factory. The famous Oulipo quote that states Oulipians are "rats who must build the labyrinth from which they propose to escape" seems especially applicable to Quimby's antics.[44] In one strip, Quimby is sucked up into a pipe, deposited in a car, dumped onto a conveyer belt, assembled and disassembled, and hit repeatedly by a mallet; it is difficult to discern, in the midst of this chaos, in which direction Quimby is traveling.[45]

Thomas Bredehoft, Isaac Cates, and other critics have drawn attention to how Ware's comics do not follow left-to-right, top-to-bottom conventions of the Western reader; one can approach the multilinear pages in *Jimmy Corrigan* from several directions.[46] When read in conjunction with Oubapo, it seems significant that these particular examples function as puzzles that must be solved if one is to understand the full intricacies of the plot. Readers have to make a concerted effort to realize, for instance, that Amy and Jimmy are related by blood through Jimmy's great grandfather and his African American servant.[47] Another manifestation of multilinear comics, "Once Upon a Time," published in Spiegelman and Mouly's first *Little Lit: Folklore & Fairy Tale Funnies* collection, presents four variations on the story of an unfortunate frog who falls in love with a princess.[48] None of these endings can really be construed as "happy": in one, the wolf steals frog's banjo; in the second, the wolf brings the banjo to the grandmother's antique store; the third story ends with the wolf selling the frog's banjo; and in the fourth story the princess regrets that she married the wolf rather than the frog. Each story is oriented at a ninety-degree angle from the next such that the reader must rotate the book to get the full effect.[49]

Little Lit also contains the random-sequence constraint in a children's game devised by Ware called "Fairy Tale Road Rage," which includes a game board,

"chits" in eight colors, four "storyboards," four playing pieces, and a die, all of which can be cut out and assembled by the diligent child. It's notable that the game board is missing a space for a "happy ending"; instead, the players accumulate colored chits on their story board, which looks like a bingo-card version of "Mad Libs" (each space is a specific grammatical category or attribute), until they have completed a coherent storyline. Of the eight possible denouements, only two are positive: "acquired superpowers" and "lived happily ever after." It is up to the child to supply the "moral of the story." Ware includes the following disclaimer at the end of several detailed paragraphs of instructions in minute type: "No insurance is made against potential alteration in moral constitution, world outlook, or temperament, nor is any child guaranteed a 'good time,' or even mild amusement."[50] As is the case with his versions of the comics factory, Ware manipulates the ironic dissonance between the playful structural games with comics form and the melancholy content of the story. This is especially true when we consider how both Oubapo and Ware deliberately contrast the text with the corresponding images.

Pastiche and *Détournement*

Under the general class of "transformative" experiments that Groensteen describes, the most obvious is *verbal substitution*, in which the original text of an existing comic is subversively altered. Oubapo member François Ayroles transforms seven pages from *The 13 Is Leaving* (*13 est au départ*), by Jean Graton, by substituting the original text with "a historical dialogue on the ontology of the *bande dessinée*."[51] A young man jauntily slides down the banister to regale his parents with a song, but the sedate couple is only annoyed by his exuberance (see fig. 6.3). Read with the textual substitutions, however, this bourgeois scene becomes a statement about comics as an art form. In the French context, Ayroles's Oubapo experiment recalls the tactic of *détournement*, which appropriates images from advertising and popular culture and transforms them into subversive messages. Employed by the Situationists in the 1960s, détournement in the form of verbal substitution in comics was frequently used as a critique of consumer culture.[52]

Menu cites one of Ware's early strips from *RAW*, "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess" to support his claim that Ware is Oubapien, stating that the comic also operates on the principle of verbal substitution.[53] Although Ware's comic is different in that he creates a pastiche of an older comic rather than appropriating an existing strip, the claim is worth revisiting.[54] Ware combines uncomfortable recollections of his grandfather and stepfather's racism and a memory of a slumber party at the house of a black friend. At first, this story appears entirely separate from the accompanying images that narrate a battle between a mad scientist and a superhero in a style reminiscent of "golden age" comics; however, the textual and visual tracks occasionally coincide (see plate 2). On the third page, for example, a young reporter clearly modeled on Lois Lane looks perplexed and the speech balloon above her reads: "I said that I thought that everyone was 'colored,' but he said that I didn't understand." The last panel of the comic depicts the superhero saving the woman reporter, which concludes both the adventure story and Ware's autobiographical narrative with the caption "It was just my mom and me, anyway." By exploiting the

Fig. 6.3. A domestic scene is transformed into a cheer for comics: "Long live sequential narration! Comics! Comics! Ouch! Baaah! . . . A book with writing!" Image courtesy of @ 2003 François Ayroles and L'Association. François Ayroles, "Le 9 est au Départ," *Oupus* 2 (2003): 43.

discrepancy between the superhero story and the autobiographical episode, the comic exposes the structural divide between word and image, once again subverting the reader's expectations to ironic effect.[55]

This tension between form and content pervades the advertising in *The ACME Novelty Library* series as well, which at first glance seems to promise wealth, fame, and happiness, but in fact provides no such consolation despite the appearance of Sears Catalog entries, coupons, or self-help offers. One notice reprinted in *The ACME Report* advertises simply the "new thing": "fresh from the mysterious plastic asshole of 'popular culture.' All shiny and ready for you to put in your home, video cassette player, or mouth. Wow! [. . .] Some people think that this is what it's all about, anyway. Maybe you could even spend your life making this stuff, the stuff that people seem to want. What could be better? Happiness awaits."[56] Like the French examples of détournement found in Situationism and Oubapo, beneath the reassuring fonts and clip-art-style graphics lurk incisive critiques of consumerism, the bourgeois family, self-help, American foreign policy, and race relations—to name just a few recurring subjects—for anyone who takes the time to read the small print.

The Writerly Text, or Art as Technique

In a conversation with Raeburn, Ware comments, "I rarely ever did a comic just for the sake of experimentation," and it would be anachronistic to suggest that Oubapo constitutes an influence upon Ware's work since his earliest comics predate the formation of the group in 1993.[57] At best, Oubapo can only

appropriate Ware through the playful title of "anticipatory plagiarist." Moreover, the wry wit of Oubapo seems far removed from the quiet anguish of *Jimmy Corrigan* or *Quimby the Mouse*. Some have reproached the work of Oubapo for being too "gimmicky," and even Oubapo members admit that constraints are at best a source of inspiration rather than a straightjacket.[58] Killoffer, a member of the group, explains his attitude toward Oubapo as follows: "Through a constraint, one can discover and reproduce a pleasing aesthetic without its systematic application."[59] Ultimately, what is illuminating about juxtaposing Oubapo to Ware's comics is the way in which these comparisons reveal how Ware's work is founded upon a range of formal mechanisms and constraints (even if these mechanisms are less overt or deliberate), much like the machinery in Swarte's *Comix Factory*.[60]

The purpose of Oubapo, according to Groensteen, is to "invite a more vigilant kind of reading, a reading that would be more investigative and more reflexive [. . .] Oubapo pages require the active participation of the reader."[61] In this respect, Oubapo corresponds to what Roland Barthes would term a "writerly" text, as opposed to a "readerly" one; the former demands an active reader who "produces" the text, while the latter only reinforces passivity and consumption. "Reading is not a parasitical act," writes Barthes; "it is a form of work."[62] Ware's description of comics reception is not far from this notion of a writerly text: "It's not in any way a passive medium. The material is inert unless you're regarding it. A film can be a very potent, emotional, thought-provoking experience, or you can just sit there with your mouth open and watch cars explode if you want to [but] it takes a certain amount of effort to read even the most vacuous comic strip. It doesn't do anything unless you're reading it. It involves the reader in a similar way that literature does."[63]

By thinking of Ware's work as a factory for comics experiments, we gain another level of appreciation for what he seeks to accomplish in reinventing the medium. Readers must slow down and read his comics with a degree of attentiveness normally reserved for literature if they are to grasp the patterns and games that bind the narrative together through an elaborate interlacing of forms.[64] Spiegelman, whose long-standing interest in experimental comics led to the creation of *RAW* magazine, quotes Victor Shklovsky in his introduction to *Breakdowns*, a reissue of his comics from the 1970s: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult. Because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged, art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object."[65] For Ware, Spiegelman, and Oubapo artists, testing the limits of the medium is a way of both continuing an avant-garde tradition and asserting that comics are a vibrant form of art.

Notes

Special thanks to Cécile Daheny and Geert Mesters for their helpful comments. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from the French are mine.

1. See *Read Yourself RAW*, ed. Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 31. The original cover was for *RAW* 1.2, RAW Books, 1980.

2. Chris Ware published his first strip in *RAW* 2.2 in 1990, followed by "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess" in *RAW* 2.3 in 1991. For a detailed history of *RAW* magazine, see Bill Kartalopoulos's "A

RAW History: The Magazine," *Indy Magazine* (winter 2005). http://64.23.98.142/indy/winter_2005/raw_02/index.html (accessed January 21, 2009).

In an interview with Todd Hignite, Ware specifically mentions Joost Swarte's artwork as having special importance for him: "I should mention that Joost Swarte's amazing cover of *RAW* [2.2] taught me everything I know about coloring using printing tints, and it was only years later that I found out that Françoise had colored it herself." Todd Hignite, *In the Studio: Visits with Contemporary Cartoonists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 256. Moreover, Ware especially admires the "conceptual" quality of Swarte's comics; see his interview with Gary Groth, "Understanding (Chris Ware's) Comics," *Comics Journal* 200 (1997): 131.

3. For an overview of Ware's place in American comics, see Jeet Heer's essay in this volume. Ware has received significant acclaim from French critics, winning both the Alph Art award for the best graphic novel and the critics' prize for *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* at the famed comics festival in Angoulême in 2003. See the translation of his interview with Gary Groth, "Chris Ware: Le plus astucieux dessinateur de la planète" *Bang!* 2 (2003): 10. See also Benoît Peeters's documentary, "Chris Ware, un art de mémoire," Arte television, 2005. Available on Youtube (accessed January 21, 2009).

4. For an analysis of Ware's ambivalence toward comics' mass-cultural associations, see David Ball's essay in this volume.

5. Jean-Pierre Mercier, "Confidences oubapiennes," *9e Art* 10 (2004): 80. Gilles Clement, one of the Oubapo theorists, comments: "The number of oubapiens by anticipation proves that, by their very structure, comics have led a good number of people to push the limits of the intrinsic constraints of comics to make something different [*Le nombre d'oubapiens par anticipation prouve que, par ses structures même, la bande dessinée a amené beaucoup de gens à pousser à l'extrême une des contraintes intrinsèques de la bande dessinée pour en faire autre chose*]" (ibid., 80).

6. The initial group also includes Jacques Bens, Claude Berge, Jacques Duchateau, Latis, Jean Lescure, Jean Queval, and Albert-Marie Schmidt. See Hervé Le Tellier, *Esthétique de L'Oulipo* (Bordeaux: Le Castor Astral, 2006), 7–8.

7. Georges Perec, qtd. in Warren Motte, ed. and trans., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998), 5.

8. See Raymond Queneau's exponential sonnet in the *Oulipo Compendium*, ed. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas, 1998), 14–33; and Georges Perec, *A Void*, trans. Gilbert Adair (Jaffrey, NH: David Godine, 2005). As of the writing of this essay, Oulipo is still an active group and published a selection of works under the title "The State of Constraint: New Work from Oulipo" in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 22:1 (2006).

9. According to Jean-Christophe Menu, the idea of Oubapo was first raised in 1987 in Cerisy-la-Salle, the same place where Oulipo began, when Thierry Groensteen and Lewis Trondheim met at a "workshop of Oulipo comics" (*atelier de bandes dessinées oulipiennes*) that Groensteen had organized. But the group did not become official until 1992. See the interview conducted by Jean-Pierre Mercier with Oubapo members, "Confidences oubapiennes," *9e Art* 10 (2004): 76–80. There is also an American section of Oubapo, although they do not have a journal. They do, however, have a Web site that cites many of the French examples and offers a place for American cartoonists to experiment as well. For example, Matt Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story* is inspired by Raymond Queneau's *Exercises de style*. See http://www.tomhart.net/oubapo/ (accessed January 23, 2009).

10. Marcel Bénabou, "Oulipo: Présentation," and Noël Arnaud, "La potentialité absolue," in *Oupus* 1 (1997): 3–7.

11. Jean-Christophe Menu, "Ouvre-Boîte-Po," *Oupus* 1 (1997): 9.

12. Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 9–10.

13. Jean-Christophe Menu, "Plates-bandes (extension 1)," *l'Éprouvette* 1 (2006): 197–98.

14. Beaty, *Unpopular Culture*, 30.

15. See the inaugural edition, *Oupus* 1, January 1997, and the deliberately non-chronological issues that follow: *Oupus* 2 (2003); *Oupus* 3 (2000); and *Oupus* 4 (2005), all published by L'Association.

16. See Motte's discussion of "ouvroir," 9, in his *Oulipo*.

17. *La bande dessinée est déjà une contrainte sur ce plan, c'est pourquoi l'Oubapo n'est pas si différent de la bande dessinée que l'on fait les uns et les autres*. See Mercier, "Confidences oubapiennes," 80.

18. The purpose of Oubapo is to "*tordre ou détourner les codes de la bande dessinée traditionnelle*." Thierry Groensteen, "Un premier bouquet de contraintes," *Oupus* 1 (1997): 13.

19. Ware first met the artists at L'Association in 1998 when he went to the comics festival in Angoulême, France. But he was not familiar with the work of Oubapo specifically. Chris Ware, e-mail to the author, January 11, 2009.

20. See Jacob Brogan's essay in this volume.

21. For a critical view of Ware's editorial role in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern 13* (2004) and *Best American Comics* (2007), see Marc Singer's essay in this volume.

22. L'Association wanted to publish the French edition of *Jimmy Corrigan*, but the editors balked when they realized how exacting Ware can be about the colors and the printing process. See Barbara Lambert, "Au nom du père, du fils et du croquis," *Livres Hebdo*, November 15, 2002, 18–19.

23. Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 80.

24. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), 18.

25. Ware won the Harvey Award for best lettering in 1996, 2000, 2002, and 2006. See www.harveyawards.com.

26. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 19.

27. Ware, *The ACME Report*, 20–21.

28. Jean-Christophe Menu, "Le prodigieux travail de Chris Ware," *9e Art: Les cahiers du Musée de la bande dessinée* 2 (1997): 53.

29. Jan Baetens, "New = Old, Old = New: Digital and Other Comics Following Scott McCloud and Chris Ware." http://www.altx.com/ebr/ebr11/11ware.htm (accessed January 23, 2009).

30. Marcel Bénabou, qtd. in Motte, *Oulipo*, 41.

31. In the context of comics, Beaty argues, sequentiality is *the* defining feature of the medium: "Thus, for the modernist project of comics to be fully engaged, artists must turn to comics that explore the formal limits of that sequentiality. This is a project that has been most clearly articulated by OuBaPo." Beaty, *Unpopular Culture*, 77.

32. Groensteen, "Un premier bouquet," 16.

33. Ibid., 13–58.

34. François Ayroles, "Feinte Trinité," *Oupus* 2 (2003): 24.

35. Ware also enjoys tinkering with metaphysical humor. See his various "God" comics, especially the cover of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13.

36. Menu, "Le prodigieux travail de Chris Ware," 53.

37. Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003), 33.

38. Ibid., 28–31.

39. In an interview with Gary Groth, Ware explains that this is a deliberate choice: "I wanted to be sure [. . .] that the 'empathies' of the reader were clearly with the main character. And I felt that anytime I showed another character's face, that feeling or tone was ruined." Qtd. in Groth, "Understanding (Chris Ware's) Comics," 141. It is true that grandmother's face appears, and the mother's face is represented once, but these instances are rare. See Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 153, 154, 264 (grandmother), 371 (mother).

40. Interview with Groth, "Understanding (Chris Ware's) Comics," 135–36.

41. See *Oupus* 3 (2000). These strips originally appeared in the newspaper *Libération* over the summer of 2000.

42. Étienne Lécroart, *Circle vicieux* (Paris: L'Association, 2005).

43. Étienne Lecroart, François Ayroles, Jochen Gerner, Killoffer, Jean-Christophe Menu, *Scroubabble* (Paris: L'Association, 2005). Each player starts with seven pieces, as in Scrabble, and attempts to create a viable narrative. According to the instructions on the box, "the coherence of the strips are judged by the participants over the course of the game." Who has "won" the game is left to the individual discretion of the players.

44. Motte, *Oulipo*, 22.

45. Ware, *Quimby the Mouse*, 16.

46. Thomas Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 869–90.

47. See Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan*, 250, 357–58. See also Isaac Cates's essay in this volume.

48. Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, eds., *Little Lit: Folklore & Fairy Tale Funnies* (New York: RAW Junior, 2000). Oubapien Lewis Trondheim contributed an excellent example of a multilinear comic, "A-maze-ing Adventure," in the second edition, *Little Lit: Strange Stories for Strange Kids* (New York: RAW Junior, 2001), 52–53.

49. For an even more melancholy version of this story, see *McSweeney's* 6, in which the frog sells his legs to buy a diamond ring to win the love of the princess. The frog's plans go awry, however, when the ring is stolen by the wolf, who then marries the princess. Ware's initial contribution was considered too pessimistic to be included in a children's book. See Chris Ware, "A Very Sad Story about a Frog and a Banjo, Not at All Appropriate for Children," *We Now Know Who: McSweeney's* 6 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2001), 131–35.

50. Spiegelman and Mouly, *Little Lit: Folklore & Fairy Tale Funnies*, endpapers.

51. François Ayroles, "Le 9 est au Départ," *Oupus* 2 (2003): 43. Ayroles is mocking the tremendously popular French comic *Michel Vaillant*, created by Jean Graton in 1957, a strip devoted to the adventures of a F1 race-car driver. As of the writing of this essay, Graton's son Philippe is continuing the series. See www.michelvaillant.com (accessed January 23, 2009).

52. There are some examples of Situationist comics in chapter 3 of Simon Ford's *The Situationist International: A User's Guide* (London: Black Dog, 2005), 101–30.

53. Menu, "Le prodigieux travail de Chris Ware," 54.

54. The strip "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess," originally published in *RAW* 2.3, is reprinted in Ware, *Quimby the Mouse*, 39–41.

55. Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 74.

56. Ware, *The ACME Report*, 66.

57. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 11.

58. Interview with Jean-Christophe Menu conducted by Matt Wivel, *Comics Journal* 277 (2006): 164–65.

59. *À travers une contrainte, on peut découvrir une esthétique qui nous plaît, et la reproduire sans le côté systématique de la contrainte*. Mercier, "Confidences oubapiennes," 78.

60. I am not arguing that these constraints are necessarily deployed as consciously or as deliberately as they are in the case of Oubapo. Rather, it seems that Ware begins with the story and then finds various patterns and structures for expressing his ideas.

61. Oubapo "*inviter à une lecture plus vigilante, plus investigatrice et plus reflexive… les pages oubapiennes nécessitent la participation active du lecteur.*" Thierry Groensteen, "Ce que L'Oubapo révèle de la bande dessinée," *9e Art* 10 (2004): 72–75.

62. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. and intro. by Richard Howard (New York: Noonday, 1974), 10.

63. See the interview with Andrea Juno, "Chris Ware," in *Dangerous Drawings: Interviews with Comix and Graphix Artists* (New York: Juno, 1997), 53.

64. Groensteen uses the term *tressage*, or "braiding," to discuss Oubapo and formally complex comics, in "Ce que L'Oubapo révèle de la bande dessinée," 74. For a discussion of how *tressage* applies to Ware's work, see Shawn Gilmore's essay in this volume.

65. Art Spiegelman, *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), n.p.

Comics and the Grammar of Diagrams

ISAAC CATES

Chris Ware's comics routinely include peculiar and inscrutable devices, external to the comics narrative, designed to testify to the intensity of Ware's authorial attention: his readers encounter fake catalog advertisements and coupons, collectible trading cards, fold-up paper-craft projects, souvenir calendars, essays and indicia in painfully minute text, and multi-part diagrams of almost inevitably discouraging complexity. These devices may serve as barriers against the casual reader just as much as they reward those who are more serious or more committed. By their density and their meticulous design, Ware's non-narrative devices imply that a complete appreciation of *The ACME Novelty Library* or *Jimmy Corrigan* comes only with intense readerly labor. Obviously outside the story's main narrative diegesis, these ancillary materials nevertheless often revise the reader's sense of the main text.[1] The fold-up paper-craft models in *Jimmy Corrigan*, for example, not only offer an alternative construction of narrative time, but also potentially blur the line between reader, active participant, and character.[2] Moreover, *Jimmy Corrigan*'s diagrams, by revealing things to the reader that are unknown to the point-of-view characters, substantially alter the emotional tenor of the graphic novel's conclusion, broadening its scope beyond Jimmy's breakdown, worry, and isolation. Ware's meticulous diagrams reveal and obscure this information at the same time: by stationing details in pointedly difficult diagrams, he distances their effects and their meaning from a casual or preliminary reading of his comic. This complicating, literary use of diagrams to layer meaning between readings is the subject of this essay's first section, but Ware's diagrams also have implications that go beyond an interpretation of *Jimmy Corrigan*. In the end, they also suggest a fundamental formal connection between comics and diagrams that comics critics have written little about, and the second half of this essay will describe this connection and some of the possibilities for comics storytelling that it, in turn, makes possible.

Diagrams in *Jimmy Corrigan*

The three diagrams that concern the characters in *Jimmy Corrigan* all conceal or obscure information about those characters that is revealed nowhere else in the book, but the purpose of the book's first diagram is most difficult to assess.[3] The front endpapers, dense with apparatus in characteristically eye-straining text, contain a daunting diagram that offers to explain the "new pictorial language" of comics and cartooning and the way that this

"language" is "good for showing stuff" and "leaving out big words" (ii). In one large circle, near the left edge of the diagram, Ware's recurring character Quimby (the mouse) strikes Sparky (the bodiless cat head) with a mallet; fine arrows lead into this circle to annotate the various elements of the simple, readily legible single-panel cartoon (see fig. 7.1). The trio of lines radiating from the mallet, for example, may indicate sound, or brightness, or a mental state; another part of the diagram shows that since Sparky's eye is an angle and not a dot, we should read those three lines as indicating pain or concussion (shown as three floating stars). Another set of boxes shows a series of possible positions for the line that represents Quimby's eyebrow and shows that the current angle indicates anger (that is, lines of heat coming from his head), which could arise either because he loves Sparky (a heart between their heads) or because he doesn't love Sparky (a crossed-out heart). Other parts of the diagram situate this moment in the history of the cosmos, locate the drawing style between more realistic pictures and language, suggest the way that sound (and thereby nostalgia) can be inferred from the image, and show that the anthropomorphic creatures are a hybrid of human and animal forms. Each of the sub-diagrams in this thoroughly annotated cartoon consists of densely packed panels full of precisely the sorts of cartoon icons the diagram is ostensibly designed to elucidate. Thus, only those readers who are already conversant with its idiom of symbols will be able to interpret its explanations, which are in turn more complicated than the single slapstick panel they propose to explain.

In some ways, this image is Ware's equivalent for the *Pioneer* spacecraft plaque: a dense, heavily encrypted diagram, in which much of the diagram's work is dedicated to explicating its own system of codes. A portion of the diagram even seems to take issue with Scott McCloud's often-repeated definition of comics as juxtaposed sequential images.[4] The single-panel cartoon in the large circle, after all, would not count as "comics" by McCloud's definition, since there are no other images in sequence with it. In the upper left corner of Ware's diagram, a set of panels attached to the motion-line arc behind Quimby's mallet seem to assert that this single panel, encoding movement as it does, is equivalent in its denotation with a two-panel sequence (which is also pictured). The motion line and action lines are equivalent, Ware suggests, to the imagined time elapsing in the gutter between separate panels. Moreover, the diagram asserts, a single-panel cartoon that uses symbols instead of serial images is closer in its methods to reading, making more use of the mind than the eye and the heart. The two-panel sequence, by contrast, is more akin to theater and privileges the eye instead of the mind.

In short, Ware's diagram seems to be arguing for a sense of the comics medium that is much nearer to language and linguistic concerns than McCloud's: one that gives as much credit to comics' elaborate system of signs as it does to the basic grammar of visual sequences. This revised definition might also allow for more variety in the nature of visual juxtaposition than mere narrative sequence, since several of the series of panels in this diagram aren't sequential: often they present arrays or ranges of possibilities, from which a single example is selected.[5] Sometimes panels are set in sequence because one analyzes or determines its neighbor. The relations may be associative, analytic, or metonymic; they need not tell a story. The Quimby-Sparky

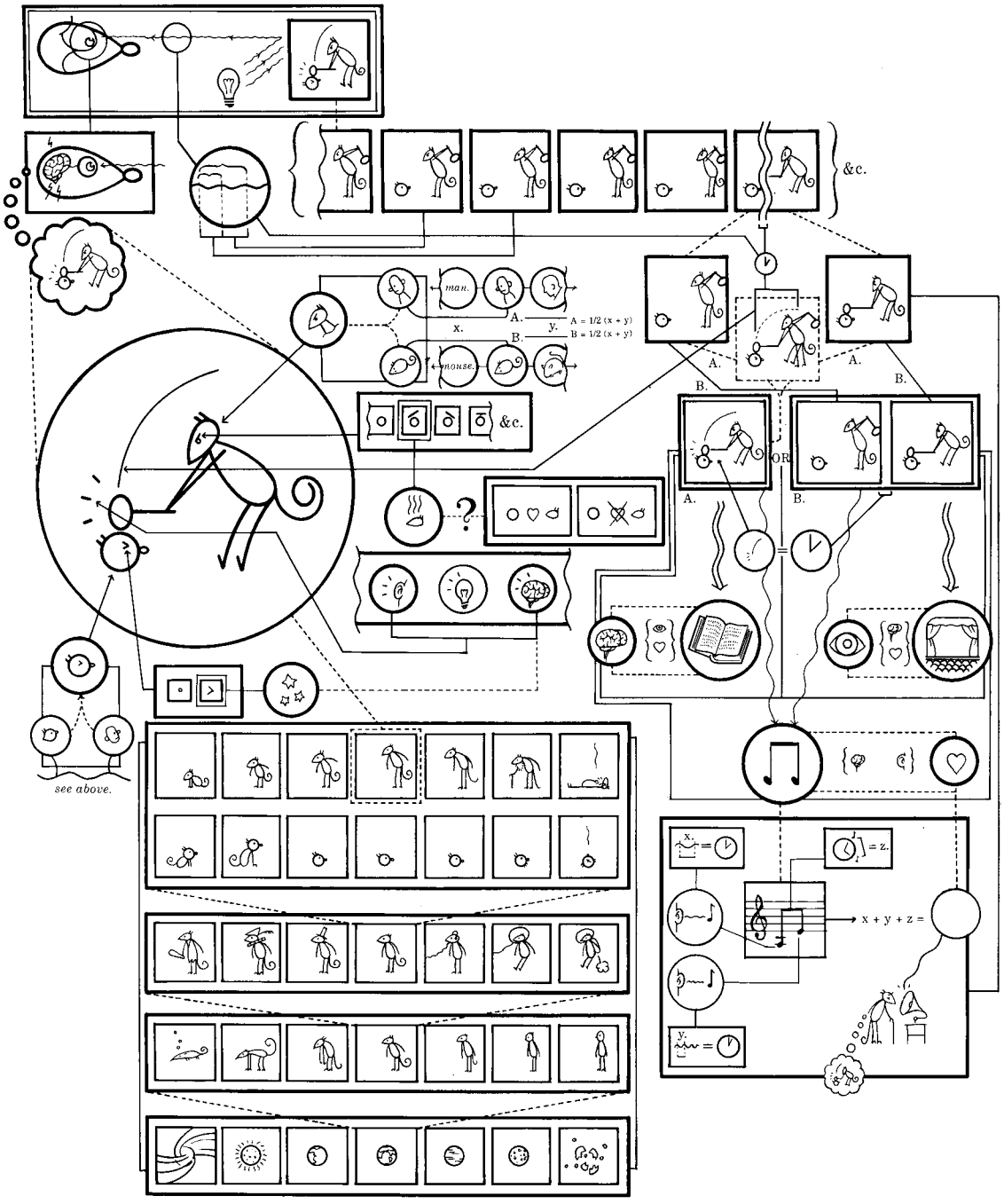

&c.
man.
x.
A.
B.
y.
A = 1/2 (x + y)
B = 1/2 (x + y)
mouse.
&c.
?
A.
B.
OR
see above.
x.
= z.
x + y + z =
y.

diagram thus prepares the reader for a comics grammar even more challenging than the one *Jimmy Corrigan* typically employs. The irony of this dense, compact, and complicated explanation of the way to understand a comic is, of course, that the reader must already know comics shorthand in order to be able to read it in the first place: it excludes the unpracticed reader it pretends to instruct. Set next to a prose essay that asserts comics' extreme popularity with "dumb people," the diagram offers to mock or frustrate even Ware's more expert readers.

This diagram in the endpapers of *Jimmy Corrigan* is hardly the most complicated or obscure of Ware's diagrams. Ware's design for the storefront of 826 Valencia presents an abbreviated history of human desires and achievements in more than two hundred pictographs and panels;[6] many of his early *Quimby the Mouse* strips toy with diagrammatic devices;[7] and a huge two-panel diagram in *The ACME Report* maps out four quadrants of virtues and vices, temperaments and facial expressions, seasons, fields of endeavor, and so forth.[8] Most of the diagrams in *Jimmy Corrigan*, by contrast, seem quite deliberate in their relation to the narrative, revealing information about the interconnection of the characters that is available to no one within the story.

The three major diagrams that involve the characters and their histories offer supplements, explanations, and complications hidden in the main story. Some of these details are quite distant from the central narrative: the large fold-out map-diagram from the interior of the dust jacket (pp. iii–iv of the paperback) shows the death of Jimmy's paternal grandmother and the immigration from Ireland of Jimmy's great-great-grandfather, a physician also named "J. Corrigan," as well as the capture, transportation, and sale of Amy's ancestors as slaves in the period before the Civil War. It also reveals that Jimmy is lying when he tells his adopted half-sister Amy that he "sorta stopped reading" comics "when [he] grew up" (329): in fact, he not only bags and boxes current issues of *Superman*, as the map-diagram reveals, but he also catalogues his collection. Jimmy's kitchen closet is devoted to long boxes, the specialty hardware of comics storage (see plate 1).

All these details expand the fictional world of *Jimmy Corrigan* (putting roots into locations far from Chicago and Waukosha), and in that sense they offer a reward for the reader's investigation and eyestrain, even if their revelations only obliquely affect the graphic novel's plot. True, the diagram suggests, more than the main "text" of the novel might, that *Jimmy Corrigan* represents one segment of a long historical sequence of tragic and lonely characters appearing and disappearing on a much larger stage. There is something frustrating, however, about the insistent triviality of some of these data: a floor plan of Jimmy's apartment; a six-step description of his comics storage process; four tiny *in flagrante delicto* panels of the bachelor William Corrigan philandering his way through Chicago. This elaborate diagram enriches the world of *Jimmy Corrigan* mainly by suggesting that the pained minutiae of the main diegesis are supported by thousands of similarly awkward moments that the graphic novel never shows us.

A second diagram (38–39), discussed at length in Thomas Bredehoft's article on "comics architecture" in *Jimmy Corrigan*, reveals through a series of shifts in chronology and perspective that the windows in Jimmy's Chicago apartment were originally installed by Jimmy's great-grandfather William,

Fig. 7.1. Ware's key to the "New Pictorial Language" explains something simple in a very complicated way. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), endpapers.

who later emerges as an important character in the nineteenth-century sections of the book.[9] This apparently trivial coincidence, placed as it is among Jimmy's fevered and worried fantasies about meeting his father for the first time, seems almost reassuring: it asserts a connection through his male forebears, a connection that literally shelters him even though he is unaware of it.[10] The diagram also tells us, however, that Jimmy's father isn't long for this world: in a series of small, blue, right-to-left-reading panels at the bottom of the diagram's first page, the father's present moment is immediately succeeded by a headstone and a grave. For the careful reader, then, this diagram telegraphs Jimmy's father's death more than three hundred pages before it happens. This kind of extension of the reader's awareness is not possible in the main narrative frame, tethered as the comic is (at this point) to Jimmy's point of view. To establish an external or authorial perspective, Ware inserts a diagram: since the diagram uses the space of the page to convey information instead of a viewpoint on the story, it naturally suggests a more abstracted, more objective position that allows, for example, generations to be compressed into a brief space. By presenting an alternative to the steady sequential march of comics narrative, Ware's diagrams allow the sort of retrospective or omniscient view of the story's events that other authors might reserve for captions in the voice of a third-person narrator.[11]

The final and most telling of the diagrams in *Jimmy Corrigan* also uses this strategy, covering several generations in a small portion of the page. This two-page diagram appears near the end of the book, immediately after its climax, when Amy pushes Jimmy away after hearing the news of their father's death (357–58) (see plates 9 and 10). At first glance, the austere, diagrammatic, and open use of space on these pages seems like a fairly cold sequel to Amy's unheard words of apology as she realizes that Jimmy has disappeared. The diagram, however, encodes enough information about Amy's ancestry (and Jimmy's) that reading it carefully forces a revision in both the meaning of the book's conclusion and the underlying connections between the book's two chronologically separate stories. The diagram traces Amy's ancestry back through the information barrier—unbreachable for the characters—of her adoption. In snapshots of three generations, the diagram shows Amy's mother giving her up for adoption in 1964, deposits Amy's maternal grandfather in a World War II soldier's grave, and reveals that her mother's father's mother was the daughter of Jimmy's great-grandfather, the looming, abusive father in the historical flashback sections of the graphic novel. Jimmy's great-grandfather fires May, the African American maid who is Amy's great-great-grandmother, when May is pregnant with his illegitimate child. In a typical turn of Ware's little tragedies, in fact, he fires her for offering a bit of kindness toward his son behind his back (243); she returns in winter, a few months later, "weighed down by some burden, concealed at the waist of her coat," but runs off into the snow after James sees her, offering no explanation (250).

This diagram is the only confirmation offered in the book that this "burden" is William Corrigan's unborn child (and James's never-known half-sister). The fact of Amy and Jimmy's consanguinity—and, moreover, her very close blood relation to little James, who is now the old man she calls "Granpa"—makes Jimmy's panicked retreat on the previous pages a tragedy of possible connections unrealized. Without the information in this diagram,

Jimmy's Thanksgiving return to his mother and his work cubicle seems like a sad return to his own status quo, one in a series of missed opportunities for the maladroit protagonist; with the information in this diagram, however, Jimmy's disappearance is a tragic failure of family reconciliation for Amy as well.

There are several reasons why Ware might bury this connection between Amy and her adopted family in a diagram (and, for that matter, in small and visually obscure details in the diagram), and I'd like to argue that the effect he achieves with this choice is actually quite subtle. Ware might have simply secreted the information here like an Easter egg for the most diligent reader, to reward more careful scrutiny with a more poignant ending. This would make a nice parable about readerly care for students in a literature class, but it's hard to come away from Ware's work with a sense that he imagines rewarding his fans. (The hardcover *Jimmy Corrigan*'s dust jacket, after all, touts it as "a bold experiment in reader tolerance.") Ware might instead resort to the diagram here, as in the early diagram about Jimmy's window, because these facts can only be related outside of the narrative diegesis. Since *Jimmy Corrigan* is anchored so closely in a few characters' points of view (mostly Jimmy's and James's), information known to none of these characters can only appear outside of the visual narrative. Furthermore, and perhaps more interesting, it's possible that the eventual revelation relies on a process of scrutiny or investigation in order for its emotional impact to feel earned or genuine: if Amy's family history were simply delivered, instead of being something the reader must hunt for, or encounter on a second or third reading, the coincidence of the characters' kinship might seem considerably contrived. As it is, and with the precedent of the other diagram establishing historical coincidences, the unlikely connection between these two characters feels more like a secret than a fiction.

Comics, Diagrams, and Information Design

Ware's persistent interest in diagrams also reaches beyond the immediate narrative needs of his graphic novel. Ware is clearly curious about the possibilities created by importing allied media into his comics, or by learning from the devices of related media. As we will see, the common grammar of comics and diagrams—their shared reliance on juxtapositions or continuities in two-dimensional space to indicate connections of meaning—establishes a number of non-narrative possibilities with which Ware and other cartoonists occasionally experiment.

The art of the diagram is one of a number of ways in which Ware's comics technique is informed by disciplines or media that aren't often considered by literary critics. Gene Kannenberg has written comprehensively on Ware's interest in typography and type design, for example;[12] and Ware is also clearly interested in music and in architecture.[13] In *Jimmy Corrigan* in particular, Ware also repeatedly invokes the early, pre-cinematic technology of moving pictures. Like comics, and like Ware's several diagrams, these early devices—the zoetrope, magic lantern slides, and the zoopraxiscope of the early photographer Eadweard Muybridge, all of which appear in *Jimmy Corrigan*—rely on sequential images to depict events in series.[14] Within the graphic novel,

of course, all of these moving-picture images are also comics: unless we remove, cut apart, and build Ware's model zoetrope, the twelve images of a crutch-walking robot can only be read as a comic, with its images helpfully moving from left to right along the top of the page.[15] McCloud has pointed to the similarity between these two mediums' ways of representing motion, claiming that "before it's projected, film is just a [. . .] very slow comic," printed on celluloid instead of on paper.[16] Ware's various invocations of early motion-picture technology, represented as comics (with minimal changes from panel to panel, in the case of the zoetrope), thus also direct us to reexamine the "very slow" sequences that are ubiquitous in *Jimmy Corrigan*. It's easy to describe these slow, moment-to-moment sequences—Jimmy's father awkwardly keeping Jimmy company in a doctor's office, for example (125)—as static, but the repetition of images also heightens our attention to slight variations of motion, body language, and facial expression.[17] Like these evocations of early motion-picture technology, Ware's diagrams urge us to reexamine the methods of the main comic as well as the fundamental proximity of the related media. Navigating Ware's dense and deliberately obscure diagrams should prepare the reader to read diagram-like devices on his comics pages as well as the structural or grammatical similarity between comics and diagrams in their foundations.

Ware's sense of the comics medium is clearly related to the visual workings of diagrams, and in the end his work asserts a basic connection between the grammar of comics storytelling and the grammar of information display that may open up interesting new possibilities for comics. As it happens, Ware's comics are akin to diagrams in a number of ways, some of which (though not trivial) are more straightforward than the fundamental similarity of their "grammars." The first of these is the flat, simplified cartooning style that characterizes most of Ware's mature work, in which many objects and even characters nearly resemble pictographs or ideograms.

Describing his own rougher but similarly simplified visual work, Art Spiegelman repeatedly compares this drawing style to diagrams. Spiegelman similarly asserts, for example, that *Dick Tracy*'s Chester Gould "understood better than anyone that comic strip drawing isn't really drawing at all, but rather a kind of diagramming."[18] In an essay on his early one-page piece "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," Spiegelman asserts, "All comic-strip drawings must function as diagrams, simplified picture-words that indicate more than they show."[19] Here, Spiegelman refers to more than Gould's in-panel text labels (e.g., "Two-way TV wristwatch") or their relation to the speech balloon and other graphic devices: he uses the idea of a diagram to describe the cartooning style that Scott McCloud calls "iconic." Iconic drawings are simplified to the point of being almost pure symbol, with inessential or non-semantic visual elements abstracted away. McCloud sees these iconic drawings as being "more like words," in that their process of signification is diminishingly a matter of resembling the thing they represent, increasingly a matter of accepted symbolic conventions.[20]

Ware, too, describes a desire for his drawings to "read like words"—for them to trigger meaning as immediately as a printed word will for a literate reader, "so that when you see them you can't make yourself not read them."[21] As a model of the immediate pictorial legibility that Ware desires, Daniel Rae-

burn, following Spiegelman, cites Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy*: "It takes more effort not to read *Nancy* than it does to read it."[22] The uniformity of Ware's line, the openness of his visual forms, his flat fields of color, and the simplification of organic background elements like trees and bushes until they resemble symbols on an architect's plan: all of these elements of Ware's style are engineered to approach this Bushmiller-like (or Gould-like) immediacy, a kind of stylistic transparency.

And yet, Ware's comics are, as a general rule, anything but easy to read. Along with this seemingly transparent cartooning, Ware at times delivers dense text, complicated page layouts, and central characters whose main attributes are emotional paralysis or painful awkwardness. McCloud argues that the iconic style of drawing somehow enables reader "identification" with the characters, and although McCloud's assertion here is among his most dubious, there is one element of truth behind it: since this iconic or diagrammatic drawing privileges the semantically charged parts of a drawing, iconic drawings of characters' faces are (or can be) easier to read for their emotional signification.[23] If we construe things like eyebrow position or the line created by the mouth as emotional signifiers—as they do seem to be—then the reduction of a cartoon face to these significant lines makes the character's internal state read, ideally, as clearly as a word, legible in every panel where we see his face.[24] It's hard to imagine a protagonist more closed off to emotional connection than Jimmy, but the repeated, virtually unchanging icon of his worried face telegraphs his emotions with excruciating clarity. Although the women in *Jimmy Corrigan* are drawn just as iconically, Ware takes pains to obscure their faces (other than Amy's) in nearly every panel, presumably to limit the legibility of their interior states. Jimmy's mother, for example, is visible many times before we see her face, tiny and at the bottom of the panel, at the end of their Thanksgiving dinner (371); even in James's dream of impressing the red-haired girl, we only see the side of her bonnet (246).[25]

Whatever Ware is aiming at with his diagrammatic, iconic drawing, then, it isn't merely the reader's identification with the characters or any ease of access to the character's interiority. Instead, it seems to be an appeal to the possibility that drawings might approach the semiotic directness of language, even though the two kinds of mark-making participate in distinct kinds of signification. Whereas words are, with the possible exception of onomatopoeia, always arbitrary signifiers, even very iconic drawings rely on natural (non-arbitrary) signification: they visually resemble the things they signify.[26] And yet, if iconic or diagrammatic drawing approaches certain language-like qualities of signification—its "common nouns" referring to general types rather than to specific individuals; its simplification, as Spiegelman suggests, indicating texture or subtext it does not show—then iconic drawings would seem to be the natural vocabulary of both the diagram and the cartooned literary comic.[27]

However, this iconic vocabulary is then activated by the grammar of visual juxtaposition that is generally understood to be central to comics as a medium. Ware's interest in diagrams clearly goes beyond their pictographic idiom. The way that diagrams relate and manipulate their symbols is also a large part of Ware's "comics poetics," but this is an aspect of Ware's work (and an aspect of the comics medium) that has received little attention. The

preeminent theorist of the diagram is probably Edward Tufte, the author of several landmark books on information design. Tufte's work, directed toward statisticians and graphic designers, primarily advocates greater clarity and "integrity" in information displays, offering strategies for revising cluttered, deceptive, or otherwise ineffective diagrams and for maximizing a chart's "data-to-ink ratio."[28] Given that these are Tufte's goals, we should expect him to offer relatively little about the potential literary uses of diagrams or about ways that comics like Ware's might deliberately exploit complexity or clutter. In the course of distinguishing clear information design from "chartjunk," however, Tufte does offer a number of insights into the language of graphics that can help us to see how Ware's comics work. For example, Tufte advocates against high-contrast juxtapositions of color or equal-width bands of black and white because of the "after-images and vibration,"[29] or the "shimmer" and "moiré vibration,"[30] that these graphic elements can cause. Ware uses both of these discomforting effects deliberately in *Jimmy Corrigan*. High-contrast red and green vibrate, for example, in the panel during Jimmy's visit to the doctor's office when he mutters, "Uh . . . I guess" (112).[31] And the optical discomfort of Tufte's black-and-white "shimmer" is visible on nearly every page of *Jimmy Corrigan*, in the too-narrow white gutters between his thick, even panel borders. In both of these cases, Ware flouts the "rules" of graphic design deliberately in order to ratchet up the visual discomfort that accompanies Jimmy's ever-mounting anxiety.

Although he is concerned with clarity more than with art, Tufte's examples of well-designed diagrams do occasionally resemble comics. In a chapter on "Multiples in Space and Time," for example, he presents a set of Muybridge's motion-analysis photographs on the same page as Huygens's time-series drawing of Saturn's orbital path and a set of maps showing continental drift. As Ware's interest in Muybridge reminds us, each of these time-series diagrams reads, sequentially, like a comic.[32] Diagrams of the movement of a seahorse or a gecko also use simplified images (cartoons) in sequence throughout the time-series section of Tufte's chapter on "Graphical Excellence."[33] Notably, Tufte treats these comics or proto-comics as if they are interchangeable with the other, more chart-like diagrams in these chapters. He also analyzes a number of comics or comics-like diagrams in a chapter of *Visual Explanations* that deals with the diagrams used to explain magic tricks. Because sleight of hand requires several stages of movement, these diagrams typically include multiple images of the same disembodied hands, revealing or suggesting the gestures and manipulations that make the trick work. Nearly all of these diagrams combine drawings with words, and they often also have recourse to other cartooning shorthand: motion lines, impact lines, and ghosted overlapping images. As Tufte points out, these are "device[s] often used in comics."[34] The fact that Tufte does not seem to distinguish between explanatory comics and explanatory diagrams could provide his most provocative contribution to the study of comics, even if this contribution is never articulated in those terms.

It's natural for comics or comics-like sequences such as Muybridge's photographs to appear in discussions of the diagrammatic representation of events unfolding over time or depictions of time-series data. If a single dimension of information (data about a single variable) is plotted over time, a straightfor-

ward two-dimensional graph is the obvious choice. If more than one variable must be correlated over a relatively small number of time samples, time-slice diagrams for the data—one graph per sampled moment—can essentially be read as a comic with graphs or charts for sequential "panels."[35] But for diagrams and charts, the measured progress of time is only one of many different sorts of data that the two dimensions of the page can describe. A chart could plot inflation against unemployment, temperature against conductivity, atomic number against atomic volume, or years in Chicago against that Chicagoan's average monthly phone bill.[36]

Diagrams use spatial proximity to denote a wide range of connections—linkages of meaning, and not necessarily of time. Since comics is a narrative medium, it inevitably uses the device of graphic juxtaposition mainly for narrative ends. If comics is such a near cousin to the diagram, however, and if diagrams can borrow the graphic idiom of comics to explain the movements of a seahorse or a sleight of hand, then there can be little reason for comics not to borrow from the wider range of graphic semantics allowed to the diagram. In particular, both Chris Ware's diagrams and Edward Tufte's appropriation of sequential art should remind us of the valuable possibility for literary comics of diagram-like non-chronological juxtapositions, sequences of images that are related in ways that have less to do with time than with other interrelations of meaning: metaphor, options and potentialities, thematic synopsis, spatial relationships, and many other unplumbed possibilities.

We need not look far to find graphic juxtapositions in Ware's work that depict relationships other than chronological sequence. The several "title page" embellishments in the early pages of *Jimmy Corrigan*, for example, offer juxtapositions that are more metaphorical or metatextual than narrative. An early page in the graphic novel offers a twelve-panel grid of possible faces for Jimmy's father (28), juxtaposed like the possible positions of Quimby's eyebrow in the endpapers diagram. Furthermore, in some two-page spreads in *The ACME Novelty Library* 18, spatial juxtaposition serves more thematic or symbolic purposes. One common layout in this issue has six sections of text and panels arrayed around a single central panel that crosses the gap between pages. These central images are sometimes snapshots of the characters at roughly the same period in the story, but they are sometimes images of an empty room, for example, or an orchid blossom—the latter suggesting an elaborate group of thematic connections between the protagonist's broken relationship, her later career as a florist, and the emotional aftermath of her decision to have an abortion. The orchid also echoes (in its appearance and its placement on the page) two similarly symmetrical gynecological images from pornographic video and a student painting on the preceding pages, making the naturally sexual aspect of the flower much more explicit. While these central thematic panels are not among Ware's most aggressively experimental maneuvers, they do clearly participate in the grammar of diagrams, by which spatial proximity or arrangement may indicate relationships other than chronological sequence.

A number of other cartoonists have also exploited the diagrammatic potential of the comics page. Cartoonists as different as Dan Zettwoch and Posy Simmonds find it useful to include a non-narrative, labeled illustration into an otherwise sequential series of panels or pages.[37] Peter Blegvad's playfully

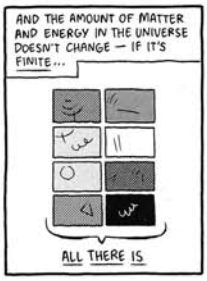
experimental *Leviathan* frequently mixes sequential images with juxtapositions motivated by less chronological concerns: alternative options, graphs or allegorical maps, and even in one case a statistical graphic borrowed from Tufte's *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*.[38] In Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli's comics adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, the panels that accompany Peter Stillman's monologue and the other extended speeches are sequential in the sense that they follow the order of the text, but their relationship to the text and to each other owes more to a metaphorical principle of juxtaposition.[39] In all of these cases, the diagrammatic potential of comics (even if it is not acknowledged in those terms) allows the pictorial space of the page to pull away from strict, camera-like storytelling, into the pictorial equivalent of synopsis, analysis, or explanation.

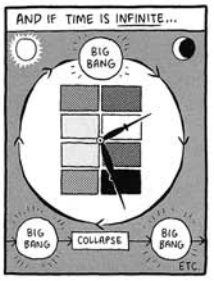
After Ware, the contemporary cartoonist most interested in the poetics or potential of the diagram is probably Kevin Huizenga, whose work had until recently only appeared in anthologies and self-published mini-comics. Huizenga's comics, often motivated by large and abstract intellectual questions, consistently treat diagrams as one of many options for conveying these ideas. In the first issue of *Ganges*, for example, Huizenga's eponymous protagonist Glenn Ganges contemplates the possibility that, given infinite time and a finite amount of matter in the universe, infinite combinations—like the books in Borges's Library of Babel—would eventually bring about every possible universe. While Glenn is lost in these thoughts, the comic's diegetic imagery disappears in favor of diagrams, which label some of the permutations of the many universes with "same story, except in French," "sentient squid," and "universal bliss" (see fig. 7.2).[40] In a different story later in the same collection, as Glenn watches his wife sleeping, he imagines all the people over the centuries who have also lain awake watching their beloveds, and his thoughts dissolve into a mandala of paired heads on pillows, suggesting the infinite numbers of these human sleepers.[41] The first of these examples is definitely a diagram; the second, a cartoon illustration of Glenn's preoccupation. And yet they are nearly the same image: circular repetition implying infinite recursion, diminishingly small units, of which Glenn himself is part of only one. Proximity in these images implies a relationship of comparison, more than causation, and their relationship to the main world of Huizenga's comic is neither entirely diegetic (Glenn doesn't literally see these things) nor entirely non-diegetic (they are illustrations of what Glenn's internal monologue describes). In a comic marked by graphical simplicity, these diagram-like comics are crucial to illuminating Huizenga's ideas. It's difficult to imagine these ideas conveyed visually without recourse to a diagram. Like Ware's diagrams, as Tufte would suggest, they encode information densely; also like Ware's diagrams, they offer an alternative to strictly diegetic imagery and its limited explanatory perspective.

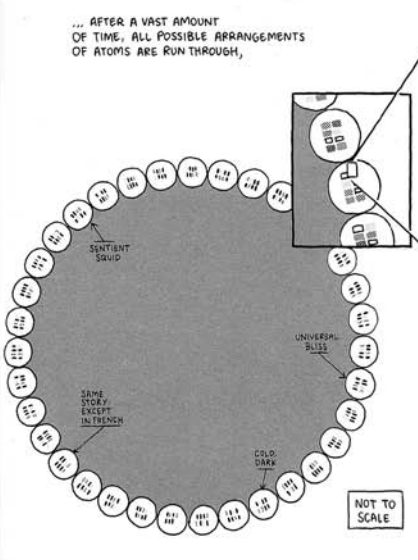
Fig. 7.2. Two diagrammatic visions of infinity from Kevin Huizenga's *Ganges*. Image courtesy of Kevin Huizenga. Kevin Huizenga, *Ganges* 1 (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2006), n.p.

Chris Ware's diagrams are, thus, more than merely another complication in a complex graphic novel and more than merely another excursion into the realm of non-diegetic ephemera. As we have seen, Ware uses these diagrams to conceal and to reveal information that alters the emotional tenor of *Jimmy Corrigan*. Formally, by invoking the non-narrative aspects of the diagram—its capacity to use juxtaposition for non-temporal relationships of meaning—Ware's diagrams suggest new possibilities of metaphor, meta-narrative, and


BUT THERE'S A WAY AROUND THAT...
IF YOU THINK OF THE "PRESENT" AS THE PARTICULAR ARRANGEMENT OF MATTER AND ENERGY AT THAT MOMENT...


AND THE AMOUNT OF MATTER AND ENERGY IN THE UNIVERSE DOESN'T CHANGE — IF IT'S FINITE...
ALL THERE IS


AND IF TIME IS INFINITE...
BIG BANG
BIG BANG
COLLAPSE
BIG BANG
ETC.


... AFTER A VAST AMOUNT OF TIME, ALL POSSIBLE ARRANGEMENTS OF ATOMS ARE RUN THROUGH,
SENTIENT SQUID
UNIVERSAL BLISS
SAME STORY EXCEPT IN FRENCH
COLD DARK
NOT TO SCALE
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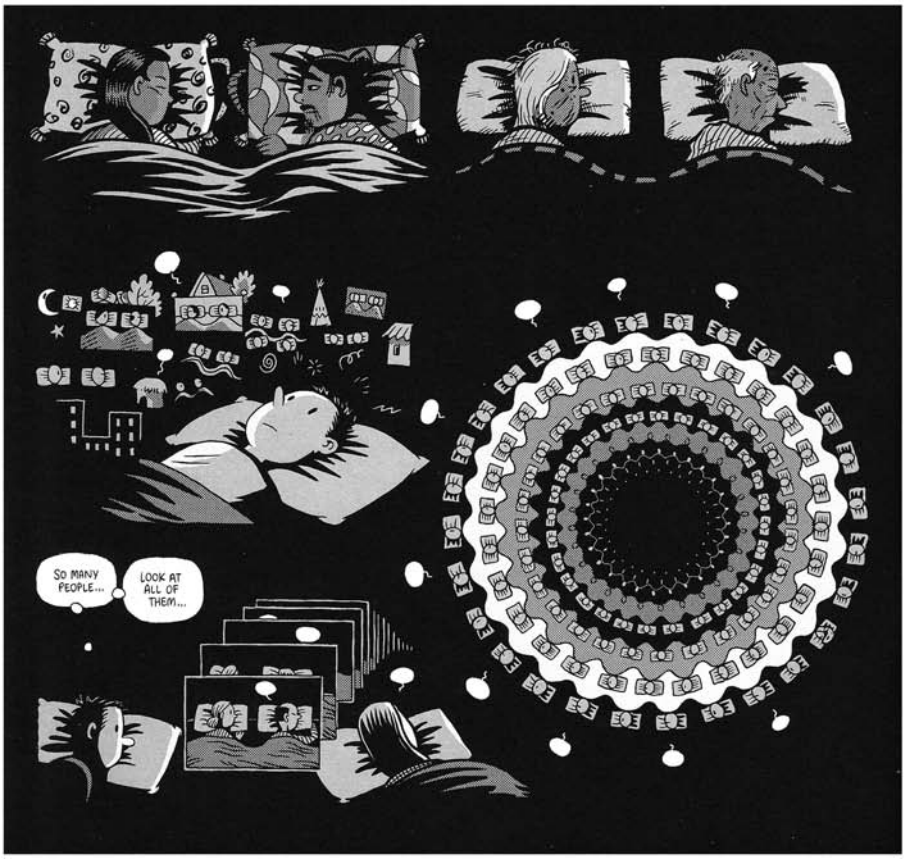

SO MANY PEOPLE...
LOOK AT ALL OF THEM...

other more "poetic" devices for the still-developing language of comics. It's a testament to the pliability of this strange hybrid medium that it can so easily absorb the techniques of other media (film, theater, painting, prose), but the close relationship between comics and diagrams is as fundamental as the speech balloon. Ware's diagrams, finally, help to remind us of this affinity, the basic connection between comics' sequential images and the time-series in a chart, and to demonstrate the potential for formal invention that this affinity implies. The diagrams in *Jimmy Corrigan*, in particular, show not only the secret interrelations of his main characters, but also the capacity of comics at once to conceal and to reveal, to mean in multiple ways simultaneously.

Notes

I owe several of this essay's points (large and small) to conversations with my friend and frequent collaborator Mike Wenthe, who always deserves my grateful acknowledgment. I am also indebted to Kevin Huizenga, not only for granting permission to reproduce his work in this collection, but also for a conversation at the Small Press Expo that sparked my interest in the connection between comics and diagrams. Two of my former students, Shawn Cheng and Lindsay Nordell, significantly added to my understanding of Ware's graphic design in essays they wrote when *Jimmy Corrigan* was hot off the presses. I would also like to thank the editors of this collection and my co-panelists at the 2007 MLA Convention, whose clear sight and energy saw the work into publication.

1. Here, I am not using the term *diegesis* in contrast to *mimesis* in the Aristotelian sense—that is, not to invoke a question of telling versus showing. (The visual aspect of a comic is straightforward mimesis or imitation, in the Aristotelian sense. As Aristotle uses these terms, the only *diegetic* element of a comic would be its narrative captions.) Rather, I mean *diegesis* in the sense that film scholars use the term, as distinct from the *non-diegetic* elements of a film: the soundtrack, the subtitles, and so forth, which are available to the viewer but outside the world of the film and its characters. Borrowing this terminology from film studies, the ordinary non-diegetic elements of a comic include labels, narrative captions, and, to an extent, sound effects or speech balloons (which denote diegetic sounds but in forms that the characters do not perceive).

2. See Thomas A. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006) 869–90.

3. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), iii–iv. Further citations of this text will appear parenthetically in the body of the essay.

4. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink, 1993), 7–9.

5. McCloud famously categorizes panel-to-panel transitions into six types, all of which are narrative in nature except for the "non-sequitur" type. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 70–73.

6. This complicated narrative diagram also appears as the back cover of Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003).

7. See, for example, Ware, *Quimby*, 10.

8. In this case, the diagram may be more an expression of Ware's effort and attention than a narrative or explanatory device: much of the graphic effort in the image goes to elements (like the manifold radiating lines) that carry little meaning. This profusion of effort for a few small jokes (for example, comparing the artist's conducting, painting, and theater with God's rock guitar, advertising, and pornography) is in keeping with the aesthetic of surplus detail and information that animates *The ACME Report*.

9. Thomas A. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 885.

10. Of course, this is also the section of the book in which a gargantuan Superman—often, in Ware's comics, a figure for the abandoning or abusive father—crushes Jimmy's house (an imagined house in which he's tucking in his imaginary son, Billy).

11. Bredehoft focuses on the diagram's capacity to represent other, non-linear ways of construing time or narrative. He makes much of the "circularity" of this diagram, which begins and ends with the same view through the apartment window, altered by the progress of decades. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture," 879.

12. Gene Kannenberg Jr., "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image, and Visual Narrative Strategies," in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 174–83. See also Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 18–21.

13. See Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 23–26. Ware reacts to Goethe's assertion that architecture is "frozen music" by writing, "This is, I think, the aesthetic key to the development of cartoons as an art form." Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Datebook* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003), 190.

14. William Corrigan glazes the windows in the "Zoopraxographical Hall" at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition "for an Englishman" (254); though Muybridge isn't mentioned by name, it must be his exhibit. The magic lantern slides tell a story with projected serial images on 136–38, and the fold-up zoetrope is on 22–23.

15. As Bredehoft points out, the structure of the zoetrope prevents it from telling an extended narrative, or indeed any narrative that "escapes the essential circularity of its mechanism." Every set of zoetrope images must return frequently to its original position and go through the same motions again. Bredehoft extends this claim, too, suggesting that this device "raises the question of how the particular architecture of comics does and does not constrain comics narratives in terms of time and sequence." Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture," 871. In some ways, diagrams raise the same question, but they also offer alternative answers that can expand the ways a comic describes or construes time.

16. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 8.

17. For an analysis of Ware's use of slowness in his comics, see Georgiana Banita's essay in this volume.

18. Art Spiegelman, "Comix: An Idiosyncratic Historical and Aesthetic Overview," in *Art Spiegelman: Comix, Essays, Graphics, & Scraps: From Maus to Now to "Maus" to Now* (Palermo: Sellerio Editore—La Centrale dell'Arte, 1998), 77.

19. Spiegelman, "Don't Get Around Much Anymore: A Guided Tour," in *Art Spiegelman*, 8.

20. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 49. Unlike words, however, cartoon drawings remain natural rather than arbitrary symbols. Even McCloud's highly abstracted stick-figure face resembles a human face in important ways; a cartoon drawing of a tree will look like a (perhaps highly generalized) tree, rather than being an unrelated set of marks (T-R-E-E) or sounds (*el arból*).

22. Chris Ware, qtd. in Raeburn, 20.

22. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 20, quoting Spiegelman, "Comix," 74. Spiegelman, in turn, attributes this observation to the cartoonist Wally Wood, though he supplies no source for the anecdote.

23. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 41–43. For a thorough dismantling of McCloud's theory, see Jonathan Frome, "Identification in Comics," *Comics Journal* (April 1999): 82–86. Frome perceptively points out, for example, that a flat character or a cruel villain, drawn in the same style as an interesting, sympathetic protagonist, would not encourage the same sort of reader identification; Charlie Brown encourages more identification than "a nameless boy with no story context" because readers are led to identify with fictional characters by story and personality, not because of the way they're drawn (ibid., 82). The cats in *Maus* are drawn just as "iconically" as the mice, but the Nazis are rarely individualized enough to merit a reader's sympathy. Personally, I find it incredible that McCloud's assertions about reader identification have survived in our critical discourse for as long as they have.

24. For a report on the psychology of facial expressions, see Malcolm Gladwell, "The Naked Face," *New Yorker*, August 5, 2002, 38–49.

25. The full-face view of James's deceased mother in his keepsake photo (145, 264) is thus all the more haunting.

26. The distinction between arbitrary and natural signifiers hearkens back to the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. According to Saussurian linguistics, ordinary linguistic signs (words) do not resemble the things they represent; the connection between sign and signified is therefore arbitrary.

Even the most "iconic" drawing of a face or a teacup resembles the object it represents; some standard comics iconography (like the thought balloon) begins to drift into arbitrary signification, but the drawings themselves remain natural and not arbitrary signs. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966).

27. It's worth remembering, however, that complex and nuanced effects are also possible in comics that take up a much more particularized, much less iconic drawing style. Eddie Campbell's pen-and-ink cartooning, for example, relies on sketchy, impressionistic renderings of appearance, rather than static iconic forms.

28. In particular, see Edward Tufte, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, 2nd ed. (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2001).

29. Edward Tufte, *Envisioning Information* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1990) 82.

30. Tufte, *Visual Display*, 107–8.

31. Raeburn also mentions the vibrational effect of color in this panel. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 71.

32. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud also conjures up Muybridge's time-series photographs (and other technologies of the moving image) in a discussion of the ways in which comics depict movement (108–10).

33. Tufte, *Visual Display*, 36.

34. Edward Tufte, *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1997), 61.

35. Several of these appear in Tufte, *Visual Explanations*, 105–9. See also Tufte, *Visual Display*, 42.

36. Tufte, *Visual Display*, 48, 49, 103, 129.

37. See, for example, Dan Zettwoch's character model-sheet diagrams in "Storm of the Hillsmen," in *Kramers Ergot 7* (Oakland, CA: Buenaventura, 2008), 40, or his multiple cutaways and instructional illustrations of the haunted-house illusion in "Cross Fader," in *Kramers Ergot 6* (Oakland, CA: Buenaventura and Avodah Books, 2006), 6–13. Posy Simmonds illustrates Gemma Bovery's fantasy of a life with her young French lover (and a job as a professional interior designer) with an elaborate allegorical diagram-cum-frontispiece: *Gemma Bovery* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 70.

38. Peter Blegvad, *The Book of Leviathan* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 2000), 26–27, 156.

39. Paul Auster, Paul Karasik, and David Mazzucchelli, *Paul Auster's City of Glass* (New York: Avon, 1994), 15–23, 27–29, 38–45, etc.

40. Kevin Huizenga, *Ganges* 1 (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2006), 3.

41. Ibid., 28. Further impressive diagram-comics happen in Huizenga's self-published "Gloriana" (*Super Monster* 14), which was republished as *Or Else* 2 (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2005).

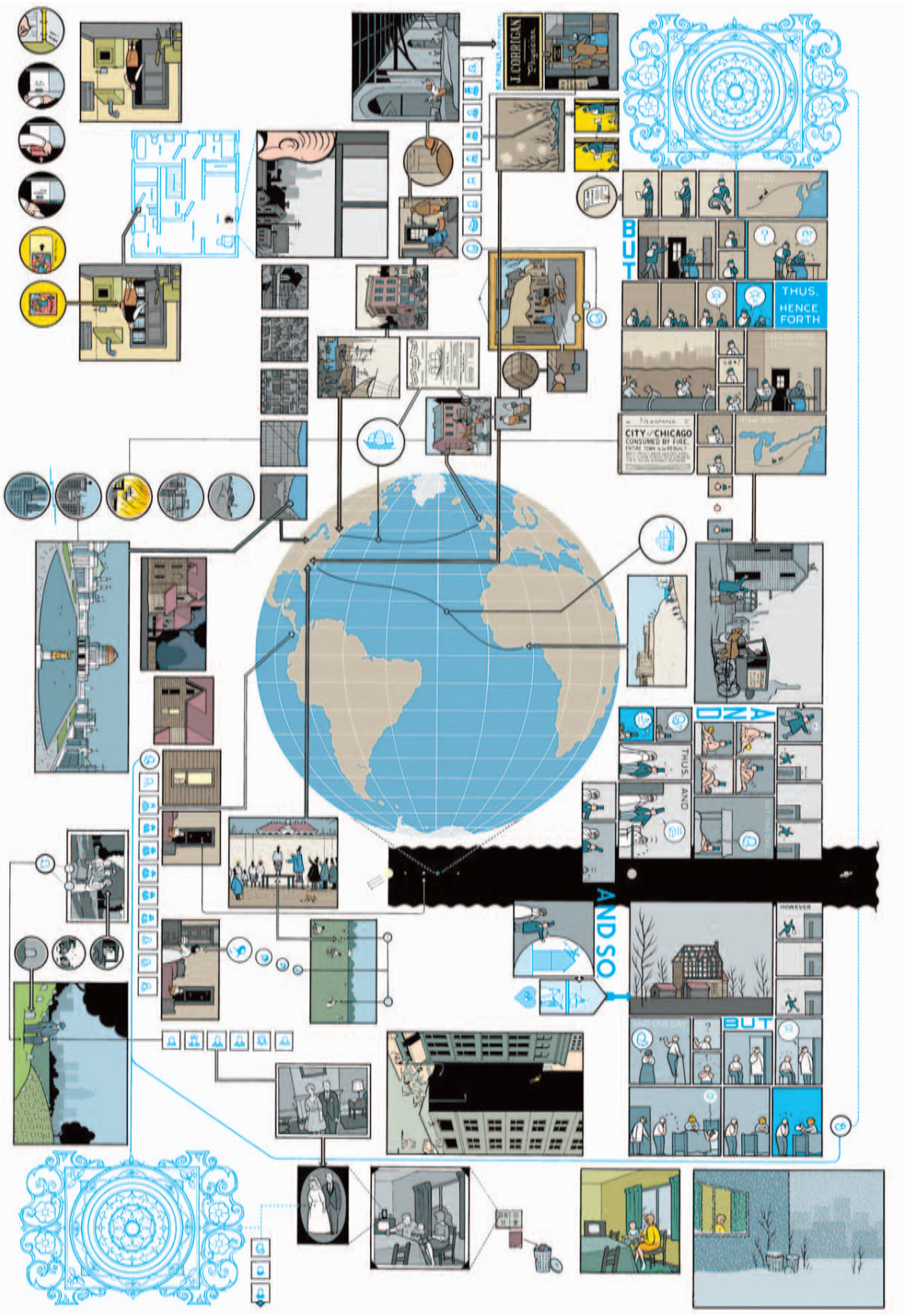


Plate 1. This map, on the inside cover of the hardbound edition of *Jimmy Corrigan*, charts transatlantic connections between Irish immigration and the Middle Passage. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), reverse cover jacket.

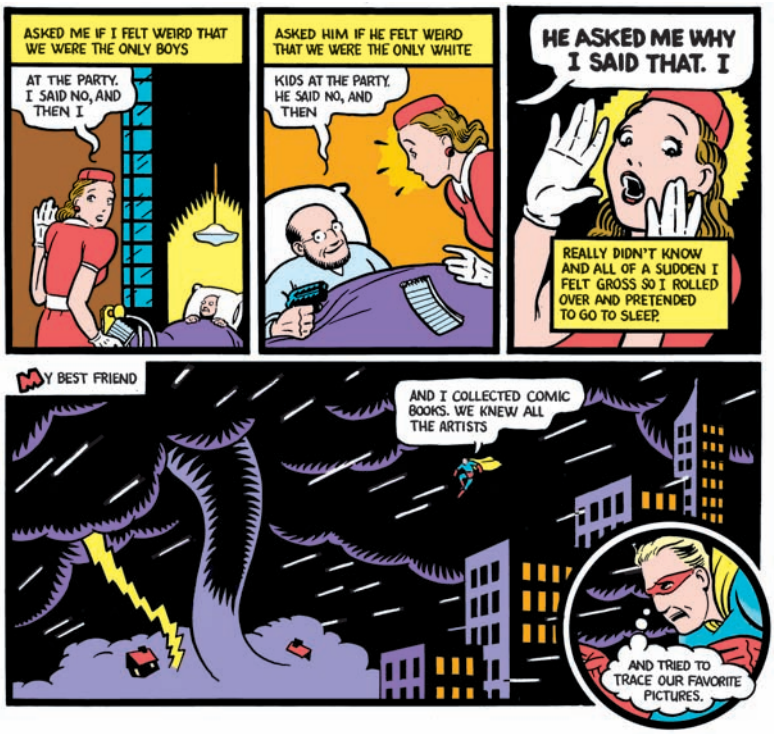


Plate 2. Ware appropriates the early superhero style of comics to relate an autobiographical anecdote from his early childhood. Chris Ware, "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess," *RAW* 2.3 (1991): 81.

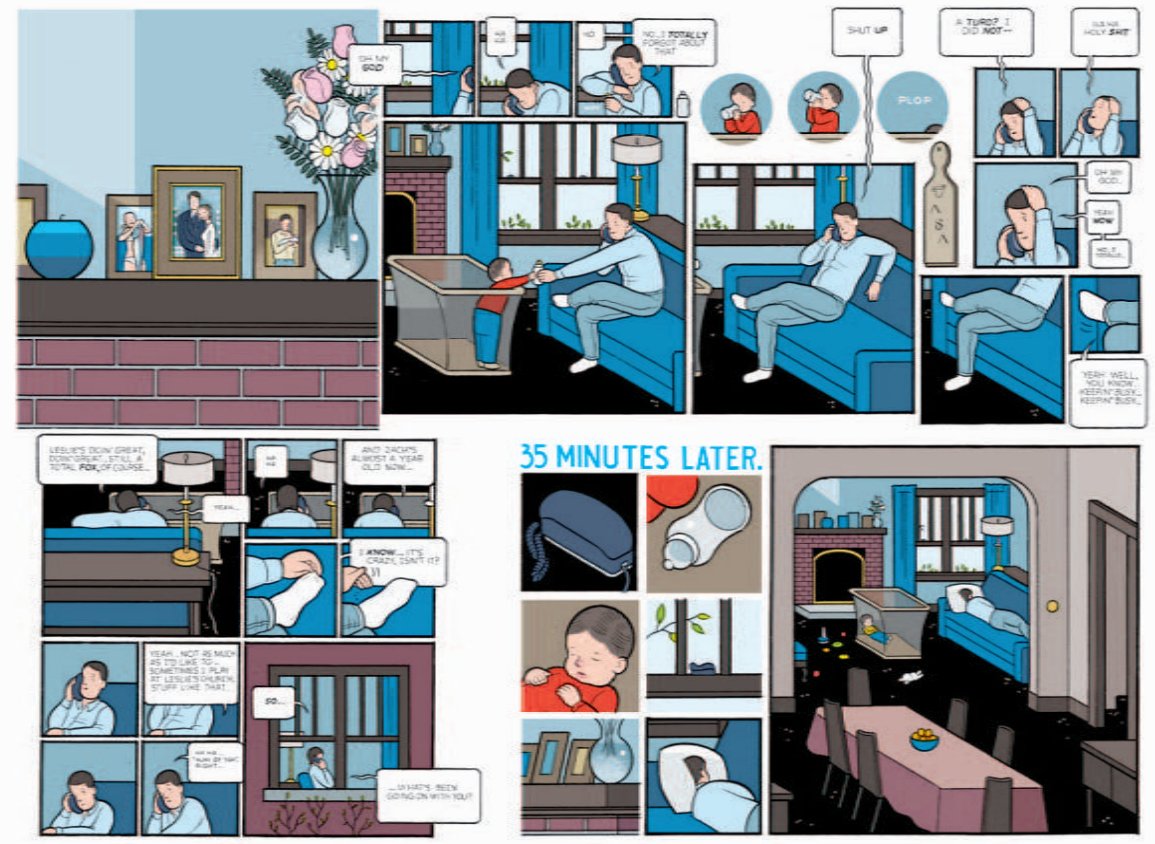


Plate 3. Jordan Lint reminisces about his college days. Chris Ware, "May 15th 1989: Jordon Lint to the age of 35," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 84.4 (2008): 183.

Plate 4. Chris Ware's solo exhibition at the Sheldon Art Memorial Gallery in Lincoln, Nebraska. Chris Ware, Exhibition Catalogue, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, February 16–April 29, 2007.

Plate 5. This *Gasoline Alley* Sunday page by Frank King shows the main characters Walt and Skeezix amid an autumn scene. *Chicago Tribune,* December 4, 1927. Reprinted with permission from *Sundays with Walt and Skeezix* (Sunday Press Books, 2007).

Plate 6. Chris Ware's "Rusty Brown" composition echoes King's bird's-eye view of a father and son walking through the woods on a fall day. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), 60.

Plate 7. The opening page of "Our History of Art" charts the dawn of the aesthetic impulse from cave art through to the Renaissance. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005),

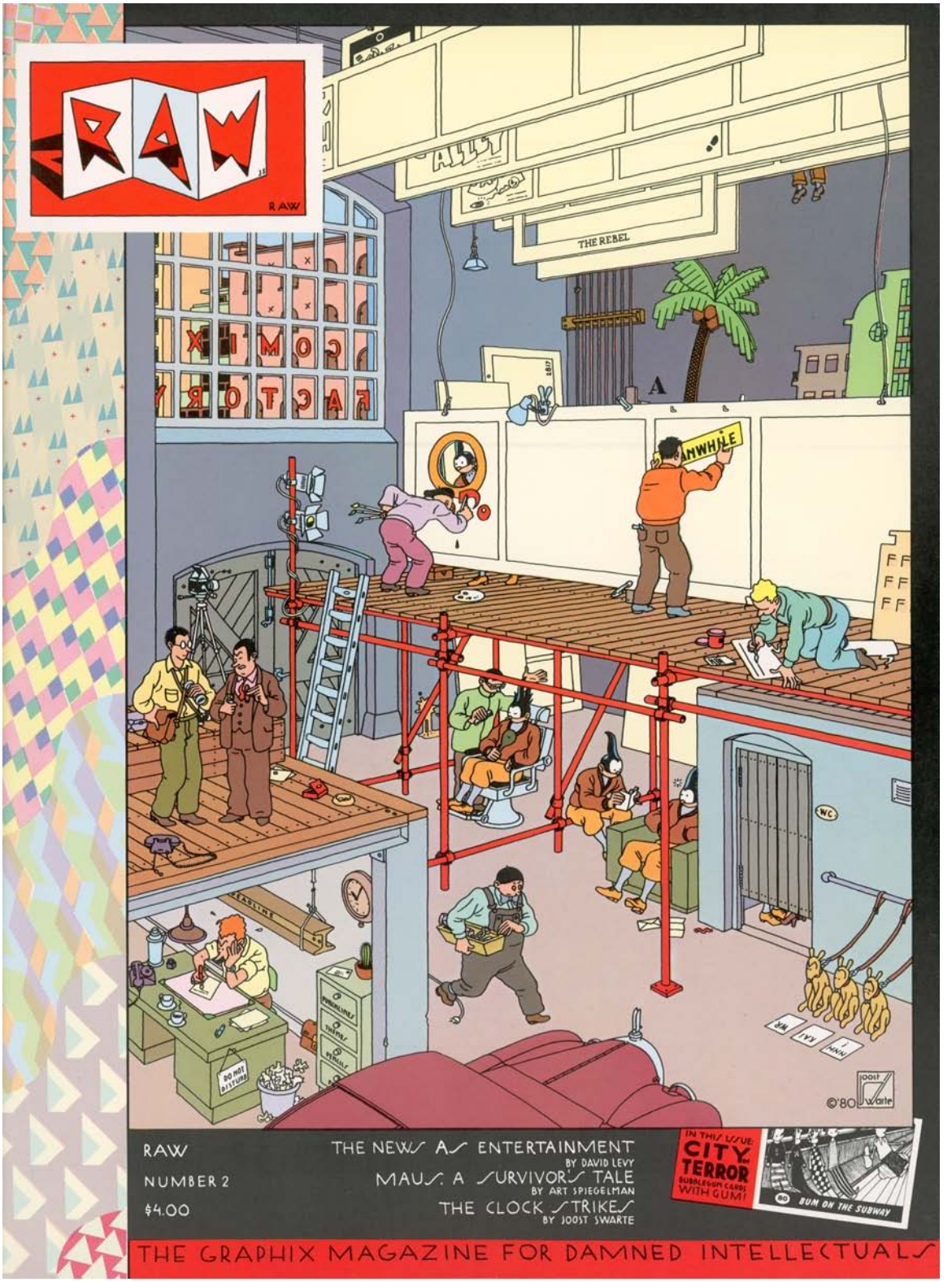


Plate 8. "The Comix Factory," by Joost Swarte, represents comics as a constructed medium. Image courtesy of Joost Swarte. Joost Swarte, *Read Yourself RAW*, ed. Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 31.

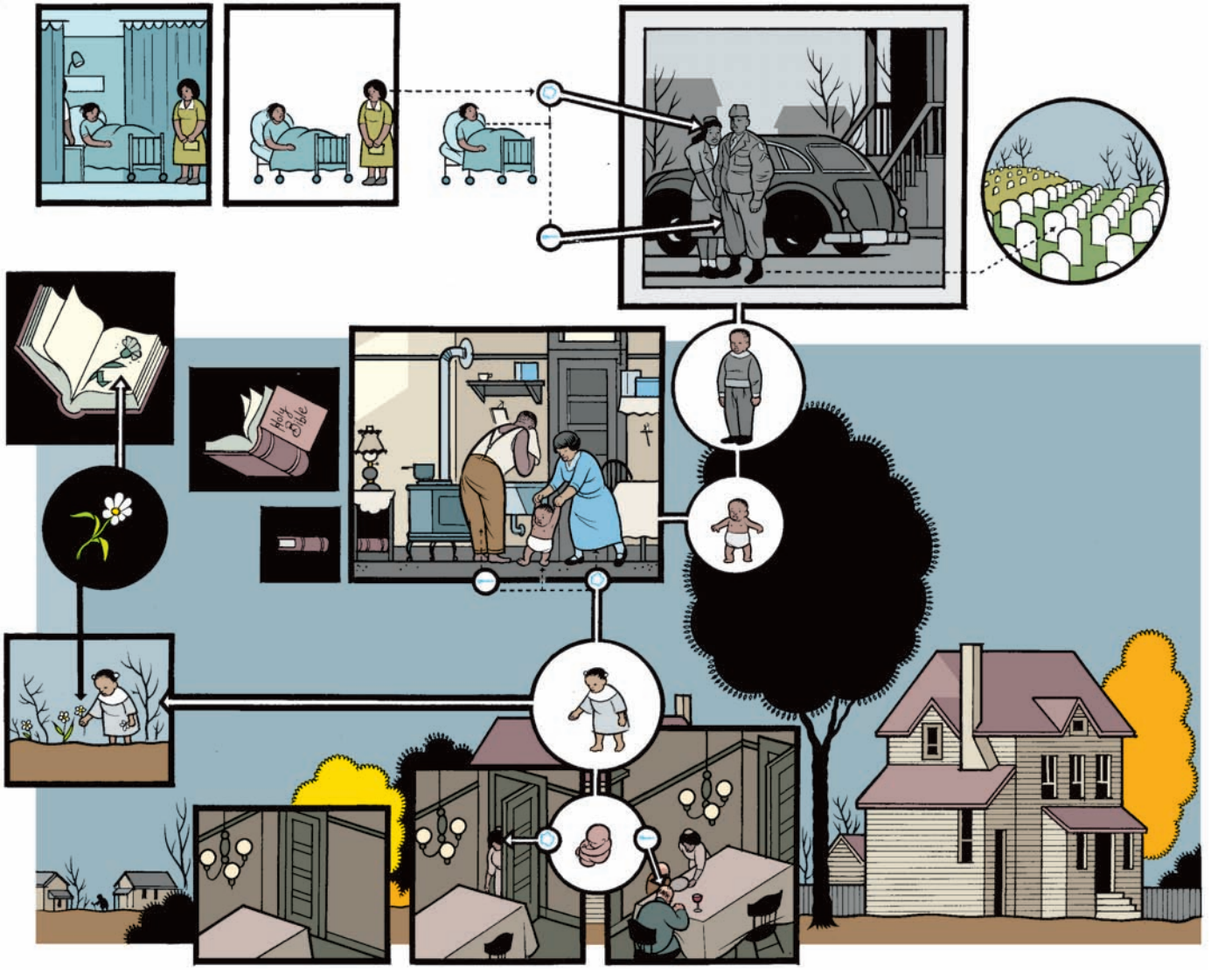


Plate 9. A two-page diagram reveals Amy's otherwise unknowable ancestry. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan:The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 357.

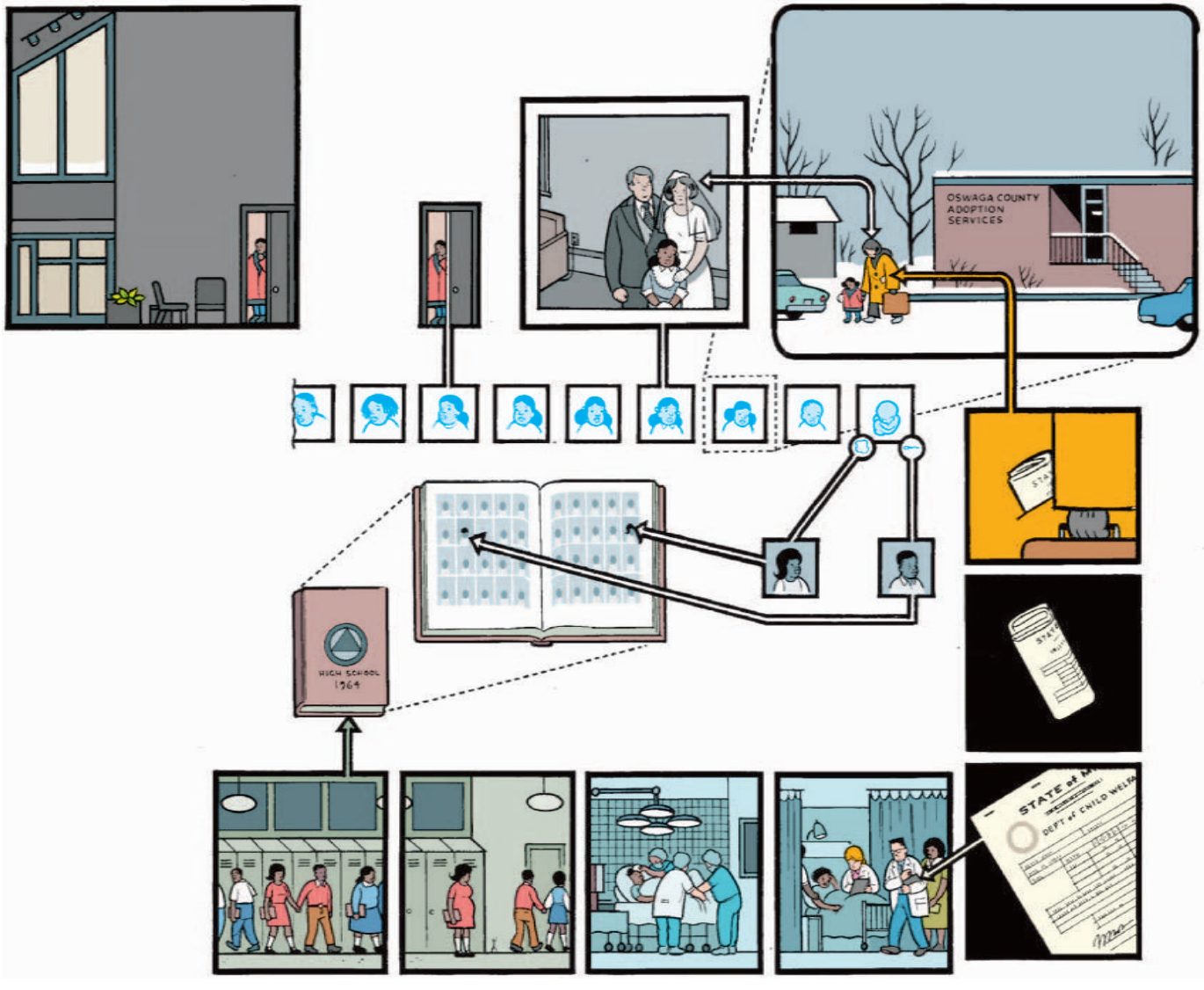


Plate 10. Second page of Amy's ancestry. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 358.

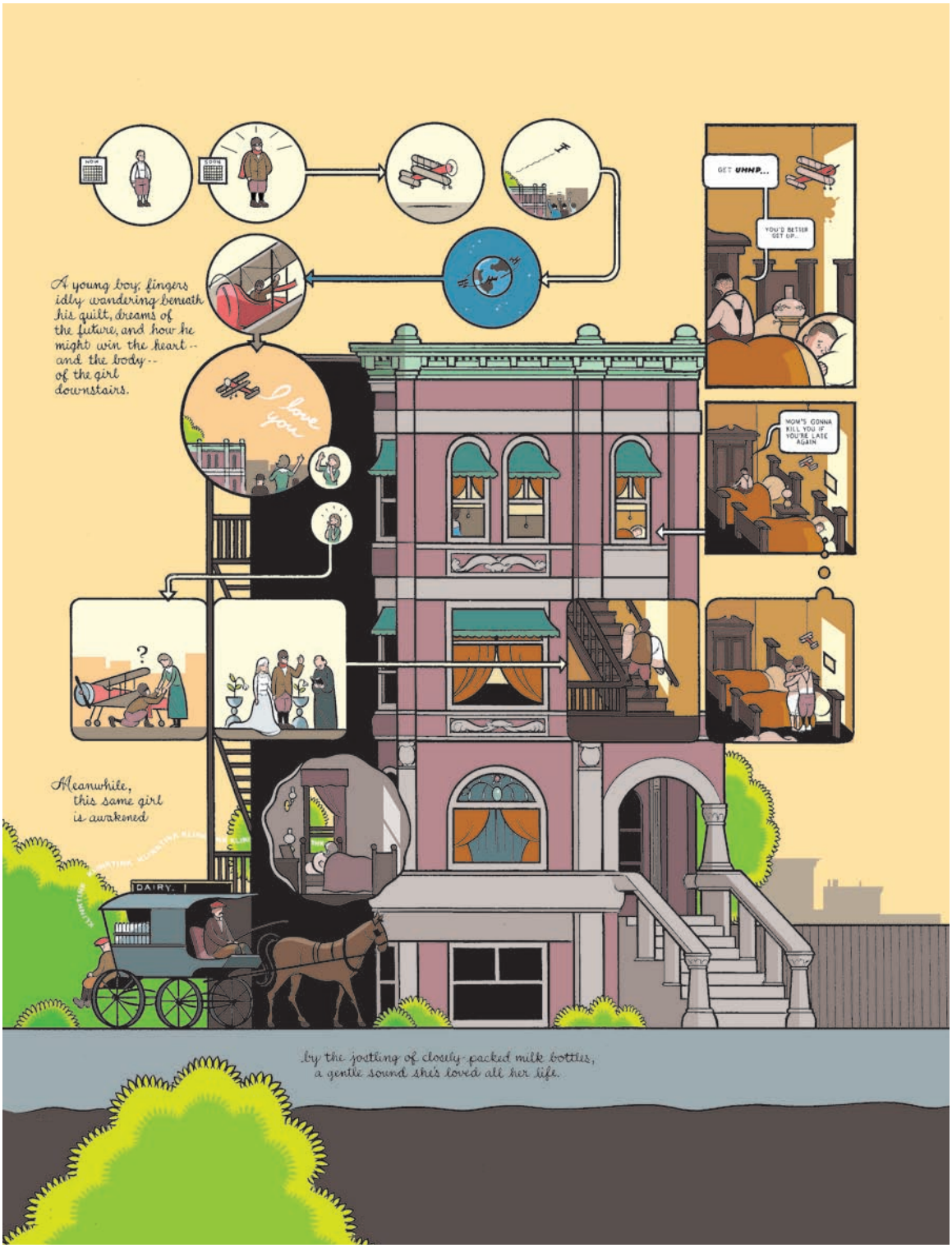


Plate 11. Residents of an early twentieth-century apartment building are comforted by their dreams in "Building Stories." Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 18 (Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2007), 23.

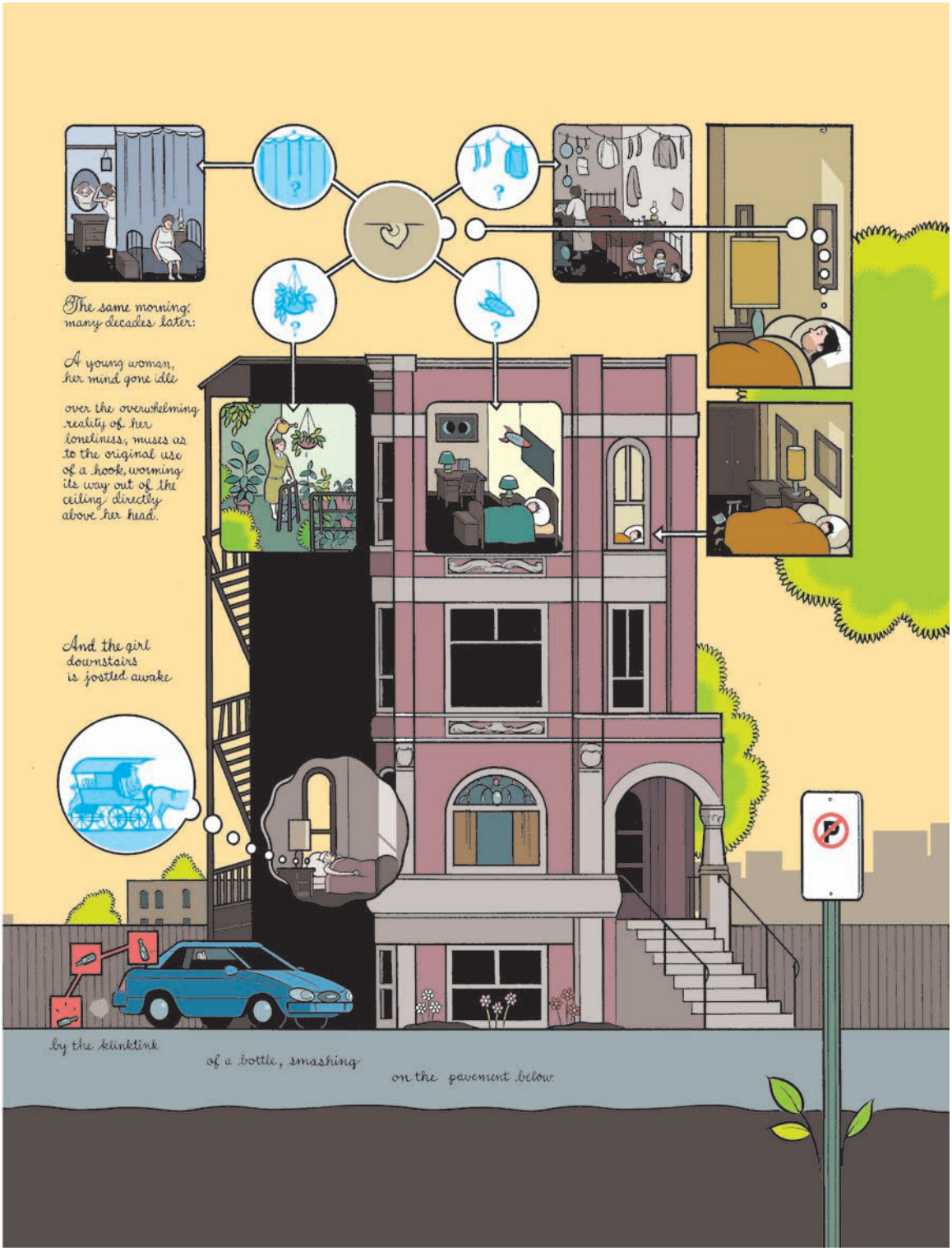


Plate 12. Residents of the same apartment building, now in the late twentieth century, fantasize about the past in "Building Stories." Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 18 (Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2007), 25.

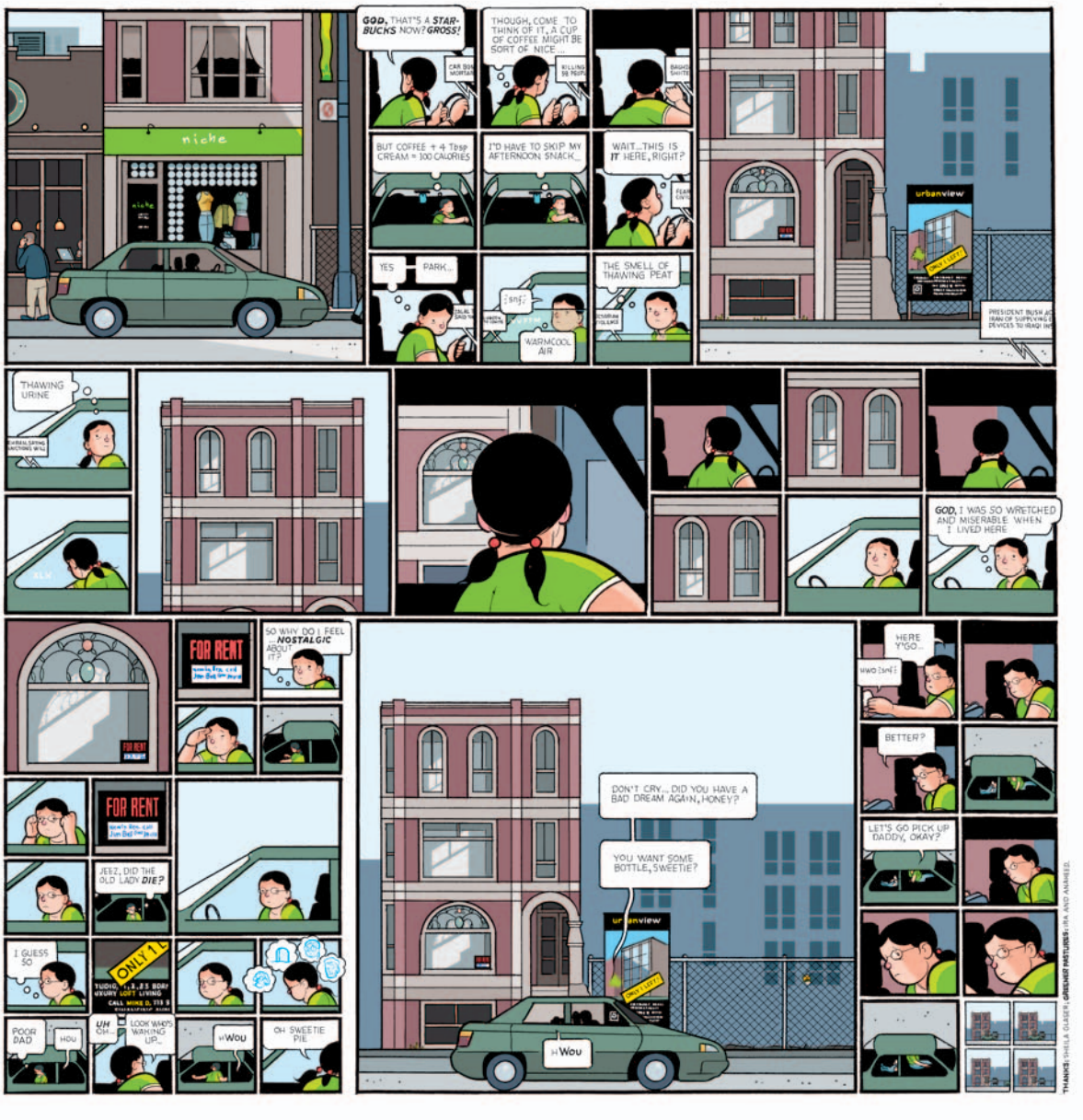


Plate 13. Now silenced and empty, the building is conspicuously out of step with the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Epilogue," *New York Times Magazine,* April 16, 2006, 37.

Plate 14. Jim Crow Magic Lantern slide. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan:The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 70.

Plate 15. Amy Corrigan's racial imagining. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan:The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 293.

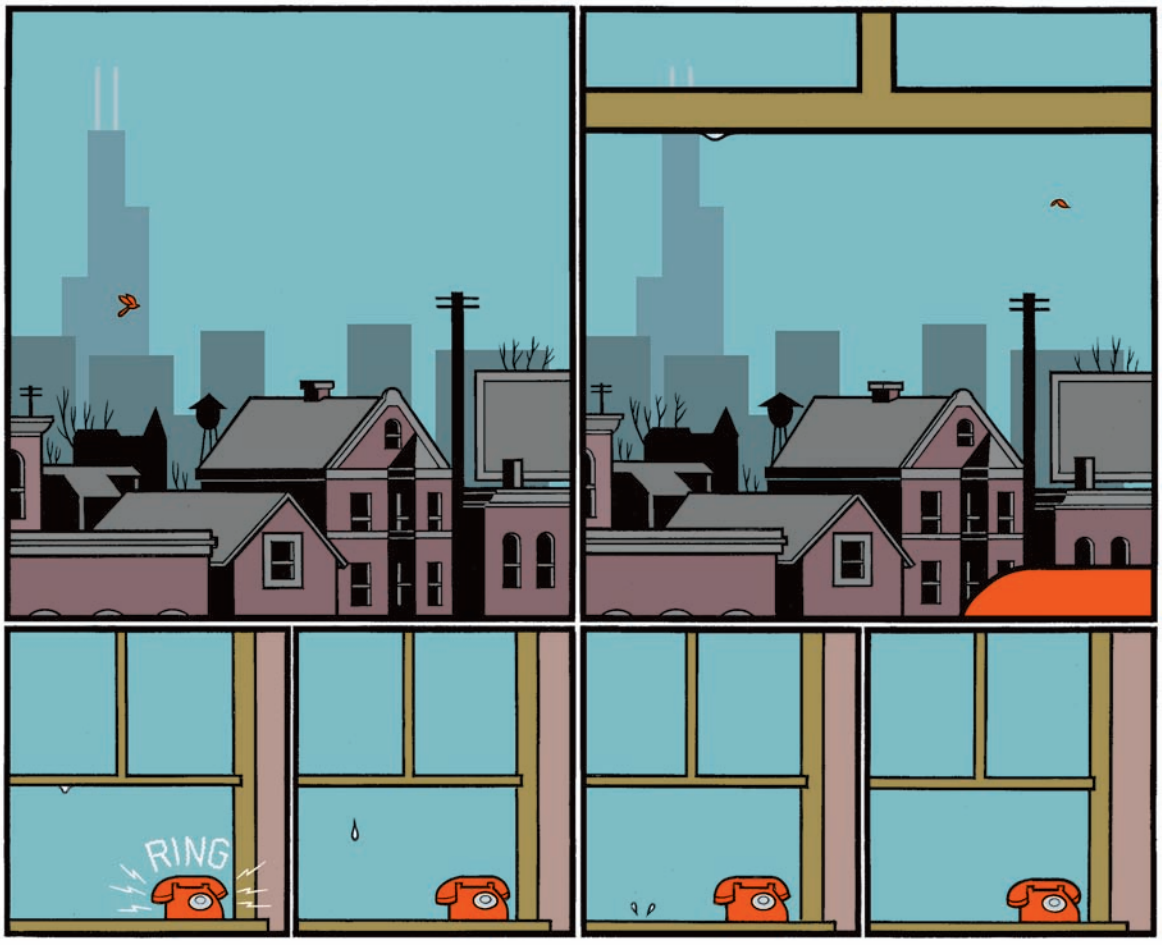


Plate 16. Slow motion, subjective time. Exceedingly brief time spans are expanded over multiple panels. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 5.

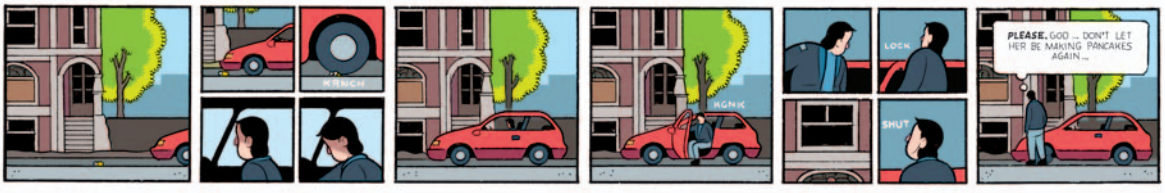


Plate 17. Ware exploits moment-to-moment panel transitions in order to create the dilated sense of time that is central to his ordinariness aesthetic. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 13," *New York Times Magazine,* December 18, 2005, 35.

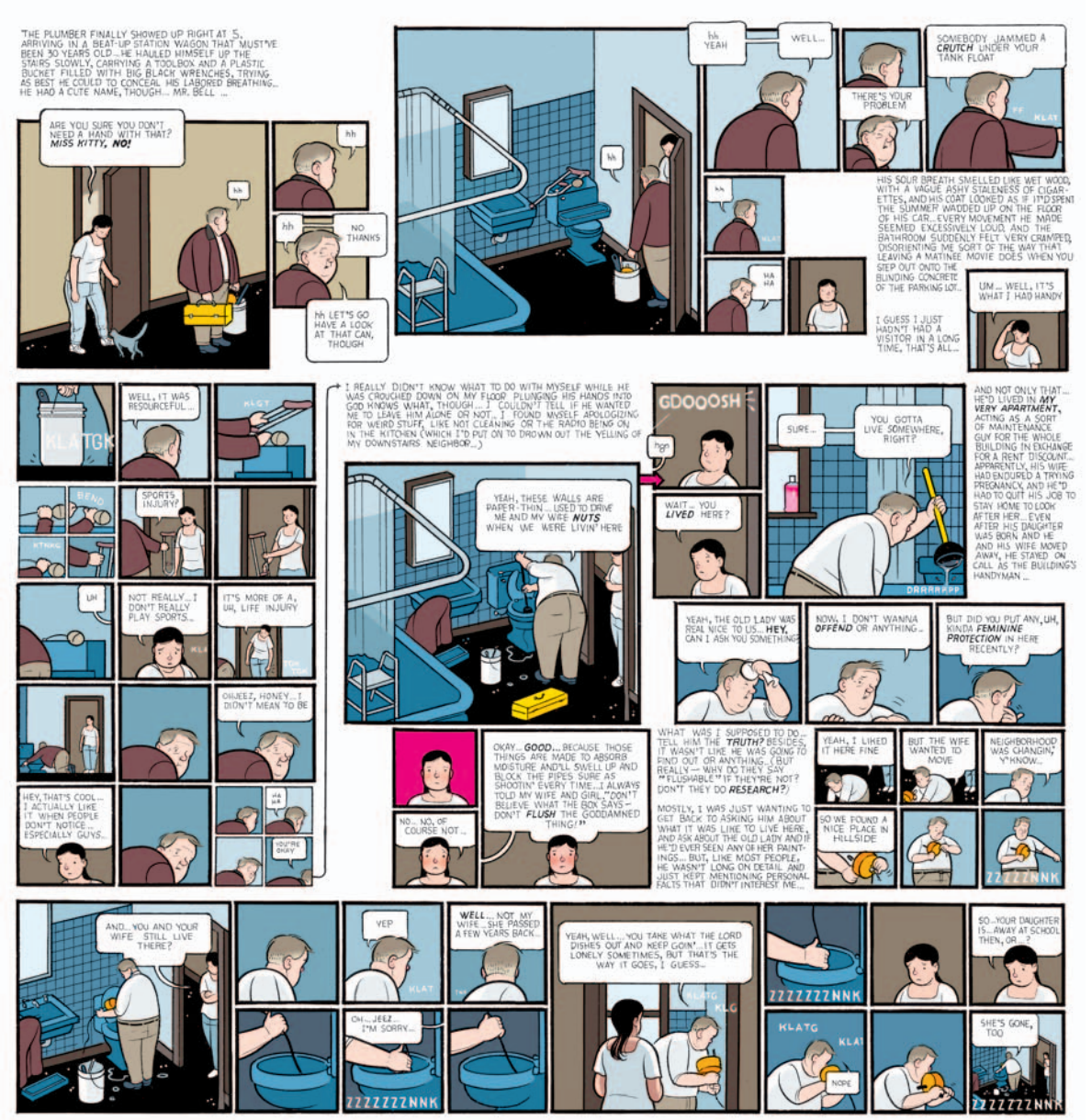


Plate 18. The protagonist's confession of a "life-injury" is acknowledged and then transformed by other significant moments related to her sexual being and the plumber's familial loss. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 22," *New York Times Magazine*, February 19, 2006, 43.

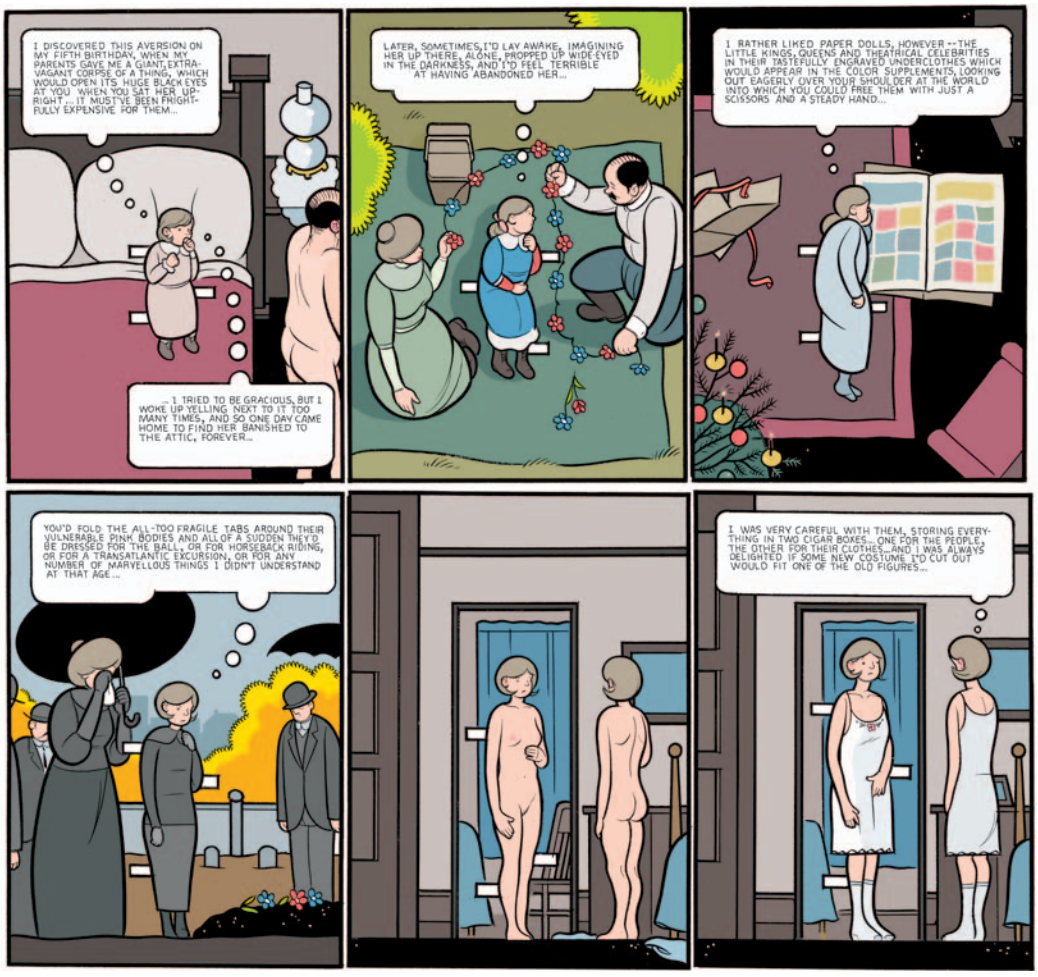


Plate 19. Memory as an interaction of text, image, and reading experience. Chris Ware, "Paper Dolls [detail]," *Chicago Reader,* March 21, 2003.

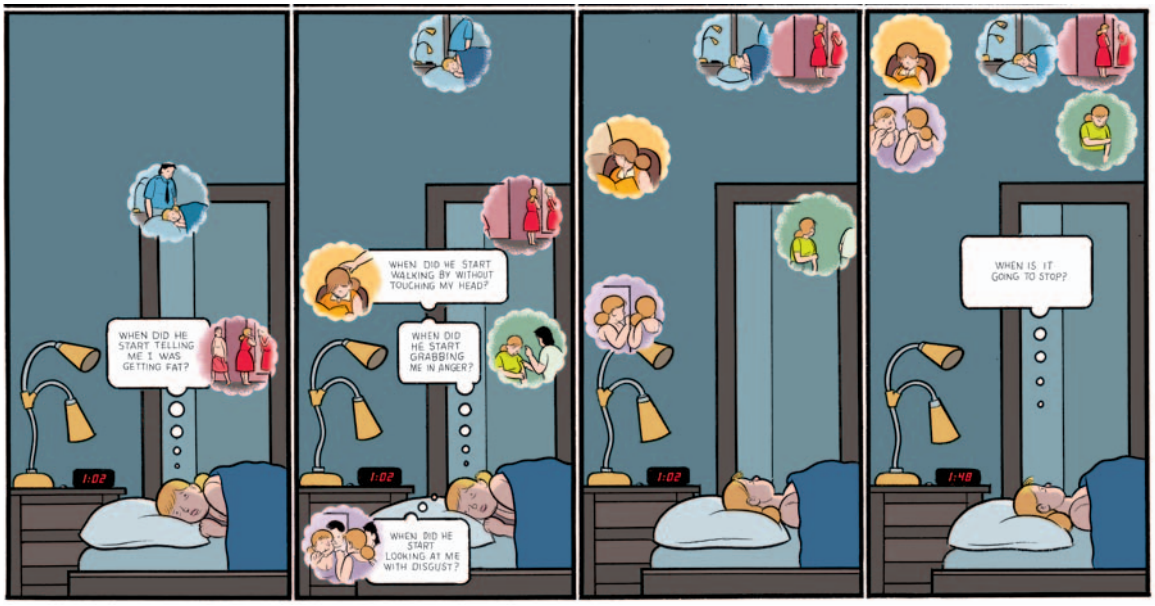
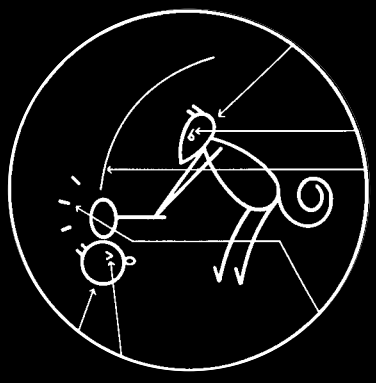


Plate 20. Memory as a comic strip within a comic strip. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 5," *New York Times Magazine,* October 16, 2006, 31.

The Urban Landscape



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On Modernism's Ruins: The Architecture of "Building Stories" and *Lost Buildings*

DANIEL WORDEN

In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved.
—Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

In a two-page sequence of Chris Ware's "Building Stories," architecture both evidences and withstands the passage of time.[1] Both pages depict the same Chicago apartment building in pale yellow morning light, one in the early, the other in the late twentieth century. On the first page, the apartment building has decorative molding around its roof and curtained windows (see plate 11). A horse-drawn wagon carrying milk passes underneath the first-floor bedroom window. Ware narrates the scene in cursive lettering: "A young boy, fingers idly wandering beneath his quilt, dreams of the future, and how he might win the heart—and the body—of the girl downstairs" (23). The lettering complements the content; cursive lends the narrative voice intimacy and sentimentality, as if these omniscient remarks could also be found in a diary, carefully scripted by hand. Above this text, there is a series of inset circular panels which depict the boy's fantasy romance; he becomes a pilot, flies around the world, writes "I love you" in the sky, marries his downstairs neighbor, then takes her upstairs to his childhood bedroom, still decorated with a model biplane hanging from the ceiling by a hook. In the lower portion of the page, Ware focuses on the object of the boy's fantasy: "Meanwhile, this same girl is awakened by the jostling of closely-packed milk bottles, a gentle sound she's loved all her life" (23). Ware endows the scene with nostalgia for this earlier industrial era, constituted by horse-drawn milk carts and heroic biplane aviation. The characters are comforted by their turn-of-the-century urban surroundings and fantasize about the future.

The next page takes place in late twentieth-century Chicago, and the building has been stripped of its roof ornament and curtains (see plate 12). Ware again narrates his characters' fantasies: "The same morning, many decades later: A young woman, her mind gone idle over the overwhelming reality of her loneliness, muses as to the original use of a hook, worming its way out of the ceiling directly above her head" (25). The "young woman" is the female protagonist of "Building Stories," an employee of a local flower shop who has a prosthetic leg. In a series of inset panels, she imagines the hook supporting

a curtain dividing the bedroom, a hanging planter, a clothesline, and finally a toy spaceship in a boy's bedroom, the closest match to the previous image of the boy's model biplane. On the street level, a blue two-door car has replaced the horse-drawn carriage, and the girl who lived on the first floor, now an elderly landlady, lies in bed imagining, in another inset panel, that the "klink-tink of a bottle, smashing on the pavement below" is the sound of the previous panel's milkman (25). In the earlier page, fantasy life grapples with the future, and the present is comforting. In the contemporary setting, however, Ware's characters only meditate on the past. "Building Stories" contrasts the possibilities embedded within architectural space in the early twentieth century with the archival fantasies about the same space that provide comfort in late twentieth-century America.

Ware's interest in architecture is further developed in *Lost Buildings*, an "on-stage radio & picture collaboration" with National Public Radio host Ira Glass.[2] *Lost Buildings* is about Tim Samuelson, the Cultural Historian of the City of Chicago, his mentor, the photographer and urban preservationist Richard Nickel, and their love of Louis Sullivan's turn-of-the-century American architecture. The work was originally performed as a slideshow, combining Ware's drawings, Ira Glass's interview with Samuelson, and a musical soundtrack. It has since been published as a book and DVD set.[3] In this project, Ware's illustrated slides mimic both comics and architectural structure—like comics they proceed sequentially and occupy a small part of a large screen, and like architectural structure they construct patterns and structures on the screen, manipulating and concretizing space. Ware comments that one of the things that drew him to the project was its emphasis on Louis Sullivan's early modernist architecture, which "seemed to be frozen *life*."[4] As a form, comics rely on dialectical relationships between the fragment and the whole; each panel is both discreet and bound to its predecessors and antecedents.

Ware's phrase "frozen life" suggests an analogous fragmentation, a necessary episodic moment that can be observed in and of itself, yet also placed in a temporal continuum. As I will argue, Ware manipulates this relationship in complex ways that map other concepts—the relationship of the aesthetic to the vernacular, melancholy to pleasure, solitude to belonging, and history to the present—onto the formal structure of comics and the slideshow. In so doing, Ware's comics and slideshow emphasize the collective visions, hopes, and dreams embedded in fragmented everyday life. For Ware, architecture is analogous to comics. This is made clear in *The ACME Novelty Datebook*, where Ware quotes Goethe's claim that "architecture is frozen music" and then adds his own thought that "this is, I think, the aesthetic key to the development of cartoons as an art form."[5] Decaying and dilapidated architecture resonates as loss, as evidence of the irreversible passage of time, yet architectural ruins emanate past grandeur. Ware's comics, then, focus on ruins and the melancholy they elicit in an attempt to render the irreversible passage of time into an aesthetic object. In both "Building Stories" and *Lost Buildings*, melancholy is remade into the imagination of the ruin as whole through an engagement with the built environment.

Chris Ware's works are often populated with melancholic, despondent, shamed figures, unhappy and ill at ease with contemporary life. In his reading of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, Brad Prager argues that Ware

belongs to the modernist canon, alongside figures like Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, and Franz Kafka, precisely because he "is committed to depicting the unhappy armor of everyday life and telling the impossible story of individual origins in the age of mechanical reproduction."[6] Douglas Wolk claims that Ware's fixation on melancholy gives his comics "an emotional range of one note," in part because "more than any other contemporary cartoonist except perhaps Robert Crumb, Ware is at home in the gallery-art world, which prefers its manifestations of pleasure-in-looking ironized—or, at least, held at arm's length."[7] Unlike Prager, Wolk is impatient with Ware's focus on alienation and argues that the alienation prevalent in works like "Building Stories" evidences Ware's connection to the elite art world. Wolk's populism, though, misses out on the very possibilities of negative critique that Prager emphasizes. Prager locates in Ware's work a strong tendency to demystify industrial America as an artificial landscape, void of legitimate pleasures and fraught with psychic tension.

As the above example from "Building Stories" demonstrates, one of the major ways in which Ware stages this critique is by juxtaposing the past with the present, best exemplified by his recurring comparison of turn-of-the-century to contemporary Chicago. This emphasis on the past's relationship to the present bears a striking similarity to Benjamin's "Angel of History," a figure articulated in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" to allegorize the inability to know the past when our own position in the present is constantly in flux. Benjamin describes an angel "turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" yet is blown forward by the winds of "progress."[8] Ware's interest in nostalgia, childhood pleasures, and forgotten artifacts functions in a similar way. Ware's depictions of architecture are not curatorial in nature but, like Benjamin's "Angel of History," strive to make the past total. Architecture is a vehicle to convey both the affective possibilities of experiencing the past as a whole and the perpetual frustration of the inability to reconstruct modernity's ruins seamlessly. Ware's focus on modernity's ruins is an attempt, however impossible, to infuse everyday life with history.

In both "Building Stories" and *Lost Buildings*, architecture's value hinges upon its status as both fragment and whole, ruin and complete structure. In "On the Museum's Ruins," Douglas Crimp argues that postmodern art emerges from a critique of what Walter Benjamin termed "aura," the traces of originality, creative genius, and the artist's presence in a work of art. Crimp writes, "Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fantasy of a creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined."[9] Crimp's assertion that postmodernism creates works of art that are bound to a cultural network rather than to autonomous value elaborates upon Walter Benjamin's famous argument, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," that photography and film change the terms of art, rendering concepts of "aura" and "authenticity" obsolete in the face of reproducibility.[10]

This shift in aesthetics from aura to reproducibility has progressed unevenly, and this unevenness is especially evident in the ways in which Ware's work has been incorporated into museum discourse. For example, Daniel Raeburn's monograph focuses on Ware as artist, with much attention paid to original line drawings, one-of-a-kind models, and artistic process.[11] Gene Kannenberg Jr. also claims a kind of aesthetic aura for Ware's work when he writes that Ware's *Quimby the Mouse* "strip collections recall sonnet sequences, in that each page is a single unit and the aggregate whole is more concerned with communicating mood and feeling than in presenting narrative."[12] Kannenberg's emphasis on Ware's art as a whole object and an expression of a singular vision ignores the very conditions of both comics as a mechanically reproducible form and modern art. The above-mentioned two-page sequence in "Building Stories" embeds citation within its very structure by reproducing the same apartment building in different historical moments. For the characters in the present-day narrative as well as the reader, enjoyment emerges from the imagination, repetition, and citation of the past. Ware's comics, then, certainly employ devices often attributed to postmodernism. Ultimately, though, the comics' focus on the impossible feat of breathing life into history means that Ware is less interested in critiquing aura and authenticity than in charting aura as a historical phenomenon. Literary critic Jared Gardner argues that "the comic form is ideally suited to carrying on the vital work Benjamin called for generations earlier: making the present aware of its own 'archive,' the past that it is always in the process of becoming."[13] As Ware's "Building Stories" demonstrates, this archival work entails not just artistic production but the very types of borrowing, citation, and contextualization emblematic of postmodern art. Ware latches onto neglected and ruined artifacts from modernism that bring to light paradoxically novel yet derivative aesthetic pleasures. That is, Ware's work is best viewed as a catalog of modernism's ruins, an archive that illuminates neglected, lost, and forgotten possibilities, as evident in the historical imaginings in "Building Stories" and *Lost Buildings*.

Ware's aesthetic relationship to public space recalls another of Walter Benjamin's subjects, the modernist figure of the *flâneur*, an aesthete who finds enjoyment in wandering through and observing urban space. Ware's integration of a modernist aesthetic into a postmodern refashioning of traditional artistic categories creates a space for the reorientation of art toward emerging media and cultural formations. In his discussion of modernism and postmodernism, art historian T. J. Clark remarks that, in order to respond to rather than mimic our visual age, contemporary art must strike at "the founding assumption, the true structure of dream-visualization."[14] As Clark points out, one of these founding assumptions is the belief that reality itself is now entirely composed of images. One of the implications of this belief is that the world itself is entirely constructed and that in this age of new media and digitization, we are at the end of history.[15] At first glance, comics seem to be a part of this postmodern image-world, owing to its two dominant poles of "continuity"-obsessed superhero material and independent, art comics that tend to be autobiographical in nature. The comics medium, in both cases, is self-contained and self-referential. In contrast, Ware's graphic narratives challenge the apparent seamlessness of the form by focusing on the

aesthetics of melancholy and fragmentation, exposing the contingency and impermanence of modern America. In its present form, "Building Stories" is itself a fragmented work, published in serial installments of *The ACME Novelty Library* and other periodicals. Ware thrives on the incomplete yet continually strives toward some totality. In so doing, his work locates renewed possibilities for pleasure, thought, and work from within history rather than outside of it.

Ware's ongoing "Building Stories," especially the segment published in *The ACME Novelty Library* 18, represents everyday life in the late twentieth century as inherently and irredeemably fragmented. While the apartment building is "sadly ignorant of the rejuvenating powers of renovation (or even restoration)," the female protagonist is painfully self-conscious: "'*Broken*' simply isn't a strong enough word for what someone can do to your heart . . . it's more like 'annihilated' or 'punched out' . . . but no word captures the undeniable, obliterated emptiness that having a 'broken heart' feels like . . . it's as if I had a hole in me that I desperately wanted to fill, to turn myself inside out like a dirty shirt thrown on the floor, to pull myself backwards through the sleeve . . . *anything* . . . just to fill the void" (9, 43). The building's lack of awareness and the protagonist's "void" both result in ruination, and Ware's depiction of the protagonist as ontologically incomplete implies that ruination is due less to a lack of maintenance than to the mere and inevitable passage of time. The final two-page spread in *The ACME Novelty Library* 18 returns to the building, presenting first its façade and then, on the facing page, its interior rooms with the façade removed (51–52). Unlike the female protagonist, the building is not constituted as a "void" here but as a repository of secrets, depth, and belonging. The narrative voice asks, "*Who hasn't tried* when passing a building, or a home, at night to peer past half-closed shades and blinds hoping to catch a glimpse into the private lives of its inhabitants?" (51). This invoked curiosity is overlaid with the allure of "unspeakable secrets." The building itself, then, is poised to fill the protagonist's own "void."

Ware's "Building Stories" gestures to a possible way out of melancholy through the shared experience of living in the built environment and its potential to render the private sphere public. Nathalie op de Beeck remarks that Ware's "Building Stories" "[urges] an illuminated awareness of looking, thinking, experiencing, and giving enhanced attention to the objects we produce and consume."[16] This "illuminated awareness" remains painfully unrealized by the protagonist in the existing "Building Stories," and the sense of melancholy, of internalized loss, is literalized by the female protagonist's prosthetic leg.[17] She remains unable to experience her building as a stabilizing and grounding element in her seemingly empty life, yet Ware's uses of architecture contain a promise of a richer life. Similarly, the collaborative slideshow project *Lost Buildings* makes clear that Ware's goal is not simply to dramatize the emergence of a more engaged experience of everyday life within the narrative frame, but also to realize that experience in the reader or viewer. If Ware's use of architecture is meant to "halt the flow of narrative time," as Thomas Bredehoft argues, then it does so to infuse narrative with history, with context that destroys the narrative's autonomy and forges connections to the experience of the viewer.[18] While "Building Stories" gestures to an unrealized connection between subjects and history, mediated by the built en-

vironment, *Lost Buildings* offers a case study of what a richer lived experience might entail.

This richer lived experience emerges, in part, from the formal complexities of the slideshow. The images in *Lost Buildings* sometimes illustrate Glass and Samuelson's remarks and sometimes depart from the audio to depict a separate scene. In the slideshow's audio track, Samuelson narrates his childhood love of Louis Sullivan's architecture, his involvement with Richard Nickel's attempts to preserve Sullivan buildings and decorations, and Nickel's tragic death during a collapse inside of the Chicago Stock Exchange Building's wreckage. Nickel's death parallels the loss of Sullivan's architecture; both the photographer/urban preservationist and the architecture he died preserving are represented by illustrations drawn from Nickel's photographs. This trace of the real, mediated through Ware's meticulous, straight-edged drawings, renders Nickel's project and the architecture as both real and imaginary, objective and subjective.

In his narration, Ira Glass discusses the melancholic predicament of Nickel's and Samuelson's love of Sullivan's once underappreciated and now celebrated architecture: "If you love something the world doesn't put any value on, you're pretty much setting yourself up for a life full of heartbreak. One building after another that Tim loved, buildings where he had rooted around with Richard, they're all gone."[19] Irrecoverable loss is a theme in many highly acclaimed graphic novels, most notably Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. As Hillary Chute argues, comics lend themselves to the treatment of trauma, loss, and melancholy because they tend to "refuse to show [trauma] through the lens of unspeakability or invisibility, instead registering its difficulty through inventive (and various) textual practice."[20] Comics aim to work through traumatic loss, and *Lost Buildings* does this by bringing the very "lost buildings" referred to in its title back into temporary existence. During the slideshow, which was first shown during live performances of the *This American Life* radio show in large theaters, the audience experiences the presence of buildings now absent from contemporary Chicago. The DVD's opening sequence makes a point of this original context. On a black screen, simple white letters read: "This was designed as a slideshow, not a movie. / It was originally presented on a darkened stage. The audio portion was read and mixed with music and quotes, live, in dim light, downstage left. The slides were advanced manually. / Pictures of buildings were tall as buildings. Even the smallest images were pretty big—three feet high. That's one meter, if you're watching this in Europe. / There are sections where the screen goes black. During those sections, the audience watched the audio be mixed, in the low light."[21] As the narrator and mixer, Ira Glass, along with the slide projectionist, lends a sense of immediacy and presence to the slideshow. It is notable here that the technologies used—audio mixing and slide projection—do not need to be operated in person. As on the DVD, they can easily be recorded and played in sync without on-stage mixing. The insistence on the slideshow's original context on the DVD as well as the choice to perform the voiceover narration live points to *Lost Buildings*' utopian promise: history can be incorporated into lived experience. This promise, though, can never be fully realized. The DVD will never truly replicate the experience of the live slideshow, just as the image of a building projected on a

giant screen can never match the experience of walking around and through the building itself. As experienced on DVD, the slideshow calls attention to itself as a ruin of an earlier performance, subject to the same erosion of presence and experience as Sullivan's architecture.

Lost Buildings is, of course, a departure from Ware's typical medium of choice. The slideshow offers possibilities that are, significantly, amplifications of the intimacy, history, and readerly participation entailed in the comics form. In the late twentieth century, as curator Darsie Alexander argues, the slideshow became a way for artists such as Nan Goldin and Jack Smith to "structure their works around issues of subjectivity that often involved emotional, psychological, or social dilemmas."[22] Slide projection carries with it associations of family and community belonging, such as the vacation slideshow shown by a family to friends and relatives. *Lost Buildings* redirects these intimate and nostalgic connotations to the built environment. Instead of feeling affection for, and warm recollections of, vacations and family belonging, the audience engages with architecture as a sentimental object. Furthermore, the technology of slide projection seems obsolete in the twenty-first century, adding to the nostalgia of the project. By using this older form, and even more so by insisting on its priority even in the digital recording of the analog slideshow, *Lost Buildings* makes the obsolete proximate and reanimates the ruin.

In *Lost Buildings*, Ware manipulates the screen in a similar fashion to the way he structures a comics page.[23] As Ware states on the DVD's commentary track, he used "corners of the screen to stand for certain parts of the story [. . .] visually, I could put those similar parts of the story in the same part of the screen so that there could be some sort of visual connection."[24] The slideshow itself, as a medium, offers a parallel to comics in that Ware has a set frame, like a blank page or even a page with a more conventional grid of panels. Ware also remarks on the DVD commentary track that the slideshow images were frustrating because they would not be preserved in print: "Some of these drawings, especially the larger ones, would only be up on screen for a couple of seconds or so. And I've never had that feeling before, thinking, oh, I'm spending all of this time on a drawing, and it's just going to end up vanishing after a second and a half."[25] The quickly vanishing images parallel the "lost buildings" themselves, evoking both immediate experience and its ephemerality. The slideshow's pacing is analogous to the temporality of comics themselves, which, according to Art Spiegelman, are "a parade of past moments always presenting a present that is past."[26] *Lost Buildings*, then, expands upon a formal characteristic of comics by rendering the image in time as well as space.

Louis Sullivan himself described his work as aesthetic because of its roots in childhood experience. In his 1892 essay "Ornament in Architecture," Sullivan remarks that in order to engage in artistic work, to create organic forms, one must "turn again to Nature, and hearkening to her melodious voice, learn, as children learn, the accent of its rhythmic cadences."[27] *Lost Buildings* also links organic form to childhood, using nostalgia and youthful whimsy to dramatize a sentimental connection to architecture. The slideshow begins with Tim Samuelson's recollection of daydreaming in his elementary school classroom. As the teacher writes on the chalkboard, Samuelson imagines what

the room must have looked like earlier in the century, "when the woodwork was still [pristine], instead of being really dark brown with all of this accumulated shellac that had turned color over the years, when it was a beautiful golden oak color and the brown wainscoting and the light fixtures with big glass globes hanging from the ceiling."[28] Ware's slides first depict the young Samuelson, slouched at his desk, in small panels on the bottom right of the screen, and then show an enlarged drawing of the classroom, with inset panels representing Samuelson's imagined original wood, moldings, and lighting. Samuelson then mentions that his childhood daydream even extended to the wall clock, remarking that he "wanted to get rid of the electric clocks and put the wind-up school clocks [back up. . . . I liked] the whole idea of having a clock that you could wind and hear the passage of time go tick tock, tick tock, tick tock."[29] With this statement, Ware presents a series of slides in the same panel on the screen, depicting a clock being wound and ticking, which slowly appears and reappears in a descending diagonal down the screen. For Samuelson, as for Ware, history is present through objects, and the passage of time entails a regretful decline in the value ascribed to those objects. Comics and the slideshow allow for their reanimation.

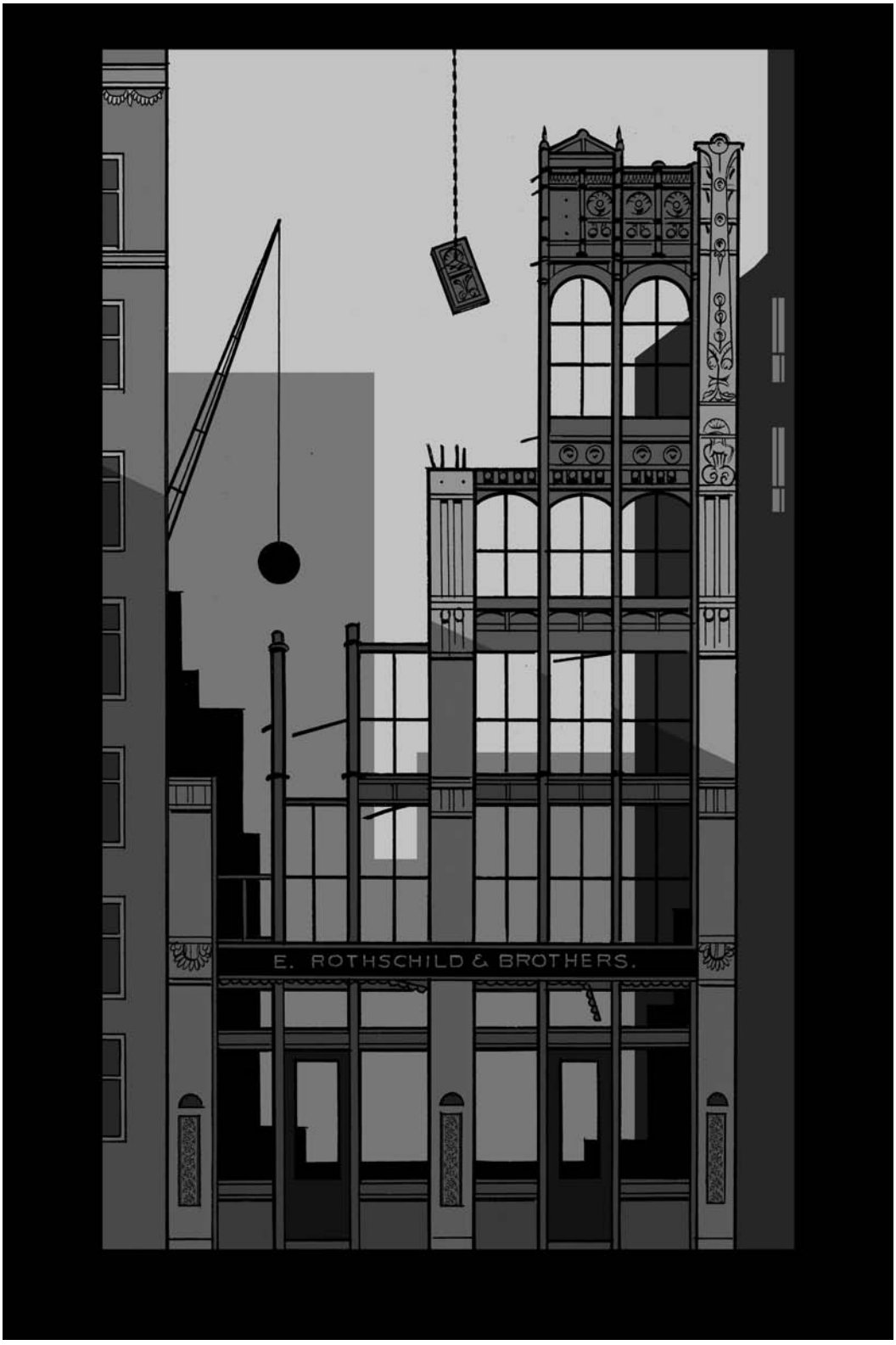
Ware's slideshow further emphasizes Samuelson's dreamlike approach to architecture when young Samuelson goes to see a Mr. Magoo film in Sullivan's Garrick Theatre, just prior to its demolition. In this sequence, the slideshow departs from the audio track. Ware's cursive script narrates Tim Samuelson's thoughts: "I remember the first time I got to see the Theatre. / I told my mother I wanted to see a movie showing there . . . / . . . some dumb kid's cartoon . . . / . . . but what I *really* wanted to see was the building. / I spent the whole time looking up at the arches, at the ornament, / illuminated by the flickering light of the film. / It was wonderful."[30] As these cursive words appear on the screen, connoting the same intimacy as they do in "Building Stories," panels depict the young Samuelson going to and eventually sitting in the theater. The slideshow then illuminates sections of the Garrick Theatre's decorative ceiling, while underneath these images is a lower tier of panels that shows the young Samuelson walking along a busy city street, looking up at the buildings. The other pedestrians are in black outline, and Samuelson is in full color. Samuelson is clearly privileged in these illustrations as an isolated individual who is able to make the quotidian experiences of sitting in a movie theater and walking down a city street into moments of aesthetic pleasure.

The disjuncture and solitude emphasized throughout the theater sequence by the bottom panels follows not only from Samuelson's and Ware's idea of melancholic aestheticism but also from Sullivan's own social vision. As architectural historian William Jordy remarks, Sullivan thought in both hyperindividualist and collectivist terms, with no middle connections between the two: "[Sullivan's] thinking jumped from an idealization of the creative self to an idealized abstraction of society. The void in Sullivan's reasoning reflected both his personal solitude and a persistent lack in American culture. There was no sense of community in between [. . .] ornamentation on the one hand (the mark of the individual genius); the effect of the whole on the other (the sign of collective afflatus); something missing in between."[31] *Lost Buildings*, though, offers a resolution to this dichotomy. By involving the audience in

the appreciation of ruined architecture, the building itself becomes an act of imagination and contemplation. While occupants of an actual Sullivan building might take it for granted in the rush of their everyday lives, those who never occupied one but imagine what one would be like bridge the gap between individual autonomy and collective belonging. Together, through the theatrical presentation of the slideshow, the audience experiences that which cannot be experienced in solitude but only as a member of a crowd: architecture in public space. The attempt to produce social belonging through engagement with aesthetic objects is a crucial component of Ware's work, and one that adds warmth to what might otherwise seem to be a cold, precise drawing style that privileges form over emotion.

Ware rearticulates Samuelson's love of Sullivan's architecture in the slideshow's structure. At one point, when Samuelson, as a young boy, makes his way into Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's office to beg him not to replace Sullivan's Federal Building, Ware's slideshow mimics a cartoon film. This shift, from largely individual slides following the narration and a mellow, contemplative soundtrack, to a jazzy film narrative ironically dramatizes Ware's own sense that comics should be distinct from film, just as Louis Sullivan's organic, detailed buildings are distinct from Mies van der Rohe's formalist style. Sullivan's buildings connote warmth, intimacy, and depth, while Mies van der Rohe's buildings seem by contrast cold, distant, and shallow. To dramatize this aesthetic difference, the slideshow slips into the less-than-serious mode of a Mr. Magoo cartoon, referencing the earlier moment in the slideshow when Samuelson prefers to look at the ornate ceiling of Sullivan's Garrick Theatre than watch the "dumb kid's cartoon" projected on the screen.[32] As Chip Kidd reports, "Angered by the notion that comics are closely related to film, Ware argues that film is a 'passive medium' requiring primarily from its audience the ability to sit and stare. Comics at their best engage the viewer in a different manner, allowing readers to help control the pacing either by taking in a page at once, or by reading panel by panel."[33] Ware's manipulation of the slideshow's pacing seems to be another expression of this resistance to readerly passivity. By embedding within the slideshow a filmic sequence, Ware strives to differentiate the slideshow from film. The Mies van der Rohe sequence, with its formal departure and upbeat soundtrack, opposes the more serious discussion of Sullivan's architecture. This portion of the slideshow points to a radical break between the ornate early modernism of Sullivan and the institutional, formalist modernism of Mies van der Rohe. Furthermore, Mies van der Rohe's architecture is cast as a style that permeates every facet of modern life, especially with the slide that notes: "Ironically, Tim now *lives* in a Mies van der Rohe building."[34]

In the filmic sequence, young Samuelson is given a hearing with Mies van der Rohe, who, with his iconic eyeglasses, is drawn as Mr. Magoo, making literal his supposed inability to see the beauty of the Sullivan building he was preparing to replace. After pleading for the Sullivan building, Samuelson, in a performed German accent, ventriloquizes Mies van der Rohe's response: "Someday I hope you look at the new building and see many of the qualities you admired in the old."[35] Instead, Samuelson privileges vanished traits over new structures. As Ira Glass comments during the slideshow, "Whenever Tim walks in Chicago, he sees not just the buildings that are there; he sees the


E. ROTHSCHILD & BROTHERS.

buildings that used to be there. The whole skyline is haunted for him." Samuelson's "haunted" city also illuminates a more complex aesthetic statement about the necessity to view the built environment as a historical entity. Paralleling the dialectical relation in comics between the fragment and the whole, the panel and the page, the page and the text, *Lost Buildings* stages a dialectical relationship between lived experience and history, individuality and the built environment.

Lost Buildings builds an even more subtle association between architecture and comics in its use of insets. In one slide, after Samuelson discusses Nickel's death, we see a large drawing of the Federal Building that replaced Sullivan's Chicago Stock Exchange Building. Ware illustrates the building, like many of the other large slides of architecture, head-on, exhibiting the homogenous panels of windows so emblematic of both the modern skyscraper and the conventional comics grid. These regimented panels, however, are broken up by an inset panel, a circle which at other moments in the slideshow is a wrecking ball and a kind of peephole into childhood. This circular inset features, first, rubble, then a piece of stair stringer, and, finally, a hardhat atop a table. These images are repeated from an earlier moment in the slideshow about Richard Nickel's death. The inset circle, then, interrupts the modern building's homogenous structure and serves as a space for memory and remembrance, while also playing with the conventional comics grid. Haunted by the new building, Samuelson looks forward to the day when it too will be demolished to make way for something different.

If Mies van der Rohe's architecture is impersonal, then Sullivan's buildings are remarkable because of their ability to produce feelings of warmth and intimacy. The ornamentation of Sullivan's buildings is central to Samuelson's feelings about them. Architectural critic Mark Wigley argues that Sullivan's notion of organic form relies on the intertwining of ornament and structure: "Sullivan's call for a removal of ornament is not a call for the eradication of ornament. On the contrary, it is an attempt to rationalize the building precisely to better clothe it with ornamentation that is more appropriate and more carefully produced [. . .] despite the 'fashion' to consider ornament as something that can be either added or removed from a building, ornament can never be simply separated from the structure it clothes."[36] Ornament, then, is not an additive to Sullivan's buildings but an integral part of the architecture. *Lost Buildings* mourns the loss of these total structures, despite the fact that there are a number of Sullivan buildings that have been preserved in Chicago. The ruination of Sullivan's buildings, though, provides an occasion for a more intense appreciation of ornament not in and of itself but as a synecdoche for these larger yet lost structures. Nickel's photographs and Ware's drawings document the erosion of the connection between ornament and structure, and they demand that the viewer imagine the whole from the fragment. One of Ware's large building images depicts the demolition of Sullivan's Rothschild Building (see fig. 8.1). In that image, we see a crane lowering a cast-iron panel. Decorative fragments such as this are pictured throughout the slideshow; they are key to Sullivan's aesthetic and are often the only surviving artifacts of Sullivan's buildings. These fragments emanate the larger architectural forms to which they once belonged, and the slideshow—a fusion of Ware's large, projected images and Glass's interpretation of Samuelson's aes-

Fig. 8.1. A crane lowers a cast-iron panel from the ruins of Louis Sullivan's Rothschild Building in *Lost Buildings*. *Lost Buildings*, produced and performed by Ira Glass, Tim Samuelson, and Chris Ware, DVD, *This American Life*, WBEZ Chicago, 2004.

thetic into a sympathetic, whimsical, and admirable worldview—asks the audience to imagine the built environment as historical and the ruin as a whole. These two processes rely on one another. Through imagining history less as a catalog of artifacts or relics but as a lived experience, a rich social fabric, one reconstitutes ruins as total objects. This revival of the ruin as a whole object is less a process of aesthetic isolation than contextualization. The ruin is rendered whole by imagining it in relation to and amidst historical life. Like the impossible archival mission of Benjamin's "Angel of History," though, we can never fully reconstitute the whole from the ruin. *Lost Buildings* embraces a necessarily incomplete yet never-ending desire to experience the past from the unstable vantage point of the present.

In "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin remarks that one of the ways in which we imagine possible futures is through recognizing the inevitable ruination of the present. His beloved Parisian Arcades, he writes, allow us to "begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled."[37] The final slide of *Lost Buildings* depicts the stark, steel and glass office building on the site of Sullivan's Chicago Stock Exchange in ruins, with a wrecking ball in the midst of its broken middle. In that wrecking ball's black interior, Ware writes "The End," gesturing to the inevitable ruination of the present. Thinking of these modern buildings as also in ruins points to the ways in which the qualities of our own lives, our lived experiences—which for Ware are saturated with melancholy, unfulfilled longing, and isolation—are themselves constructed and historical. One of the problems presented by our contemporary moment is, as Fredric Jameson remarks, "one of representation, also one of representability: we know that we are caught within these more complex global networks, because we palpably suffer the prolongations of corporate space everywhere in our daily lives. Yet we have no way of thinking about them, of modeling them, however abstractly, in our mind's eye."[38] What Chris Ware's work on and about architecture shows us is that this "modeling" of the present can only occur in relation to the past. By imagining the past and asking us to experience it in our daily lives, Ware's work contains a utopian wish that images and history can enrich everyday life. Chris Ware's work documents the melancholy realization that ruin is inevitable, yet finds in those ruins a renewed possibility for aesthetic experience.

Notes

1. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 18 (Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2007), 23, 25. All further references to this text will be indicated in parentheses.

2. *Lost Buildings*, prod. and perf. Ira Glass, Tim Samuelson, and Chris Ware. DVD and book. WBEZ Chicago, 2004.

3. I saw *Lost Buildings* performed live as part of *This American Life*'s "Lost in America" tour in Boston, May 2003. According to the DVD booklet, the slideshow "was originally commissioned by UCLA Live's spoken word series at Royce Hall in Los Angeles" and was performed at a handful of venues in 2003 and 2004. The *Lost Buildings* DVD was published by *This American Life*, the Chicago Public Radio show hosted by Ira Glass, and it is available through *This American Life*'s Web site: http://www.thisamericanlife.org. Ira Glass and Chris Ware have more recently collaborated on animated segments for the *This American Life* television program on Showtime.

4. Chris Ware, "Introduction," *Lost Buildings*, n.p.

5. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Datebook* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003), 190.

6. Brad Prager, "Modernism and the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *International Journal of Comic Art* 5.1 (2003): 211–12.

7. Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2007), 347, 351. For an analysis of Ware's ambivalence about his place in the art world, see Katherine Roeder's essay in this volume.

8. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257–58.

9. Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," *October* 13 (1980): 56.

10. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in his *Illuminations*, 220–22.

11. Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 44–53.

12. Gene Kannenberg Jr., "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image, and Visual Narrative Strategies," in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 178.

13. Jared Gardner, "Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 803.

14. T. J. Clark, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam," *October* 100 (2002): 173.

15. For the "end of history" thesis, see Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992).

16. Nathalie op de Beeck, "Found Objects (Jem Cohen, Ben Katchor, Walter Benjamin)," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 827.

17. For a further analysis of the narrator's disability in "Building Stories," see Margaret Fink Berman's essay in this volume.

18. Thomas Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 885.

19. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *Lost Buildings* are from text on screen during the slideshow or its accompanying audio track. The *Lost Buildings* DVD contains both a Quicktime version of the slideshow, which more accurately reflects the size of the screen during live performances, and a movie version tailored to fit a television screen.

20. Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123 (2008): 459.

21. *Lost Buildings*.

22. Darsie Alexander, "Slideshow," in *Slideshow: Projected Images in Contemporary Art*, ed. Darsie Alexander (University Park: Baltimore Museum of Art/Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 27.

23. The way that Ware uses the screen in *Lost Buildings* seems analogous to Thierry Groensteen's concept of "arthology," which describes the relations in comics between each individual panel and the work's structure as a whole. See Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 103–58.

24. *Lost Buildings* DVD Commentary.

25. Ibid.

26. Art Spiegelman, "An Afterword," in his *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), n.p.

27. Louis Sullivan, "Ornament in Architecture (1892)," in *Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers*, ed. Robert Twombly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 84.

28. *Lost Buildings*.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. William Jordy, "The Tall Buildings," in *Louis Sullivan: The Function of Ornament*, ed. Wim de Wit (New York: Chicago Historical Society/Saint Louis Art Museum/Norton, 1986), 149.

32. *Lost Buildings*.

33. Chip Kidd, "Please Don't Hate Him," *Print* 51.3 (1997): 46, 49.

34. *Lost Buildings*.

35. Ibid.

36. Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), 62–63.

37. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), 162.

38. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 127.

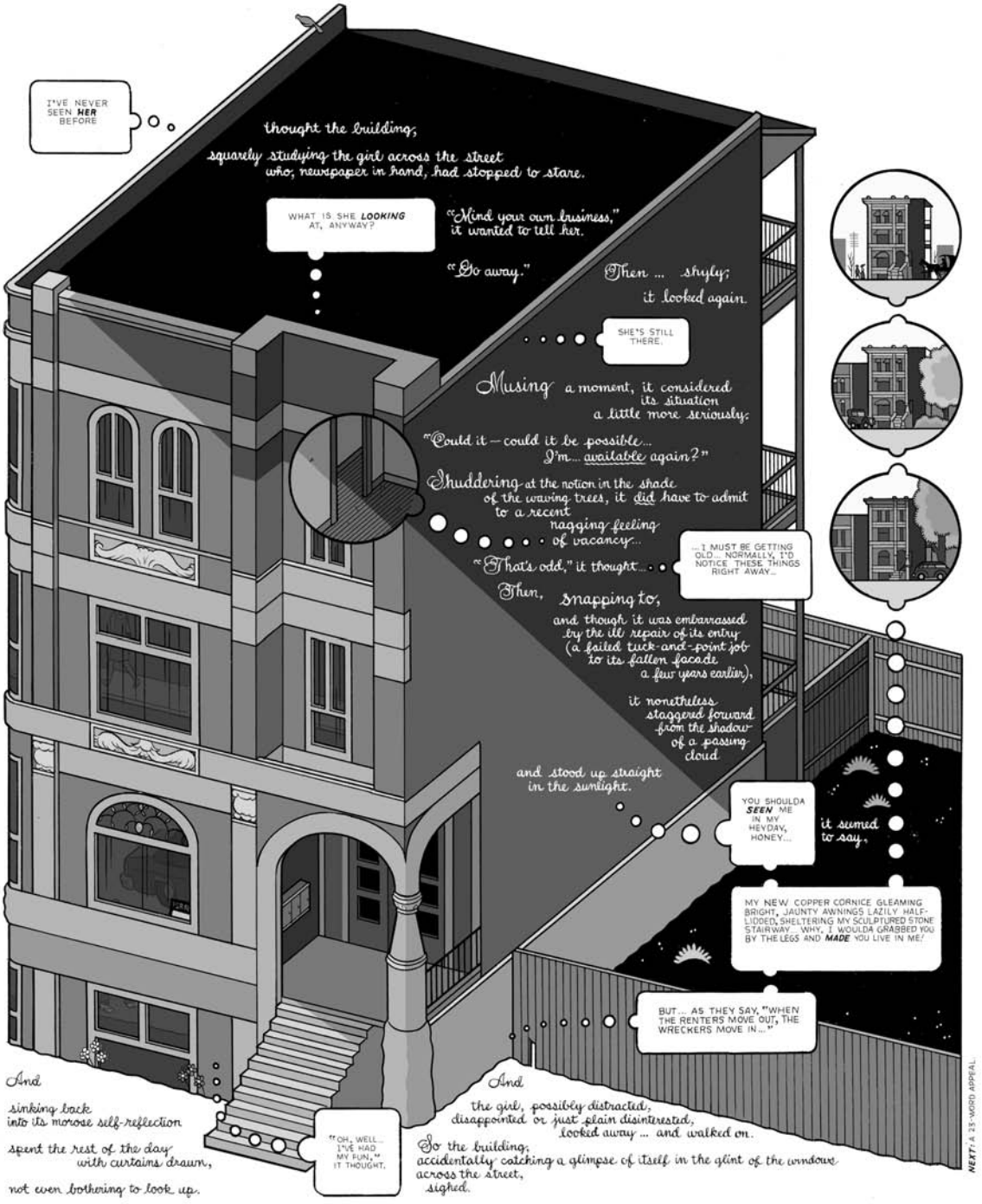
Chris Ware's "Building Stories," Gentrification, and the Lives of/in Houses

MATT GODBEY

In part 1 of Chris Ware's serialized comic strip, "Building Stories," readers are introduced to a three-story row house in Chicago's Humboldt Park. Ware represents the building as a character that struggles to interpret the motives of a woman who, newspaper in hand, studies it from across the street (see fig. 9.1). Although we can't see the woman directly (only her torso and legs are reflected in one of the building's windows), and despite the fact that we don't know why she's scrutinizing the building, the mere fact of her presence sends the building spiraling through a welter of emotions. Initially uneasy—"'Mind your own business [. . .] Go away,'" it silently urges the woman—the building changes its tone as it "admit[s] to a recent nagging feeling of vacancy" and realizes that the woman's presence can mean only one thing: it is "*available* again." Now, fully alert, the knowledge that one of its apartments is indeed vacant and that the woman must be considering renting it enlivens the building and it tries its best to woo her by "stagger[ing] forward from the shadow of a passing cloud and stand[ing] up straight in the sunlight." In the end, though, the woman walks on, seemingly rejecting the building, and it "sink[s . . .] back into its morose self-reflection [. . .] spend[ing] the rest of the day with curtains drawn, not even bothering to look up."

Culled from an ongoing series which Ware has published intermittently since 2002, "Building Stories'" nearly seven-month run in the *New York Times Magazine* recounts a day (September 23, 2000, specifically) in the life of the building and its four inhabitants: the young, single woman from the opening panel, who eventually does rent the vacant room, an unhappy couple on the floor below, and an elderly landlady. Although much of "Building Stories" focuses on the lives of these inhabitants, Ware's personification of the building suggests that he is just as interested in its life as he is the actions of his characters. Indeed, parts 2 and 3, which feature a nearly identical image of the building and are wholly devoted to its interior monologue and to establishing its history in the neighborhood, cement the building's characterization as an omniscient presence whose story frames and guides readers through the strip.

As the inaugural installment of the *New York Times Magazine*'s "Funny Pages," "Building Stories" provided Ware with what is almost certainly his largest exposure to a mainstream reading audience to date. Given this exposure, and given the high-profile nature of the strip's selection as the first of


I'VE NEVER SEEN HER BEFORE
thought the building;
squarely studying the girl across the street
who, newspaper in hand, had stopped to stare.
WHAT IS SHE LOOKING AT, ANYWAY?
"Mind your own business," it wanted to tell her.
"Go away."
Then ... shyly;
it looked again.
SHE'S STILL THERE.
Musing a moment, it considered its situation a little more seriously:
"Could it — could it be possible... I'm... available again?"
Shuddering at the notion in the shade of the waving trees, it did have to admit to a recent nagging feeling of vacancy...
"That's odd," it thought...
...I MUST BE GETTING OLD... NORMALLY, I'D NOTICE THESE THINGS RIGHT AWAY...
Then, snapping to;
and though it was embarrassed by the ill repair of its entry (a failed tuck-and-point job to its fallen facade a few years earlier),
it nonetheless staggered forward from the shadow of a passing cloud
and stood up straight in the sunlight.
YOU SHOULDA SEEN ME IN MY HEYDAY, HONEY...
it seemed to say.
MY NEW COPPER CORNICE GLEAMING BRIGHT, JAUNTY AWNINGS LAZILY HALF-LIDDED, SHELTERING MY SCULPTURED STONE STAIRWAY... WHY, I WOULDA GRABBED YOU BY THE LEGS AND MADE YOU LIVE IN ME!
BUT... AS THEY SAY, "WHEN THE RENTERS MOVE OUT, THE WRECKERS MOVE IN..."
And
sinking back into its morose self-reflection
spent the rest of the day with curtains drawn,
not even bothering to look up.
"OH, WELL... I'VE HAD MY FUN," IT THOUGHT.
And
the girl, possibly distracted, disappointed or just plain disinterested, looked away ... and walked on.
So the building, accidentally catching a glimpse of itself in the glint of the window across the street, sighed.
NEXT: A 23-WORD APPEAL

the magazine's ongoing series of graphic fiction, Ware's rather idiosyncratic decision to focus on the life of a building seems curious at best. Further, it begs the question why he would foreground the building's story over the lives of the various characters that also inhabit the strip. To understand why Ware goes to such lengths to bring to life a character as seemingly mundane and static as a three-story apartment building, it is necessary to consider Ware's keen interest in the experiential power of architectural space and the building's place in the context of ongoing debates about Chicago's gentrification.

A process by which an influx of affluent, mostly white homeowners and renters move into an economically depressed area, gentrification is the result of a depressed housing market caused by postwar white flight, the growth of the suburbs, and inner-city disinvestment.[1] Since the late 1960s, as new residents began to realize that urban living provided them with the opportunity for affordable housing, they have transformed districts by demolishing or completely renovating decaying inner-city neighborhoods. Historic buildings play a complex role in this process as they have become the primary vehicle by which gentrification takes place as well as a focal point for critics and protesters who see the maintenance of unrenovated housing stock as integral to resisting a process that threatens to redefine American cities along ever more rigid economic lines.

Ware's attention to the inner life of the row house can be read as a tribute to aging buildings whose presence in U.S. cities is rapidly diminishing. Moreover, Ware seeks to inculcate in his readers an appreciation for historic buildings, a position he advances in his writings on architecture and buildings. Throughout his career, Ware has linked his work as a cartoonist to the art of architecture and, in doing so, expressed a passion for sites that are no longer valued in contemporary urban economies.[2] In this context, we can understand the intimate portrayal of the house in "Building Stories" as an implicit plea against the demolition of historic buildings. By humanizing structures typically viewed as a lifeless assemblage of brick, steel, and wood, Ware seems to be suggesting that rather than taking such a building for granted, ignoring the role it has played in the life of the neighborhood, we should instead recognize its history and celebrate its role in the urban environment.[3]

More than simply a paean to historic buildings, though, "Building Stories" manifests Ware's belief that close attention to the affective and intangible aspects of buildings, the psychic and emotional lives they contain, offers a corrective to twenty-first-century American cities and the constant push for progress at any cost. Specifically, Ware praises historic buildings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for their beautiful ornamentation and the loving attention to detail that went into their design and construction. Perhaps nowhere is Ware's passion for historic buildings more evident than in his devotion to the buildings of Louis Sullivan. An early mentor to Frank Lloyd Wright, and considered by many to be the father of modernism and modern architecture, Sullivan designed buildings adorned with ornate, intricate façades that have long inspired Ware.[4] Writing in the introduction to *Lost Buildings*, a DVD produced by *This American Life* that documents efforts to preserve Sullivan's surviving buildings in Chicago, Ware says he shares an artistic sensibility with Sullivan and particularly appreciates his use of ornamentation to express the public nature of architecture. Lauding Sullivan's

Fig. 9.1. Ware's text in this scene both humanizes the building and comments on the action taking place around it. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 1," *New York Times Magazine,* September 18, 2005, 41.

buildings as important works of art, Ware argues that these buildings, more than most places in which people live and work, "seemed to be frozen life—the very force and shape of ideas, will, and love itself." Ware continues by noting that Sullivan's "'ornament,' sometimes wrongly dismissed as secondary to the structure, was always inextricably important to every building he designed, growing out of the fundamental idea and shape of each commission, and, in his own words, ideally admitting to the 'reality and pathos of man's follies.'"[5] By contrast, he finds contemporary architecture to be "ghastly and antiseptic," arguing that "modern buildings [. . .] mock people. They don't elevate them or inspire them—they just contain them," and suggests that Sullivan's sensibility is sorely missed in contemporary urban landscapes.[6]

Ware's connection to the lives of historic buildings underscores and begins to explain the strip's focus. Throughout its seven-month run, Ware creates a fully developed character with a long, rich history in the neighborhood. In part 1, for instance, a series of images indicates the building's age. Thus, in this opening panel, three small insets on the right side, depicting images of the building with different vehicles in front—a horse and carriage, a Model T Ford, and a contemporary car—evoke the building's years of service to residents in the neighborhood. Part 2 further emphasizes this service when it highlights the fact that the classified ad used to advertise vacant rooms was "composed more than half a century ago and preserved unaltered (minus minor monetary updates) on a limp, well-thumbed index card [. . . and] has shar[ed] space with decades of war, recession and various presidential administrations." Part 3, in turn, brings the building's history up to date by noting that the aforementioned woman has, in fact, rented the vacant apartment, joining the generations of renters who have sought shelter in its walls, and depicting a schematic of the building that recounts in exacting detail everything it has witnessed throughout its life. By eschewing a conventionally linear narrative and combining the past, present, and future in a single frame, Ware represents the life of the building as a coherent whole, humanizing an otherwise insentient object and imbuing it with affective value.[7]

Ware's use of comics and of comics' conventions to personify and amplify the life of an aging apartment building can be read as a critique of gentrification and the entire system of contemporary urban renewal that strips such sites of their artistic and historical value.[8] "Building Stories" condemns the erasure of much of the physical and cultural history of U.S. cities in the name of progress, reconsidering buildings' status as more than mere commodities in a neoliberal urban economy that is increasingly defined by the tenets of privatization and economic homogenization.[9] When Ware humanizes the building, emphasizing its service to the neighborhood, he minimizes the factor that most defines the lives of buildings in contemporary U.S. cities: their status as commodities in the urban real-estate market. This reversal emphasizes the row house's human characteristics and asks us to see it not as an object but as a person with a history, and to relate to it on a level that transcends typical object relations. Ware thus offers a new perspective on the dwellings where we live and, more importantly, shows their importance in preserving the social and public life of our cities. More specifically, "Building Stories" seems to suggest that old buildings such as the one whose life he documents occupy a special place in urban economies, serving as repositories

of the promise of cities to attract and house populations often marginalized by the mainstream, majority culture.

The implications of this stance are made clear when we consider that the building's location in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Humboldt Park positions it as a bulwark against this process and, by extension, the economic homogenization of public life. According to criminal justice professor Jeff Ferrell, as gentrifiers move into inner-city neighborhoods they, along with local governments and developers, create "new cultural spaces [that] redesign city life along new lines of spatial exclusion, and [. . .] organize new forms of control against those deemed foreign to these spaces."[10] Ferrell suggests that gentrification creates exclusive, affluent neighborhoods and communities through a variety of private forces (neighborhood boards, historic preservations statutes, corporations, etc). As a result, inner-city neighborhoods are no longer defined by their ability to serve basic needs, such as shelter, food, and community, but rather they become "urban growth machines" that are designed to provide profitable returns on the investments of the homeowners, businesses, realtors, and private developers who invest heavily in an area's redevelopment.[11]

Ware overtly addresses the issue of gentrification in part 26 when Tom, an African American character, who only appears once in the strip, sarcastically thanks the young white woman from the opening panel for making Humboldt Park "safe" for North Siders. Tom's comment alludes to the influx of wealthy, typically white residents to Chicago's historically black South Side neighborhoods. Moreover, his remark refers to the fact that gentrification targets sections of the city that have been coded as black or Latino and poor, rendering them "suddenly valuable [. . . and] perversely profitable."[12] Humboldt Park, where "Building Stories" is set, is an instructive example of this process. In postwar Chicago, the neighborhood began to attract larger numbers of Puerto Rican families who, though marginalized within the city as a whole, "managed to cultivate a strong sense of community built around a proud Puerto Rican identity."[13] Since the mid 1990s, however, it has been transformed by middle-class homeowners and the construction of luxury apartments and upscale developments.[14] Gradually, young, white, middle- to upper-middle-class homeowners and families have moved into the area, raising property values and displacing many Puerto Rican families. As a result of these changes, a rift has formed between the Puerto Rican community and the new residents. During the early 1990s, families "started hearing rumors from neighbors that developers were taking an interest in the area because of its proximity to Chicago's downtown, and to major modes of transportation."[15] Today, Humboldt Park has emerged as one of the most contested sites in Chicago and the tension between working-class Puerto Ricans and affluent gentrifiers exemplifies current debates about gentrification.[16]

When Ware locates his building in Humboldt Park, he implicitly asks readers to consider why he places a thinking and feeling building in the midst of a rapidly gentrifying Chicago neighborhood. Initially, his decision seems to suggest that the strip is intended to evoke the issues facing residents of gentrified neighborhoods. Thus, when the young woman comments in part 27 that she didn't like how Tom was "all in [her] face about that 'gentrification' stuff," the strip raises race and class tensions inherent in a gentrifying neigh-

borhood. And yet, by deferring references to gentrification until late in the strip, Ware appears loath to offer an explicit opinion on the issues of race and class attendant in discussions of the process.[17] Instead, the comic provides a more nuanced reading that does not indict the gentrification of a specific site, Humboldt Park, but speaks to a concern for urban landscapes and about what our treatment of historic buildings signals for the future of U.S. cities.

Gentrification is just the latest manifestation of a "penchant for destroying the old" in American cities.[18] As urban planners and politicians have promoted a "cycle of destruction and rebuilding as 'second nature'—self-evident, unquestionable, and inevitable"—they have continually ignored the inherent value of buildings that seemingly have little to no practical or economic use.[19] This mentality has contributed to the ongoing commodification and privatization of public spaces and has given rise to a culture that fails to recognize the importance of place, emphasizing instead "the nexus of production and finance capital at the expense of questions of social reproduction."[20] Increasingly, cities are defined by the tension "between the notion of 'place' versus undifferentiated, developable 'space.'"[21] Urban geographers James Logan and Harvey Molotch describe this same tension as the split between use value and exchange value in urban space. In the former, a particular site, whether a neighborhood or, in this case, a building, is valued because it "satisf[ies] essential needs of life" and provides a psychological and emotional fulfillment; in other words, "space" becomes "place" when there is a human connection to a structure, whether it is a house or an apartment.[22] "Space," by contrast, is simply a commodity whose value resides in the amount of capital, whether financial or cultural, a developer, an individual, or even an entire city can get for it.[23]

The difficulty of such a system is that exchange value is by definition contingent and transient. In urban real estate, this means that what is valuable and desired today will be seemingly useless and unwanted tomorrow, and, as a result of spaces constantly being redefined and recontextualized, the past must be ignored and elided in order to create conditions necessary for the redevelopment of a certain site. This elision is deemed necessary because contemporary cities rely on success in global markets such as tourism to succeed and are "invest[ed . . .] in selling their places [. . .] through a narrative of success" given that "a negative image may encounter greater difficult in attracting the levels of investment required to revise the competitive position of their economies."[24] Moreover, such a marketing campaign "succeeds only to the extent that it can distance itself from the immediate past," whether that past is codified as a working-class slum, African American ghetto, or, as in the case of Humboldt Park, Puerto Rican enclave.[25]

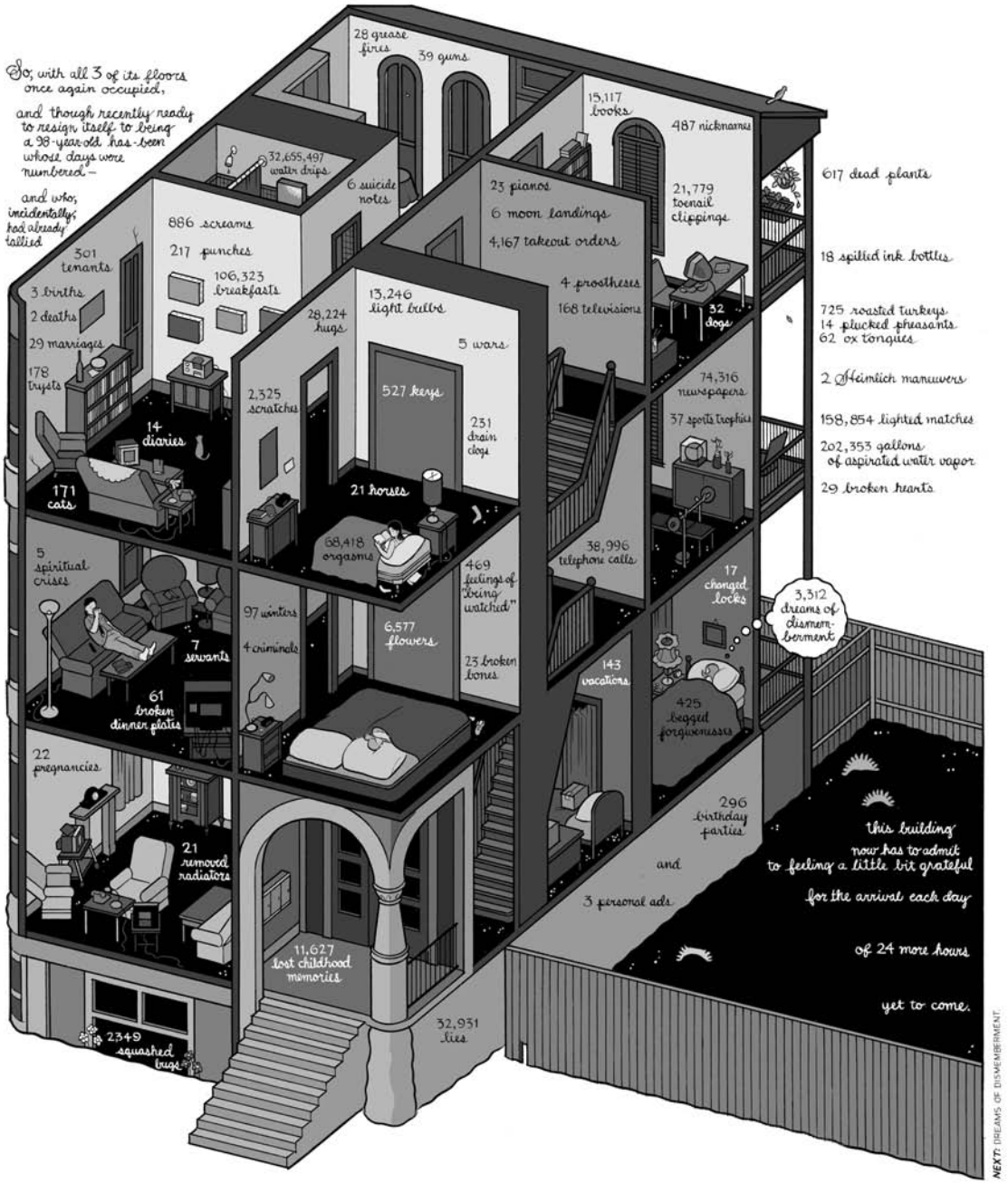
The representation of Humboldt Park in "Building Stories" implicitly challenges the rhetoric of politicians and developers who promote gentrification as a naturally occurring symbol of a bright future for U.S. cities. The strip resists a system of renewal that values buildings for their power to generate profit and promotes a perspective that recognizes their social function in an urban economy. When Ware writes in "Lost Buildings" that he is heartened to see a cultural turn toward preserving buildings that seemingly have little to no exchange value, he is in essence valuing place over space. "Building Stories" enacts a similar reversal as exemplified by the perspective presented in

part 3's schematic depiction of the building. As we learn in part 2, rent for the building's apartments has long been "utterly out of touch with local housing prices." While this means that the building has not maximized profits for the elderly landlady who lives in the first-floor apartment, it *has* made it possible for a "perpetual parade of bargain-seeking applicants" to find affordable housing in the neighborhood. Part 3 diagrams how the building links all three eras simultaneously, thanks to the fact that its low rent makes it as accessible to individuals who cannot afford higher prices (see fig. 9.2).

Laying bare the social life of the building, Ware decries the physical and psychological destruction of urban spaces caused by gentrification. This stance is perhaps most evident in the melancholic tone that pervades the strip and that contributes to the representation of the building as a character whose fate is uncertain. Despite being fully occupied, the building is wistful for earlier times, worried that its low rent and old-fashioned façade is out of touch with changes in the neighborhood. Ware's message is made even more explicit at the end of the strip with the building's growing awareness that its time is limited. Part 29 shows the building's increasing anxiety about the health of its landlady as it fears she might die soon and begins to ponder its future: "Here's where my concerns begin. Now, the long-burning lamp of my long-yearning landlady seems to fray, falter, and fizzle [. . .] So then, what? The thought of such utter vacancy fills me with dread unlike any other."[26] While the building fears that the death of the landlady portends an uncertain future, readers know it has real reason to be worried—the landlady is all that stands between it and a real estate speculator or new owner who would renovate it, thus driving up prices, or, worse still, demolish it.

It is here that the strip most clearly emerges as a statement on city life and urban planning; specifically, it forms a powerful argument against current trends in urban redevelopment and acts as a call to redress the damages caused by the redevelopment of American cities. This reading is bolstered when the strip is read alongside the work of Jane Jacobs and her 1961 treatise on how to fix the nation's cities, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs demands that city planners and politicians preserve aging structures, writing that cities "need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them [. . .] Not museum-piece old buildings, not old buildings in an excellent state of rehabilitation [. . . but] a good lot of plain, ordinary, low-value buildings, including some rundown old buildings."[27] Jacobs's praise for old buildings mirrors the sentiments evoked by "Building Stories" more than thirty years later; namely, she recognizes that demolishing or rehabilitating old homes in order to maximize their economic value sends a discouraging message about the values and beliefs of the politicians and developers who are reshaping U.S. cities.

Jacobs asserts that the bottom line has managed to take precedent over all other concerns in city-planning decisions. "Price tags," she writes, "are fastened on the population and each sorted-out chunk of priced-tagged populace lives in growing suspicion and tension against the surrounding city."[28] The tension Jacobs describes is, according to cultural critic Lewis Hyde, a function of the commodification of places and an all-consuming desire to attain material wealth. Real wealth, he writes, the intangible kind produced by gifts and works of art, "ceases to move freely when all things are counted



NEXT: DREAMS OF DISMEMBERMENT

and priced. It may accumulate in great heaps, but fewer and fewer people can afford to enjoy it."[29] Similarly, Jacobs fears that cities become stagnant when they cease to be able to facilitate the production or consumption of the kind of wealth Hyde describes. Time and again she returns to the idea that the city is a refuge for those people for whom ideas and imagination, not profit and statistics, matter.[30] Thus, Jacobs yearns for traditional urban neighborhoods that have served as havens for populations marginalized by mainstream American culture and that, increasingly, have been lost as homes and the surrounding areas are being redefined as pure commodities.[31]

The commodification of homes has intensified as urban living has come to represent a popular lifestyle decision as well as a sound investment for affluent residents anxious for affordable housing that provides access to increasingly trendy neighborhoods.[32] The last episode of "Building Stories" suggests the hidden dangers of this process. Although the penultimate scene, part 29, closes with the building merely afraid of what the death of its landlady signifies, the epilogue, which takes place five years later, suggests that these fears are realized. In this episode, the young woman and her daughter have returned to the neighborhood where she once lived (see plate 13). Noting the presence of a Starbucks and of a new boutique clothing store titled, fittingly, "Niche," she realizes how much the neighborhood has changed. Indeed, the landscape has the look and feel of a corporate space that is designed to meet the consumption needs of an affluent new population rather than the day-to-day needs of the poor, working-class residents and, in this case, Puerto Ricans who have long called it home.[33]

"Building Stories" has come full circle, but the intervening five years have redefined what the building symbolizes to the woman and, by extension, to the neighborhood at large. Unlike before, when the building's cheap rent connoted the possibility of a new life, now the woman stares at a building that is no longer owned by the original landlady and features a "For Rent" sign; apparently the structure has been renovated recently and a sign next door indicates it will soon be bordered by luxury condominiums. As these images suggest, Tom was right—the neighborhood is now safe for North Siders: both the Starbucks and the boutique, while meant to meet the consumer needs of a new class of residents, also indicate that the neighborhood has been suitably gentrified. Comforted by what have come to be common symbols of a gentrified neighborhood, new and potential residents can rest assured that the site's history as a working-class, ethnically heterogeneous neighborhood has been erased in favor of a new identity as an upscale enclave.

More tellingly, the building has been silenced. Gone is the character we encountered throughout the strip and in its place is a building whose presence in the neighborhood appears tenuous at best and whose links to the neighborhood's past have vanished. The implications of this silencing are, according to Jacobs, immense: cities are no longer able to meet the needs of an economically diverse population by providing an opportunity for a better, or different, life than the one they previously led. "Hundreds of ordinary enterprises," she writes, "necessary to the safety and public life of streets and neighborhoods, and appreciated for their convenience and personal quality, can make out successfully in old buildings, but are inexorably slain by the high overhead of new construction."[34] Nor is Jacobs alone in sounding a death

Fig. 9.2. Part 3's schematic connects the past to the present and evokes the building's integral role in the lives of its inhabitants. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 3," *New York Times Magazine,* October 2, 2005, 39.

knell for the traditional city. Countless critics and observers have mourned the loss of public life in urban landscapes. Writing in the late 1970s, Phillip Aries noted that in post-industrial American cities, "what is truly remarkable is that the social intercourse which used to be the city's main function has now entirely vanished."[35] Implicit in these arguments is a sentiment echoed by Ware's depiction of the building's loving service to the neighborhood: an unmistakable sense of loss and of concern for what gentrification has visited on the experience of everyday life for people in America's cities and throughout the United States.

Ware's vision of the city resists the prevailing view that capitalism and the capitalist ethos are the best and only option for progress. Instead, his building offers a vision of urban life where the possibility exists for sites and buildings defined not by the continued hyper-commodification of spaces and buildings but rather by their emotional, subjective presence and their ability to house populations marginalized and peripheralized within the current system. Ware's strip, although it features a building that eventually succumbs to gentrification, implicitly criticizes what Michael Sorkin has termed the "departicularizing" of the contemporary city.[36] Arguing that urban landscapes today are dominated by the spread of "globalized capital, electronic means of production, and uniform mass culture" Sorkin writes that in contrast to the "undisciplined differentiation of traditional cities [. . . t]he new city replaces the anomaly and delight of such places with a universal particular, a generic urbanism inflected only by appliqué."[37]As a living and breathing link to the history of the neighborhood where it is located, a structure that personifies the personality and unique identity of that space, Ware's building resists the "generic urbanism" Sorkin fears and the economic homogenization gentrification entails. "Buildings Stories" recognizes that buildings contain "the back and forth oscillations of time and memory, past and present" and, in doing so, provide us with hope for the future of U.S. cities.[38] Guarding against gentrification, the maintenance and preservation of historic buildings can forestall the transition to a generically corporate landscape of boutiques and corporate chains—what Sorkin calls the "repetitive minimum" that now defines most inner-city neighborhoods. Deprived of older buildings, Humboldt Park and neighborhoods like it risk reducing cities like Chicago to an anonymous every-city, in which urban landscapes are devoid of the exhilarating public life that has defined city living for generations.

Notes

1. Chris Hamnett, "The Blind Men and the Elephant: The Explanation of Gentrification," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 16 (1991): 173–89. Hamnett provides a thorough definition of gentrification as well as an overview of the critical literature and debates surrounding it.

2. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Date Book* (Amsterdam: Oog and Blik, 2003), 190. Here, Ware includes Goethe's dictum, "architecture is frozen music," and argues that it is the "aesthetic key to the development of cartoons as an art form" (190).

3. Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 96. In an interview with Raeburn, Ware suggested that "Building Stories" is the work that is closest to him and to the way he thinks.

4. Hugh Morrison titled his 1935 biography of Sullivan, the first major biography of the architect,

Louis Sullivan: Prophet of Modern Architecture. Hugh Morrison, *Louis Sullivan: Prophet of Modern Architecture* (New York: Norton, 1998).

5. *Lost Buildings*, prod. and perf. Ira Glass, Tim Samuelson, and Chris Ware. DVD and book. WBEZ Chicago, 2004.

6. Chris Ware, "You Are Here," in *Marc Trujillo: You Are Here*, Hackett-Freedman.com, 2006, http://www.hackettfreedman.com/templates/catalogueEssayPopup.jsp?id=1144 (accessed July 7, 2008); Beth Nissen, "An Interview with Chris Ware," *CNN.com*, October 3, 2000, http://edition.cnn.com/2000/books/news/10/03/chris.ware.qanda/ (accessed June 25, 2008).

7. Chip Kidd, "Please Don't Hate Him," *Print* 51.3 (1997): 42–49.

8. Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123 (2008): 462. Chute argues that in graphic narratives "we see [. . .] a rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention" (426).

9. *Neoliberalism* is broadly defined as a system of practices that breaks with the Keynesian model of state intervention and social welfare programs and seeks to bring all aspects of life under private, market-driven control.

10. Jeff Ferrell, "Remapping the City: Public Identity, Cultural Space, and Social Justice," *Contemporary Justice Review* 4.2 (2001): 167.

11. John R. Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1987), 13.

12. Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996), 6.

13. David Wilson and Dennis Grammenos, "Gentrification, Discourse, and the Body: Chicago's Humboldt Park," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23.2 (2005): 300.

14. Ibid., 301.

15. Marisa Alicea, "Cuando nosotros viviamos . . . : Stories of Displacement and Settlement in Puerto Rican Chicago," *CENTRO Journal* 13.2 (2001): 167–68.

16. Rachel Rinaldo, "Space of Resistance: The Puerto Rican Cultural Center and Humboldt Park," *Cultural Critique* 50 (2002): 135–74. Although Ware does not include the displacement of Puerto Rican families in the strip, the disruption of Humboldt's tight-knit Puerto Rican community, as documented by Rinaldo and others, has transformed the area into a potent signifier for the gentrification of Chicago's urban neighborhoods.

17. This is not to suggest that Ware has completely avoided overtly commenting on the connection between urban space and race. In his *ACME Novelty Library*, in a parody of the advertisements found in the back of comic books, he advertises "LARGE NEGRO STORAGE BOXES" that can be purchased for $5,000,000. "Designed by famous European craftsmen," he writes, these boxes "are just the thing to keep unsightly Negroes out from under foot and to make sure that your city continues to run cleanly and efficiently." Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), 62.

18. Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900–1940* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 10.

19. Ibid., 5.

20. Smith, "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy," *Antipode* 34.3 (2002): 435.

21. Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan*, 3.

22. Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes*, 2.

23. Ibid.

24. Gordon MacLeod, Mike Raco, and Kevin Ward, "Negotiating the Contemporary City: Introduction," *Urban Studies* 40 (2003): 1659.

25. Michael Jager, "Class Definition and the Esthetics of Gentrification: Victoriana in Melbourne," in *Gentrification of the City*, ed. Neil Smith and Peter Williams (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 83.

26. Chris Ware, "Building Stories," nytimes.com, April 9, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/magazine/20050918funny.pdf (accessed April 20, 2006).

27. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 187.

28. Ibid., 4.

29. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983), 22.

30. Writing about the need for old buildings, for instance, Jacobs notes that "the unformalized feeders of the arts" such as studios and galleries "go into old buildings." Further, she writes, "As for the really new ideas of any kind—no matter how ultimately profitable or otherwise successful some of them might prove to be—there is no leeway for such chancy trial, error and experimentation in the high-overhead economy [. . .] Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings." Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 188.

31. Ironically, Jacobs's ideas about city life have been adopted by individuals and groups known as New Urbanists who seek to construct versions of traditional urban neighborhoods out of inner-city neighborhoods. According to Jacobs, such plans don't have a "sense of the anatomy of [the] hearts" of cities. Further still, critics have charged New Urbanists with "romanticiz[ing] her vision, bastardizing her empirical observations of how cities work into a formula they want to impose [. . .] on cities." Bill Steigerwald, "City Views: Urban Studies Legend Jane Jacobs on Gentrification, the New Urbanism, and Her Legacy," *Reason.com*, June 2001, http://www.reason.com/news/show/28053.html (accessed February 12, 2008).

32. David Ley, "Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification," *Urban Studies* 40 (2003): 2528, 2536.

33. Herbert Schiller, *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 102. Schiller writes that as "the condominium, boutique, [and] expensive restaurant scene [. . .] flourish[es] in the downtowns of many American cities [. . . t]he urban poor are removed to the city's fringes, while the most helpless and desperate roam the streets and huddle in darkened doorways" (102).

34. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 188.

35. Philippe Aries, "The Family and the City," *Daedalus* 106.2 (1977): 233.

36. Michael Sorkin, "Introduction," in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Noonday, 1992), viii.

37. Ibid.

38. Angela Miller, "Introduction," in *Strips, Toons, and Bluesies*, ed. D. B. Dowd and Todd Hignite (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 6.

Reading History

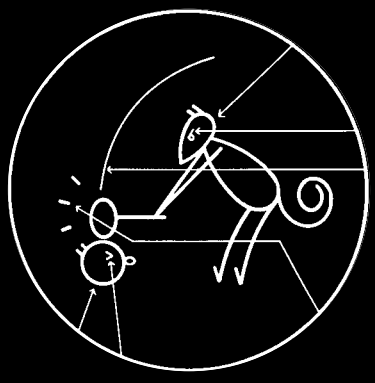


Fig. 10.1. "Admit One (1) to The United States." Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), frontispiece.

Confronting the Intersections of Race, Immigration, and Representation in Chris Ware's Comics

JOANNA DAVIS-MCELLIGATT

Chris Ware's 2005 collection *The ACME Report* contains some of the most forceful and clearly articulated critiques of American cultural identity and national policy in the history of comics. Alongside his own strips and short tales, Ware incorporates a deeply ironic and satirical hodgepodge of turn-of-the-century newspaper and magazine adverts, 1950s-era catalogue spreads and prize giveaways, in which his ACME Novelty Company is cast as a metaphorical stand-in for the American nation-state, with special emphasis on its imperialistic endeavors abroad and nativistic policies at home. In this volume, Ware interweaves both historical and contemporary aesthetics, styles, and modes of representation in an effort to "expand the possibilities for the [comics] form, just to get in a little more sense of a real experience."[1] In so doing, he employs both visual and textual comics tropes as a means to sharply criticize the treatment and perception of foreign nationals who immigrate to the United States. On the inside cover of *The ACME Report*, a space typically reserved for ads in traditional comic books, one finds an antiquated ticket granting the bearer admittance to "the world's greatest entertainment facility [. . .] AMERICA" via the required "port of entry center, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba" (see fig. 10.1).[2]

By choosing to present his critique of twenty-first-century American foreign and domestic policy in an early twentieth-century idiom, Ware offers an interesting historical contrast. Though the ticket's visual clues imply that immigration to America is as easy and joyful an experience as a trip to an amusement park, the ticket's textual subject matter urges readers to re-examine the mythos of historically lenient American immigration policies in light of the recent detainment at Guantanamo Bay of numerous peoples of Arab descent by the American government. The ticket bearer is likewise provided with two waivers, one requiring the relinquishment of "all rights of citizenship of your incubation country, now and forever" and another compelling the surrender "of all legal rights, beliefs, affiliations, membership in organizations or fan clubs, plus forever and ever and ever your claim to what used to be called due process."[3] While these waivers are clearly parodies of present-day American foreign and domestic policies that disregard the rights of "illegal aliens" who cross the border from Mexico and the detainees who are being held indefi-

nitely in Cuba, they are also reminders of the historical treatment of many immigrants to the United States, who were met with scorn and derision upon arrival, refused proper protection under state and federal law, and denied access to citizenship.

The following blurb, which is printed on the ticket itself, makes particularly manifest Ware's evaluation of American attitudes regarding immigrants:

> *TIRED* of waiting for *your* backwoods homeland to secure democracy and get all of the neat stuff that was supposed to come along with it? [. . .] Well, why not just come *VISIT* the *world's richest constitutional republic* and allow all the luxurious perks of a capitalist consciousness like *self-centeredness, entitlement*, and a *sanguine apathy towards the rest of the planet* color your every thought, action, and romantic conquest? Really—cast aside any sense of debt to society, begin developing your own personal mythology, and get that "freedom feeling" *RIGHT NOW* [. . .] Maybe someday you'll even be *accepted* as a genuine *AMERICAN CITIZEN!*[4]

According to Ware, America—founded on and forged out of racist, nativistic, capitalistic, and imperialistic policies and ideologies, a nation that has been steeped in notions of its own exceptionalism and superiority—was never structured to support the myth of racial, ethnic, and political inclusion. Rather, he argues, America has always taken for granted the means by which it achieved its development, insistently disregarded the value of domestic and international immigrant Others, and continually romanticized its own ceaseless "conquest." All of this has been made possible by the creation of numerous individual and national mythologies that support and promulgate the fiction of the American dream. These "personal mythologies," Ware argues, must be deconstructed and re-interpreted in order to come to any solvent comprehension of the past, present, and future.

Though this work is particularly manifest in *The ACME Report*, it is also a structuring motif throughout Ware's most extended project, the graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth.* Ware's novel, which follows four generations of Corrigan men from their early days in 1840s Ireland to postmodern 1980s America, is a detailed exploration of the history, treatment, and engagement of immigrants across twentieth-century America. In *Jimmy Corrigan*, as in *The ACME Report*, Ware deconstructs familiar histories of immigration and race relations by first disrupting the "personal mythology" of the seamless passage of the non-white, foreign immigrant on his way to becoming a white American. Ware additionally brings to bear the relationship between African Americans, who were brought to the United States against their will and have never been fully integrated into American society, and those same white immigrants. In this text, Ware constructs an incredibly complex family drama, in which racial, ethnic, and national identity are investigated in tandem with one another.

For those well versed in comics history, it should come as no surprise that Ware chooses to situate his critique of America around the representation and treatment of immigrant Others. Comics historian David Hajdu reminds us that Richard Felton Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*, the 1890s comic strip featuring "the Yellow Kid," now widely regarded as the first American comics "sensation,"

was set in the gutters of Manhattan's Lower East Side and depicted the rowdy antics of a gang of young scruffs. The Kid himself [. . .] was a crude but strangely endearing caricature of the immigrant poor—barefoot, ugly, inarticulate, concerned only with base pleasures, and disposed to violence. He rarely spoke, and then did so in a marginally intelligible pidgin jumble of ethnic clichés. [. . .] His pals, much the same, were all vulgar stereotypes: oil-smeared Italians throwing tomatoes; Negroes with gum-bubble lips, snoozing or cowering in fear; scowling Middle Easterners in fezzes, waving scimitars—comrades in egalitarian minstrelsy.[5]

The ever-expanding immigrant populations of major American cities immediately took to the Yellow Kid and other newspaper comic strip characters like him. Far from being offended by the racial (and what one might now call racist) caricatures, they instead felt as though these comics were written about their experiences and presented in a format they could all easily comprehend. This was largely because, as Hajdu explains, the first American comic books were often written by "immigrants and children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts," who understood their audiences well and knew how to entertain them.[6] Indeed, one of Chris Ware's comic forbears, George Herriman, the inventor of *Krazy Kat*, was a "'colored Creole' from New Orleans who allowed others to mistake him for Greek."[7] Cheap and readily accessible comics offered minorities an escape from the rigors and reality of their lives. Comic strips and comic books, then, have always been attuned to the experiences of immigrant Others and, by extension, of non-white Others who similarly found themselves outside of the American cultural and social mainstream. Given that the first major American comic strip character, the Yellow Kid, and the first American superhero, Superman, were both constructed as immigrants, there is no doubt that the comics language was not merely concerned with the experiences of immigrants, but was likewise attuned to their perception and representation.[8]

However, modern readers cannot escape the fact that despite earlier efforts to render the immigrant experience in a way that immigrants themselves could recognize and appreciate, the images comics artists employed were often racist and contained crass stereotypes. According to Ware's tongue-in-cheek history of art, this is because comic art has "its strongest roots [. . .] *not* in the Academic tradition, but in an arcane system of 19th century *physiognomy* and *racial caricature!*"[9] Art Spiegelman, in an essay regarding racial representation and the comics form, echoes Ware's sentiment: "Cartoon language is mostly limited to deploying a handful of recognizable visual symbols and clichés. It makes use of the discredited pseudo-scientific principles of physiognomy to portray character through a few physical attributes and facial expressions. It takes skill to use such clichés in ways that expand or subvert this impoverished vocabulary."[10]

Spiegelman and Ware both look back to Rodolphe Töpffer, regarded by many as the first comics artist, who in his tract *Essay on Physiognomy* explains the art of deciphering or divining the moral and intellectual makeup of an individual based upon a careful study of their facial features.[11] While Töpffer expresses a degree of anxiety about employing the practice of physiognomy to determine a person's actual moral or intellectual capabilities in any sort of real-world context, he is nonetheless an advocate of the "science" as it per-

tains to the exercise of writing successful comics. According to Töpffer, the comic artist must first ascertain the meaning of certain facial features (for example, eyes, ears, noses, or lips), establish which precise combination of features corresponds to which specific characters, personality, or type, and subsequently determine in advance what precise conclusions readers will reach upon examining those eyes or ears or lips on a character's face. Töpffer's language is dependent upon the artist's rendering a caricature so successfully that the meaning of the image is fixed within the context of the comic itself and in the world outside of the comic. Töpffer's language, it seems, only works when it has effectively preyed upon and realized the reader's instinctual judgments and invited him to come to an immediate assumption about the type of character he is encountering.

Despite the fact that Töpffer's comics language has proven indispensable for his own work, Ware nonetheless acknowledges that "the flavor of caricature that Töpffer regularly employs—jutting chin and squarish, bulbous, protruding nose [. . .] feels somewhat outmoded today. Like the elongated *s* in eighteenth-century documents that reads as an *f* to modern eyes, Töpffer's archaic style potentially trips up the possibility for empathy with his characters."[12] This is because, as Ware acknowledges, the artist and reader are subject to very specific socioeconomic, racial, cultural, and historical contexts which serve to overdetermine their engagement with the images. As a result, the ways in which comics artists create and comics readers interpret the images have everything to do with their own particular ideologies, identities, and histories, which may or may not be in close alignment with each other. Given that the principles of comics art are dependent upon both cliché and physiognomic logic, it can be difficult for the comics artist to find a way of accurately representing racial difference while still working with and around the "impoverished vocabulary" of the comics language.

Ware describes, in the following passage, just how difficult this process can be for artists:

> When I was in college at the University of Texas at Austin in 1989, I was doing a strip for the student newspaper. At the bottom of the strip, I drew two characters (trying to do a sort of emblematic "Mutt and Jeff" thing) where I wouldn't show anything but their faces floating in space. Entirely unconsciously, I designed these characters as people or "non-animals" with black heads and big white mouths, like Mickey Mouse without ears. Before I knew it, the Black Student Alliance was writing these nasty letters to the student newspaper demanding big apologies, as well as demanding that my strip be pulled from the paper. They were going to seek me out and set my house on fire, that kind of thing. Suddenly, I realized that I actually had done these horrible racist caricatures, and that I wasn't even aware of it. I felt terrible, and when I examined it, I realized a great part of the "visual rush" of comics is at least partially, if not almost entirely, founded in racist caricature. If you look at many early comic strips, they're endemically "ethnic." Abie the Agent is obviously a Jewish caricature. Happy Hooligan is an Irish caricature. And black caricatures obviously go back to the minstrel days and earlier. Even Mickey Mouse . . . what is he doing with white gloves? Gee, I wonder where that comes from. The simplification of the face comes out of an effort to distill a particular identity down to a few simple features, and that includes racial identity. It's creepy when you think about it.[13]

As the above anecdote evidences, the images used in comics are unavoidably loaded with a cultural meaning that is never static or fixed, but rather dependent upon personal, historical, and narratological context. As Ware learned, the success of the comics form in the latter half of the twentieth century depends upon the artist's ability to "distill a particular identity"—including racial identity—in a simple way without pandering to or indulging in racial misrepresentation and racist caricature. But given that the most basic components of the comics language are steeped in physiognomic logic, it becomes incredibly difficult to separate that which is "emblematic" in the comics from that which is racist. Even though it was not Ware's intention to produce "horrible racist caricatures," he unthinkingly *had*, and this, he discovered, had everything to do with the uneasy slippage between the language of comics and the long history of racial representation both within and outside the comics world. The job of the comics artist, Ware suggests, is to enable the reader to not only instantaneously comprehend the meaning of the image itself, but to understand the meaning of that image in the context of both the narrative and the "real" world. Since his experiences at the University of Texas, Ware has consistently labored to make plain the relationship between the comics form and racial imagery by both employing and challenging modes of racial representation within contemporary contexts and conceptions of history and identity. By appealing to the reader's ability to judge and come to conclusions about Others very quickly, Ware's comics can alter those initial responses by recontextualizing and reformulating conventionally racialized images.

In *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware expands upon the physiognomic foundations of the comics form by representing racial difference and racial caricature over the course of the century as two distinct, though uncomfortably related phenomena. The present moment of the comic, set in 1980s Illinois and Michigan, is spliced through with myriad flashbacks, dreams, memories, fantasies, and historical records as the protagonist, Jimmy, travels to visit his father, James William Corrigan, for the first time in his recent memory. While there for a long weekend, Jimmy meets his adopted African American sister Amy who, the reader eventually learns, is his second cousin—Jimmy and Amy share the same great-grandfather, William Corrigan. Throughout the course of the comic, the present moment of Jimmy's visit to his father is explicated in tandem with the life and times of his grandfather, the grandson of Irish immigrants, as a young boy living in 1890s Chicago.

Because Ware is invested in addressing racial representation in the comics form, he chooses to organize his narrative around the experiences of Irish immigrants and the descendants of African slaves—two groups which have been viciously stereotyped and caricatured throughout the history of twentieth-century America. As a result, Ware's obsessive attention to historical detail in *Jimmy Corrigan* renders a far more complicated and involved picture of the relationship between immigrants and African Americans than most traditional histories of American identity, Irish American identity, or African American identity would ever likely evince. To that end, Ware's text complicates American identity in three ways: by addressing the real experiences of non-white immigrants upon their arrival to the United States, by troubling the racial purity of immigrant family bloodlines, and by conflating the experiences of slaves and immigrants in the construction of those bloodlines.

Furthermore, by exploring the ways in which slaves, immigrants, and their descendants have been racially and culturally enmeshed in America, Ware's text suggests that race is not only an illusion, but a grand false memory, the product of a collective refusal to engage with or concede a greater human involvement which is not racial, but familial. In this way, Ware's text is an excellent example of the ways in which the comics form can be employed to challenge traditional histories and to recast them in more complicated ways.

The family narrative begins with Jimmy Corrigan's great-great-grandfather, a physician in a small village in Ireland, who, along with his pregnant wife, sets sail for New York in the mid-1840s. Once there, Jimmy's great-great-grandmother gives birth to a son, William, the first native-born American Corrigan.[14] Jimmy's great-great-grandparents would not have been alone in making this voyage; approximately 1.3 million Irish immigrants arrived on American shores between the years of 1846 and 1855, each expecting better wages, decent work, access to property, and unbridled cultural and religious freedom. However, the experiences of those who came from Ireland, like the Corrigans, and from Germany, Italy, and Eastern Europe were made exceedingly difficult because these "New Immigrants," as they were called (to distinguish them from the preceding waves of immigration from Western Europe), were not considered to be white. Due to accelerated levels of immigration to American shores at the time of Jimmy's great-great-grandparents' arrival, the nation-state had begun to enter a new stage in its development, marked by rampant nativism and accelerated racism that was infused in, and produced out of, the fear that the presence of millions of immigrants would fundamentally and irrevocably alter the national, racial, and cultural character of the American. The American character, it was argued, had its origins and basis in the white, European, Anglo-Saxon tradition. As a result, whiteness, which had heretofore been conceived of as a vast monolithic racial identity, was restructured, as Matthew Frye Jacobson notes, into a "fragmented, hierarchically arranged series of distinct 'white races.'"[15] If the Irish immigrants were to be considered Americans and either continued to have children amongst themselves or "inter-breed" with putatively "real" white Americans, they would, with time, mongrelize Americanness and destroy whiteness.

While such intra-white divisions would anneal with time, African Americans faced a much steeper barrier to cultural assimilation. As one contemporary scholar put it, whereas "'Irishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, etc., come here, settle down, become citizens, and their offspring born and raised on American soil differ in no appreciable or perceptible manner from other Americans [. . . the Negro is] as absolutely and specifically unlike the American as when the race first touched the soil and first breathed the air of the New World.'"[16] Unlike, he argues, the African's dark skin which remains a permanent stain, "'the coarse skin, big hands and feet, the broad teeth, pug nose etc. of the Irish and German laborer pass away in a generation or two,'" rendering them, for all intents and purposes, as white as the Anglo-Saxon.[17] As we see here, in addition to their cultural, moral, and intellectual inferiority, immigrants and Africans were also considered to be *physically* inferior to Anglo-Saxons, who were beautiful not only because they were white, but because of their fine facial features and strong, graceful bodies. By degrees, and particularly in postbellum America, it was argued that the Irish immigrant, already a type

of lower-order white man, would lose his unseemly physical and moral characteristics and would appear and behave more and more American and less and less Irish within but a few generations. The African, on the other hand, whose dark skin was inimical to white beauty, would never become white, no matter how many generations passed him by. As a comics artist, Ware is deeply attuned to the ways in which racial representation has been historically attached to racist perceptions of the subject's inferiority. By examining the ways in which the Corrigans became white and lost their Irish and African heritages, he draws attention to the ways in which Americans have historically obfuscated blood relations by filtering them through rigid racial identities.

Ware begins this exploration in a scene in which William Corrigan takes his son, James, to see a Jim Crow magic-lantern film (see plate 14).[18] The first two images show a woman—a perfect Irish caricature with her slight pug nose, red hair, and freckles—placing a pie in an oven and setting it gently on the window sill. In the third image, the well-known nineteenth-century minstrel Jim Crow peeks his ink-black head in the window. His hands, donned in the traditional white minstrel gloves, reach for the pie, his absurdly large lips rounded in anticipation. In the fourth and final slide, the window has come down on Jim Crow's head, and the pie has slipped out of his grasp, headed for the floor. The Irishwoman's face can be seen in the upper-right-hand corner, but rather than outrage, she is shown laughing loudly and maliciously. The slide serves a dual function in this scene. As a historical reproduction, it draws attention to the ways in which racist caricatures of both African and Irish Americans were used to amuse and titillate turn-of-the-century audiences; indeed, after the viewing, William remarks to his son that the Jim Crow slide was his favorite and chuckles in pity for "poor old 'Jim Crow'" (70). But this slide also provides the reader with a way of reading race in the comic itself. Because William Corrigan and his son are viewing the slide in the narrative, the reader must make a distinction between racist caricature and racial representation; in other words, William and James are characters who have been rendered according to the physiognomic principles of the comics language, but they are not racist caricatures. By juxtaposing these two constructs—the images on the slide and William's reaction to the images on the slide—Ware is able to comment on the history of racial representation and at the same time work within and outside it. What is most significant about this scene, however, is that William Corrigan does not register any awareness that the Irishwoman in the slide serves the same function as Jim Crow—to exaggerate the perceived unattractive physical characteristics of the Irish and peoples of African descent for the amusement of largely white American audiences. Because William does not conceive of himself as Irish, he ignores the caricature of the Irishwoman and instead places his focus on the image of Jim Crow.

William's refusal to engage with his own ethno-racial particularity has a profoundly negative effect on his son, James, who is fundamentally unaware that he has Irish ancestors. In one extended scene in the novel, James meets a young Italian immigrant, and while we sense that the two play well together, James is nonetheless desperately afraid that anyone should discover their friendship while in school. One day, the young boy brings James a gift of

a small metal sculpture of a horse; while at home, James shows his gift to his own horse, telling him: "That weird Italian kid gave it to me. I hate him, though. [. . .] He's a little 'wop'" (227). James knows that the boy is "weird" because he speaks in the thickly accented and broken English of the new immigrant. Because James will only shun the boy when they are in school, it seems that James is afraid that the young immigrant's difference will somehow become his difference, that his identity will be irrevocably altered by associating with this young boy. The next day, however, the young Italian boy invites all of the schoolboys over to his house to make sculptures of their own, and James, who is now afraid that the young boy will despise him because of his earlier effrontery, tentatively walks to their home to join them.

Upon arriving at their home, James discovers that everything about this young boy is different. The pages, which are rendered in a sepia tone, call to mind the "Old World," and it is obvious that the boy's family does not live in America in a manner appreciably different than they did in Italy. Having been raised in a home with no one but his father and his servant, who was in no way an accepted part of the family, James is stunned and overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle and by the welcome invitation he receives to be a part of their family for the evening. The boy eventually brings James to his father's workshop, where there are already young boys huddled together busily sculpting. Though the entire family is drawn with dark black hair and thick heavy eyebrows, the boy's father, with his moustache and work apron, calls to mind Pinocchio's father, Geppetto, tinkering in his workshop. This is an apt visual and literary reference, for not only is his studio full of handmade toys, ornaments, and religious iconography, but James also powerfully responds to him as a father figure. During this visit, James challenges his father's authority for the first time, for not only is he denying his will by going to this boy's house before heading home, he is also openly cavorting with a people for whom his father has nothing but contempt. James learns that the young boy's difference is not strange or terrible, as he had always assumed, but familiar and comforting. As a result of his time with this family, James is able to humanize them, even desiring to become one of them, to be converted into the "wop" he, only a matter of hours before, had so violently berated. The boy's father is well aware of the fact that James is in desperate need of care, and he assumes he is "un orfano," or an orphan boy (241). In some ways, this is true; compared to the immigrant family, who have held fast to old customs and habits in America, James's life is ascetic, cold, and without any sense of itself.

At home that night, James is beaten and forbidden to ever return, but still fantasizes about his sculpture, believing that it will impress a girl at school, secure him popularity, and eradicate all of his problems. When he receives his piece, however, it is missing its two front legs, ears and tail—the lead, the young boy tells him, did not fill the cast completely. All of a sudden, James finds himself at the receiving end of ridicule, as everyone, including the immigrant boy and the girl he fancies, crowds around him, pointing fingers and laughing hysterically. At one point, a child in the crowd calls him "little micky leprechaun" and goes on to ask him, "Is this yer 'pot o' gold' micky?" (248). It is, of course, deeply ironic that James's initial reaction to the immigrant child, and the words he used to describe him, are being visited upon him in

the end. But what is most interesting here is that James was entirely unaware of his own difference, of his own ethno-racial particularity. William Corrigan, who had existed in the world of white privilege for some time, had actively worked to erase any notion of that particularity from the family memory, and, as a result, James suffers incredibly for it. As we see, in their efforts to become white, the Corrigans must not only endure prejudice, but pretend, when they encounter it, that it does not pertain to them; in other words, the Corrigan men must pass as Americans in order to be considered Americans.

While William actively works to repress the memory of his own immigrant past, he likewise refuses to recognize his own mixed-race progeny. When James is a young boy, William has an affair with his African American maid, May, and sires a child. He eventually dismisses her, without ever acknowledging their child as his own, and subsequently abandons James at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (280–81). In the scene immediately following James's abandonment, we meet Amy Corrigan—William and May's descendant—as a young girl, interviewing James, now an old man, for a school project in which she has been charged to devise and complete a family tree (283–88). Amy, we learn, was adopted by a young woman who married Jim Corrigan, the father of Jimmy, son of James and grandson of William. Amy's task is riddled with irony, for her grandfather, James, is also her granduncle, and her father, Jim, is her first cousin once removed. However, because no one remembers or could possibly recall the complexity of their relationship, in part because May's place in this genealogy is conspicuously refused, and because they read the bonds they have forged as superficial, the emphasis is placed not on their family relationship or on attempts to recover the past, but on their racial differences. Despite the fact that Amy has been adopted by James Corrigan, because she is African American, not only do the Corrigan men have difficulty envisioning her as one of them, they also never suspect that she might actually be their blood relation.

Though it was Amy who requested that Jim invite his long-lost son, Jimmy, for the Thanksgiving holiday, their first meeting takes place in a hospital, where their father has been taken after a car accident. The nurse who meets Amy suggests that she wait for Jimmy to return from the restroom, referring to him as her "husband" (293). Because Amy is African American, or, rather, because she looks black, the nurse automatically assumes that Amy and Jimmy are not siblings, or related by blood, but rather assumes that any possible familial bond between them must be marital. While Amy is obviously disquieted by the confusion as she prepares to meet her brother for the first time, she nonetheless sits down and begins to anxiously imagine his face (293) (see plate 15). In a Töpfferian style, Ware renders Amy's racial imagining of Jimmy as a sequence of white faces, each one representing different men possessed of varying personalities, dispositions, and intelligences. Though Amy is very much aware of the potential for physical differences among whites, which is why, in her anticipation, she cycles through so many different types of men, her racial imagination does tend to run in stock types: the overweight guy with glasses and bad hair, the clean-cut young man, the balding middle-ager.

It is here that the context of racialized images becomes of tantamount importance. Because the reader knows what Jimmy actually looks like, Amy's

racial imagining is ironic, in some cases, and humorous in others. As Amy's face frames her imaginative construction of Jimmy's white maleness, the reader is at the same time made aware of her decidedly African American facial features: her dark brown skin, wide nose, full lips, and thick, black hair. But because Amy and Jimmy are related by blood, despite the fact that their racial difference masks that relationship, the reader is forced to engage with Amy's racial difference in terms of the history of the Corrigan family, in terms of a comics language bound by caricature, and in terms of the present moment of the narrative itself. In this way, Ware challenges the reader to become simultaneously aware of racial difference and racial representation without having to filter the reader's awareness of that difference and representation through racist logic and imagery. After their evening at the hospital, Amy shows Jimmy photographs of their family. While examining a photo of their father as a young man, Amy, jokingly, remarks that Jimmy "obviously [. . .] look[s] more like him than *I* do, though" (325). As Jimmy scrutinizes the photograph, apparently unaware of the fact that Amy was calling attention to her racial difference in an effort to lighten the mood, she tries once again to draw Jimmy out, noting, "We're practically related, right?" (328). There is something painfully ironic in this moment; as Amy and Jimmy examine their joint family history and as they attempt to come to terms with the other's existence, neither one of them could possibly, and will never, come to understand the complexity of their being "practically related." The next morning, Amy and Jimmy travel back to the hospital, where they learn that their father has passed away, leading Amy in a moment of extraordinary grief to reject Jimmy and order him to leave.

This, Ware seems to suggest at the end of his comic, is the real tragedy; the development of the American nation-state has required nothing less than the absolute disavowal of important and foundational family relationships that have been, and forever will be, lost to view. Race and racial difference, Ware suggests, were intended to deliberately conceal family relations, and the recovery of them is attainable only through difficult acts of imagination. However, because the reader is required to engage with racial difference, racial representation, and family relations through Ware's blending of the histories of Irish immigrants and African slaves, both of whom struggled tremendously in their efforts to be considered American and to participate as citizen-subjects, the reader is made aware of the ways in which both groups came to be identified as both racial and national subjects. Through a careful reconsideration of the powerful potential of racial imagery, Ware likewise makes room for cautious exploration of racial difference in the comics form, expanding upon Töpffer's original explication of the power of the comics language while working solidly within it. Ultimately, Ware's project remains one of the most vibrant and compelling American considerations of race and immigration in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005); Chris Ware, qtd. in Gene Kannenberg, "The Comics of

Chris Ware: Text, Image, and Visual Narrative Strategies," in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 174. To find the original quote, see Andrea Juno, *Dangerous Drawings* (New York: Juno, 1997), 93.

2. Ware, *The ACME Report*, i.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, 2008), 10.

6. Ibid., 25.

7. Ibid., 14.

8. Superman, born Kal-El on the planet Krypton, is rocketed to Earth by his father, Jor-El, and subsequently adopted by a farmer and his wife. I am, in this way, reading him as an immigrant figure.

9. Ware, *The ACME Report*, 8.

10. Art Spiegelman, "Drawing Blood: Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage," *Harper's Magazine* (June 2006): 45.

11. Rodolphe Töpffer, *Enter: The Comics*, trans. E. Wiese (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

12. Chris Ware, "Strip Mind," *Bookforum* (April/May 2008): 45.

13. Chris Ware, interview with Juno, *Dangerous Drawings*, 58.

14. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), dust jacket. Much of the information concerning the Corrigan family history is included on an intricate family tree located on the inside cover of the dust jacket. For an analysis of Ware's use of such diagrams, see Isaac Cates's essay is this volume.

15. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 43.

16. Ibid., 44. See also J. H. Van Evrie, *The Negro and Negro Slavery* (New York: Van Evrie and Horton, 1987), 103–28.

17. Ibid.

18. Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan*, 70. All further references to this text will be indicated in parentheses.

Public and Private Histories in Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*

SHAWN GILMORE

Chris Ware's graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth* relates the stories of two central protagonists: Jimmy Corrigan, leaving Chicago to meet his father in Waukosha, Michigan, for Thanksgiving in the 1980s, and James Reed Corrigan, growing up in Chicago in the 1890s and abandoned at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. These narratives alternate throughout the course of novel, sharing thematic, symbolic, and visual resonances as they progress. However, the novel's narrative content is also shaped by a paratextual framework of prose and images, labeled, respectively, "General Instructions" and "Corrigenda," through which we can better understand the interrelation between novel's main plotlines and the graphic narrative system that *Jimmy Corrigan* employs.[1] In what follows, I analyze how these non-narrative pages inform the novel's narrative structure and claim that the novel draws a sharp distinction between the realms of public and private history. While the characters are isolated within their respective personal narratives, a shared, public history goes on around them in which they are powerless to intervene. An awareness of the scope of this public history is available only to the novel's readers, who must work to synthesize public and private history into a cohesive whole. To understand how this system works, we should first consider the significance of the paratextual material at the novel's conclusion.

Offered as a sort of glossary, the "Corrigenda" provides a series of definitions for terms pertinent to the novel: *crutch*, *finger*, *lonely*, *peach*, *simpleton*, etc. These symbols and repeated motifs each feature a definition, though these definitions ironically offer little additional clarification. Interspersed with these symbolic terms are literary ones: *metaphor*, *symbol*, *exposition*. *Metaphor* is defined as a "tightly fitting suit of metal, generally tin, which entirely encloses the wearer, both impeding free movement and preventing emotional expression and/or social contact," thus substituting a recurring image from Jimmy's dream-world, the tin-man suit, for a conventional literary term (back cover). Similarly, *symbol* is defined as "something that represents something else, esp. common in bad literature. Also, a printed or written sign used to represent an understood corresponding aspect of experience, generally read, and not appreciated as an esthetic form in and of itself." Here, we have a more direct claim about how representation within the novel works; by equating symbolism with the graphic representation of experience, this

definition hints at the aesthetic system the novel employs, even if it is undercut by the fact that symbols are "not appreciated as [. . .] esthetic form[s]" themselves.

The representational schema at play becomes clearer with the definition of *exposition*: "The main body of a work, *esp*. that which explicates a main theme, or introduces a fundamental motif." This conceptual definition is paired with a graphic representation of an actual exposition, the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, which, of course, forms a major historical backdrop for James Corrigan's childhood narrative. By making the Exposition the "main body of [the] work," this definition helps brings to the fore the multiple layers of signification at stake in the novel's representation—at its heart a historical setting "which explicates a main theme," but which must be presented through recurring symbols in order to represent experience. By skewing the use of commonplace literary terms, these definitions expand and clarify the representational stakes of the novel, establishing a role for visual signs and historical signifiers and offering a "correct" way to understand these terms.[2] The key question thus becomes, when taken together, what do both sets of endpapers actually prescribe, and what are the terms of that prescription?

I propose that we understand the novel's endpapers as prescriptive reading instructions that guide readers toward a synthetic interpretation that interrelates the novel's two main narratives. This synthetic apprehension, available only to the novel's readers (and withheld from its characters), ultimately reveals the distinction between personal and public histories in the novel, highlighting the ironic distance between the characters' experiences and the historical circumstances that surround them. Thus, though *Jimmy Corrigan* has two main narratives, these intensely insular stories are separated by the impersonality of history. The obvious thematic and symbolic connections between these two narrative lines are only apparent to the novel's readers, not its protagonists, as only the novel's readers can braid both Corrigan males' lives synthetically together across their historical separation. The novel's sense of history, emphasized by the iconography and historical particularity of Chicago, thus becomes part of the formal and representational schema used to present the separate Corrigan narratives.

This prescriptive reading method, in combination with the structural and representational systems of the novel itself, requires a version of comics theory that takes us beyond a typical formal explanation for how comics make meaning: Scott McCloud's oft-cited notion of *closure*. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud explains that "comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality."[3] However, the notion of closure, which typically operates on a panel-to-panel level, doesn't explain larger-scale graphic narrative structures, including the visual and symbolic repetition between the main graphic narratives of *Jimmy Corrigan*. To account for this level of complexity, the meta-narrative endpapers of *Jimmy Corrigan* offer a reading method that engages in a fuller version of comics theory, one that corresponds to Thierry Groensteen's notion of *braiding*. As Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen note, braiding refers to "the way panels (more specifically, the images in the panels) can be linked in series (continuous or discontinuous) through non-narrative correspondences, be it

iconic or other means."[4] These "non-narrative correspondences," which operate at the meta-narrative level, provide links between the individual narratives of generations of the Corrigan family and the larger, historical context. To understand how this functions on the page, I will now turn to the reading method prescribed by *Jimmy Corrigan*'s first set of endpapers, labeled "General Instructions." From these prescriptive "instructions," we will see that in this version of comics theory, the reader occupies a privileged position from which to synthetically apprehend the whole of the novel's meaning.

"Comic Strip Apprehension"

The "General Instructions" that open the novel's endpapers work to manage readers' expectations, providing a variety of paratexts to orient the reader: an introduction, a brief history of comics and their aesthetic uses, tips on how and where to read the book, and so on. This prescriptive frame declares that comics have a specific role in readers' lives, that there are specific skills necessary to read a "comic strip" language, and that potential readers must have an aptitude for comics analysis. Combined, these instructions act as cautionary lessons for readers who "might not be suitably equipped to sustain a successful linguistic relationship with the pictographic theatre [that the rest of the book] offers" (i). As the (mock-serious) article "New Pictorial Language Makes Marks" advises, "with the many recent technological breakthroughs in pictorial linguistics [. . .] such heretofore-dormant skills of Comic Strip Apprehension (or CSA) are being reawakened in the adult mind, paving the way for the explosion of more complicated literature which almost certainly looms within the next decade" (ii). Thus, these instructions present the analysis of comics as arduous and fraught with interpretive peril while simultaneously outlining a coherent reading method.

The fourth section of the instructions, titled "Technical Explanation of the Language, Developing Skills," notes that "some basic premises must be re-established before attempting a thorough apprehension of the complete work. Below are five test questions by which you should be able to determine whether your understanding of the 'comic strip' language is sufficient to embark." The reader is instructed to consult two consecutive panels, both depicting a disembodied head on the ground and a mouse with a hammer (versions of Ware's recurring characters, Sparky the Cat and Quimby the Mouse) in order to answer a series of questions.[5] These questions deliberately complicate the simple panel-to-panel transition, defamiliarizing the putatively simple act of reading comics by stressing the problems that readers might encounter if they misunderstand the narrative information and its implications. Specifically, these questions suggest that reader might not be able to recognize comics as a distinct form of representation, infer sequential action, understand temporal succession, recognize narrative time as distinct from the moment of perception, or correctly sympathize with the scene. These misprisions are, of course, fairly unlikely, but the almost absurd attention to their possibility highlights the complexity of the comics theory Ware is about to present, a theory that undergirds the main narrative of *Jimmy Corrigan*.

The "Technical Explanation" refers the reader to the diagram on the following page for assistance "if necessary" (see fig. 7.1 in Isaac Cates's essay in

this volume).[6] Though this figure may seem needlessly complex at first glance, it directly coordinates the formal properties of comics with their narrative and emotive effects. Daniel Raeburn has described this diagram as an "almost algebraic dissection of the comics language [that] diagrams the language's iconic, theatrical, temporal and musical properties."[7] Beyond these registers, figure 7.1 also makes a claim about relationship between the selection of narrative material and how graphic narrative is (or ought to be) apprehended in its totality by a reader. The most prominent portion of this figure is the large circle on the left-hand side, which presents a synthesis of the two static panels presented in the "Technical Explanation." This synthetic panel recalls McCloud's notion of *closure*: it depicts the action a reader ought to infer, that Quimby the Mouse did indeed bring a hammer down on the disembodied head of Sparky, causing him pain.

Complicating this relatively obvious interstitial action are three distinct sections of the diagram. First, on the lower left, there are five tiers that (from bottom to top) progressively specify the temporal ranges from which the ideal narrative event is derived, each tier a more local (and less historical) range. Second, the top of the diagram outlines modes of apprehension, including how the duration and time of observation affect the reader's perception. Finally, the right-hand side of the diagram breaks down modes of apprehending the original two panels from the previous page's "Technical Explanation." This part of the diagram specifies three interrelated systems of understanding comics: (1) the direct understanding of action (closure), connected to the mind and the book; (2) the recognition of separate static comics panels, associated with the eye and the stage; and (3) the synthesis of these two modes, tied to the heart and music. Though complicated, these three modes and their respective symbols (mind/book, eye/stage, heart/music) relate directly to the multilayered narrative of *Jimmy Corrigan*.

Applying the three modes of apprehension presented in figure 7.1 to the main narratives of *Jimmy Corrigan*, we can see that there is a firm distinction between the novel's personal and public histories and the reader's understanding of these narrative levels. On the one hand, Jimmy and his grandfather James live within their private, felt experiences, each constituting a *private history* within which an individual life is lived (the mind and book). On the other hand, Jimmy and James Corrigan also live within a more objective, distanced *public history*, which represents events and those who experience them only as static objects (the eye and stage).[8] Finally, the synthesis of not just these private and public histories but of the totality of the narrative's parts (the heart and music) is attainable only by those able to apprehend correctly, those able to understand all of these narrative parts in proper relation. Within the novel, then, its protagonists, James and Jimmy, are excluded from apprehending the totality of the work as a whole, confined to their own personal experience of history; a synthetic reading method, championed by the novel's endpapers, is reserved only for the novel's readers. To understand the novel in its totality, readers must not only follow the two main protagonists' stories, but also link together their symbolic and iconic resonances with an understanding of the historical circumstances that bind these plots together.

How does this segmentation of history manifest itself narratively? The private experiences of James and Jimmy Corrigan, the novel's two protagonists, are kept separate when the narrative shifts its historical focus. Although Jimmy and James meet twice in the novel, they barely speak (182–86, 317–23, 333–36). The reader knows that their lives operate in tandem: abandoned at a young age, growing up in Chicago, even sharing the same street corner as the site of significant life events (including the living flag set up for the Columbian Exposition dedicatory parade and the "Superman" that Jimmy sees commit suicide). Yet in their only substantive verbal contact, James, the grandfather, reproaches his son (Jimmy's father, James William) and murkily notes that "you can't make up for lost time . . . you can't make up for lost time . . ." finally addressing Jimmy, "You're a good kid, y'know?" (335–36). As far as the reader knows, Jimmy and his grandfather remain isolated from one another, kept from knowing the shared connections between their stories.

In fact, we only see James Corrigan relate his childhood experiences in one scene, when he recounts his memories to his son's adopted daughter, Amy, in a brief section set in the early 1970s. Amy is writing a family history for a fourth-grade assignment, and James recalls: "Eighteen hundred and ninety-three, I do believe [. . .] well, then they took me to th' orphanage, I suppose [. . .] can't say as to how I really missed him [his father, William], either [. . .] The *fair?* Oh, I don't know . . . some kids burned it down, or something . . ." (283–84). From this exchange, we could infer that James's childhood narrative has been retold during this or similar conversations with Amy. More importantly, Amy and Jimmy are related by blood through their great-grandfather, as a diagram late in the novel read in conjunction with an earlier episode reveals (250, 357–58); however, this information remains out of Jimmy's purview. Though the reader remains aware of the impact of James's personal tragedy in the midst of the grand historical event that was the Columbian Exposition, it becomes clear that Jimmy will never know this, as any potential relationship with Amy is aborted by equal parts family tragedy and interpersonal awkwardness.[9]

The novel visually renders this isolation of private experience early on when Jimmy imagines his home picked up by an over-sized Superman and shaken until it crashes to the ground, where he eventually finds himself looking for his hypothetical son, Billy (50–53). Jimmy initially searches for his son, moving through tiers of panels set between two trees, the frame of which is visually transformed on the next page into a stage.[10] By the end of this sequence, Jimmy must smash in the disembodied head of his son to ease his son's pain, under the watchful eyes of the mouse theater-goers (all versions of Quimby the Mouse), who are seated to either side of this spectacle, standing in as surrogates for the reader. This is a miniature version how personal history operates within *Jimmy Corrigan*: characters are on display and are unaware of being observed, completely absorbed by present action and its emotional impact with little or no historical perspective or sense of context. Further, it also narrativizes the prototypical comics panel from the novel's "General Instructions" (see fig. 7.1). Here, Jimmy and Billy replace the mouse and cat, with Jimmy forced to reenact the smashing in of a head on the ground, his

intense emotional scene on display for observers, whose point of view he cannot access.

As James's and Jimmy's narratives progress, repeated (or near-repeated) images, locations, and symbols act as transitions and meta-narrative links. Some of these elements are visual or thematic, like the red bird on a tree branch which transitions from the narrative preface into the narrative proper (4–5). Versions of the same symbol transition from the Battle of Shiloh in 1862 to the hospital on the Exposition grounds in 1892 in Chicago and, finally, to the Medlife Clinicare center in Waukosha, Michigan, in the 1980s (99–104). Similarly, snow marks the beginning and end of some segments, and reappears at the conclusion of Jimmy's narrative, which continues into the non-narrative two-page spread at the close of the hardcover edition of the novel, featuring Jimmy in the arms of Superman and the accompanying text, "The End" (379–80). The irony of this compartmentalization comes to the fore in each protagonist's fantasies; for example, both James and Jimmy imagine stealing away from society with a bride, where presumably they can live outside of society (231–33, 331–33). In parallel, each imagines a life outside of history itself, the grandson repeating the unfulfilled fantasies of the grandfather. These extra-narrative connections exist to help bridge narrative segments but simultaneously emphasize the isolation of characters within their personal histories—though the novel has a shared symbolic register, it is available only to the novel's readers.

These visual and thematic repetitions are part of what Thierry Groensteen, in *The System of Comics*, terms *braiding* (*tressage*). Groensteen uses this term to address the extra-narrative and extra-sequential connections that can be constructed within graphic narratives: "braiding deploys itself simultaneously in two dimensions, requiring them to collaborate with each other: synchronically, that of the co-presence of panels on the surface of the same page; and diachronically, that of the reading, which recognizes in each new term of a series a recollection of an anterior term" that "far from ending in conflict [. . . resolves] in a semantic enrichment and a densification of the 'text' of the comic."[11] This "densification" of repeated visual terms reinforces their symbolic resonance, which allows them to operate simultaneously within each narrative and beyond any simple linear narrative structure.[12]

Groensteen's notion of braiding helps specify the interrelation of terms we have seen thus far. In *Jimmy Corrigan*, we can recognize *private* and *public* history as narrative modes that correspond to *diachronic* and *synchronic* modes. Diachronic private histories remain confined to their narrative space, as we have seen, but public history can operate synchronically, framing and ironically revealing the limitations of individual experience. The shared public history of Chicago, the Columbian Exposition, and the city itself create further connections accessible only to readers and those able to apprehend history as a larger totality.

The Irony of History in *Jimmy Corrigan*

As noted above, the definition of *exposition* in the "Corrigenda" features an illustration from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.[13] This image nearly repeats a panel from an earlier episode in the novel (214–16), in which young

Fig. 11.1. Ware's poster in *Jimmy Corrigan* resembles the original advertisement for the souvenir book, *Chicago of To-Day. Chicago of To-day: the Metropolis of the West* (Chicago: Acme Publishing and Engraving Co., 1891), title page.

James Corrigan and his red-haired love interest (called "the McGinty girl" by one of the workmen) sneak onto the fairgrounds of the Exposition on the day of his mother's funeral in the fall of 1892. The view is from the promenade of the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building, the largest exhibition hall of its day, of the fair's Wooded Island and some of the Court of Honor buildings. Emotionally, this is the peak of James Corrigan's personal narrative; the narration reads "He *can* see his house. He can see just about *everyone's* house. In fact it seems as if he can see the whole *world* from up here. But for him the whole world is for that moment the single strand of red hair which dances silently around his nose & eyelashes" (216). At this moment, on top of one of the Exposition's best vantage points, James can for a moment see beyond the personal to the broader world that encompasses his experience. But this vision is quickly foreclosed, his attention returning to the single strand of red hair right in front of him. The juxtaposition between public and private

histories is most stark in scenes like these. Though James Corrigan's story includes markers of the grand historical events that surround him, it is left to the reader to recognize the significance of those moments and thus the ironic distance between James's minutely rendered personal tragedy and the broad historical settings in which it occurs.

James's narrative is peppered with historical detail, beginning with the Chicago Water Tower, one of the few major buildings to survive the 1871 fire, which is immediately followed by a poster advertising "Chicago of To-Day, the Metropolis of the West" (72). These material signifiers, and many more in the first pages of the 1890s narrative, mark the historical specificity of the narrative. The poster, "Chicago of To-Day," for example, is slightly altered from advertisements for, and the title page of, a Chicago souvenir book produced in 1891, which was designed to promote the city for the upcoming Exposition (see fig. 11.1). This poster and the public signage that surrounds it collectively point to the wider social, cultural, and economic world of Chicago and the nation itself, whose largest symbol was the 1893 Columbian Exposition. But for much of James's narrative, one of the key symbols of the age, the Columbian Exposition, which is literally blocks away from where he lives, has little direct effect on him.[14]

The cultural symbolism of the World's Columbian Exposition cannot be understated. Designed to surpass Paris's 1889 Exposition Universelle, at which the Eiffel Tower was one of the main attractions, the Columbian Exposition was so named for the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage and to celebrate (or at least declare) the cultural power of the United States, as a whole, and Chicago, specifically. As American studies scholar Alan Trachtenberg observes, the Exposition "seemed the fruition of a nation, a culture, a whole society: the celestial city of man set upon a hill for all the world to behold [. . . it] seemed the triumph of America itself, the old republican ideal."[15] Moreover, as Arnold Lewis states, the Exposition occurred at "a special moment in American history, simultaneously a culmination of settlement and the beginning of a new stage of national culture."[16] In many ways burdened by its own overt symbolism, the Exposition was also a monumental undertaking, occupying much of the attention of Chicagoans for the better part of the early 1890s and attracting millions of national and international tourists.

When James and his father formally visit the Exposition, we are presented with the most sustained glimpse of the experience of the Exposition as public history. For a few brief pages, James's personal and public histories align as he and his father take a tour of the Grand Plaza, including the majestic view of the Court of Honor, Central Basin, and Lake Michigan in the distance (273); the Administration Building and the Columbian Fountain sculpture group (274); and the Agriculture (275) and Machinery Buildings on which the statuary from earlier in the narrative (86) is mounted (276). They briefly visit the other distinct part of the Exposition, the Midway Plaisance, which featured a number of ethnic and cultural scenes (quite stereotypically) from around the world (277) and small side attractions, like Eadweard Muybridge's Zoöpraxographical Hall (278).[17] In the Zoöpraxographical Hall, father and son see Muybridge's most famous photographic sequence—the galloping horse—projected by a device called a zoögyroscope or zoöpraxiscope, "a cross between a traditional optical toy (like the phenakistoscope) and a magic

Fig. 11.2. Main elevator, Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building. James W. Shepp, *Shepp's World's Fair Photographed* (Chicago: Globe Bible Publishing Co., 1893), 45.

Fig. 11.3. Living flag display and vice-presidential reviewing stand for World's Columbian Exposition dedicatory parade, October 20, 1892. J. F. Martin, *Martin's World's Fair Album-Atlas and Family Souvenir* (Chicago: C. Ropp & Sons, 1892), 118.

lantern."[18] Here, James witnesses a key innovation, sequenced photography, a precursor to film, which is graphically displayed (for the reader's benefit) in sequenced comic panels. Previously, he had viewed a sequence of images of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 using a magic lantern, a popular light-box used to project images (136–37), but this historic next step in the projection of images passes by nearly unremarked in James's recollection of events.

Ultimately, James and his father end their visit at the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building, billed at the time as the largest building in the world—one of the few pieces of public knowledge that James's narration notes (279). The Manufactures Building was one of the centerpieces of the Exposition and included the largest amount of exhibit space, serving as the site of the Exposition's dedication on October 22, 1892, and allowing hundreds of thousands of people to stand inside before the exhibits were installed. They ascend the massive elevator to the rooftop pavilion, which parallels the trip James made with the red-haired girl months before (see fig. 11.2). This elevator, the first that most of the Exposition's visitors had ever encountered, highlights the disparity of scales between the Exposition and its comparatively diminutive visitors.[19] Visually, the narrative does the same, rendering the full height of the Manufactures building (over two hundred feet) in its totality, leaving James and his father as mere specks (279–80). James is, of course, abandoned here, imaginatively rendered in one panel as a small child being tossed from the pavilion (280).[20] At this moment, at the summit of the largest building in the world, at the climax of one of the most significant cultural scenes of its age and a key moment of history writ large, James's limited emotional experience, devastating though it must be, is finally only appreciated from the reader's distanced perspective.

Though the historical perspective isolates James at the end of his narrative, it also links together synchronically a number of passages from both James's and Jimmy's stories, each centered on the same Chicago street corner. A few months before being abandoned, situated between his two main trips to the Exposition ground, James directly participates in history itself when he is chosen to be part of the living flag comprised of schoolchildren dressed in red, white, and blue for the dedicatory parade on October 20, 1892 (223).[21] In the novel, this event is rendered minutely across a few scenes, highlighting the effects it has on young James: being chosen to participate, watching children separate themselves by the color of their garments (thus breaking a moment of supposed unity into factions), waiting for the parade itself, and finally returning home to a disappointed father (221–30). The dedication parade, not actually presented on the page, was in fact one of the largest events prior to the Exposition, featuring some eighty thousand marchers and five hundred thousand spectators and centered on the living flags and the adjacent platform for dignitaries, including then-Vice President Levi Morton (see fig. 11.3).[22] However, at this moment, the novel and James's individual perspective limit the scope of what can be seen, and the broad, historical impact of the moment is withheld visually and substantively.

The same street corner participates in the most direct visual repetition in the novel, as the corner on which the living flag is set recurs throughout both narratives, visually leapfrogging its way through history. This single location serves the most narrative duty throughout, changing architecturally as time

progresses: in 1871, before and after the Great Fire (134–35), in 1892 and '93 (73–75, 222–24); and in the 1980s (15–16, 373–76). These architectural shifts reflect the material changes in Chicago's architecture from James Corrigan's to Jimmy's time, acting as a register of actual historical and cultural shifts. Historically, the Post Office corner against which the living flag is set in 1892 was eventually replaced in the 1960s and '70s by the Chicago Federal Center, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (three buildings completed in 1964, 1973, and 1974), which form the backdrop of both James's and Jimmy's experiences.[23] This form of modern architecture, inspired by Mies van der Rohe, dominates Jimmy's Chicago landscape, including the architecture outside Jimmy's office window, which we see most prominently early and late in the novel.

Visual repetition ultimately functions as a method of bringing motifs together to unite the novel as a whole. In one of the novel's first scenes, Jimmy witnesses a man dressed in a Superman costume jump from a roof to his death (15–17). Versions of the Superman figure recur through Jimmy's story: his mother's one-night stand (1–3), the jumper outside his office, and the malevolent Superman in his fantasy life (50–51). In the novel's final sequence, Jimmy looks out his office window at the impersonal office buildings across the street, now partly obscured by snow, and begins to imagine himself in the position of the suicidal Superman (375–76). A new coworker catches Jimmy's attention and draws him back into personal experience. The final, two-page spread of the narrative features Jimmy held in the arms of a flying Superman, now converted into a savior, against a field of snow. In a rare moment of hope, Jimmy's appropriated bit of shared public symbolism, Superman, carries him away from the narrative's repetition of personal failure and disappointment. At the novel's conclusion, Jimmy still remains unaware of how he is connected to his grandfather's narrative, and to Amy Corrigan, because his perspective is limited by its inward focus. This, then, is the fundamental irony of history in *Jimmy Corrigan*: only the novel's readers can create a synthetic narrative that brings together personal and public histories, braided visually and thematically together into a comprehensive historical vision.

Notes

1. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000). This is true of the hardcover edition; the paperback edition (2003) prints these pages before a two-page narrative vignette set in 2002, which depicts Amy working in a hospital. All further references to this text are indicated in parentheses.

2. For some observations on non-narrative material in *Jimmy Corrigan*, see Thomas A. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 869–90, especially 879–84.

3. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink, 1993), 67.

4. Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), ix.

5. Versions of this iconography—Quimby standing over, preparing to destroy, or trying to hide a disembodied head—recur throughout Ware's "Quimby the Mouse" comics. For examples, see *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003), 46–52, 54, 57–59, 62, 66.

6. This diagram originally appeared in Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 6 (Seattle: Fan-

tagraphics, 1995). It is one of a number of schematic diagrams Ware has produced for his works, including the fold-out dust jacket for the hardcover edition of *Jimmy Corrigan*. See also the mural Ware created for Dave Eggers's 826 Valencia writing center, reproduced on the back cover of the collected edition of *Quimby the Mouse* and in Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 86–87. See Isaac Cates's essay in this volume for a reading of these diagrams.

7. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 25.

8. Joseph Witek addresses comics' unique ability to display history: "sequential art does what prose inherently cannot do; it supplies a visual and immediate image of cause [. . .] followed by effect," from which he argues that visual juxtaposition (the sequencing of panels and manner in which visual art can display its narrative connections) offers a unique and perhaps privileged approach to the presentation of history. Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 26.

9. Jimmy and Amy are, in fact, distant blood relations, another piece of information reserved for the reader, as revealed in a non-narrative sequence (360–61).

10. Compare to the two-page "Summary of our story thus far" (88–89), where a similar tree represents the male Corrigan family tree.

11. Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 147.

12. Martha Kuhlman applies the notion of *tressage* to her reading of Art Speigelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*. See Martha Kuhlman, "The Traumatic Temporality of Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 40.5 (2007): 849–66, 855.

13. Ware meticulously researched the details of the Exposition, as he recounts to Daniel Raeburn, "I was leading up to the World's Columbian Exposition for dozens and dozens of pages. *Years*, actually. I have stacks of books and I've been collecting photographs, posters, reading up on it to decide what to put in and what to leave out." Chris Ware, qtd. in Daniel Raeburn, "The Smartest Cartoonist on Earth," *The Imp* 3 (1999): 9.

14. The Exposition's southwest corner was bounded by Stony Island Avenue and Sixty-Seventh Street. The Corrigan home is located at Wharton and Sixty-Sixth (though Wharton seems to be a fictitious street). From a tree in the yard, James can see over the Exhibition fence to the Terminal Station and administration buildings, which is consistent with a home on Sixty-Sixth Street (146).

15. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 230.

16. Arnold Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow: Europeans, Chicago's Loop, and the World's Columbian Exposition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 184.

17. "The carnival atmosphere of the Midway Plaisance confirmed by contrast the dignity of the [Court of Honor's] center. And, of course, the center represented America through its exhibitions, the outlying exotic Midway stood for the rest of the world in subordinate relation." Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 213. For more on the relationship between the Midway and the rest of the Exposition, see Julie K. Brown, *Contesting Images: Photography and the World's Columbian Exposition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), especially 103–6.

18. Stanley Appelbaum, *The Chicago World's Fair of 1893: A Photographic Record* (New York: Dover, 1980), 102. See also Brown, *Contesting Images*, 104.

19. The disparity in scales has been noted by a number of scholars: the sheer size of the buildings "complicated the relationship between exterior art and interior function. The public was dazzled by spectacular facades while exhibitors struggled with huge interiors of varying effectiveness." Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow*, 180. Further, a "sense of evanescence" surrounded the Exposition, due to its fleeting nature; see Neil Harris, "Memory and the White City," in *Grand Illusions: Chicago's World's Fair of 1893*, ed. Neil Harris, Wim de Wit, James Gilbert, and Robert W. Rydell (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1993), 3–32.

20. This is visually foreshadowed by a brief scene of a worker falling from the Electricity Building (144–45).

21. There were two flags, inset on the corners of Chicago's Post Office, which faced Adams Street: the northeastern flag faced Dearborn Street, the northwestern flag faced Clark Street. The flag presented in the novel features many fewer children than the actual historical one.

22. "The Parade: All Chicago Through the Streets—Sights along the Line of March," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 21, 1892, 1, 6.

23. Ware also treats the impact of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in a video project, *Lost Buildings* (2004), produced in collaboration Ira Glass and Tim Samuelson for the show *This American Life*. The twenty-two-minute documentary recounts Tim Samuelson's story of meeting Mies van der Rohe while the Chicago Federal Center was being built. See also Werner Blaser, ed., *Mies van der Rohe: Federal Center Chicago* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2004). For an analysis of Ware's use of architecture in his work, see Daniel Worden's essay in this volume.

Autobiography with Two Heads: *Quimby the Mouse*

BENJAMIN WIDISS

One of the central tenets of autobiography criticism is what Philippe Lejeune terms "the autobiographical pact," the "contract of identity that is sealed by the [author's] proper name," ensuring that author and narrator are one and the same.[1] Another position, however, insists that the narrator him- or herself is inevitably sundered, that there is an insurmountable gap between the "narrating I" who "tells the autobiographical narrative" and the "narrated I" who is its subject.[2] These are not mutually exclusive claims—the first makes a quasi-juridical promise, the greatest force of which is extratextual, a promise that holds in spite of the internal interpretive complications introduced by the second—but they do together allow for some intriguing questions. Could an author who felt the gulf between earlier narrated experience and the present moment of narration particularly poignantly, for example, find a way to make use of the pact as a suturing device? Would the effects of such a device be limited to the social life of the text, or would they pervade its interior? If the latter, what sorts of rhetorical or representational strategies might they give rise to, and what steps might the author take in an attempt to cement their hold?

The original readers of the material amassed in *Quimby the Mouse* (2003) might have been quite surprised to learn that it would one day occasion such questions. Absurd, surreal, repetitive, and disjointed, sometimes sacrificing narrative almost entirely in favor of intense scrutiny of a single moment or mood, most of the strips—as first published in the University of Texas at Austin's student newspaper, the *Daily Texan*, in 1990 and 1991—make no explicit autobiographical claims whatsoever. And as collected in volumes 2 and 4 of *The ACME Novelty Library* (1994), they remain largely elliptical and elusive, if gaining some modicum of transparency through the process of aggregation.[3] But the "reprinted, renovated, [and] redesigned" assemblage that Ware released as a single, expanded volume in 2003 is, more or less literally, a different story.[4] The crucial difference arises from the several-thousand-word essay with which Ware introduces the book. While Ware only fleetingly discusses the comics that follow, he expounds at some length on his situation as he created them and grows yet more expansive in relating blissful memories of his boyhood a decade earlier and his thwarted attempts to reconstitute them as a grown man a decade later, at the time of the book's publication. These autobiographical confidences corroborate, as well, those proffered in a hand-

ful of previously uncollected multi-page strips Ware adds in the center of the volume. Thus repositioned, this collection of what Ware grudgingly deems his "earliest 'publishable' work" yields an account of personal as well as stylistic origins (1). But considerable tension emerges between the childhood Ware is desperate to recapture and the apprentice comics he is almost as eager to disavow, the former experience obliquely bound up in the latter artwork. The specific genius of the volume lies in Ware's management of these intercalated personal histories, his savvy application of formal strategies developed in his comics to the book as a whole. The result amplifies not only the autobiographical content of the work, but also the potential of autobiography itself.

Reading the Strips: Themes and Variations

Ware's fascination with modes of representing (and complicating) temporal progress is well known, a logical outgrowth of his highly self-conscious and theoretical approach to the comics medium. Thomas Bredehoft's discussion of this facet of Ware's undertaking in *Jimmy Corrigan* reads the novel as repeatedly demonstrating the ways in which "the architecture of the comics page" may be exploited to "challenge our habit of understanding the narrative line as pervasively linear and sequenced in time." "In a book deeply preoccupied with the passing of time," he writes, Ware both employs ambiguous layouts that "allow a single group of panels to be read simultaneously in more than one linear sequence" and offers the reader various cut-out models that "even if constructed only in the imagination, hint at the possibility of altering or even halting the flow of narrative time-sequence" through our intuitive sense that three-dimensional objects endure across the strata of time.[5]

Quimby, too, evidences Ware's temporal concerns in a thoroughgoing trafficking in aging, nostalgia, and loss. Individual strips already make use of the representational strategies Bredehoft describes: an early meditation on memory counterpoises three straightforward vignettes of six panels each—simple, loosely slapstick interactions running left to right and top to bottom, as per convention—to a far more convoluted set of excurses on itinerant objects and fugitive associations measuring time's passage (10) (see fig. 12.1). Indeed, the strip's overall design is considerably denser than that of a similarly themed page Bredehoft deems emblematic in *Jimmy Corrigan*.[6] Aside from the slapstick insets, each lineation requires the reader to determine anew if the conjunctions linking a series of panels are those of movement through time or space, shifts in perspective or scale, or contiguities of mental or physical association. Temporal progress occurs in three and probably four directions and sometimes is indeterminate (e.g., the horizontal row at the bottom of the page). A particularly pleasing counterintuitive layout dictates that the reader follow the series of thin vertical panels up the right-hand side of the strip in order to imaginatively descend the staircase depicted along the way. Rather than pointing in any single direction, the strip curls into and out of itself at multiple points, even as it also both encourages the eye upwards through its battery of arrows pointing toward the top of the page and simultaneously drags the eye down to the inky substratum that reveals all the rest as midnight reflection.

Ware organizes the strip, then, to encourage traversals in multiple direc-

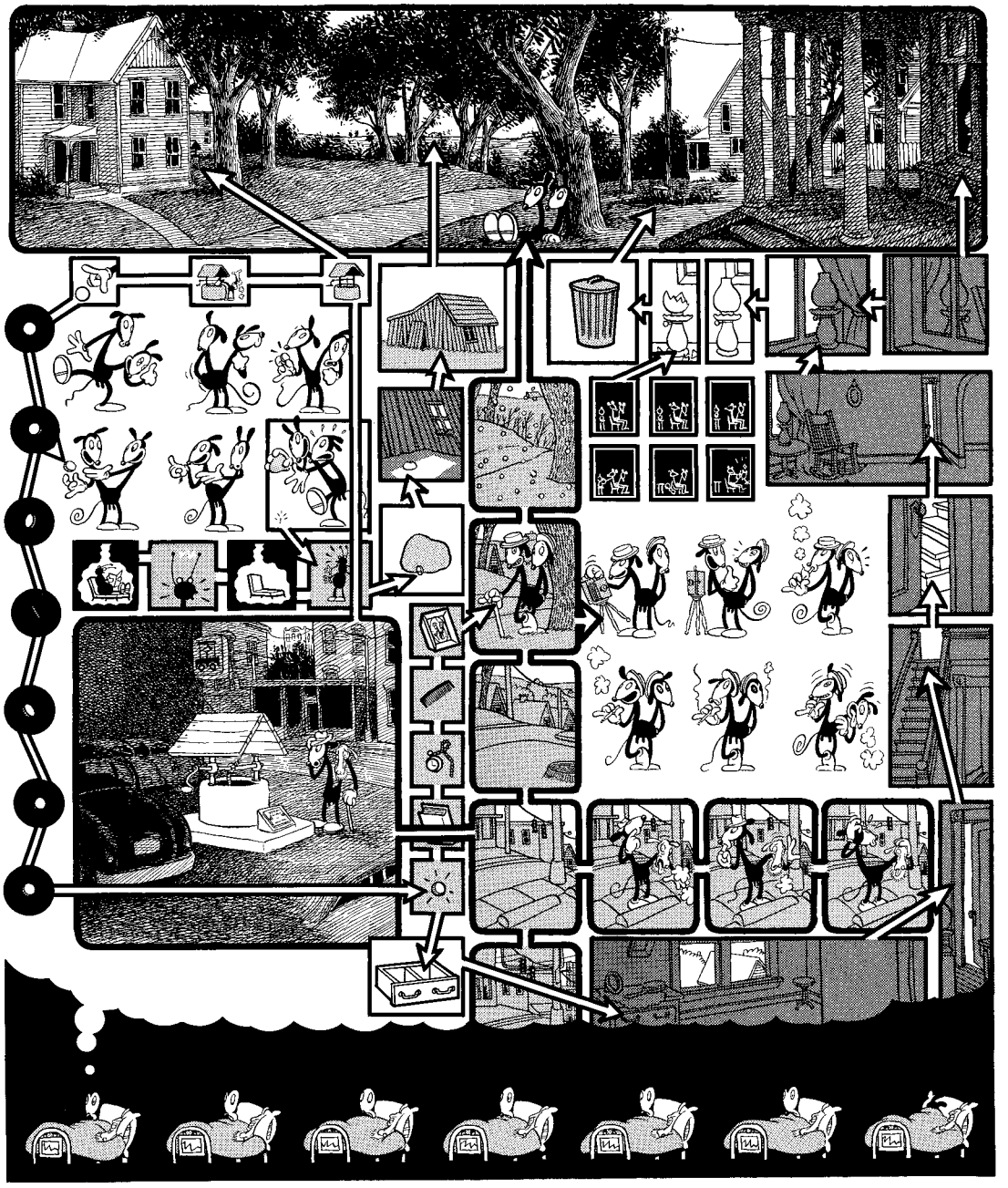


Fig. 12.1. Arrows and eddies. Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003), 11.

tions. If its overarching concern is the passage of time, and with it the onset of age and frailty, the experience of reading stands poised to undermine that inexorable progress. Forestalling, reversing, even eddying within a pocket of the past all seem at least as easy as settling into the present moment. Several nearby comics sport similar layouts; indeed, the first half of the book is dominated by this two-headed Quimby (sometimes introduced as "Quimbies the Mouse") struggling with age and loss. While the two heads appear to have begun life as twins, one repeatedly tires, sickens, rockets to old age, or explodes, rehearsing the moment of its demise again and again, even though each piece attenuates that trajectory through the vibrant display of other times.

Finally, the second head disappears for good, and the book's latter half largely details a single-headed Quimby's dysfunctional relationship with Sparky the Cat, a bodiless feline whom Quimby spends most of his time trying to rid himself of. However, after kicking and hitting it, misplacing it, burying it, bartering it, fishing with it, sending it out to sea, and other abuses, Quimby usually frantically tries to recover it and restore its health. Quimby's emotional reversals leave him scurrying to undo the effects of his actions, but Sparky's unflagging resilience ultimately questions Quimby's agency more deeply. This implication is explored most cogently in "I HATE YOU," a late strip that depicts Sparky surviving several point-blank gunshots unaltered, instead popping up in Quimby's path again and again (59) (see fig. 12.2). With each reappearance, the strip's boisterous declarations of clarity and closure are further undermined. The "I" Quimby sets up and apart from Sparky in paint-the-town red at the top of the page becomes, by the third rung from the bottom, his own body trapped in a rehearsal of the failed romance he is attempting to quit. He "falls" for Sparky again, into the white space of the backwards *F*, launching the implicit word "fell," and staggers out of the strip, physically and emotionally overcome. Quimby's debilitation is further underlined in the way the strip shunts him back and forth increasingly obviously and brutally, implying a fatalism wholly at odds with the false sense of freedom he enjoys at the start.

This kind of trajectory—hustling Quimby, and the reader's eye, along a convoluted but unidirectional path—is even more characteristic of the second half of the book than the circuitous, burrowing itinerary is of the first.[7] But while a straightforward traversal of the whole shepherds the reader toward the latter narrative mode and also reproduces it, writ large, Ware exploits the potential of the book *as* a volume, both in the sense of a coherent literary tome and as a literal "quantity or mass [. . . of] matter occupying space" to explore alternatives.[8] Measuring this accomplishment adequately, however, requires a fuller description of its component parts. Over and against the discrete and reiterative nature of its individual strips, it is possible to construe a minimal narrative, in which the second Quimby head hovers at the edge of death for some time and then disappears, leaving behind a solo Quimby who subsequently takes up with Sparky (perhaps in compensatory fashion) before repeatedly trying to ditch her as well. Ware confirms this overarching sequence in the introduction, indicating that the first set of comics was drawn in Texas in the latter part of 1990 as his beloved grandmother died, the second over the following six months as he envisioned and then embarked

Fig. 12.2. Switchbacks pushing constantly forward. Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003), 59.


I HATE YOU.
THIS TIME.
Really.
I just decided.
I THOUGHT YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW.
EVEN THOUGH I HAVE Nothing TO SAY TO YOU.
IN FACT
I DON'T CARE IF I EVER SEE YOU AGAIN
BESIDES,
I NEVER THINK ABOUT YOU ANYMORE.
& Why
I EVER
NOW
ME OT MYSTERY A 2I
IN THE FIRST PLACE
FOR YOU
I'm JUST TRYING TO BE AS CLEAR AS POSSIBLE.
SO THAT IF I EVER DO HAPPEN TO SEE YOU
AGAIN
I'LL KNOW EXACTLY
WHAT TO SAY.

on the move to Chicago, "leaving behind [. . .] a relationship which [he] had completely ruined through selfish, egocentric behavior" (1). The revelation of autobiographical content lying behind the work is entirely new to this edition. Ware provides no such contextualizing in the earlier *ACME* publications, nor does either of them (or the intervening issue) include the series of sustained first-person monologues on the subject of Ware's relationships with his mother and grandparents that provide the bulk of the text in the pieces at the book's center (28–31, 34–41).[9]

The Mature Style, and Its Stakes

Ware thus seems at pains, a dozen years after the fact, to gloss the personal stakes of comics that might otherwise read simply as formal experiments and thematic explorations. The introduction and the added strips make it clear that Ware adored his grandmother and delighted in her company as a youth. This in turn establishes—although Ware never says as much—that the senescent second Quimby head represents Ware's grandmother: a notional twin until her age suddenly imposed itself. Equally, while the introduction dispenses with Ware's lost girlfriend in a sentence, she is obviously the model for Sparky. The point is not that Ware *is* Quimby, who remains a surrealized mouse, but that interpretive purchase and coherence are both augmented by recognizing their close affiliation.

With these confidences, not just the introduction but the book as a whole becomes a form of autobiography. Purists might disagree, pointing out the fictionalizations and displacements on almost every page. But even Philippe Lejeune, who begins his discussion of the autobiographical pact with an extremely restrictive definition of the genre as the retrospective prose narrative of an individual life in which the narrator and the principle character are identical—disallowing memoir, personal novel, poetry, essay, and self-portraiture, to say nothing of short-form comics—ultimately concludes that autobiography is instead a "mode of reading" that authorial exhortations may establish as "the ultimate truth to which their texts aspire."[10] While he allows the evidence of interviews and ancillary essays in formulating such expectations, he gives pride of place to "the codes of publication [. . .] that fringe of the printed text which, in reality, *controls* the entire reading [. . .] even including the ambiguous game of prefaces."[11] Gérard Genette has subsequently defined this "fringe," citing Lejeune, as the paratext, among which any prefatory material plays a preeminent role in delineating authorial intent.[12]

Genette gives special consideration to "later" prefaces, those written for editions after the first, and he argues that while such prefaces often speak to the author's evolution in the interval between original and subsequent publication, they generally come round to insisting on a lack of fundamental change.[13] Ware's game is considerably more complex. Even as he "seals" the work's autobiographical content with the preface, he also pushes the whole of the book away. He insists in oversize type at the center of the opening page that the work contains no more than "immature, generally ill-conceived, and fairly sentimental *student efforts*" (1) that he is rereleasing only out of a sense of camaraderie with and indebtedness to his publisher. It is left to the fine print to reconcile the distance Ware feels required to establish as a measure

of his professional growth and that which he collapses by claiming the work as autobiography.

While extensive self-deprecation is standard packaging for most Ware publications, the particulars of his rhetoric here—his insistence on holding the material at arm's length rather than representing its weaknesses as his own—are worthy of note. An obvious contrast is found in the mini-comic on the softbound *Jimmy Corrigan*'s back cover, in which Ware depicts himself plunging into a dumpster to rescue a discarded copy of the hardback edition. He then takes it home to care for it alongside all his other "children"—the other copies of the book rejected by a hostile establishment that refuses to recognize graphic novels as literature.[14] *Jimmy Corrigan* is a vulnerable baby to be clasped to the breast; *Quimby* is more like an awkward and unwelcome teenager prematurely engendered in the author's own late adolescence.

"General artistic immaturity" and "technical or literary inadequacy" (1), further faults that Ware lays at the book's feet, are surprising indictments of work that dazzles for its structural ingenuity and masterful craftsmanship, its effortless retooling of countless conventions from a century of comics history. But they read into Ware's much broader critique of his chosen medium, his repeated claims that comics have yet to fulfill their potential as art or literature.[15] In an interview with Gary Groth conducted in 1997, while Ware was writing *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware impugns his own work repeatedly. His self-accusations of immaturity constitute a leitmotif throughout the exchange;[16] he refers dismissively to his earlier "indulgent autobiographical stuff" and relays a fear that had he not let go of Quimby when he did he would have been "trapped doing that stupid mouse shit until [he] died."[17] He speaks admiringly of Tolstoy's "well-rounded" characters, his "ability to present all sides of life in every way and to present every circumstance in a way that did not seem either sentimental or manipulative," and aspires to his own Hemingway-esque elimination of "style" in the service of "what's actually happening in the story." This he plans to achieve by stripping from his illustrations anything in excess of their iconic functioning as "concepts" or "signifiers that you take in rapidly and then move on to the next one."[18]

While any formal analysis of Ware's work establishes immediately that this is hardly an exhaustive description of his visual accomplishments in *Jimmy Corrigan* and thereafter, it does help explain the evolution of his aesthetic, and with it his retrospective dissatisfaction with *Quimby*'s dense layouts and the gestural richness of its cartooning, to say nothing of the volume's relentless stylistic experimentation and surreal liberties. One of Ware's most succinct discussions of his mature style is found in an interview conducted by Rebecca Bengal nine years later. Here, Ware characterizes his streamlined draftsmanship as governed by "the rules of typography" and cites among its advantages that it "keeps [him] at a sensible distance from the story." The move from the "sentimentality" of the juvenilia to the "sensible distance" of maturity entails both abstraction and disinterested observation. Ware explains: "I see the black outlines of cartoons as visual approximations of the way we remember general ideas, and I try to use naturalistic color underneath them to simultaneously suggest a perceptual experience, which I think is more or less the way we actually experience the world *as adults*; we don't really 'see' anymore after a certain age, we spend our time naming and categorizing and identifying and

figuring out how everything all fits together."[19] The price of this extremely sophisticated account of perception and intellection is a radical decrease in the visceral expression of emotion. The continual adjustments to Quimby's physical and affective posture conveyed by minute variations in the rudimentary lines that construct him give way to persistent conceptual delineations recorded by the more stolid outlines defining bodies in the later work.

The strips in *Quimby* themselves trace the early impulses toward Ware's mature style. There are outlying exceptions, but the gradual trend over the course of the book is from antic energy and continual caricatural variation at the start to a more consistent, schematic, and static representational vocabulary near the end. At the limit, a series of later strips, including that shown in figure 12.2, frequently reduces bodily movement to a minimum and does away with Quimby's eyes and mouth (thus effacing facial expression altogether) for several panels at a stretch (54–59). The transmutation of dialogue to a disembodied voiceover further distances the reader from the action depicted and further diminishes the opportunity for affective identification with the characters, who begin to feel more like illustrative tokens than individual agents. Ware seems to comment sardonically on this representational shift in a strip that appears just after this sequence (61) (see fig. 12.3). Quimby spots Sparky in a park and hides behind a tree, attracted but also chary of involving himself with it again. Holding himself aloof, he wanders off and stumbles upon a small rock that "sort of looks like" his head and resolves, laughing, to "carry it around and show it to people."[20] The simple, self-satisfied conclusion, like the easy itinerary toward it, is a world away from the convolutions of the earlier Quimbies strips. The possibility suggested by the arc of the Quimbies and Sparky runs—that a supernumerary head could come to define a part of the self—is replaced here by a defensive distancing and a compensatory light humor. Quimby turns his back on the welter of emotions sparked by affective entanglements in favor of a self-contained little joke, his projection of his own personality onto a mute lump of stone a related substitution for the volumes of interpersonal memory bespoken by the photo at the heart of figure 12.1.

The strip offers a playful commentary on Ware's movement toward the limits of visual simplification and impersonal distance to be found in the occasional pieces he has designed as covers for *McSweeney's*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and the Penguin *Candide* and for the thin edges of the boards binding his own *ACME Report*. In these works, Ware reduces the human form to a stack (or even a pair) of circles—an extreme of geometric simplification and static positioning that is legible as a parody of the comparatively restrained representational streamlining of bodies in the mature style. The miniscule heads perched atop enormous round trunks on these covers underscore the challenges they pose to affective identification; personalities—following the line suggested by Quimby's rock here—are simplified to quips. The bodies, meanwhile, resemble figurines or playing pieces to be manipulated according to the godlike, trans-historical pretensions of works whose fleeting episodes in sweeping histories of art, literature, and comics are themselves a playful extension of the multigenerational sagas detailed in Ware's mature, novelistic undertakings. While Ware acknowledges that *Jimmy Corrigan* is "semi-autobiographical" and continues to dole elements of himself out to characters

Fig. 12.3. A rock in a hard place. Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003), 61.

in subsequent works, he seems to be gravitating toward a Balzacian perch well above the fray.[21] In this, he is fulfilling a program set out for himself in his sketchbook in 1991, presumably as he was attempting to leave Quimby behind. Ware exhorts himself, "DO STORIES ABOUT EVERYONE *EXCEPT* YOURSELF!" and shortly thereafter sketches out a plan: "Start w/ Quimby the mouse // move out from cartoon // to autobiography // to fiction."[22]

Accomplishing this evolution also entails Ware's largely eschewing the furious stylistic experimentation that characterizes *Quimby*. While its variety of approaches testifies to Ware's mastery of comics history, and thus might be read as the mark of a consummate professionalism, to Ware it is apprentice work, a mere register of the search for a technique of his own.[23] The preservation of stylistic multiplicity in the sketchbooks published as *The ACME Novelty Datebook* suggests that Ware's facility in these many modes continues to serve him as a release or distraction, as a less-mediated record of daily experience and reflections, and as an avenue to explore ideas that subsequently appear in his more polished form. Despite Ware's commitment to that polish, he has chosen not to paper over the messier origins of his work, instead publishing *Quimby* and the sketchbooks, related projects of reclamation that both debuted in 2003.[24] His motive for releasing this material could be completist or financial, but the primary stake seems to be supplementing the "finished" or "mature" comics with a more raw and immediate record of self-expression. This work, in turn, serves as a relay point back to Ware's earliest artistic production as a child, referenced on the first pages of both *Quimby* and volume 1 of the *Datebook*. In the latter, Ware imagines visiting his former self, the one he describes in *Quimby* as "crouched on the carpet of [his] room, drawing pictures of grimacing musclemen in tights" (1). Ware asks his eight-year-old avatar if he isn't "worried [his drawing is] not good enough, or what people will think of you if they see it?" (1). The succinct "nah" he receives in response not only serves as a counterpoint to the older Ware's concern that the sketchbook's contents are "kind of personal," but also stands in marked counterpoint to the relentless rhetoric of failure with which Ware wraps his books and, more diffusely, to his investment in a streamlined semiotics that privileges communication over all other goals.[25]

Returning Home, and Digging In

The momentary standstill to which the adult Ware is brought by his childhood self's insouciance—which is to say his obvious self-sufficiency, his total immersion in the act of drawing—betrays a degree of envy. Ware explores this emotion far more fully in the introduction to *Quimby*, yoking the distance he feels from his former aesthetic means and goals to a much more thoroughgoing evocation of a lost time and place. The essay follows Ware on a return visit to Omaha, his home until the age of sixteen and that of his grandparents. At the time of his writing, Ware has not lived in Omaha for almost two decades and has not been back for seven years, but he reports an "unreasonable and nearly religious sort of devotion to its memory" that forestalls the possibility of living "the rest of [his] life in indifferent peace" (1). Ware is tortured by this lost Omaha. "I dream about it almost every night," he writes, "in one of a limitless number of inversions, recombinations, and reorganizations of detail

that bring back to life the dead, the now old, and the bulldozed, always with a clarity that convinces me upon waking, for at least a second or two, that my life since has been nothing but a farce I've had to endure and wear under some sort of impersonal institutional compulsion, like a private school sportcoat [*sic*], or paper hospital slippers" (1). This is very close to the territory of the Quimbies comics, in which meandering itineraries through richly detailed memories all but overwhelm the glum and straitened present. More broadly, the "limitless inversions, recombinations, and reorganizations" of the same basic material also seem cognate to the endless stylistic and structural variations wrought on two or three fundamental themes and storylines in the whole of *Quimby*, and this seething variation would then stand opposed to the more standardized, impersonal look of his later work.

Ware allows that his proper place is in the present—"the 'normal now' . . . where I belong, I guess"—but also does not hide "the feeling—it masquerading in the sensation of genuine conviction—that somehow, somewhere" those "memories and experiences" of his Omaha childhood "are all still really *there*," and that if he could just "find some way to *get* to them, wherever it is that they are," he would be "happy again" (1). Similarly, while he clearly is deeply invested in his current mode of cartooning, he is not insensible of what it leaves behind. The accomplishment of his introduction is to reposition that temporal and psychological distance as spatial: "Somewhere (not just sometime) [. . .] all of these things are still *there*" (1). *Quimby*'s contents already attest to a version of this conviction. In the comics created during the period of Ware's grandmother's decline, her house (abandoned some years before in favor of a retirement facility in Texas) frequently appears as a ghostly gray half-tone image.[26] A more starkly rendered Quimby repeatedly attempts to enter this faded figure for the past, but almost always fails (16–22).[27] A single strip, created years later, does grant Quimby full run of the house, but casts the experience as a recurring dream of fruitlessly searching every room for his grandmother long after her death (34–35).[28] The final panels show Quimby waking up in his own bedroom in the present moment, lamenting the fact that he has forced himself to throw away even so mundane a piece of memorabilia as the tin foil that protected his grandmother's toaster tray. Daniel Raeburn points out that the thin, tremulous line that characterizes the bulk of the piece thickens and firms up into what Ware defines as his "platonic black line" in these last frames, "marking the end of [Quimby's] memory and the start of his return to reality."[29] The comparison underscores that "reality"—in this piece that postdates almost everything else in the book by a decade—follows the dictates of Ware's mature style. The space of dreams and memory, then, is conveyed by a wavering line that, while not the same as any of those that Ware employs in the older material that makes up the rest of the book, likewise stands opposed to his contemporary aesthetic.

Ware places this strip at the exact center of the volume, and there is considerable force to be found in the notion that the core of the book might be read as a locus of lost time. In the introduction, Ware follows his strange conviction that the past might still exist somewhere with the suggestion that his closest approximation to finding such a space has been to return to the physical sites of his youth. This particular trip to Omaha, however, for a long while is singularly disenchanting. From the moment of his arrival, the ex-

perience strikes Ware as "flat." "Houses and trees and buildings looked both strange and oddly unfamiliar," he reports, and when he finally gets up the courage to visit his grandmother's house, since bought by a Baptist church, he discovers that it is repainted a "tongue-scum beige" and marred by "a boxy cinder-block addition they'd attached to the former entry, blotting out the window to the kitchen which was, to [Ware], the center of the house" (2). The house—the place, Ware says, "possibly where the most 'me' used to be"—is now as inaccessible and cold to him as it is to Quimby on the invariably wintry nights of the comic strips created a dozen years before (2). To Ware's surprise and delight, however, he discovers that his estrangement from everything on the land is offset by the extent to which he knows the land itself. The "curves of the streets and the shapes of the hills and bridges that [he] was travelling around, over, and under" reveal themselves as having engendered "spatial rivulets that had patiently eaten away at [his] mind [. . .] unique tunnels [. . .] through which everything else in [his] memory [. . .] seemed [. . .] to have been poured [. . .] into [. . .] the intestinal, antfarm head of an Omaha Nebraska brain" (2).

The essay making these claims silently fashions the book itself into a third structure parallel to Omaha's topography and the interior of Ware's head. The essay, too, worms its way about, leaving behind a crisp and balanced layout on the book's first page for a piecemeal hodgepodging into asymmetrical clumps of available space on the next, and then tunneling into the lower-right corner of page forty-two and thereafter to the lower left of the book's last page. Given Ware's extraordinary skill as a graphic designer, to say nothing of the fact that removing almost any one of the inset bits of Quimbiana on pages 1 or 2 would make room for the whole essay before the jump, this can hardly be an accident. Rather, it suggests that Ware's grasp of what Bredehoft calls "the architecture of the comics page" extends in new fashion here to that of the prose page and the book as well. Recast as a spatial volume, the book itself may be navigated in a manner akin to Omaha's undulating byways, the inside of Ware's cranium, or—to add yet another analogue—the circuitous warrens of the Quimbies strips. And the grail of Ware's grandmother's house, waiting at its heart, is likewise inflated to an occupiable space. The volume, then, instantiates an antithesis to the amusing rock that Quimby finds in the late Sparky strip. The latter is a found object with a superficial resemblance to Quimby's head, while the book is a built environment, created entirely by Ware, with layers of historical strata that testify to the variegated contents of his own head. Quimby plans to "carry [the rock] around and show it to people" for a momentary laugh; the book will be taken up by those interested in sustained excavation and will reward the diligent with a traversal of the very conduits of Ware's psyche.

Reading into the Volume

The stakes of Ware's autobiographical pact only begin with his signature, then; more substantial are the effects of the ontological play implied by this network of analogues. Ware finesses the division between narrating and narrated "I"s by proposing topographical experience as constitutive of the self and then reconstituting that experience in and through the book. Ware is not

Quimby any more than he is Quimby, of course, but through this larger likeness he introduces a productive new slippage into the work of autobiography. Gene Kannenberg Jr. reads "Ware's insistence on treating each issue of *ACME* as a unified design space" as placing his output squarely in the tradition of artists' books, quoting Johanna Drucker's characterization of said works as those that are "self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form."[30] With the republishing of *ACME* material in *Quimby*, Ware goes a step beyond his scrupulous creation and integration of every bit of content in the earlier volumes, fundamentally rethinking not only what meaning might be conveyed by the book's structure, to use Drucker's terms, but also what presence might be housed within it. To resuscitate another set of terms from earlier in this essay, Ware also fundamentally challenges the presumptions of a paratextual form like an introduction. Genette, though he allows for exceptions, states as the norm that paratext is "*some* text," but not "*the* text," sitting as it does on the outside of the text proper, and that it is "fundamentally auxiliary, heteronomous, dedicated to [. . .] service."[31] By creating a paratext that literally dives to the heart of the text, Ware challenges its liminal status and thereby hints at the way that the ostensibly subordinate introduction will ultimately perform the volume's deepest work. Further, Ware harnesses much of the apparatus of his artistic maturity—not just the painfully self-conscious language, but also the "hyperbolic editorials" and complex design Kannenberg cites—to pave a path back to his youth.[32]

One endpoint of that path is the book's last page. The closing paragraphs of the introduction emerge in the spot occupied in *ACME* 4 by instructions for constructing a "NOUVEAU THÉÂTRE MAGIQUE D'ACME," a proscenium arch in fact more gloomily labeled "THÉÂTRE PATHÉTIQUE," beneath which one may place a "Sparky la Chatte" head, a grim-faced "Quimby le Rat" confined to a wheelchair, an "arbre mort," and a few other items (68). The French translation, the solitary tree, and the air of pained stasis about Sparky and Quimby recall Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and thus a hyperbolic version of the endurance Bredehoft claims as the typical fruit of Ware's model kits. As the last page of the book, this ensemble forecasts sustained powerlessness and immobility, recalling Ware's actual despair when, mistakenly locked into the School of the Art Institute of Chicago overnight, he jumped out a window and broke both his legs—an episode that Raeburn glosses as "a perfect metaphor for Ware's experience of art school."[33] But as the endpoint of a tunnel that weaves its way through the entire volume, this exit bespeaks permeability and navigability, the possibility of overcoming solid obstructions and of asserting the force of the mind over the body's incapacities and over the sequential order that declares this the book's end (a stand-in, then, for the larger temporalities as well). Finally, by placing his avatar at the end of the introduction's transit, Ware effectively installs himself within his own head. Thus situated, the wheelchair-bound Quimby not only reads as an abject residuum of Ware's late-juvenile experience, but also recalls another of Ware's alter-ego protagonists in *Quimby*: the momentarily microscopic superhero in "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess" who dives into the mad scientist's brain and repairs the faulty wiring he finds there (41). In this respect, Quimby's positioning rewards Ware's "nagging" belief, stated in the introduction, that if he "could just find some way of reconnecting the right cables,

and wishing hard enough, it would all come to life again, like some sort of abandoned amusement park" (1). The frustrations and limitations of young adulthood are made to carry within themselves the pleasures and identifications of childhood; the continuum of the mature Ware's experience registers the distance inherent to all autobiography, but simultaneously overcomes it.

Notes

1. Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 19.

2. This phraseology is from Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 59.

3. The volumes' covers proclaim them as summer 1994 and winter 1994/5. Ware dates their publication as between 1993 and 1995 in the preface to *Quimby*.

4. Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003), 1. The 2003 edition is 68 pages, while volumes 2 and 4 in *The Acme Novelty Library* are 24 pages each. All further references to this text will be indicated in parentheses.

5. Thomas A. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006) 885.

6. Ibid., 876–78.

7. The first-half Quimby, in fact, undergoes a ride along a conveyor belt of this sort of construction as early as page 16.

8. "Volume," *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://dictionary.oed.com/ (accessed January 20, 2009).

9. *The ACME Novelty Library* 2 does include *Quimby*'s pages 13 and 15, the first of which appears (on the strength of the new context) to be autobiographical narration as well, and the second of which also gains a more realist tincture from its surroundings. Neither of these, however, offers the frank description of Ware's devotion to his grandmother that marks the strips on 28–31 (which dilates on her illness) and 34–35 ("Every Morning," elaborating the force of Ware's memories of her a decade after her death).

10. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 4, 30, 27.

11. Ibid., 29.

12. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 221.

13. Ibid., 253, 256.

14. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000).

15. See, for example, Gary Groth, "Understanding (Chris Ware's) Comics," *Comics Journal* 200 (1997): 163; and Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 17.

16. See also Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 15.

17. Groth, "Understanding (Chris Ware's) Comics," 137, 132.

18. Ibid., 153, 165. See also Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 18–19.

19. Chris Ware, interview with Rebecca Bengal, *P.O.V.* "On Cartooning," July 2006, http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/tintinandi/sfartists_ware.html (accessed January 20, 2009). Both quotations are included in Ware's first answer (emphasis mine).

20. At times Sparky takes a feminine pronoun, but in this strip Ware sticks to "it" throughout. Overall, Sparky's gender ambiguity seems an inheritance (along with under-motivated murine sadism) from Herriman's Krazy Kat.

21. Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan*, "Corrigenda."

22. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Datebook* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003), 83, 86.

23. Raeburn chronicles Ware's self-conscious study of cartoonists from the first half of the twentieth century (11–13) and quotes his admission that he "has always been a parrot" (13). Raeburn, *Chris Ware*.

24. One possible exception is *Floyd Farland: Citizen of the Future*, published as a book while Ware was still in college, but since all but repudiated.

25. For an analysis of Ware's rhetoric of failure, see David M. Ball's essay in this volume.

26. Ware identifies the house explicitly as his grandmother's in the introduction (2).

27. By the last of these, the house is actually boarded up.

28. Ware reports (in personal communication with David M. Ball) that the comic was originally published in the Swiss magazine *Hangar 21* in 2000.

29. Ware, interview with Bengal, "On Cartooning," (first reply); Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 90.

30. Gene Kannenberg Jr., "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image, and Visual Narrative Strategies," in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 191.

31. Genette, *Paratexts*, 7, 12.

32. Kannenberg, "The Comics of Chris Ware," 191.

33. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 14.

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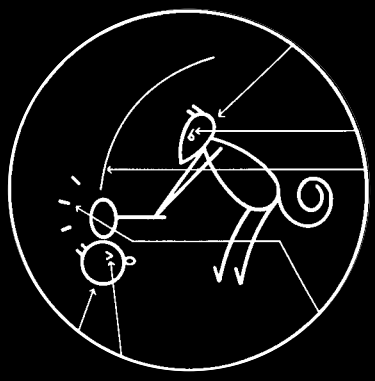
Everyday Temporalities



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Chris Ware and the Pursuit of Slowness

GEORGIANA BANITA

> To go fast is to forget fast, to retain only the information that is useful afterwards, as in "rapid reading." But writing and reading which advance backwards in the direction of the unknown thing "within" are slow. One loses one's time seeking time lost. —Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin gives a vivid impression of how strollers moved in the shopping arcades of nineteenth-century cities: some of them, he notes, walked with a tortoise on a lead.[1] These flâneurs not only cultivated slowness deliberately, but they ensured that others took note of the fact in order to express their contempt for the machine age and its obsession with speed. Benjamin's image conjures up a type of person almost unthinkable today, but one that perfectly matches the tenor and rhythm of Chris Ware's comics. Ware's graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* proceeds in small increments on the micro level of its individual panels, in which characters take dazzlingly small steps.[2] In a literal sense, this can be explained by the fact that Jimmy Corrigan suffers from a leg wound that forces him to use a crutch and prevents him from moving at normal speed. The implication, however, especially in terms of the text's layout and composition, is that the modern mechanization of time has reduced our lives to a series of small units that can no longer be experienced as a whole. Indeed, the formal grammar of Ware's comics renders time conspicuous, inscribing forms of temporal progression (or speed) in its graphic representation. It also calls attention to controlled pace as, among other things, an obstacle to the frenetic temporality of contemporary consumer culture. In an interview, Ware acknowledges his interest in "the craftsmanship and care and humility of design and artifacts" from earlier eras, explaining his preference as a reactionary response to the rhythm of modern experience: "It seems [there is] this arrogant sexuality to the modern world that I find very annoying, and, I guess, threatening [. . .] Everything has to be cool. Everything has to be sexy and fast-paced and rock-and-roll and I just find it kind of offensive. There seems to be a sort of dignity to the way we were creating the world a hundred years ago that I find much more comforting."[3] Ware's response to these rhythms is shaped by two competing yet related forms of disrupted temporality—incrementalism and fragmentation. While these do not function identically, they converge to generate narrative slowness and critique modern practices of acceleration.

Few graphic narratives resist this fast-paced, rock-and-roll aesthetic as effectively as *Jimmy Corrigan*. No doubt, the formal difficulties of Ware's earlier

works also present a formidable challenge to these assumptions. Yet the awkward, labor-intensive rhythms of the graphic novel delay and retrack narrative development, waylaying readers with constant interruptions and slowing their progression. In a brief analysis of Ware aptly entitled "Why Does Chris Ware Hate Fun?" Douglas Wolk remarks that "Ware forces his readers to watch his characters sicken and die slowly, torment (and be humiliated in turn by) their broken families, and lead lives of failure and loneliness."[4] My own analysis focuses on the first part of this assessment—the slow decay and death—which is key to understanding the embarrassment and isolation that Wolk mentions. A reading of slowness in Ware's comics would not only give a new cast to what we consider to be the speed of comics as a medium, or the rhythm of its unique language, but also establish the slowness of graphic narrative as an essential parameter of making and reading comics. The process of drawing the comics, as described by Ware, entails "about an hour and a half of work per second of reading time."[5] This exceedingly meticulous creative process inevitably results in comics that may indeed be read very quickly but more often than not invite an equally painstaking approach on several temporal levels.

This essay draws attention to the intensive and extensive forms of temporality in graphic representation, in particular, to the obsessively uncomfortable slower-than-real time in which the *Jimmy Corrigan* narrative plays out, with a focus on the agonizing patience and misery of the protagonist's embarrassment as an existential and profoundly temporal leitmotif. I start from the premise that narrative time shrinks or dilates according to the emotional state of the protagonist, who thus dictates the pace of the story. As Thomas Bredehoft has argued, "the architecture of narration" is derived from "the structural practice in comics of using space to represent time."[6] While Bredehoft details how narration in *Jimmy Corrigan* breaks the linearity of a time-sequenced narrative line (especially through the intrusion of three-dimensionality in the novel's cut-out games), I investigate what happens not only when the text formally disrupts time-sequencing, but when the narrative speed of events is inflected by patterns of constructed and contingent emotion. Therefore, I am less interested in the multiple levels created by the composition of the book as a whole than in the subtler juxtapositions within individual panels and their saturation of affect, resulting in a viscous sense of chronology. In brief, I want to show that Ware's preoccupation with temporality revolves around the concepts of nostalgia, repetition, and non-hierarchical (or, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, rhizomatic) structures. At the same time, the nostalgia and slowness invoked by the narrative are paradoxically informed by technologies of speed and interconnection that Ware makes a point of criticizing both overtly and through the subtle pacing of his narrative plot.

Narrative Temporality and Graphic Time

Accelerated temporality has become, as the French cultural theorist Paul Virilio has argued, the defining characteristic of our times, one that is beginning to cause anxiety as a result of the "general impression of powerless-

ness and incoherence" it creates, along with a fragmentation of perception and consciousness.[7] In developing his theory of "dromology" (or the logic of speed), Virilio engages with and criticizes the impact of acceleration on contemporary society, in terms of our perception of space, distance, mobility, and technology.[8] Virilio's pessimistic observations can be placed into a longer history of modernist thinking about the energizing and exhilarating (as in Futurism) or nefarious consequences of acceleration. Foregrounding slowness is a feature of much avant-garde work of the mid-twentieth century as well as a marker of minimalist aesthetics. Some modernist authors, Samuel Beckett and Gertrude Stein among them, pose challenges to clear-cut distinctions between fast and slow, as the repetitive features in their works clearly disturb the alternation of slowness and speed. Alain Robbe-Grillet's nouveau roman *Jealousy* (*La Jalousie*) offers a classic example of structural slowness by following the surveillant activities of a husband silently observing his wife's suspected affair with another man. In her study of the temporal and experiential anxieties of modernity, especially in connection with the visual arts, French philosopher Sylviane Agacinski diagnoses a tendency in modern culture toward "an experience of passage and of the passing, of movement and of the ephemeral, of fluctuation and of the mortal," which renounces conventional forms of historical temporality. To Agacinski, "modern temporality is the endless interlacing of the irreversible and the repetitive."[9] In this sense, reading Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* is sometimes akin to watching time pass, while Jimmy himself becomes what Agacinski innovatively calls a *"passeur de temps"*—a passer of time.

Despite this rampant proliferation of speed in the modern world and literary interrogations of the phenomenon, narrative slowness as a concept is almost completely free of institutionally entrenched definitions. In fact, it is impossible to probe ideas of slowness without paying close attention to its governing concept, that of speed, which in turn has been a highly under-theorized issue of narrative theory. Although there are, of course, multiple theoretical perspectives on the function of meter and rhythm in literary texts, these approaches focus primarily on the textual poetics of the cadence, the beat, and the poetic "voice" or tone, seen structurally rather than thematically. Moreover, they also do not cover the range of intermedial relations that can be found in the comics genre, premised as it is on a fundamental interaction between the image and the text, which requires a different perspective on the reading process.[10] As a decisive quality of any text, speed often leads primarily to qualitative assessments of a narrative's "too slow" pace. Research on the subtler effects of textual speed remains scarce and heterogeneous, focusing not only on structural but also, and with mixed results, on thematic temporality, i.e., a text's preoccupation with issues of acceleration and deceleration. While Kathryn Hume eloquently elaborates modes of textual and thematic acceleration in novels, she mentions "narrative retardation," a concept proposed by Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky, only in passing.[11] Shklovsky's device of "retardation" refers to a set of digressions that slow down the reader's perception of a certain narrative progression, exemplified by the critic in reference to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.[12] This particular theory foregrounds such decelerating techniques as digression, defamil-

iarization, repetition, and narrative embedding, also mentioning characters as a means to this end, a point that I will return to in my analysis of narrative delay tactics in Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*.

Temporality is also acknowledged as an essential component in comics, a medium generally defined as "a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially."[13] As Art Spiegelman notes, comics "choreograph and shape time" through their interplay of words and images, although little has been made so far of the potential differences between the velocity of conventional reading and the imperative to both see and read within the comics genre.[14] In this particular medium, slowness is characterized by complex visual and typographic means of manipulating rhythm by decelerating the average tempo of a comics narrative. The latter tends to be fairly brisk, if merely as a result of the word-image juxtaposition training the reader's eye to skip from one to another at a quick pace.

Ware, on the other hand, has displayed an intense preoccupation with the disruption of a conventional reading pace, and its attendant spatial manifestations, in his comics. His techniques range from dividing a panoramic page into polyptychs that chart several different units of time—a method Ware first encountered in Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*—to temporal overlaps and methods of stalling narrative progression.[15] Already in his early silent strips, Ware considered the implications of purely visual storytelling. On the one hand, the lack of visual detail in these strips seems to allow the reader to traverse the narrative stages with considerable swiftness and ease. Ware even suggests an analogy between his comics and early animation by referring to two one-page strips featuring Quimby the Mouse as "comictoons."[16] Commenting on the speed of Ware's *Quimby* strips, often subdivided into crunched-up, barely visible slivers, Wolk remarks: "If comics are 'a pictographic language,' as Ware says, then they're meant to be read *fast*. Dominated by simple shapes and 'dead,' fixed-width lines, Ware's pages zoom along, slowed down only by tricky diagrammatic layouts and occasional indigestible blocks of tiny type."[17] On the other hand, what Wolk fails to acknowledge is that the more formal, diagrammatic aspects of the panels demand increased attention, thus posing some problems for plot-driven readers. By repeatedly attempting to visually revert to childhood through the invocation of dated cultural paradigms, *Quimby* also instantiates a desire to not only reinhabit the past but reconstruct it from scraps of memory as well. In its combination of mourning and melancholia, this mood corresponds to what media artist and novelist Svetlana Boym terms "reflective nostalgia," which "dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance [. . .] lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time."[18]

Ware's later works, especially *Jimmy Corrigan*, with its subtext of loneliness and mortality, are easier to linger over in a way that *Quimby*'s pictographic simplicity resists. For one thing, the graphic novel is almost entirely unpaginated, which flouts established conventions of sequential narrative. Secondly, it contains diagrams retelling personal histories that replicate the non-linear, open-ended, associative clusters of memory itself.[19] Narrative deceleration is also achieved by placing recurrent images and motifs on different

pages, thus sending the eye back to a previous narrative stage and preventing events from spiraling out of the careful reader's visual control.

Ware's Slowness: Thematic and Compositional Correspondences

Many of Chris Ware's comics show an interest in the passage of time from the perspective of obsolescence and nostalgia, both in cultural and human terms. What one interviewer has referred to as Ware's "astringent melancholia" is a recurrent trope that spans most of Ware's oeuvre as a self-described attempt to "tell something much more slowly and blurrily, the way real life tends to evolve."[20] This melancholic streak is particularly visible in *Jimmy Corrigan*'s double journey back in time. On one level, Jimmy attempts to recover his absentee father and, implicitly, that part of his childhood that was harmed by his abandonment. On a second narrative plane, Jimmy's grandfather recounts his own miserable childhood in the 1890s. Moreover, behind Jimmy's inability to interact with the world lies a hyperactive fantasy life that transports both character and reader toward the past, while undermining Jimmy's ability to cope with mundane situations in the present. Meeting his long-lost father reveals Jimmy's own status as an emotionally truncated figure inhabiting a past of his own devising, one that he delights in refurbishing, even as he takes imaginary swipes at present realities that he never dares to criticize out loud. In one scene, Jimmy imaginatively revisits the setting of his own conception and carries out a very oedipal revenge against his father by bludgeoning and cutting him with a beer stein. Another shows Jimmy's grandfather being thrown from the observatory of "the largest building in the world"—a scene that, we are told, "only finds its way into the recurrent and abbreviated symbology" of the grandfather's dreams (279–80).

In *Jimmy Corrigan*, however, time stops and seems to spill not only backwards, as the story revisits previous events, but also sideways, as alternative narratives are incorporated into the main story line. From this wayward temporal flux, meanings emerge in slow motion and underfed, sluggish emotions crystallize. Importantly, the essentially self-destructive tenor of *Jimmy Corrigan* is caused not only by Jimmy's penchant for daydreaming but also by the impossibility or refusal to look further than the present. In other words, although his attitude is nostalgic, he also lapses into deep melancholia, which is less focused on past joys or possessions, instilling a fundamental passivity and reluctance to focus on the future. Jimmy's tragic inwardness, then, results from a sense of temporal immobility in terms of both narrative and character, which is also replicated compositionally. Numerous pages in the book depict the protagonist from the same perspective (often from outside the building he inhabits, through a window), which can recur over as many as nine panels (18). Other pages are organized around a central panel that shows the exterior of the space where the plot is unfolding, usually a peaceful, unpopulated image obscured by darkness or inclement weather (195–96, 198). Such expository or transitional stills often crop up unexpectedly, i.e., on the left rather than the right-hand side, so they can only be seen once the page has been turned, thus effecting an abrupt transfer into another segment of the story (199, 337).

Many of these silent panels are almost identical, reinforcing the idea of a past that recurs with obsessive persistence. The constant replay of memories, often encapsulated in iconographical detail, epitomizes the concept of difference through repetition suggested by Gilles Deleuze.[21] Drawing on Freud, Deleuze claims that with repetition comes not only difference—understood within the repetitive pattern in which it is concealed—but also remembrance. These two features aptly describe the circular movements in many of Ware's narratives and repetitive (in- and out-zooming) panels. Often the narrative events seem to emerge from a pool of unconscious links and memories, very much in keeping with Deleuze's description of repetition as "the unconscious of representation."[22] Additionally, the repetition involved in patterns of compulsive memory as well as the recurrence of certain elements of visual style recall the practice of collecting, the essence of which is an interplay between repetition (the accumulation of objects related to one theme) and difference (they are not identical). The composition of the panels on the page also mimics an act of collecting by creating an imaginary present in which the narrative levels communicate one to one rather than in progression, all characters following the slow script of a fictive contemporaneity, in which they interact like so many recycled childhood icons.

In keeping with his dictum, borrowed from Goethe, that "architecture is frozen music," Ware freezes his panels in architectural stills that stall narrative progression.[23] At the same time, he creates inner spaces of temporal layering within the panel itself, thus deepening the temporal involvement with each panel and slowing down the reading process. A paradigm of this technique is the temporal overlap occasioned by Jimmy's daydreams as he and his stepsister Amy meet the doctor to discuss their father's condition after his car accident. To Jimmy's consternation, his mother appears in eight panels of his interior thoughts, trying to gain Jimmy's sympathy, while referring to Amy as a "*colored* girl" and expressing her disapproval (307–8). More generally, Jimmy's self-absorbed mother—living in a nursing home from where she incessantly calls her son at work and at home—can be considered a constant obstacle to narrative progression. This is due not only to her repeated and often unexpected appearances, but especially to her function as an emotional leash for Jimmy himself, merely diverting attention from whatever it is that her son is (not) doing. At the same time, by serving as a frame for the novel as a whole, she can be said to contain the narrative, which she occasionally interrupts, shadowing her son like a malevolent doppelgänger.

Not only are Jimmy's temporal bearings destabilized by the encounters with his mother, but the narrative itself is temporally dispersed and scattered in a heterogeneous fashion; in this sense, it resembles a postmodern approach to form. In its structure, if not in its thematic concerns, *Jimmy Corrigan* recalls the de-temporalized simultaneity of the rhizome-concept as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* as well as by hypertext as a mode of sequential and parallel differentiation.[24] Working from Deleuze and Guattari, Stuart Moulthrop describes the rhizomatic structure of discourse as "a chaotically distributed network [. . .] rather than a regular hierarchy of trunk and branches"—not a deterministic chain of beginnings and ends, but the organic growth of an absolute "middle."[25] In this system,

any point may be connected to any other point. Ware's comics resemble this model of connectivity in the allusive form of its non-linear, boundary-less narrativity that lacks temporal finitude and closure. The most explicit illustrations of this fragmented, non-hierarchical textuality can be found in the diagrams that chart characters' family backgrounds and life stories in minute pictorial forms. These can be read both from left to right and vice versa, often providing directions in the form of arrows very much like digital linking icons.[26] Despite Ware's impatience with contemporary modes of mechanical reproduction, the temporal and conceptual framework of digital media has clearly seeped into the fabric and structure of his comics.

It is thus paradoxical that Ware's work should be influenced by the very technologies he set out to denounce through his insistence on the deceleration of perception. On the one hand, the entire corpus of Ware's work can be read as a critique of contemporary capitalist technology that demands an ever-growing reliance on speed and temporal acceleration, on the "sexy" aesthetics of fast-paced rock and roll. On the other hand, Ware's own technologies of drawing, by mere dint of their fastidiousness, acquire the comprehensiveness and connectivity of technological devices which are indeed essential to the reproduction and distribution of his work. In fact, a Web version of the Corrigan family tree is also available online.[27] What sets his work apart from digital design, however, is the intractable materiality of the medium as an object than can be seen, held, toyed with, and finally collected. With *Jimmy Corrigan*, the artist's insistence on the materiality of the book as artifact as well as the often circular paths of his narratives also reflect his criticism of the increasing incrementalism and serialization of the artistic world—despite the fact that many of Ware's other works are multiply serialized. Ware's insistence on deceleration in *Jimmy Corrigan* not only defends the freedom of art from technological temporality, but reminds us of the small, un-dromological steps we take in our daily lives as well.

In short, exhilaration and speed are not prominent features of Chris Ware's output in the comics medium. In addition, rather than paring away unnecessary words and employing the kind of telegraphic style that would allow readers to navigate easily through the visuals, Ware is in the habit of pairing the images with an equally sophisticated, multi-layered text, to the point of sounding verbose. Here is, for example, the rather unlikely monologue by Jimmy's grandfather, as he recalls his visit to the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893: "One's memory, however, likes to play tricks, after years of cold storage. Some recollections remain as fresh as the moment they were minted while others seem to crumble into bits, dusting their neighbours with a contaminating rot of uncertainty" (276). Such puzzling metaphors only serve to further obfuscate both the memories and the narrative that binds them. "To get speed," Hume writes, "we need to feel that we are missing out on meaningful transitions and links."[28] Ware offers little in the way of such subtracting techniques. On the contrary, what he favors is an excess of narrative connectivity, particularly in terms of iconography and other descriptive devices and linkages that stabilize fictional reality and prevent reading from speeding along too quickly.

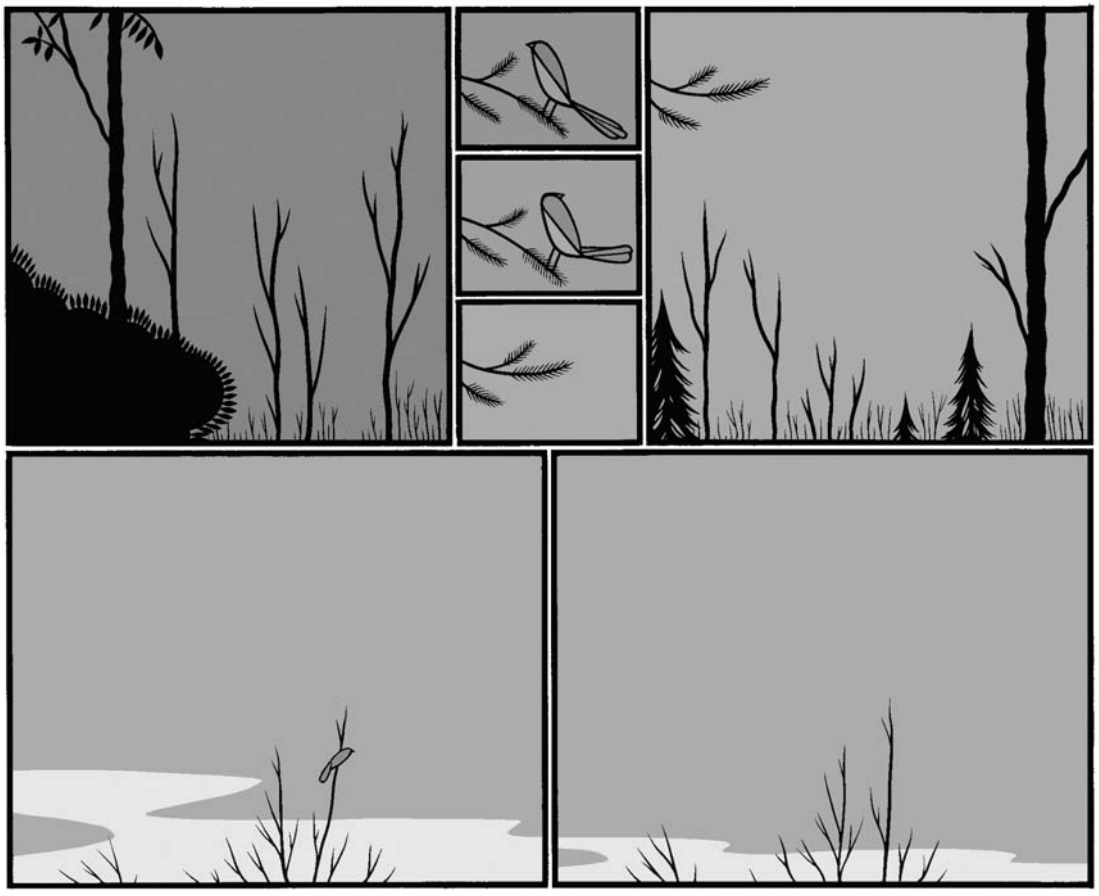


Fig. 13.1. The iconography of slowness. Silent panels provide moments of narrative respite. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 99.

Silent Panels in *Jimmy Corrigan*

"*Jimmy Corrigan*'s themes," Thomas Bredehoft writes in his study of architectural multilinearity in Ware's work, "include not only the passing of time and the recurrence or circularity of events within the passage of time, but also endurance and lack of change as well."[29] These features often translate into panels that halt the flow of narrative time. After Jimmy is hit by a truck and lies on the ground, the page following the accident scene contains seven panels of unequal sizes depicting bare tree branches, a bird that appears in three of the panels, a clear sky—alternately blue and gray—a hint of cloud, haze, or water in the bottom panels and nothing else (see fig. 13.1). The last panel, designed like a postcard, includes the words "A chill morning in April" (99). *Jimmy Corrigan* contains many such quiet moments that allow Ware to break the linearity of a time-sequenced narrative. Some resemble the iconography of still photography; others can be compared to pre-projection film, registering only slight modifications from one panel to the next and slowing down or almost completely impairing the process of reading.[30] This shock of silence leaves the reader reeling on the fault line where events occur abruptly, thus reproducing and performing the sudden changes that take place in *Jimmy*

Corrigan's narrative and the protagonist's own shock after being struck by the vehicle. Moreover, while static, these panels travel, as it were, across the book's multiple sections, punctuating the narrative and performing an integrative function through their conspicuous recurrence.

However effective on a first reading, the impact of these silent, repetitive panels is unlikely to endure when one rereads. What the reader encountered prior to these panels affects the way the visually coded rhythm effects are experienced, and the surprise element will fade with familiarity. Hume also remarks on how narrative acceleration and the confusion it engenders wear thin on second reading: "The speed effect operates best during one's first reading, but loses its ability to bother us as much on subsequent readings. The politics of using narrative speed are thus relatively ephemeral."[31] In generating narrative slowness, however, Ware's slow motion panels in fact mask a second reading taking place concurrently with the first. As Matei Calinescu has shown in his study of (re)reading practices, when a reader experiences the text with increased "structural attention," even a first-time perusal can have the same effect as a "second" reading.[32] These panels intensify reader participation and focus our attention to the extent that the pause they introduce allows the reader to revisit what came before and re-evaluate her own expectations.

It is also interesting to note that the slow moments, in fact, cover only brief periods of time with panels in succession at one-second intervals, or stretching over long minutes rather than long days—the duration residing in our subjective perception rather than in the actual number of panels we are perceiving.[33] One six-panel page, for instance, made up of two tiers of two and four panels, respectively, includes four successive images of the same red phone (framed by a window) and a drop of rain falling onto the window sill (see plate 16). The downward trajectory of the raindrop is rendered over three panels, each of which thus contains a unit of time less than one second in length. At other times the duration of a sequence is determined by Ware's efforts to "indicate hidden emotions by the order of expressions" on the characters' faces and in their awkward body language, which in turn derives from extremes of embarrassment or hesitation.[34] After his stepsister Amy rejects his offer of sympathy on hearing that their father has died, Jimmy leaves the hospital in slow motion, each panel marking one step he is taking toward the door (350). More than a reaction to the unfortunate situation, Jimmy's lumbering movement is the expression of a deeper despondency, whose very depth can only be visualized by designing the panels to accommodate depth of field. Rather than interrupting the narrative, such sequences engender a sense of suspense, demanding greater reader participation through their elusive mood and indeterminate outcome.

Recurrences within the silent panels, such as the small red or gray bird carrying a twig or flower, sitting on a tree branch (4, 5, 99, 102–4, 251, 338), serve as an element of continuity. Despite their stillness, they convey implicit motion from one panel to the next and often mark radical time shifts from one episode to another. Moreover, the homogeneous color scheme (dark browns, blues, grays) not only gauges the grimness of Jimmy's story, but also provides internal visual continuity by linking panels that lack a formal sense of se-

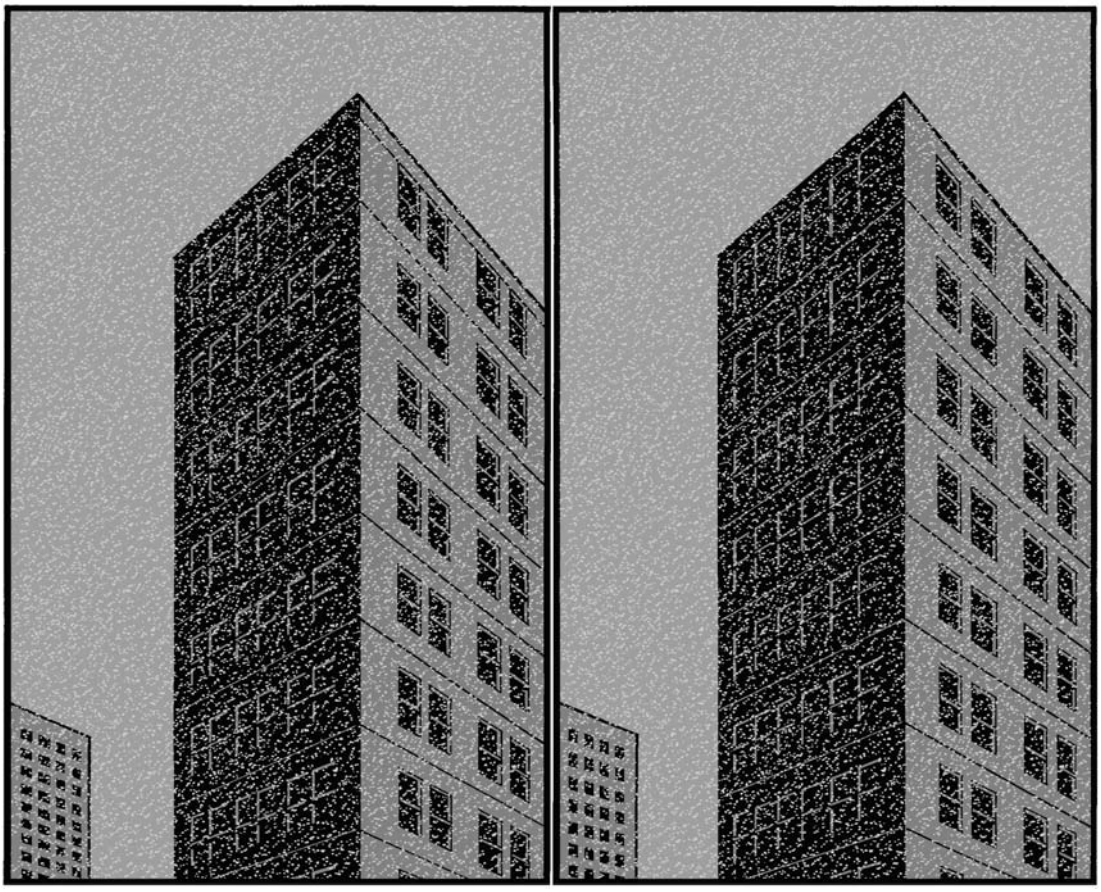


Fig. 13.2. A narratological and emotional cul-de-sac. The panels are almost visually identical, but their spatial succession sets them apart. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 362.

quence. In such instances, the links between successive panels are important as they trigger the reader's automatic reaction of comparing the elements included on each page. In other cases the deferral of signification from one panel to the next has no role in the formation of narrative (i.e., sequential) meaning. This, however, also does not mean that the panels are interchangeable or could establish free and fortuitous connections among themselves. Rather, a blockage occurs in what Jacques Derrida (a figure mocked by Ware in *The ACME Report*) and subsequent poststructuralists have termed *différance*.[35] To put it simply, the term denotes the postponement of meaning from one signifier to the next along the endless chain of a process that does not terminate in any one final or established signification, but allows meaning to take shape from linkages and deferrals.[36]

Ware's techniques amount to what we could playfully call "in-différance," to the point where one image is indistinguishable from the next and the narrative progression derives from the two panels' lack of difference in the context of their spatial alignment. In other words, Ware shows that narrative can be constructed not only through an excess of connectivity and signification, but also by containing meaning, at the risk of defying the formal conventions of the medium itself. Consider, for example, the last two pages before the

epilogue, each containing two panels that follow Jimmy's progress from the train station to his office building (see fig. 13.2). Emotionally, he is traversing a critical time: his long-lost and then regained father is now dead; his stepsister violently pushed him away; he is alone, disappointed, somewhat baffled by the turn of events; outside it is snowing heavily and thick snow is carpeting the ground. The high rise he is heading toward appears in all four panels. If the second panel contains slight modifications compared to the first, the difference between the third and forth panels is so microscopic as to be almost unrecognizable (361–62). Although the panels continue to be separated by a gutter, the reader can no longer project causality into this spacing. As still, encapsulated moments, the panels themselves come to resemble a sort of gutter interposed between the story and its ending, preparing the reader for its emotional impact. Even if the silent panels reveal the extent to which Ware redefines temporal linkages on the micro level of individual pages, on the macro level of the novel the narrative denouement is not suspended but merely postponed. Paradoxically enough, by decelerating the narrative and delaying its resolution, Ware only increases its inevitability.

Affective Deceleration

As I mentioned earlier, the duration of *Jimmy Corrigan*'s temporal sequences is often determined by the intensity of a particular mood or feeling that subjectively inflects the perception of time. "I rarely ever did a comic just for the sake of experimentation," Ware writes. "Even when I did, I was always trying to get at some kind of feeling."[37] Not only does Ware express slowness by encoding it into the composition of his comic strips, but he uses these narrative breaking points to deliberately provoke reader anxiety in order to reveal the underlying causes for this stress. What emerges from both the slowness of his larger narratives and that of their individual panels is a fear of slowness which encroaches upon the readers themselves. While meticulous slowness was a shorthand for leisurely lifestyle in the Parisian arcades of the nineteenth century, here slowness seems to indicate nothing but trauma.

The affective structure of Ware's work is closely bound up with the immediate intimacy between the text and those who interact with it, both in writing and reading comics; as he writes in his introduction to *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13, "unlike prose writing, the strange process of writing with pictures encourages associations and recollections to accumulate literally *in front of the eyes*; people, places, and events appear out of nowhere. Doors open into rooms remembered from childhood, faces form into dead relatives, and distant loves appear, almost magically, on the page—all deceptively manageable, visceral, the combinations sometimes even revelatory."[38] The self-contained visions in the still panels discussed above are "revelatory" in that they communicate a sense of personal anguish or confusion. Not only can these feelings, prompted by memories and nostalgia, produce narrative delay, but they can also be the cause of slowness obtained by other means. Narrative deceleration in general can be said to reflect varied emotional states, ranging from fear and distress to embarrassment and boredom. Jimmy is remarkable for his extreme sensitivity, a characteristic that Ware stresses and even amplifies by manipulating narrative progression. It can be the embarrassment of

a particular predicament, such as accidentally spilling the container of urine needed for a medical examination in the aftermath of his accident, or it can be the nurse's inadvertent infliction of embarrassment (she all too gladly overlooks his clumsiness, which provokes his erotic fantasies), either by cruel malice or as affectionate therapy. In both cases the slow pace of the narrative is complicit with Jimmy's own self-consciousness, shyness, and shame.

As a recurrent trope of early child development that fosters a sense of both individuality and relationality, shame not only has become a thematic mainstay of comics—employed to great effect in, among other works, *McSweeney's* 13, edited by Chris Ware—but also has been regarded as a heuristic for, in Daniel Worden's words, "how comics constitute themselves as an art form that perpetually effaces itself when claiming status as art."[39] Many of Ware's works can be read as permutations on the single theme of human alienation and shame. Further variations on these emotions stem from whether Jimmy himself undergoes the affective event or whether the reader's own mind is targeted. The perspective shift from protagonist to reader is usually enacted by substituting the first person for third person in the visual narration. For instance, Ware shows Jimmy attempting to murder his father without diegetically signposting this deviation from the main story. A means of staving off his embarrassment would be to incite himself to indignation, but this only occurs in his imagination. Far from appearing sentimental, *Jimmy Corrigan* thus depicts little in the way of emotion—explicit visual hints to affective states are few and far between—but goes a long way toward creating it. Ware suggests that the speed of reading in itself determines the text's affective content: "The mood of a comic strip did not have to come from the drawing or the words. You got the mood not from looking at the strip, or from reading the words, but from the act of reading it. The emotion came from the way the story itself was structured."[40] In other words, affect does not reside in Jimmy's defenselessness in the face of the unfortunate events, but in the narrative intensity created by the prolonged display of his reactions, often in images that do not feature the protagonist but suggest the emptiness of his mood.

Conclusion

I suggested at the outset that beyond Chris Ware's tendency to spatially juxtapose past, present, and future moments on a single page (or even within a single panel), his highly textured comics also engage in a complex strategy of determining narrative speed by structural and compositional means. The effects of these techniques are often paradoxical. Ware toys with narrative expectations of temporal movement by drawing panels that give the readers pause and quicken their pulse at the same time. The narrator of these multiply temporal strips is simultaneously immersed in time and assembling time. He communicates a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. He addresses time's passage with an implicit (and structural) nostalgia. In fact, Jimmy Corrigan's uprooting—from his family, social networks, and emotional connections—is so profound that he is not even aware of it, to the point where his nostalgia slowly morphs into a pervasive melancholia. The slowness of his existence is translated by Ware into narrative techniques

of both continuity (mundane objects that anchor him down) and discontinuity (the absentmindedness of his reveries). At the heart of Jimmy's lack of engagement with the world lies, however, an abiding fear—of the female coworker whom he never dares to woo openly, of his stepsister whom he fantasizes about, of his absent father and overbearing mother—which Ware deftly translates into multiple deferrals and repetitions, as his narrative falters and questions its own drive, obstructing a quick purchase on its meaning. Ware's use of slowness thus proves to be less an external approach to narrative and more of an intrinsic function of the writing process, of memory, of the text's own affective unconscious that collects the emotions of both characters and readers. Considering his very limited narrative agency, Jimmy may not be, after all, a "passer of time," despite his openness to time and its potentialities. Above all, his is a consciousness through which time passes, leaving him to inch his way out of emotional and temporal captivity, in a struggle that is both hopeless and empowering.

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 422.

2. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000). All further references to this text will be indicated in parentheses.

3. Chris Ware, qtd. in Andrew Arnold, "Q and A with Comicbook Master Chris Ware," *TIME*, September 1, 2000, http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,53887,00.html (accessed February 25, 2009).

4. Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 347. Wolk does not elaborate theoretically on Ware's use of slowness, limiting his interpretation to the masochistic function of prolonged embarrassment and emotional frustration.

5. Keith Phipps, "Interview with Chris Ware," *The Onion A.V. Club*, December 31, 2003, http://www.avclub.com/articles/chris-ware,13849/ (accessed February 25, 2009).

6. Thomas A. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 870–71.

7. Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 4.

8. See Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

9. Sylviane Agacinski, *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 11, 12.

10. For a rare overview of this untapped field see Kathryn Hume, "Narrative Speed in Contemporary Fiction," *Narrative* 13 (2005): 105–24; Jan Baetens and Kathryn Hume, "Speed, Rhythm, Movement: A Dialogue on K. Hume's Article 'Narrative Speed,'" *Narrative* 14 (2006): 349–55.

11. Hume, "Narrative Speed," 106.

12. Victor Shklovsky, "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, intro. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 25–60.

13. Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123 (2008): 452.

14. Art Spiegelman, "Ephemera vs. the Apocalypse," *Indy Magazine* (autumn 2005), http://64.23.98.142/indy/autumn_2004/spiegelman_ephemera/index.html (accessed July 13, 2008).

15. See Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 13.

16. Chris Ware, *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003), 46–47.

17. Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 355.

18. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic, 2001), 41. The opposite term is "re-

storative nostalgia," which is bent on rebuilding the lost home and patching up memory gaps, a goal more clearly exemplified by Jimmy Corrigan's journey into the past to meet his father and reclaim a family.

19. For a more detailed analysis of Ware's treatment of memory in his comics, see Peter Sattler's essay in this volume.

20. David Thompson, "A Fraternity of Trifles," *Eye Magazine* (spring 2002), http://www.eyemagazine.com/review.php?id=62&rid=88 (accessed February 25, 2009); Chris Ware cited in Aida Edemariam, "The Art of Melancholy," *Guardian*, October 31, 2005, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/oct/31/comics (accessed February 25, 2009).

21. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5, 7, 14.

22. Ibid., 14.

23. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Date Book* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003), 190.

24. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massim (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

25. Stuart Moulthrop, "Rhizomes and Resistance: Hypertext and the Dreams of a New Culture," in *Hyper/Text/Theory*, ed. George P. Landow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 300–301.

26. For a detailed reading of Chris Ware's use of diagrams, see Isaac Cates's essay in this volume.

27. See http://www.randomhouse.com/pantheon/graphicnovels/acme.html.

28. Hume, "Narrative Speed in Contemporary Fiction," 111

29. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture," 885.

30. This feature calls to mind Scott McCloud's remark on the affinities between film and the comics medium: "Before it's projected, film is just a very very very very slow comic." Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper, 1993), 8.

31. Hume, "Narrative Speed in Contemporary Fiction," 107.

32. Matei Calinescu, *Rereading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 51.

33. I use the term "duration" in the sense ascribed to it by Henri Bergson, who uses it to introduce a qualitative concept of time based on subjective experience. Bergson distinguishes between the "empty time" of classical physics and the "experienced time" of consciousness, which is neither measurable nor divisible. See Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by T. E. Hulme (New York: Macmillan, 1955). See also Jacques Samson, "Une vision furtive de Jimmy Corrigan," in *Poétiques de la bande dessinée*, ed. Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle and Jacques Samson (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2007), 221–33.

34. Interview with Gary Groth, "Understanding (Chris Ware's) Comics," *Comics Journal* 200 (1997), 154.

35. A brief strip flippantly questions current theory debates about image potency and its use as a compensatory alternative to failing reading skills: "*Who* said that the image has lost all power as an aesthetic tool?. . . Was it Lacan, or Daridas (sp?) Or . . . was it that the image was *more* potent since everyone is so rushed and semi-literate?" Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Report* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), 8.

36. See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3–27.

37. Chris Ware, qtd. in Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 11.

38. Chris Ware, introduction to *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004), 12.

39. Daniel Worden, "The Shameful Art: *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, Comics, and the Politics of Affect," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 894.

40. Chris Ware, qtd. in Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 13.

Imagining an Idiosyncratic Belonging: Representing Disability in Chris Ware's "Building Stories"

MARGARET FINK BERMAN

In an introduction to his comic strip "Building Stories," written for the *Independent*, Chris Ware identifies its main character as "a 30-year-old woman who has yet to find someone with whom to spend the rest of her life."[1] What is conspicuously missing from this description, though—as well as from the majority of the text in the comic strip itself—is the fact that the protagonist is an amputee: her left leg ends just below the knee, where she sometimes wears a prosthetic limb. Ware's description thus strangely elides disability as a characterization of the protagonist, relegating it to a de-privileged position in his account of the narrative.

Visually, however, the panels of "Building Stories" do anything but gloss over the protagonist's disability. Rather, they direct the reader's eyes to a frank confrontation with her legs by depicting her in close-up shots from the knee down on nine occasions throughout the comic strip—and often as three consecutive, identical panels. In the opening installments, which are narrated by the apartment building itself, one might easily miss the black line that signifies the meeting of flesh and prosthesis (in part 2, for instance, where the protagonist stands on a sidewalk in front of the building, staring up at her future home). But in part 7, the first installment narrated from the protagonist's point of view, Ware choreographs a veritable unveiling of her short leg. Having awoken from an erotic dream, the protagonist gets out of bed to use the bathroom, an action presented in three panels: one in which she lies still covered by her blanket, one in which her long leg emerges from the covers, and finally one in which her short leg is revealed. Although the text of the protagonist's late-night musings has everything to do with popsicles strangely eroticized by her dream world and nothing to do with her bodily variation, Ware directs the viewer's attention to it unflinchingly, asserting its presence in the protagonist's everyday life.

From the perspective of disability studies, the strange discrepancy between the striking presence of the protagonist's short leg in the visual register of "Building Stories" and the near absence of any acknowledgment of her disability in the textual register creates a perplexing interpretive situation. Must bodily variation always signify, one wonders? Might this disability be "merely" there, and thus not really a fruitful object for interpretation? In

this essay, I undertake a careful analysis of the aesthetic and the narrative structure of Ware's "Building Stories" in order to argue that this particular representation of a woman—one who would be normatively understood as "disabled"—does matter. Specifically, this particular representation does valuable theoretical work by positing an alternative understanding of disability rooted in the ordinary. Ware's aesthetic of ordinariness is characterized by a flair for staging the small moments of the mundane, directing readers to notice details like mantelpiece clocks, reflections in windows, and characters' fidgets. This ordinariness aesthetic, with its focus on the microprocesses of everyday life, enables a narrative structure composed of episodes whose meanings exist in dynamic tension with one another, resisting a fixed pronouncement about the meaning of the protagonist's difference.[2]

That is, in order to make sense of the largely unarticulated visual presence of the woman's short leg and to interpret the moments when it *is* textually acknowledged, one must consider the ways in which that moment's immediate meaning is shaped and reshaped by other episodes in the comic strip's composed environment. Often, when disability seems to be a locus for shame or loss, other scenes suggest alternative ways of knowing the protagonist's body—or constitute moments of equal or greater shame that are not organized around disability at all. This narrative structure creates a story in which bodily difference assumes a space in the woman's life along with a number of other traits but nonetheless retains its uniqueness. This gesture of rendering the protagonist's so-called extraordinary body ordinary opens up a new space for thinking about disability as an experience of what I call *idiosyncratic belonging*.

An Alternative to Identity Politics

Images of bodies are integral to the ways in which human beings imagine, know, and act toward one another, and thus Ware's disability representation is hardly "merely" there. Media theorist W.J.T. Mitchell explains the politics of such images in visual culture, proposing that they function as: "'go-betweens' in social transactions, as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings [. . .] Stereotypes, caricatures, classificatory figures, search images, mappings of the visible body, of the social spaces in which it appears would constitute the fundamental elaborations of visual culture on which the domain of the image—and of the Other—is constructed. As go-betweens or 'subaltern' entities, these images are the filters through which we recognize and of course misrecognize other people."[3] That is to say, all representations of the body matter in that they serve as the "go-betweens," or ways of knowing that bear upon the real and quotidian transactions between people. Recent work in disability studies has attended to the ways in which disabled bodies are mediated by a contemporary positioning in medical and rehabilitative discourse as well as a recent past of freak shows, eugenics, and institutionalization.[4] Many of the critiques launched against objectifying representations of disability operate within the field of identity politics, since the image of the disabled figure has historically been an oppressive mediation, discouraging any recognition of a person with a complex and flourishing life. However, the "disability image"

that emerges from "Building Stories" resists these normative ways of seeing by constructing a much more complex understanding of a person with an anomalous body, precisely in that it represents its protagonist in ways that challenge fixed categories of identity.

Disability studies scholars are often explicit about their work's attendant political agenda: people with certain differences are marked apart as different in a normative system, a system that Robert McRuer has termed "compulsory able-bodiedness."[5] This distinction establishes a binary that is understood as one between able/disabled, normal/abnormal, whole/broken, valuable/worthless; those identified with the second term have faced institutionalization, disenfranchisement, and discrimination. Much of disability scholarship's work is interested in critiquing the epistemological system that produces and perpetuates these conditions. In her book *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson advocates a resistance to normative ways of knowing disability, looking to the anti-assimilationist, positive-identity politics in a number of novels by feminist African American writers. "I must confess," she writes, "that my own politics parallel these black women's attempts to render physical difference as distinction, uncoupled from modernity's devaluation of the atypical [. . . My aim is] to critique the politics of appearance that governs our interpretation of physical difference, to suggest that disability requires accommodation rather than compensation, and to shift our conception of disability from pathology to identity."[6] Similarly, McRuer advocates the potential of a critically disabled, or what he terms *severe*, identity to resist the "mere tolerance" of compulsory able-bodiedness.[7] The assumption of a severe disability identity, he argues, is how the disability community might "crip"—that is, collectively transform—the ways in which the system of compulsory able-bodiedness uses queer/disabled existence to define and perpetuate itself. The political critique launched by these scholars is certainly vital, as the ways in which disability is imagined impinges directly on the well-being of those who live with disabilities.[8] The trend toward an identity politics centered on disability-as-difference, however, also has its dangers.

Legal theorist Janet Halley has taken up the problem with identity politics in her consideration of the "like race" arguments made by lawyers on behalf of queer groups or individuals. "'Identity politics,'" she notes, "is usually waged on assumptions that identity inheres in group members; that group membership brings with it a uniformly shared range (or even a core) of authentic experience and attitude; that the political and legal interests of the group are similarly coherent; and that group members are thus able to draw on their own experiences to discern those interests and to establish the authority they need to speak for the group."[9] Certainly, these "coherentist assumptions" run into trouble when one considers disability as a politicized identity, as it unites a wide spectrum of people from those with an aesthetic disability, to the culturally Deaf, to people with spina bifida—whose lived experiences vary radically and whose political needs may be likewise different—and redefines them as one kind of being, with one set of demands.[10] Identity politics, Halley argues, can become more than an organization that facilitates resistance to hegemony; it too can interpellate group members, making them "*do* things they would not otherwise do, but also [making] them *become* people they would not otherwise be."[11] Identity politics risks imposing a kind of

script on the people it would include by delimiting and defining a category of being. Halley's critique thus raises important issues about disability as a category of identity: predicating belonging on one's difference reinforces the radical otherness constructed by compulsory able-bodiedness.[12]

If disability as a politicized identity is problematic in certain important ways, how might one conceptualize the kind of being particular to Ware's protagonist—for certainly, the configuration of her legs shapes both her mobility and her sociality? Two terms are especially useful here: cultural theorist Elspeth Probyn's *outside belonging* and disability studies' distinction of *impairment* from disability. Probyn suggests *outside belonging* as an alternative to the conceptual fixity of identity, which obliges one to think in terms of division and designation. Belonging, she writes, expresses a "desire for more than what is, a yearning to make skin stretch beyond individual needs and wants," and operates "not as a substantive claim but as a manner of being [. . . it is] the desire that individuals have to belong, a tenacious and fragile desire that is, I think, increasingly performed in the knowledge of the impossibility of ever really and truly belonging [. . .] A desire that cannot be categorized as good or bad, left or right—in short a desire without a fixed political ground but with immense political possibilities."[13]

Probyn continues that belonging is "always performed with the experience of being within and inbetween sets of social relations" and that thinking beyond identity to belonging is a matter of "getting at the minuteness of movement that occurs in the everyday processes of articulation."[14] Ware's representation posits his protagonist-with-a-short-leg as belonging: by juxtaposing the protagonist's story line with those of her neighbors, Ware fixes our attention on what Probyn calls the "brought together"ness and "ongoing inbetweenness" created by the building's structure and by the ways the building's inhabitants register one another's presence (water dripping from the second-floor apartment's bathroom ceiling as a result of an overflowed toilet on the third floor, for instance; phone calls; chance meetings in the basement; noises traveling through thin walls). These events render the boundaries between the parallel story lines permeable, as do the fleeting, awkward interactions between the residents. According to Probyn, the desire of belonging "oils the lines of the social [. . .] It is through and with desire that we figure relations of proximity to others and other forms of sociality."[15]

What I'd like to call *idiosyncratic belonging* is a conception of subjectivity that conceives of a person as a locus for the ever-shifting fluctuations of one's sense of belonging (or not belonging) as it is articulated across social space and across the physical space of one's "minuteness of movement." This belonging becomes idiosyncratic in acknowledging the lived experience of one's bodily configuration, something disability scholars have tried to isolate from "disability" as *impairment*. This lived experience contributes particular, idiosyncratic articulations of one's belonging across social and physical space and accounts for particular accoutrements (crutches, shower chairs, prostheses) and practices (a certain style of climbing the stairs, for instance). Disability scholars have drawn a distinction between impairment as the physical fact of bodily variation and disability as the limitations produced by societal attitudes toward, and failures to accommodate, the impairment. Susan Squier critiques this distinction, cautioning that one must not use it to relegate im-

pairment to a totally pre-social order "devoid of social meaning and separate from the self."[16] Squier asserts that because they mobilize characters' gestures, postures, and facial expressions to tell stories, comics are especially well equipped to communicate the embodied meanings of an impairment: "comics can convey the complex social impact of a physical or mental impairment, as well as the way the body registers social and institutional constraints."[17] In moving beyond disability as an identity category forged over and against a likewise fixed able-bodied normativity, one might conceive of the particular belonging that is (also) shaped by impairment-specific spatial practices as an *idiosyncratic* belonging.

It is this kind of subjectivity that Ware composes for his protagonist as he follows the micro-gestures of each of his characters. He portrays the woman with a short leg over an array of spatial and intersubjective transactions, and her short leg produces certain idiosyncratic transactions that shape her particular belonging—what she does, how she interacts with others, what she longs for. In "Building Stories," the protagonist lives with her disability not as a member of a fixed category (never do we hear her self-identify as any *type* of person because of her leg), but as one whose movements across social and physical space are sometimes shaped by her body's variation and the technologies that she uses. This representation of bodily variation as something that contributes to an idiosyncratic belonging—rather than something that makes a certain kind of person—is bound up with Ware's ordinariness aesthetic.

Chris Ware's Aesthetic of Ordinariness and Narrative Structure

Cycling through a twenty-four-hour period over thirty weekly one-page installments, the *New York Times Magazine*'s run of "Building Stories" follows three story lines: one for each of the apartments in a turn-of-the-century Chicago building.[18] The landlady, who resides on the first floor, is an elderly woman who lives in a world of memory and regret; the second floor houses a couple in a dysfunctional relationship; and on the third floor lives the main character of the strip, a young, lonely artist with a short leg. The opening installments are aesthetically paradigmatic for the entire strip, written and drawn in Ware's characteristic style. Composed in a non-linear progression of text and panels, each installment is colored largely in muted, balanced tones with some vivid splashes; drawn with clear, precise lines and blocks of unmodulated color; and records particular atmospheric details that produce an aesthetic of ordinariness—crumbs on the floor, broken fence slats, and mailing tape on cardboard boxes. In Ware's own words, the comic strip aims for "an ever closer representation of what it feels like to be alive."[19]

Ware's version of "the ordinary" is a living moment-by-moment, dwelling on the micro-gestures that narratives usually elide; it is the bored killing of time, the waiting to finish peeing, the placing of feet on a coffee table with a plate balanced on one's lap. But Ware's ordinariness of in-between time has its moments of quiet loveliness, too; his narratives of noticing record the changing sky's colors at the window, a bumblebee climbing a wall, rows of framed photographs in a hall. Ordinary life is, for Ware, a place where people continually make efforts at connection in unsuave, inarticulate, and nervous

ways: the landlady delivers a searing riposte on the phone after her interlocutor has hung up, the protagonist expresses her feelings for a man in a way that is overeager and desperate, and the second-floor man thwarts his fantasies of a pleasant conversation with his partner by saying, "Jesus, you're not going to wear *those* pants today, are you?"[20]

Ware's ordinariness is also about unconcealing the obvious, which philosopher Stanley Cavell has argued is no small feat, since the everyday is lost "in every impulse to philosophy." In our attempts to conceive of, to notice, or to name the ordinary, we are singling it out and focusing on it, thus rendering it in some sense extraordinary. In these attempts, we see the fleeting nature of the ordinary, the way in which it must be laboriously unconcealed. Cavell avers that one must continually attempt to grasp the stuff of the ordinary: "the world must be regained every day, in repetition, regained as gone."[21] Ware's aesthetic takes pains to make present the everyday that is so obvious it's hidden, filling his panels with fuzzy toilet seat covers, weeds in empty lots, and refrigerator handles. Along with its particular attention to this lexicon of details, Ware's aesthetic exploits certain technical aspects of the comics medium in order to create an atmosphere of ordinariness.

As he presents mundane gestures, dialogues with pets, and tasks like taking plastic wrap off of sliced apples, Ware enlists a technique touted by Scott McCloud as having "great power [. . .] releasable only by the reader's mind": amplification through simplification.[22] McCloud claims that comics artists intensify the meanings of the objects and people they portray when they draw them more schematically. "By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,'" he writes, "an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't."[23] Ware's clean-lined style makes everyday objects and people more universal, such that readers engage and identify with them more readily. Ware explains: "In order to work visually my comics have to fall somewhere between the general and the specific [. . . A]s with any form of writing, the richness and texture of the story comes from the specifics, from the details. So I use specific details, but I try to draw the details in a general way."[24] Ware's aesthetic creates scenes that, though they take place ostensibly somewhere on the north side of Chicago, readers can identify with readily and inhabit easily. Situating the protagonist's body in this visual comicscape—certainly, she is rendered in the same clear colors and black outlines, a smooth curve signaling the end of her short leg—familiarizes it and renders it ordinary. At the same time, Ware's aesthetic of ordinariness represents the idiosyncratic details of the lived experience of this impairment, along with those of the rest of everyday life—a crutch in the corner, a browning banana, the stocking cap on the end of the protagonist's leg, a band-aid on her date's hand.

Ware's aesthetic of ordinariness is achieved not only in the iconicity and detail of his scenes, but also in the ways in which he organizes and juxtaposes panels in his narratives. McCloud distinguishes between six kinds of panel-to-panel transitions, noting that Western comics use uncannily similar proportions of each kind when analyzed. Western comics, he observes, emphasize action-to-action storytelling, also employing subject-to-subject and scene-to-scene transitions. What distinguishes Ware's storytelling style from that of most Western comics is the predominance of moment-to-moment transitions, in which the change and the lapse of time between panels

is minimal. Ware's action-to-action transitions also function as moment-to-moment transitions, as he primarily records micro-actions—gestures, facial expressions, and even the very steps characters take across their rooms. For example, in part 13, a series of panels depict the second-floor man's return to the apartment building (see plate 17).[25] Ware takes twelve panels to represent the event of the man's arrival, exit from his car, and approach to the apartment. Ware thus slows the pace of his comic strip such that it absorbs and portrays the smaller moments of the ordinary, which are glossed over and allowed to fall into the gutter in most comics. By manipulating panel-to-panel transitions in this way, Ware creates a certain rhythm of ordinariness, the "beat by beat" experience readers create in the act of reading smaller micro-movements. The protagonist's short leg becomes a part of this rhythm of ordinariness, synched to it, presented not as an alien, unknowable experience, but as part of the main character's everyday living. Placed in this flux of ordinary moments—of non-events, of generalized detail, of time parceled out slowly—her impairment is brought to the surface of perception as if it were as unremarkable as any of the other details in "Building Stories." Ware's ordinariness aesthetic deeply impacts the narrative structure of the comic strip, which creates an idiosyncratic belonging for the protagonist by representing her quotidian experience of having a short leg.

In her discussion of how ordinariness is present, literary theorist Lauren Berlant argues that the everyday unfolds not in dramatic events but in "temporal environments," a concept that allows for a temporal description of space "as a back-formation from practices."[26] Ware narratively structures the ordinary of his comic strip as a constellation of these smaller moments, especially on the occasions when the textual register of "Building Stories" directly addresses the protagonist's impairment as a troublesome experience. Because they are located in an ordinary environment, the events in "Building Stories" are what Berlant defines as *episodes*: "An environment is made via spatial practices and can absorb how time ordinarily passes, how forgettable most events are, and, overall, how people's ordinary perseverations fluctuate in patterns of attachment and identification. In an ordinary environment, most of what we call events are not of the scale of memorable impact but rather are *episodes*, that is, occasions that make experiences while not changing much of anything."[27] In these small moments of acknowledging the protagonist's short leg as regrettable, Ware guides readers to register the episode's accompanying mixture of anxiety, shame, and loss, while also setting the episode in an overall flux with other practices, which insistently undercut its affective tenor and drama.

In the first installment of the main character's twenty-four-hour self-narrative, she worries that she will disturb her neighbors by getting up at night. This concern stems from the fact that when she's moving about the house at night, she uses a crutch. In the next panel, the visual information is onomatopoeic, showing the girl in her underwear and leaning on her crutch, a line of white "TAKs" trailing behind her as she crosses the living room. To walk around at night with a crutch, we read, *does* mean to make noise that could awaken a neighbor. The text accompanying the scene, however, contributes information about spatial practices that constructs a different narrative. "Then again," the protagonist thinks, "I don't know what I was worried about,

since I hear them yelling at each other all the time, anyway . . ."[28] She offers a rebuttal to her own anxiety about making potentially disruptive noises—her crutch noises are akin to (or less troublesome than) the noises resulting from her neighbors' dysfunctional relationship. Thus reassured, she makes her trek to the bathroom insouciantly, as the "TAKs" are transformed in the ordinary environment as unmemorable episodes in light of the neighbors' own noise-making practices.

By narrating this ordinary moment of wanting to get up to use the restroom, setting up an impairment-related social restriction on such a quotidian task, and then interposing her neighbors' own noise-causing conditions, Ware diffuses the anxiety and self-consciousness of navigating an apartment at night with a short leg. The ordinary environment of the third and second story of the apartment building where the protagonist and her neighbors live, respectively, is elaborated by the spatial practices furnished via the protagonist's memory as well as the comic strip's other installments. For instance, the protagonist expands her self-justification by hypothesizing about her neighbor: "I'm pretty sure the guy's a drinker too . . . I hear him coming and going at all hours . . ." Readers know from previous installments, however, that he makes noise at odd hours because he works as a night security guard in an empty building. Ware's narrative construction, then, alters the protagonist's self-righteousness through its relation to other episodes, and she turns out to be rather ungenerous in her hypotheses about her neighbor.[29]

Perhaps the richest scene of the strip in terms of Ware's narrative construction of meaning for the protagonist's short leg is found in part 22, in which the plumber, Mr. Bell, finally arrives to fix the third floor's overflowing toilet. The protagonist's comments at the outset start shaping the scene's environment into one of discomfort and unease: "his sour breath smelled like wet wood, with a vague ashy staleness of cigarettes, and his coat looked as if it'd spent the summer wadded up on the floor of his car . . . every movement he made seemed excessively loud . . ." In the awkward exchange that follows, the protagonist acknowledges her impairment when Mr. Bell asks her about it without realizing—the only time in the strip that her impairment is verbally articulated. The moment is carefully composed, divided in small panels that create a more dilated sense of time, fractured and drawn out by movements of hesitation and retraction. Mr. Bell sets down his bucket and remarks that it was resourceful of her to use her crutch to support the toilet's tank float. Preoccupied with his work, he asks, "Sports injury?" The next panel shows the main character still holding the crutch out, silent, frozen. In the following panel, she gathers herself, tentatively uttering, "uh." When she finally speaks in the next panel, her eyebrows are furrowed in apprehensive discomfort: "Not really . . . I don't really play sports . . ." and in the following panel she continues, knocking on her prosthetic, "It's more of a, uh, life injury" (see plate 18).[30]

Ware depicts Mr. Bell's response as a similarly jerky start-and-stop attempt at connection and at smoothing over a too-intimate inquiry. In the next panel, the scene stands frozen, with Mr. Bell poised over the toilet and the girl standing in the doorway. In two separate panels, Mr. Bell looks over his shoulder, and then begins apologizing. The speed with which the protagonist immediately cuts him off in the next panel is slightly jarring and

certainly unsuave: "Hey, that's cool . . . I actually like it when people don't notice . . . especially guys." The scene continues in a halting and speeding arrhythmia which slowly rights itself (only to be upended at the end of the installment).[31] Mr. Bell halts, and chuckles, and finally turns back to his work, saying, "You're okay." Ware exploits panel-to-panel transitions to create the awkward pauses that reinforce the hesitation signaled by the protagonist's "uh's" and to convey Mr. Bell's attempts to navigate the confession of sorts he had inadvertently prompted.[32]

The comic strip lingers on this moment of awkwardness and candor, but at the same time, when part 22 is viewed as a whole, the protagonist's lamentation of a "life injury" is consistently undercut. Although this is an affectively intense moment, a scene immediately following is apparently more shameful for the protagonist, and as such it works to reshape the environment of ordinariness that produces meaning for the protagonist's short leg. Mr. Bell asks the girl—over three panels, wiping his forehead, nervously casting her a sideways glance, and scratching his face—if she had flushed "any, uh, kinda *feminine protection*." Her response is curious. Throughout "Building Stories," Ware periodically colors the background of a panel solid yellow to signify extreme affect (shock, fear, etc.). In this case, the protagonist is shown silent with bright pink cheeks and a solid, hot pink background. This use of color is especially striking in the midst of composition that is primarily blue and brown. Her cheeks remain flushed as she denies the charge; her feminine, leaky body is apparently a greater source of shame and embarrassment for her than her disability.

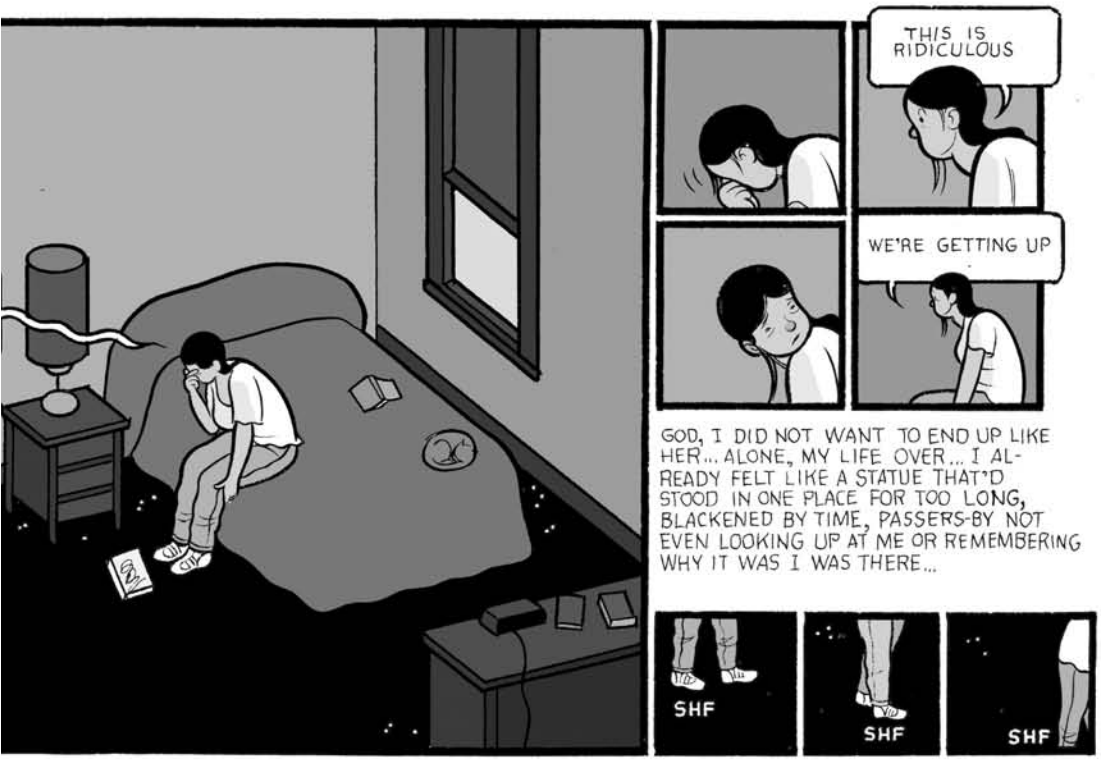
The final series of panels in the installment, stretching in a bar along the bottom of the page, also undercuts the prominence of the "life injury" scene as an expression of shame and loss. In this series of panels, the protagonist begins to ask Mr. Bell about his family after he mentions having previously lived in her apartment. In the first panel, the girl asks, "And . . . you and your wife still live [in the suburbs]?" The next panel is a shot of Mr. Bell concentrating on the toilet, and over the following four panels he confirms and then qualifies, saying, "*Well* . . . not my wife . . . She passed a few years back . . ." Under this sequence are three successive panels that center on the toilet bowl and Mr. Bell's hand as time stalls before the protagonist awkwardly apologizes. Almost a mirror to the "life injury" scene, the girl has inadvertently happened upon an intense, personal detail in the process of making small talk. The sequence is unrelenting in holding the readers to this uncomfortable exchange. The protagonist tries to recover from her question about Mr. Bell's wife by asking about his daughter; after a few panels elapse, the strip concludes with a bird's-eye view of both of them standing in the bathroom, and Mr. Bell responding, "She's gone, too." An analogy is thus drawn between the protagonist's short leg and Mr. Bell's loss of his wife and daughter; rather than positing disability as an *extra*ordinarily tragic and dramatic loss, it too is a circumstance to improvise living through.

As a whole, the narrative structure of this installment contextualizes the main character's impairment—even expressed in rather pathetic terms as a "life injury" in an exchange marked by discomfort—in a series of interactions that carry as much or more affective weight. The other episodes of reproductive shame and familial loss crowd around the initial rendering of impair-

Fig. 14.1. The protagonist's foreshortened prosthetic limb with the word "untouched" posits a connection between her impairment and sexual unattractiveness, one which is eventually complicated. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 21," *New York Times Magazine,* February 12, 2006, 43.

ment, complicating it as a certain kind of moment, resisting its putative extraordinariness. The sense of loss is a common experience for the girl and Mr. Bell; the ordinariness of the environment in which these interpersonal transactions take place is an ordinariness of characters' "enduring that life of which [one] surely is not master," as Berlant puts it.[33] In a similarly structured relation of sameness between episodes, the girl reveals her impairment with embarrassment, but embarrassment is repeated and surpassed with reference to another trait, her feminine difference. Additionally, an earlier installment offers an outright counterargument to part 22's portrayal of her short leg as a tragedy (even if unremarkable). In part 7, when the protagonist discovers that the toilet has overflowed, it is her short leg that has equipped her to deal with the situation. She remarks that she spent a lot of time on the floor as a child and is therefore intimate with the spaces of a home that are near the floor—including the knobs and pipes of a toilet's plumbing.[34] The "life injury" articulation of the protagonist's impairment, then, is a moment whose privilege is diffused by the episodic construction of the comic strip as well as by contradicting meanings proposed by other installments.

In other scenes, the protagonist's short leg is indirectly implicated in the barrenness of her amorous life, a barrenness that is more explicitly at the center of her story. These connections between impairment and loneliness are subtle, but they seem to be working with the grain of typical representations of disability. Even though Ware represents the main character as an



ordinary woman, and not as radically other, these scenes suggest that the main character's short leg has isolated her and precluded her from being the object of another's desire. The unique composition of one such panel in part 21 creates a pointed relationship (if unarticulated) between the protagonist's impairment and her "single" status. She is lying on her bed, lingering on a word she's used to describe her diary: "'Untouched' Yeah, well, that's certainly appropriate . . ." The ensuing text elaborates on this rueful remark; she is referring to the fact that she hasn't been kissed in six or seven years, to the point where she struggles to remember the experience (see fig. 14.1). This text is juxtaposed with a striking, foreshortened image of the protagonist lying on her bed. The foot and leg that loom large in the foreground are her prosthesis and her short leg; the frame visually foregrounds them in tandem with her self-label as "untouched."[35] In a later installation, she braces herself after she's asked a fellow art school alumnus, Phil, up to her apartment. She tells her readers, "Still, from experience, I'd learned to expect the worst . . ." and then tells Phil, "I know . . . You 'only want to be friends' . . . ."[36] The rejection, furthermore, was not on the basis of personality, mutual interests, or emotional intimacy, which a friend might still hope to enjoy, but rather was one of not being attracted to her "*like that*." The rejection that experience has taught her to expect in this scene is a rejection of her body as a sexually desirable object.

Her short leg, then, is figured as a variation that has deterred men in the

protagonist's past from thinking of her in amorous terms. However, over the entire trajectory of "Building Stories" these instances, in which the protagonist anticipates rejection, are more complicated.[37] The protagonist's doubt regarding the desirability of her particular body is, in the end, undermined by the simple fact that Phil does come up to her apartment in part 28 and is overcome with desire, even to the point of orgasm.[38] But that "simple fact" of affirmation is challenged since Phil experiences his desire as excessive and shameful, and readers are left not knowing whether or not he actually calls her again. The apartment building, which speaks in the installment after Phil has left, is something of an omnipotent narrator who is convinced that he won't return.[39] Elsewhere in the strip's narrative composition, this uncertain and unpromising end to the climactic Phil episode is given counterargument: the second floor inhabitant's daydream is a lusty view of her posterior, and the epilogue shows the protagonist five years later, driving past the old building with a baby in tow, cooing that it's time to pick up daddy.[40]

In the end, the protagonist has "found someone" and enjoys a life of mobility through the city at large. At the same time, though, Ware is not composing a straightforward story where the woman finds that she really *is* desirable. While "Building Stories" has a happy ending and some happy moments, it is not simply a narrative of affirmation and growing self-confidence, but also one of baggage and self-doubt. In the end, as the narrative wobbles from shame to affirmation and back, Ware's structural composition constructs a multivalent set of episodes in which bodily variation comes to the foreground in a way that complicates any definitive interpretations. Instead, each episode's meaning must be read in relation to several others—hardly clear-cut, hardly static.

Aesthetically, Chris Ware's "Building Stories" renders its main character's short leg as part of a general realism of the built space, apprehensible but not exaggerated, something that catches the gaze and, while not overlooked, is not melodramatized either. Structurally, too, Ware is composing a particular way of knowing bodily variation. He textually engages the protagonist's short leg on a few occasions throughout the comic strip, imbuing it with a certain meaning—loss, revelation, etc. At the same time, Ware works consciously to register and then complicate the meaning of each moment by putting each into play with a number of other moments that are sometimes also explicitly about her leg, sometimes about other people and other experiences. Thus, Ware's elision of the protagonist's short leg in his description for the *Independent* is not unwarranted; this is not a strip about a disabled woman. Instead, "Building Stories" looks frankly at its third-floor inhabitant and her experience in a way that isn't moralizing or hypervigilant, but conscious, attending to the constellation of interactions with people and the object world as well as the spatial practices that comprise her particular, idiosyncratic belonging. Ware offers a representation of bodily variation that is not to be interpreted as a radically other condition but as something that gives shape to a deeply ordinary, particular, and ever-shifting manner of being in relation with the world.

Notes

1. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: The Introduction," *The Independent Online*, October 1, 2006, http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/features/article1856445.ece (accessed August 31, 2008).

2. By mutually *complicating*, I'm referring to how the narrative structure creates meaning for the protagonist's leg: each figuring of the leg in the narrative suggests a certain knowledge of it, and what is particularly notable is how this signification's value is deeply relative (in the Saussurean sense of the term).

3. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 96.

4. See, for example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, eds., *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); as well as Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

5. See Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1–32.

6. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 137.

7. McRuer compares this "severe" category to queer theory's "fabulous" as a category that "would reverse the able-bodied understanding of severely disabled bodies as the most marginalized, the most excluded from a privileged and always elusive normalcy, and would instead suggest that it is precisely those bodies that are best positioned to refuse 'mere toleration' and call out the inadequacies of compulsory able-bodiedness." McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 31.

8. I want to make it abundantly clear that in outlining some of the limitations of identity politics and looking to Ware's text for an alternative, I am in no way advocating that we dispense with identity politics as we navigate the contemporary social sphere and as we engage in activism on behalf of people with disabilities. I'm not suggesting that we should be "ability blind" in our contemporary moment—to do so would certainly be disastrous and ignorant of important political realities. I am, however, trying to elucidate a way of imagining bodily variation in a way that breaks radically from the originally medicalized discourse of difference.

9. Janet Halley, "'Like Race' Arguments," in *What's Left of Theory: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2000), 41.

10. Regarding aesthetic disabilities, see Veena Das and Renu Addlakha's excellent essay, "Disability and Domestic Citizenship: Voice, Gender, and the Making of the Subject," *Public Culture* 13.3 (2001): 511–32. One might argue that "the disabled" at the very least share the condition of being marked apart as a certain human kind (what Du Bois's *Dusk of Dawn* calls a "badge" in the context of African American identity)—still, certain people with "invisible" disabilities such as chronic fatigue syndrome or transabled people with BIID (Body Integrity Identity Disorder), who "need an impairment of some sort" (http://biid-info.org), challenge even this claim.

11. Halley, "'Like Race' Arguments," 43.

12. I'm using the word "difference" here in order to deploy the language commonly used in such debates; perhaps a more appropriate way to argue this point, however, would be to warn that insisting on one's *variation* keeps one inscribed in the systems of domination that come with identity. Wendy Brown has made astute arguments against the substantive claims of identity, arguing that rather than making claims based on who one is (and thus on the white bourgeois male to whom one would like to be equivalent), it might be productive to make claims based on what one wants, thus reconfiguring the subject as an effect of desire rather than a "fixed and sovereign identity." See Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21.3 (1993): 390–410.

13. Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 6, 8–9.

14. Ibid., 13, 6.

15. Ibid., 13.

16. Bill Hughes, qtd. in Susan Squier, "So Long as They Grow Out of It: Comics, the Discourse of Developmental Normalcy, and Disability," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 29 (2008): 73.

17. Squier, "So Long as They Grow Out of It," 74.

18. "Building Stories" first ran in weekly installments of the *New York Times Magazine*'s "Funny Pages" from September 2005 until April 2006. In spring 2008, Ware published *The ACME Novelty Library* 18, which is a "Building Stories" story line, focusing on the protagonist's history and thus covering a much more expansive time frame. I will be focusing mostly on the *New York Times Magazine* run of "Building Stories," but to a great degree, the aesthetic and narrative style is consistent across the two editions.

19. Chris Ware, qtd. in Aida Edemariam, "The Art of Melancholy," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2005, http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,1605193,00.html (accessed August 31, 2008).

20. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 15, *11 a.m.*," *New York Times Magazine*, January 1, 2006, 22.

21. Stanley Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 172.

22. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink, 1993), 45.

23. Ibid., 30.

24. Chris Ware, qtd. in Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 20.

25. In error, the *New York Times Magazine* labeled part 14 "Part 13." I am here referring to this second part 13, actually part 14. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 13, *9 a.m.*," *New York Times Magazine*, December 18, 2005, 35.

26. Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 759.

27. Ibid., 760.

28. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 7, *3 a.m.*," *New York Times Magazine*, October 30, 2005, 33.

29. Ibid.

30. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 22, *5 p.m.*," *New York Times Magazine*, February 19, 2006, 43.

31. Henri Lefebvre characterizes arrhythmia as follows: "Rhythms unite with one another in the state of health, in normal (which is to say normed!) everydayness; when they are discordant, there is suffering, a pathological state (of which arrhythmia is generally, at the same time, symptom, cause and effect)." Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elder and Gerald Moore (New York: Continuum, 2004), 16.

32. Ware, "Building Stories: Part 22, *5 p.m.*"

33. Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics," in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, ed. Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 81.

34. Ware, "Building Stories: Part 7, *3 a.m.*"

35. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 21, *4 p.m.*," *New York Times Magazine*, February 12, 2006, 43.

36. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 27, *10 p.m.*," *New York Times Magazine*, March 26, 2006, 27.

37. The overlap between this and Ware's more recent *The ACME Novelty Library* 18 is striking. For instance, the book opens with the protagonist finding a pair of period-stained underpants on the floor of the laundry room (depicted in two still frames), picking it up, and putting it in the wash. One difference between the two "Building Stories," however, is that in *The ACME Novelty Library*, the protagonist is more aware of her sexual attractiveness—she discovers that the boy she nannies has an erection during a tickle fight (11). Although she is not surprised, she recognizes that this is an inappropriate interaction. Indeed, she is fired because the boy desires her (14). His father says, "Jeff's had this . . . problem . . . in the past . . . he just gets—well, too *attached* to the au pairs." At the same time, however, Ware's *ACME* narrative does recognize the ways in which disability is widely conceived as a sexually unattractive trait, as evidenced by the father's statement, "Well, we just hoped that in *your* case, you know, he might not . . . get so, uh . . . *attached*." The major difference, then, is that the protagonist

reacts with tears *and a retort* that the father is an "asshole"; she has not internalized this association of disability with sexual unattractiveness. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 18 (Chicago: The Acme Novelty Library, 2007), 20.

38. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 28," *New York Times Magazine.* April 2, 2006, 29.

39. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 29," *New York Times Magazine*, April 9, 2006, 25.

40. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 25, *8 p.m.*," *New York Times Magazine*, March 12, 2006, 29; "Building Stories: Epilogue: *Five years later*," *New York Times Magazine*, April 16, 2006, 27.

Past Imperfect: "Building Stories" and the Art of Memory

PETER R. SATTLER

> What is a memory? [. . .] An image which travels through time.
> —Lynda Barry, *What It Is*

> One realizes oneself only one piece at a time.
> —Marcel Proust, *The Fugitive*

Memory Drawings

Comics have a long history of being forgotten. It seems only appropriate, then, that "memory" has emerged as a central trope among cartoonists for discussing how this medium works, both on the page and in the minds of its readers and creators. Scott McCloud, for example, has attributed the power of cartooning to a mimetic similarity between the iconography of comic art and the contents of human memory. Cartoons, he proposes, closely resemble the simplified afterimages of the world that we carry around in our heads, beginning with the sketchy memory of our own face.[1] Art Spiegelman similarly asserts that memories amount to "cartoons [. . .] in your head" but has extended that formal affinity to comics' ability to represent the "tugs of present and past": "You get all of the memories splayed out, physically, as part of the page. And that allows you to correlate memory and put them together."[2] Canadian cartoonist Seth endorses these views of cartooning and comics but has followed the memory trail still further back, to the mind of the cartoonist himself. Memory, Seth claims, serves not simply as a repository of images and events; it is a mental and emotional activity that occurs alongside and in counterpoint to the very process of creating comics: "When I'm drawing, only half my mind is on the work. [. . .] The other half is free to wander. Usually, it's off in a reverie, visiting the past, picking over old hurts, or recalling that sense of being somewhere specific. [. . .] These reveries are extremely important to the work."[3] Indeed, Seth concludes, cartooning as a whole might best be described as "memory drawing."[4]

But if there is a "memory drawing" school of cartooning, then its dean is Chris Ware, who has done as much as any artist to formalize the notion that, as he puts it, "comics is about memory."[5] "A cartoon," Ware tells us, "is not an image taken from life. A cartoon is taken from memory. You're trying to distill the memory of an experience, not the experience itself."[6] With his empha-

sis on the distillation of "experience," however, Ware both affirms and moves beyond the broader functional insights of McCloud or Spiegelman, who basically call upon memory to underwrite the comics form at large, explaining why readers respond so powerfully to *all* cartoons. Ware posits memory as an experience in its own right—a form of sensation and state of consciousness that must be actively pursued and refined by the comics artist. And in this formulation, he also veers away from many academic explorations of memory in comics, which have tended to analyze how graphic novels like *Maus* use the artificiality of comic art to expose the artifice of memory per se, "revealing [both] as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination."[7] Ware, I intend to show, is less interested in these epistemological issues—in memory's transparency or constructedness, its accuracy or duplicity—than in the lived experience of remembering. His formal experiments in comic art, especially in recent years, stand mainly as efforts to represent and re-create that psychological and emotional phenomenon.

Ware has repeatedly indicated that his central goal as an artist is to "start with a feeling" and then "to re-create that feeling" in the mind of his reader.[8] In the present essay, I will examine this general aesthetic goal as it is pursued within specific pages from "Building Stories"—an ongoing graphic novel that, according to Ware, "from start to finish is about memory."[9] I hope to demonstrate that, in its pages, Ware not only analyzes memory as a psychological object and a fictional subject, but also develops medium-specific methods for simulating the activity of remembering itself, making that action palpable in the reading process. "Building Stories" accomplishes this feat, first, by anatomizing memory into its component parts, teasing narrative memories away from their visual and episodic counterparts. It then reassembles those pieces within the constitutive mind of the reader, creating cycles and sequences that combine past and present, outsides and insides, image and text. Through these techniques, I believe, Ware attempts to capture and encode nothing less than the very phenomenology of memory. Specifically, I will argue that Ware cares less about representing the "memory of an experience" than about reproducing memory *as* an experience—that "Building Stories" attempts to reconstitute memory, coaxing its readers not only to remember feelings, but also to *feel* remembering.

Making Memories: "Paper Dolls"

To some extent, the larger components of my claim—namely, that memory is central to Chris Ware's comics, where it is formally anatomized and re-encoded as a "feeling"—apply to the vast range of this artist's work. Early pages like "Every Morning" show Ware's cartoon surrogates explicitly reminiscing about lost family members and worrying about the fading places they occupy within his mind.[10] Other strips, such as "The Daily Observer" and "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess," lay autobiographical tales atop newspaper strips and superhero comics, blending personal and cultural memory.[11] Ware's landmark novel *Jimmy Corrigan* continues this theme and tells the story of four generations not primarily as a record of social or biographical connections ("I don't understand things from a social level," the author insists, but only "in a personal way"), but mainly as a series of nested recollections.[12] The narrative's

central section, for example, set in and around the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, at first seems to be a simple, albeit unexpected, flashback, relating the boyhood experiences of James Reed Corrigan, Jimmy's grandfather. As that historical tale progresses, however, the authorial voice—initially distant and poetic ("the boy collapses in tears onto a strange woman's coat")—slowly shifts into the first person ("at the time, I think I understood little of that afternoon"), eventually commenting directly on the potency and veracity of these century-old scenes: "One's memory, however, likes to play tricks, after years of cold storage. Some recollections remain as fresh as the moment they were minted while others seem to crumble into bits, dusting their neighbors with a contaminating rot of uncertainty. Did she really *smile* at me? I *saw* her . . . I *thought* I *saw* her . . . But *why* was I always wearing this *nightshirt*? I *couldn't* have been dressed like this! I have to continually remind myself to keep such details straight."[13] The source, the tone, and even the temporal markers of such memories are in constant flux; the comic shifts back and forth from a polished third-person narrator to the voice of a prepubescent boy and back again, eventually returning to the retrospective present. Within pages, as the lengthy Exposition story comes to a close, the entire scene becomes embedded within a new present (circa 1974–75), which shows the now aged James Corrigan telling this childhood tale to Amy, his adopted granddaughter—a scene that will, in turn, become reframed as a memory within the 1980s "present" of the novel's main narrative.[14] Clearly, Ware's work reveals a lifelong fascination with memory, its vagaries, and its persistence.

Moreover, this study's more particular focus—the pursuit of remembering as a *felt* experience—resonates with Ware's most potent statements about his artwork and its relation to readers' psychological states. Ware, for instance, has repeatedly described his comics as engaged in the puzzling work of "encoding emotion."[15] This is not, he insists, simply a matter of telling stories of emotional distress: "You don't want to write a poem about being depressed; you want to write a depressing poem."[16] Neither is it a matter of representing feelings stylistically, with slashing line work or morose colors. Indeed, Ware's visual style is defiantly *anti*-expressive, or what he calls "flat," "harsh," "mechanical," and "banal."[17] This superficial coolness and purity of design, he insists, brings a measure of silence to his "clattery" medium, allowing him to puzzle out a *formal* correlate of the feeling he is trying to re-create as a reading experience. Ware calls his medium, like music, a "compositional art, in that you're composing pictures on a page, and you're composing emotion into the work," attempting to isolate the "crystalline structures of feeling"—structures that will resonate in the reader's mind and imagination as he or she "performs" them.[18] This conception of emotion is at once deeply humanist and strongly modernist, bridging the divide between the personal and impersonal. It insists that feelings are more than broadly and intuitively universal; they are, given the right composition and encoding, capable of being formalized and transferred from psyche to psyche. Feelings are embodied *in* the work, and anyone with the ability to read those "notes" can re-create its emotional tune.

More than any of Ware's previous works, "Building Stories"—which documents the lives of four different residents of a single Chicago three-flat—experiments with the comics form to isolate memory's own "crystalline

structures." In fact, Ware has described his approach to "Building Stories" as "simply try[ing] to reproduce [a] 'false memory' on the page" through compositions that approximate, he says, "the way I actually *think*."[19] And in terms of both form and content, the novel's memories are, quite literally, everywhere. In some passages, Ware creates comics out of one resident's diary entries; in others, he diagrammatically traces that same character's thoughts as they weave in, out, and around memories of her own body. Elsewhere in the novel-in-progress, memories assume more physical and unconventional forms. Some pages suggest that human activity practically burns itself into walls and floors, leaving a mnemonic record of days long past, while other scenes grant the apartment its own autobiographical voice, which calmly recollects the building's life story. In fact, one of the novel's first collected chapters (*The ACME Novelty Library* 18) allows all these forms of memory to commingle, placing the entire sequence inside the mind of the third-floor diarist, who wakes on the volume's first pages and returns to bed on its last, surrounded by a collection of younger selves, each drifting off to sleep.[20]

Any one of these pages would serve as a noteworthy example of Ware's craft, especially the more visually experimental creations, which often reconstruct the flow of memory through circuitously linked words and images. But it is one of the ostensibly simplest "building stories"—a 2003 strip entitled "Paper Dolls"—that lays bare Ware's central techniques for representing remembering (see plate 19).[21] At first glance, "Paper Dolls" seems to deploy the medium's standard components in a straightforward manner. Two pages are divided into eighteen identical panels, which tell the story of a single character: the elderly landlady, who was born, lived, and will die in the novel's eponymous building. The landlady appears at the center of each panel, while a series of thought balloons narrate an autobiographical story about her youthful love of paper dolls. Those eighteen pictures move regularly and sequentially through the landlady's life, starting in utero, proceeding though childhood and adolescence, and gradually moving toward the character's present-day age—which is tellingly synchronized with the final word of the strip: "today."

Compared to some of Ware's more formally elaborate pages, "Paper Dolls" reads clearly and without significant impediment. That fact, however, belies the strange disjointedness of its parts. Take, for example, the disunity of the pictures themselves. Each panel contains a telling "snapshot" from the landlady's life (an apt label, seeing how she is posed and framed for each), yet those pictures bear no more narrative connection to each other than does your average collection of photographs. We jump, without preparation or explanation, from her parents' bed to a family picnic, to a quiet Christmas morning, and then to her father's funeral. By contrast, the text of the strip offers a story that seems direct and unified. But it, too, has its disorienting qualities: the landlady's paper-doll reverie begins and ends without motivation and slides without warning between past and present concerns. It is told to no one in particular, for no identifiable reason or larger narrative purpose.

The most significant disunities, though, emerge from the disjunction *between* text and image. The thought balloons, for instance, are narrated from the present-day perspective, yet the images are decidedly drawn from the past: an unexpected interpolation of the "now" into the "then." In addition,

the comic's words and images proceed at radically different paces and tempos. The text tells a story that spans perhaps eight years (the length of her childhood attachment to dolls); the pictures, though, cover an entire lifetime, with some panel-to-panel transitions skipping ahead as many as eight years across a single gutter between panels. Finally, the words within each panel seem only arbitrarily (if suggestively) related to the pictures that surround them. The fourth panel, for example, describes a traumatic fifth birthday, when the landlady's parents gave her "a giant, extravagant corpse of a [doll], which would open its huge black eyes at you when you sat her upright," but the panel's image seems to have occurred some years prior, and the strip as a whole never shows the birthday horror. We read, in addition, about how the landlady collected, cared for, and ultimately "ruined" her paper dolls, but Ware never shows her engaged in that activity either. Indeed, the only paper doll in sight is the cartoon woman herself, each incarnation of whom is drawn with a thick outline (ideal for clipping) and small rectangular tabs (for easy assembly).

Ware is plainly teasing apart the strands of the comic form, allowing each to represent a discrete form of memory and remembering. The pictures, for instance, present what most memory researchers call *episodic memories*, those moments and events from our own lives that we can call up and visualize.[22] Especially given their photo-like qualities—and the authenticity with which one usually invests such images—one might think of them as cartoon versions of "flashbulb memories," which strongly mark emotionally powerful moments in our lives.[23] The landlady's words, alternately, embody what some memory researchers single out as *narrative memory*, which gives our recollections shape and meaning, placing them in the context of a life story.[24] Our words and internal storytelling make sense of these images, giving them a feeling of direction and sequence, even though those processes tend to overwrite and overdetermine the original sensations.[25] In this comic, for example, the woman's narrative memories—the comic's words—drive us forward through the page, making connections even where, visually, none seem to exist, reconstructing the images into a coherent story of childhood fantasies and their eventual abandonment.

But comics are more than just the conjunction of text and image, and Ware is attempting to do more than simply deconstruct a series of autobiographical memories. The true art of comics involves the hybrid nature of reading words and pictures, and Ware's comic uses this hybridity to "encode" what I will call *experiential memory*—the feeling of remembering, the phenomenology of memory itself. In Ware's work, experiential memory is closely tied to the act of reading as both a physical and a mental event. It is linked, that is, to the process of optically navigating the comics page as well as the activity of consolidating that page in one's mind. As a "performer" of the comic composition, the reader moves among and connects the episodic/visual and narrative/textual memories, and that activity of reading creates its own experiential rhythms, its own sense of time, and its own set of feelings.

"Paper Dolls" encodes these feelings not in the words or in the pictures as a whole, but within the strip's panel-to-panel sequences. Within the frames of plate 19, for instance, the reader may temporarily ignore the words and the larger visual scenes and focus instead upon the isolated figures of the growing

landlady, considering those figures as components with their own discrete movement—as a comic within the comic, so to speak. Focused in this way, one sees the young woman engaged not in six separate actions at six different times, but (also) in one unified gesture. In the first tier, the girl looks over her shoulder, rolls onto her side, and lowers her right arm. In the second tier, her left arm moves slowly down her body, from shoulder to abdomen and then to the space between her legs. This action is only "visible," however, as you move *through* the sequence. It has its own story, its own speed, and its own duration—a duration that most closely parallels not the time of the comic's words or pictures, but the time of remembering itself, and above all the time of the reading. Indeed, it is the movement of *reading* that animates the landlady's small body (like a series of cartoon cells), bringing it to life, just as the act of remembering reconstitutes and connects our episodic recollections into an experiential whole.

In fact, this reading of "Paper Dolls" creates many additional linkages. As noted above, the strip's episodic and narrative memories seem unrelated; yet the act of reading creates connections between the two. Sometimes these experiential links occur within a single frame: the landlady mentions the horrible glassy-eyed doll, and the accompanying image of her infant self looks particularly doll-like; she describes finding paper dolls in the newspaper color supplements, while her younger incarnation peruses the Sunday funnies. More frequently, though, the act of reading activates our own memories of what was previously encountered, conjuring ghostly links to other parts of the comic page. The monstrous doll comes back to mind as we reach the Christmas panel, which depicts the remnants of another opened, but equally invisible, present. The description of the doll as "a giant, extravagant corpse" also assumes a terrible reality at the father's grave, which then sends our thoughts back to the partially obscured image of his swollen naked body. The landlady's description of paper dolls "in their tastefully engraved underclothes" springs to life three panels later, when we see the landlady standing in her own undergarments. And still larger linkages emerge across entire rows. The text of one panel, for example, details the dolls' "vulnerable pink bodies," which "all of a sudden [would] be dressed for the ball, or for horseback riding, or for a transatlantic excursion, or for any number of marvelous things I didn't understand at that age." Each of these phrases gains new sequential vitality as the comic progresses, beginning with the image of a girl examining her own pink paper body, ears flushed with shame and arousal, and continuing through subsequent images of dressing, commuting, and dating. In fact, by the comic's final images, the whole strip hums with memories. As the now-aged landlady wonders whatever happened to her paper dolls and insists that she will search for them (but "not today"), the entire sequence recollects itself—as a lifelong series of lost things, lost people, and lost "presents."

With its visions of episodic, narrative, and experiential memory—encountered simultaneously, but each configured with its own time, tense, and tempo—"Paper Dolls" exemplifies Chris Ware's conception of memory and his comics' ability to encode and, through reading, to mimic that experience. It also uses the comics medium to highlight some peculiar characteristics of human memory itself. Foremost among these is our tendency to re-envision our former experiences from a "third-person" point of view. We frequently

remember our past selves not as if we are inhabiting that earlier body, seeing through those younger eyes; instead, we often see ourselves as if from the outside, from a station we never could have occupied in the historical past. This odd fact about memory has long been noted, from Freud's 1899 essay on "Screen Memories" back at least to Virgil, who has Aeneas mentally revisit the battles of Troy and notes that his hero "even sees himself / swept up in the melee, clashing with Greek captains."[26] Cognitive scientists have called such third-person recollections *observer memories*, while those seen from the first-person perspective have been labeled *field memories*.[27] Scholarship has revealed that we are remarkably adept at watching ourselves, at slipping out of our own mnemonic skins. Studies have even found that observer memories are more amenable to narration, are more conducive to introspection and self-understanding, and carry less biting emotional impact than their field counterparts.[28] Scott McCloud's hunch that we each carry a simplified, perhaps even cartoon-like, version of ourselves seems partly borne out by our own retrospective faculties.

Ware exploits this paradox of memory and point of view. In "Paper Dolls," for example, readers are left uncertain whether they are seeing pictures from the "actual" past or "merely" the contents of the landlady's mind. Are we supposed to imagine the panels as photographs of what really happened or as mental projections of events the landlady could often not have actually remembered, from vantage points she could never have actually shared? Is the old woman experiencing her past as a narrative field memory, which Ware includes in the text but steadfastly refuses to draw? Or do the strip's pictures reproduce a radical set of observer memories—a possibility that puts us in the position of the old lady herself, seeing (minus the paper tabs) what she recollectively sees?

Clearly, Ware is developing a technique that blurs such distinctions, making this record of remembering one that is simultaneously inside and outside, subjective and objective. The panels showing our protagonist before her mirror, at the very center of the original sequence, drive home this point. The landlady, now in her teens, assumes her usual pose; this time, however, the panels' central figure is not the young woman herself, but her reflection. She stands before her full-length image, looking both at herself and into herself, watching as one hand tentatively explores her body. She sees herself from an external point of view and—if the image is to be believed—as a paper doll. And we readers share and appreciate her fitting perception, watching as hands wrap under a breast and slip between legs like the "all-too fragile tabs" that fold around "vulnerable pink bodies" and ready these women for a world of unknown adult activities. In addition, since Ware draws the mirror head-on, without perspective and perfectly aligned with the frame of the comic panel, one might equally say that the girl shares the reader's view of her as well. She sees her cartoon self—one in a linked sequence of rapidly maturing selves.

For Ware, then, one of the central feelings of memory and of comics resides in this mingling of interiority and exteriority, the perception of being simultaneously inside and outside oneself. The comics medium, that is, mirrors the phenomenology of memory both in its form and in its function. This is *not* because comics engage the memory and imagination more directly than,

say, novels. In fact, Ware distinguishes novels from comics partly by insisting that the purely textual medium evokes one's imagination and interior life *more* fully than its graphic counterpart:

> When you read a text—a novel, like everybody would read—you basically, for all intents and purposes, go blind. You quit looking at the words on the page. [. . .] You get completely into your own imagination. And comics kind of toe the line between that [interior reading experience and the outward experience of "looking"], where you still have your eyes open and you're still looking at pictures, but you're also reading somewhat. You're reading words and reading pictures. So there's sort of this strange thing that can happen in comics, where your own memories and imagination can be called up, but at the same time you're sort of having sort of a visual experience.[29]

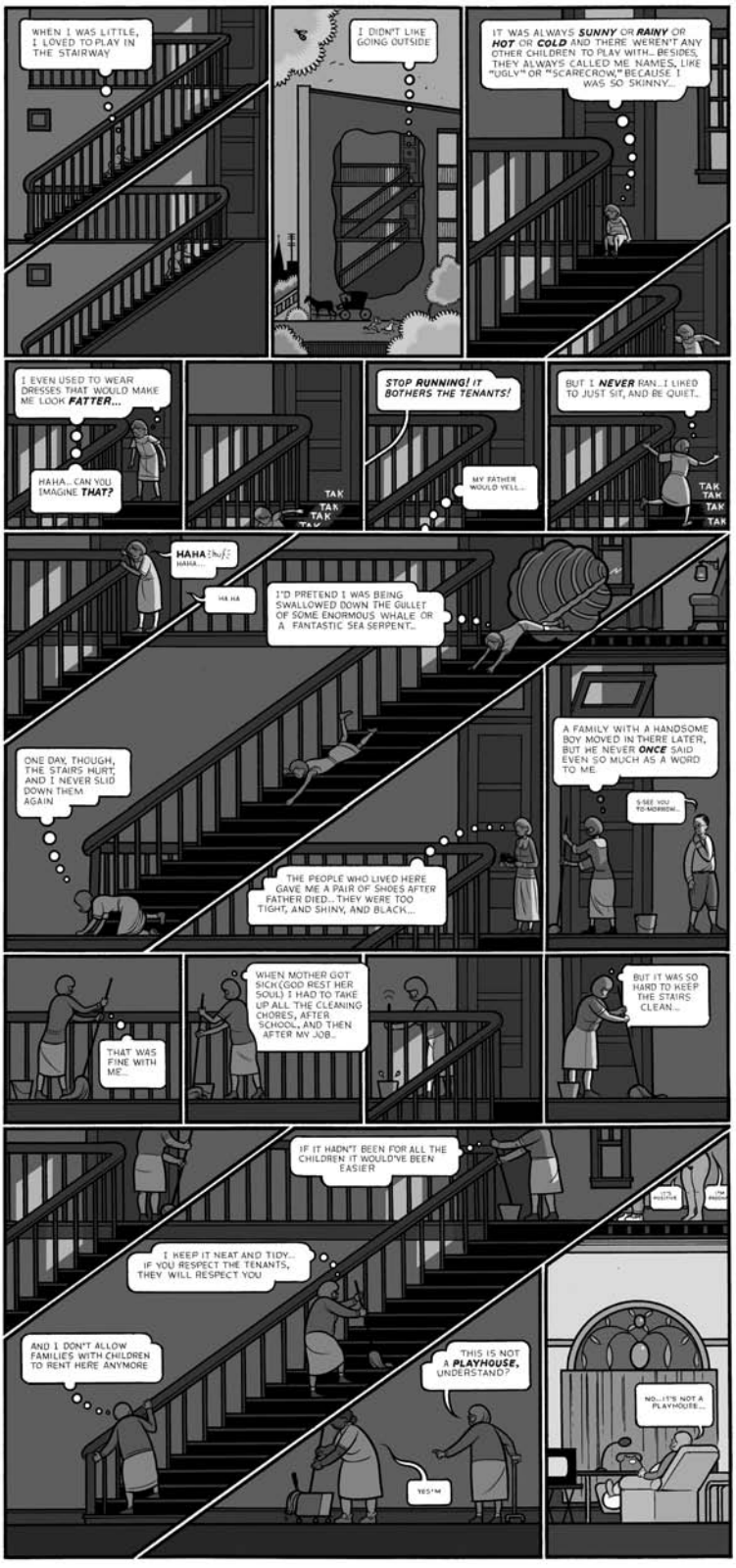
The reading process itself is here refigured as a mode of engagement through memory, an engagement that written texts and comics share. Comics, however, exist on a fluid experiential boundary between insides and outsides, between the experience of imagining a world and the experience of seeing it. The medium "calls up" one's memories but does so in a way that makes those memories visible, that allows those memories to be encountered—not objectively, but as a matter of feeling—within the external world, on the page. Comics seem to induce, one might say, a type of virtual observer memory, making the reader feel as if her interior recollections are brought to life "out there." The medium thus reproduces and perhaps even draws its vitality from the twinned perspective that many of us have on our own memories, especially those of our youth.

To be sure, this commingling of inside and outside spaces is as old as the oldest writings about memory and is registered powerfully in literary and philosophical sources. Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, John Locke, and Augustine of Hippo all noted the profound affinity between autobiographical memory and architectural space, usually conceiving of the former as a building through which one wanders. In *The Art of Memory*, Frances Yates traces these intuitions to the most famous of all mnemonic devices: the ancient method of "places and images (*loci* and *imagines*)." Developed in classical Greece, this "mnemotechnic" taught its practitioners how to improve their memories by creating often elaborate imaginary buildings, within which they could place helpful symbolic images. "Remembering" became a matter of revisiting these spaces in sequence: "We have to think of the ancient orator as moving in imagination through his memory building *whilst* he is making his speech, drawing from the memorised places the images he has placed on them."[30] This "art of memory" resonates, almost uncannily, with the art of comics: both emerge as a form of "inner writing," deploying sequential images that come to life as one moves through them.

Building Memories: "Staircase"

"Building Stories" participates in the tradition of discourse on memory, both as a form of analysis and as an extended metaphor. In fact, Ware occasionally allows the building to serve as a literal "memory theater" for the landlady's autobiographical tales.[31] In his two-page "staircase" strip, for example, Ware

Fig. 15.1. Memory as an interaction of places, pictures, and movement. Chris Ware, untitled comic strip ["Staircase"], *Chicago Reader,* June 28, 2002, sec. 4: 30–31.



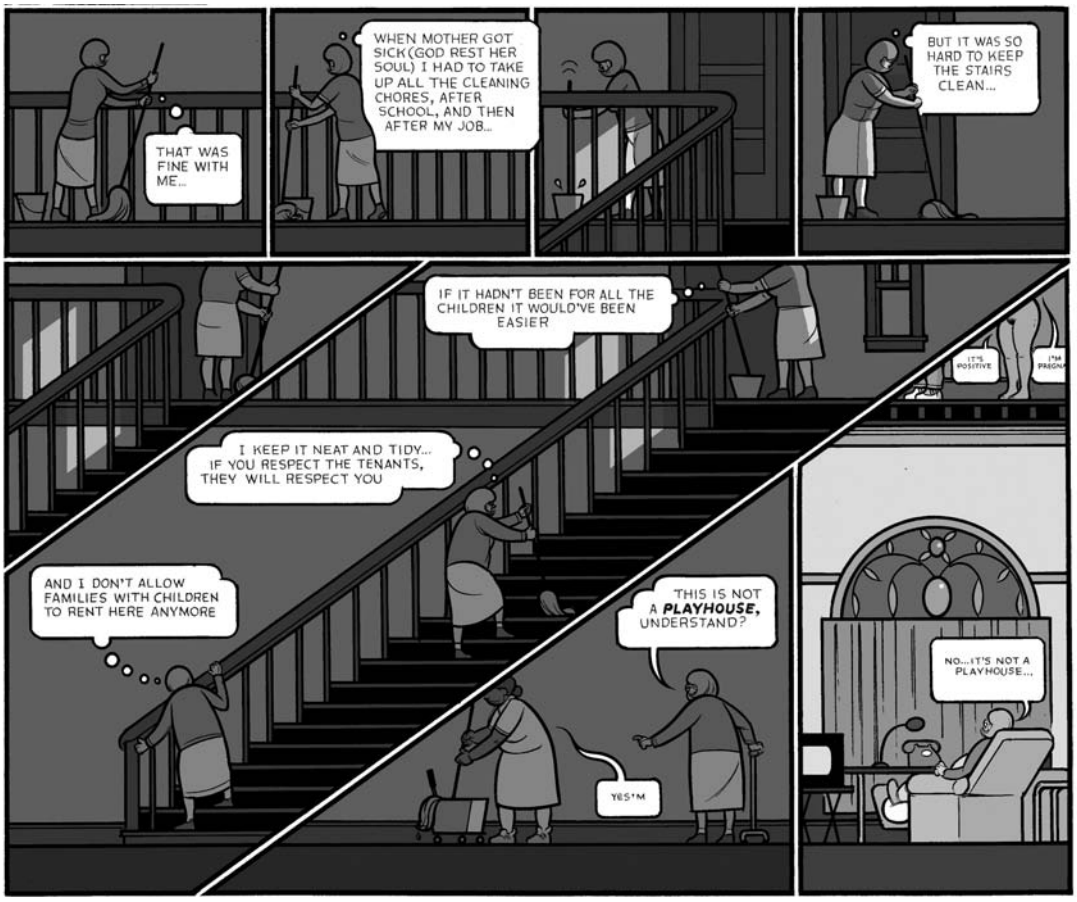


Fig. 15.2. The landlady ages until she reaches the present at the bottom of the staircase. Chris Ware, untitled comic strip ["Staircase"] detail, *Chicago Reader,* June 28, 2002, sec 4: 30–31.

presents us with a stylized cutaway of his fictional edifice, exposing its three floors along the stairwell (see fig. 15.1). Even the panels—referencing a famous 1913 page by cartoonist Charles Forbell—mimic the pitch of the steps and the lines of the handrails, organizing the page into a series of horizontal "landings" and large diagonal staircases.[32] Once again, the landlady tells a story that begins in childhood, with older thoughts emerging from younger selves: "When I was little," a little girl thinks, "I loved to play in the stairway. I didn't like going outside." And as with "Paper Dolls," we watch as the landlady progressively ages, from a toddler in the first panels to her current age in the last (see fig. 15.2).

In this strip, however, the landlady's autobiography is explicitly anchored to the space of the building, which she revisits in and through her story, much like Yates's classical rhetoricians. The comic shows us that on these stairs a child romped noisily, a girl acted out imaginative adventures, a young woman shied away from her neighbors, and an older woman cleaned and cleaned. We revisit these places with the landlady, sequentially retrieving the images and stories that are stored therein: "The people who lived here gave me a pair of shoes after father died. [. . .] A family with a handsome boy moved in there later." Reconfiguring the comic page as its own "mnemotechnic," Ware allows

psychological insides and physical outsides to merge and blend, even having the "tak tak tak" of the landlady's youthful footsteps tick off the relentless passage of years. Throughout the sequence, though, the present-day landlady is not on the stairs at all. She revisits this space from the confines of her living room, without company or audience, murmuring that the building in which she used to play is "not a playhouse" anymore.

As with "Paper Dolls," the staircase strip employs a loose interaction between the narrative memory of the text and the episodic memories of the images. This time, however, the former selves share a single memory theater, populating the staircase like multiple photographic exposures or restless spirits. These pages also rely heavily upon the activity of experiential memory, activated by the reading process. The strip presents remembering as a form of movement that accompanies and enables one's autobiographical storytelling. Its panels compel us to track and re-enact the experiences of the landlady, following her across each landing, descending each staircase, initiating a reading that brings to light the time-frame of memory itself and the feeling of memory as motion. In "Paper Dolls," the act of reading creates a single movement (the girl rolls over, shifting her hands) out of many discrete actions (e.g., reading, mourning, touching). In the staircase strip, the active reader creates a single movement out of multiple occurrences of the same act. In the strip's central staircase panel, for example, the girl slides from landing to landing. The landlady's words speak of a repeated action in the past ("I'd pretend I was being swallowed down the gullet of some enormous whale"), and the pictures reprise that repetition as girls of three different ages slide their way to the second floor. At the bottom stair, we reach the end of the slide. We also encounter the end of sliding in general, as the young woman's developing body puts a halt to her play: "One day, though, the stairs hurt, and I never slid down them again." Just as "Paper Dolls" telescopes fifteen years of images into a single motion, so the staircase strip unrolls a single action out across numerous years.

Ware's artistic goal in these strips—the encoding not of memory, but of remembering—is more difficult to meet than it may appear. First, as many cartoonists have noted, comic art is characterized by a thoroughgoing presentness. Despite the apparent affinity between memories and cartooning, Ware has noted that sequential drawings always seem to happen "now"; we perceive a comic strip's actions not as "happening in the past," but as "happening the very moment you perceived it."[33] To be sure, this property of comics reading helps bring the past to life, but a story that explores memory must gently maintain a distinction of timeframes, otherwise an act of remembering simply becomes a flashback, and the story's narrated past becomes experienced simply as a new narrative present. In a similar vein, Ware has noted that the language of comics lacks what we might call an imperfect tense, a way of depicting ongoing or habitual action in the past: "An example would be, 'Every day he would go to the store to buy milk.' Now the only way to do that in a series of pictures would be to show a character going to a store and buying milk over and over again. But the sum total of those sequences is just showing that the character went to the store to buy milk many, many times. It's a different sort of feel, and tone . . . not the same thing."[34] As an iconographic medium, comics excel at depicting generalized, even stereotypi-

cal, images, but they cannot easily show generalized actions. Images can recreate discrete episodes from the past, but they cannot as easily show larger narrative patterns across time. The immediacy of comics continually jars the past tense into the medium's visual present.

"Building Stories" confronts this problem directly, devising ways for the past and present to exist simultaneously, allowing the viewer to see the passage of time by maintaining all tenses at once.[35] To this end, both "Paper Dolls" and the staircase strip are exercises in achieving an artistic embodiment of the "past imperfect." The text of both cartoons repeatedly deploys English approximations of the imperfect (often a simple past with the appropriate adverbs): "I never liked playing with dolls"; "Later, sometimes, I'd lay awake"; "I was [always] very careful with them"; "When I was little, I loved to play in the stairway"; "I *never* ran. . . . I liked to just sit." Both stories also shift tense as the strip approaches the present day: "I wonder what mother did with them all"; "I keep [the stairs] neat and tidy [. . .] and I don't allow families with children." The images, too, correspond to the past imperfect. The staircase strip accomplishes this feat, for instance, by bundling repeated activities (sliding, mopping) into single multi-image actions. Most importantly, both strips keep their images lodged in the past by allowing the landlady's ninety-year-old voice to emerge from the minds of her younger selves. With this technique, Ware allows us to see the hidden thoughts of a self that both is and is not there, the elderly woman cloaked in an infant's body, the present that gives the past its "pastness."

Living Memories: "1 a.m."

In his book-length meditation on selfhood, philosopher and cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter argues that identity and self-consciousness are the effects of a "strange loop" inside the head, symbols that turn back upon themselves, creating a complex build-up of self-reference: "The depth and complexity of human memory is staggeringly rich. Little wonder, then, that when a human being, possessed of such a rich armamentarium of concepts and memories with which to work, turns attention to itself, as it inevitably must, it produces a self-model that is extraordinarily deep and tangled. That deep and tangled self-model is what 'I'-ness is all about."[36] Hofstadter's insights grow out of some common, if paradoxical, intuitions. As early as 1829, James Mill posited memory as a sort of feedback loop of identity, in which a present "remembering" self becomes connected to the idea a past self through a "whole series of the states of consciousness" intervening between the two.[37] Sixty years later, William James re-envisioned Mill's chain of familiar selves in terms of affect, arguing that we recognize a memory *as* a memory not by its vivacity or by its contents, but by a concomitant *feeling* of selfhood: "It must be dated in *my* past. [. . .] It must have that 'warmth and intimacy' which [characterize] all experiences 'appropriated' by the thinker as his own."[38] More recently, Daniel Dennett has re-framed memory as a form of "talking to yourself," an act that progressively creates a coherent sense of self not as an independent ego, but as a "center of narrative gravity," or what George Santayana strikingly called "an internal rumor."[39]

Ware's work takes these philosophical metaphors and makes them legible,

portraying both memory and remembering as feelings of sequential selfhood, thereby connecting his comics to larger questions of identity. "Building Stories" implies that identity emerges exactly as memory emerges—as a form of mental self-construction and endless self-reference, with words and images feeding into each other. "Paper Dolls" even metaphorizes the self as a series of nested or imbricated figurines, each of whom wears the "costume" of an older incarnation. Or consider one final comic strip, entitled "1 a.m.," which first appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* (see plate 20).[40] The page focuses on an unhappily married couple from the building's second floor. The plot of this page is simple. At 1:01 in the morning, the husband leaves for his graveyard-shift job, while his wife lies awake and wonders when exactly their relationship changed: "When did he start leaving without kissing me goodbye?" "When did he start walking by without touching my head?" "When did he start grabbing me in anger?" Forty-six minutes later, she is still wondering and staring at the ceiling, where her thoughts hover silently.

This short story presents a slightly different form of memory—the act of trying and failing to locate something in the past—which elicits a different mode of representation. The wife, in this case, cannot recall those moments that would answer her textual questions: she cannot remember the *particular* moment when things went wrong in her marriage. Nonetheless, her thoughts provide alternate answers to her queries: cartoon visions of *generalized* memories and repeated actions. Unlike "Paper Dolls," we see this woman's memories directly, as her textual thoughts morph into balloons containing a series of silent visual episodes, five comic strips that nest themselves within the larger panel frames. The first memory-comic, for example, shows the husband kissing his wife before he leaves. That episodic memory, however, is engendered by a narrative memory of how those kisses eventually *stopped*: "When did he start leaving without kissing me goodbye?" This after-the-fact knowledge, which could not have been part of the remembered experience itself, changes the tenor of the wife's memory: an embedded comic about kissing in the past simultaneous stands as—and progressively becomes—a strip about not-kissing in the present. The kisses within this episodic memory will soon disappear, and have already disappeared. The wife's recollected past bears the imprint of the recollecting present, and that first memory-comic ends with a "panel" that almost exactly matches the first panels of the "1 a.m." story. Indeed, all five of this page's "memory-comics" come to reflect the wife's present-tense sorrow: in each sub-sequence, she ends up alone, both with her thoughts and in her thoughts.[41] Five episodic memories, read in parallel, congeal into a single "imperfect" narrative of who this woman is and how she got there. The past loops into the present, the present frames our sense of the past, and the layering of both creates the feeling of the selfhood that we experience as memory.

Moreover, this story of recurring thoughts is itself encoded in a comic that must be read recurrently. That is to say, if you wish to read the first memory-strip of kissing and not kissing (color-coded as blue in the original publication), you have to follow the balloons up and to the right, away from the thinking character herself. Only then, at the end of the blue sequence, can you return to your holding position in the main narrative, now three panels in the "past." The story soon sends you off again, however, this time in pursuit

of a red memory-strip, which restages the husband's insults and cruelty. Each strip has its own color (yellow, green, violet), its own discrete sequence, and its own parallel trajectory. And these looping strips create a circuit within the common narrative and the compositional frame.[42] We readers must literally follow those cycles. The strip and your reading of it comprise stories within stories, comics within comics, selves within selves—all designed to encode and re-create the impression of one dark night's reminiscence.

Drawing Memories

"Comics is about memory." Chris Ware's pronouncement remains perhaps the best tool for digging into his graphic fiction and for exploring how that fiction is linked to the activity and experience of remembering. Both operate through a blending of images and words, of space and time, of specific episodes and general narratives, and of past and present selves. And "Building Stories" offers an image of selfhood large enough to accommodate these structural similarities. In this graphic novel-in-progress, memory and identity do not exist as unitary objects; indeed, the pages analyzed here are tremendously overpopulated, with selves folding and tumbling and bumping into one another. Selfhood, these stories tell us, is the effect of such interactions. Autobiographical identity and autobiographical memories are not things, but feelings deeply linked to the experience of sequence and succession, the activities of self-reference and introspective motion. Ware's comics, at their best, attempt to represent and even re-create such feelings.

In these pages, I have tried to illuminate some of Chris Ware's ideas by juxtaposing them with insights from cognitive scientists on the one hand and philosophers and theorists on the other. I hope that these similarities are instructive and help the reader to register some of the formal and narrative complexity of "Building Stories," especially in its representation of remembering. But Ware is not a neuroscientist, nor is he a critical theorist. And such linkages, however suggestive, should not obscure the artist's explicitly humanist goals for these comics and for his art in general—his insistence on the centrality of feeling and the ability of art to "encode feeling[s]" through "basic structures" that fit "intuitively into the way that we see, and interpret, and are disappointed by the world."[43] As an artist, Ware seems uninterested in simply dismantling what we might call "the fiction of selfhood," just as this relentless comic innovator claims he is uninterested in formal experimentation for its own sake.[44] His deconstructive techniques are not designed to expose the illusions of memory or identity alone, but to explore the phenomenological complexity of those psychological states. Through their memory stories, Ware's comics try to reproduce what it is really *like* to have a self—that is to say, in Ware's own terms, "what it *feels* like to *inhabit* one."[45] "Building Stories" wants us to feel our own sense of selfhood, to remember the experience of remembering, as we encounter it both on its pages and in our interactions with those pages. That is the message and the intended effect of this graphic novel: to remind us of what it is like to build and inhabit a story, to remind us that we are always building stories, and to remind us that the stories we build are, one piece at a time, us.

Notes

1. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper, 1994), 36–40.

2. Art Spiegelman, "Comix 101," City Arts and Lectures Series, Herbst Theater, San Francisco, October 15, 1998; Art Spiegelman, interview with Daniel Pink, *Upfront and Unscripted*, August 5, 2008, http://www.bookexpocast.com/wp-podcasts/UUSpiegelmanPodcast.mp3 (accessed February 25, 2009).

3. Seth, "The Quiet Art of Cartooning," *Walrus*, September 2008, http://www.walrusmagazine.com/articles/2008.09--the-quiet-art-of-cartooning-seth-comic-book-cartoons/ (accessed February 25, 2009).

4. Seth, interview with Sean Rogers, "Q&A: Seth" (Weblog entry), Four-Colour Words, *Walrus*, August 21, 2008, http://www.walrusmagazine.com/blogs/2008/08/21/an-interview-with-seth-part-one/ (accessed February 25, 2009).

5. Chris Ware, interview with Benoît Peeters, "Chris Ware: Un Art de la Mémoire," dir. Benoît Peeters, *Comix*, Arte France, January 26, 2005.

6. Chris Ware, qtd. in Jeet Heer, "Little Nemo in Comicsland," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 82.2 (2006): 114.

7. Marianne Hirsch, "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory," *Discourse* 15.2 (1992–93): 9. Hirsch and the many critics who have adopted her language appreciate comics, in part, because the medium highlights its own artifice, its distance and difference from the "reality" it attempts to capture. That blatant difference, Hirsch claims, "enable[s] us to expose the layers of mediation and transformation" inherent in all memory, all history, all representation (interview with Martha Kuhlman, *Indy Magazine*, winter 2005, http://64.23.98.142/indy/winter_2005/kuhlman_hirsch/index.html [accessed February 25, 2009]). Without invalidating either point of view, the difference between Hirsch and the cartoonists above is telling. The artists, on the one hand, celebrate the directness and immediacy of comics, insisting that the form of cartooning approximates and resonates with the form of memory. Comics "work," the cartoonists say, because they so closely correspond to the structures of our interior world. Literary critics, on the other hand, celebrate the indirectness and self-aware "mediacy" of comic art—making comic art no more like memory than memory itself as an objective record of the past. Comics "work," many academics reply, when they disavow any absolute resemblance to the "real" world, inside or out.

8. Chris Ware, interview with Daniel Siedell, Sheldon Memorial Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, February 16, 2007.

9. Chris Ware, e-mail to the author, August 12, 2008.

10. Chris Ware, "Every Morning," in *Quimby the Mouse* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003), 34–35. For a more detailed analysis of *Quimby the Mouse*'s autobiographical narrative strategies, see Benjamin Widiss's essay in this volume.

11. Ware, *Quimby*, 36–41. Todd Hignite notes the importance of memory to "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess," the earliest of these tales: "Assumptions about 'reading' the form are short-circuited as the acts of remembering both the physical events of one's own life and those experienced vicariously through popular media are conflated." Todd Hignite, *In the Studio: Visits with Contemporary Cartoonists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 228.

12. Chris Ware, qtd. in Daniel Raeburn, "The Smartest Cartoonist on Earth," *The Imp* 3 (1999): 4.

13. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), 219, 239, 276–77.

14. Ibid., 283–84, 288–89.

15. Chris Ware, qtd. in Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 25.

16. Chris Ware, qtd. in Raeburn, "Smartest Cartoonist," 19.

17. Chris Ware, interview with Daniel Siedell.

18. Chris Ware, qtd. in Neil Strauss, "Creating Literature, One Comic Book at a Time; Chris Ware's Graphic Tales Mine His Own Life and Heart," *New York Times*, April 4, 2001, http://query

.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E05E2DC1F3FF937A35757C0A9679C8B63 (accessed February 25, 2009); "crystalline structures," qtd. in Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 25.

19. Chris Ware, interview with Todd Hignite, *In the Studio*, 231; "the way I actually *think*," qtd. in Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 96.

20. Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library* 18 (Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2007).

21. Chris Ware, "Paper Dolls," *Chicago Reader*, March 21, 2003, sec. 4: 30–31. The strip was reprinted in expanded form in *The Paper Sculpture Book*, ed. Sin Najafi (New York; Cabinet, 2003), 135–38. Please note that the panels in figure 15.1 have been reformatted to present a series of sequential images.

22. Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic, 1996), 17; Endel Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983).

23. Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, 195–201.

24. See, for example, David C. Rubin and Daniel L. Greenberg, "The Role of Narrative in Recollection: A View from Cognitive Psychology and Neuropsychology," in *Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology, and the Brain*, ed. Gary D. Fireman, Ted E. McVay Jr., and Owen J. Flanagan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 53–85; Paul John Eakin, "Autobiography, Identity, and the Fictions of Memory," in *Memory, Brain, and Belief*, ed. Daniel L. Schacter and Elaine Scarry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 290–306.

25. In *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Knopf, 2006), psychologist Daniel Gilbert notes how verbal and visual memories embody two different, often conflicting, systems for encoding and remembering events, with the verbal often trumping and short-circuiting the visual (40–42).

26. Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 3 (London: Hogarth, 1962), 301–22; Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 2006), 1.589–1.590.

27. Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, 21–22; Martin A. Conway, "Autobiographical Knowledge and Autobiographical Memories," in *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory*, ed. David C. Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 88–90.

28. Heather K. McIsaac and Eric Eich, "Vantage Point in Episodic Memory," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 9 (2002): 146–50; Benedict Carey, "This Is Your Life (and How You Tell It)," *New York Times*, May 22, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/22/health/psychology/22narr.html (accessed February 25, 2009); Ethan Kross, Ozlem Ayduk, and Walter Mischel, "When Asking 'Why' Does Not Hurt: Distinguishing Rumination from Reflective Processing of Negative Emotions," *Psychological Science* 16 (2005): 709–15. Observer memories, which dampen the emotions, might seem to work against an artist who hopes to have his readers "feel." But such emotional distancing effects fit surprisingly well within Ware's tempered, anti-expressivist approach to drawing and design. As his "crystalline structures" comment makes clear, Ware is not trying to represent emotions directly but to encode them—and the feeling of recalling them—onto the page.

29. Chris Ware, interview with Daniel Siedell.

30. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 3.

31. Chris Ware, untitled comic strip ["Staircase"], *Chicago Reader*, June 28, 2002, sec. 4: 30–31; rpt. in Paul Candler, *Raw, Boiled, and Cooked: Comics on the Verge* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2004), 62–63.

32. Charles Forbell, "Naughty Pete," *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1913, sec. 8: 1; rpt. in Dan Nadel, ed., *Art Out of Time: Unknown Comic Visionaries, 1900–1969* (New York: Abrams, 2006), 259. Ware's homage is explicitly acknowledged in the newspaper version of the staircase strip, which appends the following note: "Apologies to Charles Forbell."

33. Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan*, inside front cover.

34. Chris Ware, interview with Gary Groth, "Understanding (Chris Ware's) Comics," *Comics Journal* 200 (December 1997): 161. Although Ware erroneously identifies this mode of expressing habitual past actions as the "subjunctive," his point remains clear.

35. For a similar formulation in fiction, see Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars: A Study of Memory, Time, and Recognition in "À la recherche du temps perdu"* (New York: Random House, 1963).

36. Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 86.

37. James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829; rpt., Hildesheim, Ger.: Gerig, 1982), 330–31.

38. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (1890; rpt., New York: Dover, 1950) 650.

39. Daniel Dennett, "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. Frank S. Kessel, Pamela M. Cole, and Dale L. Johnson (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 113; George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), 40.

40. Chris Ware, "Building Stories: Part 5, *1 a.m.*," *New York Times Magazine*, October 16, 2005, 31.

41. In fact, one could push these claims farther, as the first memory-comic ("When did he start leaving without kissing me goodbye?") completely reenacts the comic's present tense. That strip's third and fifth balloon-panels reproduce, in miniature, the full page's own second and third pictures, which show (respectively) the husband's departure and the wife's wide-eyed solitude. A lonely wife thus remembers herself as a lonely wife, and the repetition seems destined to produce a third set of recollections: the memory wife's own memories, a comic within a comic within a comic.

42. This page, with its differently colored pathways offering no clear exit, tips its hat silently to Art Spiegelman's classic 1975 strip, "Day at the Circuits" reprinted in *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), 51.

43. Chris Ware, qtd. in Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 25.

44. Chris Ware, qtd. in Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 11: "'I rarely ever did a comic just for the sake of experimentation,' says Ware. 'Even when I did, I was always trying to get at some kind of feeling.'"

45. Chris Ware, "Philip Guston: A Cartoonist's Appreciation," in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (New York: McSweeney's, 2004), 89.

Appendix:

A Guide to Chris Ware's Primary Works

Chris Ware's oeuvre presents several challenges for scholars, students, and fans alike. Much of his work was originally published in difficult-to-locate venues, often lacks pagination, and appears in substantially differing forms during the course of serial and subsequent publication. Ware's attempts to defy traditional taxonomies of classification extend even to his willful obfuscation of ISBN numbers and other publication information, often leading to his works being miscategorized by libraries and archive holdings. The list below attempts to categorize in chronological order the major works of Ware's extremely prolific career to date.

For the sake of clarity and consistency, the essays in this volume refer to the following primary sources. Pagination has been ascribed to the numbered issues of *The ACME Novelty Library* beginning with page 1 opposite the interior front cover of each issue (consistent with the pagination Ware indicates in early issues). References to page numbers in editions of *Jimmy Corrigan* are derived from the single page number given in the novel: pages 206–7, the assembly model of James Reed Corrigan's Chicago home. For both the hardcover and paperback editions of *Jimmy Corrigan*, we begin numbering pages with the first appearance of Jimmy's character. To avoid confusion with the serialized issues of *The ACME Novelty Library*, Ware's 2005 book publication *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book* will be referred to throughout as *The ACME Report*.

In order to distinguish between Ware's ellipses, which appear frequently throughout his comics, and the elisions introduced by the authors in this collection, the latter are indicated throughout in square brackets.

Serial Publications

The Daily Texan, weekly or daily newspaper cartoon strip, 1986–1991, Austin, Texas.
New City, weekly cartoon strip, 1991–2002, Chicago, Illinois.
Chicago Reader, weekly cartoon strip, 2002–2006, Chicago, Illinois.
The ACME Novelty Library 1, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1993.
The ACME Novelty Library 2, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1994.
The ACME Novelty Library 3, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1994.
The ACME Novelty Library 4, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1994.
The ACME Novelty Library 5, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1995.
The ACME Novelty Library 6, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1995.

The ACME Novelty Library 7, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1996.
The ACME Novelty Library 8, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1997.
The ACME Novelty Library 9, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1997.
The ACME Novelty Library 10, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1998.
The ACME Novelty Library 11, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1998.
The ACME Novelty Library 12, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1999.
The ACME Novelty Library 13, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1999.
The ACME Novelty Library 14, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2000.
The ACME Novelty Library 15, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001.
The ACME Novelty Library 16, Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2005.
The ACME Novelty Library 17, Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2006.
The ACME Novelty Library 18, Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2007.
The ACME Novelty Library 18.5, Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2007.
The ACME Novelty Library 19, Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 2008.

Book Publications

Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth, New York: Pantheon, 2000.
Quimby the Mouse, Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003.
The ACME Novelty Datebook, Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003.
The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book, New York: Pantheon, 2005.
The ACME Novelty Datebook, Volume Two, Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2007.

Novels-in-Progress

"Rusty Brown," appearing variously in weekly inserts of Chicago's *New City* and *Chicago Reader*, *The ACME Novelty Library* 16, 17, and 19, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review* (winter 2008–present), among other publications.
"Building Stories," appearing variously in weekly inserts of *Chicago Reader*, *The ACME Novelty Library* 16 and 18, and the *New York Times Magazine* in 2005–2006, among other publications.

DVD Collaboration

Lost Buildings, collaboration with Ira Glass and Tim Samuelson for "This American Life," 2004.

Edited and Designed Volumes

The Ragtime Ephemeralist (3 vols. to date), Chicago: The ACME Novelty Library, 1998–present.
McSweeney's Quarterly Concern 13, San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004.
Walt and Skeezix (3 vols. to date), Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2005–present.
Best American Comics 2007, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.
UnInked: Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Work by Five Contemporary Cartoonists, Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 2007.

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