IDENTITY AND FORM IN

ALTERNATIVE COMICS, 1967 – 2007

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I, Emma Tinker, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

ABSTRACT

Identity and Form in Alternative Comics, 1967 – 2007

In the late 1960s, underground cartoonists established the comic book form as a space for the exploration of personal identity. "Alternative" comics grew out of this tradition as subsequent writers produced work independently of the major comics publishers, aimed at an adult audience and encompassing a broad range of visual styles and narrative content. Throughout the past forty years, British, US and Canadian writers and artists have used this medium to explore questions of selfhood and perception, often implicitly or overtly relating these issues to the form, history and conventions of the comic book itself.

Two main threads run through this discussion of the representation of selfhood: childhood and memory on the one hand and sexuality and gender on the other. This thesis argues that for many creators there exists a useful analogy between the comic book form and mental processes, specifically between the fractured, verbal-visual blend of the comics page and the organisation of human memory. It further suggests that the historical association of comics first with childhood, and subsequently with male adolescence, has conditioned the representation of selfhood in adult comics. Comic book consumption has often centred on a community of predominantly young, white, male, socially marginal readers, buying and collecting serialised narratives. Comics creators' awareness of this audience (either in response or resistance) has affected the content of their work.

Although presented as a chronological narrative, this thesis is not a comprehensive history of Anglophone alternative comics, but centres on eight prominent authors/artists: Robert Crumb; Dave Sim; Lynda Barry; Julie Doucet; Alan Moore; the collaborative partnership of Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean; and Chris Ware. Whilst spanning a wide range of genres and themes (autobiography, fantasy, gothic horror, parody, soap opera, the grotesque and others) each confronts and negotiates with conventions regarding the representation of selfhood.

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CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. R. Crumb. Back cover, *Zap* #0 (October 1967). Rpt. in *The Complete Crumb* 4.102.

Figure 2. R. Crumb. "All Meat Comics". (*Big Ass* #1, June 1969). Rpt. in *The Complete Crumb* 6.29.

Figure 3. R. Crumb. "Head Comix". (*Yarrowstalks* #2, Summer 1967), Rpt. in *The Complete Crumb* 4.60.

Figure 4. R. Crumb. "You're Gonna Get There Anyway". (*EVO*, December 1-16 1967). Rpt. in *The Complete Crumb* 5.2.

Figure 5. R. Crumb. "Cat Life" (September 1959 – February 1960), Rpt. in *The Complete Crumb* 1.47; "Robin Hood" (March 1960), in *The Complete Crumb* 1.66.

Figure 6. Carl Barks, "Uncle Scrooge in Land Beneath the Ground", (*Uncle Scrooge* 13, March 1956), Rpt. in *Carl Barks' Greatest Duck Tales Stories Volume 1*. N. pag.

Figure 7. R. Crumb. *Hytone Comix* (back cover) (1971), Rpt. in *The Complete Crumb* 7.69.

Figure 8. R. Crumb. "Advertisement for "Weirdo" magazine" (*High Times* #94, June 1983), Rpt. in *The Complete Crumb* 14.52.

Figure 9. R. Crumb. "Schuman the Human's Night of Terror" (*Motor City* #2, February 1970); "Whiteman" (*Zap* #1, November 1967); "Mr. Natural in Death Valley" (*Zap* #0, October 1967); "Old Pooperoo" (June 1967). All in *The Complete Crumb* 4.105; 6.144; 4.88; 4.31.

Figure 10a-b. R. Crumb *Fritz the No-Good* (*Cavalier*, Sept-Oct 1968), Rpt. in *The Complete Crumb* 5.45-6.

Figure 11. Roy Thomas and Barry Windsor Smith, "Red Nails". Rpt *The Tower of the Elephant and other stories (The Chronicles of Conan Vol. 1)* (2003). 104.

Figure 12. Dave Sim. Front cover, *Cerebus* #3 (April 1978).

Figure13a-o. Dave Sim, *Guys (Cerebus Book 11)* (1997) 54-68.

Figure 14. Lynda Barry, "Breaking Up: Your Guide to Painful Separation" (1981), Rpt. in *Big Ideas* (1983) 69.

Figure 15. Lynda Barry, "Girls and Boys" (1980), Rpt. in *Girls and Boys,* 46.

Figure 16. Lynda Barry, "How Things Turn Out" (1986). Rpt. in *The Fun House*, N. pag.

Figure 17. Lynda Barry, "Perfect" (1990). Rpt. in *My Perfect Life*, 24-5.

Figure 18. Lynda Barry, *The Freddie Stories* (1999) 79.

Figure 19. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons* (2002) 62.

Figure 20. Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons* (2002) 168.

Figure 21. Lynda Barry, "Branded" (1986). Rpt. in *The Fun House,* N. pag.

Figure 22. Lynda Barry, "You Are Leaving" (1991). Rpt. in *It's So Magic* , 106-7.

Figure 23. Julie Doucet, *Dirty Plotte* #7 (1993), back cover.

Figure 24. Julie Doucet, *My Most Secret Desire* (1995), back cover.

Figure 25. Julie Doucet, "Heavy Flow". rpt. in *Leve Ta Jambe Mon Poisson Est Mort!* (1993). N. pag.

Figure 26. Julie Doucet, *Dirty Plotte vs. Super Clean Plotte* (1991). Rpt. in *Leve Ta Jambe Mon Poisson Est Mort!* N. pag.

Figure 27a-c. Julie Doucet, *My Conscience is Bugging Me.* (1989). Rpt. in *Leve Ta Jambe Mon Poisson Est Mort!* N. pag.

Figure 28. Julie Doucet, *Dirty Plotte* #4. (Sept 1991). N. pag.

Figure 29. Julie Doucet, *Long Time Relationship* (2001). N. pag.

Figure 30. Julie Doucet, *Long Time Relationship* (2001). N. pag.

Figure 31. Julie Doucet, *Elle Humour* (2006). N. pag.

Figure 32a-c. Julie Doucet, *The First Time* (June 1993). Rpt. in *My New York Diary*. N. pag.

Figure 33. Julie Doucet, *365 Days* (2007). 26/01/03.

Figure 34. Julie Doucet, *My Most Secret Desire* (1995). N. pag.

Figure 35. Julie Doucet, *The Madame Paul Affair* (2000). Episode 20.

Figure 36. Stephen Bissette and John Totleben (artists), Alan Moore (writer). *Swamp Thing* (1984) Rpt. in *Swamp Thing: The Saga of the Swamp Thing* (1987)

Figure 37. Eddie Campbell (artist), Alan Moore (writer). *From Hell* (1999). Ch. 4, 24.

Figure 38. Eddie Campbell (artist), Alan Moore (writer). *From Hell* (1999). Ch. 4, 27.

Figure 39. Eddie Campbell (artist), Alan Moore (writer). *The Birth Caul* (1999). N. pag.

Figure 40. Eddie Campbell (artist), Alan Moore (writer). *The Birth Caul* (1999). N. pag.

Figure 41. Melinda Gebbie (artist), Alan Moore (writer). *Lost Girls: Book 1* (2006). Ch. 9, 7.

Figure 42. Melinda Gebbie (artist), Alan Moore (writer). *Lost Girls: Book 1* (2006). Ch. 3, 8.

Figure 43. Dave McKean (artist), Neil Gaiman (writer). *Violent Cases* (1987). N. pag.

Figure 44. Dave McKean (artist), Neil Gaiman (writer). *Violent Cases* (1987). N. pag.

Figure 45a-c. Dave McKean (artist), Neil Gaiman (writer). *Mr Punch* (1994). N. pag.

Figure 46. Dave McKean (artist), Neil Gaiman (writer). *Mr Punch* (1994). N. pag.

Figure 47. Dave McKean (artist), Neil Gaiman (writer). *Signal to Noise* (1992). N. pag.

Figure 48. Chris Ware, "Quimbies the Mouse". Rpt. in *Quimby the Mouse* (2003). 10.

Figure 49a-d. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). N. pag.

Figure 50. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). N. pag.

Figure 51. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). N. pag.

Figure 52. Chris Ware, "Rusty Brown", in *Acme Novelty Library: Our Annual Report to Shareholders and Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book* (2005). 95.

Figure 53. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) (Paperback edition, 2001. Back cover.

Figure 54. Chris Ware, "Tales of Tomorrow", in *Acme Novelty Library: Our Annual Report to Shareholders and Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book* (2005). 94.

A NOTE ON TEXTS AND SOURCES

Many of the comics discussed in this thesis have been published both as single issues and in collected, "trade paperback" format. Where possible I have used collected editions, which are more likely to find their way into research collections and remain readily available for future study. Many of the texts are non-paginated or use somewhat eclectic systems of page numbering (some, like Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell*, for example, retain the page numbering used in single-issue format even in collected editions).

The *MLA Handbook*, which (with minor amendments) I follow throughout this thesis, does not yet include specific guidance on comics. Where necessary, I follow the citation guidelines suggested in Allen Ellis, "Comic Art in Scholarly Writing: A Citation Guide" (1998), available at <http://www.comicsresearch.org/CAC/cite.html>.

Due to the nature of this research I have been obliged to rely more heavily than usual on internet resources, including fan sites and other small, non-professional web pages that may not remain accessible in the long term. The Internet Archive <http://www.archive.org> is helpful here, and I have included it in my citations where I know that pages have been removed.

INTRODUCTION

On the back cover of R. Crumb's *Zap* #0 (1967) there appears an image of a large, angry mother berating her tearful son for "wasting" his time reading comic books (Figure 1). The accompanying commentary, intended as an advertisement for subsequent issues of *Zap,* asks the reader "Do you feel a spark of GUILT every time you pick up a comic book?". From Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766) to lamentations about the decline of reading in the age of digital media, accusations of intellectual ruin are nothing new in the history of verbal-visual culture.[1] However, the view that the comic book is a shameful form of "trash" consumed by vulnerable young minds is a peculiarly mid-twentieth-century idea. In his defence of the medium, Crumb
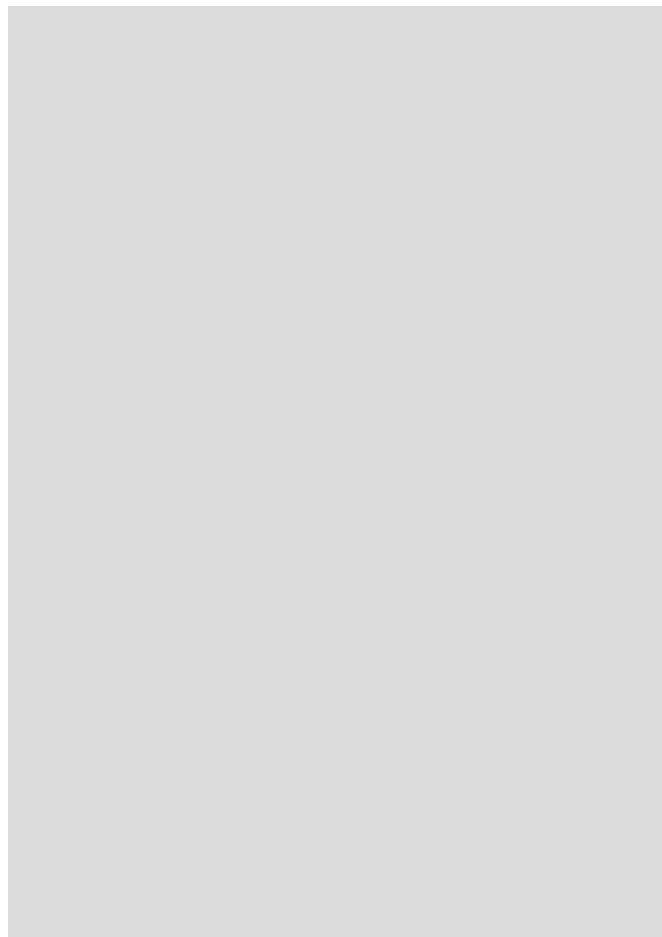
Figure 1.

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1   Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Trans. Edward Allen McCormick. (1766; Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1984). For a modern critique see Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For a balanced defence of word-image interaction, see Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendrick, *Eloquent Images: Word and Image in the Age of New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT, 2003).

addresses himself to a group of adult readers whose childhoods, and subsequent adult tastes and perceptions, have been shaped by their experience of the comics form. He suggests that the child's emergent assertion of independent aesthetic choices in the form of the comic book purchase is typically attended by tensions in the parent-child relationship. Comics, in other words, mark a step towards adulthood that has to be fought for. Crumb was writing in 1967, but the popular stereotype of comics firstly as children's reading and secondly as a somewhat embarrassing, low grade, parentally discouraged form, has proved remarkably enduring.

In the four years in which I have been researching and writing this thesis, I have had occasion to mention it to a fair number of people. Of their various responses, two have come up again and again. The first is a broad smile followed by a barrage of questions, a warm handshake or even, on one occasion, a spontaneous hug. The second is simple puzzlement, a polite version of the response shown by Crumb's angry mother: "Comics? What, you mean like *Superman* or *The Beano*?". These two extremes say a great deal about the place of comics in contemporary culture, and I believe that they point towards a number of issues in comics research.

The first is the exceptional enthusiasm and loyalty that readers of both mainstream and alternative comics feel towards the medium. The decision to buy and read comic books was not only an important identity marker for mid-twentieth-century children, but has remained one for adults throughout the late twentieth century and to the present day. As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, the comic has become a form that not only inspires devotion in its readers but seems to engender a feeling of comradeship amongst fellow fans. Throughout my research I have frequently experienced the sense that other readers consider comics consumption to be not just a pastime but a social grouping, and as a new researcher I have been welcomed as a cheerleader for the cause. As Matthew Pustz argues in *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, consumers of comics do not only buy and read the books, but participate in a complex culture of discussion and shared engagement with the narratives and characters.[2] This state of affairs has several consequences, not least the tendency of comics writers to address their community as Crumb does here, including in-jokes and self-reflexive remarks in the

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2   Matthew Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

comics themselves. As an academic reader, and one relatively new to the form, I am necessarily on the edge of such a community, and this inevitably conditions my readings of comics. I will try to be sensitive to this problem, paying close attention to the reception of these comics and the reading practices they encourage.

The second common response underlines the enduring popular association of the comics form with certain types of content, usually of a juvenile or adolescent nature. The reputation of comics has often suffered from the careless conflation of form and content. Even now, one occasionally finds the medium described as a genre, as though all comics had agreed to conform to a shared set of narrative conventions, like romance or crime fiction.[3] In popular perception, comics are often associated with particular genres of narrative – children's humour or superhero adventure, for example. Attempts to refute this assumption have not always been terribly helpful, often relying on a simplistically celebratory announcement that comics "aren't just for kids any more". However, it would be equally inaccurate to attempt a complete dissociation of form and content, because the development of adult comics over the past forty years has been strongly conditioned by both historical factors and the technical realities of the comic book. To some extent this is the case with all media: there are good reasons why one does not find many car chases in novels, or extended, introspective first person ramblings in film. It is my contention that personal identity has been a central preoccupation in alternative comics over the last forty years, and that the reasons for this are embedded in comics' history and the specificities of the medium itself. In particular, issues surrounding the role of childhood and adolescent experience in the development of adult identity have been notably prevalent. The form of the comic book conditions the content, leading authors and artists to represent selfhood in ways that are unique to this medium. This will be the central argument of my thesis, and in order to develop it I need to do two things: firstly, to expand upon the terms "identity", "form" and "alternative comics" as they will be understood here, and secondly to place my research in relation to current scholarship on the historical and technical aspects of the comics form.

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3   See, for example, Alice Walton, "Graphic novelist defends value of comics genre". *Yale Daily News*, February 5th 2007. <http://www.yaledailynews.com/articles/view/19741>

Identity

The concept of identity covers a vast area of contemporary scholarship and is studied in a wide variety of fields from political science to anthropology.[4] For the purposes of this thesis, three particular definitions concern me: philosophical, social and psychological.[5] The first, and perhaps most familiar to recent literary theory, can be found in those nineteenth and twentieth-century theories which sought to destabilise the supposed Cartesian construct of a rational, coherent subject capable of fully understanding its own existence. From Foucault and Nietzsche to proponents of Marxist and feminist theory, a very broad range of writers have argued that the ground on which selfhood is constructed and understood is less solid than had previously been assumed.[6] Directly or indirectly, these ideas have had an incalculable effect on the creation and interpretation of art and literature, and their influence permeates this thesis. Secondly, from a sociological perspective, individual identity is defined in relation to others, for example through the decision to place oneself with, or against, a particular social group. As I have suggested, readers and writers of comic books often consider themselves part of a comics community, or more specifically, a sub-group within the wider community of comics readers (Marvel fans or female zine producers, for example). Many have also defined themselves by negation of a perceived social orthodoxy (in the case of underground and punk-influenced artists, for example, it is often easier to say what they oppose than what they favour). Likewise within the comics themselves, writers and artists often describe their protagonists as seeking (often with difficulty) to place themselves in a social group, or conversely to define their identity by deliberate removal from a particular community. Thirdly, from a psychological point of view, identity is determined in large part by an individual's past experiences, particularly those of early childhood. In this understanding of identity, memory is of paramount

4   I will use the terms "identity" and "selfhood" interchangeably throughout this thesis, although I recognise that in some fields there are differences between the two (and, indeed, differences between the ways in which each term is used in different disciplines). On the variety of meanings of "self", for example, see Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney, "The Self as an Organising Construct in the Behavioural and Social Sciences", in Leary and Tangney, eds. *Handbook of Self and Identity* (New York and London: Guilford Press, 2003) 3-14.
5   I recommend Jane Kroger, *Identity Development: Adolescence Through Adulthood* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007). Part I of this book offers an excellent, accessible summary of the variety of approaches to the study of identity.
6   A selection of these views can be found in any number of collections. I use Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds. *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

importance: what we recall, or have suppressed, determines our ability to function in the present. I will shortly discuss the importance of cognitive theories of memory to the reading of comics in particular.

Each of these three versions of identity will become prominent in different areas of this thesis. The view that human perception and systems of interpretation are unreliable and arbitrary will be seen particularly in the work of Dave Sim; the artist's desire to define herself and her work through association with like-minded members of a creative community will dominate my reading of Julie Doucet; my chapters on Lynda Barry, and on Dave McKean and Neil Gaiman, will centre on the power and resilience of childhood memory. Needless to say, however, these three definitions of identity are not mutually exclusive, and all three will, to some extent, inform each chapter of this thesis.

The form of alternative comics

Turning to the term "alternative comic", one finds that this category is so broad and so widely contested that it makes more sense to suggest a set of commonly shared characteristics than to insist upon a rigid definition. As this thesis will demonstrate, alternative comics grew out of the underground scene of the 1960s and 70s, and the term itself appeared during the 80s as small press and other independent comics became increasingly diverse. The people who write these tend to define their work by its distinction from a perceived mainstream of superheroes, formulaic sci-fi or fantasy, and children's humour. The range of visual styles and narrative content found in alternative comics is infinitely broader and often more imaginative than in the comics produced by the mainstream publishers. These alternative comics are generally created and controlled by one or two people, they tend to be printed largely in black and white, they sell in relatively small numbers, and they are either self-published or produced by small independent publishers.[7] However, the adoption of "alternative", adult themes by mainstream publishers, notably DC's Vertigo line, has begun to disrupt the distinction between alternative and mainstream.

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7   I am indebted to Roger Sabin and Teal Triggs' *Below Critical Radar: Fanzines and Alternative Comics from 1976 to the Present Day* (Brighton: Slab-o-Concrete, 2000) for this definition of alternative comics. I also recommend Sabin's *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (London: Phaidon, 1996) and *Adult Comics* (London: Routledge, 1993) as general introductions to this field.

I use the term "form" to describe the specificities of the comic book medium as it is used by each artist and writer. The style of drawing, the use or rejection of traditional comics conventions, the choices of colour, panel layout, the format of the book itself, production values, and dozens of other aesthetic and publishing choices are all integral to the narrative of a comic and condition the way in which it is perceived by readers. Throughout this thesis I will argue that these choices condition comics creators' representations of identity.

One particular aspect of comics form deserves further attention here because it has been instrumental in recent changes in the market for comic books. Many of those who wish to promote alternative comics and see them included in the category of respectable literature favour the term "graphic novel". This magical phrase often seems to catalyse a mental shift in new readers and commentators: novels and graphic design are both familiar and respectable areas of research, a long way from flimsy, faded *Dandy* or garish *Spiderman* comics. The term is certainly a handy marketing tool, but its use is problematic because it almost always relies on the misconception that there is a qualitative difference between book-length and short-form comics narrative.[8] The overwhelming success of the term betrays book-buyers' deep-seated belief that size is important. Outside the community of comics fans, it is widely assumed that both adult fiction and full length "novels" in comic book form are relatively new developments. The reality, of course, is rather more complicated. Both a wide range of adult themes and a variety of narrative lengths and formats had been available to comics readers for much of the twentieth century. By the time Will Eisner used the term "graphic novel" to publish *A Contract with God* (1978), it had been in circulation amongst comics fans for years, and Sabin dates the origin of the graphic novel itself to children's fiction of the 1940s.[9] What is undoubtedly true is that comics hit the mainstream press in the late 80s, and were it not for the resultant expansion of comics' readership it is highly unlikely that I would be writing this thesis. Whilst I will avoid the term "graphic novel", I wish to draw attention to its prevalence because of its effect on comics research: it is impossible, in this field, to avoid constantly encountering the opinion that textual format matters, that it affects and even defines interpretation of a visual narrative.

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8   Hatfield shares my reservations about the use of the term "graphic novel". See Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005) 5-6.
9   Sabin (1993) 94.

Comics scholars are always already students of book history, and in the chapters that follow I will necessarily pay attention to the size, shape and publication format of the comics I discuss. [10]

I will examine the works of eight authors or artists: Robert Crumb; Dave Sim; Lynda Barry; Julie Doucet; Alan Moore; the creative partnership of Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean; and Chris Ware. Unlike the creators of mainstream comics who typically work in large teams, most of these work alone, writing and drawing, inking, colouring and lettering the comics themselves. (The main exceptions are artist Dave McKean, writer Neil Gaiman, and writer Alan Moore.) I have chosen to centre my argument on these particular writers and artists for a number of reasons. Each of these creators has produced a substantial and influential body of work over a significant period. All have been influenced by the innovations of the underground, and in this close-knit field, many have also been influenced by each other. These creators exemplify a number of key trends in the representation of selfhood over the past forty years. However, it is worth saying that the range of alternative comics relating to identity is vast, and many major authors and artists working within the period have necessarily been excluded. Faced with such an open field my choices have inevitably been conditioned by personal taste, and there are many creators, such as Chester Brown, whose exclusion from this thesis is the unfortunate result of limited space. In particular I have overlooked the many creators who have produced only one substantial comic, and it is with great regret that I exclude such works as Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995) and Debbie Dreschler's *Daddy's Girl* (1996), for example. Although my focus remains on works written in English, the close communication between British, US and Canadian authors and artists has led me to select creators from all three countries. (By way of example, one might note that of the creators discussed here, the only ones to have worked for mainstream US publisher DC Comics are Moore, Gaiman and McKean, all of whom are British.)

The chronological arrangement of chapters in this thesis is important because, as will become apparent, I intend to chart a development in the field of alternative comics, in which Robert Crumb's innovations in the 1960s have been of incalculable importance. All of the writers following Crumb have, to some extent,

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10   On the subject of terminology, I will generally avoid the term "text" when referring to a comic, unless I specifically mean the words rather than the images. Although the term is in common usage amongst literary critics, many scholars consider it inappropriate for comics because it appears to privilege the verbal over the visual.

been influenced not only by his work but by the social and political events of the 1960s and 70s which surrounded the development and subsequent decline of the underground press. Because the chapters that follow are arranged chronologically, I will present historical sources as I go along. However, it is necessary at this stage to sketch out the current state of criticism with regard to the technical aspects of comics, and to locate my own argument in relation to contemporary scholarship. In particular I wish to point up some challenges posed by the study of comics, and to explain my appropriation of a wide range of critical discourses, most notably aspects of film theory and cognitive psychology.

Comics research

Comics scholars come from a variety of academic disciplines, and bring a broad range of methodological approaches to the form. The comic book is a narrative medium typically combining word and image to create an integrated visual language. By my reckoning, the perfect comics academic would need at least five areas of expertise: art history, film, literature (preferably in several languages including French and Japanese), semiotics and cultural studies. My background is a literary one, a fact that will inevitably colour my approach to the form, but I will draw on a range of critical discourses including art history and film theory as well as the growing body of critical writing devoted to comics. I have been influenced by neoformalist film theory, especially the "pro-filmic" approach suggested by Martin Barker in his *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis* (2000). Barker's approach is a deliberate rejection of the heavy-handed theory dominant in the 1980s and 90s, particularly psychoanalytic theory as applied to films. Barker emphasises the importance of active audience engagement with films, and strongly opposes any notion of passive audiences being influenced *by* films. Focusing primarily on popular cinema, Barker stresses the impossibility of separating emotive responses from aesthetic evaluation of films. If an analysis of audience participation and response is important in film criticism, it is doubly so for the interpretation of comics, because as I suggested above, comics readers form an unusually close bond with their chosen medium and tend to have a strong awareness of cultural meanings of their readership.

Notwithstanding Barker's aversion to psychoanalytic criticism in film

studies, psychoanalysis will still be of considerable value to the argument that follows. However, classic psychoanalysis deals primarily with the unconscious, with repressed memories, dreams, fantasies and unacknowledged desires and drives. What psychoanalysis generally does not do is engage with consciously recalled mental images; for this it is necessary to turn to cognitive psychology, a field that so far has had very little to do with literary theory. Catherine Keenan's doctoral thesis, *Memory, History and the Contemporary Novel* (1999) and Nicola King's *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (2000) both offer helpful signposts in this approach, particularly in relation to narratives of personal history and traumatic experience. It is probable that cognitive theory may be of use to literary criticism in ways that have yet to be explored fully. However, the use of cognitive theory in relation to comics is particularly relevant because of the similarities between the fractured and hybrid nature of the comics page and the mind itself.

It is my view that the characteristically hybrid quality of the comic book and the non-realist form of the cartoon drawing make comics an ideal medium for the exploration of subjective states of consciousness. Various comics creators and critics have said things to this effect, often with tantalising brevity.[11] Most notably, Art Spiegelman claims in his lecture, "Comix 101":

> …comics echo the way the brain works. People think in iconographic images, not in holograms, and people think in bursts of language, not in paragraphs.[12]

Spiegelman is a writer and artist, not an academic: he has had neither the need nor the opportunity to substantiate his hypothesis through research. There is still no book-length work which engages fully with this view, but several critics have made helpful steps in that direction. The first, and most well known (although by no means the most accurate) is Scott McCloud. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud argues:

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11   Lisa Coppin, for example, asserts that "it is… all but a coincidence that Freud used to define the unconscious as a picture story. Maybe in the beginning of the twenty first century, he would have compared it to a comic, maybe even after reading *From Hell*". Lisa Coppin, "Looking Inside Out: The Vision as Particular Gaze in From Hell", *Image and Narrative* 5 (January 2003). <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/uncanny/lisacoppin.htm>

12   Art Spiegelman, quoted in *CAL Performances Presents*. University of California, Berkeley. 24th February 2004. <http://www.calperfs.berkeley.edu/presents/season/2003/program_notes/pdf_files/pn_spiegelman.pdf> Spiegelman has never published this statement in print, and says that his talks on the subject are "extemporised variations on a theme". Personal email, 10th July 2008.

When two people interact, they usually look directly at one another, seeing their partner's features in vivid detail. // Each one also sustains a constant awareness of his or her own face, but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement… a sense of shape… a sense of general placement. // Something as simple and basic – as a cartoon. // Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face – you see it as the face of another. // But when you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself. // I believe this is the primary cause of our childhood fascination with cartoons, though other factors such as universal identification, simplicity and the childlike features of many cartoon characters also play a part.[13]

Leaving aside the unacknowledged centrality of childhood perceptions here, which I will come to shortly, I suggest that McCloud starts on the right track, talking about the mental processes through which readers interpret comics. However, as his argument develops he places too much emphasis on the questionable assertion that the comics reader *identifies* more closely with the protagonist of a comic than readers or viewers of other media.[14] Nevertheless, he is right to suggest that there is something about the comics form that makes it uniquely well-suited to the mimicry of mental processes. More recently, and much more helpfully, Richard Walsh has used cognitive theory to talk about the role of medium in narrative, with particular reference to comics. Walsh denies that the process of reading sequential images as narrative is necessarily obvious, and suggests that the human brain performs the task of transforming the "undifferentiated flux of sense impressions" into a narrative. He writes:

Flux is what we encounter in the world… Representation is one of the ways in which we busy ourselves, an encoding process of cognitive mapping that, as such, is semiotic: its power is that of assimilation, primarily by reducing the chaos of sense data to comprehensible terms. Representation always functions within some system of signs, the interpretants of which are not the real, but other signs. This pursuit of signs is a function of cognitive processing…[15]

Walsh is taking issue here with one of McCloud's other well-known theories, the

13   Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Paradox Press,1993) 35-6. Throughout this thesis I will use / to indicate a new speech balloon within a panel, and // to indicate a new panel.
14   Martin Barker takes issue with the idea of identification in *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).
15   Richard Walsh, "The Narrative Imagination Across Media" *Modern Fiction Studies 52.4* (Winter 2006 858.

concept of "closure".[16] McCloud had argued that the mind closes the gaps between panels, creating a "continuous unified reality"[17]; Walsh agrees with him up to a point, but rightly stops short of saying that this narrative processing results in a smooth and seamless reading experience. I want to expand on Walsh's argument because his point that the mind, like the comic, is in the business of "reducing the chaos of sense data to comprehensible terms" is central to my thesis.

Comics and memory

Most modern psychologists adhere to a multi-store model of memory which distinguishes between short term and long term memory, although many critics adapt this model with various theories about the unity or otherwise of each type of memory and the modes of communication between the two.[18] Within the category of long term memory, neuropsychologist Larry Squire distinguishes between declarative and procedural memory, the former indicating knowledge *about* something, the latter referring to knowledge of *how to do* something.[19] Within the declarative memory, Endel Tulving identifies episodic memory, which comprises the recollection of specific synchronic events such as autobiographical incidents, and semantic memory, which comprises general knowledge not attached to a specific experience.[20] Semantic knowledge includes both the use of language and the understanding of other codes and systems such as mathematics. The point of all this is that in memory, as in comics, word and image cooperate, storing and conveying different types of information as part of an integral network of signs.

Various critics have theorised the way in which this amalgam of forms becomes an integral visual language in comics, and I would like briefly to outline the models proposed by Mario Saraceni and Scott McCloud. In his thesis, *Language*

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16   See also Ole Frahm, "Weird Signs: Comics as Means of Parody" in Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds. *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000) 177-91, and *The Comics Journal* 211 (April 1999), subtitled "The Scott McCloud Issue", in which numerous critics address this and other aspects of McCloud's *Understanding Comics*.

17   McCloud (1993) 67.

18   Alan Baddeley, *Human Memory: Theory and Practice* (Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990) is a useful general introduction to the field. See also Elizabeth Ligon Bjork and Robert A. Bjork, eds. *Memory* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996).

19   Larry R. Squire, *Memory and Brain* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

20   E. Tulving, "Episodic and Semantic Memory" in E. Tulving and W. Donaldson, eds. *Organization of Memory* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1972).

Beyond Language: Comics as Verbo-Visual Texts, Saraceni proposes a scale with iconic signs (such as photographs) at one end and symbolic signs (such as the Latin alphabet) at the other. Somewhere in the middle come Chinese ideograms, Egyptian hieroglyphs, stick figures and cartoon characters. He introduces the concept of a *semiotic blend* in the relationship between word and image, which he explains as

> …where the verbal and the pictorial elements acquire some of the characteristics of each other: the words are "seen" as pictures and the pictures are "read" as words.[21]

(I would add in passing that this need not discount wordless comics. They have fewer signs at the pure "symbolic" end of the scale, but rely heavily on other repeated images and motifs.) Saraceni's argument has the advantages of clarity and scholarly rigour that Scott McCloud lacks, although his interest is in semiotics, and he does not extend his observations into the realms of psychology or literary theory. In *Understanding Comics* McCloud begins with a scale similar to Saraceni's (although, confusingly, he uses the term "iconic" to refer to the kind of less-than-realistic image that Saraceni denotes as "symbolic", setting it against "realistic" images at the other end of the scale). However, he then introduces a third dimension, that of "non-iconic abstraction", in which the image makes no attempt at mimesis and the physical marks on the picture surface are seen *as marks*. I will discuss the role of abstraction in my chapters on Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean; for the moment I will say only that at this point McCloud's argument becomes confused and, having pinpointed the theoretical importance of abstract form, he never fully engages with its role in comics narrative.

A further analogy between comics and memory has to do with the simplification and encoding of information. No experience enters even short term memory in its entirety; the necessary information is filed and the rest is discarded. Memories can be organised in an endless variety of ways, and as F. C. Bartlett first proposed in the 1930s they are encoded by the intermediary device of the schema.[22] A schema is a pattern that helps the mind to codify and explain experiences,

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21   Mario Saraceni, *Language Beyond Language: Comics as Verbo-Visual Texts*. Dissertation, University of Nottingham (2000) 43. I recommend Saraceni's doctoral thesis, rather than the oversimplified book that followed (*The Language of Comics* (2003)), on the semiotics of the comics form.
22   F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

mediating perception in order to make sense of the world. Their organisational function is crucial but they can also be responsible for the distortion and misinterpretation of events. (My ability to conceive of the abstract concept "coat" is based on an ability to conflate the characteristics of numerous different coats, but it also accounts for my inaccurate memory of which coat I was wearing on a particular occasion).[23] Comics images are likewise characteristically stylised and simplified: it is a commonplace amongst "how to" manuals on the subject that excessively cluttered or complex images make for a confusing comic.[24] Furthermore, comics rely heavily on accepted conventions of representation such as speech balloons, which govern the relationships between different kinds of information. In other words, the interpretative conventions adopted in the reading of a comic are very similar to the schemas with which we make sense of perceptual information in the first place.

Crucially, schemata are instrumental in the formation of memories into self-narratives. Bartlett's most well-known study involved a Native American folk tale, "The War of the Ghosts", which participants were asked to remember and re-tell at intervals.[25] The respondents tended to rationalise the events of this strange, fractured story, making its details more familiar and its logic more coherent than in the original. Likewise, autobiographical memories are encoded into stories which form a clear and comprehensible self-narrative: material which does not fit is adapted, misremembered or edited out. The importance of such edited narratives in a therapeutic context has been current since Freud, but narrative has been particularly prevalent in psychology since the 1980s, partly thanks to Theodore Sarbin's essay "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology".[26] We tell ourselves stories about our experiences, and through these stories we define a sense of personal and social identity.

It is also worth noting that with the concept of the schema, cognitive psychology starts to move towards psychoanalysis, because the connections

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23   For a useful illustration of the working of schemata, particularly in recall distortion, see William F. Brewer and James C. Treyens, "Role of Schemata in Memory for Places" *Cognitive Psychology* 13 (1981) 207-30.
24   See, for example, Alan McKenzie, *How to Draw and Sell Comic Strips* (3rd edition) (London: Titan, 2005) 80.
25   Bartlett (1932) 63-94.
26   Theodore Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology", in Sarbin (ed.), *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York: Prager, 1986). See also Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), and Paulo P. P. Machado and Óscar F. Conçalves, eds., *Narrative in Psychotherapy: The Emerging Metaphor,* spec. issue of *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 55.10. (October 1999).

that the memory makes between units of information are not always conscious. Experimental studies demonstrate that people tend to "cluster" similar experiences, and the notorious unreliability of eyewitness testimony provides ample evidence of the danger of distortion, particularly of traumatic memories. [27] Information stored is not necessarily information available for recall: studies of both semantic and episodic memory demonstrate the existence of suppressed, half-remembered information, emotional memories and implicit knowledge. Experimental studies may note the distortion of memories, but to speculate about why an individual misremembers in a particular way is to move into psychoanalytic territory. Of the comics discussed here, several contain long sequences which explicitly narrate the protagonists' consciously recalled memories, and many feature sequences of unconscious mental imagery: dreams, hallucinations, fantasies or visionary states. All drift from real to unreal, conscious to unconscious recollection or thought, with little or no demarcation of a boundary between the two. Therefore in my critical approach to these comics I find it necessary to adapt both cognitive theory and psychoanalysis, addressing each text on its own terms.

Gender and sexuality

I wish to outline two significant threads in my reading of identity in alternative comics: gender and sexuality on the one hand and childhood and memory on the other. Until the mid twentieth century the reading and writing of comics was not a specifically gendered activity, but in the latter part of the twentieth century a number of historical factors conspired to render comic book production and consumption stereotypically white male pursuits. I will discuss the predominance of male authors, readers and protagonists more fully when I address the works of Lynda Barry and Julie Doucet, and I will also discuss these women's very different attitudes to feminism. However, the problem is not simply one of exclusion of women; as my opening chapters will demonstrate, many creators of alternative comics have sought to valorise white heterosexual masculinity and have tended to claim for white males the status of a socially marginal group. Some have placed

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27   See Phil Mollon, *Remembering Trauma: A Psychotherapist's Guide to Memory and Illusion* (London and Philadelphia: Whurr, 2002), David C. Rubin, ed. *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979).

themselves in direct opposition to feminism, appropriating the figure of the heroic artist to strengthen the position of the lonely, white, comic book reading male. Others, whilst not opposing feminism or directly addressing gender issues, nevertheless produce narratives that feature isolated male protagonists faced with a threatening or alienating world.

As my first chapter will demonstrate, a key part of Robert Crumb's rebellion against the enforced childishness of comics under the Comics Code was the expression of his sexuality in all its grotesque extremity. In choosing the comics form to talk about his sexual fantasies, frustrations and failures, Crumb started a trend that has continued to the present day, and significantly, it has continued through a period in which sexuality has become an increasingly important identity marker. Many of the comics I will discuss here are sexually explicit, and the impulse to rebel against restrictions on what may be represented has always been important in alternative comics. Partly owing to their historical links with self-publishing, alternative comics have a tradition of representing ideas and images that would be considered unprintable by many trade publishers. Masturbation anecdotes, for example, have become a traditional staple of alternative comics, and as my reading of Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's *Lost Girls* (2006) will show, the desire to use the comic book medium to push the limits of permissible representation of sexuality has continued to the present day.

Preoccupation with gender identity and sexuality are hallmarks of adolescence, and it will become apparent that the writers and artists addressed in this thesis are primarily – although not exclusively – concerned with young adult subjectivity. This observation leads back to the second major thread that I will follow throughout this thesis: the relationship between comics, childhood and memory.

Childhood and comics

As I noted above, the association of comics and childhood has long been a tiresome stereotype from which comics scholars and fans have been trying to escape. However, to deny that comics are fundamentally a juvenile form is not to ignore the prevalence of childhood, and particularly adult memories and revised narratives of childhood, in alternative comics from the 1960s to the present day. The comics form has had a long and complex history of association with childhood, particularly in the

mainstream US comics industry of the twentieth century as described by cultural historians such as Bradford Wright.[28] Significantly, many writers of alternative comics have engaged with this history when addressing the role of childhood experience in shaping and defining adult lives. It is perhaps surprising that so little substantial work has been done in this field. Charles Hatfield marks out a gap in current research and suggests one explanation for this problem:

> Unfortunately, the recent reevaluation of comics in the United States has, to some extent, been based on a denial of childhood and childishness. Popular journalism, review criticism, and academic study have all partaken of the idea that "comics aren't just for kids anymore" – a cliché that has circulated with teeth-grinding regularity since the 1980s".[29]

None of the authors whose work I will discuss here are writing for children, but all of them, without exception, touch upon childhood or adolescence as a key element of their expression of adult subjectivity. Most represent childhood not as an idyllic, romanticised state, but as a period in which adult selfhood is in the process of being formed and defined. For many of these writers, as for cognitive theorists, the real reason for remembering and narrating the past is a desire to deal with the present. We define ourselves by what we can remember, however distorted and schematised that remembered past might be. Freud generally believed that childhood memories are fixed, albeit locked away in the unconscious, and often used archaeological metaphors to describe their recover through psychoanalysis. In 1909, for example, he reported a conversation with a patient:

> I made some short observations upon *the psychological differences between the conscious and the unconscious*, and upon the fact that everything conscious was subject to a process of wearing-away, while what was unconscious was relatively unchangeable; and I illustrated my remarks by pointing to the antiques standing about in my room. They were, in fact, I said, only objects found in a tomb, and their burial had been their preservation: the destruction of Pompeii was only beginning now that it had been dug up.[30]

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28   Wright discusses the commercial US comic book industry from 1933 to 1992. See Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).
29   Charles Hatfield, "Comic Art, Children's Literature, and the New Comics Studies" *The Lion and the Unicorn 30.3* (September 2006) 360-82. See also "Comics and Childhood", a special issue of *ImageTexT* 3.3 (Summer 2007), introduced by Cathlena Martin and Charles Hatfield.
30   Sigmund Freud, "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis" (1909), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey. Vol. 10, 176. See also the case history of Elisabeth von R. in "Studies on Hysteria" (1895) *Standard Edition* Vol. 2, 139.

In direct opposition to this view, Bartlett's idea of the schema led to a reconceptualisation of the relationship between childhood memories and later, adult perceptions. Ulric Neisser and others argued that the schemas into which perceptions and memories are organised are not only constantly conditioning our interpretations of the present, but are themselves always being adapted in the light of subsequent experiences.[31] The traffic between adult subjectivity and childhood memory is a two-way stream, with the present and past not only interdependent but constantly rewriting one another.

The recollection of childhood in the definition of adult selfhood is particularly pertinent in narratives of selfhood in comics form because many, if not all, of the authors whose work I will discuss here report having read comics as children, sometimes with obsessive enthusiasm. Robert Crumb produced his first comic in primary school; Alan Moore's career plan, aged seven, was to "put on a costume and fight crime".[32] From *Archie* to *Spiderman*, from *Whizzer and Chips* to *Nikki*, comics and kids have a history.[33] The result is an alternative comics tradition that forever has one eye on the past. Creators of alternative comics often subvert or satirise the comics they read in childhood: funny animal comics are central to the grotesque carnival of Crumb's work, while Chris Ware's comics are haunted by a sinister superhero father figure. The values and conventions of these childhood comics merge with other early memories, conditioning the development of the reader's adult identity.

More generally, picture books are a part of childhood experience, part of how we learn to schematise experience and think about narrative. In a discussion of the near-impossibility of replacing books with electronic reading devices, Geoffrey Nunberg stresses the importance of the physicality of books in the reading process, and particularly in the early stages of learning to read. He points out, "It is unlikely

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31   Ulric Neisser, *Cognition and Reality: Principles and Implications of Cognitive Psychology* (New York: Freeman, 1976) 55-7. See also Jean Piaget, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (New York: International University Press, 1952) and *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1954).
32   R. Crumb, *The Complete Crumb Comics*, ed. Gary Groth et al. (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1987-2005). Vol. 1, vii; Stewart Lee, "Chain Reaction". Interview with Alan Moore. 27th January 2005. <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=4533>
33   Surprisingly, there are no thorough histories of children's comics per se. Sections on children's comics in Sabin (1996) are helpful. See also Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press, 2001) and Paul Gravett, *Great British Comics: Celebrating a Century of Ripping Yarns and Wizard Wheezes* (London: Aurum, 1996).

that virtual reality will soon be developed to the point of being able to render *Pat the Bunny* in all its sensory complexity."[34] It should already be clear that the physicality of the comic book form will play a key part in my argument. With specific reference to childhood, however, it is worth noting that it is almost impossible to read a comic to someone else. As Crumb demonstrated in his advertisement for *Zap*, comics represent a later point in childhood, the stage at which individuals growing up in the mid to late twentieth century were capable of choosing, buying and asserting their right to possess their own reading matter. Childhood comics existed at a crucial stage in these creators' development, and they participated in the formation of adult identity not just through their content but by the very fact of their physical existence.

Identity is a complex and multifarious construction, and as I have outlined, there will be a number of threads to the argument that follows. Ultimately, my contention is this: there are ways in which writers and artists represent selfhood in alternative comics that one does not, and indeed *could* not encounter in any other narrative medium. By tracing the idiosyncrasies of such representation, and the reasons behind them in some detail, and particularly by identifying resemblances between the works of key creators, it may be possible to arrive at new insights into this diverse and vibrant form.

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34   Geoffrey Nunberg. "The Places of Books in the Age of Electronic Reproduction."
Representations 42 (1993) 17.

CHAPTER ONE

R. Crumb's Carnival Subjectivity

It is necessary to begin with a step backwards. Each of the chapters that follow will, to some extent, build on the picture of the comics industry presented in preceding sections. Before I begin with R. Crumb, therefore, I wish to outline something of the state that US comics were in when he started writing and drawing in the early 1950s.

By the mid-twentieth century, several distinct genres of comics had been coexisting happily for some time. Newspaper "funnies", short and often humorous strips like Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* (1894-8) and Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (1913-44), had been popular since the late nineteenth century.[1] Separate comic books had developed during the 1930s, first as reprints of newspaper strips but gradually as publications of original material. One genre that flourished in this new format was the "funny animal" comic. Monopolised by Dell, these included spin-offs from the Walt Disney studios, and, whilst aimed at children, they often carried decidedly adult overtones of rural nostalgia and social commentary.[2] Crime, superhero and action comics also began in the 1930s, and became popular with a wartime readership which relished fantasies of heroism.[3] More recently, the late 1940s and early 50s saw a rapid increase in the number of sensational crime, horror and sci-fi titles published by companies such as E.C., with names like *Tales from the Crypt* and *Weird Science*.[4] Finally, Harvey Kurtzman's *Mad* magazine was launched in October 1952. This was a largely satirical publication aimed at teenagers, and, as we will see, it exerted a considerable influence on the young Robert Crumb.[5]

E.C.'s flood of sensational titles coincided with a particularly paranoid phase of U.S. history. The second wave of HUAC trials started in 1951, blacklisting

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1   For a historical analysis of pre-twentieth century comics, see 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 *The History of the Comic Strip: The Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
2   Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (London: Wildwood House, 1973) 51-3.
3   Wright (2001).
4   Stephen Sennitt, *Ghastly Terror! The Horrible Story of the Horror Comics* (Manchester: Critical Vision, 1999) is useful, although written from a fan perspective.
5   On the influence of *Mad* magazine on the underground press, see Abe Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

writers and artists in the film industry with allegedly communist sensibilities.[6] These McCarthyist "witch hunts" reflected and exacerbated an atmosphere of public hysteria, which extended to anxieties about the influence of comics on their juvenile readership. The blame for the blacklisting of comics tends to fall on Frederic Wertham, a psychiatrist whose *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) claimed a direct link between comics reading and psychological or behavioural problems in children. However, churches and parental pressure groups also made a significant contribution, whipping up a public frenzy about the potential effects of reading comics.[7] In 1954 a number of comics publishers were called before a Senate hearing on juvenile delinquency to defend the medium against accusations of depravity. Ultimately, this hearing did not impose censorship on the comics industry, but the comics publishers, in what many now consider a bizarre act of artistic suicide, agreed to an extremely oppressive regime of self-regulation, the Comics Code.[8] This prohibited a huge range of topics from sex and violence to positive representations of divorce. Although Amy Kiste Nyberg challenges the common view that the Comics Code completely devastated the industry, it certainly put several companies out of business, and drastically altered the output of most other comics publishers. It had lost much of its sting by the 1980s, but it was officially revamped in 1989, and Nyberg suggests that by designating certain comics appropriate for all ages it is still of value in the present day.[9]

I begin with an outline of this background of repression because it goes some way towards explaining the extremity of Crumb's rebellion and that of other writers, artists, performers and hippies working and living in the US underground. Placing Crumb in this context is both important and problematic because the counterculture itself is so difficult to pin down, and it would be wrong to suggest

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6   On the history of film censorship during this period, see Matthew Bernstein, ed. *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era* (London: Athlone, 2000). Also Frank Miller, *Censored Hollywood: Sex, Sin and Violence on Screen* (Atlanta: Turner, 1994).
7   An overview of the history of moral panics in relation to young people can be found in Ulf Boëthius, "Youth, the media and moral panics" in Johan Fornäs and Göran Bolin, *Youth Culture in Late Modernity* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 1995). See also Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1972).
8   The most thorough analysis can be found in Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), and in Bart Beaty, *Frederic Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2005). See also David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).
9   Nyberg (1998) 163.

that Crumb was part of a coherent movement as such. As Godfrey Hodgson points out, the counterculture was nothing if not plural, indeed contradictory. On the one hand, it was catalysed by racial tensions, opposition to the Vietnam war, and a more general sense of dissatisfaction with the values and choices of the older generation. Yet it was also driven by drugs, music, independent media and a fascination with immediate, non-rational experience, all of which had more to do with personal, individual experience than with a drive for political revolution.[10] Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle explain:

> The term 'counterculture' falsely reifies what should never properly be construed as a social movement. It was an inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies, postures, gestures, 'lifestyles', ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations, and affirmations. These roles were played by people who defined themselves first by what they were not, and then, only after having cleared that essential ground of identity, began to conceive anew what they were.[11]

Crumb came to define himself through such negation early in his adult life, and continued to do so through his sceptical and detached attitude to the counterculture. As his letters to Marty Pahls demonstrate, he was acutely conscious of social norms to which he felt unable or unwilling to conform, and was all too aware of the handicaps that this non-conformity placed upon him.[12] Braunstein and Doyle's list, including "ideals" and "moralisms" alongside "pleasures" and "tendencies", points towards a counterculture that tended to fuse social and political critique with personal identity and lifestyle choice. The idea that the personal could be political had not yet formed into popular cliché when Crumb started producing comics, but it was a defining characteristic of the social and cultural milieu in which he found himself. The uneasy, unstable blend of public cultural commentary and private subjectivity that I will identify in Crumb's comics is undoubtedly a reflection of the cultural moment of his work.

In his reaction to the Comics Code, Crumb was not simply lashing out at a programme of censorship that hit his own reading tastes. Perhaps surprisingly for a

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10   Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1976; 2005) 306-52. See also Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
11   Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, eds. *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 10.
12   Ilse Thompson, ed. *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me: Robert Crumb Letters 1958 – 1977* (Seattle, 1998).

teenage boy growing up in post-war Delaware, Crumb never showed the slightest interest in superhero comics, nor a great deal of enthusiasm for the horror and crime comics which had sparked the Comics Code furore. His letters and interviews point to several areas of influence. Firstly, Crumb admired the surreal satire of *Mad* magazine and the children's animal comics of Carl Barks and Walt Kelly.[13] In addition to these, he read and collected many of the "classic" cartoonists such as Charles Dana Gibson and H. T. Webster. In particular, he admired those artists whom he perceived as attempting to capture something of "the real world" in their work. In 1961, when he was still confident that he knew what "reality" was, Crumb wrote to Marty Pahls:

> I'm trying to put into my work the everyday human realities that I've never found in a comic strip yet, though Feiffer has come the closest. It's an extremely difficult thing to do in the comic strip medium… There are so many delicate little things that, when I try to express them in comic strip form, come out awkward… So far, I haven't really gotten at the stark reality, the bottom of life (as I see it) in my work…[14]

As Crumb's work develops throughout the 1960s and into the 70s, this pursuit of realism manifests itself less in straightforward representations of "everyday human realities" than in interrogation of what that reality might mean. Nonetheless, he has continued to praise artists who refuse to idealise their images of humanity, calling Pieter Bruegel "one of the greatest artists of all time".[15] Robert Hughes, in turn, called Crumb "the Bruegel of the last half of the twentieth century", explaining that "he gives you that tremendous impaction of lusting, suffering, crazed humanity in all sorts of bizarre gargoyle-like allegorical forms".[16] The comparison is intriguing because Bruegel, like Crumb, concerned himself with the animal qualities of human existence, and he explored this interest in paintings which fuse the mundane and the fantastic. I wish to examine the role of the surreal and spectacular in Crumb's representations of earthy subject matter.

R. Crumb's work is regularly accused of being sexually violent, misogynistic, racist and generally grotesque and sordid. As recently as 1994, his *Troubles with*

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13   D. K. Holm, ed., *R. Crumb: Conversations* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) 131; Thompson, ed. (1998) vii ff.
14   Thompson, ed. (1998) 174.
15   Mike Bradley, "Crumb Crazy", *Metro* 3rd-9th April 1999, 25.
16   Terry Zwigoff, dir. *Crumb* (1994).

Women (1990) was seized by UK Customs and Excise and tried for obscenity.[17] Underground cartoonist Trina Robbins has repeatedly criticised Crumb for his "sexually hostile" material, and it is often implied that Crumb's representations of rape, incest, ethnic stereotypes and so on are something of an embarrassment for defenders of his comics.[18] Frank. L. Cioffi says that "one comes away from Crumb's works feeling slightly soiled, ashamed of having spent the time reading them".[19] However, these apparently offensive elements are central to Crumb's work, and it is neither possible nor desirable to skirt round them in a critical analysis. These comics, I suggest, are interesting precisely because of their intense ambivalence towards the counterculture of which they were supposedly a part. Crumb was there in San Francisco in 1967, dropping acid with everyone else, and is generally regarded as the central figure in the underground scene; yet he was, by his own admission, emotionally detached from hippy culture by virtue of having "too many *hang-ups*".[20] The "deep and dangerous ambiguities" that Hodgson identifies in the counterculture, its contradictions and hypocrisies, are lit up in Crumb's work.[21] The fact that his comics are deliberately, self-consciously riddled with the ideological and psychological flaws of their creator makes his engagement with questions of personal and social identity appear perfectly in tune with the intellectual currents of the 1960s and 70s.

With this in mind, I want to suggest that one of the more helpful approaches to Crumb's work is through Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. In *Rabelais and His World* (which appeared in English in 1967, the year in which Crumb produced *Zap* #1) Bakhtin argued that carnival rituals privileging grotesque representations of the body, ambivalent laughter and the symbolic inversion of hierarchies enact a disruption of authority.[22] Carnivalesque forms are specifically manifestations of low

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17   Nick Hasted, "Strange Customs", *The Guardian,* 29th January 1996, 8-9.
18   Robbins articulates this criticism in Zwigoff, dir. (1994). See also Mark Estren, *A History of Underground Comics* (1974) (Berkeley, CA: Ronin, 1993). For analysis of apparently racist material in Crumb's work, see Leonard Rifas, "Racial Imagery, Racism, Individualism, and Underground Comix", *ImageTexT* 1.1 (Spring 2004). <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_1/rifas/>
19   Frank L. Cioffi, "Disturbing Comics" in Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons, eds. *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (Jackson, Mississippi, 2001) 112.
20   R. Crumb, *The Complete Crumb Comics*, ed. Gary Groth et al, vol. 4 (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1987-2005), x. All subsequent in-text references are to this series of collected editions.
21   Hodgson (1976) 339.
22   Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iwolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984).

culture, always unofficial, popular forms of spectacle. Crumb's work is obsessed with grotesque bodies and coarse, unorthodox, disturbing representations of the world. His drawings emphasise orifices and protuberances, his stories involve stretching, squishing, entangling, exploding bodies. The list is extensive: Eggs Ackley piles the Vulture Demonesses on top of each other by inserting each vulture's head into the vagina of the next (6.21); Dicknose, plagued by women wanting to sit on his face, gets covered in excrement which is then licked off by another woman (6.55); Crumb fits his entire body inside a vagina (9.123); birds steal eyeballs (5.127); Mrs Quiver "shivers and shakes like jelly on a plate" (6.31). Crumb even parodies his own fascination with gross physicality in "All Meat Comics" (6.28), a three-page strip with no discernible narrative but a frenzied cascade of bizarre images featuring distorted bodies, squelching, bouncing, hairy flesh, splashes of semen and sweat, rivers of vomit and blood (Figure 2). Captions like "Fun with Flesh" and "Mr Meat sez: make a mess!" pose as mock advertisements for Crumb's ongoing spectacle of pulsating bodily chaos.
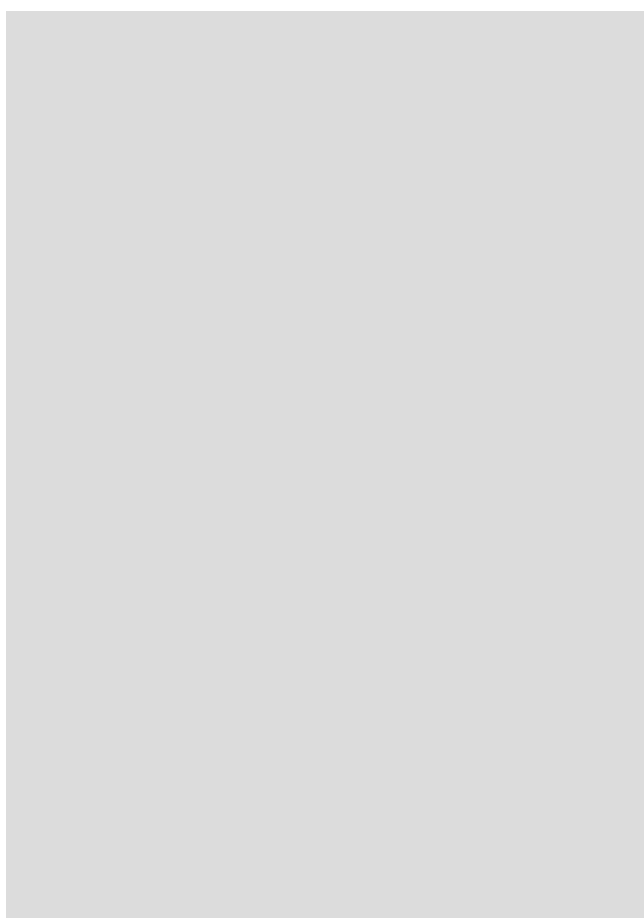
There are two main objections commonly raised against the use of Bakhtin's carnivalesque in the analysis of twentieth-century art, and until fairly recently Crumb resisted them both. Firstly, critics have pointed out that mediaeval carnival was always a *licensed* blow-out, a permitted and controlled release of transgressive energies.[23] In the twentieth century, western culture often succeeded in removing the anarchic sting from a work of art by assimilating it into the

Figure 2.

23   Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a revolutionary criticism* (London: Verso, 1981) 148.

mainstream. The fact that nothing stays subversive for very long tends to pose a problem for radical art. Abstract Expressionism, rock 'n' roll and even Banksy have now been safely institutionalised, and whilst most agree that the wider acceptance of comics as an art form has done wonders for the industry, it has also had its drawbacks for transgressive artists like Crumb. For a long time Crumb seemed to resist assimilation into high culture, refusing to adopt a longer, graphic novel format over single issue comics, and choosing the self-parodic title *The R. Crumb Coffee Table Art Book* (1997) over the publisher's favoured title *The Art of R. Crumb* when Little, Brown and Company produced a glossy full-colour collection of his work.[24] However, in the past few years there have been several major museum exhibitions of his work, and in 2005 *The Guardian* newspaper printed a number of his comics, including works that would once have been considered amongst his most offensive, such as *Joe Blow*.[25] Crumb's carnival might have been unlicensed once, but it has certainly been institutionalised now.

The second objection often raised is that modern popular culture communicates through *mass* media, a long way from the folk culture of Rabelais' world.[26] Alternative comics, however, have always been very much a handmade form, produced and distributed on a small scale. The text is invariably handwritten, and the trace of the artist's hand is always evident. Crumb folded and stapled *Zap* #1 himself and wandered around the Haight-Ashbury district selling it in the street.[27] Underground comics, in other words, are perhaps as close to folk art as twentieth-century American culture is likely to get. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the DIY ethos of the underground press lived on in the punk-influenced comics and fanzines of the 1970s and 80s, which flourished with the increased availability of good quality photocopiers. Its influence is evident in the small press scene to the present day.

Crumb's preference for single-issue format is important. In *Alternative Comics*

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24   See Estren (1974) on the early appropriation of underground art by mainstream media.
25   *The Guardian*, 7th – 11th March 2005. March 2005 saw a whole season of Crumb events in London: an exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, a series of Crumb-related films at the National Film Theatre, an onstage interview and various other events. These all coincided with the launch of R. Crumb and Pete Poplaski, *The R. Crumb Handbook* (London: MQP, 2005).
26   See, for example, M. Keith Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnivalesque* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991) 8.
27   Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution 1963-1975* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2002) 71. This is one of the best histories of underground comics currently available.

Hatfield emphasises the importance of the physical form of the comic book to the underground artists of the 1960s and 70s and their successors. He points out that part of the artistic success of these comics derived from "the way that they transformed an object that was jejune and mechanical in origin into a radically new kind of expressive object".[28] Underground comics artists like Crumb, Gilbert Shelton and Spain Rodriguez appropriated a textual shape whose associations were ripe for subversion. As Hatfield explains, these flimsy comics held the lowest possible status. Filled with advertisements and reproductions of newspaper strips, they were often given away for nothing or sold for a few cents. Ian Gordon charts the immense variety of ways in which the comics form was co-opted into commercial culture in the twentieth century, from strips dramatising the effectiveness of a soap powder or a motor oil to narratives depicting a happy consumer lifestyle.[29] So there was a deliberate formal irony in the underground cartoonists' adoption of a package that had for so long been associated with "faceless industrial entertainment".[30] Specifically, the form was associated with two areas that held particular interest for Crumb: childhood and commerce.

In order to consider more fully how the carnivalesque functions in relation to other themes in Crumb's work, I want to look in more detail at one particular story, "Head Comix" (1967) (4.60) (Figure 3).[31] This page is by no means the most spectacularly revolting or artistically interesting of Crumb's comics of the period, but it does introduce a number of characters and themes that recur throughout his work. "Head Comix" consists of thirty-six panels on a single page, which is more or less the densest concentration of any Crumb strip. The world it depicts is farcical and chaotic, full of pantomime violence and surreal links. As it turns out, this strip tells the story of a dream, but the reader remains unaware of this until the last row of panels, and on rereading, this dream context raises as many questions as it answers. The comic consists of a string of erratically connected incidents and images, and it is difficult to piece together a narrative at all. It begins with two distorted male figures, known to regular readers as Snappy Bitts and Krazy Kraks, walking along

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28   Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 7.
29   Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture 1890 – 1945* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998)
30   Hatfield (2005), 11.
31   Confusingly, the title "Head Comix" is shared by several other comic strips also produced in 1967, and an entire comic book published the following year.
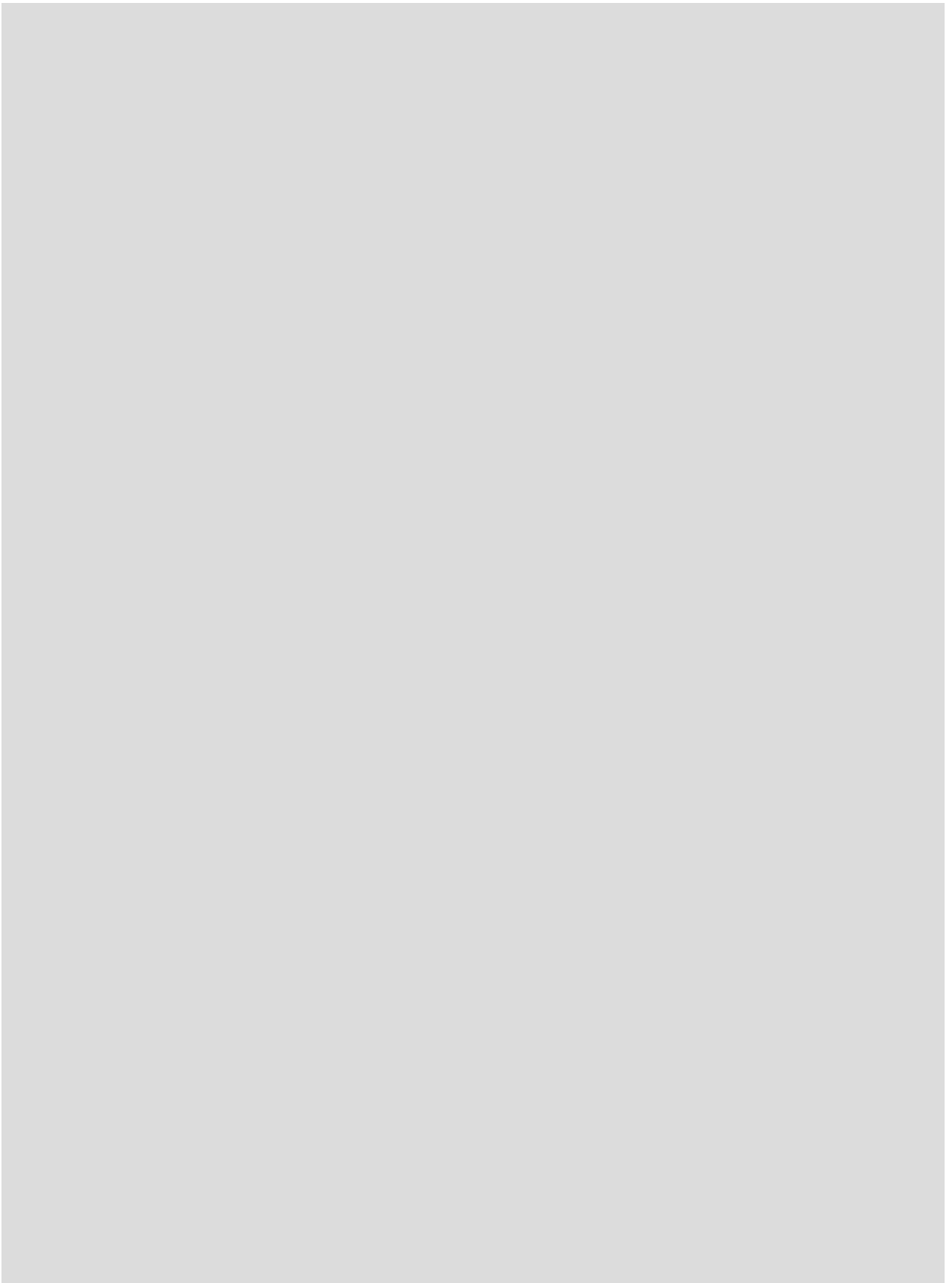
Figure 3.

in the exaggerated style now familiar from the infamous "Keep on Trucking" comic, published later in 1967.[32] Inexplicably, given that the two figures initially appear to be walking alongside each other, they collide and fight. One of them sexually assaults a passer-by and is pulled away by the other, which precipitates another fight. They later cause an explosion from which another man comes running. This third figure goes on to experience various other forms of vaguely defined persecution. In the final few panels the dream descends into meaningless theatrical jollity and ends with what looks like an advertising image. In the final row of panels another regular character, Mr Natural, awakes from "[a] dream about my youth" to find a strange inscription on his hand. Before he can decipher it, Angelfood McSpade licks the text from his skin and runs away. This plot synopsis may seem bewildering enough on its own, but to make matters worse, there are several panels that make almost no sense at all but appear to represent fragments of other stories. A car is shown driving in the moonlight in panel 5, for example, then in panel 13 a similar car appears in daylight, and a moonlit car crash takes place in panel 14. The connection between these images, and between them and the rest of the comic, remains unclear.

The first problem is the difficulty of accepting this narrative as one of Mr Natural's dreams. Far from being a dream about his youth, it reads more like a symbolic vision of the state of contemporary American culture. In view of the apparent incoherence of the whole thing, one might well argue that Mr Natural's waking in the final row represents not a frame narrative but simply another incident in a stream of loosely connected events. However, this final row is separated from the rest of the comic by a conspicuous stylistic difference: it does not rhyme.

The fact that the rest of the page does rhyme is remarkable in itself. This device is not unique in Crumb's comics but it is rare enough to merit close attention.[33] The main body of the comic uses a repetitive end-rhyme, which changes on each row of panels. To begin with, each panel represents a regular four-foot line, although this rhythm disintegrates towards the end. There is little dialogue as such. Much of the text is composed of meaningless syllables from songs ("Hey boparee bop"), nonsense words ("Fnoid, goid, bdoid, boid") or sound effects familiar from

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32   Infamous because after various battles over unauthorised merchandising, a judge eventually ruled that Crumb did not own the copyright to this (unsigned) work. As a result, Crumb was hit with a tax bill of over $20000. For more detail see Rosenkranz (2002).
33   See also, for example, "Stoned" (4.72-5).

comics ("Sock, pow, thud, bdum"). Some lines make sense in the context of the panel – "Wanna weenie in yer jum" is unclear on its own, but spoken by a character about to sexually assault a woman, its meaning becomes fairly apparent. The metre, pace and repetitive rhyme of the comic are reminiscent of songs like "Subterranean Homesick Blues" or "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream" (1965) and in view of Crumb and Dylan's shared preoccupations, including Crumb's enthusiasm for pre-war blues and old-time music, this should not come as any great surprise. Dylan's deliberate adoption of a popular form that "describes the temper of the times",[34] his themes of urban chaos and paranoia, his often surrealistic descriptions of modern America and his sense of the pointlessness of grasping after philosophical certainties – these features are present both in "Head Comix" and throughout Crumb's oeuvre.

In "Head Comix" images of paranoia, spiritual searching and the false joviality of stage shows and advertisements jostle for space alongside "low" themes like sex and violence. Old intellectual and cultural divisions are abandoned as serious philosophical questions are juxtaposed with apparently juvenile toilet humour. Grouping sex and violence together in the manner of censors would be inaccurate and misleading with most comics artists, but it seems appropriate in a discussion of Crumb. In his comics the line between consensual sex and violent assault is a hazy one, constantly in danger of being breached: fights turn into sexual encounters, sex turns into an abusive game, a carnival tangle of female flesh. In this particular page, the protagonist steps on a woman's face whilst performing cunnilingus (panel 9). Fluid drips from open orifices (panels 9 and 24), and from figures sweating with fear (panels 20 – 22). Unlike many of Crumb's comics, however, this narrative does not follow its brief sexual encounters into a sustained erotic fantasy. This strip is concerned with the hectic pace and incoherence of twentieth-century American life, of which sexuality forms only a small part. As a result, "Head Comix" features a lot more violence than sex: men punch, cars crash, dynamite explodes, someone gets struck by lightning, picked up by the scruff of the neck and dropped into a void. Crumb employs the full range of comics conventions to illustrate this manic sequence: stars float around a figure's head after a collision (panels 3 and 4), fighting figures disappear in a cloud of dust (panel 12), an explosion is signified by concentric zig-zag circles (panel 18), and lightning is stylised to the utmost

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34   Michael Gray, *Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (London, 2000) 53.

simplicity (panel 22). Crumb owes much to comics traditions of farce. I will say more about Crumb's use of the figures and styles of children's comics shortly; here I will just note that it is easy to trace the mayhem of "Head Comix" to the anarchic violence of, say, a "Tom and Jerry" cartoon. Taking the forms and conventions of a low-brow, juvenile form, Crumb uses them to satirise the contemporary American quest for authentic and stable meaning.

Crumb places particular emphasis on the futility of grasping after universal truths. This search is repeatedly frustrated in "Head Comix", both within the dream and after Mr Natural wakes up. The figure reading the book of "Answers" – possibly, but not certainly, the same individual who appears in the fourth row – is placed between two apparently disconnected panels, and utters a phrase of meaningless rubbish – "From the heads of ducks and gooses" (panel 15). The mysterious inscription on Mr Natural's hand hints at the promise of a straightforward, text-based solution, but Angelfood, the caricature of a

Figure 4.

racist stereotype, gleefully frustrates his search for knowledge. Conventional religion is no more helpful: the God-like figure in panel 23 has the voice and appearance of a Mafioso thug, not to mention a wave of liquid cascading from the top of his head. In the following panel, his victim (now without clothes or hair) tumbles into darkness with the caption "Surrender to the void, Cloid". The victimised figure in the fourth row reflects Crumb's own status as an outsider: lonely, out of step with mainstream culture, distrustful of authority. Having abandoned Catholicism in his teens, Crumb satirises not only the traditional grand narrative of religion but Mr Natural's New Age philosophies as well. Reduced to crawling pathetically, this naked, dejected individual is told "Ferget this apple sause, hoss!" by a Christ figure in a bleak desert landscape. The whole thing reads as a series of snapshots of the modern American quest for meaning: hectic, bewildering and ultimately futile.

Looking back on the work he produced during this period, Crumb is often inclined to blame it on the acid. In addition to various literary and artistic influences,
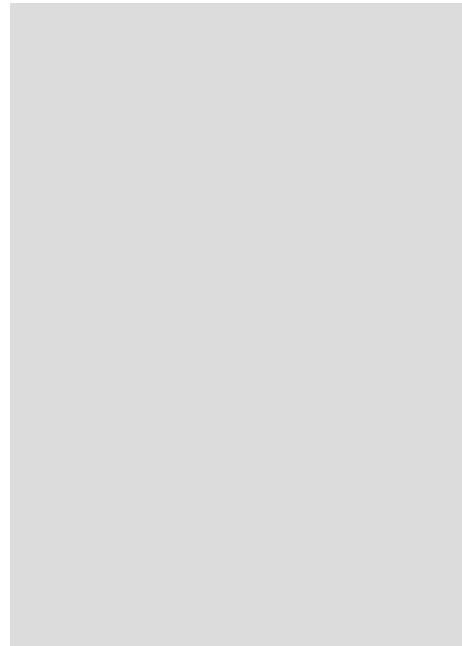
Crumb has often cited LSD as a catalyst, if not exactly a source for his work.[35] His reflection upon the ways in which different states of consciousness might be expressed in comics has certainly produced some interesting technical trickery. The labyrinth of lines representing the speech of a "speed freak", for example, describes the inadequacy of language for communicating altered states as well as mocking the incoherent ramblings of amphetamine users (Figure 4). On the whole, however, the influence of LSD is less interesting in its own right than as a tool which enabled Crumb to fuse imagery from his subconscious with his perceptions of the outside world. Writing of what he calls his "fuzzy acid phase" in 1966, Crumb explains:

> A whole new thing was emerging in my drawings, a sort of harkening back, a calling up of what G. Legman had called the 'horror-squinky' forces lurking in American comics of the 1940s. I had no control over it. The whole time I was in this fuzzy state of mind, the separation, the barrier betwixt the conscious and the subconscious was broken open somehow. A grotesque kaleidoscope, a tawdry carnival of disassociated images kept sputtering to the surface… especially if I was sitting and staring, which I often did. (4.viii. Crumb's ellipsis.)

This statement sheds some powerful light on the subject matter of Crumb's comics. Firstly, Crumb explicitly associates the terms "grotesque" and "carnival" with a psychoanalytic process in which images from the unconscious fight their way into the conscious mind. In Bakhtin's version, the carnivalesque is absolutely not about individualism. He writes:

> In grotesque realism… the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people.[36]

However, subsequent critics such as Stallybrass and White have rewritten carnival as part of a wider politics of transgression. They point out, for example, that many of the symptoms exhibited by Freud's patients represent a sublimation of carnival, a set of horrors and anxieties repressed and then reworked as modern neuroses. They write:

> In the *Studies on Hysteria* many of the images and symbols which were once the focus of various pleasures in European carnival have become transformed into the morbid symptoms of private terror. Again and again these patients suffer

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35   See, for example, Holm, ed. (2004) 120, 173.
36   Bakhtin, trans. Iwolsky, (1984) 19.

acute attacks of disgust, literally vomiting out horrors and obsessions which look surprisingly like the rotted residue of traditional carnival practices.[37]

In keeping with this view, I would argue that Crumb likewise perceives carnival as both a reflection of the "craziness"[38] of American culture and a condition of his own unconscious mind.

Perhaps most significantly, Crumb's statement that "a tawdry carnival of disassociated images kept sputtering to the surface" expresses the artist's belief in a direct, almost involuntary connection between the unconscious mind and the drawing. A sequence like "Head Comix" represents Crumb's mental imagery in a parade of fractured flashes, and he himself has described such comics as a "stream of consciousness".[39] Instead of seeking to impose an artificially smooth linear structure upon these images, Crumb takes advantage of the inherently fragmented nature of the comics form to supplement the instability of his narrative. Intuitive, even surreal leaps of logic are a function of the mind, drugged or otherwise: as I noted in my introduction, psychologists agree that the memory organises information in schematised segments, the connections between which are still not fully understood. In the hand of R. Crumb, such logical jumps also express the strangeness and incoherence of late 1960s America. Crucially, these two themes are supported by Crumb's choice of the comics form: a narrative medium that utilises ellipsis, demanding that the reader make connections between isolated segments of information.

Returning to Crumb's remarks on his "fuzzy" trip, it is also worth noting that he associates the apparent innocence of 1940s comics with something darker – this is not nostalgia but a "calling up", a resurrection of some distinctly sinister "forces" from the period of Crumb's early childhood. The "squinkies", according to Gershon Legman, were the "sex-horror" comics which he predicted would bear the brunt of the impending censorship drive. Curiously, Legman was no more worried about these comics than he was about murder mystery novels or "floppity-rabbit" cartoons: his *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship* draws attention to the pervasive

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37   Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) 174.
38   Gary Groth, interview with R. Crumb, in Milo George, ed. *The Comics Journal Library Vol. 3: R. Crumb* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2004) 24.
39   Zwigoff, dir. (1994)

violence in American culture in order to argue that the censorship of sexual content is hypocritical. Commenting on Disney's version of "The Three Little Pigs", for example, he objects that no one notices how the story allows children to indulge their aggressive fantasies through the displacement of violence: "…the wolf is papa, tricked out in animal falseface so he can be righteously beaten to death".[40] One can easily identify an affinity between Crumb's distorted nostalgic visions and Legman's somewhat histrionic argument: before the advent of popular culture analysis, both saw violent horror at a time when everyone else saw only cute cartoon animals and innocent escapism. It is hard to overstate the importance of children's comics and popular ideas about childhood on Crumb's early career. In their childhood and early teens both Robert Crumb and his elder brother Charles, with whom he collaborated on many of his earliest comics, were great consumers of Disney media. Charles was a particular fan, and Marty Pahls says that it was largely due to him that many of their first productions were modelled on *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*. Pahls notes that "Robert Crumb's first complete comic (1950, aged 7) was *Diffy in Shacktown*, using a mouse character and obviously inspired by Carl Barks", and goes on to claim that Crumb "turned out an issue of *Brombo the Panda* every month from 1952 to 1958" (1.vii). Of particular interest, in view of his longevity, is the early emergence of Fritz the Cat. A first prototype, the fairly realistic cat "Fred", appeared in *Cat Life* dated September 1959 – February 1960, when Crumb was just sixteen (Figure 5: left). Within two months the character had become Fritz the Cat, walking
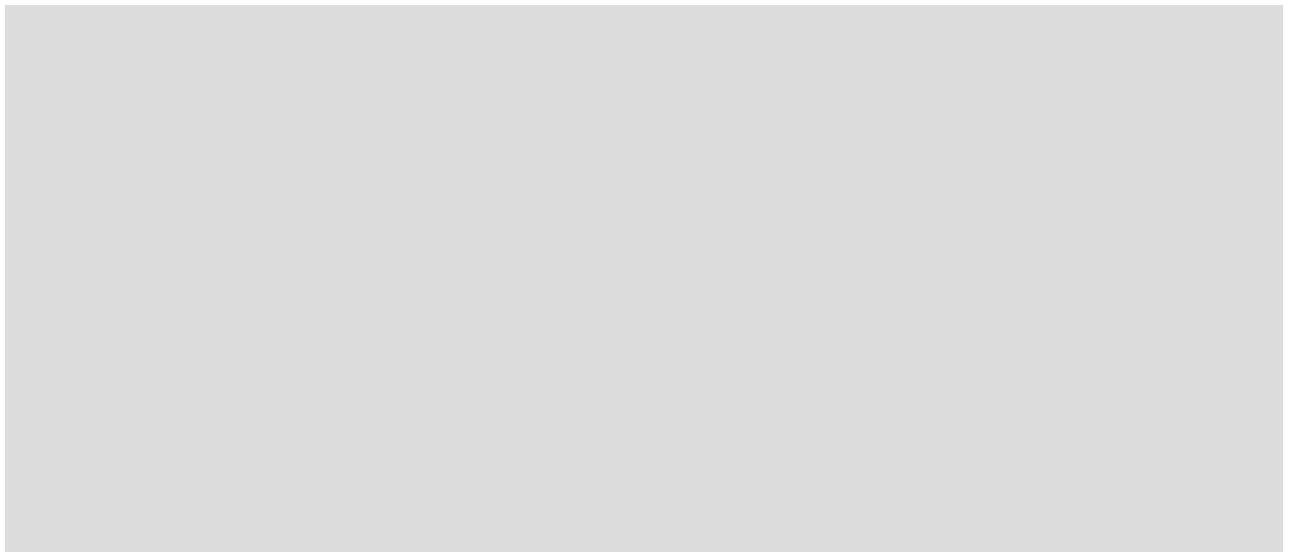
Figure 5.

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40   G. Legman, *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship* (New York: Breaking Point, 1949) 34.

upright, wearing clothes and starring in a Robin Hood story (Figure 5: right). This is still recognisably very early work, drawn in pencil on lined school-book paper, and although the bulk of the art is Robert's it still shows some involvement from Charles. By September 1962, the art work in *Fritz* is substantially more mature, but more significantly in narrative terms, Fritz himself is developing from a cute, naughty kitty into an unemployed, smart-talking womaniser. Writing on the prevalence of moral panics about youth at various points throughout the twentieth century, Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard argue:

> The public debates surrounding "youth" are important forums where new understandings about the past, present, and future of public life are encoded, articulated and contested. "Youth" become a metaphor for perceived social change and its projected consequences, and as such it is an enduring locus for displaced social anxieties.[41]

With characters like Fritz the Cat, Crumb attempts to reclaim the visual language of childhood and with it to critique adult social mores and values. As this preoccupation develops and continues in Crumb's mature work it becomes apparent that this is not just a personal rebellion rooted in humorous parody but a public act of defiance against the political hijacking of children's comics.

Crumb was attuned to the satirical possibilities of the animal comic from an early date, but much of the surrealism of his work was inherent in the Disney sources themselves. Writing on the influence of Carl Barks in underground comics, Donald Ault wrote:

> Barks' pivotal role in the emergence of Underground comics relates to the way Barks' stories involve the overlapping and interconstitution of the everyday and the fantastic – realistically grounded plots shooting off into absurd, frustrating, and even grotesque situations.[42]

It is true that Barks' comics, like so many children's stories from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to *Rupert Bear* (1920-) depend on surrealism. In "Land Beneath the Ground" (1956), for example, Uncle Scrooge, Donald and his three nephews encounter a society of brightly coloured underground creatures who move by

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41   Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard, eds. *Generations of Youth: Youth, Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998) 1.
42   Donald Ault, "Preludium: Crumb, Barks, and Noomin: Re-Considering the Aesthetics of Underground Comics" *ImageTexT* 1.2 (Winter 2004) <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_2/intro.shtml>
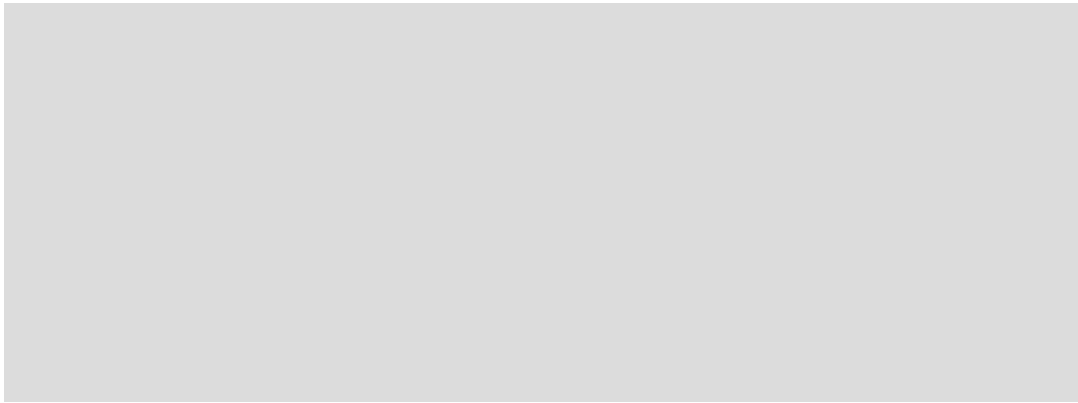
Figure 6.

rolling like balls, create earthquakes for fun and construct a moss-slide to hinder their visitors from leaving (Figure 6). There is a dreamlike feel to the story's logic, with its threading together of vaguely connected incidents in a bizarre, otherworldly landscape. Still, although Crumb seems to have been perfectly comfortable with the surrealism of these comics, he objected to their overly jolly tone. Speaking in 2007, Crumb identified horror in the sickly perfection of cultural materials addressed to children:

> My generation, we grew up in the 1950s, into the 60s, and the culture was always pushing on you as a kid happy, happy images and all that the stuff just like [sic]… your brain just soaked in these false images of happiness and fun and cute cartoon characters and underneath it all there's something, you know, sinister going on that the world could possibly end. We thought it might end in 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis. People really thought it would be the end of the world. So, then I took LSD and all that…[43]

Crumb's perception that US culture was *pushing* wholesome, happy images is not as far-fetched or paranoiac as it might seem. In *Babes in Tomorrowland*, Nicholas Sammond writes at length about discourses on child-rearing and the supposed effects of harmful media on children from the late 1920s to 1960s. He explains how Disney went to great lengths to define its products as actively beneficial in the development of a morally and emotionally healthy child. This included not only some sophisticated exercises in public relations but the production of socially instructive stories which enacted the individual's growth from humble origins to successful adulthood through hard work and moral conduct: *Pinocchio* (1940),

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[43]   Robert Crumb, audio tour at "Robert Crumb's Underground" exhibition. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. March 17 – July 8, 2007. Thanks to Leonard Rifas for this transcription.

Dumbo (1941), *Cinderella* (1950) and so on.[44]

These tales of wholesome development were themselves part of a larger pattern in twentieth-century US culture, which Jackson Lears traces through the history of American advertising. Lears argues that the story told by US advertising in the twentieth century is one of containment, a rhetoric of control over the formerly carnivalesque energies of the marketplace. He says that "twentieth-century advertising redefined the source of abundance from the fecund earth to the efficient factory", and further argues that this rhetoric of efficiency extended to ideas about personal identity, family relationships, child-rearing and the body.[45] Robert Crumb grew up and began producing comics during a period in which US spending on advertising was accelerating at an unprecedented rate, and so much of what Crumb hated about the culture in which he found himself seemed to be exemplified in its advertising: happy, beautiful faces peddling stories

Figure 7.

about the attainability of the American Dream. It is hardly surprising that parodies of advertisements are evident throughout Crumb's work, from the early 1960s to well into the 80s, nor that these parodies centre precisely on the anxieties that Lear identifies: clean teeth, regular bowel movements and a happy, smiling nuclear family. His "Hytone Comix" cover has Tommy Toilet advising, "Don't forget to wipe your ass folks!" (Figure 7), and one of his most famous works, "The family that lays together stays together" was satirising a slogan used by the Roman Catholic Family Rosary Crusade in the late 1960s (7.69, 5.91). He was not the only one to pick up on the advertisers' bright, chirpy tone: during this period *Mad* magazine was well known for its ad parodies, and in fact stopped taking advertising itself in 1955 on

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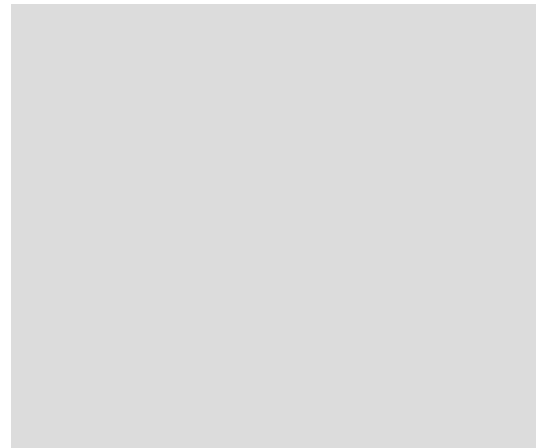
44   Nicholas Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930 - 1960* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005). For a Marxist reading of Disney see Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, trans. David Kunzle (New York: International General, 1991).
45   Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) 18.
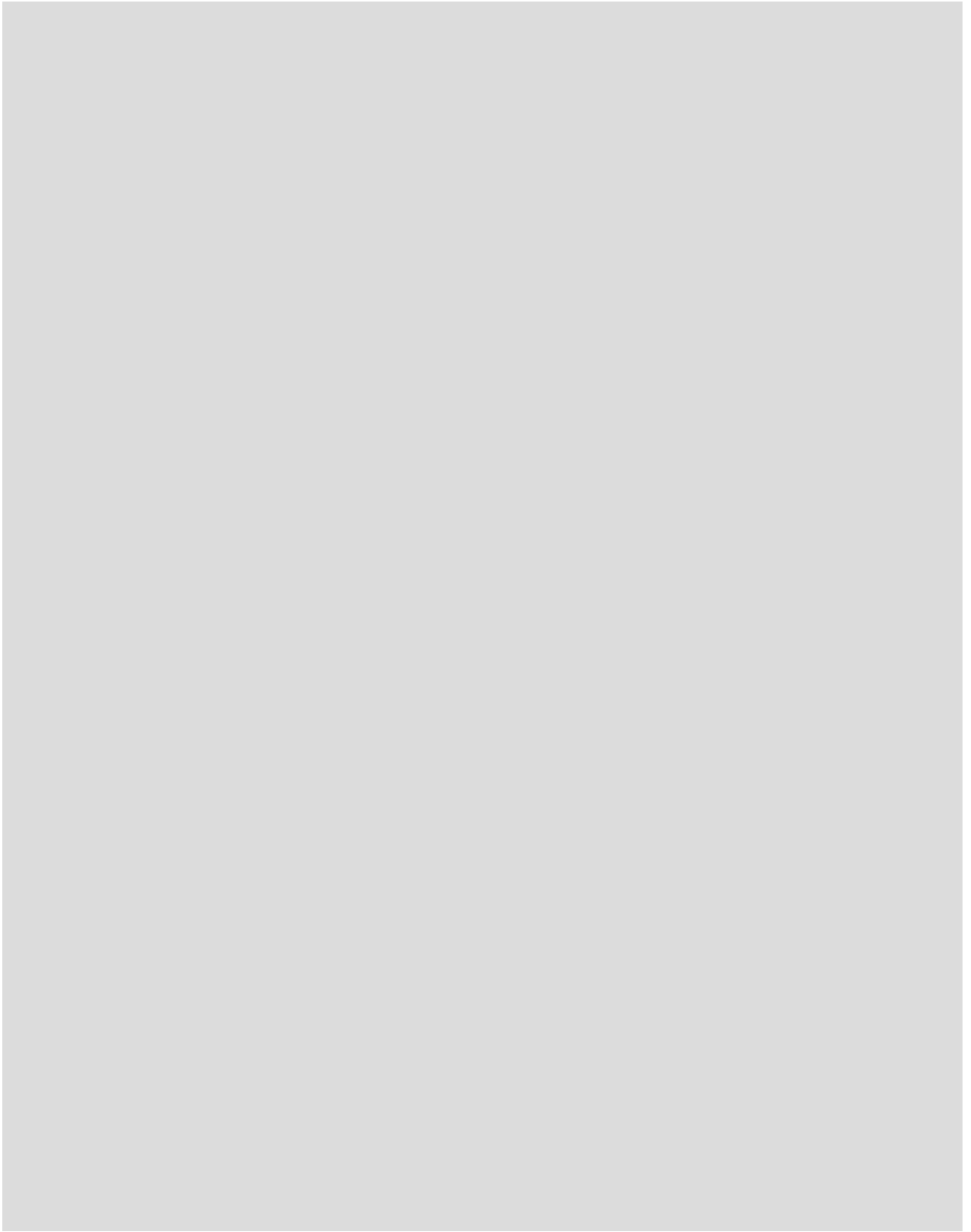
Figure 8.

the grounds that the magazine could not satirise and support advertisers at the same time.[46]

Glancing back at "Head Comix", one finds that references to advertising are everywhere. "Feels to me like *alkaloid*", "And now schlepped schloss gross floss" and even "I get my juices at the duices!!" borrow the form of ads without actually promoting anything in particular. One discerns in "Head Comix" something of the instability that Crumb saw in advertising: that too-happy, buoyant energy tipping over into hysteria. Crumb's advertising parodies lead back to Bakhtin, who argued that parody was a mechanism of the carnivalesque. In Crumb's hands this is exactly right, but parody was to remain an important mode in alternative comics for a number of different reasons. The parody we see in Crumb's ads bears only a distant relation to Dave Sim's parodies of fantasy comics, for example, or Alan Moore's rewriting of children's fiction in *Lost Girls*. Where Crumb's parodies speak a language of criticism, remarkably few later comics would use the device to such political ends.

I want to skip forward, briefly, to a later example of Crumb's advertising parodies, one which was intended as a genuine advertisement for Crumb's 1980s magazine, *Weirdo* (Figure 8). It is useful because not only does it appropriate the form of the advertisement to articulate a sense of profound dissatisfaction with the world in general, but it encapsulates some of the problems with modern masculine identity that run throughout Crumb's work. The bleak atmosphere of this ad in comparison to the chaotic energy of Crumb's earlier work (and indeed the *Zap* advertisement in Figure 1) is representative of the mood of his comics from the 1970s and 80s. Throughout this period his collaboration with his second wife Aline Kominsky and, later, Harvey Pekar, led him towards a greater realism and a sharper focus on questions of personal identity in a contemporary social environment. Crumb's early 70s comics are generally unpopular amongst his fans, and he himself has said that he dislikes much of his work from this period (9.vii). The optimism of counterculture's first phase, which Crumb had never really shared in the first place, had given way to a pervading sense of cynicism. Much of the energy of protest had subsided, leaving writers and artists like Crumb "sort of limply challenging the system", as his son Jesse put it (10.vii). The introspection of Crumb's later work therefore carries a distinct sense of despair about the possibility of engaging with

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46   See Maria Reidelbach, *Completely Mad: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine* (London: Boxtree, 1992) 50.

larger social and political events in any meaningful way, and by the mid 1980s, Crumb was citing such feelings of cynicism as the defining characteristic of his readership. Crumb's 1982 *Weirdo* advertisement uses precisely the mechanism of so many twentieth-century ads: it associates purchasing choices with the definition of personal identity. A sweating, dishevelled man, hunched in discomfort, stands amongst litter and dog turds, thinking, "This whole goddamn fucking planet has gone to shit!" The title asks, "Do you *hate* everything?" and a panel goes into further detail:

Are you constantly complaining about this, that and the other thing?
Are you frequently horrified by reality?
Do you find happy people intensely irritating?
Are you barely able to stand being alive? (14.52)

The solution, of course, is suggested by an unseen figure hidden around the corner, who whispers "pssst" and proffers a copy of *Weirdo* magazine. Selfhood, the ad says, is inseparable from criticism: your identity is defined, at least in part, by what you hate, what you reject in the world around you, and the choices and emotional states that might result from these positions.

The figure in the ad is not exactly a representation of Crumb himself, but it bears a number of similarities to the artist. Crumb has written hundreds of explicitly autobiographical strips, and in many of these he shows extreme self-consciousness about the problems of self-representation both in narrative and self-portraiture. In *Alternative Comics* Hatfield charts the development of a tradition of comics autobiography that "has tended to stress the abject, the seedy, the anti-heroic, and the just plain nasty".[47] He also tackles the general problem of truth in autobiography and, with reference to comics, the problems that arise from the act of objectifying oneself through a drawing. He analyses Daniel Clowes' "Just Another Day" (1993) which parodies the falseness of autobiography, and Crumb's "The Many Faces of R. Crumb" (1972), in which Crumb sets up multiple personae, all and none of them truly representative of the artist himself. Hatfield argues that by denying the possibility of truth in autobiography, Crumb, Clowes, the Hernandez brothers and other comics artists paradoxically assert the truthfulness of their narratives. As Hatfield puts it, "[a]rtifice and candor go hand in hand": he coins the term "ironic

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47   Hatfield (2005) 111.
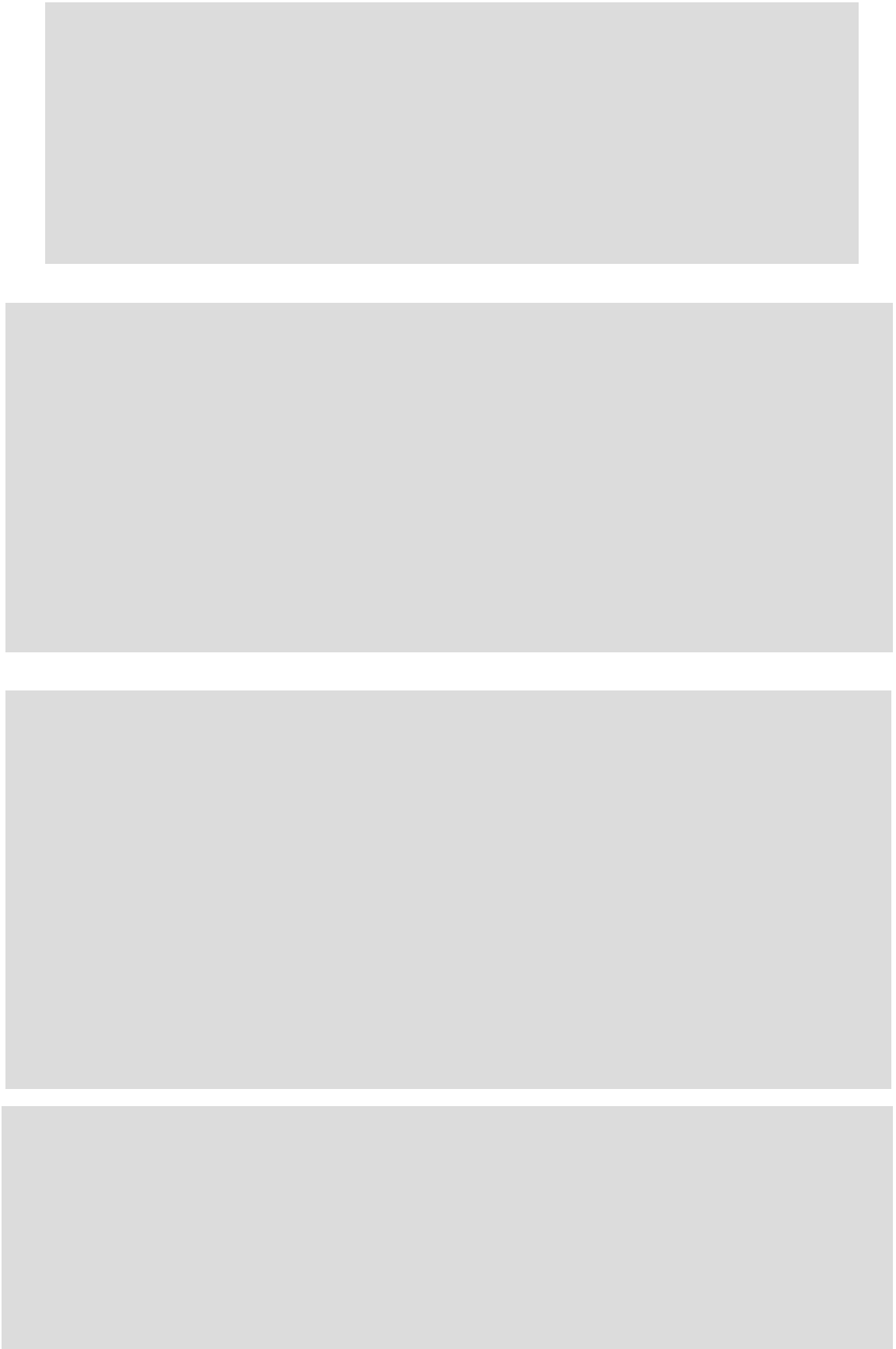
Figure 9. From the top: Mr Snoid and Schuman the Human; Whiteman; Mr Natural and Flakey Foont; Ol' Pooperoo.

authentication" to describe the comic which "makes a show of being honest by denying the very possibility of being honest".[48]

Hatfield's argument is excellent and I do not wish to go over the same ground here. What I want to suggest, however, is that in many ways Crumb's work can be considered an oblique form of self-representation even when it is not explicitly autobiographical. It does not matter whether the figure in the *Weirdo* ad is Crumb because as Hatfield points out, even the explicitly autobiographical strips are not really Crumb either. If, as he says, the truth is most strongly asserted by the proposition that truth is impossible, then it is arguably also the case that the most meaningful explorations of one's selfhood may be articulated by talking about someone else. Like dreamworks, his stories represent condensed and displaced versions of his semi-conscious fears and fantasies. As I have demonstrated, aspects of Crumb's mind and emblems of contemporary culture metamorphose into characters, personifications of his neuroses and emotional demons. The result is that the extreme confessional tone of Crumb's autobiographical comics seeps into the rest of his work. With this in mind, I want to look more closely at some of the male characters in Crumb's comics, with particular focus on the problems of modern masculinity and sexuality.

The theme of male identity has remained prominent from his earliest work to the present day. Almost all of Crumb's main protagonists are male – Fritz the Cat, Mr Natural, Flakey Foont, Mr Snoid, Ol' Pooperoo, Schuman the Human, Whiteman, and of course Crumb himself (Figure 9). Mark Estren notes that it is hard to imagine Crumb creating a fully rounded female character, but with the exception of the author's direct self-representations, none of Crumb's male figures are presented as fully rounded, realist, individual human beings either.[49] Instead they represent and often caricature aspects of masculine identity, playing out the problems encountered by individuals attempting to place themselves in a somewhat bewildering modern world. Similar issues are repeated in dozens of comics. Ol' Pooperoo, subtitled "The Cosmic Shit Shoveler", tries desperately to convince himself that he is lucky to have a job, but is so overwhelmed by the worthlessness of his lifestyle that he ends up drinking all day (4.31). Schuman the Human is constantly

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48   Hatfield (2005) 124-5.
49   Estren (1974) 130. He might have changed his mind had he been writing after Crumb's creation of Mode O'Day in 1983, a relatively realistic, if not exactly sympathetic, female character.

wallowing in existential angst (7.98), and Mr Natural ends up in a psychiatric institution (11.1-41). Mr Appropriate is so exasperatingly perfect, clean-living and environmentally friendly that his friends call him a "human bumper sticker" (12.86). No one is flawless, no one has answers or conforms to popular ideals of masculinity, and those who do are even more insufferable than those who fail.

When Crumb started out, he saw himself as one of a small handful of individuals publicly articulating their difficulties with the conventional construction of masculine identity. In retrospect, it is clear that Crumb's anxieties were part of a much wider problem endemic to white American youth culture in the 1950s and early 60s. As numerous critics have shown, the counterculture was very much a youth movement, dominated by students and college drop-outs. These individuals were determined to challenge the "classic masculinity of paterfamilias", whether that meant growing long hair and wearing colourful, androgynous clothes or embracing relationships in which immediate experience was more important than familial responsibility.[50] Yet as Kenneth Keniston argued at the time, the cultural self-doubt that these people articulated was present, albeit suppressed, in their parents' generation. Writing on the families of alienated students interviewed in his research, he remarked on the striking repetition of a familiar scenario:

> Both parents seem to have been frustrated and dissatisfied. The mother's talents and emotionality found little expression within her marriage; the father's idealism and youthful dreams were crushed by the realities of his adult life.[51]

Crumb's parents, Charles Sr. and Beatrice, were certainly frustrated and dissatisfied: as D. K. Holm notes, Charles was "a stern man who was disappointed that all his male children were 'sissies'", while Beatrice was addicted to diet pills and television.[52] In short, both in his personal history and wider social milieu, Robert Crumb was ideally placed to critique the ideals of masculinity in mid-twentieth-century US culture.

Born in 1943, Crumb reached adulthood during a period in which ideas about personal and social identity, including sexuality and race, were open to discussion in a way that had not been thought possible a decade before. White heterosexual masculinity, formerly the norm against which all else was judged

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50   Hodgson (2005) 314.
51   Kenneth Keniston, *Youth and Dissent: The Rise of a New Opposition* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 185.
52   D. K. Holm, *Robert Crumb* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2005) 32.

("both the positive and the neutral", as de Beauvoir put it)[53] suddenly represented an ontological void, a space which needed filling with new and exciting personal attributes. In a frank discussion of his tendency towards misogyny, Crumb pointed out that throughout his childhood, stereotypes about women were "constantly reinforced";[54] yet by the time he was thirty, the feminist movement was in full swing and Crumb's apparent misogyny seemed conspicuously anachronistic. I suggest that it is more helpful to see Crumb's representations of women as a manifestation of his anxieties about masculinity than to condemn him for his apparent sexism. The alleged misogyny in Crumb's work is, in any case, not as straightforward as some would like to make out. His female figures are invariably larger than their male counterparts, and often more powerful. They cannot be defined as a homogenous group: it is true that Crumb's comics feature numerous helpless, even headless female bodies being abused by male characters, but there are also plenty of tough, competent women stomping on weedy little men. The victimised ostrich in "What a World", for example, steps on her complacent male attackers, killing them instantly, yet despite having just escaped from serious danger, she regards them with little more than mild irritation: "Darn! Got my boots all icky!" (9.57). Likewise, his Sally Blubberbutt appeared in the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, declaring "Men! At best, they're pitiful!".[55] Finally, some of Crumb's 1980s comics, whilst artistically less interesting than his earlier work, modify his previous objectification of women: his collaborations with Aline Kominsky-Crumb are relatively even-handed in their representation of domestic life, relationships and parenting.

If Crumb's obsession with sexual power stems from fears of impotence and isolation, then his representations of women reflect his profound uncertainty about what it means to be a man. Feeling alienated and alone, Crumb wrote to Marty Pahls of his sense of disgust with modern tastes and values. He contemplated suicide but decided that the thought of oblivion was worse than the experience of suffering.[56] Unable to align himself with feminism, civil rights or any other minority movement, and unable to conform to his father's ideal of a masculinity defined by sporting
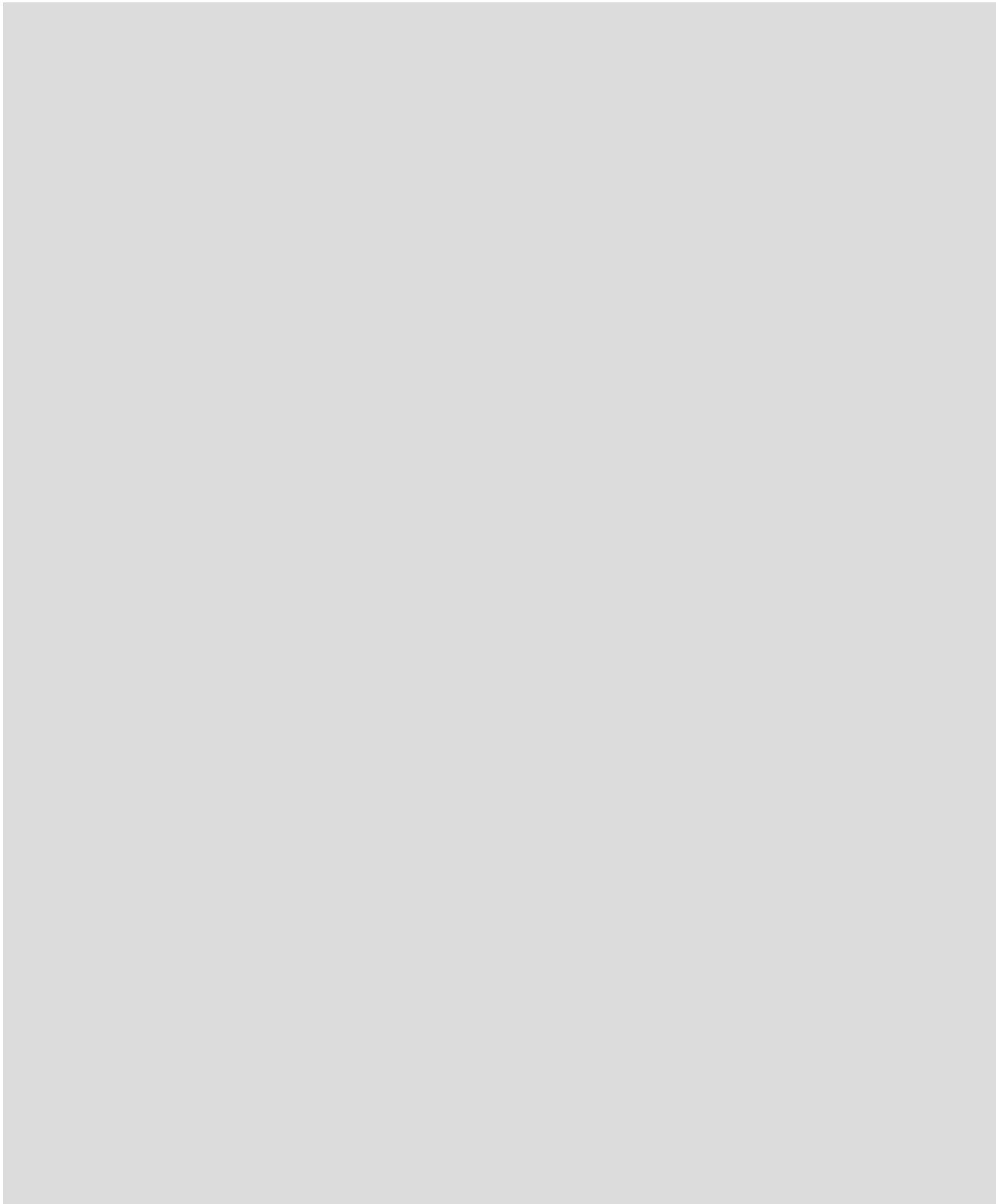
53   Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M.Parshley (1949; London: Vintage: 1997) 15.
54   George, ed. (2004) 44.
55   David Huxley, *Nasty Tales: Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n' Roll and Violence in the British Underground* (Manchester: Critical Vision: 2001) 29.
56   Thompson, ed. (1998) 207.

Figure 10a.

Figure 10b.

prowess, Crumb struggled to place and define himself. In many ways, Crumb found himself almost as out of place amongst San Francisco hippies as he had been in mainstream culture, and the result is that his work exhibits a strange mobility of perspective, a sense of drifting from insider to outsider over the course of a single page. His authorial voice is elusive, shifting, decentered. It is not always easy, in reading Crumb's work, to differentiate between the author's private subjectivity, his projections onto others and his representations of mainstream and alternative U.S. culture. In order to look more closely at this unstable web with particular reference to male-female relationships, I wish to turn to a story from September/October 1968, "Fritz the No-Good" (5.35-50) (Figure 10a-b).

Fritz the Cat is one of Crumb's most well-known characters, partly thanks to Ralph Bakshi's widely reviled film, and as I noted above he is also one of Crumb's oldest figures. Fritz is a profoundly ambivalent character: on the one hand, he represents a fantasy alter-ego for Crumb, a confident, articulate charmer, always surrounded by women and falling in and out of adventures; on the other, he is selfish, arrogant, and often in serious trouble. In this particular episode, he goes to the welfare office, gets thrown out of home by his wife, sleeps with an ex-girlfriend, joins a group of revolutionaries, participates in a particularly horrific gang-rape, is arrested for attempting to blow up a bridge, and gets bailed out by his two devoted women.

The first question is so obvious that it is easy to miss: why a cat? Why animals rather than people? The use of animal figures in both prose fiction and comics has a long and complex history, and it is worth pausing for a moment to examine the workings of this genre and to consider what Crumb does with it. Commenting on the enduring popularity of the Francophone *bande dessinée animaliere*, Thierry Groensteen conjectures:

> The *bd animaliere* has seen this expansion because it is situated at the confluence of two traditions: that of children's literature on the one hand and that of satire and fable on the other.[57]

The blending of half-innocent childhood nostalgia with a tradition of sharp social critique is undoubtedly a key factor in the talking animal comic. As I discussed

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57   Thierry Groensteen cited in Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, identity and representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) 131. (Baker's translation)

above, parodying the forms and conventions of children's animal comics was one of the most important techniques of Crumb's early work. *Animal Farm* was published in 1945 and it would have been almost impossible for Crumb to have been unaware of it by the late 1950s. The action of "Fritz the No-Good" is adult throughout and ultimately vicious, but the shapes are those of children's cartoons: fluffy bunnies and cute cats. The bouncing, happy shapes of female animals' cartoon bodies become, in Crumb's version, bulbous and grotesquely sexual. Surprisingly few critics have paid close attention to Crumb's drawing style. In his history of the British underground press, David Huxley notes a number of early twentieth-century influences:

> Crumb's drawing technique stems from a loose drawing style used by several major newspaper strip cartoonists from the nineteen-tens to the nineteen-thirties. Although open to a wide range of personal variations this style links the work of George Herriman, Bud Fisher, Rube Goldberg, E.C.Segar, Fred Opper and others.[58]

This is undoubtedly true of Crumb's shading and varying thickness of line, but the *shapes* of his characters are taken not from these classic cartoonists but the children's comics drawn by Carl Barks, Walt Kelly, Floyd Gottfredson and others. Indeed, it is the confluence of these styles – the combination of fluid lines and dark hatching with Fritz's wide eyes and rounded, kitten-like paws that defines Crumb's appropriation of the animal form.

Crumb's adoption of the talking-animal convention is not straightforwardly parodic because this genre is situated not at a smooth confluence of traditions but in an area of rather more dynamic tension. Much has been made of a more recent animal comic, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1992), in which the author uses the cat-and-mouse schema to literalise the Nazis' conviction that Jews were less than human. As Steve Baker points out, the animal metaphor is deliberately strained in this comic. He argues:

> …the visual image of the animal, however minimal or superficial the degree of its 'animality', invariably works as a Derridean supplement to the narrative. It is apparently exterior to that narrative, but it disturbs the logic and consistency of the whole. It has the effect of *bringing to light* the disruptive potential of the story's animal content. It limits the extent to which the narrative can patrol and control its own boundaries.[59]

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58   Huxley (2001) 17-18.
59   Baker (1993) 139.

In other words, at its most sophisticated, the convention of anthropomorphism works by almost-not-working, as it destabilises the readers' perceptions of the protagonists' identities. Crumb lacks Spiegelman's clear didactic purpose, and his use of animal figures is more difficult to define, but "Fritz the No-Good" is a difficult and morally unstable story in which Crumb uses animal identities to delineate social and ethnic boundaries, to highlight difference and otherness.

In his choice of animal identities for his characters, Crumb often literalises the stereotypes hidden in American English. The word "cat" as popular slang for "man" has survived less well than its counterpart "chick", but it is no surprise that Crumb's aggressive heterosexual protagonist is a feline male. In a fairly blatant parody of the racist caricature Jim Crow, Crumb generally represents black figures as crows. Policemen are often, though not always, pigs. In "Fritz the No-Good", the rape victim, Harriet, is shown to be irritating and unattractive partly through Crumb's decision to represent her as a horse. Characters occasionally acknowledge and even joke about their own animal identity and that of others: Heinz tells Fritz to ask Winston "if she's got a friend who likes pork sausage" (5.40), while Fritz accurately refers to his ex-girlfriend Winston as a "bitch", and says to his pig friend Heinz, "I haven't seen you in a hog's age" (5.38-9). By stressing the animal metaphors embedded in the English language, Crumb places his animal protagonists in a hazy no-man's-land between fable and reality. He establishes a space in which animal metaphors define individuals just as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, physical attractiveness and income bracket define social status in modern America.

Sammond notes that Disney's nature films, animation and comic books of this period had a marked tendency to naturalise gender:

> Like the child-rearing literature of the day… the illumination of natural gender roles played a significant part in each Disney nature film, as well as in its public relations. Like their suburban human counterparts, Disney's animals entered into good-natured and innocent romantic play almost from birth, frolicking suggestively before settling down to a preordained domesticity.[60]

By adopting an animal metaphor for a story that begins in a dysfunctional household, "Fritz the No-Good" is not just satirising the hypocrisy of revolutionaries but attacking the popular model of natural, domestic heterosexuality. Fritz is a

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60   Sammond (2005) 285.

useless husband and father, refusing to engage with responsibilities or even to think rationally about his life. When Winston asks him why he got married he says, "It seemed like a good idea at th'time" (5.42). In conversation with his wife, he is illogical and incoherent, resorting to bullish commands ("Suck my dick!") and brainless remarks about his own intoxication ("Man oh man am I stoned!") (5.37-8) in order to evade serious discussion. Fritz's remarks on the state of his own existence often double as aphorisms on the problems of modern life in general. Statements like "I've been walking the streets for hours… it's hard being on your own" (5.38) are addressed to no one in particular and appear to be direct statements to the reader. On meeting his friend Fuz, his comment encapsulates the apathy of the latter days of counterculture: "Here we are on the brink of apocalypse, the eve of deestruction [sic], so t'speak, an' I can't think of anything to do!!" (5.43) There is clearly an element of autobiography in all this. "Fritz the No-Good" was written towards the end of 1968, at which point Crumb was living apart from his first wife, Dana. Their son Jesse was a year old – just a little older than Fritz's baby in the comic. For several years Crumb had been dissatisfied with his marriage but lacked the initiative to end it, while his increasing fame ensured him some success with other women (4.vii-xiv, 5.vii-viii). Like Fritz, he was indecisive, uncertain and apparently directionless. He teetered between semi-conventional domesticity and the hippy lifestyles of San Francisco, never entirely comfortable in either environment.

As my analysis of "Head Comix" demonstrated, Crumb has always been keen to criticise undue seriousness and self-importance in those who seek, or claim to have found concrete answers. Mr Natural, for example, veers between genuine insight and hard-nosed cynicism, teasing his credulous disciple Flakey Foont whilst also occasionally showing real compassion. Likewise political groups in Crumb's comics are composed of disparate individuals whose ideologies form only a thin veneer on otherwise flawed personalities. In "Fritz the No-Good", one of the main targets of Crumb's satire is the group of revolutionaries. One of their number, Spick, drops fashionable buzzwords and says of Fritz, "Another cast-off of the bourgeoisie! Another morally bankrupt sedentary…Well, what's the state of his political consciousness?" (5.44, Crumb's ellipsis). As if to demonstrate the revolutionaries' own moral bankruptcy, Crumb shows them tying up their only female member,

torturing her, then falling back into conversation as Fritz rapes her (Figure 10a-b). When it emerges that they have some time to kill, they push Fritz out of the way and scramble to take their turns in "riding" Harriet the horse.

The appalling cruelty of this rape is one of the reasons I have chosen to examine this particular comic. Many refuse to accept Crumb's claim that sexual violence is part of the collective unconscious of modern America, and he has often been accused of producing pornography in the guise of satire. Deirdre English, the former editor of *Mother Jones* magazine, appears in Terry Zwigoff's film criticising Crumb's "Joe Blow" cartoon:

> On the one hand, it's a satire of the 1950s, the healthy façade of the American family, and it kind of exposes the sickness under the surface. But at the same time you sense that Crumb is getting off on it himself in some other way, and on another level it's an orgy, it's a self-indulgent orgy… I think this theme in his work is omnipresent. It's part of an arrested juvenile vision.[61]

English's argument is far more cogent than some critiques of the sexual material in Crumb's comics, and in many respects I endorse her readings of comics like "Joe Blow" if not the conclusions she draws from them.[62] Her phrase "arrested juvenile vision" is, I think, more accurate than she realises, since as I have been arguing, the violence of Crumb's comics derives partly from a perception of the dishonesty of children's media which deny the horrors of the twentieth century. However, I would question her implicit assumption that every sexual encounter in a Crumb comic performs more or less the same function. Crumb could very easily have presented the rape scene in "Fritz the No-Good" as he had presented similar sexual encounters elsewhere – funny, farcical and unreal. One could cite dozens of stories in which Crumb presents sexual violence as a form of carnivalesque hilarity.[63] However, the sexual violence in "Fritz the No-Good" is particularly shocking and unusually real. Ira, who turns out to be a police informer, says, "I wanna carve my initials on her tits", while Fuz, the victim's boyfriend, says that he wants to "kick her big ol' teeth down her throat" and tells her, "You don't deserve to live!" (5.45). Figures and speech balloons compete for space and break the edges of every panel, making

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61   Deirdre English, in Zwigoff, dir. (1994).
62   Her analysis of Crumb's supposedly racist comics is less convincing. For a response to accusations of racism in Crumb's work, see Rifas (2004).
63   Examples are so numerous that the following selection is fairly arbitrary: "The Simp and the Gimp" (6.134), "Pud" (7.1), "Pro-Junior" (7.32), "Eggs Ackley in 'Eggs Escapes'" (8.44).

the protagonists appear to topple off the page towards the reader, and disrupting the structure of the page as the characters abandon their self-control. Crumb's representation of the rape is conspicuous in its focus on aggression over anatomical detail. Many of the comics Crumb produced around this period are extremely explicit, with graphic close-ups of the protagonists' genitalia.[64] Later versions of "Fritz the Cat" likewise include Crumb's trademark features of contorted bodies and explicit sexual detail.[65] Here, however, the protagonists' intense anger is emphasised more clearly than their physical form. It appears, in other words, that Crumb is using the revolutionaries' sexual violence as a marker of their hypocrisy.

There is just one problem with this reading. The rape scene is quite clearly one of horrific violence, yet there are two frames in which the victim's response can be interpreted as an expression of pleasure. It is significant that from the start of the assault we never see Harriet's eyes, with the result that her facial expression is extremely difficult to decipher. Her identity is almost completely erased, yet its absence creates a conspicuous gap in the narrative. Towards the end of the assault, Harriet says, "Oohhh… you cat… what're you doin… moan… quiver", a string of utterances that read more like sexual enjoyment than defeated exhaustion. In the following panel, the scale of Harriet's speech implies orgasm rather than screams of pain: the first "Ohhh!" is the largest, and the lettering decreases in size down to a final whimper of "Ah…". In this panel, Fuz, Spick and Ira look on with an expression of shock, apparently surprised and slightly appalled at Harriet's change of disposition. In these final panels, Crumb appears to change his mind and attempt to un-make the horror he has created by condemning the victim as harshly as the perpetrators. Of course, it is too late: Harriet's response, however one decides to read it, cannot soften the reader's perception of her attackers. Nonetheless, one thing is clear: Crumb is not "getting off" on this one, and neither are we, as readers, invited to do so. By refusing to place Fritz and the revolutionaries within the framework of a farce tradition, Crumb forces the reader to judge them in accordance with real life standards of behaviour, and any reader who might be tempted to derive sexual pleasure from the rape scene is placed in a very uncomfortable position.

It is very easy to cherry-pick examples of Crumb's work to prove one point

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64   See, for example, "The Phonus Balonus Blues" (5. 66) (September 1968), "Eggs Ackley among the Vulture Demonesses" (6.8-22) (June 1969) and "All Meat Comics" (6.28-30) (June 1969).
65   See, for example, "Fritz the Cat 'Superstar'" (8.129ff).

or another, and many critics have done just that in their efforts to condemn or acquit Crumb of charges of racism, sexism, obscenity and so forth. Harder, but more valuable, is the task of examining the interplay between a number of Crumb's ambivalent, often contradictory poses and positions. I have suggested that in many ways all of Crumb's work can be interpreted as a form of displaced autobiography, and in this sense "Fritz the No-Good" is a confession of the Fritz-like impulses in Crumb himself: the aversion to domestic life, the predisposition towards sexual violence, the tendency to hang around with people who spout hypocritical rubbish. As just one of many thousands of stories it is only a tiny fragment of personal truth, but it is perhaps no less truthful than the representations of self to which we are accustomed in men's autobiographies: "[s]tories of energetic activity in the public domain, tales of playful, boyhood 'scrapes', sporting success, fights, the first sexual encounter…"[66]

In writing about himself – his relationships, his neuroses, his sexual fantasies and so on – Crumb started a trend which spread throughout British and American comics. Numerous critics, notably Hatfield, have described the tradition of autobiography and semi-autobiography that emerged in the wake of Crumb's rich, vivid, outrageous work. As my analysis of Lynda Barry, Julie Doucet and Chris Ware's comics will show, Crumb has been nothing if not influential. For the first time, selfhood, and the question of how the self is formed and sustained in relation to an individual's culture and surroundings, became the central preoccupation of alternative comics writers. All Crumb's carnival extravagance, his parodies of advertising and other cultural forms, his obsessions with gender, sexuality, race and childhood all ultimately lead back to basic, fundamental questions: who am I and how am I to live in a world that I perceive to be insane? Having catalysed a revolution in comics publishing, Crumb was followed by a steady stream of writers and artists asking very similar questions, in a tradition that has lasted for forty years. The comic book form has become a popular but peculiar vehicle for the examination of personal identity, loaded with technical idiosyncrasies and a mess of historical baggage. The greatest legacy of Crumb was not just the realisation that the comic book form could be used to tell stories to adults, but the understanding that its enduring association with childhood was more a valuable anchor than an awkward restraint.

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66   David Jackson, *Unmasking Masculinity: A Critical Autobiography* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 4.

CHAPTER TWO

The Aardvark Hero: Dave Sim's *Cerebus*

A number of threads have emerged in my analysis of R. Crumb that I will continue to follow through my reading of Dave Sim's *Cerebus*. Both creators share a preoccupation with male identity, a desire to claim and validate the position of the outsider, and crucially, a belief that the form and conventions of the comic book are of particular value to the expression of this identity. Beyond these similarities, however, there are also significant differences in these writers' approaches to the expression of selfhood, and in the shape that their work has taken.

This chapter will be divided into two sections. I will begin by outlining the circumstances of *Cerebus*' publication, which are extraordinary in their own right, and will then proceed with a brief overview of the plot and some of its main themes, focusing in particular on the way in which the comic has come to act as a mouthpiece for Sim's unorthodox opinions. The second part of this chapter will focus on technical details in a close reading of one section of *Cerebus*. My analysis will centre primarily on those moments when Cerebus is drugged, confused, conflicted, hallucinating or otherwise unreliable. These sections are of particular importance because Sim's belief in the inauthenticity of dominant western ideology, and its roots in fallible human perceptions, are central tenets of his personal philosophy. For thirty years Sim has deliberately set himself apart from Canadian society, espousing views that even his most loyal readers often find bizarre or offensive. As I will argue, the comic book form is integral to Sim's project for several reasons, including its technical aptitude for describing unreliable perceptions, its conventions of serial publication, and its place within a fan community that shares Sim's interests in the social exclusion and identity struggles of white males.

Cerebus is a daunting comic, if only by virtue of its scale: Sim proudly describes it as "the longest sustained narrative in human history".[1] It runs to around six thousand pages, now collected in sixteen volumes. Dave Sim started work on the comic in

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1   Tasha Robinson, "Interview: Dave Sim". *The Onion A.V. Club*. March 31st, 2004. <http://www. avclub.com/content/node/22954>

December 1977 and published the final issue, #300, in April 2004.[2] From issue #65 (1985) onwards, much of the background artwork was produced by a second illustrator, Gerhard, but the plot, script and visual appearance of the whole remained very much Sim's own. Having produced little of note throughout the early part of his career, Sim worked more or less exclusively on this single title for twenty-six years, and self-published it through his own company, Aardvark-Vanaheim.[3]

Cerebus the Aardvark began as a parody of Conan the Barbarian, which in the 1970s was drawn by Barry Windsor-Smith and published by Marvel. Cerebus begins as a barbarian mercenary, wandering a pseudo-medieval world engaging in a series of fights and adventures. Eventually settling in the city-state of Palnu, he is placed in charge of security forces (under the official title of "Kitchen Staff Supervisor") and progresses to prime minister then pope in a 1700-page story arc which focuses on the dynamics of political power. He meets, loves and eventually loses a woman, Jaka. After the collapse of Cerebus' brutal regime, he lives through a long period in which the political power is held by extremist feminists, "Cirinists". He experiences a number of ascensions into space, where he converses with a supernatural entity, the Judge, a fellow aardvark, Suenteus Po, and his creator, Dave. He drinks heavily, works in a bar, gets lost in landscapes of his own mind, travels, starts his own religion, and dies alone in extreme old age.[4] This simplified summary belies the fact that the plot of Cerebus is extremely elaborate. Charting the life of its protagonist from the age of twenty-six to his death, the story is set in an imaginary medieval society, although the anachronisms are so numerous as to render the date meaningless. Fifteenth-century Estarcion is a historical no-man's land, with glass windows, orange juice, the invention of the automatic crossbow and costumes from any number of historical periods. Cerebus borrows characters not only from other

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2   On the assumption that future comics scholars will generally be working from the collected editions, I will generally refer to collections rather than single issues. However, much fan-authored criticism refers to individual issues. See <http://www.cerebusfangirl.com/conversion.html> for conversion tables.

3   Those who are interested in Dave Sim's pre-Cerebus work can find it at Jeff Tundis' site <www.artofdavesim.com>, although unfortunately not all of it is dated. It comprises an eclectic mix of fantasy, sci-fi, horror and adventure, and shows some of the technical sophistication found in Cerebus.

4   Numerous critics have attempted to summarise Cerebus' labyrinthine plot. I recommend the chapter on Dave Sim in Douglas Wolk's Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean (New York: Da Capo Press, 2007). Readers who require a more detailed synopsis are advised to follow the links from Margaret Liss's site, <http://www.cerebusfangirl.com/>. This excellent site is currently the best gateway to online Cerebus resources.

comics for the sake of parody (Red Sophia, Elrod, Artemis and so on) but also from nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and culture (Ernest Hemingway, F Scott Fitzgerald, Oscar Wilde, Groucho Marx) for less readily definable purposes. The author's opinions and purposes for his text have changed dramatically throughout the period of writing, with the result that *Cerebus* is notoriously difficult to pin down as a unified whole.

Sim's decision to self-publish his comic has had an incalculable effect on the narrative of *Cerebus*. In my discussion of Crumb's early work I stressed the importance of self-publishing as a means of liberation from the strictures of the Comics Code, but beyond this, Crumb was never particularly committed to self-publishing as an end in itself. His work appeared not only in comic book form but alongside prose and other art work in all manner of underground publications like the *East Village Other* and *Oz*. For Dave Sim, however, self-publishing has always been central to his project, and he has continued to publish in this manner even when other options have become available.[5] This may come as a surprise to readers familiar with the prose fiction market, where self-publishing is frequently seen as a mark of desperation and little better than vanity publishing. In alternative comics, however, self-publishing is widely considered to be a perfectly acceptable practice, and as I will demonstrate in my reading of Julie Doucet's work, many vibrant subcultures have grown up around self-published comics and fanzines since the 1970s.

Nevertheless, Sim does not quite fit the stereotype of the comics self-publisher. Although Sim self-published *Cerebus*, he always paid for professional printing (at Preney Print and Litho in Ontario), and he never deviated from the conventions of monthly publication and standard format established by the mainstream publishers. Unlike most producers of small press, self-published comics and fanzines, Sim ran Aardvark Vanaheim as a full time business, and at its height *Cerebus* had a circulation of 37000 copies.[6] For a short period, Aardvark Vanaheim also published works by other comics artists such as Arn Saba's *Neil the*

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5   In the late 1980s DC Comics offered Sim $100000 for *Cerebus*. See Jamie Coville, "Dave Sim Interview". *Collector Times* 10.4 (July 2005). <http://www.collectortimes.com/2005_07/ Clubhouse.html>
6   For a while Sim published circulation figures inside each issue. The peak was issue #100 (1987).

Horse and William Messner Loebs' *Journey* from 1983-84.[7] The late 1970s was a time of increasing cross-fertilisation between mainstream and underground comics, and *Cerebus* was one of a number of "ground level" comics – that is, independent comics influenced by the underground but thematically and ideologically closer to the mainstream – being published in this period. 1978 saw not only the earliest issues of *Cerebus* but the beginning of Wendy and Richard Pini's *Elfquest*, a similarly long-running, self-published, high fantasy title with clear links to the underground, most notably in terms of its sexual content.[8] Sim's devotion to self-publishing is not simply a historical curiosity but central to the development of *Cerebus*, because, as Tim Blackmore points out, "The positioning of the individual against those around him is *Cerebus*'s leitmotif."[9] Indeed, *Reads (Book 9)* is, in part, a lengthy discourse on the importance of self-publishing. As the plot developed throughout the 1980s and 90s, Sim's worldview became increasingly at odds with the dominant ideology in the society around him, particularly regarding questions of gender and sexuality. Consequently, freedom from editorial constraints on his diffuse, polemical narrative became increasingly important.

Sim's most pervasive themes are power and gender. After a thousand or so pages of male-dominated fighting and politics, Sim introduces two groups of radical feminists who subsequently assume political power for much of the series. The Cirinists, led by Cirin (or Serna, as it later turns out), privilege mothers, and favour a protective nanny-state; the Kevillists, led by Astoria, represent daughters, and emphasise freedom (particularly abortion). The conflict between these two groups, and between them and their male opponents (or victims, since they meet with no serious opposition) occupies a central position in *Cerebus*, and therefore much of my analysis will focus on the way in which *Cerebus*' conception of gender affects its representation of selfhood.

Sim claims to have plotted the main storyline in 1979, when he first decided that *Cerebus* would run to three hundred issues, but given that the series charts Sim's changing ideology over twenty-six years, it is evident that much extraneous

7   John Bell, ed. *Canuck Comics: A Guide to Comic Books Published in Canada* (Montreal: Matrix, 1986) 42-3.
8   On *Elfquest*'s adult content, see, for example, Michael Dean, "West Virginia man jailed for selling *Elfquest*". *The Comics Journal* 215. (August 1999) 11.
9   Tim Blackmore, "Cerebus: From Aardvark to Vanaheim, Reaching for Creative Heaven in Dave Sim's Hellish World." *Canadian Children's Literature* 71 (1993) 57.

detail was added as the narrative progressed. Sim's various essays, prose segments of comics, introductions, annotations and interviews describe an increasingly obscure and elaborate philosophy. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, this philosophy focused primarily on Sim's objections to feminism. Whilst Margaret Liss argues that readers who dislike Sim's opinions should simply overlook his prose commentaries, it is undoubtedly true that the more spectacularly misogynist episodes of *Cerebus* (most notably issue #186) alienated a lot of readers and conditioned subsequent responses to the comic.[10] In the late 1990s, Sim started to formulate his own religion, a fusion of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.[11] As a result, the final two books of *Cerebus* incorporate a good deal of religious language and philosophy. In *Latter Days (Book 15)* Cerebus meets three men who consider him to be the prophet of a new religion inspired by the writings of Jaka's ex-husband, Rick, and much of this volume is taken up with Cerebus' commentary on the Torah. Given that this philosophical discourse culminates in Sim's claim to have "possibly discovered the Unified Theory that eluded Einstein all of his life", it is hardly surprising that many readers find it fairly incomprehensible.[12] Full engagement with such theories is beyond the scope of this chapter, but one cannot ignore the fact that *Cerebus*' narrative of heroic masculinity is supported by an ideology that explicitly establishes the "Male Light" against a "Female Void", and claims that women are "emotion-based beings" largely incapable of rational thought. As Sim tells it, feminine, emotion-based thinking is largely unchallenged in all areas of modern western discourse, and it is responsible for a number of social ills including overpopulation, corporate culture and the inadequacies of modern politicians. In particular, his use of the term "Merged Void" for heterosexual couples describes his contempt for the influence of women on their male partners: for Sim, male solitude

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10   Margaret Liss, "A Woman of Cerebus, or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Aardvark" *Ninth Art*, 11th May 2001. <http://www.ninthart.com/display.php?article=10> Whilst it is impossible to gauge the long-term effects of Sim's polemics on the readership of *Cerebus*, some argued that the misogynist rant of issue #186 was a publicity stunt and that Sim actually picked up more readers, who wanted to see what all the fuss was about. See, for example, Kelly Rothenberg's article "Cerebus: An Aardvark on the Edge". *Americana* 2.1 (Spring 2003) <http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2003/rothenberg.htm>
11   See Dave Sim, introduction to *The Last Day (Book 16)* (2004). One can see Sim's beliefs still in the process of formation in his correspondence with Alan Moore, published in *Cerebus* 217-20 (1997) and reprinted in smoky man (ed.) *Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman* (Leigh-on-Sea: Abiogenesis Press, 2003) 307-45.
12   Sim, introduction to *The Last Day (Book 16)* (2004).

is the only acceptable option.[13]

It is perhaps at this point that one should acknowledge the questions which have been raised about Sim's mental health. Sim was diagnosed as borderline schizophrenic when he was hospitalised in 1979. It was around this time that he conceived the entire storyline for *Cerebus*, and it was a period in which he was taking a lot of LSD. However, many critics argue that his mental instability has affected the comic more seriously as *Cerebus* has progressed. Andrew Rilstone, author of a website which has reproduced some of Sim's more off-the-wall statements in order to question the author's sanity, wrote in 2004:

> I've been very seriously considering removing the various Sim-related documents from this site… Suddenly, asking "is Dave mad?" stops feeling like an amusing rhetorical question. It starts feeling as if I am poking fun at a seriously poorly man. Having gone this far I decided to hang on for the last three issues. Please believe that it is more in sorrow than in anger.[14]

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to write off Sim's later work as schizophrenic rambling. I would argue that it is in the later books, in which Sim is at his most unhinged, that his use of the comics form is at its most exciting. Other critics have said much the same thing: Douglas Wolk compared *Cerebus* to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and said that "as *Cerebus* gets sludgier and meaner, Sim gets better as a cartoonist", while Joost Pollman has compared *Rick's Story (Book 12)* to "a piano concerto by Shostakovitch".[15] As I will demonstrate, these later books fuse verbal and visual, image and "sound", content and structure with an inventiveness hitherto almost unknown in comics.

I would also like to draw attention to the word "borderline" in Sim's diagnosis, because I suggest that this border, this unstable ground between sanity and insanity (however one chooses to define them) may be a fruitful space in which to examine late modern subjectivity. Several psychoanalysts have suggested that to attempt to cure schizophrenia is to impose a harmfully rigid social norm on individuals

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13   Issue 186 is collected in *Reads (Book 9)* 227-46. See also Sim's longer anti-feminist essay, "Tangents" *Cerebus* 265 (April 2001). This is not reprinted in the collected edition, *Form and Void (Book 14)*, but can be found at *The Comics Journal* website, <http://www.tcj.com/232/tangent0.html>

14   Andrew Rilstone. *Dave-watch*. <http://www.aslan.demon.co.uk/Davewatch.htm> 9th April 2004. *Internet Archive*. <http://web.archive.org/web/20040409095451/http://www.aslan.demon.co.uk/Davewatch.htm>

15   Wolk (2007) 301; Pollman, "Shaping Sounds in Comics" *International Journal of Comic Art (IJOCA)* 3.1 (2001) 20.

who enact a radical destabilisation of identity and language. Janis Hunter Jenkins argues that schizophrenic people offer valuable insights into processes shared by most humans, and claims that "people afflicted with schizophrenia are just like everyone else, only more so".[16] Her reading owes much to the mid-twentieth-century anti-psychiatry movement including writers like Thomas Szatz and R. D. Laing. Szatz famously claimed the very concept of schizophrenia to be a form of social control, whilst Laing argued that schizophrenia could be understood as an existential response to a hostile world, less a disease than a mode of being and communicating. For Laing, schizophrenia goes to the core of an individual's identity: "[t]he patient has not 'got' schizophrenia. He is schizophrenic."[17] In keeping with this view, Sim scorned his wife and mother's suggestions of medical help, choosing divorce and a solitary lifestyle over social conformity. Sim appears to revel in the fragmented and decentered nature of schizophrenic experience: he rails at feminists and "homosexualists", invents elaborate systems and theories, makes unpredictable connections and goes off on bizarre tangents. He has explicitly addressed the problem himself, questioning the existence of a verifiable "reality" from which he can be said to deviate:

> Assuming (for the sake of argument) that I'm crazy and everyone else is sane, what genuine, verifiable, objectively *real* foundation is your sanity based on? What, objectively speaking (or subjectively, if we're being honest here), lends that foundation validity? The thing which lends validity to my schizophrenia (I was diagnosed as a "borderline schizophrenic" in 1979 and I think it is reasonable to assume that the condition has "worsened" in the interim) is the fact that I can make a living from it. In a capitalistic society founded upon "choice" as an absolute, that gives me a certain "real" world impunity.[18]

The problem with creating a work of literature under such conditions is that to readers still enslaved by the old fantasies of coherent identity and enlightenment rationality, the narrative does not always make sense. Sim is well aware of this, and

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16   Janis Hunter Jenkins, "Schizophrenia as a Paradigm Case for Understanding Fundamental Human Processes", in Janis Hunter Jenkins and Robert John Barrett (eds), *Schizophrenia, Culture, and Subjectivity: The Edge of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 30.
17   Thomas Szatz, *The Manufacture of Madness: A Comparative Study of the Inquisition and the Mental Health Movement* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1960) 35. One might also gesture towards Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (London: Athlone Press, 1984), although it is worth noting that Deleuze and Guattari made a clear distinction between their "schizoanalysis" and the experiences of real schizophrenic people.
18   Dave Sim, *Reads (Book 9)*, 183.

has claimed that one of the features that make Cerebus endearing to readers is the fact that he shares their confusion about what is going on. He went on to explain:

> Nothing frustrates me more than the twentieth century adherence to the notion that you can find out what "actually happened" and that it is necessary for fiction to set out a linear, quantitative and absolute reality for the readers [sic] consumption and assurance. I think EVERYTHING is like the Kennedy assassination(s); riddled with inconsistencies, false trails, overlapping stories and considerations; distortions wrapped inside fabrications and coated with lies. The sooner we get over the idea that reality isn't like this, the sooner we'll be able to put together a world that fits our circumstances as they are; not as they never were and never will be. I'm not holding my breath.[19]

Although he despises academic institutions for their "totalitarian feminism",[20] Sim appears to have arrived at a kind of poststructuralism via his own circuitous route, and sneers contemptuously at the idea of representing a coherent reality in his work. Like a pop-cultural Ezra Pound, he fuses radical art and reactionary politics in a vast, odd, impenetrable *tour de force*.

I would like to discuss some of the models of masculinity promoted in *Cerebus*, but before I begin, it is necessary to place Sim's text within the category of fantasy fiction and to outline some of the gender stereotypes and expectations established by that genre. Whilst the extremism of Sim's views makes him the exception in comics and in fantasy literature of all forms (I have yet to find a fan-site where a critic broadly agrees with Sim's anti-feminist rants),[21] I would nevertheless argue that reaction against the changing status and value of masculinity is a recurrent theme in certain modes of fantasy fiction.

The first problem is the question of what we mean by fantasy. Writers who concentrate on Kafka, Borges, Marquez and Pynchon come to very different conclusions from those who define fantasy in terms of Tolkien, Robert Jordan,

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19   Jim O[ttaviani] et al. "Dave Sim – The Usenet Interview", 1992 <http://www-personal.engin.umich.edu/~hellpop/Sim.html> *Internet Archive* <http://web. archive.org/web/20060206053730/http://www-personal.engin.umich.edu/~hellpop/Sim.html>
20   Dave Sim, "Report to the Cerebus Newsgroup III". 23rd February 2005. <http://www. cerebusfangirl.com/archivereport3.html> *Internet Archive* <http://web.archive.org/ web/20060331043052/http://www.cerebusfangirl.com/archivereport3.html>
21   Some agree with him on specific points, of course, such as abortion. At time of writing, there is a heated discussion taking place at the Cerebus Yahoo! group <http://groups.yahoo. com/group/cerebus/> which developed out of an article about an apparently extremist feminist gathering at the University of New Hampshire. Whilst no one exactly concurs with Sim, his work does tend to promote discussion of gender issues.

Richard Corben and Terry Pratchett. Some clearly distinguish between "literature of the fantastic" and "fantasy"; others do not.[22] There are dozens of sub-genres under the heading "fantasy", and *Cerebus*, of course, is difficult to categorise. *Cerebus* was originally established as a parody of various "high fantasy" and "sword and sorcery" titles. In addition to the main character's parody of Conan the Barbarian, Red Sophia is a parody of Roy Thomas and Barry Windsor-Smith's heroine Red Sonja, Elrod is a version of Michael Moorcock's Elric, and so on. Such stories are generally set in a neo-medieval world, exhibit a clear sense of good and evil, and include plenty of magic and magical creatures (elves, wizards and the like). Whilst Sim is very eclectic, and some of his clearest influences have nothing to do with high fantasy (Will Eisner, for example, or Steve Gerber's *Howard the Duck*), I would nevertheless suggest that *Cerebus* starts out in what is essentially a high fantasy world.

It is not difficult to read the early 70s *Conan* comics and other contemporary sword and sorcery titles as a dramatic staging of the battle of the sexes. Conan encounters a variety of very beautiful, very dangerous, near-naked women: Valeria (a pirate wanted for stabbing a Stygian officer), Jenna (a dancer who steals his money and betrays him), Red Sonja (a hired sword) and numerous others. As Roy Thomas notes, many of the scantily clad warrior maidens depicted in the *Conan* comics of the early 70s were either not found in the original Robert E. Howard stories, or had their roles adapted and expanded for the comic book version.[23] These women
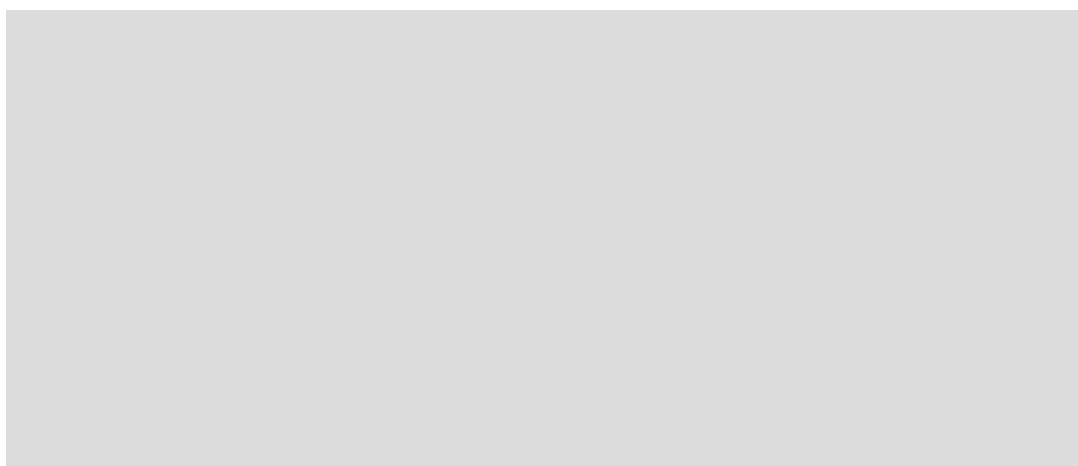
Figure 11.

22   Useful introductions include Lucie Arnitt, *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction* (London: Continuum, 1995), Neil Barron, *Fantasy Literature: A Reader's Guide* (New York and London: Garland, 1990) and Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York and London: Methuen, 1984).
23   See Roy Thomas, "Afterword" in Roy Thomas, Barry Windsor Smith et al. *The Tower of the Elephant and other stories (The Chronicles of Conan Vol. 1)* and *Rogues in the House and other stories (The Chronicles of Conan Vol.2)* (Dark Horse: Milwaukie, 2003) 161-6, 146-7.

epitomised contemporary fantasies and anxieties about femininity. On the one hand, they encapsulate certain feminist ideals: they are powerful and independent, thriving unaided in a male-dominated world. On the other, they are physically objectified for the pleasure of a largely young, male readership, and Conan's manner towards them is often rather patronising. (In "Red Nails", for example, he insists on carrying Valeria, having previously asserted that women cannot run.)[24] (Figure 11.)

Barbarian that he is, Conan has none of the wholesome morality of, say, Superman; his rugged individualism is comparable to that of cowboy heroes, and he has little interest in a world beyond male-dominated fighting.

The early issues of *Cerebus* were intended to be parodies, and Sim has a number of targets: the aggressive masculinity of *Conan*, the ludicrous posturing of superheroes, the sexual self-confidence of Sonja and so on. Significantly, *Cerebus* retains much of *Conan*'s ambivalence towards powerful women. Cerebus meets Jaka fairly early on, a woman

Figure 12.

with whom he has a complex, on-off relationship throughout much of his adult life. Admittedly under the influence of a spiked drink, he is very much in love with Jaka from the beginning. At the same time, the early Cerebus often seems asexual, indifferent and even slightly revolted by Sophia's overt sexuality. When they appear together on the cover of Cerebus #3 he does not exactly appear to be enjoying her company (Figure 12). Unlike Sonja, Sophia is a figure of ridicule (when she takes off her bikini top and says, "What do you think of these?" Cerebus replies, "They'd probably heal if you stopped wearing that chain-mail bikini").[25] In these early issues of *Cerebus* Sim seems to describe the ambivalent sexuality of the adolescent male,
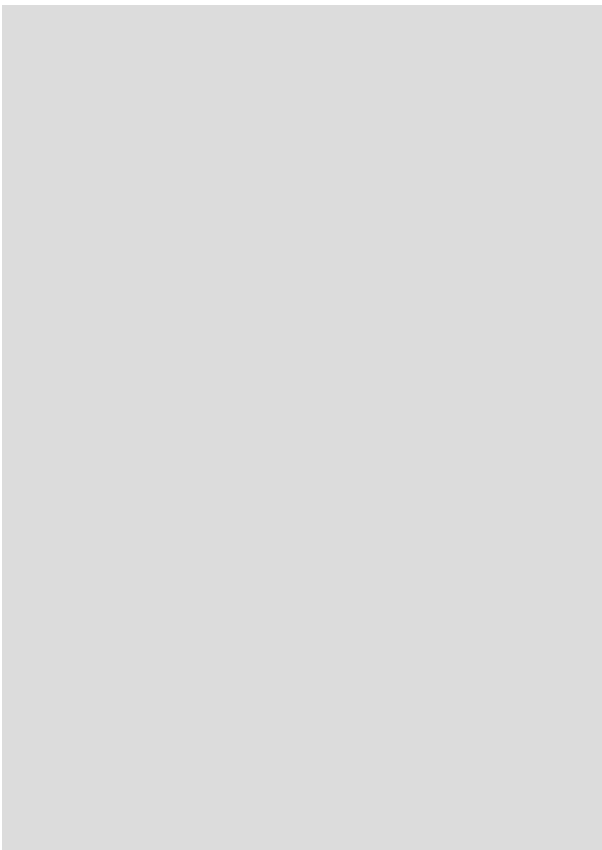
24   Thomas and Windsor Smith (2003) Vol. 1, 104.
25   Dave Sim, *Cerebus (Book. 1)* (1987) 214.

simultaneously intrigued and disgusted by women.

Although critics of fantasy fiction over the last thirty years have made great efforts to correct the misconception that women don't write – or read – about goblins and wizards, it is undoubtedly true that high fantasy literature tends to be populated by strong male figures.[26] As Noelle Bowles points out, demographics for science fiction and fantasy define their readership as predominantly male, single and aged between 20 and 34.[27] She goes on to argue:

> Within the Euro-centric confines of high fantasy, the hero's success and the villain's demise enact a fantasy of regeneration and restoration that the multi-cultural, multiracial reality of today's world denies the white male reader.[28]

Bowles focuses primarily on race rather than gender, but her argument that white males feel themselves to be marginalised is of relevance here. One cannot help noticing that the statistics she cites are very similar to those circulated about comics readers. A survey carried out by DC Comics in the 1990s suggested that ninety percent of their readers were male, with an average age of around 29.[29] This should not come as any great surprise: mainstream comics, like fantasy novels, are traditionally read by young males towards the bottom of the social hierarchy. (DC's figures, however inconclusive, do at least refute one tired stereotype: far from being *just* for kids, it appears that modern comics are not really read by kids at all.)

These readers have grown up in a period in which feminism has increasingly been assimilated into the social and legal structures of the US, Canada and Britain. In these societies, which have sought to offer support and help to ethnic minorities, women, gay people, those with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups, some able-bodied, straight, white males have felt bereft of markers with which to define their identity. Since the early 1970s a number of men's movements have emerged, all with different origins, arguments and agendas. Some pro-feminist men such

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26   See Susanne Fendler and Ulrike Horstmann, eds. *Images of Masculinity in Fantasy Fiction* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), and particularly Nicholas Ruddick's preface, "Another Key to Bluebeard's Chamber: Ideal and Fundamentalist Masculinity in the Literature of Fantasy".
27   Noelle Bowles, "'Revenge and Recovery': High Fantasy, Imperialism and the White Male Reader", in Fendler and Horstmann (2003) 207. The precise statistics are 78.6% male, 64.6% single, 63.2% aged between 20 and 34. However, as Bowles points out, surveys tend to conflate sci-fi and fantasy, making it difficult to identify reader demographics accurately.
28   Bowles, in Fendler and Horstmann (2003) 221-2.
29   Johanna Draper Carlson, "Superhero Comic Reader Stats". *Comics Worth Reading*. 10th May 2007. <http://comicsworthreading.com/2007/05/10/superhero-comic-reader-stats/>

as Victor Seidler were strongly influenced by feminism and sought to dismantle traditional constructions of masculinity which they argued were oppressive to both men and women.[30] Others blamed feminism for reinforcing a mythology of aggressive masculinity and thus perpetuating stereotypes about men. Writers like Warren Farrell argued that men are the disadvantaged sex, pointing to compulsory military service, social pressure to support a family, unequal custody laws and higher incidence of addiction, crime and certain illnesses amongst men.[31] Others, like Robert Bly, founded groups in which men were encouraged to reclaim their masculinity.[32] All were responding to a view that male identity had – for good or ill – been destabilised by feminism.

Many critics, arguing that fantasy literature is all about subversion, have focused on the ways in which it questions traditional gender roles.[33] But as far as Sim is concerned, women are the dominant power and white masculinity is under siege. It is only to be expected that anti-feminist literature may take a non-realist form in such a climate. Unlike the high fantasy outlined by Bowles, *Cerebus* is explicitly not about escapism. Sim claims that he wanted to represent "the nearest approximation of truth that I could manage",[34] and does so by imposing a fundamentalist matriarchy on a high fantasy world. As Adam Roberts writes of science fiction, such narratives represent an encoding of marginal experience: through a tale of an aardvark in a pseudo-mediaeval human society, Sim suggests that the modern world does not look favourably on white men.[35]

It is arguable that even without the comic's explicitly anti-feminist agenda, Sim's use of parody tends to keep *Cerebus* within the male dominated club of mainstream comics readers. Characters like the Roach (initially a parody of Batman, but seen in various incarnations throughout *Cerebus*) work as in-jokes, drawing

30   Victor Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1989). For a summary of men's movements in America see Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Gender Identities in Modern America* (1974; Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998). On masculinity studies more generally, see John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002), Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank Barrett, eds. *The Masculinities Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001) and Judith Kegan Gardiner, ed. *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
31   Warren Farrell, *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men are the Disposable Sex* (1993; London: Fourth Estate, 1994)
32   Robert Bly, *Iron John* (1990; Shaftesbury: Element, 1991).
33   See, for example, Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992)
34   Dave Sim, "About Last Issue". *Following Cerebus* 3 (2005) 40.
35   Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000) 29-30.

the circle of initiates more tightly together and reminding outsiders that they have some catching up to do. Sim talks at length about his inclusion of superhero parodies, arguing that to write a comic book that *is* a comic book ("not raw material for film, or something to court *The New York Times Book Review*") it is necessary to "deal with the language the people in that environment know".[36] That is, he considers himself to be addressing a knowing readership of individuals who are capable of both enjoying and mocking superhero narratives. He is writing for, and within, a particular community, and according to Sim, his use of superhero parody is an act of engagement with the world around him:

> I woke up and here I am. I was born in 1956 in this place called North America…
> I don't know what these superheroes are. I gotta go back and assess this. This is a
> very large presence. Once could almost say a disturbingly large presence. They've so
> dominated the medium for 50 years.[37]

However, it would be unwise to overstate the gendered slant to this point because it is evident from the letters pages (which, as Matthew Pustz points out, are particularly dominant in *Cerebus*, sometimes occupying almost half of an issue) that *Cerebus* had a relatively high proportion of female readers, at least until issue #186.[38] Furthermore, there are strong and articulate female characters in amongst the inane parodies, notably the politician Astoria. For all Sim's misogynist beliefs, only a few sections of *Cerebus* itself are unequivocally hostile to female readers.

It would be inaccurate to suppose that Cerebus is simply an alter-ego for Dave Sim, but it is fair to say that both the writer and his creation define their identities through an ideal of heroic masculinity. Cerebus rapidly develops beyond his Conan-parody origins, but he retains his tastes and values: he likes fighting, drinking and playing cards, he acquires a taste for women and sport, and he succeeds in the political arena. He is reasonably intelligent, and a skilled trickster as long as his opponent is fairly stupid, although his chess game with Suenteus Po highlights his limits as a tactician. His behaviour is often foolish and self-destructive, and he is frequently incapable of articulating his emotions. He is an old-style male

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36   Tom Spurgeon, interview with Dave Sim. *The Comics Journal*. Excerpts from issues #184 and #192 (2002) <http://www.tcj.com/2_archives/i_sim.html>
37   Spurgeon (2002).
38   Pustz (1999), 89-90. Pustz stresses the importance of letters pages, online forums, comics conventions and so on in the reception and sharing of comics amongst the community of readers.

stereotype, a deliberately flawed hero.

The position of the avowed anti-feminist at the start of the twenty-first century is one of extreme isolation, and like Sim, Cerebus is largely on his own. Beginning as a hired sword, he never really loses the solipsistic taste for violence and gold. He marries, divorces and even commits rape, but he drives away the one woman who loves him. His solitude is partly a function of political office: he proceeds from the position of natural loner to a social rank which precludes equal relationships. Whilst others subsequently discuss the extent of Cerebus' agency in his rise to power, it often appears that he is largely a pawn in other people's political manoeuvres. Astoria and Lord Julius (formerly married, now political opponents) both advance Cerebus' career whilst deceiving and manipulating him for their own ends. Even in his relationship with Jaka, Cerebus rarely breaks through his fundamental solitude for more than a brief moment. He lives, as the Judge predicts that he will die, alone.

The most obvious feature which sets Cerebus apart from everyone else is his physical form. An aardvark in a human world, Cerebus is variously described as "short gray one" (1.126) and "a child in a rabbit costume" (1.516), although of course no one raises the fundamental unreality of a talking aardvark as a particular problem. As I suggested in my discussion of Crumb's animal comics, this is largely a function of the comics form: the illustrations and other non-verbal elements can promote assumptions that the text declines to mention, establishing a tension between the verbal and visual threads of the narrative. However, Cerebus himself is visually distinct from the other characters in more than just his species. Cerebus is a distinctly stylised cartoon figure printed in a dot-matrix format, whilst everyone else, and the background, appears in comparatively realist hatched line drawings (see figures 13a-o, on pages 91-105 at the end of this chapter). Paradoxically, this enhances the reader's sense that Cerebus is by far the most rounded individual in the series, and other characters often appear somewhat flat by comparison. (Crumb has criticised *Cerebus* for this reason, claiming that "[t]here's not much going on there with the characters" whilst acknowledging that "Cerebus himself is the most complex character".)[39] Scott McCloud, supporting his "identification" theory, points out that in *Cerebus*, as in some Japanese manga and European "clear line" comics,

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39   Gary Groth, interview with Robert Crumb. *Comics Journal Library Vol. 3: Robert Crumb* ed. Milo George (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2004) 54.

the protagonist is customarily less "realistic" than the background and supporting characters. He goes on to argue:

> Soon, some of them [Japanese comics artists] realized that the objectifying power of realistic arts could be put to other uses. // For example, while most characters were designed simply, to assist in reader-identification // other characters were drawn more realistically in order to objectify them, emphasising their "otherness" from the reader.[40]

Whilst this device certainly helps, it is by no means the only manifestation of otherness in *Cerebus*. One of the most significant is the constant splitting and doubling of characters. *Cerebus* is full of twins and doppelgängers. The Elf and the Judge both split into fake and real versions of themselves, although both are ultimately "imaginary" beings within Cerebus' private mental landscape. Cerebus converses with a fake Suenteus Po long before he meets the real one. Victor Reid and Viktor Davis represent two opposing models of masculine lifestyle, very similar to the two models that Sim perceives to be offered by twentieth-century western society: marriage, children and conformity versus individuality and freedom. Cirin turns out to be Serna, an impostor, the real Cirin's former friend, and the two represent moderate and extremist versions of matriarchal feminism.[41]

I hesitate to mention schizophrenia here because I am aware of the popular misconception that this condition manifests itself as a Jekyll-and-Hyde-like splitting of the personality into two distinct selves. However, this condition does, in less dramatic ways, unsettle an individual's ability to relate to other people. Delusions of grandeur and paranoia are common (Sim, for example, has claimed that tens of thousands of people are willing him to kill himself).[42] Many experience delusions of reference (where, for example, the schizophrenic believes that the television is talking directly to him or her). Hallucinations, particularly aural hallucinations in which the subject hears external voices, are often reported. I would suggest that in the work of a schizophrenic author, it is hardly surprising that we find not only a main character prone to vivid hallucinations but an array of unnerving Others

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40   McCloud (1993) 44. As I noted in my introduction, the main thrust of McCloud's theory of identification has been refuted by Barker (1989), Frahm (2000) and Walsh (2006).
41   See Nachimir, "Cerebus". Personal site. <http://home.freeuk.net/integrated/sites/comics/index.html>. I am indebted to this site for several of these observations on doubled characters in *Cerebus*.
42   See Sim, *The Last Day (Book 16)* vii.

and shadow selves. In *Cerebus*, identity is always provisional, always on the brink of change, and new developments can be both positive and frightening.

The most interesting double is Cerebus himself. In *Reads (Book 9)*, Astoria reveals that Cerebus is a hermaphrodite, and through a series of flashbacks we subsequently discover that he suffered damage to "his" female genitalia owing to a childhood knife wound (9.96).[43] When Cerebus returns to his parents' home, he is particularly troubled by memories of that incident. Given that the balance of power between male and female – which Sim sees as polar opposites – is a central theme in *Cerebus*, it can hardly be a coincidence that the figure at its heart is a damaged hermaphrodite. Freud's Oedipus story and its associated castration complex have been over-used in literary criticism, but in reference to a tale of a childhood genital knife wound, written by a man who expresses intense anxiety about the diminution of male power in western culture, it is hard to avoid. It is worth pausing a moment to consider just what is going on here.

Rosemary Jackson argues that fantasy literature is full of disintegrating bodies because these fractured selves represent the trauma of entry into the Symbolic Order. She writes:

> Many fantasies of dualism are dramatizations of precisely this conflict, their "selves" torn between an original, primary narcissism and an ideal ego, which frustrates their natural desire. Many of them fantasize a return to a state of undifferentiation, to a condition *preceding* the mirror stage and its creation of dualism.[44]

The bizarre image of Cerebus' "castration" resurfaces as he returns home because this recurring cultural nightmare is all about the subject's struggle to define himself against, and away from, his parents. In the context of the story, we know very little about Cerebus' parents, but we do see a great deal of Cerebus' struggle for identity in a society of Others. Intriguingly, Ivan Ward points out that "[l]ike its sister, blindness, the theme of light is a common one in the spectacle of castration".[45] Noting that the sun has long been regarded as a symbol of male authority, he cites cases of men burning scraps of paper, playing with flaming tennis balls

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43   In spite of Cerebus' dual gender, I am going to continue writing "he/his" etc. This is partly for convenience, but also because Cerebus clearly identifies himself as male, however problematically.
44   Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981) 89.
45   Ivan Ward, *Castration* (Cambridge: Icon, 2003) 58.

and cowering in fear of a circle of reflected light.[46] For Sim, too, light represents masculinity, but at the moment of his death, Cerebus screams in fear as he is dragged towards the light, which he suddenly suspects may signify hell (16.232-9). Where Freud associated castration anxiety with guilt over masturbation, Sim says in *Tangents* that sexual desire impeded the quality of his thinking, and that he now lives a completely celibate life on the grounds that "[i]f you learn to leave your penis alone… your penis will learn to leave you alone".[47] In short, it seems that whilst Sim ostensibly relishes the disintegration of the self as a liberation, his comics and other writings tell a different story. Not only is Cerebus desperate for physical and psychic integrity but the author himself betrays intense anxieties about the power of the phallus over the male self.

As soon as one starts to think of Cerebus in these terms, the evidence is everywhere. Suddenly his habit of referring to himself in the third person looks less like a curious idiosyncrasy than an unconscious attempt at dissociation from his frightening, damaged body. In spite of Bear's accusation that Cerebus is "part chick" (*Guys*, 196) and Cerebus' own worry that his original hermaphrodite nature makes him a "faggot" (*Minds*, 114), he is nonetheless almost a parody of masculinity: aggressively heterosexual, bellicose, fiercely independent. Were it not for the knowledge of Dave Sim's anti-feminist views, one might conclude that Cerebus' feminine self atrophied when he lost his female reproductive abilities, and that his excessive masculinity highlights a tragic lack. Male and female are irreparably split in *Cerebus*, and on the face of it, Sim appears to argue that this is an inevitable thing, the product of a natural and irreconcilable difference. Only his protagonist enacts the trauma involved in this severing of masculine and feminine, and thereby hints at the harmfulness of a clear divide between the two. The real fear at the root of this incident is that it may be impossible to create a unity out of different facets of the psyche, or to retain the illusion of a coherent self in a dangerous and unstable world.

This consideration of the instability of subjective experience in *Cerebus* leads me to a closer analysis of Sim's verbal-visual blend. I wish to look in more detail at the way in which Sim fuses verbal and visual elements into an integral language, because I suggest that the form of Sim's comic, with its emphasis on the complexity and

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46   Ward (2003) 26-7, 57-9.
47   Sim (2001) <http://www.tcj.com/232/tangent0.html>

instability of perceptual experience, is fundamental to his representation of selfhood in the modern world.

There are numerous incidents in *Cerebus* in which the protagonist is shown to be operating on a higher plane of consciousness. Cerebus has a number of spiritual experiences, from his conversations with the fake Suenteus Po in the eighth sphere to his inexorable drift into the light at the moment of his death. I suggest, however, that many of the most interesting episodes begin as more down-to-earth representations of mental and emotional disruption. Sim's strengths lie in the narration of Cerebus' confused and unsettled perspective on the world, his dreams, fears and hallucinations. In a discussion of a six thousand page comic, it goes without saying that much will necessarily be excluded. Rather than skipping about, I wish to centre my analysis on a single sequence, taken from *Guys (Book 11)*, in which Cerebus is blind drunk, lying on the floor in a bar, drifting in and out of consciousness (Figures 13a-o, at the end of this chapter).[48] As the title suggests, this book is particularly concerned with homosocial relationships, and much of it takes place in or around a bar. As such, the drunkenness itself is a fairly common occurrence both throughout *Cerebus* as a whole and particularly in this book, but this sequence raises a number of technical and thematic issues which shed light on the text's representation of subjectivity. My analysis will be divided into four sections: first, I will examine those images, typographic marks, word balloons and other non-pictorial visuals through which Sim seeks to represent his protagonist's distorted perception. I will then discuss the panel layouts in *Cerebus*, and the way in which Sim uses the comics form to propose a non-linear conception of time. Thirdly, I will look more broadly at the layering of realities in the text. Finally, I will return briefly to Cerebus' recurring nightmare of bodily disintegration.

Cerebus has passed out, and is lying on the floor, face up. What we see, however, is not his body but a closed eye, and two brief images of Richard George, as Cerebus manages to peer upwards. George looks down at Cerebus and commentates on his physical state in an exaggerated faux-British accent. From the dialogue we gather that George and his brother Harrison Starkey (fellow drinkers, and parodies of Beatles George Harrison and Ringo Starr) try to move the semi-conscious Cerebus,

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48   Issue #203. See also Anita K. McDaniel, "Dave Sim on Guys" *IJOCA* 7.1 (2005) 473-84.

then give up – partly due to the noxious smell of Cerebus' farts – and throw him behind the bar. However, the image of a closed eye is noteworthy because it is not entirely clear whether this represents Cerebus' view from the inside or Richard George's view from above. Throughout this extract, there are bubbles at the edge of Cerebus' vision which presumably signify the instability of his current perceptions. However, these bubbles remain in the panels showing only the closed eye, suggesting that if this *is* an external view of Cerebus' body, his drunken vision is nonetheless affecting the texture of the entire narrative. In other words, spatial and psychological point of view do not necessarily coincide, and the reader's perspective is not always clearly signposted.

The bubbles are particularly significant because on several occasions (notably in figures 13f and 13h) they merge with clusters of speech balloons. Just as the speech balloon exists at the intersection of word and image in comics, the balloon/bubble analogy also places them at the intersection of the protagonist's hearing and vision. Drawing the reader into Cerebus' perceptual space, Sim teeters on the point of suggesting that Cerebus *sees words*, pushing the symbiosis of word and image towards a true synaesthesia.

Sim's use of speech balloons is, in any case, unusually inventive. As is customary in comics, their size, shape and texture mimic the tone of the utterance they encapsulate: an angry statement tends to be placed in a balloon with jagged edges, a whisper is a tiny word in a huge balloon and so on. But again, Sim takes this further. Transparent thought balloons overlap one another as Cerebus argues with himself, trying to suppress his anger at Jaka and control his sense of panic. These thought balloons are largely indistinguishable from those containing speech: like many alternative comics writers, Sim does not use cloud-like balloons for reported thought, preferring to retain a sense of slippage between real and imagined discourse. In figure 13i the author gives two balloons the appearance of three-dimensional form as two characters bump into each other, suggesting that it is possible to dispense with an image of the speaker and encapsulate a character within the visual form of his or her utterance. He draws icicles on balloons of frosty speech. In Sim's hands, established conventions for the representation of tone, expression and non-verbal meaning in speech expand and mutate, producing new, hybrid forms.

Similar devices indicate Cerebus' interpretation of these speech acts.

Throughout this extract, most balloons have no tails to indicate the location of their speaker: they are disembodied, often unidentified voices because their listener's cognitive abilities are temporarily impaired. In figures 13f-g, dozens of disconnected utterances crowd together in a large panel, some more intelligible than others. They represent not an ordered dialogue but a cacophony of overheard fragments of speech, and their typographic form is accordingly erratic: upper and lower case letters and various lettering styles reflect volume, pitch and mood. Almost inaudible remarks are heavily cross-hatched, their letters fading into shadow.

This is not the place for a detailed examination of the semiotic theories relating to comics' "grammar".[49] In my view, comics is not a language in the strictest sense any more than theatre is one, and references to "the language of comics" are primarily metaphorical. Nevertheless, one can identify some curious similarities between comics' modification of written words through non-verbal typographic features and the subtle shifts in meaning in the sign languages spoken by Deaf communities. Klima and Bellugi detail several modifications of the basic verb "to look" in American Sign Language, explaining how hand positioning and movement alter the meaning of the sign, producing variations like "stare", "watch", "look for a long time" and so on.[50] Without wishing to postulate any grand, overarching parallels between sign languages and comics, I would suggest that Sim's modification of meaning in comics' speech and sound effects proceeds along similar lines. By varying the size, texture, shape and positioning of words and non-verbal signs, Sim conveys narrative elements that could not easily be described with plain text and pictures.[51]

I have already briefly touched upon the question of typographic form, but this device deserves closer attention as a significant feature of this first double page and of the extract as a whole. The use of large, colourful capital letters to represent the crashes and explosions of conventional comics has become something of a cliché, and even articles in the mainstream press that seek to

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49   For semiotic theories of the comics form see Saraceni (2000), and Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007). Neil Cohn's website *Emaki Productions* <http://www.emaki.net/> is also helpful.
50   Edward S. Klima and Ursula Bellugi *The Signs of Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979). This research is summarised in Oliver Sacks *Seeing Voices* (London: Picador, 1991) (1989) 84-92.
51   Joost Pollman also draws parallels between comics and sign language. See Pollman, "Shaping Sounds in Comics", *IJOCA* 3.1 (Spring 2001) 14.

dismantle the stereotype of comics as kids' stuff usually cannot resist the odd "POW!" or "BANG!" here and there.[52] In practice, the typography of sound effects is rather more complex, often bordering on a kind of visual synaesthesia. The word "fart" at the bottom of figure 13a is represented as a large, soft, fuzzy cloud, while the "THADUMP" of Cerebus being thrown behind the bar is conveyed in more conventional form with broad brush strokes, stars and speed lines. This "THADUMP" is crammed into the bottom right hand corner of the printed page, mimicking Cerebus' body as it slumps into an enclosed space behind the bar.[53] Since the letters behave like a body, the word *reads* as an image, standing in for the semi-conscious Cerebus whose perspective governs our interpretation of the scene. Elsewhere in this extract, Cerebus' failed attempt at speech (signified by a heavily cross-hatched, double-bordered balloon) merges with the dull "THUMP" as he passes out again and hits the floor (Figure 13n). Sim defies the convention that speech and sound effects exist in separate realms of signification: perceptual information blends together on the page as it does in the mind of the protagonist. The shape, size, design, texture and layout of these speech acts and sound effects all contrive to produce a visual equivalent for sound, resulting in verbal-visual signs that sit somewhere in the middle of Saraceni's iconic-symbolic spectrum (see my introduction, page 21). The implication is that the information of the senses is no more easily separated out into sound, vision, touch and so on than it is separable from emotional, intellectual or spiritual experience.

Sim's representation of chronology is of particular interest. The depiction of temporality in comics includes features that are not seen in any other medium, because in graphic narrative, time is represented spatially. Unlike a film, where sequential images are placed successively in the same space, comics represent a chronological sequence through the juxtaposition of fragmented moments. It is easy to identify general trends in comics' representation of time: an exuberant, fast-paced sequence might exhibit irregular panel shapes, thin panels crammed closely together, dynamic page layouts and so on, whilst a calm, slow sequence would be

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52   See, for example, Arifa Akbar, "Wham! Pow! Egad! Classics get comic treatment" *Independent* 27th October 2007, 26; Ian Black, "Zap! Kraak! Pow! Comic culture has landed in Glasgow" *The Sunday Times* 18th April 1993.
53   Although there are no visible panel divisions, Sim does not draw beyond the set margins, so there *is* an outer boundary, albeit an invisible one. This is primarily a function of the printing process.

more likely to have regularly shaped panels and a balanced composition. However, the conventions governing this division of time in comics remain malleable and elusive, and as Scott McCloud pointed out, we have no "conversion chart" by which to quantify their progression.[54] Avant-garde comics creators are always experimenting and developing new ways in which visual literature may be read, but even relatively mainstream comics writers often show great interest in the way in which panels and gutters in comics signify the passage of time at varying speeds.[55] Marc Singer, for example, notes that in *The Invisibles*, Grant Morrison uses time travel, chronological loops, ellipses and flash-forwards in order to suggest that "linear chronologies are inaccurate representations of time".[56] Scott McCloud also argued that comics make it difficult to separate past, present and future:

> … unlike other media, in comics, the past is more than just memories for the audience and the future is more than just possibilities!// Both past and future are real and visible and *all around us!*// Wherever your eyes are focused, that's *now*. But at the same time your eyes take in the surrounding landscape of past and future![57]

Clearly, McCloud is thinking of comics as opposed to film here, and one must add that the past and future are, to a lesser extent, available in prose fiction: one can inadvertently catch sight of the last page of a novel and discover that a particular character is still on the scene. However, the immediacy of visual narrative lends itself to the view that by flicking through the fractured panels of a comic one is experiencing a scattered array of present moments.

In *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism* Ursula Heise suggests that one of the functions of the inventive typography found in many postmodern novels is the disruption of linear temporality. She argues that by adopting "concrete prose" for portions of the text, using unorthodox layouts and abandoning conventional punctuation, writers "transform temporal processes into visual and spatial objects".[58] Because these changes are rarely sustained throughout an entire novel, she says that "the foregrounded spatiality of print is thereby itself subjected

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54   See McCloud (1993) 100.
55   For more experimental material, see, for example, *Oubapo America* <http://www.tomhart. net/oubapo/>. Oubapo is a comics version of the French Oulipo.
56   Marc Singer, "Invisible Order: Comics, Time and Narrative", *IJOCA* 1.2 (1999) 29-30.
57   McCloud (1993) 104.
58   Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1997) 63.

to the discontinuity of change" and so this typographic configuration "contributes to the fracturing of narrative time into alternative temporal universes". Comics have a natural propensity for this kind of experimental typography. The medium's fusion of iconic and symbolic signs and its inevitably spatialised representation of time invite non-linear reading practices. Pictures, even when placed in a row, cannot be "read" in a strictly linear motion: the eye must move around each panel to make sense of the narrative. As soon as unusual typographic forms and unconventional page layouts are added to the mix, any last traces of linear chronology are abandoned. Sim is particularly fond of such devices precisely because the arbitrariness of human perception – including the perception of time – is so central to his narrative.

If panels and gutters are the structures which divide and organise time in comics, the first thing to note at the beginning of this extract is that there *are* no panel divisions: six images on each page are divided only by an unstructured expanse of white space. Sim goes to great lengths to alter the shape and arrangement of his panels according to the action of the plot, often allowing his protagonists' perceptions to govern the flow of the narrative. Throughout this fifteen-page sequence, Cerebus' grasp of time is extremely hazy: in figure 13m, Richard George[59] remarks that he and the others had forgotten about Cerebus for a while, suggesting that a considerable period of time has elapsed whilst Cerebus has been drifting in and out of consciousness behind the bar. The absence of panel divisions or gutters signifies this sense of an almost timeless consciousness.

In figures 13e-f and 13i-j, the panels – again without clear edges – appear to represent two parallel threads of perceptual experience. In figure 13e, for example, word balloons cluster into one long panel whilst Cerebus' visual perception is confined to three small, roughly circular panels showing fragments of ceiling, bottles and hands. As Scott McCloud explained, speech is a major device in the measuring of time in comics: readers inevitably linger over text-heavy panels and skip through silent sequences. If, as in figure 13e, dozens of word balloons cluster into a single panel, the effect is that of time collapsing in on itself. Far from narrating events in a coherent sequence of snapshots, this page literalises the disjunction between Cerebus' visual and aural perceptions.

Perhaps the most intriguing is the device in figure 13o: three panels that

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59   Or maybe Harrison Starkey: they are difficult to tell apart unless someone addresses them by name.

fit within each other like Russian dolls. The speech, and the weighting of the outer panel towards the bottom of the page – makes it clear that we are to read from the middle outwards – Cerebus says "Please Dave// Please// Cerebus just wants to die". The final panel shows Cerebus' hands, his fingers bigger than the columns of an ancient ruin, and (upside down) the mysterious carved faces which appeared on the Black Tower in Iest. It is a bewildering, hallucinatory image for a number of reasons, but most significant is its defiance of comics conventions regarding the representation of time. Technically, it works: one time period can take place within another just as Tuesday lunchtime is encapsulated within the larger chronological frame of "Tuesday". What it suggests, however, is that the first two utterances – "Please Dave" and "Please" – are still in the present moment at the time of the third one. In short, there is a lag, a sense of inertia. This delay can be seen as analogous to that experienced in short term memory: the thought "Cerebus just wants to die" was presumably in the protagonist's mind as he started the sentence, and so the experience of pleading, and sinking into intoxicated sleep, is encapsulated within a single moment.

The temporal disruption in this extract is found not only in these local details but in links and references to other parts of the narrative. To a first-time reader, figure 13g does not make a great deal of sense. It shows Cerebus looking through the window of a cabin and seeing an empty chair in the middle of the room, and what seems to be a smashed-up floor. The final panel shows a young female companion who fails to understand Cerebus' somewhat disconnected remarks. First time around, we assume it is just a dream, with all the usual displacement and surrealism. The prophetic significance of this vision only becomes clear at the end of the following volume, *Form and Void (Book 14)*, in which Cerebus and Jaka return to his childhood home to find that his parents are dead, the village has been abandoned and the few remaining residents blame Cerebus for deserting his family.[60] This sequence is repeated as Cerebus peers through the window of his former home. In the present extract, Cerebus' parenthetical remarks point to an exaggerated sense of déjà vu: "We've been here before… We always have this conversation… It's always falling apart…" The internal dialogue on the opposite page encapsulates Cerebus' fearful, chaotic thoughts and shows his mounting anger

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60   Issue #265 (2001).

at Jaka, but it also draws him back into the present moment with the word "look", which links to a conversation in the bar on the following page. The overlapping thought balloons in figure 13h serve as a visual metaphor for Sim's conception of time in this sequence: past, present and future are not points on a line but layers in a continuous present.

I also want to draw attention to the remark "soomthen fell" in figure 13n, because this utterance is an echo that reverberates throughout *Cerebus* as a whole. The phrase first occurred when Cerebus was in the throne room of the Eastern Church, of which Sim said:

> … a single edifice in which most of the significant events of human history had taken place would be an echo chamber on a grand scale. You could never be quite certain if you heard a sound in a distant chamber if it was something that was taking place at that moment, or something that had taken place at five year intervals over the course of the last six thousand years.[61]

He went on to suggest that an individual's experiences in such a place would echo throughout his or her subsequent life. Readers have probably elevated this device to a status that it was never meant to have, although one of the more convincing explanations is that "something fell" also foreshadows Cerebus' death (he falls off a chair in extreme old age). But whatever intricate interpretations one may impose upon this device, the central idea seems to be that history does not shut up and go away, but makes its presence felt here and now. These devices, and many others, recur and mutate throughout *Cerebus*, as Sim constantly reworks the comics form to accommodate an increasingly esoteric, postmodern understanding of history.[62] If comics narration is all about the connection of fragments, and Sim is inclined to make unpredictable connections, then it is no surprise that his representation of time would develop far beyond the bounds of traditional, linear, sequential narrative.

Sim's refusal of narrative conventions regarding chronology has had a major impact on the structure of *Cerebus* as a whole. In charting his protagonist's adult life, Sim skips over major social and political events in a single page, then devotes whole

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61   Dave Sim, "About Last Issue" *Following Cerebus* 2 (December 2004) 36. See also Craig Miller and John Thorne, "Following the Trail of Something That Fell", *Following Cerebus* 1 (July 2004) 16-25.
62   See Beverley C. Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* (London: Routledge, 2003).

books to seemingly insignificant details. Cerebus spends three years tending sheep (*Latter Days (Book 15)*, 1-20), and more or less the whole of *Melmoth (Book 6)* sitting in a café mourning the loss of Jaka. Five issues are taken up with a single fight,[63] and long sections of *The Last Day (Book 16)* describe the elderly Cerebus struggling to go to the toilet. As Douglas Wolk puts it:

> …the weird, bumpy way Sim presents his world's history, as a series of not-entirely-trustworthy, not-entirely-compatible narratives that focus on immediate details and miss the big picture, is absolutely in line with his rejection of consensus reality. He explicitly opens up *Cerebus* to interpretation: if he makes it clear that he's not emphasizing a lot of the important parts, it's an open question which the important bits *are*.[64]

Oddly, Sim's refusal of linear chronology appears to have been exacerbated by his commitment to the serial form. It is a paradox of *Cerebus* that the routine of monthly serial publication, which demands immense practical discipline on the part of the creator, also tends to result in a rather sprawling, undisciplined narrative, prone to whims and digressions. The skeleton of a plot may have been in place since 1979, but in its details and pace *Cerebus* leaps and meanders apparently at random. If this is a graphic novel, it is very much in a modernist tradition, having shaken off most traces of novelistic structure.

It is not only Sim's representation of time that can be seen in postmodern terms; *Cerebus* is extremely self-conscious about the relationships between text, reader and author/artist. As I suggested above, Sim does not always appear fully aware of the relationship himself: his aggressive, hermaphrodite anti-hero sometimes seems closer to the author than Sim would like to believe. After Cerebus has been thrown behind the bar there appears a double page which we can only assume represents Cerebus' hallucination, but which seems to have more to do with the relationship between text and reader than anything in the protagonist's unconscious mind. The first image shows Cerebus dropping a pebble down some kind of brick-built shaft, with the perspective organised in such a way that this stone appears to be falling towards the picture plane. In the fifth panel it hits and smashes a glass surface, then bounces back, now rising towards Cerebus. In the first panel of figure 13d, the stone hits another glass surface at the top of the shaft, and some

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63   Issues #180-4 describe Cerebus' fight with Cirin. See *Reads (Book 9)*.
64   Wolk, (2007) 300.

kind of black liquid (possibly blood, but more likely ink) rains onto the page until only a few specks of white are left, signifying a starry night sky.

This sequence appears to be literalising the division between Cerebus' imaginary world and that of the reader, and emphasising the obvious point that Cerebus' world is composed entirely of ink on paper. In the later books of *Cerebus*, the protagonist becomes aware of his creator, "Dave", who appears in the book on several occasions, self-consciously manipulating the plot. Such metafiction is nothing new in comics: as early as 1905, Winsor McCay showed a panel exploding in "Sammy Sneeze".[65] Still, there is a world of difference between one clever panel and Sim's full-blown, over-the-top postmodernism. *Cerebus* has it all: genre mixing, blatant anachronism, direct addresses to the reader, conversations between author and protagonist, and a certain measure of showing off about the writer's power over the ending (10.204ff). As Sim noisily problematises the empirical reality of the "real" world, this activity inevitably extends to the fictionality of fictional worlds.

On several occasions throughout this extract, Cerebus' confused vision is shown to include concentric circles like ripples on the surface of water. It seems that one of the main functions of this device is to imply that the surface of perceived reality, and the surface of the comics page, are just surfaces, with the possibility of depth underneath. In figure 13h, when Cerebus experiences a premonition of his return home, the imagined speech balloons make ripples in the space around them, as the fracturing of temporal logic disturbs the space of the comics page. And on the final page of this extract, the surface seems to break: the ripples are viewed from below as Cerebus sinks into another realm of consciousness. By drawing attention to the artificiality of his fictional world, Sim implies that the reader's assumptions about reality are no more stable than Cerebus' whisky-soaked visions.

The final observation I wish to make about this extract relates to a vivid and distinctly disturbing sequence in which Cerebus' hands disintegrate (Figures 13k-l). To begin with Cerebus seems to be rehearsing a trick commonly shown to small children in which a thumb can be made to "disappear". By the fourth panel, however, it is clear that he can detach his fingers and move them around. His fingers fuse together, then develop teeth and attack one another, and finally the victimised one explodes. This double page has an unusually straightforward and regular layout of

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65   Winsor McCay *Early Works: Vol. 1* (West Carrolton, Ohio: Checker, 2004) 108.

nine panels on each side, and the background is blank darkness. Cerebus' attention is focused exclusively on his horrific vision, and the outside world is temporarily forgotten.

As a metaphor for internal conflict the hallucination makes perfect sense. The 18-panel sequence can be read as a nightmarish reminder of Cerebus' habitual self-destructiveness. However, as I have already discussed, anxiety about bodily disintegration becomes a particular preoccupation for Cerebus in the later books. Cerebus has experienced a similar illusion once before, having watched parts of his body disappear under the influence of an alcohol/codeine cocktail in *Church and State II (Book 4)* (682-6). My analysis of this extract has repeatedly highlighted the artificiality of Cerebus' world and therefore his physical form, and this is something of which the protagonist becomes increasingly aware. Within the context of an extract which touches both Cerebus' deepest childhood fears and his awareness of his own fictionality, this nightmare operates on a number of levels. Veering between Oedipal terrors and a vague acknowledgement that he is no more than ink on paper, Cerebus tries desperately to keep himself together.

If nothing else, my analysis of this extract offers a snapshot of the phenomenal expanse of territory that *Cerebus* covers, and in its fractured nature it is, I believe, representative of the comic as a whole. Mario Saraceni, modifying Scott McCloud's definitions of the various types of transition in comics, argues that since comics have developed as adult literature, the links between panels have become increasingly tenuous. He claims that the more obvious types of transition, such as moment-to-moment and action-to-action, have lost their prominence.[66] Whilst it is difficult to substantiate such a claim empirically, I would nonetheless conclude by pointing to the extract in hand, in which relationships between individual panels and sequences have become ever more fluid and obscure. Narrating an episode in which the protagonist has lost all control over his body and is rapidly becoming lost in a landscape of his unconscious, this extract illuminates a number of late modern anxieties about the possibility of individual authenticity and integrity.

Cerebus is a deliberately, defiantly difficult work, and one which rebels with impressive force against the stereotype of comics as easy reading. It is a comic

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66   Saraceni, (2000) 131-2.

that has increasingly challenged its readers, as moments of witty parody and breathtaking technical innovation mingle with an ideology that almost everyone finds offensive or plain mad. Cerebus himself has, by and large, remained a lively and endearing character in spite of the extraordinary contortions into which Sim has twisted his narrative. I have been arguing that the form of *Cerebus*, particularly its serial self-publication and its inventive use of comics conventions, are inseparable from its narrative of heroic, solitary masculinity in a world of unstable, shifting realities. It is important to note the complexity of the creator's relationship with his work. The man who claims to celebrate indeterminacy and fluidity never shows a glimmer of doubt about the absolute rightness of his own opinions. The Sim who now prays five times a day is not the same secular humanist Sim who started the book in 1977, yet each self, in turn, believes its own perspective to be The One.

In the last chapter, I discussed Crumb's ambivalent relationship with childhood and his critique of contemporary constructions of masculinity, and I raised the idea that these are common characteristics of alternative comics. However, the temptation to make smooth, easy links between modes of critique should be avoided. Like Crumb, Sim finds himself out of place in a world in which white masculinity is no longer the central, original model from which all others differ. And like Crumb, Sim resists assimilation into modern modes of production and communication: in spite of running his own publishing company, for example, Sim has no website or email address. Yet whilst Crumb diffidently, humorously acknowledges his racist and misogynist unconscious as a part of the fabric of American culture, Sim proclaims that his vision of the world is accurate and that masculinism should replace feminism as the dominant discourse in gender politics. Both acknowledge problems with current constructions of masculinity, but their responses and solutions could not be further apart. With such a divergence of opinion, it is impossible to discern whether these white males are defining themselves as a marginalised group or simply objecting to the fact that they are no longer indisputably at the top of the tree.
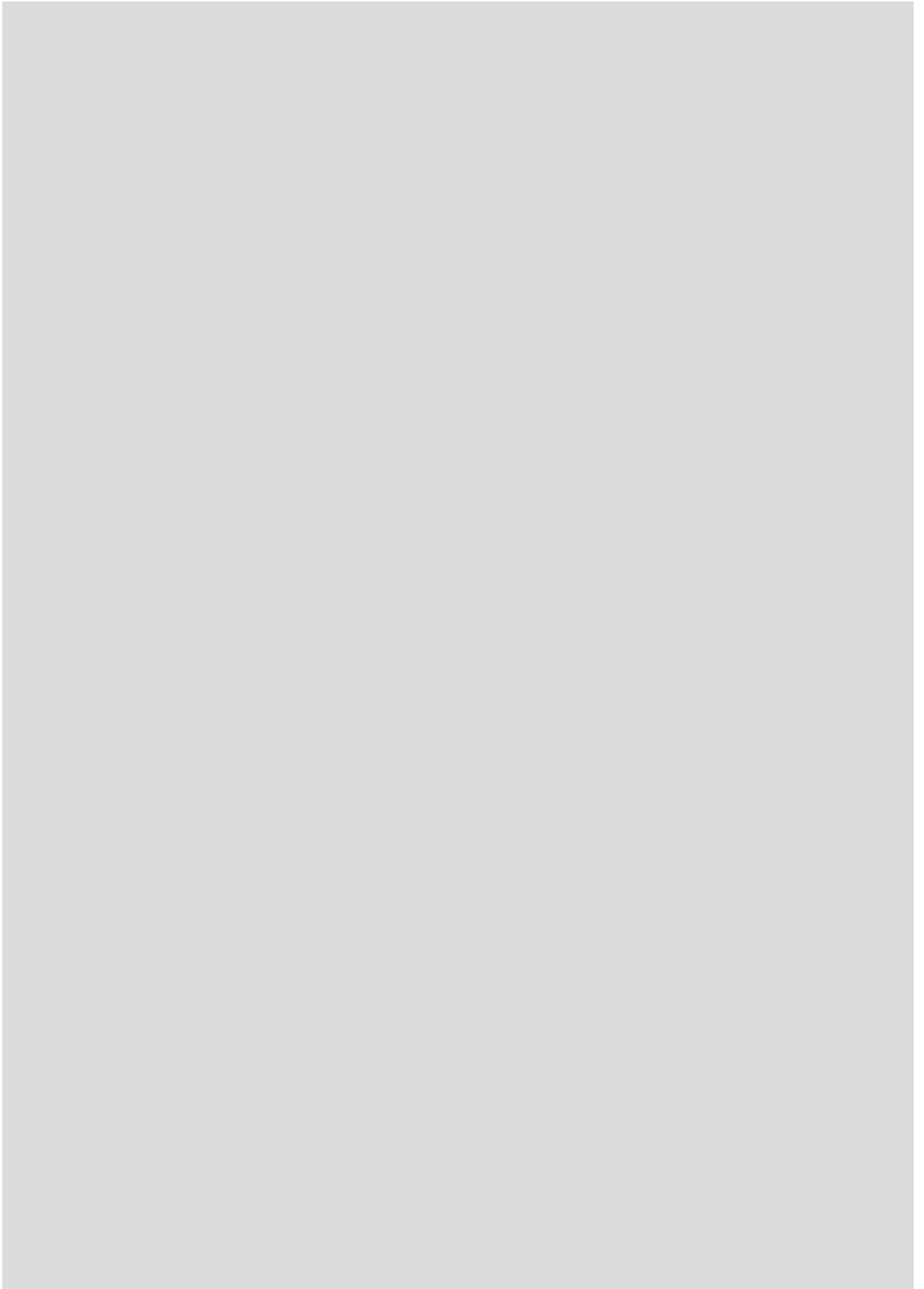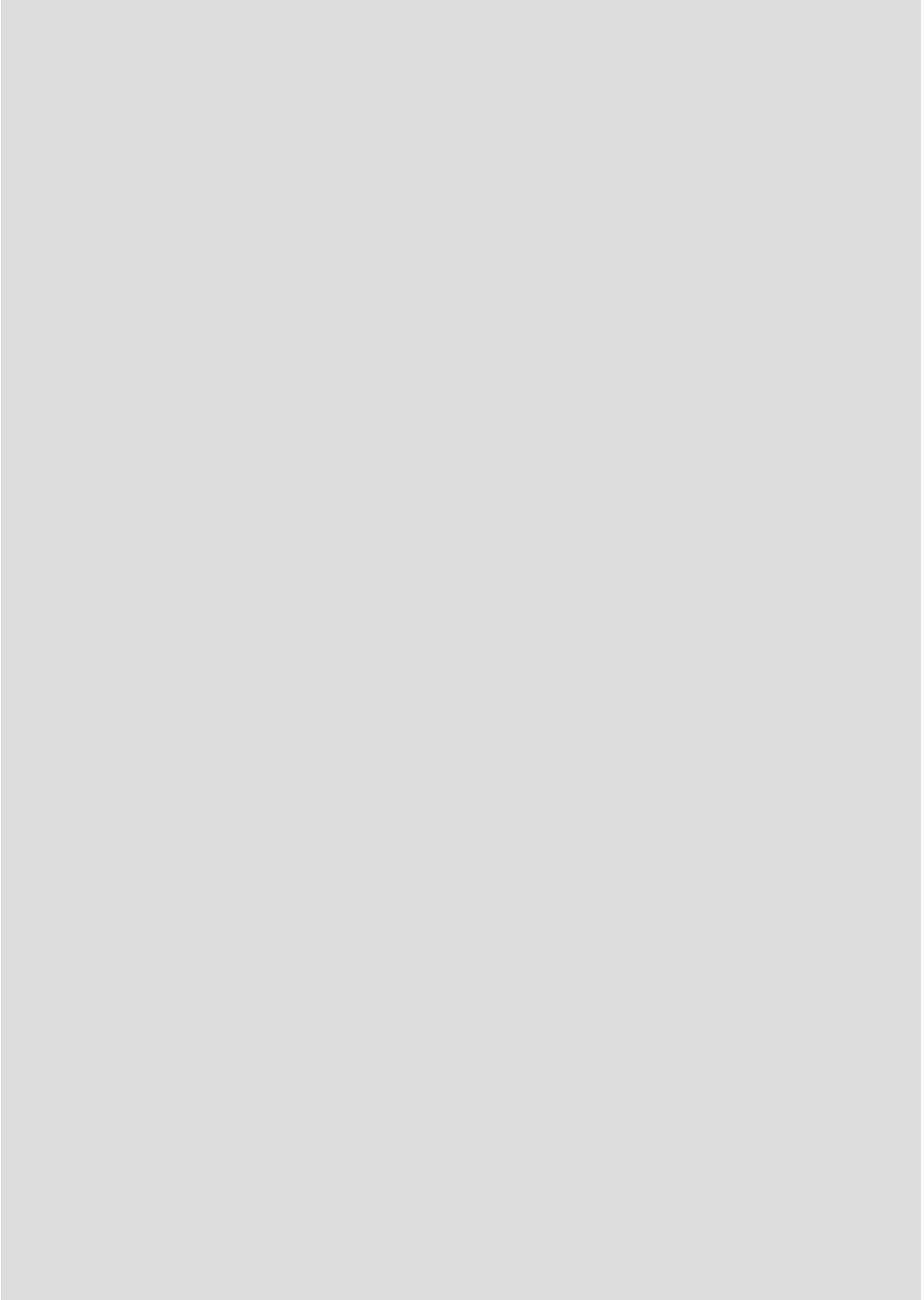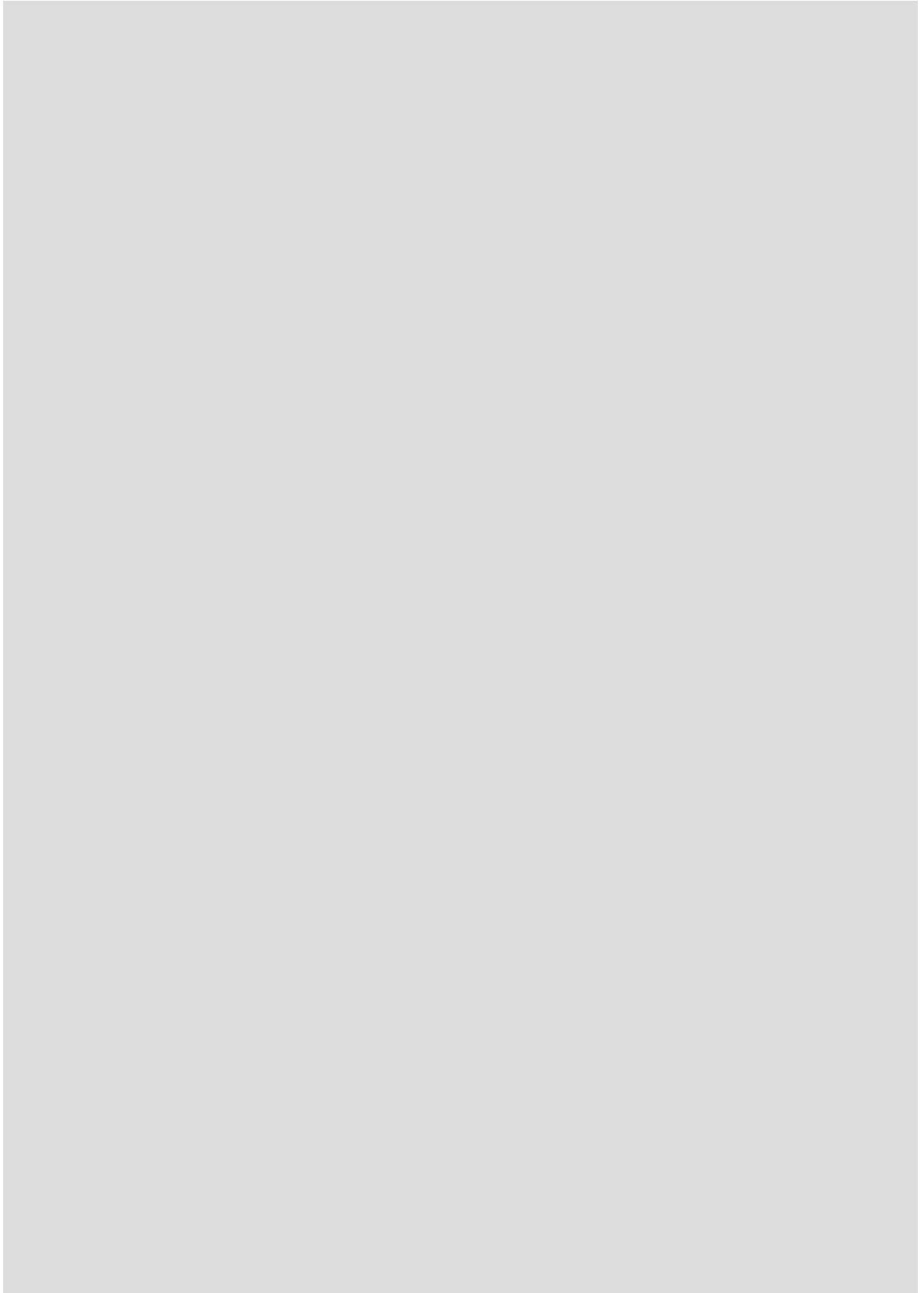
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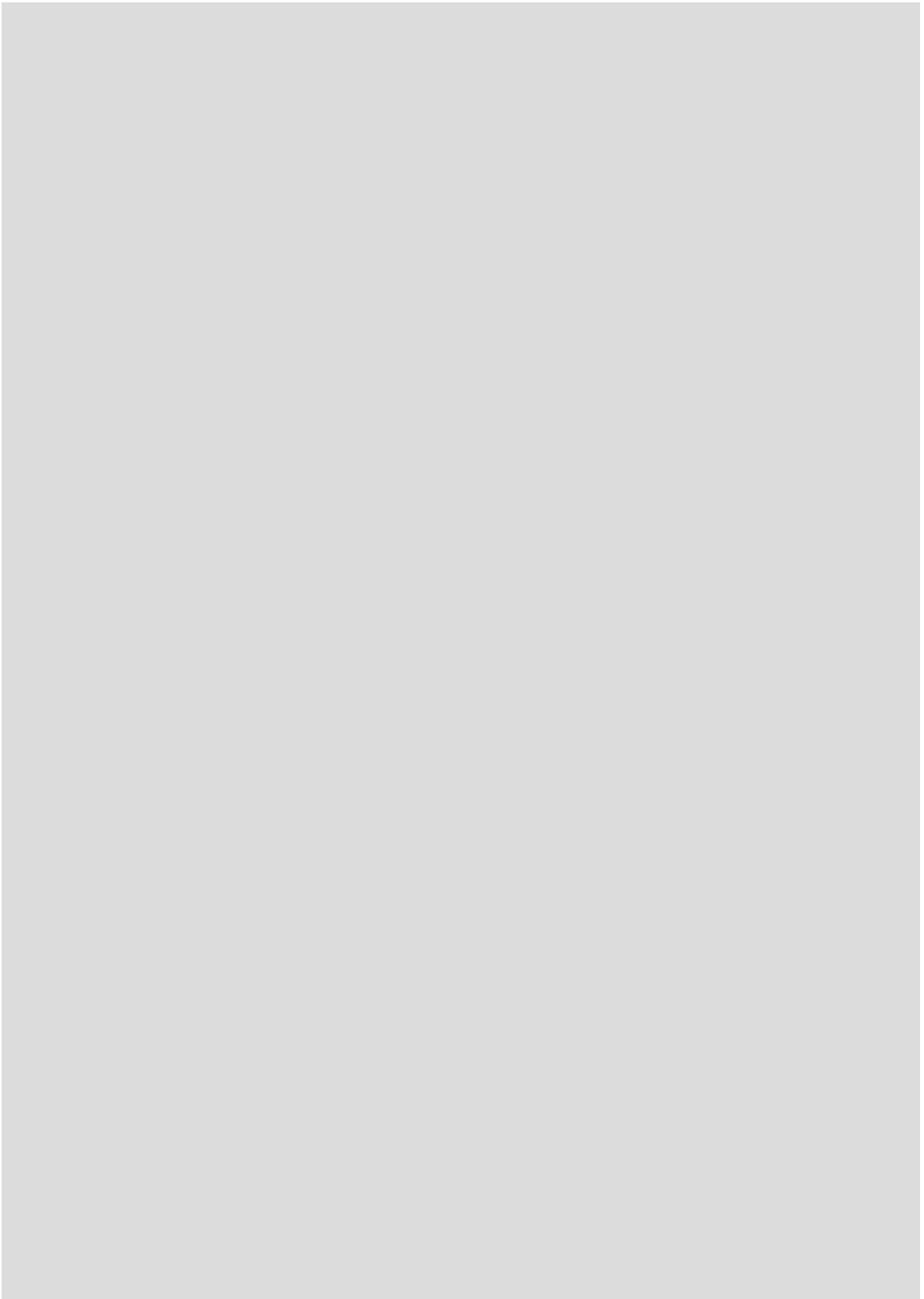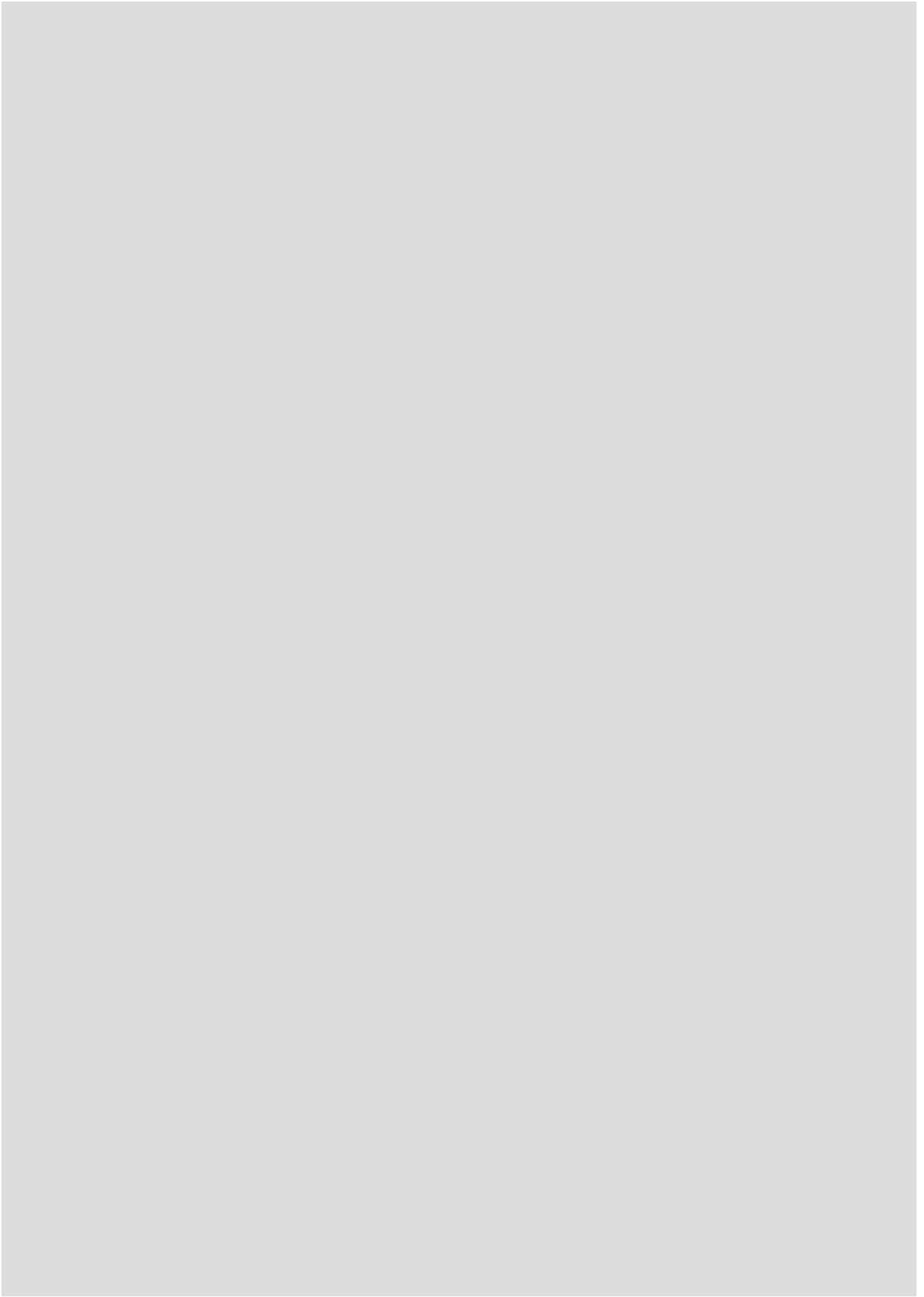
Figure 13b.
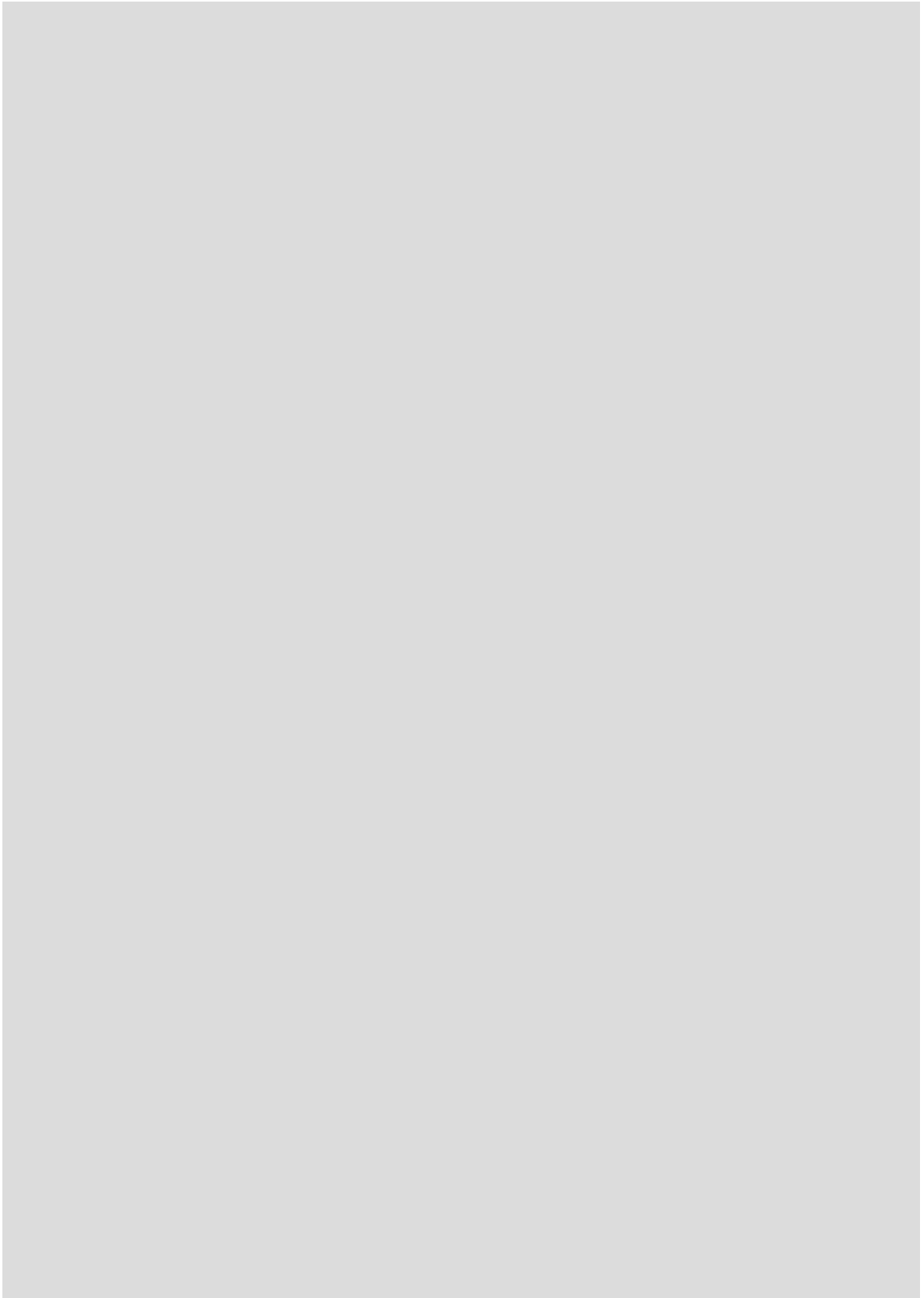
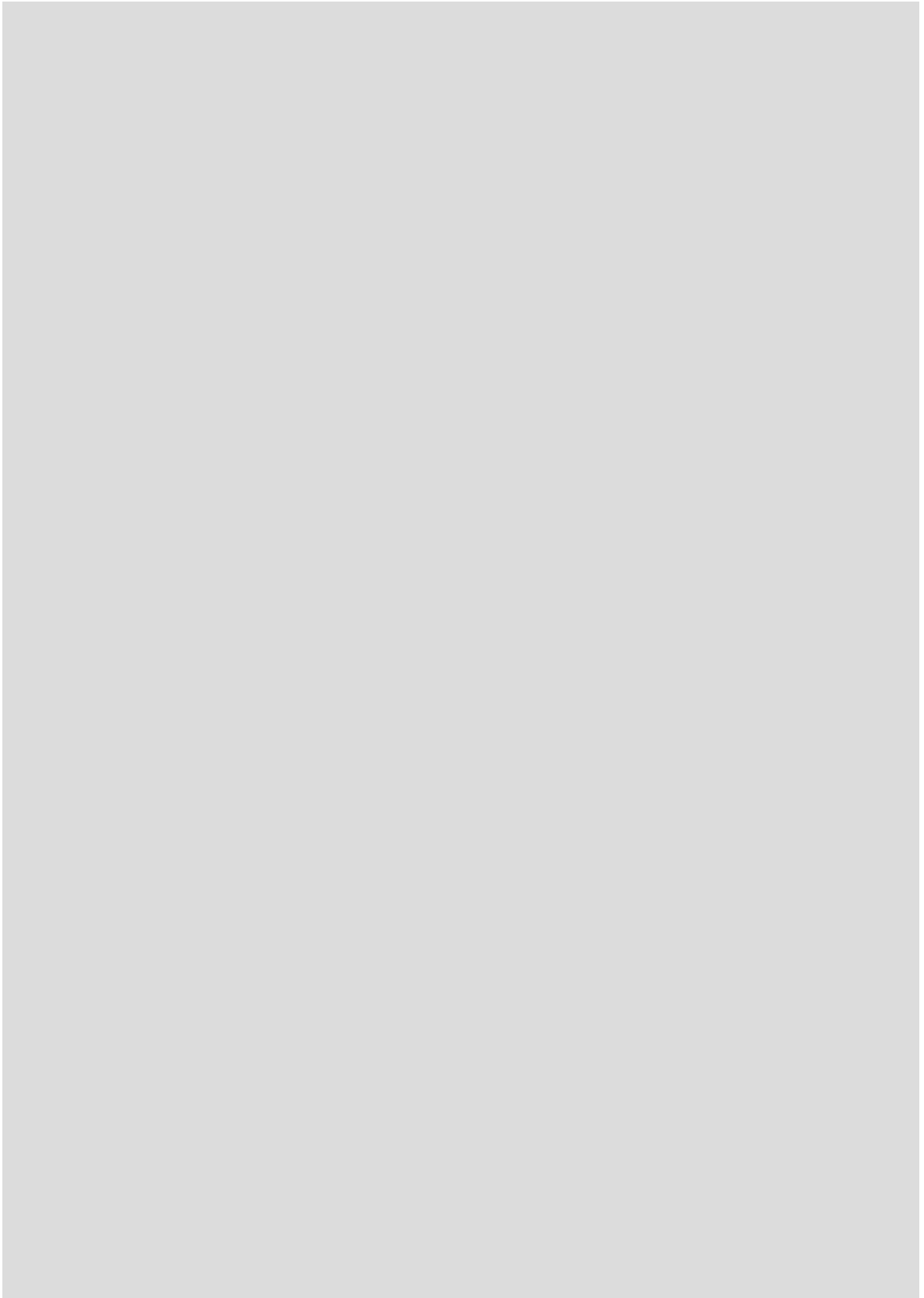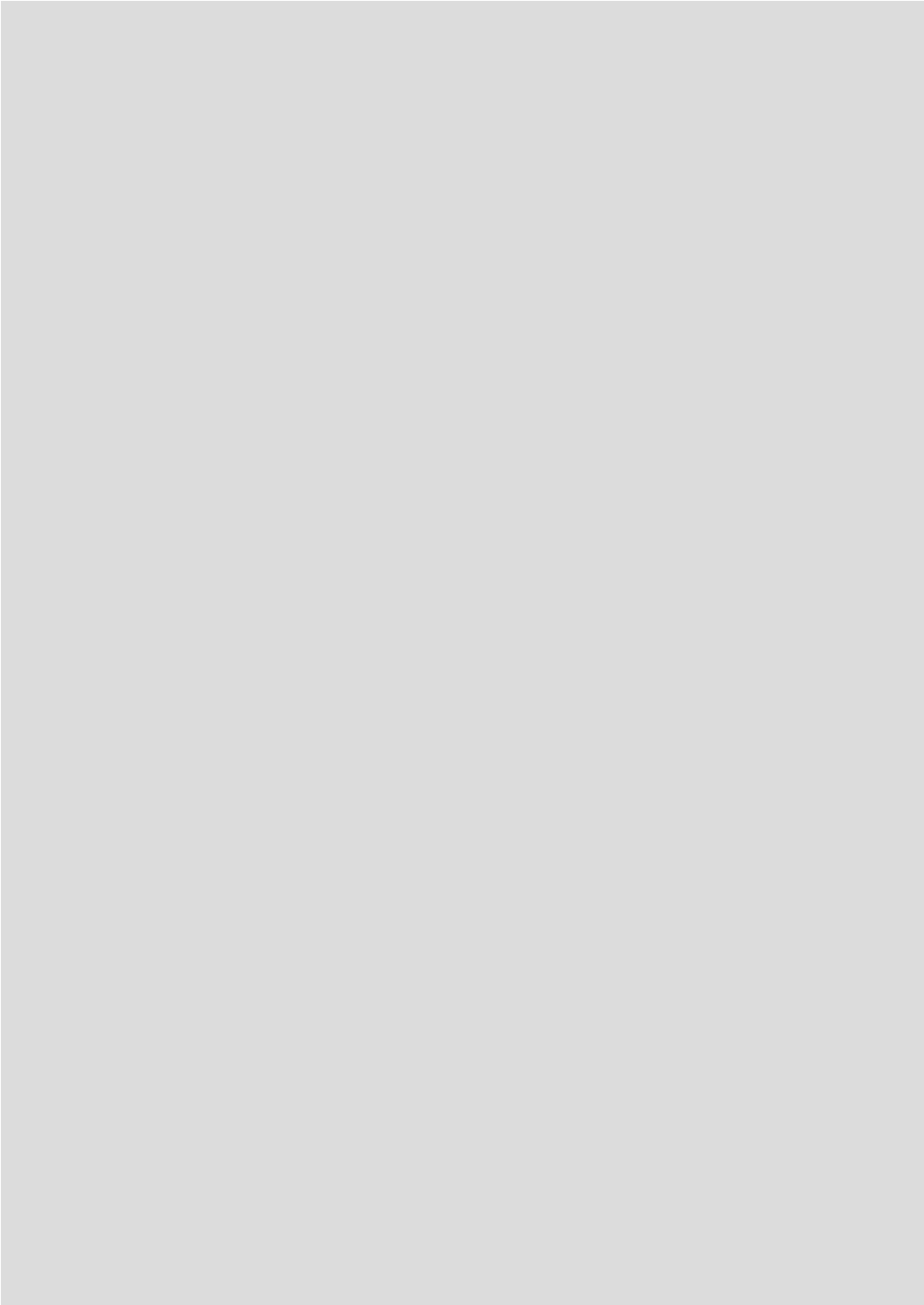**Figure 13c.**

Figure 13d.

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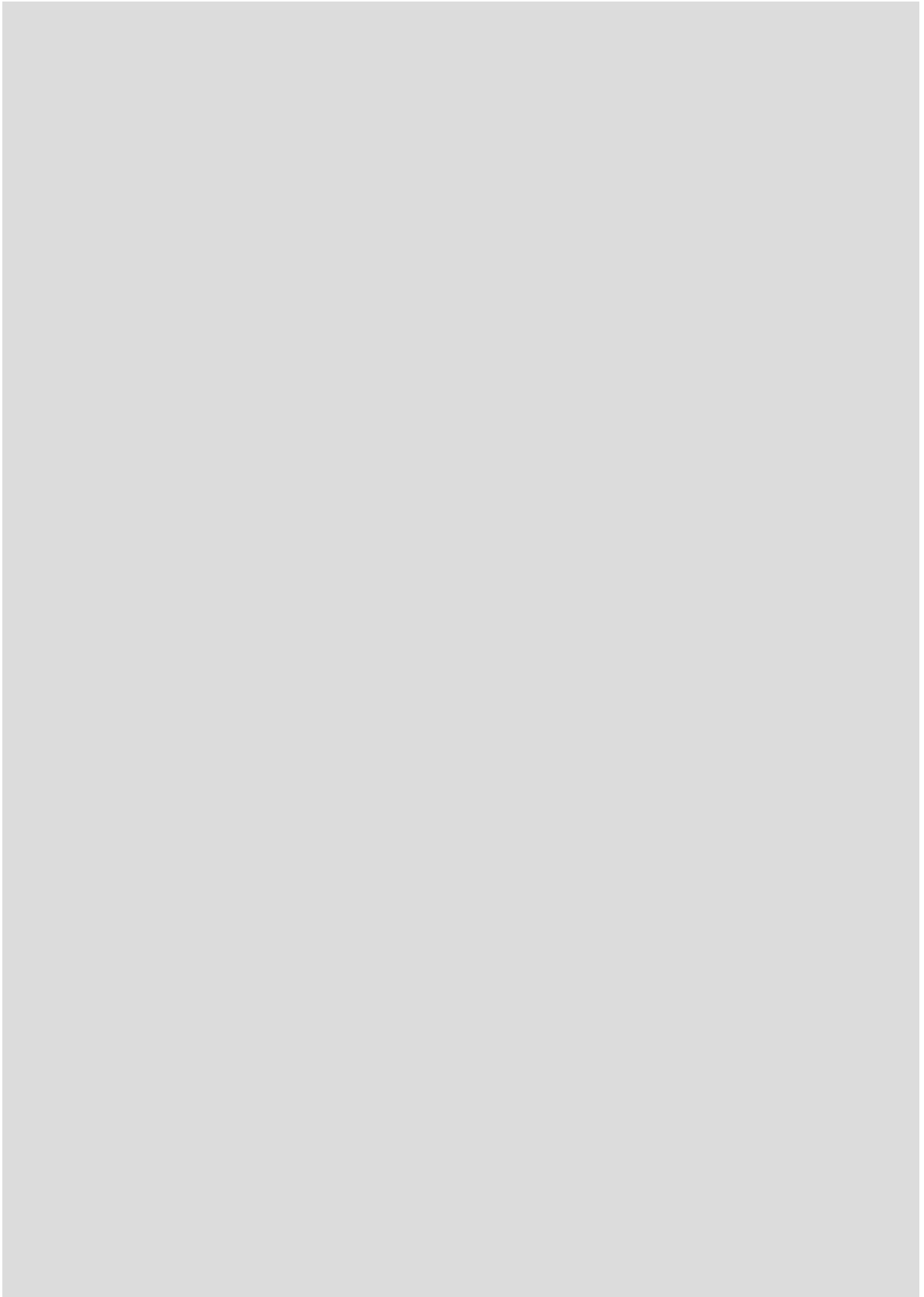
Figure 13e.
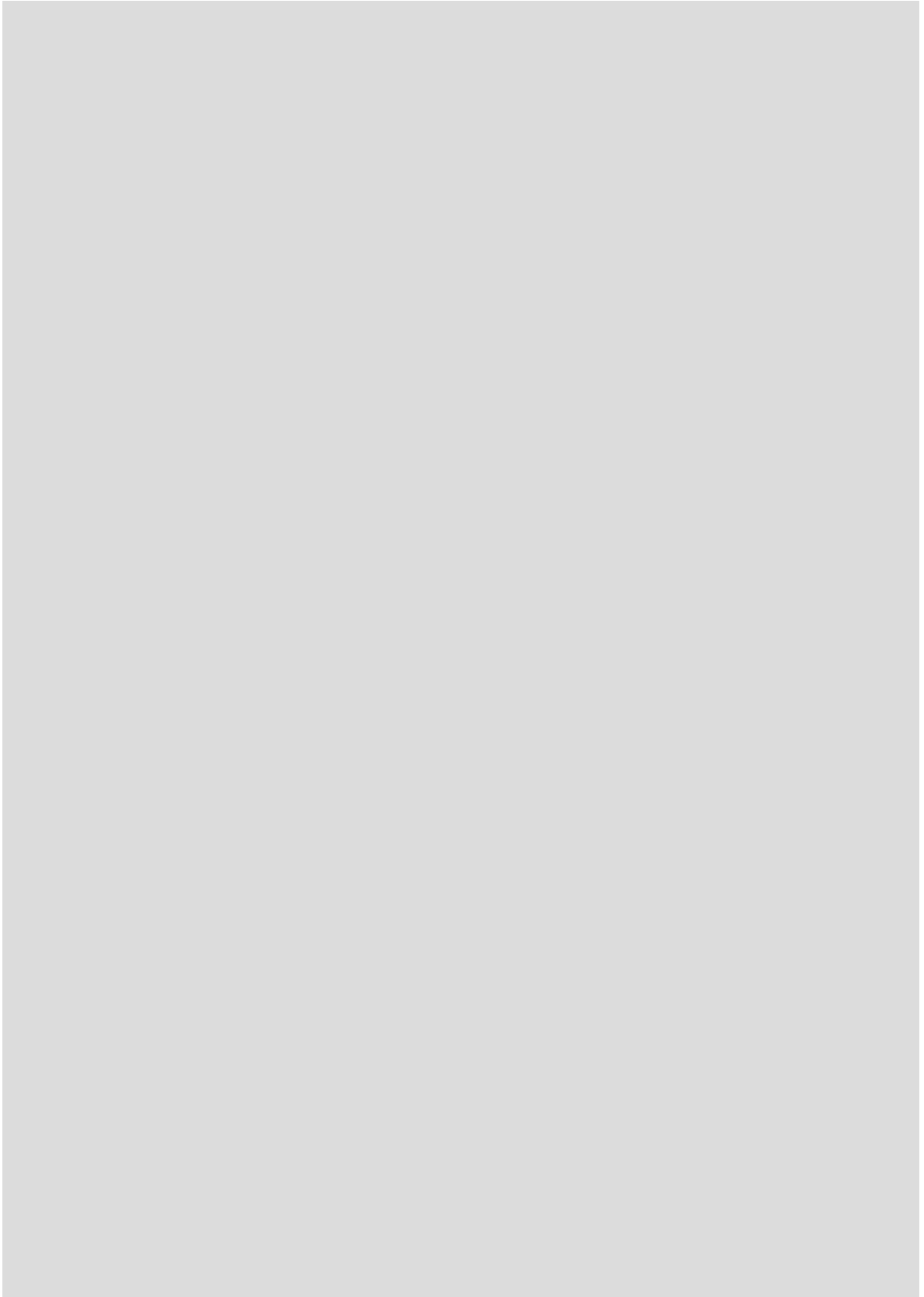
Figure 13f.

Figure 13g.
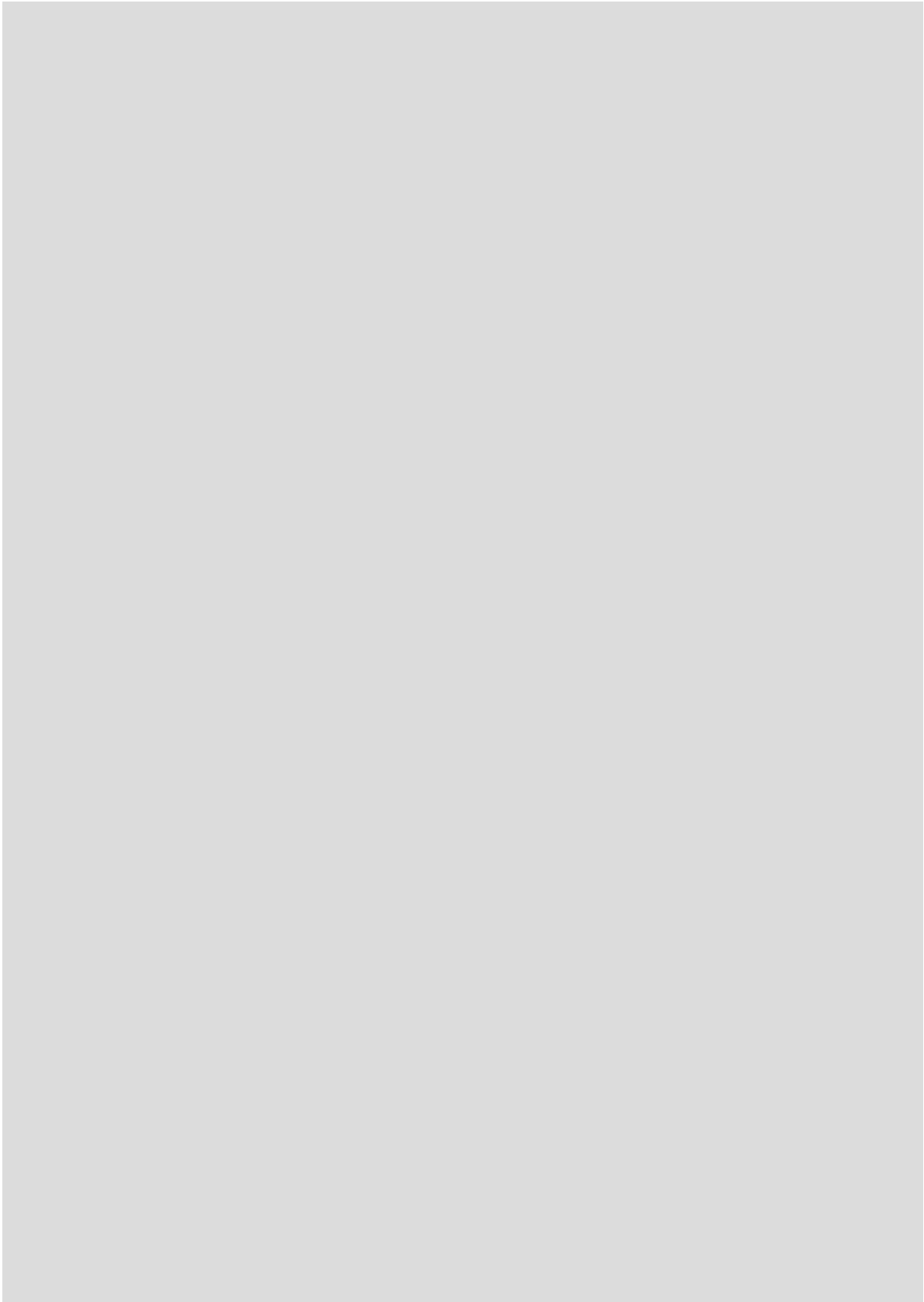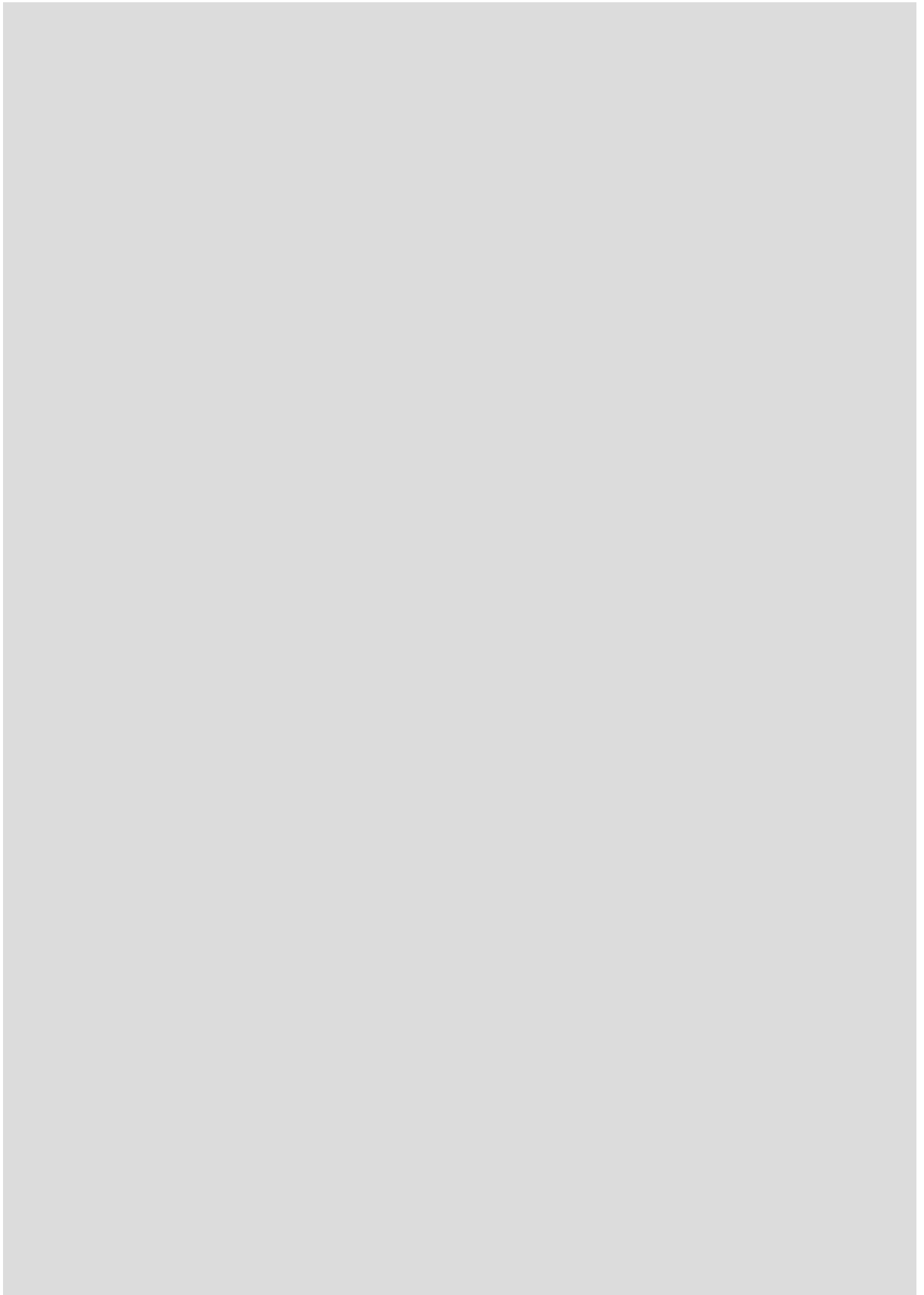
Figure 13h.

Figure 13i.

Figure 13j.

Figure 13k.

Figure 13l.

Figure 13m.

Figure 13n.

Figure 13o.

CHAPTER THREE

Selfhood and trauma in Lynda Barry's "autobifictionalography"

Stepping from the insular boys' club of Crumb, Sim et al., the transition to Lynda Barry and Julie Doucet seems particularly refreshing. However, as I turn to discuss the comics of two women I must inevitably face the question of why, of eight comics creators, I am discussing only two women. If there are really so few women writing alternative comics, it is worth considering why that might be.

As Roger Sabin points out, there are three distinct but related problems – the representation of women in comics, women as readers, and women as creators working in the comics industry.[1] Predictably, few women choose to investigate an art form that has traditionally been used to produce male-orientated, if not downright misogynistic material. Nevertheless, as my chapters on Crumb and Sim have shown, the predominance of male authors, artists, readers and themes is not as straightforward as one might imagine. Trina Robbins has done a great deal to promote women cartoonists and comics aimed at a female readership. Her books *A Century of Women Cartoonists* (1993), *From Girls to Grrrlz* (1999) and *The Great Women Cartoonists* (2001) remain more or less the only sustained examination of comics by or for women. Robbins explains that for much of the twentieth century, comics were aimed at girls as much as boys: in their heyday in the 1940s, *Archie* comics, for example, sold to children and teens of both genders and spawned dozens of spin-offs and imitators. Admittedly, most were written by men, and from a twenty-first century perspective, the versions of femininity promoted by *Archie*'s successors were often highly suspect, but nevertheless these comics sought to engage with what they perceived to be themes of interest to girls and women.[2] However, these comics declined in popularity throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

The comics industry changed a great deal as the underground and then the new independent and alternative publishers developed throughout the 1970s and 80s, but the predominance of male creators, which was no surprise in the 1940s, began to seem increasingly anachronistic. Beth Bailey writes that in the first phase

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1   Sabin (1993) 221.
2   Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of [Female] Comics from Teens to Zines* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999) ch. 1.

of the counterculture, representations of sex and the female body were often thoroughly anti-feminist, but that women were initially reluctant to challenge these for fear that the alternative was a return to the previous status quo in which sexuality was not discussed at all.[3] However, it is clear from Robbins' account that some women did challenge the dominant representations of women, and experienced exclusion because of this:

> Sadly, most of the male underground cartoonists understood as little about the new women's movement as the newspapers did, and reacted to what they perceived as a threat by drawing comix filled with graphic violence directed mostly at women. People – especially women people – who criticized this misogyny were not especially welcome in this alternative version of the old boys' club, and were not invited into the comix being produced.[4]

Although I have argued that Crumb's representations of violence against women are not straightforwardly misogynistic, and Sim's extravagant anti-feminism can hardly be considered representative, nevertheless my chapters on these creators suggest that there is some truth in Robbins' claim. Until very recently the situation has been slow to improve, partly because women writers and artists are frequently drawn to gendered topics. As Robbins points out, these women have often found themselves in an impossible dilemma: if they band together and support each other they risk becoming ghettoized, their work categorised as "women's comics", but if they attempt to compete in a male-dominated field their subject matter often leads to their exclusion.[5]

The fact that selfhood has become such a prominent topic has compounded the problem. The trend that Crumb started in the late 1960s has proved endlessly popular, and for nearly forty years, alternative comics writers have devoted a lot of energy to talking about themselves – their neuroses, identity crises, sexual fantasies, relationship problems and general sense of alienation from the mainstream of western culture. Autobiography, or semi-autobiography, has become one of alternative comics' central themes, and as many titles demonstrate, the medium proved ideal for representing the fractured, decentered qualities of late-twentieth-

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3   Beth Bailey, "Sex as a Weapon: Underground Comix and the Paradox of Liberation", in Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, eds. *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s* (London: Routledge, 2001), 305-324.
4   Robbins (1999) 85.
5   Robbins (1999) 118.

century experience. Writers like Harvey Pekar, Chester Brown, Joe Matt, Marjane Satrapi, Chris Ware and Craig Thompson have stretched the boundaries of the form in their attempts to narrate their own unstable and confusing lives and memories. However, much as I reject Scott McCloud's idea that comics readers identify with comics protagonists more intensely than consumers of other textual or visual media, it would be pointless to deny that readers of all media often privilege writers whose problems and perspectives, fantasies and ideals they recognise. As long as selfhood is the main topic of conversation, the distinction between "male" and "female" comics remains hard to erase.

I have so far said relatively little about the retail environment in which comics are sold, but it has had a significant impact on the appeal of comics to female readers. When Crumb was buying *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* as a child, these titles were distributed on newsstands alongside other periodicals. Underground comics, on the other hand, tended to be distributed via "head shops", where they were sold alongside posters, dope-smoking paraphernalia and other counterculture-related products. Throughout the 1970s, as the underground press developed into alternative and independent publishers like Fantagraphics, Black Eye Press and Top Shelf, comics gradually moved into specialist comics shops. These specialist shops generally sold both mainstream and alternative comics, supporting innovative work alongside the traditional superhero material. These shops gave comics a home as the newsstand market dried up and the head shops closed down, but they also had the effect of insulating the market. As comics were segregated from other products, consumers were no longer likely to pick up a comic book while shopping for something else, and soon comics became the preserve of a largely male fan culture.[6] The isolation of the comics market from both periodical and mainstream trade publishing worked against women comics writers. Once the retail environment had been polarised in favour of male readers, it became almost impossible for women to break back in: comic book shops were places in which women seldom felt comfortable, so those readers who might be inclined to buy a title like *The Amazing 'True' Story of a Teenage Single Mom* would never come into

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6   Parts of this argument were first published in Emma Tinker, "Manuscript in Print: The Materiality of Alternative Comics", *Blackwell Literature Compass* 4.4 (July 2007) 1169-1182. On the direct market, see Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001) 260-2, and Pustz (1999).

contact with the product.[7] Pustz notes that women who might be interested in comics are often deterred from spending time in comics shops by the prevalence of "posters featuring women with unbelievable amounts of cleavage" and "the gazes of male patrons who are surprised to see women in that setting".[8] Only very recently have book-length comics (under the guise of the graphic novel) begun to make their way into mainstream bookshops, and suddenly notable women writers like Marjane Satrapi are doing exceptionally well.[9]

Unlike Julie Doucet, Marjane Satrapi and many younger female cartoonists, Lynda Barry does identify herself as a feminist, and the development of female identity is the central preoccupation of her work.[10] In discussing the role of humour in her comics, she emphasises its power to effect social change by drawing attention to attitudes that people, and particularly women, unthinkingly internalise:

> I think that humor can actually change your point of view because it shows you the dumb girl in you and the smart girl in you. It divides it out, and when you laugh, you have this really sweet moment where you decide what you want to take back in. If you can laugh at an intelligent woman with a college degree obsessed with her body, wishing she had big tits or convinced that no one will love her because she has five stretch marks on her left thigh, then you can begin to change the way you see things.[11]

Barry goes on to speak of Roseanne Barr's humour as tremendously empowering for women because "when I see [it] I see how the system works". For her, comedy is a way of highlighting injustice, and one that is all the more potent by virtue of its unthreatening façade. Nevertheless, and perhaps disappointingly for those like Robbins who would like to promote a tradition of women cartoonists supporting and influencing one another, neither Barry nor Doucet makes any reference to the feminist comics of the 1970s like *Wimmin's Comix* (1970-91) and *Tits 'n' Clits* (1975-) in spite of their shared commitment to autobiography and feminine subjectivity.

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7   Katherine Arnoldi, *The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (New York: Hyperion, 1998).
8   Pustz (1999) 8.
9   As Paul Gravett notes, the popularity of manga amongst young girls has recently begun to alter the gender imbalance of comics reading. See Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Lawrence King, 2004) 155-6.
10   See, for example, Mary Hambly, "An Interview with Lynda Barry". *Backbone 4: Humor by Northwest Women* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1982). This, and many other interviews with Barry are archived at *Marlys Magazine* <http://www.marlysmagazine.com/interviews/hambly.htm>
11   Rosemary Graham, "Dividing Them from Us Within Ourselves: A Conversation with Lynda Barry". *Iris: A Journal about Women* 20 (Fall / Winter 1988). <http://www.marlysmagazine.com>

Barry acknowledges a wide range of sources from Dr Seuss and Mrs Piggle-Wiggle to *Mad* cartoonist Dave Berg and Pop artist Peter Max. Most significantly, for all Crumb's apparent hostility to women, both Barry and Doucet cite him as an influence, and both acknowledge themselves to be part of a comics tradition that began with the underground.[12] This paradox is understandable and certainly nothing new: one can admire and emulate the art of one's predecessors without absorbing their politics. Both Barry and Doucet absorb Crumb's influence but frame their own representations of selfhood in very different ways from the male artists of the 60s and 70s. As the following two chapters will demonstrate, Barry and Doucet, like many alternative women comics writers from the 1970s to the present day, acknowledge a considerable debt to the innovations of the underground, not least in their determination that apparently low-brow, subversive humour and bizarre, ugly or explicit drawings can be powerful tools for social change.

If Lynda Barry is not a universally recognised name amongst comics readers, this is partly because she arrived in the alternative comics world from an unusual direction. Although her work has been published in underground anthologies such as Spiegelman and Mouly's *Raw*, Lynda Barry is primarily a self-syndicated cartoonist: that is, her books are collections of material originally published in the form of short newspaper and magazine strips.[13] This has not only had a significant effect on the narrative structure of her comics, but it has also affected the demographics of her audience.[14]

Newspaper and magazine cartoons have a history all their own and are not generally discussed alongside book-length comics or anthologies of short stories. For a start, their development has followed a trajectory different from that of comic books. Comic strips have existed as a part of newspapers for longer than individual comic books, and have suffered none of the comic book's troubles in gaining social acceptance and respectability. When Frederic Wertham produced *Seduction of the*

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12   See Joe Garden, interview with Lynda Barry. *The Onion A.V. Club*. 8th December 1999 <http://www.avclub.com/content/node/24257>; [Richard Wang et al.] "Lynda Barry, Funk Queen USA" *Blair* 5 [January 1998] <http://www.blairmag.com/blair5/lynda/lynda14.html> and Andrew Dagilis, "Julie Doucet's Secretions". Interview. *The Comics Journal* 141 (April 1999) 100.
13   *Raw* 2.3. (1991).
14   Teresa M. Tensuan discusses the cultural importance of newspapers as the context in which Barry's work would first have been read. See Teresa M. Tensuan, "Comic Visions and Revisions in the Work of Lynda Barry and Marjane Satrapi" *MFS* 52.4 (Winter 2006) 947-64.

Innocent, his polemical critique of mid-twentieth-century comic books, he was at pains to point out that he had no problem with comic *strips*, which, he said, were subject to stringent censorship and not aimed at a child readership.[15] Furthermore, as Trina Robbins notes, newspaper strip cartoonists can expect a reasonable proportion of their readers to be women, unlike the authors and artists of most comic books in the 1970s and 80s.[16] Nevertheless, the relationship between comics and their newspaper hosts altered considerably throughout the twentieth century. The days when a comic strip might have a significant impact on the success or failure of a newspaper are well in the past. (In 1896, for example, Richard Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* played a key role in the success of William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*.)[17] Throughout the early twentieth century, newspaper comics artists were often allocated entire pages, and were free to develop narratives that demanded an attentive continuous readership. New writers and artists could often find a way into the business with small local newspapers, and unusual strips could potentially develop a small but loyal following. Over the last fifty years, however, the space that newspapers have been prepared to devote to cartoons has shrunk considerably, and the demands on format have become increasingly restrictive. With a few rare exceptions (Posy Simmonds in *The Guardian*, for example) artists can no longer get away with elaborate, non-standard layouts, and full-page comics in newspapers and magazines are now uncommon. Increasing syndication of comic strips has led to the same material being reprinted in hundreds or even thousands of papers, with the result that big names dominate the market, and openings for new artists are difficult to find. Syndication has also arguably affected the range of subject matter acceptable, and it is now difficult for cartoonists to experiment or deal with controversial material in their work.[18] Brian Walker notes, for example, that Gary Trudeau has repeatedly been censored for making political comments, as well as for "introducing a gay character, showing an unmarried couple in bed, and calling the president's son a "pothead"".[19]

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15   Frederic Wertham, *The Seduction of the Innocent* (London: Museum Press, 1995) 14.
16   Trina Robbins, *The Great Women Cartoonists* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2001) 140.
17   For further details of Outcault's relationship with *The New York Journal* and *The New York World* see Brian Walker, *The Comics before 1945*. (New York: Abrams, 2004) 21. This, and its companion volume *The Comics since 1945* (New York: Abrams, 2002) offer the best introduction to the field of newspaper comics, and form the basis for much of the following summary.
18   Bill Watterson discusses the influence of syndication upon cartoonists' careers in his introduction to *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* (London: Warner Books, 1995).
19   Walker (2002) 65.

In addition to the differences in publication format which in turn produce marked differences in the audience and their expectations, it is important to note that a story designed to be read in short segments cannot afford to retain the structure of a longer comic book. A three or four-panel strip requires skills very different from those used by graphic novelists: even if it can overcome the need for a daily gag, such a strip must make sense to readers who have missed a section of narrative, it cannot have long sections in which nothing much happens, it must not contain so many characters that readers forget who is who, and so on. As syndicated strips are often printed out of sequence, it has become increasingly difficult for an artist to sustain a complex, continuous storyline. Unlike a novel or even a longer comic book, the plot of a comic strip is never exactly *going* anywhere – it is necessarily open-ended, the exact opposite of a genre like the *Bildungsroman* in which character progression is the main point. In this respect comic strips most closely resemble TV series in which each episode reaches a limited closure whilst characters, setting and major story arcs are carried from one episode to the next. In their analysis of television serial narratives, Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp describe a sliding scale between the serial, like *Eastenders*, in which there is almost no closure within a single episode, and the series, like *The Simpsons*, in which each episode is complete and can be understood in isolation.[20] Modern serial comic books, like those within the Marvel universe, or indeed like *Cerebus*, are closer to the soap-opera end of the scale, demanding a continuous readership with a fairly high level of background knowledge to understand each episode, whereas daily or weekly newspaper and magazine strips must be reasonably coherent in isolation. Throughout the twentieth century the demand for self-contained, gag-based cartoons over continuous, serial strips increased dramatically, and the pressure on writers to produce strips that can be read in any order is now intense. In television, changes to the microcosm of a series are generally introduced slowly, but relative temporal stasis is easy to achieve in a comic. Partly thanks to the convenience of not having human actors to worry about, most strips adhere to the convention that characters do not age even if a strip runs for decades.[21] Together, these factors contrive to produce a narrative form quite unlike any other, and it is essential in an

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20   See the introduction to Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich (eds), *Narrative Strategies in Television Series* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
21   Such rules are made to be broken. The characters in Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* (1918-), for example, age at a relatively normal rate.

analysis of Barry's comics to pay close attention to their original publication format and the effect that this has had on her narrative.

Barry started drawing cartoons while at Evergreen State University in the late 1970s, and was first published by her friend Matt Groening, editor of the college newspaper and subsequent creator of *The Simpsons*. In 1979 *The Chicago Reader* agreed to publish her strip *Ernie Pook's Comeek*, offering what she perceived as a generous salary of $80 a week, and she claims it was at this point that she decided to become a professional cartoonist.[22] Following her successful publication in *The Seattle Sun*, Barry syndicated her own work, sending photocopies to other alternative weeklies.[23] For much of the 1980s she had a regular full page strip in *Esquire* magazine, and in recent years Barry's cartoons have been published in the online magazine *Salon*. Many of her strips have been reprinted in collections published by Real Comet Press, Harper Collins and Sasquatch Books. In addition to these collected editions of her comics, Barry has published two illustrated novels, *The Good Times Are Killing Me* (1988) and *Cruddy* (1999).

Many critics have discussed Barry's engagement with ethnicity, and I want to outline their arguments briefly before focusing on what I consider to be the more important themes of youth and gender in her work. In general, in view of the prevalence of issues surrounding the identity of troubled and marginalised individuals in comics, it is surprising that one so rarely encounters treatments of race. The Anglophone comic book world is dominated almost entirely by white writers and artists, notwithstanding the efforts of publishers like Milestone to produce superhero narratives for African American readers.[24] In terms of racial heritage, Lynda Barry exists in a curious, liminal space. She has pale skin and red hair and seems, by all appearances, to be a "white middle-aged old lady hippie", yet her mother is half Filipina and her white father has never been a major part of her life.[25] She grew up in a Filipina household with her mother and maternal grandmother, in

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22   Garden (1999).
23   Personal letter. 20 October 2007.
24   See Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001). Fredrik Stromberg, *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003) is also useful, although not aimed at an academic audience.
25   Melinda L. De Jesus, "Of Monsters and Mothers: Filipina American Identity and Maternal Legacies in Lynda J. Barry's One Hundred Demons." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 5.1 (2004) 7.

a bilingual Tagalog/English environment. The sense of a mismatch between outward physical appearance and personal ethnic identity is a particular preoccupation in *One Hundred Demons*. Melinda de Jesus' "Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness in Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*" is an excellent, thorough analysis of ethnicity in Barry's work. In this essay de Jesus argues:

> …the identity struggles Barry presents in *One Hundred Demons* must be regarded as contributing to the process of Filipina American representation and decolonization, rather than as just humorous depictions of ethnic American adolescent angst.[26]

Crucially, she points out that Barry does not need to spell out her concern with racial identity because the visual nature of the comics form does much of the work for her: red-haired, white-skinned, freckled Lynda looks very different from other members of her family. Nevertheless, Barry noted in a 1999 interview:

> …although there were racial conflicts on my street, certainly, they were nothing compared to the emotional ones… On the street where I lived, there were so many kinds of people in so many situations that it wasn't logical to group into a category as general as race.[27]

It is tempting to emphasise Barry's concern with race simply because it would be nice to find some non-white people discussing their own identity in comics. However, it would be unwise to overstate the case. When de Jesus asks, Barry does claim to identify with "pinayist" perspectives, but also says that hers is "a weird way to be Filipina" and makes the apparently apolitical statement that "I'm basically a hermit who loves to draw pictures and write stories".[28] De Jesus notes that Marlys was originally conceived as a Filipina character, but the fact that this attribute dropped away in subsequent representations suggests that ethnicity is not as important to Barry as the problems associated with gender and youth.[29]

     One Hundred Demons is perhaps the only one of Barry's books to have received the critical attention it deserves, and it is easy to assume that she has written nothing else of note. The fact that this title has received more analysis than
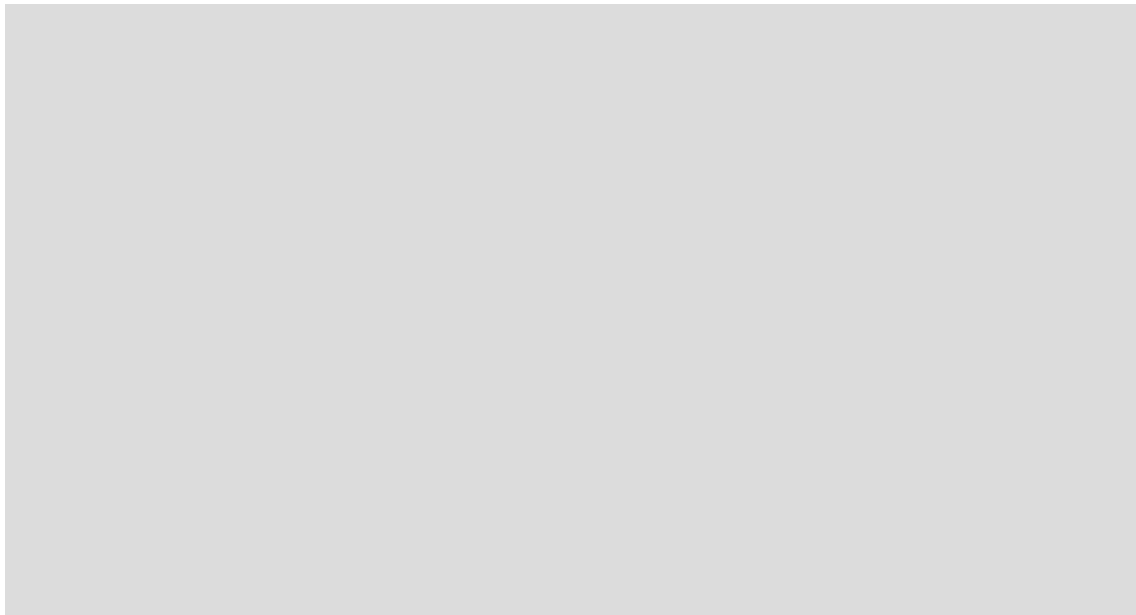
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26   Melinda de Jesus "Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness in Lynda Barry's One Hundred Demons." *Melus* 29.1 (2004) 228-9.
27   Pamela Grossman. "Barefoot on the Shag". Interview with Lynda Barry. *Salon*. 18th May 1999. <http://www.salon.com/books/int/1999/05/18/barry/index.html>
28   De Jesus, *Monsters* (2004) 7.
29   De Jesus, *Monsters* (2004) 22.

Figure 14.

all of Barry's other books put together is partly due to its awards (the Eisner Award

for Best New Graphic Album, plus an Alex Award for books appealing to young

adults) but also because it is an attractively garish book, the only one of Barry's

to be printed in full colour.[30] I do not intend to go over ground already covered in

excellent readings by Meisha Rosenberg, Ozge Samanci and Melinda de Jesus.[31]

However, I do want to place *One Hundred Demons* in the context of Barry's collected

comic strips, because as I will argue, the structural differences between *One Hundred*

Demons and Barry's short strips produce markedly different representations of

traumatic experience. First, however, I wish to analyse the development of Barry's

work from her early punk-influenced strips to the sustained examination of

childhood and adolescent experience found in her later comics.

Barry's early 1980s strips, collected in *Girls and Boys* (1981), *Big Ideas* (1983)

and *Everything in the World* (1986) deal primarily with adult relationships and exhibit

a visual style notably different from her mature work. The comic strips collected in

these books are primarily gag cartoons, often barely definable as narrative texts.

They include strips like "Breaking Up: Your Guide to Painful Separation" (Figure 14) ,

a viciously candid parody of women's magazine advice features, various meditations

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30   At time of writing this is in the process of changing: Barry's full colour *What It Is*, published
in May 2008 by Drawn and Quarterly, is intended to be the first of a series of seven books.
31   Ozge Samanci, "Lynda Barry's Humor: At the Juncture of Private and Public, Invitation and
Dissemination, Childish and Professional" *IJOCA* 8.2 (Fall 2006): 181-199; Meisha Rosenberg, "The
Demon's in the Detail: Lynda Barry's 100 Demons and the Multiple Frames of Feminist Comics."
Paper presented at the Popular Culture Association Conference, San Diego, CA 2005.

on fear and power, and any number of educated, intelligent women inexplicably fawning over worthless men. Some strips mimic a narrative format but deliberately fail to go anywhere: "The Creation of the World" starts with nothing of note and ends with a sad, prosaic anticlimax: "Everything seemed dangerous then and nearly everyone had to work at a job they didn't like all the time. But you probably know this next part by heart" (*Big Ideas*, 8-10). Significantly, the protagonists of these strips are not identifiable as individuals; they are generic young men and women in typical situations, and their stories do not require character continuity to make sense. These comics exhibit a distinct stylistic simplicity reminiscent of R. Crumb's line-only phase, but more importantly, they exemplify the defiantly messy, handmade aesthetic of punk. Where the underground, for all its supposedly liberal hippy ideology, tended to exclude women, punk had more room for female musicians, writers and artists, although the subculture was still heavily male-dominated and women are seldom allocated much space in histories of punk.[32] In discussing her time at college, Barry places herself in both camps, saying of Matt Groening, "he

Figure 15.

was not a hippie or a punk and I was both of those things in my own lame way".[33] Because "punk time for me was college", she describes 1979 as "post-punk time", although she rejects the term "new wave".[34] The deliberate scruffiness of Barry's comics later seems to reflect a commitment to the representation of childhood experience, but here in her early work it suggests a distinctly punk refusal of neatness and professionalism. Faces and figures are deliberately amateurish, noses seem stuck on as an afterthought, and particularly in representations of movement,

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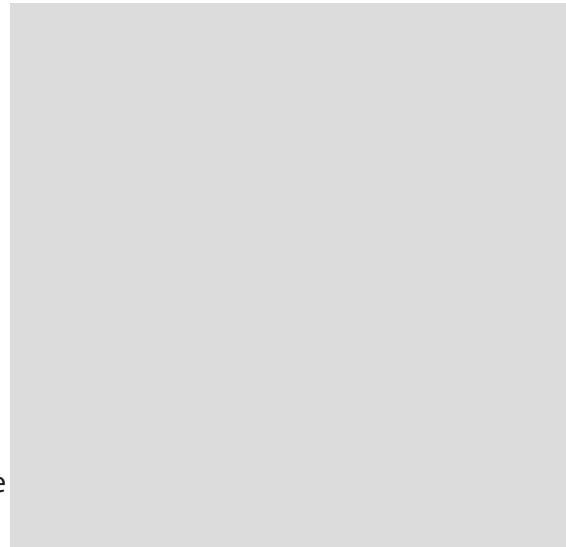
32   See Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

33   Garden (1999). Barry's perception of Groening's non-punkiness may not be entirely accurate – Guy Lawley claims that Groening worked in a "pioneering" punk record shop in 1977 and had links with the punk scene in LA. See Guy Lawley, ""I like *Hate* and I hate everything else": The Influence of Punk on Comics" in Roger Sabin, ed. *Punk Rock: So What? – The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 106.

34   Garden (1999).

lines are overdrawn almost to the point of abstraction (Figure 15) (*Girls and Boys*, 46). Most obviously, the covers of both *Girls and Boys* and *Big Ideas* feature characters with punk hairstyles, notably the "Poodle with a Mohawk" (an image which also appeared on a t-shirt).

In keeping with this defiantly punk style, Barry successfully ignores many of the conventions of professional cartooning. Several panels of "Breaking Up" are composed almost entirely of text, yet astonishingly, readers consent to see the whole strip as a comic (Figure 14) (*Big Ideas*, 69). Because Barry imitates the magazine feature format, producing a handwritten version of those carefully typeset lists of "dos and don'ts" that one might find in a boxout panel of an advice or lifestyle feature, the reader interprets the panel as a familiar form of graphic rather than as pure text. Recalling McCloud and Saraceni's iconic/symbolic scale, one might note that Barry presents symbolic text in such a way that it reads as an icon. Although deliciously witty, "Breaking Up" describes a dark and cynical perspective on modern relationships, which range from openly abusive to vaguely disappointing, with a colourful spectrum of guilt, boredom and dissatisfaction in between.

Around the mid 1980s, Barry's focus shifts towards children and teenagers. The section on "The World of Growing Up" in *Everything In The World*, in which the earliest strip is dated 1984, is both visually and thematically suggestive of her later work. Towards the late 1980s Barry gradually began to centre her comic strips on a specific family: Marlys, Maybonne and Freddie Mullen, and their cousins Arna and Arnold Arneson. The Mullens and Arnesons are both single parent families living in a lower class neighbourhood of an unspecified American suburb, although both families move around (the Mullens spend some time living in a trailer park) and both sets of children are occasionally sent to stay with relatives for reasons that their somewhat unstable mothers never explain. Maybonne is the eldest, with all the signs of emotional chaos that one might expect of a teenager; Arna is younger but sometimes surprisingly mature; Marlys is eight, and still very much a child. The boys tend to feature less prominently and their ages are harder to determine, but like Arna they generally seem to be between ten and twelve.

From *To Kill a Mockingbird* to the recent bestseller *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, the use of children as narrators of novels that comment on adult behaviour and values is nothing new. Likewise, the use of children as protagonists of newspaper strip cartoons is well established. However, most comic

strips which employ a child's perspective on adult events are engaged in a fairly light and superficial evaluation of adult values and practices. There is little hard-hitting satire or social critique in the average syndicated comic strip. This, perhaps, contributes to the prevailing assumption amongst non-comics readers that comics are kids' stuff (one reviewer of Spiegelman's *Maus* remarked "…*Maus* is not exactly a comic book, either; comics are for kids").[35] Most readers of Robert Crumb or Dave Sim would presumably recognise the unsuitability of such material for children, but the continuing dominance of this assumption may have something to do with the fact that many people's only contact with comics is through newspaper strips, which, if not exactly aimed at children, offer a distinctly anodyne vision of children's lives. The protagonists of, say, *Peanuts* or *Calvin and Hobbes* might express loneliness and perplexity at the workings of the adult world, but a reader can be reasonably sure that these characters are not going to be raped or beaten, exposed to homophobia, racism, alcoholism or mental illness. The microcosm in which they live allows the possibility of mild distress but these characters remain insulated from the worst horrors of the real world in a way that Barry's protagonists are not.

Many narratives about the lives of children are understandably preoccupied with the formation of adult identity, and many of the protagonists of Barry's strips are constantly, self-consciously trying to place and define themselves amongst their peers. To consider exactly how this works in Barry's comics, I want to examine two stories in which the narrators discuss the problematic and unstable formation of teen selfhood. In "How Things Turn Out", Arna explains the complexities of the school hierarchy (Figure 16) (*The Fun House*, n.pag). As in many of Barry's comics, the bulk of the narrative takes the form of first person narration rather than speech-balloon dialogue. Arna's commentary appears in captions which occupy more than half of each panel, and the accompanying images are fragments of an ongoing narrative illustrating differences in status between peers. Angela (labelled "top") refuses to have anything to do with Deena, at the bottom of the pile, whilst another nameless student apologises that she is forbidden from visiting a friend because "My mom says I'm not allowed to walk at where you guyses live". Barry herself has spoken of the impact that social deprivation had on her upbringing. She describes the "culture shock" of going to rich friends' houses in junior high school, and says:

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35   Elizabeth Hess, *The Village Voice* 14th January 1992. Cited in Joseph Witek, "Imagetext, or, Why Art Spiegelman Doesn't Draw Comics". *ImageTexT* 1.1 (Spring 2004).
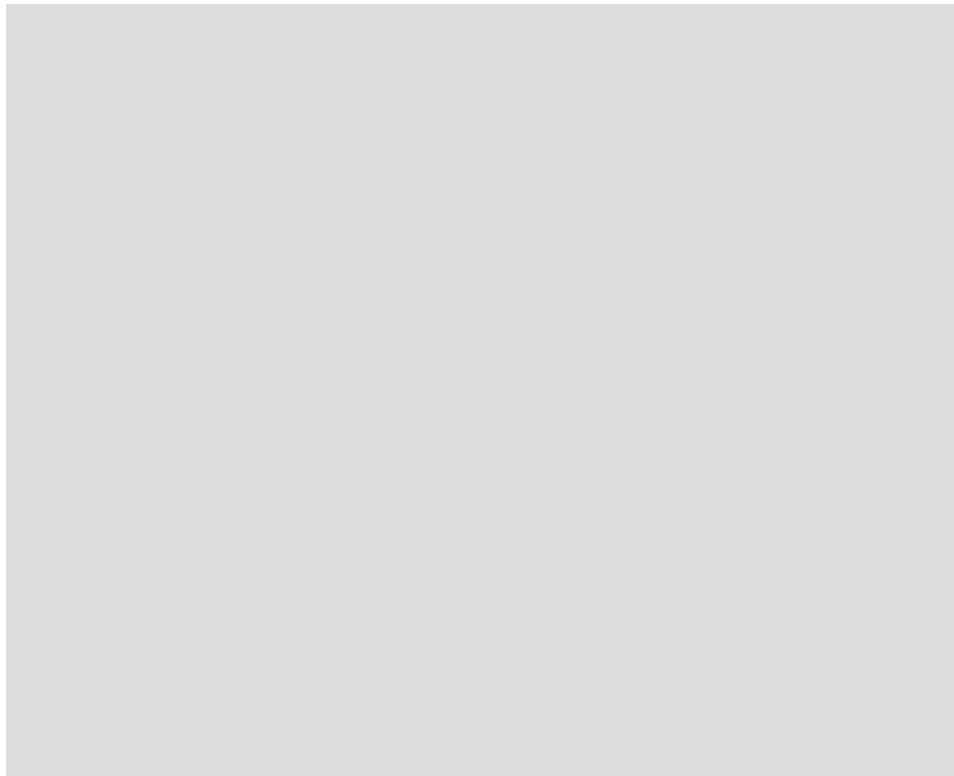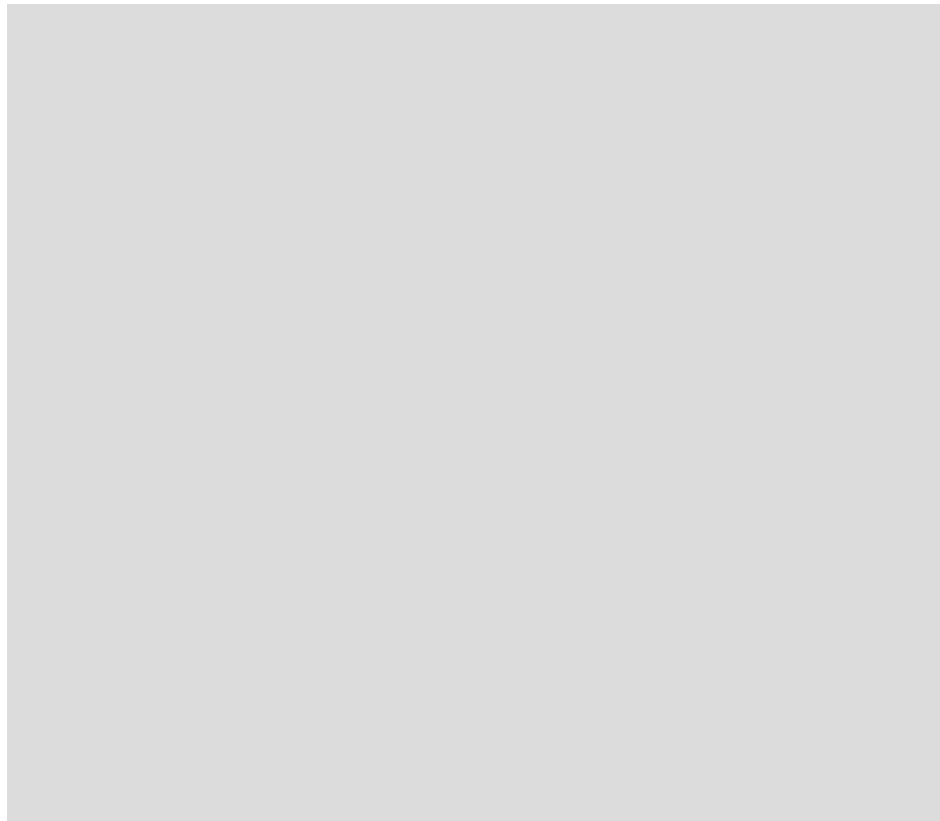
Figure 16.

I tried to be like the richer kids as much as I could because I wanted to live on their streets, at least hang out on their streets and eat their amazing food and walk barefoot on their shag carpets. I became something of a pest in that way, and in general other people's parents didn't like me. I had a boyfriend whose mother was horrified by me and would correct my manners all the time. She was so happy when it was finally over. [36]

Nevertheless, in the comics themselves one finds a marked distinction between class and peer group status. Arna notes that "money only mattered kinda", and the protagonists of Barry's comics are less concerned about wealth per se than their position in the school social order. In this hierarchy social class plays a part but so, for example, do large breasts, or a sophisticated taste in music (*Come Over*, 15; *Perfect Life,* 36). In "How Things Turn Out", Arna's mention of "the ones you would be ashamed to have to touch" inevitably refers the reader to the Indian Dalits, those outside the caste system who are often called "untouchables". In Arna's school, the American dream of being able to work one's way up from a position of low status barely exists even as an aspiration. The idea that a person of high status can be contaminated by contact with an untouchable is particularly sinister, as it produces a powerful disincentive to show compassion for the weak. In 1982, when

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36   Grossman (1999).

Figure 17.

Barry was still writing cartoons about adults, she told an interviewer that she was trying to draw attention to the power games of adolescence that "we like to think we have outgrown", and which adults "don't want to admit [happen] to them".[37] By returning to the point at which these games develop she interrogates the formation of abusive and self-destructive behaviour in adulthood. Through her ingenuous narrator Barry defamiliarises adult mores, and stages a sharp critique of a social reality in which children unashamedly mimic and amplify the attitudes of their parents.

"Perfect" is narrated by Maybonne, and describes what in many ways is an even more frightening social environment (Figure 17) (*Perfect Life*, 24-5). For Maybonne, selfhood is a personal project which demands constant effort and improvement. In another strip, when Maybonne returns to her mother's house and consequently her old school after staying with her grandmother, she resolves to take the opportunity to reinvent herself:

Mom says I don't have to start my new school until Monday. That gives me five days

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37   Mary Hambly, interview. *Backbone 4: Humor by Northwest Women*. (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 1982). Reproduced at <http://www.marlysmagazine.com/interviews/hambly.htm>

to experiment on my new personality: shy. Deep. Straight A's. And a British accent. (*It's So Magic*, 115).

"Perfect" demonstrates the futility of such efforts. Peering at herself in the mirror, Maybonne plaintively objects that "the new thing at my school is for you to be yourself", and asks, "but what do you do incase [sic] yourself really sucks?" She tries to use inspirational texts for support, but sadly reports the limits of their effectiveness: "I am trying to do that idea of the poem "You are a child of the universe" but sometimes it is so hard". Her sentence construction betrays part of the difficulty: she is trying to *do* an idea, to reconstruct herself and her feelings around a pseudo-spiritual concept. Maybonne's tearful lamentation that Doug is perfect for her is symptomatic of the mutability of her emotions: she only went with Doug in the first place to prove to her peers that she is not a lesbian, and she subsequently rejects him when he comes back and attempts to convert her to Christianity. In *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher described the immense cultural pressure on teenage girls in late-twentieth-century US culture whom she describes as being coerced into "worshipping the gods of thinness" and who "experience social pressure to put aside their authentic selves to display only a small portion of their gifts".[38] Like many girls, Maybonne finds herself saddled with the obligation to construct an identity for herself but struggles to do so in a culture that defines women by impossible standards of behaviour and physical perfection.

Both strips exhibit significant disjuncture between image and text. In "How Things Turn Out" there are two types of text, caption and speech, with the result that Barry effectively tells the same story twice, offering the reader two slightly different versions that corroborate each other's evidence. In terms of relative page space, the text dominates every panel, and the figures are squeezed in around Arna's commentary. "Perfect", on the other hand, contains no speech at all, and begins to move towards illustrated prose rather than comics narrative. The images in the first three panels could appear in more or less any order: indeed, their similarity is the point, as Maybonne's desperate wish for change remains unfulfilled and she inspects her reflection from different angles, trying to grasp how "being yourself" might work. Only in the final panel do we see a change: Maybonne's mirror-self

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38   Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994) 22.

attempts to comfort her sobbing, real world counterpart. This demonstration of the shadow-self's independence enacts the fractured nature of Maybonne's subjectivity: she can contemplate actively working on her identity because she feels herself to be divided into a number of different, overlapping selves.

An altogether more disturbing kind of splitting takes place in *The Freddie Stories* (1999), in which the deeply troubled Freddie repeatedly finds himself fractured into different personae. Freddie first begins to experience hallucinations after his failure to report a planned arson attack leads to the death of an elderly woman. He is visited by a night monster of whom he says:

> I do not control him, this fellow, this buddy, this pal. Not an imaginary friend. The very opposite of an imaginary friend. We were born together. (FS, 62).

When Glenn, who has been playing abusive "games" with Freddie, chokes to death on a peanut, Freddie attributes his death to this demonic "fellow". Freddie is subsequently hospitalised (sleeping in a damp basement protected him from his mother's anger at his compulsive behaviour but made him seriously ill), and says:

> And in the hospital the doctors brought a person back alive who was not me. And he answered them. And I watched. And he did not know I existed. (FS, 79).

The real Freddie lies in a narrow, hammock-like space above his alternate self, entangled with curling thorny shoots that accompany him for several pages, a mark of the otherworldliness of his present state (Figure 18). Here, the form of Barry's comics seems to enact the division and exclusion that Freddie feels: the caption occupies well over half the panel, and Freddie in his thorny hammock is squeezed between the hospital room and the text. Only Marlys is not taken in by the fake Freddie. Crucially, it is only when he finds other doubles – first the Baba doll and then his new identity "El Fagtastico" that he appears to regain some sense of wholeness. Freddie needs alternate selves
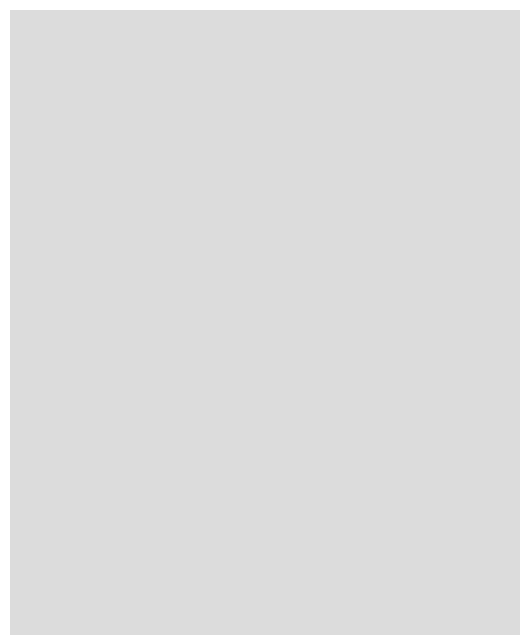
Figure 18.

in order to cope with his terrifying life: only by substituting the wilful strangeness of the Baba doll and El Fagtastico can he begin to drive out the night monster and the fake Freddie.

In all these strips Barry's drawings retain elements of a childlike style that reflects their content. Although the popular view of comics as kids' lit is invariably grounded in erroneous assumptions based on the cultural association of comics with childhood, the argument that Barry's comics are deliberately childish is rather easier to substantiate. Throughout the 1980s her style develops from her early punk drawings to a softer, more measured kind of scruffiness, and gradually her deliberate rejection of a masculine, adult, professional aesthetic is accompanied by a commitment to the representation of children's experience. She consciously adopts a messy, childish technique, with scribbled lines, distorted limbs and wiggly panel edges. The title of each strip is written in an ornate, uneven script, highlighted with decorative borders and doodled flowers in a manner reminiscent of a teenager's diary (see figures 16 and 17). The untidiness of Barry's drawing reflects the haphazard, uncontrolled character of the lives she depicts. Her protagonists veer from one disastrous personal situation to another, and unlike the artificially cute drawings of children in many cartoons for adults, Barry's children are gawky and inelegant. The correspondence between style and narrative is effective but sometimes ambivalent. On the one hand, many of Barry's comics have a sweet
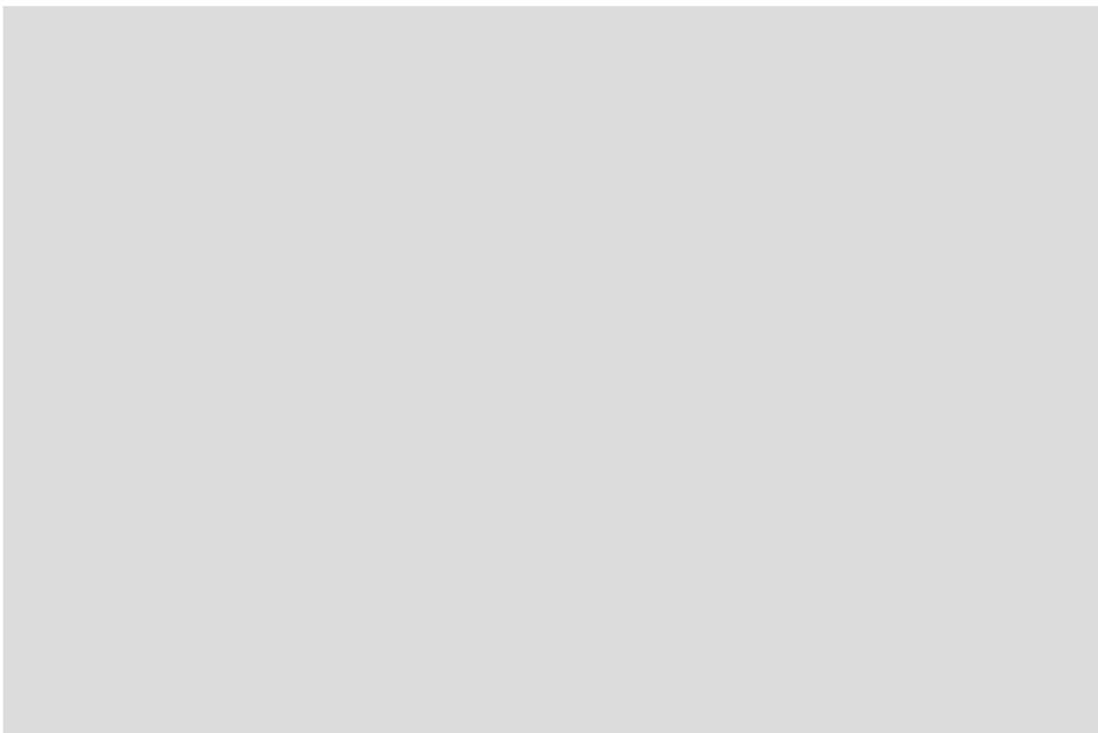
Figure 19.

and playful aesthetic that belies the serious and disturbing nature of their content. *One Hundred Demons* in particular is a brightly coloured, happy-looking book, suggesting all that is fun and frivolous about childhood and teenage life (Figure 19) (*OHD*, 62). In this respect it bears comparison with *Maus*, another text in which the narrative benefits from the disjuncture between its content and the reader's expectations based on style and medium. Yet at the same time, the clunkiness of Barry's drawings is spot-on: everyone, as Barry draws them, is ugly, fat, freckled and apparently uncomfortable in their own bodies. Mouths are big and clumsy, facial expressions are forced, limbs seem distorted and awkward. In "How Things Turn Out" Deena is small, gawky and awkward; in "Perfect" Maybonne's spotted face peers blankly at its shapeless reflection. Even people supposed to be beautiful in the context of the narrative come nowhere near to the comics stereotypes of beautiful people, and as a result the reader's sympathy remains with those who struggle with the belief that they are ugly. Perhaps most importantly, Barry's drawings of women and young girls deliberately resist any possibility of sexiness. Unlike mainstream, mostly male comics artists, who adhere to fairly strict conventions about the representation of women, Barry carefully avoids giving the reader any cute, provocatively dressed teenage girls to look at. It makes a substantial difference to the narrative: if these girls, who are so concerned about their appearance, were drawn as stereotypical cartoon eye-candy, the effect would be to trivialise their anxieties about the relationship between physical form and identity. Instead, by refusing to objectify their bodies, Barry focuses the reader's attention on the individuals themselves: her wavy, haphazard lines seem less to describe solid flesh than to mirror these girls' fragile conceptions of selfhood.

Barry's punky, DIY aesthetic also reflects a commitment to inclusiveness. At the end of *One Hundred Demons* comes an "Outro" in which she encourages readers to paint their own "demon" and offers practical advice on techniques and materials. By painting on lined legal paper and including photographs of herself slouched over a cluttered desk she demystifies the image of the artist and emphasises her "anyone can do it" stance. In addition to the "Come on! Don't you want to try it?" of its conclusion, *One Hundred Demons* is stylistically significant for its use of collage, a device that does not appear in any of Barry's black and white comics (Figure 19). Barry assembles a vast range of collected materials – pieces of printed fabric, cut out paper doilies, pressed flowers, glitter, scraps of torn and printed paper, photographs,

postage stamps and even origami insects. Her collage pages have a distinctly homemade, scrapbook feel, entirely unlike the consciously arty collages of Dave McKean, whose work I will discuss in chapter six. Meisha Rosenberg discusses Barry's collages in terms of Miriam Schapiro's concept of "femmage", which Schapiro defines as:

> …work by women of history who sewed, pieced, hooked, cut, appliquéd, quilted, tatted, wrote, painted and combined materials using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art-activities… Femmage is also practiced by contemporary women who, like their ancestors, are clear about their womanly life and how it shapes their view of the world.[39]

The practice of scavenging for discarded materials and re-using them in a creative process is, for Rosenberg, a positive, transformative process of "cutting, de-contextualising and layering of social and aesthetic constructions".[40] In Barry's hands, recycling and rearranging physical scraps of the past is a tool for controlling and defining that past, and ultimately for shaping one's own place in the present.

Having looked briefly at Barry's representation of childhood and adolescent identity in her short strips, I now want to turn to *One Hundred Demons*, and to read this book-length "autobifictionalography" alongside similar narratives of personal trauma that appear in her shorter strips (*OHD*, 4). Although many of Barry's comics contain a good deal of semi-autobiographical material, *One Hundred Demons* is more explicitly autobiographical than most, in spite of the author's ready admission that "parts of it are not true" (*OHD*, 7). The protagonist, Lynda, is clearly a version of the artist herself, who is shown as an adult in the introduction with black, flying demons telling her "this is pointless" and "what a waste of paper" (*OHD*, 11). In *One Hundred Demons* Barry sets out Lynda's childhood: a neglectful, emotionally abusive and occasionally violent mother; bullying and beating at school; poverty and social exclusion. Each chapter centres on a particular emotional "demon", and many of the episodes are linked by a preoccupation with loss. All these themes are familiar from her earlier work, but the difference here is one of perspective. As Barry looks back over thirty years, considering the effects of time and the nature of memory, the

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39   Miriam Schapiro, "Femmage" in Katherine Hoffman, ed. *Collage: Critical Views* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1989). Cited in Rosenberg (2005).
40   Rosenberg (2005).

resulting narrative is dramatically different from her short-form treatments of similar topics.

As I noted above, the comic strip is a unique medium in terms of its structure and narrative conventions. The protagonists of Barry's short strips exist in a continuous present, facing both happiness and distress here and now but never having to deal with the effects of their experiences in the long term. Marlys, Maybonne and Freddie do not age significantly over the many years that their story has run, and in spite of many traumatic and potentially life-changing events that take place, they do not exhibit substantial developments in character. On a practical level, this means that most strips (apart from those in *The Freddie Stories*) can be reprinted out of sequence with relatively little disturbance to the narrative. None of Barry's collections adhere to the original publication sequence, and only rarely does the reader notice. (One notable exception is found in *The Fun House* (1987), in which NeeNee is involved in a car accident on page 33 but only moves into the neighbourhood on page 68). More importantly, this stasis means that characters neither learn from their mistakes nor have to cope with the ordeal of reliving them. Whilst Barry's stories of the Mullen children narrate traumatic incidents, they do not show the effects of that trauma six months or twenty years later.

This open-enedness and lack of clear narrative progression is arguably more realist than the artificial novelistic structure which is so often imposed on narratives of childhood. Richard Coe, for example, notes that the timescales of childhood autobiographies tend to be contracted because, he says:

> …in the majority of cases the condensation in time reveals an attempt at a compromise between the retrospectively apprehended pattern of autobiography and the preconceived plot of the novel".[41]

One Hundred Demons is not, in this sense, novelistic; whilst it comprises a series of autobiographical incidents, its chapters do not lead on from one another in a necessary sequence. There is no single plot, but a series of episodes linked by the author's commentary. However, this commentary is of immense importance because it is this that transforms a series of detached incidents into an autobiography which exhibits the author's mature and distanced reflection upon

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41   Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984) 7.
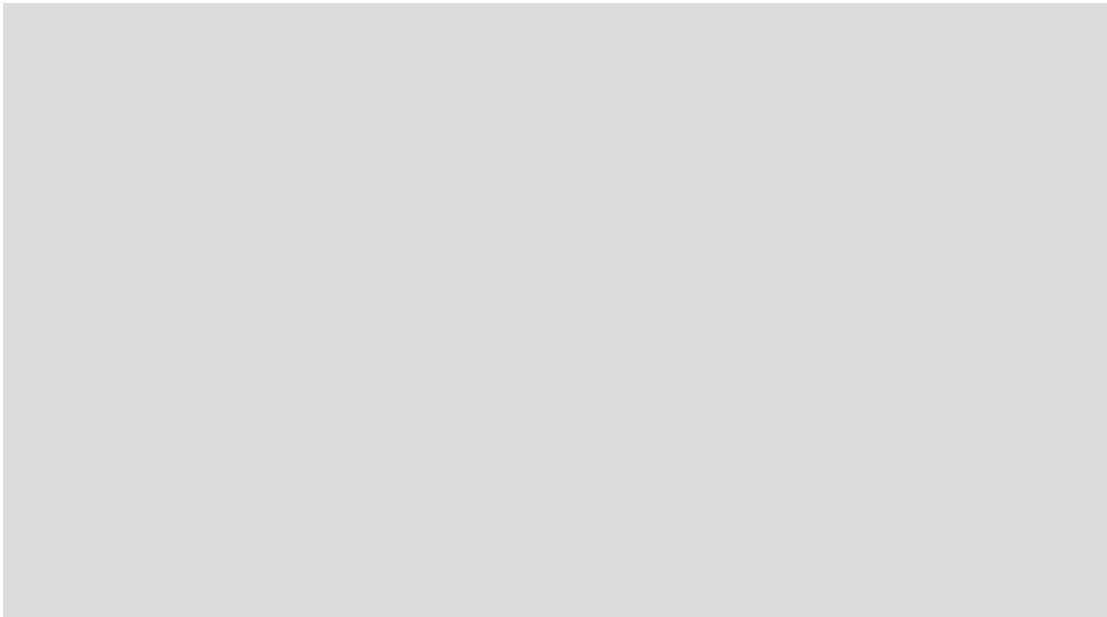
Figure 20.

past events.

One Hundred Demons is disturbing not just because of the incidents themselves ("Hey there sweetheart. Do you and your dolly want to go for a ride?") but because it demonstrates the extraordinary longevity of such events in the author's memory (*OHD*, 72). Barry uses the seventeen-year lifecycle of cicadas as a metaphor for traumatic memories which remain undead, resurfacing ceaselessly (Figure 20). She writes of her friend's suicide:

> Some cicadas stay burrowed underground for 17 years. The world turns 'round with them inside, alive in the blank darkness. Until the news reaches them. A telephone call. A scream. Come out, come out, wherever you are. // The "dog-days" cicada comes every year. They are singing as I write this. Invisible to my eye, filling this hour with sound. One year, 17 years, 30 years. I though I would be over it by now. (*OHD*, 168)

The imagery, although perfectly restrained, is straight out of a horror film, from the nightmare of being buried alive and the synecdochal sentence fragments "A letter. A scream" to the creepily playful "Come out, come out, wherever you are". Writing at a distance of thirty years, Barry is able to explore the terrifying complexity of buried memories as well as the process of burying them in the first place. She writes with anger of adults' naïve belief in children's "resilience", describing the reality of such survival as "the ability to exist in pieces", and explaining the intolerable paradox of "remembering not to remember". This is shown in Figure 19, with a partially obscured photograph of Barry herself and the perfectly balanced "CAN'T remember,

can't FORGET". Barry's use of the comics medium and the deliberate childishness of her style enact part of the problem. The young Lynda of *One Hundred Demons* is unable either to remain a child or to grow up fully, and so is caught in an appalling cycle of self-destructive behaviour that offers a momentary feeling of "wholeness" (*OHD*, 70). Furthermore, the comic exhibits a curious double vision: we see the young Lynda but read the commentary of her adult self, and we are aware that the childlike images of the girl are drawn by the adult. The narrative alternates between the child Lynda and her adult self: in "Dogs", one of the later chapters, the commentary refers to Barry's current life but the images drift between childhood and adulthood. *One Hundred Demons* encapsulates the appalling tension of early trauma, the condition of being both present and absent, trapped in childhood and forced into adulthood.

It is important to note that it is not the book-length form *per se* that produces the distance in *One Hundred Demons* but the fact that in this book, the distance between text and image effectively produces a double protagonist, the adult-child Lynda. *One Hundred Demons* was published serially, on the website *Salon.com*, and it is possible to read many chapters out of sequence without losing the sense of the narrative. Nevertheless, the effect of reading the collection as a whole is very different from that of reading the strips in isolation: the focus shifts from the humorously described "demons" to their effect on Barry herself.

Barry's use of the comics form also strengthens her narrative of trauma through its necessary condensation of events. Several theorists have written of the problems inherent in representing trauma. Dori Laub argued that although the telling of one's story is an important mechanism for survival, yet "no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to that inner compulsion" because the state of "being inside the event" makes witnessing impossible.[42] Cathy Caruth subsequently wrote:

> The trauma… requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others' knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall.

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42   Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival" in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 78, 81.
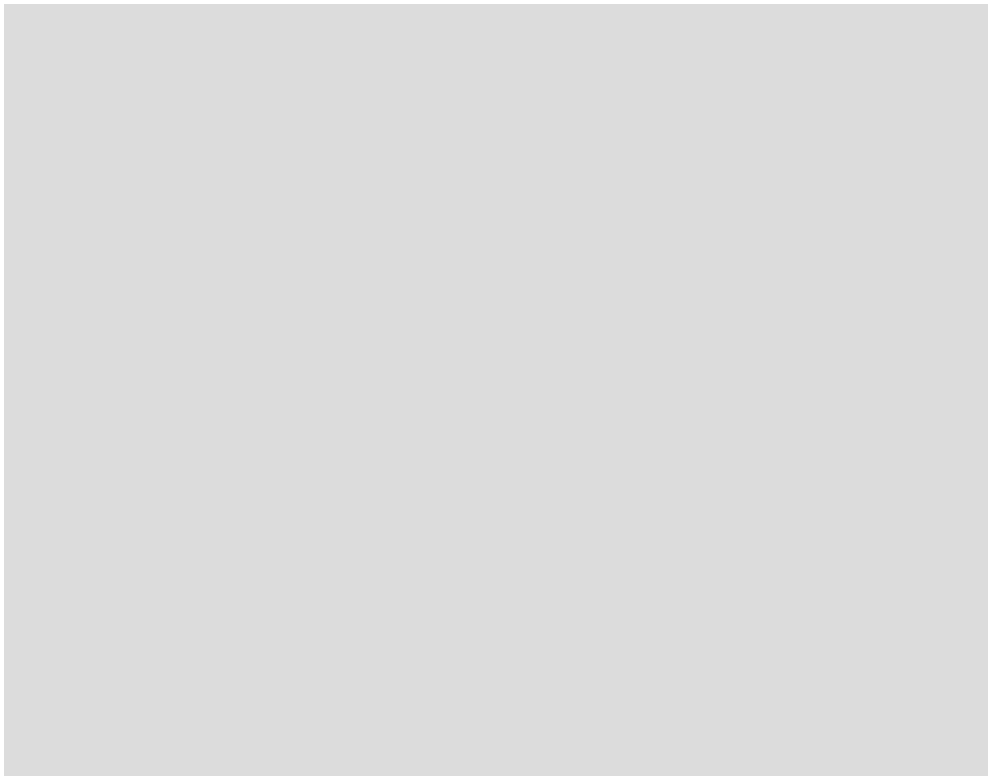
Figure 21.

Caruth goes on to suggest:

> …beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*. It is this dilemma that underlies many survivors' reluctance to translate their experience into speech…[43]

One could argue that writing and drawing a traumatic experience are two very different processes, but in fact Barry does not directly do either. Marlys' brother Freddie, her sister Arna, and Maybonne's friends Cindy Ludermyer and Cheryl Holt are all sexually abused or assaulted, but at no point does the reader witness the event itself. Although Marlys is fortunate enough not to experience abuse, she witnesses the suffering of others and is sufficiently disturbed that she refuses to narrate it. In "If you want to know teenagers", she leaves the last panel blank with the comment "Sorry for no picture. I saw something I can't even draw it. Don't try to guess it. Just forget it." (*The Greatest of Marlys*, n.pag).

Unlike Debbie Drechsler or Phoebe Gloeckner, both of whom illustrate sexual assaults in horrifying detail, Barry avoids depicting the incident itself,

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43 Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995) 153-4.

describing instead the effects of trauma on the victim's mental state.[44] In "Branded", for example, a younger child witnesses the aftermath of her older sister's rape (Figure 21). As readers we do not see the assault, nor even hear what happened from the victim herself; rather we are left with her sibling's observation of apparently unprovoked anger, the grass stains on her back, and a long period alone in the bathroom, "crying like she cried when our dog got killed". The victim's response is irrational and largely unconscious: she deflects her anger onto her family – "she said she hated me and everything and especially our mom and our dad and our house". To a reader this is clearly a displaced response to an event too traumatic and confusing to process, but to adult onlookers it simply makes no sense. The narrator reports their mother's unfeeling view that "once you're about 15 you turn to a stupid idiot and *that's* for sure", implying that such incomprehensible behaviour is not unusual in this fragile teenager. The episode is rendered unusually touching by the empathy of the helpless narrator and her effort to bring about another act of displacement: she deliberately smashes a glass and a plate to deflect their mother's anger onto herself.

One might well argue that Barry's refusal to represent sexual trauma is due partly to the limits of what a mainstream magazine will consider publishable: *discussing* sexual violence is one thing, *depicting* it rather different.[45] This inequality of censorship is too large and complex an issue to deal with here. However, I suggest that there is more to Barry's avoidance of graphic detail than simple evasion of censorship. In a conference presentation on Barry's illustrated novel *Cruddy*, Gene Kannenberg noted the narrator's tendency to talk around trauma, describing everything but the incident itself. Although *Cruddy* is not a comic, Kannenberg referred back to McCloud's disputed concept of "closure", and explained:

> When discussing his concept of "closure" in reading the gaps between comics panels – what he labels "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" – McCloud asserts… "In an incomplete world we must depend on closure for our very survival" (63). It seems to me that in these cases, Roberta is doing exactly the opposite. The "gaps" in her reported narrative act as a sort of coping mechanism, allowing her temporarily to make peace, to come to terms with a reality which is in fact *far too connected* with

44   Debbie Drechsler's *Daddy's Girl* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1996) and Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life* (Berkeley, CA: Frog, 1998) are excellent, although extremely harrowing representations of sexual abuse and assault.
45   Even without visual depiction of sexual assault, Barry has said that such strips are more likely to be censored now than they were fifteen or twenty years ago. Personal letter, 20th October 2007.

her; it's only by leaving out the worst of her life that she's able, for a while, to endure it.[46]

Kannenberg was describing Barry's prose, but this is also exactly what happens in her comics representations of trauma. These experiences go so far beyond the subjects' realms of familiar experience that they are, for them, unrepresentable in either language or image. What the reader sees, therefore, are not traumatic events but their consequences: young people crying, blaming themselves, wishing for death or developing severe behavioural problems.[47]

In *One Hundred Demons* Barry writes of the "compulsion to repeat situations that harmed you", an observation that brings together two key issues in the study of trauma narratives: agency and memory (OHD, 71). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud noted that the repetition of unpleasant experiences in dreams and play could not be accounted for by simple wish-fulfilment as he had previously thought. He hypothesised that the patient may repeat traumatic experiences "because by thus being active he gains far more thorough-going control of the relevant powerful experience than was possible when he was merely its passive recipient".[48] Repetition may represent an effort to master and control a traumatic past, but as B. A. van der Kolk notes, "clinical experience has shown that this rarely happens; instead, repetition causes further suffering for the victims or for people in their surroundings".[49] Kolk adds that children are particularly prone to this repetition, and that many individuals are not consciously aware of a connection between their early experiences of trauma and later abuse, rape and mental health problems. Again and again Barry's comics explore the boundaries of consent, abuse and assault, as girls silently submit to unwanted sexual contact. When Arna reports on her experiences with Kenny Watford she says, "…and you would stand there pretending something else was happening, anything else". A terrified Arna is shown standing in shadow, shoulders hunched, eyes shut, frozen (*Down the Street*, 101). These teenagers are clearly victims but often do not resist their abusers, and cannot possibly go to the

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46   Gene Kannenberg, ""Expect the Unexpected; And Whenever Possible *Be* the Unexpected": Lynda Barry's *Cruddy*". Unpublished conference presentation. PCA conference 2006.
47   See, for example, *One Hundred Demons* 70-1 and *The Freddie Stories* 66-7.
48   Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick. (London: Penguin, 2003) (1920) 75.
49   Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Compulsion to Repeat Trauma: Re-enactment, Revictimization and Masochism", *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 12.2 (June 1989), 390-1.

police or even to their parents (Cindy Ludermyer notes that her mother would be less sympathetic about her gang rape by Catholic schoolboys than angry that she was drunk and out at night in the first place) (*It's So Magic*, 68-9). Straightforward definitions of consent and refusal are meaningless: in legal terms these children are incapable of consent, but in practice they are at an age at which they are held responsible for their actions, including behaviours that both abusers and callous parents would denote as "asking for it". Arna's remark that she (and by implication others like her) would "sometimes" meet Kenny Watford in the woods implies that her experience is not a one-off; likewise Freddie's abuse in Glenn's cellar is ongoing, and only halted by Glenn's accidental death. The power of abuse is endlessly self-sustaining, as victims collude in repeating the very thing from which they most want to escape.

The compulsion to repeat trauma is hard to understand, but Barry moves towards an explanation when she describes her thirteen-year-old self "doing things that scared me but make me feel exhilaratingly whole" (*OHD*, 71). The idea of returning to the mental site of one's own trauma in search of this wholeness is of particular importance because for Barry, art itself can serve a similar function. She said of the singer Marilyn Manson:

> Marilyn Manson reminds me of a part of the psyche that is usually up in the back corner of the basement or attic of a person but can need to get very expanded at certain times in order for things to feel in balance to someone who is feeling off-balance. For some people, being very spooky can give enormous relief, and digging on a really spooky scary artist can provide a kind of stable sensation. I tend to look at phenomena like M.M. or the Chuckie movies or even Freddie Kruger as balancing elements in a sort of soul physics.[50]

That horror in art and literature can, for Barry, have a balancing or stabilising effect is further evinced by her references to the traditional violence of children's fiction which, she suggests, can paradoxically offer the most fertile possibilities for humanity and redemption. Following the publication of *Cruddy*, she repeatedly compared it to Grimm's *Hansel and Gretel*, suggesting that although such stories, if told as news items, would match any modern day tabloid for gruesome horror, they

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50   [Wang et al.] (1998).
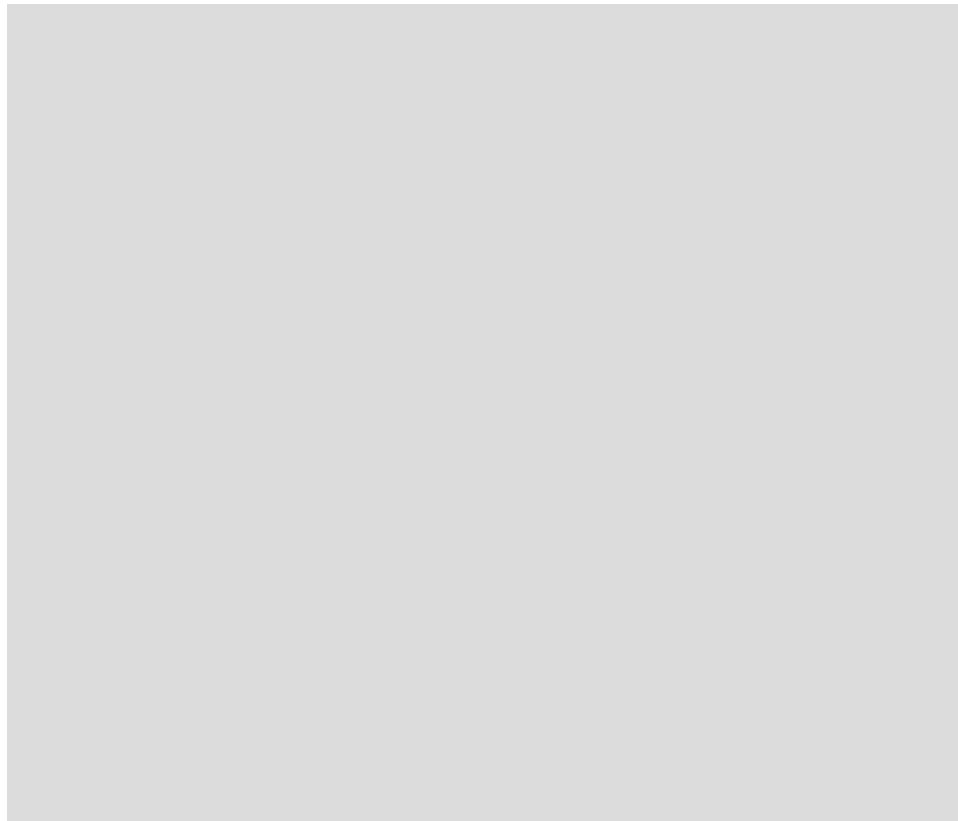
Figure 22.

can nevertheless serve as a counterbalance for the bleak cruelty of real life.[51] Such displacement, she seems to suggest, can offer a way around the problem of directly facing one's own traumatic demons head-on.

I want to return briefly to the image of the cicada, because Barry's choice of an insect as the emblem of resurfacing trauma is no accident. She writes at length of head lice in *One Hundred Demons*, and insects also appear frequently in her shorter strips. Freddie, arguably the most vulnerable of the Mullen children, has a particular fondness for insects, giving them names and making them houses out of shoe-boxes. He wins a science prize by trading swear words for insects that other children collect for him in jars (*Down the Street*, 98). When Marlys and Maybonne's mother decides than she wants them back, Maybonne's sceptical commentary is juxtaposed with Marlys' school project on termites (Figure 22) (*It's So Magic,* 106-7). In "You Are Leaving", Maybonne objects that "Me, Marlys and Freddy are supposed to just forget our lives at Grandmas [sic], just forget our friends, and our school, and kabam! Just go back to living with Mom". At the same time, Marlys explains that termites "live in

51   Garden (1999); Benny Shaboy, interview with Lynda Barry. *studioNOTES* 27 (November 1999 – January 2000) 4-6; Paige La Grone, "An Excellent Monster Maker When Monsters Are Called For". Interview with Lynda Barry. *Mean Magazine* 6 (1999)

wooden things a long time then the wooden thing falls over wrecked up. Then they move. Termite is not my first pick if I got to be an insect". It is hard not to detect a note of maternal resentment in Marlys' remark "The Queen she just lays there". Aware of the limited status that they have in the lives of the adults who control them, these children identify downwards, empathising with insects which are obliged, like the Mullens, to keep moving from one "wrecked up" home to another.

Marlys' identification with the homeless worker termites serving an indolent queen is representative of the familial relationships typically found in Barry's comics. As Melinda de Jesus points out, loving and supportive parents are conspicuously absent in the majority of Barry's strips, and mother/daughter relationships tend to be particularly problematic. In "Of Monsters and Mothers", de Jesus looks primarily at *One Hundred Demons*, and examines its mother/daughter relationships in terms of cultural estrangement of Asian-American women. She also reads Barry's mythical "aswang" as a demon of maternal estrangement which Barry has transformed into a source of creative energy. I do not wish to go over the same ground here, but I suggest that the uncertainty of maternal relationships is frequently offset by the strong bonds between siblings in Barry's comics. The children's identification with insects carries a sense of solidarity with another victimised underclass. In Barry's comics, as in many sympathetic representations of childhood, children are shown to be a minority voice, a marginalised social group. This device is of course a popular trope in children's literature (it is hard to imagine Roald Dahl or J.K.Rowling's books, for example, without protagonists who are constantly fighting a hostile, disbelieving or uncomprehending adult world). In Barry's comics this marginal stance is articulated not only in their fondness for bugs but in their support for each other and for persecuted adults. Stripped of the power dynamic of the parent-child relationship, friendships between brothers and sisters are volatile but often very supportive. Marlys and Maybonne yell at each other and express affection in more or less equal measure. When Maybonne is considering suicide, her main anxiety is for Marlys' wellbeing, and Marlys, in turn, glues the leaves onto a tree when Maybone says she will kill herself when the last one falls (*The Greatest of Marlys*, n.pag). Likewise these children empathise with marginalised adults: when Marlys' grandmother discovers that uncle John is gay and tells him not to come home again, Marlys runs barefoot down the road at 5am to say goodbye (*It's So Magic*, 46).

If the stories of Maybonne, Marlys, Freddie et al. were unremittingly negative,

the eternal present in which they seem to exist would be an appalling prison, a recurring nightmare with no promise of escape into adulthood. In fact, in spite of the traumatic events described above, many of the isolated moments described in Barry's comics are blissfully happy. Arna and Marlys hang upside-down from a T-shaped pole in the garden, saying it would be "totally worth it" if they cracked their skulls (*The Greatest of Marlys*, n.pag); the narrator of "A Funny Night" pretends to be asleep so he can enjoy being carried by his father (*Fun House*, 120); Maybonne manages to describe her year as "incredible" in spite of the fact that some parts "did make me about barf from sadness" (*Perfect Life*, 127), and all of them occasionally experience periods of great happiness in love. Furthermore, as will no doubt be apparent by now, their stories are often extremely funny. At the beginning of her career Barry said that "one of the reasons for humor with me is I need to be cheered up a lot".[52] For her, humour is a coping mechanism, a way of dealing with all that is grim and heartbreaking in everyday life. With her economical prose captions and untidy drawings, Barry captures the voices of vulnerable teenagers with rare clarity, and the suffering she describes is offset by the wry wit of its narration. Although in Barry's comics even positive events are framed within a world in which suicide and rape are possible, it is a world in which absurdity is ridiculous as well as cruel. Her protagonists' brief moments of contentment experienced seem, to the reader, all the more precious for their dark counterbalance of sickening trauma.

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52   Hambly (1982).

CHAPTER FOUR

**From Riot Grrrl to fine artist: transformations in the
work of Julie Doucet**

In *Unpopular Culture*, his study of 1990s European comic books, Bart Beaty examines the ways in which these comics' creators have shifted their claims to legitimacy from literature to the visual arts. He argues that "the evolution from a criterion of value with its basis in the novel to one rooted in the artist's book is the most significant shift in the orientation of the comics field in the past century".[1] His focus is on European, primarily Francophone comics, and he states that the US tradition (in which he includes Canada and Britain) operates quite different criteria of value. In his conclusion, however, Beaty notes the exceptions to the rule, and the example he gives is that of Julie Doucet.[2] Doucet, he explains, is one of the few to straddle the European and American comics markets, producing highly individual, stylised books in both French and English, and publishing her work both through the Canadian comics press Drawn and Quarterly and through French publishers like L'Association, Seuil and Le Dernier Cri.

Doucet's range is not just cultural and linguistic but takes her beyond the comics field altogether. Many comics writers and artists produce non-comics work, often largely for financial reasons: Robert Crumb started out as an illustrator of greetings cards, Dave McKean has worked on films, CD and book covers, and Chris Ware has completed a number of design projects including posters, books and the façade of a building. Doucet, however, has moved decisively away from comics for creative as well as financial reasons, and in spite of the high regard in which her comics are held she has claimed to dislike producing them.[3] This shift in her work is not simply a change of heart but indicative of the personal development of an artist whose work contains substantial elements of autobiography. In the late 1980s and early 90s the young Doucet (then in her mid-twenties) was producing self-published fanzines in the post-punk, "Riot Grrrl" tradition. Fifteen years later she is now in her forties, creating non-narrative art both in book form (the largely abstract *Elle Humour*

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1   Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2007) 7.
2   Beaty (2007), 245.
3   Dan Nadel, "The Good Life: The Julie Doucet Interview". *The Drama* 7 (2006), 47-52.

(2006)) and in prints and drawings exhibited in galleries, as well as narrative work like *365 Days* which is partly but not entirely a comic.[4] Throughout this chapter I will make comparisons between Doucet's early and more recent work, examining the representations of selfhood in each. I argue that the version of Julie Doucet typically seen by comics scholars is a specifically young adult identity, expressed through autobiographical comics which are only a small part of her oeuvre. I suggest that a more fully rounded picture can be obtained by viewing Doucet's comics in the context of her later, non-narrative work. In particular I will focus on changes in three areas: depictions of the body, romantic relationships, and domestic and urban space. I will begin, however, by placing Doucet in the context of third wave feminism and the 1990s fanzine culture in which she first became well known.

Although Doucet's early comic, *Dirty Plotte*, has subsequently been reissued by Drawn and Quarterly, and later collected into trade paperbacks, this series was first self-published in the form of photocopied fanzines.[5] Doucet is often described as a "Riot Grrrl cartoonist", having emerged from the small press publishing scene also favoured by writers and artists within the alternative punk culture of the early 1990s. As Roger Sabin and Teal Triggs point out, the relationship between alternative comics and fanzines is very close, while "a 'typical' alternative comic has about as much in common with *Superman* or *The Beano* as a fanzine does with *Vanity Fair* or *Hello!*"[6] They go on to note that Doucet herself advertised some of her favourite zines on the back cover of *Dirty Plotte* 7 (1993), deliberately placing herself within this tradition and actively supporting other small press creators through her own work (Figure 23). Doucet's early enthusiasm for self-publishing is important because, as I argued in my chapters on Crumb and Sim, creators of independent comics perceive a powerful connection between ideology and textual form. Stephen Duncombe describes typical fanzine producers as "[f]reaks, geeks, nerds and losers", stressing the importance of these publications as a vehicle for DIY, decentralised, anti-capitalist self-expression:

> In an era marked by the rapid centralization of corporate media, zines are
> independent and localized, coming out of cities, suburbs and small towns across

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4   *365 Days* was first published as *Journal* (Paris: L'Association, 2004). English version, trans. Doucet, 2007 (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly).
5   Self-published 1988-90. The D&Q run of *Dirty Plotte* (12 issues) was published from 1991-98.
6   Roger Sabin and Teal Triggs, *Below Critical Radar: Fanzines and Alternative Comics from 1976 to now* (Hove: Slab-o-Concrete, 2001) 5.
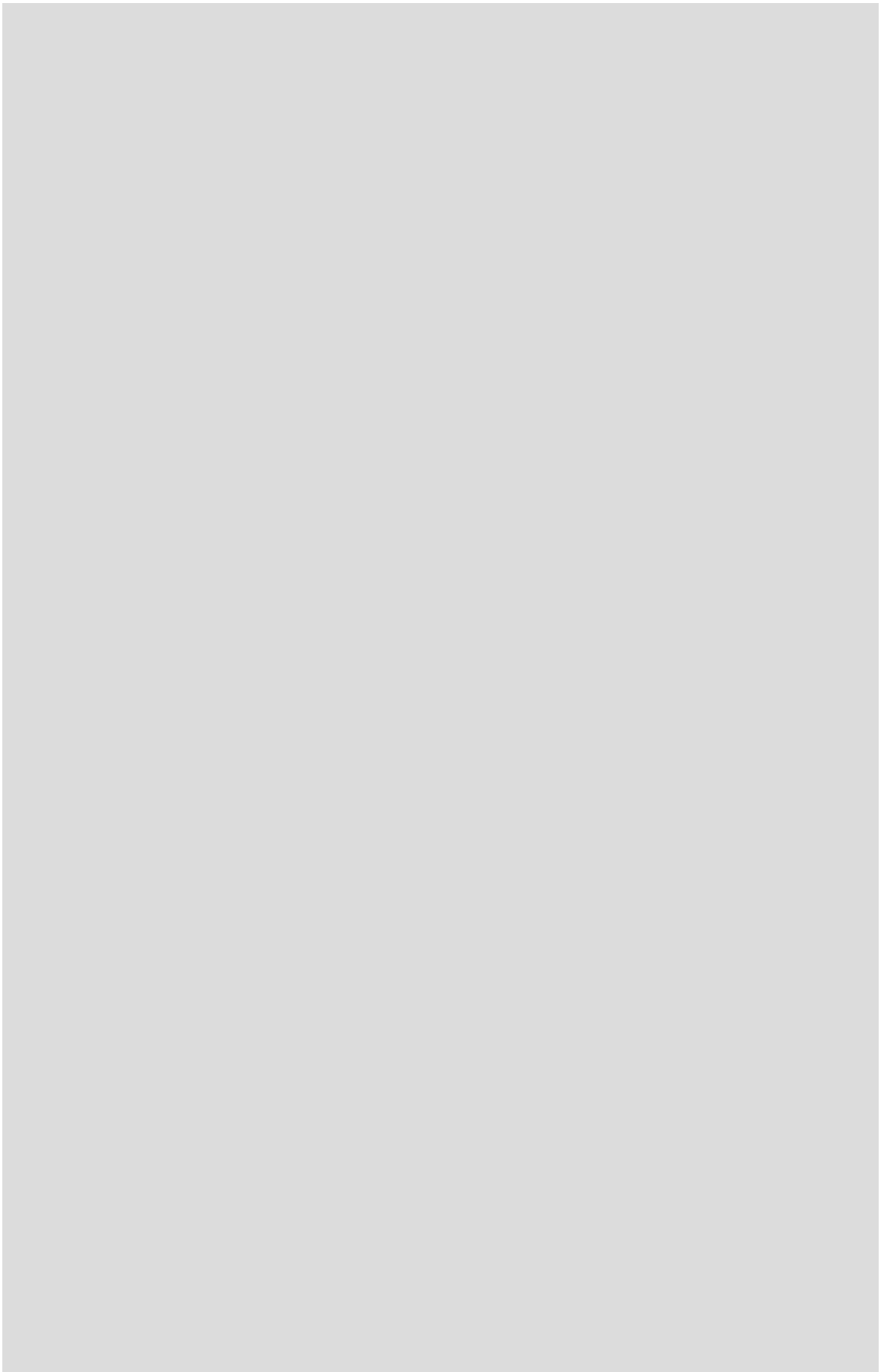
Figure 23.

the USA, assembled on kitchen tables. They celebrate the everyperson in a world of celebrity, losers in a society that rewards the best and the brightest… zine writers form networks and forge communities around diverse identities and interests.[7]

In the late 80s and 90s this shared expression of an identity independent of the expectations of mainstream western society was important to Doucet. However, as I will demonstrate, the community of comic and fanzine producers was one that she grew tired of as her identity and her art changed in her thirties and forties. The breadth and aesthetic value of her work distinguished her from the mass of comic and fanzine self-publishers: her stark black and white drawings resemble Expressionist woodcuts with their heavy blocks of tone and apparently primitive lines (see figures 25-7). Doucet's early work is of a far higher quality than the majority of self-published comics and zines, and derives much of its appeal from the confluence of a highly professional aesthetic and often blunt, shocking, adolescent content. The zinesters' anti-professional aesthetic and their typical attitude of negation and antipathy towards mainstream success was one that Doucet came to find stifling and ill-suited to her later work.[8]

Doucet's gender undoubtedly played a part in both her early rebellious stance and her later dissatisfaction with the alternative comics community. Discussing her intention to retire from comics, she remarked in 2001, "I used to feel comfortable with a boy crowd but not anymore".[9] Doucet was mixing with a largely male group: her work was published in Crumb's *Weirdo* magazine in the late 1980s, and she was friends with other Canadian comics writers like Chester Brown. However, it is also worth noting that, Crumb and Sim notwithstanding, the self-publishing revolution of the early 1990s was particularly popular with women. Mimi Marinucci argues that one can identify an explicit link between third wave feminism

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7   Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1997) 2. Other useful work in this field includes Ellen Gruber Garvey, "Out of the Mainstream and Into the Streets: Small Press Magazines, the Underground Press, Zines and Artists' Books", in Scott E. Casper, Joanne D. Chaison, and Jeffrey D. Groves (ed.s) *Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 367-402. See also Anna Poletti, "Self-Publishing in the Global and Local: Situating Life Writing in Zines", *Biography* 28.1 (2005), 183-192. For a broader history of self-publishing culture, see Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 2005).
8   On the relationship between zines and mass media see Brandi Leigh-Ann Bell, "Women Produced Zines Moving into the Mainstream" *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 20-1, 4.1 (Winter/Spring 2001) 56-60.
9   Andy Brown. "Heroine". *Montreal Review of Books* 4.2. Spring/Summer 2001. 18 July 2005. <http://www.aelaq.org/mrb/feature.php?issue=1&article=14&cat=1>

and fanzine culture, emphasising the fundamentally democratic nature of self-published zines.[10] She points out that with the advent of cheap and readily available photocopiers, printing and circulating creative work became a real option for those who would normally have been excluded from conventional publication media. Given that women had for so long found it difficult to attract the attention of comics publishers, it is hardly surprising that those keen to produce innovative, avant-garde work took particular advantage of the newly available technology.

Fanzine form aside, gender identity is central to Doucet's work. Nevertheless, her representation of feminine subjectivity is very different from Barry's and indeed from those of underground women writers like Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Roberta Gregory, Alison Bechdel and Sharon Rudahl. As numerous critics have demonstrated, women artists and performers in the Riot Grrrl scene tended to luxuriate in the defiant appropriation of labels, aesthetic choices and identity markers that earlier feminists fought against.[11] Apparently demeaning labels and self-destructive behaviours (the practice of writing names like "bitch" and "whore" on the skin and clothing, for example) were transformed into affirmative gestures.[12] The title of Doucet's serial comic *Dirty Plotte* is a bodily insult: "plotte" is Quebecois slang for vagina (as Dave Sim remarked, "Calling your autobiographical comic Dirty Cunt really makes for a misogynistic challenge when it comes to parody").[13] Many second wave feminists have accused younger women of having abandoned the political goals of the women's movement, and Generation X attitudes often intersect with third wave feminist positions.[14] To one interviewer who asked whether she considered herself a feminist artist, Doucet responded, "Probably, through what I do. But I am not the campaigning type. I can't see myself inviting people to adopt a

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10   Mimi Marinucci, "Television, Generation X, and Third Wave Feminism: A Contextual Analysis of the Brady Bunch". *Journal of Popular Culture* 38.3 (2005) 521.
11   See the essays in *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 20-1, 4.1 (Winter/Spring 2001) This special issue is subtitled "Young Women Feminists, Activists, Grrrls" and offers a useful snapshot of young women's feminist culture in the 1990s.
12   On positive appropriation of the word "bitch", for example, see Lisa Jervis, "Mission Statement for *Bitch* Magazine". *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism. Vol. 2, Primary Documents.* Ed. Leslie L. Heywood. (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Greenwood, 2006) 263-4. This collection gives an excellent picture of the variety of third wave feminism.
13   Dave Sim, *Latter Days (Cerebus Book 15)* (Ontario: Aardvark Vanaheim, 2003) 482.
14   The most well known criticisms can be found in Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (New York: Crown, 1991) and Germaine Greer *The Whole Woman* (London: Doubleday, 1999).

certain kind of behaviour or another. That is really of no interest to me."[15] This sort of laid-back but somewhat evasive response is typical of young women in the 1990s, who often espoused feminist views whilst rejecting the polemics of their second wave feminist mothers.[16] When Crumb wrote his "R. Crumb versus the Sisterhood" in 1973, there was still a sense of solidarity amongst feminists, but for women of Doucet's generation, debates on gender are, at best, characterised by debate rather than consensus. At worst, feminism is often perceived to be an outdated ideology of little relevance to young people, representing excessive political seriousness, the policing of language and cultural practices, and the development of a stultifying political correctness.[17] Admitting to being a feminist writer is perceived to carry a certain stigma, and in spite of quite blatantly engaging with gender issues, the label was one that Doucet shied away from. Her 1990s comics find their power at a crossroads between political engagement and directionless indifference.

Doucet typically addresses feminist concerns by claiming control over representations of the female body, overturning comics conventions about the forms and symbols of femininity, and challenging and redirecting the gaze of the reader. Doucet writes about menstruation, breasts, penis envy, leg shaving and personal hygiene, returning again and again to her own body and her attitudes towards it. Although Doucet denies having a feminist agenda as such, and avoids accusations of political seriousness by producing comics that are deliciously, gleefully humorous, nevertheless her work taps directly into a vein of body criticism that was at its strongest in the 1980s and early 90s.[18] Hence she places critics in a difficult position: on the one hand she seems quite clearly to engage with feminist and queer concerns and psychoanalytic theories in her comics, yet at the same time she flatly refuses to place her work under a feminist heading. The best way around this problem, I suggest, is to tread carefully, using only as much theory as is strictly

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15   Philip Dumez. "Les années Julie". Interview. *Jadeweb*. [November 2001.] <http://www.pastis. org/jade/nov01/juliedoucet.htm> Thanks to Juliette Atkinson for her translation.
16   See Jo Reger, ed. *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women's Movement* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005)
17   On the attitudes to feminism expressed by young women in the 1990s and 2000s, see, for example, Paula Kamen, *Feminist Fatale: Voices from the "Twentysomething" Generation Explore the Future of the "Women's Movement"* (New York: Donald Fine, 1991). Also Rebecca Munford, "Wake up and Smell the Lipgloss: Gender, Generation and the (A)politics of Girl Power", in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*. Eds. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 142-153.
18   See, for example, Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, eds. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999)
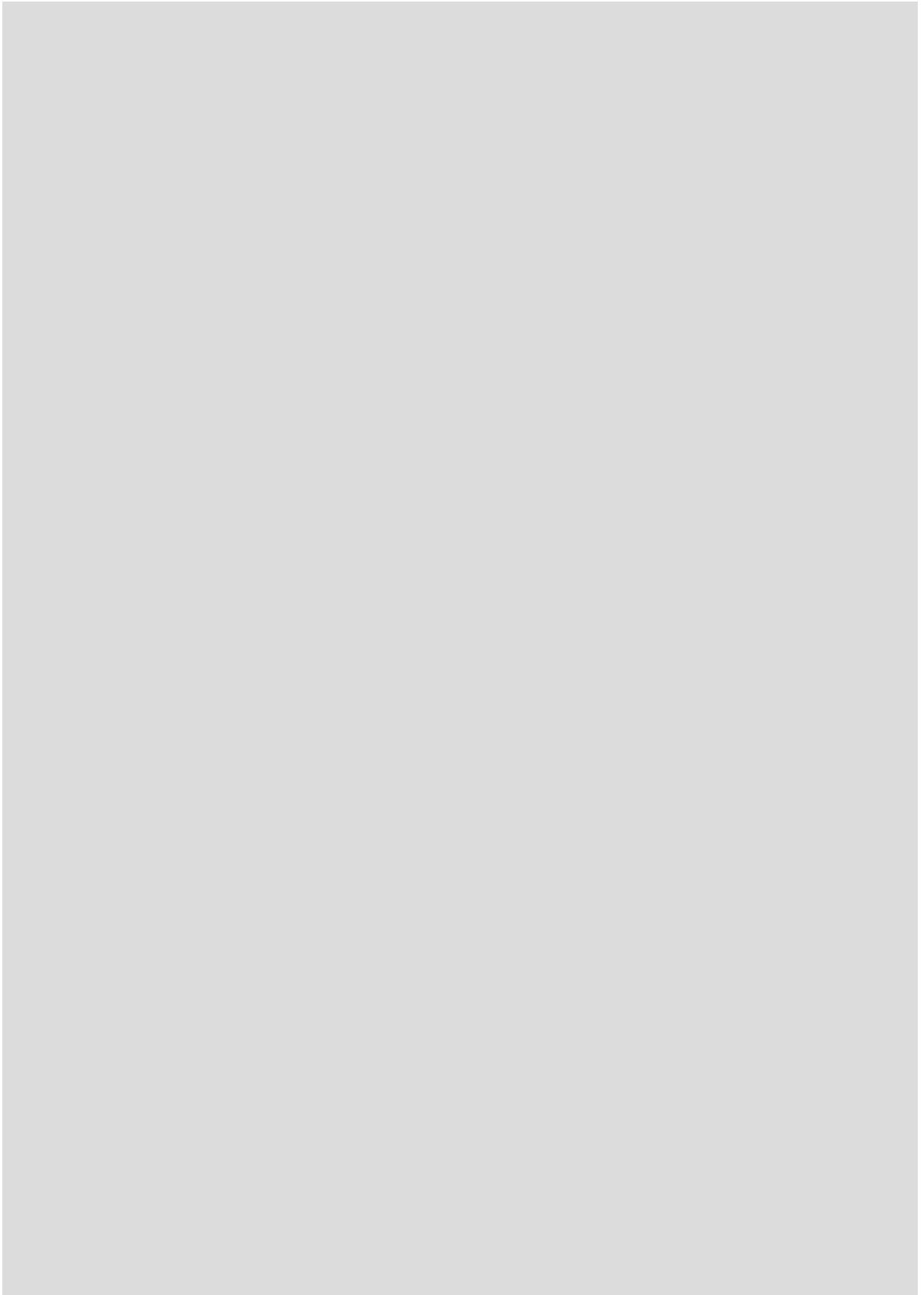
Figure 24.

necessary and never letting the interpretation take over or mask the specific, often contradictory details of the work itself.[19]

As one might perhaps expect of a Crumb fan, Doucet's interest in bodies manifests itself in an obsession with the grotesque.[20] Nevertheless, Doucet's representations of grotesque bodies are generally less a carnivalesque celebration of flesh than a sustained exploration of the abject. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva discusses the concept of abjection, the process by which the subject polices its borders by rejecting that which is "other" to the self.[21] She argues that the subject never fully, finally succeeds in banishing the abject, but that it hovers in the background, always threatening the boundaries of the self. She points out that many cultural taboos are attached to situations of unstable boundaries between body and not-body: pregnancy and childbirth, sex, food, menstruation and corpses are all typically surrounded by rituals to protect individual subjectivity against the violation of physical borders. (Kristeva writes at length about Biblical prohibitions and rites of purification, for example, with particular emphasis on the menstruating, lactating, changeable female body.) Doucet's comics are filled with instances of hazy boundaries between subject and object, often with particular focus on the female body. Many of her stories involve things being removed from or inserted into the body – Julie wipes snot on her bedside table, covers New York in menstrual blood, and experiences numerous physical injuries and surgical operations.[22] In one dream sequence, a male Julie looks on in horror as worms crawl out of his flesh; in another she gives birth to a cat. The back cover of *My Most Secret Desire* (1995) shows Doucet's body stabbed with an imaginative array of sharp objects: a hypodermic needle, a safety pin, a fishing hook, a fork and numerous other items (Figure 24). Skin is always wrinkled, hairy, sweating and pimpled, and bodies are constantly threatened with mutilation.

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19   Readers seeking a queer reading of Doucet should see Marcie Frank, ""How Did I Get So Anal?": Queer Self-Authorization at the Margins", in *Queer Diasporas*. Eds. Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 245-62. Arguably more helpful is Ann Miller and Murray Pratt, "Transgressive Bodies in the Work of Julie Doucet, Fabrice Neaud and Jean-Christophe Menu: Towards a Theory of the 'Autobiobd'." *Belphegor* 4.1 (2004). <http://etc.dal.ca/belphegor/vol4_no1/articles/04_01_Miller_trnsgr_fr.html>
20   Doucet discusses her influences, naming Crumb and F'murr (Richard Peyzaret) in Andrew Dagilis, "Julie Doucet's Secretions". Interview. *The Comics Journal* 141 (April 1991), 100.
21   Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
22   In an attempt to distinguish between author and protagonist, I will refer to the character in the comics as "Julie" and the author as "Doucet".
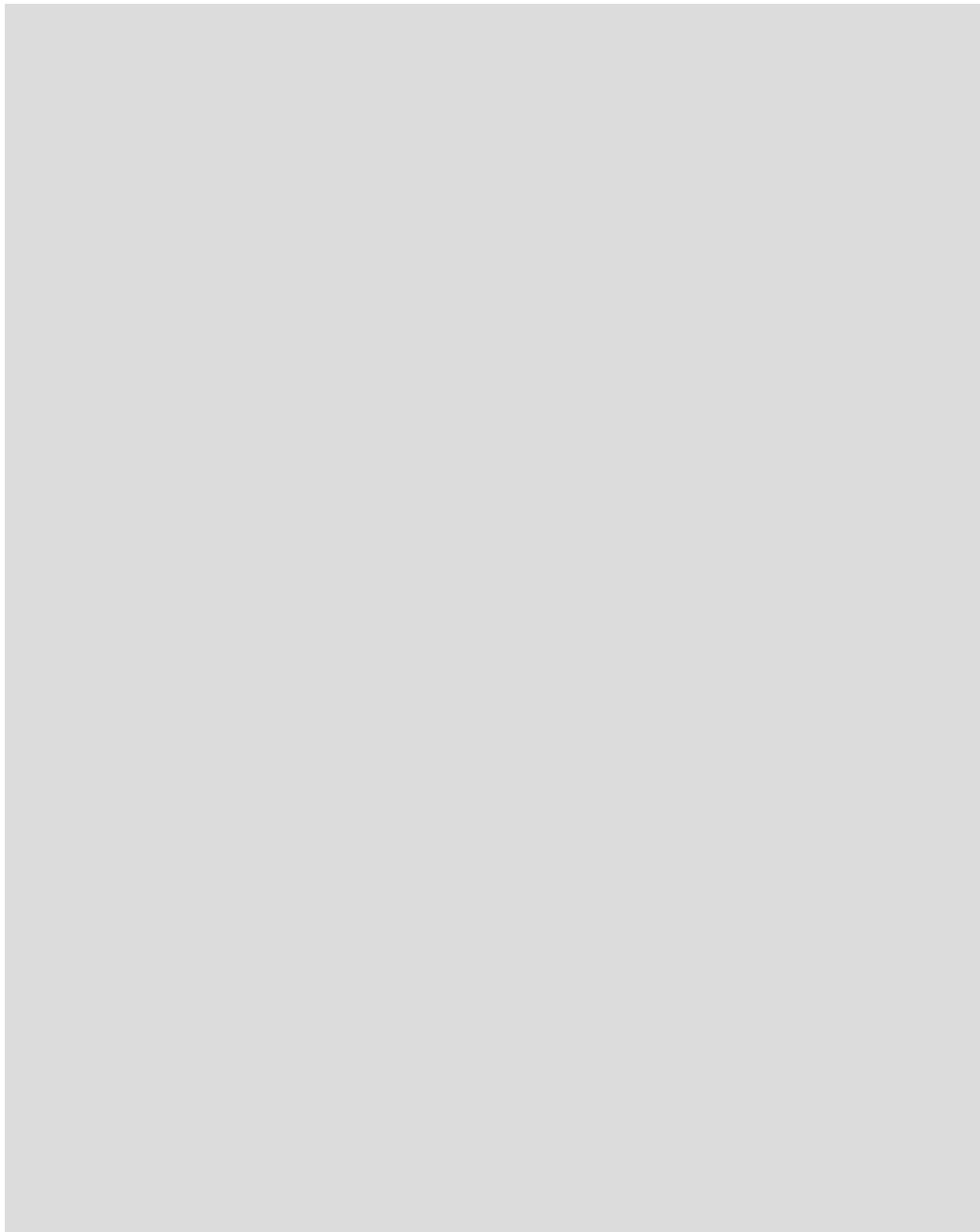
Figure 25.

The wilful ugliness of some of Doucet's early self-portraits is most often remarked upon by those who expect women to sexualise their self-representations. (Figure 25). In spite of the prevalence of nudity in Doucet's comics, she, like Lynda Barry, resists pressure to pander to the gaze of male readers. Many have pointed out that Doucet's self-representations conform less to social norms of physical attractiveness than she does in real life. As Dave Sim put it, "What is up with that level of self-loathing? I mean, okay, you don't look like Catherine Deneuve, is that any reason to draw yourself looking like a train wreck?"[23] Sim, at the furthest extreme

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23   Sim (2003) 482.

of masculine identification, cannot conceive of a woman choosing not to conform to conventions of feminine beauty. Julie's naked body is skinny, hairy, distorted and awkwardly posed, a world away from the sexualised female figures of mainstream comics or indeed many underground cartoons.

When Kristeva argued that literature is "the privileged signifier" of abjection, she was thinking of writers like Celine, whose anti-Semitism, she argued, can be seen as a codification of the abject, an attempt to mark the Jews as "other" in order to strengthen his own narcissistic sense of identity. But Doucet's appropriation of the abject is of a rather different order – she wallows in it, and rebels against attempts to tidy and protect the borders of the self. I am by no means the first critic to notice this: Ann Miller and Murray Pratt write persuasively about the ways in which "[t]he boundary between self and non-self is comprehensively transgressed by Julie through her exuberant portrayal of bodily fluids and wastes"[24]. When "Super Clean Plotte", an obsessively hygienic superheroine, comes to tell Julie off for picking her nose and proceeds to bleach Julie's flat, the protagonist fights back, covers "SCP" in unwashed sheets and laughs like a maniacal supervillain, "Never! Never! They will never get me!" (Figure 26). For Julie, poor domestic hygiene is part of a personal crusade against the sanctimonious control-freakery of women like Super Clean Plotte. As Miller and Pratt argue, this jubilant absorption in the abject represents a rejection of clearly defined subject boundaries. Doucet relishes the instability of selfhood that childbirth, menstruation, nose-picking and domestic squalor represent. Significantly, the abject is mediated by the context of its representation in the low-cultural form of the self-published comic. As I argued in relation to Crumb's use of the carnivalesque, form matters: Doucet's choice of the zine medium partly circumvents the threat of co-option into mainstream culture. By choosing the self-published comics form Doucet places her work alongside post-punk music and art in the independent zine
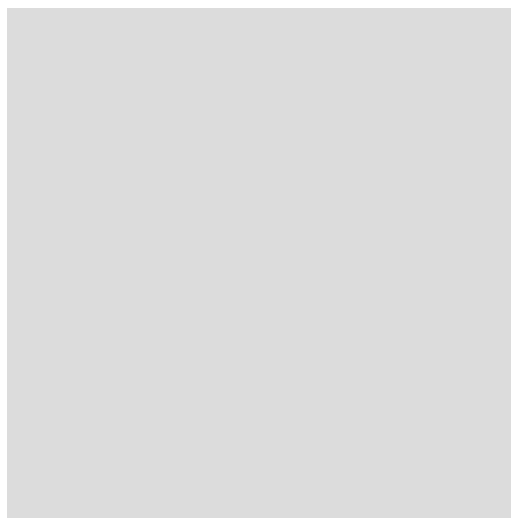
Figure 26.

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24   Miller and Pratt (2004).

145

tradition, and thereby retains for her work a shock value that it might lose in a more official or institutional context.

This is not to say, however, that Doucet does not exhibit traces of a fine art influence. Her fondness for the abject is just one of a number of ways in which she destabilises her representations of her own body, and it is essential to pay attention to the ways in which Doucet's techniques work together. In a general article on women's comics, Ana Merino suggests as a brief aside that the claustrophobic "hermeticism" of Doucet's work is "similar to the graphic expression of Frida Kahlo".[25] The comparison is useful because, without acknowledging any direct influence, Doucet shares many themes and preoccupations with the Mexican painter, and more generally with the art of women associated with the Surrealist movement. Whitney Chadwick, writing on women Surrealists' self-representation, wrote:

> In general, the works of women associated with the Surrealists display an affinity for the structures of fabulist narrative rather than shocking rupture, a self-consciousness about social constructions of femininity as surface and image, a tendency towards the phantasmagoric and oneiric, a preoccupation with psychic powers assigned to the feminine, and an embrace of doubling, masking and/or masquerade as defences against fears of non-identity.[26]

While checking features off a list is not the same as positing a direct influence, many of these identifying characteristics can be found in Doucet's comics. Like many Surrealists, Doucet not only narrates her dreams but repeatedly represents herself as a double, disrupting any clear sense of identification between the image and the artist, and like Kahlo, she repeatedly explores abjection in relation to her own body. Nevertheless, just as she subverts the abject by revelling in it as a positive force, she appropriates the figure of the double with a glee that suggests cheerful exploration, rather than *fear,* of non-identity.

Critics trying to explain the function of double self-portraits in Kahlo's work point to the many dualities in her life – Mexican/European, woman/artist, loved/rejected by Diego Rivera, a bisexual inhabiting a beautiful but painful body.[27] Like Kahlo, Doucet lives on the edge of two cultures, a bilingual woman in Montreal,

25   Ana Merino, "Women in Comics: A Space for Recognizing Other Voices." *The Comics Journal* 237 (2001) 48.
26   Whitney Chadwick, "An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation", in Chadwick (ed.) *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1998) 6.
27   See, for example, Emma Dexter, "The Universal Dialectics of Frida Kahlo", in Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson, eds. *Frida Kahlo* (London: Tate, 2005) 11-29.
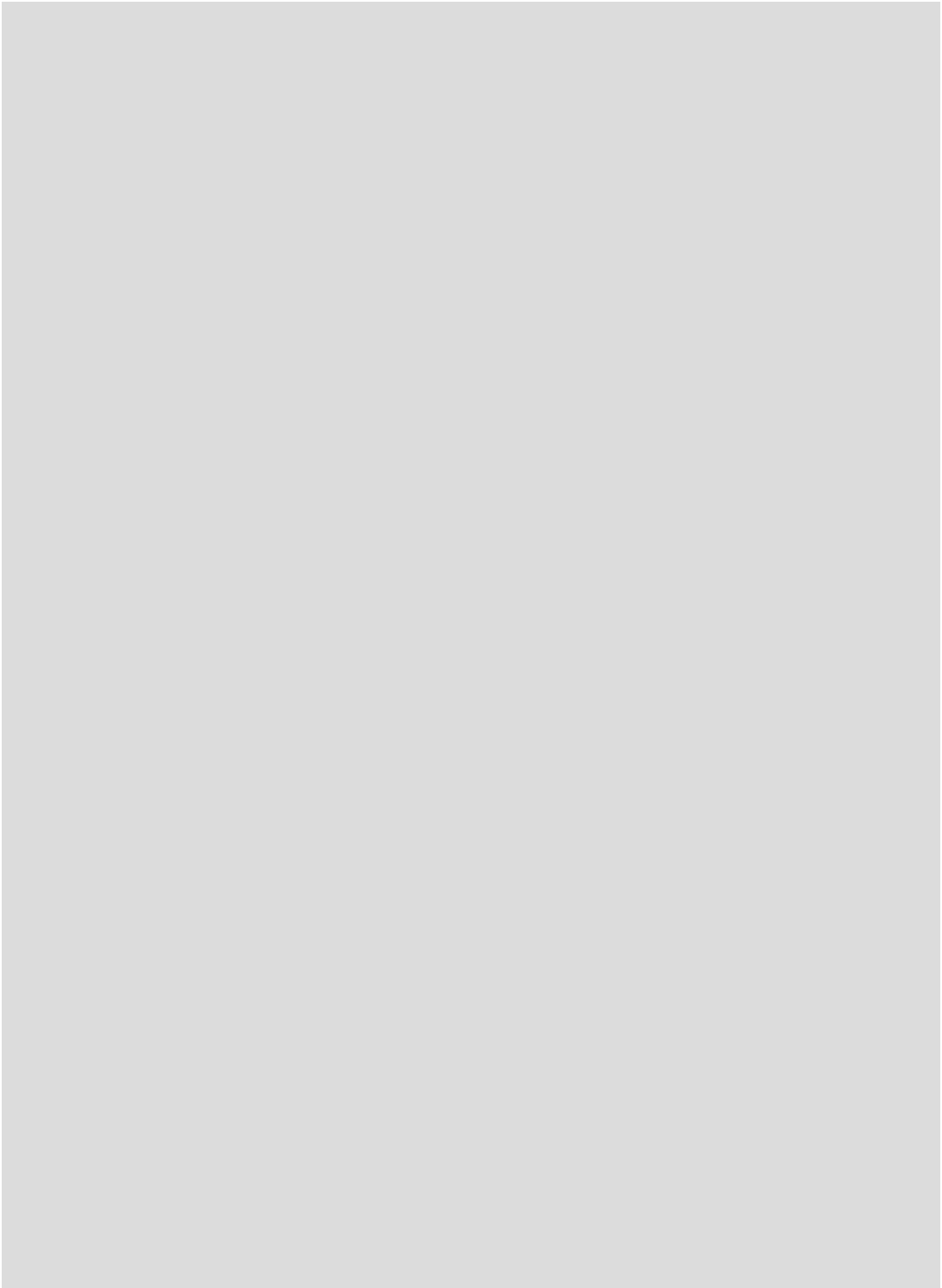
Figure 27a.
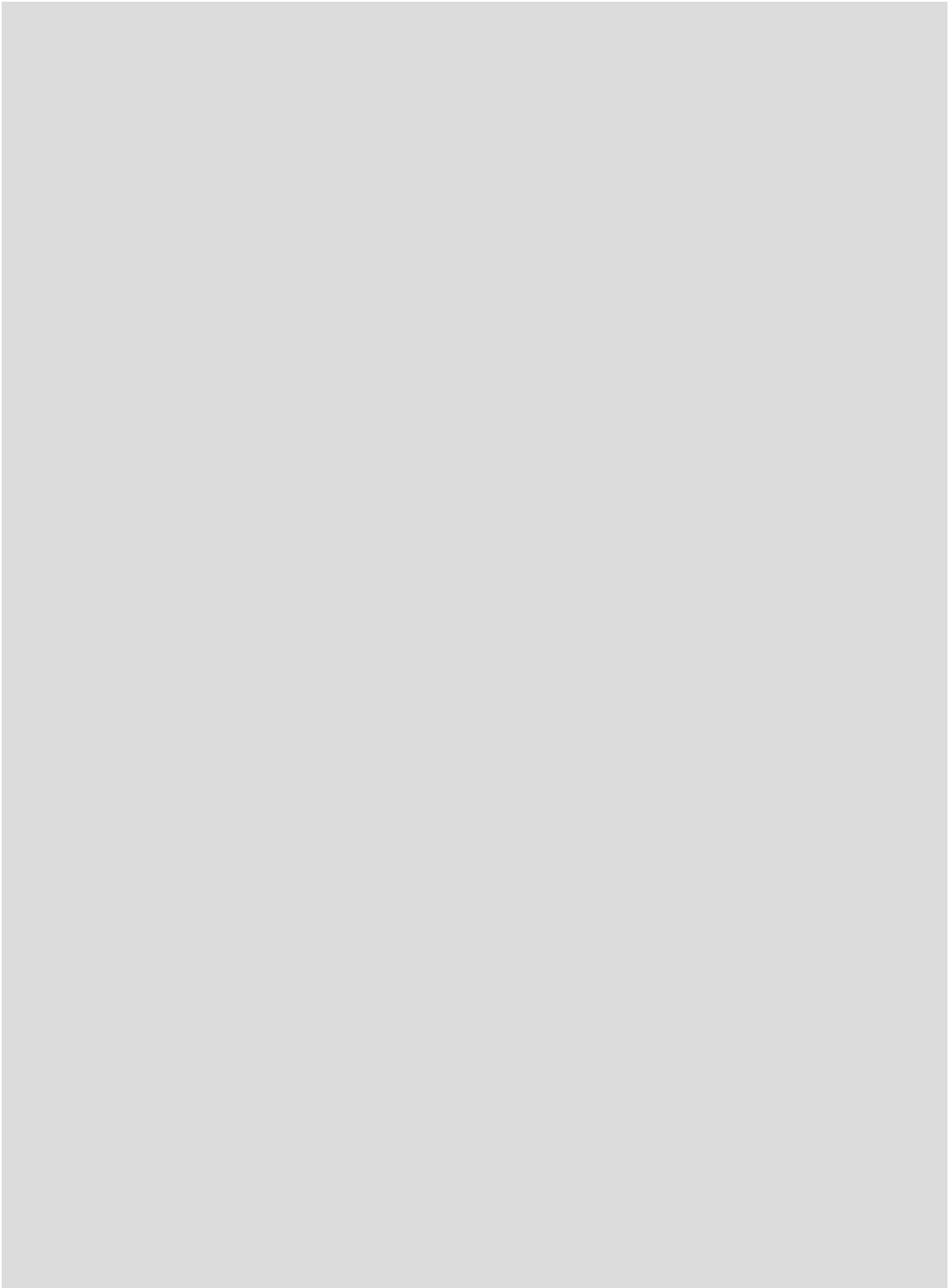
Figure 27b.
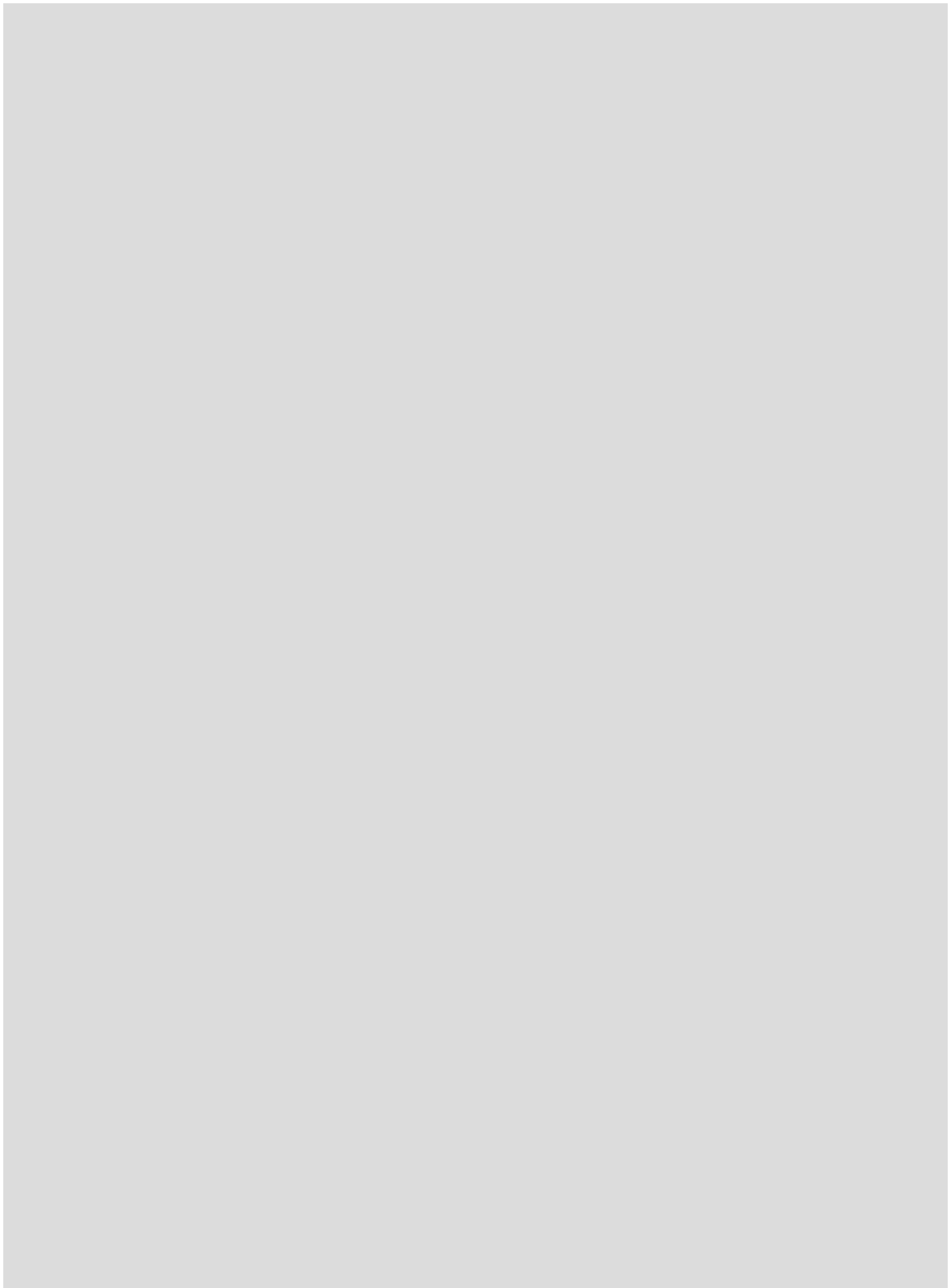
Figure 27c.

published in French and English yet, to European ears, fluent in neither. (Her French publisher criticised her French as "too Quebecois", yet her English often sounds strange, with sentences like "It's so much responsabilities [sic] to be a landlord…" (*Madame Paul*, 13)).[28] As I will show in my discussion of Doucet's geographical space, she moves constantly, never settling anywhere. She is also in an uneasy position as an artist, a female comic book writer with fine art training, divided between worlds and fitting in nowhere. But perhaps most importantly, she uses her comics to explore contradictory elements of her character. In the story "The Double", Julie takes control of a dream in order to create a male version of herself, with whom she then has sex. In "My Conscience is Bugging Me" (Figure 27a-c), Julie's conscience is the irresponsible one, jumping on cars and leering at passers by, but the conclusion is very similar – the two are reconciled in an embrace.

I wish to pause momentarily to look more closely at this strip because it describes a state of tension between the protagonist's public and private identities. Julie's alter ego, with her snake-like hair, needle-scarred arms, revealing top and tight trousers with the flies undone, follows her conventional self about, spitting and yelling at people. When Julie ditches her irresponsible double and goes home alone, she expresses deep distress and agitation:

> Oh yeah she's really getting to me!!!/ Bitch!// I don't know where I'm at any more…// My brains are scrambled!// I'm always unshakeable… Cool as a cucumber!// One day it's gonna be too much!

When they are reconciled with a kiss, their expressions resemble those of a couple making up after a fight: an odd mixture of relief, anger, happiness and exhaustion. One cannot help noticing that Doucet's sensible self is primarily ashamed of her reckless "conscience" *in public*. In the first panel, the alter ego says "So where to now?" and an irritated Julie responds "We go home". In the outside world, the alter-ego's sluttish appearance and antisocial behaviour contrast conspicuously with Doucet's normal self-image, and because exterior façade and interior selfhood construct one another, Julie cannot cope. But in private, Julie is more receptive to the possibilities of multiple, contradictory selves, and the two can be reconciled, albeit temporarily. It would be too easy to define the pair as ego and id, conscious

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28   Lapo Boschi, "Stranger than Kindness", March 2003. *Word Riot*. <http://www.wordriot.org/template.php?ID=259>

control and repressed desire; Doucet was writing in 1989, and for her, such binaries were no longer relevant. This was the decade of Madonna and Cindy Sherman, a decade in which post-feminism became well-established and young women became increasingly aware of identity as a set of reflexive choices, an endless range of poses and options.[29] Good girl and bad girl stereotypes disseminated through films and television were no longer mutually exclusive, fixed characteristics but masks from which women could pick and choose, which could be assumed and dropped at will.[30] As Judith Butler argued in *Gender Trouble*, gender identity is not essential but performative, created and enforced by social coercion, "instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*".[31] In a later essay she elaborated:

> Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalised, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original;*…[32]

This is precisely the view that Doucet dramatises here and in other comics of this period. In *My New York Diary* (1999), Julie expresses anxiety about going outside on the grounds that she is uncertain about the ways in which people might look at her:

> I don't like to attract attention, to be looked at. I don't like it when men stare at me, I blush so easily! I never know what to think: is it because they find me pretty? I don't think so, I am nothing special!.. Dirt on my face? Unzipped pants? I never know. // I hate it when women look at me! In one quick glance they will estimate my whole self and disapprove every part of it. I suck, I don't know how to dress, how to do my hair… how to be a real girl! // And the children, they always make me feel uncomfortable, kids are such strange little creatures!.. Always I am afraid they'd come talk to me. I just don't know at all how to deal with them!.. I am such a coward, a chicken!.. How the hell did I get that way??? (15)[33]

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29   See Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London: Routledge: 1995), Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 1996), and Judith Williamson, "Images of "Woman": The Photographs of Cindy Sherman" *Screen* 24.6 (November/ December 1983).
30   On the representation of "bad" women in mainstream comics, see Jeffrey A. Brown, "Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Films and Comic Books" in Sherrie A. Innes, ed. *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
31   Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) 179.
32   Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination", in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, ed. *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
33   Each story in *My New York Diary* has its own pagination.

Doucet assumes control over her self-image when narrating her life in comic book form, but in the outside world Julie is incapable of gauging or manipulating others' perceptions of her. This concern about the plethora of possible ways in which men and women might judge her appearance is part of Doucet's unusual degree of self-consciousness about being looked at. Most telling is the comment that "I don't know… how to be a real girl!". As Butler argues, gender identity is constructed through a series of masks and postures through which individuals are expected to control, manipulate and perform their sense of identity. What Doucet narrates are the experiences of those who (like Barry's vulnerable teenager Maybonne) do not know how to do this, who feel unsure about what kind of image they want, who feel unable to find or create a satisfying balance between selfhood and appearance. In a world in which "drag" is the norm, to be unable to create oneself is to feel not-quite-real.

In their reading of Doucet, Jens Balzer and Ole Frahm draw a parallel between the unreliability of real-world gender identification and the impossibility of author/character identification in an autobiographical comic. They argue:

> … no research has been able to liken Doucet's identity between name, drawing and narrative to any other. The three perspectives of the autobiographical narrative (the real person, the author, the fictional character) are not traceable back to one identity; in the visible process of creation the creator disappears. This disappearance is crucial. The marks on the page relate to each other and not to a person. All unity disappears in the cleft between blurred authorship and the multi-faceted identity of the author. [34]

Looking at the way in which Doucet disrupts settled, "masculine" versions of identity, they go on to explain:

> From the tension between reality and fiction (between real reader and a character drawn by a real author) Doucet's stories are comparable to test-runs of representation. The male perspective is tested, especially with regard to the body and gender…

The idea that Doucet's comics are "test-runs of representation" is intriguing

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[34]   Jens Balzer and Ole Frahm, "Immer Ärger mit der Identität: Frau, Subjekt, Blick und Bohème in den Comics von Julie Doucet" (A Constant Struggle with Identity: Woman, Subject, Perspective and Bohemia in the Comics of Julie Doucet). *Rundbrief Frauen in der Literaturwissenschaft* 46 (1995) 42-8. Thanks to Tim Whiteley for his translation.

because at this stage in her career, it seems that she is trying on both subject positions and modes of representation. In her comics she plays with ideas suggested by feminism and psychoanalysis ("Do I have penis envy? What might that be like?") but without ever allowing herself to settle into any single role. Far from expressing a pre-established set of ideas about her identity and femininity, Doucet often gives the impression of working it out as she goes along.
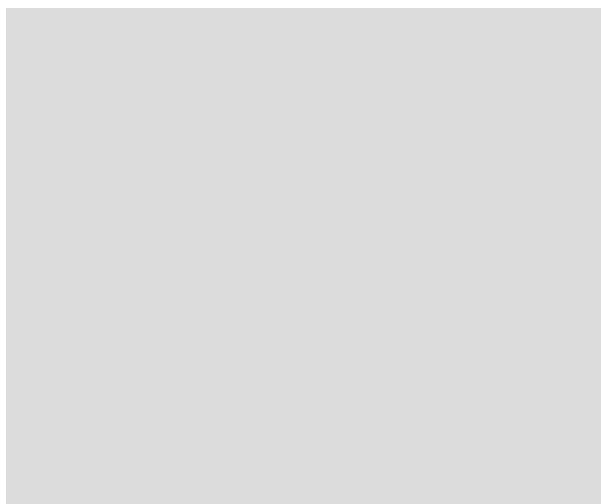
Figure 28.

At the same time, she is testing her style, the ways in which she represents herself and her environment. As I will argue, representation was to become increasingly important in her later work, while personal identity and the problems associated with self-representation would diminish.

In this early work, Doucet's awareness of the gap between her authorial identity and her comics self is evinced on a number of occasions by her direct addresses to the reader, in whose presence the protagonist Julie often seems distinctly uncomfortable. In Doucet's comics, her character frequently addresses the reader directly, speaking out of the picture plane as though to an imaginary camera. More than once, she explicitly tells this "camera" to go away. In *Dirty Plotte* 4 (Figure 28), having introduced readers to her new home in New York, Julie waves and says, "Why, that's all folks! Bye!" Doucet the artist, however, does not listen, and draws two more panels in which Julie looks embarrassed and repeats "I said bye!" then holds out her hands to block the reader's view, muttering "Haa fuck!!!@#?" The word "end" is written in the bottom right hand corner of this panel, and finally, in the gutter beneath the last two panels, there appear the words "Aw right, next page please". By expressing anxiety about her readers' gaze, Doucet is picking at the relationships between author, artist, character, alter-ego, and reader. If Julie the character has no control over the presence or absence of Doucet's "camera" in her life, then the gap between the two becomes immense: Doucet is colluding with the reader at
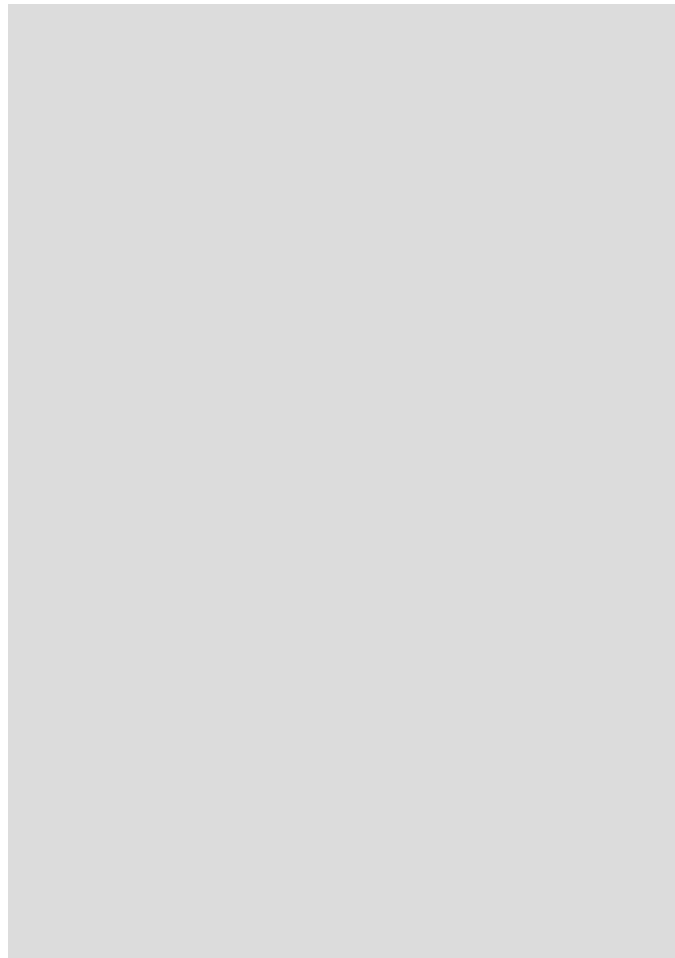
Figure 29.

the expense of Julie's privacy. She dramatises the dilemma of the autobiographer, knowing that the very act of narrating and depicting her life can mutate her identity. There are many levels of tension between representation and reality in Doucet's comics, and as I have suggested in my brief analysis of "My Conscience is Bugging Me", Doucet acknowledges that identity comprises myriad roles and masquerades, none of which can ever be described as a "real" self. As a post-feminist, Doucet both relishes the freedom from objectification that this gives and worries about what it may mean for her own sense of self-identity.

Doucet has not completely abandoned her interest in the human body in her later work, but in recent years this preoccupation has lost all its autobiographical content and taken an increasingly abstract form. In *Long Time Relationship* (2001) (which is largely a collection of work previously published in Doucet's art pamphlet series *Sophie Punt*) Doucet's eye for the grotesque is focused not on herself but on the imagined bodies of individuals posting personal ads in newspapers. She depicts a number of individuals alongside their somewhat far-fetched self-descriptions.

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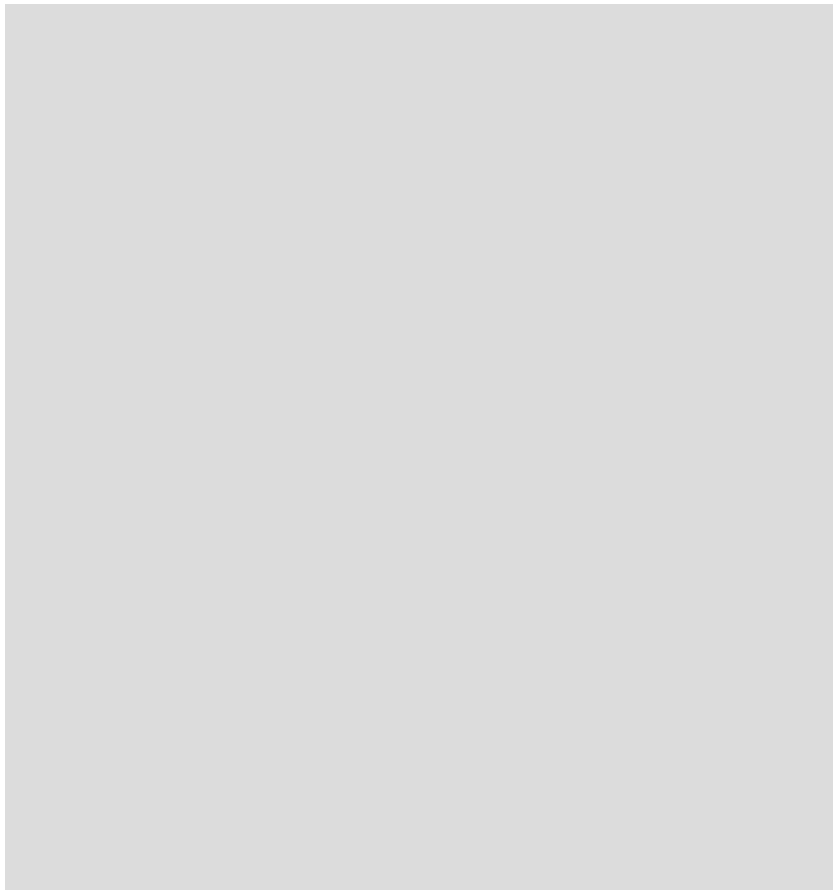
Figure 30.

A shrivelled old man in a chequered jacket and thick glasses calls himself an "extremely successful handsome exec" (Figure 29) whilst a skinny middle-aged woman advertises herself as "perfect doll". Doucet not only highlights the abjection of the body, particularly its hairy, spotty, wrinkled skin, but the sad optimism of those who seek companionship (and/or sexual gratification) in spite of their obvious physical imperfections.

It is worth noting that in comics terms, *Long Time Relationship*, like many of Doucet's later books, is not a narrative text. The distinction is tricky: in fine art discourse, the term "narrative" does not necessarily imply sequence: a single image that represents elements of a story, however ambiguous its incidents might be, can be described as narrative.[35] In comics criticism, however, "narrative" rarely describes a single panel, although as Scott McCloud demonstrates it is possible to show the passage of time in one image.[36] Doucet recently claimed that she is still "hugely"

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35   See, for example, Annabel Thomas, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Narrative Painting* (London: John Murray/National Gallery, 1994)
36   McCloud (1993), 95. See also Donald Ault, ""Cutting Up" Again Part II: Lacan on Barks on Lacan", in Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, *Comics and Culture* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000) 123-140.

interested in narrative and suggested that she is now more interested in writing than she was when she worked on comics.[37] Books like *Long Time Relationship* do not entirely abandon notions of narrative: a collection of annotated portraits tells a story of sorts, hinting at a long history of failed relationships and damaged hope. In another section of *Long Time Relationship* a disordered page of apparently random figures becomes more evidently narrative when accompanied by the fortune cookie tag "you may attend a party where strange customs prevail" (Figure 30). This chaotic image is composed of two layers, black and red figures superimposed on one another like a double exposed photograph. Within the image's neat, box-like rectangle, crowded, line-drawn figures pose in bizarre positions. One man in a
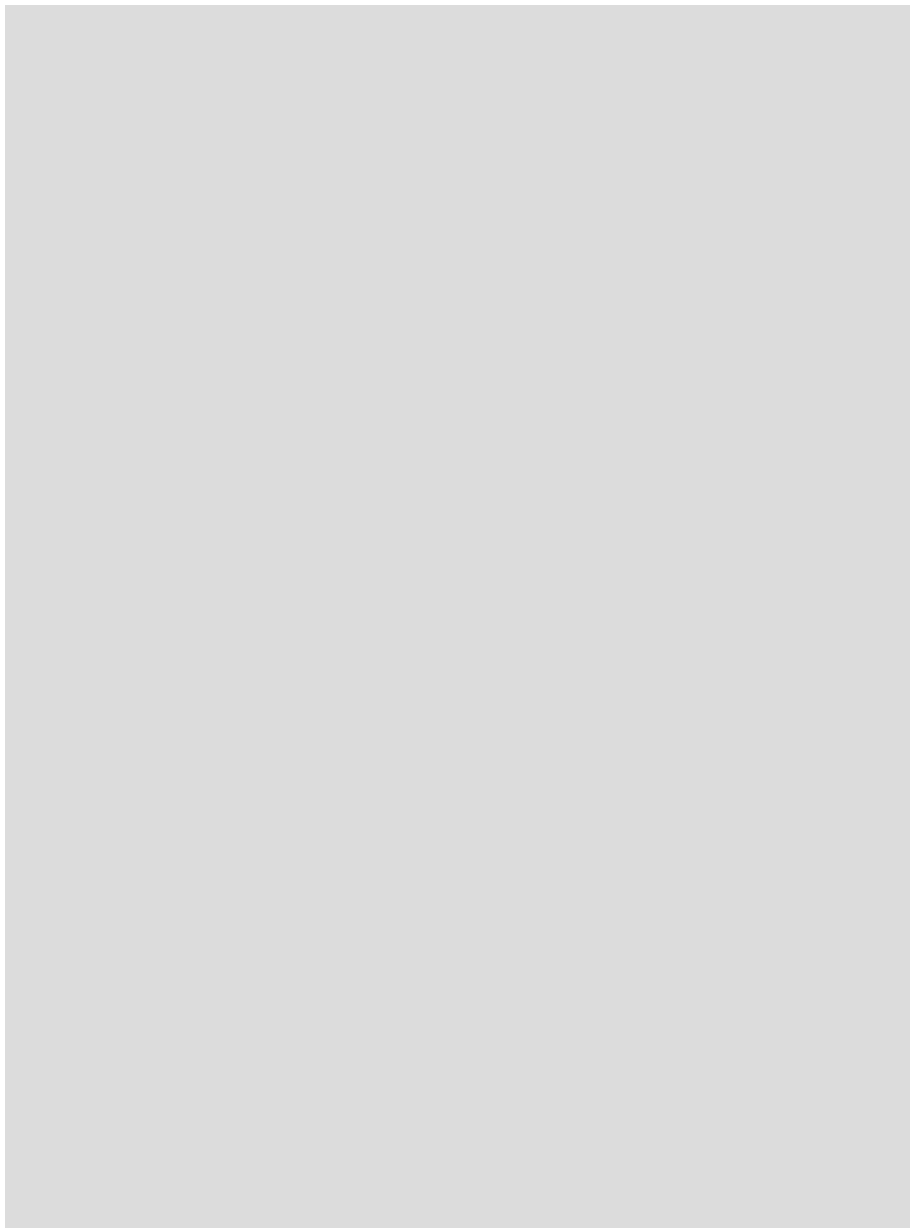
Figure 31.

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37   Nadel (2006) 47.

baseball cap licks the knee of another figure who appears to be urinating on the floor. An elderly woman in slippers holds her breasts in a suggestive manner. A figure with two faces inserts a tampon. Intermingled with these are other shapes and symbols crammed together in a mass of doodles: an alligator with a geometric tail, a frog-legged figure reading, an angry flower, a key, hats and dollar signs. These "strange customs" – particularly the tampon insertion – read like a flashback into Doucet's earlier work (see "Heavy Flow", "Charming Periods" and an unnamed strip about menstruation, all in *Leve Ta Jambe, Mon Poisson Est Mort* (1993)).[38] The grotesque bodies are still here, but Doucet's former celebration of the abject is gone, and her perspective is more distanced. Her attitude is not quite distaste but certainly one of wry amusement at the "strange customs" of others.

In *Elle Humour* Doucet's bodily representations are even less realist. Odd, vaguely humanoid shapes in garish felt-tip colours are juxtaposed with fragments of cut-out text and images of clothed bodies from 1950s magazines. Some are accompanied by collage poems (Figure 31):

> Vous ferez Une rencontre Suivez votre intuition
> Faites un long voyage sans perdre du temps

> You are an ironing table beauty
> An all-steel skeleton with white complexion[39]

The distorted body-like shape resembles a doodle in fat, bright marker pens: a large yellow bottom and a waist are evident, but the body has several penises or tails, and a suspicious-looking eye replaces a limb. The shape is certainly surreal and somewhat grotesque, but it has none of the blatant abjection of Doucet's earlier work. Whilst the French caption appears to be a mishmash of clichéd advice taken from a horoscope (a form Doucet touches upon in *Long Time Relationship*), the English text amalgamates words and phrases referring to physical beauty and domestic objects. Her decision to use words cut from mid-twentieth century Quebecois magazines conditions her vocabulary, producing texts that bring together conventions of female beauty ("white complexion") and images of

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38   Balzer and Frahm's reading of "Heavy Flow" is excellent.
39   French text translates as: You will have An encounter Follow your intuition/ Go on a long journey without wasting time.

consumer goods. For all Doucet's evasion of a feminist agenda, her appropriation of gendered collage material and its juxtaposition with cheerfully misshapen physical forms seems a small and often humorous rebellion against the tyranny of women's magazines. In such images Doucet retains the theme of bodies and objects introduced in her early work (not to mention a nod to the post-punk fanzine tradition in her use of collage text) but abandons her self-destructive tone in favour of a more upbeat, less direct, less aggressive mode of expression that seems to reflect a greater self-assurance.

This move away from apparently demeaning and destructive modes of self-portraiture is a departure from a particular tradition of alternative comics writing. Following R. Crumb and Harvey Pekar in the 1970s, a large number of US and Canadian artists and writers produced autobiographical comics that, as Hatfield notes, "tended to stress the abject, the seedy, the anti-heroic, and the just plain nasty".[40] Writers like Seth, Joe Matt, Mary Fleener, Chester Brown, Ed Brubaker and dozens of others described their dysfunctional relationships, meaningless jobs, existential malaise and days spent sitting around masturbating in squalid apartments. Doucet's abandonment of such themes leads her away from a well-established discipline in alternative comics and towards a less autobiographical fine art tradition in which aesthetic results are privileged over candid personal revelation.

A similar change in theme and mood is evident in her representations of personal relationships. Many of Doucet's early narratives show a preoccupation with relationships, whether with men or with alternate versions of herself. I want to look briefly at some excerpts from *My New York Diary* because Doucet's representation of relationships in this text has significant bearing on the formation of her adult identity. Although this comic is primarily concerned with Julie's time living with a partner in New York City, the volume includes two other stories, "The First Time" and "Julie in Junior College". "The First Time" narrates the loss of Julie's virginity to an elderly man whom she has only just met. The last three pages of this story merit particular attention, because Julie's lack of emotion in what one might expect to be a highly emotional experience is a hallmark of Doucet's narratives of her early relationships (Figure 32a-c).

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40   Hatfield (2005) 111.
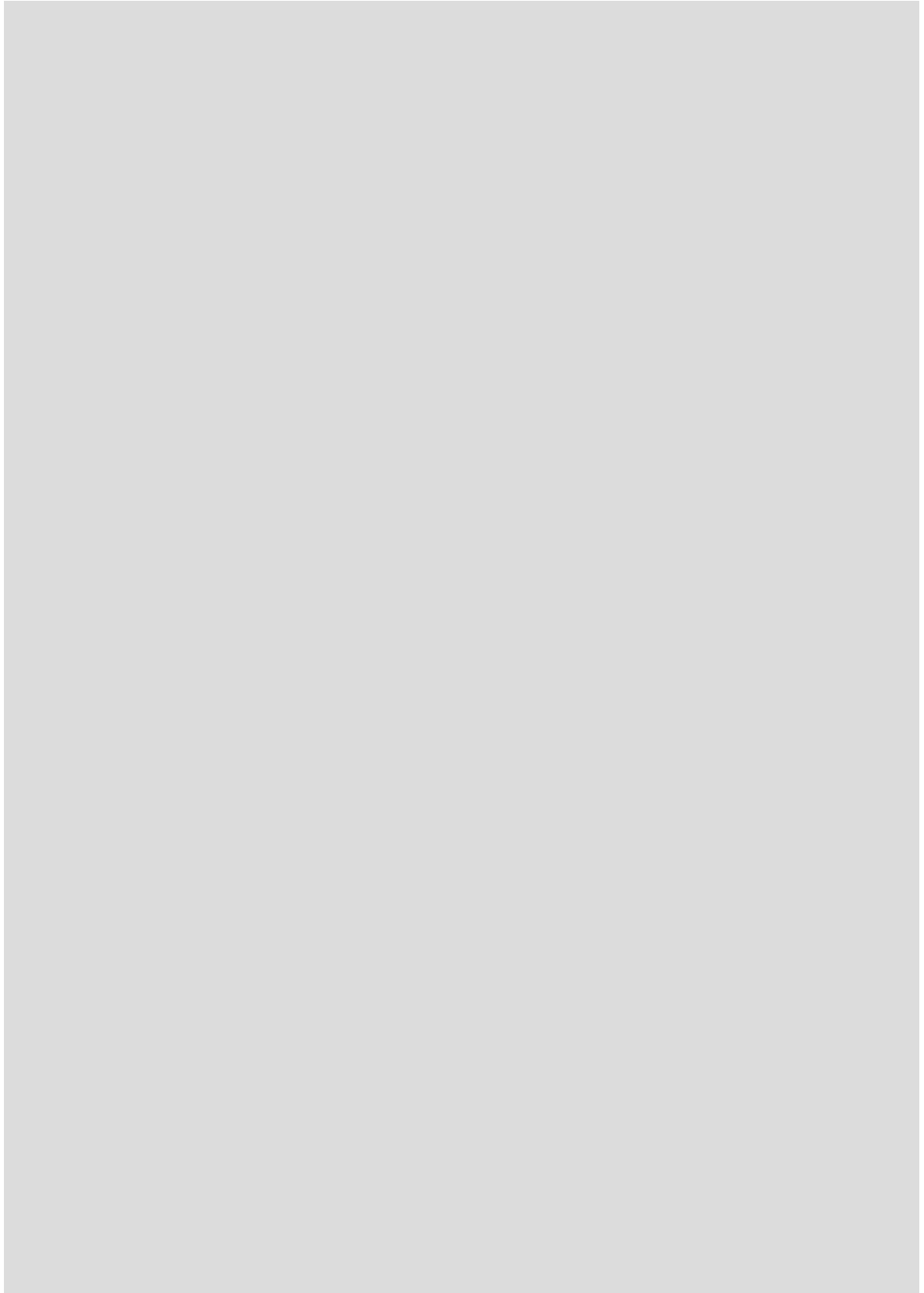
Figure 32a.
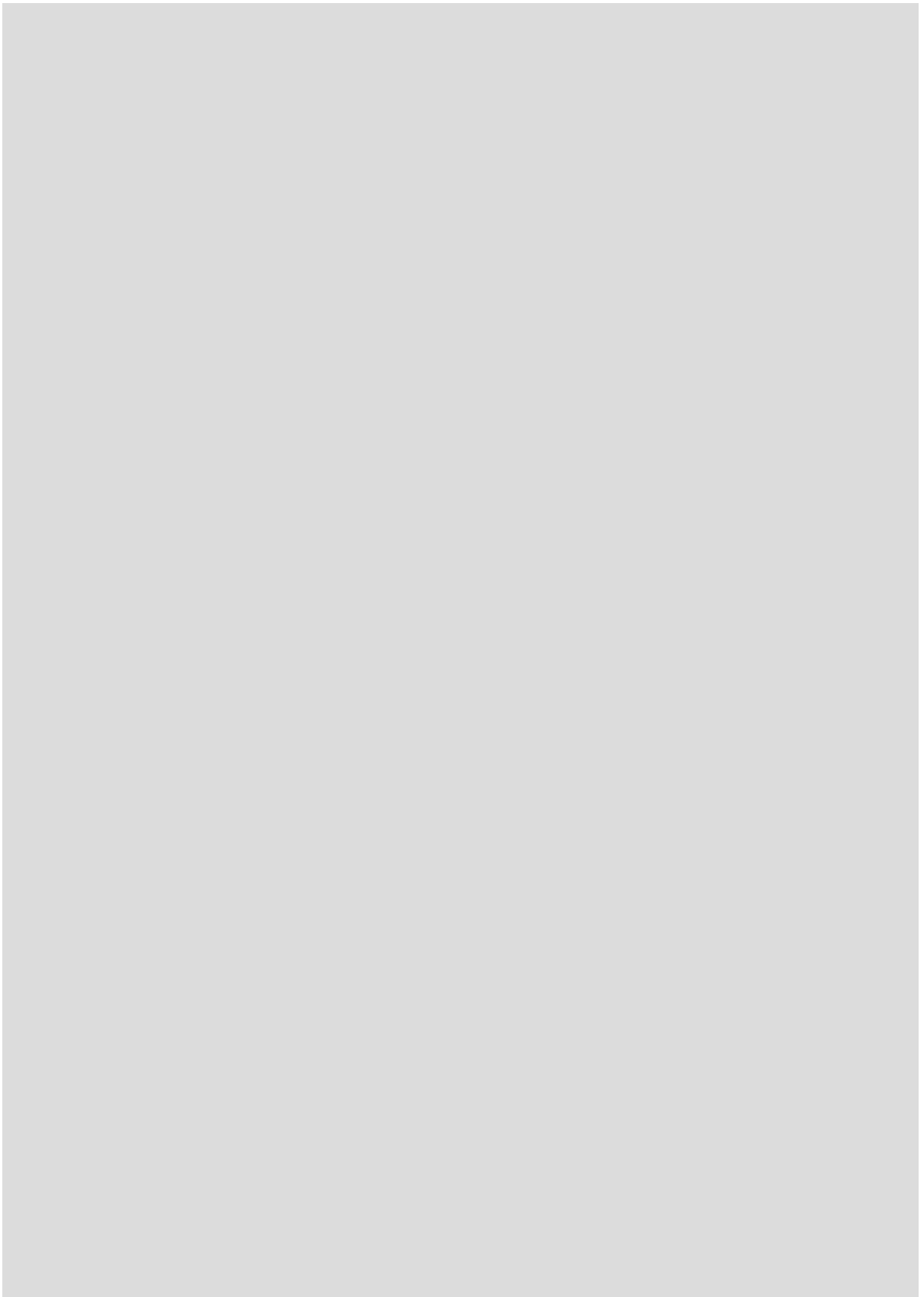
Figure 32b.
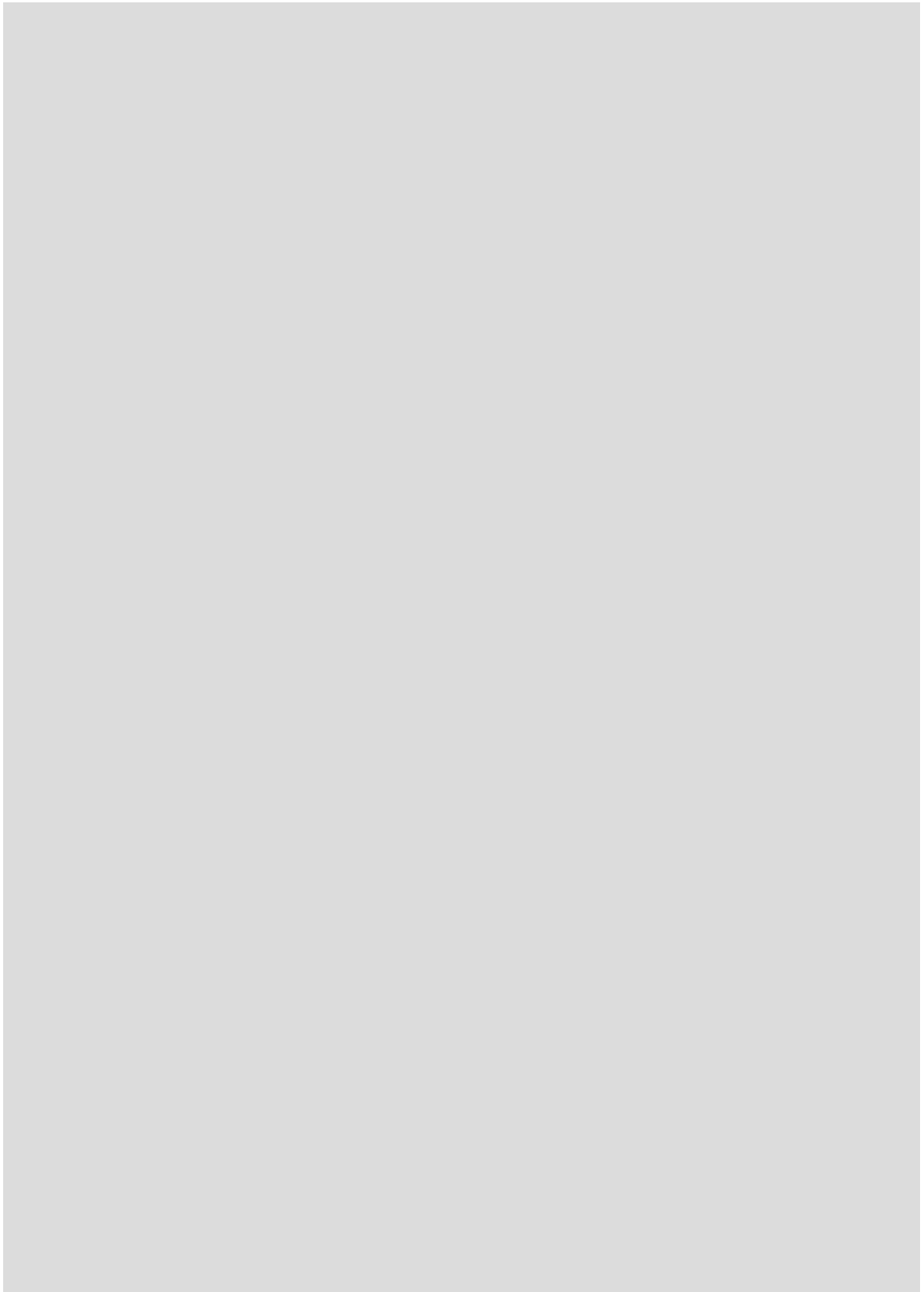
Figure 32c.

Julie has gone with her friend Nathalie to visit Chuck, who agrees to steal a motorcycle helmet for Nathalie. Having acquired the helmet, Nathalie leaves, but Julie stays with Chuck's friends, who are drinking beer in a park. Julie is clearly lost and out of place, but enticed by the identity markers that she associates with adulthood – cigarettes, alcohol, independence, and the attention and approval of adult men. As soon as Nathalie leaves, Chuck and his friends taunt Julie about her lack of experience, saying she looks "sweet" and "naïve". Desperate to disprove this, she ends up kissing Chuck after he dares her to do so, only to be mocked for not using her tongue. Humiliated, she escapes with George, who hears that she is a prospective art student and offers to show her his clumsy watercolours. She has enough of an artistic eye to dislike his work, but is too polite to say anything but "Yeah, yeah, they're really really nice".

Although Julie is surprised when George tries to kiss her (signified by a "??!" in a thought balloon and those characteristic teardrop-shaped marks around her head), her response is one of blank acquiescence – "Oh well" and "I guess this is it" as she undresses without the slightest hint of excitement. The fact of losing one's virginity is clearly marked in Julie's mind as a landmark transition from childhood to adulthood, so much so that the idea of doing "it" far outweighs the actual experience. The encounter is conspicuous for its total lack of emotion and the author's refusal to offer any clues about Julie's motivations. None of the usual suspects are there: she does not seem to be in search of emotional intimacy or peer status, and she is certainly not acting on sexual desire. Doucet's report of the encounter is fractured and abbreviated, giving no detail of her mental processes. The only thought balloon on the final page expresses a blank, an absence of physical sensation or emotional response ("Is that it? I didn't really feel anything.") Tellingly, the final panel shows Julie as an empty space, a white silhouette against a black background, while in the foreground symbols of adult femininity (a confident-looking woman) and paralysing shock (a dog caught in car headlights) hint at her mental state. In its own frighteningly mundane way, the episode retains traces of the surrealism of Doucet's dream narratives: the bizarre, nonsensical string of events suggests a protagonist profoundly detached from the operation of her own life. In stories like "The First Time", Doucet's practice of drawing figures with enlarged heads and wide eyes contrives to exaggerate the protagonist's innocence. With her harsh chiaroscuro and the pseudo-childlike simplicity of her lines, Doucet's narrative of her

sexual encounter anticipates Debbie Drechsler's horrifying *Daddy's Girl* (1996), but where Drechsler's protagonist expresses fear, anger and ultimately defiance at her father's sexual abuse, Julie gives nothing away. Her narrative is an emotional blank, and the reader is left to imagine how this event might have affected Julie later on. Learning to identify her feelings and act on them is shown to be a crucial but not always straightforward step in the formation of her adult identity.

Developing a confident, adult attitude to relationships is something that takes Julie a number of years. In "Julie in Junior College" Doucet depicts herself as a wide-eyed innocent, drifting unthinkingly into sexual encounters with little more than a shrug of "Oh well". When Louis asks "Do you want to be my girl?" she says:

> How could I resist? He said he loved me. I figured I love him too. Right? Wrong!!.. It took me one week to find out it wasn't working that way. Three weeks to get the nerve to break up. (15)

When she does end the relationship, Louis attempts suicide in her flat. Julie's boyfriends are invariably manipulative, controlling and clingy. When she moves in with a partner in *My New York Diary*, he becomes intensely jealous and anxious, trying to dictate her movements and lapsing into hysteria when she talks about moving. Significantly, he also attributes her creative success to her gender:

> …you should hear him talk about how it's so easy for women to make it nowadays, about how he doesn't stand a chance… he says that's how I got successful, the bastard! (29)

Julie's development as an artist runs parallel to her growing confidence in dealing with men. As she matures she becomes increasingly aware that her partner's jealousy stems from the professional rivalry of an inferior cartoonist as well as the possessiveness of an insecure lover.

As Doucet's art progresses the attentions of undesirable men become less and less prominent, at least in her autobiographical work. As I have demonstrated, Doucet mocks the self-deceptive efforts of those who place personal ads in lonely hearts columns in *Long Time Relationship*. There are several self-portraits in this book, but the only one in which she appears to be thinking of a relationship is when she wants a child: "Der Mann meiner Träume" ("The man of my dreams") appears opposite an image of the author naked and pregnant. She mentions in *365*

Figure 33.

Days that "I think a lot about having a baby these days" but expresses reservations on the grounds of her epilepsy and says "maybe it's not something to try" (*Days* 1/5/3).[41] The relative insignificance of romantic relationships in Doucet's adult life is most evident in *365 Days*, a visual journal of the artist's life from 31st October 2002 to November 2003. In this journal Doucet is single and apparently enjoying her independence. She has a large group of friends in Montreal and easily makes new friends when travelling. The Julie of *365 Days* is a world away from the protagonist of *Dirty Plotte*: although Doucet occasionally expresses feelings of stress, she generally represents herself as a confident and professional artist, visiting and participating in shows, negotiating contracts and working hard. She is confident of her opinions on political and religious matters (she opposes the Iraq war, despises the Bush administration and calls Douglas Coupland a "damn fool" for believing in God) (*Days*, 3/11/2, 20/3/3). Unlike her younger self she is not remotely intimidated by men or easily manipulated into undesirable situations. In Figure 33 she depicts herself with a group of other artists, cartoonists and writers whom she represents as friends and professional equals. Her main concern is Max's opinion of her work: the Spanish cartoonist is a colleague and collaborator whose judgement she values.[42] In spite of her habit of drawing breasts and nipples on clothed women, Doucet does not represent herself in overtly sexual terms. *365 Days* is primarily a journal of her professional life: there are no romantic encounters, no nudity, and certainly no masturbating or changing of tampons. Many reviewers found the book's lack of intimate personal detail frustrating, accusing it of blandness and lack of narrative drive, but I suggest that the change in Doucet's subject matter reflects a shift in personal priorities and values which is, in its own way, as revealing as *Dirty Plotte*.[43] *365 Days* is an aesthetic exercise, an elegant piece of design that reflects a period of Doucet's life in which her identity as a mature adult artist is of paramount importance.

As time goes on, Doucet's sense of self is less divided, less dependent on others for its stability. Nevertheless, *365 Days* suggests that the mature Doucet is,

41   *365 Days* has no page numbers, but as it takes the form of a diary, I refer to entries by date.
42   Doucet and Max collaborated on an entry in the anthology *Comix 2000* (Paris: L'Association, 1999).
43   See, for example, Brian Bethel, "365 Days: A Diary by Julie Doucet". Review. *Popmatters*. 8th January 2008. <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/comics/reviews/56325/365-days-a-diary-by-julie-doucet/>; and Jessa Crispin, "Julie Doucet's 365 Days: A Diary". Review. *Bookforum* February/March 2008. <http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/014_05/2091>
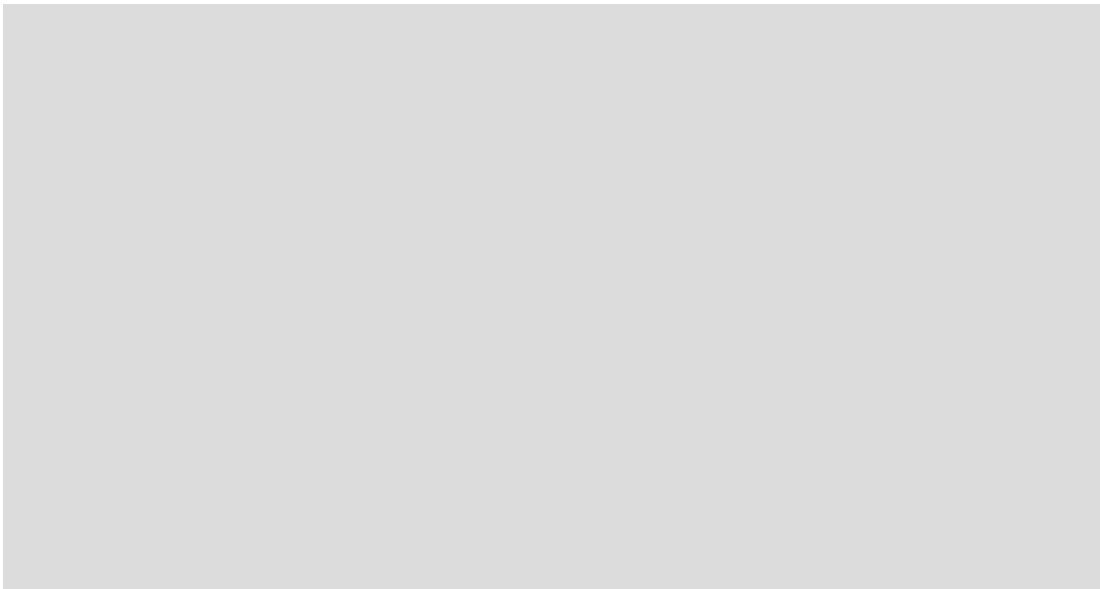
Figure 34.

if anything, even more concerned with the effects of geographical location on her identity than she had previously been. Two distinct but closely related concerns, space and place, have been prevalent in Doucet's work since the beginning. In their enthusiasm for Doucet's exploration of hazy subject boundaries, critics have tended to overlook the geographical specificity and spatial awareness of her work. Where Crumb and Barry's comics, for example, are set in a vague, abstracted American landscape, Doucet's fictionalised Julie is always on the move from one specific location to another. One could argue that this wandering is a consequence of her Canadian – and specifically Quebecois – identity: many critics have noted that a concern with place is a common feature of Canadian writing.[44] This is not the whole story, as Doucet's travel can easily be attributed to the breadth of her creative influences, but her sense of non-belonging may be attributed in part to national as well as personal history. *My New York Diary* begins with Julie leaving Montreal for New York and ends with her departure for Seattle. Even within her stay in New York her residential arrangements are always problematic: desperate to escape from her obsessive boyfriend, she moves into a windowless room in a flat shared with strangers. *The Madame Paul Affair* (2000) tells of a similar restlessness: it starts with Julie and her partner Andre moving into a rooming house, and ends with them

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44   Northrop Frye famously suggested that the central problem for Canadian writers is not "who am I?" but "where is here?" See Carl F. Klinck, *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965) 826. Margaret Atwood addressed this issue in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).

moving out after a number of problems surrounding the building and its owners.[45] Likewise *365 Days* describes the author's movements between Montreal, Berlin, rural England, Paris and Marseilles, and her strong emotional responses to each place. I wish to dwell on this preoccupation for a while because a concern with the relationship between identity, space and place is a recurring interest for writers of alternative comics, and will become a prominent theme in my chapters on Alan Moore and Chris Ware.

The association of women with domestic interiors has existed almost as long as literature itself. Male characters go off adventuring in the big wide world while women tend the hearth and await their return. In Doucet's early work, however, the domestic space is not one of safety or harmony. Her interiors are dark, dirty, chaotic and dangerous. Nails protrude from the wall, insects lurk on surfaces, bits of discarded food litter the floor. Sharp objects are particularly prevalent – scissors, knives, razorblades and jagged tin cans lie about the flat, while breakable beer bottles balance precariously on every surface. One story in *My Most Secret Desire* (1995) shows Julie waking from a dream to find a crowd of objects shouting abuse and death threats (Figure 34). The clutter marks the interior space as an extension of Doucet's self, but it is a notably destructive manifestation of her character. By drawing herself as small and fragile, and her environment as sharp and dangerous, Doucet effectively splits her self-projection, leaving Julie the character an innocent, vulnerable figure in a threatening world created by Doucet the author.

Doucet's comics offer little possibility of escape from this claustrophobic landscape. Her images are always tightly cropped, showing no more of the surrounding space than is strictly necessary. Ana Merino points out that there are few windows and doors in Doucet's comics.[46] When windows are evident within the *mise-en-scène*, they never offer a view onto the outside world. Julie explains as she introduces the reader to her New York flat that the views from the small windows are of garbage on one side and a back yard on the other. Even exterior scenes manage to retain the same claustrophobia, showing shop fronts and littered streets but never broad vistas or open sky. There is no *flânerie*, no jubilant ownership of geographical space: if she travels at all, Doucet does so reluctantly, usually by the subway. Even in the story "Heavy Flow" in which Julie runs out of tampons and

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45   Originally serialised in French in *Ici Montreal* (March – November 1999).
46   Merino (2001) 48.

rampages across the city in King Kong fashion, drowning the streets in blood, the panels are tightly cropped around Doucet's body, with only a tiny portion of the final panel devoted to sky (Figure 25).

Far from claiming New York as a formative influence in *My New York Diary*, Doucet repeatedly expresses a sense of dislocation from her environment. Julie explains that it is unsafe to go out alone at night in Washington Heights, and that expense prevents them from moving downtown to be nearer her friends. Where her boyfriend expresses an intense emotional attachment to the city, collapsing into hysterical sobs when she remarks that she cannot imagine living in New York for the rest of her life, Julie seems curiously detached from her surroundings. In this respect, the narrow focus of her panels makes perfect sense: Julie's world, the land that she considers to be part of her self, is a very small area around her body. Julie's personal space comprises her flat, a few streets in the immediate vicinity, and not much more. This is partly a result of fear: Julie's anxieties about being looked at, which I discussed earlier, are most prevalent when she is obliged to go out alone. For all the apparent hostility of Julie's domestic interior, she claims the space as safe because it offers freedom from the gaze of strangers. However, a further clue can be found in some of her earliest strips. The "Kirk and Spock in a New Spot" stories show the *Star Trek* protagonists "possessing" a planet by urinating on it.[47] Each time something odd happens – the urine floods the planet, or flows upwards, or their skin becomes coated in a sticky substance. In other words, Doucet's own attitude to her environment must be set against her mockery of the masculine instinct for possession.

In "Weird Signs", Ole Frahm analyses a 1917 Sidney Smith comic, "Old Doc Yak", in which the space on the page takes part in the tense negotiations over Old Doc Yak's living space. As Frahm points out, there are no gutters between panels, and the landlord tells Old Doc Yak, "The price of white paper is too high". The landlord talks about prices of advertising space and threatens to "throw you both [Old Doc Yak and his son] off this page".[48] Something similar can be seen in Crumb's strip "Boxes", which establishes the panel as a room-like space from which the inhabitant wants, but is afraid to escape.[49] While Doucet's comics lack

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47   Dirty Plotte #4, reprinted in Doucet (1993).
48   Ole Frahm, "Weird Signs: Comics as Means of Parody", in Magnussen and Christiansen, ed.s (2000) 181-3.
49   R. Crumb, *The Complete Crumb Comics: Vol. 4* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1989) 54.
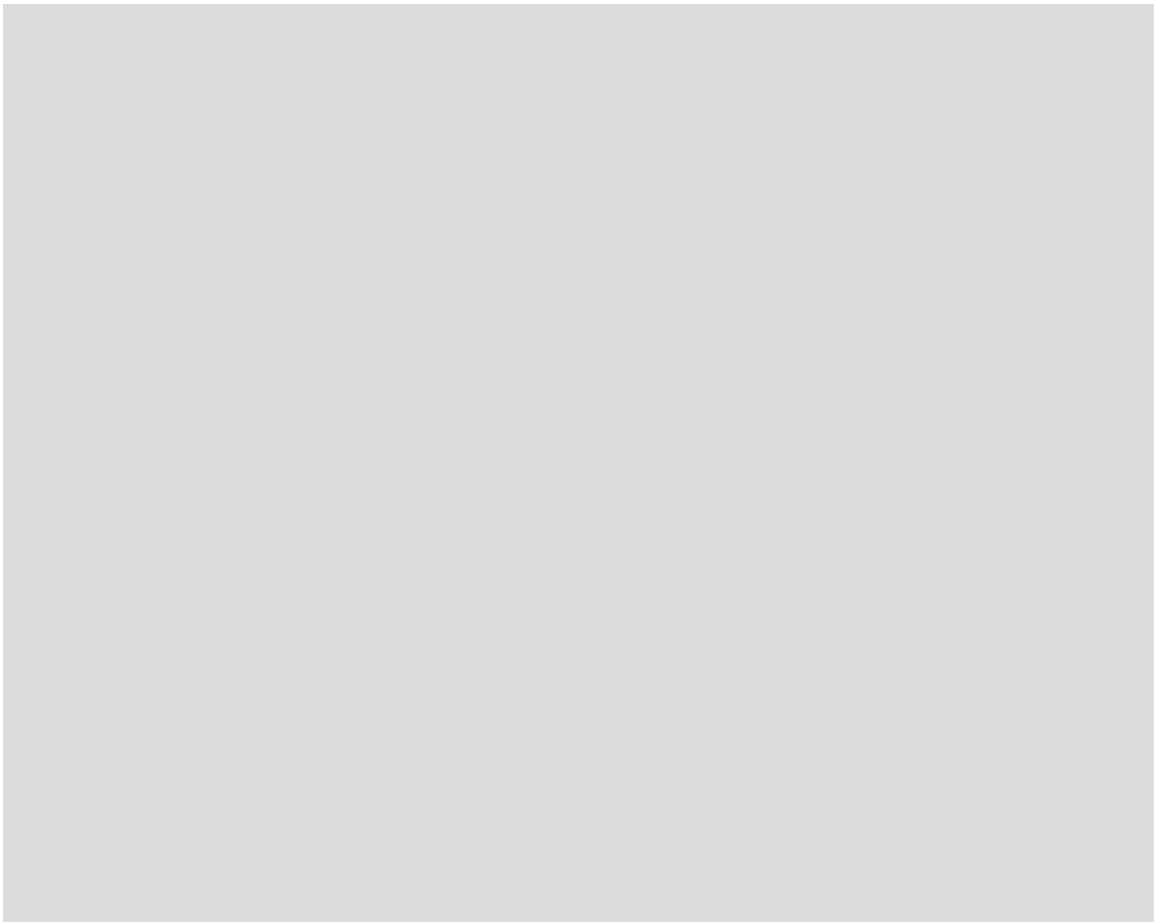
Figure 35.

the conspicuous self-referentiality of Smith's, the claustrophobia of her panels can likewise be seen in relation to the negotiations over space in her stories. It is worth noting that in *The Madame Paul Affair*, a paid, weekly strip for the Montreal paper *ICI*, Doucet is intensely concerned with ownership of space. The whole story turns out to have stemmed from a dispute over an inheritance, as a result of the unexplained wealth issuing from Madame Paul's basement distillery. Julie and her friends only start investigating in the first place out of concern for the security of their own living space, after having received a letter informing them that the building they are living in has been sold. Furthermore, the construction of a comics page out of panels is particularly appropriate for a story set in a tenement building, as the panels often mimic rooms. In Figure 35, for example, Julie and Sophie climb down into the bottom row of panels as they enter the basement. Doors tend to open onto one side of a panel, as in the second image here. Yet in spite of this intimate link between the characters' panel space and their environment, they make every effort to dissociate themselves from their living space. Everyone is evasive – for no apparent reason Madame Paul lies about her origins, while the new owner claims no responsibility

for the building and refers everyone to his absent wife. Andre, Julie's supposed partner, plays very little part in the story and hardly seems to live in the building at all. The protagonists are all constantly trying to disconnect themselves from the world around them, because in an environment that is constantly changing due to factors beyond their control, to anchor their identity to their surroundings would be to leave that identity in danger.

A significant change in Doucet's attitude to geographical location and interior space can be seen in *365 Days*. Whilst her drawings of interior space still rarely show windows or doors, they are not as squalid or claustrophobic as those in her earlier comics. Her emphasis is increasingly on people rather than furniture and objects: figures are large and less easily dominated by their surroundings (see Figure 33). Nevertheless, she describes a strong emotional investment in the various cities she visits throughout the journal. She complains of being "stuck in Montreal", desperately wishing to move to Paris but afraid that she could not afford to live there (*Days*, 9/4/3). Before leaving Paris at the end of the book she reports having dreamt of living in an Eiffel Tower-shaped cabin in rural Canada, saying, "Yeah, I don't know where I want to be, where to go…" (*Days*, 18/10/3). Her concerns are partly tied up with language: in spite of having published much of her earliest work in English and established a reputation amongst the Anglophone comics community, she prefers to speak French and reports "I am sick of speaking in English… it doesn't make sense to me to write in that language anymore" (*Days*, 7/4/3). Although, as Beaty notes, she is successful in both US and European comics markets it appears that Doucet is most comfortable in the more art-oriented Francophone comics community. Her anxieties about art, language and place are impossible to separate. For all her worries about moving to Europe or being "stuck" in Canada, Doucet's attitude to her immediate physical surroundings is more relaxed in her later work. Domestic objects have always played a significant part in Doucet's representation of space. As I noted above, in Doucet's early work she frequently represents mundane items like crockery and cutlery as aggressive or threatening. In *Elle Humour*, however, her attitude is almost exactly reversed, and she produces a collage poem of admiration for a bag and a chair: "Are you single, chair? Let me sit on you, chair/ Your body do the job/ Chair you are all right." The text is followed by four drawings of different seats: a fold-up chair, a stool, a simple wooden kitchen chair and one covered in striped fabric. Doucet writes a similar poem expressing her regard for

tools ("Cold and then warm in my hands they open any body… I love tools"). The images are drawn in warm, friendly colours with thick, soft outlines. As a mark of her esteem for these objects, Doucet allows each one its own page: her drawings are spaced out, not simply records of pleasing design but portraits of almost anthropomorphised objects. Doucet's changing attitudes to geographical place on the one hand and personal, domestic space and its associated objects on the other are indicative of a more general shift in her attitude to the world around her. She no longer feels threatened by her environment, and appears more in control of her movements, but still has strong emotional ties to particular countries and cities.

In 1972 Margaret Atwood made a number of observations about Canadian literature that seem superficially to apply to Doucet. As well as her remarks on place that I have noted, she argued that the figure of the victim or loser is a familiar one in Canadian literature.[50] She also commented on the prevalence of conspicuously ugly women.[51] However, Atwood was setting the apparent Canadian "will to lose" against the American "will to win", a distinction that should be treated with some caution with reference to alternative comics. Doucet does indeed privilege grotesque, ugly, abject self-representations in her early work, but as I have shown she does not do so consistently throughout her career. More seriously, one can point to a number of US artists (Crumb and Barry, for a start) doing much the same thing during this period. Writing in 1986, Mark Shainblum noted the similarities between the "inferiority complex" stereotypically shared by Canadians and comics creators and readers.[52] Canadian cartoonists such as Chester Brown, Seth and Ho Che Anderson have certainly been influential, particularly since Drawn and Quarterly was founded in the 1990s, but the themes of victimisation and low self esteem had been put in place long before then, by the US-led underground scene.

Doucet's increasingly relaxed attitude to the physical space around her is further reflected in the use of space and the relationship between verbal and visual signs in her books. In Doucet's early work one often finds conflict and competition between words and images. Speech balloons seem squeezed into cluttered images, crowding the speakers. *Elle Humour*, *Lady Pep* (2004) and *Long Time Relationship*, on the other hand, rarely exhibit the dense chaos found in Doucet's earlier work.

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50   Atwood (1972) 34-5.
51   Atwood (1972) 210.
52   Mark Shainblum, preface to John Bell, *Canuck Comics: A Guide to Comic Books Published in Canada* (Montreal: Matrix, 1986) 1-2.

Elle Humour in particular features blank, coloured pages or pages with only a single shape, a small group of marks or fragment of text set in empty space. In contrast to her younger self's economical use of paper, the older Doucet is generous with her pages, allowing a drawing or collage to luxuriate in its own space. Her later books also demonstrate a more relaxed, playful and experimental attitude to the interplay between words and images. Texts, images and symbols in different fonts, scripts and languages sprawl and meander across multicoloured pages in all directions. Although the pages of *365 Days* are densely packed, the images and words share the same space on each page: the book is part comic, part illustrated prose diary, with drawings, doodles and collage elements interspersed with the narrative. It should come as no surprise that Doucet, with her long-standing preoccupation with relationships between signs, should have moved towards abstraction. In a 2007 interview she expressed an increasing interest in this mode and added, "Writing is a form of abstraction, no?"[53] It seems likely that she will continue to work in unconventional, abstract narrative modes and to exploit book and pamphlet formats in her work.

Doucet has said that those who imagine that they know her through her comics and art work are mistaken.[54] Paradoxically, Doucet's early, gut-spilling narratives mask an oddly private personality. Looking back from Doucet to Crumb, a similar logic applies – a man who freely admits to having been sexually aroused by a dead seagull actually succeeds in masking huge sections of his life and identity from the public eye.[55] I have been arguing that Doucet's early comics, for all their apparent explicitness, are best seen in the context of the artist's later work in which she presents a very different version of her identity. The range of Doucet's work enacts the changeable nature of selfhood, particularly young adult selfhood, to an extent not often seen in alternative comics. Conversely, by choosing not to show the most intimate details of her personal life in her later work, Doucet tells a different but no less interesting story about her mature adult self. Moreover, the lack of explicit autobiographical detail in her later work reflects an increasing emphasis on aesthetics over self-expression, an ideological shift that places Doucet firmly outside

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53   Nadel (2006) 48.
54   Dumez (2001).
55   D. K. Holm, "The Latest Confessions: An Interview with Robert Crumb". *R. Crumb Conversations*. Ed. D. K. Holm (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) 224.

the youth culture of comics self-publishers.

Doucet announced her "retirement" from comics in 2001, before she wrote *365 Days*.[56] This volume is not exactly a comic but it can hardly be considered a wholesale rejection of graphic narrative either. She dreads being "stuck with the cartoonist label for the rest of my life" but the comics form is an important part of her history as an individual and an artist.[57] If there is any continuous story being told through Doucet's work it is one of resistance to containment. In her early work she addressed this directly: the uncontained female body, the rebellion against domestic hygiene, the self-published fanzine form and so on. But radicalism has its own conventions and the forms of rebellion common in alternative comics soon came to appear constricting. For all the distinctiveness of her graphic style, Doucet's work is marked by the restless mobility of one who refuses to stop thinking. Her most defining characteristic is constant, creative change.

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56   Brown (2001).
57   Nadel (2006) 48.

CHAPTER FIVE

Romantic selfhood in the comics of Alan Moore

Writers of alternative comics are characteristically an eccentric bunch, members of a culture that sets itself apart from producers and consumers of mainstream comics and other media. Nevertheless, Alan Moore is often considered to be weirder than most. Even before he declared himself to be a magician and worshipper of the Roman snake-god Glycon, his physical appearance, outspoken views and unorthodox, sometimes volatile relationships made him the subject of a reasonable amount of gossip in the comics world.[1] This eccentricity is important because it is impossible to separate Moore's representations of selfhood from his unorthodox beliefs about human perception, history, magic and contemporary culture.

Moore has been nothing if not prolific, and the bibliography provided by the Alan Moore Fansite lists several hundred titles.[2] What I am seeking to demonstrate here is that Moore's later works, particularly *From Hell* (1991-6, collected 1999), *The Birth Caul* (1995) and *Lost Girls* (1991-2006) are the products of a neo-Romantic sensibility which developed in parallel with his identity as a magician. I will begin with a brief examination of an earlier comic, *Swamp Thing*, in which traces of his later preoccupations can be seen, but which differs in several significant ways from his 1990s work. I will then discuss those comics written during and after Moore's magical "mid-life crisis" (as he put it),[3] as it is in these works that Moore most clearly privileges the visionary and the non-rational, and attempts to describe a lost, intuitive, spontaneous selfhood uncontained by social convention. He also places increasing emphasis on the importance of individual experience, and particularly spiritual experience unmediated by religious authorities. At the same time, all three of these comics are powerfully aware of social class and the ways in which physical and historical factors determine personal identity. I wish to trace the development of these views and to discuss the central role of perception in Moore's vision of human

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1   Arguably the best place for comics community gossip is *The Comics Journal* message board. <http://www.tcj.com/messboard/>
2   Stephen Camper, "Bibliography". *Alan Moore Fan Site* <http://www.alanmoorefansite.com/bibliography.html>
3   Tasha Robinson, interview with Alan Moore. *The Onion A.V. Club.* 24th October 2001. <http://www.avclub.com/content/node/24222>

identity.

Before I address Moore's comics I will give a brief outline of his early work and the cultural scene in which he was writing. By the time Moore began writing at the end of the 1970s, comics in Britain had been in decline for some time.[4] Children's comics and action and adventure titles were still in print but their circulation had dwindled, partly due to the growing dominance of television. Imported US titles were popular, and as Huxley's study demonstrates, there was an indigenous underground scene buoyed up by punk culture in the late 70s, but nevertheless, the industry was hardly thriving. Strongly influenced by this underground culture, Moore started writing comics in 1979, initially with the intention of both writing and drawing his stories.[5] He had no art school or literary training, and had in fact been expelled from school for dealing LSD. He began by writing small strips in various alternative music magazines and the local *Northants Post*, including the bizarre and decidedly countercultural *Maxwell the Magic Cat* (1979-86, collected 1986-7). From these he progressed to writing scripts for *2000AD* and a variety of Marvel UK titles, both pre-established series such as *Doctor Who* and his own early series *The Ballad of Halo Jones* (1984-6) and *Skizz* (1983). He also wrote for Dez Skinn's anthology *Warrior*, in which Moore's *V for Vendetta* was first published between 1982 and '85.[6] All of these comics were primarily science fiction and action-based, but as Sabin points out, *2000AD* "exhibited a definite punk edge" with its anti-authoritarian stance and taste for violence.[7] Like Sim's *Cerebus*, Moore's early work existed at a confluence of the mainstream and the underground, consisting of sci-fi, fantasy and adventure stories with a strong alternative flavour. The comics I will discuss here are amongst Moore's more literary works, but it is worth remembering that his roots are firmly in a popular, superhero tradition, and indeed his most recent works for his own imprint ABC ("America's Best Comics") show a decisive return to superhero narratives.

Moore has said that at the age of seven his career plan was to "put on a costume and fight crime".[8] One might expect a writer from a tradition as overtly

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4   Sabin (1996), 131.
5   Moore has discussed his debt to the underground in numerous interviews. See, for example, Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, "Authors on Anarchism: An Interview with Alan Moore". *Infoshop News*. August 17th, 2007.
<http://news.infoshop.org/article.php?story=2007alan-moore-interview>
6   For basic biographical information and a fuller publication history see Lance Parkin, *The Pocket Essential Alan Moore* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001).
7   Sabin (1996) 134.
8   Lee (2005).

masculinist as superhero comics to share Sim and Crumb's anxieties about the declining dominance of white masculinity, or at least to relate the concept of the superhero to his own identity struggles. However, Moore has never been particularly hung up about male power, and has expressed overtly feminist views both in his comics and in interviews.[9] Nor is he ever really talking about himself in his comics, notwithstanding his brief appearance in *The Birth Caul*: Moore's authorial voice is certainly insistent and frequently didactic, but it is rarely autobiographical. His concern with subjectivity derives from a belief that human perceptions are totally unreliable indicators of reality, and this view is coupled with a belief in imagination as quite literally a magical force. In his published correspondence with Dave Sim he wrote:

> The simple fact of things is that we can never directly perceive any such phenomenon as this putative "reality": all we can ever perceive is *our own perceptions*, with these perceptions assembled into a constantly updated mosaic of apprehensions (or misapprehensions) that we call reality.[10]

This view is intrinsic to many of Moore's narratives: in the comics I will discuss here he examines the visionary states experienced by a serial killer, the pre-linguistic perceptions of young children and the sexual fantasies of adults. Moreover, it is a view well suited to the comic book form for several reasons. Firstly, the argument that the world is not as most people perceive it is one that lends itself to science fiction and fantasy, which had become dominant modes in both British and US comics by the time Moore began writing.[11] Secondly, the comics medium itself presents its narratives as a "mosaic of apprehensions" which never aspire to represent reality with any precision. But thirdly, as I have already shown, the authors of independent comics typically have a high degree of autonomy and freedom from editorial constraints, and are therefore at liberty to explore all manner of unorthodox opinions in their work.

Whilst auteur theory has largely been discredited when it comes to film

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9   See, for example, "The Curse" (*Swamp Thing* Vol.3, ch.6), an outright critique of patriarchy and domestic bullying; and Lee (1995), in which Moore condemns the eroticisation of violence against women.

10   Smoky man [sic] and Millidge, eds, *Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman* (2003) 308.

11   I am thinking in the most general terms here: Mila Bongco, for example, places both Moore and Sim in a post-superhero tradition. Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York and London: Garland, 2000).

analysis,[12] it still holds a good deal of power amongst independent comics writers who are characteristically proud of their resistance to being told what to do. Authors like Crumb, Sim, Barry and Doucet have almost no external editorial input, even on the basic level of spell-checking. Moore likewise is adamant that the creative process is his alone, and argues that this control over the narrative is one of the major advantages that the comics form has over film:

> …in one of my comic scripts, if there is a full stop at the end of a sentence, that full stop will be there in the finished comic, unless something has gone wildly wrong. In movies, I accept that there's no one person who has that control… In my world, the actors and the director are all made of paper, and they do exactly what I say.[13]

There may be some truth in this but it comes with a caveat: Moore does not illustrate his own scripts, and in spite of the unusual level of detail he prescribes to his collaborators, the artists inevitably have a significant input.[14] This chapter is not, therefore, only about Alan Moore but also about his collaborators, particularly Eddie Campbell and Melinda Gebbie, whose distinctive work plays a central role in interpretation of *From Hell*, *The Birth Caul* and *Lost Girls*.

I want to begin with a brief sketch of *Swamp Thing* because whilst it is clear that Moore's neo-Romanticism was most clearly defined in *From Hell* and subsequent works, some of his ideas had been developing over a longer period. Where *From Hell* and *Lost Girls* are both historical narratives that take place around the turn of the twentieth century, *Swamp Thing* is a work of science fiction, set in an alternative present. Importantly, it is also set in the DC universe – that is, the narrative takes place in a world in which Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman and other DC heroes also exist, and no DC author may write something that undermines the plot of another title. All stories are part of a larger, continuous whole which hardly anyone has read in its entirety: few readers catch a story at the very beginning, or follow it right to the end (even an irrevocably dead character can always be revived by a flashback sequence). With *Swamp Thing*, then, Moore was working within very tightly defined parameters and it is a mark of the author's

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12   See John Caughie, ed. *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge/ BFI, 1981).
13   Robinson (2001).
14   For an example of Moore's comics scripts, see Alan Moore, *From Hell: The Compleat Scripts Volume 1* (1995). See also Steve Bissette, "Mr Moore and Me", in smoky man [sic] and Gary Spencer Millidge, eds, *Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman* (Leigh on Sea: Abiogenesis Press, 2003) 219.

singular ingenuity that he managed to change the title as much as he did.

When Moore took over the second series of *Swamp Thing* in 1983, the comic's sales were in decline and its editors at DC were thinking of cancelling it altogether. *Swamp Thing* had been created by Len Wein in 1971, and told the story of a scientist, Alec Holland (Alex Olson in the earliest version), who mutated into a vegetable-humanoid monster after a chemical explosion. Moore accepted the job on the understanding that he would be free to rework the title in whatever way he saw fit. He was a relatively unknown writer at the time, but DC did not have much to lose.[15] What Moore did was to rewrite the back story, claiming that the Swamp Thing was not a mutated version of Alec Holland but a sort of sentient plant that had modelled itself on Holland, who had indeed died in the original explosion. In "The Anatomy Lesson" (the second issue scripted by Moore), Jason Woodrue explains what happened when the explosion blew Holland's body into the swamp:

> His body goes into the swamp along with the formula that it is saturated with. And once there, it decomposes… [The plants in the swamp] eat him… and they become infected by a powerful consciousness that does not realise it is no longer alive! Imagine that cloudy, confused intelligence, possibly with only the vaguest notion of self, trying to make sense of its new environment… gradually shaping the plant cells that it now inhabits into a shape that it's more comfortable with. (Vol.1, 23)

This revelation prompts something of an identity crisis in Swamp Thing, who, having shared all Holland's memories, had always believed that he was Alec Holland, and had been hoping for a cure that would return him to human form. Woodrue calls him "a ghost dressed in weeds" (Vol 1, 33) and "the moss-encrusted echo of a man" (Vol 1, 40). Moore also saw the funny side, likening the old Swamp Thing to "Hamlet covered in snot".[16] However, their disparaging assessments do not remain true for very long. Gradually abandoning his attachment to his old, human identity, Swamp Thing becomes accustomed to his new, plant self, and finds that he is able to sustain a psychic connection with the plant world, "the green". In a double page at the beginning of chapter three, Swamp Thing's thoughts appear as an interior monologue (Figure 36):

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15   Lance Parkin, *Alan Moore* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001). A detailed publication history of *Swamp Thing* can be found on Wikipedia. "Swamp Thing". *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. 17 September 2007. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swamp_Thing>

16   Lee (2005).
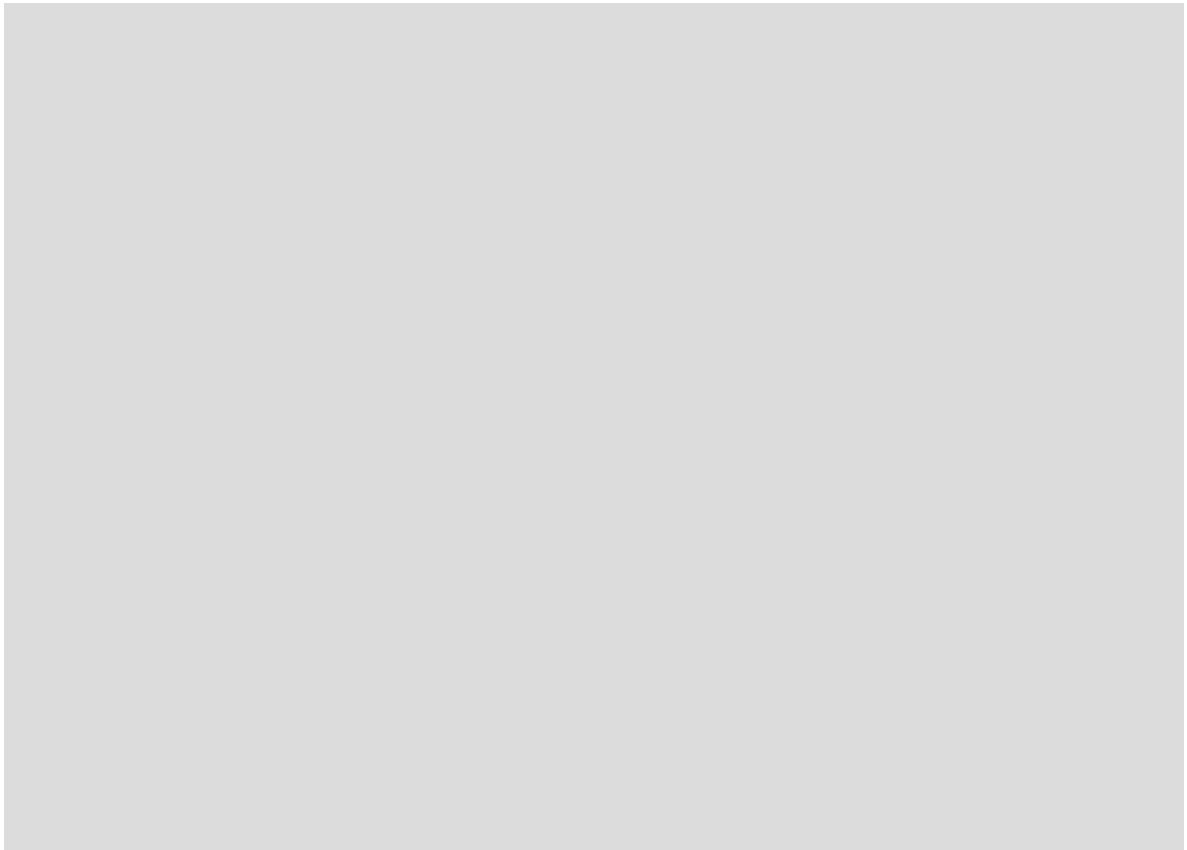
Figure 36.

Somewhere quiet… somewhere green and timeless… I drift… the cellular landscape stretching beneath me… eerie… silent… beautiful… My awareness… expanding out through the forgotten root systems… (Vol.1, 61)[17]

The page layout reflects this free-floating plant consciousness: patterns of cells, striated plant tissue and meandering roots entwine amongst panels that overlap and drift out of alignment in multiple shades of green. The still-humanoid body of Swamp Thing appears suspended in a vast green space as the character learns to inhabit a new mode of consciousness. What is noteworthy about *Swamp Thing* is the notion that the main character's consciousness is transferable, that it can be shared, moved or can lie dormant for long periods. He is a hybrid, a unique entity, a member of the plant kingdom that has acquired many human attributes and is capable of relationships with humans. Much of the narrative of Moore's run on *Swamp Thing* concerns the protagonist's efforts to strike a balance between his plant self (and related environmental concerns) and his relationship with a human woman, Abby Cable.

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17   The ellipses are Moore's: Swamp Thing's speech is always punctuated with them, presumably to indicate that he speaks very slowly.

Science fiction in general has always been concerned with subjectivity, from the plaintive introspection of Frankenstein to *Star Trek*'s Borg collective. Far from transporting readers to other worlds, sci-fi offers an oblique perspective on the problems of human subjectivity here and now. Jenny Wolmark used Stuart Hall's idea of the "becoming" subject when she wrote of feminist science fiction:

> An open-ended sense of identity, and the capacity for it to be constructed and reconstructed in time and history, allows for the creative destabilization of definitions of self and other and for the acknowledgement of difference.[18]

Indeed, Swamp Thing thinks of his own identity in terms of "becoming":

> I am learning… so much… about what I am… and the knowledge… is gradually… changing me… But what is it changing… me into? What… am I… becoming? I bide my time… in this place… until I am grown… And I consider… this organism… that I am. Sometimes… I am in awe… at its strangeness… and complexity… Sometimes… I am almost frightened… by my own possibilities. (Vol.3, 62)

Swamp Thing is in a state of flux between human and plant, unable and unwilling to shake off his human memories but gradually acquiring the habits of the green. He is post-human, his existence radically conditioned by historical forces and scientific intervention. Like the cyborg of Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto", he is a chimera, a creature of multiple origin stories, none of them quite conclusive or immune to rewriting. For Haraway, the boundaries between animal and human, human and machine, physical and non-physical have long been breached, and the cyborg is a politically radical figure existing outside old dualisms. The cyborg, she says, offers new possibilities for socialist feminism by celebrating irony, multiplicity and the end of wholeness. Above all, Haraway's cyborg is beyond the dualism of gender, and Swamp Thing likewise transcends the fixed gender role – the masculine emphasis on *action* – suggested by his superheroic identity.[19]

On the one hand, I am suggesting, Swamp Thing is a decisively postmodern figure, a hybrid who eventually comes to terms with his post-human identity. Yet at the same time, many of the concerns that surround his existence – human relationships with the natural world, the place of individual heroism, and the need

18   Jenny Wolmark, "Time and Identity in Feminist Science Fiction", in David Seed, ed. *A Companion to Science Fiction* (2005) 161.
19   Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", in Neil Badmington, ed. *Posthumanism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).

for more intuitive, non-rational modes of perception – are the products of a much older set of ideas, specifically the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century. In retrospect, *Swamp Thing* bears the traces of an interest in selfhood and perceptual experience that would become increasingly important in Moore's later, independent work. The necessity of abandoning preconceptions of an identity based on civilised norms and returning to a natural, intuitive state of selfhood are themes which the author would approach from a number of different directions throughout the 1990s.

From Hell was not only written at a point of personal change for Moore, but was itself instrumental in his decision to become a magician. In a 2006 interview with Eddie Campbell, he described this vast and complex fictionalisation of the Jack the Ripper murders as "a way station approximately on the borderline between my life before magic and my life after."[20] I will first give a brief description of the form and style of *From Hell*, and will then relate these elements to the book's plot and ideology, which, I argue, have stronger connections with Moore's personal world view than is generally acknowledged.

Moore and Campbell's historical comic *From Hell* was originally published in Steve Bissette's horror anthology *Taboo* between 1991 and '92, and subsequently by Tundra and Kitchen Sink Press until 1996. In this book Moore explores the premise that the Ripper murders were committed by Sir William Gull as part of an elaborate psychogeographic ritual, and that they marked the birth of twentieth-century culture. The comic is a sort of cultural scavenger, taking in the figure of the flâneur, late-nineteenth-century philosophies of history and time, and the beginnings of modern tabloid journalism, not to mention a number of guest appearances by late-nineteenth-century celebrities. In Moore's view, the comic book medium (which, in terms of its first widespread newspaper publication, can be traced to around this period) is linked to the birth of modernity, and therefore *From Hell*'s interest in the problematic nature of modern selfhood is inextricable from the form of the comic itself.

From Hell makes a great show of its own textuality, and it is clear from the outset that an interest in paper, in reading and writing practices and their attendant tangles of signification forms an integral part of the project. *From Hell* is one of

20   Interview with Eddie Campbell in *A Disease of Language* (London: Knockabout/ Palmano Bennett, 2005) N. pag.

the few comics to carry footnotes, and each chapter has several, usually lengthy epigraphs. Moore as researcher is led down infinite paths in an endlessly complex plot, faced with a bewildering proliferation of texts and stories. His attempts at explaining his choices to the reader invariably raise as many questions as they answer. On the one hand, Moore attempts some measure of historical veracity, imitating Victorian dialogue with varying levels of success and researching London's history in meticulous detail; at the same time he acknowledges the impossibility of any kind of absolute truth and is constantly drawing attention to the slipperiness of his material. The epigraph at the beginning of chapter 13 underlines the point:

> Whatever is almost true is quite false, and among the most dangerous of errors, because being so near truth, it is the more likely to lead astray.
>
> Henry Ward Beecher (1813 – 1887)[21]

As well as helping to clarify or (more often) obfuscate the plot, the footnotes draw attention to the physical textuality of the comic: it moves towards hypertext, offering numerous reading possibilities and pointing towards an endless trail of other texts, sources and references. It also has the side-effect of making the text impossible to translate directly to film, and most critics agree that the film version of *From Hell* (Hughes dir. 2001), starring Johnny Depp and Heather Graham, is somewhat disappointing.[22]

Eddie Campbell's work makes an invaluable contribution to *From Hell* because the distinctiveness of his style makes the drawings themselves a central part of the narrative. Far from a cartoon stereotype, Campbell's illustrations for *From Hell* were influenced by both 1890s illustration and early-twentieth-century traditions of newspaper cartooning (see Figures 37-8). They are dark and often chaotic, their surface crowded with a mesh of scratchy lines reminiscent of an etching. Significantly for a horror comic featuring extended scenes of murder and mutilation, they contain no colour. Moore has criticised the "pornographic" and "cliché[d]"[23] nature of many Jack the Ripper narratives, and went to great lengths

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21   The chapters of *From Hell* have non-continuous pagination. The epigraphs in each chapter appear on an unnumbered page facing page 1.
22   *The Internet Movie Database* has an archive of reviews from 180 sources. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120681/externalreviews>
23   Saxon Bullock, "The House that Jack Built". Interview with Alan Moore. *Saxon Bullock* personal website. October 2002. <http://www.saxonbullock.com/alanmooreint.htm>

to avoid charges of voyeurism in *From Hell*. Campbell's drawings never eroticise the women in the novel, or glamorise prostitution: indeed, in their attention to the poverty and squalor of nineteenth-century Whitechapel the drawings are often reminiscent of Gustave Doré's illustrations of Victorian London, although thankfully without Doré's occasional sentimentality. Moreover, in its monochrome depiction of the hardship of urban life, *From Hell* is a direct descendant of Frans Masereel's woodcut narratives such as *The City* (1925) and *Passionate Journey* (1919). Campbell's real strength is architecture: his drawings of London are stunning, those of people comparatively flat. I suspect that this is as much a reflection of Campbell's abilities and interests as it is a carefully calculated technique, but the effect is to privilege the city over the people, matching Gull's distorted perspective with this bizarre artistic vision. At times, Campbell's drawings appear to suggest that the significance of individuals is slipping away as broader patterns of history and geography begin to take hold. I wish to look a little more closely at how this works, and to consider its implications.

Through both script and image, *From Hell* frequently signals a powerful connection between individuals and their environment, between body, city and text. At its simplest level this seems fairly obvious: the women in *From Hell* are inseparable from their environment, and even Abberline eventually stereotypes "East End women" as untrustworthy (Ch.11, 25), whilst Gull's social position and West End address put him in a position of intellectual command over the whole of London. However, the parallels between body, text and landscape are often more subtle: Netley claims to know London "like the back of my hand" (Ch.4, 6), whilst Moore, in his letters to Dave Sim, describes Marie Kelly's body as a text, saying "The scalpel interrupts the normal linear continuity of things, allows new possibilities."[24] In the same correspondence, Moore also describes the process of sorting through research materials in specifically geographical terms: "Rivers of theory. High points of conjecture and ley-lines of association."[25] *From Hell* not only emphasises its physical textuality; it also draws attention to the ink on its pages by playing with parallels between ink and blood, writing and violence. On the most literal level, splashes of ink represent splashes of blood. (One might recall Dave Sim's use of a very similar trick in *Cerebus* (Figure 13d).) Gull spells out the parallels

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24   Smoky man and Millidge, eds. (2003) 323.
25   Smoky man and Millidge, eds. (2003) 310.

Figure 37.

Figure 38.

from time to time: when he assumes the form of a seagull, for example (a recurring pun), he explodes to rain blood on Mediterranean sailors, saying "I sign my year of panics with appalling miracle" (Ch.14, 6). All this can be read in a number of ways. Firstly, Moore acknowledges the parallels between Gull's project and his own: Gull's assumption of power through the ritualistic dissection of bodies is mirrored by the writer's mastery of textual material and the distribution of ink on paper. Secondly, the slippage between body, city and text suggests that formerly safe hierarchies of value defining man's place in the world no longer stand, and meanings are to be found in the apparently random and chaotic urban environment and its inhabitants. But finally, I would submit, the text is trying to say something about its own medium: if text and body can merge then so can word and image. The collapse of boundaries between human constructs invites a similar collapse between those formerly segregated arenas of representation, the "sister arts".

In writing *From Hell* Moore was strongly influenced by the writings of Iain Sinclair. Sinclair's *Lud Heat* (1975), a strange mixture of prose, poetry, hieroglyphics, maps and various kinds of illustration, has much in common with the esoteric textual concerns of Moore's comic, and more importantly, provided the basis for Gull's explanation of London's Hawksmoor churches (Appendix 1, 3). Moore's interest in the possibility of a landscape exerting an unconscious influence on the lives of its inhabitants is most conspicuous in chapter 4, in which Gull gives his new-found accomplice, Netley, a tour of the city (Figures 37 and 38). Gull proclaims:

> We'll penetrate its metaphors, lay bare its structure and thus come at last upon its meaning… The greater part of London's story is not writ in words. It is instead a literature of stone, of place-names and associations… where faint echoes answer back from off the distant ruined walls of bloody history. (Ch.4, 9)

Gull's lengthy discourse on London as "symbol, history and myth" (Ch.4, 6), taking in an intensely misogynistic history of gender relations, is confusingly esoteric and ultimately overwhelming. As a participant in Gull's guided tour, any slightly inattentive reader is led to side with the illiterate, terrified Netley, who ends up vomiting in fear on the final page. Moore has said that magic is all about language:[26] here, black magic arises from a frightening surfeit of signification as Gull claims an ability to read meanings into every detail of the landscape. It is important that

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26   Bill Baker, *Alan Moore Spells it Out* (Milford, CT: Airwave, 2005) 9.

we, as readers, are in danger of feeling as confused as Netley. Chapter 4 shows Gull forming and justifying his plans in the wake of instructions from Queen Victoria to murder the women who are indirectly blackmailing Prince Eddy. However, these plans are not so much explained as circled around with flourishes of bewildering arcana. It is a chapter in which the reader is supposed to feel a little lost, and this effect is achieved partly through a tension between word and image. The pictorial sequence shows a fairly straightforward trip around London, whilst the dialogue – in fact, predominantly Gull's monologue – is in a world of its own. The interaction of word and image and the obscurity and abstraction of architectural form conspire to lead the reader out of her depth. Gull's discourse, in strings of linked word balloons, leads the eye around the architectural drawings in mimicry of the guided tour itself, often making a significant contribution to the structure and composition of the page. When it rains the marks on the page become a tangle of blotches that begin to resemble calligraphy (Figure 37). Crowds of people dissolve into shaky swirls of ink: the figures on the bridge at the top right of Figure 38 are described in abstract strokes very similar to those marks depicting the mud in Figure 37. This slippage between symbol and image points towards the synaesthetic effects of hallucinatory experience, which becomes more prevalent in Gull's subsequent visions. Here, Gull attributes Netley's feeling of sickness to the fact that the language of architecture "speaks direct to our unconscious mind" (Ch.4, 23). Gull's remark identifies an erosion of the boundaries between senses and interpretative structures which Campbell mirrors with his calligraphic drawings.

Perhaps more importantly, however, his statement also taps into various twentieth-century psychoanalytic ideas on the matter of abstract form and the unconscious. Freud claimed that the unconscious mind deals in images, and employed the same methods in interpreting art that he used to decode symptoms and dreams in his patients.[27] However, Freud had little time for abstract form, and tended to view paintings as texts to be decoded for their symbolic content. As Jack Spector points out:

> Freud ignored abstract art, not only because he demanded art… with a content capable of interpretation by a hermeneutic approach along the lines of psychoanalysis, but because he never appreciated the "musically expressive"

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27   See, for example Sigmund Freud, "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood" (1910), *Standard Edition* 11 (1953-74) 57-137.

qualities of nonmimetic, abstract art.[28]

Subsequent critics have engaged more fully with abstraction in art: Anton Ehrenzweig, for example, argued that the unconscious has a structure similar to music or visual art, and that its "inarticulate form" is comparable to that of abstract painting or architecture.[29] The Abstract Expressionists were not the first to introduce abstract elements to painting, but by abandoning representation altogether, they made the clearest statement in defence of the formal language of visual art. Having internalised a number of Romantic ideals, they spoke of their paintings as spontaneous expressions of the imaginative self, which they associated with the Romantic Sublime, a quasi-spiritual state beyond the reach of language.[30] For this reason their paintings are often resistant to critical interpretation. Eddie Campbell's drawings owe a great deal to Abstract Expressionism because that movement established a formal language independent of illusionist imagery and suggested that this, rather than a vocabulary of symbols, is the language of the unconscious.

Gull similarly asserts that architectural form and geographical space speak the language of the unconscious, but draws the somewhat disconcerting conclusion that they exert a real, invisible effect on the present without our knowledge. Several characters allude to a vague sense of a larger structure at work: Marie says "it was like things had a pattern I couldn't quite see" (Ch.9, 48). These ideas disrupt the reader's hope of a clear understanding of events: linear history, straightforward causality and enlightenment logic are dislodged by an altogether hazier and more troubling web of connections. Gull's intuitive perception of connections in London's history and geography is most clearly demonstrated through his visions.[31] There are several sections of *From Hell* that might be described as narratives of visionary experience, from Gull's vision of the goat-headed deity which he addresses as Jahbulon (Ch. 2, 27) to the moments preceding his own death in chapter 14. Chapter

28   Jack Spector, *The Aesthetics of Freud: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Art* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1972). See also Stephen Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis and Spirituality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
29   Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967)
30   See David and Cecile Shapiro, eds. *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ellen G. Landau, ed. *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).
31   See Coppin (1993) for an analysis of the transition in Gull's perception from the physical to the supernatural world.

14 of *From Hell* takes place in 1896, when Gull is in St. Mary's Asylum in Islington under the name Tom Mason. While a nurse and an orderly have sex in his cell, Gull finds himself back in a canal boat of his childhood. This marks the start of a visionary journey that takes him over the Mediterranean in 1888, over London and into William Blake's house where he appears to Blake as a reptilian monster, backwards and forwards in time, appearing as visions or dreams to Peter Sutcliffe, Ian Brady, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Gull's own former driver, Netley.

This chapter is particularly worthy of attention because it exemplifies *From Hell*'s non-linear conception of time. In chapter14 Gull revisits a conversation he once had with James Hinton, who refers to the theories suggested by his son Howard. He explains, "They suggest Time is a human illusion… that all times CO-EXIST in the stupendous whole of eternity" (Ch.14, 12; Moore's ellipsis). In addition to the more mundane perceptual experiences of disrupted chronology in *From Hell* – a drunk woman with gaps in her memory, or an unreliable witness who claims to have seen Marie Kelly after the time of her death – Moore narrates several episodes in which Gull experiences quite spectacular visions of atemporality. Both at the beginning of chapter 2 and during Gull's vision prior to his death there occurs a sequence in which different voices heard in the dark throughout Gull's life are merged into a single experience. Only the white speech balloons interrupt the black panels: without visual reference as an anchor, Gull's mind skips freely between time periods. The sequence is ostensibly set in Gull's childhood, as he travels through a darkened canal cut, and the future "memories" he hears lead him to make prophetic statements about his adult career: "I dreamed I was a grown-up man. I dreamed that I was famous for my use of knives." (Ch.14, 5) In his vision shortly before his death, Gull travels between historical periods, witnessing, amongst other things, a scene in a late-twentieth-century office. He criticises the apathy of the figures he sees:

> Whence comes this dullness in your eyes? How has your century numbed you so? Shall man be given marvels only when he is beyond all wonder? With all your shimmering numbers and your lights, think not to be inured to history. Its black root succours you. It is INSIDE you. Are you asleep to it, that you cannot feel its breath upon your neck, nor see what soaks its cuffs? (Ch.10, 21)

The image of Gull as a spectral advocate of history in its darkest, most patriarchal form is a distinctly creepy one because he is ultimately addressing not just the late modern figures within his vision but the readers themselves. The comic's non-linear

structure mirrors the modern conception of historical time, but it is the postmodern

abandonment of historical meaning that Gull is challenging: as he tells it, for all

the apparent chaos, there is a pattern if only we could see it. Most importantly,

Gull's argument is supported by the comics form itself. Because comics represent

the passage of time through the spatial juxtaposition of isolated moments, their

presentation of time is indeed fractured. Moreover, as Scott McCloud pointed out,

these "moments" remain on the page for the reader to experience at will, with the

result that "[b]oth past and future are real and visible and all around us."[32]

Whilst the prevalence of serial killers in Gull's visions of the future is

specific to his character, the appearance of William Blake, and Gull's earlier vision

of an animal-like deity, recall Moore's own experiences and interests. In his

correspondence with Dave Sim Moore reports having had visionary contacts with

the demon Asmodeus,[33] and his sustained interest in Blake is evinced by his spoken

word performance *Angel Passage* (2001), a homage to Blake.[34] The relationship

between Gull and the author is more powerfully ambivalent now than it was when

the book was first written. Gull is a monster, a serial killer of women whose actions

Moore never attempts to glamorise, yet he is also a visionary who seems, in the

heights of ecstasy, to have a psychic connection with Blake, and whose ideas would

have a profound effect on Moore's life and career. As Moore tells it:

> One word balloon in *From Hell* completely hijacked my life… A character says
> something like, 'The one place gods inarguably exist is in the human mind'. After
> I wrote that, I realised I'd accidentally made a true statement, and now I'd have
> to rearrange my entire life around it. The only thing that seemed to really be
> appropriate was to become a magician… I'm dependent on writing for a living, so
> really it's to my advantage to understand how the creative process works. One of
> the problems is, when you start to do that, in effect you're going to have to step off
> the edge of science and rationality.[35]

Furthermore, for all Moore's criticisms of Gull's freemasonry, this tradition has strong

connections with modern ritual magic, to which Moore now devotes much of his

time and energy. As Ronald Hutton notes in *The Triumph of the Moon: A History*

of Modern Pagan Witchcraft, many modern occult societies derive much of their

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32   McCloud (1993)104.
33   Smoky man and Millidge, eds. (2003) 326.
34   For an analysis of Blake's role in Moore's work see Roger Whitson, "Panelling Parallax: The
Fearful Symmetry of Alan Moore and William Blake", *ImageTexT* 3.2 (Winter 2007).
35   Steve Rose, "Moore's Murderer". Interview with Alan Moore. *The Guardian* 2nd February, 2002.
<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/sciencefiction/story/0,6000,643500,00.html>

symbolism and ritual, not to mention their emphasis on secrecy, from the secret societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of which the Freemasons were the most prominent.[36] Hutton adds that one key difference between the two traditions can be seen in their attitudes to women, and in this Moore and Gull are indeed polar opposites. Moore is both intrigued and horrified by Gull's experience, disgusted by his actions and ideology but enthralled by the heights to which these actions manage to take him. I suggest that Moore's solution, unplanned though he claims it to have been, was to produce *The Birth Caul*, a text which reclaims visionary experience and casts it in more democratic, less violent terms.

The Birth Caul, subtitled "A shamanism of childhood", was originally a spoken word performance read to music by Moore in November 1995. It was one of several site-specific performances that developed out of Moore's magical work during this period, along with *The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels* (1994), *The Highbury Working* (1997), *Snakes and Ladders* (1999) and *Angel Passage* (2001). Moore has said that he and his collaborators Tim Perkins and Dave "J" underwent a magic ritual to decide how to proceed with the project, and having written it almost at the last minute, concluded that "the trick to these things seems to be to plan as little as possible and trust in the process itself to carry you through to the correct conclusion."[37] That both *The Birth Caul* and *Snakes and Ladders* have subsequently been adapted as comics is due in large part to the strong working relationship that Moore had developed with Eddie Campbell throughout the production of *From Hell*, which was still going on when *The Birth Caul* was written and performed. It is hardly surprising then that *The Birth Caul* and *From Hell* have a number of themes in common in spite of their obvious superficial differences. In comparison to the sprawling *From Hell* and the pornographic marathon of *Lost Girls*, *The Birth Caul* is tiny: a 48-page comic, folded and stapled, printed on thin newsprint and self-published by Eddie Campbell in 1999. It was written shortly after the death of Moore's mother, and is, in part, an autobiographical work. However, for all its compact size, its scope is vast, encompassing local history, child development, language acquisition and the formation of personal identity.

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36   Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 52-65.
37   Interview with Eddie Campbell in *A Disease of Language* (2005). N. pag.
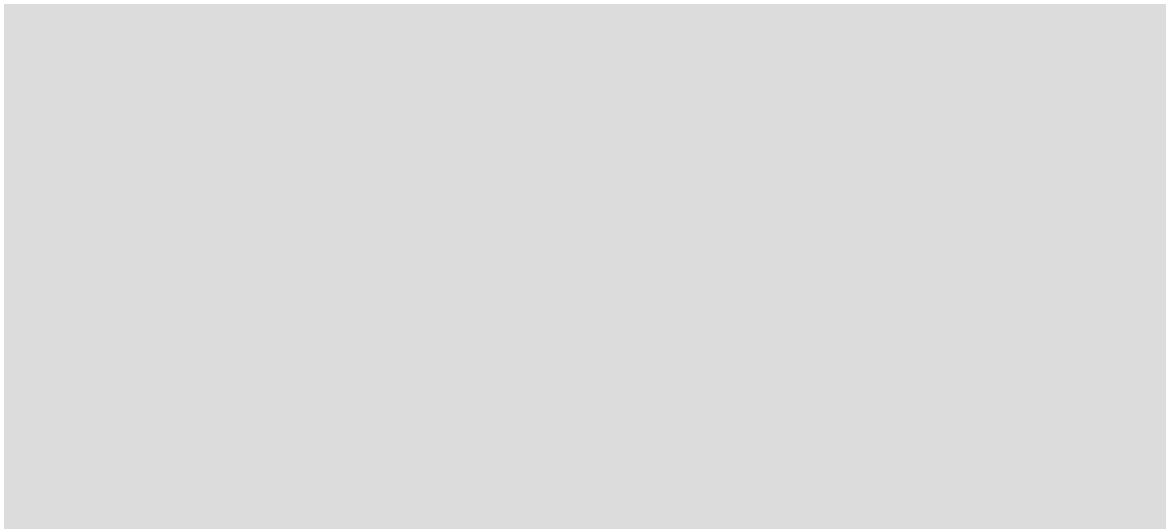
Figure 39.

Moore is not the first person to have used the comic book form to explore perceptions prior to language acquisition or beyond the grasp of normal language. Chester Brown's unfinished *Underwater* spends several chapters charting the early perceptions of a baby, with speech rendered as incomprehensible syllables ("leesh ya neesh fee thuw turlen", etc.).[38] Likewise Dave Sim's *Cerebus*, as I have already discussed, excels at representing the experiences of comatose, hallucinating or visionary characters in a manner that necessarily transcends speech. *The Birth Caul*, however, explicitly addresses language acquisition as a key moment in an individual's development:

> The Birth Caul is our converse, a concealed interior surface to the death mask, faint Turin impression of the foetal squint and scowl, our destinies bound not so much within our brow as in the flimsy curtain drawn across it; a mosquito net to trap our earliest, strangest dreams; the web in which our eyelids twitch and struggle. Long before we have the word, before the dressing of the tongue, before society makes us a dummy to its gross ventriloquism, this ripped page is our first text, our only copy of a script from which we must rehearse the world… (34)

Where Gull transcended language only in the heights of visionary ecstasy, *The Birth Caul* suggests that in childhood everyone experiences a similar freedom from the "gross ventriloquism" of civilised behaviour. Most notable is Moore's paradoxical use of a textual metaphor ("this ripped page…") for a pre-linguistic state. In his article, "Unwrapping the Birth Caul", Marc Singer engages with the apparent problem of Moore's verbal dexterity in a text about the tragedy of language acquisition. He uses

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38   Chester Brown, *Underwater* #1 (Drawn and Quarterly, 1994) 9.
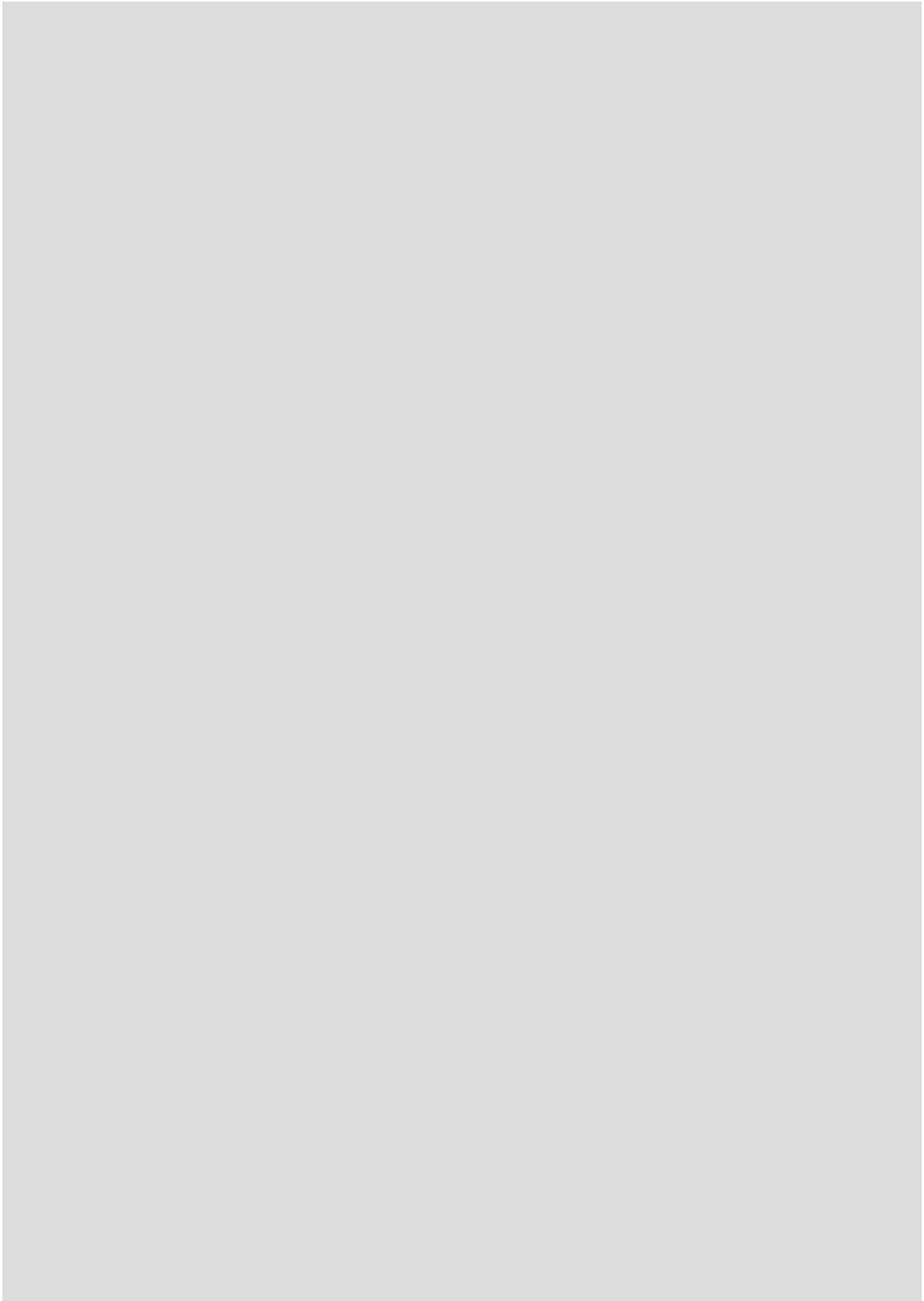
Figure 40.

the twentieth-century psychologist Piaget in order to explain:

> Moore's linguistic command in *The Birth Caul* is not a logical impossibility but rather the only feature that makes his narrative possible, as Moore's metaphoric gifts are the nearest means of approximating the earliest modes of human consciousness.[39]

Singer also points out that Moore presents a Romantic view not only of history but of individual human lives, suggesting that the intuitive, prelinguistic awareness of childhood is tragically lost in the transition through speech to an adult understanding of the world. What he does not do is to address the key correspondences between *The Birth Caul* and *From Hell*. The argument of *The Birth Caul*, with its elegy for a forgotten interval in our personal history, is a miniaturised version of Gull's commentary on history, only here Moore has no character to hide behind: the voice is unmistakably his.

      The Birth Caul is an adaptation of a text spoken in a particular place and time, and like *From Hell*, it is preoccupied with relationships between selfhood, time and geographical space. Superficially, *The Birth Caul* is concerned less with patterns in geography and history than with the drudgery of people's lives in factories and fast food restaurants. Early on, the text gives a brief history of Newcastle (the location of its initial performance), from 123AD to McDonalds and Topshop in a double page. Even on a microcosmic scale, space is important: a young child's description of "worldwood roof of undertable" and "house row all with sick long face" transforms a familiar urban space into a vast, alien landscape (Figure 39). Perhaps more importantly, Moore's description of the birth caul itself includes a geographical metaphor – "Rag-edged, a map of lost interiors, first continents. Upon its parchment breath, the log of older tides" (Figure 40). In this Moore gestures towards a hidden geography, a reading of space that is lost not just in the spirit-crushing routine of nine-to-five jobs but in the inevitable transition to adult selfhood. As in *From Hell*, people and place, geography and history are inseparable. The label on the caul's wrapping is a "postage stamp from some new cannibal republic", a relic of the early twentieth century and an incongruously neat tag for this foreign artefact. The page embodies the strangeness of the caul: set against the scattered ephemera of organised society (photos, leaflets and certificates), the caul is a frail, unfathomable

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39   Marc Singer, "Unwrapping *The Birth Caul*". *International Journal of Comic Art* 6.1 (2004) 247. This paper offers an excellent analysis of the main themes of *The Birth Caul*.

shape described in messy, abstract swirls of white paint. The layout of the page – pale, shapeless form emerging from an opened shoe box amongst a cluster of tattered personal effects – hints at the unknowable space, beyond language and therefore beyond memory, which the caul signifies for Moore.

From Hell was simultaneously ordered and chaotic, exhibiting patterns whilst never quite allowing readers to comprehend the whole picture. In *The Birth Caul* Moore articulates the view that linear time is a prison, and so the narrative does its best to escape from a clearly structured, ordered panel sequence. Although the arrangement of panels is roughly linear on many pages, the text and images often sprawl across the page, unbounded by panel borders. Campbell uses collage fragments more in this text than in *From Hell*: photographic images, reproductions of other artists' work and scraps of printed text are jumbled together with fabric and wallpaper. In this respect *The Birth Caul*'s fractured representation of childhood is reminiscent of Gaiman and McKean's *Violent Cases* (1987), which I will discuss in the following chapter. Like McKean's comic, it deals in memories: odd incidents and dreams, a television with insect legs, a giant ox-tongue. Campbell also uses a far greater variety of media than he did in *From Hell*, with some pages dominated by squiggly pencil marks and others awash with watercolour. The effect of this variety is to pull the text in two directions, on the one hand linking the narrative to the real world and pushing it towards the everyday experiences of the readers, yet at the same time pulling away, towards a less easily defined mode of consciousness. There is a feel of the deliberately homemade about *The Birth Caul*, a calculated lack of polish. As with many small press comics and fanzines, this slight clumsiness is a part of the point, a rejection of the over-produced slickness of mainstream consumer culture.

With its low production values and its explicit references to the lives of working class Geordies (from mills, factories and typhoid in the nineteenth century to the "boil-in-a-bag" contemporary life spent at "the lathe, the desk, the counter"), *The Birth Caul* represents an attempt to reclaim visionary experience from the hands of one serial killer and place it in the domain of ordinary people. *From Hell* stressed the polarities of class in late Victorian England, with the Queen's plan to cover up a royal scandal leading to Gull's murder of five Whitechapel prostitutes. *The Birth Caul* takes Gull's experience and insists that it is not only available to anyone but that it is naturally experienced by *everyone* in visionary "dreamtime" of pre-linguistic

childhood.

The fact that childhood is also a major theme in *Lost Girls* may account for some of the tensions in this conspicuously adult text. *Lost Girls* is a grand, elaborate work of pornography which incorporates characters from nineteenth-century children's fiction and questions relationships between imagination and reality, sexuality, selfhood and trauma. As a comics scholar one learns to judge a book by its cover, or at least, to pay close attention to the choices an author makes about the form, shape and materials in which a text is produced. Seen from the outside, *Lost Girls* is a text begging to be taken seriously: three large hardcover volumes presented in a purple slipcase, priced at $75US. These are no flimsy Tijuana Bibles to be sold under the counter: Moore and Gebbie's erotic thrills don't come cheap.[40] The price is a particular irony because Moore has always been careful to describe *Lost Girls* as pornography rather than erotic literature on the grounds that the distinction between the two is primarily one of the reader's social class.[41] And given that, for legal reasons, the book's UK distribution was delayed by over a year, *Lost Girls* is a remarkably exclusive pornography.[42]

The comic's long gestation matches its substantial weight. The first two chapters of *Lost Girls* were published in single issue format in the early 1990s, but the rest remained unpublished until 2006. The project started in 1991 as a collaboration between Moore and illustrator Melinda Gebbie. (As Moore himself has joked, the book worked wonders for his relationship with Gebbie, whom he married in 2007.)[43] Whilst the initial idea for *Lost Girls* was Moore's, Gebbie's input was undoubtedly substantial. Although, as Charles Hatfield argues, Moore's interest in sex has been evident throughout his career, Gebbie was drawing erotic comics long before Moore even entered the comics industry.[44] She was a regular contributor to *Wimmen's*

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40   For a more detailed history of erotic comics, see Tim Pilcher, with Gene Kannenberg, Jr. *Erotic Comics: A Graphic History from Tijuana Bibles to Underground Comix* (New York: HNA, 2008).
41   See, for example, Jonathan Kuehlein, "More of Moore". Interview with Alan Moore. *Metro News* 14th August, 2006. <http://www.metronews.ca/column.aspx?id=5028>
42   For the news story on Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital's objection to *Lost Girls*, see Jack Malvern, "Comic row over graphic Peter Pan". *The Times,* 23rd June 2006. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article678107.ece>. For Moore's comments on the threat of legal action see Noel Murray, "Interview: Alan Moore". *The Onion A.V. Club*, 22nd August 2006. <http://www.avclub.com/content/node/51180>
43   Murray (2006).
44   Charles Hatfield, "A Review and a Response" *ImageTexT* 3.3 (Summer 2007). <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/lost_girls/hatfield.shtml>
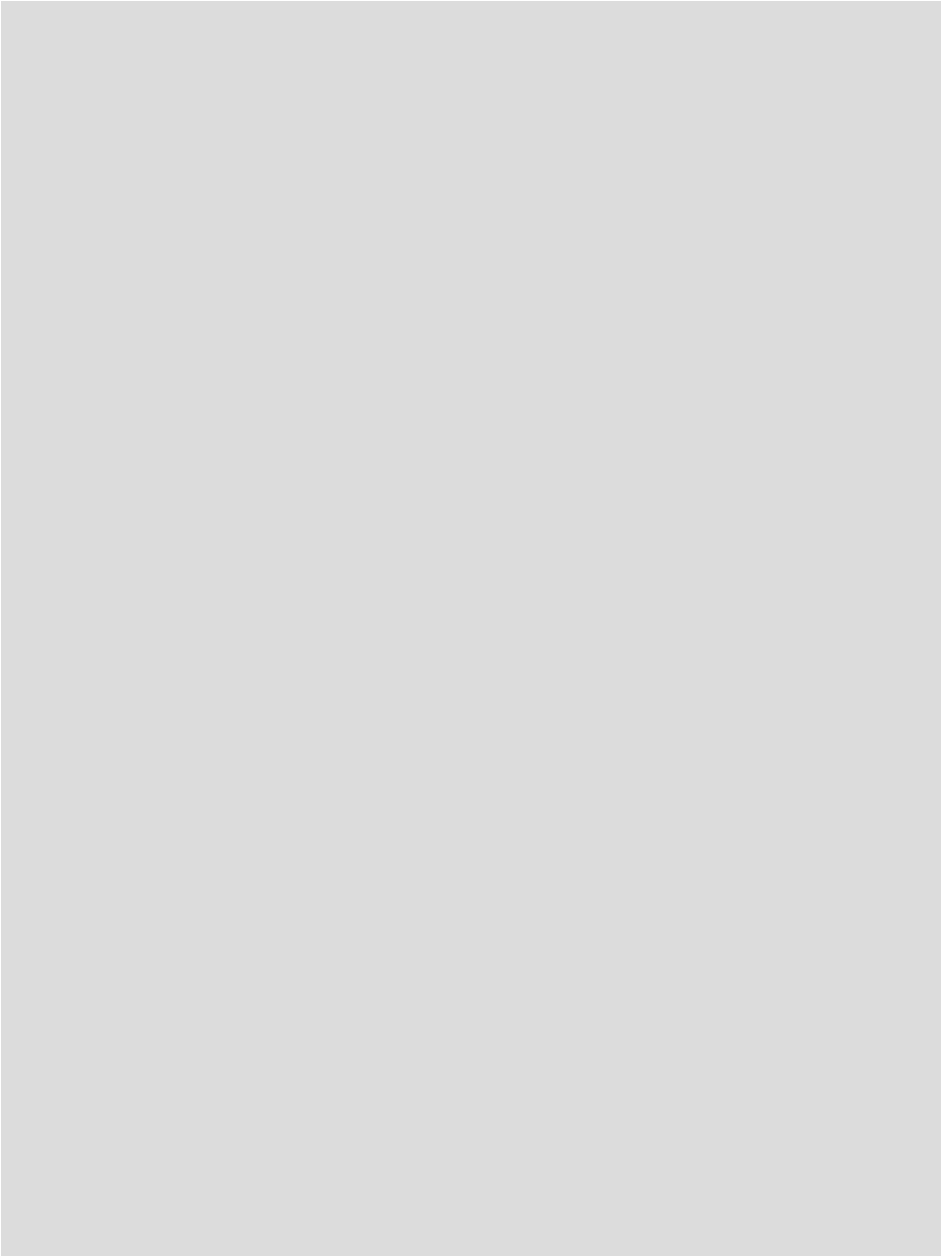
Figure 41.

Comix in San Francisco in the early 70s, and in 1977 she published *Fresca Zizis*, which was subsequently seized and burnt by UK customs, appearing in court alongside Crumb's *Troubles with Women*.[45]

In keeping with pornographic tradition, the plot of *Lost Girls* is fairly simple: three women meet in an Austrian hotel in 1913 and proceed to have a lot of sex whilst narrating stories of their previous sexual encounters, particularly those early encounters that played a formative role in their sexual identities. Moore's narrative incorporates numerous references to contemporary art, music and politics: the women attend the opening night of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913), and their stay in the art nouveau Hotel Himmelgarten ends with the start of the First World War. The women are based on characters from children's literature of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries: Lady Fairchild is Carroll's Alice, Dorothy Gale is Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*, and Mrs Potter is Wendy from *Peter Pan*. There is, of course, a great variety of sexual activity in *Lost Girls* (although several critics have reported finding it rather wearing and repetitive after a while).[46] What interests me here is not the sex itself but Moore's vision of sexuality as a creative force, the ways in which sexual experience affects the emotional lives of the protagonists, and the particular ways in which Moore and Gebbie have used the comics form.

All three women have in the past suffered negative consequences of sexual relationships: the young American Dorothy eventually confesses that she was sent away to Europe after her stepmother discovered she had been sleeping with her father, and Wendy Potter admits:

> My own desire had scared me so badly that I locked it all away in the darkness beyond those railings. I married Harold, twenty years my senior, because desire… w-well, frankly, it wouldn't be an issue" (Ch.27, 7)

Still, it is Alice whose past is the most deeply traumatic. She tells the story of her first sexual experience in chapter 9, "Looking Glass House" (Figure 41). Like all Alice's recollected anecdotes, this chapter does not take a traditional comics form, but moves towards the conventions of children's picture books, with elliptical

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45   Ismo Santala, interview with Melinda Gebbie. *Ready Steady Book.* 9th November 2006. <http://www.readysteadybook.com/Article.aspx?page=melindagebbie>
46   Kenneth Kidd reports being "more bored than titillated", while Philip Sandifer summarises other critics' sceptical responses to the text. Kidd, "Down the Rabbit Hole", and Sandifer, "Introduction – ImageSexT: A Roundtable on *Lost Girls*", *ImageTexT* 3.3 (Summer 2007) <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/lost_girls/>

panels captioned underneath with the adult Alice's commentary. She describes an unwanted encounter in which her father's friend, "Bunny", plies the fourteen-year-old Alice with wine and sexually abuses her. In an ostentatious device typical of *Lost Girls*, every image in this chapter includes a reflection: water, glass, metal and the pupils of Alice's eyes refract scenes from an incident that leaves its narrator feeling disconnected from her self:

> I no longer felt like me. The house no longer felt like mine. I had not substance. I was the reflection. From beyond the mirror-pane the real me gazed out, lost; quite hopeless. (Ch 9, 7)

The reader's prior knowledge of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) is essential, because Alice's tale of trauma turns Carroll's version into a sweetened gloss, the encoded dreamwork of a troubled and damaged psyche. Various details of Carroll's tale are absorbed into Alice's version: the drink, the abuser's appearance and preoccupation with time, the inversion of normal rules and so on. Most important is the displacement of the protagonist's self onto a looking-glass Alice to whom all this is happening, a behaviour that recalls Lynda Barry's teenage victims with disturbing accuracy (see Freddie, for example, in Figure 18). It is only at this point that we understand the full implications of the book's opening scene: Alice has carried the looking glass from that room around with her throughout her adult life, and addresses the other, fourteen-year-old Alice as a beloved child from whom she has been separated. At the end of *Lost Girls* she is content to leave the mirror behind and we see soldiers smashing it as they ransack the hotel, but as Hatfield argues, her equanimity is not altogether convincing:

> … there are disquieting moments of ambivalence and irresolution (understandably, as the sex in the book leaves few proclivities unexplored). These moments are disquieting because they are minor admissions of guilt that, ultimately, are not allowed to upset or even to make compelling dramatic sense within the novel's utopian world. Perhaps Moore and Gebbie deserve credit for dredging up some darkness; yet… I don't think *Lost Girls* deals with those dark moments persuasively… If *Lost Girls*, as Kenneth Kidd argues, simultaneously "attests to trauma and celebrates erotic power," it does so by slighting the consequences of the former and exaggerating the healing efficacy of the latter.[47]

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47   Charles Hatfield, "A Review and a Response" in ImageSexT: A Roundtable on Lost Girls. *ImageTexT* 3.3 (Spring 2007) (para. 12) <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/lost_girls/hatfield.shtml>
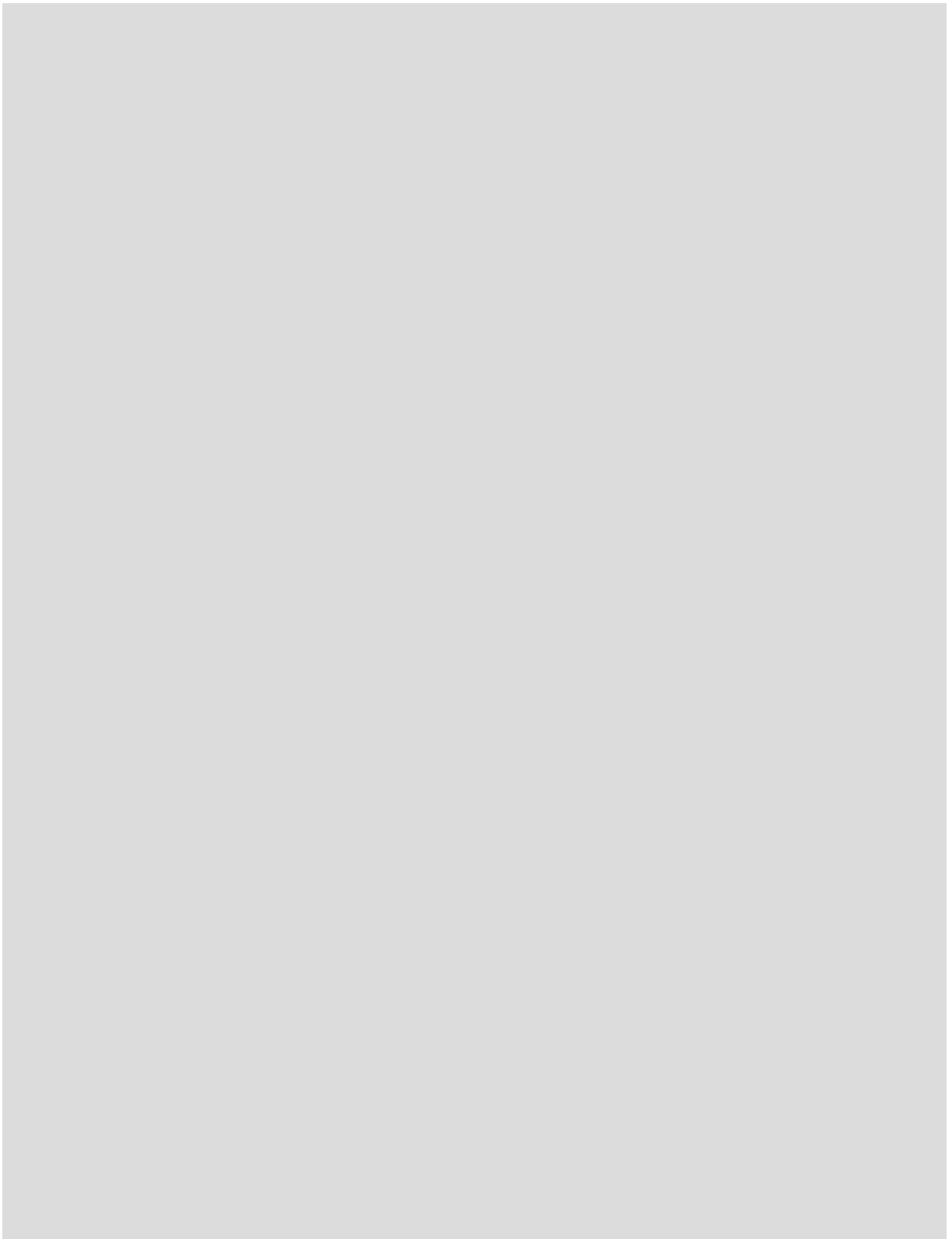
Figure 42.

As I discussed in chapter 4, Julie Doucet uses double self-images to examine multiple possibilities in the construction of feminine identity. For her the double or mirrored self, even in an abject body, is not a loss but an exploration. For Alice, however, the mirror-self is the result of a violent rupture, a forced split that leaves the real world Alice appallingly damaged. The trajectory of *Lost Girls* resembles that of *The Birth Caul*: both chart the fall from a pure childhood state into a repressed and civilised adult world. In *Lost Girls* uninhibited sex has the power to shake individuals out of their repression and the tensions associated with a hidden sexuality, but this resolution is not without its problems.

It is worth juxtaposing Alice's case with that of Swamp Thing because the two characters appear to represent polar opposites in their models of selfhood. Alice is a traumatised individual who needs wholeness, or at least a convincing illusion of coherent selfhood. As Marina Warner pointed out in her analysis of literary metamorphoses, the literature of doppelgängers is bound up with the history of illusionism: it is no coincidence that Alice and her uncanny double exist in a story that is full of visual trickery.[48] In Chapter 3, "Missing Shadows", Harold and Wendy Potter hold a mundane conversation about his work whilst their shadows appear to be having sex (Figure 42). Separate narratives run in parallel, either in the form of juxtaposed sets of panels (in Chapter 20 an opium-fuelled sex scene runs alongside the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand) or in sequences where the verbal and visual texts tell different stories (in Chapter 11 Harold's staid letter to a friend acts as a voiceover to the orgiastic adventures taking place all around him). Words and images do not necessarily collaborate but contradict each other, revealing each other's lies. The narrative is a concoction of tricks, and any image could at any moment turn out to be misleading. The result is that the identities of *Lost Girls*' protagonists, especially Alice, are profoundly unstable. For all her supposedly modern tastes and opinions, Alice is a creature of the nineteenth century, and in spite of the deceptive brightness of Gebbie's drawings, there is a Gothic shadow to her doubling. Even when she shakes off her other-Alice by leaving the mirror to be destroyed, she cannot convincingly become whole for the reader because she is always already doubled, the alter ego of Carroll's Alice who continues to exist

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48   Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Warner makes some particularly useful comments on Lewis Carroll, particularly his *Sylvie and Bruno* books, one of which is depicted on the front cover of *Lost Girls* Vol. 1.

beyond her grasp. Swamp Thing, on the other hand, readily comes to terms with the impossibility of a coherent subjectivity and explores the potentialities of his new, rhizome identity. Almost a century beyond Alice, he is a late modern figure who accepts that there is no going back to his old illusions of humanity. He is a contemporary of Deckard in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (which appeared in cinemas in 1982, the year before Moore took over *Swamp Thing*), dynamically questioning the possibilities of his nearly-human identity within a tradition of post-human science fiction that has continued to the present day.[49]

I have so far paid little attention to the role of Gebbie's art in the comic. Gebbie is largely self-taught and her work has none of the technical sophistication of erotic artists like Hans Bellmer, whose work she cited in a 2006 interview.[50] With their coloured pencil and somewhat awkwardly posed figures, her drawings are more reminiscent of the life-size pencil sketches of Pierre Klossowski. In fact *Lost Girls* is the most technically proficient of all Gebbie's work, and her 1970s comics have a distinctly amateurish, homemade feel. Like Lynda Barry, Gebbie refuses the slick professionalism of mainstream comics artists, and her representations of sex are arguably more real for their flaws and clumsiness. That said, Gebbie is a consummate plagiarist and easily forges Beardsley, Schiele, Toulouse-Lautrec and many others. *Lost Girls* is overflowing with visual references to early twentieth-century art, with copied, borrowed and appropriated material. Indeed, the book would lead us to believe that we are at times reading a copy of a fake of a fake: Lady Fairchild insists that Rougeur's *White Book* is a forgery. Optical devices are only one aspect of the book's gaudy display: from the wallpaper to the window-boxes, everything is decoration, surface, artificiality.

The artificiality is part of the point, because Moore's insistence on the power of the imagination is bound up with Monsieur Rougeur's defence of pornography:

> Incest, c'est vrai, it is a crime, but this? This is the *idea* of incest, no? And then these children: how outrageous! How old can they be? Eleven? Twelve? It is quite monstrous… except that they are fictions, as old as the page they appear on, no less, no more. Fiction and fact: only madmen and magistrates cannot discriminate between them. (Ch.22, 4)

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49   I recommend Elaine L. Graham's *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) as an introduction to this sub-genre of science fiction. Incidentally, Moore, who generally expresses indifference to cinema, claims to have enjoyed *Blade Runner*. See Robinson (2001).
50   Santala (2006).

This is undoubtedly a taunt at the censors: as Gebbie, Crumb and many others have found to their cost, fiction in comics form is particularly vulnerable to accusations of obscenity. It no coincidence that *Lost Girls*' publisher, Top Shelf, is run by Chris Staros who is also president of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, a US organisation "dedicated to the preservation of First Amendment rights for members of the comics community".[51] Censorship aside, Moore has frequently used his later comics as an opportunity to lecture on the power of the imagination. In *Promethea* (1999-2005) he literalised imagination in the form of the Immateria, a magical realm of which imagination was the level closest to the physical plane. In the Immateria, as in the Dreaming realm of Gaiman's *Sandman* (1989-96), all stories are real, and the oldest, most archetypal stories are the strongest (Red Riding Hood's wolf, for example, is vast and powerful because as Promethea says, his story "probably goes back to the Stone Age") (Vol.1, ch.3). Even as he acknowledges that it is an "utterly inane" idea, Moore is very taken with the thought that well-known characters can break free of their original narratives and wander off into each other's stories: his *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-) is founded on this concept.[52] *Lost Girls* is not just a pornographic parody of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan* and *The Wizard of Oz* but a typically late modern blag, a claim that all stories and characters are up for grabs. In Moore's case, however, this playful gesture is also a deadly serious argument, because although the appropriation of material from all over the place was a common trick throughout the 1980s and 90s, Moore has a greater personal investment in the concept of imagination than many writers.

In 1993 Moore declared himself to be a magician, and he has spoken at length about the similarities between magic and writing. In an interview with Bill Baker he claimed:

> I think that storytelling and creation are very close to the center of what magic is about. I think not just for me, but for most of the cultures that have had a concept of magic, the manipulation of language, and words, and thus of stories and fictions, has been very close to the center of it all.[53]

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51   For further information on the CBLDF, including current court cases, see <http://www.cbldf.org/>
52   Alan Moore, "Introduction", *Saga of the Swamp Thing (Vol. 1)* 9.
53   Baker (2005) 9.

I have been arguing for a relationship between Moore's neo-Romanticism and his increased interest in magic in the 1990s. Both are linked to his belief in the power of the imagination and the power of language to manipulate the perceptions of others. In *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* Elizabeth Rosen argues that for Moore, the faculty of creativity gives humans near-godlike status, and makes them worth saving from the many apocalyptic threats prophesied in his narratives.[54] Unlike Aleister Crowley, who used the spelling "magick" to distinguish occult ritual from stage conjuring, Moore suggests that "both disciplines are concerned with the manipulation of human perception and thus the manipulation of human consciousness".[55] It is worth noting that there are also clear historical links between modern ritual magic and the philosophical and creative ideas prevalent at the beginning of the nineteenth century, by which Moore has been so strongly influenced. Neopagan practices, which were once thought to have their roots in pre-modern beliefs and rituals, are considered by modern scholars to have developed since the early nineteenth century. Arguing that neopaganism is an essentially modern and "spectacularly counter-cultural" religion, Ronald Hutton argues:[56]

> …the characteristic language of a committed modern paganism has its direct origin in German Romanticism, the result of a fusion in late eighteenth-century Germany of three powerful forces: admiration for ancient Greece, nostalgia for a vanished past, and desire for an organic unity between people, culture and nature.[57]

Moore does not subscribe to any particular magical tradition, sharing Blake's view that "I must create a system or be enslav'd by another mans",[58] but the evidence suggests that his neo-Romanticism and his magical beliefs ultimately derive from the same source.

In *Visionary Fictions: Apocalyptic Writing from Blake to the Modern Age*, Edward Ahearn examines the works of a number of English and French writers from Blake to Burroughs. He argues that these writers' texts, which typically privilege sexual

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54   Elizabeth Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008) 37-8.
55   Campbell interview, in *A Disease of Language* (2005).
56   Hutton (2001) vii.
57   Hutton (2001) 21.
58   William Blake, "Jerusalem" copy E, pl. 10. *The William Blake Archive*. Ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi. <http://www.blakearchive.org/>

ecstasy as a route to visionary experience, express hostility towards conventional religion, and use a wide range of devices to suggest that "the world as we perceive it is an impoverished and dull thing", are also deeply concerned with real world history, even to the point of advocating political revolution.[59] It is not hard to place Moore in a similar tradition. Surveying his comics since the 1980s, it becomes apparent that behind his preoccupation with individual perception and experience there lies a powerful social awareness. *V for Vendetta* (1982-88) was transparently a swipe at Thatcherite Britain; various episodes of *Swamp Thing* comment on environmentalism, gender relations and AIDS; *From Hell* and *Lost Girls* are both deeply aware of social class, and the latter is also set against the backdrop of events leading up to the First World War. Moore is not only a magician but describes himself as an anarchist, as suspicious of systems of political power as he is of organised religion.[60] Throughout his work, his political and spiritual views, his privileging of individual, intuitive selfhood above social structures and conventions, point to a decisively neo-Romantic sensibility.

Moore produced his best work in the 1980s and 90s, and his recent ABC line is of minor critical interest. He has more or less retired from comics in order to concentrate more fully on his work in magic, and in this sense he is unique amongst those authors discussed here in that he is concerned with subjectivity *per se* as much as with its representation in fictional form. All three of Moore's mature works – *From Hell*, *The Birth Caul* and *Lost Girls* – ultimately centre on the loss of a creative, intuitive, sexually uninhibited part of human consciousness. However powerful the comics form may be, Moore's work demonstrates the impossibility of fully recapturing this consciousness on paper, either in language or image. His ambitious project now takes him beyond the bounds of representation.

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59   Edward Ahern, *Visionary Fictions: Apocalyptic Writing from Blake to the Modern Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996) 3.
60   *Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness* (2007).

CHAPTER SIX

Childhood and memory in the comics of Neil Gaiman
and Dave McKean

For Alan Moore. With thanks and gratitude, and, after all these years, still a smidgen of awe. – Neil and Dave.[1]

It makes sense to discuss Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman side by side because not only are they arguably the most prominent names in British alternative comics but they have been instrumental in each other's careers. In the mid 1980s Gaiman was introduced to comics partly by reading Moore's *Swamp Thing*, and Moore subsequently taught Gaiman how to lay out a comics script.[2] Melinda Gebbie claims that it was Gaiman who first gave her Moore's phone number in the early 90s, and Moore credits Gaiman with some of the references in *From Hell*.[3] As I will demonstrate, Gaiman shares some of Moore's preoccupations with the power of the imagination and issues surrounding childhood, but where Moore's interest is in perception, Gaiman's focus is primarily on memory.

In this chapter I will discuss the relationship between Neil Gaiman's preoccupations with imagination, memory and childhood identity and Dave McKean's distinctive collage illustration style. I will focus on three comics scripted by Gaiman and drawn by McKean: *Violent Cases* (1987), *Signal to Noise* (1992) and *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Mr Punch* (1994). These collaborative works form a triad of short, richly coloured, collage-based comics about the difficulties involved in forming and sustaining adult subjectivity. Where *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* narrate an individual's first unwilling steps into the adult world, *Signal to Noise*, which is told through the eyes of a dying film director, comprises reflections on the end of a life. In all three comics, and the creators' commentaries upon them, Gaiman and McKean propose that collage, and particularly McKean's digital collage comprising photographs, drawings and other found materials, is an ideal medium in which to represent unreliable perceptions and memories. I will draw on several

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1   Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, dedication, *Violent Cases* (1987) (Dark Horse, 2003).
2   Both have mentioned this on a number of occasions. See, for example, Baker (2005) 71-2.
For Gaiman's assertion that Moore made him want to become a comics writer, see, for example,
<http://www.bloomsbury.com/Childrens/qanda.asp?id=81>
3   Santala (2006); Moore and Campbell, *From Hell* (1999) Appendix I, 2.

theories of human memory to analyse the ways in which McKean's collage works as a narrative form. However, I wish to begin with a brief description of Gaiman and McKean's collaboration and a snapshot of each creator's career in the context of the comics industry in the late 1980s and early 90s.

Gaiman and McKean have been working together throughout their careers, having met in the mid 1980s when Gaiman was a young journalist and McKean was still at art college.[4] They were introduced by Paul Gravett at a time when both were keen to break into comics but had so far met with little success.[5] They have subsequently collaborated on a number of titles, including *Black Orchid* (1991), parts of Gaiman's *Sandman* series, and most recently, the feature film *Mirrormask* (2005), which Gaiman wrote and McKean directed. Both have children, and they have collaborated on children's books including *The Day I Swapped My Dad For Two Goldfish* (1997) and *The Wolves in the Walls* (2004). They are not merely colleagues but good friends: Gaiman has written affectionately about McKean's reckless driving, his chocolate consumption and his pet carp.[6] Effective co-authorship in comics is difficult to achieve, and their friendship, like Moore and Gebbie's relationship, is of central importance to the success of their collaboration.

Gaiman and McKean's creative partnership began at what seemed a particularly promising time for avant-garde comics. Several major comics texts began serial publication in 1986, most notably Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (February-June 1986), Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986-7) and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986-91). It was around this time that the mainstream press caught on to the existence of adult comics, and the consequent proliferation of articles proclaiming the "birth of the graphic novel" helped to enlarge the readership of book-length visual narratives. As Roger Sabin notes, the popular view that comics attained adulthood in the late 1980s "is a seductive interpretation of events, and has become one of the enduring clichés of arts journalism".[7] It is at best an oversimplification

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4   Gaiman discusses their meeting, and the genesis of *Violent Cases,* in his introduction to the 2003 Dark Horse edition.
5   Not a comics author or artist himself, Gravett is an important figure in the British comics scene, reviewing and publicising comics, curating exhibitions of comic art, and recently, writing surveys, such as *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Laurence King, 2004) and *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life* (London: Aurum, 2005).
6   Neil Gaiman, "Neil Gaiman on Dave McKean", *Neil Gaiman* personal site. <http://www.neilgaiman.com/exclusive/essay08.asp>. This well-maintained and exceptionally popular website, now run by Harper Collins, is a good source of information about his work.
7   Sabin, (1993) 1.

and at worst simply untrue, but for Gaiman and McKean it seemed a useful and potentially lucrative fiction. The fact that *Signal to Noise* was originally serialised in *The Face* (June-December 1989) is telling: suddenly comics were seen as hip and sophisticated, and showing an interest in them was a way for publications to appear on the cutting edge of contemporary arts and culture.

Whilst the three texts discussed here embody many of the themes that run throughout Gaiman's work, the author is more widely known for his fantasy series, *The Sandman* (1989-96). This series appeared at a key moment in the history of adult comics, coinciding as it did with the launch of DC's Vertigo imprint, which was aimed at a late teenage and adult market and incorporated something of the subversive tone of alternative comics. Karen Berger, the editor responsible for Vertigo, had come to DC as a newly graduated English major, and not a comics reader. Gaiman's 2003 introduction to the Dark Horse edition of *Violent Cases* stresses a desire to break away from the popular stereotypes and produce "a comic for people who didn't read comics"; Berger was after much the same thing. Although *The Sandman* was in production before Vertigo was conceived, Berger has said that it was "the key book that really helped launch the line", partly because it sold extremely well to both male and female readers.[8] Vertigo was to become a major player in the adult comics market throughout the 1990s and 2000s, publishing titles such as Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's *Preacher* (1995-2000), Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson's *Transmetropolitan* (1997-2002) and Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles* (1994-2000), not to mention the collected reprints of Moore's *Swamp Thing* and *V for Vendetta*. The majority of these titles were outside the main continuity of the DC universe, and if DC characters appeared at all they were strictly in cameo roles. Most importantly, many of these authors (Garth Ennis, Warren Ellis, Grant Morrison, Peter Milligan and Jamie Delano, and of course Gaiman and Moore) are British. Berger has suggested that British authors were valuable because, like her, they entered the US comics world with an outsider's point of view and consequently "brought an irreverence and a subversiveness to their work".[9]

Although Gaiman is primarily a fantasy writer, his work derives from

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8   Joseph McCabe, interview with Karen Berger, in *Hanging Out With The Dream King: Conversations with Neil Gaiman and his Collaborators* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2004) 49.
9   Jennifer M. Contino, "A Touch of Vertigo: Karen Berger". Interview. *Sequential Tart*. February 2001. <http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/feb01/berger.shtml>. See also McCabe (2004) 50.

a mythological tradition very different from Sim's sword and sorcery roots.[10] Neither Gaiman nor McKean grew up in a fan culture of comics consumption, and Gaiman's childhood reading comprised mainly prose fantasy fiction.[11] Nevertheless, the comics I will discuss here are not, by any definition, works of fantasy, notwithstanding their interest in imagination and the fact that *Violent Cases* was written for a science fiction writers' workshop. These earnestly realist works reflect something of Gaiman and McKean's determination to make comics a grown-up art form. Alan Moore's introduction to the first edition of *Violent Cases* relies heavily on the metaphor of adolescence, not yet a tired cliché in 1987:

> …comics have been changing so fast that we scarcely recognise the snub-nosed toddler that we used to call 'Freckles'. In its place there's something spotty and gawky and strange-looking, that's asking a lot of awkward questions about sex and politics, while striking unfamiliar attitudes and dressing itself in colours nobody over twenty-five would be seen dead in. Its utterances range from the unbearably crass to the undeniably brilliant, and though its self-consciousness may prove irritating every now and then, it's still possible to catch glimpses of the confident and fascinating adult persona that it's struggling towards.[12]

As I have argued, the idea that the comic was a fundamentally adolescent form until the 1980s is highly inaccurate. Nonetheless, Gaiman, McKean and Moore buy into this fiction in their desire to promote the "confident and fascinating adult persona" of the comic book medium. For Gaiman and McKean, rescuing comics from their traditional pigeonholing as an adolescent medium meant moving away from the form's fantastic past and towards a more realist mode.

McKean's visual style is difficult to place within any single comics tradition, and in many ways his work feels like a new mode of narrative where that of Crumb or Sim, for all their formal and stylistic innovation, generally does not. McKean owes very little to the underground scene of Crumb and Doucet, nor to the US fantasy adventure world in which Dave Sim grew up. As a British artist, one might hope to locate his work within a UK comics industry, but at the time that he met Gaiman, McKean had recently tried, and failed, to find work as a comics artist in New York. Although he has never expressed great enthusiasm for mainstream US

10   See especially Stephen Rauch, *Neil Gaiman's The Sandman and Joseph Campbell: In Search of the Modern Myth* (Rockville, Maryland: Wildside Press, 2003).
11   Steven Olson, *Neil Gaiman* (New York: Rosen, 2005) 12. Aimed at young adults, this book is (understandably) a somewhat simplistic introduction to Gaiman's work.
12   Alan Moore, introduction to Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, *Violent Cases*. (London: Escape/ Titan, 1987) N. pag.

comics, and is inclined to dismiss his own *Arkham Asylum* (1989) as "still a bloody Batman comic",[13] the UK comics industry did not seem to hold much promise for him either. He remarked in an interview in the mid-1990s, "The comic industry in England is dead. There is only *2000AD*, which I always hated and apart from that there is nowhere to go."[14] McKean was strongly influenced by US comics artist Bill Sienkiewicz, and was initially worried that the influence might overshadow his own style.[15] Artist and illustrator Barron Storey remains both an influence and a critic: he accused McKean of having "let the material down" in the serial version of *Signal to Noise*, and McKean agreed, making changes in the book edition in response to his and other observations.[16] However, it is a mark of his flexibility that he also talks of Jose Muñoz and his interest in 1930s German illustrators as a source for the pared-down style of *Cages* (1990-6). McKean's eclecticism is a distinctive characteristic of his art, and both he and Gaiman have consistently sought to distinguish their work from traditional comics themes, even when working for DC Comics, at the heart of the US mainstream.

Nevertheless, one of the most important influences on McKean's work in the 1990s was not artistic but technological. Unusually for an alternative comics artist over the last twenty years, McKean has embraced the developments in computer software in his design, and it is perhaps surprising that he is in a minority in this. For all Scott McCloud's assertions that the future of comics lies in digital production and web-based methods of distribution, the majority of comics writers and artists have remained reluctant to use design software in creating and producing their texts.[17] McKean, on the other hand, uses a great deal of collage and mixed media in his comics, and relies on Mac software, primarily Adobe Photoshop, to blend different visual materials into a coherent whole. In this chapter I will examine the ways in which McKean's distinctive style – and the technologies on which it depends – affects his representation of the remembered and imagined scenes described in Gaiman's scripts.

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13   Henrik Andreasen, "An Interview with Dave McKean" *Serie Journalen*. 1st May 1996. <http://www.seriejournalen.dk/tegneserie_indhold.asp?ID=25>
14   Andreasen (1996).
15   Andreasen (1996).
16   Chris Brayshaw, "Interview with Dave McKean". *The Comics Journal* 196 (June 1997), 69. *The Comics Journal* is an excellent source of in-depth interviews with comics creators, and I will refer to this one repeatedly throughout this chapter.
17   Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics* (New York: Paradox, 2000). See Emma Tinker (2007) for further discussion of technophobia amongst alternative comics creators.
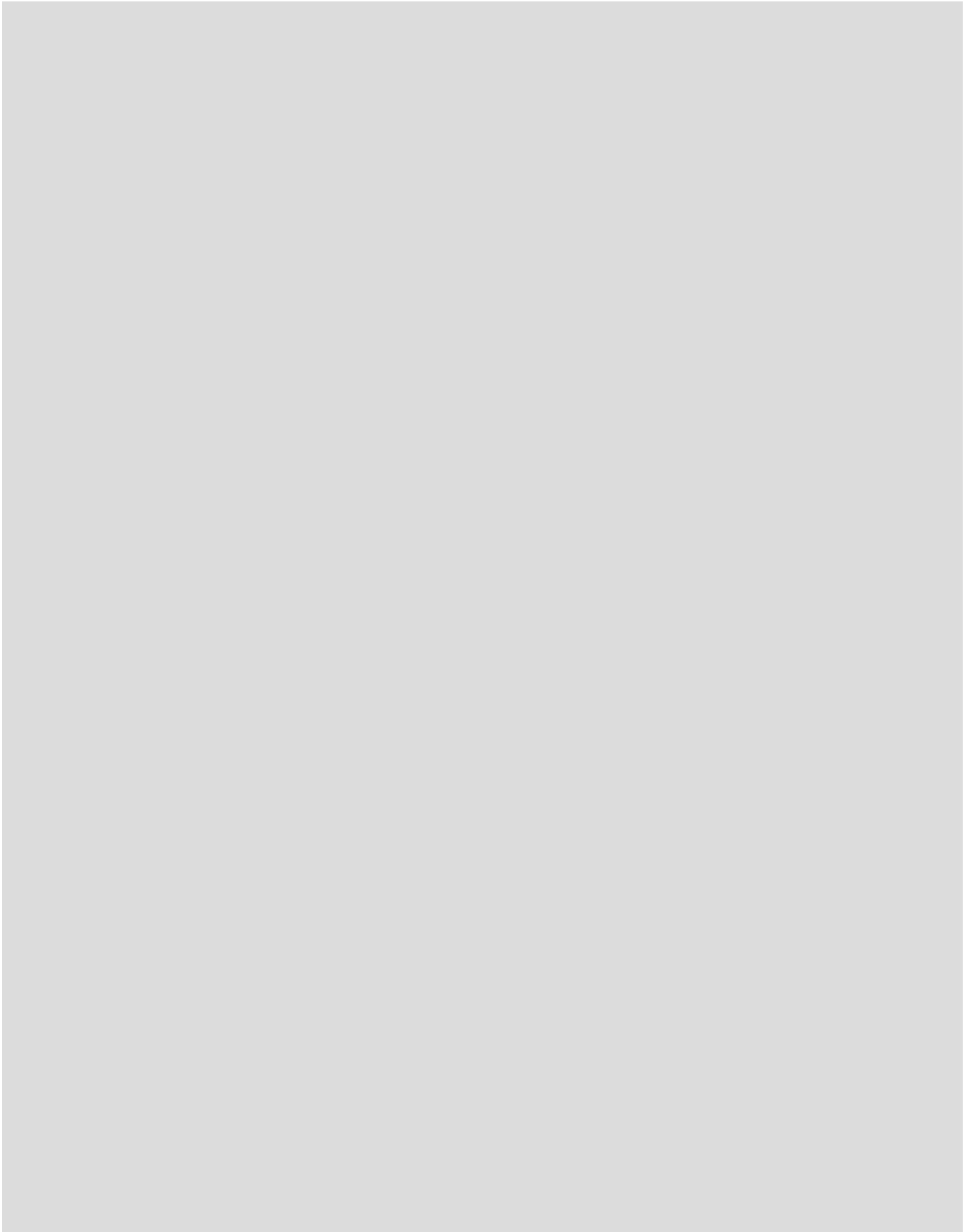
Figure 43.

Violent Cases and *Mr Punch* were planned as part of a sequence of four books on childhood, of which the other two were never written.[18] Both centre on children's encounters with violence, and in both cases, the incident at the centre of the story takes place when the protagonist is separated from his parents for reasons beyond his control. Like so many fairy tales, these comics chart the transition from innocent dependence towards the beginnings of adult selfhood and understanding. However, both stories are told several decades on, by the protagonists' adult selves, who look back on the events of their childhood with both the benefit of hindsight and the hindrance of a potentially unreliable memory.

   Violent Cases, the first comic produced by either Gaiman or McKean, tells the story of a young boy with a dislocated shoulder visiting an osteopath who used to treat Al Capone. Like all McKean's comics it is visually striking, and its design deserves careful analysis. I will begin by examining the first page of *Violent Cases*, considering how form and theme work together in what is a fairly straightforward, non-collage page. I will then look in more detail at McKean's collage technique and discuss some of its implications. The opening page of *Violent Cases* sets up many of the themes for the rest of the book (Figure 43). The narrative is introduced by the adult narrator, who sits in a relaxed pose, cross-legged and smoking, as though in an interview. Although the creators do not generally describe the story as autobiographical, this figure is unquestionably Neil Gaiman, and is the result of one of McKean's unusual working practices. McKean's drawings are often based on life drawings of real people: in order to make his unusually realist images appear consistently convincing, he poses actor friends as characters and works from their photographs. This occasionally leads to curious similarities between characters – the grandmother in *Violent Cases* seems reminiscent of Mrs What in *Cages*, for instance. In this case, the use of Gaiman in particular establishes a sense of uncertainty about the position of the narrator: the story looks autobiographical even if it is not, and the context in which the narrator is telling his story is never clear. He remarks:

> I would not want you to think that I was a battered child. // However…/ I wouldn't want to gloss over the true facts. / Without true facts, where are we? / The truth is this: // When I was four years old, my father did something to my arm.[19]

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18 Gert Meesters, "Dave McKean". Interview. *Stripkap*, November 1997. <http://www.stripkap. net/McKean.html>

19 All of the comics discussed in this chapter are non-paginated.

We are not, presumably, supposed to take this endorsement of "true facts" at face value. Although the narrative does represent a commitment to an attempt at personal *truthfulness*, the narrator subsequently admits that his recollections are far from reliable:

> … although there is much that I remember of this time, there is as much that I do not. // I remember our conversations, for example,– / and I remember how it ended. // I am not sure that I remember what he looked like.

He tries to piece together a mental picture of the osteopath out of his father's reports of "an eagle's nose" or "a Polish Red Indian Chief", and his own memories of "an owl-like man, chubby and friendly". Later, he says:

> I suppose I should intrude here, in the interests of strict accuracy, – // and point out that the picture I have of him at this point is neither the grey haired indian [sic] – // nor the tubby doctor, – // not the amalgam of the two I remembered earlier in this narrative. // Now he seems much younger. / He looks like Humphrey Bogart's partner in "The Maltese Falcon", – / although for a while just now I found it hard to remember whether we ever saw Bogart's partner in the flesh, or whether he lived and died offscreen. / No, we saw him, briefly, at the beginning.

Freud's concept of the screen memory, which he used to describe the displacement of later emotions onto an event from early childhood, is of value here. Somewhat confusingly, Freud proposed two different models of the screen memory, first describing the childhood "psychical intensity" as a screen onto which a memory of a later incident could be projected, but subsequently describing the later memory as *screening off* an earlier event.[20] What we find in *Violent Cases* is a particularly cinematic experience of screening: figures from a noir film (and a misremembered one at that, as Bogart's partner does indeed appear repeatedly throughout *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)) are projected onto the protagonist's childhood memory, presumably due to their thematic similarity. On the first page of the comic Bogart stands in for the narrator's father in the framed photograph. In a footnote to "Childhood Memories and Screen Memories" Freud noted:

> Dr B – showed very neatly on Wednesday… that fairy tales can be made use of as

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20   Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories", in *Standard Edition, Vol. 3*. 308. For the later version see Sigmund Freud, trans. Alan Tyson, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901; London: Penguin, 1960), 83-93.

screen memories in the same kind of way that empty shells are used as a home by the hermit crab. These fairy tales then become favourites, without the reason being known.[21]

Lynda Barry has made similar remarks about *Hansel and Gretel*, suggesting that stories of violence offer children a way to process their own experiences of trauma.[22] Here, *The Maltese Falcon* is not adopted as a complete shell, but fragments find their way into the narrator's memory of his father. The concept of the screen memory is particularly valuable here in view of the apparent realism of McKean's drawings. Although the drawings in *Violent Cases* are unusually realist, they are not to be trusted as accurate representations of a "true" story. Indeed, if anything, their vividness and almost photographic precision renders them even more suspect: Freud used the word "ultra-clear" (German: überdeutlich) for the unusually vivid, false images that he claimed were the result of repression of related memories.[23]

This first page exemplifies some of the book's concerns regarding childhood understanding and violence. With thirty-five panels, it initially seems rapid and cluttered, as though embarking upon the telling of a story has brought a number of memories to the surface all at once. However, many of its images are repeated with just a slight variation in perspective or composition, or stretch over more than one panel. Several panels are entirely blank, implying the erasure of moments in the speaker's memory. Just as significant, however, are the three larger panels, describing the injury itself, which are overlapped by their neighbours. On the one hand, these memories are bigger, more dominant in the narrator's mind, but for that reason they also compete for space and struggle to exist alongside prosaic mental images of hat-stands and whiskey bottles. Memory is always excessive in McKean's visual narratives, with one image overflowing into the temporal and spatial territory of another. The narrator's monologue on this first page enables the reader to make sense of panels which would otherwise be difficult to read as a narrative. His captions dictate the speed of the sequence: the bottom two rows of panels contain relatively little text or figurative imagery, effectively freezing the reader in this traumatic but indescribable moment.

The speaker goes to considerable lengths to stress the uncertainty of his

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21   Freud (1901; 1960) 90.
22   Garden (1999).
23   See Freud, "The Psychical Mechanism of Forgetfulness", *Standard Edition Vol. 3* (2001) 289-97.

recollections, but like so many writers of autobiographical comics, whose all-too-candid disclosures mask the restricted zones of their past, this narrator never addresses the question of why this particular memory is so important. It is worth asking why the narrators of both *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* have chosen to return to early experiences of violence, and, indeed, whether the opening image of *Violent Cases* shows a laid-back Gaiman chatting to McKean or an emotionally damaged adult talking to a therapist. Again, one can hardly avoid a gesture towards Freud. Although many of his views on the relationship between sexuality and aggression in children have been discredited by subsequent research, the general tenor of his argument – that the suppression of violent impulses is a key event in the subject's assimilation into the adult social world – still holds true.[24] In *Violent Cases* in particular, the protagonist and his contemporaries are not without violent impulses of their own. As a game of musical chairs degenerates into a fight, the protagonist listens to his osteopath tell a story about Al Capone's savage murder of numerous associates. Reflecting upon this afterwards, the narrator says of his fellow party guests, "I thought of the other children/ Their heads bloody caved-in lumps./ I felt fine about it./ I felt happy."

Much of *Violent Cases*' fractured feel reflects a problem of interpretation. The protagonist is a newcomer in the symbolic order: he has language, but only just, and much of the discourse of the adult world still eludes him. Much of what is said makes no sense to him: he mishears his father's revelation that gangsters keep their guns in violin cases, and presumably does not read the inference in the osteopath's confession "I had been with his wife". Many of the book's images convey a child's-eye view of the world: the narrator's father is a giant, the steps down to the basement are wonky and dizzying, and carpets and floor tiles seem unusually prominent. His anxieties have yet to develop adult proportion or logic: he is afraid of a magician at a birthday party, yet the experience of having his arm dislocated by his father is described without a hint of fear or anger. One of the most convincing explanations

24   For Freud's theories on the relationship between childhood sexuality and aggression, see particularly "Infantile Sexuality" (1905) in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and other works*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. (London: Penguin, 1991). For a summary of the way in which Freud's work is seen by modern researchers in child development, see, for example, Peter K. Smith, Helen Cowie and Mark Blades, *Understanding Children's Development* (3rd edition) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). A useful summary of behavioural research on childhood aggression can be found in R. E. Tremblay, "The development of aggressive behaviour during childhood: What have we learned in the past century?" *International Journal of Behavioural Development* 24.2 (2000) 129-41.

of infantile amnesia is that young children lack the schemata with which to codify and organise experience into coherent memories.[25] The protagonist of *Violent Cases* is four years old, just about able to make sense of most events but still liable to confuse and misremember details that go beyond the narrow compass of his past experience. It is hardly surprising that McKean's visual representation of such a character's narrative is dramatically fragmented, and the story itself is strongly conditioned by its disjointed form.

Understanding and power are inextricably tangled, and the protagonist's life is as circumscribed as it is confusing. The hero of *Violent Cases* is of an age at which he has almost no control over his own life. He attends the parties of people he does not consider to be his friends because "their mummies and daddies were my Mummy and Daddy's friends"; he is told what to wear, what to say ("Thank you for having me!") and when to go to bed. He is almost without a voice of his own, and lets his adult alter-ego do the talking for him. However, he is beginning to learn that adults are not always right, and can be corrupt. One digression charts his changing attitudes to his father's threats of "I'll stop the car and put you out". As a four-year-old, he believes his father, and shuts up; a few years later he believes the threats are a bluff; at twelve he finds that his father is prepared to stick to his word, gets thrown out of the car, and retaliates by hiding until his parents are frantic with worry. Most significantly, the story is told at a moment of realisation that adults, even parents, are not infallible: the digression starts when the narrator's father denies the truth of something that had, in fact, happened. The narrator of *Mr Punch* articulates a similar problem when he explains the seed of doubt in his mind as he dismisses his grandfather's jokes of "Shall I throw you in the water?" "Adults lie", he observes, "but not always". The problem, in short, is not simply one of unreliable adult memories, because both protagonists are at an age when they are uncertain about what constitutes reality, what is to be believed and trusted and how events are to be interpreted.

McKean is known for his rich colour palette, and tends to favour warm reds and browns, but *Violent Cases* is dominated by soft, hazy blues and greys which suggest a faded, almost inaccessible memory. Although the book was first

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25   A useful summary of current theory on infantile amnesia can be found in Josef Perner, "Memory and Theory of Mind" in Endel Tulving and Fergus I.M. Craik (ed.s), *The Oxford Handbook of Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 297-312.

published by Escape and Titan in 1987, the full colour edition that we have now did not become available until it was reissued by Tundra in 1991. Much subtlety is lost in the monochrome version, and that first edition serves as a reminder that printing costs are a major consideration for new comics artists: few publishers will risk the expense of a full-colour graphic novel unless the author and artist are already well established. Like so many of McKean's books, *Violent Cases* is a deliciously textured, multimedia rebellion against the traditional flatness of the comics page. Where illustrators of mainstream comics carefully erase pencil lines and replace them with clear blocks of ink, much of *Violent Cases* is made up of pencil and pastel sketches in which the individual strokes and smudges are clearly visible. What I want to explore more fully here is the fact that these marks – the smudges, scratches and splatters of pigment on torn, grainy paper – are as much a part of the story as the characters themselves.

Violent Cases is the work of a young illustrator, just out of college, full of ideas and eager to impress. As such it has its share of technical machinery: numerous blank panels signify moments at which the narrator has forgotten or erased parts of the narrative; long, thin panels represent imperfect views of scenes, as when the protagonist peers through a crack in a door or between two curtains; a shattered panel signifies the shock of a staged explosion; the protagonist imagines the euphemism "rubbed out" as the literal erasure of a pencil-drawn figure from the page. By far the most significant of McKean's technical innovations, however, is his use of collage. Much has been written on the use of collage in twentieth-century art, from Cubism and Dada to Pop Art. Most critics concur that the form took off with Picasso and Braque as a deliberately incongruous hybrid of high art and low culture.[26] Collage reflected a distinctly modernist sensibility, a rejection of totality and straightforward mimesis, a self-consciously playful clustering of disparate elements to create a surface with a multiplicity of possible meanings. It was, at least to begin with, a notably private medium, generally produced quickly and on a small scale, and not initially intended for exhibition. Nevertheless, many later examples had a strong, often left-wing political bias, as seen in the work of photomontage artists like John Heartfield and Peter Kennard, and it is probable that the cool cachet

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26   Brandon Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004); Diane Waldman, *Collage, Assemblage and the Found Object* (London: Phaidon, 1992).
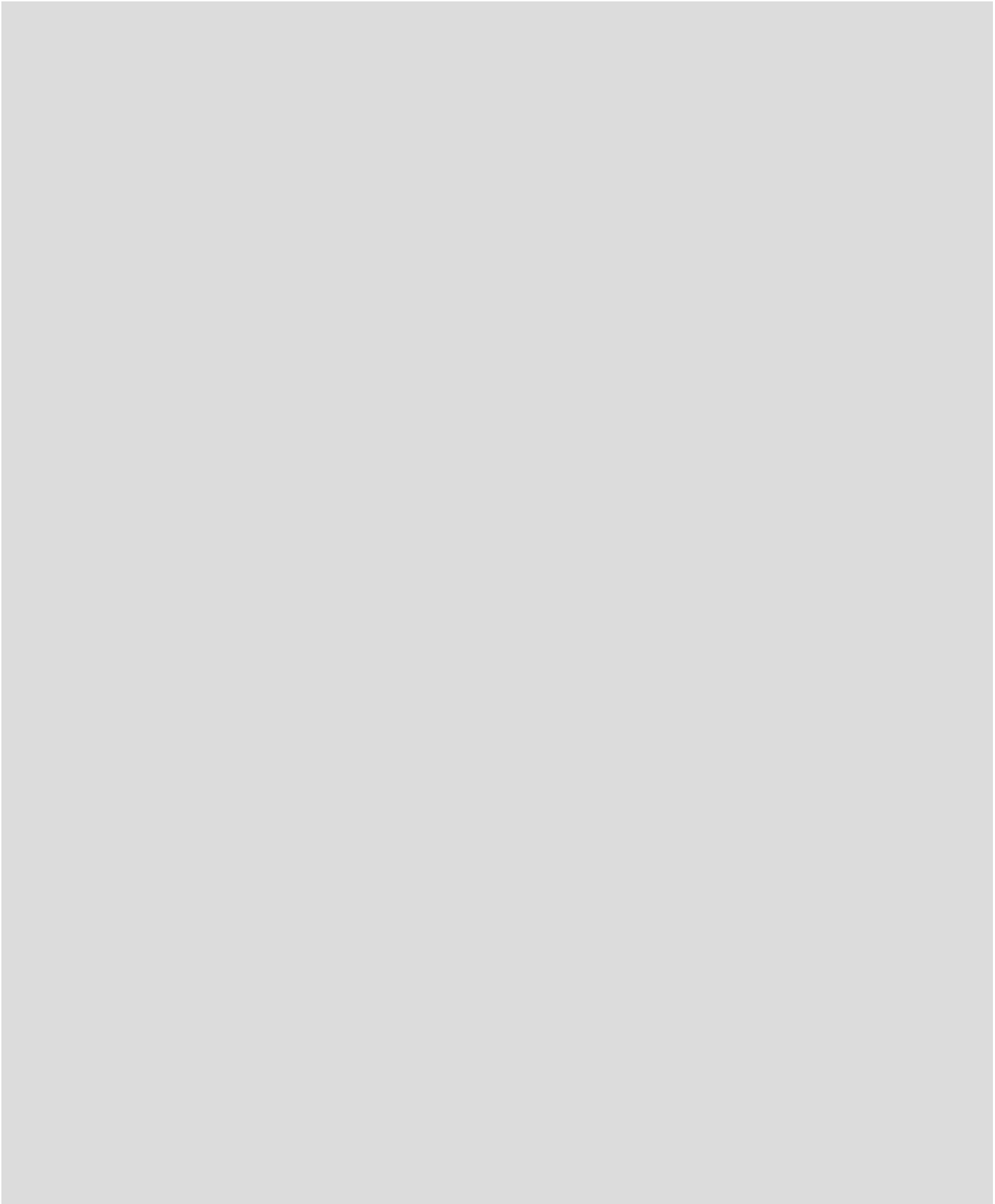
Figure 44.

which collage has enjoyed owes much to its perceived status as a tool of political radicalism, allied with socio-political autonomy as much as artistic freedom.[27]

As a narrative medium, however, collage has been less widely used, and has received almost no critical attention. McKean juxtaposes old photographs and posters, maps, biological diagrams, scraps of fabric and newsprint, often visibly held together with grubby strips of masking tape (Figure 44). As the osteopath talks of his early life, fragments of visual information crowd together and overlap, serving as figures for dissonant, unspecified regions of the speaker's memory. Useful information like a diagram of the human skeleton competes with ephemeral scraps such as tile patterns or a cigarette packet. When McKean produced the first edition of *Violent Cases* in 1987 he did not own a computer: to obtain translucent collage effects such as that shown in Figure 44 he was obliged to resort to double-exposing photographs and "torturing photocopiers".[28] In the early 1990s, however, he started to use Mac software, primarily Photoshop, to blend different visual materials into a coherent whole. In much of his later work, the scratchy surfaces and torn edges belie the high technology behind McKean's digital collage. Effects that take days to produce by hand can be achieved in seconds with the multiple blending modes of a graphics program, and undone just as easily; colour and tone can be altered dramatically with the click of a mouse; effects can be previewed, rejected or confirmed at will. Creation need not be a linear process, well-planned from the outset; layers can be added to the background of an image and altered after the rest of the composition is complete. McKean has asserted that computer technology did not alter his design aims, but enabled him to realise a greater proportion of them than he had done previously. Most significantly, he added, "I suppose what I'm trying to do is allow somebody else to get into my head".[29]

The idea that collage may be an accurate representation of mental imagery is an important one. Lucy Rollin, writing on "Guilt and the Unconscious in *Arkham Asylum*", suggested:

27   Diane Ades, *Photomontage* (1976) (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986) is an excellent survey.
28   Dave McKean, in conversation with Posy Simmonds, Paul Gravett and Dan Franklin. "May Contain Graphic Content". English PEN event. Guardian newsroom, London. 12th September 2006. McKean also discusses his use of digital media in Barbara Gibson, "Dave McKean: Illustrating the Imagination," *Apple*. 15th February 2006. <www.apple.com/pro/design/mckean>
29   Brayshaw (1997) 73.

[*Arkham Asylum*'s] fragmentation visually reproduces the jumble of memory, sensory experience, language, image and fantasy that characterises our dreams, allowing a glimpse into the unconscious.[30]

Such a sketchy outline of an argument is tempting, and Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum*, set in a psychiatric hospital, invites psychoanalysis even as it signposts that path as a dangerous dead end.[31] However, the assumption that to write about mental imagery is necessarily to write about the unconscious is erroneous, notwithstanding the convenient coincidence that many of the twentieth-century artists who used collage were also interested in dreams. Psychologists researching autobiographical memory regularly use the idiom of photography to describe the recording and storage of mental images. The concept of "flashbulb memory", although challenged by critics who deny that it is qualitatively different from other forms of episodic memory, is widely used to describe particularly vivid memories of brief, traumatic events.[32] The term "photographic memory" is commonly used to describe eidetic memory, the unusual ability to recall a previously viewed stimulus with great accuracy. However, photographic memory, whilst a handy gameshow trick, is not actually very useful in everyday life.[33] Most people remember information that they need, plus an apparently arbitrary selection of details from personal experiences, sometimes – but not always – selected on the basis of their emotional significance. For most people, the choice of what to remember exists in a slippery space between conscious and unconscious: I could claim to have made a conscious effort to remember my pin number, but how conscious is my memory of how to get to the bank, or what the journey looks like, or which route I prefer to take? Were I required to represent this information on paper, it would indeed come out as a mishmash of text, maps and squiggly drawings. Photographic, cinematic narratives might represent life as it looks from the outside, but they are unlikely to represent narratives as they are remembered by their protagonists.

In his 1997 interview with *The Comics Journal*, McKean said of collage, "If

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30   Lucy Rollin, "Guilt and the Unconscious in *Arkham Asylum*" *Inks* 1.1 (1994) 6.
31   See also Marc Singer, ""A Serious House on Serious Earth": Rehabilitating *Arkham Asylum*" *IJOCA* 8.2 (Fall 2006) 269-82.
32   See Baddeley (1990) 15-18.
33   The most well known example is that of Luria's patient, "S", discussed in A.R.Luria, *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (London: Penguin, 1968). See also Alan J. Parkin, *Memory and Amnesia: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) 52-4.

you use existing materials, they bring with them their own past lives, a tremendous accumulation of time in each piece."[34] This emphasis on time is significant because it illuminates the difference between narrative and non-narrative collage. In a non-narrative collage, the elements exist in a shared space and time, though with histories of their own. A single image, however vibrant and dynamic, however varied its constituent parts, is still comparatively static. In a comics sequence, which uses juxtaposition to signify a progression through time, narrative collage takes on a further signifying role by its association of individual protagonists with the material world around them. In reading Figure 44, the reader need not assume that the osteopath in *Violent Cases* explicitly mentioned Players Navy Cut cigarettes to his four-year-old patient, nor is it necessary to imagine a distinct recollection of him smoking them. The Navy Cut advertisement brings with it intimations of a particular historical period and a masculine environment, whilst the map and the photograph of a ship underscore the protagonist's association of these cigarettes with Portsmouth. The cigarette packet carries any number of associations which contribute to the osteopath's anecdote about his early adult life, and so conveys to the reader a sense – however vague – of the memories that it evokes for that character.

In his analysis of Dave McKean and Iain Sinclair's *Slow Chocolate Autopsy* (1997), Julian Wolfreys uses Derrida's *Right of Inspection* (1985; 1989) in observing the graphic novel's deviation from the conventions of both prose fiction and photography:

> Unlike the novel, "which does not allow for a synchronic *exposition* or *presentation* of images", on the page of the graphic text, everything, at least at first glance, appears (and appears so as to appear) to take place in one glance, in the same time and yet, in that time, never quite the same time. It is as if we were looking at several panels within one frame, a series of photographs within one image. However, while in the photograph, according to Derrida, "all parts of the image are… assembled within the same instantaneous shot", the graphic text graphically (as it were) simultaneously presents and dismantles the simultaneity of presentation and representation, re-presentation of the presentation within representation. Thus, the graphic novel: neither novel nor photograph, yet partaking of and disordering the temporalities of both…[35]

In short, what is true of many comics is doubly so of McKean's. The move away

34   Brayshaw (1997) 73.
35   Julian Wolfreys, "London Khoragraphic" *ImageTexT* 1.2 (Winter 2004). <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_2/wolfreys/>

from linear prose exposition is for him a decisive rejection, a commitment to a narrative form that enables and even celebrates the simultaneity of disparate events and disruption of artificial unities. Although Wolfreys does not spell it out, he demonstrates the unsuitability of the term "graphic novel": book-length comics may not be much like films, plays or photographs, but they are certainly not much like novels either.

Mr Punch has none of the spectacular gangster violence of *Violent Cases*, yet in this book the older protagonist is, paradoxically, more easily frightened by the aggressive and deceitful behaviour of adults. Gaiman has said that this narrative was "sort of autobiographical", although some parts were altered or rearranged.[36] An adult narrator, less visible than the Gaiman-esque figure in *Violent Cases*, recalls how as a young boy he went to stay with his grandparents, the owners of a failing amusement arcade in a dilapidated seaside town. His recollection of his grandfather, uncle Morton, and the Punch and Judy man who calls himself Professor Swatchell, are interspersed with episodes from Punch and Judy shows seen at different points in the narrator's life.

Like *Violent Cases*, *Mr Punch* is obsessed with perception and memory. The narrator says of his grandparents, "I… have my mental snapshots of them: frozen moments of the past, in which the dead are captured in tiny loops of motion". Nevertheless, where the narrator of *Violent Cases* reported the unreliability of his own memory with good humour, the speaker in *Mr Punch* describes the inaccessibility of the past as a source of distress:

> I wish with all my heart, now, I could go back and talk to them, ask questions, illuminate the darkness of the past. / But these people are dead, and will not talk. Now that I want to go scrabbling around in the past, I cannot.

The episode that the narrator wishes to illuminate with the benefit of adult understanding is an overheard conversation between his uncle Morton and a girl paid to dress as a mermaid, whom the narrator's grandfather has made pregnant. The young protagonist, who had not understood an older boy's remark that the mermaid's costume would soon be too tight, neither connects the two

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36   Thomas L. Strickland, "Tea with the Dream King: An Interview with Neil Gaiman", 11th October 2003. <http://www.jivemagazine.com/article.php?pid=899>

conversations nor understands the implications of what he sees and hears. Just as the four-year-old in *Violent Cases* hears the osteopath's remark "I had been with his wife" without understanding it as his adult self presumably does, so the narrator here is unsure of the accuracy of his reporting because he was unable to make sense of what he heard at the time. Particularly in view of the traumatic nature of the narrator's experience – he witnesses a man beating the pregnant girl with a piece of wood – it is likely that his memory is seriously flawed.

In order to look more closely at the way in which photomontage and other collage techniques function in *Mr Punch*, I will use a three-page sequence in which the protagonist buys a comic book of ghost stories, wanders through a hall of mirrors, and meets the Punch and Judy man who tells him an anecdote about his grandfather (Figure 45a-c). Each page has a colour scheme of its own – pale browns and bluish greys on the first, rich oranges with a flash of turquoise on the second, and sepia-tinted black and white on the third. The first page, comprising just three panels, begins with a photograph of a net curtain and a twig with which McKean has blended a clumsy cartoon image of a skull and a small, frightened-looking snapshot of the narrator. Like many of the panels in which imagination dominates over reality, this image bleeds off the edge of the page, unbound by panel edges. The protagonist's reflection in the mirror in the second panel is scratched into a white painted surface, while in the background, scarcely noticeable to a casual reader, there appears to be a large, blurred photograph of a fork, almost the size of the boy's head. Such inclusions are ostensibly without meaning, and certainly without direct signification in the context of the narrative, but suggest something of the surrealism and impenetrability of the protagonist's perceptual world. Fragments of ornate calligraphic script appear in various guises throughout the text and in clipped fragments on the final panel of this page. Although the presence of this text could be explained as part of Mr Punch's long, dark history, it does also seem symptomatic of an extravagantly postmodern sensibility which scavenges for scraps from multiple historical periods.

In the first panel the narrator says:

> With sixpence of my new-found half-crown I bought a comic from the mucky postcard shop. It was a black and white comic, cheaply reprinting older American tales, and was filled with short ghost stories: people who vanished or never existed, houses that weren't there the next time people went back to look for them, murdered wives who returned from the grave.
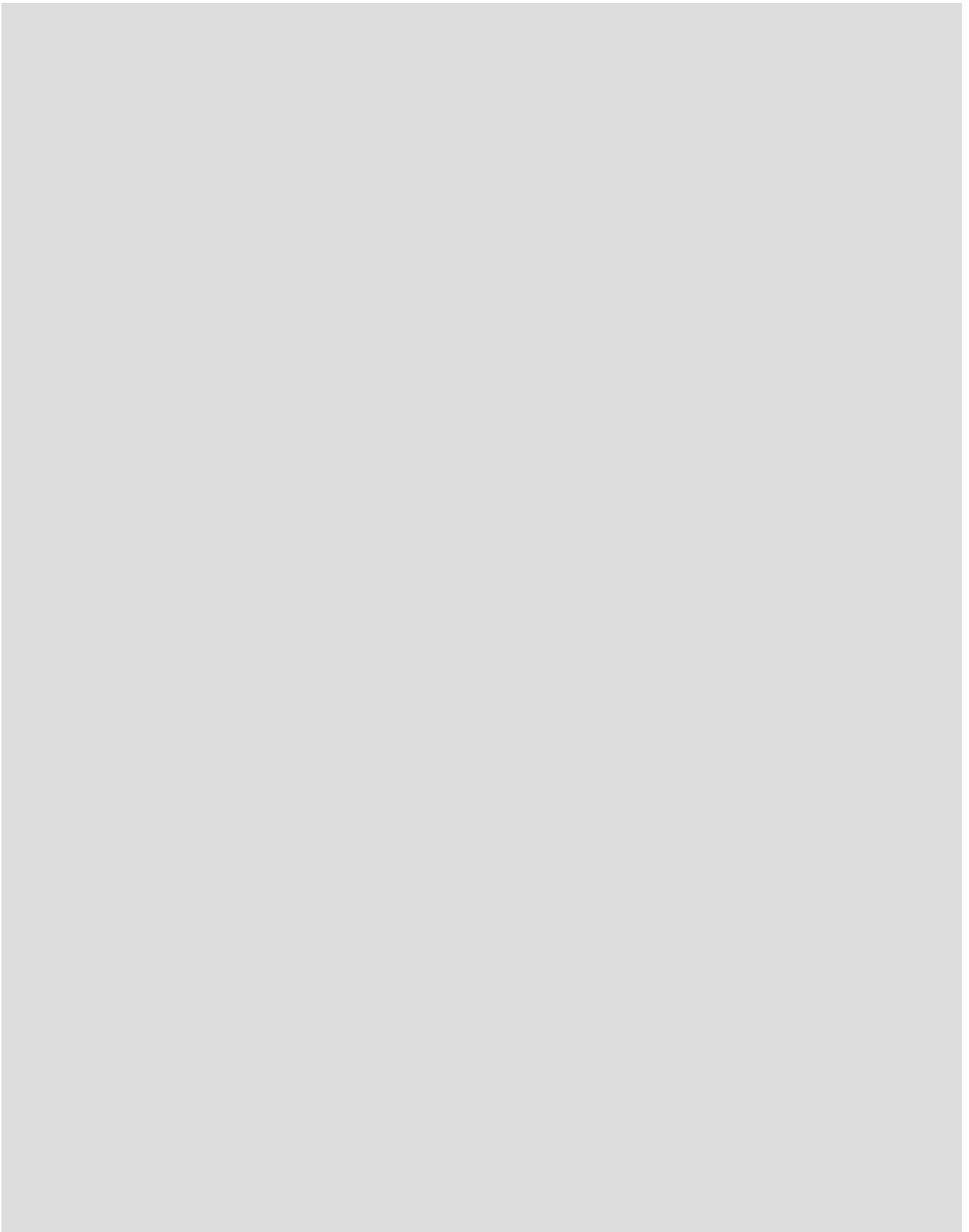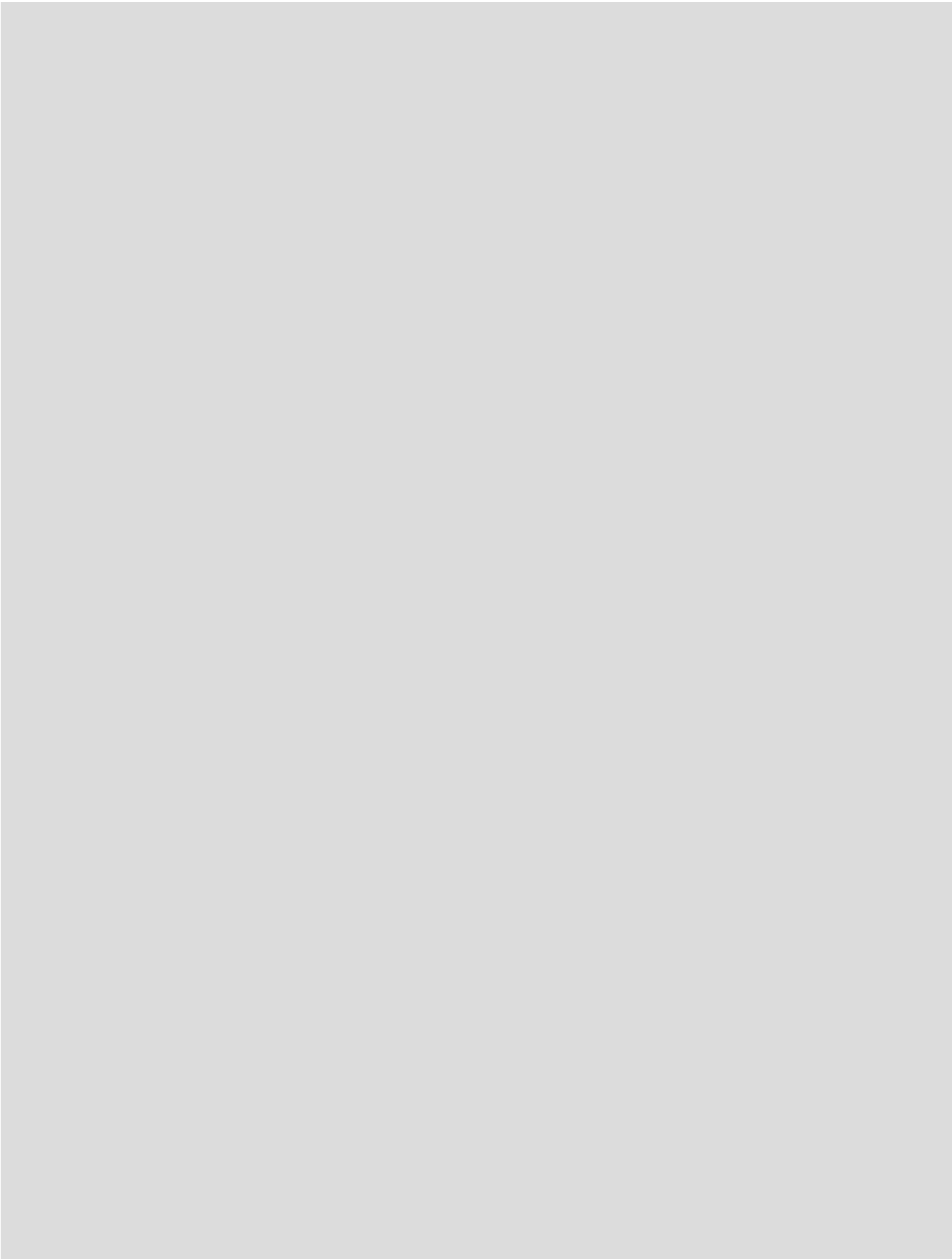
Figure 45a.
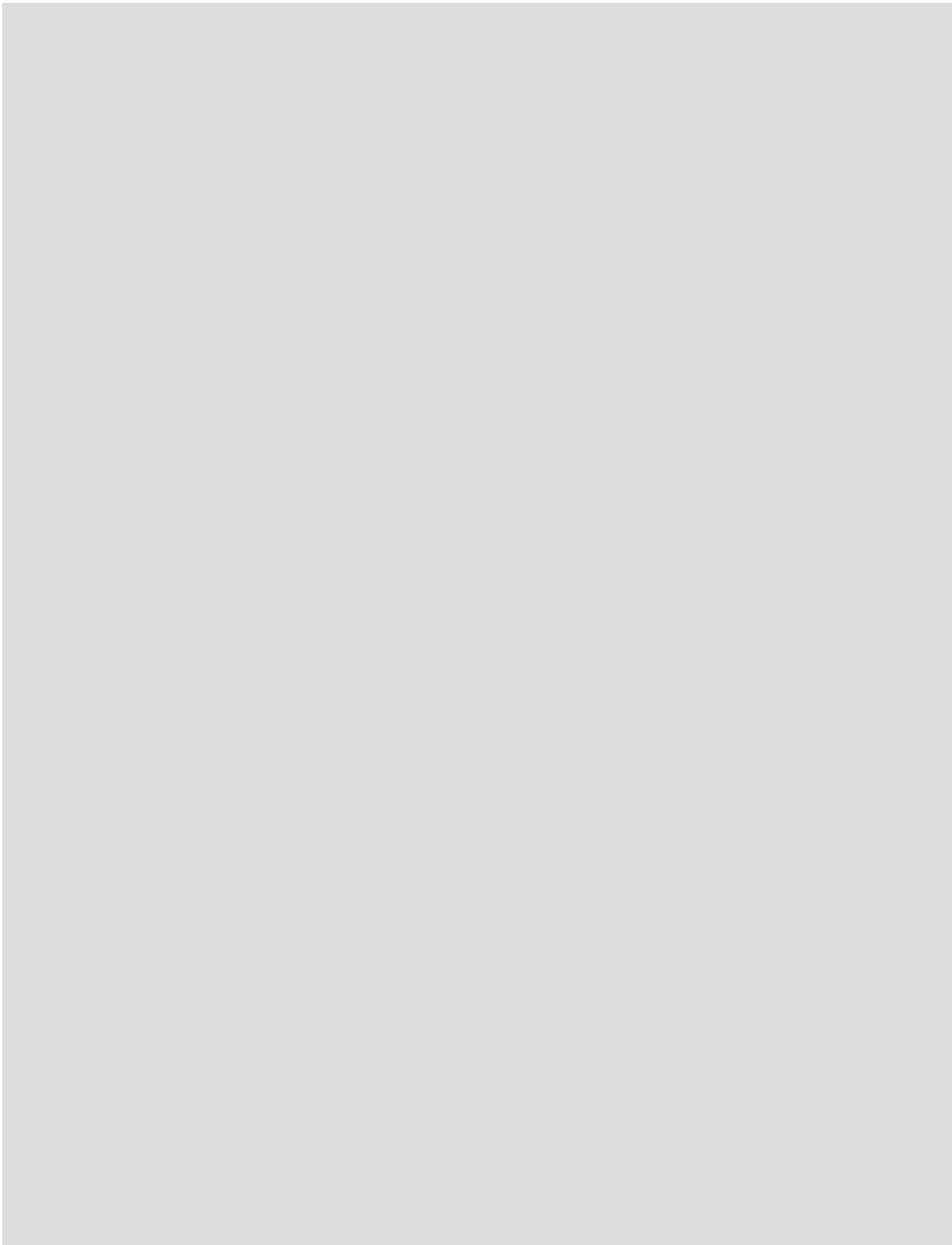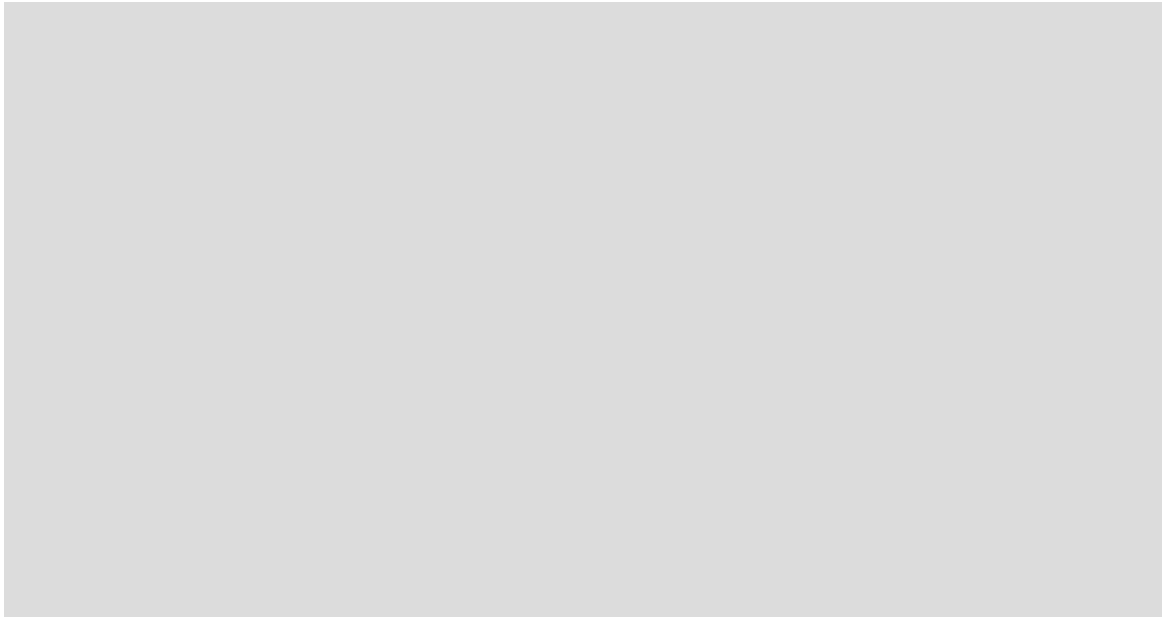
Figure 45b.

Figure 45c.

With this book of imported ghost stories – illustrated by the skull-like face beneath the net curtain – the narrator's childhood intertwines with the history of the comics form. As I have shown, the Comics Code grew out of anxieties about children's exposure to representations of violence, and it took many years for the comic book medium to work its way past this issue. In the UK the 1955 Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act, whilst less prescriptive than its US counterpart, placed the onus on publishers and importers to restrict comics which represent "the commission of crimes", "acts of violence or cruelty", or "incidents of a repulsive or horrible nature".[37] *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* are conspicuously arty, adult books produced during a period in which the comic book form was eager to prove itself as a creative medium. By writing about childhood and violence, particularly in a post-war setting, Gaiman re-examines this period in which the effects of violent comics on children were the subject of heated public discussion. His argument is clear: comic book horror does not come close to the trauma caused by children's real world experiences of violence.

On the second page, the protagonist – a line-drawn figure on a collage of torn and painted paper – stands before a series of blurred reflections of himself, while his adult self comments, "…for the first time I understood that mirrors could lie". As readers, of course, we are seeing not mirrors but photographs, distorted, filtered to an orange glow and pasted onto a flat picture plane with a collage of scattered paper scraps. Only when Swatchell interrupts does the narrative resume its panel-bordered format; as long as the child is lost in his reflections, his perceptions remain a field of free-floating segments. McKean has said that "One of the things I wanted to try with *Punch* was exploiting the difference between drawn images and photographic images".[38] To a general reader, it might seem counterintuitive that in *Mr Punch* the "real" world is composed of line drawings, while nightmares and puppet shows are represented by photographic images. But realism, in the sense of an accurate, detailed, naturalistic visual representation of events is not the key to high quality comics narrative. The simplest line drawing can communicate a truth,

37   See Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London: Pluto Press, 1984) on the history comics censorship in the UK. Gaiman is an active supporter of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. See "Neil Gaiman on the CBLDF!" [video]. Retrieved 23rd July 2008 from *The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund.* <http://www.cbldf.org/>
38   Brayshaw (1997) 80.

Figure 46.

whilst photographs, like parents, can lie, particularly when filtered through software like Photoshop. Numerous panels of *Mr Punch* show impossible combinations of drawings and photographs. When the protagonist explains his fear of ghost trains, he appears as a sketchy drawing over a painted skull and a faded photograph of a train (Figure 46); in the opening scene, he walks with his grandfather through a landscape which is a composite of drawn people, photographed sky and sea, and a drawn Punch and Judy tent with photographed puppets. The narrative in such sequences is drawn into an uncertain hinterland between fiction and reality, a space in which the real world – where grandparents have illicit affairs with mermaids – is no more plausible than a nightmare world of murderous glove puppets and scarlet crocodiles.

One would never know it from the work of most comics artists, but we are entering a post-photographic era, a stage in which photography is moving back in the direction of painting. Image manipulation is now the norm, whether it be the removal of "red-eye" from party snapshots, the smoothing of a cover-girl's wrinkles or the creation of entirely new digital art. Photos can no longer be trusted to represent reality, if indeed they ever could. We know this, but find it easy to forget: numerous psychological studies have demonstrated the ease with which photographs can create false memories.[39] Sarah Kember argues that anxieties over

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39   Maryanne Garry and Matthew P. Gerrie, "When Photographs Create False Memories" in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14.6 (2005) 321-5.

the loss of "truth" in photography are really displacements of a deeper fear about the loss of a stable subject, which had already been undermined by structuralism. She says that the "guarantees and reassurances" offered by analogue photography "are ultimately illusory and were always already lost", and goes on to suggest that digital images should be regarded as "image statements rather than truths".[40] This is certainly the case for the protagonist of *Mr Punch*, who, in an unstable period of his life, is learning how to understand and interpret perceptual information. Long before the advent of digital image manipulation, he sees his distorted reflection and understands that the world is not as safe or coherent as he had supposed.

The third page of this extract is markedly different in colour and tone, with a single line-drawn image of Swatchell laid over a series of manipulated sepia-tint photographic images. The background of fields and trees is naturalistic enough, but the threatening figures appear to be photographs of masks. The convention that black and white represents the past is a familiar enough cinematic device: it is arguably one of the reasons that *Violent Cases* works so well in near-monochrome. But the addition of masks to photographic images blurs the conventions and is deliberately disturbing. The child who hears of an assault on his fraudulent grandfather finds himself imagining the attackers as semi-human puppet figures because the violence of Punch and Judy shows is paralleled in male-female relationships in the "real" world of the narrative.

Masks and stages are prevalent throughout *Mr Punch*. The book's opening image, and one that recurs frequently by virtue of the ubiquitous Punch and Judy shows, is that of a stage, and one cannot help noticing the endless preoccupation with modes of storytelling in Gaiman and McKean's comics. Perhaps because of the multimedia qualities of his work, Gaiman often describes himself as a storyteller rather than a writer.[41] He talks about the social functions of storytelling, valorises a practice for which he was once criticised (a child who tells stories is a liar, an adult who does so is a writer) and places himself in a folk tradition in which narrative is a populist, democratic practice rather than the preserve of a literary elite. His most well-known comic, *The Sandman*, is about the human propensity for telling stories, and in this series the central character, Dream, is an embodiment of narrative

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40   Sarah Kember, "The Shadow of the Object: Photography and Realism" in Liz Wells, ed. *The Photography Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).
41   David Roel, interview with Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean. December 1994. <http://www. naylor.net/andrew/mckean/interview2.html>

itself.[42] Begun in 1988, *The Sandman* was ongoing when Gaiman scripted the books discussed in this chapter, so it is hardly surprising that all three centre on the act of telling a tale.

So much of *Mr Punch* is about the assumption of roles and the question of whether acting a part constitutes dishonesty. The Punch and Judy man in *Mr Punch* is the counterpart of the magician in *Violent Cases*, an adult gifted with powers of transformation that the protagonist finds both terrifying and captivating. The narrator describes the feeling of trying on a crocodile glove puppet:

> I didn't ever want to give it back. I wanted it to sit on my arm forever, brave where I was fearful, impetuous where I held back. I would have taken it to school and scared my teachers, taken it home and made it eat my sister…

The puppet, like a mask, enables the wearer to assume a role to which he aspires, but which he cannot quite manage alone. Like Doucet's alter ego with her anxieties about the way in which strangers regard her physical appearance, the narrator is concerned with assuming an external identity as a way of dealing with a threatening world. Here the assumption of social identity and the creation of a role through writing or performance are seen as facets of the same project. Just as the comics form is a mask for Gaiman in this semi-autobiographical story, so the puppet holds the potential to act as a mask for his seven-year-old alter ego.

Signal to Noise was originally serialised in *The Face* in 1989, and was published in an expanded and revised edition by Dark Horse and VG Graphics in 1992. It has subsequently been adapted both for the stage and for a BBC radio production that McKean has said was more successful than the book.[43] The story features a film director who plans his last film in his head whilst he is dying of cancer, and where *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* examine the beginnings of adult selfhood, *Signal to Noise* looks at its end. The film in question, planned in the closing years of the twentieth century but set in the last moments of the tenth, is the tale of a predicted apocalypse failing to materialise. McKean described the comic as "a look back in time as a way of dealing with the future", a summary that serves to emphasise

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42   Joe Sanders, ed. *The Sandman Papers: An Exploration of the Sandman Mythology* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2006).
43   Dave McKean, "Introduction", Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, *Signal to Noise* (2nd edition) (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse, 2007) N. pag.

Figure 47.

similarities between *Signal to Noise* and the two other comics discussed here.[44] The film-maker justifies himself to a neighbour, who asks, "Why your obsession with the end of the world?" by claiming:

> It's not my obsession. It's *the* obsession. / Human beings are always living in the last days. // What have we got? Never more than a hundred years until the end of our world.

More than apocalypse, *Signal to Noise* is obsessed with interpretation. Doctors aside, the two people with whom the director has contact in the last days of his life are Inanna, who believes "that there [is] no ultimate meaning to anything. All there ever [is is] the illusion of order in the chaos", and Reed, who claims:

> It all *means* something. Even the stuff that doesn't mean *anything*. Like the noise you get changing channels on an old radio. / It's all patterns. Or it would be if you could see the big picture. There's no such thing as noise.

The phrase "Signal to Noise" is a technical term describing the ratio of a signal power

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44   McKean (2007) N. pag.

to background noise, and its use as a comics title represents a synaesthetic sleight of hand, a play on the incongruity of an aural term which describes a visual effect. A number of panels in *Signal to Noise* mark areas of drift between meaning and non-meaning, interpretation and confusion in images. Lines on the narrator's palm become haze, then blackness; a snowstorm in a story becomes interference on a TV screen; disparate threads of narrative wander into each other's space in a blur. The director looks at an x-ray image, trying to make sense of an apparent abstraction in which the doctor is able to distinguish the shadow of a tumour.

When the collected edition of *Signal to Noise* was published, a number of abstract pages were added, marking the breaks that represented chronological gaps in serial publication. These images are often brightly coloured, conspicuously digital in their production, and contain largely incomprehensible fragments of text. McKean explained, "We ended up dealing with the noise part of the title a lot more than the signal in those bits".[45] One richly coloured blue page appears to feature a close-up television image, blurred and pixellated, which shows a barely outlined figure and a window frame (Figure 47). On the facing page the image is duplicated with an inverted tonal balance, the darkness of the window turned to four dimly glowing screens. Superimposed on this canvas is what appears to be an extract from Gaiman's instructions to McKean: "… from this scene onwards, if we have any external, realistic shots, it might work if they contained images of thing[s ro]tting, falling apart, being torn down…".[46] However, this text runs off the page, and seemingly random words are highlighted. On the facing page, the highlighted words are so pixellated as to become unreadable: they are abstract white squares clustered on small grey rectangles scattered across the page. The signal is weak, out of kilter, tipping from meaning into noise.

The book opens with epigraph from Barthes' "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" from *Image, Music, Text*: "Everything has a meaning or nothing has. To put it another way, one could say that art is without noise". Referring back to Barthes, we find an explanation and a footnote:

> …art is a system which is pure, no unit ever goes wasted*, however long, however loose, however tenuous may be the thread connecting it to one of the levels of the story.

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45   Brayshaw (1997) 69.
46   "Things rotting" is a conjectural emendation.

* At least in literature, where the freedom of notation (in consequence of the abstract nature of articulated language) leads to a much greater responsibility than in the "analogical" arts such as cinema.[47]

For McKean and Gaiman, it seems, such a qualification leaves comics, and certainly *Signal to Noise*, on the "art" side as a text in which even apparently meaningless fuzz signifies. If cinematic images, by Barthes' implication, are more inclined towards meaningless "noise", then surely the story's suggestion is that the director's narrative of first-millenarian fears of apocalypse is more meaningful in comics form than it might have been had it been made into film. Paradoxically, cinema, the medium possessed of a greater propensity for realism, is the least *meaningful* in this schema. Gaiman and McKean's appropriation of Barthes is an answer to those who question the value of abstraction in comics.[48] Speaking of a BBC radio adaptation of *Signal to Noise*, McKean remarked:

> I think the interesting thing about that was how accepting of abstraction people are in sound, in music, and not in words and pictures. A picture has to look like something. Whereas, since when has a piece of music ever been a solid object? It is this wonderful, intangible abstract language.[49]

McKean returns to the idea of abstraction in relation to music in *Cages*, but in *Signal to Noise* the abstract pages perform a particular narrative function. *Signal to Noise* is constructed out of a variety of marks, be they figurative or abstract drawings, areas of paint or iconic signifiers, and the story itself describes the process of trying to pull meaning out of perceptual information in the course everyday life. As I noted in my reading of Moore and Campbell's *From Hell*, abstraction can be used in comics to describe experiences of the visionary sublime. Here, however, the protagonists are not transcending language to revel in an ecstatic state but grasping after understanding.

Images such as Figure 47 point towards two distinct problems: interpretation as a more or less universal feature of human existence and interpretation as a specific problem associated with visual media. A comic about a film that cannot be made unavoidably highlights some of the differences between the two forms, and

47   Roland Barthes, trans. Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977) 89-90.
48   Many readers disliked the abstract, "noise" sections of *Signal to Noise*. Brayshaw (1997) 68.
49   Brayshaw (1997) 69.

Signal to Noise often explicitly discusses the relative advantages and drawbacks of different literary and artistic media. In the 2007 edition of *Signal to Noise* McKean noted that the character of the director grew out of a bundle of notes on the death of Eisenstein. One must exercise caution in applying film theory directly to comics, but it is not hard to see how Eisensteinian montage could be of interest to McKean. Eisenstein developed his theory of montage during the 1920s, the same period in which Soviet artists such as Rodchenko and El Lissitsky were particularly interested in photomontage.[50] Stripped of the Soviet director's ideological commitment, intellectual montage for McKean is a valuable tool in a narrative medium that relies on the juxtaposition and superimposition of fragments. The director's dream at the opening of *Signal to Noise* echoes many comics writers and artists' frustrations about the form. Although film is said to be a "compromised medium", the director insists that he uses it because it is an "obsession" over which he claims "I don't have a choice". Such remarks seem reminiscent of many comics artists' observations about their own medium. In spite of the falling costs of digital media, a film is still an extremely expensive undertaking, necessitating large teams of actors and production staff. Comics may be time-consuming, but as McKean himself has pointed out, they are democratic by virtue of being pleasingly low-tech.[51] The narrator of *Signal to Noise*, house-bound and alone, plans his film in a manner that takes advantage of the essential interiority of the comics form.

Facing the last days of his life, the narrator of *Signal to Noise* struggles with his own search for meaning through the narration of his planned film, but if he comes to any life-changing conclusions, he gives little away. Unlike the protagonists of *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* he has no one to speak for him, no older, more confident self to comment on his actions or survey his responses with the benefit of a quarter of a century of hindsight. Still, like the children in those earlier comics, he is powerless and isolated, telling his story in comics form because his chosen medium – film – is no longer available to him. Its conclusions, such as they are, are dark and pessimistic: the message of *Signal to Noise* is that interpretation is a labyrinth of false turns, and meaning, even when found, does not help much. As the director dies, the protagonists of his film are left alive but lost and confused, their beliefs and

50   Ades (1986) 62-97. See also Richard Taylor, ed. *The Eisenstein Reader* (London: BFI, 1998)
51   Dave McKean, *Pictures that Tick: Short Narrative, Book 1* (Pacific Grove, CA: Hourglass/ Allen Spiegel Fine Arts, 2001) 10.

livelihoods in shreds.

Surveying all three collaborations at once, it becomes evident that none of these nameless protagonists are in control of their own stories. This may be, in part, a side effect of Gaiman's double narrator strategy and McKean's collage technique. At best, these figures exist in the shadows of older selves who edit their biographies for them; at worst, they exist in a bewildering wasteland of endless signification in which they fight for space alongside scraps of printed ephemera, abstract paint-strokes and giant forks. It is also worth noting that all three protagonists fall into the increasingly familiar category of the lonely white male, struggling to make sense of a threatening and alienating world. Neither Gaiman nor McKean share Sim's masculinist views (and indeed, Gaiman's *Sandman* is noted for its unusually high proportion of female readers),[52] nor are they explicitly addressing a male-dominated comics readership, but they still choose the figure of the white man to address issues of troubled identity in late modern Britain.

Recollection of childhood is fundamentally an adult practice. Only distance can provide the opportunity to reflect, to recognise the memories that have survived and grown, and to know what one has forgotten. It is no accident that so many self-consciously adult comics have taken up a nostalgic stance, with narrators looking back at their past selves. Like Crumb, Barry and others, Gaiman and McKean began working at a time when comics were still in sight of their childish past. McKean's use of collage and photomontage over a traditional comics style represents a deliberate attempt to get away from this past, to make the comic book a respectable, grown up, artistic medium.

Although *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* centre on children's encounters with violence, they are not of quite the same order as Barry's representations of trauma. Where Barry's cicadas symbolised the survival of memories, Gaiman emphasises the opposite: the loss of memory, corruption of information, and the difficulty of finding a mode of representation that is faithful to the remembered experience. Intuition tells us that our more traumatic experiences should be burned more indelibly, and more truthfully, on the memory; evidence suggests that this is not always so.[53] In their collaborations, Gaiman and McKean explore the reality of shifting mental

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52   Contino (2001).
53   Loftus (1979).

images which overlap, invade and replace one another as an individual transforms from a child into an adult. Human memories are corruptible, fallible, cobbled together out of a mishmash of partial perceptions and half-truths. For Gaiman and McKean, it would be an act of dishonesty to narrate such memories in the form of a coherent, traditional comics narrative, edited and laid out in a neat, straight line. For them, an adult narrative should be comfortable with flaws, gaps and silence.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nostalgia, Collection and Identity in the Comics of Chris Ware

The work of Chris Ware forms a neat conclusion to my investigation of selfhood in alternative comics. Throughout the last six chapters I have been tracing two main themes: gender and sexuality on the one hand and childhood and memory on the other. Both of these themes have been central to Ware's career. From his early, short *Quimby the Mouse* strips (1991-93, collected 2003), through the fat doorstop *Jimmy Corrigan* (1993-2000, collected 2000) to the currently incomplete *Rusty Brown* (2005-present), Ware obsessively re-treads the same ground, narrating the lives of lonely American males whose sad and traumatic childhood experiences have moulded them into damaged, dysfunctional adults.

Following a brief outline of Ware's cultural and creative background, I want to start by looking at *Quimby the Mouse* because it is in this early work that Ware sketches out the themes that were to become central in his later comics. I will then discuss short extracts from *Jimmy Corrigan* and *Rusty Brown*, examining the ways in which these comics dissect problems of social disconnection and troubled family relationships. I want to argue that for Ware, the comic book medium is inextricable from the lives of his protagonists, firstly through the interplay between private selfhood and the public visual language of graphic design, and secondly by the association of comics with childhood and nostalgia. Finally, I will discuss the question of why the collection and possession of comic books and other objects is such a central preoccupation for Ware.

Chris Ware's work represents a confluence of the themes and ideas of underground comics and the slick graphic design of the 1990s. It is significant that Ware's fine art studies took place at University of Texas at Austin. Austin has long been an important countercultural centre both in its musical history (site of the Armadillo World Headquarters, for example) and as the home of several major underground cartoonists including Gilbert Shelton and Jack Jackson (Jaxon). Both of these artists studied at the University of Texas, and indeed, some of Shelton's earliest work (including his "Wonder Wart-Hog") was published in the college

magazine *The Texas Ranger*.[1] Ware likewise produced his *Quimby the Mouse* strips

for the university paper *The Daily Texan*, and claims to have acquired much of his

graphic design knowledge from the "extremely helpful and tolerant pre-press guys"

on that publication.[2] He has frequently acknowledged his debt to the underground,

particularly to Crumb, whom he describes as "the greatest artist in the world", and

to whose influence he attributes his sketchbook drawings.[3] With regard to other

artists discussed in this thesis, he is also a friend and fan of Lynda Barry, and has said

that "[h]er semiautobiographical experiments were pretty much responsible for the

maturation comics experienced in the '90s".[4]

      Ware has done his best to suppress his very earliest experiments in comics,

but his *Quimby the Mouse* strips have been collected, and it was this work that

drew him to the attention of *RAW* editor Art Spiegelman, himself a veteran of the

underground.[5] Spiegelman encouraged Ware and published his work in *RAW* in

1990 and '91.[6] Throughout the 1990s Ware worked on his first major narrative *Jimmy

Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*, which was serialised in Ware's comic *The Acme

Novelty Library* and published in a single volume in 2000.[7] Unusually for a comic,

Jimmy Corrigan won not only industry awards (notably the Angoulême Award for

Best Album in 2003) but the Guardian First Book Award and an American Book

Award. It is relatively easy to see why Ware has enjoyed such success beyond the

small market of regular comics buyers. In both pace and subject matter *Jimmy

Corrigan* is perhaps the most novelistic of all comics, and Ware manipulates the

codes and conventions of everyday language with a precision that few comics

writers share. He also appropriates much of the visual language of graphic design, a

field that enjoyed increasing exposure throughout the 1990s, with new magazines

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1   Rosenkranz (2002) 16-20.

2   Alan Pipes, *Production for Graphic Designers*. 4th edition. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005) 98.

3   Gary Groth in conversation with Chris Ware and Jules Feiffer, in *Conversations among Four Generations of Cartoonists*. Special issue of *The Comics Journal*. Vol 4 (Winter 2004), 59. See also Chris Ware, introduction to *The Acme Novelty Datebook Vol. 1* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2003), 3.

4   Evan Narcisse, "Q&A: Chris Ware". *Time Out New York* 571, 7th-13th September 2006.

5   For reports that Ware wants to destroy all copies of *Floyd Farland: Citizen of the Future*, see Jon-Mikel Gates, *Cowboy Orange*. Blog. April 10th 2006. <http://cowboyorange.com/blogs/?cat=4>

6   *RAW* 2.2 (1990) and 2.3 (1991).

7   Throughout this chapter my references to *Jimmy Corrigan* will be to the single volume edition. This text is non-paginated. There is much work to be done on Ware's editing process, as scenes often change considerably from newspaper publication to comic book and from comic book to collected edition. See, for example, Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (London: Laurence King, 2004) 100, for a comparison of two versions of a page from *Rusty Brown*.

such as *Ray Gun* and *Speak*.[8] As I will demonstrate, the study of typography, composition, information design and other aspects of graphic art would impact upon Ware's developing style and help to promote his work to readers who had not previously been consumers of comics.

The *Quimby the Mouse* strips are formally experimental, predominantly black and white, and usually silent. They owe a great deal to George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, a surreal, minimal, early twentieth-century strip that Robert Warshow called "the best that the comic strip has produced" and E. E. Cummings claimed as an allegory of the individual in society.[9] But where *Krazy Kat* centred on the love triangle of Krazy, Ignatz and Offissa Pup, Quimby is always either alone or in an emotionally fraught relationship with one other person. In my chapter on Crumb I discussed his appropriation of the funny animal comic for adult narratives. In view of their shared commitment to the underground tradition, it is worth noting that Art Spiegelman, who published Ware's work in *RAW*, was also using a mouse figure at around the same period. Although Spiegelman's *Maus* and Ware's *Quimby* are very different in theme and scope, both use the smallness and fragility of mice to describe the vulnerability of human protagonists in a threatening or alienating world.

Ware notes in his introduction to the collected *Quimby the Mouse* that he wrote many of these strips as his grandmother was descending into dementia in the years before her death. He says:

> All her life she'd been one of the most generous people I'd known… But in death, she became alarmingly demanding, petulant, almost spiteful, cruelly alienating herself from my family's memories of her… During her steady decline I continued my weekly strip for the student newspaper in Austin, but found that I was only able to draw stories of my increasingly littler mouse wandering, alone, through a large, unoccupied house – my grandmother's house. (2)

Isolation, disconnection from people and longing for an irrecoverable past: these problems are established in *Quimby the Mouse* only to become increasingly dominant in Ware's mature work. As well as the strips in which Quimby explicitly struggles to cope with his grandmother's decline and death, there are many

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8   For a graphic design perspective on Ware, see Rick Poynor, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (London: Laurence King, 2003).
9   Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, eds. *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) 65 and 30-34.
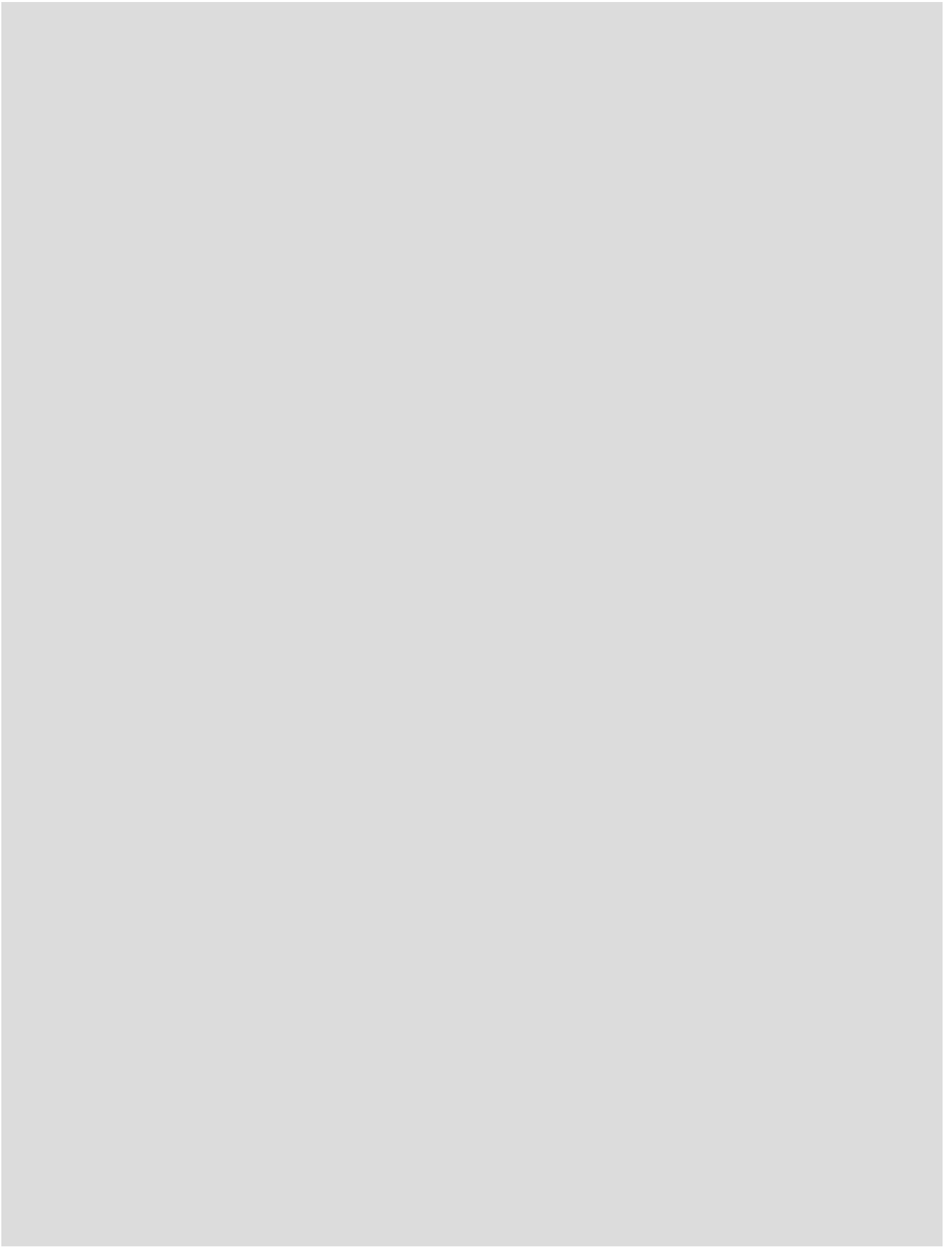
Figure 48.

narratives in which he forms a love-hate relationship with a severed cat-head, Sparky.[10] Most interesting, however, are the *Quimbies the Mouse* strips, in which two conjoined mice age at different rates and the younger one worries at length about what will happen when his twin dies. I want to take as an example the untitled strip that appears on page 10 of the collected edition (Figure 48). This strip exhibits much of the technical sophistication that one sees in Ware's recent *Building Stories* (2005-6, collected as *Acme Novelty Library 18* in 2007) and like those tales this strip is not so much a single narrative as a string of anecdotes that the protagonist remembers in relation to a particular place. It owes much to Richard McGuire's "Here", an influential six-page comic that appeared in *RAW* 2.1(1989) and depicted a single place in several time periods. The Quimbies are joined at the hip, with two heads and penises but only two arms and legs between them. As they lie in a hospital bed at the bottom of the page, the healthy one recalls small incidents from their life together: the squashing of an ant, the taking of a photograph which now lies in a drawer, the breaking of a lamp in an incident of domestic violence. These miniature narratives are non-linear, interweaving across the page in multiple directions. Arrows sometimes indicate the order in which the panels should be read, but more often the reader is left to work it out, and there is often no beginning or end to these diagrammatic stories.

Crucially, the entire sequence is enclosed within a thought balloon, and its non-linear structure is analogous to the random jumbling of thoughts in the protagonist's memory. Small features in the image at the top of the page are associated with specific memories: a distant barn reminds of the incident with the ant; a rubbish bin recalls the disposal of the lamp smashed in anger; a wishing well once set in a garden is now in an urban street. The young conjoined Quimby's memories are full of guilt at his treatment of his twin: we see the weaker brother coughing from passive smoke, panting as the other walks too fast and cowering from his seemingly random violence. Matthew Pustz is right to describe these non-linear strips as "unending cycles of despair": they enact the endless repetition

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10   For a superb analysis of "I'm A Very Generous Person", a visually complex monologue in which Quimby tries to delude himself that he is over a break-up with Sparky, see Gene Kannenberg's "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, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) 174-97.

of guilty or troubling memories.[11] Equally significant, however, are the small visual details that are not properly narrative at all: reading this page one is left with the sense that we are seeing not just a rocking chair but the precise shape of *that* rocking chair, not just any drawer but the exact location of the drawer that holds a treasured item. Rooms, furniture and objects are endowed with heightened significance because of their ability to encapsulate particular memories in Quimby's mind.

Reading *Quimby the Mouse*, one becomes aware of the recurrence of buildings, particularly domestic spaces, in Ware's early strips. The lonely Quimby wandering through his grandmother's empty house becomes an emblem for a more fundamental isolation that, for Ware, is a characteristic of modern existence. In Figure 48, time passes, and an urban space grows up around the ageing Quimbies. The young Quimby's memories, however, do not follow the same linear model but skip about in a pattern of free association. Reality and thought are out of synch, and it seems that for Ware, architectural spaces are a more useful model for the structure of memory when translated to the comics page than a more traditional, linear, left-to-right panel format. We will see a development of this preoccupation with the psychology of physical space in *Jimmy Corrigan*.

Ware has said that the Quimbies figure was a direct reference to his grandmother's decline and death, whereas Sparky the Cat derived from a particularly bitter relationship break-up.[12] But examining this strip in the context of Ware's later work, one recognises the recurrence of double figures in Ware's comics. James Corrigan is the nineteenth-century counterpart of his grandson Jimmy, whilst Rusty Brown and his friend Chalky White seem to represent the light and dark of socially marginalised white men, one bitterly angry and the other almost irritatingly optimistic. In retrospect, it seems that the Quimbies are not only about Ware's grandmother but about the problems of relationships *per se*, particularly the bonds of family or lifelong friendship which cause pain but cannot be severed without considerable trauma.

Jimmy Corrigan tells the story of a lonely man meeting his father, grandfather and adoptive sister for the first time, whilst also flashing back to episodes in the

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11   Pustz (1999) 118.
12   Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (London: Lawrence King, 2004) 48.

grandfather's childhood. The tales of both modern day Jimmy and his grandfather James are narrated less with words than through Ware's visual representation of their numerous dreams, fantasies and unconscious responses to events. *Jimmy Corrigan* is very long and it would be impossible to undertake a full treatment of it here. I wish to focus first on a sequence of four pages in which Jimmy's father's car is stolen from outside a diner, and Jimmy has a dream (Figures 49a-d).

Jimmy sits in a diner, stumbling through an awkward conversation in which his father attempts to make up for decades of absence by inviting Jimmy to stay at his place and watch videos. Jimmy, emotionally inarticulate as ever, is frozen with anxiety, and slurps at his drink, saying nothing. When his father explodes with fury at the theft of his car, Jimmy retreats into one of his many fantasy scenarios. He dreams of narrating the day's events to a child of his own, but is interrupted by a superhero figure on the windowsill. This figure metamorphoses from tiny, doll-like creature to a godlike giant who picks up their house and drops it. This superman is not just a random fragment of psychic detritus from Jimmy's day but a highly ambivalent symbol who appears throughout Ware's work, and it is worth looking at him in greater detail.[13]

Jimmy Corrigan opens with a childhood incident in which Jimmy's mother sleeps with a man dressed as "The Super-Man" at a classic car show. The narrative then proceeds to a present-day scene in which one of Jimmy's colleagues commits suicide dressed in a superhero costume, having left Jimmy a post-it note saying, "I sat across from you for *six months* and you never *once* noticed me! Goodbye." The superhero figure reappears elsewhere in Ware's work, notably in a long, silent, untitled sequence in *Acme Novelty Library: Our Annual Report to Shareholders* (2005). In this story he saves a young girl from a falling aircraft, allowing the other passengers to drown, then keeps her away from civilisation and has sex with her when she reaches adolescence. This figure is always middle aged, rather chubbier than the classic superhero, an icon of the flawed father. His superpowers are not moderated by superior moral conduct, but are wielded clumsily, selfishly and with arbitrary cruelty. In *Jimmy Corrigan* this surrogate father figure is, in part, the subject of oedipal fantasies, but in view of the suicide note which charges Jimmy with his dysfunctional lack of engagement with other people, it seems that he also has the
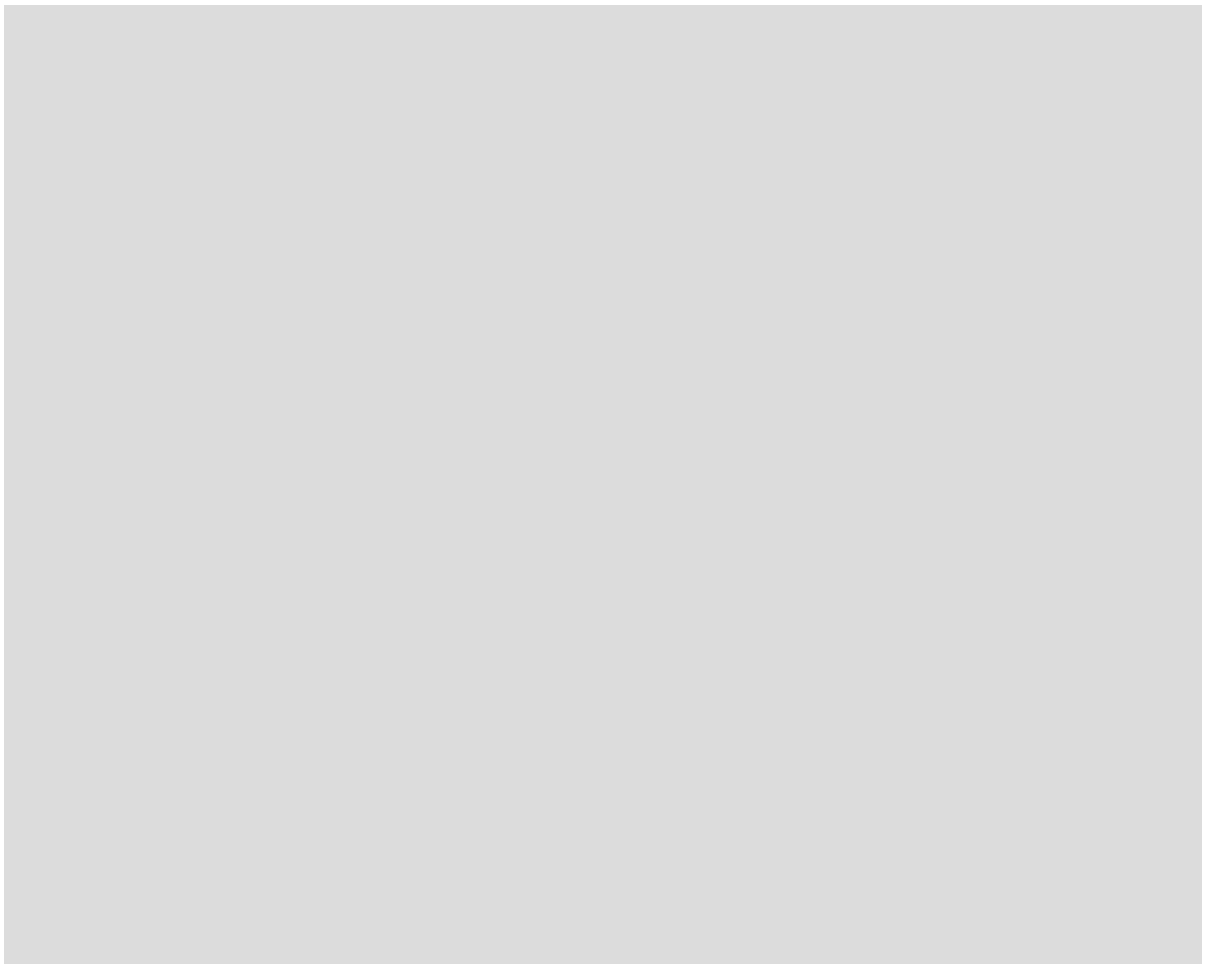
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13   Daniel Raeburn's fanzine *The Imp* 3 (1999) includes a perceptive, if now dated, reading of this superhero figure.
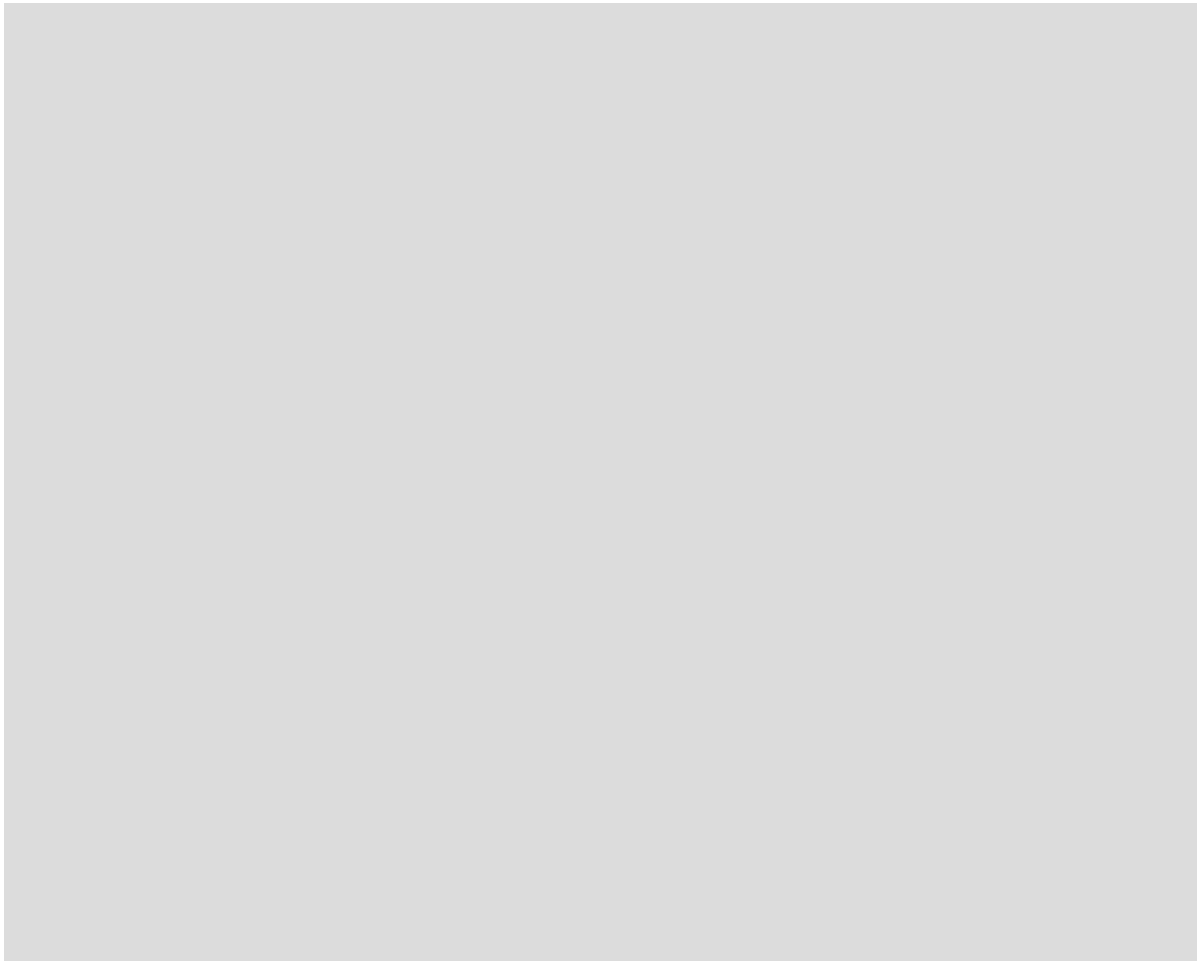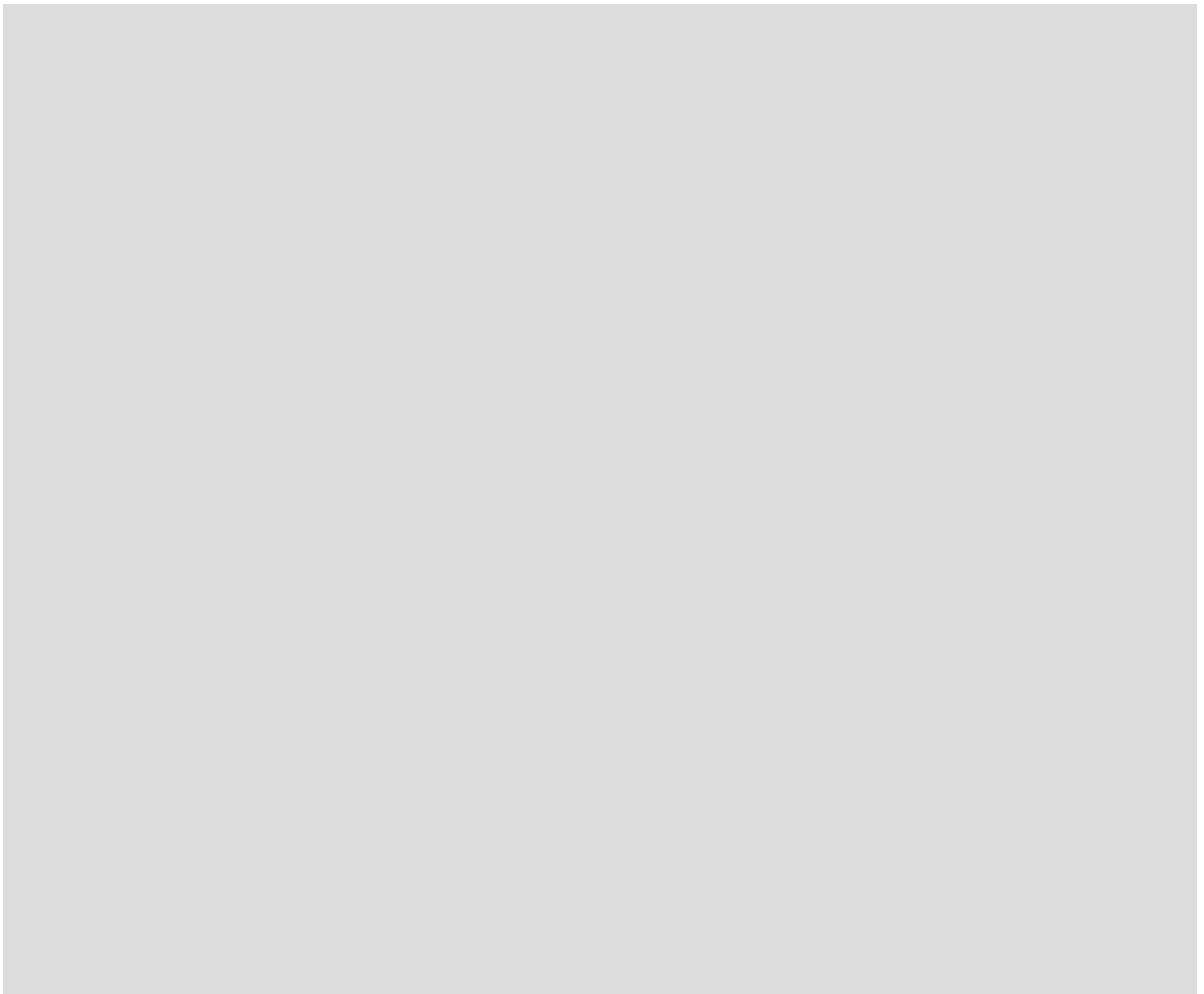
Figure 49a.
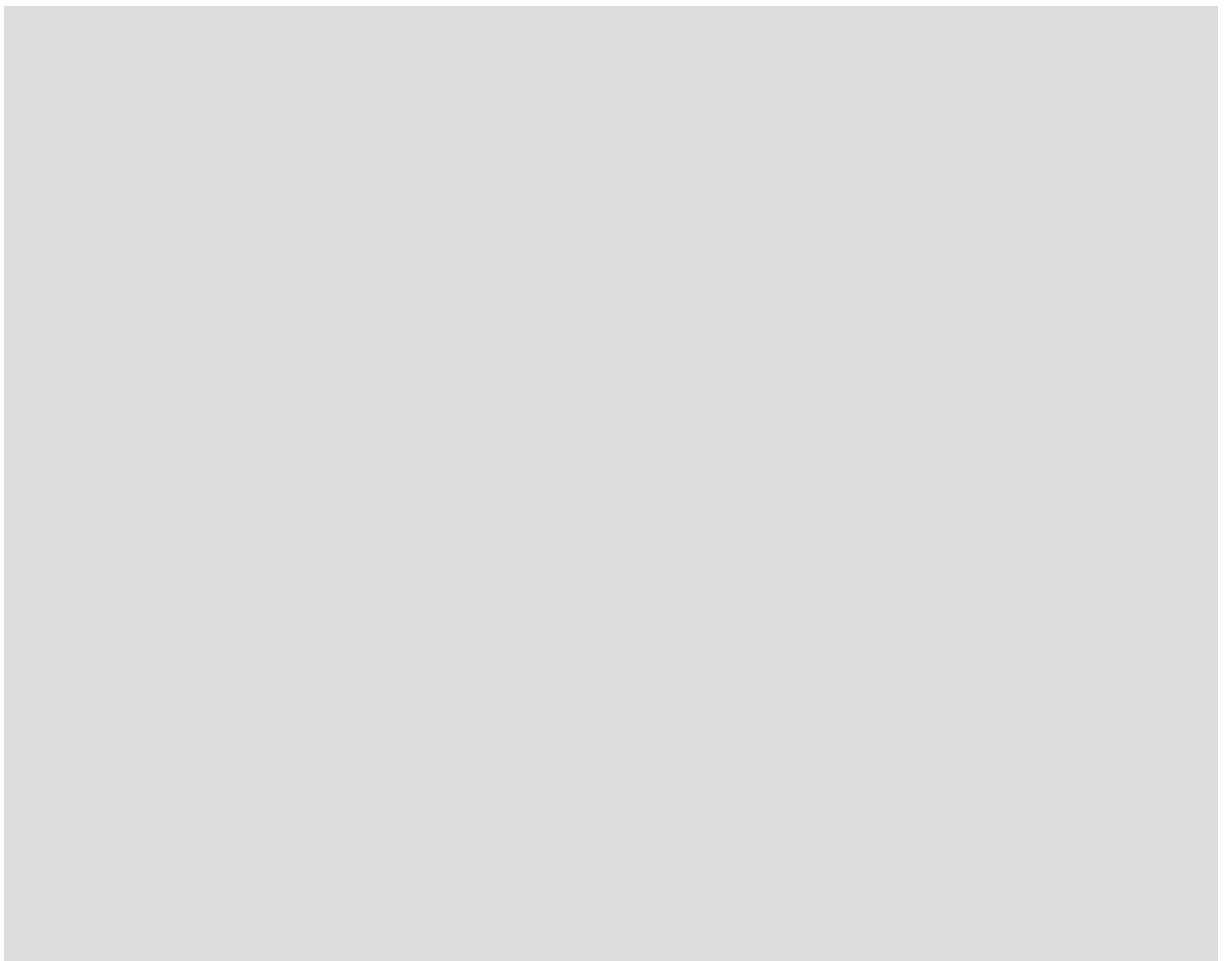
Figure 49b.

Figure 49c.

Figure 49d.

power and the inclination to spotlight others' weaknesses. His fearful dominance in Jimmy's unconscious is marked by his garish red and blue costume, which in this extract is set against the dull browns and greys around him. Scathing as Ware is about the dominance of superheroes in comics, he appropriates the brightly-costumed male to talk about the difficulties of masculine identity and the terrifying gap between Jimmy's fantasy life and his stilted reality. It is no coincidence that in terms of comics history the superhero figure stands in a parental relationship to many alternative comics since the 1970s. Like many other comics authors, Ware grew up reading mainstream action and adventure comics, so the superhero is *Jimmy Corrigan*'s literary ancestor as well as the character's symbolic father within the text itself.

Father-son relationships are central to most of Ware's comics, and they are invariably fraught with hostility and failure. In *Our Annual Report to Shareholders,* Rusty Brown's father is shown to suffer from depression and view his son with disdain, while the "Big Tex" strips depict an openly abusive father-son relationship, as Tex's father repeatedly beats, humiliates and even plots to kill his stumbling, incompetent son (*Annual Report,* 26, 40, 60). In the nineteenth-century sections of *Jimmy Corrigan*, the young James Corrigan's father neglects and eventually abandons him at the Chicago World Fair. *Jimmy Corrigan* is not autobiographical, but Ware, like his protagonist, met his father for the first time in adulthood, and spent only a few hours with him before his death. Ware had already started writing *Jimmy Corrigan* when his father contacted him, and he discusses his life's unnerving imitation of art in a note at the back of the collected edition. Having outlined the sequence of events – a series of phone calls and a single meeting before his father's death from a heart attack – Ware adds:

> I mention none of this to try and align myself with the seemingly unstoppable swarm of personal memoirists who populate the extra-curricular booklists of multiple self-help programs, but to admit 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. (*JC*, n.pag.)

The statement pulls in two directions: *Jimmy Corrigan* both is and is not about Ware's relationship with his father. Superficially it is a fiction that came true with astonishing accuracy, yet to its author *Jimmy Corrigan* still inevitably fails because it cannot give meaning or coherence to the relationship it describes.

Like Ware, Jimmy struggles to make sense of his relationship with his father. In the dream sequence in this extract, Jimmy imagines breaking out of the cycle of indifferent or non-existent parenting, but his fantasy, in which he narrates the day's events to a child of his own, is almost as implausible as that of the superman. Jimmy is single and childless, vaguely in love with a colleague who finds him annoying, and is trapped by the many neuroses that he developed in childhood. He remains close to his mother, and Ware's conspicuous refusal to depict her face leads the reader to suspect Jimmy of Oedipal feelings. His muddled blend of wonder and terror, which mirrors his curiosity and apprehension about meeting his father, is heightened by the uncharacteristic mock-jovial voice he uses to address "Billy":

> *Billy!* Why, Billy, *look!* Look who's on the *windowsill!* It's *Superman!* It's *Superman* and he's really *small* and he's *waving* at us! *Ha ha!* Why, isn't that *wonderful*, Billy? *Look!*

The over-emphasised baby talk highlights this forced, uncharacteristic speech: the voice in the dream is that of an alternate version of Jimmy's self, one which, in turn, is performing a particular self for the audience of a child. The fact that Jimmy goes on to tell the child (inaccurately) how babies are made betrays his other preoccupation, which is never far from the surface. The dream throws up a tangle of anxieties about interpersonal relationships and the impossible necessity of performing an identity that does not quite fit, not to mention a muddle of incomprehension and guilt about the suicide of his unknown colleague. Like the dozens of other dreams in *Jimmy Corrigan*, it owes much to those late twentieth-century psychoanalytic models which posit the function of the dream as the processing of events and emotions that threaten the integrity of the psyche.[14] The dreams of both Jimmy and the young James Corrigan a century previously comprise an uneasy blend of trauma-processing and sheer surrealism, whilst wish-fulfilment is confined strictly to waking fantasies.

In many ways this extract, like much of *Jimmy Corrigan*, is conspicuous for its slow pace and mundane subject matter. Notwithstanding the imminent loss of the car, there is little in the way of dramatic action: both men are shown drinking from paper cups and stumbling awkwardly through a dull conversation. Ware pays a great deal of attention to the realities of everyday language: he includes

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14   See Sara Flanders, ed. and intro. *The Dream Discourse Today* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 1-23.

discourse markers, repetition, stuttering, trailed off sentences, pauses and coughs. Many panels are effectively silent, containing no dialogue at all. Here, these silent or near-silent panels serve two functions: firstly, they slow the narrative down, forcing the reader to experience the awkwardness of the situation; secondly, they draw attention to the fact that language in *Jimmy Corrigan* is not really about communicating. The suicide post-it note marks a theme of disconnection that forms a central thread of the book. Ware includes apparently insignificant details: the clunking and spitting sounds that accompany the cooking of bacon; the background noise of a radio skipping between stations; the small talk between a gas station cashier and a customer. Chatter and noise are everywhere; connection is almost impossible to achieve.

Ware's emphasis on the inadequacy of language and the inability of individuals to communicate serves to counter the logocentrism that threatens the comics form. In *Jimmy Corrigan*, text-heavy panels invariably signal trouble, often depicting an anxious speaker trying to cover up emotional turmoil. In page two of this particular extract, where the narration slips seamlessly from the day's events to Jimmy's reworking of his experiences in a dream, the change is marked by a switch from inarticulacy to logorrhoea, the protagonist's helpless attempt to mask his discomfort. The emotional weight of this proliferating speech is important because Ware's comics do not, on the whole, rely heavily on dialogue for their narration: the pictures themselves tell the story rather than illustrating a verbal narrative.

We see the power of visual narration in Ware's use of body language. Several reviewers have remarked on Jimmy's bad posture, but few have stressed the narrative function of his shifting, slouching, shuffling, awkward body as an index of his emotional state.[15] Likewise James's furrowed brow and hunched posture, which suggest that he is permanently flinching in anticipation of violence, says a great deal about the day-to-day existence of an abused and neglected child. The research on non-verbal communication pioneered by psychologists like Mehrabian in the 1960s and 70s has been absorbed into popular culture so readily that it is tempting to overlook its role in visual narrative.[16] It is of particular significance in *Jimmy Corrigan* because the book's rejection of speech as the primary mode of communication leads it towards a kind of textual mime. Through the interaction of body language

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15 Eisner discusses the importance of body language in *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) 101-3.
16 See Albert Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972).
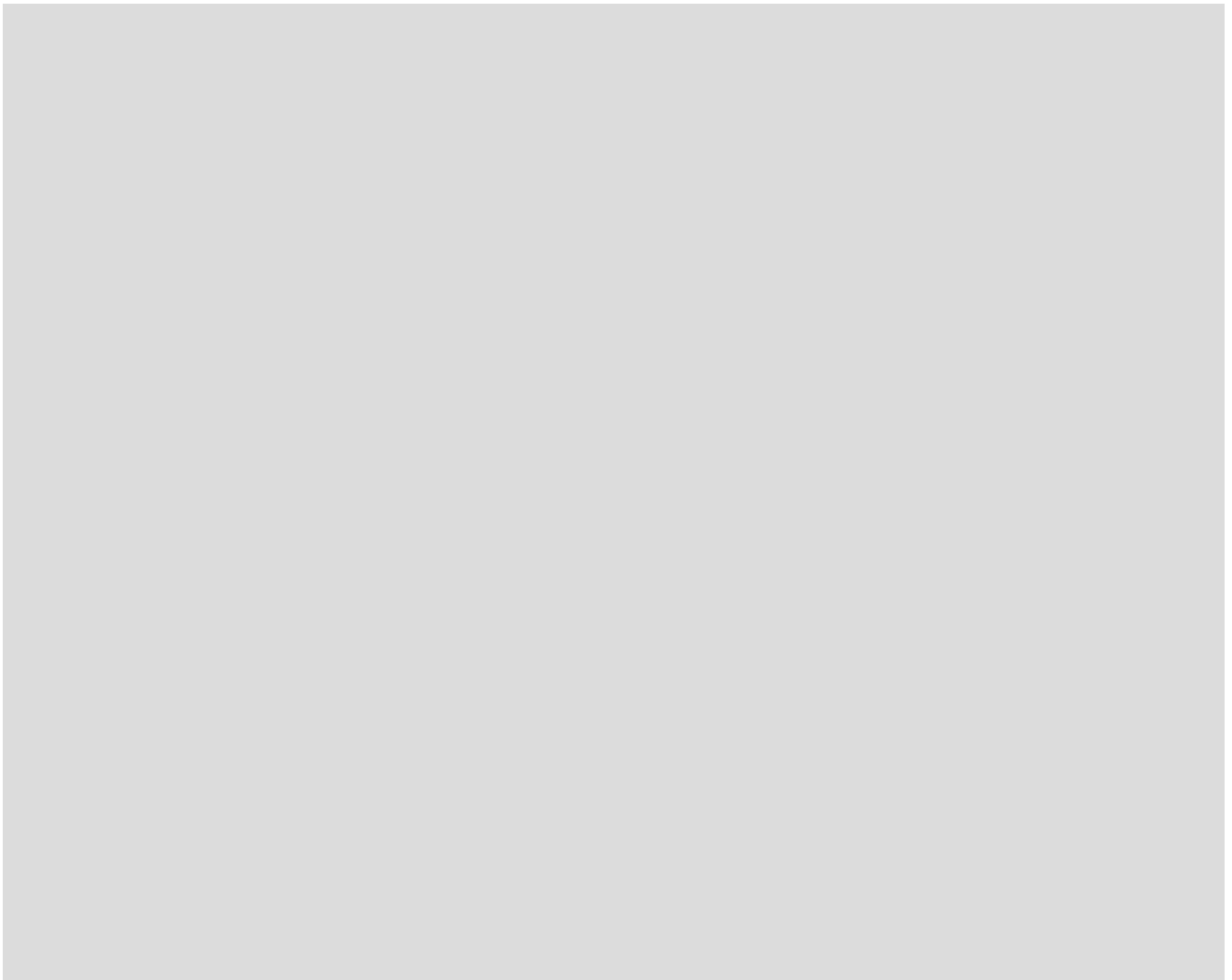
Figure 50.

and graphic design styles, non-verbal communication is elevated from a handy
flirting tool to a fully fledged visual language. By privileging simplified images and
other non-verbal signifiers, Ware sides with Saraceni, McCloud and the other comics
critics who have stressed the need to "reduce" images to the level of words.

I want to talk about these reduced images in some detail because whilst
many critics have made perceptive observations about Ware's distinctive graphic
style, there is still a great deal to be said about the synergy of form and content in
his work. Ware is unusually concerned with the semiotics of the comics medium,
and whilst he has abandoned many comics conventions as clumsy or clichéd
(the signalling of a distinction between dream and reality, for example, or the use
of cloud-shaped balloons for verbal thoughts), he readily appropriates features
of other sign-systems in his work. Figure 50 is taken from a later scene in *Jimmy
Corrigan*, in which Jimmy is in hospital, having just been involved in a minor
accident with a mail van. He is in a state of shock, partly because of the collision

but primarily because his father has just told him that he has a sister, dropping the information with the thoughtlessly casual remark, "What… you thought you were the only mistake I ever made?". In his ensuing state of bewilderment and panic, Jimmy is struggling to produce a urine sample.

The page is extremely cluttered. Just as Ware introduces wordless panels to slow down a scene of awkwardness or tedium, so he crowds thirty five dense panels into a small page as a reflection of his protagonist's emotional turmoil. Pacing is key, and Ware explained in one interview:

> I reread every strip hundreds of times while I'm working on it. Sometimes it's a matter of inserting an extra panel or a bodily shuffle or a cough. Sometimes it's changing the angle of the drawing. It's trying to get a sense of reality and the passage of time almost in a musical way.[17]

The comparison to music is significant for two reasons. Firstly, as a keen pianist and music critic, and publisher of a specialist magazine *The Ragtime Ephemeralist*, Ware clearly knows a great deal about musical form and structure. This form governs the shape not just of individual scenes but of the whole book, and Ware pays close attention to the balance between different elements. Leitmotifs such as horses and peaches recur in different guises throughout. Asked by an interviewer whether the term "symphony" would be appropriate to *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware agreed, "it was sort of structured that way, consciously, especially the whole seventh part that is set in 1893".[18] Throughout the book, individual pages can be compared to musical passages. Here, for example, the multiplication of panels in the face of Jimmy's panic is reminiscent of the mass of semiquavers in a *presto* passage. However, there is a second possible explanation for Ware's interest: music has a complex non-verbal system of written notation, and it is evident – particularly in this scene – that Ware is trying to expand and refine the repertoire of signs available to comics.

This page is technically innovative on a number of counts. In the opening panel Ware enlarges conjunctions to form a structural part of the image: here and elsewhere in *Jimmy Corrigan,* "and", "but" and "so" become a kind of verbal-visual punctuation, joining and separating sequences of panels. Verbalised thoughts are

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17   Emma Brockes, "I still have overwhelming doubt about my ability". Interview with Chris Ware. *The Guardian* December 7th 2001. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/firstbook2001/story/0,10486,614835,00.html>
18   Andrew Arnold, "Q and A with Comicbook Master Chris Ware". *Time*, 1st September 2000. <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,53887,00.html>.

not contained within cloud-like balloons but stray across panels, even following the lines of walls and furniture. Ware's refusal to mark a clear distinction between real and imagined events – demonstrated here by Jimmy's imaginary phone conversation with his mother – renders *Jimmy Corrigan* a sort of visual equivalent of interior monologue. Indeed, the fact that the phrase "stream of consciousness" appears in Ware's published sketchbook *The Acme Novelty Datebook Vol. 1* (2003) alongside the instruction "loosen up your narrative" (86) suggests that Ware consciously conceived of his comics in these terms. More importantly, however, Ware appropriates a number of conventions from twentieth-century visual culture, and at several points on this page Jimmy's thoughts are filtered through the sign systems of the world around him. From the beginning, traffic-light colours signify a sense of urgency. Soon afterwards, a series of parallel lines represents Jimmy's attempt to structure and control his thoughts, and the enlarged "NO… NO" mimics the style of a roadside warning. In the next panel an empty bubble with a cross through it implies an attempt to erase distracting mental images. Jimmy tries to calm his mind with a peaceful, bucolic image of a deer, but his thoughts swerve back to the road sign which was the last thing he saw before his accident.

In this extract the visual references to road signs are of particular interest, because I want to suggest that Ware is deliberately exploiting the tension created by the use of public codes for private discourse. Several of the major semiotic systems that Ware appropriates are public: the visual language of advertising and the extremely simplified images used in information signs and on instruction diagrams. The title, "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth", is repeated throughout the comic in the form of advertising logos or poster-style panels, suggesting a fantasy world of public acclaim at odds with the protagonist's humdrum existence. In their own environment, information signs convey just that: here is a telephone; this is a mail van; stop the car; watch out for deer. In non-fictional narrative form they provide very simple sets of instructions: how to exit the plane in the event of an emergency, or how to assemble your stylish new desk. It would come as something of a shock if the figures in these "comics" (and Scott McCloud agrees to include them in his definition) were to express fear at the thought of a crash or annoyance at the complexity of a simple 10-minute assembly.[19] This incongruity lies at the heart of

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19   McCloud (1993) 20.

Jimmy Corrigan: Ware taps into public sign systems that assume a dispassionate set of interpreters, but reprograms these systems with emotion and uses them not to convey broad, simple stages of a set of actions but to detail every nuance of human behaviour and every flicker of body language.

Ware's appropriation of public sign systems would probably not be possible were it not for the distilled minimalism of his images. His figures are described in clear, strong lines and decisive blocks of colour, a style that Ware claims to have "stole[n]" directly from Herge's *Tintin*.[20] It comes as a surprise to many readers that his comics are entirely drawn (although not coloured) by hand: they have a cold, mechanical, too-perfect look about them. This sense of coldness is accentuated by the bleak atmosphere that Ware produces with his choice of a muted palate and empty urban landscapes. The protagonists of Ware's comics often seem lost in a world dominated by machines, buildings and the endless clutter of signs and corporate logos. Brad Prager argues that Ware's mimicry of early twentieth-century graphic styles is directly related to an anxiety about loss of identity in a world dominated by machines. He claims:

> Jimmy, because of the mechanistic world of which he is a part, is fundamentally a steely assemblage – a claim to which Ware calls the reader's attention through providing cut-out kits with which readers can themselves construct the robot Jimmy.[21]

There are flaws in this. Jimmy is not straightforwardly, *fundamentally* a "steely assemblage": for all his emotional stiltedness, his crippling diffidence and inarticulacy, Jimmy cries, faints, dreams, panics and contemplates suicide. His personality is irreparably shaken by the dehumanising effects of modern urban life and by any number of miniature traumas in his past, but it is a long way from being erased. Still, there is a lot of truth in Prager's argument, and indeed, further evidence of Ware's preoccupation with bodily mechanisation and relationships between people and robots has emerged since the publication of his paper. A sketch in the *Acme Novelty Datebook Vol. 1* shows a masturbating robot (160), Rocket Sam builds robots as companions but then neglects or abuses them (*Annual Report,* 34-8) and

20   Rebcca Bengal, "On Cartooning". Interview with Chris Ware. *PBS*, 12th November 2007. <http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/tintinandi/sfartists_ware.html>

21   Brad Prager, "Modernism in the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" *International Journal of Comics Art* 5.1 (2003) 210.
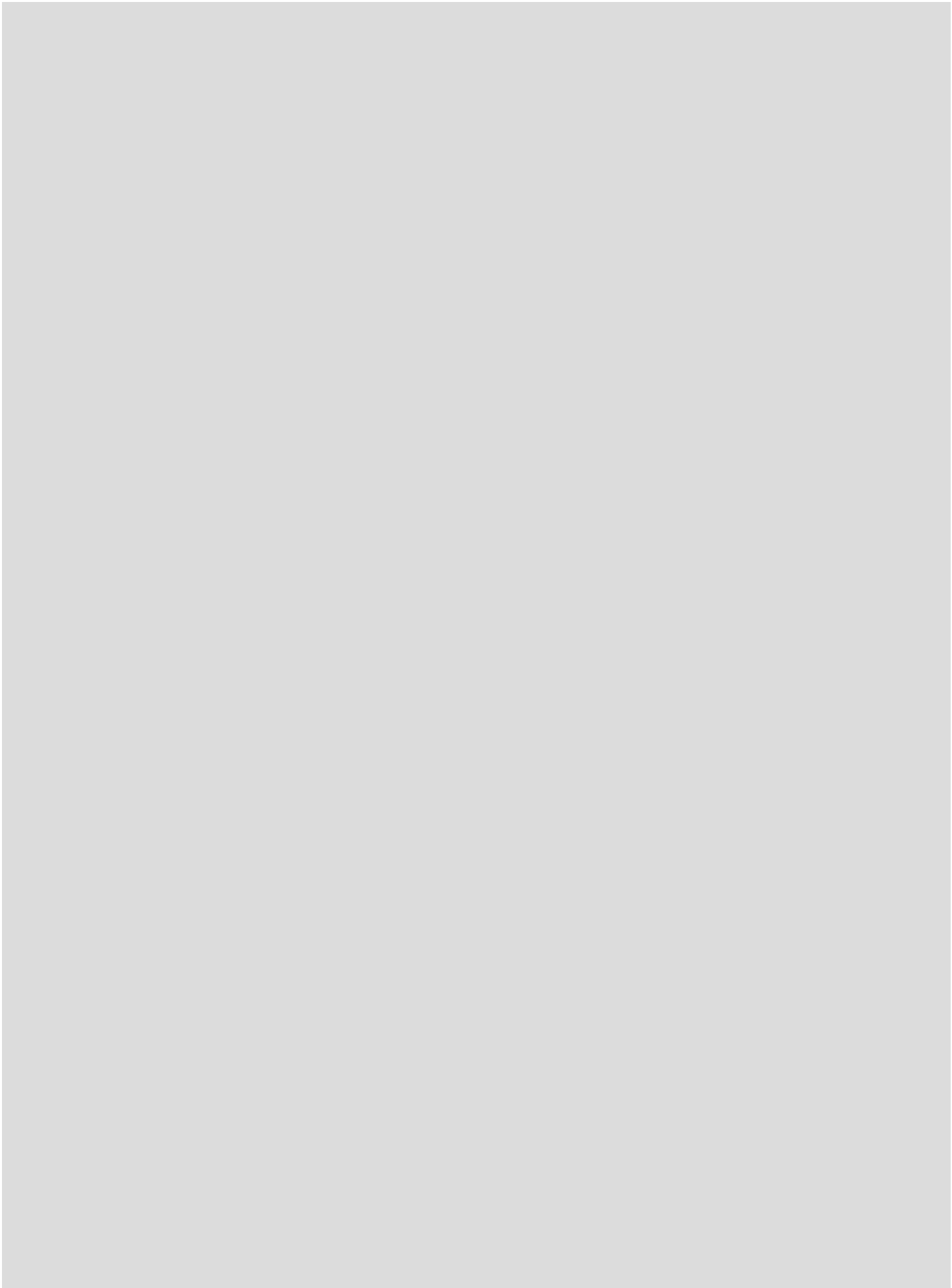
Figure 51.

non-humanoid machines such as answerphones often participate in characters' lives in slightly disturbing ways (*Annual Report,* 9, 14). The important point in Prager's argument is that the world of *Jimmy Corrigan* seems mechanistic because of Ware's graphic style. On the one hand, Ware claims to prefer early twentieth-century graphic styles because they show "respect for other people" and "craftsmanship and care and humility of design";[22] on the other, their aloofness and reserve reflect an emotional coldness evident in Jimmy and his grandfather. Ware's adoption of such styles in *Jimmy Corrigan* reflects an ambivalent nostalgia for a period of time in which everything was beautifully made but men were not supposed to express emotion.

The Village Voice Literary Supplement wrote of *Jimmy Corrigan* that "[w]hat looks like an extended nostalgia trip turns out, on more thorough examination, to be a satisfyingly maudlin rejection of retromania…"[23] The reviewer is right to note the scepticism in Ware's attitude to "retromania", but for all its ambivalence, Ware's stance on nostalgia is never one of outright rejection. Nostalgia is the ground on which all Ware's stories are drawn, and its tone conditions every panel of the narrative. The uncertainty that this reviewer discerns is in fact inscribed into the very nature of nostalgia, with its double vision of the love-hate relationship. As Svetlana Boym says, "A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life".[24] Ware's comics are distinguished by their knowingness, their open-handed acknowledgement that the past for which the nostalgic craves is always imaginary and impossible: history viewed through a lens of fantasy.

The styles of the past dominate the world in which *Jimmy Corrigan*'s tortured anti-heroes are trying to live. Ware's drawings of Chicago are meticulously researched and detailed, with the result that that city, like London in *From Hell*, often dwarfs the protagonists of the comic. Ware's figures are frequently lost in the grandiose or starkly minimalist architectural forms that surround them. When James Corrigan's father abandons him at the Chicago World Fair, the boy himself is barely

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22   Arnold (2000).
23   Quoted in the paperback edition of *Jimmy Corrigan*. Incidentally, the fact that Ware chose to reprint this does not necessarily indicate agreement: although he receives relatively few negative reviews, he seems to delight in them, and has reprinted several amongst the usual glowing assessments.
24   Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) xiii - xiv.

visible, a tiny speck at the top of a vast, neoclassical White City pavilion. Ware clearly finds the architecture of the late nineteenth century very beautiful, but the World's Fair building looms over James throughout the final section of his story, its vast scale exaggerating his helplessness (Figure 51). In the modern sections of *Jimmy Corrigan* Jimmy is often depicted against a concrete backdrop of petrol stations and burger bars, his landscape punctuated not with trees and certainly not with people, but telegraph poles and street signs. He spends a lot of time in liminal public spaces: corridors, waiting rooms, airport lounges, a staff canteen, never settling or appearing at ease in any environment. Within the first few pages of the book, the house in which Jimmy grew up is shown to crumble into dereliction and eventually disappear, leaving its former inhabitant adrift in a world in which he does not fit. The prominence of architectural form in *Jimmy Corrigan* accentuates the parallels between Jimmy and James's experiences: both are products and victims of their environment.

As I have noted in previous chapters, it is a convenient coincidence that both comics and buildings are, at their most basic level, formed out of clusters of rectangles. As in Doucet's *Dirty Plotte*, this coincidence lends itself to comics like *Jimmy Corrigan*: the protagonists seem as trapped within the panels as they are within buildings and in their everyday lives. In Figure 50 the oppressive multiplication of panels gives the impression that Jimmy feels the walls of this cold room to be closing in on him in his distress. And whilst *Jimmy Corrigan* lacks the conspicuously experimental form of *Quimby the Mouse* or *Building Stories,* Ware complicates matters by including in *Jimmy Corrigan* several cut-out models of buildings that appear in the narrative.[25] These relics of twentieth-century childhood coax readers towards a fuller imaginative absorption in the space of the comic, but as Thomas Bredehoft notes they also disrupt the relationships between reader, author and narrative.[26] We almost enter into the architectural world of the comic, but not quite: the paper models that we are invited to construct are small, feeble replicas of the buildings that dominate Jimmy and James. Like the Superman, we are outside the panels, intruding on the narrative space with box-like toy houses that can fit into the palm of a reader's hand.

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25   A number of Ware's "Building Stories" are collected in *Acme Novelty Library* 18 (Self published, 2007).
26   Thomas A. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth" *Modern Fiction Studies 52.4* (Winter 2006) 869-890.

As these cut-out models suggest, Ware's work is nostalgic not only in its borrowing of early twentieth-century graphic styles, but in its obsession with childhood and all the cultural forms associated with that state. Myla Goldberg suggests that Ware's work is disarming because its style – "the sorts of pictures we enjoyed as children in the form of Sunday funnies and Saturday morning cartoons" – leads readers to believe that they know what to expect.[27] Ware engages with readers' memories of childhood by advertising non-existent toys and games, using titles like "The Smartest Kid on Earth" and "Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book", and with his parodic appropriation of the patronising, ludicrously jolly tone of mid twentieth-century advertising addressed to children:

> *Wow*! Just think of it! You could be a real *movie star* and meet all the handsome people that make the exciting Jimmy Corrigan action movies. What could be a better way to become popular and stay competitive with your friends. (*Annual Report,* 23)

Whether or not Ware's interest in early twentieth-century style is, for the author, linked to a personal longing for childhood, his books are both nostalgic and deeply self-critical about the psychological flaws that nostalgia represents. Form and content become inseparable: Ware's comics adopt a pastiche graphic style that is constantly pulling the narrative back into the past, and as I have shown, his stories often hold childhood memories responsible for a character's inability to function in the present. By juxtaposing childhood and adult narratives in both *Jimmy Corrigan* and *Rusty Brown*, Ware consciously locates the roots of his protagonists' adult neuroses in their early traumas. By doing so in a visual style that joins the public language of advertising with private, nostalgic images of childhood toys and objects, Ware locates these individuals' emotional dysfunction as much in the outside world of twentieth century US culture as in the protagonists' personal pasts.

At time of writing, *Rusty Brown* is in its early stages, and it is dangerous to make too many assumptions about where the narrative might be going. However, I want to look at the fragments that appear in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders* and in volumes 16 and 17 of the *Acme Novelty Library* because it seems that Ware

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27   Myla Goldberg, "The Exquisite Strangeness and Estrangement of Renee French and Chris Ware", in *Give Our Regards to the Atomsmashers: Writers on Comics*. Ed. Sean Howe. (New York: Pantheon, 2004) 206.

is peculiarly concerned with the figure of the collector and the psychology of collecting as they relate to nostalgia. Comics have always had a particularly close affiliation with nostalgia: it is no coincidence that *The Comics Journal*, a publication of comics news and criticism, was originally *The Nostalgia Journal*, a collectors' magazine. Nevertheless, Ware takes this further than most, openly interrogating the nostalgia of the collector in his work.

In *Our Annual Report to Shareholders* Ware includes an item of mock-natural history, "Collectors: A Guide – Permitting Easy Field Identification and Classification". The article outlines habitat, geographical scope, and six basic types: Reparationist, Historian, Vigilante, Completist, Vindictivist and Researcher, going into some detail about the habits and practices of collectors in each category. Ware is a collector himself and clearly expects many of his readers to share both his collecting instincts and his self-consciousness about that practice. In his analysis of issue 13 of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, designed and edited by Ware, Daniel Worden examines the ways in which Ware casts comics reading as a humiliating and "vulgar" practice.[28] He points out that in his attempt to valorise comics, Ware romanticises white heterosexual masculinity, using the figure of the lonely, misunderstood male as part of his defence of the artistic value of the comics form. Worden writes:

> …the intersection of intimacy, shame, and gender melancholy provides an avenue for this anthology to make a case for the artistic merit of comics. However, in making an aesthetic case for comics, the anthology uses tropes common to masculinist modernism, such as the feminization of mass culture, a focus on "melodramas of beset manhood", and a romanticization of the straight, white male as the object of society's scorn.[29]

As Worden notes, Ware selects only single-author work for his edition of *McSweeney's*, establishing the auteur figure of the solitary cartoonist as the model for comics production. I suggest that Ware includes the practices of the collector in the category of artist or auteur: the lonely devotee of a neglected art form, appreciating ephemeral items rejected by mainstream culture. However, his representation of collectors in his work is equivocal, encompassing two quite different models of collecting. At times he appears to support the view of collecting as a narcissistic, fetishistic practice of the regressive adult, as described, for example,

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28   Daniel Worden, "The Shameful Art: McSweeney's Quarterly Concern, Comics, and the Politics of Affect." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006) 891.
29   Worden (2006) 894.

by Baudrillard in "The System of Collecting":

> …a correlation with sexuality can generally be demonstrated, so that the activity of collecting may be seen as a powerful mechanism of compensation during critical phases in a person's sexual development. Invariably it runs counter to active genital sexuality, though it should not be seen as a pure and simple substitute thereof, but rather a regression to the anal stage, manifested in such behaviour patterns as accumulation, ordering, aggressive retention and so forth.[30]

At other moments, however, Ware also upholds the view expressed by Kevin Melchione that collecting is an active, creative process of aesthetic decision making analogous to art. Melchionne argues that the "fog of Freudian jargon" that has typically surrounded discourses on collecting is fundamentally unhelpful. He claims that scavenging for objects is "an act of freedom, innovation, even dissent, which challenges reigning taste", and that the "form-appropriation" of a collection is "no less a giving shape to the world" than the making of new art objects.[31]

Both of these positions are evident in Ware's characterisation of Rusty Brown and his friend Chalky White, whom he represents with both empathy and cynicism. Both have numerous collections, although it appears thus far that their main interest is in twentieth-century action figures. It does not take a particularly astute critic to deduce that a man who collects toys might have feelings of nostalgia towards his childhood. What we see in Rusty Brown is a deeply delusional misremembering of what appears to have been a largely unhappy past. When Rusty's mother (with whom he still lives in middle age) throws away his collection of cereal packets, he sobs to his Kermit teddy, "Once, for a fleeting moment, we lived in the very cradle of beauty – but – they cast it all aside – and for what? For what? Couldn't they see?" (*Annual Report,* 15). In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart discusses miniatures, giants, souvenirs and collections, examining the ways in which these produce narratives of selfhood. She writes:

> The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination.[32]

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30   Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting", in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion, 1994) 7.
31   Kevin Melchionne, "Collecting as an Art" *Philosophy and Literature* 23.1 (April 1999) 150, 152, 154.
32   Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) 69.
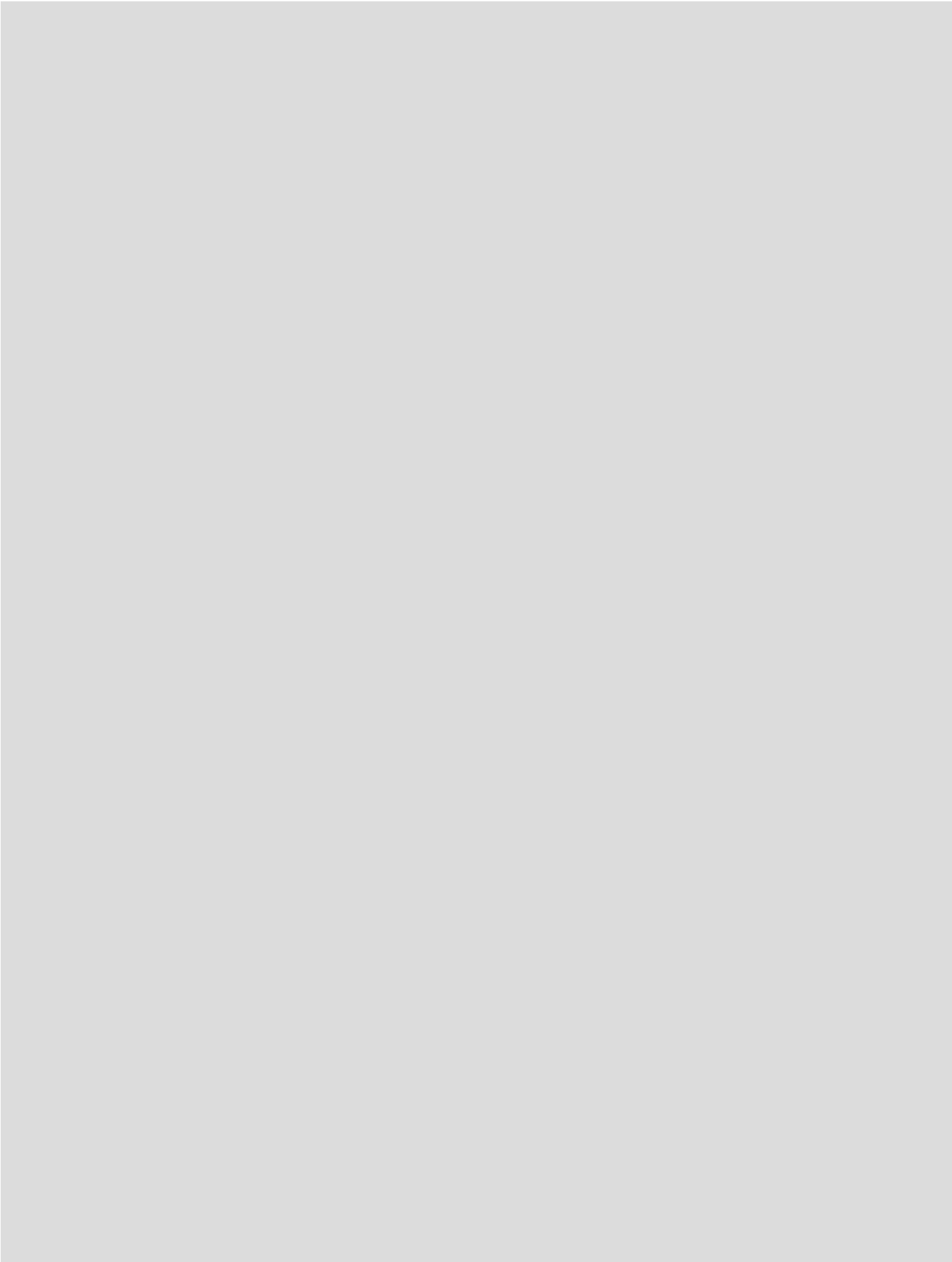
Figure 52.

Figure 52.

Ware had already established the interplay of miniatures and giants in *Jimmy Corrigan*: as we saw in Figures 49a-d the safe, "manipulatable" superhero doll mutates in Jimmy's nightmare into a monstrous and destructive father figure. In childhood, Rusty's Supergirl doll is his imaginary friend, the key to a fantasy world in which he has superpowers and does not get bullied by older boys who spit in his gloves. She is a fetish, a substitute for human companionship and real-world sexuality. She is safe and stable, a comfort in a threatening world. In adulthood, however, Rusty's fetishisation of his collection becomes something more disturbing. Where Chalky is reasonably relaxed about his collections, finding comfort in his family and his religion, Rusty's passion is all-consuming: he is a serious junkie whose emotional attachment to his collections dominates his life. Unlike Chalky, who looks out for desirable items for his friend, Rusty is vindictive, selling Chalky a fake Supergirl doll at great expense and destroying the "Colonial Warrior" doll that Chalky wants when he finds it at a flea market. His attachment to his collections is also unpredictable: at one point he lies in bed complaining, "I'm never gonna find a Looney Lemon" (*Annual Report,* 63) but when Chalky produces one it is too late: "I sold 'em all so I could concentrate on my "GI Joe" collection" (*Annual Report,* 85).[33]

The penultimate narrative of the adult Rusty Brown in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders* is particularly revealing of the dysfunctional masculinity of the collector (Figure 52). It appears that Rusty has been staying with the Whites for some time, as Candy sobs to Chalky, "I want him *out*…*sob*… I can't stand it any longer…". Chalky is far from a flawless model of adult masculinity, and there is more than a hint of mockery in Ware's depiction of his relentlessly positive Christian outlook, but he is at least a pleasant and supportive husband and father. Incapable of behaving like an adult guest, Rusty sits on the sofa stuffing his face with crisps and yelling obscenities at the television. More alarmingly, Mrs White goes on, "I- I don't like the way he looks at Brittany". For all Chalky's reassurance to his wife that such fears are "ridiculous", he later experiences the same discomfort when Rusty buys Brittany a naked, slightly dishevelled doll as a gift. The final image of Rusty kneeling outside the bathroom door, trying to stuff the doll underneath shows him as a monstrous baby, operating entirely outside the norms of social behaviour.

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33   These are presumably the original "GI Joe" dolls, not Ware's "GI Jim" featured elsewhere in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders*.

Even more than Jimmy Corrigan, who looks roughly the same from childhood to middle age, Rusty is stuck in the nightmare of his childhood. There is a sinister visual correspondence between the naked pink-skinned blonde doll with its inflated breasts and pinched waist, the clumsy blonde Brittany in her pink tracksuit, and the appalling, baby-like figure of the obese, near-naked adult man. The strip flags what we knew all along: Barbie-style dolls aimed at young girls are highly sexual figures, and have everything in common with the objects of adult male sexual fantasy.[34] As in Baudrillard's formulation, adult male collectors are thinly disguised babies, driven by an unrestrained id with little more than a flimsy veneer of civilised behaviour.

Jared Gardner, writing on Ben Katchor and Kim Deitch, notes the prominence of collecting as a theme in comics, and pays close attention to the tensions between text and image which he accurately identifies as fundamental to the comics form.[35] Gardner argues that the collection is "fundamentally an autobiographical narrative" (801) and suggests that collecting is analogous to reader participation in comics because for collectors, comic books "are not simply artefacts they own but texts they have helped to make meaningful" (800). As Gardner implies, comics collections differ from collections of other objects because through letters pages and other events such as comics conventions, fans of serial comics often played a part in the future of a particular title.[36] However, Gardner's argument does not account for the prominence of collections of other objects amongst comics writers and protagonists (Daniel Clowes' collection of trashy erotic fiction, Ware's sheet music, Rusty Brown's toys, Crumb's '78 records and so on). I suggest that the explanation lies in the comics form's intimate historical association with childhood, because childhood memory is one of the main ingredients in the longing that all collectors share.

Marilynn Gelfman Karp, herself an inveterate collector, wrote in her lavish and celebratory *In Flagrante Collecto*:

> Collecting is analogous to gastronomy; it's about savoring, ingesting, assimilating. What is collected is accretion; it becomes part of you, enhances your being…
> Collecting exists on the borders of memory and commerce, the spline of the private

34   Bild Lilli, the German doll on which Barbie was based, was originally marketed to adults. See Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York and London: Free Press, 2005) 187.
35   Jared Gardner, "Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006).
36   See Pustz (1999).

universe and the public world from which the object derives.[37]

This tension between public and private is central to the relationship between collecting and comics, both in Ware's work and in comics in general. As I have argued, Ware is particularly fond of appropriating public codes for private narratives. He tells intimately personal stories using a visual language derived from advertising, sign-writing and commercial logos. But even without Ware's distinctive style, alternative comics in general exist in a curiously liminal space between public and private, memory and commerce.

A comic book is a commercial product, but alternative comics have always existed on the borders of successful trade. Producers of self-published comics and fanzines often barely cover their costs, and even in well-established alternative comics it is rare to see anyone making much money.[38] Both Fantagraphics and Top Shelf have, within the past five or six years, been saved from near-bankrup013y by website postings in which they openly begged comics fans to buy their books. That such undisguised pleading works at all is a testament to the extraordinary loyalty that readers feel towards the producers and publishers of alternative comics, but that it is necessary remains rather worrying for the industry. A long way from the mainstream publishers whose comics are now largely subsidised by film and merchandising, alternative comics publishers seem to exist on the borders of capitalism, distributing work which is barely capable of sustaining itself financially. It is hardly surprising that so many are no longer in business.[39]

Comics collectors' markets, like sales of other types of collectables, exist in a commercial hinterland. Some comics, like some plastic dolls, change hands for large sums of money, but most are worth a few dollars, valuable primarily to those who, like Rusty, invest them with a significance that goes far beyond their sale value. Rusty and Chalky collect obscure, often unwanted objects, the detritus of consumer

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37   Marilynn Gelfman Karp, *In Flagrante Collecto: Caught in the Act of Collecting*. (New York: Abrams, 2006) 328.
38   *Wikipedia* describes a fanzine as "a non-professional publication produced by fans of a particular subject for the pleasure of others who share their interest", and stresses that these publications are generally sold at "a nominal cost to defray postage or production expenses". "Fanzine". *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 13th September 2008. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanzine> Parts of this argument were originally published as Emma Tinker, "Manuscript in Print: The Materiality of Alternative Comics". *Blackwell Literature Compass 4* (July 2007). <http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/literature/>
39   A list of comics publishers no longer in business can be found in *Wikipedia*: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Defunct_comics_and_manga_publishers>
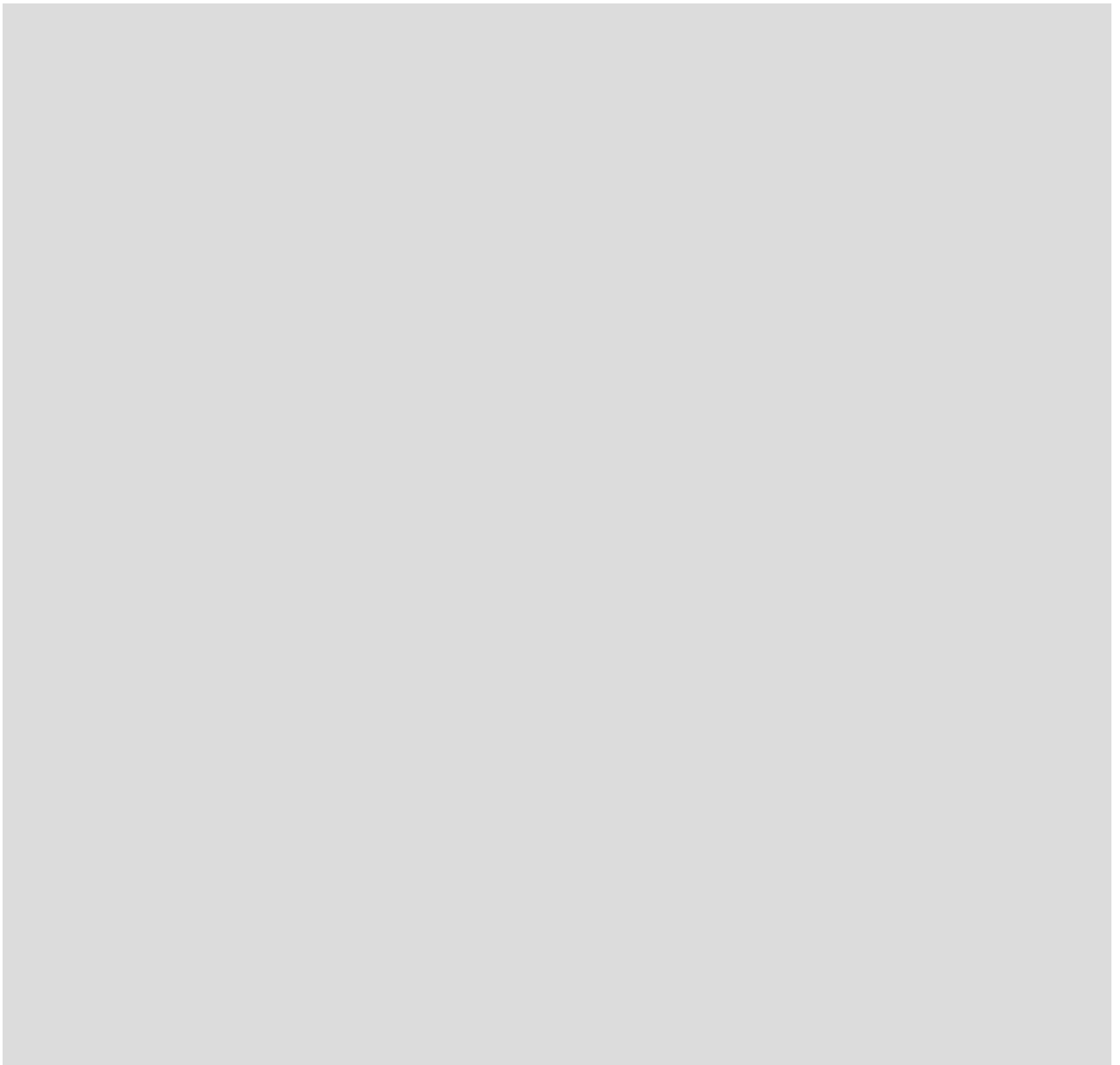
Figure 53.

culture, and place upon them a tremendous emotional value. As Karp says, Rusty's objects are ingested, assimilated, they become a part of him. When Chalky sells a box of Edison rolls to a man at a flea market (a man, incidentally, who looks very much like Ware) he describes him as a dope for paying $50, but as readers we are well aware that Chalky is equally likely to pay ridiculous amounts for what, to others, are worthless toys.

On the back cover of the paperback edition of *Jimmy Corrigan* there appears a twenty-three panel strip that tells the story not of Jimmy Corrigan the character but of copy number 58463 of the book, *Jimmy Corrigan* (Figure 53). The text is shown to have a life and a body of its own, with adventures, embarrassments and

disappointments analogous to the failures of Jimmy Corrigan himself. The book starts its journey "somewhere near Hong Kong". (The only way for Ware to produce a full-colour edition cheaply was to have the book manufactured in China, and indeed, as Bryan Appleyard points out, Chinese printing has played a significant role in the recent success of book-length comics).[40] On its arrival at "Barnes Ignoble" bookshop in the US, the book experiences the indignity of being excluded from the literature section and categorised as "a *graffik noh*vel… it's *kid's lit*…you know… superhero stuff… for *retards*!" As the bookshop manager explains to his innocent employee, the graphic novel section is "somewhere near science fiction and role-playing games I think…" Copy number 58463 listens anxiously as a potential buyer is directed towards a "rock band lyric book", which is included in the literature section. Unsold, copy 58463 ends up being thrown away, then rescued from homelessness and starvation by the author himself. In the final few panels the author is shown with a collection of similar happy-looking books, lamenting, "All my children… I love you so… but… I can't keep taking you *all* in by myself like this…"

There is, of course, a good deal of self-deprecating posturing in Ware's narrative, and as Worden argues it is hard not to feel that he revels in the traditionally low status of his chosen medium, in spite of the conspicuous literariness of his texts. Nevertheless, this narrative stresses the physicality of individual copies of the book: although they are mass produced and essentially identical, Ware implies that a different story could be told about each one. The content may not differ from one copy to another, but each has a physical body that can be lost, damaged, burnt, loaned or treasured by its owner. Ware's attitude recalls Walter Benjamin's observation that, for the book collector, "not only books, but also copies of books have their fates. And in this sense, the most important fate of a copy is its encounter with him, with his own collection".[41] However, Ware goes even further than Benjamin's collector in his implied relationship with the individual copy. Although *Jimmy Corrigan* is not autobiographical, there are many similarities between the author and his protagonist (the Chicago setting, the absent father, the morbidly low self-esteem) and Ware's attempt to endow the book itself with the same characteristics of misunderstood loner implies identification not only with

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40   Bryan Appleyard, "The Image-Soaked Future" *The Sunday Times,* 4th March 2007, 6.
41   Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library: A Talk About Book Collecting", in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) 61.

his narrative but with the paper, card, ink and glue of its body. In other words, the identity crises narrated within the comic are also imposed on the physical book itself.[42]

This attitude is borne out by Ware's unusual interest in the physicality of his texts. His books are lavishly designed and undoubtedly very beautiful. Although Ware does not seek to place his work in the European comics tradition like Doucet, his obsessive emphasis on style does point to a set of creative values rooted in a fine art tradition. When Gene Kannenberg wanted to talk about the exceptional level of craft and integration of typography and imagery in Ware's books, he brought in Johanna Drucker's definition of the artist's book, placing particular emphasis on her observation that the artist's book is "almost always self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form".[43] *Jimmy Corrigan* is still a very novelistic text, but like Ware's other work, it is contained within a book which is a meticulously designed object in its own right. There is something excessive about Ware's design, his compulsive filling of every square centimetre of available space. A note in the *Acme Novelty Datebook Vol. 1* quotes an art teacher's comment "your sketchbook is groaning with drawings" (110), and indeed all Ware's books seem to creak under the weight of proliferating text and images. He delights in non-standard publication formats: the dust jacket of the hardback edition of *Jimmy Corrigan* folds out into a poster, and there are two miniature comics tucked into a fold in the front cover of *McSweeney's*. Ware plays with the forms and conventions of the book: the cataloguing-in-publication data in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders* appears on page sixty eight, and the inside front cover of *Acme Novelty Library 16* features an insert common to school books, stating "This book is the property of…" followed by a list of names in a variety of juvenile hands. Plates included for the inscription of the owner's name are often attended by laconic remarks:

> This collection of personal sketchbook pages which were never intended to be seen by anyone yet are now clearly and cleanly reproduced for the keen eye and harsh judgement of pretty much any middle income wage earner in the western world belongs to: *(Datebook, 209).*

On the one hand, this carefully, sarcastically points at the ordinariness of a

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42   Worden makes a similar point about *McSweeney's*, saying that "[t]he book demands to share in its owner's identity, becoming a participant in defining the consumer". Worden (2006) 891.
43   Kannenberg (2001) 191.
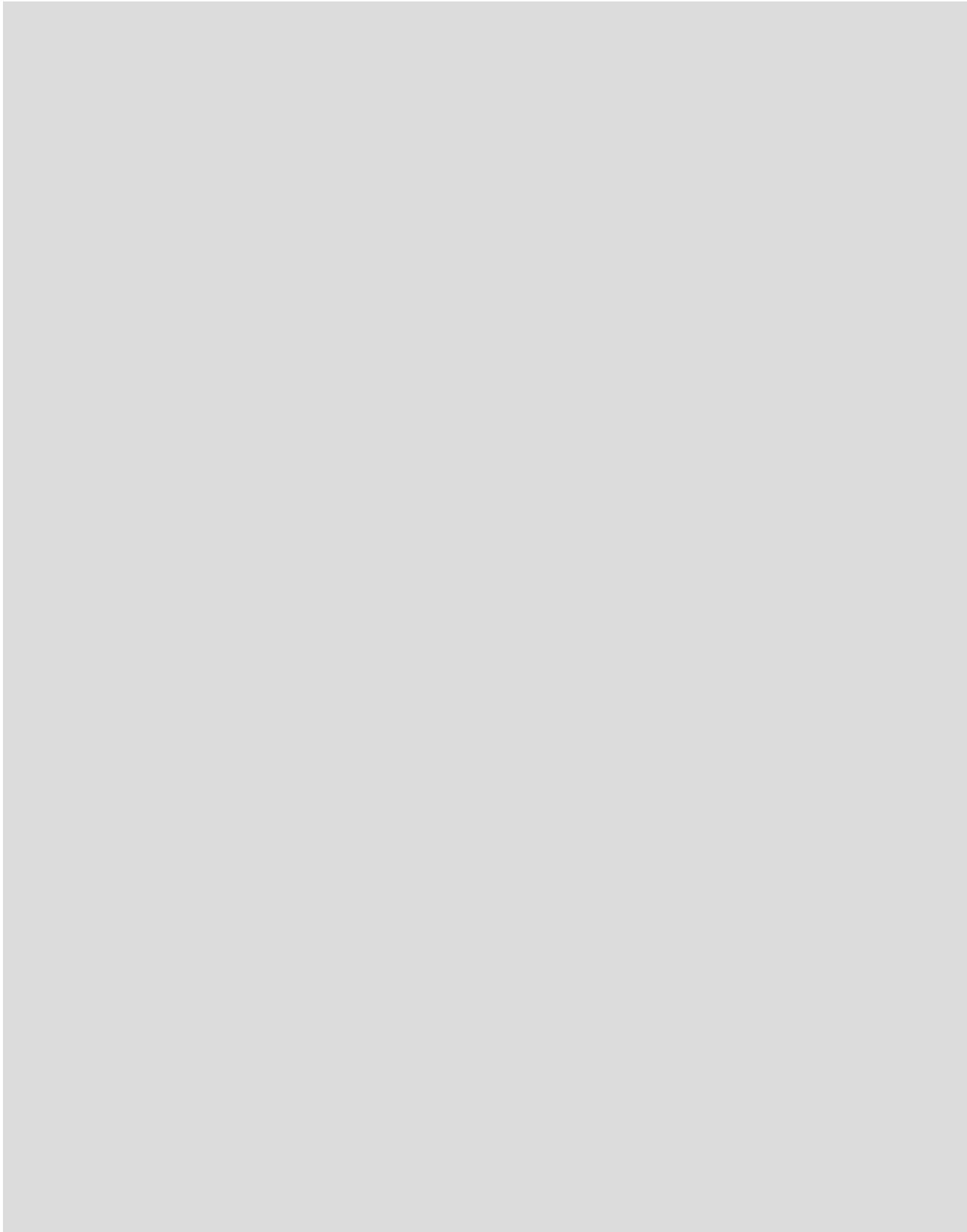
Figure 54.

reproduced book, as though in spite of its meticulous design, something is inevitably lost in the publication and widespread circulation of such private material. Yet at the same time, the plate encourages personalisation, inviting the owner to transform the copy back into a unique artefact with the addition of her name. Intensely personal, painstakingly handmade, yet reproduced: Ware's work hovers, like so many alternative comics, on the cusp of public and private.

There is some irony in Ware's attempts to claim a place in the margins of culture whilst producing such fine books. Exclusion from the aesthetic considerations of mainstream culture gave early comics an innocence that Ware's self-conscious, late modern books can never regain. A vast disjuncture can be seen between the shameful comics culture he describes and in which he claims to participate, and the fine art world in which his work actually exists. Ware's work is exhibited in Adam Baumgold Gallery in New York along with that of Julie Doucet and other comics artists such as Jules Feiffer, Renee French and Aline Kominsky Crumb. Ware's insistence on the low status of the comics form in the face of all evidence to the contrary is in itself a nostalgic act, an attempt to reclaim a lost past in which comics were marginal and therefore special, the private domain of an exclusive club of lonely male devotees. Ware is nostalgically trying to insist upon the marginalised status of the comics form even as he is destroying that status with his own work.

The world has changed since the beginning of Ware's career. Where Jimmy Corrigan was a tale of the 1990s, *Rusty Brown* exists in a post-9/11 America. Evangelical Christianity is a dominant political force, and the twentieth-century past for which Rusty and Chalky are nostalgic seems a long time ago. Opposite Figure 52 in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders*, there appears a single panel: a large, circular image of Rusty and Chalky in "Tales of Tomorrow" (Figure 54).[44] The "Tales of Tomorrow" strips usually show a solitary man in a world run by computers, but in this odd image, Rusty and Chalky walk through a devastated landscape of crushed buildings and abandoned cars, picking through debris amongst a discarded fridge and scattered household items. The pair are unshaven, their clothes tattered and dirty. Both wheel

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44   It would be misleading to suggest that this panel appears alone on the page. At the bottom there is a separate strip entitled "GI Jim" in which a tired, elderly member of the US Army Reserve is called up. Obviously this strip is to be read in the context of the main panel in which a "GI Jim" doll is found.

shopping trollies, to which they are umbilically attached by ropes around the waist. They scavenge for valuables, including collectable toys: a caption at the bottom describes Chalky's happy discovery: "Hey Rusty – check it out! A Kung Fu grip G.I. Jim – and it's in VG+ condition!" The ruins of two skyscrapers in the background underline the post-9/11 context, and Rusty trails a banner proclaiming, "Support Our Troops". Whatever disaster stripped the landscape, it seems to have happened a long time ago: a thin branch protrudes from the window of a crumpled house, and in the distance one figure chases another with a spear. With their shopping trolleys, the scavenging men are reminiscent of the nameless heroes of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

The image is a fantasy, depicting a scene that will never – one imagines – take place within the narrative of *Rusty Brown* as a whole. Nevertheless it is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it encapsulates the difference in tone between *Jimmy Corrigan* and *Rusty Brown*. Jimmy is sad, lonely and lacks social graces, but has many redeeming qualities. *Rusty Brown* is altogether darker, a tale from a more menacing world. But perhaps more importantly, it says something about the collection of apparently meaningless possessions in a culture ravaged by violence. Gardner quotes from Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* regarding his use of archival comics material after 9/11:

> The only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses to flood my eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers were old comic strips; vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of the 20th century. That they were made with so much skill and verve but never intended to last past they day they appeared in the newspaper gave them poignancy; they were just right for an end-of-the-world moment.[45]

Ware appears to suggest that there is something inherently poignant about the survival of the fragile, and particularly the survival of culturally innocent, popular art. It is the optimist Chalky who speaks, not the self-absorbed Rusty. Ware's tone is not without criticism, but in this image he seems to admire Chalky's ability to derive comfort from ephemera in the ruins of the American landscape. It is the very helplessness of ephemera, the pointlessness of their existence that appeals: perversely, their collection seems to take on greater urgency in a harsh and unpredictable climate. Like the lipstick that turned up after the liberation of Belsen, plastic toys bring a sad smudge of individuality to a frightening, unstable, post-apocalyptic world.

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45   Art Spiegelman, *In The Shadow of No Towers*, in Gardner (2006) 794.

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