

Introduction: Chris Ware and the “Cult of Difficulty”

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

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

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

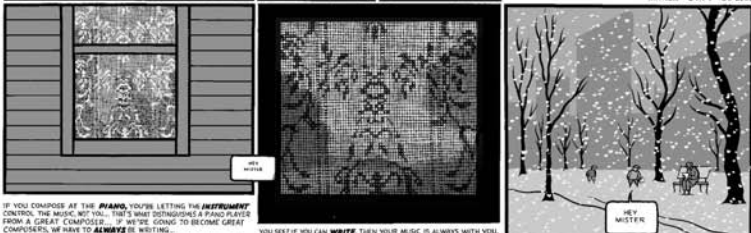
not alone; Ware's work has also been likened to the fiction of Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, John Barth, and the "high modernism of [Franz] Kafka."³ In interviews and critical essays, Ware himself has a decidedly literary bent, including references to Ernest Hemingway, Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Nabokov,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

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

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

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

SCOTT JOPLIN



IF YOU COMPOSE AT THE PIANO, YOU'RE LETTING THE INSTRUMENT CONTROL THE MUSIC, NOT YOU. THAT'S WHAT DISTINGUISHED A PIANO PLAYER FROM A GREAT COMPOSER. IF WE'RE GOING TO BECOME GREAT COMPOSERS, WE HAVE TO ALWAYS BE WRITING.

YOU SEE? IF YOU CAN WRITE, THEN YOUR MUSIC IS ALWAYS WITH YOU.

When Scott Joplin died in 1917, only a few dozen of his compositions had actually been seen printed, and as recently as 1951 hundreds of his original manuscripts (including a Piano Concerto and a Symphony) were reportedly in the hands of his heirs; though all works have since been lost, believed to have been disposed of as "worthless."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Life and Works

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

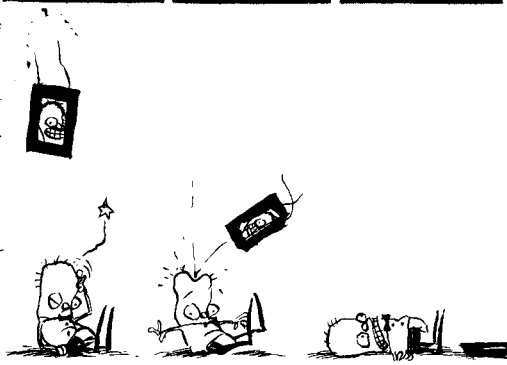
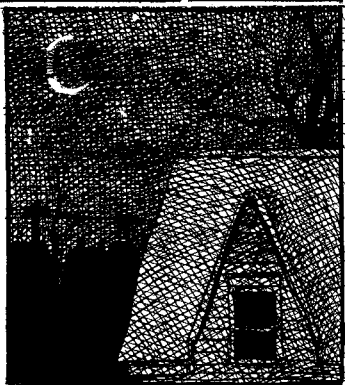
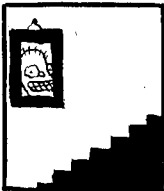
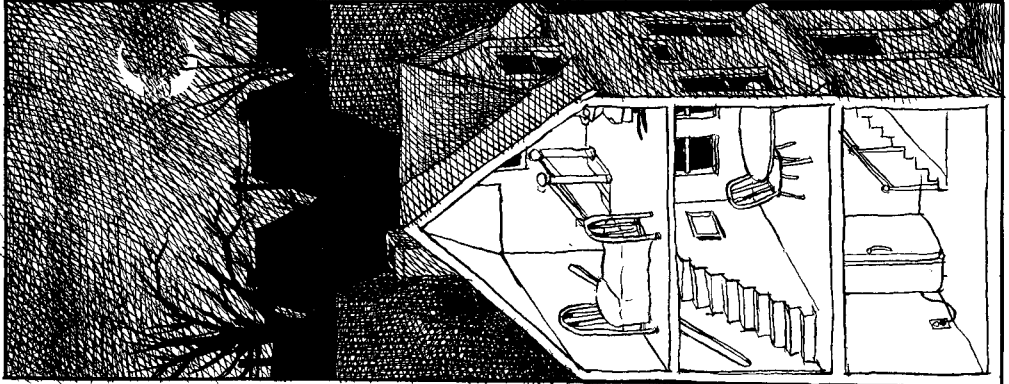
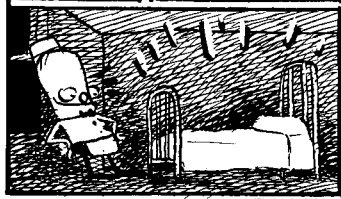
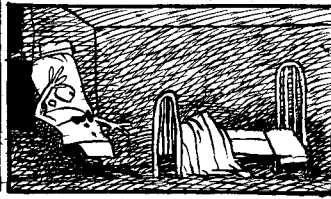
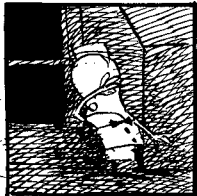
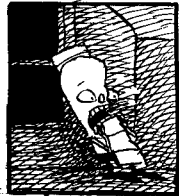
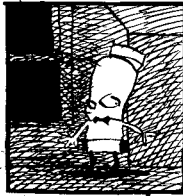
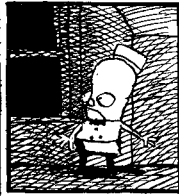
Ware first pursued formal training in the fine arts at University of Texas at Austin and began work as a cartoonist for the student paper. His first comic strips for the *Daily Texan* were published from 1987 to 1991, demonstrating an early interest in formal play with comics conventions. Characters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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Ware among the Critics

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

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

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

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

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

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

Critical Approaches to the Comics of Chris Ware

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

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

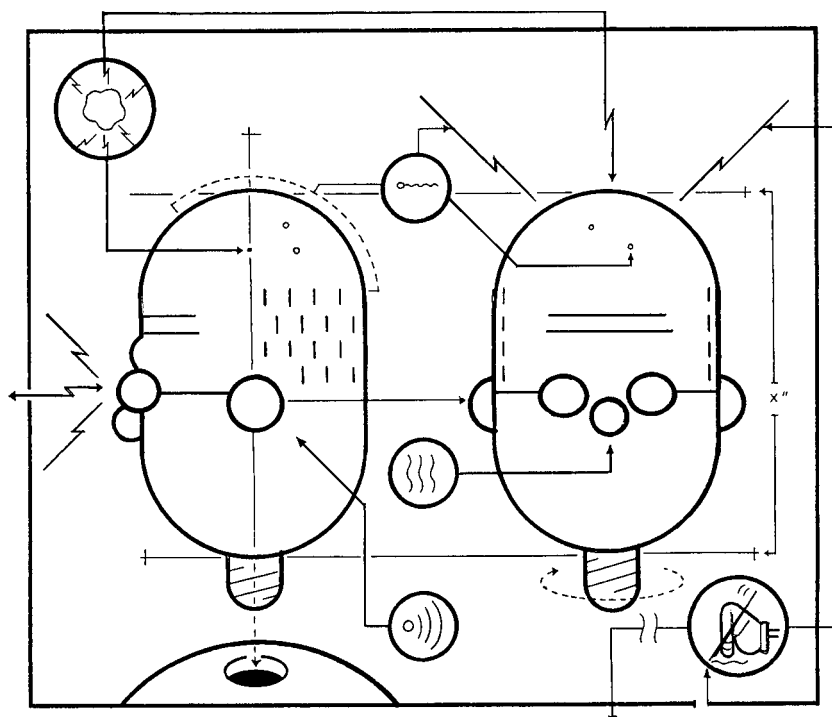
The three essays that comprise *Artistic Intersections* approach Ware’s comics from the perspectives of art history, comparative literature, and graphic design. Through her close reading of “Our History of Art,” Katherine Roeder studies how Ware’s comics version of art history reveals his fundamental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

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

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

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

Fig. 1.3. The complicated complexes of the artist.
Chris Ware, Self-Portrait,
2002.



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

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

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

Notes

1. Charles McGrath, "Not Funnies," *New York Times Magazine*, July 11, 2004, 24+.
2. Peter Schjeldahl, "Words and Pictures: Graphic Novels Come of Age," *New Yorker*, October 17, 2005, 162.
3. Myla Goldberg, "The Exquisite Strangeness and Estrangement of Renée French and Chris Ware," In *Give Our Regards to the Atom Smashers! Writers on Comics*, ed. Sean Howe (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 205; Brad Prager, "Modernism and the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *International Journal of Comic Art* 5.1 (2003): 195.
4. See Gary Groth's interview with Ware in the *Comics Journal* 200 (1997): 119–71. Ware also created a witty cover for the *Virginia Quarterly Review's* "Writers on Writers" special issue (fall 2006), which included a fanciful and encyclopedic tour of the history of literary influence, including such gems as "Johnson on Sterne," "Austen on Johnson," and "Coleridge on Opium." Ware also includes two Nabokov quotes as epigrams to his introduction to *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 13 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2004).
5. Dave Eggers and Ware are very much intellectual interlocutors: Eggers has written appreciatively of Ware in *Masters of American Comics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 309–16 and in the *New York Times* ("After Wham! Pow! Shazam!" November 26, 2000), and Ware has appeared multiple times in Eggers's ongoing *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, edited a comics anthology appearing as the thirteenth number of *McSweeney's*, and painted a mural on the façade of Eggers's Writers' Resource Center, 826 Valencia, in San Francisco.
6. See Ware's article "Philip Guston: A Cartoonist's Appreciation," *McSweeney's* 13: 85–91 and the second page of "Apologies, etc." (Omaha: Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, 2007), Ware's self-authored exhibition guide to his 2007 show at the University of Nebraska.
7. Ware created a curio cabinet inspired by Joseph Cornell; to view a photograph of his artwork, see Daniel Raeburn's book, *Chris Ware* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 50. Ware has in his living room "a shrine of sorts to honor Joseph Cornell and the unique, inventive, private life that Cornell shared through his art." See "Nobody Special: An IMP Special Report," *The Imp* 3 (1999): 16.
8. See the collaborative project "Lost Buildings," created by Chris Ware, Tim Samuelson, and Ira Glass. Published by *This American Life*, WBEZ Chicago, 2004.
9. Art Spiegelman, quoted in Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123 (2008): 460.
10. See Jan Baetens's article, "New = Old, Old = New: Digital and Other Comics following Scott McCloud and Chris Ware," January 1, 2001, and January 18, 2009. *Electronic Book Review*, January 1, 2001. <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/webarts/graphic> (accessed January 18, 2009). Even though Ware's comics may appear to be computer generated, Baetens argues that his artwork is actually more sophisticated than what McCloud predicts for the future of digital comics in *Reinventing Comics*.
11. The discrepancy between the amount of time it takes to read Ware's comics and the amount of time it takes to create them is staggering. In the article "Not Funnies," by McGrath, Ware describes working on a wordless comic: "It involved maybe 8 to 10 seconds of actual narrative time. But it took me three days to do it, 12 hours a day" (46).
12. Interview edited by Bill Kartalopoulos, "A RAW History," *Indy Magazine* (winter 2005). http://64.23.98.142/indy/winter_2005/raw_01/index.html (accessed January 18, 2009).

13. Groth interview, 128.
14. *Ibid.*, 127.
15. Chris Ware, "Richard McGuire and 'Here:' A Grateful Appreciation," *Comic Art* 8 (2006): 5–7.
16. Groth interview, 164; Todd Hignite, *In the Studio: Visits with Contemporary Cartoonists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 238.
17. John Carlin, Introduction to *Masters of American Comics*, ed. John Carlin, Paul Karasik, and Brian Walker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 162.
18. Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2007), 353.
19. See Raeburn, *Chris Ware*; and Hignite, *In the Studio*.
20. McGrath, "Not Funnies," 26; Chute, "Comics as Literature?" 459; Peter Schjeldahl, "Do It Yourself: Biennial Follies at the Whitney," *New Yorker*, March 25, 2002; and Carlin, Introduction, 163.
21. Chris Ware, "Apologies, Etc." (Omaha: Sheldon Memorial Gallery, 2007), n.p.
22. Interview with Chris Ware conducted by the *New Yorker*, archived at the "ACME Novelty Archive" Web site. http://www.acmenoveltyarchive.org/media/audio/Ware_NewYorker_061127.mp3 (accessed June 26, 2008).
23. Most notable among this disavowed early work is Ware's science fiction satire *Floyd Farland: Citizen of the Future* (Forestville, CA: Eclipse Books, 1987), now out of print.
24. Groth interview, 128; Kartalopoulos, "A RAW History."
25. See vol. 2, no. 2, 1990, redrawn and reprinted in *ACME Novelty Library* 3: 20–21.
26. See vol. 2, no. 3, 1991, reprinted in *Quimby the Mouse*, 39–41.
27. George Herriman, *Krazy and Ignatz*, 8 vols. to date (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2000–present); Frank King, *Walt and Skeezix*, 3 vols. to date (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2005–present).
28. Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 353–54; Hignite, *In the Studio*, 238.
29. McGrath, "Not Funnies," 26.
30. Groth interview, 119.
31. Gene Kannenberg Jr., "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image, and Visual Narrative Strategies," In *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 175.
32. Kannenberg, "The Comics of Chris Ware," 195.
33. See Jan Baetens, "New = Old, Old = New," and his essay "Comic strips and constrained writing," *Image & Narrative* (October 2003). http://www.imageandnarrative.be/graphicnovel/janbaetens_constrained.htm (accessed January 18, 2009).
34. Thomas A. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 885.
35. Prager, "Modernism and the Contemporary Graphic Novel," 205.
36. Goldberg, "The Exquisite Strangeness," 205.
37. Daniel Worden, "The Shameful Art: *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, Comics, and the Politics of Affect," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 894.
38. Raeburn, *Chris Ware*, 23.
39. *Ibid.*, 25.
40. Chris Ware, quoted in Daniel Raeburn, "The Smartest Cartoonist on Earth," *The Imp* 1.3 (1999): 9.
41. Marianne Hirsch, "Editor's Column: Collateral Damage," *PMLA* 119 (2004): 1212.