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4th ISSUE VOLUME 3

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The Cheer-Up Book FOR THIS SEASON'S COLDEST MONTH

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SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ISSUE

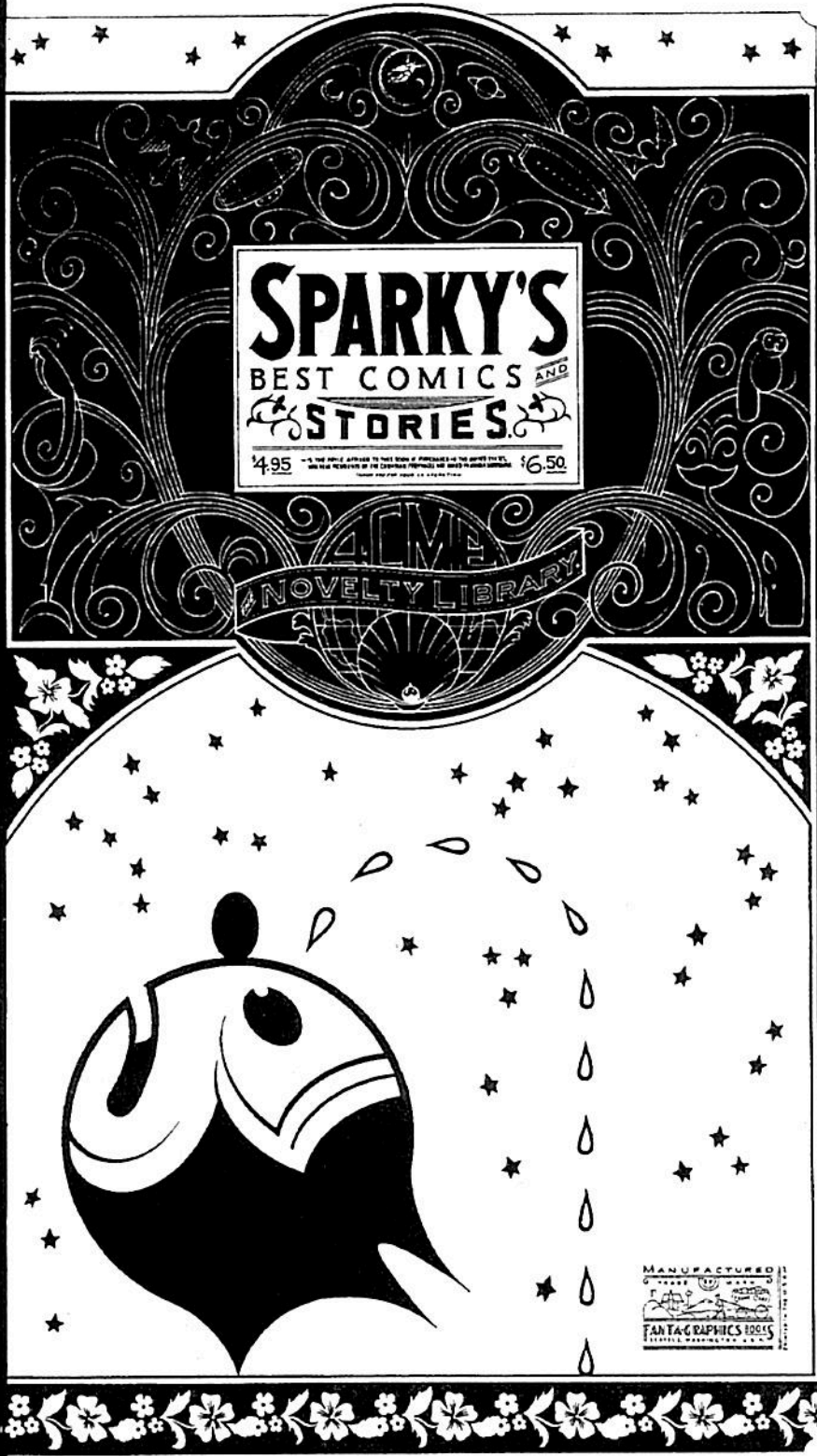
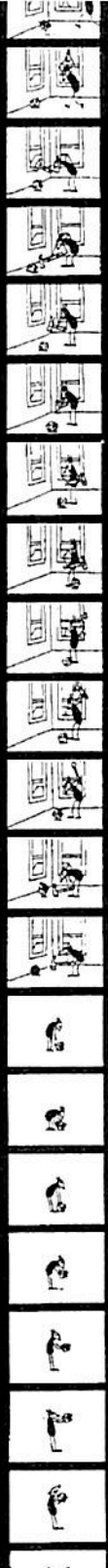
- THE STORY OF SPARKY™ CAT. A MINIATURE SPARKY COMIC BOOK, PRESLETTERS & PAPER-FOLDING ACTIVITY.
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TO THE LINGERING SPARKLE OF AN EDDING AFTERNOON GAZING



Cover of *Sparky's Best Comics and Stories* from the ACME Novelty Library, fourth Issue, Volume 3, Winter 1994-95.

chris ware

has created stylistically unique and intellectually stimulating contemporary work drawing comics under the name ACME Novelty Library. He has forged his own singular signature on the formal and contextual territory of the medium. Ware was born in 1967, raised in Nebraska and got his start in comics while attending the University of Texas in Austin. In 1987, Art Spiegelman invited him to contribute to RAW magazine. He moved to Chicago in 1991 and continued to draw his peculiar comics for the alternative weekly paper New City, where he is currently a mainstay. He graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago with a degree in printmaking.

Fantagraphics (Seattle) has published eight issues of his series in a variety of formats, ranging from a digest-sized black and white edition to a full-color 11 x 18-inch version. These include Quimby the Mouse, Sparky's Best Comics and Stories, The ACME Novelty Book of Jokes, as well as five issues featuring "Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth."

In addition to artwork, Ware uses written material extensively such as satirical articles from the "newsletter" of the fictitious ACME Novelty Library, letters from his readers with his replies and mock advertisements. Much of the text is set in barely readable type. Even his humblest of copyright notices are written in a meticulously crafted style reminiscent of popular turn-of-the-century catalogs and magazines. Suggestive of a comforting antique innocence, upon further examination they reveal caustic, subversive parodies that are hysterically funny. His meticulous hand-lettering and graphic design have given him additional acclaim. He also hand crafts objects such as the ACME Book Dispenser, a wooden vending machine that releases tiny comic books in exchange for house keys, Quimbies the Dancing Mouse, his two-headed mechanized mouse contraption and Sparky the Singing Cat, a box powered by a crank handle in which a stitched black cat face contorts as it sings goodbye to its grandmother.

Ware has received critical praise from the popular press to the art world. The cartoon industry presented him with ten Harvey and Eisner Awards between 1995 and 1996. He has illustrated several book, magazine and CD covers, but spends most of his time and energy on the ACME Novelty Library.

ANDREA JUNO: You hold such a unique spot in the world of cartooning because you've created your own form, unlike any other cartoonist that I've seen.

CHRIS WARE: I've tried to avoid all genres. I don't understand why more people don't do this. Instead, they seem to want to "fit" their work into a certain genre, like detective fiction, fantasy or romance. Doing that, it seems to me, immediately limits the possibility for creating a real sense of life.

AJ: As well as being very complex and multifaceted, your work contains critiques about popular culture. Yet, you never directly refer to it.

CW: If there ever is any so-called contemporary critique, I try to put it into the stories unconsciously. In the stories, I might exaggerate the ridiculous architectural spaces we have to live in now like apartments and shopping centers. But I don't want to do rants about "our shitty culture." Robert Crumb and Dan Clowes are both such amazing, articulate ranters, I would never want to try to get into the ring. Besides, I like to keep the work non-confrontational.

AJ: There's a subtle comment on the barrenness of the world. It's never directly stated; it's hardly dogmatic.

CW: Gee, that's nice. I appreciate it. I got a letter from a really angry man who said I had no right to critique architecture since I had no background in its history. I hate that kind of attitude.

AJ: I read that letter [letters and his responses are an integral part of Ware's comic books]. I thought you made it up. So, that's a real letter?

CW: Oh, all my letters are real.

AJ: No?!

Artists like myself are all *trying* to tell potent stories with the tools of jokes. It's as though we're trying to write a powerful, deeply engaging, richly detailed epic with a series of limericks.



Chris Ware standing in front of Quimby's Queer Store in Chicago for which he designed the signage.

Comic strips are like music notes on paper. When you read them you "hear" things in your mind, the same way you "hear" rhythms when you read prose. Sounds and sensations are vaguely called up by the drawings themselves.

CW: Of course. I've never made up a letter.

AJ: I'm so surprised!

CW: Really?

AJ: This one from Dawn is real? She says, "I'm 15. I'm interested in a lot of different things: Andy Warhol, Gothic, Punk hair dye, toys, oppression of any kind (slavery, holocaust, etc.), Vinyl clothes just to name a few. I had blue hair for a year but now it's bleached. I have one friend, his name is Robert."

CW: That letter was written with a felt-tip marker on rainbow stationery. It was so "perfect," I suspected it might be a joke letter. I respond personally to people who write letters months before the issue comes out. For lack of anything better to do in that particular issue, I just decided to adopt a sort of unpleasant editorial stance.

AJ: Some of your responses can make me laugh hysterically. To Dawn, you wrote: "Obviously, from your brief list of 'interests' you have little in the way of imagination, yet you insist on maintaining an over-developed sense of your own self-importance." Why such a scathing response?

CW: I was imitating what some of my teachers told me in graduate school. I guess it's just a sick move on my part. I want to "get back" at my teachers, I guess. It's really childish. I'm sure in ten years I'll be embarrassed by it.

AJ: What about the irate one where the headline says: "Special note for Large Record Companies and Radio Stations" and you go into a scathing warning about using your copyrighted work ["The contents of this publication are created and licensed according to common copyright law and as such are not intended to be utilized in conjunction with the promotion of any unauthorized product, organization, or loathesome little musical skit, regardless of whether or not you think our company and its many shrewd observers are not savvy to more 'mainstream' cultural activities and thus would not be aware of our stories and happy pictures being swiped solely to promote your puerile trash."]

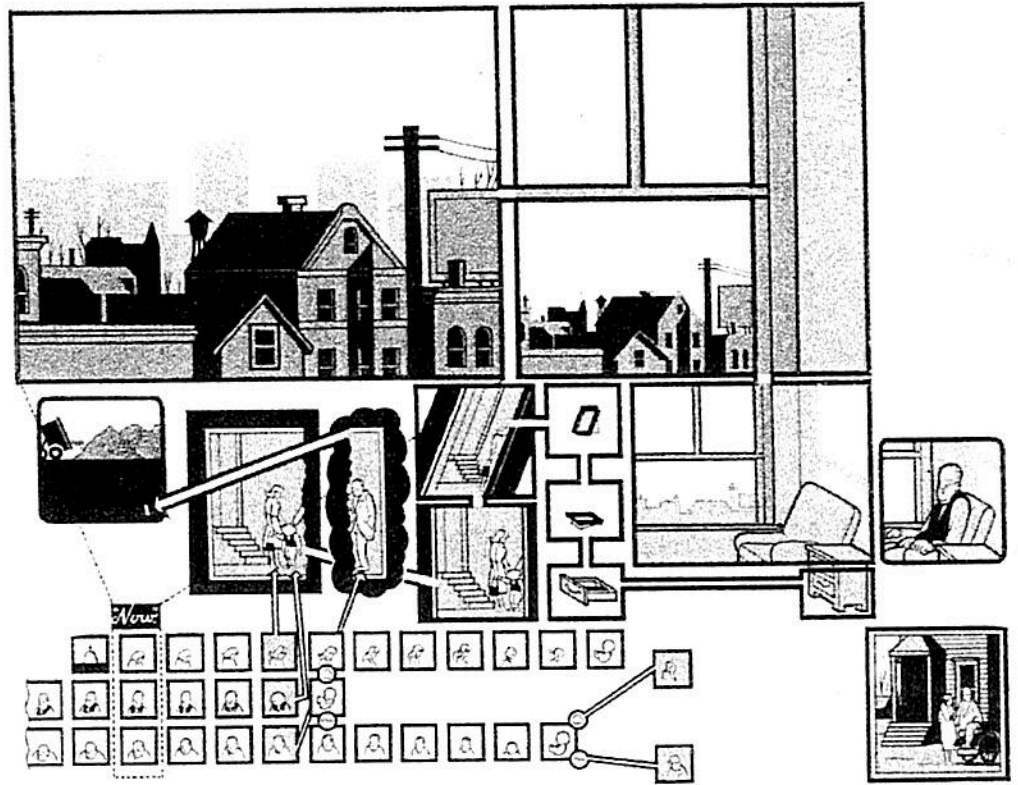
CW: That stemmed from a "right to review" contract MTV sent me. They contacted me as they contact seemingly every other alternative cartoonist. They wanted to "develop" my stuff into whatever they think they

can, you know, force down people's throats.

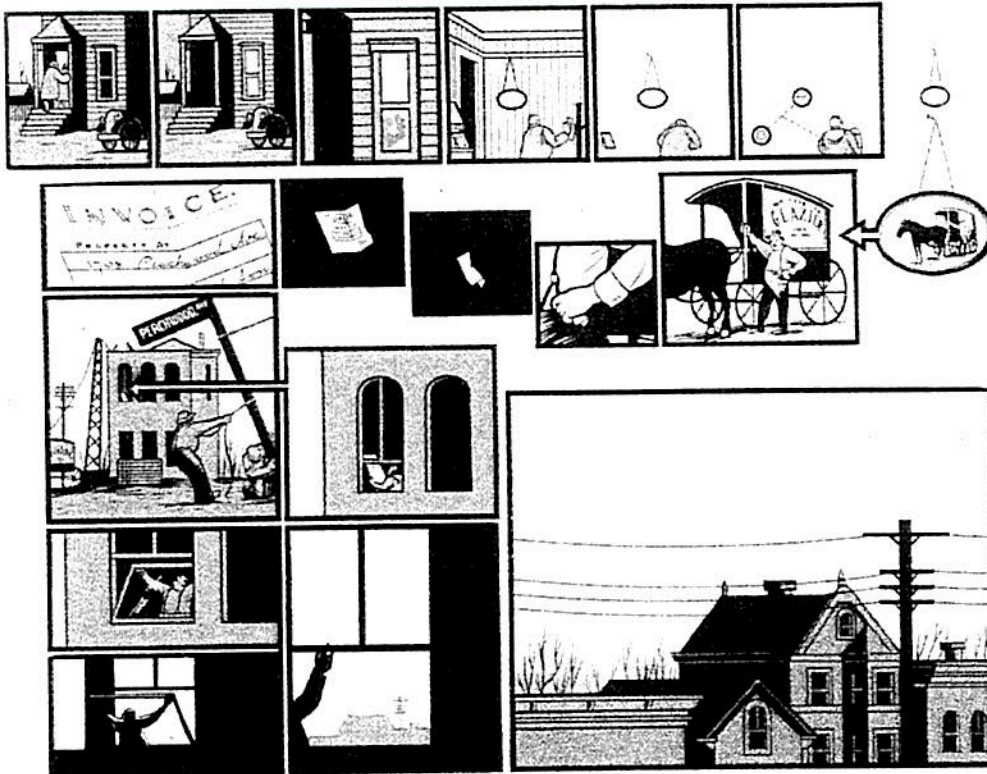
I know other cartoonists who have gone through this for years, but it was new to me. They wanted copies of all my comics, and when I sent them, I was supposed to also send along this contract. Signed. The contract said if MTV were to do anything "similar or identical"—that's their wording—over the next ten years, I promised not to sue them. It essentially gave them the rights to use anything of mine, anytime they wanted, for whatever purpose, and I would have no legal recourse. Which is astounding. I guess people are just ready to do that—"right on, go right ahead, please"—you know.

AJ: They have stardust in their eyes because it's TV, film or record companies calling, and they allow themselves to get screwed. Didn't you have a problem with Warner Brothers?

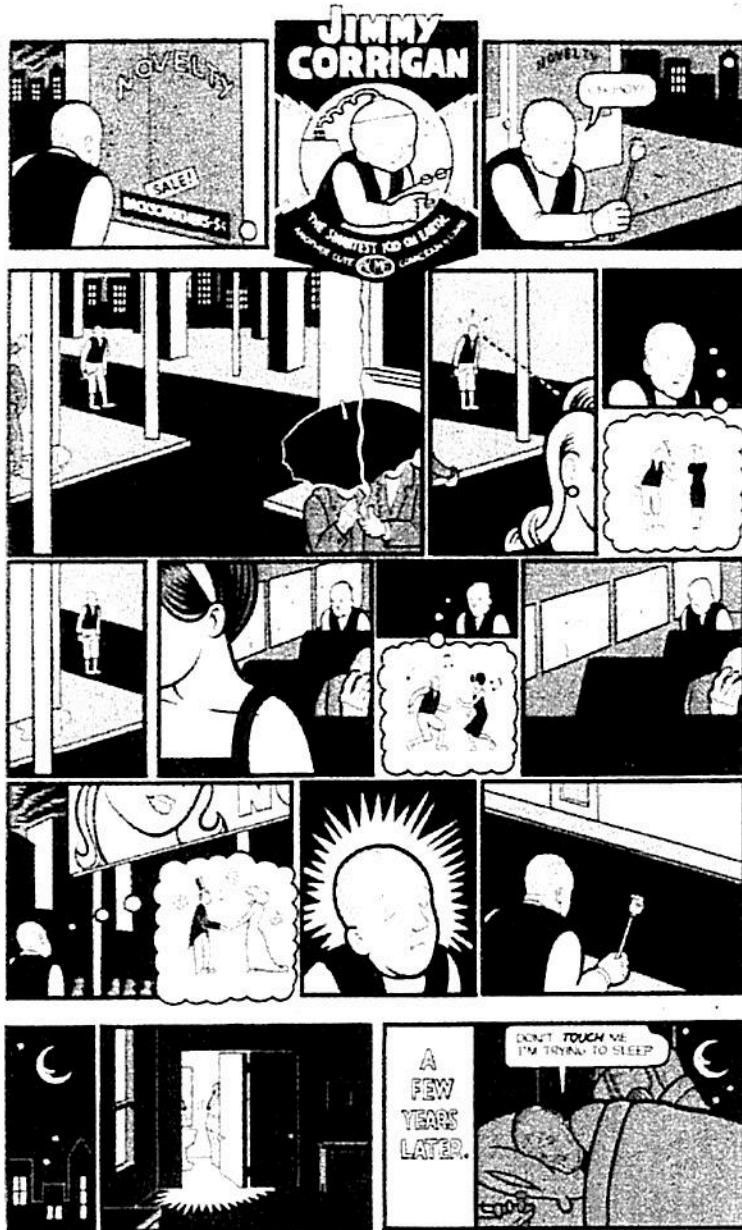
CW: A Fantagraphics employee happened to be in Australia. He bought this record, opened it up, and realized, "That's Chris Ware's stuff." Warner Brothers scanned in the back cover of my third issue and used it on a compilation CD which was only distributed in New Zealand. But, because there's a lot of weird international laws, they got away with it. So the only way I could vent my spleen was to write a dumb attack on them in my comic book which they'll never see anyway.



© Chris Ware



Two pages from *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* from ACME Novelty Library Volume 6, Issue 5, Spring 1995.



Page from *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* from ACME Novelty Library Issue No. 1, Winter 1993-4.

AJ: It's outrageous that they couldn't pay you properly when they're loaded. You're probably not making much money, are you?

CW: No. I have actually started to become comfortable only recently. Two and a half years ago, when I was interviewed by the *Chicago Tribune*, I told the reporter I had ten dollars in my bank account. Fortunately, I'm not in that situation now. Unless you take the MTV-Nickelodeon route, you're not going to make money in this field. But why would anyone take the MTV-Nickelodeon route? When you devote your life to possessing a certain amount of freedom, no one can buy that. "Product developers" think they can buy the rights to a character, but they're really trying to buy the rights to the freedom that you give yourself. And that's impossible.

AJ: Your work is extremely elaborate and detailed; it looks very labor-intensive. Do you draw it all by hand or do you work on a computer?

CW: I don't have a computer. My strip appears in a newspaper so I use their computers to do the typesetting.

AJ: What newspaper?

CW: It's called *New City*, optimistically enough. It comes out weekly here, in Chicago. They've been very generous, printing my work in color for almost five years now. As well, they give me an amazing amount of space—almost a full page—which no other weekly paper apparently is willing to give any cartoonist, as far as I know. I'm very lucky. And they allow me to use their computers when there's no one in the office.

AJ: Your type comes from a computer? It looks exactly like it was typeset by the old metal type of machine used before the '60s.

CW: Nope. It's all on computer, and it's actually rife with error. I get letters from experienced typesetters who point out that I've ignored ligatures. The complaints come in these beautifully typeset letters, and I think, "Oh God, I need to work on this." Anyway, most of the interior text is typeset, and the covers are done with hand-lettering.

AJ: You mentioned that you taught comics?

CW: I actually taught a class once, and it was a miserable experience. I could ruin a whole room full of hopeful students in an hour. I'm a terrible teacher, first of all. I didn't know what to tell them. They all wanted to draw *The X-Men*, and of course I tried to get them all to be little self-revealing, confessional artists. Halfway through the semester, though, I realized I should just be grateful these kids wanted to draw anything, even if it was men in tights. I was doing the same thing I had hated all my art school teachers for doing—trying to change my thinking. Teaching just ended up being a disaster, and I'd never ever do it again. I'd just as soon shuffle paper or cap bottles for a living.

AJ: What kind of student were you?

CW: As a kid, I got in trouble. Teachers wrote letters—"Chris draws too much; he needs to pay attention." I was a "problem child." I punched kids. According to my mom, I apparently used to get up in the middle of class and hit them. Then I'd sit back down and I wouldn't shut up.

My first grade teacher, through "positive reinforcement," basically got me to curb my terrible behavior. When I didn't get up and punch someone, she rewarded me with gold stars. When I earned a week's worth of gold stars, she'd give me a gift, which usually had something to do with art. After about six months of this treatment, I was more or less cured. I remember even at that point having enough self-awareness to be grateful to her; when I was in second grade, my mom remarried and that same first grade teacher was the only person I wanted to invite to the wedding.

AJ: And did that set you on your artistic path?

CW: I drew, but I didn't think, "I want to be an artist." Every kid draws when they're that age; it's just considered a normal activity. Only later does it become definable as an activity or then—*gasp*—even worse, a career.

AJ: Were comics at all important to you?

CW: I didn't really like reading comics. I just liked looking at them, and fantasizing about being big and muscular and acquiring super powers, running around with women dressed in tights. When *Batman* became a TV show, it was the ultimate thrill for me to be able to see it in real time. I took it deadly seriously. I didn't have any idea it was a satire. I really preferred watching it on television and dressing up and all that hoohaw. That's all embarrassing stuff, so—

AJ: Did you see any underground work?

CW: Later on, I did. When I quit going to private high school, I started going to public school, hanging out with kids who were smoking a lot of pot and going, "Hey man, you ever seen a *Zap Comix*?" By this time, I was a real dork. I couldn't play basketball or do any sports, so I got picked on a lot. The typical cartoonist. I'm sure everyone you talk to is going to tell you they were chronic nose pickers and that they got beat up.

AJ: Sure, everyone I know.

CW: Yeah, we'll show 'em. [laughs]

I was into the whole '60s culture-smoking-pot-after-school scene. After I saw some undergrounds, I tried to draw this sort of "nostalgic" hippie-looking stuff.

AJ: But weren't you born in 1967?

CW: Yes.

AJ: So you were into hippie culture during the '70s?

CW: Actually, this would have been in 1981 or '82. I did dumb things. I started losing control of my vocabulary. I smoked pot every day, and tried to draw these '60s comics, like Crumb's. I thought, "Oh man, if it was only the '60s again, everything would be so cool."

AJ: Did you do graduate work at the Art Institute of Chicago?

CW: Most of it. I didn't finish up the classes.

AJ: So you don't have a graduate degree.

CW: No, I don't have a graduate degree, much to the chagrin of my mother who would like me to get my degree.

AJ: What does your mother do, by the way?

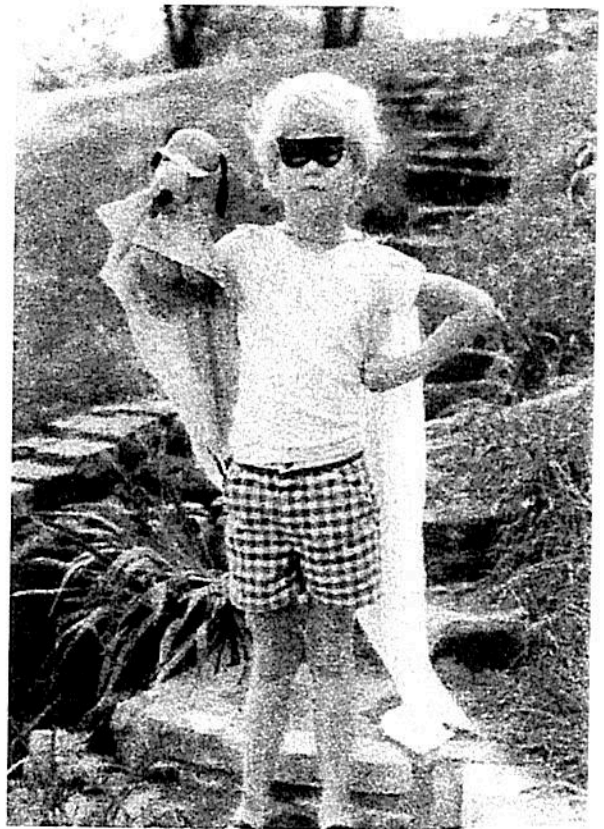
CW: For many years, she was a newspaper reporter and editor for the *Omaha World-Herald*. She worked very, very hard. Because she has perfect diction, grammar and spelling, I sometimes get nervous talking to her. She'll throw some new word out at me, and I'll say, "What does that mean, Mom?" She'll say, "Look it up." She actually proofread a couple of my issues.

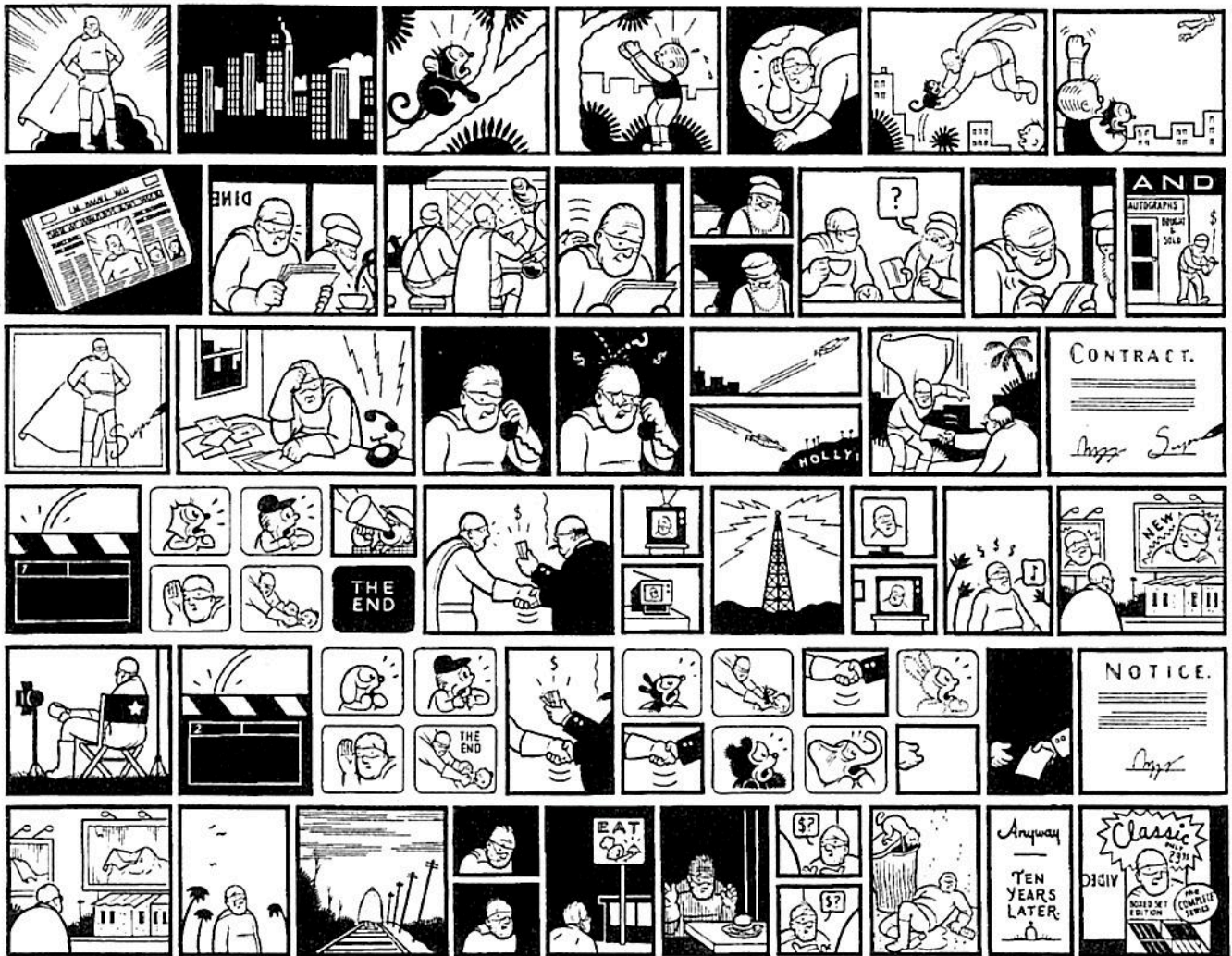
AJ: Was she shocked?

CW: No. She's never been anything but supportive to me. I really admire her. She's one of the smartest people I know. Pretty funny too. She'll curse like a sailor; she picked that up from working in the old newsrooms. When I came home from school, I used to call her up at work. I heard typewriters in the background—it sounded like a movie set.

AJ: Did you go visit her?

Ware at age 7.





© Chris Ware

Page from the ACME Novelty Library's Book of Jokes, Volume VII, Issue VII, Summer 1996.

CW: I went there all the time, and watched the guys airbrush photographs and draw cartoons. When I was a kid in the '70s, newspapers were still using local cartoonists. Most of them don't do that anymore; now it's pretty much all syndicated material. For this same paper, my grandfather was a sportswriter in the '20s, and eventually became the managing editor so there's always been newspapering in the family.

AJ: Do you still have a good relationship with your mother?

CW: We talk twice a week. She's only expressed doubt about my work once, saying, "Everyone's going to think I'm a bitch." I told her the strip wasn't about her. If it was, I'd be Jimmy Corrigan, and you can't think I'm like him. Recently, she actually paid me the highest compliment I've ever gotten. She said when she read my most recent issue, she was laughing really hard, enjoying it, and then all of a sudden she stopped and realized I had written it. She'd completely forgotten I wrote it. Which is pretty darn nice.

AJ: Was she always encouraging?

CW: She never tried to force me to do anything I didn't want to do. She tried to guide me to where I wanted to be. I don't think I could have been better off. Without a doubt.

AJ: There's almost no women characters in your work.

CW: Yes, I know. I wonder about that.

AJ: Not that I think it has anything to do with your mother.

CW: There are women in my earlier work. I've done many stories about my grandmother, who was a pretty amazing person.

AJ: Did you grow up with your father or stepfather?

CW: I never really "met" my father. He came to the house once when I was a kid. I sensed something weird was going on, and took off to the next door neighbor's house. My mom remarried when I was in second grade, was married for a few years, got divorced again. Now she's remarried again.

AJ: And what was the second husband like?

CW: He was sort of odd, but her new husband's great. They've been married fourteen years.

AJ: Was that marriage after you left home?

CW: No. I was still living at home. We moved to Texas soon thereafter because of a job my stepfather had taken.

AJ: I ask because the theme of fathers and men, as pretty depressing and oppressing characters, is prevalent in your work. Are you aware of working your past into your work?

CW: It seems pretty apparent to me. "Never met my dad." I only have a vague idea what I'm going to write about when I start a comic strip. It seems a common thing—your background influences the content of work. There's a great quote from Vladimir Nabokov, something he said when he was teaching *Madame Bovary*: "There are three things that go into the formation of a human being. Heredity, environment and the unknown agent X."

AJ: In your work, there's an immersion in a male world of loneliness, inner sexuality, numbness, deadness. There's also a cruel super hero who appears every once in a while and has a sadistic side, almost a pot-bellied Captain Marvel.

CW: I don't know what to say about that. That's a sort of dad character, I guess. It seems such an obvious metaphor.

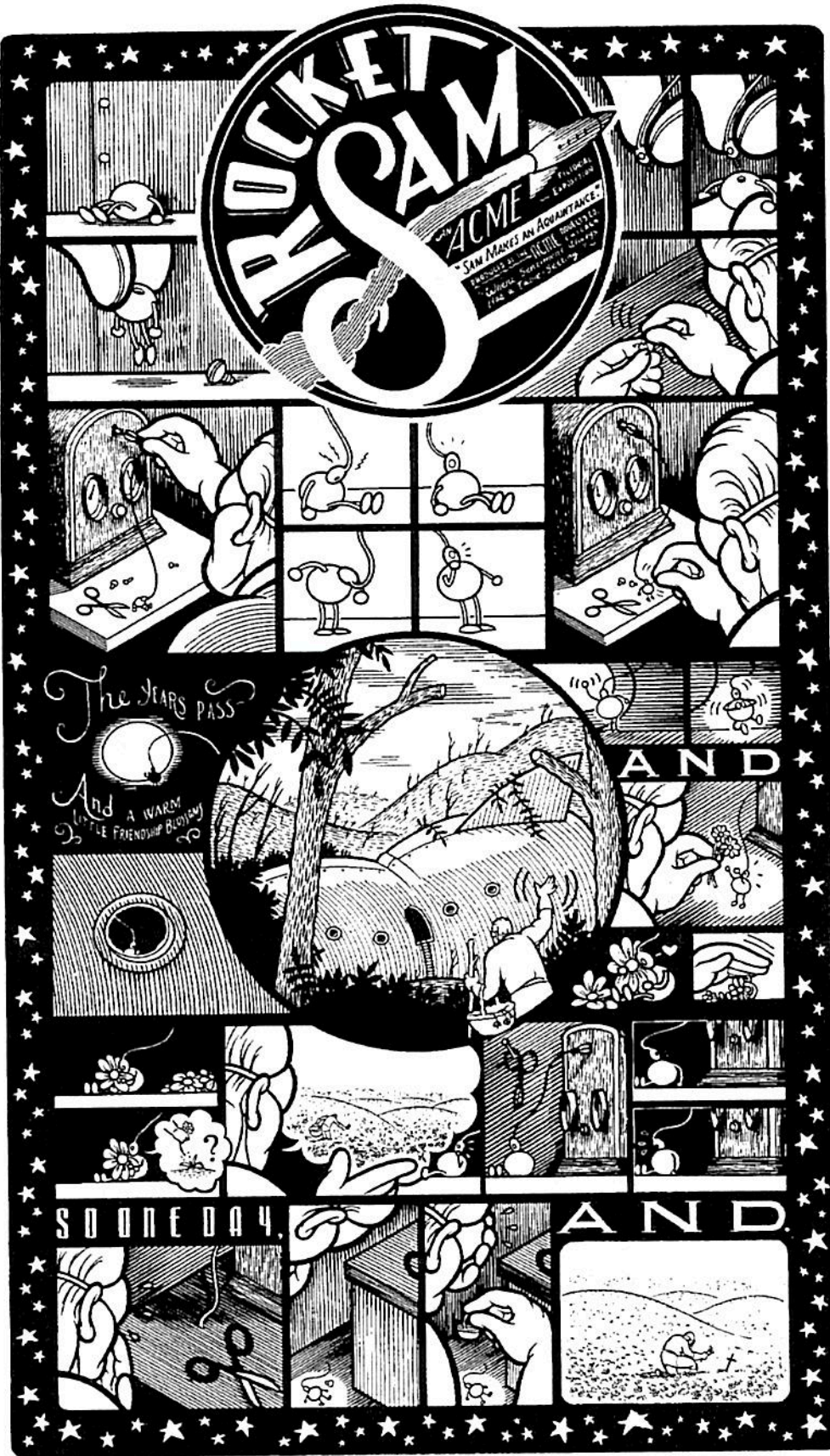
AJ: How did you move from being a typical stoner kid to a constructive artist?

CW: When I was around 17 or 18, and trying to go to college, I tossed aside my previous life entirely and was ready to start anew. I naïvely decided that America had no culture. A few years later, I realized we have one of the *weirdest* cultures ever. We have these incredibly obvious metaphors. Superman and Mickey Mouse are ripe for the picking. If you treat comics as a visual language and trace their origins, they point back, essentially, to racism. In the early 19th century, there was an artist named Rodolphe Töpffer. It could be argued that he was one of the first Europeans to come up with some sort of system of picture writing. Apparently, Goethe, on his deathbed, was all excited about Töpffer's drawings. His work grew out of his studies of

It's just my own completely unjustifiable taste, but for the most part I think youth culture is embarrassing. It's garbage. Now it's infected modern filmmaking—a movie these days is filled with dialogue such as, "Oh yeah, man, I came on her face."

Panel from the *ACME Novelty Library's Book of Jokes*, Volume VII, Issue VII, Summer 1996.





"Sam Makes an Acquaintance"
from the ACME Novelty Library's
Book of Jokes, Volume VII, Issue
VII, Summer 1996.

phrenology [the study of bumps on the head], and his interest in face shape and racial type [see pages 28–31].

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

AJ: What about Mickey?

CW: What is he doing with white gloves? Gee, I wonder where that comes from. [laughs sarcastically] The simplification of the face comes out of an effort to distill a particular identity down to a few simple features, and that includes racial identity. It’s creepy when you think about it.

AJ: Cartoons probably do transmit social myths and fears, though they’re also transmitting hopes for social change or other attitudes.

CW: Almost every teacher I encountered at the Art Institute of Chicago was desperately trying to get everyone to codify their thinking down to one stupid little drum to beat. “What are you interested in? What are your issues? What are you trying to say?” It started to make me really angry. Though there were a few teachers who encouraged work to be about a sense of pain or life or simply to enjoy yourself, the majority I encountered really encouraged you to define your work in terms that were important to *them*. “What about gender issues?” Stupid, stupid. It’s a waste of time.

AJ: In *Jimmy Corrigan*, there’s a poignant bit where Jimmy is skulking past women sitting on benches who are cat-calling and harassing him, and all of a sudden, a Rauschenberg-type superhero appears. In the next panel, it’s evident that the superhero is part of a painting. The text below says: “So, class, by repainting or appropriating these images, the artist has recontextualized them within the cultural discourse, historicizing their intentionality and effectively revealing the male gaze endemic to their structure.” But with this parody, you have recontextualized.

CW: I’m surprised you read it so carefully. My Lord. I desperately try to make the drawing so clear because I think, “No one’s going to understand what’s going on in this panel.”

AJ: I felt like I understood it because I thought you were very intentional.

CW: The intention there was to get out some anger I had when I was taking all these very pedantic art history classes. I used to write down the exact words the teachers said, words like “historicize” and “intentionality.” I collected so many of those terms, I wondered, “Are they making these words up?” Intent’s a good word, you know? Yet, they have to make up these words which don’t even exist to make their pseudo-thinking sound intelligent. *Historicize!* What does that mean? I’d get so mad. I’d think, “I hope the teachers read my strip this week!” Really egotistical, terrible thoughts.

AJ: And “appropriating,” if we have to hear that one more time.

CW: I actually had a teacher *tell* me to “appropriate” Lyonel Feininger’s work. I was just showing the work to him because I thought Feininger’s cartoons were incredible, and he said, “You should use them.” I said, “What do you mean *use* them?” He said, “You should put them in your work to make it art. Appropriate them. Everyone is doing it.” I said, “That’s stealing.” I got really mad at the guy. I didn’t get as mad as I should have. It was just stunning!

Other than motion pictures and Wagnerian opera, comics use more elements of art than any other form. You have to know how to draw, you have to know how to write, you have to have, for lack of a better word, a musical or poetic sense, because of comics’ internal, almost poetic, rhythm. You have to have an awareness of gesture, almost in a dance-like way.

AJ: And yet, though I hate overused words like “appropriate,” they are also shorthand expressions for complex ideas that are quite interesting. “Appropriating” can be applied to hip-hop sampling and other techniques in the arts which can be exciting. Ironically, you *obviously do* appropriate a number of things, such as different cartoon styles. It’s a shame these terms are now clichés, because there are some interesting ideas within the overused, academic jargon.

CW: Art and culture may naturally “appropriate,” but it’s silly to turn it into a self-conscious, mechanical thought process. I never think, “Here I am. I am overlapping images.” It seems to me that approach doesn’t have anything to do with human life. Oh god, I can think of nothing worse.

AJ: Would you say that cartooning is a ghettoized form?

CW: Yeah, definitely.

AJ: You work in an unglamorized field, a field which is almost despised as childish by many people who consider themselves literate and “cutting-edge.” I’m sure if you were at a party and said, “I’m a cartoonist—”

CW: A wide circle of emptiness would grow around you: “Don’t talk to that guy.”

AJ: Which is why I think there’s so much more vitality in the field.

CW: If you compare cartooning to a lot of art that’s being done now, it does seem like it’s the most warm, direct, old-fashioned sort of craft being done. One of my complaints against the use of computers in typography or design is that it looks as if the artist is just working within the boundaries set up by the computer program. Of course, I fall into this trap just as easily as anyone. They’ve followed those boundaries, and haven’t made any attempt to change them. Do you know what I mean?

AJ: There’s a laziness.

CW: Everyone and their dog can now make signs that say, “Close the bathroom door.” They’ll do it on their Mac and print it out in some doofy font. I would much rather see a hand-written sign than something like that.

AJ: Why?

CW: Because I can see the amount of effort that went into the project. Work done by hand implies a certain respect towards the reader. If you look at most buildings built after 1960, you don’t see the sort of craftsmanship or love that went into the construction of an older building. Hand-crafted work is inviting. It’s not insulting. I guess I really don’t want my work to just seem insulting to the reader.

AJ: Your comics are wonderfully jarring—like getting visual and textual whiplash. In one panel you can have the most heart-wrenching emotional scene, then in the next encounter a complete reversal with emotional distance. Do you consider your work emotional?

CW: I desperately try to put as much real emotion into it as I possibly can. But even cartoonists I really admire have been quoted as saying they find my work dry and laborious. I think they’re looking at it as art, rather than reading it as a comic strip. To me, it comes down to the problem, or advantage, of comics. They’re defined as separate from writing or visual art because they’re simultaneously read and viewed. If the reader “views” it rather than “reads” it, they’re going to pay more attention to how it’s drawn. (It’s a common mistake to assume because work is messy or loose, it’s therefore more expressive, human and warm.)

AJ: You include pages of mock advertisements, which seem styled after meticulous and intricate ads from an earlier era. What’s your inspiration?

CW: Design in the period between the turn of the century and the Depression has a quality I like. I enjoy the typography and the general look. It feels much more human and warm to me, than the current slick, sophisticated design. It’s more inviting. It has a sort of dorky “join the party” quality, whereas design today has a maybe-you-can-be-like-us-if-you-want quality.

Back then, some guy who manufactured bolts or toilets might design his own logo around a Greek statue or an olive branch. And it’s silly-looking, but you sense their designs made life

Comics are not in any way a passive medium. The material is inert unless you’re regarding it. A film can be a very potent, emotional experience, or you can just sit there with your mouth open and watch. You cannot do that with comic strips. It takes a certain amount of *effort* to read even the most vacuous comic strip. It doesn’t *do* anything unless you’re reading it.

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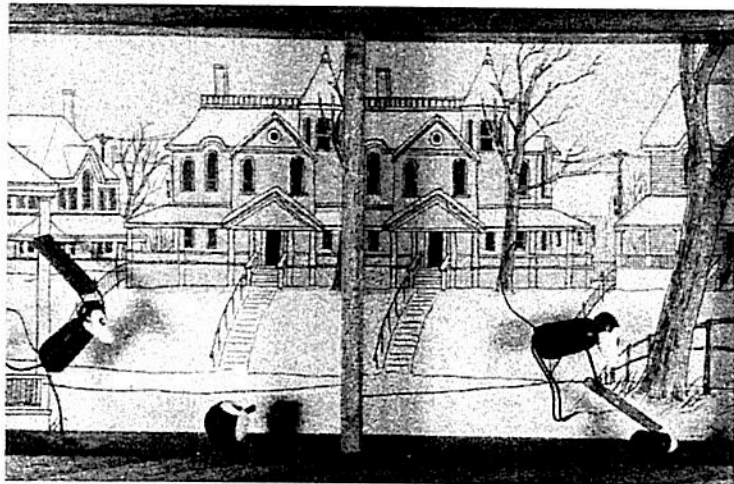
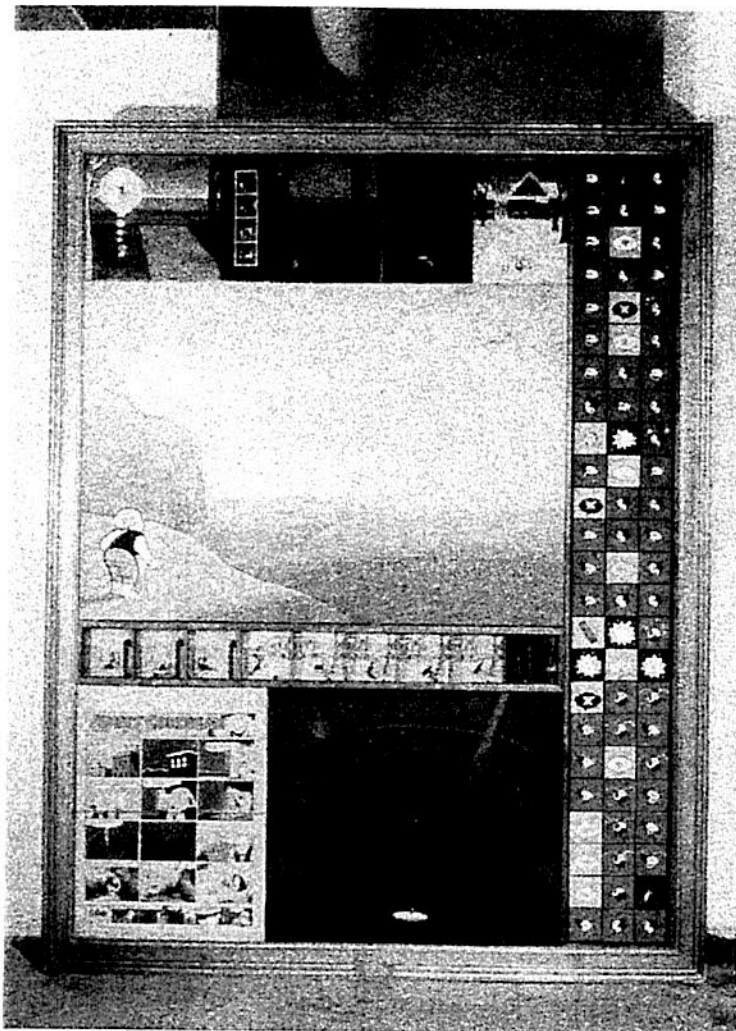
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Back cover of *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*, ACME Novelty Library, Volume no. 6, Issue no. 6, Winter 1995-96.



Jimmy Corrigan, *The Smartest Kid on Earth by Ware*, oil and wood, 60 by 75 inches (1992); bottom: detail of work.

more palatable. Older design seems to have a generosity towards the viewer or reader, a generosity which is just not as prevalent now, it seems to me.

AJ: An article I just read in your press kit praised your work as “dense, hilarious wordage bracketing vaguely, disturbing yet beautifully drafted pages.” But, you’ve mentioned some of the feedback isn’t appreciative, that people find your work cold or dry.

CW: People think I’m a negative guy who’s trying to depress them.

AJ: Yet, you express a lot of compassion in your work. For instance, you have many characters that society has thrown out—the elderly, those who don’t conform to standards of beauty, throwaways who become very sympathetic. You work is *not* nihilistic.

CW: I do not want my work to be like that at all. I would hate it if that was the message that I was getting across. I would hope it has the exact opposite effect.

AJ: Which is?

CW: It’s almost optimistic. It’s just an attempt to be a little more realistic. At any given time things can turn really bad and you’re going to have to be prepared for it. Turning a blind eye or always having a big smile on your face is silly...not that I walk around and frown at people. I actually try to smile at as many people as I can, which is not a good thing to do in Chicago.

As far as society goes, I think things have always sucked. I’m not looking backwards. I’m glad we have penicillin. I’m not pining for the good old days when people were dying of typhoid in the Chicago streets because they drank backed-up sewer water. I say this only because there’s a common assumption that cartoonists prefer the past, because many of us seem to be a cranky nostalgic kind of lot. I don’t think any of us are advocating a return to the past.

AJ: You critique TV a lot. Do you watch TV?

CW: I haven’t had a TV since high school.

AJ: Why not?

CW: In high school, my idea of a good time was sitting down with a big bag of nacho cheese Doritos, some orange pop, and then downing the whole thing while watching TV until I passed out.

If I had a TV, I know I wouldn’t get any work done. It can also be terrible when it influences your work. I don’t want to order my subject matter in the same way a sitcom orders subject matter. I don’t want to draw or frame things like TV does. I can tell when people watch a lot of TV because they talk like people on TV. I really think the structures and rhythms of television can affect the way one perceives things, and I’d like to avoid that as much as possible.

AJ: Do you ever achieve a kind of contented state when you do a drawing?

CW: No.

AJ: Other artists I've spoken to have also said that creating is not cathartic. A part of me wants to be more Pollyanish. I want to believe art is a channel for darker conflicts which we need to resolve, but I'm not convinced. When I think of your work, such as the scene when Jimmy Corrigan suddenly breaks the glass and sticks it in his dad's eye and then rips his back out, I have to wonder if you don't experience a moment of reprieve when you're drawing something that loaded.

CW: I hope for those moments: "Wow. It would be really fun to draw this. I'll get out all those whatevers." It's not like Cy Twombly, scribbling big penises. That's what I really want. I admit it. But cartooning is not immediate. Art Spiegelman has said that most cartoonists don't have a sudden burst of inspiration which allows them to whip out the work immediately. There are exceptions such as Gary Panter and Robert Crumb, which is why their work has an incredible heat and reeks of inspiration. Whereas for myself and Charles Burns or Dan Clowes, the initial "inspiration" seems buried. It's more a matter of meticulous and time-consuming execution. Comics are not the best thing to pick if you want to work that way. I also don't plan anything, I don't write a script.

AJ: So you just meander—

CW: Basically. I do know where I'm going, the essential outline is there. But I don't write conversations and dialogue unless I have bits and pieces I want to insert. I don't write scripts or thumbnails. I let it happen, I try to keep it lively, and allow it to develop on the page. This of course might be the absolute worst way of working possible...I don't know.

AJ: Do you do other work beside these books and your weekly strips?

CW: I also do occasional illustrations. Recently I've done work for Chip Kidd, an incredible book designer for Knopf. But my ultimate goal is to be able to concentrate solely on comics. I keep thinking now that I have all this free time, I will work harder. Of course I just sit around and listen to records, play piano or stare at the wall as much as I ever did.

AJ: What kind of records do you listen to? I heard you like old music.

CW: How did you hear that?

AJ: It was in a posting on the Internet. A rumor, I guess.

CW: Rumor? Who would care what I listen to? What is this? It's weird.

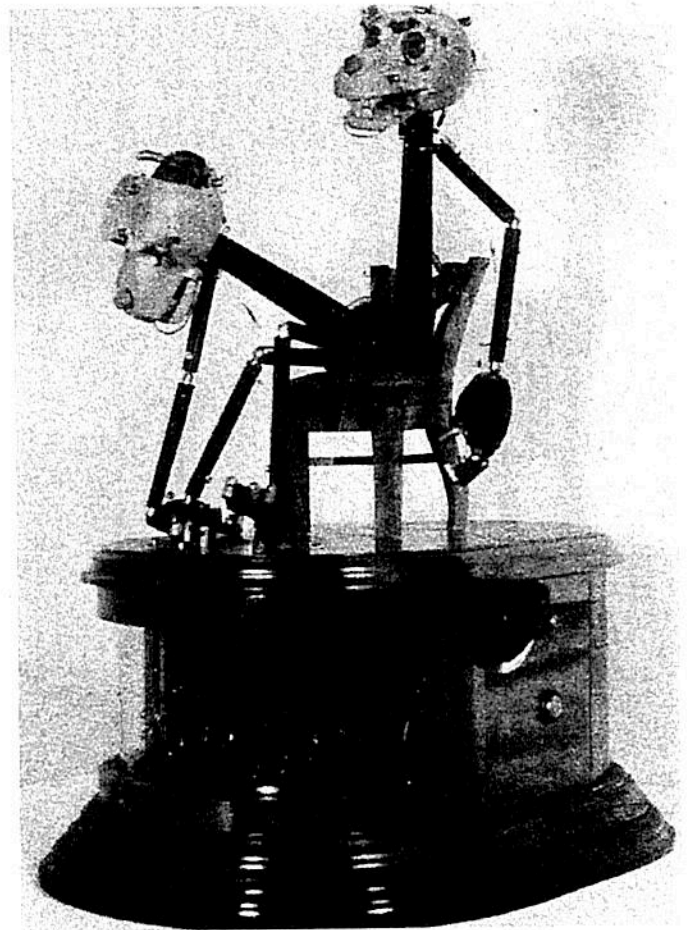
AJ: You have a big following on the Internet.

CW: I don't want to know this. It will paralyze me. I won't be able to draw. The Internet seems so myopic. The best I can hope for is that 60 years from now, some schlep is going to find a paperback collection of my stuff. It will be falling apart, or some dog has peed on it, but at least he won't have to plug it in his computer or turn it on. He can just look at it, and think it looks all right, considering he only paid a dollar for it. That's the best scenario I can hope for as far as posterity.

AJ: What kind of music do you listen to when you're drawing?

CW: I can't listen to music when I'm writing or drawing. Comic strips are like music notes on paper, in a way. When you read them you "hear" things in your mind, the same way you "hear" rhythms when you read prose...sounds and sensations are vaguely called up by the drawings themselves. Listening to music while working interferes with this "natural rhythm" of a comic strip. I usually read my comic strips 200 times while I'm working on them. I'll stop, start up at the top and read all the way down, in order to make sure the internal rhythm is right. It has its own music. If you're listening to music,

Quimbies the Dancing Mouse, a moving sculpture by Ware, 12 by 15 by 20 inches (1993).





The SMARTEST KID on EARTH.

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YES, IT'S ME, MR. CORRIGAN

A COVER UP? OR JUICE? WOULD YOU LIKE A JUICE? I'VE GOT JUICE

OH, NO THANK YOU, MR. CORRIGAN. I'M WELL, ACTUALLY

UM, I'M AFRAID I CAN'T STAY TODAY, UM...

I'VE GOT A TEST TOMORROW AND

WELL, THAT'S QUITE ALL RIGHT, HARRIET. I UNDERSTAND. YOUR SCARING MAMMA... BUT NEXT WEEK... WE'LL CELEBRATE!

WELL, ACTUALLY... I'M AFRAID I CAN'T.

BUT HARRIET... I DELIGHT YOU THAT I GUESS I'LL JUST LEAVE IT HERE

WELL, AT LEAST TAKE

NO MR. I DON'T WANT ANY MONEY LISTEN I'VE GOT TO GO

HA HA WELL... IT'S ABER LOSS, ISN'T IT? IT'S ABER LOSS, ABER LOSS

Page from Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth from the ACME Novelty Library Issue No. 1, Winter 1993-4.

you're not paying attention to what you're doing.

AJ: What kind of music do you like?

CW: Ragtime, early jazz and blues. When I was a kid, I actually wanted to be a ragtime piano player. I performed with a ragtime piano player who played at Holiday Inns, saloons and ragtime festivals.

AJ: How old were you?

CW: Fourteen or 15. I'm self-conscious playing in front of more than two people, though, so that was always a horrifying experience. I'm a fairly crappy musician on top of that. I simply don't have the temperament for it. I can play by myself, but when it comes to actually playing in front of people, my brain crumbles and I can't remember things. I feel the way schizophrenics must feel; it's like I'm inhabiting someone else's body. I still really love ragtime, and I constantly read about it, and try to learn to play it. I've been trying to find turn-of-the-century music, really cornball military band recordings of ragtime.

AJ: What's the appeal of ragtime?

CW: It's similar to cartooning, an "American art form" which blends a classical melodic sensibility with a syncopated rhythmic base. The best of the music has such an overwhelmingly melancholy feeling, yet it's always played in an up-tempo, optimistic way. If it's played properly, there's really a combination of sad and happy emotions which you don't get anywhere else.

AJ: Is this akin to your drawing?

CW: I wish.

It's funny because many cartoonists have similar musical tastes. My best friend on earth is a fellow cartoonist in Texas named John Keen. We met when I worked on the student newspaper. After getting to know him, lo and behold, his favorite thing to do besides draw cartoons was play ragtime piano.

AJ: Stranger than fiction.

CW: Peculiar. We're all from weird semi-repressed, middle class backgrounds.

AJ: How do you like Chicago? You seem to have a real knowledge of the city's history.

CW: Three years ago, I was playing piano at the Art Institute. The piano was up in this balcony, and because I was playing after hours, the security guards inadvertently locked me up there. The only way I could get down was to make a rather thoughtless leap. I'm not exactly the most coordinated person, so I landed improperly and broke both of my heels. I couldn't leave my apartment for a long time, and ended up reading a lot about Chicago history. I became really interested in the city, maybe because I couldn't go out into it. The city's history became more and more a part of the story that I was working on.

Chicago's a weird town because there's really no reason for it to be here anymore. The stockyards are gone, and many of the industries which created the city are obsolete. It seems like the only reason Chicago is here is because it's here. Modern life seems divorced from the essentials of living. A hundred years ago, days were taken up building or fixing your house, washing your clothes, doing the tasks that were necessary to keep you alive. Whereas now, almost everything is purchased or taken care of by someone else.

AJ: Who are your favorite artists?

CW: Can I skip this question? Honestly, it's hard for me to say. There are too many, and the list changes so much. I don't want to forget people. I probably like all the same people other artists in your book have mentioned.

AJ: None of the artists I've interviewed have mentioned Joseph Cornell [the Surrealist who made boxes which contained imaginative universes]. I was excited to

N **ERVOUS?** **WORRIED?**
ARE YOU **UNHAPPY?**

What's wrong with you? Do symptoms of Constipation, Indigestion, Dizzy Spells, Sweating, Sleeplessness, Unquenchable Thirst, Paranoia, Suicide, Fears of Loneliness, Stuttering, Patchy Baldness, Wrinkles, Flabby gut, Inferior height, Impotence, Conversational Inadequacy, Loquaciousness, Stupidity, Ignorance, Foolhardiness, Shaky Hands and a feeling that you were abused by your family ever bother you? Well, if not, then my book will most likely help you find a way to manufacture one or more of a fascinating variety of maladies. I guarantee that you will have a reason to feel crappy at every hour of the day. I've been feeling terrible for years now. Let me give you the chance, too. Start by sending me \$10.

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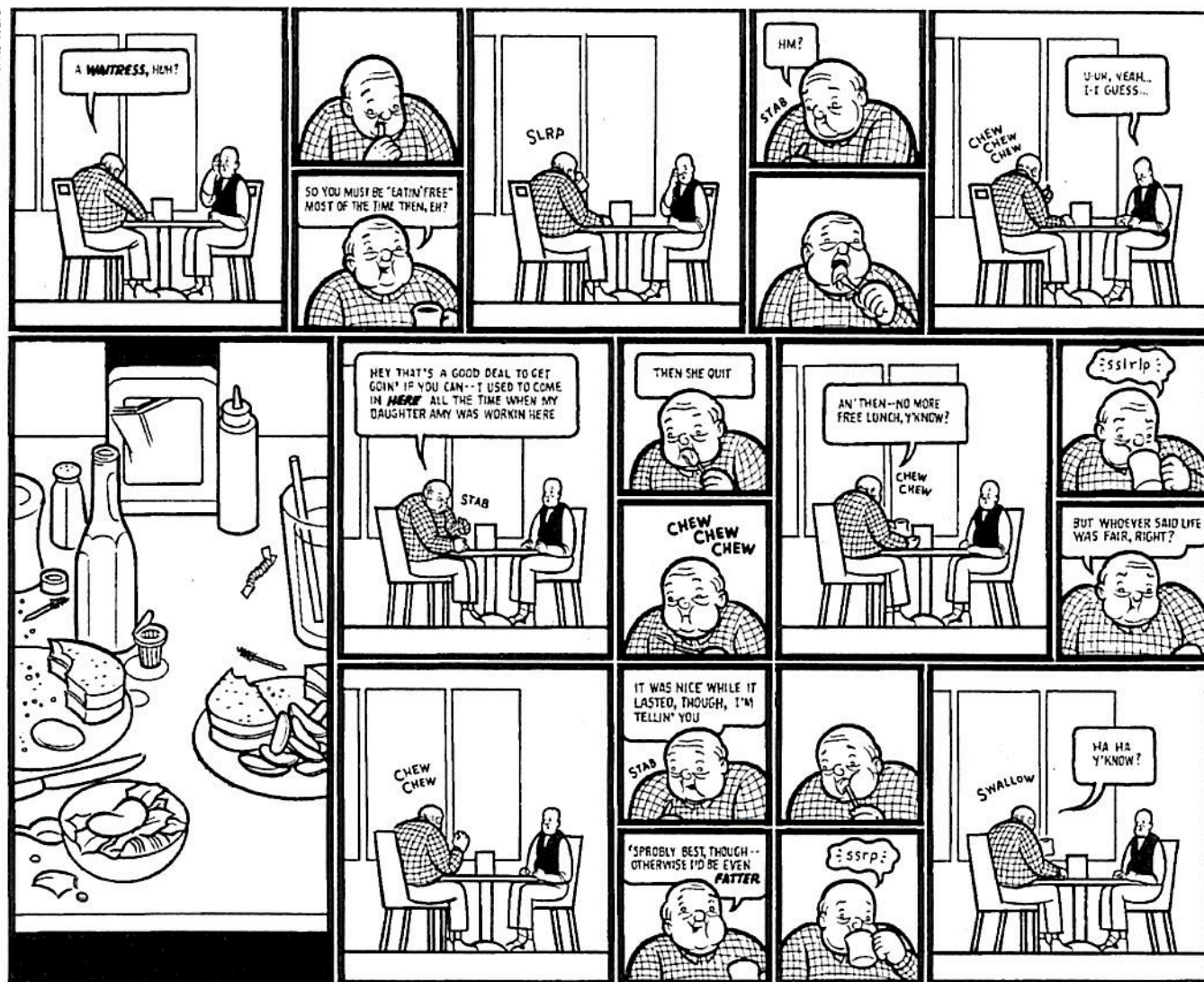
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Mock advertisements by Ware from *Sparky's Best Comics and Stories*, ACME Novelty Library, Volume 3, Issue 4, Winter 1994-95.

Ragtime music is similar to cartooning, an "American art form" which blends a classical melodic sensibility with a syncopated rhythmic base. The best of the music has such an overwhelmingly melancholy feeling, yet it's always played in an up-tempo, optimistic way.



Page for upcoming issue of *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*.

read you liked him.

CW: His sensitivity is unparalleled. His work is so delicate and warm. As far as writers go, I like Tolstoy, Nabokov and Flaubert. I read a little Turgenev recently. But I haven't been reading books as much as I used to. I don't know if I've become lazy.

AJ: Do you see movies?

CW: I see the new garbage, but it's usually just an excuse for socializing. I don't see a lot of movies. Apparently, everyone else does. And all their friends do. "Oh yes, well this blah-blah-blah film made by this director," and I'll think, God, I don't know anything about this stuff. I did like Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Dekalog*, a series of hour-length films made for Polish television which center around a certain apartment complex. They're incredibly great, powerful stories. I've never seen anything like them. I liked Fellini's *A Night in Cambodia*. And there's a wonderful recent Chinese film called *To Live* by Zhang Yimou.

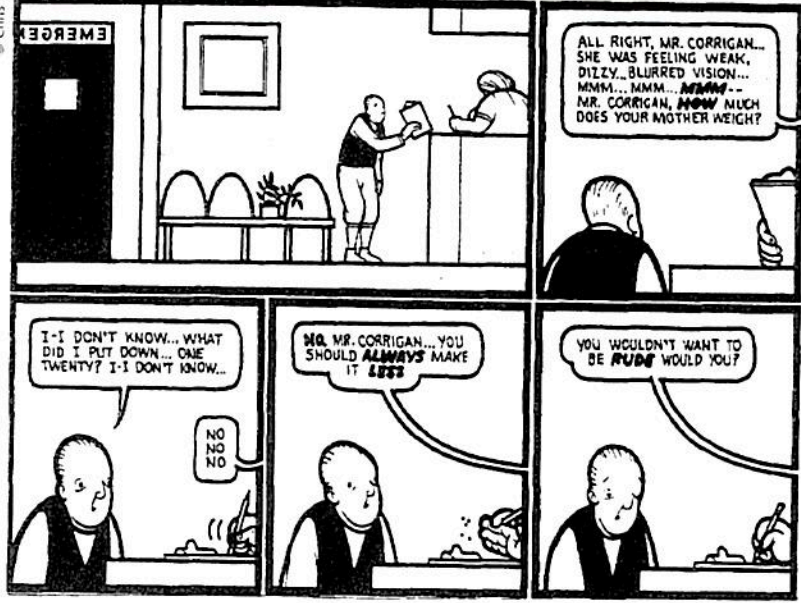
Asking me what films I like is like asking Joe on the street what his favorite comic strips are. He'll probably say *The Far Side*. I don't know why I don't go see movies more often, maybe because it requires too much effort to get out of the house.

AJ: You're published by Fantagraphics. How do you feel about the whole aspect of having your work marketed and promoted?

JIMMY CORRIGAN

SMARTEST KID ON EARTH

© Chris Ware



Panels from *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* from ACME Novelty Library Volume 6, Issue 5, Spring 1995.

adjusted now than I ever have.

AJ: Are you married?

CW: I'm living with my girlfriend. We've gone out for three years, and lived together for the past two. She's probably one of the most well-adjusted, sane human beings I've ever met. She never has shown any signs of being either manipulative or nasty, which are quite wonderful qualities to avoid, qualities in myself I try to suppress.

AJ: So you are actually socially functional.

CW: Whatever. Dan Clowes put it really well in a recent interview. He talks about how you order your life to the point where you're not even thinking about the order. There are almost obsessive routines you go through to the point where they become habits. If you break them, it seems to disturb your whole life.

AJ: You went to college in Austin, the home of college rock. Were you involved at all in that scene?

CW: I saw a few bands, but actually, I hated that scene. It's too loud, and for the most part, I was too busy working on a strip. John Keen, at that time, was one of the least social people I'd ever met, and even *he* would complain about how I never went out. I talked about it with my

grandmother, and she said, "You have to go out and do something or you'll lose your source of pollination."

Regardless, I went out to these clubs occasionally, but I didn't much care for it. And after a while it started to positively irritate me that Austin was seen as the big youth culture center. It's just my own completely unjustifiable taste, but for the most part I think youth culture is embarrassing. It's garbage. Now it's infected modern filmmaking—a movie these days is filled with dialogue such as, "Oh yeah, man, I came on her face." It's used only as a means of trying to make the film appear gritty and real because directors and writers have lost all sense of characterization and no longer explore or understand what motivates people. I have to think the culture of youth as somewhat responsible. *Leaving Las Vegas* was one of the worst movies ever made, just a vile piece of crap. My parents saw it and told me it was powerful and moving. When I saw it, I was embarrassed my parents had seen it. I felt responsible because it was made by my "generation."

AJ: You're not really part of your generation.

CW: I guess not.

AJ: You're a century too late, or early. I'm not sure which. [laughs]

CW: I'm a fairly crass, somewhat offensive person, or so I've been told.

AJ: How do you think your work and the work of your peers differs from the undergrounds of the '70s?

CW: I read an interview with Crumb where he stated that he couldn't create anything that wasn't funny. I think there are a lot of younger artists who are perfectly willing to do something that's entirely not funny at all. There seems to be a new generation creating a more "mature" form of literature. At least, that's what I'm trying to create. Other than motion pictures and Wagnerian opera, comics use more elements of art than any other form. You have to know how to draw, you have to know how to write, you have to have, for lack of a better word, a musical or poetic sense, because of comics' internal, almost poetic, rhythm. You have to have an awareness of gesture, almost in a dance-like way. I could be grasping at straws here, but it just seems to me that it requires a lot from anyone trying to do it. And, as a result, it doesn't seem

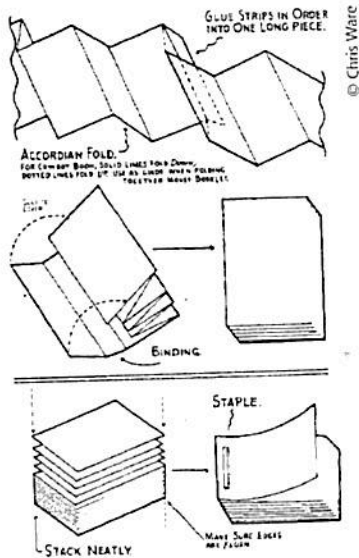
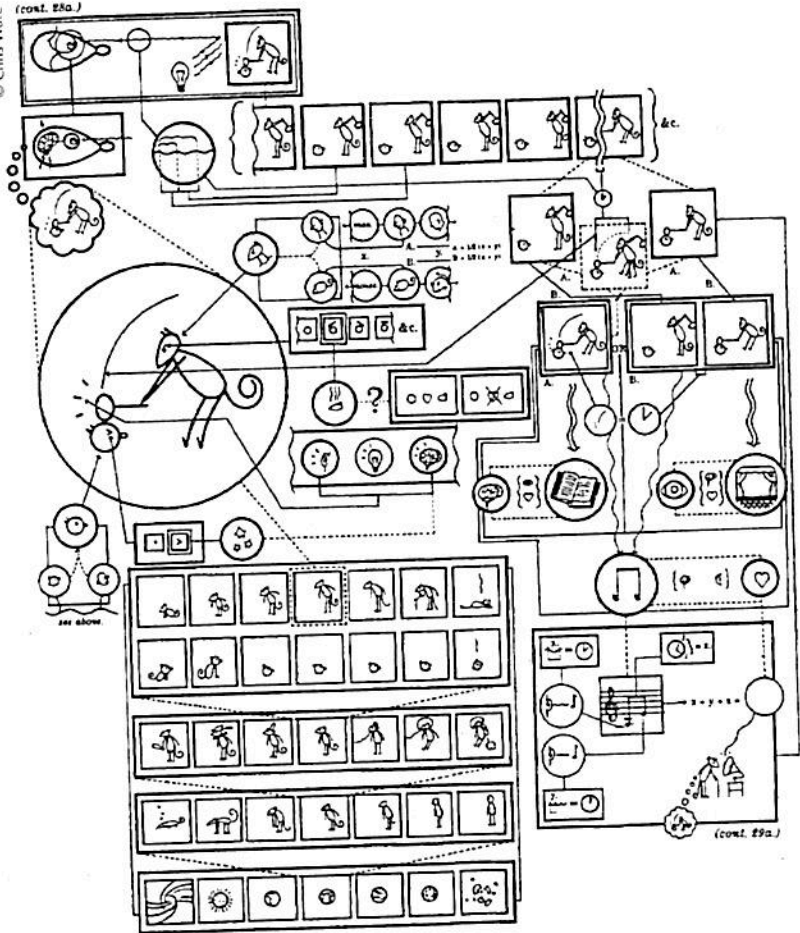
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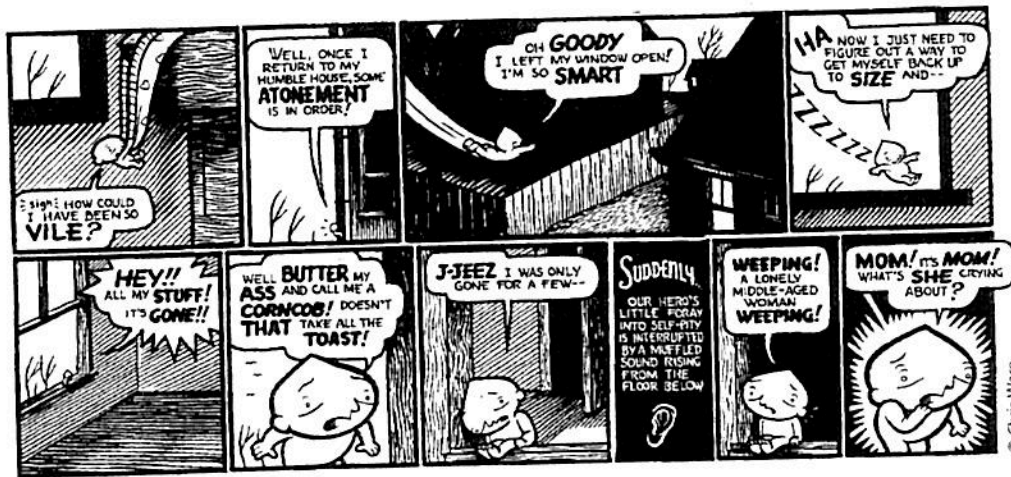
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An ACME Novelty Library assortment. Clockwise from top: ACME masthead; illustration from the ACME Novelty Library's *Book of Jokes*; panels from "Jimmy Gets Out of the House" from *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* in Issue 1 Winter 1993-94 and illustration from *Jimmy Corrigan The Smartest Kid on Earth* in Issue 6, Fall 1995.



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OUR HUMOROUS FOLKS

OR, Life Illustrated.

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Table of contents from ACME Novelty Library's Book of Jokes Volume VII, Issue VII, Summer 1996.

like a terribly attractive thing to attempt, unless you're a megalomaniac like myself.

AJ: We all know what fiction can do, we all know what a painting can do. The best comics create a third level, more than the sum of their parts.

CW: It's not in any way a passive medium. The material is inert unless you're regarding it. A film can be a very potent emotional, thought-provoking experience, or you can also just sit there with your mouth open and watch cars explode if you want to. You cannot do that with comic strips. It takes a certain amount of *effort* to read even the most vacuous comic strip. It doesn't *do* anything unless *you're* reading it. It involves the reader in a similar way that literature does, although prose acts on your entire sum total of human experience; my vision of *Anna Karenina* is going to be somewhat different than yours, because we've lived different lives. Comics are more specific, because they're visual. They simulate theatrical experience. The "art" involved is the skill of the artist to balance that level of specificity. Here I go making up words like those art history teachers. Does that make any sense at all?

AJ: Absolutely. I'm trying to get an articulation of this myself. Your comics are actually a bit hard to read, or more accurately, "challenging," but the rewards are so great.

CW: That's why they're not passive. I wish they weren't difficult to read, but I realize that they are. One of the best comic strips is *Nancy*...and to acknowledge that is almost a cliché amongst cartoonists...but I've tried to get some of that deadness into my work. I want my pictures to look as if they died on the page. I don't want them to have any life to them. I want them to be static. The theatrical quality, or the feeling of life, or animation comes once you start reading them. Spiegelman, quoting Wally Wood, has said, "It's harder not to read *Nancy* than it is to read it." When you read comics, they come alive. Again, the closest analogy I can come up with is music notes on a paper. They're just marks, unless you understand music, read them, and it then becomes music. It happens inside the brain somewhere.

AJ: It's so multi-layered; you have to pay attention.

CW: It involves two completely different parts of the brain. The part that reads and the part that looks. It comes down to an almost Platonic difference of the specific and the general. You've got a drawing of a car, you can't make it too specific because then it becomes too much of a drawing and then it doesn't work within a circumstance where you're "reading" the pictures. I try to balance that by making the pictures look cold and dead, like typography. I give it an element of reality with naturalistic color. That was Hergé's trick with *Tintin*.

AJ: You use letters and essays within the stories; it's not a simple, straightforward story. Contemporary literary critics saw great potential in the act of playing with narrative and traditional forms. Comics, like yours, seem to me to achieve that goal of breaking down narrative conventions, and implicating the reader in active participation.

CW: You ought to write for *The Comics Journal*. There isn't usually this level of formal talk about comics. No one's writing about the inherent formal problems of the comics. Maybe it's for the best, because if they did, cartoonists might become stultified and self-conscious. It would ruin them. I'm of two minds about it. After my many, many years in the "salt mines" of the American art education system, I became disenchanted with the whole idea of criticism. But I do think it's a problem that the formal language of comics is still so incredibly limited. Artists like Dan Clowes, Jason Lutes and myself, are all *trying* to tell potent stories with the tools of jokes. It's as though we're trying to write a powerful, deeply engaging, richly detailed epic with a series of limericks. I've just tried to expand the possibilities for the form, just to get in a little more sense of a real experience.

AJ: So you're going to continue creating more challenging work?

CW: I don't know...I could just be completely wrong, going down the wrong road. Before I know it, I'll look behind me and I'll be the only one there.

AJ: I'm worried about reproducing your work in this book. Your work is often so small.

CW: Art Spiegelman told me that he has two pairs of glasses, one for reading, and one for reading my stuff. That's my favorite thing anyone's ever said, except for what my mom said. ☛

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