CHAPTER SIX

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

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

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

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

1 Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, dedication, *Violent Cases* (1987) (Dark Horse, 2003).

2 Both have mentioned this on a number of occasions. See, for example, Baker (2005) 71-2. For Gaiman's assertion that Moore made him want to become a comics writer, see, for example, <http://www.bloomsbury.com/Childrens/qanda.asp?id=81>

3 Santala (2006); Moore and Campbell, *From Hell* (1999) Appendix I, 2.

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

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

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

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4 Gaiman discusses their meeting, and the genesis of *Violent Cases,* in his introduction to the 2003 Dark Horse edition.

5 Not a comics author or artist himself, Gravett is an important figure in the British comics scene, reviewing and publicising comics, curating exhibitions of comic art, and recently, writing surveys, such as *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Laurence King, 2004) and *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life* (London: Aurum, 2005).

6 Neil Gaiman, "Neil Gaiman on Dave McKean", *Neil Gaiman* personal site. <http://www.neilgaiman.com/exclusive/essay08.asp>. This well-maintained and exceptionally popular website, now run by Harper Collins, is a good source of information about his work.

7 Sabin, (1993) 1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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10 See especially Stephen Rauch, *Neil Gaiman's The Sandman and Joseph Campbell: In Search of the Modern Myth* (Rockville, Maryland: Wildside Press, 2003).

11 Steven Olson, *Neil Gaiman* (New York: Rosen, 2005) 12. Aimed at young adults, this book is (understandably) a somewhat simplistic introduction to Gaiman's work.

12 Alan Moore, introduction to Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, *Violent Cases*. (London: Escape/Titan, 1987) N. pag.

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

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

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13 Henrik Andreasen, "An Interview with Dave McKean" *Serie Journalen.* 1st May 1996. <http://www.seriejournalen.dk/tegneserie_indhold.asp?ID=25>

14 Andreasen (1996).

15 Andreasen (1996).

16 Chris Brayshaw, "Interview with Dave McKean". *The Comics Journal* 196 (June 1997), 69. *The Comics Journal* is an excellent source of in-depth interviews with comics creators, and I will refer to this one repeatedly throughout this chapter.

17 Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics* (New York: Paradox, 2000). See Emma Tinker (2007) for further discussion of technophobia amongst alternative comics creators.

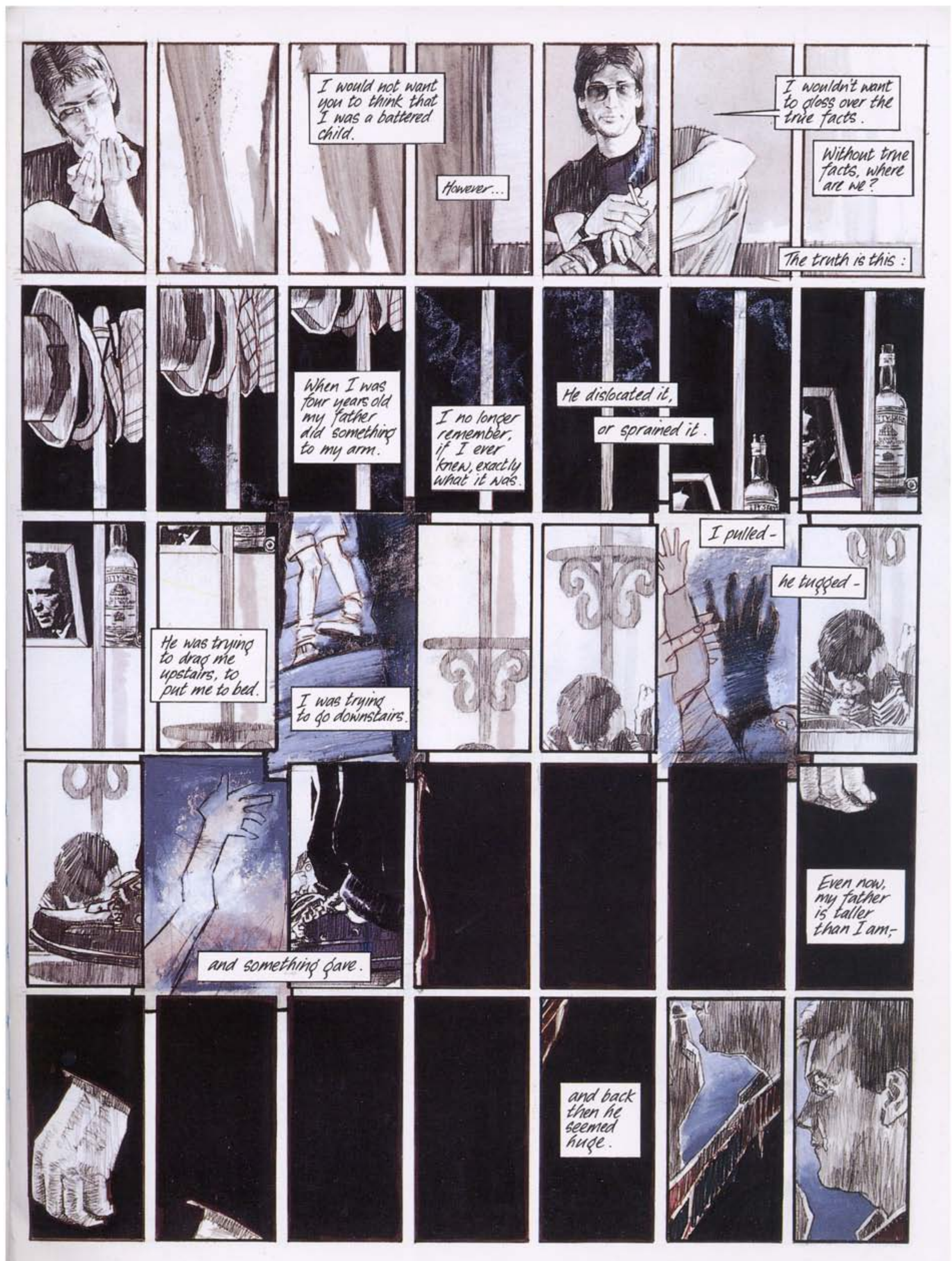

Figure 43.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

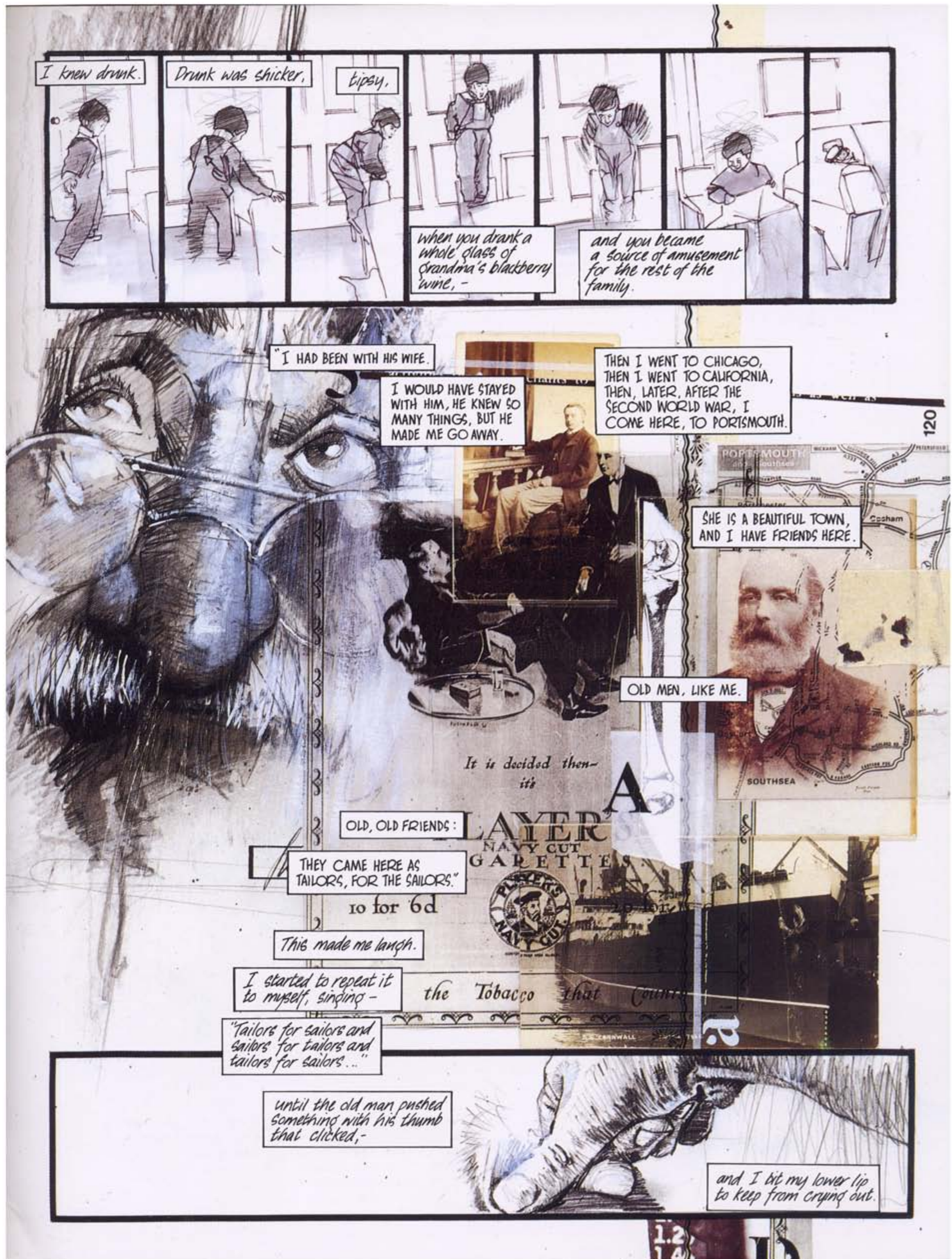

Figure 44.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

36 Thomas L. Strickland, "Tea with the Dream King: An Interview with Neil Gaiman", 11th October 2003. <http://www.jivemagazine.com/article.php?pid=899>

conversations nor understands the implications of what he sees and hears. Just as the four-year-old in *Violent Cases* hears the osteopath's remark "I had been with his wife" without understanding it as his adult self presumably does, so the narrator here is unsure of the accuracy of his reporting because he was unable to make sense of what he heard at the time. Particularly in view of the traumatic nature of the narrator's experience – he witnesses a man beating the pregnant girl with a piece of wood – it is likely that his memory is seriously flawed.

In order to look more closely at the way in which photomontage and other collage techniques function in *Mr Punch*, I will use a three-page sequence in which the protagonist buys a comic book of ghost stories, wanders through a hall of mirrors, and meets the Punch and Judy man who tells him an anecdote about his grandfather (Figure 45a-c). Each page has a colour scheme of its own – pale browns and bluish greys on the first, rich oranges with a flash of turquoise on the second, and sepia-tinted black and white on the third. The first page, comprising just three panels, begins with a photograph of a net curtain and a twig with which McKean has blended a clumsy cartoon image of a skull and a small, frightened-looking snapshot of the narrator. Like many of the panels in which imagination dominates over reality, this image bleeds off the edge of the page, unbound by panel edges. The protagonist's reflection in the mirror in the second panel is scratched into a white painted surface, while in the background, scarcely noticeable to a casual reader, there appears to be a large, blurred photograph of a fork, almost the size of the boy's head. Such inclusions are ostensibly without meaning, and certainly without direct signification in the context of the narrative, but suggest something of the surrealism and impenetrability of the protagonist's perceptual world. Fragments of ornate calligraphic script appear in various guises throughout the text and in clipped fragments on the final panel of this page. Although the presence of this text could be explained as part of Mr Punch's long, dark history, it does also seem symptomatic of an extravagantly postmodern sensibility which scavenges for scraps from multiple historical periods.

In the first panel the narrator says:

> With sixpence of my new-found half-crown I bought a comic from the mucky postcard shop. It was a black and white comic, cheaply reprinting older American tales, and was filled with short ghost stories: people who vanished or never existed, houses that weren't there the next time people went back to look for them, murdered wives who returned from the grave.

Figure 45a.

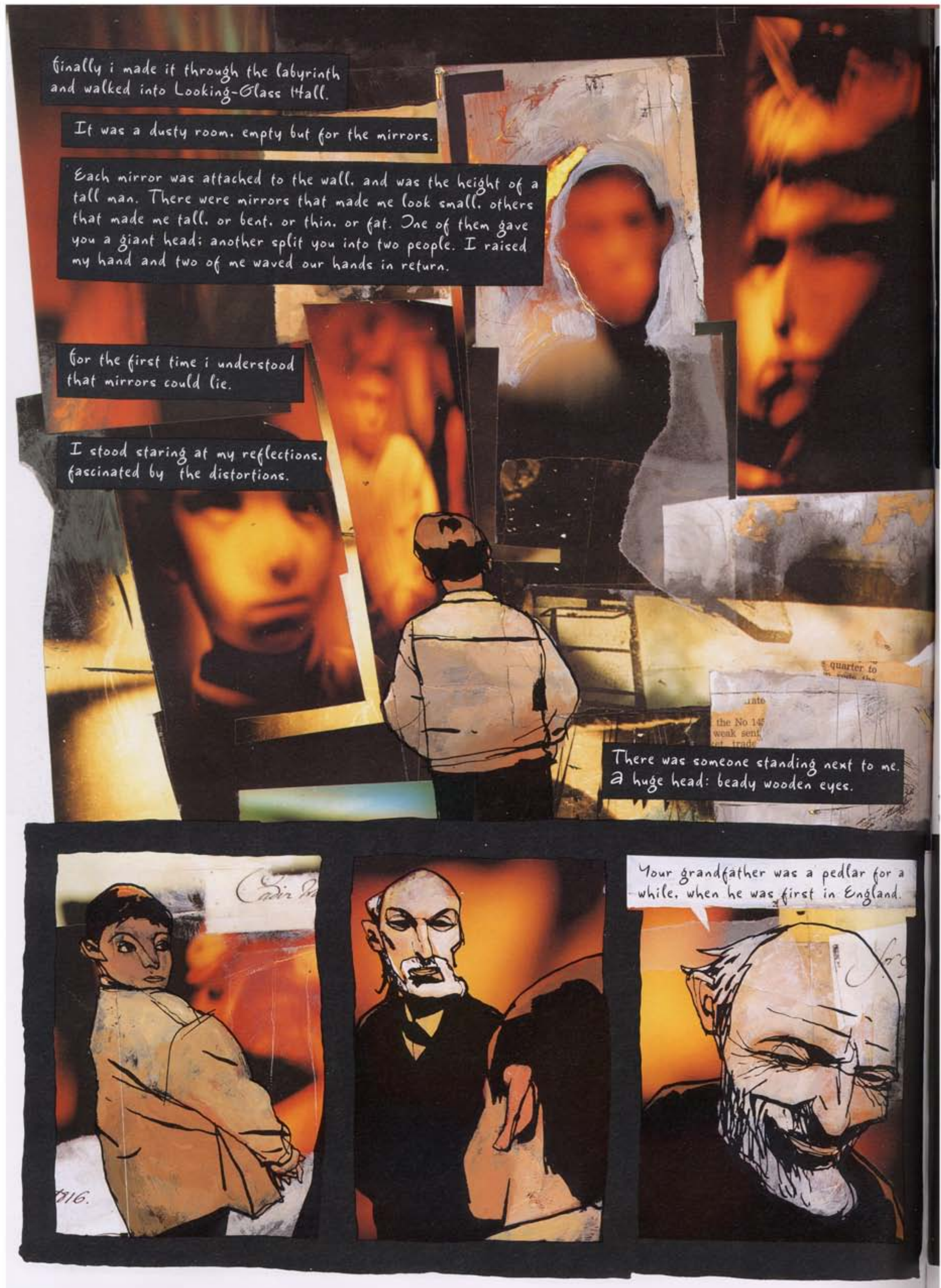

Figure 45b.

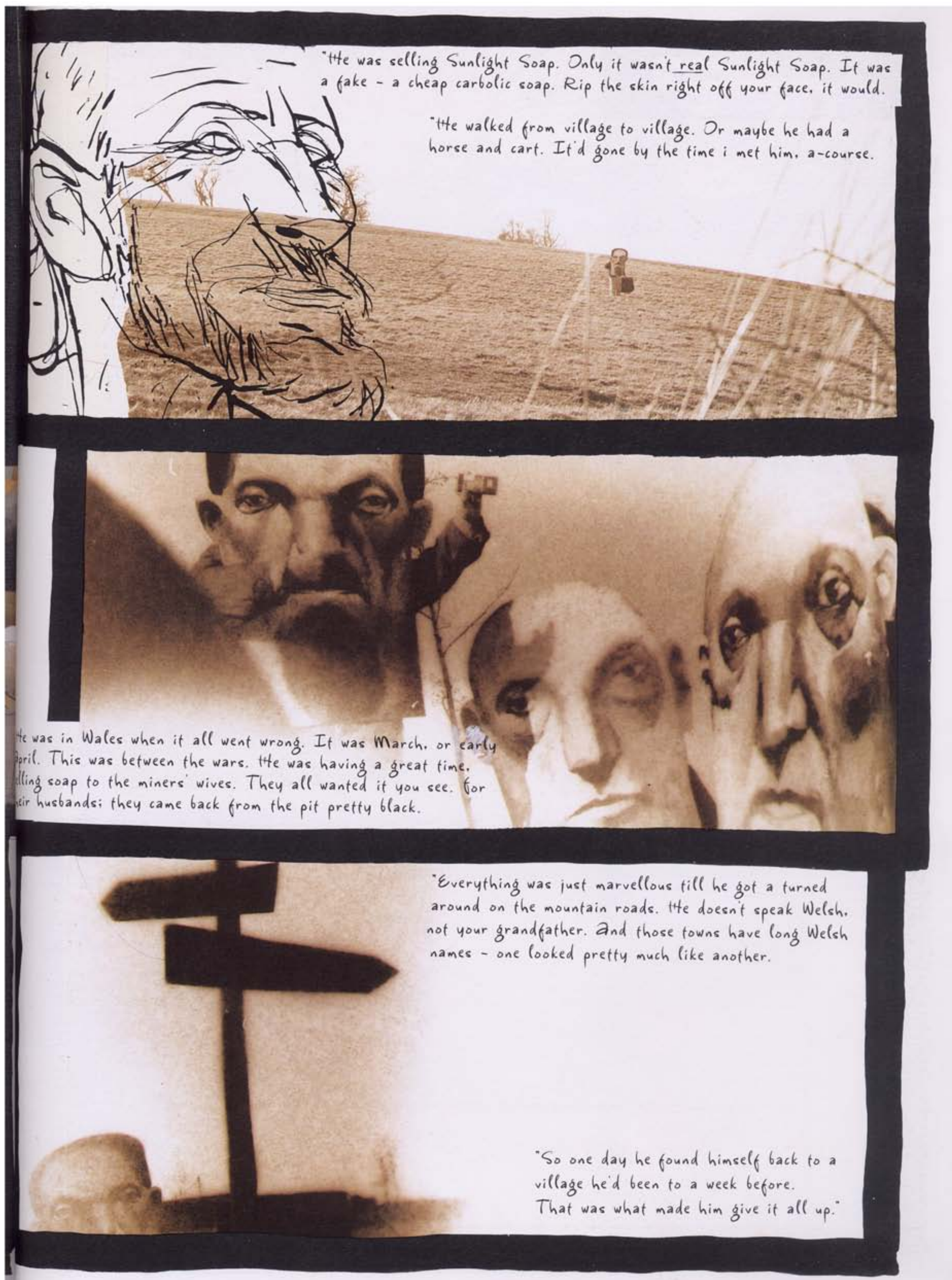

Figure 45c.

With this book of imported ghost stories – illustrated by the skull-like face beneath the net curtain – the narrator's childhood intertwines with the history of the comics form. As I have shown, the Comics Code grew out of anxieties about children's exposure to representations of violence, and it took many years for the comic book medium to work its way past this issue. In the UK the 1955 Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act, whilst less prescriptive than its US counterpart, placed the onus on publishers and importers to restrict comics which represent "the commission of crimes", "acts of violence or cruelty", or "incidents of a repulsive or horrible nature".[37] *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* are conspicuously arty, adult books produced during a period in which the comic book form was eager to prove itself as a creative medium. By writing about childhood and violence, particularly in a post-war setting, Gaiman re-examines this period in which the effects of violent comics on children were the subject of heated public discussion. His argument is clear: comic book horror does not come close to the trauma caused by children's real world experiences of violence.

On the second page, the protagonist – a line-drawn figure on a collage of torn and painted paper – stands before a series of blurred reflections of himself, while his adult self comments, "…for the first time I understood that mirrors could lie". As readers, of course, we are seeing not mirrors but photographs, distorted, filtered to an orange glow and pasted onto a flat picture plane with a collage of scattered paper scraps. Only when Swatchell interrupts does the narrative resume its panel-bordered format; as long as the child is lost in his reflections, his perceptions remain a field of free-floating segments. McKean has said that "One of the things I wanted to try with *Punch* was exploiting the difference between drawn images and photographic images".[38] To a general reader, it might seem counterintuitive that in *Mr Punch* the "real" world is composed of line drawings, while nightmares and puppet shows are represented by photographic images. But realism, in the sense of an accurate, detailed, naturalistic visual representation of events is not the key to high quality comics narrative. The simplest line drawing can communicate a truth,

37 See Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London: Pluto Press, 1984) on the history comics censorship in the UK. Gaiman is an active supporter of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. See "Neil Gaiman on the CBLDF!" [video]. Retrieved 23rd July 2008 from *The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund.* <http://www.cbldf.org/>
38 Brayshaw (1997) 80.

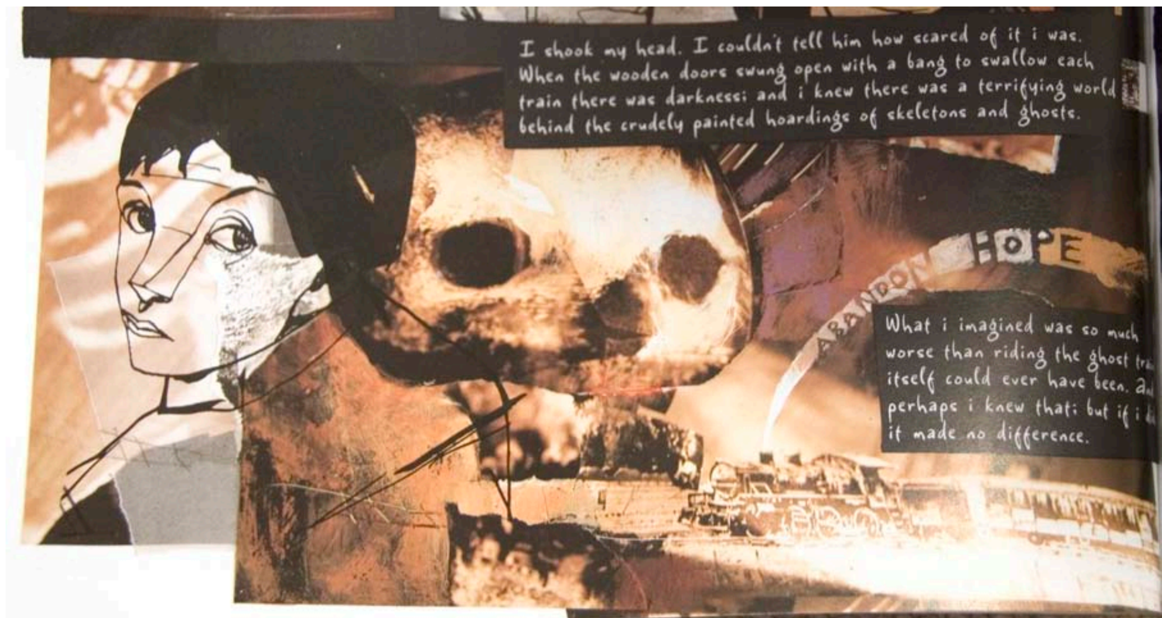

Figure 46.

whilst photographs, like parents, can lie, particularly when filtered through software like Photoshop. Numerous panels of *Mr Punch* show impossible combinations of drawings and photographs. When the protagonist explains his fear of ghost trains, he appears as a sketchy drawing over a painted skull and a faded photograph of a train (Figure 46); in the opening scene, he walks with his grandfather through a landscape which is a composite of drawn people, photographed sky and sea, and a drawn Punch and Judy tent with photographed puppets. The narrative in such sequences is drawn into an uncertain hinterland between fiction and reality, a space in which the real world – where grandparents have illicit affairs with mermaids – is no more plausible than a nightmare world of murderous glove puppets and scarlet crocodiles.

One would never know it from the work of most comics artists, but we are entering a post-photographic era, a stage in which photography is moving back in the direction of painting. Image manipulation is now the norm, whether it be the removal of "red-eye" from party snapshots, the smoothing of a cover-girl's wrinkles or the creation of entirely new digital art. Photos can no longer be trusted to represent reality, if indeed they ever could. We know this, but find it easy to forget: numerous psychological studies have demonstrated the ease with which photographs can create false memories.[39] Sarah Kember argues that anxieties over

39 Maryanne Garry and Matthew P. Gerrie, "When Photographs Create False Memories" in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14.6 (2005) 321-5.

the loss of "truth" in photography are really displacements of a deeper fear about the loss of a stable subject, which had already been undermined by structuralism. She says that the "guarantees and reassurances" offered by analogue photography "are ultimately illusory and were always already lost", and goes on to suggest that digital images should be regarded as "image statements rather than truths".[40] This is certainly the case for the protagonist of *Mr Punch*, who, in an unstable period of his life, is learning how to understand and interpret perceptual information. Long before the advent of digital image manipulation, he sees his distorted reflection and understands that the world is not as safe or coherent as he had supposed.

The third page of this extract is markedly different in colour and tone, with a single line-drawn image of Swatchell laid over a series of manipulated sepia-tint photographic images. The background of fields and trees is naturalistic enough, but the threatening figures appear to be photographs of masks. The convention that black and white represents the past is a familiar enough cinematic device: it is arguably one of the reasons that *Violent Cases* works so well in near-monochrome. But the addition of masks to photographic images blurs the conventions and is deliberately disturbing. The child who hears of an assault on his fraudulent grandfather finds himself imagining the attackers as semi-human puppet figures because the violence of Punch and Judy shows is paralleled in male-female relationships in the "real" world of the narrative.

Masks and stages are prevalent throughout *Mr Punch*. The book's opening image, and one that recurs frequently by virtue of the ubiquitous Punch and Judy shows, is that of a stage, and one cannot help noticing the endless preoccupation with modes of storytelling in Gaiman and McKean's comics. Perhaps because of the multimedia qualities of his work, Gaiman often describes himself as a storyteller rather than a writer.[41] He talks about the social functions of storytelling, valorises a practice for which he was once criticised (a child who tells stories is a liar, an adult who does so is a writer) and places himself in a folk tradition in which narrative is a populist, democratic practice rather than the preserve of a literary elite. His most well-known comic, *The Sandman*, is about the human propensity for telling stories, and in this series the central character, Dream, is an embodiment of narrative

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40 Sarah Kember, "The Shadow of the Object: Photography and Realism" in Liz Wells, ed. *The Photography Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

41 David Roel, interview with Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean. December 1994. <http://www.naylor.net/andrew/mckean/interview2.html>

itself.[42] Begun in 1988, *The Sandman* was ongoing when Gaiman scripted the books discussed in this chapter, so it is hardly surprising that all three centre on the act of telling a tale.

So much of *Mr Punch* is about the assumption of roles and the question of whether acting a part constitutes dishonesty. The Punch and Judy man in *Mr Punch* is the counterpart of the magician in *Violent Cases*, an adult gifted with powers of transformation that the protagonist finds both terrifying and captivating. The narrator describes the feeling of trying on a crocodile glove puppet:

> I didn't ever want to give it back. I wanted it to sit on my arm forever, brave where I was fearful, impetuous where I held back. I would have taken it to school and scared my teachers, taken it home and made it eat my sister…

The puppet, like a mask, enables the wearer to assume a role to which he aspires, but which he cannot quite manage alone. Like Doucet's alter ego with her anxieties about the way in which strangers regard her physical appearance, the narrator is concerned with assuming an external identity as a way of dealing with a threatening world. Here the assumption of social identity and the creation of a role through writing or performance are seen as facets of the same project. Just as the comics form is a mask for Gaiman in this semi-autobiographical story, so the puppet holds the potential to act as a mask for his seven-year-old alter ego.

Signal to Noise was originally serialised in *The Face* in 1989, and was published in an expanded and revised edition by Dark Horse and VG Graphics in 1992. It has subsequently been adapted both for the stage and for a BBC radio production that McKean has said was more successful than the book.[43] The story features a film director who plans his last film in his head whilst he is dying of cancer, and where *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* examine the beginnings of adult selfhood, *Signal to Noise* looks at its end. The film in question, planned in the closing years of the twentieth century but set in the last moments of the tenth, is the tale of a predicted apocalypse failing to materialise. McKean described the comic as "a look back in time as a way of dealing with the future", a summary that serves to emphasise

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42 Joe Sanders, ed. *The Sandman Papers: An Exploration of the Sandman Mythology* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2006).

43 Dave McKean, "Introduction", Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, *Signal to Noise* (2nd edition) (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse, 2007) N. pag.

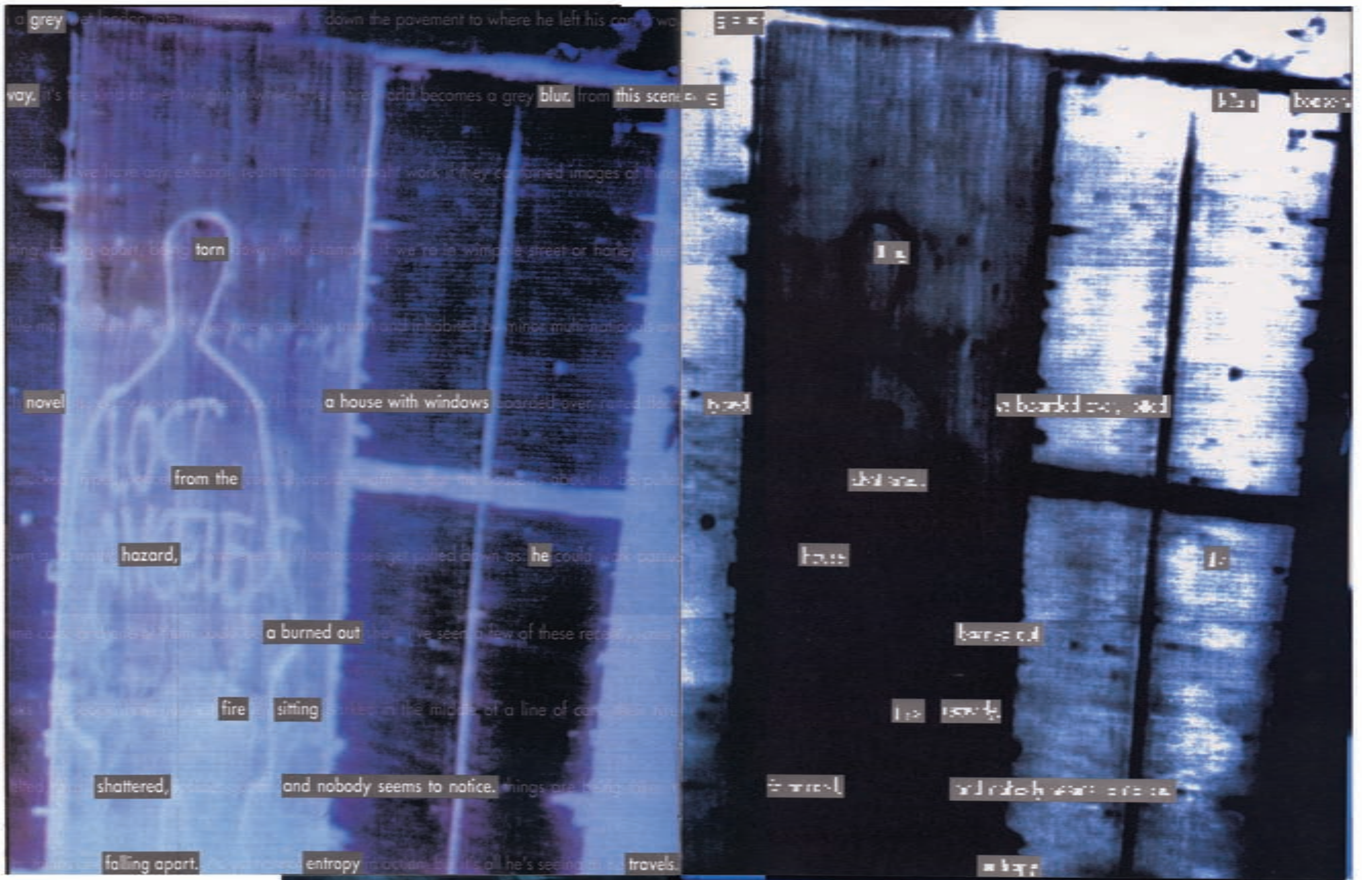

Figure 47.

similarities between *Signal to Noise* and the two other comics discussed here.[44] The film-maker justifies himself to a neighbour, who asks, "Why your obsession with the end of the world?" by claiming:

> It's not my obsession. It's *the* obsession. / Human beings are always living in the last days. // What have we got? Never more than a hundred years until the end of our world.

More than apocalypse, *Signal to Noise* is obsessed with interpretation. Doctors aside, the two people with whom the director has contact in the last days of his life are Inanna, who believes "that there [is] no ultimate meaning to anything. All there ever [is is] the illusion of order in the chaos", and Reed, who claims:

> It all *means* something. Even the stuff that doesn't mean *anything*. Like the noise you get changing channels on an old radio. / It's all patterns. Or it would be if you could see the big picture. There's no such thing as noise.

The phrase "Signal to Noise" is a technical term describing the ratio of a signal power

44 McKean (2007) N. pag.

to background noise, and its use as a comics title represents a synaesthetic sleight of hand, a play on the incongruity of an aural term which describes a visual effect. A number of panels in *Signal to Noise* mark areas of drift between meaning and non-meaning, interpretation and confusion in images. Lines on the narrator's palm become haze, then blackness; a snowstorm in a story becomes interference on a TV screen; disparate threads of narrative wander into each other's space in a blur. The director looks at an x-ray image, trying to make sense of an apparent abstraction in which the doctor is able to distinguish the shadow of a tumour.

When the collected edition of *Signal to Noise* was published, a number of abstract pages were added, marking the breaks that represented chronological gaps in serial publication. These images are often brightly coloured, conspicuously digital in their production, and contain largely incomprehensible fragments of text. McKean explained, "We ended up dealing with the noise part of the title a lot more than the signal in those bits".[45] One richly coloured blue page appears to feature a close-up television image, blurred and pixellated, which shows a barely outlined figure and a window frame (Figure 47). On the facing page the image is duplicated with an inverted tonal balance, the darkness of the window turned to four dimly glowing screens. Superimposed on this canvas is what appears to be an extract from Gaiman's instructions to McKean: "… from this scene onwards, if we have any external, realistic shots, it might work if they contained images of thing[s ro]tting, falling apart, being torn down…".[46] However, this text runs off the page, and seemingly random words are highlighted. On the facing page, the highlighted words are so pixellated as to become unreadable: they are abstract white squares clustered on small grey rectangles scattered across the page. The signal is weak, out of kilter, tipping from meaning into noise.

The book opens with epigraph from Barthes' "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" from *Image, Music, Text*: "Everything has a meaning or nothing has. To put it another way, one could say that art is without noise". Referring back to Barthes, we find an explanation and a footnote:

> …art is a system which is pure, no unit ever goes wasted*, however long, however loose, however tenuous may be the thread connecting it to one of the levels of the story.

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45 Brayshaw (1997) 69.
46 "Things rotting" is a conjectural emendation.

> * At least in literature, where the freedom of notation (in consequence of the abstract nature of articulated language) leads to a much greater responsibility than in the "analogical" arts such as cinema.[47]

For McKean and Gaiman, it seems, such a qualification leaves comics, and certainly *Signal to Noise*, on the "art" side as a text in which even apparently meaningless fuzz signifies. If cinematic images, by Barthes' implication, are more inclined towards meaningless "noise", then surely the story's suggestion is that the director's narrative of first-millenarian fears of apocalypse is more meaningful in comics form than it might have been had it been made into film. Paradoxically, cinema, the medium possessed of a greater propensity for realism, is the least *meaningful* in this schema. Gaiman and McKean's appropriation of Barthes is an answer to those who question the value of abstraction in comics.[48] Speaking of a BBC radio adaptation of *Signal to Noise*, McKean remarked:

> I think the interesting thing about that was how accepting of abstraction people are in sound, in music, and not in words and pictures. A picture has to look like something. Whereas, since when has a piece of music ever been a solid object? It is this wonderful, intangible abstract language.[49]

McKean returns to the idea of abstraction in relation to music in *Cages*, but in *Signal to Noise* the abstract pages perform a particular narrative function. *Signal to Noise* is constructed out of a variety of marks, be they figurative or abstract drawings, areas of paint or iconic signifiers, and the story itself describes the process of trying to pull meaning out of perceptual information in the course everyday life. As I noted in my reading of Moore and Campbell's *From Hell*, abstraction can be used in comics to describe experiences of the visionary sublime. Here, however, the protagonists are not transcending language to revel in an ecstatic state but grasping after understanding.

Images such as Figure 47 point towards two distinct problems: interpretation as a more or less universal feature of human existence and interpretation as a specific problem associated with visual media. A comic about a film that cannot be made unavoidably highlights some of the differences between the two forms, and

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47 Roland Barthes, trans. Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977) 89-90.
48 Many readers disliked the abstract, "noise" sections of *Signal to Noise*. Brayshaw (1997) 68.
49 Brayshaw (1997) 69.

Signal to Noise often explicitly discusses the relative advantages and drawbacks of different literary and artistic media. In the 2007 edition of *Signal to Noise* McKean noted that the character of the director grew out of a bundle of notes on the death of Eisenstein. One must exercise caution in applying film theory directly to comics, but it is not hard to see how Eisensteinian montage could be of interest to McKean. Eisenstein developed his theory of montage during the 1920s, the same period in which Soviet artists such as Rodchenko and El Lissitsky were particularly interested in photomontage.[50] Stripped of the Soviet director's ideological commitment, intellectual montage for McKean is a valuable tool in a narrative medium that relies on the juxtaposition and superimposition of fragments. The director's dream at the opening of *Signal to Noise* echoes many comics writers and artists' frustrations about the form. Although film is said to be a "compromised medium", the director insists that he uses it because it is an "obsession" over which he claims "I don't have a choice". Such remarks seem reminiscent of many comics artists' observations about their own medium. In spite of the falling costs of digital media, a film is still an extremely expensive undertaking, necessitating large teams of actors and production staff. Comics may be time-consuming, but as McKean himself has pointed out, they are democratic by virtue of being pleasingly low-tech.[51] The narrator of *Signal to Noise*, house-bound and alone, plans his film in a manner that takes advantage of the essential interiority of the comics form.

Facing the last days of his life, the narrator of *Signal to Noise* struggles with his own search for meaning through the narration of his planned film, but if he comes to any life-changing conclusions, he gives little away. Unlike the protagonists of *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* he has no one to speak for him, no older, more confident self to comment on his actions or survey his responses with the benefit of a quarter of a century of hindsight. Still, like the children in those earlier comics, he is powerless and isolated, telling his story in comics form because his chosen medium – film – is no longer available to him. Its conclusions, such as they are, are dark and pessimistic: the message of *Signal to Noise* is that interpretation is a labyrinth of false turns, and meaning, even when found, does not help much. As the director dies, the protagonists of his film are left alive but lost and confused, their beliefs and

50 Ades (1986) 62-97. See also Richard Taylor, ed. *The Eisenstein Reader* (London: BFI, 1998)
51 Dave McKean, *Pictures that Tick: Short Narrative, Book 1* (Pacific Grove, CA: Hourglass/ Allen Spiegel Fine Arts, 2001) 10.

livelihoods in shreds.

Surveying all three collaborations at once, it becomes evident that none of these nameless protagonists are in control of their own stories. This may be, in part, a side effect of Gaiman's double narrator strategy and McKean's collage technique. At best, these figures exist in the shadows of older selves who edit their biographies for them; at worst, they exist in a bewildering wasteland of endless signification in which they fight for space alongside scraps of printed ephemera, abstract paint-strokes and giant forks. It is also worth noting that all three protagonists fall into the increasingly familiar category of the lonely white male, struggling to make sense of a threatening and alienating world. Neither Gaiman nor McKean share Sim's masculinist views (and indeed, Gaiman's *Sandman* is noted for its unusually high proportion of female readers),[52] nor are they explicitly addressing a male-dominated comics readership, but they still choose the figure of the white man to address issues of troubled identity in late modern Britain.

Recollection of childhood is fundamentally an adult practice. Only distance can provide the opportunity to reflect, to recognise the memories that have survived and grown, and to know what one has forgotten. It is no accident that so many self-consciously adult comics have taken up a nostalgic stance, with narrators looking back at their past selves. Like Crumb, Barry and others, Gaiman and McKean began working at a time when comics were still in sight of their childish past. McKean's use of collage and photomontage over a traditional comics style represents a deliberate attempt to get away from this past, to make the comic book a respectable, grown up, artistic medium.

Although *Violent Cases* and *Mr Punch* centre on children's encounters with violence, they are not of quite the same order as Barry's representations of trauma. Where Barry's cicadas symbolised the survival of memories, Gaiman emphasises the opposite: the loss of memory, corruption of information, and the difficulty of finding a mode of representation that is faithful to the remembered experience. Intuition tells us that our more traumatic experiences should be burned more indelibly, and more truthfully, on the memory; evidence suggests that this is not always so.[53] In their collaborations, Gaiman and McKean explore the reality of shifting mental

52 Contino (2001).
53 Loftus (1979).

images which overlap, invade and replace one another as an individual transforms from a child into an adult. Human memories are corruptible, fallible, cobbled together out of a mishmash of partial perceptions and half-truths. For Gaiman and McKean, it would be an act of dishonesty to narrate such memories in the form of a coherent, traditional comics narrative, edited and laid out in a neat, straight line. For them, an adult narrative should be comfortable with flaws, gaps and silence.