

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nostalgia, Collection and Identity in the Comics of Chris Ware

The work of Chris Ware forms a neat conclusion to my investigation of selfhood in alternative comics. Throughout the last six chapters I have been tracing two main themes: gender and sexuality on the one hand and childhood and memory on the other. Both of these themes have been central to Ware's career. From his early, short *Quimby the Mouse* strips (1991-93, collected 2003), through the fat doorstop *Jimmy Corrigan* (1993-2000, collected 2000) to the currently incomplete *Rusty Brown* (2005-present), Ware obsessively re-treads the same ground, narrating the lives of lonely American males whose sad and traumatic childhood experiences have moulded them into damaged, dysfunctional adults.

Following a brief outline of Ware's cultural and creative background, I want to start by looking at *Quimby the Mouse* because it is in this early work that Ware sketches out the themes that were to become central in his later comics. I will then discuss short extracts from *Jimmy Corrigan* and *Rusty Brown*, examining the ways in which these comics dissect problems of social disconnection and troubled family relationships. I want to argue that for Ware, the comic book medium is inextricable from the lives of his protagonists, firstly through the interplay between private selfhood and the public visual language of graphic design, and secondly by the association of comics with childhood and nostalgia. Finally, I will discuss the question of why the collection and possession of comic books and other objects is such a central preoccupation for Ware.

Chris Ware's work represents a confluence of the themes and ideas of underground comics and the slick graphic design of the 1990s. It is significant that Ware's fine art studies took place at University of Texas at Austin. Austin has long been an important countercultural centre both in its musical history (site of the Armadillo World Headquarters, for example) and as the home of several major underground cartoonists including Gilbert Shelton and Jack Jackson (Jaxon). Both of these artists studied at the University of Texas, and indeed, some of Shelton's earliest work (including his "Wonder Wart-Hog") was published in the college

magazine *The Texas Ranger*.¹ Ware likewise produced his *Quimby the Mouse* strips for the university paper *The Daily Texan*, and claims to have acquired much of his graphic design knowledge from the “extremely helpful and tolerant pre-press guys” on that publication.² He has frequently acknowledged his debt to the underground, particularly to Crumb, whom he describes as “the greatest artist in the world”, and to whose influence he attributes his sketchbook drawings.³ With regard to other artists discussed in this thesis, he is also a friend and fan of Lynda Barry, and has said that “[h]er semiautobiographical experiments were pretty much responsible for the maturation comics experienced in the ‘90s”.⁴

Ware has done his best to suppress his very earliest experiments in comics, but his *Quimby the Mouse* strips have been collected, and it was this work that drew him to the attention of *RAW* editor Art Spiegelman, himself a veteran of the underground.⁵ Spiegelman encouraged Ware and published his work in *RAW* in 1990 and ‘91.⁶ Throughout the 1990s Ware worked on his first major narrative *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*, which was serialised in Ware’s comic *The Acme Novelty Library* and published in a single volume in 2000.⁷ Unusually for a comic, *Jimmy Corrigan* won not only industry awards (notably the Angoulême Award for Best Album in 2003) but the Guardian First Book Award and an American Book Award. It is relatively easy to see why Ware has enjoyed such success beyond the small market of regular comics buyers. In both pace and subject matter *Jimmy Corrigan* is perhaps the most novelistic of all comics, and Ware manipulates the codes and conventions of everyday language with a precision that few comics writers share. He also appropriates much of the visual language of graphic design, a field that enjoyed increasing exposure throughout the 1990s, with new magazines

1 Rosenkranz (2002) 16-20.

2 Alan Pipes, *Production for Graphic Designers*. 4th edition. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005) 98.

3 Gary Groth in conversation with Chris Ware and Jules Feiffer, in *Conversations among Four Generations of Cartoonists*. Special issue of *The Comics Journal*. Vol 4 (Winter 2004), 59. See also Chris Ware, introduction to *The Acme Novelty Datebook Vol. 1* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2003), 3.

4 Evan Narcisse, “Q&A: Chris Ware”. *Time Out New York* 571, 7th-13th September 2006.

5 For reports that Ware wants to destroy all copies of *Floyd Farland: Citizen of the Future*, see Jon-Mikel Gates, *Cowboy Orange*. Blog. April 10th 2006. <<http://cowboyorange.com/blogs/?cat=4>>

6 *RAW* 2.2 (1990) and 2.3 (1991).

7 Throughout this chapter my references to *Jimmy Corrigan* will be to the single volume edition. This text is non-paginated. There is much work to be done on Ware’s editing process, as scenes often change considerably from newspaper publication to comic book and from comic book to collected edition. See, for example, Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (London: Laurence King, 2004) 100, for a comparison of two versions of a page from *Rusty Brown*.

such as *Ray Gun* and *Speak*.⁸ As I will demonstrate, the study of typography, composition, information design and other aspects of graphic art would impact upon Ware's developing style and help to promote his work to readers who had not previously been consumers of comics.

The *Quimby the Mouse* strips are formally experimental, predominantly black and white, and usually silent. They owe a great deal to George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, a surreal, minimal, early twentieth-century strip that Robert Warshow called "the best that the comic strip has produced" and E. E. Cummings claimed as an allegory of the individual in society.⁹ But where *Krazy Kat* centred on the love triangle of Krazy, Ignatz and Offissa Pup, Quimby is always either alone or in an emotionally fraught relationship with one other person. In my chapter on Crumb I discussed his appropriation of the funny animal comic for adult narratives. In view of their shared commitment to the underground tradition, it is worth noting that Art Spiegelman, who published Ware's work in *RAW*, was also using a mouse figure at around the same period. Although Spiegelman's *Maus* and Ware's *Quimby* are very different in theme and scope, both use the smallness and fragility of mice to describe the vulnerability of human protagonists in a threatening or alienating world.

Ware notes in his introduction to the collected *Quimby the Mouse* that he wrote many of these strips as his grandmother was descending into dementia in the years before her death. He says:

All her life she'd been one of the most generous people I'd known... But in death, she became alarmingly demanding, petulant, almost spiteful, cruelly alienating herself from my family's memories of her... During her steady decline I continued my weekly strip for the student newspaper in Austin, but found that I was only able to draw stories of my increasingly littler mouse wandering, alone, through a large, unoccupied house – my grandmother's house. (2)

Isolation, disconnection from people and longing for an irrecoverable past: these problems are established in *Quimby the Mouse* only to become increasingly dominant in Ware's mature work. As well as the strips in which Quimby explicitly struggles to cope with his grandmother's decline and death, there are many

8 For a graphic design perspective on Ware, see Rick Poyner, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (London: Laurence King, 2003).

9 Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, eds. *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) 65 and 30-34.

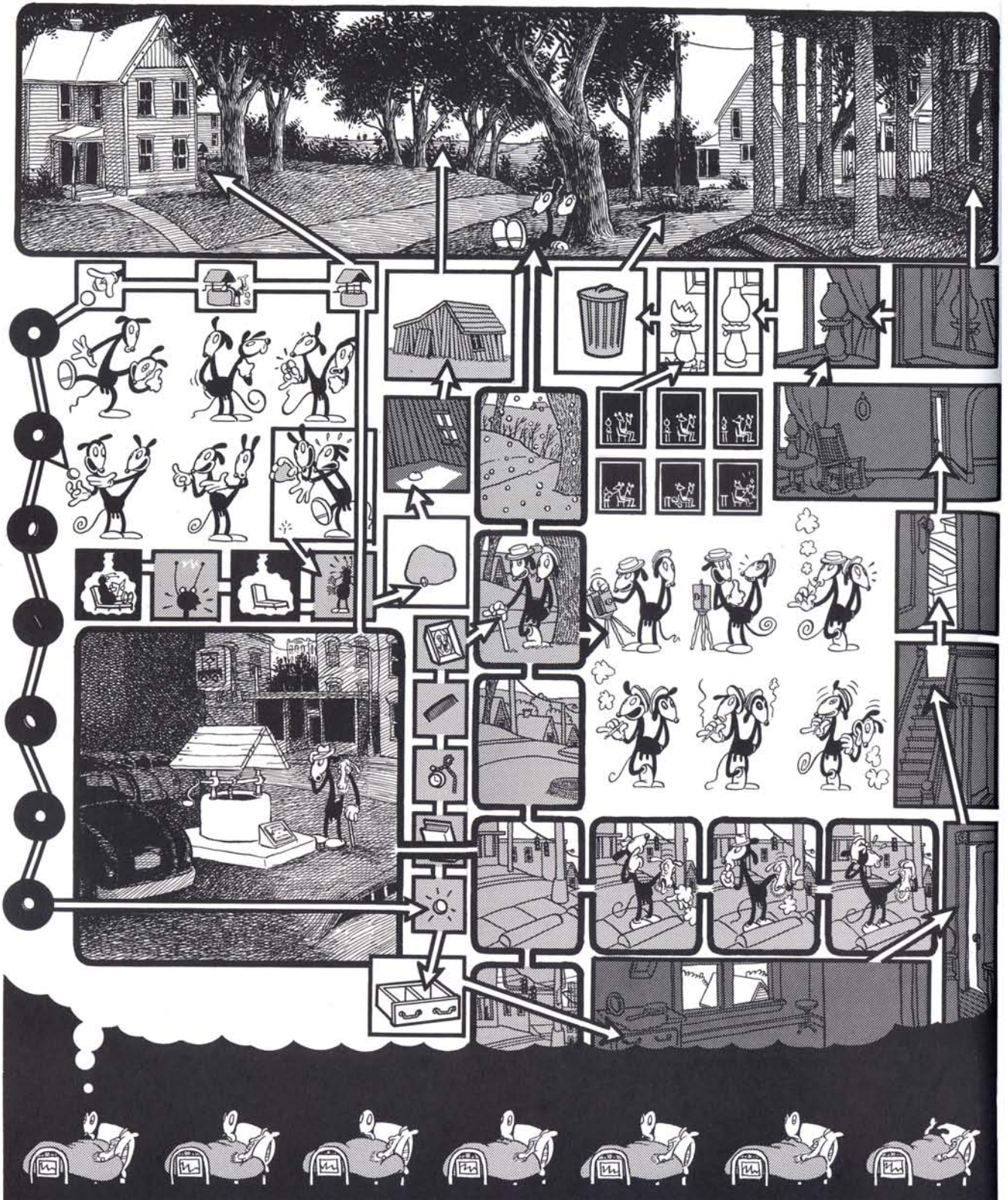


Figure 48.

narratives in which he forms a love-hate relationship with a severed cat-head, Sparky.¹⁰ Most interesting, however, are the *Quimbies the Mouse* strips, in which two conjoined mice age at different rates and the younger one worries at length about what will happen when his twin dies. I want to take as an example the untitled strip that appears on page 10 of the collected edition (Figure 48). This strip exhibits much of the technical sophistication that one sees in Ware's recent *Building Stories* (2005-6, collected as *Acme Novelty Library 18* in 2007) and like those tales this strip is not so much a single narrative as a string of anecdotes that the protagonist remembers in relation to a particular place. It owes much to Richard McGuire's "Here", an influential six-page comic that appeared in *RAW* 2.1 (1989) and depicted a single place in several time periods. The Quimbies are joined at the hip, with two heads and penises but only two arms and legs between them. As they lie in a hospital bed at the bottom of the page, the healthy one recalls small incidents from their life together: the squashing of an ant, the taking of a photograph which now lies in a drawer, the breaking of a lamp in an incident of domestic violence. These miniature narratives are non-linear, interweaving across the page in multiple directions. Arrows sometimes indicate the order in which the panels should be read, but more often the reader is left to work it out, and there is often no beginning or end to these diagrammatic stories.

Crucially, the entire sequence is enclosed within a thought balloon, and its non-linear structure is analogous to the random jumbling of thoughts in the protagonist's memory. Small features in the image at the top of the page are associated with specific memories: a distant barn reminds of the incident with the ant; a rubbish bin recalls the disposal of the lamp smashed in anger; a wishing well once set in a garden is now in an urban street. The young conjoined Quimby's memories are full of guilt at his treatment of his twin: we see the weaker brother coughing from passive smoke, panting as the other walks too fast and cowering from his seemingly random violence. Matthew Pustz is right to describe these non-linear strips as "unending cycles of despair": they enact the endless repetition

10 For a superb analysis of "I'm A Very Generous Person", a visually complex monologue in which Quimby tries to delude himself that he is over a break-up with Sparky, see Gene Kannenberg's "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image and Visual Narrative Strategies" in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) 174-97.

of guilty or troubling memories.¹¹ Equally significant, however, are the small visual details that are not properly narrative at all: reading this page one is left with the sense that we are seeing not just a rocking chair but the precise shape of *that* rocking chair, not just any drawer but the exact location of the drawer that holds a treasured item. Rooms, furniture and objects are endowed with heightened significance because of their ability to encapsulate particular memories in Quimby's mind.

Reading *Quimby the Mouse*, one becomes aware of the recurrence of buildings, particularly domestic spaces, in Ware's early strips. The lonely Quimby wandering through his grandmother's empty house becomes an emblem for a more fundamental isolation that, for Ware, is a characteristic of modern existence. In Figure 48, time passes, and an urban space grows up around the ageing Quimbies. The young Quimby's memories, however, do not follow the same linear model but skip about in a pattern of free association. Reality and thought are out of synch, and it seems that for Ware, architectural spaces are a more useful model for the structure of memory when translated to the comics page than a more traditional, linear, left-to-right panel format. We will see a development of this preoccupation with the psychology of physical space in *Jimmy Corrigan*.

Ware has said that the Quimbies figure was a direct reference to his grandmother's decline and death, whereas Sparky the Cat derived from a particularly bitter relationship break-up.¹² But examining this strip in the context of Ware's later work, one recognises the recurrence of double figures in Ware's comics. James Corrigan is the nineteenth-century counterpart of his grandson Jimmy, whilst Rusty Brown and his friend Chalky White seem to represent the light and dark of socially marginalised white men, one bitterly angry and the other almost irritatingly optimistic. In retrospect, it seems that the Quimbies are not only about Ware's grandmother but about the problems of relationships *per se*, particularly the bonds of family or lifelong friendship which cause pain but cannot be severed without considerable trauma.

Jimmy Corrigan tells the story of a lonely man meeting his father, grandfather and adoptive sister for the first time, whilst also flashing back to episodes in the

11 Pustz (1999) 118.

12 Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (London: Lawrence King, 2004) 48.

grandfather's childhood. The tales of both modern day Jimmy and his grandfather James are narrated less with words than through Ware's visual representation of their numerous dreams, fantasies and unconscious responses to events. *Jimmy Corrigan* is very long and it would be impossible to undertake a full treatment of it here. I wish to focus first on a sequence of four pages in which Jimmy's father's car is stolen from outside a diner, and Jimmy has a dream (Figures 49a-d).

Jimmy sits in a diner, stumbling through an awkward conversation in which his father attempts to make up for decades of absence by inviting Jimmy to stay at his place and watch videos. Jimmy, emotionally inarticulate as ever, is frozen with anxiety, and slurps at his drink, saying nothing. When his father explodes with fury at the theft of his car, Jimmy retreats into one of his many fantasy scenarios. He dreams of narrating the day's events to a child of his own, but is interrupted by a superhero figure on the windowsill. This figure metamorphoses from tiny, doll-like creature to a godlike giant who picks up their house and drops it. This superman is not just a random fragment of psychic detritus from Jimmy's day but a highly ambivalent symbol who appears throughout Ware's work, and it is worth looking at him in greater detail.¹³

Jimmy Corrigan opens with a childhood incident in which Jimmy's mother sleeps with a man dressed as "The Super-Man" at a classic car show. The narrative then proceeds to a present-day scene in which one of Jimmy's colleagues commits suicide dressed in a superhero costume, having left Jimmy a post-it note saying, "I sat across from you for *six months* and you never *once* noticed me! Goodbye." The superhero figure reappears elsewhere in Ware's work, notably in a long, silent, untitled sequence in *Acme Novelty Library: Our Annual Report to Shareholders* (2005). In this story he saves a young girl from a falling aircraft, allowing the other passengers to drown, then keeps her away from civilisation and has sex with her when she reaches adolescence. This figure is always middle aged, rather chubbier than the classic superhero, an icon of the flawed father. His superpowers are not moderated by superior moral conduct, but are wielded clumsily, selfishly and with arbitrary cruelty. In *Jimmy Corrigan* this surrogate father figure is, in part, the subject of oedipal fantasies, but in view of the suicide note which charges Jimmy with his dysfunctional lack of engagement with other people, it seems that he also has the

13 Daniel Raeburn's fanzine *The Imp* 3 (1999) includes a perceptive, if now dated, reading of this superhero figure.



Figure 49a.

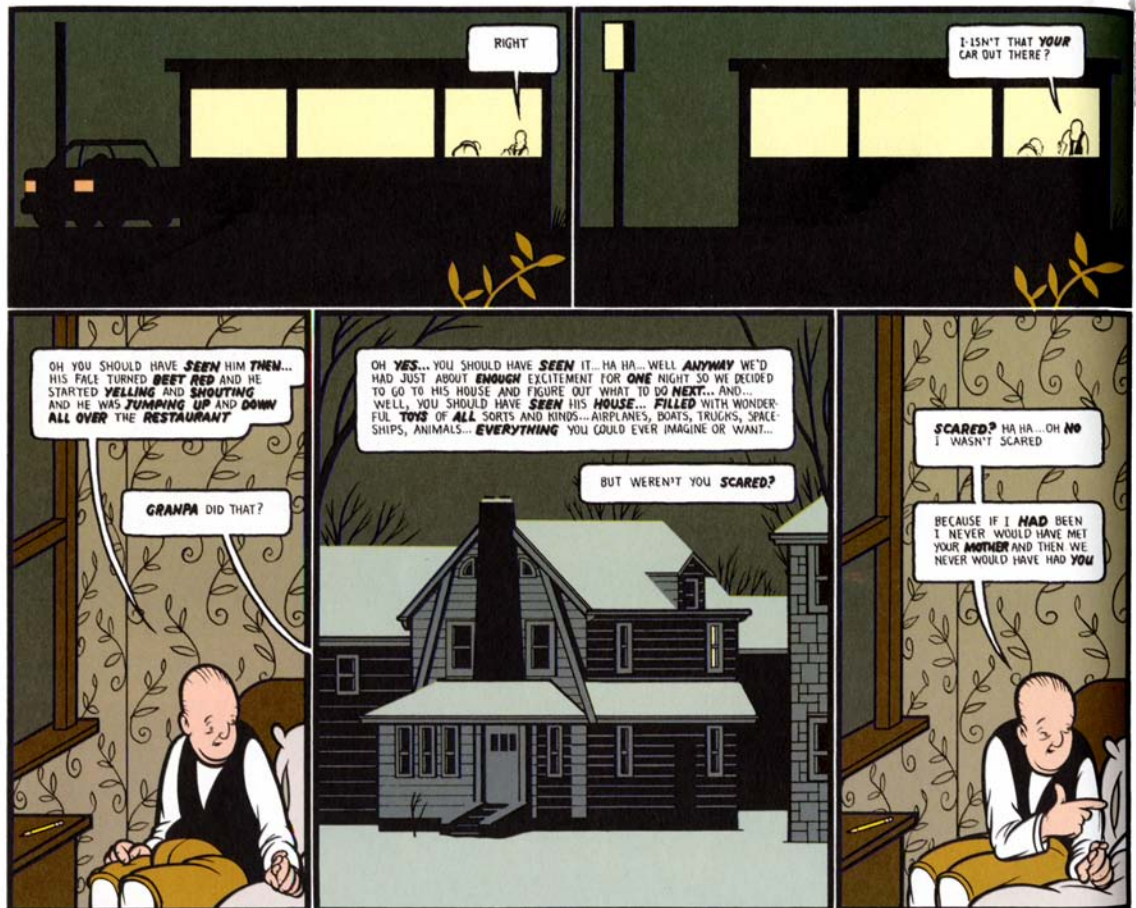


Figure 49b.



Figure 49c.



Figure 49d.

power and the inclination to spotlight others' weaknesses. His fearful dominance in Jimmy's unconscious is marked by his garish red and blue costume, which in this extract is set against the dull browns and greys around him. Scathing as Ware is about the dominance of superheroes in comics, he appropriates the brightly-costumed male to talk about the difficulties of masculine identity and the terrifying gap between Jimmy's fantasy life and his stilted reality. It is no coincidence that in terms of comics history the superhero figure stands in a parental relationship to many alternative comics since the 1970s. Like many other comics authors, Ware grew up reading mainstream action and adventure comics, so the superhero is *Jimmy Corrigan's* literary ancestor as well as the character's symbolic father within the text itself.

Father-son relationships are central to most of Ware's comics, and they are invariably fraught with hostility and failure. In *Our Annual Report to Shareholders*, Rusty Brown's father is shown to suffer from depression and view his son with disdain, while the "Big Tex" strips depict an openly abusive father-son relationship, as Tex's father repeatedly beats, humiliates and even plots to kill his stumbling, incompetent son (*Annual Report*, 26, 40, 60). In the nineteenth-century sections of *Jimmy Corrigan*, the young James Corrigan's father neglects and eventually abandons him at the Chicago World Fair. *Jimmy Corrigan* is not autobiographical, but Ware, like his protagonist, met his father for the first time in adulthood, and spent only a few hours with him before his death. Ware had already started writing *Jimmy Corrigan* when his father contacted him, and he discusses his life's unnerving imitation of art in a note at the back of the collected edition. Having outlined the sequence of events – a series of phone calls and a single meeting before his father's death from a heart attack – Ware adds:

I mention none of this to try and align myself with the seemingly unstoppable swarm of personal memoirists who populate the extra-curricular booklists of multiple self-help programs, but to admit the chasm which gapes between the ridiculous, artless, dumbfoundedly meaningless coincidence of "real" life and my weak fiction – not to mention my inability at knitting them together. (*JC*, n.pag.)

The statement pulls in two directions: *Jimmy Corrigan* both is and is not about Ware's relationship with his father. Superficially it is a fiction that came true with astonishing accuracy, yet to its author *Jimmy Corrigan* still inevitably fails because it cannot give meaning or coherence to the relationship it describes.

Like Ware, Jimmy struggles to make sense of his relationship with his father. In the dream sequence in this extract, Jimmy imagines breaking out of the cycle of indifferent or non-existent parenting, but his fantasy, in which he narrates the day's events to a child of his own, is almost as implausible as that of the superman. Jimmy is single and childless, vaguely in love with a colleague who finds him annoying, and is trapped by the many neuroses that he developed in childhood. He remains close to his mother, and Ware's conspicuous refusal to depict her face leads the reader to suspect Jimmy of Oedipal feelings. His muddled blend of wonder and terror, which mirrors his curiosity and apprehension about meeting his father, is heightened by the uncharacteristic mock-jovial voice he uses to address "Billy":

Billy! Why, Billy, look! Look who's on the windowsill! It's Superman! It's Superman and he's really small and he's waving at us! Ha ha! Why, isn't that wonderful, Billy? Look!

The over-emphasised baby talk highlights this forced, uncharacteristic speech: the voice in the dream is that of an alternate version of Jimmy's self, one which, in turn, is performing a particular self for the audience of a child. The fact that Jimmy goes on to tell the child (inaccurately) how babies are made betrays his other preoccupation, which is never far from the surface. The dream throws up a tangle of anxieties about interpersonal relationships and the impossible necessity of performing an identity that does not quite fit, not to mention a muddle of incomprehension and guilt about the suicide of his unknown colleague. Like the dozens of other dreams in *Jimmy Corrigan*, it owes much to those late twentieth-century psychoanalytic models which posit the function of the dream as the processing of events and emotions that threaten the integrity of the psyche.¹⁴ The dreams of both Jimmy and the young James Corrigan a century previously comprise an uneasy blend of trauma-processing and sheer surrealism, whilst wish-fulfilment is confined strictly to waking fantasies.

In many ways this extract, like much of *Jimmy Corrigan*, is conspicuous for its slow pace and mundane subject matter. Notwithstanding the imminent loss of the car, there is little in the way of dramatic action: both men are shown drinking from paper cups and stumbling awkwardly through a dull conversation. Ware pays a great deal of attention to the realities of everyday language: he includes

14 See Sara Flanders, ed. and intro. *The Dream Discourse Today* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 1-23.

discourse markers, repetition, stuttering, trailed off sentences, pauses and coughs. Many panels are effectively silent, containing no dialogue at all. Here, these silent or near-silent panels serve two functions: firstly, they slow the narrative down, forcing the reader to experience the awkwardness of the situation; secondly, they draw attention to the fact that language in *Jimmy Corrigan* is not really about communicating. The suicide post-it note marks a theme of disconnection that forms a central thread of the book. Ware includes apparently insignificant details: the clunking and spitting sounds that accompany the cooking of bacon; the background noise of a radio skipping between stations; the small talk between a gas station cashier and a customer. Chatter and noise are everywhere; connection is almost impossible to achieve.

Ware's emphasis on the inadequacy of language and the inability of individuals to communicate serves to counter the logocentrism that threatens the comics form. In *Jimmy Corrigan*, text-heavy panels invariably signal trouble, often depicting an anxious speaker trying to cover up emotional turmoil. In page two of this particular extract, where the narration slips seamlessly from the day's events to Jimmy's reworking of his experiences in a dream, the change is marked by a switch from inarticulacy to logorrhoea, the protagonist's helpless attempt to mask his discomfort. The emotional weight of this proliferating speech is important because Ware's comics do not, on the whole, rely heavily on dialogue for their narration: the pictures themselves tell the story rather than illustrating a verbal narrative.

We see the power of visual narration in Ware's use of body language. Several reviewers have remarked on Jimmy's bad posture, but few have stressed the narrative function of his shifting, slouching, shuffling, awkward body as an index of his emotional state.¹⁵ Likewise James's furrowed brow and hunched posture, which suggest that he is permanently flinching in anticipation of violence, says a great deal about the day-to-day existence of an abused and neglected child. The research on non-verbal communication pioneered by psychologists like Mehrabian in the 1960s and 70s has been absorbed into popular culture so readily that it is tempting to overlook its role in visual narrative.¹⁶ It is of particular significance in *Jimmy Corrigan* because the book's rejection of speech as the primary mode of communication leads it towards a kind of textual mime. Through the interaction of body language

15 Eisner discusses the importance of body language in *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) 101-3.

16 See Albert Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972).

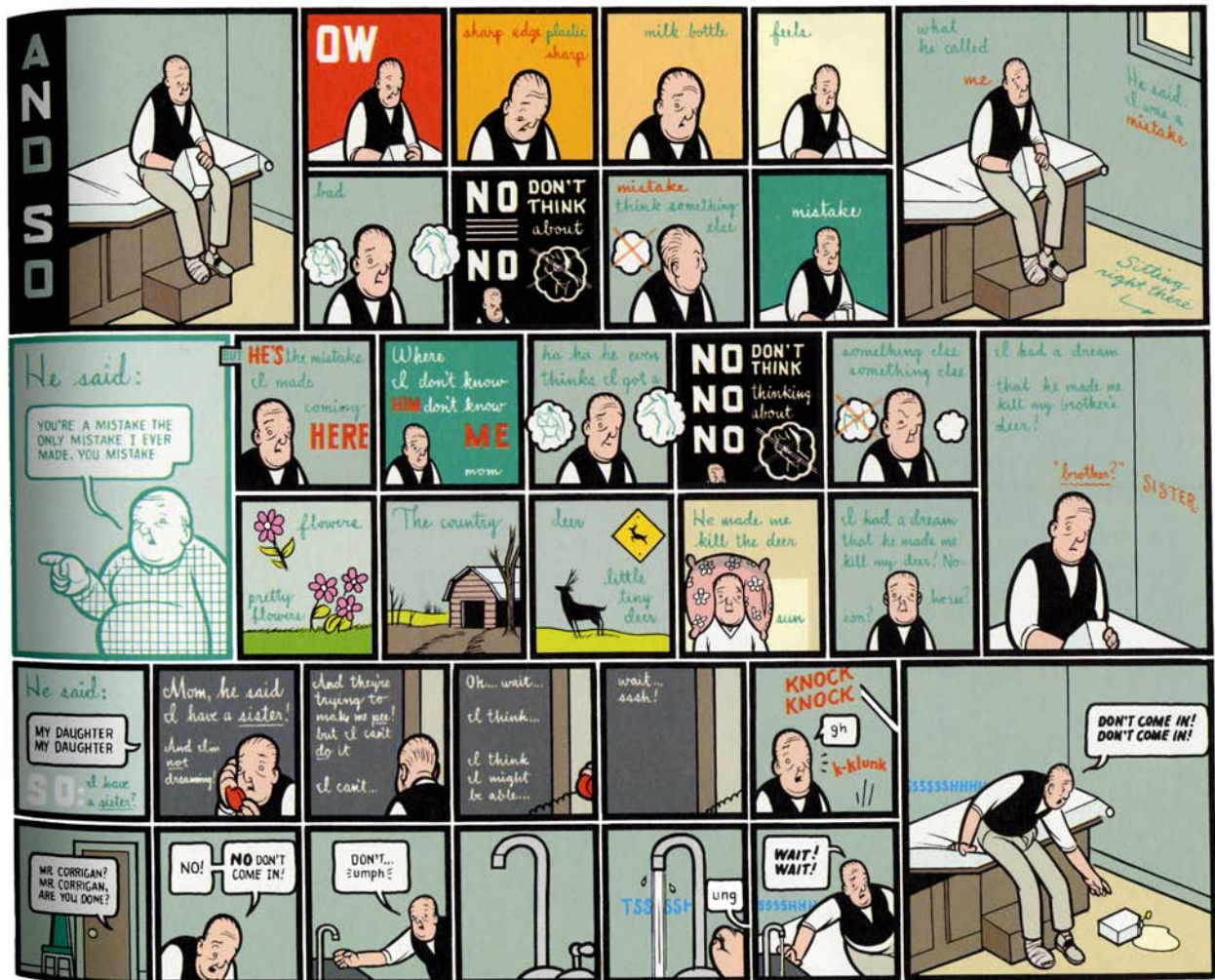


Figure 50.

and graphic design styles, non-verbal communication is elevated from a handy flirting tool to a fully fledged visual language. By privileging simplified images and other non-verbal signifiers, Ware sides with Saraceni, McCloud and the other comics critics who have stressed the need to “reduce” images to the level of words.

I want to talk about these reduced images in some detail because whilst many critics have made perceptive observations about Ware’s distinctive graphic style, there is still a great deal to be said about the synergy of form and content in his work. Ware is unusually concerned with the semiotics of the comics medium, and whilst he has abandoned many comics conventions as clumsy or clichéd (the signalling of a distinction between dream and reality, for example, or the use of cloud-shaped balloons for verbal thoughts), he readily appropriates features of other sign-systems in his work. Figure 50 is taken from a later scene in *Jimmy Corrigan*, in which Jimmy is in hospital, having just been involved in a minor accident with a mail van. He is in a state of shock, partly because of the collision

but primarily because his father has just told him that he has a sister, dropping the information with the thoughtlessly casual remark, "What... you thought you were the only mistake I ever made?". In his ensuing state of bewilderment and panic, Jimmy is struggling to produce a urine sample.

The page is extremely cluttered. Just as Ware introduces wordless panels to slow down a scene of awkwardness or tedium, so he crowds thirty five dense panels into a small page as a reflection of his protagonist's emotional turmoil. Pacing is key, and Ware explained in one interview:

I reread every strip hundreds of times while I'm working on it. Sometimes it's a matter of inserting an extra panel or a bodily shuffle or a cough. Sometimes it's changing the angle of the drawing. It's trying to get a sense of reality and the passage of time almost in a musical way.¹⁷

The comparison to music is significant for two reasons. Firstly, as a keen pianist and music critic, and publisher of a specialist magazine *The Ragtime Ephemeralist*, Ware clearly knows a great deal about musical form and structure. This form governs the shape not just of individual scenes but of the whole book, and Ware pays close attention to the balance between different elements. Leitmotifs such as horses and peaches recur in different guises throughout. Asked by an interviewer whether the term "symphony" would be appropriate to *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware agreed, "it was sort of structured that way, consciously, especially the whole seventh part that is set in 1893".¹⁸ Throughout the book, individual pages can be compared to musical passages. Here, for example, the multiplication of panels in the face of Jimmy's panic is reminiscent of the mass of semiquavers in a *presto* passage. However, there is a second possible explanation for Ware's interest: music has a complex non-verbal system of written notation, and it is evident – particularly in this scene – that Ware is trying to expand and refine the repertoire of signs available to comics.

This page is technically innovative on a number of counts. In the opening panel Ware enlarges conjunctions to form a structural part of the image: here and elsewhere in *Jimmy Corrigan*, "and", "but" and "so" become a kind of verbal-visual punctuation, joining and separating sequences of panels. Verbalised thoughts are

17 Emma Brockes, "I still have overwhelming doubt about my ability". Interview with Chris Ware. *The Guardian* December 7th 2001. <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/firstbook2001/story/0,10486,614835,00.html>>

18 Andrew Arnold, "Q and A with Comicbook Master Chris Ware". *Time*, 1st September 2000. <<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,53887,00.html>>.

not contained within cloud-like balloons but stray across panels, even following the lines of walls and furniture. Ware's refusal to mark a clear distinction between real and imagined events – demonstrated here by Jimmy's imaginary phone conversation with his mother – renders *Jimmy Corrigan* a sort of visual equivalent of interior monologue. Indeed, the fact that the phrase "stream of consciousness" appears in Ware's published sketchbook *The Acme Novelty Datebook Vol. 1* (2003) alongside the instruction "loosen up your narrative" (86) suggests that Ware consciously conceived of his comics in these terms. More importantly, however, Ware appropriates a number of conventions from twentieth-century visual culture, and at several points on this page Jimmy's thoughts are filtered through the sign systems of the world around him. From the beginning, traffic-light colours signify a sense of urgency. Soon afterwards, a series of parallel lines represents Jimmy's attempt to structure and control his thoughts, and the enlarged "NO... NO" mimics the style of a roadside warning. In the next panel an empty bubble with a cross through it implies an attempt to erase distracting mental images. Jimmy tries to calm his mind with a peaceful, bucolic image of a deer, but his thoughts swerve back to the road sign which was the last thing he saw before his accident.

In this extract the visual references to road signs are of particular interest, because I want to suggest that Ware is deliberately exploiting the tension created by the use of public codes for private discourse. Several of the major semiotic systems that Ware appropriates are public: the visual language of advertising and the extremely simplified images used in information signs and on instruction diagrams. The title, "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth", is repeated throughout the comic in the form of advertising logos or poster-style panels, suggesting a fantasy world of public acclaim at odds with the protagonist's humdrum existence. In their own environment, information signs convey just that: here is a telephone; this is a mail van; stop the car; watch out for deer. In non-fictional narrative form they provide very simple sets of instructions: how to exit the plane in the event of an emergency, or how to assemble your stylish new desk. It would come as something of a shock if the figures in these "comics" (and Scott McCloud agrees to include them in his definition) were to express fear at the thought of a crash or annoyance at the complexity of a simple 10-minute assembly.¹⁹ This incongruity lies at the heart of

19 McCloud (1993) 20.

Jimmy Corrigan: Ware taps into public sign systems that assume a dispassionate set of interpreters, but reprograms these systems with emotion and uses them not to convey broad, simple stages of a set of actions but to detail every nuance of human behaviour and every flicker of body language.

Ware's appropriation of public sign systems would probably not be possible were it not for the distilled minimalism of his images. His figures are described in clear, strong lines and decisive blocks of colour, a style that Ware claims to have "stole[n]" directly from Herge's *Tintin*.²⁰ It comes as a surprise to many readers that his comics are entirely drawn (although not coloured) by hand: they have a cold, mechanical, too-perfect look about them. This sense of coldness is accentuated by the bleak atmosphere that Ware produces with his choice of a muted palette and empty urban landscapes. The protagonists of Ware's comics often seem lost in a world dominated by machines, buildings and the endless clutter of signs and corporate logos. Brad Prager argues that Ware's mimicry of early twentieth-century graphic styles is directly related to an anxiety about loss of identity in a world dominated by machines. He claims:

Jimmy, because of the mechanistic world of which he is a part, is fundamentally a steely assemblage – a claim to which Ware calls the reader's attention through providing cut-out kits with which readers can themselves construct the robot Jimmy.²¹

There are flaws in this. Jimmy is not straightforwardly, *fundamentally* a "steely assemblage": for all his emotional stiltedness, his crippling diffidence and inarticulacy, Jimmy cries, faints, dreams, panics and contemplates suicide. His personality is irreparably shaken by the dehumanising effects of modern urban life and by any number of miniature traumas in his past, but it is a long way from being erased. Still, there is a lot of truth in Prager's argument, and indeed, further evidence of Ware's preoccupation with bodily mechanisation and relationships between people and robots has emerged since the publication of his paper. A sketch in the *Acme Novelty Datebook Vol. 1* shows a masturbating robot (160), Rocket Sam builds robots as companions but then neglects or abuses them (*Annual Report*, 34-8) and

20 Rebecca Bengal, "On Cartooning". Interview with Chris Ware. PBS, 12th November 2007. <http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/tintinandi/sfartists_ware.html>

21 Brad Prager, "Modernism in the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" *International Journal of Comics Art* 5.1 (2003) 210.

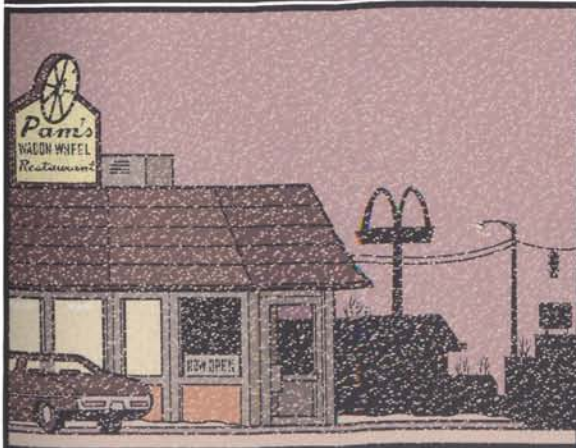
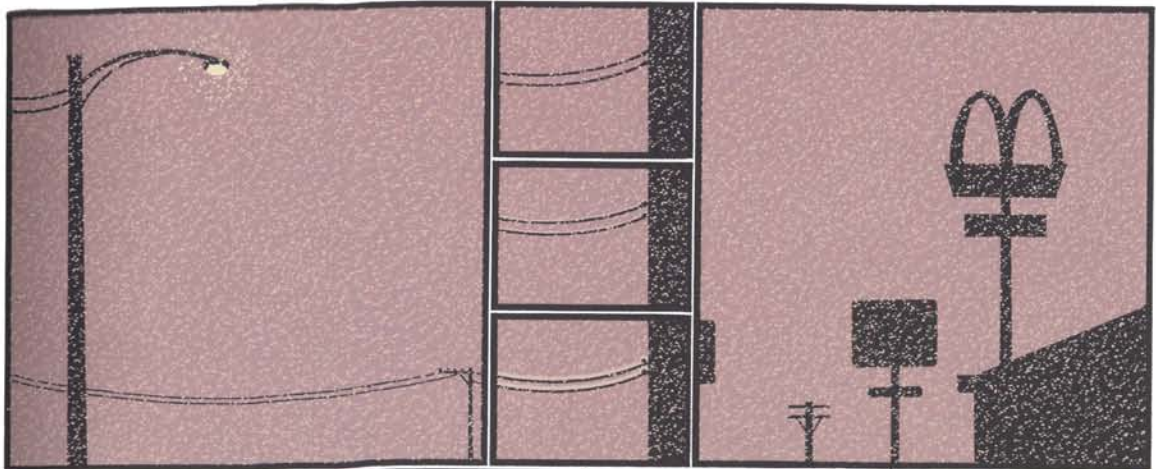
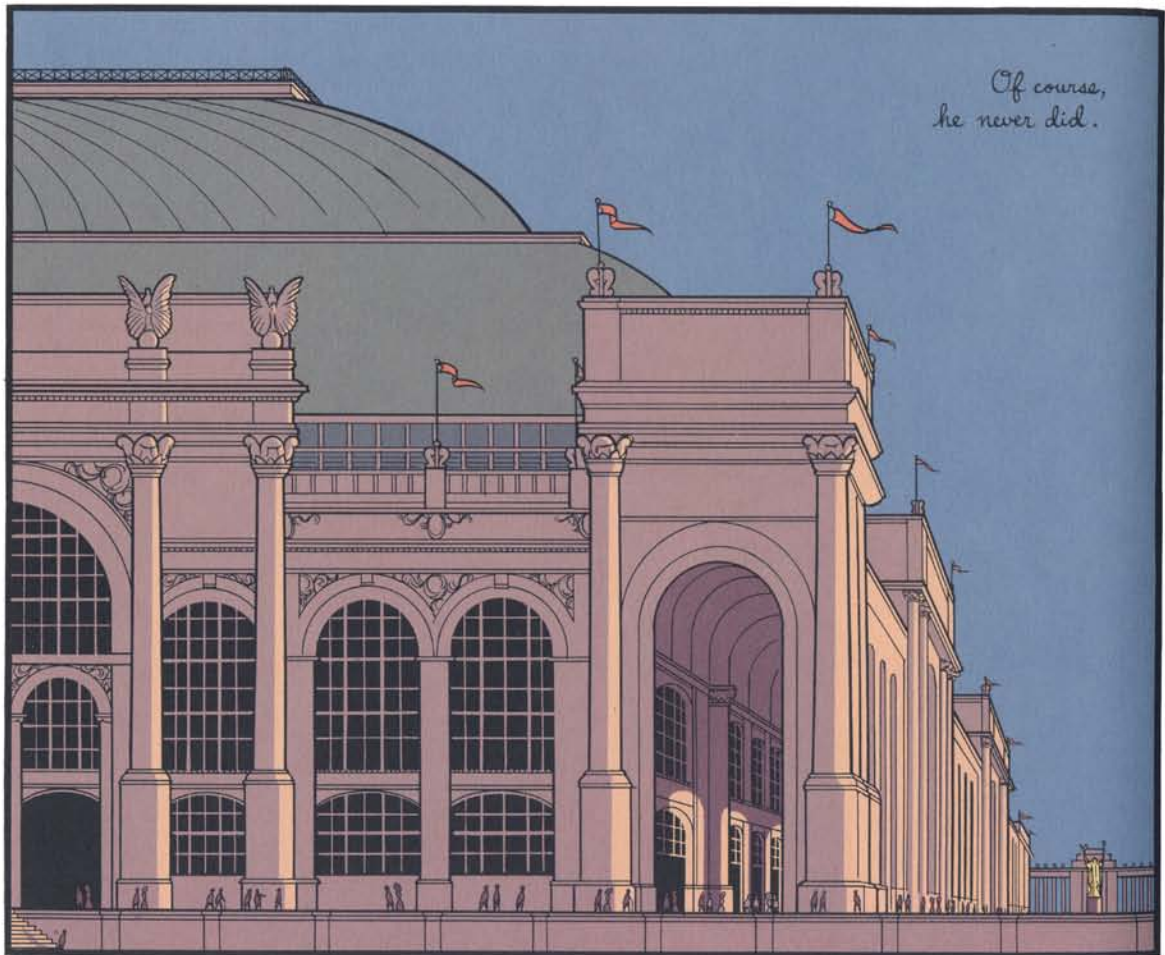


Figure 51.

non-humanoid machines such as answerphones often participate in characters' lives in slightly disturbing ways (*Annual Report*, 9, 14). The important point in Prager's argument is that the world of *Jimmy Corrigan* seems mechanistic because of Ware's graphic style. On the one hand, Ware claims to prefer early twentieth-century graphic styles because they show "respect for other people" and "craftsmanship and care and humility of design";²² on the other, their aloofness and reserve reflect an emotional coldness evident in Jimmy and his grandfather. Ware's adoption of such styles in *Jimmy Corrigan* reflects an ambivalent nostalgia for a period of time in which everything was beautifully made but men were not supposed to express emotion.

The Village Voice Literary Supplement wrote of *Jimmy Corrigan* that "[w]hat looks like an extended nostalgia trip turns out, on more thorough examination, to be a satisfyingly maudlin rejection of retromania..."²³ The reviewer is right to note the scepticism in Ware's attitude to "retromania", but for all its ambivalence, Ware's stance on nostalgia is never one of outright rejection. Nostalgia is the ground on which all Ware's stories are drawn, and its tone conditions every panel of the narrative. The uncertainty that this reviewer discerns is in fact inscribed into the very nature of nostalgia, with its double vision of the love-hate relationship. As Svetlana Boym says, "A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life".²⁴ Ware's comics are distinguished by their knowingness, their open-handed acknowledgement that the past for which the nostalgic craves is always imaginary and impossible: history viewed through a lens of fantasy.

The styles of the past dominate the world in which *Jimmy Corrigan's* tortured anti-heroes are trying to live. Ware's drawings of Chicago are meticulously researched and detailed, with the result that that city, like London in *From Hell*, often dwarfs the protagonists of the comic. Ware's figures are frequently lost in the grandiose or starkly minimalist architectural forms that surround them. When James Corrigan's father abandons him at the Chicago World Fair, the boy himself is barely

22 Arnold (2000).

23 Quoted in the paperback edition of *Jimmy Corrigan*. Incidentally, the fact that Ware chose to reprint this does not necessarily indicate agreement: although he receives relatively few negative reviews, he seems to delight in them, and has reprinted several amongst the usual glowing assessments.

24 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) xiii - xiv.

visible, a tiny speck at the top of a vast, neoclassical White City pavilion. Ware clearly finds the architecture of the late nineteenth century very beautiful, but the World's Fair building looms over James throughout the final section of his story, its vast scale exaggerating his helplessness (Figure 51). In the modern sections of *Jimmy Corrigan* Jimmy is often depicted against a concrete backdrop of petrol stations and burger bars, his landscape punctuated not with trees and certainly not with people, but telegraph poles and street signs. He spends a lot of time in liminal public spaces: corridors, waiting rooms, airport lounges, a staff canteen, never settling or appearing at ease in any environment. Within the first few pages of the book, the house in which Jimmy grew up is shown to crumble into dereliction and eventually disappear, leaving its former inhabitant adrift in a world in which he does not fit. The prominence of architectural form in *Jimmy Corrigan* accentuates the parallels between Jimmy and James's experiences: both are products and victims of their environment.

As I have noted in previous chapters, it is a convenient coincidence that both comics and buildings are, at their most basic level, formed out of clusters of rectangles. As in Doucet's *Dirty Plotte*, this coincidence lends itself to comics like *Jimmy Corrigan*: the protagonists seem as trapped within the panels as they are within buildings and in their everyday lives. In Figure 50 the oppressive multiplication of panels gives the impression that Jimmy feels the walls of this cold room to be closing in on him in his distress. And whilst *Jimmy Corrigan* lacks the conspicuously experimental form of *Quimby the Mouse* or *Building Stories*, Ware complicates matters by including in *Jimmy Corrigan* several cut-out models of buildings that appear in the narrative.²⁵ These relics of twentieth-century childhood coax readers towards a fuller imaginative absorption in the space of the comic, but as Thomas Bredehoft notes they also disrupt the relationships between reader, author and narrative.²⁶ We almost enter into the architectural world of the comic, but not quite: the paper models that we are invited to construct are small, feeble replicas of the buildings that dominate Jimmy and James. Like the Superman, we are outside the panels, intruding on the narrative space with box-like toy houses that can fit into the palm of a reader's hand.

25 A number of Ware's "Building Stories" are collected in *Acme Novelty Library* 18 (Self published, 2007).

26 Thomas A. Bredehoft, "Comics Architecture, Multidimensionality, and Time: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006) 869-890.

As these cut-out models suggest, Ware's work is nostalgic not only in its borrowing of early twentieth-century graphic styles, but in its obsession with childhood and all the cultural forms associated with that state. Myla Goldberg suggests that Ware's work is disarming because its style – “the sorts of pictures we enjoyed as children in the form of Sunday funnies and Saturday morning cartoons” – leads readers to believe that they know what to expect.²⁷ Ware engages with readers' memories of childhood by advertising non-existent toys and games, using titles like “The Smartest Kid on Earth” and “Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book”, and with his parodic appropriation of the patronising, ludicrously jolly tone of mid twentieth-century advertising addressed to children:

Wow! Just think of it! You could be a real movie star and meet all the handsome people that make the exciting Jimmy Corrigan action movies. What could be a better way to become popular and stay competitive with your friends. (Annual Report, 23)

Whether or not Ware's interest in early twentieth-century style is, for the author, linked to a personal longing for childhood, his books are both nostalgic and deeply self-critical about the psychological flaws that nostalgia represents. Form and content become inseparable: Ware's comics adopt a pastiche graphic style that is constantly pulling the narrative back into the past, and as I have shown, his stories often hold childhood memories responsible for a character's inability to function in the present. By juxtaposing childhood and adult narratives in both *Jimmy Corrigan* and *Rusty Brown*, Ware consciously locates the roots of his protagonists' adult neuroses in their early traumas. By doing so in a visual style that joins the public language of advertising with private, nostalgic images of childhood toys and objects, Ware locates these individuals' emotional dysfunction as much in the outside world of twentieth century US culture as in the protagonists' personal pasts.

At time of writing, *Rusty Brown* is in its early stages, and it is dangerous to make too many assumptions about where the narrative might be going. However, I want to look at the fragments that appear in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders* and in volumes 16 and 17 of the *Acme Novelty Library* because it seems that Ware

²⁷ Myla Goldberg, “The Exquisite Strangeness and Estrangement of Renee French and Chris Ware”, in *Give Our Regards to the Atomsmashers: Writers on Comics*. Ed. Sean Howe. (New York: Pantheon, 2004) 206.

is peculiarly concerned with the figure of the collector and the psychology of collecting as they relate to nostalgia. Comics have always had a particularly close affiliation with nostalgia: it is no coincidence that *The Comics Journal*, a publication of comics news and criticism, was originally *The Nostalgia Journal*, a collectors' magazine. Nevertheless, Ware takes this further than most, openly interrogating the nostalgia of the collector in his work.

In *Our Annual Report to Shareholders* Ware includes an item of mock-natural history, "Collectors: A Guide – Permitting Easy Field Identification and Classification". The article outlines habitat, geographical scope, and six basic types: Reparationist, Historian, Vigilante, Completist, Vindictivist and Researcher, going into some detail about the habits and practices of collectors in each category. Ware is a collector himself and clearly expects many of his readers to share both his collecting instincts and his self-consciousness about that practice. In his analysis of issue 13 of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, designed and edited by Ware, Daniel Worden examines the ways in which Ware casts comics reading as a humiliating and "vulgar" practice.²⁸ He points out that in his attempt to valorise comics, Ware romanticises white heterosexual masculinity, using the figure of the lonely, misunderstood male as part of his defence of the artistic value of the comics form. Worden writes:

...the intersection of intimacy, shame, and gender melancholy provides an avenue for this anthology to make a case for the artistic merit of comics. However, in making an aesthetic case for comics, the anthology uses tropes common to masculinist modernism, such as the feminization of mass culture, a focus on "melodramas of beset manhood", and a romanticization of the straight, white male as the object of society's scorn.²⁹

As Worden notes, Ware selects only single-author work for his edition of *McSweeney's*, establishing the auteur figure of the solitary cartoonist as the model for comics production. I suggest that Ware includes the practices of the collector in the category of artist or auteur: the lonely devotee of a neglected art form, appreciating ephemeral items rejected by mainstream culture. However, his representation of collectors in his work is equivocal, encompassing two quite different models of collecting. At times he appears to support the view of collecting as a narcissistic, fetishistic practice of the regressive adult, as described, for example,

28 Daniel Worden, "The Shameful Art: McSweeney's Quarterly Concern, Comics, and the Politics of Affect." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006) 891.

29 Worden (2006) 894.

by Baudrillard in "The System of Collecting":

...a correlation with sexuality can generally be demonstrated, so that the activity of collecting may be seen as a powerful mechanism of compensation during critical phases in a person's sexual development. Invariably it runs counter to active genital sexuality, though it should not be seen as a pure and simple substitute thereof, but rather a regression to the anal stage, manifested in such behaviour patterns as accumulation, ordering, aggressive retention and so forth.³⁰

At other moments, however, Ware also upholds the view expressed by Kevin Melchione that collecting is an active, creative process of aesthetic decision making analogous to art. Melchionne argues that the "fog of Freudian jargon" that has typically surrounded discourses on collecting is fundamentally unhelpful. He claims that scavenging for objects is "an act of freedom, innovation, even dissent, which challenges reigning taste", and that the "form-appropriation" of a collection is "no less a giving shape to the world" than the making of new art objects.³¹

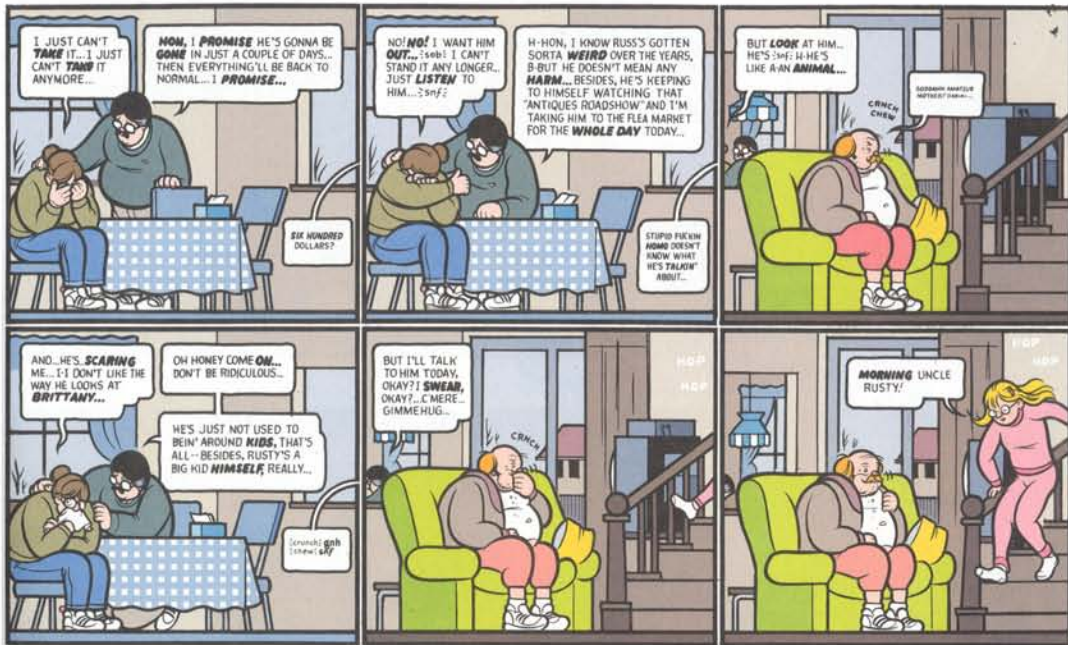
Both of these positions are evident in Ware's characterisation of Rusty Brown and his friend Chalky White, whom he represents with both empathy and cynicism. Both have numerous collections, although it appears thus far that their main interest is in twentieth-century action figures. It does not take a particularly astute critic to deduce that a man who collects toys might have feelings of nostalgia towards his childhood. What we see in Rusty Brown is a deeply delusional misremembering of what appears to have been a largely unhappy past. When Rusty's mother (with whom he still lives in middle age) throws away his collection of cereal packets, he sobs to his Kermit teddy, "Once, for a fleeting moment, we lived in the very cradle of beauty – but – they cast it all aside – and for what? For what? Couldn't they see?" (*Annual Report*, 15). In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart discusses miniatures, giants, souvenirs and collections, examining the ways in which these produce narratives of selfhood. She writes:

The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination.³²

30 Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting", in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion, 1994) 7.

31 Kevin Melchionne, "Collecting as an Art" *Philosophy and Literature* 23.1 (April 1999) 150, 152, 154.

32 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) 69.



RUSTY BROWN

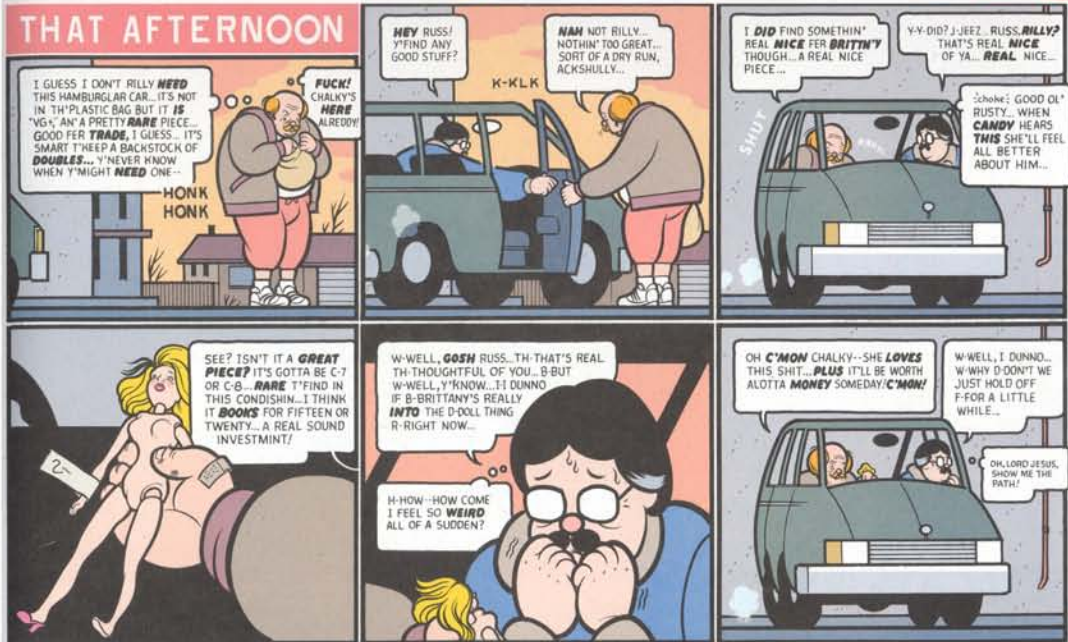


Figure 52.

Ware had already established the interplay of miniatures and giants in *Jimmy Corrigan*: as we saw in Figures 49a-d the safe, “manipulatable” superhero doll mutates in Jimmy’s nightmare into a monstrous and destructive father figure. In childhood, Rusty’s Supergirl doll is his imaginary friend, the key to a fantasy world in which he has superpowers and does not get bullied by older boys who spit in his gloves. She is a fetish, a substitute for human companionship and real-world sexuality. She is safe and stable, a comfort in a threatening world. In adulthood, however, Rusty’s fetishisation of his collection becomes something more disturbing. Where Chalky is reasonably relaxed about his collections, finding comfort in his family and his religion, Rusty’s passion is all-consuming: he is a serious junkie whose emotional attachment to his collections dominates his life. Unlike Chalky, who looks out for desirable items for his friend, Rusty is vindictive, selling Chalky a fake Supergirl doll at great expense and destroying the “Colonial Warrior” doll that Chalky wants when he finds it at a flea market. His attachment to his collections is also unpredictable: at one point he lies in bed complaining, “I’m never gonna find a Looney Lemon” (*Annual Report*, 63) but when Chalky produces one it is too late: “I sold ‘em all so I could concentrate on my “GI Joe” collection” (*Annual Report*, 85).³³

The penultimate narrative of the adult Rusty Brown in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders* is particularly revealing of the dysfunctional masculinity of the collector (Figure 52). It appears that Rusty has been staying with the Whites for some time, as Candy sobs to Chalky, “I want him out... *sob*... I can’t stand it any longer...”. Chalky is far from a flawless model of adult masculinity, and there is more than a hint of mockery in Ware’s depiction of his relentlessly positive Christian outlook, but he is at least a pleasant and supportive husband and father. Incapable of behaving like an adult guest, Rusty sits on the sofa stuffing his face with crisps and yelling obscenities at the television. More alarmingly, Mrs White goes on, “I-I don’t like the way he looks at Brittany”. For all Chalky’s reassurance to his wife that such fears are “ridiculous”, he later experiences the same discomfort when Rusty buys Brittany a naked, slightly dishevelled doll as a gift. The final image of Rusty kneeling outside the bathroom door, trying to stuff the doll underneath shows him as a monstrous baby, operating entirely outside the norms of social behaviour.

33 These are presumably the original “GI Joe” dolls, not Ware’s “GI Jim” featured elsewhere in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders*.

Even more than Jimmy Corrigan, who looks roughly the same from childhood to middle age, Rusty is stuck in the nightmare of his childhood. There is a sinister visual correspondence between the naked pink-skinned blonde doll with its inflated breasts and pinched waist, the clumsy blonde Brittany in her pink tracksuit, and the appalling, baby-like figure of the obese, near-naked adult man. The strip flags what we knew all along: Barbie-style dolls aimed at young girls are highly sexual figures, and have everything in common with the objects of adult male sexual fantasy.³⁴ As in Baudrillard's formulation, adult male collectors are thinly disguised babies, driven by an unrestrained id with little more than a flimsy veneer of civilised behaviour.

Jared Gardner, writing on Ben Katchor and Kim Deitch, notes the prominence of collecting as a theme in comics, and pays close attention to the tensions between text and image which he accurately identifies as fundamental to the comics form.³⁵ Gardner argues that the collection is "fundamentally an autobiographical narrative" (801) and suggests that collecting is analogous to reader participation in comics because for collectors, comic books "are not simply artefacts they own but texts they have helped to make meaningful" (800). As Gardner implies, comics collections differ from collections of other objects because through letters pages and other events such as comics conventions, fans of serial comics often played a part in the future of a particular title.³⁶ However, Gardner's argument does not account for the prominence of collections of other objects amongst comics writers and protagonists (Daniel Clowes' collection of trashy erotic fiction, Ware's sheet music, Rusty Brown's toys, Crumb's '78 records and so on). I suggest that the explanation lies in the comics form's intimate historical association with childhood, because childhood memory is one of the main ingredients in the longing that all collectors share.

Marilynn Gelfman Karp, herself an inveterate collector, wrote in her lavish and celebratory *In Flagrate Collecto*:

Collecting is analogous to gastronomy; it's about savoring, ingesting, assimilating.
What is collected is accretion; it becomes part of you, enhances your being...
Collecting exists on the borders of memory and commerce, the spline of the private

34 Bild Lilli, the German doll on which Barbie was based, was originally marketed to adults. See Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York and London: Free Press, 2005) 187.

35 Jared Gardner, "Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006).

36 See Pustz (1999).

universe and the public world from which the object derives.³⁷

This tension between public and private is central to the relationship between collecting and comics, both in Ware's work and in comics in general. As I have argued, Ware is particularly fond of appropriating public codes for private narratives. He tells intimately personal stories using a visual language derived from advertising, sign-writing and commercial logos. But even without Ware's distinctive style, alternative comics in general exist in a curiously liminal space between public and private, memory and commerce.

A comic book is a commercial product, but alternative comics have always existed on the borders of successful trade. Producers of self-published comics and fanzines often barely cover their costs, and even in well-established alternative comics it is rare to see anyone making much money.³⁸ Both Fantagraphics and Top Shelf have, within the past five or six years, been saved from near-bankruptcy by website postings in which they openly begged comics fans to buy their books. That such undisguised pleading works at all is a testament to the extraordinary loyalty that readers feel towards the producers and publishers of alternative comics, but that it is necessary remains rather worrying for the industry. A long way from the mainstream publishers whose comics are now largely subsidised by film and merchandising, alternative comics publishers seem to exist on the borders of capitalism, distributing work which is barely capable of sustaining itself financially. It is hardly surprising that so many are no longer in business.³⁹

Comics collectors' markets, like sales of other types of collectables, exist in a commercial hinterland. Some comics, like some plastic dolls, change hands for large sums of money, but most are worth a few dollars, valuable primarily to those who, like Rusty, invest them with a significance that goes far beyond their sale value. Rusty and Chalky collect obscure, often unwanted objects, the detritus of consumer

37 Marilyn Gelfman Karp, *In Flagrate Collecto: Caught in the Act of Collecting*. (New York: Abrams, 2006) 328.

38 *Wikipedia* describes a fanzine as "a non-professional publication produced by fans of a particular subject for the pleasure of others who share their interest", and stresses that these publications are generally sold at "a nominal cost to defray postage or production expenses". "Fanzine". *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 13th September 2008. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanzine>> Parts of this argument were originally published as Emma Tinker, "Manuscript in Print: The Materiality of Alternative Comics". *Blackwell Literature Compass 4* (July 2007). <<http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/literature/>>

39 A list of comics publishers no longer in business can be found in *Wikipedia*: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Defunct_comics_and_manga_publishers>



Figure 53.

culture, and place upon them a tremendous emotional value. As Karp says, Rusty's objects are ingested, assimilated, they become a part of him. When Chalky sells a box of Edison rolls to a man at a flea market (a man, incidentally, who looks very much like Ware) he describes him as a dope for paying \$50, but as readers we are well aware that Chalky is equally likely to pay ridiculous amounts for what, to others, are worthless toys.

On the back cover of the paperback edition of *Jimmy Corrigan* there appears a twenty-three panel strip that tells the story not of Jimmy Corrigan the character but of copy number 58463 of the book, *Jimmy Corrigan* (Figure 53). The text is shown to have a life and a body of its own, with adventures, embarrassments and

disappointments analogous to the failures of Jimmy Corrigan himself. The book starts its journey “somewhere near Hong Kong”. (The only way for Ware to produce a full-colour edition cheaply was to have the book manufactured in China, and indeed, as Bryan Appleyard points out, Chinese printing has played a significant role in the recent success of book-length comics).⁴⁰ On its arrival at “Barnes Ignoble” bookshop in the US, the book experiences the indignity of being excluded from the literature section and categorised as “a *graffik nohvel*... it’s *kid’s lit*...you know... superhero stuff... for *retards!*” As the bookshop manager explains to his innocent employee, the graphic novel section is “somewhere near science fiction and role-playing games I think...” Copy number 58463 listens anxiously as a potential buyer is directed towards a “rock band lyric book”, which is included in the literature section. Unsold, copy 58463 ends up being thrown away, then rescued from homelessness and starvation by the author himself. In the final few panels the author is shown with a collection of similar happy-looking books, lamenting, “All my children... I love you so... but... I can’t keep taking you *all* in by myself like this...”

There is, of course, a good deal of self-deprecating posturing in Ware’s narrative, and as Worden argues it is hard not to feel that he revels in the traditionally low status of his chosen medium, in spite of the conspicuous literariness of his texts. Nevertheless, this narrative stresses the physicality of individual copies of the book: although they are mass produced and essentially identical, Ware implies that a different story could be told about each one. The content may not differ from one copy to another, but each has a physical body that can be lost, damaged, burnt, loaned or treasured by its owner. Ware’s attitude recalls Walter Benjamin’s observation that, for the book collector, “not only books, but also copies of books have their fates. And in this sense, the most important fate of a copy is its encounter with him, with his own collection”.⁴¹ However, Ware goes even further than Benjamin’s collector in his implied relationship with the individual copy. Although *Jimmy Corrigan* is not autobiographical, there are many similarities between the author and his protagonist (the Chicago setting, the absent father, the morbidly low self-esteem) and Ware’s attempt to endow the book itself with the same characteristics of misunderstood loner implies identification not only with

40 Bryan Appleyard, “The Image-Soaked Future” *The Sunday Times*, 4th March 2007, 6.

41 Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking my Library: A Talk About Book Collecting”, in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) 61.

his narrative but with the paper, card, ink and glue of its body. In other words, the identity crises narrated within the comic are also imposed on the physical book itself.⁴²

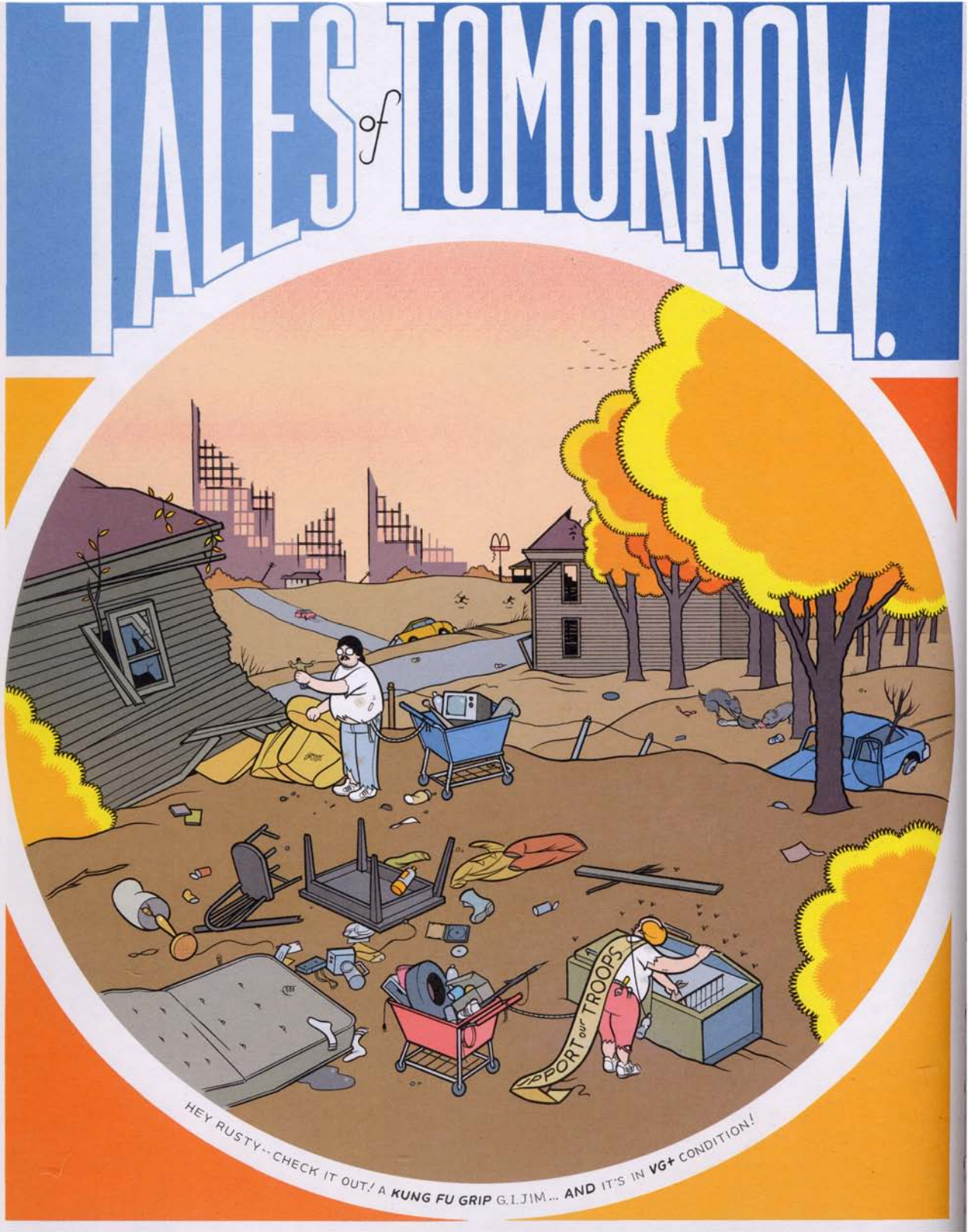
This attitude is borne out by Ware's unusual interest in the physicality of his texts. His books are lavishly designed and undoubtedly very beautiful. Although Ware does not seek to place his work in the European comics tradition like Doucet, his obsessive emphasis on style does point to a set of creative values rooted in a fine art tradition. When Gene Kannenberg wanted to talk about the exceptional level of craft and integration of typography and imagery in Ware's books, he brought in Johanna Drucker's definition of the artist's book, placing particular emphasis on her observation that the artist's book is "almost always self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form".⁴³ *Jimmy Corrigan* is still a very novelistic text, but like Ware's other work, it is contained within a book which is a meticulously designed object in its own right. There is something excessive about Ware's design, his compulsive filling of every square centimetre of available space. A note in the *Acme Novelty Datebook Vol. 1* quotes an art teacher's comment "your sketchbook is groaning with drawings" (110), and indeed all Ware's books seem to creak under the weight of proliferating text and images. He delights in non-standard publication formats: the dust jacket of the hardback edition of *Jimmy Corrigan* folds out into a poster, and there are two miniature comics tucked into a fold in the front cover of *McSweeney's*. Ware plays with the forms and conventions of the book: the cataloguing-in-publication data in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders* appears on page sixty eight, and the inside front cover of *Acme Novelty Library 16* features an insert common to school books, stating "This book is the property of..." followed by a list of names in a variety of juvenile hands. Plates included for the inscription of the owner's name are often attended by laconic remarks:

This collection of personal sketchbook pages which were never intended to be seen by anyone yet are now clearly and cleanly reproduced for the keen eye and harsh judgement of pretty much any middle income wage earner in the western world belongs to: (*Datebook*, 209).

On the one hand, this carefully, sarcastically points at the ordinariness of a

42 Worden makes a similar point about *McSweeney's*, saying that "[t]he book demands to share in its owner's identity, becoming a participant in defining the consumer". Worden (2006) 891.

43 Kannenberg (2001) 191.



HEY RUSTY--CHECK IT OUT! A KUNG FU GRIP G.I.JIM... AND IT'S IN VG+ CONDITION!

Figure 54.

reproduced book, as though in spite of its meticulous design, something is inevitably lost in the publication and widespread circulation of such private material. Yet at the same time, the plate encourages personalisation, inviting the owner to transform the copy back into a unique artefact with the addition of her name. Intensely personal, painstakingly handmade, yet reproduced: Ware's work hovers, like so many alternative comics, on the cusp of public and private.

There is some irony in Ware's attempts to claim a place in the margins of culture whilst producing such fine books. Exclusion from the aesthetic considerations of mainstream culture gave early comics an innocence that Ware's self-conscious, late modern books can never regain. A vast disjuncture can be seen between the shameful comics culture he describes and in which he claims to participate, and the fine art world in which his work actually exists. Ware's work is exhibited in Adam Baumgold Gallery in New York along with that of Julie Doucet and other comics artists such as Jules Feiffer, Renee French and Aline Kominsky Crumb. Ware's insistence on the low status of the comics form in the face of all evidence to the contrary is in itself a nostalgic act, an attempt to reclaim a lost past in which comics were marginal and therefore special, the private domain of an exclusive club of lonely male devotees. Ware is nostalgically trying to insist upon the marginalised status of the comics form even as he is destroying that status with his own work.

The world has changed since the beginning of Ware's career. Where Jimmy Corrigan was a tale of the 1990s, *Rusty Brown* exists in a post-9/11 America. Evangelical Christianity is a dominant political force, and the twentieth-century past for which Rusty and Chalky are nostalgic seems a long time ago. Opposite Figure 52 in *Our Annual Report to Shareholders*, there appears a single panel: a large, circular image of Rusty and Chalky in "Tales of Tomorrow" (Figure 54).⁴⁴ The "Tales of Tomorrow" strips usually show a solitary man in a world run by computers, but in this odd image, Rusty and Chalky walk through a devastated landscape of crushed buildings and abandoned cars, picking through debris amongst a discarded fridge and scattered household items. The pair are unshaven, their clothes tattered and dirty. Both wheel

⁴⁴ It would be misleading to suggest that this panel appears alone on the page. At the bottom there is a separate strip entitled "Gl Jim" in which a tired, elderly member of the US Army Reserve is called up. Obviously this strip is to be read in the context of the main panel in which a "Gl Jim" doll is found.

shopping trollies, to which they are umbilically attached by ropes around the waist. They scavenge for valuables, including collectable toys: a caption at the bottom describes Chalky's happy discovery: "Hey Rusty – check it out! A Kung Fu grip G.I. Jim – and it's in VG+ condition!" The ruins of two skyscrapers in the background underline the post-9/11 context, and Rusty trails a banner proclaiming, "Support Our Troops". Whatever disaster stripped the landscape, it seems to have happened a long time ago: a thin branch protrudes from the window of a crumpled house, and in the distance one figure chases another with a spear. With their shopping trolleys, the scavenging men are reminiscent of the nameless heroes of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

The image is a fantasy, depicting a scene that will never – one imagines – take place within the narrative of *Rusty Brown* as a whole. Nevertheless it is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it encapsulates the difference in tone between *Jimmy Corrigan* and *Rusty Brown*. Jimmy is sad, lonely and lacks social graces, but has many redeeming qualities. *Rusty Brown* is altogether darker, a tale from a more menacing world. But perhaps more importantly, it says something about the collection of apparently meaningless possessions in a culture ravaged by violence. Gardner quotes from Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* regarding his use of archival comics material after 9/11:

The only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses to flood my eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers were old comic strips; vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of the 20th century. That they were made with so much skill and verve but never intended to last past they day they appeared in the newspaper gave them poignancy; they were just right for an end-of-the-world moment.⁴⁵

Ware appears to suggest that there is something inherently poignant about the survival of the fragile, and particularly the survival of culturally innocent, popular art. It is the optimist Chalky who speaks, not the self-absorbed Rusty. Ware's tone is not without criticism, but in this image he seems to admire Chalky's ability to derive comfort from ephemera in the ruins of the American landscape. It is the very helplessness of ephemera, the pointlessness of their existence that appeals: perversely, their collection seems to take on greater urgency in a harsh and unpredictable climate. Like the lipstick that turned up after the liberation of Belsen, plastic toys bring a sad smudge of individuality to a frightening, unstable, post-apocalyptic world.

45 Art Spiegelman, *In The Shadow of No Towers*, in Gardner (2006) 794.