theories and methodologies

Three Wishes for *Why Comics?*

MATT SILADY

WITH ITS ENTICING QUESTION SPLASHED ACROSS THE COVER, HILLARY CHUTE'S *WHY COMICS?* INVITES THE READER TO CONSIDER THE CONnections among comics, comics creators, and the medium's ever-expanding audience. Through ten chapters all prefaced by "Why" ("Disaster," "Superheroes," "Sex," "The Suburbs," "Cities," "Punk," "Illness & Disability," "Girls," "War," and "Queer"), Chute examines why the shape-shifting form of comics continues to serve as the perfect vessel for visual storytellers attempting to capture the complexity of the human condition.

Throughout the text, Chute shows how comics can be adapted to the needs of a particular artist, movement, or environment. For example, comics can depict large-scale disasters in ways that other forms of reporting and reproduction cannot:

> In comics, images that represent extreme experience can feel powerfully immediate and direct, which often gives them an emotional force when they are expressing what can't be put into words. Images of disaster in comics are drawn from one person's pen, not captured through a mechanical device. As one *makes* a picture but *takes* a photograph, in the idiomatic convention, images in comics are created out of whole cloth by a living, breathing body. (35)

By tackling the big question through each of her smaller questions, Chute makes insightful connections that indicate the potential for a grand unified theory of comics. An explanation of how comics work at their most fundamental level has long been on the wish lists of comics scholars and practitioners alike. In each of her thematic examinations, Chute reveals how comics maintain the ability to simultaneously embrace and subvert audience expectations to create powerful depictions of everything from the overwhelming landscape of war to the "diary-like intimacy" of adolescent identity formation (280). Chute's biographical approach and close examination of the underlying formal elements of comics grant our wish to further understand why storytellers return to comics again and again. And yet a few more issues in our effort to decode comics—and Chute's role

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in this effort—remain unresolved. Let us turn now for help to the comics genie and ask him to grant us three more wishes.

First Wish: Even Greater Representation

Who comics? Writers write. Painters paint. Sculptors sculpt. Dancers dance. Sadly, no one comics. Cartoonists cartoon, and that act of cartooning (sometimes in collaboration with writers) produces comics (sometimes also referred to as cartoons, strips, funnies, floppies, sequential art, narrative art, manga, *bandes dessinées*, *fumetti*, graphic narratives, and graphic novels). The linguistic taxonomy of comics is a convoluted mess best dealt with by simply saying that anyone who draws a quick doodle on a napkin makes comics. To answer why comics work, Chute leans heavily on the question of who makes them. From Robert Crumb to Chris Ware, from Art Spiegelman to Lynda Barry and Charles Burns, the artists Chute profiles fill the pantheon of widely celebrated comics auteurs.

For many comics fans and enthusiasts, this is familiar territory. Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is canon, as is its journey from panel to stage, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is a regular feature on undergraduate literature syllabi. Had Chute instead profiled lesser-known cartoonists, we would miss her insights into the creative processes of the more established artists with whom she developed extensive working relationships during the years she spent researching them. Chute's work with Spiegelman on projects like *MetaMaus*, which collected interviews, photographs, and historic documents associated with Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize–winning comics memoir, *Maus*, made it clear to her why comics was his medium of choice. As Chute writes:

> *Maus* couldn't exist meaningfully in any other form but comics. Its black line drawing is key to how it creates a compelling world into which the reader is easily invited. Its animal faces and tails—for Spiegelman's characters are clearly humans overlaid with a visual metaphor—provide a crucial level of abstraction that creates a compelling tension with the book's deeply researched historical specificity. And the structuring of the comics page in *Maus*—what a cartoonist might call its panelization—shows how comics can express the effects of real-life disaster through experiments with time and space. (48)

This is *Why Comics?* at its best. When Chute draws connections between her extensively researched biographical profiles and the form itself, she shows how each artist's approach to the page activates the unique strengths of comics as a storytelling medium. By taking this biographical tack, she raises questions about the most important issue facing comics today: the representation of marginalized voices in terms of creators and content. Because the cartoonist profiles are the entry point for understanding the comics form, the selection of storytellers takes on an outsize importance. The demographics of comics' audiences, creators, and characters have radically shifted in the last two decades. This is why it is good to see Allie Brosh's game-changing *Hyperbole and a Half* examined alongside the more expected work by perennial critical all-stars such as Ware, Daniel Clowes, and Joe Sacco. And while Chute does place cartoonists of color such as Los Bros Hernandez and Barry front and center in the story of North American comics, substantial profiles of black, trans, and nonbinary cartoonists would have more accurately reflected the world of comics today. Ideally, granting the wish to broaden the scope of representation among the profiles wouldn't mean displacing the icons of the industry. Making room for everyone has been one of the most important projects taken on by the comics community in recent years. Supplementing *Why Comics?*, a solid reading list focusing on black and trans cartoonists might include the

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Eisner Award–winning texts *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* (Gateward and Jennings) and *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (Howard and Jackson), as well as *Black Comix Returns* (Duffy and Jennings) and *We're Still Here: An All-Trans Comics Anthology* (Avery).

Second Wish: Relocating Crumb

The most challenging profile in *Why Comics?* is that of Crumb. In the chapter "Why Sex?," it is difficult not to cringe at Chute's choice of Crumb as an ambassador for the power of comics to explore human sexuality. Chute takes care to place Crumb in his historic context, in which artists were pushing back against the creative restrictions placed on mainstream publications by the Comics Code Authority, a self-regulating body established in 1954 by American comics publishers to avoid government regulation of content. "Hand-drawn comics—positioned against the repression of midcentury America—became with Crumb a medium for overturning censorship. In his comics, anything could be pictured and nothing needed to be held back" (113). This has long been the argument for finding value in Crumb's more problematic work. Comics needed someone to resist the puritanical tide that led to industry-wide self-censorship and to the sales dominance of the superhero genre, and made American comics less eager to confront complex and emotionally challenging themes.

Unfortunately, Crumb's disruption of the status quo, in particular its restrictions on open explorations of sexuality, came with a price: his depictions of unapologetic misogyny are capable of retraumatizing victims of sexual harassment and violence. Explaining the connection between the power of Crumb's work and the comics form, Chute writes, "People react much, much differently to an image, drawn or photographed or filmed, than they do to prose. Images produce affect very quickly—they feel immediate. The ability of comics to picture has long produced its sense of the illicit and forbidden" (104). Adding to the intensity with which Crumb's readers respond to visual imagery is his acumen at the drafting table. "Crumb is one of the most virtuosic, if not the most virtuosic, draftspersons in comics. He is acknowledged across the board, and worldwide, as a master of drawing" (109). Chute adds, "When Crumb's attentive pen lines fall to sexual subjects, particularly, the result evokes strong reactions" (110). When combined, the arresting quality of comics storytelling and Crumb's high-caliber drawing skills create more than discomfort for many readers. They re-create the experience of sexual trauma itself.

In the context of the larger question—Why comics?—Crumb's inclusion makes sense. There's no arguing that his work is not of historic importance to the medium. Setting that aside for a moment, it is crucial that we recognize that comics implicate the viewer in the visual world of the story each time the reader is asked to create "closure" between one panel and the next (McCloud 63). "Several prominent thinkers about comics, including the late literary critic Edward Said, have used the word decode to describe reading comics. Comics, in fact, is a medium that involves a substantial degree of reader participation to stitch together narrative meaning" (Chute 22). At first glance, comics may be viewed as an easily digestible format for storytelling. A closer inspection reveals that they require the reader to actively fill in the gaps (or gutters) between panels. Any exploration of Crumb's work featuring incest, sexual assault, and statutory rape, which is cited by Chute throughout the chapter, forces the reader to participate in the narrative construction of the sexual acts depicted on the comics page. Crumb's own motivation for creating this type of material deepens the already painful experience for many readers when encountering his work.

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Crumb admits that he uses comics to express his anger toward women:

> I guess I had a lot of anger in me. It actually came out after I became famous. I put it all out there to test their love—my earlier underground comics are actually pretty soft, but after I became famous I exposed my deepest, darkest thoughts for all to see. Many women at the time were talking about the abuse men had subjected them to; it was the first big wave of the women's liberation movement and the last thing they wanted to see was this male anger. I kinda got it out of my system, though.

And when asked directly about misogyny, Crumb replied, "It's there. . . . I would be lying if I said I had no beef with the female of the species" (qtd. in Hyzagi). In an alternative version of Chute's book, Crumb's work would be well-placed in a chapter titled "Why Misogyny?" One important takeaway from Chute's examination of comics is that their power can be applied to any narrative endeavor, whether that project is capturing the melancholic ennui of the suburbs, documenting the daily challenges of living with disability, or, in Crumb's case, deliberately dehumanizing the female body. With great power comes great responsibility, as they say.

None of this should suggest that we should avoid a close examination of how sexuality and sexual trauma are depicted in comics. Nor is it an argument in favor of shielding readers from challenging imagery. Today's sophisticated comics readers are capable of distinguishing between depictions of sexual violence created with the intent to traumatize and depictions that are sensitive to and humanize the victims of sexual violence. This distinction is an important one. Even though "Crumb's unfiltered depictions of explicit sex inspired an entire movement of underground cartoonists to shred taboos—both verbally and visually, with paper and ink" (Chute 105), the ongoing praise of these depictions as the pinnacle of self-expression in comics has created the impression among many cartoonists that Crumb's unfiltered creativity is valued over the victims of misogyny and sexual abuse. The industry's demographics are rapidly shifting to include equal numbers of women, trans, and nonbinary cartoonists, and the echoes of this sentiment conjure an unwelcoming environment for many members of the comics community.

Chute does highlight a more thoughtful and emotionally complex strategy for depicting sexual trauma through her examination of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, in which the author, Phoebe Gloeckner, "believes that the medium of comics, with its word-and-image dimensions, allows her to communicate difficult subjects while also maintaining a sense of agency and control" (135). This approach, steeped in empowerment, is far better suited to the young cartoonists putting pen to page today than are the uninhibited, formerly consequence-free comics of previous generations, which belong in conversations about power, control, and misogyny rather than in those about sexuality. Granting this second wish, to relocate the discussion of Crumb's work to a thematic space related to power and privilege, rather than sex and freedom of expression, might also make it so that *Why Comics?* signals the end of the lionization of Crumb's thoroughly examined career and the beginning of an effort to turn our critical attention to the many vital voices emerging as comics continue to evolve.

Final Wish: More Sex-Positivity

Instead of further criticizing Crumb's placement in Chute's book, let us start exploring sex and comics in a new direction, one that Chute hints at when she briefly mentions Erika Moen's *Oh Joy Sex Toy* on the final page of "Why Sex?" (139). An essay more squarely focused on sex-positivity might include a deep dive into, for example, the work of Spike Trotman, a cartoonist and publisher of Iron Circus

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Comics whose art represents human sexuality in creative, empowering, provocative, consensual, and inclusive ways. Trotman's interest in building community and her ability to provide a welcoming introduction to comics for new readers as well as financially viable paths into comics for new creators are exactly why comics are here to stay. A profile of Trotman written with Chute's care for detail, insightful analysis, and clear prose style would bring us even closer to an understanding of what comics are now, where they are headed next, and why comics have the limitless potential to give voice to anyone with a story to share.

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