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THE SMARTEST CARTOONIST ON EARTH.

PUBLISHED *sheepishly* ONCE PER ANNUM *by:*
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WITNESSES REPORT SEEING U.S. CIVIL WAR, 1893 WORLD'S FAIR, SUPER-MAN, AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN WORLD.

YET—"NOTHING" HAPPENS.

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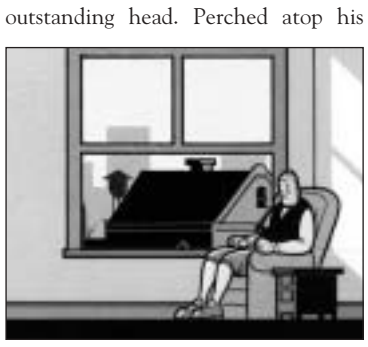
—H.L. Mencken.

CHICAGO.— On a gray day at the end of 1998 I rode the elevated train to Chris Ware's house. The el roared above rows of wet, bleating cars and rumbled across the only river man forced to run backward. As we clattered past a shit-brown jumble of shattered warehouses, housing projects, rusted water towers, and pork-reprocessing plants, my thoughts rose high and distant as the black skyscrapers that fringe Lake Michigan's long, watery eye. I was already composing my opening paragraph for this story, one I hoped would capture the appalling panorama of the town built on a swamp and named for the swamp's stinking, wild fruit: the Chakawga onion.

I alighted from the train above Damen Avenue and plopped my way through oily puddles toward Hoyne Street, home of Mr. Ware and his Acme Novelty Library. The top window of the stone home glowed in the midday gloom. With a squawk and a buzz I was inside and ascending the groaning steps.

Chris Ware is of average height, average weight, and wears unassuming clothing chosen for just that reason. This early thirty-something's nondescriptness supports, however, a most outstanding head. Perched atop his

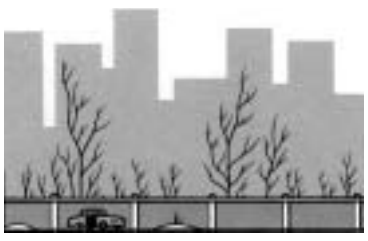


The beleagured subject of the investigation.

body and looming behind spectacles, it is a head that can only be described as *owlish*.

"Hey Dan," Chris chirped. He poured coffee, shooed the cats slinking around my ankles, and saw his affable wife, Marnie, off on errands. I sat on the davenport with my sheaves of questions and made myself comfortable.

Anyone familiar with Chris's work would also feel at home in the real-life Novelty Library. Like Chris's comic book, his home is a dense, elaborate amalgamation of massive, solid, polished stuff, all well-crafted and ornamented. A piano and at least two victrolas were squared away amid knick-knacks, gewgaws, and whatnots tucked into curio cabinets and cubbyholes, which were filled with banjos, magic lanterns, stereopticons, edison rolls, sheet music, books, handmade toys in hand colored boxes, yellowing comic strips, antique postcards, and of course Chris's cat and mice sculptures that sing and dance when you turn their tiny brass crank.



Chris unwrapped a 78 r.p.m. record from the day's mail—"An old banjo tune I bid on," he said sheepishly—and slid it away in a record closet lined edge-to-edge with manila sleeves. I spotted a honeycomb of cassette tapes, each spine bearing an intricate, hand-lettered logo. ("Did you see his tapes?" one cartoonist later asked me in a near-whisper. "Those labels alone made me realize that I have wasted my entire life.")

Comics: A Matter Of Life And Death?

The oddest thought popped into my head as I gawked at Chris's stuff: *I would never kill myself if I lived in this apartment*. Beethoven rose and fell from a stereo and mingled with the

purring of the potbellied cat that had settled like a buddha in my lap. I stroked the cat and mulled my sweet and sour thought.

"Hey," Chris called from the kitchen. "I wanted to thank you very, very much for your letter and especially your, um, *enclosure* of last week." The week before I had mailed Chris my thanks for consenting to the interview and enclosed a 1930s Tijuana Bible as a herald of my appreciation. This eight-page, pornographic comic tract, *Hot Nuts*, was gracefully illustrated by the

SMARTEST KID continued on page 2.

BLIZZARD OF PRINT ALMOST BURIES CARTOONIST ALIVE.

"WARE REVIEW" GENRE HITS MIDWEST.

Cartoonist Paralyzed, Mortified.

CHICAGO. — A comic book critic writing about *The Acme Novelty Library* once remarked, "Man, what can you say about this comic that hasn't already been said?"

Tons. Since that remark five years ago a veritable blizzard of printed paeans to Mr. Ware continues unabated, this latest IMP being only one, solitary flake among the multitude swirling from official and ivory towers. Now that the flakes have piled neck-high in Chicago it is easy to see their mutual drift. Conventions have crystallized in writing about Chris, forming a new genre entirely devoted to writing about him and his wares (a lame pun which reoccurs, of course, with predictable frequency.)

The reviews all share one pattern: this comic is the "hottest" comic and the "coldest" comic, the most "depressing" comic and the most "hilarious" comic; its author is the most "cynical" and the most "sincere." Most of all, to put it in lingo that will no doubt make Chris Ware flinch, he is the *most*.

The foremost convention of this writing-about-Ware genre is to crown him with a superlative—a word defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary* as "the highest degree, or acme." A babel-

BLIZZARD continued on page 2.

INVENTS ROBOTS WITH FEELINGS.

ROBOTS MADE IN OUR OWN IMAGE.

Are They More Human Than Humans?

CHICAGO.—At one point in the vast, illimitable cosmos of the writing-about-Ware genre, an interviewer asked Chris why Jimmy Corrigan dreamed that he was a robot. Chris shrugged; it seemed like an obvious way to depict somebody who called his mother every day.

Robots are such a recurring theme in Chris's world that I did not bother to ask him about them. Chris's outer space explorer, Rocket Sam, builds robots to keep him company in his solitude on Planet X; likewise, Chris laid out a paper robot for his lonely readers to cut out and assemble on wintry evenings at home. When asked by a magazine for a picture of himself, Chris submitted the self-portrait above.

What is funny about these robots is their humanity. We often justify a feeling by saying that it is "only human," meaning that it is a natural, unavoidable reaction to life. It is automatic, we imply, and this reflex is partly what makes us human. It is also partly what makes us an automaton. An automaton, derived from the Greek neutral for

HUMAN ROBOTS continued on page 3.

INVENTS REAL SUPERHERO.

DEITY WATCHES TELEVISION, STEALS AUTOMOBILE, URINATES ON DUMPSTER.

A "God" Made in Our Own Image.

CHICAGO. — If *The Acme Novelty Library* has a mascot, the Super-Man is it. An increasingly obese, balding, masked man, Super-Man hovers in each issue's introductory frame, bestowing laurels and upholding the orb of Truth. He floats throughout the margins of the book in one-shot strips, dashing and restoring people's hopes. He appears as both a bum and a celebrity, your murderer and your saviour. Chris Ware says that his Super-Man is "all things at once."

That is as good a definition of "God" as any. Super-Man is real because He is more human than many humans. At times He shoplifts, burns churches, and brains innocent bystanders before jacking their car. In one strip He sinks so low as to make Hollywood movies. But at other times He gives his loot to the homeless, rescues a nose-diving airplane, strums His banjo and contemplates a sunrise. He is our "inner child," as capable of kindness as of torturing us for His sport, and for this reason I do not worship Him but I do believe in Him.

Chris told *Moxie* magazine that when he was a boy, he believed he would grow up to be the first real superhero. "I was sure that all I had to do was either study really hard or involve myself in some sort of industrial accident, and then I would acquire superhero powers," he said. "I firmly thought that something like that was going to happen to me."

REAL SUPERHERO continued on page 16.

BLIZZARD OF PRINT.

Continued from page 1.

like tower of superlative crowns teeters atop Chris's skull, courtesy of not just comic fandom but even the gray, mainstream papers as well. The more considered media coronations to date consist of largely unimpeachable titles such as, "the most talked-about cartoonist," "the most electrifying new cartoonist," and, "the most astounding and idiosyncratic craftsman working in comics." After this trio of sensate pronouncements, however, the litany of Mostness grows longer and more seriocomic.

"The most fascinating read in comics" is sadly typical of the vast majority of the Ware genre's blandishments: it is the wimpiest, least interesting superlative possible, short of actually calling it "the most interesting read in comics"—a title no doubt already being prepared in the regal offices of a well-respected, "men's" or "women's" magazine. These dull, "consumer-oriented" magazines—the kind which like to remind us once a year, with one or two sentences, that comics are not yet dead—tend also toward titles such as "the king of the indie-comic world." This title is technically true only if you consider the phalanx of trophies the wheezing, bean-counting, comic book industry thrusts at Chris every year, and if you also accept such assembly-line flummery as "Best Inking," "Best Lettering," and "Best Page Numbering" as your numeric index of an artist's merit. Even a thoughtful essay on Ware's comics failed to capture the essence of Chris's superlative work when it stated that *The Acme Novelty Library* was "the first existentialist comic," a horsefeathers phrase if ever there was one. Leaving obvious names such as Crumb and Herriman aside, do not even "Cathy," "Dilbert," and "Garfield" serve as adequate proof—perhaps the greatest proof—that we live in an indifferent universe that attacks us every day?

You cannot capture Chris with adjectives, statistics, or vague comparisons to vague, angsty philosophies—which is why some Ware genre writers, myself included—have sidestepped the direct superlative and compared Chris to other, superlative artists. The results are better for their specificity: they run from good and predictable ("The Samuel Beckett of comics" is by far the most frequent)* to charmingly quirky ("The Emily Dickinson of comics," quips a Yale poet), all the way to jackass, as when the Seattle *Times* brayed that Chris Ware was the "Kevin Costner" of comics.

Reading the last of these appellations, it is no wonder that Chris dreads media attention. These well-intended, if not always well-aimed, attempts to pinpoint Ware only point out our own, ever-shortening attention span. They are hyperbole and hype and they inherently miss the artist's body of work. Nevertheless I enjoy them all, particularly the lame ones, and list a smattering because they do show an appreciation of novelty, however un-novel their expression.

It is impossible to nail such a singular artist in thirty thousand words, let alone a dozen, and it is in this spirit of inspired, hypocritical failure that I offer up this newspaper, headlined with a glib superlative and laced with relentless and vague comparisons of Ware to Gustave Flaubert.

My headline is just a dumbass play off the title of Chris's latest book, but Chris Ware really is a genius, as everyone but he has noticed. Of course, we would expect nothing less from The Most Self-effacing Cartoonist on Earth. ■

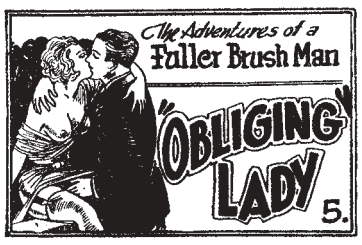
*This comparison is the most popular because there is some merit to it, as anyone who has sat through one of Beckett's excruciating, eventless plays, filled with minimal, repetitive, banal, yet deeply moving dialogue will probably attest.

The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 1.

anonymous "Mr. Prolific" and described the Fuller Brush Man's easy-come, in-and-out sales technique at a welcoming, "New Woman" nudist camp. I spotted *Hot Nuts* in a curio cabinet across the room, enshrined behind glass like a yellow butterfly.

"Actually," Chris said, returning to the living room with his coffee, "it arrived on a day when I was contemplating suicide, and it pulled me right out of it."

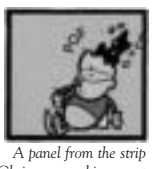


A comic book similar to the one that saved Ware's life.

We settled down for the interview. A copy of Daniel Clowes's just-published book, *Caricature*, lay on the table between us. "I just got it in the mail," Chris said, "and I was like…." He cocked his index finger against his temple and pantomimed a silent pow. "There is no way I will ever be able to write at Dan's level," bobbing his head in confirmation and enjoying his self-abasing awe. "I'd almost forgotten how *incredibly* dense and compact Dan's stuff is."

So *Caricature* sparked a depression from which *Hot Nuts* saved him?

Chris seemed distracted for a moment. "No," he said, gently dismissive. "Oh no. That happens every couple of weeks or so. That's just a normal part of working."



A panel from the strip Chris was working on at the time of our interview.

They are called deadlines for that reason. Chris's mother was an editor and reporter for the Omaha *World-Herald;* her father had been the paper's managing editor. With such black ink running through his blood it is fitting that Chris Ware is first and foremost a newspaper cartoonist. Each week he sweats out an original, full-page, full-color strip for the weekly Chicago tabloid, *New City*. One to three years after their newsprint appearance, Chris collects the strips in volumes and prints them in his more widely known, periodic comic book, *The Acme Novelty Library*. The last six years of these newspaper strips will be the basis for an approximately 380-page "graphic novel," that is, a big comic book, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. This book will be published by Pantheon sometime early in the next century.

Chris showed me the fold-out, two-sided, quintessentially Wareian dust jacket he has designed for the hardback. "Originally I wanted to make it look like a regular book," he said, "or a regular 'novel.' But then I decided, No. I want it to look like a comic book. I want it to have comics all over it, so it screams the word *comics*."

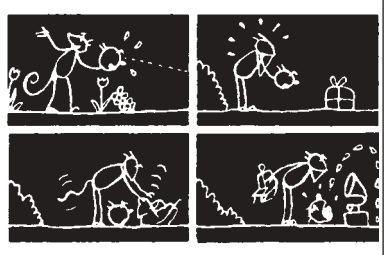
What Is This Book?

The obstacles in defining this book are myriad. To begin with, it is a newsprint comic strip, then a comic book pamphlet, and finally a comic book book. For posterity's sake I will refer to it as the book. For simplicity's sake I will refer to it by its subtitle, *The Smartest Kid on Earth,* in order to minimize any confusion with Jimmy Corrigan himself, the ostensible main character. I also need to add that Chris makes not-always-slight changes to the story every time it enters its next incarnation—so the newspaper and *Acme* reproductions you see in this paper may well not match their final form in the Pantheon book. Add to this the fact that the original, newspaper story is not yet finished—10 weeks to go at IMP press time—and it is obviously futile to try to be definitive about the book. It will change twice even after it is "completed," and with this uncertainty, it is best that we approach the constantly transforming story with the vague, overarching generalizations for which THE IMP is justly renowned. Even if the story were not going to mutate, its complexity is such that a twenty page newspaper can only capture a whiff of its essence. We will look at what the book is about, more than the book itself, to make this paper slightly less ephemeral and, I hope, not spoil the ending for non-Chicagoans who have not yet reached the end.

Perhaps my greatest problem in discussing this book arises from the fact that it is a comic. Comics are an intuitively understood, yet strangely elusive art. Their words and pictures work apart but they also work together, both in harmony and in counterpoint. The possibility born from this union of prose and visuals is a third thing, trickier than its respected parents, and perhaps for this trickiness comics are still called a bastard child. Anybody can read the comic language, but almost nobody, myself included, can easily explain it. Chris Ware's comics are more undefinable than most because they are the most comic: he uses comics' weird alchemy to write with pictures and draw with words far more than most, "illustrated storyboard" comic artists. Nobody's comics play with space, time, and your head quite like Chris Ware's. He is clearly a genius, as even his harshest critics will admit.

The genius of Ware's comics may lie in their deliberate similarity to poetry. "Poetry" is one of the most abused words in the language, but the analogy between a poem and a comic is inevitable. In a poem the physical properties of a sentence—its length, intonation, and punctuation—mean as much as the literal meaning of the sentence. That is why *onomatopoeia,* when a word sounds just like what it means, is so prized in a poem. Chris's comics are onomatopoetic because he has simplified his cartoon panels to near-icons that we can read rapidly, in sequence, just like words; he has, in effect, reduced pictures to the level of words. He has also done the reverse: made words into pictures that visually bridge panels, moods, and places in space and time. The problem with my pseudo-poetic definition is that these multiple functions can all harmonize or clash, on both the visual and verbal level, simultaneously, for an infinite range of possibilities. Verbal-visual poetry is a rather weak, not to mention unpoetic, definition.

"No, it isn't dumb," Chris said. "I've always secretly thought that myself, although I'm loathe to say it because I don't really understand poetry. But it's always seemed to me that what I do could be excused as poetry, rather than thought of as a *coherent story line*." He chuckled.

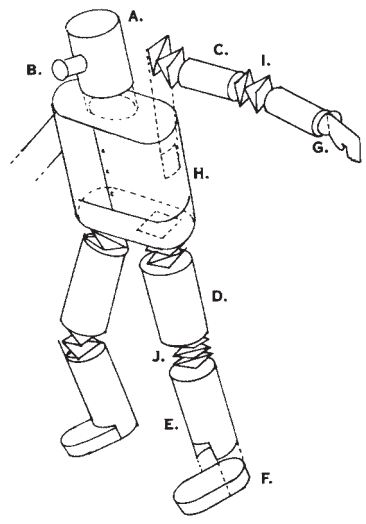


On a similar note, the genius of Ware's comics may also lie in their deliberate similarity to music. There is a rhythm and a timbre not only to the words in a comic, but also to the panels. The panels form a string of notes, or beats, that we "hear" or "feel" as our eyes travel across the page. The timbre of each panel is shaped by its relative size and its relatively cartoony or realistic style.

"That sounds about right," Chris said. "That's kind of what I was trying to do with that Quimby the Mouse stuff. But after a while I felt like it wasn't working. I look at those strips now and I still don't know what the hell they were about."

These earlier Quimby comics, done mostly when Chris was in Texas and in art school, were incredibly complicated, almost algebraic proofs of love, loss, hope and despair. I would need an entire IMP to do justice to even a dozen of them. Their tiny panels played tinny tunes like little player pianos, animated by some human ghost hiding in their machine-like construction. The ghost in that machine is what gives Chris's comics such life, and as we shall see, he is not sure what exactly makes his comics come to life.

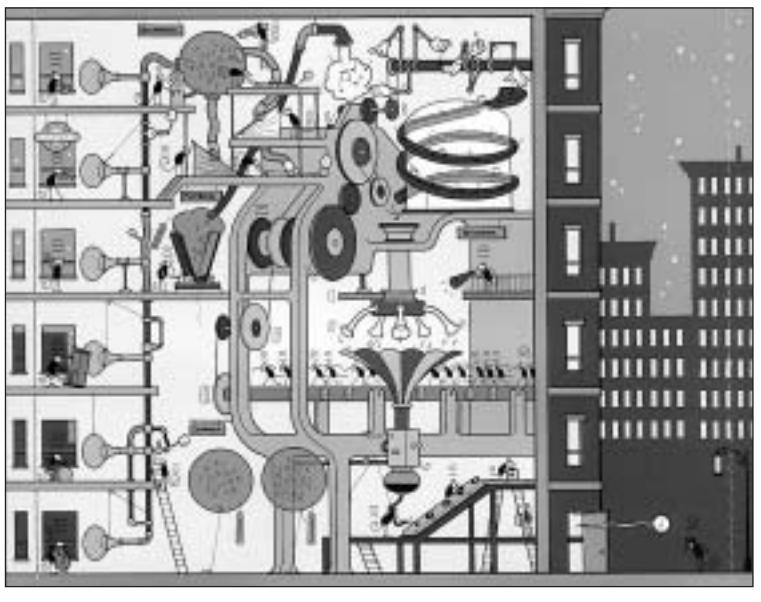
And so this story of mine is really a ghost story. Imagine, if you will, that we are creeping through the phantom universe of Chris Ware's comics, with his voice as our guide, searching for his *anima,* his work's soul.



IS THOUGHT COMIC?

The Smartest Kid on Earth is a synthesis of the poetry and music described above, and still something more: thought itself. Our thoughts, if you think about them, seem to be oddly composed of words and shifting pictures at once, but they also carry a

SMARTEST KID continued on page 3.



The music in the machine is evident in this Ware illustration reminiscent of The Inventions of Professor Lucifer G. Butts, *by Rube Goldberg. This illustration is taken from the album "Manhattan Minuet," a collection of Raymond Scott compositions performed ebulliently by The Beau Hunks Sextette. ©1996 Basta Records.*

THE WARE GENRE.

As Always, With Apologies

WHAT FOLLOWS is a smidgen of the Ware reviews I read before writing this newspaper. Special thanks to Eric Reynolds at Fantagraphics, who had one of his poor interns amass the bulk of this reading for me. Not surprisingly, this dazed and abused intern neglected to include bibliographical information with many of her hastily-made photocopies; as a result, this bibliography is peppered throughout with questionable omissions.

Blurb sheet. Fantagraphics Books. *Thrust* magazine called *The Acme Novelty Library* "the most fascinating read in comics"; *The Stranger* called Ware "the most astounding and idiosyncratic craftsman," etc.; and *Indy* magazine rightly noted, "Man, what can you say about this comic that hasn't already been said?"

Bulka, Michael. "Ware on Earth." *World Art,* Nov. 1994, pp. 96–99.

Eds. "Chris Ware Gets His Own Comic." *The Comics Journal,* issue 164, p. 128.

Eds. "Seattle's Own Fantagraphics Is Garnering Much Praise." *Seattle Times,* date? The infamous "Costner" quote deserves to die a dateless death.

Eds. "The Acme Comics Library (sic)," *Philadelphia Weekly,* Nov. 6, 1996, p. 21.

Eds. "The Door To An Unvisited Room." *Crash,* Winter 1995, pp. 56–57. *The Acme Novelty Library* is "the first existentialist comic book." A good essay otherwise.

Eds. "The 'It' Cartoonist." *Entertainment Weekly,* issue ? They called Ware an "illustrator" and the "king of the indie comic-book world."

Edwards, Gavin. "Graphic Material." *Details,* Sept. 1997, p. 131. God is not in these *Details*.

Gehr, Richard. "Read The Fine Print." *Spin,* issue ?. Ware's work has "1990s bad attitude." *Spin* has 1990s bad writing.

Gilbert, Scott A. "He Said To Tell You He Had A Real Good Time: *Acme Novelty Library* Volumes 1–3." *The Comics Journal,* issue 174, pp. 47–48. This is the guy who said that Chris's comics lack soul.

Glenn, Joshua. "Artists of The Year." *City Pages* (Minneapolis), Dec. 27, 1995, p. 10.

Groth, Gary, ed. "Chris Ware Interview." *The Comics Journal,* issue 200, pp. 119–178. The Ware interview to end all Ware interviews. Exhaustive, definitive.

Huang, Francis. "Comic Madness." *A&E,* Oct. 19, 1995, p. 5.

Huestis, Peter. "Chris Ware: Comics' Acme." *Hypno,* vol. 4, issue 8, 6 pages.

Juno, Andrea, ed. "Chris Ware." *Dangerous Drawings: Interviews With Comix and Graphix Artists*. New York: Juno Books, 1997, pp. 32–53.

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Kelly, Dan. "Of Mice and Men and Cat Heads Too." *Chum,* vol. 1, issue 1, pp. 14–21.

Kidd, Chip. "Please Don't Hate Him." *Print,* issue ?, pp. 42–49. Kidd is *The Acme Novelty Library*'s resident poultry advisor and the graphic designer currently working with Ware on the Pantheon *Corrigan* book.

Kreiner, Rich. "Number 17" in "The 100 Best Comics of The Century." *The Comics Journal,* issue 210, p. 81. The editors were drunk with power and seeing double: empirical evidence proves that *The Acme Novelty Library* is number eight and a half.

Menu, Jean-Christophe. "Le Prodigieux Projet de Chris Ware." *Neuvième Art,* issue ?. pp. 45–57.

O'Hara, Gail, and Sutter, Dawn. "Chris Ware and Archer Prewitt." *Moxie,* issue 1, pp. 4–12. Chris wants to design pajamas with a rocketship pattern. I would wear them.

Only, Members. "The Chris Ware Backlash." comix@ email discussion forum, Feb. 11–19, 1999. "'Nuff said," as the Members would say.

Pratt, Sam. "Big Draw." *Esquire,* March 1996, p. 3.

Pruian, Todd. "Notes From The Underground." *Chicago,* Feb. 1998, pp. 69–71.

Römpötti, Harri. "Uudistuksellisen Sarjakuvan Keulakuva: Yhdysvaltalainen Chris Ware Kuvaa Muistin Virtaa." *Helsingen Sanomat,* May 26, 1998. Essential. A must-read for every Ware fan.

Ryan, Mo. "Chris Ware: Purveyor of Comics, Jokes, Tricks, Novelties and Assorted Laff-Getting Sundries." *Steve Albini Thinks We Suck,* issue 8, pp. 6–9.

Shahum, Leah. "Media! Picks." *Mother Jones,* July/August 1997, p. 72. Mother does know best: Ware's comics are "among the very best graphic, comic, illustrative, and fine artwork being produced in the world right now."

Spiegler, Mark. "Ware's World." *Chicago Tribune,* July 19, 1994. Chris hates himself and the vanity inherent in producing "Art"; eerily similar to Flaubert's swamp of despair quoted in this issue.

Tolentino, Noël. "Chris Ware of *The Acme Novelty Library*." *Bunnyhop,* issue 9, pp. 93–95, 126. Chris counters goofy questions with very good answers, including a banjo history lesson.

Williams, Dylan. "An Interview With Chris Ware." *Destroy All Comics,* issue 1, pp. 8–19.

HUMAN ROBOTS.

Continued from page 1.

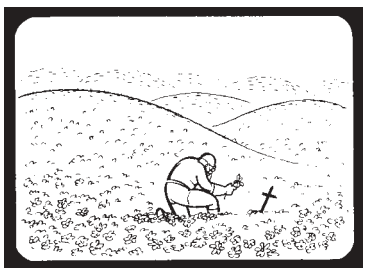
automatos—meaning a man who acts spontaneously, on his own free will—is one who behaves in a mechanical or automatic manner.

Humans naturally recoil at the suggestion that they are machines, and this may be one reason why some readers find Ware's comics "cold," "emotionless," or "single-gear." If there's a metaphor for this syndrome, the robot is it.

I once speculated that Chris's comics were too sophisticated, at least on their surface, for some readers to see the emotion in them. Now I see that I was wrong: the emotion in Chris's strips is too apparent for some people's taste. A certain type of person recoils from a naked display of emotion in art—a human enough reaction, I suppose—and for all their picto-linguistic complexity, Chris's stories are direct at heart. Chris's spoof of the lost-in-space genre, Rocket Sam, is an example.

Crash-landed and stranded on various planets named X, Rocket Sam builds robots to keep him company. In "Sam Makes an Acquaintance," Sam fashions a tiny robot and gives the newborn a pair of freshly picked flowers as a symbol of their love.

The robot "asks" Sam (in a wordless strip) if he killed the flowers by picking them. Sam justifies his picking by explaining that he plucked them from a meadow filled with millions more just like them. The metal imp is nev-



ertheless heartbroken at being the cause of their death and commits suicide. The last panel shows a grieving Sam bury his creation in that same meadow and place a single flower atop the grave.

This simple fable permeates Sam's long life on Planet X. In "Tis The Season of Giving on Planet X-38," Sam instructs a new and improved robot progeny in the ways of Christmas and the custom of giving reciprocal gifts. As Sam builds his gift, a she-bot to keep his metal man company, he wonders what he will get in return. A laser pistol? A jet pack? A working rocket to get him home again? The big day arrives. The metal man and his new mate fall immediately in love, and the metal man leads an expectant Sam through frozen woods to see the gift he has made for Sam: a giant picture of a flower, traced into the snowy side of a mountain. Sam is crushed by the ephemeral nature of this artful gift. Heartbroken, he smashes both his creations to pieces and sobs his way through the snow back to his crumpled ship, once again alone.

In following strips Sam rebuilds this metal man only to finally banish it to the wilderness. Of course Sam grows to eventually regret this. In "I Never Stopped Loving You," a gray and wheelchair bound Sam instructs his latest and last robot to go out and pick flowers for him, flowers which remind him of his long gone first love. The little robot dutifully does its best to find flowers but erroneously brings back mushrooms, then rocks, to the disappointed Sam. One day the robot brings back a basket full of rusted sprockets which Sam recognizes as belonging to the metal man he banished. Overcome with emotion, Sam demands the robot tow him to the site, where he sees the rusted robot, standing like a scarecrow, amid a field of flowers. The robot is

long "dead," of course, and Sam dies on the spot of a broken heart. Just then the new robot's light bulb turns on: flowers, it finally sees. The robot begins dutifully picking them all and piling them next to Sam's flyblown corpse.

The hard ironies in this cycle of stories is clear. The servotron's constant desire to please their master is every bit as human as Sam's constant disappointment in them, as human as Sam's "inhuman" treatment of them. If Sam's creations had hearts, Sam made them—but that doesn't stop him from stomping them when they "fail" him. Sam is breaking his own heart when he breaks his tin men. To me, the spirit of this little equation is one wisp of the ghost in Chris Ware's tragic, comic machine. ■

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The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 2.

silent "sound" in a vague but undeniable way. This vagueness is what Chris has now captured precisely, and that capture is one of the miracles of this book. It is not a novel of ideas but of thought itself; it is the evanescence of everyday intelligence made concrete.

Rather than summarize the Corrigan family's experience or depict it with a presumed authority, the book recreates their experience as they actually live it. Just as our capricious, largely uncontrollable mind races from reality to daydream, between yesterday, now, and tomorrow, Ware's panels discriminate little or not at all between the real and the imagined, between now and then. Chris gathers over one hundred years of his subjects' thoughts, holds them in his own head, and imprints that mirrored mosaic on the page. Panels reflect, refract, and echo each other, forming a mind-boggling polyphony of space-time hallucinations and emotional associations. This emotional logic, coupled with the clear pictures Chris draws, makes *The Smartest Kid on Earth* a coherent stream of consciousness. The book mirrors thought, and like thought, it is difficult to define but easy to follow.

"Human thought is so incredibly important to storytelling in a comic book," Chris said, "and yet it's one of the most unused elements. Usually it's just a bubble with some word balloons in it. That's not what thoughts are really like. I'd hoped to organize this stupid Jimmy Corrigan story in a way that would allow for thought and its various subspecies, such as memory, prediction, dreaming, ambition, and metaphorical association, to shape the 'story' rather than a traditional plot might've shaped it. Thought affects experience *and* perception, and I've tried to simulate this in the story with intrusions that probably seem to most people like 'postmodern noodling,' though that wasn't my intent, just my fumbling, juvenile result. I dunno. It's hard to tell a serious story with a dumb main character. I think my big mistake was approaching it as fiction."

Deaf and Dumb.

The autobiography in this fiction is obvious, as we will see; Chris's cartoon universe is composed of characters from every figment of his imagination, all of them always playing out some eternal war inside his head, a war with its own, weird, harmony. Knowing that Chris has tried to organize this story in a "musical" style, I asked the amateur pianist about his favorite piece of music.

"Beethoven's Ninth Symphony," Chris said. "To me, good music should be the perfect and irrefutable analogy of thought—and not necessarily conscious thought, either. It should honestly reflect the shifting and wrenching of the 'soul' as intuitively as possible. A life can be read in music because, to sound ridiculously pompous about it, the moods shift and wrestle with each other, like a soul undecided. For this reason I almost can't listen to Beethoven's Ninth. I find it so moving, and so true, that it is overwhelming. It isn't even 'music' in the traditional sense. Themes rise and fall and intertwine and change in ways that are so undeniably human that only someone who was *deaf,* and trapped within the music of his own mind, could have written it. I can't think of any art that is better than that symphony."

This then seems the best analogy for *The Smartest Kid on Earth*. It is a symphony composed of words and pictures, and just as Beethoven "heard" his final masterpiece when he was completely deaf, Chris Ware is playing a silent, comic music composed totally, and tonally, of his own thoughts.

If Chris is reading this, he is recoiling at this point, for he would never be so grandiloquent in his assessment of his own book. Nobody, but nobody, is a harsher critic of Chris Ware than Chris

At a signing, Ware embellished his comics with these nebbish self-portraits.

Ware. "This book is a rambling mess with no organizing ideas," he told me. "It's the lankiest, most meandering sort of…" His voice, and his face, disappeared into his hands. As Terry LaBan's cartoon in this issue's comics page shows, Chris will talk fairly objectively about his comics until you make the mistake of paying him a compliment. Ware's paroxysms of self-loathing are now legendary, mainly because depicting them with anthropological curiosity is a hallmark of the writing-about-Ware genre to which I now contribute.

I attempted to count the times and ways in which Chris called himself an idiot, but I finally quit after tallying words like moron, retard, dolt, numskull, imbecile, and simpleton, along with corollary descriptors such as crass and brain-damaged babbler. Baffled by my admittedly nebulous questions and in obvious pain, Chris said, "I should just off myself." He cried, "I'm sorry I'm not more intelligent."

You get the point. I have edited out most of the barbs and run through them here because this self-flagellation makes for a giggle at first. After six hours of interviewing it grew overwhelming, and finally enlightening. What the hell, I thought, maybe there is some truth to this supposed stupidity. And I saw that there is. It is simple. If the greatest knowledge is the acknowledgment of your own ignorance, Chris is the smartest cartoonist on earth. He may not know anything, but he knows he does not know anything, and this makes him smart.

If I am making easy irony, forgive me, for ironies abound in Mr. Ware's wise cranium. One look at his work and you can see immediately that he is a perfectionist; he also has an unshakable belief that his comics must be improvised. He is a satirist who repeatedly stabs our society with fiendish, hilarious glee; he also insists that his art has no point and certainly no "message." Emotion is everything in his work, he stressed; an hour later he mimicked paring his fingernails and caricatured himself as "a namby-pamby æsthete," a "spoiled-rotten Little Lord Faunterloy" whining and pining for the long-lost days of lace doilies and triple-mitered woodwork. I raise my white flag: you are not going to understand this guy from reading this newspaper. Not a ghost of a chance.

Fortunately, Chris is one of the nicest people I have met. As I struggled visibly with these contradictions and my suspicion that the soul of his art lurks somewhere between them, Chris

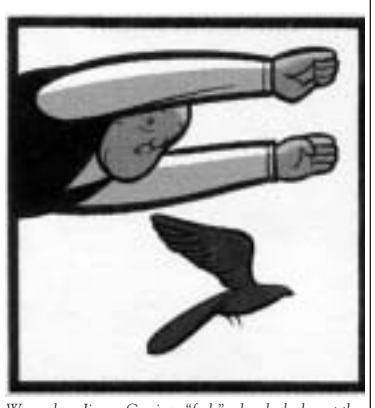
SMARTEST KID continued on page 4.

COMIC ART 101.

In comics, fantasies are usually indicated with devices such as cloudy panel borders, a muted color scheme, or thought balloons. The Smartest Kid on Earth *uses all of these devices but, more importantly, it also ignores them. When a Corrigan feels something, the reader sees it. When a Corrigan wishes for something to happen, it appears to happen. Ware's omniscient narration is a triumph of subjectivity, and this is why the Corrigan's emotions are built into the book, telling the true story of sex, violence, and heroism hidden in their otherwise humdrum existence. Below are five examples of this objectively-rendered subjectivity.*

We see what James Reed Corrigan "sees" in 1892 when he wishes he were a grown man.

We see how Jimmy Corrigan "feels" when he tries to write a letter to his father.



We see how Jimmy Corrigan "feels" when he looks out the window at a cardinal flying past.

We see what Jimmy Corrigan fears his father might do.

Even when Chris shows thoughts using the old-fashioned methods, he uses them in a novel way.

The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 3.

leaned forward in his chair to soothe me. "All you're going to come up with in writing about this," he said, "is that I fill in a space for the paper every week. That's all I do. I fill in the space."

In this too, he was right.

A Book About Everything.

The Smartest Kid on Earth gives us four generations of Chicago Irish: Jimmy; his dad, Jim; Jim's dad, James; and the great-granddaddy of them all, the nine-fingered, boar-whiskered William Corrigan. Add to this lineage the surprise appearance of Amy Corrigan, Jimmy's Black sister, and we have what chest-thumpers like to call "The American Century," from its embryo to its end. William Corrigan's story begins with the Civil War; his son James's story runs through the Columbian Exposition of 1893, which was called "Man's Greatest Achievement" and celebrated the emergence of America's central city, Chicago. The book ends today with these forefathers dead or near death. Their children, Jimmy and Amy, live in a land where "man's great achievement" is "the broad sweep of power lines, the delicate articulation of poles, signs, and warning lights, and the deep forest of advertisements."

If this sounds like a Great American Novel, the author never intended it as such. "Honestly, I don't understand things from a social level," Chris said. "I can only talk about them in a personal way. An Irish friend of mine understands the world in such a different way than I do. He'll say things like, 'These people are middle-class descendants of Dutch merchants; therefore, they will obviously always purchase this certain type of drywall screw.' I *cannot* understand the world in that way. That's a European way of looking at the world; it's not an American way."

Chris is steeped in the American Way, born in the grain belt and transposed as a teen to a Texas public high school named after Robert E. Lee, the man who led the charge to keep slavery legal (or for "state's rights" if you are a politically correct southerner.) The horrible facts about our Black and White history are hinted at early in the book and they grow into the context that imbues Jimmy's relationship with Amy with more significance than it might otherwise have.

The "White City" of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition looms throughout James Corrigan's tragic childhood story. Built on the swamp of Chicago's south side, the White City housed the most important world's fair ever held on American swamp. With a total attendance of nearly 28 million—in a young nation of only 63 million—the Exposition contained exhibits on nearly every subject imaginable, all housed in a palatial, neoclassical, lagooned city designed by Chicago's most prestigious architect, Daniel Burnham, and built with a white, temporary plaster called *staff*. It is here, standing atop the largest building on earth and the first disposable architectural masterpiece, that William Corrigan runs away from his son, on James's birthday, no less—a primal abandonment that sets the tone for the rest of the Corrigan lineage.

"It was such an incredible human achievement," Chris said of the White City. "The modern world was forming at that time: the technology and the culture that defines our world today. Music, movies, *everything* that I like. I get so tired of people dismissing the Exposition because it was disposable. That's ridiculous—everything we live in now is disposable."

Much of the contemporary drama of the story takes place in a prefab, mock Tudor box of an apartment—"The Coves at Honey Farm"—and in "Pam's Wagon Wheel," a hokey, white-bread diner. Chris's feelings about modern architecture are clear in the postcards framing his sixth chapter, postcards which describe the concrete plain of edge cities with comically Whitmanesque fervor. The degradation of American architectural aims is evident in this book, but it is certainly not the point, if there is one. Chris may point out our culture's fault lines but his point, for lack of a better word, seems to be that humans are the same as they were one hundred years ago, even if the architecture framing modern lives no longer admits of human dignity. The sterility of our commercial world highlights the real story, Jimmy's search for his father. That is the point of Ware's satire: to frame sincerity. The sincerity, in turn, sharpens the satire.

"I think a lot of people make the mistake of thinking that culture forms people," Chris said. "It's the other way around. I like writing about that kind of stuff, and I stick it in there, but I don't want it to be the subject matter. This sounds smarmy and arrogant, but honestly, the subject is the human heart. Everything else surrounds that—which is an inversion of the actual truth."

Everything surrounds the human heart—or the human heart surrounds everything. This is the kind of inductive-deductive question that haunts my reading of *The Smartest Kid on Earth*.

A Book About Nothing.

> *What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible… No lyricism, no comments, the author's personality absent. It will make sad reading… Nowhere in my book must the author express his emotions or his opinions…The entire value of my book, if it has any, will consist of my having known how to walk straight ahead on a hair, balanced above the twin abysses of lyricism and vulgarity (which I seek to fuse in analytical narrative). Never in my life have I written anything more difficult than what I am doing now—trivial dialogue.*
>
> —Gustave Flaubert, letters to Louise Colet, 1852.

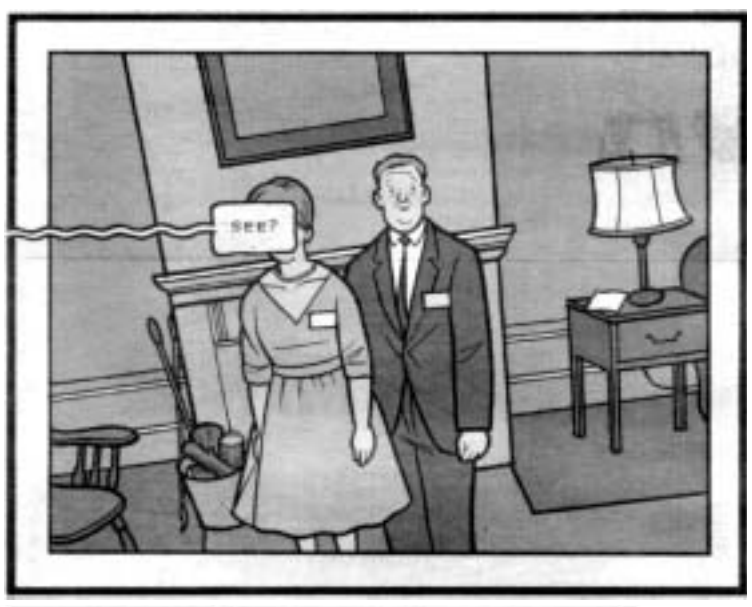
Like *Madame Bovary*, the 19th century masterpiece by Gustave Flaubert, *The Smartest Kid on Earth* is largely an omniscient depiction of boredom and daydreaming. And as with *Madame Bovary*, the characters' exquisitely rendered thoughts do not necessarily tell us what the author thinks about them. Composed of such airy stuff, *The Smartest Kid on Earth* is nevertheless a book of substance, weight, and consequence, held together by the gravity of its center: the bond—or lack of one—between fathers and sons.

One hundred years ago, James Corrigan was abandoned by his father; now old and near death, James silently watches his grandson Jimmy's contrapuntal struggle to find and regain his father, Jim Corrigan. Everyone is acting out of their abandonment, their void—that is one of the major criticisms made of *The Smartest Kid on Earth*—and nothing is somehow at the core of the book. Its numerous champions and critics might both agree: Ware's book has made nothing meaningful.

Jimmy Corrigan is essentially a nobody living a life of acute loneliness. Finally Jimmy's agony overcomes his inertia, and with a mysteriously hobbled foot he sets out one Thanksgiving weekend on an odyssey—and I use that world carefully—to Waukosha, Michigan, to meet the father he has never known. As Jimmy limps along in search of filial love, he keeps one eye out for the woman of his romantic dreams. In page after excruciating page, comprised almost entirely of false starts and trivial dialogue, Jimmy's search for kinship results in anticlimax after anticlimax. It is, as Ware writes, "A series of adventures which will attempt to accurately counterfeit the mechanism of mundanity." It is, as Ware elsewhere says, a book that provides *nothing* "in the way of excitement, interest, or what contemporary connoisseurs refer to as

SMARTEST KID continued on page 5.

This page, clockwise from top: the 1893 Columbian Exposition; William Corrigan; James Corrigan and wife holding Jim; 1890s "Chicago" poster; James Corrigan as a boy; the "Century of Progress" World's Fair; Jim on a model T; Berenice, keeper of the Corrigan family secret; and James's mother, who died giving birth to James.



This page, clockwise from top: Jimmy, Jim, and James meet today; Leatherneck Jim; Jimmy, his mom, and the rip in his life; Amy and her Dad; Amy and her Mom; Jimmy with a bloody nose and a bleeding heart; 1980s "Chicago" poster; Jim and Amy's mom; Jim and Jimmy's mom.

The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 4.

'character development.' Students of the 'cartoon language' may nonetheless savour the many subtle shifts in tone, pattern, and dreariness which this number affords, and bask in the renewal of nature's beauty while they wonder after the gentle touch of new love, watching the squirrels and birds frolic about upon the moist earth below the dormitory window, the tear-wrinkled tissues of our quarto crushed between their quaking fingers."

Stop me before I quote again. Chris is a gifted writer, and I could make this an anthology of his own words. There is something funny about Jimmy's loneliness, and there is something funny about the book's structure as well. Somebody once said that there are two plots in life: someone leaves town or someone comes to town. Jimmy does both by leaving Chicago and coming to Waukosha. Chris advances this almost ridiculously simple plot with ineffably thin action and yet, with a—dare I say it?—kaleidoscopic complexity.

Perhaps I am being lazy, but clichés seem the plainest way to capture the brilliantly simple paradoxes of this book. The face-to-face meeting between Jimmy and his father, Jim, is like looking into both sides of a mirror at once; we must search as they do for clues about each other in their sideways glances and ashamed pauses, pauses that hint at the unspeakable truths the two strangers mask with their awkward conversation. The Corrigans' body language and their silences tell the invisible story of this book.

A Brilliant Hoax, Cry Critics.

Perhaps that is why some people just do not "get" the story; or perhaps they do get it and say, "So what?" *The Smartest Kid on Earth* does not "connect," says a surprisingly large number of comics readers. Although the chorus of Comic Fandom has prostrated itself before Ware and proclaimed him the latest in a long line of comics messiahs, already you can hear the critics crowing and heralding Ware's inevitable crucifixion. A certain kind of art critic secretly loves to be disappointed, and a certain bunch of them can wait no longer for the greatest disappointment of their lives.

They have voiced much of it in the dependably acerbic *Comics Journal*—when Chris drew a *Journal* cover he titled it "The Magazine of News, Reviews, and Mean-Spirited Back-Stabbing." As we noted earlier, Chris wrote deliberately wordless strips for years to harness the unheard, "musical" power of the comics language. Predictably, in its first review of these comics, the *Journal* declared, "Ware's works are never graceful: to borrow a term from jazz, they don't 'swing,' they don't even come close." The reviewer then excoriated Ware's comics for a host of failings, chief among them a perceived lack of "*soul*," with this pendant—"Although that very lack is the real theme of Ware's work." Remember this critic's koan, for later it will return to haunt my own argument.

What is weird about this is the way in which the critic, with uncanny accuracy, honed in and criticized Ware for the very things he was working hardest to achieve. Other cartoonists in their *Journal* interviews have also voiced similar reservations about Chris's comics. This might be expected from Chris's peers, of course, as cartoonists are a competitive bunch of hardasses, clawing and pinching each other like lobsters in the proverbial barrel. What is strange about their disappointment is the way in which they too fault Ware's comics for lacking the very quality Ware says he most passionately wants to convey: emotion.

Chris began the "famous" phase of his career in comics obscurity with this statement in *The Comics Journal:* "I'd like to be like Chopin or Brahms and create something that makes you want to weep, but I'm not anywhere near that."

Apparently some of Chris's peers still agree with that quintessential Ware self-assessment. By far the most consistently made criticism of Ware's work, and *The Smartest Kid on Earth* in particular, is that it lacks emotion, or that it presents only one emotion: sadness, alternately described as hopelessness, heartlessness, even cruelty. In this sense the primary reservation about Chris is that he is too cold, too reserved. The critical litany growing from this central complaint—flat, repetitive, pointless, single-gear—is growing longer and longer.

The bunch most anxious to nail Chris as a pretender on this point are, unfortunately, a private lot. Their self-titled "Chris Ware Backlash" is not fair game for quoted reportage, having taken place in a private, e-mail discussion forum open to "Members Only"—no doubt the actual brand of haberdashery worn by some of the club's more dyspeptic contributors. And so you will have to take my word on what the Members Only say about Ware. Since "controversy" sells newspapers, I politely invite the Members Only to step outside of their clubhouse and onto the more public letters page of this newspaper.

In order to maintain the appearance of playing fair with the other children, I must hang my head and admit that I was once a Member. Until their comprehensive debates about "The Fantastic Four" and marvelous inkers inspired me to resign my membership, I was privy to the "substance," if you can call it that, of their arguments against Ware. And I will admit the half-truths in their argument, if only to more thoroughly and politely trounce them. I must also admit that the Members Only intended the title of their Backlash with some irony. Every itemization of Ware's "failures" as a writer and artist inevitably ended with a statement along the lines of, "Don't get me wrong—I still think he's one of the best cartoonists ever!" The style is brilliant, all admitted, but the substance they found lacking.

These were of course the very charges brought against Gustave Flaubert, the one writer Ware has named again and again as his exemplary inspiration. Flaubert's critics, like Ware's, found his greatest failure in what the author considered his greatest achievement. Leaving aside for now the tricky distinction between style and substance—a particularly tricky distinction in comics—let us investigate the half-truths in these emotional points. Granted, Jimmy Corrigan has no emotional connection in his life, save for the tortured one with his domineering Mother. But that is why he hobbles off on his odyssey: to make an emotional connection. Jimmy is *obsessed* with finding love, and if he had one motive, that would be it. Perhaps Chris's critics are more involved by the book than they remembered to admit: perhaps they want so badly for Jimmy to find love that they cannot wait any longer and for that reason find the story disappointing.

This paradox is also perhaps why Chris told me, "I very much want to express emotion. Since I was 15 years old, that's all I've ever wanted to do in comics. As far as I'm concerned, that's what it's *all about*."

I cannot doubt Chris's sincerity on this point, having heard the tenor of his voice strain every time the subject of this missing "emotional center" arose.

"It really frightens me when I read other cartoonists saying that my work has no 'emotional center,'" he said. "I don't know what that phrase means, but it means that I'm not communicating something." Throughout our six-hour interview Chris maintained a painfully funny state of jocular despair—what we might call his "good grief" frame of mind—and yet this alleged lack of emotion seemed to haunt him with a deep sense of personal

SMARTEST KID continued on page 6.

The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 5.

failure. He literally sagged in his chair every time the topic came up.

This riddle is the gravity that either holds the book together or makes it seem hollow. The absurd irony of this emotional issue finally forced me to admit—as much as I hated to—that the Members Only are on to something. I do not agree with them, but they do bring up a point worth fighting about. There is something strange about their criticisms, and reading about Chris and interviewing him only bolstered my strange suspicions.

Our Search For An Emotional Center.

Chris may put his entire heart and mind into the book but he is obviously split in his feelings about emotional connections in real life. Just as the human brain is split into two halves, Chris seems to be of two different minds about this vague, but ardently demanded "emotional connection." In his landmark interview with Gary Groth in the 200th issue of *The Comics Journal*—hereafter referred to as the Grothasaurus—Groth told Chris that, in his reading of the book, human connection was confirmed as *impossible*.

"Well, I think that's sort of true," Chris replied. "Sometimes I feel like I'm really close to people, and at other times I feel completely distant from those same people… So I probably have some brain damage or something."

I told Chris that, in my reading of his book, human connection was confirmed as *essential*.

Chris almost leapt from his chair. "If you were a girl I'd jump up right now and give you a big kiss," he said. "I really appreciate that because I've tried to capture that feeling."

The genius of this book—we might say the soul of this book—may then lie in a hollow center. Perhaps it is a void that we as readers fill with our own emotion. Like the dark waters at the bottom of a well, perhaps it is the proverbial artistic mirror. Maybe the people who do not see what Jimmy Corrigan is about find it too dark down there. Or maybe they find it too shallow.

What can we say about Jimmy? If there is a tangible center to this book it could be him—he is the main character, after all. But he is an odd character. A doughy, balding, descendant of potato-eaters, Jimmy is the kind of lumpen we see every day on the bus but never remember. He meekly lives his life of perpetual discomfiture and anonymity in a big, ugly city in the Middle West. He is middle-aged (36 years old in the 1980 "now" of the story) but he always looks like an infant and an old man, even when he is a kid. Other than this outstanding middling quality, and those ridiculous knickers he wears, Jimmy's most distinguishing characteristic is the ease with which everybody overlooks him. Even his stutter is so timid that it fails to distinguish him. Jimmy Corrigan is a nobody.

That is why many readers feel he is not a character at all. This is the starting point for those who are trying to understand the book, and the final point made by those who do not care to understand it. Members Only have described Jimmy as a "one-dimensional character," a "two-dimensional character" (literally true of course), and a "cardboard character" (literally true if you count the card stock covers he is printed on). I wonder: is it possible for a passive character to provide a book's center? Is it possible that a nobody is really best suited for the role of Everyman? Is it possible that nothing, not even grief, is more emotional than loneliness?

Ciphers.

A cipher is the literary equivalent of a zero; a cipher lies at the center of a book in the same way that a zero lies at the center of a number line, and the other characters in the book gain their negative or positive value in relation to the big Zero. I suggested to Chris that perhaps we ought to see Corrigan as this Zero.

"I don't see Jimmy as a cipher at all," Chris said. "He's sort of a type, and there's a little bit of the general to him, but I see him as a *fairly* real person."

I am of two minds about this last statement of Ware's. Half of me sees Jimmy as a dud, one more boring than any person could ever be. I look out my window, however, and I see a city smack dab in the middle of a featureless prairie, peopled almost entirely by millions of nobodies, has-beens, and never-weres. And I am sure my fellow Chicagoans see me as Nobody when I haltingly order my root beer and tuna melt. Each and every one of those nobodies has at times, just like me, an inner life filled with almost suicidal stakes. Jimmy may be a zero, but he is far from worthless in my eyes. I see myself in him.

And that is intentional on Ware's part. Chris has drawn the male Corrigans as bald, and with dots for eyes, for a reason: to draw a blanker slate, so to speak, on which the reader can project his own image. (As always, refer to Scott McCloud's essential book, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, for a coherent exegesis of this and other theories.)

"I only started to think about the baldness thing a few years back," Chris said. "I noticed that and thought, Wait a minute. I did it just by default. There's a strange wall between the artist and the reader in comics, and I think that the less information you provide about a character's external appearance in a comic strip, the more apt a reader is to identify with that character. Anyone who draws cartoons long enough will start to realize this relationship intuitively."

Given the Everyman face of Jimmy Corrigan, it is odd that the word "alienation" gets bandied about so much in the voluminous writings about Ware. I am not sure "alienation" is the right word to use to describe Ware's world; alienation is related to, but different than, loneliness. Alienated people are often lonely, but are lonely people often alienated? If we could fit Chris Ware neatly into the icebox of alienation, then it would preserve this idea that his comics are cold and unemotional.

In the Grothasaurus Chris mentioned the Ingmar Bergman movie, *Persona*, in which an actor withdraws from social intercourse because she cannot stand the pretensions and prattling conventions of society. Real-life acting drives her nuts—so she avoids it to keep her sanity, and gets put away as a consequence. I asked Chris if he had that *Persona* syndrome in mind when he created Jimmy Corrigan.

"A little bit," Chris said. "Actually, I feel that way most of the time. I really don't like going out that much. I always regret what I say in public circumstances, whether it's a party or a talk or a conversation. I've rarely talked to people that I honestly connected with. I always feel regret and despair: I think, Why did I say those things? I'm such an idiot. I didn't mean what I said, they didn't understand what I said, blah blah blah, I'm a failure. It didn't work out."

Chris sank and murmured, "Even right now I'm saying all sorts of dumb stuff I know I'm going to regret."

I laughed at that last statement, a laugh that later returned to haunt me. The blackness of Chris's situation is humorous because it is clear that he wants to be understood. There is no visibly smug superiority to his alienation—and I think he is not so much alienated as he is isolated, mainly out of a sense of inferiority. His characters certainly feel inferior. As a boy, James Corrigan describes himself as a "failed ghost." This prophecy sadly comes true one hundred years later when James impassively watches Jimmy Corrigan break down and weep, "It's all my fault… I-I… I-I always mess everything up… (snf!)" Either scene ought to satisfy—or repel—all those emotional readers who cannot empathize with Jimmy's situation. These self-characterizations also point out that these two Corrigans see themselves as zeros as much as any reader.

Since Chris Ware is undoubtedly the Most Self-Effacing Cartoonist on Earth, many of his interviewers have concluded that Jimmy Corrigan is Chris Ware, and vice versa. When I brought this up Chris squinted, pained by the obvious, and said, "Who *else* would he be? That's such a dingbat question." Wonder softened his focus, and he asked me, "Why do people ask questions like that?"

Dingbats.

Perhaps they ask for technical reasons. Jimmy Corrigan has been dozens of different personas throughout the years. Although in the novel Jimmy is only the frump described above, he has also appeared in many different guises throughout past newspaper strips. Jimmy originated years ago as a dwarfling kid wizard, the "Smartest Kid on Earth," in a series of rocket-ship and chemistry-experiment adventures parodying the detective adventure comics of the 30s and 40s: "Secret Agent [Corrigan] X-9", by Dashiell Hammett and Alex Raymond, and "Detective Jim Corrigan," by Superman's half-creator, Jerry Siegel. After his gee-whiz joke of a birth, the Jimmy Corrigan character then became Ware's all-encompassing but humble brainchild, a man of many ages who stood in for the cartoonist's many moods.

"Originally I'd conceived of the idea of a character being so malleable that I could present him one week as a bitter old man, then the next week as a regretful, warm old man, and it wouldn't matter," Chris said, referring to the early years of Jimmy Corrigan strips. "I really do see the idea of 'character' as being so unreal that I thought, Why should I adhere to a naturalistic continuum?"

SMARTEST KID continued on page 7.

The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 6.

He sighed. "Of course, this brought me *no end* of problems. "

Including, no doubt, the problem of reading him as a real character. This malleable, almost nonexistent conception of character is why Corrigan (like all of Chris's characters) eventually turned into him. The brilliant little kid and the mercurial old man—an apt enough summation of the twin poles of Chris's character in real life—have now met halfway in the middle-aged Jimmy Corrigan of the novel. This Jimmy is the middleman lookalike of his rotund father and his gnomish grandfather—whom we see only in his childhood and near-senile "second childhood."

Over the years the Corrigan joke, far more than any of Ware's other characters, has turned into an incredibly complex, lyrical, pictogrammic rumination on identity. Chris has taken Jimmy's character farther than the rest because Jimmy's roots are the most personal, and the most painful. It is clear from following Chris's comics and past interviews that when Chris first moved to Chicago he went through a period of hellish, heartbroken isolation. Here in the city of slaughterhouses, he ate alone every day for a year. It was then that the lonely, "real-life" Jimmy Corrigan character was born.

"Yup," Chris said. "Exactly. My sketchbooks from that time are filled with strips where, basically, I am him."

The Ghost of Loneliness.

Chris is now married, relatively successful, and well established. Listening to his thoughts about one of the worst times of his life, it was clear that the specter of that past loneliness still lurks nearby. "I still have a sympathy for Jimmy," Chris said, "but it's not like…" His voice trailed off. "I've been working on this story for *so long* that it's dangerous to carry all that into this part of my life. But maybe it's good to take it this far. One of the reasons I did the Jimmy Corrigan stuff, and why I'm still doing it, is not only to recreate those feelings, but also to create something in which people who were feeling the same way might find some solace. Loneliness seems to me to be the most basic human condition. I'm not saying that loneliness is what it's *all* about, but it's a part of existence, and to say that *that* is unemotional is ridiculous. For me it's where the big internal struggle comes from."

Loneliness is almost impossible to define. To speak of it in a dangerously "existential" way, it is always there at the center of your being, and though you can allay it with wine, building model rocket ships, or incessant fornication, it always returns to haunt you. It is an evanescent feeling, an almost physical state, that borders on non-being. You are the most you and the least you when you are lonely. You feel weakest when your identity is most pronounced.

"Strangely enough," Chris said, "during the grimmest times in my life, when I've been in that situation…" He searched for the one, right word. "I don't know if I felt more *alive*…" He shook his head. "I don't know. I'm not the sort of person who would ever want to live alone, like Gustave Flaubert did."

Loneliness might be the solitary reason for Jimmy's Everyman nature. "All sorts of other miseries can spring from relationships," Chris said, "but the raw core of human experience is loneliness. There's always that sense of isolation, whether you're with someone or not. And if you're not with someone, then it becomes undeniable. Razor-edged."

This sharp focus on isolation—whether Jimmy is with someone or not—is the single reason why some readers have understood the Corrigan story as cold and even cruel. Jimmy's relentlessly lonely existence baffles readers, including me, because his isolation forms either a sympathetically

offered picture of detachment, a cruel detachment itself, or both—that is the puzzle. It is as puzzling as our culture in general, a culture that has babbled about the subject of loneliness endlessly and yet will not face up to it; one that sympathizes with loneliness but recoils at an unsparing depiction of it; one that defines it, and diagnoses it, as "depression" so that doctors can prescribe a pill to make it go away. Loneliness is both ever-present and determinedly absent in the modern world. Perhaps for this reason, Chris chose this subject—a subject he said is "beaten into the ground"—to be the subject of his life's work.

"It's the typical modern subject, in a way," he said. "There are hundreds of thousands of people out there who, for some reason, never managed to make that big conquest that our culture celebrates so much: to find a sexual partner. These are the people with the coats and the hats who get on the bus carrying two plastic bags, their newspapers and magazines, their headphones on, their puzzle books out, and they look like they're gritting their teeth against all hope. There's no guarantee that you're ever going to find companionship. Sometimes I wonder if that is the natural state of humanity, and if a lot of anger and rage is due to the fact that our culture operates against that."

Daydreaming Happiness.

Chris once asked a painter friend of his, Why do people always expect to be so happy? The painter thought for a moment and replied, "Because there's pictures of it everywhere, that's why."

We are all familiar with the rant against advertising: never has society promised us so much romance, so much fun, so much fashion, and so much sex. And never have we felt so dull, no matter how much we buy.

"We're living in the culture that we've been working for millennia to complete," Chris told me. "There's nothing we do anymore that is directly related to maintaining our life on earth. Sustaining ourselves, finding food, fending off predators, sheltering ourselves—that's all been taken care of. We do this indirect thing, called "work," that provides us with this strange currency which allows us to purchase the means of life. Every need has been met, and I think that's the modern problem. It's an unrest, an innate dissatisfaction, that I think everyone feels. At least I feel it."

Eight-year old James Reed Corrigan sports the debonair mustache of his dreams.

When the modern world was forming in 1902, Jules de Gaultier coined the word *Bovarysme*. Taken from the heroine of Flaubert's novel, *Bovarysme* is the daydreaming with which we supplement our humdrum existence. Madame Bovary was the quintessential bored housewife: stuck with a clumpish, doofus husband and her dispiriting chores, she occupied her emptiness with romantic novels, frivolous purchases, and endless mooning out her window. She became a symbol of the modern malaise because she embodied the biggest question: now that we have everything we need, what do we want?

We want action, romance, and adventure, of course, just like Walter Mitty. We want what Jimmy Corrigan imagines as he stands on the poop of his dream yacht, tippling a G&T with Chauncey and wondering if they should wake the ladies sleeping below deck. We want what James Corrigan wanted in 1893, when he thwarts the stagecoach robbery and carries off the little red-haired girl of his dreams on the imaginary horse of his passions.

Jimmy's heroics in an imagined World War III.

"Those embarrassing daydreams seem so obvious and transparent," Chris said, "but I still fall for them. They're naturally human and unavoidable. The question is whether culture recognizes them or not. I find Flaubert inspiring because he tried to embrace the dullness of life as well as the excitement of life. I've tried to do that in this story, which may be a total mistake. Who wants to read about dullness? If you're creating an artifact that's carefully crafted, why would you want to carefully craft the dullness of life? But sometimes I find myself thinking that there's some comfort in delineating that dullness."

Where is the comfort in watching Jimmy, isolated in the peepshow frame of his living-room window, waiting eternally for his phone to ring? It is not surprising that the majority of reviews written about Chris's work call it "unremittingly bleak" or some such descriptor. That is true, but there is more to the truth. Sadness has a strange math: when art adds to it, its sum seems to come out right, as listening to a sad song can make you feel better. What is more, the vanities with which Jimmy enriches his humdrum existence are humorous; not always laugh-out-loud funny, perhaps, but certainly worth a chuckle or two. They are impossibly romantic, yet they are as "real" as anything else in the book. They are satirized with compassion, and that is a comfort.

Emma Bovary tried to realize her impossibly romantic dreams through adultery and the looking glass of her life shattered. French literary critics (all men) fairly exploded as well. Some sang praise but most, never having seen a book from which the author remained almost entirely absent, mistook Flaubert's absence for aloofness. They could not easily judge the specter of his omniscient narration, and thus said that Flaubert's book was a brilliant exercise in style but lacked what they called a "moral center."

"That's so *weird*," Chris said. "That's the weirdest thing to say about a book."

Back then people thought that books should tell the reader how to feel, I offered. They were not used to making up their own minds.

"They still want that today," Chris sighed. "That's why there's so many bad movies."

The critics pestered Flaubert incessantly about the implications and inspiration for Madame Bovary until he finally turned away from the window to face them, and floored them with his obvious answer: "Madame Bovary, *c'est moi*."

"I could see Flaubert as Madame Bovary," Chris mused. "He seemed like a passionate guy who'd had his heart stomped a couple of times."

This phrase—having your heart stomped—comes up again and again in Chris's conversations with interviewers. It is almost impossible to underestimate the importance of heart-stomping in Ware's work, particularly his earlier Sparky the Cat and Quimby the Mouse stories. Betrayal and abandonment are as integral to these animals' love lives as Ignatz's brick repeatedly beaning love-struck Krazy Kat was to George Herriman's world. Jimmy's love life is another invisible, intensely personal subject of *The Smartest Kid on Earth*.

"Well, I hope it's an underlying theme," Chris said in a rare moment of self-explication. "I've chosen a character who is not exactly asexual, but sexually inexperienced. I'm more interested in the relationships between people as a *result* of sex, not just the biological urge itself. I'm a little frustrated by the amount of movies that imply that we're only a bunch of sex-crazed animals. Maybe that's true, but I also think that there's a bit more to life after that."

A bit more is a bit of an understatement. *All* of life comes after sex—that is why we exist—and that concept is, as much as anything, the genesis of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*.

Why We Exist.

Underground comics have always been tyrannized by sex, from the ribald Tijuana Bibles of the twenties and thirties to

SMARTEST KID continued on page 8.

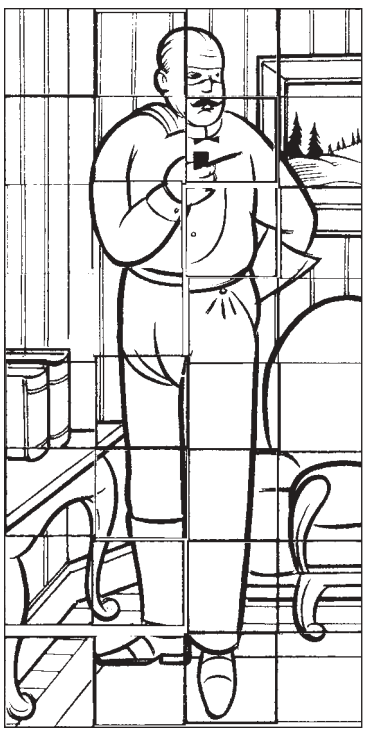
The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 7.

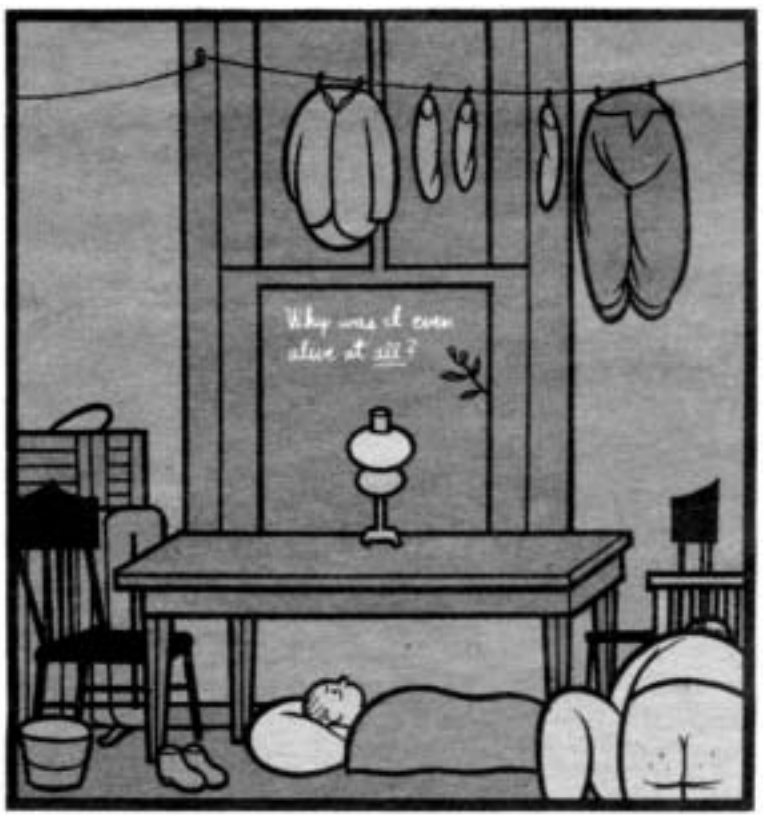
the scatological explosion of the sixties and seventies, and *The Smartest Kid on Earth* is no exception to this rule. Ware's early work in the seminal, now-legendary anthologies *Donut Sissy*, *European "Naked" Robot*, and *Pale Effete Shred of a Man* drew an explicit sexual manifesto of sorts. The Corrigan novel, however, goes deeper than Ware's early work. What makes this book different is the phantasmal, almost invisible way sex penetrates the story. Jimmy is no Lothario; he is a virgin, and sex is therefore ever-present by virtue of its absence.

The Smartest Kid on Earth is perhaps the least sexy, sex-obsessed comic ever. As one *Acme* reader wrote to Chris: "I have shown my wife various parts of 'Jimmy Corrigan' and now, whenever we might be about to have sex, we stop." The book follows the line between lust and love—a line that can be as thin as your own skin, or as wide as miles and longer than one hundred years—and leads to its inevitable consequences. Sex lies at the mystery of Jimmy's lineage: from his great-grandfather William's porcine grunting with prostitutes, lonely widows, and possibly Berenice, his black maid, to the present-day, romantic reverie Jimmy projects onto his every brief encounter with womankind.

Most of Jimmy's daydreams are embodied in his doctor's office fantasy. As he is being treated for a bloody nose, he imagines the nurse pressing one polished nail to her lips, which issue this whisper: "Let's go someplace where I can *really* give you an examination." She whisks Jimmy off in a red sports car to a fireplace, an off-panel coo or two, then a sunny-side up egg breakfast followed by the inevitable ring and finally a cabin, cozied by mountains, happily ever after. The warm, corny timbre of this fantasy harmonizes with Jimmy's grandfather's fantasies about the little red-haired girl he falls in love with a century earlier—the Charlie Brown overtones of which are so blatant that I will not bore you with an exegesis.



The "Dad" puzzle, (poorly) assembled from The Acme Novelty Library's *"Great Big Book of Jokes."*



ingly complex character as the story progresses. Nevertheless, it is plain that Chris was already drawing a more sympathetic father before he met his real father. Such a weird juncture could have either reinforced or removed Chris's inspiration for the book.

"That's part of the problem," Chris said. "I found my father, so some of the original reasons for doing this story are gone now, or solved in a way. The fiction of the story has become even more fictional, and it has taken on its own life. This fantasy has mushroomed into this long, drawn-out…" Chris was silent for a moment, weighing an incredibly heavy subject that is oddly thin as air. "Ah," he concluded. "I don't know."

The Corrigan odyssey in embryo.

Making Mistakes.

It is no secret that Chris Ware had never met his father when he began writing this book six years ago. If Jimmy is a *bastard*, to use society's unkind word, then so is Chris—that is one of the painful truths behind *The Smartest Kid on Earth*.

"This story started as a personal fantasy," Chris said. "I wondered, What would happen if I met my father?"

In a remarkable case of life imitating art, Chris's unknown father phoned him from nowhere as Chris was composing the thick of the book. Unsettling enough, but especially so because Chris's father turned out to be a lot like Jimmy's fictional father: full of bravado and bluster. "I was surprised at the incredible rage I felt," Chris told Gary Groth. "I almost felt like I was being mocked in some way. He was calling me things like 'pardner' in this overly familiar tone."

I asked Chris about this conjunction of fantasy and reality and the eerie concordance of the two. "I think that in any interaction between a father and a son who've never met—and where, obviously, the father feels guilty—the father would be somewhat defensive and say dingbat things he didn't really mean to say," Chris said. "My dad's ridiculous, self-confident comments were intended to show that he knew how the world really worked. But really they illuminated the fact that he had no idea how the world works—just like everybody else."

This confluence of Chris's art and his life illustrates his struggle to solve the book. The problem of the Corrigan story's face-to-face meeting with reality is that it makes the story seem more real; it is probably not coincidence that Jim Corrigan is portrayed as an increas-

The Ghost of Childhood.

> *Genius is nothing more nor less than* childhood recovered *at will*.
>
> —*Charles Baudelaire*, The Painter of Modern Life, *1863*.

"Wow," Chris said. "That's great. In art school I got in touch with what I wanted to do by going all the way back to being a kid again."

It is easy to see how Chris's genius originated in Baudelaire's intuitive recognition: a childish intelligence is embodied in the title of his opus, and it animates his most labyrinthine space-time constructions. The primary element of a child's genius is not knowing but wonder, and Chris's comics provoke wonder. Look no further than any one of his elaborate cover designs. Their baroque organization dazzles a reader into the state of diminutive amazement peculiar to childhood. The artwork may be elaborate, but the artifice is in the service of humility: Chris aims mainly to please. By virtue of its nearly overpowering complexity, his art reduces us to that most childish expression of awe, the syllable *Wow*.

In my poring through the voluminous writing-about-Ware, I found several anecdotes so illustrative of the Nebraska urchin's origin that I represent them here. These stories are the seeds of a myth that is at least partially true: the myth of the artist as an eternal child.

The first creation myth comes from no less an authority than Chris's own mother. She is one of his dearest friends and most unflagging fans, and she wrote the afterword to his first published comic book, *Floyd Farland*™. (*Farland*™ is a largely forgettable specimen of the near-mandatory, alliteratively named main character phase particular to U.S. cartoonists.) Chris's mom remembered his first doodle, made when he was only 18 months old.

"It was a weekend morning," she wrote. "Chris awakened well before I chose to get out of bed, but in keeping with his usual early-morning behavior, sang and played in his crib while I went back to sleep. Later, he cheerily greeted me as I entered his room. He pointed to the far end of his crib and said: 'Look, look! Picture!' Sure enough, it was a picture; a finger painting, really, on the headboard. He was exceptionally proud of it. I don't recall exactly what it was. I do, unfortunately, remember the medium."

From this fecund beginning Chris's talent grew. During his undergraduate years in Austin, Texas, where he drew the aforementioned *Floyd Forgettable*™ ("I would have been a good person if I'd shot myself for doing that,") Chris fell in love with a girl. This fall led to what we might call the Second Creation, the blossoming that came when this girl stomped on Chris's heart.

Dumped, crushed, and despondent, Chris cried, "Who cares?" and threw away all his artwork. He went back to the drawing board and began drawing directly in ink without worrying about whether it was Art or not, or whether it was Good or not—and it is then, of course, that his comics became Good Art. These autobiographical "potato-man" strips made Chris the brightest star in the Lone Star State's cartooning firmament.

Chris explained the childlike essence of this rebirth to *The Comics Journal*. "It was the first time I actually started to really enjoy what I was doing. It was the first time in my adult life where I reclaimed that feeling I had as a kid, where I didn't care *why* I was drawing what I was drawing, I was simply doing it. I realized I'd been robbed of this urge some time around adolescence. That sense of inspiration is so rarely acknowledged in college, if at all, but it's the only real reason to do anything artistic."

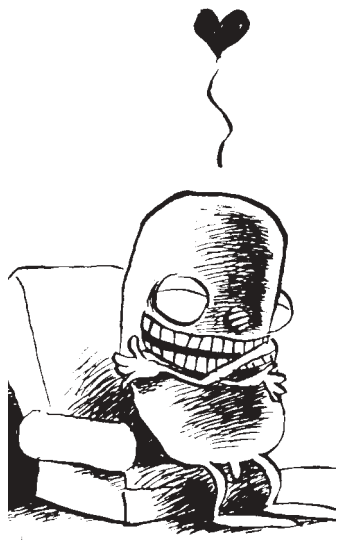
Anyone who has read Chris's comics knows that he still hates school, as any good imp should—and, since we are on the topic of genius, we should recall that Albert Einstein attributed his own success to the fact that he had never learned anything in school. Although Chris is still close to some of his teachers, his contempt for The School of The Art Institute of Chicago is evident throughout his work. When Chris entered a graduate printmaking program at what he calls "The Art of The School Institute," most of his instructors reacted to his comics as though he were still dabbling in the warm medium of his infancy. In an anecdote told to both *Hypno* magazine and Gary Groth, Chris recalled a particularly arrogant instructor who did "site-specific installations" and scorned any trace of "sentiment" in art. One day, as Chris was working on a Quimby the Mouse strip, this instructor peered over Chris's shoulder.

"You know," the instructor warned, "that is very American."

Well, Chris replied, that's what he was—an American.

"So, you are never going to grow up, eh?" the instructor sneered.

Chris dropped out of The Art of The School Institute just a few credits before graduation.



The Ghost of Old Age.

Like almost every truth, this creation mythology is a half-truth; more precisely, it is a whole truth balanced by an equal and opposite truth. Baudelaire's oft-forgotten addendum to the memorable dictum quoted earlier is that only *adulthood* can make this essential, recovered childhood at all intelligible. I would be caricaturing Chris if I implied that his genius resides only in an inner, snot-nosed imp, the kind of dandiprat who delights in drawing himself on every bathroom wall. Mr. Ware's work is much too carefully thought through and mature to make him a member of what has been called the "Whee!" school of underground cartooning.

However, if you ever have to wee in the boys room of Chicago's Lounge Ax tavern, take a close look at all the crap written above the two urinals. Amid the scribbles you will see a little Sof'Boy, drawn by Archer Prewitt, gleefully waving at you. Next to Sof'Boy is a woebegone, potato-headed homunculus drawn in an unmistakable hand. Archer is a good friend of that cranky old man, Mr. Ware, and I suspect it is only this loyalty that led Mr. Ware into such a loud, crowded, smoky bar filled with obnoxious rock music.

This bit of bathroom humor illustrates the crux of our subject's genius, the seesaw between Chris, the inner imp, and Mr. Ware, the curmudgeon. If the childlike genius is the progenitor of Chris's work, the more visible side of Mr. Ware's comics is that of the finisher, the painstaking craftsman. Ware orders his every composition for deliberate, and delicate, effects, and he shapes every filigree of his imagination with the mettle of a perfectionist's iron will.

A similar irony is apparent in *The Smartest Kid on Earth:* Jimmy Corrigan may be a fuddy-duddy in his middle age, but the prelude to the book shows that he was an irrepressible little kid. The story of Jimmy's grandpa, James, and his passionate childhood dreams strikes a sharp counterpoint to the bitter note he sounds when Jimmy meets

SMARTEST KID continued on page 9.

The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 8.

him as an old grump. Jimmy's father, Jim, is the man in the middle of Jimmy and James, and he seems to swing between hatefulness and hopefulness. Although he abandoned Jimmy he is obviously trying to make up for it with this Thanksgiving weekend; this ambiguity is the mystery that puzzles Jimmy and gives the story part of its emotional momentum. We can see the shifting clouds of Jimmy's doubt and wonder darken and lighten his otherwise impassive countenance as he listens to his father. Meanwhile, his father rambles in an human, humble tone and an equally human arrogant tone.

It would be a too-obvious move as an artist to embody Hope only in the form of a child, and a weary Misanthropy in an old man's stoop. That is part of what Chris has done in his book, but there is more to this apparent dichotomy than meets the eye. In fact, Chris has a hard time distinguishing at all between youth and old age.

"I can't help but look at people and see them as children and old people at the same time," Chris said. "That's what life *is*. That's what we *are*. We just happen to be at a particular time in our lives right 'now.' That's why I leap backwards and forwards in all of the character's lives, and that's why I draw them as adults and children at the same point. Even right now, as I'm sitting and talking to you, I have to remind myself that I'm not seven, or seventeen, years old."

The problem, according to Chris, is that people do comprehend the entire cycle of their life; unfortunately, they focus their dreams almost exclusively on their May, and that fantasy leads to a lot of unhappiness.

"When we're little kids we're encouraged to think of ourselves as young adults, and when we're older we're still encouraged to think of ourselves as young adults. Our entire culture seems to focus on this celebration of adolescence and youth: 'We can keep adolescence going as long as we want to! The excitement of rock and roll!'

"It's *embarrassing*," he nearly spat. "It's truly embarrassing. That's our guaranteed formula for depression right there."

Chris's Grandmother.

Chris's early embrace of his impending old age comes, I am certain, from his love of his grandmother. His personal experience of childhood and old age met for him in her person, and he grew up literally at her feet, looking up to her. She is dead now, but her presence is still the greatest influence on Chris's sense of storytelling—more than any other writer, artist, or teacher—and she may always be The Most Important Person in his life.

"The long and short of it is that there was something in her personality that I haven't found in anybody else," Chris said. "Except for Marnie and my mom, I've never loved anybody as much as her. It was an almost *transcendent* affection. She had a way of telling stories that was always engaging, no matter what the topic. My cousin Eric referred to her as his 'magic aunt' because she could make *anything* fun, and anything interesting. Every family gathering ended with her sitting in a chair, like the one I'm sitting in now, with people crowded around her, listening to her tell stories about her childhood, her first marriage, her middle marriage—anything. Talking to her was like having a working time machine.

"I had to move from Omaha to Texas when I was sixteen, which is not a good time for anyone to move, because you think you know everything. I knew that I was the smartest kid who ever came along, and that I was right about everything, and that, more than anything, I didn't want to leave her. So I visited her every summer vacation and every winter vacation. Some of my best memories are of sitting at her kitchen table, listening to her tell stories. She was getting old then, so she and I drove to Nebraska City and she showed me the homes she'd grown up in, all of the places where the stories I'd heard all my life took place. I'm lucky she did that, because she didn't live much longer.

"She definitely had her faults, no two ways about it, and they came out most strongly when she was dying. Most people's personalities seem to invert when they die. My grandfather was like me: a cantankerous, testy, self-centered *bastard*, for lack of a better word. He was a generous man, but overall his personality was impatient and hot-tempered, traits I unfortunately inherited. But in the last weeks of his life, when he was dying, he turned into this angelic, translucent person, full of great love for everyone.

"Conversely, when my grandmother died, she became nasty. She lost her mind, she was hallucinating: it was like an impostor was lying on her death bed. Unfortunately, because of the extreme quality of that circumstance, a lot of my most vivid memories are of her in those dying days, being really cranky."

Chris did a strip about that experience (Self-published in *Lonely Comics & Stories*, 1993), but was never satisfied enough with it to reprint it in *The Acme Novelty Library*. "I think I'll try again in more detail," he said.

In the meantime, he is showing how personalities can invert in *The Smartest Kid on Earth*. The once-sweet James Corrigan teeters bitterly near death after an entire century of life, growing more translucent by the panel. His son, Jim Corrigan, worked on having a humane life in the 1970s after he abandoned Jimmy and his mother. Jim remarried and was a loving father to his stepdaughter, Amy. Like his wife, Jim was a chain smoker, and after his wife died of lung cancer, Jim began to slide into the not-so-nice guy Jimmy meets. Jim advises Jimmy never to tell women he likes them until after he has "done" them, and says that the "spicks" should all shoot each other for all he cares. Need I say where this anger really comes from?

The Thanksgiving weekend is Jim's most obvious conundrum: to Jimmy, he grunts, "Photo albums, turkey dinners, 'family vacations'…all that's *crap* as far as I'm concerned." Pages later, when he is talking about Amy, tears well up in his eyes and he sniffles, "Boy, she's taught *me* a thing or two. You'll like her. *Plus…* she's a heckuva cook and I know she's got a real *special* turkey dinner planned for us on Thursday."

Jimmy is as utterly baffled as the reader by these contradictory displays. When I pressed Chris to explain the way in which the Corrigan men seem to shift between sympathy and bitterness, Chris gave me the most obvious, and best answer.

"I think people shift back and forth," Chris shrugged. "It depends on the person."

Ultimately *The Smartest Kid on Earth* is as simple, and as baffling, as that.

Ghosting The Book.

How much more worth living did life appear to me now, now that I seemed to see that this life we live in half-darkness can be illumined, this life that at every moment we distort can be restored to its true pristine shape, that a life, in short, can be realized within the confines of a book! How happy would he be, I thought, the man who had the power to write such a book! What a task awaited him!…He would have to prepare his book with meticulous care, perpetually regrouping his forces like a general conducting an offensive, and he would have also to endure his book like a form of fatigue, to accept it like a discipline, build it up like a church, follow it like a medical regime, vanquish it like an obstacle, win it like a friendship, cosset it like a little child, create it like a new world without neglecting those mysteries whose explanation is to be found probably in worlds other than our own…In long books of this type there are parts which there has been time only to sketch, parts which, because of the very amplitude of the architect's plan, will no doubt never be completed. How many great cathedrals remain unfinished!

—*Marcel Proust*, Time Regained, *1927*.

I interviewed Chris when he was halfway through cartooning the final chapter of *The Smartest Kid on Earth*, bringing six years of his life's work to a close, and he seemed ready to explode, or implode, from the pressure. Sources close to Mr. Ware reported that things had been thrown. Things had been broken. Things had been shouted—all at himself, or the four walls, of course. I asked Chris if he was losing his child-like wonder in working on such a long, elaborate story.

"Every few days," he said. "It's so *mercurial*. Sometimes I'll be working on it and I'll be done penciling it in one hour. Other times it will take four hours to do one panel." He sighed. "It's a horrible position to be in. It's the major source of my rage right now. I want to be done with it, and yet I have to finish it. All I can see are the problems, the mistakes, and the immaturity of it."

The relationship an author has with It—his life's work—is one that readers fortunately never have to weather. As we looked at the printer's dummy of his book, Chris said, "Sometimes I'll look at this when I'm pasting in each week's page and I'll think, *Yes*. This is really what I want to do. This is what I want to do… *No*—it's not what I want to do. Fuck it! I should just throw this story in the trashcan and do what I really want. Then I think, *Wait*. I am doing what I want—aren't I?"

An answer of sorts came to him: "It's so ridiculously stupid!"

Stupid or not, Chris is doing what he wants—drawing comics—but he cannot

do everything he wants to within the confines of a measly 400 pages. And make no mistake—he has wanted to do everything. Late one night, or rather early one morning, as I struggled to articulate what I feel is the genius of *The Smartest Kid on Earth*, it struck me that one of the many measures of this book's worth is the sheer number of "unfinished cathedrals" it contains. Chris has obviously considered hundreds of tangents in this book's construction that he has had to eliminate, or merely hint at, and that is partly what makes this book so rich.

Chris laughed. His entire being surrendered to this laugh, a series of surprisingly loud *hyuk hyuk hyuk*s that shook him with relief. "You're saying that the reason it's good is because it's inarticulate," he said, "because it's *failed*." Over my furious protest he shouted, "Actually, would you write a quote for the dust jacket when it's printed?"

Sure, I thought, piping down. You bet.

"You should write, 'This is *garbage*, and in this garbage we find the very stuff of life.' I was leading up to the World's Colombian Exposition for dozens and dozens of pages. *Years*, actually. I have stacks of books and I've been collecting photographs, posters, reading up on it to decide what to put in and what to leave out, how long it was going to be, how I was going to structure the pages, how they'd be composed against each other, what image would reflect what other image—all that, and for what: *eight pages?* God!"

Chris's authoritative roar reverted to a pitched, needling tone he reserves for talking about himself, like a mosquito humming in and out of one ear. "Everything I'd planned, every photo, all ended in a defeating sense of nothing. I wanted to get at the immensity of that event and I got nothing. *Zero*."

Before I could tell Mr. Ware that he had just made my point for me, albeit in a perverse way, he said, "Nobody cares about an 'unfinished cathedral.' I wish they did because I'm making one. If *Anna Karenina* was an unfinished cathedral, it would be in the discard bin at the public library. It's not."

Beaming with *schadenfreude*, I asked Chris if he really needed such high standards to create his comic books.

"It's always bothered me," Chris said, contemplating the locked fingers in his lap. "My mom has said that I need to quit being so hard on myself."

The Smartest Character?

In the Grothasaurus, Chris said that he felt his first step toward real maturity as an artist would be creating a character who is smarter than himself. I suggested that Amy Corrigan is becoming that character.

"She started out that way," Chris said. "She's a bit more mature than mere smarts, but so far she's smarter than the story itself. It's almost impossible to describe, but lately I feel like I've almost outgrown my characters in a way. They're too limited. Jimmy's almost a foil now, and I feel more of an empathy for Amy now. I think that she's the only real character, which may be the biggest mistake of all: to introduce somebody specific, like her, into a story that's vaguely allegorical. But that's the way it's going, so I can't stop it now. I've been planning it this way for a long time."

I reminded Chris that he had stated, just one hour earlier, that Jimmy Corrigan was a *fairly* real character.

"That's true, too," he said. "But Amy's more real than Jimmy is. She's more *specific*. The dads are also more specific."

My argument—that Jimmy Corrigan is a "real" character—had suddenly become fictional. Perhaps Jimmy is not a real character after all. At this point I must have looked like I had seen a ghost, because Chris leaned forward and said, "Again, honestly, what passes for 'writing' in what I do is the act of filling in the space every week. It may come out looking very carefully planned—probably because of the way I draw—as a delineated, crystalline, coherent world view, but it's random and mercurial.

"I'm sorry," Chris said. "I used that word again. Mercurial."

Writing in Thin Air.

I am sustained only by a kind of permanent rage, which sometimes makes me weep tears of impotence but which never abates. I love my work with a love that is frenzied and perverted… I collapse on my couch and lie there, bogged in a swamp of despair, hating myself and blaming myself for this demented pride.

—*Gustave Flaubert, letter to Louise Colet, 1852.*

"God," Chris chuckled. "That's great. That's absolutely true, you know. He puts it so well. God, it's embarrassing, too. It sounds like the most spoiled rotten, Little Lord Faunterloy whining. That's why I like his letters so much; it's so comforting to see the self-indulgence of being a so-called artist."

Most cartoonists plan their strips ahead of time by preparing thumbnail sketches or a script. Chris, however, insists on ignorance. Every week he takes a white sheet of Bristol board, a blue pencil, and begins drawing in the upper left-hand corner of the page with no real idea how he will end the strip. Basically he makes up everything as he goes. Although Chris is careful to add that he usually has a vague idea of what is going to happen in each week's strip—and that he knows how he will end the entire novel—unknowing is still the basic way he works.

If he is essentially filling in the space, it is obviously *essential* that he fill in the space. There is almost no white space at all in the pages of his weekly strips nor in *The Acme Novelty Library*, not even in the masthead and text frames surrounding each issue. Chris instinctively crowds out every last bit of the blank page and literally fills the void with a driven intensity. For a cartoonist barely over thirty, Chris has a huge, dense body of work already behind him.

"Just start writing," he said by way of explaining his output. "That's what writing is. Writing and drawing are *thinking*. We're told in school that they're skills but that's wrong. Drawing is a way of thinking. It's a way of seeing. That's why my way is improvisatory for the most part. I may have a vague idea for the week's strip, but I personally couldn't write out a script ahead of time and then illustrate it. If I did that, I'd just be illustrating a vaguely-imagined and quickly thought-out thing. When I draw a picture it always suggests a number of possibilities that I never would have thought of if I was merely writing out a script. I would never write, 'She says, "Um," looks slightly to the left, and scratches the back of her hand.' But when I'm drawing I'll think, 'Oh, that will look right if she scratches the back of her hand.' The act of drawing is almost more like

SMARTEST KID continued on page 12.

CARTOONIST TRAVELS THROUGH TIME AND SPACE.

HIS AMAZING ÆSTHETIC INVENTION.

AND ITS "STUPID" GENESIS.

MORE THAN JUST HIJINX.

OUR IMPLICATION IN HISTORY?

Reading *The Acme Novelty Library* is like having a working time machine. Chris Ware plays with time and its close relative, space, in novel ways that make even the most mundane events in his stories leave us agog. Stupendous as these time tricks are, however, they are always in the service of his story. In some of his strips time itself seems to be the subject. Even when "nothing" happens, as in the sequence looking out of Jimmy's window below, we can see Jimmy's mysterious lineage and one of *The Smartest Kid on Earth*'s first ironies: the window out which Jimmy looks, wondering where he came from, was installed by his ghostly great-grandfather.

Time travel is of course inherent in the forward and backward movements of any song, story, or film. Marcel Duchamp, the "Futurist," even managed to work time into painting when his nude descended a staircase. Although there can be a beginning, a middle, and an end to all of these art forms—and not necessarily in that order—comics are more rooted in the fourth dimension than any other visual medium.

Like rhythm, comics are based on divided time. But unlike a cinematic moment, seen and then vanished, or a musical note, heard then gone into thin air, a comic panel remains visible. The chain of panels allows us to almost literally see time passing; more precisely, the chain of panels reveals the passing of time as an illusion—an incredibly important illusion.

Comics and Life.

"To me," Chris said, "the act of reading a comic book is more analogous to the experience of life than, say, a film. To me, comics are almost like the way we live life: it's all there, our past and our future. Our life has already happened and it has *always* happened, even though we can only experience it in one direction, in one, infinite 'present' at all times."

In his book, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud likens the "present" in comics to a storm front that our eyes move across the page, pushing the high-pressure, "future" panels ahead and leaving the low-pressure, "past" panels behind. No matter how intently we focus on the present panel, however, our eyes cannot help but peripherally see the past and future panels at the same time as we read. In this way we cheat time as we read, and we cheat more with each re-reading of the page, appreciating the ways in which panels prefigure and echo other panels. The more panels the cartoonist fits in our field of vision, the more complex and intricate connections—and thus emotions—grow from this simple phenomenon. Chris seems to be more aware of this phenomenon than most cartoonists: he said it was "one of comics' biggest advantages as well as one of its biggest drawbacks." (A drawback because it is more difficult to create surprise.) This ability to flit rapidly back and forth in time is one reason why *density* is the word Chris often uses to describe what he is trying to achieve in his comics.

Chris Is Dense.

In an interview in *Destroy All Comics*, Chris said, "Cartoons are the perfect medium for making something so dense that you have to read it over and over again… If I read something in a book, say Faulkner, and a hundred and fifty pages later the character comes up again, I think: 'Wait a minute. I've read that name before.' Then you start going back and you think: 'Let's see, the pages in my left hand were this thick and I remember reading the name in the upper left-hand corner.' But in a comic book you immediately have a recognizable, visual reference, so you can turn back and know exactly where something is."

Almost all comic book writers know this and cartoon with a comic book's amplified echo effect in mind, but Chris has played with this relativity more than any cartoonist I have seen. In *The Smartest Kid on Earth*, time is so visible that we can see through it: as a turning crystal reflects previous and future facets in the facet before us, Chris's panels reflect past and future panels. Just as the Cubists painted a still life from multiple perspectives at once, and as William Faulkner viewed one funeral from fifteen different viewpoints, Chris knows that we do not make meaning from life in a straightforward manner. In *The Smartest Kid on Earth* we can clearly see how history has created the present, how every decision made has led to the present panel. Because of this "chain reaction," every single moment that ever happened—and will happen—is brought to bear on Jimmy's every "present" panel, or moment, for a cumulative effect in which time vanishes and yet becomes all-important.

"Well," Chris said. "I've tried to do that by drawing the same street corner over and over again."

He is being modest, as always. That is the simplest and most obvious example of how time is one ghostly subject of his book. He also warps time and space by clustering small panels into groups next to a large panel: the large panel is so big that the reader's eye does not have to leave the smaller, grouped, panels in order to read it, in effect allowing the reader to be in two different times, and two different spaces, simultaneously.

"That's something you can do pretty easily in writing prose," Chris said, "because as a narrator you're free to navigate in and out of people's minds. It's difficult to do in comics because you're literally always at one, fixed point. That's why I don't understand why so many cartoonists always stick with a regular panel size. Changing the panel's sizes allows you to group actions together: I try to put images together so that they make sense and yet keep the page's overall sense of space. I'll put a drawing of a space next to a series of grouped actions, and the two together work in the way you were describing. I've organized the pages in the whole Corrigan story specifically for this reason. In next week's strip I've drawn a six-panel sequence, containing a character's memory, that blocks out much differently than the rest of the composition, which is open and dry. I tried to compress that memory into a very small space so that you can also see it while you're looking at the bigger pictures—so that you can see that character's memory while you're reading the larger panels depicting her in her exterior world."

The "Stupid" Genesis of Genius.

Not surprisingly, this mindbending contraction and expansion of space and time is rooted in a silly idea that Chris picked up as a boy.

"You're the first person who's ever asked me about this," Chris said. "This is the whole reason I started really getting into comics when I was a kid. Let me preface this story by saying that these are all very adolescent, fifteen-year old thoughts.

"When I was in high school I read this dumb book by this idiot Victorian philosopher. His name was Charles Howard Hinton—no, that's not it, but it was something like that—anyway, he was a nutty polygamist who claimed that he could visualize four-dimensional objects while he was sleeping with as many women as he could."

Hinton's theories about four-dimensional congress swayed the adolescent Ware. "I was sitting in Government class one day when it occurred to me that any experience of time as a direction is completely subjective. As I was sitting there I realized that, in the amount of time it takes for an image to reach your eyes, be processed by your brain, and then experienced as the 'present'—the speed of light plus an eighth of a second for your brain to process it—in that time, what you perceive as the present has actually become the past. And, of course, while you're perceiving that 'present,' the future has already happened. This struck me as the most logical, scientific proof that we have no will, whatsoever, and that we are essentially moving along in this already-planned world. Even the idea of 'planning' has to do with human life, with a beginning, a future, and an end. Our whole moral structure has to do with the idea of a beginning, a past, a future, and an end."

Chris laughed. "I started thinking about this so much that I began to damage my personal life. So I realized that I was way too self-conscious about it. But at the time it struck me that comics were the perfect medium—or the closest equivalent—that one could have to that simultaneity, or the lack of it."

Chris worked out his earliest, most self-conscious experiments with the fourth dimension in the pages of the *Daily Texan*—a collection of strips he sheepishly allowed me to flip through before he put them away.

"I don't really think about time in that way anymore," Chris said. "That was just part of my early, self-conscious, teenage years, when I thought I knew everything."

Self-Consciousness.

Remembering Chris's earlier comment—that trying to deal with the nature of "reality" in Art is like trying to bake a cake with a flute and a rock—I asked him how he understood the tension, if any, between consciously exploring the dizzying formal possibilities in comics and the more traditionally "emotional" aspect of writing—fleshing out the world's demons and angels.

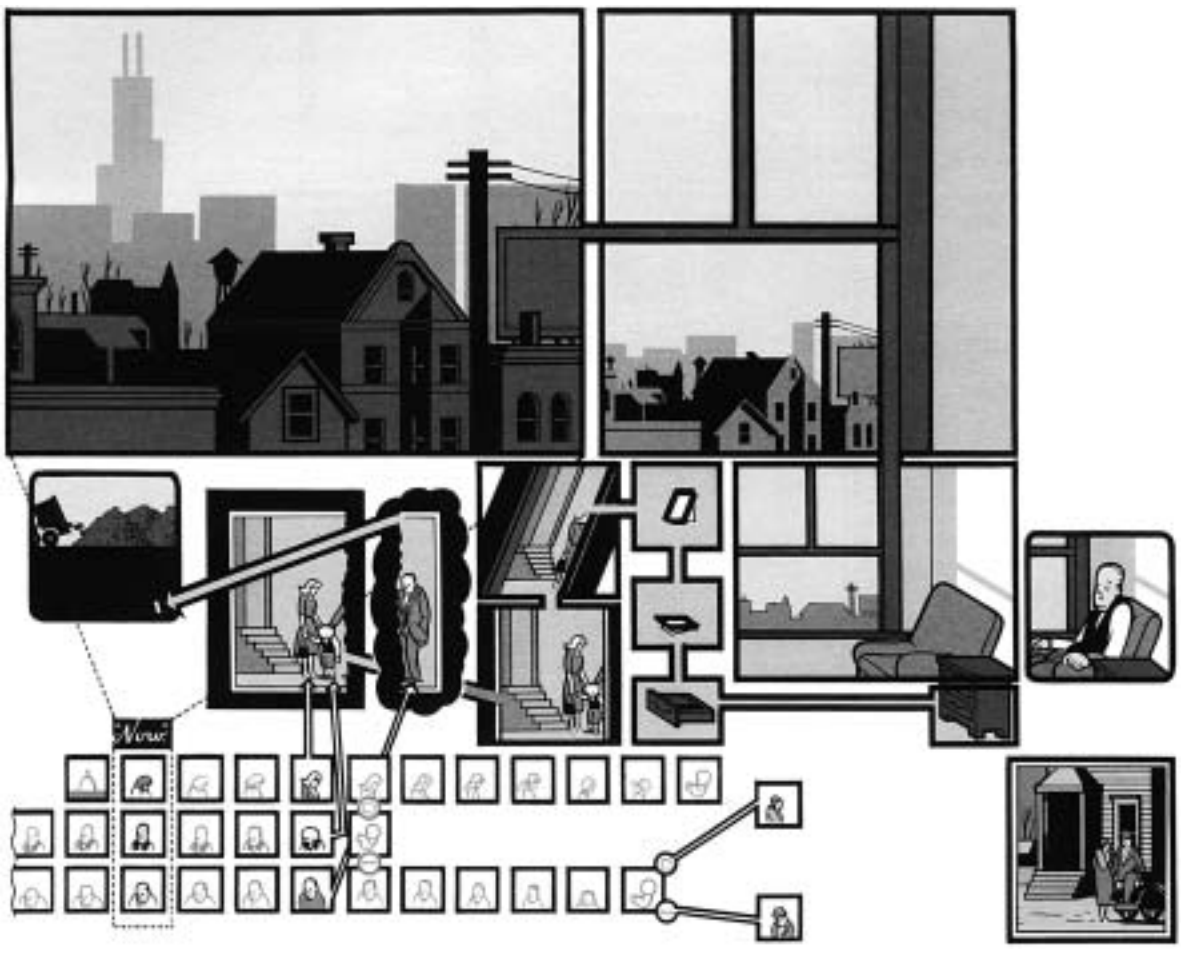
"I try to do both," Chris said. "Even in school, when I was trying to experiment with styles and panel sizes, I would always try to get at least some sense of emotion about something that had happened in my life. More often than not, it didn't work. If it didn't communicate any emotion it was my failure as an artist. That kind of overly self-conscious experimentation can really get to you after a while. Obviously, I've taken a lot of flak for it."

Emotional Connections.

In John Donne's famous phrase, "No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe," and Jimmy Corrigan is no exception—although, if any man were an island, Jimmy would be. But he is not, as the panels at left, taken from the book's first chapter, begin to illustrate. It is as though Chris Ware's unconscious has deliberately and perversely—and I think wisely—led him to draw the most unconnected character possible, if only to see if *everything*, and everyone, is connected despite all appearances to the contrary. Make no mistake, that is one point *The Smartest Kid on Earth* draws toward its end, as Black and White Jimmy and Amy come together, more closely related than even they might realize. It is this sense of history that makes these little time travels in Ware's book far more than clever hijinx. They make the emotional story possible.

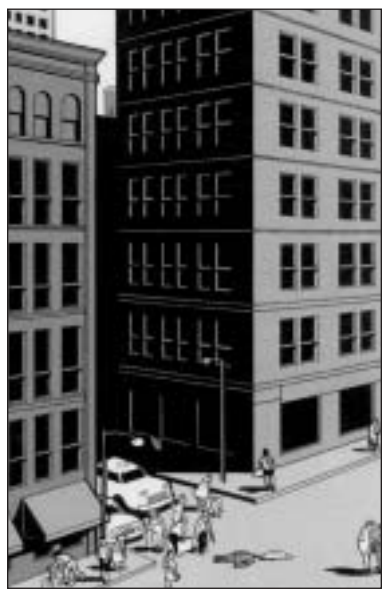
In the Grothasaurus Chris related a recent incident that pointed at the uncomfortable nature of his own connection to a stranger. "I was at the YMCA," Chris said, "waiting to get a photo I.D. made, and a Black woman was standing next to me at the counter, waiting along with me. When the secretary handed my I.D. back to me she said, 'Hey, you two have the same last name.' I looked over at the woman next to me and said something brilliant like, 'Hey, cool,' and immediately realized my unintended insult; it's more likely than not that the reason she had the same name as I is because *my* family at one time may have owned her relatives."

I asked Chris about this brief but telling concordance between his fiction and his reality. "It didn't directly influence the story," Chris said, "but it did bolster my confidence to keep running









with it. You can't deny that reality. My mom once maintained that she didn't feel any responsibility for the era of slavery. It might have been her family's responsibility but she felt that she didn't have anything to do with it. Where does this attitude come from? Many people who say such things would also be the *first ones* to trumpet the heroics of their great-grandparents."

Although Chris's legendary humility often appears to be the face of an inherent selflessness, it is also the result of another, equally valid self, a gigantic one that takes in over a century of our country's history and feels a personal responsibility for its unpleasant truths. In this sense, history and our unavoidable connection to it, and our *implication* in it, is the "moral structure" of Ware's book—although, of course, the most self-effacing cartoonist on earth would never, ever, agree with my claim—and for good reason. As he has said, Chris does not understand things on a social level, only on a personal level. Paradoxically, that is why *The Smartest Kid on Earth* suggests more about the effects of the "patriarchy" in our American century than any academic rant could ever express.

Jimmy's grandfather, James Reed Corrigan, is an odious wretch when Jimmy meets him—thanks in part to the hateful treatment James received at the nine-fingered hands of his own father, William Corrigan. Dads have always been the recurring bugaboo in Ware's work, your alpha and your omega, your creator and your destroyer. The century-wide compass of Ware's omniscient narration shows that Jimmy Corrigan, sad sack loser that he is, is actually better off, and a better person, than his fathers—mainly by virtue of being separated from them at an early age. While it is apparent that Chris is exploring the void his own father left in him when he abandoned him, it is equally apparent that Chris is exploring the benefit of that same void. *The Smartest Kid on Earth* is a true book because it shows both sides of this apparent contradiction.

Jimmy's father, like Chris's real father, might be a father but he is not a Dad. In a sense, the bloated Jim Corrigan embodies the worst of the post World War II, "boom" generation, the generation that spent more of their—and our—time "getting in touch with their feelings" than any other. The "Me" generation was okay, you were okay, and everything was so okay that fragile things, including the landscape and their own children, were horribly ignored in their seemingly endless search for I, me, and mine.

"I agree," Chris said. "Our grandparent's generation built the world that our parent's generation *destroyed*. I truly believe that. I'm not saying that all people in that generation destroyed it, and, obviously, I have more of a connection with the cultural ephemera left over from our grandparent's generation than from our parent's, but I do feel that something after World War II went truly, *terribly* wrong.

"My wife, Marnie, could probably tell you that I like to sit at the dinner table and just complain about things and make crass, moral statements like these. In this particular story it just comes down to that particular generation of people who were off, "finding themselves," or something like that. That's an urge that is ever present, especially if you're a guy, and it seems like that generation just gave in to that urge."

But Jim Corrigan also embodies the best of the post World War II, "Love" generation. Jim fought vehemently against his father's "Colored" perceptions—and his own—to adopt and raise the foundling Amy Corrigan. Jim Corrigan was everything to Amy that he was not to Jimmy. Jim is both the best and the worst in his generation, and somewhere in between those two is the ghostly, "real" Jim Corrigan, a man at war with himself—just like everybody in every generation. The book shows this ambivalence over time, using time to amplify both the "right" and "wrong," the tragic and the comic, the opposites from which *The Smartest Kid on Earth* was born. The contrapuntal stories in it neither damn nor pardon the Corrigan generations, and if the book had a "moral structure" that would be it.

"When it comes down to it there's really no difference at all between the generations," Chris said. "But when I think about it, I'm *glad* that I didn't grow up with a father. I'm thankful that my mom raised me to be a wimp. Actually, one of my main goals in life is to raise a kid who isn't a football player—that, and to have a woodshop." ■

PURELY "FORMAL" INNOVATIONS.

JIMMY tries to tell his father for the first time how he feels about having never known him. Despite the vagueness of Jimmy's utterance, his emotions are clearly built into the second panel, most obviously by his immediate reversion to childhood. Although this grayscale scan does not show it, the background turns bright red, while Jimmy's body and the panel's border turn bright green; butted against each other in this way, the two complementary, opposite colors vibrate with a perceptible tension. If word balloons are the "quotation marks" of the comics language, Chris has de-quoted the rest of Jimmy's utterance by running it below the panel in the space traditionally reserved for narration. This is the only point in the entire book that Jimmy's voice shifts in this way. The shift makes his voice "feel" more like his thought itself—undeniable, with the presumed, timeless authority of a narrator—and yet also more ephemeral, because it is disembodied. Ware writes the halting, first words of Jimmy's utterance above in both ways at once, amplifying the silent "sound" of Jimmy's voice ringing in both his and our heads.

"METAPHYSICAL" IDEAS.

CHRIS MAINTAINS that art is not equipped to deal with "metaphysical" ideas about "the nature of reality." It is odd, then, that his comics travel so dizzyingly through space and time, and suggest so much about the eternal and transitory nature of both. It might be more accurate to say that Chris does not *care* about "metaphysical" ideas—he just wants to tell a good story.

The panels shown here are taken from a strip that allows us to see one tree, or one space, at fifteen different "spaces" in time. As we read the strip we travel backward in time and see Big Tex, the faithful hillbilly dolt, grow younger as he disappoints his father again and again. By the time we reach the end of the strip, we see the tree as a sapling on the day Tex planted it, and we realize the comedy and tragedy in the high hopes Tex's parents express for their young son. Our eyes pull back and comprehend the entire tree, and Tex's entire life, all at once in one, unified, composition. Chris has literally captured the distance between comedy and tragedy—time—but only to show us a sense of life, and to illustrate a story about human nature.

HEAD-SPLITTING MIND FUCK.

THE "MUSIC" OF COMICS, ILLUSTRATED.

PERHAPS THE MOST MIND-BOGGLING of all Ware's strips, this little cat-and-mouse humdinger manages to compress all of two lovers' existence into one, painful instant, and then re-explodes that instant for our enjoyment, clearly explaining the way in which the comics language works and expressing a simple story of cruelty and regret at the same time.

In this head-splitting instant (shown prominently at the center left of the composition), Quimby the mouse is crushing Sparky, the loyal cat head, for the same reason as always: he both loves and hates him. (When Quimby is lonely, Sparky meets his need for companionship; when Quimby is not lonely, he resents the burden imposed on him by the disembodied head.)

You can start "deconstructing" this story by looking at a depiction of your very own viewing of this strip in the top left corner, illustrated by the reflected light from the page reaching your eyes. Follow the solid line, leading down from the lightbulb's wavelength, and the dotted line, leading down from the picture off which the light is reflecting, across the string of panels atop the composition. The last panel at top right is broken: the break in the panel is exploded downward into a series of panels which illustrate how motion and "closure" can be achieved in comics, closure being the means by which you mentally "fill in" the white space in the gutters between panels and read the divided actions as continuous motion. The "closure" is shown just below the break, below the clock icon, in a ghostly, dotted border.

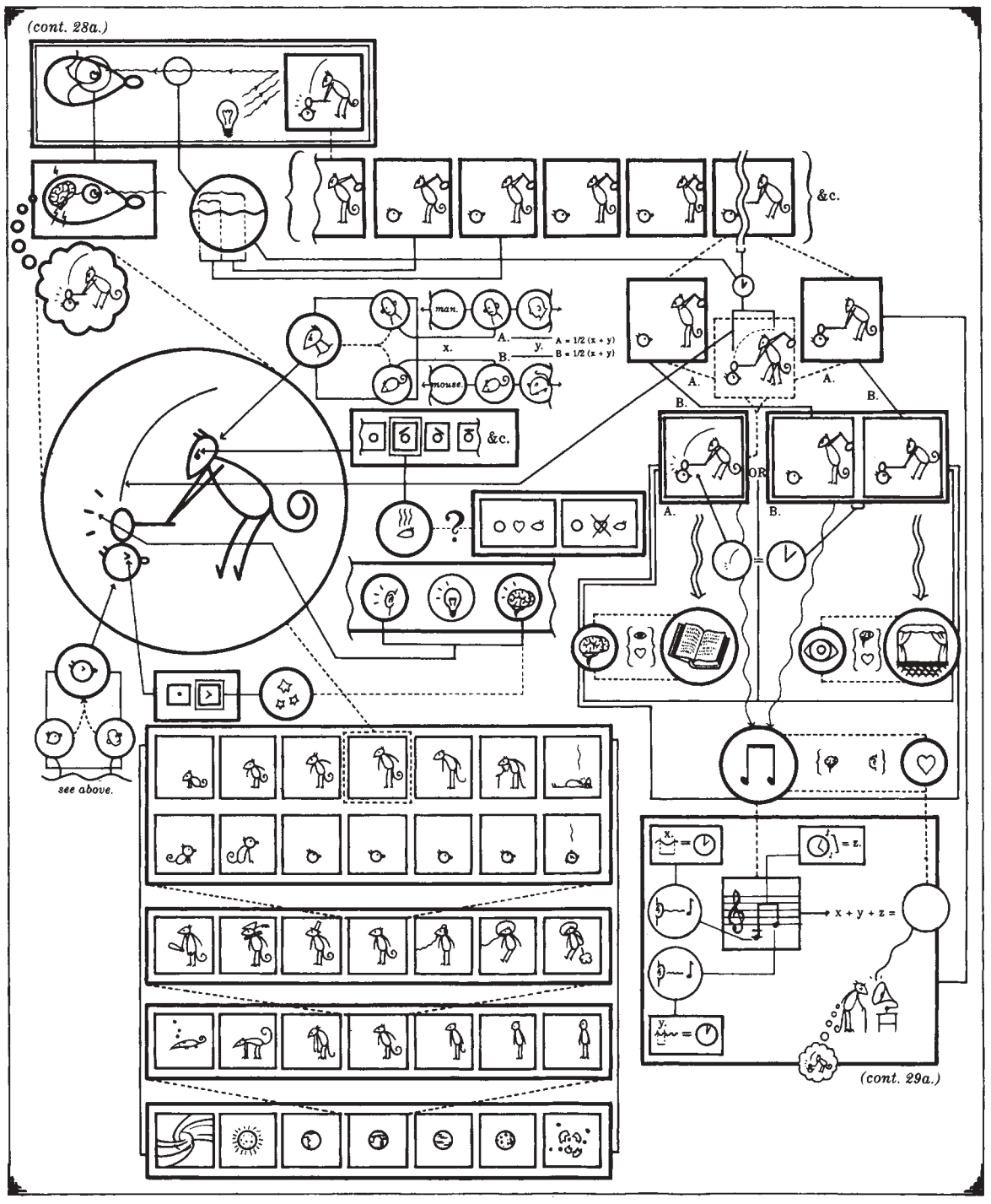
As the further breakdowns show, Ware portrays the head-splitting two ways: using one panel with a "motion line," and using two panels with a gutter. The "motion lines" are analogous to silent "sounds" that we "hear" in our brain, and he uses the book icon to compare this to reading. This "reading" method primarily involves the brain, with the eyes and heart secondary.

The two-panel, "closure" method is analogous to divided time, shown by the clocks, and he uses the stage icon to compare this to theater. This "stage-like" method primarily involves the eyes, with the brain and heart secondary.

Both methods of depicting motion in comics fuse toward bottom right in the musical note icon—the "music" of comics—with yet another breakdown below it, illustrating how music is essentially, like comics, divided time.

Clusters of equations in the top center of the composition break down how the iconography of the comics language works: Man is reduced to an icon, as a concept is reduced to a word, then fused with a mouse. The angles of Quimby's eyebrows signify emotions (anger in this case) where Sparky's squint reads as pain (shown by the stars).

You can start anywhere in this story: begin with the creation of the earth, at bottom left, reading up through the evolution of the species, technology and culture, and the two lovers, respectively. Or begin at the end, at bottom right, when Quimby—now aged, sad, and alone—hears the music that reminds him of his cruelty to Sparky. Only Chris Ware could manage to work a little poignancy into this circuit-board, algebraic exposition of the universe. Pure genius.



The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 9.

writing than writing the words themselves, if that makes sense."

Cartoonists who do not work on the superhero assembly lines have often noted the inseparable nature of their writing and their drawing. Those who script out their story ahead of time do so with the future task of drawing in mind; likewise, the act of drawing often leads them to rework or even abandon their thought-out script. That is just one of the balancing acts that make cartooning so difficult.

This belief in perpetual improvisation is, I think, what the "Whee!" school of underground cartooning advocates. And there is an undeniable magic in improvisation. But if you are trying to create something for the ages—and that is what Ware is doing—well, you are making life pretty hard for yourself by resigning yourself to improvisation. Then you are also a member of the "ShitDamnErase" school of cartooning, and Mr. Ware leans farthest toward this end of my admittedly artificial and oversimplified spectrum. Things get thrown, and things get broken, because of Chris's tortured faith in improvisation.

"My main problem as a writer is that I never know what end I'm working toward," Chris admitted. But when I asked him if he knew how he will end *The Smartest Kid on Earth*, he said, "Oh yeah. Definitely."

The puzzle, then, must be how to build a maze in the few remaining pages that will lead us to this definite ending.

This puzzle shows how relentlessly revised "improvisation" is no different, really, than scripting ahead of time. Chris has just narrowed the gap between conception and revision; he is saving time by trying to edit instantaneously, in true newspaper deadline fashion. Spontaneous editing is the way in which Mr. Ware imposes economy and order on his spontaneous imagination, and to him editing is perhaps the most important part of creating comics.

"You should do an issue of *The Imp* on the topic of editing comics," Chris said. "Editing implies planning, execution, and rhythm at the same time, and how you edit is intimately linked to how you work. For example, Chester Brown works panel by panel and pastes them up, while Dan Clowes writes and rewrites the story before committing it to paper. I think Gilbert Hernandez begins in the middle of a story and draws it *outward*."

He shook his head in wonder, for a moment as fannish as I. "I just puke it up and color it pretty," he murmured. Then he straightened in his chair and apologized. "I'm being facetious. I will go back and redraw and rearrange things. That's my way of editing."

There is some truth to the puke theory, as anyone who has seen Chris's original artwork can attest. A Chris Ware page is almost always a *mess*, a cyclone of cyan scribbles, ghostly blue bodies in un-inked poses, unused dialogue, blobs of white-out, eraser smears and unarticulated tangents. I call the Ware page hanging on my wall a *palimpsest*—a document that has been recopied and altered so often that you can see many previous incarnations in the phantom writing beneath. Each panel obviously draws all of Mr. Ware's thoughts, and all his turmoil.

"This may be too confessional," Chris said, "but last night I was so enraged with myself that I had to leave the house and go for a long walk. I ended up at Myopic Books on Division Street, looking at the journals of John Cheever. I've been thinking about buying this book for ten years, and I don't know why I never do, but I occasionally pick it up. Last night I read one paragraph in there that struck me as being so true: it's about how art has developed in the last one hundred years.

"To paraphrase badly what Cheever said: It's impossible for people today to

understand what happened in the arts at the turn of the century. Musicians, painters, and sculptors suddenly felt they had to deal with the 'metaphysical' ideas that were emerging—and the arts are not equipped to deal with that sort of thing. They're simply not. That's like trying to bake a cake using a flute and a rock. Anyway, Cheever says that it was left to *literature* to carry the dying ember of the human spirit through all of this over-intellectualization about 'reality.' For Cheever to be aware of that, and to be a keeper of that ember—that was such a great codification of all the things that I'd been feeling since art school. Art schools can imply that there is an almost mathematical way to make art: 'What is your art about?' they ask. 'Pick something and pick the best way to do it.'

"That's not what art is about. It's about intuition. Intuition is thinking. I've said this about drawing, and I've said this about emotions, too. Emotion is just another way of thinking. It's a distinctly human way of thinking through your experience. That's what art *is*. Intuition is not just 'getting messages from the gods,' or some sort of gas that afflicts you—it's an internal logic. It is the sum total of your human experience guiding you, and you can't consciously be aware of it. You can't drive your way through art that way—it just doesn't work. Any time you're totally aware of what you're doing, you won't be able to do it. I firmly believe that."

All this is by way of saying what any creator already knows, or senses: the act of writing (or painting, or strumming) itself teaches you what you want to write. Writing and drawing are both thinking because thinking is a process, and like your emotions, they will teach you what you already know if you listen closely enough. Revision gets you closer to your original, cloudy intuition. Your adulthood gives form to your childish wonder.

"When I'm working on a strip I read through it a number of times," Chris said. "Frequently there'll be stumbling points where the comic just doesn't work, and it's because a character's eyebrow isn't angled properly. When a gesture seems wrong it's not necessarily a theatrical problem but a rhythmic problem. Sometimes I'll add another panel in there and, all of a sudden, the rhythm seems right and the page works. I don't understand why, but it needs an extra beat. The internal rhythm of the strip is what carries it along—it's the "music" of the strip, as you were saying. In this way you get the internal, almost intuitive emotion of the strip. Does that make sense? It's the same as film editing. If you look at early films, they were like filmed plays: they'd set up the camera and people would act as though they were on stage. Directors eventually realized that they could stop the camera, move it to another location, and move in for a close-up or different perspective. They noticed that when the zoomed in on someone's face, it created a weird emotional effect. People suddenly realized that editing could be used as an emotional tool, to give a film a musical force. And I think that there's a force like that in comics."

The Meaning of Babble.

This musical force might be the heart of *The Smartest Kid on Earth*. Without delving too deep into the technicalities of the comics language, one reason why Chris's drawing is like writing is because Chris often writes in *body language*. When a gesture seems wrong Chris says it is not necessarily a theatrical but a rhythmic problem; but that *necessarily* shows that the theatrical and the rhythmic are almost inseparable. Just as stage actors frame their utterances with pauses—what they call "beats"—Chris frames his character's dialogue with "silent" panels, pauses in which the Corrigan "speaks" by muffling a cough, picking his nose, or looking out the window. This obsessively-rendered, nearly imperceptible body language is the rhythm of the silent "music" that imbues this book's trivial dialogue with such importance.

The focus on Amy Corrigan's gestures and her breast creates the weird and intimate effect of this passage.

If this proposition sounds pretentious and purely formalist, bear with me for one paragraph. Chris has often speculated that he might be "brain-damaged," so let us entertain the validity of his claim. There is a disorder of the brain's left temporal lobe called *receptive aphasia*. A spot in the gray matter stops working, and, as a result, aphasics are left unable to understand spoken language. Direct a statement or question at an aphasic, and he hears only gibberish. However, the right lobe of the aphasic's brain compensates for this disorder by growing hypersensitive to everything but the content of the gibberish. Aphasics hear only nuances, but they hear them well. By listening to the emotional tone, timbre, and rhythm of every utterance, and by scrutinizing every tic, tremor, and wrinkle that shapes your "expression," aphasics grow astonishingly good at understanding character. It is said that you can never lie to a veteran aphasic. Their built-in lie detector enables them to survive in the world of babble. Obviously, Chris is not aphasic—but he does have their intuitive gift for listening to the unspoken emotion in the jibberjabber of everyday chatter. Our omniscient narrator is almost preternaturally attuned to minute shifts in verbal and facial expression, and that is why, to me, his characters pulse with such illusive and elusive emotional life.

If you do not "see" what I am saying, reread the book with a whisper of aphasia in the back of your mind. As you witness Jimmy's perpetually dumbstruck reaction to the ceaselessly mutating world around him, maybe my proposition will make some sense. We have all felt aphasic at times: usually at a party, when it is late, we are tired, maybe a little drunk, and everybody is yammering away in everybody's ear about a million things and we cannot understand the hubbub but we know that we are not really interested in what they are saying, whatever it is. We just want to go *home*. We would like to be interested; really, we do want to connect. Then an elbow nudges us and an excited voice in our ear babbles, "WannaplayJumanji?"

"Uh," is about all we can stammer at that point. That is when we are Jimmy Corrigan.

The Masked Man.

Much has been said about the faceless aspect of *The Smartest Kid on Earth*, and rightly so. Until the end of the book the faces of every non-Corrigan, adult character are cropped out of the panels, turned from the viewer, or obscured by word balloons and a thousand other sleights of the artist's hand. On the surface this faceless world reflects Jimmy's almost claustrophobic loneliness: he is too plain-looking to merit eye contact, too shy to make it himself. This device also directs the reader's empathy (and not necessarily her sympathy) toward Jimmy and the Corrigans alone. But Chris has hidden so many faces also to overcome what he calls the inherent "vulgarity" of the comics language.

This vulgarity problem is thoroughly discussed in the Grothasaurus, where Chris explained that comics, because of their visual nature, are too explicit at times. The comics reader cannot always participate in reading a comic book as he would a novel by drawing his own, mental picture of a scene—because the artist has already done it for him. Comics can be too obvious for the reader's imagination. To overcome this and approximate the omniscient narration possible in prose, Chris has hidden the faces to make blanks for the reader to fill with his own imagination.

Some readers, the Members Only in particular, do not like the sleight. One family so alone in a world makes the book too claustrophobic, they say, and

SMARTEST KID continued on page 16.

SMARTEST CARTOONIST ON EARTH CAPTURES ESSENCE OF CHICAGO.

SKETCHES UNSUSPECTING CITIZENS ON ELEVATED TRAIN.

AN IMP EXTRA.

CHICAGO.—Everybody is a nobody when they ride public transportation. Lulled by the rhythmic sway of the car, trying unsuccessfully to avoid touching strangers from side to side, passengers fall almost automatically into the odd, intimate detachment of train behavior. If passengers speak at all they say, "Sorry," or "Excuse me," with a downward glance. When they do move they pick their way through the crowd of shrinking bodies so gingerly that they might be apologizing for their existence. In this way we are all Jimmy Corrigan when we ride the train.

Like elevator behavior, the first rule of train behavior is to never stare directly at another passenger's face. The businesslike passengers are always protected by their newspapers and books, of course, but the lazy among us must gaze out the window or dream while staring pointedly at some safe, faceless spot in space. If you are like me or Jimmy Corrigan that safe spot often wanders toward the downy nape of a neck or a tightly sheathed thigh. Somehow these random sexual fantasies seem almost innocent, perhaps because the train itself is so dirty and abused. The naive imaginings are transcendental, almost idealistic, rising as they do above the scummy reality.

Everybody's steadfastly avoided stare is what give el rides their impersonal, vacant quality, but also their meditative quality. When we steal a glance at the face of our fellow daydreamers—and we always do—we can see each one staring into his own, personal void. Because each face holds the reflection of that void, public transportation is one of the best places to see our lowest common denominator, which is this: we will always feel more than we understand. This hollow poignance is plain as day or harsh as fluorescent light on every passenger's face.

Drawing and Cartooning.

Readers who have not had the pleasure of seeing Chris Ware's sketchbooks might be surprised by the "loose" quality of these drawings coming from a cartoonist known for his tight, iconic compositions. Here is an important distinction that merits repeating: Chris cartoons in his newspaper strip, but he draws in his sketchbook.

"Drawing comics and cartooning are two different things," Chris explained. "When I'm signing books for people, occasionally somebody will ask me, 'Why are you drawing all scratchy and wiggly?' I tell them, 'Because that's the way I *draw*.'"

To Chris, making comics is cartooning; that is, telling a story with pictures that are simplified almost to the level of symbols. This enables us to rapidly "read" his pictures in sequence, just as we read words. That is just one reason why cartooning is a language and why comic strips are written—even if they don't have any words in them.

Life drawing, on the other hand, is an effort to capture a thing exactly as it is. You do not reduce your subject because you invite the viewer to linger on every nuance. In my favorite life drawings I can see the lives of both the artist and the subject merge and move in the line, a line which can quiver with the almost imperceptible tension created by their mutual life energies. Chris's line is like that. It owes its tremulous quality as much to the living, shifting subject as it does to the hand guiding it. In Ware's drawings we can sense that the subject is shaping him as much as he is shaping them.

The Best Cartoonist on Earth.

The wavering fidelity of these drawings is more than a little reminiscent of the superlative lines on paper drawn by another, more famous artist. If life drawing is a way of thinking and of seeing, as Chris says it is, then to him there is no better thinker and no better seer than The Best Cartoonist on Earth: Robert Crumb. Because Crumb is also one of the best drawers on earth, Chris's friend and mentor, Art Spiegelman, complimented Chris' sketchbooks when he said that they were afflicted with "Crumb-itis."

"To me," Chris said, "Crumb's sketchbooks reveal an insatiable desire to see the world. There are drawings in his sketchbooks of trees, and light through windows, that to me are beautiful, even heart-wrenching. This kind of detail is sometimes in the background of his comic strips, and I wanted to put detail like that into my comic strips."

Chris's drawings appear more often in his earlier cartoons, usually as realistic vignettes and still-lives that either frame the cartoon or act as a small window within it to the "real" world. The sequenced, almost hieroglyphic complexity of his cartoon strips is surrounded by a bare tree in the dead of winter, or punctuated within by a solitary, faithful drawing of his late grandmother's home in Nebraska. These painstaking drawings imbue the kinetic, cat-and-mouse action of the cartoon with what Chris has called a "tone," in the musical sense, as a long, held, solo note can sober a song.

R. Crumb's drawings also often have this timbre. There's a warmth to his renderings of "The Lonely Guy Tea-Room" and its patrons, and of trails leading into dark forests, that is far, far too often ignored in the predictable brouhaha over his more obvious love of steatopygic, and therefore callipygian, women. This overlooked, emotional quality of Crumb's work is what inspires Chris.

"I'm not copying Crumb's drawing style," Chris explained, "but his overall *empathy*." He picked up a sofa-side copy of the R. Crumb letters book and waved it, as a defender might wave a debatable piece of evidence during his passionate plea to the jury. "The title of this book is *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me*, but I think Crumb has an *incredible* vigor for life, in a way that's almost like Tolstoy's. Early in his life Tolstoy said that if he could make the readers of following generations live, laugh, love, and fall in love with life, then he would feel his job was accomplished. It may appear that Crumb has this hateful disregard for human life, but he doesn't. Just look at the way he draws! Even when he's just drawing a tree or a house there's an incredible sense of life there, and of *beauty*, for lack of a better word."

Chris settled back into his chair and let the book drop with a bump on the bookstand. His eyes retreated behind his spectacles as he turned on himself and reverted to character. "I may be *totally* wrong," he said, his voice no longer emanating from his gut but from his nose. "I may be a completely naïve *jerk* for talking about Crumb in this way." Then his face and his voice slackened a bit: "But the empathy in his drawings really influenced me."

All Aboard.

These six drawings, which Chris selected from his sketchbook, capture perfectly the odd community of isolation found aboard any train or bus in any city. It is not too much of a metaphoric stretch to say that I have been at one time all of the passengers aboard this train. Suspicious, curious, worried, exhausted, just plain dumb: I have been there. Your fellow passengers are almost never a pretty sight, but they are a beautiful sight if you have eyes like Chris, eyes that face the "ugly" truth. Look at the eyes of the man who is wearing the hat and scarf and absently holding one of his gloves. When I ride home at night from work, I am wiped out, anguished, and relieved; my entire being feels both full and hollow, and I know that I am that man. ■

THE 1900 SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO. CATALOG.

THE ACME OF AMERICAN BOOKS.

CHICAGO.—Ernest Hemingway once said that all American literature came from one book: *Huckleberry Finn*. If that is the case, then everything else in America came from this book—including *The Acme Novelty Library*.

Inspired by his cross-town rival, Montgomery Ward, and Ward's "Wish Book," Richard Warren Sears printed his first catalog in 1893, the year of the Columbian Exposition. By the beginning of this century Sears's catalog had grown to over 1,100 pages. It weighed over four pounds and contained nearly every single item available for consumption or use, from seven kinds of Alaskan silverware ("A New Discovery"), to six different models of zithers ("The Wonder of The Age"), with thousands of guns, drugs, herbs, fashions, talking machines and men's electric potency belts in between. The Catalog proved so popular and so indispensable that Americans commonly referred to it as "The Big Book."

Although hundreds of artists worked year-round on The Big Book, it remained in large part Sears's personal masterpiece: until his retirement he oversaw the design and composition of each issue, ensuring that each and every item was described with elaborate language and an accompanying engraving. The Big Book was literally the acme of commercial graphic design, *Acme* being the brand name Sears bequeathed to his in-house line of products. The ubiquitous brand of The Big Book eventually became the quasi-generic brand name seen in Road Runner cartoons and countless other facets of American culture.

A Creepy Book.

Today we feel a weird recognition upon opening The Big Book's densely-packed pages. We sense that we have seen this book before even if we have not, perhaps because Sears's story is also our story. As his fortunes rose, so did our nation's. Sears started with almost nothing and became the largest mail-order company on Earth, occupying the largest commercial building on earth. Sears then rose to the height of power as the largest retailer on earth, occupying the tallest building on Earth, in the most boastful city on earth, before its recent fall to has-been status and accompanying retreat to the low-lying suburbs. In this sense Sears stands for America, and his 1900 Big Book is our *textus receptus*, our original Bible and blueprint for 20th century life. All of our wants and needs are present in the Book, yet strangely past. The Catalog's plenitude and relentless salesmanship seem as elemental and as granted as the air we breathe.

Anybody who has seen both the Catalog and the tiny ads for nugatory products in *The Acme Novelty Library* might expect Chris Ware to claim The Big Book as an influence. I certainly did. When I found my copy of the Catalog in a used bookstore I thought I had discovered the Acme Rosetta Stone.

"Yeah, my grandmother had a copy of this when I was a kid," Chris said as I lifted the tome into his hands. He immediately leafed through the yellowed pages and brought his head down almost to his lap to scrutinize the columns of minute type. "I don't remember what I thought of it the first time I saw it," he said. "All I know is that it gave me the *creeps*."

He pondered the cyclopædia staring up at him. "I don't know why it was so creepy. I had *no idea* what it was. It had nothing to do with the world now." After a moment more of contemplation, he concluded, "It didn't terribly engage me. It wasn't like I pored over it or anything. I'd occasionally look at it in moments of boredom, but I wouldn't consider it a formative experience."

Unwilling to relinquish my conceit that I had unearthed "It," I reminded Chris that *Acme* was Sears's word for his in-house line of products. "Really?" Chris said. He riffled through the pages and stopped. "Hey, you're right." He studied a moment more. "I'm such an *idiot*." He looked guiltily round at the dozen instruments leaning about his living room. "I think I *have* one of those banjos, too."

The Big Book's influence, if any, might be unconscious. "I guess so," Chris said. "Yeah. After I saw it in childhood I never looked at it again until I did my third issue. Sears issued a stereopticon set in the 'teens, with a tour of their facilities, that I borrowed from heavily for my own tour of the Acme factory."

The Imaginary Factory Town.

Sears's colored glass slides took his consumers on an aggrandizing tour of the Sears buildings at 900 South Homan Street, then the Largest Supply House on Earth. The prose and pictures comprising Chris's own tour of the imagined Acme grounds is equally aggrandizing, a bizarre, free-associating elocution that faithfully mimics every neoclassical pretension of a tycoon's Elysium. Chris imagines the Novelty Library itself as "a true reorchestration of cheap material; a dialogue of space, light, and money—all ordered up from the pages of a catalog." The Acme grounds are sunken gardens of "great ornamental beds of potted green ferns, banana trees, and purple heliotropes," beyond which stretches the "azure lake with the great fountains playing in the sunlight." Such splendor is allegedly all for the lunch time enjoyment of Chris's unfortunate workers, a "great healthy army of city men and women, many of whom live in flat, squalid, shit-stained buildings with neither front nor back yards and not a spear of green grass or a flower to greet the eye in any direction."

Chris builds his lumpens this paradise then proceeds to treat them like the shades condemned to Dante's inner circles. Unlike the famed Sears network of pneumatic conveyor tubes, Chris's vacuum conveyors carry not only messages but the messengers themselves. Workers and citizens gather at the exits of the tubes waiting for the battered children to emerge, "their stumbling, bleeding bodies and disoriented dances almost always certain to provoke a hearty chuckle or guffaw." Meanwhile, accidentally amputated, or "abbreviated" men continue to work Acme's great book-trimming machine under the colossal shadow of the Money Building, an edifice "a quarter of a mile long, two blocks wide, and nine thousand stories high," where armies of women wage-slaves count his coinage day and night.

Although this Xanadu decreed by Chris's fictive, inner tycoon borrows heavily from Richard Sears's empire, its mixture of patronizing, patrician benevolence and downright inhumanity most resembles the Chicago neighborhood of Pullman.

The Real Factory Town.

The railroad sleeping car magnate George Pullman conceived Pullman in 1881 as America's first corporate-owned utopia. The planned village consisted of modest, row cottages quartering Pullman's workers, or "children," as he called them, spread like brick cribs before his own palatial quarters. The City of Chicago and the Chicago *Tribune* trumpeted Pullman as a "visionary"; the city even built special trains to convey attendees of the 1893 Columbian Exposition to and from Pullman's magic kingdom. Pullman's magic formula was this: raise profits by cutting your children's salaries while maintaining their monthly rent and utility payments. When his children could not pay, Pullman cut off their heat. Thousands of men, women, and children starved and froze to death in their quaint cottages while Pullman fired any worker who protested his "enlightened capitalism." Finally an unknown organizer named Eugene V. Debs led a successful sympathy strike. The cogs of national commerce were frozen, and Pullman appealed in the national interest to President Grover Cleveland. Cleveland promptly sent in U.S. troops who, in the time-honored Chicago manner, shot and killed the protesters.

This concordance between Pullman's true vision and Chris's fictional dystopia is why I had originally planned to conduct our interview in the decayed, Queen Anne splendor of Pullman's Florence Hotel, at whose once-gleaming bar porcine industrialists found a spiritual oasis from the otherwise dry, teetotal rule of the village. Unfortunately, less than a week before our interview, a disgruntled Pullmanite burned down the behemoth Administration Building, closing the grounds to visitors and making ashes of my plan to interview Chris Ware in the only simulacrum of his imagined Acme town.

"It's almost feudal," Chris mused of Pullman's now nearly-empty village. "I've always wanted to go there and now I feel extra stupid because some nutcase burned it down."

Pullman is long buried in Graceland Cemetery, but the grim, patrician spirit of his capitalism lives on in one of today's more cuddly, "interactive" utopias: "My downstairs neighbor was doing publicity for Walt Disney's city, 'Celebration,'" Chris said. "He even asked me to do some artwork for their magazine. Can you imagine? It's the most horrifying, artificial, *lie* of a place. Did you know that residents are supposed to keep a journal?"

In comparison to Pullman's cruelty and Disney's megalomania, the empire of Richard Sears seems honorable, his Big Book a relic of that rare strain: the honest salesman.

Hefting the Sears Catalog in his hands, Chris stressed that Sears's æsthetics are what impress him most: "I love the way it looks, I like its density. I like the way they felt they had to do the most carefully-done engraving of every object, and to write about it in the most elaborate way. More than anything, I like the writing style."

The Dry-Goods Æsthetic.

Sears's writing style was an unsettling mixture of the Latinate and the American, of prevarication—one of Chris's favorite words—and bluntness. "We commend this catalogue to the careful consideration of all buyers," Sears wrote. "If lower prices than any other

The Big Book's cameo appearance in The Smartest Kid on Earth.

concern can quote are any inducement, then we say send us your orders. If a scrupulous and pains-taking honesty, if strictly correct representations, religious-like in their fidelity to truth, are worthy principles, then you need not hesitate to trust us." Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera—in six-point type for over one thousand pages. At times Sears reached deliberately comic heights in his extravagant spiels, as when he used munificent language to describe the wonder of the Sears one-dollar sewing machine—a needle and thread.

Though this ostentatious writing style—what we might term the "dry-goods" æsthetic—was common to almost *all* turn-of-the-century writing, Chris applies it in a commercial, and comic, manner like Sears. As a pure comic writer Chris is nearly peerless, perhaps because he has grasped a curious attitude best described as *honest irony*. Chris's writing is not parody but *burlesque:* treating the ridiculous with dignity, and treating dignity ridiculously.

"There's an earnestness, a dignity, to that language that is completely missing in today's world," Chris said. "I

honestly like that kind of writing because of the consideration of the words. I wish I could tell you why I write like that, but it's a pretty unconscious act. But I'm not parodying it, honestly I'm not."

Chris's love of magniloquent rhetoric is complicated by his admission that he is sometimes frightened by his own tyrannical bombast. "It's so easy for me to affect it," he explained. Asked if he worried that he himself was a flatulent, orotund pontificator, Chris sighed, "Yes. Without a doubt."

Consider just one promise made in one corner of one issue of *The Acme Novelty Library*—the "catalog" issue: "Neither attractive, accurate, nor even mildly practical, our hollow taxonomy of artfully fallow products and services nonetheless promises a crudely prevaricated literary insurance against the average American consumer's incurable quest to find happy times and solace in the heart of the most freshly-acquired commercial drygood or intimate relationship."

Now read it again. We should buy this book to protect ourselves from buying other products? The joke is on us but on Ware as well. The personal, honest irony of this catalog is the æsthetic culmination of all the intermittent advertisements Chris has celebrated and savaged throughout his still-young history. Though he has often adroitly replaced the inconsequential, tangible object for sale with the important emotion or "bandwagon" technique that is really for sale, the catalog surrounding Chris's tenth issue was the most comprehensive, hilarious, disturbing compendium yet. It took the giant, contemptuous, faux-corporate aspect of Chris's Acme persona to a zenith that disturbed even Chris.

"It was a little bit too much," he admitted. "It amuses me but I do feel like the tenth issue is the last one where I'll do that. After a while it gets a bit tiresome in its irony and its distance. I don't know what I'm going to write to 'frame' the next issue. To be perfectly honest, right now I feel more lost than I have in a long time. I really do. I feel untethered."

The Ghost of "Everything."

As he weighed the 1900 Sears Catalog in his hands, Chris made one thing clear: his is parodying himself, or burlesquing himself, as much as any other deserving target. "What it comes down to is that acquisitiveness is a part of not only American but modern life," the bespectacled collector explained. "We seek comfort and meaning in all this stuff. All this stuff is what we decorate our life with." He studied the ponderous volume. "I can't put my finger on it, really."

Earnestness, I prompted him. What was earnest about Sears?

"This is everything here," he said, weighing the past century's omnibus. "This codifies what is America. This is *everything*. Honestly, I cannot tell you why it amuses me. I cannot put my finger on it."

Chris's nebulous understanding of The Big Book could just as easily dispel as confirm my notion that it is an ancestor of *The Acme Novelty Library*. The lineage must remain uncertain—up in the air, so to speak—if only to suggest that an artist's influence can be one of which he is partly unaware, an invisible one which surrounds him and creeps over him. ■

THE IDIOCY of the Catalog is best symbolized by the Hotcha boy lighter, the "Outstanding Novelty!" of 1938. Hotcha was a figurine of an "innocent" Black boy with his pants down. You lighted your cigar or cigarette by sticking it into Hotcha's glowing red anus and then sucking and puffing away. In his moronically metaphorical style, Johnson Smith said, "Hotcha feels that there are two sides to every question and if you will turn him around you will find out why he is received with a warm welcome in thousands of homes."

WHOOPEE CAPS

Hi, boys! Hi, girls! These Whoopee Sailor Caps are fun to wear and funny to read. Snappy titles: **Anything on Tonite?, I'm Lonesome, I'm in the Mood, Let's Get Acquainted, Out for a Good Time, etc.** Well made with large colored letters. **12c**

No. 7271. Whoopee Caps

Start A Band!

Gather together a few of your friends, pass out the instruments and start to play. In no time at all you will be playing those toe-tickling tunes you hear on every radio program, in a finished and polished manner. Perhaps the amazing popularity of these sets is due to the remarkable simplicity of playing but we prefer to point out the superb quality of the finished musical renditions.

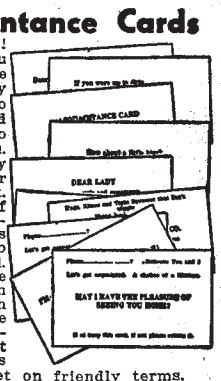
Plate Lifter

Plate lifter consists of a long rubber tube with a lifter on one end and a bulb on the other. Use it under a plate to spill the soup or under vest to imitate heart beat, or under bedclothes as mouse, etc. **25c**

No. 2163. Plate Lifter. Postpaid..

Acquaintance Cards

SAY, Boys! Why don't you make up to the girls? They come out to meet you and look nice to please you. They are only waiting for you to speak. Get some of these Acquaintance Cards and give one to that jolly girl. She will love you for it. Even with girls with whom you are already acquainted it sometimes is difficult to get on friendly terms.



"May I have the pleasure of escorting you home? If not, can I sit on the fence and watch you go by? I'd like to make a date with you. If your answer is YES just keep this card and if it is NO, just hand it back."

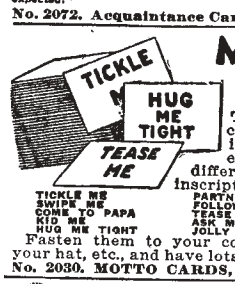
"I'm somewhat of a liar myself, but go on with your story. I am listening."

"How about a little kiss? For both it'll be bliss. Just one you'll never miss, and I won't make you do that or this."

"If you were up to date you'd go riding in my Straight 8. You know it's never too late. Jump in—don't hesitate."

"Dear Miss, I feel lonesome and dejected. I fear my heart you have affected, and if I don't get rejected, I'll take you home and you'll get everything you expected."

No. 2072. Acquaintance Cards, Set 10c



Motto Cards

There are ten colored cards in an envelope each with a different comic inscription, such as:

TICKLE ME
SWIPE ME
COME TO PAPA
KID ME
HUG ME TIGHT
PARTNER WANTED
FOLLOW ME
TEASE ME
ASK ME
JOLLY ME

Fasten them to your coat, dress, in your hat, etc., and have lots of fun. **10c**

No. 2030. MOTTO CARDS, pkt...

THE JOHNSON SMITH & COMPANY CATALOG.

Surprising Novelties -- Puzzles --Tricks --Joke Goods -- Useful Articles -- Etc.

SURPRISE SNAKES, HOTCHA GIRLS, EXPLODING EVERYTHING & WOW!

"ONLY CONCERN OF ITS KIND IN AMERICA."

DETROIT.—Johnson Smith & Co. were America's number-one purveyor of nonsense, and therein lies their great importance. If it was hooey, hufty-magufty, or an outright ripoff Johnson Smith advertised it for decades in almost every comic book on the stands. X-ray specs, gorilla masks, red hot gum, hypnosis lessons, 1001 insults and handshake buzzers—if it was silly, they sold it. The Sears, Roebuck Catalog may have had *everything*, but the Johnson Smith Catalog had everything *else*.

When I discovered them at the age of eight, in 1976, their motto was "Things You Never Knew Existed." In practice this meant that if it exists, it should have a swimsuit beauty and "Let's Make Whoopee" painted on it. It should also squirt water, deliver an electric shock, and blow up in some chump's flustered face. The barely repressed sex and violence evident in Johnson Smith's gargantuan Catalog makes it the closest thing we have to a detailed index of The Imp of the American Perverse.

The Evil Twin.

You had to get the actual Johnson Smith Catalog to see the really bad, i.e., good stuff, because the goods advertised in the comics were relatively tame, mere teasers intended to hook the uninitiated lad into the Catalog's infinitely more twisted universe. The Catalog offered you shotguns, live five-foot alligators, the confessions of former maidens sold into "White Slavery," and volume after volume of every "ethnic" joke (to put it politely) in circulation.

The Laughing Camera.

No. 29R176 The Laughing Camera. A whole passing show. Furnishes more amusement than you would get in a circus. Your friends grotesquely photographed. Stout people look thin and thin people look stout. By getting a focus on passing pedestrians, horses, cars, etc., the most ludicrous pictures are witnessed. **The passerby takes on the swinging stride of a grand-daddy-longlegs,** horses look like giraffes. Price, each.....130

If by mail, postage extra, 5 cents.

This ad from the 1900 Sears catalog shows that it might be the father, more than the twin, of Johnson Smith's catalog.

"It's sort of the evil twin of the Sears Catalog," Chris said, "promising you naked women and cigarettes." Then he added, with characteristic Ware taste, "Although, as a kid, I always got more of a charge from the 1900 Sears listings for 'vaginal syringes' and 'bust cream' than anything Johnson Smith offered."

For the generations of boys who grew up on comic books, Johnson Smith was one of their first glimpses into the obsession adults have with sex. This alone ensured its present, canonical status in the comic book pantheon.

Chris said, "I don't think there's a male cartoonist alive who hasn't wanted to parody or celebrate Johnson Smith's peculiar verbiage and the powerful idiocy the Catalog promised—from Kurtzman's *Mad* parody to Crumb's ads in *Weirdo* to Ben Katchor's first book, *Cheap Novelties*. After I finished my first issue Dan Clowes wrote me to say that he was disappointed because he'd have to wait for the air to clear before he could do *his* parody of it."

Revenge is doubtless one motive behind so many spoofs of Johnson Smith's poppycock. For many boys it was also their first fall for the fictive

7-POWER TELESCOPE $1.98

Magnifies 50 areas, whatever that means. More power for less money. Now you can look at the moon close up. Now you can see the wonders of the heavens; distant planets and stars. But mainly, now you can see into that window that you've been straining your beady little eyes on for so long. Quality ground lenses melted from the best sand out of the finest quality ground you ever saw. Pocket size, 15½ inches open; 3 16 of an inch closed. Wow! **$1.98**

EXPLODING TORPEDO BOMBS

Real explosion

Shoot off indoors or outdoors. At parties, dances, celebrations. SCARE PEOPLE! Can't you visualize the effect of one of these babies exploding in a crowded room. Imagine the surprised expression on the faces of your friends as they stampede for the exits, trampling each other to death. Wow Wow! You'll be the leading juvenile delinquent in your neighborhood. Each shot contains a sizeable amount of gunpowder and digs a crater approximately 4 ft. deep. **$1.00**

From the cover of Mad *issue 21, featuring the "Smithson John & Co, Dept. 98, Wow, Michigan."*

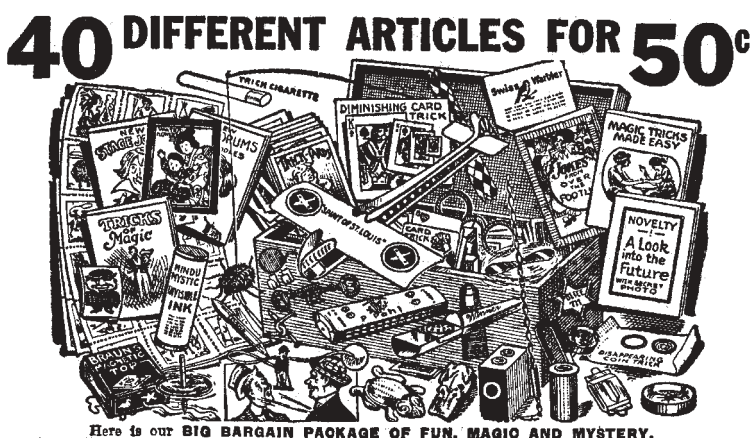
euphoria promised by advertising, and many boys did indeed fall for it. Somebody actually bought those "Sea Monkeys," hoping they would lewdly make more humanoid babies in a fishbowl. I never fell for that scam but I did fall for the pocket-sized "Spy Scope." No neighbors ever sunbathed or undressed in its teeny-weeny "male gaze," mainly because its magnification power was barely over nil squared.

"My trust in what they promised was crushed when a friend ordered their X-ray glasses," Chris said. "They were cheap cardboard with feathers for 'bones' attached. So I went home and made my own. I think I still have them, actually."

The Meaning of Nonsense.

All those firecrackers, guns, nudies, and "coon" masks prove that kids wanted just as much nonsense then as they do now. But, as recent teen sprees have shown, that old nonsense now seems quaint in comparison to the crap kids buy into these days.

You cannot really parody the Johnson Smith Catalog anymore. The Catalog was *already* a parody of human dignity, and that is why Chris Ware is not parodying it as much as he is *using* it to remind us of the real nonsense we live with now. Our modern nonsense is as senseless as ever, but with that comes more consequence than ever before. ■



Here is our BIG BARGAIN PACKAGE OF FUN, MAGIC AND MYSTERY.

SMARTEST CARTOONIST ON EARTH CAUGHT "SWIPING."

Go Out and Steal, Concludes Investigator.

EVERYWHERE.—To paraphrase Pablo Picasso, good artists copy and great artists steal. One of many joys in researching this issue of THE IMP was discovering what, in small part, makes Chris Ware a great artist. I had recognized his most obvious swipes before—the *Grit* ad, the Burpee seeds scam, and other bits of frippery endemic to the comics I read growing up in the 1970s—but I was not prepared for the socio-historical depth and breadth of Ware's swiping. I was not even looking to ferret swipes and yet *deja vu* popped up everywhere in my cursory examination of 19th and 20th century American ephemera.

When I opened the first book on ragtime that I read, I immediately saw the phrase, "The Present Day Fad" atop Max Hoffman's 1897 "Rag Medley" sheet music. (Perspicacious Ware fans will remember that phrase also caps the six-foot high *Acme Novelty Library* display stand—a work of art that deserves an IMP article in and of itself.) I spotted a 1938 Johnson Smith & Co. catalog at an overpriced junk shop and noted a Ware swipe before I even opened the book: the spine read, "Only Concern of Its Kind in America," just like the cover of *The Acme Novelty Library*'s catalog issue.

Before I "uncovered" these swipes I feared that Chris was a genius with a unique, originality gene in his brain; once I got the goods on him I felt relieved. Learning from others—through imitation and tribute if appropriate—is part of what makes him a great artist. I confronted Chris with a few of his swipes and blurted, "You're just good at learning from others!"

"Right!" Chris exclaimed, equally relieved by my appropriate praise.

A Chicago cartoonist was recently accused by many of blatantly aping Chris Ware's style. Without descending into that pointless, boring, morass of contention, it is worth noting that the cartoonist's use of fake ads in his comic book was one of the many things that raised fandom's hackles. In fairness to all we must ixnay that one point in the accusers' arguments—or else we must include Ware himself and a host of great cartoonists in the "guilty" list.

Not just any old schmoe but Harvey Kurtzman—the Moses of underground comics—pioneered the *faux* ad idiom which Chris and his peers are working in today. Kurtzman used bogus ads to demonstrate that ads are inherently bogus, and Chris is standing on Kurtzman's giant shoulders along with everybody else.

In fact, many of the quirks which appear to make Chris "unique" in comics—the sham ads, the antique hand lettering, the cut-and-assemble toys—he learned from earlier sources.

I have assembled Ware's cut-out peepshows, robots, and rocket ships and placed them on my shelf, right next to Mr. Natural and Flakey Foont driving their bulbous, cardboard Crumb-mobile, which I cut out and assembled from the back cover of 1971's *Mr. Natural* number 2. And I bet that Crumb got the idea from the comics that he grew up with, just as he copied many of his lettering styles from his music collection. That is how all culture grows—it feeds on itself—and comic books are no exception. Chris's contribution to comics culture proves that it makes sense to steal from the best—and from the worst. ■

COMIC SAILOR CAPS 15¢

Who knows what these are for. Apparently someone at one time thought they were funny. They make you look stupid. Printed sayings are trite, corny. This sort of humor is gone forever. We think it has something to do with the Second World War. Get one for dad. He might like it, the stupid old bastard..... **15¢**

TRICK MUSIC

JUST WHAT YOU WANT!

Almost Like Real Music

Yazz-UH! Twelve examples of the latest "Rock and Roll" toe-tappers carefully selected with the aging consumer in mind. Encourage the tempting thesis that adolescence is not just another hormonal change but a fun lifestyle that you can willfully perpetuate. **Thrill** to these kids' "rebellious streaks", and **Identify** with their angry, disconsolate poetry. Listen to them howl, or, if you really get into it, pay to see them strut and preen in a large public venue. It's embarrassing. Watch the clownish remnants of an obsolete satire of slave culture become our nation's primary aesthetic export! Wow! Get two!

No. 2431. CD $17.95

Tears of Joy

One of life's rarest experiences. Unpredictable and hard to extract. Ineffable. Find as many different ways as you can. Experience necessary, yet seemingly harder as you get older. Companionship? Music? Pictures? You decide.

PREMIER Mfg.Co., Dept. 9. Detroit, Michigan.

THE PLATE LIFTER

or "Palpitator" -- A Startling New Novelty Item.

The illustration above shows the manner in which the "Plate Lifter" is placed and utilized as an amusement. Secreted beneath the dinner tablecloth, the perpetrator squeezes the rubber bulb, causing the victim's plate to jiggle and dance in a most alarming way. Repeatedly, the plate bounces up and down, rhythmically, and ever more excitedly, with passion, and concerted effort, until the contents of the plate are suddenly upset and sprayed into the unsuspecting person's lap. This is one of the newest novelties and will it ever be popular. It can also be used as a palpitator, wherein it is hidden beneath the chair of another unsuspecting, and the same procedure above mentioned is repeated to shouts of alarm. Also may be concealed in one's trouser pocket for "special effects". Also use to inflate household pets, or other small animals. Many hours of fun.

No. 2416. Little Pumper ..... 25¢.

MOTTO CARDS

There are ten colored cards in an envelope, each nicely printed and with a different comic saying. Inscriptions include:

Tickle Me	Hug Me Please
Tease Me	Nobody Loves Me
Touch Me	I am Available
Kiss Me	I am Extraordinarily Lonely
Coax Me	Please Somebody Talk to Me
Shall We Dance?	The Emptiness of My Apartment Mocks Me Day and Night
I'm Fun	
Good Times	If I Don't Find Someone Soon I'll Kill Myself
Partner Wanted	

Fasten them to your coat, dress, or to your hat, etc., and have lots of fun. Go to a party and surprise the bunch. The gals will love 'em.

No. 4294. Motto Cards, per pkt. 15c

Famous HUMOROUS RECITATIONS

A Large and Popular Collection

This is a new and valuable collection of some of the best humorous recitations, both in prose and verse, in our language. The selections have been made with great care, the object sought being to provide the best and most comprehensive collection of popular humorous recitations ever sold at a low price. The book contains in all, over 50 selections, including selections in the Yankee, Dutch, Irish and Negro dialects.

We have space to enumerate only a very few of the titles as follows: "Barbara Frietchie," "Carl Dunder Talks to the Children," "Managing a Mule," "McCloskey's One-eyed Goat," "Pat's Love," "Rory's Kissing School," Romance of a Hammock," "The Smack in School," "Uncle Pete and Marse George," "Miss Foggerty's Cake," "Pat's Mistake," etc. **10c**

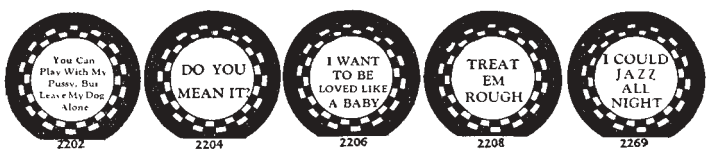
No. 1226. HUMOROUS RECITATIONS. Price Postpaid

Comic Celluloid Buttons 2 for 10c

Round Comic Buttons in 2 Colors - Funny Sayings - Very Popular

These Buttons provide subjects for pleasant jokes and amusing conversation, and thus smooth the way to a more familiar acquaintance and cordial friendship. They are very wittily worded and quite unobjectionable. Wear one and see the effect. Illustrations are half size.

Order by number. 2 for 10c - 6 for 25c - 12 for 45c - Postpaid



ATOMIC WEAPONS

Fun new technology actually allows you to burn up millions of people in enormous balls of flame who bother you. Also good for destroying buildings, wilderness, oceans. Makes more room for your stuff. People will listen up. Be the first on your block. Great at picnics, genocides. We've got lots at surplus prices. Order now. Shipped Express only.

No. 6932. PARTY POPPERS. Each .. $200,000,000.

Who Made That Stain?

A Marvellous Joke to Play.

Just imagine the look of terror on Mom, Dad, Sis, Brother, Grandma or Grandpa's face when you slip one of these horrible-looking stains on an expensive chair, carpet, or bedspread. Harf! Disgusting. Three different stains available: Urine, Feces, and "The Liquid of Life". Ew! Looks like Sis was on the couch with her boyfriend. Watch the sparks fly. Grandpa soiled the chair again. Grandma's incontinent! It's laffs, laffs, laffs. Nothing tickles the fancy quicker than a good "body fluid joke". All three in package.

No. 3382. Gross Truths 75c

Comic Celluloid Buttons 2 for 10c

Round Comic Buttons in 2 Colors - Funny Sayings - Very Popular

These buttons provide subjects for pleasant jokes and amusing conversation, and thus smooth the way for more familiar acquaintance and cordial friendship. There are very wittily worded and up to date. Wear one to town, to the fair, or to the dance and see the effect. Illustrations are actual size.

Order by Number. 2 for 10c - 6 for 25c - 12 for 45c - Postpaid

The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 12.

rather than opening the book for their interpretation the facelessness shuts them out. They say it is suffocating rather than empathetic; it is dictatorial rather than collaborative. Once again the critic's complaint is our author's intent.

"I may be—I don't know—*damaged* or something," Chris told Groth, "but simply showing every character's emotional reaction seems to instantly limit the potential for any subtlety of feeling. Adults *lie* with their faces. The comic strip language is not yet sophisticated enough to deal with that fact."

It is now, and this "sophistication" is one of Ware's biggest formal and emotional achievements. He has taken pains throughout the novel to show how body language can both reveal and obscure the unspoken truth in a statement, and when he does show us a face it is for a specific, deliberate reason. As we sit and listen like Jimmy to his father's pointless rambling over lunch, we can read, or "feel," Jim's real character in his mannerisms and ever-shifting expressions. On the surface we see Jim's gustatory slurping and too-loud laughter for what it is: the gluttony of a selfish man with a repressed conscience. But we can see beyond that repression as well: as Jim averts his eyes from his abandoned son and pensively chews his dessert, it is clear from his averted gaze and rounded eyebrows that he is also chewing the reality of his own failures as a father and a human being. Ware can show a lifetime of curious loss and disappointed wonder in something as small as the clunk of a coffee mug on a lunch counter; when Jim Corrigan glances into his half-full cup it might as well be his own life.

"I'm hoping to indicate hidden emotions by the order of expressions on the father's face," Chris told Groth. "There's much less being communicated in what they're saying than in how they're moving, like their gestures, or how they interact… Because essentially what they're saying to each other is just junk. Especially the father."

Reading the trivial dialogue in this book is just as easy, and just as important, as it is in real life. That is why Ware's technical sophistication is not merely formal or elitist; after all, it is intuitive. Everybody knows how to read between the lines. It is what we do every day, at work and with loved ones, and this universal feeling for unspoken language is perhaps the smartest thing about *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. To borrow Ernest Hemingway's criterion, this book is a good one because it makes us feel more than we can understand.

The Super-Man.

The question facing Jimmy is what he will do with his own feelings. He may see behind the confident and ugly faces his father wears, but will he himself wear such a mask? This central question is what makes *The Smartest Kid on Earth* a superhero comic book at heart, and makes Jimmy Corrigan the most mainstream superhero in the history of comics.

If you think I am exaggerating for comic effect, you are only half right. I asked Chris about his novel's first three pages, which serve as a prelude to the first chapter and ensuing "symphony." In this prelude we see a day from Jimmy's enthusiastic childhood and the way in which a low-rent, imitation Super-Man seduces and shtups Jimmy's mother—using the poor bastard as his uneasy accomplice.

"That's the allegorical core of the book, or something," Chris blushed. Then he muttered, "Those are the only good pages in the entire book, anyway."

The Viennese doctor would have quacked about the "symbols" lurking in this, the embryo of the novel, between puffs on his cigar. Let us leave the decoding of symbols to others and look at the elements in this opening scene as metonyms: they do not represent something else, they are what they are; however, we can begin to sense the "meaning" of the masked allegory from this seduction.

The Allegorical Core, or Something.

Little Jimmy fashions a mask for himself and is driven to an automobile show by his impatient mother so that Jimmy can meet his idol, the star of teevee's famous show, the Super-Man. The auto show is an orgy of repressed sexuality, from the cars, named Sweet Thing, Hot Stuff, Pussy Cat, and Lover Boy, to the signs overhead which scream, "Power Show," "Muscles!" and "Pumped Up!" A glossy, bodacious babe spreads her legs to the ceiling and curls her manicured hands around a massive tool. Amid this hypertrophied tribute to men's internal combustion we see another kid, sauntering hand in hand with his oafish Pa, who is wearing a "Number One Dad" tee-shirt.

Enter the Super-Man. "It's great to be here," says the masked man to the indifferent crowd. "I just flew in but y'know—my arms aren't tired at all!" Ba-doomp, *splash!* Oblivious to the cheesiness, Jimmy simpers through the pathetic show—"ha ha ha"—and tentatively approaches the actor for his autograph. The sweating, oleaginous Super-Man intones, "Hello, son."

Reenter Mom, or more specifically, her indignant, heaving bosom. It is almost all we and the leering Super-Man see of Mom as she reprimands Jimmy for dawdling. With a wink the sly Super-Man immediately enlists Jimmy's aid: "Hey hey there, ma'am—that's no way to treat my partner!" he exclaims. "This here slugger's a *real smart kid!*" Quick as another wink Super-Man has made a date with Mom, ushering Miz Corrigan's plump posterior into the vinyl booths of a decrepit, Kountry-Kookin' restaurant while Jimmy watches in awe. Then they go back to the Corrigan home for late-night coffee while an uneasy Jimmy lays awake in his bed listening.

The next morning Super-Man tiptoes out of Mom's bedroom only to find woebegone Jimmy eating cold cereal alone at the kitchen table. Super-Man whispers, "You tell her I had a *real good time*, okay?" and bequeaths his famous mask to Jimmy before slipping out the back door. Overjoyed by the 'real' mask, Jimmy tries it on.

And there ends the childhood of the smartest kid on earth, and begins the novel. Although Jimmy does not fully realize the implications of this oedipal mindfuck, every element in this prelude, even the wink, will return to haunt his life's story.

The Emotional Center?

The first chapter begins with the adult Jimmy receiving a letter from the father he never had. This letter, if you can call it that, contains no introduction, no explanation, nothing but a request that Jimmy come to Michigan with the enclosed plane ticket. It is the sort of direct action male members of our species are supposedly known for taking. Bewildered, Jimmy goes to the break room where a coworker browbeats him with stereotypical advice about taking charge, getting the pussy, and never letting chicks know that you like them until you've fucked them at *least* six times. "Chicks don't *dig* guys that're *nice!*" says Jimmy's beefy coworker.

We are not at the car show any more, but the atmosphere is every bit as super-manly, and we begin to see how ubiquitous this manly mask is. The Super-Man and the masks men wear raise the question, what does it actually mean to be a man? The answer, of course, is not to show emotion. It is okay to have emotions, but you must hide them. That is what the command, "Be a man!" literally *means:* shut up and keep your feelings to yourself. That is why this phrase is bellowed at any boy who cries or would rather play house than play football. *Be a man* is our culture's way of teaching you how to grow up, and every boy and girl tries on this disguise as they grow. Some eventually grow into the mask, a few discard it permanently, and most take it on or off as the occasion encourages. In

SMARTEST KID continued on page 18.

JIMMY CORRIGAN & JOSEPH CORNELL.

Jimmy Corrigan in his garden, 1708 Peachwood Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, forever.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HANS NAMUTH.

Joseph Cornell in his garden, 3708 Utopia Parkway, Flushing, New York, 1969.

"NOBODY SPECIAL."

An Imp Special Report.

To his neighbors Joseph I. Cornell was nobody special. Born on Christmas Eve, 1903, Joe Cornell lived at home for his entire life in order to care for his beloved, handicapped brother and his nagging, smothering mother. Joe was a private man, by appearance silent and depressed. He never married and remained a virgin almost until the day he died. He was the sixth man in his family to bear the name Joseph I. Cornell, a lineage so erased by time that he never knew what his middle initial stood for.

Chris Ware has fashioned in his living room a shrine of sorts to honor Joseph Cornell and the unique, inventive, private life that Cornell shared through his art. Like Cornell's famous boxes, Chris's shrine is a box of sorts, a wooden bookcase filled with books about Cornell, aging photographs, and Cornell-inspired pieces given Chris by fellow admirers. Chris has arranged these elements so that they touch each other, just so, almost as carefully as Cornell arranged the ephemera with which he composed his own, three-dimensional collages.

Toward the end of his life Cornell wrote, "Anyone who has shown any… concern with my work and has not been moved or inspired to become involved somehow with the humanities in a down-to-earth context has not understood its basic import." Cornell once described his boxes as "peepshows," and anyone who has cut out and assembled Chris Ware's own dioramas and peepshows can feel the inspiration Ware sees in Cornell's constructions.

It is impossible to categorize Cornell's works. They are *curios:* collage, diorama, birdhouse, hotel, theatre stage—all of these at once, framed behind glass by a handmade, wooden box. Inside the box Cornell directed an ornate but unpretentious array of unique and everyday objects.

Peer into Cornell's looking-glasses and you will see exactly what Ware values most in art: "a sense of life." It is often ossified life: a seashell, driftwood, a feather, an eggshell or a butterfly. Cornell arranged these fragile relics into humble constellations and set them, like our own tiny existence, against the abstract infinity of a night sky—a sky also spangled with our imaginary constellations.

Cornell's boxes are also toys, built with trap doors, marbles, and soap-bubble pipes. They are made to be played with. Balls roll down wire tracks, in and out of hoops and drinking cups, dinging bells like a celestial game of pachinko. The pedestrian complaint about modern art— "Even I could do that," or "My eight-year old kid could do that"—is an essential part of Cornell's genius. He was entirely self-taught, and, perhaps for that reason, he never lost a child's touch for playing with life in a novel way. His work deified childhood, and he made many of his boxes as gifts for children.

It was no coincidence that during the hour I spent crowded into the Art Institute of Chicago, taking notes on their Cornell collection, it was the youngest tourists with whom I jostled for space. The kids pawed the glass cages surrounding Cornell's boxes and fogged them with their breathing, frustrated, while their bovine, shuffling parents wearily admonished them to keep moving. As the Institute's curators admit in their notes accompanying the collection, there is a irony in placing Cornell's works beyond the reach of the hands for which they were meant.

Because Cornell's art is three-dimensional, it has a literal depth that cannot be captured by a camera's mechanical eye. In a wink the shutter would steal Cornell's soul, and for that reason I have no inclination to include a gray scan of a photograph of Cornell's work with this article. I have also resisted the temptation to draw explicit comparisons between Cornell's and Ware's novelties. Cornell's influence on Chris is easy to see and is best grasped wordlessly. Visit the Art Institute's Cornell collection (placed in the "Surrealist" room) and see his inner world for yourself. When you do you will see exactly what I am not talking about. ■

THE FIRST REAL SUPERHERO.

(Continued from page 1.)

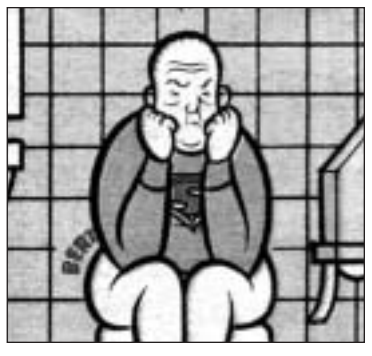
Little Chris prepared for this inevitability by making a mask for himself. He pulled a tube sock over his head, wrapped his head in masking tape, then blacked in the mask with a magic marker.

"It was very disappointing," Chris concluded. "If it's possible for a nine-year old to feel complete and utter, debilitating rejection after such a venture, that's how I felt."

Since "God" does not exist, we must invent Him, and Chris has continued to do so. In the beginning of *The Acme Novelty Library,* the younger, leaner Super-Man was all the things Chris does not have: an Acme corporate spokesperson, a boss, a Dad, a God, squeezed into one red, yellow and blue unitard. He was a sadistic prick, the kind we love to hate. "Jeez," He'd muse in Heaven, pondering your name in His Big Book of Souls. "Man, you sure were a *pussy,* weren't you?" As Chris is the God of his own cartoon world, I asked him if creating this world brought out the sadist in him.

"Yeah," Chris said. "I think so, somewhat. You can toy with your characters, flick them around a bit. I don't know if I would be like that if I had that power in real life, but I think a lot of people would be. When there's no fear of punishment that seems to be the natural human tendency. So maybe I would be. Maybe for a week or two."

The funny thing is, that is what happened. After his infancy the fickle, motherfucking Super-Man committed suicide at the beginning of *The Smartest Kid on Earth*. Now that Jimmy Corrigan has inherited Super-man's shirt—but not necessarily His mask nor his cloak—He is reborn as the harmless Nobody He ought to be, remade in Chris's own image all over again. ■



Grace & Beauty

Special to The Imp. by DAN KELLY.

CHICAGO.—By a bizarre accident of birth, Chris Ware's wife and my girlfriend became sisters. As a result, the four of us are thrust together each Christmastide for a visit to the girls' parents in Michigan. Once there, Chris and I often leave the wimmens to bond with their relatives, while we go on half-day jaunts to that state's splendid antique stores. I suppose there are manlier ways to enjoy the wolverine state—but Chris and I are delicate lads. Eager we are to buy pop cultural ephemera and filigreed dainties. Eager we are not to toss cabers, build log cabins with naught but a hatchet, and eat thrice our weight in beef in the neverending barbecue ritual performed by the girls' dad each visit. But I digress.

Watching Chris walk about an antique store provides a case for spirit possession—namely the spirit of a ninety-year-old man inhabiting a thirty-one-year-old man's body. In his carriage, Chris saunters slowly about, hands thrust deeply into pockets, whistling tunes unheard since Thomas Edison first committed them to wax. Occasionally he stops to riffle through a stack of fin de siècle sheet music, to gently shuffle through piles of fragile shellac 78s, to assay a late nineteenth century minstrel show poster, or to pick out a tune on a circa 1920 banjo ukulele with an "Oh! You Kid!" cartoon imprinted on the drum.

No matter which store we visit, there is one inevitability. If there is a piano in the store, Chris will sit down and play ragtime. More often than not, as I'm tossing Beanie Babies and back issues of *TV Guide* aside in search of Freemason miscellany, I'll hear Chris two rooms over, diddling out James Scott's "Grace and Beauty" or Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag." Sometimes he'll cut his sessions short, for fear of annoying the store owners. Once upon a time, when Chris and cartoonist John Keane staged an impromptu cutting contest at a Texas store, the owner complained, going so far as to create a magic marker sign that screamed, "NO JOPLIN RAGS!" More often, I find Chris surrounded by a gaggle of gawkers, drawn by the novelty of someone who knows that a piano isn't just a pretty piece of furniture, and who can coax still more prettiness from it.

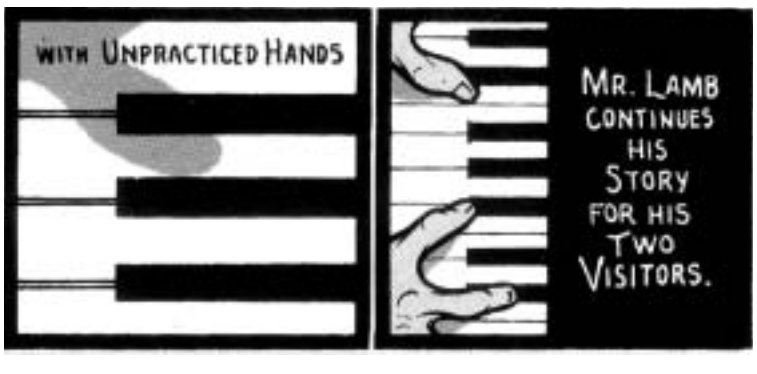
Chris's merciless self-criticism is legendary. He's especially unkind where his playing ability is concerned. While as a fellow ragtime buff I should agree with some of his pronouncements, he protests too much. What Chris lacks in virtuosity he makes up for in passion. His playing has an easy charm and a decided lack of pretension. His unadulterated devotion to a musical genre now condemned to ice cream trucks and B.J. McPudrucker's theme restaurants shines through. Chris Ware plays like a man in love.

Strangely, Chris's love of ragtime is often only fleetingly touched upon in interviews—a quirky affectation of the boy genius, don't you know? Even in Chris's extensive Comics Journal interview, Gary Groth praises Jeezus that Chris's Emerson, Lake, and Palmer-listening days are behind him and leaves it at that. Moreover, sources at Quimby's Bookstore reveal that Chris's megalithic mash note, *The Ragtime Ephemeralist*, flew off the shelves powered more by the Acme Novelty Seal of Quality than by any influx of cakewalk and string band fascination springing from Wicker Park's hipster population. A potentially fortunate turn of events, perhaps, as ragtime music provides a terrific vantage point from which to appreciate Chris's work.

Chris's ragtime religiosity is best testified in one of his *New City* strips, "American Beauty." The strip recounts a melancholic snatch of ragtime history, scored by the delight of rediscovery, yet saddened by the crass commercialism that ultimately killed the music. Recounting a scene from Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis's seminal history, *They All Played Ragtime*, "American Beauty" recalls the authors' 1949 meeting with composer Joseph Lamb. The event is noteworthy not simply because of Lamb's status as one of the three titans of classical ragtime—a distinction shared with Joplin and James Scott—but because Lamb was thought long deceased, or perhaps even a pseudonym for Joplin himself. Not so.

Lamb plays the title rag for Blesh and Janis while explaining where "he's been for the past forty years." Desiring nothing more than recognition as "a great ragtime composer," Lamb had twelve rags published by Joplin's publisher, John Stark, between 1908 and 1919. Eventually, ragtime's popularity flagged, forcing Lamb to vanish into the private sector. Justifiably rapt, Blesh and Janis are bursting to tell Lamb's story to the world. However, in a quintessentially Wareian, resonant note, Lamb stops playing, turns to his visitors with "a color of suspicion and sadness" in his eyes, and asks, "How much is it going to cost me to be in your book?"

Chris mocks his use of metaphor, but he's quite adept at it in "American Beauty," as poetic a history of ragtime as I've ever encountered. The key lies in the title—not just the name of a rag but also of an exquisite strain of rose. Chris festoons his strip with roses in various stages of growth. The "American Beauty" rag is lovingly described as "delicate melodies which twist around twining trellises of chords." Ragtime itself was "fertilized by the abolition of slavery," and it flourished "in clubs and so-called 'hot houses' across America." Ragtime, we learn, "was a hybridization of two diverse cultures"—European and African—"though it was planted in soils somewhat better suited to commerce." The wilted roses crowning Lamb's tombstone punctuate the metaphor.



While most people's acquaintance with ragtime music is limited to the taxing backbeat and cheesed-out melody of Marvin Hamlisch's arrangement of "The Entertainer" (a.k.a. "The Sting"), the "American Beauty" rag is something else entirely. It rises up, ghostlike, barely identifying itself with the ragtime tradition, then bubbles over midway with all the brashness and huzzah one expects from a piece of pre-World War I American music. A charming piece—one wonders why its audience is limited to cartoonists, cartoonists' hagiographers, and Dutchmen with bowl haircuts. Metaphor steps in again with the third meaning of the title: this strip is about the "American beauty" of ragtime music, and its abandonment on the cultural slag heap when it ceased panning out for Tin Pan Alley—refinement and delicacy be damned.

Our contemporary culture's damnation of delicacy bears closer examination. Of particular note is the peculiar backlash emanating from some of Chris's fellow artists. Ware's stark illustrations, his ritualistic ablutions in pathos, his involute line work—recalling not a particular time period, but many lost time periods—for these Chris has been accused of, among other maladroit descriptions, "coldness."

If Chris's work is viewed as "cold," the fault lies in the beholder's lens, undoubtedly scuffed and scraped by that supposed liberator of art: the punk æsthetic. Almost as overlooked as his affection for ragtime is Chris's self-divestment from the past twenty years of pop culture. Despite reports of neo-Luddite behavior, Chris does indeed

use electricity and has access to an indoor toilet. On the other hand, he has no clue who Silverchair, Monster Magnet, Korn, or even Britny Spears are. To give you an idea of how far removed Chris is from the pop music continuum: capable of recalling any banjoist active from 1890 to 1925, when pressed to name a modern pop act, the most recent one Chris can conjure up is The Hooters.

Antipodally, I'll wager that many of Chris's contemporaries spent those all-important art school years drowning in the skinny-butted machismo of hardcore punk (or so they say, though I'm sure there's a Smiths album hiding in one or two of their closets). Granted, the punk rock æsthetic is a necessary and visceral escape hatch during anyone's formative years, but it is also wont to hang about like an out-of-work brother-in-law: consuming volumes of beer, watching a blur of television programs, and inundating itself with the most witless musical structure imaginable. Punk stresses amateurism above ability, and purports an emotional range from petulant anger to…well, that covers it. With its dogged reliance on the sitcom format, punk has contributed few ideas to comic storytelling and *mise-en-scène*. Whereas Chris employs an entire page to show the falling of a leaf—evoking time's passage and metamorphosis—most punk-inspired comics are encapsulated in the twenty-three minute framing technique which reached its creative zenith with "I Dream of Jeannie." Given my druthers, I'll take Chris's unsullied, innovative, and warm depiction of life's coldness over other's cold-blooded, apathetic, and antipathetic approaches to comics any day.

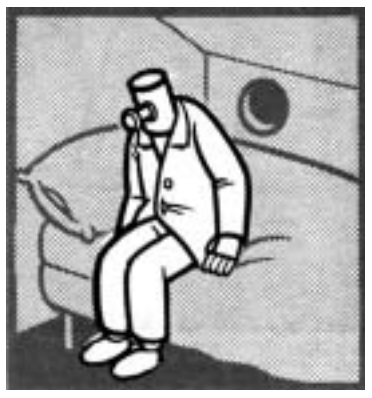
As Chris has pointed out elsewhere, comics have difficulty being accepted as great art because cartoonists are attempting to tell "richly-detailed epics through a series of limericks." And so it was with ragtime. A handful of Joplins, Lambs, and Scotts tried to breathe life and respectability into music viewed first as a gutter "colored" product, and then as silly salon trifle. Indeed, there are many physical parallels between Chris's work and this strongly idiosyncratic music: the Otto Messmer tempos of Quimby Mouse, the gay whorls and eddies of the cover art, and the jim-dandy, hot pups, and humdinger archaisms riddling the gag ads. Noting these structural similarities is all well and good, but a more astute observation is this: Chris, like his adored ragtime composers, draws his art from the wellspring of humanity.

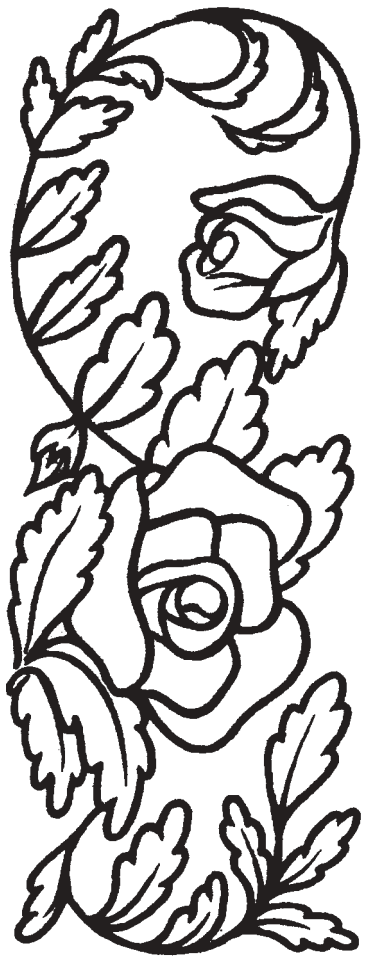
In Chris's other ragtime strip, "Scott Joplin: King of Rag-Time," we see Joplin late in his life, finally given a chance to record his most celebrated work, the "Maple Leaf Rag"—the musical piece that sent ragtime skyrocketing and spawned a host of Joplin *manqués*. Hunched over and twitching, his brain half-melted by tertiary syphilis, Joplin sits at a piano roll-making machine in a daze, unable to concentrate, much less coax out a tune. As the paper clicks on unmarked, two Babbitts stand by, glancing at each other nervously, before one takes the initiative to turn off the machine. Joplin stammers out an apology for "wasting" their paper and excuses himself. A scene from Joplin's twilight years—no springtime reveries here—he stumbles out into a blustery winter's day. The Babbitts stare out at him through a window. "King of RAG-time," one sniffs. "Just looks like another old nigger to me."

At the close of the strip, Chris informs us that hundreds of Joplin's manuscripts, including a piano concerto, a symphony, and an opera, were discarded by his heirs as "worthless."

For those curious about how abysmally inappropriate that last word is, take the time to listen to Joplin's "Magnetic Rag," a piece that pays tribute to every major human frailty, foible, and saving grace in a exhilarating four minute exhalation. This song's lesson Chris has learned well, and it is the wellspring from which he draws his own stories. There is an essential humanity to Chris's stories, a feeling that we are more than the whole of our parts. In Jimmy Corrigan's social ineptitude, in magpie Rusty Brown's bathetic attempts to recapture childhood, even in the ruthless sadism of Rocket Sam there is something salvageable, something to be cherished. That is what makes Chris Ware's work so important.

Occasionally on our antique store jaunts, Chris finds something bright and sparkly—though you wouldn't know it at first glance. In one particular instance, he discovered a magic lantern: an early projection device powered by lamp oil and imagination. The projector was a safety orange, tin-looking thing. Its lines were clean: a sharply defined collection of cylinders stacked atop one another, a pinkie finger of a lens sticking out the middle. Chris showed it to me, turning it this way and that. "It's sort of sad, isn't it?" he said, employing his familiar conversational phrase. I hadn't thought about it, but the lantern was haunting in its simplicity, its smallness, its unjust obsoleteness in a world of laser discs, DAT, and HDTV. Sad, alone, lonely, and forgotten, yes—but beautiful—looking for all the world like a Chris Ware cartoon. ♪





The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 16.

Ware's comics this mask is the tragic mask of manhood, or adulthood, itself.

"Adults are always masking things," as Chris told Gary Groth. "A superhero is such a great image because he's always hiding behind a mask."

It is oddly appropriate that Jimmy's silent struggle between sensitivity and cocksureness reflects the very thing that Ware's critics have zeroed in on: a perceived coldness or lack of emotion. I asked Chris if he had ever considered the possibility that this perceived emotionless quality of his comics might be the result of he himself being, on some level, what most people call a "typical male"—afraid to show emotions.

"Yeah," Chris said. "But I think it's more of an artistic problem, actually."

He is too kind. It is a reader's problem, because the Super-Man "subtext," for lack of a less pretentious word, is blatant throughout *The Smartest Kid on Earth*. Immediately following Jimmy's receipt of the mysterious letter from his "Dad," we see a costumed Super-Man wave good-bye to Jimmy from a building across the street. In a single bound Super-Man leaps to his death, splat, face-flat. This suicide makes sense on several levels. First, it is an apt metaphor for the suicidal comic book industry, bent as it is on producing more and more insipid rehashes of its self-congratulatory mythology. More importantly this suicide shows that the mask of adulthood does not conceal; you may be able to hide from others, but not from yourself, and perhaps Super-Man could not face himself any longer. Most obviously, Super-Man is dead, and some kind of *real* hero must take his place in the 350 pages following. That is why timid Jimmy becomes a Super-Man different than the breed that fucked his mother.

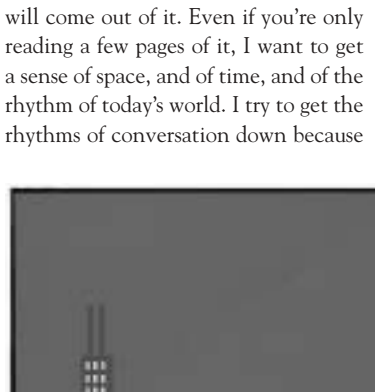
Our Heroes.

The Super-Man references fly in and out of the rest of Jimmy's story, and if Jimmy's gradual transformation has a catalyst, it is Amy Corrigan. Amy wants to peek behind Jimmy's mask; she is the open chord, so to speak, that sets the tone for the resolution of Jimmy's odyssey and the entire, quasi-allegorical symphony of the book. Although Amy grows sharp once or twice in the face of Jimmy's passive quavering, she is truly kind, in every sense of the word, to her new brother. She confronts their father's shortcomings with an openness and honesty that is reflected in a larger, stylistic shift: the entire novel opens up as the faces of supporting characters are increasingly admitted into the book. As the book nears its wintry end it is unmasked, literally and figuratively, as Jimmy Corrigan—wearing a red and blue Superman pullover borrowed from his dad—must face up to the life-and-death trauma facing his own flesh and blood.

A "Conclusion" of Sorts.

Of course I did not ask Chris about any of this Super-Man stuff. I know what he would say: *I don't know*. As he has said before, your brain will connect things for you if you will let it. Sensing these interrelations is half the fun of reading *The Smartest Kid on Earth*, and although I have written a few words on what I feel it is about, where its heart lies, I have not said what it means—mainly because, like Chris, I have no earthly idea. As I said, this is a book that makes you feel more than you understand. That is what makes it so smart, and so haunting. But it does make you think: if writing is thinking, and drawing is thinking, and intuition and emotion are thinking—well then, thinking is everything. With my tongue in my cheek I asked Chris perhaps the best, or dumbest, question of all: I asked him for his thoughts about thought itself.

"I don't really know how to answer that question," he said. Then, because he is perhaps the nicest cartoonist on earth, he offered all of the educated guesses you have just finished reading.



Chris switches from third- to first-person narration at the happiest moment of James Corrigan's childhood.

The Haunted House.

The sky, the color of stone houses during the day, went dark and took the color from Chris's living room with it. The Beethoven had long since stopped turning on the stereo and the cats had grown bored and left the room. The twin eyes of my tape recorder spun and spun, taking in only the sigh of an overhead aircraft. Neither Chris nor I got up to turn on the light.

"All I can hope for when I finally finish this meandering, confusing story with plot holes," Chris said, "is that through some accruing of detail, emotion, and connections in my own mind, a kernel of sincerity—a sense of life—will come out of it. Even if you're only reading a few pages of it, I want to get a sense of space, and of time, and of the rhythm of today's world. I try to get the rhythms of conversation down because I think that's important, as important as what people actually say. That sounds really formalist or something, but I do believe that, especially in the adult world.

"I want somebody to read this book fifty years from now and get a vague hint of what it's like to be alive now. When you read truly good books you'll sometimes get a sense, just for a moment, of a particular place and time. I don't think movies are the best way to do this. They're the easiest way, but I'd like to do it with comics.

"That's what's important in art," Chris concluded, "to communicate a sense of life."

A vague phrase, I thought. So vague it is almost perfect.

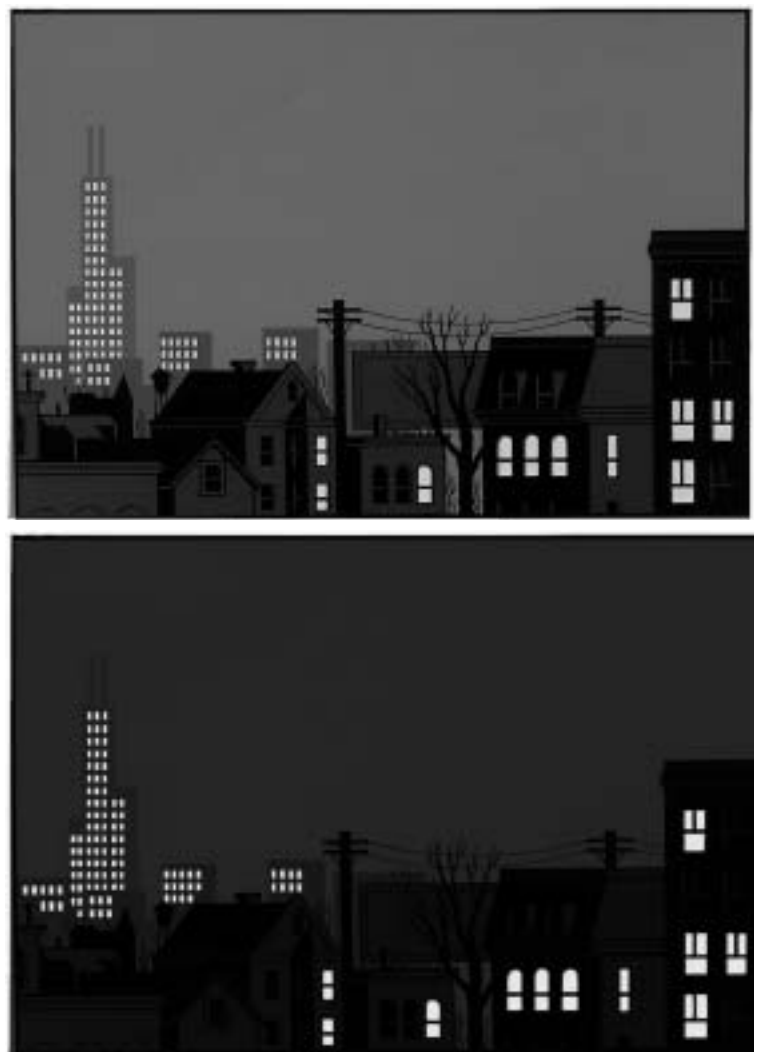
Finally, Chris said, "You're really making an awful lot of tapes here. I'm embarrassed because I honestly don't have a heck of a lot to say anymore."

The distant, clockwork passing of an el train clattered through the gloom. A streetlight and windows blinked yellow, gilding the outlines of all the gray matter that surrounded us. Chris looked at me through the gray and his eyes were filled with regret—a regret that bordered on pain, then became pain, a hollow anguish that emanated from his stare and seemed to negate his entire being—and I could only read his mind: *Why did I say those things? I'm such an idiot. I didn't mean what I said, he didn't understand what I said, blah blah blah, I'm a failure.*

It didn't work out, I thought, guiltily. At that moment I did not realize where that thought came from.

"I really wish I had some amazing, eye-opening things to say," Chris said, his voice rising to a thin, almost hopeful pitch. Then he came down once again on his refrain: "I'm sorry I'm not smarter."

SMARTEST KID concluded on page 19.



THÉÂTRE PATHÉTIQUE.

ARCHITECTURE & ÆSTHETICS.

DIGNITY is the word Chris used repeatedly to describe what he appreciates in architecture. I asked the self-proclaimed "namby-pamby æsthete" what dignity meant to him. After a moment, he answered: "An awareness of the innate pain and struggle of trying to get by in the world. Things with care put into them."

"It's the same kind of care that goes into making something like this," he said, hefting the 1900 Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog. "NPR ran a story a few weeks ago on the workers who were restoring the New York Public Library reading room. The workers were *astounded* by the craftsmanship. They said, 'These are triple mitered cuts! Jesus! How did they do this?' They were astounded because today, *nothing* is built with that kind of care and intelligence.

"I can't think of a better word to describe modern architecture than *insulting*. It is the surrounding in which we play out our lives, and yet it doesn't admit what human life is about. Ornamentation admits a folly and a weakness in people, a folly that's fundamentally there. Buildings should admit that. If they don't, why would you want to live your life in them? It's a terrible arena in which to live your life. It's off-putting. It's insulting. Whenever I'm in those horrible boxes downtown I feel angry, and I want to lash out."

The Smartest Kid on Earth.

Continued from page 18.

CHRIS'S RAG.

This quality of "weirdness" seems to be at the heart of classic ragtime, and it permeates the rags on many levels: structurally, melodically, harmonically, rhythmically. It is this illusive factor that gives ragtime both its complicated intellectual content and its great emotional depth… There is a surface gaiety juxtaposed against an underlying rigidity and sadness. If it were not for this tension in the music, the mood would be light and one-dimensional. Good ragtime might be humorous, but it is rarely happy.

—*Terry Waldo,* This Is Ragtime.

The interview finally over, Chris lit the lamp in his parlor and sat at his piano. He began playing the "Grace and Beauty" rag, by James Scott. The music was alive, strikingly loud, every note in the arrangement a bell ringing us awake. Chris's left hand thumped along with the regular rhythm boots make on the street; his right hand, meanwhile, wove a capricious melody that circled the beat and spun from it, disappearing then reappearing a beat later, entwined again, as inextricable as lifelong partners in a dance known by heart. Chords shimmered and cascades of notes rose, fell, and exploded over and over, reborn each time in sequence yet tonally different. With a clang, Chris stopped.

"Obviously I can't play it," he said, "but I hope you get the basic idea."

I felt as though I had stepped off a roller coaster, grateful that the room had stopped moving. All I could think was, *Play it again*.

And Chris did. "What's called 'classic' ragtime goes by so fast," he explained, "because it's such a densely-composed music, with so much emotion literally built into it, that you can over-interpret it and make it schmaltzy. Because it has this perfect, crystalline form, you can play it happy or you can play it sad. There's so many different ways to play it. I've heard 'Grace and Beauty' played this way, in a wistful and melancholy style. You can also play it with more of a beat, like this, swinging it, and it's a happier music. The in-between of these extremes is to play it as flatly as possibly, like I tried to before, in order to get both of those feelings at the same time. You play them *against* each other. To my ears, Reginald Robinson does that perfectly. He doesn't play too sentimentally, and he doesn't play too romp-and-stomp, although both of those elements are still present in the way he plays.

"His song 'Truly Yours' is an example. This is just a formal point about the song, and I can't even play it, but here goes. That first note that he hits is a major triad—the most basic chord in the Western scale. So this song is in F sharp, this key right here (*plink*). That's the basis for the entire song. He plays this chord with an opening note at different octaves, here (*pling*), and here (*plung*), so when I play the chord and this note, all together, I get this. (*pliunkg!?*) Hear that? He's got decisiveness, and yet complete indecisiveness, in the very first note of this piece. That's what makes Reginald such a good composer. He did this intuitively, too. When I asked him about it he said, 'Hm. Yeah, I didn't think of it that way.'"

"Of *course*," Chris shrugged, then continued playing the song.

"To me, this is the quintessence of ragtime, and of any art, right here. Ragtime literally meant something. In Beethoven, for example, the music, all by itself, means something. You don't need somebody howling over the music, 'Oh, what great spiritual emptiness I feel. I am searching for some sign that my time on earth has meaning.' That's what popular music is *today*. You have a guy whanging an electric guitar, an eerie keyboard part, and a guy telling you what you're supposed to feel. Ragtime comes from an age when people still knew how to express themselves, intuitively, through music. It was part of the culture, and it's no longer that way, in my opinion. I'm not saying that every musician now is this way, but for the most part, music is an accompaniment to, or an illustration of, emotion. It's not emotion itself. It's not presenting the emotion in purely musical terms—and that's what music is *about*. That's what all art is about. You don't want to write a poem about being depressed; you want to write a depressing poem. You use the tools of your art to recreate the actual experience. Ragtime is pure music in that way. For a popular culture to exist at a certain time, when 'pure' music was 'the big thing,' is *amazing* to me. It's almost inconceivable now. Ragtime had real, human emotion built into it and it was actually popular!

"Ragtime has a lot of influence on the way I structure my comics because it's the only kind of music I ever think about, for the most part. Good ragtime is honest music. It's tonally clear music. I liken ragtime to comics because comics are a composed form. They're not about *performance*. This is a totally fey way of putting it, but the cartoonist is the 'composer' and the reader is the 'performer.' You 'play' a comic as you would play an instrument, or read sheet music. As you order the panels, all of a sudden they come alive in this mysterious way. The best comics are the ones where, as soon as you start reading them, they immediately seem real. That's what I always liked about Krazy Kat: the way Herriman's pantomime worked. These little scratchy drawings come to life and dance around, but only as you're deliberately reading them in sequence. As soon as you stop reading them and merely look at the whole page, everything stops.

"If there was a language of description for comics, though, it might ruin them. I personally find myself alternately hoping for and wishing against such a thing. I think Robert Crumb sees comics as a natural outgrowth of the early, low-class form of comics, which came out of vaudeville, which came from minstrelsy. It has always been a low-class form, and I'm guessing that to try to elevate that would rightly go against Crumb's sensibilities. I'm prone to agree with him. On the other hand I think of someone like Scott Joplin, who took a so-called low-class form, which for him represented what they called 'Negro culture,' and elevated it into a composed form. If I'm at all self-conscious about what I'm doing, I see myself doing something like that."

Coda.

Everything one invents is true, you may be sure. Poetry is as precise as geometry. Induction is as accurate as deduction; and besides, after reaching a certain point one no longer makes any mistake about the things of the soul.

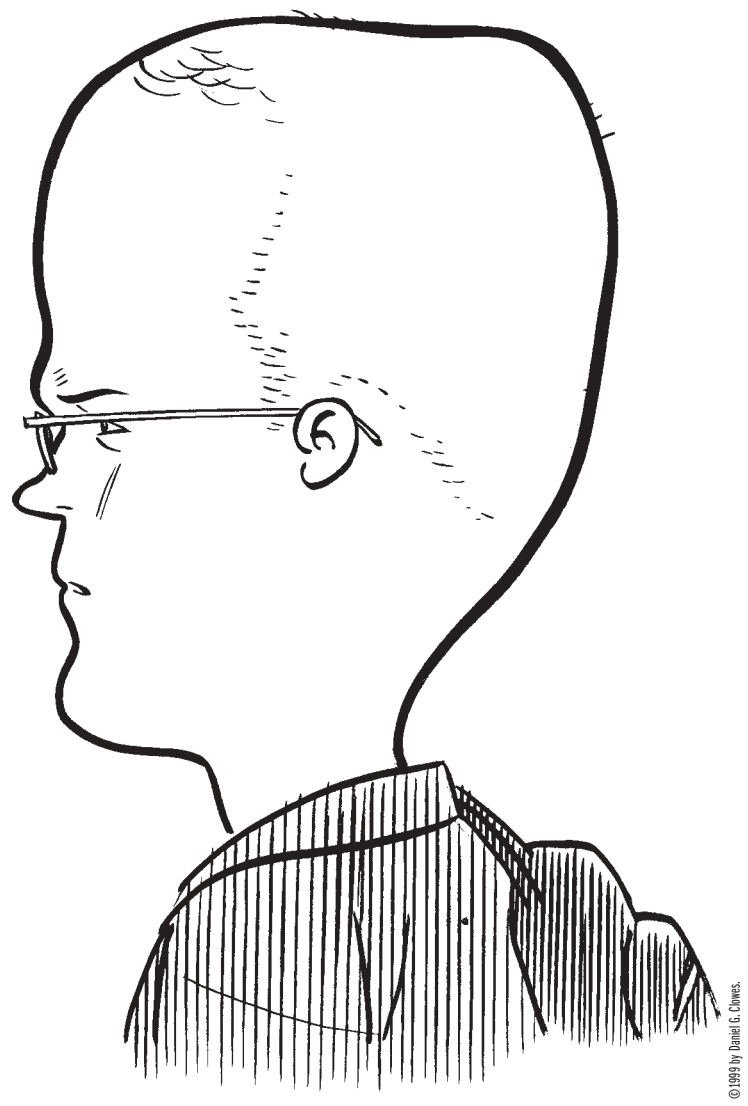
—*Gustave Flaubert, letter to Louise Colet, 1852.*

Later that evening Chris, Marnie, and I went to a party hosted by a pair of cartoonists on the North Side. I drank a lot and talked a lot and noticed that Chris did not. He was polite but quiet, preoccupied. Something like regret hung over his head and before long he went home.

A few days later he phoned me. "When I got home that night I was more depressed than I've been in *ages*," he said. "I stayed up late writing you this long letter about Texas, about my grandmother, about everything, but I just couldn't mail it to you. No, I can't. No. It's too dumb. So anyway, my apologies. I'm sorry. You were an incredibly well-prepared interviewer and you asked good questions; it's just…"

Chris paused for a breath. "You just caught me on one of those days when it's obvious that I have a *hollow soul*."

Of course he has. That empty space is what allows him to hold an entire world within him. ■



"Chris Ware's work has single-handedly restored my faith in humanity," says IMP correspondent Daniel Clowes.

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APOLOGY.

THIS NEWSPAPER SHOULD HAVE BEEN A BOOK. Only a tabloid sized, 400-page book could do justice to the comics of Chris Ware. Selecting Chris's artwork to illustrate my paragraphs was like selecting a brick from the Taj Mahal, pulling out the brick, holding it up and asking you to see the beauty of the entire building. As Chris said of his own attempt to capture the Columbian Exposition on paper, "I got nothing. *Zero*." Although *nothing* is exactly what I tried to get, this does not diminish my regret at slighting or omitting Big Tex, Paw, the Potato Man, Quimby and Sparky, Rusty Brown, the Tales of Tomorrow frump, and Frank Phosphate from this rumination on F.C. Ware's world. His comics contain *everything*, and, although I am a fool, I was not foolish enough to try to capture that.

It might be possible to read this paper through and not realize that Chris Ware is one of the most earthy, funny people you could ever hope to meet. It saddened me to leave out almost all of the laffs in this issue, but I trust that a reader's humor would not improve with my speculations. I ruin jokes when I explain them, and I hope that the side of Chris I have presented here will only make his more comic side stand in bolder relief.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.

DURING THE LENGTHY, roundabout assembly of this issue, **FRANKLIN CHRISTENSON WARE** proved to be perhaps the nicest cartoonist on earth. He politely endured my barrage of sophomoric questions and conjecture, let me see many of the astonishing novelties stored in his personal Library, gave me a gizmo that colors comic strips, demonstrated ragtime on his piano, and let me play with his toy sculptures. He even tried to pay for the pizza when it arrived. I am both humbled and inspired by Chris's humanity, and the fact that this IMP will only embarass him is but one more proof of his noble humility.

GARY GROTH conducted the elephantine, definitive Chris Ware interview in the 200th issue of his magazine, THE COMICS JOURNAL, and graciously gave THE IMP full permission to quote liberally from his adroit interrogation. The IMP you now hold was written and produced almost entirely in the shadow of this Grothasaurus, and despite my making every effort to properly credit Messrs. Groth & Ware for their primary ideas and repartee, a shrewd fact-check will doubtless uncover numerous, unconscious "appropriations" and other assorted journalistic fuckups.

ARCHER PREWITT, IVAN BRUNETTI, JESSICA ABEL, DANIEL CLOWES, and **TERRY LABAN** are all IMP saints. The comics will be everybody's favorite part of this newspaper, and they are certainly my favorite. It was a pleasure to work with these artists and I am honored to have their comics in THE IMP. Mr. Brunetti also made many astute, editorial suggestions which influenced my writing, although he is in no way responsible for any of my numerous mistakes, vagaries, and flights of fancy.

In addition to submitting his own Ware panegyric, Oddfellow scholar **DANIEL Q. KELLY** furnished me with the single best piece of advice I heard during the writing of this newspaper. When I asked Dan how I should try to understand Chris's comics, Dan said, "Learn as much about ragtime as you possibly can."

The avuncular **KIM THOMPSON,** Chris's editor at Fantagraphics Books, gave me the second best piece of advice I heard during the writing of this newspaper. Kim chuckled, "Good *luck*."

PATRICK JODOIN of **QUEBECOR PRINTING** was the ideal printer's representative, serene and gracious despite my repeated failure to meet my own deadlines.

Thanks to **THE BOOKSELLERS** who have taken the time and care to sell my ridiculous, unprofitable pamphlets. Long may we continue to make pennies together. All shopkeepers omitted from the list on page one should write me to ensure their inclusion in future issues and "synergistic market strategizing."

Thanks to all **IMP READERS,** especially those who mailed me encouragement, criticism and suggested topics for future issues. The "Jughead" issue will happen eventually, I assure you. In the meantime your continued suggestions and submissions are always welcome.

The **ADVERTISEMENTS** in this issue are not commercials but endorsements intended to make THE IMP look more like a newspaper. I received no compensation whatsoever for their use.

I would like to take this fine-print opportunity to state that my choice of **FEATURED IMPS** to date does not necessarily imply that I hold these cartoonists in higher esteem than others; that is, I do not put Dan Clowes in "first place," Jack Chick in "second place," and so forth. This type of ranking and list-making has its place, of course, but it is a place far from this office. (Although I do stand by my assertion that R. Crumb is the Best Cartoonist on Earth.) I have neither the experience nor the inclination to impose a lengthy pecking order, and I profile cartoonists only on the basis of whimsy.

SUGGESTED READING.

Sources Quoted, Mentioned, Shown, or Unjustly Ignored.

I RECOMMEND ALL OF THESE BOOKS, even though many of them have nothing at all to do with Chris Ware. Some of these books have influenced him directly and would, I am sure, come with his "stamp of approval," but many have only a ghostly, tangential relevance that I alone sensed.

Adelman, Bob. *Tijuana Bibles: Art and Wit in America's Forbidden Funnies, 1930s–1950s*. New York: Simon J. Schuster, 1997.

Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Jonathan Mayne, ed. and trans. London: Phaidon Press, 1964.

Blesh, Rudy, and Janis, Harriet. *They All Played Ragtime*. New York: Knopf, 1950.

Clowes, Daniel. *Caricature*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 1998.

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Katchor, Ben. *Cheap Novelties: The Pleasures of Urban Decay*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

Kurtzman, Harvey. "Smithson John & Co.", *Mad*, March 1955, front cover.

Mencken, H.L. *The Vintage Mencken*, Alistair Cooke, ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1955.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Northampton: Tundra Publishing, 1993.

McShine, Kynaston, ed. *Joseph Cornell*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980.

Prolific, Mr. *Hot Nuts: The Adventures of a Fuller Brush Man*. City, publisher, and date unknown.

Proust, Marcel. *Time Regained*. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, trans. New York: The Modern Library, 1993.

Sears, Richard, ed. *Consumers Guide, Fall 1900, Catalogue No. 110*. Chicago: Sears, Roebuck & Co., 1900.

Smith, Johnson. *Catalogue of Surprising Novelties, Puzzles, Tricks, Joke Goods, Useful Articles, Etc*. Detroit: Johnson Smith & Co., 1938.

Smith, Johnson. *World Famous Fun-filled Catalog of Gadgets & Novelties!*, Detroit: Johnson Smith & Co., 1976.

Solomon, Deborah. *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.

Waldo, Terry. *This Is Ragtime*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1976.

EDITORIAL.

TWO YEARS AGO I rode my bicycle to Chicago Comics, where Chris Ware was signing copies of his booklets that day, to meet him and ask for his permission to write this newspaper.

"Sure," he said.

Before I left the store I witnessed Chris raise his head from the mess of comics passing beneath his pen, as though—Eureka!—he had a revelation. "I have a funny-shaped head," Chris announced, the fine pitch of his midwestern voice rising above the buzzing hubub. The crowd quieted. "It's too big," Chris said. "It looks like an overgrown *peanut*." The muscle of his formidable brow bulged with perplexed amusement.

As soon as I heard this I thought I had the perfect beginning for my story. I would draw Chris as both the Charles Schulz and the Charlie Brown of "underground" comix, the creator humbler than his own humble subject. I promptly recorded Chris's description of his cranium in the first page of my new, "Acme" notebook and pedaled home, confident that I was on the right path.

But then came the interview. The "failure" of this interview is detailed elsewhere in this newspaper because it *is* the story itself. My questions, which were admittedly nebulous, swung Chris from the "aw shucks" to the "I suck" end of his ego spectrum, and he disarmed almost every lob in my six-hour barrage with a profession of ignorance so all-encompassing, and so profound, that it verged on the transcendental. And yet amid all of this unknowing Chris was dead certain of one thing: Comics.

When the topic of Comics, with the capital *C*, arose, Chris's eyes narrowed to black periods behind their spectacles, as if to punctuate his answer. "Essentially, comic strips are obsolete," he declared. "They were contemporary with movies at the turn of the century, but movies outdistanced them almost immediately. There's no reason for them to *exist* anymore, and yet they do exist. The only reason comics have survived, and continued to develop, is because they have some sort of inherent, æsthetic power that *nothing else* has."

He paused. "I believe that." Then he chuckled with the jocular despair that had permeated the afternoon: "But very, very few people believe that."

The first time I finished writing this newspaper I finally ended it by quoting Chris's utterance of faith. I needed that faith. For weeks I had forced my pen to paper, plucked at my whiskers, stubbed out cigarette after cigarette, and pressed my chewed fingertips to my furshlugginer noggin in a physical effort to force out some kind of conclusion about Chris Ware. I finally concluded that "faith" was the answer. "That's it," I said to the empty room. I gathered the black and white mass of everything I had written to date—over one hundred pages of scrawled notes, exploded diagrams, and joyless explication of Ware's full-color world—and threw it all in the garbage. It was the best point I had made yet. Now I knew where to begin: at the proverbial, bitter end. I took out a clean sheet of paper and wrote, "Essentially, comic strips are obsolete…"

Many mornings and pages later I gathered the black and white mass of everything new I had written to date and again threw it all in the garbage. This was the second best point I had made yet. Now I truly knew where to begin: with nothing. I took out a clean sheet of paper and copied these words: *What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing…*

And that too did not work as I had planned. The point of this "idiotorial" is this: Chris Ware is beyond words, as is any artist worth my time. I failed. Even if I did know what I was doing with these booklets of mine, they would still be doomed to failure—and I think I should continue to fail in this manner for as long as possible. The Imp of my Perverse is not to write what I know, but to write what I do not know. Unknowing is what keeps me going. If this doggerel credo sounds suspiciously like Ware's own artistic philosophy, as I have presented it in this newspaper, then I freely admit my imitation. An imp is a mischevious, tiny demon child, derived from the Latin verb *impere*, "to graft onto"—and mimicry is an essential part of my learning process. In the words of one infamous Chicago hellraiser, I am nothing but a pale, little, grafted devil. I imp the imp itself.

Some cultural critics might call this approach brown-nosing; they are correct, of course. The imp is like a frantic pup that must sniff every earthly vapor that excites its hyperactive sense. The imp scurries straight up to the most mysterious hole it can find and sticks its quivering nose straight into the darkness. In these pages we are sniffing the asshole of Art, with one nostril cocked for the scent of the familiar, amid the fecund mystery of the "shameful"—and therefore sacred—artistic outlet that is Comics.

LETTERS to the EDITOR.

Address all Correspondence to: 1454 W. SUMMERDALE, SECOND FLOOR, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, 60640.

ALL LETTERS to THE IMP become the property of Mr. Raeburn and are assumed intended for publication. THE IMP reserves the right to edit your letter for length and clarity. Missives written with paper and pen will receive preferential treatment. Send your trivial "e" mail to *theimp@xsite.net*.

THE FALLEN WORLD OF DANIEL CLOWES.

You created a Dan Clowes I would like to believe in.
— MICHELLA RIVERA GRAVAGE, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA.

I knew Dan when he lived in Chicago. (Not well though…) He certainly *was* gloomier then. But even then I was struck by what you brought out so well: a core of gentle hopefulness in the midst of all that rank, spellbinding grimness.
— GREG FRIED, JAMAICA PLAIN, MASSACHUSETTS.

THE HOLY WAR OF JACK T. CHICK. — *or* — HATE MAIL.

Jack Chick is a powerful and effective artist, regardless of how one feels about his "worldview." It is this latter sticking point that prevents most people, myself included, from proclaiming themselves to be true, unabashed fans of the man. His comics once shook me deeply during a certain low point in my life . . . I don't resent him for it, though — *au contraire*, I *admire* him for it!
— PETER CHRISTIAN BAGGE, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON.

I particularly liked the "spiritual cum-shot" bit — of course.
— JIM BLANCHARD™, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON.

I can't believe I forgot to tell you this! When I was in Jack Chick's office, I casually mentioned that although it may seem romantic to be an outsider, it never feels good to actually be on the outside. With sincere, downcast eyes, Chick replied, "No, it doesn't feel good at all."
— DWAYNE WALKER, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA.

Just finished the new IMP and am flabbergasted… Wow!… Are you really dissatisfied with it? Hard to imagine…
— DANIEL CLOWES, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA.

I wish the story had been longer.
— STEVE BYNUM, KETCHUM, IDAHO.

My only complaint is that your essay was so short.
— ERIC REYNOLDS, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON.

You secular humanist pussy!
— T. ARNOLD, RAYLE, GEORGIA.

As a serious collector of Chick tracts, I cannot thank you enough for indulging and ultimately legitimizing my sick problem. Your Dictionary-Concordance is obviously the result of a long, losing struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder.
P.S.—A midget with black lacquered hair, wearing a powder-blue leisure suit, once approached me. He pressed a Chick tract on me with shaking, sweaty palms, and whispered, "The human heart is deceptively weak and deceitfully wicked."
— TAMARA PARIS, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON.

I went out drinking last night with some people, including a Christian friend, Yasmin, who is a true believer in Jack Chick. As we rapidly drank bottles of wine Yasmin did not say much; to her, the evening must have been like a Chick tract come true. She took a look at THE IMP and decided that you did not like Chick—but she still wanted a copy. Later I asked Yasmin what she thought of THE IMP. She said that she was not impressed by your comparison of Chick tracts to pornography—but she agreed that you at least appreciate Jack's work, which she felt was better than nothing.
— JEREMY THOMAS, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA.

Oh boy! Your Chick book is an utter doozy! I am so gratified to be vouchsafed a glimpse into the life and mind of such an alien character. The question of why people believe what they believe is of consuming interest to me, and this wee bookeen is loaded with insight. I haven't enjoyed anything this much since *Kool Man*. You've done the world a public service by illuminating the hidden world of this venomous toad. Stay well, and for Christ's sake, keep up the good work!
— JIM WOODRING, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON.

Unlike others, I've never cared for the "mystery artist." Chick is the man — a nice, cartoony style.
— SETH, TORONTO, ONTARIO.

I nearly got fired for reading THE IMP on the job. The faces of the men in the centerfold look like masks of tragedy, especially the man with his arm twisted, standing next to the screaming, bearded man with his arms in the air. It's almost like Picasso's mural of the Guernica bombing.
— STEVEN SCHARFF, HENDERSON, NEVADA.

I want to add THE IMP to the permanent collection of the State Historical Society's Library. Yours is one of the most amazing periodicals I have encountered in years, and I have been doing my job for over 25 years, adding tens of thousands of titles to our collection and scanning a great deal more. My only problem is, what is THE IMP *about*?
— JAMES DANKY, STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN

There are people over here who really appreciate all the slightly insane care and devotion you dedicate to this highly personal critique of comics…Thank you for taking this one-man stand.
— PAUL GRAVETT, CARTOON ART TRUST, LONDON.

What is your background? Are you a chaplain? If so, in what religion? What is the Semiramis Society? How do you support yourself?
— CHRIS PROPST, SAN MARCOS, TEXAS.

Between reading the Torah and Leviticus last week and asking those more knowledgeable than myself, I learned a lot more about ancient Jewish blood sacrifice. They sacrificed for many reasons other than atonement (praise offerings, for one,) but sacrifices were indeed required for quite a few categories of sin, and a full atonement couldn't take place without them. The whole thing was close in spirit to paying a fine—that's the important thing.
But animals have no moral standing in Judaism and so cannot be "innocent" in any sense: nowhere in Jewish thought do you find the notion that by killing an innocent, you somehow negate a sin. That's a wrong notion that's been used to justify a lot of nastiness over the years. This is not at all to say that ancient Judaism isn't full of all sorts of irrational and (to us) repugnant blood sacrifice. But we've never sacrificed animals to substitute their "purity" for our own sinfulness.
— TERRY LABAN, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

Jack Chick has reprinted *Soul Story*. The tract number assigned to this reprint is (gasp!) number 069. Why did Chick use the taboo 69 for this *Soul* rerelease? He could have recycled yet another tract number, or used a 4-digit number as he's done with other, recent rereleases. And six months later, why is *Soul Story* 069 still not listed in his pricelist? Is it possible that some sexually naive employee at Chick Publications innocently assigned number 69 to *Soul*, then sent it to press before Jack realized what had happened? Or is Jack sending both of us a silent message, saying, "I know about you guys?" Your package with the blue IMP 069 reprint arrived on the same day as did my copies of the *Soul Story* 069 reprint . . . Coincidence?
Sounds like the name of a Chick tract, doesn't it?
— BOB FOWLER, SAN LEANDRO, CALIFORNIA.

I first encountered Chick tracts at a Christian barbershop in my hometown of Livonia, Michigan. The barber had transfromed his space into an ersatz temple, with Chick tracts as the operative Word. I was ten or so at the time — nice and impressionable — and was fascinated by this lamb's one-man crusade to save his patrons. The barber was small and wiry, and a grim good humor pervaded his speech and manner. For your first few visits, all talk was strictly shop: how long, tapered or straight across, and how about those Tigers? After familiarity took root, however, he felt comfortable enough to share his fire-and-brimstone faith, and even detailed the mercy "witnessing" missions he took to Detroit and other predominantly Black locales. The undercurrent of dread that flowed beneath his vigorously joyful sermonettes both fascinated and repelled me. My own faith — Catholic, of course — went easy on the "eternal damnation" aspect of the afterlife. The threat of perpetual suffering gave his narratives a panicky edge that I found scary and entertaining. I remember that he had placed a bumper sticker reading, "Have you accepted Jesus as your Personal Saviour?" on the ceiling, directly above the sink, so that you would meditate on it while he was giving you a shampoo.
While waiting for my turn under the scissors, I happened upon "Somebody Loves Me." I still remember the violent reaction the comic aroused in me: a sort of giddy expectation of this waif's outrageous, relentless suffering, coupled with a guilty conscience for enjoying it all. I dug the violence, the cruelty, and the redemptive purity of the message so much that I slipped it into my pocket and walked off with it. My father later discovered the stolen propaganda in my room and called me a thief. Here might be the seed of the reaction-formation that leads to some kinds of religious faith. Chick's stories, which present the struggle for the spirit as a battle between polarized, aggressive tendencies, are the stuff of fairy tales and war yarns, perfectly digestible because they do not acknowledge the possibility — or the contradictory, problematic nature — of true mercy.
Those comics also managed to spark in me a dread of my own sexuality, as well as the fear of God. So, yep, they did their job. But they also got me thinking about issues of belief, toughened me up, and brought my own sense of faith into sharper focus. Now there's spiritual boot camp for you!
I greatly admired your sensitivity to Chick's talent and to his war experience. Your portrait fleshed out this military man of God, a man too easy to hate without learning more about him. I still hate Jack Chick, but now I know that he's worthy of my hatred.
— ERIC WILLIAMS, ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN.

Soul Story has been reprinted. It was reprinted, believe it or not, at *my* suggestion, with a tract number which I can only assume was provided in homage to my Post Box number in Sydney. Poor Bob Fowler!
I also found a reference to Fred Carter in a book totally unconnected with JTC. It seems Carter is a well-known, Sunday school magazine illustrator.
— JEREMY THOMAS, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA.

WHAT KIND OF MAN READS THE IMP?

I'm a queer, ex-junkie, recovering Trotskyist, former national security reporter currently laboring to complete a book about heroin, called *Me and My Monkey*.
— DAVID MORRISON, WASHINGTON, D.C.

I'm a Christian. Even though my parents are atheists—my dad is an erotic fantasy photographer—and I never set foot in a church when I was a kid, I have always firmly believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ, much to my parents' annoyance.
— KELLY RENEE, LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA.

I'm a 40-year old, queer, HIV-positive, atheist, comix fan living with my family of born-again, fundamentalist Christians, who began giving me Chick tracts when I was young.
— WAYNE RANELLI, LIVINGSTON, NEW JERSEY.

I work at a Christian punk record company. My favorite *Eightball* strip is "Why I Hate Christians." Here is a copy of my zine, *Hot Ass*.
— CRIS ESTEY, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON.

I'm a starving, 20-year-old female college student with a perfect score on the English portion of the SAT. I have a nose ring, nice lips, and I'm quite pleased with my ass. All my fingers and toes are intact. I'm also quite a fan of Dan Clowes. So I humbly propose that you allow me to serve as your faithful "intern," or what have you. Even if I don't end up wearing a blue beret and calling you "Sir," I'd still be interested in talking about your work. My pay would be the experience and perhaps four bucks for public transportation.
— JENNY ORRICO, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

I'm a Roman Catholic and, sad to say, not terribly devout. If I'd been devout I wouldn't have wound up in this roach-infested dungeon. Please accept my heartfelt thanks for sending me a copy of THE IMP. I feel like such a leech for having begged you for it. I never thought I'd lower myself so far as to beg for anything; but then again, I never thought I'd wind up in here. I've got to go now. We're not supposed to use this machine for personal correspondence and I could get sent to the hole just for writing this.
— JOSHUA STANCIL #0594801, MARION, NORTH CAROLINA.

JACK CHICK IN THE NEWS.

This Chino-based comic book artist-writer… has become an alternative comics darling.
— *LOS ANGELES* "L.A. TO Z—THE *HOTTEST* FACTS ABOUT THE WORLD'S *COOLEST* CITY."

THE IMP IN THE NEWS.

THE IMP is one of the very best things to come out of comics this year.
— THE COMICS JOURNAL.

It's a shame that a project of such high-minded aspirations is bound to be seen by only a fraction of the audience that it deserves.
— THE COMICS JOURNAL "ON-LINE."

The "crowd" for Dan Raeburn's signing at Quimby's can hardly be described as such… "I sold one copy," says the one-man-band publisher of THE IMP.
— THE CHICAGO NEW CITY.

~FOR SALE.~

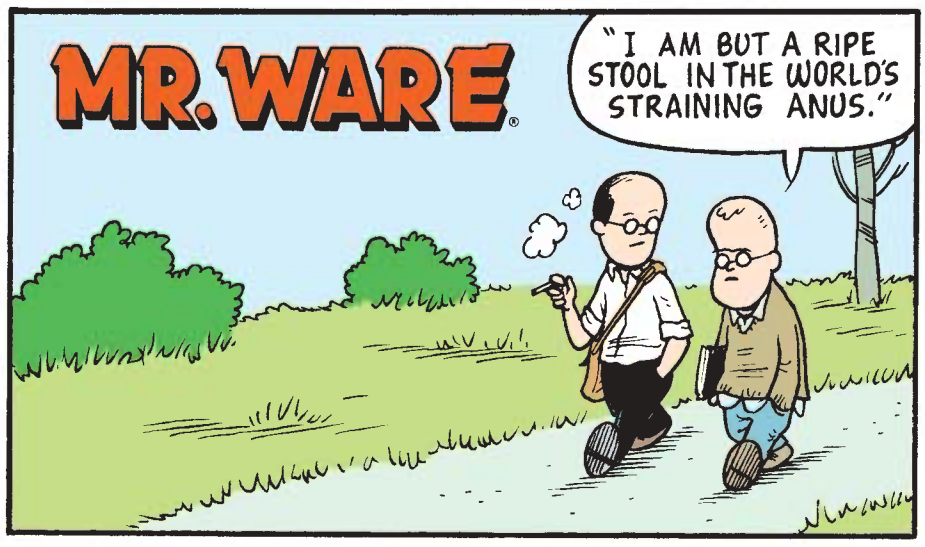
— ISSUE ONE. —
32 pages of florid and confused writing, spiked liberally with Mr. Clowes's own insight into the fallen world of EIGHTBALL. Order your copy of this glossy publication and join the elect.

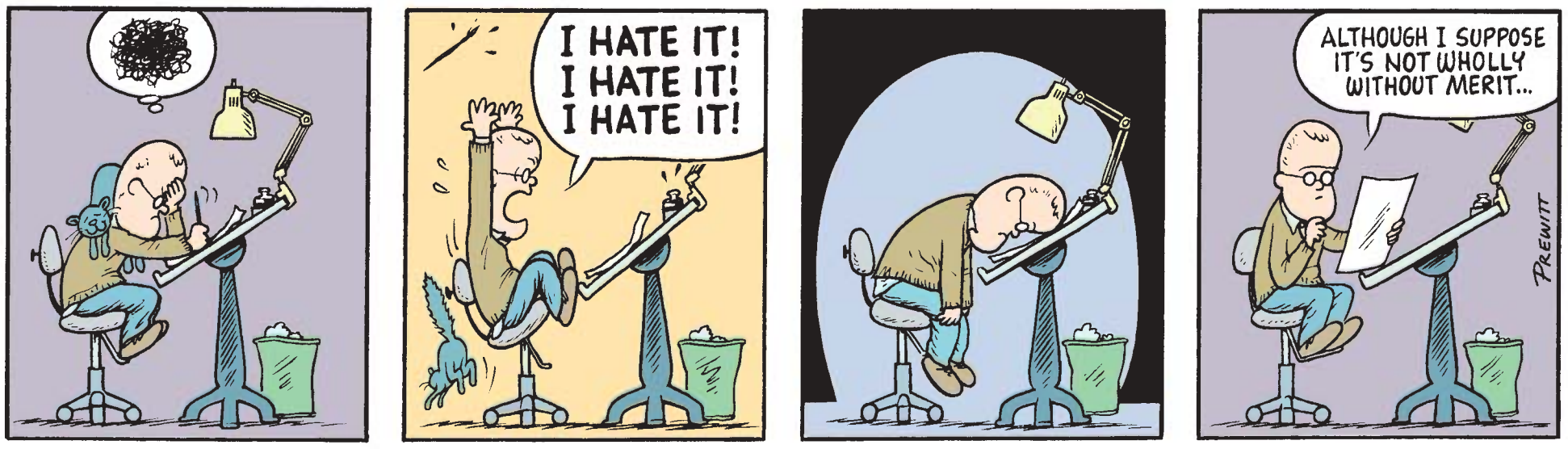
— ISSUE TWO. —
An inexplicably popular, expensive, 68-page romp through the fallen world of mainstream superhero cartoonist Jack T. Chick. A few copies of the red "female" printing remain. Hundreds of copies of the blue "male" printing are stacked in my "living" room. Order both, place them side by side, and wait in vain for them to mate.

The Imp COMICS

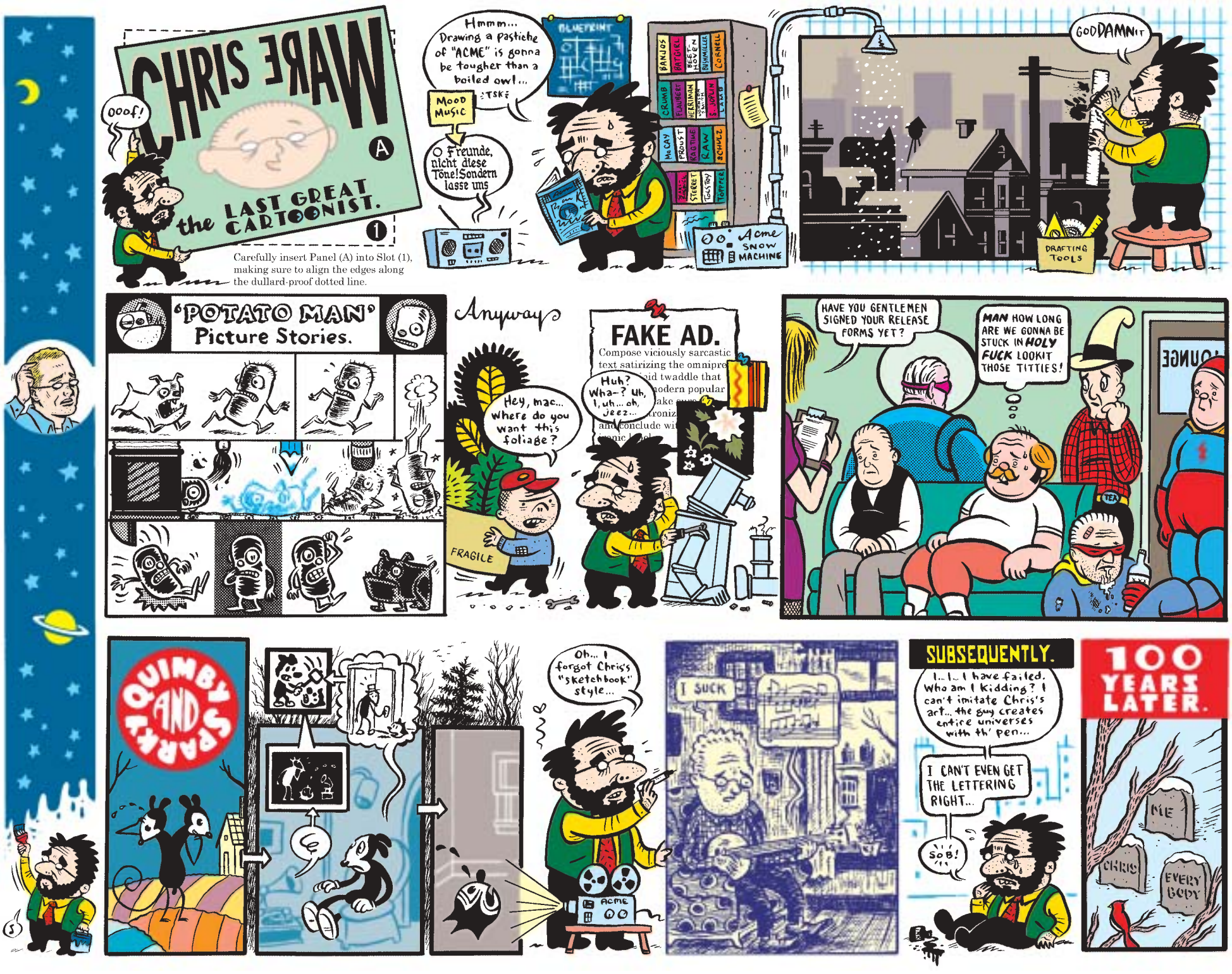
A Lot of Fun to Be Had.

MR. WARE





CHRIS WARE

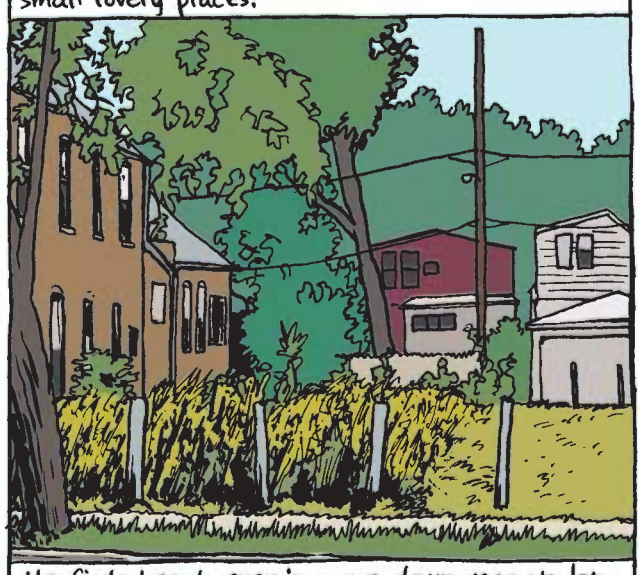


His readers in all other parts of the world may not realize it, but, to a Chicagoan, Chris Ware's work reads like a love poem to the city he has adopted. Before Chicago, he drew miniature cats and mice in tiny dark rooms, underground, or seemingly so. Since his arrival, there have opened vistas, space, and promise.

I sometimes get frustrated with Chris for creating a world so hermetically hopeless. But then there's that promise, that love, that shines through the depression — not for people — Jimmy Corrigan should be so lucky — but for a place. A grand and shining, majestic city.

Even while his characters continue to stumble and fail, there is all that — *background* — to contend with.

And in the shadow of the regal, sometimes chilly beauty of the grand buildings of the city, Chris shows us what he has found, the secrets, the small lovely places.



He finds beauty even in a run-down vacant lot, a broken fence, a garage.

And even if they only appear in the background of Jimmy Corrigan's bitter life, they still give me the sense that, if Jimmy only paid attention, he would have so much more at his disposal.

The Chris Ware EXPERIENCE

by TERRY LABAN ©98

"Y'KNOW, I NEVER SHOULD'VE AGREED TO DO THIS. I MEAN, WHAT THE FUCK DO I HAVE TO SAY ABOUT CHRIS WARE?"

ALL ITEMS ACTUALLY SEEN BY MYSELF!