

Ennui, Elves, and Edward Gorey: Alternative Comic Books

There are three questions that a reasonable person would probably ask upon coming into my room and seeing how much of my bookshelf space (very valuable real estate in general) is taken up by books with pictures in them: What are alternative comics? Why do you care? And why do you have so many of them? The best answer to all of these is probably “I’m not sure, although I’ve spent way too much time thinking about it.” But I’ll try.

The most frustrating thing about my obsession with alternative comics is that I don’t really know how it started. I know that one day my father finally decided that I was old enough to read the *Elfquest* books that had been languishing in the basement, and I know that soon after that I started eating my way through my library’s comic book section about as randomly as was possible. I know that I was around fifteen when this happened, and I also know that my discovery of comics was closely entwined with me learning how to navigate New York City by myself. New York has a lot of wonderful comic book stores, and some of them—Desert Island and Bergen Street Comics—had opened at around the same time I’d discovered that there were comics outside of Superman and Sazae-san. At first, exploring comics was an excuse to explore the city—but soon that was reversed. I loved comics. I loved the over-the-top fantasy world of *Elfquest*, and I loved the perfectly designed heartbreak boxes of Chris Ware. But I still didn’t know why.

I used to think that what drew me to comics was the combination of words and pictures, and that the synthesis of these two ways of looking at the world could bring forward ideas and sensations that neither could do alone, just because of what elements were allowed to mix together. This still makes sense to me, but not all comics have words in them. (Part of me wonders if it’s possible to have a comic without pictures.) So it must be something else that makes comics special.

I think I finally figured out what it was this summer, when I was reading the introduction to Eva Brann’s *Homeric Moments*. In it, she makes a distinction between *moments* and *events* as things that can be dealt with in stories. Good comics are concerned with overall ambiance, but are concerned most of all with particular *moments*, instead of events. Moments are strung together to make events, but the way that you look at them is different. A moment is something still, and because of that a moment is able to capture certain things, to “catch this fluidity which is human life and [...] focus a light on it and [...] stop it long enough for people to be able to see it.”¹ Events are important, but, for me at least, it’s single moments, where you can stop and look around and understand what the moment means when it’s floating in the feeling of the rest of the story, that hit me hardest. This is what comics are built to do.

Actually collecting alternative comics is a strange project. The field is so broad and expanding so rapidly that it’s hard to know what exactly what you should own beyond a few indispensables. Everything that isn’t a superhero comic or manga is basically “alternative”, with some wiggle room for comics put out by smaller imprints of DC and Marvel, like Vertigo and Image. Even though the definition is broad, it’s still a niche world that’s filled with even smaller niches. (Some niches/types of comics include: art comics that are abstract to the point of incomprehensibility, confessional autobiographies, journalistic exposés, dystopias and fantasy worlds, surrealist dream sequences,

1 (William Faulkner’s talk at UVA, 1958)

accounts of contemporary life, borderline pornography, webcomics of all stripes, and stuff that's just impossible to categorize.) People tend to only pay attention to a few parts of the alt-comics world—even websites that focus on alternative comics.

To add to the confusion, the alt-comics world has been growing incredibly fast even since I started paying attention to it five years ago. Comics festivals, publishing companies, and stores have been popping up all over the country over the past few years (the first Chicago festival was in 2012), which must mean that more and more people are being sucked in. However, this doesn't mean that the line between people who pay attention to alternative comics and people who don't has gotten any thinner. A lot of the people who are involved with alternative comics are the people who make them—when I go to comic festivals, I'm one of the only people who doesn't bring anything to trade or sell. (I'm a bad artist.) It's actually unusual to be into alt-comics while being on the outside of the community. I'm not really sure what's going on even when I'm able to keep up with everything that's going on, but I'm not sure that's a bad. Having an outsider's perspective allows me to curate—to figure out what it is I like and how it links to the other things I like, without the pressure of needing to answer to what everyone else says is good.

The books I buy come from all sorts of different places. Some of them are put out by big publishing companies (like Alison Bechdel's books, or *Asterios Polyp*), and I can just pick them up at a Barnes and Noble. Others, like the self-published ones, are difficult to find. *Quimby's*, in Wicker Park, has an excellent supply of tiny comics, but *Quimby's* has to curate, too. Sometimes I have to wait to go to a comic festival to find a comic, and sometimes I have to go through the artist's website. But the chase is part of the fun. Curating my collection has more to do with choosing what I don't want than with figuring out what I do, because there's just so much out there that I'm not yet aware of. Usually, I don't like comics that are so abstract that they stop telling a story, comics that feel too pretentious and trapped in themselves (“pretentious comic” isn't actually an oxymoron), or comics that are badly drawn. I know love fantasy comics, comics that take apart real-world experiences and try to understand them (Nate Powell's comics and *Skim* are good examples of this), character-driven comics (like *Love and Rockets* and *Dykes to Watch Out For*), and comics with a wacky and occasionally depraved sense of humor (*Asterix*, *The Mourning Star*, *Akiko*), but that's in no way limiting or final. I want my collection to be a hoard of wonderful things, but a hoard that's as open to new directions as the medium itself. I know that I like what I own, but I don't know what I'll find next. That's the most exciting thing of all.

With that said, though, there are a few comics on my to-acquire list. Here are some of them:

--More from the world of underground comix (the guys who started it all.) This includes R. Crumb, Art Spiegelman, Kim Deitch, Justin Green, Phoebe Gloeckner, Harvey Pekar (who didn't draw), and many others. A lot of these people came to UChicago's Comics Conference last spring.

-French comics (*Heavy Metal* (a French alt-comics magazine), books by Moebius, Lewis Trondheim, and other important artists.)

-Comics by Jason. He's a Norwegian cartoonist who basically does film noir as comics. His work is surprisingly funny and beautifully designed.

-All of *Bone*, by Jeff Smith. The ultimate all-ages fantasy adventure.

-*Fun Home*, by Alison Bechdel. I have *Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Are You My Mother*, but not her most famous book.

-All of *Love and Rockets*. (See bibliography.)

-All of *Krazy Kat*, by George Herriman (I haven't read nearly enough *Krazy Kat*, but it's one of the best

examples of what good comics can do.)

-Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, which I've yet to read.

-Books from Koyama Press. This is a relatively new Brooklyn publishing company that puts out amazingly cool things. Lots of the people published by Koyama Press are the most important new artists in the field (Michael DeForge is the best example).

Annotated Bibliography

(This is not a complete list.)

Barry, Lynda, ed. *The Best American Comics 2008*. Boston, 2008. Houghton Mifflin. Like new.

Barry, Lynda. *What It Is*. Montreal, 2001. Drawn And Quarterly. Very-good (well-loved.)
[This book is part collage, part writing manual, part memoir, and all awesome. It's full of ideas about what an "image" is, and what that means/how we understand them. It fits in incredibly well with my musings about what stories are and how they work, and that connection has helped me to figure out how to think about comics in general. It's also inspiring while still somehow being down-to-earth and no-nonsense, which is perfect.]

Bechdel, Alison. *Are You My Mother?* Boston, 2012. Houghton Mifflin. Like new--autographed and personalized.

Bechdel, Alison. *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*. Boston, 2008. Houghton Mifflin. Very good.

Bell, Gabrielle. *Lucky: Volume Two, Number One*. Montreal, 2007. Drawn and Quarterly. Like new. [I bought this from Bell at a comic festival in Brooklyn, and she drew a portrait of me in it. It looks just like me!]

Brideau, Neil. *The Plot #1: A Monster in the Forbidden Forest!* Chicago, 2011. Self-published. Good, except for tiny tear on bottom cover. Hand-bound with blue embroidery thread. (mini-comic)

Brideau, Neil. *The Plot #2: Your Curiosity Will Get You Killed!* Chicago, 2012. Self-published. Excellent. Hand-bound with gold embroidery thread. (mini-comic)

Brunetti, Ivan *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories: Volumes 1 and 2*. New Haven, 2006 and 2008. Very good.

Brunetti, Ivan. *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice*. New Haven, 2011. Yale University Press. Like new--autographed.

Brunetti, Ivan. *Schizo No. 4*. Seattle, 2006. Fantagraphics Books. Very good—some shelf wear on bottom pages.

Burns, Charles, ed. Barry, Lynda, ed. *The Best American Comics 2009*. Boston, 2009. Houghton

Mifflin. Like new.

Burns, Charles. One original panel from *X-ed Out*. 2010.

[I bought a weird, purple, wordless French version of *X-Ed Out* from Charles Burns at the 2010 Brooklyn Comics and Graphics Festival. I gave it to someone as a gift, but I did get to keep the signed panel art he was giving out with every purchase. There's a label on it that says something to the effect of "you can do whatever you want with this, but if you sell it, I will personally make sure you spend eternity in hell".]

Clowes, Daniel. *Ghost World*. Seattle, 1997. Fantagraphics Books. Very good.

Collardey, Domitille. *What Had Happened Was...#1* and *#2*. Brooklyn, 2009 and 2010. Like new (both autographed—issue 1 in gray manila folder with custom stamp design)

Crilley, Mark. *Akiko: Flights of Fancy--The High-Flying Expanded Edition*. Unadilla, New York, 2007. Sirius. Very good.

Crilley, Mark. *Akiko Volume One* and *Volume Two*. Unadilla, New York, 2001. Sirius. Very good.

Daly, Joe. *Dungeon Quest: Book One*. Seattle, 2010. Fantagraphics Books. Very good--slight bending on cover corners, but nothing serious.

Desert Island Comics, publisher/editor. *Smoke Signal: Issues 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8* (double issue). Brooklyn, New York, 2009-2011. All good (with center fold maintained). 6 is slightly folded.

[Smoke Signal is a free newspaper put out by Desert Island, an alternative-comic store in Brooklyn. Desert Island is also responsible for the Brooklyn Comics and Graphics Festival, which is becoming a respected institution on the alt-comics festival circuit. It was one of the first places I went to when I started going into the city by myself, and Smoke Signal allows a lot of up-and-coming (and already established) artists to put their work out there for people who are just starting to explore it.]

Ellsworth, Theo. *Capacity*. Jackson Heights, 2008. Secret Acres. Good--some rippling on top pages (water wear?)

[Theo Ellsworth basically makes up worlds and goes into them as deeply as possible. His work is almost impossibly detailed, but it's also filled with excitement about the act of figuring out what exactly it is that's being explored. I love his stuff.]

Ellsworth, Theo. *The Understanding Monster*. Portland, 2012. Secret Acres. Like new, autographed with small drawing of man in diving helmet. Comes with cut-out paper doll of small, hairy creature.

Ford, Christopher. *Stickman Odyssey: An Epic Doodle*, Book One and Book Two. New York, 2011 and 2012. Philomel Books. Like new.

Gerard, Shannon. *Hung 2&3, and Hipster Bingo*. 2006-2007. Self-published. Good condition—collected in brown bag with illustration on front. Top of bag is slightly worn from shelf, but is otherwise fine. Bag contains two comics and a "hipster bingo" board.

Gorey, Edward. *Amphigorey Also*. Boston, 1993. Mariner. Very good.

[Whether or not Edward Gorey counts as comics is an open question. He plays around with pictures and words in a non-traditional way, and “comics” fits what he does better than anything else does. The stories he writes range from the slightly creepy and melancholy to the completely incomprehensible, and sometimes feel like they’ve been imported from an alternate version of Victorian England (or something close to that.) The internal-logic-amidst-complete-oddness that Gorey pulls off so well is something that a lot of alternative and indie comics try to do, too.]

Gorey, Edward. *Amphigorey: Fifteen Books*. New York, 1980. G.P. Putnam’s Sons. Very good.

Gosciny, Rene, and Albert Uderzo. *Asterix La Galere D’Obelix*. 1996, Paris. Albert Rene. Very good.

Gosciny, Rene, and Albert Uderzo. *Asterix Omnibus: Books 4, 5, and 6*. London, 2011. Orion Books. Like new.

Hasegawa, Machiko. *The Wonderful World of Sazae-san, Vol. 1*. New York, 1997. Good condition. Some creases on spine cover.

Hernandez, Gilbert, and Jaime Hernandez. *Love and Rockets: Issue 16*. Seattle, probably circa 1986. Fantagraphics Books. Like new.

Hernandez, Gilbert, and Jaime Hernandez. *Love and Rockets: New Stories #4*. Seattle, 2011. Fantagraphics Books.

Hernandez, Gilbert, and Jaime Hernandez. *The Love and Rockets Library, Vol. 1*. (Includes six softcover volumes that collect Jaime and Gilbert’s stories separately (three for each), and a seventh that includes smaller stories by Gilbert, Jaime, and their brother Mario.) Seattle, 2007. Fantagraphics Books. Like new.

[*Love and Rockets* is one of the most important (and one of the best) alternative comics out there. It celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2012 to almost universal acclaim, and it’s still fantastic. It’s written by two brothers (Los Bros Hernandez), who tell parallel stories published together in the same comic. Jaime’s stories are about a group of punk Hispanic teenagers (and later not-that-punk adults) growing up in Los Angeles. Gilbert’s stories are about a group of people living in a tiny Latin American village called Palomar. They’re both great for different reasons (Jaime’s art is sleek and his characterization is painfully good, and Gilbert’s stuff can kind of be like a family saga that takes place in a nightmare), and people have been arguing about who’s better since the comics started getting attention. It doesn’t matter (I like Gilbert’s earlier stuff better and Jaime’s later stuff better), because they’re both great. A must-read for anyone who wants to know what’s up with alternative comics.]

Horrocks, Dylan. *Hicksville*. Montreal, 2010. Drawn and Quarterly. Good, aside from slight bend in front cover.

[*Hicksville* is about a tiny town in New Zealand whose inhabitants are all obsessed with comics. One of the characters writes a comic that appears as part of the story. It’s meta and wonderful.]

Hooyman, Kevin. *The First Sign of Anything*. Mattoon, IL, 2012. Self-published. Good--a small bit of bend on the bottom right corners. Autographed.

Klenell, Johannes. *From The Shadow of the Northern Lights, Vol. 2*. Marietta, GA, 2010. Top Shelf Publishing. Very good.
[Anthology of Swedish comics.]

Lutes, Jason. *Berlin: Volumes 1 and 2*. Montreal, 2001, 2008, 2009. Drawn and Quarterly. Like new.

Maarup, Steffen P., ed. *From Wonderland with Love: Danish Comics in the Third Millenium*. Seattle, 2009. Fantagraphics Books. Very good.

Mazzucchelli, David. *Asterios Polyp*. New York, 2009. Pantheon. Very good, aside from a few smudges on the (white) cover.

McNeil, Carla Speed. *Finder: Sin-Eater*. Annapolis, 2007. Lightspeed Press (self-published.) Like new.
[Carla Speed McNeil has been self-publishing *Finder* since 1996, and it's not given nearly enough attention. I still haven't finished reading this volume, because the worldbuilding is so dense and requires so much time. (Reading McNeil's extensive footnotes is essential for understanding what's going on, and I'm not sure if that's always a good thing.) But I love the world of *Finder*--which is too complicated to explain in this short footnote--and I'll keep exploring.]

McNeil, Carla Speed. *Finder: Talisman*. Annapolis, 2012. Lightspeed Press (self-published). Like new, autographed.

McSweeney's. *McSweeney's Issue 33: The San Fransisco Panorama*. San Fransisco, 2009. Good (slightly crumpled--printed on thin paper)

[The 33rd issue of *McSweeney's* was a huge, Sunday-sized newspaper that included a full-color comics section. Alison Bechdel, Chris Ware, Daniel Clowes, and others were included.]

Medley, Linda. *Castle Waiting: Volumes 1 and 2, Issues 16, 17, 18*. Seattle, 2006, 2010, 2012. Very good--first volume has some wear on binding.

[I love *Castle Waiting* so, so, so much. It's a story about stories, it's a fairy tale that people who hate fantasy can enjoy, and it's hugely intelligent. It centers around an ancient castle that used to be home to a Sleeping Beauty-type character, but now acts as a safe haven for a motley crew of fairy tale outcasts. There aren't many characters directly pulled from real fairy tales, but there are lots of references for people looking for them. But the real point of the story is fleshing out all of the characters who live in the castle. It looks like the series is going to be over far before everyone gets explored to my satisfaction, but I'm still happy with what we've got--it's just so impossibly good. Bearded nuns and haunted libraries--need I say more?]

Powell, Nate. *Any Empire*. Marietta, GA, 2011. Top Shelf Publishing. Like new.

[Nate Powell tends to fly under the radar, even though he's been putting out comics for a long time. He tells a lot of stories that have to do with the almost surreal pain of growing up, and they're often disturbing and all-too-relatable. Plus, his art is beautiful--sketchy black and white.]

Powell, Nate. *Please Release*. Marietta, GA, 2006. Top Shelf Publishing. Very good.

Powell, Nate. *Sounds of Your Name*. Portland, OR, 2006-2007. Microcosm Publishing. Like new, autographed.

Powell, Nate. *Swallow Me Whole*. Marietta, GA, 2008. Top Shelf Publishing. Very good.

Reed, MK, and Jonathan Hill. *Americus*. New York, 2011. First Second. Like new.

Reed, MK, and Jonathan Hill. *The Lorian Gendarme Guidebook for Adventuring Standards*. 2011-2012. Self-published. Good--some bend by stapled parts. Autographed (inscription is on a mock library plate. It has my name, the year and place issued (2012, Small Press Expo), and says "Good adventuring to you!" below that.)

Sally, Zak. *Like A Dog*. Seattle, 2009. Fantagraphics Books. Like new.

Sally, Zak. *Sammy The Mouse I*. Seattle, 2007. Ignatz Collection: Fantagraphics Books and Coconino Press. Like new.

Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York, 2003. Pantheon. Good condition for most part—list of chapters in ballpoint pen written in inside front cover. (Used copy)

Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*. New York, 2004. Pantheon. Used book, but like new.

Spiegelman, Art, and Bill Griffith. *Arcade: Issues 1, 3-7*. Berkley, 1975-1976. Print Mint. Very good condition--kept in a manila bubble folder.

[*Arcade* was one of the big underground comix magazines put out/made by Art Spiegelman, R. Crumb, Kim Deitch, and others. (Some of the others were *Raw*, *Zap!*, *Weirdo*, and the French *Heavy Metal*, all of which I'd like to own someday.) My grandfather bought these when they came out, and gave them to me when my obsession with comics started to become undeniable and unavoidable.]

Strzepek, Kazimir. *The Mourning Star*, Vols 1 and 2. 2006, 2009, Jersey City, NJ. Bodega Distribution. Okay--cover has come off the binding on the back side of Vol. 1, and is starting to do the same on the front of Vol. 2.

[I'm not sure if these books are falling apart because they were made badly or because I've read them so many times. They're about an alien society dealing with the aftermath of a comet collision, and are hilarious, grotesque, and beautiful. The books are small--maybe about a handspan--and the art was all drawn at that size. It would be impressive art even without that (intricate and atmospheric, and done just with black and white), but it makes these books twice as cool.]

Tamaki, Mariko, and Jillian Tamaki. *Skim*. Toronto, 2008. Groundwood Books. Very good.

Thurber, Matthew. *1-800-MICE*. Brooklyn, NY, 2011. PictureBox. Very good, aside from a small tea stain on the front cover.

[*1-800-MICE* is one of the weirdest comics I own. It's interesting because it's weird in ways that are typical to weird indie comics--the story is surreal and occasionally obscene, and on the surface it makes little to no sense. But once you start reading it closely, its internal logic creeps up on you, and by the end of the book, you're a member of its world.

Ware, Chris. *Building Stories*. Seattle, 2012. Fantagraphics Books. Very good--some of the smaller booklets are starting to show wear.

Ware, Chris. *Lint (Acme Novelty Library #20)*. Seattle, 2010. Fantagraphics Books. Like new--autographed with personalized inscription.

[Chris Ware is one of my favorite cartoonists, because of the way he plays with what comics can look like and do. I once read an article about him that noted how different his cartooning style is from his actual "drawing" (which are beautiful, lifelike sketches). To paraphrase, Ware says that he does this because cartooning isn't about art, really; it's about symbols and indicating ideas through the way those symbols interact with each other. I think this is often true, and Ware pulls it off beautifully, achingly well. I got to meet him at Bethesda's Small Press Expo in 2012, and he was kinder than I'd thought possible.]

Ware, Chris, ed. *McSweeney's Issue 13*. San Francisco, 2004. Very good (slightly crumpled from unfolding cover and putting it back on.)

[The 13th issue of McSweeney's (now out of print) is an anthology of essential alternative comics similar to the *Best American Comics* series and to the *Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories*. I actually think it's better than the *Best American* stuff, and maybe the *Anthology*, too--it has a better collection of artists and organizes them in a more interesting way. Out of all the big anthologies I own, it's the one I find myself going back to most.]

Watterson, Bill. *Honk Magazine #2: Calvin and Hobbes Interview*. Seattle, 1987. Very good.

[All of the Calvin and Hobbes books in my house are communal, but I am the single proud owner of this copy of *Honk*. It has one of the only ever published interviews with Bill Watterson, and an adorable Calvin and Hobbes illustration on the cover.]

Wishnia, Leah, ed. *Happiness Comix: Issue 2*. New York, 2012. Self-published. Good--slightly bent on the back top corner, and the front is slightly wrinkled. (Came with stickers and illustrated envelope.)

Zacchilli, Mickey. *Rav 6*. Providence, RI, 2012. Self-published. Very good, autographed.

[I picked this up at the Small Press Expo because it had been nominated for one of the festival's Ignatz awards. It's in the middle of an ongoing story, and the art is scribbly and messy, so I was scared that I was buying something that I'd flip through once and never return to again. I was very wrong--somehow, even though I had no idea what the context of the story was, I was able to follow who was doing what and to construct a story around it. The weird accessibility turned *Rav 6* into a much friendlier type of adventure, and it's a place I want to figure out how to navigate now that I know I can.]

Addendum: Comics that belong to my family but that are still very important to me (which is why I haven't bought them myself):

- Various volumes of *Asterix*, including *Asterix and the Golden Sickle*, *Asterix and the Class Act*, *Asterix and the Actress*, and *Asterix and the Falling Sky*.
- Various volumes of *Tintin*: *Tintin Vol. 1*, *Tintin Vol 5*, *The Calculus Affair*.
- Various volumes of *Calvin and Hobbes*.
- Various volumes of *Peanuts*.

-Watchmen (Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons)

-The first four volumes of *Elfquest*. [These were the first comic books I read that got me to realize how fantastic comics could be. My uncle gave them to my father soon after they first came out in the '80s, and they're beautiful--full-color with glossy pages and some extra letters and comments. *Elfquest* isn't exactly a "cool" series to like, and I'm not sure why--it might be because the story got a lot worse after the comics in Volume 4, or just because it's a fantasy story with elves and trolls and time travel. But it was formative for me--it probably couldn't have been told in any other format and still been able to retain the same combination of elements that made it special.]