Glass/Ware: New Media for Writing American Lives

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Producer/Host, *This American Life*

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Transcript of interview-format lecture presented by the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing and the Interdisciplinary Graduate Minor in Literacy & Rhetorical Studies

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Preface

At the Thirteenth Annual Colloquium sponsored by the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing on February 18, 2002, Ira Glass and Chris Ware engaged in a dialogue about their respective forms of communication. We invited the two here to tell us whether they see their work (Glass's uses of aural snippets and Ware's use of the visual in his choice of the comic genre) as "postmodern" forms of literacy. Each took real interest in this question, and Glass and Ware sparred with each other about alternative forms of literacy in front of a near-capacity crowd at the Ted Mann Concert Hall at the University of Minnesota.

Ira Glass is the award-winning host of *This American Life*, produced by WBEZ/Chicago and distributed by Public Radio International. Glass began his career in public radio in 1978 at the age of nineteen and has worked in nearly every production job at National Public Radio, including hosting *All Things Considered.* He has won awards from the National Education Association and the Education Writers Association for his reporting on schools in Chicago, and *Time Magazine* nominated him Broadcaster of the Year for 2001. Begun by Glass in 1995, *This American Life* won a Peabody in its first year for its original broadcasts of taped monologues and short audio documentaries that result in intimate representations of life in America.

Chris Ware is the award-winning comic artist and author of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* and *ACME Novelty Library*, published by Fantagraphics. Ware's comics gained national exposure after appearing in *RAW* in 1990 and 1991. Since then, his comics have appeared in a variety of publications including; *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *New City*, and *L.A. Weekly*. Ware has gained critical acclaim for his

illustrated narratives that can't accurately be characterized as exclusively comics or novels; his form approximates a “static” form of narrative filmstrip. Since 1995 Ware has won numerous comic industry awards including the Harvey, Eisner and Ignatz awards. *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* recently won the British Guardian First Book Award, the first graphic novel to win such a prestigious award since Art Spiegelman won the Pulitzer for *Maus* in 1992.

What follows is a transcription of the Ira Glass and Chris Ware interview. These two artists discussed various forms of storytelling now present in popular media and their work in particular. “One of the things that makes a radio story really effective is the fact that you can't see the people and so you can project anything into it,” Glass said. In radio, he said, “there's no visual detail, which means that, as a listener, you can…just completely invest; there's nothing stopping you.” Like exclusively text-based books, his work demands close attention from its listeners, but unlike books, radio gives its listeners the aural realities of the lives being represented. Ware, whose work relies on both visual images and text, suggested that comics need to be equally balanced between the two forms and that the craft is secondary to the story. “You don't read a book trying to get emotion out of the font that it's printed in,” according to Ware, “you read it for the story, you read for what happens in your mind, and to me comics are some sort of magic language that happens before your eyes.”

The CISW is grateful to the many departments and organizations that helped sponsor this event: College in the Schools-College of Continuing Education, The College of Liberal Arts, the Department of Art, the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, the Department of English, the Department of English Graduate

Student Organization, the Design Institute, the Humanities Institute, the Institute for New Media Studies, the Loft Literary Center, the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, the Minnesota Journalism Center at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, the Office of the Vice President for Campus Life, the Office of the Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate School, and the University of Minnesota Academic Initiative/Campus Life Initiative/Community Initiative in partnership with Coca-Cola.

The Center's Annual Colloquium and its Speaker Series contribute to its primary mission, which is to improve undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. These activities, along with faculty development workshops, conferences, publications and other outreach programs, are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all of the members of the university community. In addition, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- curricular reform through writing across the curriculum,
- characteristics of writing across the curriculum,
- connections between writing and learning in all fields,
- characteristics for writing beyond the academy,
- the effect of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing, and
- the status of writing ability during the college years.

We invite you to contact the Center about this publication or any other publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Mesut Akdere; Tom Sebanc; Sara Berrey; and Erin Harley, Editors
November, 2002

Introductions

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Good evening, and welcome to the Annual Colloquium sponsored by the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing. My name is Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, and I'm Director of the Center, a professor of English, and learning about new media.

The mission of our Center is to improve writing at the University of Minnesota and to sponsor scholarly activities that promote a rich climate for academic literacy. We're in for some richness tonight. For those of you who saw this title in some alternative medium and thought glass/ware might be an episode of the *Antiques Road Show*, I want to tell you that your in the wrong place, but please stay and you won't be disappointed.

Tonight we present two inspiring talents: Ira Glass, host of *This American Life*; and Chris Ware, New Yorker comic artist and illustrator/author of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. They'll engage each other in a conversation about their work and the successes they've had in contributing to new forms of public discourse.

As we were planning this event, we were struck by comments both have made about the inadequacies of ordinary language, familiar forms of journalism, and traditional art forms to promote reforms of various sorts in America. Both have found unique combinations of the written and spoken word, sound and image to tell their powerful stories about American life – from efforts at school reform to religion to politics, to very private matters about identity.

We have to thank our many sponsors who've made this event possible: The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing, as I've mentioned; College in the Schools and

Continuing Education; the College of Liberal Arts; the Departments of Art, Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, and English, as well as the English Graduate Student Organization; the Humanities Institute; the Institute of New Media Studies; the Loft Literary Center; the Minneapolis College of Art and Design; the Minnesota Journalism Center at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication; the Design Institute; the Office of the Vice President for Campus Life; the Office of the Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate School; and the University of Minnesota Academic/Campus Life/Community Initiative in Partnership with Coca-Cola.

[audience laughter]

So, guess what you'll have after the event! I read you that long list just because I think it's indicative of the wide range of people who are interested in our two speakers tonight. Because planning an event like this is such a major endeavor, I'd really like to extend the gratitude of all of us to Ann Browning, Assistant Director of our Center, for all her hard work orchestrating this event. And Ann would like to add a few words: Ann Browning.

Ann Browning: Thank you, everyone. Thanks, everyone for coming—it's just so nice to come in here and see a crowd. Thanks to Lilly for being an ongoing source of inspiration and mentorship for the Center. Thanks to Pamela Flash, who can give a big wave, for having the idea of bringing Ira in the first place. Thanks to Ira for having the idea of bringing Chris Ware. Susan Leem and super intern Tom Sebanc for assistance with PR and a myriad of tasks I threw at you daily. Terri Klegin, Mesut Akdere, Erin Harley, Sara Berrey, Allison Hartfiel for picking up the ball, and Muriel Thompson for support. Thank you very much.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Immediately after the interview tonight, we'll invite questions from you. We'll do this in a somewhat organized way. So, you should have received an index card as you entered the auditorium, and what we'd like to ask you to do is to write your questions on these index cards and turn them into the ushers as they circulate after the interview. If you don't have a card, any kind of paper will do, but the ushers will be circulating with note cards if you'd like one. Pamela Flash, who's going to wave her hand again, will be gathering these, and we will get to as many of them as possible, so watch for Pamela.

When we finish with questions and answers, we invite you to join us for a reception in the lobby where Ira Glass and Chris Ware will be signing books and a CD or two, which are available for purchase.

And now it's my pleasure to introduce Nora Paul, the director of the Institute for New Media Studies, who will introduce Ira Glass. Nora Paul and her colleagues are in the forefront of imagining new forms of communication here at the University of Minnesota.

[audience applause]

Nora Paul: Thank you, Lillian, and good evening, everybody. I'd like to see a quick show of hands. How many of you are *This American Life* fans? Yay! Ok, me too, and we have Ira Glass to thank for it. Ira started *This American Life* back in 1995 at WBEZ in Chicago. Within a year it was distributed nationally and won the prestigious Peabody Award. In issuing the award, the Peabody judges did a great job of capturing the essence of *This American Life*'s compelling formula. They said, "*This American Life* juxtaposes fictional and non-fictional elements to create a captivating collage which takes full advantage of the creative powers of the sound medium." Now, Ira's had years of public

radio experience in which to hone these creative powers. From his professional debut in 1977 where he was performing as R2-D2 on a local radio show, he went on to become an intern at the Washington Headquarters for National Public Radio the next year. In the subsequent twenty-four years, he graduated with a degree in semiotics from Brown University and then went on to work on virtually every NPR network news program, and perform virtually every kind of production job—from tape cutter, newscast writer, reporter, editor, and producer.

He's not only *This American Life's* creative and innovative producer and host—he modestly refers to himself as just the front man. He's also a solid and honored journalist. He was named one of the Young Journalists of the Year by the Livingston Foundation back in 1988, and he's won awards from the National Education Association and the Education Writer's Association for his reporting on schools for *All Things Considered*. He was honored by the National Association of Black Journalists in 1991 for a series he and John Matisonn did comparing race relations in South Africa with those in the United States. And just last year *Time Magazine* named him America's best radio host. Ira is all about storytelling, but mostly he's about getting others to tell their stories. Tonight we'll get to see Ira do his stuff live, in person, with his face visible, interviewing Chris Ware, getting him to tell us his story. I'm really looking forward to it. Thank you.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Dean Mary McDunn had hoped to be here from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, but she has strep throat and can't talk, so she has sent her very capable colleague, Frenchy Lunning, who is a professor at MCAD—as we know it locally. And MCAD, to those of you who may not know, is a hotbed of comic

books, graphic design, and non-verbal communication. So Frenchy will tell us a bit about Chris Ware's background.

Frechy Lunning: Chris Ware is an exemplary comic book writer and artist, whose work has broken through traditional comic book storytelling to create a unique reading experience. He's created compelling work in his *ACME Novelty Library* series, but the work he's most identified with is *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. Jimmy's complex and poignant tale is told in an urban landscape of beautifully drawn buildings, found in the middle-class neighborhoods of the Midwest. It is a landscape of vacancy and darkened windows, empty streets and apartment buildings. His experience of everyday life accentuates those waiting room moments of loneliness and isolation, while surrounded by the familiar human community sitting around him. His comic book narrative is surrounded by puzzles, definitions, and 3-D cutouts that expand his storytelling tools to the margin of pulp traditions. My personal favorites are the pastiche ads for "Misery" and "Tears of Joy" and "Blinded by Love" next to ads for the "National School of the Presidency" in the back of several works that seem to display the cultural expectations and desires that surround Jimmy Corrigan. They recall those wonderfully tacky invitations found in pulp periodicals to participate in the play of self-improvement and hope, as well as the deliciously funny set of instructions to build your own cathead. Chris Ware has thrilled those of us who study and love the comic book medium, and we anxiously wait whatever he comes up with. Thank you.

[audience applause]

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Enough already, this is what we came for! Let's give a warm Minnesota welcome to Ira Glass and Chris Ware! [audience applause]

Ira Glass/Chris Ware

New Media for Writing American Lives

[Transcript]

[audience applause as Ira Glass and Chris Ware walk onstage]

Ira Glass: I was hoping they were going to stay as a kind of panel of judges, and after every question there would be numbers and debates in the audience; you would reveal that you are a Canadian, and…

Don't they look different than what we thought?

[audience laughter]

Chris Ware: Oh, yeah. Oh, boy.

Ira Glass: We were told that the organization that brought us here, its mission is to improve undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota so if there are any students from other schools, please don't follow any of our advice.

So Chris, um…

Chris Ware: We're going to start now? All right…

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Chris, why don't we start by having you—do you want to talk about how you ended up as a cartoonist? Was it something that you wanted to do as a kid, reading cartoons?

Chris Ware: Well, I guess, I should explain this… I have to… there's this sort of neurosis that I have. I've only talked in front of a group of people a few times, and I actually didn't graduate from the Art Institute of Chicago with my MFA because I had to

give an oral report. And, thus, I never got the credits to graduate. It's—for somebody who sits at home at a table all day long, doing this is sort of torturous. But fortunately I can only see the first couple of rows here, so I… I'm going to apologize in advance for everything that I may say and for the fact that I'm… not a terribly articulate person, but anyway…

Ira Glass: Sometimes when I've been trying to explain to people who haven't met you, Chris, what it's like, that you're like, I say, "Well, you know the clerk in *High Fidelity*?

[audience laughter]

The really shy one?" I'd say, "Sort of like that, but more so." And then I found out that you met Jack Black.

Chris Ware: Right, but you're not talking about him though, right?

Ira Glass: And that you actually, like, actually stood next to him, so it was like this scene in my head actually happening in live person.

Chris Ware: Yeah. Anyway, OK.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: One of the things that we were curious about is how many people here would actually – came knowing Chris's work?

[audience applause]

Chris Ware: Wow. All right, well. That's a surprise. Well, that's good.

Ira Glass: You might want to pull the mic a little closer.

Chris Ware: Oh, sorry. All right. All right, well, that's ah, about five minutes now. OK, so you had a question that I avoided already. What was it?

[pause in dialogue]

Ira Glass: Um…did you want to do cartoons when you were a kid?

Chris Ware: I'm sorry.

Ira Glass: …reading cartoons, 'cause, you know, there are a lot of things that one thinks one might do as a kid, you know. Did you, did you want to do cartoons?

Chris Ware: Well, as a kid I read a lot of superhero comics, I actually didn't read them… I, ah—mostly I just looked at the pictures of the muscle-y men and tried to copy them figuring that I had better prepare myself for the day that I became that sort of…

[Ware laughter]

Didn't really happen, so. Most of the comics that I read as a kid were like *Peanuts*. My grandfather was a managing editor of a newspaper in Omaha, Nebraska, where I grew up, and so he got a lot of free syndicated comic strip collections and I remember reading *Peanuts* a lot because there were characters in those, in *Peanuts*, that I actually cared about, and seemed like genuine friends, or something like that, for a kid that didn't, all the time, you know, wasn't necessarily well-versed in the terms of basketball and gym class. Was much more fun to read that. I did actually—I guess I did grow up wanting to draw comics—for what reason; I'm not exactly sure, so um…

Ira Glass: Did you think you would do it as a job, or were you just drawing comics?

Chris Ware: I didn't think I'd ever do it as a job, I guess I thought that I would just do it, for some reason, I, I wasn't thinking, obviously. I mean, there wasn't any plan involved, or anything, so. I actually went to college thinking I would do it, God knows why, but….

Ira Glass: Um. You went to the Art Institute of Chicago for grad school…

Chris Ware: Right.

Ira Glass: …and um—were they very supportive of the idea of somebody doing comic art?

Chris Ware: Not really. Actually, it was a, was not a very, very supportive environment…entirely, there were a couple of teachers that were very good. One was a guy named Richard Keane; another guy, Bob Loescher. There were a couple of incidents… how many people are in art school here, at the school? A smattering of victims.

[audience laughter]

Every—at the end of every semester in graduate school, you have to go through this thing called a critique, where, sort of…a passel of teachers or instructors get together and just say whatever they feel like about what you've been doing all semester. And, you know you try to pour your heart into something, or do something genuine and human and they'll just, they'll sit, I… I've had teachers fall asleep when you're trying to explain your artwork, and I had one instructor actually accuse me of drawing comics as a "gig." He said, "So you do this gig, and then you come here and try to make art—like, I don't get it." And then, another teacher—that same critique session—went over and looked at the strip that I was working on, which was in color separation form, which is basically every layer of printed ink color was being drawn at a separate layer on acetate. And he picked it up and held it up as if it was some sculptural object, or something, and said, "Well, this is kind of nice," you know, looking at it upside down. Trying to get the art teachers to actually read the strips was the hardest part, 'cause I don't think that, in art school at least, they were – they were ready to really read something, they just wanted to look at it.

Ira Glass: When you were an undergrad at the University of Texas at Austin, you started drawing a strip called *Potato Man*, and you told *The Comics Journal* that it was the first time that you started to really enjoy what you were doing. You said that it was the first time in your adult life where you reclaimed the feeling you had as a kid. Why I didn't care—"I didn't care why I was drawing what I was drawing"… "I didn't care why I was drawing what I was drawing, I was simply doing it."

Chris Ware: Uh-huh.

Ira Glass: Could—what was your work, what were you doing before then, and then what made that transition happen?

Chris Ware: I was just—I, I—well I could, I have slides of some very early embarrassing stuff I could show. But, essentially I was just, I was, um—maybe I should just show the slides. Would that be the most sensible thing to do?

Ira Glass: Um, sure.

Chris Ware: Wh—you think?

Ira Glass: Let's, let's do the slides.

Chris Ware: Again, I'm going to warn you, and I apologize in advance. A lot of these were slides of – this is, like, very early student work. It's—it's not good. And, on top of that, the slides are not good, so the two together do not make a pleasurable audio/visual experience. But I will go through them as quickly as possible, and uh…

Ira Glass: Before you start them, could you just talk about that transition that happened with *Potato Man*? What, what happened in that transition?

Chris Ware: Uh…a girl broke up with me. That was, that was—it's the truth. There's a sort of sense of desperation, I guess, at that point—where I felt like nothing mattered

anymore, and it seemed silly to try to invest… art, especially the art that I was doing in school, with such power, in—I don't really know how—a way to put it, it just seemed like there was just too much weight being put on art as being dangerous, or something, and I just wanted the art basically to be my friend. That sounds pathetic, but I mean—it's true.

Ira Glass: You mean, you mean, like, there's all this pressure from teachers, like when you make art, it has to be art with a capital "A"…

Chris Ware: Yeah.

Ira Glass: …in this way that made it hard to actually make any…

Chris Ware: I think, I mean I didn't realize you had to try to—try to defend your art when you went to art school, or you had to talk about it. I mean, today I went and visited a class at the University here and um, they were having a critique again, and I—the very first critique I had, (I didn't know we had to have a critique). I go into class, everything's hanging up on the wall and all of a sudden everybody's, you know, staring at you and you're in a row and you have to talk about yourself. I couldn't do it, I mean, it seemed weird. It never occurred to me that you have to do that. Of course, that's art school, right there; that's every week, basically.

Ira Glass: You were going into art more to—to actually sort of avoid people.

Chris Ware: Well, I mean if you have to—well …I—if you have to explain art, I think that it's not really very successful art, necessarily, if it doesn't—

[audience applause]

That's all the art students in here I guess. So, but here I am onstage, so what am I doing here, you know.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Well, let's see some of the slides of some of your—

Chris Ware: OK, again I'm gonna—really, if you guys want, just want me to stop just yell at me or something.

Ira Glass: Um, Jason, let's turn down the lights a bit on stage, so we can show these.

Chris Ware: [muttering to himself] Oh. Great.

[audience laughter]

OK. Like I said, as a kid, um—I um, grew up reading comics books and uh, wanted to draw super heroes, and, most of the time I really wanted to watch them on television 'cause it seemed much more real, and uh, I just copied the pictures out of the comics, like I might trace these or something. So, the only thing I really knew about art was that it was something that people didn't really do anymore—uh, I figured that all that people did now was, was like, advertising art, or whatever. I knew about Renaissance drawing and that sort of thing, so when I went to art school I started trying to draw like that. This is from my freshman year. And then I had teachers tell me, well you—that's an academic drawing, you need to—ah, so that, they're showing me people like Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, and this is the Schiele-Klimt rip-off.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: This is basically the same figure, but um, but skinnier.

Chris Ware: Yeah

[audience laughter]

Right. This was a few… weeks later, basically. And they said, "Well, you're still too tight, you need to get messy and expressive." So I thought, well, OK…

[audience laughter]

So, I got messy and expressive, so. But at the same time, I…

Ira Glass: So, this—it's sort of, this is the same figure, but just sort of blurry now.

Chris Ware: Yeah, well they were all… naked, basically, um. At the same time I was doing a wretched comic strip for the, ah, the student weekly, which I'm not going to name, but it was, um—well, I don't even want to show it anymore. But it was very derivative, sort of nonsense and very plot driven, and silly, and that's one page of it sort of set in the future, it's just…. God, it's embarrassing. Um, this is a little bit later, a terrible art school painting, and sort of, they were showing us all these new painters of the day, like David Salle and Robert Longo and people like that. I was trying to get at some sort of emotion by super-imposing figures, and that kind of stuff, and of course I always kind of put comics into it, too. And…

Ira Glass: So this picture—

[audience laughter]

So this picture is sort of a David Salle, sort of, like close-up of a face, and then two, ah, two comic book figures in the front.

Chris Ware: Yeah, just trying to put…I don't know what I was thinking.

[audience laughter]

This is a little bit later one here, so….

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Same two comic book figures…a drawing of a girl in the background, all close-upy.

Chris Ware: Sort of criminal, I should sue them…. Anyway, it's—you know, it's my fault. I didn't have to do it.

[audience laughter]

Uh, then I started—a friend of mine, I actually read *Krazy Kat* as a kid, but I didn't understand a word of it, 'cause I was a kid. A friend of mine sort of encouraged me to look at it; he was also a cartoonist for the—the school paper that I was working on. And, I really started to, to enjoy reading it, and I finally started to understand it, and uh, um, I don't know if I should try to explain what it's about, or…

Ira Glass: Yeah, explain what you liked about *Krazy Kat*.

Chris Ware: Uh, more than anything, I think it was the overall layout, use of color, the sense that these figures actually lived on the page; they seemed to actually come alive to me on the page, that they, they seemed to live in a real space, and it seemed like a deeply personal comic strip, it seemed like it was, it was, it was its own thing, it started from…. It basically, it created its own world, I don't know how else to describe it. Some of the best comics, I think, are still from the turn of the century, when the medium was still being developed as a language. And each particular artist developed that language to suit his or her own particular vision, which I don't think has really happened since the 1940's, where it's just absorbed—this sort of ready made language of, sort of, cinematic close-ups, and dissolves, and long shots and that sort of stuff. Um….

Ira Glass: When you say they're alive on the page, like how are these characters alive in this page in a way that, you know, the contemporary comic might not….

Chris Ware: As far as—I mean when I read this page, or when I look at it, the character really seems to move of its own volition, and that's partly due to the fact that it doesn't change in scale, there's no movement of what's called a "camera" back and forth. Uh…this particular page isn't a particularly good example of that because of the limited number of panels, but overall, I mean, how many of the comic pages look this beautiful? I mean, Herriman was an amazing cartoonist. And the strip was incredibly simple, it was just three characters. The same thing happened, basically, in every strip: that the Krazy Kat was deeply in love the mouse, who deeply hated Krazy Kat and every—it was this mouse's obsession to smack the cat on the head with a brick 'cause he hated the cat so much, and the cat interpreted this as a sign of affection, and then Offissa Pupp, the, the dog that comes in the fifth panel there, it's his only job to try to prevent this from happening, and that went on for about forty years or so on the pages of the…

[audience laughter]

It's a beautiful strip, it's true poetry, it's the greatest comic strip ever drawn, and I don't know if it will ever be bettered.

Uh, I don't know if anybody is familiar with *Raw* – I would think so. This is something else I started reading when I was late in high school and then in college, it was probably some of the more, most sophisticated comics ever published in the past fifty years or so. This cover is by Charles Burns, a published artist like Gary Painter, and of course Art Spiegelman edited it, and to me it really, uh, it made visible the possibility of comics as an expressive medium. Also, probably the greatest living artist of his time is Robert Crumb; this is a page from his sketchbook. He's, uh, best known for his, sort of, sex

comics, I guess for lack of a better word, which are fun to read, of course. He also keeps these amazing sketchbooks with these beautiful drawings that are just stunning, and I found them so inspiring. I found this sketchbook, a friend of mine loaned it to me and I was blown away, and uh… so, that of course, influenced my own sketchbook. This is from way back when I when I started drawing this particular character, which you're referring to as the Potato Man. This is from the late 80's or so, and it was the first character I actually cared about. So, I finally started going into the woodshop in art school, and finally got over this sort of masculine nervousness that I had about going in there and being made fun of, and made this, in the same way that, when I was a kid once I wadded up a bunch of scotch tape and drew a face on it and carried it around with me all day. I guess, I don't know why, it's just sort of like "keep a friend with you all day" or something, so.…

Ira Glass: Wait. When you were a kid you wadded up a bunch of scotch tape and drew a face on it and carried it with you all day?

Chris Ware: Yeah.

Ira Glass: What was its name?

Chris Ware: I didn't name it, I don't know. Actually, I never named this character either, but there's something about actually making the character physically that made it real to me, and I don't know.

Look at that, something you do in prison, or something.

[audience laughter]

This is one of the earliest strips I drew with that particular character. This is a strip about his dog being taken away on the train and the resulting emotional—whatever. It's pretty

simple, so. Obviously, a big *Krazy Kat* influence. Basically, I'm just a—just sort of, just rip off stuff I like, I really can't put it any other way. It's embarrassing to admit, but…

Ira Glass: Yeah.

Chris Ware: This is the later thing I built, sort of uh, that's when the relationship starts to turn bad.

[audience laughter]

And when you move it back and forth, the character pumps up and down. This is another thing I built. That's the same character sitting in a—in a little room, and there's a little tiny radio in there that plays music, and there's a deep diorama of a cityscape behind it. And this is that particular character, then I started drawing him blind…he woke up blind one day in the strip, which basically happened when this relationship ended, which is about how I felt, I guess. I guess this is really self-indulgent, but I didn't want to write a strip about, "Oh, I feel terrible." Nobody wants to read that. It's not interesting.

This is another thing I built. My painting teachers didn't really like this one too well.

Ira Glass: Wait, th—th—this is a, this is a slide of, of a figure, and um…

Chris Ware: Yeah, it's like a wooden toy.

Ira Glass: …and does it actually paint, if you push the button?

Chris Ware: Yeah, if you push the red button, he makes an abstract-impressionist painting.

[audience laughter]

It didn't go over so well. And it was part of a larger painting that I made that was a cabinet. This is a painting I did of my grandmother's house. This is when I started to get more and more self-indulgent in art school, because I realized it didn't matter who cared,

you know, it's just art. It's just all gonna, you know, be buried in a hundred years anyway, who cares. So much pressure's put on an artist to make something that seems relevant, and what's the point? I could get hit by a truck tomorrow, what difference does it make? Actually, one of my friends was hit by a truck, in art school, so….

Ira Glass: It looks like, um, you're enjoying yourself in the making of this.

Chris Ware: Um, I guess, yeah, that was, I suppose, again, it was—it's not gonna mean anything to anybody. It was just that when my grandmother moved, that was the house she lived in, and then I made all this magnetic furniture that you could actually move around.

Ira Glass: It's just so cool looking. It's real…. Now, when you would show something like this to your art schoolteachers, what would they…

Chris Ware: I don't know, I—they didn't seem real enthusiastic. I guess they were—I don't really remember, I guess they were nice about it. I don't know. But, this is a painting I did a little bit later. That's my grandfather again. Actually, a teacher did make fun of this. He asked me if it was Art Linkletter. There's no reason—he wouldn't know it was my grandfather, I wouldn't expect him to know, I was just making it for me.

Ira Glass: That looks nothing like Art Linkletter.

Chris Ware: I don't know, but… um, there's an animated film projected over to the right, there, that I drew, and uh, that's his hat, and it's really sentimental. Uh, and in the lower left hand corner, is uh, is a doll that I built based on these superhero dolls that I had when I was a kid that were—basically like little eight inch figurines. And this was a character that I made up, when I was a kid, called The Hurricane, and it's actually

dressed in what I—the costume I designed for it. This is, though, actually what I thought I looked like—

[audience laughter]

—when I wore that costume. So…

Ira Glass: You—you wore that costume?

Chris Ware: Yeah… I don't want to go into too much detail about that, so. Um, so, this is a page from the—I think the very first *Superman* comic, and um, I started to think about Superman and, when I was a kid, my obsession with superheroes, and I think the superhero's probably one of the greatest American metaphors there is. Certainly, it is a metaphor for America itself as this sort of powerful World War II arrogant man, basically, who is just unstoppable, righteousness, or something. It just seems so passé now, but, mostly for me, I realized it was basically a—a father figure, and I think for a lot of kids it was a father figure, so. 'Cause I never actually met my real dad. Also, obviously, the most prevalent idea of whenever you speak of cartoons is Mickey Mouse, and uh, a sort of impish character.

Ira Glass: Did you like Mickey Mouse? I don't remember having any feeling at all about Mickey Mouse.

Chris Ware: I don't think many people do, actually. It's not a character you can project any sort of sympathy on necessarily, but…

Ira Glass: So the characters you projected sympathy on as a kid were—Charlie Brown…

Chris Ware: Charlie Brown

Ira Glass: …and Superman?

Chris Ware: I never really cared about Superman, who cares about Superman? You just want to *be* Superman, so.

Ira Glass: Batgirl?

Chris Ware: What?

Ira Glass: Batgirl?

Chris Ware: Yeah, well sure, you know.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: You once told me something about the colors in Batgirl's uniform. Do you wanna just….

Chris Ware: You don't want me to tell that again. Great, uhh. However, it's, I think you could probably ask a lot of cartoonists. I know Dan Clowes has told me the same thing, but even if, like, I see the particular color combination of Batgirl's uniform, now as an adult, it's…I still find it sexually arousing.

[audience laughter]

It's—I don't know what it is. It's just, you know…. I shouldn't admit that. Anyway, so…

[voice from audience: "I do, too."]

Chris Ware: Really?

Ira Glass: Somebody else does too, out in the audience…

Chris Ware: Umm, so I started drawing this character, Quimby the Mouse, because – basically, the other character died in my mind, it didn't know, it's, it's almost like characters die within you, they don't do anything anymore. You could draw a character, it wouldn't do anything at all. So, sort of a desperate search for a new character. This is a strip, a painting, a giant painting of him going back to his school, which, surprisingly, is

not unlike the school I went to when I was a kid. I started drawing him then in the comic strips. This is him actually appearing with a very Superman-like character, and uh – being, basically abused by that character.

Ira Glass: What's the relationship between Quimby the Mouse and Mickey Mouse?

Chris Ware: Basically, there's—I mean the history of mice in cartoons goes all the way back to the Egyptians. There's ah, there was some archeologist that actually found comic strips drawn on the back of bricks that were in the pyra— …certain pyramids and tombs, of mice and cats and slaves and – and slave drivers drawn as cats and mice beating each other. So it's kind of a tried and true, you know. You run out of anything else, draw mice, I guess, I don't know what, you know, so…

Ira Glass: Do you see Quimby the Mouse as a critique of Mickey Mouse?

Chris Ware: No, I don't really, actually. That's a good question, though.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Thank you!

Chris Ware: I'll go through this quicker now, sorry…

Ira Glass: Now this, this particular panel of *Quimby the Mouse* that you have up here, this particular page of *Quimby the Mouse* that you have up here – there are no words at all, and—and there's a good amount of your work which, where there, where there's no words at all. Can you talk about the attraction of that, for somebody who's such a…

Chris Ware: Well, I quit using words because I was using words in my early strips like that terrible early one I showed, and I realized it was relying on it to tell the story, and I wanted to tell the story only with the pictures. 'Cause I realized, looking at strips like *Krazy Kat*, that there was a musical rhythm that took over when I read a comic strip, that

would actually drive the story forward. And you almost didn't need words, and I wanted to limit myself to using no words at all, to try to communicate a story only through gesture, because I figured that that would probably be the best way to, to acquaint myself with the cartoon language of any way I could, so…. Um, this is a strip where I started drawing the mouse with two heads, and this was the time when my grandmother was actually in the nursing home dying and the strips are about one half of the two-headed mouse getting old and dying right before the other one's eyes. This is another thing I built. It pulls his head off and stomps on it. This is a mechanical toy that I built, or like an automaton of that same mouse.

Ira Glass: What does it do when you turn the crank?

Chris Ware: You turn the crank, one side gesticulates sort of wildly, the other one just hangs there and twitches.

[audience laughter]

A metaphor for relationship, I guess, or something. Then I, uh, started drawing this cat character. Again, I don't know why I was doing these sort of stereotypically cartoon characters, um, but this is obviously sort of based on Felix the Cat or other cat characters popular at the twenties or so, and obviously it has some antecedents, precedents.

This is Phillip Guston, probably one of the greatest painters of the twentieth century, who, I think, truly put genuine emotion into modern painting in a way that nobody ever has before or since. He, he actually feels the human body from the inside out. And it occurred to me one day when looking at this painting that this is a painting of what it feels like to be inside a head if you'd never seen what you look like. That's what you'd think you looked like, you'd think, oh I've got this eye thing here, and then this stubble

and these things over here, but I don't know how big they are. It's an incredible painting and it communicates such amazing despair and such humility at the same time….

Ira Glass: Wait um, why is that, why is that in the slides?

Chris Ware: Oh, because I ripped it off, basically.

[audience laughter]

This is the—this is the mouth of a cat head I built also. So when you turn the crank it just kind of cries piteously. Its eyes roll around and stuff, so…

[audience laughter]

I started—the strips got more and more complicated as I went along because I wasn't using any words, and I'd need more and more panels to tell stories, and the layouts got more and more complicated and became harder and harder to understand for anybody that would care to read 'em. Then I realized that maybe I'd better start using words again.

Ira Glass: How many panels is that?

Chris Ware: Uh, it's enough, that's for sure.

Ira Glass: Over a hundred….

Chris Ware: It's a lot, I don't know….

Ira Glass: This, uh, this afternoon, um, this afternoon um, you, I saw, you had – you had a comic strip that was, um, taped to the outside of a notebook, and it was a comic strip that was the width of two chopsticks, and I counted the number of panels in it and it was twenty-nine panels. What's the attraction to such miniature story telling?

Chris Ware: I don't know. If you can still read it, you know, why waste space? I figured there's a lot of, you know—there's a lot of junk out there filling up the world, just try to

use as little as possible. Really, I mean, I don't know, I don't know. It seems unnecessary to waste much more space than that, and um, it seems more intimate, I guess.

Ira Glass: Yeah.

Chris Ware: But anyway, this was a—I had started putting words on top of—I started out with words, and then started putting the drawings around them, it's pretty experimental. This is about another great relationship. Then, at the same time, I was doing these really dumb comics in my sketchbook—uh, just completely foolish. I didn't care whether they made any sense at all, or were funny, or… But they actually involved human beings, which was sort of a novelty at this point since I was only drawing mice. This is another couple pages. I started…

Ira Glass: [reading text on slide] "Big text, rocket sound."

Chris Ware: I started drawing this character, Jimmy Corrigan, in my sketch book, and uh, did a couple of stories with him, and I realized he's my only human character so I better hold on to him. Uh, there's a strip called *Gasoline Alley* that, uh, I think was one of the greatest strips ever drawn, actually. And I was attracted to it, and I didn't know why. Um, that was a page from the sketchbook where I copied it. There's a—as I was telling Ira earlier today, Frank King is, I think, about the only cartoonist who did strips about the colors of leaves. And this was printed in the *Chicago Tribune* about 1929 or 1931, I'm not sure what year, but. This is a strip just about Uncle Walt, the character, the strip's protagonist, and his adopted son Skeezix walking around and looking at trees. And would that fly now, I mean, can you imagine that being in a newspaper now? It just seems so beautiful. And there's a mood to the strip that I don't think—that I don't think cartoonists concentrate on that anymore, so.

Ira Glass: Talk about the mood. What was it that the mood taught you?

Chris Ware: Uh, I guess I don't really know. I mean, it was the first time I realized that there could be a mood in a comic strip as opposed to just the story or characters, that you could actually communicate a sense of… something, whether it be….

Ira Glass: And the mood was—the mood was the thing that was attracting you to the strip?

Chris Ware: Yeah.

Ira Glass: Like, the mood was the main thing?

Chris Ware: Well, 'cause I was trying to get at a more even, real tone of what life was actually like, and I wasn't getting that with the staccato little panels of the mouse strip. Because comics are a very staccato, loud medium. They smack you in the face. You look in at what's going on in the panels, and you're at a safe distance. It's a perfect way to tell jokes. It's very, it's not a medium that's necessarily, at least at this moment, designed to tell stories about real life, or about maybe more depressing feelings, so. But I think Frank King was able to do that somewhat, so.

Ira Glass: Frank King is the one who did, um…

Chris Ware: *Gasoline Alley*, sorry. This is part of a painting that I did where I actually copied the colors of *Gasoline Alley*, but of course it has none of the mood to it or anything. This is the larger painting that also had the—I was still drawing, uh, more stuff about relationships. Anyway. Uh, there's also a comic strip called *Nancy* that, to me, typifies what the comic strip language is, actually, as a symbol system. I started to realize that you don't actually look at comics, you read comics, you read them like words, you

read pictures like words. And, though this is actually kind of an ugly comic strip, visually, it reads beautifully.

Ira Glass: Explain what you're saying. Take one of those—take one of the lines and just talk about what you mean.

Chris Ware: Well, it's just—basically the way that it's structured, like where she slips there, she's saying "Ha ha ha!" down at the bottom. That's not the way you look when you slip, but it's a perfect picture symbol of a slip, and it has this sort of internal, almost Sumerian quality of being frozen in time. And when you read it, you read it… like, I think Art Spiegelman has said, you can't not read *Nancy*, and you see it and you read it without even being aware of the fact that you read it. This is a later strip where I was trying to combine those sensibilities, I guess. It's starting to become more cold and icy. I got asked to do a comic book for company in Seattle unfortunately named Fantagraphics, but it's run by two very great guys, Gary Groth and Kim Thompson. Um, they also publish *Eightball* by Dan Clowes and Robert Crumb stuff, so it was really great to be asked. And this is one of the issues, called *The ACME Novelty Library*, and I was inspired by books from the twenties and thirties, or earlier, that just seemed to radiate fun, to me. Like, I really liked the design of them and I—I liked this sort of, sort of, I don't know, sexless promise of them, or something, I don't know…*Popular Science*. These—these magazines are amazing 'cause they're filled with all these great ads of what people were doing back then, before TV took over their lives. People building airplanes in their backyards, and flying them into trees and stuff, you know. So, uh, some of the pages in my comic book take on some qualities that…

Ira Glass: With all the ads all around it.

Chris Ware: It's basically just nonsense to fill space, so. This is a parody of a comic book ad.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: The ad on the right. Just read: "Make mistakes, get children, and forever alter the flavor of life."

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Then there's a boy and girl; the girl's pregnant.

Chris Ware: I was using the metaphor of a seed company. You know, you're supposed to sell flower seeds, and you get prizes. But in this case you get, like if you sold 175 packs of seeds you get birth control, or ah, narcotics or pornography or something. It was dumb jokes, basically. Also in the comic there are these cutouts that I do. I liked making paper cutouts as kid. This is a couple of covers where I started doing this interminably long *Jimmy Corrigan* story that then became the book. Um, these are two of the issues when it was printed in chapter form in, in the comic book. This is one of the pages from early on in the book. The character, Jimmy Corrigan, has uh, been taken to a car show to meet Superman, or the actor that played Superman on TV, who ends up going home with his mom and spending the night. And this is, this is Superman sneaking out in the morning.

[audience laughter]

Before his mom wakes up, so.

Ira Glass: Could you just say…go back to that one for a second. Can you just describe the layout of the page, the big panels and the small panels and how you think about, like…

Chris Ware: It's totally improvisatory, I really don't know how to describe it. It's just how I know how I want to start and know basically kind of where it's going to go, and I just draw and hope that it works. So there's really, um, I don't really know how to describe it beyond that, so…

Ira Glass: When you start the page, do you know what the layout is going to be, or do you just start with a blank page?

Chris Ware: No.

Ira Glass: So you just start at the upper left hand corner and just draw across?

Chris Ware: Right. And this is the book itself then, the actual story. It's collected, and it took seven years to draw or so. So, I didn't expect it to take that long. It's the story of this character then meeting his real dad, uh, later in life, about age 35 or so. Anyway, sorry about all that. Anyway.

[audience applause]

Ira Glass: Jason, bring up the lights for—for a little bit, and then we'll see more slides. Um, *Jimmy Corrigan* and a lot of, a lot of the other work that you do, the—the people are so sad and unhappy. Um, in *Jimmy Corrigan*, like, the, the plot line is just like, things go from sad to worse to worse. And, uh, and um, do you, do you think that um—it's more bearable to read about that kind of thing if it's in comic form?

Chris Ware: I guess it could be, yeah. I don't, I never really thought of it that way. I know that – some cartoonists have said that, but more than anything I was just trying to

get a real sense of what it felt like to be alive, and there's a lot of those moments in life, and I didn't want to ignore them. I wanted to try to put them on the page, so to try to get a real sense of time passing. So…

Ira Glass: Um. How would you describe the look of your comics now?

Chris Ware: Icy, cold, and dead, I guess. I don't know. I try, I try to make them as linguistically simple as possible so that they're easy to read, in the same way that *Nancy* is, and I realized that if you respond to them as—or if you look, there is my art school training, God. Uh, if you look at them as drawings, they're not satisfying drawings, they don't communicate much emotion as drawings at all. As a matter of fact, they're bad drawings. But it's almost like, you don't, you don't read a book trying to get emotion out of the font that it's printed in, either. You read it for the story; you read for what happens in your mind, and to me comics are some sort of magic language that happens before your eyes, and um. I found that the more detail or the more expression that I put into the line of my own stuff at least, that's not true for all cartoonists, of course—it didn't come alive as much as I wanted it to, so.

Ira Glass: Now explain that point, what are you saying? The more, the more—the more detail, like, the more…

Chris Ware: The—the more that I made it into a picture, the less that it seemed to, to actually come alive on the page, so.

Ira Glass: Kind of like the less information you provide about somebody's appearance, the more…

Chris Ware: Right.

Ira Glass: …a person can invest.

Chris Ware: Right, exactly. 'Cause you're sort of projecting a mem—I mean, when you read a particular bit of prose, or something like that, you're bringing your own memories and your own experiences, too, which is one of the things that can make it such a deeply personal experience. And with comics, you've actually got something in front of your eyes, and if you get too specific, it can become a little alienating, I think, sometimes.

Ira Glass: It's interesting because that's very similar to, to—in radio, one of the things that makes, that makes a radio story really effective is the fact that you can't see the people and so you can project anything into it. And it makes a certain kind of storytelling way easier on radio than I think it would ever be on television or in film, or even in comics, really, because there's—'cause there's no visual detail, which means that, that you can just, you can—as a—as a listener you can just completely invest. There's nothing stopping you.

Chris Ware: Well, it takes place all in your head then, too, I think.

Ira Glass: I can't remember who said this—but have you ever seen—I can't remember who talked about this, it might have been Art Spiegelman, the guy who did, um, *Maus*. Who talked about Little Orphan Annie's eyes, how her eyes were just two circles, and, and if they, she had, she had pupils in her eyes, it would express less.

Chris Ware: I think that's probably true, there's a blank dot, and there's almost this vacant deadness to it, or something. It's kind of frightening if you actually look at it. She looks like a walking corpse with a fright wig on, or something.

Ira Glass: Why don't we, why don't we read, why don't you read one of the *Jimmy Corrigan*…

Chris Ware: There's a… I guess I'll read real quick—there's a part in here, from the very beginning of the book, that is not necessarily exemplary of the tone of the book. In fact, it's just basically sort of a dumb joke, and it has some foul language in it, so I'll apologize here. I'll read it real quickly. Uh, it's…

Ira Glass: Unless you want us to stop. Avoid the foul language.

[Glass and audience laughter]

Chris Ware: Anyway. Um, it's very early in the book, and the only thing you really need to know about the main character, Jimmy Corrigan, is that he's in his mid-thirties, he's never met his dad, and that he's just gotten off the phone with his mom, and he's also just gotten a letter in the mail from his dad, who he's never talked to before, suggesting that they meet. And also, that Jimmy Corrigan's never known the touch of woman before.

Ira Glass: Hey, Jason, bring down the lights a little bit.

Chris Ware: So, I – should I read this out loud, too? Oh, OK. So this is him in the, in the office, uh – the cafeteria here, one of the more beautiful places we have to enjoy life in our culture. So he's decided he's going to go get himself a snack to make himself feel better. And in walks one of his warm officemates, says:

[reading strip aloud]

"Hey, Jimbo. How's it hangin', Jimbo?"

"'Oh, OK, I guess, Jack. Ha-ha."

"Oh, c'mon, Jimbo. That's a glum face. Cheer up! It's probably the last nice day of the year today. Don't tell me that some bitch has let you down again."

"Well, actually, Jack…"

"I knew it, I knew it! Corrigan, you know what your problem is?"

"What?"

"You're too nice to 'em, you know that? You're too goddamn nice to 'em."

"Too nice?"

"Exactly, Jimbo. Listen, man: chicks don't dig guys that are nice."

"They don't?"

Chris Ware: [pauses and comments] This is embarrassing to read. Actually, somebody said this to me once, when I had a job. Anyway—

Ira Glass: Somebody said this to you?

Chris Ware: Yeah.

[resumes reading strip aloud]

"No way, if you want the pussy, Jim, you've got to take charge, man. Plus you can't ever let a chick know you like her until you fuck her, anyway. In fact, I've made it my personal rule not to tell any chick I like her until I've fucked her at least six times. Anyway, you've got five bucks I could borrow till tomorrow, Jimbo?"

"I've got four dollars and fifty cents in quarters."

"Great! You're a pal, Jim."

And then he's left to…clean the crumbs up. Then he goes back to his desk, after visiting the men's room, and notice a post-it note on his desk. It says, "I sat across from you for six months and you never once noticed me! Good-bye"

And that's actually also true. Somebody told me this, too. And he says, "Good-bye?" So he decides to look over into the adjoining cubicle, where it's empty. He sees over the cubicle, out the window, and sees a waving figure on top of a building.

[audience laughter]

Sees that it's his childhood idol, Superman, waving at him. It's Superman about to jump and take off.

[audience laughter]

Anyway, that's one short part of the beginning of the book, there, so…

[audience applause]

Ira Glass: What did Superman mean to you, in this strip?

Chris Ware: I think, I mean, I think he definitely was a father figure, I think. So…I originally didn't even think of him that way, it was just the more I drew him I started to realize that's basically what he stood in for, so. I had a – an interim father, I guess you could say, who uh, used to – he worked with the National Weather Service, and he, he would sleep during the day because anybody who worked at Weather Service has to have really weird hours, and when he slept during the day he'd wear one of those sleeping masks, you know, you ever see one of those things?

Ira Glass: Sure.

Chris Ware: And I always thought it looked really cool, 'cause he looked like Robin or something. So I thought, "My dad's a superhero," so. The things kids will think to make themselves feel better…

Ira Glass: In your mind, is that really happening, that Superman guy jumping off the building?

Chris Ware: I don't know. I don't know why I drew it, I thought it was sort of funny. I mean, you always hear the story of kids jumping off of buildings with towels, that sort of thing, so.

Ira Glass: [Glass laughs in sarcastic tone] Ha-ha.

[audience laughter]

Chris Ware: It's sort of funny, I mean…

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Um, do um.… One of the things I've read that you've said about, um, about comics is that the way that people's thoughts are usually shown is through little thought balloons…

Chris Ware: Um-hm.

Ira Glass: …and that, that you find that limiting, to have their thoughts appear in thought balloons. Could you just talk about some of the other things that you do to make…

Chris Ware: I've tried to figure—I mean, 'cause I think, actually, the experience of life is the experience of thought, and I've tried to figure out a way, and I haven't come to any good way of doing it at all. But in comics, you certainly have two congruent – is that the word I want, I don't know if it is—parallel narrative lines going, obviously, with words and pictures. And there's so many different ways where you could actually move the narrative of what's going on in reality into the words and show thoughts and pictures and vice-versa and go back and forth. So I try to, sometimes, interject with thoughts that might come to one's mind, and, depending on their—their importance or power in the character's mind, either show it, write about it, or change the tense of what's going on in the story and try to get a sense of that experience, I guess, so. I mean in radio you—I would think you have to do certain things like that narratively as well, when you're telling a story.

Ira Glass: To express somebody's thoughts, you may just have to say it. You don't have much choice.

Chris Ware: He's thinking – well, that's easy, that's great.

Ira Glass: There's a – there's a panel there, there const- there are points at—there are points at different times in, ah, in the *Jimmy Corrigan* book, where the thing that we're seeing on the page is just what's going through his head. One of my favorite pages in the book is this page where, um, his dad has called him up, who he's never met, and he's going to go meet him, and there's a, there's a page where there are twelve different guys, all in exactly the same position, saying like, "Hi, how are you?" or "Hiya, Jimmy." Um, and just look so pretty, like all of them against each other…

Chris Ware: I was just, yeah, I mean, at—at that point, I still hadn't met my own dad, I didn't know what he looked like. So you're running through these pictures and like, "Well, is he going to be a creep, is he going to be a nice guy?" you know. "Is he going to be loathsome?" or, you know? This is kind of running through your mind of what—what might the actual event be, so.

Ira Glass: One of the things I find myself—as somebody who does radio—always responding to and really aware of in, in your comics, in a way, in fact, I've never really noticed in other comics is um, that there are pauses built in. Like in the thing you just read, the guy will say something in one panel and then there will be a panel where nobody says anything and Jimmy just sits there, and then the next thing will happen. It's like you're building in, you're building in a moment in between, like you're building in pauses, you're controlling time and the speed of the reading.

Chris Ware: I think that just comes from, from drawing—first of all without using words, and then trying to give it a real sense of the rhythm of life. And I can't use any other word to describe it, but there's a certain…. When I'm drawing a strip, it has to have

a certain rhythm to it and I basically play through it while I'm reading it, almost like a piano roll, and if I read through it and that there's a pause in it or there's a rhythm in it that seems wrong, I'll subdivide a panel to put in a space, or—

Ira Glass: You'll actually put in a panel, which is, which will space it out?

Chris Ware: Yeah. I mean, I would think it would be analogous to what you're doing when you're editing an interview so that it sounds natural and if somebody, you know, coughs or burps or whatever, or they say something embarrassing…

Ira Glass: Well then, well actually, well actually, like—somebody will talk and be making their big point and you just feel like—as a producer, you feel like, "Oh, I want to slow them down." Because, because the point will have more emotion and will come across to the listener with the emotion that the person's feeling more if you slow them down. And so, we're constantly taking, like, these tiny little pieces of—of blank time and inserting it between words to change the pacing.

Chris Ware: Wow.

Ira Glass: Yeah.

[audience laughter]

Chris Ware: That sounds…wow—

[audience laughter]

Chris Ware: Is that legal, though?

[audience laughter]

I mean, it almost seems like that would be…

Ira Glass: It's lying.

Chris Ware: …prosecutable, you know.

Ira Glass: Well, we had the quote the same. I mean, one of the things about audio…

[audience laughter and applause]

…one of the things about audio that's um, particular and different than other media is that you can edit, you can edit those, you can edit out a phrase, you can move a phrase to another place—as long as, like, they keep a certain, sort of, pitch and speed of their voice. Like, there's so much manipulation you can do. And so the version of… like sometimes people will say, "Well, how come the people on public radio just seem so much more articulate than people you meet?" And it's because, man, we have edited out everything extraneous. You know, they're talking better than they've ever talked in their lives. You know? And, and uh, you know, we're making a more perfect version of them than could ever exist in nature. And…

[audience laughter]

And my feeling about it is like, it's, it's, it's such an artificial, um, it's such an artificial thing to sit down and tape somebody to start with. Like, you're already not getting the real person; do you know what I mean? You're already getting this weird approximation of parts of their personality that they feel comfortable saying in the presence of a near stranger with a tape going for an audience of a million people. Like, already—like, that's such a weird thing that, um, to get at something where it seems like that, that they're talking about something that means something to them and to make it come across right, putting in a pause here and there doesn't seem like that much more manipulative than the act of recording itself. Suddenly I sound like Michel Foucault.

[Glass, Ware, and audience laughter]

Do you know what I mean? Like, it's already so artificial. So I go, pshaw, a pause. They're not ever gonna know. They just gonna think, "God, I am such, I am so expressive. Like, I left that interview, and I knew—I knew I nailed that interview with that boy, but I *really* nailed it. And when you put the music underneath, man, it just…." You know? If there could be music underneath all the time...you know what the music is in the radio story? Music is like the frames on the page. Like the music actually takes it and makes it – the music takes it and makes it into something, which is larger than itself. It's like it puts a frame around the picture, suddenly you see it as – as a cinematic thing, or you hear it as a cinematic thing when the music comes in.

Chris Ware: Well, you're the first person I've ever noticed that's ever done that—basically, where you can tell where somebody is actually about to start to tell a story, where there might be an introductory line, and then the music starts and you know that, "OK, this is the – this is where it begins." It almost—it feels cinematic, but I've never heard anyone else do that before.

Ira Glass: Yeah, if you put the music in at a certain place it just creates this feeling of motion, "OK, now we're going somewhere." And then one of the tricks we use a lot is that if there's music playing underneath somebody and you pull it out, whatever they say next, over the silence, sounds more important, and you pay more attention to unconsciously. And so, as a producer, if you want to be sure that people get this point, like this is the point, they must get this, or the rest of this isn't going to work, or this is the really—like this is the most surprising thing they said, and you want to be sure that it comes across with the power that you're feeling it, as the person putting it together, you totally pull out the music and maybe put in a little extra pause here or there.

[audience laughter]

Because you've only got your sound and your silence, you know, it's like—a pretty primitive medium, you've got your sound, you've got your silence, and so you've got to encase the sound around—

Chris Ware: That's true. Gee! You sound like aesthetic fascists up here, or something.

[audience laughter]

Wow.

Ira Glass: You know, um, *Jimmy Corrigan*—you, you, you, you started to write at a time in your life of, of very little—when you were pretty much eating every meal alone. And, um, I'm wondering now that you're married and your life is a little more, um, settled and I think a little happier, what kind of characters are you finding, come?

Chris Ware: Just the same old ones, basically. No, I'm trying to draw more characters now in a story; I'm trying to juggle more than one. I mean, I tried for years, basically, to simply do stories that were simply told though the voice of, or the eyes of, only one character. And now I'm trying to juggle that, which is—most comic strips you'll see, they'll just draw a bunch of characters, and for so many years I found that almost schizophrenically disturbing to see so many eyes staring back out at me out of the page, so. But—uh, now I seem to deal with it a little better, I don't know why. I didn't even think of that.

Ira Glass: But you see…the characters now are just as sad and miserable as, um…

Chris Ware: Oh, no, maybe not as sad and miserable. I don't want to—you know, just—I'm not trying to make, you know, depress people or anything. I guess I get accused of

that, sometimes. I'm really not, you know. It's like, I don't want, you know, it's not—this is not a guidebook on how to live your life.

[audience laughter]

There's plenty of miserable, lonely people in the world and there's not enough art about it, I don't think. I, you know—I get tired of reading stories about sexual liaisons and, you know, and conquests and all that kind of nonsense, it just gets tiresome. There's plenty of that stuff, I mean. I don't know, I guess I'm nuts or something.

Ira Glass: Happy-happy people have the *Friends.*

[some audience hissing]

Chris Ware: What?

Ira Glass: Happy people have the TV show *Friends*.

[audience chuckles]

Chris Ware: No, but I mean, you ride the bus, you ride the train, and you see so many people that you know they'll never meet anybody. I mean, you can tell. And it's, I mean it's—

Ira Glass: So you're saying, happy people have enough art? There's enough art about the successful and happy.

Chris Ware: That's all there is, it's just art to make you feel better about yourself, or something.

Ira Glass: David Sedaris has said that one of the things that he liked about reading *Jimmy Corrigan* is that it was a book that when you were done, you could feel like your life was better than the guy in the book.

[audience laughter]

He said he found that kind of uplifting.

Chris Ware: Oh, that's nice. That sounds…fair enough.

Ira Glass: In your current, uh—one of the characters you've been writing about is this character named Rusty Brown. And the issue begins with—with, you know, like six point type, uh, an entire page which is sort of a diatribe against people who collect things.

Chris Ware: I should say, actually, that I'm one of those people. I actually have found out that I guess I made some people mad with this because they thought I was making fun of them, but it's entirely about me, so there's no…

Ira Glass: You give sort of a guide – guide to the different, um, types of collectors. Um, you know, things, things like, "Note what the suspect collector is doing. Is he forging on a dealer table? Note syntax if within range: is it quasi-sophisticated or commercial, i.e., that's a rare piece, pre-Hasbro, with no contact greening." And then, um, and then Rusty is a collector of, um, various sorts of things, uh, from his childhood, and uh, has a *Battlestar Galactica* poster in his room.

Chris Ware: Yeah, these strips are just kind of jokes, and this particular issue is just sort of an antidote to the whole *Jimmy Corrigan* story which is way…very much more depressing, I guess, an attempt to actually get at something real, and this is more in the more traditional vein of just telling single-page jokes, I guess.

Ira Glass: See, but I was wondering if drawing… you're not, you're not crazy about the collector culture.

Chris Ware: Well, I'm a part of it, I mean, I don't know, you know. But…

Ira Glass: But you find it disturbing.

Chris Ware: Well, a little bit, I—I mean, it seems to be more and more prevalent, too. There's—I mean, with the, the, the advent of the internet, where basically all the material goods in America are being, like, sucked into this black hole and redistributed at the other end to the people that, you know, have been looking for that particular thing from their childhood. And, you know; now they find it again, or something, and then they want another one. And it's very strange that this is happening. I don't know exactly what it means, but—but I'm not a social critic so I don't really know.

Ira Glass: See, I was wondering if writing Rusty Brown, who is a collector, made you feel more sympathetically toward collectors and the whole idea of collecting.

Chris Ware: Yeah, I think, definitely. I mean, I used to go to these collector shows with a teacher friend of mine named Richard Keane, actually, who was an obsessive collector, and I wrote—I dedicated the issue to him, actually. He was a very, very, uh, sensitive man who taught life drawing at the Art Institute, and uh, he actually died about a year ago or so. Now I can't go to these collector shows anymore, because I always think of him, or something, so it's not. But the other characters in there are… I don't know, it's hard to talk about…

Ira Glass: Wait, you can't go to the collector shows because why?

Chris Ware: Because it's – he died, and I used to go with him, so, I kind of miss—I can't go without him, basically.

Ira Glass: You can't go without him?

Chris Ware: Yeah, but that's, that's all-mawkish sentimental stuff, it doesn't mean anything to anybody but me, I guess. But—

Ira Glass: Could you, um, could you, ah, talk about, uh—for *Jimmy Corrigan*, there's scenes which take place, um, for the 1892 Columbia Exposition…

Chris Ware: Um-hm.

Ira Glass: Um, could you just talk about how much research you did on – on that, and maybe show us some pictures?

Chris Ware: Sure. I can do that, I can real quick—I'm sorry this is taking so long, because…you guys are gonna… I apologize for that. I'll just go through these really quick. These are…part of the book happens in 1892 and it happens around the—the main character's great-grandfather and grandfather so—I'll show the slides now, and the lights will go off, I guess, or something.

Ira Glass: How, how much research did you do, like how much did you know about the 1892 World's Fair? Was it, was it—like, how much did you know about it?

Chris Ware: I didn't really know that much about it; I just started seeing pictures of it, and I was astounded that this was in Chicago. This was in Jackson Park down in the south side of Chicago. And I'm sure a lot of people have heard about it, but all these buildings are intended to be temporary. And this was a regular thing that happened in most major cities in America, and in Europe before; that were to have a World's Fair. And this was about the largest one up until that point to commemorate Columbus' discovery of America, and it was called The World's Columbian Exposition, uh…

Ira Glass: None of these buildings, except for one, still stands in Chicago. They're all gone.

Chris Ware: Right. They're all gone; they were built out of completely temporary materials. And the interiors of them are just astounding. I just couldn't—I couldn't

believe that this existed and then ceased to exist, and that this much effort was put into something that was so temporary. And I started to wonder what it would have been like to actually grow up or to live near those buildings when they were being constructed, and I found these pictures of houses that were actually just a couple blocks away. So, I set part of the story there, and I found this picture of the house in the upper right hand corner…

Ira Glass: Wait—go back, go back one slide. So, the house on the right is the one…

Chris Ware: Right, yeah.

Ira Glass: OK.

Chris Ware: There are a few less windows in it here, or something, so….

Ira Glass: And then here it is as a cartoon.

Chris Ware: Right. And I—I researched a lot of how the buildings were built, took a lot of notes, um…more notes than I probably ever needed. I even went down there and took notes about the stupid grass and stuff like that, you know…

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Wait, wait—you went down to where, where it had happened?

Chris Ware: Where it had happened, and I walked around—all this stuff, I just—

Ira Glass: Wait – why would you need pictures of the different kinds of plants?

Chris Ware: I don't know! I just thought that I should, you know, I just—I didn't know what, what would occur to me or what I would use, you know. A little bit I used, but for the most part none of it I used. Um, and even in drawing these particular buildings, I realized that at certain times I was orienting them incorrectly and that the sun was rising

on the wrong side of the earth and casting shadows incorrectly, so I built this little model just to remind me like…

[audience laughter]

"Oh, yeah – the outhouse is over here…"

Ira Glass: Wait. Go back to that model. So, what would you do with the model?

Chris Ware: I'd just put it on my drawing table so I wouldn't screw up when I was drawing, that's all. It's just like virtual reality, but with, ah, balsa wood, I guess.

Ira Glass: And you knew…

[audience laughter]

And you knew where the sun would be.

Chris Ware: Yeah, I guess. Well, actually…whatever. These are things you have to do as a cartoonist. It's really a lonely job. This is a—another… this is a page at the final part where it happens—The World's Columbia Exposition—where this character, the small character there, is the main character (Jimmy Corrigan's grandfather). And that's the actual building there that I was drawing, so—the administration building. This is the interior of the Fisheries Building, the actual photograph where it was.

Ira Glass: Go back to your drawing.

Chris Ware: All right—I don't want to bore people here.

[voice from audience: "We're not bored!"]

This is a—this is a media culture we're in. We're saturated with distractions, we have to keep this flying by.

[audience laughter]

Uh, in The World's Columbian Exposition there was a part of the—of the grounds called the Midway. In fact, every world's fair had its own midway, which is actually the fun part, where you can go see half-naked women dance and stuff. And you could see so-called savages living in their natural habitat. Uh, this is the South Sea Islanders, which I included in the story there. They actually did have a sign called "dwellings of the cannibals." Some of them were actually Chicago residents that dressed up. And this is the largest building in the world that had ever been built, up until that time, built out of plaster, steel girders, horsehair, and straw. And it's the building then that the great-grandfather then abandons the uh—the grandfather on the top of, and at the end of that segment, it's set in the nineteenth century…

Ira Glass: It's funny how—how in the cartoon it looks, sort of, even more, um, grand—because the cartoon simplifies the lines a bit.

Chris Ware: I guess, but I think it's a pretty lame drawing, actually. I mean you don't really get the… you had to kind of…yeah.

Ira Glass: The colors do it, too.

Chris Ware: It's just the little people, I think…

Ira Glass: How much do you experiment with the colors?

Chris Ware: Um, I don't, you know, whatever works. Basically, I was trying to get a sense of, like, the setting sun there, so. And the particular colors then carry over to the next page, which then is in 1976, and that's during a snowstorm, which I'm not showing here, so. I think—

Ira Glass: Is that the last one?

Chris Ware: What? Yeah, that's the last one we could probably just skip the next part, I think. But—

Ira Glass: Um, let's talk—let's just talk a little bit about process and then we'll go to, to peoples, uh, questions. Um, how do you find ideas to, to write about? Do you even think of it that way?

Chris Ware: It's—I mean I hate to admit it, but having a weekly deadline pretty much takes up most of that, you just have to do something, you have no—you have to come up with something and so you just find yourself mining all of your, your obsessions and desires and traumas. I probably indulged myself way too much already, as it is. And I, um, I don't know. I mean, I don't have any heavy social issues; I don't want to discuss, necessarily, maybe a few here and there, but I don't have any big message, other than I guess life is worth living, or something.

Ira Glass: But barely even that.

Chris Ware: What?

Ira Glass: But barely even that.

Chris Ware: Well, how about yourself? I mean, you're working, you're…you're working from the outside world and you're condensing down from there, I mean—

Ira Glass: Yeah, I mean mostly to, to find ideas for the radio show, it involves a—there's sort of an industrial process, to, to get enough material in to, to fill the show. Um, we have contributing editors; we have an e-mail list of about over three hundred people who we send out story themes to, once we have a theme. And then to, to end up with three or four stories on the air, we'll go through twenty ideas, we'll put into production seven or eight ideas and spend money and produce seven or eight things and then kill two or three.

Because—because the aesthetic of a show is that we want stuff that will be surprising and, uh, that will just get—get to us, you know what I mean. Like, you just gotta try a lot of stuff, you just gotta do a lot of work, and get a lot of, um, get a lot of tape in the door, get a lot of radio in the door – um, to see what will grab you, to see what will be just…. You basically have to do enough things so that, so that luck can kick in. So, it's not a very efficient process. Like, built into our budget we assume that about—about a fourth or a third of all the acquisitions money that we pay in a given year, which is, you know, a lot of money. We spend, now, about $140,000 just buying work from people.

Chris Ware: Wow.

Ira Glass: Um—

Chris Ware: Do you want to buy some work?

[Glass and audience laughter]

Ira Glass: It's not to one person, though.

[Glass laughter]

It's over the course of a year to all the different contributors, and, and, you know, about a th—probably a third of it goes to stuff that we kill. Um, so. Um—yeah, deadlines, I feel like they're huge. I, like—I feel like I'm fundamentally lazy but I put myself into a position where I'm over my head…

Chris Ware: Right.

Ira Glass: …so I'm constantly working all the time. Do you feel that?

Chris Ware: Absolutely. I would not get anything done if it wasn't for a deadline, which maybe would be a blessing, actually, but. I need that hanging over my head. I think I

come from a long line of deadline people. My grandfather was a newspaper editor, like I said, and he was…. I keep hearing—these family stories keep surfacing about my grandmother being really impatient with him and having to wait for him in the car because he didn't like to drive, and he'd say he'd be done with his column and then my grandmother would go to pick him up and she'd have to wait in the car for a half an hour.

Ira Glass: Hm.

Chris Ware: My wife is becoming increasingly fascinated by these stories, I guess, as it becomes clearer and clearer that I'm doing this, so. But a deadline is a good way to get something done, I think, especially if you're wracked by self-doubt, like I am. Sometimes I can barely even sit down to draw—it's just too much to even think about. Every time when I sit down to draw, I feel like I can't do it anymore, like I've completely forgotten how. I woke up, I've lost the ability, you know. I just don't even—I don't even know how to start, basically, so. Do you ever feel that way when you have to work on your—

Ira Glass: When I have to write I can feel that way, not when I have to edit, and most of my job is editing.

Chris Ware: Editing is like sculpture, basically, in a way.

Ira Glass: Editing is so much easier than writing. It's like a miracle.

[Ware and audience laughter]

Like, I'll just put down crap on the page just so I have something that I can edit the next day.

[Glass, Ware, and audience laughter]

Chris Ware: That's a good trick. I've gotta remember that.

Ira Glass: I feel like, too, that when I, when I—when, when, when I was, um, when—when I wanted to, like, make stuff for a living, like one of the things that nobody ever said was, was um—I like, I was really terrible, for a really long time. Like, I was just not very good, and it wasn't—like, I started in public radio when I was nineteen and wasn't competently making stories until I was twenty-eight, twenty-seven—twenty-seven or twenty-eight. I was a decent tape cutter, um—up until then I was a pretty good tape cutter, but in terms of just writing a story, figuring out what the voice of the story is going to be, and how the voice would work with that tape. Like, I was exactly the worst kind of person to ever work with because I would obsess over the smallest thing and I couldn't tell, like… Well, should I say this in the script, or say this in the tape, and then I would go back and forth, and back and forth, and back forth on the tiniest decision for, like, hours. And um, I don't know, being just forced to do a volume of work just forces things to come together eventually.

Chris Ware: Are you going to play that recording that you brought?

Ira Glass: I've brought a bunch of recordings where I'm just doing terribly. Could you pull your mic just to get a little more on mic? Just turn it so it's more…

Chris Ware: Oh, what am I doing wrong? I'm sorry.

Ira Glass: No.

Chris Ware: OK.

Ira Glass: Do you want me to play embarrassing work?

Chris Ware: Yeah, definitely.

[whistle from audience and audience applause]

Ira Glass: OK, um—Angela, let's cue up cut, uh, 25. This is something, um—I was, I was, uh, uh, twenty, and I talked my way onto the set of the TV show M.A.S.H., which was then in the twelfth—its twelfth year. And, uh, I didn't really know much about how to do a story and so I'd interview all the stars and stuff. And, um, and the people putting the show together, and um, my grandmother was a huge fan of M.A.S.H. and, and somehow, like I—I don't know why I ended up there, because I didn't know anything about it. And I had this question in my head, which was kind of like, well, "How do you do something which is sort of entertaining and popular but seems to mean something and have a real feeling to it," um, which is the way I saw M.A.S.H. at the time. Um, I—it was such a horrible experience being there—I have literally not seen the show since 1981, um. And so, this is me, I'll play you, ah, two clips, um, all my interviews were characterized by two things: one, they begin with like, mic handling noise, when I'm going like, nervously…

[Glass demonstrates banging and shuffling of mic]

Like, the sound—it's like the sound of anxiety manifest on tape. And then, um, make a long…like I have heard that—and this is actually true if you're doing an interview—that, like, one way to get somebody to tell you a story is that you tell them a story, you know. And so I was constantly, like, going on these little preambles, where I would tell these stories that made next to no sense and I am so scared. So, this is me with Jamie Farr, who played the character Klinger. Angela, if you could play cut 25.

[audio from Glass recording]

> ***Ira Glass:*** *One thing that's, uh… one of the messages, one of the messages that I always get from the show is that every person, ah, should be listened*

to, every person, you know, should be, um. It's a very humanitarian, almost a populist sort of—sort of message that every person deserves some, deserves some attention. But, is there a problem with that with you, because if you give—who knows, you know—by seeing you on TV, some attention, is that, isn't that difficult? Can't there be just a lot of pressure with that?

Jamie Farr: *Um, the answer to that long question is: Yes. Of course.*

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: [talking over the still playing CD] Um, I'll play you, um, cut—cut 30, um, Angela, and maybe a touch louder still. It's me with Alan Alda, who was then writing and directing a lot of the, um, episodes of the show.

Alan Alda: *I don't want to sound self-congratulatory. I mean, there are times that I, I don't think…*

Ira Glass: Wait—could you—go back to the beginning and play 30.

Alan Alda: I don't want to sound self-congratulatory…

Ira Glass: Go to 29. Sorry.

Chris Ware: So this is the part you'd edit out if you if you were doing the show?

Ira Glass: Pretty much.

[Glass and audience laughter, audience applause]

Ira Glass: *Your recent, ah, writing and directing and acting, uh – all the stories have very—they, they show a lot of human, human values, um very moralistic, in a lot of ways. Do you believe that television and film should teach?*

Alan Alda: *I think to answer that question I'd have to know what you mean by moralistic. That sounds faintly pejorative to me. I don't know. Tell me a little more about what you mean.*

Ira Glass: *Well, when you—uh…what are you trying—well maybe; maybe you should define it for me. What are you trying to?*

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: The old "maybe you should define it for me" trick.

[audience laughter]

Alan Alda: *I think that, for me, the kind of writing that appeals to me the most is writing…*

Ira Glass: All right, that's enough.

[audience applause]

So, I pretty much had seven years of that. And, um…like I, like I, yeah…whew, that's something, huh? It's sort of surprising I stayed in radio—to me, sometimes—when, when I hear what I sounded like. And then, like, once I could sort of competently put something together, like… it was really hard to put together, because I wanted something that would have more feeling than—than most of what I was hearing on the radio. And, um…like, the people of my generation of people who – who came into public radio—and I'm 42 and, and I started when I was 19, there, there's still a feeling of like, we're not exactly sure how to make this. There's a feeling of, like, OK, we're just making this up, um, and that it's not entirely clear, like, what the medium can and can't do, which I still feel.

Chris Ware: It's the same problem I have, definitely, so. I mean, the one thing I noticed in art school, much to my increasing anger, is that very few, almost—if none—of my teachers ever talked about how to communicate feelings. It was always about how to upset the viewer, how to make them aware of the fact that they were in a gallery, or that they wore shoes that were made in a third world country, you know. Sure we know all that stuff, but is it really—I mean you don't have to, necessarily, make art about it, and nobody – even in critiques nobody ever talked about how to feel more through art, and that always to me was what I wanted to do more than anything, so. Sorry.

[audience applause]

Ira Glass: We've um….

Chris Ware: I feel like I should cry now, or something.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: The people who ah, who, who, ah—who invited us here, uh, gave us this—a list of questions that they said would be of interest to the audience and that we were to run through these really quickly. One: "Ways the work of both Glass and Ware exploit the medium for which they write." I'll read—go ahead.

Chris Ware: Um. I don't know, I don't know. What? Exploit? I guess….

Ira Glass: OK.

Chris Ware: Don't know.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: OK.

[Glass laughter]

"Their artistic purposes: how do they want to affect their viewers/listeners? How do they choose the medium they chose to achieve these ends? To what extent have they reached beyond the alternative, or at least non-mainstream audiences of NPR/serious comics? To what do they attribute the current popularity? How do they see their work addressing important issues of public discourse?"

[audience laughter]

Chris Ware: I think…

Ira Glass: Wha—"How do they describe their audiences? How might audiences for our students change in the future? Associated with questions about audience or regional differences, do Midwestern audiences respond differently to their work than audiences in the East or West Coasts?" Do audiences on the Midwest respond differently to your work?

Chris Ware: No idea. I don't know.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: I feel like, that, that—these questions presuppose that we're thinking a lot more about the audience than I think we are.

Chris Ware: Right, well certainly right now we are, but I mean…

[audience laughter]

But, I don't think that, I mean, I would be surprised if any writers or artists really think about their audiences at all. And that was another—not to harp on art school because I had some great experiences and teachers there – but there were some teachers who said, "Oh, you really need to think about your audience, who are you talking to?" or, "What are you trying to make them think?" That sort of thing. And I, I never wanted to do that,

as I—the worst thing you can possibly do is to try to imagine your audience because—I mean, first of all, how could I describe the audience here, I mean other that it's a lot of people sitting staring at me and making me feel uncomfortable.

[audience laughter]

There's not—there's no way—you can't—you can't think of an audience. You can't, you can't direct your work at an audience because as soon as you are, you lose sense of yourself and you lose sense of any communication of—of feeling and humanity, I think.

[some audience applause]

Ira Glass: I sometimes think about that there's an audience. Like, like, you know, like I think about the fact that—that it's a million people listening and, and—and like I and the people I work with, the staff of the show, we get obsessed about certain things that we just feel like, somebody should talk about this. And so we went though a period of doing—you know, we went through a period where we were all obsessed with sentencing laws and people in prison, and… like, there's like, there's a certain amount of that where you feel like, "We've got a radio show, we've got to do something!"

Chris Ware: Well, you're dealing with the real world, too, I mean…

Ira Glass: Yeah. Yeah. No. So, well, sometimes, there's that. But then mostly I feel like we're like—we're like you—like we're making work that will please us. Like, the aesthetic of it is that we feel like, we feel like we're typical enough that if we like it, if it gets to us, then it will probably get to other people. It's not a lot more sophisticated than that.

Chris Ware: I think it's true.

Ira Glass: Um, and then, um…like, "How do you want to affect your listeners/viewers?"

Chris Ware: I don't want to make them mad at me, I guess.

[audience laughter]

You hope to communicate some of the feeling that you're putting into the strip and hope that they feel it as well, you know. That's about all you can hope for.

Ira Glass: You know one of the things that I've seen that your work is criticized for, that I've never really understood, is that people say it's cold. I've seen that in print, which shocks me, because I feel like your work is so, um, is so emotional—it's so emotional. And—how do you, how do you explain the fact that, that some people are reading it that way?

Chris Ware: Oh. Again, I think it's just like what I said earlier: that they look at the drawing style, and maybe it is, I don't know, you know. I mean I don't—I don't want it to be, I want it to be as emotional as possible. I don't have any idea…

Ira Glass: It's pretty heartbreaking.

Chris Ware: You know people that would disagree, I guess… I don't know. I… that—I think that's, again, it's just looking at the drawing style which is, again, very inexpressive. It doesn't say anything that a drawing should about finding the picture or about—or about drawing carefully or accurately. It's a completely different sort of thing, so. I mean, would anybody want to read an anguished book that was written in a, in a—in an illegible scrawl, or something, because it was more emotional? That—to me, that's the… but, I don't know. Art Spiegelman got really mad at me once when I said this, and I'm probably wrong.

Ira Glass: Why? What did Art Spiegelman say?

Chris Ware: He just thought I was full of, full of it, I guess. He could be right, I don't know.

Ira Glass: One other set of slides that you brought, is you just brought a, a, a—couple of quick slides, which just show you putting together a page. Why don't we go through this real fast?

Chris Ware: Do you guys wanna see this, or something? I don't wanna drag this thing out.

Ira Glass: [looking at and referring to slides] They're so cool!

Chris Ware: It's just like five—I'm gonna speed past this part. This is a part I was going to read, but—

Ira Glass: Buy the book!

[audience laughter]

Chris Ware: It's another part of the, of the story that happens on the same street corner where Superman jumped on 1892. And then the book ends on the same street corner after he's met his father, and he's come back. So… in the interest of time, this a more recent strip I've… uh… did. Um. I've been trying to do these strips for a long time that don't start at any one specific point. They're almost like a diagram of events, or of a series of interconnected causations, or something. I don't want it to sound all fancy or anything, I mean, it—it should be fun to read, too, and have a point, um, somewhat. But of course I'm not going to tell you what that is with this because it's too complicated.

Ira Glass: And when, and when you do it, like, basically, there are panels pointing places. It's like a little map…

Chris Ware: Right. I had started—

Ira Glass: …in addition to being a scene. When you do it, is your thought—is anything, like, bigger or more theoretical than like, "God, that would be cool."

Chris Ware: Uh,

[Ware chuckles]

No, no.

[audience laughter]

I don't ever think that. I think, "God, I've gotta get this done by next Tuesday, and I hope it isn't bad," so. This one I erased a lot of. Basically it's a—involves a—I can't talk about it, it's so dumb, but it, um. I started at—this is, ah.

[Ware sighs]

What the—it looks like when I'm drawing it in pencil. I draw it – what's—in non-photo blue pencil which means that it doesn't photograph, obviously. Um, with this illust-

Ira Glass: Then how are we seeing it?

Chris Ware: Hm?

Ira Glass: Then how are we seeing it?

[Glass and audience laughter]

Chris Ware: Um…it's—

Ira Glass: Just kidding. No, I'm just kidding, just kidding.

[Glass and audience laughter]

Chris Ware: Um, but I started this with the drawing of the house, basically, or the apartment building, and then started with the drawing right above that, of the girl doing the laundry in the basement, which points down to the—

Ira Glass: Yeah, there's a laser pointer here.

Chris Ware: I will not point it into the audience, I promise.

[audience laughter]

I won't go over this too far, but there's this part here with this girl doing laundry in the basement, here, and she sees a bee, which you really can't see too terribly well here, who is trapped inside and wants to get out and get back to his family. So she lets the bee out the window; the bee goes up, goes out the window. Before he goes home he decides to pollinate some flowers, goes back home to his wife and they're all happy. And that's in one year. And then there's—depending on how you might want to read it—there's three beds of flowers down here, one that's red, one that's white, and one that's pink. I told you this was stupid, but. Ah, this particular part here shows the elderly woman who's sitting on the first level of this house, planting the flowers three or four years previous the white flowers. And over here, these red flowers are brought back in the towel of these vacationing—

Ira Glass: Now wait, without going into, like, all the different stories, why don't we go to the next one and talk about the changes that you made, like on this one?

Chris Ware: Sorry, it's not going to make sense here. See, I told you I was no good at this, I apologize. This is, ah, another version of the pencils where you can see I changed a few of the panels down here. And there's also a blank space up here, that I realized needed to be filled. And this is after I ink it in, using India ink and a brush, and uh, Rapidographs for all the straight lines. I draw all the characters with a brush and then all the backgrounds, or all the hard edges, with

lines because that's kind of how I see the world. It seems like the organic and then the hard edges of, of, of tables and things. But anyway—

Ira Glass: Now now wait wait wait—say, say that last point again. You—you do it in hard lines because that's how you see the world because—

Chris Ware: Yeah, I see everything straight up and down, very hard edges. But then people, to me, are softer in a way, or something. I don't know, but. Um, and… anyway, the, the red flowers are, are brought back by the vacationing couple who happen to bring seeds back in there. And then I'm sure that anybody here who knows anything about botany would know this is all nonsense, but it's just a metaphor. Ah, inadvertantly plants the flowers when he shakes out his towel, here. And then, the first day of the, the spring, the new year—the girl in the top part here who had let out the bee—the bee, is um, picking a flower here that's pink that's come to be because of the red and white flowers have cross-pollinated and created a pink flower. And when she does that she disturbs the same bee off the flower here, and it lands in this puddle of Coca-Cola that this—uh—vacationing guy, here, with a mullet, is drinking.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Let's skip—maybe we should skip the –

Chris Ware: While he's uh—while he's drinking it, he happens to look at this girl's butt, 'cause she's bending over, and he wonders what she might look like without any clothes on. And uh, then when he happens to look down from thinking about her, he sees the bee that had fertilized this all to begin with, and

stomps on it and kills it. And then of course the last panel is the bee's wife and children waiting for him to come home.

[audience laughter, some audience applause]

So…so, and uh, this is what it looks like with the non-photo blue pencil when it's photographed, the pencil disappears, and then I color it in.

Ira Glass: And wait a minute, so, and so you, and so you—so you draw it in blue and then you paint it the – just the black and white part, and then you scan it into the computer? Is that how you get to…?

Chris Ware: Right. I used to hand-cut all the colors with—it was a very laborious headache-a-week process. And now I still get a headache a week, but I do it on the computer because it's a little bit easier. And that's about the only way you can send printing files anymore to printers. They don't even really know what to do with hand-cut stuff anymore. And that's what it looks like with the colors.

Ira Glass: So, you do all the colors in, in just in Photoshop, or something?

Chris Ware: Yeah. Right, so. And I—

Ira Glass: So you have this black and white thing and then you can just—

Chris Ware: I haven't a vague idea what they might be when I'm working on it, so. But anyway, that's how one—it's a pretty traditional way of working. When I used to draw comics, way early on, I didn't pencil or anything, I drew directly in ink on the board. There's a million different ways you can do it, so, but. Sorry about that. So, that's that—so.

Ira Glass: OK. Um, let's take questions. You have cards, and—

Chris Ware: Oh…

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Yes, we do, we have questions. And uh, people will gather questions from you now, if you have them. We have a few to start. Chris Ware, "Can you tell us about your use of birds?"

Chris Ware: Wow. What, for what purpose?

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: I have no idea, someone just gave me this.

Chris Ware: Um, I guess I've used birds in some stories as a way of linking together, um, narrative passages that, that happened in maybe different time periods, or um, maybe to kind of create a hint of causation between two different time periods. Um, plus I like drawing birds because they move very fluidly and then they also move very jerkily, I guess. But I've never been asked that before; I'm sorry I don't have a very good answer to that.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: There's not a name on that, on that question, but you maybe want to talk to him later.

Ira Glass: You know, before we do this, I feel like we've gone a little bit long.

Chris Ware: Yeah.

Ira Glass: If people have, like, babysitters or things…should we give people a minute who need to go, a minute to go? And then we'll do, like, ten minutes of questions?

Chris Ware: Yeah. Everybody leave.

[Glass, Bridwell-Bowles, and audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Do you guys want to…?

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Anybody who wants to go can go.

Ira Glass: Maybe. Like, should we turn up the house lights to – to half, if people need to go? No. Just keep going, OK.

[voice from audience: "Just keep going!"]

Ira Glass: If you need to go, go. We'll turn the house lights back down.

Chris Ware: Are you sure? If you need to leave, you're not going to hurt our feelings, or anything, so. I'm sorry this went on so long, so.

Ira Glass: OK, house lights back down.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: This is a question for Ira, uh, "What was your worst show ever?"

Ira Glass: What was the worst show ever. Well they all, like, want to be really bad when we're working on them. Like, they're all trying to be really mediocre. But the worst one ever…there's one called "A Night at the Wiener Circle," which didn't work out. Where we – we had spent all night at a, a, a hot dog stand. Um, and it didn't, it didn't—it didn't work out. Like, some things just don't come together no matter how hard you will them with your mind. There's a lot of ones that I really regret.

The very first one that played in Minnesota, was um – we were, we were trying so hard to get on the air in Minnesota. And um, and it was really early, it was in the first year of show, or so, and um, we just needed something to fill, so we had a theme every week and then—and then we just had, like, nothing for this, this particular week. And usually when a new station would start to run the show, we would give them, like, three or four of the best shows to start with. Um, and I don't know how it fell through the cracks, but the very first one that we did here was one we called "Fall Clearance Sale," where it was the new fall and we just took some stories that we had sitting around, which we hadn't been able to figure out, like, where else to put them. But we thought they were pretty good stories—it was, like, a David Sedaris story.

Anyways, so one of the stories was from a Web site where—where there's a Web site of a kind of beastiality, not where you have sex with the animal, but where

you actually fall in love with the animal. And um, and this woman wrote this letter to the Web site saying like, saying like, um—saying like, you know, "Please just tell me how to deal with my husband, like, I found out that, like, all these nights that he would just, like, go outside to, like, go and, like, watch the horse, that, like, he was in love with the horse. And now he wants me to just feel OK about the fact that he's been seeing our horse.

[audience laughter]

And I was asking him, like, 'Well, what's up, like what's going on?'" Like, I can tell that something that she describes, like, it seemed like—seemed like somebody who's been cheated on, except it's with a horse.

[audience laughter]

And he's not having sex with the horse, he's just in love with the horse, in this way where he's completely obsessed with it. And he's out on his wife all the time, and she's asking for advice about, like, how to deal with this, and we thought it was really, really funny.

But um, but really, like, the people who run Minnesota Public Radio are very, very nice people and really, it made them question our judgment…

[audience laughter]

That the very first show was this big thing about somebody loving a horse. And we had to backpedal pretty seriously for about six months.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: OK, a burning question for Chris, um, "What are the colors of Batgirl's outfit?"

Chris Ware: Golly. Um…

Ira Glass: Grey.

Chris Ware: Really, is this serious? Grey, yellow, blue, and that's about it, I think. Well, then she had that, like, red pouch, or something, I think. Oh, I'd never thought about that.

Ira Glass: I'm so sorry, Chris.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: It's very important to the person who asked.

Chris Ware: Wow, I'm trying to withhold my desire.
[audience laughter]

It was the red hair or something, so.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: OK, this is for Ira Glass, "Do you accept and develop unsolicited stories for *This American Life*?"

Ira Glass: The answer to that…

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Honestly.

Ira Glass: Honestly?

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Honestly.

Ira Glass: Unsolicited? Yes, we do. Yes, in fact, pretty much once every other show there's something which somebody just sent in, or pitched us. Um, if somebody here, if people here are intersted in doing that, the way to do it is to go to our Web site, go to the Frequently Asked Questions, and pitch. And the big mistakes people make when they pitch is that they don't actually seem to take into account the, the format of the stories that we do. Often people send us commentaries, or they send us things that are about incidents that are either too small, like, like, too small or too unsurprising. Like, we're doing pretty traditional narrative, so in the—you know, there are characters in a situation and at the end

of the story they've learned something they didn't know at the beginning. They change in a way that's really traditional drama. And in a way which you don't have to do if you're doing a story for, you know, for the marketplace.

[audience laughter]

You know, where you're just reporting something which is happening. A very fine show, by the way. And tomorrow night: a story on, oh never mind, on – on Joey Ramone's obsession with Maria Bartaromo. Anyway. Um, so—so yes we do, and if you want to, go to the Web site.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Chris Ware, "How do you deal with the inevitable conclusion that Jimmy Corrigan is really you?"

Chris Ware: Well, it's fair enough, I guess, I mean. Um, I mean, I guess it was more me when I was a bit younger, or something like that. I mean, I met my real dad, and um…I don't know, I guess, I mean, it's a fair enough accusation, or something like that. I hope I'm not that weird looking, but I guess I sort of am.

[audience laughter]

It's a—it's an accusation that's leveled at every, every writer, though I'm not a writer, I'm just a cartoonist, so. But I think, I mean it's certainly, Charles Schultz could – could have been accused of being Charlie Brown, and that's why he cared so much about Charlie Brown, I think. Did anybody ever see the last interview that Charles Schultz ever did? Really? It was amazing, he… it was when he announced his retirement, shortly before he died, and… I… happened to see it on a plane, my wife nudged me an- and, you know, "Put on your headphones" and I put 'em on, and then I watched Charles Schultz talk about the ending of his comic

strip and as soon as he had to mention the name of any of his characters, he burst in hysterical tears and uh, I realized, like, he, he couldn't bear to, to imagine living without these characters, which is why he died, I think, partly. I mean, that's kind of a romantic notion, but…he was an amazing cartoonist, I think he's the only cartoonist to ever…ever put that sort of feeling into cartoons, and, into, into his characters. He cared more about Charlie Brown than anybody did, so. That's sort of a long-winded answer, I think, so.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Good answer for Saint Paulites. OK, um, this is for Ira: "How"—this is a two part question, so don't answer the first one right away. "How do you feel about being a heartthrob? And why do you think you are such a heartthrob?"

[audience laughter and applause]

[more audience laughter and applause]

Ira Glass: I mean, my attitude about the whole heartthrob issue is just, "Don't think about it; don't think about it; don't think about it."

Chris Ware: At least you've got something to think about. God!
[audience laughter and applause]

Ira Glass: Hmmm. I, I think that's just really, like, it's inexplicable.

Like…um…yeah.

[audience laughter]

Sarah Vowell has said that, like anybody, like anybody who's, anybody, huh – anybody who's actually, like, wanting to get closer to me by hearing me on the radio would be put off if they would actually understand, like, my actual life, which involves working all—all the time. Um, um, yeah. And, and, and, would, and like, and, and like, whenever the whole heartthrob thing comes up, it brings out actual homicidal impulses in my actual girlfriend. Um…and I, like, and—

and why it's happened, I think, um, it's because I sound like, you know, a college-eduacated person with a job, um.

[Ware and audience laughter, some audience applause]

You know, and um, and, and for a long time, like, the show—like now there are more men on the staff, but for a long time it, it was me and three, uh, women producing the show. And as, as the show's Senior Producer Julie Snyder said, like, you know, she loves her husband, but she would love him more if every word he said was edited by three women.

[Ware and audience laughter, some audience applause]

That would kind of take kind of some of the rough edges off.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Thank you.

Ira Glass: Are people heartthroby towards you, Chris?

Chris Ware: No.

[audience laughter]

Ira Glass: Come on!

Chris Ware: No, it's true! I mean, I'm…

Ira Glass: That's because you don't draw…

Chris Ware: Who wants—who wants to do a cartoonist? I mean…

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: Things can change after tonight, I think.

Chris Ware: Yeah. No. I'm not fooling myself.

Ira Glass: It's 'cause you're so belligerently always drawing the characters so—to be so, like, sort of, desperately unnattractive. You should make them more cute!

[audience laughter]

Chris Ware: Alright. I'll get on that right away.

[audience laughter]

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: OK, Chris, here's another question from someone who must know you. Um…

Chris Ware: Oh-oh.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: "Where do you go for good eats now that the Busy Bee is no longer around?"

Chris Ware: Huh. Well, that's um, somebody from Chicago. The Busy Bee is this great restauraunt that was in the Wicker Park area that since turned into—like um, I think of it as ethnic cleasing, basically. It's just like been completely turned into condos and stuff. Um…

Ira Glass: Any morning of the week you would see, um, old Polish guys there drinking vodka.

[audience chuckle]

Chris Ware: Right, yeah. There's no place like that left around there, there's all these, like, places called, like, "Flash Taco."

[audience laughter]

Actually there's a really depressing restaurant on Lincoln Avenue that I go to every week with my friend Ivan Brunetti, and we sit around and talk about comics. And it's called The Lincoln, appropriately enough. So, if that answers—that's a clear answer to a clear question.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: OK, um, question for Ira Glass, "Do you think that traditional radio talk shows are dead?"

Ira Glass: Well, no, I don't think they're dead, they're everywhere. The thing that I always want more of on, on the radio is journalism, in general, which is that I feel like—that the way the journalism is generally done, um, it trades in stock images and ideas that we already know. That, that is that most journalism you don't feel a sense that the person doing the reporting is actually out to discover something new about the world. And so, and so, and so, you never get a sense of surprise and joy. Like, like, like, the emotions that happen in journalism don't include, usually, the notion of, like, a sense of, like, joyful surprise of like, "Oh my God, can you imagine?" You know, like, like Sam Donaldson, like, would never in the middle of an interview go, "Oh really, like I never thought of that!"

[audience laughter]

Like, his head would blow off!

[audience laughter]

And I think it's a failure of, of craft, you know—I think that's what's so, so dispiriting about, about—well, there's like, really wonderful journalism going on in, in the news. Like, we get reported the news in a way that's clear and, and fair in this country. And we—you know, that wasn't always true, so that's really a huge thing, but I guess I would be happier with it personally if there was, if there was more a sense of, of um…a sense of, like, discovering the world in the reporting. Like, like, I feel like, the news, it's, it's like, it's trying to represent the world, and the world that it represents is a world where there never is a sense of joyful surprise. And I feel like what—and often it's a world without any real emotion, except for sort of stock corny emotion, and—and I feel like that is a failure of craft. Like, that, that's belittling like that. That makes the world seem

like a place where there is no joy and surprise and that makes the world seem smaller, and it just makes us smaller. And I hate that. I, I, like—it's disappointing.

[audience applause]

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: This is the last question for Chris, um, and we have many wonderful questions. I'm sorry, we really don't have time for all of them. Chris, "Given your lousy art school experiences, how do you feel about being 'accepted by the art world,' the *Whitney Biennial*, for example? Is your inclusion just a fluke or a sign that the art world is really ready for art that has some soul?"

Chris Ware: It's a warp in the fabric in the universe, I think. Actually I shouldn't—I don't want to make it sound like I had a horrible art school experience. If I hadn't actually gone to the University of Texas I would be such an idiot—I mean, I'm already an idiot, but I would be a bigger idiot if I hadn't gone there, 'cause I had to take many classes about things I never would have learned about, and I had a—a wonderful teacher there named Richard Jordan who was a painting teacher who would come into class alternately either angry at all the students and would rip them to shreds, or then come back the next, uh, following class period and be looking like he just narrowly escaped gassing himself the night before and just amazed at the variety of what people were doing, and just like a raw nerve. He was a wonderful man, a great teacher. Um, so I—I don't want to make it—I mean, everybody has bad art school experiences. So, but, um.

Ira Glass: And the fact that you're in the *Whitney Biennial*, what do you make of that?

Chris Ware: I don't know. I really don't. I think it's—I don't know, I mean, just luck, or something, I guess, I don't know, um. I mean, I guess it's certainly—I'm extremely

flattered, I never would have expected that. I, uh, I think—I mean as far as comics go, I think it's a good thing. Maybe it'll—maybe it'll make it not so embarassing to read them, or something. Nobody wants to go to a comic shop and buy them. And they're still in the most depressing part of any book store, next to the role playing games and science fiction.

[audience laughter]

Um, maybe someday that'll change before I'm dead, but I don't know. Depressing to go into a book store and see them there, but.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles: It's already—it's already happening. And people want to go out and buy them out in the lobby and have some refreshments and talk to you. So, thank you both very much.

Chris Ware: Don't feel any pressure, just …

[audience applause]