INTERVIEWS

On Cartooning

"Hergé has been perhaps the greatest single visual influence on my own work, but my approach to making comics is quite different." Jason Lutes, author of *Berlin*, talks about reading *The Adventures of Tintin* as a kid.

MORE SPECIAL FEATURES:
ESSAY
Tintin in America

Jessica Abel | Daniel Clowes | Phoebe Gloeckner | Jason Lutes | Seth | Chris Ware

P.O.V.: Your linework is very crisp and clean, and remniscient of the *ligne claire* ("clear line") style Hergé employed when drawing the iconic characters of *Tintin*. That style contrasts with the unusually realistic landscapes and backgrounds of the worlds Tintin visits and inhabits. As Scott McCloud pointed out in *Understanding Comics*, this contrast gives the effect of allowing the reader to" mask themselves in a character and safely enter a stimulating world." "One set of line," he writes, "allows readers to *see*; the other to *be*."

Describe your illustrative strategy or style as you see it. How did you arrive at it? How do you feel it's been most effective? Did it come naturally or did you struggle to find it? When does it not work?

JASON LUTES: I agree somewhat with Scott's analysis of the relationship between the reader, Tintin, and Tintin's world, and Hergé has been perhaps the greatest single visual influence on my own work, but my approach to making comics is quite different. I'm not trying to create a stand-in or avatar with whom the reader can identify, but separate, believable characters with distinct personalities; I'm trying to place the reader more in the role of observer [rather] than that of participant.

I think this approach comes out of my own personal desire and struggle to understand our world, and the complex interactions of people with one another and their environment. My work is an improvised exploration of this complexity, as opposed to a structured, plot-driven narrative. Although my earlier work had a more internal focus, my current approach has evolved naturally from it. The challenge I face now is to keep this non-traditional approach engaging and accessible without compromising its exploratory nature.

P.O.V.: You've become best known for *Berlin*, a comic series that has been described as historical fiction: it is Germany seen through the lives of characters living in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the

ENLARGE IMAGE

Jason Lutes

"Hergé has been perhaps the greatest single visual influence on my own work, but my approach to making comics is quite different."
—Jason Lutes

the lives of characters living in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the years prior to fascism and World War II. You've said you are a fan of *Tintin*, in which Hergé traveled vicariously through his hero to foreign places he'd never visited. I wonder if you could talk about your own connection to *Tintin*, and how that might relate to the drawing of *Berlin*.

JASON: Another thing Scott McCloud says about Hergé is that he created a world with "an equal democracy of form." That is, regardless of whether it was Marlinspike Hall, a Chinese steam engine, or a Peruvian blanket, Hergé drew everything at the same level of detail. As an adult, I realize now that the way he rendered the world on the page has had an enormous effect on my own development as a cartoonist, beginning when I first read *Cigars of the Pharaohs* at age six.

Through mastering the physical characteristics of every thing that might fill a given panel, and rendering each with restraint and only a little inflection, Hergé created a convincing reality for his characters and readers to inhabit. There is a kind of knowledge gained through drawing from close observation — an understanding of the physical world, its separate components, their interconnectedness — that the reader can see growing in Hergé when his body of work is examined in chronological order. In my attempt to recreate the look and feel of Berlin in the 1920s, I strive for a similar level of coherence and believability, but am (alas) much more prone to stylistic indulgences than Hergé ever was.

P.O.V.: How have you researched the material in *Berlin*? Where do you take liberties with the history — or are you even conscious of taking liberties? What inspired you to create the series?

JASON: After completing my first comics novel, *Jar of Fools*, I knew I wanted to do something that would really challenge my ability as a cartoonist. I was leafing through a magazine one day and saw an advertisement for a book called *Bertolt Brecht's Berlin: A Scrapbook of the Twenties*, accompanied by a short blurb that sparked my interest. Without really knowing much more about the period than what I had seen in *Cabaret* and inferred through *Threepenny Opera*, I decided right then that my next book would be about Berlin in the '20s and '30s, that it would be broad in scope and substantial in length.

Between making that decision and drawing the first panel of the story, I spent about two years collecting reference materials and reading everything I could about Weimar Germany, German culture, European history and the city of Berlin. Tacked up on the wall over my drawing table are several maps of the city from 1928, which help me envision the geographic relationships of landmarks and neighborhoods. Since comics is a visual medium, photographs, paintings, and drawings from the period are of particular interest, and the more mundane the better — it's easy to find images of the Brandenburg Gate or the Reichstag, but things like doorknobs and kitchen utensils are of much greater interest to me.

I try to be as faithful as possible to the facts as I understand them, but any story is at least partly a product of the imagination. I can comprehend a lot by immersing myself in all of the information I've collected, but my imagination is what brings it to life, and the bridging of that gap — between the received history and the conceived fiction — is both the most difficult and most enjoyable part of the process for me.

P.O.V.: How do you feel about your recurring characters? How real do they become to you as you work and live with them over the years? Do you imagine them having a life independent of the comic?

JASON: I care very much about all of my characters, recurring or not. All of the primary and secondary characters in *Berlin* have lives that extend past what I show on the page, and every time I draw

Related Links:

Drawn and Quarterly: Jason Lutes
The artist's page on his publisher's website.

"I personally have no need to make a strict definition of the medium. I am more interested in what can be done *with* comics than how it can be described, and if I want to remain truly open to the creative possibilities, the less I define the medium, the better."

—Jason Lutes

ENLARGE IMAGE

someone's face, even if he or she just appears for a panel or two, I try to imagine something about that person beyond his or her physical appearance. After creating them, part of my job is to inhabit them and try to see their world from their perspective.

P.O.V.: Describe your working process. Do you work daily? When you begin a comic, do you start with image, or with text? What are the raw materials of a story? Do you always know what is going to happen, or does the story take turns that surprise you?

JASON: I work five days a week, Monday through Friday, from about 7:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. with a few short breaks. The process starts with the writing in coffee shops around town, which is more like story-boarding than writing in the usual sense; for each page of a comic I make a little thumbnail diagram to work out panel divisions and the placement of visual elements (characters, word balloons, etc.) within them, writing out the dialogue alongside. I try to make comics that integrate words and pictures thoroughly, so I need to see how the dialogue is going to fit into the page layout. Also, since an important formal unit of the medium is the page, and the turning of the page is a built-in pacing mechanism, I need to consider carefully what comes before and after each page break. This consideration of the page as a narrative measure, along with sustained left-to-right movement throughout a given story, is something I picked up from studying Hergé. Working from and remaining largely faithful to that thumbnail script, I then move on to penciling and then inking the full pages.

Storytelling for me evolves intuitively from the interaction of various elements — things I've put down on the page, formal constraints and everything I have in my head. The basic structure of *Berlin* is defined by a handful of key historical events, and my job is to get from one to another in a way that makes sense and feels more or less "true." At practically every level, the way I make comics is an act of improvising within structural boundaries. There's a rough plan, with a beginning, middle and an end, but how I get from one point to another is unknown at the outset, and a large part of what keeps me engaged. It's an exploration for me, and hopefully for the reader as well.

P.O.V.: Marshall McLuhan, author of the 1967 book *The Medium is the Massage*, wrote about the differences between what he called "hot" media versus "cool" media. Hot media, like movies and radio, he said, were dense with data and therefore demanded only a passive audience, whereas "cool" media, lo-fi and utilizing iconic forms, required active, involved audience participation. His examples of "cool" media are television and comics. Do you agree with McLuhan's assessment?

JASON: Absolutely. I love and admire McLuhan's work. The first time I read *The Medium is the Massage*, I experienced it as an affirmation of things I had long felt but would have never been able to articulate. While we can generalize when describing a given medium as hot or cool, all media can be said to possess both hot and cool aspects to varying degrees, and part of what I try to do with comics is figure out when and how the temperature needs raising or lowering.

P.O.V.: What were some of the first comics you read? How do you think they found their way into your work, consciously or perhaps unintentionally? Who are some of your other influences, in comics and in other forms, such as art, literature and pop culture?

JASON: The first comics I read were Marvel comics in the early 70s, most memorably westerns like *The Rawhide Kid* and superhero comics like *The Avengers* and *Captain America*. Some *Tintin* albums found their way into my hands a little later, and of all of the influences present in my work, I am most conscious of Hergé.

Students at the Academy of Art from the point of view of their figure model (detail). From *Berlin: City of Stones*, p. 31. Copyright Jason Lutes. Courtesy Drawn & Quarterly.

"At practically every level, the way I make comics is an act of improvising within structural boundaries. There's a rough plan, with a beginning, middle and an end, but how I get from one point to another is unknown at the outset, and a large part of what keeps me engaged."

—Jason Lutes

ENLARGE IMAGE

I am constantly absorbing things that then come out in my work, mostly from the great wide world outside my front door, but over the years, some specific artistic influences have become apparent to me. The late 1980s were particularly inspiring as far as comics go: Art Spiegelman's *RAW Magazine* expanded my understanding of the expressive potential of the medium; the work of Chester Brown showed me how to slow things down; and the great Ben Katchor helped me see comics as a kind of poetry.

From *Berlin: City of Stones*, p. 57 (detail). Copyright Jason Lutes. Courtesy Drawn & Quarterly.

Film has had an enormous effect on me, but more in my general development of a visual and sequential vocabulary than through the work of specific directors (although I am currently enamored of the stratum of filmmakers that includes David O. Russell, Spike Jonze and Sofia Coppola). In terms of writing, I love Haruki Murakami, William Faulkner and Anton Chekhov, but I'd be hard-pressed to demonstrate how any of them has influenced my work.

P.O.V.: Although some have approached its widespread popularity, there is no exact parallel to *Tintin* in American comics. Why do you think this is so? What in American comics comes closest to *Tintin* and approximating the cult of Tintin? In other media?

"...of all of the influences present in my work, I am most conscious of Hergé."

—Jason Lutes

JASON: That's a hard one to answer. It seems to me that any popular fictional character's appeal is idiosyncratic in nature, so finding anything "like Tintin" is likely impossible. Characters with large followings — Sherlock Holmes, Harry Potter, the crew of the Starship Enterprise — seem to embody something very particular even as they speak to something within a huge number of people. When I think of the most time-tested examples, the common thread appears to be an author who feels deeply for what he is creating, and even though Tintin might not be considered "deep," Hergé's discipline and devotion to his chosen protagonist is anchored somewhere in the vicinity of the Lost Unicorn.

P.O.V.: Graphic novels and comics have become popular even among mainstream audiences right now, especially with movie adaptations of non-superhero comics like *V for Vendetta, Sin City, American Splendor, Ghost World, A History of Violence*, and, just out at the time of this interview, *Art School Confidential.* In the United States, graphic novel sales have more than tripled to $245 million in recent years. Yet bookstores still often have a hard time deciding where to shelve them: some finally have been given their own section, but often you have to look in the Humor section. Nearly every review or article written about them still includes a definition of the genre, as if a reader would have no preconceived idea of what a comic or graphic novel is, implying that the form is largely misunderstood. Why do you think it's taken so long for comics and graphic novels to become as popular as they are now? Why do you think this implied need to define comics still exists? Do you have your own definition?

ENLARGE IMAGE

Journalist Kurt Severing reflects on the state of affairs in late 1928 (detail). From *Berlin: City of Stones*, p. 80. Copyright Jason Lutes. Courtesy Drawn & Quarterly.

JASON: I personally have no need to make a strict definition of the medium. I am more interested in what can be done *with* comics than how it can be described, and if I want to remain truly open to the creative possibilities, the less I define the medium, the better.

The ongoing effort to broaden the public perception of comics has been long and slow for two reasons that I can see: the preceding cultural definition in America became entrenched over the course of a century, and we still have only a handful of works that can be cited as examples of comics outside of that definition. If there were a volume and variety of comics equivalent to that found in any other medium, the question would be moot; the disappointing truth is that it would take you a week (maybe a month, tops) to read every single non-superhero comics novel currently in print in America. The simple fact is that public opinion changes incrementally because exemplary comics get produced incrementally, regardless of how much their validity is promoted.

P.O.V.: Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Lichtenstein, and other

artists like Raymond Pettibon have certainly been influenced by comics and have incorporated elements of them into their paintings. (Warhol was particularly influenced by Hergé.) And of course, Art Spiegelman really struck a nerve with a literary and a mainstream audience with *Maus*. In the last few years, a number of literary journals have been devoting space to comics; the *New York Times* magazine began serializing comics in 2005, beginning with Chris Ware's. Although for years comics have been denigrated as a so-called "low art" category, it appears they're becoming more widely accepted and perhaps even validated as a form of art and a long literary narrative. Would you agree with this? Is "form" the right word here? Do you think that this kind of validation is inhibiting in any way, that comics are in danger of becoming less rebellious or creatively free because they're more accepted and being published in the mainstream?

JASON: I think more mainstream visibility is great, and I don't see any danger of it watering down the medium. Wider public validation is just another restraint that rebellious practitioners can (and hopefully will) chafe against.

I loathe high/low art distinctions in any case, so the crossing and re-crossing of that line is an act to be savored and celebrated, regardless of how it turns out. I consider that transgressive aspect of the medium one of its great strengths. In the way comics is both words and pictures while being neither, comics is the Trickster's medium, and as such I would be happy if no one ever knew what to do with it.

"In the way comics is both words and pictures while being neither, comics is the Trickster's medium, and as such I would be happy if no one ever knew what to do with it."

—Jason Lutes

P.O.V.: How is cartooning different for you as a creative process than working in other artistic or literary genres and forms?

JASON: I love writing and the little filmmaking I have attempted, but comics is the means of artistic expression that feels most comfortable to me. It's also still a largely uncharted medium with enormous unrealized potential. I like finding new ways to communicate an idea or a feeling, ways that can't be duplicated in other media, so I take great pleasure in the invention and exploration that comics necessitates.

P.O.V.: Hergé underwent a period of despair and anxiety during which he suffered recurring nightmares filled with whiteness — certainly iconic dreams for a cartoonist! Eventually, after psychoanalysis, he emerged with a new direction: *Tintin in Tibet*, with its stark alpine landscapes and minimalist cast and story, was a major departure for Hergé. Do you have periods when you lose faith in your work? How have you handled them? What do you feel is your greatest creative or artistic accomplishment?

JASON: In the course of working on *Berlin*, I have often questioned the wisdom of my decision to take on the project, and have faltered on more than one occasion. Along with financial concerns, this occasional wavering of commitment is part of the reason it's taken me ten years to write and draw up to the halfway point of the story — 300 out of 600 pages. I usually cope with the difficult times by switching gears and doing other work, like short stories or illustration, but currently I am working on *Berlin* full time and am feeling content and optimistic about it. No doubt more struggle awaits ahead.

Hopefully when it is complete, I will be happy with *Berlin* and regard it as a worthwhile accomplishment. Aside from that, the piece I like most is a short story called "Rules to Live By," which appeared in a little-seen anthology called *Autobiographix*. It's the only directly autobiographical work I've ever done, and documents a difficult and transformative period of my life.

"Although my decision to write and draw *Berlin* was not consciously motivated by American politics, and came instead out of a desire to 'read history and know my place in time,' relating present-day politics to those of Germany in the 1920s is inevitable, and brings with it a host of parallels and contradictions."

—Jason Lutes

P.O.V.: How does politics influence or impact your work in comics (or not)? Has it had a lesser or greater effect over the years?

JASON: The specifics of day-to-day politics don't have much of an effect on my work, but I'm drawn to larger questions of human nature and how it has informed politics throughout history. Although my decision to write and draw *Berlin* was not consciously motivated by American politics, and came instead out of a desire to "read history and know my place in time," relating present-day politics to those of Germany in the 1920s is inevitable, and brings with it a host of parallels and contradictions.

P.O.V.: What are you working on now?

JASON: I recently completed writing a comics novella about Harry Houdini (illustrated by Nick Bertozzi), for Hyperion Books and am currently at work on chapter 14 of *Berlin: City of Smoke*, the second book in my Berlin trilogy.

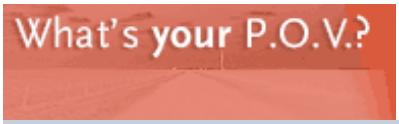
Rebecca Bengal conducted this interview via email for P.O.V.

Next:
Seth »

ON CARTOONING | THE INTERVIEWS:
Jessica Abel . Jason Lutes . Jason Lutes
Jason Lutes . Seth . Chris Ware

TOP OF PAGE

TELL A FRIEND
ABOUT THIS SITE



Share your reactions to "Tintin and I" with us: talk about the film with other viewers or ask the filmmaker a question.

P.O.V. > **Tintin and I:** Film Update | Special Features | Behind the Lens | Talking Back
Resources | For Educators | About the Film

Posted June 29, 2006

Premiered: July 11, 2006 at 10PM | Check for Rebroadcasts

INTERVIEWS

On Cartooning

"If I was talking to a young cartoonist I would certainly tell him/her not to worry about style. It will take care of itself." Comic artist Seth talks about how he developed his unique visual style.

MORE SPECIAL FEATURES:
ESSAY
Tintin in America

Jessica Abel | Daniel Clowes | Phoebe Gloeckner | Jason Lutes | Seth | Chris Ware

Seth

P.O.V.: The *ligne claire* ("clear line") style Hergé employed when drawing the iconic characters of *Tintin* contrasts with the unusually realistic landscapes and backgrounds of the worlds Tintin visits and inhabits. As Scott McCloud pointed out in his book *Understanding Comics*, this contrast gives the effect of allowing the comic reader to "mask themselves in a character and safely enter a stimulating world." "One set of line," he writes, "allows readers to *see*; the other to *be*."

Your style is extremely distinctive: evocative and impressionistic in its use of light and shadow, with a compelling urgency of movement through the story. Describe your own illustrative strategy as you see it. How did you arrive at it? How do you feel it's been most effective? Did you struggle to find it or did it come naturally? When does it not work?

SETH: Style is a funny word — we all think we know what it means because we look at a cartoonist's work and we see the evidence of it there. It is right on the surface. However, the funny thing about style is that it is a misleading concept. Many young artists (myself included when I was younger) have the mistaken idea that you pick a style and draw in that style. Some people manage to do it this way. However, in my own experience it seems more likely that the style picks you. It is something that grows out of a series of choices when you are learning to cartoon. If, for example, you decide to simplify the drawings down to their most basic shapes (to aid in clear storytelling), then those choices in simplification decide your style. Perhaps you chose circles for heads and blank backgrounds — there is your style. Maybe you preferred a more atmospheric approach and you used a lot of crosshatching to define your figures — another style. Ultimately, a million choices are made in trying to figure out how to tell a comic story and these little choices (e.g., How do I draw a nose simply?) add up to a style.

This is the process that evolved my style. I certainly didn't realize it at the time, but the way I draw now is the result of thousands of such choices over the years. When I was in my early twenties I didn't really have a clear drawing style and I was worried about

"Many young artists (myself included when I was younger) have the mistaken idea that you pick a style and draw in that style. Some people manage to do it this way. However, in my own experience it seems more likely that the style picks you."

acquiring one. I drew one strip in an Edward Gorey style and another in a clean line approach. I didn't know what I was doing. A few years later I was surprised to discover that I had developed some sort of style of my own by simply trying to learn to draw a comic book. It happened while I wasn't paying attention. If I was talking to a young cartoonist I would certainly tell him/her not to worry about style. It will take care of itself. Instead pay attention to the details of your craft.

On the matter of "masking" — I'm not so sure I accept that idea. I don't think I experience this effect when I'm reading a comic myself. I simply enter into the reality of it in the same way I would a prose novel. I don't need an iconic representation in a novel to enter into the world of the story. I merely need to decode the words and have them unfold in my mind into pictures. I believe a comic does exactly the same thing, except with the comic book you must decode both the words and the pictures and combine them in your mind into a single unit. I believe this is why Hergé's clear line approach is so effective. The drawings are really a series of simplified picture symbols that are as easy for your reading brain to decode as the words are. They are remarkably clear. He is never deliberately trying to create any ambiguity in the drawings. If you had to pause to figure out the drawings in a *Tintin* comic, I would be surprised. Hergé has done a masterful job at making the storytelling clear. This straightforward approach to storytelling is exactly what I am aiming at myself in my own work and Hergé was a large influence on my thinking back when I was young and trying to figure out how to tell a story.

P.O.V.: Among your most well-known characters are traveling salesmen and comic book collectors. How do you feel about your recurring characters? How real do they become to you as you work and live with them over the years? Do you imagine them having a life independent of the comic?

SETH: Writers often say that the characters come to life for them but sadly, that has not fully been my experience with them. Perhaps if, like Charles Schulz, you have drawn them for 50 years they come to life for you. I find that I have a good understanding of my characters and I know how they would "act" in a certain situation, but they are too fully made up out of bits and pieces for me to think of them as real. They are stitched together from parts of myself and other people and things I have read in books or imagined; Frankenstein monsters more than real people.

I suppose, in a vague sense, they live outside of me. I do feel that with a character like Wimbledon Green, that he carries on somehow after the book is finished. If I wanted to, I could sort of squint and take a look and see what he is "up to" and then write another comic story about him. But that all seems to be happening in some dark, rarely visited back corner of my brain.

Generally, I am not much interested in continuing characters (for my own work). I like to come up with a story that has a beginning and an end. However, I don't impose that restriction on others. Sometimes a continuing character works. As a reader, I often want more of a character after I finish a book — so I am no different than any other reader. The temptation to return to a character who has been well received is a difficult one for a cartoonist — and it is easy to make a mistake and return to that well one too many times and find it has run dry. The history of cartooning is mostly the history of famous cartoon "characters" — not powerful or meaningful stories. As an artist — I am not overly concerned with creating characters. Mostly I am trying to capture something about life itself and convey it through the person who the story is about. Hopefully they become interesting people rather than great cartoon characters.

P.O.V.: Describe your working process. Do you work daily? When you begin a comic, do you start with image, or with text? What are the raw materials of a story? Do you always know what is going to

—Seth

Related Links:

Drawn and Quarterly: Seth
The artist's page on his publisher's website

Fantagraphics Books: The Complete Peanuts
Seth designed this 25-volume set of Charles Schulz's classic *Peanuts.*

"If you had to pause to figure out the drawings in a *Tintin* comic, I would be surprised. Hergé has done a masterful job at making the storytelling clear. This straightforward approach to storytelling is exactly what I am aiming at myself in my own work and Hergé was a large influence on my thinking back when I was young and trying to figure out how to tell a story."

—Seth

happen, or does the story take turns that surprise you?

SETH: I work everyday. Though I work on a wide variety of projects and some days I don't get to do any cartooning — I may just be drawing or designing for a commercial project. I find that the longer the period is between actually working on a comic strip, the more likely I am to be depressed. Something about cartooning is just more satisfying to me than any other artistic pursuit (though it is also more difficult). Usually my ideas come to me in a vague form — just a feeling or a situation or a setting — and then as I develop the idea it constitutes itself into a comic form in my brain. Not that it becomes anything complete, merely that I start to see it with a kind of structure or rhythm. In other words, much like a writer might start to put together sentences in his mind to describe the scene he is imagining, I start to imagine comic panels and the sequences they may flow in. When I actually sit down and start drawing little thumbnail sketches of the strip, it may take on an entirely separate narrative flow, but it usually starts with at least one simple sequence — say, a character rising from his bed while recalling a dream. It never starts as a series of words that then have pictures added to them. I would imagine a filmmaker thinks in a somewhat similar way — imagining scenes with movement rather than just characters' dialogue which will then need some visuals.

ENLARGE IMAGE

The Clyde Fans Company's neglected storefront — closed after 44 years of continuous business. From *Clyde Fans: Book One*, p. 11. Copyright Seth. Courtesy Drawn & Quarterly.

A lot of my story ideas take years to develop, usually starting with something very nebulous, like an interesting building I might see on a drive somewhere, and then over time other little odd bits and pieces will be added to it. Perhaps I will read a book and it will mention some occupation that interests me (a trainspotter for example) and I might then imagine that this fellow lives in that house. Eventually these things come together into some sort of an empty skeleton. I often have many of these skeletons rattling around in my brain. What changes them into real material for me is if something human from my own life gets added to them to make them vital. Perhaps this guy will become the vehicle to discuss the relationship I have with my father (or some such thing). When this alchemy happens I am often surprised. The stories themselves are always a bit of a surprise to me because I never really try to come up with "plots" for them and so I don't really know what they are about (in some ways) until they are up and running.

P.O.V.: You've said that comic writing is much like poetry because so much depends on rhythm; you also said you believe comics are closer to being like a combination of poetry and design than drawings and literature, or film and literature. Can you talk a little more about what you mean by that — and how cartooning is different for you as a creative process than working in other genres like illustration and design?

SETH: Illustration and design are almost purely visual activities while comics is mostly a storytelling medium. That makes them very different right from the start. While working on those activities I am merely thinking of trying to create something aesthetically pleasing that treats the viewer with some kind of respect. I try to get some sort of sense of humor into it too — and some beauty. All of my art has a real hand-done feeling to it so I want it to be beautiful in some fundamental way — it should look human and warm.

"The temptation to return to a character who has been well received is a difficult one for a cartoonist — and it is easy to make a mistake and return to that well one too many times and find it has run dry."
—Seth

Now comics — that is a lot more complicated. In comics I am trying to be an "artist" in the bigger sense, and I'm trying to convey something of real life experience. Every day I go down into my

studio and I feel a real variety of human emotions — the whole experience of spending so much time alone (which a cartoonist must do simply to do the work) engaged in introspection and memory really fires my entire purpose as an artist. It is very frustrating to me that this deepest [level] of feeling is the hardest thing to get down on the page. I don't feel I have ever managed to get even a tenth of it into anything I do. I think as a human being there is a strong desire to communicate to others all that turmoil of emotion that is locked up inside of us. The experience of inside and outside is so profound — we live in this exterior world but everything is understood from inside our minds. We really live in here and not out there. That interior landscape is so difficult to portray — but that seems to be the thing most important to try to share.

As for comics and poetry: The connection between the two is fairly obvious if you've ever sat down to write a one-page comic. The entire process is concerned with rhythm and condensed language. In many ways, the restrictions placed on a cartoonist when he writes (amount of text that will fit in a wood balloon or caption) and the very nature of how reading panels creates a rhythm, a cadence, in the reader's mind makes a pretty good case for comparing the two disciplines.

P.O.V.: Marshall McLuhan, author of the 1967 book *The Medium is the Massage*, wrote about the differences between what he called "hot" media versus "cool" media. Hot media, like movies and radio, he said, were dense with data and therefore demanded only a passive audience, whereas "cool" media, lo-fi and utilizing iconic forms, required active, involved audience participation. His examples of "cool" media are television and comics. Do you agree with McLuhan's assessment?

SETH: Being a fellow Canadian, I agree with McLuhan on nationalistic terms alone. Seriously, though, I think McLuhan is dead right. It could be simply self-interest but I do think that comics (like prose) require a more active involvement of the reader. As I mentioned earlier, simply reading a comic book is a process of deciphering the words and images simultaneously. That sounds rather impressive, but of course, if you've read any comic (even *Garfield*, for example) you realize that it is a rather natural process and doesn't require any study. Whenever I hear someone say they met someone who doesn't know how to read a comic book I am always perplexed. It seems pretty easy to me. If you are having too much trouble reading a comic I suspect the cartoonist has done a poor job of his storytelling.

Simple or not, I do believe comics are an inherently fascinating art medium. In the hands of a talented and ambitious cartoonist the work can be an extremely layered reading experience, and can involve as much analysis from the reader as they wish to put into it. I think the electronic media of film and television can be as richly layered — but I would agree with McLuhan that the viewer is mostly in a passive state while taking it in. They are both more clearly group experiences, too. Reading remains a more intimate process — one to one. That one to one relationship between artist and reader appeals to me.

P.O.V.: You're redesigning *The Complete Peanuts* as a 25-book series for Fantagraphics; you've also said that you were significantly influenced by *Tintin*. How have these comics found their way into your work, consciously or perhaps unintentionally? What about other influences of yours, like the short stories of Alice Munro?

SETH: Personally I am a sponge when it comes to influences. I have been influenced by an endless stream of other artists and writers and filmmakers. At some point the word "influence" seems to be a poor choice, because after a certain age you are less being influenced than simply outright stealing from your peers (which I have certainly done). Generally, when I consider my influences. I

ENLARGE IMAGE

Simon Matchcard makes a sales call at the Dominion General Store. From *Clyde Fans: Book One*, p. 99. Copyright Seth. Courtesy Drawn & Quarterly.

"I find that the longer the period is between actually working on a comic strip, the more likely I am to be depressed. Something about cartooning is just more satisfying to me than any other artistic pursuit (though it is also more difficult)."

—Seth

tend to go back to the "seminal" — the ones I was drawn to at a young age and had tried my best to absorb whatever I could from them. Schulz was the most powerful. His work interested me at an early age and has continued all of my life. I didn't understand as a child why I was drawn to his work (I just thought it was funny) but later, in my early twenties, I began to go back and reread all of those *Peanuts* books I had loved as a kid. I came to really see and appreciate the sensitive genius he was. Unlike any other cartoonist working in that commercial venue, Schulz managed to infuse a very personal and idiosyncratic vision into what was essentially a kiddie gag strip. The work had a lot of black humor, and it was sad, poignant and dark, but not in a calculated way. Schulz was simply fusing his own inner life with the characters. It touched people even if they never understood why they were responding to it. He really was one of a kind. Funny, smart, subtle, mean and emotional. A rare type to find working in newspaper strips in those days.

Later, I discovered Robert Crumb. Crumb is surprisingly like Schulz in that he used comics as a natural outlet for his own inner life. Unlike Schulz, he was not restrained by the conventional media, nor was he from the same generation as Schulz. Crumb's self-expression was markedly bolder and more startling, but essentially, these two artists are not that different from each other. Both of them are amazing examples for a young cartoonist — neither compromised their vision in any way. They both took what was a straightforward commercial art medium and used it as a very personal method of self-expression. These men were great pointers for a young artist to follow.

When I was about 19 or 20 I began to be interested in the three artists that would hold my interest in that first half of my twenties: Crumb, J. D. Salinger and Woody Allen. The last two have slipped somewhat from my radar over the last decade, but in those years these men were very influential in my thinking. In retrospect, it tells me a lot about myself that I was drawn to these three artists and not others. All of them were somewhat introspective and backward-looking and none of them were artists with a capital "A." I certainly wouldn't put myself in a list with these men, but these are the qualities that I was clearly looking for in them.

There are many artists who have been important to me since them, and out of those a good number of artists I am most drawn to are oddball loner types — somehow I really admire these characters who produced art for such personal reasons (often getting little positive feedback from the outside world). That purity is very appealing. And certainly in the last decade I have found myself responding heavily to a handful of Japanese writers from the early 20th century (Tanizaki, Kawabata, Mishima, etc.) whose slow and patient interior storytelling appeals to me greatly. Alice Munro is definitely among my very favorite writers simply because she has such a deep, deep understanding of the inner life. I would never list her as an influence because what she does is mysterious and is something beyond my ability to incorporate or even outright steal.

As for *Tintin*: Hergé came along at just the right time for me. I started studying his work in my early twenties, and this was when I really needed some examples of how to tell a story clearly and cleanly. That brilliant clarity of line and design in *Tintin* was the object lesson I needed.

P.O.V.: Although some have approached its widespread popularity, there is no exact parallel to *Tintin* in American comics. Why do you think this is so? What in American comics comes closest to *Tintin* and approximating the cult of Tintin? In other media?

SETH: It probably has something to do with national character. America and France/Belgium are such different places and I think the popular media of these two cultures reflects something on the character of the countries themselves. America adopted the superhero as its model (eventually) and this seems to have filled the

ENLARGE IMAGE

From *Clyde Fans: Book One*. Copyright Seth. Courtesy Drawn & Quarterly.

"Crumb is, surprisingly, like Schulz in that he used comics as a natural outlet for his own inner life. Unlike Schulz, he was not restrained by the conventional media, nor was he from the same generation as Schulz."

—Seth

same role for young children that Tintin filled for much of the rest of the world. The difference between a Tintin and a Superman is an interesting comparison, and I think it says an awful lot about how Americans view themselves vs. how Europeans do. I don't think it is a coincidence that both of these iconic figures rose to popularity during the thirties and WWII. I won't bore you with an essay about what these two characters represent. I think it is pretty obvious right on the surface.

Certainly Hergé's example was a better model for producing lasting cartooning. The very format of the hardcover *Tintin* albums vs. the disposable pamplets of the American comic books meant that the North American artists would naturally be viewed differently than their European counterparts. It has made for a longer steeper climb for cartoons to find an adult audience over here in America.

ENLARGE IMAGE

From *Wimbledon Green*, p. 14. Copyright Seth. Courtesy Drawn & Quarterly.

P.O.V.: Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Lichtenstein, and other artists like Raymond Pettibo, have certainly been influenced by comics and have incorporated elements of them into their paintings. (Warhol was particularly influenced by Hergé.) And of course, Art Spiegelman really struck a nerve with a literary and a mainstream audience with *Maus*. In the last few years, a number of literary journals have been devoting space to comics; the *New York Times* magazine began serializing comics in 2005, beginning with Chris Ware's. Although for years comics have been denigrated as a so-called "low art" category, it appears they're becoming not only more popular and widely accepted, but perhaps even validated as a form of art and a long literary narrative. Would you agree with this? Is "form" the right word here? Do you think that this kind of validation is inhibiting in any way, that comics are in danger of becoming less rebellious or creatively free because they're more accepted and being published in the mainstream?

SETH: It has been a long uphill climb for the lowly comic artist. Lately, it seems as if we have finally gotten our heads out of the water and have made some important steps to get out onto the beach. Personally, I think this is great. I have no desire to hang onto any kind of outsider status. I would like the comic book (or "graphic novel") to be a perfectly legitimate medium for artistic pursuit. We are much closer to people perceiving it that way. I think there are currently a handful of cartoonists working today at a level that is equal to any other group of artists in any of the other mediums. I can't control how the work will be perceived or labeled — I simply know that the comic medium is like any other medium. It has its own strengths and weaknesses and it is only as good an artistic tool as the artists who practice it. It has a lot of negative baggage as a junk medium — but film and photography were once in this camp also. I have faith in it. However, the outside attention that comics has been receiving in the last few years has been very gratifying. I've noticed a large change in how my own work is being received. Things have changed significantly in a pretty short time period. I have no worries about the rebelliousness of the medium being squashed — already a new generation of cartoonists has risen up behind me that seems to be rebelling against all the directions we took. It appears to me that this new generation wants to get some "fun" back into the medium and that they aren't all that interested in producing "long and complex" narratives like the "old farts" of my cartooning generation. The comic book has real roots in the junk culture and no matter how much highfalutin acceptance it gets there will always be a contingent of cartoonists waiting to remind us of its origins. Which is also a good thing.

"'Do you have periods where you lose faith in your work?' Yes — those periods are called 'every day.' I find the process of cartooning a genuine struggle."

—Seth

P.O.V.: Do you think it's also fair to say that a division or tension exists within the world of American comics, between the mainstream daily syndicated comic strip world or, say the *New Yorker* cartoon world, of which you are a part, and the comics underground/graphic novel world, of which you are also a part?

SETH: They are all part of some kind of a continuum because they are all forms of cartooning. But — the intentions of the artists

"When I first read of Hergé's troubles, years ago, I was not surprised. It seems an archetypal cartoonist story. The fact

they are all forms of cartooning. But — the intentions of the artists in these various camps are quite different. I can respect and enjoy cartooning that strives for more traditional goals (e.g., simply going for a laugh) but I don't feel a great affinity necessarily with these cartoonists. I would probably feel more of a connection with another artist (of any medium really) simply based on what their artistic intentions are. For me it is a desire to communicate something of the inner life. In some ways this is probably closer to a contemporary fiction writer than a newspaper comic strip artist or a *New Yorker* gag cartoonist. That doesn't mean I don't feel any connection to these artists — I do. But it is often based more on a shared cartooning history rather than where we are heading.

P.O.V.: Hergé underwent a period of despair and anxiety during which he suffered recurring nightmares filled with whiteness — certainly iconic dreams for a cartoonist! Eventually, after psychoanalysis, he emerged with a new direction: *Tintin in Tibet,* with its stark alpine landscapes and minimalist cast and story, was a major departure for Hergé. Do you have periods when you lose faith in your work? How have you handled them? What do you feel is your greatest creative or artistic accomplishment?

SETH: "Do you have periods where you lose faith in your work?" Yes — those periods are called "every day." I find the process of cartooning a genuine struggle. You must have the confidence in yourself to pursue your work and publish it (you've got to have some faith in it to send it out into the world) but you must also have enough doubt about what you are doing to constantly try to tear it apart and try to make it better. It is a tightrope walk that is never very pleasant.

A cartoonist has a very isolated job. You sit in a room with yourself everyday, all day. You have to come to some sort of truce with yourself. It is difficult to do, and easy to become depressed or melancholic. When I first read of Hergé's troubles, years ago, I was not surprised. It seems an archetypal cartoonist story. The fact that this depression became fodder for his work strikes me as just what I would expect. You work it out at the drawing board — I could relate to that.

As for my greatest creative accomplishment — that is the work yet to come. I like some of what I have produced and others, not so much. The work that most holds my interest is the work-to-be.

P.O.V.: How does politics influence or impact your work in comics (or not)? Has it had a lesser or greater effect over the years?

SETH: I am really not much of a political person. I have political beliefs, but they don't occupy a large part of my daily life. I am so utterly self-obsessed that my main artistic concerns are generally informed more by my inner world than the political realities of the outer world. Clearly I am a typical product of this pampered North American affluence in that I can afford to be complacent and contemplate my own navel. When the end of the world hits (any day now) I am sure I will suddenly find out what a sheltered cry-baby I was. But it will be too late then to have made any effort to prevent what I am currently ignoring.

P.O.V.: What are you working on now?

SETH: I am plowing ahead with the second part of my book *Clyde Fans*. I hope to have a good chunk of it done by the end of this year and the whole book hopefully finished up in another year after that (with luck). Look for the next issue of *Comic Art* Magazine (no. 8) for a small 100-page book (titled: *40 Cartoon Books of Interest*) that is shrink-wrapped in with it. This is a little book I recently produced that explores some of my collecting interests over the last twenty years.

It looks like there may be a strip in the works for a high profile magazine — but the negotiations have just begun on this so I am

that this depression became fodder for his work strikes me as just what I would expect. You work it out at the drawing board — I could relate to that."

—Seth

not naming any names just in case it doesn't happen.

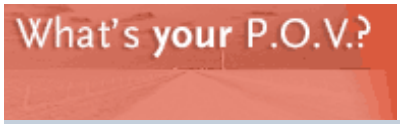
Rebecca Bengal conducted this interview via email for P.O.V.

Next:
Chris Ware »

ON CARTOONING | THE INTERVIEWS:
Jessica Abel . Daniel Clowes . Phoebe Gloeckner
Jason Lutes . Seth . Chris Ware

TOP OF PAGE

TELL A FRIEND
ABOUT THIS SITE



Share your reactions to "Tintin and I" with us: talk about the film with other viewers or ask the filmmaker a question.

P.O.V. > **Tintin and I:** Film Update | Special Features | Behind the Lens | Talking Back
Resources | For Educators | About the Film

Posted June 29, 2006

Premiered: July 11, 2006 at 10PM | Check for Rebroadcasts

Watch the Trailer

INTERVIEWS

On Cartooning

Chris Ware is the author of the award-winning book, *Jimmy Corrigan — The Smartest Kid on Earth*. He talks about the difficulty of drawing cartoons, and why *T*intin never caught on in America.

MORE SPECIAL FEATURES:

ESSAY
Tintin in America

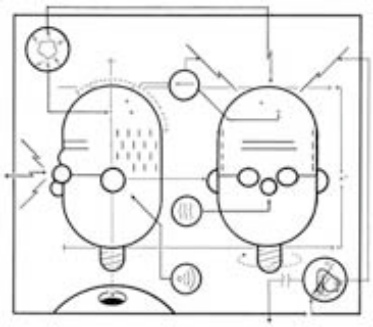
Jessica Abel | Daniel Clowes | Phoebe Gloeckner | Jason Lutes | Seth | Chris Ware

P.O.V.: The *ligne claire* ("clear line") style Hergé employed when drawing the iconic characters of Tintin contrasts with the unusually realistic landscapes and backgrounds of the worlds Tintin visits and inhabits. As Scott McCloud pointed out in his *Understanding Comics*, this contrast gives the effect of allowing the comic reader to "mask themselves in a character and safely enter a stimulating world." "One set of line," he writes, "allows readers to *see*; the other to *be*."

Your own work is graphically striking, the layout meticulously rendered, incorporating elements like toy cutouts. Describe your illustrative strategy or style as you see it. How did you arrive at it? How do you feel it's been most effective? Did you struggle to find it or did it come naturally? When has it not worked for you?

CHRIS WARE: I'd agree with McCloud, though I think Hergé employed the same so-called "clear line" to create his backgrounds as he did his characters; he simply didn't present the people quite as inertly as the settings, for the reasons you articulate. (There's something very strange and wrong-seeming about drawing realistic eyeballs in comics, at least in the mode of comics where action is carried more by the movement of the characters rather than where narration links disparately framed selected images.)

I arrived at my way of "working" as a way of visually approximating what I feel the tone of fiction to be in prose versus the tone one might use to write biography; I would never do a biographical story using the deliberately synthetic way of cartooning I use to write fiction. I try to use the rules of typography to govern the way that I "draw," which keeps me at a sensible distance from the story as well as being a visual analog to the way we remember and conceptualize the world. I figured out this way of working by learning from and looking at artists I admired and whom I thought came closest to getting at what seemed to me to be the "essence" of comics, which is fundamentally the weird process of reading pictures, not just looking at them. I see the black outlines of cartoons as visual approximations of the way we remember general ideas, and I try to use naturalistic color underneath them to simultaneously suggest a



Chris Ware

"Tintin was fundamentally too sexless to really catch on in America. There are hardly any girls in Hergé's stories, and there's also a peculiar sense of responsibility and respect in Tintin that is antithetical to the American character..."

—Chris Ware

perceptual experience, which I think is more or less the way we actually experience the world as adults; we don't really "see" anymore after a certain age, we spend our time naming and categorizing and identifying and figuring how everything all fits together. Unfortunately, as a result, I guess sometimes readers get a chilled or antiseptic sensation from it, which is certainly not intentional, and is something I admit as a failure, but is also something I can't completely change at the moment.

Incidentally, I stole this idea of using very carefully composed naturalistic color under a platonic black line more or less directly from Hergé, as there's a certain lushness and jewel-like quality to his pages that also seems to hint at the way we gift-wrap our experiences as memories.

I realize that this is all a rather over-thought, dogmatic and somewhat limiting way of approaching comics, especially if one tries to look at my strips as "good" drawings, because they're not, but it's also allowed me to finally arrive at a point where I'm able to write with pictures without worrying about how I'm drawing something, instead permitting me to concentrate on how the characters "feel." I wouldn't recommend this method to anyone, though; it's just the way I work, though I certainly don't think it's the only way to work in comics at all.

P.O.V.: You often return to the same characters: how do you feel about your recurring characters — especially those who've been called semi-autobiographical like Quimby and Jimmy — or others like the Super-man: how real do they become to you as you work and live with them over the years? Do you imagine them having a life independent of the comic?

CHRIS: I went through a period of dealing with characters which were essentially regurgitations of American icons, and I've only in the past five years tried to write "real" people into my stories. My single goal is to create people with whom, for better or for worse (and regardless of how embarrassing it sounds) I can "fall in love" and somehow feel something deeply about, and through. All of the earlier characters, like the ones you mention, started out as gag strips and sort of naturally blossomed into more fleshed-out figures, but then dried up and stopped suggesting anything to me. More recent characters like those in the two stories I'm working on now feel like real people to me. I don't think this way of developing as a cartoonist is at all unusual to someone sort of feeling their way as a writer; if I'd been more careful or surgical in my approach, or trained as a writer, maybe I would have arrived at this point much earlier. And of course there's always the possibility that it's an utterly wrongheaded way to think about it all, too.

P.O.V.: Describe your working process. Do you work daily? When you begin a comic, do you start with image, or with text? What are the raw materials of a story? Do you always know what is going to happen, or does the story take turns that surprise you?

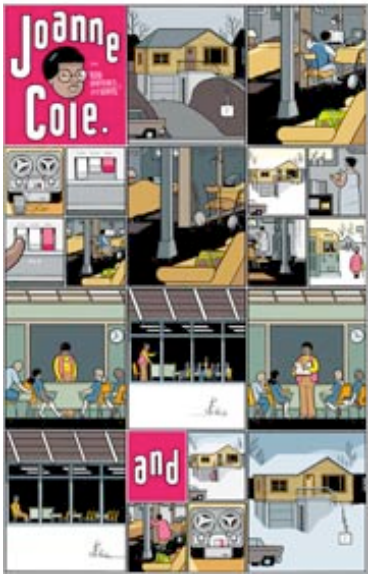
CHRIS: As I get older I find myself thinking about stories more and more before I work so that by the time I eventually sit down to write them, I know more or less how it's going to look, start or feel. Once I do actually set pencil to paper, though, everything changes and I end up erasing, redrawing and rewriting more than I keep. Once a picture is on the page I think of about ten things that never would have occurred to me otherwise. Then when I think of the strip at other odd times during the day, it's a completely different thing than it was before I started.

As for my workday, I used to sit down and fritter away my time, but now I work within a more compressed schedule because I spend most of the day looking after my daughter. I've also given up my weekly deadline to allow the work to happen at a more natural pace, and I think I can say that for these two reasons I'm genuinely happy for the first time in my adult life. I'm glad I put myself

Related Links:

Chris Ware
The artist's website, from publisher Fantagraphic Books.

ENLARGE IMAGE



"My single goal is to create people with whom

through the true misery of deadlines for 20 years, but if I can't do it now for its own sake, then I shouldn't be doing it at all.

P.O.V.: Marshall McLuhan, author of the 1967 book *The Medium is the Massage*, wrote about the differences between what he called "hot" media versus "cool" media. Hot media, like movies and radio, he said, were dense with data and therefore demanded only a passive audience, whereas "cool" media, lo-fi and utilizing iconic forms, required active, involved audience participation. His examples of "cool" media are television and comics.

Do you agree with McLuhan? Does that connect with what you wrote about cartooning in the intro to the *McSweeney's* comics issue you edited? You said: "Cartooning isn't really drawing, any more than talking is singing... The possible vocabulary of comics is by definition unlimited, the tactility of an experience told in pictures outside the boundaries of words, and the rhythm of how these drawings 'feel' when read is where the real art resides."

CHRIS: Sounds good to me. In fact, I read that book as an impressionable college freshman and it's obvious I completely internalized it and have been spitting it back out uncredited ever since. But I wouldn't classify television as "cool," because to me anything that involves the reader's consciousness to drive and carry a story is an "active" medium, and anything that sort of just pours into the eyeballs and ears is the opposite. (Personally, I'm most moved by music, so my mentioning this is not a value judgment.)

What I was trying to peck out and articulate in the *McSweeney's* introduction was the difference between seeing and reading in terms of the mechanics of comics, and to find where the real "feeling" is in the medium, because I don't necessarily think it's in the drawing.

P.O.V.: Graphic novels and comics have become popular even among mainstream audiences right now, especially with movie adaptations of non-superhero comics like *V for Vendetta, Sin City, American Splendor, Ghost World, A History of Violence,* and, just out at the time of this interview, *Art School Confidential*. In the United States, graphic novel sales have more than tripled to $245 million in recent years. Yet bookstores still often have a hard time deciding where to shelve them: some finally have been given their own section, but often you have to look in Humor. Nearly every review or article written about them still includes a definition, as if a reader would have no preconceived idea of what a comic or graphic novel is, implying that comics are largely misunderstood. Why do you think it's taken so long for comics and graphic novels to become as popular as they are now, and why are they still so misunderstood? In your *McSweeney's* introduction, you wrote: "Comics are not a genre, but a developing language." I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that.

CHRIS: Is that really true, though? I don't think that people are necessarily going to films simply because they were adapted from comics, though I could be wrong. Comics aren't really misunderstood either, they've just been mostly silly for the past century, and those genre-centered stories have found their way into the movie theaters over the past couple of decades because a generation who grew up reading them has, well, grown up. Yet there are more artists doing good work now in comics than ever before, and I think some readers sense that there's something about the disposition of the person who wants to grow up to be a cartoonist that somehow allows him or her to be able to see and comment on our world in a way that's maybe a little more clear-seeming (or, in its most immature but still valuable form, judgmental). Also, it's a way of literally experiencing someone else's vision with a purity that I don't think any other medium offers; there are no technical, electronic or financial limitations; one only has to work harder to improve. Lately I think a new attitude has prevailed that comics aren't inherently an Art form, but that

I, for better or for worse (and regardless of how embarrassing it sounds) I can 'fall in love' with and somehow feel something deeply about, and through."

—Chris Ware

ENLARGE IMAGE

"Lately I think a new attitude has prevailed that comics aren't inherently an Art form

some cartoonists are genuinely artists.

As for the shelving problem, it's due partly to a slow erosion of the content that's filled comics for decades now in favor of more self-motivated work, because, I think, such work is simply more interesting; the kids who grew up reading *Mad* magazine drew the undergrounds, and the kids who read the undergrounds drew "alternative" comics and the kids who read alternative comics are likely drawing something like manga. This generation will get jobs at the *New Yorker* and NBC and Random House and start to hire manga artists rather than the cartoonists of my generation.

P.O.V.: Although some have approached its widespread popularity, there is no exact parallel to *Tintin* in American comics. Why do you think this is so? What in American comics comes closest to *Tintin* and approximating the cult of Tintin? In other media?

CHRIS: Tintin was fundamentally too sexless to really catch on in America. There are hardly any girls in Hergé's stories, and there's also a peculiar sense of responsibility and respect in Tintin that is antithetical to the American character, or at least that of the budding individualist nine-year-old boy who just wants to set things on fire and has been weaned on much more outrageous stories. I'm not even sure if it's fair to say that there is an analog in American culture to *Tintin*, actually. I read a few serialized episodes in a magazine my mom subscribed to for me when I was a kid and it made me feel really, really weird; I didn't like it at all. I could tell that it was "approved" and "safe" and it immediately bored me, because it didn't seem to have anything to do with what I thought of as the "real" adult world, which was for me at that time superpowers and crimefighting. (I like *Tintin* now, of course.)

P.O.V.: Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Lichtenstein, and other artists like Raymond Pettibon, have certainly been influenced by comics and have incorporated elements of them into their paintings. (Warhol was particularly influenced by Hergé.) And of course, Art Spiegelman really struck a nerve with a literary and a mainstream audience with *Maus*; your book *Jimmy Corrigan — The Smartest Kid on Earth* was received, and sold very well. In the last few years, a number of literary journals have been devoting space to comics; the *New York Times* magazine began serializing comics in 2005, beginning with your own.

Although for years comics have been denigrated as a so-called "low art" category, it appears they're becoming more widely accepted and perhaps even validated as a form of art and a long literary narrative. Would you agree with this? Is "form" the right word here? Do you think that this kind of validation is inhibiting in any way, that comics are in danger of becoming less rebellious or creatively free because they're more accepted and being published in the mainstream?

CHRIS: "Form" seems fine, and sometimes I use the word "language," and while I am genuinely happy that I don't have to explain that I'm not an animator anymore when someone asks me what it is I do, I do worry that beginning cartoonists could feel somewhat strangled by the increasing critical seriousness comics has received of late and feel, like younger writers, that they have to have something to "say" before they set pen to paper. Many cartoonists feel even more passionate about this idea than I do, vehemently insisting that comics are inherently "non-art" and poop humor or whatever it is they think it is, but that attitude is a little like insisting that all modern writing should always take the form of *The Canterbury Tales.*

I'm all for anything and everything in comics; I started drawing them with the specific goal of finding out whether or not they were capable of expressing things other than jokes and contempt. To me, Robert Crumb is a perfect artist because he's one of the most visually sensitive people alive yet he's widely also known as one of

inherently an Art form, but that some cartoonists are genuinely artists."

—Chris Ware

ENLARGE IMAGE

"My prose-writing friends have amazed me with the figures they've quoted being offered for first books, easily double or triple that for what I've heard for newer cartoonists."

—Chris Ware

the world's great curmudgeons, simply because his emotional range is so wide and his ability to see the world so perspicacious; all artists should hope to be so pluralistic. I do worry that museum shows and literary magazine appearances might start to cloud the general readership's ability to see comics clearly, as anything that's presented as high art immediately blurs a viewer's perceptions with thinking and theory, but I think it also means that more talented and thoughtful people will be attracted to it as a medium. With *McSweeney's*, which you've mentioned already, it wasn't my intention to elevate anything; all I wanted to do was show what I think of as good comics to people who might not otherwise have seen them, and demonstrate that cartooning could be a serious, involving, moving medium.

P.O.V.: Do you think it's also fair to say that a division or tension exists within the world of American comics, between the mainstream daily syndicated comic strip world or, say the *New Yorker* cartoon world, and the comics underground/graphic novel world?

CHRIS: Maybe there used to be, but I think pretty singularly due to the efforts of Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly (and David Remnick and Ted Genoways) that that distinction is largely eroding, at least between the *New Yorker* and alternative comics. If there is any separation between all of these various so-called outlets, however, it only has to do with each outlet's relative artistic freedom and whether something was done to please an editor and/or perceived readership, which hasn't been my experience with either alternative comics or the *New Yorker*.

If I could, I would like to mention here that comics are NOT illustration, any more than fiction is copywriting. Illustration is essentially the application of artistic technique or style to suit a commercial or ancillary purpose; not that cartooning can't be this (see any restaurant giveaway comic book or superhero media property as an example), but comics written and produced by a cartoonist sitting alone by him- or herself are not illustrations. They don't illustrate anything at all, they literally tell a story.

P.O.V.: How is cartooning different for you than working in other genres, as a creative process? Do you consider yourself a storyteller or an artist, or a hybrid of both? Do you think it's difficult for a comic artist to find serious acceptance for work in other artistic and literary genres or in film? What has your own experience been?

CHRIS: Not to be obtuse, but I guess I consider myself a cartoonist first, though I was "trained" as a painter/printmaker/sculptor. If there's still any resistance to cartooning in the nuts-and-bolts world of acquiring the means of survival, it's probably mostly on the pay scale. If graphic novels are selling really well and are "growing the book market" or whatever it is a businessman would say about them, I don't see it in the remuneration offered by some of the publishers. My prose-writing friends have amazed me with the figures they've quoted being offered for first books, easily double or triple that for what I've heard for newer cartoonists. A good portion of all of the various comic books and so-called graphic novels that are appearing right now are probably assembled, scanned and delivered as printable files by the cartoonists themselves, and this is in addition to the painstaking, difficult and self-worth-challenging task of drawing (and learning to draw) them all in the first place. In short, cartoonists are all paid more poorly than a prose author would ever be, and this isn't even factoring in all of this extra work. How many prose authors have to set their own type, do their own covers and learn production for offset printing so that the ink traps properly? Cartooning is an artistic commitment that requires the full attention and passion of the artist on every level; one should not get into it if one expects to do anything more than produce a book or a story that is exactly as one wants it to be.

ENLARGE IMAGE

"I lose faith every time I have to start a new page, and this is no joke."

—Chris Ware

As for "storytelling," I think this is one of comics' esthetic hurdles at the moment, which was the novelist's problem 150 years ago: namely, to take comics from storytelling into that of "writing," the major distinction between the two to me being that the former gives one the facts, but the latter tries to recreate the sensation and complexities of life within the fluidity of consciousness and experience. As far as I'm concerned, that's really all I've been trying to do formally for the past decade or more with comics, and it's certainly time-consuming, since it has to be done with drawings, not words. Hergé actually was one of the first to try this, I think.

P.O.V.: Hergé underwent a period of despair and anxiety during which he suffered recurring nightmares filled with whiteness — certainly iconic dreams for a cartoonist! Eventually, after psychoanalysis, he emerged with a new direction: *Tintin in Tibet*, with its stark alpine landscapes and minimalist cast and story, was a major departure for Hergé. Do you have periods when you lose faith in your work? How have you handled them? What do you feel is your greatest creative or artistic accomplishment?

CHRIS: I lose faith every time I have to start a new page, and this is no joke. I'm really glad you're bringing this up because I've occasionally been criticized over the past couple of years for publicly "complaining" about how difficult drawing comics is, yet I've only mentioned it so that the younger cartoonists who are trying it out and finding it difficult and painful realize that they're not alone. There's not really any set way of learning how to do this, and it's always a struggle to improve, and, more importantly, see accurately whether or not one's work is communicating any shred of feeling or truth at all.

P.O.V.: How does politics influence or impact your work in comics (or not)? Has it had a lesser or greater effect over the years?

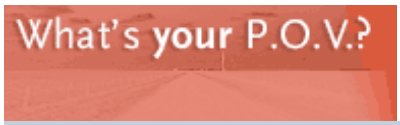
CHRIS: Drawing the kind of comics that I do takes so long that to specifically address something as transitory as a political matter in it would be about as effective as composing a symphony with hopes that it would depose a despot. On top of that, I personally don't think that my version of art is the best way to deal with political issues at all, or, more specifically, the place to make a point. Not that art can't, but it's the rare art that still creates something lasting if its main aim was purely to change a particular unfair social structure. (For example, I'd hate to have been a cartoonist in the 1970s and be only able to claim a body of anti-Nixon comics.) I admit that this is an entirely arguable point, however, and I defer to anyone who takes issue with me about it, because I change my mind about it often and I'll agree with anyone just so I don't have to talk about it.

Besides, it's not like there aren't enough political cartoonists out there already who are much smarter and more clear-headed than I am. About the only times I've allowed myself to be topical and opinionated have been in the fake ads in my comics, as I consider that to be the "throwaway" parts of what I do; I know that I'm living in a country where all needs and comforts for a large part of the population have been met frequently at great cost to other parts of the world, however, so writing stories about its inhabitants takes on a sort of responsibility in and of itself. Fundamentally, I have no idea how the world works, though I am trying to figure it out.

P.O.V.: What are you working on now?

CHRIS: Two long stories, "Rusty Brown" and "Building Stories," which I'm serializing in my regular comic book, "The ACME Novelty Libary," and which I'm now self-publishing.

Rebecca Bengal conducted this interview via email for P.O.V.



Share your reactions to "Tintin and I" with us: talk about the film with other viewers or ask the filmmaker a question.

Posted June 29, 2006