

Quimby the Mouse

Written, drawn, and designed by Chris Ware
 Fantagraphics Books, Seattle
 70 pages; illustrated; \$24.95

The Acme Novelty Date Book

Written, drawn, and designed by Chris Ware
 Drawn and Quarterly, Montreal
 208 pages; illustrated; \$39.95

Krazy & Ignatz, 1929–1930: A Mice, a Brick, a Lovely Night

Written and drawn by George Herriman
 Edited and annotated by Bill Blackbeard
 Additional notes by Ben Schwartz
 Designed by Chris Ware
 Fantagraphics Books, Seattle
 112 pages; illustrated; \$14.95

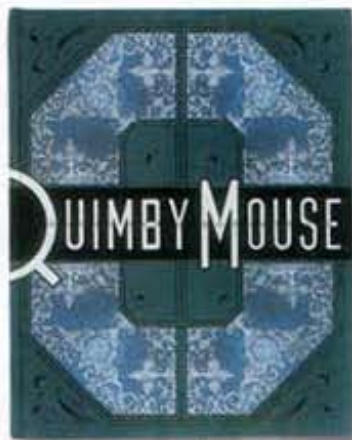
Reviewed by Douglas Wolk

Cartoonist Chris Ware's work has an emotional range of one note, and he sings it loud and proud. Ware won the Guardian First Book Award in 2001 for his graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*, after years of sweeping comics awards ceremonies with his series *The Acme Novelty Library*. Since then, he was featured in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, and he recently published two exquisitely designed volumes of work predating *Jimmy Corrigan*, while he serializes his next major graphic novel, *Rusty Brown*.

Ware's work has phenomenal craft and formal audacity; it's full of unbelievably labor-intensive gestures, like his trademark "diagrammatic" comic strips, composed of several hundred panels connected by arrows that show how a complicated system changes over time. Almost without exception, his comics are executed in the idioms of an-



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tique light entertainment: top-hat-and-tails design, big-headed kids, wacky, flexible cartoon animals, clean geometrical forms, cutout dioramas. But his work also systematically brutalizes the idea of light entertainment. His characters sicken and die slowly, torment (and are in turn humiliated by) their broken families, and lead lives of pathetic failure and loneliness.

Quimby the Mouse collects the best of Ware's student work from the early '90s, though its back cover is a version of the staggering mural he recently designed for 826 Valencia, Dave Eggers's storefront community center in San Francisco. (A massive diagrammatic history of communication and the drives for food, sex, and shelter, it demands at least 20 minutes of concentrated staring to grasp in its entirety.) The *Quimby* strips occasionally echo other cartoonists' work—there's a pitch-perfect parody of old *New Yorker* cartoons—but they're mostly the work of an artist who's found his own wildly original style. In the agonizingly funny sequence "Quimbies the Mouse," one of a pair of Siamese twins remains young while the other is dying of old age. The book also includes a handful of Ware's other work from the same period, notably "I Guess," a nifty experiment in separating text and image in comics: Visually, it's a pastiche of late-'40s superhero funnybooks, but the words in the captions, dialogue, and sound effects convey an unrelated, unhappy autobiographical reminiscence.

Physically, the oversized *Quimby* book is an eye-popping artifact, especially in its hardcover edition, which bears gilt-embossed borders and decorations, an original "wallpaper" design, illuminated 19th-century, deluxe-style typography, and ornately hilarious endpapers. *The Acme Novelty Date Book*, which is not a datebook at all but an anthology of Ware's sketchbooks, is almost paradoxically elegant—a "tab" system to indicate when each page was drawn, a hand-lettered, self-effacing timeline of the artist's life ("Discovery that rapidly-thinning hair on top of head may be made to appear fuller by trimming sides shorter to contrast; age 32"), a gold-and-black-embossed red cloth spine, and more witty endpapers.

Ware's published work has always been overwhelm-

ingly smooth, mannered, and stylized: His lines are perfectly straight or perfectly curved, his compositions mathematically precise. It's hard to imagine that any of his just-so drawings was ever a sketch. So the raw, frantic energy of the *Date Book* is a pleasant shock. The body of the book comprises 204 handsomely reproduced pages selected from roughly 1500 in the sketchbooks Ware kept between 1986 and 1995: roughed-out comic strips and stories, life drawings, stylistic exercises, pornographic doodles, self-lacerating self-portraits, quotations from writers and teachers, pastiches of his favorite cartoonists, and outdoor scenes. Much of the work is rendered in delicately attuned color, and all of it is accompanied by Ware's unforgiving notes on his own work: "Stop imitating yourself!" "Your drawings are becoming much more careless and unobservant—you don't keep this sketchbook just to fill it up!" "LIES! LOOK next time!" "Awful! Awful! I can't draw!"

As if. In the earliest pages of the *Date Book*, from Ware's teenage years, he's still working out his technique (and drawing imitations of dozens of old newspaper strips), but he's already observing the subtleties of style beautifully, assimilating the work he admires into his own. In 1987, he discovers Robert Crumb's sketchbooks (a big influence here) and, evidently, decides to try to outdo them; by 1991, even his throwaways beat most cartoonists' best work. After Ware moves to Chicago from Austin, Texas, he starts filling his sketchbook with fully fleshed-out comic strips and a series of remarkable illustrations of buildings. (To paraphrase Henry Miller, when he draws a building, it stays drawn.)

The second half of the *Date Book* is, in some ways, the most extraordinary drawing Ware has published—he's got a gift for representation that his iconic professional work only hints at. Sketches of people he sees on trains, or coffee cups, or masturbating robots (don't ask) are more finely observed than he'll ever admit to himself. When he reproduces images from old comic books, he incorporates a sense of the original printed distortions into their lines and colors.

But it's also frustrating to discover that Ware can draw so loosely and playfully yet nonetheless insists on a

hard, formal surface for his "real" work. He quotes Goethe's dictum that "architecture is frozen music" and calls it "the aesthetic key to the development of cartoons as an art form" (on a page that also includes some terrific sketches of shoes and cats, and a watercolor-tinted 12-panel doodle about hating his work in progress). Cartoons imply motion and change in a way that architecture doesn't, though, and the chill Ware has mastered doesn't always suit his medium.

Ware designs mostly his own publications, but he's also been designing Fantagraphics' ongoing *Krazy & Ignatz* series (three volumes so far; the latest is *A Mice, a Brick, a Lovely Night*), reprinting one of Ware's artistic touchpoints: George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat*. Herriman's work has rarely had more than a small cult following—during *Krazy Kat*'s original run, from 1916 to 1944, it survived mainly because William Randolph Hearst was a fan—but within the cartooning community, he's a god. (The early pages of the *Date Book* include a bunch of Herriman homages, and the cat-head-and-mouse games of some of the *Quimby* strips are a refracted variation on his themes.)

Krazy Kat is based on a disarmingly simple premise. *Krazy*, a cat of no particular gender, loves *Ignatz* the mouse. *Ignatz* hates *Krazy*, but when he throws bricks, *Krazy* takes it as a sign of affection, while *Offissa Pupp*, the canine policeman, drags *Ignatz* off to jail. This formula was repeated in almost every strip for 30 years, and the strip's achievement is making it brilliantly new every time. Herriman's characters play out their rituals against a crazily abstracted Southwestern landscape, talking in neo-Joycean puns and witty, word-drunk rhetoric. The brick becomes a symbol of communication and miscommunication; the character triangle allows Herriman to riff on every possible angle of desire and authority. And *Krazy Kat* is enormously funny, in a way that sneaks up on you. Read one, and you scratch your head; read ten, and you can't stop grinning.

Like Ware, whose comics have been published in Chicago alt-weeklies *NewCity* and the *Chicago Reader*, Herriman had a full newspaper page to play with, and he experimented with layout as wildly as he could. The strips from the '40s took their compositional cues more from contemporary art than from the rest of the comics page. In the late '20s, syndicate restraints forced Herriman to design his pages around a central panel that could be dropped to run "*Krazy Kat*" in two tiers instead of three; that middle piece became an "art" panel, which he usually used for a tiny, unrelated gag. Halfway through *A Mice, a Brick*, the layout becomes free-form again, and you can practically hear Herriman exhale with relief, letting panels stretch languorously across the page and throwing in Navajo-inspired abstract designs.

Ware's design is graceful and simple. The typefaces and little lines above the page numbers suggest an early-20th-century newspaper. The endpapers are constructed around a few images extracted

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firepower on display in Ware's sketchbook. Nonetheless, every last comic reproduced in *A Mice, a Brick* was meant to give pleasure, if sometimes a perplexing or subtle pleasure—not to dangle it like a bunch of grapes, and then snatch it away as a lesson in the foolishness of hoping for it. Indulging in unalloyed fun doesn't make Herriman a less sophisticated artist. And Ware deserves to let himself do the same, too, every once in a while.

Young Man

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from this volume's strips, tiny gray-scale dingbats of Ignatz appear on pages with explanatory endnotes, and each strip appears with its original "Krazy Kat by Herriman" header, which was often redesigned from week to week. The cover is splendid, too: an Art Deco composition and design given energy by Herriman's distinctly unruly linework.

It's interesting to note, though, how Ware differs from Herriman. Ware has a gift for his predecessor's ebullient visual grammar, but he uses it exclusively to mock the idea of art-for-pleasure and entertainment, and to demonstrate how the horror of mere being infects and destroys fun. After a while, it becomes hard to endure Ware's work, as inventive and gorgeous as it is—the irony and asceticism become stifling.

Herriman was a visionary cartoonist and designer, and he could conjure remarkable space, weight, and light with a few scratchy lines, but he didn't have the sheer drawing

