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Everyday Trauma: Narrativizing the Self in Chris Ware's Graphic Novels

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Everyday Trauma: Narrativizing the Self in Chris Ware's Graphic Novels

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 11, 2021

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Introduction: Ware as Formalist

The term “graphic novel”—that is, a book-length narrative that employs the comics medium to tell its story—has entered into the vocabulary of comics enthusiasts and readers alike. But, despite the popularity of contemporary graphic novels, many graphic novelists began their careers writing underground comics that garnered little mainstream attention. For example, Art Spiegelman, the author of *Maus* (1980) and arguably the most famous contemporary comics artist, started his career working on the underground, adult-oriented comic strip *RAW*. And, while working on *RAW* in the 1980s, Spiegelman discovered the experimental comic strips of then college student Chris Ware (Spiegelman, “Chris Ware” 3). At the time, Ware was majoring in the visual arts at University of Texas at Austin and drawing comic strips of a mouse named “Quimby” for the school’s newspaper when Spiegelman invited him to contribute to *RAW*. As Ware recalls in his autobiographical work *Monograph* (2017), “It was with great suspicion one night in 1987 when I picked up the phone in this apartment and the voice on the other line claimed to be Art Spiegelman....I naturally assumed it was [my friend] John Keen playing a joke on me. But it wasn’t, it really was Art Spiegelman” (43). Under the mentorship of Spiegelman, Ware began making frequent contributions to *RAW*, and even started his own series entitled the *ACME Novelty Library*. Although Ware spent thirteen years composing underground comics, his works were neither popular nor commercially successful until 2000.

Nearly fifteen years after Spiegelman’s call, Ware compiled his various, serialized “Jimmy Corrigan” stories from the alternative Chicago newspaper *Newcity* and *ACME Novelty Library*, and published his seminal graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). Simply put, Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* won multiple awards—including the Guardian’s First Book Prize, which novelist Zadie Smith won the year prior—and was overall a commercial

and critical success (*Monograph* 146-147). Reflecting on the publication of *Jimmy Corrigan*, Ware writes, “I published a book that allowed me to finally pay my monthly rent and grocery bill without having to take on some soul-emptying commercial job; of course, I was thrilled” (*Monograph* 147). The relative success of *Jimmy Corrigan*, though, is surprising when the graphic novel’s subject matter and artistic style are taken into consideration. Instead of telling an action-packed, pulp narrative about superheroes fighting crime in fictional cities, Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* takes place in Chicago and focuses on two characters, James I and James III (Jimmy), and their inability to connect with people (specifically their fathers); in other words, *Jimmy Corrigan* is a graphic novel that explores the hardships of everyday people. Ware’s radically experimental use of the comics medium—a topic that I will be discussing, at length, later in this thesis—also seems as if it would hinder the work’s success, not contribute to it. Nonetheless, Ware’s strips have been published in multiple prestigious magazines (e.g., *The New Yorker*) since the release of *Jimmy Corrigan*, and Ware has released two more graphic novels, *Building Stories* (2012) and *Rusty Brown* (2019), to immense critical acclaim.

The focal points of this thesis will be Ware’s aforementioned interest in the everyday struggles of ordinary people and his formal experimentation. Much of the early scholarly conversation on Ware, however, primarily examined Ware’s themes and his work’s relation to modern and/or postmodern aesthetics. For example, in his 2003 article “Modernism and the Contemporary Graphic Novel: Chris Ware and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” scholar Brad Prager contends that Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* is a modernist work, because it engages with the same the concerns as modernist authors and philosophers Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin (197). In contrast, scholar Anthony D. Baker interprets Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* from a postmodern lens and demonstrates that *Jimmy Corrigan* helps elucidate some of the key

elements of postmodernist works for undergraduate students (111). While some scholars are still interested in the connections between Ware, modernism, and postmodernism—Ariela Freedman, to offer another example, examines the influence of modernist authors like Joyce and Proust on Ware (352)—analyses of Ware have largely shifted their focus to his subversive use of the comics form.

More recent scholarship has begun to explore Ware's formal choices and his interest in everyday life from various lenses, and my thesis builds upon this work but also moves the scholarly conversation in new directions. Through an analysis of *Building Stories*, scholar Massimiliano Morini contends that Ware's experimental, diagrammatic panel sequences visualize how human beings think and organize their thoughts (33). Thomas Bredehoft explores Ware's interest in architecture and connects it to his subversive panel sequences (870-871), while Margaret Fink Berman discusses Ware's "aesthetic of ordinariness"—that is, his aestheticization of everyday life—in *Building Stories* (199-200). There is one fundamental aspect of Ware's works, though, that scholars have yet to analyze: his representation of trauma. My examination of Ware's recent works, a comprehensive analysis that no scholars have conducted before, reveals that people's traumatic experiences and memories are the focus of nearly all his works. Not only does my thesis explore a significant aspect of Ware's works that scholars have missed, but it also examines his two most recent works, *Monograph* and *Rusty Brown*, concerning which no scholarship has yet been published. Ultimately, I contend that Ware uses the comics medium to accurately capture the way that people feel when they experience a traumatic event. In tandem, Ware demonstrates that seemingly "normal" events that everyone experiences, such as brief moments of miscommunication or frequent intrusive thoughts, are traumatic.

Before examining Ware's unique representation of trauma, I am going to explain what techniques distinguish Ware from other comics artists. At the beginning of his graphic novel *Rusty Brown*, Ware depicts Rusty's encounter with two bullies in the hallway of his high school (Fig. 1), and, in the process, foregrounds one of the unique qualities of his artistic form. In the panel sequence, these bullies steal Rusty's mittens, spit in them, and return them to the sobbing Rusty. Although confrontations with high-school bullies are common in other representations of adolescence, Ware's portrayal of the bullies tormenting Rusty is unique because of his experimental approach to the comics page. In many popular comic books and graphic novels, artists ordinarily employ a 3x3 panel arrangement, and relegate all unnecessary actions and movements to the "gutter," the space that exists between the panels. To offer an example, a comics artist does not usually show every individual movement of someone raising their hand; rather, the artist typically draws one panel of the person's hand down, and, to the right of it, draws another panel of the person's hand completely up. Yet, almost every panel in the *Rusty* sequence's top two rows are identical, with the only noticeable visual differences being the slight, negligible movements of the characters. Ware's employment of small, "moment-to-moment" panels—that is, panels where little or no change occurs between them (McCloud 70)—is a fundamental aspect of his artistic form and distinguishes him from many of his contemporaries.

The smallness of Ware's moment-to-moment panels also has implications for the act of reading itself. As comics theorist and artist Scott McCloud explains in *Understanding Comics*, "time and space are one in the same" on the comics page (100). To elaborate, a series of larger panels, such as the 3x3 panel arrangements that many mainstream comics employ, typically requires less reading time, because there is less content to read, comprehend, and interpret on the

page. Conversely, a series of smaller panels (e.g., Fig.1) requires more reading time, as there is more content occupying the space of the page.

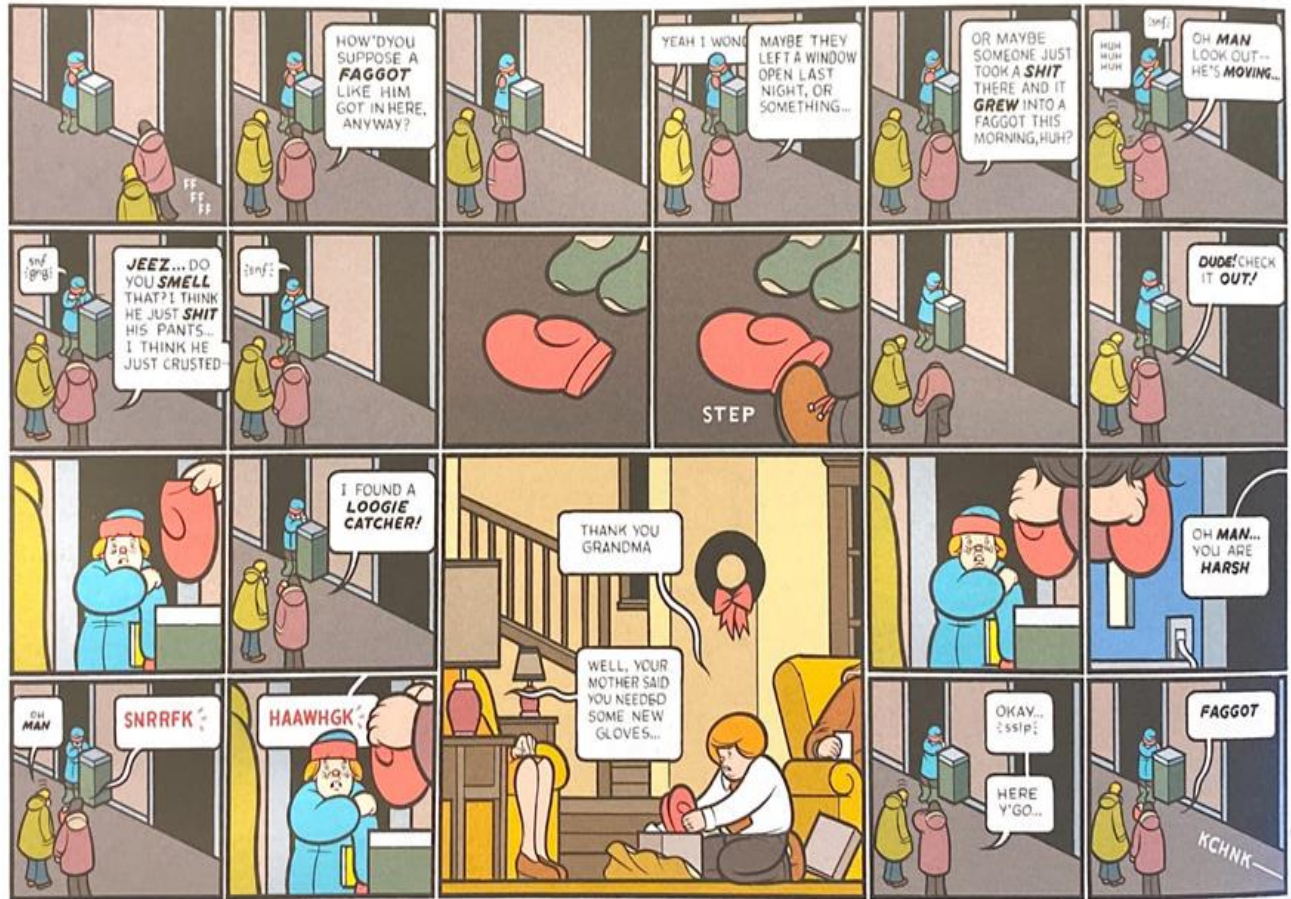


Fig. 1

While the smallness of the panels in Figure 1 is a technique relatively unique to Ware, Ware employs another technique that is common in the works of other graphic novelists. More specifically, Ware manipulates the space of the page and the ordering of the panels to spatially represent the past's disruption of the present. As McCloud writes in *Understanding Comics*, comics are a unique medium because, unlike film or prose fiction, the reader can see the future of the story (the panels to the right of the one they are reading) and also the past that they have already read (the panels to the left of the one that they are reading). The present, as McCloud notes, is the panel that the reader is currently looking at (104). In the aforementioned sequence

from *Rusty Brown*, the large, square panel of Rusty receiving the mittens from his grandmother is a memory from his past but, because it is in the middle of a sequence that depicts the present (Rusty being bullied), it effectively becomes the reader's present when they reach it in the sequence.

Ware's use of small panels and his tendency to spatially represent the past invading the present capture the manner in which people remember and perceive events. In tandem with these aforementioned techniques, Ware often employs elaborate, diagrammatic, and non-linear panel sequences of characters remembering certain events in their lives. Figure 2 from Ware's early work *Quimby the Mouse*, for example, combines all of these techniques to illustrate how Quimby remembers various events in his life. Most of the panel sequence, a sequence in which Quimby recalls events that happened to him in one house, is inside of a thought bubble, thereby suggesting that Ware is trying to capture the way that memory and thought operate. The most important element of this sequence, though, is that it does not feature a definitive beginning, middle, or end. Instead, the reader needs to follow the disconnected, individual threads of Quimby's memories. The arrows of these memories also intersect with one another, indicating that they are not linearly organized in Quimby's mind. By formally representing Quimby's memories in a non-linear and fragmented manner, Ware suggests that people cannot place their memories into a cohesive, singular "sequence." In his more recent works *Building Stories* and *Rusty Brown*, Ware reinforces his non-linear and fragmentary conception of memory, but expands it from individual moments and spaces (e.g. Figure 2) to entire life stories. The characters in these works, such as Jason Lint in *Rusty Brown* and the unnamed old woman in *Building Stories*, struggle to place their life memories in chronological order, a struggle that Ware formally represents with non-linear, fragmentary panel sequences. In other words, many of

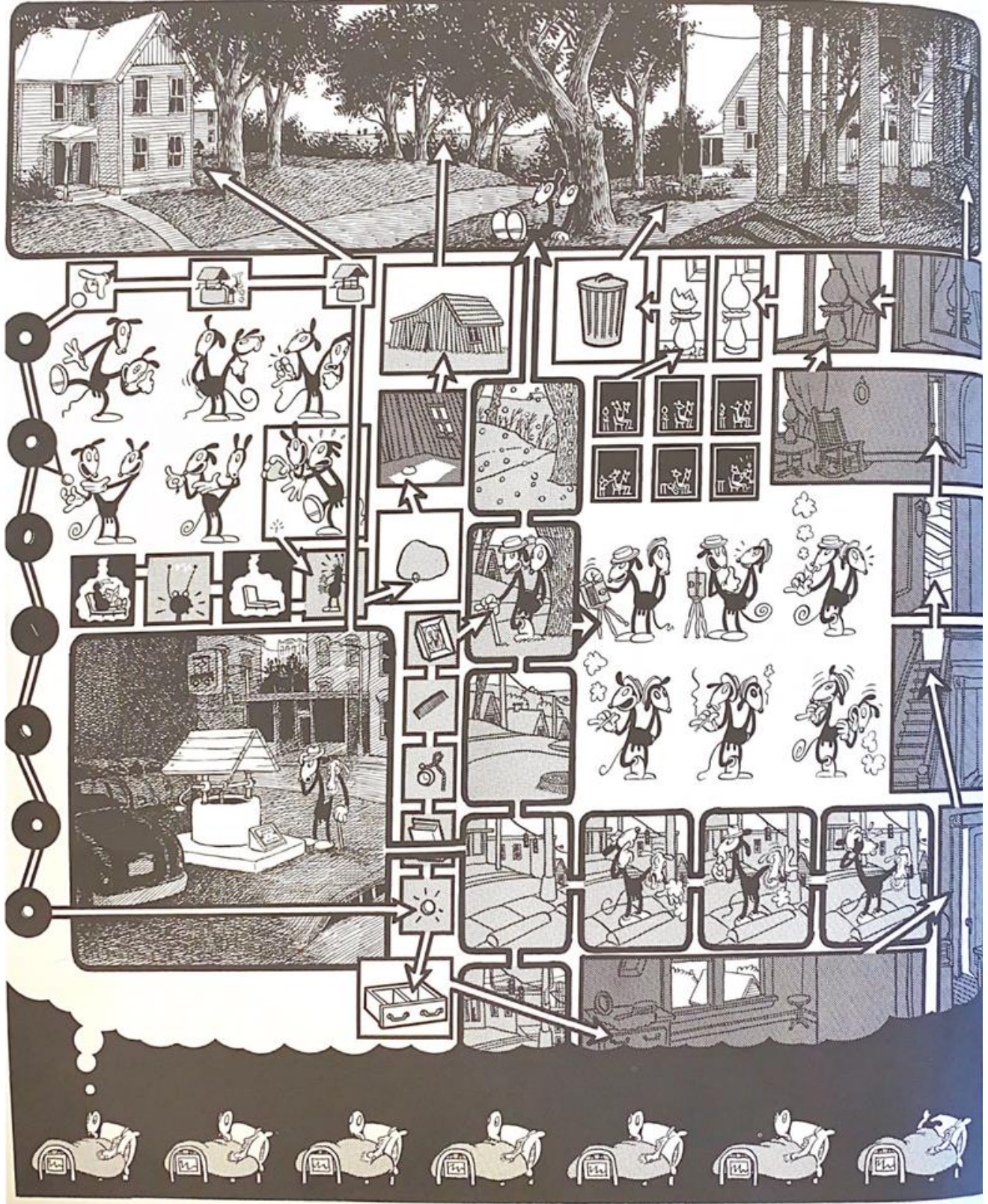


Fig. 2

the characters in Ware's recent works cannot unify their memories into a cohesive life story that features a beginning, middle, and end.

The view of memory that Ware presents in his works, however, conflicts with the view of memory that many contemporary psychiatrists possess. In his work *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, psychiatrist Bessel Van Der Kolk discusses a study in which he asked people to recall positive experiences versus traumatic ones. Explaining the differences in their responses, Van Der Kolk states:

Weddings, births, and graduations were recalled as events from the past, stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end [...] In contrast, traumatic memories were disorganized. Our subjects remembered some events all too clearly [...] but could not recall the sequence of events or vital details. (Van Der Kolk 195)

In Ware's works, though, there is no clear distinction between characters' recollection of traumatic memories and seemingly happy memories—all of their memories are similarly disorganized, fragmented, and lacking a stable linear narrative. Figure 2, for instance, does not depict any traumatic memories that occurred in Quimby's house, but it is nonetheless non-linear and visually disorganized. If positive memories cannot be placed into a linear sequence, as Ware's formal representation of them implies, then, by extension, traumatic memories also cannot be placed into a linear sequence.

While Ware's non-linear representation of memory has implications for people's life stories and the nature of memory in general, it also implies that people can never fully recover or heal from their traumatic experiences. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, psychiatrist Judith Herman explains the different steps that survivors of trauma undergo to recover. Describing the second stage of recovery, Herman writes that, "the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells

it completely, in depth and in detail. The work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life" (175). As Herman notes, survivors must narrativize their traumatic memories and incorporate those memories into their overall life story in order to recover. Problematically, Ware's characters do not possess easily narrativized life stories. On the contrary, Ware's characters even struggle to integrate their happy memories into coherent and linear narratives about their life. Ware, therefore, rejects the initial premise that people's life stories are stable narratives with a definitive beginning, middle, and end, and alternatively suggests that people's life stories—and, in fact, their overall sense of self—are everchanging and constantly in flux. So, because Ware's characters are unable to unify their memories into a summative life story, they are consequently unable to engage in the second stage of traumatic recovery and heal from their experiences.

Ware's rejection of recovery aligns with the attitudes of his artistic contemporaries towards trauma. In the article "Autography's Biography," scholar Jared Gardner surveys the history of autobiographical graphic works, which he calls autographies, and states that many of them, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, depict the past "collapsing" into the present (18). This collapsing, as Gardner argues, indicates that the subjects of these autographies never fully recover or heal from their trauma; instead, the subjects must recognize that their memories of the past will always, in some way, be with them in the present. Like his contemporaries, Ware's comics suggest that survivors of trauma can never fully recover from or integrate their traumatic experiences into a linear life narrative. Yet, Ware's formal representation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic events, in addition to his focus on the traumas of people's everyday lives, distinguishes him from other comics artists.

Ware's Contemporaries: Autographies of Public and Private Trauma

As noted above, Ware distinguishes his works by manipulating the comics medium (the ordering of the panels on the page, the size of the panels, etcetera) to accurately capture how people feel when they experience PTSD or a traumatic event; another element of Ware's works that differentiates him from other artists, however, is the types of trauma that he chooses to represent. In his works, Ware focuses on traumas that are seemingly part of most people's everyday lives: moments of miscommunication, the miserable experience of playing dodgeball in grade school, feelings of loneliness and isolation, and generally intrusive thoughts. While Ware's unique exploration of everyday traumas will be examined later in this thesis, it is important to briefly analyze the history of comics and autographies, and determine what they generally focus on that Ware does not. The primary focus of many comics and autographies in works other than Ware's is the connection between public traumas—that is, public atrocities like war and genocide—and people's private experiences. Furthermore, many autographers and comics artists depict traumatic events that are horrific and oftentimes ineffable, whereas Ware places more emphasis on traumatic events that most people experience throughout their lives (e.g. bullying, the death of an older relative).

Arguably the most widely known autography, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* explores the connection between public trauma—in this case, the Holocaust—and how it affects people's private lives. In *Maus I*, Spiegelman visualizes multiple conversations that he had with his father, Vladek, about the Holocaust and the various events leading up to it. Figure 3, for instance, depicts a conversation in which Vladek describes his experiences in the army (45). On the left of the page, there is a panel of Vladek as a young soldier intruding on the space of his living room in the present, which suggests two things about the nature of trauma and the past. On the one

hand, the placement of the panel indicates that, as Vladek retells the past, it effectively enters into the present. In fact, the foreground of the panel is slightly eclipsed by Art's legs, and the panel appears as if it is a fixture or piece of furniture in the living room's space. Spiegelman, in effect, manipulates the space of the page to convey that the past enters into the present when it is retold or remembered. On the other hand, though, Spiegelman also demonstrates that a traumatic event in the public sphere (World War II) is intruding upon the private lives of *Maus*'s subjects fifty years later. Vladek's living room, a space commonly associated with people's private lives, is being invaded by the public terror of war. As a result, Spiegelman indicates that there is an intimate connection between public traumas (war) and people's privately experienced traumas (e.g. being a soldier in the war).

In addition to visualizing the past's disruption of the present and the connection between public and private traumas, Spiegelman also employs an iconographic, cartoon-like art style—a style that implies the horrific and ineffable nature of the Holocaust. Multiple scholars in trauma and autobiography studies, such as Leigh Gilmore, note that traumatic events are oftentimes too terrible to represent or translate into words (Gilmore 6). Because any attempts to realistically render the horrors of the Holocaust would still fail to convey how traumatic the event itself is, Spiegelman alternatively represents himself, Vladek, and other people in *Maus*'s narrative as anthropomorphized mice, cats, and pigs. The effect of this anthropomorphizing is apparent in Figure 4, which depicts Spiegelman sitting on a pile of corpses in Auschwitz (41). Not only does Spiegelman insert his present self into a space from the past, which in turn emphasizes Spiegelman's formal representation of the past disrupting the present, but the panel also suggests that the atrocities committed by the Nazis are beyond representation. The mountain of emaciated and deceased mice forces the reader to imagine an even more horrific image,



Fig. 3

whereas a more realistic art style would inhibit the reader's ability to imagine the extent of these horrors. To synthesize, then, the types of trauma that Spiegelman focuses on in *Maus I* and *Maus II*—and, in fact, also his short work about 9/11 *In The Shadow of No Towers* (2004)—are ineffable or unrepresentable public traumas that intersect with people's private lives.

Similar to *Maus*, Thi Bui's more recent autobiography *The Best We Could Do* (2018) chronicles her father Bô's experiences growing up during World War II and the Vietnam War, and explores how his traumatic experiences in the past affect him (and her) in the present. And, like *Maus*, Bui draws a connection between Bô's privately experienced traumas and the public traumas that occurred during his childhood and adolescence. To offer an example, Figure 5 juxtaposes a traumatic moment in Bô's personal history—namely, a moment in which Bui's grandfather physically abused him—with the United States' bombing of Hiroshima. By placing these two, ostensibly disconnected events in sequential order (and on the same page), Bui suggests that there is a connection between private traumas and ones that occur in the public sphere. As McCloud writes in *Understanding Comics*, the reader typically infers a connection



Fig. 4

and finds “meaning or resonance” between panels that seem to have no causal relation to one another (73). The placement of the panels in Figure 5, therefore, suggests to the reader that there is a relationship or commonality between privately experienced traumas and public traumas.

While Bui and Spiegelman are both authors from the West, it is important to note that Japanese comics explore comparable themes. In fact, Keiji Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen* (1973), a semi-autobiographical work that depicts Gen’s life before and after the bombing of Hiroshima, predates Spiegelman’s *Maus* by nearly fifteen years. And, in the foreword of *Barefoot Gen*’s most recent print, Spiegelman notes that the work was relatively innovative for its time of release: “It’s odd that, until the development of underground comics in the late 1960s, overtly autobiographical comics have not comprised an important ‘genre.’ Rarer still are works that overtly grapple with the intersection between personal history and world history” (“Barefoot Gen”). Figure 6 portrays the aforementioned “intersection” that Spiegelman refers to (89).



Fig. 5

For one, Figure 6 demonstrates that World War II considerably affects Gen's family and the people around them. In the top-right panel, Gen's cousin Gokichi is celebrated as a war hero in the public sphere—as Gen's father notes, Gokichi lost his arms, legs, and sight in the war—but, in the bottom-left panel, Gokichi's parents mourn over him in the privacy of their home.

Consequently, Nakazawa conveys two things about personal traumas and their connection to public history: firstly, Nakazawa foregrounds that there is often a disconnect between how traumatic events are portrayed in the public sphere (Gokichi is now a hero) and how they are experienced in the private sphere (Gokichi begs for his parents to kill him); and, secondly, Nakazawa underscores that atrocities in the public sphere (WWII) often disrupt people's lives and traumatize them in the private sphere. Thus, *Barefoot Gen* is an early, non-Western example of graphic memoirs examining the intimate link between private traumas and public events.

As Figure 6 also showcases, Nakazawa's drawing style is notably iconographic and cartoonish—a style that he uses later in the work to emphasize the horror and ineffability of the bombing of Hiroshima. In Figure 7, Nakazawa cartoonishly renders a mother and her baby with their skin melting after the atomic bomb is dropped (271). Other people in the panel are trapped under rubble or narrowly running away from the flames behind them. Here, Nakazawa employs this iconographic style to depict an atrocity that is, simply put, too terrible to portray realistically (at least without seeming gratuitous). The bombing of Hiroshima, like the atrocities committed at Auschwitz, is an event that cannot be effectively described or represented, and because of its ineffability, Nakazawa uses a deceptively innocent art style to imply its horror. Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen*, in sum, is another work in the autobiography genre that explicitly focuses on the relationship between private and public traumas, and the ineffability of certain traumatic events.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Of course, there are multiple works in the autobiography genre that do not examine the link between private and public traumas, nor do they focus on traumatic events that are indescribable or ineffable. Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), a work that is widely considered the first graphic memoir or autobiography, chronicles Binky's—who is a thinly-veiled representation of Green himself—intrusive thoughts and struggles with obsessive compulsive disorder. Thematically, Ware's works are similar to *Binky Brown*, as both of them represent the everyday traumatic thoughts of their main characters; Green, however, employs an expressionistic art style to capture the affective qualities of these thoughts, whereas Ware manipulates the size and arrangement of panels. In Figure 8, Green externalizes Binky's internal fear of phallus-shaped objects (e.g. his fingers) by representing his fingers and feet as phalluses with sexually charged rays coming out of them. Furthermore, the final four panels render Binky in an almost Cubist style after he starts standing “perfectly perpendicular” to avoid hitting statues of Mary with his rays, which externalizes Binky's internal repression. So, while Green focuses on the everyday traumas that his characters experience, he predominantly visualizes these experiences with his art style instead of the arrangement of panels.

Despite their differences, all of the autobiographies that I examined above constitute what Leigh Gilmore calls autobiographical “limit cases” (14-15). In essence, a limit case is an autobiographical work that does not market itself as an autobiography or employs artistic techniques that challenge readers' conceptions of what an autobiography is or should be. *Barefoot Gen* and *Binky Brown* are, in fact, autobiographical limit cases, because the authors utilize fictional characters (Gen, Binky) to narrativize their personal experiences. Alternatively, *Maus* and *The Best We Could Do* are limit cases, as they depict the various historical events that occur in them expressionistically and not realistically or objectively.



Fig. 8

As I will demonstrate in the first chapter of this thesis, many of Ware's texts, including his autobiographical text *Monograph*, are also limit cases, since Ware's seemingly fictional works are intimately connected to his personal, real-life experiences and traumas. Additionally, Ware's works also challenge conceptions of the self and how the self should be represented or conceived. In the first chapter, I ultimately argue that Ware represents people's memories, sense of self, and life stories as fragmented and unstable—a conception of the self that aligns with the ideas of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

The second chapter of this thesis focuses on Ware's formal representation of two symptoms, intrusion and constriction, that people with PTSD experience. In addition, I examine how *Building Stories* and *Rusty Brown* illustrate that people often experience and remember failed romances, intrusive thoughts, and moments of miscommunication as traumatic. Ware's depiction of these two symptoms and everyday traumas, I argue, is one of the fundamental elements of his works that separates him from other artists. Concurrently, I will also examine how Ware's comics reject the idea that people can "recover" or "heal" from their traumas by analyzing the "Jordan Lint" chapter in *Rusty Brown* and the Old Woman booklet in *Building Stories*. These two sections feature aging characters who are constantly agonizing over their past memories and traumas, which suggests that, even right before death, they still cannot integrate their traumas into a cohesive life story.

The third and final chapter of this thesis examines the political implications of Ware's works. More specifically, Ware demonstrates that there are people in certain demographic categories—African Americans, for example—who experience everyday traumas (e.g., racism, microaggressions) that other, more privileged people do not. In particular, Ware examines how race, gender, and the intersection of these two identities influences the traumatic experiences that

people encounter in their day-to-day lives. I argue that Ware, in his depiction of the experiences of disempowered groups, encourages the reader to practice a radical form of empathy.

My analysis of Ware's works from these various lenses—psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and a sociopolitical lens—underscores that Ware's texts are thematically complex and rife with nuance. And Ware's complexity, as I will discuss further in the conclusion to this thesis, solidifies graphic novels as a complex artistic medium that should receive scholarly attention. The challenging process of reading Ware's texts—some of his pages would require some readers to have a magnifying glass, for example, and others require the reader to turn and manipulate the physical page—can be daunting for those unfamiliar with graphic novels, but simultaneously rewarding to those who take the time to engage with his texts. So, the central purposes of this thesis are to provide an introduction to Ware's works and their thematic exploration of trauma and memory, situate them in relation to the history of graphic novels, and emphasize their artistic merit as great works of literature.

Chapter 1 -- A Psychoanalytic Approach to Ware's Depiction of the Self

All of Ware's works, in some way, explore the nature of people's memories and how people perceive time. In fact, Ware explicitly acknowledges that his interest in the past traces back to a traumatic epiphany that he had as a child. In *Monograph*, Ware describes an occasion in which he found old photo albums of his mother, and discusses the revelations that accompanied his discovery:

The day I discovered these photo albums, somewhere around age ten, my sense of our family, my mother's childhood and, most of all, the irrevocable and irrepressible forward wash of time overwhelming us all affected me so emotionally that when I went upstairs and saw [my mother]...sitting at that kitchen table, I burst into tears...It imbued me with the strangest sense that the world of the past was all still *there*, but just out of my reach. (11)

Here, Ware acknowledges the indisputable fact that time is always moving forward and progressing. The recognition of this fact, simply put, leads to a series of other disconcerting recognitions—namely, that everyone eventually grows up, gets old, and passes away. Yet, the “forward wash of time” does not stop Ware, nor his characters, from constantly thinking about their (traumatic) pasts with either extreme nostalgia or regret. Ware and his characters, in other words, cannot “reach” the past, but attempt to access it through their memories in the present. Additionally, Ware's works highlight that, as people age, they occupy multiple selves and assume different identities. Ware recognizes in the above passage from *Monograph*, for instance, that his mother is figuratively a different person than she was as a child. Ultimately, Ware's *Monograph*, *Building Stories*, and *Rusty Brown* illuminate that people's memories of the past are unreliable and fragmented, and that people do not possess stable, unified identities.

After the Enlightenment, the mind was generally thought of as unified. Rene Descartes, an Enlightenment philosopher famous for his work *Meditations on First Philosophy*, explicitly discusses the self as something that is not comprised of composite parts; rather, the mind is a singular, unified, and indivisible entity. The unified self that Descartes discusses is commonly referred to as the *cogito*, a term that originates from Descartes's popular phrase *Cogito, ergo sum* or "I think, therefore I am." In the first chapter of *Meditations*, Descartes writes, "I am not a collection of members which we call the human body...I find that I only leave myself certain of the fact that I am somewhat" (10). According to Descartes, the human body is a conglomerate of different things (e.g., limbs, organs, and bones), but the mind is something that cannot be divided into these distinct parts. In *Monograph*, Ware mentions that he took a few courses in Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, and even discusses the contrast between the mind and the body, suggesting that he is at least familiar with the *cogito* and Descartes's philosophy (77). Ware's unique representation of the self, then, challenges two traditions: firstly, Ware rejects Descartes's *cogito* and depicts the self or mind as multiple, divisible fragments; and, secondly, Ware subverts a Western autobiographical tradition—a tradition that, in fact, seems to be a product of the Enlightenment (Gilmore 20)—that often focuses on the indivisible, thinking "I" or *cogito* (Gilmore 2).

The notion of the fragmented self is often associated with the teachings of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In one of his famous lectures from 1949, Lacan introduces the idea of the "ideal-I" or, more commonly, the ideal ego (76). According to Lacan, there is a stage in a child's development in which they look at themselves in the mirror and recognize that their physical body is a unified whole, because they realize that all of their limbs and organs form one, cohesive body. The unification of their external body, however, contrasts with their internal

state, as people's minds are typically full of contradictory thoughts and conflicting identities (76). After seeing their physical image in the mirror, the child starts to strive for the unity that they see in the mirror; in other words, the child wants their internal confusion to match the external unity of their body. Lacan argues that this internal or mental unity is unachievable, because the child—and, the adult that they become—will always be striving to become something that they are not: the unified whole that they perceive in the mirror (76). In Lacan's account, the self is necessarily fragmented, since the ideal ego represents what people always want to become but cannot. Ware's graphic novels and *Monograph* depict the self as permanently disunified and fragmented, thereby aligning Ware's conception of the self with that of Lacan.

The unconventional form of Ware's *Monograph*, in particular, underscores his Lacanian approach to representing the self. In *Monograph*, Ware represents himself in three ways—his own words and verbal accounts of his memories, photographs that have been taken throughout his life, and his own artwork. In effect, Ware employs these three mediums to emphasize that he possesses multiple identities or selves. To elaborate, Ware's verbalization of his thoughts, feelings, and memories is representative of his internal self, as he makes frequent use of the first-person pronoun "I." In contrast, Ware's inclusion of photographs allows the reader to see Ware's external self, because the photographs show the reader how Ware physically appears (or once appeared) to his friends, family, and fans. The final medium, Ware's artwork, is more complicated. On the one hand, Ware's artwork exhibits his internal creativity and oftentimes captures some of his internal thoughts and memories. On the other hand, the inclusion of Ware's artwork in *Monograph* enables the reader to form connections between his life experiences and the work that he produces. The reader creates their own version of Ware's life story and artistic

development based on their interpretations of his work, which leads different readers to have different interpretations of Ware as a person and artist. In sum, the hybridity of Ware's *Monograph* suggests that there is a disconnect between Ware's internal self and how he appears, either physically or as an artist, to others.

Ware's inclusion of photographs in *Monograph* illustrates that, throughout his life, Ware has assumed multiple selves and identities. In Figure 9, Ware juxtaposes three school pictures of himself, and states that they represent his "inexplicable decline, from third to eighth grade" (12-13). First and foremost, the three photographs of Ware feature gaps between them. The photographs also create a sequence, which enables the reader to perceive the transformation of Ware's appearance from childhood to early adolescence. Ware's ordering and placement of these photographs is reminiscent of the comics form, as the sequence of photographs resembles the linear, 3x3 panel arrangements of classic comics and graphic novels. By placing these photographs in a comics-like sequence, Ware contrasts different versions of himself and explicitly visualizes that these selves are three distinct people and not a single, unified person. Ware's description of these images as an "inexplicable decline" similarly illuminates that he represents the self as dynamic, because it suggests that Ware's development has been non-linear—sometimes he changed for the better, but other times he changed for the worse. Also, Ware verbally reinforces the fragmentation of his self at the end of *Monograph*. One of *Monograph*'s final pages features a list of Ware's artistic and personal influences, but Ware does not simply list all of his influences. Instead, the page features three distinct boxes—the top one is titled "Ware 3.0 – 3.3.2," the bottom-left one is titled "Ware 2.0," and the bottom-right one is titled "Ware 1.0"—that have different influences listed under them. Here, Ware analogizes the evolution of his self to upgrades in computer software, and, in effect, underscores that there have

been multiple versions of him. While the linear succession of Ware 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 ostensibly implies that Ware's self has only significantly changed three times, the inclusion of the "3.3.2" in the top box suggests that Ware is always changing in miniscule ways. Both Figure 9 and the page of Ware's influences, then, juxtapose three different versions of Ware's self and underscore that his self is unstable, because it is always changing either externally or internally.



Fig. 9

The original artwork on *Monograph's* front cover also emphasizes Ware's fragmented conception of the self (Fig. 10). To begin, Figure 10 is notably diagrammatic and features no definitive beginning, middle, or end. Instead, the reader must follow the various thin, black lines from Ware's face and the different panels. These panels depict multiple moments in Ware's life, such as the birth of his daughter in the middle of the right side and his childhood memories of drawing on the left side. Additionally, the bottom-right side of the cover portrays Ware in the future as an old man with a cane, thinking about his life, memories, and eventual death. The simultaneous presence of three Wares on the page—that is, as a child in the past, as an adult in the present or near-past, and as an old man in the future—suggests that Ware's self has fundamentally changed over time. Ware juxtaposes these multiple selves on the page, which

underscores that Ware’s self is not unified or stable; rather, Ware has been different selves across his life. And, Ware demonstrates that his internal self has changed along with his external, physical self. While the child Ware on the left side fantasizes about becoming a superhero, the elderly Ware on the right side envisions his own death and what the afterlife looks like. The various things that Ware thinks about, in other words, have shifted since his youth.

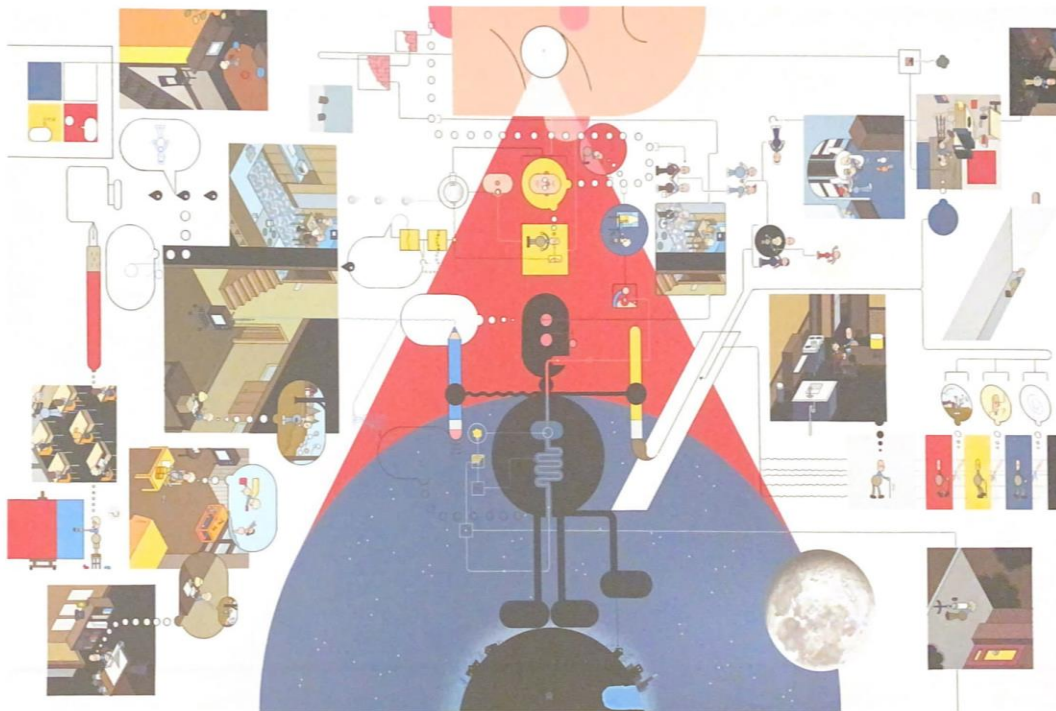


Fig. 10

Furthermore, the form of Figure 10—a non-linear, diagrammatic “sequence” that readers can engage with in any order—illuminates that Ware does not view life stories and memories as easily narrativized. In his article “Multimodal Thought Presentation in Chris Ware’s *Building Stories*,” Massimiliano Morini contends that Ware employs diagrammatic panel sequences to accurately capture the way that the human mind works (31). Morini’s analysis can be applied to Figure 10, because all of the individual sequences portray Ware’s thoughts, memories, and anxieties about the future (i.e., his stream of consciousness). Morini, though, primarily focuses

on how Ware depicts thought as a verbal-visual phenomenon and misses the implications that Ware's representation of thought has for people's memories and life stories. Based on Figure 10, Ware's life story appears to be organized, but not in a linear or easy-to-follow manner. On the left side of the cover, for example, there are three square panels of Ware drawing. In two of the panels, Ware is a child, but, in the bottom-left panel, Ware is a full-grown adult. The placement of these panels suggests that his memories are organized by subject or action—in this case, the action is his drawing—and not by the dates that they occurred in Ware's life. In fact, there is a thin blue line stemming from Ware's blue pencil on the left side of the cover that leads into Ware's memory of him drawing as a child. Here, the implication is that all of Ware's memories are contained within this object, the pencil, and he recalls them every time he encounters that object. Ware, therefore, represents his own life story as one that lacks a definitive beginning, middle, and end, because most of his memories are not chronologically organized.

Not only does the artwork of *Monograph* reflect Ware's approach to representing the fragmented self, but the physicality of the book, in tandem with the artwork, reinforces that Ware depicts the self as divisible and fragmented. Figure 10, in actuality, is one half of a larger art piece; the other half of the piece is on the back of the book (Fig. 11), and it depicts the right side of Ware's face. Visually, Figure 11 is less diagrammatic and easier to follow than Figure 10, simply because there are fewer lines, individual panel sequences, and seemingly disconnected images to look at. The visual differences between Ware's left face and right face indicate that he is using the comics medium to capture a popular theory about the brain: namely, that the left brain helps people with analytical and sequential thinking, whereas the right brain helps people with creative and abstract thinking (Lim et al. 1358). The meticulous, diagrammatic aesthetic of Figure 10 suggests that Ware is trying to place all of his memories, thoughts, and fantasies into

an interconnected network, which reflects one of the functions of Ware's left brain. In comparison, Figure 11 is less chaotically organized and even depicts the right side of Ware's brain as outer space, implying that his right side is a vast infinity of ideas and abstract thoughts. Nonetheless, Ware's division of his brain into two, distinct pieces emphasizes his fragmented representation of the self, since Ware visualizes the two different selves—his analytical, organizational self and his more abstract and creative self. The placement of these two art pieces on the front and back covers only reinforces the fragmentation of Ware's mind and self, because these two selves are physically separated by the pages and content of *Monograph*.¹

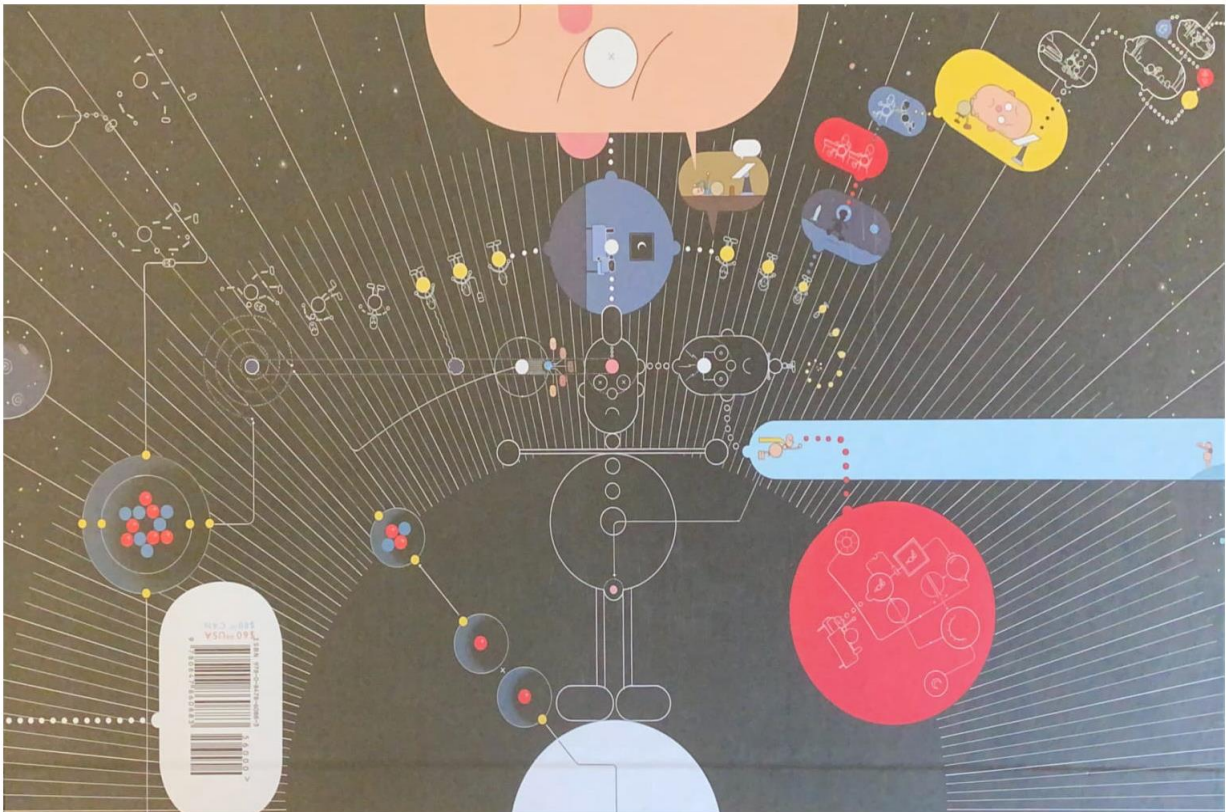


Fig. 11

¹ The observant reader will note that Ware is facing the reader on the front cover and back cover, meaning that what I have described as the left side of his brain is technically a representation of his right side. It seems unlikely, however, that Ware drew these two panel sequences with that in mind, as he needed to illustrate it from the viewpoint of a reader. And, even if that is the case, my general argument is still valid, because Ware is still visualizing two modes of thought and his different selves.

While *Monograph* offers insight into how Ware conceives of his own self and his life story, it is also important to examine how Ware represents the selves of other characters in his fictional works. The “Jordan Lint” chapter in *Rusty Brown* depicts the entire life, from birth to death, of a man named Jordan Lint (sometimes Jason) who grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. Throughout the chapter, Ware demonstrates that Jordan’s sense of self is fragmented. Figure 12, for instance, features overt Lacanian mirror imagery that emphasizes the disconnection between Jordan’s internal self and external self. On the right side of the page, the top panel portrays what Jordan actually looks like (a normal teenage boy) and what he sees himself as (a masculine adult). The most interesting thing about Figure 12 is that it reverses the order of events in Lacan’s mirror stage; instead of looking in the mirror and seeing the ideal, unified version of himself, Jordan already has a conception of how he wants to be seen and how he wants to look, and projects that onto his reflection in the mirror. For Ware, the ideal ego is something that exists in the mind first, and then influences how someone perceives themselves in the mirror. The sequencing of the panels—most readers will view the top panel first, and then view the bottom panel—and the placement of the gutter visualizes this phenomenon, because Jordan sees his actual self first and subsequently projects an image onto it. Ware also employs Ben-Day dots, the small colored dots that characterize the style of early comics, in the bottom panel of Jordan to suggest that Jordan’s perception of his external self is being filtered through his own ideas of how he wants to be seen. Despite inverting the concept of the ideal ego, the point of Figure 12 is Lacanian, as Ware visualizes the disconnection between who Jordan is and who he wants to be.

In addition to visualizing this aforementioned disconnect, Ware also uses words and pictures simultaneously to underscore the conflict between Jordan’s internal thoughts and reality. On the page following Figure 12, there is a panel sequence of Jordan attempting to ride a bike

down a hill. While Jordan is riding the bike, he thinks, “I am the best bike rider in the world; I am the fastest bike rider in the world. I will ride down this hill better and faster than anyone has ever ridden down it before. I am going a thousand miles per hour. I am the best.” Immediately after Jordan’s final thought, he falls off of his bike and rolls down the hill. In this sequence, Jordan possesses an idea of who he wants to be, the “fastest biker in the world,” and attempts to convince himself that he is, in fact, this person. Jordan’s constant usage of “I am” crystallizes that Jordan already views himself as the various characteristics that he lists. Problematically, Jordan’s internal conception of himself conflicts with the reality of the situation, as Jordan’s reckless riding results in him falling off the bike and proving that he is assuredly not the “best bike rider in the world.” Jordan also proclaims that he is “going a thousand miles per hour,” which further underlines that there is a contrast between Jordan’s perception of his actions and how the world actually is. Ultimately, Ware employs the multimodality of comics—that is, the words and the pictures—to emphasize the disconnect between Jordan’s internal self and external self, because Jordan’s internal words contrast with what the reader sees.

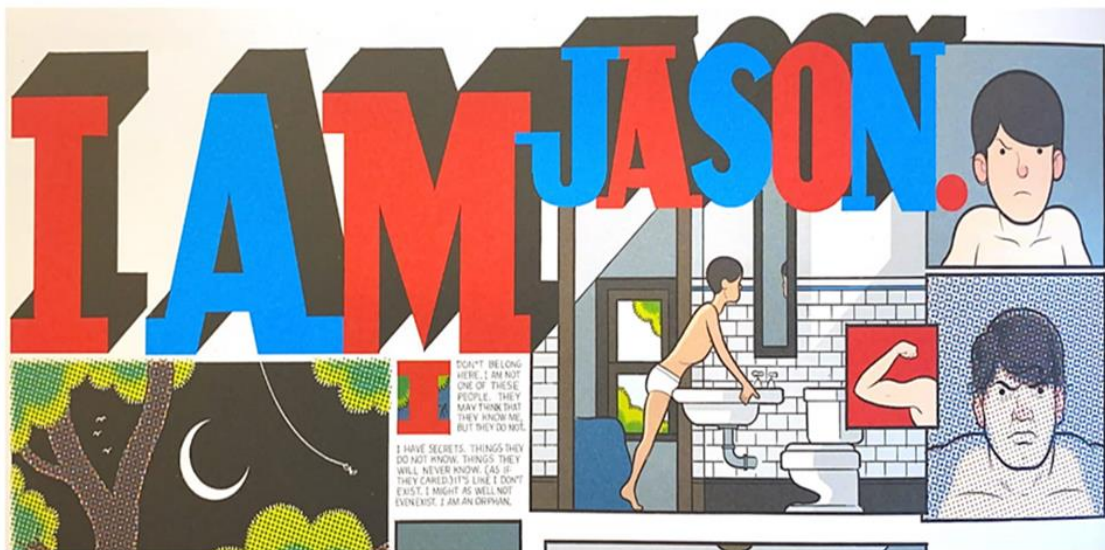


Fig. 12

Throughout the chapter, Jordan changes his name from Jason in his youth to Jordan in his adulthood, which further underscores the fragmentation of his self. After graduating from college, Jordan gets married, finds a stable job, and raises his two sons in the suburbs; in other words, Jordan becomes a responsible adult. Jason, in contrast, is the rebellious, libidinous, and impulsive teenager that Jordan once was. For Jordan, his former name “Jason” encompasses a set of characteristics that he no longer identifies with. Yet, as Figure 13 demonstrates, Jordan oftentimes reverts back into the person that he was as Jason. Within Figure 13’s six-panel sequence, Jordan encounters a woman—a woman who he, in fact, eventually has an affair with—and begins to have sexual fantasies about her. These fantasies are contained within an even smaller six-panel sequence entitled “Jason Lint,” thereby suggesting that Jordan associates sexual desire with a different version of himself. Also, the “Jason Lint” sequence interrupts the linear flow of the larger “Jordan Lint” sequence. This interruption visualizes Jordan’s temporary regression into his former self, because his self from the past (Jason) disrupts how he thinks of himself in the present (Jordan). Ware, in short, illuminates that Jordan has assumed multiple selves throughout his life, but also underlines that Jordan’s sense of self sometimes fluctuates between Jordan and Jason within the present.

While Jordan mentally regresses into Jason in Figure 13, his external appearance remains the same; in Figure 14, however, Jordan’s entire physical appearance changes and he transforms into a child. In effect, Ware demonstrates that certain contexts make Jason feel, internally and externally, like a different version of himself. In Figure 14, Jordan is now an older man visiting the doctor. The top-left panel of the sequence features some of Jordan’s internal, stream-of-consciousness thoughts: “Naked...I hate...hate...it...makes you feel...” After this panel, Jordan turns into himself as a child and remains that way until the near end of his doctor’s visit. Here,

Ware implies that Jordan's experience of being naked and vulnerable at the doctor's office temporarily disrupts Jordan's sense of self. The physical transformation of Jordan emphasizes that his internal state affects how he perceives his external self, for Jordan's mental discomfort manifests itself into a physical feeling of smallness and vulnerability (i.e., child-like characteristics). On the bottom right of the page, a sequence of panels also depicts Jordan turning back into an adult, then into a child, and finally into his adult self again. Not only does Ware demonstrate that Jordan's self fluctuates based on the situations that he is in, but Ware also underscores that, even during these situations, Jordan's self is constantly in flux and changing. Figure 13 and Figure 14 effectively illustrate the same general idea—namely, that Jordan often regresses into one of his past selves while he experiences the present—but with different visual techniques.

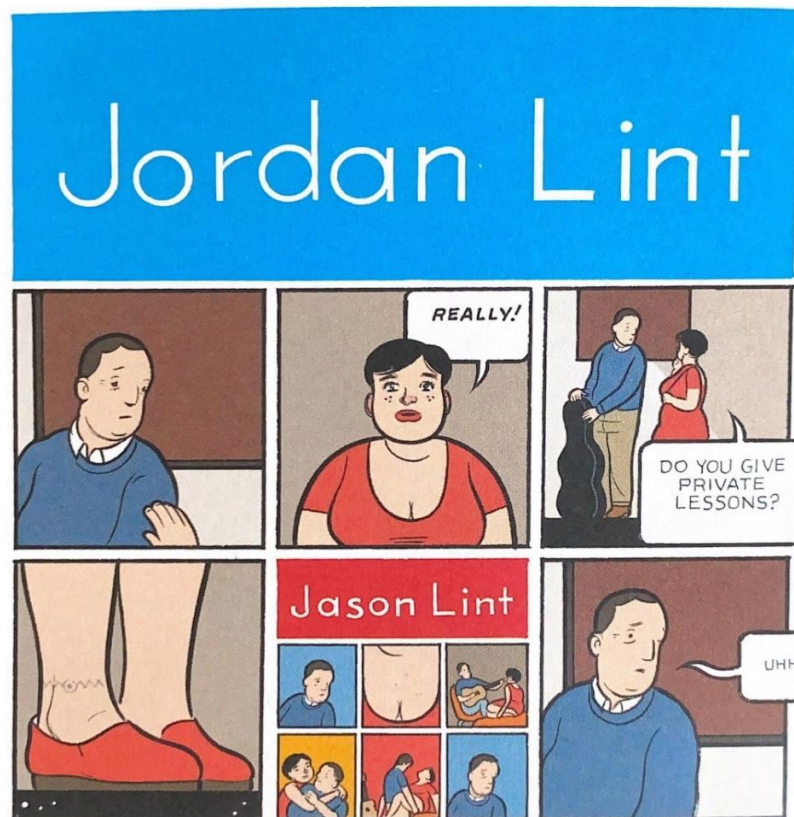


Fig. 13

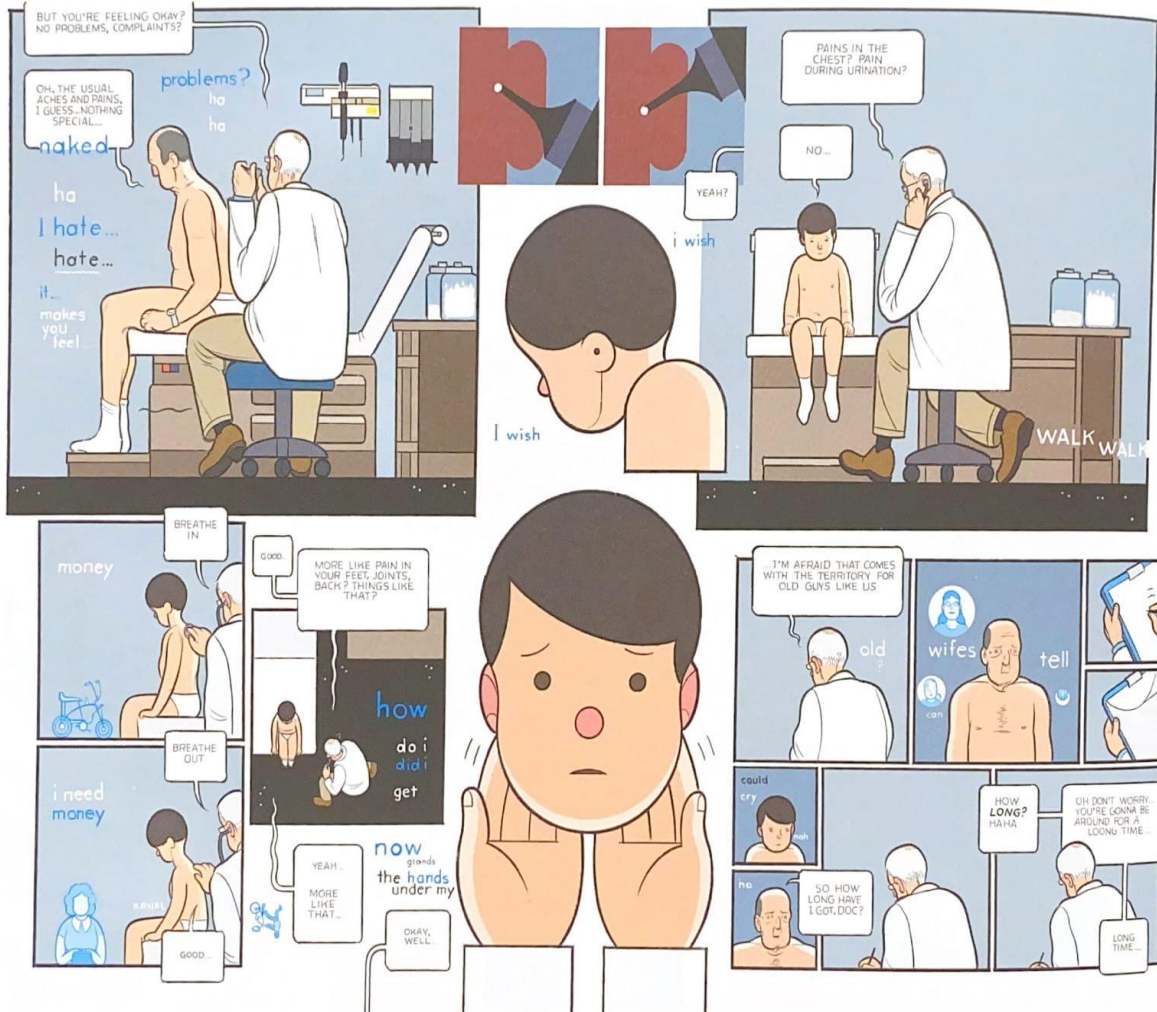


Fig. 14

In addition to portraying the fragmentation of the self, *Rusty Brown*'s "Jordan Lint" chapter also showcases that Ware's characters cannot place their life stories into coherent, linear narratives. On the surface, the structure of the "Jordan Lint" chapter refutes this point, considering that the chapter follows Jordan's life from birth to death. Each page of the chapter also represents one year of Jordan's life, which means that the chapter is always progressing forward linearly. Despite the seeming linearity of the chapter, it is important to note that Jordan spends the majority of his adult life thinking about the past. In Figure 14, for example, the blue sketches that occupy the space of the bottom-left panels are images from Jordan's past: a bicycle

that he rode as a child, and a rough image of his mother who passed away when he was young. In another panel on the bottom-right side, Jordan thinks about his wife in the present, but also about his first wife whom he is no longer with. These sets of panels suggest that Jordan's present is repeatedly interrupted by the past, as his memories of his bicycle, mother, and wives disrupt the space of the doctor's office. Towards the end of Jordan's life, he also sees images of his best friend who died in a car accident that they experienced together, which indicates that Jordan is thinking about the past even as he nears his own death. The structure of the "Jordan Lint" chapter, then, suggests that Jordan is unable to linearize his own life story, because his disorganized memories are frequently disrupting his experience of the present. And, on a more metatextual note, the linearization of Jordan's story in *Rusty Brown* underlines that people's life stories cannot be linearized by the person themselves but can be linearized by a historian or biographer. In the case of Jordan Lint, Ware is a figurative biographer who takes the chaos of Jordan's experiences and places them into a more readable sequence—something that Jordan could not do in his own mind.

However, Ware underscores that Jordan's life cannot be effectively narrativized because Jordan forgets certain moments in his life, and, more specifically, the ways that he has abused others. Near the end of the chapter, Jordan discovers a memoir that his son (Gabriel) wrote about his upbringing. In the part of the memoir that Jordan reads, Gabriel describes a moment where Jordan physically abuses him after learning that Gabriel potentially watched his brother use the bathroom. Ware's inclusion of Gabriel's memoir, first and foremost, disrupts the linear flow of the chapter. While the "Jordan Lint" chapter progresses at a pace of one year per page, the memoir halts this progression of time, as it occupies five pages within the chapter. For Jordan and the reader, the present ceases to move forward and becomes overtaken by a narrative from

the past. More important, though, is the fact that Gabriel's narrative conflicts with Jordan's. Jordan does not remember abusing his son, and eventually sues Gabriel for writing the memoir (presumably for libel). By including Gabriel's memoir, Ware underscores that the reader has only been given one version of Jordan's life story—that is, Jordan's version—and that other interpretations of Jordan as a person exist. As a result, Ware emphasizes that people cannot create a cohesive or entirely accurate narrative of their lives, because this narrative is limited to their perspective and the things that they remember.

Similar to *Monograph* and *Rusty Brown*, the “Old Woman’s Book” in *Building Stories* highlights that Ware represents people’s self and memories as fragmented. First and foremost, Ware manipulates the physicality of the “Old Woman’s Book” to demonstrate that there is a tension between how the unnamed old woman appears and the internal workings of her mind. The front cover of the booklet depicts the old woman from the front, sitting in her chair and barely moving. Likewise, the back cover of the booklet features multiple panels of the old woman from the back, and nearly nothing has changed in her apartment or her sitting position. In contrast, the middle of the book—that is, the multiple pages that comprise it—do not occur in the old woman’s apartment; rather, the inside of the book portrays the old woman’s internal thoughts and memories, which are visually chaotic, disorganized, and fragmented. By placing two panel sequences, one of the old woman from the front and another of her from the back, on the two covers of the booklet, Ware suggests that the reader is figuratively moving through the old woman’s head and seeing the machinations of her mind in the booklet. And, while the old woman appears to live a relatively inactive life, her mind is completely active because she is constantly thinking about her memories and the past. Ware’s contrast between the calmness of

the booklet's covers and the chaos of the booklet's pages, in sum, conveys that there is a conflict between the old woman's external self (the covers) and internal self (the pages).

Inside the "Old Woman's Book," Ware formally depicts the old woman's memory as non-linear, fragmented, and chaotically organized. In the article "Past Imperfect: 'Building Stories' and the Art of Memory," critic Peter Sattler contends that Ware employs the medium of comics to accurately capture the way that remembering something feels (207). While Sattler also briefly examines the implications that Ware's representation has for the self (217, 219), my analysis expands upon Sattler's by, one, examining the more formally experimental pages of the "Old Woman's Book" and, two, further exploring what Ware's portrayal of memory suggests about people's life stories. In this sense, Figure 15 reflects many of the same ideas about memory and life stories as *Rusty Brown* and *Monograph*. Figure 15 is a collection of memories that the old woman has of her father. These memories are not in chronological order, as the old woman fluctuates between herself as a child, adult, and older adult throughout the page. Here, Ware challenges normal reading practices and demonstrates that the old woman's memories cannot be placed into a cohesive narrative that features a beginning, middle, and end. To elaborate, the left-hand side of the page features a series of small panels that depict the old woman's memories of her father going to work. If the reader approaches this page like a standard comics page—that is, they read it in a linear, left-to-right and top-to-bottom order—this sequence will be interrupted by multiple panels of the wall, a drawing of the father's jacket, and a panel of the old woman's mother vacuuming. But if the reader chooses to only read the small panels first, the small panels actually create a sequence of the old woman's father putting on his hat, saying goodbye, and leaving for work. So, Ware implicitly encourages the reader to engage with the old woman's

memories in a different order than they are arranged on the page, which reinforces that people’s memories, even of particular events, are not linearly organized inside of their minds.



Fig. 15

The old woman’s memories of her father, in addition to being non-linear, are also comprised of multiple mediums. Put another way, the old woman’s actual memories of events are just one way that she can partially access the past and recall her father, which further underscores that her memory of him is fragmented. In Figure 15, there are multiple panels of photographs that interrupt the flow of the overall sequence. Like Ware’s use of photographs, verbal narratives, and his art in *Monograph*, Figure 15 underscores that the past can only be accessed through various forms of representation. To explain, the old woman possesses a memory of her father before and after he took some of the pictures but lacks any memory of

actually posing for the pictures. The photographs, in other words, replace the old woman's memory of these moments and indicate that she remembers her father through different types of representation (her memory and pictures). Also, Figure 15 features multiple objects, such as the father's work coat and a camera, that are scattered throughout the page. These objects are significant for two reasons: firstly, the different objects are surrounded by the old woman's memories that she associates with them, which suggests that these objects evoke certain memories for her; and, secondly, these objects are effectively artifacts of her father who passed away, thereby rendering them their own, unique form of representation. Ware, therefore, visually illustrates that the old woman's memory is fragmented, because she remembers the past through multiple mediums—her memories, photographs, and physical artifacts.

While Figure 15 further illuminates that Ware depicts people's memories of specific events or subjects (the old woman's father) as non-linear and fragmented, the "Paper Dolls" sequence (Fig. 16) demonstrates that Ware represents the self as fragmented and life stories as irreducible to easy narrativization. Peter Sattler, as noted above, examines Ware's formal representation of memory by offering an extensive analysis of the "Paper Dolls" sequence (210 – 213), but does not consider the implications that this sequence has for the self and people's life stories. For one, Figure 16 is figuratively an abridged version of *Rusty Brown's* "Jordan Lint" chapter, as it portrays the old woman's entire life and begins with her in the womb. Figure 16 differs from "Jordan Lint," however, because the old woman's life is condensed into a two-page spread, which enables the reader to see all of the different selves that the old woman has been at once. The simultaneous presence of multiple selves on these pages—on the left-hand page, for instance, the reader will see the old woman as a baby, child, teen, and adult—indicates that the old woman's self, especially in her younger years, is unstable and consistently changing. In fact,

Ware even employs a standard, 3x3 panel arrangement to emphasize that the old woman's self is fragmented, because the gutters literally segment the various selves that the old woman has been.

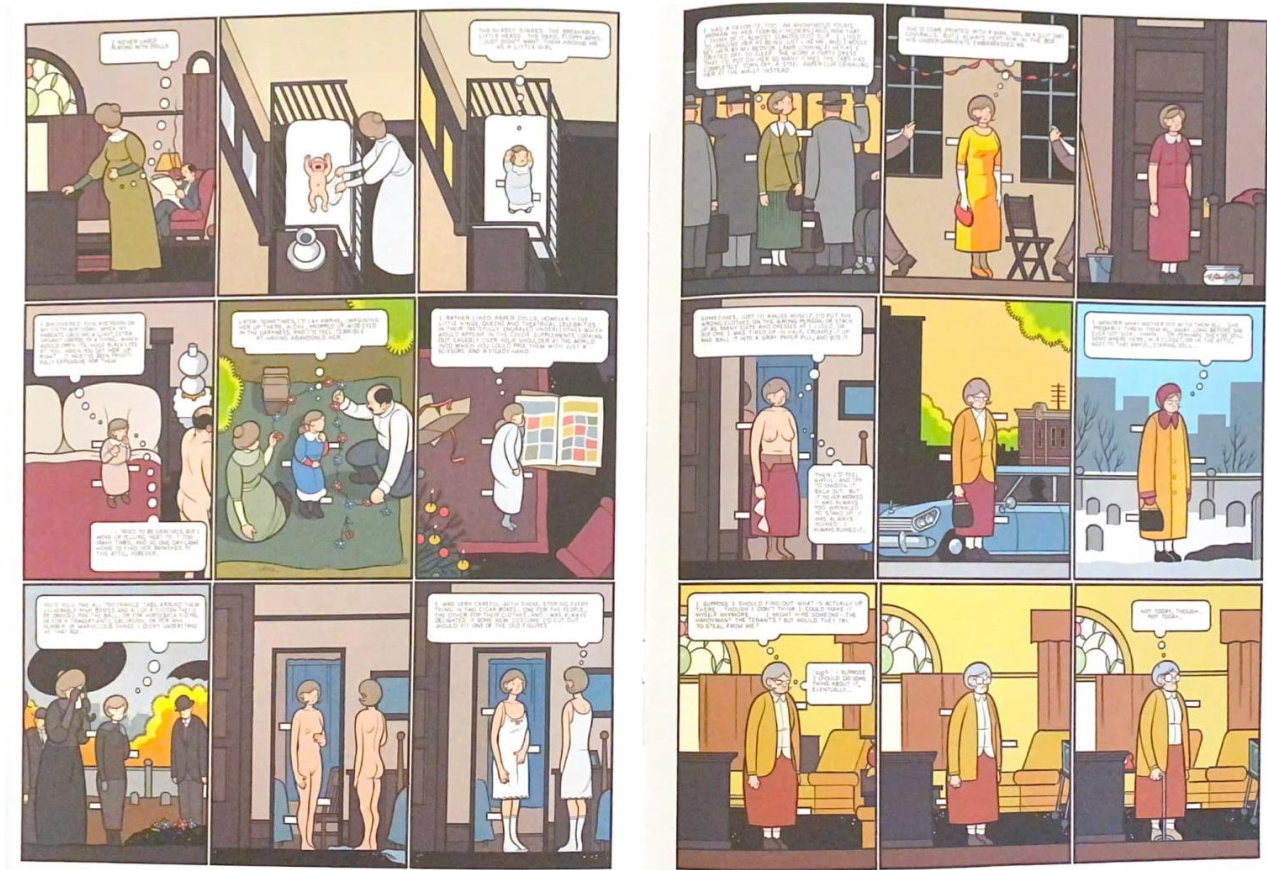


Fig. 16

More importantly, Figure 16 crystallizes one of the central arguments of this chapter: namely, that life stories, on Ware's account, cannot be neatly narrativized. On the surface, Figure 16 undermines this point, because it offers an apparently linear and cohesive narrative of the old woman's entire life. Yet, there are two fundamental elements of Figure 16 that undercut this initial interpretation. The gutters, first and foremost, implicate that the old woman's narrative of her life is incomplete, since they signify that there are gaps in the old woman's memory. In other words, there are certain details from the old woman's life that she either cannot remember or deems insignificant. The placement of the gutters, then, indicates that the reader and the old

woman are in comparable positions, for neither the reader nor the old woman know every detail about the old woman's life story. And, different people, including the old woman herself, will have different conceptions about what pieces of her story are integral to the narrative, as the "Paper Dolls" sequence is comprised of the fragments that the old woman herself deems important. In tandem with the gutters, Figure 16 also features parts of the old woman's life story that she cannot possibly remember. More specifically, the two panels in the top-left depict the old woman in her mother's womb and as a baby in a crib. In order to construct a seemingly linear narrative of her life, the old woman needed to infer certain things about her early life because she does not possess actual memories of them. Ware's depiction of the old woman's life, then, is similar to his representation of his own life in *Monograph* and Jordan's life in *Rusty Brown*. All of these stories initially appear as if they are linear, complete narratives of the subject's life stories, but Ware manipulates the medium of comics—or, the various mediums that comprise *Monograph*—to undermine their seeming orderliness.

Chapter 2 -- Ware's Representation of Everyday Trauma & The Rejection of Recovery

In the previous chapter, I established that Ware rejects the idea that life stories can be easily narrativized by people. Simply put, Ware's characters lack the objectivity—that is, they cannot escape their own, subjective perspective on themselves and their pasts—to completely assess their life stories and chronologize their memories. Aside from their inability to narrativize their lives, Ware's characters also struggle to fully live within the present. Ware's characters, specifically the unnamed old woman and Jordan Lint from the previous chapter, are constantly thinking about their pasts and having their experience of the present disrupted by their fragmented memories. At this point, it is important to ask: what exactly are these memories of? While some of these memories are seemingly benign, most of them are somehow traumatic. On the complicated, non-linear page from the “Old Woman's Book” in the previous chapter (Fig. 15), for example, the old woman recalls negative interactions with her mother, her parents fighting while she was a child, and eventually her father's death. Even at the end of her life, the old woman is still thinking about her past and some of the traumatic moments that occurred in her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In *Rusty Brown* and *Building Stories*, as well as in some of his previously unpublished work from *Monograph* and his early work *Quimby the Mouse*, Ware manipulates the placement and size of the panels on the page to formally capture two fundamental symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): intrusion and constriction. As I will also demonstrate, Ware formally represents everyday experiences like gym class and failed romances as traumatic, which challenges conventional notions of what constitutes trauma. By visualizing the symptoms of PTSD, Ware indicates that his characters are unable to fully recover from their trauma and integrate their traumatic pasts into their life stories, as their experience of the present is mostly subsumed by vivid memories of (everyday) traumatic events.

At first glance, it seems like an exaggeration to refer to everyday events like gym class as traumatic. As Herman writes in *Trauma and Recovery*:

Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence or death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe. (33)

Much of what Ware writes about, on Herman's account, would constitute "commonplace misfortunes": moments of miscommunication, failed romances, and an inability to effectively participate in gym class are nearly universal experiences that, ostensibly, most people overcome and do not dwell on. But ultimately, Ware illuminates that these "commonplace misfortunes" do have a significant impact on people regardless of their seeming unimportance. To an unathletic child, gym class may certainly feel like a "close personal encounter with violence or death," especially if they are being bullied. And to others, like the unnamed protagonist from *Building Stories*, daily thoughts about loneliness, depression, and suicide can, in Herman's words, evoke a feeling of "helplessness and terror." For Ware, traumatic events can be ordinary occurrences that *feel* extraordinary or traumatic to different individuals.

Yet, before examining Ware's focus on everyday traumas, it is necessary to define the terms intrusion and constriction. In *Trauma and Recovery*, psychiatrist Herman concisely describes intrusion: "Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present[...] The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep" (37). According to Herman, a

survivor of trauma might encounter an innocuous object or hear an innocent noise and be reminded of the traumatic event that they endured. A war veteran, for instance, might hear a loud crash and associate the crash with the falling of bombs. Subsequently, the veteran's memories of being in the war will return to them—this is outside of their control, of course—and they will feel as if they are reliving their time in the war. To offer another example, the aforementioned veteran might have an actual nightmare about their time in the war, forcing them to reexperience their traumatic past while they sleep. In either case, the veteran's traumatic memories *intrude* upon their present. So, Ware formally depicts this phenomenon by placing panels that portray a traumatic event from a character's past in between panels that represent the narrative's present. For the reader and the character alike, the traumatic past temporarily intrudes upon (and effectively becomes) their present.

While intrusion largely occurs after a person has experienced trauma, constriction sometimes occurs during the moment of trauma. During a traumatic event, it is common for people to experience time in a slowed, distorted manner (Herman 43). To put it more colloquially, Herman notes that a person experiencing trauma often feels as if time is moving in “slow motion,” or as if they are in a dream (43). In addition, the survivor of trauma will often feel detached from their mind, their body, or reality as a whole even after the traumatic event has ended (Herman 43). In Ware's works, he employs two visual techniques to capture the affective qualities of constriction. Firstly, Ware uses extremely small, moment-to-moment panels to reflect the slower passing of time during a traumatic event. The smaller panels increase the amount of time that the reader spends viewing the page, thereby allowing them to feel the character's slowed sense of time. Secondly, and less commonly, Ware often utilizes the Ben-Day dots to indicate that the character's perception of reality has been altered by a traumatic event.

Early on in his career, Ware was already experimenting with small panels to formally capture constriction. “Gym Class” (1987), a never-before-published work that Ware released in *Monograph*, demonstrates his early interest in capturing the symptoms of PTSD and how everyday events can feel traumatic (22). In “Chris Ware and the Pursuit of Slowness,” critic Georgiana Banita explores Ware’s manipulation of time in *Jimmy Corrigan* (177). More specifically, Banita examines Ware’s use of “silent panels”—that is, panels in which nothing changes between them—and how they affect the pace of reading (184). These silent panels differ from moment-to-moment panels, as there is no perceptible change between them, whereas moment-to-moment panels at least feature a miniscule change. As McCloud notes, moment-to-moment panels require very little work on the reader’s behalf, since the changes between the panels are small but still apparent (70). In addition, Banita also asserts that Ware uses these decelerative techniques to capture the feelings, such as “distress” and “boredom,” of his characters (187). Banita’s analysis, however, does not include an examination of Ware’s small, moment-to-moment panels or what their thematic function is. Also, Banita’s argument that Ware uses the medium to visualize his characters’ feelings does not connect Ware’s decelerative techniques to his formal representation of trauma.

On this note, Ware’s “Gym Class” not only depicts the class itself as traumatic, but also illustrates that the *anticipation* of gym class is traumatic. The second and third rows of panels, for instance, all portray the main character sitting in class. Every panel features a clock in the upper-left corner that barely changes between each panel, indicating that time is moving excruciatingly slow. In contrast, the row below the large, gym-class panel features the main character engaging in activities that he enjoys like singing on his walk home and watching TV. These panels elide a significant amount of time between them, which suggests that time moves

quicker when the main character is enjoying himself. “Gym Class,” then, is one of the earliest examples of Ware experimenting with panel size and pacing to visualize constriction, as the moment-to-moment panels reflect the traumatic anxiety and dread that the main character endures while waiting for class.

Not only does Ware manipulate panel size in Figure 17 to formally capture the feeling of constriction, but he also uses it to formally represent intrusion. To elaborate, all of the panels on the page are an identical size besides one: the large, dark panel in the center of the page in which the unnamed character gets hit with a football. The darkness of the panel, first and foremost, distinguishes it from the smaller and lighter panels, suggesting that gym class is figuratively a dark, traumatic moment for the character. In tandem with the darkness, the size of the panel similarly underscores that this character is traumatized by gym class—it is worth noting that this trauma could be caused by the character’s lack of athletic ability, or by bullies who are relegated to the gutter—as the largeness of the panel disrupts the reading flow of the page. Also, the football that bounces off of the character’s head in the large panel actually enters into the space of the previous panels in the top right and hides some of the illustration. Here, the object that causes the main character trauma (a football) intrudes upon the space of these panels before the moment of trauma even occurs, indicating that the character’s anxious thoughts about this object invade his present. More importantly, Ware’s placement of the football over the panels helps the reader experience the affective qualities of intrusion, since the football literally overtakes the present panels and prevents the reader from seeing all the details. All of these techniques, in sum, emphasize Ware’s early interest in formally capturing intrusion.

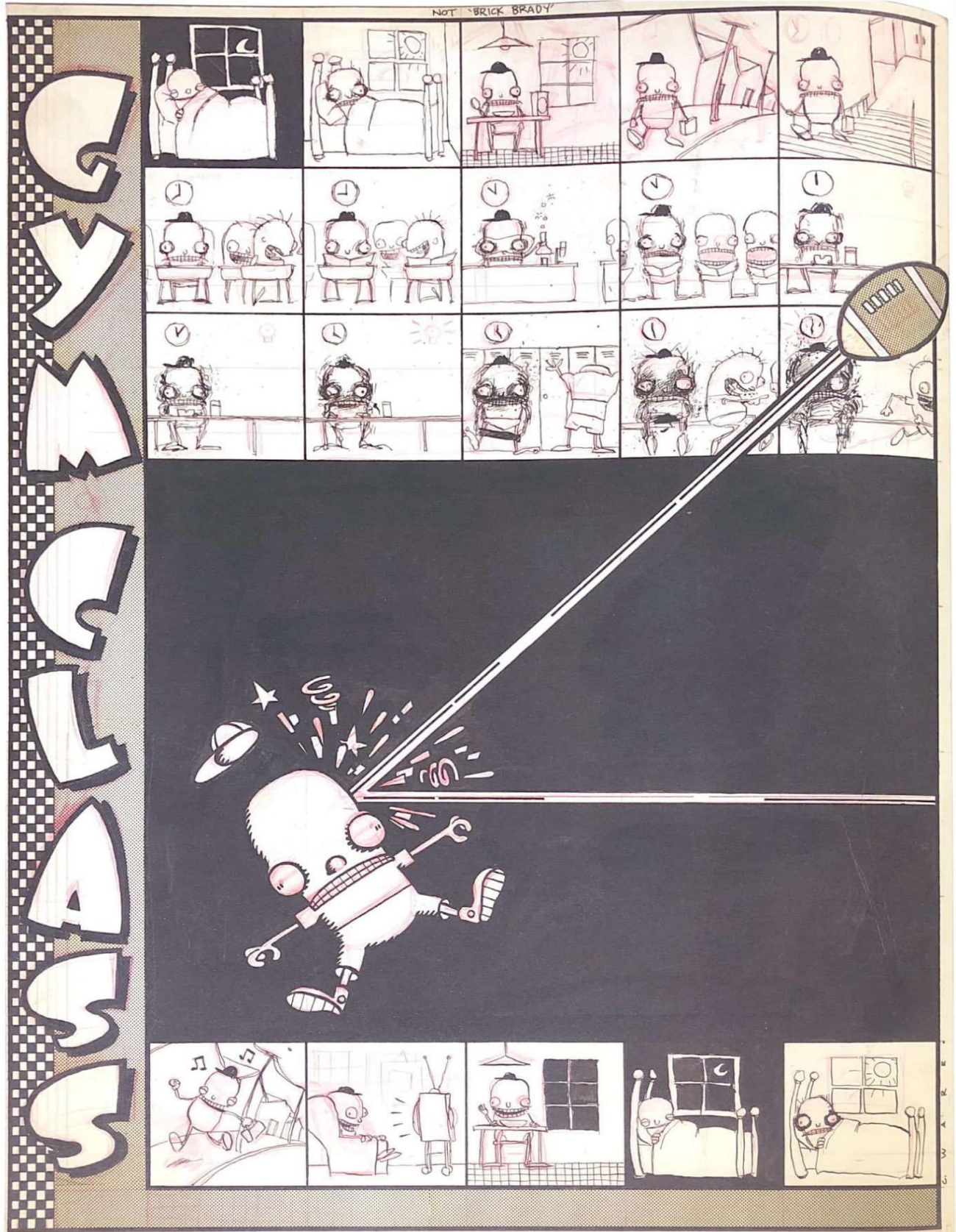
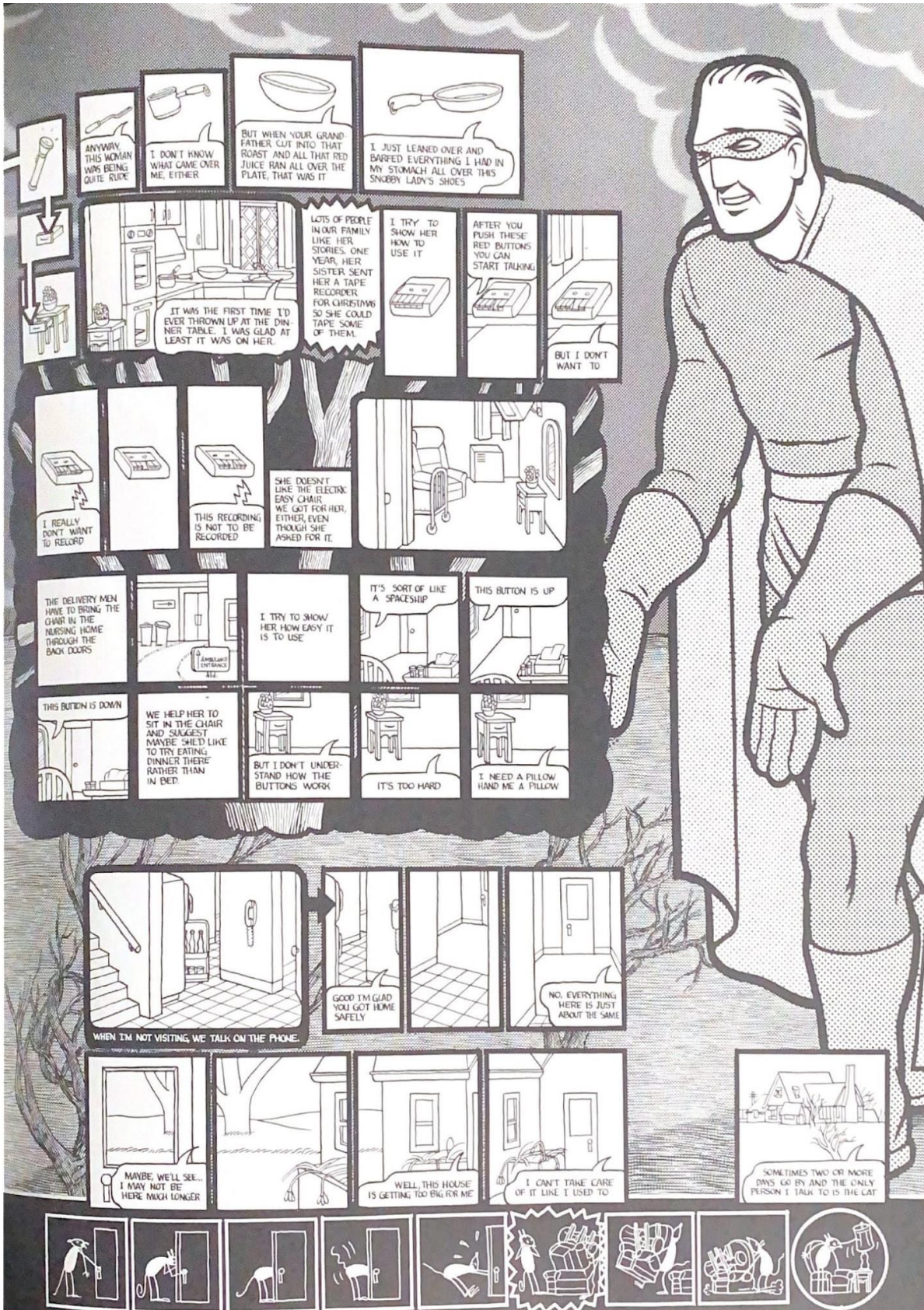


Fig. 17

While “Gym Class” is certainly an early example of trauma in Ware’s works, it was never released or published as a standalone comic strip. The strips that comprise Ware’s *Quimby the Mouse*, however, were released once a week as standalone strips for *The Daily Texan* and deal explicitly with trauma. As Ware writes in *Quimby*’s verbal introduction, he drew many of the strips in *Quimby* to help him cope with the imminent death of his grandmother:

During her steady decline I continued my weekly strip for the newspaper in Austin, but found that I was only able to draw stories of my increasingly littler mouse wandering, alone, through a large, unoccupied house—my grandmother’s house. Every week was a torment of my trying to do something that might mean something to a reader waiting to take a Calculus test and balancing the inevitable erasure of one of the most important people in my life.

In this passage, Ware notes that he struggled to represent his traumatic experiences in an accessible and meaningful—at least, in a meaningful manner to college students. And, there are multiple panel sequences in *Quimby* that, simply put, the average reader would probably find impenetrable or difficult to casually read. For example, Figure 18 features two seemingly disconnected sequences. On roughly ninety percent of the page, there is a non-linear, diagrammatic panel sequence of a nameless, faceless narrator discussing their grandmother and their grandmother’s experiences in a nursing home. Since Ware himself notes that many of *Quimby*’s strips are autobiographical, it is safe to assume that this narrator is somehow a representation of him. The other ten percent of the page features a more accessible, linear sequence of *Quimby* retrieving old furniture from a closet. In Figure 18, then, Ware acknowledges that the trauma of his grandmother’s decline is incapable of being placed into an easy-to-read sequence like the one of *Quimby* at the bottom.



Even though the more experimental sequence in Figure 18 is initially difficult to comprehend, some of the techniques that Ware employs in it capture the affective qualities of constriction. In this instance, the panel size is not the only thing that affects the page's reading time; the ordering of the panels and their content also increases the amount of reading time. On the one hand, the sequence at the bottom with Quimby can likely be read in under a minute, because it is linearly arranged and does not have any words. On the other hand, the sequence that occupies most of the page forces the reader to figure out what order that they should read these panels in—or, at least, what order that they *can* read these panels in—and simultaneously interpret words and images. In the introduction of *Quimby*, Ware notes that his grandmother's final years were equally as traumatic, if not more traumatic, than her death itself: "In death, she became alarmingly demanding, petulant, almost spiteful, cruelly alienating herself from my family's memories of her with an unfamiliarity that was only matched by the bloating of her body and the *gradual* curling of her limbs" (emphasis added). Thus, in Figure 18, Ware captures the feelings associated with the traumatic experience of watching a loved one decline by employing a diagrammatic, dense series of panels that force the reader to move through the page at a slower pace. So, the form of Figure 18 is not just experimental for the sake of being experimental; rather, Ware uses this form to convey that he felt a slowed, constricted sense of time during his grandmother's traumatic final years.

In the "Jordan Lint" chapter of *Rusty Brown*, Ware also demonstrates that out-of-the-ordinary traumatic experiences, unlike gym class or the death of a parent, are experienced similarly to more ordinary traumatic events. On the final page of the "Jordan Lint" chapter, Jordan is on his deathbed and remembers a car accident that he experienced as a teenager (Fig. 19). After the accident, Jordan's high-school friend is pronounced dead as a result of the crash.

In the middle of Figure 19, there are two, medium-sized panels of Jordan behind the wheel, which indicate that he is still thinking about this traumatic event, even on his death bed. Jordan's memory of his trauma, in other words, intrudes upon the narrative flow of the present—that is, Jordan in his final moments—and forces the reader to relive this traumatic event along with Jordan. On the bottom right of the page, Jordan's deceased friend also enters into the space of the present, as Jordan's friend is lying on the hospital bed on top of him. Of course, Jordan's friend is not literally in the room with him, but Jordan feels as if his friend is with him while he relives this traumatic moment. Ware's utilization of these visual techniques, in turn, enables the reader to also experience the affective qualities of intrusion.

Furthermore, Figure 19 occurs at the exact end of Jordan's life, indicating that he never recovered from the car accident or the death of his friend. Following Figure 19, there is a blank white page with the phrase "I am" repeated three times on the leftmost side. This phrase is reminiscent of Descartes's often cited phrase, "I think, therefore I am." And, in fact, Jordan continues thinking until his mind fails him and he is no longer alive. Interestingly, Jordan's final thoughts in Figure 19 are dominated by his unfulfilled sexual fantasies (on the top of the page) and the traumatic death of his friend (on the bottom of the page). Here, Ware demonstrates that people's conscious thoughts are usually not about the present but are instead about their past traumas or regrets. These thoughts are involuntary, as Jordan's reaction to his deceased friend figuratively entering the hospital room—he exclaims "get off" when his friend lies down on him, for example—implies that these memories are entering into his present without his consent. The only reprieve from these intrusive thoughts about the past, as Ware suggests in *Monograph*, is death itself: "I can think of nothing more horrifying, unimaginable, or inescapably terrifying than the endurance of consciousness after death [...] While oblivion may be terrifying if not

both the reader's eyesight and their ability to make connections between these miniscule, moment-to-moment images. Without even reading it, the structure of Figure 20 (i.e., the panel arrangement) communicates that the reader needs to engage with it slowly and methodically if they want to fully understand the narrative of the page.



Fig. 20

It should be noted, too, that Figure 20 offers no new narrative content to the reader; the only reason for the reader to engage with these panels, simply put, is if they want to understand the way that Mr. Brown feels when he remembers these events. In fact, all of the small, borderline unreadable panels on the page depict events that the reader has already seen throughout the chapter. The only necessary part to read is Mr. Brown's narration in the center of the page, in which he states, "Now, that time of my life is all just little pieces of memories that

speed by in a flash (or linger, if I want them to)...none of it makes any sense.” Here, Ware takes Mr. Brown’s statement—namely, that his memories are “little pieces”—to its logical conclusion and condenses the entire “Mr. Brown” chapter into one, incredibly packed page. More importantly, Mr. Brown’s narration in the page’s center emphasizes that there are two ways for the reader to approach this page: firstly, the reader can completely skim over all of the small panels “in a flash,” since they already know Mr. Brown’s life story; or, secondly, the reader can “linger” and read the page panel by panel, and relive the memories slowly like Mr. Brown might. In other words, Ware encourages reader choice in Figure 20, and the choice that the reader makes will influence how they affectively experience Mr. Brown’s memories.

These two aforementioned modes of reading in Figure 20 (skimming or lingering) individually capture the affective qualities of intrusion or constriction. The prevalence of choice in Ware’s works—especially *Building Stories*, which I will partially analyze later in this chapter—has garnered some attention from scholars. Simon Grennan and Ian Hague, for example, compare reader choice in Ware’s *Building Stories* to the choices that players make in video games (74). In sum, Grennan and Hague argue that, in video games, the player’s actions have the potential to substantially alter and change the plot, whereas, in *Building Stories*, the reader’s decisions do not impact the outcome of the narrative at all (81). Grennan and Hague, though, miss one fundamental point: namely, that how a reader approaches some of Ware’s pages will affect their emotions while they are reading. If the reader decides to skim Figure 20, Mr. Brown’s memories will seem like a fast-moving, intrusive flashback—Mr. Brown even describes these traumatic memories as a “flash” sometimes—that temporarily overtakes the present. In this sense, the first mode of reading allows the reader to affectively experience intrusion. If the reader decides to linger, Mr. Brown’s memories will seem painstakingly slow

and almost tedious to read, which captures the slowed sense of time that characterizes traumatic constriction. Similar to Figure 18 from *Quimby*, the reader can decide how to approach reading Figure 20; the key difference is that the reader is not required to read the entire page to understand the narrative or the emotions that Ware is trying to capture. Put another way, the reader will choose, either consciously or unconsciously, what symptom of PTSD that they are going to experience along with Mr. Brown.

Both of the examples from *Rusty Brown*, while still difficult to initially read for a variety of reasons, can be read in the standard, left-to-right and top-to-bottom reading order that characterizes most contemporary graphic novels. To synthesize, Ware's contemporary works blend the effective simplicity of "Gym Class" with some of the radical experimentation present in *Quimby*, enabling him to depict trauma in a nuanced manner. And Figure 21 from *Building Stories* emphasizes that Ware's representation of everyday trauma has shifted formally, but not thematically. Near the end of the "Old Woman's Book," the old woman discusses her mother's death and the arduous process of waiting for it. As the old woman states, "The situation had grown intolerable and had stayed that way for decades. I would have moved her into a home, but we couldn't have afforded it. No, we couldn't have afforded it." The old woman's repetition of the line "couldn't have afforded it" suggests that she views the end of her mother's life with deep regret, because she had to spend many of her adult years solely caring for her mother instead of living independently. In fact, the old woman even notes that her mother's death was liberating for her, as she was able to start purchasing things for herself that her "mother wouldn't let [her] have." Thematically, the figure about Ware's grandmother from *Quimby* and Figure 21 from *Building Stories* are similar—in both instances, Ware demonstrates that the time spent waiting for someone's death can be more traumatic than the death itself.



Fig. 21

Despite Figure 21's thematic similarities to *Quimby*, Ware's formal representation of intrusion and constriction in Figure 21 significantly differs from his early works. To begin, Figure 21 underscores that traumatic memories are typically associated with different objects. The presence of a large rose lapel in the center of the page, a lapel that the old woman gave to her mother a year before her mother's death, suggests that many of the old woman's memories of her mother are somehow triggered by this particular object. And, for the reader, the large rose lapel has two important effects. For one, the largeness of the lapel, the eye-catching color of it (red), and its placement in the direct center of the two pages will almost guarantee that the reader will look at it first when they turn the page. After seeing the lapel, the reader will likely try to form some connection between the lapel itself and the narrative of the page. Like the old woman, the reader will associate the traumatic memories of her mother with this object, thereby enabling

the reader to understand how certain, physical objects can serve as permanent reminders of one's trauma. Additionally, the large lapel bisects the page and disrupts the flow of the narrative (the reader's present), which emphasizes how intrusive this object is to the old woman. In comparison, Ware's "Gym Class" also visually demonstrates that certain objects—in that case, a football—are often associated with traumatic memories or events, but the rose lapel sequence helps the reader literally feel how these associations are formed through Ware's manipulation of space on the page.

The rose lapel sequence is also a synthesis of the techniques that Ware employs to capture constriction in "Gym Class" and *Quimby*. Above the lapel in the center of the page are three panels of the light subtly changing in the apartment of the old woman's mother. These panels are moment-to-moment panels because the changes in lighting that occur between the panels are negligible and seemingly insignificant. There are also panels—the two in the top-left corner of her mother's hands, for instance, or the panels of various photographs placed throughout the page—that do not progress the plot, but rather add more details about the old woman's past or the space of the apartment. Plus, there are a variety of objects placed throughout the page that similarly slow down the narrative (e.g., to the right of the rose lapel). All of these formal techniques, in effect, help underscore that the old woman experienced a slowed, constricted sense of time in the months leading to her mother's death.

But in conjunction with these formal techniques, Ware also gives the reader some agency in how they approach the page. On the right of the rose lapel, the old woman states, "The things mother wouldn't let us have I bought." If the reader continues to read to the right, the sentence is syntactically coherent: "The things mother wouldn't let us have I bought | an electric blanket | television | a colored maid | with the money she left behind." Yet, if the reader decides to read

the panel directly below the initial statement, the sentence also makes sense: “The things mother wouldn’t let us have I bought | with my meager shopgirl salary.” In both instances, the reader needs to reread the initial sentence—and perhaps even a few panels before it—to fully grasp what the old woman is discussing. The availability of choice to the reader causes them to slow down, because it necessitates some amount of rereading, and forces them to stop and decide about where they want to read next. In this sense, Ware’s depiction of constriction in Figure 21 is similar to the aforementioned, diagrammatic sequence from *Quimby* since the non-linearity of the page evokes a slowed sense of time for the reader.

All of the techniques that Ware employs to represent intrusion and constriction are present in Figure 22 from *Building Stories*—a figure in which he depicts the unnamed protagonist’s everyday thoughts as traumatic. Below, Figure 22 depicts the intrusive thoughts that the unnamed protagonist has before she falls asleep. On the left side of the page, the protagonist is thinking about the various ways that she could commit suicide and speculates on who will find her first. On the right side of the page, the protagonist expresses uncertainty in her future and thinks about the emptiness of her life. On a preliminary note, this panel sequence is notably diagrammatic and features multiple linearities for the reader to navigate. In order to comprehend the page, the reader must follow the various threads of words, images, and arrows that Ware has placed throughout. The ability for the reader to choose significantly slows them down and forces them to make decisions about how they are going to approach the page. But Ware also slows down the reader in another way—namely, he forces them to turn the physical book around and look at the page from multiple angles if they want to read everything within the sequence. Not only does having to turn the book force the reader to read more slowly, but it also disorients them and frustrates traditional reading practices. These various techniques, in turn,

capture the feelings of constriction that accompany moments of trauma, as well as the generally disorienting feelings associated with these thoughts.

Furthermore, the entire sequence occurs within a large, black thought bubble that originates in a panel at the bottom of the page, which implies that the protagonist's thoughts are intruding upon her present. In this panel, the protagonist is lying in her bed and gripping her head. The protagonist's physicality, first and foremost, indicates that she is not in control of these thoughts; rather, the protagonist is struggling against these thoughts and is physically trying to prevent them. More importantly, Ware manipulates panel size in Figure 22 to demonstrate that the protagonist's thoughts are intrusive. The large thought bubble subsumes the entire page and completely overwhelms the small panel of the protagonist, suggesting that she is being figuratively crushed by the weight of her negative thoughts. Put another way, the protagonist feels like she is in a small, confined box when these thoughts occur to her. And all of these formal techniques, in tandem, illustrate that thoughts themselves—which are, for most people, everyday phenomena—can be equally as traumatic as certain experiences.

Despite his use of different formal techniques over time, Ware's overall attitude towards trauma and recovery has not changed. All of the characters that I have analyzed in this chapter struggle to escape their pasts: Jordan Lint constantly remembers his friend's death (and his own survival) in a car crash; Mr. Brown cannot forget about a failed, traumatic romance from his youth; and the old woman's present is entirely consumed by memories of her father's death, her mother's death, and all of her past regrets. Besides their inability to stop reliving the past, Ware's characters have something else in common—none of them seek help. Instead of pursuing therapy, Ware's characters, like many people in the real world, leave their trauma completely unresolved and continue living their day-to-day lives as if things are normal. In short, Ware's works do not suggest that people cannot fully (or mostly) recover from their trauma; rather, Ware's works emphasize that many people *do not* recover from their trauma for a variety of reasons both inside and outside of their control.

At this point, it is fair to ask: what about Ware himself? In both *Quimby* and *Monograph*, Ware offers extensive descriptions about certain traumatic events in his life, such as the death of his grandmother or the sudden death of his friend Lisa (*Monograph* 189), but never explicitly mentions whether or not he is receiving psychiatric help. In *Monograph*, however, Ware notes that drawing comics and writing serves a therapeutic function for him:

[*Monograph*] is a good example. Does the world really need another printed tome about an artist, let alone one about an admittedly marginal and rather questionable graphic novelist/artist/writer who has already littered the recycling centers and used bookstores of his home country with dog-eared examples of his own self-regard? No... Why should I feel compelled to remake [the world's matter] into something that reflects the encoded, vague, approximate shape of my memories, anxieties, and personal problems? (187)

Here, Ware acknowledges that he feels “compelled” to transfigure his various thoughts and emotions into something more tangible like, in this case, *Monograph*. As a reminder, one of the key steps in recovering from one’s trauma—or, at least, learning to cope with it—is narrativizing it and integrating it into one’s life story. Interestingly, the act of writing an autobiography, memoir, or semi-autobiographical work seems to help someone achieve this. If someone wants to write a widely understandable autobiography, they need to take the internal chaos of their memories, traumas, and general thoughts and turn them into something palatable to the reader. And, in fact, Ware accomplishes this in *Monograph*. Of course, *Monograph* still features some idiosyncrasies, like Ware’s use of multiple mediums and his various verbal digressions throughout, but the book offers a linear narrative of Ware’s personal life and artistic development. Creating art, as Ware notes, often helps people cope with their trauma and the painful thoughts and feelings that accompany it.

Some of Ware’s characters also create art to help them process their traumas. In the aforementioned “Mr. Brown” chapter from *Rusty Brown*, for example, Mr. Brown writes a science fiction story that features a short, red-haired man with glasses—this man almost completely resembles Mr. Brown in his early adulthood, in fact—who lives on Mars. On this small Mars settlement, the main character falls in love with another astronaut who accompanied him on the mission. Unfortunately for the male protagonist of Mr. Brown’s story, the astronaut decides that she wants to leave and meet up with another settlement on the planet, which leads the main character to chase after her and nearly kill himself in the process. Within this story, the parallels to Mr. Brown’s life are clear: both characters fall in love with a woman who ends up leaving them, and both of them perceive this as traumatic. Not only does this text-within-a-text demonstrate that Ware’s characters often use art to process their various traumas, but it also

implies something about the nature of comics as a medium. More specifically, Mr. Brown's short story is a strictly verbal text but, while he is reading it, he imagines it as a series of images placed into a sequence. Here, Ware suggests that the form of comics can be used to capture the way that people perceive or imagine things internally. As I noted throughout this chapter, Ware employs this general approach to the comics form to try to convey how people's experience of the present is altered by the symptoms of PTSD. So, Ware self-reflexively implies that the form of comics allows people to translate their perceptual experiences—whether those experiences be traumatic, happy, or neither—into a visual language that helps them process these internal feelings. And these experiences do not need to be extraordinary, either; the comics form, as Ware demonstrates, is also capable of capturing how people feel when they encounter events that *feel* traumatic in their present, everyday worlds.

Chapter 3 – Ware and the Political Implications of Trauma

In the previous chapter, I established that Ware acutely focuses on the types of trauma that many people encounter throughout their lives—namely, the anticipation of waiting for gym class, the sadness that accompanies a failed romance, and the death of a parent or grandparent. Despite the universality of these events, it should be noted that not everyone will experience these events in the same manner or even perceive them as traumatic. A popular, athletic child may actually enjoy attending gym class, and someone who does not know or is not close with their grandmother may not experience her death (and the events leading to it) as traumatic at all. At the risk of proposing a truism, the simple fact of the matter is that different people will experience different events as traumatic. Ware's graphic novels, however, advance this idea and demonstrate that there are traumatic events specific to certain demographics of people. In *Rusty Brown*, for example, the character Ms. Cole is verbally harassed by Mr. Brown for being an African American woman. The everyday traumas that Ms. Cole experiences, as I will examine later, are the product of broader societal problems like racism and sexism, and these sociopolitical issues influence her experiences within the world. Of course, Ware is not essentializing the identities of his characters and proposing that *all* members of certain demographics experience these traumas. Rather, Ware's *Building Stories* and *Rusty Brown* illustrate that there are certain, identity-specific traumas that different groups of people might encounter, and that some of these traumas manifest themselves in multiple, subtler ways across different generations.

Many readers might find Ware's empathetic representation of these traumas surprising, given that he is a cisgender, white male. And in fact, Ware often does write about characters who hold identities similar to his, like Jordan Lint and Mr. Brown from *Rusty Brown*. Yet, Ware is

starkly critical of these characters and their actions: Jordan Lint physically abuses his son, cheats on his wife, bullies Rusty Brown for his non-normative masculinity, and adopts some of his father's racist attitudes at an early age; and Mr. Brown verbally abuses his son (Rusty), frequently argues with his wife, fantasizes about one of his high school students, and makes racist comments towards Ms. Cole. In short, the disempowered characters in Ware's works—the disabled protagonist and Branford Bee from *Building Stories*, and Ms. Cole and Rusty in *Rusty Brown* are all examples—are represented far more sympathetically in Ware's works, because Ware illustrates that they are often the targets of Jordan's and Mr. Brown's racism, sexism, and even homophobia. Not only is Ware trying to accurately capture and understand the experiences of disempowered people, but he is also using his own position as a cisgender, white male to censure the behaviors of those who occupy similar positions of privilege.

Despite the progressive political implications of Ware's works, there are only a few pieces of scholarship that analyze the more political elements of his texts. Joanna Davis-Mcelligatt, for example, examines Ware's representation of race and assimilation in *Jimmy Corrigan*, contending that Ware challenges the racist ways that African Americans have been depicted throughout comics history (139). Additionally, Margaret Fink Berman analyzes Ware's representation of disability in *Building Stories* and argues that Ware adopts an "aesthetic of ordinariness"—that is, an aesthetic focus on the ordinary aspects of people's lives, like eating food or passing the time in one's room alone—which effectively normalizes the protagonist's disability (195). Berman also suggests that Ware does not depict the protagonist's prosthetic leg as a source of embarrassment for her, but rather states that some of her lived experiences as a woman (e.g., having a period) lead to her embarrassment in some everyday situations (199). These two analyses are limited for two reasons: firstly, both of them only focus on one of Ware's

texts instead of multiple works in his oeuvre, and in Berman's case, she only examines one fragment out of *Building Stories*'s fourteen; and secondly, neither of these analyses connects the political implications of Ware's works to his representation of trauma and traumatic experiences. My analysis, then, fills these gaps in scholarship, since I will be examining *Building Stories* and *Rusty Brown*—two texts that Ware wrote around the same time and initially published serially—and demonstrating how Ware politicizes the everyday traumatic experiences that some groups of people encounter.

The unnamed protagonist in *Building Stories*, for example, aborts her unplanned child and eventually recalls this abortion as traumatic—an event that specifically women experience. After the protagonist arranges the appointment to have the procedure done, she states, “Nothing I said or did during that time made any sense at all...I was a true ‘basket case’...I acted mechanically, out of necessity...somehow, the true horror of the consequence of my actions wasn't even real to me until that morning...that wretched, awful morning.” Here, the protagonist underscores that she felt disconnected from her body and herself preceding her procedure, because she felt as if she was living her life “mechanically.” This disconnect or, as Judith Herman describes it, “detachment” (43) is a trauma response, and it prevents people from being overwhelmed with emotion during a traumatic event or the anticipation of one (47). In this particular instance, the protagonist becomes emotionally numb before the moment of trauma, and only becomes overwhelmed with emotion on the “wretched, awful morning” of her abortion. But after the abortion, the protagonist describes a feeling of emotional numbness: “As the afternoon sun dimmed, I lay there by myself, thinking...even if I'd wanted to cry, I don't think I could have.” In order to cope with the trauma of her abortion, the protagonist once again dissociates from her emotions, which prevents her from crying about the event. All of the feelings that the

protagonist describes during this section, in short, underscore that she experienced the anticipation of her abortion and the abortion itself as remarkably traumatic.

In addition, Ware's representation of the protagonist's abortion has a number of sociopolitical implications. For one, Ware implies that the protagonist's ex-boyfriend Lance—the person who impregnated her—does not experience the event as traumatic, and even seems apathetic towards it. Following the abortion, Lance tells the protagonist that he needs to leave for a rehearsal. The protagonist sardonically responds, "I'm sorry, but I just had an abortion here," to which Lance hurtfully replies, "Well if I don't go to work, then who do you think is gonna pay for it?" Here, Lance simply views the abortion as an expense, whereas the protagonist's emotions fluctuate from overwhelming to seemingly non-existent. Put another way, Lance (a man) does not have firsthand experience with the abortion itself, and because of this lack of experience, he does not adequately understand the emotions that the protagonist (a woman) is going through.² Additionally, it should be noted that Ware is not suggesting that abortion is morally wrong by showing its effects on the protagonist; instead, Ware is simply depicting an event that women commonly experience—in fact, one study reports that there were nearly 189 abortions for every 1,000 live births in the US (Kortsmit et al)—and showcasing how it can be potentially traumatic for them. This particular moment in *Building Stories*, then, demonstrates that common experiences for women (e.g., abortion) are often different from men's common experiences, leading to differences in the types of trauma that women encounter.

Furthermore, Ware represents the protagonist's thoughts about her body—namely, her unhappiness with her weight and her feelings of undesirability to her husband—as potential

² This is not to suggest that men cannot be traumatized by their partners having abortions. Of course, men can experience these overwhelming emotions, too, and they can also empathize with their partners in these instances. But Lance's reaction here reflects a broader issue—sometimes, men lack knowledge of women's experiences, and this lack of knowledge causes them to be unempathetic with their emotions and traumas.

sources of trauma. In one panel sequence, the protagonist is getting ready to have dinner with her husband and a few of their friends. As the protagonist is putting on makeup, her husband remarks that she “looks nice”; but, when the protagonist looks into the mirror, she sees wrinkles, a double chin, and her awkward smile. In this moment, Ware demonstrates that people’s negative, intrusive thoughts about themselves can literally influence the way that they see themselves in the mirror. The jarringly detailed drawing that Ware employs here, which is less iconographic than the previous panels in the sequence, underscores this idea, because the protagonist only sees her supposed flaws and imperfections. The size of the panels is notable, too, as the close-up panel of the protagonist’s face occupies more space within the sequence and disrupts the flow of the smaller panels. In short, Ware depicts another ordinary, but still traumatic, event that many women experience: preparing for a good night out with jewelry, makeup, and a nice dress, and still thinking that one looks unattractive. Of course, both women *and* men express dissatisfaction with their body image and how attractive they feel, but a study conducted by Hannah L. Quittkat et al. found that young and middle-aged women are much more likely to experience this dissatisfaction. Similar to the protagonist’s aforementioned abortion, Ware demonstrates that some common events, like looking in the mirror, can be traumatic for women.

In conjunction with her negative body image, the protagonist often worries about how desirable she is to her husband. Across two of *Building Stories*’s fragments, there are two individual panels of the protagonist standing naked beside her husband’s bed with an exaggerated frown on her face. On the bed, the protagonist’s husband is browsing on a tablet and lying naked with a flaccid penis, seemingly unaroused by her. While one of these panels occurs within a normal, moment-to-moment sequence, the other panel is borderless and subsumes an entire page of the booklet that it is in. By having this latter panel take up an entire page, Ware

effectively disrupts the flow of the narrative—in fact, this image of the protagonist standing beside her husband does not follow from any of the events on the previous page—and forces the reader to view this uncomfortable image. In both of the individual sequences, though, the protagonist’s husband asks her the same question: “Are you okay?” And in both instances, the protagonist responds with the same phrase: “Just feeling a little self-conscious, that’s all.” The repetition of this phrase and this event throughout *Building Stories* illustrates that certain actions—for example, getting undressed before intercourse—trigger the protagonist’s negative body image, which is similar to the way that specific objects or actions can lead someone to remember their trauma.

Ware acknowledges, however, that there are specific types of trauma that men experience too: namely, men who do not appear or act conventionally masculine are often shamed for their non-normative masculinity. In *Rusty Brown*, for instance, Rusty’s appearance is not characteristically masculine. Rusty has two buckteeth, long red hair that resembles a football helmet, and a double chin. Furthermore, Rusty’s interests—comic books, for example—render him an outsider to others or, more colloquially, a nerd, and he often expresses his emotions and cries in front of his bullies. For these reasons, Rusty deviates from what is considered conventionally masculine in both physical and non-physical ways, and he is frequently bullied as a result. On one page, Jordan Lint and his friend corner Rusty, spit in his mitten, and call him a “faggot”; on another page, two of Rusty’s grade-school classmates physically assault him and push him to the ground as they call him a “faggot.” In other words, Rusty is specifically targeted by his peers because he does not conform to masculine norms and, thus, experiences a type of traumatic bullying that is exclusive to non-normatively masculine men.

Interestingly, Ware also explores the various traumas that non-normatively masculine men experience in *Building Stories*; in this case, though, the character who “lacks” masculinity is a bee. In one instance, Branford (the bee) finds himself with pollen stuck to the collecting hairs of his legs. These hairs, however, are exclusive to female bees, and the narrator of Branford’s story notes, “Such a discovery to a normal drone bee would be the equivalent of a human male waking up in a dress.” Here, Ware suggests that Branford subverts traditional gender norms—that is, possessing these collecting hairs while being a male bee—and compares the gender norms of bees to those of human society (e.g., males being discouraged from wearing dresses). As a result of these norms, Branford experiences a number of intrusive thoughts about his gender identity: “Am...Am I not a man? This wretched discovery...It doth impugn not only my virility, but also mine very beeness.” Because of his deviance from what is considered normal for his gender, Branford feels simultaneously less masculine and, more interestingly, less like a bee; in other words, Branford’s conception of his entire self is disrupted by the discovery that he might, in fact, be a woman—a thought that he experiences as intrusive and traumatic. And following this statement, Branford thinks about his fellow bees calling him a “wimp,” “girly wirly,” and a “flower girl.” In essence, Ware satirizes the gender roles that people impose upon each other by having Branford, a bee, experience the same type of intrusive, traumatic thoughts that a non-masculine, human male like Rusty might think.

In the “Ms. Cole” chapter of *Rusty Brown*, Ware illustrates that race can also influence the types of traumatic experiences that someone encounters. At one point in *Rusty Brown*, Ware depicts Ms. Cole as an adolescent on her way to school. While she is walking, someone hollers to Ms. Cole from a window above and proceeds to spit on her. In this moment, Ware once again employs the comics form to convey that this event is traumatic for Ms. Cole. After the man in the

window waves to Ms. Cole, the panels become much smaller, 1 in x 1 in boxes. And once the spit begins falling, the panels become roughly 1/4 in x 1/4 in, with one of the final images in the sequence being a point-of-view (POV) image of the phlegm about to fall onto Ms. Cole's face. First and foremost, the smaller panel size during this traumatic moment indicates that Ms. Cole is experiencing constriction while the spit is falling. But more interestingly, Ware's placement of the reader into the POV of Ms. Cole suggests that he wants the reader to empathize with Ms. Cole and the traumatic experiences that she encounters almost daily. In another instance, Ware has the reader assume Ms. Cole's point of view during a meeting with her coworkers. This meeting occurs in the past when Ms. Cole is roughly thirty, and one of her coworkers is a younger Mr. Brown. During this meeting, Mr. Brown aggressively stares at Ms. Cole—in fact, the image of Mr. Brown staring is nearly quadruple the size of the other panels on the page—and makes racist comments towards her, such as “What *your* people do in your free time is no concern of mine, only that it does not affect the quality of instruction that we offer.” In this case, Mr. Brown's words and actions are microaggressions: small gestures or phrases that intentionally or unintentionally communicate something hostile to a person of color (Derald Wing Sue et al. 271). Mr. Brown's phrase “*your* people” constitutes a microaggression because it indicates that he views African Americans as somehow lesser or Other. Not only does Ware force the reader to feel the intense discomfort of Mr. Brown's gaze, but he also encourages the reader to empathize with Ms. Cole and feel the potential hurt that accompanies Mr. Brown's racist microaggressions.

But Ms. Cole is not targeted solely for her race; as an African American woman, she is frequently targeted for possessing both of those identities. In a sequence that is closer to the narrative's actual present, Ms. Cole attends a Christmas party with her coworkers. At this party, Mr. Brown approaches Ms. Cole and sexually harasses her with a question: “Miss Cole...| You

ever make love to a white man?” Once again, the reader assumes Ms. Cole’s POV in this moment, enabling the reader to further empathize with Ms. Cole. There are also more large panels of a drunken Mr. Brown angrily staring at Ms. Cole, which recalls the traumatic experience of him staring at her during their meeting. Here, Mr. Brown’s comment is another notable microaggression, but it also demonstrates that African American women can experience a specific type of identity-based trauma—namely, both sexual harassment and racism in the workplace at once. By portraying this traumatic moment for Ms. Cole, Ware underscores that the intersection of people’s identities can be a source of trauma for them, and censures Mr. Brown for his racist and sexist actions.

While most of this chapter has focused on people who have been traumatized in Ware’s works, it is also important to examine the people who are *traumatizers* and why they act in these racist, sexist, and homophobic manners. In some instances, Ware traces people’s dangerous attitudes back to their childhood and upbringing. When Jordan Lint is a child, for example, he loses his red block at preschool and starts thinking about where it went. One of the panels features Jordan’s child-like thoughts and narration, in which he states, “Daddy sometime talk about black people. He say bad black people. They steal and lie he say.” After thinking this, Jordan looks upwards and sees a small African American child playing with a red block; Jordan presumes that this block is his and punches the child to get his block back. In essence, Jordan effectively bullies and traumatizes his classmate because his father taught him to possess these racist attitudes. Put another way, Ware demonstrates that pernicious ideologies can be reproduced within families, which leads to the perpetuation of certain identity-based traumas (e.g., racism) across generations.

Although Ware clearly portrays the origin of Jordan's racism, Mr. Brown's childhood and upbringing are absent from *Rusty Brown*. What Ware does demonstrate, however, is that Omaha, Nebraska (the town that Jordan Lint and Mr. Brown live in) has a history of racism that could be informing some of the characters' actions in the present. Near the end of *Rusty Brown*, Ms. Cole is looking through some old newspapers and finds one with a disturbing headline: "Omaha Mob Lyncher Attempts To Hang Man." Beneath the title, the newspaper also reads, "Negro Is Beaten Senseless When Dragged From Burning Court House—Is Hung, Shot, and Burned. Pieces of Rope Sold as Souvenirs." As Ms. Cole is looking at the newspaper, there are multiple panels from her POV of the people's faces in the newspaper—the people who lynched the African American in the article. In this moment, Ware visually parallels the POV panels from Ms. Cole's encounters with Mr. Brown and her other white coworkers, implying that there is a connection between the microaggressions that she experiences in the present and the violent racism that defined the town's past. And in fact, Ms. Cole remembers finding this newspaper article *right after* her encounter with Mr. Brown, which suggests that his racism triggered her memories of the town's racist history. Ultimately, Ware demonstrates that Ms. Cole's traumatic experiences in the present are part of a vicious, generational cycle—a cycle in which African Americans are subjected to traumatic racism and violence.

Throughout *Building Stories* and *Rusty Brown*, Ware encourages the reader to empathize with members of disempowered groups. But Ware also encourages the reader to view these characters as complex human beings with their own, often selfish motives. Ms. Cole, for instance, eventually becomes the principal of the school that she taught at. While Ms. Cole is the principal, she meets with a middle-aged Jordan Lint about the behavior of his son, Zachary, and states that she cannot give Zachary any more chances. After Jordan asks if there is anything that

he can do, Ms. Cole states, “Mm yes, well...Well, your long ‘family history’ with our institution is certainly not an insignificant factor.” Here, Ware implies that Ms. Cole is asking Jordan Lint for money—or, is at least asking him for some favor—in exchange for letting his son stay in school. Interestingly, this interaction does not occur in the “Ms. Cole” chapter of *Rusty Brown*; rather, it occurs in the “Jordan Lint” chapter. In another interaction that Ms. Cole has with Lint in her chapter, she states that she is giving Zachary another chance because she is a “Christian” who believes in people’s “innate goodness.” By contrasting the interaction that Lint remembers in his chapter with the interaction that Ms. Cole remembers in her chapter, Ware demonstrates that people who traumatize or inflict some level of pain upon others rarely remember their actions. And simultaneously, Ware emphasizes that Ms. Cole is not a perfect human being, even though she has her own traumatic experiences and hardships.

Yet, the complexity of Ware’s disempowered characters is exactly what makes his representation of them unique and remarkably progressive. Rather than using problematic stereotypes to flatly portray these characters as victims, Ware urges the reader to use their judgment and be critical of these characters when it is necessary. In fact, this also applies to the privileged characters like Jordan Lint and Mr. Brown since both of these characters similarly inflict trauma and experience trauma. Ware’s representation of these characters, in short, is concurrently empathetic, critical, and radically humanistic. And by exploring the experiences of different people and groups, Ware offers a realistic portrayal of human emotions and behaviors without being overtly didactic. Ware subtly explores the political within the personal.

Conclusion: The Originality of Chris Ware

Most of this thesis has explored the formal elements of Ware's works—namely, his formal representation of the self and the symptoms of PTSD. But it is important to ask: what does Ware accomplish with the comics medium that cannot be accomplished with words (or is at least more difficult with words)? For one, Ware employs the comics medium to directly visualize the fragmented self. In verbal autobiographies, the person telling their life story remains constant throughout; in other words, there is usually only one first-person narrator. In Ware's graphic novels, however, he juxtaposes the multiple selves that his subjects have been and visually demonstrates that his subjects have evolved (or devolved) over time. Put another way, Ware uses the comics medium to challenge the ways that life stories are typically told, and illustrates that the self is always in flux. And Ware not only accomplishes this in his graphic novels, but also in his own autobiography—a nearly 300-page behemoth in which he uses multiple mediums to narrativize his fragmented personal and artistic history. By visualizing the fragmentation of the Self in both his graphic novels and *Monograph*, Ware subverts long-standing autobiographical traditions and reinforces that graphic novels are uniquely suited to portray people's life stories.

While Ware's graphic novels and *Monograph* all deal with different subject matter, they all explore, in some way, the nature of trauma. And Ware's visual portrayal of trauma is certainly one of the most original elements of his works, as Ware's small panels, diagrammatic sequences with multiple linearities, and non-linear narratives all formally capture intrusion and constriction (i.e., two symptoms of PTSD)—something that other graphic novelists and verbal novelists have not explored. The originality of Ware's formal representation of trauma, though, is not the only reason that it is important. Additionally, Ware's representation of trauma illustrates that the comics form can realistically convey the nuances of people's emotions and

experiences. Ware is not approaching PTSD from the viewpoint of a clinician or psychiatrist; rather, Ware approaches PTSD from the perspective of a humanist, because his form indicates that he wants readers to empathize with and understand the affective qualities of trauma and PTSD. Ware's depiction of trauma, in short, solidifies comics as a medium akin to or even superior to literature, for Ware emphasizes that it is capable of relaying complex human emotions and conditions to readers in a way that words cannot—through the organization of panels on the page.

And historically, comics have *not* been used to tell complex, deeply human stories. For the most part, the comics medium has been dominated by superhero narratives, short funnies in Sunday newspapers, and, in recent years, memes on the internet. But Ware belongs to a group of graphic novelists—namely, Art Spiegelman, Alison Bechdel, and Keiji Nakazawa, to name a few—who use the medium to tell more serious, “adult” stories about traumatic events in their lives. The fundamental difference between Ware and the other graphic novelists listed is that he explicitly focuses on events and people that, at first glance, seem unworthy of narrativization. While Spiegelman, Bechdel, and Nakazawa's works all focus on events that are extraordinary and even ineffable (e.g., the Holocaust, a parent's suicide, Hiroshima), Ware's works examine the moments that constitute the majority of people's day-to-day lives; feelings of loneliness, self-consciousness, and boredom are some of Ware's focal points. And the people that Ware focuses on, like Ms. Cole and Mr. Brown, are not extraordinary individuals with extraordinary experiences; instead, Ware's characters are normal people who are simply trying to get through the pains of everyday life. In this sense, Ware challenges both the comics tradition and autobiography tradition, since they have historically both focused on extraordinary individuals and circumstances.

By depicting the lives of ordinary people, Ware asserts that ordinary lives are worthy of representation, no matter how seemingly uneventful they might appear. And this assertion, which is central to all of Ware's works that I have examined in this thesis, also challenges a literary tradition that has favored grandiose narratives about extraordinary (or at least remarkably unique) people. Ware self-reflexively acknowledges this in *Building Stories* when the protagonist, after combing through her bookshelf for something to read, states, "Why does every 'great book' have to always be about criminals or perverts? Can't I just find one that's about regular people living everyday life?" Ware's graphic novels do, in fact, focus on "regular people living everyday life" and the traumas that they encounter in the world. So, Ware not only advances the medium of graphic novels by depicting people's everyday lives, but he also advances literature and, more broadly, art itself, by questioning what experiences are deemed worthy of artistic representation. For Ware, the most interesting moments in life are those that appear uninteresting.

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