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**BETWEEN HISTORY AND MEMORY:  
AMBIVALENT LONGING IN THE WORK OF SETH**

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A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BIRKBECK COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

2013

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is solely my own.

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Daniel Marrone

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## ABSTRACT

The work of Canadian cartoonist Seth positions itself between history and memory, and in doing so gives rise to a range of ambivalent impulses, chief among them an ambivalent longing for the past. Seth suggests that “the whole process of cartooning is dealing with memory,” and by consistently drawing attention to the narrative representation of the past, his comics reveal the extent to which the making of history is an act of great artifice. In its exploration of what Walter Benjamin calls “the mysterious work of remembrance—which is really the capacity for endless interpolation into what has been,” Seth’s work exhibits a complicated nostalgia, well aware of its own reactionary, restorative and nationalistic inclinations and able to channel them toward productive ends.

Seth’s ironic, humorous and metafictional approaches to memory, remembrance and longing for the past reveal that his attitude toward these closely related subjects is deeply ambivalent. He nimbly mobilises history, (auto)biography, anecdote, documentary and other parallel modes. This investigation seeks to understand the ways in which his appropriation of such historicising discourses substantiates the powerful evocations of longing, loss and memory that characterise his fiction. Memory is here conceived not just as an invisible, ubiquitous mental phenomenon that reflects our experience of time and relation to the past, but as a medium, an art – and one which is in many ways akin to Seth’s mode of expression. The fundamental operation of comics, as a visual medium, initiates and makes space for narrative interpolations in a way that is not only comparable to but in a certain sense mimics the historical interpolations of memory; in both cases, longing is spurred by incompleteness. Seth turns the medium of memory on itself, using it as an instrument to examine the processes of remembrance and making history.

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# INTRODUCTION

In *The Age of Empire*, Eric Hobsbawm writes of “a twilight zone between history and memory” (3) – the work of Canadian cartoonist Seth seems to occupy precisely this ambivalent, in-between zone. In such a space, where history and memory interpenetrate, the latter often rushes to fill in the gaps left by the former. Seth’s narratives are consistently, and often explicitly, concerned with this process, what Walter Benjamin calls “the mysterious work of remembrance—which is really the capacity for endless interpolation into what has been” (*Reflections* 16). It is possible to conceive of the medium of comics in the same way, as both a practice and a capacity that is closely related to the excavation of the past. Seth suggests that “the whole process of cartooning is dealing with memory” (Taylor 15), a claim that goes a long way toward setting the parameters for much of this investigation.

The past is inaccessible, except through imagination, memory and history – practices that are indeed mysterious in their attempts to make present a fundamental absence. As Keith Jenkins asserts, “history is a discourse about, but categorically different from, the past” (6). Anachronism is an inevitable starting point for even the most dispassionate history, which can only view the past from a moment that is not past, obscuring what has been even as it tries to bring it into focus. This is the essential, ambivalent operation of history: to juxtapose time, to set time against itself, creating continuities and discontinuities, constructing linear chronological progressions. In *Narrative and History*, Alun Munslow addresses the need to confront “the epistemological belief that history can be made to correspond with the past even though

the past no longer exists” (15).<sup>1</sup> Echoing Jenkins, Munslow suggests that “because history is not the same as the past, the notion of correspondence has to be replaced with the logic of narrative representation” (*Narrative and History* 15). Without dismissing history as artificial, Seth’s comics draw attention to the narrative representation of the past and reveal the extent to which the making of history is an act of great artifice – as well as an invitation to readerly interpolation into what has been.

Comics studies, not unlike cultural studies (with which it sometimes overlaps and from which it often borrows), does not constitute a particular methodology or unified body of expertise; there are many different streams.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the chapters to follow engage in comics studies by way of literary criticism, but a literary criticism that is particularly alert to visual culture, and which is strongly inflected with the theoretical indiscipline of a practice that finds itself somewhat deracinated from its borrowed fields of study. This investigation may take its title from Hobsbawm, but its primary historiographical touchstone is Linda Hutcheon, whose focus is not history but literature. Hutcheon provides a remarkably apt description of Seth’s work when she uses the term “historiographic metafiction,” which, she says, questions “how we know the past, how we *make sense of it*” (*Canadian Postmodern* 22, emphasis in original). This investigation seeks, in a number of different of ways, to address one principal question: How does Seth make the past?

This introduction frames this central question not only in terms of history, but also – drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell, Svetlana Boym, and others – through a consideration of memory and nostalgia. Hutcheon is a reliable source of insight on

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<sup>1</sup> Munslow’s *Narrative and History* (2007) and *Deconstructing History* (2006) thoroughly review the different epistemological approaches to writing history, namely: constructionist, reconstructionist and deconstructionist.

<sup>2</sup> The study of comics accommodates art history, film and media studies, semiotics, sociology, geography, narratology, cognitive science, ethnography, philosophy, and political economy, among other diverse fields.

nostalgia, irony, the postmodern, and the Canadian, and pays particular attention to the ways in which these various properties relate to each other. Her greatest contribution to this investigation, however, may be the concept of the heterocosm, or alternative world, which Chapter 8 conceives in terms of narrative heterocosms that may be fictive or historical (which I sometimes refer to as “ghost worlds”). Heterocosms can be at once fictive and historical, as is often the case in Seth’s work. Chapter 8 draws on Hayden White’s landmark work *Metahistory*, and though it does not adopt White’s elaborate schema or terminology, it does find his notion of a “metahistorical consciousness” extremely useful as a way of describing the heterocosms that Seth creates. White also identifies three conventional conceptions of historiography from the eighteenth century: fabulous, truthful, and satirical. Seth deploys all three types of history, often in various combinations, to create multifaceted literary-historical metafiction that seems to present something different with each reading, approximating the changeability of memory.

In his book *History and Memory*, Geoffrey Cubitt frames the two as “proximate concepts: they inhabit a similar mental territory” (4). Occasionally at odds, history and memory are “conceptual terms that have constantly interacted with each other, moving in and out of each other” (5). Cubitt provides a practical point of departure when he states that the term memory denotes “relationships to the past that are grounded in human consciousness” (9). It quickly becomes necessary, however, to refine this rather broad characterisation and move toward a sharper definition. One of Cubitt’s main strategies is to define memory in relation to history, and to some extent this investigation follows a similar trajectory as it attempts to describe a space between the two proximate concepts. David Krell pursues another line of inquiry that also proves useful in delineating this liminal, in-between space: in his dense and subtle book *Of Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing*, it is the process of inscription that brings the topic of memory into focus. To

anchor this approach (which foregrounds mark-making in a way that resonates with comics studies) Krell begins with a helpful account of classical understandings of memory.

Introducing the complex role of inscription in the philosophical conception of memory, Krell determines that “we shall have to ask whether writing is a metaphor for memory or memory a metaphor for writing” (4). This vital question – which points to the ways that literature can act as a mnemonic – derives, in part, from the notion of memory as a medium or art in its own right. “It may seem odd to speak of memory as a medium,” Mitchell writes in *Picture Theory*, “but the term seems appropriate in a number of senses. Since antiquity, memory has been figured not just as a disembodied, invisible power, but as a specific technology, a mechanism, a material and semiotic process subject to artifice and alteration” (191-92).

To this end, a familiar story retold in brief: the lyric poet Simonides, dining at the house of an aristocrat, is called away moments before the roof of the banquet hall collapses, killing everyone at the table. In his absence, the house becomes a ruin, a crypt, the guests crushed beyond recognition. When it comes time to properly bury the dead, Simonides finds he is able to recall the seating arrangement of the feast and identifies each body based solely on its location in the rubble. In doing so he stumbles upon the method of loci, a classical “art of memory” in which recollection is aided by the visualisation of a spatial order.

This canonical anecdote (most famously recounted by Cicero in *De Oratore*) becomes something of a prototype for imagining relationships to the past, and one which almost permits a conflation of memory and recollection. To parse these overlapping terms, it may be useful to draw on Aristotle’s distinction between the two, which Krell succinctly summarises in this way: “Memory as such [Aristotle] classifies as an affection

or pathos; recollection or reminiscence he celebrates as an activity” (13). Seth’s remarks about the process of cartooning suggest that in some sense it, too, is an art of memory, a reminiscent activity – and one that is strangely kindred to the method of loci in terms of the primacy of visual representation and spatial arrangement. The typical comics page consists of images arranged in highly structured spatial configurations, and Seth’s work in particular is preoccupied with imagined spaces and recollection. Also of note, as Krell points out, is the way in which “Aristotle underscores the importance of imagination and psychic ‘images’ (*phantasmata*) in memory” (15). It could be argued that memory is not fundamentally tied to images, but, for the purposes of this investigation, it is ultimately more productive to explore rather than resist the role of images in memory.

This is not to discount the role of writing and textual inscription in memory. One of Mitchell’s primary contentions in *Picture Theory* is that “all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous” (5). Of course, this is also particularly true of the representations found in comics, which often seem to exemplify the kind of heterogeneous combination – imagetext – that Mitchell discusses. “The term ‘imagetext’,” he says, “designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text” (89n). Seth’s dense, multivalent work certainly constitutes an imagetext – not only as comics, but also as an exercise in the medium of memory. “Memory, in short, is an imagetext, a double-coded system of mental storage and retrieval” (Mitchell 192). The medium of memory and the medium of comics are both imagetexts, and together they reach a height of craft and inventiveness in Seth’s work, in which writing is not just a metaphor for memory but seems to be actually doing the work of remembrance.

The work of Marcel Proust immediately suggests itself as a point of reference for the study of fictional treatments of memory (especially those with a biographical or

autobiographical inflection) but this may be a kneejerk impulse that has more to do with popular conceptions of Proust's work than with the actual work itself. As Roger Shattuck astutely notes at the outset of *Proust's Way*, his "field guide" to *In Search of Lost Time*, "even though the seven volumes of the *Search* deal with motifs of time, the past, and recollection, the novel is not primarily about memory and sentiments concerning the past" (xiii). Seth's work, on the other hand, is very much about memory and sentiments concerning the past, both implicitly and explicitly, concerns which are reflected in his style, structure and storylines.

However, though Seth's comics are deeply concerned with memory and its relation to (auto)biography, this investigation does not generally attempt to draw parallels between Seth's life and his work, and never treats his fictional work as veiled memoir. Seth's biographical details are as follows: born Gregory Gallant in a small Southern Ontario town in 1962, he moved to Toronto in the early 1980s to attend art school and stayed in the city for nearly twenty years, before eventually settling in Guelph, Ontario, where he still resides.<sup>3</sup> Even in those instances when his stories are patently (or playfully) autobiographical, particular knowledge of his personal life does little to extend an appreciation or understanding of the work. However, this is not to say that his extra-literary circumstances, or indeed his personal opinions, do not have a place in this investigation. Both his remarks about his own work and the cultural context out of which that work emerged are important (though not predominant) parts of this study. In a broader sense, Seth's authorial role as a forger of histories is at the very centre of this investigation.

My analysis focuses almost exclusively on Seth's longer stories, i.e. those book-length works that he both conceived and illustrated. Seth's first professional comics

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller account of his time in Toronto and his reasons for leaving, see my interview with Seth, the transcript of which is included here as Appendix B.

experience – prior to publishing his own work in the series *Palookaville* – was as an artist for the Vortex Comics series *Mister X*.<sup>4</sup> He speaks of this job as a kind of “apprenticeship period” during which he was not only refining his technical drawing ability but also discovering those cartoonists that would have a great influence on his subsequent work (Appendix B 296-97). In 1990, he was one of the first authors to publish with Drawn and Quarterly, at the time a barely-established outfit based in Montreal, Canada, and now one of the most highly regarded alternative comics publishers in North America. Arguably, Drawn and Quarterly represents a continuation of the avant-garde comics publishing tradition epitomised by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly’s pioneering magazine *Raw*, a fixture of alternative comics throughout the 1980s. Seth’s work is firmly rooted in this cultural and industrial context, which favours the output of comics *auteurs* who the reader imagines working in isolation in a studio (this is in fact how Seth works, see Appendix B 291-92). As one of Drawn and Quarterly’s flagship authors, Seth shares with his publisher a trajectory from smaller-scale, independent producer to literary comics establishment.

*Palookaville* (initially *Palooka-ville*) is Seth’s long-running comic book series, the most recent issue of which abandoned the magazine format in favour of a hardcover compendium-style book that includes essays and sketchbook extracts along with the ongoing comics story. Seth’s first book-length narrative, *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken*, appeared in issues four through nine before being published as a standalone “picture-novella” in 1996. The story weaves together two autobiographical plots, with Seth’s day-to-day life in Toronto set alongside his search for a little-known Canadian gag cartoonist, John “Kalo” Kalloway. He ultimately discovers that the cartoonist died years ago, having given up cartooning to raise a family. *It’s a Good Life* closes with

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<sup>4</sup> Vortex Comics is also known for publishing Chester Brown’s innovative comic book *Yummy Fur*, before that series switched to Drawn and Quarterly.

reproductions of all extant Kalo gags collected by Seth over the years. Convincing as these reproductions are, however, John Kalloway is in fact a complete invention – as perhaps are any number of the ostensibly autobiographical incidents depicted in the book.

Since 1997 *Palookaville* has been home to *Clyde Fans*, a family saga about two brothers, Simon and Abraham Matchcard, who attempt to manage the electric fan company founded by their long-dead father, Clyde. A story in four parts, *Clyde Fans* shifts among different time periods, locations, and narrative points of view: Part One takes place in 1997 in the Matchcard family home (which includes the Clyde Fans storefront), with Abe directly addressing the reader, reminiscing about the business, now-defunct, and about Simon, now dead; Part Two is set in 1957 and follows Simon on an unsuccessful sales trip to the small town of Dominion City; Part Three finds Simon back in the Matchcard home, now in 1966, and centers on his mother's growing dementia and his own fragile mental state; Part Four (as yet unfinished) skips ahead to 1975, tracing the beginning of the end of the family business. Parts One and Two were published together as *Clyde Fans: Book 1* (2004), which collects issues ten through fifteen of *Palookaville*.

The ongoing serialisation of *Clyde Fans* in *Palookaville* has run parallel to the publication of book-length narratives begun in other formats – for instance, in Seth's personal sketchbook. *Wimbledon Green: The Greatest Comic Book Collector in the World* (2005) is Seth's first sketchbook story, a lively send-up of the world of comic book collecting that boasts a sprawling cast of collectors, cartoonists, sellers and other peripheral figures, all orbiting around the title character. One of the book's many notable features is the inclusion of sample comics from Wimbledon Green's collection. Seth's polished and stately follow-up, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (2009), offers a quietly

unpredictable biography of a small-town hero known for his decades-long lecture series and local TV show, in which he revisits arctic expeditions from early in his life. Much of the book first appeared serially, in weekly installments, in *The New York Times Magazine* from September 2006 to March 2007. *George Sprott* is distinguished from Seth's other work by the presence of an unseen omniscient narrator. Seth's most recent book, *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (2011), is another non-serialised narrative that began in his sketchbook. In some respects a companion volume to *Wimbledon Green*, this book comprises numerous appraisals of metafictional comics and detailed portrayals of the Brotherhood's sprawling clubhouse.

Along with comic books, picture-novellas and sketchbook stories, Seth is also known for a range of other endeavours, among them: cover illustrations for *The New Yorker*, book designs, installations in art galleries, a float in a parade, and occasional pieces for Canadian newspapers and magazines (sometimes in comics form, sometimes not). Also notable are his non-narrative books, such as *Vernacular Drawings* (2001), a "Consolidated & Abridged" selection of full-size pages culled from six sketchbooks, and *Forty Cartoon Books of Interest* (2006), a compact annotated bibliography of idiosyncratic works from Seth's personal comic book collection.

In the scope and substance of his work, Seth is perhaps the foremost contemporary cartoonist in Canada, arguably more visible than his friend and colleague Chester Brown, and with a higher literary profile than an artist like Bryan Lee O'Malley (whose extremely popular *Scott Pilgrim* comics were adapted into a 2010 film, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*). Of course, this kind of fuzzy ranking reveals very little about the actual literary significance of Seth's work and its place in the comics landscape, broad subjects which will gradually come into focus over the course of the investigation. Some sense of Seth's comics cohort can, however, be gleaned from his more autobiographical

work and even from the telling dedications that appear in his books. Seth has dedicated books not only to Chester Brown (who appears as a character in *It's a Good Life*), but also to his contemporaries Joe Matt and Chris Ware. Their work, as well as that of Daniel Clowes, offers many useful points of comparison that help to bring out various aspects of Seth's narratives.

Seth has been the subject of numerous journalistic profiles and interviews over the course of his career, but in-depth academic work is in comparatively short supply. Charles Hatfield was one of the first to take a scholarly interest, giving a paper on Seth and "the problem of nostalgia" at the 2002 Annual Conference of the Popular Culture Association (this was something of a follow-up to his 2001 paper for the PCA, which addressed the significance of nostalgia in contemporary comics as a whole). Hatfield anticipates many of the avenues of inquiry that I pursue in this investigation, from the importance of irony and ambivalence in nostalgic comics to the structural affinity between comic book narratives and collection. Of particular note is Hatfield's conclusion that Seth's work represents "a signal moment in comics' ongoing dialogue with itself." Katie Mullins similarly frames Seth's work as an act of "autocritique," showing how *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* addresses the shortcomings of the mainstream comics tradition by means of its female characters.

Jared Gardner, in his 2006 article "Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics," examines the increasing presence of archives in a range of contemporary comics narratives (by Seth, Clowes and others). He observes that *Wimbledon Green* "goes so far as to playfully imagine the collector and the superhero as one and the same" (799). His arguments, which are occasionally at cross-purposes to many of the claims I make, are specifically addressed in Chapters 7 and 8. Candida Rifkind takes a more biographical approach to Seth's work in "Drawn from Memory:

Comics Artists and Intergenerational Auto/biography” (2008). One of her focal points is father-son relationships, and she appropriately selects as objects of study Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan*, and Seth’s collaboration with his father, *Bannock, Beans, and Black Tea: Memories of a Prince Edward Island Childhood during the Depression*. This collaboration also makes a brief appearance in Paul Buhle’s 2007 article “History and Comics,” in the context of a comparison between oral and graphic history (316).

Perhaps the most robust engagement with Seth’s work to date appears in Simon Grennan’s recent article “Demonstrating *discours*: Two comic strip projects in self-constraint” (2012), which applies a narratological approach to *Clyde Fans*. Grennan’s methodology seems to run parallel to that of this investigation, without substantively corresponding or conflicting with it. Chapter 1 provides a summary of Grennan’s comics narratology and attempts to put it in context with an argument about how Seth’s style reflects a particular type of ambivalent longing.

The various iterations of this ambivalent longing are sometimes referred to as nostalgia, which here serves as a kind of shorthand for a family of phenomena concerned with homecoming, return, and repetition. As Svetlana Boym recounts in her 2001 book *The Future of Nostalgia*, the word “nostalgia” was coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in 1688, to diagnose homesick soldiers with symptoms such as nausea, fever, and even cardiac arrest (3-4). Boym characterises the condition as a mania, an obsessive malady in which the sufferer compulsively returned to thoughts of home (4). A return home to Switzerland was the most reliable cure at first, but as nostalgia evolved and spread across Europe over the eighteenth century, the “mania of longing” (4) became increasingly difficult to treat, even as its physical symptoms fell away (6). By the nineteenth century, the affliction was far more fashionable than incapacitating, embraced

as a romantic attitude, which Boym summarises in the form of a Cartesian proposition: “I long therefore I am” (13). A Swiss invention with Greek roots, “nostalgia” literally translates as an ache (*algia*) for the return home (*nostos*) – though Boym offers a more evocative and specific definition: “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii).

The fictive, imagined home is at the centre of much of Seth’s work, as is its implicit analogue, the nation. (In some instances, the nation becomes an explicit concern, most obviously in *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*.) The longstanding national implications of nostalgia – which Hofer considered a patriotic illness (Boym 4) – help to account for the subtle correlation between Seth’s imagined homes and his invented communities. However, nostalgia is also as much about a return to the past as the return home: Boym calls it an “historical emotion” (7), a reaction to “the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time” (13). Nostalgia tends to obscure the distinction between geographical and historical origins, operating at once spatially and temporally. Boym identifies a strain of “restorative nostalgia,” which aligns itself with the notion of tradition (often national or regional tradition) and attempts to realise “a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” (xviii). She contrasts this with a “reflective nostalgia” that “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity” (xviii). In both cases, nostalgia is rooted in ambivalence (where reflective nostalgia embraces ambivalence, restorative nostalgia reacts against it).

In her book *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (2005), Janelle L. Wilson offers this astute advice: “Attempting to grasp the meaning and experience of nostalgia requires an open and inductive approach” (19). Likewise ambivalence, which this investigation identifies as the source of not only nostalgia, but also the uncanny, the Gothic and a wide

array of other aesthetic/literary phenomena related to the seemingly inevitable return of the repressed. This premise – which, needless to say, owes a great deal to Freud’s understanding of ambivalent impulses – finds its full elaboration in Chapter 5 but informs every chapter to some extent. Though the phrase “ambivalent impulses” and its attendant ideas come from Freud, my overall conceptual approach to ambivalence and the return of the repressed is not strictly psychoanalytic. It would be more accurate to say that it is a literary approach of Freudian extraction, of the sort that Francesco Orlando pursues in his study *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination* (2006). Ultimately, this investigation does not regard psychoanalysis as a fundamentally coherent system of thought that must be adopted in its entirety. Especially in a literary context, the discipline may be more useful in fragments, which is to say as an occasional tactic rather than an overarching strategy.

Following Wilson’s advice, I aim to pursue an open and inductive approach, to rigorously clarify, classify and interpret the complex network of literary and historical operations at work in Seth’s comics, but at the same time to be flexible, to preserve certain spots of indeterminacy, to allow for theoretical detours, to not always resolve every ambiguity that presents itself. Various chapters borrow and at times even deform certain concepts to illuminate an aspect of Seth’s work. For instance, Chapter 7 includes a somewhat abbreviated account of Jacques Derrida’s notion of the crypt as a point of reference for better understanding Matchcard family dynamics. Similarly, Chapter 6 makes unusually literal use of Gilles Deleuze’s dense philosophical work *The Fold*. These are slight digressions, but they help to fortify the larger arguments of the sections in which they appear.

Seth’s own comments also provide fodder for speculation. In August 2011, I visited Seth at his home in Guelph, Ontario, for an informal, occasionally meandering,

but ultimately quite fruitful interview (Appendix B). Unless otherwise indicated, all remarks attributed to Seth throughout this investigation come from that interview, which does not become a dominant source text but does certainly lead to new avenues of inquiry. This investigation does not treat Seth as the ultimate authority on his own work or accept his comments as incontestable – but many of his reflections are subtle and perceptive enough to warrant sustained analysis. For instance, the qualifiers “mannered” and “fey” – mentioned by Seth almost in passing during the interview – take on particular significance in certain chapters. Seth’s use of these terms in conversation is far more conventional and casual than the theoretical elaborations that I attempt, but in such instances the investigation nevertheless takes its cue from the interview, which acts as a highly flexible series of speculative prompts. The interview also suggests some very interesting avenues of inquiry that are *not* taken up in the chapters (for instance, the future of the book as a cultural object or the ways in which a cartoonist cultivates a sense of silence in comics). In these cases, the status of the interview shifts slightly, from a resource that has direct bearing on the investigation to a standalone document that complements and supplements but cannot be fully incorporated into the chapters.

Each chapter contributes to an overarching argument about ambivalence, longing for the past, and the way in which Seth’s work induces the reader to fill narrative gaps. A consideration of the state of comics studies, “Surveying the Field,” contextualises this argument with an account of the semiotic structure of comics, a brief review of existing criticism, and reflections on the definition and formal lineage of comics. Following this survey, the investigation is organised into two parts: a set of diverse chapters that spotlight certain notable features of Seth’s work, and a series of more closely connected chapters that build toward a broader understanding of how Seth solicits the contribution of the reader. The two parts are very much in conversation with each other, as are the

individual chapters, which address the same material from a range of perspectives. The second part regularly draws on specific observations from the early chapters, which take on their full significance in light of the more general argument that they anticipate.

Although these chapters retreat from personal pronouns, they do not proceed under any pretense of apositionality. Any discussion of the behavior and responses of “the reader” relies on my own readings, reactions, observations, and speculations – in short, my own personal encounter with Seth’s work. My role in this investigation is to be a kind of ideal reader (a Model Reader, as Umberto Eco might have it), one who is especially receptive to Seth’s evocations of the past and eager to dwell in the space between history and memory.

Chapter 1, “Style, Design, and the Appearance of Authenticity,” considers the materiality and appearance of Seth’s work (with particular attention to the influence of Peter Arno on Seth’s cartooning style) in an attempt to understand how a sense of authenticity becomes legible to the reader. Chapter 2, “Pictures at a Remove,” closely examines Seth’s drawn photographs, often comparing the ways in which comics and photography relate to their represented realities in terms of time, narrative, duration, and framing. Chapter 3, “Tropes and Chronotopes,” draws on the literary criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin to describe a range of recurring motifs and literary configurations in Seth’s work, arguing, in part, that his comics are typified by his most marginal spaces and characters, which invite a particular kind of reading. Chapter 4, “The Rhetoric of Failure,” traces the frequent revaluation of success and failure in Seth’s narratives, placing Seth in a Chekhovian tradition of storytelling and drawing on Francesco Orlando’s study of obsolete objects in literature.

Chapter 5, “Return, Repetition, and Other Ambivalent Impulses,” begins with Zygmunt Bauman’s account of ambivalence, delineates the relation of ambivalence to

modernity and ambiguity, and elaborates the role of Freud's thinking in this investigation through a consideration of the uncanny. Chapter 6, "Filling the Gaps," elaborates on the structure of comics, a medium that is at once fragmented and coherent, discussing page elements such as the gutter and frame, as well as addressing exceptional cases like the single-panel gag cartoon and the fold-out page. Chapter 7, "Collection and Recollection," focuses on *Wimbledon Green* and *Clyde Fans* (particularly with regard to Simon Matchcard), drawing together arguments about ambivalence, narratives of the past, and the fortification of identity through the process of collecting. Chapter 8, "Forging Histories," explores Seth's invented worlds and interior landscapes, making particular use of Hutcheon's concepts of the heterocosm and historiographic metafiction.

Seth's ironic, humorous and metafictional approaches to memory, remembrance and longing for the past reveal that his attitude toward these closely related subjects is deeply ambivalent, in certain instances even constituting a self-reflexive meta-ambivalence. He nimbly mobilises history, (auto)biography, anecdote, documentary and other parallel modes; this investigation seeks to understand the ways in which his appropriation of such historicising discourses substantiates the powerful evocations of longing, loss and memory that characterise his fiction. Memory is here conceived not just as an invisible, ubiquitous mental phenomenon that reflects our experience of time and relation to the past, but as a medium, an art – and one which is in many ways akin to Seth's mode of expression. The fundamental operation of comics, as a visual medium, initiates and makes space for narrative interpolations in a way that is not only comparable to but in a certain sense mimics the historical interpolations of memory. In both cases, longing is spurred by incompleteness. It is this affinity that allows Seth to so effectively turn the medium of memory on itself.

# SURVEYING THE FIELD: COMICS STUDIES

The three thematic sections of this survey aim to provide a larger context for my study of Seth's work by presenting a broad view of comics scholarship. The first section focuses on the formal aspects of comics and the ways in which the medium conveys meaning to the reader, drawing on the work of prominent comics commentators like Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen and Charles Hatfield. Their accounts are couched in broader discourses around representation, literature, and communication in general. The second section examines more general criticism and appreciation, beginning with recent essay anthologies like *A Comics Studies Reader* (2009). The third section addresses the question of definition and its relation to historical continuity.

## **The Structure of Comics**

This investigation begins with a semiotic understanding of the unique structure of comics, which serves as a foundation for much of the analysis of Seth's work. This understanding is strongly informed by the work of Thierry Groensteen and Charles Hatfield, and also draws on Scott McCloud's popular book *Understanding Comics*. Groensteen is among those who conceive of comics "as a language...an original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning" (*System of Comics* 2). I generally reserve the term "language" for verbal expression, preferring to identify comics as a medium. However, I also suggest, in Chapter 5, that language may be understood as "a system of segregations" (which is consistent with Groensteen's description of comics as a system that constitutes a distinct language). Hatfield sometimes refers to comics as a "form" – this investigation does not adopt his usage of the term, though it does

occasionally distinguish between comics as a medium and the cartoon as a unique visual form (see discussion of McCloud's definition below). Similarly, Heer and Worcester refer to the "cluster of related forms" associated with the umbrella term "comics" (*Comics Studies Reader* 13). (Appendix A, which proposes a provisional typology of comics, refers not to forms but to genres.)

Groensteen considers the irreducible unit of what he calls the language of comics to be the panel, which he describes as "fragmentary and caught in a system of proliferation; it never makes up the totality of the utterance but can and must be understood as a component in a larger apparatus" (5). To this end, comics require "active cooperation provided by the reader" because they "offer the reader a story that is full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning" (10).

Roman Ingarden's ontological investigation *The Literary Work of Art* provides a broader theoretical framework that can be aligned with semiotic studies of comics. Like Groensteen and others, Ingarden emphasises the contribution of the reader: "during his reading and his aesthetic apprehension of the work, the reader usually *goes beyond* what is simply presented by the text (or projected by it) and in various respects *completes*" what has been represented (252, Ingarden's emphasis). The complementary work of John Durham Peters helps to contextualise this literary phenomenon more generally within communication theory, in particular his article "The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made," in which he explores "the gap between utterance and reception" (118).

Peters notes that those forms of communication that are particularly suspended and indiscriminate – for example, writing – put "the hermeneutic burden" on the audience (Peters 124). The distance between sender and receiver, however, is not actually considered an impediment to communication and the production of meaning.

Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, Peters argues that “distanciation is a necessary and productive part of all human discourse and experience” (129). In this sense, distance does not degrade communication, but is in fact an indispensable part of it. Peters states that the “gaps at the heart of communication are not its ruins, but its distinctive feature” (130). The chapters to follow examine the distinctive gaps at the heart of Seth’s work.

In a literary work, the hermeneutic burden generated by the inevitable distance between author and reader takes an inconspicuous and more particularised form: gaps in the representation of the narrative world. Ingarden remarks that “while reading a work we are not conscious of any ‘gaps,’ of any ‘spots of indeterminacy,’ in the represented objects” (251). In fact, “when we read we usually *go beyond* what is simply represented in the work” (280, Ingarden’s emphasis). In *Roman Ingarden’s Ontology and Aesthetics*, Jeff Mitscherling states that spots of indeterminacy “belong to the peculiar mode of being of the literary text and in fact make possible the creation of its ‘reality’” (106). Two principal attributes of the written word characterise this literary reality: (1) the written word is inert and (2) the written word does not represent by means of physical resemblance. Consequently, it is the reader alone who animates the literary work. It is the reader’s attention that realises the represented world conceived by the author. Comics have a literary mode of being all their own: though they share with traditional literature a fundamental immobility, they also operate by means of image-based representation that depends on resemblance.

The two characteristics of traditional literature are easily reconceived as the two principal differences between words and images, which Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons identify in the introduction to their 2001 anthology *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*. The first, noted by Plato, is that “images resemble the objects they represent,” whereas “words represent objects only by virtue of custom or convention.

They are arbitrary symbols that are useful only insofar as their signification is commonly understood” (xi). In the eighteenth century, Gotthold Lessing observed the second key difference: though “words must be spoken or written one after the other in time and are apprehended sequentially, the elements of an image are arranged side by side in space and are apprehended all at once” (Varnum and Gibbons xi). Comics, however, disrupt the decisiveness of such distinctions: the cartoon mode of representation simultaneously resembles the objects it represents and relies heavily on convention; the panels of a comic may be apprehended sequentially or all at once, and, not infrequently, both kinds of perception compete and cooperate on the page. Seth’s comics take full advantage of the particular tensions and capacities of the medium, and sometimes even test the limits of cartooning conventions.

Varnum and Gibbons’s introductory remarks also include an incisive assessment of Scott McCloud’s contribution to the field and the “great heuristic value” of *Understanding Comics* (xiii). “From our point of view,” they write, “the most significant contradiction in *Understanding Comics* is that McCloud treats comics as both a partnership of separate elements and as a unique language” (xiv). This contradiction seems to reflect the fundamental ambivalence of comics as a medium. Here is McCloud’s definition of “sequential art” from *Understanding Comics*: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). In using the term “juxtaposed,” McCloud emphasises the adjacent arrangement of images, which are consecutive in space, as compared to the images in media like film, video, and animation, which are sequential in time (7). McCloud’s book marks a step toward understanding how comics operate as a language, and his definition is often cited in English-language works on the subject. Beyond his definition of sequential art, McCloud details the function of “that

space *between* the panels” (66, emphasis in original), the gutter, and the reader’s capacity to “mentally construct a continuous, unified reality,” an operation he terms “closure” (67). Though *Understanding Comics* is often quite convincing and sensible in its approach to the medium, it remains somewhat autodidactic, isolated from theoretical traditions of semiotics.

By contrast, European scholarship has a history of theoretical approaches to comics, as Varnum and Gibbons point out: “It has become commonplace in Europe to look at comics through the lens of semiotics theory. Among the first writers to do so were Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle in 1977 and Alain Rey in 1978. More recent semiotics-informed European studies of comics include those of Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre in 1993, of Benoît Peeters in 1991, and of Thierry Groensteen in 1999” (xiii). Groensteen’s landmark work of 1999 is *Système de la bande dessinée*, translated into English in 2007 as *The System of Comics*, which develops an impressively detailed yet broadly applicable semiotic account of the medium. Groensteen characterises the book’s principal theoretical frameworks as “macro-semiotic” (6): the spatio-topical system, which is to say the distinctive potentialities of space and place on the comics page, is governed by arthrology, Groensteen’s designation for the various relations among comics images. Use of this terminology allows for greater precision in descriptions of Seth’s work that might otherwise be somewhat vague.

Though Groensteen’s methodology obviously differs from that of McCloud (if in fact McCloud can be said to have an identifiable methodology), there is substantial theoretical overlap between *The System of Comics* and *Understanding Comics*. Both books pay particular attention to “the active cooperation provided by the reader”

(Groensteen, *System of Comics* 10), the process that McCloud refers to as closure.<sup>1</sup> For Groensteen, the panel is “the base unit of the comics system” (*System of Comics* 34), a contention that is complemented by McCloud’s chapter on the gutter, which identifies various types of “panel-to-panel transitions” (McCloud 70). The panel and the gutter are interdependent components of the comics page; “it is between the panels that the pertinent contextual rapports establish themselves with respect to narration” (Groensteen, *System of Comics* 107). One of the distinguishing features of comics is that structuring gaps are not only conceptual – as in the gaps of communication or literary spots of indeterminacy – but also match the representational concreteness of the medium.

It may be useful to draw a number of distinctions derived from the above discussion: (1) the comics panel cannot be equated with the frame or shot of moving image media; (2) the panel cannot be treated as a picture or painting, particularly when it is in juxtaposition with other panels; (3) the image-based representational contents of a panel are not equivalent to the units of traditional literature, i.e. the letter, the word, etc. This last assertion may seem especially self-evident, but it still calls for some elaboration. In what way should the contents of the panel be understood, if they cannot be compared to the components of traditional literature? In McCloud’s straightforward but not unsophisticated account, the fundamental constituent of comics is the “cartoon” – a particular iconic mode that represents reality by means of “amplification through simplification” (30). (Notably, the term “icon” is used by McCloud to designate both words and images; Will Eisner similarly suggests that in comics “text reads as an image” [2].) Operating as “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” (McCloud 36), the cartoon induces a specific kind of reading that sets comics apart from

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, Groensteen also uses the term “closure,” but in a different way: for Groensteen, closure is a function of the panel’s frame, which works “to close the panel” and “enclose a fragment of space-time belonging to the diegesis” (*System of Comics* 40).

other visual forms like painting and illustration. McCloud describes the cartoon as both “a way of drawing” and “a way of seeing” (31), a characterisation which is congruent with Groensteen’s contention that “comics lean toward a work of *narrative drawing*, and its images generally present intrinsic qualities that are not those of the illustration or the picture” (*System of Comics* 105, emphasis in original).

To this understanding of the substance of comics, Hatfield adds a description that is credible, straightforward and far-reaching: comics, he states, are “heterogeneous in form, involving the co-presence and interaction of various codes” (*Alternative Comics* 36). Though almost any medium might be plausibly characterised as “heterogeneous” (as Mitchell might point out), the latter part of Hatfield’s sturdy definition addresses the distinctive formal synthesis inherent in comics. The complexity of this system demands a specific kind of reading, which rarely involves a great deal of conscious effort on the part of the reader but is nevertheless quite sophisticated (even if the narrative content of the comic is not). As Hatfield succinctly puts it, “the reader’s role is crucial, and requires the invocation of learned competencies; the relationships between pictures are a matter of convention, not inherent connectedness” (41). By convention, the gaps between images invite a particular response, which the cartoonist guides by means of manipulation of verbal and visual cues, but it is ultimately the reader who makes the connections moment to moment to arrive at the illusion of a seamless whole.

In many ways, it is the discontinuity of the comics page that affords the medium its great formal flexibility: with such a wide range of available techniques, the cartoonist is able to suit form to narrative in a way most writers cannot. No particular combination of elements is necessary to tell a story in comics because the exclusion of an element – for instance, speech balloons or panel frames – generates a specific kind of gap, which the reader will have little trouble assimilating into a field of information that is by nature

already full of gaps. The surface of Seth's page is only very rarely an unbroken, monumental unit, and in such cases usually for the purposes of rhythmic punctuation, to contrast the more fragmented and porous pages that precede and follow it (this technique is deployed to particular effect in *George Sprott*).

Most comics pages comprise a network of panels that invite a specific kind of participation from the reader – at once separate and linked, the panels lend themselves to multiple ways of being read. Hatfield's description is characteristically lucid:

In most cases, the successive images in a comic are laid out contiguously on a large surface or surfaces (that is, page or pages). Each surface organizes the images into a constellation of discrete units, or "panels." A single image within such a cluster typically functions in two ways at once: as a "moment" in an imagined sequence of events, and as a graphic element in an atemporal design. (*Alternative Comics* 48)

Here the affinity between comics and graphic design becomes especially apparent; in fact, it could be argued that graphic design is one of the most crucial of the various codes that a cartoonist makes use of. In terms of the significance of page layout and its effect on the reader's experience of the "flow" or "rhythm" of panels, it is clear that "comics exploit *format* as a signifier in itself" (52, emphasis in original). The ambivalent function of the comics panel, as both an interdependent part of that format and an independent fragment of narration, is at the root of the medium's more generalised formal ambivalence. The theoretical framework that Hatfield develops, which understands comics as a system that thrives on tension between codes of meaning, helps to illuminate this ambivalence in Seth's work (especially in Chapter 6).

Like Groensteen, Hatfield describes the system of comics at a macro-semiotic level and is able to broaden the terms of discussion without becoming vague or imprecise: "comics involve a tension between the experience of reading in sequence and the format or shape of the object being read. In other words, the art of comics entails a tense relationship between perceived time and perceived space" (*Alternative Comics* 52).

Perhaps it is this irresolvable tension that, channeled through devices like the speech balloon, enables the reader to so effortlessly give life to static images. It would seem to be this tension, between codes and between modes of perception, that lends comics their particularly changeable coherence and at the same time accommodates a range of reading strategies. Just as there is no single template for a comics page, there is ultimately no “right” way to read a comics page: “There is simply no consistent formula for resolving the tensions intrinsic to the experience” (66).

### **Criticism and Appreciation**

A great deal of early comics appreciation is fan-based, and distinctly non-academic, but even early academic work sometimes lacks the rigour and discernment that characterises most contemporary study. In his introduction to *The System of Comics*, Groensteen laments the state of research in France (which is somewhat surprising, considering the relative legitimacy of the “ninth art” in that country): “Myopic scholarship, nostalgia, and idolatry have structured the discourses around comics for about three decades” (1). Hatfield is frustrated by a similar tendency, which he identifies as the “notion of *ease*” – he pointedly notes that “criticism in English, until very recently, has been unable to distinguish between *skimming* comics and *reading* comics, with the result that critical discussion of the form has been generally impoverished and, at times, irresponsible” (*Alternative Comics* 66-67, emphases in original).

Comics Studies, as it has come to be known, seems to have reached a critical mass in recent years. In addition to book-length studies, essay anthologies, and textbooks, the field also boasts a range of academic and non-academic journals (of the latter, the most established is *The Comics Journal*, the first issue of which was technically published in 1977). Relatively recent peer-reviewed periodicals like *Studies*

in *Comics and ImageText*<sup>2</sup> offer important arenas for sustained academic engagement with comics. Though the field of study is less developed than other comparable popular culture disciplines, it is no longer in its infancy and, as it continues to accelerate, new research appears constantly.

In *A Comics Studies Reader*, Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester offer a comprehensive sample of comics scholarship, with contemporary research set alongside works that anticipated the field of study, for instance, Gilbert Seldes's 1924 account of comics. (Heer and Worcester have also co-edited an earlier noteworthy anthology, *Arguing Comics*.) The editors demonstrate their commitment to diverse perspectives by including an excerpt from American psychiatrist Frederic Wertham's 1954 alarmist study *Seduction of the Innocent*, which is generally credited with prompting the implementation of the self-regulating Comics Code among American comic book publishers. Most of the essays, however, are more recent, and some were even prepared expressly for the *Reader*. In one such contribution, Joseph Witek discusses the notion of "comicsness," which he suggests "might usefully be reconceptualised from being an immutable attribute of texts to being considered as a historically contingent and evolving set of reading protocols that are applied to texts" (149).

*The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* (2010), edited by David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman, is an equally strong but much more focused anthology. Unlike Daniel Raeburn's monograph, *Chris Ware* (2004), Ball and Kuhlman's book eschews the biographical and the extra-bibliographic (Ware's sketchbooks, paintings, sculptures, etc.) and draws together an almost daunting range of critical approaches, fifteen contributors organised under five broader themes, such as "The Urban Landscape" and "Everyday Temporalities." The essays occasionally graft

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<sup>2</sup>Other academic journals include: *European Comic Art*, *Image [&] Narrative*, *The International Journal of Comic Art*, *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *Mechademia*, *Studies in Graphic Narratives (SIGNs)*, *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art*.

theory onto analysis in a manner that is not entirely seamless, but the investigations are much more than merely heuristic and the volume as a whole represents a substantial contribution to the study of Ware's work and to comics scholarship in general.

Of course, the field of comics studies does not consist solely of recent anthologies. One of the earliest, fiercest works of substantial comics criticism is Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (1971), original published (and banned, and burned) in Chile and translated into English by David Kunzle (whose comprehensive histories of comics are mentioned in the following section). Rather than celebrate the gentle humour and assured pen-strokes of Carl Barks, as American commentators might be inclined to do, Dorfman and Mattelart reveal, as Kunzle dramatically has it in his introduction, "the scowl of capitalist ideology behind the laughing mask" of the Disney corporation (11).

Charles Hatfield's excellent study, *Alternative Comics*, has already been cited extensively, but its lucid descriptions of the tensions inherent in medium are just the foundation for the book's analysis of specific works. Hatfield does a great deal to contextualise alternative comics in relation to more "mainstream" work and develop a sophisticated critical approach to the entire field. "Simply put," he writes in his introduction, "a critical stance that posits no meaningful distinctions among comics cannot do justice to the form. Nor can it explain its recent rejuvenation" (xiii). Hatfield's focus is American cartoonists such as Crumb, Harvey Pekar and Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez (all of whom have had an influence on the development of Seth's work).

Perhaps the most popular collection of comics appreciation written by a single author in recent years is Douglas Wolk's *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (2007). As readable as *Reading Comics* is, however, Wolk is susceptible to sweeping statements and haphazard conceits; one chapter descends into a

seven page “list of things I love about comics” arranged in “no particular order” (81). At his most careless, Wolk repeats some of the medium’s easiest creation myths: “A form that was once solely the province of children’s entertainment now fills bookshelves with mature, brilliant works” (3). Only according to the narrowest definition has the medium ever been intended for children alone – Wolk perpetuates this popular notion for effect, exaggerating the literary trajectory of comics. He seems to find thorough historical research somewhat tiresome, at times displaying a casual imprecision that may actually obscure a fuller understanding of the medium: “Better, perhaps, to wave vaguely at the past and say that, yes, comics have been around for a good long time” (29).

The next section attempts to delineate a functional alternative to both pedantic “ancestor seeking,” as Wolk aptly calls it, and his own superficial claim that comics “just coalesced” into their recognisable form in the early twentieth century (29-30).

### **Histories and Definitions**

In their *Comics Studies Reader*, Heer and Worcester succinctly outline the key features of the historicising impulse in comics scholarship. “The writing of the history of comics,” they observe, “has been plagued by questions of definition and continuity: what constitutes a comic and what is the relationship between the protocomics of the past (everything from Egyptian hieroglyphics and the Bayeux Tapestry to the sequential prints of William Hogarth) and subsequent comics” (13). Though these two questions are closely related, it may be helpful to address them individually at first before attempting to move toward a more complicated consideration of their interdependence. The word “comics,” in both popular and academic contexts, “is very much an umbrella term which brings together a cluster of related forms: nineteenth-century illustrated stories, gag cartoons, comic strips, comic books, and many other branches of the same

family tree” (13). Of course, to extend the classification too far renders it useless. Is there a definition that accounts for this cluster of related forms, while at the same time excluding those forms which are similar but cannot productively be considered comics (such as the painted triptych or illustrated children’s novel)?

The medium often seems to straddle the border between more traditional forms, residing in the space where categories overlap, and consequently much of the debate over definitions entails fastidious adjustment of boundary lines. At its most innovative, Seth’s work draws attention to these boundaries and highlights the fundamental plasticity of comics. What constitutes an illustrated book as opposed to a comic book? What is the difference between a photo essay and a comic that makes use of photography? Such questions, though they may seem somewhat arcane, attempt to arrive at the essence of the medium, that elusive quality which allows even the casual observer to determine – almost at a glance – whether or not a work may be considered a comic. “I know it when I see it” is not sufficiently specific or impartial to operate as a definition, but it possesses an immediacy and fidelity to the experience of reading comics that the critic cannot afford to dismiss.

While many proposed definitions aim to be ahistorical and categorical, the attempt to define often leads almost inevitably to the question of historical developments and formal precursors – of which there are potentially a great many, depending on how far back one wishes to go. Scott McCloud’s definition of comics, and by extension his sense of the historical continuity of the medium, is famously broad: he includes everything from pre-Columbian “picture manuscripts” and stained glass windows to airline safety diagrams and illustrated car manuals (*Understanding Comics* 10-20). McCloud claims that he has “no idea where or when comics originated” (15), a (slightly disingenuous?) statement which implies that some version of the medium has existed

almost since the advent of pictorial communication. He is quite aware that he is stretching the term “comics” and its definition beyond conventional use, as this telling remark makes particularly clear: “as the 20th century drew near, the comics we *call* comics began to appear” (18, emphasis in original). This distinction between comics as an umbrella term and “the comics we call comics” invites the question: How far should one expand the term “comics”? Having conceded that the medium does not exist in a formal vacuum, the pressing concern is how to delimit a much broader category of comics.

“Early histories of comics,” Heer and Worcester observe, “tended to be popularly written books rich in enthusiasm and anecdote but lacking in primary scholarship based on archival research. The pioneering studies of the tireless art historian David Kunzle changed all that by going well past twentieth-century North American sources” (13). Kunzle, in his two-volume *History of the Comic Strip* and his subsequent work on Swiss comics innovator Rodolphe Töpffer, has done a great deal to provide art-historical context for the medium. Following the example of his mentor, eminent art historian E. H. Gombrich – whose *Art and Illusion* contains a chapter on caricature and the kernel of Kunzle’s *History* – Kunzle in turn laid much of the foundation for the work of other comics scholars.

“The history of the comic strip,” Groensteen writes in his contribution to Charles Dierick and Pascal Lefèvre’s excellent anthology *Forging a New Medium: The Comic Strip in the 19th Century*, “can be regarded as starting on a number of different dates, depending upon the elements one selects as definitive: with or without balloons, printed or not, produced for a mass public or not” (107). In *The System of Comics* Groensteen strives to avoid this sort of narrowly historical definition and offers instead a foundational principle – he suggests that “one must recognize the relational play of a

plurality of interdependent images as the unique ontological foundation of comics” (17). This foundational principle he terms “iconic solidarity,” which he defines as “interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated” and at the same time “plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*” (18). Groensteen readily acknowledges that such a broad scope is “not without inconveniences,” but demonstrates that other frequently proposed criteria – such as the presence of speech balloons and/or captions – dismiss a great many comics (*System of Comics* 14-17). For every rule, there are always exceptions.

In their introduction to *Forging a New Medium*, Dierick and Lefèvre comment that in previous periods “it was technically possible to draw graphic stories for entertainment and print them, but it is not until the 19th century that the comic strip became a medium for mass entertainment” (19). This is generally attributed to the unprecedented convergence of various factors exemplified by the comic strips of the era: the gradual standardisation of comic strip conventions, advances in printing technology, and increased literacy accompanied by increased distribution of inexpensive periodicals. Dierick and Lefèvre summarise these and related trends simply as “larger social, scientific and artistic developments” (22). The emergence of *manga* in Japan provides a unique instance of this convergence of developments, as Paul Gravett relates in his history *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (2004). Even in a country known for traditions of visual art incorporating language, manga in its recognisable form “might never have come into being without Japan’s long cultural heritage being soundly disrupted by the influx of Western cartoons, caricatures, newspaper strips and comics” (Gravett 18). Though it swiftly became an idiosyncratic and identifiable cultural form in

its own right, manga began as a product of Japanese and Western sensibilities and has continued to develop in tandem with European and North American comics.

Lurking behind such accounts of the medium, with their various diverging and converging streams, remains that corollary to historical continuity: definition. Not just where did comics come from but always as well, what *are* comics? “Every investigation into the origins of the comics strip,” Groensteen pronounces, “should also define it” (“Töpffer” 107). Some critics approach definition by way of specific elements or conventions (for instance, the speech balloon); others opt for more abstract principles (Groensteen develops the concept of iconic solidarity). In “Defining Comics?” Aaron Meskin finds that these critics, in their efforts to be definitive and ahistorical, produce definitions that are anachronistic. “The trouble that they face is a trouble that has always faced formalism—its failure to take into account the historical contexts in which works of art are produced” (374). As noted in the introduction, Seth’s work was and is produced in an historical context that is rooted in the alternative comics movement of the 1980s and has since matured into a much more established literary form.

Meskin’s account of comics seems to hinge on what may be considered “plausible,” a word he uses repeatedly and with no small amount of skill to parse the various definitions under review. For instance, in his consideration of the commonly held notion that comics are by definition dominated by pictures more than words, Meskin suggests that “film provides us with a plausible example of an art form which is typically pictorial but not essentially pictorial” (374). Meskin also exposes the unfounded assumption that “narrative is an essential component of comics” (371). The most plausible conclusion is that comics may be predominantly narrative but are not essentially narrative (372), a practical distinction which suggests that comics constitute a flexible structure.

Or, as Groensteen has it, a *system*, which comprises many possible elements and mobilises multiple codes, many of which do not belong exclusively to the system (e.g. written text, graphic design), some of which are standard parts of the system (e.g. the speech balloon, the gutter), and none of which are in themselves essential to the system. This is all to say that comics do not require any particular combination of those elements and conventions available to the cartoonist. As Groensteen clearly and concisely explains, any given work “only actualizes certain potentialities of the medium, to the detriment of others that are reduced or excluded” (*System of Comics* 12). Joseph Witek suggests that comics entail an “historically contingent and evolving set of reading protocols that are applied to texts” – in effect, “to be a comic text means to be *read* as a comic” (149, emphasis in original). As Groensteen very astutely remarks, “searching for the essence of comics is to be assured of finding not a shortage but a profusion of responses” (*System of Comics* 12).

Most commentators seem to acknowledge the interdependence of definition and history but nevertheless attempt to produce paradoxically ahistorical definitions, which often lead them back to periods that predate the advent of modern comics by hundreds of years. This approach, Groensteen observes, “dissolves the specifics of the comic strip in the general history of representation; it confuses a modern medium with the thousand-year-old tradition of visual expression” (“Töpffer” 108). Meskin does not cite Groensteen, but also finds recourse to pre-comic antecedents unconvincing. Where Groensteen objects to a specific kind of historical indistinctness, Meskin seems more generally opposed to the method as a whole: “Establishing the existence of artistic pictorial narrative prior to the nineteenth century might seem to offer a way to establish the art status of comics, but comics have earned the right to be considered art on their own merits” (Meskin 376). This is a far more nuanced and satisfying response than

Wolk's vague wave toward the past because Meskin arrives at his conclusion only after a measured, comprehensive review of available criticism. Ultimately, Meskin urges critics to go beyond the definitional project and engage with comics as art.

This review represents an attempt to render a condensed overview of the field of comics studies – a practical account of the current state of scholarship. Given the constant appearance of new work, a genuinely wide-ranging survey will soon scarcely be possible, at least not without its sheer length beginning to impede utility. Here already, in the interest of manageability, much material has been only generally alluded to or left out entirely, some because it seemed outdated, some for the opposite reason that its rate of development seemed likely to date any snapshot of the present moment. The aim of this review is to illuminate the field from several different angles and in this way provide a description of comics studies to date that will help to ground the investigation of Seth's work.

If there is any consensus about the formal aspects of comics, it may be localised around an acknowledgement of the medium's ambivalence. In part, this ambivalence is rooted in the function of the panel, which simultaneously isolates a moment of the narrative and places it in sequential relation (both spatially and temporally) with other moments. Perhaps the most striking peculiarity of the medium is that the gaps between panels exist on the page as concretely as the panels themselves, but are also at the same time the more familiar figurative gaps of literature and communication in general, which the reader fills during the act of reading. There is also the manner in which comics at once resist and reinforce traditionally opposed categories, most obviously word and image. Hatfield refers to the heterogeneity of comics, "the co-presence and interaction of various codes," and emphasises the way that the tensions between these codes inform the

reader's experience. Fragmentation and instability, he suggests, are the medium's inherent assets (assets which Seth deploys with great skill and subtlety). It is a pervasive structural ambivalence, in which various oppositions are both maintained and collapsed, that seems to distinguish comics as a medium.

It is not surprising, then, that the "essence" of comics has proven so elusive: none of its formal elements and conventions can truly be considered defining because the whole of the medium does not ultimately depend on any particular part for its coherence. So what is it that makes comics comics? For most contemporary critics, the question of definition is almost inevitably interdependent with that of historical continuity, though the absence of a single decisive watershed moment has led to a wide range of accounts tracing various trajectories and marking different starting points along the historical continuum. It is inadequate to suggest that all these accounts are equally valid, but, presently, the prevailing wisdom seems to be that the most useful definitions are local, "based on histories of practice rather than abstract formal criteria" (Hatfield xv). Appendix A offers a generic typology for the classification of comics rooted in precisely these histories of practice.

# I Notable Features

# 1

## STYLE, DESIGN, AND THE APPEARANCE OF AUTHENTICITY

As with many comics, the most immediately compelling feature of Seth's work is its appearance, those physical elements that combine to form a strong, instant impression of what may be generally termed "style". Even alongside other contemporary comics, his books often stand out as carefully designed book-objects. (He is also a sought-after designer for other people's books, a parallel profession that has superseded his work as a jobbing magazine illustrator.) More than just his comics' packaging, however, what is here called style includes graphic design and panel layout, shading and colour scheme, treatment of diegetic space, and of course the actual drawing itself, which in Seth's case strongly recalls a bygone era of cartooning. Though he does not attempt to slavishly reproduce the technique of any particular cartoonist from the so-called Golden Age of American comics, Seth conjures a consistent surface that seems uncannily familiar, reassuring, and authentic in its evocation of this visual history. This is not style in the sense of something opposed to substance or meaning but rather, as Susan Sontag predicts, style as a kind of "totality" (*Against Interpretation* 17). Style is understood to encompass and sometimes even dictate substance.

Still, as Sontag points out, even to invoke the term "style" is to imply something that is somehow separable from what might commonly (and with a pretense of neutrality) be referred to as "content." Implicit in this chapter is an argument that such a separation may be regarded as an acceptable and even productive theoretical manoeuvre, particularly in the analysis of a visual narrative medium like comics. At the same time, however, style in comics is more than just the sum of its parts, more than the choices

made by a cartoonist between synonymous elements. It is connected to what Groensteen calls the “medium-related pleasure” of comics, which he rightly maintains cannot be reduced to a simple combination of narrative and artistic pleasures (“Why” 10). The medium-related pleasure of Seth’s comics is often bound up with a sense of history, craft, and that nearly intangible quality, authenticity. The word “authenticity” accommodates a great deal of connotative slippage, which this chapter attempts to preserve even as it draws out particular meanings. Likewise “appearance” – the discussion of “the appearance of authenticity” represents an effort to parse a sometimes elusive set of concerns: not only what Seth’s style looks like and how it operates, but also the process by which it becomes perceptible.

### **The Spectre of Authenticity**

In her contribution to *The Concept of Style*, Svetlana Alpers observes that “Style, as engaged in the study of art, has always had a radically historical bias” (137). That is to say, the concept of style has traditionally been an instrument of art historians used to classify and chronologise their object of study. With this in mind, Seth’s relationship to the past already begins to come more into focus: part of the reason his period evocations are so compelling is that he is using style as an historicising discourse, as art historians do, but in a manner that is at once nonspecific and almost overdetermined. By nonspecific is meant the ambiguity of his style – it evokes the past, but not any particular past, a past that exists only on the surface of his page. By overdetermined is meant the indiscriminateness of his style – it is applied uniformly to every part of a narrative, regardless of the actual year in which the story takes place.

Alpers’ is one of the less fastidious essays in *The Concept of Style*, a dense and wide-ranging anthology full of careful terminological distinctions and schematic

proposals that are often at odds with each other. Can all these schemas really be equally useful? Ultimately, the most intricate theories seem to collapse under the weight of their various taxonomies, typologies and neologisms; less prescriptive contributions fare better. For instance, Kendall L. Walton asks, “Are styles attributes of objects, or of actions?” (72) She suggests that the two are intimately connected, but favours the latter. Her approach takes into account the way in which a work is made, “the act of creating it,” and in doing so draws a sharp distinction between art objects and natural objects (for instance, sunsets) (73-74). This understanding of style as the product of an artist’s process, constituted by actions, dovetails with one of Sontag’s formulations: “If art is the supreme game which the will plays with itself, ‘style’ consists of the set of rules by which this game is played” (AI 33).

Simon Grennan sees Seth’s work in terms of such representational constraints or rules, which he claims may be summarised as “*nothing un-North American, nothing post-1959*” (296). Arguing for an alternative approach to comics narratology, Grennan uses *Clyde Fans* to highlight the relation between what Émile Benveniste refers to as *histoire*, “what is told,” and *discours*, “the situation in which enunciation is made” (Grennan 296). He persuasively suggests that Seth “uses a history of specific past forms of expression to self-consciously form his own” and that the reader’s experience “parallels this adoption of past forms” (300). Within this framework, however, Seth’s style is understood as the product of an appropriated *discours*: “We see Seth’s attempts to act within constraint, by adopting a complex *discours* other than his own, whilst simultaneously recognizing that he is Seth, drawing in the twenty-first century and not a comic strip artist of the 1940s” (313). Why Grennan considers the *discours* of Seth’s work to be “other than his own” is not entirely clear; arguably, both the *histoire* and *discours* are uniquely his own, and uniquely contemporary, even if significantly

informed by “past forms of expression.” Though he acknowledges the complexity of Seth’s style, Grennan still attempts to fix it to a particular past: “*North America, pre-1959*” (299). In this way, Grennan’s sophisticated narratological approach may actually risk obscuring one of the fundamental aspects of Seth’s style: that it reflects a longing for a past that never existed.

In Seth’s work, as elsewhere, this kind of longing is always haunted by the spectre of authenticity. When deployed as a critical term, “authenticity” often refers to a specifically modern literary articulation, a site where aesthetics and ethics tellingly overlap. Sontag asserts that the distinction between aesthetics and ethics is “a trap,” the result of a Western misapprehension (*AI* 23). Indeed, their inseparability seems to find its epitome in a stylistic quality like authenticity, which pretends to be not stylistic but natural, artless. What is at stake in a style that wants to efface itself? And what continues to make authenticity such an urgent concern in contemporary art and literature? “That the word has become part of the moral slang of our day,” wrote Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, “points to our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences” (93). Seth’s work reflects and engages with precisely this anxiety, which might be considered the kernel of his style, the most immediately apparent expression of which is an ambivalent nostalgia (what Svetlana Boym would call “reflective nostalgia”).

Whether general or specific, reflective or restorative, nostalgia consistently entails a corresponding concern with what is natural and real, an inclination that becomes particularly visible in literature (and sometimes literally visible in comics). Nostalgic writers seem to strain toward a stable referent – in their texts, the past is “attached to other terms that make it a locus of authenticity” (Doane and Hodges 9). In this sense, Seth is not a nostalgic writer; he is too self-aware, constantly undercutting the

credibility of nostalgic impulses. In *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Seth-as-protagonist explicitly voices anxiety about the material degradation he perceives in everyday life – “quality” becomes metonymically linked to authenticity, with the past as the locus of each – but this nostalgic attitude is presented as suspect (43). A more extreme instance of authorial disavowal is found in the satirical depiction of Jonah, Seth’s hysterically nostalgic self-caricature from *Wimbledon Green*, who takes his longing for the past to absurd ends.

And yet, at a glance, a casual reader might still fairly remark that Seth’s work looks “nostalgic” or “old-fashioned,” or even “handmade,” because to a significant extent it is the evident craft of his books that suggests something from a previous era. As much as Seth may discursively disavow nostalgia, the appearance of his work continues to make a case for the pleasures of longing and the value of an outmoded brand of authenticity. The ethical/aesthetic stakes of authenticity can seem implicit (if not explicit) in every brushstroke and background detail; moreover, the very surface of the page seems charged with the tension between this authentic imperative and the artifice used to conjure it. As with anything so pervasive, however, the appearance of authenticity is not always at the vanguard of the reader’s attention, and the experienced reader can choose to “tune in” to it (or tune it out) to varying degrees. Still, this ambivalent appearance, which is such a large part of Seth’s style, is in many ways unavoidable.

The phrase “the appearance of authenticity” contains a number of closely related meanings, the most obvious being, plainly, “what authenticity looks like.” In Seth’s work, as has been stated, authenticity often looks “handmade” or “nostalgic”: muted colours, handwritten lettering, panel frames that are not perfectly straight, a drawing style that evokes the history of cartooning (more on this below). A second principal

meaning might be paraphrased as “how authenticity discloses itself to the reader,” the manner in which authenticity actively *becomes* legible. In comics, as in painting or sculpture, appearance is paradoxically a static becoming (or a network of static becomings) activated by the perceiver. How does authenticity become legible to the reader of Seth’s work? Much depends on the reader. This does not mean that the reader must be able to name the cartoonists that have influenced Seth’s approach to the medium, or be intimately acquainted with the minutiae of comic book production. The visual literacy of the average reader is sufficiently high to appreciate the tensions in Seth’s work and be rewarded by his attention to detail.

This typical reader would immediately intuit, for instance, the difference between a mass market superhero comic and Seth’s work. It is not necessary to know that distribution of labour (into writer, artist, inker, letterer, etc.) is the norm for the former in order to appreciate the wager of authenticity made by the latter. To take a specific example: *It’s a Good Life* operates within the genre of autobiography, one of the most familiar modes of expression in literary comics, and likely the one most associated with authentic expression. As Bart Beaty observes in *Unpopular Culture*: “In the field of contemporary comic book production, autobiography holds a promise to elevate the legitimacy of both the medium and the artist” (144). The reader with a general sense of cultural context will be able to understand the tensions between art and pop culture that appear in an autobiographical comic.

The term “appearance” can also have an almost pejorative implication, as when appearance and reality are hierarchically set against each other. In this sense “the appearance of authenticity” may suggest a surface that is not credible, or that seeks to conceal a decidedly inauthentic reality. Seth’s work, in its ambivalent relation to authenticity, to some degree helps to dissolve such a hierarchy. In *George Sprott*, for

example, the credibility of the narration is constantly called into question. The narrator apologises for gaps in information and, significantly, worries about conveying something “real” about George. The reality that does emerge is not entirely favourable: it gradually becomes apparent that George’s entire career (television show, lecture series, his Institute of Polar Studies) is built around a handful of “expeditions” the actual cultural value of which is highly suspect.

Of course, this again is ambivalence expressed at the level of plot, and does not address the issues of authenticity and reliability that surround any other aspect of the narrative, namely its physical appearance. Seth’s surface remains quite seamless – but does this necessarily mean it has something to hide? Sontag may be useful here: “Even if one were to define style as the manner of our appearing” – a definition that suits the purposes of this chapter quite well – “this by no means necessarily entails an opposition between a style that one assumes and one’s ‘true’ being. In fact, such a disjunction is extremely rare. In almost every case, our manner of appearing *is* our manner of being” (AI 18). Under these circumstances, the critical aim should not be to peer “beyond” appearance, regarding it as a surface below which a more fundamental truth about the work lies hidden. Rather than assuming that the appearance conceals or, at best, points toward meaning, it is necessary to recognise the potential for appearance in and of itself to contain meaning.

A great deal of meaning is contained in the surface of Seth’s work, most notably its evocation of the early gag cartoons of *The New Yorker*. This impression – which is reinforced by the storyline of *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* – should be understood as a kind of shorthand. What it specifically points to is something in Seth’s drawing style that recalls the work of one of *The New Yorker*’s most renowned cartoonists, Peter Arno. (Seth describes Arno in the glossary of *It’s a Good Life* as

“Possibly *The New Yorker*’s greatest stylist.”) The best scholarly introduction to Arno’s work, and perhaps the best introduction to the cartoons of *The New Yorker*, is Iain Topliss’s *The Comic Worlds of Peter Arno, William Steig, Charles Addams, and Saul Steinberg*. As the title suggests, the book is a study of four landmark American cartoonists and their relation to *The New Yorker*, which, Topliss contends, “might be described as the house organ of a key fraction of the American middle class” (4). Ably balancing explanations of the context and content of *The New Yorker*’s cartoons, Topliss demonstrates the inseparability of the two, often with careful analyses of individual gags. His approach is distinguished by attention to detail and an easy familiarity with the material, yielding a sturdy investigation that does not shy away from the significance of surfaces.

Thorough but not fatiguing, Topliss sets out to “frame a defense of the cartoon as a form, along with a liberationist account of humor, that will not be too excessive in its claims” (10). He begins by situating the cartoon nearly at the centre of *The New Yorker*’s distinctive style. “Cartoons have been a defining element in *The New Yorker* since Harold Ross founded it in 1925,” Topliss argues, going on to say that “the cartoons, more than anything else in the early years of the magazine, set its tone, established its look, and offered anchorage for readers navigating the vast ocean of its text” (5). And more than any other cartoonist it was Arno, especially in these formative years, who exemplified the prevailing mood of the new magazine: “sophisticated, adult, and antisentimental” (21). Topliss looks closely at this by-now familiar attitude and finds it is the product of conflicting impulses – to participate and to observe – which resolve themselves into the viewpoint delineated in Arno’s work: “Disengaged intimacy, the hallmark of his humor, was the basis of *The New Yorker*’s famous sophistication” (22).

In the cartoons of Peter Arno, Topliss traces the “emergence of a mood of rueful discontent with modern life” (15).

Seth reinterprets this mood in *It's a Good Life*, offering variations on the theme through his invented cartoonist Kalo, whose work is presented as contemporary with that of Arno.<sup>1</sup> Kalo is on the whole somewhat softer than Arno – lacking, perhaps, that insider’s inclination to truly skewer his subject – but the similarities can be striking. In one of Arno’s best-known cartoons, a long row of nearly indistinguishable Miss America contestants recedes into a vanishing point somewhere beyond the right edge of the panel. In the foreground, on the left side of the panel are two men, likely contest judges, one of whom is saying: “Makes you kind of pleased to be an American, doesn’t it?” (fig. 1.1). Compare this to a very similar Kalo panel from the collection at the back of *It's a Good Life* (fig. 1.2). Two stout middle-aged, middle-class women stand face-to-face, offering the reader almost identical mirrored profiles. One of them says, “What a coincidence, I was Miss Oklahoma the year before you” (169).

The target of the gag in both cartoons is not just a certain kind of American homogeneity, but the superficial pride taken in a specifically sexualised homogeneity. The joke in both cases is illustrated by a pleasing repetition and similarity, which implicates the reader in the enjoyment and celebration of an idealised uniformity. In Kalo’s far gentler cartoon, however, the lascivious male gaze is safely off-panel and unvoiced, implicit rather than explicit. Nonetheless, Arno is a clear point of departure for the self-referential exploration of cartooning that Seth undertakes in *It's a Good Life*, and Kalo serves as an opportunity for Seth to experiment within the strict tonal and formal conventions of a cartooning practice (the single-panel gag) that is in many ways very unlike the practice he has otherwise pursued in his books. Through the filter of

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<sup>1</sup> See Grennan for a reading of the tonal and temporal relation between Seth and Arno vis-à-vis *Clyde Fans*.



Fig. 1.1. Arno, Peter “Makes you kind of pleased to be an American, doesn’t it?” 1960. From *The Complete Cartoons of the New Yorker* (New York: Black Dog & Lenthal, 2006) 65.



Fig. 1.2. Seth, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (Montreal: D&Q, 1996) 169.

metafiction, *It's a Good Life* demonstrates that “rueful discontent” remains a benchmark for single-panel gag cartoons, a touchstone of authenticity for contemporary cartoonists. (Or, at least, for Seth; fellow Canadian cartoonist Chester Brown is depicted as being appreciative but hardly enthusiastic about old magazine cartoons [*It's a Good Life* 19].)

“In his best later work,” Topliss writes, “Arno creates an alarmingly capacious comic world of disillusionment, failed purposes, and actuality’s falling short of expectation” (24). The same might be said of much of Seth’s work, not only in *It's a Good Life* but in his later books as well. Of course, where Arno compresses disillusionment into an ephemeral gag, Seth’s capaciousness resides in allowing his characters’ disappointments room to breathe in long-form narratives. In Seth’s work the reader finds thwarted expectations, but with consequences as opposed to punchlines. However, tempting as it is to suggest that Seth is heir to Arno, taking Arno’s comic vision of modern discontent to its tragic conclusion, such a facile reading likely overstates the narrative dimension of the relation between the two cartoonists.

Seth’s stories are not protracted Arno cartoons in which the humour has been turned inside out in an anxious effort to conceal the predecessor’s influence. Rather, the influence is quite plainly visible, which is to say, visual. Seth’s evident debt to Arno in creating *Kalo* reflects the broader importance of Arno in Seth’s work. He explains:

I can remember Arno being very influential for me for understanding how characters could be shapes, in a way. [...] He used the washes to make things solid, but he’s really carving those figures out with a brush [...] that was something that really taught me how to approach drawing in a different way. Something I needed to learn at that point.

(Appendix B 335)

There is a definite family resemblance – not always reducible to specific details – between the drawing styles of Seth and Arno, and it is arguably more significant than any perceived correspondence in their temperaments. In his life and work, Arno

epitomised a knowing dandyism, the particular energy and freedom of which is less apparent in Seth's drawing than is a reified visual trace of that Jazz Age esprit.

Flipping through *The Complete Cartoons of the New Yorker*<sup>2</sup>, it quickly becomes clear that the magazine accommodated a range of cartooning styles. (This is apparent even in the abbreviated spectrum that Topliss offers in his book, from the spotlight sensuality of Arno to the almost transparent linearity of Saul Steinberg.) To see the diverse work of a particular period juxtaposed is somewhat artificial – in the magazine, cartoons do not typically appear next to each other – but the anthology layout nevertheless provides an interesting sense of chronological context. Especially with Seth's work in mind, it is relatively easy to identify Arno amid a page of his contemporaries, set apart by (among other things) his theatrical lighting and a certain hard-to-quantify thickness and sureness of brushstroke. Seth puts it well when he says, simply, "Arno was pure modernity – bold lines, masterful compositions" (*IAGL* 180). In his own work, Seth seems to have domesticated these bold lines to some extent, perhaps deliberately, perhaps involuntarily. In his rare action-oriented sequences, in some of his people, and even in certain inanimate objects, there is a tendency toward this boldness – but it seems constantly held in reserve, never fully allowed to materialise.

"The line is always bold, confident, elegant, and stylish," Topliss says of Arno's work (34). (This last descriptor, "stylish," tellingly points to a fundamental elusiveness: what does it mean to describe someone's style as stylish?) The list of adjectives could just as easily describe Seth's line, but with one significant addition: restrained.

Particularly as his style matures, there is little that is splashy in Seth's line. At times, it seems almost tense in its restraint, the result of obvious labour and craft, full of carefully channeled energy. If Arno's authenticity is his boldness, Seth's is his restraint; Seth

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<sup>2</sup> The coffee-table anthology actually only contains 2,004 of the more than 68,000 cartoons included on the accompanying digital archive.

seems to make use of boldness as a counterpoint while remaining “true to himself.” A slightly more precise term than “authenticity” in this case might be “integrity,” though the rather inexact implication is roughly the same: integrity refers here to the principal characteristic of a work around which other characteristics seem to cohere. In this sense, it would not be inappropriate to speak of “structural integrity” when trying to pin down an artist’s style. Seth offers a wonderfully practical explanation of the structural development of style: “I think most drawing style is based on *how* you choose to simplify. And the stylisations you *build* out of those simplifications. Every cartoonist starts picking a series of noses they draw, for example. And they stylise that and a system develops” (Appendix B 333-34, Seth’s emphases).

Set side by side, it is the differences between Seth and Arno that are most apparent. One gets the impression that Seth has incorporated Arno’s style at some deep level without copying his specific techniques. The difference is especially clear when a particular element is isolated from the whole – for instance, a nose. Ranging from elegantly aquiline to downright hawkish, Arno’s noses are invariably sharp, whereas Seth’s noses rarely, if ever, come to a point and certainly not in the same way that Arno’s do. This sort of scrutiny may seem pedantic as opposed to actually illuminating – the aim is to demonstrate the manner in which coherence nearly evaporates on close examination, as in a Seurat painting. The ghost of Arno remains, but it is in certain respects easier to *imagine* the stylistic similarities between his work and Seth’s than to actually pick them out by sight. Topliss astutely observes that “Arno’s drawings create their meaning first stylistically, in the way they are drawn, and only secondarily in their paraphrasable content (whether of drawing or caption)” (Topliss 34). This is almost necessarily not the case with Seth’s narratives, if only because he is not working within the single-panel format, in which the first impression is so paramount. Important as the

first glance may be to the reader (especially the new reader) of Seth's work, it could not be said to really precede the content in its constitution of the work's meaning.

It should be noted that although this last remark unapologetically distinguishes between form and content, it does so while still clinging to the critical orthodoxy that the two are not really separable. Both form and content contribute to meaning and style in an ongoing interaction that is mobilised by the attention of the reader. This is one of the fundamental assumptions of this investigation, and as such it continually invites questions and demands clarification. It has been suggested that any reader is equipped to coordinate the interaction of form and content particular to the medium of comics, but who is Seth's *ideal* reader? Is it a style-literate comic book fan, attuned to the subtleties and history of the medium, who appreciates the array of techniques that Seth deploys? Arguably, Seth is not addressing himself to the segment of the middle-class that Topliss identifies as the main audience for *The New Yorker*, but neither does he seek to exclude such an audience. It may be that Seth's books teach the reader how to read them, actively creating their audience; and perhaps this is the most credible sign of authorial authenticity.

### **The Polished Appearance**

Seth holds up Robert Crumb as paragon of openness, to which he imagines future readers will respond: "Crumb's laying it all on the line and that works somehow for him, and I feel that that will continue to transmit as time goes on" (Appendix B 332). By contrast, Seth describes himself as "uptight," lacking in precisely those qualities he admires in Crumb. "There's none of that freedom," he says of his own work (Appx. B 304). And yet, among cartoonists of his generation (which might be labeled post-punk, though the utility of that term remains uncertain), he is by no means the most tightly

controlled artist. Perhaps this is partly due to the lessons learned from Arno about how to carve out lively shapes with a brush. Describing Arno's line, Topliss says: "It has weight and presence and yet – when Arno is at his best – is never mechanical or dead" (34). The frontrunner for most mechanical contemporary cartoonist is Chris Ware, who has stated his deliberate intention to develop a cartooning style that is "cold and dead, like typography" (quoted in Juno 53); Adrian Tomine has also cultivated an extraordinarily neutral surface.

By contrast, Seth's surface could hardly be described as neutral. While it may be fairly seamless and restrained, it is sometimes too uncanny to fully recede into the background of the reader's awareness. Of his work, he admits: "It does have a mannered quality to it, and at its worst it becomes sort of fey in a way that I don't like" (Appendix B 332). This may be another instance of Seth being his own harshest critic, but the observation is neither falsely modest nor imperceptive. This is not to say that his drawing is wooden or his compositions awkward, but the artifice of his craft is much in evidence. In terms of authenticity, this might be regarded as something of a double move: because it is not "natural" or effortless, artifice can seem to slide away from authenticity; at the same time, however, the evidence of craft and effort reveals the reality of the human hand that must work to create the polished appearance.

Seth's ability to draw "as Kalo" in a manner that is comparable yet notably distinct from the rest of the drawing in *It's a Good Life* reveals not only his skill as a draftsman but also the fallacy behind the myth of "natural" or "authentic" style. As Seth observes:

artists are touchy about their drawing style. I've actually found that other cartoonists want to pretend that they didn't come up with it, that it just sort of happened by accident. I think cartoonists sort of look at it like it's a fashion statement or something. Picking a drawing style, developing a

drawing style, is like wearing a fancy outfit, and they're a little ashamed that they've put that much effort into coming up with it.

(Appendix B 333)

As might be expected, Seth seems to be at his loosest, his least mannered, in his sketchbook. This may help to account for the great appeal of *Wimbledon Green*, which offers the reader a winning balance of sketchbook looseness and narrative density.

(Nowhere does Seth seem to resemble Arno more than in his sketchbook stories, *Wimbledon Green* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*.)

Seth reports that at the beginning of his cartooning career, when he was illustrating comics written and conceived by others, he still had much to learn about how to simplify his drawing: "I saw how many extraneous lines there were in every drawing and it was kind of a shock. There were little dots and fragments everywhere; I was just filling in space" (Appendix B 297). This is in marked contrast to his drawing in *Palookaville*, even the very first issue, and especially his recent work, which is meticulous but decidedly unfussy. Seth certainly appears to have succeeded in focusing his draftsmanship, now using, in his phrase, "only the absolutely necessary lines" (Appx. B 297). Of course, the notion of absolute necessity demands some attention. In all likelihood, this is an ideal toward which every mature cartoonist strives, though it will mean quite different things for different kinds of artists.

For instance, it would be somewhat irrelevant to suggest that the obsessively drawn lines that make up Edward Gorey's densely textured interiors are unnecessary (fig. 1.3) or, to take a less refined example, to dismiss Gary Panter's deceptively crude sketches as having extraneous lines. The question becomes: what conception of necessity has Seth developed for his work? Here it may be instructive to look at *Wimbledon Green*, ostensibly his most unpolished and least self-conscious book. Not only does this work feature a relaxed version of Seth's style, it also possesses that

particular kind of economy that comes from working quickly and aiming for adequacy rather than perfection. Even this sketchbook story is suffused with Seth's characteristic restraint, distinguished by "technical precision and tight graphic control; nothing was arbitrary or left to chance," as Matthew Screech says of another cartoonist's work (27).

This is from Screech's discussion of the *ligne claire*, or "clear line," pioneered by *Tintin* creator George Remi, better known as Hergé. (Seth identifies Hergé as one of "two big influences" [Appendix B 297]; the other is Arno. In some ways, Seth's drawing style might be considered a marriage of the two). Ann Miller, in her book *Reading Bande Dessinée*, describes the "clear line" as a technique that "eschews shading, gradation of colours and hatching, in favour of clear outlines, flat colours and

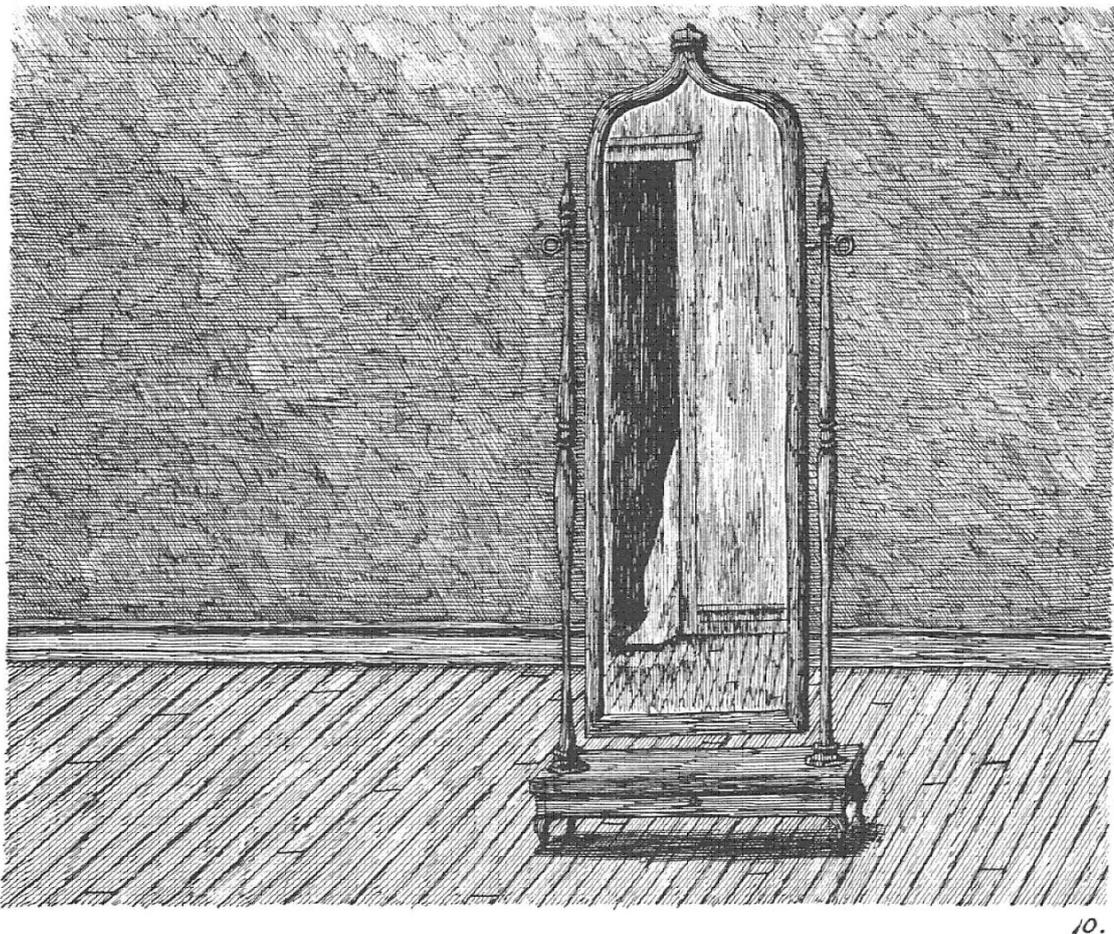


Fig. 1.3. Edward Gorey, *The West Wing*; rpt. in *Amphigorey* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1972) n. pag.

geometrical precision,” all of which contribute to a style that is not just appealingly clean but also, as a result, “implies narrative legibility” (18). She suggests that what makes the *ligne claire* so compelling is precisely this ideological corollary of its physical appearance, “the idea that the world is legible” (18).

For Seth, the legibility of the world is muddy at best, despite the clearness of his line. Indeed, this discrepancy is one of the driving tensions of his work, and one which sometimes works itself out on a purely visual plane. The most striking example of this may be Seth’s muted palette, which is a crucial expression of his style. When *Tintin* first appeared in colour, “Hergé selected fresh, pastel shades, sky blues, pale pinks and light greens, all of which conjured up an attractive, non-threatening and clean-looking world, where goodness triumphed” (Screech 28). Seth forgoes the vivid solidity of Hergé’s colours in favour of subdued washes and subtle shading.

In fact, shading, in its ubiquity, may be the most inconspicuously insistent element in Seth’s work, quietly setting the tone and giving the images added depth. This is particularly so in *It’s a Good Life If You Don’t Weaken*, which is shaded with a single colour – a delicate blue – that unifies the pages, offering the reader a reassuring, consistent surface. In this way it is not unlike Clowes’s *Ghost World*, which is also shaded with an ever-present blue wash (though the drawing in *Ghost World* is somewhat more naturalistic than Seth’s drawing). Everything depicted – a dream sequence, a card game in a diner, an incident from the past – has the same subdued appearance, becomes part of the same totality. Into this muted blue palette *Clyde Fans* introduces a range of grays, which further deepen the scenes and seem to reduce the distance between cartooning and illustration.

Related but in some ways quite distinct from Seth’s shading is his depiction of shadows, which also highlight the tension between the simplicity of the drawing and its

more illustrative tendencies. What are here termed “shadows” are part of the drawing, solid shapes rendered in the same bold black as Seth’s line. Sometimes characters are subsumed within these solid black shadows, reduced to flattened profiles. This is not done for dramatic effect, to add suspense or unearned menace to the narrative, but as an environmental effect, so to speak, part of the *mise en scène*. Certain panels from *It’s a Good Life* quite clearly demonstrate the distinction between shading and shadow, and the interaction of the two (fig. 1.4).

In *Clyde Fans* this interaction is even more pronounced, particularly on the stairs and in the doorways of the Matchcard family home (fig. 1.5). As Simon Matchcard walks through the house, his face and shoulders frequently dip into the shadows, something of a signature technique for Seth (fig. 1.6). On the threshold of his office, framed by the entryway, Simon appears as a silhouetted bust, with a sliver of highlight to indicate an ear. Such deeply shadowed images, with their suggestive, almost abstracted details, show Seth at his most gestural. He can also suggest the materials of his process: in the midst of an otherwise seamless surface, traces of the brush are occasionally visible, a technique used to add texture (fig. 1.7). Such techniques represent a break with the traditional *ligne claire* approach, but are obviously not sloppy or careless; the rough edge of the brushstroke may be “left to chance,” as Screech puts it, but it is by no means arbitrary.

Seth has always been quite deliberate, from the smallest detail to the overall design of a book. With *Wimbledon Green*, however, he reaches a new plateau: very much a book-object, it gives the stout impression of a collector’s item, with rounded corners, a raised cover illustration and title lettering (fig. 1.8), and thick pages that evoke the materiality of a sketchbook. The sturdy cover is, appropriately, green, though the interior of the book is subtly autumnal, a limited but surprisingly rich palette of warm

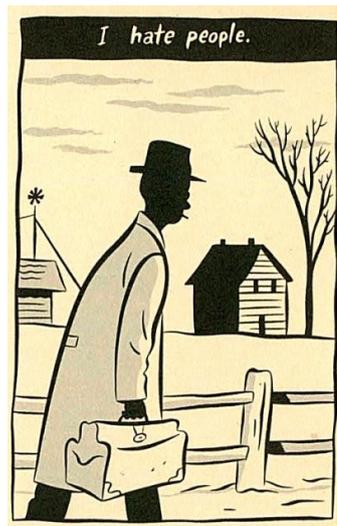


Fig. 1.4. Seth, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (Montreal: D&Q, 1996) 94.



Fig. 1.5. Seth, *Clyde Fans: Book 1* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 50.



Figs. 1.6 and 1.7. Seth, *Palookaville 19* (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 86, 77.

grays, faintly inflected with green, gold, and brown. There is the overall impression of yellowing newspaper, though some pages are cooler, devoid of colour, offering a spectrum of pure grays that suggest black-and-white film or fresh newsprint. Rendered in Seth's distinctive strokes, these ink washes suggest an artifact from a bygone era of comic-book production. About his cartooning style in the book, Seth has little to say except that it is "sketchbook quality," insisting in his introduction that "[t]he whole thing was drawn in the spirit of 'good enough'"(11). If Seth is to be taken at his word on this subject, then *Wimbledon Green* becomes all the more impressive an achievement, a true testament to his ability as a cartoonist. The book's apparently effortless layouts and illustrations – while occasionally more perfunctory than they might be in a more polished work – are more than just readable. Many of the panels in the book are little more than one inch squared, thumbnail sketches, repetitive and single-minded – and yet hardly insubstantial.

Seth's next book is a material triumph of a different sort: where *Wimbledon Green* is warm, compact and "good enough," *George Sprott* is extremely polished, capacious, and often downright wintry. Part of its capacity can be attributed to its narrative structure, which (not unlike *Wimbledon Green*) comprises many disparate points of view, including that of an idiosyncratic narrator. However, "capacious" may not give an adequate impression of its sheer size – at 14¼ x 12 inches, it dwarfs most books and features full-page arctic tableaux that span nearly two feet. The cover is imposing, with simplified Art Deco detailing and a portrait of George. The modest subtitle, "A Picture Novella" – Seth's coinage, which appears on all his book-length, non-sketchbook narratives – here seems to ironically emphasise the outsize dimensions of the work. The back cover features the large raised logo of George's Institute of Polar Studies, complete with crest and solemn Latin motto. The book originated in a much

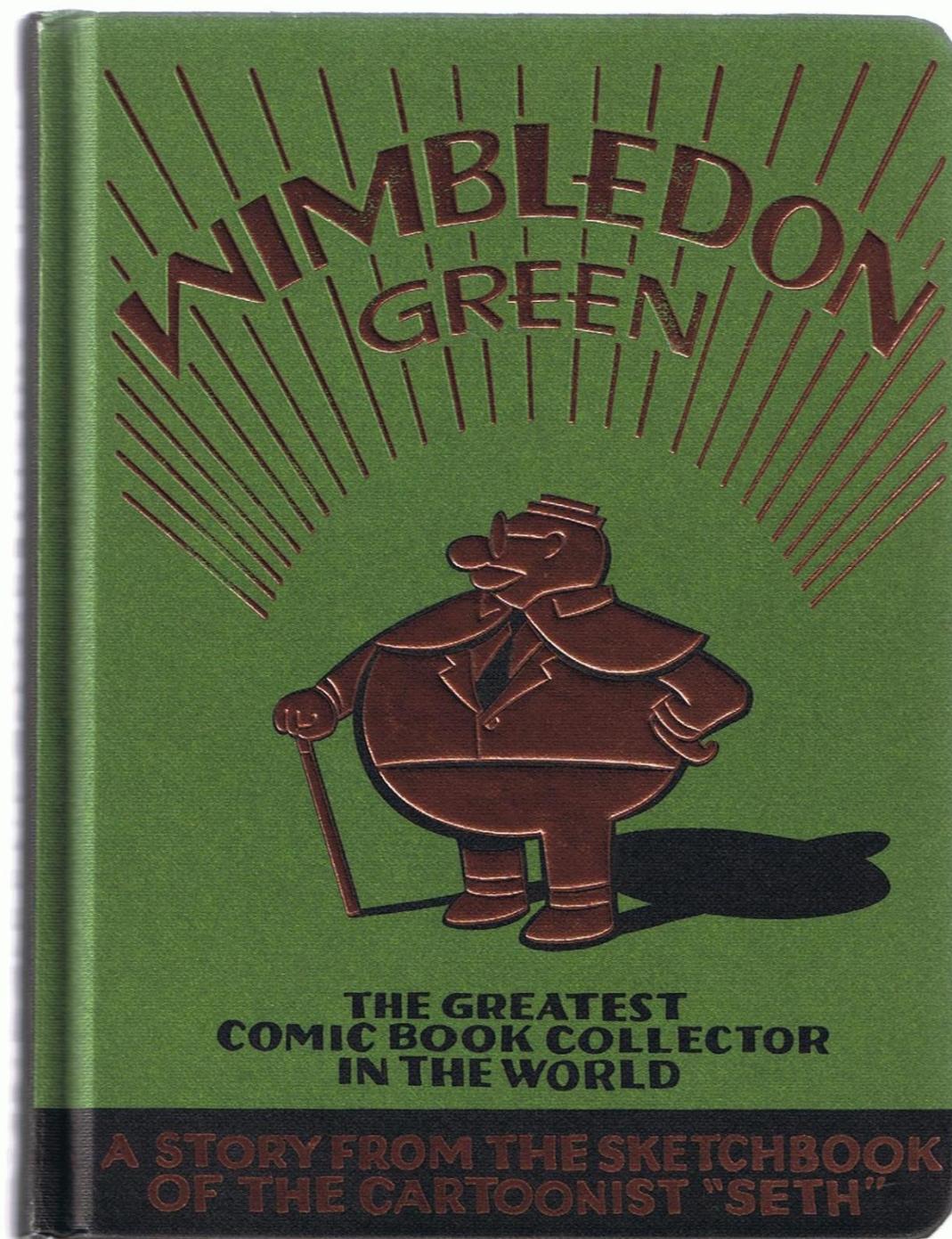


Fig. 1.8. Seth, *Wimbledon Green* (Montreal: D&Q, 2005) front cover.

different format, certain parts of it appearing serially – a page at a time – in the weekly *New York Times Magazine*. The version of the story serialised in the magazine is smaller not only in size, but in scope as well, to such an extent that it seems in many ways incomplete when compared to the expanded book. (In addition to mute, two-page arctic spreads of icebergs and snowy landscapes, the full edition of *George Sprott* also contains unnarrated biographical interludes, photographs of cardboard models of Dominion City, and a novel fold-out section. In many respects the book is a *tour de force*, but in other ways so understated as to make such a phrase seem almost embarrassing.)

*Palookaville*, Seth's long-running comic book series, has also undergone a format change, but of a different and much more momentous kind. With *Palookaville 20*, the series shifts from the traditional pamphlet-style comic books of numbers one through nineteen – typically sold only in alternative comic shops – to a more market-friendly, hardcover periodical that accommodates a range of material (sketchbook work, short articles, etc.) alongside the ongoing serialised story. The continuity of this story's style is not disturbed. As the Matchcard saga begins to wind down, it maintains the appearance developed in earlier instalments of *Clyde Fans*: clean, reserved, and refined, but also full, with a certain sumptuousness. These qualities are on particular display in *Palookaville 19* (discussed at length in subsequent chapters).

Seth's proficiency as a designer extends to page layout as well. In his work, as in all comics, graphic design is a significant code among other verbal and visual codes. As he astutely remarks, “comics are often compared to film or literature or a combination of the two, but I really think they're closer to poetry and graphic design” (Appendix B 316). Seth draws attention to an affinity among these forms that is based in economy and density of expression, as well as a shared sense of spatio-topia, to use Groensteen's

terminology. (Seth's comment also calls to mind the vermiculate comics of experimental Canadian poet bpNichol, which occasionally incorporate concrete poetry.) Comics, Seth says, "are really about compression and about moving things around, like the way that you do when you design things. Moving images around, moving shapes around" (Appx. B 316).

Gene Kannenberg, Jr. discusses the innovative page designs of Chris Ware, which often press design elements to their narrative limit in the form of elaborate diagrams or inventive fusions of diverse visual registers. "For Ware," Kannenberg observes, "design thus becomes a crucial narrative element" (176). Ware's interventions at the level of graphic design are more apparently radical than those of most other cartoonists, more conspicuous – indeed, his genius is in bringing to the forefront of his work those potentialities of design inherent in any comics page. As might be expected, Seth's page design tends to be more low-key and, apparently, less premeditated. For the most part, Seth constructs his pages as a great many cartoonists do, using a network of rectangular panels of various sizes aligned into rows and columns. This sturdy structure accommodates a great range of arthrological variety and compositional possibilities.

According to Seth, he works more by instinct than intention when he begins to lay out the panels of a given sequence. His description of the process suggests that he is improvising on a latent grid, an as yet undetermined mental structure, which – in the act of drawing – is gradually actualised. The result is what Groensteen calls the multiframe, which is "the sum of the frames that compose a given comic" (*System of Comics* 31).<sup>3</sup> In designing his pages, Seth notes that sometimes "there's an architecture to them that develops and you'll see that it needs to be a certain way" (Appendix B 315). This approach is inductive rather than prescriptive, but still allows for the development of

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<sup>3</sup> "The strip, the page, the double page, and the book are multistage multiframes, systems of panel proliferation that are increasingly inclusive" (Groensteen, *System of Comics* 30).

carefully calculated sequences. Impossible for the artist to fully visualise in advance, comics sequences offer the reader a visible document of thinking on the page. For the cartoonist (even and especially a cartoonist like Ware) many conscious design ideas can surface only as the layout is being concretely rendered. As Seth says, “it just sort of happens as you’re doodling it out” (Appx. B 316).

The organisation of page space among panels exists in tandem with another, equally significant element in comics: the organisation of the fictive space *within* panels. Seth explains: “How you compose space within the panel is as big a part of your drawing style as what kind of faces you draw” (Appx. B 334). He perceptively identifies the “deep space” of Chester Brown, the “blocky” genius of Ben Katchor, and the relative “picture box” flatness of Daniel Clowes (Appx. B 334-35, fig. 1.9). As much as line or shading, it is the creation of space that determines the feel of their work. “Feel” is more than just a metaphor here, because the representation of three-dimensional space, repeatedly perceived in panels from various angles, affords comics a strangely synaesthetic quality; the sense of space shaped by a cartoonist is almost tactile.

What, then, is the essential quality of Seth’s spatial relations within the panel? It



Fig. 1.9. Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1997) 13.

is surprisingly hard, in fact, to pin down – but perhaps it could be said that the reader will discern in his compositions a supple naturalism. Less stagy than Arno, but less naturalistic than Hergé, Seth is able to conjure a world that is unobtrusively realistic, even if it is rendered in a manner that is uniformly cartoonish. Seth’s space has a softness, a malleability, but a definite presence: in earlier work, this presence feels lighter, the characters almost like paper cut-outs in some panels; more recently, the space seems weightier, with a clay-like solidity. Seth’s movement through this space, his point of view, is dynamic and flexible. Though it is not ostentatious in the manner of an artist like Jack Kirby (another favourite of Seth), it admits scenes of all kinds, for example: panels with a striking depth of field (fig. 1.7); the countless talking heads of *Wimbledon Green* (fig. 3.11); the almost isometric views of urban and suburban environments that punctuate his dream sequences (figs. 3.12, 8.8).

Style, according to Seth, is not accidental or inevitable but based on how an artist decides to simplify. Sontag makes clear the link between this process of simplification and the attention of the audience, which is focused by the artist: “stylistic decisions, by focusing our attention on some things, are also a narrowing of our attention, a refusal to allow us to see others” (*Against Interpretation* 35). The most interesting works of art, Sontag maintains, are distinguished by “the intensity and authority and wisdom of that attention, however narrow its focus” (36). For comics – even literary, urbane comics – this focus can be quite narrow indeed since simplification is the principal engine of the cartoon. “Every cartoonist,” Topliss claims, “answers to some general category” (39). This general category, this space that the cartoonist constructs over time and comes to occupy, represents the distillation of an overall style to its most easily identified

outlines. “Arno,” Topliss says, “is the dandy”. Hergé is the tidy adventurer. Clowes is the ironic anthropologist; Chris Ware is the cerebral technician.

What is Seth’s general category? Could it be said that Seth is the ambivalent nostalgist? It has been shown that Seth is skeptical of nostalgic impulses as well as the notion of authenticity, and a certain tension has been observed on the surface of the page in connection with nostalgia and authenticity. However, it has also been suggested that Seth’s ambivalence does not clearly manifest itself in his work’s appearance. Despite the acknowledgement of artifice, the surface of Seth’s work has repeatedly been described in this chapter as “seamless.” But Seth himself uses a much different and potentially more fruitful word: *mannered*. It is possible that this quality constitutes precisely the appearance of ambivalence that has been thus far obscured by the seamlessness of Seth’s artifice.

The ultimate suggestion of this chapter is that Seth’s work appears “*mannered*” because his style, in its role as an historicising discourse, becomes a meta-discourse that comments on the concept of style itself. This claim signals a pause in the examination of Seth’s style, which cannot fully conclude here – inclusive and elusive as it is, Seth’s style will continue to be a subject of inquiry throughout the entirety of this investigation. However, for a final word on the relation between style and authenticity in Seth’s work, there is likely no more apposite an observation than that of Oscar Wilde: “Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” (788).

## 2

# PICTURES AT A REMOVE: SETH'S DRAWN PHOTOGRAPHS

The metapicture is not a subgenre within the fine arts but a fundamental potentiality inherent in pictorial representation as such: it is the place where pictures reveal and 'know' themselves, where they reflect on the intersections of visibility, language, and similitude, where they engage in speculation and theorizing on their own nature and history.

W.J.T. Mitchell (*Picture Theory* 82)

To begin, a metapicture from the history of photography: a framed picture, which hangs unassumingly in the centre of Daguerre's early photograph of a cabinet of curiosities (fig.2.1). The picture is too small to clearly make out (though a figure is visible) and the top of its bevelled frame is obscured by the hazy edge of the



Fig. 2.1. Daguerre, Louis-Jacques-Mandé. *Still Life (Interior of a Cabinet of Curiosities)*. 1837. Société Française de Photographie, Paris. From Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Laurence King, 2006) 13.

daguerreotype. The lower, left corner of the frame is tangent to the rounded contour of a wicker-wrapped flask, also suspended and taking up a central position, serving as counterpoint to the rectangular picture. Arrayed below is a collection of plaster casts, one of which – a bas relief panel angled against a wall – has its own built-in frame. The objects, presumably arranged by Daguerre, draw the eye around the cramped cabinet in several passes, from one image to another. In this way, one of the oldest surviving photographs (dated 1837) offers the viewer a series of contiguous, co-present representations, the largest and most prominent of which are isolated by frames and panels. Photographs of pictures – of paintings, drawings, illustrations – remain extremely familiar to readers in any number of contexts (newspapers, magazines, websites, textbooks, advertisements, etc.). The inverse, which is to say non-photographic representation of photography, is far less common. A photograph of a picture is rarely even acknowledged as such; in many cases, it is simply considered a “reproduction” of the original. A drawn photograph, however, is first and foremost a drawing.

Photography is still commonly regarded as objective, mechanical, scientific, democratic and on the whole quite public and accessible – in other words, the ideal medium of history. Comics, by this logic, can seem subjective, manual, intuitive, insular and overall comparatively private – with regard to the past, much more a medium of memory. Of course, in practice, photographs pervade private and domestic spaces, and have always functioned as souvenirs and mementos. By the same token, although comics do not quite constitute a truly popular culture (in the same way as, for instance, television), they are hardly exclusive and by no means exclusively used to tell personal stories. Nonetheless, notions of photographic objectivity and cartoon subjectivity persist. Nancy Pedri summarises in this way: “The distinction between photography and painting as theorized along the axis of reference, where photography is unmediated and

painting is authored, has been extended to cartooning.” Pedri notes that, according to this distinction, the cartoon “cannot be further removed from the photographic image.” Seth’s drawn photographs exploit this perceived difference, allowing the ambivalence of the reader to animate them.

This ambivalence encapsulates the ambivalence that photography on its own arouses in the viewer (but does not strictly compound it, as in the case of a photo of a photo). The indeterminacy of the photographic image is rooted in its relationship to the past, which in certain respects corresponds to the relationship of Seth’s comics to the past.<sup>1</sup> This chapter reviews some considered observations about photography in an effort to illuminate these similarities. As ever, Susan Sontag’s remarks – despite their occasionally vexing aphoristic quality – ring too true to be ignored: though certainly not an infallible sourcebook, *On Photography* does serve as a useful point of reference. For instance, Sontag writes, “photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art” (15). As John Tagg notes, such statements are “neither supported historically nor developed theoretically” (204), but they are nevertheless suggestive and may be productively aligned with the observations of other critics. Sontag’s identification of photography as a nostalgic medium is bolstered by Siegfried Kracauer’s comparable reflections on Proust and “the possible role of melancholy in photographic vision” (Kracauer 16). It is not too much to suggest that melancholy also plays a role in Seth’s vision, the twilight quality of which is particularly apparent in his drawn photographs.

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<sup>1</sup> This correspondence can also be observed in other comics that deal explicitly with the past, for instance Alison Bechdel’s memoir *Fun Home*, each chapter of which has a title page with a drawn photograph.

### **Framing Different Immobilities**

Seth's drawn photographs are patent meta-images, representations of representations. They give the impression of being twice-mediated, and in rare instances this is actually the case (as in the yearbook sketch from *Palookaville 20* and the drawing of the snapshot of "Kalo" in *It's a Good Life*, discussed below). Many of these drawings, however, presumably have no photographic referent, and yet they carry on representing nonetheless – what is it that they mediate? C. S. Peirce's semiotic typology (index, icon, symbol) still proves useful in attempting to untangle such representational knots. Christian Metz notes that "Peirce considered photography as an index *and* an icon" ("Photography and Fetish" 82). In Peircian terms, the cartoon operates principally in iconic and symbolic modes. A cartoon rendering of a photograph is intended to be read as a photographic index of the fictional world – i.e. it symbolically and iconically represents an indexical perspective.

Sontag draws attention to some of the distinguishing features of this photographic perspective: "The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world that denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery" (*On Photography* 23). In many of these respects, the photograph is fundamentally different from the comics panel, which exists in a network and depends on interconnectedness and continuity for much of its legibility. Each panel remains somewhat opaque by virtue of its relative separateness – the typical comics page is atomised – but the panel's co-operation with adjacent panels lends the images a narrative transparency, because the reader must consolidate them to generate meaning. Here film may provide a helpful point of comparison: cinematic images are so automatically consolidated for the viewer as to be totally transparent; there is no need

for cinematic frames to be adjacent in space because the sequence of images is so rapidly adjacent in time.

These observations almost necessarily lead the discussion toward the issue of duration, which may aid in the comparison of media because each medium has a distinct relation to time and temporal perception. Between photography and film, Metz addresses a fundamental difference in

the spatio-temporal size of the *lexis*, according to that term's definition by the Danish semiotician Louis Hjelmslev. The *lexis* is the socialized unit of reading, of reception: in sculpture, the statue; in music, the 'piece'. Obviously the photographic *lexis*, a silent rectangle of paper, is much smaller than the cinematic *lexis*. (81)

In comics, as in traditional literature, the *lexis* is the book, or for shorter works, a certain number of pages within a book. Metz goes on to explain that "the photographic *lexis* has no fixed duration (= temporal size): it depends, rather, on the spectator, who is the master of the look, whereas the timing of the cinematic *lexis* is determined in advance by the filmmaker" (81). Like the photograph, the comics panel has no fixed duration; however, the story within which the panel operates has a duration that is both guided by the author and mobilised by the reader (who is in this context the "master of the look"). In these durational terms (if in no other terms) it may be fair to situate comics somewhere between photography and cinema.

The frame plays a very significant role in the determination of these *lexes*, especially in photography, where it essentially constitutes the entirety of the *lexis*: not only does the photographic frame instantly establish spatial parameters, it is also the symbol of the photographic image's temporal isolation. For the comics panel, the frame similarly serves "to enclose a fragment of space-time belonging to the diegesis" (Groensteen, *System of Comics* 40); the panel, however, is rarely a self-sufficient totality. The photograph is solitary, and as such suggests the moments not pictured,

somewhere beyond the frame. Metz compares photography and film in this regard, and suggests that the cinematic “off-frame space is *étouffé*, let us say ‘substantial,’ whereas the photographic off-frame space is ‘subtle.’ In film there is a plurality of successive frames...so that a person or an object which is off-frame may appear inside the frame the moment after, then disappear again, and so on” (86).

In comics, “frames” are not successive but rather consecutive, adjacent in space. They are also typically sequential in time for the purpose of narrative progression, but it is the co-presence of images that defines the comics page. For the reader, this means that a person or object may appear in several places at once, or even doubled, side by side in adjacent panels. In comics, there is no photographic or cinematic “off-frame” space, because this space is usually swarming with other panels (this is of course not the case for the single-panel gag). The off-frame space – or, rather, off-panel space – is the gutter between panels, which accommodates (some might say demands) readerly interpolation.

About framing in photography, Sontag says “the point is precisely to see the whole by means of a part—an arresting detail, a striking way of cropping” (*OP* 170). On the comics page, by contrast, the whole is seen by means of many different parts, an array of arresting details. Comics share with film what Metz calls “the plurality of images” (83), a plurality which implies the passage of time. At one point, he imagines a hypothetical film in which each shot is a still image, a film composed of “successive and different immobilities” – this phrase might be adapted to describe the comics page as a network of sequential and simultaneous immobilities, sometimes different, sometimes quite similar.

Immobility is the quality that comics and photography have most in common: both offer static images to the reader (most critics insist that photographs are not simply viewed but read). The stillness of the image appears more pronounced in photography

than in comics, even and especially in blurry “action” shots that indicate objects in motion, primarily because of the photograph’s uniquely mechanical, vestigial relation to what it represents. The photographic image is frozen in time – “a neat slice of time,” as Sontag puts it (*OP* 17) – in a way that has no real parallel in other media. In comics, the temporal interval of an image is never so tidy and definite as it is in a photograph, even a long-exposure photograph of unknown duration. Frozen, isolated from the flow of time, the photograph is always, as a result, invoking time more insistently than other image-based media. “Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it,” Sontag says, “all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” (15).

The stillness epitomised by the photograph is characteristic of many contemporary literary comics (which to some extent are reacting against action-oriented comics), and Seth’s work is no exception. Photography lingers in the background of Seth’s comics, fortifying the stillness of his pages, occasionally coming to the foreground in moments that emphasise the affinity between the two media but also muddle the reader’s perception. The first part of *Clyde Fans* closes with a staid photograph, a portrait of Simon Matchcard (fig. 2.2); several pages later, the reader encounters a very similar panel, a frontal view of Simon on a train, reading in his seat. By all accounts the two panels are almost identically rendered, but through sheer force of context, and subtle differences in lighting, the drawn photograph of Simon does in fact seem slightly more still.

The difference (or lack of difference) between the two modes of representation is on display in the last six panels of the first part of *Clyde Fans*, which alternate between Abe and the portrait of Simon (fig. 2.2). It is a simple but dense sequence that plays various kinds of stillness off of each other. Just as stillness is a notable feature of Seth’s drawing, here it becomes clear that it is also a significant component of his storytelling.



Fig. 2.2. Seth, *Clyde Fans* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 77.

As part of this complex of narrative and visual stillnesses, the sequence also invokes *motion* pictures: there is the sense of a cinematic “zooming in” until the portrait of Simon fills the last panel, and this magnification is “intercut” with a “shot” of Abe sitting, a braiding effect (as Groensteen would call it) that strongly suggests film but highlights the absence of motion and could only be achieved on a comics page.

As this sequence and others like it illustrate, both the photograph and the panel are autonomous units, isolated by frames which are so similar that they may be seamlessly superimposed. Even though the panel typically exists within a network of panels, it remains an isolated fragment of the narrative, just as the photograph appears as an isolated fragment of the past. The relation between narrative and time may be more than just analogous: as Peter Wollen observes, with reference to photography, “it is impossible to extract our concept of time completely from the grasp of narrative” (77). In freezing time, photography necessarily fragments it, and in this way affects its narrativisation; a comics page offers a sequence of co-present narrative fragments that are understood by the reader in temporal terms. Seth’s drawn photographs synthesise these complicated temporal relations in metapictures that silently invite the reader to consider the nature of visual mediation.

### **Absence and Pseudo-Presence**

It is not, perhaps, a particularly strong invitation. It does not overtake the story. Even when the similarity between photographic image and comics panel is emphasised, the coherence of the represented world is not really compromised in any way. In fact, Seth’s drawn photographs are as common and apparently neutral as any actual photos the reader might encounter in day-to-day life. Their appearance seems perfectly natural, shoring up the credibility of his characters’ shared, documented histories. So it is not

particularly jarring when an actual photograph appears in one of his books: the final page of *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* – just before Seth's author photo – features an actual snapshot of “Kalo”. The reader has already seen a version of this picture, drawn by Seth, earlier in the book. No doubt this snapshot went a long way toward encouraging early readers of the book to believe it was a true story, made up of events actually experienced by Seth. “Since its inception,” Pedri notes, “the photographic medium is considered to be closely associated with the real through the referent.” The photograph of the man labeled “Kalo” is not real in the way that a credulous reader might suppose, because Kalo is of course a fabrication, but it is still a real photograph, an undeniable fragment of the past repurposed by Seth to substantiate a narrative.

Sontag asserts that “a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (*OP* 154). Comics are by no means traces of the real in this sense, but at the same time the panel is not “only” an image as a painting or drawing is, especially when read in sequence with other panels. In fact, even when a panel is alone on a page, a relatively isolated cartoon image, it does not behave like a painting or a drawing. Part Four of *Clyde Fans* features two such full-page panels, framed only by the physical edge of the page. The first offers a cross-section perspective of Abe Matchcard's office and the surrounding structure, and in this way the scene *is* visually framed by the spaces beyond the floor and ceiling, which mimic the linear grid of panels and gutters (fig. 2.3). There is the distinct suggestion in this image of a stage, with the peaked rafters standing in for a proscenium arch, or even an elaborate movie set, but in its immobility, its cartoon iconicity, and its playful understanding of the medium's conventions, it is quintessentially a comics page.

The same can be said of the second full-page image, even though it is many ways the polar opposite of the transparent, framed cross-section view: a portrait of Clyde Matchcard as seen from behind, monumental in more ways than one, it reveals almost nothing (fig. 2.4). Unlike the more typical panelled pages that precede it, and unlike the previous single-panel page, this page is closed, cryptic, opaque – and in this sense almost photographic. Speaking in terms of “shots” and “close-ups,” Seth addresses the seemingly inevitable influence of the camera perspective on comics production:

You can't avoid it. I think that that has great power. To be inside a character's head, to see that head blown up large, it implies that you're – how do I put this? – you get that sort of sensory experience of being the character's head. And that is something that can only be done by presenting a large, iconic image on the page. (Appendix B 310)

The large panel showing the back of Clyde Matchcard's head is uniquely cartoonish, decidedly not one of Seth's drawn photographs, and yet at the same time it has a recognisably photographic resonance.

This particular resonance is quite aptly described by Sontag when she states that a photograph is “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (*OP* 16). An evocative, ambivalent definition, it seems to raise the question: Do Seth's drawings of photographs rehabilitate the presence of the images, or amplify their implied absences? This question, however, is somewhat misleading because the two qualities are so closely related – it is effectively impossible to emphasise one and not the other. Sitting with Chester Brown at a deli counter in *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Seth's gaze wanders to a nearby collection of wedding photos: three panels, which correspond to his point of view in the scene, drift from Chet's profile to increasingly detailed depictions of the assorted photographs (fig. 2.5). The reader may gloss quickly over this sequence, propelled by the dialogue balloons toward the next part of the conversation, but the deliberate progression of panels encourages a slower, more attentive reading that considers the

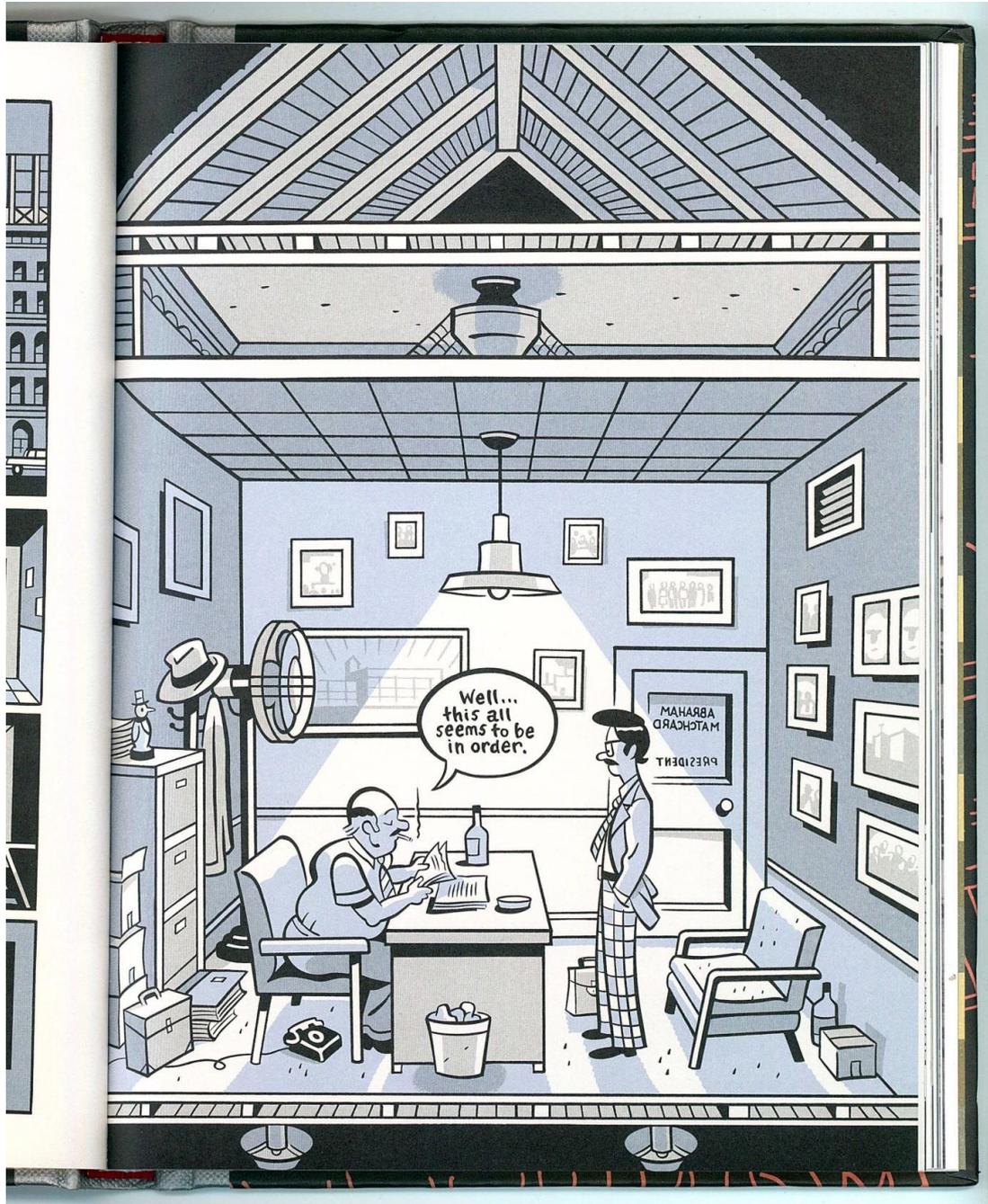


Fig. 2.3. Seth, *Palookaville 20* (Montreal: D&Q, 2010) 10.



Fig. 2.4. Seth, *Palookaville 20* (Montreal: D&Q, 2010) 30.

presence of the photographs and the absences they suggest.

In Part Four of *Clyde Fans*, Seth draws attention to photographs in an even more emphatic sequence – though it is not a sequence of panels in the usual sense. More of a photographic caesura, it features two Matchcard family pictures, each alone on facing pages, both of which bear crude alterations (fig 2.6). In the first, a child stands facing the camera but looking up at the man behind him, who has been cut out of the photo at the shoulders so that the upper portion of the image is missing. The photograph on the opposing page is similarly arranged, with two children standing in front of a parental figure, whose head has been excised from the picture with a noose-like incision. This striking pair of images is part of the extended campaign of visual absence that surrounds Clyde Matchcard, epitomised by the full-page posterior portrait discussed above (fig. 2.4). Of course, neither photograph has a caption and there is no explicit indication that these are Matchcard family photos or that the removed figure is Clyde Matchcard. It is left to the reader to substantiate these hollowed out traces of the past, an interpolation which occurs almost effortlessly as a result of the accumulated narrative context of *Clyde Fans*. In the same way that the comics reader fills the gaps between panels and imbues simplified cartoon drawings with life, so does the viewer (or reader) turn the photograph's absence into a pseudo-presence.



Fig. 2.5. Seth, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (Montreal: D&Q, 1996) 36.

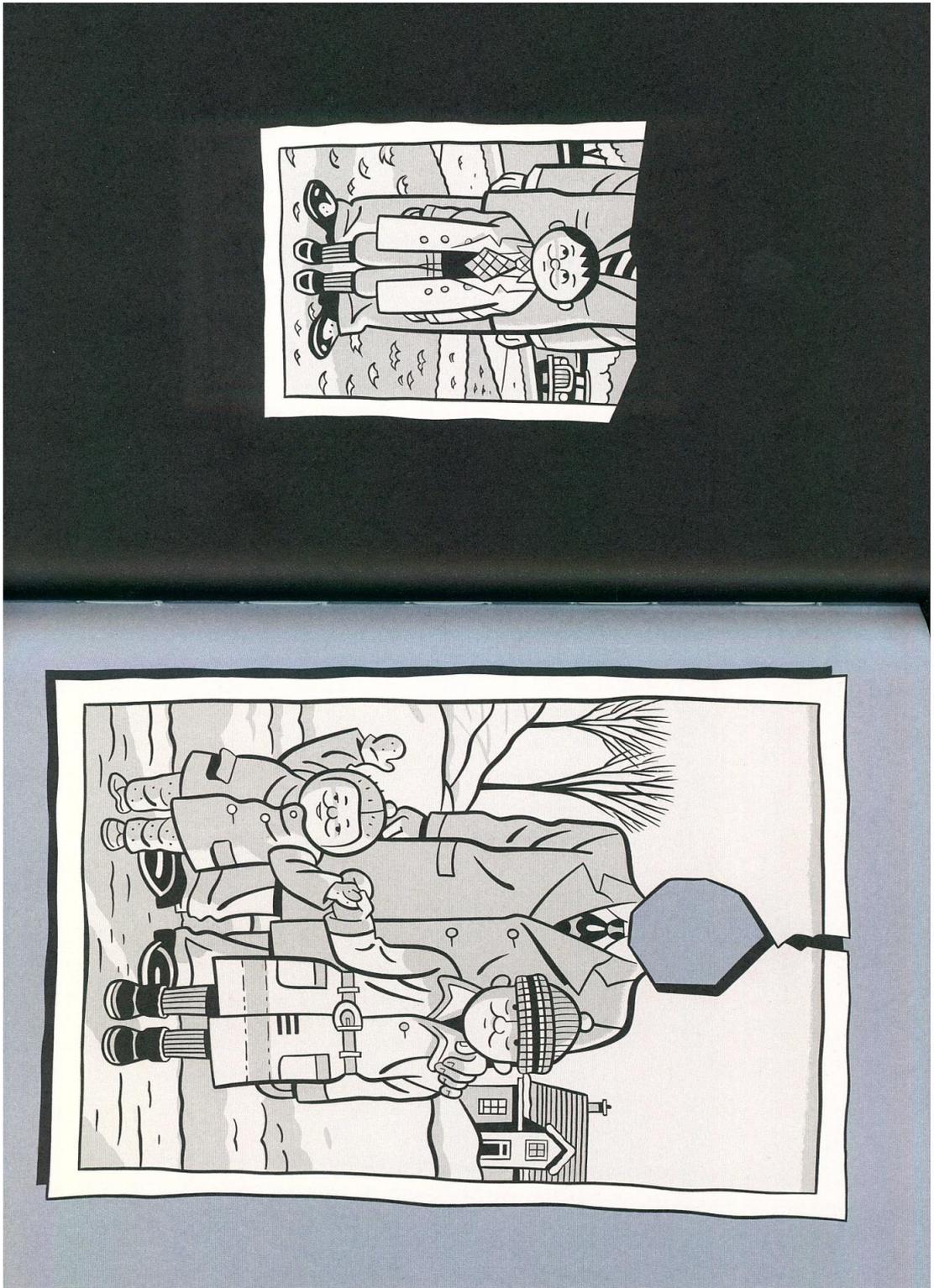


Fig. 2.6. Seth, *Palookaville 20* (Montreal: D&Q, 2010) 17-18.

Seth's drawn photographs make a double appeal, soliciting both kinds of readerly interpolation, though they do not all have an equal effect. The inside covers of *Clyde Fans: Book 1* feature rows of drawn photographs (among them young versions of Simon and Abe), portraits with names beneath them in the standard yearbook format. This very familiar method of arranging images of people is conspicuously similar to the grid of the comics page, which more often than not comprises rows (strips) of panels and incorporates text to make the images more intelligible. Seth also uses yearbook pages as the basis for a marvellous sketchbook exercise included in *Palookaville 20* (fig. 2.7). Far more than the deliberately staid and uniform images that bookend *Clyde Fans*, these sketchbook pages seem to thrum with life. In some ways, it is difficult to imagine more evocative images of people in any other medium: not quite caricatures, but certainly not straight illustrations, these cartoon portraits are uncanny in their ability to convey distinct personalities and suggest entire lives with a few deft brushstrokes. Though obviously drawn from photographs, these sketches seem to surpass the lifelike capacity of the mechanical medium even as they evoke it – there are few better examples in Seth's work of what his drawn photographs can communicate. Pedri's remarks about the drawings in a work of comics journalism, *Le Photographe*, could just as easily describe the effect of Seth's drawn photos: "The drawings trouble the security of the photographic image, producing a differentiated space of representation that opens up a more complex articulation of the way in which photography cannot fulfill its promise to make the 'real' or the 'true' visible." The real always remains somehow absent.

### **Abbreviating History**

*Le Photographe* does not feature drawn photographs in the way that Seth's work does, but it does extensively combine cartooning and photography. Comics, in their



Fig. 2.7. Seth, *Palookaville 20* (Montreal: D&Q, 2010) 62.

fundamental heterogeneity and mode of organisation, have a great capacity to accommodate signs. Nearly anything (photography, painting, long passages of text, etc.) may be admitted without compromising the category “comics.” The surface of a photograph, however, can only admit so much before it seems to become something else (a photo-collage, for instance). Victor Burgin maintains that photography draws on “a heterogeneous complex of codes” and that each specific photograph “signifies on the basis of a plurality of these codes, the number and type of which varies from one image to another” (131). This is undoubtedly true, but the photograph is still a closed and sleek totality, a classical body, whereas comics are by nature open and fragmented, grotesque bodies (this useful distinction is borrowed from Mary Russo).

A *collection* of photographs, however, takes on the qualities of a grotesque body, and as noted above has clear structural similarities with a page of comics panels. Seth takes advantage of this resemblance when presenting a group of drawn photographs, which offers the reader an open and fragmented history. “Any collection of photographs,” Sontag asserts, “is an exercise in Surrealist montage and the Surrealist abbreviation of history” (68). In this sense, the collection of photographs in *George Sprott* that appears under the title “A Fresh Start” might be identified as a notable example of the vein of surreality that runs through the book, which in this instance takes the rather domestic form of a scrapbook page (fig. 2.8). Along similar lines, Simon Matchard’s collection of novelty postcards also exemplifies a domesticated Surrealism: “Folksy photographic manipulations,” as Abe calls them, they feature farmers and fisherman dwarfed by outsize crops and catches (fig. 2.9).<sup>2</sup> It may, however, be somewhat redundant to say “domesticated Surrealism” – Sontag defines Surrealism as

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<sup>2</sup> One of the eight “varieties of photographic vision” identified by Moholy-Nagy is “Distorted seeing: optical jokes” (94). Other varieties include rapid seeing (snapshots), slow-seeing (prolonged time exposures), and simultaneous seeing (superimposed photomontage).

“the art of generalizing the grotesque” (OP 74). Perhaps the photo collections in Seth’s work simply underline the unexpectedly domestic qualities of the grotesque body and the surreal point of view. Sontag goes on to say: “No activity is better equipped to exercise the Surrealist way of looking than photography, and eventually we look at all photographs surrealistically” (74).

The reader does not ultimately look at all panels surrealistically, but comics do



Fig. 2.8. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

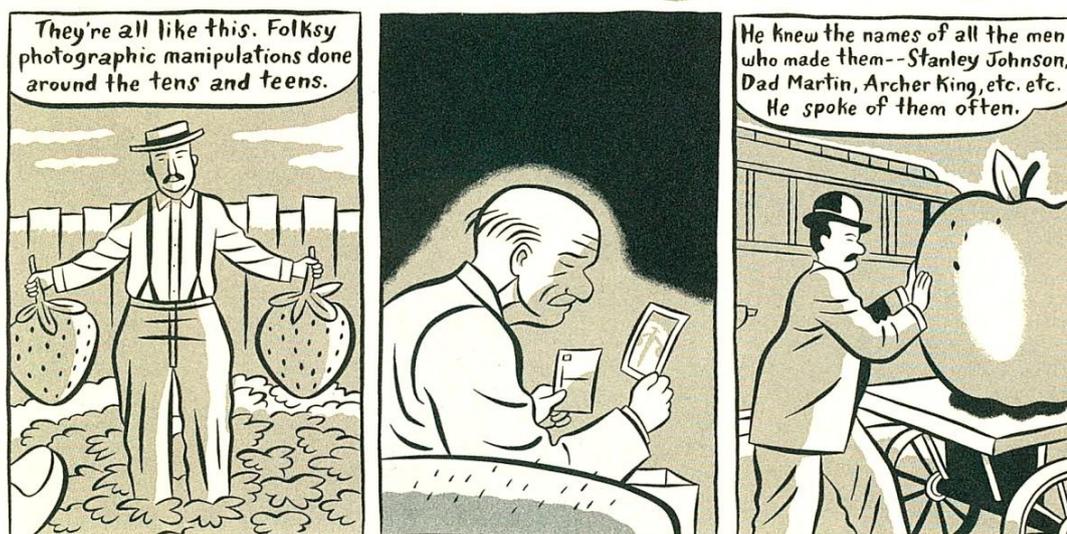


Fig. 2.9. Seth, *Clyde Fans* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 57.

certainly permit this type of reading. Metz refers to the “timelessness of photography,” which he claims is “comparable to the timelessness of the unconscious and of memory” (83). Comics as well possess a certain amount of this timelessness, and Seth’s work in particular is concerned with the memories and unconscious goings-on of its characters. The timelessness of photography is most apparent in Seth’s work when he emphasises it by making the frame of a panel congruent with that of a drawn photograph (fig. 2.2.). In such instances, the reader has the sense of an invisible double frame, or rather a meta-frame, which is not quite the same as a *visible* frame within in a frame. The inherent stillness of the panel is amplified by that of the drawn photo that occupies it entirely.

Both Seth’s frame and the frame of the photograph tend to historicise whatever is pictured. Sontag claims that the photographer is engaged in

the enterprise of antiquing reality, and photographs are instant antiques. The photograph offers a modern counterpart of that characteristically romantic architectural genre, the artificial ruin: the ruin which is created in order to deepen the historical character of a landscape, to make nature suggestive—suggestive of the past. (*OP* 80)

In this sense, Seth's comics relate to the past in much the same ways as photographs: like Sontag's photographer, Seth also seems to be in the process of "antiquing reality" by means of his drawing style, which similarly produces instant antiques.

"In all photographs," Metz notes, "we have this same act of cutting off a piece of space and time, of keeping it unchanged while the world around continues to change, of making a compromise between conservation and death" (85). This subtle observation has much in common with one of Sontag's far blunter, aphoristic statements: "All photographs are *memento mori*" (*OP* 15). Seth similarly maintains that "the whole process of cartooning is dealing with memory" (Taylor 15). It is impossible to proceed by axioms alone, but taken together these related claims form the powerful suggestion that Seth's drawn photographs are densely, doubly mnemonic, cryptic reminders of reminders that, ultimately, do not point to any specific remembered experience. Rather, they are like death masks of the process of cartooning.

The page in *George Sprott* titled "A Fresh Start" mimics a scrapbook, every panel a drawn photograph with visible (even dog-eared) borders, some of which overlap each other (fig. 2.8). Whereas most comics panels appear as ideal shapes, windows through which the reader sees the represented world of the narrative, these panels are emphatically objects, which look pasted onto the background, giving the entire page a rather photographic opacity. Though arranged in a roughly chronological sequence, the self-contained drawn photographs do not represent a sequential narrative and the page has about it the photographic timelessness that Metz identifies, as well as the attendant timelessness of memory. Precisely whose memory, however, is not clear: it is not George's memory – he has not assembled these photos – but neither does it seem to be the memory of another character, or even the narrator (who provides assorted biographical details in captions). It is a kind of atmospheric memory apparently

untethered to any particular subjectivity. In this sense, it approaches history, but a history so germinal, domestic and as yet opaque as to frustrate conventional notions of the historical. This scrapbook page leaves the reader somewhere between history and memory, and it is the reader's own interpolations between panels/photographs that determine the ultimate meaning of the images.

The reader must exercise even more autonomy, though of a slightly different sort, when perusing *George Sprott's* remarkable fold-out section, six large pages from which the narrator is entirely absent. Neither chronological nor even particularly sequential, this section is composed of drawn photographs mingled with clusters of panels that depict disjointed scenes from a first-person perspective – unmistakably George's memories. Notably, the recollections and the photographs are treated almost synonymously, and the connection between “the timelessness of the unconscious and of memory” is reinforced not only by the overall feeling of liminality that the pages engender but also by the specific moments they inscribe. Many of the memory-clusters begin or end with austere text plates that contain a single word, “WAKE” (or, occasionally, some similar variation, such as “WAKE UP, GEORGE”). Death as well is a significant link between photography and memory: the car accident in which George's wife was killed makes several appearances, both as memory and as drawn police photograph; an odd cemetery snapshot of a Sprott family obelisk – both a mini-monument and a meta-memento – impresses a sense of mortal finality that seems impassively overdetermined. It is perhaps also worth noting that in these examples where death is made present, it is in relation to family, another important point of intersection between photography and memory.

Family photographs have always been a fixture of Seth's longer works, beginning with the Kalloway family album featured in *It's a Good Life, If You Don't*

*Weaken*. As the book builds to its quiet climax, there is a brief pause in the home of Kalo's daughter, Susan, in which she and Seth exchange traces of her father's past: a silent panel shows Seth looking at photographs of Kalo in a family scrapbook while Susan sees her father's cartoons for the first time in the dossier that Seth has assembled (151). In *Clyde Fans*, family snapshots are joined by their corporate counterpart, the company photo. "Through photographs," Sontag writes, "each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness" (*OP* 8). Company photographs appropriate precisely this domestic practice, staging portraits that are meant to show a familial cohesion. In the fourth part of *Clyde Fans*, these artefacts of manufactured togetherness ironically punctuate the conversation in which Abe Matchcard and his lawyer finalise the dissolution of Borealis Business Machines (*PV20* 13-16). (Between the family portrait and the company portrait is the club portrait: the most prominent drawn photograph in *Wimbledon Green* shows the founding members of the Coverloose Club, a group of comic book collectors from which Wimbledon Green was pointedly excluded.)

At the beginning of *George Sprott*, before the title page, a two-page spread features a large group portrait, "The Stars of CKCK—1966" (fig. 2.10) – and in the background of this drawn photograph, looming behind the assembled TV personalities, is a large, framed picture of the Queen! This odd portrait within a portrait is full of ambivalences: easy to overlook, once noticed it becomes a point of focus, seeming to radiate a benign equanimity that sets the tone for the larger image in which it appears; unexpected, it at first seems out of place, something of a non sequitur, but is in fact evocatively period-specific and of course perfectly Canadian (royal imagery emptied of meaning remains commonplace in Canada, for instance on currency); it is also strangely positioned, both in the drawn photograph (the top of its frame cropped off by the border)

and on the physical page, or rather pages, almost perfectly bisected by the centre seam of the book. Altogether a peculiar, dense image, both unassuming and regnant – and, unexpectedly, it has this in common with a drawn photograph featured at the end of the book, a tattered snapshot of the Inuit woman George impregnated and promptly abandoned on one of his expeditions (fig. 2.11).

Appropriately, this neglected memento is hidden out of sight at the very back of *George Sprott*, preceded by the CKCK station sign off, a sequence of familiar Canadian images (a silhouetted moose, an ice-breaking boat, a coastal lighthouse) which is afforded two full pages. This chapter has occasionally turned to film as a point of comparison, but in *George Sprott* it is television that provides the primary counterpoint to photography. “Television,” Sontag writes, “is a stream of underselected images, each of which cancels its predecessor. Each still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again” (*OP* 18). George’s long-running TV show, *Northern Hi-Lights*, revisits the same familiar territory for over twenty years, a profusion of images but hardly a progression: each is cancelled by a subsequent image that is more or less identical. In a sense, the show takes on the monolithic, unchanging, frozen qualities of the northern landscape to which it continually returns (the same qualities generally attributed to photography). George is not exactly a pioneer of the medium of television and uses it more or less as he would photography, as a means of repeatedly privileging long-past moments.

In the same way that George’s show is not “good” television, Seth’s drawn photographs are not examples of “good” photography. Kracauer identifies certain “affinities” of photography – qualities to which the medium seems structurally inclined – for instance, an “affinity for unstaged reality” (18) and for chance occurrences. “Random events,” Kracauer says, “are the very meat of snapshots” (19). Like most



Fig. 2.10. Seth, *George Spratt: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.



Fig. 2.11. Seth, *George Spratt: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

family snapshots and company photos, Seth's drawn photographs do not take advantage of the medium, they are not of particular aesthetic interest, they do not capture surprising moments; in short, they are not art. Indeed, as photographs they are almost invariably mundane, perfunctory, sterile – and yet this seems to be part of the reason that they are such superb, even pioneering, examples of drawn photography. This is not to say that photographs and drawn photographs are essentially at odds. Here is another of Kracauer's photographic affinities, which holds for comics as well: "photography tends to suggest endlessness...it precludes the notion of completeness" (19). This preclusion of completeness (Sontag uses the terms absence and pseudo-presence) makes demands on the reader not at all unlike those made by comics, which are likewise "founded on reticence" (Groensteen, *System of Comics* 10). Seth's comics in particular seem to share with photography the affinity for melancholy ambivalence that Kracauer associates with Proust. In their remoteness from any real or represented past, Seth's drawn photographs abbreviate history in a way that provokes an ambivalent longing for that past.

Mitchell suggests that, ultimately, what the metapicture most calls into question is "the structure of 'inside and outside,' first- and second-order representation, on which the whole concept of 'meta' is based" (42). This astute observation anticipates the discussion in subsequent chapters, particularly Chapter 5, which describes the structure of ambivalence in terms of Zygmunt Bauman's "master-opposition" between inside and outside. Mitchell's understanding of the concept of "meta" makes clear the ambivalent, inside-outside structure of metafiction or autocritique – a structure that is also central to the reader's realisation of a visual narrative in the move between the inside and outside of panels on a comics page.

A final maxim from Sontag: “To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real” (164). Above all, it may be this alienated re-apprehension of the real that Seth’s drawn photographs, at such a distinct remove, most facilitate. These metapictures trade in ambivalences, apparently caught between (among other things) the subjective and objective, the atomised and continuous, the opaque and transparent, the classical and grotesque, the absent and present. At the seat of these tensions is an ambivalent relationship to the (historical) referent, inherent in the photographic perspective and amplified by Seth’s drawing. In their extreme reticence – an uncommon synthesis of photographic and cartoon stillnesses – Seth’s drawn photographs exemplify his method of compelling the reader to take a position between history and memory in order to make sense of images.

### 3

## TROPES AND CHRONOTOPES: NOTES TOWARD A LIMINAL POETICS

At various points, the previous chapters briefly describe the sense of duration and dimension that comics can engender – which is to say, both the feeling of narrative time within space and the feeling of narrative space over time. This chapter attempts a more sustained examination of particular instances in which these impressions coalesce into recurring literary forms in Seth’s comics. These forms steer the reader toward certain reading strategies and kinds of narrative interpolation. In his long essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin develops a critical approach that provides the foundation for this chapter’s analysis.

“We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, ‘time space’),” Bakhtin says, “to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Needless to say, this very flexible and sophisticated formulation has the potential for extremely wide application in literary studies on the whole; with specific regard to comics studies, it is of interest because the connectedness to which Bakhtin refers can be so palpably visible on the comics page. This visual sense of “time space” allows for an almost tactile understanding of the represented world of the narrative (Chapter 1 describes the space of Seth’s later work in terms of a “clay-like” solidity). The ongoing perception of spatial relations over the course of the narrative becomes a crucial aspect of the reader’s experience.

Bakhtin was not writing about comics, so use of the term “chronotope” in this chapter immediately diverges somewhat from the concept that he developed with traditional literature in mind. Part of the task of this chapter is to explore the possibilities

of what “chronotope” might mean in the context of comics, specifically in Seth’s work. Sue Vice, author of *Introducing Bakhtin*, has applied the concept to Spiegelman’s *Maus*, writing on “the Chronotope of Holocaust” in her contribution to Jan Baetens’ anthology *The Graphic Novel*. “The chronotope,” Vice suggests, “is ideally suited to discussions of sequential art forms” (“It’s About Time” 47). Rikke Cortsen has also drawn on Bakhtin’s work, identifying a network of chronotopes in the work of Alan Moore.

Bakhtin aims to be rigorous and precise in his elaboration of the chronotope, but it is nevertheless a somewhat elusive theoretical construct that concerns all the complex ways that representations of time and space relate to each other in literature. (The subtitle of Bakhtin’s essay, “Notes toward a Historical Poetics,” captures something of this elusiveness.) Cortsen contends that “the chronotope for Bakhtin varies slightly from text to text and is never explicitly defined” (137). Still, his descriptions can be quite evocative:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (Bakhtin 84)

Chronotopes are typically characterised by particular dramatic motifs, such as meeting/parting or recognition/nonrecognition. “By their very nature,” Bakhtin explains, “these motifs are chronotopic” (97).

Along with such motifs and chronotopes, Seth also deploys a range of distinctive comics tropes (which are categorically different from traditional rhetorical tropes, such as metonymy or hyperbole). This chapter uses the term *trope* to designate *literary configurations that are unique to the medium of comics*. For example: Seth’s use of anecdotes, in which characters address the reader directly through speech bubbles, constitutes a trope. The speech bubble itself, however, is merely a conventional device,

and on its own is not a trope. Likewise, the manifold permutations of what Groensteen calls arthrology are not tropes, even though a trope may depend on a particular relation among panels. Of particular note are those tropes that unmistakably intersect with motifs and chronotopes. Collection, for example, is such a significant part of Seth's work (see Chapter 7) that it cannot really be reduced simply to a trope. Though it does certainly function as a trope, collection is also a pervasive motif, and can even be said to constitute a chronotope in certain instances.

In its organisation and method of inquiry, this chapter favours specificity over completism: not every motif, chronotope and trope that appears in Seth's work is discussed below. Those calculated omissions and points of interest only briefly examined here – including collection, drawn photographs, text plates, single-panel gag cartoons, and certain techniques found in *George Sprott* – are addressed at length in other chapters. Some tropes seem too infrequent to warrant discussion (for example, Seth rarely conveys narrative exposition in speech bubble dialogue between characters), some recurring motifs too slight. The aim of the following inventory is to highlight the more telling aspects of Seth's work, and attempt to account for the "feel" of certain moments and sequences. This approach takes as a guiding principle one of Bakhtin's most vivid descriptions of the chronotope: "The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (250).

## **Motifs and Chronotopes**

### *Encounters with Strangers*

Encounters with strangers constitute one of the more notable recurring motifs in Seth's earlier work. For the most part, these encounters are either incidental or accidental, but they also seem somehow inevitable, a result of the urban setting of the

stories. Seth's very first story, in *Palookaville 1*, revolves around a particularly ugly run-in with strangers sparked by the forced intimacy of public transit. It begins in a subway car and ends violently in front of a crowd of commuters. In *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Seth-as-protagonist continues to cross paths with strangers, though these encounters are far less dramatic and far more one-sided, often consisting entirely of Seth's interior reactions to (and projections onto) the strangers he observes in fleeting moments around the city.

Significantly, these passing encounters are not exactly ephemeral for the reader, who can linger and return to them in a way the protagonist cannot. Even those background characters that elicit no verbal reaction from the protagonist remain permanently inscribed on the page, open to readerly scrutiny. Indeed, it is these characters in particular that are most open to the reader's own reactions and projections because they fall outside the zone of verbalised authorial attention. The reader who pays attention to these peripheral characters almost automatically enlivens them with even a brief look. As is often the case in comics, it seems to require more effort *not* to read the simplified images, *not* to imbue them with life. The panels of Seth's early urban scenes are full of such strangers, too many for the main character to describe (or in most cases even notice). Seth's drawings, however, are sufficiently descriptive in and of themselves; the occasional caption commentary simply refocuses the reader's attention, bringing these ubiquitous "extras" briefly to the foreground. The reader's engagement with Seth's background characters (sometimes deliberate, often largely involuntary) serves as an example of McCloud's contention that the cartoon engenders a specific "way of seeing," and that it operates as "a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled" (31, 36). The absence of explicit authorial comment produces precisely this type of vacuum, a site for readerly interpolation.

In more literal terms, these urban characters are often already in the shadowy foreground of panels (fig. 3.1). In such urban scenes, the composition of space within the panel – which significantly affects the “feel” of the represented space – is often defined by the ambivalent tension between foreground and background. Seth uses shading and compositional conventions to draw the reader’s eye to the protagonist in most panels; nevertheless, his work consistently emphasises moments of meandering and lingering in which the protagonist becomes a vehicle for the kind of non-linear narrative pleasures that are specific to the medium of comics. The third part of *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* opens with a wordless sequence in which Seth wanders around the Royal Ontario Museum, alone but in close proximity to strangers. Here the comics page invites a combination of reading and looking that might best be described as “browsing” (with that term’s connotations of leisure and consumerism left largely intact). In such sequences, the main action of the plot recedes. Or, more precisely, the negligible action reveals that the imperative of plot progression is not more important to the story than contemplative moments in which the reader and protagonist look around.

In this way, Seth’s books offer a spectacular, peripatetic experience that attunes

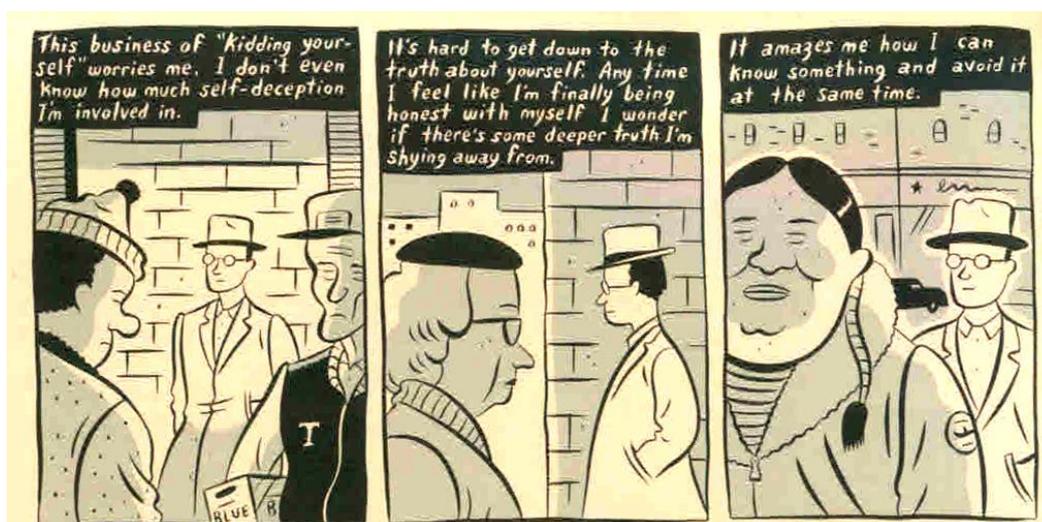


Fig. 3.1 Seth, *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* (Montreal: D&Q, 1996) 44.

the reader to what Walter Benjamin calls “the tempo of flânerie” (*Arcades Project* 422) – and it is the very structure of the medium of comics that encourages the reader to act as a flâneur. One of the peculiarities of the comics page (peculiar, that is, for a page of literature) is that the reader can choose to focus on those aspects of the narrative that remain unwritten. Simply put, the visual density of the comics page offers a great deal of nonverbal narrative information and affords the reader greater freedom in processing this information and filling narrative gaps. Having become accustomed to browsing by the regular appearance of certain kinds of sequences, the reader of Seth’s work remains alert to unwritten details even when the story proceeds at a more conventional pace.

It is not really possible to “read around” a traditional literary text in this fashion. The reader of prose fiction – say, a novel by Zola that contains a vivid crowd scene – does not have access to a minor character’s wardrobe unless it is explicitly described, in which case it has been given a particular emphasis and exists on the same narrative plane as the rest of the book. By contrast, the viewer of a film – for instance, the opening of Chaplin’s *City Lights* – can easily perceive the hat of an extra, but the image is likely to be fleeting and irrelevant to the narrative. The strangers that populate Seth’s panels are marginal, but at the same time they are available for prolonged examination, as explicitly depicted as the main characters.

### *The Overheard Remark*

Strangers are not always relegated to the margins in Seth’s work. A diner scene in *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* features an older man who seems to be listening to Seth and Chester (fig. 3.2). The sequence is very deliberate: after his profile appears, this character is shown at a neighbouring table and is then afforded his own panel, with Seth’s dialogue in a speech bubble above him. The unusual attention given

to this apparently trivial character challenges the expectation that central and peripheral aspects of the story will literally correspond to the centre and periphery of the panel.

In disrupting this standard visual hierarchy, Seth gently pushes against conventional notions of narrative significance and further encourages the reader to browse. Unlike background characters in, for example, Daniel Clowes's *David Boring*, this character does not hold any enigmatic significance and never makes another appearance. The eavesdropper is simply part of the *mise-en-scène* on this particular page, and this seems to be the only reason that Seth has emphasised his presence. Here, and in the following example from *Clyde Fans*, it becomes clear that a chronotope (the diner) can crystallise around a particular motif or motifs (conversation, eavesdropping).

Fraught encounters with strangers define Simon Matchard's experience as a first-time salesman. For Simon, as for any traveling salesman, Dominion is a town of



Fig. 3.2 Seth, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (Montreal: D&Q, 1996) 71.

strangers, but due to his extremely reclusive habits he is particularly sensitive to every passing moment spent in this strange new locale (which to most visitors would seem like a fairly dull small town). Simon is shy nearly to the point of paralysis, and his “interaction” with strangers sometimes does not go beyond the act of eavesdropping. Shortly after arriving by train, Simon finds his way to the Bluebird Diner for a late dinner; for the next two pages, he sits quietly in a booth, eating and listening to two women talking behind him. The main substance of the sequence is an overheard anecdote, which by most measures could be considered unremarkable: it is plainly told, not particularly dramatic, propelled by banal sentiment. There is, however, something archetypal about the story, both in itself and in its context (i.e. a small town diner late at night). During the sequence, Simon shows no outward signs of being particularly moved, but like all his experiences in *Dominion* this one leaves a lasting impression on him.

Toward the end of *Clyde Fans*, Simon chances upon a hill with a stand of trees. On seeing it, he recalls a specific part of the overheard anecdote: “...where time seems to stand still. A sort of enchanted place” (154-55, ellipsis in original). These ordinary, somewhat lacklustre phrases suddenly take on a new resonance, seeming not bland but rather unpretentious and elemental. Simon’s recollection transforms the remarks from ordinary to typical to somehow emblematic or symbolic. It is a deceptively simple moment, the density of which is masked by its brevity and by the reader’s instant realisation that Simon has transposed a remark overheard in a diner. The visual transposition of the remembered phrase onto a new scene (fig. 3.3) contributes to the seeming simplicity, but several complex things are happening here at once: pausing in a liminal place, Simon is recalling not only a peripheral conversation, but a stranger’s recollection (a memory at a remove) about another liminal place, “where time seems to

stand still,” just as this present moment seems to stand still on the comics page. A confluence of memory, marginality, and medium-specificity, this short sequence exemplifies many of the notable features of Seth’s work, culminating in a potent tableau that manages to be both dense and transparent.

### *Precise Points of Articulation*

The above examination of the overheard remark (and its parent motif, the encounter with a stranger) represents an approach that may also be applied to other, less prominent motifs. That exhaustive analysis is not undertaken here. The specific examples above demonstrate how motifs can operate in comics as precise points of articulation – knots of narrative – where various abstractions (such as “memory” and “liminality”) come together in tangible narrative and visual forms. Some other recurring motifs in Seth’s work include: dreams, collecting, soured romantic affairs, death by automobile accident, urban and industrial decay, and birds. Needless to say, not all motifs are equally frequent or consequential. Certain motifs have clear associations to chronotopes and tropes: the motif of collecting is related the motif of recognition and the

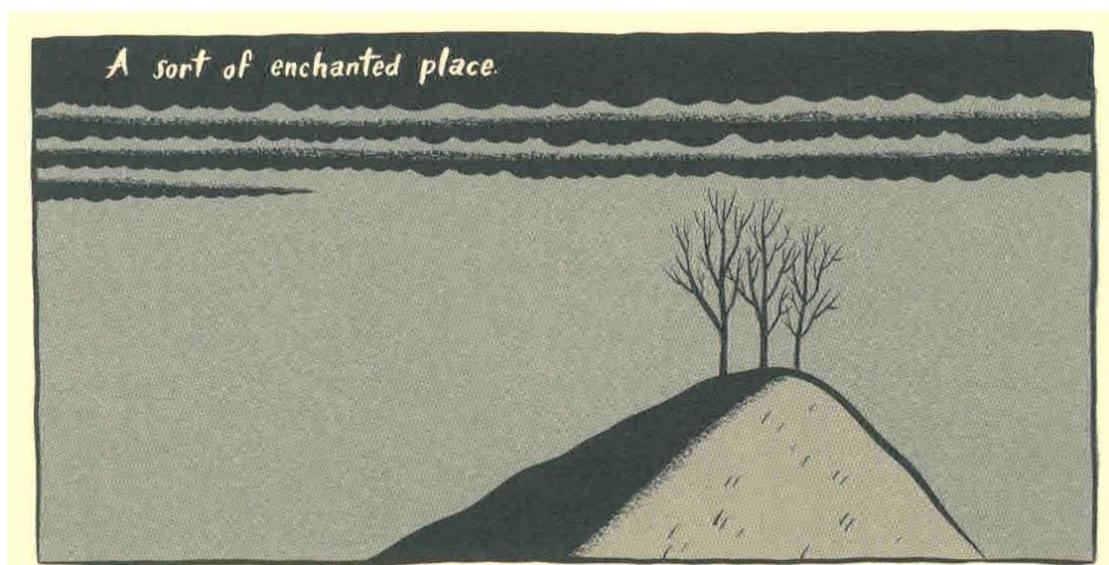


Fig. 3.3. Seth, *Clyde Fans: Book 1* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 155.

trope of the catalogue. To take a very different example, the motif of the dream is so distinct and self-contained as to be an identifiable trope, but perhaps too ephemeral to constitute a stable chronotope.

### *The Road*

By contrast, the motif of the road is so stable and pervasive that it is reasonable to treat it chiefly as a chronotope, as Bakhtin does: “The importance of the chronotope of the road in literature is immense: it is a rare work that does not contain a variation of this motif, and many are directly constructed on the road chronotope, and on road meetings and adventures” (98). This observation not only establishes the significance of the road, it also shows the ease with which Bakhtin moves between the terms “motif” and “chronotope,” using them almost synonymously. In a certain sense, chronotopes are simply elaborated motifs, substantiated by particularly strong temporal and spatial associations within the narrative; of these, the road is Bakhtin’s leading example. “The chronotope of the road appears as a natural part of a story,” Cortsen explains, “because it resembles a linear experience of time passing, as well as structuring the reader’s forward progression through the material text” (139).

The chronotope of the road can be conceived in terms of a line traced from one point to the next – the line is ultimately finite, but from moment to moment it appears ongoing and indeterminate.<sup>1</sup> This dynamic can be observed in a condensed and conveniently literal form in the sequence that depicts Simon Matchcard’s train trip in *Clyde Fans*, which passes through a number of stations and many picturesque landscapes before arriving at Dominion (fig. 3.4). From panel to panel, the reader does not know how long the sequence will be or what the next point will hold. Such a

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin does not visualise the chronotope of the road in this way, but such figurative descriptions may prove useful when comparing the road to other chronotopes in Seth’s work.

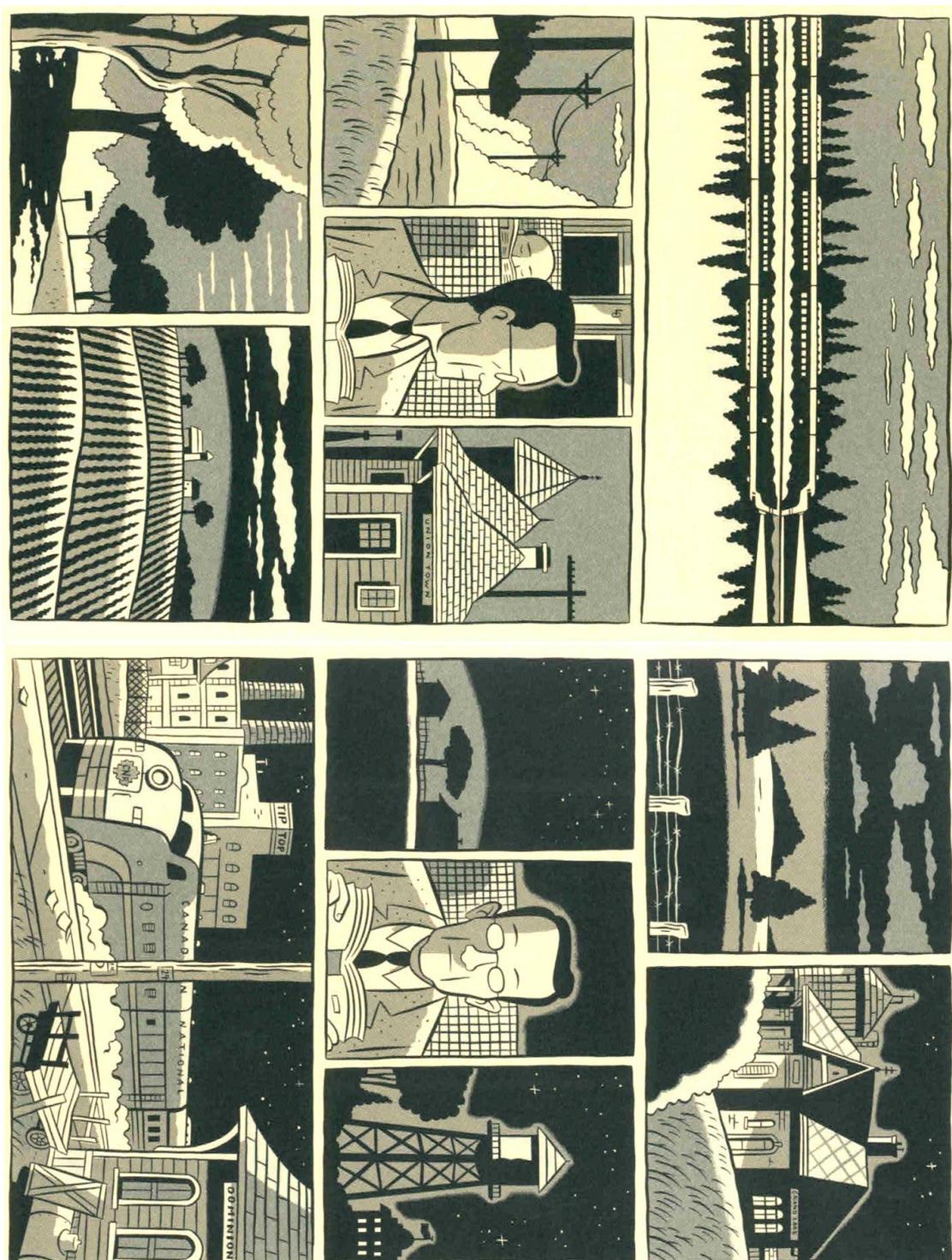


Fig. 3.4. Seth, *Clyde Fans: Book 1* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 82-83.

sequence exemplifies the process of narrative interpolation, in which the reader constantly reinterprets what has come before and anticipates what will come next. Progression along the road is often open-ended in this way (Bakhtin sometimes refers to “the open road”), and narratives that take shape around this chronotope tend to obey the dictates of “infinite adventure-time” (94). This infinite adventure-time, Bakhtin explains, “is entirely composed of contingency – of chance meetings and failures to meet” (94). Accordingly, this discussion will soon return to encounters with minor characters in an attempt to explicate what Bakhtin highlights as “the close link between the motif of meeting and the chronotope of the road” (98). But first, some other motifs that embellish and interact with the road chronotope.

#### *The Train and the Phone Booth*

The train is an almost overdetermined (and somewhat old-fashioned) signifier of travel, an unfixed, in-between site with clear associations to the road. Seth takes several train trips in *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, always to small towns that seem to harbour some important fragment of the past. As in *Clyde Fans*, the train is portrayed as a very legible form of travel that suggests continuity: every stop on the track is observable through the passenger window. In Seth's work, the train cements a certain mood but rarely becomes a stage for any significant part of the narrative. It adds ambience to a chronotope that is distinguished by meetings, but (except for the subway incident in the first issue of *Palookaville*) none of Seth's protagonists meet anyone in train cars.

Another motif that contributes atmosphere to the chronotope of the road is the pay phone booth, which often appears in narrative tandem with train travel. Craving a familiar voice after talking with strangers in the town of Strathroy, Seth calls Chester

from a phone booth on his way to meet John Kalloway's mother (*IAGL* 158). Simon calls Abe from Dominion, as instructed, but when he hears his brother's voice he cannot bring himself to speak and abruptly hangs up (*CF* 121). Wimbledon Green's trusted aide, Dozo, calls headquarters from a pay phone in the parking lot of a roadside diner while attempting to track his boss (who has taken to tramping in a fit of amnesiac enthusiasm for the open road) (*WG* 56-57). Not unlike the train, the telephone is a technology that seems to collapse the distance between places.

### *The Logic of Chance*

Even in a work like *Wimbledon Green*, which is distinguished by fragmentation and narrative discontinuity, the chronotope of the road strongly asserts itself. Many of the book's episodes take place in an infinite adventure-time, operating according to their own interior logic – which is to say, the logic of chance. The centerpiece of the book is “The Green Ghost,” an adventure story in two parts that details the lively and not altogether successful pursuit of the first issue of (fictional) cartoonist Hal Drake's most acclaimed comic series, *The Green Ghost*. The pace and structure of the narrative are determined by chance occurrences and reversals of fortune, the most significant of which is Wimbledon Green's loss of memory. When a rival collector, Jonah, spots a hitchhiking Wimbledon Green and pulls over to pick him up, a black panel with white text announces that “YES – THE WORLD IS FULL OF CHANCE” (fig. 3.5). This phrase is repeated later in the story by Wimbledon Green himself (now recovered and in his own car) when the man he is pursuing passes him on the highway, going in the opposite direction. “The Green Ghost” illustrates Bakhtin's assertion that “The road is especially (but not exclusively) appropriate for portraying events governed by chance” (244).



Fig. 3.5. Seth, *Wimbledon Green* (Montreal: D&Q, 2005) 57.

### *Recognition*

As noted above, the events that take place on the road are frequently meetings of one kind or another. In *Wimbledon Green*, the motif of meeting and the chronotope of the road are very often joined by a third element, collection, which itself comprises a range of motifs. On the road there are chance meetings with other collectors, but there are also, more significantly, chance discoveries of old comic books. These discoveries (which might be thought of as chance meetings with objects) function in a way that is consistent with another of Bakhtin's observations: "The motif of meeting is also closely related to other important motifs, especially the motif of recognition/nonrecognition" (98). What makes Wimbledon Green "The Greatest Comic Book Collector in the World" is his preternatural power of recognition. One character insists that he can "determine a comic's publication date just by the position of the staples" (WG 15). This is a comically extreme, highly specified example of the more general ability of the collector to recognise the value of seemingly worthless items. One of the crucial ingredients in the Wimbledon Green back-story is that he got his start as a book collector taking "cross-country trips in his old truck during the late 1960's. He hit every little backwater burg he could in his search for old comics" (23). This single biographical detail contains the dense intertwining of recognition, collection, and road

motifs that give substance to *Wimbledon Green*'s entire exploration of obsolete objects and literary escapism.

### *Hotel Rooms*

Meetings and discoveries do not always take place literally on the road, as when Wimbledon Green hitches a ride with Jonah or happens upon an old barn converted into a used bookstore. In Seth's work, the motif of meeting often appears in connection with a common correlative to the chronotope of the road: the hotel room. Particularly in *Clyde Fans* (though also in *It's a Good Life*), the hotel room comes into its own as a distinct chronotope. The hotel is a fixed place, a hub where chance meetings occur, but it still retains a sense of the transient that comes from its associations with the road and travel. In a hotel room, the strangeness of an encounter with a stranger becomes somehow sharper, more well-defined: entering a stranger's hotel room, one is confronted with a stealthily uncanny space. A hotel room is certainly ambivalent, familiar and unfamiliar in its approximation of domestic comfort, but it is perhaps too perfunctory and bland to elicit strong feelings of uncanniness. A *stranger's* hotel room, however, seems to grow increasingly strange and private with each moment.

All this is ably captured in Seth's queasy encounter with his troubled motel-room neighbour, Annie, in *It's a Good Life*, especially since she has made of the cramped quarters a permanent residence and art studio. Though too polite to decline Annie's invitation into her room, Seth leaves at the first opportunity. In many ways, this encounter can be read as an embryonic version of the masterful hotel room scene that plays out between Simon Matchcard and fellow salesman Frank Wilmot in *Clyde Fans*. Frank "Whitey" Wilmot invites Simon into his room, in which he has set up a vast assortment of inexpensive, miscellaneous goods (fig. 3.6). Under the pretense of

candour and professional camaraderie, he pours Simon a drink and launches into a baroque exposition of his wares, their quality or lack of it, the inexplicable popularity of certain items, the sheer range of products available. “Mr. Matchard,” he grandly concludes, “spread before you, in this room, the details of man’s great achievements in our time” (*Clyde Fans* 126). For Whitey, this is little more than a sale. Simon recognises this fact, but the experience nonetheless has a lasting effect on him. Years later, he thinks of the encounter: “Whitey. With all the people he’s met – does he even recall me? Myself – I am intimately involved with everyone I’ve ever known” (*Palookaville* 16 16). Chance meetings and fleeting encounters resonate deeply with Simon, perhaps because the road and its associated spaces are so foreign to him.

In considering the setting as a chronotope, it may be useful to explicitly ask: what is the (literary) logic of the hotel room? In Bakhtin’s phrase, what knots of narrative are tied or untied there? By now it seems clear that the hotel room, like its parent chronotope, the road, is governed by chance, and that its fixedness affords the



Figs. 3.6. Seth, *Clyde Fans: Book 1* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 124.

space a stage-like quality. But what is enacted on this stage? What intangible qualities is the hotel room host to? In Seth's work, it becomes the ideal setting for estranged encounters that overlay the familiar and the foreign – in the enduring language of salesmen, it becomes a home-away-from-home.

Annie and Whitey are not the only characters who ensconce themselves in hotel rooms. Following the sudden death of his wife in a car accident, George Sprott moves into three rooms on the top floor of Dominion's Radio Hotel. Where in previous works the hotel room is clearly bound to the road, in *George Sprott* it is recast as a terminal location (it is worth noting that George is a main character, whereas Annie and Whitey are peripheral and make only brief appearances). The reader never actually sees George at home in his hotel suites. Instead, there is a large panel depicting the main room shortly after George's death, and beneath it a series of small panels containing some of his collected objects, followed finally by an image of the room stripped bare, once more a free-floating and inactive domestic space (fig. 3.7).



Fig. 3.7. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

*Thresholds and the Matchcard Family Home*

The page depicting George's empty hotel suite shares certain elements with the end of Part Three of *Clyde Fans*, in which Simon Matchcard peruses his mother's recently abandoned bedroom. In this sequence, however, the bedroom is by no means interchangeable with other rooms, as in a hotel. Indeed, Simon's careful description of its contents renders the space unique, likely the most fully-realised room in the house. Often in *Clyde Fans*, the Matchcard family home is depicted as a heavily shadowed backdrop of doorways, stairwells and corridors, a series of storage rooms, basements, and crawl spaces (figs. 3.8, 3.9). This is not to say that more central rooms are not also represented, but as the Matchcard brothers move through the family home they seem to be constantly passing through liminal spaces. Arguably, such spaces are related to what Bakhtin calls "the chronotope of *threshold*," which he links to crisis (248). "In this chronotope," he notes, "time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time."

The Matchcard home could easily be seen as existing outside of normal time, frozen in a moment all its own. For all their differences, Simon and Abe draw very similar distinctions between the interior life of the house and the outside world. "It's only in here," Abe admits, "that anything ever felt real. Out there everything was empty and hollow" (*Clyde Fans* 51). For Simon, the interior is "where reality is at its most solid. Outside the shell – it's all illusion" (*Palookaville* 17 43). This last statement accompanies a panel that shows Simon, half obscured in a shadowy doorframe, at the precise moment that he passes into a room (a recurring image, which in this instance is preceded by panels that depict him walking through a deeply shadowed corridor of the house).

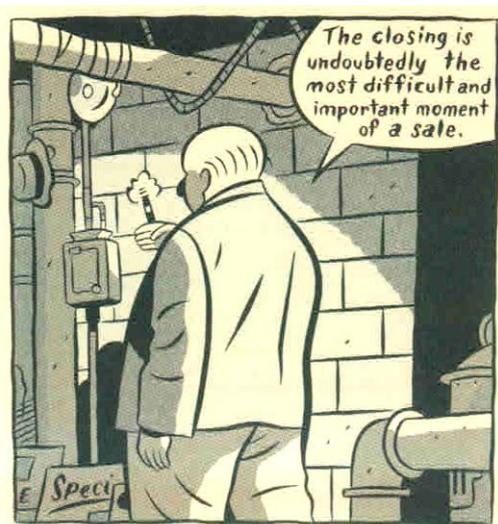
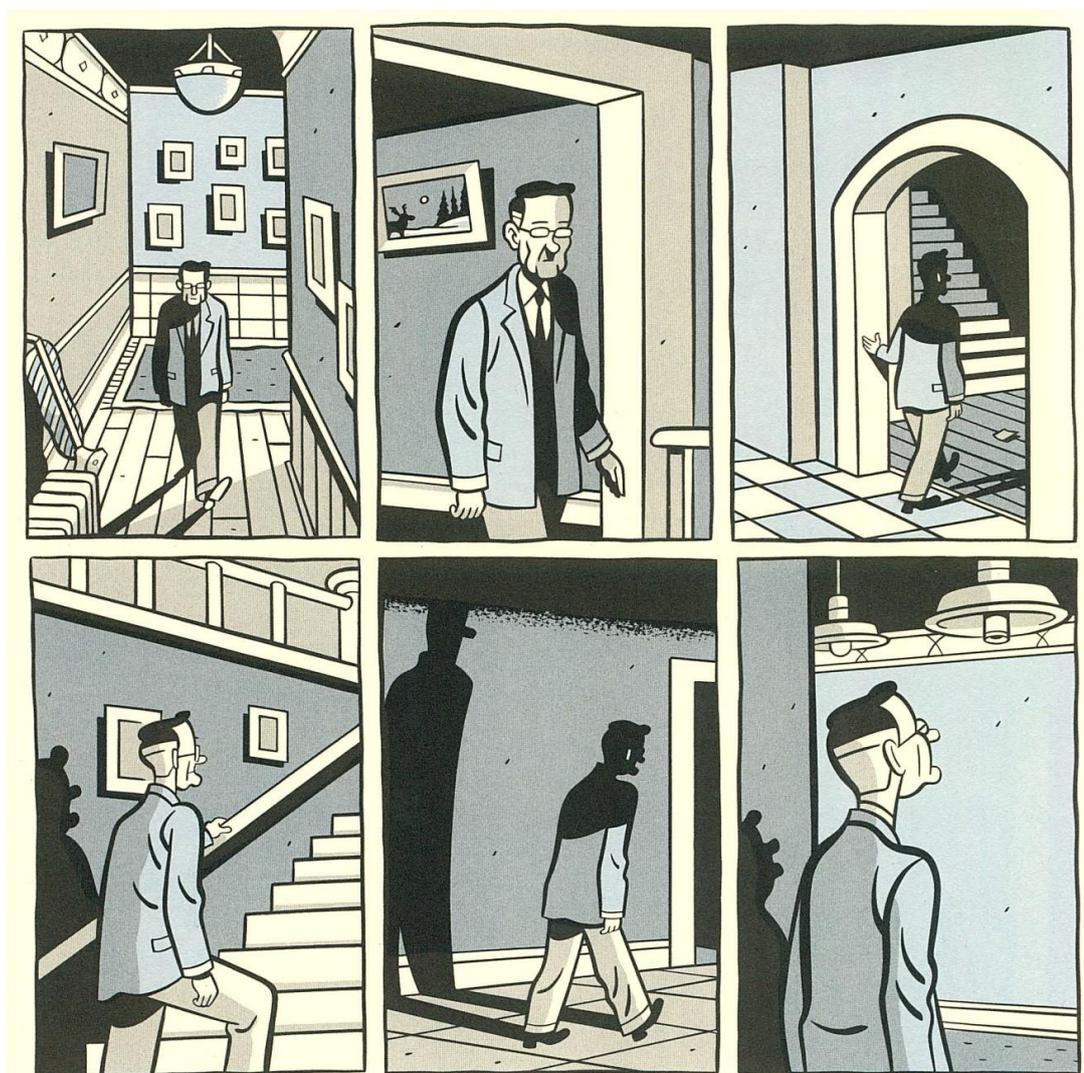


Fig. 3.8. Seth, *Clyde Fans: Book 1* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2004) 39.

Fig. 3.9. Seth, *Palookaville 19* (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 86.



Simon explains that though he once regarded the house as a prison, he has come to think of it as a part of himself – not metaphorically but literally, he says, “an appendage,” a protective shell (*PVI* 743). In *Clyde Fans*, the chronotope of the family home – which seems in some way wrapped around the chronotope of threshold – always comprises the motifs of selfhood and solitude as well. This combination of motifs/chronotopes finds its most extreme expression in Simon’s ongoing identity crises, which are both temporal and existential in the purest sense. In other words, it is through these delicately interwoven chronotopes that crisis materialises in time and space within the work.

#### *Urban Perambulation*

Simon’s crises, however, are by no means confined to his home. If life outside seems hollow and illusive to the Matchcards, it is not surprising that Simon experiences such acute apprehension as he makes his way from one cold call to another around the town of Dominion. This is in stark contrast to the Seth character in *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken*, who, despite some antisocial tendencies, seems very at ease in public, and spends much of the book walking around his hometown, Strathmore, following up on Kalo leads. Urban perambulation – the significance of which was alluded to above in the discussion of browsing and non-linear narrative pleasures – is in fact a persistent feature of Seth’s work. In addition to establishing a particular narrative tempo, it offers the reader a pedestrian’s-eye-view of Seth’s urban spaces. (This brings to mind Seth’s cardboard models of Dominion City, which are fully tangible extensions of the urban spaces in his comics panels.)

If the chronotope of the road suggests a line along contiguous points, then the chronotope of urban perambulation appears to trace a circle around a locus. The classical

prototype for this locus is the agora, the public square, which Bakhtin associates with biography and autobiography, and in a sense with everyday life (131). This correlation helps to illuminate the dynamic interaction of chronotopes in Seth's work. What Bakhtin refers to as the "real-life chronotope" of the public square is distinct from (though not necessarily opposed to) the "adventure time" of the open road. "Chronotopes," Bakhtin writes, "are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships" (252). Thresholds, for instance, are folded into the family home. The public square can be a detour on the road.

Whereas the road is characterised by a cycle of chance occurrences taking place in linear adventure-time, urban perambulation constitutes an everyday chronotope, which is "a configuration of time and space that is fragmented" (Cortsen 138). Seth occasionally superimposes these two chronotopes (which may also intersect with other chronotopes). Halfway through *It's a Good Life*, the trail seems to go cold and Seth assumes that the search for Kalo has reached a dead end. It is only much later (the reader watches the seasons cycle in the city) that he resumes the hunt and takes to the road with new information, making another trip to Strathmore, where the book began. The protagonist's repeated (and repeatedly frustrated) efforts on the road lend the story much of its everyday, autobiographical credibility. At the same time, his search dovetails with his habit of regularly returning to familiar, comfortable interior places.

### *Collections*

One of these interior places – in fact, the very first setting to appear in *It's a Good Life* – is the second-hand bookstore, which is explicitly associated with collection. It could even be said that the second-hand bookstores that appear in Seth's work are

very specific instances of a collection chronotope that intersects a wide range of spaces, such as : the comic book shops and personal libraries of *Wimbledon Green*; Whitey's makeshift depot and Lily Matchcard's bedroom in *Clyde Fans*; the discarded CKCK video library that contained recordings of George Sprott's TV show. The ultimate manifestation of the collection chronotope, however, may be the fanciful Northern Archive that Seth depicts in *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*.<sup>2</sup>

Outlandish in more ways than one, the Brotherhood's archive is immense and remote, with an appropriately cartoonish hub-and-spoke igloo design. The archive's holdings are described as almost unthinkably vast, kept safe in a network of vaults and libraries, full of gleaming flat-file drawers, dusty stacks and stout filing cabinets, as well as storage rooms full of as-yet-uncatalogued material. Seth offers the reader some representative and idiosyncratic examples, which, along with the other metafictional excerpts in *G.N.B.C.C.*, are among his liveliest inventions. As in *Wimbledon Green*, the invented comic books substantiate the acts of collection that define the narrative of *The Great Northern Brotherhood* (these acts include not only recognition, but also selection, accumulation, and other behaviours discussed in Chapter 7). It is these collection-related actions and events that make up the collection chronotope. "The space of the chronotope," as Cortsen notes, "is an event-space that relies on action to constitute its elements, characters, their surroundings and their interconnectedness over time" (138).

### **Some Notable Tropes**

#### *The Invented Item*

It is no coincidence that invented comics feature significantly in *It's a Good Life*, *Wimbledon Green*, and *The Great Northern Brotherhood* – all are explicitly concerned

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<sup>2</sup> Though collections and archives are not identical (as noted in Chapter 7), the collection *chronotope* quite comfortably accommodates the archive.

with collection. This is one of the clearer examples in Seth's work of the way in which a trope (the invented item) consistently sustains a particular chronotope (the collection). Though traditional literature is full of objects, this chapter considers the invented item to be a unique comics trope because the cartoonist's representation of objects is iconic, i.e. it depends on physical resemblance. Unless the invented item is merely referred to and never actually shown on the page, it shares a materiality, however remote, with the physical objects that populate the reader's life. Seth's style often affords his drawn objects an appealingly ductile tangibility, solid but patently cartoonish (fig. 7.6). In the opening pages of *GNBCC*, Seth goes even further, offering the reader actual photographs of objects from the story (cartooning awards and a ceremonial hat). More familiar, however, are the book's metafictional comics, which contribute to a collection chronotope.

### *The Catalogue*

Collection constitutes a range of tropes in and of itself, variations on the catalogue. Usually the catalogue acts as an index of a larger, unseen collection, for instance, "selections from the library of Wimbledon Green" (fig. 7.1); but it can also be self-contained, as in "Rivals of Wimbledon Green" (fig. 6.6). *Palookaville 20* literally features a catalogue page, i.e., a page with twenty different fans from the May 1975 Borealis Business Machines catalogue (fig. 3.10). And, as these various examples demonstrate, there exists a very noteworthy relationship between the trope of the catalogue and the trope of the invented item, which nearly always buttress each other in Seth's work (this is discussed further in Chapter 7).

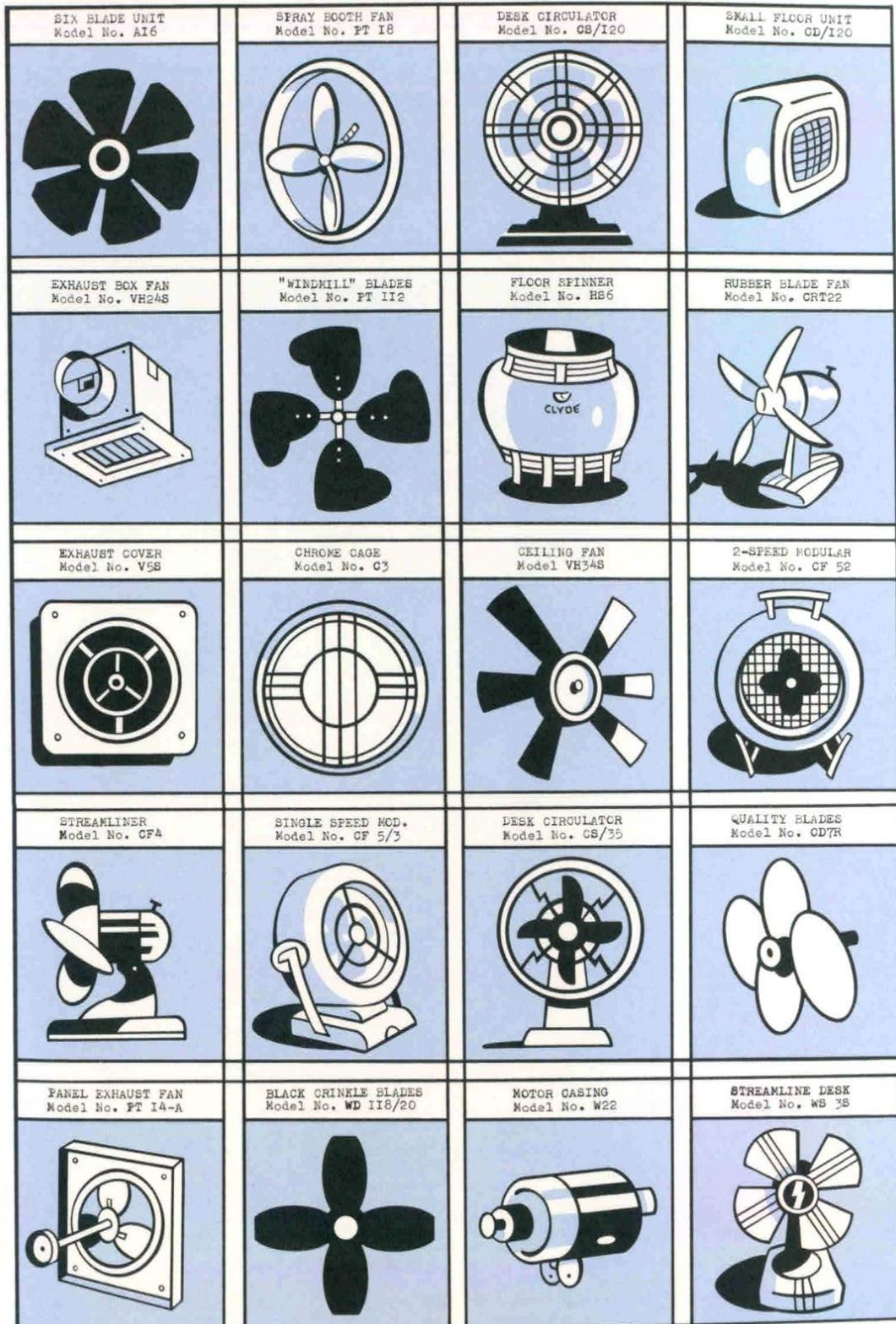


Fig. 3.10. Seth, *Palookaville 20* (Montreal: D&Q, 2010) 6.

### *Caption Narration*

Not every trope is as complex and specific as the catalogue. Perhaps the simplest trope that Seth deploys – also one of the most flexible and functional – is caption narration. These unobtrusive text boxes appear throughout Seth’s work, usually as first-person narration. The content of captions can vary widely, sometimes commenting directly on the images portrayed beneath them, sometimes offering an interior monologue that runs parallel to the scenes it accompanies. The narration in *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* consists largely of Seth’s musings (on cartoons, memory, the general vicissitudes of life); caption narration allows Seth to shift effortlessly from these musings and recollections to present-tense, in-the-moment observations.

In its familiarity and visual similarity to prose text, caption narration is the technique in Seth’s comics that most closely approximates a traditional literary reading experience. This trope easily supports a range of chronotopes, from the public square (Seth’s running narration as he walks through city streets making offhand observations) to the family home and the collection (Simon Matchcard’s detailed descriptions of the objects in his mother’s room). Journal entries are also conveyed in caption narration, appearing in longhand instead of block letters to distinguish them from other kinds of narration, but sometimes it is difficult to determine if longhand captions indicate extracts from a diary. The longhand caption narration in *Palookaville 16* begins in an ambiguous third-person, setting the detached, uncertain tone of the entire third part of *Clyde Fans*.

### *The Personal Anecdote*

In *Wimbledon Green*, caption narration becomes a standard component of another trope, the personal anecdote. The majority of the book consists of anecdotal recollections and speculations about Wimbledon Green, which are conveyed by a large

cast of characters, primarily through speech bubbles. There is an occasional shift in these anecdotal sequences from pictured storyteller to illustrated recollections (panels with caption narration) but for the most part the characters address the reader directly, in documentary fashion, almost as though facing a camera (fig. 3.11). As much as this technique may appear to borrow from film, however, the reader never senses that Seth is attempting to reproduce a cinematic experience. Indeed, this almost overwhelmingly simple repetition of images seems not only well suited to comics but uniquely so.

This testimonial format, which characterises much of the book, quickly takes on the feeling of a convention native to the medium, less staged somehow than the comparatively artificial practice of placing a speaker before a camera. In a certain sense, this form of storytelling even comes to seem somehow unmediated: comic book characters in their natural milieu – the panel – speaking directly to the reader. It is possible to trace a tropic evolution from the varied anecdotes of *Wimbledon Green* to the more formal “interviews” that appear throughout *George Sprott*. It is unclear who (if anyone in particular) is conducting these interviews, and even Seth makes the colloquial concession of referring to a “camera” in such cases. “You talk about comics,” he says, “you always end up using film terms” (Appendix B 308).

### *Cinematic Tropes, Establishing or Transitional Panels*

Sometimes it is appropriate and accurate to use film terms. If caption narration is inherently literary, many of the tropes discussed in the previous chapter on drawn photographs are plainly cinematic: “zooming in” on an image over a series of panels, for instance, or “intercutting” between two visually distinct parts of the same scene (fig. 2.2). The use of this latter trope could be as simple and self-evident as conversational back and forth in which alternating panels show different characters speaking. Another

## "WIMBLEDON GREEN HAD EXCELLENT TASTE"

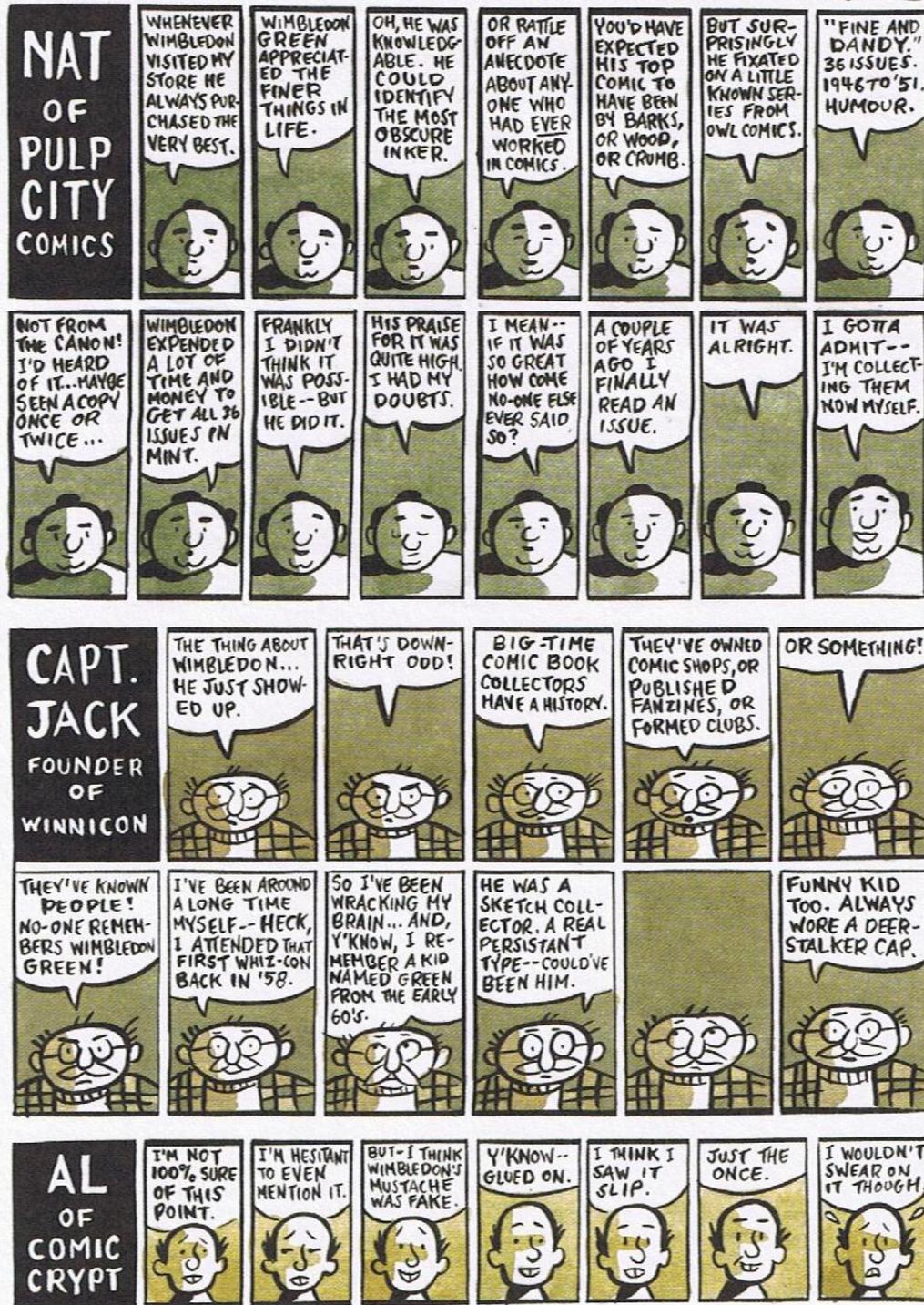


Fig. 3.11. Seth, *Wimbledon Green* (Montreal: D&Q, 2005) 18.

narrative tic that comics seem to have picked up from movies is the use of establishing or transitional images to ease a change of scene. Especially in Seth's earlier work, the trope of the establishing/transitional panel has a particularly familiar cinematic quality; in certain cases, entire sequences seem designed to establish a tone, to give the reader an opportunity to settle into the narrative. The second part of *Clyde Fans*, for instance, begins with a large image of a train on bridge, followed by a two-page sequence that wordlessly depicts Simon's trip to Dominion. These two facing pages are very reassuring, not only because the panels are appealingly illustrated but also because of the sequence's mirrored structure, which is bookended by establishing panels (fig. 3.4). (A number of cinematic, transitional panels in Seth's work feature trains or train stations. Though it is tempting to explain this by noting the longstanding affinity between trains and the cinema, the simpler explanation is that the chronotope of the train/train station is perfectly suited to depicting moments of narrative transition.)

*It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* features a long, wordless transitional sequence (113-117), which abbreviates the literal transition from season to season for a calendar year, and from which main characters are entirely absent. Beginning with winter, each of the five pages roughly corresponds to a season – the effect is of a cinematic montage. Seth easily could have deployed a single panel or caption that read “One Year Later” (such transitional text plates are a hallmark of *Wimbledon Green*) but instead fills five whole pages with somewhat nondescript images. Like Simon's train trip, this seasonal sequence is leisurely, sensual, with a sort of weightless, untethered quality. In these ways, it is not unlike the book's dream sequence (*IAGL* 66-68), though the latter actually feels far more substantial and specific, anchored by the presence of the protagonist, and far less cinematic.

### *The Dream Sequence*

Almost all of Seth's books contain dream sequences, a distinctive narrative trope characterised by arresting juxtapositions and shifting dreamscapes that never quite coalesce into identifiable chronotopes. Though, perhaps it is a mistake to say that the dream trope is characterised by anything in particular; much of the integrity of its stream-of-consciousness progression lies in its ambiguity. These dreams are not, however, merely capricious. Seth has managed to create sequences that are unpredictable without being arbitrary, and which credibly resonate with the character's waking life. Simon Matchcard's dreams in *Clyde Fans* are by turns transparent and opaque, with a great deal of reconstituted memory and anxiety in between. The occasional dreams in *George Sprott* show flashes of uncertain interiority in a character that often appears completely defined by his self-assured public persona.

### *Tropes in George Sprott*

George's dreams are somewhat different from those of Seth's other characters, however, because they are framed by the book's semi-omniscient narrator, whose unique brand of narration might be regarded as a trope all its own. In fact, it may be useful to think of *George Sprott*, as a whole, as its own discrete, complex system of tropes, many of which do not appear in Seth's other work (and some of which appear only once but are nevertheless recognisably distinct as tropes). This is most likely a result of the atypical production of the work, which began as a serial story (one page per week) in the *New York Times Magazine*. Some of the published book's inventive tropes include a two-page television station sign-off, an unexpected fold-out section, pages of Sprott aphorisms and words of wisdom, and large arctic tableaux that punctuate the narrative. Against such a wide array of narrative techniques, the comparatively simple,

unnarrated sepia scenes from George's life stand out as examples of ostensibly straightforward, continuous storytelling.

### *The Continuous Scene*

This is one of the distinguishing tropes of Seth's earlier work, which he sometimes refers to as "naturalistic storytelling" (Appendix B 310), i.e. continuous scenes that follow a character from moment to moment. The most languid of these scenes, in the first part of *Clyde Fans*, consists of a single, uninterrupted, 65-page sequence in which Abraham Matchcard wakes, dresses, eats, smokes, reads, bathes, and more than anything else wanders from room to room in the Matchcard home, all the while talking to the reader. Seth suggests that this trope is one of the great assets of comics: "I think that's what initially interested me in cartooning, was natural storytelling, where you follow someone walking around and you see it as if you're a ghost walking with them" (Appx. B 307). This technique does cultivate a very smooth, intimate reading experience, and also lends itself to the chronotope of urban perambulation, which in turn contributes to a tempo of *flânerie*.

### *The Single Image*

In comics, even the smoothest reading experience almost necessarily appears as a series of disconnected images. On those occasions that Seth dispenses with panels, the result is monumental and/or instantaneous – narrative suspension as opposed to narrative continuity (fig. 2.4). Curiously, a single image that spans an entire comics page is much easier to read when it has been divided into panels, submitted to the narrative logic of the multiframe. This eye-catching trope, in which a single image is at once coherent and fragmented, demonstrates the unique capabilities of the medium. A page near the end of

*George Sprott* divides a night-time tableau into a grid of twenty-five panels, many of which contain running caption narration. Even more striking is a dream sequence in *Palookaville 19* that shows Simon wandering around “squalid yards” – a single image is divided into twelve panels, each of which contains a representation of Simon (fig. 3.12). This page updates a mode of pictorial storytelling with a long history, in which multiple representations of a central figure appear in different areas of a single image.<sup>3</sup>

Seth’s elegant, transparent page design very effectively underscores the manner in which repetition and juxtaposition permit narrative continuity in comics. It is not unusual for a character to appear in every panel of a page, but the visual connection between time, space and narrative in comics becomes particularly clear when each of these panels is part of a single image. The dozen Simons also produce a somewhat uncanny doubling effect, which is well-suited to the logic of this particular dreamscape. It is perhaps in these squalid yards that the trope of the dream sequence – amplified by the trope of the single-yet-fragmented image – comes closest to coalescing into an identifiable chronotope. As Cortsen observes, the chronotope is “tightly connected with the populated space that time measures out when characters move through the coordinates of a fictional world” (137). Through Simon’s almost zoetropic progress across a unified background, Seth arrestingly illustrates this movement. In such sequences, which draw special attention to the particularities of the medium of comics, Seth’s work reveals that the chronotope is necessarily composed of fragments – even as the chronotope is one of the principle means by which literary fragments cohere into what Bakhtin calls “concrete” narrative events.

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<sup>3</sup> In the first volume of his history of the comic strip, David Kunzle presents a late fifteenth-century North Italian engraving (not divided into panels), which features various juxtaposed episodes from the martyrdom of an infant saint (Kunzle 1973, 25).

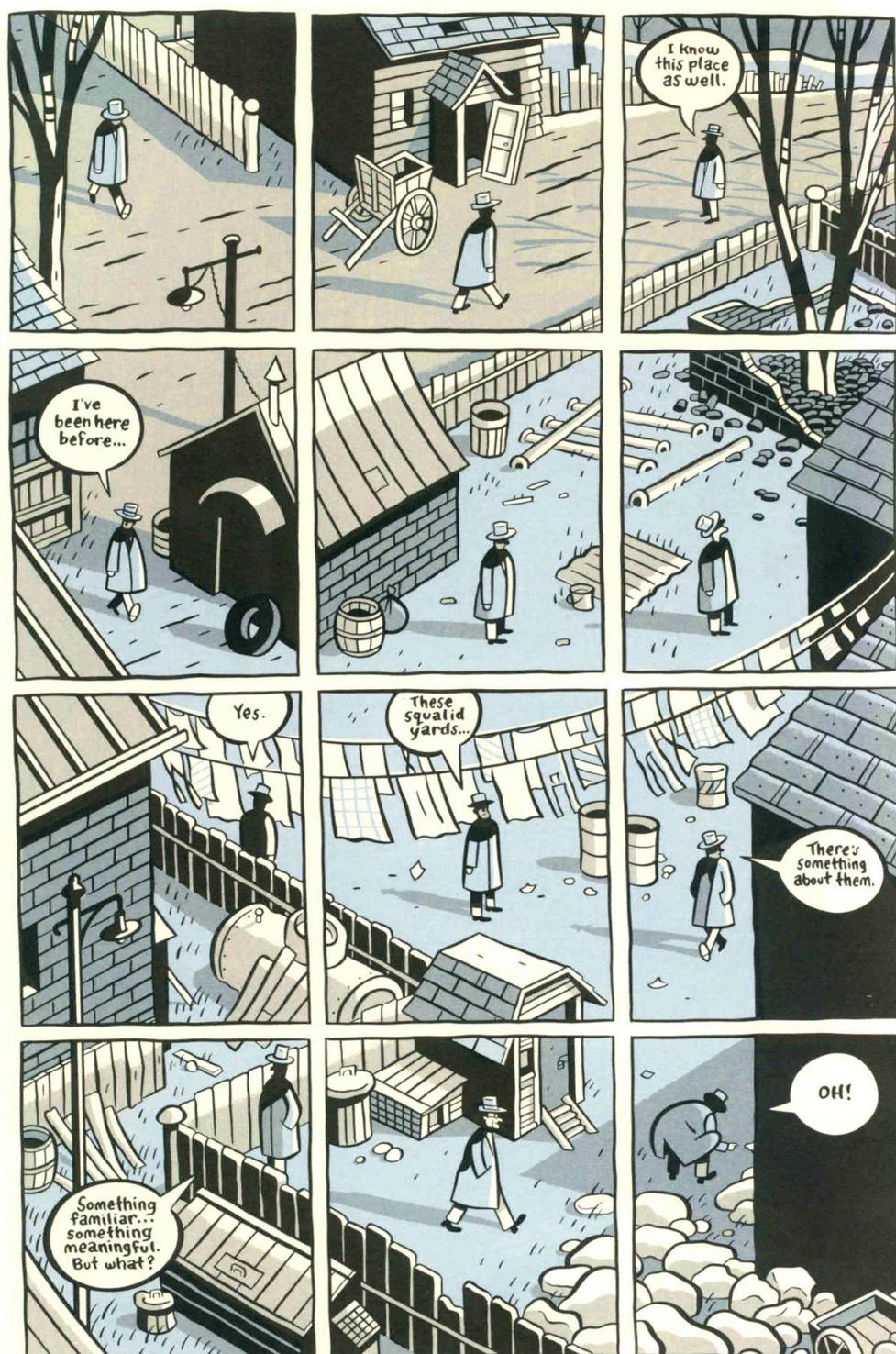


Fig. 3.12. Seth, *Palookaville 19* (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 74.

The perception of time is bound to narrative – narrative is the way in which time becomes legible. In Bakhtin’s phrase: “Times becomes, in effect, palpable and visible” (250). The chronotope constitutes an event-space where “knots of narrative” (points of narrative articulation) give form to abstractions through the representation of action. In this way, chronotopes act as narrative anchors around which a literary work coheres. In comics, the chronotope possesses a concrete, visual dimension: the material particularities of the medium extend the representation of the “time space” of the narrative, and in certain respects make the relationship between narrative time and space more apparent. Bakhtin notes that chronotopes are mutually inclusive and frequently interact. It is by means of such interactions – sometimes fortuitous, sometimes deliberate – that Seth is able to make movement through time tangible and perceptible in specific narrative moments.

Several notable recurring elements emerge across this array of specific narrative moments. Perhaps most unexpected is the prevalence of the motif of the stranger, which significantly contributes to the chronotope of the public square, undergirding narrative non-linearity and encouraging the reader to browse. The stranger is also central to the chronotope of the hotel, which is often depicted in Seth’s work as a stop on the road where estranged meetings with marginal characters occur. Liminal spaces come to the fore in Seth’s pages, especially in the threshold chronotope of *Clyde Fans*, which finds particular expression in the doorways of the Matchcard home.

Seth’s work also reveals the capacity of tropes to support chronotopes: the trope of the catalogue specifically supports the collection chronotope; the trope of caption narration is more generally applicable, contributing to a range of chronotopes. Chronotopes, which Bakhtin calls “the primary means for materializing time in space” (250), depend on such techniques to articulate various abstract concepts in concrete

ways. “Without such temporal-spatial expression,” Bakhtin explains, “even abstract thought is impossible. Consequently, every entry into the sphere of meaning is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope” (258). Through his distinctive chronotopes, Seth often reveals the ambivalent pleasure of taking one’s time in strange and liminal spaces. In turn, such inconspicuous and overlooked spaces become crucial, easing the reader’s entry through the chronotope into the sphere of meaning and narrative event.

## 4

## THE RHETORIC OF FAILURE

A wide range of failures (personal, financial, narrative, material) will shortly be under consideration – but what is meant by the term “rhetoric”? For the most part, it is not used here in the most familiar sense of the word, which refers to contrived or persuasive speech (and implies the possibility of more transparent or neutral language that is free of rhetoric). As Jennifer Richards writes in her compact survey of the subject, “language is essentially and inescapably rhetorical” (11), a point of view she associates with Nietzsche. There is little contemporary resistance to this observation that “rhetoric permeates all language” (11), that language is inherently figurative no matter how plain and seemingly unadorned, but can this insight be extended to other kinds of communication? For instance, there is a tradition of allegory in painting – does this bluntly metaphorical mode of representation constitute a wrenching of the visual into the realm of language, or does it indicate a rhetorical potential in even those forms that do not explicitly contain words? Perhaps every interaction between artist and audience is invested with the sort of rhetorical significance more easily discerned in speech. It might even be argued that, in nonrepresentational art, abstraction attempts to free the work from precisely this burden of language.

Before this line of inquiry leads too far afield, however, or haphazardly revisits material better explored by others,<sup>1</sup> it may be prudent to return the focus to comics.

Though the medium is fundamentally visual, it is also decidedly narrative<sup>2</sup> and open to a

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<sup>1</sup> In “Rhetoric of the Image,” his well-known reading of advertising images, Roland Barthes suggests that rhetoric appears as “the signifying aspect of ideology” (49).

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of nonrepresentational experiments in cartooning, the majority of comics are still concerned with fairly traditional storytelling. “Abstract Comics,” such as those collected by Andrei Molotiu in his 2009 anthology of the same name, tend to exploit the tension between the absence of story development and the conventionally narrative structure and sequence of the comics grid.

range of familiar critical approaches rooted in the study of rhetoric. It is clear that even a lengthy sequence of “silent,” wordless panels can be read for its rhetorical significance; what may be less immediately apparent is the rhetorical significance inherent in the form itself, the cartoon, apart from the connotations of the narrative (though of course still linked to them). Cartooning works in much the same way as metaphor, with an iconic element standing in for some part of the represented reality of the work, and the distance between the two provoking the reader to a new awareness of that reality. It may be the case that cartooning is a particularly figurative (i.e. not literal) or even rhetorically charged mode of drawing, in contrast to more realistic forms of draftsmanship. Of course, cartoonists frequently combine modes of representation that have varying degrees of realism. For instance, Hergé is known for his naturalistic environments populated with relatively cartoonish characters (a combination of styles the rhetorical implications of which would certainly be worth investigating).

By comparison, Seth’s cartooning is more or less of a piece: his environments and the people that move through them are all rendered in the same evocative style. His accomplished brush strokes and ink washes form an almost seamless appearance, matched by his storytelling, which tends toward the deliberate and the contemplative. But just below this palatable and unassuming surface lies the disorder of his characters’ various failures and disappointments. With this ironic contrast Seth achieves a stable but not static balance of narrative elements. Neither polished to the point of superficiality nor choked with bleak plot points, Seth’s storytelling draws a quiet energy (and a certain slow-building momentum) from the tension among its various elements.

### **The Irony of Unfulfillment**

Deliberately or not, Seth is working in a Chekhovian tradition of literary fiction. Radislav Lapushin's recent work on Chekhov helps to establish some parameters for what this specifically means: Lapushin argues that "the fundamental trait of Chekhov's poetics" is "inbetweenness" (3). This corresponds with the observations of Ruth Davies, who addresses some more particularised aspects of what Lapushin refers to as "a permanent dynamic vacillation" (3). Davies notes that among "the most pervasive elements in the writing of Chekhov is irony, especially the irony of unfulfillment" (328).

Seth's work is subsumed by the irony of unfulfillment; nearly every one of his characters deals with thwarted expectations.<sup>3</sup> This far-reaching disappointment is neither monotonous nor melodramatic but matter of fact, part of the texture of the stories. There does not seem to be any attempt to overwhelm, manipulate, or even necessarily move the reader to pity – only to provide a fuller understanding of the characters by illuminating the particular dimensions of their regret. Unfulfillment accrues organically, without much regard for any timetable of anticipated character development that the reader might have in mind. This is to say that the rhythm of narrative dips and disappointments is not predictable, especially in a long story such as *Clyde Fans*, published in ongoing serial instalments for over ten years. As the stories progress, they acquire an unforced depth and substance, a kind of naturalism that both offsets and plays off of their distinctly un-naturalistic qualities (most notably Seth's iconic drawing style). As in much of Chekhov's work, it is the irony of unfulfillment that gives weight to events and makes the characters so recognisably lifelike. Seth's work is imbued with a sense of day-to-day authenticity that is anchored by its depiction of the way that little failures accumulate into substantial disappointments.

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<sup>3</sup> Notably, an abbreviated form of this irony animates Arno's work, in which Topliss finds a "comic world of disillusionment, failed purposes, and actuality's falling short of expectation" (24). See Chapter 1.

One of the more compact and linear examples of this accumulation can be observed in Part Two of *Clyde Fans*, which introduces the reader to Simon Matchcard through his ill-fated business trip to the town of Dominion. His first and last excursion as a sales representative for Clyde Fans begins on an optimistic, even redemptive note: he sees it as an opportunity to alter the course of his life and make up for decades of torpor. “I mustn’t underestimate the importance of these next few days,” Simon writes in his journal on his first night in Dominion. “Perhaps by exercising some self-will I can erase the fruitless years I’ve spent hiding” (*Clyde Fans* 94). It is also a chance to prove to his brother that he can overcome his agoraphobia and make a significant contribution to the family business beyond the walls of their home. “This small, sad effort,” he writes, “is the largest thing I’ve done in more than a decade.” It soon becomes clear, however, that Simon is in no way suited to the task of making cold calls: introverted, apprehensive and apologetic, his natural instinct is to flee even the most vaguely confrontational situation. Case by case, Simon’s failure to make a sale is understandable, a combination of his own inapt temperament and the airtight deflections offered by his unwilling customers. On his first two attempts, he is promptly dismissed – gently, by a man who insists he has all the fans he needs, and then rather indignantly by a stubborn store owner who refuses to see salesmen on any day but Friday (figs. 4.1 and 4.2). With each failed attempt, the circumstances seem more and more discouraging and, as the failure mounts, resignation begins to set in. Eventually, Simon cannot even bring himself to speak to potential buyers, let alone offer a compelling sales pitch.

Years later, going over the details of the trip, he recalls having taken a book of poetry with him. “Poetry. No surprise I’m a failure. What sort of man brings poetry on a sales trip?” (*Palookaville* 16, 16). The book in question is by the nineteenth century American writer Stephen Crane, known for his concentrated, often allegorical poems. In

the second part of *Clyde Fans*, Seth offers the reader a fragment of one of Crane's untitled poems, reproduced below in full:

A man saw a ball of gold in the sky;  
He climbed for it,  
And eventually he achieved it --  
It was clay.

Now this is the strange part:  
When the man went to the earth  
And looked again,  
Lo, there was the ball of gold.  
Now this is the strange part:  
It was a ball of gold.  
Aye, by the heavens, it was a ball of gold. (Crane 37)

Crane's vivid yet ultimately ambiguous parable of striving and disappointment, perception and reality, is indeed the last thing one would expect a salesman to read in preparation for a long day of selling. Someone of Simon's temperament, however, might be reassured by this compact meditation on perspective and the way in which success seems sometimes to flicker into a semblance of its opposite.

Part of Seth's accomplishment in *Clyde Fans* is to dramatise – without any anti-consumerist interludes or overwrought Miller-esque dialogue – the desperation of sales, a desperation acutely felt by Simon and, by extension, the reader. We see Simon's failure through his eyes, from the inside out, and this small-scale view can be achingly



Figs. 4.1 and 4.2. Seth, *Clyde Fans: Book 1* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 101, 111.

clear because Simon understands so well his weaknesses but is still, ultimately, unable to overcome them. His pathos is not that of Willy Loman: it does not signify the failure of a national dream to come true, but rather an entirely private, insular failure – in many ways, a failure to connect with anything as vast and communal as a national dream. Simon’s failure should not be understood as the concluding point on a trajectory of disillusionment, but as a circle of dread and self-doubt.

Not all failure is so fraught with centripetal anxiety. Toward the end of *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken*, Seth tracks down Ken Tremblay, one of Kalo’s closest friends. Ken admits at once that he doesn’t know a great deal about John Kalloway’s cartooning career, but Seth is eager to find out what he can and asks a number of questions, the most pointed of which concerns Kalloway’s feelings about his decision to stop drawing professionally. In many ways, Ken’s answer exemplifies the attitude toward unfulfillment that is particular to *It’s a Good Life*: “Life isn’t a series of good or bad choices. It’s harder to steer it one way or the other than most people think” (fig. 4.3). This might be read as a kind of fatalism or resignation, but Kalo’s apparent contentment in spite of his relative failure as a cartoonist (especially as framed by the title of the book) makes it clear that Ken’s sentiment is about fortitude in the face of

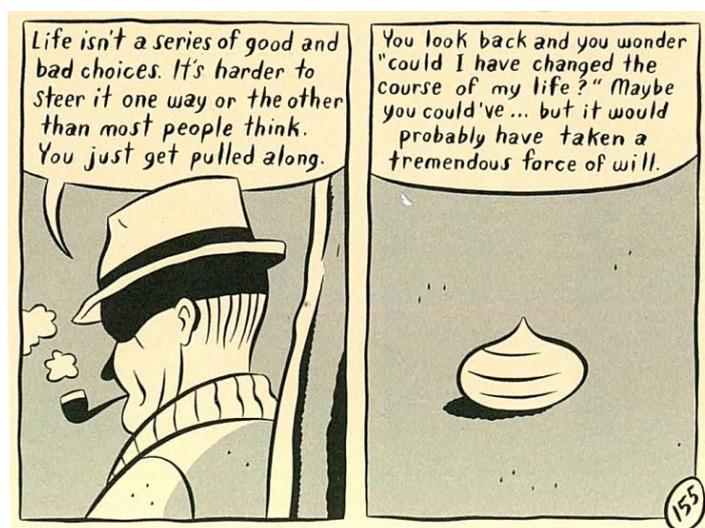


Fig. 4.3. Seth, *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* (Montreal: D&Q, 1996) 155.

disappointment. Much of Seth's work is characterised by this stoic disenchantment, what Davies identifies in Chekhov as "a gentle melancholy which is marked by peace as well as pain – the peace that comes from not expecting much from life. This is the twilight tone in Chekhov's writings" (330). (In Seth's books, this twilit quality is not limited to the writing: the brushwork, lettering, and colour palette all contribute significantly to the overall tone of the work.)

Another of Davies' observations is that "Chekhov was not concerned with salvation, but he was acutely aware of frustration" (328); Seth as well seems intimately familiar with this latter sentiment. *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* chronicles a search the only constant of which seems to be the searcher's frustration. *Wimbledon Green* teems with tales of resentful collectors who were unable to secure a particular item. More than these somewhat superficial examples, however, there is the deeper frustration experienced by those characters that are jolted into a fresh awareness of their present circumstances – often by a fragment of their past – and are startled to find that their lives have not proceeded as they had expected. For George Sprott, it is the obituary of a girlfriend from his youth that provides the jolt: "George felt as if he had woken up from a long sleep. As if, in 1916, he had forgotten who he was [...] and then, one day, unexpectedly remembered who he was and where he was supposed to be" (fig. 4.4).

The frustration of expectations occasionally extends to the reader as well, who may be unprepared for Seth's array of narrative tactics, especially his interventions into



Fig. 4.4. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

narrative continuity, which have two principal expressions. The foremost is his deliberate pacing, which consistently invites the reader to linger on panels and moments. This deliberateness is on particular display in sequences of mute panels, but his control of the reader's attention is just as sure when words are present. At the end of Part Three of *Clyde Fans*, for instance, Simon tenderly describes the objects in his mother's recently vacated bedroom, a restrained, sequence that goes on for nearly five pages (*Palookaville 19*, 90-94). This strange catalogue, the very appearance of which is somewhat unexpected, follows an unpredictable rhythm from page to page and panel to panel, sometimes concentrating on the merest detail of an instruction manual or pair of gloves, elsewhere glossing quickly over an entire cluster of items. In comics, as in other narrative media, pace is determined in large part by precisely this expert manipulation of audience expectations. Seth's other principal narrative device is discontinuous storytelling, in which fragments of quite varied length are gathered together without the benefit of a single, driving plot line. This fragmentary approach reaches an apotheosis in *Wimbledon Green* and *George Sprott*, though in the former it seems nearly accidental, a result of Seth's sketchbook process, whereas in the latter it is much more deliberate and refined, incorporated into the mode of narration in a way that is almost personal.

Though *George Sprott* is as saturated with regret as any of Seth's works, the figure most mired in the rhetoric of failure is not the book's eponymous protagonist, but rather its contrite narrator. The narrating voice of *George Sprott* is unmistakably distinct from that of Seth-as-author, though it could be read as a parody of his characteristic modesty, familiar to readers from other works (for instance, his introduction to *Wimbledon Green*). Where Seth typically comes across as humble and serene, *George Sprott's* narrator compulsively apologises for lapses in omniscience, emphasising the unreliability of the narration, which is characterised by false starts and amendments. The

idiosyncratic prelude to the book – a somewhat dreamy rumination on time and narrative sequence, discussed in Chapter 6 – is presented as a demonstration of “how little your narrator really knows.”

Soon after, on the page titled “A Fresh Start,” comprised of drawn photographs (fig. 2.8), the narrator seeks to begin again: “I must admit I have done a rather poor job of ‘setting things up’”. The page is peppered with such remarks, which, along with sketchy biographical details, appear as captions for the images; nearly half the images bear annotations that refer in some way to their own inadequacy. “As an omniscient narrator,” one caption reads, “I realize I leave much to be desired. Again, I apologize.” At the bottom of the page, after scattered highlights from George’s life have been related, the narrator decides that the present scrapbook introduction is not succeeding: “Damn! This is no good! I’ve entirely failed to give you any of the flavour of these events. I’m sorry. And once again, I’ve imparted nothing ‘real’ about the man himself.” The final photo shows George Sprott’s headstone, which affords the narrator’s apologetic caption – “I’m so terribly sorry” – the suggestion of condolence.

Despite such conventional unreliability, the narrator is elsewhere articulate and insightful, as when describing George’s reflections on the death of his mother (fig. 4.5). The perspective is extremely flexible; the reader can never predict what the narrator will and will not know, which allows for genuine anticipation and surprise. In many ways, it is the narrator’s very fallibility, the failure to be omniscient in the usual sense, that gives



Fig. 4.5. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

the narration its unique strength and momentum. Often, this is accompanied by a certain sentimental attachment to George. Particularly in the depiction of George's final moments, the narrator betrays an aversion to the sensational, and a curious sense of decorum: "now that the moment has come...I find that I can't show it to you. It's too awful." Daisy Sprott confesses, "I was the one who found Uncle George when he died" before adding "I won't talk about that." The reader is shown the moment that precedes Daisy's discovery, but the final panel of the page detailing the minutes of George's death is unillustrated, white text on a black background: "I will spare you this scene as well." In such instances, the narrator emerges as a distinct personality, one who has an undetached affection and esteem for George and his family.

Many of Seth's other characters would benefit from such a benevolent presence, especially the Matchcard Brothers, who are left to tell their own stories and tend to be rather critical of themselves. One of the tragic through-lines of *Clyde Fans* is that the family business manufactures a product that is in many ways obsolete. By the 1950s, Abe tells the reader, air-conditioners were on the rise, but he "never foresaw the day when little offices or private homes would be able to afford such a machine" (*Clyde Fans* 47). He attributes this to a certain "wrongheadedness" that he and Simon share. Reminiscing about earlier years in the business, Abe says, "Something of the flavour of those times and those people...has been lost. I say this with a kind of sadness – and that is my great failing" (29, ellipsis in original). Abe sees his tendency to mourn for the lost past as a distinct failure, especially for a businessman who must always be looking ahead in order to succeed. "When you've built your life on the belief that progress is a good thing – it's particularly painful when that juggernaut paves you under" (47). Often in Seth's work it is the characters' livelihood that comes to seem obsolete. In *It's a Good Life* and *Wimbledon Green*, cartoonists are cast as an obsolescent breed. Those who

don't give up cartooning for a more lucrative trade frequently die broke or unacknowledged, their once-popular work now widely dismissed as old-fashioned and insignificant. In both books, it is the collector that redeems these obsolete objects by assigning great historical and monetary value to them (though countless stacks of comics are nevertheless consigned to landfills). Collections surface in *George Sprott* as well, some kept by attentive collectors and fans of George, others seen as worthless and callously discarded (like the CKCK video library, which comprised tapes of *Northern Hi-Lights* and other local programs).

In *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination*, Francesco Orlando pioneers a comprehensive approach to his subject, which is applicable at varying levels of complexity. Orlando's inquiry is a development of what he refers to as the "general postulate, of Freudian derivation," that literature is "the imaginary site of a return of the repressed" (5). Originally published in 1993 and translated into English in 2006, this substantial, systematic work of literary analysis is built around a highly elaborated, symmetrical semantic tree that diagrams possible contexts for and tensions among literary instances of "nonfunctional corporality." This tree yields twelve categories of nonfunctional corporality, such as "the threadbare-grotesque," "the sinister-terrifying" and "the prestigious-ornamental," illustrated by Orlando with examples spanning the full range of Western literature in works both familiar and obscure. His system is perhaps too schematic to be usefully adopted in its entirety, but the governing principals of his analysis may serve as reliable points of reference. Literature, like dream-life, is understood as a field of repressed impulses, a repository of the irrational and immoral. Orlando suggests that literature is also particularly suited to accommodating a return of the "antifunctional" repressed (7), which is to say the obsolete.

As his term “non-functional corporality” suggests, the failure of the obsolete body is the failure to function, a failure which is directly related to the passage of time. Many of Seth’s characters value objects precisely because of their age or clumsy corporeality. Orlando explains:

what is called into question is an ambivalence intrinsic to the relationship – for human beings – between things and time. Time uses up and destroys things, breaks them and reduces them to uselessness, renders them unfashionable and makes people abandon them; time makes things become cherished by force of habit and ease of handling, endows them with tenderness as memories and with authority as models, marks them with the virtue of rarity and the prestige of age. (Orlando 11)

In Seth’s work, a counterpart to obsolescence is the seeming degradation or vulgarization of the present – this degraded present can appear to characters as a failed version of the past, which leaves them longing for those earlier times. The personification (or, rather, caricature) of this longing is Jonah, the ultra-nostalgic egomaniac collector from *Wimbledon Green*, who refuses, even in his daily life, to admit objects that do not conform to his pre-1950 collection. Here, and in less extreme instances, the failure of obsolete objects to be relevant becomes a virtue.

### **An Honest Sort of Failure**

Financial failure hangs over nearly all of Seth’s work, occasionally coming to the fore and almost always looming somewhere in the background. In *George Sprott*, the various successes of the protagonist are rimmed by the hard times faced by many of the peripheral characters. There is the relative poverty of the small, northern town where George left his unacknowledged daughter and her young Inuit mother, having visited briefly during one of the “expeditions” on which he built his fame; there is the near-bankruptcy of Daisy Sprott’s arctic-themed literary journal, *Northwinds*; but most of all there is the general decline of Dominion City, where George lived and worked for much

of his life. The Dominion of George's prime has been largely eroded by the gradual (and seemingly inevitable) financial collapse of some its most distinctive landmarks: the local television station (where George was one of a gallery of personalities), the Coronet Lecture Hall (where George gave weekly talks for 35 years), and the Melody Grill (once a high-end spot for the "entertainment crowd" where George often held court). In time each place becomes a husk of its former self, usually in a futile attempt to stay solvent. Only the TV station remains, but in an unrecognizable form, while the lecture hall and restaurant have nearly disappeared from local memory.

Failed ventures are at the heart of *Clyde Fans*, as well: in Part Four, Borealis Business Machines – the parts manufacturer acquired by Clyde Matchcard in his years at the helm of Clyde Fans – sinks into utter bankruptcy despite the efforts of Abe Matchcard to keep it afloat (*Palookaville* 20). On the eve of a public announcement to the plant's middle-aged employees, who are picketing in vain for a living wage, Abe tells his lawyer, "I have been running this place, Walter, since I was 29 years old... This bankruptcy represents complete personal failure for me" (ellipsis in original, 13). Taken out of context, this quote may seem expository, even heavy-handed, but it succinctly illustrates the significant link between individual and economic failure. The reader senses this link in Kalo's apparently practical decision to give up cartooning – "he just wasn't making any money on it" (*It's a Good Life* 154) – and even more acutely in Seth's depiction of the popular cartoonists of *Wimbledon Green*, almost all of whom end up penniless.

If this recurring circumstance in *Wimbledon Green* does not alert the reader to Seth's anxiety about the value of his chosen vocation, his introduction to the book certainly will. He sets out to lower expectations: "The drawing is poor, the lettering shoddy, the page compositions and storytelling perfunctory... The character designs are

gross and rubbery...Even I find some of the characters ugly. My apologies for all of this” (11). To say the least, this apology elicits an ambivalent response from the reader, who is not inclined to doubt its sincerity but is nevertheless faced with a book that abounds in Seth’s trademark elegance and gentle wit, and is buoyed by a sketchbook energy. Is this simply an instance of polite modesty, or does the author hold himself to unrealistically high standards? Perhaps both. David M. Ball identifies a comparable tendency in the work of Chris Ware, a “characteristic self-abnegation” (45), particularly when the cartoonist addresses his own work or comics as a medium. Ball places Ware in a literary tradition that stretches back to Melville: “American authors have long cultivated a self-conscious rhetoric of failure as a watchword for literary success, effectively transvaluing the meanings of success and failure in reference to their own writing” (46).

This specific type of rhetoric constitutes a deliberate strategy intended to sway the reader.<sup>4</sup> Especially in extra-literary contexts, Ware is certainly the foremost practitioner of this mode of heightened deficiency, but it is fairly common in contemporary comics. When, for instance, Daniel Clowes names a character “David Boring,” it could be considered a rhetorical ploy in this same vein, one which rewards an expectation of irony and cements the reader’s interest. The back page of *Palookaville 16* features columns of mini-advertisements and notices, one of which announces the availability of Part Two of *Clyde Fans* (collecting numbers thirteen through fifteen). The ad copy is characteristically ironic: “This time a middle-aged man (filled with dread) walks about silently for 70 more pages. The excitement knows no bounds!” (23).

Ware’s deployment of the rhetoric of failure, Ball argues, is a central component of his broader project: “not only to write comics with the texture and sophistication of

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<sup>4</sup> Here Ball’s use of the term rhetoric relies on “the distinction that is traditionally drawn between ‘natural’ and ‘rhetorical’ expression” (Richards 11).

literary fiction, but to have them treated as such” (46). The introduction to *Wimbledon Green* reads as an extension of this rhetoric, or even a playful homage to Ware’s persona. After all, Seth is not merely acquainted with Ware, *Wimbledon Green* is dedicated to him, and the title character “came together on a trip to London taken with Mr. Ware” (11). When examined together, Ware and Seth’s campaigns of self-disparagement take on the appearance of an inadvertent humility contest. Not surprisingly, Seth has anticipated this most basic of critical acts, the comparison, and pre-emptively deflected it with another humble aside: “certainly no one would mistake this gentle poking of the comics world with Mr. Ware’s profound and moving work” (11). It is true that Seth does not strain toward the profound in *Wimbledon Green*, but the book is nonetheless quite poignant at times.

With all this in mind, it will come as little surprise that Seth’s introduction to the 2001 re-issue of *Palooka-ville I* is disproportionately scathing. It begins: “If there’s one thing I’ve learned from my career as a commercial illustrator it’s that you don’t bad-mouth your own work. [...] I wish I could follow my own advice here – but this comic book is truly awful.” This is an unnecessarily harsh assessment, and it is hardly the only one; what follows reads more like a retraction than an introduction, filled with amusingly acid condemnations. “This work is not old enough to simply dis-own as youthful ineptitude. It clearly shows that only ten years ago I was an idiot.” Much of Seth’s bile is reserved for his younger self’s choice of story: an occasionally alarming anecdote about being the victim of a vicious homophobic assault. (Seth is not gay, but – seemingly on principle – lets his attackers believe he is.) While Seth’s later, fictional narratives are certainly more subtle and sophisticated, this early story is compelling in its own way and the illustration is already quite accomplished, with linework that is light, confident, and distinctive (fig. 4.6). Of course, this is not something that Seth would be

likely to concede: “when I pulled out the artwork to ready it for this edition,” he writes, “I was unprepared for the depth of hatred and shame I would feel toward it.”

Shame and self-loathing are minor hallmarks of Seth’s output, especially his autobiographical work, and can be found in comical abundance in a sketchbook account of his 2001 trip to an author’s festival in Calgary, included in *Palookaville 20*. Full of loneliness, feigned cheer and awkward encounters, these unpolished journal entries – not quite a series of anecdotes, certainly not a fleshed out story – seem to provide a window into Seth’s actual day-to-day life, untethered to the conventions of fiction. The trip ends on an appropriately hopeless note that somehow manages to sound like a punchline: Seth examines his reflection in a bus window and thinks, with certainty, “I hate myself...much more than anyone else in the world” (89, ellipsis in original). This was evidently a somewhat grim episode in Seth’s life, but rendered in comic book form his perceived shortcomings read like high comedy. In contemporary literary comics, nothing succeeds like failure.

Self-loathing is a familiar attribute of Seth’s characters as well, particularly the Matchcard brothers. In *Clyde Fans* it seems closely tied to the desire to hide, a “family



Fig. 4.6. Seth, *Palookaville 1: Special Re-issue* (Montreal: D&Q, 2001) 9.

trait” according to Abe (52). Unlike Simon, Abe has the ability to suppress this trait. “That was the central dilemma of my life – the sin of sociability. I could push down my fears, my hatred, my disgust. I could play the game.” He goes on to say that such performances were inevitably followed by self-loathing, his “penance” for going against his instincts (53). In a rare moment of esteem for his brother, Abe remarks that he “couldn’t help but admire Simon’s sheer inability to cope” (52), even as he resented him for it. Here failure becomes almost a principle, a refusal to “play the game” or engage with life on any terms but one’s own.

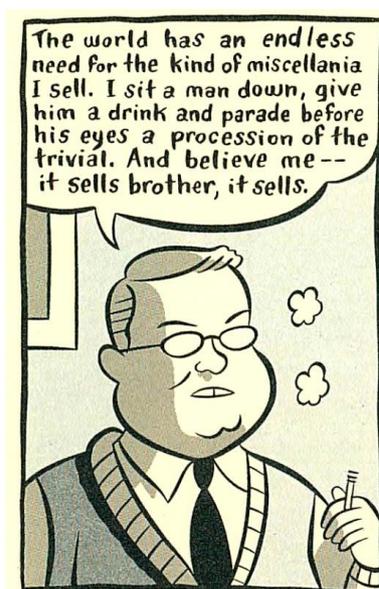
Of all Seth’s variously compromised characters, failure seems to cling to no one so steadfastly as it does to Simon. He appears at first as a finely wrought archetype, something of a loner, whose occasionally paralyzing inability to relate to people is familiar but by no means formulaic. As Abe suggests, his brother is coloured by an honest sort of failure, a failure that, once admitted, serves to shield and in certain respects even embolden Simon. After two unproductive days in an unfamiliar town, unable to bring himself to speak to his over-bearing brother by phone, Simon reaches out to a stranger, the owner of a general store on the outskirts of Dominion. He examines some penny postcards before asking, almost involuntarily, “Sir – did you ever feel that your every action, your every thought, was being scrutinized? As if an intense light was focused on you” (*CF* 150). The man’s response is dishearteningly obtuse but hardly surprising (fig. 4.7). Rebuffed in such unmistakable terms, Simon displays his bulky Clyde Fans sample case on the store’s front counter and half-heartedly makes a sales pitch, which is promptly declined. It is at this point that Simon’s failure seems to coalesce into a form of integrity – in a moment of quiet, apathetic triumph, he curtly pays for the postcards and leaves, abandoning the open sample case with the perplexed store manager.



Fig. 4.7. Seth, *Clyde Fans: Book 1* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 150.

Simon not only fails to make any sales of his own, but also fails to resist the transparent pitch of a fellow salesman and hotel neighbour, Whitey, who explains that he arrives in a town with trunks full of wares and works out of his hotel room. In conspicuous contrast to Simon – who has spent a demoralising day making entirely unsuccessful cold calls on foot – Whitey phones potential clients and they visit him in his room, just as he has invited Simon to do. Gregarious and verbose, Whitey displays his “procession of the trivial,” as he refers to it, with a carnival barker’s relish (fig. 4.8). His catalogue includes all manner of “novelties, souvenirs, knick-knacks, small housewares and related inexpensive goods” (124). Of this vast inventory of cultural detritus, Simon selects perhaps the most loathsome item on offer: a cheap toy distinguished only by its casual racism. Several pages before the reader discovers that Simon has given into this base consumer impulse (fig. 4.9), Whitey aptly describes the item as “a revolting trifle. When you open this celluloid watermelon – out pops a little pickaninny” (125).

The reader may be quite shocked to see the thing in Simon’s possession, but only briefly, for it also seems all too appropriate a souvenir of his trip. Why is this grotesque,



Figs. 4.8 and 4.9. Seth, *Clyde Fans: Book 1* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 124, 129.

cheap caricature at once so shocking and so at home in this story? Perhaps because, surprising as it initially is, it encapsulates so much failure. A failure of restraint and of taste on Simon's part, in many ways a characteristic failure of will; in a broader sense, a sudden failure of repression, a strangely cathartic instance where repression is broken through. Simon's decision to buy the toy constitutes a distinctly uncanny moment, when "beliefs which have been surmounted" – in this case, a warped, sentimental attachment to racial difference – "seem once more to be confirmed" (Freud, "The Uncanny" 249). As Whitey says of the toy watermelon, "to men of our intelligence this is a tawdry thing" (*Clyde Fans* 125) – and yet Simon feels compelled to have it.

This is consistent with Simon's other compulsive habits, such as repeatedly sketching the same group of abstract objects and obsessing over events from his past. Undergirding much of Seth's work is this other species of failure, a Freudian-inflected failure to resolve inner conflicts, which often shows itself in fixed patterns of behaviour. The characters' compulsive tendencies frequently find expression in the act of collecting, though a wide range of fixation is evident. In *It's a Good Life*, for instance, Seth describes "two very mundane and potent childhood memories" that he repeatedly returns to, especially when depressed (11-12), and throughout the book the reader sees evidence of this habit of placing himself in familiar or reassuring circumstances. Annie, the nervous hoarder who lives amid accumulated detritus in her motel room, compulsively stutters over the pronoun "I" and has a weak grasp of conventional social boundaries. Seth is initially unsettled by his encounter with Annie, but he ultimately seems to recognize something of himself in her, leaving a kind note on her door when he checks out.

On the other end of the spectrum are the very social habits and routines of George Sprott, many of which span decades: his weekly TV show, as well as his weekly

talk at the Coronet Lecture Hall, both of which revisit ad infinitum the series of trips he took north. Like Simon Matchcard, George Sprott spends much of his life reliving a set of early experiences; unlike Simon, George has managed to parlay these rehearsals into a livelihood. Nevertheless, even George inevitably loses momentum and the reader finds that his interior life is characterised by regret. Here the fundamental ambivalence again discloses itself: the past is lamented even as it is fervently recalled. The repeated thoughts and actions of Seth's obsessive collectors, compulsive nostalgics and introspective neurotics reveal the ultimate impossibility of actual repetition, of redoing, of redressing past failures.

In Seth's work, character is delineated as much by failure as by accomplishment – or, more precisely, by the distance between the two, by the sobering irony of unfulfillment. This irony reflects a Chekhovian attitude to failure that is both ambivalent and fundamentally humane. Chris Ware's extra-literary rhetoric of failure, as Ball observes, “maps his characteristic ambivalence toward the very notion of ‘graphic literature’” (47); Ware deploys this rhetoric to great effect in reference to his own work as a means of addressing the low expectations associated with comics. By comparison, Seth's rhetoric of failure seems less tactical. It is similarly bound up with an overarching ambivalence, but it has less to do with his own literary status than with broader notions of worth and what constitutes a good life. It is part of an aesthetic tendency in his work toward attentiveness, second looks, and re-evaluation. Davies claims that Chekhov is not interested in salvation – if so, it is here that Seth breaks with Chekhovian tradition. There is a sense of inbetweenness, of constant vacillation, in Seth's work, but also a strong impulse to save. Despite his unmistakable “twilight tone,” Seth is, ultimately, concerned with salvation, with “the redemption through artistic euphoria of the painful

or the ugly” (Orlando 11). In Seth’s work, the reader repeatedly witnesses an ambivalent transmutation of clay into gold: failure develops in the direction of ambivalence, until finally it coincides with its opposite. Though such inversions are not stable, the antifunctional repressed briefly becomes the antifunctional redeemed.

# II

## Continual Crossing

## 5

# RETURN, REPETITION, AND OTHER AMBIVALENT IMPULSES

Seth's work is full of homecomings. *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* is structured around several returns to several different homes; the Matchcard family home is the central space of *Clyde Fans*, to which the story always returns; when Wimbledon Green loses his memory, the reader discovers that he is most at home traveling on the open road, as he did in his youth. In one way or another, all of Seth's narratives are inflected with a nostalgia that brings to mind Svetlana Boym's description of the original 17th-century ailment: "Nostalgia operated by an 'associationist magic,' by means of which all aspects of everyday life related to one single obsession" (4). However, though many of Seth's characters seem obsessed in this way, their nostalgia is only one strand in a much larger network of impulses, which this chapter designates as "ambivalent" based on Freud's observation that obsessive neurosis is "derived from *ambivalent* impulses" (*Totem and Taboo* 35-36, emphasis in original).

Ambivalence, which Hayden White has called "the great discovery of Freud" (2012), is in most cases not a self-evident concept. When Freud uses the term ambivalence, he is typically making specific reference to "ambivalence in love-relationships". He lists ambivalence among the preconditions of melancholia (a close cousin to nostalgia), one of the principal features that distinguishes it from ordinary mourning ("Mourning and Melancholia" 250-51). Although this investigation does not subscribe to psychoanalysis in its entirety, it does find in Freud's writing a very rich vein of speculation that may be applied to the study of literature. This literary dimension is

particularly strong in his essay “The Uncanny,” through which this chapter is ultimately able to propose some significant relations between ambivalent impulses.

### **Un-Disordering Ambivalence**

Zygmunt Bauman opens *Modernity and Ambivalence* with this preliminary description: “Ambivalence, the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category, is a language-specific disorder: a failure of the naming (segregating) function that language is meant to perform” (1). This definition may at first seem slightly too narrow to be useful in a comics studies context, since Bauman uses the term “language” in the most familiar sense, to denote words, speech and naming. The present discussion of ambivalence inclines toward a broader conception of language, such as that expressed by David Lodge when he states that “narrative is itself a kind of language that functions independently of specific verbal formulations” (4). Bauman’s description of the naming function of language, however, is not completely at odds with accounts that attempt to accommodate the nonverbal. His emphasis on segregating suggests that he is more concerned with what words *do* than what they *are* (a distinction that seems implicit in the Saussurean idea of the arbitrariness of the sign). “To classify,” Bauman says, “means to set apart, to segregate” (1). In this sense, it is possible to conceive of language as a system of segregations – a fairly permissive but also potentially productive understanding that extends beyond strictly verbal formulations.

Bauman goes on to claim that “It is because of the anxiety that accompanies it and the indecision which follows that we experience ambivalence as a disorder”. Is it possible to un-disorder ambivalence, to experience it without anxiety, but at the same time to retain something of its fundamental tension? Not, that is, to re-order or resolve ambivalence, but to preserve and even enjoy it in a sublimated form? In short: yes. One

of the implicit claims of this chapter is that such sublimation is regularly achieved through narrative and literature, in which ambivalence expresses itself not as anxious disorder but as dramatic conflict and textual tension. There is a hint of Aristotelian catharsis in this notion, though that affinity does not take the analysis very far. This account of ambivalence in literature has more in common with the “general postulate” introduced in the previous chapter, which undergirds Orlando’s examination of obsolete objects (5). As Orlando explains, this general postulate holds that literature is

the imaginary site of a return of the repressed. In other words, it assumes that literature is either openly or secretly concessive, indulgent, partial, favorable, or complicit towards everything that encounters distancing, diffidence, repugnance, refusal, or condemnation outside the field of fiction. (5)

Indeed, the idea of sublimated ambivalence is not just comparable to but in fact directly related to the return of the repressed. Ambivalence is often refused and condemned, diagnosed as disorder, but more than this it governs the return of the repressed, i.e. the fundamental inability of the repressed to remain so. “Constitutional ambivalence” – in Freudian terms, an ambivalent disposition that is not limited to a particular circumstance or love-relation – “belongs by its nature to the repressed” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 256-57).

At this point it may be appropriate to return to the notion of structural integrity. In Chapter 1, structural integrity was introduced as a way of thinking about an artist’s style, but it is also more literally applicable to the semiotic structure of comics, which is foregrounded in the following chapter. To glance briefly ahead: much of what will be said about the structure of the medium is an elaboration of the claim that comics are constituted of tensions that arise from “the co-presence and interaction of various codes” (Hatfield, *Alternative Comics* 36). Jared Gardner identifies many of these tensions as binary – for instance, between text and image or pop culture and literature – and

maintains that “comics necessarily leave their binary tensions unresolved. It is at heart a bifocal form, requiring a double-vision on the part of reader and creator alike” (801). As regards Seth’s comics specifically, the inherent structure of his medium of choice is complemented by a vein of ambivalence that runs through his work at the level of narrative. *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* is notable for its ambivalent attitude toward history and autobiography. It might be viewed as Seth’s earliest sustained intervention into the history of cartooning, with his affectionate period fabrications exemplifying the temporal ambivalence that will become a hallmark of his work. This “temporal ambivalence” corresponds with Boym’s less clumsy and more specific term, “reflective nostalgia.”

Ambivalence is itself a relatively new term, only about a hundred years old, which originally appeared in psychological literature. “Ambivalency,” according to the *OED*, was first described as “a condition which gives to the same idea two contrary feeling-tones and invests the same thought simultaneously with both a positive and a negative character.” In its emphasis on simultaneity, ambivalency provides a counterpart to Bauman’s ambivalence, which is more concerned with language than with time. However, Bauman’s apt pairing of modernity and ambivalence does call to mind the simultaneity of perspectives found in Modernist art and literature – work that is contemporaneous with the flourishing of ambivalence as a condition.

Etymology aside, this investigation does not find the definition of “ambivalency” particularly productive, and instead favours Linda Hutcheon’s more recent account of ambivalence. In her engagement with modernism and postmodernism, Hutcheon cogently describes ambivalence as “the desire to be on both sides of any border, deriving energy from the continual crossing” (*Canadian Postmodern* 162). In this sense, ambivalence can be understood as a product of what Bauman calls “the master-

opposition between the inside and the outside” (53). This originary, subjectivity-forming tension between inside and outside significantly informs the structure of the comics page and the reader’s perception of it. As Mitchell observes, the concept of “meta” (which accommodates not only the metapicture and metafiction, but also autocritique and even reflective nostalgia) depends on this inside-outside structure. Bauman feels the need to add: “The outside is what the inside is not” (53). To take this seemingly tautological statement to its conclusion: a boundary automatically springs up between inside and outside – there can be no division without a dividing line. The continual crossing of this line (which, in comics, takes a particularised form in the movement from panel to panel) is what makes ambivalence such a generative force.

Lodge is describing this generative capacity when he observes that “paradoxically, indeterminacy of meaning leads to an *increase* of meaning, because it demands more interpretative effort by the reader than does traditional narrative” (143, emphasis in original). This so-called paradox is ambivalence in action; as a general rule, this investigation names ambivalence as the logic of literature (if not the governing principle of all communication). Whether or not a narrative is “traditional” – Lodge uses the term as a measure of the hermeneutic burden placed on the reader – the fundamental ontology of the literary work of art remains the same. The next chapter, in its development of several related semiotic arguments about the structure of comics, draws on Roman Ingarden’s ontological account of literature, in particular his notion of literary “spots of indeterminacy.”

Marjorie Perloff offers a complementary account of indeterminacy in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. She draws a distinction between two “rival strains” of Modernism, which she identifies as the Symbolist or “High Modern” and the “Other Tradition” (33). This other Modernist tradition includes poets like Gertrude Stein,

William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, and is characterised by what Perloff calls “the mode of undecidability” (44).<sup>1</sup> Without attempting to clumsily map an account of poetry onto a discussion of comics, it may be useful to borrow Perloff’s evocative concept and suggest that Seth’s work sometimes operates within the mode of undecidability, a mode which entails a particular attitude toward images. As noted in Chapter 1, Seth observes that comics are “closer to poetry and graphic design” than to other forms. This surprising and perceptive pairing suggests that the poetry he has in mind is particularly modern (even Modernist) in its approach to the image. In Perloff’s description, undecidability challenges the reader to approach images on their own terms, as opposed to reading them for symbolic meanings. She quotes Rene Magritte on the inherent “mystery of the image” and the responses it evokes (Perloff 44). Perhaps the most obvious instances of the mode of undecidability in Seth’s work can be found in his compelling dream sequences, which avoid straightforward symbolism (more on this below).

### **Types of Ambiguity**

Undecidability and indeterminacy are extremely useful terms, but the study of ambivalence in literature has been dominated by a far more familiar word: ambiguity. Though this chapter uses William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* mostly as a point of departure, it remains a significant touchstone. For Empson, ambiguity refers to “any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language” (19). This description of ambiguity appears to align with Bauman’s account of ambivalence as a disorder of language – but it would nevertheless be careless to conflate the terms. Though the two are very closely related, ambivalence and

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<sup>1</sup> In *Ezra Pound and the Making of Modernism*, William Pratt goes so far as to suggest that “Imagism, the movement [Pound] launched in 1912, was the beginning of what came to be called Modernism” (5).

ambiguity are not quite interchangeable. How, then, do they relate? With regard to literature, perhaps the most precise statement would be that ambiguity arouses ambivalence in the reader.

Figuratively speaking, a literary work might be described as ambivalent; aspects of the work may appear to reveal some authorial ambivalence; within the world of the work, a character can behave in manner that seems to indicate ambivalence; but ultimately a work cannot be ambivalent in and of itself. In her essay “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern” Hutcheon keenly observes that irony and nostalgia are not qualities that exist in objects, to be perceived, but rather are phenomena that observers “make happen” (see Chapter 8 for more). The same is true of ambivalence, which should be understood as something that happens rather than a property of a work.

In a literary context, ambivalence is an impulse that this investigation attributes to readers, a desire to make sense of perceived ambiguity. Whether or not an author deliberately intends a literary detail to be ambiguous, the reader may read it as such. (As noted in the next chapter, one of the distinguishing features of the ontology of the literary work of art is the interweaving of countless spots of indeterminacy; in this way, the literary work is a fabric of potential ambiguity.) Nonetheless, Seth seems particularly adept at subtly fostering ambiguity and stoking the reader’s ambivalence.

Each ambiguity constitutes an opening into which rushes the animating ambivalence of the reader. This is as true for a pun (a particularly distinct instance of Empson’s third type of ambiguity) as it is for a complex arrangement of panels on a comics page. Needless to say, a comics page can easily accommodate both verbal and visual ambiguities, or even combine them in a meaningful way (this kind of combination sometimes appears in the fold-out pages of *George Sprott*). No doubt an exploration of the various types of ambiguity unique to comics could fill a book modelled after

Empson's; this is not the place for a comprehensive new typology, but some suggestive types are examined below with examples from Seth's work.

If the panel is the base unit of the comics systems, then it is not surprising that one of the most common sources of ambiguity in comics is an ambiguous transition between panels. What McCloud calls a non sequitur transition, "which offers no logical relationship between panels whatsoever" (72), is acutely ambiguous, but transitional ambiguity can occur in any of the transitions that he identifies in *Understanding Comics*. Every transition between panels holds the potential for ambiguity, but this is such a fundamental convention of the medium that it often goes unnoticed. Throughout *George Sprott*, Seth massages conventions, quietly cultivating ambiguity, and the scenes often feel more fresh and immediate as a result. In one of the book's unnarrated sepia sequences, titled "July 10 1904," an unframed panel shows young George Sprott running in the empty space of the page; this image (the only unframed image on the page) is directly followed by one of Seth's heavy black text plates (fig. 5.1). It is soon revealed that this text is dialogue, the shouted taunt of another boy. The narrative pace and the context provided by the surrounding panels allow this moment to remain an unobtrusive



Fig. 5.1. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

part of an overall sequence, but this is in fact a rather ambiguous transition between atypical panels. The words – “Hey Smelly!” – appear abruptly at the end of a row of panels, followed at the beginning of the next row by an image of George braking on his heels. Even if only for a split second, the reader stops short along with the protagonist, caught off guard by a sudden verbal interruption. The row that this interruption completes seems to exemplify Seth’s comparison of comics to poetry and graphic design, and the rhythmic progression of images inclines toward abstraction in a manner that could be described as Modernist.

Rhythmic movement from panel to panel has a significant effect on the reader’s perception of duration – how much time is represented within a panel – which is similarly loaded with potential ambiguity. Seth-as-protagonist spends much of *It’s a Good Life* on the move, walking around one town or another, and to a great extent this steady walking pace informs the reader’s sense of panel duration (see Chapter 3 on urban perambulation). The eye seems to follow Seth from panel to panel, even though it is the very movement of the eye that produces the apparent movement of the character across the page. “Each new panel,” Groensteen observes, “hastens the story and, simultaneously, holds it back” (*System of Comics* 45). The reader responds to “this double maneuver of progression/retention” (45) and determines the cadence of the narrative, often unconsciously. When the protagonist is at rest, however – or absent entirely from the page, as in the sequence showing the changing seasons – the durational ambiguity of the panels increases considerably. With fewer rhythmic cues, the reader must decide how long to look at each panel. Both transitional and durational ambiguity are particular varieties of a more general type of ambiguity unique to comics, which might be identified as spatio-topical ambiguity.

Another general type is diegetic ambiguity, in which the narrative implications of a convention of the medium are left open to interpretation. Seth's deployment of the speech bubble provides some specific examples of diegetic ambiguity. For instance, what is the status of speech issuing from a character that is alone in a scene? In the first part of *Clyde Fans*, Abe Matchcard seems to address the reader directly, but this could conceivably be read as a depiction of Abe talking to himself, thinking aloud. The speech bubbles in this sequence could also be understood as an engaging representation of Abe's purely interior life, externalised for the benefit of the reader (seventy pages of thought bubbles would strike a different tone entirely). The later parts of *Clyde Fans* contain even greater speech-related diegetic ambiguity, particularly those scenes in which Simon talks not only to himself but to inanimate objects – and they respond. What exactly is being represented when Simon's toys speak? Is Simon speaking aloud to himself, or is something else taking place? However the reader reads this ambiguity, Seth has eerily collapsed the distinction between Simon's interior and exterior worlds.

Simon is often portrayed as a bundle of ambivalent impulses – one evening brimming with optimism and determination, the next disgusted with himself for indulging in such feelings – and from moment to moment the outward manifestation of these impulses is hesitation and doubt. His uncertain, occasionally inexplicable behaviour makes him one of Seth's most compelling creations; there is ambivalence at the core of all of Seth's characters, but Simon is an extreme case, with an array of very conspicuous, eccentric behaviours. As the *Clyde Fans* series develops, Seth gradually overlays Simon's fairly typical reclusive tendencies with more specific traits, while at the same time portraying his idiosyncratic inner life with striking sequences that mingle dream, fantasy and memory. This is one of Seth's great, understated achievements: in Simon Matchcard he has rendered an utterly convincing unconscious. There is much

strangeness here, but none of it gives the impression of being weird for weird's sake. Dream sequences are governed by a sturdy but elusive interior logic, conveyed with the same unsensational composure as the less remarkable aspects of Simon's life. His failure to relate normally to people is not made explicable, but rather is compellingly contextualised. From behind his unassuming facade, Simon emerges as a singular figure, richer in some respects than Abe, inscrutable and a conduit for the uncanny.

One of the more tangible of Simon's behaviours is his rather obsessive, compulsive sketching habit, which is ambivalently productive (in the sense of being prolific, but creatively stagnant). Simon's odd drawings refract some of the reader's attention back onto the medium of comics, which often requires the cartoonist to repeatedly draw the same images over and over again. Simon's sketches are numerous (and numbered) but his subjects are few: trees, lighthouses, and beehives, each with their origin in Dominion. The trees are based on those that Simon discovers at the end of *Clyde Fans: Book 1*; the lighthouse recalls a picture from Simon's room at the Dominion Arms; the beehive is from a dream he had the night he spent there. The lighthouse and beehive in fact become linked fixtures of a recurring dream that is a maze of inside-outside relations, full of thresholds, windows, and doorways that open onto a version of Dominion (fig. 5.2). Though it is tempting to read Simon's sketching as an effort to make sense of the dream imagery, its purpose is unclear; less speculatively, the sketches constitute a return to Dominion. In this sense, the actual act of sketching becomes as important to Simon as the repeated subject matter. (The reader is also able to observe the way that Simon's eccentricities bleed into each other: he sketches while arguing with his row of toys, beneath the shelf of which are taped some of his drawings.)

The numbered sketches, drawn on the pages of a yellow legal pad, adorn the inside covers of *Palookaville 16* (beehives) and *17* (lighthouses). These pages show not

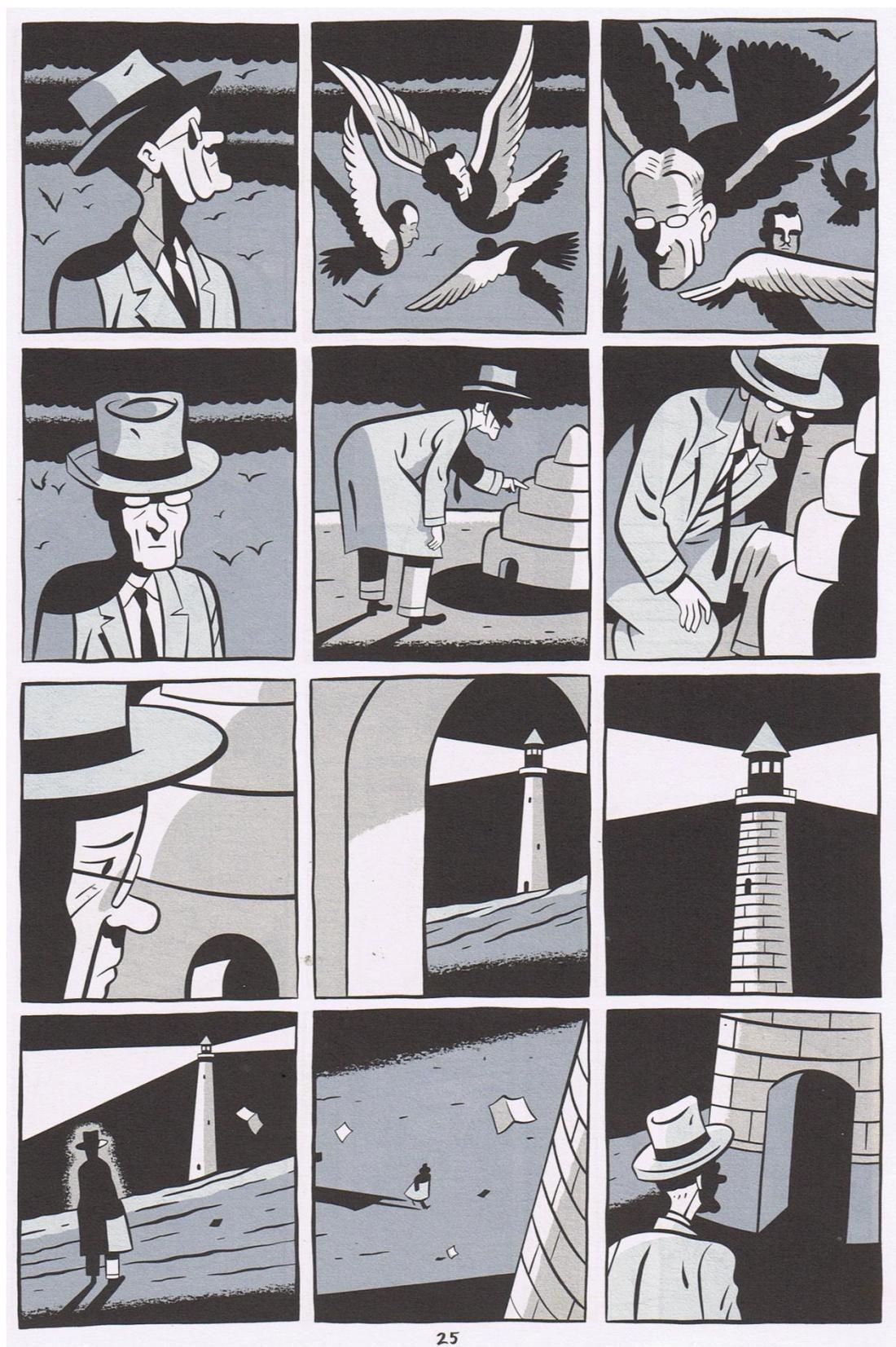


Fig. 5.2. Seth, *Palookaville 17* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 25.

simply mindless repetition, but rather ongoing variations on the forms (fig. 5.3). Through his sketches, Simon examines the images from multiple perspectives, experimenting and exhausting possibilities. Some sketches are more abstract than others, impenetrable cylinders or suggestive silhouettes. The beehive seems in some way to be a double of the lighthouse – both are conical forms that typically have an opening at the base and sometimes give off light. The possible significance of these shapes and their relation to each other remains obscure, operating, like Simon’s dreams, within the mode of undecidability. Numbering is the only apparent organising principle that Simon imposes, but it is enough to turn his compulsion into an ordered collection. (Simon’s various collections are examined in more detail in Chapter 7.)

George Sprott repeats himself in a different manner – he becomes a public figure – but his fame nevertheless derives almost entirely from return and repetition, the endless rehearsal of trips he made to the Canadian arctic. From a detached (and perhaps ungenerous) vantage point, George’s long-running lecture series and television show

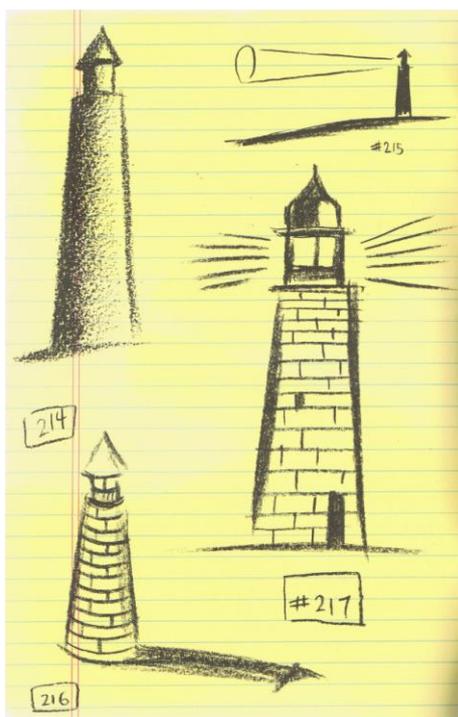


Fig. 5.3. Seth, *Palookaville 17* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) front inside cover.

seem to offer more than anything else a demonstration of redundancy. Significantly, Seth does not tell the story from this point of view. The distinctive narrator of *George Sprott* is not at all aloof or typically omniscient, recounting events with affection for the protagonist and unmistakable ambivalence with regard to the actual task of storytelling. As a result, the narration itself is occasionally redundant: on the page titled “A Fresh Start” (fig. 2.8), which contains mostly perfunctory biographical details and dates, the narrator refers to George’s death in 1975 – and then mentions it again (fig. 5.4).

Here Seth’s playful approach provides an exaggerated illustration of Groensteen’s observation that “redundancy is a principle of the vast majority of comics” (115). Some of the characters “interviewed” in *George Sprott* are not as charitable as the narrator. A television colleague, who identifies himself as a good friend, warmly recalls that “George was a crashing bore.” Far less warm is the damning testimony of Jimmie Freeze, a cartoonist who accompanied George on his first expedition in 1930.<sup>2</sup> His recollections of the trip are not fond, and he does not care to return to them by means of George’s TV show. “He tried to bring me on air a few times, but I always brushed him off,” Freeze says. “I had no desire to rehash all that hogwash.”



Fig. 5.4. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

<sup>2</sup> Fans of Seth will recognize the character as a homonymous double of Jimmy Frise, the creator of a well-regarded but largely forgotten strip, *Birdseye Center*. In the glossary of *It's a Good Life*, Seth describes Frise as “Undoubtedly the finest Canadian cartoonist of the past” (180).

### Developing in the Direction of Ambivalence

Ambivalence features significantly in Seth's account of the creative process, especially his revealing description of

that strange thing that happens when you're working which is that you start to develop an idea that this is really good, what you're working on, that it's really great, that it's the best thing you've ever done...and then you take the mood swing to where it's the worst. 'It's terrible, how can I even release this?' And I think that kind of combination between the two is important, to keep the work in balance. (Appendix B 325).

Ambivalence toward one's work – which is not critical objectivity but rather the competition between two polarised subjective responses – becomes a defining part of building stories. However, in addition to this general, productive ambivalence, Seth also betrays a more focused ambivalence toward particular aspects of his work. Troubled by the possibility that over time his books will seem wanting in ways he can't foresee, he admits, "I'm already aware of certain elements in my own work that I can't control" (Appx. B 332). One of these elements is what he refers to as a "mannered quality," which in the previous chapter on style was considered as a "double move" with regard to authenticity/artifice, the very appearance of ambivalence in Seth's work. This is mentioned together with another, possibly related quality: Seth curiously remarks that at times his work is "sort of fey in a way that I don't like" (332). Part of what makes this self-criticism intriguing is the notion that his work is in some sense beyond his control. The implication is that Seth is simply compelled to tell certain stories in certain ways, acting on ambivalent impulses. Obviously, this investigation does not regard the mannered and fey tendencies of Seth's work as defects; indeed, in some instances they may even be thought of as peculiar strengths, and certainly as points of interest.

For instance, *George Sprott*, despite the unpredictability of its narrator, has a stately quality that is attributable to more than just its sheer physical size. Like its title character, it exhibits a kind of grandeur that borders on grandiosity (in fact, the book

often fares better than the man in this regard). The composite narrative proceeds at a measured pace, with lots of still intervals and page titles like “And So, Here We Are” and “Merrily We Roll Along.” There is much to consider for the detail-oriented reader as well, moments in which the eccentricity of the narration recedes and what remains is a distilled, distinctive voice. After describing the gradual decline of a once-successful restaurant, the Melody Grill, the narrator offers a closing speculation: “In a few years, you may notice that it has been boarded up. And even if you pause to consider it, you will be hard-pressed to pinpoint just when it passed from the living to the dead.” There is something in this pre-emptive epitaph that is slightly ponderous (something perhaps in the deliberate phrasing) but quite compelling. In these moments, it becomes clear that the term *mannered* can describe not only the material appearance of Seth’s work, but all aspects of the storytelling in general.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that Seth’s storytelling is overwhelmingly *mannered*, that this is the prevailing tone of his work. But at times there is an almost cumbersome, vaguely anachronistic quality that simultaneously captivates and holds the reader at a distance. This rhetorically potent tension is also present in the cartooning shorthand of comics (e.g. onomatopoeia, action lines, sweat beads), though most of these techniques have become so familiar that their distancing effect seems much diminished. *George Sprott* is something of technical laboratory, in which Seth continually experiments with the conventions of the medium. The book’s elaborate fold-out section abandons naturalism entirely in favour of a somewhat modernist narrative approach in which the repetition of images and phrases creates a hypnotic approximation of the rhythms of memory. Seth’s forays into more experimental territory offer a clearer view of the *mannered* quality of his work, which is less noticeable against the background of more straightforward sequences. (Both his experimental storytelling and

his mannered storytelling might be contrasted with the naturalistic “realism” of works like *Ghost World* or Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings*.) The word “mannered” generally indicates some stylistic affectation, but Seth’s remarks suggest that his mannerisms are involuntary. As noted above, Seth also identifies as beyond his control a slight tendency toward the otherworldly, a “sort of fey” quality that exists on the same aesthetic spectrum as the macabre and the uncanny.

In the previous chapter, the uncanny was briefly addressed with regard to Simon Matchard’s failure to resolve inner conflicts, but a fuller account of how the uncanny relates to nostalgia and other ambivalent impulses in Seth’s work was absent from that discussion. The uncanny shares many defining characteristics with nostalgia: both revolve around the home and concern that which is *heimlich*, ambivalently familiar and private (Freud, “The Uncanny” 222-23). Freud observes that “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until finally it coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*” (226). Homesickness, or *heimweh*, is a similar sub-species, a longing for that which is *heimlich*.

Never simply strange or foreign, the uncanny is “a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar” (Royle 1). This intrinsic ambivalence often manifests as uncanny doubling or compulsive repetition, the repeated return of the repressed. Return is the engine of nostalgia as well as the uncanny. Whereas the latter constitutes an unexpected return *of* the past, the former is a longing for the impossible return *to* the past; in each instance, the past is *heimlich*. Not unlike nostalgia, the uncanny “leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud, “The Uncanny” 220). However, this is just one component: one of the keys to Freud’s account of the uncanny is his explanation that “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and

hidden but has come to light” (225). Boym characterises nostalgia in very similar terms when she notes that “*nostos* is connected to the Indo-European root *nes*, meaning return to light” (7). The uncanny, as Susan Linville suggests, can be considered “a double of nostalgia” (27).

Just as nostalgia extends beyond Johannes Hofer’s original medical definition, the uncanny ultimately “overflows psychoanalysis” (Royle 24). At the beginning of his essay, Freud admits that the uncanny is somewhat outside the psychoanalyst’s area of expertise (219). He classifies it more as an aesthetic phenomenon, “undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror” (219), to what in literature is often identified as the Gothic. According to Orlando’s general postulate, Gothic literature might be understood as a field of repressed impulses related to death. In his work on the genre, Robert Mighall argues that the Gothic is in a broader sense “about history and geography” (xiv), that it is “an attitude to the past and the present” (xxv), and in these respects it is well within sight of nostalgia.

What Seth refers to as “fey” is not synonymous with the Gothic, but the generic category serves as a useful point of departure and it is probably fair to classify *Clyde Fans* as Southern Ontario Gothic (more on this in Chapter 8, which engages explicitly with the national/regional dimensions of Seth’s work). Simon Matchcard personifies the fey aspects of Seth’s storytelling and is certainly the best example of what the sort-of-Gothic looks like in his work. A brief, extraordinary sequence at the end of *Palookaville 17* finds him descending into a paranoid nightmare that seems to grow exponentially stranger with each panel. There is an existential undercurrent to the scenario, something almost Kafkaesque, but that comparison does not quite convey the unique tone of the episode, in which Simon becomes convinced he is being watched and hides in a crack in the wall (fig. 5.5). “Here’s where things make no sense,” Simon says. “That tiny crack



Fig. 5.5. Seth, *Palookaville 17* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 46.

was no wider than three-quarters of an inch. Nevertheless, like a paper novelty I folded up, layer by layer, edge to edge, and eased myself into that dark space” (46). This is related from Simon’s point of view and is not presented as a dream sequence or hallucination. The plainspoken, almost quaint language – “a convenient crack in the wall” – is perfectly pitched for mingling the everyday with creeping dread to achieve a positively uncanny effect. The very logic of the incident follows the ambivalent trajectory that Freud describes, as Simon seeks to make himself *heimlich* i.e., concealed, out of sight. “Inside, I continued to push back, away from those watchful eyes until I felt safe. Hidden” (*PVI* 7 46). This is a rare incident; for the most part, even the most conspicuous expressions of Simon’s ambivalence do not take such an overtly uncanny form.

A far more subtly ambiguous sequence appears at the very end of Part Two of *Clyde Fans*, just after Simon discovers his “enchanted place,” the hilltop stand of trees (155-56). He touches one of the trees, and then sits beneath it, his back against its trunk. What happens next is something of a puzzle: the last two panels of the page (and of *Clyde Fans: Book 1*) are visually very similar and yet at odds in their evocation of Simon’s emotional state (fig. 5.6). In the penultimate panel, Simon looks content and



Fig. 5.6. Seth, *Clyde Fans* (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 156.

relaxed, almost beatific, his head slightly raised, the thin line of his mouth tracing a mild, unforced smile. In the following, final panel, his head is bowed, his shoulders hunched, his mouth now a nervous squiggle (which is mirrored by his fluttering tie and a loose lock of hair on his forehead). Perhaps most significantly, his glasses have slipped down his nose to reveal that his eyes are closed. This panel raises a number of questions, both on its own and in relation to the preceding panel and the interceding gap between the two. How much time has passed between the two panels? What accounts for the shift in Simon's expression? Is he conscious in the final image, or has he slipped into an anxious sleep? What, ultimately, is Simon thinking? Some inscrutable change appears to have taken place between these two frozen moments, and it is left entirely to the reader to determine what has not been shown. Most gaps between panels ask questions that the reader is able to answer unconsciously, but this transition, emphasised by its position at the end of the book, urges a more attentive approach.

The inscription of borders and boundaries necessitated by the presence of panels on the comics page can be understood as a very particular, concrete visual expression of Bauman's master-opposition between inside and outside. The comics reader continually shuttles between the two spaces in an ambivalent manoeuvre that both advances and suspends the narrative. This generative ambivalence comprises what may be the defining semiotic operation of comics, but it is nevertheless only one specific way in which the medium accommodates ambivalence. Like all literature, according to Orlando's general postulate, comics narratives house a return of the repressed and are consequently suffused with ambivalent impulses.

Such impulses are at the heart of a distinctly modern family of phenomena that includes nostalgia (which as Boym observes is a longing for the repetition of the

unrepeatable) and the uncanny (in which the repressed returns in a form that is at once strange and familiar). Behind the repetitions and backward-looking preoccupations of Simon Matchcard, George Sprott and other characters is an ambivalent impulse to return. Seth's own ambivalent impulses as an author also reveal themselves, especially in those moments where the storytelling takes a fey or mannered turn. These aspects of the work tend to have a mildly alienating effect that at once attracts and repels, ensnaring the reader in an ambivalent impulse; in this way, they have much in common with the abundant ambiguities that constitute Seth's work.

Whether unique to the medium of comics (transitional, durational, diegetic) or observable across a range of literary forms (the mode of undecidability), ambiguity mobilises the ambivalence of the reader, which in turn reciprocally animates the text. The next chapter shifts the focus from ambivalence to gaps, in some respects building on Bauman's understanding of the segregating function of language and reconceiving the participation of the reader in terms of gutters and spots of indeterminacy in comics.

## 6

# FILLING THE GAPS: FRAGMENTATION AND COHERENCE

In *Alternative Comics*, Charles Hatfield identifies fragmentation and instability as native strengths of the medium. He argues that “comic art is composed of several kinds of *tension*, in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other” (36). The narrative structure of Seth’s books, particularly in his most recent work, reproduces these various tensions, reflecting the fractured yet unified surface of the comics page. This approach mimics, on the scale of a sustained narrative, the operation that occurs between comics panels, what McCloud calls “closure”. Mario Saraceni very clearly provides the context for this process:

If, in its simplest definition, a text is a sequence of discrete units, it follows that between every unit and the next, there occurs an interruption, of variable dimensions and significance, during which something is left out. The act of filling in any connections which are required is precisely what closure (or inference) can be thought of. As Umberto Eco observes, a text is intertwined with white spaces, interstices to be filled.

(Saraceni 175)

It bears repeating that there are many kinds of gaps in comics, more than in literature that does not incorporate drawing. Like most media, comics are multimodal – and possibly more multimodal than most. For every mode of communication featured in a comics sequence, there is a corresponding gap. Here Saraceni focuses on the concrete gaps between images:

In comics these white spaces are not only metaphorical but also physical, represented by the gap, called *gutter*, between one panel and the next. So, the mental process of filling in missing pieces of information is constantly active in the reader of comics. Of course, this is not always necessarily a particularly complex operation. In fact, most of the time *closure* can be described as an unconscious process on the part of the reader. (175)

Straightforward as this account is, however, it does not really explain in any detail the process to which it refers.

What is it that occurs between panels? For a detailed description, the most thorough source is still Groensteen's *System of Comics*. Groensteen explains that the gutter "marks the semantic solidarity of contiguous panels above all, both working through the codes of narrative and sequential drawings. Between the polysemic images, the polysyntactic gutter is the site of a reciprocal determination, and it is in this dialectic interaction that meaning is constructed, not without the active participation of the reader" (115). This description is dense with technical language, but not needlessly so, considering that Groensteen is attempting to dissect an invisible and almost instantaneous process. The "reciprocal determination" that takes place between images, the construction of meaning, does not actually require a visible gutter. Saraceni observes that occasionally panels "are not separated by a gutter but only by the borders of the panels. However, in these cases the division between panels retains its importance, since it does not depend on the actual amount of physical space but on the narrative hiatus between the panels" (175n). As has been stated previously in other terms, the panels and the hiatuses between them are interdependent.

### **An Art of Suggestion**

As Groensteen notes, each panel at once advances and suspends narrative movement. "The frame," he states, "is the agent of this double maneuver of progression/retention" (45). In this way, the frame is a kind of fulcrum between the diegesis of the panel and the intericonic void represented by the gap between panels. The surface of the comics page (or, more precisely, what Groensteen labels the spatio-topia) coheres around various framing functions, which are typically carried out by

literal frames that border images and make plain the gaps between them. An examination of the atypical instance, i.e. the frameless panel, may help to show the extent to which the coherence of the page depends on *implicit* framing.

One of the unnarrated sepia sequences in *George Sprott* features a number of frameless panels, in which a young George appears in isolation, almost as though he has stepped out of the diegesis and into the void of the gutter (fig. 6.1). A suggestive ground shadow gives these panels a hint of dimension, but George's environment – the richly rendered world of the narrative that persists in nearly all of the sequence's panels – has vanished along with the frame that normally contains it. For most readers, however, these intermittent gaps in George's backdrop will not disrupt the reading experience to any significant degree. Rather, they punctuate the sequence, lending emphasis and perhaps even a certain sense of timelessness to particular moments.

Even though these panels are frameless (and in this sense constitute a structural/narrative interruption), they are nevertheless surrounded by the frames of other panels and by the physical boundary of the page's edge; their status as panels and



Fig. 6.1. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

their position in the sequence is never really at risk because it is expected that the reader will automatically make sense of the empty spots. In theory, all of the panels in a sequence could be frameless (though Seth's work does not feature any such sequences), which would slightly increase the interpretive burden placed on the reader, but would likely not impede understanding of the narrative.

A somewhat obvious observation that may border on tautology: panels that have their own frames are also framed by the frames of adjacent panels. Indeed, it is this proliferation of frames that gives rise to the conventional gutter. "Bound to the contents that it encloses, the frame is no less attached to the frames that surround it" (Groensteen 43). Framing not only encloses a fragment of diegesis, insuring the integrity of the panel (Groensteen 25), it also structures the relations among panels. In this sense, "framing" refers not only to particular functions of visible borders but also to the context that the juxtaposition of images provides. Groensteen identifies six distinct functions of the frame, but these functions interact and overlap to such an extent that their detailed elaboration does not contribute much to this chapter.<sup>1</sup> Still, in his discussion of what he calls "the expressive function" of the frame, Groensteen astutely notes that "the frame of the comics panel can connote or index the image that it encloses" (49). In this way, framing can provide information about how to read and interpret a panel. The soft, cloud-like borders of the dream sequence panels in *It's a Good Life* offer a somewhat superficial example, though far more subtle and inventive techniques are available to the comics author. Seth's use of drawn photographs has already been discussed, as has his method of fragmenting a single, continuous image into contiguous panels. One of the most understated and effective examples of expressive framing, however, appears at the end of *Palookaville 19*, in the bedroom of Lily Matchcard.

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<sup>1</sup>The function of closure; the separative function; the rhythmic function; the structuring function; the expressive function; the readerly function (*System of Comics* 39-57). Groensteen himself admits: "The function of closure and the separative function are, in truth, nothing but the same function" (45).

“The frame,” Groensteen asserts, “is always an invitation to stop and to scrutinize” (54). In the final pages of *Palookaville 19*, Seth offers the reader scores of uniform frames, laid out in regular rows with text captions, which invite a very deliberate, attentive reading. The reader may choose not to accept this invitation, but will nevertheless be compelled to respond to it in some fashion – perhaps by skimming the pages casually and concentrating only on the most striking panels; perhaps by examining the images but generally ignoring the accompanying text; perhaps even by skipping the sequence entirely, flipping through to the very last page of *Palookaville 19*, where Seth opens up the page with a series of larger panels. Such atypical readings seem fairly unlikely, however, particularly for the reader who has arrived at this point in the *Clyde Fans* saga and is already accustomed to the measured pace of the ongoing story. In any case, the layout of the sequence and the events that precede it do not predispose the reader to inspect the illustrations but disregard the text; likewise, it would be effectively impossible for the reader to pore over the captions without immediately, almost involuntarily absorbing the images that they describe.

It seems probable that Seth intends this sequence to induce what he has referred to in interviews as “sublime boredom” (Appendix B 304), a borderline phenomenon that is always at risk of slipping into outright tedium. Sublime boredom is a feeling that will be familiar to admirers of Andrei Tarkovsky’s long, unbroken shots, or the experimental films of Michael Snow, or even the exhaustive scene-setting descriptive passages found in certain kinds of genre fiction. Seth suggests that sublime boredom, as he conceives it, is by no means a negligible feeling, though it does occupy a somewhat marginal field of experience, “a thin line between things that are interesting and dull” (quoted in Dunley). Of course, apparently self-evident descriptors like “interesting” or “dull” encompass many conventions, assumptions and subjective attitudes. Sontag strongly asserts that

“the charge of boredom is really hypocritical” and suggests that it masks another reaction:

There is, in a sense, no such thing as boredom. Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration. And the new languages which the interesting art of our time speaks are frustrating...our sensibilities may take time to catch up with the forms of pleasure that art in a given time may offer. (*Against Interpretation* 303)

For readers receptive to the pleasures of an intentionally slower pace, lingering gives way to luxuriating, time seems to slow to a soporific crawl.

For a film to achieve this effect, it must usually approximate a more static medium by significantly reducing camera movement and extending the length of time between cuts. Comics, in their fundamental immobility, are in some ways much better suited to cultivating stillness in storytelling. Even in the most quickly paced comic, the reader always has the option to linger on a particular panel or narrative moment. It is, in fact, more than just an option available to the reader – it is an imperative of the medium, a constant invitation to appreciate both the movement and stillness of the sequence of panels, and the tension between the two. (This is the double manoeuvre of progression/retention to which Groensteen refers.) The frustration that Sontag identifies might be regarded as the result of friction between two contrasting modes or sensibilities, the more familiar one based on forward narrative movement, the other an extension of the potential for stillness.

Stories and sequences in which “nothing happens” tend to emphasize setting and tone over action and progression. Such works can achieve a meditative quality that derives precisely from their ambivalence toward the advancement of the plot. This approach courts the reader’s indifference and seeks to cultivate the liminal state of mind that best accommodates reflection, reverie and reminiscence. Still, much depends upon the individual reader’s response, which remains basically unpredictable despite the

author's attempts to guide it. Some will be attuned to Simon's rhythms – indeed, some readers might find the annotated bedroom collection inventive and deeply satisfying – but it is not difficult to imagine those who will find his farewell to his mother dreary and overlong. In some ways, this sequence constitutes a significant authorial gamble on Seth's part, particularly since various lurid associations still cling to the medium of comics. By frustrating any expectation of hectic storytelling, Seth takes a marked turn away from the stereotype of disposable comics and toward something decidedly more contemplative. His work often requires close attention and is written to be read more than once. It meets that basic Wildean criterion voiced by Cyril in *The Decay of Lying*: “this is perhaps the best rough test of what is literature and what is not. If one cannot enjoy reading a book over and over again, there is no use reading it at all” (Wilde 784).

Here, again, the individual reader's capacity for enjoyment is paramount, and to imply that Seth's work places unusual demands on the “typical” reader of comic books is to make broad and unproductive assumptions. Is there such a thing as a typical reader, of comics, of poetry, of mass market fiction? What evidence is there that any particular reader will be more inclined to appreciate action-oriented comics? It is possible that some readers will put aside *Palookaville 19* in boredom (or frustration) and others will return to it with consistent enthusiasm, but what is more likely is that each reader will experience a range of reactions, not only over the course of multiple re-readings but also within a single reading. Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader* helps to frame this discussion in terms of the interdependent relations between reader and text:

To organize a text, its author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses. To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them. (Eco 7)

By this account, each text produces its own reader; indeed, “the text is nothing else but the semantic-pragmatic production of its own Model Reader” (Eco 10). This notion corresponds to the earlier suggestion (in Chapter 1’s discussion of authenticity) that Seth’s books teach the reader how to read them.

In this respect, the work with the highest learning curve – in other words, the work that makes the most demands on the reader – remains *Clyde Fans*, especially in its latter sections. Where Part Three, as discussed above, puts particular pressure on the reader’s attention span, Part Four tends to increase the “hermeneutic burden” with sequences that require a significant amount of deduction and supposition based on context and background information. The reader who picks up *Palookaville 20* without reading the previous ten installments is likely to be baffled by the opening sequence, which begins with a desperate dash around a city and ends in tears, all presented from the fragmented, first-person perspective of an unseen, unnamed narrator. Has someone died? Who is crying, and why? Even the devotee of *Clyde Fans* will experience some uncertainty – but this is one of the pleasures of the work, and of Seth’s work in general, which is punctuated by moments of carefully orchestrated disorientation. In such instances, when the interaction between cartoonist and reader is at its most suspended (and, arguably, most literary), the reader becomes aware of actively filling narrative gaps. This is somewhat out of the ordinary because, widely acknowledged as it is that “the role of the reader becomes of most importance in between panels” (Round 317), very often this action does not require a great deal of conscious effort.

Gaps automatically spring into existence as soon as multiple signs are placed in proximity; it might be said that juxtaposition is the fundamental (perhaps even inevitable) relation among proximate units in this system. Groensteen argues as much when he suggests that “the central element of comics, the first criteria in the

foundational order, is *iconic solidarity*” (*System of Comics* 18). The simultaneous fragmentation and coherence of images on the comics page relies on their sequential juxtaposition. Barbara Postema goes so far as to suggest that the “construction based on juxtaposition makes the sequential form of the comic into the narrative form of images *par excellence*” (495). If this is so, then it is the visible narrative hiatuses generated by the juxtaposition of images that give comics their preeminent narrative potential.

However, this distinguishing feature – the gutter – can overshadow the other, less concrete gaps that also structure comics, for instance the various kinds of distance that exist between word and image. Groensteen quotes Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre on the “temporal gap between the perception of the image, which is almost global and quasi-simultaneous, and the course of verbal signs, which is slower and in all cases more gradual” (quoted in *System of Comics* 132). (Seth deploys this tension to particular effect in a wordy sequence in Lily Matchcard’s bedroom at the very end of *Palookaville* 19.)

The gaps that comics most share with traditional literature are those “spots of indeterminacy” – gaps in the represented world – that Ingarden identifies as a crucial aspect of the ontology of the literary work of art, and which contribute significantly to what readers experience as the reality of the work. In comics, spots of indeterminacy and concrete gaps between images are by no means the same, but to some extent they may be considered functions of each other and often seem to overlap. Not every literary spot of indeterminacy in a comics narrative can be located in the gutter – though it is the rare gutter that does not constitute a spot of indeterminacy. To take a simple example from Seth’s work: *Wimbledon Green* never offers the reader an image of the title character’s mother, but this does not necessarily lead the reader to imagine her in the spaces between panels. Her physical appearance is indeterminate, but not in the same way that,

for instance, Wimbledon Green's movement from one illustrated location in a panel to another in an adjacent panel is indeterminate.

Panels aside, spots of indeterminacy are also present in the very fabric of the cartoon medium. The most obvious point of contrast is the photographic medium, which offers images of an entirely different texture and type. "Reading comics," Stephan Packard suggests, "is among other things about mending the indexical lack of graphic signs" (115). This is one of the ways in which the reader is expected to "go beyond" the image in a panel, even before contending with the lack between panels. Seth does not shy away from the cartoon extremes of the medium, using action lines, simplified facial expressions and other such techniques with great dexterity and even subtlety. In Seth's work, cartoonish modes of expression combine with rich, delicate ink illustrations to produce a very potent visual tension that underscores the emotional range of the narratives. Lefevre notes that "For the French comics scholar Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, the comics medium is an art of suggestion, not of mimesis" ("Medium-Specific Qualities" 29). In his evocative approach to narrative, especially with respect to the conventions of the medium, Seth frequently exemplifies the art of suggestion.

### **Panels as Gaps**

Sometimes Seth incorporates gaps into his sequences in a way that exceeds the expected spaces between panels: in certain instances, panels themselves serve as gaps, solid black voids. Such gaps do not behave in the same way as the negative spaces of the gutter, which tend to lead the reader's eye to the next image, operating as a steady force for forward momentum. Rather, these solid black panels tend to suspend narrative movement, operating as pauses. Readers may not be inclined to linger over these pauses, as they are often positioned in the corners of pages, which can make them easier to

overlook or regard as mere space fillers. Nevertheless, when they appear amid Lily Matchcard's cluttered items, they stand out as noticeable blank spots.

Far more common than these solid black panels are Seth's distinctive text plates, black panels with white block text, which appear with increasing regularity over the course of his career. In *Wimbledon Green*, they often serve as transitional panels; in *George Sprott*, they usually contain dates, sound effects and fragments of speech or thought. In *Palookaville 20*, these panels are used extensively and, it seems, exclusively to depict thoughts. The opening pages of Part Four of *Clyde Fans* establish the technique of interspersing terse text plates with more conventional panels depicting illustrated action (fig. 6.2). These illustrated panels show disjointed images from a first-person perspective, so the black text plates produce a strong blinking effect, which structures the sequence and determines its sporadic rhythm. With regard to what might be labeled tempo, the text plates offer something of a counterpoint to the standard panels. Though both provide fragmented narratives, the illustrated part of the narrative moves at a hurried pace, even depicting the narrator's feet as he races from one location to another. By contrast, the choppy text covers little ground: "I remember the sound of my feet on the pavement as I ran, and turning the corner, blood rushing in my ears, like wind through a canyon. And I remember he wasn't there" (1). These two short sentences are spread out over an entire page in fragments, mingled with fragmentary images that also contain various kinds of text. These multiple layers of text interact with each other in a way that is ultimately at the discretion of the reader. The foremost layers are the text plates and the onomatopoeia of the illustrated panels; in strictly linear fashion, they appear thusly:

I remember/the sound of my feet on the pavement/KLOP//KLOP/as I ran,/KLOP/and turning the corner//KLOP/KLOP/blood rushing in my ears,/KLOP//like wind through a canyon./KLOP/And I remember//he wasn't there.

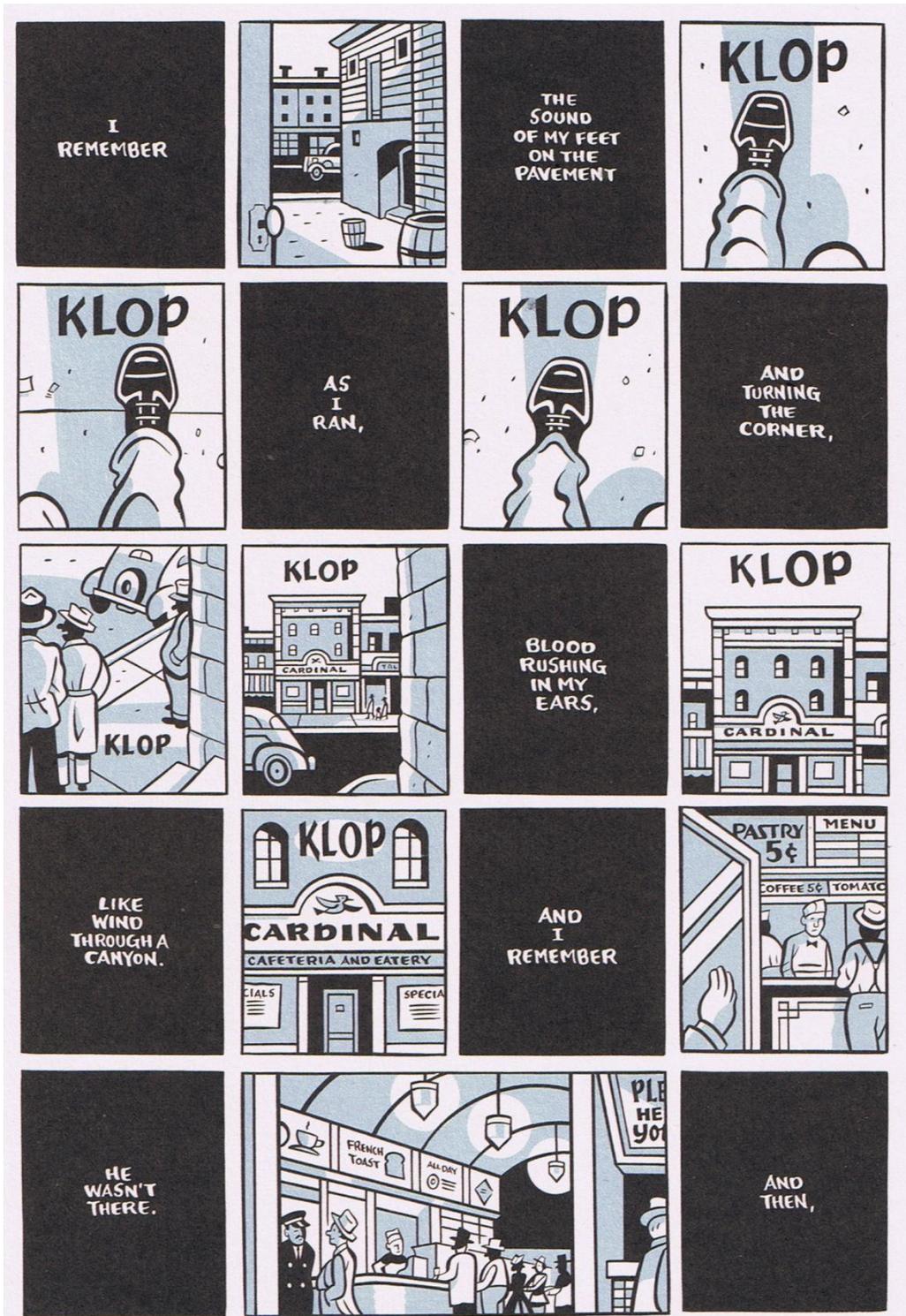


Fig. 6.2. Seth, *Palookaville 20* (Montreal: D&Q, 2010) 1.

Although the purely textual notation gives some sense of rhythm, what it cannot capture is the way that words behave in the context of a comics page, the internal and external soundscapes that they can suggest, especially in tandem with cartoon images.

This sequence offers a clear illustration of Groensteen’s term “braiding”: the standard panels and the text plates are interwoven for four pages, and rather than encumber each other they seem to coexist without any confusion or sense of interruption. It is only at the end of the sequence that the two parallel modes appear to dovetail: the final panel features a cartoon tear against a solid black panel (fig. 6.3). Instead of appearing cluttered or overburdened with too much disparate visual information, the pages in fact seem quite spacious and cleanly laid out. In part, this is due to the high contrast between the two kinds of panels – the black blocks open up the

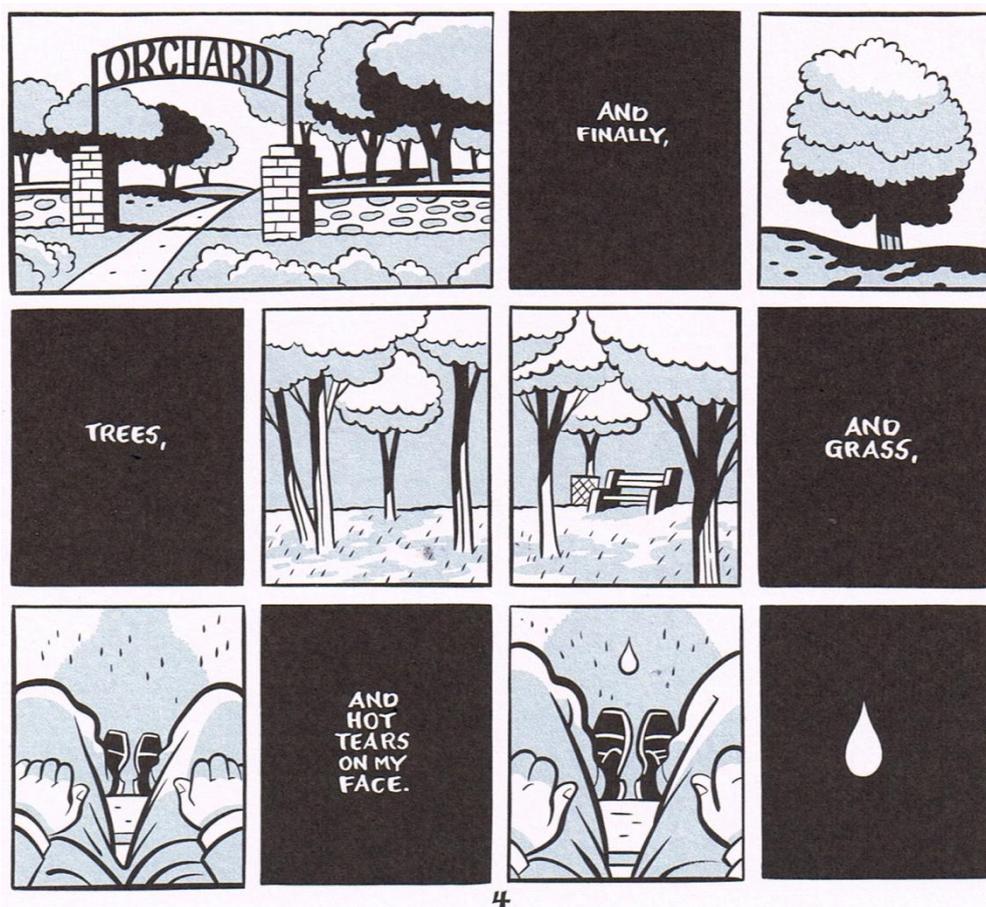


Fig. 6.3. Seth, *Palookaville 20* (Montreal: D&Q, 2010) 4.

page by providing explicit gaps between images (which supplement and complement the implicit gaps of the gutter). If the narration appeared in captions, within the panels instead of between them, the narrative would be entirely different, and the pages would likely seem cramped, less visually appealing. In some ways, Seth takes Will Eisner's dictum that "text reads as an image" (2) to an extreme by isolating text fragments in their own highly legible units. Through this unique stratification of comics elements, Seth emphasises the fragmented appearance of the page but in doing so reveals the ease with which the reader can put the pieces together.

### **The Single-panel Gag**

The single-panel gag cartoon, self-contained though it may be, rarely if ever appears in isolation. In magazines and newspapers, single-panel cartoons have always shared space with columns of text, advertisements and other comics of various formats. In *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Seth reproduces the *mise en page* of magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The New Yorker*, into which he seamlessly incorporates Kalo's cartoons. In this way, Seth not only makes the gags that much more convincing as artifacts, he also acknowledges that the American single-panel cartoon is a specific form that does not exist in an ahistorical vacuum. The relation between the single-panel gag and its historical context is reciprocal: as suggested in Chapter 1, *The New Yorker* owes much of its style to its cartoons, and vice versa. By inserting the works of his invented cartoonist into historical documents, Seth revises the reader's perception of history, and only when the reader has read the cartoons is the interpolation into the past complete. Part of what makes this anachronistic manoeuvre so potent is that it mirrors the semiotic operation of comics, and uses the reader's

hermeneutic impulse to cement the bond (and blur the boundary) between public history and Seth's private, fabricated history.

The narrativity of the single-panel cartoon always seems to overflow its single panel, suggesting not only the space and time beyond the frame but also the overall context in which the frame exists. The same might be said of the photograph, but unlike the photograph the single-panel gag inclines toward narrative transparency rather than opacity. It may be the reader's projection of the narrative that realises the gag, but all the necessary elements are already present in a latent form within the frame. Postema observes that "the single, static image contains intrinsic narrativity in a number of ways" (500). This is true of almost any sequential panel plucked out of its narrative context, but it is also true of a single-panel cartoon, the narrativity of which is not buttressed by sequential images.

The narrative context for a particular panel in a sequence is provided by a wide array of ever more expansive contextual information (e.g. other related works by the author, other unrelated works by the author, other works in a similar genre, canonical literary works, general literary conventions, historical events, etc.), but the most immediate context comes from adjacent panels. In the case of the single-panel cartoon, unconnected to other panels, the most immediate narrative context comes from the reader's experience of *other* single-panel cartoons. Familiarity with the conventions of the form – its economy, its typical topics and settings, its default point of view – is an important part of the reader's comprehension.

What may be the wittiest of the "Kalo" gags relies to a large extent on the reader's ability to make contextual leaps, both conventionally and culturally (fig. 6.4). The panel shows a familiar domestic scene: as a cross woman cleans up a broken lamp, she addresses a young boy who is standing in the corner of the room, facing the wall.



Fig. 6.4. Seth, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (Montreal: D&Q, 1996) 171.

(Of course, familiarity is a relative quality. Readers are expected to instantly recognise the furniture, wallpaper, decorations, etc. of the depicted room as well as the attire and, significantly, postures of the characters.) In a fraction of a second, the reader will infer a mother and son relationship between the two the characters; though not explicitly stated, this relationship seems so strongly implied by all available information as to be effectively obvious. The caption – “I am *not* drunk with power!” – confirms and plays on the mother-son dynamic. Appreciation of this dynamic entails another inference, strongly implied by the structure of the caption and the emphasis on the word “not,” that the mother is responding to a particular phrase used by the child. The single-panel gag cartoon, in its compactness, its verbal-visual density, and its combination of various cultural registers, exemplifies the way in which “different modes in multimodal media work together to provide the reader with clues to fill gaps and formulate hypotheses” (Kukkonen, “Comics as a Test Case” 40).

In this particular instance, the substance of the joke is absent from the panel. In diegetic time, it has occurred just prior to the scene that is made available to the reader. The child’s precocious, hyperbolic accusation – which perfectly articulates a conventional reaction to parental authority – is the substance of the joke, and yet *not the joke itself*. If the same panel depicted the child saying “you are drunk with power,” the effect would be much diminished. So what is the joke itself? It might be said that the joke is the relation between the mother and child, which exists in its full complexity only in the mind of the reader. Not only the child’s implied remark but the relation between the remark and the mother’s childish retort, situated in a middle-class context. The gag draws its power from suggestion and works precisely because the reader must construct the full story. An understanding of narrative “as a cognitive construct” (Kukkonen 40) helps to account for the difficulty of locating the joke within the panel.

Construct, infer, formulate – these terms may be altogether too intentional, since the reading operation occurs so quickly and so instinctively. The reader experiences the gag not as a hard-won insight but as an epiphanic burst of understanding. At issue is an aspect of the gag cartoon that is rarely remarked upon, likely because of its obviousness: the reader wants to get the joke. Some of the most successful gags enlist the reader's desire to make sense of the available information. Others, equally successful but in a different way, seem to lack any substantial punchline and depend mostly on the reader's expectation of humour. In another of Kalo's cartoons, set on a windy urban sidewalk, a nonplussed police officer confronts a carefree man dressed only in undergarments, who says, "It's actually quite an amusing story, first my hat blew off..." The joke here is not so much the man's circumstance as his lack of concern about it, and his blithe disregard for police authority. A certain amount of Arno-flavoured class friction undergirds this gossamer gag, which Seth has aptly inserted into an issue of *The New Yorker*. In many ways it is a sight gag, well-designed and illustrated with a light touch, with all the lines drawing attention to the speaker's oblivious face; the caption is almost superfluous. The contrasts are telling: the hunched, middle-class policeman grips a baton at his side; the relaxed, upper-class gentleman rests a closed umbrella on his shoulder (indeed, it is his lack of concern that most strongly implies his class position). Many gag cartoons rely on attitude and tone, particularly Arno's disengaged intimacy, and some seem to flatter the reader with their dryness – to appreciate a *New Yorker* cartoon is to fortify in a small but significant way one's status as a reader.

### **Walls of Time**

Part Three of *Clyde Fans* mirrors, to a certain extent, Part One, which features Abe alone in the Matchcard family home in the late 1990s. The third part of the story,

set several decades earlier, depicts Simon, caring for his mother and having brief encounters with Abe but for the most part extremely isolated. Where Part One has Abe addressing the reader directly, through speech balloons, the caption narration in Part Three is far more private, made up of Simon's interior musings. Most of these musings are written in cursive script, suggestive of diary entries, but follow a circuitous and fragmented stream-of-consciousness progression. The topic to which Simon returns again and again is the nature of time, and in particular its power to splinter selfhood and erode relationships. "It's not distance that separates you from people – but time" (*Palookaville* 16 17). An extreme instance: Simon's mother, suffering from dementia, is no longer the same woman. "The mother I know isn't upstairs – she's on the other side of that wall of time. And there is no way to pass through it" (*PVI6* 18). For a more commonplace example, there is Simon himself, who wonders at the coherence of his own identity over time. His reference to an "endless sequence of Simons" (*PVI7* 44) hints at the affinity between his personal view of time and the manner in which the medium of comics represents temporal continuity. In comics, each intericonic gap between panels, typically indicated by frames and a gutter, seems to constitute a wall of time.

Simon's tendency to conceive of time as a barrier or boundary brings to mind Nabokov's evocative description, in *Speak, Memory*, of "the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness" (20). Simon strikes a similar balance between frustration and resignation, though his reflections seem more private and austere, and in this way more direct. "Why is it that time only moves forward? Its barrier firmly in place to keep you from turning around... The very best that can be achieved is a stalemate" (*PVI8* 55). In a particularly self-aware sequence, Simon persuasively suggests that his interest in novelty postcards is directly related to a desire

to halt time, which, he argues, conventional photographs do not have the same capacity to do. “It was the remarkable re-ordering of reality in the cards that made them so potent,” he says. “They showed a frozen place far removed from the mundane reality that regular photographs record” (*PVI* 8 57). Perusing this section of *Clyde Fans*, the reader may be inclined to ask: Do comics effect a comparable re-ordering of reality?

Seth explicitly addresses the way time behaves on a comics page in a sequence titled “George is Born,” which appears at the beginning of *George Sprott*. Before the prologue, before even the title page, this unusual preface offers the reader two pages of panels, in which floats George Sprott, both as a newborn and in old age. Many panels depict only disembodied heads at various angles, with captions that contemplate the unknowable void beyond time-bound life. “Is it even relevant to discuss time in such circumstances?” the narrator asks. “Or are the before and after realms two different places? Two voids separated by a brief spurt of time?” The narrator ultimately acknowledges that “these are very naive questions” – but first describes a moment of insight George experiences while reading a comics page (fig. 6.5). Perhaps time, George muses, “needs to anticipate and fulfill in both directions. Maybe in this way the future determines the present as much as the past.” The narrator, of course, does not pretend to have any definitive answer. Nevertheless, George’s account of the coherence of time – though its philosophical rigour may be questionable – straightforwardly explains the sophisticated interdependence of fragments on the comics page.

### **Seth’s Marginalia**

It is a fundamental tenet of comics studies, and of this investigation, that the medium is structured around narrative absences, which frequently take the form observable spaces on the page: gaps, gutters and margins. The corollary of this basic

structural principle is an acknowledgement of the reader's significant role in filling these absences – but this acknowledgement can obscure the materiality of these liminal spaces. Since the reader is not generally understood to be filling the narrative gaps by physically inscribing the page with new images, the visual properties of the gaps are sometimes ignored. Seeming to shift back and forth between figure and ground, conventional spaces between panels look like window frames through which the contents of the panels may be viewed, but at the same time recede into a continuous backdrop on top of which the panels sit. Particularly in his recent work, Seth occasionally embellishes this standard form: the normally overlooked gutters become sites of experimentation and play.

The earliest examples can be found in *Wimbledon Green*, where Seth sometimes disrupts the continuity of a page's negative space by extending the lines of panel frames *through* the gutter, fully realising the grid-like nature of the layout, creating a system of small squares and slim bars held between the panels. This has the effect of flattening the page somewhat; as opposed to the appearance of more conventional layouts, these panels neither look like they are “floating” before the single background plane of the page nor like they are slightly recessed. In certain layouts, this playful manipulation of

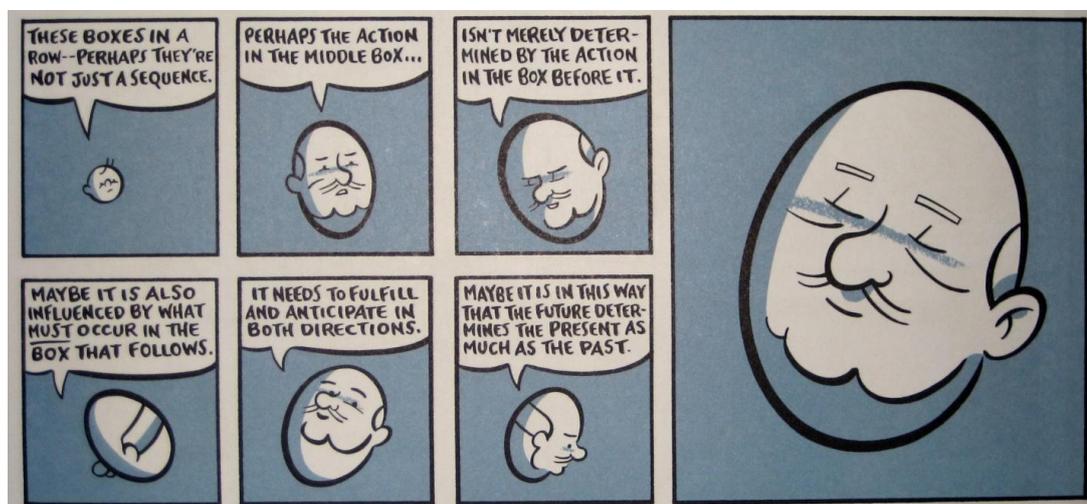


Fig. 6.5. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

gutter conventions is accentuated with colour. In a section titled “Rivals of Wimbledon Green” – a kind of *dramatis personæ* in which other major collectors are described in terms of their relation to the title character – the intervals between panels are shaded to match the background of the panels themselves, which transforms the grid of the layout into a kind of warped checkerboard. The light ink washes that Seth favours give the impression of diffused light originating from behind a flat plane, as in a stained glass window (fig. 6.6).

*The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* also features playful violations of the gutter. On several occasions, two panels are connected through the gutter by an element from the drawn world of the story. The impression is simple but effective: objects appear to be breaching the frame, leaping up out of the panels in an instance of cartoon trompe-l’oeil. The most striking example shows a pod launching from a space station, piloted by the Inuit astronaut Kao-Kuk, the trail of the pod’s trajectory sweeping across the gutter from one panel to the other (fig. 6.7). In a subtler, more droll instance, separate panels that share a background image are linked together by a fishing rod (fig. 6.8).

These embellishments have an involuntary, almost compulsive quality, as of a child doodling idly in the margins, extending existing planes, filling in spaces. (This improvised play with conventions occurs at the level of narrative as well – anecdotes give way to apocrypha, adventures, quasi-academic analyses, and other additions.) It is appropriate that this type of play within the margins first appears in *Wimbledon Green*, which itself occupies a somewhat marginal position with respect to more polished works. For much of his career, Seth has been publishing sketchbook material along with his other work, not only narratives like *Wimbledon Green* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*, but also non-narrative illustrations and sketches

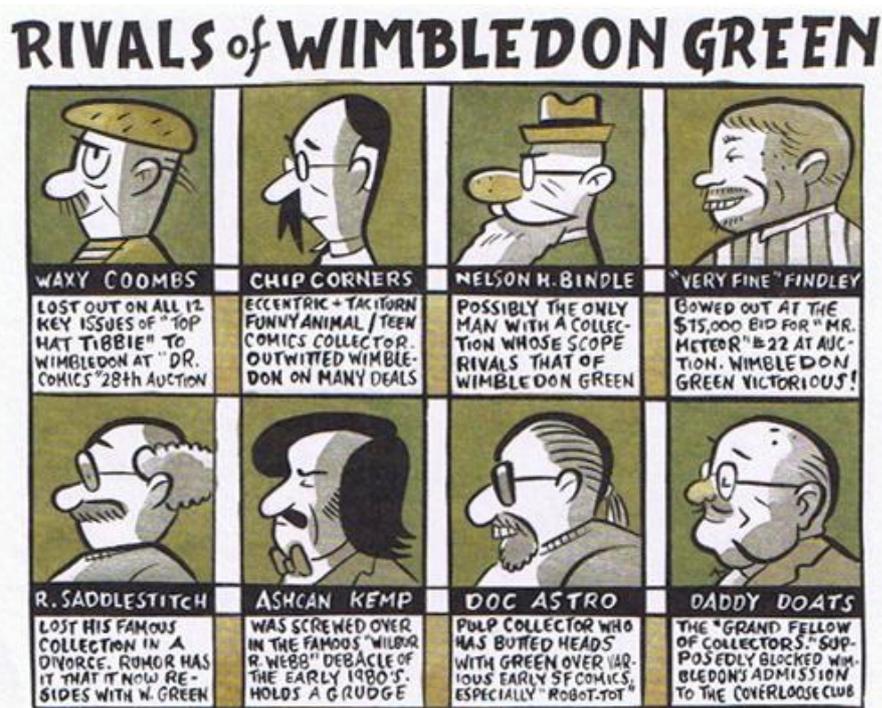


Fig. 6.6. Seth, *Wimbledon Green* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2005) 16.



Fig. 6.7. Seth, *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) 46.



Fig. 6.8. Seth, *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) 34.

as well. The collection *Vernacular Drawings* contains over two hundred pages of work drawn from “Sketchbooks 1 to 6” and one of *Palookaville 20*’s three sections consists of “Selections from Sketchbooks Seven & Eight”. The presence of this material de-centers that work which is more conventionally “finished” and tends to erode the boundary between public and private work. “Working in a sketchbook is always freeing,” Seth explains, “because you never *have* to publish anything. It could take any form it likes. . . .you’re aware that you *might* publish it. But if it works out, you’ll figure out how to make it work in another form” (Appendix B 319, emphases in original). The result of this process can be observed in the fully-developed technical experimentation of a refined work like *George Sprott*.

### **Dense and Porous**

In its scope, its conspicuous materiality, its capacious structure, its occasional ornate flourishes, and its profusion of available perspectives, *George Sprott* could fairly be characterised as baroque. The word is used here without any pejorative connotations to spotlight the work’s formal and narrative plasticity: “baroque” provides another way of thinking about how Seth manages to convey “the capacity for endless interpolations” in the finite space of a book. This understanding of the protractible space of *George Sprott* draws on Deleuze’s notion that “the Baroque invents the infinite work or process” (39). This is from *The Fold*, his book on Leibniz and the Baroque, in which he similarly states that “The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity” (3). Deleuze also identifies the *unfold*, which he describes as “the continuation or extension of [the fold’s] act, the condition of its manifestation” (40).

In certain contexts, these statements might seem abstract or opaque, but in the case of *George Sprott*, the reader must literally unfold large leaves in order to read them

– a deliberate and somewhat delicate act that is haptically and narratively distinct from the conventional turning of pages. Here the *unfold* becomes a physical action performed by the reader, which does in fact extend the folded page and permit the manifestation of otherwise concealed panels. Unfolded, the fold-out pages are in excess of themselves, extrusions from the familiar space of the book which materialise the break from narrative linearity that their evocative sequences carry out. In these ways, the fold-out section gestures toward the unbounded, irrepressible aspects of memory. The tactile experience of unfolding also fulfills the suggestion of tangibility made throughout *George Sprott* by drawn photographs, which sometimes overlap or appear with corners folded in a trompe-l'oeil effect, as on the page titled “A Fresh Start” (trompe-l'oeil is a hallmark of baroque art and architecture) (fig. 2.8).

It may be fruitful to pursue the potential affinity between the baroque and the “mannered quality” of Seth’s work examined in previous chapters. Seth’s baroque gestures, of which the fold-out section is the most overt, might be thought of as mannered qualities taken to a particular extreme. However, it is not just the excess of the physical page that suggests the infinite but the profusion of unusually open-ended, evocative sequences. The reader is presented with six pages of drawn photographs, stream-of-conscious panels, and text plates that contain very distinctive, clipped language. Of particular note is Seth’s use of the word “that,” which repeatedly appears as an adjective – as in “that ball” or “that toy” or, more pointedly “that child”. As in other sequences where text plates form a dominant presence, the black boxes establish a sort of cadence, and here their baroque deployment coincides with a hypnotic, mannered language. If “baroque” seems like too fraught a word, perhaps it would be better to say that the fold-out section of *George Sprott* is at once dense and porous – indeed, it might be said to typify the book’s particular brand of density and porosity.

Originally serialised in the weekly *New York Times Magazine*, when *George Sprott* was eventually published as a large-format book, it contained many additional pages: illustrated intervals, two-page arctic spreads of icebergs and snowy landscapes; full-page photos (actual photos, not drawn photos) of cardboard models of some of Dominion's buildings; and of course the sepia-tone sequences from George's life. These biographical interludes are less schematic than the bulk of the book, in which George's life seems one step removed, narrated by the unreliable narrator or through the anecdotes of secondary characters. The original pages drawn for the magazine are somewhat cramped, but the additional material is airy and open, and contributes significantly to the book's capacious feeling. Arguably *George Sprott* represents a development of the narrative approach Seth improvised in his sketchbook with *Wimbledon Green*. Both books seem to take the very surface of the comics page – fragmented and almost infinitely flexible – as a model for narrative structure.

The seamless inclusion of new material in *George Sprott* suggests an ideal literary space that might be expanded indefinitely – and it is ultimately the participation of the reader that makes such a space possible. The reader's capacity to bridge gaps and to incorporate (not to mention take pleasure in) unfamiliar or unexpected narrative fragments is one of the defining features of literature. In comics, this process is most in evidence on a smaller scale, from panel to panel: "For the comics reader," Groensteen states, "the fact of presupposing that there is a meaning necessarily leads him to search for the way that the panel he 'reads' is linked to the others" (*System of Comics* 113). Readers find meaning not only between panels and between sequences, however, but even in the isolated image of a single-panel gag, where the presupposition of meaning presents itself in terms of a presupposition of humour. To get the joke is to fulfill the

role of the model reader that the cartoon has set out and enter into the full world suggested by a diegetic fragment. The narrative density and porosity offered by even a single cartoon image make comics uniquely suited to the kind flexibility that Seth so often displays in his storytelling.

This investigation's continued attempt to repurpose terms like "mannered" and "baroque" is part of an effort to highlight the various ways in which Seth pushes his work to certain narrative limits. The structural potentialities of comics allow him to devise sequences that are uniquely dense and porous, qualities which often appear as two sides of the same coin. This dense/porous dynamic in Seth's work permits a reconsideration of the interdependence of fragmentation and coherence in comics, a new way of understanding the distinctive texture of the medium. Hatfield's contention that comics comprise various kinds of tension, which entail "various interpretive options and potentialities" (*Alternative Comics* 36) can be understood as a particular expression of how density and porosity engages the reader.

At its most dense and/or porous, Seth's work engenders a heightened awareness of the gaps inherent in the medium of comics, and encourages an unusually self-conscious form of readerly interpolation. By gently disorienting the reader, Seth draws attention to the re-orientation of perspective that constantly takes place when assembling a coherent narrative. With each panel, each new fragment, the reader's sense of the text evolves slightly, and the spaces in between are an indispensable part of this process. Seth's work points to itself by emphasising these gaps, and reminds the reader that it is only through fragments that a coherent literary world can be suggested.

## 7

## COLLECTION AND RECOLLECTION

Memory, recollection, remembrance – these words are not quite identical or interchangeable, but little is gained from rigidly differentiating between them. To narrow the meaning of each, to try to reduce the overlap among them in an effort to render their usage more technical, is an exercise in almost arbitrary definition. The empirical impulse to build a stable of terms with reliable, distinct denotations is continually frustrated by the ambiguity of the concepts and their rough equivalence in everyday speech. Etymological explorations can only take an investigation so far: in the case of “memory” (c1225), “recollection” (1576), and “remembrance” (c1330), the *OED* reveals a centuries-old nest of intersecting connotations. Memory, from the Old French and Anglo-Norman *memorie*, *memore*, *memoire*, rooted in the classical Latin *memor*, “mindful, remembering”; and remembrance, from the Old French for “awareness, consciousness,” which at the same time (early 12th century) had the more familiar meaning of “memory, recollection”.<sup>1</sup> Recollect comes from the Latin *recolligere*: “to gather up again, reassemble, to repossess oneself” and “in post-classical Latin also to recall, remember.” Ultimately, the lineage of these words does not especially illuminate their contemporary significance, though it does demonstrate that they have always been closely related, and also foregrounds the longstanding association between recollection and an aware, attentive frame of mind.

It may be more productive to revisit the Aristotelian classification, which understands “recollection” as an activity and “memory” as an affection or pathos. W.J.T. Mitchell observes a shift from ancient to modern conceptions of memory that seems to

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the semantic overlap, “remembrance” did not emerge as a derivation of the verb “remember,” as might be assumed.

mirror precisely this distinction. “The ancient memory systems,” Mitchell notes, “are artificial, cultivated techniques designed as aids to public verbal performance; the modern sense of memory treats it as something more like a natural faculty, an aspect of private consciousness” (193). Mitchell challenges these categories, arguing that memory/recollection – as an imagetext – permeates the borders between ancient and modern, public and private, artificial and natural: “the composite imagetext structure of memory seems to be a deep feature that endures all the way from Cicero to Lacan to the organization of computer memory” (193). The imagetext structure of Seth’s work likewise blurs the boundary between the natural process of memory and the cultivated process of recollection.

As for the process of collection, perhaps the best way to begin to conceive of it is as a product of Bauman’s master-opposition between inside and outside. This opposition is in many ways the root of all those behaviours related to boundaries, containment, and compartmentalisation; the comics page is the result of such behaviour carried out within a visual plane, in most cases with the aim of conveying a narrative. The panel is a representation of a bounded narrative interval, “a fragment of space-time belonging to the diegesis” (Groensteen, *System of Comics* 40). Beyond this fragment (which can exist even without an explicit frame) is the gutter, the gap that is visually and otherwise interdependent with the panel. Together the panels and the gaps between them define the inside/outside relations that establish the narrative integrity of the page. Many of Seth’s more recent works employ a narrative method that has become fairly common in contemporary literary comics. As he explains in his introduction to *Wimbledon Green*, “It’s an approach wherein you tell a longer story through a variety of shorter, unconnected comic strips. Cumulatively they add up to a bigger picture” (11). It will be apparent to even the casual reader of comics that this technique mimics not only the

process of serial publication – which remains a distinguishing feature of many comics genres – but also the very structure the medium. As Jared Gardner suggests, the comic book collector is driven by “the compulsive need to fill in the gaps, to make connections between issues (the serial gap inherent to comic production, mirroring and complicating the gaps between the frames themselves)” (800). A comic book is accumulative by nature, a collection of panels, moments, images.

This chapter focuses on *Wimbledon Green* and *Clyde Fans*: the former is explicitly about collectors and collecting in a way that exceeds any of Seth’s other books, even *It’s a Good Life If You Don’t Weaken*; the latter features Simon Matchcard, a consummate collector and one of Seth’s most distinctive, fully conceived characters. Reading Seth’s introduction to *Wimbledon Green*, the reader suspects that the integrity of the narrative world owes much to *A Gentle Madness*, Nicholas A. Basbanes’ first book on bibliomania, which Seth cites as a source of “great character material” (*Wimbledon Green* 11). The aim here will not be to draw didactic lines between Basbanes’ book and Seth’s, but, knowing the extent to which *A Gentle Madness* informed the creation of *Wimbledon Green*, to allow the former to enrich a reading of the latter. Basbanes undeniably captures something of the texture of book collecting, and though he tends not to be a source of paradigmatic theories or keen historical reconsiderations, he does offer this useful definition in a later book, *Among the Gently Mad*: “book collecting is synonymous with book hunting” (23).

Indeed, a lengthy book-hunting adventure, “The Green Ghost,” is granted a central position in *Wimbledon Green*, a lively justification of the title character’s passion. The incidents that constitute this adventure – memory lost, acts of self-reliance, memory regained, keen detective work – suggest that a collection is a more than anything else a story that the collector tells himself about his identity. Stuart Hall argues

that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (225). Collecting is a means of not only positioning oneself within existing narratives of past, but also forging new narratives.

In *Patience and Fortitude*, Basbanes drily asks Umberto Eco for “a painless definition of semiotics” (225). With some reluctance, Eco quite helpfully replies that it concerns “the activities by which we use something present—a word, an image, an object—in order to tell you something which is not there” (225). In many instances the collected object is a stand-in for something more elusive. Susan Pearce argues that the “crucial semiotic notion is that of metaphor and metonymy, a key which helps us to unlock one fundamental aspect of the nature of collections” (*Museums, Objects, and Collections* 38). This fundamental aspect, she goes on to explain, is that the collection is metonymically related “to the body of material from which it was selected,” but that, in being selected, set apart from this material, it also “bears a representative or metaphorical relationship to its whole” (38).

This semiotic insight suggests another possibility: that the individual object of a collection has a synecdochal relation to the collection as a whole. Each discrete narrative unit in *Wimbledon Green*, for instance, serves as a microcosm of the overall story within which it is situated (a function that is substantiated by the individuality of its foremost narrative mode, the personal anecdote). Gesturing toward Barthes, Pearce also observes that “collected objects are both signifier, that is the medium that carries the message, and the signified, the message itself. This dual nature of the collection is at the heart of its significance” (38).

In one of her later books on the subject, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*, Pearce complements her semiotic argument by proceeding from a less analytical starting

point. “Collecting as a process works in the shadowland,” she writes, “making its meaning on the edge where the practices of the past, the politics of present power, and the poetic capacity of each human being blur together” (1). It is in this shadowland that both Wimbledon Green and Simon Matchcard seem to collect themselves, though in very different ways.

### **Collecting Comics, Collecting the Self**

In *A Gentle Madness*, Michael Zinman, a noted American collector of material printed before 1800, describes the appeal of the collecting process: “It’s the action, but there also is an *interaction*, a link with some mechanism of history that strikes a responsive chord for me” (305). On an institutional scale, as Basbanes points out, such interaction with history is indispensable. The boundary between inside and outside is in some ways collapsed in that familiar institutional extension of the collection, the museum, where visitors are invited to have a personal interaction with history in a public setting. Part Three of *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken* finds Seth at Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum. The opening panels depict the skeletons of prehistoric sea creatures, suspended, as though in water, by not-quite-invisible wires. Seth estimates that the exhibits “must’ve been put together in the 50’s...or maybe the early 60’s. The fake plants, the plaster-of-Paris rocks...those faded background paintings. Those paintings are so primitive, so naively beautiful” (61, ellipses in original). Here the distant past is conveyed by outdated techniques from a past that is just distant enough to elicit pangs of longing from the observer. Unsurprisingly, there is anxiety lurking behind his nostalgic appreciation: “I’m afraid one of these days I’m gonna walk in there and find it all renovated and hi-tech. I couldn’t stand that” (61). The unsophisticated artifice of the museum colours its collection and creates a space for various engagements with

the past. Notably, these engagements with the past take place while wandering around a public space, sometimes in the company of strangers. As an event-space, the museum is composed of two principal chronotopes: the collection and the public square. This combination informs the entirety of *It's a Good Life*, a “real-life” chronicle of collecting, the pace of which is largely dictated by browsing and urban perambulation.

It is in *It's a Good Life* that collecting first comes to the fore of Seth's work: he casts himself as the collector of gag cartoons drawn by an obscure Canadian artist, John Kalloway. Seth closes the book with “reproductions” of these cartoons – “Kalo's Famous Eleven,” as he ironically calls them – which are prefaced by this claim: “For over a decade now I've been actively looking for ‘Kalo’ cartoons. Sadly, my successes have been few and far between. In fact, I haven't come across a new one in several years. On the following pages you will find my meagre collection – less than a dozen” (166). With great skill and affection, this fabricated collection tangibly recalls the gag cartoons that appeared in the late 1940s and 1950s (figs. 1.2 and 6.4). With these invented artifacts, Seth is not presenting a set of historical documents that trigger memory or contribute to a more or less objective conception of the past. Rather, he is offering the reader something approaching memory itself, a highly subjective and fully imagined conception of the past.

Were Kalo not a fictional character, a collection of his cartoons might simply be a site of mediation between the reader and an ultimately inaccessible past. In the case of a conventional collection, such mediation mingles imagination, memory and history, lending imagination and memory some of history's substance and authority. Kalo's Famous Eleven lack historical substance and authority, though they brilliantly imitate both. Not quite memory, either, the collection is instead Seth's impression (in nearly every sense of the word) of a particular moment in the history of cartooning. Kalo's

cartoons confuse the distinction between an imagined past and an historical past – or, in cruder terms, fiction and nonfiction – both of which are only accessible through artifacts.

*Wimbledon Green* is in this respect far less confusing, though Seth’s deployment of (fictional) collections persists, most explicitly in three full-page, illustrated selections “from the Library of Wimbledon Green” (fig. 7.1). In these interludes, Seth abandons framed panels and presents nine exemplary items from Wimbledon Green’s comic book collection, arranged on the page in three rows of three, each accompanied by a summary catalogue entry that includes the series title and number, condition, date of publication, a brief descriptive note, availability, and value. Though *Wimbledon Green* does overlap at times with the real world (for instance, there is occasional reference to actual comic book stores [31]), each of the comic books is a metafictional invention, as is the vast collection that they represent. Poring over the evocative details of these catalogue selections, the reader may struggle to parse the various degrees of literary collection: Wimbledon Green’s comic book collection is a collection of stories, which exists within the collection of stories that constitutes the comic book *Wimbledon Green*. Is this dense and inverted concatenation significant, or just striking? In attempting to contextualise this imaginary collection, the reader is obliged to consider the imaginary (and, perhaps, semiotic) component of both collection and recollection. Each object in a collection recalls a world, a narrative; this is particularly so when the objects are books.

If the fictional auction catalogue can be considered not only a trope but a distinct literary genre, one of its most notable examples, discussed by Basbanes, is a fourteen-page item widely distributed in the summer of 1840, which announced “the forthcoming dispersal of a private library gathered over four decades” by a collector identified as Count Fortsas (*Gentle Madness* 116). The auction was “canceled” one day before it was



Fig. 7.1. Seth, *Wimbledon Green* (Montreal: D&Q, 2005) 19.

scheduled to occur, and was not publicly acknowledged as a hoax until much later.

We know now that this was a clever prank...At the time, however, the announcement was received with utmost seriousness. The genius of the scheme lay in the tantalizing catalogue entries. None of these books existed, but they were described in a way that made them irresistible.

(*Gentle Madness* 118)

More recently, and with no intent to deceive, Leanne Shapton published *Important Artifacts and Personal Property From the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry* (2009), a novel in the form of an auction catalogue. In this work and its 19th century precedent – as in the selections from Wimbledon Green’s collection and Simon Matchcard’s catalogue-like tour of his mother’s bedroom in *Clyde Fans* – the actual (non)existence of the items catalogued does not detract from their charm. Many suspected that the collection of Count Fortsas may have been a fabrication, but its very possibility remained enticing (Basbanes, *Gentle Madness* 118). The effect of Shapton’s book, which includes many photos and “reproductions,” depends on its fictitious status. Part of the pleasure derived from peeking into Wimbledon Green’s library is the knowledge that it is an invention, that the books it contains can never be read. In certain contexts, the unread text is more appealing than the book that has been completely realised – a popular maxim holds that a book collector is someone who buys books with little intention of reading them. The unread (or unreadable) book always holds the spark of potential.

Though this investigation is less concerned with direct correspondence between *A Gentle Madness* and *Wimbledon Green* than with a shared (or, perhaps, borrowed) sensibility, certain explicit parallels are too striking to be omitted. To be clear, Seth’s protagonist is by no means a simple composite of real-life figures – what makes Wimbledon Green so successful as a character is that his behaviour is not only recognizable but also unexpected, even for the reader acquainted with Basbanes’ books.

But in his occasional posturing, his obscure origins, and the funds at his disposal, he unmistakably recalls one of the collectors depicted in *A Gentle Madness*: Haven O'More. Basbanes describes this American collector as noteworthy but with a disproportionately high regard for his accomplishments:

Haven O'More craved books in flawless condition, books of the greatest consequence. But just as much, according to the people who came to know him, he craved recognition. For many, it was his least endearing characteristic, even to his closest bookseller friends—his insistence on being recognized as the greatest book collector alive. He had declared as much, often, in the company of collectors who were undeniably great...  
(*Gentle Madness* 250)

In one instance, O'More hectors a bookseller into giving him a ten percent discount (after first insisting on forty percent) on a number of 15th century editions of Aristotle's works. "I am the greatest book collector in the world," he is quoted as saying by way of justification (253).

*Wimbledon Green* opens with a similar, though somewhat less off-putting incident, in which the eponymous hero insists on seeing a rare comic that is to be auctioned. When an underling at the auction house refuses, he erupts in pompous frustration, declaring himself "The greatest comic book collector in the world" (14). The phrase is given an authoritative twist because the reader has already encountered it on the cover of the book (fig. 1.6), and though this subtitle cannot be taken at face value, neither can it be considered sarcastic. The status of the claim, like the status of the character to whom it refers, remains productively ambivalent. Seth – or his narrator, depending on how finely one wishes to parse the act of sketchbook writing – is not out to deflate Wimbledon Green in the way that Basbanes ultimately deflates O'More.

Wimbledon Green's name-making break came, as he tells it, in 1974, when he discovered the notorious Wilbur R. Webb Collection (fig. 7.2), to which many pages of

*Wimbledon Green* are devoted.<sup>2</sup> The 900-odd mint-condition items that ultimately sold at auction represented only a fraction of Webb's original collection, the vast remainder of which vanished at his death. Wimbledon Green admits: "I had been trying to keep him [Webb] for myself. When I did return he was gone and the apartment was empty. Of course, he had died" (*WG* 32). In these scenarios, it is always knowledge that the collector hoards and cunningly deploys in order to steal these bits of the past, though not always with the same success. About the unrecovered bulk of the Webb Collection, Wimbledon Green ruefully tells the reader, "I was never able to determine the fate of the remaining comics. The city dump, no doubt!" (32). His regret is less for the potential loss of money than for the loss of the objects themselves. Here collecting coincides with preservation – for Wimbledon Green what the collection seems to preserve is memory.

Collecting, to return to Eco's definition of semiotics, is one of "those devices we use in our everyday life to make something present which is not there" (quoted in



Fig. 7.2. Seth, *Wimbledon Green* (Montreal: D&Q, 2005) 35.

<sup>2</sup> In its renown and calibre, the Webb Collection resembles the great library of Robert Hoe III, fifty years in the making, which was dissolved shortly after his death (Basbanes, *Gentle Madness* 173-74). One of this collection's most notable items was a vellum Gutenberg Bible, sold in 1911 for \$50,000 to Henry E. Huntington, "a stately man with a bushy moustache" (181), i.e. a likely physical template for Wimbledon Green.

Basbanes, *Patience and Fortitude* 225). What is being made present by the collections of Wimbledon Green and his fellow collectors is the past, and often a past that is almost completely conflated with childhood. It will not escape the reader's attention that the collectors portrayed in *Wimbledon Green* often collect children's comics: Wimbledon Green closes the book with a reminiscent, meandering tale, in which he fondly recalls, among other things, Pete's Corner Store, "the glorious site where all the comics of my youth were purchased" (119). He plainly asserts that "these childhood images rest at the very core of who I am," they constitute a "stockpile so potent -- so meaningful that I can't help but return to them again and again" (119). It is tempting to assume that he speaks on behalf of Seth.

Seth is given an opportunity to speak for himself (in a certain sense) in Joe Matt's collection of autobiographical vignettes, *Spent* (2007), which features Seth as one of the main characters. In fact, Seth appears on the first page, which opens in a very familiar location, a secondhand bookstore. As Matt and Seth bicker and browse, Matt discovers a rare volume of "Birdseye Center" strips by the much-forgotten Canadian cartoonist Jimmy Frise. Seth pleads with Matt to let him have the book, noting its poor condition; Matt purchases it for himself for ten dollars (fig. 7.3). "You wouldn't even know about it," Seth rails, "if I hadn't shown you my old newspaper clippings!" The scene has the archetypal heft of a vaudeville routine: two collectors, arguing over the right to own a rare book. Later, as they sit in a diner with Chester Brown, Matt haggles with Seth and sells him "Birdseye Center" at seven times its original price.

As a collector, Matt exhibits the typical signs of a completist. Though he goes to extreme lengths to save money and is often frustratingly parsimonious, he admits his willingness "to spend whatever it takes to complete my collection of 'Gasoline Alley' newspaper strips" (Matt 118). However, it is Matt's other, more sordid collection –



Fig. 7.3. Matt, Joe Spent (Hong Kong: D&amp;Q, 2007) 10.

which seems to overshadow even his interest in comics – that illuminates the intersection of his completism with a kind of purism. He has amassed hundreds of hours of video pornography, painstakingly copied and edited into dozens of dense compilation tapes. This collection reveals that Matt is concerned not just with quantity or quality, but with a sense of necessity, distillation, and consolidation. These tapes, highly “edited and refined” (55), have been cleansed of any footage deemed extraneous or substandard (for instance, images of male performers’ faces). In the diner scene, Brown jokes that he and Seth should nominate Matt in the category of “Best Editor” for an upcoming cartoonists’ award (Matt 79). The quip plays on the pervasiveness of editing as a cultural practice, from the esteemed revision of a collection of literary work to the maintenance of Matt’s less publicly recognised collection.<sup>3</sup>

The collector’s compulsion to edit is closely tied to the pursuit of new acquisitions, which is an integral part of the collecting process. Matt explains that “to find and excavate the rare gems” that constitute his collection, he “had to wade and sift through” an abundance of low-grade material from the collection of an acquaintance (55). Editing is always preceded by accumulation, but the two practices tend to shade into each other in the act of selection. It is tempting to identify selection as the germ of collection, its most fundamental element. It is the process of selection that distinguishes the collection from the archive, which is primarily a product of accumulation.

Whereas the collection is a carefully selected group of items, the archive often overflows with unsystematically accumulated material, more a source for history than a spur to memory. Like comics narratives, both the collection and the archive are necessarily fragmented, structured around gaps. Gardner convincingly compares comics to the archive, arguing that “the comics form retains that which cannot be reconciled to

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<sup>3</sup> Brown has also explored his relationship with pornography collection in his memoir *The Playboy*, which is dedicated to Seth.

linear narrative—the excess that refuses cause-and-effect argument, the trace that threatens to unsettle the present’s narrative of its own past (and thereby of itself)” (801). The accumulating excess of the archive is certainly a part of Seth’s work, but on the whole his narratives remain highly edited and deliberately assembled.

Accumulating, selecting, editing: these indispensable components of collecting form a hazy continuum of at times indistinguishable behaviour. The familiar tension at work in such behaviour is that between inside and outside. Every act of collection is a revision of the boundary that determines what is interior and what exterior. It is not uncommon for this preoccupation with inclusion and exclusion to reveal itself in the social life of the collector; for Joe Matt, it frequently takes the form of self-exclusion. Much of *Spent* finds him either alone in his bedroom or alienating those closest to him with a range of stubbornly antisocial habits. At the same time, however, in writing *Spent* Matt has positioned himself within an exclusive clique of acclaimed contemporary cartoonists (and collectors).

It is perhaps this sort of group that Seth had in mind when he conceived *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*, which shares with *Spent* and *Wimbledon Green* a largely unexamined and apparently inevitable homosociality. This atmosphere seems to cling to any appreciation of the comic book medium and recalls the old-fashioned notion that bibliomania is related to castration anxiety and “applies strictly to men” (Basbanes, *Gentle Madness* 28). Basbanes ably deflates this theory with examples of well-known female collectors, but the stereotype persists, particularly when the books collected are comic books, as evidenced by the dearth of female characters in *Wimbledon Green* and *GNBCC* (it is not insignificant that the Club is a brotherhood). Meanwhile, the most notable link between women and collecting in *It’s a Good Life* and *George Spratt* is that the respective protagonists – Seth and George – seem to collect

women in a series of short-lived relationships. (The same might be said of Chester Brown in his recent autobiographical work *Paying For It*, which details his experiences with prostitutes.)

Seth's collectors seem to be loyal to their own personal pasts above all else. "At first glance," the character Ashcan Kemp explains, "all comic collectors might seem like backward looking sorts. And to some degree, that's true. But most collectors are merely reaching back to their own childhoods" (*Wimbledon Green* 65). Why do comic books, collecting, and a "sense of loss connected to childhood" (11) correspond so effortlessly? It has already been suggested that the collection is a narrative of the collector's identity, and in much of Seth's work this identity is presupposed by the collector to reside in a lost childhood. Perhaps it could be said that the comic book collector, in particular, is someone for whom this sense of loss, this void signified by childhood, is the seat of identity. To put this in Eco's straightforward terminology, identity is the absent thing being made present by the collection.

*Wimbledon Green* is a collection of fractional recollections, each from a distinct perspective. Taken together, these fragments – some as short as a single strip, others spanning multiple pages – provide a portrait that is stable but never static. (The same can be said of *George Sprott*.) Seth employs a wide range of storytelling techniques, primarily personal recollections related by characters, but also tales told from a more detached narrative perspective, as well as historical documents, an index of eminent collectors, and items from collections – all fabricated. The individual details are credible and, more than this, they cohere into a whole that is too compelling to be doubted.

### **Interlude: Forgetting**

In *Palookaville 16*, Simon Matchcard muses on the coherence of identity over time, and the role memory plays in the continuity of the self. However, the conception of the self as a stable bundle of memories moving through time is quickly complicated: “are the memories even the same,” he wonders, “or have they changed too?” (18). When Wimbledon Green loses his memory, what remains is very revealing. The reader is introduced to a more essential Wimbledon Green, who – stripped of wealth, sense of status, and even the urge to collect – delights in the carefree isolation of lonely highways and open roads. “It seems I’ve lucked into a grand situation! Freed of self and past, I am left to revel in the moment” (54). (Incidentally, the immobility of comics permits such appreciation of the moment in a way that other media cannot, allowing the reader to linger on concrete images without interrupting the narrative.) The circumstance of an amnesiac collector casts in sharp relief the extent to which collection and recollection are attempts to forestall loss, not only of the objects preserved in the collection, but also of the self.

The collection can serve as a reminder of that which might otherwise be forgotten, but more than this it focuses recollection, fortifying particular memories in particular ways while allowing others to mutate, recede and fade away. The shuffle of recollection leaves nothing completely intact, there is no remembering without forgetting, and forgetting seems to perform a deeper, more cryptic function in the ongoing process of collecting. On the subject of personal libraries, Eco has said that sometimes “the forgotten book is the most important book you can have” (quoted in Basbanes, *Among the Gently Mad* 19). What is to be made of this murky statement? Is it merely a prescription for “unconditional accumulation” (*A Gentle Madness* 306), the indiscriminate collection of even those items whose significance is not immediately

apparent? Or is it about blind spots, gaps, and the often-unacknowledged value of forgetting? Or, perhaps, it is a more subtle comment on the relation between collecting and memory, the ultimately strange and unpredictable ways in which the two reproduce each other. Waiting to be rediscovered, the forgotten book – not unlike the unread book – is full of potential, but an entirely invisible, abstract potential that is not part of the collector’s awareness.

By contrast, the collector is sometimes fully aware of having forgotten and may consequently overvalue the blank potential of the things forgotten, as Simon does when he attempts to recall the forgotten contents of his childhood treasure box. “Sometimes,” he says, “I imagine that if I could just remember those objects, find them again, and place them back in the box in just the right order, then (like a magic recipe) it would open up that time barrier and I’d be on the other side...in a better moment” (*Palookaville* 16 20). Perfect recollection, for Simon, becomes nearly equivalent to the impossible reconstruction of the lost past.

### **Simon Matchcard’s Cabinet of Curiosities**

As the third part of *Clyde Fans* draws to a close, Simon and Abraham Matchcard take their mother, Lily, to a nursing home. For years Simon has been caring for her by himself, attempting to manage her escalating dementia – now, for the first time in his life, he will be alone in the family home. His somewhat daunting return home at the end of *Palookaville* 19 leads to an extended rumination on his mother by way of her just-vacated bedroom. Though she has not died, her absence from the house is palpable, and Simon – like many of Seth’s other characters – instinctively turns to reminiscence to alleviate feelings of loss. For four and a half pages he methodically (obsessively?) describes the contents of the room, which are for the most part unremarkable. The

sequence is made up of over one hundred square panels, most of which contain a single item or detail of an item, accompanied by running narration that contextualises the objects with observations and memories (fig. 7.4). Seth's deceptively simple approach is to imbue these mundane objects with lifelike significance simply by focusing on them, using Simon as a lens. In this way, Lily Matchcard's bedroom becomes an event-space that houses recollection, governed to a significant extent by the collection chronotope.

This sequence is in fact one of the clearest instances in Seth's work of a character exploring the familiar recesses of recollection by way of a bounded collection of objects. Despite the explicitness of the scenario, Simon's reminiscences seem particularly unforced and understated, perhaps in part because the items in his mother's room constitute an inadvertent collection. In this sense, it is unlike the collections of the characters in *Wimbledon Green* and very unlike Simon's own vast, meticulously organised collection of novelty postcards. But the objects are by no means less meaningful to Simon for being less deliberately collected: to a collector, almost any group of familiar items may warrant the same consideration as a calculated collection. For many of Seth's characters, and certainly for Simon, collecting is a way of thinking.

Of course, to conceive of collecting as an abstract mental process in this manner is to abbreviate the distance between collection and recollection – a theoretical manoeuvre that may be facile or, worse, imprecise. Collection and recollection remain quite distinct, even as modes of thought, though there is significant overlap between the two. The similarities are made especially apparent by some of the techniques deployed by Seth. The expansive fold-out section toward the end of *George Sprott* – six generous pages of moments and photographs from George's life – resembles nothing so much as a scrapbook. Unlike a standard album, however, which consists of physical items that may act as prompts to the collector's memory, this scrapbook is composed primarily of

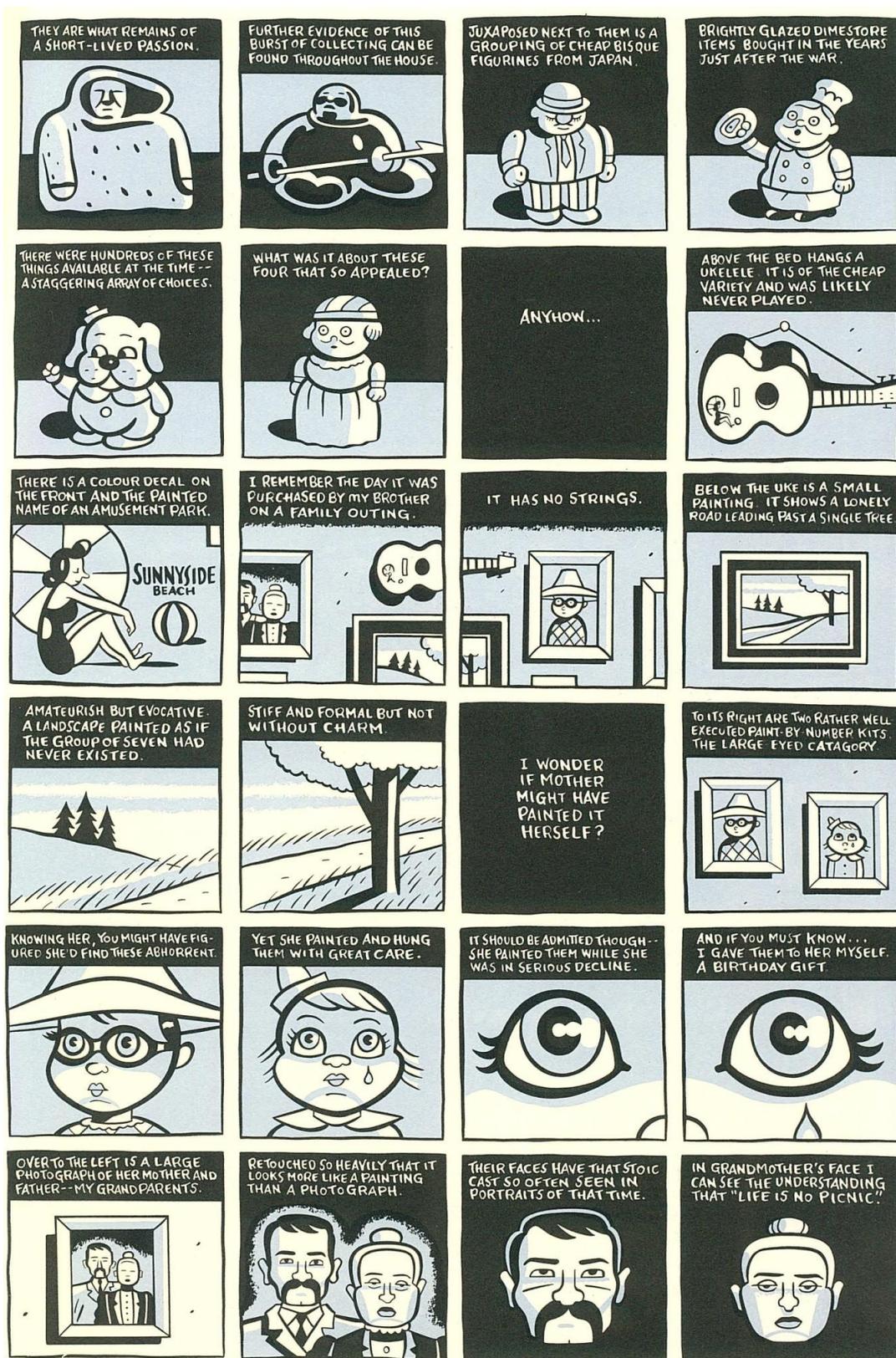


Fig. 7.4. Seth, *Palookaville 19* (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 93.

memories themselves, loosely organised fragments of experience that are interspersed with drawn photographs. Seth's intuitive and innovative approach to the spatio-topia in this section demonstrates the fundamental flexibility not only of the medium of comics but also of the medium, so to speak, of collection.

At a glance, the reader can appreciate the extent to which a collection often contains other collections: one of the sequences within the six-page spread wordlessly displays the items in an old cardboard box; another shows a series of memories from extramarital affairs; a third classifies flora (golden rod, Canadian thistle) on the hill behind George's childhood home. As a whole, the fold-out scrapbook is a self-contained unit in the much larger collection that constitutes *George Sprott*. Nested collections are also a hallmark of *Clyde Fans*. Simon remarks that the vanity desk in his mother's bedroom "has always been something of a cabinet of curiosities for me" (PVI9 90). The pages showing her everyday items resemble a very orderly cabinet or display case, each uniform panel a compartment, in which these extremely private items take on some of the public, scientific mien of a museum collection. Here, as much as anywhere else in Seth's work, the reader is encouraged to browse with the protagonist, an act that is highly compatible with collection and does not necessarily require a public space. The sequence recalls Svetlana Boym's account of the museification of the home in the nineteenth century, the rise of "armchair nostalgia" aided by "a multitude of archival drawers, display cases and curio cabinets" (15). The sequence in Lily Matchcard's bedroom interweaves the mutually inclusive chronotopes of the collection and the family home. (In its museum-like suspension of time, this sequence also seems to comprise the threshold chronotope.)

What Simon offers the reader in this sequence amounts to a kind of guided museum tour. His commentary is meandering but not haphazard, tending to follow the

layout of the room (“Next to the vanity is a bookcase”). He is affectionate but not uncritical: describing, for instance, a diamond-encrusted gold engagement ring hidden within the folds of a souvenir scarf, Simon frankly admits “It is a rather ungraceful object” (92). By all accounts he is the ideal guide, perceptive, invested, with an intimate knowledge of what his mother’s things say about her. Looking at the titles on a shelf of the bookcase, Simon notes that they reflect “the tastes of an early 20th century woman of intelligence and middle-class breeding” (92). In these ways, Simon turns his mother’s bedroom into a genuine collection, not an absent space but a memorial suffused by her presence.

The recollection of each item provides a multilayered perspective: Simon’s view of his mother’s self-perception. This process is sustained by his attention to detail, which exemplifies the alert, mindful aspect of recollection. Seth gives Simon ample room to attend closely to objects, devoting four panels to a pair of flared black gloves with zigzag cuff stitching (fig. 7.5), another six to a green plastic radio from the late 1940s. This sense of capaciousness is augmented by the occasional appearance of empty panels, devoid even of text, solid black squares that sit at the beginning of some strips. These blank black panels operate as brief caesuras that punctuate the regular rhythm of the grid, adding another kind of porousness to the page: the readerly interpolation provoked by a filled black panel is of a different order than that invited by the familiar gaps *between* panels. Both types of gaps, however, work to accommodate the reader within

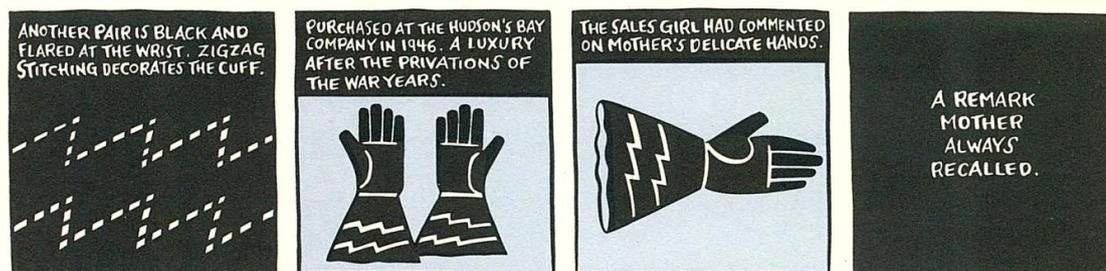


Fig. 7.5. Seth, *Palookaville 19* (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 92.

the structure of the comics page.

Seth's techniques are not merely structural. One of the more engaging ways in which Seth draws the reader into the fictional world is by describing invented products, which evoke entire company histories in a single panel. The top drawer of Lily Matchcard's vanity is a trove of beauty products with, in Simon's phrase, "names and packages recalling a time gone by" (90). Among the many items are an enamelled tin of "Morning Glow Face Powder #15" (90) and a package of "Lady Frost Melting Face Cream," which is "Trademarked to the Milksoft Company of Montreal" (91). These products, in their detail and specificity, assume an unexpected tangibility, the impression of which is strengthened by their narrative and visual isolation from each other in discrete panels (fig. 7.6).

"Collectors," Basbanes states, "are tactile people"; he goes on to say, somewhat



Fig. 7.6. Seth, *Palookaville 19* (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 90.

opaquely, “a person still has to handle the goods in order to achieve full satisfaction” (*Among the Gently Mad* 69). Simon comes across as a tactile person – he is describing his mother’s things from memory, but his facility with the objects is the result of regular handling. “Each object—its form impressed upon me by years of contact,” he says. Not simply visual contact, but physical contact as well: “I think I would recognize anything here even if I were to encounter it in a darkened room” (*Palookaville* 19, 90). Some items (the perfume bottles atop the vanity, the volumes on the bookcase) are initially presented in groups, and then on their own in panels like darkened rooms. Seth’s cartoon rendering of the items – restrained but stylized – gives them a distinctive weight, and substantiates the tactility so crucial to this collection. Simon’s familiarity with the objects, however, is accompanied by occasional obscurity. One of the pictured beauty products is a peculiar applicator, the function of which remains “an utter mystery” (91).

The contents of a box in the vanity’s top drawer appear only as a fragmentary image. Simon’s treatment of this “variety of odd rubber hoses, bulbs, bottles and pads” clearly indicates that the utter mystery is not any particular artifact but rather maternal femininity as a whole. In sharp contrast to painstakingly described hairbrushes, jewelry and other relatively neutral possessions, these intimate objects receive very little attention. In a sequence (and story) that is otherwise characterised by an excess of detail, this is no accident. Simon’s narration glosses quickly over the items, “which I have tried not to look too closely upon for fear of discovering their purposes” (91). Here more than anywhere else it becomes apparent that Simon is actively preserving his own naïve innocence along with his mother’s memory.

The final strip of the sequence illustrates a cardboard box and its contents, the remains of a vase, which stands intact in one panel and lies broken in shards in the next (fig. 7.7). Both panels are imagined by Simon – the box remains beneath his mother’s

bed – but the first demonstrates the great capacity of individual memory to “make its way to objects from the past that are physically intact in their distance” (Orlando 115). Simon succinctly describes the vase as “a thing so precious, that even though ruined, it could not be tossed away” (*PVI* 94). For Simon, it is the ruin that reveals the object as precious. Unbroken, the vase is unremarkable; broken but stubbornly preserved, it takes on a new significance and more powerfully evokes the memory of his mother.

Collection always entails various related forms of preservation, often the preservation of an artifact with an attendant set of memories. The binding of object to past experience is one of the collection’s primary operations, in some respects its driving mnemonic, but the vagaries of preservation are not always guided by such a straightforward correlation. Simon’s collection of novelty postcards, for instance, appears at first to have little to do with recollection or the maintenance of personal memories evoked by specific items. Meticulous nearly to the point of being clinical, this collection becomes an outlet for Simon’s obsessive and compulsive inclinations, with the significance of individual postcards subordinate to the much broader logic of a planned book on the subject – a “grand history,” as his brother Abe says in Part One of *Clyde Fans* (61). “He spent years collecting, researching,” Abe tells the reader, “filing them away. All these little boxes are filled with carefully sorted and ordered postcards” (56). It is difficult to determine which is ultimately more important to Simon, the book for which he has prepared hundreds of “carefully typed notes” or the actual process of

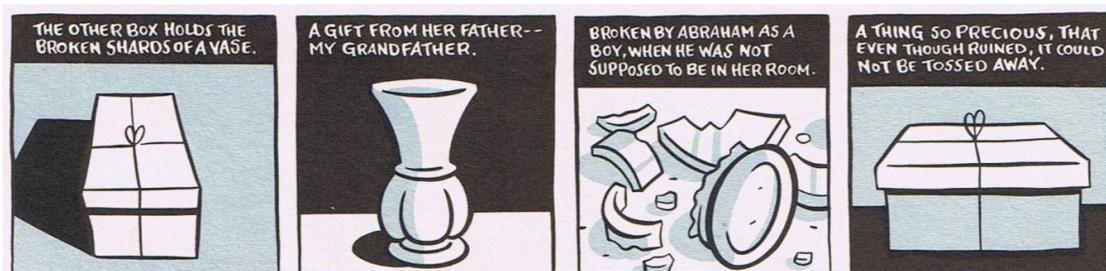


Fig. 7.7. Seth, *Palookaville* 19 (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 94.

researching and collecting, assembling those notes. In any case, there is little to doubt in Abe's account of Simon's quiet devastation "when someone beat him to the punch in the mid-'70's and published a book on the same subject" (61).

What Abe does not know, however, and what the reader does not learn until the end of *Clyde Fans*' second part, is that Simon's preoccupation with the postcards began by chance during his fateful trip to Dominion, every detail of which gradually becomes a fixture of his psyche. Even the mere name of the place, Simon admits, "has a deep power over me" (*Palookaville 16 15*). Like some of his other collections (namely, his repetitive sketches), the collection of postcards becomes far more legible in the broader context of Simon's lifelong fixation on his experiences in Dominion. That this unsuccessful sales trip should prove so indelible is hardly surprising: it is one of the few events in Simon's life to occur outside the reassuring routines of the Matchcard home. Even much less momentous occurrences seem to stand out against the great, uniform interior Simon has created for himself. Of the people he has briefly encountered throughout his life, he says: "In their thoughts I have grown smaller and smaller...or ceased to exist entirely. However, for me, they live on, carrying on some sort of continuing daily relationship. They only grow larger" (ellipsis in original, *PVI6 17*). The postcards, as well, grow over the years, in both volume and significance. Abe suspects that Simon's collection and the extensive research surrounding it is simply "busy work" (*Clyde Fans 57*), and to a certain extent this may be so, but it is not quite arbitrary in the way that he suggests.

It is possible to understand Simon's extension and elaboration of this trivial subject as an expression of his desire to fix himself in a moment in time. Not necessarily a particular moment – not, that is to say, the moment in Dominion when he first discovered the postcards – but any moment. He describes an adolescent preoccupation

with trying to reconcile the various incarnations of a self that is “Separated – cut apart by time” (*Palookaville* 16 18). Though he dismisses this as “a meaningless mental exercise” (19), it is clear he still retains something of that childhood wish to halt the terrible, identity-splintering flow of time. On the comics page, of course, this splintering is made explicit: multiple moments in time, and the multiple Simons that inhabit them, are visible at once. For many of Seth’s characters, collection is much more than simply the physical preservation and expert knowledge of plastic-sleeved comic books kept in pristine condition. It is more, even, than the preservation of a particular experience associated with an object; through collection, what is being recollected is the self. Simon’s collection of postcards is one of the means by which he preserves his identity.

Various other means include: the objects of his mother’s bedroom, his numbered sketches of beehives, trees and lighthouses, a childhood “treasure box” once filled with now-forgotten artifacts, and, perhaps most striking of all, a relatively recent collection of toys kept on a shelf above the desk in his study. In one of the most overtly uncanny sequences in the *Clyde Fans* story, the toys talk to Simon, and bicker with each other, in a manner that suggests familiarity and long acquaintance. They are, however, an antagonistic presence whose critical, nagging remarks are largely unwelcome. The most outspoken toy – a wide-eyed figure with a large spherical head, a long peg nose, and a frozen grimace (fig. 7.8) – is also the harshest and the most self-aware, responding to Simon’s complaints about their temperament with the question, “Are you even capable of imagining a pleasant conversation between two people?” The toy goes on to remind Simon that “you’re speaking for both of us” (*Palookaville* 17 35). The strange collection of anthropomorphic objects both splits Simon’s personality and reveals this splitting as a centripetal swirl of self-talk.

The house in which Simon spends so much time alone, attending to his various collections, eventually becomes the site of a final, less insular collection. Abe observes: “I’ve come to see that Simon prepared this place for me” (*Clyde Fans* 54). This preparation is somewhat ominous, but also considerate, an outward-looking, communicative gesture from Simon. In contrast to the unintentional collection left by Lily Matchcard in her bedroom, what Simon leaves for his brother is almost a bequest. Part exhibition, part missive from beyond, Simon’s collection is more or less imbricate with the Matchcard home. “Only by infusing this whole place with the spirit of his lonely struggle,” Abe says, “could I ever come here and understand him” (54). The “piles of books he left,” for instance, are not merely a bunch of diverting volumes but a synecdochal record of his interior life. Likewise the other items: “somehow he put some of himself into every object in here.” Simon seems to have intuited that his brother would eventually retreat, like he did, into the house, and so he organised a private collection with the hope, expectation, or foresight that Abe would one day need it. As Abe says, he has found in the interior of the family home “the contentment that the outside world never gave me” (54).



Fig. 7.8. Seth, *Palookaville* 17 (Montreal: D&Q, 2004) 34.

It is this kind of contentment – or, at least, solace – that Simon seems to find in his mother’s bedroom. It is the comfort of an inherited collection, intimate but still surprising, at once familiar and unfamiliar. Describing a group of items, Simon notes that “this is just a small sampling of a much larger assortment” (*Palookaville 19 91*), a statement that underscores the rhetorical method of the entire bedroom sequence. The final page of Simon’s recollections begins with two rows of panels containing only white text on a black background, the first of which reads “All this is but the tip of an iceberg.” Simon goes on to suggest various ways in which his reflections could be deeper and more nuanced, exploring the minutest contours of objects or the hidden meaning of their position in relation to one another (fig. 7.9). For Simon, the collection is almost necessarily cryptic, something to be deciphered.

The collection can also be considered cryptic in another sense, i.e., as resembling a crypt, using the word in much the same way that Derrida has used it, as a kind of shorthand for the manner in which traumatic experience consolidates itself. In his foreword to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word* – a dizzying re-analysis of Freud’s famous patient – Derrida considers the process by which a kind of interior tomb is constructed as a “monument” to trauma (xxii). He repeatedly asks, “What is a crypt?” It might be said that, for Derrida, a crypt is a structure that keeps a secret safe (from the self) within the self. “The inhabitant of a crypt,” he writes,



Fig. 7.9. Seth, *Palookaville 19* (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 95.

“is always a living dead, a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but *as* dead, one we are willing to keep, as long as we keep it, within us, intact in any way save as living” (Derrida xxi).

Although Derrida goes into greater detail about interiority/exteriority and the formation of the self, this abridged description of the crypt is enough to reveal a fundamental correspondence to the process of collection. Collection similarly forms a monument to house the past, to keep it alive and present, but always as something absent. At the root of this structural similarity is an ambivalent impulse – like the collection, the crypt manifests and mediates the relations between inside and outside.

The Matchcard home is like a collection of crypts, a mausoleum in which ever more interior spaces adjoin and intersect (and as the brothers move through the house, they appear, by virtue of the co-presence of images on the page, to occupy multiple spaces at once). The innermost of these interiors is a crawl space, most easily accessible through Simon’s mother’s bedroom by way of a small door in a slightly recessed part of the wall. The reader also sees Simon, as a young child, enter the space through an even smaller door in an upstairs hallway (fig. 7.10). What is the secret he keeps safe in the crawl space? In this liminal domestic area, behind and between the walls of the home, reside the predecessors of Simon’s talkative toys: a group of stuffed and mounted animals. Taxidermy serves as an unexpectedly apt literalisation of Derrida’s description of the inhabitant of a crypt – an entity that is kept alive as dead – but it is not an owl or a beaver that Simon keeps hidden from himself. As his grimacing toy perceptively suggests (*Palookaville* 17 35-36), for Simon the stuffed animals operate as a metonym for the person who stuffed them: his long-absent father, Clyde Matchcard.

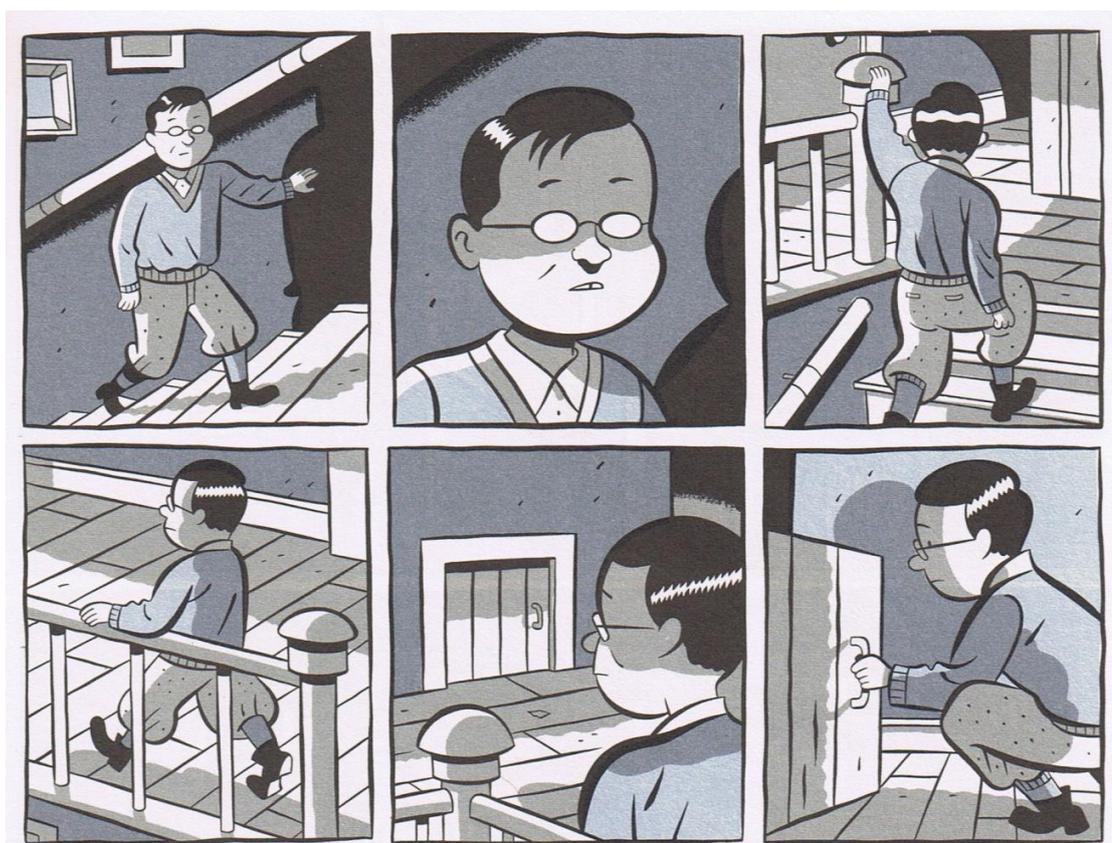


Fig. 7.10. Seth, *Palookaville 16* (Montreal: D&Q, 2002) 12.

Clyde Matchcard is the absent presence at the centre of *Clyde Fans*, the living dead that gives the story many of its crypt-like qualities, and the fragment of identity that Simon most conceals from himself. Through his collection of bad-tempered toys, Simon seems to have neutralised the traumatic memory of Clyde in ways that his mother and brother have not. This is a somewhat inverted circumstance in which the process of collection actually appears to inhibit recollection, but with same ultimate consequence, i.e. the preservation of identity.

If identities, as Hall suggests, are positions within narratives of the past, then it should come as no surprise when these positions change, multiply, or otherwise fail to

remain fixed in response to those ever-shifting narratives. This is nevertheless a threatening prospect, to which the collector responds by attempting to fix a relation to the past. Seth's characters are so often on the cusp of anachronism, slightly out of step with the times, because they are continually attempting to fix their positions within the narratives of the past. The collection helps to fortify identity by arbitrating between inside and outside, i.e. what is part of identity and what is not. Out of the chaos of the past, something specific, stable and representative emerges.

A similar operation is at work in the medium of comics, which is structurally very similar to the "medium" of collection. Particularly in their immobility, comics give the reader every opportunity to master the narrative – to recall earlier moments, to re-collect disparate parts – and yet in their fragmented presentation they simultaneously demand constant repositioning in relation to the narrative. Through collection and recollection, the collector means to keep loss at bay. Seth reveals the fragility of these processes, the ultimate failure to forestall loss, but at the same the potential for meaning that resides in this loss.

## 8

# FORGING HISTORIES: GHOST WORLDS AND INVENTED COMMUNITIES

In *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Seth evocatively describes the way that “bits and pieces” of the past seem to linger on in the present “like remnants of some ghost world – a vanished world” (43). This is from Part Two of the book, which was originally published as issue number five of *Palookaville* in 1994. At this time, Daniel Clowes was already publishing parts of what would become his best-known work, *Ghost World*. For Seth, the notion of the ghost world is perhaps most productive as an analogy for history; for Clowes, the ghost world comes to serve as a thematic through-line that underscores his characters' sense of loss and alienation. *Ghost World* seems to play on the expression “ghost town,” commonly used to describe an abandoned place, cut off from other towns and also perhaps frozen in time – a circumscribed zone isolated both spatially and temporally. In this sense, the ghost *world* would be a boundless place, an alienated totality that is, paradoxically, both omnipresent and remote.

In another sense, it is quite useful to think of the fictional realities of literature as ghost worlds, which are enlivened by the reader. This not only helps to conceptualise the various strata of Seth's sometimes dense metafictional excursions, it also permits a fuller examination of the interdependent relationship between the historical and regional/national dimensions of his work. Seth is engaged in “historiographic metafiction,” a term coined by Linda Hutcheon, which she defines as “fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities” (*Canadian Postmodern* 13). In works like *Wimbledon Green* and *The Great*

*Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*, the fictional and historical ghost worlds are constituted primarily by invented communities, which Seth conjures by means of suggestive details that prompt the reader to imagine the whole.

Stuart Hall's suggestion that identities comprise different positions relative to narratives of the past is echoed by one of Eric Hobsbawm's remarks on community: "To be a member of any human community is to situate oneself with regard to one's (its) past, if only by rejecting it" (*On History* 10). Seth does not reject the past, but neither does he fully embrace it. Rather, he ambivalently situates himself in relation to the past by remaking it in fictional form – and encourages the reader to take up a similarly ambivalent position. Hutcheon explains that historiographic metafiction "questions the nature and validity of the entire human process of writing – of both history and fiction. Its aim in so doing is to study how we know the past, how we *make* sense of it" (*Canadian Postmodern* 22). Her emphasis on the making of the past resonates strongly with the practices of both Seth and his characters.

### **Narrative Heterocosms**

A more technical term for "ghost world" might be "heterocosm," i.e. a separate or alternative world. Hutcheon uses the word to denote the world of a fictional narrative – as in "the fictive heterocosm" – which she insists is "not a way of viewing reality, but a reality in its own right" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 90). Much the same reality-claim could be made about the heterocosm found in non-fictional, historical accounts. In fact, it seems likely that many readers would sooner accept the historical heterocosm – in other words, "the past" – as a reality in its own right. Though the past may be quite distinct from the present reality of the reader, it is nevertheless understood to be somehow continuous with that present reality – separate, but not alternative.

As discussed in previous chapters, Seth takes advantage of the credibility often attributed to historicising discourses, using them to fortify his invented realities. This technique is extremely effective because fictive and historical accounts constitute highly compatible narrative heterocosms.<sup>1</sup> No doubt other types of heterocosms exist, each with varying degrees of narrativity. A discussion of a video game, for instance, could plausibly refer to the “ludic heterocosm” with which the player interacts, and such a heterocosm could have a strong narrative element. Conversely, an orchestral composition might be said to offer the listener access to an “abstract heterocosm” that is essentially non-narrative. For the purposes of this investigation, however, the term heterocosm refers to a *narrative* reality, a ghost world tied to a story.

In Seth’s work, fictive and historical heterocosms often intersect, and in some cases even become seemingly indistinguishable from each other. The credulous reader has little reason to doubt the veracity of the collection of cartoons, “The Famous Eleven,” that appears at the end of *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken*. Not only does Seth convincingly insert the gags into pages from period publications, he also provides a photograph of their author, Kalo, as well as a glossary that contains historical information on other cartoonists. More than this, he presents the entire Kalo fabrication within the broader context of a believable autobiographical narrative.

One of the distinguishing features of *It’s a Good Life* is the protagonist’s self-reflective commentary, a vein of autobiography that all but disappears from Seth’s work in subsequent stories. However, even the most personal of these reflections is not conventionally autobiographical due to the fabricated nature of the story. “In the field of contemporary comic book production,” Bart Beaty notes, “autobiography holds a promise to elevate the legitimacy of both the medium and the artist” (144). In *It’s a*

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<sup>1</sup> In the opening pages of *Metahistory*, Hayden White explicitly refers to “the fictive character of historical reconstructions” (1-2).

*Good Life*, Seth interrogates this notion of legitimacy by offering an apparently autobiographical story that centers on fictional events. Notably, *Palookaville 20* closes with fourteen pages from Seth's sketchbook journal, a record of a trip to Calgary (discussed in Chapter 4), the first unmistakably autobiographical material of significant length that Seth has published since the earliest issues of *Palookaville*.

What emerges most palpably in these journal entries is Seth's sense of loneliness and estrangement from the people he encounters, a far cry from the camaraderie he feels with fellow cartoonist Chester Brown in *It's a Good Life*. Brown likewise depicts his relationships with Seth and Joe Matt in his autobiographical book *Paying for It*, and Matt provides a group portrait of the three in *Spent*. In these instances, autobiography seems less a route to artistic legitimacy than to artistic *community*. Seth even dedicates non-autobiographical books, *George Sprott* and *GNBCC*, to Brown and Matt respectively – in the latter case, bestowing on Matt the title of “honourary Canadian”. For the reader, the three authors form a community of cartoonists.

Even the reader who understands that John Kalloway is not a real historical figure – and in turn wonders about the fictive dimensions of the rest of the plot of *It's a Good Life* – is still likely to accept as authentic Seth's investment in the cartoon medium, his preoccupation with the past, and his friendship with Brown. In these ways, the fictive heterocosm of *It's a Good Life* is emotionally grounded in the extra-literary reality of the author, which presumably overlaps with the world of the reader. To a certain extent, it is this presumption of continuity between realities (the ostensibly objective ghost world of the past, the present everyday reality shared by the author and the reader, and the more subjective ghost world of the autobiographical narrative) that grants Seth's historical inventions/interventions their plausibility. His technique in *It's a*

*Good Life* is to pretend that the fictive heterocosm is not separate or alternative at all, but is in fact consistent with the historical past and, by extension, the present.

This is not to say that Seth necessarily intends to deceive the reader. Particularly in subsequent books (which do not feature Seth as a protagonist and so are not explicitly bound to any autobiographical reality), it becomes clear that Seth is forging not just parallel histories but wholly alternative ones, each with “its own rules which govern the logic or motivation of its parts” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 90). The appeal of *Wimbledon Green* is in some ways rooted in its self-containment. The reader has access to a thoroughly imagined world with a consistent internal logic (the obsession and compulsion of collecting and bibliomania), which extends from its single-minded characters to its accumulative story structure. The same could be said of the autonomous worlds of *George Sprott* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*.

Other narratives feature self-containment of a different variety. One of the most arresting ghost worlds in Seth’s work is also one of the most private and obscure: Simon’s dream world. A heterocosm within a heterocosm (a “meta-heterocosm,” though that term may be too clunky to be useful), the dream world is comparable to the metafictional comics that appear throughout Seth’s work. It has even more in common, however, with the “frozen place” of Simon’s novelty postcards, which appeals to him because it is removed from “mundane reality” (*PVI* 8 57). Though these dream worlds are intangible, they bleed over into Simon’s waking reality in the form of fantasies and reveries. Seth’s drawing style remains consistent, so Simon’s private reality looks the same as the broader fictive heterocosm within which it appears. Nevertheless, it is rarely unclear to the reader which reality a particular sequence depicts, especially since the distinctive imagery of Simon’s dreams becomes so familiar. In most cases, Seth uses

narration, empty panels and other, more elaborate transitions to explicitly toggle between Simon's mundane existence and his dream life.

Sometimes, however, the distinction between worlds does seem to collapse, as when Simon's toys speak to him (which may or may not be a sign of mounting dementia inherited from Lily Matchcard). The most ambiguous encroachment of the unreal into the everyday world is the uncanny sequence in which Simon – gripped with sudden paranoia – recedes into a crack in the wall and then realises, too late, that “I had become separated from myself” (fig. 5.6). Is this simply a nightmare, like the recurring dream of drowning to which Simon compares it? While it certainly has dreamlike qualities, it seems entirely unlike Simon's other dreams in overall tone and structure. Is it a paranoid delusion, further evidence of dementia? Seth does not offer the reader any clear indication about which stratum of reality is being depicted in this anxious sequence. Simon recounts the incident rationally, acknowledging its strangeness with no small amount of confusion and alarm. “About a month ago,” Simon says at the beginning of the sequence, “I was sitting downstairs in the office” (*PVI* 746). This in itself may be a hint: the sequence is an instance of analepsis, a past event reported by Simon from the diegetic present. Unlike the scenes in which Simon talks with his toys, this unsettling episode is not part of the immediate present of the narrative. The reader may interpret the incident in any number of ways, but the literal meaning seems sufficiently potent: in a moment of anxiety, Simon is absorbed into the protective walls of his home.

In certain respects, the Matchcard family home, which provides a clearly delimited setting for much of *Clyde Fans*, constitutes a heterocosm of its own, which to the reader may sometimes seem like a crypt or haunted house. Its inhabitants, however, do not think of it as a ghost world: as noted in Chapter 3 (in the discussion of the threshold chronotope and its relation to the Matchcard family home), both Simon and

Abe consider their home an oasis of reality in an otherwise hollow and illusive world. For Abe, what lies *outside* the house is the true ghost world, an alienated totality made up of fleeting relationships and empty roles such as “Salesman, wheeler-dealer, pillar of society” (*Clyde Fans* 51-52). For Simon, the house becomes a protective shell that shields him from the practical, day-to-day ephemera that Abe endures, the change and progress that seem so at odds with the Matchcard temperament.

Against the inexorable forward movement of time, Simon manages to achieve what he calls a “stalemate” within the walls of his home. Time, he suggests, “can be halted. It can be held in place for short periods” (fig. 8.1). This state is not attained through any deliberate exertion but is rather the result of, in Simon’s cryptic phrase, “an effort that was, somehow, the opposite of will power” (*PV18* 56). Deliberate or not, this temporal exercise is of a piece with Simon’s preoccupation with the improbable

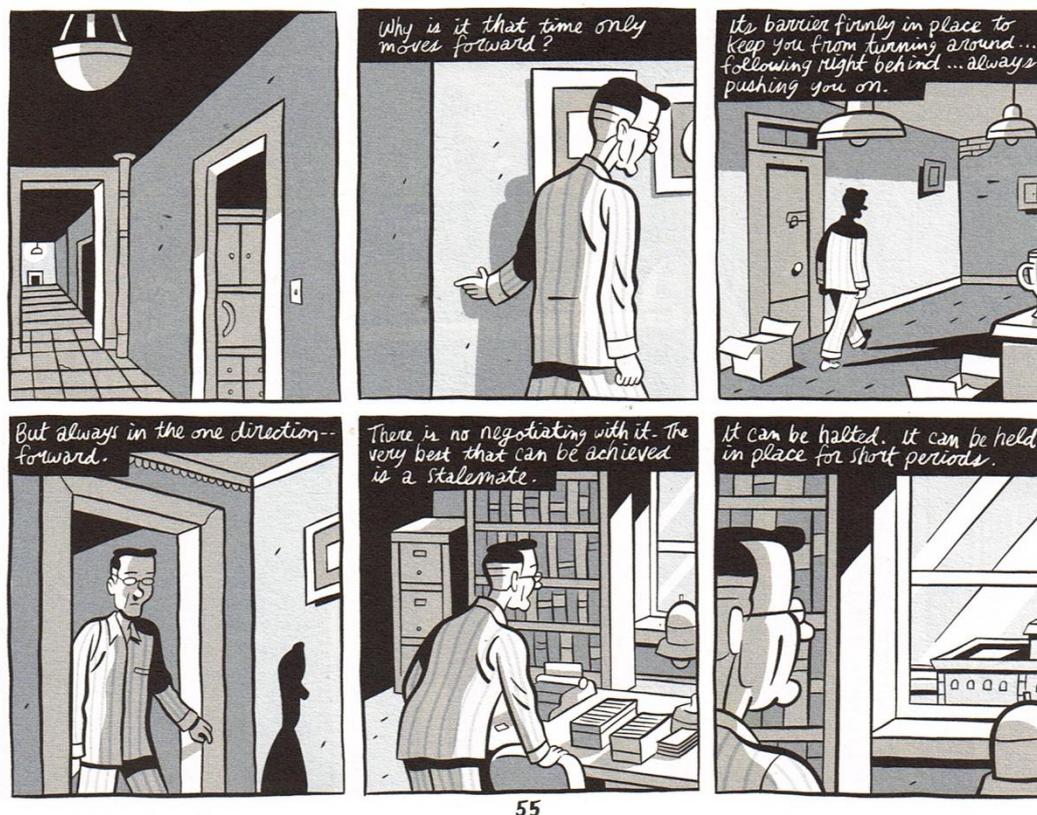


Fig. 8.1. Seth, *Palookaville 18* (Montreal: D&Q, 2005) 55.

persistence of a self that seems reborn with every passing moment. Within the threshold chronotope, as Bakhtin describes it, time seems to have no duration; it is as if the threshold exists in/as a frozen moment, outside the normal flow of time (Bakhtin 248). By residing in the threshold spaces of his home, and to such a degree that he considers the building a physical extension of himself, Simon feels he is able to suspend time – though not indefinitely. His mother’s imminent departure from the house serves as irrefutable proof that not only has the flow of time resumed but that, as Simon says, “Everything is winding down” (*PVI* 8 63).

Part Three of *Clyde Fans* is taken up almost entirely by Simon’s occasionally ambiguous but nonetheless consistent ruminations on time, which appear in caption narration. These circuitous musings – which repeatedly return in one way or another to the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity between the past and present – accompany panels that depict Simon moving from room to room around the Matchcard home, tending to his mother, working, sketching, sometimes just wandering, thinking. Literally hundreds of panels offer the reader variations on the image of Simon in doorways and corridors, moving in and out of long shadows as he puzzles over the mutability of time, memory and identity. The Matchcard family home comes to resemble a workshop or laboratory where Simon carries out various thought-experiments that test the nature of time, the most successful or instructive of which are not necessarily intentional.

The reader has already been introduced to the spaces of the house in Part One of *Clyde Fans*, which in some ways resembles a one-act play designed to show off a complex, detailed set. Through the lens of Simon’s fixations, however, the house comes into sharper focus and the reader gains a more intimate, in some cases almost claustrophobic sense of how its walls, passages and rooms fit together. Chapter 1 describes this sense of space – which gradually accrues with each panel read – as

“synaesthetic”. Through the visual composition of elements within the panel, the cartoonist produces a nearly palpable impression of spatial relations in the world of the narrative. What Seth refers to as “spatial understanding” (Appendix B 334) is a significant aspect of a cartoonist’s drawing style and contributes considerably to the distinctive reality of the fictive heterocosm in comics. The spatial understanding that Seth imparts to the reader changes slightly from story to story – or even, in the case of a long-running series like *Clyde Fans*, over the course of a single narrative – but certain hard-to-define qualities remain consistent.

It may be analytically superficial (and somewhat indecorous) to set one of Seth’s earliest pages alongside something more recent, but such a comparison dramatically demonstrates the evolution of his drawing style (figs. 8.2 and 8.3). There is a tendency



Fig. 8.2. Seth, *Palookaville 3* (Montreal: D&Q, 1993) 3.



Fig. 8.3. Seth, *Palookaville 19* (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 90.

toward depth and dimension, qualities that have always been present in Seth's work but increasingly define his composition within the panel. This investigation has characterised Seth's space in terms of its "softness" and "solidity"; the previous chapter noted the nearly tangible quality of the items collected in Lily Matchcard's bedroom; attention has also been paid to the materiality of the books themselves, carefully conceived objects that make haptic appeals to the reader with raised cover illustrations and fold-out pages. With all this in mind, it begins to seem almost inevitable (or at least entirely understandable) that Seth would plunge fully into three-dimensional creation, as he does with his cardboard models of the buildings of Dominion City.

### **The Chalk City**

The cardboard buildings make their first appearance in *George Sprott*, which features five large, full-page photographs of individual models. Each model – photographed in isolation against an empty white backdrop – appears opposite a standard page of comics panels that tells a story related to the building, in many cases "A Brief History of" the place (fig. 8.4). Though the models appear meticulously crafted, with detailed trimmings and carefully painted surfaces, they are not to scale and no attempt has been made to disguise the fact that they have been constructed out of cardboard. The buildings are by no means sloppy, but they are literally rough around the edges: the fluted core of the cardboard is particularly visible at the corners of the structures, where corrugated sheets meet, or around the borders of glued-on windows and embellishments. Unlike their two-dimensional counterparts, these cardboard buildings are not seamless.

They do, however, share the decidedly cartoonish quality of Seth's drawings, constituting a material extension of the distinctive style he has spent so many years

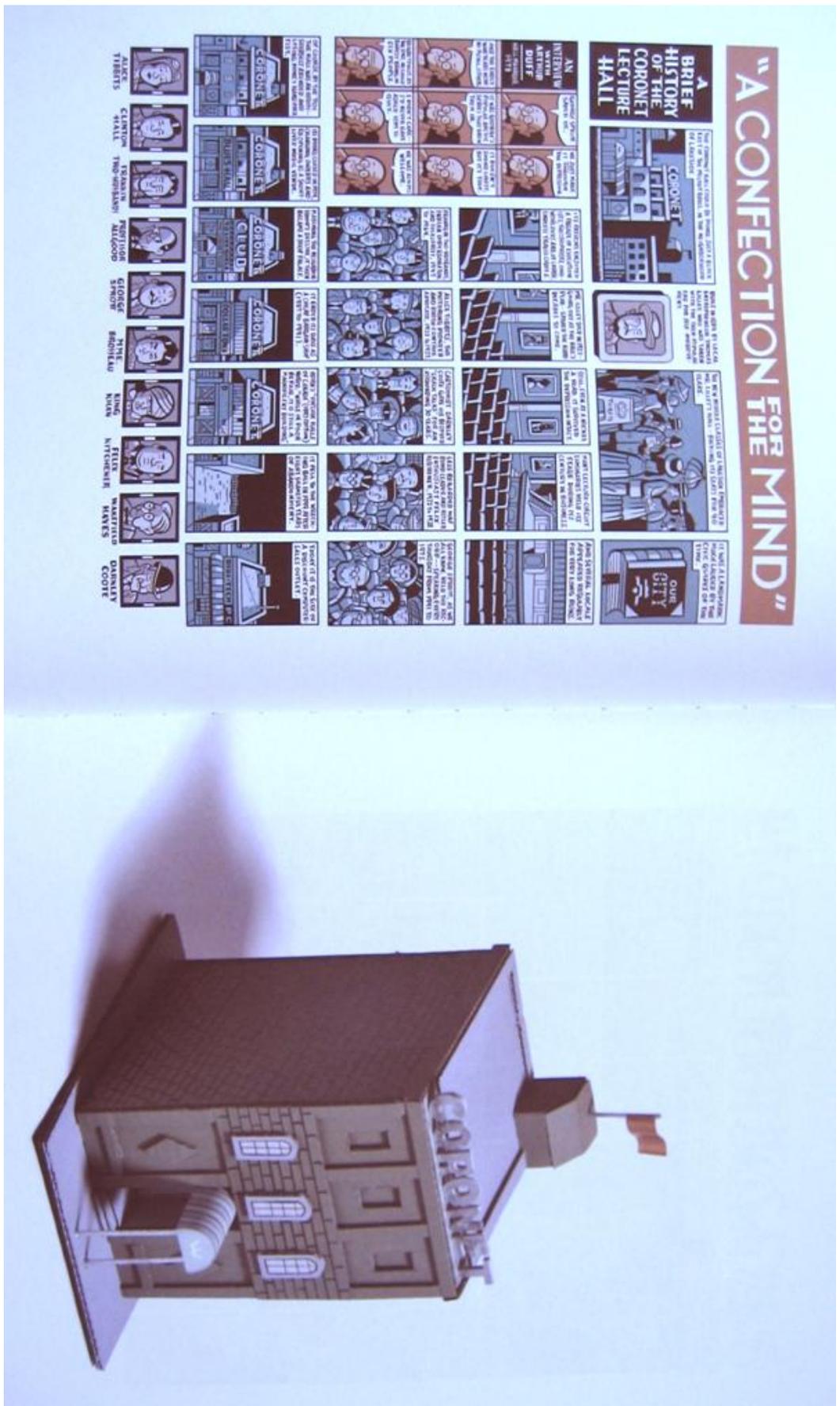


Fig. 8.4. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

refining in his comics. In some cases, the brushwork on a model is even more detailed than it would be in a two-dimensional drawing of the same building. A wall composed of interlocking bricks, for instance, might be indicated in a drawing by a handful of suggestive hatches; on Seth's models each individual brick is visible, painted onto the cardboard walls with an almost obsessive precision that demonstrates fidelity to a rather peculiar notion of verisimilitude. It is clear that Seth is not aiming for "realism" as such, but his characteristic attention to detail still helps to substantiate the reality of the ghost worlds that he creates.

The buildings featured in *George Sprott* are only a representative sample of a much larger project undertaken by Seth, which comprises a total of fifty Dominion City models, as well as a wealth of sketchbook work. A section of *Palookaville 20* is devoted to this "basement sort-of project" (44) and, judging by the material presented, a complete account of Seth's process could easily fill an entire book. In one sense, it already has: there are numerous extracts from "Encyclopedia Dominion," Seth's ledger workbook, which along with sketches of buildings includes notes, lore, stories, and scenes related to life in Dominion. One two-page spread features "Reference Books of Dominion" (fig. 8.5), each with a short synopsis and publication information, a familiar instance of an invented collection of books. These arcane volumes, such as a mid-nineteenth century "City Directory" and an architectural history titled *The Chalk City*, stand in for the storied past that the reader imagines is contained in their pages. Another sketchbook spread shows a more conventional comics sequence, narrated by George Sprott, which offers a tour of Dominion's "night spots" like the Edgewater Club and the Swan Room at the Forest Inn, locations not featured in *George Sprott* (PV 20 57).

In addition to these sketchbook reproductions, *Palookaville 20* also contains more than a dozen photographs of many of the fifty cardboard models, both on their own

(as in *George Sprott*) and grouped together to form makeshift city blocks. With their satisfying physicality yet cartoonish demeanor, the models are like miniature monuments, closed and mute, but exuding the same restrained energy as Seth's most polished comics. The sketches and notes are more openly energetic – voluble, peopled and loose, with an evocative narrative depth – but lack the concrete, finished quality of the buildings. Ultimately, the cardboard models and the sketchbook histories are interdependent parts of the extensively imagined heterocosm that is Dominion City; taken together, these disparate modes of world-building provide a substantial and organic sense of place.

As Seth explains in the personal essay that accompanies the Dominion City documentation in *Palookaville 20*, the genesis of the project can be traced to a long-since-abandoned concept for a suite of stories. “There were five of them – five

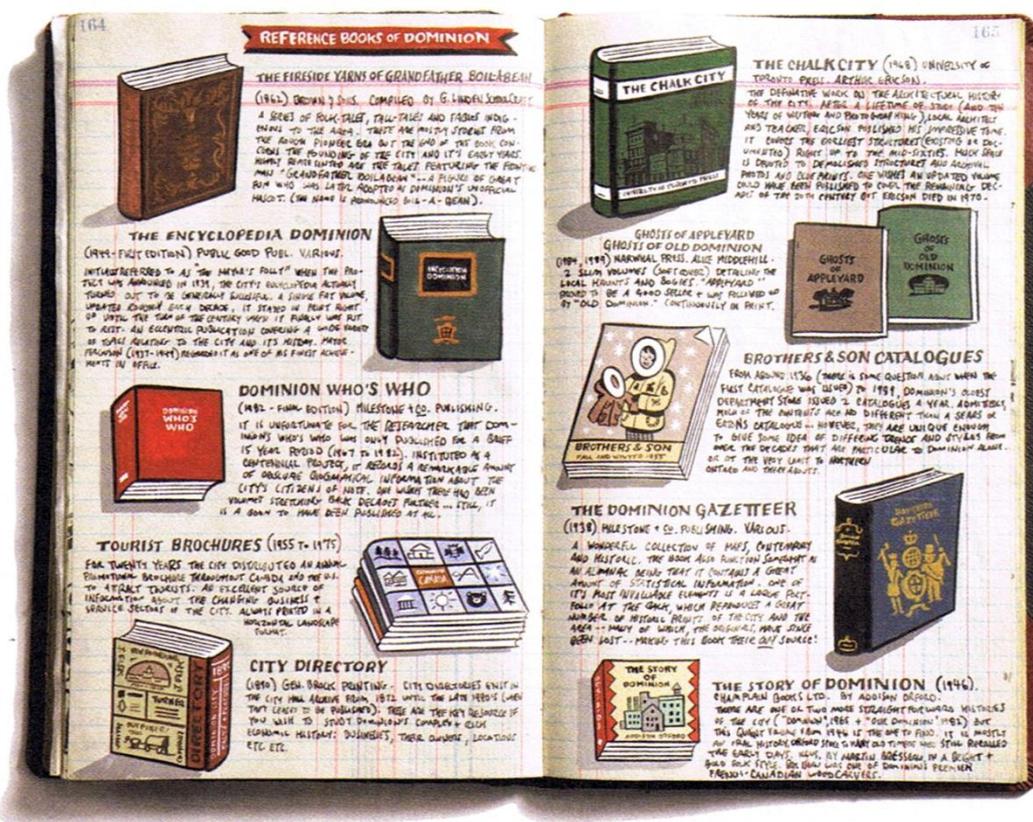


Fig. 8.5. Seth, *Palookaville 20* (Montreal: D&Q, 2010) 57.

characters, five short stories. Nothing really linked them together, though. The characters never met, nor did the stories comment on each other. I thought it might be a nice idea to set all five stories in the same location” (*PV20* 41). Seth claims to have settled on Dominion – “the same city in which Simon Matchcard had failed to close” (41) – on a whim. In fact, this instinct toward continuity from project to project persists throughout Seth’s career.

The front inside cover of the second issue of *Palookaville* (published in 1991) is a photograph of a lighthouse; the image of a lighthouse later becomes a fixture of the *Clyde Fans* saga, recurring both in Simon’s dreams and in his sketchbook. If this seems like an insignificant repetition, perhaps even a simple coincidence, the inside cover of *Palookaville 3* offers even stronger evidence of continuity: a novelty postcard with a manipulated photograph featuring an oversized fish, exactly the sort that Simon discovers in Dominion and begins to collect (fig. 8.6). Seth’s inclination toward continuity yields a body of work that is unexpectedly coherent for a career that shows

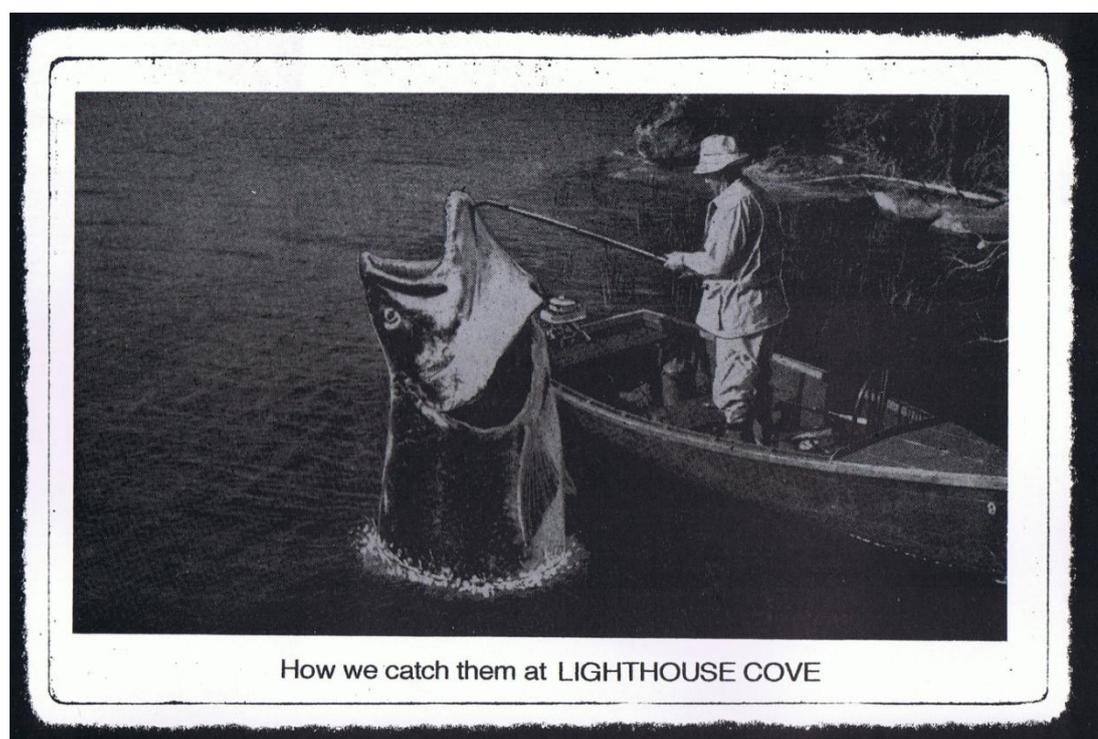


Fig. 8.6. Seth, *Palookaville 3* (Montreal: D&Q, 1993) front inside cover.

such a steady incline in artistic maturity over more than two decades. From this point of view, his work is an ongoing series of overlapping and sometimes interlocking worlds that reaches a particular culmination in the elaborated manifestations of Dominion City. In 2005, the cardboard buildings were installed together as a city block to form the centrepiece of Seth's solo show at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Canada. This exhibition (which also included comics pages) was the first to bring the models into a public space, marking what Seth describes as the transition of Dominion from private hobby to work of art. Neither context, however, fully demonstrates the literary depth or inhabitability of the imagined city. Even in its earliest state, according to Seth, the place had already begun to make another kind of transition: "day by day Dominion City became less of an artistic project and more of an interior landscape. I found myself walking its streets each night as I lay down to go to sleep" (*PV20* 42).

Appearing together in such close succession, these two striking statements tend to crowd each other, but both warrant further attention. First, the notion of the "interior landscape": this term perfectly conveys the dimensions of the project and also helps to account for its flexibility. More than a hobby or an art installation, Dominion City is an interior landscape which can take any number of exterior forms depending on the context (sketchbook, studio, gallery, etc.). In 2008, Dominion became the exclusive focus of a subsequent exhibition mounted in Waterloo, Ontario – an immersive, homey installation adorned with "Flags, filing cabinets, oak swivel chairs and a giant portrait of 'Our Founder'" (*PV20* 53). Along with these unforced curatorial flourishes, Seth also created new work to complement his sketches and models, suggesting an interior landscape the full potential of which remains unexhausted.

Second, Seth's description of a particular somnambulistic impulse: each night, in mentally rehearsing the type of urban perambulation that often appears in his comics,

Seth recasts the interior landscape as a kind of dreamscape. This brings to mind the meandering dreams of Simon Matchcard, in which he often wanders through urban spaces that may or may not be Dominion, occasionally encountering his mother.

Likewise, the photographs in *Palookaville 20* of the model city block strongly recall the aerial perspective of some of Simon's dreams (figs. 8.7 and 8.8). It may also be worth noting that the practice of mentally navigating an interior space is one of the principal components of the method of loci – more colloquially known as a “memory palace” – the classical mnemonic device discovered by Simonides at the collapsing banquet hall. In the same way that an orator would use this art of memory by housing the parts of a speech in the various imagined locations of a memory palace, Seth houses the history of Dominion in the imagined city's buildings.

Some models embody a very specific period in the life of a building. The model of the Coronet Lecture Hall, for example, reproduces the building in its prime, sometime in the 30-year period that George Sprott was giving his weekly talks. The page in *George Sprott* that offers “A Brief History of the Coronet Lecture Hall” (fig. 8.4) depicts the precipitous decline of the site in the years following George's death: ultimately, the building is torn down and replaced by a computer outlet. This is an example of “the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers,” which Bakhtin argues is necessary for “the representability of events” (250). In the larger context provided by the brief history of the building, the cardboard Coronet becomes a kind of time capsule, which contains a frozen segment of a much larger heterocosm.

Seth describes his model-building practice as “The kind of thing sad men cook up as they hit middle age. Like a train set...or putting ships in a bottle” (*Palookaville 20* 44, ellipsis in original). Behind the self-deprecation is a worthwhile comparison to other activities that entail the careful construction of alternative, separate (and usually



Fig. 8.7. Seth, *Palookaville 20* (Montreal: D&Q, 2010) 47.



Fig. 8.8. Seth, *Palookaville 18* (Montreal: D&Q, 2005) 68-69.

miniature) worlds.<sup>2</sup> Such activities are very ordinary – familiar, domestic, amateur – but at the same time expressly intended as an escape from the everyday, a pastime that creates a ghost world which exists outside of everyday time. In this sense, there is a strong affinity between Seth’s collection of cardboard models and Simon’s collection of novelty postcards (and even, perhaps, Clyde Matchcard’s collection of amateur taxidermy). Like Simon’s postcards, Seth’s models exceed mundane realism, and both collections eventually surpass their initial status as mere diversions.

Seth’s model-building serves as a useful case study for rather abstract concepts such as craft, scale and manipulability. As three-dimensional anomalies in a chiefly two-dimensional artistic career, Seth’s cardboard buildings often seem like modeled drawings, obviously handcrafted objects caught somewhere between model and cartoon. Whereas a drawn photograph by Seth is a cartoon approximation of a vestige of the real, his cardboard models are in some way an inversion of this method: real, three-dimensional representations of cartooning. Of course, it is difficult to say which version of a building is “real,” particularly when the model and the drawing are side by side, as often happens in *George Sprott*. A page titled “5th Floor, End of the Hall” shows the reader George’s suite of rooms on the top floor of the Radio Hotel; the cardboard model of the hotel, however, on the facing page, only appears to have a total of four stories. The model of the Radio Hotel is like a slightly distorted impression of the “actual” building (which perhaps only exists in the mind of the reader).

The sheer plasticity of these imagined buildings is even more apparent in the realisation of the North Star Talking Picture House. Part of Seth’s 2008 gallery show, the movie theatre is “a human-sized cardboard version of one of the models – *not to*

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<sup>2</sup> Seth’s remark also contains a highly abbreviated set of assumptions about the roles that age and gender play in the pursuit of the hobbies to which he refers. Left unsaid is the corresponding class assumption: the man with the train set in his basement is not only middle-aged but likely also middle-class. The implications of the stereotypical profile of the hobbyist, however, lie outside the concerns of this chapter.

*actual scale*, but big enough that people could walk around inside” (PV20 53, emphasis added). Seth first constructed a cardboard model of the steeped building, of which the final, “life-size” construction is a more modest interpretation, suited to the confines of a gallery space. Nevertheless, the North Star – complete with working screen showing films selected by Seth – “turned out to be an ideal interior space (in both meanings of the phrase)” (PV20 54).

In addition to a cardboard model of the G.N.B.C.C. clubhouse, the opening pages of *The Great Northern Brotherhood* also feature photographs of real-life objects: the club’s well-worn presidential top hat, as well as the Journeyman and Jasper awards (fig. 8.9). These objects are not models or scale replicas (though perhaps they may be regarded as sculptures); rather, they are materialisations of invented items, “real”



Fig. 8.9. Seth, *GNBCC* (Montreal: D&Q, 2011) 6.

artifacts from the world of Seth's sketchbook. As such, they have more in common with the convincing counterfeit documents collected at the end of *It's a Good Life* than with the obviously handcrafted models of Dominion City buildings. Similarly, even though the models of Dominion are three-dimensional, they are more like the sketched selections "from the library of Wimbledon Green" (fig. 7.1) than they are like the fully actualised G.N.B.C.C. artifacts. In each instance, the thing forged serves as evocative stand-in for something greater, a synecdoche of the complete collection or heterocosm that is too extensive to be perceived in its entirety.

### **Ambivalent Conceptions of Historiography**

The most compelling community invented by Seth – livelier and more character-driven than the interior cityscape of Dominion – may be the community of comic book collectors in *Wimbledon Green*. Here the ostensibly stuffy world of auctions, price guides and specialty bookshops is revealed to be the dynamic world of forgeries, lifelong searches and unexpected reversals of fortune, all depicted in Seth's invitingly brisk sketchbook brushstrokes. And though these engaging aspects of the book certainly help to animate the characters, what really brings the community to life is Seth's portrayal of bibliophile politics. Whereas the history of Dominion resides in its distinctive but impartial buildings, it is the personal anecdotes told in *Wimbledon Green* that form a sort of talking history of the community, a history which is dominated by rivalry, rumour and scandal.

The Coverloose Club provides a representative example: founded by "Cuts" Coupon as a sanctuary for comic book collectors, it deteriorated into little more than a clique when the other members – to Coupon's dismay – vetoed Wimbledon Green's entry. Coupon attributes the Club's behaviour to "Avarice, pettiness + jealousy" (*WG*

107), but makes no reference to the persistent uncertainty surrounding Wimbledon Green. Amid accusations and conflicting information, there is much to suggest that he is not quite who he claims to be. In part, it is this irresolvable ambiguity concerning the identity of the community's central figure – cast in sharp relief by occasional flashes of blunt condemnation – that gives *Wimbledon Green* its restless energy.

The book also contains brief glimpses into the adjacent community of comic book artists, a particular segment of which becomes the focus of Seth's subsequent sketchbook story, *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*. Seth's work has always been quietly Canadian, but in *The Great Northern Brotherhood* the national allegiances become explicit. Using a variation of the narrative technique developed in *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Seth reinforces his invented national history with references to actual Canadian cartoonists like Doug Wright and James Simpkins.

Along with extended assessments of metafictional comics and detailed descriptions of the Brotherhood's sprawling clubhouse, Seth spends nine pages on Wright's popular strip *Nipper*, for which he clearly has genuine affection (fig. 8.10). The annual G.N.B.C.C. award for best cartoonist, "The Jasper" (fig. 8.9) is a tribute to Simpkins' once nationally beloved, now nearly forgotten character Jasper the Bear. The



Fig. 8.10. Seth, *GNBCC* (Montreal: D&Q, 2011) 56.

reader who does not possess an encyclopedic knowledge of Canadian cartooning will probably not recognize names like Peter Whalley and George Feyer, and may assume that they too have been invented by Seth. Seth takes advantage of the relative obscurity of these real-life cartoonists, deftly incorporating them into a dense imbrication of historical fact and credible invention.

In this way, the central tension that emerges in reading *The Great Northern Brotherhood* is between the known and unknown. This might fairly be described as epistemological ambivalence on the part of the reader, which is a product of the ontological ambiguity that is inherent in metafictional narratives, and accentuated by Seth's appropriation of historicising discourses. In the opening pages of the book, Seth playfully anticipates (or perhaps even incites) this tension between known and unknown in his description of a bas-relief arch over the clubhouse entrance: "It's a Who's Who of Canadian cartoon characters. Some famous...some forgotten" (15, ellipsis in original). The reader with complete information (to borrow a term from game theory) knows that although some of the characters depicted in the arch may be relatively famous (Wright's Nipper) or forgotten (Simpkins' Chopper), many are Seth's invention, which are strictly speaking neither famous nor forgotten.

Within the world of Canadian cartooning that Seth has invented, however, even his invented cartoons exist in a hierarchy, some better known than others. By placing historical and fictive entities on the *same* spectrum between famous and forgotten, Seth once again yokes together fictive and historical heterocosms. About the bas-relief arch, Seth deadpans: "It's worth looking at carefully just to see who you can recognize" (16). The amusing implication is that an absence of recognition signals not utter fabrication on Seth's part but simply the natural fading of certain artifacts from the collective pop cultural memory. This gambit has a sharp ironic edge because much of the real, *non-*

fabricated history is so obscure. Throughout *GNBCC*, even the most careful reader experiences occasional moments of literary-historical vertigo in which it is difficult to discern – or remember – which parts of Seth’s history are invented. Seth gives new emphasis to the old motif of recognition/nonrecognition by making of it a game in which the reader is an active participant. The integration of real, esoteric Canadian history into an invented community is so seamless that for many readers – especially on the first reading – *The Great Northern Brotherhood* may have the effect of flattening all hierarchies, real or invented, into an ahistorical arcade. (In a final deadpan manoeuvre, the book closes with an alphabetical index, an entirely neutral list that does not distinguish between history and fabrication.)

Writing about Chris Ware’s role in comics history, Jeet Heer reports that “Canadian cartoonist Seth, whose passion for old comics matches that of his friend Chris Ware, once noted that most cartoonists have to educate themselves in the history of comics” (Heer 4). In turn, they sometimes educate the reader. Heer positions Ware as a comics historian “engaged in an act of ancestor creation, of giving pedigree and lineage to his own work” (4). In many ways, Seth’s literal invention of cartoonist predecessors is comparable to Ware’s more conventional historical endeavour. In *It’s a Good Life* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood*, Seth foregrounds his role as a comics history autodidact, but the knowledge he passes on to the reader blurs the boundary between fiction and nonfiction. These books constitute ironic versions of what Heer aptly calls “canon formation” in Ware’s work (Heer 4). Both Ware and Seth are forging histories, but in different ways – Seth’s work fully accommodates the double meaning of the word “forge” and in doing so points to the deliberate manipulation of material that even the most apparently neutral history entails. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White describes this process as the “selection and arrangement of data from the *unprocessed historical*

*record* in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an *audience* of a particular kind” (5, emphases in original).

It is the audience that finally realises this arrangement of data as history. Seth’s work frustrates this realisation because the reader cannot participate in its history-making without simultaneously setting in motion other discursive modes – satire, metafiction – not traditionally associated with historical truth. White’s very lucid remarks about “The Conventional Conceptions of Historiography” help to account for this tension. “In the eighteenth century,” he writes, “thinkers conventionally distinguished among three kinds of historiography: fabulous, true, and satirical” (*Metahistory* 49). These distinctions persist, indeed have become so entrenched that the twenty-first century reader may regard the term “true history” as redundant, and think of fabulous or satirical history simply as genres of fiction. Seth blends the three kinds of historiography together, which compels the reader to constantly take up new positions in relation to the text. In this way, Seth seems to cultivate something akin to what White calls a metahistorical consciousness, which “stands above, and adjudicates among, the claims which the three kinds of historiography (fabulous, satirical, and truthful) might make upon the reader” (*Metahistory* 51).

In Seth’s work, this metahistorical consciousness usually has an ironic quality. As a result, satire – being a narrative manifestation of irony (*Metahistory* 8) – often seems to emerge as the foremost historiographical mode, even in those narratives that are not overtly satirical. For instance: the earnest, elegiac tone of *It’s a Good Life* rarely takes on a satirical edge, but the mode of the work (i.e. fabulation presented as autobiographical truth) is highly ironic. *Wimbledon Green* on the other hand is outright satirical fabulation, an affectionate send-up of bibliomania, which employs historicising discourses (chiefly anecdote) but which no one would mistake for a truthful history. Its

companion volume, *The Great Northern Brotherhood*, is similarly fabulous, but incorporates truth in a manner that destabilises conventional historiographical distinctions; this very ambiguity, however, seems to invite a satirical resolution.

Each book offers a unique juxtaposition of the fabulous, truthful and satirical, but Seth does not (cannot) actually impart either a metahistorical or ironic consciousness – readers will respond in different ways to the various claims made upon them by his work. In her rich, astute essay “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern” Hutcheon describes such responses:

Irony is not something *in* an object that you either “get” or fail to “get”: irony “happens” for you (or, better, you *make* it “happen”) when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid, come together, usually with a certain critical edge. Likewise, nostalgia is not something you “perceive” *in* an object; it is what you “feel” when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you. (emphases in original)

This simple but by no means simplistic passage does much to refine and draw together certain strands of this investigation: first, it highlights the structural similarity between irony and nostalgia, both of which stem from ambivalence; second, it advances an appropriately process-oriented understanding of complex phenomena that resist rigid definition; third, in doing so, it helps to complicate the notion of “epistemological ambivalence” identified in the above discussion. It is not simply that the reader knows or does not know that, for instance, Kalo is a fictional character or that Doug Wright is an actual historical figure – it is that Seth’s work engages readers in the process of *making* their own historical knowledge. Moreover Seth’s work prompts readers to make historical knowledge that is ironic, nostalgic, or otherwise ambivalent.

Nostalgia is itself a form of historical knowledge, not unlike memory. As Hutcheon suggests in her essay, it consists of “the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire.” However, nostalgia is also a form of geographical knowledge: it operates both temporally *and* spatially, unable to separate geographical and historical

origins. Originally a diagnosis of patriotic homesickness (Boym 3), nostalgia has always had geographical, which is to say national, stakes. Were Seth's more overtly Canadian stories not so saturated with irony and ambiguity, their geographically specific longing for the past might be in danger of becoming overdetermined as nationalist discourse.

Particularly in works like *George Sprott* and *GNBCC*, nostalgia is often bound up with emblematic instances of Canadiana. The most obvious example is a literal emblem, the 1967 Canadian Centennial logo, which Seth uses as an insignia on the brass buttons of the G.N.B.C.C. club jacket (fig. 8.11). Several pages later, there is a reference to the National Film Board of Canada, or NFB, an actual long-standing Canadian institution that Seth weaves into his invented history. Addressing the reader directly, the narrator insists "You must remember, in grade school, watching those NFB cartoonist documentaries" (26). Here Seth invents a community of readers with a shared cultural memory – though, needless to say, the memory too has been invented by Seth.

In addition to these markers of official, institutional Canada, Seth's work also contains identifiably Canadian elements that are more organic. In *Clyde Fans*, the collected items in Lily Matchard's bedroom include several Inuit stone carvings (fig. 8.12), which encapsulate precisely the commodification and compartmentalisation of aboriginal Canadian culture that becomes a sustained undercurrent of *George Sprott*.



Fig. 8.11. Seth, *GNBCC* (Montreal: D&Q, 2011) 21.



Fig. 8.12. Seth, *Palookaville 19* (Montreal: D&Q, 2008) 92.

Another recurring feature of *George Sprott* is the arctic landscape, which appears not only in narrative episodes but also in the arresting two-page illustrations that punctuate the book. Northern geography appears in *The Great Northern Brotherhood* as well, but it is given a far less reverent treatment as the backdrop of the comically remote G.N.B.C.C. Archive; in another flourish of hyperbolic Canadiana, the unlikely architecture of the Northern Archive is styled after igloos.

It is not surprising that a cartoonist would both utilise and satirise such potent imagery, bordering as it does on caricature, but this nevertheless suggests a series of questions: Is there some kernel of national identity that irony does not deflate? Aside from the sheer associative power that Inuit culture and arctic landscapes possess, what is it that makes them Canadian? From such historical and geographical specificities, is it possible to derive abstract elements of “Canadian-ness”? Grounded, as Hutcheon says, in “historical, social, and political realities” (*Canadian Postmodern* 13), Seth’s historiographic metafiction readily assume a political tenor. Underlying the specific questions that particular works may prompt is a much broader question: who claims the authority to conceive and designate national spaces and identities?

## National Tendencies

In *The Canadian Identity*, originally published in 1961, historian W. L. Morton proposed that the “alternate penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization is the basic rhythm of Canadian life, and forms the basic elements of Canadian character” (5). Half a century later, this claim sounds more like mythmaking than measured historical analysis, but it nevertheless has a certain undeniable resonance. Like other cultural stereotypes, this notion of the basic “Canadian character” may dissolve on close examination but seems to cohere at a distance, powered by an irresistibly unambiguous essentialism. Morton imagines two archetypal geographies – wild and civilised – between which Canadians continually shuttle. This “basic rhythm” is reflected in “a country resting on paradoxes and anomalies” (51), for which the “evolution of the national identity” was “slow, obscure, and indefinite” (71). For Morton, Canadian identity is, essentially, a site of tensions and ambiguities.

In *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (1991), Hutcheon suggests that these ambiguities have done much to inform Canadian art and literature. “Obsessed, still, with articulating its identity,” she writes, “Canada often speaks with a doubled voice, with the forked tongue of irony” (1). To some extent, Hutcheon is responding directly to Morton, whom she briefly cites, attempting to update and develop his claims. In the preface to *Splitting Images*, she offers Canadians an alternative to the endless search for a cohesive national identity: “what if we made a virtue out of our fence-sitting, bet-hedging sense of the difficult doubleness of being Canadian, yet North American, of being Canadian yet part of a multinational, global political economy? That virtue’s name may well be irony” (vii). In many ways, Seth seems to embrace Hutcheon’s proposal. The virtue of irony pervades his books, which do not strain toward national self-definition even when their stories have an explicitly Canadian dimension.

To return to the question posed at the end of the previous section, which speaks to the political implications of conceiving the nation: Seth's work serves as a counterpoint to apparently authoritative imaginings of national identity/geography (for instance, those asserted by historians like Morton). Seth's juxtaposition of differing conceptions of historiography also unsettles conventional notions of geography, providing an arena in which the reader is free to imagine not only unauthorised histories but also the unauthorised geographies in which they take place. His unassuming but hardly toothless approach is nowhere more on display than in his most ironically Canadian book, *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*.

The book opens with an epigraph attributed to the experimental cartoonist Henry Pefferlaw, one of Seth's most appealingly iconoclastic creations. According to Pefferlaw, "Canadians have a born advantage when it comes to cartooning because of their national tendency toward dullness" (*GNBCC* 1). Oddly, this sardonic statement strongly recalls W. L. Morton's entirely earnest claim that Canada is "governed only by compromise and kept strong only by moderation" (*Canadian Identity* 51). Morton seems comically temperate by comparison, a personification of the stereotypical Canadian dullness that Pefferlaw ironically invokes. Pefferlaw's droll aphorism is not just flatly ironic, however; it entails a range of ironies, the enumeration of which may help to demonstrate the rhetorical density of *The Great Canadian Brotherhood*.

First and most obviously, the epigraph ironically praises Canadians for a rarely-praised quality – dullness. Second, and less obviously, this irony is compounded by Pefferlaw's status as an experimental cartoonist (not revealed until much later in the book) whose non-narrative comics could be described as willfully dull in their lack of conventional narrative action. With this in mind, the statement becomes doubly ironic: Pefferlaw's apparently sarcastic swipe may actually indicate esteem; employing the self-

conscious rhetoric of failure, his epigraph ironically transvalues dull and interesting. As a writer, Pefferlaw has much in common with real-life artist Martin Vaughn-James, who only lived in Canada for a decade but produced a significant corpus of innovative short comics and book-length works during that period (“Martin Vaughn-James”). Seth lists Vaughn-James’s “darn near impenetrable” non-narrative book *The Projector* as one of his *Forty Cartoon Books of Interest* (44).<sup>3</sup>

Seth’s own affinity for dullness in the form of “sublime boredom” adds a further dimension to the layered ironies of Pefferlaw’s remark, which despite its shifting significance remains a statement about national identity. This convoluted, ambivalent brand of nationalism does seem characteristically Canadian, at least according to the terms set out by Morton and Hutcheon. Hutcheon is quick to note that irony is in no way uniquely Canadian, but she observes that there “seems little in Canada that is not (or has not been) inherently doubled and therefore at least structurally ripe for ironizing” (*Splitting Images* 15). Throughout *The Great Northern Brotherhood*, Seth demonstrates Canada’s susceptibility to irony and satire, often with pointed (though not ungenerous) historical inventions.

One of the most indelible of Seth’s invented comic book characters in *GNBCC* is “Kao-Kuk of the Royal Canadian Astro-Men” – an Inuit astronaut (fig. 8.13). This marriage of occupation and cultural background has a cartoon logic that is strangely compelling: “the Eskimo, with his unique understanding of isolation...and his experience with vast emptiness made him the perfect choice for space exploration” (*GNBCC* 46, ellipsis in original). Like Morton’s conception of the basic Canadian disposition, this simplified understanding of “Eskimo” identity holds an essentialist

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<sup>3</sup> *The Projector* was first published in 1971 by Coach House Books, the Canadian avant-garde press that was also home to bpNichol, whose concrete poetry-comics hybrids were briefly mentioned in Chapter 1. Coach House’s re-issue of Vaughn-James’s 1975 book *The Cage* features an introduction by Seth.

fascination – drawn into the momentum of the peculiar premise, the reader is suddenly complicit, fulfilling the caricature with personal assumptions and associations.



Fig. 8.13. Seth, *GNBCC* (Montreal: D&Q, 2011) 45.

Even the character's name functions in this associative manner. Creator Bartley Munn (also invented by Seth) admits that "Kao-Kuk" is not authentically Inuit, but rather a linguistic forgery that he felt "sounded Eskimo" (*GNBCC* 46). This telling detail further complicates *The Great Northern Brotherhood's* ambivalent longing for this period in cartooning's past, and goes a long way toward evoking an era in which such culturally insensitive fabrication would go largely unnoticed. It also deftly conveys that particular strain of racism that lacks malice but is all the more insidious as a result. A white author sends an Inuit character into outer space: this scenario is a hyperbolic exemplification of the displacement and appropriation that characterises pop culture's re-imagining of communities that have become marginal. (Seth explores this white-Inuit dynamic in *George Sprott* as well, though not through the ironic lens of metafiction.) In a complementary instance of metafictional hyperbole, Seth inverts Canada's putatively dominant culture with one of *The Great Northern Brotherhood's* most outlandish characters, Canada Jack, who is loosely styled after nationalist heroes like

Johnny Canuck.<sup>4</sup> Seth reports that Canada Jack was created in the 1960s by a mysterious cartoonist named Sol Gertzman. Some highlights include: a short-lived flying robot horse, a guest appearance by a poorly-drawn Snoopy, an entire issue devoted to highway construction, and a caveman valet. As Seth says of his invented series: “They are certainly the oddest comic books ever made in Canada – a kind of folk art, almost” (95). Indeed, it is the sheer eccentricity of the stories that marks them as particularly Canadian (fig. 8.14). With his utterly unpredictable expressions of civic enthusiasm, Seth’s Canada Jack is what Hutcheon might refer to as an “ex-centric,” who is at once inside and outside the dominant culture (*Canadian Postmodern* 4). In this sense, Canada Jack is a nationalist hero – but it is a knowing, Pefferlavian nationalism that delights in ambivalent impulses. As Seth says elsewhere, in a description of one of the Brotherhood’s social clubs, it is “both grand *and* self-mocking” (*GNBCC* 70, emphasis in original).

A more delicate form of this ambivalent sentiment governs *George Sprott*, the fallible narrator of which personifies the doubt and disappointment behind George’s “Gentleman Adventurer” façade. In its idiosyncratic, anti-epic narrative approach, *George Sprott* provides a noteworthy alternative to Chester Brown’s much more straightforward Canadian comic-book biography, *Louis Riel* (2004), a carefully-researched account of one of Canada’s foremost revolutionary figures. Hutcheon names Riel as an “archetypal marginal ex-centric” (*Canadian Postmodern* 4). By contrast, George Sprott’s particular brand of small-town marginality is based around a rather conservative archetype. Nevertheless, it is a conservative archetype that is enlivened by a spark of self-awareness. Pages such as the one titled “A Few Words from the Man

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<sup>4</sup> Here the boundary between historical truth and fabulation becomes exceedingly porous: in the mid-1940s, freelance artist George Menendez Rae created a very straitlaced, “realistic” Nazi-fighting hero named Canada Jack (“Guardians of the North”).

Himself” (in which George addresses the reader directly with bon mots and aphorisms on a variety of topics) reveal a would-be iconoclast nagged by regret, aware of his limitations and of the ephemeral nature of his work. Seth imbues his small-town hero with the same clear-eyed intelligence discernible in his less successful characters.



Fig. 8.14. Seth, *GNBCC* (Montreal: D&Q, 2011) 97.

With the “folk art” of Canada Jack, Seth tempers nationalism with camp; *George Sprott* exhibits nothing as strident as nationalism, so its exploration of the contradictions of the nation can afford to be implicit and nonverbal. Some of the most identifiably Canadian features of *George Sprott* are the two-page arctic landscape illustrations, which operate within the mode of undecidability even as they allude to the history of Canadian art. Seth’s wintry tableaux owe a great deal to the later canvases of Lawren Harris, one of the foremost members of the Group of Seven, a pioneering collective of interwar Canadian landscape painters.

Morton makes specific reference to Harris’s work in *The Canadian Identity* as an example of what he calls the “art of the hinterland” (109), a tradition that Seth clearly gestures toward in *George Sprott*. Harris’s arctic paintings are often bright and translucent, distinguished by icy peaks and shafts of light that strongly suggest some form of spiritual ascension (fig. 8.15). Seth’s allusive illustrations are more cryptic and opaque (fig. 8.16), moonlit panoramas that offer the reader a reprieve from the densely-

paneled, text-heavy pages that are typical of *George Sprott*. As an elaboration of his claims about the essential Canadian character, Morton points to “the existence in Canadian art and literature of distinctive qualities engendered by the experience of northern life” (109). In their resistance to sequential reading and interpretation, the large, mute, arctic hiatuses that Seth incorporates into *George Sprott* use the mystery of the image (in Magritte’s phrase) to evoke this northern experience. At the same time, these instances of undecidability are culturally anchored by their reference to Harris’s depictions of the north.

Harris makes a more explicit appearance in *The Great Northern Brotherhood*. During the tour of the G.N.B.C.C. archive, Seth discusses the Group of Seven’s “connection to cartooning” (91). One of the archive’s holdings is a “picture novel” by

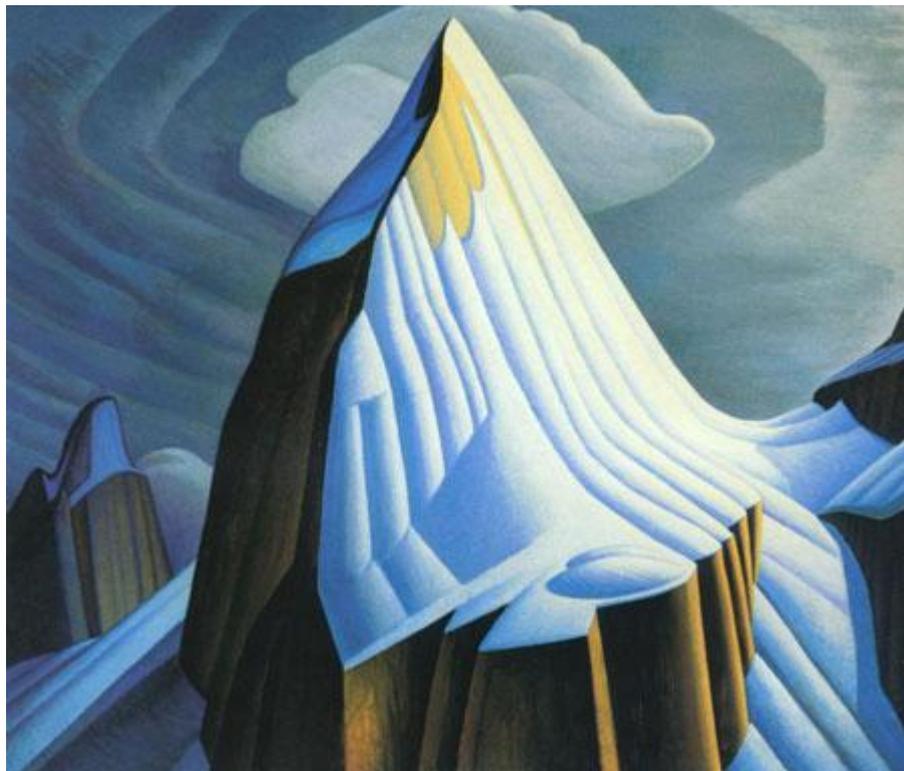


Fig. 8.15. Harris, Lawren. *Mt. Lefroy*. 1930. McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.



Fig. 8.16. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (Montreal: D&Q, 2009) n. pag.

Harris, an artist's journal that documents a painting expedition (92). (The very believable title of this journal, *Pillar in the Sky*, may be lifted from *Snow Pillars in the Sky*, a 1915 landscape by Group of Seven member Tom Thomson.) The same page features a similar picture journal by Thoreau MacDonald, who, as Seth notes, was not actually a member of the Group of Seven, but was the son of founding member J. E. H. MacDonald. Through the manuscript attributed to Thoreau MacDonald, Seth once again reveals his affinity for the marginal or peripheral, the artist working largely in obscurity. He presents the "unpublished" (i.e. invented) work as "A simple record of his everyday life in Thornhill, Ontario. A quiet work – personal yet told with real restraint" (93). This is quite a fitting description of much of Seth's own work, from the specific Canadian setting to the sense of moderation.

*Clyde Fans* in particular is a model of regionalism and restraint, of quietly locating the universal in the specific and provincial. The province in this case is Ontario

and, as suggested in Chapter 5, the Matchcard family saga can be regarded as “Southern Ontario Gothic” – a relatively recent development in the Gothic tradition. In *Eleven Canadian Novelists*, a 1973 collection of interviews by Graeme Gibson, noted Canadian author Timothy Findley remarks that Nathan Cohen (a Canadian theatre critic) recognised the influence of Southern Gothic literature in certain regional Canadian writing. Findley asserts, “sure it’s Southern Gothic: Southern *Ontario* Gothic” (138, emphasis in original). The most internationally renowned writer of Southern Ontario Gothic fiction is likely Alice Munro, another of the eleven Canadian novelists featured in the collection.

Gibson proposes that the region in which Munro’s writing is rooted “might become a kind of mythical country, like the American South” (248). Munro concurs:

Yes, I’ve thought of this, yes, probably because the writers who first excited me were the writers of the American South, because I felt there a country being depicted that was like my own. ...[Southern Ontario] is rich in possibilities in this way. I mean the part of the country I come from is absolutely Gothic. (248)

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Seth cites Munro as an example of a writer whose stories are at once deeply personal and restrained: “her work has a great depth of understanding of human beings, but you don’t get any sense of Alice herself. She’s maintained a writerly distance somehow from it, but the work is very deep” (Appendix B 333). Seth’s comments suggest a correlation between reserved “writerly distance” and Southern Ontario Gothic, which as a genre tends to hew quite closely to realism. This sense of unspoken emotional depth adds to the potency of the work’s Gothic elements, which seem to represent a genuinely involuntary return of the repressed.

One of the most recognisably Gothic features of *Clyde Fans* is its portrayal of lineage, a fixation of the genre that almost inevitably takes a sinister form: “A cursed family inherits an unwelcome legacy” (Mighall 80). This is precisely the circumstance

of the Matchcard family, each surviving member of which feels haunted by the legacy of Clyde. It is a powerful shared history, and perhaps all the more so because it is left largely to the reader's imagination. Mighall observes that "the idea of the Gothic carries a (pseudo-) historical inflection" (xv). This sense of pseudo-historicity is fundamental to Seth's overall aesthetic and to his method of unearthing invented pasts.

In his article on archives in contemporary comics, Gardner makes reference to Clowes and Seth and offers careful readings of the similarly archaeological comics of Ben Katchor and Kim Deitch. However, he finds nothing Gothic in these diverse excavations of the past: "The phrase 'ghost world' is used by both Clowes and Seth," Gardner says, "and as we have seen it applies equally well to the work of Katchor and Deitch. But it is important to note that there is nothing gothic, nothing uncanny, in these scenes of haunting" (803). Needless to say, Gardner's claims are at odds with many of the observations of this investigation, which explicitly outline the Gothic and uncanny qualities of Seth's work. "Nothing is unsettled by the coexistence of past and present, text and image," Gardner insists. "Here the double-vision that allows present and past to coexist is not uncanny, but natural, inevitable, and responsible" (803). After persuasively arguing that "comics necessarily leave their binary tensions unresolved" (801), Gardner ultimately finds in the comics he examines not an irresolvable, generative tension between past and present but an everyday coexistence of the two. Though this coexistence can be quite everyday and familiar, in Seth's work the familiar (and especially the domestic) often entails a Gothic-tinged return of the repressed.

In *Clyde Fans*, Gothic elements find their clearest personification in the fey and uncanny figure of Simon Matchcard, whose dreams, encounters and behaviour have already been discussed at some length, above and in previous chapters. Abe, the more grounded of the brothers, is more nostalgic than uncanny, but even his most practical

concerns, often domestic or business-related, take on a somewhat Gothic aspect. If, as Mighall suggests, the Gothic is an attitude to the past, then the same can be said of nostalgia and the uncanny. What nostalgia, the uncanny, and the Gothic have most in common is the past, to which they have variously ambivalent attitudes.

### **A Note on Modernism and Postmodernism**

As a structural and aesthetic response to ambivalence, *Clyde Fans* seems to incline not only toward the Gothic but also significantly toward modernism. Often Seth's approach to Simon and Abe's shared history brings to mind Virginia Woolf's striking image of the connected "caves" she digs out behind characters in her quintessentially modernist novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (*A Writer's Diary* 60). Chapter 5 attempts to highlight the interdependence of modernism and ambivalence. To some extent, ambivalence ("the great discovery of Freud") is understood as a characteristically modern phenomenon, and modernism is understood as the response to a swell of newly ambivalent impulses. Subsequently, ambivalence also figures prominently in postmodernism (as Hutcheon expertly observes).

Beaty suggests that "comics are only now moving through a modernizing period but that they are doing so against a larger cultural backdrop of postmodernism" (11). Against assumptions that literary comics represent an inherently postmodern mingling of high and low culture – literature being high, comics being low – Beaty cogently asserts that "it is difficult to fully comprehend how comic books could move into postmodern culture without having paused first in modernism" (76). Much of Seth's work appears to share not only the concerns of modernism but a number of its techniques for addressing these concerns (for instance, the mode of undecidability), which are often related to ambivalence. In these respects, *George Sprott* may be Seth's most modern book,

especially if read as a searching formal exercise in which fragmented storytelling creates an ambivalently elegiac mood.

By comparison, *The Great Northern Brotherhood* is quite gleefully postmodern, not only in its deployment of jostling metafiction but in the overall attitude to nationalism and national history that these fictions delineate. Seth's historiographic metafiction is invariably informed by irony and nostalgia. In "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern" Hutcheon brilliantly explores the manner in which the three phenomena relate to each other, observing that the postmodern "does indeed recall the past, but always with the kind of ironic double vision that acknowledges the final impossibility of indulging in nostalgia, even as it consciously evokes nostalgia's affective power." This ambivalent double vision is a hallmark of Seth's work, for instance in the quaint but unsettling racism of the Kao-Kuk premise. A less specific example of this double vision is provided by the overall narrative of *It's a Good Life*, the protagonist of which is more sentimental about Kalo's work than Kalo himself. Hutcheon writes:

In the postmodern, in other words, (and here is the source of the tension) nostalgia itself gets both called up, exploited, *and* ironized. This is a complicated (and postmodernly paradoxical) move that is both an ironizing of nostalgia itself, of the very urge to look backward for authenticity, and, at the same moment, a sometimes shameless invoking of the visceral power that attends the fulfillment of that urge.

("Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," emphasis in original)

Seth's search for Kalo points to a broader attempt to pin down an authentic past – a ghost world – that, ultimately, may not exist. Moreover, the figure of John Kalloway literally does not exist, except as an historiographical spectre available through Seth's metafictional gag cartoons.

The complicated irony that Hutcheon describes is a definitive element of *The Great Northern Brotherhood*, which offers the reader a moving target composed of constantly shuffling layers of truth and fabulation that never quite settle into an

identifiable mode of historiography. In many ways, this disruption acts as rejoinder to familiar, institutional narratives of history, geography, and national identity by drawing attention to their construction. Metafiction is certainly the most identifiably postmodern technique in Seth's work, a fundamental narrative element as early as *It's a Good Life*, but postmodern playfulness alone does not account for the sheer charm of Seth's invented comics. Seth's metafictional comics are at their most lively when their blurring of familiar borders playfully highlights the invented component of his communities.

Seth's incorporation of historicising discourses (sometimes plain historical fact) into the portrayal of invented communities tends to collapse conventional historiographical hierarchies, leaving the reader in a kind of suspense – suspended, that is, between history and forgery. Often the forgeries offer fractional views that cumulatively suggest a comprehensive fictive heterocosm, much of which may remain unrepresented. Each cardboard model, for instance, manifests only a limited part of the history and geography that constitute the interior landscape of Dominion City. The notion of the interior landscape – *which is at once intangible and inhabitable* – engenders a richer understanding of the possibilities of the heterocosm, particularly in Seth's work.

If a meaningful distinction exists between the terms “heterocosm” and “ghost world” (used almost interchangeably in this chapter) it is that the latter has a less neutral connotation. Ghost worlds are haunted heterocosms, inflected with the return of the dead, the repressed, the past. In Seth's work this haunting elicits an ambivalent longing, not only from his characters but from his readers. Just as irony is made by the reader when two meanings come together, nostalgia, Hutcheon says, “is what you ‘feel’ when two different temporal moments” come together. In this coming together, Hutcheon could just as easily be describing the “feeling” of history, of narrative progression, of the movement across a comics page. It is worth noting that the medium of comics fundamentally comprises the juxtaposition of meanings (as does irony) and the juxtaposition of temporal moments (as does nostalgia). Seth takes full advantage of these structural affinities, offering complex metahistories that amount to “a turning of the Ironic consciousness against Irony itself” (White, *Metahistory* xii). Without the complicity of the reader, however, this recursion is only a suggestion – it is ultimately the reader who must forge history.

## CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters I have identified a range of ambivalent impulses related to Seth's work, in particular an ambivalent longing for the past, which I occasionally refer to simply as nostalgia. This longing in fact takes many forms and has many sources, most of which on closer examination reveal an oppositional structure that arises from boundaries or gaps. Bauman's master-opposition between inside and outside illustrates this structure in the broadest sense; a more specific example is the fundamental semiotic interdependence of panels and gutters on the comics page. Seth's work consistently engages with the crossing of boundaries and filling of gaps, and compels the reader to do likewise to make sense of his narrative modes of address (and sometimes even to make sense of narrative content). Above all, Seth's work appears to reside in the margin between history and memory. This ambivalence permeates every aspect of narrative, from drawing style to story structure – at every level, Seth's work solicits an act of interpolation, a contribution from the reader. The following pages will draw together this investigation's main arguments and observations, before looking ahead to some of Seth's upcoming projects and considering future avenues of academic inquiry, both for Seth's work and for comics scholarship in general.

This investigation has tended to accept Francesco Orlando's broadly Freudian assumption that literature is a field of repressed impulses, the imaginary site of a return of the repressed. For Orlando, literary preoccupation with obsolete objects constitutes a return of the "antifunctional" repressed that reflects an ambivalent attitude toward time, in the sense that the passage of time renders objects non-functional but can also imbue them with meaning. In narratives like *Clyde Fans* and *Wimbledon Green*, the process of collection encapsulates this ambivalent dynamic by turning non-functional objects into items of great significance. In such instances, the relation of ambivalence to the return of

the repressed takes the form of obsolete objects – but this relation also expresses itself in many other ways. Chapter 5 borrows the phrase “ambivalent impulses” from Freud to designate a whole range of tendencies and behaviours borne out of repression (which are often also related to return, repetition, and the passage of time). These ambivalent impulses saturate Seth’s work, manifesting themselves in particularly nostalgic or uncanny sequences, in formal experiments that stretch the narrative capacity of comics, and even in Seth’s distinctive, highly-refined drawing style.

I have argued that the medium of comics induces a particular kind of readerly interpolation because it is essentially “founded on reticence” (Groensteen) and “composed of several kinds of tension” (Hatfield). Perhaps the most significant tension is the kind that arises between the panel and the gutter, a structural interdependence which is often plainly visible on the page. Even in those instances where the gutter is only implied, and images abut without visible spaces to separate them, the comics page still generally presents itself as a vacillating arrangement of boundaries and borders that the reader must traverse. Linda Hutcheon’s definition of ambivalence remains unparalleled in its simplicity and broad applicability: “the desire to be on both sides of any border, deriving energy from the continual crossing” (*Canadian Postmodern* 162). Successful realisation of the narrative depends on the reader’s ability to synthesise adjacent images into a sequence, in effect reading multiple moments at once. This entails a constant reinterpretation of previous panels in light of the panel currently being read, a constant re-interpolation into what has been.

Hutcheon’s description of ambivalence applies not only to macro-semiotic understandings of how comics operate as a unique system of signs, but also to Bauman’s account of inside-outside relations. The thresholds and liminal spaces that appear both in Seth’s stories and on the surface of his pages reflect the border between interior and exterior, the continual crossing of which gives ambivalence its generative energy.

Though ambivalence is not synonymous with ambiguity – which is the capacity for multiple interpretations of a literary detail – the two are closely related to each other. Chapter 5 suggests a causal relationship, in which perceived ambiguity engenders a generative ambivalence in the reader. In this way, ambiguity produces an opening that the reader is prompted to fill by means of interpretation and interpolation. Seth's comics contain many overlapping ambiguities, simultaneously verbal and visual, structural and discursive, literary and historiographical. Hatfield succinctly describes this multilayered complex of diverse elements as “the co-presence and interaction of various codes” (36). These codes each involve specific kinds of ambiguity, which demand a range of reading strategies in response to their “various interpretive options and potentialities” (36).

It is ultimately the reader who, in filling the gaps, serves as a site of articulation – i.e., a joint or junction – between the fragmentation and coherence of the comics narrative. Often the reader fulfills this role almost unconsciously, especially the reader who is already quite accustomed to the kind of narrative interpolation required by comics. The reader becomes more aware of this process of articulation-through-interpolation in books like *Wimbledon Green* and *George Sprott*, which consist of shorter fragments that accumulate into a larger narrative. At its most dense and porous, *George Sprott* in particular demonstrates Seth's willingness to abandon traditional storytelling, trusting that the reader will make sense of his indeterminate, sometimes cryptic sequences. The fragmentary fold-out section of *George Sprott* comes closest to what Benjamin famously calls “the chaos of memories” (*Illuminations* 60); a mixture of text plates, panels, and drawn photos, it becomes coherent only through the persistence of the reader.

Seth's strategy of prompting the reader to arbitrate between history and memory is often strikingly demonstrated by his drawn photographs, which recast the historical objectivity typically ascribed to photography in terms of the more subjective medium of

comics. These dense meta-images combine the referential reticence of cartoons and photography, offering the reader representations that act as indices of an invented reality. This complex operation mirrors the larger thrust of Seth's work: he indexes a past that perhaps never existed but is nonetheless made real through the cooperation of the reader. As Karin Kukkonen suggests, the reality of the narrative is a cognitive construct of the reader.

Hutcheon uses the term "heterocosm" to designate such a reality, a separate or alternative world. For the reader, Seth's literary realities are "ghost worlds," fictive heterocosms that are haunted by the past. For Seth's characters, however, the term ghost world could just as easily refer to the past itself, the historical heterocosm from which the dead and the repressed return. Of course, this distinction between fictive and historical becomes quite murky in Seth's work, which provides many instructive instances of what Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. This particularly ambiguous mode of literature works to uncover the various mechanisms (fictive, historical, etc.) that commonly construct the past. Seth often does this by setting different types of historiography against each other. Hayden White distinguishes among three kinds – fabulous, true, satirical – out of which Seth crafts subtle historiographic imbrications that provoke the reader toward a "metahistorical consciousness," an attitude to history that is governed by irony and ambivalence.

This strategy is not limited to the historiographic status of the plot. In Seth's work, even style becomes a meta-discourse, a set of attributes that often operates as a sort of running commentary on itself. In much the same way that an art historian might use the concept of style to create a generic chronology, Seth likewise uses style as an historicising discourse, deploying a range of historically-inflected points of reference to form a version of the past. In some cases, these are plainly visual references assimilated from the history of comics (for instance, a drawing style that bears the influence of

particular cartoonists). However, Seth's style tends to crystallise around less specific elements – a certain handmade quality or autobiographical narrative register – which evoke a sense of authenticity that seems rooted in the past. If the appearance of authenticity in Seth's work takes on a mannered aspect, it reflects a fundamental ambivalence toward this constructed past. Chapter 1 characterises Seth's overall style as ambivalently nostalgic, straining toward an authentic past even as it recognises the artifice necessary to conjure this past.

In his representation of the past and the passage of time, Seth is particularly attuned to materiality, physicality, and the composition of space within the panel. Chapter 3 draws on Bakhtin's notion of the literary artistic chronotope, that particular fusion of "spatial and temporal indicators" in which time seems takes on a certain corporeality and space becomes particularly "responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84). Seth often creates the "real-life chronotope" of the public square (Bakhtin 131) through scenes of urban perambulation and encounters with strangers, which invite the reader to browse the comics page. These sequences foster a unique reading pace (comparable to the testudine tempo of *flânerie*) that accommodates an appreciation of marginal spaces. The ultimate centrality of the margin in Seth's work also becomes apparent through the chronotope of the threshold, which is exemplified by the liminal spaces of the Matchcard family home in *Clyde Fans*. Here time is instantaneous, frozen in place, "as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time" (Bakhtin 248). This is particularly true for Simon Matchcard, whose experience of time and space unsettles the narrative and obliquely draws attention to the conventions of comics.

Despite Seth's evident awareness and expert deployment of the particular capacities of comics, this investigation nevertheless places his work in the Chekhovian tradition of literary fiction, a tradition which Chapter 4 describes in terms of

“inbetweenness” and irony, particularly the irony of unfulfillment. Through the irony of unfulfillment – which is to say, the accumulating regrets and disappointments of Seth’s characters – the past and the passage of time come into increasingly sharp focus. However, this specific form of literary irony tends to reveal an ambivalent attitude toward the notion of disappointment, yielding a rhetoric of failure that works to disrupt conventional attitudes about success. For brief moments, an ambivalent inversion takes place and failure seems to coincide with its opposite. Seth deploys the irony of unfulfillment in a way that renders his characters’ relation to disappointment ambivalent and to a certain extent suspends the passage of time.

Seth’s characters often set themselves against the constant movement of time in their attempts to establish stable identities – which, as Hall suggests, are positions relative to the narratives of the past. In many instances, the process of collection allows characters to more effectively arbitrate between the past and present, and secure their identities by giving a fixed form to the chaos of memory. The containment and compartmentalisation at the heart of collection can be understood as another expression of the master-opposition between inside and outside, which manifests itself in terms of the selections and exclusions of the collector. As an intervention into the past, into memory and history, collection provides a model of meaning-making that extends not only to Seth’s method of collecting fragments into larger narratives, but also to the acts of readerly interpolation that these narratives require. As exercises in historiographical refraction, Seth’s narratives of the past call for an alert response from the reader, who then gets caught up in the characters’ repeated attempts to forestall loss by means of collection and recollection.

Following W. J. T. Mitchell, this investigation has often referred to memory/recollection as a medium, which is to say “a mechanism, a material and semiotic process subject to artifice and alteration” (192). It is likewise appropriate to

speak of *collection* as a medium, and one that has much in common with the medium of memory. In Seth's work, it is the medium of comics that illuminates this correspondence, a task to which it is uniquely suited because it shares significant structural similarities with both collection and memory.

These complicated affinities suggest an avenue of inquiry that might be summarised with the following question: Does the medium of collection, like the medium of comics, share what Mitchell calls "the composite imagetext structure of memory" (193)? This is an area of interest that warrants further study, beyond the now-familiar observation that comics narratives are collections of images. The comparable structure of the archive also likely has bearing on this topic, and Jared Gardner's recent work – which touches on the bifocal excess of the comics form – may point comics scholarship toward fresh approaches to the notion of imagetext. Before jumping ahead to comics studies as a whole, however, it is first worth considering the prospects for future engagements with Seth's work specifically.

One of the most engaged responses to Seth and his comics will likely come from Luc Chamberland, who is directing a feature-length documentary produced by the National Film Board of Canada. Information about the film, simply titled *Seth*, has been circulating for several years, but not in a form that bears much resemblance to wide publicity (Hetherington); as late as March 2013, it was still in some stage of production (Ng). In my interview with Seth, he admits a certain dissatisfaction with the documentary, which he characterises in terms that reflect his intuitive understanding of the appearance of authenticity and representations that evoke the past: "I don't care about the lighting, I don't need the whole thing to look like it's set in nineteen-forty. That's what I *don't* want" (Appendix B 330). Despite Seth's misgivings about the film's tone and substance, it nevertheless constitutes a noteworthy engagement with his work,

not least because it marks Seth's first foray into animation (executed by the filmmakers, but with some guidance from Seth).

Extra-literary projects aside, Seth continues to spend most of his time working in his basement studio. As of this writing, the *Clyde Fans* saga is nearing completion: forthcoming issues of *Palookaville* will feature the final installments of the story.<sup>1</sup> *George Sprott* bristles with technical mastery and *Wimbledon Green* is a paragon of sketchbook vitality, but, arguably, *Clyde Fans* remains Seth's most profound work to date, in no small part because of the character of Simon Matchcard and the kind of comics storytelling he makes possible. This includes not only the striking dream sequences and ambiguous descents into dementia, but also the remarkably understated section at the end of *Palookaville 19* describing the objects in Lily Matchcard's bedroom. Seth has expressed a particular affinity for this sequence and suggested that it may be an indication of work to come, even speculating on the possibility of a book composed entirely of descriptive storytelling. "More and more, as I'm moving on," he says, "I find I'm more interested in the description than I am in the plot. And I'm realising I think that's where my work is going" (Appendix B 305).

Analysis of Seth's next book may have to find new ways to engage with description, but there is still much to examine in his already-published work. It is not difficult to imagine, for instance, a sustained investigation that focuses on Simon Matchcard, whose behaviour Seth never reduces to mere eccentricity and whose fixations offer a very particular window onto Dominion City. As this present investigation has in part sought to demonstrate, Seth's work lends itself to a variety of critical approaches. Katie Mullins has closely examined the female characters in *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, a method that may be extended to consider gender

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<sup>1</sup> Presumably, Parts Three and Four of the narrative will eventually be published as *Clyde Fans: Book 2*, a companion to *Clyde Fans: Book 1*, the 2004 volume that collects Parts One and Two.

dynamics in Seth's other books, in particular the significance of mothers and sons and the near-absence of women in *Wimbledon Green* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*. These works could also be read for their representations of race, and the histories of caricature that they connote. Like many contemporary literary comics, most of Seth's stories could operate as case studies for the examination of white masculinity, but *Clyde Fans* and *George Sprott* also contain protagonists for whom age becomes a significant marker of identity.

However, such studies run the risk of becoming formulaic exercises that examine representations of identity to the exclusion of other aspects of Seth's comics, such as his unique manipulation of the medium. In an effort to seem academically legitimate, scholars may pursue ideological analysis not alongside but *instead of* examination of the particular pleasures of comics. Scott Bukatman warns against this brand of scholarship, which he characterises as one of the pitfalls of a still-developing field of study: "It becomes a very predictable parade of scholarly concerns that played through in other fields decades ago" (Smith 138). That said, analysis of Seth's work could very likely benefit from theoretical approaches that borrow from masculinity studies and postcolonial studies.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Simon Grennan pushes the study of Seth's work in a new direction by using *Clyde Fans* to illustrate an argument about narratology – a critical approach which might very fruitfully be applied to the shifting narrative perspectives of *George Sprott*. Recent comics scholarship in fact reveals a trend toward narratological approaches, employed not only by Grennan but also notably by Susan E. Kirtley in her book *Lynda Barry: Girlhood Through the Looking Glass* (2012). Narratology has been gaining influence in comics studies for some time, and will perhaps reach a new level of currency with the recent publication of Thierry

Groensteen's *Comics and Narration* (2013)<sup>2</sup>, the fifth chapter of which directly addresses "The Question of the Narrator." An earlier version of this chapter appeared as "The Monstrator, the Recitant and the Shadow of the Narrator," a 2010 article in *European Comic Art* in which Groensteen aims to "raise questions about the specificities of the medium" (3), outlining a narratology of comics that is distinct from that of traditional literature and film.

This investigation has not pursued a narratology of comics (just as it has not pursued a sociology or political economy of comics) because such a methodology entails a specific set of concerns, the contextualisation and elaboration of which demand an investigation of their own. This is not to say that a deliberate combination of narratology and some of the critical approaches I have adopted in the preceding chapters would not yield interesting and worthwhile results. Future comics scholarship may, for instance, productively integrate the notion of the chronotope with a narratological concept like focalisation (which concerns narrative perspective): Bakhtin meets Genette, so to speak, as applied to comics. Kukkonen draws on a cognitive model of "transmedial narratology" in a 2011 article that understands narrative as a cognitive construct and argues for an understanding of the dynamic interaction of various narrative components. Her forthcoming textbook *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* (2013) likewise features cognitive approaches to the analysis of comics narratives, pushing comics studies pedagogy in a new direction. In any case, there is still much work ahead for scholars who wish to develop a consistent and distinct narratology of comics.

Part of this work involves positioning comics narratives in relation to the narratives found in more familiar or established modes of literature, namely the novel. In

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<sup>2</sup> The follow-up to Groensteen's *System of Comics*, this translation by Ann Miller was originally published in 2011 as *Bande dessinée et narration: Système de la bande dessinée 2*. Miller's own book *Reading bande dessinée: Critical Approaches to French-language Comic Strip* (2007) also contains a chapter on narrative theory.

his introduction to Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist explains that Bakhtin's concept of the novel does not coincide with the familiar literary canon of novels: "Rather, 'novel' is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system" (xxxix). In this sense, Seth's work exemplifies the novel, often drawing attention to the formal and narrative potentialities of the system of comics as it delineates an ambivalent longing for the past.

Seth does not go so far as to *unmake* the past in his work, but he does often leave it half-made, its narrative scaffolding exposed, inducing the reader to imagine the whole. In this way, Seth puts the reader in the position of the historian, who attempts to construct a coherent story out of various assorted fragments of the past. The particularly zealous reader of *It's a Good Life* or *The Great Northern Brotherhood* may actually feel compelled to seek objective corroboration outside the text in an effort to discern truth from fabulation from satire. Even the more casual reader, however, will go beyond the text, filling spots of indeterminacy in the manner that Ingarden describes. In Seth's work, the role of the reader corresponds to the task of the historian: interpolation into what has been. Seth highlights the seams and borders of his stories, and openly examines the processes by which narratives of the past come to seem seamless.

Perhaps less explicit, but equally in evidence, is Seth's engagement with the concept of marginality itself and the spaces in which remembrance often takes place. Boundaries, borders, gutters and gaps take on a marked significance, and it is in this sense that his comics (particularly in their metafictional aspects) can be understood as a postmodern response to the anxieties of longing for a lost past. "The margin or the border," as Hutcheon says, "is the postmodern space *par excellence*, the place where new possibilities exist" (*Canadian Postmodern* 4). The continual crossing of these borders gives rise to much of the repetition and uncertainty in Seth's work – a corollary

to the structure of comics, in which borders abound and various oppositions are at once maintained and collapsed. Chief among ambivalent impulses is a complicated nostalgia, well aware of its own reactionary, restorative and nationalistic inclinations and able to channel them toward productive ends. Seth turns the medium of memory on itself, using it as an instrument to examine longing, loss, and the processes of remembrance and making history.

## APPENDIX A: COMICS GENRES

This generic typology draws on specific histories of practice, and the eight provisional genres are by necessity and design ambivalently differentiated, overlapping and overflowing, reflecting the indeterminate character of the medium as a whole.

1. *Action comics*: This genre comprises the most mainstream comics in English-speaking countries, those long-running series that feature now-familiar characters like the costumed crimefighters popularised by Marvel and DC Comics in America (*Action Comics* is the title of the DC series that introduced Superman in 1938). Often intended for younger audiences, action comics are typically published in the recognisable “comic book” form, i.e. “the standard-format comics magazine as developed for the U.S. newsstand market in the early 1930s and formularized by the early 1940s” (Hatfield *Alternative Comics* 8). Among the better known American titles: *Donald Duck* and other Disney comics, the various *Archie* series, *Young Love* and other romance titles, *Mad* magazine, and horror comics like *Tales from the Crypt* that ultimately became the flashpoint for the institution of the Comics Code. “The period 1935 to 1955 is generally recognised as the ‘Golden Age’ of American comic books” (Sabin, *Adult Comics* 144). Later British examples from the 1960s and 70s include *Valiant*, *Jackie*, and *Action*.
  
2. *Newspaper and magazine comics*: This genre includes the single-panel gag cartoons that helped define weekly magazines like *Judge* and *Life* in the nineteenth century (and which later became synonymous with *The New Yorker* in the twentieth century) as well as the serialised comics that have long supplemented newsprint journalism.

Some of the better-known American newspaper comics are George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*, Gary Larson's *The Far Side*, and Bill

Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes*. R. C. Harvey identifies Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff* (c. 1907) as a significant turning point:

Until *Mutt and Jeff* set the fashion, newspaper cartoons usually reached readers in one of two forms: on Sunday, in colored pages of tiered panels in sequence (some, like Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, intended chiefly for children to read); on weekdays, collections of comics grouped haphazardly within the ruled border of a large single-frame panel (directed mostly to adult readers). The daily cartoons were often found in a paper's sports section. (Harvey 40)

3. *Bandes dessinées*: Literally translated as “drawn strips,” these Franco-Belgian comics are numerous and diverse, and enjoy a certain mainstream legitimacy rarely found in North America or Britain. France and Belgium were “the main centres for the early production of comics *per se*,” and *bandes dessinées* were published both periodically and in albums of collected strips (Sabin, *Adult Comics* 184). “Albums,” Sabin explains, “tended to be sold on the basis of a creator's reputation rather than contents as such, and a ‘star-system’ developed. Top creators rapidly became as esteemed as film directors or novelists: having invented the *auteur* system with regard to cinema, the French now did it again with comics.” One of the most significant comics *auteurs* is Jean Giraud, who came to prominence under the pseudonym Moebius with his work for magazines like *Métal Hurlant* (which he co-founded in 1975). Likely the best known BD, however, is still Hergé's *Tintin* series.
4. *Manga*: Katsushika Hokusai, the Edo-period artist famous for his woodblock prints, is generally credited with coining the term *manga* in 1814 to describe a book of his “whimsical sketches”; the more literal meaning is involuntary (*man*) pictures (*ga*) (Schodt 18). In contemporary Japan, manga constitute a truly popular culture that makes English-language comics seem marginal by comparison: approximately 40

percent of publications in Japan are manga (Gravett 18). Important innovators include Osamu Tezuka, perhaps best known as the creator of Astro Boy, and Yoshihiro Tatsumi, who pioneered alternative *gekiga* (“dramatic pictures”).

5. *Independent comics*: Independent comics are published outside or on the margins of the mainstream industry, the most identifiable developments being underground comix (in the late 1960s and 1970s) and, later, alternative comics. Though the most high-profile figure of the underground is undoubtedly Robert Crumb, the comix boom is significant because it also represents “the first time, generally speaking, that women creators had been given the scope to produce stories by themselves” (Sabin, *Adult Comics* 104). Following the final dissolution of countercultural sensibilities at the hands of punk culture, “a new kind of avant-garde emerged, typified by a title called *Raw*, which was the brainchild of Art Spiegelman” (Sabin 127-128). *Raw* was home to a host of international alternative comics and also serialised Spiegelman’s holocaust memoir *Maus*, which would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize. Contemporary independent comics have not really coalesced around a movement as in earlier periods, and are frequently self-published by authors in zines/chapbooks or online.
  
6. *Online comics*: Sometimes referred to as webcomics, online comics represent the latest development of the medium. Popular examples like *Cat and Girl*, *Penny Arcade*, and *Hark! A Vagrant* just happen to be digital, though some webcomics actually exploit the unique narrative potential of the internet. *The Nietzsche Family Circus*, for instance, is a randomising engine which indiscriminately captions old *Family Circus* panels with the aphorisms of Nietzsche, often with uncanny and genuinely funny results. As well, so-called “hypercomics” take advantage of their online digital form to upset the traditional sequential linearity of the medium. (It is

worth noting that many popular online comics are re-published in printed anthology books, and many print comics, especially newspaper comics, are available online in official archives.)

7. *Experimental comics*: Experimental comics test the limits of both representation (Mary Fleener, for instance, has developed an almost Cubist style) and narrative (in *Ed the Happy Clown*, for example, Chester Brown employs “automatic drawing” stream-of-consciousness storytelling). The French comics collective L’Association pioneered many avant-garde experiments, and the recent anthology *Abstract Comics* (2009) features a wide range of completely non-representational, non-narrative comics. Experimental, independent, and online comics often overlap, since they all operate beyond the mainstream and benefit from an absence of censorship and other impositions.
  
8. *Literary comics*: Perhaps the most ill-defined and wide-ranging genre, literary comics accommodate authors as diverse as Edward Gorey, Daniel Clowes, Art Spiegelman, Lynda Barry, Alan Moore, Seth, Chris Ware, Alison Bechdel, Ivan Brunetti, Kate Beaton, and dozens of others. Many such literary cartoonists began their careers as independent comics creators before becoming more established. Literary comics can easily intersect with other genres, but are often distinguished by their mode of production – they tend to be written and drawn by a single author. In bookstores and popular contexts, the broad term “graphic novel” has become almost synonymous with literary comics, which also include memoirs, travelogues and other non-fiction comics.

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW WITH SETH

The following is a transcript of a personal interview conducted on 8 August 2011 at Seth's home in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. For readability, stammers and stutters (mostly the interviewer's) have been omitted, as have many "ums" and "uhs". Nonetheless, this document attempts to present an accurate and clear transcript of the original recording.

**DANIEL MARRONE:** When did you arrive in Toronto?

**SETH:** I got there about 1980, I think. And left around 1999 or 2000, something along those lines. Yeah, so it was a long stretch but I certainly fell in love with the city in the first ten years. There was nowhere I would have been happier. The next ten years not so much. It declined.

**DM:** What happened?

**SETH:** Well, it was a combination of two things. One is that I got into a bad relationship that lasted for nine years – now that's a long stretch. And...she didn't like Toronto and – well, it's a complicated story but basically she...she was kind of a controlling type and my life got smaller and smaller, and finally she just really wanted to leave Toronto and so we moved here to Guelph. And, uh, then we broke up. And so I just stayed here, and now I'm very comfortable here. But I probably would never have left if she hadn't pushed me to. But the truth is I was using the city a lot less in that ten years, besides the bad situation. I was staying in – like I was always in the house anyway. My real years of going out and exploring the city and doing things were the first ten.

**DM:** Yeah, you seem quite comfortably ensconced.

**SETH:** Oh yeah. I'll die here for sure. There's no chance I'll ever move again. It's like, I'm not – I hate moving, for one thing, so I – now that we've actually bought a house, I know I will never – even if I got like, you know, five million dollars, all I would do is maybe buy the other houses around here and knock them down.

**DM:** [laughs]

**SETH:** I wouldn't move, not a chance.

**DM:** ...alright, let me see if I can segue smoothly into any of my questions here...

**SETH:** Sure.

**DM:** Um, how much commercial illustration are you doing lately?

**SETH:** Not that much, really, anymore. The truth is, um, that market is dead. It's funny, when I entered illustration in the eighties it was a very lucrative field. There were a lot of people doing it and I can remember how busy I was even within a year of starting out in illustration. But now, you know, ever since, well, since the internet, basically.

Magazines are all dying, and even the ones that are surviving don't have the ad revenue to pay for illustration half the time. I'm just grateful I'm not like a full-time illustrator. I know lots of people like that, and you can see them scrambling. Now, I mean, I have a regular gig I do every month for a magazine – I actually had two that I did every month, but I actually just quit one of them because I have other stuff I've got to get done and I can't do it all. I find that I do more book design now than I do illustration, which I like better but is a lot more work, is the problem. You know, it's more fun to design a book even if you're not interested in the book. It's really no fun to illustrate boring articles.

That's just dull. So I only do a little bit, but I still do a fair amount of commercial work. I mean, I just took on a book design and illustration project that will last for like four books over four years, and that's going to be a lot of work and it's a project that will be interesting, but it's not something that I would have picked if they weren't going to pay

me well. So, that's the kind of thing where I'd rather just work on my own work than do all these other things. But you gotta make a living.

**DM:** Do you feel the need to read the book front to back before starting the design?

**SETH:** It depends. These ones, definitely. Yeah, these are books that I will have to illustrate, and I'll have to do a good job on them, too. And I'm also going to be doing another book that's like a prose book that I'll be illustrating, and that one I definitely will read front to back as well. There are other things you can kind of fake through. It depends. But generally if you want to do a good job you have to be familiar with the material. Even the boring illustration articles, you have to read them.

**DM:** So, do you mind if I ask what you're working on right now, in terms of your own personal work?

**SETH:** Well, right now, finishing *Clyde Fans*.

**DM:** Oh, great!

**SETH:** That's what I'm working on right now. So that's the project for the rest of this year and then, hopefully, it's onto a new book next year. So...that's a big project for me.

**DM:** Yeah...you seem to be putting out actually a lot of books recently.

**SETH:** It's funny, things just accumulate, sort of. I think if you just work on things every day, at some point they just come together. So it looks like a lot of stuff is coming together or coming out at the same time, but it's years of accumulation, really. I think that's always the way it is. People think, "Oh, you must be working so hard all the time," but if you put out a sketchbook, that's like six or seven years work coming out. But I try to always keep busy is the truth.

**DM:** What's your daily schedule like?

**SETH:** I get up around eight, I guess, and go down to the studio – if I'm smart and don't go to the computer first, I go right down to the studio and get to work. If I go to the

computer, I probably don't get to work till about ten. Basically I just work until my wife comes home around dinner time and then I go back to work after dinner till about eleven, and then we spend time together after that. So I work, I'd say, every day all day and all evening except on the weekends when I'll take a day or two off, usually. But it's the kind of thing – it's like, I want to be in the studio anyway, so I never feel like a pressure that I *need* to be there. I can't really think of anything I'd rather do than just sit in the studio anyway. It's funny, you don't plan your life in a way, but sometimes things – you realise when you get older, maybe subconsciously you did steer things in a direction, and you didn't realise it. When I was twenty years old, I wouldn't have realised that I was kind of recreating my teenage life, for the rest of my life. Staying at home, sitting, listening to the radio or television or whatever and drawing all day: that's like what I did all through my teen years. And that was not really by choice, I was kind of an isolated teen. But then you realise that's what you're familiar with, and somehow you've recreated that life and that's what I do every day. It's the same life.

**DM:** Can you recall a time when you weren't drawing?

**SETH:** Yeah, for sure. There was a short period in the eighties. I went to art school in the early eighties and that's where I first – I wanted to be a cartoonist as a teenager, I knew that, but when I went to art school, that was probably when my life most changed...discovering new things, being a new person. I came to Toronto as a small-town boy, I met a lot of peers who were a lot more sophisticated and I got involved with the punk rock scene and suddenly I was going out to clubs. I started to have an outside life more than the drawing, and I can remember my interest in cartooning really was declining. The problem, too, was I just wasn't interested in the comics anymore, either. That was around the time that I – there's sort of a brief period between reading mainstream comic books in my late teens and then discovering people like the

Hernandez brothers and Robert Crumb, and in that in-between window, when I was going to art school, I wasn't reading comics, I just wasn't interested in them anymore. But I still thought I wanted to be a cartoonist, although to be perfectly honest I didn't know what I was going to do anymore because I didn't want to go draw Spider-man. But I didn't really – if I'd been left to my own devices, I'm not sure I ever would have figured it out. I needed those people to point the way. I needed to see the Hernandez brothers and say “*Oh*, I see what you could do.” And so in those years I got way more interested, for a couple of years, in just going out and taking drugs and things like that. And, at that point, I can remember there was a day where I hadn't – I don't think I'd drawn in about a year. I dropped out of art school, and I remember every once and while I would go and sit at the drawing table and try and draw something, but I just wasn't interested. And I remember one day I just said to myself, “Well, I guess I'm not going to be a cartoonist. It was a pipe dream.” And that was kind of shocking to me because I didn't have any back-up plans. There was nothing else I'd planned to do in life. But the funny part of that is that very quickly after that it turned around. Within a couple of months of that I decided I had to straighten my life out, and so I decided to go back to art school, and that meant I had to get a portfolio together, and so I started sitting down and doing a portfolio. And right at that point, when I was drawing the comics in my portfolio, that's when I met up with the publisher of Vortex Comics, and that's when I started working on the *Mister X* comic. And after that it just sort of rolled on normally. There was a period there where it really didn't look like I was going to draw for a living. So you never know what's going to happen.

**DM:** When you first kind of got back into it, were there any cartoonists in particular that you were deliberately emulating?

**SETH:** Yeah, at that point, since I was really like – I hate to say the word, but I was a punk at the time, Jaime Hernandez was the person I was most interested in. It's funny, at the same time I was reading Gilbert's work, of course, and I was reading Crumb then, too, discovering all his work, and actually Edward Gorey was big at the time, too, for some reason. And I can remember trying a little bit to draw in some other styles. I didn't have a style of my own yet, but I can remember trying to draw a bit like Gorey and trying to draw a bit like Jaime and Crumb, you know, not really being able to pull it off. But Jaime was the one I was gravitating towards, and I think it was because his work was closest to what my own life was like at that point. And I think that naturally was a sort of clean line sort of artist, and so he appealed to me instantly. And that kind of opened up a world – actually, getting involved with *Mister X* sort of opened up another world of discovered a lot of European cartoonists. And then going back and discovering the older artists – that was a period where I really started to look into cartooning and looking beyond the stuff I just knew as a teenager. But Jaime was big influence on me. Very...liberating, to see what he was doing. It was fun, and it was serious but it wasn't pretentious in any way. And that was really inspiring, for sure.

**DM:** Around what time did you kind of settle into what people might recognise as your distinctive style?

**SETH:** You mean like my drawing style?

**DM:** Yeah.

**SETH:** I guess it starts to come together – truthfully, I think it probably starts to come together right after I left *Mister X*, I suppose. Near the end of those comics, I was starting to understand what I was *trying* to do. It was a good apprenticeship period, because, I mean, I can't stand to look at any of that stuff but at least I wasn't writing it. So it's not painful – the stupidity of the comics doesn't bother me, I didn't write them.

That's fine. I knew they were bad even then, so I can cut myself *some* slack. But I think during that period I was really trying to figure out...how to compose the pages was the big problem, and how to simplify the artwork to make it work. It was a real shocker to me when I had the first issue of *Mister X* published, because that's when you really see your work for the first time. And I saw how many extraneous lines there were in every drawing and it was kind of a shock. There were little dots and fragments everywhere, I was just filling in space. If I drew a guy's head, for some reason I feel like I had to put a couple of little lines over here or there. That was a good lesson for me to cut back – only the absolutely necessary lines. But during that process I discovered Hergé's work, too – that and then, later, Peter Arno were the two big influences after Jaime, that taught me about the simplification of artwork. And that happened over a span of about five years, I guess. So by the time I quit *Mister X* and started to do illustration work, I was starting to approach the work differently. I was freed up from a certain kind of comic book realism – which even Jaime is somewhat connected to – into a freer world of sort cartoon stylisations that appealed to me more and I think are more natural for me. Once I got away from any attempts at true realism – realism, for comics, there's not really much in the way of realism – that opened the door for me to really come to understand what I was doing and to free me to actually start thinking about drawing, cartooning as symbols and shapes, and not trying to create drawings of the real world. And that took about a five to six or seven year period. And that took a lot of understanding of older cartoonists, and I think that's why I started to look back more and more at older stuff. And that's when my whole life, I think, started to turn toward looking backward.

**DM:** Was this around the same time that you were becoming proficient with a brush?

**SETH:** Yeah, pretty much. During that *Mister X* period I was trying to learn to use the brush, and that sort of came together by the end of that. Especially working in

illustration, it's funny – thank god I recognised at that time the importance of having to learn it, because it's a real task. I'm not sure young cartoonists right now would feel they *have* to learn it... The computer offers such easy options to escape trying to figure out how to get that slick finish. I can remember looking at people like Hergé or Yves Chaland's work and trying to figure out how they could possibly get those brush lines that are straight lines – how do you get a straight line with a brush? Having to figure it out, having to come up with a method, that you could use a ruler and brush and actually get enough control to be able to do it – these were all skills that took years to acquire, really, but thank god that I was forced to do it, because it's not a pleasure to learn any craft. And I do worry that young cartoonists are probably not learning things as easily, just because they don't need to. They've got other options. And maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe some guy who was a woodcutter would say it's a shame the next generation doesn't know how to make woodblocks. But maybe it doesn't matter.

**DM:** ...I have to think it matters, though.

**SETH:** It does matter to me. I must admit, I'm a bit of a devil's advocate of my own position because I have such a – my opinion of the world is all basically a knee-jerk reaction, that I don't like much that's new. And so I always have to think that my opinion is probably the least trustworthy of anyone's. I mean, I don't like the idea of doing – replicating a brush on the computer, like a program that could just give you the brush lines rather than doing it yourself. There seems something about that that's morally wrong. Like, you've got to put the time in and *learn* to use those tools. But then, I'm sure that in a generation people just won't think that way.

**DM:** I suppose that's probably true. I just like to think that I'd be able to tell the difference.

**SETH:** Yeah.

**DM:** Maybe not in a single line, but looking at an entire work, somehow I'd know what was going on.

**SETH:** I feel that, but you know everything gets so sophisticated – you know someone will develop the program that allows it to be spontaneous enough that you can't figure out it's not real. It's funny – there is a significant difference but it's hard to argue whether these things are better. That's the problem. I was watching an old movie from the seventies, the old Superman movie, not long ago, and I was looking at the special effects and thinking what a great deal of effort went in to making this glowing sun or whatever, whatever effects they had, and I thought just the sheer effort involved in it impresses me more than the computer effects of today. I'm not impressed by the computer effects, even though I recognise a huge amount of effort and skill and knowledge went into figuring this stuff out. But there's something unimpressive about it. The fact that some guy had to go get a can of gasoline and light something on fire and film it and then put it through an optical printer, blah blah blah – that seems to me like a Herculean attempt that makes me more impressed with it than the gloss of the computer. And I feel that that's my main problem with almost all of the digital revolution, is I'm just not impressed with it. But I should be impressed. But somehow it leaves me cold.

**DM:** I think there's something about clunkiness, in material, and even sometimes in storytelling, in old movies. There's a certain clunkiness in tension with what's trying to be put across that gives something its substance.

**SETH:** Yeah, I think you're right. When things develop a formula that's rigid enough that it becomes boring, it is the elements of eccentricity that creep into things or an inexactitude or humanness – when I was watching that Superman movie, I was thinking “This movie is really corny,” and there are some real bits in it that are just outright odd choices. I can't imagine – there's this scene where Superman is flying with Lois Lane

and she's like reciting a poem in her head? And I was thinking "Boy, this is corny." But I was also thinking, "I can't imagine this in a contemporary action film."

**DM:** It wouldn't even make it into the script.

**SETH:** Yeah, it was such a strange choice, I thought "That's kind of interesting."

**DM:** Have you come across much criticism of your work?

**SETH:** Well, I try to *not* read as much of it as I can, but of course you do come across it.

The internet – that's another thing about the internet, it's opened a door to

eavesdropping, basically, on people's thoughts, that you didn't have access to before.

And, yeah, certainly I have seen a lot more criticism of my work because of the internet

than I did before. In a way, it's – well, it *is* a bad thing. It's simple: you don't want those

opinions because they're not well-reasoned criticisms that are being aimed at you. But

they sting, and they're often accurate. But they're said with the kind of meanness that

you would say talking behind someone's back. I mean, I have those kinds of criticisms

of other artists, too – I'll just dismiss people as boring or superficial or whatever, but I

wouldn't write it down. If I was going to write a criticism, I would want it to be a bit

more substantial. I will read some criticism that people have put online that *is*

substantial, and I appreciate that even if it's negative. But the offhand comments are the

ones that hurt, actually. But I think the thing that most irritates me, as I've mentioned to

you in emails, is the way that my work has just been boiled down to "nostalgia." I mean,

I understand why it is. And it's also because people aren't required to give as much

thought to the work as I am. They see me, and they see that I'm living a kind of

nostalgist's lifestyle, and so the work must be about the idea that things were better in

the past. But I like to think it's never that simple. Even when I talk about the past in

interviews, I try to make it a point never to say things were just better in the past. It's a

very complicated issue. You can't say that things were better in 1935 than they are now;

that's just a stupid position. You can argue about the relative merits of different aspects of culture. Certainly I wouldn't have been happy living as a cartoonist in 1930. It's a much better time to be a cartoonist right now. In fact, for most of the arts, this is the time that – we're born in this time, this is the time we belong to. But people think that because the work is about looking back that it's about dreaming about a golden era. And I've always tried, even in my earliest work, to make it clear that characters' thoughts – like even when it's me, that my own opinions are suspect. Even in something as old as *It's a Good Life*, I wanted to make it clear that even though I'm pining for the past, that my own opinions are definitely undercut by what's going on in the story. But people generally just see it as a simple thing of Seth and his nostalgia. And that bothers me because it does really imply that I just think everything is better in the past and I'm longing for the past and my characters are longing for the past, and that's not true. But I am *interested* in the past and I am a person who's always thinking about their past, and my characters are like that, too. So that mix-up is irritating to me. I rarely see anything about me where the first line of the review doesn't have the word "nostalgia" in it in a way I don't like.

**DM:** [laughs] Yeah, admittedly, that *was* the starting point for my research way back in my masters when I was looking at Daniel Clowes, and I was looking at what I was calling nostalgia in his work. And I've sort of backed off from the N word, but that was kind of the way in. You quickly discover that, as you say, it's much more than just pining.

**SETH:** Yeah, well Dan's an interesting case because, like many of the cartoonists I know, they are very much involved in the past – but I think Dan's avoided the whole negative stereotype of nostalgia that hounds a few cartoonists because his work has a built-in edge of cynicism that makes it very clear that even if his characters *are* pining

for the past, that we don't sympathise with them truly. That "1966" story, which I think is a great piece, we don't sympathise with the guy who's talking about how great 1966 is. Dan's been smart in separating himself from the characters in a really clear way. Even from the beginning, he's never earnestly applied himself to like "This is me," which I think is smart. I can't do that. I'm always very identified – the characters are me, my sympathies lie with them. To some degree. Usually I have some moral ambiguities toward them – but that's a smart move. Even somebody like Chris Ware hasn't succeeded really in separating himself from the characters. He gets labelled a nostalgist. Even someone like Ben Katchor gets labelled a nostalgist, and I think that – Ben's work is about a *sort* of a past, but it's really – it's hard to explain what Ben's work is about, but certainly not about a longing for the past.

**DM:** It's sort of like the New York I imagined in my childhood.

**SETH:** Yeah, it's an alternate reality of some sort. It's so absurdist that it's hard to imagine that nostalgia's connected to it, but I think we've reached a point in the culture where an interest in past is seen as nostalgia. Nostalgia's a commodity now, it's like something easily sold and labelled. I'm not sure that was so true if you went back to say the nineteen-seventies. There certainly was a big nostalgia movement going on in the seventies, but I think it was recognised that people who did period pieces weren't necessarily nostalgists. I mean, nobody would have called *The Godfather* a nostalgia film, even though it was set in the past. Now, if you were to do like a gangster film set in the forties, there would be some sort of veneer of retro-nostalgia to it which is unpleasant.

**DM:** Can you think of any influences of yours that might surprise readers?

**SETH:** It's hard to say. When *you* like something, you think it's natural, but I know that a lot of my own interests are not – if you knew me, you'd see that I have really wide

tastes. I'm sure my readers would be surprised how much I like old B-movies, for example. It doesn't really fit in to the "nineteen-thirties guy" image I've got. But I wouldn't really say any of that stuff is an influence. Those are just things I'm interested in. Jack Kirby certainly remains someone I have a deep interest in – it's hard to say whether he's an influence at this point. I never sit down and try and draw like Jack Kirby. I still study his work, though. I look at how he composed panels, and that's still interesting, but I can't say that a lot of that is really applicable to what I do any longer.

**DM:** What is the enduring appeal there?

**SETH:** Well, beyond *actual* nostalgia – and that's a case where I *would* have real nostalgia for Kirby's work because I loved it so much as a child – it's just that he was such a great visual cartoonist. There's some potency in the work that's different to me than when I look at other cartoonists I love, too. Like I love, say, Harold Gray or Chester Gould, but they don't have that same personal connection for me as Kirby does, even though I would like their work better if I had to sit down and read it. There's something in Kirby's work that – I guess it's like we all have certain foods we like to eat, there's a flavour. And Kirby has a certain flavour that really appeals to me. It's funny how you can like a lot of art, but there are certain people that just immediately rise to the surface and you put them in a special pantheon. I have a sort of pantheon of artists that I like more than other artists, and not all of them necessarily – there's only a few cartoonists in that group. For some reason, these people click with you in some way. Glenn Gould would be on that list. But it's not because I'm a great lover of piano music, it's just something about Gould clicked with me. Henry Darger is someone who's one of favourite artists, yet I think most people would not see any Henry Darger in my work. I think sometimes it's a combination of the life story and the artist and the art. Stanley Spencer is a British artist I have a deep affinity towards. And also another British artist

named L.S. Lowry. These are guys who are big in my list of favourites, but most cartoonists – I have my people who influenced me and I love, but they don't all necessarily make it into this top list of artists that mean the most to me. Crumb does. Crumb rises above almost any cartoonist I'm interested in. Crumb and Schulz. They sit together at different ends of spectrum. It's funny, though: I really don't think people would see much Crumb in my work. There's none of that freedom. None of that kind of... "let it all hang out" earnestness. I'm just too uptight for that – [those] kind of revealing qualities. I think that that's really valuable, and I think when was younger I was thinking I was working towards that, but I never was. That was just an illusion. Schulz I think people might see more of in my work. The simplicity of it, the clear line approach. Even sometimes the way he paces things, I think, has somehow got into how I move the characters...

**DM:** Yeah, I wanted to ask you about pacing, because it seems so important to your work in ways that is maybe less apparent in other work. I mean, how would you kind of define "pacing," with respect to comics?

**SETH:** Well, for me, the storytelling *is* the comic. When people talk about what particular qualities do comics have that other media don't, I think it really comes down to – the main thing is the way you can control the flow of time. The compression or decompression of time. And that's all in the pacing. And I think, ideally, I would like to slow the pacing down as slow as humanly possible. The problem, of course, is that you're limited by your ability to draw it. Every time I do a page where a character walks from one room to another, I always think "Maybe it should've been two pages." But the truth is, it's a thin line between – I think of a thing I call "sublime boredom," which is a boredom that is a good thing. And then if you go a little too far you pass into actual boredom. And it's tricky to know where that thin line is.

**DM:** It's a fine balance. I mean, it's probably different for different readers, too.

**SETH:** Exactly. I was reading – somebody was saying somewhere once – in one of the chapters of *Clyde Fans*, recently, I had like a six page sequence at the end where the character goes through the items in the mother's bedroom. Somebody made a comment, something like "This could have been like three pages shorter." And I was thinking – when I was working on it I was thinking it should have been twenty pages longer. I love that sort of thing. More and more, as I'm moving on, I find I'm more interested in the description than I am in the plot. And I'm realising I think that's where my work is going, ultimately, into description...rather than characters. I like describing things. I think the next book is going to be just almost all description. And that means – you realise it's all about slowing down. I like slowed down storytelling, but it's tricky on how you handle it. The George Sprott book didn't have that much slowed down storytelling, even though each segment is kind of like, nothing happens. It's like, you had to get a lot of nothing into one page. So if I were to do that as a comic, if I just had freedom of space like *Clyde Fans*, each of those one pages would've probably been about thirty pages long. I would've really added in a lot more of what I call the storytelling. You want that feeling – there's a kind of a magic feeling in comics, the way your eye moves across the page that allows you to invest meaning into images. So if on those George Sprott pages I've got George in one panel walking through the snow, in the next panel he's back in the television studio. You didn't have much space to do things there. I would have liked to have put like three pages in there, really slow that down. Show the sequence of walking through the snow, have the narration go along with it, have some silent panels in there...you get a feeling to reading them. I think after a while every cartoonist just has a rhythm they're familiar with. There is kind of an unspoken staccato that goes along with how a page reads, and you can kind of break that

in certain ways, stretch out a long note here. If you have like four little panels and then a long one, it changes the kind of rhythm of reading, the feeling of it. And that's, to me, the real magic of comics. There's lots of other elements, of course, on how they work, but that's the main thing that interests me about them. I'm not interested in drawing in a real sense. Every once and a while I realise I better put something in here that looks like "real drawing" in it. But, ultimately, the kind of bravad– bravura? bravado? what's the word I'm looking for?

**DM:** I think both work.

**SETH:** That kind of really impressive drawing that comic fans like – I like to look at it, too, but I don't really think of that as important in any way in comic storytelling. When I look at an old, say, Jack Davis comic or something, any of those classic comic illustrators, I can be impressed. Like "Wow, look at this big vista they drew" or all these characters or whatever, that's impressive. But truthfully, I think comics are most effective when they aren't just about telling the story, and that means every once and a while you might want to pull out a two-page spread to show the city or to show a room crammed full of people. But most of the time it's the simplicity of how the things move from panel to panel that's of interest. You get caught up in the drawing, that's where you get lost. I think a lot of young cartoonists, they actually have to learn that. I did, too. It's like you're afraid people will think you *can't* draw. There's so much impetus put on being a "good artist" that you kind of have to pull it back and realise it's not about showing people you can draw. You can do that on the cover. It's about telling the story in an effective manner. And for me that means telling it quietly.

**DM:** You've got those – in *George Sprott* – those kind of arctic spreads. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**SETH:** Well that was pretty much exactly what I was talking about earlier – I had been forced to design each of those pages as very cramped. And even those, the actual editing of them, when I sat down and wrote them, and then broke them down, each of those pages I tried to just work out as panels and then see how many panels it would be, and it was always – I think I could do about a maximum of thirty panels on a page.

**DM:** Which is a lot.

**SETH:** It's a lot, yeah. Squeezed in small. [telephone rings] Oh, just a sec. Actually, I'll let the machine get that.

**DM:** Are you sure?

**SETH:** Yeah, because I know – it's either phone sales or my agent going to want to have a conversation, so I'll call him later. At about thirty panels, so that was maximum. Small panels. But each time after I wrote it was about ninety panels. So it would be like a massive amount of editing, and even there you try and fight to get in like one silent panel there somewhere. But the thing is, since I knew that was so dense, each of those pages, I felt like I had to have some way to open the book up. So that's primarily why I have those big double-page spreads. I want people to be able to read that, and then you turn the page and you get like a big long pause.

**DM:** It's like a palette cleanser, almost.

**SETH:** Yeah, exactly. And that's also why I added in the shorter strips, where they're not so dense. Because I wanted to break away into some actual – what I call naturalistic storytelling, where the characters, you follow them around. I mean, I think that's what initially interested me in cartooning, was natural storytelling, where you follow someone walking around and you see it as if you're a ghost walking with them. I always thought that that was the strength of comic storytelling, that kind of progression, and that's why old comics like *Superman* were not good comics, because they didn't really follow the

characters much. They jump from one big scene to another. Superman's in his apartment, and then in the next panel he's on the moon. Because they just describe it, they say "He flew out the window and went to the moon." So you think "That's bad cartooning." But now I'm not so sure about that anymore. Now I feel like you can do both. As I say, as I'm getting more into description I'm realising that – for a while, I just thought narration was bad, you shouldn't use narration unless it's interior dialogue. Now I'm thinking, it's okay to describe things. You just gotta be careful that when you're doing it the storytelling underneath the descriptions is somehow interesting on its own. As I'm thinking more and more about how I just want to write about places, or describe things, rather than show them, I'm realising that you can do both. You can find a way to keep the storytelling lively. Like what I did in *Wimbledon Green*, where you have a variety of approaches. You can have people talking directly to the camera, you can have naturalistic storytelling, and you can have straight description. And they can kind of work together. I think when I was younger I thought "It has to be that naturalistic storytelling."

**DM:** It's funny that you say "camera." Is that kind of how you think of it?

**SETH:** I don't, but it's the way that we've learned to see it. You talk about comics, you always end up using film terms. You say a medium shot or a long shot. There's really no other terms for them.

**DM:** I mean, to me it almost seems more natural than speaking to a camera. There's no technology that the character's addressing, it's just right straight to the reader. It seems almost native to the medium somehow.

**SETH:** It's funny, I agree. You know, when *Wimbledon Green* came out, a few people said it was done like a documentary. And I hadn't thought of it in those terms, because I just thought the characters were talking to the reader. But people do see it as talking to

the camera. And, as you saw, I use the term myself because – I think we're so used to watching film and television that we tend to think in those terms. But in comics I think it's a natural thing to have the characters talk directly to the reader. God knows when they started that, but I imagine that even back in the twenties there must have been a bit of that. But now it seems like after the underground, after people like Harvey Pekar, et cetera, that seems like a completely normal – even newspaper strips, I'm sure there are characters that speak directly to the audience. Yet somehow I think people see that as a filmic technique, breaking the fourth wall kind of thing.

**DM:** *Are* there any filmic techniques that kind of crept in or just that you sort of absorbed without realising it?

**SETH:** I think a lot of my cartooning in the beginning was very much based on film technique. Mostly, though, that's because I grew up studying mainstream cartoonists. And so if you're drawing comics as a teenager and you're looking at Marvel comics, a lot of that stuff, how they actually tell the story, is based on film. A lot of those cartoonists deliberately tried to incorporate the same techniques. You see it, even a guy like Kirby, clearly he watched a lot of movies. I don't think I really thought about it for a while. Those early *Mister X*'s are just completely – that type of teenage storytelling is surfacing in that work. It wasn't till later, when I started to step back and think of the medium itself and realise there's no reason why you need to have an establishing shot like in a film before you start. And that you need to keep the scene interesting by moving the camera around. That's something that really got into my brain early – if a guy's sitting in a chair, you should be going around the chair while they're talking, it's boring just to have the same shot over and over again. But I think most cartoonists eventually come to realise that there's nothing wrong with using rigid grids or repetition. That stuff all works fine. I think there's been of a knee-jerk reaction *against* filmic

approaches. I think that maybe in the last fifteen years cartoonists have sort of felt like maybe it was a betrayal of comics to tell it in a – what’s the word I was going to use? I guess, filmic is the word for...

**DM:** ...sort of, cinematic...

**SETH:** ...yeah, cinematic, there you go. But I think it can’t be avoided on a certain level. I think what I was calling naturalistic storytelling – it makes perfect sense that you should follow a character in some sense. It’s not necessarily an emulation of a camera to follow someone walking through – to cut to different shots. This is an editing process we’ve gotten used to, and I think that we see the world in that manner to some degree and so you have to use it sometimes. You *could* do everything like *Blondie* – you know, it’s all proscenium arch and you’re constantly following full figured characters from a side view – and that would probably be very true to cartooning. But it is limiting and it does cut back – sometimes I think you want to pull in to a closer shot on a face because that has some sort of iconic power to it, that you’re not going to get by always having them the same size. I know Chris Ware talked a lot about that. He was very interested in – and he still talks a lot about using the comics medium in its purest form, but if you really look at Chris’s work, it’s full of close-ups and all that sort of stuff, too. You can’t avoid it. I think that that has great power. To be inside a character’s head, to see that head blown up large, it implies that you’re – how do I put this? – you get that sort of sensory experience of being the character’s head. And that is something that can only be done by presenting a large, iconic image on the page. You can’t do it by having it constantly in that proscenium arch.

**DM:** How long have you known Chris Ware?

**SETH:** I guess since some time in the late nineties, I suppose. Yeah, we met when I went through on a book tour down there, and just became friends. Very influential person. But no one would be surprised by that. Chris had a big influence on me.

**DM:** Like personally on your work.

**SETH:** Oh yeah, totally. When I met Chris in like the late nineties, it was a wake-up call, really. I went to his house, and I'd read his first couple of issues and I was impressed with them. But somewhere in my mind I thought he was just doing a lot of that work with computers. All this type – when I actually saw the level of craft in what he was doing, it really made me sit up and say “I've got to work harder.” I think he had an effect like that on a *lot* of cartoonists, where they said “Boy...”

**DM:** Really kind of galvanised...

**SETH:** Oh absolutely. Chris is the figure that will be remembered from this period, there's no doubts about it. I think initially everyone was taken aback by Chris's ability. And his intelligence. And I think in time each of the cartoonists – we've all had to deal with Chris's work, we've had to realise we'll never beat him at his own game. And so you just have to do your own work and forget about Chris Ware. But I think he was a very galvanising person – he was kind of like Crumb in that sense. I think Crumb changed the whole underground medium just by being Crumb in the centre of it. And I think Chris had that effect, too. The funny thing is, he affected the older cartoonists, and I think Crumb did that in a way, too. I think people like Kurtzman – I think they recognised instantly that here was someone of great transformative power in the medium. I can tell, artists like Spiegelman, they've been affected by Chris as much as his own contemporaries. He's just a big figure. And fortunately he's a very humble person – that's not something that I think is a concern of his. Because he could be very smug.

**DM:** Yeah, he certainly doesn't come across as smug.

**SETH:** No, not in the least. It's his saving grace. But certainly Chris – it wasn't just his skill, it was also his depth of understanding of the comics medium, that made me think deeper, too. It really did make me think about why I was approaching certain kinds of storytelling. I have an affinity for slowing it down and keeping it quiet, and I was interested in that almost from the beginning, but I'm not sure I'd given it as much thought as a could have. Chris was good in that sense that he really made everybody sit and think about what they were doing, and why they were doing it.

**DM:** I wonder if you could talk more about that tension between storytelling and describing.

**SETH:** Okay, well, basically I think, as I was saying, when I started out I felt that the strength in cartooning was in showing and not telling. And even while I, for example, loved Lynda Barry – she was like a favourite cartoonist of mine – I always felt like Lynda was relying too much on narration for me to really emulate that approach. And as I was saying, with those old comics, where they would tell you things rather than show you, I thought a secret in real, good cartooning – why cartooning is good – is if you actually just show things happening. And that meant I really tried to have as few transitions as possible. So, a character gets up in the morning, they get out of bed, they walk to the bathroom, they walk downstairs – and you follow them, and you don't try to just jump between scenes. And that's a kind of storytelling that I think is very effective at creating – not a believable world, but immersing you into the world of the character. It takes you in, in a way. Whereas the other kinds of storytelling actually *are* more distant. But the thing is, that is a very specific approach, and it is actually pretty tedious to draw. I mean, you *want* to jump between scenes. And I think around the time when I did *Wimbledon Green*, it showed me that there was actually a great power in doing short

sequences that you just sort of set together, and let them create their own dynamic by being together. But as for the tension between that and the descriptive form, it took me a while but eventually I came to realise that narration has a power to it. There was lots of cartooning I was reading that was heavily narrated and I didn't have a prejudice against it. Like Dan's work is remarkably full of narration, every panel usually – he does a lot more narration than he does naturalistic storytelling. Well, maybe not so much anymore. Something like *Mr. Wonderful* has got a lot of naturalism in it, a lot of characters walking around and talking, rather than just narration. And Ben Katchor is full of narrative. And I love both those cartoonists. But I think I had a real prejudice against doing it myself. Only when I started to use it more did I realise that in a way it's my natural voice. I'm not a quiet person, I'm actually a very talkative person and I have a desire to describe things and talk about them. And I felt that was an element of my personality that was frustrated in trying to do the work, because I wanted to write and talk about things. That sequence I described – describing the mother's room – there's a power to description, by bringing it to the surface, that's different from just allowing the pictures to tell the story. Yes, you can draw the room, and show the accumulated detail, which I was doing as well, and allow the reader to make assumptions based on that. That's one of the powers of cartooning – someone is wearing a hat, you don't have to describe the hat, they just have a hat on, and so the reader knows they have a hat. But you might want to bring the hat forward and say what's interesting about this hat. And that's where a lot of my interest actually lies. The city I've been making up for years – the city of Dominion – that's all just about description. When I write in my notebooks about it, I'm writing down facts, and visual descriptions of things. I'm talking about how elements fit together and realising that's where my work is going. Going about, describing places and events and circumstances, more than showing them. And the trick

is to find a balance between the two. Because you can't have just – there's nothing more boring than saying "the So-and-So Building" and drawing a picture of that building, "It's on Smith Street" and then drawing a sign that says "Smith Street." Sometimes you have to do that, but too much of that is really dull, and then you start to say "Why even draw it at all?" So what you need to do is find that happy tension between the two.

What's interesting is that when you're drawing description based work, that's when the strip comes alive in ways you didn't plan. For example, I just got a magazine in [Seth gets up] that I did a six page story for. It came today, actually. [returns with issue no. 82 of *Canadian Notes & Queries*] This strip I did here on – "Jocko," it's called. It's a strip I just did about these little gumball machine things. And this is this little character that appears in these little books that are in these gumball things, and his name is "Jocko" and he's a little Scotsman. So when I was drawing it, I wrote out the dialogue first – it's all description, basically, talking about who owned the company and how he came up with the idea for these little books. When I was drawing it out – it mentions, why did he pick a little Scotsman character? And so as I was drawing it, this little tramp appeared in the drawings, asking for spare change, which becomes like a funny point of him seeing this Scottish tramp and he's getting the idea for the character. Now that wasn't in my mind at all when I was writing it, that only comes together as you're drawing it.

Description sort of takes on a separate life of its own when you're actually drawing it out, when you're breaking it down. There's a different part of the brain involved somehow in drawing and writing. So a lot of times I will sit down and type out a script of dialogue between characters. Like the sequence I'm working on right now, there's a long conversation between the two brothers in *Clyde Fans*, and that's all just typed out. But when you actually sit down and start drawing it, breaking it down in comics, that's when somehow a new alchemy gets involved that it takes on a different life – that is why

you're not writing a novel. Stuff happens in the pictures that make it interesting. Most of the stuff I write down here, it's not interesting – it wouldn't be interesting as a short story. Like I say, there's a certain kind of alchemy that occurs when you draw pictures, different things happen by making sequences form.

**DM:** It's not simply illustrated prose.

**SETH:** Yeah. Like somehow with talking about the gumball machine, having the kid go and get the gumball and having it come out and seeing it open and seeing the little booklet – there's something in the actual movement of a sequence that brings things to life. They create a parallel kind of storytelling that goes with the narration, and that to me is really interesting at the moment. Maybe more so than the naturalistic storytelling I'd been doing previously.

**DM:** When you lay out the panels of a scene, are you working quite intentionally, or more instinctively...?

**SETH:** Kind of instinctively. I mean, initially, *always* instinctively. Then I might decide to work harder and take that same sequence – when you break down, you do thumbnail pages, a quick thumbnail. You might say, “That looks pretty good” or you might say “Let's do that again” and work it through. Sometimes you realise the central panel – say you've got a nine panel grid, and the middle panel would be panel five. But you might find that panel six, where you drew something, that really should be the centre of the page. You'll find a way to shift your storytelling, cut something out, or expand something else. Sometimes pages, there's an architecture to them that develops and you'll see that it needs to be a certain way, or you'll realise “There's a nice repetition going on here, I should break this into two pages instead of one.” It all kind of happens as you're doing it. And it always just starts with pure instinct, moving the story along, and then you realise that there's a design element that has to be taken into account. I

think comics are often compared to film or literature or a combination of the two, but I really think they're closer to poetry and graphic design. And I think it's because they are really about compression and about moving things around, like the way that you do when you design things. Moving images around, moving shapes around. So that compression of time and that moving of the shapes is why you make pages look the way they do. In something like this, these are pretty straightforward – obviously I put a big picture in there because I thought that would be nice graphically. But sometimes – here's a good example: while you're drawing it you'll realise that the flame of the sign will tie in well with him lighting the match here. Or you'll realise that you can align the three figures here simply. Or over on this page here, you'll realise this is the perfect spot to open the page up, having a silent panel there frees it up, and the same thing over here, where suddenly you can take all the density of all the architecture that's around the single figure there in the centre and that will kind of bring it to life. But you don't know that when you start designing the page, it just sort of happens as you're doodling it out.

**DM:** The silent panel seems like a kind of favourite of yours, a sort of treat to include for yourself.

**SETH:** It is, yeah. Because I think cartooning has always been about brevity of space, you don't have a lot of space. Most cartoonists had to work in short spaces, so they weren't often given that luxury. It's actually a great luxury to have silent sequences, too, where you can – the *Clyde Fans* part I'm working on right now has several pages of characters walking down stairs, things like that. That's like a luxury cartoonists in the past did not have. If you had six pages, you could not devote even a panel to a silent moment. And I think because of that, I've always had a fascination for the power that a single image has when surrounded by a lot of text. Suddenly that one panel just pops. It adds a moment of profundity to almost any sequence. It's funny that way. But I have a

real fondness for it. And it's funny how a single drawing is not a silent panel. Like if you see an illustration, it's not silent. But in the middle of a comic strip, something without any dialogue in it is silent somehow.

**DM:** What would you say about like a silent, single-panel gag strip? I mean, it wouldn't be a strip...

**SETH:** Yeah, that's funny. It wouldn't really seem silent in that way to me. I mean, all cartooning in a strange way isn't fully quiet. It takes a real effort to create actual silence in a comic strip because there's always some implied sense of motion and noise in a drawing. And certainly in a gag cartoon, even if there's no dialogue, it feels noisy to me, I guess because it's humorous. It's always a humorous situation. Maybe if it was the right kind of drawing. Maybe if it was a character sitting in a chair in a darkened room, it might feel silent, even if it was funny. But usually they feel – I think it's because they're kind of broad...

**DM:** ...you can almost hear the punch of the...

**SETH:** Yeah, exactly. Whereas – I think a lot of it has to do with sequence. Something about sequence where you... Hmm, it's funny. It's sequence, but it's not just that. I can imagine in some of Doug Wright's strips, for example, which are all entirely without words, they're all pantomime, not all of it feels silent. Only once and a while is there a panel that implies quiet.

**DM:** Hmm. And how does he achieve that?

**SETH:** Usually I think it's circumstantial. Like a shot of the father peering into the darkened room with the children sleeping, or maybe the kids looking out the window as snow is coming down. It has to be something that the actual content implies silence as well. A shot of the kids running through the house, that's very noisy. A lot of it has to do

with rhythm, I suppose. There's always an implied rhythm and so it's hard to actually create real silence because that rhythm's still moving you through the strip always.

**DM:** How does serial publication affect structure and rhythm when you're putting these things together?

**SETH:** It does. And I think I'm only just starting to get away from that now. Even with the first hardcover of *Palookaville*, that *Clyde Fans* sequence in there is like pretty much what I would have done in a regular comic. Because the length of those comics did affect how I thought of each segment in terms of how it's going to fit together. I know when I first started *Palookaville*, I felt like having a whole issue to tell a story with was a lot of space. And then in the next issue or two I did a couple that were a two-part story. And then I did like a six-part or something. In each of those, each issue became a chapter, because that space determined what a chapter would be. When I moved on to *Clyde Fans*, I realised I needed more space, so they would be *part* of a chapter. But the thing about that was you're even then structuring them to have some kind of a moment at the end. And so that affects it, too. Now, working on this piece that I'm working on right now, I finally feel a little freed up, that this will just be the end of that other chapter. So it will be as long as it is, it doesn't really matter. I think the books that follow, I will be a little more freed from that as well. They will take just the space they require. But I think that space limitations have always affected the way people think about what they're working on, and certainly affected me. That twenty-four page sequence of a comic book was pretty much what I thought of as a chunk you work in.

**DM:** How would you compare it to a sketchbook story like *Wimbledon Green*?

**SETH:** Well, actually, *Wimbledon Green*, now that you say it, that was releasing me from that, now that I think about it. Because I wasn't concerned about that at all. If it was a one-pager, it was fine, if it was five-pager, it was fine. I think that kind of

storytelling actually frees you from that to some degree. Working in a sketchbook is always freeing because you never *have* to publish anything. It could take any form it likes. If it works out – I mean, you’re aware that you *might* publish it. But if it works out, you’ll figure out how to make it work in another form. And I suppose even *George Sprott* to some degree, although that was really determined by the form of the magazine. But then compiling it later was kind of freeing, to figure out some other way to use the space. But they are physical objects, these books, and that does have an effect on your thinking, for sure.

**DM:** At what point did you decide that you wanted your books to be real objects?

**SETH:** Probably not immediately. But certainly by the time I was working on *It’s a Good Life*, I was becoming more interested in the design of things. Even then it was still formative, I was really learning at that point. And when I look at my first collection, my first book collection, I didn’t know what I was doing and there’s all kinds of obvious errors. But I can see I was making some attempts to do certain things. I was starting to understand that the actual design elements in the book that go around the story are important to setting the tone of the story. There’s a bit of that in *Good Life*. And I think that’s something that’s been increasingly more interesting to me as time goes on. I think because the cartoonists of my generation came out of that world of newsprint comic strips or comic books, it took us a while to understand that design was important. I can remember Chester Brown and I, when we would talk about comics back in the eighties, we never talked about design. It was always just about storytelling. The only design that you really gave much thought to was that it would have a cover. And the choices made in picking a cover were part of a process of coming to get away from the idea of a comic book cover. To make things inherently not an exciting image. So much of what a comic book cover was about was picking some potent moment from the story, and I think

Chester and I were both trying to avoid that. And you look at Crumb's work and you see he's one of the first guys who started to do that – pick something that was not a moment per se. If you look at some of those *Mr. Natural* comics or something, Mr. Natural might just be on the cover with leaves falling or something. That in a way was like a big shift for the comic book. That was certainly inspirational to me, when Crumb would take an atypical moment. And Crumb was interested in design. But I don't think I recognized that when I was young, I just saw that he was doing interesting things with how he was putting his comic books together. It was later I realised that Crumb might have been one of the first comic book artists to really be interested in design in a way that applies to the modern aesthetic. But...what was I talking about? Where did this start from?

**DM:** ...now I don't even recall...we were talking about your books as objects.

**SETH:** Oh, yeah, that's right. That really comes later. Now I'm very concerned with that, which is also worrying because the book seems to be in a state of decline right now. It's worth wondering what's going to happen. I mean, I'm pretty sure I can continue to make books until I die, but whether they will be the primary way your work is released...that's worrisome.

**DM:** It is worrisome. I can barely stand to read comics on a screen.

**SETH:** Yeah, it's not an experience I like.

**DM:** People keep talking about how much they love their Kindles or whatever...

**SETH:** Yeah, I'm clearly not the audience for that stuff. And it's like I'm actively hostile to it, too. So I can't imagine I'll *have* a Kindle, unless it's the only way to read certain people's work and it may be. But the funny thing is, I'm really just not interested in doing my own work for that, but I'm worried that that's what it's going to be in ten years – it's gonna be like that's the only way that people will read your work. And at

that point what I'll be trying to do is continue to have a book published of it, but I'll be aware that that's like a vanity project, just to go in the closet.

**DM:** Oh, that's depressing.

**SETH:** Or to sell to other collectors who are still concerned about books. It seems strange to me that the book could have *possibly* passed so quickly into something that isn't vital in the culture anymore. After a thousand years. It's surprising. It just seems a mistake. It's funny, the book is just a perfect delivery system. It's just not the same for me, to look at something electronically.

**DM:** Until I can eat on top of a Kindle...

**SETH:** Yeah, exactly. They're an integral part of everyday life.

**DM:** What are you reading right now?

**SETH:** Well, let's see, what *am* I reading right now? I just finished a book called – what's it called? – *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Which is a book from around the turn of the last century, I guess. A sort bucolic set of interconnected stories. A bit kind of *Winesburg, Ohio*-ish. But a lot gentler. And I also just finished reading – what was it? – *The Bridge of San Del Rey*, something like that, a Thornton Wilder book. Yeah, I just picked it up at Good Will, it was like a hundred and fifty pages, so it was a quick read. It was actually pretty good. Somewhere in my mind I'd always got that book mixed up with *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* so I thought, I'm not interested in that sort of military story, but it wasn't. Comic-wise, though, I'm reading whatever graphic novels have just come out. Dan's *Mr. Wonderful*; I just finished Lynda Barry's two collections.

**DM:** So you try to keep very up-to-date?

**SETH:** Yeah, I'm probably more up-to-date than people might think. I follow all the young cartoonists that are interesting – I have a huge stack of graphic novels that are

always the new stuff to wade through. I'm paying attention to any young cartoonist who's interesting.

**DM:** Any bright lights on the horizon?

**SETH:** Yeah, there's a couple of really great guys. There's a guy from Britain right now I'm crazy about named Jon McNaught, who has a book – actually, he has two books out. One's called *Birchfield Close* and the other's called *Pebble Island*. And he's quite young, I think he's only like twenty-three or something. And he's using a really beautiful slowed down storytelling. Very much to my taste. Let's see, who else am I interested in right now? Well, there's a handful of guys who you probably wouldn't even count as the younger guys anymore. People like – I think Kevin Huizenga is brilliant. Sammy Harkham's super interesting, his last comic *Crickets* was really good. The funny thing about that last comic, *Crickets* – if this was like 1989, there would be so much discussion of it. But there's so much stuff coming out now that people are spoiled.

**DM:** Yeah, it's hard to keep track of everything.

**SETH:** Yeah, for sure.

**DM:** Which of your works would you recommend someone starting with, if they were just coming to your work?

**SETH:** Well, for me, I like – *George Sprott* is the work I would give to someone. But you know I really don't get the impression that that's the work of mine that people like the best, at all.

**DM:** Really?

**SETH:** Yeah, I find that, generally, the two things I notice is – people like *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, which is a book I can't even look at anymore. It's a very young book.

**DM:** I suppose the storytelling's very accessible.

**SETH:** Yeah, it is.

**DM:** It's not broken up...

**SETH:** Yeah. And every time I look at it I find – well, for me, it's too young. I can see the young person I was when I wrote it.

**DM:** And you don't care for what you see?

**SETH:** No, it's like – certainly things I can see I'm trying too hard, and the drawing looks awful to me, and there's all kinds of moments that bother me. It's earnest in the wrong ways and not honest enough in other ways. It's fine for what it is, but it's a not a book for me. Which is the funny thing about writing books, is that you write them because they're the books you want to read, and then they're books you will never enjoy under any circumstances. And the other one people seem to like is *Wimbledon Green*. A lot of people say that's their favourite book. I think because it's fun.

**DM:** Yeah, it has such an energy to it, I guess.

**SETH:** And in some ways, I like that, and in other ways, I'm like, "Well, that's kind of a refutation of what I actually want to do with my work." It's like what I *really* want to do is not work that people are interested in. But that's okay. *Clyde Fans*, in a way, is not a book I would recommend to start with because it's a big, disjointed work in a way. And when it's done, I think it will make sense as a single narrative. But in some ways, it's a big long book of me figuring out what I want to do. And I think the next book after that is the book probably that will be probably – well, of course it's the book I'm most interested in now, because it's the one I'm planning. But I also think that it might be the book that I've been building up to do. That I've had to figure out how to do my own work, and it's just starting to come to me now. Like working in this strip here – that's kind of where I'm headed, which is being able to jump from one piece of description to another and build like a complicated thread of places and ideas. And I think that that's

going to be what my work has always been about, but I didn't know it. I was trying to get a plot into everything. Now I realise that my work isn't probably about having a plot.

**DM:** How many years have you been working on *Clyde Fans*?

**SETH:** Well, certainly over ten years. Maybe even coming up on fifteen, I'm not sure. I mean, I started thinking about those characters probably by about 1994 or something. Probably didn't start drawing them until the late nineties. The thing is, remarkably, the story has not changed that much from my initial plans. It's just become subtler in my mind as each year has gone on. So as I finally reach each point as I'm working on it, those *were* the points I was planning to get to, but they have changed somewhat in my thinking. And, in fact, it's funny that the last part, which was Part Three, when I finally finished that I realised that it came out the way I was planning it but that's not what I want anymore. I've actually gone back, a re-edited that and changed some of it. And now, okay, "That's closer to what it should be like." So when the collection finally comes out, it will be a little bit more cohesive. That section was a little bit gangly.

**[recording pauses]**

**[recording resumes]**

**DM:** I wanted to ask you about misanthropy and self-loathing and anti-social tendencies that seem to crop up in your work.

**SETH:** Sure. Yeah, it's funny – well, how would I put this? I think it's a typical trait amongst cartoonists that they had a kind of upbringing – well, where they ended up feeling kind of isolated or outcast or something. It's not surprising, it's the typical comic book kind of experience. And I think it leads to a certain type, that does end up working in this kind of cartooning. I guess basically my point is that the kind of cartoonists who do the kind of work that we do – in my peer group – seem to be of a type. And part of

the type, I think, is that there's a complicated balance between a kind of self-loathing, mixed with a certain kind of narcissistic arrogance, too. It's not just self-loathing, because you can't produce art if you just don't like yourself. You have to have some sort of confidence that there's a reason you're putting the artwork out there, too. You see more extreme versions of it in some people than others. There are people like Al Columbia, who has some sort of severe problem about actually releasing the work. And I think that gets caught up in the kind of perfectionism that comes from self-loathing, too. But I actually think that it's an important balance to have, because it keeps you in check in a weird way. And I find that most of the cartoonists I talk to, even the ones that it's not that pronounced in – someone like Chester Brown doesn't have very much self-loathing at all. He's actually pretty confident in his own weird way.

**DM:** Yeah, I just read *Paying For It*.

**SETH:** [laughs] Oh, yeah. It's an interesting book.

**DM:** He's almost like...compulsively articulate.

**SETH:** Yeah. Yeah, exactly. And he's almost, in a strange way, unwilling to go into certain emotional areas. It's like: it's not gonna happen. But even Chester has that strange thing that happens when you're working which is that you start to develop an idea that this is really good, what you're working on, that it's really great, that it's the best thing you've ever done...and then you take the mood swing to where it's the worst. "It's terrible, how can I even release this?" And I think that kind of combination between the two is important, to keep the work in balance. Because if you think things are too good, that's a not a good way to learn about your own work. But the funny thing is, I find I joke about self-loathing, but it really comes in when it's connected to social interaction, I think. And I think that's why the types I'm talking about, partly why we're cartoonists is that you spend a lot of time alone. And I think that that time alone is

actually – it's a complicated thing, because I would say that being by your self is when you are most authentically yourself *but* it's also a comfortable situation where you're not *really* presented with the complications of being yourself. That comes into play when you deal with other people. You're always comfortable when you're with yourself, because you don't have the conflict that comes with dealing with others. Of course, the problem with dealing with others, I find, is that that creates a distraction from the core of who you are. There's something about experience experienced alone that is deeper than experience with other people, because you're distracted by your persona. The very nature of talking to other people is a distraction. And I find that, mostly, when self-loathing is most potent to me is when I've been out involved in social activities of any sort. I come back, and it's worse at some times than others, but you have a kind of inability to let go of the experience, to keep going over them, it's very unpleasant.

**DM:** I'm thinking now of that sketchbook anecdote that you included at the end of *Palookaville 20*, the Calgary authors' festival.

**SETH:** That's a classic example, yeah. And the truth is, that does happen to me, although there are times when you're happier and times when you're less happy. That was kind of a grim period for me, too. I wasn't very happy during that time.

**DM:** Although, it plays like high comedy, somehow...

**SETH:** [laughs] I know. Well, it's always over the top, in a weird way. That obsession with yourself is always a bit unpleasant, too. But the funny thing is that, for me, the thing I'm most interested in *is* myself. I mean, I'm sitting in a room all alone all the time, and picking over the details of my own existence, constantly. And that is the most interesting thing to me. Every once and a while you're reminded that there's people experiencing really complicated things out there in the world and that your little interior drama is probably not that important. But somehow that's the luxury of living in this

culture, to be able to sit and worry about these minor little existential worries. But I do think that that's an almost unavoidable character type for the sort of person who's sort of overly involved with looking back all the time. I'm not sure why I'm so interested in looking back. It's just to earlier time periods, it's looking back in my own life, mostly. But nothing is really as interesting to me as the past. The present is interesting to me because it's connected to the past. When I go out, if I'm walking down the street and it's a nice sunny day, I'm feeling like the overlays of the other sunny days from the past that have remained in my memory that are potent. And it's that interconnection of one overlay over the other that makes that experience pleasurable to me. I don't really feel that everyone's like that. I think a lot of people do actually kind of enjoy living in the moment more. But to me the real pleasure comes from sending out these kind of psychic feelers that feel around for the past. I see an old house, I like to see the crumbling steps on it, somehow that feels good to me. To feel that iconic sense of the past is alive around you. I'm not sure why that is. It's a fetish, almost. It's a fetishistic interest in the Western past of a hundred and fifty years, for some reason. I'm not sure I could really rationalise it as having any great meaning, but certainly that informs every thought of my waking days, usually.

**DM:** I wanted to ask you, as well, about background characters and strangers. Because even in like *Palookaville* number one, you've got scenes where you've got the strangers kind of crowding around the big event. And in *Good Life*, you've got the Seth character kind of looking at these strangers passing by and making little judgements and wondering "What's their deal?"

**SETH:** It's funny, now that you say it, I probably haven't given as much thought to that over the years and I'm thinking maybe that had a lot more to do with me living in the city back then. Because I'm realizing I don't do much of that anymore with my work. In

fact, I realise I draw an awful lot of empty scenes now. And it may have to do with the shift from moving from an urban environment to a more rural environment. Certainly, on the weekend, the thing I do most is drive out of town to the country. And I do know that – somewhere someone commented on something that was like the absence of people in these drawings, in city scenes, and it hadn't occurred to me that I didn't draw anybody in the street, because I hadn't been thinking of it. I was just thinking of streets themselves. I think it may have had a lot to do with the fact that when I was younger and living in the city I probably *was* more interested in people than I am now. Certainly when I moved to Toronto as I young person that was one of the great, life-changing experiences, was to be around so many people. And I was very naive in those years, coming from a small town, so being in a big city like Toronto was like remarkably eye-opening. I don't think I really do pay as much attention to people any longer, and do try to avoid them in general. I know when I go downtown here, I try to actually takes routes where I won't see any people. I usually walk on the railroad tracks – which is very safe – because no one's ever up there except maybe some hobos, and they're not looking to talk to you, so it's fine.

**DM:** [laughs] So, it's really contact you're hoping to avoid.

**SETH:** It is, yeah. It's funny, that's part of that – what we were talking about – that social anxiety. It's funny, I can *deal* with talking to anybody, it's not a problem. And I never really have any kind of awkward thing that's awful. Of course, you say things and later you think “That was stupid,” but everybody has that and it's not trauma. But the funny thing is, any kind of social contact – I do kind of dread it in a way. When I go downtown, I don't really *want* to talk to a teller at the bank. It's all little – fraught with anxiety. Even though there's nothing to be anxious about, and it's all forgotten the second you leave. Phoning someone, anything like that, I don't like to do. I've gotten

used to spending my time entirely by myself and that's really comfortable. It ties in again to what I was saying, this feeling that that's you're authentic self. And that when you're talking to other people, there's some facade – I think, actually, that's a lot of what my work – I kind of dream that the work will ultimately spell out who's under the facade. But it doesn't really seem to do it.

**DM:** No?

**SETH:** No, that doesn't really get at it. I did a documentary with the National Film Board over the last few years, and I'd hate for the director to hear this but it was not a good experience for me.

**DM:** [laughs] Oh, really?

**SETH:** I mean, I think he knows that. What bothers me is, it didn't get under the surface.

**DM:** Right.

**SETH:** I felt like what I wanted was that they would film me long enough that somehow...

**DM:** The real you would...

**SETH:** The real – yeah, and it never happened. In fact, I think it was less me than ever.

**DM:** Because you felt the need to perform...

**SETH:** Yeah, he put me on the spot, made me feel like I had to be a performer of some sort, and it really wasn't working. Yeah, so, we'll see. I hope to god he can pull it together, but I have my doubts. Yeah, it felt pretty awkward, and when he would leave I would have a severe depression afterwards for a week, because it was – talk about social anxiety, that really felt like “Oh god, not only did that go badly...”

**DM and SETH:** “It's all on film.”

**SETH:** ...and they're going to edit that together somehow... I've told him, too, I will only watch it once. If I could say I wouldn't watch it at all, I would, but that's just too rude. For someone who put that much time in. But I think watching it once will traumatize me for life.

**DM:** Was he a great fan, or was he kind of commissioned by the Board...?

**SETH:** No, he was a fan, and at first I thought we might be copacetic. And he's a really nice guy. I mean, I like him. But as time went on, I thought "This is not what I would do." His way of handling it – it was all style as opposed to substance, and that really was – I wanted it the opposite. Like, just forget about the style. I don't care about the lighting, I don't need the whole thing to look like it's set in nineteen-forty. That's what I *don't* want. But that's what it's going to end up being. We'll see. My only hope is that he's also – there's also going to be a series of animated sequences through it.

**DM:** Oh!

**SETH:** I'm hoping that might – that might pull it together, maybe. We'll see.

**DM:** Have you done animation in the past?

**SETH:** No. And in this sense I'm really not doing much, either. I'm just helping them. But maybe that will pull the thing together. I'm hoping that will distract away from the other stuff. We'll see.

**DM:** I'm trying to imagine your work in motion.

**SETH:** The little bits I've seen, he's done limited kind of stuff so far, and it seemed fine. I was – "Oh, that's not too bad, that's okay." But I'm not really interested in animation in the sense of seeing my own work animated. And I suspect if they actually have some sequences where they go into more full animation, I'm not going to like it. I can't see those characters walking, somehow.

**DM:** Is it that it seems somehow superfluous? Or just not right somehow.

**SETH:** I think if I was interested in animation, it wouldn't be to animate what I would draw. Somehow that seems boring to me. Like I certainly wouldn't do a cartoon with characters walking around. I can see maybe doing like – about place, I can see drawing buildings and moving around somewhere. Trying to set up some sense of being somewhere. But the idea of drawing a couple of my characters and having them walking along and talking and stuff, that just seems ugly in a way and...kind of vulgar, sort of. I wouldn't like it, I don't think. And I'm sure there will be stuff like that in this. And I probably won't care for it. But I'm letting it out of my hands, like "It's not my project. They can't blame *me* if it's a bad documentary." The worst they can say is that I'm a terrible subject. And so that's fine.

**DM:** [laughs] It seems somehow unlikely that they'll actually say that.

**SETH:** Well, they might. We'll see. The problem is, being the subject of a documentary, what you really worry about is that people will basically watch it and say you're an asshole.

**DM:** Right.

**SETH:** [laughing] And I think there's a possibility. I think this may be one of those things where you shake your head at the end and – I've seen a few documentaries where people just came off as unlikable. And not because they were real jerks – I've seen those, of course, where you're watching someone who's the head of a skinhead movement, of course they're a jerk – but I mean I saw a documentary about the cartoonist Bruce McCall. Guy who works for *The New Yorker*. And at the end of that, I just thought, "I don't like this guy." And I *wouldn't* like him. And I'm thinking that's what this is going to be like.

**DM:** That's how you're going to come off.

**SETH:** I have a feeling. Or, the worst case scenario is you come off stupid. You just look like – they put the wrong stuff together, stupid things came out of your mouth and at the end you just shudder.

**DM:** [laughs] Would that be like the harshest criticism you could think of? If someone said, “Oh, his work is just stupid.”

**SETH:** Yeah. I think so, yeah. I think the thing that most worries me, if I really let myself worry about it, is that as time goes on the work will be seen as superficial. And I can't control that, is the funny thing. What you want the work to do, ideally, is to transmit some depth of experience, of what you felt while you were alive. But you're a part of the time you live in and you're a result of many influences – as time goes by, the work could become mannered and start to be unreadable to future audiences. And also seem precious or pretentious or empty or all kinds of things, and you can't see it in your own work. I'm already aware of certain elements in my own work that I can't control. It does have a mannered quality to it, and at its worst it becomes sort of fey in a way that I don't like. I'd like it to have a real kind of... I'd like it to have an honesty rather than an earnestness, and that's difficult to get into the work. I'm not an open person like somebody like Crumb. Crumb's laying it all on the line and that works somehow for him, and I feel that that will continue to transmit as time goes on. I'm not sure that the work I'm doing will have that quality. But you can only do the work you do. There's nothing you can do about it.

**DM:** Can you think of anyone you might hold up as a model of being honest but also sort of restrained?

**SETH:** Hmm...

**DM:** Not necessarily cartoonists, just any writer or...

**SETH:** Let me think about that for a moment. Well, Alice Munro would be a good example, because her work has a great depth of understanding of human beings, but you don't get any sense of Alice herself. She's maintained a writerly distance somehow from it, but the work is very deep. But I'd have to think about it to come up with the ideal answer to that question.

**DM:** Is that distance a quality you think would be useful for a writer-cartoonist, is that kind of necessary?

**SETH:** I don't know if it's necessary. You get different quality of work from it, though. Cartoonists, for some reason, tend to have a desire to I think infuse their own personality into the work, maybe more than writers do. Writers are a little more comfortable with that distance. It may have to do with the fact that you draw it, and that makes it somehow...it's more connected to you than a writing style. A drawing style is sort of a representation of – artists are touchy about their drawing style. I've actually found that other cartoonists want to pretend that they didn't come up with it, that it just sort of happened by accident. I think cartoonists sort of look at it like it's a fashion statement or something. Picking a drawing style, developing a drawing style is like wearing a fancy outfit, and they're a little ashamed that they've put that much effort into coming up with it. Most *guys* want to pretend that everything they've done is just “Whatever...”

**DM:** Somehow organic, or inevitable...

**SETH:** Exactly.

**DM:** Do you have a pretty good sense of the development of your own style?

**SETH:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was always very calculated. Every step of the way was a process of incorporating something you learned from some other artist or making some decision to simplify. In fact, I think most drawing style is based on *how* you choose to simplify. And the stylizations you *build* out of those simplifications. Every cartoonist

starts picking a series of noses they draw, for example. And they stylize that and a system develops. And that simplification process is where your style comes from, the combination of a million of these little elements put through a kind of...Systematic Stylization Machine, which makes it all of the same stamp. The parts all fit together.

**DM:** Can you think of an early plateau, when a lot of these things felt like they were really coming together for the first time for you?

**SETH:** Well, it really was like right around the end of *Mr. X*, beginning of the illustration career. I think that's when I started to understand how I was simplifying and started to make a more conscious choice about how to make the elements work together. And then I think probably a few years later when I started to understand how to compose a panel better. And those things are really connected to each other. How you compose space within the panel is as big a part of your drawing style as what kind of faces you draw. I think if you really look at cartoonists you'll start to see that they have a kind of spatial understanding they work with, which is really different from artist to artist. Somebody like Chester – who often draws in a kind of deep space – the characters exist in a fully realised reality. You can *sense* the streets going back.

**DM:** Yeah, there's a real volume.

**SETH:** Yeah, exactly. Somebody like Dan – it's shallow, the characters are standing in like a picture box, almost. They're almost always on a flat surface. Somebody like Chris Ware – as much deep space as he can get into it, the drawing's too iconic to really feel like you're in the real world. He's moving around big blocks, sort of, and the characters are in amongst these things. This stuff is so integral to their *feeling*, their style. But generally when people think "style," they think like "Well, they use cross-hatching" or "he's got a slick brush" or whatever. But I think that's the surface of the style. The real style is how you construct the actual panels, and how the space moves around.

**DM:** Whose panel composition do you really admire?

**SETH:** Well...I'm actually pretty impressed with Ben Katchor's compositional skills. He has a real kind of spontaneous look to the work, but the panels are actually really smartly composed. And if you really study how he's doing things, he's leading your eye through those pages really cleverly and he really – he has a blocky, kind of clunky understanding of how things sit together that I find very impressive. But when it really comes down to it, who I probably spent most of my life studying, it's probably someone like Hergé. Hergé is probably where I learned more about panel composition. And some of the guys who followed in his wake, like Yves Chaland, were pretty influential in those early years. And Peter Arno. Those guys, I mention them a lot because even though I don't look at them the way I used to, they were really formative. I can remember Arno being very influential for me for understanding how characters could be shapes, in a way. That sounds pretty straightforward but, actually, looking at something like Hergé, they're pretty illustrative, it's pretty obvious they're *drawings*, in a way. When I first looked at Arno's work, they were almost a bit two-dimensional. He used the washes to make things solid, but he's really carving those figures out with a brush, and that was very – that was something that really taught me how to approach drawing in a different way. Something I needed to learn at that point.

**DM:** A friend of mine wanted me to ask you a very specific material question.

**SETH:** Sure.

**DM:** I don't even know really what to ask – brushes, paper, tools...

**SETH:** Well, it's very simple. Like old cartoonists, I work with the most primary of tools. I work with a #4 brush, and I work with India ink; I draw with HB pencils and non-reproduceable blue pencils; I work on a light table, which is a little different than most people. I'll work out the page as a thumbnail, I'll draw out the grid I'm going to

use, and then I'll draw each panel individually – tracing over top of each other to get it just right – and then I'll tape it onto the page, and then I'll do the next panel, blah blah blah. And then I'll see, as they're going up, if they work. It's an easy method – you can just tear a panel off and say “That character should be a little higher a little lower.” And that way, rather than drawing on the board – where you make a lot of mistakes and you have to erase and then you start to ruin the surface. So when that page is done, you just take that page and put it on the back of a good piece of paper, put that on the light table, and then I can ink without ever disturbing the surface of the paper. And I use Wite-Out. Lots of Wite-Out. There's lots of corrections made to everything. That's something I'm trying to get away from. And it's not because – when people see the amount of Wite-Out I use, they think I'm making a lot of mistakes. It's not actually any mistakes; what it is is perfectionism. A desire to control the art too much. And that's why something like *Wimbledon Green* or this other book that's coming out this year, this *GNB Double C* book – I'm able to do that without all the correcting, because I've already told myself right away that I'm not concerned with it being perfect. I'm trying to find some way to meet a happy medium between the two. Because I don't enjoy the perfectionism. But it's hard when I do that finished comic page not to fix up *every little thing*, to fix every little hair you don't quite like, to thin out a line a little bit. And when you start working that way, that means that while you're inking, you're actually planning on fixing it, so you're not as concerned with making it a finished drawing to begin with. So, you do a line, you just *let* it go out the edge of the panel, because you're gonna fix it later, anyway. You're going to fix every line with a bit of Wite-Out. So I'm trying – I keep telling myself that the next work will be the one where I kind of let go of that, but we'll see. I'm definitely going to carry it through to end of *Clyde Fans* and then I'm going to try and get rid of that.

**DM:** How big is everything before it's reduced?

**SETH:** Well, it used to be much bigger. I'd say when I started *Clyde Fans*, each of the pages was about *that* big [indicates dimensions with hands]. But now it's down to about that big [moves hands closer together]. So it's only about double or something. Yeah, I've been progressively working smaller and smaller as the years go by. I think it's because I've discovered that something like this ["Jocko" strip] is only about eleven by seventeen, the actual page, about that big. I've discovered that I like filling the space better when the spaces are smaller. It allows me to be a little more iconic. To do a drawing like this little empty room, there, if I was drawing the panel this big [moves hands to enlarged dimensions], I'd be tempted to put more stuff in it. And you don't need it. So the smaller you draw, the more it allows you to actually work with simpler shapes.

**DM:** And something sort of enormous like *George Sprott* – you get the sense, opening that, that it's almost actual size.

**SETH:** Some of it was actual size, for sure. Yeah, actually all of it was actual size except for the pages I did for the...

**DM:** For the magazine?

**SETH:** Yeah, those I did bigger because there were just too many panels per page. Everything else I did for it afterwards – those sepia pages, the big drawings – those were done actual size. And generally I'm getting closer to working actual size. I like to work small, now. The sketchbook stuff is small, it's a like a sketchbook *size*. So if you've got twenty panels in a sketchbook, that's pretty small. A character's head is that big [indicates with thumb and forefinger]. But that *is* freeing. A lot of working with a brush is working in big shapes, too. So working in little shapes is very simple.

**DM:** Does it annoy you at all when readers with a less trained eye tell you how much they like *Wimbledon Green*, and how loose it is and...?

**SETH:** Yeah. It does bother you a bit because part of you thinks, “What’s the point of doing the other work?”

**DM:** Right. “What am I putting all of this effort into it for?”

**SETH:** But the flip side of that is you always know you’re only doing that for yourself anyway. There’s some weird fetishistic quality to artwork anyway, it’s like you’re trying to create this perfect object for *yourself*. There’s something in it – that’s why you go back and fix a panel that’s perfectly fine. Because you know it will bother you to see it later. No one else will ever notice it. In fact, if I was to say to almost anybody – like with one of those pages – “Pick your favourite drawing on that page,” I would guarantee that they would almost always pick the drawing I like the least.

**DM:** [laughs] It’s like a magic trick, like an awful...

**SETH:** [laughs] Exactly. So you can’t really think about that too much. And truthfully I try not to think about what anyone – it’s funny...what do I not like? I don’t care if people don’t like the work. It doesn’t really bother me and I accept that, and I kind of take it for granted.

**DM:** Just because it’s not for everyone?

**SETH:** Yeah. Yeah, and I know I’m not crafting the work in a way to make it what people would like. Even the work of people I *do* really like, I know why I like it and I know I’m not doing that. I look at somebody – like Dan’s work – I know why I’m engaged with it, and I’m not putting that into my work.

**DM:** Right, you’re not trying to engage someone in that specific way.

**SETH:** Yeah. I’m *going* for something that’s kind of boring in a way. I like things that have – like I say, on the edge of boring. And I know that that’s not going to engage most

people, and I even know people who like the sort of thing I like might not care for it. But that's where it's going and it's – nothing I can do about it...beyond do work I'm not that interested in. You have to do what you want to do. In fact, I realise as time goes on I'm moving into a direction that *I'm* excited about, thinking "Oh boy, I'm going to do a whole book that's just description." Every once and a while I think, "Maybe nobody wants to read that. Maybe that guy was right when he said three pages was enough of that stuff," and I want to do like three *hundred* pages of it now. But what are you gonna do? You – you bet on the fact that what you're interested in, someone else will be interested in. And you have to do it that way. And that's the only work that ultimately can matter. People often say – and I've had this experience – working with someone else will make the work more interesting sometimes, for other people. They'll make suggestions and you're like, "Oh, yeah, that does make it better." But I can't work that way. It's got to be – if it's going to be worse work, at least it's my work. Those are choices you have to make. I don't know what started me on this – I can't remember the question. Oh, I guess it was about readers and their opinions. It's like, you're happy that they like something, and you can see why and you feel good about it – like when people like *Wimbledon Green*, I think that's nice. I mean, I enjoyed working on it and it was meant to be fun, and it's nice to know that some element of your sense of humour actually got out into your work in some way. But I guess I never did want it to be better than the other stuff I was trying *harder* on. But you end up learning from that anyway, and some of that ends up getting incorporated into the other work. And I like to think that what I learned doing *Wimbledon Green* will make this next book a book that they'll like more than, say, the other books, because maybe there's a bit more freedom in it than what I've been doing in *Clyde Fans*, for example. Each one is a bit of a process.

**[end of interview]**

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