



Dave McKean, contemplating his direction of the 2005 film *MirrorMask*. Columbia Pictures/Photofest

McKean has worked as a graphic designer for corporate clients including Sony. He won the Alph-Art, Pantera and **Harvey Awards** for *Cages*, best film awards from four European film festivals for *MirrorMask*, and an **Eisner Award** Best Publication Design.

See also: Sandman, The

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Diana Green

MEMOIR/SLICE-OF-LIFE THEMES. The term memoir or slice of life describes a form of story that many see as a recent innovation in graphic fiction, concentrating on the realistic details of everyday life rather than the spectacular and

fantastic worlds that are often associated with comics. These works offer experimental, novelistic aspects of the medium, explore long and often harsh realities of life and human nature, and inhabit profound, shocking, and disturbing corners of the human experience. Paul Gravett calls them stories that “turn the personal and specific into something universal and inclusive” (20). In reality, slice of life comics existed at the medium’s inception.

One of the first comics, *The Yellow Kid*, could be seen as the first slice of life cartoon. *The Yellow Kid* was a doppelganger for the public mentality, silly, violent, quickly entertained, and easily patronized; the kid was a stand-in for New York’s teeming immigrant, semi-literate, worker population, the new America of century’s end. R. F. Outcault’s character first appeared in 1894 in a few cartoons before he became the star of *Hogan’s Alley* in Joseph Pulitzer’s Sunday edition of his newspaper, *The New York World*. The University of Virginia American Studies Web site lauds Outcault as “present(ing) a turn-of-the-century theater of the city.” Speaking in a strange sort of criminal argot of the poor, the Kid caused a sensation. His shirt itself constituted the word balloon for the comic strip and often his messages straddled social commentary and naked advertisement. Holding a record player he said, “listen te de woids of wisdom wot de phonograff will give yer.” His pidgin English expressions, his long draping

body sweater/nightshirt, and his Charlie Brown bald hair style (used by the poor to combat lice) made him the darling of the lower classes, giving them a champion and commentator.

Winsor McKay's strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905–14), while purporting to be a pure fantasy of a child's evening nocturnes, explored the psyche of childhood desires. Nemo would indulge in a fantasy world of eating, playing, and ice skating. McKay's later *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1904–13), explored the fantasies of adults (city life, stock market, subways, etc.) in a similar fashion. When the comic book began to achieve popularity in the 1930s, real societal issues and personal autobiography quietly crept into the publications. Paul Gravett described comics' popularity as "a secret retreat from parents and siblings, a private way of facing fears and fantasies, (and) a trove of big important tales to read over and over" (20). **Joe Shuster** and **Jerry Siegel** were two immigrant kids with dreams of merging into the great melting pot of American society and gave their character **Superman** their same hopes and ambitions. Superman was an immigrant who had lost everything, including his native homeland, his family, and his identity to come to the United States. It was hard for readers to tell where Superman's fiction ended and their truth began. Superhero creators did not neglect real world problems. **Jack Kirby** and **Joe Simon** evoked their own experiences in World War II in their *Captain America*, *Guardian*, and *Fighting American* superhero strips. Even before his later graphic novels, **Will Eisner's** long running *Spirit* comic strip dealt with inner city squalor, tenements, and society's refuse. Often *The Spirit* was only a supporting character to more complex urban tragedies. Eisner portrayed life's losers with sensitivity and emotional complexity. The post-war Noir period signaled a decline in **superheroes** and a new interest in **romance**, **war**, and **horror**. Returning veterans, as well as comics, had to face the complexities and anxieties of post-war life at home. EC Comics used suggestive metaphors and featured stories of **zombies**, cannibalism, and vampirism arguing that the post-war society was filled with predatory forces. Rampant consumerism, unemployment, and higher prices were fears and worries of the postwar recession. Even optimistic space adventures like DC's *Mystery in Space*, reflected new fears about exploration and unconquered worlds.

By the 1960s, the counter-culture was producing **underground and adult comics** that ridiculed conventional society, and was experimenting with autobiographical motifs. **Robert Crumb** used the vehicle of the comic format to discuss the drug culture, but also a cynical and insightful attitude towards his own life. However, it was Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* that boldly moved into pure autobiography in 1972. Green exposed his complicated guilt about religion and the obsessive compulsive disorder that governed his life. He would dream of women's underwear and nuns without their habits. He conflated his sexual desires and neuroses with his upbringing in a religious school. He agonized about his lusts and felt that his natural human urges were horrific sins. He fantasized about his punishment before the nuns. Others, such as like **Art Spiegelman** and Crumb were emboldened to go further and make their own life stories the center of the their comic world.

Though much of Crumb's early output was episodic in *Zap*, *Hup*, *Weirdo*, and other venues, his tales regarding the women in his life were eventually anthologized in the full-length collection, *My Troubles with Women*. In this album Crumb explored his own obsessions with women, starting with his pre-fame days where he idealized women as an unattainable goal and wrote strips like "Footsy," subtitled, "the true story of how I became a teen-age sex pervert." He admits, "but, I've been lucky—oh so lucky! A few of these wondrous beings have allowed me to have my way with them." This declaration is followed by a typical Crumb image of Crumb glomming on to the leg of an Amazon woman of gigantic proportions. Crumb's images go beyond realism to grotesque caricatures featuring his exaggerated eyes, hideous glasses, an anemic body and a lecherous expression. He writes, "my whole trouble with women is that I'm too much into 'em." Yet Crumb's narrative progresses beyond lecherous infatuation with the female form. Crumb becomes famous and has his fill of women and his fetishes. He writes about one conquest, saying, "she's cute but we're just two sweaty animals going at it, like cows or pigs." Readers are continually reminded of Crumb's low self-esteem, his humor, and his honesty about himself; but Crumb has a wider vision, maturing and growing beyond his mere lusts. He marries Arline, his soul mate of sorts, and becomes a father. Still, his puzzling relationship with women continues. He has a mid-life crisis and writes and draws ironically about his failure to work. He reemerges with "Arline and Bob," a strip about domestic life and the manner in which his young daughter Sophie dominates his life in the same manner women dominated his life before. Only now, Crumb, instead of being dominated by his urges, is dominated by his daughter's urges, whims, needs, and phobias. In the strip, he describes his bouts of depression, sitting in bed, and moping about his life. He then shows his wife Arline the finished midlife strip, and she threatens to cry if he does not draw her in a more flattering manner. Even when happily married and a family man, Crumb still has female troubles.

As the **Comics Code** began to lose its censoring force in the 1970s, more adult comic experiments began to arise. Eisner produced the dark but deeply moving *A Contract with God* stories in 1978. Eisner's novelistic depiction of 1930s Jewish tenement life in the Bronx at 55 Dropsie Avenue featured edgy portrayals of people left in a rundown apartment dwelling. Eisner never calls these tales directly autobiographical, but they clearly are derived from his life experiences. There is a cast of losers and wannabes including a pedophile superintendent; a greedy little Lolita child who steals the super's money and kills his dog; a gigolo addict; a broken-down opera diva; a secretary who vacations in the country and dreams of a wealthy husband; and Willie, a young man who loses his virginity to a worldly older woman.

Other comics took a more intellectual view of nonfiction material. **Scott McCloud** chose to talk about the comics medium and explain how the combination of words and pictures was a unique art form. In his seminal, *Understanding Comics* (1993), he explained how comics were a part of his own life and how the comics form has altered how we see the world. McCloud, posing in the comic as narrator and pivotal spokesman for the medium, suggests that the comic medium is a pivotal piece of society's mythic

structure. He sees comics as all-American art form, and like a documentary filmmaker he takes readers behind the scenes, explaining everything from panel structure, to point of view, to styles of comics. Autobiography, comics history, and technique have strangely merged in McCloud's life. Having published several comics explaining the medium, the way he has drawn himself (literally) into the medium has made his life a part of the form he describes.

More often than not, autobiographical comics tell common tales of individual lives, and while earlier autobiographical works of Robert Crumb, Justin Green, and **Harvey Pekar** broke taboos about sex and perversion, later memoirs dealt with simpler slice of life issues portrayed in compelling images and poetic writing. Craig Thompson's graphic novel *Blankets* (2003) explores a young man's coming of age in a deeply religious community. In the lengthy narrative, the protagonist begins to question the assumptions of his religious foundation. He falls in love and experiences his first romance, breaking from his religious and family beliefs and tentatively charting a new course for his life. He explores the difficult territory of self-discovery and experiencing a larger world than his origins. Not only is the subject matter adult in the most novelistic way, but Thompson's work treads a fine line between traditions and innovation. Thompson draws in a regular traditional comic style, with wide-eyed characters and gangly cartoon bodies. However, these characters are not caricatures or superheroes, but normal people with small flaws and mild expressions. Thompson's pacing emulates real life and events unfold slowly. His parents enforce a strict church doctrine in his family household, but the adolescent Thompson slowly grows to see a larger world by visits to church camp. There, theoretically, the attendees are to become more devout, but many of the kids go just to escape the watchful eyes of their controlling parents. In one scene, the other students make fun of Thompson for reading his Bible, and he even prays to God to forgive his peers for ridiculing him. More touching is his burgeoning relationship with the kind and good-hearted Raina, a girl he meets at the church camp. Their closeness and growing understanding awaken his passion and normal degree of teenage lust, but Thompson is deeply conflicted about his feelings. Is this temptation or real love? If Raina is a Christian too, than why would she want to have a physical relationship instead of abstinence? Thompson wrestles with his sexual identity and his pangs of first love in an often amusing, confusing, and heartbreaking way that all people who were adolescents remember and ponder in later life.

Some comics blur the lines between fairytale and reality. J. M. DeMatteis and Jon J. Muth's epic fairy tale *Moonshadow* (1985–87) tells the story of a young enchanted boy coming of age among a host of quirky acquaintances. Along the way he sees his mother die, experiences other losses, and grows to maturity. Tinged with elements of philosophy and folk wisdom the story has resonances in our everyday world. When *Moonshadow's* mother is murdered, he goes to see a slimy funeral director. "Unkshuss talked: I listened. He proposed: I agreed. He billed: I paid." DeMatteis's fantasy world of strange journeys and odd friends is much like Crumb's real world of hollow dreams and faint ambitions, tinged with the stuff of reality. Danny Fingerroth argues that

DeMatteis expresses “a disarming conviction of man’s potential and the beauty to be found in life” (94).

Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003–5) tells the story of her childhood and growth in modern Iran in the time after the Shah and during the blooming power of Islamic fundamentalists. She is shaken by fearful childhood experiences that are described with simplicity but with dark and rich resonances. At one point she is accosted by a league of women fundamentalists who want to report her to the local police for not wearing the traditional women’s veil. She cries and lies her way out of prosecution, but it is a frightening, embarrassing experience that terrifies her. She has an uncle who is accused of crimes against the Islamic revolution, and he is to be put to death. He has a choice of one visitor and he requests young Marjane be that one guest. It is an awesome responsibility for a little girl, but she is brave and hugs her uncle. He calls her “the star of his life” and the little girl he wished he had. After his death, the papers write “Marxist spy punished.” However, Satrapi’s story is not mournful or self-pitying. Bad things happen to people she loves. A neighbor next door is bombed and her playmate is killed, buried in the rubble. She is given a chance to escape at the end of the autobiography’s first volume, but she cannot leave her family for fear she will never see them again. It is a simple and moving account of a little girl who wants nothing more than to be left at peace, to play Madonna records, and to be free of war and internal spies.

Not all graphic experiments in nonfiction are such personal tomes. Some like Larry Gonick’s *A Cartoon History of the Universe* (1990) seeks to tell a massive story, literally the history of the universe from the Big Bang to the present in a quirky and irreverent way. Gonick is neither a defender or denier of any religious or philosophical view, but he plants them all in the story of man’s rise. People, dinosaurs, and mammals are shown full of energy and individualism. His story of King Saul and David is typically funny. Saul’s daughter, Michal wishes to marry David and Saul sets an impossible condition. “She’s yours—If you bring me 100 foreskins of the Philistines!” David’s reply, “No problem.” Gene Kannenberg writes that it is an “irreverent, but informative and alternative way of delivering a history lesson packed with quirky facts” (74). Gonick places the dinosaurs and man’s precursors on an equal footing, and he has fun with the writers of the Bible and the Greeks, who are by turns inspired and mired in their beliefs and philosophies. In any event the rise of civilization is chronicled with humor and a wise eye towards man’s many foibles. While not strictly a memoir, it is one man’s quirky view of our cultural history.

Bryan Talbot’s *Alice in Sunderland* (2007) is an encyclopedic journey into the world of *Alice in Wonderland*, the life of Lewis Carroll, and the town of Sunderland, England, as well as a macrocosmic view of the world and history. Talbot makes remarkable connections between the bizarre, the coincidental, the cosmic, and the minor. The parallels in the life of writer, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Carroll), his trip down the rabbit hole with Alice, and the larger vision of the world of Carroll and the economic, political, and social events since his era are intertwined. It would be easy to write Talbot off as a strange eccentric with a gift for seeing conspiracies and connections that others cannot

envision, but Talbot has a larger agenda. He is seeking to make a visual codex to the work of Carroll and tie that motif and text to the events of the next hundred years and illustrate the inextricable links between seemingly unrelated events. Danny Fingerth explains, “He immerses you in history, not just that of Alice and Carroll, but also of England, America, religion, entertainment (including comics), war, disease, birth, death and everything inbetween” (67).

Nick Bertozzi’s *The Salon* (2007) is a more limited cultural experiment in history and art but no less exciting than Talbot’s gambit. Bertozzi writes about the period of early 20th-century modern art with Picasso, Satie, Braque, Gertrude Stein, Edward Muybridge, and other vibrant personalities existing in turn of the century Paris. He places this remarkable, complex time in the frame of a murder mystery; a mysterious lady in blue paint is killing off avant-garde artists, and Georges Braque, his lusty friend Picasso, the Steins and Gertrude’s paramour Alice B. Toklas have to find the cause and murderer or risk the same end themselves.

Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) was a creative experiment that made autobiographical comics not only respectable, but profound. Spiegelman tells the desperate story of his father, Vladek, a concentration camp survivor, but in an unconventional way. Rather than simply another holocaust memoir, he wanted to illustrate the story using the holocaust images to explore ideas about humanity and inhumanity. In his tale, the Jewish people are allegorically portrayed as Mice, the Polish as Pigs, and the Nazi oppressors are viewed as cats. This dark metaphorical structure not only produces a view of racism, it uses the comedy structure of Disney cartoons to pointedly undercut and increase the drama. Comedic cats and mice are rarely equated with worldwide tragic events, but here, we are forced to confront the most horrific acts of man’s depravity against man in the friendly and winsome guise of a cat-and-mouse cartoon. Reading *Maus* is disturbing for many, because while enjoying the tale, the reader feels guilt for obtaining pleasure from so much human suffering. To complicate matters further, Spiegelman’s tale has a modern connection, since his father was a living character at the time and the adult Spiegelman struggles to understand his damaged parent within the comic. As a son, he cannot understand his father’s incredible anguish as a survivor, and he consequently cannot comfort this parent who grew up under such extraordinary conditions. As is often the case, Spiegelman finds that those closest to a victim of tragedy can be the least understanding; the event is too close, too prescient, and too demanding for relatives to engage it. Spiegelman’s novel shows the private face of suffering.

Daniel Clowes’s experiments in the graphic novel format provide a humorous and often surreal lens to critique society. In his popular *Eightball* anthology series (1989–) from Fantagraphics books, Clowes was able to lampoon contemporary social conditions. Various stories have been revived in separate graphic novels. In *David Boring* (2000) he addresses the protagonist’s sexual obsession with a perfect woman, being stranded on a desert island, and the apocalypse. *Like A Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* (2005) is Clowes’s *Finnegans Wake*, a disturbed, modern Ulysean/Kafkaesque journey where protagonist Clay Loudermilk seeks his lost wife, meets bizarre surreal characters, and undergoes

unsettling metamorphoses. In *Art School Confidential*, Clowes ridicules the pretentious world of art students and the pomposity of art education with wry observations such as, “the only thing of less value than one of your paintings will be your BFA diploma.” Rocco Versaci argues that Clowes’s “real intent is to explore the psychologies of the town’s oddball citizens” (17).

Clowes is most widely known for *Ghost World*, a series of short comic tales from *Eightball* translated into a successful 2001 film, which follows the seemingly aimless wandering (and wondering) of two urban, nomadic, post-high school teen girls who are looking for a meaningful role in life. M. Keith Booker describes Clowes’s work as an exploration of “the alienation and ennui of postmodern youth,” (87) and *Ghost World*’s teen protagonists are the embodiment of that condition. Enid Coleslaw is the outspoken, angry, punk misanthrope and her friend, Becky Dishwaller is the naïve puzzled cooler partner in their rambling, semiotic approach to the modern city. While Enid critiques boys, jobs, schools, and society, she is also lost and unhappy, stuck in the quagmire between adolescence and true adult life. Yet Clowes carefully removes the outer layers of polite camaraderie and analytically dissects contemporary intimacy between two girl friends that are nearly a singular consciousness. When Enid thinks she is accepted to school at Swarthmore it portends a monumental breakup for partners who have shared their most secret thoughts. When Rebecca complains that Enid does not want her along, Enid retorts, “it has EVERYTHING to do with you, you remember every little detail I wish I could forget”(74). Clowes strikes at the horrible burden of intimacy in a fragmentary society that values aloofness and alienation over any sense of community. *Ghost World*’s visual language underscores the banality and lack of reality of life in postindustrial America, making the girls’ estrangement and confusion more plausible.

In *It’s a Bird* (2004) writer Steven Seagle and artist Teddy Kristiansen take the figure of **Superman** and work it into a personal memoir of a character dealing with life realities. Seagle’s protagonist, Steve, is a comic-book author offered the chance to write the *Superman* strip, which causes him to ponder the problems of omnipotence. His opening line is “what I think about most is the big red ‘S.’” Danish artist Teddy Kristiansen’s work is extremely chilling, showing the influence of Fritz Lang’s expressionistic *Metropolis*. Seagle’s script plays off of that dark, almost monochromatic world, juxtaposing Kristiansen’s dull coloring with the notion of a fantastic world of comic culture. Though Kristiansen’s style is abstract, these people are not grotesques, just sympathetic flawed humans worthy of compassion. Seagle’s Steve ponders Superman’s might while dealing with disturbing family traumas. His father has gone missing, and he is haunted by the fact that he has a genetic propensity for Huntington’s Disease, an incurable and fatal genetic condition. Instead of jumping at the opportunity of a lifetime, Steve balks at the idea becoming reticent and prickly. He thinks he cannot write Superman stories and lacks empathy with the character. He proclaims, “there’s no access point to the character for me.” Steve has watched his mother die, he fears marrying a long time paramour for fear of making more children with the fatal disease, and he fears for his missing father;

he feels anything but super. Seagle sees the massive gulf between puny human experience and the overwhelming cosmic-ness of an omnipotent character like Superman. *It's a Bird* brings the Superman myth to everyone, suggesting that the **man of steel** could make anyone feel inadequate.

It was fitting that one of the greatest innovators of comics, Will Eisner, ended his career on another inventive experimental work. In the late 1970s, inspired by underground comics telling personal tales, Eisner embarked on a series of autobiographical comic projects that illustrated his worldview. Even in *The Spirit*, Eisner purposefully sidelined his protagonist on occasion to focus on a totally inconsequential supporting character. In essence, Eisner was inserting alterative short stories into the superhero medium back in the 1940s; but in the aftermath of 9/11, surrounded by the rage of conspiracy stories and fears of foreign terrorism that haunted the United States, Eisner turned to an absurd and vile primal conspiracy theory that had haunted him his whole life, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This sham document, an obvious forgery created by anti-liberal repressive factions in the Tsarist government of Nicholas II, was intended as a conspiracy theory linking Jewish groups to a plot of world domination as a pretext/rationale for punishing Jews through a series of *pogroms*. Eisner wanted to uncover this conspiracy about conspiracies, and he used the formula he had honed so well in the 1940s, the character-driven mystery suspense tale that he had perfected in *The Spirit* to such superb effect, to explore the bizarre twists and turns in this fable. Here he begins with the tale of Maurice Joly, the French scribe who in 1864 created "The Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu." The work was a critique of Napoleon III and was intended to tarnish his rule and regime. It was used in the creation of the text of *The Protocols*. In 1921 *The London Times* did an expose revealing the absurdity of the document and dismantling its claims, yet it still persisted. In the story, Eisner is embodied by journalist Philip Graves, who seeks to know how the lies of the Protocols persisted so long and have continued to have such a negative effect. He asks a bookseller how such a weapon of mass deception could survive when "that document is shown to be a fake?" The bookseller calmly responds, "no matter people will buy it anyway . . . because they need to justify the conduct they may later be ashamed of."

Using the dependable mystery format, Eisner links the *Protocols* to the larger issue of peoples' fear of social change. Eisner grapples with the kind of conservatism that leads people to believe outrageous stories that support the status quo. Holocaust deniers, 9/11 deniers, and Iraq conspiracy buffs are all part of this unlikely crop of scenarios promoted as truth. Eisner also returns the graphic novel to its origins in didactic instructional materials explaining history and social behavior. Eisner's last work was a fitting end and summation of the graphic novel's progress, invoking novelistic, nonfiction, didactic, and graphic elements in one package.

Paul Gravett said that comics are important because "they are often the first pieces of fiction that a young boy or girl chooses for themselves"(20). Gravett thinks they help us build interior worlds. Rocco Versaci suggests that "we are drawn to others' lives out of the desire to connect with and learn from their stories" (76). What the

memoir/slice of life comic has achieved is to make graphic novels the full partner of other contemporary forms of literature and communication, both liberating the form from ghettos of superheroes, adolescent fantasy, and crude illustrative styles and linking graphic storytelling to film, other media, and life itself.

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Stuart Lenig

MERCHANDISING AND LICENSING. Merchandising and licensing are twin industry practices that involve utilizing characters and stories created in one medium for the marketing of ancillary products. Licensing refers to the practice of selling or renting the rights to characters for use in other media (television, film, advertising), while merchandising is the sale and creation of products, such as toys, lunchboxes, or video-games, based on those characters. Licensing and merchandising have always been an important part of the American and Japanese comic book industries. However, as large media interests acquired publishers, and the number of media outlets expanded from the 1970s to the 1990s, licensing and merchandising became much more important in the American comic book industry.

Generally, two types of licensing have played roles in the comic book industry. In the first type, properties from other media (largely television and film) are licensed to comic book publishers who then produce comics based on the characters. This has been significant in the American industry since the 1950s. After the adoption of the Comics Code in 1954, Dell became the largest American publisher largely because it held the license to publish comics based on the Disney characters. Dell and its successor company, Gold Key, published many licensed titles through the 1960s, including comics based on such oddities as *The Beverly Hillbillies* television series and Disney’s film version of *Swiss Family Robinson*. In this type of licensing, the comic books, produced as extra commodities to profit from the popularity of characters, are the merchandising.

The second type of licensing generally reverses this process. Comic book publishers license their characters to other companies. This process also has a long history in the industry. For example, DC’s iconic superhero **Batman** made his comic book debut in 1939; by 1943, the character was appearing in *The Batman*, a 15-episode movie serial. *Batman and Robin*, another serial, followed in 1949. From 1966 to 1968, the campy live-action *Batman* television series was a prime-time hit; it was also successful