Review of:


by Emma Tinker

1. Even outside the cliques of the “comics community,” Chris Ware is rapidly becoming the biggest, trendiest name in the business. His books routinely receive mainstream critical coverage in high profile publications, and his reviews are invariably glowing with admiration. The string of accolades is impressive and apparently endless: the Guardian First Book Award, Book of the Year at Angoulême, the American Book Award, not to mention various Harveys, Eisners and numerous others. Rarely has a single comics writer or artist been so deserving of serious, sustained scholarly attention.

2. Although not a comics scholar, Daniel Raeburn is well placed to comment on Ware’s work. For a start, he knows the author personally. One of the many intriguing inclusions in *Chris Ware* is a wooden toy, the “Raeburn Algorithmatic” which Ware made as a gift for Raeburn’s wife, an exquisitely designed joke about Raeburn’s fondness for embellishing anecdotes (81). Raeburn has also written extensively on Ware before: issue 3 of his fanzine *The Imp* was devoted to Ware, and included many hours of interview material and detailed analysis. It comes as a slight disappointment, therefore, to find that Raeburn’s *Chris Ware* does not go as
far in its analysis as one might have hoped. It is a slim volume, with three quarters taken up by Ware’s illustrations, accompanied by Raeburn’s captioned commentary. It must be said, however, that many of the book’s shortcomings are not really Raeburn’s fault. Constrained by the conventions of Yale University Press’s Monographics series, Raeburn has produced what the series requires: a book comprising “an analytical introductory essay, followed by carefully selected examples of the subject’s work, detailed captions, and a bibliography for reference and research”. We can assume that a man whose fanzine on Ware ran to thirty thousand words could have said a great deal more if freed from these editorial constraints.

3. Raeburn’s introductory essay begins by placing Ware within the comics tradition of Töpffer and Herriman and emphasising Goethe’s famous remarks on the promise of the medium. There is something pleasingly honest about Raeburn’s unabashed snobbery – he dismisses the developments in superhero comics of the 1940s and 50s as “wrong turns” (11) and says, “The 'comixscenti' insist that snobbery has played a major role in the damnation of comics but neglect to blame the cartoonists themselves, who have by and large justified the prejudices against them. After Töpffer, the majority produced comics that were bad beyond all conception. Only a handful have fulfilled Goethe’s auspicious prognostication” (8-9). Always in a somewhat adulatory tone, Raeburn’s meandering commentary touches on Ware’s fusion of text and image, stresses the importance of non-realist style and relishes “[t]hat sweet spot” (20) where cartoony drawings and hand-drawn typography meet. He also draws out the parallels that Ware himself makes between comics and other media, referring to “nearly algebraic expositions of the comics language” (11) and suggesting links with architecture, music and poetry.

4. While many would agree with Raeburn’s remarks, he nevertheless writes as a commentator rather than an analyst. The essay is fine as far as it goes, but it could go much further and often gestures towards ideas that remain tantalisingly undeveloped. He claims, for example, that “the similarities between poetry and comics are undeniable” (22), but then backs up this statement with little more than two lines of explanation. At best, Raeburn makes some fascinating, if sometimes carelessly sweeping observations that would benefit from further elaboration, but at worst, the limitations of space lead to confusing compressions in his argument. Take, for example, the sentence, “If the comic strip is literally a map of time, and time is the distance between tragedy and comedy, Ware has used his comics to bring the two opposites painfully close” (11). The observation is astute when applied to the “Big Tex” strip on page 39, but as part of a general paragraph on the language of comics on page 11 this statement simply does not make sense.

5. The bulk of the book is taken up with images of Ware’s work, and Raeburn’s choice of plates is hard to fault. The captions contain as much information as anyone can reasonably get away with in a caption, often leaving the impression that, given half a chance, Raeburn could happily improvise a chapter on each image. As well as a broad selection from Jimmy Corrigan, plus all the original Acme Novelty Library covers, there are paintings, sketchbook pages, graphic design commissions, segments of prose, and Ware’s models and kinetic sculptures such as the fully articulated “Quimbies the Mouse” (48). Raeburn also includes such curiosities as a cabinet inspired by Joseph Cornell’s boxes, and a wedding
invitation designed for Ware’s friends Jay and Christine. Perhaps most importantly, he also includes two versions of a page from Rusty Brown, his caption briefly explaining the ways in which Ware has altered the page from serial publication to book format. This demonstration of Ware’s meticulous self-editing gives a rare insight into the processes by which he constructs and refines such delicately nuanced scenes.

6. Although the bibliography is valuable for its inclusion of Ware’s commercial design work, its list of secondary criticism is largely useless from an academic perspective. Where, for example, is Gene Kannenberg’s essay “The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image and Visual Narrative Strategies” (2002)? Such small omissions are symptomatic of a broader problem with Raeburn’s book – this text is not aimed at comics scholars, and makes no attempt to engage with current discourses on Ware’s work. It may be an ideal introductory text for, say, a fine art or graphic design student as yet unacquainted with Ware’s work, but it is of little use to those who would like to see his comics subjected to closer and more objective scrutiny. As one would expect of any text composed primarily of Ware’s art, Chris Ware is a beautiful book, and an opportunity to see some of Ware’s one-off creations. But as an analysis of his comics it is little more than a scaled-down version of The Imp #3, and it does not attempt to fill the current gaps in Ware criticism.

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