

Chris Ware's Graphic Tales Mine His Own Life and Heart

by Neil Strauss

CHICAGO—It was obvious from the first issue of his Acme Novelty Library comic book that Chris Ware was no ordinary illustrator. Some pages were crammed with as many as 40 frames, while others were airy and bordered by exquisite floral designs. One page, with a circuitous illustrated diagram that simultaneously led the reader through the story of an unanswered telephone and a family history, took a good 10 minutes to get through, but at the end came a denouement so logical and tidy that it left readers reeling.

In the 13 issues that followed its 1993 debut, many of them now collected in “Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth” (Pantheon), Mr. Ware painted an excruciatingly desolate yet wonderfully nuanced portrait of loneliness through Jimmy Corrigan, a friendless, inarticulate and sickly man in his 30’s with a smothering mother, a father who abandoned him as a child, and a rich fantasy life.

In a publishing world just getting comfortable with long-form comic books as graphic novels, Mr. Ware’s comics heralded the arrival of a more rarefied genre: graphic literature. To many fans of alternative comics (which tend to focus on the internal life of everyday characters rather than the superhuman exploits of larger-than-life ones), Mr. Ware is one of the best graphic artists of his generation. Each of his comic books sells about 30,000 copies, which is high for the genre.

“Chris’s work has completely redefined and expanded the inherent potential of comics,” said Ivan Brunetti, a fellow cartoonist from Chicago. “He’s changed our assumptions about this humble art form more radically than anyone since Robert Crumb.”

Thanks in part to Mr. Ware’s Acme Novelty Library, alternative comics have been slowly but steadily moving out of their underground niche over the last decade. One alternative comic, the Ghost World series by Daniel Clowes, which concerns the insular world of two female best friends, is being adapted into a feature film. Mr. Ware said he had shooed away several inquiries about making a movie out of his books, which chronicle four generations of lonely, abandoned Corriganes (whose most frequent utterance is an awkward “koff”).

Mr. Ware, 34, was wearing a blue Izod cardigan recently when he answered the door at the town house on Chicago’s West Side where he lives and works. “This interview isn’t going to be printed in question-and-answer format, is it?” he asked right away. “Because a lot of my thoughts tend to come out muddled and ungrammatical and, if nothing else, inarticulate.”

There were shades of Jimmy Corrigan in his ovoid head and thinning hair, and like his semi-autobiographical character, he seemed old before his time. The impression was reinforced by the antique Victrola, Edison cylinder machines, piles of vintage “Gasoline Alley” newspaper comic strips, and framed old-time advertisements scattered around his house.

“I’ll read old Popular Mechanics magazines for inspiration,” Mr. Ware said. “But I’m not nostalgic for any period that I haven’t lived in. Mostly I’m nostalgic for when I was 6 years old. Sometimes I think a lot of disputes between people could be solved if everybody had to wear a lapel pin showing what they looked like as children. That way, you’d kind of feel sorry for them.”

He stopped and critiqued himself: “That’s pure insanity. I don’t know. A byproduct of sitting at a table all day long.” The longer Mr. Ware talks, the more he seems to feel that he is putting his foot in his mouth. His sentences often end in phrases like “but then again I could be wrong.”

Mr. Ware, who lives with his wife, Marni, and a cat, grew up in Omaha. “I know that my teacher hated me in school just as much as the other kids did,” he said. “I was a dweeb.”

Like Jimmy Corrigan’s father, Mr. Ware’s abandoned the family soon after his son was born. While Mr. Ware was writing the series, in which Corrigan’s father reappears after an absence of more than 30 years, his own father also happened to materialize. The real-life father and son were reunited in a scene that Mr. Ware described as more awkward than the scene he had previously created for Jimmy Corrigan.

“I think he was about as embarrassed and uncertain as I was, sort of trying to make up for lost time in an overenthusiastic way,” Mr. Ware said of the dinner he shared with his father. Not long after the encounter, his father died (as does Corrigan’s in the comic). He said he regretted never having shown his father his work.

Mr. Ware’s drawing career began when he moved with his mother from Omaha to Texas and began attending the University of Texas in Austin, where he created a strip for the campus newspaper, *The Daily Texan*. He describes this late 80’s work as “miserably awkward stuff, just wretched.” But his colleagues from the paper disagree.

John Keen, who describes himself as “one of Chris’s obscure loser friends” (he’s actually an animator for Nickelodeon), recalled: “I could tell that he was something of a genius right away. I kind of looked up to him, even though he was only 18 and I was two years older.”

Mr. Ware might never have hit his stride in illustrating but for an event that took place a couple of years later. He was working on what he describes as a pretentious, conceptual comic when his girlfriend dumped him.

“It depressed me so much that I scrapped everything I was doing and started drawing these improvisatory stories that I had in my sketchbooks,” he said. “And that was the first time I ever felt an emotional kinship with anything I was doing.”

The early issues of *Acme Novelty Library* include those strips. In these mostly wordless and action-free tales of a potato-shaped character who bears a remarkable resemblance to Mr. Ware, one can see the beginnings of his immense vocabulary of loneliness, economical use of space and dark humor.

In some subsequent black-and-white strips, he copied his illustrations with a photostatic camera and used them as backgrounds for other panels, creating a strange simulation of depth. In others he experimented with what he calls map strips, elaborately constructed diagrams detailing, in the space of a page, complex relationships among events, places and people. Soon some of his comics were crammed with as many as 300 panels on a single page, an attempt, he said, to create a comic that could be read like musical notes on a score.

In one series, “*Quimbies the Mouse*,” he explored the tension between the security of companionship and the freedom of solitude through a character with one body and two heads. “Those I started drawing when my grandmother went in the hospital,” Mr. Ware said. “She was basically dying, and I started drawing in my sketchbook this Siamese-twin character with one half either resenting the other half or dying off. I liked having two characters in one and drawing something about relationships and cruelty. In almost any relationship you can’t bear to be around the other person, but when you’re away from them, you can’t bear to be apart.”

Mr. Ware started drawing Jimmy Corrigan in Texas, but when he moved to Chicago in 1993, the desolation he felt in this new, cold city led him to make the strip semi-autobiographical as he developed it through his job as a cartoonist for the alternative weekly *Newcity*.

As the years passed, Mr. Ware began collecting posters, books and memorabilia about the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, leading to beautifully colored and elaborately detailed pages later in the *Acme* series in which Jimmy Corrigan’s grandfather is abandoned by his own father at the world’s fair. A more subtle recurring theme

in the comics is the passing seasons, reflected in the changing trees and scenes outside Jimmy's window.

"The first thing I do when I get up is I look out the window," Mr. Ware said. "I've been looking at the same image for six years. It's imprinted in my mind like an afterimage template. And those slight variations are what add to a sense of not only time passing but also a wasted life."

Kees Kousemaker of Galerie Lambiek in Amsterdam, one of the world's first comic-book-only stores, said, "It is virtually impossible not to start reading Chris Ware's work when setting one's eyes on it."

Every square inch is filled with art, text, hand lettering and cutout home-assembly paper models of robots, peep shows and more. The back pages are often jammed with sarcastic ads for novelty items, parodying old Sears, Roebuck and Johnson Smith novelty catalogs. Even the microscopic copyright information in the front of each book is riddled with little jokes and humorous antiquated phrasing.

"I don't want to feel like I'm wasting any space," Mr. Ware said. "When I was a kid, I liked books that just seemed so dense you could lose yourself in them for a whole afternoon. They were like their own whole world. There seems to be such a laziness in—and I hate to use this phrase—the modern world. Everything is pumped out so quickly so that you can read it while passing by, like billboards or those flashcards before movie shows."

Musically minded, Mr. Ware recently started publishing an occasional 200-page journal called *Ragtime Research*, full of articles and vintage ragtime scores, photographs and advertisements.

"Ragtime has about the same amount of respect as comics," he said. "And in a way they're similar art forms. Ragtime is highly compositional, and the emotion in the music is built in, whereas in jazz a lot of that emotion comes from the way it's performed. To me comics are also a compositional art, in that you're composing pictures on a page, and you're composing emotion into the work. This way, readers can sort of play them when they read them."