

THE COMICS OF CHRIS WARE

Text, Image, and Visual Narrative Strategies

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Artists like Dan Clowes, Jason Lutes, and myself, are all *trying* to tell a serious story using the tools of jokes. It's as though we're trying to write a powerful, deeply engaging, richly detailed epic with a series of limericks. I've just tried to expand the possibilities for the [comics] form, just to get in a little more sense of a real experience. (Chris Ware, qtd. in Juno, *Dangerous Drawings* 53)

Chris Ware stands as one of the most influential American cartoonists of the 1990's, garnering numerous industry awards and receiving glowing reviews in trade publications and popular magazines alike. With work appearing in various comics anthologies, magazines, and his own comic book series, *Acme Novelty Library*, Ware has worked in a variety of comics genres, from stand-alone gag cartoons to his serialized novel of multi-generational ennui, "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth." Critics have praised Ware's work for its formal complexity, characterized by dizzyingly intricate pages, while marveling at how deftly Ware manipulates traditional comic-book characters (superheroes, cowboys, spacemen) to tell darkly humorous stories that concern acceptance and loss, pain and longing.¹

This narrative complexity manifests itself in Ware's skilled juxtaposition of disparate narrative and graphic elements, and his sophisticated approach

to the use of text plays a vital role in this process. Through deliberate manipulation of the appearance and placement of text within—and surrounding—his comics pages, Ware exploits the graphic nature of printed comics text in ways few other cartoonists have attempted. In so doing, he takes full advantage of comics' innate ability to create complexity through the multivalent interpretive possibilities engendered by the form's presentation of structured text/image combinations.²

In this essay I will discuss how Chris Ware's ingenious use of text in comics relates to theories of visual literature in order to demonstrate Ware's unique understanding of the comics form's underpinnings and potential. Text reads as an image in Ware's comics, conflating two sign systems in ways which question the binary text/image opposition. His comics can present simultaneous narrative strands by combining text and image in non-traditional designs. In his long narratives, Ware brings together many different strategies of reference between visual elements both within and across comics pages, exploring the narrative potential of the comics form. And his overall book design for his comics shows a kinship with the visual narrative form known as artists' books. Ware's careful attention to the appearance and placement of text in his comics—its visual appearance and its placement upon the page—reveals the nature of comics as the union of story and structure, simultaneously tempering levity with gravity in order to approximate, in his terms, "real experience."

WARE'S COMICS AS VISUAL LITERATURE

The detail in Ware's artwork itself reveals his careful attention to the appearance of text. Additionally, Ware himself describes his specific approach to text in his comics in numerous interviews. In his interview from *Comics Journal* 200, Ware notes:

The way text is used visually in comics seems to me to be so incredibly limited. It's the one avenue in comics that seems to have been more or less completely untouched. I mean, when you have all the tools of visual art at your disposal, then why put words in balloons? (Ware, qtd. in Groth 161)

Although Ware does not define what "all the tools of visual art" might contain, his practice makes clear his familiarity with both high art history as well as the traditions of American publication design—in which word and

image both play important roles. In Ware's comics, we see echoes of architectural blueprints, electrical diagrams, maps, and catalogs. Unlike the work of some cartoonists whose sole point of artistic reference seems to be old comic books, Ware's publications reveal an awareness of and appreciation for art and its relation to text in broad terms. Although Ware does not shy from using traditional comics devices like word balloons when it suits him, his work indeed reveals a concerted effort to use text in various, rarely-seen fashions.

He notes elsewhere:

How they [the tools of visual art and design] are patterned and combined is what makes the stuff interesting and emotionally real. By synthesizing the visual mechanics of written language with the effects of seeing, a comic strip 'fools' you into the illusion of 'theater' by letting you think you're 'watching' an event transpire, when you're actually reading it! (Ware, qtd. in Sabin 41)³

For Ware, design thus becomes a crucial narrative element. The arrangement of visual elements upon the page creates the illusion of theater, the acting-out of narrative. Unlike theater, however, comics allows for the simultaneous presentation of convergent or divergent information via the arrangement of various visual elements within the unifying space of the comics page. While most comics narratives progress in time from panel to panel, many of Ware's comics pages juxtapose different narrative sequences within a contained space.

In this way, Ware actively explores the tension in comics between word and image in a manner similar to that done in what is known as *visual literature*.⁴ Eric Vos has defined (visual literature) as "[t]he use of visual means of representation in a literary context" (135), a description which immediately calls to mind the image of the comics page, although Vos does not mention comics per se in his discussion.

For Vos, visual literature exists not as a "hybrid" form between literature and visual art, but rather as a system in which verbal and visual symbols retain their traditional denotative functions while affecting each other in complex, form-determined ways:

[O]ne and the same semiotic procedure underlies the integration of the verbal and the visual. In both cases, that is, we are dealing with not a unilateral ref-

erential relationship from sign to referent that we could call iconicity, but with a bi- or even trilateral relationship from the sign to some concept that in turn both refers back to a characteristic of the sign in question and leads us toward contemplating conventions of verbal and literary communication. (141)

This idea yields some important points relating to comics, and Ware's comics in particular. First, symbols in such systems do not lose their denotative function—that is, nothing is lost when symbol systems are combined within the same space, although much can be gained. Thus, the arrangement of word and image in Ware's comics allows us to consider the page itself as a visual-literary totality, a closed system in which the various elements both act in their traditional representative fashions and, through their spatial juxtaposition, participate in creating larger units of meaning.

Second, "the exemplificative elements of this referential complex are the prime factors of the work's aesthetic status and function" (144)—that is, the work's medium and identity are defined precisely by this interplay of sign systems. In Ware's work, layout and design govern visual and thematic complexities, wherein the words and the images are conjoined in such a way that it is not possible to discuss one without considering the other.

Third, "exemplification and complex reference are totally unconcerned with boundaries between media and art forms. As exemplifying symbols, verbal and visual signs function in exactly the same way. This and only this is what allows us to speak of semiotic integration of the verbal and the visual [. . .]" (144). The semiotic basis of this statement may be questionable; verbal signs, as units of a system of language, clearly follow systems of grammatical rules that images do not. But visual literature's enterprise—to use visual means of representation narratively—asks readers to reconsider the binary opposition between word and image by blurring distinctions between the two. And it is just such a blurring that Ware's work embodies so well.

WORD AS IMAGE: "QUIMBY THE MOUSE"

Ware radically questions the binary opposition of text and images in highly structured pages like the one in Figure 1, a self-contained mini-narrative of *Quimby the Mouse* and *Sparky the Cat* from *Acme Novelty Library* 4. The use of text on this page reflects Vos' observations about visual literature quite clearly: text and image enlighten each other without one system dominating the other; the juxtaposition of disparate elements cannot be

separated without fundamentally altering the piece, and text is used as a visual element every bit as illustrative as the images, allowing for an integration of verbal and visual narrative.

In the Sparky and Quimby stories, Ware explores the difficulties involved in interpersonal relationships. Quimby the mouse at times loves and at other times hates Sparky, who exists as a disembodied cat-head and therefore requires special care and attention; this tension informs the strips. (In a nod to *Krazy Kat*, George Herriman's ode to unrequited love in which Krazy becomes alternatively male or female, Sparky remains gender-neutral, while Quimby appears to be male.) Like most of Ware's short-form work, each strip runs a page in length and narrates a complete event. Movements from page to page in these collections do not reveal one continuous narrative; rather, these strip collections recall sonnet sequences in that each page is a single unit and the aggregate whole is more concerned with communicating mood and feeling than in presenting a narrative.

Ware graphically manipulates text in ways which acknowledge cartoonist Will Eisner's dictum that "text reads as an image" (Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*. Expanded Edition. 10). Given the complexity with which Ware approaches his textual elements, it will be helpful in these discussions to speak not simply of a speech balloon or caption, but of lexias. I use lexia to describe a distinct textual division in a graphic, not grammatical sense: a block of text which is designed to be read/viewed as a single unit, usually (although not always) a smaller sub-unit in a larger structure such as a panel or page. In this practice I follow Amy Spaulding, who adapts the term from Roland Barthes.⁵

In this "Quimby" page, Ware uses lexias as bold display and design elements, as much a part of the page's composition and structure as the individual panels themselves. As we see in several instances near the top of the page, representations of Quimby interact with lexias as if they represented physical objects in the story-space, not simply text elements on the page. This conflation of "text" and "image" becomes understandable when placed in context with Ware's views on the use of images within his work. He states:

It [comics] involves two completely different parts of the brain. The part that reads and the part that looks. It comes down to an almost Platonic difference of the specific and the general. You've got a drawing of a car, you can't make it too specific because then it becomes too much of a drawing and then it doesn't work

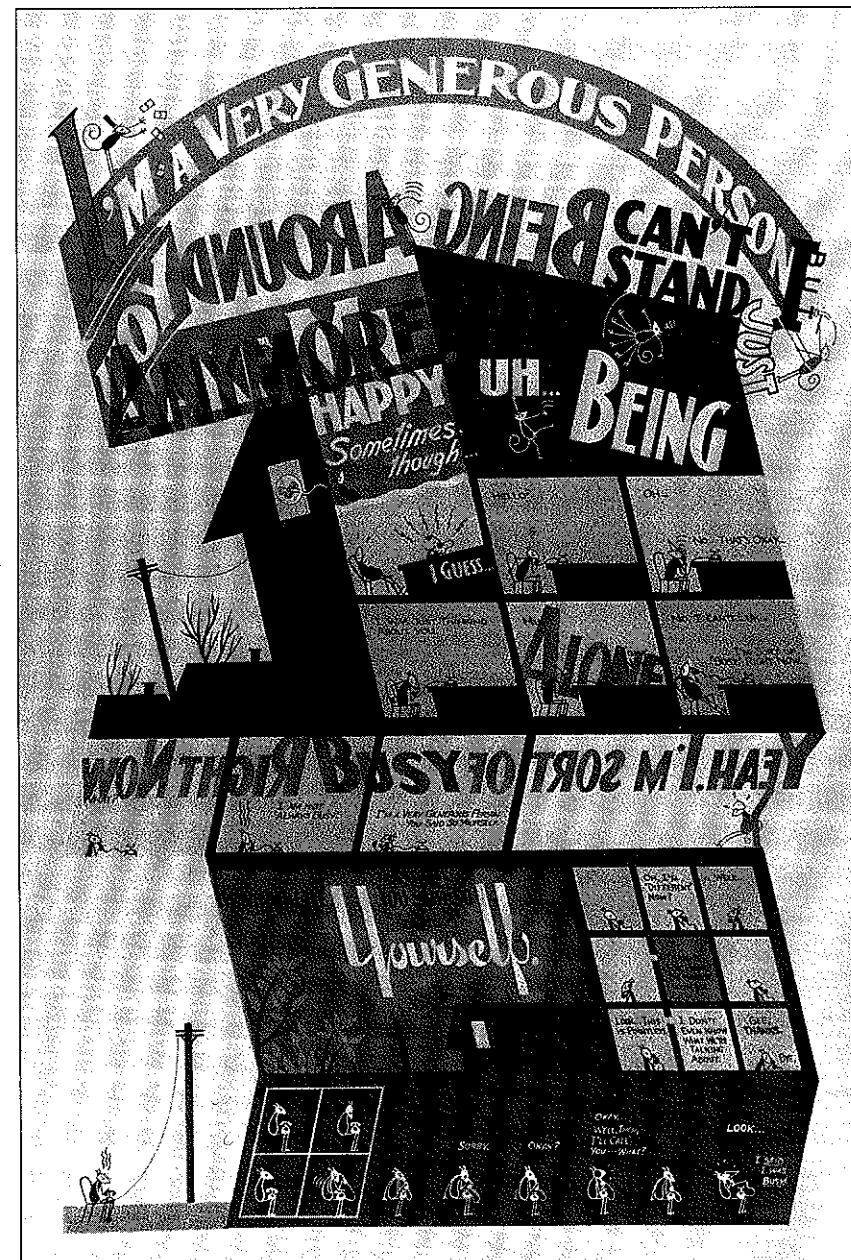


Figure 1: Ware uses palimpsest, full-page design, and meta-narrative reflexivity to question the binary opposition between text and image. *Acme Novelty Library 4* (Winter 1995), n.p. Copyright © 2000 Chris Ware.

within a circumstance where you're 'reading' the pictures. I try to balance that by making the pictures look cold and dead, like typography. (Ware, qtd. in Juno 53)

The comparison with "typography" should not be conflated with comics lettering itself, however, which for Ware is often the most expressive element on his comics pages. And not simply expressive, but structural in the way in which the images and panels themselves are generally understood:

I've done strips where I've tried to make the words the structure on which the pictures are hung as opposed to the other way around, which is the way comics are usually thought of—a series of pictures with the words plopped down on top. (Ware, qtd. in Groth 164)

The "Quimby the Mouse" stories have at their heart (so to speak) a tension between the desire for love and connection and the desire for independence—conflicting though simultaneous emotions. The text design of this page makes this tension explicit through a sophisticated use of color and layout. In this example, text becomes diagrammatically directive in both *narrative* and *meta-narrative* fashions. By *narrative* I here refer to the way in which the placement of lexias act to guide the reader's gaze across the page in a specific direction in order to read various elements in a particular order. By *meta-narrative*, however, I refer to the ways in which the appearance or placement of lexias on the page serve to reflect thematically on characters or events in the narrative. A third form of textual practice is *extra-narrative* in which the appearance of the text reflects not on the story proper but rather on the book-object itself; this practice will be discussed in more detail in "From Comic Book to Artist's Book" below.⁶

In this page's visual narrative, we see Quimby asleep in a chair in his house; he is awakened by a phone call (presumably from Sparky), and he then calls Sparky back. The large lexias serve in some stretches to echo or reinforce the dialogue which Quimby speaks into the phone, at other times to convey the conflicting emotional states that Quimby does not verbally express but which nevertheless inform his hesitant, contradictory replies. Thus text, whether used within a panel in traditional fashion or in bold lexias placed upon the page in atypical ways, provides a simultaneous structural and contextual element that unites the page in both design and theme.

This "Quimby" page begins with an arch of text reading "I'm a Very Gen-

erous Person"; the "I" is oversized in comparison to the rest of the line of text, and printed in red, distinguishing it from the inverse blue of the rest of the sentence. The emphasis on the "I" here immediately draws our attention meta-narratively to the self-centeredness of Quimby, our protagonist. Next to the "I" we see an image of Quimby tossing money in a cartoonish emblem of financial "generosity." Here Quimby wears a stovepipe hat which echoes the large "I," creating a sort of eye-rhyme referral between image and text; it also refers to the single other image of Quimby in this hat which occurs in this collection, on the previous page in which he is also "generously" offering a drink (actually symbolizing self-pity) to Sparky.

By buttressing the "n" in "Person" with "But I" in black text, Ware begins narratively to lead the reader's eye back across the page, right to left, to add the sentence "But I Just Can't Stand Being Around You Anymore"; this contradictory reading direction meta-narratively mirrors the contradictory emotional tenor of the two thoughts. Notice that the "T" in "But" also functions as a spike which Quimby is shown striking with a hammer into the "I," symbolizing the pain he is inflicting both upon his love and, paradoxically, himself. The word "Just" drops out of the sentence, offering Quimby a perch upon which to stand as well as a verbal hedge in his painful declaration.

This sentence blends into the following one in an unusual way. By utilizing the opacity of printed ink on white paper, Ware creates a deliberate, legible palimpsest, superimposing conflicting sentences—and conflicting emotions—on top of each other. He thus creates a visual representation of Quimby's inner emotional turmoil, which also meta-narratively reflects the dream state we see illustrated in this panel. The object "You" in the previous sentence becomes the subject in "You Make Me Happy Sometimes, Though..." Because words from each sentence occupy the same space on the page, we cannot read one sentence without seeing/reading the other; in this way, Ware makes explicit the conflation of emotions which the story attempts to convey graphically.

Placing "I Guess..." in the panel in which Quimby is awakened by the ringing of the telephone reinforces the tentativeness of his emotional state/s; the subtle coloring shift within the letters moves the narrative into the next panel, and into the strip-format of panel-to-panel continuity; the alternating color backgrounds of these small panels further reflect Quimby's changeable attitudes and emotions; a pattern of pulsating visual referral guides the "seeing" eye as well as the "reading" eye.

"Yeah, I'm Sort of Busy Right Now," which runs backwards across the

middle of the page, serves narratively as a verbal vector to lead the eye back to the left-hand margin of the page. Of course, it also magnifies, quite literally, the lie which this speech-act represents. Also, referring to the construction metaphor from the top of the page, we see an image of Quimby quite outside the main narrative, struggling to support the asymmetrical house-structure which contains the narrative, a metaphor for the unstable rhetorical framework which his speech represents.

Due to the alternating direction and sloping attitude of the various lexias, we also can find the sentence "I Can't Stand Being Alone" running down the right-hand side of the page. The fact that the word "Alone" stands as a palimpsest over the panel after which Quimby states "I was just thinking about you" emphasizes this sentiment, although the dream-thought makes the reader aware that "I was just thinking about you" is not as positive a statement, perhaps, as it is intended.

"Remember? You Said So Yourself" hangs in the air outside the house with the telephone wire visible, emphasizing the weight of language, the ever-present burden of communication, on the understanding and relationship between these two people. After this, two small scenes are subdivided and pared down even further. Even at this greatly reduced size, the body language of Quimby itself says almost as much as his words do, expressing his unease both with the caller and his own feelings—a way in which Ware attempts to make his drawings more "readable" rather than illustrative. The final panel's tiny, white-upon-black "Look . . . I Said I Was Busy!"—utterly incomprehensible in light of his apology just four panels previously—speaks as loudly as do the large, multi-colored lexias throughout the page. Quimby has learned nothing; yet we, as readers, have seen his thought process which reveals, however unconsciously, his desire for connection, for communication, for love. As in most of Ware's comics narratives, here we see not only the worst of human nature, but also the conflicting emotional states underlying such actions.

The graphic design of this page, managed via and structured by text placement and visual arrangement, allows for—and, due to its branching and overlapping nature, demands—a reading which must meander, drawing visual, verbal, and thematic connections between the images and various lexias of the page. This page presents a perfect example of Ware's ability to structure the comics page in order to subordinate plot to theme; compositional referral

between lexias and non-text images allow for communication on multiple levels simultaneously.

SIMULTANEITY: "THRILLING ADVENTURE STORIES"

Ware has a specific goal in mind when creating complementary, co-existing narratives:

It seems like comics are the perfect place to [. . .] recreate how those words in your mind superimpose or affect the perceived experience. In comics it can be done almost synthetically in a way that's more immediate than writing. You're always at one point in writing. As you read, you can't be simultaneously in two places, the way you can be in a comic, with a word and a picture. (Ware, qtd. in Groth 161-62)

One of Ware's earliest published anthology pieces demonstrates a sophisticated attempt to portray simultaneity in comics—to portray an instance in which perceived experience is colored by intellectual action. "Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess," was published in 1991 in *Raw*, the highly influential avant-garde anthology co-edited by Françoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus* (Figure 2).⁷

The story presents two apparently unrelated narratives through a clever, disorienting ploy: the pictures, or the visual narrative, illustrate a clichéd "superhero vs. mad scientist" story, while the words, or the textual narrative, tell a young boy's first-person reminiscence of the troubles he and his mother have with various men. This textual narrative is broken up and placed, piece-meal, into the visual narrative's word balloons, captions, and sound effects, and other textual elements, presenting two narratives within the same (con)textual space, yielding an instance of what Holly O'Grady has termed "visual polyphony" (O'Grady 157).⁸ A careful reading of "Thrilling Adventure Stories" reveals Ware's deliberate, mutually reflective patterning between word and image by conjoining seemingly unrelated verbal and visual narratives; within each panel, and across pages, verbal and visual themes meta-narratively magnify, undercut, or otherwise comment upon each other.

In the top two tiers of Figure 2, drawn from the final page of the story, we see the superhero (who has reduced his size) fix a faulty wire within a mad scientist's brain and escape through the scientist's ear. The accompanying



Figure 2: Visual polyphony—presenting two narratives within one contextual space—brings with it the possibility for a third field of interpretation. “Thrilling Adventure Stories / I Guess.” RAW 2.3 (1991): 81. Copyright © 2000 Chris Ware.

textual narrative, four sentences which are broken into six lexias shaped like either narrative captions or thought balloons, describes how the bigotry of the narrator’s stepfather upsets the boy’s mother so much that she eventually leaves the man. While the images show a superheroic way to re-order a person’s unacceptable behavior, the text presents the viewpoint that such problems have few easy solutions but many long-term and difficult consequences.

The middle tier of panels shows the superhero reunited with his love interest, the plucky reporter, as they watch the scientist move from madness to sanity. In his excitement, however, the scientist (accidentally?) steps on a detonating switch. In the text, the narrator describes one of the last times he spent with this stepfather, an uncomfortable and only dimly-recalled “sleep-over.” In terms of the visual narrative, the lexia in the scientist’s speech bubble—“Maybe that’s what we did, but I don’t remember”—could almost function directly as quoted speech. The ambiguity of the textual narrator’s recollection of this point, however, is doubled in the ambiguity of exactly why the scientist hits the detonator switch. Perhaps he does not recall “what happened,” but perhaps he does; so too, perhaps the narrator simply does not wish to recall the events of the night in question.

In the final tier, the story’s Freudian subtext is brought to the fore. Holding the reporter, the hero leaps to the sky, leaving the scientist behind; an explosion occurs, but the final shot reveals a close-up view of our escaped main characters—a look of thanks (and perhaps love?) on the reporter’s face, and a grim-set look of self-satisfaction on the hero’s visage. The text, however, reads, “But that was okay with me, since I liked things better / When / It was just my Mom and me, anyway.” Using the lexia “When” as the sound effect for the explosion (middle panel) creates visual punctuation and allows the final text/image juxtaposition to exist in relative isolation from other action. Throughout the story, the hero figure in the visual narrative has co-existed in uneasy thematic relationships with the various father figures in the narrator’s life—his grandfather, his stepfather. At the story’s end, however, this “sliding signification” has been transferred to the boy narrator himself—he “like[s] things better” when other male figures have been left behind, so no one can come between him and his mother.

“Thrilling Adventure Stories” is remarkable for its sophisticated blending of two narratives, and all the more so because it ultimately suggests a third field of interpretation. The textual narrative’s point of view is that of a young

boy who, as the larger story reveals, is enamored with superhero comic books, their costumed heroes as well as their moral and narrative clarity. The events he witnesses in his own life, however, are anything but clear; the nuances of adult interrelationships and the depths of bigotry are concepts which he cannot yet fully understand.

To read "Thrilling Adventure Stories," then, is to experience the conflicting emotional states of the boy himself. The text reveals the events of the boy's life, while the accompanying pictures reveal the limited types of relational and moral reasoning which are at this point available to him, as he tries to make sense of his experiences. The visual narrative's idiom glosses the content of the textual narrative in an attempt to reproduce a psychological state upon the page. In this way, Ware makes good his claim that comics can reproduce on the page conflicting and simultaneous emotional states—to communicate both an event and how that event is experienced, within a contained, coordinating space.

"JIMMY CORRIGAN": TEXT/IMAGE INTEGRATION ON A GRAND SCALE

A final example will serve to explore the text/image relationships that Ware brings to bear upon longer narratives, wherein page design is used to subdivide one long narrative into smaller portions (as opposed to sagas like "Quimby," above, wherein each page represents a unit of discourse complete in itself). The longest narrative Ware has attempted to date is his serialized novel "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth," appearing in issues 5-6, 8-9, and 11-14 of *Acme Novelty Library*.

This nearly 400-page story centers on Jimmy's family history; while Jimmy's reunion with his estranged father represents the prime story, the idea of family history is felt throughout the narrative. Flashbacks make up a good deal of the novel, reaching back to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and the death of the mother of Jimmy's great-grandfather William; these events are shown to have repercussions in both the past and present. Similar situations of familial loss, or other forms of abandonment, figure prominently over the narrative's course. Throughout the novel, characters strive for, but rarely attain, stable relationships; they often seek substitutes for comfort, such as mass-produced entertainment or the acquisition of material goods, but even at the best of times, such panaceas are ultimately revealed to be merely powerless placebos.

"Jimmy Corrigan" utilizes several highly distinctive and effective narrative methods, and text usually plays a decisive role in these strategies. Narration itself is at times limited to nothing more than conjunctions writ large: lexias such as "And." or "But." are placed within panels of their own or are printed large and in color atop or alongside panels, providing graphic, relational referral between illustrated events. In such instances, the picture narratives convey brief incidents, and the conjunctions demonstrate the relatedness of such incidents to each other. Unlike typical comics narrative blocks which float at the top of panels and which form only part of a larger omniscient narrative voice, these conjunctions serve as striking, graphic punctuation on the narrative level, linking not verbal sentences but illustrated events.

Another form of narration that Ware uses in the series' flashback sequences is a third- or first-person narrative voice, presented in cursive handwriting, which "floats" in unadorned lexial units amongst panels on the page. This voice "speaks" haltingly, at times using complete sentences within a panel, at other times presenting only phrases or single words within a panel. In such latter cases, entire sentences or thoughts can be spread across one or several pages, portions appearing in only selected panels. Readers need to "assemble" a sentence over a long series of non-contiguous panels which may be interspersed with scenes of dialogue as well. This narrative technique mandates a non-linear reading strategy that once again demonstrates Ware's use of comics to describe events from multiple points of view in the same space.

One good example of this narrative technique may be found in *Acme 11*, which takes place before the death of William's mother, young James' grandmother (Figure 3). Here we can see how Ware's design differs from previous examples. The initial two lexias on this page complete the phrase begun on the previous page: "The sound / of One Lung / filling with water / drowned out by wave after wave / of a million buzzing insects / an invisible chorus / that only knows how to sing / the last letter / of the alphabet." This elaborate way of highlighting the insects' onomatopoeic "Zzzz" brings to mind the referential nature of the alphabetic letter without printing it on the page; it also anticipates the page's focus on the letter "M" to follow.

In the visual narrative, young James (Jimmy's grandfather) climbs into a tree overlooking the construction site of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair; Lake Michigan lies at the horizon. The text continues: "Up here he can see all the

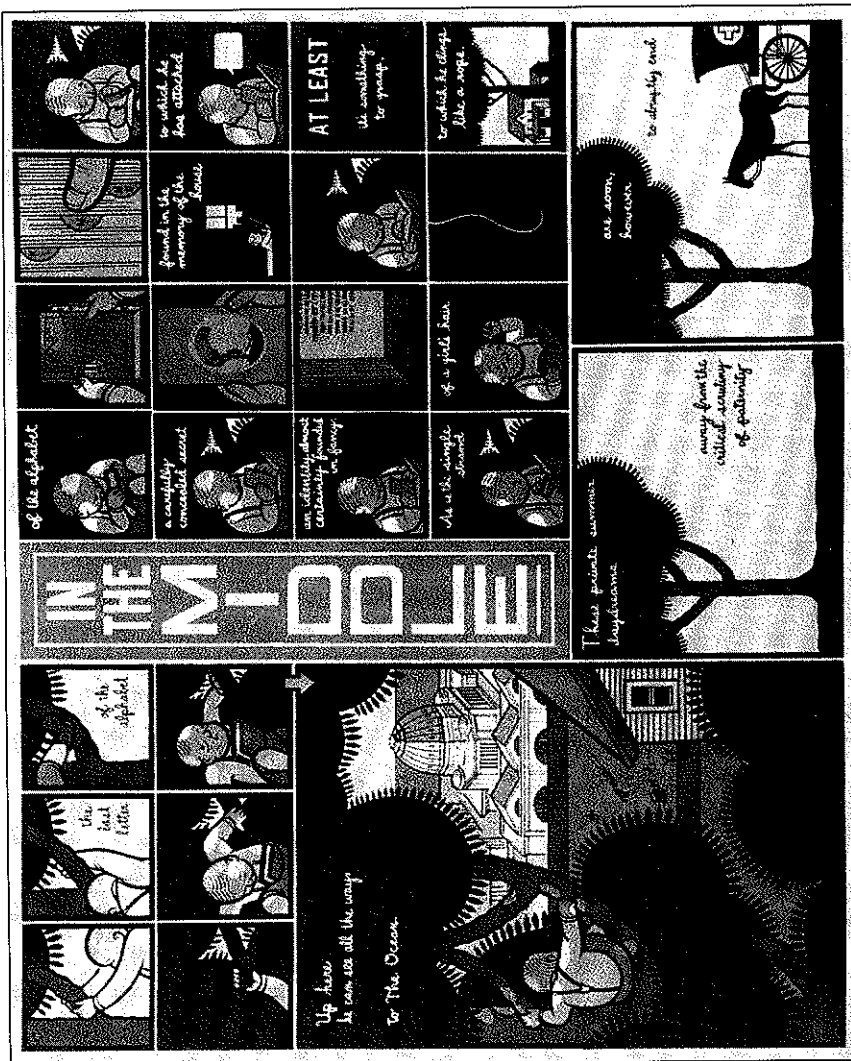


Figure 3: A page from the long "Jimmy Corrigan" novel demonstrates overlapping systems of referral, with the use of text as a narrative anchor. *Acme Novelty Library 11* (1998): n.p. Copyright © 2000 Chris Ware.

way / to The Ocean." Note that the lexia "to The Ocean" is printed along the same horizontal line as the Lake Michigan horizon, conflating via design the text and the picture to create a meta-narrative idea about the boy's perceptions, much as in "Thrilling Adventure Stories." Of course, Lake Michigan is not an ocean at all, but to the young boy, the technical distinction is slight at

best. As one of the Great Lakes, Lake Michigan is an ocean-like mass of water lying in the middle of North America; and the next lexia on the page seems to echo this fact: "In the middle" read the letters, in an inverse white-upon red text field. This lexia also stands in approximately the middle of the page, a visual blockade ensuring narratively that the first column of panels are read together as a whole unit. These words also begin the narration which draws our attention to the letter "M" in the dictionary which young James has brought with him.

In the middle of the dictionary, which by its nature contains all stories, lies a picture of James' mother, who died in childbirth and whose absence James feels ever more acutely now that his paternal grandmother also lies dying. As this sequence of sixteen panels develops, note how each small panel contributes to the revelation of the book's contents. In the first nine panels, which eventually reveal a complete textual sentence, lexias are usually placed in panels featuring close-ups of James and his incidental actions. The other panels in the sequence, while "silent," reveal contextual details. Through a combination of visual and verbal variation, the panels gradually reveal the narrative situation; specific close-up views gain importance through the referral made possible by the continued return to the contextual image of James in the tree.

The end of the sixteen-panel sequence reveals the presence "of a girl's hair," perhaps the boy's mother's, also in the book. Earlier in this chapter, James has fantasized about a magic lantern's beam of light resembling a human hair, a metaphor for life which continues its journey into the heavens, occasionally interrupting and simultaneously illuminating outside phenomena, until it is finally extinguished; the chapter will end striking a similar, though more forlorn, note. Here, "in the middle" of the chapter, the metaphor is recalled obliquely; the juxtaposition of the silent panel showing the strand of hair and the next panel, containing the lexia "to which he clings like a rope," calls to mind the hair as a symbol of escape—from the tree in which he sits, and from his young life which is, so far, governed by whims of family and fate.

The arrival of the ambulance carriage in the final two panels—which also include the tree in which James sits—serves to reinforce this powerlessness. The positions of the lexias within these two panels are themselves narratively significant. "These private summer daydreams" occur, quite literally, within the dark safety of the tree, and exist "away from the critical scrutiny

of paternity" via their separation within the frame. The "scrutiny of paternity" is replaced with a perhaps more terrifying image, the specter of death, in the final panel, as that scrutiny is replaced physically with the ambulance—which "abruptly end[s]" by being cut off by the panel border to end the page. This meta-narrative visual referral allows the text and the image to each comment upon the other in order to illuminate the theme of the scene.

Though the black and white reproduction of this figure cannot adequately represent Ware's use of color on this page, it is important to note that Ware uses color itself as a compositional reference. This page, for example, is dominated by the pale burgundy tones which elsewhere in this chapter are used when the grandmother's failing health dominates James' thoughts, as opposed to those slate gray tones that color passages about the forward-thinking, progressive World's Fair or the deep gray tones that suffuse the pages upon which James runs away from home to avoid confronting death.

All of these elements together—color, composition, textual placement (or absence)—create complex and overlapping systems of referral over the course of the narrative. While each of these elements plays a substantial role, the text itself becomes an anchor to which Ware returns again and again. In his comics, wherein the images themselves take on an air of familiarity (due to Ware's precise drawing style which attempts to render images as instantly recognizable shapes *à la* words themselves), the deliberate design of the text—in grammatical reference as well as the reference invoked by placement and appearance—allows for ever-expanding possibilities for text/image relationships upon the comics page.

FROM COMIC BOOK TO ARTIST'S BOOK

"Jimmy Corrigan" and "Sparky and Quimby" are but two of the story-types Ware includes in his *Acme Novelty Library*; other stories use traditional comic book staples like cowboys, spacemen, and superheroes. When used in traditional comic books, these character types have served as tools for telling simple, genre-based stories. Through his use of such stock character types, Ware invokes genres which he can then by turns embrace and alter in service to larger thematic issues, as we have already seen with Quimby and the superhero from "Thrilling Adventure Stories"; the received and preconceived ideas which underlie such characters paradoxically contribute to the depth of the stories which Ware creates. Yet for all its indebtedness to comic book conventions, *Acme* exhibits a peculiar design sense all its own; it

does not look like a traditional comic book. In fact, Ware's insistence on treating each issue of *Acme* as a unified design space, characterized by the use of expressive typography as well as his tight integration of text and image in his comics pages themselves, places the series more in line with "artists' books" than with comic books as such.

We may think of artists' books as carefully crafted books in which every detail—from illustration to prose, from binding to typeface—is controlled by the artist toward some thematic end. In *The Century of Artists' Books*, Johanna Drucker offers a potential definition of the form—which by its very nature is hard to describe definitively:

It's easy enough to say that an artist's book is a book created as an original work of art, rather than a reproduction of a preexisting work. And also, that it is a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues. (2)

Quick to qualify all of these terms, Drucker notes, for example, that some artist's books have in fact been created for reproduction. Yet the most important aspect, for Drucker, is that an artist's book is "almost always self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form" (4). Ware's attention to detail and overall design in the *Acme* series certainly meets this criterion. While his comic books are published by Fantagraphics Books, Ware himself designs the entire contents of each issue anew, including the publishing indicia.⁹ No publisher-decreed insignias or even standard UPC code boxes violate the integrity of Ware's intended vision. The format of individual issues varies; physical size corresponds to content, from the small issues of the serialized novel, "Jimmy Corrigan, Smartest Kid on Earth" (7 1/4" x 6") to the "Book of Jokes" issues (10 3/4" x 18").

The design of these periodicals makes these booklets appear to hail from a century past, dimly-remembered yet fondly recalled. Faux art nouveau detailing on the covers, hyperbolic editorials, ironic advertisement pages, and even paper models and games all contribute to the books' overall impact. The design of such pages and the typefaces used on them extra-narratively recall early twentieth century magazine and catalog designs, as well as grant an overall visual identity to each individual issue. While these text designs do not contribute to the comics' narratives in a direct sense (as do the narrative and meta-narrative strategies discussed earlier in this essay), these extra-

narrative associations identify each comic book as a unique object. These associations also create a semblance of nostalgic innocence, a context of comfort which serves ironically to amplify Ware's stories' often harsh themes.

The cover to *Acme Novelty Library 1* provides a bold example of Ware's often baroque design sensibility, a tendency to crowd his display spaces with a variety of superficial artistic flourishes, densely ornate compositions, and verbose slogans (Figure 4). Immediately, the reader notes the bold, cartoony figure of young Jimmy Corrigan as scientist, giant, shrunken boy, and—startlingly—self-surgeon. The text, while mostly given to absurd hyperbole, also professes a deep cynicism, e.g. “An Indefensible Attempt to Justify the Despair of Those Who Have Never Known Real Tragedy” and “Where Art and Avarice Share the Same Telephone Line.” These arch labels serve to critique the nostalgic impulse which the pictorial style apparently embraces, a tension similar to the strategies we have seen in Ware's work thus far.

Throughout each book, the extra textual material itself contains additional illustrations by Ware, often containing the same characters and situations found within the comics “proper.” The text pieces are by turns humorous and abrasive, and oftentimes both at once. The design and diction of the advertisements not only recall the past; they often, as Daniel Raeburn notes, draw explicitly upon material found in the 1900 Sears, Roebuck & Co. Catalog and the Johnson Smith & Company Catalog, infamous for its variety of items including live alligators, “whoopee cushions,” X-Ray Spectacles, and the like (Raeburn 14-15).

Ware's parodic concerns, however, extend beyond specific goods. Items “for sale” in *Acme* speak to the bleakness of existence or the horrors of modern life; typical consumer goods include “Certainty,” “The Noose,” or “Happy Family Appliqués” (Figure 5). Within these advertisements, the care-free joys of nostalgia are humorously debased with the deadening effects of modern life. In the books' hyperbolic editorial matter, often concerning the hypothetical “Acme Novelty Library Corporation,” century-old diction combines with the bleakest of “goal-oriented” corporate progress to ensure readers that they have purchased a quality product:

Under these conditions it is not surprising that in addition to sudden illness among employees we have an outrageous number of accidents each day. We have been particularly fortunate, however, since we opened this grand facility, in that we have incurred *very little* in the way of legal pursuit [. . .]. (Ware, *Acme* 3, 37)

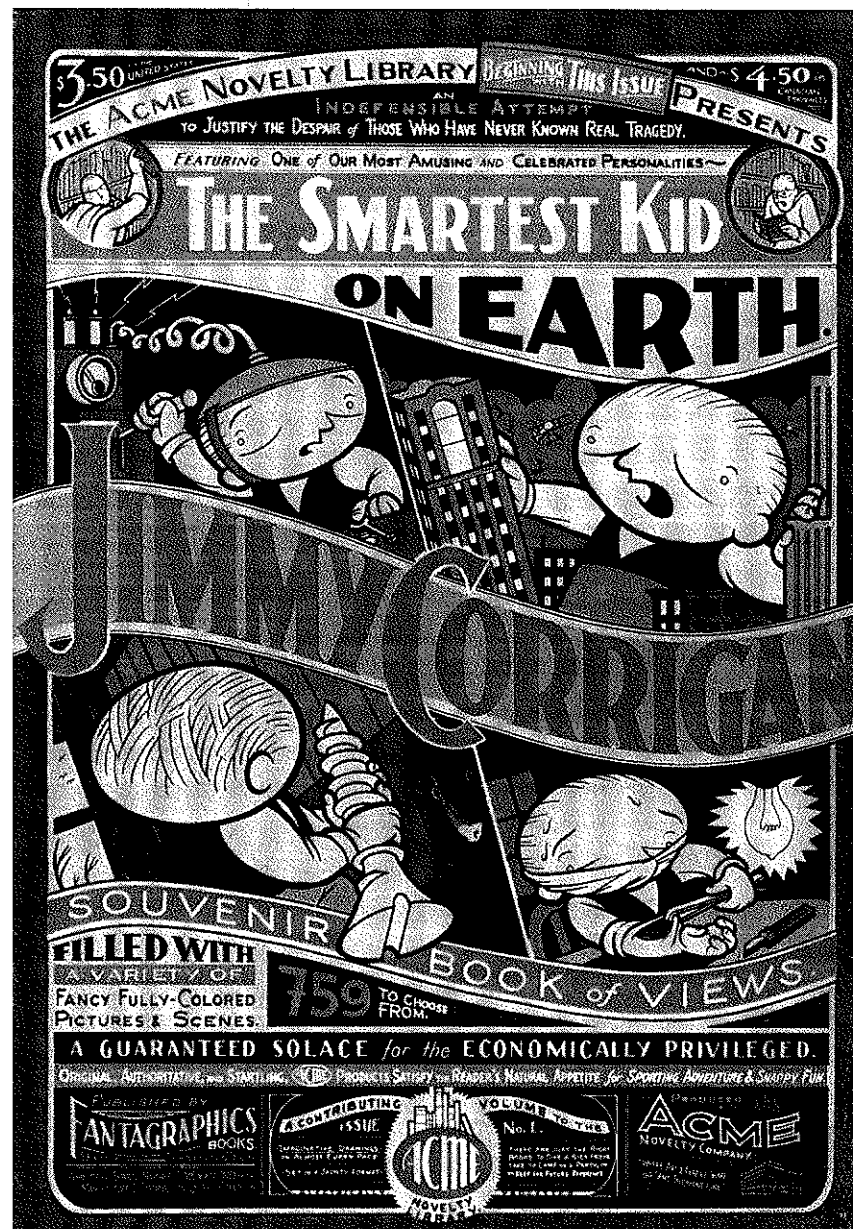


Figure 4: Ware's attention to thematically significant verbal and visual detail in the total design of his comics makes them a form of artist's book. *Acme Novelty Library 1* (Winter 1993), cover. Copyright © 2000 Chris Ware.

In both the advertisements and editorial material, Ware simultaneously embraces and undercuts the American consumer culture, and the entertainment industry which is part and parcel of that culture, as a utopian ideal. Richard Dyer, in his essay "Entertainment and Utopia," notes that entertainment has at its core an attempt to communicate the idea of utopia:

Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. [...] Entertainment does not, however, present models of utopian worlds, as in the classic utopias of Sir Thomas More, William Morris, *et al.* Rather, the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it is organized. (373)¹⁰

Ware himself sees at least a tendency toward utopianism, or at least comforting humanism, in early twentieth-century advertising and design matter. He notes his affinity for the style's visual appearance:

Design in the period between the turn of the century and the Depression has a quality I like. I enjoy the typography and the general look. It feels much more human and warm to me, than the current slick, sophisticated design. It's more inviting. It has a certain dorky 'join the party' quality, whereas design today has a maybe-you-can-be-like-us-if-you-want quality. (qtd. in Juno 42)

Ware's text design on the level of the book-object, then, can be seen as an active critique of the twentieth century's utopian optimism. Entertainment and advertising, from various sources, mix in the popular magazine format; Ware's comic books, products of a single aesthetic viewpoint, conjoin advertising and entertainment forms with specific content which questions their utopian pretensions. In so doing, Ware demonstrates the cultural path which has led so many of his stories' characters to their downtrodden lives: society conditions these responses by building unrealistic utopian goals which cannot be fulfilled by the products and services which are produced and advertised to do just that. By utilizing what he sees as "human and warm" design elements in his own work, Ware tempers the bleakness of his thematic concerns, but in a way which paradoxically reinforces them, as well.

The "party" his ads and editorials ask readers to "join" seems, in his view, ironically to lessen the quality of life. Through employing designs, rhetoric,

CERTAINTY

What? Now's your chance to eliminate doubt forever. Never be wrong again, either in your principles, or in petty arguments with your inferiors. What could be better? Remember everything perfectly, from facts, to figures, to political issues. Be absolutely sure. Everybody's doing it. You don't want to be left out, do you? No sir. Not in this day and age. Nothing's worse than being wrong, right? Special offer: if, for some highly unlikely reason, you do end up being slightly misled, or vaguely lead astray, or just simply misinformed, we include free of charge a special reserve of arrogance, with a special free gift of an instant expression to wear just for good measure, in case you get caught. Warning, not for children. Please specify size: Dad, Grator, Politician, or Ashhole. No. 3124. **ADULTHOOD** \$25.00

GRANDMA & GRANDPA

PLEASE GIVE US A HOME Hey here's a neat thing. Your very own Grandma and Grandpa, two kind old souls who will sit quietly in the kitchen or living room, wrapped in blankets watching television until you're home. It's easy and convenient. They look great at the dinner table, especially on holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. Their leathery, wrinkled skin is just so manly and their crackly voices are just the perfect touch for a sweet reminiscence about the "good old days". Poor old grandpa and grandpa. If only they understood how difficult it is for you, and what incredible emotional and sexual torment you struggle with. Both store away easily in a side bedroom, and clean up in minutes with a damp cloth. Some owners even like to rent storage space at "home", ship them off, and then inspect them whenever the spirit strikes. It's your choice. Available in a variety of temperaments and sizes. Unfortunately due to limited availability we cannot guarantee live delivery. Hey -- they're just old people, anyway. No. 3129. **FAMILY ROOTS**. Each \$39.99.

INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY

Apparently, what everyone wants right now, so we're offering it at a special reduced rate. Make more stuff, make more money. Make more. Better to make more, whatever it is. Make more. No. 3142. **WAGE WORK** \$10.00.

PAPER & PENCIL SET

Now here's the thing. Novelty "pencil" and "paper" clip to side of computer screen for instant "screens". Put down inspirations, thoughts, or just let your mind wander. Nostalgic look adds a homesy touch to any setting. Permanently stores any information for quick retrieval at any time. The perfect father's day gift, mother's day gift, pipe, and beer attendant will love the "feel" of the old pen and the swelling smooth "fifties" of the "paper". No. 3176. **GIFT IDEAL**. Each \$3.00.

ACME NOVELTY & Co.,

MAGIC! ADJECTIVES MAGIC!

JUST THE THING TO MODIFY YOUR PRODUCT OR SERVICE. Make your business competitive and exciting with these "Adjectives" -- they're like MAGIC!

Finally! An assortment of modifiers and exclamatory words which, when properly applied, can change the "flavor" of any product forever. These are the time-tested words which have been used for decades, but we've assembled a collection of the absolute latest in these magical, aggressive little numbers. Change "fabric" into "non-friendly factory-made fabric". Make any dressage "decadent", "tempting", and "luscious" -- and watch ladies beg for their piece. Turn toilet paper into "irresponsible" items that any "deserving" consumer will be sure to buy. Turn Exceptional Custom-Made "shirts" into "Patented Expandable Elastic" like shirts, "Elegant" and "Special Quality" "shirts". Now you're really rubbing their nose in it. Most people are stupid to notice anyway. Add to menu, to sign, or even to conversation whenever you want. Important: Classic, Natural, Hi-Tech, Environmental, Safe, Having (don't use), Best, Best, Elegant, Simple, Swan, Shaker, Rugged, Enriching, Precious, Rare, Pungent, Antique, Modern, Vicious, Deceitful, Mendacious, Untrustworthy, Minister, and Lawvere, with rugged, bold, and special assortments available for these natural hi-tech disciplines. There's simply no limit. Mix and match for new effects. Mental warfare has never been so easy. A special assortment available for these natural hi-tech disciplines. No. 3175. **LINGUISTIC JEWELRY Starter Package of 300** \$25.00

THE NOOSE

Stop searching the house for electrical extension cords, old belts, or torn sheets with which to facilitate your demise. The Noose is always at the ready. Sturdy, Eco-sensitive design of Polytemp material is hypo-allergenic earth-friendly synthetic derivative -- discourages destruction of rainforest vegetation, and prevents irritating chafing effected by most tools of self-ruin. Simple, elegant velcro closures insure snug fit, guaranteed. Irreversible arrangement. Stores neatly away in dresser drawer, hangs in closet, or stores beneath car seat in handy carrying case (optional) for long business trips. Avoid "second thoughts" by having "The Noose" at the ready, night or day. Not available in all states. No. 3187. **THE NOOSE**. Each . . . \$29.99.

"SWEAT" PANTS

Originally designed for professional athletes in training, these cozy and lightweight garments are rapidly becoming the standard of comfort. At last, the fashion answer for those who simply can't seem to control themselves. Ergonomically fitted with drawstrings and elastic, allowing for comfortable movement at all points. Especially suited to those who look most unimposing in them, it is nonetheless the wearer's own comfort which is paramount, not the visual pollution of our nation's landscape. Besides, if everyone dresses like a large incognito, then the standard of beauty might change. Available in a variety of patterned colors, all of which stain easily and creep up between the buttocks. No. 3264. **AMERICAN FASHION**. \$5.99.

HAPPY FAMILY APPLIQUÉS

Complete Outfit -- Most Valuable to Every Home

Three handy translucent appliques are just the thing for the "dysfunctional" family beset by alcoholism, infidelity, and other popular social problems. Put on a happy face for the rest of the neighborhood. Easily applied with a damp cloth and warm water, each window-sized plastic image depicts an attractive American family engaged in various activities endemic to those in more respectable circumstances. Mask the tith and squallor of your living room with our warm image of Mom, Dad, Brother and Sis all enjoying their favorite "program" together. Close the concept of your kitchen with a pleasant four-color printed illustration of Mom and Dad taking a walk. Avoid the heat, barbed from the drug-addicted activities of friends with a soothing "Group Hug" scene. Put on a happy face behind our agreeable families of successful, well-off from behind the positive image. Especially handy for those who have a "happy" face and a "sad" face. Everyone consults the Encephalon and Gastro-Round the Pan. Put on a happy face and a sad face. Put on the knowledge that our services are available to you. No. 3155. **HOME ADVERTISING**. Each \$19.99.

ACME NOVELTY & Co., Chicago, Illinois. Page 9.

Figure 5: Acme's parodic textual matter wagers the utopian optimism promised by advertising and entertainment. *Acme Novelty Library 10* (Spring 1998): 9 (catalog section). Copyright © 2000 Chris Ware.

and publishing conventions of the past to construct his books, Ware produces a nostalgic veneer which, like the comics genre characters he uses in his stories, appears to embrace the ideals of a bygone era. However, the comics narratives themselves demonstrate that the "good old days" were hardly ever that. In fact, the problems of the present (an absent father, an emotionally

distant mother, an inability to maintain friendships or sexual relationships) have their mirrors—and often their roots—in the actions of the past. The tragedy in the search for connection found in so many of Ware's stories thus lies not entirely within the characters themselves, but rather is symptomatic of the culture which these characters inhabit. In presenting his comics stories in the context of self-designed book packages in which textual content and form serve in various ways to reinforce and amplify the stories' own themes, Ware's practice can be seen as analogous to the artist's book, which, Drucker states, "has to have some conviction, some soul, some reason **to be and to be a book** in order to succeed" (10-11, emphasis Drucker's).

CONCLUSION

More than perhaps that of any other modern cartoonist, Ware's work is highly contextualized and thematized through its publication design. Not only has Ware created a series of artists' books in the form of comic books; he has, further, created an all-encompassing reading experience—the entire *Acme* series—which is united in terms of visual design, narrative themes, and characters, by one guiding artistic and aesthetic principle. And while Ware actively uses genres and print traditions which initially call to mind simple pleasures, he uses those elements to fashion a narrative which rises above the humor and nostalgia which color it, calling the values embodied by those forms into question.

Through combining text and images in mutually expressive ways, and by exploring how the appearance of his text can affect both his comics narratives and his comic books as a whole, Chris Ware makes a significant contribution not just to comics but to visual literature as a whole. Ware takes the traditional elements of comics—panels, word balloons, sound effects, narration, and page design—and combines them in startling, sophisticated ways, emphasizing the materiality of text on the comics page as a visual element and using it to fashion complex, polyvalent narrative structures. In his comics pages, text is often used quite specifically in a *narrative* function, directing the reader's gaze across, through, or around intricately designed pages, pages in which panels progress in decidedly non-linear fashions. Text faces and placement also serve *meta-narratively* to reflect thematically on his stories. His use of text for display purposes reveals an *extra-narrative* tendency to use the appearance of text—and therefore, the publication design *in toto*—to exhibit a specific visual identity and to create thematic associations

which resonate throughout each comic book issue as information does within artist's books.

Aaron Marcus observes, "[V]isual literature begins where language leaves off; it extends mankind's abilities to identify, describe, analyze, evaluate and extol the ineffable" (19). In his various textual/aesthetic practices, Ware provides a compelling example of comics which—however apparently familiar, funny, or frustrating they might at first appear—also use concrete textual and visual means to address the ineffable. Chris Ware's use of text in his comics narratives demonstrates a formidable grasp of the properties and potentialities of this plastic, eminently fruitful and eloquent means of artistic expression.

THE LANGUAGE OF COMICS

WORD AND IMAGE

Edited by Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons

STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

Nancy Walker, General Editor

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