

AUTOGRAPHY'S BIOGRAPHY, 1972–2007

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In a recent interview, Alison Bechdel, author of *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), said, “I always felt like there was something inherently autobiographical about cartooning. . . . I still believe that. I haven’t exactly worked out my theory of why, but it does feel like it almost demands people to write autobiographies” (“Alison” 37). While it would be easy to point to the broader history of the medium to refute the claim—after all, the vast majority of those working in the field never turned to autobiographical forms—since 1972 there has certainly been a steady progression of autobiographical memoirs within the comics form, to the extent that today one can identify sub-genres and historical movements within autobiographical comics. Even as I will gesture toward such taxonomies in what follows, my larger goal in approaching this point of origin for the graphic memoir form is to search out answers to Bechdel’s question about the autobiographical “demands” of comics.

The early 1970s is a watershed moment for autobiographical comics, and there is evidence that the first decade of the twenty-first century is another momentous moment in the life story of this peculiar form, as more graphic memoirs than ever are being published, and even more important, gaining critical and cultural attention. Turning first to Alison Bechdel’s critically-acclaimed *Fun Home*, an extended meditation on history, memory, identity, and trauma, I will then follow Bechdel’s lead back to 1972, to where these issues first began to take shape in the comics form. In imagining the bloodlines that connect these very different personal stories across generations, I want to suggest the ways in which the graphic memoir provides a space to theorize and practice new ethical and affective relationships and responses. Indeed, we might understand the particular urgency of the form in 1972 and 2007 in terms of the unique space that this hybrid form stages for such engagements.

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Bechdel's memoir tells the story of the author's childhood in an ironically named "fun home," a site of repression, refinement, isolation, and death, both because of the father's business—a mortician—and because of the death of the father which haunts the book and prompts its overarching (and unanswerable) question: did he kill himself or was his death accidental? This unanswerable question ultimately leads to other questions, histories, and theories that seek to reconnect the past (death) with the present (art). How would her father's life have been different had he been able to come to terms with his own homosexuality? How was Bechdel's relationship to her own sexuality shaped by her father's repression? How was her art and odd choice of career determined by the "fun home" in which she grew up? What role does geographic destiny, historical coincidence, and even one's course of reading play in the shaping of our identities?

Against these large and abstract questions, Bechdel reconstructs an array of concrete references: literary works (Joyce, Colette), historical events (Watergate, Stonewall), maps, genealogies, diaries, architectural details. If the early 1970s is the moment when comics discovered autobiography, this same period looms large in Bechdel's own portrait of the artist as a young obsessive-compulsive, as she describes the onset of her O.C.D. The rituals, repetitions, and incantations, familiar to O.C.D.-sufferers, were in many ways amplified in the "fun home," which Bechdel describes as a "mildly autistic colony" (139). It was at this time that Alison began her first diary, a corporate souvenir from a burial vault company from 1970, which her father had given to her in hopes it would help discipline her mounting compulsions and anxieties. "Just write down what's happening," he said. Simple enough, it would seem, and Alison tackles the charge with the due diligence of the obsessive compulsive. But within a short time, the seemingly simple and concrete task of recording in words "what's happening" becomes fraught with perils and doubts. As she describes it:

It was a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing there were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those. My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst. (141)

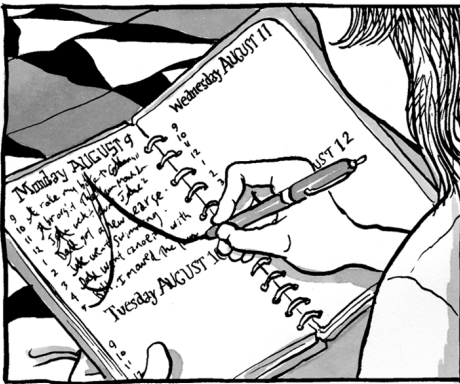
Against the backdrop of increasing problems at home—her father's arrest for drinking with underage boys—and nationally—the Watergate tapes—"truth" and "facts" were especially fraught topics for the young autographer in 1972.¹ Alison's first solution to this "epistemological crisis" is to qualify each declarative statement with an inserted "I think"; but soon even these words prove inadequate to the widening gulf between signified and signifier.

Alison begins to transform the qualifying words “I think” into abstract blots and symbols, which begin to make their appearance in the daily diary right around the time that Alison begins menstruating (Fig. 1). Even this biological fact of life cannot be recorded “straight,” requiring instead an algebraic variable “n,” one that will later serve to describe other changes and discoveries, including masturbation and sexuality. Thus we are shown in painful detail how the struggle to tell “what happened” creates for the young autographer increasingly complex and abstract sets of panels, combining words and images, fact and doubt, history and theory.

Read from a clinical perspective, the diary records an unsettling but familiar portrait of the rapid acceleration of O.C.D. But this is also a portrait of an autographer as a young woman, who will grow up to tell her story in an always-uneasy combination of words and images, facts and fictions, in discrete panels and boxes—much like the calendars and day planners with which she began in 1971. It is important that the discovery in her first act of autobiography of the limitation of words to describe the truth does not result in a rejection of language in favor of images. Images (postcards, polaroids) are no more trustworthy in the truths they share. Instead, what develops over the course of her diary, as Bechdel records it in *Fun Home*, is an increasing sense that text and image are each alone inadequate to the task, and that some merger of the two is required to tell the story of the truth, and the truth of the story.

Bechdel describes her first addition of image to text in her diaries as a “curvy circumflex”—like the caret used over a variable as an estimator (used in statistics to represent the unknown); or, more familiar to humanists, like

THEN I REALIZED I COULD DRAW THE
SYMBOL OVER AN ENTIRE ENTRY.



THINGS WERE GETTING FAIRLY ILLEGIBLE
BY AUGUST, WHEN WE HAD OUR CAMPING
TRIP/INITIATION RITE AT THE BULLPEN.

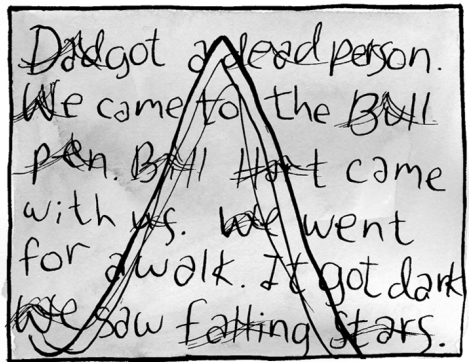


Figure 1. Excerpted from *FUN HOME: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel (p. 143 top). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

the proofreading symbol indicating where additional text should be inserted. As an estimator or a placeholder for facts yet unrecorded, the sprawling caret symbol became for the young Alison “a sort of amulet, warding off evil from my subjects” and soon from the entries as a whole—simultaneously keeping her entries open to further revision and protecting her stories against the failings of memory and the violations of time. It is after her father shows her the body of a dead cousin on his table that the carets take on a life of their own, “almost completely obscur[ing]” the text itself, as if the two—image and text—are at war for the page and its memories of the dead boy. But beneath this entry is the first figural drawing that appears in Alison’s dairies: a pathetic smiley face, untouched by text or circumflex. If it is death that sparks this first burst of cartooning in her diary, it is sexuality that fuels its further development, as we see in her post-pubescent diary entries, where image and text share the work of telling the day’s events (Fig. 2).

As she tells the story of her own realization of her sexuality while in college, shortly before her father’s death, Bechdel describes the discovery as appropriately mediated by the discovery of a book: *Word is Out* (1978). But it is not just any book, but a text that is a combination of words and images (as she highlights in an earlier version of this “Coming Out Story” published in 1993 in Howard Cruse’s *Gay Comics*). Indeed, in both versions of the story,

MY DIARY ENTRIES FOR THAT WEEKEND ARE ALMOST COMPLETELY OBSCURED.

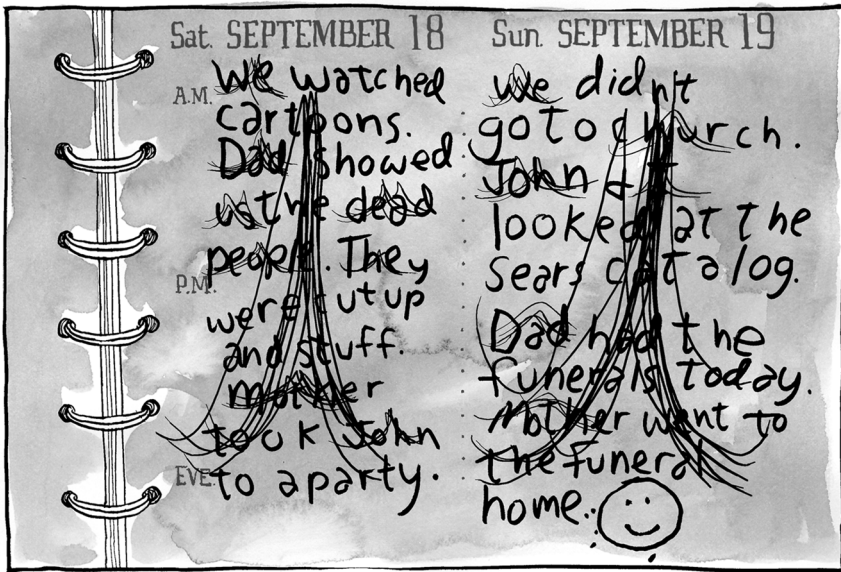


Figure 2. Excerpted from *FUN HOME: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel (p. 148). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

Bechdel focuses on the images on the cover of *Word is Out* as a series of panels, like a comic.² As she describes this discovery in *Fun Home*, what results is the unique grammar of the comics form: the dialogue balloon articulating a giant, hand-lettered exclamation point (Fig. 3). This symbol is neither text nor image, nor can it be accurately translated into one or the other: it transcribes the moment of revelation that is likewise neither word nor image—a scene of self-knowledge that is both at once and reducible to neither.

From this moment on, despite having been a star literature student earlier in her academic career, Bechdel describes the traditional study of literature as increasingly irrelevant to her. As her English professor drones on about catechistic symbology in *Ulysses*, Alison illustrates the pages of the novel with a drawing of Bloom/father, leaving the candle in the doorframe for Stephen/Alison—an image of the “Ithaca moment” (222) she has longed for and never quite achieved with her father. But neither does she find her future in traditional visual arts. The act of self-discovery and self-representation for Bechdel has become forever bound in the strange alchemy of word and image that is represented by the “curvy circumflex” or the impossibility of the spoken exclamation point.

It is important, however, that this alchemical combination does not promise the gold of Absolute Truth. Instead, what it does provide, at least here, is a release from childhood compulsion, from the crippling doubt and fear that words alone might betray her, that images might atomize her. If text and image alone fail to ameliorate her compulsions, together they do point a way out of the vicious cycle. But this does not mean that comics autobiography makes greater truth claims than does traditional autobiography. In fact, it almost always makes fewer claims than either prose or image alone have traditionally



Figure 3. Excerpted from *FUN HOME: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel (p. 203 middle). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

made. The comics form necessarily and inevitably calls attention through its formal properties to its limitations as juridical evidence—to the compressions and gaps of its narrative (represented graphically by the gutterspace between the panels) and to the iconic distillations of its art. The kinds of truth claims that are fought over in the courts of law and public opinion with text-based autobiography are never exactly at issue in graphic autobiography. The losses and glosses of memory and subjectivity are foregrounded in graphic memoir in a way they never can be in traditional autobiography.

“Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true?” Lynda Barry asks in the Introduction to *One Hundred Demons* (7). “Is it fiction if parts of it are?” Barry’s solution to these questions is to term her book “autobifictionalography.” Indeed, the hybrid term could be said to apply to all autobiography, but it is the graphic memoir that foregrounds in its very form the ways in which the power of memory must always share the act of self-representation with the devices of fiction. Barry offers an image that usefully describes this tension, picturing herself as a child looking through the panes of a window on which are inscribed the seemingly incommensurate statements: “Can’t remember” / “Can’t forget” (62). The two statements are laid on separate panes, like the panels of a comic: the demand placed on both author and reader is how to read across the gutter, how to make these two truths speak simultaneously. As the story entitled “Resilience” goes on to describe, trauma fragments the child, teaching her how to “exist in pieces”—what Barry calls the “horrible resilience that makes adults believe children forget trauma.” As we will see in what follows, it is the discovery of comics’ unique ability to represent the impossible demands of trauma, memory, and narration that has made it increasingly a dynamic and even urgent medium for life writing.

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To learn more about the autobiographical demands of comics (and the comics’ demand of autobiography), it makes sense to return to a point of “origins” for the form. And to tell that story, we need to go back to the early ’70s, the same period when Bechdel first discovered the unique power of combining words and images. But while Bechdel’s childhood story remained bound by her father’s “solipsistic circle of self” (140) in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, this story takes us to San Francisco in 1972.

Beginning with such pioneering work as R. [Robert] Crumb’s *Zap Comix* (1968), the comicbook form, which had for three decades been associated with juvenile entertainment and superhero fantasies, was hijacked and made to speak unspeakable (and often deeply disturbing) new fantasies. Most of the early work in the underground comix movement found its pleasures and its justification in iconoclasm, and in expressing openly topics and fantasies

long forbidden (and explicitly outlawed by the comics code of 1954) in mainstream comics and in mainstream society. But in opening up the form to new ideas, images, and audience, the underground comix movement spawned a new form of graphic expression that would ultimately outlive the movement by many decades.

As is perhaps inevitable, the exuberant energy that propelled the early underground comix began to lose steam in the early 1970s. The market had become oversaturated by second-rate work and mainstream imitations, and many of those who had been experimenting with the possibilities of the form since the mid-60s began to find their energy flagging. Iconoclasm's hangover was very much in the air when Justin Green explicitly addressed the question: after the idols have all been smashed, what then? In fact, Green's pioneering graphic memoir, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), begins its story with a literal act of iconoclasm, as young Binky's twisted compulsions are set in motion by the accidental shattering of a statuette of the Virgin Mary (Fig. 4).

By many accounts, Green's *Binky Brown* was the first extended autobiographical comic to emerge from the underground comix scene. As always, such claims to "firsts" are problematic. Others had been experimenting with



Figure 4. Excerpted from *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* by Justin Green (*Justin Green's Binky Brown Sampler* 11). Copyright © 1972, 2008 by Justin Green. Reprinted by permission of Last Gasp Publishing. All rights reserved.

autobiographical stories earlier, including Spain Rodriguez, Kim Deitch, and Crumb. Many of these earliest autobiographical comix were mixtures of life and fantasy, often recounting acid trips or dreams, and deliberately blurring the lines as to where “real life” ended and the fantasy took over. But the drive in the earliest autobiographical comix remained more about shock value than about exposing the self. For example, “The Confessions of R. Crumb” (1972) begins by promising access to Crumb’s artistic psyche, but ends up with an extended fantasy about reentering his mother’s womb.

Green’s autobiographical work was a different thing entirely, and it was recognized as such by his contemporaries who encountered it for the first time while he was working on it in 1971. Art Spiegelman credits his encounters with *Binky Brown* for his own ambitions to do work in autobiographical comix: “without Binky Brown there would be no MAUS” (“Symptoms” 4). “Justin turned comic book boxes into intimate secular confession booths,” Spiegelman declares, and he and others began lining up to offer their own confessions to this new repository.

In fact, Green opens his memoir with an extended “Confession to my Readers,” featuring the author himself hogtied over an inverted sword of Damocles, forced to listen to “Ave Maria” while penning his memoirs with his mouth (Fig. 5). This overwrought image is a direct descendant of the underground comix out of which Green’s work emerges, but it is also, for all of its shock value and gross-out humor, a fitting image for the autographer, one that will in many ways serve to emblemize the Catch-22 by which all those who work in this strange form will find themselves.

Green begins by reminding the readers that his comic, although written in a form historically associated with children’s entertainment, is not “intended solely for your entertainment, but also to purge myself of the compulsive neurosis which I have served since I officially left Catholicism on Halloween, 1958” (10). To entertain others and to purge the self: as these are set side-by-side against the backdrop of Green’s naked and trussed body, it is hard to see how either goal will be met. Bound literally from head to toe, there seems little possibility that his body (or brain, which is also bound in a thick bandage) will be able to purge anything at all. And the sight of his tortured body promises little in the way of entertainment. As if recognizing the absurdity of these promises to himself and his reader, he then changes his justification for the autographical act:

My justification for undertaking this task is that many others are slaves to their neuroses. Maybe if they read about one neurotic’s dilemma in easy-to-understand comic-book format these tormented folks will no longer see themselves as mere food-tubes living in isolation. If all we neurotics were tied together we would entwine the globe many times over in a vast chain of common suffering. (10)

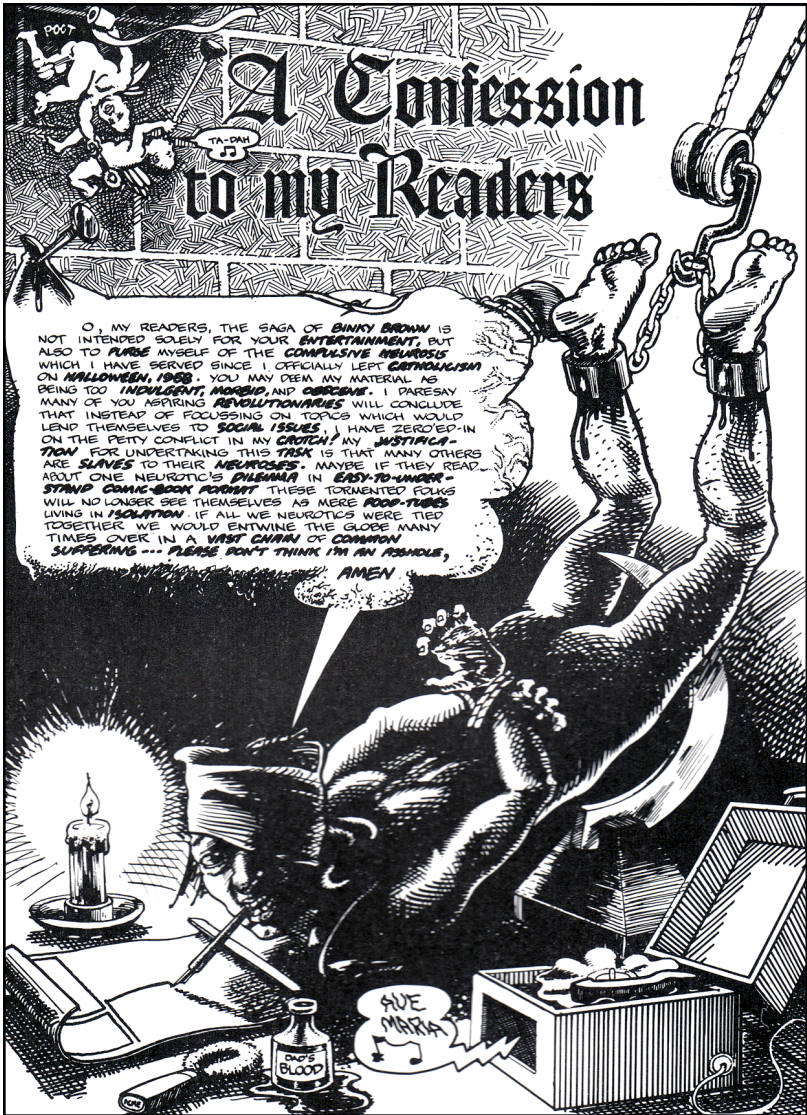


Figure 5. Excerpted from *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* by Justin Green (*Justin Green's Binky Brown Sampler* 10). Copyright © 1972, 2008 by Justin Green. Reprinted by permission of Last Gasp Publishing. All rights reserved.

Green's explanations for his confessional mode shift from entertainment, to purgation, to testimony. The function of testimony, both traditional and secular, is to create common bonds of understanding and humanity, and in both contexts there is an explicit or implicit faith in an ultimate universal understanding to which the testimony contributes, whether it is the understanding of universal salvation or universal human rights. And Green starts to

work himself toward this new ideal, imagining a world in which the neurotic sufferers are bound together by their shared experience, as opposed to being locked in isolation by their inner demons and conviction of their own freakishness. But even this fantasy of release becomes yet another image of binding, as it is now the world, as opposed to the individual body of the autographer, which is described as being “entwine[d] . . . many times over in a vast chain of common suffering.” As if realizing the irony of this fantasy of a common chain in the face of the demands of the “aspiring revolutionaries” of his generation, Green concludes, “Please don’t think I’m an asshole, Amen.”

But of course common chains can be powerful mediums of communication and even release, as for example Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* reminds us. When Paul D is left to drown in the rising mud, chained alone in a wooden box, it is the chain that binds him, invisibly, to others that ultimately saves them all, allowing them silently to communicate a message one to the other that brings them through the flood and to safety. That which bound the men is transformed into a telegraph wire, thrumming with messages that released them, if not from their chains, at least from their isolation. The question for the tradition of autography has long been, and remains, not whether the act of graphic memoir will set the autobiographical subject free (Green makes it very clear that it will not), but whether it will release him into a chain of common suffering, and whether that chain can be made to communicate, to bind one to the other.

Release and imprisonment, communication and solipsism, pleasure and pain. These are just some of the contradictory pressures under which Brown finds himself bound, paradoxical demands common to much autobiography. But this one panel also describes some of the contradictory pulls unique to the autographer’s task. His hands bound, Green writes with his mouth—a graphic image describing the autographer’s craft of combining words and images. But even here, this image of merger is not triumphant, and the cost of the labor is represented both physically (the suffering body) and in terms of the accuracy of the utterance itself. Toward the very end of the book, and just as Binky has arrived at the crucial self-revelation that his visions were in fact “all up here!,” we return briefly to the scene of autography (Fig. 6). As Green struggles to draw and speak the final panels that will set Binky free, he is also desperate to set himself free from the act of self-revelation. “Almesh fineshkl!,” he mumbles. The pen-in-mouth that represents the word/image that is the autographer’s medium inevitably hampers the accuracy (and legibility) of both image and text.

It is a truism of autobiography studies (and of narratology more generally) that the narrator and subject are not one and the same; but in no form is this more graphically clear than in graphic memoir. Within prose narrative,

the “I” can remain (in the mind’s eye of both author and reader) identical to the author, allowing for extended moments of forgetting (or effacing) the distance between narrator and subject. In recorded visual autobiographical acts (film, video, photograph), the image is accorded truth status. Leigh Gilmore has similarly described the juridical pressure on autobiography to speak the authentic and verifiable truth:

Telling the story of one’s life suggests a conversion of trauma’s morbid contents into speech, and thereby, the prospect of working through trauma’s hold on the subject. Yet, autobiography’s impediments to such working through consist of its almost legalistic definition of truth-telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable, even in the presence of some ambivalence about those criteria. (129)



Figure 6. Excerpted from *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* by Justin Green (*Justin Green's Binky Brown Sampler* 50). Copyright © 1972, 2008 by Justin Green. Reprinted by permission of Last Gasp Publishing. All rights reserved.

The comics form, conversely, explicitly surrenders the juridical advantages of text-based or image-based testimony.³ With comics, the compressed, mediated, and iconic nature of the testimony (both text and image) denies any collapse between autobiography and autobiographical subject (the frequent use of pseudonyms or caricatures only reinforces the split), and the stylized comic art refuses any claims to the “having-been-there” truth, even (or especially) on the part of those who really were. The split between autographer and subject is etched on every page, and the hand-crafted nature of the images and the “autobifictional” nature of the narrative are undeniable.

But it is important that this split is not a casualty or regrettable cost of the autobiographer’s chosen form, but is instead precisely what motivates the drive to tell the self in comics form. As Green said in an interview, the curse and gift of his OCD was to endow him with a “split vision, being both the slave to the compulsion and the detached observer” (Randall). Comics autobiography from Green to Bechdel highlights that split and puts it to productive use, allowing the autographer to be both victim of the trauma and detached observer. And it forces a similar split upon its readers, complicating the fantasies of authentic and unmediated truth facilitated by traditional autobiographical texts.

As if the formal properties of the comics form did not present sufficient challenges for those wishing to tell their stories in this medium, there remains to be addressed the cultural associations and stigmas intrinsic to the history of comics in the US. For Green’s generation especially, but only slightly less so thirty-five years later, comics are associated with childish entertainments, with the lowest common denominator, even with juvenile delinquency, as Green reminds us.⁴ The one thing that comics most certainly were not associated with was “truth.” Still less were they associated with cultural authority, and even today, when comics seem to be suddenly in places that had historically shunned the form—museums, universities, the *New York Times*—the equation of “comics” and “comic books” with the easily digested and easily discarded remains firmly rooted in our daily discourse. Thus the decision to tell the most personal and painful of stories using this gutter form is a deliberately fraught one, one that seems to deny any possibility of being taken seriously or literally.

Which of course leads us back around toward the big question: why? Why tell these difficult stories in a form that is still today, despite the accomplishments of several generations of serious comics storytellers, associated with the cultural gutter? Why tell one’s most personal story in a form that invites disbelief, distance, and laughter? Green gestured toward one answer shortly after the publication of *Binky Brown*, describing the unique laughter that the autobiographical comic seeks to release: “the laughter of sudden discovery that you’re above or beyond a conflict that once blocked you in” (qtd. in Rosenkranz 188). What made this “laughter of freedom,” as Green terms it, transformative,

however, was the response of others—the laughter of recognition. Green recalls that “it wasn’t until I did *Binky Brown* that I felt a strong energy return from [the] faceless audience that I’d been working for up until then” (qtd. in Rosenkranz 189).

This was perhaps the greatest surprise of the first comics autobiographers: that the most personal stories became the ones that forged the most meaningful connections with others, opening up a dialogue with audiences and a sense of communal experience and release. At the end of her own first extended experiment in graphic autobiography, the 1993 “Coming Out Story,” Bechdel describes it as her “own humble contribution to that epic tale of collective self-revelation that my sisters and brothers have been telling for generations,” concluding by inviting her readers to “come out again”: to share their own stories and add to the larger chain-letter they are forging together. But twenty years earlier, the notion that an act of autography about the most personal of experiences (OCD, catholic guilt, sexuality) could be part of an act of “collective self-revelation” was a surprise to Green, and to his readers.

“While you may think [Binky’s] victory is a puny one,” Green concludes, “don’t forget that just such desperate leaps as his were taken by our brave ancestors the fish” (Fig. 7). Green recognized at the time that what he was doing

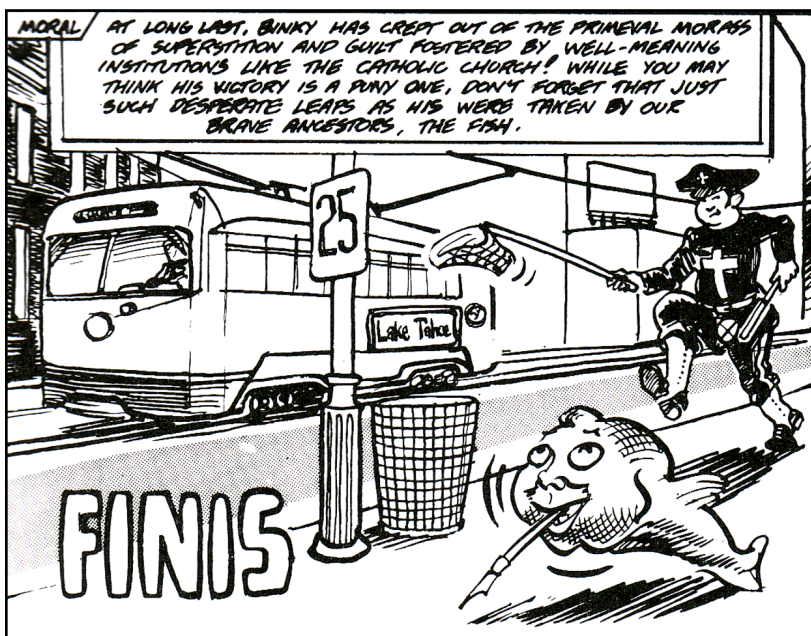


Figure 7. Excerpted from *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* by Justin Green (*Justin Green's Binky Brown Sampler* 50). Copyright © 1972, 2008 by Justin Green. Reprinted by permission of Last Gasp Publishing. All rights reserved.

in *Binky Brown* had the potential to serve as an “evolutionary” leap forward in the development of the medium. But like all such moments, it cannot ultimately be reduced to a single individual’s agency. In 1972, autography, which had occurred to comics practitioners only sporadically for decades, suddenly seemed not only obvious but urgent. And as a tool for the “working through” of childhood trauma, Green’s example opened up the graphic narrative medium to a powerful wave of autography, one which would be mined and developed over the coming decades by Phoebe Gloeckner (*A Child’s Life*), Barry, Bechdel, David B (*Epileptic*), and others.

Like Spiegelman, Aline Kominsky-Crumb credits Green’s *Binky Brown* with helping to galvanize her own rethinking of the comics medium (126). Shortly after encountering *Binky Brown*, Kominsky began to tell her own stories, developing her first autobiographical persona, “Goldie,” in the first issue of *Wimmen’s Comix* #1 that same year. For Kominsky, the determination to tell her daily experiences of neuroses, body-issues, and sexuality was going very much against the grain of the underground comix movement, which remained dominated by a macho culture of rape fantasies and power trips. But Kominsky had arrived in San Francisco at the right time, just as a group of other female cartoonists led by Trina Robbins, frustrated by the male-dominated scene in the city and inspired by the feminist movement and revolutionary politics that were very much in the air in 1971, determined to create a comic for women’s art and stories. The *Wimmen’s Comix* collective would develop over the next several years into a place where a new generation of autobiographical comics creators, including Phoebe Gloeckner and Alison Bechdel, would find a place to tell their most personal stories.

In addition to being the first autobiographical comic by a woman cartoonist, “Goldie” is revolutionary in another respect as well. Whereas Green’s addressed childhood trauma, Kominsky is the first autographer to focus instead on the much more mundane, messy neuroses of an ordinary life (Fig. 8). There is no glamour, but neither is there any shame: the open, even prideful honesty of this work would become an inspiration for a new generation of comics autographers, opening up a new sub-genre of diarists and chroniclers of the everyday. And as she began collaborating with her husband, R. Crumb, on *Dirty Laundry* and other collaborative journal comics, Kominsky opened up the possibility of doing such work for others. The drive in Kominsky’s work was always confessional—not in the ecclesiastical sense suggested by Green’s *Binky Brown*, but in the tradition of the confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s, speaking openly about aspects of daily life that had been understood to be off-limits for both polite conversation and public literature. Kominsky’s example inspired dozens of confessional autographers, including Julie Doucet, Ivan Brunetti, and Joe Matt.



Figure 8. Excerpted from *Goldie* by Aline Kominsky Crumb. Copyright © 1972 by Aline Kominsky Crumb. Reprinted by permission of Ms. Kominsky Crumb. All rights reserved.

One of those inspired by the possibilities opened up by Kominsky's work was Crumb's old friend from Cleveland, Harvey Pekar, who also began publishing autobiographical stories in 1972, ultimately self-publishing his first issue of his famous autobiographical comic, *American Splendor*, in 1976. But if Kominsky's work opened up the medium of bringing everyday confessions to autobiographical comics, Pekar's experiments in some sense take the idea even further—or perhaps better put, much closer to home. Kominsky was, after all, a member of the bohemian movement in San Francisco, married to the godfather of the underground movement, and a founding member of the *Wimmen's Comix* collective. Collectives and movements were a luxury Pekar could not afford, bound to the daily grind of working-class life in middle America. His determination to use the comics medium to express the daily mundane experiences of a “working stiff,” to fully explore the complexities of “ordinary life,” was in many ways as revolutionary as the iconoclasm of Crumb and his colleagues on the West Coast. From the daily headaches of a dead-end job and failed relationships to bouts of crippling depression and self-doubt, no topic was too private or too quotidian for Pekar to explore.

Perhaps even more revolutionary was the unique approach Pekar took to his autobiographical comics, inviting different artists to represent him and illustrate his stories. Within the very first issue of *American Splendor* four different artists (including Crumb) draw Pekar, and each of them has a decidedly different vision of the subject. Within a short time, the representations of Pekar proliferated across so many different hands that when his soon-to-be wife Joyce Brabner arrives in Cleveland to meet him for the first time, she has

a rolodex of images of the man dancing before her. “Who is Harvey Pekar?,” Crumb’s Pekar asks early in the run of the series. The answer might seem to be easy and uninteresting: a Jewish working-class kid from Cleveland, a file clerk at the local Veteran’s Hospital. But there is nothing simple in the act of narrating the self, and even the most prosaic life refracts in the telling, presenting infinite variations, renderings, and representations that never quite add up to a coherent whole. Harvey Pekar’s favorite word to describe his subject matter is “quotidian”: a fancy word for the everyday life we all inhabit, the life we work hard not to think about, because it is often exhausting, or painful, or dull—but mostly because it stars ourselves. And we are not Stars. In telling his own quotidian story in a form dominated by tales of the most Super of Superstars, the comicbook superhero, Pekar offered a roadmap to a new generation of comics diarists and memoirists to address their everyday with the same microscopic attention that the mainstream media directs to its celebrities and public figures. From Jim Valentino’s autobiographical comics in the 1980s to Gabrielle Bell’s diary comics today, the tradition of the quotidian that Pekar’s example inspired remains one of the most vibrant sub-genres within autobiographical comics.

Of course, it would be the response of Art Spiegelman to the possibility of autobiographical comics, and his own unique approach to collective autobiography, that would be most influential in shaping the reception of the form in the decades to come. It is hard to overstate the significance of Spiegelman’s *Maus* in lending cultural legitimacy to this gutter form, from its Pulitzer prize in 1992 to the dozens of critical essays that have secured a place for comics studies within the walls of academia. Like the others we have been discussing, Spiegelman’s epic *Maus* traces its origins back to 1972. Shortly after moving to San Francisco to be closer to the epicenter of the underground comix scene, Spiegelman got a chance to see Green’s *Binky Brown* in its earliest stages. Soon after, his own work began to take a more autobiographical turn, writing about dreams and his personal life, often using an autobiographical persona, “Skeeter Grant.” In *Short Order Comix* #1 (1973), for example, “Skeeter Grant” tells of a dream he had in 1973 in which he found himself a comic character, “just like Happy Hooligan,” complete with speech balloons and gutters between which he disappears as he moves from panel to panel. In the dream, he begins to panic, until another character walks into his panel and says, “Relax buddy boy. . . . It’s just the style you’re drawn in!” As an early meditation on autography, this short comic is particularly meaningful, reminding us that dreams and reality, representation and the thing itself, are forever muddled in the graphic memoir form. In this same issue, Spiegelman offers another, more deeply personal story, this one in a heavy

German expressionist style, telling the story (this time without the cover of a persona) of his mother's recent suicide and his ongoing struggles with mental illness. This story, "Prisoner on a Hell Planet" (1972), would later be reprinted (and play a crucial role) in the first volume of *Maus* (1986).

In fact, although it would not be completed for almost twenty years, that same year *Maus* began to take shape in his first version of the story, "Maus," published in *Funny Animals* #1 (1972). Here the father mouse tells his son an unlikely bedtime story of the rise of the Nazis (represented, as they would be in *Maus*, as cats). But at the point where the father comes to tell of the entrance into "Mauschwitz," he "can tell . . . no more." "It's time to go to sleep," he insists, and the child complies. But the stories, of course, will not go to sleep, and Mickey will awaken as the adult Art, and this time not let his father off the hook so easily, with painful consequences for both father and son.

Much has been written about Spiegelman's masterpiece, and the work has been especially of interest to scholars of the Holocaust, life writing, trauma, and narrative theory. In all cases, what is recognized as especially challenging and meaningful in this work is Spiegelman's complex approach to narrative address, to time and framing, to the ways in which he simultaneously validates his father's memories and first-hand experience as authentic even as he recounts the costs and the fictions—for both father and son—required to record those memories. Simultaneously, Spiegelman manages to challenge the authenticity of any memory even as he insists on the vital truth of the story Vladek tells, and which he recounts. If, as Robert S. Leventhal suggests, "*Maus* bears witness to the process of bearing witness, and the technical and technological requirement of writing and tape-recording in order to produce a narrative of the trauma and thereby alleviate the symptomology of depression and withdrawal that is the danger of a past left to fester as an unhealed wound," we should be wary of any attempts to seek out closure or healing in Spiegelman's work. Autography does not release the autobiographer from the "unhealed wound" of the past trauma, as Spiegelman demonstrates repeatedly, including in his early "Prisoner on a Hell Planet." That early autobiographical story ends with our narrator in prison, condemned for life by the traumas of his own and his family's past. Five years after finishing *Maus*, Spiegelman portrayed himself in a short autobiographical piece, "Mein Kampf/My Struggle" (1996), as hounded by "a 5,000 pound mouse breathing down my neck."

In place of ideals of freedom from or ownership of the past, *Maus* offers the seemingly meager recompense of a full accounting of all the obstacles that stand in the way of healing and recovery: lost diaries, lost mothers, conflicting testimony. Spiegelman once discussed his attraction to the comics

frame as being in part inherited from his father, who like other survivors was a compulsive packer, teaching his son how to stuff as much as possible into the suitcase—or the frame (D’Arcy). But *Maus* is equally about what can’t be put in, what can’t be told—most powerfully represented by the mother’s missing voice and lost diary, which Vladek destroyed in a fit of depression. As Hillary Chute points out in describing the complex bleedings of past and present to which the comics medium is ideally suited, *Maus* is motivated by a desire “for continuousness rather than a closure,” one “which resists the teleological and the epitaphic” (220). Narrating life and its traumas makes the past continuous with the present, bleeding its wounds into our daily life. This is not the failure of a proper externalization or “working-through” of the past, but is in fact the desired (the only desirable) goal of the blending of fact and fiction, image and text, a blending that allows the present to be productively continuous with the past.

This bleeding through of history, of course, is not unique to graphic memoir. Traditional prose autobiography likewise opens wounds of the past, and produces moments that forge a temporary (and problematic) collapse of autobiographer and subject. For example, in his first autobiography, Frederick Douglass describes the ways in which recalling the wounds of the past inevitably reopens them: “the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes,” he writes of one memory of such childhood trauma (72). This moment of collapse between writing self and child self is a complicated but telling one, as many commentators have noted: Douglass records the distance between his adult self and the boy named Fred Bailey, even as the record also forges a connection to those who brought violence to the child he once was. Douglass’s attempt to describe his wounds leads to a collapse not only of present and past, but of image (wound) and text (the pen with which he is writing), as if reaching out in 1845 for a formal expressive synthesis not yet available, or imaginable.

In graphic memoir, such moments of collapse are everywhere, and all of them play on precisely the tensions invoked by Douglass’s example. For instance, in Phoebe Gloeckner’s account of her traumatic childhood (one punctured by physical and sexual abuse, drugs, and abandonment), there is an arresting image of her child alter-ego, eight year old Minnie, about to engage in an open-mouthed kiss with an older woman (Fig. 9). On closer examination, we realize that the older woman is in fact Gloeckner herself, as an adult. On one hand, as with Douglass’s image of the pen and the wound, this makes the traumatic lost childhood continuous with the present, and offers an image of bonding, suturing that which the act of childhood trauma works to fragment. But on the other hand, again like Douglass, the image also aligns



Figure 9. Excerpted from *A Child's Life* by Phoebe Gloeckner; published by Frog, Ltd. Copyright © 2000 by Phoebe Gloeckner. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

the adult autobiographer with the work of those who inflicted the trauma. In Douglass's case, this pen re-etches the wounds slavery inflicted on the child self. In Gloeckner's case, the passionate kiss links the autobiographer with the predatory adults who violated the child's body and trust. Spiegelman makes a similar point several times in *Maus*, linking his own interrogation of his father with the acts of violence inflicted on him a generation earlier—a connection underscored by the title of his 1996 autobiographical sketch, "Mein Kampf."

* * * * *

There are of course risks to turning to American comics in 1972 as a scene of primal origins for the rise of graphic autobiography and the differing approaches that emerged from this pioneering work. For example, it ignores the graphic memoirs that preceded it, including the recently recovered *Four Immigrants Manga* (1931) by Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama. And it does not address the global reach of the comics form or the seminal works of autography developing at this time in France and Japan (most importantly in Keiji Nakazawa's

epic history of the bombing of Hiroshima, *Barefoot Gen*, a project he also began in 1972). And the risks of imagining these strains as separate genres, as opposed to tangled genealogies, are equally great: indeed, one can easily identify aspects of each of these pioneering works that fall squarely into all four categories. Like the graphic memoirists whose work I have been describing, I am not imagining that any fixed truths about the form will be uncovered by telling an origin story, which like all the stories critics tell is always half true, have constructed—and no less right for being so. However, the genealogical blood lines connecting the projects that emerged out of 1972 with the increasing visibility of the comics form and graphic memoir today do highlight the ways in which even the most personal of stories is always a collective autobiography, a collaborative project between autobiographer and autobiographical subject, between present and past, between reader and writer, between image and text, between fact and fiction, and of course between the author and those who have braved the dangerous waters of the form before.

There are other insights that emerge from this “family history” I have been tracing here. Scouring the headlines of 1972 with a historicist’s appetite for cultural logic, suggestive patterns emerge (several of which Bechdel highlights in her own return to this point of origins). Watergate, the Olympic massacre, the Vietnam War, for example, all point to the rapidly accelerating demands of media: a President’s crimes are (imperfectly) recorded on audio tape; the stand-off in Berlin becomes a world-wide television event; the loss of a misbegotten war on the other side of the world is attributed by some to the failure to win the media war at home. Less obvious from the headlines, 1972 also witnessed the birth of new media technologies that would accelerate these changes for the generation to come, including the first email program, the first microprocessor, and the first arcade video game. Such insights don’t ultimately provide conclusive answers to the question of why, in this year, autography was “born,” but they do suggest a reason for why it has thrived over the past generation despite (until very recently) cultural neglect and even hostility. In 1972, it is almost a truism today, “national innocence” was lost in the wake of Watergate and Vietnam, and with it the fantasy that the nation’s “fathers” could be trusted to protect and tell the truth. But as the films that followed this moment emphasized—*The Conversation* (1974) or *The Parallax View* (1974), for example—perhaps the greatest epistemological cost of this rupture was the belief that an unmediated truth could be recovered at all. In 1972, media and mediation is foregrounded as the essential condition of histories and identities—both personal and national—and in this respect, the world we live in today is most certainly born of that seminal year.

Of course, in the face of our own new media world and our own national scandals and global tragedies, we are still learning these lessons—and perhaps learning the wrong ones too well. Here, I would argue, the autobiographical comic has a particularly urgent role to play today. Marianne Hirsch has suggested usefully that the comics form offers a vital model for the “visual-verbal literacy” necessary to “respond to the needs of the present moment” (1212). And I have argued elsewhere that the rise of comics in the new media age is due in part to the fact that the form is ideally suited for “making the present aware of its own ‘archive,’ the past that it is always in the process of becoming,” a ghostly interaction often represented in new media narratives in the interaction between image and text (803). But the rise of graphic memoir responds to a more particular need of the present moment, seeking as it does to move autobiography—the testimony of the self to another—beyond the dead-end concerns over authenticity in which it has been cornered and contained for a generation.

In *Alternative Comics*, Charles Hatfield persuasively argues that the “problem of authenticity” in autobiographical comics is, in fact, no problem at all. But what is at stake here is not simply “ironic authentication”—a postmodern ironization of all claims to truth and authenticity—but the insistence that the either/or dilemma by which autobiography is traditionally judged and sentenced, as Gilmore and Amy Hungerford have both described, can (and should) be replaced by both/and.

In their overview of autobiography’s changing, “rumped” forms in the new media age, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson usefully highlight Dave Eggers’s memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2001) as an example of recent autobiographies that “undermine expectations of sincerity, authenticity, intimacy, and completeness long hailed by both critics and readers as essential to the autobiographical pact” (2, 5). In *A Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers provides complex and playful instructions as to how the reader is to “use” his text, including the suggestion that those who are unhappy with the book should exchange it with the publisher for a floppy-disk version, one which will provide increased interactivity: “This can be about you! You and your pals!” (xxiii–xxiv).

Smith and Watson are of course right to see this (and much of the framing to his memoir) as a “send-up of autobiographical self-interest”—and, I would add, of the cult of “interactivity” that has dominated media discourses in the twenty-first century (8). And of course there is also something quite serious here in Eggers’s meditation: the realization that the readerly self-interest of fiction and the authorial self-interest of autobiography are in a fundamental tension. It is a tension Eggers seeks to put to productive

work in his latest book, *What is the What* (2006), the autobiography/novel of the life of Valentino Achak Deng, a “Lost Boy” from Sudan now living in the United States. In this seemingly impossible hybrid form, the competing demands of autobiography and fiction are allowed to articulate themselves simultaneously: the claims of truth and authenticity (and the demands of those claims on the reader’s faith and respectful distance) exist equally and collaborate productively with the invitations of fiction to enter into the life and mind of another (suspending disbelief but never erasing it, and collapsing all respectful distances). In telling Valentino’s story in this hybrid, multimodal form, therefore, Eggers at once (via autobiography) commands the respect and attention of the reader to the story of an other, even as he (through fiction) invites the reader to inhabit this life, such that the alien landscape of southern Sudan or the refugee camps of Ethiopia and Nigeria might become not alien, but “home.” Fiction is for Eggers “interactive” (with or without floppy-disk), encouraging the reader’s narcissism; autobiography is auratic, performing the autobiographer’s narcissism and commanding the reader’s attention.⁵

I use the awkward term “auratic” advisedly here, to suggest the parallels between the distance (still) commanded by autobiography and the effects Walter Benjamin details as emerging from the “aura” of the traditional work of art before mechanical reproduction. In fact, it could be argued, that it is in autobiography alone that the “aura” has continued to find sustenance in the twentieth century—although it is an aura always vulnerable to charges of “fictionality,” charges that threaten to thrust it immediately from its privileged but precarious perch back to the common ground of mediation and “interactivity.” But for those working in the form, and most especially for the tradition of comics autobiographers who have been reinventing it for a new century, the auratic nature of autobiographical truth is worth defending—indeed it must be defended—even as the fictional mediations of that truth must be simultaneously acknowledged, not as a fall from grace but as a paradoxical but equally valid “truth.” It is the graphic memoir that best allows for this simultaneous claim of autobiography and fiction, and for the simultaneous demand on the reader for both distance and identification.

If fiction is an ideal form for identification and affective attachment, and autobiography is an ideal form for auratic distance and contemplation (including the transformative silences of testimony), autography is the narrative form that allows both to share the frame. As Gillian Whitlock writes, “the unique vocabulary and grammar of comics and cartoon drawing might produce an imaginative and ethical engagement with the proximity of the other,” mapping possibilities for new “affective engagements and recognition

across cultures” (978). At the hands of the autographer, respect and awe for the otherness of the other can and must exist simultaneously with the “interactive” invitation of fiction to assume the lives of others. The dangers of the traditional separations in terms of our ethical responses to the fundamental problem of other people have perhaps never been so clear or so urgent than at this moment. Elaine Scarry’s truism about the problem of other people’s pain—“To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt” (13)—might easily be scaled to describe the problem of other people themselves. The public acceptance of torture as national policy, air raids of civilian targets as strategic practice, wiretapping and surveillance of private citizens as necessary for national security, and child slavery and the exploitation of immigrants as economic policy all point to how well those in power have learned the lessons of 1972—learned especially how to exploit media and mediation so as to encourage such doubts as to the authenticity of the humanity of other people.

Autography points toward how we might in fact fight back, using the multimodal and multimediated form of graphic narrative to, as Green suggested in *Binky Brown*, “entwine the globe many times over in a vast chain of common suffering.” Only by allowing the past to bleed into history, fact to bleed into fiction, image into text, might we begin to allow our own pain to bleed into the other, and more urgently, the pain of the other to bleed into ourselves. This “vast chain of common suffering” might not be the image Green’s “aspiring revolutionaries” saw themselves fighting for in 1972. But in this new century, in our desperate need to learn lessons very different from those that our governments and media conglomerates would teach, this might well be the highest goal toward which we have to struggle. If so, there is no body of work that is better suited to the task than that of graphic memoir, which began telling its own multimodal “autobifictionalographies” thirty-five years ago.

NOTES

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1. I borrow the term “autographer” from Gillian Whitlock (971).
2. See Bechdel, *Fun Home* 203 and “Coming Out Story.”
3. Autographers often meditate on the nature of photographic evidence, as we saw earlier with Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Toward the very end of the second volume of *Maus*, Spiegelman inserts a photograph of the father he had been drawing for hundreds of pages as a mouse. The effect is jarring, calling into question, as photographic evidence

inevitably does, the authenticity of Spiegelman's entire project. But even as the photograph of the "real" Vladek threatens the governing logic of the story Spiegelman has been telling, we are reminded of the dangers of such testimony: the image, after all, is of Vladek dressed in the uniform of the deathcamp he has only recently escaped, but it is a souvenir uniform—clean and crisp and in every way *in*-authentic.

4. At one point early in Green's *Binky Brown*, a television story reports on congressional investigations into the links between juvenile crime and comics and the resulting Comics Code system of self-censorship put in place in 1954—the Code that the underground comix movement would work to violate at every turn (22). For a history of the anti-comics hysteria of the 1950s, see Chapter 6 of Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation*, and Amy Kiste Nyberg's *Seal of Approval*.
5. Thinking about Eggers reminds us of the always imbricated pulls and demands of fiction and autobiography at the heart of his major work, concerns that are highlighted, as we have seen, by the unique formal mixings of comics. Eggers himself has long been fascinated by comics, including as a practitioner (one of his earliest works was a comic strip in the San Francisco *Weekly*), but more importantly as a champion of the form, as critic, editor, and publisher. As Eggers wrote in 2000 in an omnibus review for the *New York Times*, the best work in graphic narrative needs to be reconceived "not as literary fiction's half-wit cousin but as, more accurately, the mutant sister who can often do everything fiction can, and, just as often, more." Complaints about the narcissism of autobiographical comics have been a refrain in comics criticism for some time. See, for example, Lewis.

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