

The Complexities of Ordinary Life: Autobiographical Comics and Graphic Novels

Being raised by two psychiatrists has made me extraordinarily interested in learning about the lives of others. While autobiographical comics may seem like an odd crib sheet to use to learn about the human condition, their confessional style provides readers like me with the answers to the questions we dare not ask. I equate reading an autobiographical comic with the occurrence of a stranger handing you his diary, staring meaningfully into your eyes and saying, “I want you to read this... all of it. Oh, and just so you know, I drew pictures of everything that happened, too.”

I first became interested in autobiographical comics and graphic novels after reading some of Jeffrey Brown’s comics in 2005. There was something about his loose, sketchbook-style illustrations that made his work accessible to a newly minted comics fan such as myself. There were no superpowers, no buxom women and no maniacal villains in his comics... just real stories.

Right when I was on the brink of exhausting Brown’s catalogue, Peter Birkemoe, the co-owner of The Beguiling¹, suggested that I expand my interests. When he rang up my latest purchase, he said, “If you like this stuff, you should try reading some John Porcellino.” I promptly swept up Porcellino’s *King-Cat Classic: The Best of King-Cat Comics and Stories* and I soon discovered other autobiographical cartoonists including Chester Brown, Joe Matt, Lucy Knisley and Harvey Pekar. Comic fans are notorious collectors and it was only a matter of time before my collection started to develop.

¹ The Beguiling is a comic book store in Toronto. The store stocks the largest selection of alternative, underground and independent graphic books in Canada.

In most discussions about comics, a few definitions and a brief history are required to shed some light on the genre. The term “comic books” typically refers to shorter, serialized comics that are 30-40 pages in length. The newer term “graphic novel” refers to longer, book-length comics. While the term “graphic novel” was created in an attempt to bring greater legitimacy to the medium of comics, these two terms are often used interchangeably. So, whether we refer to this art form as comic books or graphic novels, we’re all talking about the same thing—sequential art.

Autobiographical comics first appeared in the underground comics scene of the 1960s and were a reaction to the mainstream comics of the time (superhero, cowboy, romance, etc.). Cartoonists used these alternative, self-published, autobiographical comics as a way to express themselves more candidly—something the mainstream genres did not allow. Some of the pioneers of the autobiographical comics’ movement include R. Crumb, Justin Green, Harvey Pekar and Art Spiegelman.

Just like their predecessors of the 1960s, modern autobiographical comics are mostly self-published or published by alternative publishers. That said, their popularity is increasing and they are starting to be recognized by the mainstream. Many types of autobiographical comics are being published in North America and the books in my collection include diary comics, travel journals and graphic memoirs. My collection focuses on significant,² modern autobiographical comics and graphic novels that were originally written in English and published between 2002 and 2008.

My collection has, for the most part, progressed organically. Many of these books have been purchased at The Beguiling or at comic conventions or festivals such as the

² That is, critically acclaimed, award winning, best selling, rare, etc.

annual Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art (MoCCA) Festival in New York. Browsing through aisle after aisle of cartoonists peddling their wares always seems to lead me to some very fascinating finds. While the attached bibliography lists every autobiographical comic and graphic novel in my collection, this essay will focus on the more notable or critically acclaimed books that I have collected.

Some of the most poignant works in my collection are Jeffrey Brown's comics. Brown is considered to be one of the most popular autobiographical cartoonists in North America. He writes about his relationships, work life and all of the awkward moments in-between. While Brown's drawings may seem primitive at first glance, his style is reflective of the implied spontaneity of journal comics. When a comic appears to be rough and unfinished, the reader can pretend that the comic was dashed off in the heat of the moment and forget that it was actually drawn from memory. To achieve this effect, Brown draws his autobiographical comics directly in ink without doing any initial penciling. His books tend to be smaller-sized volumes that are reminiscent of notebooks or diaries and there is something about their size that makes the experience of reading them a more intimate one. My collection contains a signed³ copy of *Little Things: A Memoir in Slices*—Brown's first full-length autobiographical graphic novel in several years and his first graphic novel to be published by a mainstream, trade publisher.

John Porcellino is also known for his simple art style and his writings about daily life. He is considered to be one of the greatest of cartoonists coming from the self-publishing and zine movement of the early 1990s. While much of Porcellino's work has been self-published, Canadian comics publisher Drawn & Quarterly Books re-published many of

³ See Appendix A.

his works. My collection includes *King-Cat Classix*, a compendium of the first 50 issues of his self-published comic *King-Cat Comics and Stories*. This handsome hardcover volume is a contrast from the original, inexpensively produced volumes of this serialized comic.

As mentioned earlier, Harvey Pekar is considered to be one of the pioneers of autobiographical comics and is best known for his *American Splendor* series.⁴ Pekar is solely a writer and a variety of notable cartoonists have illustrated his stories including R. Crumb, Alison Bechdel and Chester Brown. *The Quitter* was illustrated by Dean Haspiel and is a unique book in of itself because of its content—in this book, Pekar chronicles his teenage years (romance, school, job-hunting, etc.) for the first time in his writing career. Pekar signed⁵ my copy at a This is Not a Reading Series (TINARS) event in 2005.

Considered to be one of the most prolific cartoonists of the new generation, Lucy Knisley is only 24 years old. I came across Knisley's work at the MoCCA Festival in 2007. My collection includes a signed⁶ copy of the original, self-published version of her first graphic novel, *French Milk*, where she details a trip she took to France with her mother. After Knisley self-published *French Milk*, Simon & Schuster took notice and published a revised version of the book under their Touchstone Imprint in 2008.

I was also introduced to Anders Nilsen's work at the MoCCA Festival in 2007. Nilsen's *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow* is, perhaps, the rarest book in this collection. *Don't Go* is now out-of-print and only 3,000 copies were originally printed. Nilsen has chosen not to reprint the book due to its highly personal nature. It chronicles his fiancée's

⁴ In the *American Splendor* series, Pekar details his work as a file clerk at Cleveland's Veteran's Administration hospital as well as other everyday experiences.

⁵ See Appendix B.

⁶ See Appendix C.

battle with Hodgkin's. *Don't Go* is not a traditional comic—in addition to delicate pen and ink drawings, it also includes reproductions of letters, postcards and photographs.

I was introduced to Joe Matt and his work, *Spent*, at a presentation that I went to the day after I heard Nilsen speak. This handsome signed⁷ hardcover has a cloth spine, which is not typical of most autobiographical graphic novels; most are issued in paperback form. This book collects the comics that were originally serialized in issues #11 - 14 of his comic book series, *Peepshow*. The work details Matt's obsession with pornography, masturbation and his lack of a girlfriend. While the explicit content in this graphic novel may not appeal to many audiences, I appreciate Matt's candour. Also, Matt's drawings are superb and exhibit clean lines and solid ink work.

I picked up Paul Hornschemeier's sole autobiographical work, *The Three Paradoxes*, at the MoCCA Arts Festival in 2008. In this graphic novel, Hornschemeier weaves together five different tales involving his girlfriend and his father—some true and some fictional. This graphic novel is unique because each story is drawn in a different style, with different production processes and colour themes (i.e., blue pencil, Photoshop, Benday dots printing, etc.).

Another great event for tracking down comics is Toronto's The Word On The Street Book & Magazine Festival since it was where I met Chester Brown. While the autobiographical comics scene in Toronto is not a large one, Brown is one cartoonist in particular who has had a long-standing career in the field. Brown's work describes his neuroses, struggles growing up and penchant for pornography—he also happens to be close friends with Joe Matt. Brown's *The Playboy* was originally published in 1992 and

⁷ See Appendix D.

was the first graphic novel published by Drawn & Quarterly. It was originally serialized in issues #21 - 23 of Brown's comic book series *Yummy Fur* and published by Vortex Comics. This comic details Brown's childhood obsession with *Playboy* magazine. My collection includes a signed⁸ copy of the 2002 reprint of this book.

My collection also includes works that I have tracked down by combing comics websites or reading reviews. Craig Thompson's *Blankets* is one of the most critically acclaimed graphic novels of recent years. Thompson won four Harvey Awards, two Eisner Awards and two Ignatz Awards for *Blankets*. Just under 600 pages in length, this ambitious work details Thompson's growing up in a fundamentalist family in the American mid-west. One of the impressive facets of this book is Thompson's bold and expressive brushwork.

The final work I will discuss is Alison Bechdel's critically acclaimed and bestselling work *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. It won an Eisner Award and TIME Magazine ranked it their Best Book of 2006.⁹ This graphic novel chronicles Bechdel's coming to terms with being gay and her father's closeted homosexuality. It took Bechdel seven years to complete *Fun Home*¹⁰ in part because her laborious work process whereby she takes reference photos of herself in the poses of all the characters featured in the graphic novel.¹¹ The paperback edition in my collection features a different cover than

⁸ See Appendix E.

⁹ *Fun Home* was ranked higher than books written by prominent writers such as Cormac McCarthy and David Eggers.

¹⁰ Emmert, Lynn (April 2007). "Life Drawing". *The Comics Journal* (Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books) (282): 36, http://www.tcj.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=598&Itemid=48. Retrieved on 2009-02-27.

¹¹ Harrison, Margot (2006-05-31). "Life Drawing". *Seven Days*. <http://www.sevendaysvt.com/features/2006/life-drawing.html>. Retrieved on 2009-02-27.

the original hardcover edition—the paperback edition’s cover is far more “comic-y” as it includes an actual panel from the graphic novel featuring Alison and her father. The original edition showcases a simple calling card on a plate.

In the future, I hope to add many other books to this collection including Jeffrey Brown’s *Cat Getting Out of a Bag: And Other Observations* (2007); John Porcellino’s *Perfect Example* (1999); Anders Nilsen’s *The End* (2007); Joe Matt’s earlier works: *Peepshow: The Cartoon Diary of Joe Matt* (1992), *The Poor Bastard* (1996) and *Fair Weather* (2002); and Chester Brown’s *I Never Liked You: A Comic-Strip Narrative* (1994) and *The little man: Short strips, 1980-1995* (1998).

I also hope to collect books by other notable North American autobiographical cartoonists including Julie Doucet, Phoebe Gloeckner and Josh Neufeld.

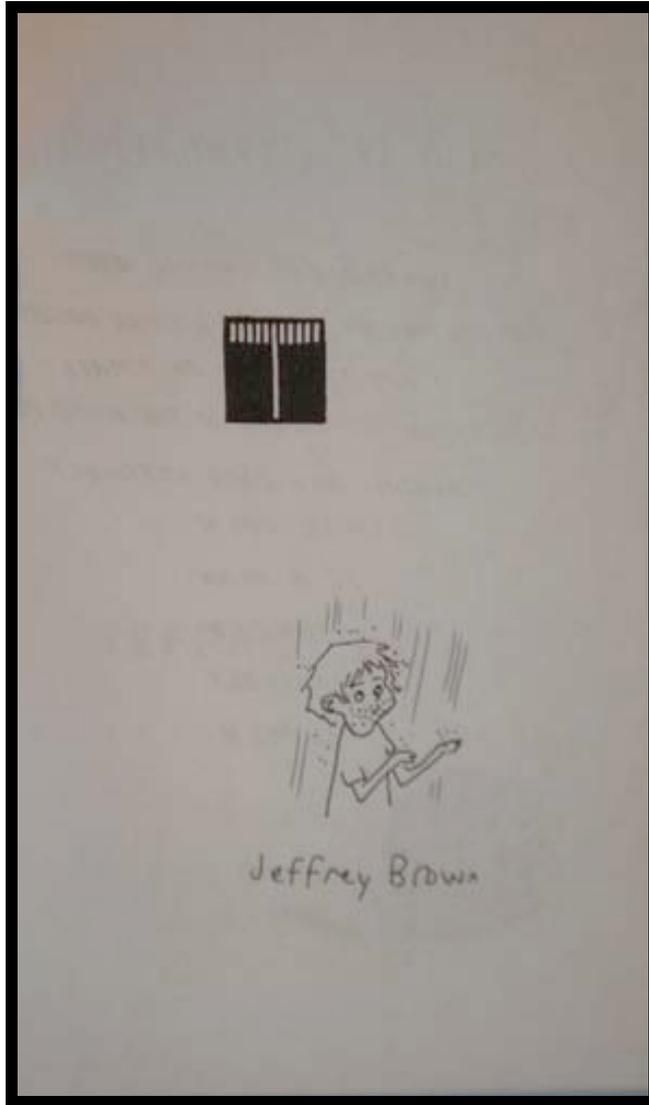
While this collection mostly includes books that represent the lives of North Americans, more and more critically acclaimed autobiographical comics are being translated into English from the French, Spanish, Hebrew, Malay and Japanese. I am considering starting a second collection that will include those comics and graphic novels. Truth be told, I’ve already purchased a few.

While this collection is by no means comprehensive, it provides a solid base from which further study can occur. As comics and graphic novels are being viewed as increasingly relevant and are being recognised as a legitimate art form, more and more universities are offering comics courses. A bibliography such as this one could provide both students and professors with fodder for their studies. In addition, newer and established cartoonists alike may take an interest in learning about the personal and professional lives of their peers. Finally, individuals who want to learn more about the

human condition will find that the inimitable autobiographical comic will surely capture their interest. The burgeoning mainstream popularity of autobiographical comics and graphic novels just shows us that these works offer stories that are interesting and relevant to readers.

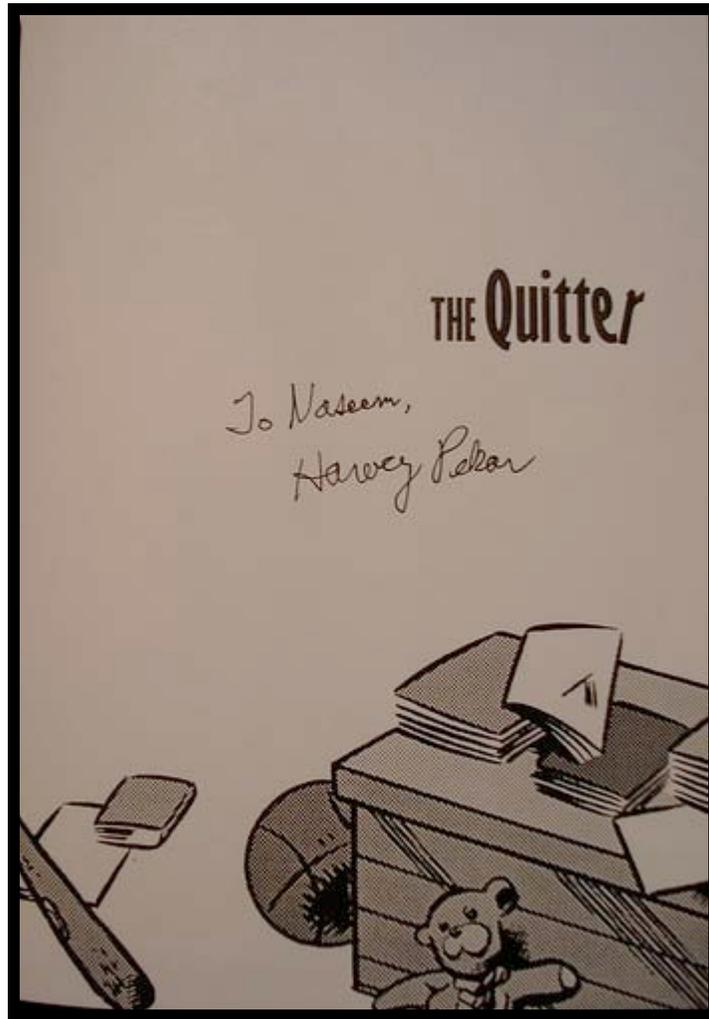
APPENDIX A

Signed copy of Jeffrey Brown's *Little Things: A Memoir in Slices*



APPENDIX B

Signed copy of Harvey Pekar's *The Quitter*



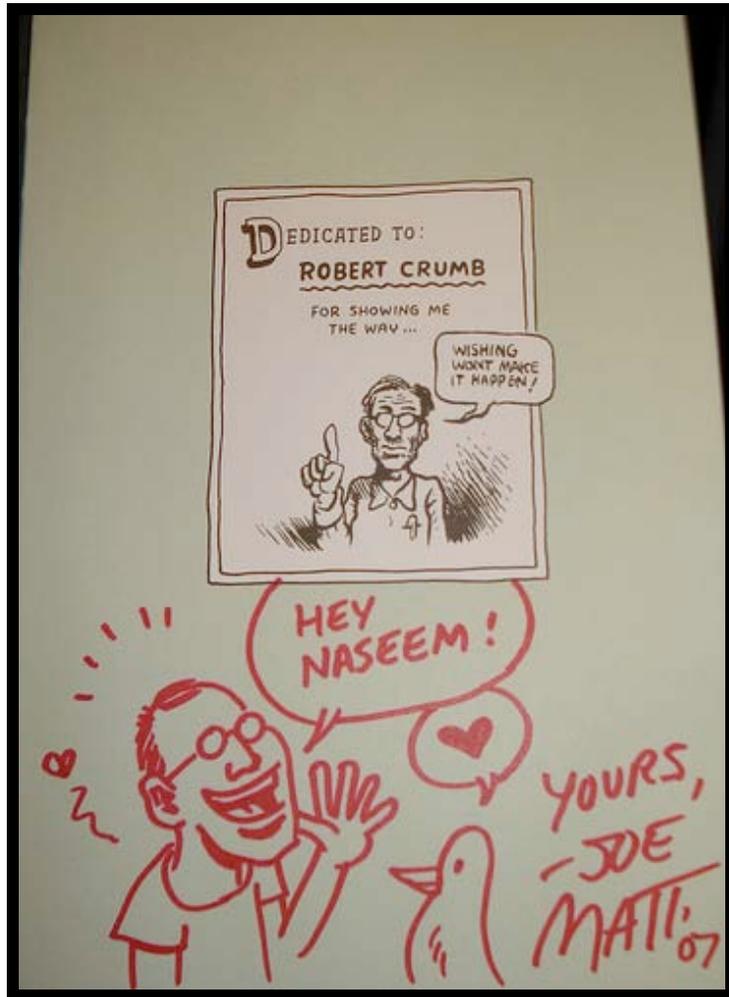
APPENDIX C

Signed copy of Lucy Knisley's *French Milk*



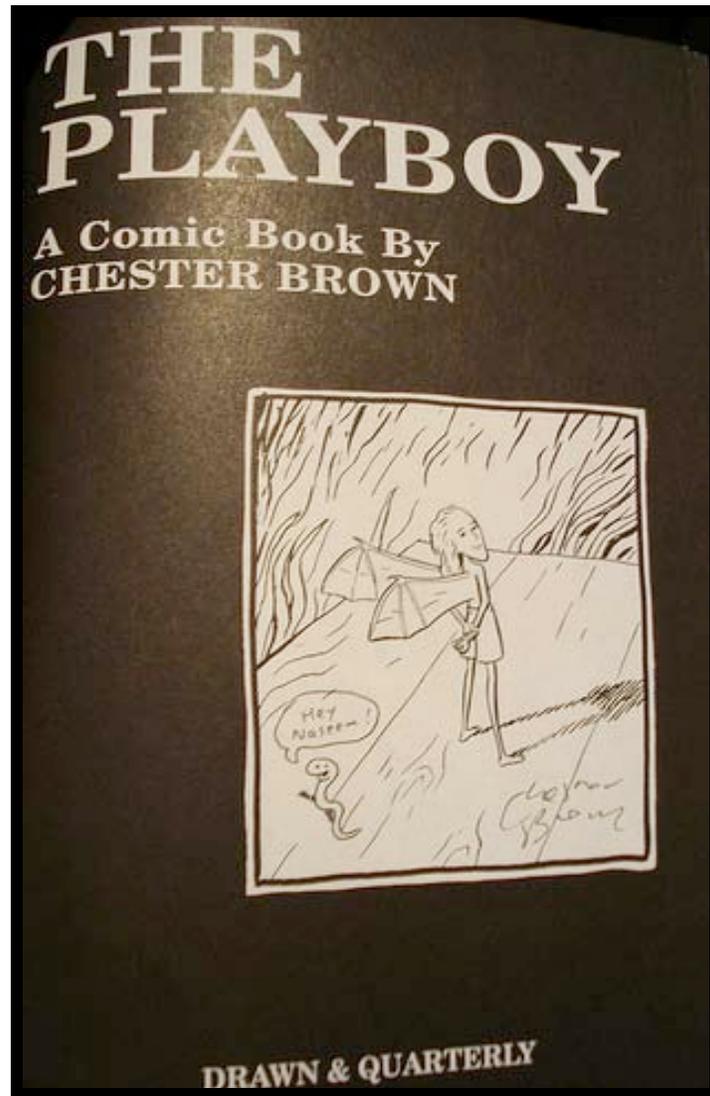
APPENDIX D

Signed copy of Joe Matt's *Spent*



APPENDIX E

Signed copy of Chester Brown's *The Playboy*



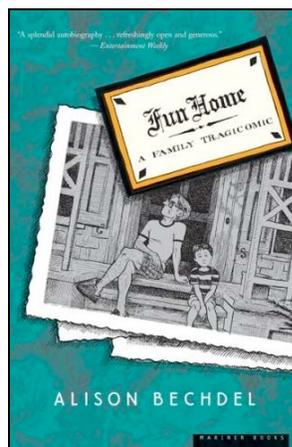
BIBLIOGRAPHY

BARRY, Lynda. *One Hundred Demons*. Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books, 2005. Soft Cover. Reprint Edition. 224 p. Illustrated (colour). ISBN-13: 978-1570614590. Minor wear on corners of cover. Very Good.



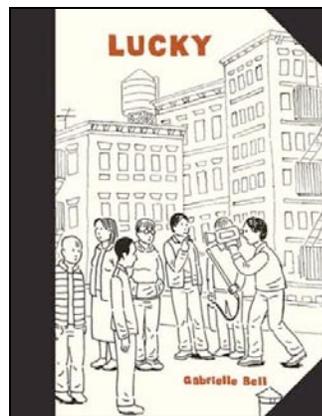
One Hundred Demons collects 20 of Barry's "autobfictionography" comic strip stories. These strips were originally serialized on Salon.com.

BECHDEL, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007. Soft Cover. First Edition. 232p. Illustrated (colour). ISBN-13: 978-0618871711. Slight bumping to spine. Near Fine.



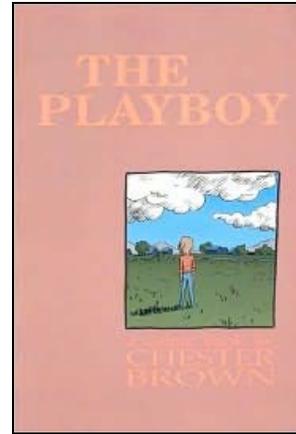
Bechdel chronicles her childhood, her father's homosexuality and her coming-of-age.

BELL, Gabrielle. *Lucky*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly Books, 2006. Cloth. First Edition. 112 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1897299012. Slight shelf wear on spine. Cover slightly soiled. Very Good.



Bell records her day-to-day life in Brooklyn, New York.

BROWN, Chester. *The Playboy*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly Books, 2002 (c1992). Soft Cover. Reprint Edition. 172 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-0969670117. Covers slightly marked and small crease on corner. Signed by author. Good.



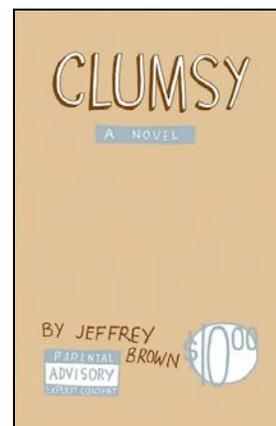
Brown details his interest in pornography as a young man.

BROWN, Jeffrey. *AEIOU: Any Easy Intimacy*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2005. Soft Cover. First Edition. 224 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1891830716. Covers slightly rubbed and small crease on corner. Some rubbing to the spine. Very Good.



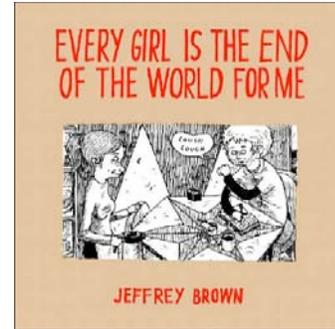
Brown's comic memoir details his relationship with his third girlfriend.

BROWN, Jeffrey. *Clumsy: A Novel*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2002. Soft Cover. Third Printing. 232 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-0971359765. Slight bumping to corners of spine. Minor wear at edges. Small crease on cover. Some soiling. Fair.



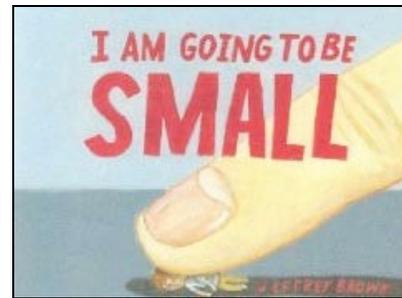
Brown's debut autobiographical work chronicles his long distance relationship with his girlfriend.

BROWN, Jeffrey. *Every Girl is the End of the World for Me*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2005. Soft Cover. First Edition. 104 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1891830778. Slight bumping to covers. Very Good.



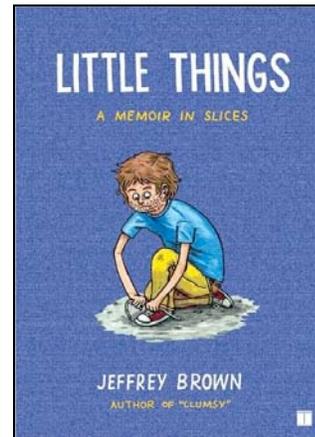
This collection of short comics details Brown's life from December 26, 2003-January 15, 2004.

BROWN, Jeffrey. *I am Going to be Small*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2006. Soft Cover. First Edition. 384 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1891830860 Minor wear at edges. Some creasing. Fair.



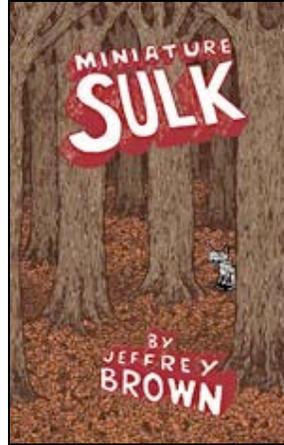
This collection includes both autobiographical comics as well as single-panel gag comics.

BROWN, Jeffrey. *Little Things: A Memoir in Slices*. New York: Simon & Schuster (Touchstone), 2008. Soft Cover. First Edition. 352 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1416549468 Slight bumping to corners of covers. Minor wear at edges. Small crease on cover. Signed by author. Good.



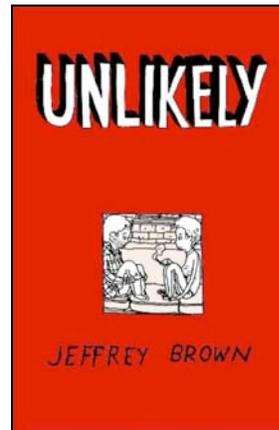
A collection of short comics about Brown's life from 2006-2007.

BROWN, Jeffrey. *Miniature Sulk*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2005. Soft Cover. First Edition. 98 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1891830662. Slight bumping to spine. Near Fine.



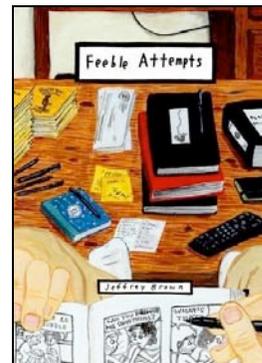
Very short autobiographical comics that cover the mundane details of Brown's life.

BROWN, Jeffrey. *Unlikely or How I Lost My Virginity*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2005. Soft Cover with French Flaps. First Edition. 256 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1891830419. Long crease across centre of cover. Signs of wear. Fair.



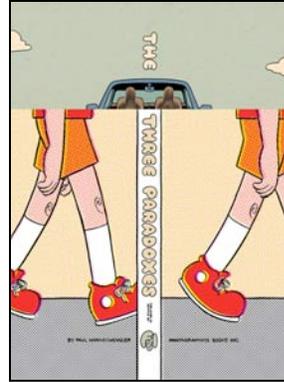
In *Unlikely*, Brown tells the story of how he lost his virginity in vignettes.

BROWN, Jeffrey. *Feeble Attempts*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2007. Soft Cover. First Edition. 48 p. Illustrated (b&w). Slight bumping to spine; minor wear on edges. Very Good.



Feeble Attempts includes both autobiographical and fictional comics.

HORNSCHEMEIER, Paul. *The Three Paradoxes*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2007. Hard Cover with Dust Jacket. First Edition. 80p. Illustrated (colour). ISBN-13: 978-1560976530. Some wear on dust jacket. Good.



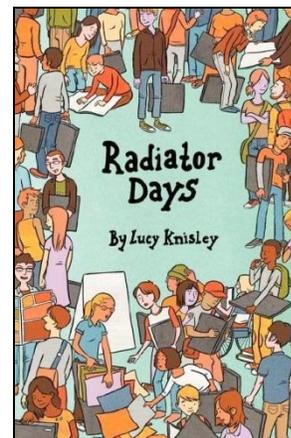
An autobiographical comic that blends fantasy and reality and discusses creativity and the author's life.

KNISLEY, Lucy. *French Milk*. Rhinebeck, NY: Epigraph Publishing, 2007. Soft Cover. First Edition. 181p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-9789427-5-5. Clean, crisp copy; signs of some wear. Signed by author. Out of print. Very Good.



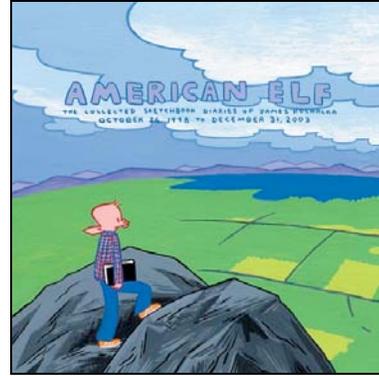
Chronicles Knisley's month long stay in Paris with her mother.

KNISLEY, Lucy. *Radiator Days*. Rhinebeck, NY: Epigraph Publishing, 2008. Soft Cover. First Edition. 316 p. ISBN-13: 978-0979882852. Signs of some wear. Very Good.



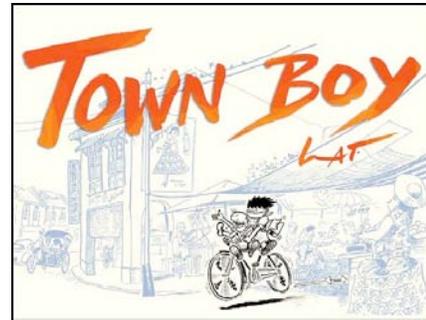
These journal comics were written during a two year period when Knisley lived in Chicago.

KOCHALKA, James. *American Elf Volume 1: The Collected Sketchbook Diaries Of James Kochalka*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2004. Soft Cover. First Edition. 496 p. Illustrated (colour and b&w) ISBN-13: 978-1891830495. Signs of wear on edges; cracked spine. Poor.



This collection includes five years worth of Kochalka's diary comics.

LAT. *Town Boy*. New York, NY: First Second, 2007 (c1980). Soft Cover. First American Edition. 192 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1596433311. Cover exhibits minimal signs of wear. Near Fine.



Lat details what it was like to grow up as a teenager in Malaysia.

MATT, Joe. *Spent*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2007. Hard Cover with Cloth Spine. First Edition. 120 p. Illustrated (colour). ISBN-13: 978-1897299111. Clean, crisp copy; signs of minimal wear. Signed by author. Near Fine.



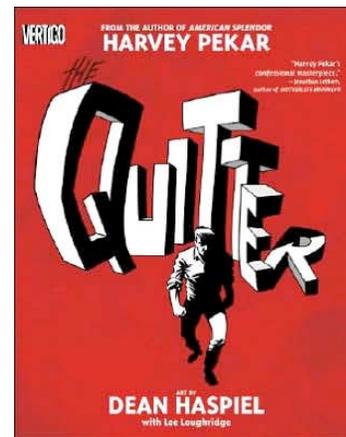
Matt chronicles his youth, adulthood and personal issues in this autobiographical graphic novel.

NILSEN, Anders. *Don't Go Where I Can't Follow*. With Cheryl Weaver. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly Books, 2007. Soft Cover with French Flaps. First Edition. 224 p. Illustrated (colour). ISBN-13: 978-1894937931. Some creasing on cover. Signs of minimal wear. Out of print. Good.



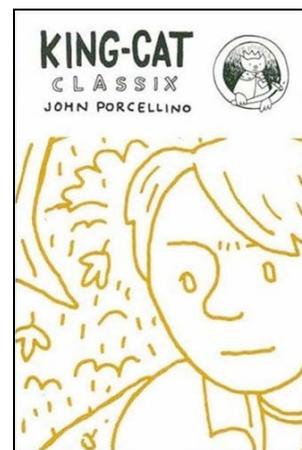
Nilsen chronicles his longtime girlfriend's battle with cancer.

PEKAR, Harvey. *The Quitter*. Illustrated by Dean Haspiel with Lee Loughridge. New York: Vertigo, 2005. Hard Cover with Dust Jacket. First Edition. 104 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1401204006 Slight bumping on dust jacket. Signed by author. Near Fine.



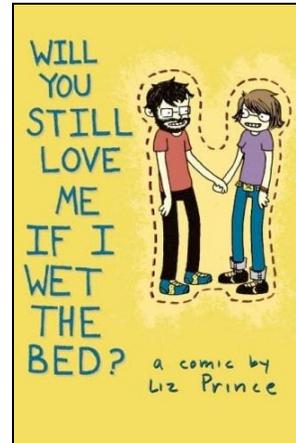
For the first time, Pekar chronicles his teenage years.

PORCELLINO, John. *King-Cat Classix: The Best of King-Cat Comics and Stories*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly Books, 2007. Hard Cover with Dust Jacket. First Edition. 320 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1894937917. Dust jacket has short tear and slight wear to corners, otherwise crisp and clean. Never read. Good.



Collection of the first fifty issues of the self-published *King-Cat Comics and Stories*, with extensive endnotes.

PRINCE, Liz. *Will You Still Love me if I Wet the Bed*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2005. Soft Cover. First Edition. 80 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1891830723. Slight wear on spine. Near Fine.



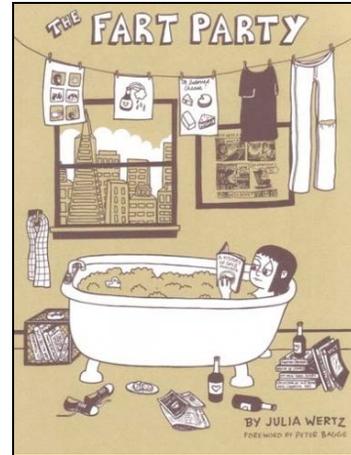
Prince discusses her relationship with her boyfriend through short mini-comics.

THOMPSON, Craig. *Blankets*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2005. Soft Cover with French Flaps. First Edition. 592 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN-13: 978-1891830433. Slight wear on spine. Near Fine.



This graphic novel is Thompson's account of his growing up in a fundamentalist family in the American mid-west.

WERTZ, Julia. *The Fart Party*. Baltimore, MD: Atomic Book Company, 2007. Soft Cover. First Edition. 178 p. Illustrated (b&w). ISBN: 978-0978656935. Some edge wear and creasing on cover. Good.



This book chronicles Wertz's first year of making comics, moving apartments, relationships with her patented sarcasm.

WILLIAMSON, Kate T. *A Year in Japan*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006. Soft Cover with French Flaps. First Edition. 192p. Illustrated (colour). ISBN-13: 978-1568985404. Clean, crisp copy with slight edge wear/laminate peeling. Near Fine.



Williamson chronicles her stay in Japan in her first autobiographical work.