
A NEW ACADEMIC APPROACH TO WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS

By Olga Michael





Chute, Hillary L. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2010. ISBN 978-0-231-15062-0. 297 pages.

Graphic Women is a much-needed book in studies on comics and women's self-writing as it initiates a new beginning in these areas. It argues that the graphic memoir provides space for radical feminist constructions of female subjectivities and re-creation of issues around sexuality and trauma that are otherwise silenced and suppressed. With the aid of rich theoretical background in trauma and autobiography and substantial close readings, Chute examines the work of Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel. While Bechdel and Satrapi's works have enjoyed a large amount of literary criticism, academic attention on the remaining artists' work remains relatively limited and *Graphic Women* initiates a beginning for their further exploration and study. Despite being focused on women artist's work, Chute does not fail to mention in her introduction works by male artists like Art Spiegelman, Robert Crumb and Justin Green, who have been initiators of the genre and a great influence on women cartoonists, showing an interconnection between them and constructing a more rounded image of graphic memoir.

In the first chapter, Chute gives a lucid analysis of Kominsky-Crumb's autobiographical comics like *Love that Bunch* and *The Complete Dirty Laundry Comics*. Kominsky-Crumb is one of the first women to use this form and her work is both radical and controversial. It has been rejected as pornographic by male publishers, critics, and feminist underground cartoonists alike because of its failure to idealise women and for constructing abject behaviour as a subject matter (p. 37). By seeing this work from a different angle however, Chute argues that both the excessive and harsh style, as well as the obscene content of Kominsky-Crumb's narratives brings forth a darker side of female sexuality.

In the second chapter, Gloeckner's *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* are discussed and female sexuality is presented as being composed both of pleasure and degradation (p. 61). With her provocative analysis of the narratives of the protagonist's sexual abuse by her stepfather, Chute demonstrates how pain, trauma and pleasure are intertwined and how child sexual abuse is seen from the perspective of the victim. Additionally, she succeeds in underlining the significance of the visual in the transmission of these issues by comparing these narratives with a prose text of similar content, the *Bastard out of Carolina*, and noting that "there's a resistance to something that is drawn that wouldn't exist if it were written" (p. 61). It is suggested that it is only through the visual element of comics that what Chute calls "embodiment" of female desire and experience are mediated and this mediation is more disturbing when visually constructed. Additionally, she



notes that despite their value, these graphic narratives have been heavily criticised as pornographic, banned and denied entry at the French and British borders. By entwining legal and ethical issues with the discussion of the text, Chute succeeds in showing the complexities around publication and circulation of radical female graphic narratives like *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. Simultaneously however, she gives an opposite view to that which characterises Gloeckner's work as pornographic, and she substantially argues for a radical form of feminism emerging in these graphic memoirs.

Chute also discusses Lynda Barry's work and focuses again on trauma and child sexual abuse as they are constructed in *The Red Comb*, *One Hundred Demons* and *What It Is*. Barry constructs child sexual abuse as an absent presence, which according to Chute is never explicitly named as such but implied through the combination of image and text. By placing Barry's imaginative treatment of this challenging problematic next to Gloeckner's, which is significantly realistic one, Chute successfully demonstrates the multiplicity of ways that comics offer to recreate this experience. Also, she introduces Cathy Caruth's theory on trauma and explains that the visual element is essential in traumatic memory, hence, pointing to the ability of comics as a medium to substantially mediate trauma.

Furthermore, Chute explains how the female body is both constructed through and constructs these memoirs, and she argues for the significance of materiality in the construction of the female self as it is shown in *One Hundred Demons*. She suggests that decorativeness and the dependence on materiality result in a different form of female experience and links Barry's construction of *One Hundred Demons* to the pattern and decorative movement of the 1970s. However, the idea of decorativeness and ornamentation in art goes further back to late nineteenth century artistic movements like art nouveau and the arts and crafts movement. By placing too much emphasis on contemporary contexts, Chute fails to consider that certain aspects of Barry's work are explicitly tied to the long history of literary and artistic representation, as she only briefly mentions similarities to the avant-garde without elaborating on them.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* expands Chute's analysis beyond the scope of the U.S. Here, readers face public and collective trauma of war, as opposed to come across sexual ones, which were previously discussed. In terms of style, Chute notes that Satrapi's work mediates the horror and the complexities of war and death in minimal drawings, underlining in this way the perspective of the girl child and the collectivity of trauma. She also describes the censorship of *Persepolis* in Iran as opposed to its inclusion on approximately two hundred and fifty university syllabi in the U.S. alone (p. 137), reflecting the different perceptions on what is and what is not speakable in Eastern and Western contexts. While to ignore *Persepolis* in *Graphic Women* would have been an



oversight, it is important to note that its inclusion in is somewhat problematic in that Satrapi is the only non-American artist Chute discussed. Instead of focusing on her work only, Chute could have discussed graphic memoirs by other American or non-American artists who are not as well known as Satrapi in order to offer a more diverse perspective on the genre.

The final chapter discusses another work, which has received a lot of scholarly attention, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. In her analysis, Chute shows how the past is explored in graphic language and how it re-emerges in Bechdel's narrative. In this case, childhood trauma stems from the closeted homosexuality of the protagonist's father and the everyday presence of death in Alison's life due to the funeral home maintained by him. She introduces trauma and death in relation to artistic creativity. She interestingly poses drawing as a form of touch and paper as a kind of skin (p. 199), supporting once more her idea of embodiment and the significance of the body in the construction of graphic narratives.

Furthermore, she discusses the heavy literary allusions the book is filled with and she explains how Alison's father's literary preferences and opinions re-emerge in the daughter's graphic life narrative both through text and image. Therefore, *Fun Home* is seen as demonstrating how the past is brought back to life through Bechdel's artistic creativity. Chute dismisses again the re-emergence of late nineteenth century Decadent decorativeness both in terms of content and drawing style, which is detailed and excessively ornamented. By paying more attention on this aspect of the narrative, the creation of *Fun Home* is shown to be in many ways similar to the restoration of the Victorian house by Alison's father. The excessive dependence on materiality and ornamentation demonstrates a re-appropriation of Decadent literary and artistic ideas both by the father's obsession with the house and with the daughter's construction of the graphic memoir as an inheritor of this tradition.

To conclude, Chute's close textual analysis and the comparisons between these artists are lucid and support her argument for new feminist constructions of female subjectivities and the embodiment of female experience and trauma in graphic memoirs. Throughout the book, Chute only provides black and white illustrations, giving their coloured reproductions at the end. In some cases though, it would aid readers more if she included more examples of the panels or pages she analyses in her text as it would give them a more substantial view of the matters she discussed. On another level, each of the five artists included in *Graphic Women* demonstrates a different use of comics and a different approach to the construction of trauma and female experience through the manipulation of visual and textual elements. However, as already mentioned before, the inclusion of less well-known women artists and/or non-Americans would enrich the scope of her investigation in women's graphic memoirs. A last missing element from



the book is a concluding chapter, which would round up Chute's arguments; instead, the book ends with the chapter on Alison Bechdel. Nevertheless, *Graphic Women* is an essential book for those who are interested in autobiography, visual studies and comics in general as it initiates a beginning in the study of women's graphic memoirs.