

5-10-2012

How Do We Read Comics of the Quotidian? (Part I of a Series)

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Recommended Citation

Bramlett, Frank, "How Do We Read Comics of the Quotidian? (Part I of a Series)" (2012). *English Faculty Publications*. 18.

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How Do We Read Comics of the Quotidian? (Part I of a Series)

In two separate posts on *Pencil Panel Page*, Qiana Whitted and Aaron Meskin have explored the way comics readers engage with images. (Click [here](https://pencilpanelpage.wordpress.com/2012/03/15/how-do-we-talk-about-animals-that-talk/) (<https://pencilpanelpage.wordpress.com/2012/03/15/how-do-we-talk-about-animals-that-talk/>) to read Qiana's post and click [here](https://pencilpanelpage.wordpress.com/2012/05/04/what-are-the-secrets-of-identification-and-the-icon-we-call-the-cartoon/) (<https://pencilpanelpage.wordpress.com/2012/05/04/what-are-the-secrets-of-identification-and-the-icon-we-call-the-cartoon/>) to read Aaron's.) Specifically, they engage Scott McCloud's claim that readers identify with drawn images of human beings. To quote McCloud, "when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon—you see yourself" (36).

My question in this post has not to do with images but rather with narrative. When we read comics, to what degree do we see ourselves in the narratives we're reading? Or perhaps more accurately, to what degree do we see our lives represented therein? Do we identify more with those stories that are less realistic than we do with those stories that are more realistic? Although I don't think that the terms *quotidian* and *realistic* are equivalents necessarily, I do think they provide a rich starting point for a discussion.

Charles Hatfield explores this notion of representations of the everyday in his chapter called "The Problem of Authenticity in Autobiographical Comics." In his analysis of Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, Hatfield writes that "Pekar's achievement is to have established a new mode in comics: the quotidian autobiographical series, focused on the events and textures of everyday existence" (109).

And we find representations of the everyday in vast numbers of comics. In her graphic novel *Exit Wounds*, Rutu Modan creates a snapshot of the intertwining of two characters' lives. One central character is Koby, a man who drives a cab in Tel-Aviv for a living. The other central character is Numi, a female soldier in the Israeli army. Koby and Numi spend time together in the story trying to figure out how their lives are connected. [No spoilers here!]



<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/in-the-park-2.jpg>

What interests me about this story is the way that Rutu Modan creates a narrative of every day life —of eating, of sleeping, of swimming, of arguing, of having sex—but infuses in that narrative an incredibly matter-of-fact treatment of bombings. It is notable how the characters in the story move in and out of their conversations with each other, not focusing on how horrible the bombings are but using the bombings as backdrop, as bedrock for conversations revolving around other issues.

Only in occasional moments are bombings the focus of the dialogue; instead, they are much more frequently catalysts which spur narrative action and character development. There is even confusion about which bombings Korby and Numi ask about. Was it the bombing in Hadera? Or did they mean the one in Haifa?



<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/denial-2.jpg>

Are readers more able to identify with narratives that are grounded in the everyday lived experiences of all humans? Are we instead more able to identify with less quotidian, more rarified, perhaps exotic narratives containing mystery, danger, eroticism, and intrigue?

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Posted by [Frank Bramlett](#) on [May 10, 2012](#) in [Graphic Novel](#), [Narrative](#), [Quotidian](#), [Rutu Modan](#), [Scott McCloud](#), [Uncategorized](#).

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About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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