

Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics.

Hillary L. Chute. 2010. Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 297. £18.50, \$26.50, paperback

Over the past few years, academic interest in comics has been on the rise, as indicated by the inauguration of several peer-reviewed journals focusing on graphic narratives (including, for example, the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* and *Studies in Comics*), as well as the establishment of a Comics and Graphic Narratives discussion group at

the Modern Language Association Convention in 2009 (founded by Hillary L. Chute). This academic attention has coincided with an increasing recognition of comics as a respected form of literature in more mainstream venues, from popular bookstores to the pages of *The New York Times Magazine*. Yet, as Chute attests in *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, women have often been virtually left out of discussions of what many see as the “man’s world” of comics. While a large number of women are involved in both the production of and criticism about comics and two are the creators of arguably the most popular and widely acclaimed graphic narratives in recent years (*Persepolis* and *Fun Home*), scholarly criticism about women and comics is not nearly as widespread as it could or should be. Chute’s *Graphic Women* is the first book-length scholarly work devoted to a theoretical exploration of women and comics, and in it she establishes graphic narrative as a form with a profound and unique feminist potential.

Chute devotes each of her five main chapters to a highly influential female cartoonist. Three of these artists, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, and Lynda Barry, have received limited critical attention, while Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel have been written about fairly frequently (though rarely in the context of “women’s comics”). Chute focuses on autobiographical texts, and particularly how the comics form lends itself to the work of testifying to and representing trauma. She reveals how the patch worked and often disconnected structure of comics – prominent in the works of each of these particular cartoonists – in many ways corresponds to the fragmentary nature of traumatic memories. The possibility of representing absence (and, consequently, presence) on the page is, for Chute, one of the quintessentially appealing features of graphic narratives for artists who are interested in exploring complex and often painful personal and communal histories.

In the first three chapters of the book, Chute investigates the various ways that these authors have portrayed childhood and adolescent experiences of sexual trauma, whether visibly or, for Barry, through suggestion and implication. The comics of Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Phoebe Gloeckner, though clearly divergent in aesthetic styles, are both preoccupied with the “complexity of sexuality,” and particularly the decidedly feminist project of demonstrating that representations of sexual trauma and shame do not obviate the possibility of an artist’s exploration and picturing of sexual pleasure, even within the same text (35). Chute reads Barry’s diverse oeuvre as a reflection of her interest in the power of comics to provoke and disturb by stirring the imagination.

In the last two chapters of the book, devoted to Satrapi and Bechdel, Chute investigates the ethics of testifying to the histories of those around us, as well as to our own. In Chute’s reading of Marjane Satrapi’s work, and especially *Persepolis*, she argues the potential of the comics form to “contest dominant images and narratives of history” (136). Similarly, her final chapter on Alison Bechdel argues that comics as a medium is “suited to articulate the dynamic of knowing and not knowing” (181). In

both cases, Chute marks comics as a space where authors can re-create their own versions of a suppressed or censored history.

Graphic Women is a text that will appeal to anyone with an interest in contemporary women's literature and trauma studies, as well as those with a budding or established interest in the rich world of comics studies. Her book includes a twenty-six page appendix of color plates, so those unfamiliar with the texts under discussion can get a real sense of the texture and style of these particular comics creations. In the end, Chute successfully establishes what she sets out to prove; namely, she demonstrates "how and why the stories these authors both tell *and* show could not be communicated any other way" (2).

doi:10.1093/cww/vpr006

TAHNEER OKSMAN
City University of New York Graduate Center, USA
toksman@hotmail.com