

Revelations

How I Tried to Be a Good Person

By Ulli Lust

Seattle, WA; Fantagraphics Books, 2019,

368 pp., \$34.99, softcover

Hot Comb

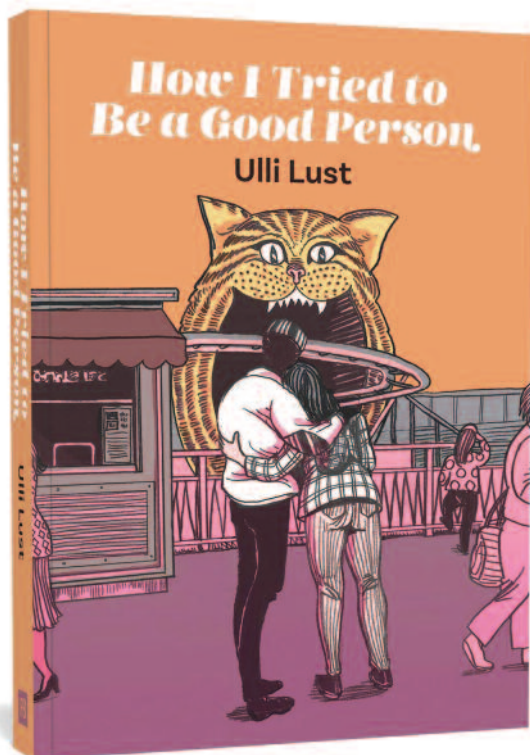
By Ebony Flowers

Montreal, Quebec; Drawn & Quarterly, 2019,

184 pp., \$24.95, paperback

Reviewed by Tahneer Oksman

“The unexamined life is not worth living,” Plato’s Socrates is said to have pronounced at the trial in which he fended for his life. But what exactly does it mean, to examine, or not to examine, a life? More to the point, for one who decides to put pen to page, to share her own story, is examining an ineluctable part of the telling?



As any discerning reader recognizes, every memoir—indeed, every story told that has been based on real life—is the consequence of a sequence involving selection and construction. Where to begin, and where to end. What tone to strike, and what details to share or withhold. Whose perspective to include, and how to shape that point of view. Austrian cartoonist Ulli Lust’s recently translated-into-English graphic memoir, *How I Tried to Be a Good Person* (or, in its original German, *Wie ich versuchte, ein guter Mensch zu sein*) is a book that seems less invested in self-examination and self-discovery than in presentation, in demonstrating the process of exhibiting, mostly through dialogue and visuals, an unfolding strain of events. By the end of this three-hundred-plus page book, in which we’re privy to everything from our protagonist’s most agonizing points of shame to her deepest bodily desires, repeatedly exposed *in flagrante*, it seems curious—remarkable, even—that her character remains something of a mystery.

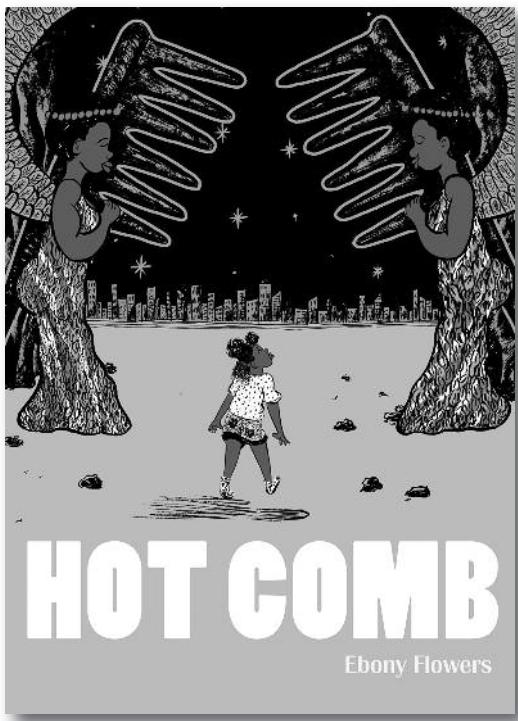


Ulli Lust

Lust’s first graphic memoir, another impressive tome, was brought to the English-speaking world in 2013, with the assistance, and prompting, of the late comics editor, translator, and publisher Kim Thompson. (Translation, in comics, is an especially labor-intensive commitment, as it involves not just linguistic conversion but also re-lettering, often by hand, within pre-allotted, often cramped spaces.) With *Today is the Last Day of the Rest of Your Life*, readers were introduced to young Ulli, the rebellious, punk teenage runaway with a lushly drawn spiky hair-do. In the mid-1980s, as the book recalls, she set out on a wild, some might say reckless, hitchhiking expedition with a new friend.

On their travels through Austria and into Italy, the young women encountered lustful, even dangerous men, who preyed on (and were sometimes the prey of) the penniless pair. By the end of the book, as Ulli returns to her childhood home with her parents, who had been frantically seeking her, she seems largely unaffected. As readers, we know this is not actually the case—she is not the person she was at the beginning of the book; she no longer has the innocence of inexperience—but in what ways, and to what extent, she has been changed are questions that remain unanswered.

As with that book, *How I Tried to Be a Good Person* is best described as atmospherically ambitious. It



opens with an inauspicious line of narration, “The alley was swept every Saturday,” and a subsequent sequence of six relatively symmetrical and balanced panels depicting a man sweeping an alley on what looks to be a suburban, residential street. A school bus whizzes by; two children pass and say hello to the man. As we soon learn, this is the entryway to the apartment where Ulli’s young son, Philipp, lives with her middle-aged parents, who, it was agreed upon some years earlier, would raise him until she found herself in a better position to do so. That the book begins on such a slanted note—Philipp, and Ulli’s family more generally, are rarely the focus of the narrative—is revealing. Though the style proceeds in relatively uniform ways—with geometrically laid out page arrangements, soft, dual-colored landscapes, and generally spare, cartoonishly drawn characters laced throughout—we are often pushed and pulled just outside the frame of the central storyline, just past where, it seems, our attention is meant to be. Ulli is in her



Ebony Flowers

early twenties and frequently visiting the employment office as she searches for a way to make her dream of becoming an artist come true. She visits Philipp most weekends, but mainly the memoir tracks her as she pairs her sexually dissatisfying but emotionally comforting and intellectually rewarding relationship with her twenty-years older boyfriend, Georg, alongside an authorized (and often encouraged) passionate love affair with a Nigerian-born man closer to her age, Kimata (or Kim). Like her readers, Ulli seems continually at risk of being subject to interruption, in this case from living out what she hopes will be her professional destiny.

Much of what happens in this book, as in *Today is the Last Day...*, is presented in competing, often irreconcilable dualities. Ulli feels guilt for living away from her child; as she uncharacteristically tells readers during one of her first encounters with Kim, there are two questions she hates being asked: “Do you miss him?” (of her son), and “Where is the father?” Yet Ulli’s attraction to Kim is founded not only on their mutual, almost fanatical sexual appetites for one another—a development she amply and graphically details on the page—but also on the fact that they both, though for different reasons, remain painfully distanced from their children. And while Ulli spends much of the narrative working hard to maintain her independence from the roles and responsibilities involuntarily hoisted on her, Kim is emphatically trapped in a racist, nationalistic, and anti-immigrant society, in which, as he tells it, African men without papers are told to seek out rich white women for survival. Not surprisingly, and with a commitment-phobic, but caring, older boyfriend (that is, Georg) thrown into the mix, the story does not end well.

Here, too, as in Lust’s earlier autobiographical work, our heroine comes off as less than heroic by the end of the story: she seems to have endured rather than to have pointedly determined to get to where she finds herself by the story’s conclusion. In fact, none of the central characters undergo willful or pronounced transformations, at least within the boundaries of the narrative. Instead, the book presents what could be described, optimistically, as a before, a lead-up, to a life potentially lived meaningfully. It’s a work testifying to pacing and chronology, to those transitional moments in between, to the slow, careful, and cumulative quality of what could, at some later time, make for an examined life.

“I never thought about my hair when we lived in the trailer,” explains our protagonist, Ebony, in the opening story from *Hot Comb*, a debut comics collection by Ebony Flowers. Like Lust, Flowers explores the formative years of a young girl’s life—a time “before”—though in this case Ebony is just eleven years old, and in fifth grade, when her hair begins to take precedence. She and her family have just moved from a trailer in Severn, Maryland, to an “all black neighborhood” just south of Baltimore. Ebony wants to fit in, or at the very least to stop getting picked on by other kids. Over half of this forty-plus page story takes place in Dee’s Salon, a place Ebony lobbies her mother to take her to, in order to get her first perm.

In the end, the kids at the bus stop continue making fun of Ebony’s now-permed hair. But the story pivots less on this disappointing outcome

than on a young girl’s initiation: into a world of Black women’s hair care, its financial and temporal costs, its community, its pleasures and pains, its fantasies and disappointments. “With black hair,” writes comedian Phoebe Robinson in her 2016 book, *You Can’t Touch My Hair*, “there’s a whole culture of shared experiences that many outside the black community do not understand. The amount of time, effort, and money that is spent on black hair is not because of superficiality... [I]t’s because black women know that the quality of their life and how others will treat them is riding on the presentation of their hair.”

Everything in *Hot Comb* revolves around hair, with chapters divided by mock one-page advertisements of hair products. The book is filled with pain, love, and humor. It is drawn all in black-and-white, in a loose, expressive, and often associative mode. Flowers’s style reveals how something as commonplace as one’s hair can open up depths of memory to bring together otherwise seemingly disparate experiences and interactions. In “My lil’ Sister Lena,” the most moving story in the collection, the narrator describes her sister’s experiences playing softball as the only Black girl on her team (she was “the only ‘fly in the milkpan,’ so to speak,” says our narrator). Her white teammates become interested in—or, more accurately, obsessed by—her hair, making it “their little curios,” touching it, talking about it, continually reinforcing Lena as Other. The second half of the story documents, in slow progression, Lena’s consequent ritual of prodding, pulling, and eventually tearing out her hair until she forms bald spots, followed by various attempts by family and professionals to intervene. In other words, in the span of twenty pages, we witness a narrative of cause, effect, and attempted resolution, except that the conclusion comes first when our narrator tells us that Lena eventually stopped playing softball for good and then with an additional reminder (accompanied by a full page close-up testimony of such) that “she still pulls her hair out though...”. As with Lust’s work, this is a book reminding readers how the stories people tell us about themselves, and their related histories, don’t usually begin, or end, just where we think they do or where we might want them to.

In her acknowledgements, Flowers highlights her teacher, Lynda Barry, the beloved cartoonist, author, and educator who is now perhaps best known for her recent works exploring imagination, memory, creativity, and the image. “You taught me how to discover the writing in drawing and the drawing in writing,” Flowers delightfully recognizes. Reading through *Hot Comb* feels like being privy to an intimate, hard-won process of examination and discovery. Even in drawing, and drawing up, the most dismal or tormenting reminiscences, Flowers demonstrates a child’s simplicity and sweetness somewhere waiting to be unearthed. 📖

Tahneer Oksman is an assistant professor at Marymount Manhattan College, the author of “How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?": *Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs* (Columbia University Press, 2016), and the co-editor of the anthology, *The Comics of Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell: A Place Inside Yourself* (University Press of Mississippi, 2018). She often reviews graphic novels and illustrated works for the *Women’s Review of Books*.

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