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Thinking Panoramically

An Interview with Lauren Weinstein

TAHNEER OKSMAN

Lauren Weinstein's *Girl Stories* (2006), originated as a series of short comics on www.gURL.com, a website aimed at teenage girls. *Girl Stories* is a small, brightly colored book, drawn in the bubbly style of a young, creative teenager. The graphic novel follows the life of a girl entering the eighth grade as she experiences the humiliations and exhilarations of her young adulthood. Weinstein has also published less categorizable comics in the form of a short series called "Little Laurie Sprinkles," created for Seattle's independent newspaper, *The Stranger*, and an oversized, beautifully drawn comic book about the adventures of Valkyrie, the great-granddaughter of Thor, entitled *The Goddess of War* [Fig. 52]. Tahneer Oksman interviewed Lauren Weinstein in person on September 20, 2011, at a coffee shop in the small New Jersey town where Weinstein lives. Weinstein discussed how she began writing comics and how her Jewish identity has influenced her project *Girl Stories* (2006), and her current book, its sequel, *Calamity* (in progress).

Each of your books has a different shape and size. What influenced each of your books' unique forms?

Girl Stories was long and looked like a *Garfield* book. It started [as a series] on the web, so that was the easiest size to put all of the work into. As I work on the new book, *Calamity*, which is the same size by default, it makes me think panoramically. With *The Goddess of War*, I was really inspired by old comic strips, like from the 1920s. *Krazy Kat* and all of those old comics. I also love Chris Ware's big books. I wanted to work in the biggest size that I could without making it too much of a publishing issue, but it became a publishing issue. Also, because it's just a pamphlet—it's not even a hardcover—the books get damaged a lot. I don't think I'll ever work in that size again. My originals are really big. It's a daunting thing, to work that big. I do think about a project concept first, and then I design everything around that. The *Girl Stories* books seemed like they should be long and thin and accessible. With *The Goddess of War*, I wanted it to be epic, so I made it big.

How important is packaging for your books and your websites?¹

The *Girl Stories* website was designed by John Kuramoto. We designed it together. We really wanted it to look like a kid's journal. And then my blog is new—I just started to work

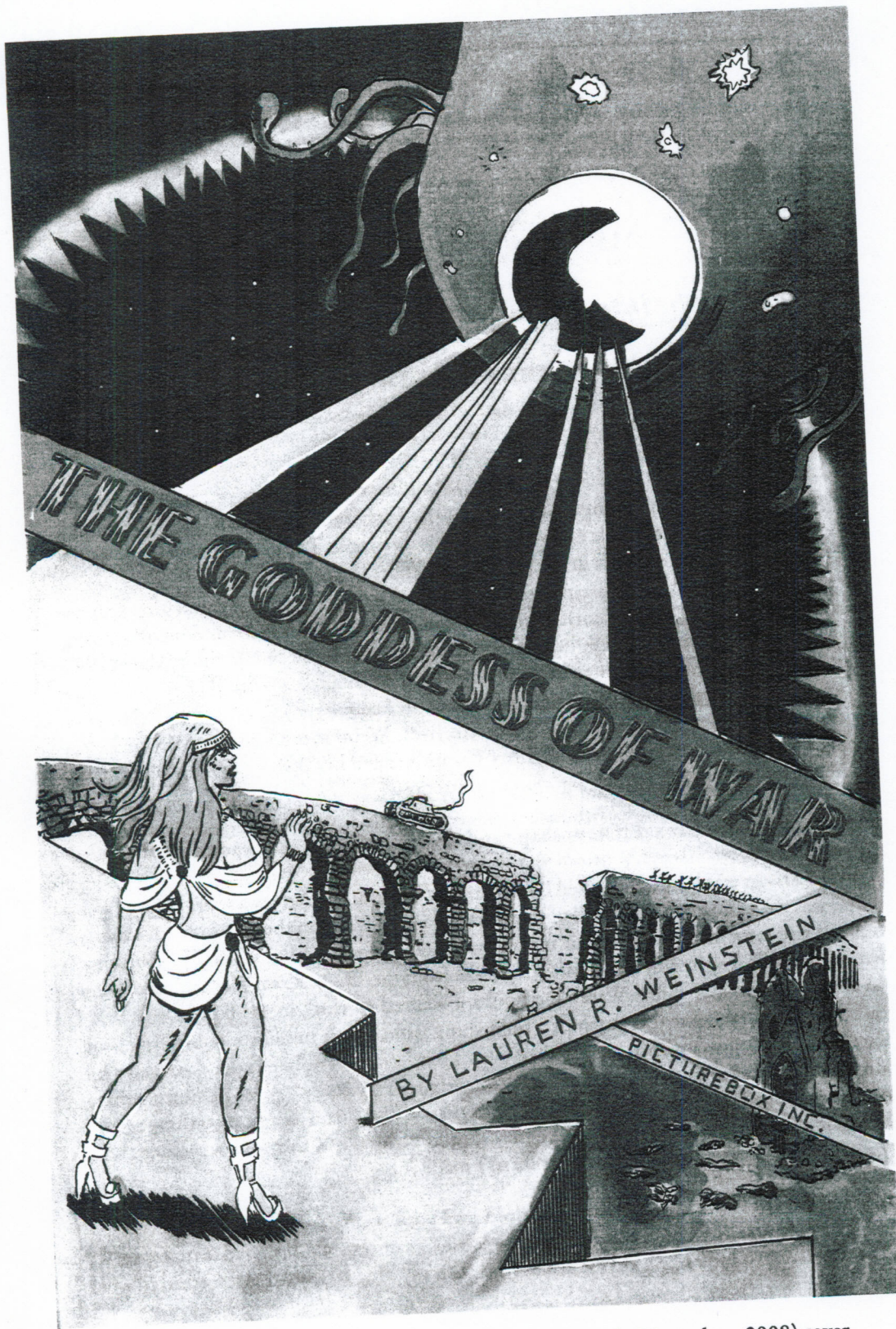


Fig. 52. Lauren Weinstein, *The Goddess of War* (New York: Picturebox, 2008) cover.

on it seriously; my intern of Visual Arts].

How do you feel about

I was recently talking about feminism and fine art, and the main concern is that there's not enough women because even if there is somebody who's the same as me, I'm kind of in a position where I can help and contribute, only recently realized that

Have you ever had a mentor?

I've been really lucky. I've had [Robert] Crumb and a few other different things. I love Robert. She's a peer—I take her

Are you in touch with other cartoonists?

I've corresponded with a few. I'm Facebook friends with a few, comics, not really. Luckily, ... Danny Hellman was a mentor. He was doing cartooning shows, and that's how you'd meet

You have mentioned interest in cartooning.

My heart just wanted to be like Debbie Dreschler's as a cartoonist. I xeroxed "Art School Confidential" and I was laughing and I thought, "I get it instantly, but after I get it, I'm a literal-minded, I can't do it. I think that nowadays it's not as cool then. All stories are hard to tell a story, it would be so separate at that time.

I was a good painter. I feels like there's something that wasn't satisfied with a drawing. I remember making these squares, and then I cut them into smaller and smaller squares, who's a cartoonist and

Did you start with a comic?

The first comic

on it seriously; my intern and I are designing it. She was a student of mine at SVA [the School of Visual Arts].

How do you feel about having an intern?

I was recently talking to a friend who's a painting professor. We were talking about feminism and fine art, and why women don't get ahead more. She was saying that one of the reasons is that there's not a lot of mentorship between older established men and younger women because even if there's nothing going on, it seems weird. It's easier to be a mentor to somebody who's the same sex as you. I think that since I'm at the School of Visual Arts and I'm kind of in a position of power, it's wonderful to have women interns, people that I feel like I can help and connect with other people. I think that's a big deal. It's something that I only recently realized that I could do for people.

Have you ever had a mentor?

I've been really lucky in that I've gotten to meet almost all of my heroes. I've met [Robert] Crumb and Chris Ware—and they've helped me, they've given me advice about different things. I love Gabrielle Bell's work so much, and we go out and draw sometimes. She's a peer—I take her words seriously.

Are you in touch with older women cartoonists?

I've corresponded with some, like Aline Kominsky-Crumb, but not in a serious way. I'm Facebook friends with Carol Tyler. But, in terms of people that have mentored me in comics, not really. Luckily, I met an amazing group of people when I first came to New York ... Danny Hellman was a great mentor. He would do these Max Fish shows, these large cartooning shows, and anybody that was a cartoonist could come and put their work up.² So that's how you'd meet everybody. He's really instrumental in my meeting a lot of people.

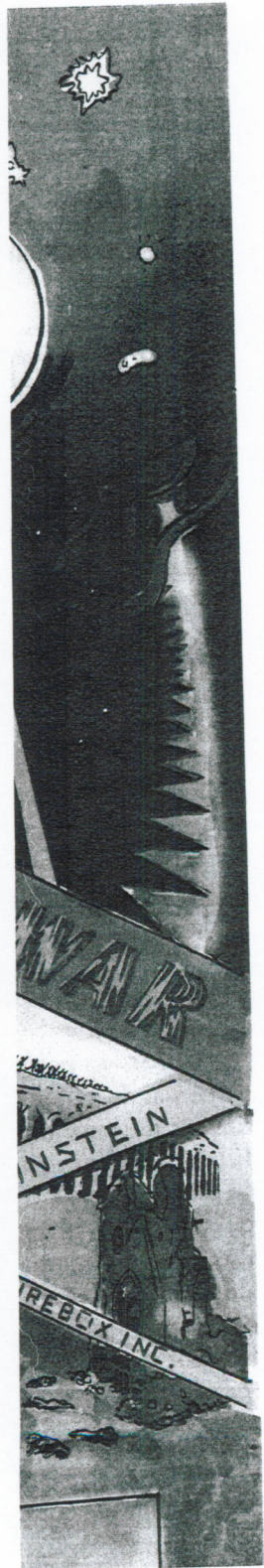
You have mentioned being in art school and hating it, and only later discovering an interest in cartooning.³ How did you arrive at that conclusion?

My heart just wasn't in painting. I wanted to tell stories. I saw Lynda Barry's work and Debbie Dreschler's and Chris Ware's and Crumb's, and Dan Clowes's... I got passed the xeroxed "Art School Confidential" comic in my studio in college and I fell down on the floor laughing and I thought, this is exactly my life.⁴ I just felt comics was my calling... Not instantly, but after I graduated from college, I thought, this makes the most sense to me. I'm literal-minded, I can't talk the talk of the school gallery world, and I'm not into pastiching. I think that nowadays, people tell stories more in art school, they allow that. But it wasn't cool then. All stories had been told; we were in a world of post-stories. And if you wanted to tell a story, it would be through illustration. The world of cartooning and fine art seemed so separate at that time.

I was a good painter and I was good at handling paint in an emotional way, where it feels like there's somebody behind it. It's not so glossy... I could paint anything but I just wasn't satisfied with any theme because it didn't get to the meat of anything for me. I distinctly remember making this one painting. I didn't know what it was, and then I divided it up into squares, and then I cut up those squares into smaller squares, and then I cut everything up into smaller and smaller squares, and then just threw it all away. I feel that's a sign of someone who's a cartoonist and just hasn't figured it out yet.

Did you start with autobiographical comics?

The first comics that I did were for the school comics magazine that my husband was



:box, 2008) cover.

editing at the time. Now he's [Tim Hodler] the editor of *The Comics Journal*. I made a comic about going to Red Lobster⁵ and how I was depressed and the fish were saying: "Well, at least you're not breaded, cheer up." Making that comic came naturally to me. That was the first time I ever did a comic, and it was autobiographical. I was doing all sorts of weird comics when I first started. They were all sort of half art and half comics. I went out for a summer with my friend who was an artist in Connecticut. I was a waitress and I would do landscape paintings on my breaks. At the end of the summer, I put together all of the drawings and I thought, how do I make a comic out of all of this? I decided to turn it into: "Places Where You Could Get Killed in The Litchfield Hills, Conn." [Fig. 53]. And I just put arrows next to each one of the drawings. My first comics were just little moments. After that, I got a job for the website, www.gURL.com.⁶ Their idea was for me to write semi-autobiographical stuff about high school, and I thought: I can do that.

How did you find the job?

This was when the internet was just taking off, around 1997/1998. My roommate's girlfriend's friend was the editor of www.gUrl.com, and they needed comics. When I started, I said I would make just one. I didn't realize you were supposed to work bigger. I didn't know any of the rules. I just did it. At the same time, I got a job for *The Stranger* in Seattle, doing these weird little gag comics. To me, I still feel like that was some of the strongest work I've ever done. They're totally bizarre; there's a certain sensibility in them that's hard to wrap your head around and it's not something that women [at the time] were doing necessarily. The Lynda Barry/Debbie Dreschler confessional women's comics thing always kind of bugged me. I didn't want to be pigeonholed like that. That's why I really tried to do other things... But I also feel there's nothing wrong with telling a good story about your life.

Does that mean you find it easier to write memoir?

I do and I don't. Research-wise, it's easier. It's what happened to you, so you can remember or at least piece together what it must have felt like for something to happen. The story is already there, so you just have to craft it into something good.

Can you talk about your new book, *Calamity*?

A lot of the book revolves around my relationship with my mom and this one incident that happened. It never really dawned on me how important my mom's relationship with her parents was, in shaping her and the decisions she made. But, having just had a child myself, there's nothing that puts you more on a continuum. Suddenly you are a mother and a daughter—and so many things come up about your own childhood. I think about the choices that my mom made and it gives me a different perspective. Thinking in this way involves more work, and also more pain. I've been delving into things that have affected the people in my family for years. It's this big, amazing puzzle.

Girl Stories is considered separate from your other work, less sophisticated because it's about issues of adolescence.⁷

I've always felt really conflicted about *Girl Stories*, though less so now because I know that I was just shooting from the hip. There's a lot going on in those comics. For example, I didn't feel like I wanted to include "Am I Fat?" when I first was trying to put together the book, as I thought it was such a frivolous comic.⁸ It's not a story, it's not art... And then I thought, how could I not put that comic in? It's exactly what I felt like for so many years. The book is uneven because it's stuff that's collected from my early twenties. I agonized over every story but everything that I chose to go into it was consciously done.



Fig. 53. Lauren W
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Fig. 53. Lauren Weinstein, "Places Where You Could Get Killed in The Litchfield Hills, Conn.," *Inside Vineyard* (Cupertino, CA: Alternative Comics, 2003) (n.p.).

I'm always taken aback at how differently people respond to memoir when women are creating it versus men. Women's work often seems to be described as "cathartic."

I did not consider the making of *Girl Stories* to be cathartic. It was more like stabbing a wound over and over again. As soon as I decide to do memoir, the story changes. It's crafted.

You draw a lot of places and maps. The "Litchfield Hills" comic is one example, and the poster-sized map you drew for *The Ganzfeld*.⁹

I like diagramming things, and I love looking at maps. I have a horrible sense of direction. I think drawing out maps helps me visualize an entire space or an entire world; it's a good way of fleshing out a world. When I was a kid, I'd draw tons of weird maps... In third grade, I drew this fancy ballroom—a flat view of a ballroom and all the different rooms and kids having a slumber party in a side room. I just love doing stuff like that. I'm really obsessed with Botticelli's work, all those cartooning things that he did where you have four different views of the person on the same path... I'm doing that a lot in my new books. I like the idea that there are no breaks—you're just traveling along this line... That's what I love about cartooning. There's this time and space, and you have complete control over it and a couple of things can be happening at the same time. I find that true in reality, too. Again, having just had a kid, things are arbitrarily moving forward, but there's a lot that's happening in the background, a lot that happened in the past, that's affecting right now.

Can you talk about the theme of alienation that threads through your work?

When I was younger, I felt genuinely lost. I don't feel that so much anymore. I do feel more grounded now—the comics I'm doing [on my blog] these days are about having a child. Those early comics had that feeling of total alienation. And *Girl Stories* was a book about the worst period in my entire life. So there's no better time to show alienation... Like getting into a tub in front of a whole class—I don't know how that happened, but it did.¹⁰

How does your Jewish identity figure in your works?

It's one of those things that you can't shake. I think maybe I'm an atheist, but a lot of Jews are. There's this really interesting thing with cultural versus religious Judaism—there's a lot of overlap. But I feel like there are certain things, even just the history of cartooning and Judaism, there's something to it. And I don't really know what it is. Maybe it's the idea of making something funny and sad—that funny and sad are basically the same thing, it's just putting a different twist on it. Maybe because Jews like to *kvetch* a lot, there's a *kvetching* aspect to the work. But I don't think you can shake it. *Girl Stories* definitely seems Jewishy to me, even though there's not a lot that's obviously Jewish. There's Latke Boy, for example.¹¹

The name of your persona's nemesis in *Girl Stories* is Glenn Schwartz, a very "Jewish" name. Other cartoonists talk about feeling a discomfort around Jewish boys when they are young—they are surrounded by them, yet they feel alienated from them because nice Jewish girls are supposed to eventually marry Jewish boys.

That's funny—Glenn Schwartz is not a real person. He's an amalgam of people and maybe some of those people were Jewish and some were not. I go back and forth with the question of Jewish identity in my own work. When I was first drawing, I definitely just wanted to be this person that didn't necessarily have a gender or a religion. And now, I like owning up to it all. I feel like you can't shake Judaism and it's so rich, so why not be a member? I'm on a continuum with all of these people that have complained about things. There is also this idea of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, which is completely selfish at the same time.

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These are all themes I'm working on now. There are a couple of scenes in my newest book that deal with being Jewish... My mom got into a car accident, that's the big thing that happened, and we had a *Seder*/Passover in the hospital. And my mother's workaholicism I think also has a lot to do with being Jewish—that she carries the weight of the impoverished on her shoulders—that seems very Jewish to me.

Do you mind being labeled a Jewish cartoonist?

I always hate things that pigeonhole people in that way. But then, I also think it's interesting that there is this strain... It's an easy way to box something in—people are going to think of this person's identity first and foremost, rather than, simply, this is a good story.

In *Girl Stories* you compare your persona's looks with that of another young woman, Diana.

Less Jewish looking ... I was obsessed with Barbies, too. That idea of Jewish beauty—her nose is not as *schnozzy* as mine. That was definitely a real feeling I had.

When you draw female characters, do you think a lot about how you want to portray them, or do you portray them how you think you remember them?

I think it changes from panel to panel. That's what I love about comics. There are a couple of moments in *Girl Stories*... When Lauren and Genine write this letter to play a prank on Glenn, and then she [Lauren] doesn't send it, and it's in order to become friends with the other cooler girls. I very intentionally drew myself looking a lot prettier in that panel because I was morphing into those girls. I think that is something you can do. If you feel really pretty for real, you can look pretty. If you feel spazzy, you can look spazzy. I think the best advice anybody ever gave me about drawing was in fourth grade, after school. A guy that was working at the after-school program said: "Draw a portrait of yourself where you feel like you're drawing the inside of your face." I really take that to heart. I want my drawings to feel like you're looking at the inside of your face. Not the musculature or anything like that, but what's going on in your mind. Even if it's really exaggerated, like the eye-balls are bugging out ... I think morphing the way somebody looks—as long as you keep those big iconic markers—means you can make them look like anything [Fig. 54].

Would you agree that autobiographical comics are a constant battle—you're drawing how other people see you, but you're also drawing how you see yourself?

Chris Ware said it best when he said: "Comics is the art of memory." That seems pretty obvious for memoir comics, but comics are the best at constructing a fictional memory. They're so controlled through the filter of somebody else that you're invited into this world that's completely synesthetic, that somebody else is creating. I think that's why dream comics are so popular and why they work better here than in hardly any other medium—you can take a person down a road with you in a very specific way. As a cartoonist, you think about how you're showing every aspect of a situation: what parts of the backgrounds do you put in, and what parts of the person's body are you going to show, and what kind of style are you going to use. It's really layered.

So it's similar to film?

It is like film, but then it's not because you can play around with how the viewer perceives time—your eyes can linger for longer, the format can completely change... You can't do a rant very well in film, but you can do it very well in comics. You could do a comic of somebody walking down the street, ranting about something, and that would be completely compelling

DIANA IS SUCH A SMART, GIVING PERSON THAT I PREDICT THAT IN SIX YEARS SHE WILL BE IN AFRICA SAVING CHILDREN FROM STARVATION AND MALARIA! AND JOHN WILL BE RIGHT BY HER SIDE BEING THE LAMEASS THAT HE IS.



Fig. 54. Lauren Weinstein, "Diana," *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006) 174.

if the composition and drawing was interesting. In a film it would be boring. I think it's a specific filter and I take [the notion] that comics are the art of memory as a practice. It's not exactly a true memory, but you're creating something so specific that you want the viewer to key into it and be in that space. That's what that whole map piece was about that I did for *The Ganzfeld*. It was just creating all these four different people's lives, a memory of their entire lives, in the course of one day at the park. It's so cool the way you can do that with comics. That's why it's such a humbling task. At every level, there's another thing that you do, and there's so much that's already been done that you can look at.

Whose work do you look at?

Full disclosure—my husband is the editor of *The Comics Journal*, so every day we get a free box of comics delivered to our house. I've been reading French comics artist Jacques Tardi recently. He does a lot of film noir-ish and weird surrealist stuff. I've been reading him, and his style is just so appealing. I love Lynda Barry. I love Gabrielle [Bell]'s work. I love Vanessa [Davis]'s work... I love *Popeye*, I love slapstick, just do-anything-you-can-do-to-get-that-story-to-move-ahead, funny, rapid-fire stuff. And I love old *Mad Magazines*...

You've mentioned before that you want to write a book about being pregnant...

I took tons of notes when I was pregnant, and I've been interviewing a lot of people. It seems like everyone I know just got pregnant in the last year or so. To me, pregnancy seemed like a second adolescence. And in working on the sequel to *Girl Stories*, a lot of pregnancy things came up even as I was doing something about high school—the way your whole mind changes, trying to wrap itself around something new. Once you're a new parent, it is a bit like being in high school again. You're meeting all of these new moms, and are they going to be the same kind of cool as you? You just want to make sure that your kids like each other and that you like each other. I've started to just put pregnancy stuff online [Weinstein's blog]. I think that will generate an audience and it's going to help sell and help me do the work for it. It's something that seems to write itself... For the first time in a lot of adults' lives, in my life, you're handing your body over to somebody else. There are all these things

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that happen over the course of a pregnancy, such as genetic testing and all sorts of things that I don't think anyone is really equipped to deal with. It's medical, but it's also about how your whole life changes in kind of an amazing and wonderful way, but nobody writes about it.

There doesn't seem to be a lot written about how pregnancy and becoming a mother affects women's work...

I actually made a comic about this recently. Once I stopped breastfeeding, my drive to work came back. The oxytocin comic.¹² There's this amazing calm that I carried with me when I was pregnant that I loved. I just felt really excited, I couldn't wait to meet Ramona. And I feel like that's an important thing to talk about. I think in my work in general, I strive to get a lot of different angles of a situation. I try to just be honest, even if it's just telling the "emotional truth." For me, the big question is how to organize the book. Like *Girl Stories*, they are visual essays that are anecdotal, but they touch on big themes that people can relate to... And, also, I'd like to include other people's birth stories because I love hearing how the deal went down for people. It's really fascinating. That's what I'm thinking about right now. I've been getting a lot of feedback about the pregnancy stuff recently. I just went to the Small Press Expo and a lot of people came up to me and have been telling me that they've been reading my blog. I have a binder and I keep throwing stuff in for this pregnancy book. I think that, for right now, the Internet is the best way of laying claim to it, of putting it out there.

NOTES

1. Weinstein currently has a web address, www.girlstoriescomics.com, which links both to her blog and to a website centered specifically on *Girl Stories*.
2. Max Fish is a bar and art gallery located on the lower east side of Manhattan. Danny Hellman curated an annual comics show at Max Fish from 1990 to 2000.
3. In her interview with Jesse Sposato, published on SadieMagazine.com (2011), Weinstein talks about her time in art school: "I hated it ... I hated not knowing what I was doing. I really wanted to tell a story and I liked drawing, and you couldn't really do that with painting. And I didn't really know comics yet, although I kind of did—I just didn't realize I liked them so much... I didn't realize that women even made comics; I hadn't seen any comics by women yet. But I graduated and I kept making paintings and never felt like they were doing what I wanted them to do..." Weinstein also talks about her experiences in art school in a recorded interview with Robin McConnell posted July 8, 2009, on www.inkstuds.org. Finally, in an interview with Emily Bobrow printed in *The Believer* (2007), Weinstein also discusses her move to comics.
4. "Art School Confidential" is a short story published by Daniel Clowes as part of his *Eightball* series. It was also adapted into a film directed by Terry Zwigoff in 2006.
5. Red Lobster Seafood Restaurants are an American restaurant chain.
6. gUrl.com was founded in 1996. According to the site, it is a "leading online community and content site for teenage girls."
7. In his introduction to an *Inkstuds* interview, for example, Robin McConnell describes *Girl Stories* as a collection which "I was carefully informed does not represent your work."
8. "Am I Fat?" is a comic, which can be found at the end of *Girl Stories* (191–200), in which Weinstein's teenage persona explores her nagging anxiety about her weight, as well as her general relationship with food and with how women are depicted by the media. The subsequent comic: "Fat Feedback" (201–9), explores the many responses Weinstein received from young women upon the original online publication of the comic.
9. According to its website, *The Ganzfeld* is "an annual book of pictures and prose." It was originally founded in 2000 by three art graduates of Washington University in St. Louis, Dan Nadel, Patrick Smith, and Tim Hodler. In 2008, its final issue (#7) included a full-size, two-sided poster by Weinstein. One side of the poster features a colored drawing of a park with many of the same characters drawn serially on the page, engaging in various activities and taking up different spaces on the page.
10. In "The Tub," another comic published in *Girl Stories* (34–45), Weinstein's persona volunteers in science class to help her teacher demonstrate how Archimedes discovered how to measure volume. The comic depicts her stepping into a trash can lined with a garbage bag at the boys' locker room in the basement of school, in front of her

entire class. In the last panel of the comic, as she walks away, barefoot and shivering in her bathing suit, one of her classmate's speech bubble reads "freak" (45).

11. Latke Boy is featured in "The Chanukah Blues" (64-74). As he describes himself: "I help Jewish boys and girls everywhere get over the Chanukah Blues," 71.

12. This unnamed comic can be found on www.laurenweinstein.com. The comic begins with the opening narrative, "The day I weaned Ramona ..." and continues "... was the same day I got an intern and started to update my website a lot."

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 _____. *Inside Vineyard*. Gainesville, Florida: Alternative Comics, 2003

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Corinne Pearlman is a regular contributor to *Quarterly* until 2011, a commissioning editor and a partner in Co to produce health in group that has been conversation is base Sarah Lightman in 1

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