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Drawing Expansive Narrative Boundaries*

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Andrew J. Kunka. *Autobiographical Comics*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Nicole Dib

University of California, Santa Barbara, ndib@umail.ucsb.edu

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Abstract

Review of Andrew J. Kunka. *Autobiographical Comics*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Keywords

autobiographical comics, comics studies, graphic life writing

Andrew J. Kunka. *Autobiographical Comics*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 286 pp.

As an introduction to a genre, a reference guide, and a critical study, Andrew J. Kunka's *Autobiographical Comics* represents a necessary foray into the particulars of autobiographical graphic narratives. His book contributes to the *Bloomsbury Comics Studies* series, upholding its commitment to expansive and accessible introductions to comics and Comics Studies. Kunka deftly juggles concepts new and familiar to Comics Studies, as his thorough survey of this genre takes up questions of reliability, authenticity, and objectivity. All the while, he pays special attention to the formal aspects of comics, and in his consideration of how autobiographical questions and literary concepts play out in graphic narratives, he is always aware that his subject matter interweaves form and content as only the visual-meets-written medium of comics can. Kunka charts the way seemingly familiar formal elements, such as caption boxes, parenthetical asides, and exaggerated realism, play a role in how "autobiographical comics can challenge truth claims" (9), and he proves that they have a unique role in this graphic medium. Kunka also invests in the "taxonomic anxieties" felt by autobiographical artists, which backgrounds his project's commitment to holding generic instability in hand while simultaneously providing an entryway into the world of autobiographical comics for readers of all familiarity levels (13). His book explores the contours of the genre and its "taxonomic" hurdles, while providing especially intriguing analyses of autobiographical comics' contributions to trauma studies, questions of race and ethnicity, and other critically important social and cultural concerns.

To guide us through the genre and its ambivalent mix of autobiography with seemingly inherent fictionality, Kunka organizes his book into five chapters that can each stand alone for readers who want to read about particular works or concepts, although together they provide an expansive view of the genre. After the introduction's discussion of the "porous boundaries" of autobiography, chapter two entitled "The History of Autobiographical Comics" carefully traces autobiographical "hints" in works that come before the 1970s boom of more explicitly autobiographical graphic narratives (15). Providing a chronology of autobiographical glimpses in earlier comics proves the medium's potential to eventually become a popular site for autobiography even before the emergence of explicit autobiography in stand-alone, often book-length works such as *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972). Kunka's survey of autobiographical traces in strips and stories from the 1900s to the 1960s leads to his definition of "proto-autobiographical comics": works that exhibit the tensions and characteristics of autobiographical comics while still being more over-exaggerated and caricatural than post-1970s works (22). Kunka thus brings to light these proto-examples, helpfully qualifying them by pointing out their relative lack of influence

but still unpacking their history, necessary for a fuller understanding of autobiographical comics. The rest of the chapter includes a survey of the “underground comix” period, where Kunka explores how taboo-breaking personal stories in anthologies such as *It Aint Me Babe* (1970) and in series like *Gay Comix* (1980-1998) would eventually lead to the more expansive autobiographical comics that are often called graphic novels today. This chapter continues the historical survey into the twenty-first century, unveiling the early seeds of autobiography that eventually bloom into mainstream titles whose complexity and influence led to the cementation of Comics Studies as a “legitimate area of academic interest” (53).

Kunka’s third chapter on “Critical Questions” negotiates the complexities of autobiography as a genre, which magnify when mixed with the particulars of the comics form. His summation of readers’ expectations for authenticity being troubled in comics is especially provoking: in the space between the written word and the photographic or filmic image, comics, as a drawn medium, require a different understanding of objectivity and authenticity. As Kunka explains, “the autobiographical experience is more transparently filtered or mediated through the artist’s consciousness and style” (60). Readers of autobiography necessarily reorient themselves and expect different levels of factuality or objectiveness from a work that claims to be autobiographical; the addition of words to pictures, for example, can add a new filter. Kunka walks us through various other stylistic choices, such as Lynda Barry’s caption boxes in *One Hundred Demons* (2002), that serve as the narrating “I,” a type of “focalization” that filters the narrative (62). Artistic choices such as this one help compose Kunka’s overview of autobiographical narrative theory as unique to comics, and they also help his examination of authenticity, another subsection of his “Critical Questions” chapter. “Style as an indicator of authenticity” is a claim that brings up intriguing ways to rethink mimesis in comics (71). A realistic drawing style does not necessarily convince a reader of the artist’s authenticity, for example, and Kunka probes these concerns to consider the impact of authorial choice on our reading practice. Does seemingly spontaneous art, for example, with drawing errors and all, suggest a more authentic story experience?

In keeping with the format of works in the *Bloomsbury Comics Studies* series, Kunka also includes a chapter on the “Social and Cultural Impact” of autobiographical comics and a fifth, final chapter on “Key Texts” (this final chapter is followed by appendices, a glossary, interviews, comic excerpts, and terms, which round off the book’s usefulness for students and teachers). Within the fourth chapter on “Social and Cultural Impact,” the section on trauma ties in especially nicely to the book’s interest in autobiographical specificity, considering (among other questions) why autobiographical comics seem more invested in covering traumatic events rather than the mundane experiences of everyday life. Kunka’s close reading of how form mirrors content in comics that cover traumatic experiences is

especially valuable, as he explains how “the fragmented, panel-to-panel nature of the comics form can be used to represent the tragic, traumatic experience” of, for example, grieving a lost child in Tom Hart’s *Rosalie Lightning* (2015) (87). Kunka’s exposition of these moments in autobiographical comics is helpful as a close reading guide for readers, students, and teachers of this genre of comics. As importantly, the perspectival work he does in the “Social and Cultural Impact” chapter regularly asks us to reconsider what we expect or even prefer from graphic narratives. He points to lesser studied texts such as Raina Telgemeier’s *Smile* (2010) and *Sisters* (2014) as examples of popular autobiographical comics that deal less with trauma and more with everyday experiences, and he prompts comics scholars to engage with these kinds of works in addition to heavier works of historical or personal trauma. Kunka is equally attentive to the importance of social movements and issues, and this chapter’s sections on “Women’s Underground Comix” and “Queer Comics and the Underground,” together with his survey of comics that engage with questions of race and ethnicity, are a tremendous resource for anyone crafting a syllabus and hoping to include popular or lesser known works.

Kunka’s introduction guides and helps us interrogate the genre of autobiographical comics. His careful survey and his attention to texts and critical questions both popular and lesser known make this book a clear and compelling resource for readers of comics who might wonder about the narrative, stylistic, or thematic questions behind comics that represent, in so many different ways, autobiographical experiences.

Nicole Dib
University of California, Santa Barbara