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Jean Braithwaite, ed. Chris Ware: Conversations. Jackson: The UP of Mississippi, 2017.

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Abstract

Review of Jean Braithwaite, ed. *Chris Ware: Conversations*. Jackson: The UP of Mississippi, 2017.

Keywords

Chris Ware, comics, popular culture, creative process

Jean Braithwaite. *Chris Ware: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2017. vii +250 pp.

If the subject were any other cartoonist, the publication of *Chris Ware: Conversations* would be a matter of course. As the field of comics studies matures, it is only natural that the canon of American comics will expand, and with that expansion comes the need for access to reference materials. In some respects, this type of book would be noteworthy regardless of its subject, as it signals that comics studies has reached the point at which entire bodies of work are being discussed in scholarly contexts, as opposed to a handful of comics being selected and presented as a cut above the rest. This is all to say that, from the beginning, *Chris Ware: Conversations* distinguishes itself by filling a gap in comics scholarship by focusing on *oeuvre* rather than on individual texts.

What makes this book especially timely, however, is the fact that Chris Ware is not simply part of the rank and file of contemporary American cartoonists—as much as he would like to argue otherwise. Since Art Spiegelman invited him to contribute to *Raw Magazine* in 1987, Ware has won the admiration of fellow cartoonists, critics, and readers of all stripes as a result of his meticulously crafted *ACME Novelty Library* series and his wildly popular long-form comics, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) and *Building Stories* (2012).

In her introduction, Jean Braithwaite recognizes that one of the biggest challenges in writing about Chris Ware is honoring Ware's self-critical, introspective temperament (often framed as shtick) without allowing it to take the spotlight off his work. Still, it can be difficult to remove Ware's personality from the equation entirely, and Ware himself has insisted on the separation of his personal identity (perceived by readers) from his professional persona. One part of this book's project is to preserve interviews from Ware's early career, many of which were published in intimate venues that are now difficult to track down (zines, small literary magazines, etc.). As a result, comics scholars face the problem of writing about Ware's constantly evolving body of work when so many early editions are extremely hard to find. These challenges arise not only from the usual difficulties of locating early serializations of later-collected works, but also from Ware's earnest attempts to remove his early work from the market. Such is the case with *Floyd Farland*, one of Ware's early texts that is mentioned in several of the interviews in this volume.

Nevertheless, this book is not entirely a labor of preservation. In addition to lesser-known early interviews, Braithwaite includes several noteworthy interviews that occurred after the year 2000—the year in which Ware received widespread recognition for *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. Ranging from a conversation with Ira Glass for *This American Life* #178 to a live interview at the Copenhagen international comics festival, these post-*Corrigan* pieces connect well

to the earlier interviews. In these, Ware's enthusiastic endorsement of fellow cartoonists, his staid dedication to an exacting creative process, and his bleak optimism regarding contemporary culture endures. The only difference in these later interviews is that Ware now speaks to an international audience.

Closing out the book are twenty pages of editor Jean Braithwaite's previously unpublished correspondence with Chris and his wife, Marnie Ware. Although it is not structured like a typical conclusion, Braithwaite covers a large amount of ground in this section. In addition to countering the common characterization of Ware's work as depressing, she gives Ware the opportunity to talk about his literary and philosophical influences to a greater degree than usual. For example, Ware recounts the influence of Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor, authors whose depictions of the human condition tread the same fine line between horror and beauty. The highlight of this section is Ware's description of an epiphany he had in high school: "I also remember sitting in ninth grade and suddenly realizing that Hemingway had ordered his sentences in the same succession that one more or less experiences and understands a situation" (239). Not long after, Ware explains, he had a similar revelation about the way the brain visually processes a situation. While this small insight does not solve the puzzle of Ware's inventive art style, so to speak, it does shed light on the logic behind his meticulously segmented way of visually representing the flow of time. This section containing Braithwaite's previously unpublished correspondence responds to a concern raised in Ware's 1994 interview for *Destroy All Comics*, where he laments: "It's getting worse with me. The weekly strip now is almost in real time. . . . It took eight panels for a character to put his pants on last week" (22).

Braithwaite's interview with Marnie is similarly productive. In a way, this section updates Charles Brownstein's 2000 interview with the partners of Chris Ware, Daniel Clowes, Adrian Tomine, and Gilbert Hernandez. Here, Braithwaite speaks to Marnie about life with Chris after the birth of their daughter, highlighting Marnie's unique perspective on the development of female characters in Ware's more recent work. When asked about *Building Stories*, for example, Marnie states: "I think Chris captures what certain aspects of parenthood can feel like for both men and women. It is a story about becoming the costar in your own life and how important and necessary it is to do that when you have children" (237).

Braithwaite's experience in both academic and creative writing circles shines in this volume. Choosing from the deluge of existing interviews with Chris Ware is no easy feat. Braithwaite's careful selection not only ensures that hard-to-find early interviews are not lost to time, but also showcases a wide range of interviews—academic and public, live, and virtual—that Ware has given since the publication of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. With interest in Ware's work on the rise, this book could not have come at a better time.

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