

**The Literariness of Hybrid Forms:
The Place of Autographics *Persepolis*, *Fun Home* and *Can't We Talk
About Something More Pleasant?* in the Literary Field**

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MA THESIS
LITERATURE TODAY
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

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5 NOVEMBER 2018

Content

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: Literature Review.....	7
Chapter 2: Memory Processes and Identification in Autographics	22
Chapter 3: Adult Content and Trauma in Autographics	41
Conclusion	59
Works Cited	62

Abstract

This thesis explores the place of autobiographical comics in the literary field. Since Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, there has been an increase in the attention of literary prizes and the literary field for the medium of comics. It is striking that this attention mostly stretches to autobiographical comics in particular. This study aims to show that the three autobiographical comics *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, and *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant* by Roz Chast are indeed literary, even though it is a hybrid form that combines image and text. The study is based on the work of Rita Felski on literariness and gives an overview of the current debates in the academic field of comics and life writing. Satrapi, Bechdel and Chast use the comics form to deal with memory processes and trauma, whereby they construct a new literary aesthetic. Because of the form and its literary qualities, the reader constantly is invited to engage with the text in different ways. In this way, the thesis aims to show that the autobiographical comic has some inherently literary qualities.

Introduction

Literary prizes historically have much influence on the canon of anglophone literature. Big prizes such as the Man Booker, the Nobel Prize for Literature, or the Pulitzer Prize, to name just a few, garner a great amount of attention each year, and the nominees and winners are usually put at the front in bookshops and see an increase in sales. James English describes cultural prizes, among which literary prizes, as “fundamentally equivocal” in nature (7). On the one hand, the institutions behind those prizes do intend to honour works that are in their opinion worth celebrating, but on the other they are often also concerned with self-promotion and money. Additionally, different prizes have different criteria for determining which writer or book wins, which makes it hard to define the position of prizes within the literary field. The choices by the judges can be controversial: when the Nobel Prize for Literature went to Bob Dylan in 2016, many journalists, writers, and others working in the literary field criticised the Swedish Academy (Gezari 480; North; Stephen; “Should Bob Dylan”). The main point of this criticism touched upon the debate on what literature is. Dylan makes music, but that does not necessarily mean it is not also literature; think of art forms such as slam poetry or rap music (literally rhythm and poetry). Besides winning a literary prize, Bob Dylan has been the object of study for literary scholars, such as Sudev Pratim Basu, as well. Literary research has also been conducted on rap music and slam poetry; for example, Ernest Morrell and Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade have examined the promotion of academic literacy through engaging hip-hop culture and both Bronwen Low and Susan B. A. Somers-Willett have researched slam poetry. A different hybrid form are comics, which combines word and image. While some academic attention had been given to comics before, for example by Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman’s autobiographical comic *Maus* changed the game when it won a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and the topic of comics became subject to increasing academic attention.

It is striking that many of the comics celebrated by literary prizes are autobiographical. Three of the most popular comics, which have been written about by many academics and are part of the curriculum at some universities, are Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and the Story of a Return*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?: A Memoir*. They have won or were shortlisted for many literary prizes, among which the ALA Alex Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the LAMDA Book Award and the Kirkus Prize for Nonfiction. These nominations evoke the question of why autobiography was the first genre of comics to be recognised in the literary field and in what ways comics can be considered literature. To answer these questions, there first needs to be an understanding of what literature or 'literariness' is. There has been much contention between academics as to what defines a literary text, as opposed to non-literary, and what literature does. In its argument, this thesis will predominantly draw on the work by Rita Felski, who gives an account of the meaning of literature in her book *Uses of Literature*. She identifies a theological view and an ideological view as the two main, contemporary views on literature but rejects both (Felski 4; 6). Instead, she proposes that literature is both about the aesthetic as well as the reader's engagement with the text (6); reading literature involves four different elements, namely "recognition", "enchantment" stemming from the aesthetic, the creation of "social knowledge" and "the experience of being shocked by what we read" (11). The reader thus is very involved in the literary text and the text seems to invite this reader engagement. Felski does contend that these are not "intrinsic literary properties", but "are woven into modern histories of self-formation and transformation" (11). This thesis aims to show that the autobiographical comics by Satrapi, Bechdel and Chast are intricately layered and they use the comics form to add to what the term 'literariness' can mean. The combination of word and image is used to give an insight into the complex working of autobiographical creation, such as memory processes,

trauma and relationships, that adds to the possibilities of life writing and engages with the meaning of literature as identified by Felski.

The thesis is compiled of three different chapters. Firstly, the literature review will give a summary of the history of comics in relation to the academic field and addresses different current debates with regard to comics. The review gives an overview of what has already been researched by academics who concern themselves with comics. Chapter two will start to explore the three case studies by Satrapi, Bechdel and Chast with regard to self-identification and memory processes in autobiographical comics. Chapter three will then address the different types of adult content and trauma that pervade the comics. Finally, the conclusion will bring the different chapters together and makes some suggestions for further study.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Only fairly recently have literary scholars developed an interest in comics as a form of literature. However, comics have existed for over a century and the term ‘graphic novel’ was first coined in 1964 (Chute “Introduction” 15), which means that the history of the medium itself is much longer than its academic history. Over time, there have been several different approaches to comics or graphic novels in literary studies. In 1994 *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud was published, a book that explored the form of comics and is still frequently referred to by contemporary scholars. More recent works include *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* by Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey and *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*, edited by Stephen Tabachnik. These books are an indication that comics are increasingly being seen as part of the literary field. They attempt to compile different approaches to comics and explore the possibilities of this form within the literary field. Another relevant and recent work, which focuses on the history and development of comics is *On the Graphic Novel* by Santiago García. Autobiographical comics in particular have gained much attention in recent work, and are the main focus of the scholarly work by Hillary Chute and Gillian Whitlock. However, the internationality of comics has also gained considerable attention in this field, for example by Dan Mazur and Alexander Danner. There are many issues that these scholars address, among which the most important are the form of the comic and the possibilities that arise from this form, the relationship between ‘high art’ and ‘low art’, the relationship between comics and popular culture, the pre-existing theories on comics, and the relationship between comics and feminism.

One of the key issues that needs to be addressed here is the internationality of comics, as comics studies has observed a divide between American comics, European comics and Japanese mangas. *Persepolis* is hard to place in any of these categories, because it was written in France by an Iranian author but is often studied in an anglophone context. This is because it is often cited as being made specifically for a western audience (Malek 375) and was

published during a time in which memoirs were experiencing a surge in the USA, especially memoirs by Iranian women (Malek 360). This thesis will focus on comics in an anglophone context, as the English translation of *Persepolis* is used and Satrapi's comic is studied alongside two American comics. Nevertheless, it must be noted that *Persepolis* was first published in Europe and has won literary prizes in France. Furthermore, this thesis does not consider any mangas, because there have not yet been influential autobiographical mangas by female writers that have been recognised in the literary field. Still, it must be acknowledged that mangas have "played an important role in the graphic novel boom" and has regained the female audience (García 177), while for years comics had the reputation of being geeky and predominantly for men. The increased interest of women in comics and the change in its reputation, partially invigorated by mangas, also made way for female cartoonists to publish their own work.

Before continuing to the most recent developments in comics, the history of comics will be addressed briefly to give an overview of the processes that have shaped the form of the comic as it exists now. The first comics work in America was a comic called *The Yellow Kid*, which was published in *New York World* by Joseph Pulitzer in 1896 (Chute "Introduction" 13). Additionally, multiple other illustrations have been found from the eighteenth and nineteenth century that are perceived as precursors of the comic form. Tabachnik points towards the drawings by William Hogarth, James Gillray, and Thomas Rowlandson, who painted sequential panels that were used to tell a story (27). Tabachnik also cites Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as an eighteenth-century example of illustrations that "are not an added on or extraneous interpretations of aspects of the book", but rather "intrinsic to the pages on which they appear" (27). Another example of an early cartoonist was the Swiss illustrator Rodolphe Töpffer, who drew sequential, satirical stories, one of which was published under the title *Histoire de Monsieur Jabot* in 1833 (Mazur and Danner 58). While these early examples did not use text balloons and in some cases did not make use of different

panels on one page, they all made use of sequential pictures, sometimes with text underneath it. In this sense, they were among the first to experiment with sequential pictures (and text) to create a narrative. The combination between narrative and images was later expanded which paved the way towards comics as literature.

Although the artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth were drawing for an adult audience, in the first half of the twentieth century this changed, and comics were easily accessible and aimed predominantly at children (Mazur and Danner 59; Tabachnik 27). Consequently, comics were not considered a serious art form and were not part of the academic canon during that time. Because of the looming threat of war, this period also saw the rise of the superhero comics in the United States (Tabachnik 29). This began with the publication of *Superman* in the 1930s, which was immensely popular among children. Additionally, most comics were printed periodically and relatively cheaply, which led to the status of comics as a mass-market product. Still, during this period there were many unrecognised artists who experimented with the medium of comics. For example, Chute states that the movements of Dada and surrealism were a big influence on the comic books of the first half of the twentieth century and “the first modern graphic narratives, called ‘wordless novels,’ had already appeared” (“Comics” 455). This meant that comics were associated with high art even before it was studied in a literary context. After the Second World War, other genres than superheroes or political satire became popular, such as romance and horror. As the topics in these new comics were sometimes extremely violent or sexual and a big part of the audience of comics were still very young, many Americans became concerned for the effect these comics had on children, leading to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in the US (Tabachnik 29). This was a censoring body that regulated the content of comics, ensuring that most of the violence was cut out (Tabachnik 29).

Ironically, the CCA had an enormous influence on the artists that first shaped the ‘graphic novel’ in the form it now takes. The strict censorship around comics opened the

doors for an underground movement, which aimed to free comics “from commercial strictures of any kind” (Chute “Introduction” 14). The artists of the underground started to experiment with the possibilities of comics as a form of narration and as a form of art (Chute “Introduction” 14). Many have cited Eisner as a pioneer in the production of comics, both fiction and autobiographical (Chute “Introduction” 14; Tabachnik 35-6; Mazur and Danner 62). While the term ‘graphic novel’ had been used before, in 1978 Eisner’s *A Contract with God* was the first comics work that was marketed as a graphic novel (Chute “Introduction” 14). The intent was to create comics that were “an art form for grown-ups” (Tabachnik 35), and soon comics or the graphic novel became “an accepted medium for literary and visual creativity and storytelling” (Baetens and Frey 74). Even the traditional superhero comics started addressing more adult topics, such as Marvel’s *The Death of Captain Marvel* (Baetens and Frey 79). Additionally, many of the underground artists such as Justin Green and Aline Kominsky-Crumb, who published autobiographical comics, influenced Art Spiegelman in the making of *Maus*, which is arguably “the most globally famous graphic narrative” (Chute “Introduction” 18). These underground artists opened the way for artists such as Alison Bechdel and Marjane Satrapi, because they approached the comic as a sophisticated form and experimented with the possibilities of aesthetics and reader engagement that the form offered, especially within the autobiographical genre.

Graphic novel, comics, bande dessinée... What’s in a name?

The long history and the relatively late emergence of the term graphic novel has sparked a debate amongst literary scholars as to the terminology of this form. When artists started to create a more serious and adult form of comics and this development was more widely recognised, different terms were coined to refer to different kinds of comics, such as co-mix, graphic novel, graphic narrative, bande dessinée, manga, funnies and more. While some of them can be used to refer to a more specific type of comic, such as the term co-mix, which

was more specifically used for the comics that were created in the underground after the CCA and frequently used by Art Spiegelman (Frey and Noys 256), *bande dessinée*, which is used to refer to European or French/Belgian comics, and *manga*, which is used to refer to Japanese comics, there is not one term that all academics who study comics agree on. There certainly is an argument to be made for a different term for literary comics. For one, many of those are published like novels in a book format that presents one ongoing narrative, as opposed to a collection of short comics, or a series of shorter comic books, which is very common for the superhero comics for instance (Baetens and Frey 13). Additionally, these works usually have more complex content, that really invites and requires the reader to engage with the text in several ways, than the comics of the early twentieth century, which were published purely for entertainment, were aimed at the masses and often had a very young readership (Frey and Noys 255).

Nowadays, the term *graphic novel* is perhaps most widely used – many of the books and articles written by the critics here have this term in their titles. Nevertheless, this term has met much criticism and some critics even refuse to use ‘*graphic novel*’. One of those critics is Chute, who prefers to use the term ‘*graphic narrative*’, arguing that the term *graphic novel* is not inclusive of works of nonfiction and defining her term as “a book-length work in the medium of comics” (“Comics” 453). She thereby also states that the term *graphic novel* was merely used as a marketing term (453). Chute acknowledges that a term is needed to refer to the more adult form of comics but rejects the more widely known ‘*graphic novel*’. Similarly, Katherine Labio rejects the term *graphic novel* on the grounds that it now used for all kinds of comics and it should not be used as “an umbrella term for a whole genre” (123). However, Labio argues that instead of using a different term, academics should just use ‘*comics*’ to refer to this form of literature (124). She argues that both ‘*graphic novel*’ and ‘*graphic narrative*’ “privileges [...] the literary character of comics over the visual” (126), it is not inclusive of the work of many important cartoonists and it reaffirms a certain divide between high art and

low art (126). Additionally, Whitlock coined the term “autographics” to refer to comics in the autobiographical genre, because she wants to draw attention to “the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics” (“Autographics” 966).

On the other side of the spectrum are critics who do widely use the term ‘graphic novel’, often without explaining why they use this term. This indicates how mainstream it has become to refer to the type of comics discussed here: many will immediately know what is meant by graphic novels and why they are perceived as different to comics. Baetens and Frey use the term graphic novel precisely because it “has escaped the cultural exclusion of much of the comics universe” (2). They claim that the experimental nature of graphic novels must be appreciated and that comics is a “much more heterogeneous domain than is often acknowledged” (21). At the same time, they emphasise that their definition is open to change and they “reject any transhistorical or essential approach towards the graphic novel” (22). However, in this thesis preference will be given to the term ‘comics’ to refer to the form, whereas ‘autographic’ will be used to indicate the autobiographical comics by Bechdel, Satrapi and Chast. The term comics is used because historically the form has become known under this denomination, whereas the term ‘graphic novel’ was only invented later. While ‘graphic novel’ might have been fitting, as this thesis specifically treats the literariness of *Fun Home*, *Persepolis*, and *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, the approach here is to find out how the form of comics can be literary. I mean to maintain an open mind and place these autographics within the broader context of comics, not just graphic novels.

Comics in the literary field

The disagreements on finding the right term gives rise to the question of what a comic actually is and what it is about this form that makes it relevant for literary scholars in particular, as opposed to art critics for example. While many critics who have written about comics or graphic novels have also, and quite unsurprisingly, paid attention to defining the

form, it seems that there is not one clear explanation of what a comic is, yet there are some characteristics that are emphasised by all scholarly studies. The next section will aim to give an overview of the opinions on the definition of comics. Defining comics will be useful to understand the later analysis of the autographics by Satrapi, Bechdel, and Chast in terms of the terminology that is used to describe form-specific elements of the comic.

The most basic explanation of the phenomenon of comics is that they work with sequential panels on a page, which enclose cartoons and text balloons to tell a story. Chute defines this as “a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially” (“Comics” 425). Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith point towards another important aspect of the form in their article “How the Graphic Novel Works”, namely that typically comics are “hand-drawn work” although sometimes other forms such as photography and combinations of other images can be used (8). Additionally, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven state that the comic “does the work of narration at least in part through drawing” (767) – Duncan and Smith also emphasise that the drawings are essential to the medium, but it can also contain other elements. Perhaps the most important feature of comics that most critics agree on is the combination of images and words, “that generally does not privilege text over image” (Labio 124). This makes the attention from literary scholars in specific, who usually look at just text (although in different forms), even more interesting to study. In fact, Labio emphasises that comics are a “hybrid genre” (124), and it is not unusual to talk about comics while using terms that are also applied to talk about films. For example, Duncan and Smith explain the positioning of elements within panels by using the term *mise-en-scène*, a French term that is frequently used in Film Studies (14).

When going through the body of scholarly work on comics, several reasons can be identified that support the literariness of comics. First of all, comics are published in the same format as most works of literature: on paper, in book-form, which can be hardback or paperback. Comics are also centred around a narrative and there are comics in different

genres. The narrative is built with a sequence of panels, which can be varying in size, and are read from left to right in the anglophone context. Additionally, comics experiment with different modes of reading by combining word and image. According to Lisa Zunshine, “we read both fiction and memoir for people’s mental states” (133). Reading for people’s mental states is called “theory of mind” (114), in which humans have the “tendency to obsessively watch, interpret and reinterpret emoting bodies” (129). We do not only read the words in the text balloons and elsewhere in the image, but we also read the body language and facial expressions of the cartoons in the panels. Zunshine observes that for this reason some people on the autism spectrum have difficulty reading both prose and comics – the underlying mental states that are described in novels and shown in comics are unreadable to them (118). As interpreting both the mind and the body while reading, which Zunshine refers to as “mind-reading” (114), is an important feature of both prose novels and comics, it is not a surprise that literary scholars, who “make a living by reading and misreading minds” (116), have developed an interest in comics as a new and experimental form of literature. Zunshine’s theory also complies with Felski’s definition of literature, because it is not just about the aesthetic, but also about the reader engagement with the text – or in the case of comics, the text, images and everything in between.

Nevertheless, there are also many features of comics that make them different from literary works such as prose or poetry. Artists can experiment with both the placing of the panels on the page and the composition of the different elements of the drawings within the panels in a way that is not possible in textual literature. A few critics have studied the ways in which the medium of comics can be used, for example Duncan and Smith in “How the Graphic Novel Works” and Baetens and Frey in the introduction to their book *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*. Together they give an overview of the elements that make up comics and the terminology that is associated with them, which will be useful for the later discussion of Bechdel, Satrapi and Chast’s autographics. While the possibilities of comics are

endless, and artists are always experimenting to find new ways to use the medium, there are three basic, medium-specific characteristics: the use of the panels and drawing style, the possibilities of time and space, and text and dialogue.

The most basic form a panel can take is a square or rectangle defined by a black line, in which the action takes place, and which is placed in a sequence of multiple panels on a page that is otherwise blank. Variations on this can take place – the frames can be jagged or scalloped, to indicate an unusual setting or memory from one of the characters for example (Duncan and Smith 11). The panels can also change shape or size, for example to indicate a change in pacing or for emphasis (11). Artist can even stretch one panel out over two pages, as books are printed with side-by-side pages (21). The action takes place within the panels, but the blank spaces between the panels, called the gutters (18) are equally important in the process of reading comics. The gutters represent a “transition” (18), a passing of time that the reader has infer before they move on to the next panel. The temporal space of the gutter can vary greatly: the action continuity can be very close to each other, for example when two people are in dialogue with each other and the gutter represents the second it takes for one character to answer the other, but it can also take up days or years. While the artist of the comic can experiment with the possibilities of panels and gutters, there has to be a certain order in the sequences of panels and gutters to keep the action flow readable. According to Duncan and Smith, this is similar to the “180-degree rule” (20) in film, because if the reader is confused “what sequence to put the panels into” (21), they are taken out of the story-world.

Within the panels there are endless possibilities for the artist to show off their artistic skills, because the comic is handcrafted. Whereas you can print both the works of Virginia Woolf and Zadie Smith in the same font and size, comics always carry the personal visual style of the artist with them. Within the panels, artist can create different meanings by experimenting with composition. Duncan and Smith refer to “the rule of thirds” (13), which yet again is borrowed from film studies, and means that “the eye finds it most pleasing when

the composition places key elements off-center” (13). The artist can foreground or reduce elements or characters to indicate their importance, move them around in the panel, or use “shadows to direct the reader’s attention” (13). They can also experiment with the overall placing of elements within the panel, or *mise-en-scène*, such as text (balloons), sound effects, background, props and characters (14). As comics work with icons, or “the representation of a person, place, thing or idea” (McCloud 27), artists can experiment with different ways to present different emotions. Eisner has compared the representation of emotions in cartoons with stage-acting (Duncan and Smith 13): the emotions are represented in an exaggerated and enlarged way for the reader to understand them properly. These emotions can be presented in facial expressions, but also in body language or in text (balloons).

Another feature which is unique to comics, is the relationship between space and time in the narrative. Chute calls panels “essentially boxes of time” (“Introduction” 9), because each panel represents one frozen moment in time. The combination between drawings and text in comics ensure that the artist has to find a different balance between space and time than in text. Charles Hatfield points to the essential difference between writing as an “[art] of time” and drawing as an “[art] of space” (Baetens and Frey 166): yet the comic, where text and image are equally important, is an art of both space and time. The form can be said to “fracture both time and space” (McCloud qtd. in Chute “Comics” 455), because comics are made of separate pieces, the panels, that need to be strung together by the reader to form a narrative. The creation of meaning through the action in the narrative applies to literary text but is also foregrounded in comics, only comics uses a different aesthetic in its storytelling. The artist can create a complex relationship of the discrepancy between what is shown in the images and what is told in the text, for example to create a comical effect. They can also use the different panels to play with the flow of the narration, for example by “delay[ing], retrack[ing] or render[ing] recursive” (Chute “Comics” 460), thus placing “a great demand on our cognitive skills” (460), as each of these changes are represented in a fractured manner and

the reader has infer meaning themselves. Baetens and Frey argue that a visual representation of temporal relationships is very hard to achieve, but “as long as time can be represented through space, [...] the power of the medium can be dramatically high” (167). According to them, time and narrative is less important in comics than in prose, as often the concern of comics is more with “the portrait of the characters and the multiperspectival representation of their bodies” (176). Although both prose and comics are equally flexible in different ways, the combination of panels, gutters and text (balloons) ensure that comics can experiment with space and time in a unique way. The concept of time is especially important in the autographics by Satrapi, Bechdel, and Chast, because they deal with memory processes in the autobiographical context, which will be more extensively explored in chapter two.

The final essential feature of comics is the text and the way text is presented. Duncan and Smith identify four types of text that appear in graphic novels and comics in general: “dialogue, thoughts, sound effects, and captions” (15). Each of these are presented in different forms. Dialogue is often presented in text balloons with a smooth, round or elliptical form, whereas thought is presented in a text balloon with scalloped lines. However, sound effects are not enclosed with any type of text balloon, but rather just “float in the panel” (16). The final type of text, the only type that does not take place within the story world or is non-diegetic (16), are the captions, which are usually placed within boxes floating in the panel or just at the top or bottom of the panel. Interestingly, Duncan and Smith argue that experts in the field of comics agree that “the visuals do most of the work in communicating through comics” (16) and say that words “are used to complement the images” (15), whereas Chute argues elsewhere that comics are a “hybrid word-and-image form” (“Comics” 452), with a visual and verbal narrative track, not placing one above the other. Labio also states that the genre “generally does not privilege text over image” (124). There are certainly shorter comics that consist of sequenced panels of images without text and there are also longer comics which include panels without text, but still text is an essential feature in the comics that are

treated in this thesis. In comics the interaction between the verbal and the visual offers possibilities for a new aesthetic and reader engagement, both of which are essential to reading literature according to Felski's theory (6).

Comics and autobiography

This thesis focuses on *Fun Home*, *Persepolis*, and *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, all of which are autobiographical. It is striking that many of the comics that have gained the most academic attention and have been awarded literary prizes are autobiographical works. *Maus* has perhaps been the most successful in this sense, having been nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award as early as 1986 and winning a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992. The recognition of his comic as autobiography did not occur immediately – Spiegelman had to fight *The New York Times* to get *Maus* moved from the fiction to the nonfiction bestseller list (Chute "Comics" 457). Many scholars that have researched comics have explored the relationship between comics and memoir or autobiography. Even though fictional comics can be just as good or powerful as autobiographical ones, autobiographical comics can make the four elements of literariness that Felski identified, namely recognition, aesthetic, creation of social knowledge, and the experience of being shocked (11), especially relevant, as the interplay between memory, trauma and real events requires the reader to engage with all four elements.

Firstly, according to Chute, the artist of the autobiographical comic is always visibly present because the medium is handcrafted. In addition to the images that are drawn by an individual with his or her own style, the text is also usually presented in their own handwriting, which always bears "a trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker" ("Introduction" 10). Chute compares this to reading a diary, saying that "there is an intimacy to reading handwritten marks on the printed page" (10), because it simulates reading personal documents such as letters or a diary. This is even more striking in the autobiographical

comics as opposed to mass-market comics, as the latter are often created by a team of different people, with different cartoonists and writers, whereas the autobiographical comics are often drawn and written by only one artist. A comic made by only one artist inherently bears the trace of its maker and is more intimate in its personal style. The colourful pictures and scraggly lines of Chast's *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* are for example completely different from Satrapi's simple black-and-white illustrations in *Persepolis*. This intimacy invites a closer relationship between the comic and the reader and opens up possibilities for a personal and literary aesthetic.

Furthermore, Baetens and Frey argue that comics permit a certain directness that “can appear clichéd in the novel and especially in film” (96). Comic artists can directly relate their own feelings to the historical or sociological situation they find themselves (96). The artists that create autobiographical comics remediate themselves with their autobiographical avatars (Warhol 3; Watson 28; Whitlock “Seeing” 971; Whitlock *Soft* 187). Like autobiography in prose, autobiographers in comics construct from memory, whereby they foreground their own experiences. They have different means to achieve this. They can for example create a discrepancy between word and image:



(Bechdel 112)

In the excerpt from *Fun Home* above, the narrator explains that Alison felt “inexplicably ashamed” here, but this is not visible in her expression in the accompanying image. The reader has to string the combined meaning of the image and the text together, because this is not stated explicitly: Alison felt ashamed of her sexual feelings towards women but tries not

to let any of that show towards her father. Whereas in a prose autobiography the writer can distance themselves from what is happening by referring to themselves as 'I' throughout (Baetens and Frey 174), the visual qualities of comics confront the reader more directly with its materiality.

Thirdly, autobiographical comics have the unique ability to represent the past self and the present self beside one another, "even within the space of a single panel" (Chute "Introduction" 5). Chute explains that nonfiction comics "spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page" ("Comics" 453). The form of comics "expands modes of historical and personal expression" (453): when representing the past, artists or writers are always working from their own experience and subjectiveness. Chute claims that the medium of comics offers a new and creative way to present historical accuracy (459). Personal narratives placed in collective history provides new perspectives on that history and negotiates with the pre-existing knowledge or understanding the reader may have of that history. As such, autobiographical comics create a dialogue with the reader, where the literary elements of recognition, because the reader recognises elements of the history, and creating social knowledge, because their knowledge is expanded by the experiences of the maker of the comic, are important.

Finally, one of the most important works with regard to autographics written by female writers is Chute's book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, which explores the works of several influential women in the field of comics and life writing, including Bechdel and Satrapi. She emphasises how female cartoonists were often ignored and comics were seen as a man's domain for a long time, but this has changed under the influence of successful cartoonists such as Bechdel and Satrapi. Chute claims that comics can create new opportunities for women to produce works that make us "rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and audibility" ("Introduction" 3). That cognitive appeal of rethinking and reconsidering tropes is what makes autobiographical comics literary,

because it combines reader engagement with the aesthetics of the handcrafted comic. Earlier it was established that the artist of an autobiographical comic is very visibly present in their work – female cartoonists can use that visibility to establish their own narrative and create something completely their own. Chute then concludes that the form of comics is “apposite to feminist cultural production” (“Introduction” 9). The next chapters will delve deeper into the the autographics of female artists Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel, and Roz Chast, in order to provide evidence for the statement that autographics are literary, and drawing on the theories that have been touched upon in this literature overview.

Chapter 2: Memory Processes and Identification in Autographics

To identify the aesthetic and reader engagement at the heart of literariness in comics, it will be useful to understand the different layers that are at work in an autographic. In an article about Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Robyn Warhol critiques the scholars Hillary Chute and Charles Hatfield for identifying only two layers in comics, namely the words and the pictures (5). According to Warhol, the autographic comprises three separate layers in its narrative, two verbal and one pictorial. The first is the "extradiegetic voice over narration" (5), which in *Fun Home* is made up of capital letters, placed above the panels or in rectangular text boxes within the panel. The second is the "intradiegetic dialogue, representations of the word spoken inside the narrative world" (5), in *Fun Home*, these are recognisable as the speech balloons within the panel. Lastly, there is the pictorial "level of the cartoons themselves" (5). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson even add another two layers: "the hand or aesthetic autograph of the author/artist ... and the addressees within the comic and beyond" (169). This offers the artist infinite possibilities to experiment and establish a new and personal aesthetic.

For example, the cartoons can support the text of the narrator or the characters but can also contradict it. Additionally, the cartoons can be free of text altogether and speak for themselves. Not all three autographics make use of the texts in the same way: *Persepolis* does not have text outside of the panels, with the exclusion of the titles, so the layer of the extradiegetic narrator here only takes the form of a rectangular text box within the panel. Most of the extradiegetic narration in *Why Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* takes place outside the panel. Chast often only draws panels when depicting something within the story world, such as a dialogue between her and her parents. She mostly makes use of the extradiegetic verbal layer to recount her experiences. As such the comic form allows the artist to make a cognitive appeal to the reader to make sense of their experiences and, with the different elements available to the form, create their own aesthetic.

When referring to the author's representation of themselves in their autographic, many scholars use the term "autobiographical avatar" (Warhol 3; Watson 28; Whitlock "Seeing" 971; Whitlock *Soft* 187), coined by Whitlock to indicate the self-portraiture of the comic artist. She states that autobiographical comic artists are "self-reflexive practitioners in their use of cartoon drawing" and "their autobiographical avatars actively engage with the conventions of comics" ("Autographics" 971). Additionally, following the theory of McCloud, she argues that the face is an especially powerful visual in cartooning. She states that "the more cartoonish ... a face is, the more it becomes an icon that has the capacity to produce recognition and association in our own image" (*Soft* 191). Watson calls the term 'avatar' "provocative" (28), because it "recalls the role-playing environments" of online games (29). In these games, players can construct their own characters, with the possibility of creating a completely different persona or alter ego within the parameters of the game. While it would be far-fetched to say that the autobiographical avatar in autographics works the same as the avatar in online games, the autobiographical avatar is also a representation of the self, constructed from memory. Smith and Watson touch upon the importance of memory in creating an autobiography as well; they approach life narrative "as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present" (1). Additionally, they state that "memory is a means of 'passing on,' of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, thereby activating its potential for reshaping a future of and for other subjects" (26). Bechdel, Satrapi and Chast have created a new aesthetic by reshaping the possibilities of self-reference and memory practices from traditional autobiography. This chapter will examine the ways in which the three use the different layers of the comics form in their processes of self-identification and their memories, whereby they engage the reader to identify with them by including points of reference the reader recognises or by briefly taking them out of the story world.

In his article on *Persepolis*, Joseph Darda emphasises that processes of memory in autobiography are complex and representation of the truth is subjective, because autobiography is focused on the experience of one individual. He claims that “it is crucial to attend to ... where [the text] shows the limitations and failures of representation, communicating proximity rather than sameness” (41). The notion that experience and memory cannot be fully represented in autobiography relates to Smith and Watson’s theory on personal remembering, whereby they claim that “acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective” (26). Satrapi uses her personal experiences to depict life during the Islamic regime in Iran, by which she adds her own perspective to others. As the act of personal remembering is always also social and collective, the text then creates new configurations the social knowledge that is part of literariness according to Felski. By adding a new perspective, the reader is invited to reconsider his or her previous knowledge of life in Iran for women and the Islamic Revolution.

Within this line of thought, Satrapi’s autographic can be seen as “a project of linking organic memories to, or replacing them by, prosthetic memory” (Smith and Watson 27), or linking personal experience to global phenomena. One of the best examples of linking personal experience to social and collective remembering in Iran occurs on the very first page of *Persepolis*, of a chapter called “The Veil.” Here, Satrapi juxtaposes images of her life at primary school with the images of people participating in the Islamic Revolution. The narrator indicates that it became obligatory to wear a hijab at school; this statement is accompanied by an images of little girls playing with their hijabs and making jokes about the revolution. The image of an angry-looking crowd raising their fists is contrasted by the image of girls playing and having fun, indicating that Marji, which is what Satrapi’s autobiographical avatar is called, and her friends could not grasp the seriousness of the regime, as they are playing with their hijabs and making fun of the Revolutionaries.



(Satrapi 3)

She contrasts the white panels of her own childhood memories at school with the black panel of an angry crowd, that is part of the collective remembering in Iran; she was not present in the crowd of Revolutionaries and has reproduced the picture from images she may have seen on the news or in the newspaper. She contrasts her own experiences with that image of collective remembering, showing another perspective: the perspective of what it was like to

live in that Islamic regime as a child. Hereby she assumes little knowledge on the topic on the part of the reader – she explains everything in detail. Her personal experiences add to the configurations of social knowledge of the reader, because she adds her perspective to a topic of which she assumes there is little knowledge.

Satrapi's drawing style is also an important part of linking the personal and the collective, because it appeals to the recognition of the reader, another element of Felski's theory on literary texts. Her style is sparing, evocative of the simple drawings of children's books. This style not only visualises the childhood of Satrapi herself, but Satrapi also appeals to the recognition of the reader's childhood. Referring back to McCloud's theory of the cartoon face as easily identifiable for the reader of comics, Satrapi's simple style helps the Western reader identify with Marji, even though their experiences may be far from what she has experienced. In the first two panels of *Persepolis*, Satrapi depicts herself and her classmates. They are all sitting in the same position and they are all wearing the same simple uniform, their hijabs depicted as black masses surrounding their heads. Yet Satrapi has managed to include very subtle differences in her spare drawing style, by including some small locks of hair in different styles, giving each girl their own character by making the eyebrows, eyes and noses just a little bit different. By including these differences, she contradicts the unification of Islamic women by hijabs and uniforms, showing that the girls are not the same even though they look the same. She has singled out her own avatar, by placing her in a different panel altogether. Marji is also the only one who directly looks at the reader, by which Satrapi represents herself as a brave, if not provocative, young girl. She thus identifies herself in two ways: she shows herself as related to other Iranian girls by wearing the same clothes and the same hijab, but she also singles herself out as different by literally separating herself from the other with lines and a gutter. The first images indicate towards the remembering of Marji's personal story, linked to a collective memory of the similar experiences of other girls in Iran. She appeals to the recognition of the reader by the aesthetic of her simple black-and-white icons, but at the same time creates social

knowledge by showing a personal account of a collective experience, placing recognisable elements in an unfamiliar environment.

In her article on *Fun Home*, Julia Watson states that the medium of the autographic “offer[s] multiple possibilities for interpreting experience, reworking memory, and staging self-reflection” (28). According to her, the reading of cartoons “affords occasions for reader identification with characters and situations that solicit our autobiographical intimacy” (29), which, like Whitlock, she links to McCloud’s theory of the icon of the face as eliciting “identifications with our own image” (29). In Satrapi’s case, identification is achieved by the simple, recognisable style and references to Western culture, such as Michael Jackson and Kim Wilde (130-1). For Bechdel however, the exploration of identity and memory takes a different form. For example, she uses a vast body of literary references to illustrate her relationship with her father and her journey towards and after coming out as a lesbian. These literary references are not only present in the narration, even though she also frequently references literary works such as *Ulysses* by James Joyce (Bechdel 226), the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald (62-4) and many different feminist and lesbian works (74-6; 80; 229). They are also present in the cartoons, when different characters are reading (28; 34; 62; 84; 185), or the books are just lying around somewhere in the frame (3; 79; 99; 141; 165). These books offer a world of intertextuality for the reader of *Fun Home*, as the intertextuality invites the reader to engage with the autographic on a deeper level, having to link the literary references to the Alison’s experiences.

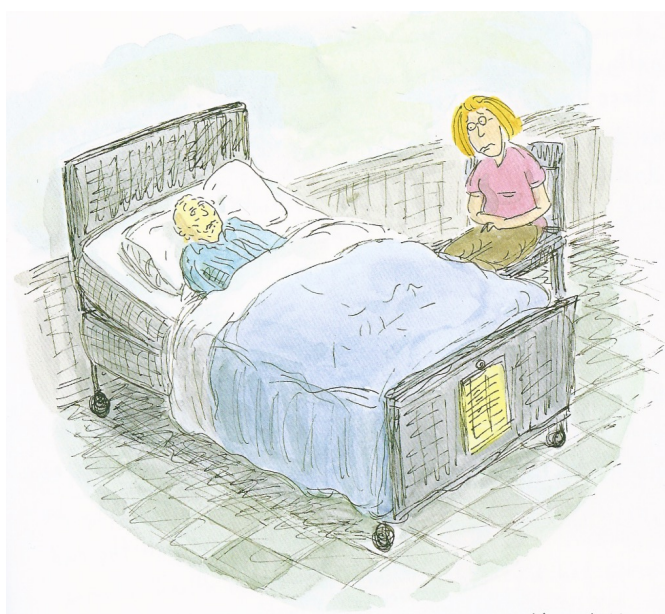
Additionally, literature has helped Alison explore and discover her identity as a lesbian; Alison-the-narrator states that “[my] realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing” (Bechdel 74). However, literature is also one of the few things she has in common with her father, a high-school English teacher who according to Alison “was always reading something” (28). The few times Alison and her father are connecting, it is over books (130; 198; 208). It is tragic that Alison could explore

her queer identity through literature, while her father, a closeted gay man that Alison's suspects committed suicide, never found the same solace in literature and his identity remained hidden until his death. Literature is used as an analogy for Bechdel's experiences but is also an important motif in her relationship with her father; it functions as a point of reference and engagement for the reader, who can explore, or possibly already understands, this intertextuality to get a better understanding of Alison's experience.

Another way in which Bechdel processes memory and identity is the vast collection of photographs, film scenes, maps and more that she has reproduced in *Fun Home*, elements from outside the story world, which she has remediated within the autographic. As opposed to Satrapi's simple black-and-white style, Bechdel's cartoons are much more detailed and use a greenish shading to give them more depth. This array of remediated documents is called an "archive of feelings" by Ann Cvetkovich (117). She explains this term as "documents [which] are important not merely for the information they contain but because they are memorial talismans that carry the affective weight of the past" (120). As such, these remediations render the processes of memory that produced this autographic. Bechdel offers the reader a real, retraceable archive. According to Cvetkovich, the act of drawing in *Fun Home* "becomes an act of witness, while also giving rise to a collection of emotionally charged documents and objects" (120). The image that is mentioned the most often and that is the most striking is the picture of Roy the babysitter in the centrefold of the book. Alison came across this image after her father's death and it leaves her with conflicting feelings. Alison-the-narrator wonders why she is not "properly outraged" (Bechdel 100), because her father seemed to have had secret sexual relations with her babysitter, and suggests that maybe she "[identifies] too well with [her] father's illicit awe" (101). On the other hand, she also identifies the picture as "typical of the way [her] father juggled his public appearance and private reality" (101). The picture becomes a symbol of Alison's past, where the weight of her father's secret had effect on the whole family, while it is also overwritten by new meaning – Alison's realisation that

she might be more like her father than she thought. Bechdel remediates the picture to ascribe her own aesthetic to it and overlays it with new and personal meaning.

In her autographic *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, Chast deals with memory practices and identity in a different style to Satrapi and Bechdel. Whereas Satrapi and Bechdel both use capital letters of a standard computer font, Chast's comic is completely handwritten. The panels too are drawn by hand and the drawings are not confined to the lines of the panel necessarily. In other instances she does not use panels at all, but the image is separated for the narrated text by a coloured background instead of black lines. The obvious handcrafted style gives an even more intimate feeling to the autographic, as Chute has also observed. She states that this intimacy “works in tandem with the sometimes visceral effects of presenting ‘private’ images” (“Introduction” 10). The handcrafted style of intimate images, according to Chute, appeals to a deeper feeling and recognition within the reader.



(Chast 143)

This image of Roz and her father at the hospital is a good example of the intimate feeling that Chast conveys through the combination of drawing style and handwriting. The lack of a panel gives an isolated feeling to the avatars of Roz and her father. The image of Roz sitting next to her dying father represents a very personal experience, and that is supported by the handwriting, where she underlines words or capitalises them, to emphasise her own

incomprehension at the situation. Chute contends that “both writing and drawing the narrative in comics leads to a sense of the form as diaristic” (“Introduction” 10), and for Chast this is especially relevant: her handwriting seems to come straight from a diary or notebook and the visuals have an immediacy to them. Chast is very immediately present in her autographic; the whole aesthetic of the autographic focuses on her personal experience.

However, besides drawing and writing, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* also comprises photographs, sketches and copied documents from her personal collection. Like Bechdel, Chast includes an ‘archive of feelings’, materialising the memorabilia that remind her of her parents after they have passed away. Chast’s archive briefly takes the reader out of the story world, because in many instances she has chosen not to draw the documents but include scans. For example, she has included several poems by her mother, which were copied into the autographic from her mother’s handwriting. In chapter 6, Roz’ mother has to go to hospital and Roz is mostly concerned with the fate of her father, who is entirely dependent on his usual routines with his wife. At the end of the chapter she has placed a poem by her mother, without introduction or context. Besides extradiegetic verbal level, the intradiegetic verbal level and the pictorial level, the memoir has another level that is in between verbal and pictorial: it inhabits both the story world as well as the world beyond the story, a copy of a document that was written by someone else than the author-as-narrator or author-as-character. Where Bechdel used her ‘archive of feelings’ to serve “as a touchstone for both her father’s feelings and her own, as well as for the complexities of their relationship” (Cvetkovich 117), Chast does the same for her and her relationship with her mother. As such, Chast’s mother adds to Chast’s experience and meaning is not just created from Chast’s witnessing, but also from her mother’s. As there is no other context or introduction provided regarding to the poem, the reader needs to engage with the text and make these connections themselves.

When an unexpected illness struck down the innocent

A random meteor
Shattered my world from above
Disrupting the lives
of those whom I love

My husband my daughter
Are caught in the ^{swirling} storm's wake
But I shall overcome this
For all of ours sake -

Possibility of impact
Always was there
But we lead our lives
Not knowing when or where.

My routines, my compass
Went up in smoke
In flames and debris so thick
One could choke.

But we can't lead our lives
In fear of what might be
So live each day to its utmost
Only then will you be free.

E. B. Chast
Maimonides Hospital, Bklyn.
Jan 15, 2006.

(Chast 67)

One technique Bechdel, Satrapi, and Chast all use that has derived from the mass-marketed comics, that were more low-brow and written for a young audience, is their use of humour. In this way, the form is literary because of the ways in which it deals with memory processes, which has been explored earlier in this chapter, whereas it still maintains the characteristics that is inherent to all comics. Whereas academic attention for comics started with the more serious adult topics that different artists began to employ and the rebelling against the Comics Code Authority (Chute and DeKoven "Introduction" 14; Tabachnik 29-30), Bechdel, Satrapi, and Chast show that using humour does not take away from the more

serious topics of their autographics. Additionally, the use of humour can create tension between what is written and what is shown. Whitlock states that “what charges life narrative in comics is the particular tension and dissonance it generates by mixing codes from juvenilia into autobiographical narratives of history and trauma” (“Bookends” 201). The comics form invites the reader to navigate between the form as they know it from their youth and the form in a more literary and adult context. Lopamudra Basu claims about Marji in *Persepolis* that “the autobiographical person as a comic character [allows] for an ironic distance which removes elements of nostalgia, sentimentality, and solipsism” (5). However, the use of comics does not necessarily remove elements of nostalgia and sentimentality as Basu claims. If anything, it appeals to the nostalgia of the reader by employing a form that is associated with childhood. It creates a new aesthetic that combines childhood elements, such as style or humour, within an adult context.

As the subtitle of the first part of *Persepolis* implies, “The Story of a Childhood”, Satrapi represents the Islamic revolution in Iran from a child’s perspective in her autographic. According to Chute, the child’s perspective is relevant to discuss, as it is “putatively ‘simple’” (“Witness” 102) in representing the trauma Marji suffers from the regime. Whitlock too observes a disparity between the child and the regime in the first panels about the veil that were mentioned previously to illustrate Satrapi’s simple drawing style. Whitlock observes that these cartoons show a “dissonant combination of the familiar (the universal cartoonish figure of the child) and the strange (the veiled and radical other)” (“Bookends” 190). However, whereas these analyses of *Persepolis* so far mostly focus on how the simple illustrations and general child’s perspective contrast with Marji’s experience, the use of humour by Satrapi is not extensively discussed. The humour is part of the appeal to childhood and an analysis of this humour gives a better understanding of the child perspective. This humour is one of the most important devices she employs, not only to add to the child’s point of view, but also to alleviate the tension that is created by the awfulness of the Islamic regime.

The chapter entitled “The Key” is one of the most shocking chapters in the sense that it shows how the regime convince very young boys to fight for them, only to get slaughtered in the battle field. These boys were subsequently celebrated as martyrs for the faith. In this chapter, Satrapi emphasises that humour has often been her default response to tentative situations. The narrator states that “after a little while, no one took the torture sessions seriously anymore. As for me, I immediately started to make fun of them” (Satrapi 97). The use of humour is one of the aesthetic techniques she uses to represent her traumatic experience of violence during the war.



(Satrapi 97)

The humour in these panels heavily rely on interplay between the verbal and pictorial levels. When Marji dramatically imitates the martyrs of the Islamic regime, her avatar is holding her hands up in the air and in the next panel flailing her arms and legs about. When she is lying on the ground and when her teacher asks her what she is doing, Marji's cheeky

smile is indicative of her youth and comedic talent. Even though the drawings are very simple, they materialise the humour that the verbal layer on its own does not fully represent. It is telling of the naïve and ignorant childish viewpoint Marji has at this point, which is later contrasted by her own direct experiences with the severe violence of the Islamic regime and Marji's own encounters with violence and death. Moreover, the child is presented as a universal figure (Whitlock "Bookends" 190), as Marji may wear a veil and live in a repressive regime but her cheekiness and playfulness is characteristic of most children. Just as Satrapi's drawing style is reminiscent of the illustrations in children's books, so is Marji's behaviour that is depicted in these panels. It is easier for the reader to identify with Marji's experience, because even though they might come from a very different background, the child figure remains recognisable. The humour appeals to two of the elements from Felski's theory: recognition, but also the ability to shock, because the universal figure of the child grows up in an environment of war, that is contrasted with normal childhood experience.

Bechdel too places her perspective as a child and adolescent at the centre of *Fun Home*. However, the humour in *Fun Home* is vastly different from the humour in *Persepolis*. Whereas *Persepolis* heavily relies on the cartoons to achieve comical effect, in *Fun Home* the general tone of the narrator and the many (literary) references carry the humour. In one particular instance, when Alison's father has just died, she wonders who is to embalm him – as he was the owner of the local funeral house and he was usually the one who embalmed the dead in their neighbourhood.



(Bechdel 51)

She proceeds to a conundrum of a barber who is not able to shave himself, as a comparison to her father's situation. The reference does not end here: when she sees her father, she mentions how he could have used a barber at this point, as the embalmer had not been gentle in his grooming. In this instance, the narrator uses a sense of sarcastic humour. The scene counters

the expectation of the reader: this is not a dramatic scene, the shock at seeing her dead father is not immediately visible. Instead, the narrator recounts how Alison focuses on very specific details. The visuals take place in slow-motion: it takes three panels before they see their father, Alison and her brothers walking in slowly while the narrator explains the conundrum of embalming. This really is a tragicomic moment. Tragic, because neither Alison nor her brothers are able to induce any emotional response to their father's death. This tragic aspect is aided by the pictorial layer, in which Alison and her brothers are walking in slowly. Comical, because of the absurd way in which Alison wonders who is embalm her father when he cannot do it himself and the image it recalls of someone trying to embalm themselves. Like in *Persepolis*, there is an appeal to the shock effect of the scene: Bechdel has made something humorous out of a very dire situation.

Of all three autographics, Chast's *Why Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* most particularly relies on humour. Her Jewish parents were children during the Great Depression, which has led them to live a life of extreme frugality. Their reclusive way of life led them to heavily rely on each other and develop curious habits, that only seem to worsen in old age. For a long time, Roz barely visited her parents, until several circumstances related to old age, such as illness, required her to regularly visit and check up on her parents again. Roz' frustration and incomprehension for her parents is depicted comically, yet at the same time Chast touches upon serious topics such as the final loss of childhood at the death of your parents. Whereas Bechdel and Satrapi use humour to emphasise a child's view of a serious situation or contrast and thus re-enforce the gravity of what happens, Chast's humour is more directed at the comedy of everyday life while taking care of elderly parents, which will be recognisable for many readers. Often Chast makes use of exaggeration to make a situation more humorous than it actually may have been.



(Chast 142)

In the example above, the nurse at the hospital is running to Roz. In depicting the nurse, Chast uses a technique often employed by cartoonists, of making her look panicked by illustrating the flailing arms as if there are multiple arms attached to her, indicating movement with a few lines. Here she adds comedic effect by depicting the nurse so humorously, while in real life this situation would not have been as funny. By employing a humorous drawing technique associated with more low brow comics too, Chast appeals to the nostalgia of the reader.

Like Bechdel, Chast makes use of comparisons and similes, which is a common figure of speech in literature, but the pictorial level adds an extra layer, as the comparisons or similes are often accompanied by a figure that is drawn in an exaggerated manner or makes comical gestures. For example, when she expresses her annoyance at the fact that her father was a very fussy eater, she states that he would make all other normal-eating people “feel like they were hell-bent on self-destruction, or insensitive brutes with caveman stomachs”:

Anything fried, "too sweet," or "too rich" sent him over the edge. It wasn't so much his not-eating these things as the little speeches that would accompany the not-eating, which seemed designed to make those who continued to eat those things feel like they were either hell-bent on self-destruction, or insensitive brutes with caveman stomachs.



(Chast 79)

She has added a cartoon of a cavewoman underneath the narration. The pictorial and verbal layers together reinforce Chast's point that living with and later also taking care of her parents took a strain on her and they sometimes defy comprehension, because of their erratic behaviour, such as when her father refuses to eat normally, or her mother makes every shopping trip extremely difficult (Chast 47). Whereas Chast makes use of long extradiegetic texts, the cartoons are ultimately where she shows off her comedic talent and where she can most easily illustrate and enlarge her parents' peculiarities, as well as her own troubles with taking care of two elderly people. She uses humour to simultaneously depict her extreme annoyance at her parents sometimes, but also to indicate the ingrained habits her parents have become accustomed to after living alone for such a long time. Her autographic sheds light on the consequences of isolation that many elderly people face, as well as the effects of this on the children that have to take care of them. The humour gives that the autographic a light-hearted tone, but also emphasises Roz' conflicting feelings of annoyance and of losing your parents. The handcrafted medium, that was mentioned earlier, and the humour aid Chast's

narrative, which paints a poignant picture of old age that confronts the reader with a condition they eventually will have to face too.

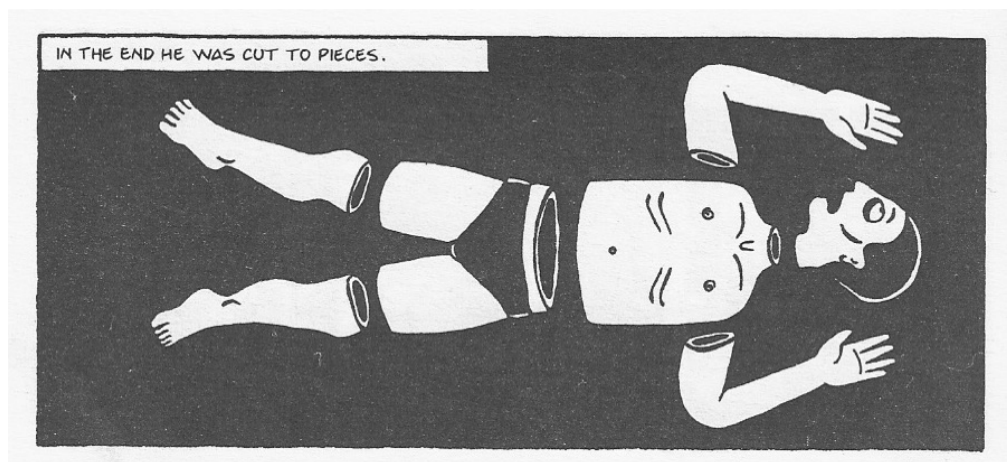
The autographics by Satrapi, Bechdel and Chast all deal with processes of memory and identity in unique ways. However, these processes are crucial to autobiographies and autographics like the three discussed in this chapter. Just the fact that the medium is handcrafted already gives an intimate, diaristic feeling to autobiographical comics, and at the same time it has a mixture of “conventional ‘high’ and ‘mass’ elements” (Chute “Introduction” 10), especially these comics that are made by one artist alone. The autographics by Satrapi, Bechdel and Chast are true hybrid forms of literature, because they use their unique styles and work with the different verbal and pictorial layers of the form to combine elements that derive from comics, such as humorous images and appeal to the nostalgia of the reader, with elements from literature, such as intertextuality and literary tropes. However, this chapter has not yet touched upon the meaning of the distinct adult topics in a medium that was previously associated with children but is now used for an older audience. The next chapter will delve deeper into the interplay of verbal and pictorial levels in autographics when depicting topics such as war, sex or death, which another distinctly literary aspect in autographics.

Chapter 3: Adult Content and Trauma in Autographics

The transition of comics from specifically aiming at children to include all kinds of different genres allowed for more experimentation with the form, not just with regard to memory processes and identification in autobiographical comics, but also with the depiction of more adult content. In the middle of the twentieth century, the CCA in the USA censored comics to ban any sex and violence to ensure all comics were suitable for children. This led to an underground movement, where artists were aiming to create comics that were meant specifically for adults and often contained adult content (Tabachnik 35). In turn, this movement influenced Spiegelman in his writing of *Maus*, which has been important for the recognition of the autobiographical comic (Chute “Introduction” 18). The CCA strengthened the idea that comics were for children and made it difficult for anyone to write about violence or sexuality. The abolishment of the CCA resulted in a greater freedom for artists to experiment with the form of comics and a greater recognition of comics as an art form within the literary field. The previous chapter discussed the ways in which Satrapi, Bechdel and Chast deal with memory processes and identification in their autographics. The ways in which their autographics deal with trauma adds to their recognition within the literary field. Like artists such as Spiegelman, and indirectly the underground movement against the CCA, *Persepolis*, *Fun Home* and *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* show that including adult content emphasises and enhances their (traumatic) experiences, because of the possibilities the pictorial level offers to represent trauma.

Satrapi's *Persepolis* tells of her childhood during the revolution in the 1970s and 1980s and the war that ensued. The story deals with her growing up in an Islamic regime with Marxist parents and the difficulty of being a bright and outspoken girl in a regime where that is not appreciated. There are several occasions in which Marji encounters or witnesses death and severe violence. The contradiction between the simple drawings from a child's perspective and the gruesomeness of war is shocking, because the traumatic experiences

contrast the ideal childhood experience. Satrapi experiments more with her simple black-and-white drawing style in her depiction of acts of violence; she uses different techniques to represent the violence Marji directly witnesses, because she is present at the scene, and the violence she does not directly witness, because she is not present but hears about it later. An example of indirect witnessing occurs when two old friends of her parents, Siamak and Mohsen, return after they had been imprisoned for their political beliefs. Marji is in the room when they tell her parents how the prisoners were tortured. Marji is already shocked by the fact that they used household items such as irons to torture people: in the extradiegetic text she says that “[she] never imagined that you could use that appliance for torture” (Satrapi 51).



(Satrapi 52)

Siamak and Mohsen tell the family that their friend Ahmadi had been executed and cut to pieces. Accompanying the words “in the end he was cut to pieces” (Satrapi 52) is a drawing of Marji’s imagination of what a cut-up man looks like (Figure 1). The man seems completely bloodless and hollow on the black background, as if it is a Barbie doll instead of a real person. Yet the face of Ahmadi does look tortured and sunken in, with a gaping mouth and hollow cheeks. With some simple lines, Satrapi captures both the childish and innocent view of her younger self and the actual horror of war. This duality visualises the different ways in which this trauma manifests itself in the private sphere. Whereas anyone can access images of war on the internet or through the news, Satrapi brings it closer to the reader by offering a mediated image of her own trauma. This personal viewpoint enforces the impact of that

trauma, because it combines images that are familiar to the reader with images that are strange to them. This is an example of literariness, because Satrapi creates a new aesthetic to represent childhood trauma and stimulates reader engagement, because it simultaneously makes them recognise the child's view and shocks with the brutality that should not be part of childhood.

Satrapi also contrasts her innocent childhood with the war that raged in Iran by juxtaposing contradicting panels on the same page. In a chapter entitled "The Key" she has placed two panels underneath one another that depict entirely different aspects of life in Iran. The upper panel depicts young boys who are blown up while fighting in the Revolutionary army. These boys were often from poor families and were lured into enlisting with plastic golden keys that would be their direct ticket to heaven and glory. The lower panel is of Marji dancing and smiling at her first party. The juxtaposition of these two panels draws attention to the relatively normal life Marji leads, going to parties just as any other teenager does, and the horrors that are going on at the same time. Both images depict bodies in the air that are making the same movements but are starkly different. The different drawing techniques add to that contrast. Whereas the lower panel is drawn with clear lines and recognisable faces, the figures in the upper panel are silhouettes, and the explosion is depicted with abstract scratchy lines. The most detailed element of this panel are the keys around the necks of the figures. Satrapi has created an aesthetic of directly and indirectly witnessing: Marji is not present at the explosion, so this event is re-imagined more vaguely and in less detail than the party.

THE KEY TO PARADISE WAS FOR POOR PEOPLE. THOUSANDS OF YOUNG KIDS, PROMISED A BETTER LIFE, EXPLODED ON THE MINEFIELDS WITH THEIR KEYS AROUND THEIR NECKS.



MRS. NASRINE'S SON MANAGED TO AVOID THAT FATE, BUT LOTS OF OTHER KIDS FROM HIS NEIGHBORHOOD DIDN'T.

MEANWHILE, I GOT TO GO TO MY FIRST PARTY. NOT ONLY DID MY MOM LET ME GO, SHE ALSO KNITTED ME A SWEATER FULL OF HOLES AND MADE ME A NECKLACE WITH CHAINS AND NAILS. PUNK ROCK WAS IN.



I WAS LOOKING SHARP.

(Satrapi 102)

However, Satrapi simultaneously attracts attention to the sameness of the figures. While those in the upper panel are anonymous, and the lower ones more recognisable, they might just as well change places. Marji just happened to have been born in more fortunate circumstances

than the martyrs in the upper panel. This realisation extends to the reader, as the readers of Satrapi's autographic are not likely to be from Iran (it has never even been published there) (Chute "Texture" 94); the circumstances of birth and situation are completely trivial. The literariness of the autographic is evoked from the shocking contrast between boys that are dying and normal and universal teenage experience of Marji happening at the same time on the same page.

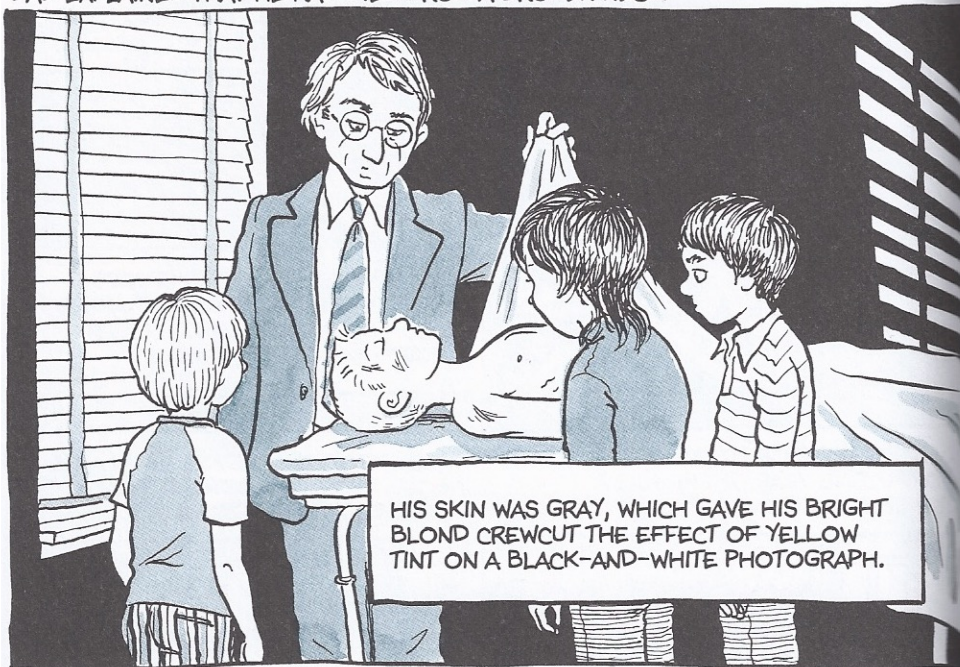


(Satrapi 142)

The first time Marji witnesses violence herself, rather than only hearing about it, is when a building in their street was blown up and she sees her friend's bracelet among the rubble. The bracelet is depicted as shining or glowing amidst the rubble, so it catches the eye of the reader. It is still attached to something that Marji cannot identify or does not dare talk about. On the last three panels of the page Marji's reaction to what she is witnessing is visible. At first, she looks horrified and covers her hand over her mouth. The next panel does not incorporate any captions or speech balloons, but just shows Marji covering her eyes with her hands. The final panel is completely black, with only the caption "No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger" (Satrapi 142). In previous examples, Satrapi has drawn the violence that Marji did not witness herself, but she is not able to draw the direct and traumatic witnessing of violence here. There is a limit to Satrapi's power of images: the traumatic experience of witnessing a dead friend cannot be drawn and a black panel fills it place. Nonetheless, the black panel is still powerful, as it engages the reader to consider Satrapi's aesthetic and to infer their own meaning on the pictorial level. Satrapi lets the experience speak to the imagination of the reader, rather than filling it in herself. In these examples the violence is present, but it is done in a subtle way and there is no visible bloodshed or extreme gruesomeness: rather, Satrapi uses the instances of violence to underline the traumatic experiences of a country torn by war and her own personal place in it.

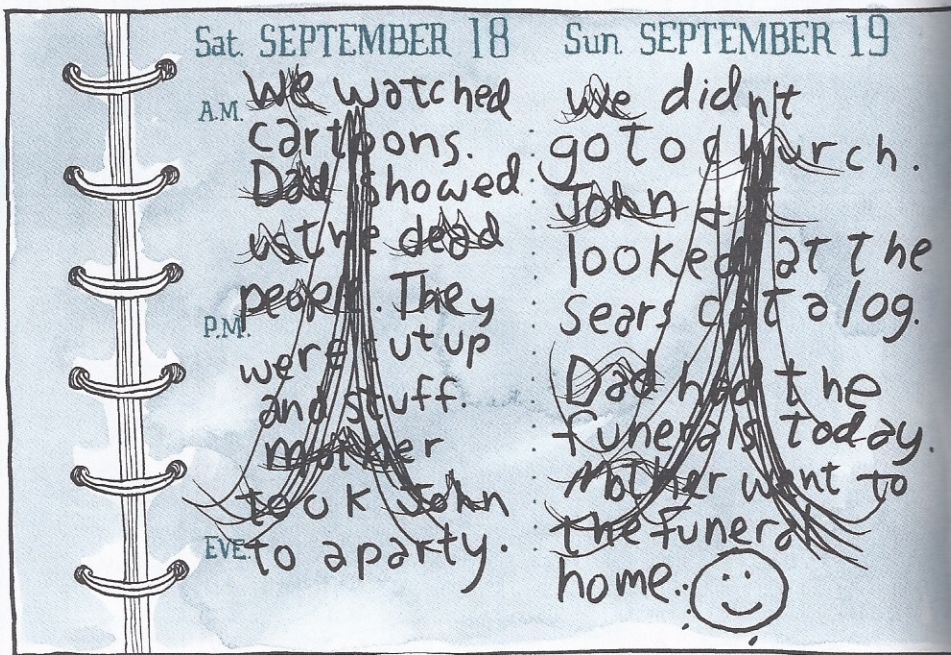
Similarly, the images of death or illness in Bechdel and Chast's autographics visualise their traumatic experiences to create a new aesthetic and invites reader engagement. For instance, Bechdel's father owns a funeral house. Bechdel frequently saw the dead bodies her father prepared to be buried. She particularly remembers when her cousin died in a car crash and was brought to the funeral house.

DAD EXPLAINED THAT HE HAD DIED FROM A BROKEN NECK.



HIS SKIN WAS GRAY, WHICH GAVE HIS BRIGHT BLOND CREWCUT THE EFFECT OF YELLOW TINT ON A BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPH.

MY DIARY ENTRIES FOR THAT WEEKEND ARE ALMOST COMPLETELY OBSCURED.



(Bechdel 148)

In the panel, Alison is looking at the body, but the reader cannot see her expression. The narrator adds some detail by describing the colours that the reader cannot see. Alison distances herself from what she sees, comparing the body to a photograph, not fully grasping what she is seeing. Her traumatic experience comes into full force in the panel beneath it: she has been using the upside down 'V' as analogy for 'I think' and in the lower panel she has

scratched it in with particular force. Like Satrapi, Bechdel is not able to directly draw her reaction at seeing a dead body but uses another image to convey a traumatic memory. The reader needs to engage with the different layers of the autographic to make sense of the traumatic experience that is present. Contrastingly, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* does not materialise dead bodies in the same way, but it does include sketches that Chast made of her dying mother (Chast 211-22). The sketches are quite schematic, but convey the suffering and frailty of Chast's 93-year-old mother as Chast witnesses it. The divergent style of the full-colour, humorous cartoons in the rest of the autographic and these sketches from her personal archive indicate a specifically vulnerable moment for Roz. The reader gets taken straight to the past, as the sketches were made at the exact moment when her mother was dying without the later interpretation of the memory from the narrator. Each artist has their own aesthetic of combining pictorial and verbal levels to render these traumatic memories, but they all require the reader to make these connections for themselves, as some experiences cannot be put into words or images.

Another form of trauma that is explored in *Fun Home* is the intergenerational struggle with sexuality, because in the autographic Alison discovers that her father, who died when she was nineteen, was a closeted homosexual and that she herself is a lesbian. Bechdel tells of her complex relationship with her father, whose secret homosexuality affected their family life in several ways and the moral complexities of finding out her father was gay and had a preference for having sex with teenagers. Cvetkovich argues that rather than condemning or praising her father for his homosexuality, or herself for her own, Bechdel treats "sexual desire as a messy and unpredictable force that can't be relegated to scapegoated perverts" (118). Additionally, the anachronistic nature of the autographic does not only make sure that Bechdel herself overlays past memories with present meanings, but also engages the reader to make connections between the different chapters. For example, in chapter 4 a young Alison is depicted, while she visits a strip mine on holiday with her family. The reader already knows

about her sexual orientation and how her father died. In the first panel her father leaves the car to get groceries and Alison looks at a calendar with pictures of naked women:

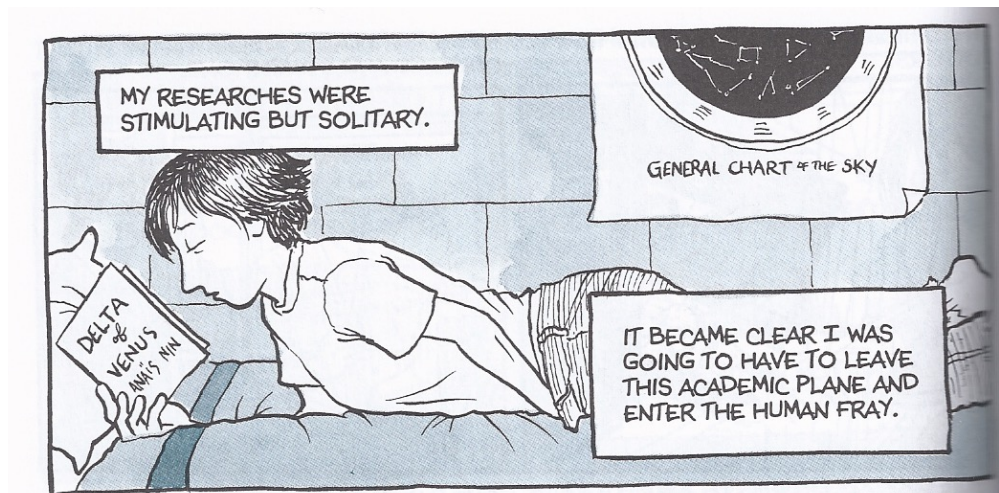


(Bechdel 112)

In the second panel, Alison looks detached and as if nothing happened, with the narrator explaining that Alison felt “inexplicably ashamed” (Bechdel 112). Next to Alison, her father gets into the car, holding a bag with Sunbeam Bread in it – a recurring motif as he was killed by a Sunbeam truck. The panel lays bare and points to the trauma that is at the heart of the autographic: Bechdel depicts her own shame at her arousal at the sight of a naked woman, while her father was also haunted by shame, which caused him to hide his homosexuality his whole life and which Bechdel believes to be the cause for his possible suicide. The prominent Sunbeam bread in the middle of the panel tragically refers to his death at the end of *Fun Home*. These connections are not only important for Bechdel’s story about her youth, but also for the reader to engage the journey towards accepting her own sexuality and her father’s past. An autographic like *Fun Home* can create greater awareness or understanding among readers towards the acceptance of homosexuality.

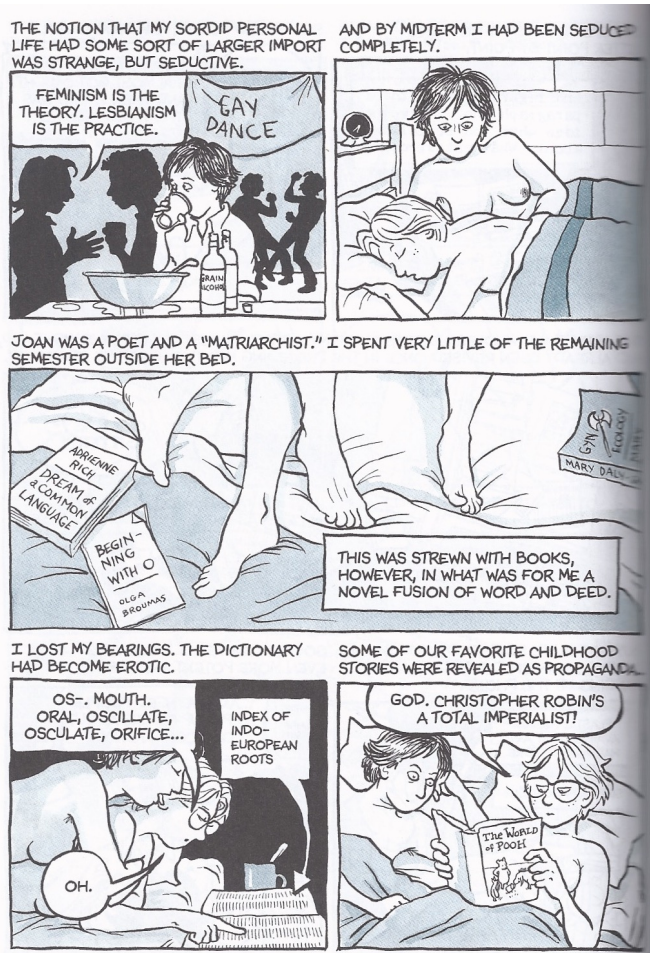
Further exploration of Alison’s sexuality is described more extensively in earlier chapters of *Fun Home*. This autographic is in some instances not only graphic because it includes images, but also because it alludes to and depicts sexual content. However, this graphic depiction of sexual content is always balanced out by the narrator’s research-based approach toward her sexual awakening and the many literary references. For instance, in a

panel in which she masturbates, she refers to the exploration of her gay identity during her time as a student as “researches”:



(Bechdel 76)

In the panel she is reading *The Delta of Venus* by Anaïs Nin, writer of many essays, novels, short stories and erotica. The narrator comments that “[Alison] was going to have to leave this academic plane and enter the human fray” (76), but while she eventually does that and has girlfriends, the depictions of sexuality still often revolve around literature and reading.



(Bechdel 80)

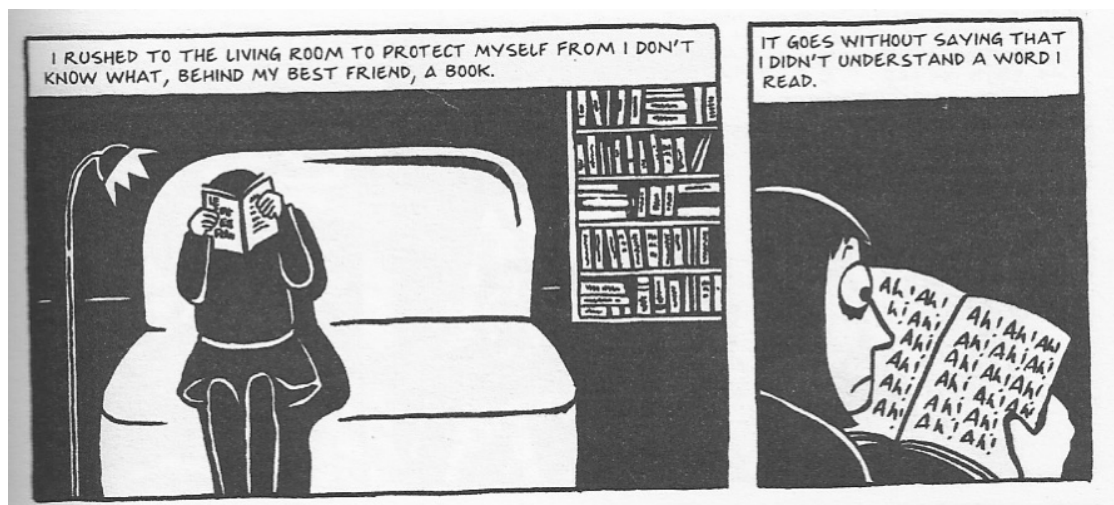
In chapter 2 of this thesis, a link was already established between the love of literature as the commonality between Alison and her father, while at the same time literature aided Alison in her exploration of her lesbian identity. That link does not only support the narrative as a whole, but in these panels the references to literature also ensures that the graphic content does not become vulgar, because it is meant to create a literary aesthetic. The contrast between the narrator's tone and the literary references with the naked bodies on the page fuses sexual experiences with literary and intellectual awakenings. As the narrator explains, "the dictionary had become erotic" and "some of [their] favorite childhood stories were revealed as propaganda" (80). The adult content is used not purely to shock or arouse, although that does play a part, but always serves a purpose to indicate a growth or change in Alison's own development, which creates "distinctive configurations of social knowledge" (Felski 11), because her story can be placed within an ongoing discourse of queer narratives.

While Alison explores her own sexuality in *Fun Home*, the autographic simultaneously mirrors this with her father's homosexuality. His sexuality is not depicted so directly and graphically as Alison's own, as her father was always hiding it and Bechdel would not have known what this intimate experience was like for her father. The repression of his sexuality affected the whole family and Alison in particular, as she remembers the absence of warm and close familial feelings, and the isolation and individualisation of each family member (Bechdel 134). Another memory that pervades her childhood was her father's obsession with home decor, which left her and her brothers tiptoeing around the house in an attempt not to break anything and anger her father (Bechdel 12). The one instance where his sexuality is depicted more graphically is in the centrefold picture of their babysitter Roy, an example which was already discussed in chapter 2 in relation to Alison's identification with her father.

The picture of Roy is reframed by Bechdel, the narrator ascribing an "ethereal, painterly quality" (100) to it. The pose Roy takes is considerably erotic. The aesthetic and erotic qualities of the picture are not immediately visible, as the picture is a black-and-white rendering of the original. Only because Alison imposes her meaning on the picture the reader is able to see these qualities. The picture contrasts the graphic images earlier in the autographic of Alison and her girlfriend, as it has been hidden away and her father is not present on the picture itself. Cvetkovich states that Bechdel's experience can be placed within the larger context of private and queer histories (122); the difference between the openly graphic images of Alison's sexual encounters and the hidden images of her father indicate the difference between generations in queer history. As Smith and Watson also indicate, Alison's story does not only deal with her own traumatic memories within (queer) history, but is also a tale that "explores those histories of everyday trauma that are embodied in the next generations" and thereby celebrates the "survivors with imagination, energy, and resilience" (30). The suffering of her father, and in a larger context all gay people from his generation,

ultimately has led to an improved position for gay people of Bechdel's own generation. Again, the autographic works toward the creation of social knowledge, by depicting the difficulties other generations have gone through and the improvements in contemporary society.

While they are not part of queer narratives, the secretive nature that surrounds the subject of sex and sexuality also occurs in the autographs by Satrapi and Chast. For Satrapi, living in an Islamic regime while growing up meant that sex was never discussed, not even by her more progressive parents. When Marji moves to Austria, it is the first time that she talks openly with a friend about sex and the narrator explains how she was appalled that her friend would just talk about a subject like that (188). Later on she hears her friend having sex with her boyfriend, which is comically represented by her reading a book while not actually taking anything in, imposing what she is hearing onto the pages of the book:



(Satrapi 189)

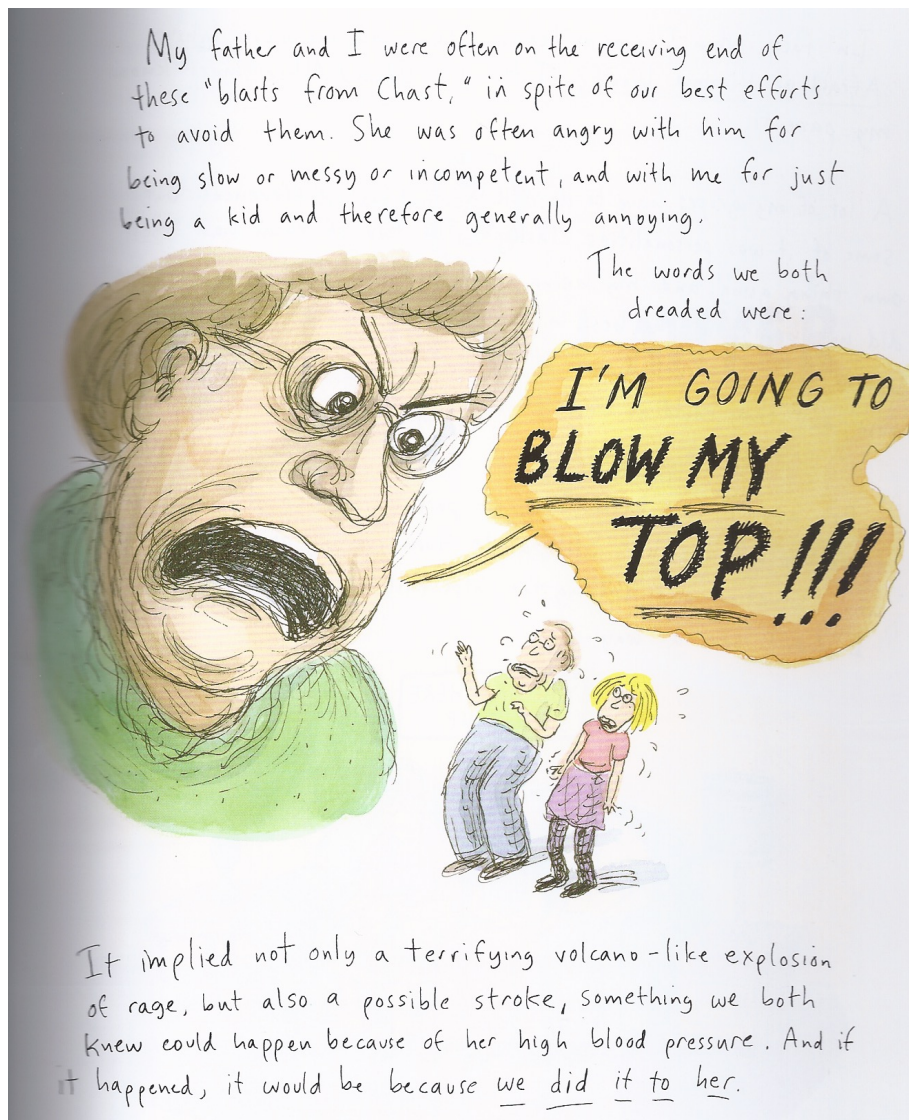
Both Bechdel and Satrapi depict themselves as children or teenagers who are just learning about sexuality and visualise their discomfort at encountering it for the first time, which is a universal experience and a point of recognition for the reader. Even though *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* is not a coming-of-age story in the conventional sense, Chast refers to that same uneasiness about sexuality in a chapter entitled "A Rare Sex Talk" (25). In this chapter, Roz' mother tells her that "you can tell the degree of a woman's

sexuality from her shoes” (25), because wearing heels means that you are ‘available’. The scene is illustrative of Chast’s frustrations with her mother and her comedic talents, but it is also a rare moment of identification with her mother, as she draws both her own and her mother’s feet wearing sturdy flat shoes. The topic of sexuality within these autographics is then not only used within queer literary discourse, but also as a point of recognition and identification for the reader.

A final topic that was not prohibited by the CCA, but does add to the literariness of the comics because of the literary aesthetic and the required reader engagement are the parent-child relationships in all three autographics. Because the autographics by Bechdel and Satrapi both contain coming-of-age elements, their relationships with their parents change from child to teenager to (young) adult. The autographic by Chast is not coming-of-age in the same sense, but the narrative is written around the relationship between Roz and her elderly parents. Her parents have very different personalities, which is only intensified in their old age. Chast uses her comedic style and her combination of narration and image without panels to represent her relationship with her parent humorously, but at the same time points out the trauma that her parents inflicted on her, especially by not talking about anything that might be painful or might upset someone. Their silence around difficult topics in turn come from their own trauma’s, because Roz’ parents grew up during the Great Depression in poor families in New York and they already lost a baby before Roz was born. Roz was never allowed to ask about these things and her mother referred to the dead baby as “that mess” (Chast 5), which indicates their own difficulty with dealing with trauma. Like in *Fun Home*, the different struggles across generations is a theme and Chast uses an intimate aesthetic and humour to paint a complicated picture of both frustration and the difficulty of losing your parents – a universal experience.

While Chast’s relationship with her parents during her youth was difficult, the autographic depicts how that later became more nuanced, because she came to understand

them better. She uses exaggeration to show the dominance of her mother over the whole family. In one example, she tells about her mother's fits of anger which they called "blasts from Chast" (Chast 35) and was often directed at her or her father. In the image accompanying this text, Chast has enlarged her mother yelling and looking angry while hanging over two figures that are much smaller and look very scared, leaning back in fear.



(Chast 35)

While the image on the one hand presents something that has actually happened, Roz' mother yelling at Roz and her father, it also enlarges the personality of her mother and represents the fear Roz constantly lived in, not to anger her mother, a fear that in the image literally hangs over them. The uneasiness that surrounded her youth made Roz feel reluctant in visiting her parents when she became an adult herself, and by the time her parents became so old that they

could not take care of themselves anymore, Roz had not visited them for eleven years. She explains how she always found excuses, but actually simply “just didn’t want to” (11).

Through her personal account Chast shows both sides of the loneliness among elderly people: the child who is reluctant to visit her parents and the parents who are becoming isolated in old age.

The reversal of roles between Roz and her elderly parents, where she effectually takes over the parenting role because she has to take care of them, confronts her with the traumatic memories of the past. As mentioned in chapter 2, Chast has created an archive of feelings by including documentation and photographs in her autographic, besides drawings and text. Besides the poems by her mother, Chast included many different photographs from her own archive in her memoir, such as a picture of her parents (14), a picture of herself as a toddler with both her grandmothers (189) and many pictures of the junk she cleared out of her parents’ apartment after they left it to live in a care home (109-118). The latter are meant to illustrate the mess the apartment was in and the fact that her mother could never throw anything away, because it might become useful someday. On the next page Chast has drawn several items she decided to keep after clearing out the apartment. Whereas the useless junk that she hated so much and that represents the qualities that annoyed her in her parents is presented in photographs, the things that she picked to keep and has emotional value has been drawn by Chast herself.



(Chast 119)

Just as Bechdel and Satrapi did not draw those instances that represented specific traumatic memories for them, Chast has chosen not to materialise those objects that remind her of unpleasant youth memories on the handcrafted pictorial level. Whereas *Fun Home* and *Persepolis* can be placed in a history of gay narratives and war narratives respectively, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* can be placed within the greater narrative of

personal histories and generational divide. Chast's experiences with her elderly will be recognisable for many readers, but her specific story of parents that are so dependent on each other can create a greater awareness for the importance for elderly people to engage in social activities.

It is not just the inclusion of adult content such as sexuality, violence and complex familial relationships, but rather the way in which they are depicted that add to the literariness of *Fun Home*, *Persepolis*, and *Why Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* The different elements as identified by Felski are woven into the different pictorial and verbal levels of these autographic. The experiences of the artists in their autographics appeal to the recognition of the reader, the reader is invited to identify themselves with the protagonists of the autographics to some extent, but at the same time these accounts are very personal. This means that besides identification, the artists also show that their experiences are unique, sometimes by shocking the reader with the violence that is contrasted with the figure of the child, and sometimes by trying to create a greater social knowledge, by teaching the reader about their experiences as minorities or depicting the unspeakable. They create a whole new aesthetic of portraying experience, because they work with different pictorial and verbal levels, in a very intimate and diaristic way.

Conclusion

The literariness of *Fun Home*, *Persepolis* and *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* is mostly expressed in the ways in which the artists deal with complex themes such as memory processes, trauma, relationships and more. The artists use the comics form to represent their own memories and traumas to form a new aesthetic of experience. They use established literary tropes, such as contradictions or comparisons, except they accomplish this within both verbal and pictorial levels, and other techniques available to comics such as panels and gutters. The effect is a hybrid form, which is different from other literary works, but nonetheless fits within the field of literature. Additionally, the comics can be placed within disciplines and genres of literature that already existed. They can be studied within the fields of life writing, feminism, war narratives, queer narratives and so on. By employing a different form, the comics can add to pre-existing narratives and extend the knowledge or perspectives that are already in place, which is an important function of literature according to Felski (11). Although this thesis has not extensively discussed the role of the female artist, the autographics by Satrapi, Bechdel and Chast add a new perspective to women's writing specifically. Other scholars, such as Whitlock and Chute, have previously already explored comics and female life writing; the form of comics gives female artists the opportunity to establish their narratives outside of traditional literature.

Even though it has been established that these autographics have a literary quality to them, the fact that the comics form combines low-art with high-art is what makes them so successful. Western culture is ever-changing and now, more than ever, the internet and fast-paced cultural production threatens the traditional media. Because of these developments, different forms of art can reach all kinds of audiences and art has become more widely available. The drawings in comics have a sort of universal quality to them: whereas text can contain words the reader does not understand or might be written in a language that is unknown to the reader, an image speaks for itself. Additionally, comics have come from a

more traditionally low-art form, originating in mass-market culture and widely read by children. While the comics by Satrapi, Bechdel and Chast stand out because they take their comics to a higher level and experiment with the form, the origins of the form are still visible in their comics, such as the humour and nostalgic elements. Without devaluing their achievements and literariness, the awarding of literary prizes to these comics, but also to Bob Dylan for example, shows that traditional institutions have become more open toward more experimental and hybrid forms of literature.

The genre of autobiography lends itself particularly well to the advancement of comics as a literary form. The combination of the low-art form of comics with elements from traditional literature are given more credibility by the fact that Satrapi, Bechdel and Chast are writing and drawing from a position of truth and experience. The “[reader is] invited to consider the narrator a uniquely qualified authority” (Smith and Watson 33) in order to give the story a credibility. The drawing style may then be simple or evocative of children’s books, but the narrative needs to persuade the reader to belief, because it is fundamental to “the intersubjective exchange of ... narrator and reader” (35). This credibility of experience is especially important for the recognition of comics as a literary form. In order to be shocked, enchanted, gain knowledge or recognise themselves in the story (Felski 11), the reader must to some extent believe in what he or she is reading. Simultaneously, the reader is invited to engage with the text and construct their own meaning out of the story, because of the “tensions and contradictions in the gaps, inconsistencies, and boundaries breached within autobiographical narratives” (Smith and Watson 40). Autographics lends itself well to this reader engagement, because the form itself is already fractured, with many different pictorial and verbal elements, and panels and gutters, that constitute the narrative; the reader constantly needs to engage with these different layers to make sense of the narrative. Autobiographical comics are a very valuable addition to the literary field and has created a new literary aesthetic.

Comics are an interesting medium to study for academics of literature, but it must still be acknowledged that the form is hybrid and it is also useful to study them from other angles, such as film studies or art criticism. For example, it would be interesting to provide analyses of the mise-en-scène and other perspectives of the images of the autographics. Furthermore, a more extensive analysis of the place of autographics within the field of life narratives would also provide a more complete picture of these autographies within a broader context. Even though the topic of feminism was briefly touched upon in this thesis, a more extensive study of the place of women within comics studies or a feminist analysis of these autographics would be useful to get a better understanding of these narratives as feminist cultural production.

(15.951 words)

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