

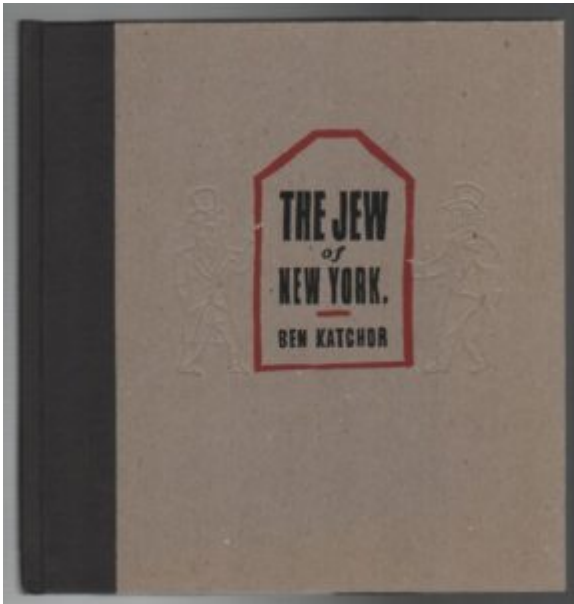
The Past Impaneled



The publication of the second volume of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* in 1991 marked more than the completion of Art Spiegelman's painstakingly researched comic book account of his father's Holocaust experience and survival. It also marked, at least for those readers who were either unaccustomed to the medium or had relinquished it somewhere during their adolescence, the intellectual legitimization of the comic book. While some of the pictorial conventions used by Spiegelman, particularly his depiction of his characters as animals, left some critics uneasy (misunderstanding the device's goal of subverting the racist tenets of Nazism), *Maus* received acclaim as an original and indisputably serious work of history—both in the story it told and in the graphical and textual ways of its telling. (For more reviews and commentaries about *Maus*, see ["Maus Resources on the Web."](#))

Maus's accolades notwithstanding, a certain air of irrespectability still lingers about the comic book as a medium for serious work about the past. Cartoonists such as Larry Gonick, Raymond Briggs, and Joe Sacco have been recognized for the quality of their respective graphical histories, memoirs, and journalism, but the fervent sales and serious critical attention engendered by *Maus* have not been repeated. Last year, almost a decade after it published *Maus*, Pantheon released a group of new comic books packaged in formats seemingly designed to belie their actual status: so sumptuous-looking—and expensive—that they

might be construed as *art* instead of *comic* books.

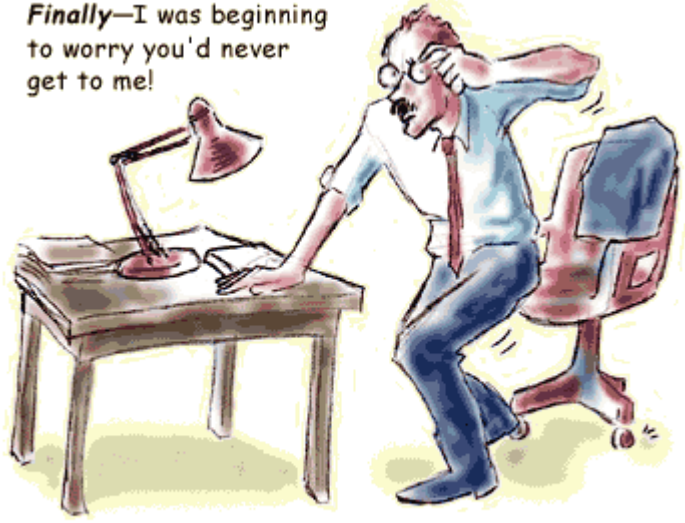


Chris Ware. *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*.
New York: Pantheon, 2000. 380 pp., \$27.50.

But, while two of these new books—Ben Katchor’s *The Jew of New York* and Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Boy on Earth*—traffic in the past, unlike their predecessor they are works of graphic historical fiction. As such, their publication by a commercial American publisher might be construed as signaling a further maturation of the medium—at least in the sense that they have boldly relinquished the respectable trappings of scholarship, however crude that might at times end up being, in favor of exploring the past in more fantastical terms. But their status as fiction allows us to raise a useful question often overlooked when the pedantic and didactic virtues of “fact” are offered as the primary goal of a work: *Why do history in the form of a comic book?* Why use this particular medium as opposed to others? What can the comic book offer in the presentation of the past that is unique and compelling?

In the spirit of fantasy—or, at least, fiction—let’s step out of *Common-place*’s ordinary mode and into, around, and through these works and their worlds.

Finally—I was beginning
to worry you'd never
get to me!



Benson Misanthrope: obscure,
nonetheless opinionated, historian.

Ben Katchor has been slogging through the urban past since 1988, when his comic strip *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer* first made its appearance in the pages of the weekly *New York Press*. Let me introduce you to the eponymous hero.



Each week we join Mr. Knipl here on his peripatetic journeys through a dense cityscape as he interrogates—well, really, he mainly listens to—the obsessive and beleaguered tales of various New Yorkers. Invariably squat, bathed in the grayest of washes (made even murkier on the newsprint page—the reproductions you'll see here look much better), these characters convey a fantastic yet oddly plausible urban social and cultural history.

Forgotten urban services such as the Ink Eradicators, who each week pick up old documents from offices for cleansing. Or the lingering entrepreneurial dreams cloistered in the businesses located at the last stop of a subway line. Or obscure city institutions such as the Municipal Birthmark Registry. Or the real estate phenomenon of the oldest continually vacant storefront in America:

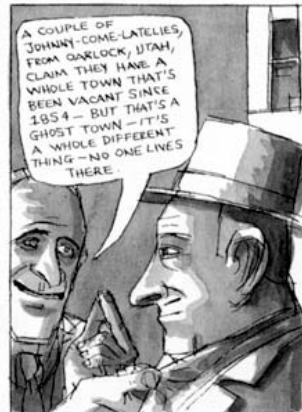
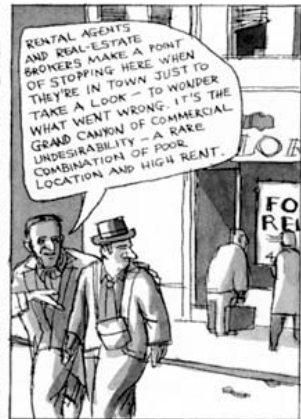


[Click here to see the complete comic strip.](#)

I suppose it's obligatory for me to mention Katchor's MacArthur—the first awarded a cartoonist.

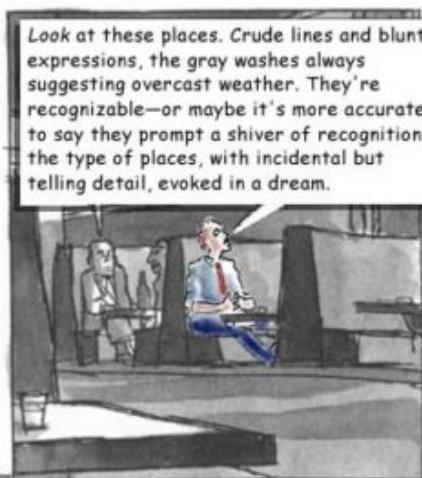
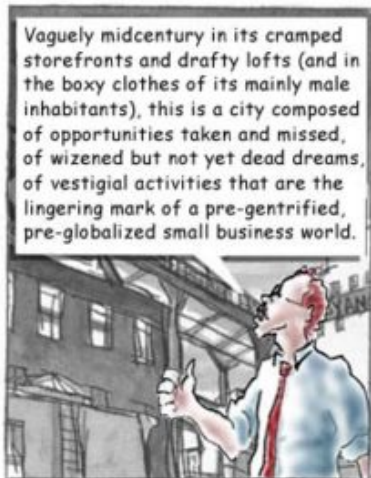
Now that I've got that out of the way, let's take a closer look at Knipl's city.





From Ben Katchor, *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer: The Beauty Supply District* (New York, 2000).

Knipl (which in Yiddish refers to the little "nest egg" you hide away for a rainy day) is comics' contribution to the cultural historian's favorite urban figure, the *flâneur*. But what is the passing scene that Julius Knipl observes and savors each week?



I know Katchor sees himself as a naturalist, but his sensibility is surrealist in the sense of revealing the mysterious embodied in the ordinary.* In that way, marching through his fondly rendered, rundown, downtown business districts, gazing through windows and overhearing conversations, he's a wry Jewish Edward Hopper.

Or how about Joseph Mitchell meets Isaac B. Singer?



*Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Cannon Fodder: Authoring Eugene Atget" in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis, 1991) 35.

Did I mention how Katchor is a master of the comic strip form? How each individual strip encompasses and evokes a particular urban obsession or phenomenon? His concise stories unfold in about eight panels, told in an interplay of omniscient narrator, interpolative dialogue, and changing perspectives.

For more on Katchor's vision and technique, see Lawrence Weschler's 1993 *New Yorker* profile, "Katchor's Knipl, Knipl's Katchor," reprinted in *A Wanderer in the Perfect City: Selected Passion Pieces* (Saint Paul, 1998), and Paul Buhle's "Walker in the Imagined City," *The Nation*, October 16, 2000. For those less concerned with pictorial representation, check out the short-lived NPR series based on Julius Knipl's exploits.

IN THE SUMMER OF MY FOURTH YEAR IN THE WILDERNESS, WE CAME UPON A PECULIAR SETTLEMENT BUILT ON THE LEEWARD SIDE OF A GENTLY SLOPING HILL.



THE WORDS "NEW AFFLATUS" SPELT PHONETICALLY WITH HEBREW CHARACTERS!



WELCOME, WELCOME. I AM SEPTUM DANDY, PNEUMATIC PILOT AND ENGINEER, THESE THIRD DEGREE. THESE ARE MY SONS, YAYU AND NOTUS; AND THIS IS MY SISTER-BRIDE, SUSPIRA.

FROM THESE INCONTROVERTIBLE FACTS, THEY EXTRAPOLATED THE SCIENTIFIC DESTINY OF AMERICA.



OURS IS A COMMUNALISTIC SECT FOUNDED UPON THE SCIENTIFIC PRINCIPLES OF THE GREAT GENIUS AND DISCOVERER OF OXYGEN, JOSEPH PRIESTLY.



CALL US FREE OXYGENATORS, AIR BATHERS, WIND WORSHIPERS... IT'S ALL THE SAME TO US. OUR GOAL: TO SEE TO IT THAT THIS FREE AND MOST UBIQUITOUS GIFT OF THE NATURAL WORLD IS NOT TURNED INTO A TAWDRY COMMODITY TO BE BOUGHT AND SOLD IN THE MARKETPLACE.



WHEN YOU HAVE TIME, YOU CAN JOIN OUR STUDY GROUP.

"I HAVE BEEN SO HAPPY AS BY ACCIDENT TO HAVE HIT UPON A METHOD OF RESTORING AIR INJURED BY CANDLES, AND TO HAVE DISCOVERED ONE OF THE RESTORATIVES WHICH NATURE EMPLOYS. IT IS VEGETATION!"

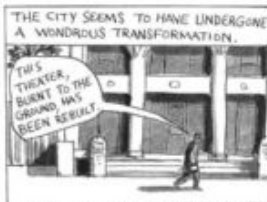


WHEN THIS CONTINENT IS THOROUGHLY OXYGENATED, THERE WILL BE NO NEED FOR PERMANENT DWELLINGS. THE CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES WILL REASSUME THE SALUTARY WANDERING LIFE OF THE ANCIENT HEBREWS.

The Jew of New York is a different tack for Katchor. Whereas his Knipl strips might be viewed as each a short story, *The Jew of New York* is Katchor's novel (albeit one fractured into episodic, page-long bites, parts of which appeared in the Jewish weekly, *The Forward*, in 1992-93). And this time the past has a firm date—1830.



These are but a few of the characters parading through Katchor's version of Jacksonian New York—a city glimpsed through the prism of Jewish identity and misidentification. Now, that's got to be an arcane vision since, amid New York's teeming 197,000 residents in 1830, no more than a few thousand were Jews . . . and Katchor's large cast of characters seemingly comprise a sizeable part of that group.



So what we have here is a shaggy-dog story inspired by one factual event: the brief establishment in 1825 of a proto-Zionist settlement on Grand Island, just below Niagara, by the New York journalist, politician, and playwright Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785-1851). The collapse of Noah's Ararat, which was to be a refuge for oppressed European Jews, sets off the two major strands of Katchor's 1830 story. One is the return to the city of a disgraced ritual slaughterer named Nathan Kishon who, after being disillusioned by Noah's failed experiment, had wandered for five years through the wilderness of upstate New York.

A returned Nathan Kishon marvels at the changes wrought by a booming New York economy.

Kishon's return coincides with the production of a new play, *The Jew of New York*, ostensibly based on Noah's abortive scheme. The play's title (and, as it turns out, the goal of its mysterious and menacing playwright, Prof. Solidus) invokes scientific racism's mission, heralded in the physiognomic and pathognomic literature of the time, to delineate the "true" Jew among a panoply of racial types. But Katchor's joke, running through a myriad of deftly juggled plots, is that the Jew of New York defies type.

Noah's Ararat is the only actual event in Katchor's tale. But *The Jew of New York* turns out to be an extended reverie on the millennial dreams and entrepreneurial schemes of the times. Most of the first third of the book chronicles Kishon's lengthy rural sojourn, wandering through what I assume is the "Burned-over District" of New York and the euphoria of the Second Great Awakening (if more in the trash left behind by revivalists than in the revivals themselves). During his journey, Kishon also encounters utopian communities where he contends with the perfectionist rejection of the market economy he will soon return to . . .



[Click here to see the complete page.](#)

It's one of many hilarious riffs on the Jewish unconscious of American millennialism. As is Katchor's vision of the proponents of the Jacksonian "main chance," exemplified in the great seltzer scheme of the Lake Erie Soda Company:



And, of course, Katchor touches on the very foundation of his Kniplian perspective—the incessant process of erasure and replacement that is the city's history:

As here, *The Jew of New York* mixes real and imaginary sites. And Katchor peppers his tale with an assortment of fake "ephemera"—handbills, tracts, advertisements, etc.—that cleverly probe our notions of documentation and authenticity.

What *The Jew of New York* fails to do, though, is offer a compelling visual world. Katchor's rendering of an 1830s New York is not much different from the city in which Julius K. wanders—the gray washes, the squat figures, the jittery linework. But here the places, ostensibly imagined, seem merely copied from other sources and, for the most part, they're bland, inhospitable backdrops for the characters. And, over ninety-eight pages, Katchor's charming repertoire of gestures and expressions wears thin. A technique that works so well in the short form of the comic strip is, at length, exhausted.



[Click here to see the complete page.](#)

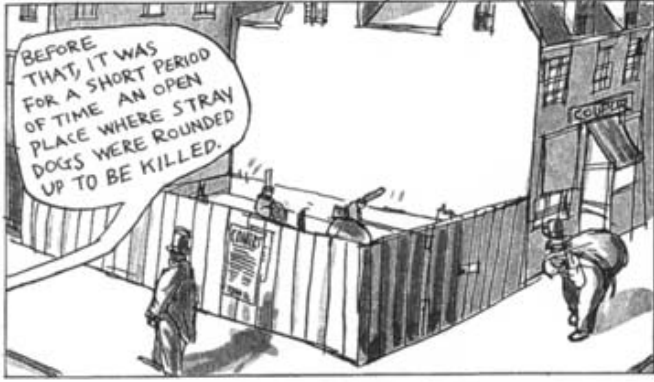
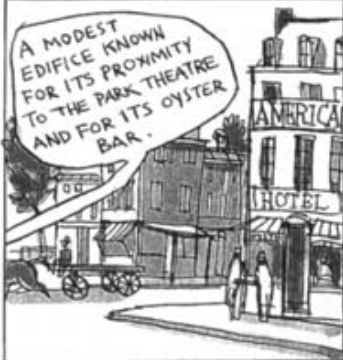
One vignette, describing how one character's infatuation with an actress is daunted by the imperfect print media of the period, delineates the limits of *The Jew of New York's* visualization of a past world:



[Click here to see the complete page.](#)

It's a wonderful passage, providing in the narration an acute observation about the nature of antebellum pictorial reproduction and, in the dialogue, a strong sense of the character's obsession. But it's all in the text: the meaning, not to mention information, is discernible only in the words.

OUT OF CURIOSITY, ENOCH LETUSHIM QUESTIONS
A HOTEL PORTER.





AN ASSEMBLAGE OF CONVEX LINES - FAR REMOVED FROM ANY FIRST-HAND OBSERVATIONS FROM NATURE - DESCRIBING LIMBS, TORSO, AND HEAD.

SOME EXAMPLES WERE HAND-TINTED, WITH THE AID OF STENCILS, IN A LIMITED PALATE OF SEMI-OPAQUE COLORS: SPOILED-SALMON PINK, INDAMINE BLUE, VERDIGRIS GREEN, CRESOL RED AND MASSICOT YELLOW.

THE COLORS ONLY APPROXIMATELY OVERLAID THE FORMS THEY WERE ASSIGNED TO - THE PRODUCT OF POORLY PAID PIECEWORK DONE BY A CHILD OR CARELESS ADULT.

TO MAKE THE LEAP OF SENSORIAL ASSOCIATION FROM THESE CRUDE PRINTS TO THE FLESH OF AN ACTUAL WOMAN REQUIRED A RECKLESS IMAGINATION.



Ben Katchor's 1830s New York is a literary experience. Nothing wrong with that. But the question remains: *Why do history in the form of a comic book?*

In contrast to *The Jew of New York*, you wouldn't at first glance think of Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*—which began in 1993 as a serial in Ware's *Acme Novelty Library* (published by Fantagraphics) and took seven years to finish—as having much to do with history. This, by the way, is the eponymous, er, hero.



Er is an operative term here. Along with *sniff*, *wink*, *shut*, *jngle jng*, *scrnch*, *k-klk*, and many other onomatopoeic and *nononomatopoeic* words that nonetheless represent sounds, all of which run throughout this massive tale. One thing Jimmy Corrigan is *not* is articulate. He is forever at a loss for words. And *loss* is one of the terrible themes of this book: loss of a parent, loss of love, loss of history.



[Click here to see the complete page.](#)

Jimmy's vision, too, is curtailed and his world, even in a memory of early childhood, is missing the details of other people's faces—reflecting his inability to return even the friendly gaze of his mother's one-night lover (a sometime actor who impersonates comic book superheroes at promotional "personal appearance" venues).

Years later we meet Jimmy as a thirty-six-year-old Chicago mail clerk, incapable of connecting with anyone but his mother, whose demands he is always trying (ineffectually) to fend off. His routine of frustration and delusional daydreaming is interrupted one Thanksgiving week by a letter from his long-lost father inviting him to come to Michigan. The ensuing reunion is marred by a series of accidents, misunderstandings, and the shock of discovering he has an adopted black half-sister as well as an ancient grandfather, also named Jimmy Corrigan.

I know describing this plot makes it sound pretty dreary stuff. If I want to be depressed, I can just read the newspaper, right? But there's much more here . . .





(WELL HEY THERE, PARTNER...WHAT'RE YOU DOING UP SO EARLY?)

EATIN' CEREAL..

(OH YEAH? HEY "CAPTAIN CRUNCH"? THAT SOUNDS PRETTY GOOD..)

HOW COME YOU'RE WHISPERING?

(WELL I DON'T THINK YOUR MOM WANTS TO WAKE UP YET...AND I'VE GOT TO GET GOING!)



(BUT YOU TELL HER I HAD A REAL GOOD TIME, OKAY?)



(AND HERE... THIS'S FOR YOU!)



OH, WOW! YOUR MASK!

(AND YOU DESERVE IT.)

(KEEP YOUR EYE OUT FOR CRIME, PARTNER!)



A FEW MINUTES LATER.



MOM!

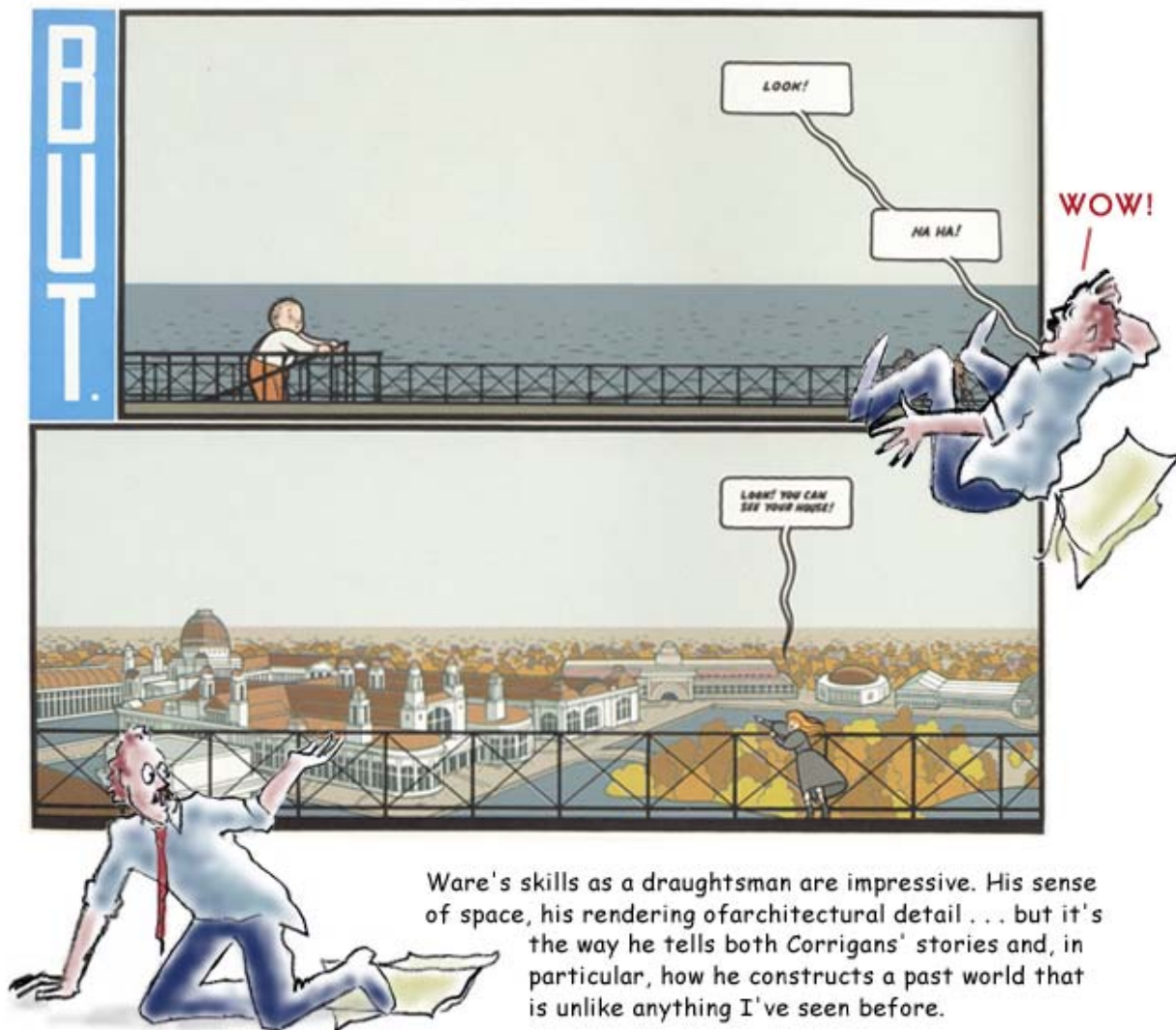
MOM! HE SAID TO TELL YOU HE HAD A REAL GOOD TIME!

For one thing, *Jimmy Corrigan* turns out to be an intergenerational story. Embedded in the telling of Jimmy's sojourn in Michigan is a lengthy parallel plot set in 1893 Chicago during the construction of the "White City" of the World Columbian Exposition and the onset of an economic depression.

This is grandfather Jimmy Corrigan's tale, his bitter reminiscence of a childhood framed by his mother's death in childbirth, his cruel and rejecting father (who works as a glazier in the rising White City), the death of his grandmother, his father's work injury and resulting unemployment, the loss of his home, the persecution by his classmates . . .

It seems that the Jimmies, unbeknownst to each other, are trapped in a vicious, repetitive familial cycle of history [a vision of the past also explored by T. Coraghessan Boyle in his *World's End* (New York, 1987) and Peter Ackroyd in *Hawksmoor* (New York, 1985)].

I know what you're thinking. Pretty dreary stuff again. But amid Jimmy the Elder's 1893 trials and trepidations, there also are rare moments of surprise and exhilaration. After fearfully stealing into the White City construction site, creeping through dark cavernous rooms, and climbing skeletal heights, Jimmy discovers:



And, truth be told, I've read a lot of comics in my day.

Although I tend to leave that out of my vita.

Ware securely situates Jimmy's experience in the historical moment without resorting to exposition. It's an 1893 world as seen through the eyes and heard through the ears of a child, critical aspects of time and place coming to light in momentary glimpses and half-understood remarks. It's a vision of the past attained through the accumulation of historically-specific observations and sensations in which the reader must participate to grasp significance.



[Click here to see the complete page.](#)

For example, although tangential to the discomfort and revulsion Jimmy feels in one scene, the Chicago Fire dominates it. Neither Ware nor his protagonist comment on the fire or its significance, but it's there—during this uncomfortable tryst as well as, equally unremarked upon, in other parts of the book—for the attentive reader.

Similarly, the next morning, Jimmy accompanies his father to a new job, and through his fractured impressions we gain a sense of the racial boundaries of turn-of-the-century Chicago—culminating in the great symbol of that exclusion, the White City:



[Click here to see the complete pages.](#)

These sections, which in time we learn are the grandfather's recollections almost a century later (delineated in the cursive script), operate with the alternating precision and ellipses of memory. And Ware, in odd moments, plays pictorially with the dissonances in that process of remembering. When Jimmy and his father finally visit the completed White City, the reader can't help notice the nightgown Jimmy wears, a sharply surrealist note in the otherwise naturalistic setting.



[Click here to see more of the page.](#)



BUT THE
Brightly colored
shadows

ORPHANED CHILDREN
LEFT TO PERISH



FAIL
to capture the boy's
interest.



A MAN OUT OF HIS
MIND WITH DRINK



DOUSES HIS DAUGHTER'S
FIERY LOCKS WITH WHISKEY



instead being divided between
ISN'T THERE SOMETHING
A LITTLE LESS UPSETTING?



OH HOW
AWFUL



His attention



A loose tooth

an unpleasant
powdery smell



OF COURSE

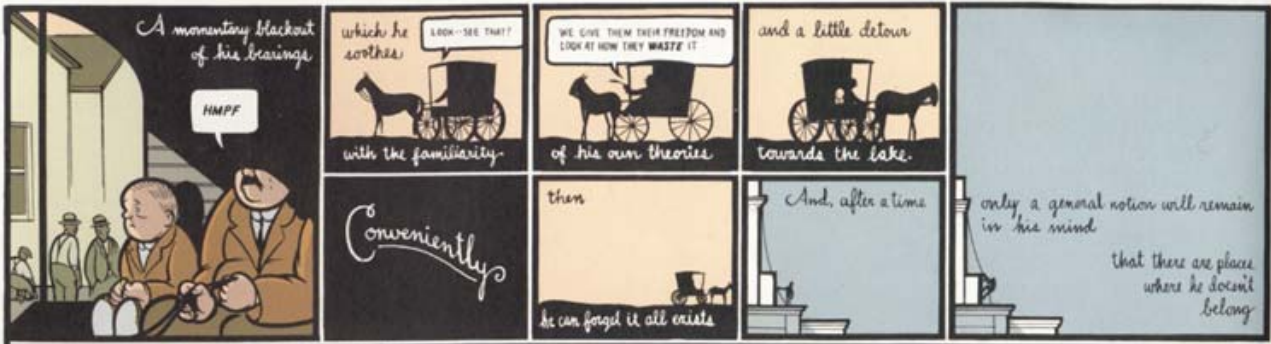
and the unfamiliar woman

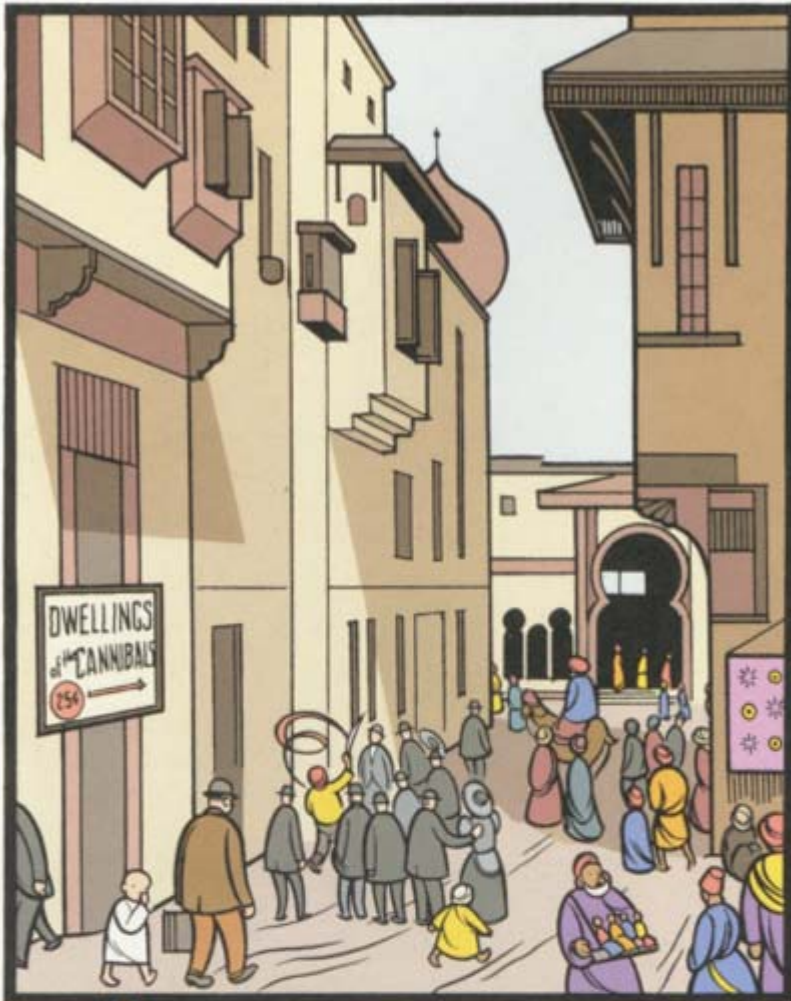


his father's
filthy hand



occasionally fingers.







Using different visual cues, Ware places us in specific historical moments. For example, we pass by this building many times over the course of the Jimmies' saga, each time marking a different temporal moment—separated by weeks or sometimes by generations. And, cumulatively, the repeated (but subtly altering) motif links the younger Jimmy Corrigan's confused present to a past. It's a past, though, that we are privy to but, robbed of broader familial relationships and a knowledge of family lore, he is not.



Here and in other places in his book, Ware situates us in the historical moment only through visual information and comic narrative conventions. Alternating panel size, points of view, and shades of color (from murkier tones to harsh chiaroscuro), in six panels he suggests what the ascent in a White City elevator, rising to unimagined heights, felt like.

[Click here to see more of the page.](#)

In this case, Ware's linework and perspective recall the architectural and spatial mastery of the pioneering cartoonist Winsor McKay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. But Ware's architectural work extends to the design of each page (and page-spread) with the purpose of suggesting more than different historical eras. Changing the size and number of panels, altering text styles, alternating image and text, using distant and intimate perspectives—by, in effect, pacing his story through comics' pictorial and typographic conventions—Ware manages to convey in this sequential two-dimensional medium a palpable sense of time. From the languidness of a child's play to the curt interruption of an adult:



[Click here to see the complete page.](#)



Through his skillful use of the medium (itself influenced by the conventions of filmmaking), Ware comes closer than any other cartoonist I've seen to simulating the rhythms and *longueurs* of experience. This comes across most clearly in his strategic use, in contrast to Ben Katchor, of *silence*:



[Click here to see the complete page.](#)

[Click here to see the complete page.](#)

Look, you'll just have to buy the book because the structure and pacing of Ware's storytelling is predicated on the spatial relations of the *printed page*—not the Web page. And when you do, you probably won't thank me because reading *Jimmy Corrigan* is a demanding task. If you're expecting to skim because, well, it's composed mainly of pictures, isn't it?—then forget about it. On the other hand, if you want to explore the past in a way you haven't done before . . .



Okay, I could quibble about Chris Ware's last-minute change of heart that doesn't ring true to the rest of the book. In the end, though, *Jimmy Corrigan* is one of those rare books that bears reading more than once.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to check back to 1893.

For more on Chris Ware and *Jimmy Corrigan*, [check out this recent radio interview](#), and two extended published interviews: "Understanding (Chris Ware's) Comics," *The Comics Journal*, 200 (December 1997), 118-71; and "The Smartest Cartoonist on Earth," a special issue of *The Imp*, 1-3 (1999).

A tip of the digital hat to Renee Bender, Ellen Noonan, Roy Rosenzweig, and Andrea Adas Vasquez, and *Common-place*'s Ed Grey, John McCoy, and Ben Zevin.



*I followed him like a loyal animal
right up to the edge
of the largest building in the world*









This article originally appeared in issue 1.3 (March, 2001).

Joshua Brown is director of the American Social History Project at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. His *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crises of Gilded Age America* will be published by University of California Press in 2002.

Benson Misanthrope's adventures looking for academic employment were chronicled in the *Radical History Review* from 1984 to 1989. He is currently associate professor of history at Malapropos University.