
Interview with Marjane Satrapi

Robert Root

By now we all ought at least to be aware of, if not conversant with, the growing influence of graphic literature in the culture. By “graphic” I mean “illustrated,” the medium of cartoons and comics. (As writer-illustrator Marjane Satrapi jokes, “When you say ‘graphic novel,’ I think you mean *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* or something like that.” She prefers the term “comics.” “Graphic” and “comic” will refer specifically to panels of pictures from here on.) Comic books and graphic novels have been adapted to film in movies like *Batman Begins*, *X-Men*, *Sin City*, *From Hell*, and *V for Vendetta*; bookstores have markedly expanded their sections devoted to graphic novels and manga; scholars study Japanese manga and Spanish *photonovelas*; children can distinguish readily between American cartoons and Japanese anime; and cable television carries popular channels like *Toon Disney* and the *Cartoon Network*, which has a late-night division called “*Adult Swim*” carrying animated shows not for children. Graphic literature has crossed into the mainstream with highly successful and critically acclaimed works like Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, Daniel Clowes’s *Ghost World* and *David Boring*, Craig Thompson’s *Goodbye, Chunky Rice*, and *Blankets*, Keiji Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen* series, and Charles Burns’s *Black Hole*. Despite the fact that all of these works are labeled as “graphic novels,” Spiegelman and Thompson have actually created masterful graphic memoirs.

Graphic memoir is able to approximate the narrative elements of the traditional textual memoir, as it largely does in Thompson’s *Blankets*, a book about adolescence and the conflicts and complications of growing up in a religiously conservative family. The verbal equivalents of these books might be works like Kim Barnes’s *In the Wilderness*, a memoir of life in a Pentecostal family, or *Blue Windows* by Barbara Wilson, about growing up in a Christian Science family. Graphic memoir can also approximate the experimental or lyric forms of the memoir. Spiegelman’s *Maus* is a

memoir told in two timelines, one following the narrative of the author's parents' experiences as Jews living in Eastern Europe during the rise of Nazi power and throughout the Holocaust, the other following the author's efforts to drag memories out of his aging and ailing father and record them in comics format. Textual equivalents might include not only Holocaust memoirs like Elie Wiesel's *Night* or Helen Fremont's *After Long Silence*, but also the late Deborah Tall's lyric memoir, *A Family of Strangers*.

Memoirs frequently revolve around an author's efforts to understand a parent, as well as to understand him- or herself. Think of Blake Morrison's *And When Did You Last See Your Father?*, a memoir alternating between the father's deathbed and the author's memories of the father during his own childhood, or Donald Antrim's efforts to come to terms with his relationship with his mother in *The Afterlife*. Graphic memoirs can be similarly powerful and insightful. *Fun Home: A Graphic Tragicomic* is such a memoir by Alison Bechdel, best known for her long-running comic strip "Dykes to Watch Out For" (which has been collected occasionally in book form). Bechdel examines the events surrounding her discovery of her sexual identity, the subsequent revelation of her father's homosexuality, and the circumstances surrounding his death. Her images both counterpoint and elaborate on her verbal narration.

While a good many graphic novels are scripted by a writer and illustrated by an artist, graphic memoirs mentioned here were scripted and drawn by the same person. They are more fully the creative vision of a single person than the productive output of a team, as most comic books are. One graphic author who has attained prominence in the field is Marjane Satrapi.

Satrapi first gained attention in the United States with the publication of *Persepolis*, a graphic memoir of growing up in Iran during the last years of the Shah's reign and the early years of the Islamic Revolution. Eventually the narrative followed her through a period of living in Austria, where she attended school, and took her through her return to Iran and life there until she finally emigrated for good. She now lives in France, where her work was first published. The story was published in four parts in Europe and compressed into two here. She followed *Persepolis 1* and *Persepolis 2 with Embroideries*, a book in which seven women discuss their lives in Iran, and more recently with *Chicken with Plums*, a book about the life and death of an uncle. The first two books were a continuous narrative, one about childhood, one about young maturity; the third was very much like a play, carried mostly by dialogue; the fourth resembled, in style and form, a folk tale. *Persepolis* is being made into an animated motion picture, with Catherine Deneuve contributing her voice to the soundtrack.



From the book: *PERSEPOLIS* by Marjane Satrapi. Translation Copyright © 2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Originally published in French by L'Association in 2000 and 2001. Published by arrangement with Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

The interview with Marjane Satrapi took place in November 2006 at the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver, in between a crowded afternoon reading at the Boulder Book Store and a crowded evening reading at Denver's Tattered Cover Book Store.

Root: I'm interested in the use of illustration in the service of autobiography or memoir or other kinds of nonfiction and how that affects the "non-fictionness" of it, the truth of it. People keep referring to your books and to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* as "graphic novels," but it seems to me that a more accurate term would be "graphic memoirs," since they are all autobiographical on some level.

Satrapi: Yes, they *are* autobiographical, but at the same time the search for truth . . . If you're looking for truth you have to ask it from the Fox News and the *New York Times*. As soon as you write your story, it is a story; this is not a documentary. Of course you have to make fiction, you have to cheat, you have to make some angle around there, because the story has to turn, so that is the reconstruction of what we do. For instance, I don't know, when I write something about people and I'm mean to them, of course I would not use the real names and the real figures, even not the real story. I will create this new personage around myself. Of course, they will always be related to my experiences—what I have seen and what I have heard, or whatever—but any writer will do that, even in science fiction you do that. So the use of the drawing for me is that first of all, I am a very lousy writer. I have tried actually, you know, at one time to write. If I had to write this short article or something, here I am good. But for a novel, just forget about it. I lose all my sense of humor, I lose completely all my decency, and I become completely lousy and pathetic. If I say to myself, "Now you are a serious girl and now you are going to make some serious work," there's nothing worse than wanting to make a serious work for me. So drawing gives to me the possibility of this sense of saying what I want to say.

Also, there are so many things that you can say through images that you cannot say with the writing. The comics is the only media in the whole world that you can use the image plus the writing and plus the imagination and plus be active while reading it. When you watch a picture, a movie, you are passive. Everything is coming to you. When you are reading comics, between one frame to the other what is happening, you have to imagine it yourself. So you are active; you have to take part actually when you read the story. It is the only medium that uses the images in this way. So, for me, comics has only convenience.

Root: There have been a couple of successful textual memoirs about the experience of Iranian women, such as *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* by Azadeh Moaveni, and *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* by Azar Nafisi.

Satrapi: I did not read the *Lipstick Jihad*, but I read *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and I know Azar Nafisi. We came from a situation, all of us, we come from a situation that suddenly the government in our country decided we were worth half of the men—my witness counts half that of a mentally handicapped man just because he's a man. The basic culture is not that the woman is nothing—Iran is not Saudi Arabia—the women, they are educated, they are cultivated, they work. You have women that are judges, they are doctors, they are journalists, they work. So these women, when you tell them that their witness doesn't count as much as that of the guy who is going to wash the windows, even when the woman is a researcher in, I don't know, nuclear science or whatever, it makes you have more reason to talk, actually, because you are repressed. Our men are in a better situation, so they don't have any shouts, they don't need to be heard as much as we do. Of course, we have men who are great people that have been politically concerned, who have gone to jail, etc., etc., but the basic right that the society gives you, we don't even have this right. And I think this was a good model for us to take us out of that. I'm very happy that there's so many, actually.

Root: You've mentioned before the two languages that you work with, the language of words and the language of image, and how they come together. I wish you would elaborate a little more on that. You've said that you don't write the story and then find images to illustrate the text, that they go together and bounce off of one another. How does that work?

Satrapi: I have a small page on which I know more or less what I want to write in my story. When I start, I have these small little sketches with small drawings of people, and I have short, short dialogues going together, and once in a while I write the dialogue, and once in a while I go the other way. It's like a baby growing up. You don't have first the nose come up and then one eye and then one hand or one leg—all of it grows at the same time. Another thing also: when I work, you know, I am completely in a trance. I'm so concentrated on the work that I don't look at myself working. And I work alone on my books. So since I don't watch myself, it's very difficult for me to know what I'm doing, since I don't see what I'm doing.

Root: In our journal we talk largely about text, and publish many essays and memoirs. You and I may be introducing something to people that they're going to get nervous about, because people in nonfiction worry endlessly about whether something's true or accurate. You probably heard the stories about *A Million Little Pieces*, James Frey's fictionalized memoir, and how everyone went ballistic over that. What would you tell people about how to read a graphic memoir?

Satrapi: I think the people, they should read the story and that's that. Everything is story. As I say, the truth, you have to ask Fox News to tell you the truth—

Root: Good luck with that.

Satrapi: —and *New York Times* and *USA Today* to tell you the truth. The thing is, if I give a historical event—for example, if I say, I don't know, the Rex Cinema was burned in Tehran—of course I will check out the date, and of course I will say exactly what happened, but how do you want me exactly to remember all the dialogues? Basically, yes, it was an ambience like that, and the things that I'm talking about, of course they are not bullshit—but at the same time, it should be read as a story. That's it. It's not because you put yourself in the story that the stories suddenly become the truth. It should be read as a story. The search for truth in a novel, you know, is a very sick thing. It shouldn't be this way. Everybody told me, “So, how much of that is the truth?” It's like asking a cook what is the recipe of his best dish. Of course I will not say. Why should I? Why should I? This is also for me preserving my personal life. I am telling a story. In this story there is some truth. In this story I have to cheat, because it is after all a story and it has to be read as a story, and of course on whatever the historical moments are, of course I try to be as precise as possible. But again, it is not an academic work. People, if they want to nag about a work, this work should be academic—and then about an academic work, if they say this work is not real, they are right. But not about a novel. A novel stays a novel.

Root: Is there something about the comic form that gives you a kind of freedom to portray yourself? A lot of things that Marji does in *Persepolis* are nasty. For example, she informs on somebody just for the power of it. Do you feel freer to portray yourself as that person because it's a cartoon character, rather than you portray yourself, say, in a textual memoir where you have to—

Satrap: Yes, I don't know, because I have always said, even verbally, orally, that I was nasty. I am very much a fan of imperfection, actually. This idea of perfection—I think really, it's the beginning of the fascism, this idea of perfection. You know, in the history of the human being there was one time when human beings were really intelligent—that was in ancient Greece, when all the gods were imperfect for once. Of course there were many of them, and all of them were imperfect. They were fucking and sleeping and burping and shitting and whatever. The only thing that made them gods actually was that they were eternal; that was the only reason they were gods. If you have this idea that you have to be perfect, you cannot be but frustrated, because we are imperfect, and because you and I we die for the same reason as a worm, with all the conscience that we have. So already here, the imperfection is in the condition of our life. Looking for perfection is just a lost cause, and if you look for something that you will never achieve, what will you get? Frustration. So I am very happy of my imperfection. I don't even try to be perfect. I am nasty, yes. I am a human being. And I am not ashamed of being nasty, because if there is a god, the shame should be the god that created me in this way, you know. The only thing I hope is that I don't do the same nasty things two times exactly the same, which never happens. I always do it five, six times, before I understand that it has been nasty. For me, I think, the moment that I thought I became mature was the moment I stopped justifying myself, the moment I looked at myself and I said, "Listen: You did a bad thing because you are a human being; don't worry; try to do better next time. At least try." So I always try, but it's not always with success, because I have all the frustration of a human being. I'm always in front of this big existential question, which is, Why all of that? This death is such a scandal; it's just impossible, that you make all these experiences and the day that finally you are intelligent enough you can slip around like that on the ground, you become flat. What the hell is that?

Root: Do you have any restraints that you put on yourself as an illustrator illustrating your own life? Any limits that you want to have, or even in how you portray that person physically?

Satrap: When the book came out, everybody was talking about my false naive style. I assure you, there was nothing false about the naiveté of my style—I was naive because one of the things that makes the images, the drawings in a comic different from illustration is the notion of movement. Illustration can be very static, but in comics you cannot have that. You have

to be able to know the movement, you have to know the anatomy of the human being. In my first art courses in university, our model was covered, so you know we knew very well how to draw the tissue or the nose or the face, but the rest I didn't know it. By coincidence the first book is about my childhood, so I draw like a child. In the second book I draw like a . . . a . . . I was going to say, like a human being . . . like a grown-up. And then in *Chicken with Plums* even more, because the more you draw, the better you draw. I choose the black and white. My limit is when I don't want to use the codes like the background and the color and this and that. These are the limits in the drawing. In the story my limit is to try not to hurt anyone, so I change the names and faces and everything of everybody—not that I care so much to not hurt people, but basically it's because my point of view and their point of view are certainly not the same, so at least I know that my point of view is certainly not the right one, because there is another one. I had a husband who for me was a very nasty man, and I don't have his face and his name [in the book]. Of course if you ask his point of view, for him I would be the nasty one, and certainly for him he is right, for his own reasons. So in the knowledge of that, that there are two points of view, I would never permit to myself to draw him, because then I would be judging him. It's extremely shameless to judge people in this way. So of course I have limits. Of course I believe I always give myself the freedom of speaking and saying what I say, but my freedom also stops where the freedom of others start. So I am careful about that.

Root: You were talking about the film that you are making of *Persepolis*. Phillip Seymour Hoffman, speaking about the film *Capote* and someone's comment about how truthful it was, said that no matter how much it's based on real life, the moment you start making a film you've started making a fiction.

Satrapi: Of course. Of course. It's to the point that I have made the drawing of myself, and then the group of a hundred people make the drawings for the film. Of course I cannot make a couple of hundred thousand drawings all by myself, as you can imagine. Of course it's to the point that, even though it's me in those drawings, when I talk to people I say that it's "she" and "her mother said so," and at the end it's she and her mother; it's not any more me, it's a character after all. It's another voice; it's not my voice. It's people drawing the movement that I play in front of them, but they draw it so it's not my movement anymore. Of course it's fiction.

Root: When you look at clips of the film and you see these characters in motion . . .

Satrap: It's a shock. I feel like God, you know. God created the man and said, "Stand up and walk." I drew that. He walks and he talks and makes noises. So I feel a little like a good god, of course. Yeah, it's amazing. The first time was about a year and a half ago, when we had about three minutes of animation, and we made the projection just to see how the result would be on a big screen. The first time I saw that, it was just three minutes, but after one minute I came out and had three cognacs because it was just too much, it was just unbearable. Now two and a half years have gone by.

Root: Let me show you this page from Art Spiegelman's *Maus II*, these panels where they're driving along and he's talking about his difficulty doing things. Down here he talks about the difficulty of working on comics.

Satrap: (*Reads*) "I guess I bit off more than I can chew. Maybe I ought to forget the whole thing. There's so much I'll never be able to understand or visualize. I mean, reality is too COMPLEX for comics . . . so much has to be left out or distorted." "Just keep it honest, honey." "See what I mean . . . In real life you'd NEVER have let me talk this long without interrupting." "Hmmp. Light me a cigarette."

Root: There are two things I like about this: One is the nature of comic books—and of course he's a mouse, so it's not exactly wholly realistic to begin with. But that statement that "reality is too complex for comics," that "so much has to be left out or distorted." Do you have any comment about that?

Satrap: Well, he's right. He's right. But that is the thing. Once you have started you understand that on the contrary, it gives you lots of possibility. Because it's such a long work, the comic—it's not like someone gives you help while you're doing it. I know very well Art—he's a very good friend of mine—I know very well Chris Ware. I know them well. None of us would give our work to somebody else for inking. It's impossible. It takes such a long time. Imagine that you have to use the two languages together, and it almost seems like it's impossible. For example, for *Chicken with Plums*,

one day I was sitting with a friend of mine who is also a cartoonist, unfortunately not known in America, and I was talking to him and I said I want to make this story, and I told him what I had in mind. He looked at me and he said, "This is a script for a movie. You can never do it in comics." That is why I did it, because the challenge of saying to myself, "How am I going to do it this time?" For example, I made *Persepolis*, that was one challenge. Then *Embroideries*, for me that was a big challenge, because you have seven people sitting in the same room and they are just talking and they do nothing else but talking.

Root: It's more of a comic play or graphic drama.

Satrapi: Exactly. Because on each page you have to find a way of saying it, because you cannot draw it the same way the whole time, because you have to worry about how to keep the reader through 150 pages and give them a surprise of discovering a new way of drawing and the layout, etc., so that they wouldn't be bored. So then I did that and it worked, and then I was okay, and now I want to do a story with the past and the future, and now I wanted the remuneration. Now I know how to make the *Chicken with Plums*. Now I am thinking about another story that moves not only in lots of directions, but actually you have the story that goes by, and once in a while you have different points of view about the story so you have different ways of saying it. All of them, they are right, but not really—and no matter what, from all of that you have to understand one thing and that is that the story will continue, and then again you have this dilemma and again you have to find this common point among all these dilemmas. In a graphic way how to do it is really hard for me, but I have a slight idea of how I can do it. But the whole challenge of finding a way to do it is much more interesting than anything else. Otherwise, you know, if I wanted to simply be a cartoonist of success, I would have made *Persepolis 3*; it would have been a big hit, you know—my life in Paris, my trips to America—I could make good money, but it doesn't interest me. I have done that. I know how this works. What is the challenge? What is the artistic and intellectual challenge for me? Zero. I have never worked with the idea that, oh, I'm going to become famous and rich. If I can do what I like to do, that gives me the greatest satisfaction. The rest is the plus that comes with it, which is great. The joy of thinking about the remuneration in completing each page is a joy that nothing else is comparable with.

Root: The other thing that Spiegelman does in that section of *Maus* is break the frame. He's really coming out of the book and saying, this is a comic book, in case we didn't know.

Satrap: Exactly.

Root: Do you do anything like that anywhere in *Persepolis*?

Satrap: No. Because I didn't come from a culture of comics. People like Art, they were kids that read comics, so they have lots of knowledge about the comics. They're aware of what they're doing. I didn't know anything about comics. I just started coming from nowhere and I had to figure out how it works, and I had to ask my friends all the time, How do you do this?, and thank God I was just surrounded by people that were really nice to me and helped me really a lot. Now, with the work, I have some ideas about comics, but at the moment I started doing it I was like this Candide kind of person. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't have the experience and the background and all the theory. I didn't think about the comic; I was just doing it, and that was it.

Root: Being in the culture, things come spontaneously, impromptu, because you're used to it.

Satrap: Exactly. Really, it was extremely exciting for me because I never did it. I started making an animation movie with my best friend and I absolutely didn't know what I was doing. The first year I was saying to myself, If I knew it would be like that, why the hell would I have started this? I will never do it. But I did it. And then I got the satisfaction. All the things that I don't know how to do, that's why I do them. As soon as I know how it works, it doesn't interest me anymore. ■