Chester Brown

Conversations

Edited by Dominick Grace and Eric Hoffman

CHESTER BROWN: CONVERSATIONS

Conversations with Comic Artists M. Thomas Inge, General Editor

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Edited by Dominick Grace and Eric Hoffman

Annotated by Chester Brown

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Works by Chester Brown

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Yummy Fur 32 issues (1986–1994)
Ed the Happy Clown originally serialized in *Yummy Fur*; reprinted in 9 issues (2005–2006); collected edition 1989, revised editions 1992 and 2012
The Playboy originally serialized as *Disgust* in *Yummy Fur*; collected edition 1992, revised edition 2013
I Never Liked You originally serialized as *Fuck* in *Yummy Fur*; collected edition 1994, revised edition 2002
Underwater 11 issues (1994–1997)
The Little Man: Short Strips 1980–1995 (1998; revised edition 2006)
Louis Riel: *A Comic-Strip Biography* 10 issues (1999–2003); collected and revised edition 2003, tenth anniversary edition 2013
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INTRODUCTION

The early 1980s is a fascinating period in comics history. The major publishers, DC and Marvel, had assumed a largely hegemonic control of the market, yet new talent—particularly Alan Moore and Frank Miller in their tenures on DC's *Swamp Thing* and Marvel's *Daredevil* titles, respectively—were making their first tentative steps towards an eventual revolution in mainstream comics, in subject matter, artistic integrity, and creators' rights. Also, certain "ground-level" comics artists—so-called because they occupied a middle ground between the DIY aesthetic of sexually explicit and politically adventurous underground comix of the 1960s and the above-ground mainstream—were broadening the possibilities for comics by utilizing the new technologies of inexpensive offset printing and the relatively new market of the comic book shop. Dave Sim (*Cerebus*), Wendy Pini (*Elfquest*), and Jack Katz (*First Kingdom*) took advantage of the opportunities made available via the direct market, a method of selling comics at a discount on a nonreturnable basis to comic shops. The vast majority of these shops' patrons were the burgeoning audience of comics "fandom," consisting primarily of an older audience of readers that had grown up reading comics and now had disposable income who, in some cases at least, demanded more sophisticated fare than men and women in tights. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the third of a triumvirate that also includes Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986/87) and Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1985/86), was just beginning to be published serially in Spiegelman's anthology series *Raw*, an anthology that published considerably more experimental comics by an international stable of recognized, and as yet unrecognized, comics talent.

In short, it was an era when anything seemed possible. Young comics artists entered a field where the first generation of comics fans had only recently taken creative control of the mainstream comics they read and enjoyed as kids. New ground-level publishers appeared—including Comico, Eclipse, First, and Pacific—publishing exciting new work by up-and-coming talents. Moreover, the work, both by above-ground and ground-level comics artists

or self-publishers like Sim and Harvey Pekar (*American Splendor*), pointed toward untold potentiality for the medium. Before long, however, the more atmospheric material—*Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* are instructive here—unintentionally resulted in an aesthetic stranglehold on the medium that ironically cut that limitless potentiality short by making the dark and brooding superhero the order of the day, a form and method that has largely dominated the medium since.

Also taking place at this time was another, lesser-known and certainly less organized movement, one that married the underground aesthetic with a DIY ground-level approach. Certain artists outside the dominant aesthetic of the mainstream, or lacking the capital necessary to break into ground-level publishing, began taking advantage of the mass availability (and relative cheapness) of Xerox printing, using regular carbon paper to copy their original artwork. Called "minicomics," these copies were then folded into squares, stapled, and (in those pre-internet days) placed in comic and music shops and book stores and sold inexpensively (generally about a dime compared to the fifty cents or more for mainstream comics), or often traded by mail between various minicomic artists. Because these comics were most often available within only a limited range of wherever these artists lived, and because they were often produced by the artists who wrote and drew them (mostly in black and white though sometimes hand-colored), they had the additional appeal for the reader of being "in the know," contributing to their cultish appeal.

Self-publishing has its roots in the Silver Age when, in 1966, comic book artist Wally Wood began publishing his own work, together with the work of other professional comic artists, in the pages of *Witzend*. The irregular comic provided these artists with an outlet for creative expression unfettered by commercial concerns (although still primarily consisting of material that reflected dominant comic book genres: namely superhero, humor, horror and science fiction). Aside from the "Tijuana Bibles," short pornographic comic strips published from the 1920s to the 1940s, *Witzend* was among the earliest underground comics. By the mid-1960s, underground "comix" (most of them published in black and white on cheap newsprint paper with four-color covers) began appearing in head shops, emphasizing themes that appealed to their counterculture audience: drug humor, sexual promiscuity, and anti-establishment politics. Because of their limited distribution, underground comix were not subject to the Comics Code Authority, established in 1954 in reaction to the Kefauver Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency's hearings concerning the content of comic books, in particular EC's line of crime and horror comics. As a result, they provided comics artists with significant

creative freedom. Ironically, by the mid-1970s, the underground comix movement collapsed largely due to what had given it life: its identification with sex, drugs, and leftist politics, which began to create its own creative restrictions. Also contributing to their collapse were the development of new printing technologies such as offset printing; the direct market that allowed for the proliferation of smaller publishers willing to publish nonmainstream work, regardless of subject matter; and the mainstream absorption of the same themes that had made undergrounds distinct. Artists left the undergrounds to work in mainstream comics, with smaller publishers, or to self-publish their own material.

Had he begun working in comics a decade earlier, Montreal-born Canadian Chester Brown would probably have worked in the undergrounds. Brown grew up reading DC and Marvel (indeed, his early minicomics contain tongue-in-cheek references to a number of mainstream comics) and initially intended to work for the major publishers. DC and Marvel both passed on hiring him, however, rightly arguing that his style seemed to contain too much of an underground aesthetic. These rejections perhaps worked to Brown's benefit. Aside from some illustrations for the fanzines that proliferated at the time, Brown's superhero work, despite its surface professionalism (Brown is adept at perspective, shading, and other technical skills acquired from a childhood and adolescence spent reading comics) is finally too cartoonish and superficially too amateur for the mainstream aesthetic, standing in stark contrast to the Neal Adams–dominated realism of the 1970s and 1980s. Had the wider range of styles currently acceptable in mainstream comics existed then, Brown might well be a better-known but far less significant mainstream writer-artist today.

Having had his work rejected by mainstream publishers, Brown began self-publishing his own work in 1983 under the title *Yummy Fur* (1983–1985). The deeply original cartoon style Brown utilized in his earliest comic work (and later refined to its present state, with the occasional lifts from *Little Orphan Annie* artist Harold Gray or Fletcher Hanks) bears some resemblance to the loose, unpolished aesthetic of the undergrounds. Moreover, like that of the underground cartoonists, Brown's early minicomic work deals with decidedly nonmainstream subjects. Yet where the undergrounds focused their attention on breaking taboos concerning politics, religion, and sexuality, the apolitical Brown was far more concerned with matters of the self to be bothered with pursuing larger social issues in a didactic manner (that would come later with *Paying for It* [2011], Brown's meditation on the life of a john). He was, after all, writing and drawing in the aftermath of the cultural revolution of the

1960s and 1970s, in the era of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, a period that saw a re-entrenchment of reactionary politics and the establishment of a nostalgia for an idealized pre-Vietnam, pre–civil and women's rights 1950s.

The earliest stories in *Yummy Fur*, before the saga of Ed the Happy Clown began dominating its pages, are for the most part anecdotal non-sequiturs with a surrealistic bent; Brown frustrates conventional narrative in his use of sudden and jarring shifts in tone. Brown admits in his notes to the collected *Ed* that the first few Ed stories were an exercise in spontaneous writing, inspired by his reading Wallace Fowlie's *Age of Surrealism* (1950) (Brown 2012, 205). Observes Brown:

> the surrealist writers believed that in creating spontaneously they could get in touch with The Unconscious and were thus producing work that was in some way meaningful, even if it read like meandering nonsense. I was many years away from coming to the conclusion that Freud was wrong about most things, so this surrealist stuff sounded valid. Embracing surrealistic spontaneous creation gave me an artistic direction at a time when, to be frank, I had nothing to say. (ibid. 205–6)

Moreover, surrealist Merit Oppenheim's art object consisting of a teacup, saucer, and spoon covered in fur, explains Brown, provided the inspiration for the title of *Yummy Fur*, "an odd juxtaposition of two unrelated words" (ibid., 208)

Due to the restrictions of minicomics noted above, many of Brown's stories were only a few pages in length, and this restriction largely determines their content, though Brown also manages to pack a lot in. One example will suffice. "Walrus Blubber Sandwich" (1981) is a three-page story that presents walrus meat as a marketable commodity, aliens on a "cattle mutilation expedition"—cattle mutilations being a somewhat popular subject at the time—mistaking a walrus for a cow and lassoing it from their UFO, only to crash when a CIA infiltrator on board their ship tries to take over, sending the walrus meat plummeting fortuitously in front of the walrus meat vendor's store, only to have him immediately crushed by the crashing UFO. Brown's fondness for absurdity, narrative non-sequiturs, and gore are all on display in highly abbreviated form.

Brown's first major work, *Ed the Happy Clown*, developed out of a similar group of several seemingly unrelated stories (later presented as "Introductory Pieces" in the collected *Ed*), including a handful of "Ed the Happy Clown" and "Adventures in Science" stories. (The latter consist of one or two scientists addressing an imaginary audience as if they were on an educational

Ed breaks his leg. From *Ed the Happy Clown: A Graphic Novel*, © 2012 Chester Brown. Published by Drawn & Quarterly.

television show, discussing topics as diverse as the masturbation techniques of squids, the appearance of Christ's visage on masking tape, or how to tell apart a grand piano and an earthworm). One of the last of these introductory pieces, "Ed the Happy Clown" (1985), is instructive of Brown's method of continually reworking and re-envisioning his material (*Ed* underwent several revisions: a collected version in 1989, somewhat revised and reprinted with new content in 1992; a serialized reprinting of this version in 2004 and 2005 with new annotations; and, most recently, a 2012 edition with revised annotations and a new subtitle: "a graphic novel"). No plot summary can do *Ed the Happy Clown* justice; it weaves numerous elements derived from horror, science fiction, absurdism, satire, scatology, and surrealism into a multiply circling narrative. We meet Ed, a naïf clown on his way to a hospital to entertain sick children; he graphically and horrifyingly breaks his leg while the city attempts to deal with a plague of rats by dropping pygmies on them from the skies, with devastating results—for the pygmies, who die upon impact. Ed cries out: "the rats are attacking those dead babies—I'm saved!"

Brown introduces more narrative threads, folding in Jack and the Beanstalk, cannibals hunting pygmies that survived the rats, Frankenstein's monster (one of Brown's numerous references to *House of Mystery*, *House of Secrets*, and other horror-themed mainstream comics Brown grew up

reading), and even the aliens from "Walrus Blubber Sandwich." Though not all of these continue to be relevant, they reflect Brown's penchant for reusing and revising earlier narratives as he proceeds.

A narrative shift introduces hospital janitor Chet Doodley (autobiographical in name only; Brown often goes by "Chet," and the surname reflects Brown's self-deprecating view of himself as a cartoonist, or "doodler"), who finds a severed hand and assumes it's his when he notices his own hand is missing (in his annotations, Brown notes that as an artist, he feared losing his hand, which is reflected in Chet's circumstances here). Elsewhere, a jealous boyfriend punches Ed for reasons not provided, knocking loose his tooth. Ed places his tooth under his pillow and in the morning finds a severed hand. He takes it to the police station and the police, believing Ed to be guilty of cutting off Chet's hand, imprison him.

He ends up in a cell beside "The Man Who Couldn't Stop," a character from an earlier one-page story (from 1983) now folded in to the narrative. In it, a man is sitting on a toilet for nine panels. In the tenth, he looks down, thinking, "Hmm . . . can't seem to stop." In this strip, Brown's obsession with the base functions of the human body becomes explicit. Where in underground comix, bodily functions such as defecating, farting, or urinating are routinely utilized for shock value or for cheap laughs, in Brown's work, the shock value is diminished and, as a result, these functions take on an almost Freudian scatological subtext, which remains central to *Ed*. Unbelievably, the man's anus turns out to be a gateway to an alternate dimension, where the people have no toilets and, as a result, fecal matter is piling up everywhere. The man's anus appears in that dimension as an invisible hole, into which they begin to pump all of their fecal matter.

When the man who couldn't stop is killed by his cellmate (one of the "Adventures in Science" scientists, who has mistaken him for a werewolf) in an attempt to curtail his constant defecation, the continued flow of feces ruptures the jail walls, freeing Ed, who makes his way to a bookstore, outside of which he collapses.

Later, Chet dreams that he is a monk praying before a statue of the Virgin, which comes alive and kisses Chet, then rips his hand off during sex. Chet wakes from his dream next to his girlfriend Josie, of whom the statue in his dream is representative. As it turns out, Chet, like Brown, grew up in a religious household; according to his notes, Brown based Chet's childhood on memories from his own childhood. As a child, Chet's sister Annie died in a fall while his mother read to him from *The Lives of the Saints*. The story the mother was reading was that of Saint Justin, who, according to the text his

mother reads, cut off his right hand for fear it might tempt him, after a vision of the Virgin Mary entreating him to a life of piety and chastity.

Chet learns of Ed, the man who allegedly cut off his hand, so he goes to find him at the bookstore. While there, he reads again a biography of Justin. Meeting Josie later for a sexual encounter in a forest, Chet—haunted by guilt and having taken from Justin the lesson that you should "cut off from yourself the thing that is making you sin"—murders her. (Typical of a misogynistic male perspective, he identifies the cause of his sin as the woman with whom he fornicates, not his own sexual organ). Ed is witness to the murder, and he and Josie's body are subsequently carried off by pygmies.

While carrying them through the sewers, the pygmies hear a voice coming from Ed's pants and, investigating, discover a small human head where the tip of Ed's penis should be. The head is that of Ronald Reagan, no recognizable Reagan of this universe, but the President of the alternate universe and overseer of the effort to rid that universe of its excess fecal matter. Just then, Josie returns from the dead as a vampire and saves Ed from the pygmies.

Meanwhile, a small scientist who had entered the anal portal between universes in search of Reagan's head encounters human scientists and tries to enlist their aid. In discussion, the scientists conclude that returning Reagan's head through the portal would require Ed to have anal sex with the man's corpse, a homosexual act (how this might work is never explained, and that it would also be necrophilia seems to bother none of them). The small scientist is baffled by this antipathy to an act that he says everyone does in his home universe, to which the scientists respond by murderously gunning him down. This is a rare instance of social commentary in *Ed*—one should remember that the 1980s were a time of heated controversy concerning homosexuality, in particular the AIDS epidemic for which that community was blamed and the resulting hysteria that ultimately strengthened the gay rights movement of the 1990s and beyond.

In its collected format, the *Ed* saga ends with Ed having Reagan's head removed from his penis and replaced with the much larger member of another man, much to the satisfaction of that man's wife, after the orderlies return Ed to her as her husband. Josie takes revenge on Chet by murdering him and then dies herself when Chet's hand opens her bedroom blinds, exposing her to the sun, which reduces her to ash. The final pages, never part of the serialized version, show, in one of the most chilling and powerful final images in any graphic novel, Josie consigned to hell and left pressed against Chet's mutilated corpse, surrounded by eternal flame, tears staining her cheeks. Thus, the narrative ends with Josie, not Ed.

Initially, however, Brown envisioned Ed to be his primary ongoing character, at first attempting to explore domestic issues by following Ed's experiences as a husband in suburbia in an additional six issues. Dissatisfied with the "Ed in suburbia" stories, however, Brown abandoned the storyline and has not included these chapters in any of the subsequent reprintings of the material, instead adding the new coda to the work for the 1992 edition. In his notes to *Ed*, Brown observes, by the early 1990s

> the way I was thinking of my career was beginning to change. A new model was developing for narrative-print-cartoonists—the graphic-novelist model. Novelists do a long story about one character or set of characters, take that story to a conclusion, and then move on to another tale with a different set of characters. There was no reason why cartoonists couldn't do the same thing. Maybe I didn't have to only do stories about Ed. (Brown 2012, 242)

Near the end of the decade, controversy flared over the increasingly adult content of comics. More and more comics began appearing in collected format in bookstores. These titles drew the attention of parents unaccustomed to the idea of comics published for adults. Comics were, to quote a by-now well-worn phrase, "not just for kids anymore," and the reactionary censorious attacks by parents, concerned about the more salacious material being published by the major publishers—subjects that routinely included adult language, realistic violence, drug use, and sexual content—began to take the industry by storm. Parents, remembering only the squeaky-clean comics of their youth, were shocked to find the material on sale in comic book shops (largely patronized by adults). At that time, clearly defined distinctions between adult-oriented and child-suitable comics had not yet been drawn and, as a result, comic shops faced lawsuits when clerks inadvertently sold adult titles to children. On 10 December 1987, police raided Friendly Frank's, a comic book shop in Lansing, Illinois, arresting its owner for selling adult material within 1,200 feet of a residential area. The Friendly Frank's court case showed an industry undergoing significant transformation, as well as a disconnection between perception of the medium and its reality.

Around the same time as the Friendly Frank's bust, DC Comics entertained the possibility of implementing a rating system for its comics. This sparked outrage among creators, who accused DC of censorship, resulting in an exodus of creative talent, including Frank Miller and Alan Moore. DC—a company that previously utilized the ironic slogan "DC Comics Aren't Just for Kids"—eventually decided to scrap the idea, but not before doing damage to

Josie's fate. From *Ed the Happy Clown: A Graphic Novel*, © 2012 Chester Brown. Published by Drawn & Quarterly.

their reputation as a creator-friendly company. (Creator's rights were a major issue in 1980s comics as creators sought less creative interference and greater job security and benefits—at the forefront of the issue was Joe Shuster's and Jerry Siegel's ongoing lawsuit with DC over ownership of their Superman character and Jack Kirby's struggle to obtain his original artwork from Marvel; Siegel's heirs continue this struggle even today). DC attempted to restore this confidence by creating a new publishing imprint, Piranha Press, but this press offered only partial ownership and therefore, in Brown's estimation—see the Torres interview included here—only attracted second-rate talent.

Yummy Fur came of age in the midst of this storm. Bill Marks's struggling direct market publishing company Vortex picked up the title in November 1986, reprinting the seven minicomics in the first three issues, followed by new material. Sales on the title were substantial enough to allow Brown to quit his day job at a photography lab—though not enough for him to move out of his rooming house, Brown's preferred living arrangement—and soon

the comic began attracting high praise from critics, readers, and peers. Yet the comic was not without its detractors. Its highly offensive content—dismembered talking head penises and all—including Brown's highly unconventional adaptations of the Gospels (discussed below)—led to some controversy and several instances of censorship. In the fourth Vortex-published issue of *Yummy Fur*, the first containing original, non-minicomic material, Marks asked Brown to edit out an image of Saint Justin's ejaculating penis. Brown acquiesced, pasting in a panel over the head of the penis, covering up the ejaculation. In the overlay panel Brown's comic alter ego, a small bunny, offers to send anyone interested in seeing the original panel a photocopy (see Brown 2012, 216). The scene where Chet murders Josie during intercourse proved particularly incendiary, resulting in the comic being dropped by its printer (after several pages inadvertently ended up mixed as padding for an order for a feminist publication of all things) and possibly the decision by Diamond Distributors to discontinue carrying the title with issue 9. (Diamond insisted it was due to low sales, though they continued to carry other Vortex titles with lower sales than *Yummy Fur*; Diamond eventually picked up the title again nearly a year later; accordingly, issue nine remains particularly scarce in the collectors' market). Finally, another printer refused to publish the first collected edition of *Ed* in 1989, which featured an introduction written by Harvey Pekar and drawn by Brown, again portrayed as a small cute rabbit. With this introduction, Brown was making his first tentative steps into a growing subgenre of autobiographical comics territory masterfully explored by Pekar, a style then explored by Brown's friends, the comics artists Seth (*Palookaville*) and Joe Matt (*Peep Show*) and in the work of Julie Doucet. (By the early 1990s, Brown befriended Seth and Matt, and Seth had recently begun publishing with a relatively new company, Drawn & Quarterly, who also published Doucet. D&Q's publisher Chris Oliveros had tried unsuccessfully to get Brown to publish with him earlier and, after his contract with Vortex expired in 1991, Brown used the opportunity to begin publishing with Oliveros.)

If the *Ed* material at times approached blasphemy, Brown, in contrast to this material, introduced in issue 4 of *Yummy Fur* an unexpectedly straightforward adaptation of the Gospel of Mark. Like many raised in a religious household (Christian Baptist in Brown's case), Brown, during early adulthood, began to question his religious faith. Unable to commit to being an atheist, he came to consider himself agnostic, eventually reading some critical commentary on the Bible, including several "literary textual-analysis" books on the scriptures that left him with the impression that the scriptures were "just a mish-mash of different people's contradictory theological ideas

with no consistent, coherent philosophy" (Brown 2012, 217). Mark, and later Matthew, became for Brown a method of "trying to figure out what I believed about this stuff. It was a matter of trying to figure out whether I even believed the Christian claims—whether or not Jesus was divine" (Brown 2012, 213). In fact, religion crops up frequently in Brown's work: the Saint Justin sequence in *Ed the Happy Clown*; Brown's adaptation of a Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia*, "The Twin"; his religious upbringing as depicted in *The Playboy* and *I Never Liked You*; and Louis Riel's religious visions in *Louis Riel*.

Brown's view of Christ changed depending on which Gospel he adapted; in Mark, Brown portrays Christ with soft features, in keeping with his quiet demeanor. In Matthew, however, Jesus is a fierce man, almost cruel in his convictions; as a result, his features are harder, more angular. Compared to his Mark counterpart, Matthew's Christ is almost a force of nature—he is often impatient and angry with his disciples (depicted in all their nose-picking and farting glory to be all too human), who remain fearful of him; to them Jesus is an almost alien being. Some sort of malady afflicts nearly every character in Brown's Gospels; this near-universal condition represents a physical manifestation of the fallen state of humanity. Pitifully ugly, poor, unexceptional, they curse, vomit, and eat their snot. Observes critic Francis Hwang, even Jesus's Twelve Disciples are "barely able to reconcile the greatness of God with the miseries of their existence" (Hwang, n.pg.)

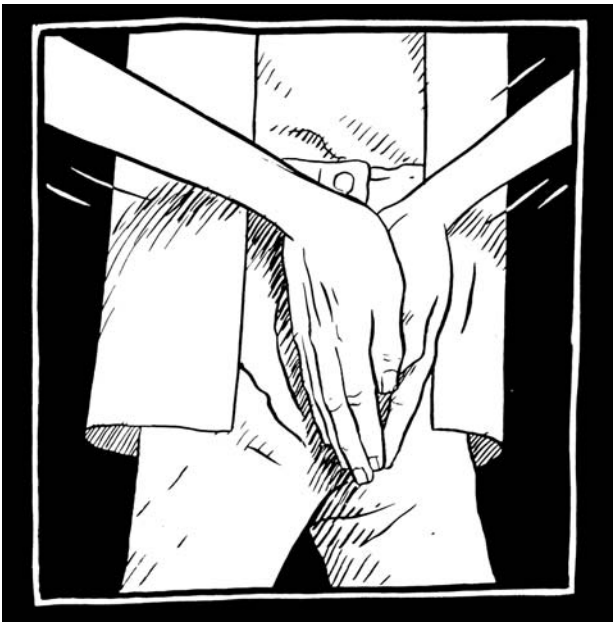
As with the "Ed in suburbia" stories in *Yummy Fur*, Brown abandoned his Gospel adaptations midway through Matthew. The last completed chapter appeared in the final issue of *Underwater* in 1997. Brown has in the past voiced his interest in returning to the story, but in a 2011 online interview with Sean Rogers for *The Comics Journal*, Brown said the work would likely remain unfinished, as he had lost interest in completing it (Rogers 2011, n. pg.). Fans and critics alike responded well to Brown's adaptations; critic and historian John Bell considers them the most important of Brown's uncollected work (Bell 2006, 160).

Aside from the episodic Gospels and the occasional short piece in *Yummy Fur*, Brown very closely followed this model of coherent, self-contained narratives from this time forward. Significant sales on collected editions of *Maus*, *American Splendor*, and other so-called "underground" comics convinced Brown that the market for narrative comics was changing. (Today, paperback collections of serialized comics are the norm.) Brown changed his approach to the material at the same time he changed the material itself, gradually moving from the surrealistic, humor-oriented to autobiographical material far more restrained and elegiac in tone than the earlier strips. However, as in

the *Ed* and Gospel material, Brown managed to retain his unique sensibility, for example the unsettling lack of emotional connection between characters, a kind of non-traversable disconnect that may be an expression of Brown's expressed discomfort with other people and his inability to maintain meaningful relationships with women (explored in great detail in his later work). In the surreal comics, actions are sometimes inexplicable; things happen but without context or in logical sequence. Similarly, in the historical work, particularly *Louis Riel* and the Gospels, events proceed but of their own logic and this, Brown seems to be insisting, is its own brand of surrealism, i.e. the illogicality and randomness of human behavior.

This randomness finds its most sublime expression in the autobiographical comics that comprise the majority of Brown's work during the early 1990s. Brown has stated that his autobiographical comics are their own kind of history, but a personal history, and in that sense they combine some aspects of the autobiographically tinged *Ed* comics together with the historical flights of fancy in the Gospels and *Louis Riel*. Brown's autobiographical comics appeared in quick succession: first the shorts "Helder" and "Showing 'Helder'" (both 1991), quickly followed by the full-length narratives *Disgust* (1991; retitled *The Playboy* for its collected edition 1992) and *Fuck* (1991–1993; retitled *I Never Liked You* in collected format in English-speaking countries [1994]). Brown also revised these works for their collected form.

A reader of Brown's work will immediately note that what sets the autobiographical works apart from Brown's earlier work is the shift in drawing style; the autobiographical stories incorporate a far more organic page layout, with fewer panels (in some cases, only one) per page. Brown's compositional method involves drawing one panel at a time on a board while sitting upright in a chair. This allows Brown the ability to rearrange the panels based on visual cues provided by the demands of page composition as opposed to a rigid grid-based format used previously (Brown would later return to the grid layout with *Louis Riel* [comprised primarily of six-panel grids] and *Paying for It* [eight-panel grids]). "Showing 'Helder'" is an autobiographical comic relating the composition of an earlier autobiographical story, "Helder," itself a meditation on Brown's dealings with an abusive and violent tenant in his rooming house in Toronto in 1984. "Showing 'Helder'" shows Brown drawing the earlier comic panel-by-panel, pasting its contents onto a board, and then sharing the story with friends, gauging their reactions and making changes based on their suggestions. ("Showing 'Helder'" is also unique in that it is entirely free from panel borders; after "Showing 'Helder'" Brown abandoned the grid format in favor of a more freely flowing page composition. For the collected



Praying to *Playboy*. From *The Playboy*, © 1992 Chester Brown. Published by Drawn & Quarterly.

edition of *Fuck, I Never Liked You*, Brown entirely rearranged the comic, again revising its layout in its 2002 "New Definitive Edition.")

The events Brown relates in his shorter stories from this period, "Helder," "Showing 'Helder,'" and "Danny's Story," take place in the mid to late 1980s or early 1990s. Because of disagreements over representations of his friends in these stories (captured by Brown's then-girlfriend Kris objecting over his portrayal of her in "Showing 'Helder'"), Brown, in his subsequent longer works, *Disgust* and *Fuck*, turned his attention to his adolescence in the 1970s. These comics take place in Brown's hometown of Châteauguay, Quebec, a Montreal suburb, beginning in 1975 when Brown was fifteen.

Disgust/The Playboy is a memoir of the adolescent Brown's fixation with *Playboy* magazine. Brown, as shown in the comic, is disgusted with this obsession, and has feelings of profound guilt, reflected in the way he contrasts masturbation with religion. We first see him tempted by the thought of the magazine in church, and when he acquires his first issue, he places it on an old trunk and then kneels before it, and, as if worshipping an icon on an altar, he masturbates in a reverse prayer posture, hands together and fingers pointed downwards rather than upwards. (This rather odd masturbation technique is perhaps the books' most notorious feature and came to be known as "doing a Chester.") He hides his secret collection of magazines from his parents and

occasionally discards them, only to begin collecting them again as an adult to the extent that he becomes a Playmate connoisseur, memorizing their names and the dates of their appearances. He later comes to the conclusion that his difficult relationship with women—his extreme introversion and inability to maintain an erection unless fantasizing about Playmates (commenting on how pornography distorts normal expectations of beauty—both as a teenager and adult), is the result of this objectification of women and unreal expectations of their sexuality. Brown slightly alters the trope of the angel and devil over his shoulder that visually represents inner conflict by having his angel (if in fact it *is* an angel, since it has bat-like wings rather than the more traditional dove wings of angels) tempt Brown into using pornography. The "angel" also functions as a narrator who breaks the fourth wall by speaking directly to the reader, relating the events of the story. Near the end of the story, the angel begins referring to himself in the first person, suggesting that Brown, having managed to discontinue using pornography, is now more "angelic."

Critical reception from fans, critics, and Brown's peers to *The Playboy* was overwhelmingly positive. *The Comics Journal* included Brown's autobiographical comics as number 38 of the top 100 comics of the twentieth century, and the comic received a nomination for the much-coveted Harvey Award. As with any of Brown's work, however, it was not without its critics, including women who considered his supposed glorification of pornography off-putting. In addition, the work prompted *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner to write Brown a fatherly letter, expressing concern about what he perceived as Brown's unhealthy guilt over enjoying the female form, wondering how anyone who came of age during the sexual revolution could be so guilt-ridden about sex. (Brown responded to Hefner that he had since gotten over it).

In *Fuck/I Never Liked You*, first serialized in issues 26 through 30 of *Yummy Fur*, "Chet," raised in a strict religious upbringing (his mother chastises him for swearing, for example) does not undergo the usual coming-of-age trials of alcohol, drug abuse, and promiscuous sex. Instead, Chet is an extremely shy and withdrawn youth, routinely harassed by bullies (in part for his refusal to swear) and unable to relate socially or emotionally to women. In his interactions with others, Chet seems unable to bridge the gulf wherein normal social interaction should take place, consistently unable to notice verbal and visual cues, particularly with several female friends in whom he is interested. As a result, despite their attempts to begin romantic relationships with him, he eventually turns away. When Chet's mother dies following a battle with schizophrenia, he seems oddly unaffected, forcing himself to shed a tear for

his mother as it seemed the appropriate thing to do. Brown constructed *Fuck* primarily out of vignettes that follow no logical or consistent pattern. The effect on the reader is that of undergoing a series of unrelated memories.

Unlike *The Playboy*, the story has no narrator and very little dialogue, and Brown reduces the panel numbers to generally no more than three per page. In the collected edition, Brown included two pages worth of notes. Annotations initially began appearing in the pages *Yummy Fur*, during his adaptation of the Gospel of Mark, and have since become commonplace. Brown used these hand-lettered notes to excellent effect in his autobiographical short "My Mom Was a Schizophrenic," a piece that argues that schizophrenia is not a disease but instead a catch-all name to diagnose individuals whose beliefs and behaviors deviate unacceptably from social norms. Inspired by the distribution methods of the religious tracts of Jack T. Chick, Brown distributed Xeroxed copies of this strip in public places in and around the Toronto area. Brown later returns to the subject of mental illness and the impracticality of the diagnosis of mentally aberrant behavior in *Louis Riel* and in his Gospels appearing in *Yummy Fur* and *Underwater*. Of all his works, *Paying for It* has the most extensive annotations, running nearly a third of a book and including what amounts to a political broadside arguing in favor of the decriminalization and against the regulation of prostitution.

With issue 32, D&Q publisher Oliveros argued that due to the new directions in which Brown had taken *Yummy Fur*, the title no longer seemed appropriate to him. Oliveros suggested that Brown change the title (Oliveros may have also been thinking of increasing readership by introducing a new first issue, generally coveted by collectors in addition to drawing in new readers with a fresh start). Inspired by his reading of the eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* and the "restrained approach" in the films of Robert Bresson (Juno 1997, 144), Brown had been working on a new story entitled "Underwater," and so decided to make that the new title. *Underwater* lasted a mere eleven issues, published from 1994 to 1997. Brown continued to publish the Gospel of Matthew adaptation in the back of the book, so aside from the title change, the book remained remarkably similar to *Yummy Fur*. In fact, the title change arguably backfired on Oliveros and Brown, as *Underwater* never caught on with readers and remains the least successful, both critically and commercially, of all of Brown's work.

Underwater is told from the perspective of two infants, twin sisters Kupifam and Juz, who are born into a world where normal, everyday events are colored by their consciousnesses, perceived through filters where actions are nonsensical, the adults' language is encoded gibberish, and dream and reality

interweave into an indistinguishable whole. The children's perception of the adults emphasizes the alienness of the everyday. Gradually, as the children grow older, the language and actions begin to make more sense, and dream and reality become better defined. However, Brown misjudged his audience's readiness to follow this ambiguous and obscure storyline, a work that lacks much of the humor or human interest that made Brown's *Ed* and his autobiographical work so captivating. In many ways, the story is an attempt to marry Brown's surrealist impulse with autobiography. While the comic does have much to offer, including remarkable painted comic covers, a cartooning style (complete with circular, pupil-less eyes) influenced by Frank King (*Walt and Skeezix*) and Harold Gray (*Little Orphan Annie*), in addition to an interesting meditation on the philosophical and psychological foundations of consciousness, readers did not appreciate its subtleties or its slow pacing. The work also lacks clear direction; if Brown was making it up as he went along, as he did with *Ed*, his instincts here were far less certain and self-assured. *Underwater* remains, at best, a failed experiment. Brown said to Darrell Epp in a 2005 interview (collected here):

> I had wanted the project to be about twenty to thirty issues, and I should have written it out as a full script beforehand. That's what I had originally intended to do, and then I said, "Oh, screw it, I was able to wing it with *Ed the Happy Clown*, I'll do it again with *Underwater*," but *Underwater* was a different type of story, and "winging it" didn't work with *Underwater*, because the pacing was very important to *Underwater*, and to tell the story the way I wanted it to be told, to continue to tell it that way, at the pace that I had been telling it in the first eleven issues meant that telling the whole story would take, like, three hundred issues [Brown is likely thinking of Sim's three-hundred-issue *Cerebus* here]. And I didn't want to do a three-hundred-issue series, so it meant having to rethink everything.

By contrast, Brown carefully scripted *Louis Riel*, a work he began in 1998, almost immediately following his abandonment of *Underwater*. Following the death of his father in 1998, Brown, who had since 1995 been reading about Riel, leader of a nineteenth-century French Canadian Métis rebellion in Manitoba, became fascinated by Riel's allegedly schizophrenic behavior (recall Brown's mother was a diagnosed schizophrenic).

Brown also found much to admire in Riel's politics, and soon became compelled to write a biography of Riel in comic form. In keeping with Brown's long-stated desire to write in graphic novel form as opposed to serialized comics, he wished to complete the work as a single volume, but Oliveros

talked Brown into publishing the series in ten issues. The series took Brown an astonishing five years to complete.

Louis Riel is not a straightforward biography: its focus is on the Red River Rebellion of 1869–1870, and the North-West Rebellion of 1885. Brown's story begins with Prime Minister Macdonald striking a deal with representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company to purchase Rupert's Land, an expanse of largely unoccupied territory in what is now Manitoba. However, the Métis—French-speaking people of a mixed heritage consisting of both Native American and French blood who inhabit certain areas of Rupert's Land, including the Red River settlement, the home of Louis Riel—catch wind of Macdonald's deal. They protest the government's contention that the Hudson's Bay Company can sell their land to the Canadian government without payment or recognition of ownership. In retaliation, Riel and his followers take up arms and capture nearby Fort Garry.

Following an armed confrontation, the Métis establish a provisional government, naming Riel president. Eventually, the Canadian army sends over 1,200 soldiers for reasons, so they say, of keeping the peace, but their true intent is to lynch Riel. As a result, Riel's followers leave Fort Garry, unable to resist such a sizeable army. Riel goes into self-imposed exile in the United States. In his absence, the Ottawa government hands over control of Manitoba to the Anglophone John Schultz, a member of the Canadian army, and offers a reward for Riel's capture, dead or alive.

Despite the price on his head, Riel manages to be elected to the Canadian parliament—twice—but is ejected by new Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie (who won in part due to his refusal to grant amnesty to the rebels) for his failure to appear. Nevertheless, Riel manages to win back his seat in the next election. Mackenzie's government finally gives in and grants amnesty to the rebels, including Riel, provided he remain outside the country for the next five years.

During this exile, Riel, while living in Washington, D.C., experiences a religious vision. Standing on a hilltop, Riel sees the expanse of the universe and hears God speak. Naming him David, God declares Riel to be the Prophet of the New World, telling him that it is his duty to lead his people to freedom. Riel begins to exhibit increasingly bizarre behavior, and, concerned for his sanity, a friend commits Riel, under an assumed name, to an asylum outside Montreal. Here, Brown means to underline the unclear divisions between madness and religious experience—is Riel mad or are his revelations genuine? Parallels can be seen to Brown's "My Mother Was a Schizophrenic" and its argument that schizophrenia—which Riel arguably had—as a disease is

not so much an aberration as a convenient moniker used to set arbitrary limitations on socially acceptable behavior. Comparisons between the behaviors of Brown's Christ provide additional insight, for what was Jesus's behavior if not outside the limits of social convention? That both Riel and Christ prevailed against institutionalized power reinforces Brown's view of the psychological definition of schizophrenia as a politically loaded diagnosis.

Meanwhile, the Métis situation is worsening. Having reached the end of their patience, they begin looking for Riel in Montana, believing that the return of Riel will convince the Canadian government to take them seriously. Riel is at first reluctant, but then is convinced to return to Canada. By this time, Macdonald is again Prime Minister and, together with the president of the Canadian Pacific Railway, he plots to use the threat Riel poses, the splintering of a unified Canada, as an excuse to complete a transcontinental railway, arguing that the moving of an army to the western territories to deal with Riel will require an extensive rail system. Things come to a head at the Battle of Duck Lake, when Riel's army confronts an army of Mounties. The Métis are defeated, in part due to Riel's religiosity having reached a manic state. Riel turns himself in, hoping this will bring attention to the Métis cause. Against his wishes, his lawyers plead insanity, but in the end, the jury finds Riel guilty of treason, punishable by death by hanging.

Brown in his notes and annotations[1] shows that he never intended total accuracy; he consolidated or condensed events and individuals as the narrative demanded; similarly, a number of events were expanded while still others Brown did not include. Certain aspects of the story could be entirely inaccurate (such as his depiction of John Macdonald as the classic comic strip villain, complete with an oversized nose reminiscent of Hergé's *Tintin* villians), while others Brown carefully recreates to mirror historical facts, such as using actual court testimony from Riel's trial.

As with *Underwater*, Brown drew the comic in a style highly reminiscent of Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie*. At first, the Gray influence was much subtler, but as the series progressed, the characters became more Gray-like, as heads grew smaller and bodies grew larger. Due to this inconsistency in appearance, Brown redrew nearly half the book for its republication in collected format. Unlike *Underwater*, *Louis Riel* achieved considerable critical and commercial success, including accolades from *Time* magazine and gaining

1. Brown's use of annotations has inspired other creators: "When I met Alan Moore in 1988, he told me that he decided to use endnotes in *From Hell* because he saw my notes on my Gospel adaptations in *Yummy Fur*." (Chester Brown, in an e-mail to the authors. All subsequent footnotes are by Chester Brown.)

Brown popular exposure— in its eventual completed form, it became the first graphic novel to achieve best-seller status in Canada.

Riel also had an effect on Brown's political beliefs. Before researching *Riel*, Brown thought of himself as an anarchist and found himself attracted to Riel's anti-establishmentarian beliefs. However, he soon found himself siding with Macdonald, his villain, and eventually became more and more interested in libertarianism, in particular its support of property rights; he later ran for parliament as representative of the Libertarian Party of Canada in 2008 (he lost). Brown now believed that only those countries with strong property rights managed to achieve economic stability, and he considered rewriting *Riel* to reflect this change in his thinking but eventually decided against it, recognizing the difficulty in maintaining a coherent narrative. He instead opted to make his new views known in his annotations.

Brown ran for parliament again in 2011, just as his only post-*Riel* work to date, *Paying for It*, went to press. *Paying for It* is a highly confessional work in which Brown openly discusses his experience with prostitutes (his views on prostitution are affected by his libertarian views). At first, Brown considered dropping out of the race, but the Libertarian Party assured him that because the Party believes foremost in individual rights, Brown had no reason for concern.

Paying for It is Brown's first autobiographical book since 1994's *I Never Liked You* and his first extended narrative that specifically addresses his adult life. As previously noted, in previous autobiographical works, Brown concentrated on his adolescence because his portrayal of friends and family ran him into problems. With *Paying for It*, however, Brown appears to have solved this issue. For one, he only includes other artists, namely Joe Matt and Seth, and does not deviate from the already public personae each of these artists established in their own confessional work. Moreover, Brown obscures the faces of the prostitutes he visits, and while referencing previous relationships, for the most part Brown does not portray individuals in this work other than the select few mentioned above.

Initially, Brown did not intend to author a book concerning his experiences as a john, nor did he set out to write a polemic advocating the legalization of prostitution. However, past girlfriends requested that Brown not make their sexual encounters with him public, and, as a result, the book limited its focus only to those women whom he paid for sex. Even then, in order to protect the prostitutes' identities, Brown changes their names, hides their faces, and draws nearly all of them in roughly the same style.

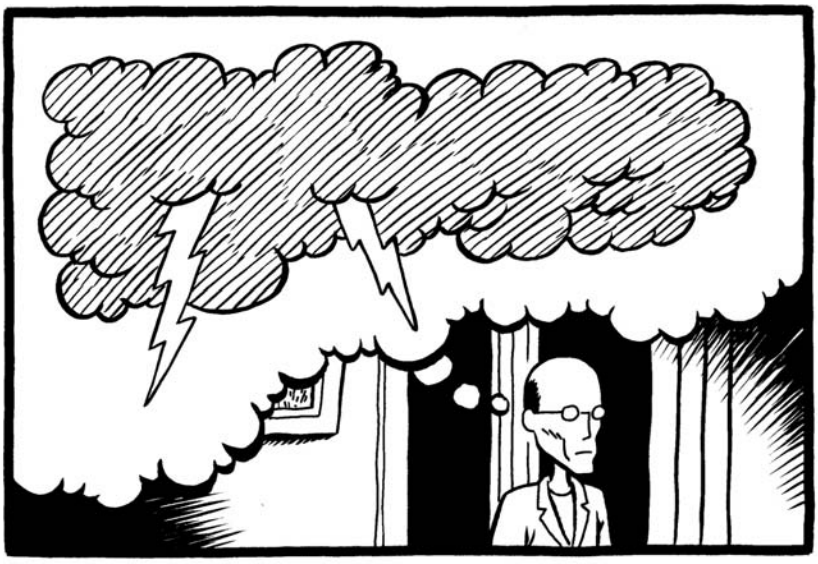
The book begins with Brown breaking up with then-girlfriend, the musician and actress Sook-Yin Lee. Frustrated by this failed relationship, Brown decides he no longer believes in "possessive monogamy." He finds it difficult approaching or getting to know women and, as a result, decides to become celibate. However, his need for sex is at odds with his celibacy, and, desiring to have sex but not have a girlfriend, Brown finds a logical solution to this problem by soliciting prostitutes.

At first, Brown begins riding his bike around Toronto, looking for streetwalkers. He is unsuccessful, however, and soon turns his attention to ads in the back of local alternative newspapers. In recounting each meeting, he depicts his discussion with the women, their physical characteristics, and the details about their sexual skills. As with his *Playboy* Playmates, Brown becomes a connoisseur of prostitutes, comparing and ranking them based on a number of attributes, writing reviews of them on internet-based review boards frequented by other johns, at first using a pseudonym, but then, in keeping with Brown's openness about his activity, posting under his real name.

The book reenacts in detail (too much detail for some readers) each of Brown's encounters with twenty-three separate prostitutes, interspersed with ongoing debates with friends concerning the ethical nature of Brown's activity. Eventually, Brown meets a prostitute named Denise with whom he forms an attachment, eventually deciding to stop seeing any other prostitutes except for her, essentially negating his stated aim of avoiding monogamous relationships. Friends, including Seth and Matt, point out this contradiction, which Brown rationalizes as he is still paying Denise for sex. He can see other women at any time, so, in that sense, it is not the same as being in a relationship where monogamy is a precondition for sex. In the end, Brown argues that his feelings for Denise are not "empty" simply because he is paying her; he argues that even in a monogamous relationship it is understood that some form of economic coercion is taking place.

Paying for It concludes with a fifty-page, twenty-three part appendix wherein Brown meticulously weighs the pros and cons of the decriminalization of prostitution, concluding that he believes prostitution should be decriminalized. Seth contributes a brief essay to these annotations, disagreeing with Brown's conclusions and arguing that Brown is unable to form normal, emotional attachments. Seth finds it ironic that Brown chose whoring because among his male friends Brown seems to him the most considerate and therefore most likely candidate for being in a healthy monogamous relationship.

In contrast to the Harold Gray–inspired artwork of *Louis Riel*, in *Paying for It*, Brown opted for a dispassionate drawing style in a strictly eight-panel



Chester gets angry. From *Paying for It*, © 2011 Chester Brown. Published by Drawn & Quarterly.

grid (he does occasionally deviate from the eight panels, usually when portraying himself engaged in a sexual act). This grid is inspired in part by the relatively static visual style of comics artist Fletcher Hanks (whose hitherto obscure work had recently started to be reprinted in paperback form) as well as Matt's autobiographical comics, and again the films of Robert Bresson (Rogers, n. pg.). Faces show no emotion—this flattening effect reinforces the emotional flatness observed by Seth in Brown's character—underlining the unemotional nature of john-prostitute relationships; to reinforce this lack of emotion, Brown's comic alter-ego is drawn eyeless, almost always wearing his glasses (even during sex). The eyes being the "windows to the soul," Brown here seems to point toward the cold detachment required by a man willing to pay for sex. Rarely are characters drawn in close-up; this accentuates both their anonymity and the overall emotional aloofness of the work. Brown, however, insists he drew the comic in this way due to his discomfort in conveying emotion (instead, in one instance, drawing a thunderstorm and lightning to convey a fit of rage) in a comic as well as his need to portray prostitution's "ordinariness" (Hays 2011, n. pg.).

Reception for *Paying for It* has been overall very positive, with the book achieving bestseller status, while also managing to raise some controversy (given its subject matter this seems inevitable). Among the aspects of the

book criticized are: Brown's clinical drawing style, his perceived objectifying of the prostitutes by paying for sex, his overall lack of concern for their lifestyle or willingness to portray the more cruel realities of prostitution (namely, human trafficking, poverty, and drug abuse, the latter of which Brown rousingly describes as a "myth"), and the didactic tone of the extensive annotations.

Quite in contrast to the emotionally void character of "Chester Brown" in *Paying for It*, the actual Chester Brown is a lively, engaging, and humorous fellow, as the interviews collected here attest. Brown is not an expansive interview subject; his answers tend to be short and straightforward, yet his honesty and clarity often make him a refreshing interview subject. His discussions concerning his own work are always enlightening and insightful, and in his responses, Brown shows himself to be intensely individualistic, even idiosyncratic, as his unique oeuvre attests. Yet, at the same time, Brown does convey a degree of reticence in discussing his work, worrying that perhaps his own perspective is too limited or too personal and, as a result, diminishes the full impact of his work, always understanding that it is the reader that ultimately fulfills and completes what the artist places in front of her.

Andrew Moreton, Jane Schofield, and Martin Hand's early and far-ranging interview, published in the key British fanzine *Fantasy Advertiser* in 1988, finds Brown at the start of his career as a professional comics artist, eager to elucidate on the various machinations and inspirations behind *Yummy Fur*, in particular *Ed the Happy Clown*, not yet completed at the time. This interview finds Brown engaging and talkative, as he and the interviewers discuss myriad topics including Brown's influences, his view of *Yummy Fur*'s place within the larger comics medium, its scatological humor, the Gnostic influences behind his Gospel adaptations, and his overall disinterest in working with mainstream comics publishers.

Scott Grammel's major career-spanning (as of 1990) interview goes into extensive detail about Brown's biography and family relationships, which became rich fodder for his autobiographical work. It explores his early development and ambitions as a cartoonist and his shift away from the "mainstream" comics industry to focus instead on more idiosyncratic, personal, and initially self-published work. It includes extensive discussion of *Ed the Happy Clown* in terms of its structure, tone, and controversial content, including some discussion of the material's potentially legally actionable content. It also delves into Brown's too frequently overlooked Gospel adaptations. We also get more of Brown's occasionally surprising opinions about other cartoonists (including many mainstream figures) than are found anywhere else in these interviews.

Other 1990s interviews included here are Jay Torres's 1991 interview, focusing mainly on *Ed* and the Gospel adaptations and providing surprising insight into the genesis of these works (there was more commercial consideration than one might have thought), as well as into how religion informs not only the Gospel adaptations but also Brown's work more generally. This interview also includes some of Brown's most uncompromising comments on the mainstream comics world. In Steve Solomos's confrontational 1994 interview, conducted during the gestative period of *Underwater*, Solomos and Brown discuss the political content of Brown's work, including censorship, pornography, and feminism, in addition to Brown's then-recent forays into autobiographical work, with thorough examinations of *I Never Liked You* and *The Playboy* and, finally, *Underwater*.

Louis Riel is the focus of Darrell Epp's 2002 interview. Brown discusses how Canadian English and French perceptions of Riel affected Brown's approach to the subject. Also under discussion here is Riel's alleged schizophrenia, the differences in narrative construction between Brown's earlier work and *Riel*, in particular *Ed the Happy Clown*, in addition to Brown's use of Riel as a prism by which to reflect on current issues of Native and property rights in Canada. Epp and Brown also focus on the technical aspects of *Riel*, in particular the influence of Harold Gray. In the course of this interview, the two also manage to touch on Brown's decision to abandon both *Ed* and *Underwater*, the inspiration behind Brown's Gospel adaptations, and Brown's Thomas Szasz–influenced views on schizophrenia.

Epp's interview is followed by six interviews spanning 2004 to 2005, conducted after *Louis Riel* but before Brown had begun significant work on *Paying for It*. Heidi MacDonald's short 2004 interview offers some insight into Brown's working methods, hinting at the direction *Paying for It* might have taken but didn't, and offers some of Brown's opinions on the state of the medium in the early twenty-first century. Matthias Wivel's 2004 interview focuses on *Louis Riel*, recently published at the time of the interview, in order to delve fairly deeply into some key recurrent thematic elements of Brown's work, notably the blurry line between reality and fiction, or sanity and insanity, as well as into the significance of religious belief and experience. Brown also provides fascinating insight into how his political views changed while working on the book (from anarchism to libertarianism) and how that created challenges for him in dealing with his views of the characters. There is also considerable detail about the specifics of Brown's working methods and page design. Also from 2004, Nicholas Verstappen's interview explores the

relationship between Brown's various works: the autobiographical comics, Gospel adaptations, and *Riel*, again discussing Brown's aesthetic choices in conveying Riel's story, in particular the influence of Gray. Brown also takes time to discuss briefly his political beliefs and his reasons for abandoning his earlier projects, and his recent revision of *The Playboy*. Nancy Tousley's 2004 interview provides insightful detail about Brown's working methods while completing *Louis Riel*, as well as his thoughts on some key influences on his work, such as Gray and filmmaker Robert Bresson. Those who find Brown's work cold and detached will get insight into why that is from this interview. Dave Sim's 2005 interview, part of a series entitled "Advise and Consent: The Editing of Graphic Novels," conducted by Sim at the 2004 Toronto Comic-Con, focuses on autonomy in artistic expression, discussing Brown's use of editors in his work, and in what way he requests, accepts, or rejects advice from others. Brown discusses his composition process in considerable detail, looking primarily at "Showing 'Helder'" in addition to exploring his revisions of several works, primarily *Louis Riel*. Conducted after the publication of *Riel*, Robin McConnell's 2006 radio interview addresses Brown's tendency to revise his work and delves into some of the continuities between historical and autobiographical cartooning. The focus is on the *Riel* book primarily, but the interview makes several connections across Brown's oeuvre.

Concluding the book are five short interviews conducted in 2011 during Brown's promotion of *Paying for It*. In Nicholas Köhler's discussion of *Paying for It*, Brown addresses questions of romantic love and whether *Paying for It* might, ironically, be a romantic story after all. The interview also explores some of the contrasts between how prostitution is generally understood versus how Brown experiences it, and raises some of the questions (e.g. about human trafficking) that Brown does not address fully in the book. Ian McGillis's interview with Brown interrogates Brown's intentions, his focus on the advocacy of legalizing prostitution, and Brown's apprehension over the response to such a controversial work, particularly coming on the heels of the positive critical and commercial reception of *Louis Riel*. Conducted after the publication of *Paying for It*, Noel Murray's interview gently nudges Brown to defend his views on prostitution; it also addresses Brown's politics more generally, including his then-current run for political office and his thoughts on why a disproportionate number of cartoonists seem to have individualistic and iconoclastic beliefs. It also includes Brown's brief thoughts about a few up and coming cartoonists. Dave Gilson's short interview concentrates solely on *Paying for It*, in particular Brown's decision to escape the "evil institution" of "possessive monogamy" and his decision to pay for sex, his argument for

decriminalization of prostitution, and his forays into libertarian politics. Lastly, Paul McLaughlin's interview is interesting chiefly for its emphasis not on Brown's actual work but on his life as a john, especially his post–*Paying for It* life as a john in a monogamous paid sexual relationship; this is the "real" Chester Brown today, in interesting comparison to the Chester Brown depicted in the autobiographical comics.

We would like to thank all of the interviewers for their work and for permission to reprint it, from them or from the copyright holders in the instances where the interviewers are not the rights holders. Original publication information appears at the head of each interview. The editors made every effort to contact rights holders and to receive permission; if you are aware of any errors, please contact us, and we will make corrections in a subsequent edition.

We wish also to thank the following people: Walter Biggins, for shepherding the book through the publishing process; Anne Stascavage, for her careful and attentive editing; and Peggy Burns at Drawn & Quarterly for facilitating permission to reprint images and for providing copies of the illustrations. Finally, and especially, we thank Chester Brown for his support, not only for granting permission to reproduce images from his uncollected work but also for generously agreeing to provide annotations for this book, thereby making it a much more substantial collection.

DG
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CHRONOLOGY

1960	Born May 16, 1960, in Montreal, Quebec.
1976	Death of mother.
1977	Graduates high school and travels to New York City to meet with representatives of Marvel and DC.
1977–1978	Attends college at Dawson College but drops out because arts program did not offer courses geared toward a career in comics.
1979	Moves to Toronto. Finds work in photography lab. Second New York trip.
1980	Starts reading the work of underground comics artists and submits work to Fantagraphics, Last Gasp, and Art Spiegelman's *RAW*, but is rejected by all three.
1982	Plans comics anthology *Beans and Wieners* with film archivist Reg Hartt but project never materializes.
1983	Begins self-publishing minicomic *Yummy Fur* under the Tortured Canoe imprint and distributing the work in comic shops, bookstores, and music stores around Toronto. First "Ed the Happy Clown" stories published.
1984	Work showcased in Kromalaffing at the Grunwald Art Gallery. Becomes part of avant-garde community centered on the Queen Street West district of downtown Toronto. Two additional *Yummy Fur* minicomics published.
1985	Seventh and final *Yummy Fur* minicomic appears. Publishes shorts "Dirk the Gerbil" in *Escape* #7, "About Brad's Enlightenment" in *Casual Casual Comics* #10, and "Things to Avoid Stepping On" in *Dada Gumbo* #7.
1986	Bill Marks's Vortex Comics begins publishing *Yummy Fur* in December, reprinting the contents of the minicomic. Brown quits working at the photo lab. Publishes shorts "An American Story" in *Escape* #9, "Help Me Dear" in *Dada Gumbo* #8, and "The Gourmets

from Planet X" in *Honk!*. Short "Art School" collaboration with Gideon Steinberg published in *Canadian Comics Cavalcade*.

1987 Adaptation of the Gospel of Mark begins appearing in *Yummy Fur*. Publishes shorts "Back to Obedience School" in *Snarf* #10 and "The Twin" in *Prime Cuts* #3. Interview in *Greed Magazine* #5.

1988 Publishes shorts "A Late Night Snack" in *Taboo* #1, "Anti-Censorship Propoganda" in *True North*, and "The Afternoon of March 3rd, 1988" in *Puma Blues* #20. Sketchbook published in *The Comics Journal* #125.

1989 Completes the Gospel of Mark in January, begins the Gospel of Matthew in March. First *Ed the Happy Clown* collection published, featuring an introduction by Harvey Pekar. Last "Ed the Happy Clown" story published in October.

1990 Brown begins publishing autobiographical work in *Yummy Fur*, beginning with the stories "Helder," "Showing 'Helder,'" and *The Playboy*. First major interview *in The Comics Journal*. Wins U.K. Comic Art Award and Harvey Award for Best Graphic Novel for *Ed the Happy Clown*; awarded Harvey for Best Cartoonist.

1991 Collaboration with Harvey Pekar published in Pekar's *The New American Splendor Anthology*. Autobiographical story "The Little Man" published in *Yummy Fur*. Drawn & Quarterly begins publishing *Yummy Fur*. Serialized autobiographical stories *Disgust* and *Fuck* appear. Publishes short "The Weird Canadian Artist" in *True North II*.

1992 *Disgust* collected edition published under the title *The Playboy*. *Fuck* and the Gospel of Matthew stories published in *Yummy Fur*. *Ed the Happy Clown: The Definitive Ed Book* published.

1993 Additional *Fuck* and Gospel of Matthew installments appear. Provides inks over Stephen Bissette's pencils for Alan Moore-scripted *Tales from the Uncanny* #3. Feature on "autobiographical cartoonists" published in *The Comics Journal* #162.

1994 *Fuck* collected under the title *I Never Liked You*. The last issue of *Yummy Fur* published in July; first issue of *Underwater* published in August.

1995 Publishes comics essay "My Mom Was a Schizophrenic" in *Underwater*.

1997 Final installment of the Gospel of Matthew published in the last issue of *Underwater* (October). Father dies.

1998 *The Little Man: Short Strips 1980–1995* published; wins Ignatz Award for outstanding graphic novel or collection.

1999 Begins publishing ten-issue series *Louis Riel*. Wins Urhunden Prize for Best Foreign Album for foreign edition of *Ed the Happy Clown*.

2002 Revised edition of *I Never Liked You* published.

2003 Final issue of *Louis Riel* published. Collected and revised edition published later that year. Wins Harvey Awards for Best Writer and Best Graphic Album of Previously Published Work for *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*. *Getting Riel*, letters between Dave Sim and Brown, published in *Cerebus* #295–297.

2005 *Ed the Happy Clown* begins to be reprinted as nine-issue series. Autobiographical work published in *SPX Anthology*. Provides cover for *True Porn* #2.

2006 Additional issues of *Ed the Happy Clown* appear. Revised edition of *The Little Man* published. Provides cover art for Penguin paperback edition of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover.*

2011 *Paying for It: A Comic-Strip Memoir about Being a John* published in hardcover edition.

2012 *Ed the Happy Clown: A Graphic Novel* published. Selection from *Paying for It*, "Angelina," included in *The Best American Comics 2012*.

2013 Paperback version of *Paying for It*, revised edition of *The Playboy* and tenth anniversary edition of *Louis Riel* published.

CHESTER BROWN: CONVERSATIONS

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Chester Brown

ANDREW MORETON, JANE SCHOFIELD, AND MARTIN HAND / 1988

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This interview takes place in the artist's sketching room at this year's UKCAC [UK Comic Art Convention]. All around is noise and chattering that will make portions of the tape untranscribable.

Chester is a quiet, softly spoken man, beautiful and thin, dressed in torn-up jeans, wearing long, light hair and pausing thoughtfully before most of his answers. He is not the deranged maniac you might expect from reading his extremely strange comic *Yummy Fur*.

The interview begins among considerable noise and confusion.

Andrew Moreton: How did you first come by the small press scene, Chester?
Chester Brown: Okay . . . I had a girlfriend who was in it—she was involved with lots of small press people in Toronto, and they published poetry and this type of thing here in a small press format. So she saw that I was doing all these comics and sending them off to publishers and not getting them printed. . . .

AM: Who did you send them to?
CB: Different underground people, Rip Off Press [founded 1969, one of the most significant underground publishers, best known for publishing *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*], *Raw* [avant-garde comics anthology magazine created by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, published from 1980–1991] . . .

AM: None of them published you?
CB: No. *Raw* almost published, I think, the pigs story ["City Swine," later published in *Yummy Fur* #3 (late 1983)], they sent me back a letter saying, "We

almost used this, but we think you can do better, so send more stuff." So I just kept doing more stuff and sending it places and it was kind of piling up, and my girlfriend said, "Why don't you just publish it yourself?" and I said, "Okay."

AM: Do you think the small press is a good idea? And what do you think is good about it?
CB: Well I think it's good that you don't make any money off it so you've just got to follow your own creative impulses and not worry about trying to make money because you can't anyway.

AM: Not a chance!
CB: Not a chance! Right! And so I think that's really good. Also it's kind of a good place to start from; it gets your work seen and everything.

AM: How do you imagine your ideal consumer, the audience that you're playing to in your head?
CB: In my head I'm just playing to myself, I don't imagine an audience. My audience is whoever wants to pick up the book and enjoys it.

AM: Do you pick up a finished issue of *Yummy Fur* and think, "Wow! Fuck me!! I did this, it never existed before, and now I've just made it!"?
CB: Sometimes, but sometimes I look at an issue and say, "Oh God, do I have to publish this?" It varies, some of the issues I like, some of them I don't like.

AM: Which ones don't you like?
CB: I wasn't crazy about number 6.

AM: You'll have to remind me which one that was.
CB: Josie, it's like her ghost rises and they go down into the tunnel and Josie connects back up with her body. No, I wasn't crazy about that one.

Jane Schofield: Any particular reason why not?
CB: It was just that I had a larger story planned and it became obvious that I wasn't going to be able to fit it in the whole issue and I was going to have to cut it short, which . . . well, it kind of worked out anyway, because I got other ideas which were better than the ideas I'd originally had.

JS: Do you find it difficult to drop an idea once you've got your teeth into it?
CB: Not if I realize that another idea is better.

AM: Are you into the idea of each issue of *Yummy Fur* standing on its own, without the others, like a singular artifact on its own?
CB: I'd like it like that, but I'm afraid they're not. I think that if anyone just picked up any issue of *Yummy Fur* then they'd be pretty confused.

JS: That's just what I did. I came in in the middle.
CB: And it still made sense?
JS: Yeah.

Martin Hand: It's something that's good issue by issue but is far more rewarding if you read them all. It's really frustrating because Titan [British comics distribution company, sold to Diamond in 1992] doesn't distribute it regularly or something like that. You can't get some issues for love nor money.
CB: Well, I think that was partly because, you know, that thing about Diamond Comics, the distributor in the States, Titan gets them, I think, through Diamond, and because Diamond wasn't getting any Titan wasn't getting any.

AM: Is that Steve Geppi? [then owner of Diamond]
CB: Yeah, but actually Diamond are getting my stuff now so there's no problem, and I think Titan just got two hundred of each issue and so they should be around now.
MH: That's good news.

AM: Yeah it is. Do you make a living off comics?
CB: Almost. I'm pretty close.

AM: That's pretty good going. Do you do a proper job as well, then?
CB: One night a week I pack comics for a distributor in Toronto.

AM: That sounds horrible.
CB: Well, it did seem pretty horrible when I first started, but I've got used to it and all the guys . . . and it's pretty enjoyable, actually.

MH: Do you pack your own comics?
CB: Yeah, I pack every comic that comes out and the distributor ships around, which is just about everything, so I get to see copies of *Yummy Fur* and how many and where they're going and how it's doing against *Spider-Man* or whatever.

The censored version of the panel from *Yummy Fur* issue 4. From *Ed the Happy Clown: A Graphic Novel*, © 2012 Chester Brown. Published by Drawn & Quarterly.

AM: Do you do anything else of a creative manner apart from drawing comics?
CB: No, not really. All my creative energies go into *Yummy Fur*.

AM: Who's influenced you? Which artists? Who do you think is a worthy figure to attempt to emulate?
CB: Comics artists?

AM: Anybody.
MH: Tell us about some good comics.
CB: Well, everyone's reading *Love and Rockets*, I'm into them as much as anyone, er, who else, *Neat Stuff*—Peter Bagge—*Transit*'s very good.

AM: Your letter columns are full of letters from these people.
MH: *Yummy Fur* is one of those comics read by all the professionals.
JS: A comic person's comic!
AM: A truly elitist comic! Er, what are your politics?
CB: I dunno. Leftist, I s'pose.

AM: Party leftist, or leftist leftist?
CB: Leftist leftist.

AM: What do you mean? Controlled economy? Socialist utopia?[1]
JS: Or just everybody being nice to each other?
CB: I'm not that much into politics. Right now there are elections coming up in Canada, and I'm going to vote for the party that's most against censorship.

MH: You actually censored yourself once, didn't you?
CB: I covered a panel.

MH: And you could send away for it.
CB: That's right.

MH: Did you get a big response?
CB: Quite a few people. In fact, someone just asked me if I'd brought any Xeroxes with me, and I wish I had. It really didn't occur to me.

AM: Do you think that *Yummy Fur* has any relevance to the outside world? I mean apart from the fact that it's you producing it and that you're connected with the world. What I mean is, does it reflect any great truths?
CB: Well, I kind of hope so. I'm a person with opinions and feelings about things, and I suppose I express them in *Yummy Fur*.

MH: It is pretty much about the outside world. You may not get seals or walruses dropped on your head, but it is much closer to the outside world than most comics.
CB: That's definitely true, but *Love and Rockets* and stuff, that's much closer to the outside world than what I'm doing, but we're dealing with different levels of closeness to reality.

MH: What genre would you say you were working in? Is it a comic comic, or an alternative comic, is it a superhero comic, is it a funny comic?
CB: I don't know that it fits in a genre. Now, if people ask me, I say it's a horror comic, because a lot of people have said that so I just go along with it.

JS: Does *Yummy Fur* make you laugh?
CB: Almost never. I used to laugh at my stuff all the time, but not now.

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1. I was out of my depth here. I should have asked, "What's a controlled economy?" but I didn't want to make my ignorance apparent.

AM: How much in control of your style are you? Does it come out looking the way it does because that's the way you draw, or did you "design" it with *Yummy Fur* in mind?
CB: No, it just comes out this way.

AM: Do you like your drawings?
CB: No, not really. I like them a bit, but I wish they could be better.

AM: Do you reread *Yummy Fur* when it comes out? I always reread my comics loads of times.
CB: No, I pick it up when it comes out and look through it to make sure that the pages are in order. I don't really reread them.[2]

AM: Don't you try to imagine that you're someone picking it up in a shop . . .?
CB: No, no. It would be too painful.

MH: Aren't the first few issues of *Yummy Fur* difficult to get hold of? I was wondering if there are any plans to release the whole story at some point. In fact, I would have thought that when you finished the Gospels that a collection could be something that'd make you quite a lot of money.
CB: We've kind of thought about it, but we're not sure. . . .

MH: That's the kind of thing that'll legitimize comics.
CB: We'll probably try it. How successful it'll be is another matter.

JS: Was there a particular reason for putting the Gospels in, or was it just a good story to draw?
CB: Well, I've always been pretty much obsessed with the Bible, so that just seemed natural to me.

AM: And why all this interest in Gnosticism?
CB: The Gnostics were kind of the neat Christians, they got wiped out, and I suppose the "traditional" Christians gained power, killed them all, and burned their scriptures.[3]

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2. I've reread *Louis Riel* and *Paying For It* a lot.

3. I now doubt the validity of the term. In her 2005 book, *What Is Gnosticism?*, Karen L. King wrote that "There was and is no such thing as Gnosticism, if we mean by that some kind of ancient religious entity with a single origin and a distinct set of characteristics. Gnosticism is, rather, a term invented in the early modern period to aid in defining the boundaries of

AM: Weren't they around before the beginning of Christianity and they kind of bought into it? You chose Mark, which is the most Gnostic of the Gospels,[4] I gather, full of light and darkness imagery, lots of hidden truths. Which is what I gather Gnosticism means, am I right? It's to do with some kind of hierarchy of hidden truths that eventually allow you to ascend to true knowledge. Is that right?
CB: Well . . . ascent within yourself. Gnosticism means "to know," right, and that's basically to know yourself, you have your light within you, and you have to look within yourself to find your divine spirit.

AM: So it's almost pantheistic.
CB: No, actually it's almost the opposite. Well, it sounds like it is, but the thing is that most Gnostics believe that the whole world is corrupt and our bodies are corrupt and evil and there's a tiny bit of God within us that we have to search for, but we have to get past our bodies.

AM: How do you find that? Loads of religions, especially Catholicism, seem to be really anti-body and pleasure. . . .
CB: That's the kind of Gnosticism I don't like, the kind that thinks everything is evil, our bodies and everything.

AM: Your comics contain some pretty bizarre moments—you doing loads of drugs or what?
CB: Not for quite a few years. I was never really into drugs that much.

AM: Yeah, I realize that's a pretty wide question to ask. I'm not suggesting you're into heroin or anything, but I do suspect the influence of the odd psychedelic on your work.
CB: Well, not really. I used to smoke pot and never got much by it.

AM: How do you account for the deep weirdness that comes out of your comics? Is all this in the bottom of your gut and you're letting it spill out, or what?
CB: I s'pose.

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normative Christianity. Yet it has mistakenly come to be thought of as a distinctive Christian heresy or even as a religion in its own right" [pp. 1 & 2].

4. John's Gospel is the one that's usually identified as being the most Gnostic. I would think that I would have known that back in 1988. Perhaps I didn't want to embarrass Andrew by pointing out his error.