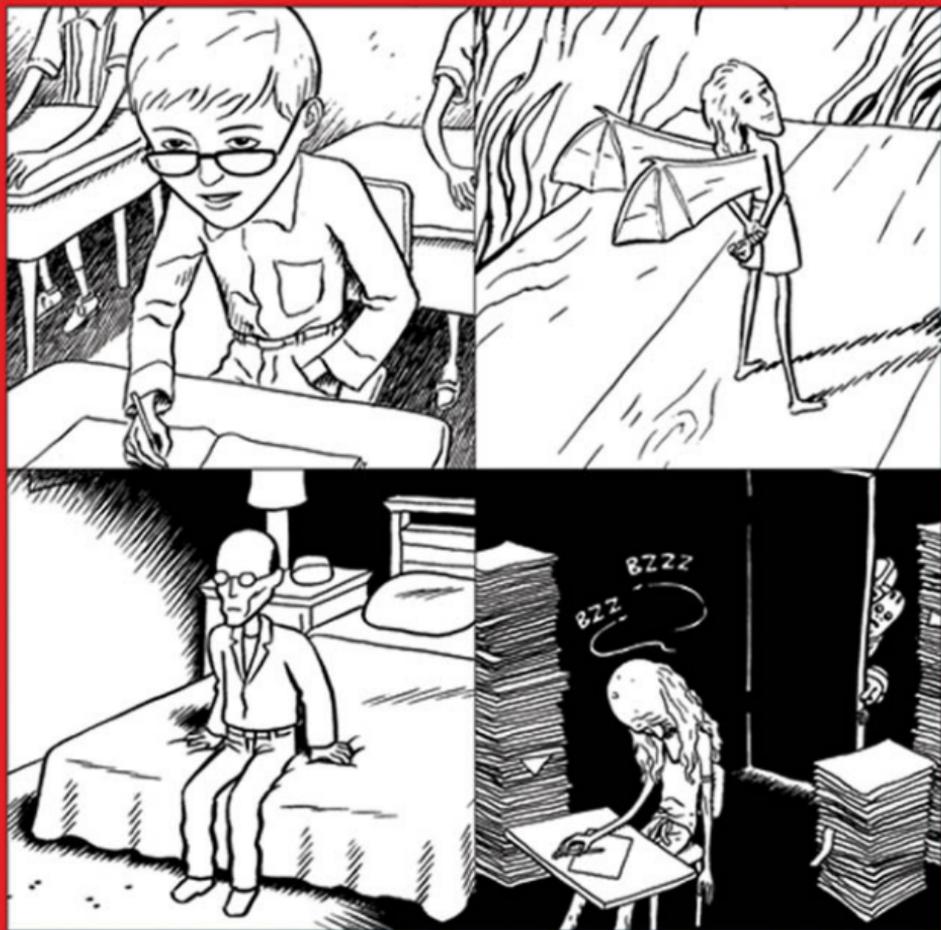


Chester Brown Conversations

Edited by Dominick Grace and Eric Hoffman



CHESTER BROWN: CONVERSATIONS

Conversations with Comic Artists

M. Thomas Inge, General Editor

Chester Brown: Conversations

Edited by Dominick Grace and Eric Hoffman

Annotated by Chester Brown

Works by Chester Brown

- Yummy Fur* (minicomic) 7 issues (1983–1985); reprinted in *Yummy Fur* 1–3 (1986)
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
Paying for It: A Comic-Strip Memoir about Being a John (2011)

www.upress.state.ms.us

The University Press of Mississippi is a member of the Association of American University Presses.

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Manufactured in the United States of America

First printing 2013

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brown, Chester, 1960–

Chester Brown : conversations / edited by Dominick Grace and Eric Hoffman ; annotated by Chester Brown.

pages cm. — (Conversations with comic artists)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-61703-868-6 (hardback) — ISBN 978-1-61703-869-3 (ebook) 1. Brown, Chester, 1960—Interviews. 2. Cartoonists—Canada—Interviews. I. Grace, Dominick, 1976– editor of compilation. II. Hoffman, Eric, 1963– editor of compilation. III. Title.

PN6733.B76Z46 2013

741.5'971—dc23

2013011461

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

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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—disembodied 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 (*Pa-lookaville*) 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.)

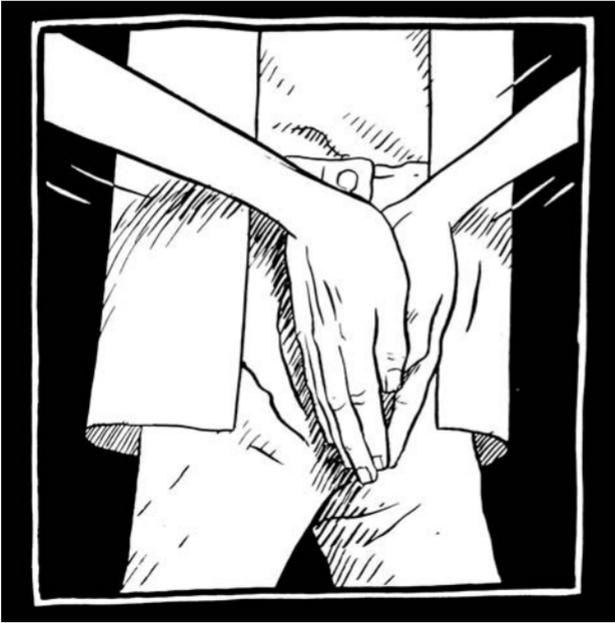
As with the “Ed in suburbia” stories in *Yummy Fur*, Brown abandoned his Gospel adaptations midway through Matthew. The last completed chapter appeared in the final issue of *Underwater* in 1997. Brown has in the past voiced his interest in returning to the story, but in a 2011 online interview with 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