

Sarah Lightman, ed., *Graphic Details Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews*. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2014. 308 pp., 108 pl. (57 in color), \$49.95.

In 2008, Sarah Lightman, an artist and curator born and bred in London, organized a show called “Diary Drawing” at The Centre for Recent Drawing, a not-for-profit art space. The exhibit featured mostly women artists, as well as the work of several prominent cartoonists, including the Americans Miriam Katin, Gabrielle Bell, and Ariel Schrag and the Israeli cartoonist Rutu Modan (whose illustration of a redheaded woman wearing on-fire glasses happens to be the cover to my book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* [Columbia University Press, 2010]). Lightman got in touch with me that year, searching out resources in connection with the academic study of comics. By 2010, the next time I heard from her, she was working toward her PhD (having completed an MFA some years earlier), and had found her footing in the comics community in a significant way. She wrote to let me know that she and Michael Kaminer, a journalist for the *Forward*, a Jewish newspaper based in New York City, were co-curating an exhibit entitled “Graphic Details: Confessional Comics by Jewish Women,” which would feature cartoonists as well as contributions from academics and other writers. Lightman, as she explains in the preface to *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews*, had e-mailed Kaminer in 2009 after reading his *Forward* profile of female Jewish autobiographical cartoonists and suggested that they collaborate on a show, advancing her earlier “Diary Drawing” and his essay.

That joint traveling exhibit, which opened at the Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco, inspired this edited volume. On its second page Lightman notes: “Between us we would bring comics by Jewish women into established art spaces, and in the process find me the creative family I had always hoped for.”

Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews is a wonderful resource, but also feels scattershot as a book. In setting up the critical angle, a lot rides on Lightman's Preface, which she titles “Imagetextlines—Confessions of a Co-Curator, Editor and Artist.” There is indubitably a hunger for the material covered in the book: comics is a medium that is engendering more and more interest on the part of all different sorts of readers. The runaway

success of twenty-first century graphic memoirs such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (an international best-seller first translated from the French in 2003) and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (voted *Time* magazine's number-one book of the year in 2006 and translated into dozens of languages) indicates that the genre of comics nonfiction, especially by women, is resonating deeply with readers around the globe: it is intimate and political at the same time. Further, many of the artists, both male and female, working in comics today are Jewish and even write and draw about specific features of Jewish life. It is practically foundational (despite the aniconism of Judaism): the most famous work of comics in the world, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, which appeared in two volumes in 1986 and 1991, is Jewish in content (it is about testimony and the Holocaust), and other ways that have to do with author Art Spiegelman's constantly questioning approach to both historical narrative and to his own motives and means of visualization.¹ But Lightman is interested in women specifically, and comics as a form for the self-expression of both Jewish and female identities—and their intersection. The book deals with the Venn diagram construction for four overlapping sets: Jewish, women, confessional, comics. How do they all relate?

This book is a recovery project and a celebration of that recovery. Lightman explains her female framework by reviewing sexism in the world of comics with a slightly heavy touch. She protests that a show about Jews and Comics titled “From Superman to the Rabbi's Cat” is excessively male because it implicitly refers only to male creators, *Superman's* Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster and *The Rabbi's Cat's* Joann Sfar, and explicitly to all-male creations, since in Sfar's story, the titular rabbi's cat was male. She is not wrong, though, that the field has to change: in January 2016, Joann Sfar, along with several other cartoonists from France and America, withdrew his name from consideration for the world's biggest, and most prestigious, comics festival's prize, at Angoulême, because there was not a single female cartoonist on the thirty-person shortlist for the festival's Grand Prix.

Lightman wants the personal, exuberant work of female creators to take the spotlight. That all makes

¹ For more in this vein, including Spiegelman's appreciation of what he sees as the “nature of Judaism as a process of questioning,”

see *MetaMaus*, a book I collaborated on with Spiegelman about his Pulitzer Prize winning series.

sense; people have been debating the inclusion of women in galleries, museums, universities and publishing for a long time. The fascinating part of the book is in the Jewish crux, and that is where I wish Lightman had put more of her energies into articulating the concept of the volume. I was riveted, for instance, by a brief mention of Glückel of Hameln; Lightman suggests that the work in the show continues the tradition of women creating work about their own lives. As with the book as a whole, which is sliced up too thinly in seven parts with subsections, the preface is broken up into too many sections—twelve, in fact, over fifteen pages—for Lightman to give herself the space to articulate clearly the Jewish motivation of the book, however complicated. Some synthetic overview about how the featured intergenerational group of creators relate to Judaism would have strengthened the presentation upfront.

Tahneer Oksman, a contributor to the volume, points out in her directly relevant recent book *How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?: Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs*, which features six artists also covered in *Graphic Details*, that many of the younger artists making comics today have very ambivalent connections to their Judaism, even if it comes up in their work. Some well-known cartoonists, such as Sophie Crumb, are halachically Jewish, but have no interest in that heritage. Over the course of the volume, I was surprised to see the names of several cartoonists, some of whose work I know well and some whom I know well as people, mentioned in the lists of Jewish creators. If it means nothing to them, should it mean something to us? I do not think there is an obvious answer to this question, but I had hoped that Lightman would tackle it more directly: what is the range of attitudes about Jewish identity carried by the eighteen women featured in the book? Furthermore, who was considered Jewish and why? These are core questions linked to serious debates today in many sectors. Does Lightman think there is such a thing as Jewish art (to invoke Harold Rosenberg's famous question from the 1960s)?

Some of the contributors do address Judaism and the Jewish experience in compelling ways. The German-Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon (1919–1943), who created a hybrid sequential narrative called *Life? Or Theatre?*—a series of gouaches with images and words—before she was killed at Auschwitz, hangs over the book as a sort of patron saint (the wrong analogy for a Jewish book). Salomon was very much an inspiring influence for Art Spiegelman, and artists across

generations and different sections of the book—critical essays, interviews, biographies—detail her influence stylistically and as a historical figure that represents creative self-expression under duress. Essays such as Evelyn Tauben's "*Mi Yimtza? Finding Jewish Identity through Women's Autobiographical Art*" tackle the "Jewish" of the book's title head on. Before putting comics artists into conversation with visual artists working in a fine art tradition, Tauben opens with Rosenberg's question.

Dan Brauner's essay, with its clunky and not-for-the-squeamish title "The Turd that Won't Flush: The Comedy of Jewish Self-Hatred in the Work of Corinne Pearlman, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Miss Lasko-Gross, and Ariel Schrag" is one of the volume's best for its lucid argument that addresses Jewishness. First, Brauner takes a risk, I believe, in interpreting—persuasively, in the end—two comics stories about an adolescent fear of being caught defecating with fear connected to Jewish ethnicity (in neither case is ethnicity specified). He goes on to claim that Miss Lasko-Gross and Ariel Schrag create work that is "part of a Jewish tradition of self-conscious, confessional work in which self-hatred is exploited for comic purposes" (138). He then clarifies, explaining his use of a term that gets bandied about quite a bit: in his essay, he is "using the term Jewish self-hatred primarily to indicate not an unthinking, internalized anti-Semitism but rather a process of satirical self-interrogation and self-criticism that is paradoxically most Jewish when it is most adversarial toward Jewishness." Brauner concludes his essay with an excellent, pithy summary of the small subfield of books about comics and Jews, glossing their propositions against his, giving readers a strongly argued takeaway that contextualizes the achievement and tone of a wide swath of comics.

The comics themselves jump off the page. *Graphic Details* features color pages in addition to black and white. Vanessa Davis's work looks sumptuous in full color, while Sharon Rudahl's black and white textured tones reproduce beautifully. For me, certain artists were a revelation. The work of the English cartoonist Corinne Pearlman, who has largely published her comics in the London-based *Jewish Quarterly*, was a happy surprise, as was the work of Sarah Lazarovic, a young Canadian with a comics column. I very much enjoyed the work of Israeli artists Ilana Zeffren (I had not seen her comics translated from the Hebrew before, and she has started, fascinatingly, using English "subtitles" in her comics with the Hebrew) and Racheli Rottner (a heavily stylized black-and-white page from Rottner's

The Other Side of the World featuring a romance between a girl and a cockroach made me laugh out loud). Throughout, I longed for the excerpts of the comics works to continue, having been drawn into their worlds so convincingly. Lightman is clearly a *tour de force*, and the energy and care required to assemble *Graphic Details* produced a vital, hybrid, indubitably important, and sometimes messy—which Lightman could claim as a virtue—volume from which people can discover and appreciate new idioms.

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Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics (Columbia University Press, 2010). She is Associate Editor of Art Spiegelman's *MetaMaus* (Pantheon, 2011), which won a National Jewish Book Award. She recently co-edited both the *Critical Inquiry* special issue *Comics & Media* (University of Chicago Press, 2014) and Daniel Aaron's *Scrap Book* (Pressed Wafer, 2014). In 2006 she co-edited, for *Modern Fiction Studies*, the first issue of a journal in the field of literature devoted to analyzing comics, and in 2012 she and cartoonist Alison Bechdel co-taught a theory and practice course on comics, the first of its kind. She has written for publications including *Artforum*, *Bookforum*, *The Believer*, and *Poetry*.

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