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Senior Integrative Project

Thoughts on The Midwestern Plain

Comics

6:30 in the morning is much too early to wake up, especially for a teenager. I've heard they need more sleep than they're allowed to get. It always felt like it was still night when my mother came and shook me awake. Nausea overpowered my appetite in the morning but I forced myself to eat a bowl of cereal, thinking ahead. I read comics I had picked up at the library as I ate. It was too difficult to navigate a page of text while making sure my spoon brought cereal to my mouth. Besides, I've always been a visual person. My dad told me that when I was two, I painted trains. *Calvin and Hobbes*, *The Adventures of Tintin*, and early *Spiderman* comics are the most memorable of my morning reading material. The creators of those works, Bill Waterson, Herge, and Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, respectively, are masters of storytelling, and I became utterly immersed in the worlds they created. It was the beginning of my interest in the graphic narrative, as well as the possibilities it presented as medium.

Conception



Calvin and Hobbes 05-21-1992

I conceived this story long before I named it, and even before I saw the film *The Spirit of the Beehive*, which the title references. I kept a little idea book in my back pocket throughout the spring and summer of 2010 where I wrote down anything that inspired me. I was taking classes on the relationship between Islam and the West during the spring, and often found myself paraphrasing scholars like Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, who's deconstruction of the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing Islamophobia and violence had me thinking up analogous storylines and various metaphors for larger sociopolitical issues. However, in considering the more vague concepts of how one culture relates to another, or even of how one person relates to another, I began to address my own personal experiences and build a story based on those while still retaining themes of religion, urban-suburban relationships, national perspective, and childhood, which I think are all quite related.

The story remained in an unfinished state for some time. I knew only that it was about a boy in a suburban neighborhood who witnesses a burning car rolling down his street at night, a metaphor for the infiltration of the outside world. During this time, I watched *Spirit of the Beehive*, a 1973 Spanish film that examines the sociopolitical climate during Francisco Franco's dictatorship through a portrait of a little girl and her family. I recognized how curiously my own story mirrored the social commentary and general subject matter of the film, and felt almost obligated to reference it. The opening caption establishing the setting in *Beehive* reads, "Somewhere on the Castilian plain", which I eventually appropriated as my title. James was already surprisingly like the character Ana in the film. They are both quiet and influenced heavily by the words and images they are exposed to. In *Beehive*, Ana is haunted by the movie *Frankenstein* as she interacts



James and Ana

with her family and an outlaw she meets in an abandoned building. She eventually runs away, but is found by her father and brought back to safety, impacted profoundly by her experience nonetheless.

During this time, I was also considering works like *Stitches*, an autobiographical graphic novel by David Small. James, in fact, was initially named David, after the famous Biblical David. After some writing however, I felt I didn't want to draw the comparison between my fictional David and the real one, who, in *Stitches* suffers from cancer his parents do not tell him he has. Small's meditation on childhood is particularly cinematic and very well paced. I was also drawn to the very loose line drawings and ink washes, which was a departure from the tightly executed illustrations in a novel like *Watchmen*, or even most things one might pick up at a local comic store. At the same time, I was attracted to the work of Andrew Wyeth and his father, illustrator NC Wyeth. I had an opportunity to see their work together in an exhibit at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, and was intrigued by the discrepancies between a loose watercolor sketch, a detailed dry brush portrait, and an action-packed oil illustration. I began to consider the possibility of heavily altering my illustrative style in order to convey varying amounts and types of information to the reader while retaining a fluid narrative. In readdressing the graphic novels I've mentioned above, as well as ones like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *Black Hole* by Charles Burns, and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, I also considered how text would relate to those images. In an effort to simultaneously avoid first person narration, which is used heavily by every graphic novel mentioned above, but not in *Beehive*, and to create an individual voice for each character, I chose to work with personalized fonts instead of with word bubbles. David Simon wrote of his creation, the HBO series *The Wire*, that there would be no 'external exposition', such as voice-overs, dramatic music, or flashy cinematography. I kept that term in mind as I continued to consider the function of text, and towards the end of my working on *Somewhere on the Midwestern Plain* I had essentially stripped my story down to the two essentials of text and image. It seems to me



James surprised while drawing

now a testament to the aesthetic simplicity of *Tintin*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, early superhero comics, and particularly *Beehive* and *Stitches*, only even simpler.

James

In *Somewhere on the Midwestern Plain*, James's experiences in particular are based on my own. George, for example, is modeled after a neighborhood friend of mine who moved away when I was small. In the story, this sets the stage for James' trials, which he experiences in a state of personal isolation and never explains to anyone else. The fight between George and James simultaneously foreshadows James' troubles and establishes him as a kind-hearted, sensitive boy. I remember now desperately urging a couple of boys I met while camping with my family to throw back toads they caught in the creek instead of skewering them on sticks like they had with others. Coincidentally, George shares a certain knack for cruelty with Ana's sister.



James and George

Heidi

Like James, I distinctly remember crying when I was little during Disney's 1993 version of *Heidi*, which my mother had brought home from the library. *Hedi* in the story is an ideal for James. The mountains become a sort of greener grass on the other side, and in fact distract him from concentrating on keeping in touch with George.



Heidi in *Midwestern Plain*

Samson

Even before I sat sleepily eating cereal and reading Spiderman, I owned an illustrated children's Bible that I believe was given to my parents when I was born. Enticed, of course, by some amazing illustrations, I often climbed to the center of my



James as Samson

bed, plopped the heavy thing down before me, sat cross-legged, and read a story or two. The stories of Moses parting the red sea, Daniel in the Lion's den, David and King Saul, and Samson and Delilah resonated deeply. Samson's suicide as a blind man, which killed an entire temple of Philistines, became to me, as I considered my narrative, representative of both an us-versus-them mentality and an arbitrary sense of self-righteousness blindly acted upon. These ideas are also evident in the television broadcast that Sean is watching early in the story, which is comprised of the type of language Derrida and Butler condemn (reference to the immoral sexuality of Anti-American militants in the Middle-East, and a lack of proper religion). James experiences the story of

Samson in his dream as a manifestation of the difference between Gunther's and his parent's approach to faith, possibly feeling guilt for having enjoyed such a religious story.

The Burning Car

Perhaps the most distanced from my own experiences are the burning car rolling down the street and James running away. Back during early high school, I was at a friend's house down the street. It was past dark when we began to hear noises outside and so we ran upstairs to his bedroom window. We could see the road, yellow from streetlights, and the next-door-neighbor's, where there was a verbal fight taking place

between a small group of people from the house and another from a car parked in front. When one of the males lunged forward and struck a smaller female figure in the face, she collapsed and did not return to her feet. Fights erupted onto the streets but eventually the car sped off. The remaining carried the girl's body onto the lawn, yelling, "She's dead! They fucking killed her". My dad, hearing police cars pass our house and going down the hill, came to pick me up, and so I went to sleep arguing with myself whether she was dead or alive. Alive, it turned out in the morning, but that



James sees the car

experience impacted me tremendously. In the context of my other childhood memories, that story became a metaphor for otherness and separation to me. It was like a brief glimpse of the outside world, and the dangers and uncertainty that exist beyond the familiar.

For James, the burning car is the equivalent. It is a curious threat from beyond his world, and it serves to destroy his imagined ideal. Frightened, he runs away, towards where he first saw *Heidi's* mountains, an action that mirrors Ana's in *Beehive*. James' parents, meantime, suffer the uncertainty of not knowing the fate of their son for an entire day. The four images of the burned out car illustrating that passage of time are based both



on Monet's famous *Haystacks*, and a rejected cover for Cormac McCarthy's dystopian father-son survival novel *The Road* by Chip Kidd, which included a black and white photograph of a burned-out car. These paintings were among the first images created for the story and

were completed during the script's unfinished state, but their reconciliation of themes of time, light, and atmosphere, evident in Monet's work, and those of parenthood, suffering, and faith, evident in McCarthy's, remained relevant as the story grew around them.

Robins

Unlike the themes mentioned above, the robins are included at the beginning, middle, and end of *Somewhere on the Midwestern Plain*. In the beginning, an adult robin is shown flying with a worm in its mouth, which it needs to feed itself and its offspring. The act foreshadows James' inability to maintain his imagined ideal, as he saves a worm from George in the same scene. Sean later discovers a nest of baby robins while he is painting the house. He lies when he tells James that he didn't touch any of them, and James in turn lies about having had a dream the night previous, or just doesn't remember. The conversation simultaneously reflects their growing rift and, more generally, the loss of parental authority. The final panel of *Somewhere on the Midwestern Plain* depicts the baby birds' skeletons, which affirms James' concerns, negates his father's credibility, represents the death of James' innocence, and is a real manifestation of death, previously seen only in James' dreams.



The robins

Gunther, Sean, Christina,

Because they're mine, all these characters have a little bit of me in them, but while James is a slightly distorted reflection of me, Gunther, Sean, and Christina represent complete manifestations of three slightly different world-views that often



Gunther in two styles

conflict in my mind. Gunther is a man of outward faith. He believes with all his heart in his Christian ideals, and that is what is important to him. Sean is skeptical of such an outlook and is preoccupied with domestic issues and will not trust outside help. The



Sean in two styles

urgency of re-painting his house distracts him from spending all his time with James, and his leaving the ladder propped against the house directly contributes to James running away. The door-to-door solicitor who inspires Sean to paint, Donnie, is based on my experiences as house painter in wealthy Brighton, Michigan during the summer of 2009. It was an awful job. I felt entirely misplaced as I navigated the endless suburban landscape. At times it seemed to me to be more desolate than the open countryside, especially areas of development, where white

driveways slithered up green, checked hills from the road and towards white houses, the trees all far away. Was somebody home? I never knew. People and their vehicles hid indoors. Mine was often the only car parked on the street. “I’m in construction, so I can do it myself” was a common response when someone answered their doorbell. Sean’s reaction and Gunther’s past are based on that experience.

Christina has a slightly larger scope than the other characters. She seeks the good of her community, but is slightly estranged from the specifics of the day-to-day and caught up in events that take place beyond her home. Her conversation with her co-worker Tom on the way to work demonstrates this, and is accompanied by a series of paintings illustrating the transition into the city, two of which are based on images from the introduction to *The Soprano’s*, which depicts Tony Soprano’s trip from urban New Jersey, where much of his lucrative business takes place, to suburban, where he lives with his family. The others are based on pictures I took nearing and in Chicago.



Christina in two styles

1 of 2 based on *The Sopranos* intro

Sum of Parts

All the main characters have specific give-and-take relationships with the nameless city their suburb is barely a part of and with outsiders in general. Gunther was directly responsible for the construction of a city he does not live in, and he at once fights for acceptance in the context of his story, but rejects the teenagers visiting next door. In the same vein, Sean is suspicious of the house-painting service. Christina, however, feels entitled to the City's services, where she also works. In the conclusion, the medical services are provided by the hospital in the city to James, but the burning car that made him run away was from the outside world as well. Gunther and Sean are the only two characters who are exposed to international politics, which is expressed in the story as the nationalist, simplistic point I've described above and a more obscured counterpoint, but they remain unaffected, too far away. These various relationships, as well as those between the characters themselves, are meant to touch upon ideas of scale while simultaneously relating politics, religion, morality, and the illusions, assumptions, and identities children and adults alike form somewhere on the Midwestern Plain.

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