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CHAPTER

28 My Favorite Thing Is Monsters: The Socially Engaged Graphic Novel as a Platform for Intersectional Feminism

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Abstract

This chapter places Emil Ferris's graphic novel *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* (2017) in a longer tradition of graphic novels that reflect on and intervene in ongoing social, cultural, and political debates. It argues that the work builds specifically on three foundational works that have been particularly influential in the graphic novel's relatively short history as a literary genre: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The chapter's analysis of *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* places it within a tradition of socially engaged graphic novels, showing how readers' engagement with its narrative's two main historical periods both builds intertextually on its literary forebears and at the same time revises our understanding of them by reading them through the prism of current social and political debates. Both aspects underline the importance of intersectional feminism as a way of thinking, writing, and engaging with history.

Keywords: comic books, graphic novel, society, politics, history, intertextuality, intersectionality

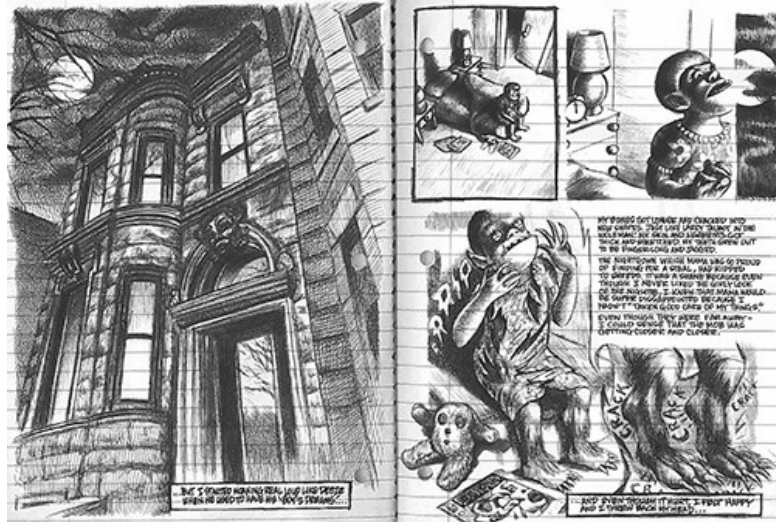
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MY Favorite Thing Is Monsters (2017), the debut graphic novel by Emil Ferris, opens with an elaborate dream sequence. Karen Reyes, the ten-year-old Hispanic protagonist being raised by her single mother and older brother in working-class Chicago in 1968, vividly imagines herself transforming into an enormous werewolf. Both liberating and terrifying, her imaginary change is an experience that is simultaneously empowering and isolating: in a striking series of single- and double-page splash panels, we see her becoming strong enough to slay those who would harm her, while at the same time being pursued through the streets by an angry mob (see Figure 28.1).

Figure 28.1



The introductory dream sequence shows narrator Karen Reyes being liberated by her transformation into a monster.

In a move that typifies both the book’s overall structure and the sensibility of its precocious narrator, the dream sequence cleverly incorporates and explains back to us the etymological roots of the word *monster*: “from the Latin word ‘monstrum’ which means ‘to show’” (Ferris);¹ the word has a fundamental connection to revealing that which is hidden. Just as monsters in late-night horror films and cheap comic books give form to that which is invisible or, more commonly, deliberately repressed, so, too, does Karen’s embrace of the werewolf figure allow her to adopt an identity that makes her visible while also distinguishing her from what she calls the “M.O.B.,” her pithy acronym for the normative crowd that stands for “Mean, Ordinary & Boring” (see Figure 28.2).

Figure 28.2



Karen’s visualization of the mob, or M.O.B.: mean, ordinary, and boring.

Easily one of the most acclaimed graphic novels of 2017 and a universally celebrated literary debut, *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* arrived at a historical moment when a direct critical engagement with civil rights, gender, economic inequality, and the long shadow of twentieth-century fascism could hardly be more relevant. Blithely folding these themes into one another with almost uncanny creative ability, Ferris’s work

p. 491 reads in many ways like a textbook dramatization of the most basic tenets of intersectional ↪ feminism. So much so, in fact, that it might have appeared mechanical had the book not incorporated this critical and theoretical framework into such a gripping, immersive, and meticulously structured narrative.

In this chapter, I will place *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* in a longer tradition of comic books and graphic novels that reflect on and intervene in ongoing social, cultural, and political debates. While the book is radically intertextual, weaving in references to a large variety of cultural works from numerous media, I argue that it builds on three specific foundational works that have been particularly influential in the graphic novel's relatively short history as a literary genre. The first of these intertexts is Art Spiegelman's groundbreaking autobiographical *Maus*, which in many ways established the graphic novel as a literary genre that enjoyed some degree of cultural legitimacy by combining autobiography with an oral history of the Holocaust. The second is Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, which brings together the graphic autobiographical narrative of a queer woman's family history with an intricately structured layering of references to modernist literature and the emphatic foregrounding of artworks' ability to offer personal empowerment and a transformative broadening of personal, cultural, and political horizons. And finally, Marjane Satrapi's two-volume autobiography *Persepolis* interweaves the confessional mode of graphic autobiography with a focus on ethnicity, cultural identity, religion, and social and political transformations.

Without suggesting that these three foundational works are by any means the only influences on Ferris's work as an author, my intertextual analysis of *My Favorite Thing Is ↪ Monsters* places it within a developing tradition of socially engaged production of the graphic novel as a cultural form. This chapter will show how our engagement with its narrative's two main historical periods both builds on its literary forebears and at the same time revises our understanding of them by reading them through the prism of current social and political debates. Both aspects explicitly underline the importance of intersectional feminism as a way of thinking, a way of writing, and a way of engaging with history. But before this more elaborate discussion of the book's powerful combination of intertextual and sociocultural engagement, I will first offer a brief introduction to the graphic novel's subject matter and formal structure.

Form and Structure: The Diary of a Precocious Werewolf-Detective

My Favorite Thing Is Monsters appeared from independent comics publisher Fantagraphics Books in May 2017. In physical form, the book approximates as closely as possible a reproduction of a collection of notebooks written and drawn by the fictional protagonist Karen Reyes. Following this spirit, the book's prefatory material is reduced to an absolute minimum: the first page identifies Emil Ferris as author, alongside the book title and identifier "Book One,"² and the publisher name all written down in the ↪ mock-childish scrawl that represents the narrator's handwriting throughout the book. The only other bibliographical information—still minimal in size and quantity—is relegated to the very last page. All other content between the two covers is designed to replicate the lined pages of a child's spiral-bound notebook, while the spine has been made to resemble a pile of such notebooks, with the title hand-lettered across them as if with a marker pen. All the pages that make up the book proper consistently maintain this design: blue horizontal lines are visible across the background of every single page, and page numbering is absent throughout.

This design aesthetic, applied consistently throughout *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, strengthens the book's immersive recreation of its narrator's point of view. Presenting itself to readers as a collection of private notebooks, the narrative's confessional register is strengthened first by the design choices and second by the absence of consistently employed traditional comic-book panels. Again, as in a sketchbook, pages vary from full-page color drawings without any text whatsoever to long sections of handwritten prose interspersed with occasional sketches. While most of the book does indeed operate within Scott McCloud's

general definition of *sequential art* (9), Ferris takes a more flexible approach to page design than even Will Eisner’s famously “flamboyant” paneling work in *A Contract with God* and its sequels and successors (Witek 154). Nevertheless, Ferris’s consistent use of isolatable images accompanied by free-flowing prose text, as well as her frequent use of conventional text balloons, keeps the book conventionally readable by scanning the pages —roughly— from left to right and top to bottom.

But while the book’s visual design might suggest a free-form collection of notes and drawings, the narrative is, in fact, rigorously and classically structured along recognizable genre lines. First, Karen’s autobiographical notebooks follow the familiar trajectory of the coming-of-age story, or the Bildungsroman (see Bakhtin). This aspect of the text portrays the environment of 1968 Chicago from an easily confused prepubescent girl’s limited point of view. Her autobiographical narrative focuses on her relationship with her working-class mother, her older brother, Deeze, her best (and only) friend, Sandy, and—later in the book—their black compatriot, Franklin. Many of these reflections involve her various recollections of visiting the Art Institute of Chicago, where her older brother has given her an impromptu education in art appreciation, art interpretation, and art history. Expanding and texturing the Bildungsroman through-line, these art-historical digressions (organized around impressive and elaborate ink-and-pencil reproductions of many famous paintings) bring together the seemingly disparate spheres of high art and popular culture, as Karen also reproduces the garish covers of comic books with the same passion and craftsmanship she brings to her renditions of paintings by Seurat, Fuseli, and many others (see Figure 28.3).

Figure 28.3



An interpretive and transformative reproduction of high art: *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli.

The plot’s forward movement is largely centered on Karen’s investigation into the death of an upstairs neighbor in her low-rent tenement building. Melancholy Holocaust survivor Anka Silverman (consistently rendered in impressionistic shades of blue) has been found dead in her bedroom, and while the police have somewhat indifferently ruled it a suicide, Karen’s pulp-fueled imagination prefers to render it a murder, thereby also providing herself with a specific role and generic identity that conspicuously allow her to evade the mystifying and traumatic circumstances of her own family history and social context. For as befits the Bildungsroman as a primary framework, the mystery of Anka’s death is ultimately intertwined with conflicts and tensions that exist within Karen’s domestic life, which must be addressed in order for her to transform her own sense of social, cultural, and sexual identity.

Thus, while drawing herself as a self-created hybrid of werewolf and *film noir* private investigator, Karen's investigation soon leads her to discover a set of audio tapes in which Anka recounts her life story to an unidentified interviewer who had visited her repeatedly six months prior to her death. This additional autobiographical tale makes up the second major plot of the book, as Anka's stoic recollections of growing up as a Jewish girl in a bordello in 1930s Berlin intersect poignantly with Karen's experience of being a working-class queer Latinx in 1968 Chicago. In its narration of emergent Nazism and one survivor's harrowing flight from a genocidal regime, Anka's autobiographical narrative focuses in particular on the community of sex workers among whom she grew up, and how her survival ultimately came about through her involuntary involvement in a covert pedophile network that included powerful figures in the ruling Nazi party.

Paradoxically, the book's visual depiction of Anka's narrative is visually more detailed and conventionally "realistic" than the sequences set in the book's present of 1968. Karen's own narrative, with some notable exceptions, is more cartoonish in design as well as more sketchbook-like in style. The constant asides, flights of fancy, verbal and visual puns, and "unfinished" pictorial style give the Karen narrative an immediacy that is strengthened by the book's overall form, while the illustrations of Anka's tape-recorded recollections—which, by implication, are visualized entirely on the basis of Karen's imagination—adopt an impressionistic realism that gives them both historical and emotional weight (see Figure 28.4).

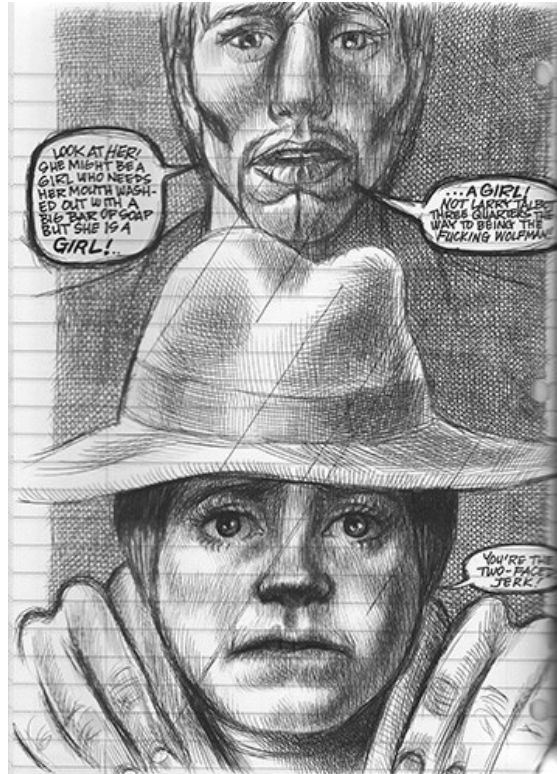
Figure 28.4



Visualizations of the Anka narrative combine expressionism with visual realism.

Thus, in a manner befitting the classical Bildungsroman and the larger structure of the frame narrative, Karen's transparent attempts to evade her own questions about her own sexual, ethnic, and family identity end in a cathartic confrontation with those very things. Two key moments of catharsis and release bring together these diverse strands, first when an irate Deeze forces her to look at herself in the mirror, leading to the only image in the book in which Karen draws herself not as a cartoonish monster-detective but in a strikingly realistic rendition of a ten-year-old girl's face in close-up (see Figure 28.5), and second when Karen comes out to her brother as queer directly on the following page. In this way, the embedded Anka narrative combines with Karen's voyage of self-discovery to reach a point where the latter is able and willing to start merging her real identity with her imagined identity.

Figure 28.5



The only page on which Karen draws herself as a girl rather than as a monster.

But where the Bildungsroman has traditionally represented this kind of transformation and growth as an individual process of maturation, *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* constructs this process as one enmeshed in social and political processes of overlapping, conflicting, and intersecting identities. In both main narratives, the challenges on the road to self-actualization and psychological growth are deeply connected to categories of gender (both narrators are cis-gendered women), ethnicity (Anka is a German woman of Jewish descent; Karen is the child of a Mexican father and a mother who

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describes herself as “one half Irish from Appalachia and part Indian from ... who knows where,” sexual identity (Anka is born into a brothel and forced as a child into becoming a sex worker; Karen is queer in a strongly homophobic domestic and cultural environment); and class (both Anka and Karen come from working-class backgrounds). Kimberlé Crenshaw articulates her concept of “*intersectional feminism*” so as to include

an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of nonwhite women. Neither Black liberationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents. In order to include Black women, both movements must distance themselves from earlier approaches in which experiences are relevant only when they are related to certain clearly identifiable causes (for example, the oppression of Blacks is significant when based on race, of women when based on gender). The praxis of both should be centred on the life chances and life situations of people who should be cared about without regard to the source of their difficulties. (334)

In other words, while feminist theory collapses too easily into a critical framework that essentializes gender identity and in the process too easily excludes people of color, trans and intersex identities, and forms of

patriarchal oppression grounded in social-economic class or migration, intersectional feminism is grounded in radical solidarity interweaving and connecting the many strands of identity within social systems of power. By identifying and connecting these multiple threads explicitly thought the fabric of her book, Ferris fleshes out each of these aspects within a fitting process of creative and transformative rewriting of specific elements drawn from three foundational intertextual forebears in the genre.

Rewriting Histories of Genocide: *Maus* as Foundational Intertext

As I have described, *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* combines a number of literary genres in ways that are both familiar and innovative. While the dominant structural framework remains that of the Bildungsroman, Ferris also incorporates the detective novel, Gothic horror, pulp fiction, the frame-story structure, and oral histories of the Holocaust as key elements within her eclectic and diverse but thematically unified vocabulary. Because she is working not in prose fiction but in the comics medium, her book is constructed in a way that also forges strong intertextual connections to earlier works in the medium that have in many ways defined the critical and scholarly reception of the graphic novel—most specifically as a cultural form that engages directly with questions of history, injustice, and social movements (Sabin 87–95).

p. 498 While one cannot reduce the complex cultural history of the graphic novel as a literary genre (let alone comics as a medium) to a small handful of influential titles, there are nevertheless a few specific works that stand out conspicuously in its deceptively short history, both in terms of their critical, public, and academic reception and in terms of their enduring and obvious influence on other works. And as Ferris's book reflects in many ways on the social and cultural history of the late twentieth century and how to read it, she also builds upon the legacy of the key works that have also brought legitimacy and acclaim to the graphic novel as a literary form. First and most obvious among them is Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning comix work that changed many people's perceptions about the medium's cultural status and its creative, social, and artistic potential (Wright 254–280).

The influence of *Maus* on *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* is writ large throughout the book, embracing on the one hand Spiegelman's formal strategy of estrangement in drawing all of his characters as all but indistinguishable animal characters (mice, cats, dogs, etc.) while on the other hand narrating a nonfictional (auto)biographical tale (Doherty 69). A similar strategy pervades the Karen sections of Ferris's book, in which the visual representation of several key characters is highly cartoonish and obviously "unrealistic." In these parts of the book, there is a noticeable spectrum along which the degree of detailed visual realism of various characters is organized. For instance, Karen's close family members Deeze and Mom are consistently drawn without substantial cartoonish exaggeration, but other central characters, such as Sandy, Franklin, and—most crucially—Karen herself, are all depicted in a much less realistic mode. The Kentucky-born misfit Sandy is drawn as an emaciated, bug-eyed caricature; the large-bodied, scarred, and silently dignified Franklin comes to resemble a black incarnation of Boris Karloff in the role of Frankenstein's monster; and Karen herself, as mentioned above, is drawn as a pint-sized and most acutely unrealistic werewolf-detective hybrid, dressed appropriately but ridiculously in a fedora and a trench coat. Thus, by selectively giving readers access to some characters as realistic and textured while others remain hidden behind cartoonish depictions, the book's character design choices strengthen and underline its central theme of learning self-love and self-acceptance, especially for female characters whose ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, and/or physical appearance has made them social and political outcasts. The aforementioned cathartic moment where Deeze forces Karen to look at herself in the mirror and show readers the face behind the mask seems to pay specific homage to Spiegelman's shattering coup de grâce, confronting readers with a reproduction of a photograph of the actual person whose horrific journey as an Auschwitz survivor has been represented from behind the relative safety of the virtual "mouse mask."

The second way in which *Maus* is a constantly felt presence in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* is in its incorporation of the oral history of a Holocaust survivor's narrative as a frame story within its larger narrative. As in *Maus*, the intergenerational impact of a fascist regime takes center stage, though in this case from one orphaned woman to another rather than from father to son.³ As in *Maus*, tape-recorded monologues documenting one survivor's point of view are edited, visualized, and structured by a narrator who was not a witness to the events being described. Thus, the truly unimaginable and unrepresentable horror of the Holocaust can in both cases only be visually rendered by a creative and imaginative leap undertaken by a younger generation.

p. 499 But while Spiegelman's influence is especially palpable in the Anka sequences of *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, Ferris's book at the same time builds on *Maus* rather than merely replicating it. Especially notable in Ferris's approach are the consequences of centering both parts of her narrative on female protagonists. In the case of Anka's recollected experiences of fascism, anti-Semitic persecution, and genocide, the foregrounding of the fate of sex workers in Nazi Germany illustrates painfully how some lives are regarded as more valuable than others, even in the historical accounting of the victims of genocide. As Anka resignedly intones:

Of course when the history books tell of the groups murdered by the Nazis, they never list the prostitutes, because I'm sure the mention of their deaths is considered a stain on the other victims. The attitude is that the lives of prostitutes are worthless. I think it is self-hate. Our world hates anyone who would accept us and our bodies, and our secret desires without reservation. That is what the ladies taught me ... to welcome disdained things.

The bordello where Anka grew up is presented to the reader as what Michel Foucault would describe as a "heterotopia of deviation," a community of individuals who refuse to abide by the normative frameworks of behavior for their society and therefore must find refuge in shared spaces like this one (25). Anka's narration, together with the artwork, emphasizes how these sex workers, themselves social outcasts, provided warmth and comfort to the many maimed and otherwise damaged men in post-World War I Berlin. Exchanges between the women in the brothel are narrated and depicted with affectionate tenderness, and Anka's relationship with matron Sonja forms a vital sequence in her own coming-of-age story.

At the same time, Anka's memories of life among the sex workers in Berlin is neither sentimental nor one-sided. Even before the Nazis rose to power, it is abundantly clear that these women, inherently vulnerable due to their occupation and its low social status, exist only at the whim of a deeply sexist and patriarchal social and political order. In her portrait of this marginalized community of sex workers, Ferris finds a delicate balance between depicting them both as subjects with agency and as the victims first of societal misogyny, then of fascist genocide, and ultimately also of historiographers who have deemed them less worthy of sympathy as Holocaust victims.

My Favorite Thing Is Monsters therefore both draws on Spiegelman's seminal influence and also transforms his frame story of patriarchal legacy and filial guilt and anxiety into a narrative of intersectional feminism. The heterotopian community of sex workers elegantly illustrates how intersectionality is grounded and defined by conjoined threads of identity and oppression; lines of social class, sexual identity, ethnicity, systems of faith and belief, and legal status are just a few of the various threads of identity that bind this heterotopia of deviation together, while also making it vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and—tragically—genocide. At the same time, the book's feminist perspective is made all the more powerful by the complex ways in which Anka's illustrated memories are interpreted, experienced, and mirrored by Karen's character development.

Fun Home: Queering the Bildungsroman

This brings us to the second work whose influence seems to hover over *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* and an author with whom Ferris is similarly in dialogue. Together with *Maus*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, and perhaps Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is among the most widely read and critically celebrated works in the graphic-novel genre. And as one of the few canonical works of graphic fiction not only to have been authored by a woman but also to be itself an intervention that foregrounds sexual identity, literature, and reflective autobiography, it occupies a similarly unique position within this comics pantheon.

As an intricately structured autobiographical Bildungsroman, *Fun Home* depicts the author's own childhood and adolescence, organizing its larger narrative around the many tensions, mysteries, and similarities between the author's own history as a queer woman and her father's closeted identity as a gay man. Only learning about his sexual identity after a deeply ambiguous road accident abruptly ended his life, Bechdel, too, tells the story of a precocious and highly literate young teenager determined to solve the mystery of a death that may or may not have been self-inflicted. Describing growing up in a highly educated and deeply literary family in rural Pennsylvania and residing in a funeral home of which her father is the director (abbreviated by its ironically inclined inhabitants to the titular "fun home"), Bechdel's book is as much about her own history as it is about her father's, thereby sharing a great deal of thematic engagement with its own remarkable forebear *Maus*.

As a work of graphic autobiography, or "life writing" (Smith and Watson 83–109), *Fun Home* is stubbornly nonchronological in the asynchronous unfolding of its narrative and thematic structure. While it is clearly organized around the intergenerational tension between a father and child who have more in common than first appears—again, like *Maus*—Bechdel's book is as much about the transformative nature of art and literature as it is about the main subject's coming-of-age story. The central role played by books and, more specifically, modernist literature reflects not just on the importance of literature and mythology to Bechdel's personal development but also on how multiplying and overlapping interpretations of these works make both them and their role within her family more meaningful.

Ferris's deeply enmeshed dual narratives are both more linear and straightforward than Bechdel's famously recursive "labyrinthine" approach, which simultaneously refers to and transforms the narrative forms and strategies of modernist literature that are featured, cited, and critiqued throughout the text (Freedman 126). At the same time, Bechdel's austere visual style, with precise and regular panel grids framing a simplified and slightly cartoonish representation of an otherwise stable and realistically detailed environment,⁴ is far removed from Ferris's heterogeneous collection of garish and cluttered notebook pages.

p. 501 But besides the unmistakable generic trappings of the autobiographical Bildungsroman shared in different ways by all three foundational intertexts in this chapter, two specific creative choices connect *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* more deeply to *Fun Home*, as well as to the critical framework of intersectional feminism. First, both books' narrative and thematic trajectories are structured around trajectories of coming out and queer self-discovery, and in both cases, the narrator/protagonist sees aspects of her own development mirrored in the life story of a (real or symbolic) generational predecessor. Second, both books prominently feature an eclectic but hugely meaningful cross-section of artworks from both high and low culture, which are simultaneously reproduced and—literally—rewritten in the context of both books' feminist perspectives.

Starting, then, with Bechdel's prominent theme of sexual self-discovery within the framework of the literary Bildungsroman, her book explores the tension between the author/narrator's own memories of adolescence and the uncanny ways in which her own emerging sexual desires and her father's reflect and invert each other: "Not only were we inverts, we were inversions of each other. While I was trying to

compensate for something unmanly in him, he was attempting to express something feminine through me” (Bechdel 98). *Fun Home*’s central focus is on her fraught relationship with her eccentric and caring but also emotionally distant father, whose sudden death, by either a freak accident or suicide, has left this tension unresolved. The book is therefore in many ways a coming to terms with this filial relationship, made even more complicated by the posthumous revelation that her father was himself a closeted gay man—a disclosure that overshadowed and transformed her own coming out.

Throughout her graphic memoir, Bechdel masterfully maps out the tension between the memoir as a nonfictional literary form on the one hand and the writerly impulse to embellish, interpret, and fictionalize on the basis of any number of cultural and literary tropes on the other. In the case of *Fun Home*, the constant references to classical mythology, fine arts and architecture, and—especially—modernist literature add ambiguous layers of meaning both to Bechdel’s own life writing and, inversely, back to the cited sources themselves. More than anything, the ways in which family dynamics are inextricably intertwined with the interpretation of cultural texts become a central motif throughout the book. Bechdel constantly compares her life, her surroundings, and her family members to literary and pop-cultural figures, from Henry James to *The Addams Family*, to illustrate how this cultural archive can be especially meaningful to those who feel excluded from normative society (Spiers 319–322).

An all but identical strategy is used in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, where Karen’s omnivorous approach to the cultural resources she absorbs constantly infects and adds meaning to the notebooks that document her own life. While obviously dissimilar in visual style as well as in formal genre (fiction versus nonfiction), the two books also have in common that the text on nearly every page is driven by first-person prose rather than the more conventional type of sequential art usually employed in anglophone comic books and graphic novels. In both cases, the narrator’s first-person prose is the driving force for the narrative, while the images serve a predominantly illustrative function. ↵ While clearly essential to both books in any number of ways, there are remarkably few transitions between panels that could be described as linear narrative progression. Or, to put it more simply, while many comic-book narratives can be roughly followed and interpreted by “reading” the sequence of pictures, most panels in these books only make sense in combination with the text captions that accompany them.

Scott McCloud famously introduced a basic taxonomy of types of transition between comics panels. This model makes categorical distinctions, for instance, between what he calls “subject-to-subject” transitions, in which two different images communicate narrative and temporal progression by showing different images that remain “within a scene or idea” (70), and “scene-to-scene” transitions, which move the narrative from one location to another. Quantifying these transitions in different comics genres and national traditions, McCloud concludes that the vast majority of mainstream American comics primarily feature “action-to-action” transition, in which panels picture a single subject engaged in consecutive actions, with far lower (though still substantial) numbers of subject-to-subject and scene-to-scene transitions. *Fun Home*, by contrast, features remarkably few action-to-action or subject-to-subject transitions, as the vast majority of panels visualize or otherwise complement the text captions directly above them.

While both the Karen narrative and the Anka narrative in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* are organized into narrative structures that are certainly far more linear than the emphatically nonchronological *Fun Home*, we do find here as well that the first-person memoir is again accompanied by more of a reliance on scene-to-scene transitions than on either of the more commonly used categories of comics transitions. This is especially the case in the Anka narrative, which favors long stretches of first-person narrative, with only occasional sequences that are depicted in panel transitions that can be categorized as either action-to-action or subject-to-subject. This helps foreground the historical distance that accompanies Anka’s narrative, as well as underlining the idea that the visual content of the panels—including the voice balloons attributed to other characters—are all extrapolated by the narrator/author from Anka’s voice recordings.

But while the Karen narrative begins similarly, with seventeen pages of introductory first-person narration illustrated by a striking sequence of scene-to-scene transitions, her frame story is dominated by the more customary action-to-action and subject-to-subject formations. Even without clearly defined rows of standard comic-book panels, the higher frequency of formal comic-book devices used for linear narrative progression brings a stronger sense of immediacy to the temporal “present” of Karen’s life writing, contrasting it deliberately with the oral history recounted through Anka’s tapes and subsequently dramatized in Karen’s notebooks.

p. 503 This ongoing juxtaposition ultimately strengthens the book’s thematic commitment to creative and sexual self-discovery. The pioneering work done by Bechdel, both in *Fun Home* and in her long-running comic strip series *Dykes to Watch Out For*, uses the comic-book form to create a space for representation of the LGBT community. The syndicated series in particular, which ran from 1983 until 2008, has been widely celebrated as an important cultural expression of the diversity within the American LGBT community, while the influence of *Fun Home* extends to and includes the Tony Award-winning stage adaptation that ran successfully on Broadway in 2015.

Like Bechdel’s representation of her childhood self, Ferris’s semiautobiographical⁵ protagonist/narrator Karen is portrayed as an articulate, creative, and culturally omnivorous protagonist who struggles to find recognizable representation in the heteronormative culture that surrounds her. Just as Bechdel’s younger self finds early indications of her emerging sexual identity in her rejection of the “girlish” costumes her father repeatedly forces her to wear, Karen reaches for the monstrous, socially ostracized figures of pulp fiction to forge a fitting identity for herself. In both instances, the struggle these girls must face poignantly dramatizes the extent to which LGBT adolescents are forced to construct their sense of selfhood from the ground up.

In both cases, the only models that are available to them are considered undesirable or even monstrous by the normative frameworks that surround them. For Bechdel, her recollection of catching a glimpse of a “bulldyke truck driver” while on a road trip with her father, along with his distasteful reaction (“Is that what you want to look like?”; Bechdel 118), provides the narrator with a rare vision of a possible identity that would sustain her through the years (119). In a similar way, we find in Ferris’s book that Karen is also pressured to perform her gender on the basis of normative femininity. She therefore embraces the freaks and monsters of comic books and horror movies as a way of constructing an identity for herself in the absence of LGBT representation or acceptance. Karen, too, finds herself resisting various kinds of social pressure to conform, and she, too, finds meaningful symbolic representation in visual arts and literary figures—though her socioeconomic background clearly makes some forms of culture more open and available to her than others.

In the context of both books’ thematic motif of the struggles faced by LGBT adolescents to find appropriate identities and strategies of self-representation in an overwhelmingly heteronormative culture, the incorporation of other cultural works becomes more than mere citation. Just as Bechdel’s many playful incorporations of literary tropes and characters effectively perform the double gesture of reading and (re)writing, Ferris’s lavish pencil-and-ink reproductions of comic-book covers, movie monsters, and fine artworks constitute a *transformative* act of interpretation and appropriation (see Figure 28.6). For just as Bechdel’s references to characters from novels by Marcel Proust, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Henry James help both her and her reader make dramatic sense of her own family life, they simultaneously cast new meaning on the texts she is quoting from. By the same token, Karen’s reproductions, visual analyses, and thematic interpretations of various narrative and nonnarrative artworks from high and low culture open up new meanings both for the character and for the reader. More than merely contributing to the book’s already-rich intertextual web, these transformative readings, reproductions, and appropriations ultimately underline the book’s basic connection between LGBT representation and the act of interpretation as an intersectional strategy for identity construction (see Figure 28.7).

Figure 28.6



Imaginative reproductions of comic-book and Gothic horror book covers complement the narrative throughout.

Figure 28.7



Franklin's visit to the Art Institute is the best example of queer transformative readings of high art.

***Persepolis*: Race, Gender, and Migration**

The third graphic novel that this chapter draws on as a foundational intertext for *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* is Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Originally published in four French volumes between 2000 and 2003, the widely read English translation first appeared in two volumes in 2003 and 2004 (subtitled, respectively, *The Story of a Childhood* and *The Story of a Return*), followed by a successful film adaptation (codirected by Satrapi) in 2007 and then a single-volume book titled *The Complete Persepolis* (2007). While highly distinctive in structure and visual style, Satrapi's work falls within the same generic framework as both *Maus* and *Fun Home*, using the graphic novel as an expressive form for autobiographical life writing. Like Spiegelman's book, *Persepolis* gives readers a vivid personal history that documents the rise of a totalitarian and genocidal regime. And as with Bechdel's consistent focus on issues of gender and sexual identity, Satrapi similarly uses her personal memoir to underline the specific ways in which the oppression and objectification of women are central to patriarchal authoritarianism. At the same time, *Persepolis* is also structured as a Bildungsroman in which a young woman's coming of age is dramatized as a struggle to find meaningful representation for the construction of identity (Trousedale 241–243).

p. 506 While far more linear in structure than either *Maus*'s frame narrative or *Fun Home*'s recursive and labyrinthine patterning, *Persepolis* still largely follows the same formal ↪ pattern evident in those other works: an ongoing first-person prose narration provides the primary storytelling engine, with the visuals in the accompanying panels illustrating, dramatizing, or otherwise enhancing and complementing the written text. While the linear structure accommodates the use of more action-to-action and subject-to-subject transitions than in *Fun Home*'s overwhelming reliance on scene-to-scene sequencing, the scene-to-scene category remains the dominant one here as well—most notably in the many mini-narratives, historical reflections, religious and mythological fables, and stories recollected by other characters that constantly interrupt and enhance Satrapi's ongoing life writing, and in the early episodes where the narrative relies primarily on the stories being told to a prepubescent narrator and less on the events she recalls from her own life in her teenage years.

But while *Persepolis* clearly has formal, generic, and thematic parallels with both *Maus* and *Fun Home*, its focus on questions of ethnicity, migration, and class offers vital threads to *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*'s tapestry of intersectional feminism. As a foundational intertext within the developing graphic-novel genre, *Persepolis* contributes a visual and narrative vocabulary for representing some of the challenges faced by migrant women of color in a globalizing world and where people of color (including those of Middle Eastern descent) are too often treated like second-class citizens.

In Satrapi's life writing, we follow her transformation from precocious only child of educated and privileged parents in prerevolutionary Tehran, through an adolescence spent mainly in Austrian boarding schools, to her return to her family in a nation transformed by the religious fundamentalism of an autocratic regime. The early episodes in the book paint an especially vivid portrait of public life undergoing enormous transformations as the struggle for hegemony between various groups opens up spaces for new conventions, structures, and social norms (Žižek 10). The many public protests against the corrupt and brutal regime of the Iranian shah are depicted as representing several highly diverse social and political groups, including Satrapi's own upper-middle-class family and their desire for a more liberal, socially progressive, and democratic government. For a short time, at least, such change seems possible, as the crowd becomes not a single voice of a homogeneous *people* but the liberated chorus of a radically diverse *multitude* (see Hardt and Negri).

But this doesn't last long. As the fundamentalist Revolutionary Guard increasingly takes control of the multitudinous energy and violence comes to dominate public gatherings, hopes for a liberal and democratic

transformation quickly dissipate. And while the new regime's ascent to power is narrated in broad strokes by the protagonist, her firsthand account of changes in her own environment powerfully illustrate how the public sphere is affected by radical political change. Even more than under the shah's corrupt and abusive government, the space for dissent, difference, and nonnormative behavior is increasingly policed not only by the police and other government-employed officials but also by opportunistic individuals eager to adapt to the new norms, codes, and practices.

p. 507 This resonates strongly with two key elements in Ferris's book: first, the ways in which children experience political protest and eruptions of tension and conflict in the public sphere and, second, how gender and ethnicity are key categories of marginalization and ↪ oppression in Western heteronormative societies. Starting with the representation of political protest in the public sphere, two specific elements in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* have striking similarities to Satrapi's frightening depiction of Iran's transformation into a fully totalitarian state. Most obviously, the Anka narrative's depiction of how social relations were affected by the Nazis' ascent to power emphasizes how political regimes become palpable at the level of daily life. In particular, the two pages in which Anka describes how "even the decent people" started treating Jews differently out of fear have marked similarities to Satrapi's account of Iran's fundamentalist regime (Satrapi 75). In Ferris's book, Anka says:

A lot of people were in a state of terror. They tried to be happy, have parties, play records, see their friends. But it was as if they were infected by a virus. Like fear was a virus. It passed from person to person. Like from a bite one to the other. The bitten became the biters. Parents were more silent in the presence of their children, fearing that their words against the Nazis might get repeated at school. People put their heads down and shuffled through their lives, hoping to escape the notice of the authorities, but that was nearly impossible.

In both cases, a child's first-person perspective is used to illustrate how fascist and fundamentalist political movements thrive in a climate of fear, operating (though in wholly different cultural and historical contexts) through the deliberate and organized ostracization and othering of vulnerable groups, defined in both situations on the basis of intersections of gender, ethnicity, and religion. Moreover, a second and internal parallel is drawn within *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* by having Karen encounter situations on the streets in 1968 Chicago where combinations of racism, sexism, and homophobia make her vulnerable to the attacks of moblike groups guided by heteronormative frameworks.

Again, a similar thematic parallel is developed within *Persepolis*, as Satrapi's experience of discrimination and social isolation in Austria reminds her repeatedly of the threats she experienced in her native Iran. Clearly, these parallels are not meant to suggest an equivalence between fundamentalist Iran and a liberal democracy such as Austria—just as anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany is not presented as the same thing as abusive mob behavior on the streets of 1960s Chicago. But both books use these parallels to emphasize how vulnerable any open society is to the kind of predatory and proto-fascist group dynamic that these historical cases illustrate. Above all, they show how some groups are much more vulnerable to these political and cultural shifts than others: women, migrants, people of color, members of the LGBT community, sex workers, the working class, and those whose ideological or religious beliefs clash with the emerging order all repeatedly bear the brunt of this violence.

p. 508 Therefore, by drawing together these specific connecting threads from several foundational precursors, Ferris's *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* forcefully establishes intersectional feminism as the only viable way forward. By visualizing and narrating the lived experiences of those whose various identities make them particularly vulnerable to symbolic, social, and/or physical violence, her work offers a model for thinking ↪ through the necessity of social movements that are fundamentally intersectional. Written and published in a historical context where far-right neo-fascist groups are once again on the rise, Ferris's book draws effectively on its foundational graphic-novel forebears to illustrate how these movements thrive on the

forms of hatred, fear, and indifference that impede the multitude's inherent solidarity. The only answer to such threats to our most vulnerable groups and communities is a form of social consciousness that is not only explicitly feminist and anti-racist, but also and above all fully and truly intersectional.

Notes

1. The book has no page numbers. References to specific passages will be clarified in the text as accurately as possible in terms of their general location within the book.
2. A second book, unpublished at the time of this writing, has been announced as the final part of the series. But the first volume stands on its own as a coherent and complete literary work, regardless of what its successor may add.
3. Where *Maus* is strongly focused on the patriarchal continuity (and its constitutive tension) between father and son, fathers in both of Ferris's narratives are conspicuously absent, leading the female narrators to construct alternative frameworks of support and community.
4. In interviews, Bechdel has explained how she went to great lengths to base her line drawings on photographic evidence, just as many key moments and close-ups are pencil-drawn reproductions of photographic, printed, or handwritten materials.
5. While the book is ostensibly a work of fiction, there are strong autobiographical elements throughout *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, including its setting in the author's native city of Chicago in the period of her own childhood years, her multiethnic heritage, details of her artistic development and cultural interests, and so forth. See Tumey.

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