Facing Feelings: Inside the World of Raina Telgemeier

Based on the exhibition at the
Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum


KA-BOOM!

This book is based on the exhibition *Facing Feelings: The Art of Raina Telgemeier*, curated by Anne Drozd, which was on view at The Ohio State University's Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum from May 24, 2023, to November 5, 2023.

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A Note on the Artwork and Images

Unless otherwise indicated, Raina Telgemeier's original artwork was created using blue pencil and ink on Bristol board and scanned from her original drawings. Images from Telgemeier's books are identified by the book title and page number. Most of the artwork included is on loan from the artist for inclusion in the exhibition, with additional works from the collection of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum at The Ohio State University, as well as other loans. Additional credits appear alongside the images.

Photographs from the exhibition on pages vi, viii, 1, 2, 3, 4, 23, and 228 are by John Landry, Top5ive Photography.

Colorists for Raina's Books

The Baby-sitters Club books—*Kristy's Great Idea, The Truth About Stacey, Mary Anne Saves the Day,* and *Claudia and Mean Janine*: Braden Lamb; *Smile*: Stephanie Yue; *Sisters*: Braden Lamb; *Guts*: Braden Lamb; *Drama*: Gurihiru; *Ghosts*: Braden Lamb

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I'D ARGUE THAT EMOTIONS ARE AS TRUE AS FACT.

–RAINA TELGEMEIER

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Raina Telgemeier (L) with curator Anne Drozd

Raina Telgemeier's graphic novels combine an accessible cartoon style with real-life experiences to create powerful stories that connect with readers of all ages and genders. While studying illustration at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, she realized that what she enjoys most is creating narrative sequential stories that "capture a mood and memory on paper." Her love of drawing with ink, keen eye for observation, and years of journaling made for the perfect combination to create memoir comics with universal appeal. She demonstrates a mastery of comics storytelling with impeccable pacing and fluency of line, which make her work appear effortless. Her protagonists are flawed, funny, and instantly relatable. Her books collectively have more than eighteen million copies in print, due in no small part to her charming and approachable storytelling style.

Raina came on the scene in the early 2000s, at a time when North America's relationship with comics was in flux. Superhero comics were increasingly marketed toward adult men, and the manga boom was beginning to hint at untapped audiences. Webcomics were growing in popularity, though sustainable business models were yet to be proven. Michael Chabon's prophetic statement from his keynote at the 2004 Eisner Awards ceremony described just what Scholastic and Raina were about to do:

> *Maybe somebody should try putting out a truly thrilling, honestly observed and remembered, richly imagined, involved and yet narratively straightforward comic book for children, about children.*

At this time, major publishers began to take an interest in the comics medium and were starting graphic novel imprints, including Scholastic's Graphix. Raina's work on the graphic novel adaptation of Ann M. Martin's The Baby-sitters Club, and later her books *Smile*, *Sisters*, *Guts*, *Drama*, and *Ghosts*, helped pave the way for a new era of middle grade long-form comics.

Raina remembers exactly what it felt like to be in middle school and communicates it brilliantly in her comics memoirs and stories. She spent her childhood journaling and drawing to document and process her experiences. The emotional interactions and reactions of the characters in her books are central to the plot. Her 2019 memoir *Guts* documents her struggle with anxiety and emetophobia (an often-debilitating phobia that causes intense anxiety pertaining to vomit), which began at age nine. *Guts* also explores how the support of her family and therapy helped Raina to understand and cope with her anxiety. Raina's work focuses on feelings, emotions, and relationships to drive the plot forward.

Facing Feelings explores how graphic novelist Raina Telgemeier uses an honest vulnerability in her work that emotionally resonates with readers through shared human experiences and relatable characters.

—ANNE DROZD


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Foreword

Like all great cartoonists, Raina Telgemeier is a skilled and gifted storyteller. I'm so grateful that she chose the medium of comics to tell her stories. Raina draws from her own experiences growing up, which are unique to her but at the same time universally relatable. There's something magical about the way she combines words and pictures to connect with her readers, young and old.

It's hard to believe that the explosion of book-length comics (or graphic novels) written specifically for children is a relatively recent phenomenon. When I was growing up in the 1970s and Raina was growing up in the 1980s, there were no graphic novels for kids. Instead, we had serial comic books starring superheroes, teenagers, and cartoon characters. We had *Mad* magazine. And we had newspaper comic strips (my favorite) conveniently delivered right to our house every day.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, confirming the appeal of autobiographical comics to a wide audience. But Raina's breakout book, *Smile*, released in 2010, was the catalyst for bringing together these

various threads to launch a new genre of graphic novels based on real experiences aimed at middle grade readers. Since then, one of the fastest-growing areas of publishing is graphic novels for kids!

Smile was not an immediate bestseller but slowly grew in popularity as young readers, encouraged by librarians, teachers, and parents, discovered how special, accessible, and appealing Raina's stories are. Most importantly, the ultimate success of her work has inspired cartoonists from all different backgrounds to tell their personal stories through the medium of comics. Today, young readers can choose from a vast array of graphic novels covering almost every literary genre. In recognition of this extraordinary contribution, Raina was named the Comics Industry Person of the Decade in 2020 by the influential news site Comics Beat. Here was her response:

> *What an honor. I accept this on behalf of every creator who toils away quietly, hoping to reach people with their art. For all the kids reading their first comics, falling in love with the medium, and who might be inspired to*

pick up a pencil or stylus themselves. And with gratitude for all the booksellers, librarians, teachers, journalists, and parents who have advocated for comics for the past decade. You've all made a difference, and I'm overjoyed to have you along on this journey!

The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum was honored to host the first major retrospective—held from May 24, 2023, to November 5, 2023—of Raina's work, offering her fans a glimpse into her life and career as an artist. Raina and curator Anne Drozd put together an extensive display that featured Raina's original art from throughout her life, reaching back as far as her childhood drawings, minicomics, and webcomics, up through her most recent memoir, *Guts*.

The exhibit illuminated her writing and drawing process and helped us appreciate how Raina uses the unique language of comics to convey her stories and depict the range of emotions that her characters experience. Drawing on the collections of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, the exhibit also provided visitors an opportunity to see examples of original artwork by the cartoonists who inspired Raina, such as Keiji Nakazawa, Lynn Johnston, Bill Watterson, Lynda Barry, Robb Armstrong, and Jeff Smith.

I want to end with a heartfelt thank-you to Raina, who was so lovely to work with! She generously gave her time, energy, and insight to make this exhibit extra special. We were delighted to partner with her on this exhibit, and are especially grateful to her for her generosity in sharing the proceeds of this book to support our work!

—JENNY E. ROBB,
HEAD CURATOR OF COMICS AND CARTOON ART,
THE BILLY IRELAND CARTOON LIBRARY & MUSEUM

Introduction

EMOTION AS ACTION: RAINA TELGEMEIER AND THE KIDS' COMICS REVOLUTION

Smile, back cover artwork

A GENRE IS REBORN

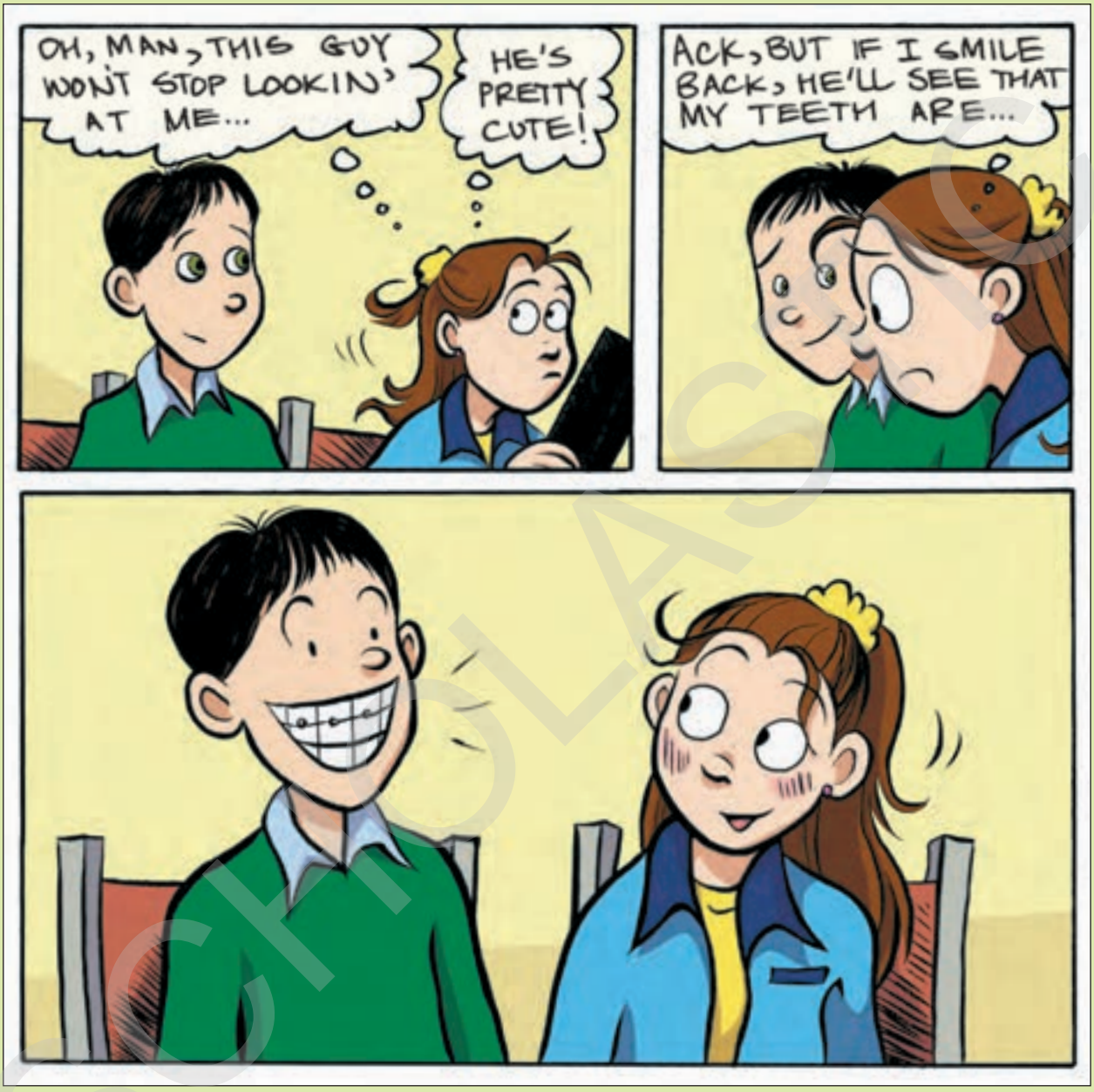
Genres evolve slowly. When a cartoonist wants to tell a new kind of story, they tend to use the same storytelling tools that served the stories they were already making. The styles, tropes, and trappings we associate with popular new genres often take decades to accumulate, while the relics of their predecessors take decades to fall away.

But once in a while, a cartoonist can understand the challenges of a genre so quickly and intuitively that they practically *become* that genre for a generation of readers. So it was with Jack Kirby and the American superhero comics of the so-called Silver Age (roughly 1956 to 1970), and so it is with Raina Telgemeier and the kids' comics explosion of today.

The Telgemeier style is instantly recognizable for its clean, open lines; playful interactions; and down-to-earth locales. But under the surface, the real revolution is taking place in the structuring of stories: the subtle art of deciding which moments, which subjects, and which emotions are worth *rendering* in that style—decisions that Telgemeier made wisely from the start.

EMOTION AS ACTION

Walk into your local comic store, or the comics section of a bookstore, and start opening each book; within seconds you'll get the gist of their visual styles, and the similarities and differences that comprise their respective genres. But what you *won't* see is all the panels the artists didn't draw, all the panels left out. Yet,



Smile, page 60

in comics, as in film, the decision to include or eliminate moments is at the heart of the art form.

In the superhero comic books I read in my early teens, the few emotions on display were expressed mostly in dialogue and in a limited selection of broad facial expressions. The pacing of those stories was anchored not in the characters' emotional journeys but in their physical actions. New actions called for new panels, while emotions were shoehorned into as little space as possible to make room for the physical conflict of bodies in motion. If two or three emotions could be fit into a single word balloon, all the better.

But in a Telgemeier comic, emotion *is* action; if a character goes from surprise to disappointment to amusement, each emotion is worth a beat of its own. Wondering who feels what, and why, are top of mind for Raina's millions of young readers as they navigate stories from panel to panel. Connecting the dots from one emotional state to the next is how the shape of those stories is revealed.

Likewise, when an emotion persists *unchanged* over days or weeks, that, too, is shown, like in the remarkable sequence on the next page, portraying young Raina's continual worries about puberty and its possible connections to her ongoing panic attacks and nausea.

Notice how the continuous, singular contours of the figure capture the continuous nature of her anxiety, while the four horizontal subdivisions indicate the passing hours and/or days. Chronicling change—or the *lack* of it—is what sequential art is best at, and Telgemeier is the best there is at chronicling the small changes that loom large in the lives of her young characters.

The emotional journeys taken by those characters (including the character of Raina herself) pass through challenging territories filled with injury, anxiety, and conflict. But Telgemeier steers her readers safely through it all, never letting moments of trauma overwhelm the meta messages of warmth and affirmation that anchor her work. When characters feel most anxious or at risk, they tend to express it in progressively broader—even silly—facial expressions, blunting the full impact. Faces are also softened to a degree with upturned eyebrows, a marker of kindness and good humor, a signature visual reminder to readers that there are friends everywhere in Raina's pages.

MEETING THE MOMENT

Middle grade comics were a perfect match for the kind of writing and art that came naturally to Telgemeier. Creative kids are often urged by their teachers to "write what you know," but Raina didn't need such advice. From age ten, she kept a daily diary (in part influenced by Ann M. Martin's The Baby-sitters Club books), and from age eleven

Lynda Barry, "Stress" rough sketch for *Newsweek*, 1999. Ink on paper. Gift of Lynda Barry, Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum.

Guts, page 120

onward, it was an *illustrated* diary. Real life was a constant source of inspiration, and both words and pictures were her natural outlet.

Slice-of-life newspaper strips like *For Better or for Worse* by Lynn Johnston, which specialized in small emotional moments, were some of young Raina's first experiences as a comics reader. When she began branching out in terms of reading material, the San Francisco native discovered underground and independent cartoonists like Lynda Barry, who also paid attention to life's small moments.

When Telgemeier enrolled at New York's famed School of Visual Arts, several turn-of-the-century trends in comics culture were converging just in time to welcome her to the industry and set the stage for the big bang of new readers that would change the course of North American comics forever.

First, an early wave of US manga readers, many of them girls, was beginning to upend the boys' club culture of American comics, a trend that continues to this day.

Second, the internet was bringing cartoonists together to share their work as they never had before, creating a worldwide community of support.

Third, the idea of the "graphic novel" was finally catching on—and catching the eye of New York publishers.

And fourth, as digital artwork proliferated, an awareness of the value of hand-drawn, personal illustrations was also on the rise: a movement of hand-drawn, self-published minicomics and zines began to spread throughout the alternative comics scene.

THE HAND OF THE CARTOONIST

One of comics' signature strengths is its perceived accessibility for would-be cartoonists. It's empowering for readers with a creative streak of their own to see evidence in their favorite artist's work that it was actually made by a human being. Telgemeier's artwork has always been loose and never too "perfect." For all the careful thought and planning that goes into each page, there's always plenty of jazzy improvisation and little wobbly bits that empower young readers to imagine their own hands drawing stories of their own.

Raina Telgemeier has arguably increased the readership of comics in North America by at least a million. If only one in a thousand of those readers considers a career in comics, the long-term knock-on effects of her work could be incalculable. Thanks to her accessible, moving, and innovative works, a whole new generation will learn that telling stories of their own is as close as the nearest pen or pencil. Even now, a future master of the form, ready to spark their own revolution, may be reaching for that drawing tool for the very first time.

And they'll have Raina Telgemeier to thank for it.

—SCOTT McCLOUD

PART ONE

A Conversation with Raina

ANNE DROZD **Raina, I've enjoyed working with you on the exhibition *Facing Feelings: The Art of Raina Telgemeier*, and I'm happy to have this opportunity to ask you some questions about your life, career, and comics. Most of the stories you tell are about "childhood you." What were you like as a child?**

RAINA TELGEMEIER I was an artist! I spent a lot of my time drawing. Because my parents encouraged me; they gave me markers, paper, and pens, and sent me to art classes. I had an environment where I could be creative and thoughtful, and I don't think I was ever very bored.

I lived in a city, and outside my door was a shared rental community backyard. It was about a dozen families with apartments facing a big common lawn, and then courtyards on every block that we could play in. But I *wished* for a forest in my backyard, with big trees and a stream and paths to wander down. I dreamed about a rural lifestyle, and that kind of set the tone for my being wistful and a bit of a daydreamer. I liked looking at pictures of faraway places, and many of my childhood drawings reflect that: drawings of me in the woods, drawings of little animals who live in the woods! (laughter)

I loved watching cartoons on television. Cartoons were not on 24/7 the way they are now. I would get up very early on Saturday mornings and race downstairs—I think they started at six a.m., and I was always ready. There were also weekday afternoon cartoons on TV, so every day after school, before I did my homework, I ate a snack and watched cartoons!

ANNE **You mentioned that your family was very supportive. Your parents were taking you to art classes and supplying you with art tools. Was anyone else in your family also artistically creative and into drawing? Was there someone in your family who influenced and inspired you? Or was it an interest that grew from your experience with drawing, and you just realized you liked it?**

RAINA Art was innately there inside of me. I liked the feeling of picking up a crayon and putting it on paper. My mom has always been artistic, too. She dabbled a lot in different mediums—calligraphy, illustrated poetry, and colored pencil drawings, all of which she put on the walls in our house.

She was also a musician! She played guitar and sang, and she would come into my elementary school classes and teach an hour or two of songs—I was always very embarrassed by that. I'd be like, "This is so weird," but I remember the goodwill of it and the sort of unspoken lesson that art is important, that we were allowed to have art and music as part of our lives.

My dad is a writer and an editor. He taught creative writing for many years at San Francisco State University. The campus was very close to where I grew up, so SF State kind of acted as my second backyard. My school bus stop was on campus, so after school, my dad would pick me up, and we'd go to the student union to get a soda, or climb around on the funky architecture, or go to the bookstore. We spent a *lot* of time at the student bookstore. Some of my first comic strip collections came from that store. And he was really encouraging! His attitude was, "Yes, you can always have a book!" (laughter)

My dad read comics as a child and then became interested in underground comix in the 1960s and '70s. Since we lived in San Francisco, he was pretty tuned in to the underground comix scene here. I think I benefited from that, and also just from having parents who were big readers and had massive bookshelves that I could peruse any time I liked.

ANNE **It's wonderful that you had that support. That your parents demonstrated curiosity and an interest in learning, which really helped to shape you.**

RAINA Absolutely.

ANNE **Can you recall the first time you responded to a work of art?**

RAINA I wish it was something more sophisticated, but the truth is: My earliest memories were shaped by watching cartoons. I was obsessed with *The Smurfs* at four or five years old. It's very repetitive: The characters live in their little village and have ongoing adventures, the same bad guy chases them, they sing their Smurf song. It drove my parents nuts. I know neither of them enjoyed having this show blaring every Saturday morning, but I loved it, and I'm glad they didn't make me turn it off.

The early '80s were a golden era for children's licensing and marketing. Television shows, toys, greeting cards, storybooks: They were all parts of a whole. Strawberry Shortcake dolls, for example, the toys, and then the cartoon show, calendars, drinking glasses, and novelty items—I had to have it all. I drew pictures of Strawberry Shortcake. I wore clothing with Strawberry Shortcake on it.

That combination of mediums was really immersive, and I imagine most people of my generation can relate. (The same thing was happening with My Little Pony, He-Man, and the Transformers . . .) We reminisce about how much we loved these characters and storylines, and our parents are like, "Oh, it was just marketing drivel. It was designed to sell things." As a grown-up, I can understand that a little bit better, but I can also still put myself into the mindset of being a kid and really loving the spirit of it, and the actual artistry of it—those were genuinely cute characters! They were designed by somebody (an artist!) to be cute and appealing, and they *were*! (laughter) Strawberry Shortcake dolls had hair that smelled like different fruits, so we were experiencing this world through visuals, sound, touch, and even smell. It really tapped into the different senses.

ANNE Right, in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan instituted the deregulation of advertising, which led to a huge increase in cartoons with licensed characters. The shows were really advertising the toys to the kids who were watching, but as kids of the 1980s, there's a deep connection that we have to those characters and the stories.

RAINA I also responded very deeply to picture book illustrations. We had a lot of picture books in my house. Some of the earliest ones I remember are *Corduroy, The Little Engine That Could, Harold and the Purple Crayon,* and *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*. I loved the artist Gyo Fujikawa, who did these super cute books about little kids, sometimes playing in nature, sometimes in homes or school. They were really beautifully drawn, stoked my imagination, and inspired me to draw similar characters.

Another thing that really sticks out in my memories is music. Like, I remember hearing songs and really latching on to certain voices. I became aware of Michael Jackson when I was five or six, around the time that the album *Thriller* came out. The songs stopped me in my tracks every time I heard them. My parents bought me a copy of the record for Christmas—my first pop record! (I also owned several Strawberry Shortcake and *Sesame Street* records, and of course, a well-worn copy of *Free to Be . . . You and Me*, 1970s baby that I was). *Thriller* has a centerfold of Michael Jackson lying on the floor in soft focus with a tiger, and I remember feeling very embarrassed by it, like, "Ooh, I'm six, this is not something I should be looking at!" But record album art was interesting to me. My parents' record collection was from the '60s and '70s, so they had some really groovy, trippy stuff, and I stared at the art for hours. Maybe what I'm getting at here is that I was really taking in sound, shape, motion, color, aroma, and stories, all at once.

ANNE There's also this idea that there's "fine" art in a museum, and then everything else, like pop culture and commercial art that we're surrounded by every day, and that, somehow, we shouldn't have as much of an emotional or spiritual connection with that. But I don't think that's the case. And you're saying that all these things you were surrounded by daily had a significant impact on you. And we now have museums of pop culture, comics, and cartoon art that are showing work coming from these commercial art forms as well. But there's still work to be done on removing this idea that there is a

separation of art. To look at things like a cartoon show that's marketing toys to children, but also teaching life lessons and making you aware of how to interact in the world. They all show the beauty of what it is to be human.

RAINA Maybe that's why I became a creator who makes work for young people. I don't know. I valued kids' media so much as a child, and never really left it behind. I do remember being about eight and having a new baby in the family. With my younger sister, too, a lot of what was in my house was for younger kids. We still had those same storybooks from my own baby days lying around. I still thought *Sesame Street* was one of the greatest things in the universe. I remember being in third grade, and we had to do some sort of oral report where we answered the question, "What's your favorite TV show?"

And I said, "Well, I love *Sesame Street*, and I love *Inspector Gadget*. Those are my two favorite TV shows," and my classmates just trashed me! They were like, "You're such a baby, you should grow up and get over that baby stuff," and I was like, "What *should* I watch?"

And somebody said, "You should watch *The Golden Girls*," which I think is hilarious, because it wasn't even about cool teens or something—it's about old ladies. (laughter)

ANNE It certainly wasn't aimed at that third-grade demographic, either.

RAINA (laughter) No! But I was so impressionable, and felt so out of the loop, that I started watching *The Golden Girls* . . . and of course, *The Golden Girls* is amazing. It doesn't matter that they're old ladies. They're wonderful people, and they're hilarious, and their character interaction was genius. So it was a negative moment, but it had a positive outcome and widened my scope a bit. (But let it be known: *Sesame Street* is still really awesome!)

ANNE And your classmates probably thought the same thing about *Sesame Street* and *Inspector Gadget*. Still, there's an idea when you are immersed in a social group that you need to seem cool.

RAINA Yeah.

ANNE And also, thinking back to a lot of the things you're talking about, there were fewer television stations back then. There was a shared experience of everyone watching the same program at the same time and then talking about it the next day. Kids today, though, aren't necessarily consuming the same things at the same time as their friends. So, what would that same conversation be in a classroom today?

RAINA There's still plenty of entertainment that reaches critical mass with kids today. There's still a *massive* contingent of Pokémon fans, kids all play certain video games, and there will be a *lot* of kids in twenty years who talk about *Bluey* as the thing they fondly remember. What's cool about kids' media now is that, while some of it is made for the lowest common denominator, there's a lot being crafted by people who care, who really value kids' minds. (They also know that grown-ups are going to be watching the shows alongside kids, so there's a standard of quality!)

Kids now have access to the full Studio Ghibli catalog starting the day they're born. I didn't see a Studio Ghibli movie until I was in my midtwenties because they were not being distributed here in the States yet. When I finally did, it felt like opening a door that's been in your house your whole life, but you've never seen the inside of: "Oh, look in here. Here it is, an essential thing that I've been looking for all this time."

I don't really know how to describe it, except to say that those movies just felt so integral the moment I opened that door. I envy children now who get to watch *My Neighbor Totoro* before they even know how to speak, or they get to watch *Ponyo* when they're her [the main character's] age. They're so lucky.

ANNE I want to talk a little bit about what you were drawing when you were in grade school. I know that you were an illustrator for your high school newspaper. What kind of illustrations did you do? Any comic strips?

RAINA Most of what I did for the school newspaper were really topical opinion pieces, or just kind of "day in the life" of students. Like, "Hey, we've got a piece about how stressed out students are during finals. Can you draw something for that?" So I'd do an illustration of a girl sitting in a classroom, sweat beads coming out of her head and papers all over her desk, looking very nervous and worried. They weren't so much comic strips as single illustrations for articles. Most of them were in-jokes, stuff that wouldn't make sense to anyone outside the bubble of my specific high school. We were a college prep school, an academic magnet, and a lot of the focus was getting into a good college. We really focused on the AP tracks, GPAs were extremely important, and everybody was aiming for Ivy Leagues or the University of California system.

I had no expectations of going to a prestigious college; I wanted to go to art school. So I was just taking classes that seemed interesting. I joined choir and theater, I was in student government. I wasn't a very good student in high school, but I flourished in those smaller creative spaces. I didn't actually join the school paper until my senior year. It was a late-in-the-game thing. I think if I had joined earlier, I might have done some sort of regular feature or a comic strip, but that did not happen.

ANNE When you joined the journalism class, was it due to your interest in illustration, or did you also join to write?

RAINA It was just illustration. I had a lot of friends who said it was a really fun class. And they were right; I loved it. The frantic environment, how there was always something happening, and people being under deadlines to make things together. It was really collaborative, and things could change at any minute. There were a lot of late nights. It's where I saw high school students drinking coffee for the first time! (laughter) People would stay after hours and order dinner. It was a nutty but really focused and driven space where my whole job was to draw pictures. And I discovered that the people there cared about stuff beyond the classroom in a way that I hadn't necessarily seen before in high school.

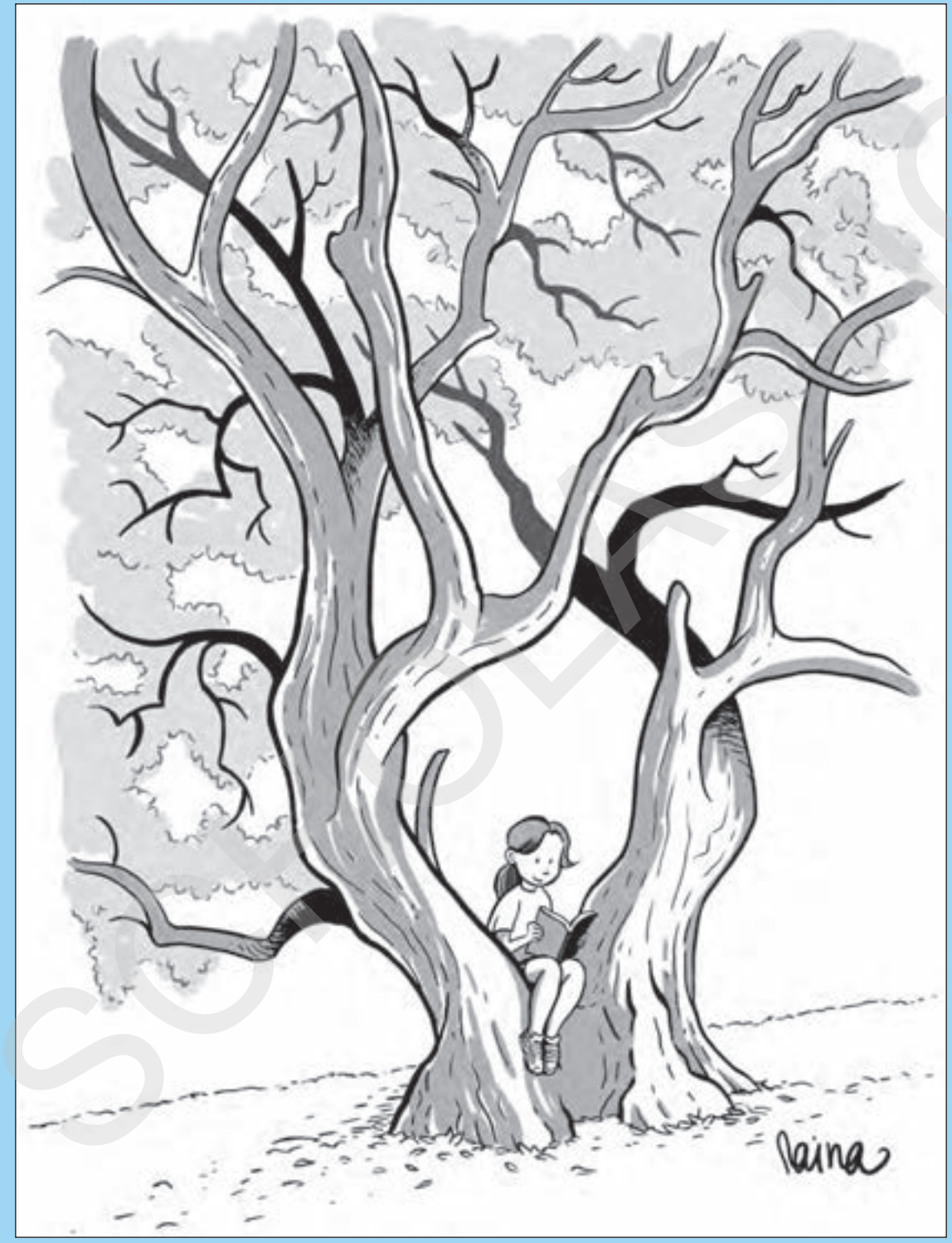
One of my favorite books at the time was a graphic novel by Keiji Nakazawa called *Barefoot Gen*, which is a lightly fictionalized eyewitness account of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. I read the book for the first time when I was nine and ten and immediately began thrusting it into my friends' hands, saying, "You have to read this book." Most of the time, kids were like, "Okay, whatever, it's a comic book, I don't read comics," or "It's about war. That's not very interesting!"

But in journalism class in high school, I was still toting *Barefoot Gen* around, and suddenly my classmates responded with, "Wait! That sounds really interesting. Can I read that book? Can I borrow it from you?" My copy made its way around my class (that's when the front cover fell off), and everyone wanted to talk about it. And then somebody was like, "Oh, my grandma's from Japan! Let's see if she has any memories of that time." It started a conversation!

I ended up collaborating on a big back-page piece for the school newspaper with a couple of friends about autobio comics and why they're so impactful. The first collected volume of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman had just come out, so we talked about *Maus*; we talked about *Barefoot Gen*. I did the illustrations, and my friends did the reporting, writing, and editing. This was before the internet took off. We didn't have blogs. We didn't have social media. We didn't have as many platforms as people do now to talk about things we found important, things that mattered. The newspaper gave us a platform, a loudspeaker.

ANNE That's what newspapers were back then, right?

RAINA Yeah. I wish I could tell you that there was some



Untitled, 2019. Created digitally in Procreate.

sort of feedback from the piece, but I don't remember the response to it.

ANNE Just knowing that you were advocating for comics back in the high school newspaper is a testament to how you've been doing it your entire life.

RAINA I read *Barefoot Gen* in 1987, right after the English-language edition first came out. My dad found out about it (in *Whole Earth Catalog*, for those who want to know . . .), bought a copy, read it, and then gave it to me to read. And just a few years later, the Gulf War broke out. Do you remember that?

ANNE Yes. It was everywhere in the news, and I remember fearing the reality of war for the first time. Before that, I had only seen it in history books.

RAINA The war was broadcast on television. There were these green missiles striking in the night and explosions that you could see in the distance—it looked like a video game, it was so surreal. And after reading *Barefoot Gen* I was just like, "How could anybody do this? How could anybody know the atrocities of war and still go into it willingly?" My brain, at age eleven, twelve, thirteen, just could not comprehend. And it wasn't just me. A lot of my classmates were like, "No war in Iraq," "Stop the fighting," and "Peace." Peace symbols became very popular. I did this little campaign at school where I put up posters that said "Peace in the Middle East" and "Give Peace a Chance" and . . . this is so embarrassing, but they all had Bart Simpson illustrations on them because *The Simpsons* was popular at the time . . .

ANNE *The Simpsons* was huge at that time.

RAINA So it was like, Bart Simpson down on his knees, throwing his clasped hands in the air, and saying, "Give peace a chance, man!" I truly believed this was the way forward, that putting these hand-drawn flyers up in my middle school was going to stop the war. Sadly, my posters didn't stop that war (laughter), but I was a changed person. It's funny how one book can really impact and change your life.

When I went to college at the School of Visual Arts, I did a comic called "Beginnings" for one of my classes. The assignment was to "write a comic about the first comic you ever read." *Barefoot Gen* is not the first comic I ever read, that was probably *Calvin and Hobbes*, but it was the first comic that really struck me on such a deep level. So I wrote and drew this short three-page story for the class and brought it in, and we put our pieces up on the wall for critique. (I should also maybe note that I was one of only two girls in my class. It was a class of twentysomething young men, and then me and Jess Fink, who is also an excellent cartoonist.)

Photo of young Raina reading *Barefoot Gen*, 1987

ANNE What years did you attend the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City?

RAINA I started in '99 and graduated in 2002. I transferred in—I went to City College of San Francisco for a few years first. I was *not* a cartooning major, I was an illustration major. But the two majors share a department chair and a lot of the same core classes, and so I was kind of studying both. I took cartooning for all my electives. It was where I felt like, "This is not homework, this is pure pleasure."

ANNE At the time, most of the students were male in the comics program at SVA?

RAINA At the time, yeah, it was. It was significantly male.

Anyway, I put my pages of "Beginnings" up on the wall in class. My teacher, Joey Cavalieri (an editor at DC Comics by day and a cartooning teacher in the evening), I remember his reaction. It was basically: "Whoa." I then self-published that story in a minicomic, *Take-Out #2,* and a very similar response was had by my readers. I had never really self-published before. I didn't have a website or any way of sharing my work with people outside of a classroom environment, or outside of just friends or family.

Getting minicomics into readers' hands was a manyfold process. People could order them from me through the mail, and my local comic store in New York City was willing to sell them. They had a great minicomics section! That, and I started going to comic conventions. So, suddenly, people were actually reading my work, and that same short story, "Beginnings," got incredible feedback. I was getting actual fan letters from people and being invited to pitch to anthologies. It's the story that eventually got me on the radar of the Graphix team at Scholastic.

This little story that I wrote about *Barefoot Gen*, about reading a book as a child, was taking me places and starting conversations. Looking back at middle school Raina taping peace posters up in the hallway, I remember a real sense of urgency, that I needed to make my voice heard then and there. I wanted to see the impact right away. But, I mean, it's still happening. Artwork can start conversations, and then they can keep going.

ANNE And was the comics shop that was selling minicomics focusing on comics that were very local to New York only? What was the range of the minicomics that were available there?

RAINA The store was Jim Hanley's Universe (JHU). It was in Midtown Manhattan, a classic all-purpose comic book store. They had weekly floppies and lots of superhero stuff. They sold toys and collectibles. They had a pretty good selection of indie stuff and trade paperbacks, collected editions of comic strips, and some manga. Manga was not that popular yet, the way that it became just a few years later.

Lots of New York cartoonists I was getting to know were self-publishing. There were also cartoonists from Philly and San Francisco and Chicago. I think there was kind of a cross-pollination between the bigger cities and their indie comics communities. The folks who worked at JHU were very welcoming and said, "Oh, just bring in a copy of your minicomic and we'll take a look. Oh, hey, we like it! We'll take five copies!" And if they sold any, they kept half the profits and gave you half. Business!!

ANNE It was also a way to get your work seen by the people who were shaping comics publishing coming down the road.

RAINA And the funny thing is that in the beginning, I was selling my minicomics for a quarter apiece. They were hand-printed and folded, they were twelve pages long, but I had this idea that they weren't valuable, that they weren't worth asking for even a dollar, like that was too much. *Take-Out* was just little short stories that I wrote for class, and mostly one- and two-page stories. So it wasn't a substantial read; it wasn't like you were going to spend an hour, or a day, absorbed in a minicomic. I calculated that my collected editions of *Calvin and Hobbes* cost $10 each,

and they were 125 pages long, so for twelve pages there's no way I could have charged more than a few cents.

ANNE I love the comparison—how you calculated the cost of your minicomics based on *Calvin and Hobbes* as the standard!

RAINA And so, I sold my minis for a quarter in the beginning. At the time, people still did generally have change in their pockets!

ANNE Back then, a call on a pay phone was a quarter, so everybody carried an emergency quarter, right?

RAINA Right, it's funny, I remember when I raised my price to fifty cents, people were like, "Good, don't devalue yourself." And eventually, I raised my price to a whole dollar per mini! Selling my minis in comic stores meant I was getting checks cut for, like, two dollars and fifty cents in a pay cycle. Tiny commerce! But this wasn't my primary work at the time. I was finishing up art school, and then I got a job at a book publisher. I was just making comics for fun after hours. It was really satisfying. I didn't do it because I was trying to make money, I was doing it because I wanted to . . . just make stuff. I had a lot of ideas in my head that I wanted to get out. My email address was on the back of each minicomic, and readers would sometimes drop me a line and say, "Hey, I want to order the rest of your books. Can you send them to me in the mail?" Tiny commerce! Maybe that's (laughter) the phrase I'm gonna keep coming back to here.

It was thrilling at the time, and I became friendly with a lot of the folks who read my work on a regular basis and were anticipating what was coming next. It took a long time for that community of readers to build, but it started somewhere, as they say.

ANNE Why did you decide to attend school in New York? I'm curious if, in San Francisco, you had a community of friends who were also creating comics that were supportive of your work, or is that something that you found in New York?

RAINA I like to say that I became obsessed with New York as a child because of *Sesame Street*. I knew that's where it took place, and I wanted to go there someday. My family took a trip when I was eleven to visit an aunt in Connecticut, and we went to New York City for one day. We got to walk down Forty-Second Street. We took the Circle Line cruise around Manhattan. All I remember is how awesome it was. We ate in a diner that had really good soup, and my mom's like, "Don't you remember the guy who got stabbed on the street when we were there? And there were ambulances and puddles of blood?" I don't remember any of that!

ANNE You only remembered the positive!

RAINA I remember how excited I was just to be there. It put a seed in my head that someday I wanted to live in New York. Then, in high school, I knew I wanted to make comics. I didn't really know what shape they were going to take—I wasn't cut out for a daily newspaper strip, because punch lines are hard. I didn't read superheroes, so I didn't want to make superhero comics. But I had been making short story comics and journal comics for most of my life.

We had an art school here in San Francisco, the Academy of Art University, but I wanted to go somewhere else for college . . . I just hadn't found the school yet.

I went to junior college in San Francisco for a few years and took basic requirements: reading and math, science, credits I could transfer to wherever I ended up next. I also signed up for art classes, including my first figure-drawing classes. Those were my favorite, just drawing from a model—what a joy to have somebody pose for you, to really look at bodies and see how they move. The models that we got in San Francisco were so diverse. They were every color, every age, and every size. These were not stereotypically beautiful people necessarily, but they were all interesting people, which *is* beautiful. And there

I was at the age of nineteen, and it was really validating for me to just *see* people. To not feel so self-conscious about myself, because here are people of every stripe, and they're wonderful.

I finally did find the school that I wanted to go to. It was the early days of the internet search engines. I searched for "schools that teach comics." I knew I was an artist, but I wanted to be a cartoonist. I found the School of Visual Arts through a search, and, wouldn't you know it, it was in New York City. So, I was like, okay, I should check this school out and see what it's all about. I went there for one of their open houses. It was my first trip back to New York since I had been there as a starry-eyed kid, and it was my first time traveling alone. I think I was twenty at the time.

I stayed in youth hostels. I spent half a day at The Met. I went to see *Rent* on Broadway. I visited the top of the World Trade Center. And I went on this school tour. Part of my goal was to determine whether I should choose illustration or cartooning as my major, so I met with the department head, showed him my portfolio, and asked him which one I should pick.

Unfortunately, this guy was kinda biased. He was an old-school illustration dude. He didn't even give it that much thought, he just said, "You should do illustration," and I was like, "Okay." I did not question him! And then a year later, after I moved to New York and started classes, I was like, "What am I doing? I should really be making comics."

But at that point, I figured that the illustration foundational classes would be useful. I did a lot of painting, and I did a lot of in-depth illustration assignments, kind of like what I did in journalism class, where I was given a story to illustrate with just one or two images. I liked doing that, but I liked it even more when I could do multiple images. And so sequential work started to sneak into everything: Where an assignment was for one illustration, I'd ask my instructors, "Can I do, like, five instead? Can I draw a comic to tell this story?"

An interesting side note is that I did a lot of figure drawing at SVA, too, but I found that the models in New York were actually *models*; like, they were all beautiful, dancers, long and lean and fit and young. They were gorgeous and drawing them was a lot of fun, a lot of them were very acrobatic! They could hold complex poses for long periods of time. But I found that the work itself was less interesting. There was a piece of my brain that wasn't engaged in the same way it had been when I was drawing plus-sized and elderly models.

You had asked if I had an arts community in San Francisco. I did, and it was mostly theater kids and musicians. I fell in with the theater kids when I was in high school, so that was a big part of my life, and that's where the book *Drama* comes from. I didn't really have cartoonists that I was friends with. I wanted to be with people who read the kinds of books that I liked to read and who watched cartoons like I did. On my first trip to New York, at the SVA open house, I met a group of students who were volunteering at the event. They took us around the campus and talked to us about their experiences. I met a handful of people that day who became my good friends when I eventually became a student!

Just chatting with them it was like, "Oh my gosh! You guys are into all the same stuff that I'm into." When I started school, one of my first friends was named Steve, and we bonded over our mutual love of *The Iron Giant*. Nobody I knew in San Francisco had seen that movie! It turned out, like, everybody we went to school with was into *The Iron Giant*, everybody was into nerdy stuff, and everybody just talked about craft and storytelling and the comics that they were reading. I think because a lot of SVA students, and New Yorkers in general, are adjacent to the publishing industry and the cartooning industry, it was the perfect place for me. I absolutely flourished there and had an amazing time.

ANNE You mentioned studying other mediums like painting in art school. What type of painting? Oil? Acrylic? Watercolor?

RAINA It was mostly oil, and I hated using oil because I'm not a particularly neat person, and oil takes so long to dry.

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