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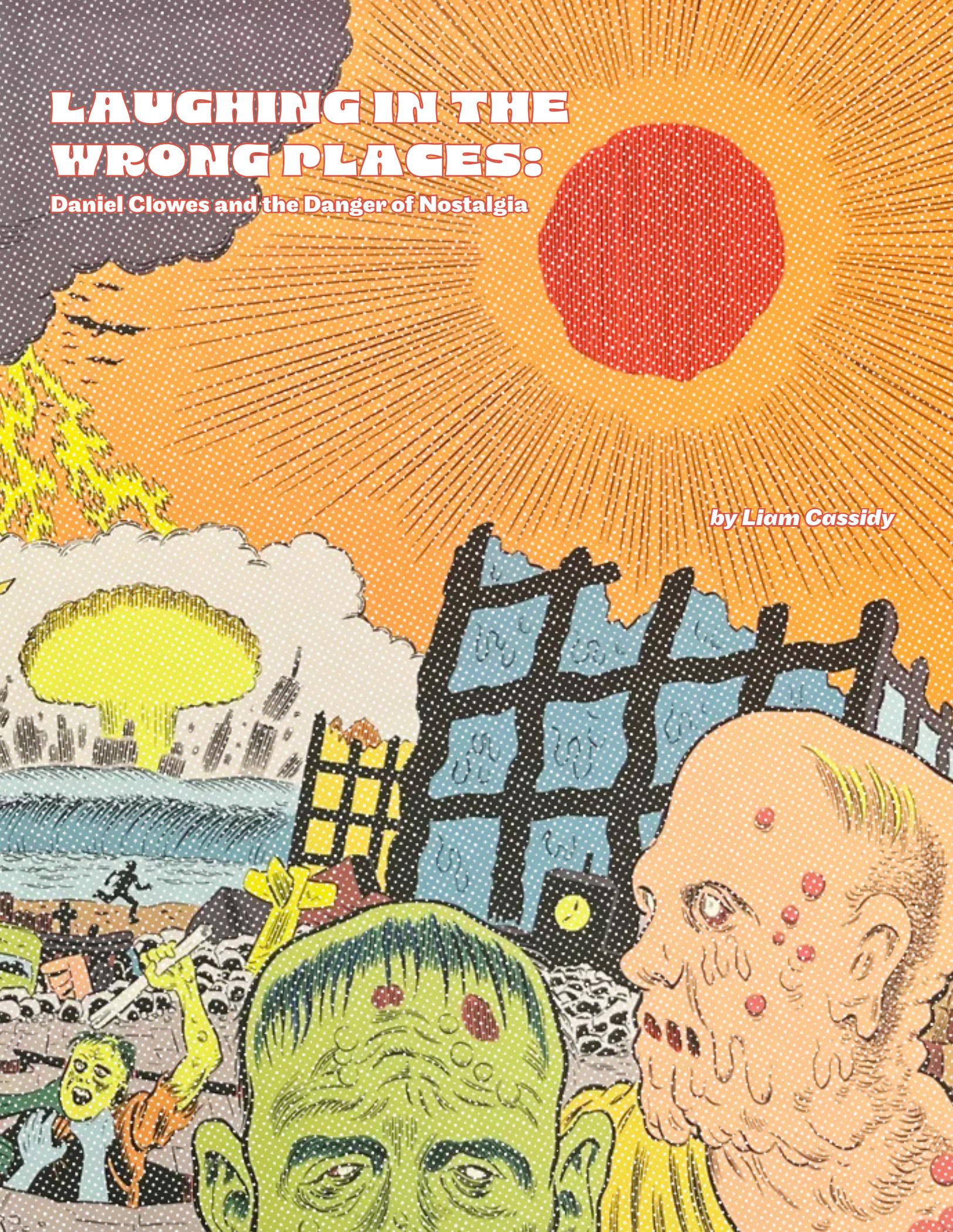
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LAUGHING IN THE WRONG PLACES:

Daniel Clowes and the Danger of Nostalgia

by Liam Cassidy



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This essay explores the relationship between art objects and our past, narrowing in on nostalgia as a malevolent force in American culture that will lead to its eventual downfall. Focusing on Daniel Clowes' latest graphic novel *Monica* as a case study, I demonstrate how graphic stories like this seek to reflect rather than interpret, and are often more closely aligned to the creator's biography than an attempt at broad strokes or political pandering. The essay uses interviews with Clowes at various points of his career, reviews of *Monica*, academic essays on Clowes, as well as articles and books dissecting nostalgia and its correlation to American politics. I take a unique approach to this essay, placing my narrative voice in a fictional post-apocalyptic scenario. I did this because I am a fiction writer and this position felt natural, but also I wanted to emphasize the real stakes facing the United States in our upcoming election. In this essay, I focus on blending visual and literary analysis when looking at Clowes' work. This is a subtextual argument that I am making in terms of how we consider comics and graphic narratives, as much of the source material I looked at that was specific to comics leaned heavily in the literary direction and neglected visual cues for interpretation.

I am drawn by the smoke. A promise of heat in this eternal winter. The ice encasing the trees looks like how they used to vacuum seal vegetables to ensure their longevity far beyond the natural course of decay. Who thought the apocalypse would be cold like this? I always imagined pillars of fire, instant annihilation. Still, the clouds that have gathered over America have blotted out the sun, allowing for this perpetual Morrissey song to envelope a land once dominated by nihilistic cheer. The color is gone, and so with it the overstimulation, the constant head-whirling distraction, and any respite from the world and its profound ugliness.

Thank God there is still warmth here beneath the rubble of the public library. The fire that was set to a pile of YA novels spread its arms around the building

and squeezed. I discover a partially melted pair of horn-rimmed glasses on a pile of bricks, the remains of our last rebel resistance in the new age of American authoritarianism; the librarians. I mourn those brave socially awkward souls who were never built for a culture war that was fought by intellectuals on one side and AR-15s on the other.

I hold my gloved hands out to the embers and see something there just to the edge of the dying fire pinched between fallen slabs of cement. I reach for the singed corner and pull, slowly revealing the profile of a young woman glowing cyan over a field of candy planets and stars. I brush away the stones and dust to read the Bazooka Joe bubblegum pink title just above the young woman's up-do, the long-hidden sun

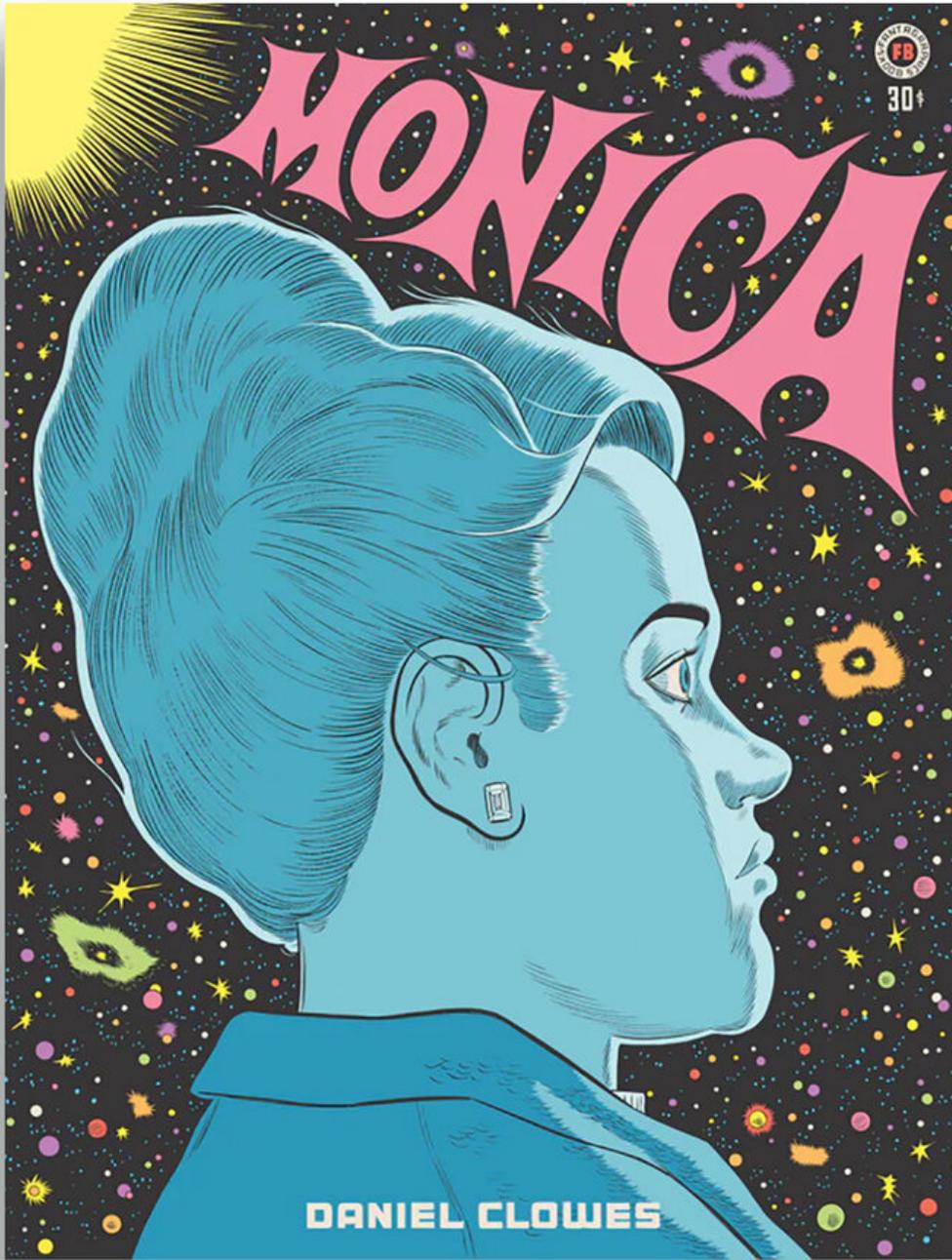


Figure 1:
Monica sitting for her silhouette
portrait (Fantagraphics 2023).



Figure 2:
The cheery endpapers of *Monica*
(Fantagraphics 2023).

blasting its happy rays from the upper left corner. I recognize this artifact immediately; it is *Monica*, the last published work of cartoonist Daniel Clowes.

I too was once a cartoonist in America, so you might understand the joy this discovery has given me. I studied all of Clowes' work, at first closely identifying with his misanthropic tendencies made manifest by the characters rampant throughout *Eightball* who hated the world with a passion available only to the young and garrulous. Ultimately though, I was hooked by Clowes' tenderness, a morsel of hope for a falling (or fallen) world.¹

I scurry off, away from the warmth of the fire and the miscreants it may attract, to read in the relative safety of a drainage ditch. Perhaps I will find something in this book that will explain things, why I and I suppose "we" ended up in a ditch clutching

this vestige of counter-cultural ephemera. The stiff binding crackles against my opening of the endpapers where I encounter the familiar visage of my apocalyptic fantasies, a fuming, stormy planet boiling in its blood-red seas. What went wrong?

A page turn brings me to a spread suggestive of comics that describes a sweeping history of the Earth from the hairy micro-organisms and the freshly legged fishes' initial bumbblings onto land, to the death of the dinosaurs through to the first appearance of our floofy-tailed ancestors who would evolve and thrive and suffer and invent faith and suffer again and make art and start wars and split the atom and make rock music and assassinate presidents, culminating with the Beverly Hillbillies grinning with the stupidity of the fabulously (and recently) wealthy.

The colors here are as bright as ever, pink, green, and yellow ink glows against the grayness of the day. I sense my own nostalgia for the "before times." A nostalgia for an America from before the "before"

1 Raeburn, Daniel. "The Fallen World of Daniel Clowes." 1997.



Figure 3:
A brief history of the world from
Monica (Fantagraphics 2023).

was an existential threat upon the lips of pundits and liberal thinkers of the time, and maybe that's where I can begin my search—that dangerous desire for an America that was once “great.” The America that glimmered like the mythical El Dorado (with fewer Mexicans) in the minds of those who flung themselves against the Capitol building, crushing their bodies against the armor of the Capitol police, banging their skulls into the unmovable incongruity of their own beliefs.

There was a time when “nostalgia” was primarily used as a sort of medical terminology to describe an extreme version of homesickness experienced by soldiers and others living abroad. It wasn't until the 19th century that “nostalgia” as an “imaginary homesickness for places and times the nostalgists never experienced and in some cases never existed” became a thing in the United States. In politics, references to the American heyday came into common use, and often it was about the gold ol' days of slavery, when a white

man could kick up his heels and sip sweet tea.²

Our greatest artists of the time were not immune. Mark Twain pined for his youth on the Mississippi River, and musicians like Stephen Foster sang gleefully about those better olden times. Then there was Buffalo Bill, whose Wild West show glorified the slaughter of Native Americans, performed by the very man who committed said slaughter. But these performances were as mournful as they were celebratory. Not mournful toward the obvious brutal acts of America's so-called pioneers; rather it was an anticipatory mourning. The performers and revelers alike grieved the passing of a time that had not yet passed. Nostalgia untethered to reality has been deeply embedded in American culture ever since.³

Clowes' most blatantly nostalgic comic is

- 2 Andersen, *Fantasyland*. In this book, Kurt Andersen argues that nostalgia is one of many delusions befalling Americans, and one of the main catalysts leading to Donald Trump's first presidency.
- 3 Andersen, *Fantasyland*.

probably “MCMLXVI” (or 1966) from issue number sixteen of *Eightball*. The narrator is obsessed with the year 1966, which, not only is the year he was born, but also “represents the peak of American culture.”⁴ In the first panel, the narrator bends over the back of a chair holding a toy ray gun. In the background, several other collectibles are lined up on a shelf. It was the only full-color comic that appeared in that issue of *Eightball*. I remember its technicolor palette, which was reminiscent of color television shows of the 60s. The character himself is small, almost childlike but for the ever-present stogy in his mouth. It is almost as if his physical growth is stunted by his frozen affinities for another time.

The narrator is an unironic devotee to the past, a response to the irony-drenched pop culture of the 1990s, and perhaps a stand-in for Clowes himself. There is a panel where the character complains about seeing old movies at the theater. This is likely a reference to the academic article “The Psychopathy of Nostalgia”⁵ written by Harvey Kaplan in the 1980s (and what time was more burdened by nostalgia than the 80s? Reagan coined the phrase “Make America Great Again!”). Clowes mentioned this particular article in an interview with Daniel Raeburn titled “The Fallen World of Daniel Clowes.” In the interview, Clowes paraphrased the article stating, “The nostalgic will go to old movies and be unhappy because the audience laughs in the wrong places.”⁶

Nostalgia is present not only in Clowes’ storylines but also in the making of the images. One of Clowes’ first characters was Lloyd Llewellyn. When I think back to those early character designs for Llewellyn I see Clowes’ predilection for mid-century masculinity; Llewellyn is all angles like a Pontiac GTO. He wears skinny ties and black-rimmed glasses, a flat-top haircut, and a houndstooth blazer. He looks more NASA scientist than cultural commentator. But the nostalgia within the Lloyd Llewellyn comics is primarily aesthetic and not thematic. The storylines are unconventional, the characters surreal, and by



Figure 4: Going to the movies in the 1990s. From *Eightball* (Fantagraphics 1996).

Figure 5: Next page, Lloyd Llewellyn keeps it classy (Fantagraphics 1993).

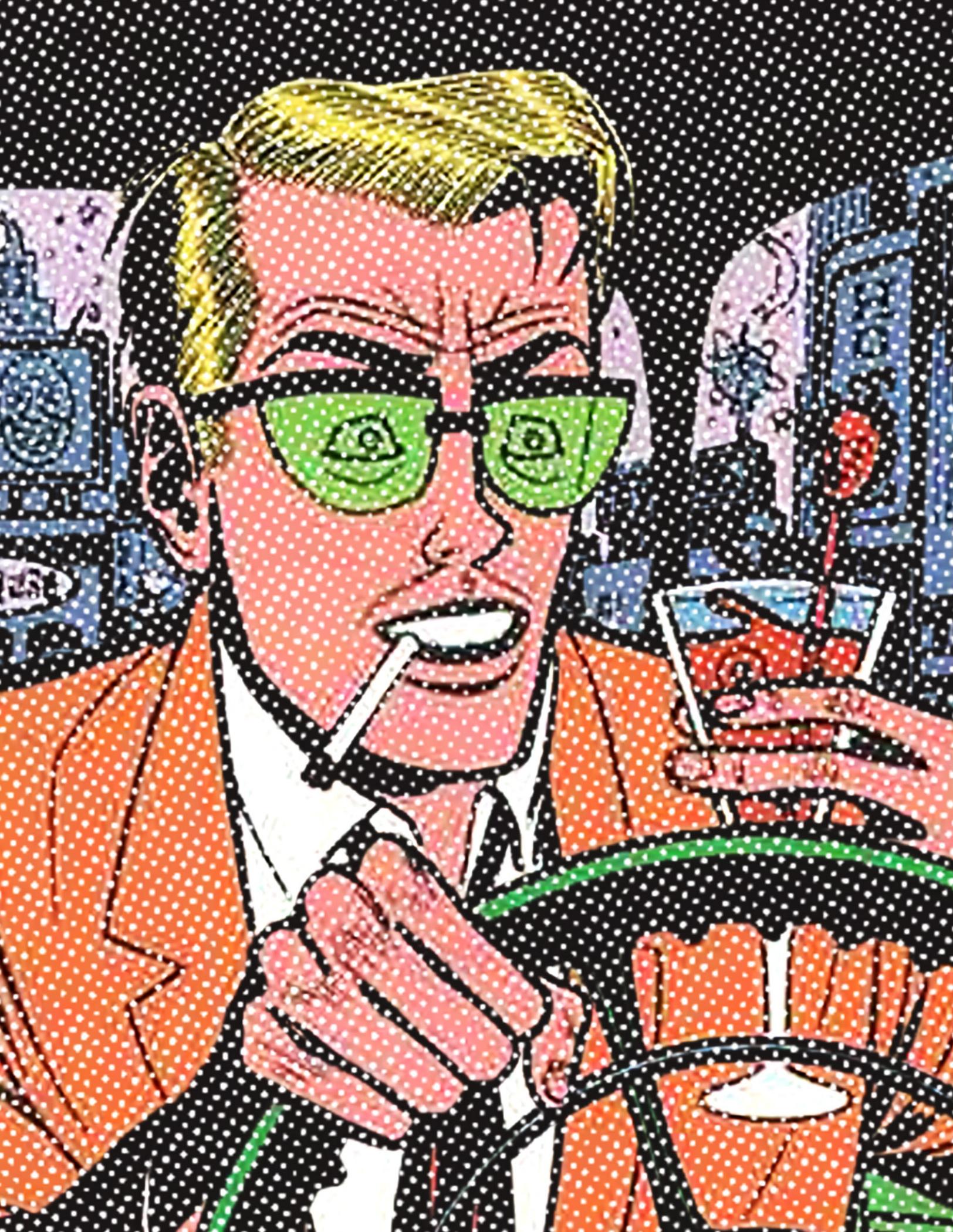
these means, Clowes subverts our thinking of this period. The absurdities within the stories serve as a subtle commentary on the pitfalls of nostalgia, suggesting that a selective and idealized view of history can lead to silly, if not downright horrible, outcomes. Or maybe it is to say that people were stupid then and are stupid now, stripping away the shiny veneer of the 1960s.

Clowes’ most famous graphic narrative, *Ghost World*, is also haunted by the past. Enid Coleslaw and Rebecca Doppelmeyer are at the age of transition from childhood to adulthood; the crux of the conflict between the two girls. Enid opposes the world she feels forced to join; Rebecca is more resigned to her fate and is preparing to enter a traditional idea of normal adulthood, evident by the type of visual culture Rebecca now consumes. In the first panels of

4 Clowes, “MCMLXVI.”

5 This article is also referenced on the cover of the next issue of *Eightball*. Issue #17 features a large bald man with a brain filled with images of real, and not so real memories. On the back cover a bearded, bespectacled man plays at a piano (perhaps Kaplan?). His music sheet reads “The Psychopathology of Nostalgia.”

6 Raeburn, “The Fallen World of Daniel Clowes.” 1997.



Ghost World Enid finds an issue of *Sassy* magazine in Rebecca's bedroom and freely expresses her disgust at the publication's phoniness. "Why do you have this?" Enid says. For Enid, a person is defined by what they collect, and the presence of this magazine proves Rebecca has "accepted an authorized and inauthentic view of the world."⁷

That is not to say Enid does not desire to shunt off the shackles of childhood herself, though her efforts are often half-hearted. In the first panel of Chapter 2, "Garage Sale," Enid sits at a table refusing to sell "Goofie Gus," a childhood toy, to "some jerk with a trendy haircut." Enid cannot shake her view that the world they are entering is grim. The garage sale itself is Enid's attempt to sell the only things she sees as having any value; her past, the objects she has collected, and the culture she has amassed. She grasps at Rebecca's ankles trying to drag herself forward into the future, but she has not yet realized that the true currency of nostalgia in a late Capitalist society is not in the actual objects but in the reselling of ideas inherent in those objects.

By the end of the graphic novel, Enid and Rebecca are no longer friends. From Enid's point of view, we see Rebecca through the window of the fake 1950s diner the two girls used to frequent, sitting in a booth with a young man, Josh, who previously barely warranted her attention. Josh has essentially replaced Enid. At this point Enid delivers the final line of the book; "You've grown into a very beautiful young woman." It's an odd tone for a nineteen-year-old, one befitting the way she is now moving through the world. Enid has just left a meeting with the Don Knotts look-alike psychic named Bob Skeetes. In their meeting, she asks Skeetes about her future, but Skeetes sees only into the past, describing a woman from the 1930s who is "an artist...or a scholar... a woman of intellect and leisure." Skeetes tells Enid that the woman seems to want to say something but runs away before Enid can get any answers.

In the last panels, Enid seems to have embraced the "coming of age" motif forced upon her, and in the end, we might also accept this fate. We may even realize that Clowes has been hinting at this inevitability throughout the book. Looking closely we can spot the decay. The letters of the diner's sign

go missing one by one. Enid and Rebecca also age in an accelerated way. Rebecca wears glasses in the diner when we last see her. Enid has changed her whole wardrobe, costuming herself in what may be described as 1950s librarian attire. The pages of *Ghost World* are awash in a blue hue that evokes melancholy. This color was not an arbitrary choice. In an interview, Clowes recalled his early memories of that blue color as a teenager growing up in Chicago. He described walking around his neighborhood in the evening. He saw his neighbors coming home from work and turning on their televisions. This was at a time when most people still had black-and-white TV sets. Outside the world was dark and gloomy, but inside there was this specific blue light that he found haunting. He wanted *Ghost World* to capture that feeling.⁸

While *Ghost World* may not have been directly autobiographical, it was steeped in Clowes' childhood. So is *Monica* "about" nostalgia? While Clowes' use of blue in *Ghost World* was an acknowledged attempt to resurrect a feeling, the feeling was not a positive one. Clowes did this before in short comic stories like "Like a Weed Joe" and "Blue Italian Shit" which followed the same young man looking back at the not-so-peachy moments in his life. Even the self-identified and proud nostalgist of "MCMLXVI" is an angry, ugly character struggling to fit in a world opposed to his point of view.

Clowes understood that complexity is inevitable when fawning over a bygone era. He pictured himself as the grumpy film patron described in Kaplan's article. Clowes said, "There's a lot of trouble to being nostalgic because you can't really edit everything out of the past...you sort of inherently have to accept the way the culture was back then, and there are many things that were obviously wrong with the culture."⁹ Another story from *Eightball* takes this notion of toxic nostalgia to the extreme. "Gynecology" follows the story of an artist named Epps who uses racial stereotypes to make a name for himself and get rich.

Epps' attraction to these images is genuine and without nostalgia, insisting "I just love the way things looked back then."¹⁰ He claims that his racist, sexist, and homophobic drawings are not ironic, but later in

7 Parille, "Close Reading Clowes's Dialogue: 'You've Grown into a Very Beautiful Young Woman.'"

8 "Daniel Clowes." Interview by Xavier Guilbert. Du9.org, January 2009.

9 Raeburn, "The Fallen World of Daniel Clowes." 1997.

10 Clowes, "Gynecology."



Figure 6: Epps defends the indefensible in “Gynecology,” from *Eightball* issue #17 (Fantagraphics 1996)..

Figure 7: Enid and Rebecca looking forward to the future, from *Ghost World* (Fantagraphics 1997).

the story, he recognizes irony protects his work from potential criticism. Epps claims this is true because his work is “obviously an ironic statement, innocent of base sentiments and glamourless motives.”¹¹ He sells his work to advertisers. The art is eventually co-opted and copied, becoming so ubiquitous as to lose all meaning (and all profit) for its maker.

Flipping through the pages of *Monica* I notice some damage. The pages are stained, perhaps from exposure to the rain that finally put out most of the library fire. But, no, I realize now the pages are tinted. At first, this seems like a suggestion of aging paper, as the color progresses from white to a brownish off-white. I remember that there were theories when

Monica was first published about what might be behind this system. Some suggested that the page colors represented changing time periods, while others said they marked a shifting perspective.¹² Clowes was methodical, making precise choices about color, typographic references, and even paper choices. *Monica* is a culmination of all these things.

12 In his review of *Monica*, Joe McCullough describes these theories more thoroughly. I agree with his assertion that *Monica*’s stories (the ones she wrote as a character) are separated by color from those which describe her own life story. But there is some randomness here, most notably the horror genre comic “The Glow Infernal” which seems to dodge all systematic reasoning. McCullough, “Monica.”

11 Clowes, “Gynecology.”



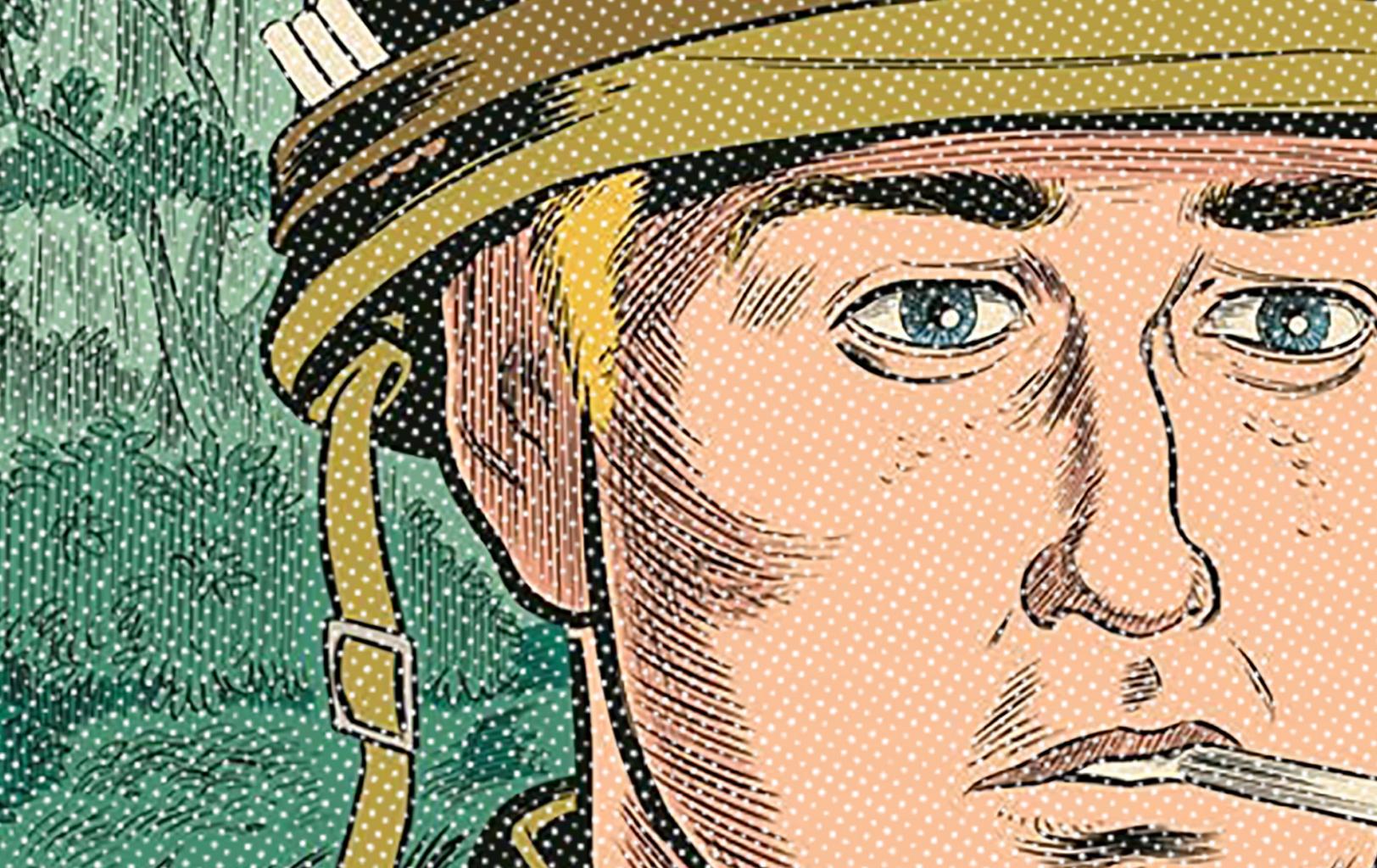


Figure 8:
Butch revels in the cushy war lifestyle, from *Monica* (Fantagraphics 2023).

I am distracted by an explosion in the distance. I hurry away from the edge of the drainage ditch and crouch in a large cement pipe for cover. There is some yelling, and a dog barking. I sit down far back enough in the pipe to muffle the noise. Here I open to the first story of *Monica*, titled “Foxhole.” As in all of Clowes’ comics, there are references to comics history, through which faded genres become mouthpieces for modern-day concerns. The influence of “war comics” is evident. Somewhere in Vietnam,¹³ two soldiers—Johnny and Butch—are bogged down by increasing enemy fire. The first panel contains many of the tropes of war comics; Johnny lights a cigarette in the foreground as Butch waxes about the war lifestyle. The surrounding jungle is indistinct, cast in receding values of bluish-green. It is a non-place. Specific but vague, defined by the

reader’s preconceived notions of the war-torn country. It can also be a stand-in for all American wars both past and those to come.

The relationship between Johnny and Butch is familiar. They represent the political divisions leading up to America’s downfall. For years there was a battle between chaos and order.¹⁴ Butch is chaos. “I get to kill people and blow up their shit? Sign me the fuck up!” He declares. Johnny is the opposite. He believes in order, the way things have always been. Johnny tries to reassure Butch; “One day this is all gonna be over. We’re gonna pack up our gear, shake hands, and head back home to real life. Everything nice and normal.” Throughout the story, Johnny is clutching fervently to a past that no longer exists, even if he doesn’t know it yet.

13 Nowhere in “Foxhole” does it say this story takes place in Vietnam. One could assume this from the other stories, but my assumption could also just as easily been influenced by my own bias.

14 Or at least this is how it was framed. Progressives believed the MAGA movement was a manifestation of grievances gone haywire even as they called for law and order. The Christian conservative right believed liberalism and the “woke” represented chaos, and they pushed us toward authoritarian rule.



As I read on, the situation for the two soldiers gets increasingly dire. The enemy is invisible, but through the onomatopoeia common to comic books (*BOOM! BANG! THOK! RATATATAT!*) we sense them closing in. The final panel crops close as the two men are crowded in by the sound of gunfire and bombs. Here Butch delivers his final line, “Everything we ever loved or cared about is buried, ruined, gone forever.” Butch’s words are a rejection of nostalgia, as it were. What point is there in looking back at better times when surrounded by such brutality in the present? But the soldiers also represent what has always been true about America; its mythos combines both “restorative” nostalgia which “proposes to rebuild the lost home...” and “reflective” nostalgia which “dwells in longing and loss.”¹⁵

The following story is titled “Pretty Penny.” The Penny being referenced here turns out to be Johnny’s girlfriend. In “Foxhole,” when Johnny imagines his life returning to normal, he is referring to his life back home with Penny. But, like many her age, Penny has been sucked into the Bohemian lifestyle of the 1960s. The first panel shows her in bed with another man: a nihilistic and self-involved artist, the exact opposite of Johnny. She even acknowledges that this scenario would be “Johnny’s nightmare,” but otherwise doesn’t seem to care much. Penny’s life continues in this fashion as she beds one moronic male boomer stereotype after another, each seemingly worse than the last. But Penny isn’t depicted as a victim. She has embraced chaos as a bulwark against the banality of existence, and reading on, I get the sense that this

15 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. Though Boym’s book predates Trump’s first successful presidential campaign she captured the essence of his strategy in the defining of “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia. Trump denounced Democrats for their stripping away of fundamental rights and freedoms enjoyed in the past, and swore to reestablish said “freedoms.” It was implied that this restoration would happen by force.



Figure 9: Johnny and Butch trade light stories while in the shit. From *Monica* (Fantagraphics 2023).

choice of chaos over order is what will ultimately be at the core of our hero, Monica's journey.¹⁶

We first meet Monica as a baby in a carriage, born to the unwed, unmotherly, hippie anarchist Penny. Monica is our narrator for this story, and in the first panels, she sets up rather clearly that much of this book will be about looking back. Monica is searching for something. Yes, it may be the literal search for her mother and father, but also there is a desire for meaning and purpose. In a later story, titled "\$Uçç`E\$\$" we learn that Monica's wealth is derived from the re-establishment of her mother's old candle company (there is profit to be had from old ideas!).¹⁷ This financial success is empty and isolating for Monica, and forces her into a self-reflective state. She is also a creative person (she writes stories, and may be the source of the narratives that occur outside of her personal story, including those that are set before she was born). Her search for Penny leads her to join a religious cult, where meaning is replaced by terror and ultimately squashed by the revelation that the guru is just another moron among her mother's collection.

Throughout the book, Monica is looking backward to try to understand herself both in the present and the future. This nostalgic yearning may be a kind of defense against the chaos instigated by her mother's choices.

At the bottom of the drainage pipe, I see a faded soda can poking out of the muck. Though the can is smashed I can still make out the old Pepsi logo, and feel in this moment transported from this hellscape to my childhood in the nineties. My mother didn't buy soda except for the odd special occasion or holiday, moments often marked by simple contentment. Can meaning and purpose be gleaned from nostalgia? Are there any answers when looking toward the past, or are we just overwhelmed with emotional memory? Clowes' view seems to be that the past is often slippery, and memory can be easily influenced by interpretation.

In the fourth story, our narrator describes her young self after the death of her grandmother. Emotionally unable to deal with the demands of college, Monica escapes to her grandparents' lakeside cottage where she had spent much of her childhood after her mother, Penny, disappeared. Monica is a motherless seeker, much like Enid from *Ghost World*. The way Clowes draws Monica here is a direct reference to Enid's punk period (hair dyed green), and both girls want to disconnect from the present by immersing themselves in the past.

The lakeside cottage itself is also referential. "Like a Weed Joe" from *Eightball* issue #16 features a young man, Rodger Young, who spends his summers with his grandparents at a lakeside cottage writing and transcribing cryptic messages on the sandy beach. The story is about regret, and the tone of Rodger's narration is one of shame, as if his childhood must be apologized for, but why? For what reason, exactly, is difficult to pinpoint.

Much like Rodger, Monica is scrolling through her rolodex of memory and trying to understand her past. While staying at her grandparents' cottage she decides to look in on her grandfather's room which is "basically untouched since he died." In

¹⁶ In an interview for *The Comics Journal*, Clowes was asked what was going on in his head when writing *Monica*. Clowes answered: "This book is...dealing with chaos. And it felt like chaos was and is reigning supreme." Kelly, "This Book Is About My Hatred Of Chaos": Daniel Clowes on *Monica*.

¹⁷ See every Marvel movie ever.



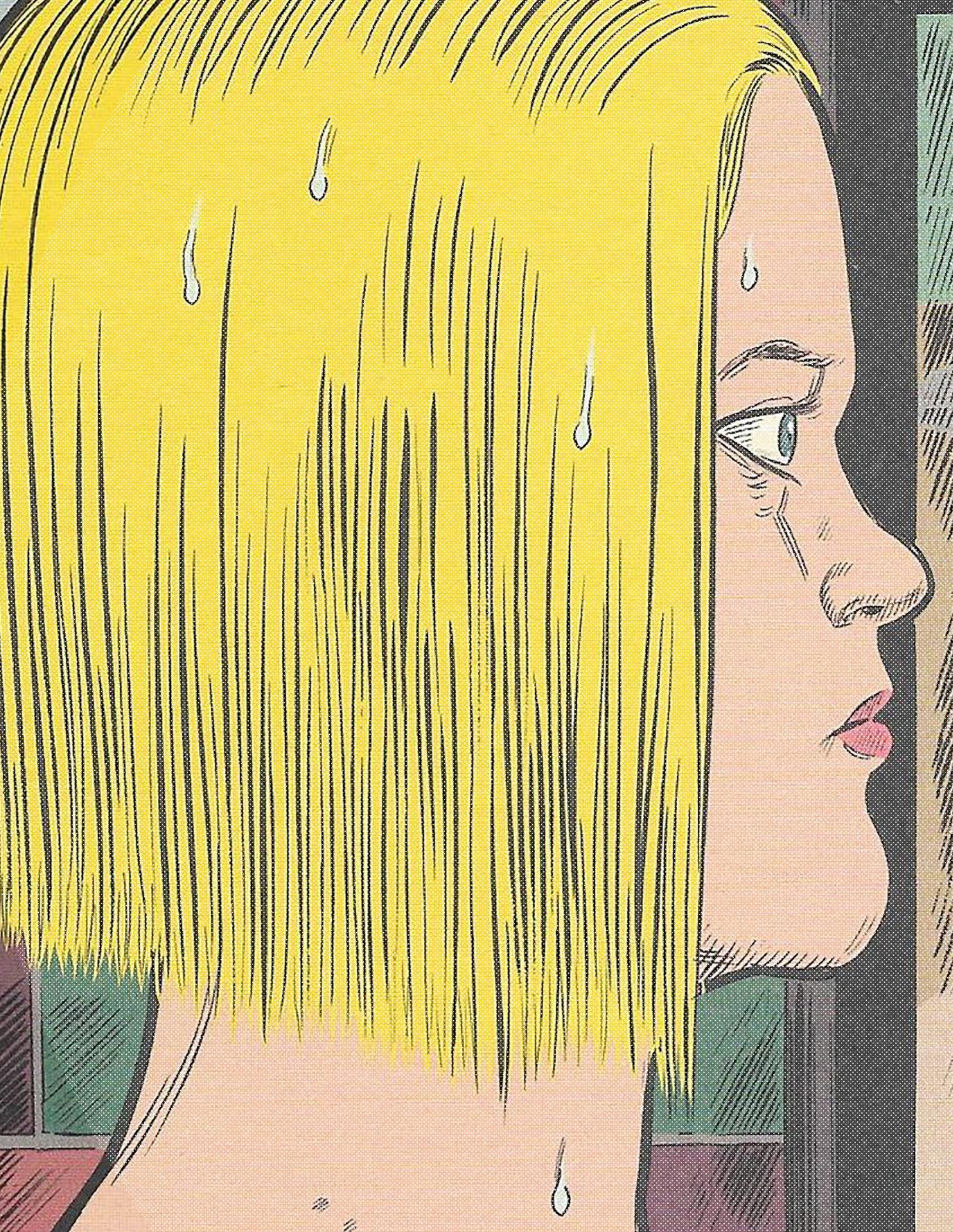
Figure 10: Penny takes baby Monica on a pleasant morning stroll. From *Monica* (Fantagraphics 2023).

Figure 11: Next page, Monica looking at Monica looking for Monica. From *Monica* (Fantagraphics 2023)..

the room, she finds an unopened Walkman, a gift for her grandfather. She opens the packaging and pops in the tape but realizes that she has no batteries and discards the player. Later on, the plastic packaging begins buzzing and calling out to Monica, "Radio!" Eventually, she acquiesces to the strange command and turns on the small transistor radio that had belonged to her grandfather. She rolls the dial past an advertisement and a radio preacher to hear again her grandfather's voice. She spends days "talking about old times" with him, or "whistling to old songs." The days stretch into weeks until Monica's boyfriend shows up, forcing upon her the present and the future. He starts bagging up the trash in the old cottage and even changes the station on the radio to some crappy rock tunes. Monica kicks the boy out, but the damage is done. She stays with her grandfather for a few months as his signal fades until he is gone. "Poppa's" voice

coming from a source of both advertising, religious proselytizing, and entertainment is poignant. As a vehicle for communication, the radio can be seen as a beacon of truth. After her "Poppa's" voice fades away Monica buries the radio. Maybe because the loss of her grandfather's voice from beyond the grave seems like a second death. Maybe it's because the past is now inaccessible to her. Reading on, it's questionable that this story is meant to be literal. There is a suggestion that it never happened, that it was all a dream experienced while Monica was in a coma.

The story takes its title from her grandfather's pet name for her, "Demonica." A name that is both innocent and telling, unironic and literal. As the book goes on, *Monica* flits between fiction and non-fiction, reality and non-reality, Monica and not Monica,





A LOT HAS
HAPPENED
IN THE PAST
22 YEARS .



until we learn the true prescience of this nickname. Toward the end of the book, Monica eventually finds her mother who dispels her of any mystified version of the past. Unwilling to let go, Monica then looks to her father, who turns out to be the chaotic Butch from “Foxhole.” At this point, Butch is a dying old man who has embraced religion in place of chaos and dismisses his supposed daughter with placid niceties.

Finally, Monica goes back to where her grandparent’s cottage once stood, testing the validity of her fantastical memories by digging up the old radio. She turns the radio on, expecting or hoping to hear her grandfather’s voice again but instead hears a “chorus of ghosts.”¹⁸ These new voices instruct Monica to dig yet another hole. Monica follows these directions and unearths an egg-like object. The voices again direct her to break the egg, which she

does without question. This is how the world ends, at the hands of a well-intentioned but misled seeker. Monica, who only wants answers for herself is blind to the consequences of her asking. The radio, once a bastion for Monica against the cruelty of the outside world, is now an arbiter of chaos. Our desire to regain the past is too easily co-opted by malevolent forces.

As I close *Monica* I can’t help but feel sad. Not because the ending is apocalyptic, but because the story is over. There may be a warning here about the dangers of nostalgia, but that is not the point. It was folly to look toward a comic for answers. Art is a reflection, and when looking in a mirror we see what we want to see. I often heard a phrase repeated before the demise of our country, “History will judge you for what you do.” Often this phrase was pointed at makers who were hesitant to imbue their work with big political statements. But what history is there now? For those who survived barricaded in their

¹⁸ McCulloch, “Monica.”



Figures 12 and 13: Monica and Enid enjoying their new hairstyles. Left image is from *Monica* (Fantagraphics 2023). Above image is from *Ghost World* (Fantagraphics 2002).

multi-billion dollar bunkers or slunk away in their superyachts, that history is pretty clear; they won. The TikToks of the marching and protesting were dissolved, and the Instagram reels of righteous indignation were obliterated along with the server farms. Crows have picked the breadcrumbs leading back to our proof of good intentions, and the forest itself leveled to bare earth. Art was never going to defend against such destruction.

Those of us still crawling among the ruins might ask what it all means. Turning back to those beginning pages of *Monica* that scrolled through history as if it were a social media feed, I find some kind of solace.

These two pages primarily serve the purpose of copyrights, production credits, and dedications, but they also place the following nine stories within a context; there is a cyclical nature to existence; life and death. This is as true for humanity as it was for the dinosaur.

I step out from the cement pipe. The night is coming but the sky is aglow in the distance. At first, I think it's fire again, but it's the sun dipping below the haze to set in the west. I leave the hiding place for my little hovel—a half-collapsed White Castle which now serves as a make-shift fortification—and cut through my former neighborhood. Most of the houses are

gone, but I see near a split oak tree one of those little libraries guilt-stricken white people used to put up as they gentrified the area. I open the plexiglass door. Inside there is a dog-eared John Grisham novel. A few battered children's books. An oddly fresh copy of UX for Dummies. I place *Monica* inside and close the door. Maybe there are no clear answers for us in Clowes' work, but there is a benefit to seeing ourselves reflected. What we see may help us move forward, or it may trap us, but ultimately we as readers are the only ones that can decide our fate.



Figure 14:
Boom goes the termonuclear weapon.
From *Monica* (Fantagraphics 2023).



Figure 15: The new American Gothic according to Daniel Clowes, from *Monica* (Fantagraphics 2023).

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