The Comics of R. Crumb ed. by Daniel Worden, and: *R. Crumb: Literature, Autobiography, and the Quest for Self* by David Stephen Calonne (review)

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Tragedy plus Time is particularly well timed. Scepanski wrote the epilogue in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we all try and make sense of the pandemic and what it means to move forward to a postpandemic era, what preceded the epilogue seems like necessary reading for what is next. Making a somewhat ominous observation, Scepanski reminds—or perhaps warns—us that comedies about trauma tend to reflect political fractiousness. Accordingly, paying close attention to what and how jokes are told will provide essential insights into the near-future political climate. While aimed toward comedy scholars broadly, this book is particularly valuable to those curious about comedy's intersection with history and politics. Moreover, it will be beneficial to those who study trauma, and it is a welcome (and relatively novel) addition to humor studies, particularly given its connections to psychology and health as well as cultural and media studies.

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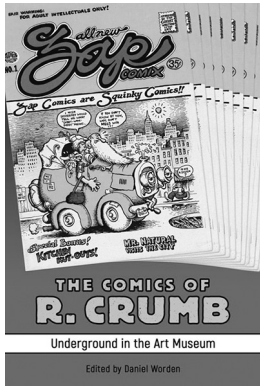
The Comics of R. Crumb.
Edited by Daniel Worden.
Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2021.
318 pp.

R. Crumb: Literature, Autobiography, and the Quest for Self.
By David Stephen Calonne.
Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2021.
288 pp.



REVIEWED BY KERRY DAVID SOPER
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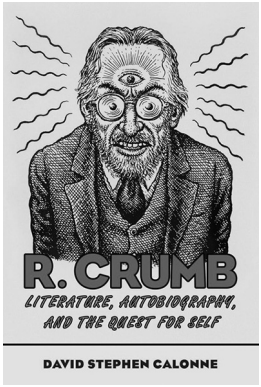
Two radically different books about the notorious but much-revered cartoonist/satirist/confessionalist R. Crumb have been published by the University Press of Mississippi. The first is a multiauthored, critical analysis of the cartoonist's complicated work and career; the second is a single-authored tribute. As scholarly studies, both books excel in some respects and falter in



others—and those contrasting qualities become especially pronounced when the books are read in tandem.

We can begin with *The Comics of R. Crumb.,* a collection of essays edited by Daniel Worden. Steeped in current cultural studies methods and theoretical frames, this book is objective and sober, "designed to provide new perspectives on Crumb and his comics, not to defend or celebrate the artist, but to offer archival and context-based assessment of Crumb's work" (8). The origins of the book have shaped its critical tone: it was imagined as an objective response to heated online debates over Crumb's legacy after a regional comics organization—the Massachusetts Independent Comics Expo—decided to retire the honorary naming of a conference venue as Crumb Hall because of the cartoonist's problematic depictions of women and ethnic minorities.

Readers familiar with Crumb's career—perhaps through *Crumb* (1994), Terry Zwigoff's film about the artist—will recall that scholars and critics have long been conflicted about his comics and place in the history of popular culture. On the one hand, he is a cartooning virtuoso (melding classical cartooning tropes with a naturalistic inking style), an occasionally brilliant satirist (targeting most powerfully the vapid aspects of a consumeristic, celebrity-worshipping culture), and a fascinating chronicler of his own life and psyche (most recently in collaboration with his wife, fellow cartoonist Aline Kominsky-Crumb). I remember being inspired by some of his best work when I was a graduate student back in the early 1990s; I admired how his rejection of traditional syndicates and publishing venues allowed him to be honest and innovative; he expanded the narrative and visual palettes of the medium and opened doors for alternative genres and hybrid forms to emerge.

At the same time, however, I remember becoming frustrated by how often Crumb used his freedom as an underground/alternative cartoonist to create work that felt irresponsible or self-indulgent. Most notoriously, he published some ostensibly satiric pieces "When the Niggers Take Over America Moreover" and "When the Goddamn Jews Take Over America," that were confusingly ambiguous in tone and representation. Readers were left to wonder if it was some kind of ironic commentary on far-right paranoia or

just a careless purging of Crumb's own racist thoughts under the banner of satire. As a result, these cartoons were widely misread and even appropriated as propaganda material by neo-Nazi groups. Crumb's autobiographical pieces also degenerated too often into creepy psychosexual confessions and reductive depictions of women as fetishized objects. Perhaps Deidre English, in an interview in Zwigoff's film, described the problem most succinctly: "Crumb appears to 'get off' on stepping 'over the line of satire' and 'just producing pornography'" (35).

The Comics of R. Crumb addresses head on the problematic aspects of Crumb's career—and the first several essays ("Towards a Reconciliation of Satire and History in Crumb," by Jason S. Polley, "Crumb Agonistes: The Passions of a Disenchanted Utopian Scatologist," by Paul Sheehan, and "Reading, Looking, Feeling: Comix after Legitimacy," by Daniel Worden) are especially strong in their theoretical framing and methodology. Together, they create a sustained dialogue that is smart, objective, and tuned in to the current political zeitgeist. More specifically, Polley lays out the challenge of understanding Crumb's work as it "occupies a precarious or disputed contentious space, one between satire and hostility, between expressing and exposing, between art and anger" (37). Sheehan's article tries to triangulate the political impulses that undergird Crumb's nonideological, intentionally offensive, and consistently pessimistic cartoons: as a disenchanted, "utopian scatologist" with a nostalgic, radically conservative distaste for modern/postmodern cultures, Crumb uses the lowbrow orientation of comics to engage in "bourgeois baiting," assaulting good taste and political propriety. Worden's study helps the reader to understand (but not justify or excuse) the racist, sexually violent, and misogynistic elements of Crumb's work by contextualizing him within his original medium and time period—the underground print cartoons of the 1960s. In *Zap* comics, he explains, Crumb was working in a low-brow medium through which he was connected to an alternative, "homosocial community, united by rebellion against domestic and feminine norms" (68); his confessional cartoons resonated with a like-minded audience of emotionally immature, sexually dissatisfied, socially alienated, heterosexual white males.

The other essays in this book (organized under three umbrellas, "Political Imaginaries," "Cartoons of Scripture, Self, and Society," and "The Fine Art of Comics") are generally strong but perhaps eclectic to a fault and scattershot in their treatment of a variety of topics (as often happens when there is an

open call for essays). Stand-out articles include "How Many Trees Had to Be Cut Down for This Article: Crumb as an Ironic Ecologist" (Jose Alaniz), "Competing Masculinities in the Work of R. Crumb," (Ian Blechschmidt), "Viewing R. Crumb: Circles of Influence in Fine Art Museums" (Kim A. Munson), and "Crumb and Abstraction" (Paul Fisher Davies). There are also a few creative experiments that could have used a bit more development. Julian Lawrence's article, for example—"Where the Action is: Crumb, Semiotic, *L'Écriture féminine* and Taste"—follows in the vein of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* in exploring Crumb's cartoons through the medium of comics, creating the expectation that the article will bridge a gap between an academic audience and lay readers. While it succeeds visually, using dynamic visual effects and a self-reflexive avatar (the author as a guide), the text of the article is mired in semiotics and remains inaccessible for readers outside that particular field. Moreover, in other essays, authors rehash similar ideas in different terms, as if talking past each other. The book as a whole, nevertheless—a politically aware and carefully researched collection of essays—is an excellent and important addition to the field of comics studies in general and Crumb's work in particular.

The second book, *R. Crumb: Literature, Autobiography, and the Quest for Self,* is a focused monograph by David Stephen Calonne. On the positive side, this book is engagingly written in a conversational and dynamic style. Moreover, Calonne's knowledge of literary history and cultural/political movements of the twentieth century is impressive. The book is cleverly organized according to Crumb's philosophical affinities with existentialist and countercultural thinkers: Kerouac, Sartre, Kafka, Phillip K. Dick, and so on. Reading the study feels like listening in on an interdisciplinary graduate seminar where the professor makes lots of exciting (but perhaps at times attenuated) connections across time periods, mediums, and genres. In its generous exploration of the connections between Crumb's political beliefs, artistic influences, and spiritual yearnings, this book evoked what fascinated me about Crumb when I first encountered his work: how the raw honesty and poignancy of his expressionistic drawings and autobiographical stories felt so much more authentic than the highly mediated mainstream comics of most magazines and newspapers.

However, Calonne seems uninterested in investigating the aspects of Crumb's work that perplex and often sour readers who spend a significant amount of time with his confessional comics: the depictions of violent

sexual fantasies, the misogyny of Crumb's brand of geek masculinity, and the sloppy expression of ethnic stereotypes under the banner of satire. Crumb's problematic depiction of women, for example, is ignored through most of the book—with the exception of a short discussion near the end of chapter 6, "In the Beginning," about Crumb's progressive reimagining of female identities in *The Bible*. Calonne seems irritated, in fact, by Crumb's critics, referring in several places to the "putative" misogyny of Crumb's depiction of fetishized female bodies within violent sex acts—as if this were an inflated or so-called problem that didn't deserve too much attention (3). The philosophical impetus of this attitude eventually becomes clear, as Calonne borrows concepts from Beat writers and other countercultural figures from midcentury to praise the "mystical" or "sacred" side of Crumb's uncensored depictions of sexuality—and the "transgressive power" of Crumb's violent and fetishistic male fantasies (64).

Calonne also seems to condone (or at least leave uninvestigated) the way countercultural male thinkers like Crumb and Kerouac use female figures as props—either as objects of lust or as idealized, romantic angels—in their accounts of unfettered, male journeys of self-actualization. For example, in the chapter "On the Road," Calonne explores in detail the philosophical complexity of Crumb's cartoons about mystical self-discovery by male protagonists; the role of women and sex in those cartoons, however, is treated in a flippant way. In his synopsis of "Bad Karma," for instance, Calonne reports that the male character at one point "engages in typically Crumbian sexual hijinx with his voluptuous mate—which goes on for a full twelves pages" (42). Those twelve pages remain unexamined, however, and the phrasing of that description comes across as a bit tone deaf, as if these explicit depictions of sex—which invariably reflect Crumb's particular fetishistic interests—are just a bit of innocent, boys-will-be-boys slapstick. In another passage Calonne opts for a mystical justification that elides the problematic gender politics of depictions of violent male fantasies: "While this ecstatic power of sexual love to bring one to the deepest knowledge of the Self through the Other is certainly present, he combines it with a transgressive power. Sex is violent, an eruption of the unconsciousness, a primal act of surrender" (64).

Calonne's analysis of Crumb's treatment of African American culture and identities is generally rich and nuanced—with just a few gaps that are left unaddressed. For example, the second chapter, "Jelly Roll Morton, Charley Patton: Blues, Voodoo, and the Devil," is a fascinating exploration of both

the visual and narrative facets of Crumb's celebration of early blues singers and voodoo folk culture. (This is an interesting area of Crumb's work, in fact, that is neglected in the Worden book.) We can still quibble, however, with Calonne's lack of critical edge in dealing with the more complicated sides of Crumb's reverence for this subject matter. For example, both Crumb and Kerouac celebrated black musicians and folk culture as an antidote to a corporatized, conformist, consumeristic midcentury American culture. In Kerouac's *On the Road*, Black bebop musicians are venerated as countercultural saints; the alternating flux and flow of time in a "raggedy" African American neighborhood is imagined as an antidote to the demands of the corporate clock; and his protagonist, Sal Paradise, when looking into a poor Black neighborhood from a distance, wishes he could touch the "knee of some dusky, mysterious, sensual gal" and "exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America."[2]

Inspired by Kerouac (as Calonne effectively argues), Crumb had a similar kind of veneration for aspects of an idealized Black culture that felt dangerous and authentic: voodoo mysticism, juke joints, and the music of early, forgotten blues musicians ("conduits to aesthetic ecstasy," in Calonne's phrasing [39]). On one level, this idealization of Black folk culture can be seen as a genuinely progressive move at the mid-twentieth century, when much of popular culture was still awash in two dimensionally racist depictions of African Americans. From our current cultural perspective, however, it seems essential to at least acknowledge (if not fully explore) the more problematic sides of this practice: the patronizing and reductive strategy of using saint-like (and often child-like) minority figures as useful others in a white person's search for soul and purpose, as well as the conservative nostalgia of pining for the "authenticity" of an earlier, idealized African American folk culture that was embedded in poverty and disenfranchisement.

Finally, scholars of satire might be disappointed that Calonne briefly defends—but doesn't fully investigate—Crumb's "ironic" use of reductive stereotypes of women and minorities. As an aside at the end of chapter 2, he states that in his "portrayals of Blacks, Jews, and women, [Crumb's] goal is to send up stereotypes that are lodged in the American subconscious, to bring to light the hidden cauldron of simultaneous fear and attraction that gives birth to stereotypes" (94). There's a kernel of complexity there—the mingling

2 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin, 1957), 180.

of fear and fascination—that could be developed, but Calonne seems eager to move on to more celebratory discussions of Crumb's work. The failure to look more deeply into the unstable workings of satire seems like an important omission in a book about Crumb's politics and philosophical worldview. In fact, Calonne's discussion of Crumb's comedy and satire in general is almost purely laudatory; to him, it is simply "zany," "brilliant," or progressively "politically incorrect" in its subversiveness (3). His work is summed up as "sharp parodies and satires [that] puncture many pieties" (62). Calonne (like his subject) seems to dwell in a midcentury, countercultural mindset that sees any challenge to mainstream bourgeois culture and sensibility—no matter the nature of the content or the maddening degree of satiric ambiguity at work—as inherently positive.

Stylistically, Calonne is unafraid to pepper his often rambling analyses with lots of poetic flourishes and ambitious metaphors. This strategy makes for an entertaining read, but the consistently celebratory tone of the book becomes a bit grating (especially when compared to the more objective and critical tone of the edited collection). Calonne uses amplifiers too liberally for a scholarly study and is unrelentingly effusive about the brilliance of Crumb's art, satire, and philosophy. Crumb, the "genius," is "outrageously humorous," is "uproariously humorous," displays "spectacular draftsmanship," and is a "dazzling humorist," or "rapier-witted satirist."

In sum, Calonne's book is smart, engagingly written, and fascinating; it is also significantly flawed in its blind spots, omissions, and laudatory tone. While Worden's edited volume is fully engaged in current political and theoretical discussions, Calonne's study feels a bit out of touch, like a colorful relic from an earlier countercultural era that needs to reckon with many dated assumptions. Read in tandem, though, these two ambitious books underscore the reasons why Crumb remains such a revered but frustrating figure in the history of comics and popular culture.

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