



- [Home](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Commentary](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Recommended](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Forum](#)
- [E-Mail](#)



## Introduction

It's been over thirty years since the first time I was exposed to the comics artform. In those decades, I have read many thousands of comics and graphic novels, thankfully managing to dispose of most of them over time. You would probably be surprised how few comics and related books I own at any given moment -- no more than it takes to fill two bookcases and a few stray shortboxes. It is a frightening thing, indeed, to contemplate what the tactile and asthetic realities my collection might embody were it to have adhered to a rule of strict accretion with no culling for reasons of space conservation, critical discernment or unforeseen disaster ("Damned mustard!") in the time since Richard Nixon was President of the United States.

There are few true masterworks I have encountered in three decades of comics -- fewer still in the past few years of writing about the artform. But I think it's important to recognize the true works of art that have been created, and to direct you to search out the ones you are not familiar with. I am generally only listing here creators still actively working, in the hopes that, like me, you will make a habit out of seeking out and supporting their new work. These are the creators who, for me, virtually never disappoint. In some cases, if one of these creators turns out work I don't understand or enjoy, I grant wide latitude to the premise that the failure in communication between artist and reader is mine, not theirs. For example, the first time I read **Top 10**, I was so overwhelmed by the seeming chaos of the new world Alan Moore had created that I gave up and dismissed the title as not for me. Coming back to it again a few years later, after reading and being hugely entertained by other ABC titles of Moore's creation, I was able to better parse his intentions in the book, and came to realize that the series wasn't as complex or chaotic as I had at first thought. **Top 10** has come to be one of my very favourite comics series of all time. It just took me a year or three to come around.

If Comic Book Galaxy is in any sense a dialogue between its creator and its audience, and I absolutely do wish it to be so -- we would be well on the road to establishing a common language in which to communicate if your personal library contains works by the following creators, and especially the essential titles I am recommending here.

### Dan Clowes - [Fantagraphics Web Page](#)



I think I loved **Eightball** the first time I read it, but Clowes has so evolved as an artist over the years that it's difficult to reconcile his earlier work with the complex and evocative material he has proven himself capable of.

He hasn't so much changed as he has expanded his skill-set. Early **Eightball** and even moreso its predecessor **Lloyd Llewellyn** were soaked in a love of all that is hip and kitsch for its own sake. Anger and bitterness were there, too, but even the most focused stories seem a bit broad now when compared to the tight focus Clowes is now capable of. He has created whole universes with his uncanny sense of what to leave in and more importantly what to leave out, and there's always the sense in any Clowes story that if you could look around a different corner in any given panel, it's *all there*, Clowes is just showing you the part of that world that *he* wants to. This is a vital characteristic of much good art -- the probably-correct impression that the artist has thought much more about the world he is showing you than merely what he is allowing you to see.

As Clowes has matured as a writer and artist he has chosen to explore humanity, in all its depth and ugliness. He has a brilliantly sharp ability to make you see the world as he sees it, but at the same time he only shows you selected elements. Ultimately the joy of Dan Clowes and his work is just how much of the story is constructed within your own mind. It's this off-kilter approach that so delights even as it makes the story totally, utterly *yours*, because Clowes makes you earn it.

**Essential:** [Ghost World](#), [Eightball #22](#), [Eightball #23](#)

### Chris Ware - [Fantagraphics Web Page](#)



Dan Clowes said in a **Comics Journal** interview that Chris Ware is angry. While I think that anger does come through in the totality of his work, a study of any one given panel or page usually demonstrates something quite different: Control.

Of course, anger often comes from a lack of control, and I think Ware's entire career as an artist is based upon coming to grips with his anger, sorrow and sense of loss by tightly controlling every element of his art. This is stunningly apparent in the new **The ACME Novelty Library Datebook** from Drawn and Quarterly, a book that gives the reader perhaps the most complete vision of a cartoonist's artistic process and development that has ever been made public. Hundreds of images show you Ware battling with his own instincts, and a comparison with his finished works will give you both a sense of what has

been achieved and what has been discarded. The dichotomy is that both are compelling and beautiful, and the haunting question is what could have been if anger had superceded control?

**Essential:** [Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth](#), [The ACME Novelty Library Datebook](#)

**Alan Moore** - [Comicon Web Page](#)



There are few comics creators whose work intimidates me, but the fact that I've never done a full-length review of **From Hell**, **Watchmen**, or most of Moore's major accomplishments should give you a clue who the primary suspect is.

I'm most attracted to works that challenge my mind and engage my senses while clearly presenting a complete, comprehensive worldview. For decades now Moore has done just that in virtually every project he has created, which is why he is one of very few comics creators I truly consider a master despite the fact that his mastery skews to one discipline (writing) rather than both (writer/artist). The fact that he is the most accomplished and gifted writer ever to work in comics does not mean he is perfect. Much of the writing he did for Image following the collapse of his Mad Love imprint was inferior not only to his own best work but to that of many others. But -- when he is engaging his full creative power, which is *usually*, the work succeeds. He's grown enormously over time, eschewing skillful tics and tropes to pare down and humanize his approach to its current, sublime transcendence. You truly cannot go wrong with any current offering from his America's Best Comics line, although I think **League of Extraordinary Gentlemen** and **Top Ten** offer the best balance of entertainment, ingenuity and genuine human drama.

**Essential:** [Voice of the Fire](#), [From Hell](#) (with Eddie Campbell)

**Robert Crumb** - [Fantagraphics Web Page](#)



I was born around the same time Crumb was coming into his creative power, so I not only missed it the first time around, but I actively avoided it as I was first maturing and discovering the awesome depth that the comics artform offers.

As someone whose first exposure to the greater range of comics material included **Love and Rockets** and **Cerebus** in the 1980s, I was frankly put off by the seemingly cruder style of Crumb's work, and as a young adult looking to find his own brilliant path to enlightenment, I was offended, I think, at the thought that those dirty old "underground comix" of the 1960s would have anything to offer to a sharp, '80s kind of guy like myself. As I am sure many people approaching 40 have said of themselves as they look back a couple of decades, what a stupid *asshole* I was.

Crumb's brilliance is in slicing off his skin and laying bare his inner being for all and sundry to be repulsed by. If you've seen Terry Zwigoff's masterful documentary *Crumb*, then you know it could never have been any other way.

Crumb has taken the pain of his life and dealt with it using paper, pens, brushes and ink. It's probably the only reason he's still alive, and we're all the better for it. His best work elevates humanity even as it disparages and mocks its most base instincts. Strip away cultural and idiosyncratic variables and inside, Crumb seems to say, we're all the same horny, paranoid caveman. Fuck it, *we are*. Somebody had to say it, and no one has ever said it better than R. Crumb.

**Essential:** Bob and Harv's Comics, My Troubles with Women

### **Paul Hornschemeier** - [Holy Consumption Web Page](#)



While I discovered Hornschemeier much more recently than the rest of the names you see here (and with the prodding of Rob Vollmar, one of the few people who writes about comics that I have learned to trust implicitly), the work he has done to date certainly ranks with the other creators I consider masters of the comics artform; my respect and admiration for his comics work led to my being tapped to write a profile of Hornschemeier that appeared in **The Comics Journal #259**, an expanded version of which appears on this site [here](#).

Hornschemeier's sublime and exquisite design sense serves to fully convey his artistic concerns, which focus on sorrow, loss, and alienation. At the same time, he is vastly experimental, constantly changing gears but always recognizably Hornschemeier. This first became apparent on his early series **Sequential**, second only to **ACME Novelty Library** in its dedication to experimentalism (and well worth seeking out). **Forlorn Funnies #1** was a full-length experiment in form, mood, story and design that also managed to be wildly funny and thought provoking. In no way did it prepare the reader for the greater, deeper joy of storytelling to be found in the masterful issues that followed, including the serialization of **Mother, Come Home** in issues #2-4 and the *tour de force* of cartooning delights presented in the standalone issue #5.

Hornschemeier is probably the least well-known name you'll find in this article, but his audience is sure to grow wider with the move of **Forlorn Funnies** to Fantagraphics. Those first-time readers are in for an enormous shock of recognition when they finally find Paul Hornschemeier; recognition of a true comics genius.

**Essential:** Forlorn Funnies, Mother Come Home

### **James Kochalka** - [American Elf Web Page](#)



Probably the greatest pleasure I've had as a comics critic is watching the profound artistic growth of James Kochalka, a cartoonist and musician from Burlington, Vermont who has redefined comics for me.

His daily diary strips at [American Elf](#) are like a brief chat every day with an old friend, a wacky old friend who may interrupt the call to yell at his cat,

feed his infant son, or wash acrylic paint out of the boy's hair (oops!). My first exposure to his work was **Monkey vs. Robot**, which I was knocked out by at the time, but his daily sketch diary strips have outpaced his charmingly off-beat fictions by a magnitude of astronomic units. He is, finally, America's Greatest Autobiographical Cartoonist (Non-Crumb Division), and his recent mammoth collection of diary strips spanning five years of his life, one day at a time, cements his place as one of comics' all time masters. If he never draws another thing, he has earned his place on this list -- but he can't *stop* drawing, and thank whatever gods there be for that.

**Essential:** [American Elf: The Collected Sketchbook Diaries of James Kochalka, Reinventing Everything #1-2](#)

### **Chester Brown** - [D&Q's Chester Brown Web Page](#)



Chester Brown defies expectation. Most top-level cartoonists start with fiction and work their way into that most sublime, revelatory of genres, autobiography; think of Crumb's **Fritz the Cat** or the aforementioned **Monkey vs. Robot** by James Kochalka, and you'll see what I mean.

The appeal of autobiography is obvious; the truly curious mind seeks out truth, "*tell me something real*," in the words of Dirk Deppey, and in comics the very best autobiographical works are virtually always more vital, more compelling, and even more entertaining than the very best work to be found in any other genre.

Brown, though, he has to be different. He started off with impressive works of autobiography like **The Playboy** and **I Never Liked You**, but demonstrated an unusual willingness to fall on his face through his still unfinished and highly experimental gospel adaptations and, of course, the truly bizarre and challenging **Underwater**.

But when Brown truly matured as a cartoonist, reaching, I think, the very peak of his career to date, was with **Louis Riel**, a lengthy and idiosyncratic biography of someone who to most of the world and certainly to most comics readers, is an obscure figure from Canadian history. Riel's iconoclastic life story is obviously important to Canadians, though, and in that tale Brown found even more reason to relate to his subject: Riel seems to have shared the same schizophrenia that Brown's mother experienced. He set out to tell Riel's story, and eventually delivered what has to be one of the top five most accomplished and, ironically, *personal* graphic novels yet created. **Louis Riel** is a stunning work of depth and complexity, a history lesson and character profile that is among the most compelling comics works I've read.

**Essential:** Louis Riel, The Little Man

### **Grant Morrison** - [Grant Morrison Web Page](#)



In a way, Grant Morrison is the James Kochalka of violent, reality-bending comics filled with ultra-hip characters who tear

their way through life to the very extreme edges of the universe, turn around and either flip us the bird or invite us along. His best work reminds me of Kochalka in that it is so *human*, whether it's Fanny's devastating origin story in **The Invisibles** or Greg Feely's transcendent love for his cat in **The Filth**, Morrison almost always finds the key to making you feel what his characters feel, often with shocking verisimilitude. This is an incredible accomplishment, given how much of his work is focused on peeling away the layers of reality and encouraging readers to test the very limits of their imaginations (and his own).

Morrison's body of work covers a huge range of emotions and colours; whether it's the interdimensional, time-travelling conspiracies of **The Invisibles** or the deconstructionist love letter that was his lengthy **New X-Men** run, Morrison has proven he has one of the sharpest and most subversive minds in corporate comics, and is in fact one of the industry's Most Valuable Players. We need more like him, and fast.

**Essential:** [The Filth](#), [New X-Men](#)

**Seth** - [D&Q Seth Web Page](#)



Seth is probably the most mannered cartoonist working today, a master formalist whose visual tranquility intersects brilliantly with his meditations on longing and regret. This is most clearly enumerated by the building sense of lost opportunities that is evident in **Clyde Fans**, the tale of two brothers and the mistakes that come to define their lives.

Seth's obsession with the appearance and mannerisms of the past reached its apotheosis in **Bannock, Beans and Black Tea**, a memoir written by his father and designed and illustrated by Seth. It's not comics, but as a revelatory family history, it's a fascinating little side-project that offers unexpected insights into the development of Seth's aesthetic sensibilities.

Seth's linework is so serene and comforting that one could almost be forgiven for seeing it as ironic or detached, as some have mistakenly interpreted his sublime [Coober Skeber X-Men cover](#). But immersion in his work is a transformative experience that allows the reader to perceive the world through Seth's eyes, reinventing reality as a lost world of forgotten charm and elegance. Visually, Seth is comics' premier nostalgist -- but his writing packs a deeper emotional faculty that provides for constant narrative astonishment.

**Essential:** Vernacular Drawings, It's A Good Life If You Don't Weaken, Clyde Fans

**Phoebe Gloeckner** - [Phoebe Gloeckner Web Page](#)



To the detriment of all humankind, women seem forever bound to their sexuality and judged by their experiences; Phoebe Gloeckner's body of work says "fuck all that" and demands attention not only to her voice, but to those of all her fellow women and girls.

I realize that's a heavy load to put on the back of one cartoonist, but goddamn if Gloeckner's comics don't succeed in re-defining what it is to be female, rejecting easy sympathy and instead demanding *understanding*. The reader of Gloeckner's works will not be able to nod sympathetically as Minnie is molested, abused and emotionally abandoned. Instead, the reader will have their eyes gently pried open as Gloeckner tracks a very personal journey from powerlessness to empowerment, from sexual victimization to a more complex view of the entire spectrum of human sexual experience.

Her work has had a profound, paradigm-shifting affect on how I see the women around me. Thank God for Phoebe Gloeckner and her magnificent body of work.

**Essential:** [A Child's Life](#), [The Diary of a Teenage Girl](#)

**Gilbert Hernandez** - [Fantagraphics Gilbert Hernandez Web Page](#)



So you've spent nearly two decades serializing the life stories of a bizarre, heartbreakingly human group of characters and compiled it into one of the greatest graphic novels of all time, **Palomar**. A back-breaking slab of hardcover comics excellence, the book transcends comics and enters into the rarified realm of magical realism. Luba and her family exist only in your imagination, yet to your readers, they are as real or moreso than their own families and friends. You've done all that, Gilbert, finally, you can rest. Your reputation as one of comics' all-time genius cartoonists is secure. So what do you do? You keep pumping out new issues of **Love and Rockets**, **Luba** and **Luba's Comics and Stories**. You just can't freaking *stop*, can you?

It seems like not a month goes by that there isn't new work by Gilbert Hernandez to read, thrill to, ponder and place on the ever-growing pile of comics that is his monumental life's work. **Palomar** is the place to start if you've missed out on two decades of some of the world's greatest comics. If that's the case, I envy you.

**Essential:** [Palomar](#)

**Adrian Tomine** - [D&Q Adrian Tomine Web Page](#)



Tomine seemed to work the kinks out of his style in his **Optic Nerve** mini-comics days; from the very start of the regular, Drawn and Quarterly-published series, he has demonstrated a narrative confidence and fascination for human idiosyncracies that is uniquely his own.

I love the raw *reaching* of his mini-comics stuff, reprinted in **32 Stories**, but his issue-length character portraits in **Optic Nerve** provide entertainment and provoke thought with every passing issue. His most recent release as of this writing is issue #9, the start of a three-part exploration of a young Asian man's increasingly damaging fascination with blonde American chicks. It's his most provocative storyline yet, but I can recommend anything with Tomine's name on it without reservation.

**Essential:** 32 Stories, Sleepwalk, Summer Blonde, [Scrapbook](#)

**Renee French** - [Renee French Web Page](#)



Renee French can do things with a pencil that no other artist can seem to accomplish. She creates weird worlds of wonder that have a palpable, tactile sense of hyper-reality. Her strange window into human behaviour is never less than compelling, and her burgeoning career as a children's book author (as "Rainy Dohaney" to avoid kids picking up her more adult work) is riveting as well.

**Essential:** Marbles in My Underpants, [Tinka](#), The Soap Lady

**Tony Millionaire** - [Maakies Web Page](#)



Tony Millionaire's insane world of suicidal drunks is as addictive as crack cocaine. The strange charm of **Maakies** is in the recursive loop that the strip has travelled again and again for years now, a constant deconstruction and reconstruction of amputations, blown-off heads and endless, glorious, *I-Just-Shit-Myself* -- Yay! drunkenness. I don't know that Millionaire is at all sane or healthy, but as a comics creator he is without peer. As a bonus, beneath every brilliant, beautifully-illustrated **Maakies** strip there runs a minimalist second cartoon that reveals Millionaire's inner mean, misogynist, racist bastard. Or mockery thereof. When you're this drunk, who gives a shit? It's party time!

**Essential:** [The House at Maakies Corner](#), [When We Were Very Maakies](#)

**Joe Matt** - [D&Q Joe Matt Web Page](#)



Joe Matt's alternative comic series **Peepshow** has taken us on his cartoon avatar's years-long journey from selfish turd to nearly-unhinged compulsive masturbator, with one stop along the way to visit his idyllic, sun-soaked childhood filled with comic books, bike rides, and girls with their shirts off.

It's one of the most disturbing character arcs in all of comicdom, and we still don't know where it's going to end up or how real Matt's comics really are. Don't know, don't really much care. They're things of wonder, these stories of cum-soaked Kleenex and jars full of piss. What a fucking nutcase!

**Essential:** The Poor Bastard, Peepshow #10-13

**Jim Woodring** - [Jim Woodring Web Page](#)



Jim Woodring's entire career seems to be a working-through of all the difficulties that are implicit in seeing the world quite different from those around you. He has used his personal experiences and perceptions to create lush, inviting worlds of strange danger, wicked oddness and living machines so eerie in their otherness that they invite comparisons to Lovecraft, except, you know, with bright splashes of colour suggesting the Golden Age

of Animation.

His fat, powerful ink work is as compelling as his colour work, and his text, rare as it is, must be read carefully and parsed as both the brilliance and nonsense that it is. Jim Woodring lives in a world all your own. You can run, but you shouldn't.

**Essential:** [The Frank Book](#), The Book Of Jim

## And So...

It should go without saying (but reader reaction often proves otherwise) that an article such as this is a work of opinion. I am not suggesting that this is received wisdom, unable to be debated or discussed because *this is just the way it is*. While I do tend to believe (to the irritation of many) that certain elements and variables can be reasonably calculated to determine to a close degree of accuracy questions that speciously appear to be matters of opinion rather than fact (by any rational, intelligent standard, it is without question that Alan Moore is the most gifted writer ever to work in the comics industry), when dealing with what is essentially a "ten best list," (although I did not limit myself to ten), it must be accepted that the list is informed only by the experiences and critical faculties of its creator.

Despite the incredibly diverse styles, genres and interests of the comics creators above, all of them have in common the sense *anything is possible* in their work and indeed, that their best work may yet lay ahead of them. We are extraordinarily gifted to have such visionary artists sharing their work with us, and I hope you'll investigate any of the creators I've discussed whose work you haven't yet exposed yourself to. If you approach their work with an open mind and ready for new experiences and new ways of seeing the world through comics, I don't expect that any of them will let you down.

-- [Alan David Doane](#)

---

Click [here](#) to learn how you can support Comic Book Galaxy.



Please support Comic Book Galaxy by visiting our sponsor



Google Search



Search WWW



Search [www.comicbookgalaxy.com](http://www.comicbookgalaxy.com)

**Subscribe to [comicbookgalaxyupdates](#)**

enter email address



Powered by [groups.yahoo.com](http://groups.yahoo.com)

