

ABOUT TCJ

SUBSCRIBE

BACK ISSUES

WRITER'S GUIDELINES

ADVERTISING

## ARCHIVES

BY ISSUE NUMBER

NEWSWATCH

INTERVIEWS

REVIEWS

ESSAYS

ONLINE FEATURES

AUDIO ARCHIVES

IJOURNALISTA!

DOGSBODY

## Phoebe Gloeckner

Interviewed by Gary Groth

excerpted from *The Comics Journal* #261

cover art from from *The Atrocity Exhibition* (as reprinted in *A Child's Life*), ©1990 Phoebe Gloeckner

### Artistic Beginnings

**GARY GROTH:** How young were you when you started drawing?

**PHOEBE GLOECKNER:** Well, all kids draw.

**GROTH:** Yeah, but some kids are more obsessed with it than others.

**GLOECKNER:** I guess I was obsessed with it early -- so early that I don't remember.

**GROTH:** And did you draw continually? Or did you have your periods of...

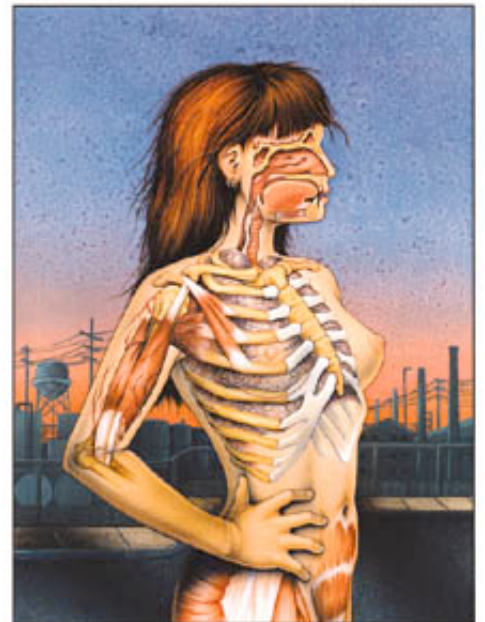
**GLOECKNER:** No. I mean, I pretty much did something all the time. I was always writing or drawing or making newspapers...

**GROTH:** So, what was life like in Pennsylvania? Your father was gone after age four...

**GLOECKNER:** My mom remarried, but we were really pretty poor for a while. At first, we lived in a converted garage belonging to a painter friend of hers, Napoleon Gorsky. My mom was young. When I was four, I guess she was barely 20 and she had two kids and she was going to college. My mom's parents took care of us much of the time. We moved around a lot. I don't think I lived anywhere for more than a year before I was a teenager, and I went to a different school every year. I didn't make lasting friends. I made temporary friends, that I would remember forever, but I wouldn't keep in contact with them because I was a little kid, you know?

**GROTH:** Did that bother you as a kid, or did you just consider it normal?

**GLOECKNER:** It felt normal to me, but it was also painful. I was always in a state of missing someone, and then you go to a different school and everybody already has friends and so you kind of feel left out, and then you end up becoming that kid on the outside over and over and over



again. I guess you get used to that. That probably carries over. It probably affected my personality somehow.

**GROTH:** Were you close to your sister?

**GLOECKNER:** No. She's two years younger than me. We fought like crazy. I was so mean to her. I tried to kill her.

**GROTH:** Really?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah.

**GROTH:** Was it just because she irritated you, or because there was something in you that you would have had to...

**GLOECKNER:** Because she was my sister, I guess. I was a really angry little kid, and it was also that they told my mom that I was borderline hyperactive, they wanted to treat me with drugs if they could. I was like a problem kid.

**GROTH:** What was the man that your mother married like?

**GLOECKNER:** You mean, after my Dad? He was a Pygmalion, 10 or 15 years older than my mother. He was Scottish. A professor of calculus or something at the University of Pennsylvania, and then he became a publisher.

**GROTH:** Uh oh!

**GLOECKNER:** I know. [*Laughs.*] I mean, he was an editor, and then he moved up through the ranks... you know, as an editor of scientific books, and then he got hired as Editor-in-Chief of *Scientific American*, which was at that time based in San Francisco. So that's why we moved to San Francisco.

**GROTH:** I see. So he was pretty accomplished.

**GLOECKNER:** Well, he was very smart, but very fucked up.

**GROTH:** How was he fucked up?

**GLOECKNER:** He was an angry person.

**GROTH:** How did this manifest itself?

**GLOECKNER:** Well, sometimes he'd get mad at our cat and chase it around the house with a broom, eventually catching up to it and bringing the broom down on the animal's head with all his strength. [*Laughter.*] On the other hand, he was the one who found the cat run over in the snow. He carried it home, dead, with tears streaming down his face...

He was very conflicted. He called his parents "peasants" because they hadn't gone to college, but he had put himself through the University of Edinburgh and got his PhD in the States and had made something of himself. An intellectual. But he remained conscious of his "peasant" roots... He had a great disdain for people he saw as "*nouveau riche*," probably because he was nouveau everything, having come from a poor family. He was critical of ignorance, and admired intelligence, and had a cruel habit of comparing people: who was smarter, who was more beautiful, who was more this or that.

**GROTH:** It sounds oppressive. How long were they married?

**GLOECKNER:** They were married for 10 years, but separated for half of the time. It wasn't very stable.

**GROTH:** Was there anything positive about his involvement in the family, or his...

**GLOECKNER:** Oh sure. For me it was great because he thought I was bright, and he let me know this. But on the other hand, he had a natural daughter and he would tell me that I was brighter than she was. So this is an example of him comparing people, and in this case I was put in a position of feeling like I had betrayed someone -- my stepsister.

**GROTH:** More guilt.

**GLOECKNER:** More guilt. Right.

**GROTH:** Now, when you were a kid, you were not particularly drawn to comics from what I can tell.

**GLOECKNER:** No, not particularly... I read *Little Lotta* and *Little Dot* sometimes.

**GROTH:** So the drawing you did when you were a kid, it wasn't cartoony; it wasn't related to comics; it wasn't stories; it was just individual illustrations.

**GLOECKNER:** Right. I guess. Drawings. I drew people...

**GROTH:** I understand you moved to San Francisco when you were 12. That would have been around 1971, I guess.

**GLOECKNER:** Seventy-two.

**GROTH:** You said that your parents had underground comics around the house at that time. Who would your parents have been at that point?

**GLOECKNER:** That was the stepfather I was just talking about and my mom.

**GROTH:** The professor of calculus?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah. Right, professor of calculus.

**GROTH:** So, you sneaked looks at the underground comics?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, that's what they had. They had all the dirty ones.

**GROTH:** Well, they were all dirty, weren't they?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, I guess they were.

**GROTH:** So, do you remember which comics were lying around? I know that *Twisted Sisters* was a huge influence.

**GLOECKNER:** Yes, a huge influence, but that came out later.

**GROTH:** So, what other comics?

**GLOECKNER:** Well, the first ones I saw were *Zaps*. And, you know...

Wonder Warthog...

**GROTH:** Was this a revelation to you?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, because I think that's how I found out about sex. I remember just feeling incredulous and shocked, and I think it switched something on in my head. The revelation was, OK, well, you can write a story about anything in comics.

**GROTH:** How old would you have been when you discovered underground comics?

**GLOECKNER:** About 12.

**GROTH:** Crumb's "Joe Blow" had a big effect on you.

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, it did. I loved the drawings, how soft they looked and rounded...

**GROTH:** Tactile...

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah... they reminded me of Garth Williams. I loved *Charlotte's Web*, and other E.B. White stuff he illustrated, but that story, "Joe Blow," it's like you can just pick it up off the page. It's very... dimensional somehow, and for a kid, it's very appealing. It looks like a kid's book illustration. Stuff like Victor Moscoso, I'd look at it, but it just was like prickly daggers, sharp and slick. It wasn't attractive to me.

**GROTH:** Too abstract?

**GLOECKNER:** No, too clean and not warm. The images didn't mean anything to me either. I don't know.

**GROTH:** What about Wilson? He's pretty warm.

**GLOECKNER:** Oh yeah, I liked Wilson a lot. What... Ruby and the Pirates? Star-Eyed Stella... but still that never seemed to be about real people. I mean, Crumb was talking about real people. Then when I saw *Twisted Sisters*. Aline was writing directly about herself, and Diane Noomin had the character, Didi Glitz. Do you know that comic?

**GROTH:** Of course, yeah.

**GLOECKNER:** It's the best. I still think it's better than any later *Twisted Sisters*.

**GROTH:** Right, and Didi Glitz was an alter-ego of Diane's.

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, exactly, and it was the funniest thing I'd ever seen. Still, if I look at that, I just laugh out loud. Unfortunately, she's hardly ever recognized for how wonderful her work is. You look on lists of comic books and comics creators and she's rarely included. I think she's one of the best. Seriously. I love her stuff.

**GROTH:** She's great, but she's not prolific. I mean, she does comics very sporadically.

**GLOECKNER:** This wasn't always true. It certainly didn't matter to me whether she was prolific or not. I just read whatever she did.

**GROTH:** Yeah, we should do a collection of all of her work.

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, it's a good idea. Do it.

**GROTH:** There are a million projects in the back of my head that we have to get around to, and that's one of them.

So this had an enormous effect on you at the age of 13 or 14?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah.

## **Hippies and Underground Comics**

**GROTH:** Tell me a little about how you evolved. You did "Mary the Minor," and then you did a comic strip called "Identity Crisis" in 1977. I think at some point you met Crumb and perhaps that inspired you to do more comics.

**GLOECKNER:** I met him actually before, when I was 15 or something. Do you know this story? Did I say it before?

**GROTH:** You did, but not in this interview, so you're going to have to say it again. Your mother took you to a concert where his band, The Cheap Suit Serenaders, were playing. I guess you had written him a letter before that.

**GLOECKNER:** I had written Aline --

**GROTH:** That's right. OK.

**GLOECKNER:** -- and she remembered it. I used to see him a lot. I mean, it's not like he was my friend, but he was at our house a lot because my mom was dating another cartoonist in the band.

**GROTH:** Bob Armstrong.

**GLOECKNER:** Right. And so...

**GROTH:** So, it was one big happy family.

**GLOECKNER:** Right, but I was scared of him, of Crumb, because I was so shy and I thought he was so great and I mean, he would sleep in my bed and I would go sleep in my sister's room. Or a couple times I know he was sneaking looks at my sketchbook and stuff, and then he would draw something in there and I'd get really embarrassed. I'd get, you know, tongue-tied.

But I knew Terry probably better. Terry Zwigoff.

**GROTH:** Oh, really?

**GLOECKNER:** He was also in the Serenaders. He became a pretty good friend of my mother's.

**GROTH:** So how did you get to know all these people. What was the trajectory?

**GLOECKNER:** Well they're my mom's generation, so she started dating Bob [Armstrong], they all lived near the city. They would all come to our

house to practice before they did a gig or something. They were all in the band together -- Bob Armstrong, Terry Zwigoff, Al Dodge, Crumb, and a few other guys that came and went. Terry lived in the city and used to work in the unemployment office and at one point...

**GROTH:** ... which your mother visited?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah. She was on unemployment at some point. She knew him before, but it was convenient to know someone down at the office. So, we knew him pretty well. Terry's brother was a doctor. He lived in Philadelphia, and he was my grandparents' doctor.

**GROTH:** Jesus. Small world.

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah. Crumb didn't really have anything to do with me publishing any comics. I don't think. I mean, he would say, "Why don't you..." I didn't want to talk to him about it.

**GROTH:** He published you in *Weirdo* in 1981, so he had something to do with it.

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, later on, but by that time I was 21 and had been drawing comics for five years.

**GROTH:** I think the first comic I know that you published was in *Young Lust*, is that true?

**GLOECKNER:** Yes, but it wasn't the first one I did.

The story is, I was too shy to ask Crumb how to get a comic published, so I said, "OK, well, I'll just go to Last Gasp." I think I was 15, and I called up and I said, "I'm a cartoonist. Can I show you my work?" I met Ron Turner, who showed me the original pages from some comic book that was about to be printed. He was very nice to me, patronly, almost -- he seemed really interested in what I was doing, but didn't exactly tell me whether he liked it or not. He did say, however -- and I think it was good advice -- that I was going to have to learn how to draw fire hydrants and everything else under the sun. I think he was kind of shocked that a 15-year-old girl came all alone. I wasn't very bold. I was shy, you know? Last Gasp is in a huge warehouse in San Francisco. You've been in it, haven't you?

**GROTH:** Oh, yeah.

**GLOECKNER:** Well, at that time it looked different -- not a lot, but there were all these open shelves just filled with comics and comics and comics and comics. He just let me take whatever I wanted, and it was fantastic. I remember I was really afraid to walk into a store and buy comics, because, like I said, I had this thing against hippies. I hated them.

**GROTH:** You're talking about head shops, right?

**GLOECKNER:** I was embarrassed. I would have to work up the courage to go into a head shop, because I would think, "Oh they think that I want to buy a pot pipe," or "They think I want to get a dirty comic," or "They think..." you know. I would have to hold my breath in order to buy anything. If you're a 15-year-old girl, you feel that people are staring at you, like "What are you doing?" I don't know. It's horrifying. So at Last Gasp, he just threw anything at me, gave me everything. It was great

because I read things I'd never read before and probably couldn't get in a head shop anyway.

**GROTH:** What was your aversion to hippies?

**GLOECKNER:** I guess because my mom was kind of a hippie, and a lot of her friends certainly were. I hated the Beatles because my mom liked them. I thought the Monkees were better.

**GROTH:** So it was an aspect of rebellion...

**GLOECKNER:** I don't know. I just...

**GROTH:** ...which the hippies also were.

**GLOECKNER:** I thought they were slow and stupid. That really bothered me, that kind of stoned quality, and "everything was beautiful" and "love the one you're with..." and I just thought, "What a joke." It is, you know?

**GROTH:** [Laughs.] You didn't buy into any of that.

**GLOECKNER:** No.

**GROTH:** Can you tell me how you first appeared in *Young Lust*?

**GLOECKNER:** They said I could do something, but I had to either figure out how to make it the same proportion as that comic...

**GROTH:** You met Bill Griffith, right?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, I met Bill Griffith.

**GROTH:** Where did you meet him?

**GLOECKNER:** I think I met him at Jay Kinney's house. Do you know Jay Kinney?

**GROTH:** Yeah.

**GLOECKNER:** That's where I had to go. I don't remember who directed me there, whether it was Ron Turner or Crumb. I went there, and then I went to Bill's house and Diane was there. I was totally freaked out. I was so scared because Diane was my idol. It's like meeting Jesus.

I guess the next time I was published was in *Re/SEARCH* Magazine, one of the first issues, when it was a tabloid. It was a very "edgy" publication at that time. When I was about 17, punk rock hit San Francisco, and the Sex Pistols played their last concert at Winterland, and I was going to all the clubs every night. But I think that was the first and only time in my life I wanted to join a club. I wanted to be in the punk club. *Re/SEARCH* was a part of that. I wore a leather jacket. Cut my hair short and dyed it black and had safety pins hanging from me and got an exacto-knife tattoo. It was fun, but at the same time it's somewhat embarrassing to me. I don't know. It doesn't matter.

**GROTH:** Did you feel like you fit in there, or you wanted to?

**GLOECKNER:** What I loved was dancing all night. Slam dancing, because I've always had some sort of violence in me. I used to get into big fights in the parking lot, at like two or three in the morning with other girls...

**GROTH:** You did?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah. I loved it! I relished it. I loved slam dancing and banging against other people and being down in North Beach and walking home all alone in the middle of the night after the Mabuhay Gardens closed. Five miles and walking, walking, walking as fast as I could. I just loved those feelings -- using up all of my energy, screaming and yelling. That's what I loved. It wasn't so much the external, the look or anything else. It was just being allowed to...

**GROTH:** ...to expend that energy?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, and get totally punchy and...

**GROTH:** Where do you think the violence came from? Why did you enjoy that?

**GLOECKNER:** I guess I have a lot of my dad in me. He was a wrestler. He was the same way.

**GROTH:** Did you get hurt?

**GLOECKNER:** No, I was really strong.

**GROTH:** [*Snickers.*]

**GLOECKNER:** I was!

**GROTH:** What do you mean, "was?"

**GLOECKNER:** I don't know. I haven't fought that way in a long time.

**GROTH:** I see.

**GLOECKNER:** I wish I could. You wanna come over?

**GROTH:** You and your husband have punch-outs once in a while, don't you?

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, we do, actually. Do you want me to get side-tracked and tell you about that?

**GROTH:** Hell, yes. And then we can go back.

**GLOECKNER:** OK, I'll just tell you. We were at his parents' house a couple years ago, and, you know, the typical scenario, it's like I'm punching his arm, and he kept saying, "It doesn't hurt. I don't even feel it. It doesn't hurt. I don't even feel it." So, I'm punching him harder and harder and harder, right? Playing around in the living room, and I'm punching him as hard as I can. "I don't feel it. I don't feel it." He turned just a little slight bit and I clipped him on the scapula or something, but the impact, it was so strong, that I felt this crack in my hand, and I just said, "OK, my hand's broken." And he looked at me like, "You're crazy. You're crazy." I said "No, it's really broken." I told his mother, and she said, "Let me see, I'm about to serve dinner. It's fine. Just sit down. It'll feel better in a minute once the aspirin hits." I said, "It's really, really broken." Finally his father said, "Oh, Phoebe I believe you. Let's go to the hospital." They took an x-ray and it was one of the happiest moments in my life because it was a perfect, beautiful x-ray, showing the fifth metacarpal beneath the little finger snapped in two like a pencil. And the doctor said, [*deep doctor*

voice] "Well, generally, this is an injury we commonly see in young men, it's called a boxer's fracture. But I've never seen it on a woman your age." [*Laughter.*] I was so proud of my boxer's fracture.

**GROTH:** And that was fairly recently, like within the last couple of years?

**GLOECKNER:** Yes. It's the only broken bone I've ever had, and so, I'm glad I had it.

**GROTH:** You should be rightly proud of that.

**GLOECKNER:** Anyway, the point is, I've always had that in me, and I guess people do, it's lucky I wasn't a boy, because I probably would be in jail. I often feel that because it's that kind of a hair trigger. You know, I feel it. I can control myself, but I like confrontation, for the most part. Unless there's no point to it.

**GROTH:** You can usually make a point to any confrontation, though.

**GLOECKNER:** Sure, and who can't? That's the thing about lawyers, right?

**GROTH:** So, OK, you sort of became a punk, and it was during this period when you also started appearing in comics with *Young Lust* in 1980, and Robert published you in *Weirdo*. The next thing I know you did is a cover for *Wimmin's Comix* in 1989.

**GLOECKNER:** I did lots of *Wimmin's Comix* in between.

**GROTH:** Is that where most of the material from *A Child's Life* appeared?

**GLOECKNER:** Maybe. I don't know. Another thing... I didn't do a lot of comics. I never considered myself a cartoonist. That's really true. I think if I had, I would have just done comics, but...

**GROTH:** Why have you not considered yourself a cartoonist -- when you clearly are a cartoonist?

**GLOECKNER:** Well, why do you think I'm a cartoonist? Because I've done cartoons?

**GROTH:** Because you've done comics that involve cartooning. I mean, you have a whole book of comics published.

**GLOECKNER:** What do you mean, "comics that involve cartooning?" I've done comics, but I think of myself as an artist. I've done paintings, but I don't call myself a painter. I think my last book [*Diary of a Teen-Age Girl*] is probably more what I was headed for. And now I feel like I'm headed for something else. But it just... I mean, what is a cartoonist? No, I feel like the medium or the kind of genre is totally unimportant to me in a sense. I mean, I think comics for a long time worked for me.

**GROTH:** I was just going to say, comics require a certain set of conventions and involve a certain grammar, all of which you've more or less mastered. To go back to why you are a cartoonist -- which is not to say you're not a prose writer as well, obviously -- but it looks like for at least 20 some odd years, much of your artistic expression has been cartooning.

**GLOECKNER:** Yeah, are you going to say something else?

**GROTH:** No. I'm just making my case that you're a cartoonist.

**GLOECKNER:** I guess, but I guess it's just... It doesn't... I don't know why, Gary. I think there are other people who perhaps really are what I would consider a cartoonist.

**GROTH:** Is it because you feel like an outsider in the cartooning world?

**GLOECKNER:** Perhaps that's some of it. But I just... I don't feel that... Well, I don't even know how to say it. I use that medium and... I don't know, I guess I resist it because when I think of cartooning... OK, now I'm losing my words. I don't love comics, any comics, as much as I think I should if I was to call myself a cartoonist. It's not like I'm in love with that medium over all others. I feel actually constrained by it, and calling myself a cartoonist feels like more constraint. I'm hesitant to accept that, I guess -- and no, I've never really felt accepted by the world of comics. I mean, you probably know that...

**GROTH:** Which could be a good thing.

**GLOECKNER:** I guess. Maybe. But if I felt like I could honestly call myself a cartoonist, I would, whether I felt like an outsider or not.

**GROTH:** I don't know when we first met, or got into contact, but you never quite traveled in those circles. You know what I mean? So, yeah, you always seemed like a bit of an outsider. And you weren't as prolific as a lot of cartoonists.

**GLOECKNER:** Because I wasn't a cartoonist. I wasn't prolific in the same way. If you consider all the things I've done that aren't comics, you'd probably see me as more productive than you do. And you're saying I didn't travel in your circle, I think. I've always known cartoonists. In San Francisco, all the *Wimmen's Comix* people, and Paul Mavrides and Hal Robins are good friends of mine...

**GROTH:** Right, but you don't feel any more passionately about cartooning than you do about any number of other art forms. That seems to be what you're saying.

**GLOECKNER:** No, not about that medium in particular. I'm passionate about art.

**GROTH:** Right, and cartooning is just one aspect of that passion.

**GLOECKNER:** Right...

**GROTH:** Let me ask you this: How did you figure out how to do comics? Was it by studying Aline and Noomin and Crumb and working it out by trial and error?

**GLOECKNER:** What's to "figure out?" Reading comics teaches one how they are structured. Because I started doing comics when I was so young, I was learning to draw, to write, to read... to do comics... concurrently. It was a natural development of these skills...

**GROTH:** Was it instinctual, or did you actually sit down and study it and try to figure out how to create the rhythm of a story visually, and what to put in each panel?

**GLOECKNER:** Oh, no, I didn't. I wasn't thinking about structure. I just

knew, or thought I knew it at some point, whether what I was doing was right or wrong, or working or not. I don't work in a very organized way -- I never know what the end of the story's going to be when I start out. I never sketch out the whole story. I work toward the end, but I never know what that's going to be.

***[To read the rest of this interview, please see The Comics Journal #261.]***

[About](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Back Issues](#) | [Writers](#) | [Advertising](#)  
[Newswatch](#) | [Interviews](#) | [Reviews](#) | [Essays](#) | [Online Features](#)

All site contents are © 2002 **FANTAGRAPHICS BOOKS**