

My Not-So-Secret Identity:

The Fact and Fiction of Phoebe Gloeckner

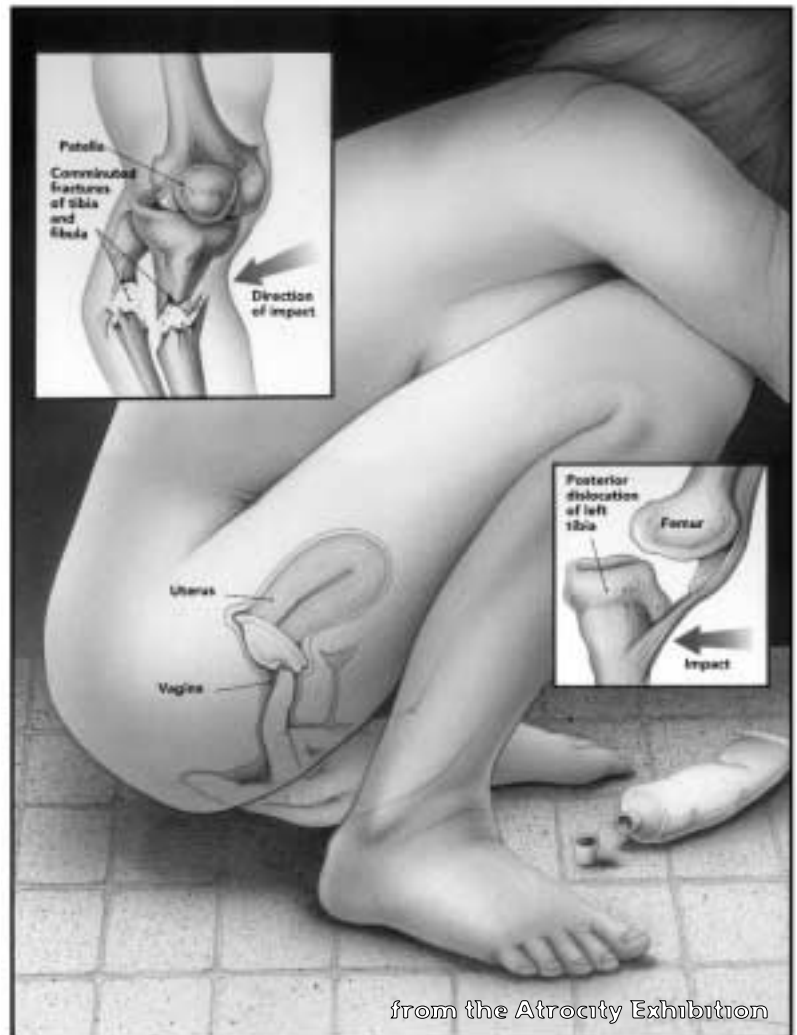
Dear Diary,

Today, I closed my eyes, and imagined that young-adult writers Beverly Cleary and Judy Blume weren't old and WASPy prudish. Instead, they wrote about cool tween girls growing up in mid-seventies California who smoked a lot of pot. One of the girls had a sexual relationship with her mother's boyfriend. And maybe, just maybe, the other dabbled in porn and pimped her best friend out in exchange for heroin. And there was a leering step-father and a bunch of other malevolent older men circling around them, especially when they were out at night, and there was a vague mother in the background, and even vaguer siblings. And then later, as a grown-up, one of them published her diary all about it. But then I opened my eyes, and it turned out that I was smack dab in the middle of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, the acclaimed debut novel-cum-comic born of the imagination and experiences of an exciting new cartoonist called Phoebe Gloeckner.

This spring, Phoebe Gloeckner was a special guest of the inaugural Toronto Comic Arts Festival. By day, Gloeckner is a professional artist with a master's in biomedical illustration; she illustrated J.G. Ballard's controversial novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* complete with irreverent pre-med cross-sections like that of a blow job, and point-of-impact drawings of sexual intercourse and female anatomy. By night, Gloeckner is someone else entirely.

Troubling, inventive, beautiful, and haunting, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is the first-person story of the misadventures of the woman-child (and Gloeckner alter-ego) named Minnie Goetze. Minnie is a not-quite-pretty-enough brunette, a precocious Ramona Quimby-like teen who floats through the haze of her traumatic sexual awakening in 1970s San Francisco with all the devil-may-care attitude of one Pippi Longstocking and the naivete of a kindred-spirited Anne. The resultant *Diary* is a chronicle of adolescence gone horribly, horribly awry: every parent's worst fears manifest.

By Nathalie Atkinson



from the *Atrocity Exhibition*

Fears that come true more often than you might think. And some fears that did, for its author.

At first meeting, you would never guess that the ebullient forty-ish Gloeckner is a multi-media force to be reckoned with, and that her dark, edgy work ebbs and flows from a nondescript Long Island home studio (a converted garage) where she is raising two pre-teen children. But then you look more closely: the charismatic woman bears more than a passing resemblance to the girl captured in her book's black and white drawings. Sure, the real, grown-up version sports a ladylike manicure, but it's in rebellious punk-black, and she has a breathy, girlish voice with soft, roundly pronounced vowels. After the nail polish, that voice is the next thing you notice about Gloeckner: her husky voice the adult personification of the tentative, shy, screwed-up girl from the diary page. Minnie's diary. Phoebe's diary. Autobiography. Fiction.

Brave and voyeuristic, *Diary* is an exercise in genre-bending. It defies critical classification: call it proto-feminist biography, post-modern memoir, meta-narrative or coming-of-age smut, but its fans are many and varied. Sexy site Nerve loves it; so do chick mags that run the gamut from BUST and Bitch to Jane and YM; Salon weighed in with a borderline-fawning profile earlier this year, and even that grey lady, the New York Times, has pronounced that Gloeckner is "creating some of the edgiest work about young

women's lives in any medium." And despite the fact that Gloeckner claims she's no cartoonist, *Diary* has just been shortlisted for a Harvey Award, the alternative comics industry's coveted and more street-credible indie recognition scheme.

Growing up, Gloeckner's idols included legendary underground comix man R. Crumb and his wife Aline Kaminsky (friends through her hippie-groupie mother). Predictably, she has been drawing — and keeping a detailed diary — since she was her heroine's age. But she is restless, and has never called herself a cartoonist. "I like film, I like writing prose, I like drawing, I like painting. I tend to change how I do things a lot." Discussing art and memoir, Gloeckner is as emphatic as she is inquisitive. She answers probing questions with honest philosophical questions and pauses thoughtfully before responding.

However, on the point of autobiography, Gloeckner is coy but firm. "A lot of it, well, incorporates a lot of the diaries I wrote when I was a teenager," she demurs. So it draws from them, if not exactly mirroring them? "No, a lot of it is exactly mirroring them, actually. I struggled for a long time arguing with myself, you know, 'how precious is this as a document, do I care, is this documentary, is it autobiography, what is it?' How do you make a book where people will be 'what does it all mean?' So it took me a long time to do the book, even though I had a lot of the material already, and part of it


was I was confused myself about how I was going to approach it. But finally I abandoned the idea of preserving the diaries as they were and, I threw half of it away, and added more stuff, rearranged stuff, combined stuff in order to make a story with some kind of narrative."

Factual or not, Gloeckner offers an engrossing living portrait of sexual awakening, shame, self-awareness, intellectual curiosity, obsession, and infatuation. The heroine is a sweet and angry young woman who has a vivid internal life and more importantly, a candid interior monologue. We are privy to it in Minnie's diary entry illustrations, peppered with song lyrics, spoken word fragments, and non sequitur musings. But the bulk of the account is through traditional prose and sequential comic panels. Technically, *Diary* is "an account in words and pictures" but in reality it transcends classification — though the cover helpfully suggests shelving in either Literature, Comics or Art. Some might even suggest it qualifies as a sort of unconventional erotica, because in a difficult, disturbing way, it's also a very sexy book. "You know, sex was so much a part of my life when I was that age — it coloured my life. My mother's sexuality, the people around her, it was almost a palpable thing, another character," admits Gloeckner, "and Minnie as a character is obsessed with sex."

Yes, Minnie is both consumed by sex and completely guileless about it. "She is also, in many ways, kind of prudish," says

Sex and Violence: A Timeline of Underground Comics

by Brian Joseph Davis

	<p>Egyptians publish their comics in underground tunnels and tombs. Horus, a bird headed god (think Hawkman) is violated by his evil uncle Set. Horus runs to Isis, his mother, with Set's seed on his hand. Isis cuts off Horus's contaminated hand and places some of Horus's seed in Set's garden. Set becomes pregnant when he eats from the garden. Considered way too weird, the series is cancelled after only two thousand years.</p>	<p>A dark time for the development of comics — underground or otherwise. Greeks and Romans prefer buff statuary to illustration; Islam eschews visual representation altogether; and Christians are so flat-ass broke they have to write their scriptures on fucking leaves. As visual art develops, the idea of sequential art is considered primitive and thrown in the back of the drawer as goofy men in tights kill themselves to create perfect perspective and anatomical renderings.</p>		<p>Tsukioka Yoshitoshi becomes one unpopular dude in the rarefied world of ukiyo-e woodblock printing. His chosen palette is very red and delineates the crumbling of the Japanese Empire. Images of Samurai slaughterers, succubae, geishas, and plagues are often at odds with his incredibly graceful hand.</p>			
<p>Pre-historic Frenchmen paint sequential pictures on the walls of underground caves near Lascaux, France. Giant phalluses dance around images of slaughtered bison.</p>			<p>William Hogarth is born. This master printmaker publishes his own collections, often stories of prostitutes, drunkards, and criminals.</p>				
<p>13,500 BC</p>	<p>3000 BC</p>		<p>1000 BC-1300 AD</p>		<p>1697</p>	<p>1850</p>	

Gloeckner. "What she really wants is love, and to be loved. And somehow she's got the idea that sex and love are the same thing. Or they might be, so she's very confused. And then love becomes eroticized. I know that the book could titillate, but that's not the point. My books are not so much about sex, but about wanting something, looking for something, but that thing remains enigmatic and undefined. I'm still not sure. Do you think that love and sex can be the same thing?"

An initial experimental and more haphazard rendering of the Minnie/Phoebe story can be found as fragments in Gloeckner's *A Child's Life and Other Stories*, published in 1998 — at least when it's not mistakenly confiscated (which it is, and often) by squeamish customs folk worldwide for one particularly graphic depiction of underage fellatio. And this *Diary* explores disturbing territory, too. In a key early scene, after her mother and sister are in bed asleep, 35-year-old Monroe gets cozy and lets 15-year-old Minnie drink some of his wine. Minnie recalls the beginning of her obsessive relationship with her mother's boyfriend: "He sort of rubbed my breast through my nightgown but I was so surprised by what he was doing that even though I half-felt that it was rude and presumptuous of me to think he was doing this intentionally, I backed away because I didn't want him to feel how small my breasts were, even by accident.... And I also had this strangely calming feeling that



Phoebe Gloeckner and Minnie Goetz

even if he had touched my tits on purpose that it was probably all right because he's one of our best friends and he's a good guy and he knows how it goes and I don't."

With *Diary*, readers are constantly surprised that they identify so closely with a character despite sharing none of the same actual experiences. "What I hope and what I do get sometimes is that people respond to it not because they think it's me, not because they think it's real, but because [Minnie] is vivid enough," continues Gloeckner, "that they can understand the character's motivations, confusions, and hear her voice." And it's true: Minnie resonates as though Gloeckner was in the room, as if it was her own voice telling the tale as a cautionary bedtime story. "One e-mail in particular," she says, "said 'I am an Asian



male, I am 39 years old, I am not anything like Minnie at all, yet I identified with her completely."

Written with the benefit of hindsight told by an observant young everywoman, *Diary* captures the poignant paradox of a young woman at once self-conscious and guileless. Love it or hate it, more than just the voice of that teenage girl, Gloeckner is an important voice in alternative comics.

Signing off, dear diary, until tomorrow.



Robert Crumb is born.

Zap Comics #4 is released. Hippie stores on both coasts are busted by "the man" for selling it with the New York trial going on for seven years. Zap is the Yale of the underground and issue #4 features sado-sexual nightmares courtesy of S. Clay Wilson's "Checkered Demon" and the straw that broke the judge's back, "Joe Blow" by Robert Crumb — an incest-laden parody of the American nuclear family. (See 3000 BC)



The stock market crashes and comic publishers have to widen their child-based market (Little Nemo, Mutt and Jeff) to include adolescents and adults. Yes, Tarzan and Prince Valiant eventually pave the way for Fritz.

EC Comics begins publishing, in no particular order: blood drenched noir, scatological humour, grotesque horror, and sangfroid Poe-esque morality tales. The US government accuses them of being Communists. EC is all but ruined with only their humour title MAD surviving.

Trina Robbins, an early member of the Yippies, takes time off from throwing blood bombs at Dean Rusk when she realizes that there's no room for her or other female comic artists in the very male underground. She forms the "It Ain't Me Babe" publishing collective. She's crunchy, but you'd be crunchy too if you had to endure the sexism of 1960s alpha males.

After nearly 15,000 years the French pick up their pens and inkwells again and create Metal Hurlant — launched in North America as Heavy Metal — an LSD-drenched comics magazine of fantasy and sci-fi, noted for its frank depiction of violence and sexuality. A flip through any issue reveals giant breasts dancing around slaughtered robots. (As an aside, while I may have once opened up a copy accidentally on the stands thinking there would be photos of Def Leppard, I don't know a single person who has ever purchased or read a copy of this magazine save for one woman I knew a few years ago who had a complete set and worked in an adult video store. Who supports this magazine? Where are they?! Surely this one strange woman can't be the sole readership of a major, glossy publication? Do they survive on grants?)

