Most comics are about fictitious characters. No matter if the format is print or digital, comic strip or comic book, webcomic or graphic novel, the great majority of comics tell stories about made up protagonists facing journeys/obstacles/complications and all kinds of other devices that make narrative arcs so compelling for readers to follow. The goal of fiction – to tell tales about people and events that don’t really exist – stands in stark contrast to that of non-fiction, which seeks to chronicle reality as it is, was, and may well be. The field of journalism prides itself on its commitment to this concern for reality and on its dedication to non-fiction’s essential task of documenting truth, facts and historical record rather than the fictional and the fantastic. While some comics are certainly works of notable non-fiction, including many that are superb pieces of journalism like Guy Delisle’s *Burma Chronicles*, Josh Neufeld’s *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, Joe Sacco’s *Footnotes in Gaza, Palestine* and *Safe Zone Goražde*, they are overshadowed by the immense number of fictional stories/characters presented in comics dating back over a century since the rise of ongoing newspaper strips began in the final years of the Nineteenth century.¹

But within this divide between fictional and non-fiction comics, and between creative fantasy and factual journalism, lies the curious phenomenon of the comics creators who have inserted themselves into their own creations. While we often like to think of artists and authors as “putting themselves into their work” in a metaphoric sense, the practice has been far more concrete within the medium of comics throughout most of the 20th century.
comic book creators like Winsor McCay, Chester Gould, Ham Fisher, Will Eisner, Milton Caniff, Jack Cole, Jack Kirby, John Byrne and others have included themselves as actual figures within their otherwise-fictional tales, blurring the divide between reality and fiction. Even more compelling is how, in starring as themselves within their work, such appearances are often used as a form of commentary about their own creative beliefs and practices along with their very role as artists within comics culture. Sometimes their presence serves to inform the reader about how these creators began their career or how they approach their craft, while other times they appear as a means of commenting directly about their characters. Occasionally they even show up in order to blow off steam about their own fame and fortune (or lack thereof) along with the practical concerns of writer’s block.

In drawing themselves into the pages and panels of their own work, such creators blur the line between journalism and fiction in a way that frequently creates a hybrid of both. Their presence often becomes a process of documenting the life of a cartoonist/comics artist in a way that offers us, the reader, a physical record of not only who that creator is (with self-portraiture in play as they draw themselves), but also in how they chronicle their own lives, relationships with their characters and/or their creative processes. While autobiographical comics have become more commonplace in recent years with the success of award-winning books like Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis, the instinct to insert oneself into the comics page can be traced back to some of the earliest comic strips and comic books.
Most comics creators don’t usually depict themselves in their own work, but when they do the results can often be unflattering by their own design. In his 2020 autobiography *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist*, Adrian Tomine offers readers a painfully self-reflexive look at his career as a comics creator – one in which he regularly questions his own talents. “The only reason I got anywhere in the comics business is just that I was so obsessively, single-mindedly focused for so long. It doesn’t have to do with talent, training, ability… if I practiced and thought about anything that much, I’d be half-way decent at it by now. Maybe not sports, but you know what I mean. I don’t know if that’s a good way to spend a life, to be honest,” he confesses to his wife. He depicts himself as a creator with a career marked by constant self-doubt about his work, describing how “my clearest memories related to comics – about being a cartoonist – are the embarrassing gaffes, the small humiliations, the perceived insults.” He surmises: “I think at heart, I’m basically a competitive, petty, easily wounded narcissist, and this so-called ‘career’ has only made things worse.” His confessionary statements have numerous precursors in the realm of comics dating back more than a century. For as long as people have picked up a pen and drawn themselves in their own comics, there have been self-reflexive examinations of their own work.

Tomin identifies himself as a cartoonist, and it is worth breaking down the term here further. This essay traces the ways in which comics artists have depicted themselves across a range of publishing platforms. Comics scholars have long debated the theoretical boundaries of the term “comics,” with the medium encompassing a number of different formats, from newspaper strips to comic books and graphic novels to a growing number of new digital forms.
When asked about the difference between cartoonists and those who create comic books, children’s book author and historian Leonard Marcus offered this distinction: “Well, there are many cartoonists who do single image cartoons. For example, in *The New Yorker*, you have a picture and a caption, and that’s it. So there’s no continuity, no frame to frame continuity. It’s kind of like the difference between a sprint and a marathon. And it takes a different set of skills to do one as opposed to another.”

Indeed, those who create single-panel strips like Gary Larson’s *The Far Side*, or Charles Addams work for *The New Yorker* are commonly called cartoonists, with their work usually described as cartoons (a term also applied to motion picture animation). But the designation of “cartoonist” is also commonly applied to artists who draw multi-panel newspaper strips in addition to single-panel strips, such as Ernie Bushmiller (*Nancy*), Ham Fisher (*Joe Palooka*) and Chester Gould (*Dick Tracy*) among others. Many modern creators who have done both single-panel work and multi-panel work like Tomine and Ivan Brunetti refer to themselves by this cartoonist moniker, even though they regularly work in the comic book and/or graphic novel formats.

Comics historians have typically reserved the term cartoonists for those whose work does not attempt to evoke realistic physical anatomy, with Robert C. Harvey’s *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History* reserving the term for those who draw in a “cartoony style” that holds relatively little “accuracy” in terms of how “they depicted the natural world.” In turn, Harvey distinguishes cartoonists from those who draw adventure strips like *Buck Rogers* and *Tarzan*, calling them “‘illustrators’ (not, strictly speaking, ‘cartoonists’)” because of how such strips adhere more closely to natural physical anatomy, architecture, etc. The term “cartoonist” is a slippery one, it seems, with all sorts of preconceptions in play as far as what such artists actually
produce and through what kind of aesthetic or critical lens readers should judge the results. Some comic book artists refer to themselves as cartoonists while others reserve the term for work done in other formats. Brunetti writes of how, “With the advent of the ‘graphic novel,’ cartooning has become (slightly) commercially and critically viable, compounding the problem.” Such preconceptions and the general malleability of both the term cartooning and the venues and formats that cartoonists’ work appears in are surely contributing factors to the self-deprecating assessments by Tomine in *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist* and others.

One of the earliest comic strip cartoonists to explore his own insecurities as an artist was Winsor McCay in *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*. Best known for his strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and well as his pioneering animated film *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), McCay took *Little Nemo’s* focus on dreams and the subconscious in bold new directions with *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* between 1904 and 1911 for *The New York Evening Telegram*. In the September 9th, 1909 installment, the first panel features a man getting dressed for his wedding while directly commenting on the fact that he is a drawn creation in a comic strip: “Today is my wedding day and I must look my best! I hope Silas is feeling good, and draws me up swell and makes me handsome” says the man, referring to McCay by his pen name, Silas. As each panel unfolds, the man is drawn progressively less and less “handsome,” devolving into a crude looking semblance of his former self -- resembling a child’s drawing and appearing as little more than a stick figure by the end. “Silas surely is not feeling very well! I’ll go and see a doctor about this!” says the man, only to be told by the doctor that he needs to see an art editor instead: “you’re a bum drawing!” the doctor pronounces. The art editor offers up a similarly scathing diagnosis: “Who ever drew you must be ill or else he is an amateur. You look fierce!”
As the young man visits his betrothed, he explains to her that his newfound “amateurish” appearance is grounds to postpone the wedding. “It’s not my fault dear! Silas drew me this way!” he protests. The bride-to-be calls up their creator on the phone to complain: “Say, Silas, why did you draw my intended husband so bum?” she asks. Silas goes over to see them and explains that he has been ill, promising to redraw her fiancé. “Yes! I’ll draw this over again. It was a good idea, but I could not draw it!” he laments, carrying away the man in a frame after drawing a rectangular around him. The strip ends as each installment of Rarebit Fiend does – with a sleeper awakening from the dream that preceded the final panel. The punchline sees McCay in bed as his doctor asks him how he feels today: “I’m much better! I had a good sleep but a bum dream, doc. I can get up now can’t I, doc?” Silas responds.

McCay further explored his creative limitations in a July 6th, 1911, installment of a new strip called Midsummer Day Dreams (continuing the dream premise without having his characters wake up in bed). Here, McCay daydreams at the drawing board as he struggles to come up with a new idea for his latest strip: “Oh! If I could only get an idea! …Oh! For an Idea! What is funny? What can I draw? Oh! For a joke! Let me think!” he cries. Eventually McCay finally does find an idea (in the form of a cute, fluffy little creature with the word “IDEA” emblazoned upon it, which he then cradles and coddles proudly), it quickly disappears on him by hopping away when a fellow artist sitting behind him interrupts the moment. McCay picks up his drawing board and shatters it over top of the other man’s head in retaliation. The strip offers readers a rare glimpse of McCay’s creative process as he struggles to find inspiration, hands on his head as he slumps across his drawing board before nurturing a newfound idea with a huge grin on his face. It also offers a look at the production methods behind how comics are made as we view the artist sitting before his angled drawing board, mere inches away from another artist.
sitting behind him at another drawing board. These close working quarters became commonplace at the earliest comic book packaging studios of the late 1930s and early 1940s, with artists working in similar conditions at Will Eisner and Jerry Iger’s ‘Eisner and Iger Studio’ (later the Roche & Iger Studio when Iger partnered with Ruth Roche) as well as at studios led by Jack Binder and Harry Chesler. This rare peek at the material conditions behind how comics are made is furthered by the inclusion of an ink pot and the brushes held by each artist, not to mention how readers are given a unique look at the physical dimensions of a comic artist’s drawing board as McCay picks it and shatters it into pieces over his colleague’s head.

McCay’s examination of his working process and creative inspirations (and frustrations) is furthered in a November 22nd, 1906, installment of Dream of the Rarebit Fiend in which Silas sits at his drawing board while a parade of visitors stop by to compliment on his work in vaudeville, which he had begun doing that same year. As each well-wisher appears over the span of ten panels, McCay’s head grows larger and larger, inflating like a balloon as they offer up praise, flattery, fan mail and invitations for future appearances. When his head finally grows so large that it presses against the panel’s frame, it at last explodes – cogs and gears sent flying as if it were a machine unable to withstand the pressure of such constant praise and adoration. Here we watch a creator unable to accept and enjoy the success that his work has brought him, much like how Tomine obsesses over the negative aspects of what he labels as his ‘so-called career.’

Creators Versus Characters
The playful self-deprecation on display in McCay’s assessment of his own talents is taken a step further by creator Sheldon Mayer decades later in December 1942’s *All American Comics* #45. Mayer created the superhero The Red Tornado for *All American* in 1940, alter ego of a woman known as Ma Hunkel whose costume consists in part of red long underwear and a cooking pot with eye holes for a helmet. The Red Tornado’s humorous adventures in *All American* regularly satirize the superhero genre, serving as a comical counterpoint to the more serious tales starring Green Lantern, The Atom and Doctor Mid-Nite in the pages of that same series each month. Mayer uses Hunkel (along with kid-cartoonist Scribbly, who co-stars in her adventures) as a vehicle for undercutting the traditional norms and values surrounding heroism in superhero comics, along with undercutting the ways in which both gender and class typically function in the genre.

In keeping with this genre-defying tradition of The Red Tornado’s adventures, Mayer breaks further norms by having Hunkel become aware of the fact that she is a character in issue forty-five. The story opens with a panel introducing the hero to readers as she bounds in mid-stride along with her two sidekicks, The Cyclone Kids. A narrative caption declares, “To look at Ma Hunkel, her daughter, Sisty, and Scribbly’s kid brother, Dinky, no one would suspect that terrific trio -- The Red Tornado and The Cyclone Kids -- yet, just let anyone of evil intentions come within smelling distance of them and *whammo!* -- Some fun!!!” The following panels find Hunkel, Sisty and Dinky commenting on their introduction, as Ma rests her hand on the first panel’s borders – literally bending the frame of the second panel as she looks in on the first panel. “Now, willya lookit that!” she says. When Dinky asks what she’s referring to, Hunkel
gestures towards the opening panel and responds: “That! That stupid introduction!! It’s the same old malarkey every month!” Dinky tries to defend Mayer’s opening set-up by telling Ma, “Well – th’ reader has to know what goes on, don’t he?” Ma complains that she’s “sick of seeing this story open th’ same way every month!!!!”, Dinky challenges her to come up with a better way of starting the story. “I’m not a cartoonist! That’s not my job – I’m busy enough traipsin’ around in that corny costume and beatin’ up crooks an’ all – I can’t do everythin’ ya know!” she replies, drawing a sharp distinction between her role in the narrative and the way that it is produced for the reader.

When Sisty suggests that they take their concerns to Mayer directly, we soon hear the creator’s voice from off-panel speaking to his creations. “Hey! What’s going on here? You’ve wasted a whole page sitting around and talking! …According to the script, you should’ve been in costumes, and in the middle of some hot action three panels ago!” Mayer gripes. When Scribbly arrives and asks to “meet a real cartoonist” like Mayer, Hunkel questions Mayer’s talents: “Real cartoonist. Bah! Between you an’ me, I think you’re a better cartoonist than he is – but if you really want to meet him --- Hey, dopey – d’ya mind steppin’ up onto this page fer a minute? Got somebody here wantsa meetcha…” she bellows while literally bending the edge of the panel back. Mayer in turn peels back the edge of the following panel to join his characters on the page, threatening to take an ink eraser to them for disrespecting him. As Hunkel begins berating him for getting paid when she’s the one doing all the work fighting crime, Mayer decides he’s had enough of being treated badly by his own creation in a way that his peers don’t have to deal with:

Stop! I’ve had enough! I dunno why I stand for all this! Look at Nodel and Hasen – do they have this kind of trouble with the Green Lantern? NO!
And look at Superman! He has to jump into the air, and fight airplanes with his fists, and stop bullets with his chest – and did Seigel and Shuster ever hear a word of complaint? NO!

With this realization that Martin Nodel, Irwin Hasen, Jerry Seigel and Joe Shuster are not plagued by their own creations, Mayer decides to kill himself: “I’ve had enough! I’m thru…” I’m gonna end it all!” he cries, proceeding to take a leap off of the page into the blank white void of the margins. As Mayer breaks through the frame of the panel on the story’s final page, his long plunge down is interrupted just in time after Hunkel, Sisty and Dinky change into their costumes and rescue the distraught cartoonist (“Saved!” says Mayer, apparently expressing some relief). The story ends as Mayer signs off with a final narrative caption: “Sorry folks – this sort of thing just has to happen to every cartoonist at least once in a lifetime…” Here, the instinct for comics artists to insert themselves into their stories as a way of working through their creative frustrations is framed as a natural force that all cartoonists face. Placing oneself within the story is a cathartic force for the artist, in Mayer’s experience; this potential for catharsis and emotional release would become a driving force for autobiographical cartoonists by the early 21st Century.

While Mayer’s relationship with his own character drives him to suicide, other artists depicted themselves as dealing with their creations in ways that weren’t quite as bleak but still fraught with complications. Jack Cole, who created the superhero Plastic Man in 1941’s *Police Comics* #1, drew himself into several stories -- first clashing with one of his own characters, and then with his editor. In *Police Comics* #20, Cole is visited by Plastic Man’s sidekick Woozy Winks, who is looking for clues when he mistakenly believes his friend “Plas” has been murdered. Lacking a photograph of his suspects, Woozy seeks Cole’s help to draw their
likenesses based on witness descriptions: “Is this Jack Cole, the cartoonist who draws the adventures of my friend, Plastic Man? Listen… I’ve got a job for you…” Cole balks at the offer at first, depicting himself as a stuttering pushover whose tongue often hangs out of his mouth. “Suh-Sorry, Winks… I already guh-got a job! Wh-wh-why I earn millions…” says Cole. When Woozy offers him “a buck – cash!”, Cole leaps at the offer. After drawing the faces that Winks describes, Cole is told that his work is terrible. “I can’t pay you for such a punk job!” says Woozy.13

When Cole, drawing himself as a pencil-necked, wide-eyed softy, protests (“Aw gee… Y-y-y-y-you ain’t f-f-f-fair!”),14 Winks offers to give him a plot for his next story instead. But while Mayer tried to off himself and McCay’s head exploded from too much praise, Cole depicts himself as being exceptionally proud of his accomplishments and boastful about his talents – albeit overly boastful enough to make the reader wonder what he is compensating for. When captured by a pair of baddies, Cole brags: “M-m-my wife s-says I’m the buh-best c-c-c-cartoonist afoot! P-p-p-p-publishers b-beg for my s-services! I write my own stories t-too! I’m super! I’m s-swell! I’m, I’m I’m Etc. Etc…” The pair of crooks swiftly tie Cole up and gag his mouth. The artist is saved from his captors only when his publisher arrives to drag him back to the drawing board. “O g-g-gosh! My publisher! M-m-mighta known it… t-that guy c-could f-find me anywhere!”15 Cole laments, as he realizes his boss has tracked him down yet again to demand that he draw more pages.

Ultimately, Cole’s self-portrait in Plastic Man is one of a timid creator being manipulated by his own creation while at the same time possessing what we are to believe is an elevated sense of self-worth about his own talents (given how he feels the need to describe his wife’s assessment of his talents). Cole undercuts this depiction – somewhat - in subsequent appearances
when he draws himself in the pages of 1944’s *Crack Comics* #33 and 34. Taking over two installments of ‘Inkie’ (created Al Stahl in issue twenty-eight of the series) about a young boy who comes to life from the pages he is drawn in). Cole foregoes the stutter this time, but again finds himself tied up by criminals. In one story, Inkie has to step in to come up with ideas when Cole falls asleep on the job. In the other, Cole fights with his editor who demands that the artist put more of the title character into the story, handing him memos such as “To Jack Cole: Subject: This strip! Where is Inkie? Readers don’t want to wait until the last page to see their favorite hero! Get him in the story sooner! The editor.” Cole shoots back: “Nerts! These editors who try to change stories,” using his drawn persona to express some of his no-doubt real life frustrations about negotiating the creator’s and the editor’s needs within comic book storytelling.

In *The Journalist’s Handbook*, Kim Fletcher paints a picture of the news editor as an imposing figure and of assistant editors as bastions of interference for reporters. “In any newsroom, there is a heightening of tension, an increase in drama, at the sight of the editor on the floor, reading pages, questioning stories,” says Fletcher, while assistant editors “may interfere where they like, depending on the instructions they have from the editor.” Cole expresses similar frustrations with editorial interference, albeit in a playful form, as he depicts himself regularly being pressured by his editor to tell Inkie’s story in a certain way as he in the middle of drawing it (“If he wants Inkie, he can have him! But it interrupts a good story – just when it was getting exciting!” laments Cole as he gives the editor what he wants).

Cole went on to draw for *Playboy Magazine* in 1954, but committed suicide in 1958 (famously mailing a suicide note to *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner). Mayer only joked about ending it all, but Cole’s self-portraits of a frustrated artist hinted at deeper and darker problems. In his book *Jack Cole and Plastic Man*, Art Spiegelman points out that Cole had used suicide as
a plot device in numerous stories. He also notes that Cole did numerous cartoons about impotence for *Playboy*, further adding that he and his wife Dorothy’s “childlessness cast a poignant shadow on their isolated lives.” Cole, says Spiegelman, “looked back at his own beginnings in the comics with disenchantment, dismissing the “comics mags” in a letter to a friend as being “‘for the birds’…”19 Cole’s comic book self-portraits take on additional meaning when viewed through the lens of his suicide, with these images of a stuttering pushover being literally restrained by gangsters and routinely hampered by editors creating a cumulative picture of sadness and frustration.

While Cole presented himself as a slave to his editor, other cartoonists depicted themselves as being slaves to their creations. In a one-page story for *Collier’s* magazine in 1948 called “Steve Canyon and Me,” artist Milton Caniff recounted how he developed the strip *Steve Canyon* in 1947 after working on *Terry and the Pirates* for the Chicago Tribune-New York News Syndicate since 1934, owning the rights to the former. Caniff described how the “urge” to own their strip “is deep in every cartoonist – [one] wants to own a character outright…” But Caniff also tells of how the control that is made possible by creating a new character is not a one-directional process for cartoonists: “In the adventure strip field it is also a desire to identify himself with a handsome hero – so he thinks of all the things he wishes he had done. Then a Jekyll-Hyde transformation takes place! The imagined idol passes from skull to paper – and he finds that the slave he has created owns him!” says Caniff, who sits at his drawing board while Steve Canyon peers at him from the drawing board and says “Think fast, Bub! What do I do next?”20 Caniff draws himself as holding a glass of champagne as he first creates the new character in 1947, but a year later sits with his hand on his head and a cup of coffee beside his drawing board as he realizes that the freedom of owning one’s own character also means that the
creator too is owned by the character; Caniff’s is the sole authority behind telling the character what to ‘do next,’ not an editor or a publisher (as Cole lamented), a freedom also places the sole responsibility for success or failure on the creator.

Collier’s ran several of these autobiographical pieces in the late 1940s by many of the top comic strip creators of the time, including Ham Fisher (Joe Palooka), Ernie Bushmiller (Nancy), V.T. Hamlin (Alley Oop), Harry Haenigsen (Penny), Frank Willard (Moon Mullins) and Chester Gould (Dick Tracy). In Gould’s installment, “Dick Tracy and Me,” he depicts how he got started at The Chicago Tribune and created the Dick Tracy strip. A miniature version of Tracy himself appears on Gould’s desk: “I’m all set. Let’s go to work, Gould” says Tracy as Gould starts drawing. But Gould soon faces similar pressure from his own creation, much like Caniff’s, as Tracy sits perched on his creator’s shoulder. “Well, do something!” urges Tracy as the sweat starts to drip from Gould’s brow. Unhappy with Gould’s productivity, Tracy gives him a swift kick in the rear, telling him to “Get going, you, before I run you in.” The story ends with Gould being chased down the street with at least a dozen of the Dick Tracy strip’s characters in pursuit. Several of them hold a giant fountain pen, poking Gould in the backside as runs away while telling the reader how he’s “been on the go ever since!” The strip serves as a lighthearted portrait of a creator motivated by his creations to keep producing new work. It is perhaps unsurprising to see Gould render the creative process as one in which a creator is treated violently by his creations given the steady emphasis on the brutal acts of career criminals in his Dick Tracy strip.

Cartoonists as Chroniclers
In Ham Fisher’s autobiographical story for *Collier’s* in 1948, the *Joe Palooka* creator recounts how he got into the business. The first panel depicts Fisher as a baby on the day he was born, held in a nurse’s arms as his father marvels at having a son to supposedly carry on the family business: “I’m gonna be a cartoonist!” cries baby Ham in protest. The second panel shows a young Fisher reading books about such artists as James M. Flagg, Charles Dana Gibson, again pronouncing, “I’m gonna be a cartoonist!” Fisher really did have his heart set on cartooning as a career from a young age, recalling how “At the age of five I decided that I wanted to be a cartoonist. Was thrown out of every class at school for drawing pictures. My father refused to allow me to study drawing, since he wanted me to enter business like he did. So I burned the midnight oil studying alone.”

Fisher depicts his classroom struggles in the third panel of his *Collier’s* strip, with a young Ham again declaring that he wants to be a cartoonist when his teacher scolds at school for flunking algebra, geometry, calculus and chemistry. But Fisher finally gets his shot when he later approaches a newspaper editor with one of his drawings, with the strip chronicling how he became a reporter for the *Wilkes-Barre Record* in Pennsylvania as a young man. “Here’s a cartoon about the whiskey barrels that disappeared from the police-station,” he says.” “Hmm. Not bad. How’d you like a steady job? Reporter and cartoonist,” says the editor. Fisher worked for the *Wilkes-Barre Record* in the role of “all-around cartoonist,” drawing everything from sports caricatures to editorial cartoons. The artist described how he “landed a job as editorial, sports and banquet cartoonist on the *Wilkes-Barre Record*. Quit and went over to the Times-Leader after one year. Was given “carte blanche, travelled and drew pictures of every subject,” he recalled. In depicting himself in the dual role as reporter and cartoonist, Fisher saw a natural
affinity between the two fields, which anticipates the later work of creators like Joe Sacco who have made a career as journalists who produce their work in the form of comics. Daniel Worden describes Sacco’s work in books like *Palestine*, *Footnotes in Gaza*, *Days of Destruction*, *Days of Revolt* and *Paying the Land* as “comics journalism” in *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a Visual World*.26

Indeed, one of Sacco’s best-known books is simply called *Journalism*. In its preface, Sacco attempts to “rout all those who would naysay the legitimacy of comics as an effective means of journalism” by describing how the objective reporting of facts can be enhanced by the subjective nature of the drawn image.27 Sacco believes that comics allow journalists to escape the trap of “the slavish adherence to ‘balance’” in their reporting, concluding that “the blessing of an inherently interpretive medium like comics is that it hasn’t allowed me to lock myself within the confines of traditional journalism. By making it difficult to draw myself out of a scene, it hasn’t permitted me to make a virtue of dispassion. For good or ill, the comics medium is adamant, and it has forced me to make choices. In my view, that is part of its message,” he says.28

Even within the realm of fictional superhero storytelling, numerous creators since the 1940s have depicted their work as being marked by a journalistic role – one that saw them chronicle their own creations’ adventures. Comics artists like Will Eisner, Jack Kirby and John Byrne frequently portrayed their own creative processes as one that saw them recount on the page what their heroes had already done in the (supposed) outside world beyond their studios. In the May 3rd, 1942 edition of Eisner’s *The Spirit*, for instance, the creator renders himself at his drawing board awaiting the titular hero’s visit to his studio: “Good grief!! It’s almost midnight, and The Spirit’s still not here with his weekly adventure!” Eisner gripes. “Doesn’t he know I’m
behind schedule as usual? Here I am, a stooge to a crimefighter… he has the adventures and I work my head off drawing ‘em!! One of these days I’m going to have adventures of my own and make The Spirit draw ‘em!” complains Eisner about the supposed relationship he has with the character he draws.29

The story frames Eisner as a “comics journalist” who doesn’t invent imaginary stories but instead documents the actual accounts of a costumed hero who inhabits the artist’s own world and not a fictional one. The same approach is found in multiple Fantastic Four stories by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee in the 1960s. In issue ten, Jack and Stan are shown hard at work in their New York studio plotting the next issue of the series. Readers of the issue encountered the creative duo after four pages about the F.F. gathering at their Manhattan headquarters. The fifth page of the story begins with a narrative caption from Lee as the scene shifts to Kirby at his drawing board: “And that, dear reader, is as far as Jack Kirby and I got with our story, before the unexpected happened! But let us show you how it all came about…” Lee then laments, “Too bad that Doctor Doom was lost in space! He was possibly the greatest villain of all!” The “unexpected” moment Lee foreshadowed quickly arrives as Doctor Doom himself shows up at the studio: “Did someone mention my name?” he intones. “No! It can’t be! It isn’t possible!” exclaims Lee, while Kirby adds, “But it is! It’s Doctor Doom – he’s alive!” Doom and his arch-rivals The Fantastic Four are not mere characters who Lee and Kirby created, it would seem, but rather real-life figures whose thrilling lives the creators document. “You are searching for a story – well, I shall give you one! Here, phone Mr. Fantastic – say what I tell you if you value your lives!” Doom bellows.30

In 1965’s Fantastic Four Annual #3, Stan and Jack attempt to join a wedding reception for Reed and Sue Richards (Mister Fantastic and The Invisible Girl) in the story’s final moments.
Lacking an invitation, the two creators are turned away at the door. “But you can’t keep us out!” cries Lee. “You haven’t heard the last of this! We have ways of getting even!” Kirby yells. “How about that?? Imagine them keepin’ us out, Stan!” he adds in disbelief. “We’ll show ‘em, Jack! Let’s get back to the Bullpen and start writing the next ish!” Stan threatens.

Marvel staffers (known as the “Bullpen”) appeared regularly within issues of various series. Jack drew himself and the entire Marvel Bullpen in *Fantastic Four Annual* #5, while Steve Ditko drew himself and Lee within the pages of *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #1. John Romita Sr. depicted himself, Lee, Larry Lieber and Roy Thomas attempting to plot Spider-Man’s next adventure in *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #5, while Thomas was drawn by artist George Perez along with Lee, Kirby and Perez himself in *Fantastic Four* #176.

The latter issue finds the Marvel Bullpen once again struggling to produce a new installment of the F.F.’s adventures because the team has been out of town and won’t return their calls: “And how can we do our authorized F.F. comic mag – if they don’t tell us what they’ve been into?” Thomas wonders. When Kirby suggests that Thomas and Perez “just make up some stories” about the heroes, the pair stare at Jack dumbfoundedly. “What? Make up stories?” cries Thomas. “Instead of just drawing what really happened!” Perez asks in confusion. “Nice try, Jack… but it just isn’t done,” Lee reminds them.

Marvel’s creators, they would have us believe, are not fictional storytellers but journalistic chroniclers who tell true stories rather than imagined ones.

Kirby would take this conceit to new extremes in the pages of 1978’s *What If?* #11, a series that reimagined the history of various characters in highly speculative ways. In a tale called “What If The Fantastic Four Were the Original Marvel Bullpen,” Kirby wrote and drew himself as The Thing, alongside Lee as Mister Fantastic, secretary Flo Steinberg as The Invisible
Girl and Vice President Sol Brodsky as The Human Torch. The foursome is transformed into their fantastic alter-egos after receiving some fan mail at the Marvel office which includes a mysterious box emitting “a shower of cosmic rays!” Kirby actually based The Thing’s alter ego, Ben Grimm, after his own working-class experiences growing up in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. While *Fantastic Four* saw him use the character as an alter-ego to fictitious narrative ends in the 1960s, Kirby’s *What If?* tale allowed him to use Grimm later in his career as a vehicle to comment on his contentious working relationship with Stan Lee. Comics historian John Morrow notes, “From the 1960s on, Kirby always called Stan “Stanley,”’ most notably in *What If?* #11 in 1978, which could be seen as a similar way of condescending to Stan – a sort of passive-aggressive attempt to remind Lee that he started as an office boy working under [Joe] Simon and Kirby.”

Building further off of the conceit that Marvel’s creators were journalistic chroniclers of real-life superhero adventures, writer/artist John Byrne devoted an entire issue of *Fantastic Four* to the premise. Byrne frequently inserted himself into the pages of his stories, making appearances in such series as *Iron Fist*, *Sensational She-Hulk* and *Star Brand*. He likened the way in which Marvel’s creators supposedly chronicled heroes’ actual adventures to a fertile workplace environment in a 1983 installment of the editorial “Bullpen Bulletins.” The feature, which appeared in each issue of Marvel’s titles in a given month, saw Byrne at his drawing board while surrounded by dozens of the publisher’s characters watching on as he works. He describes in a brief caption accompanying the full-page image how Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter “asked me to a guest spot for the Bulletins page, and for the longest time – like, two years – I couldn’t come up with anything resembling a theme. Then it hit me: why not talk about why I love Marvel so
much. Then it hit me again! Why not draw about why I love Marvel so much. What do I love most about being here at Marvel? It’s the interesting people you get to work with…”³⁶

The January 1984 issue of Fantastic Four (#262) is one of Marvel’s most extensive efforts at telling a story about how the publisher’s creators supposedly serve a journalistic role in documenting their characters’ efforts. Byrne opens the tale by showing him on the phone with Marvel editor Mike Higgins as they discuss the creator’s looming deadline for the upcoming issue: “Mike, I appreciate your position, believe me. But I just don’t have the story for this issue. I’ve been calling and calling all week, but all I get from [F.F. headquarters] the Baxter Building is the FF’s robot receptionist making polite apologies. …Tell ‘em I’m sorry, but I’m not about to risk making up a story. You know how the FF hate it when we do that… especially The Thing!” says Byrne.³⁷

Byrne is soon summoned by a cosmic character named The Watcher who is “committed to observing and compiling knowledge on all aspects of the universe without inference.”³⁸ Taken by The Watcher to observe an intergalactic trial “in a place out of time and space” for Mister Fantastic, Byrne asks why he has been brought along. “Because you are the chronicler, John Byrne. Because to you has fallen the task of recording the exploits of The Fantastic Four,” he is told.³⁹ Byrne bears witness to the trial alongside The Thing, The Invisible Girl and The Human Torch, and after Reed’s acquittal sets out to chronicle the story as he returns home to his drawing board: “Craft well your tale, John Byrne. But do so quickly. Already the full majesty of the cosmic truth is fading, for no mortal mind can long contain such knowledge,” heeds The Watcher.⁴⁰ The story was part of a month-long event across most Marvel titles called “Assistant Editors Month,” with various series seeing abnormal premises and gags throughout (The Avengers appeared on Late Night With David Letterman, for example).⁴¹ While the fact that
Byrne did not appear again in the series -- coupled with the “Assistant Editors” gimmick -- might make it tempting to read the issue as a comical novelty, the notion of comic book creators as chroniclers has a long history both within the publisher’s own efforts as well as the comics industry as a whole dating back many decades.

The metaphor of the reporter-as-chronicler is a long-entrenched one within journalism. Many newspapers have used the word “chronicle” in their title dating back centuries, from The San Francisco Chronicle’s launch in 1865 to The Daily Chronicle being founded in Britain in 1872 to The Houston Chronicle’s arrival in 1901 and The Chronicle of Higher Education’s debut in 1966. Michael Bloor et al. describe Daniel Defoe as the “father of modern journalism and chronicler of the great plague of London,” while Richard Orange and Barry Turner call Samuel Johnson “the great chronicler of his time” in recounting his approach to journalism in the 18th Century. Communication scholar John Crothers Pollock sees the position of “chronicler” as one of two major roles that journalists can serve along with that of “examiner”: “A “chronicler” perspective would refer to breadth, restraint, and ‘technically efficient’ journalism,” whereas the role of “examiner” involves the “‘investigative, analytic and interpretive.”

The ways in which Byrne, Perez, Eisner and other comics creators have depicted their relationship with their characters since the 1940s certainly avoids creatively interpreting and examining these heroes’ actions in new ways in favor of reporting them with supposed efficiency and restraint (lest The Thing get upset!) in the mode of the chronicler.

Conclusion
By the time that Byrne’s run on *Fantastic Four* ended in 1986, the rise of postmodern storytelling devices had grown rapidly in superhero comics. Frank Miller challenging traditional norms of comic book heroism by re-envisioning Batman as an aging and unrepentant crusader in 1986’s *The Dark Knight Returns*. That same year, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchmen* offered a dystopian take on publisher Charlton Comics’ heroes like Captain Atom, Blue Beetle and The Question that DC Comics had acquired in 1983. By the late 1980s, this postmodern-turn also saw creators inserting themselves into their stories in new ways – often for meta-narrative purposes. In 1988, writer Grant Morrison began a new *Animal Man* series starring hero Buddy Baker (who first appeared in a 1965 issue of *Strange Adventures* and could take on the abilities of any animal). In 1990’s *Animal Man* #26, Morrison’s final issue, the writer inserts himself directly into the story to confront Baker with the fact that he is character in a comic book. When Baker first asks the author who he is, Morrison responds, “Me? I’m the evil mastermind behind the scenes. I’m the wicked puppeteer who pulls the strings and makes you dance. I’m your writer.”

While Morrison doesn’t draw the story himself, his appearance sparked a new trend in meta-narrative approaches within genre comics like superhero titles in which the very conventions of how comic books tell stories are dissected for the reader in ways that update and extend how this pattern of creators-meeting-characters played out in past eras. Morrison, for instance, makes his character aware of the formal devices of comics storytelling that structure Baker’s very existence, like how stories are structured through the use of sequential panels. When Animal Man asks him where they’re going, Morrison replies, “Nowhere. Just walking. I don’t suppose you ever notice how easy it is to travel just by cutting from one panel to the next. Maybe that’s why superheroes never grow old – they save up all their time by cutting from one
This meta-narrative approach continued in later decades in series like Morrison’s *Doom Patrol* and *The Invisibles*, Warren Ellis and John Cassidy’s *Planetary*, Alan Moore and J.H. Williams III’s *Promethea*, all of which took the self-reflexive approach began by Will Eisner, Jack Cole, Sheldon Mayer and others in the 1940s in *The Spirit*, *Plastic Man* and *All American Comics* to new heights as they deconstructed the various norms and tropes of comic book storytelling.

At the same time as genre publishers like DC took a meta-narrative approach to superheroes and other adventurers (sometimes finding creators appearing within their stories, sometimes not), autobiographical comics grew in popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. While there had been several autobiographical efforts in prior decades like Justin Green’s *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky’s *Dirty Laundry Comics* (1974) and Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor* (1976), the genre established a more regular presence with the success of Will Eisner’s *The Dreamer* (1985) and *To the Heart of the Storm* (1991), and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (serialized between 1980 and 1991), among others. Since the year 2000, autobiographical comics reached new audiences with the success of Craig Thompson’s *Blankets* (2003), John Lewis’s *March* trilogy (2013; 2015, 2016) and George Takei’s *They Called Us Enemy* (2019). Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000) was adapted as an animated film in 2007 and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) became a Tony-award winning Broadway musical in 2015.

In his 2018 book *Breaking the Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies*, Marc Singer critiques various processes of canonization within the field of comics studies – including the celebration of memoir in recent years associated with artists like Chris Ware. Singer critiques in particular a 2004 *New York Times Magazine* article by Charles McGrath that equates “comics’
newfound respectability” in critical and literary circles with the growth in autobiographical comics. Artists like Ware, Singer argues, “project the literary world’s preferences for realism and autobiography onto comics.” McGrath, he says, heralds certain “alternative comics precisely because they conform to contemporary literary fiction’s preferences for realism, interiority, self-reflection, and above all autobiography.” In turn, the memoir becomes elevated high above other comics – the former being “better” comics “with a brain,” in McGrath’s view.47

The ways in which recent autobiographical comics have become canonized within comics studies has certainly neglected the myriad of ways in which comics artists inserted themselves into their work in prior decades. Elisabeth El Refaie begins her book *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*, for instance, by describing how “The roots of autobiographical comics began in the underground comix movement in the U.S. of the early 1970s, when comics artists first produced subversive and often sexually explicit stories for adults, which were often based on their own experiences.”48 But comics creators had been telling stories about their own experiences as artists for many decades prior, even if such efforts were more humorous than sexually charged in the works of Winsor McCay, Jack Cole and others.

Making comics can be a solitary profession for many creators; inserting oneself onto the page serves not only a cathartic role, it allows the reader to gain insights into the creative process, the culture of cartooning and the way the creator envisions their responsibilities to and relationship with their characters. Long before autobiographical comics became a regular sub-genre by the end of the 20th Century, many newspaper strips and comic books from earlier decades served as vital testimonies about the lives of comics creators.
Endnotes


3 Ibid., 157-159.


7 Brunetti, *Cartooning*, 3.


12 Martin Nodel created Green Lantern in *All American Comics* #16 while Irwin Hasen joined the series the following year, first drawing the character on the cover to issue twenty-four and then in a full story in issue twenty-six.

14 Ibid., 7.

15 Ibid., 11-12.

16 *Crack Comics*, No. 34, Summer 1944 (New York: Quality), 31.


18 *Crack Comics*, No. 34, 31-32.


22 Martin Sheridan, *Classic Comics and Their Creators* (Boston: Hale, Cushman and Flint, 1942), 130.


25 Sheridan, 130-131.


28 Ibid., xiv.


39 Fantastic Four, No. 262, 3.

40 Ibid., 22.

41 See The Avengers, No. 239, January 1984 (New York: Marvel Comics).


46 Ibid., 9.
