COLLECTING AS STORYTELLING – THE CASE OF SETH'S *IT'S A GOOD LIFE, IF YOU DON'T WEAKEN*

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Within the realm of a graphic novel, the line between facts and fiction gets blurred easily, as the world depicted is often that of personal experience – in equal parts lived, remembered, and imagined. Simultaneously drawn and written, the story reinvents itself, free to suspend (or even undermine) the absolute journalistic truth. While authors like Seth, Chris Ware, or Daniel Clowes repeatedly introduce themselves as "fiction writers"[1], it is hard not to see them also as chroniclers of actuality, as their works tend to be assembled out of minutiae: things overlooked or forgotten, gestures passed unnoticed, and improbable encounters. Presented in innovative, medium-conscious ways, these scattered elements are turned into carefully curated collections, organized by individual desires and invisible grids. Graphic novel, by displaying an elaborate plot in a set of boxes, works particularly well as a medium capable of reassembling life from pieces, while not forcing cause-and-effect connections. In order to unveil this idea, I propose to analyse Gregory Gallant's, better known as Seth, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* as an example of a fictive autobiography in which the idea of collection becomes both the main motif and a vehicle for storytelling.

When the first issue of *Palooka-ville* was launched – a comic book, which later gave life to *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996), and *Clyde Fans* (2019) –, Seth was still at the very early stage of his career. Nevertheless, he was lucky enough to collaborate with the small, Montreal-based publishing house established by Chris Oliveros: Drawn & Quarterly. Specialized in graphic novels and small artist's books, it helped him to gain reputation not just as a great cartoonist, but a highly original author. Seth's strong bonds with the underground comic scene, on the other hand, contributed to make the new label more appealing, and make it not simply meet the needs of its target audience, but often outrun its expectations, offering translations of European and Japanese classics or anthologies of authors admired by the associated artists. Another important aspect of Oliveros' business was his activism in the field of graphic novels – for many years he was not only promoting the term, but also convincing bookstores to create a separate section where these longer narratives could be differentiated from comics. All of these aspects had a huge impact on Seth, from very early on, making him conscious of his craft and free to experiment with it (up to the point of, actually, disliking the term "graphic novel", and stubbornly calling his own works "picture novellas"). At the later stage, it also allowed him to put himself into the role of curator – either as

1 Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, Seth, and Chris Ware, "Panel: Graphic Novel Forms Today", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Spring 2014), p. 163.

the counsellor for D&Q's future publications, or the organizer of a retrospective exhibition, where he featured Oliveros as one of the most influential comic book artists in Canada.[2]

Palooka-ville, which on the surface may appear to be just another story about the melancholy of suburbia, is, then, also a register of searching for one's own voice – a feature which reaches its peak in the issues #4 - #9, with the story of looking for the traces of an obscure cartoonist. Before being turned into graphic novels, the series was published roughly biyearly, in a traditional pamphlet format. What in the one-shot version got replaced with blurb and recommendations, originally was a letter column – something that now, with the rise of internet forums and social media, is in decline, but in the early 90s, was still an important part of most serialized comic books. Primarily, it served as a platform for giving feedback to artists and editors, but it was also an important channel for the fans to get in touch with one another (letters would usually be published along with the contact address). It should be stressed, however, that the correspondence not always had to be real – many authors (Seth including), tended to use the convention as yet another paratextual space, within which they could highlight topics or even stylistic issues of their interest.

The correspondence featured in *Palooka-ville* is still deeply engrained in that tradition, filled with voices of dislike ("you fucking suck and your comic is worse than anything any fucking one could have fucking dreamed of"[3]), and those of praise ("you've caught the first few dreamy sequences of cataclysm. A lovely job"[4], "just wanted to let you know that I've been completely bowled over the new issue of *PV"[5]).* Regardless the tone, these messages convey a strong sense of community, nourishing a very specific set of values ("I feel a real connection to anyone that survived the small town experience and lived to tell the tale"[6]), and facilitating exchange of information.

This second aspect became particularly important for the part of the story which eventually gave rise to *It's a Good Life...,* as it is intimately linked with the question of collecting, especially all sorts of paper ephemera. In *Palooka-ville,* it finds reflection in a desperate cry from one of the readers ("Dear Seth, you'd think that *Palooka-ville* was *Ulysses* being smuggled from Canada into United States. Nowhere in Phoenix could a copy of your comic be found. By the time #3 had come out, I realised I would need to stick a cheque in the mail to get those suckers", along with a reply form the publisher: "Issues #1,2,3 are available, for 2,50$ each (…). Number 1 is almost sold-out so

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2 Bart Beaty, "Chris Oliveros, Drawn and Quarterly, and the Expanded Definition of the Graphic Novel", in: Jan Baetens, Hugo Frey, Stephen E. Tabachnick (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 426-442.

3 Seth, *Palooka-ville* #4, Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly 1993, p.1.

4 *ibidem.*

5 Seth, *Palooka-ville* #5, Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly 1994, p. 25.

6 Seth, *Palooka-ville* #4, *op.cit.*

you'd better order soon."[7]), but also Seth's own call ("If anyone comes across any Kalo cartoons I'd love to hear about it"[8]). As much as there are different motivations behind these two instances (the effort of completing a collection versus finding out more about a specific item), they both fold back into the general idea of gathering and devotion – the two forces that seem to be fundamental for comic culture, especially since many of the leading cartoonist themselves would be dedicated collectors (like Robert Crumb, or Chris Ware), or would tend to depict their characters as such (works of Ben Katchor, José Carlos Fernandes, and Seth, among others).

While it would be tempting to explain this bond between collecting and cartooning as a mere consequence of comics being published in series, it would be a great over-simplification – and one which could easily be challenged with the example of graphic novels, as works that most of the times are one-shot publications, and yet maintain interest in the idea of fragmentation, accumulation, and assemblage. It seems, then, that these are not the formal aspects that create the connection, but rather a very specific world-view that somehow finds the comic book a natural home for storytelling that tries to retain which cannot be reconciled to a linear narrative (may it be the excess that refuses cause-and-effect argument, or some ghostly traces that threaten to unsettle the present) – an idea often advocated in the works of Jared Gardner.[9] In the case of *It's a Good Life...*, this connection is very consciously used to explore the capacities of the medium for becoming an (auto)biographical repository: like Duchamp's *Botte-en-valise,* or boxes in Simon Critchley's *Memory Theatre,* Seth's picture novella is designed to serve as a veritable museum, in which every item – as well as a person – is but a speck of a much broader story.

Since in the realm of *It's a Good Life...* everything is in equal parts itself and a stand-in for something else, the categories of fact and fiction become hard to apply. This seems to be, in great part, a consequence of choosing collecting as an axis for the story, since collecting is in itself always a creative act – an invention of a contextual scenario, in which objects and collector are the principle characters. For this reason, the narration itself naturally tends towards becoming a balancing act between historical record and artifice, often getting close to the poetics of the documentary. This link becomes obvious especially in the context of the cinema, where – just in the past decades – such movies as Jem Cohen's *Lost Book Found,* John Maloof's *Finding Vivian Maier,* or the two movies about Mike Disfarmer (Martin Lavut's *Disfarmer: A Portrait of America,* and David Soll's *Puppet*) aimed precisely at reconstructing someone's life story on the basis of the objects left behind.

One of the aspects that make these a good ground for comparison with *It's a Good Life...,* is

7 *ibidem.*
8 Seth, *Palooka-ville* #5, *op.cit.*
9 See: Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of the 21st-century Storytelling,* Redwood City: Stanford University Press 2012.

that – to a certain extent – they also explore the possibility of performing the author's own identity, as he is presented not merely as a subject that reveals the view, but the one who is being viewed himself. Of the aforementioned examples, maybe Maloof's documentary makes this double-bind most explicit, as the quest of unveiling the story of Vivian Maier is simultaneously an opportunity to show himself as a dedicated collector, art curator, and amateur photographer.

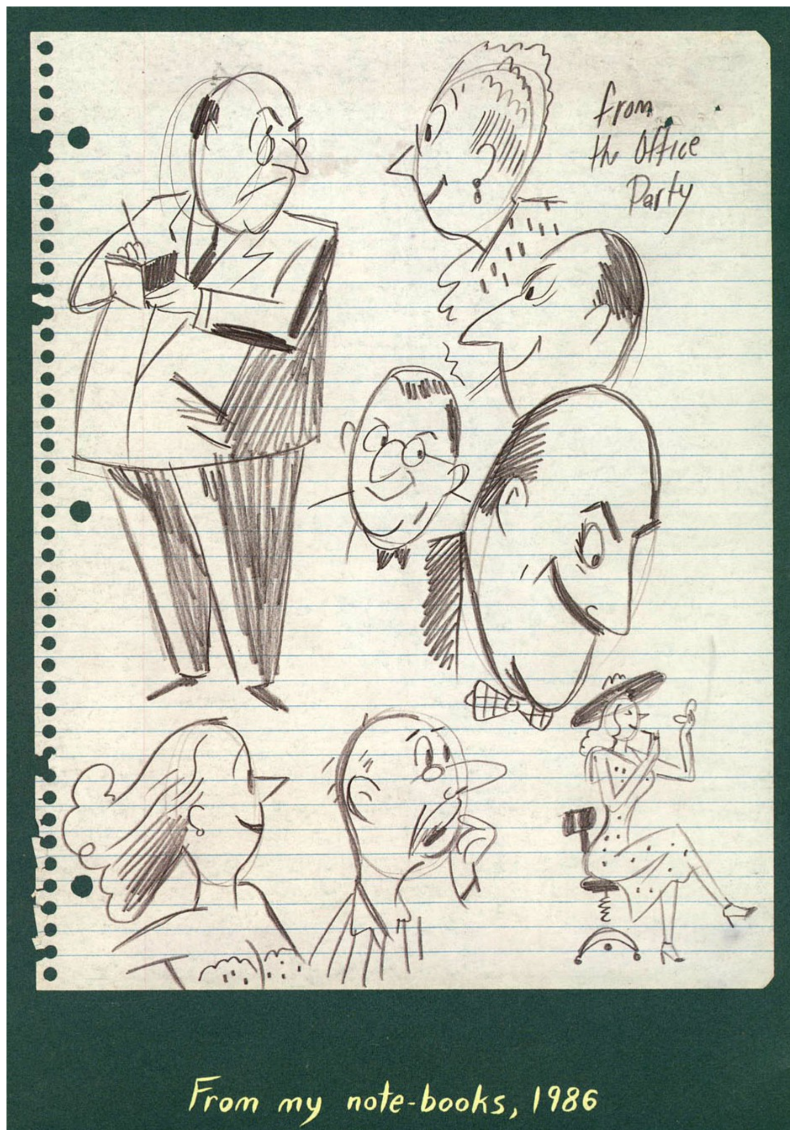
In Seth's case, this interplay between the figures of an author, narrator, and protagonist, is pronounced in many different ways. First of all, through the introduction of the textless panels (ex. pp. 8-10, 20-21, 46-47, 57-60), since, through them, the main character's private behaviour is being revealed and left for a general inspection. The other strategy is the use of a voice-over (ex. pp.11-12, 29-32, 41-45). Only rarely matching the images, it enables a slippery chain of associations, which, by showing the main character as a "selfsame object perduring over time and possessing the accumulative memory of that voyage"[10], helps to grant him a biographical dimension. Especially this aspect plays a crucial role in making it possible to maintain the illusion of the entire work being an autobiography. And, along with the fact that the protagonist is carefully fashioned to resemble the real-life Gregory Gallant (they use the same pen-name, work as cartoonists, have Chester Brown as a friend, as well as a brother named Steve, they dress similarly, and share opinions on various topics), it gives credibility to the story. The autobiographical pact, however, can never be truly sealed, as, very early on, the main plot turns out to be fictional.

On the other hand, as it has already been mentioned, the simple division on fiction / non-fiction, does not easily apply. What does not allow to discredit the idea of *It's a Good Life...* being an actual autobiography (or, to that matter, a memoir) is that the main character is also a patchwork of influences that could have been important for Seth himself. Within the book, many authors, as well as fictional characters, are presented as not only sources of inspiration, but also gateways onto various episodes of biography. It could be argued, then, that the novel is, in fact, a material display through which the author simultaneously represents and constructs his own identity – until achieving unity, or finally discovering his distinctive voice.

In this sense, Seth's work is not only about collecting objects (books, cartoons, and comic strips), but also forging connections. The references to famous cartoonists and characters, as well as the personalized glossary included both in *Palooka-ville* and *It's a Good Life...*, can be seen as yet another strategy of self-fashioning. In the end, a catalogue of this kind helps to historicize and canonize the author's own work, serving for an alternative lineage. It is also by no accident that, throughout the book, Seth is so often depicted copying other artists' work – and getting desperate at his incapacity of doing so in a satisfactory way (ex. pp 8-9, 38, but also the back cover of *Palooka-ville* #4, where a sketch inspired by Whitney Darrow Jr's illustrations for *The Office Party* – a

10 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Boston: Northeastern University Press 1986, p. 129.

classic 1951 gag cartoon book featuring white-collar workers, which is claimed to have inspired the main character's "lifetime interest in the cartoonists of the old "New Yorker"[11] – was reproduced) –, or finding parallels between his life and that of the people he admires (ex. panel 2 page 19, pp. 31-32, 93-94). With each of these gestures, Seth's own craft is being presented as both unique (since he is the only authority behind the catalogue of his artistic ancestors) and profoundly derivative (as every extra item added to the list, enhances the plurality of voices that somehow influenced his style). But, as Seth himself suggests: "Understanding why you are attracted to specific ideas or images helps you to make the art you want, rather than the art you think you are supposed to do."[12]



Seth, *Palooka-ville #4*, Montreal: D&Q 1993, back cover.

Whitney Darrow Jr (il.), *The Office Party*, New York: Doubleday 1951.

Seth, *It's a Good Life...*, Montreal: D&Q 2005, panel 1, p. 9.

The most striking example of this strategy, however, is the creation of Kalo as his character – even though entirely fictional and, for this reason, never mentioned in the glossary – becomes not only an obsession, but also an ultimate excuse for the protagonist to reflect over his own vocation.

11 Seth, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken,* Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly 2005, panel 7, p. 3.
12 Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, Seth, and Chris Ware, *op.cit.*, p. 166.

By trying to reconstruct the biography of someone who seemed extremely gifted, but nevertheless got forgotten, Seth challenges cultural history and, at the same time, weighs up the prospects behind the career of a cartoonist. In both cases, what he works with is scattered data, doomed to be incomplete. On one hand, these are the few samples of someone else's work, combined with the memories of those who knew him; on the other, the surplus of possibilities for his own future. As the investigation progresses, and a set of haunting coincidences comes up to the surface (the similarity of style, the same places of origin), the two characters begin to overlap. The collection stops being just a product, and becomes a producer of the one who collects – it sinks into his life like the story sinks into the life of the storyteller.

This double-bind has been widely explored throughout history, moving from the medieval notebook method, through the private cabinets of curiosities, and up to the contemporary strategies in curating art exhibitions. In these contexts, it becomes apparent that the simple act of choosing – or refusing to choose – is what already pours meaning into every single item of a collection and, by default, renders the image of the one who picks them. Collection, differently to an archive, and much like a story, is not a mere accumulation of data, gathered and made accessible, but a careful attempt at constructing some sort of an identity – while it could not possibly convey the essence of things, it can certainly serve as a metaphor for searching for meaning. In this sense, collecting is also a mode of storytelling that remains in direct touch with the experience.

The act of bringing together and juxtaposing objects that – under any other circumstances – may have never been put side by side, is also a strategy for welcoming astonishment and renewal. What often begins a collection, and manages to keep it growing, is an object riddled with error, or a thing known but imperfectly. It confronts us with the unknown and, through that, sparks curiosity, encourages wonder and confabulation. Yet, while the urge for finding out more is what grants the expansion of the collection, a collector seldom begins with the goal of a closure. The thrill of the hunt is far more powerful than the desire for completion and it is in this act of eschewing finality that the pleasure of exploring varying sets and configurations lays, for as much as every collection is guided by a specific rubric, and may follow a very strict pattern for cataloguing and assembling the items, every new element – as well as every new gaze – reinvents it by expanding the context and shifting the original position of the pieces.

In the case of Seth, this process may be illustrated through the act of turning what used to be a serialized comic into a graphic novel. While, in general, the work did not suffer many changes (most of them would be simple corrections of punctuation, word-choices, or historical errors – like, for instance, the date of Ross' death on page 35), some were quite significant. First of all, the one-shot version is no longer black-and-white: not only it is printed on a yellowish paper, but also uses

blue shading, which gives the work a patina of time. In some panels, the text is rewritten to fit the composition (ex. panel 6 on page 11).

The only example of a panel that has been redrawn is the image of Ruth on page 25. As much as the changes are minimal (a line of shadow added on the nose, wider eyebrows, eyes drawn closer to one another), they immediately make her more characterful. Interestingly enough, the preoccupation with this particular part of the story continues, as the only instance of changes in the layout of the page is the scene of meeting in the park (pp. 46-47). What originally was condensed in 7 panels, now doubled. Inserting new pieces allowed to extend the moment of melancholic contemplation, but also drew attention to the very act of making – and pursuing – the decision to follow Ruth. This choice seems to be even more significant, as that specific scene may be the only one in the story, when the main character is presented as someone who, in the end, has some agency over his own life.

"Ruth", Seth, *Palooka-ville #4*, Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly 1993, p. 25.

"Ruth"*,* Seth, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken,* Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly 2005, p. 25.

The question of changes introduced to the layout – especially as it concerns the organization of the panels – serves as one more argument for seeing comic books as a potent medium for stories centred around the theme of collecting. On one hand, it only reminds to what extend this specific artform relies on delivering pithy items for reflection – pieces that could be read fast, but would make the feeling linger. Seth pays homage to that notion not only through his own work, but also pointing out to the work of the early masters (like Peter Arno, for example), reminding that "for a great deal of the 20th century newspaper cartoonist[s] had *a* page to tell a story"[13]. On the other hand, it is important that a comic book presents a story in a series of frames, which makes it a natural choice for anyone interested in the idea of somehow reassembling life from pieces, or simply confronting himself with a challenge of arranging scattered fragments into some sort of a conceptual or temporal order.

In Seth's work, frames often serve as display cases for accumulated minutiae – they seem to be an equivalent of boxes, "a safe, confined space", as the main character defines them.[14] Combined with a relatively regular layout (usually seven panels per page, slightly varying in size), they enhance the feeling of order, openly favouring the mode of contemplation. At the same time, they highlight every moment of disruption, as it would usually be signalized by the removal of the thin, black line and replacing it with an alternative framing. One of the most vivid examples here is the scene in which Seth presents Kalo's cartoons to Chet for the first time (pp. 18-19). What begins as a friendly exchange of opinions, ends up with a profound disillusionment. Its peak is brilliantly captured in the final panel on the page 19: a close-up on Seth's face, devastated with a discovery that his obsession with Kalo is his alone. In this particular case the removal of the frame, additionally emphasized by a puff of smoke transgressing towards the gutter, as well as the vertical composition of the three panels, aligned one below the other and presenting the subsequent stages of this realization, grasp what may be the greatest fear of every collector: the failure at making his findings appealing and, in consequence, missing out on the opportunity for granting them wider recognition.

Other cases of changes in framing are mostly related to the opening panels of the subsequent parts of the story (ex. p. 1, 57) – or various scenes that suspend or derange the narration (mother and Chet asking about the relationships, people playing ice hockey, Ruth appearing in the library, conversation with Annie, new traces of Kalo being found). They are also used to mark some less intense moments of disillusion (ex. p. 30, 65, 71, 87), or a deepened melancholic mood (ex. p. 46, 75, 95). The common feature of all these panels, enclosed in an undulating, cloud-like shape, is that, above anything else, they tend to stand for the fleeting possibility of change – the very moment of

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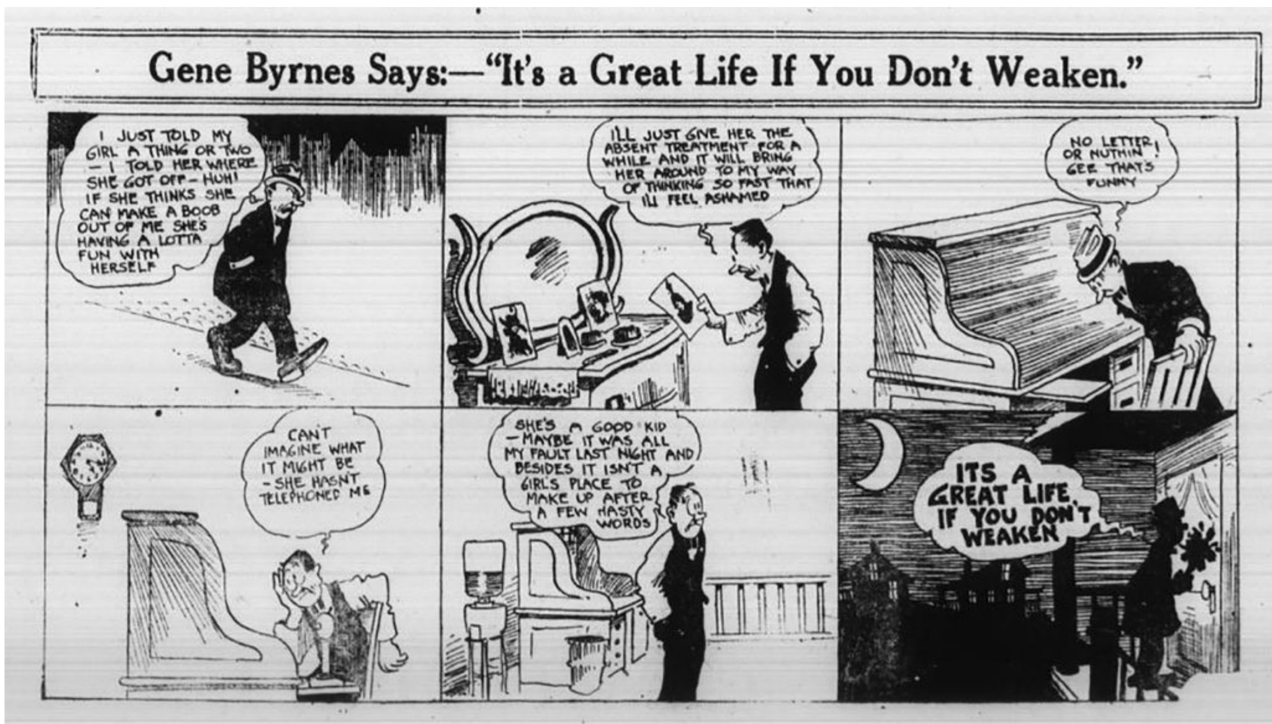
13 *ibidem,* p. 165.

14 Seth, *It's a Good Life...*, *op.cit.,* panel 5, p. 12.

making a choice of whether to grasp the alternative thread of a story, and maybe rearrange all the fragments anew, or reject it and stick to the previously established grid.

Dreams and memories from childhood are one more example of panels using alternative framing (in this case, a wavy shape, resembling the edges of an old photograph). Just like the aforementioned cases, they too address the main character's doubts and insecurities – though in a slightly more elaborated way. The dream sequence (where boundaries between the panels are diluted even further, as part of the gutter morphs into small clouds) represents the tension between the ambition of becoming a continuer of a great artistic tradition, and the thrills of finding beauty in the least expected places – a choice that, in a way, reflects the eternal discord between the canon and the transient wonders. Retrospections, on the other hand, seem to serve as gentle reminders (or maybe even explanations) of the origins of Seth's artistic inclinations. Both the example of playing with a paper boat, or warning a friend who walks on the frozen lake, prove that imagination is a treasure hard to overprice – especially in the dull reality of a small town.

The motif of suburbia finds its reflection also in the title of the work. While Seth claims that the reason for choosing it was just a fond memory of the saying used by his mother[15], it also seems to be a wink towards Gene Byrnes' 1915 comic strip – “It's a Great Life If You Don't Weaken”. Regularly published in *The New York Telegram,* it featured a character of a restless wanderer, slightly obsessive and clearly incapable of adapting to modern life, and, by 1917, slowly transformed into “Reg'lar Fellows” – a series about kids from a small town, dedicated both to the young ones and their parents, which became a great success.



Gene Byrnes, "It's a Great Life If You Don't Weaken", *The New York Telegram*, 1915.

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15 *ibidem,* dedication page; Eric Hoffman, Dominic Grace (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 113-114.

Since Byrnes is yet another example of a cartoonist who had once gained a reasonable reputation, but then fell into obscurity (nowadays he is remembered mostly as the author of a drawing manual), he may also be regarded as a real-life equivalent of Kalo. Never mentioned explicitly, not even in the glossary, but present as yet another, hidden reference, he serves as an invitation for a reader to begin his own investigation – and maybe come across some other noteworthy example of an artist whose work should be reclaimed. This idea of breaking the fourth wall and blurring the boundaries between actuality and the world of fiction, while in itself not particularly original, serves as a great vehicle for sparking curiosity around the work and, in many cases, granting it some sort of continuation.

One more example of such play, contemporary to *Palooka-ville*, can be the case of Mary von Rathen and Augustin Desombres – two characters from François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters' *Obscure Cities.* While the first one, being "a cataloguer of unexplained phenomena"[16], was purely fictional (even though she was supposed to have briefly visited our world, and the authors claimed that some letters of her, as well as a testament, were found[17]), the other was fashioned to resemble an actual artist – born in 1869 in Bourg-en-Bresse, and lost without trace by the end of 1906. His works, rediscovered and exhibited in the early 90s, were featured in a catalogue designed by the duo behind *The Obscure Cities.* Thanks to the accompanying soundtrack and photographs, the story became credible enough to make many of the readers involved in the search of more traces of the forgotten painter. Among the more recent examples, it's enough to mention the fictional graphic novel featured in the *Utopia* tv series, where the legacy of the artist – and the dogged determinacy of some comic books fans – becomes the core of a conspiratorial plot.

Such attempts at turning the reader either into a collaborator or a heir, draws attention to one more aspect of collecting that is explored in Seth's work: the possibility of an object (or a set of them) to become a substituent of a person, a legacy which would "recapitulate him indefinitely, beyond the point of death."[18] It is a preoccupation reflected not only in the image of the collector as a redeemer of the neglected – or simply overlooked – remnants, but also the urge for preserving the present, turning that which is always on the brink of disappearance, into a real thing. Within the analysed book, it is manifested not only through the interest in the long-forgotten cartoonists, but also appreciation for Annie's work – one which clearly stands for the outsider's art.

History, however, knows many examples of such efforts turning futile. Seth himself often says jokingly that, whenever he thinks of his own death, he sees his "wife's foot crushing the paper

16 François Schuiten, Benoît Peeters, *The Obscure Cities (The Grain Sand Theory),* Hamburg: Verlag Schreiber & Leser 2012, p.33.

17 Joseph le Perdriel, "Mary's Mystery Remains", in: *Alta Plana* [on-line: https://www.altaplana.be/blog/2013-04-02/mary-s-mystery-remains, accessed: 25.04.2020].

18 Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting", in: John Elsner, Roger Cardinal (ed.), trans. Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting,* London: Reaktion Books 1994, p. 17.

town into the dumpster" - a sad comparison between the possible fate of the Dominion project and that of Scott Joplin's suitcase, which – full of compositions - "was carted around for ten years until, finally, his sister threw it in the garbage."[19] But, differently to manuscripts or original art projects, graphic novels circulate in many copies. Being a medium that proves itself great for registering the very process of making sense by gathering and assembling scattered pieces – and now commonly used in confessional writing, (auto)biographies, and journalism – just like collections, they can serve as volatile repositories. As Chris Ware wittingly points out, they can also aptly represent the person, because: "they have a spine, and they are bigger on the inside than they are on the outside, just like we are. Plus they can lie to you"[20] - a remark verified by the example of *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken.*

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19 Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, Seth, and Chris Ware, *op.cit.,* p. 161.
20 *ibidem,* p. 163.