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INTERVIEW

## Paddy Johnston Interviews Ken Parille, Editor of *The Daniel Clowes Reader*

Paddy Johnston\*

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Ken Parille and Paddy Johnston discuss *The Daniel Clowes Reader* (2013) and Daniel Clowes' works, Ken's other publications, approaches to studying comics, issues in comics criticism and the future of the field.

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**PJ:** Hi Ken. Thanks a lot for agreeing to be interviewed. As your most recent book is *The Daniel Clowes Reader* (2013), I'd like to start by asking: Why Daniel Clowes? A significant number of your academic publications have been works on Clowes. What is it that makes you want to write about him so much?

**KP:** Because Clowes constantly changes his approach to narration and visual style, there's always something interesting to write about. Many pages in *The Death-Ray*, for example, look conventional, with square panels organized into a basic grid, familiar word balloon shapes, and a limited colour palette. But Clowes uses different thicknesses in panel borders and slight changes in balloon shapes to indicate shifts in narrative perspective: in one sequence, the main character's narration aligns temporally with the images, and in other sequences, it doesn't – the protagonist narrates from the future, speaking through a younger version of himself. These are odd effects, yet Clowes integrates them seamlessly into the narrative.

He also creates idiosyncratic and memorable characters. The tense friendship between *The Death-Ray's* protagonists is both sad and frightening. The comic works as a parody/critique of superhero narratives, or simply as a story about friendship, in which the superhero elements form a backdrop for something more interesting. *The Death-Ray* is a kind of follow-up to *Ghost World*, which explores the relationship of two young women near the ages of *The Death-Ray's* main characters. The two stories couldn't be more different in terms of look, approach to form, and genre, yet both display Clowes' ability to understand friendship, loneliness, anger, and desperation in ways I find profound and oddly funny. And his narrative techniques, which illuminate his characters' anxious inner lives, help us to sympathize with characters who are often difficult to like.

Even after reading a Clowes comic over a dozen times, I see new things – maybe just a background detail or a line of dialogue that I overlooked – that can affect how I understand the story. The fact that Clowes' work continually reveals something new makes me want to write about it because I know that, while writing, I'll learn more about it and the medium in general. And I assume that other readers might have overlooked aspects of the comic that initially eluded me.

**PJ:** How did the experience of working on *The Reader* differ from working on *The Art of Daniel Clowes: Modern Cartoonist*, in terms of your research methods and engagement with different areas of scholarship?

**KP:** Because *The Reader* is a critical edition rather than an artist monograph, the approach and goals are fairly different. With *The Reader* I want to show that Clowes' work, and even a single comic, benefits from a wide array of interpretive approaches. So, the section on *Ghost World* features several kinds of analysis. Pam Thurschwell's essay uses literary theory to discuss Clowes' portrayal of adolescence and reveals the ways that capitalism shapes the protagonists' lives. Adele Melander-Dayton's personal narrative explores her emotional investment in the comic's heroine. Kaya Oakes examines important social contexts: the countercultural fanzine, DIY, and Indie movements of the early 1990s. And to give Clowes' perspective, I include an interview about the comic conducted by Joshua Glenn. Taken together, these approaches give a broad sense of what *Ghost World* is about, showing how complicated and carefully constructed the comic is.

Many comics in *The Reader* are highly allusive, and so much of my research involved tracking down and reading – or listening to – Clowes' sources. I wanted some of the annotations to be a little more detailed than those found in traditional critical editions. For example, I provide a brief plot synopsis for all of the books Enid owns in *Ghost World* so readers can think about why these books would be meaningful to her and how they relate to her life. *The Reader* includes Clowes' illustrated prose manifesto *Modern Cartoonist*, which is full of references

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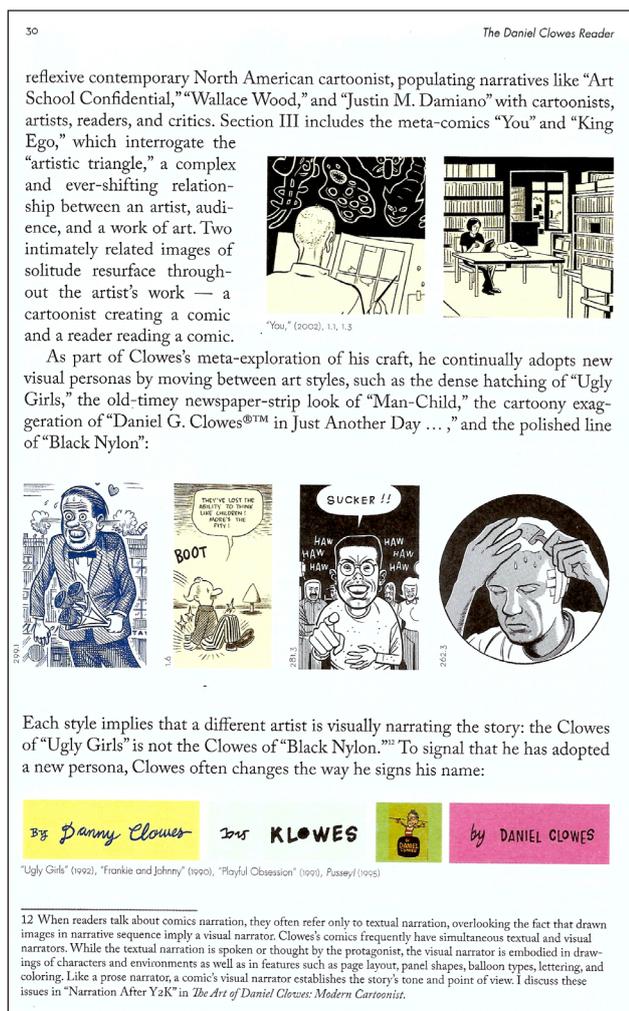


Fig. 1: Parille, K. ed. (2013) *The Daniel Clowes Reader* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 30).

to comic books and artists. It’s accompanied by a series of annotations that form a kind of mini-essay on American comic-book history.

The essays on Clowes’ “Black Nylon,” “Blue Italian Shit,” and “Art School Confidential” take other approaches: some explore genre or narrative strategies; others look at gender, masculinity, and psychoanalysis; and some focus on biography, relating the comic to Clowes’ life. I hope the introductions, essays, indexes, and annotations represent an interesting sample of what’s possible when it comes to researching and writing about comics in scholarly and other ways.

**PJ:** *I’d say it certainly does. You mentioned that The Reader benefits from a wide array of interpretive approaches. To what extent do you think comics studies, as an emerging field of scholarship, deals well with the need for a variety of approaches that present comics as a unique art form?*

**KP:** The last decade or so has seen scholars writing about comics from social, political, and historical perspectives; and in terms of exploring issues and content, everything seems like it’s on the right track. Ideally, I’d like to see more writing that’s as attuned to form as to content; the comics “as a unique art form” aspect you mention still seems under-explored to me. I’d also like to see more scholarly venues

that feature non-traditional kinds of writing, in addition to the conventional academic essay and book review.

**PJ:** *That’s an interesting point, as a lot of scholars believe the field has been somewhat dominated by formalist analysis and that texts with a formalist leaning have become almost paradigmatic. I’m thinking here of the weight given to Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics and Will Eisner’s Comics and Sequential Art, texts such as Thierry Groensteen’s The System of Comics and Comics and Narration, and more recent texts such as Neil Cohn’s The Visual Language of Comics. How would your idea of exploring comics “as a unique art form” differ from these approaches, and how can comics scholars better engage with comics as a unique art form?*

**KP:** I’ve also heard people say the field is dominated by formalism, and perhaps they’re right. It may depend on how you define “the field.” When I think about academic comics writing as whole, I see lots of essays that, while they refer to the books you mention, don’t employ those theories — or any kind of formalist or art-based approach — at any length. And that’s perfectly fine, as I talk about here (<http://www.tcj.com/two-questions-answered-about-the-state-of-comics-criticism-2013/>). I sometimes read arguments that could be strengthened by exploring form/styles issues. Yet, in an essay on a comic’s politics, looking at the meanings of grid design or the ink line’s changing weight might be a needless distraction.

As far as how my approach differs from each of the theoretical approaches you mention, it’s difficult to answer briefly except to say that some of them often rely on what seems to me to be a questionable fundamental premise: they equate “comics” with “narrative” without acknowledging, or perhaps recognizing, that they are doing so, and without exploring types of non-narrative comics. Since many different kinds of objects can reasonably be called a comic, the idea that a single theoretical approach can explain something about all comics or that it can be used when interpreting any comic seems strange to me.

**PJ:** *When you say The Reader’s content engages with comics “in scholarly and other ways,” I’m curious as to what your conception of the “other ways” is, and where you draw the lines between scholarly writing on comics and other writing on comics? I’m thinking here of your writing in The Comics Journal and your columns there. How do your approaches differ between the different types of writing you do about comics?*

**KP:** I think about my writing in terms of the audience I’m addressing. Academic writing (for peer-reviewed journals and books) typically comes with certain expectations: the writer must position the argument in terms of current critical conversations, cite other scholars, and make the argument at a certain length. These things ensure that an essay is useful to other academics, yet they also lead to a piece that likely wouldn’t be right for many online readers of *The Comics Journal* or people who come across my writing when searching the web for material on an artist or book they’re interested in. I try to use the insights and approaches I’ve learned as an academic and put them in a form that addresses a wide variety of readers, or at least that’s the plan. Writing for *The Comics Journal*, I can



**Fig. 2:** Parille, K. ed. (2013) *The Daniel Clowes Reader* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 163).

structure my pieces however I want. I can close-read a page of a children’s comic (<http://www.tcj.com/friendly-ghosts-and-comics-form/>), write a review of Chester Brown’s *Paying For It* as an imaginary four-person conversation (<http://www.tcj.com/drawing-sex-and-paying-for-it/>); or explore a more issue-based approach, as in this essay on gender and superhero costumes (<http://www.tcj.com/this-man-this-monster-super-heroes-and-super-sexism/>). Hopefully, this diversity, whether in *The Journal* or *The Reader*, keeps things interesting.

When developing *The Reader*, I imagined a book that would work many ways simultaneously: as a classroom text, a book for a Clowes fan or general comics fan, or for someone new to the medium. I wanted it to have academic and non-academic features, allowing people to see it — and use it — in whatever way was best for them. So it includes footnotes, citations, annotations, and articles written by academics that follow scholarly conventions. It also includes shorter essays, contextual analysis, and close-readings that don’t explicitly engage a critical conversation. Some of the essays take a form seldom found in scholarly contexts, such as my short illustrated piece on Clowes and advertising or the scene-by-scene reading of “Black Nylon,” which I set up with six different arguments about how to read Clowes’ cryptic superhero story. And

Clowes’ comics, which the book includes in full, are always at the centre.

Though the book follows the “critical edition” model in many ways, it doesn’t always look like a conventional “scholarly edition of a literary work.” A big part of *The Reader*’s accessibility is the result of Alvin Buenaventura’s careful, streamlined design — and Fantagraphics’ Eric Reynolds’ willingness to allow us to print the entire 360-page collection in full-colour. I think it’s important that we were able to use so many examples of Clowes’ art in the essays and features, and Alvin’s design integrates Clowes’ images and the essayists’ words, ensuring that they work well together. Like the essays, the layout of the book helps to make the case about the sophistication and depth of Clowes’ comics.

I hope that people come away from *The Reader* thinking about Clowes’ work in new ways and have an expanded idea of what constitutes valid “comics criticism.” For example, the index I made for objects, themes, and allusions in *Ghost World* is comics criticism of a sort. It opens several avenues into the comic and makes an implicit argument about the graphic novel’s construction and concerns.

**PJ:** *I’m interested to hear that you were keen for The Reader to be accessible to someone who was entirely new to the medium. How important do you think it is for comics studies (as an academic field) and for comics criticism in general to think about this audience and to make its texts welcoming to readers who might be new to the medium? Audience and ghettoisation are often seen as problems for comics as a medium - do you think these issues extend to comics criticism?*

**KP:** *The Reader* includes features like a glossary of comics terms keyed to examples from *Ghost World* that would be useful to new readers working on their own, or to members of a class, providing a shared vocabulary that would assist group discussions. And Clowes’ in-depth interview on his creative process serves as a great introduction to how comics are often created.

I don’t think that academic critics have any obligation to write for an audience beyond other academics — that’s their job, and peer-reviewed essay are, by their nature, generally limited to an academic audience. But I assume that some feel as I do. They’d like an audience of more than just scholars reading what they write. And one way to find this audience is to write for non-academic venues. I’ve written for the ongoing collection of Carl Barks’ comics, which features accessible short essays by academics such as Jared Gardner, Craig Fischer, Matthias Wivel, Donald Ault, and others. If someone were to teach these stories, their essays could serve as models for how to think and write about comics. Pieces by Martha Kuhlman, Jeet Heer, Hillary Chute, Philip Nel, Charles Hatfield, and other scholars appear online, reaching a general audience. I used to have a bias against writing for online publications and wanted to see my work only in print — but no longer.

**PJ:** *Was there anything in particular that led you to reconsider this bias - perhaps a particular critic, site, or series of publications? Or was this bias gradually worn down by the growth of digital media?*



### Decoding "Black Nylon"

by KEN PARILLE



"Black Nylon" is the most cryptic and compact of Clowes' stories. His friend and fellow cartoonist Peter Bagge once described it as written in "code," and there's something to this claim. While no key can decipher the story's "meaning," "Black Nylon" gestures toward numerous interpretations. This openness stems from a choice Clowes makes: he withholds explanations of the mysteries he initiates, leaving us to "figure it all out" — a phrase from the comic's final panel. Like most detective stories, "Black Nylon" is about interpretation; readers are expected to treat every detail as a possible clue that

needs careful consideration in relation to every other detail. Yet because the story lacks a traditional crime plot, its clues never add up to a familiar "the butler did it" kind of solution. Rather, to solve this mystery is to interpret it. When making sense of a comic as intricately strange as "Black Nylon," we can think in terms of analytical frameworks

Fig. 3: Parille, K. ed. (2013) *The Daniel Clowes Reader* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 267).

**KP:** In late 2007, I joined a group blog with Alvin Buenaventura, cartoonist Tim Hensley, cartoonist/designer Jonathan Bennett, and critic Todd Hignite. This was the first time I wrote about comics with any regularity, other than posting on message boards. Previously, I'd only written two essays on comics: one on Clowes' *David Boring* for *Comic Art* and another in the *Boston Review*. The blog was fun, a chance to meet and interact with readers, critics, and cartoonists and develop ideas about writing on comics. I think my bias was eroded, as you suggest, by the growth of digital media. But I also enjoyed the fact that I could write pieces on any topic and at any length. When Dan Nadel and Tim Hodler revamped *The Comics Journal* in 2011, I joined as a columnist, realizing by that point that I wanted most of my writing to appear online.

**PJ:** *I've enjoyed the fact that The Reader has a dedicated Tumblr which updates regularly with medium-appropriate Clowes content, such as rare original art or covers from the various worldwide editions of Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron (2004) for example. I assume you yourself look after this Tumblr, and also the Facebook page - was it your idea to set up these pages, and what was the motivation behind this? Does it represent an attempt to engage with people online who might not ordinarily engage with comics scholarship or criticism? This also begs the wider question of how you think social media and especially sites like Tumblr can*

*fit in to scholarship and criticism, for comics and more generally - what are your thoughts on this?*

**KP:** I created these ongoing pages with the hope of reaching people who might be interested in the collection, and Tumblr, with its visual/ art focus, seemed an important place to be. Books often have a short media life, and since *The Reader* offers accessible, and I think, long-lasting approaches to comics criticism, I want to increase the possibility that people will find out about it. Though [danielclowesreader.tumblr.com/](http://danielclowesreader.tumblr.com/) is mainly promotional, it's also a place to explore Clowes' work through sets of images and occasional illustrated text pieces. It would be a good thing if more academic scholarship appeared in social media venues, but I'm not sure that many academics will want to invest much effort if their institutions don't recognize such work as a valid part of a scholar's writing and research. I'd like to see institutions become more open-minded, recognizing that, when academics participate in these online venues, it's a positive.

**PJ:** *As comics is a relatively young art form the majority of criticism in existence relates to work by creators who are still alive. The University Press of Mississippi Conversations series has engaged with this side of comics criticism and produced a number of useful volumes including one on Daniel Clowes (which you edited with Isaac Cates), and The Reader contains a number of enlightening interviews too. I'm curious about how you think comics scholars and critics should engage with the authors of the work they're criticising, if at all, and what you think is the best way to go about it? I'm also curious as to whether you have a personal relationship with Daniel Clowes, and whether he had any personal input into The Reader while you were putting it together.*

**KP:** We needed to get Clowes' permission, but he left the contents — the comics and the essays/features — up to me. I ran some things by him, but they were mostly factual questions about his career, the accuracy of certain dates, etc. Clowes has often said that interpretation is the critic's job, not his. I'd guess that some of the claims I make about his work would differ from, and even contradict, his own thoughts. But that's fine.

Most critical editions begin with an editor's introduction, but I wanted *The Reader* to begin with Clowes' take on issues key to his comics and creative process. So it opens with fifteen interview excerpts accompanied by panels from his comics. Having discussed Clowes' work with many students, I've learned what kind of things that they want to know about it and how they like to talk about it. In part, I organized *The Reader* so that it would address these interests.

Cartoonist interviews have affected the ways I write about comics, as much or more than other forms of criticism. I don't take an artist's commentary on their work or their medium as definitive, but cartoonists such as Clowes, Chris Ware, Ivan Brunetti, and Kevin H. have spoken and written about comics in ways that have fundamentally broadened my approach.

**PJ:** *I'd definitely agree with you that it's very important to use visual examples of comic art when criticising and studying comics, and this was definitely a significant reason for The Reader's success as a critical volume. Sometimes,*

however, articles in journals aren't accompanied by images when they analyse comics. Do you think it's possible to produce effective comics criticism without using significant visual examples? Often there are issues with copyright when reproducing images from comics, and it can often take a long time to obtain the necessary permissions. How do you think comics scholars should deal with this, and do you think there should be a greater awareness of these issues in the field?

**KP:** I wouldn't say that effective criticism requires a lot of images — or even any — but I tend to think that, in a review or analytical essay, more images help. I'll often see an online review with only a single image when it wouldn't be difficult or costly to have three or four. The same holds true in academic journals. Typically, images help to make the writer's case — and they help a reader assess a scholar's or reviewer's claims. I understand the concerns about permission, but I think "fair use" covers many scholarly situations, though people sometimes hesitate to take a risk, which is understandable.

*The Reader* includes a couple of essays with a limited number of images, but in these cases, the comic being discussed appears a few pages earlier. My essay on Clowes' post-2000 graphic novels in *The Art of Daniel Clowes* uses over 70 images, and I don't think it would have worked if it wasn't heavily illustrated, showing Clowes' constantly shifting approach to style; and if people don't want to read my prose, they can just look at all of the art.

**PJ:** Finally, what's next for you, in terms of bigger projects? I've been enjoying your column in *The Comics Journal*, but can we expect another *Reader* or a similar work soon? Is there more to say on Clowes, or would you consider putting together a similar volume on a different cartoonist?

**KP:** There certainly is more to say about Clowes, and I'll likely write about his work again. As far as bigger projects, or something like another *Clowes Reader*, I have a few ideas, but don't know if any of them will happen.

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