Collective Memory in *George Sprott: 1894-1975* and *Building Stories*

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Abstract

This thesis examines collective memory in the graphic novels *George Sprott: 1894-1975* by Seth and *Building Stories* by Chris Ware. Seth and Ware illustrate how individual memory is inextricable from collective experiences of history, space, and community by using unconventional publishing formats paired with the visual language of graphic narrative. I argue Seth and Ware also extend the border of collective memory to include the non-fictive space of the reader through multi-media adaptations and collaboration. Seth's cardboard Dominion models, the chamber oratorio *Omnis Temporalis*, and Ware's iPad comic *Touch Sensitive* create a larger community of memory that extends beyond the page.

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Introduction

All we can say of ourselves is that we are the central character in our own little stories. We are the star. Others decide whether that is 'true' or not."

Seth, from *Seth: Conversations*, 132

I think at one point or another everyone has a dream where they read a surprising book, or see a huge, complicated painting, or hear a moving song and then wake up and realize that they'd created the whole thing, alone, in their mind.

Chris Ware, from an interview with Chris Mautner, *The Comics Journal*

Seth's *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (2009) and Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012) are ambitious graphic narratives, works that use the physical presence and visual language of comics to examine the process of remembering and the interplay between individual and collective memory. Using unconventional publishing formats coupled with the unique formal resources of comics, Seth and Ware examine how their protagonists— George Sprott in *George Sprott*, and the Unnamed Woman in *Building Stories*— remember and forget, and how their memories are shaped in turn by the communities that surround them. Seth and Ware interrogate the mechanisms of memory while simultaneously suggesting that remembering is not just an individual exercise: to remember is to implicate other narratives and other voices, including those who might lie outside the page entirely.

George Sprott evinces Seth's claim that "memory really fires my entire purpose as an artist" (*Seth: Conversations* 103). The book is a panoramic view of the life of George Sprott, a self-styled Arctic explorer and faded small-town celebrity. Using flashbacks, "interviews" with supporting characters, and elaborate asides detailing the history of the

fictional city of Dominion, Seth illustrates the decay of a once-vital figure alongside the

landmarks that marked the rhythms and events of his life. George is a relic by the end of

his life and a shadow after his death: his books are out of print, his films are destroyed,

and his Gentleman Explorer persona is outdated. "I've worked hard in this life, and I'd

like to leave something of value behind me," George declares, "But I'm no fool. My work

was ephemeral in nature. It's likely to melt and leave little trace" ("More From the Man

Himself" 5.4-5[1]). Preserving and interpreting George's memory is largely in the hands of

others, and *George Sprott* examines how those preservation efforts are influenced by

individual recollection, physical spaces, and the deep currents of history.

Memory is both a structural and thematic preoccupation in *Building Stories*,

perhaps the best example of Ware's self-professed creative methodology: "My incessant

use of rulers is ... an attempt to get at how houses and buildings affect the shapes and

structures of our memories" (Mautner n.p.). *Building Stories* follows the life of the

Unnamed Woman, "this nauseated girl who, for much of her life, has been much too

eager to be loved" (Element 9, np.), as her life intersects and entwines with others. Much

of the drama of her life plays out in a three-storey walk-up apartment building, a home

she shares with a squabbling couple downstairs and the building's aging live-in landlady.

This shared living space becomes the framing metaphor for *Building Stories*, as Ware

exposes the structural instability of memory. While *George Sprott* highlights the

collective effort necessary for the reconstruction of memory, *Building Stories* lingers on

the breakdown of individual recollection. It is a breakdown that reveals just how thin the

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[1] See "A Note on Citation" for further guidance on the citation method adopted throughout this project.

walls between individuals really are, and how much the preservation of memory depends on its continued circulation between individuals.

When George Sprott and the Unnamed Woman remember and are remembered, their memories are connected to the places shared, moments passed, and experiences forged in the company of others. Paul Ricoeur contends in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2006) that this reflexivity is a fundamental feature of memory:

> One does not simply remember oneself, seeing, experiencing, learning; rather one recalls the situations in the world in which one has seen, experienced, learned. These situations imply one's own body and the bodies of others, lived space, and, finally, the horizon of the world and worlds, within which something has occurred. (36)

George Sprott and *Building Stories* foreground the memories of Sprott and the Unnamed Woman against this ever-changing landscape of collective memory, terrain whose breadth and depth shifts with the force of recollection. While Seth and Ware focus the reader's attention through George Sprott and the Unnamed Woman, they are always figured within a larger community context, their history and memory in constant dialogue with the spaces and characters that surround them. Each artist's attentiveness to "lived space" highlights what Ricoeur terms "... a distinct, yet reciprocal and interconnected, constitution of individual memory and of collective memory" (95). The memories of George and the Unnamed Woman are indelibly marked by each character's interaction with the world that surrounds them, emphasising that memory cannot be wholly detached from the world in which it is made: it is a blend of the singular and the communal, the local and the global, the public and the private.

Seth and Ware articulate the "distinct, yet reciprocal" relationships between individual and collective memory through the language of graphic narrative, the grammar of which relies on the interplay between individual panels and their cumulative effect throughout an entire work. Thierry Groensteen argues in *The System of Comics* for "...the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images as the unique ontological foundation of comics" (17). Each image in *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* acquires structure, resonance, and rhythm in relation to the work as a whole, be that a strip, page, or series at a time. The play of images may introduce conflict or create consistency, but it never ceases to reinforce the connectedness of every element of the story. The durability and flexibility of comics as a language enables Seth and Ware to adapt the grammar of graphic narrative to surprising ends, enabling readers to recognize those adaptations as acts of continuous narrative world building.

The unorthodox publication history and physical formats of *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* can make such recognition and narrative reconciliation challenging—these works are instantly recognizable but resist easy classification. Both works were partially serialized in *The New York Times Magazine* under the "Funny Pages" banner, an enterprise the editors pitched as a revival of the Sunday supplements that saw their heyday in the early decades of the twentieth century newspaper publishing. The first issue opened with a segment from the then-in-progress *Building Stories*, which ran in "The Funny Pages" during 2005-06. *George Sprott* would follow in 2006-07. Both *Building Stories* and *George Sprott* adopted a relatively straightforward style for their *NYTM* runs: self-contained single page installments with a classic grid layout that could be read independently or as part of a series. Seth and Ware both published extended versions of

their "Funny Pages" comics following each work's *NYTM* run. *George Sprott* was published as an oversized 31x36.4 cm hardcover with the winking subtitle "A Picture Novella," an expanded form that allowed the inclusion of new material to "diffuse [the] directness of the original narrative" (Hoffman 128). While the printed *George Sprott* has a commanding shelf presence, it retains a recognizably bookish appearance; *Building Stories* resists and reimagines that form.[2] Ware compiled *Building Stories* as fourteen individually printed elements, ranging from double sided strips to bound books to a giant cardboard fold-out, all packed in a large cardboard box[3] reminiscent of a childhood board game. It collects over a decade of work, including and expanding on the original comics from the "Funny Pages." The results of Ware and Seth's inventive approach to publication format are pieces that at first glance exist somewhere between literary *objet d'art* and coffee table book. Few graphic narratives have achieved such an effective blend of comics tradition (the newspaper strip and the serial storyline) with formal and material inventiveness.

Seth and Ware extend their formal provocations beyond the back covers of their respective works. *George Sprott* inspired the multimedia project *Omnis Temporalis* (2017), a collaboration between Seth and composer Mark Haney to imagine the world of *George Sprott* through music, performance, and a gallery installation. The fictional city of Dominion, which provides the backdrop for *George Sprott*, was the subject of its own exhibition, *Seth: Dominion* (2008). Created in collaboration with curator Andrew Hunter,

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[2] I will continue to refer to *Building Stories* as a book, slippery though the term may be in this case.

[3] I list the cardboard box among these elements and make the case for its inclusion as "Element 15" of *Building Stories* in Chapter Three.

Seth's cardboard models of Dominion toured galleries across Ontario, Alberta, and Prince Edward Island. The "boxed" publication of *Building Stories* is a culmination of a Ware's series of experiments in the flexibility of comics as both a medium and a language. Chief among these is *Touch Sensitive*, a comic-as-digital-application created by Ware for *McSweeney's*. While access to the digital version of the comic has been tenuous, the comic is included in printed form in *Building Stories*. In addition to *Touch Sensitive*, several segments of *Building Stories* were previously published as part of Ware's ongoing *Acme Novelty Library* series, among other publications, in formats as varied as the paper pieces in the *Building Stories* box. *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*, no matter their format, are suffused with a sense of play, a willingness to experiment, and a keen awareness of the artistic possibilities of graphic narrative.

The unusual blend of traditional and alternative publication methods marks *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* as outliers within the already diverse world of graphic narrative, and their material status threatens to consume much of the oxygen from the critical atmosphere that surrounds them. *Building Stories* in particular has inspired much breathless commentary. "*Building Stories* does things no traditional novel can, or not without much lumbering effort," declared *The Guardian*'s review, "and it does things no comic has hitherto pulled off. No wonder, then, that opening it for the first time makes you feel like a child at Christmas" ("Building Stories" Cooke np). Cooke, again reviewing for *The Guardian*, called *George Sprott* "a small masterpiece" and approvingly noted the inclusion of photos of Seth's cardboard Dominion models: "It's as if Edward Hopper had set to work with scissors and glue" ("George Sprott" np.). While the physical forms of each work are impressive, they are not unprecedented. I aim to explore how Seth

and Ware adapt the grammar of graphic narrative beyond the confines of a classic comic book, and how the language of comics supports a broader conversation within each work about the relationship between people, space, and memory.

Cooke's comments are also indicative of a larger gap in critical response to *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* specifically, and Seth and Ware's work in general. Jeet Heer identified Seth and Ware as members of the same creative generation, "who came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s creating comics that aspired to greater narrative scope" ("Chris Ware, The Art of Comics No. 2" n.p.), but Ware has emerged as the dominant figure in that generation. The David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman edited volume *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* (2010), for example, featured four essays devoted to *Building Stories* alone—all written prior to the work's final publication. The publication of the collected *Building Stories* prompted an entire series of companion essays in *The Comics Journal* to reflect on and advance the initial analysis offered in *The Comics of Chris Ware*. Ware has been the subject of monographs[4] and dozens of academic essays in addition to considerable non-academic critical and media attention. More often than not, the name "Chris Ware" is a synonym for "serious comics."

Seth, in comparison, has a much lower profile in comics criticism. While mainstream appreciation of his work is growing,[5] Seth's name has yet to signal the same

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[4] Daniel Raeburn's *Chris Ware* (2004) and DJ Dycus's *Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan: Honing the Hybridity of the Graphic Novel* (2012).

[5] Luc Chamberland's film *Seth's Dominion* (2014) as a notable example.

critical shorthand for greatness as Ware. A handful of essays[6] mark Seth's presence in the

academic discourse on graphic narrative. There is very little sustained critique of *George*

Sprott, save Candida Rifkind's "The Biotopographies of Seth's *George Sprott: 1894-*

1975" and Daniel Marrone's *Forging the Past: Seth and the Art of Memory* (2016), which

considers *George Sprott* within the larger context of Seth's work. Ware is the undisputed

titan of graphic narrative, while Seth is the quirky nostalgist hot-gluing FedEx boxes in

the basement.

The gulf between Seth and Ware's comics is not as large as this critical and

popular disparity would suggest. Their respective works are grounded in a shared

understanding of the history of graphic narrative. Ware's *Quimby the Mouse* (2003) is a

paean not only to classic comic strips—George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* chief among

them—but a high-speed survey of superhero comics and pulp fiction plots, with nods to

the legacies of both Mickey and *Maus* (Spiegelman 1986, 1992). *The Great Northern*

Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists (2011) uses Seth's affinities for the early and mid-

twentieth century to fuel an imaginative alternate history of a glorious Canadian

cartooning tradition that never existed. Each has brought in the figure of the Comics Fan

for a self-aware drubbing—witness the action-figure obsessed characters Rusty Brown

and Chalky White in multiple issues of Ware's *Acme Novelty Library*,[7] and Seth's

eponymous, egomaniacal cartoon aficionado in *Wimbledon Green The Greatest Comic*

Book Collector in the World (2005). These comic riffs owe their strength not only to Seth

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[6] Katie Mullins' "Questioning Comics: Women and Autocritique in Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*," Bart Beaty's "Selective Mutual Reinforcement in the Comics of Chester Brown, Joe Matt, and Seth," and Barbara Postema's "Memories that Don't Weaken: Seth and Walter Benjamin."

[7] Issues 16, 17, 19, and counting.

and Ware's creative instincts, but to both artists' deep appreciation for and understanding of the history of the medium and language they work in. Seth has served as series designer for *The Complete Peanuts* (2005-2017) and *The Collected Doug Wright* (2009). Ware is the series designer and editor of Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* strips under the *Walt and Skeezix* (2005-present) title; he is also the series designer for Fantagraphics' compilation of the *Krazy Kat* Sunday comics as *Krazy & Ignatz.* Seth and Ware have assumed a curatorial role in preserving and interpreting the legacy of comics in North America, developing a shared institutional memory of comics that underpins their own work.

Beyond this shared historic frame of reference, both Ware and Seth have spent much of their respective careers interrogating the distinctions between fiction and truth, memory and history. Ware makes cameos in his work: witness the despondent art teacher "Mr. Ware" in *Acme Novelty Library 16* (2005). He also injects autobiography into ostensibly fictional stories: the halting reunion between the estranged father-and-son duo of Jimmy Corrigan Jr. and Sr. in *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) borrows from Ware's own strained relationship with his father. Meanwhile, Seth's *It's a Good Life if You Don't Weaken* (1996) assumes the form of a faux autobiography that casts "Seth" as a cartoonist on the hunt for his artistic ancestors, detailing the quest to learn more about the enigmatic (and fictional) cartoonist "Kalo." In recent years, Seth has turned over portions of his ongoing *Palookaville* (1990-present) series to autobiographical diary entries, and he collaborated with his father on a graphic memoir of his father's childhood in rural Prince Edward Island, *Bannock, Beans and Black Tea* (2004). These deliberate slips between fact and fiction, and the embrace of auto-fiction as a creative

modus operandi, highlight how constant the theme of memory has been throughout Seth

and Ware's work. Moreover, their interrogations reveal that the preservation of memory

and the work of recollection is a collaborative process between author and subject, as well

as author and audience. Read with this history in mind, *George Sprott* and *Building*

Stories are less a revelation of Seth and Ware's thematic preoccupations than a

culmination of decades-long investigations into the relationships between fiction and

memory.

Given Seth and Ware's enduring interest in memory, and the evergreen popularity

of graphic memoirs, biographies, and histories in general, examining memory beyond the

individual account becomes crucial for addressing the development of graphic narrative.

Bart Beaty notes in *Comics Versus Art* that, even with the rapid diversification of subject

matter in alternative comics, "confessional autobiographical comics (such as

Spiegelman's *Maus*) are the most durable of all alternative genres" (218), an observation

borne out by the success of works such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family*

Tragicomic (2007) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003), in addition to the much-cited

Maus. Discussions of memory in graphic narrative in turn form a substantial part of the

existing scholarship on the form.[8] The focus of this scholarship, however, is often on the

(auto)biographical details of a single subject in a graphic narrative and is less often

concerned with collective or communal experiences of memory. This can leave graphic

narratives that blend the techniques of life writing with the methods of oral history and

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[8] Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), Elisabeth El Refaie's
Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures (2012), and the Candida Rifkind and Linda Warley
edited *Canadian Graphic: Picturing Life Narratives* (2016), to name a select few volumes.

journalism, or adopt the critical postures of historiography, in a critical limbo. Graphic narratives that deliberately obscure the distinctions of fiction and nonfiction, as Seth and Ware so often do, may be scrutinized for proof of status without due consideration for how their transgressions of genre and medium enrich their narratives. Memory is an enduring concern for comics scholarships and considering paradigms of memory beyond individual life writing opens a fresh range of critical interpretations that can benefit newer and older works alike.

My analysis of collective memory in *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* will consider how collective memory is fundamentally shaped by the intersection of time and space. Graphic narratives are sites of exchange, and Seth and Ware observe "the horizon of the world" with exacting grace within the pages of their works. Communities of memory form within the pages of *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*, referencing shared moments and places, while depending on each other for their coherence and intelligibility.

Chapter One considers the experience of collective memory as a result of Seth and Ware's probing of the divisions between public and private life. In their contrast of "public" and "private" memories, *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* take aim at the apparent contradiction at the heart of memory: the "mineness" of memory is fundamentally shaped by the memories of others. This chapter will examine the treatment of memory from the perspective of Halbwachs' assertion that "The individual calls recollections to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory" (182). It will also consider Michael Warner's contention that "public and private sometimes compete, sometimes complement each other" (*Publics and Counterpublics* 28) in the context of Seth and Ware's repeated transgression of the traditional boundaries between public and

private. Mediating these moments of transgression and exchange is the language of graphic narrative, and this chapter will consider how the composition of *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* facilitates the collapse of the division between public and private recollection in the realization of collective memory.

Chapter Two focuses on the construction and experience of time within *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*. Temporal flux may be the most marked characteristic of *Building Stories*, reified by the fragmented physical structure of the work. *George Sprott* contends with the same temporal distortions, even though such distortions may seem unremarkable at first. Time, space, and memory are braided concerns, and the formal structures of graphic narrative illustrate the connections between them. Conflicting timelines, layered histories, and the accrual of memory in places over time are examined in detail, demonstrating how George and the Unnamed Woman are marked by the residue of memory.

Finally, Chapter Three discusses how Ware and Seth exploit the materiality of their narratives to extend the relationships between memory, place, and community into the world of the reader. This chapter will approach these material experiments from the perspective of Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre's concepts of "perigraphy" and "paratext" ("The Work and its Surround" 192). Ware's comics-in-a-box approach to *Building Stories* and Seth's real-world rendering of the *George Sprott*'s fictional city of Dominion are unusual examples of a graphic narrative making the implicit contract between text and reader an overt engagement. Ware's iPad comic *Touch Sensitive* and Seth's forays into the art gallery with the Dominion exhibits and *Omnis Temporalis* are extensions of the narrative worlds of *Building Stories* and *George Sprott*. These multi-modal presentations

acknowledge the relationship between audience and narrative, and their potential as a

sites of memory exchange should not be overlooked.

A Note on Citation

While the formal inventiveness of *Building Stories* and *George Sprott: 1894-1975*

offers rich opportunities for interpretation, the unusual physical structure of both works

makes it challenging to apply a conventional citation style to excerpts and

quotations. Neither *Building Stories* nor *George Sprott* are paginated and, in the case of

the former, simply determining a reading order is a separate thesis entirely. Analysis of

these works depends on close attention to their visual and iconic properties and, as a

result, some adaptation of MLA style has been required to accommodate this analysis.

References to portions of *George Sprott* are noted with the section title, followed

by the row number and panel number where the text occurs within the given row. This

numbering generally follows a top-to-bottom, left-to-right reading pattern. For example, a

quotation from the page titled "The White Dream" would be formatted as follows:

"George can't really be said to have a body in the dream—it's more a ghost body" ("The

White Dream" 3.4). In the case of nested panels, row and panel numbering will begin

from the top of the specific section in question, either as a leading note within the

sentence, or as a parenthetical citation, whichever is less disruptive. For example: "With

'An Interview with Martin Klug: Owner, 1978,' Seth outlines the parallel histories of

Sprott and the Melody Grill: 'It was sad to see him dim as he aged' ("Enjoy Our High-

Hat Service" 2.4)." In the case of chapters that continue over multiple pages, row

numbering will be considered continuous, with panel numbering resetting with each row.

I have opted to distinguish the individual components of *Building Stories* by

approximate size or format, a general convention that has been adopted by critics and

reviewers since Pantheon published the compiled work in 2012. It is tempting to assign a

hierarchy to the *Building Story* components, but the listing below is only intended to help the reader of this project refer quickly and clearly to the section of *Building Stories* under discussion at any given point. As such, the decision to list them in ascending order by size is arbitrary. When referencing image or text I use the element name (see list below) and section title where available, before noting the row and panel numbers as established in the preceding paragraph, where possible. The components are identified as follows:

Element 1: 3.5" x 28" Strip One (depicting the Unnamed Woman in the snow)

Element 2: 3.5" x 28" Strip Two (depicting the Unnamed Woman with her child)

Element 3: 3" x 9.75" Strip Book (wordless)

Element 4: Branford the Best Bee in the World (booklet)

Element 5: Little Golden Book

Element 6: 11" x 8.25" Booklet One (depicting the elderly landlady)

Element 7: 11" x 8.25" Booklet Two (depicting the couple that lives below the Unnamed Woman)

Element 8: 12" x 9" Booklet Three ("Disconnect")

Element 9: 12.5" x 9.25" Bound Book (approximating *Acme Novelty Library 18*)

Element 10: The Daily Bee (single sheet)

Element: 11: 16" x 13" Single Sheet (depicting the Unnamed Woman's high school boyfriend)

Element 12: 22" x 16" Double Sheet (describing the Unnamed Woman's childhood accident)

Element 13: "god…" (broadsheet newspaper)

Element 14: Cardboard Foldout

Element 15: Box

Furthermore: in order to distinguish between the ellipsis native to the work (which both authors use extensively) and the elisions I have made in quoting from them, the latter will be indicated with square brackets. This follows a convention employed by Ball and Kuhlman in *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* (2010), which I have found useful to employ in this work as well.[9] Quoted text or dialogue that runs over multiple panels will have panel breaks indicated by a forward slash (/).

The intent of these reference methods is to be as precise as possible when noting the location of a quotation or example, without resorting to extensive figures or lengthy explanations about that location—a process that may be more confusing than helpful if the reader is not already familiar with the structure of these works. It is not a perfect system: several sections of *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* defy even the modest organizational system I have set out above. I also recognize that the system I have proposed already demonstrates an intrinsic sense of priority (left to right, smallest to largest) that may reveal an unconscious visual—and by extension, narrative—bias. Instances of divergence from the classic grid structure of comics and unconscious assumptions of visual hierarchy will be the basis of further discussion within this project.

Finally, all excerpts and images are taken from the first print editions of *George Sprott: 1894-1975* and *Building Stories* unless otherwise noted.

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[9] Please see page 223 of that volume for further discussion of this convention.

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Chapter One

Collective memory complicates the distinction between public and private life. Maurice Halbwachs argues that collective memory is fundamentally social: "there are no recollections that can be said to be purely interior, that is, which can be preserved only within individual memory ... As soon as we locate people in a society it is no longer possible to distinguish two types of observations, one exterior, the other interior" (169). Halbwachs' contention is perhaps an uncomfortable one. When it comes to an individual's sense of their public and private selves there is a feeling of inviolability between those two personas, or, as Michael Warner observes, a "visceral conviction that there ought to be a clear distinction" (29). The absence of such a distinction raises questions about the boundaries of memory and self.

The distinction between public and private is elusive in *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*. George Sprott is a public figure characterized by his niece, Daisy, as "complicated. Even when braying out one of his 'tales,' he seemed alone—isolated," ("Uncle George" 1.4). Yet he is spoken of by fans with the false sense of intimacy typically fostered by celebrity: "Of course, I never actually knew George Sprott" declares Violet Glow, a Sprott devotee, "but after watching him on TV for 20 years I felt like I knew him" ("I Remember" 1.1). The Unnamed Woman of *Building Stories* is perhaps the ultimate private figure—her name is never given, grounding her character in a fundamental anonymity—but her body invites public comment. "I've heard it all, thousands of times: 'Look at her leg'," remarks the Unnamed Woman; "I guess people think you're not going to hear them or something—but I can read those words on anyone's lips from a *mile* away…" ("Her Leg" Element 9, 2.2-3). The boundaries

between public and private are not fixed, but fluid, and there are degrees of intimacy

within *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*. Transgressing the "visceral conviction" that

public and private are distinct categories affords Seth and Ware the latitude to explore

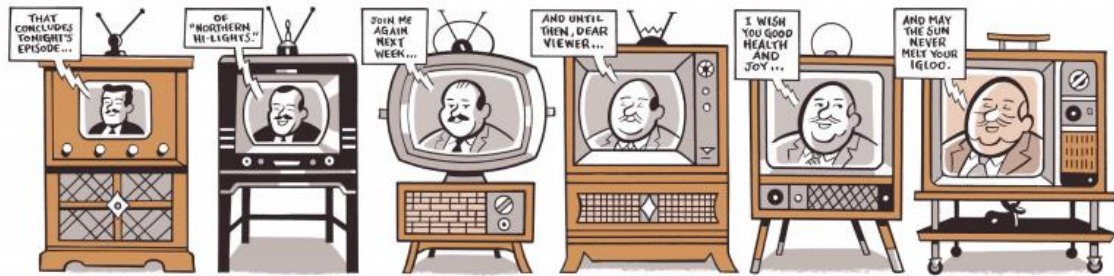how memory is influenced by the actions and presence of others.

Fig. 1.1 Excerpt from "I Remember," *George Sprott: 1894-197*. Used with permission

from Drawn & Quarterly. Copyright Gregory Gallant.

Recollection in *George Sprott* takes the form of a faux "oral" history, structured

by a limited omniscient narrator and a series of illustrated interviews with friends, fans,

and colleagues of George. The composition of the "I Remember" chapter is typical of the

page layouts favoured by Seth throughout *George Sprott*: a set of interviews with

characters claiming a long association with George, revealing memories of him that may

or may not agree with one another, contrasted with imagery depicting the changes that

mark George's lifetime. Much of this composition is a direct result of the limitations of

the original "Funny Pages" publication, something Seth has commented on at length: "I

had a lot of story ground to cover so that meant each strip had to be pretty dense—

twenty-five or thirty panels a page ... I needed to design the pages really tightly to make

all those panels read simply" (Hoffman and Grace 127). This economy of composition is

a practical response to one of the most pressing challenges of serialized publication:

reader continuity. "Since I couldn't count on the reader dutifully following it [*George*

Sprott] week to week," Seth notes, "I hoped I could at least make each page satisfying on

its own. [The] faithful reader ... would be free to tap into the bigger narrative" (Hoffman

and Grace 127). Each page of *George Sprott* must account for a range of readers, some

dedicated followers of each installment, others ignorant of the story's prior history.

The memories of George Sprott are likewise mediated by the degrees of

familiarity that separate a given character from George himself. The later years of one

long-time fan, Violet Glow, are warmed by the memory of George. "George, he was like

family. Sure, he rambled, but you liked listening to him just the same" ("I Remember"

2.1). Her appraisal of George is affectionate and laudatory: "Say what you like—he was a

class act!" (3.6). This public image of George Sprott is largely flattering, burnished to a

shine in Violet's memory. That image is tarnished in the same page by the testimony of

Frank Kennedy, one of George's fellow CKCK television presenters and a self-declared

friend. "God, we tied on a few together," Frank remembers, "And yes, he could talk. But

always about himself./He never asked you a goddamn question. Ever!/I hate to say it, but

George was a crashing bore" (5.4, 7-9). Frank's assessment of George's character,

informed by private experience, contradicts Violet's memory of a classy man. These

memories are placed in literal opposition to one another: Violet's interview occupies the

top two thirds of the page, while Frank's interview is a single strip bordering the bottom

of the page. Joseph Witek argues in "The Arrow and the Grid" that "panels on the page

always create narrative meaning both as sequences and as spatial arrangements; this

double-text is implicit in all comics forms, but it comes to the fore most fully in comic

books" (153). The oppositional placement of Violet and Frank's memories opens a gap

between the two accounts, one that is mirrored in the composition of the page. It is the gulf between private and public perception of George Sprott.

Bridging that gap is an unusual strip of panels that compounds the effect of this double-text. A line of television sets (fig. 1.1) separates Violet and Frank's interviews in "I Remember," each one an iconic representation of George and the changing times he's lived through. Other than his enduring fascination with the Arctic, television is one of the few fixtures in George's life. His time at CKCK as the host of his own show, "Northern Hi-Lights," is the common denominator between Violet and Frank as well. It should come as no surprise that the disagreement in their memory of George is mediated by this border of televisions: Violet's memory is informed by her experience on one side of the set, Frank on the other. That border, however, is not impenetrable. Warner observes, "Public and private are not always simple enough that one could code them on a map with different colours—pink for private and blue for public. The terms also describe social contexts, kinds of feeling, and genres of language" (27). The television transmits George's public persona, which has a profound impact on Violet's private memories. Frank's public recollection of George, now on the public record in the form of his interview, are coloured by his collegial interactions with George. All of these memories undercut the smiling face on the screen, the television set becoming a symbol of the fluid relationship between public and private.

George is not constrained by one set of memories or the other. Whether or not Frank's account is demonstrably more "true" than Violet's by virtue of his personal proximity to George is up for debate. Seth hints that Frank's relationship with George may be more complicated than the reader knows: Frank was content to pal around with

George and "didn't mind picking up his discards," (6.6) before blasting him as a "crashing bore." Halbwachs observes, "In the same moment that we see objects we represent to ourselves the manner in which others would look at them ... to look at them from the point of view of others" (168). Frank's interview may be tainted by personal and professional jealousy, or downright forgetfulness—the reader cannot be certain. The television set strip suggests that George can contain the recollections of both Frank and Violet. The parade of faces across the screen show George at many stages of life, from the womanizing raconteur suggested by Frank to the kindly, rotund storyteller evoked by Violet. However Violet or Frank choose to frame their memories of George, either to themselves or the unseen audience who reads their interviews, it is their prerogative. George spans a continuum of both Violet and Frank's memories.

The character interviews throughout *George Sprott* highlight how private memories can inform the public record of an individual's legacy, particularly when the person in question is unable to speak for themselves. Frank Kennedy and Violet Glow are unaware that the other person exists and will never know they share a connection in their mutual attachment to George Sprott: their association is coded in the anatomy of the "I Remember" page. It is a striking example of Groensteen's assertion in *The System of Comics* that "comics are composed of interdependent images; and that these images, before knowing any other kind of relation, have the sharing of a space as their first characteristic" (28). The composition of "I Remember" mediates the relationship between Violet and Frank's memories and underscores Halbwachs' earlier contention: "there are no recollections that can be said to be purely interior" (169). The shared space of the page

exposes unlikely bonds between characters, and it has profound consequences for collective memory.

The most acute observations of the dynamics of shared space unfold within the walls of an aging three-storey apartment building in *Building Stories*. Few boundaries between public and private feel as inviolable as those which encircle the concepts of house and home. Warner notes that the connection between privacy and domestic space is so acute that "Modern American law frequently defines privacy as a zone of noninterference drawn around the home ... courts have sometimes refused to recognize a right to privacy in other spaces" (27). *Building Stories* challenges this boundary between public and private by peeling back the facade of an apartment building, exposing the connections between the Unnamed Woman and the characters who surround her through the careful observation and articulation of space.
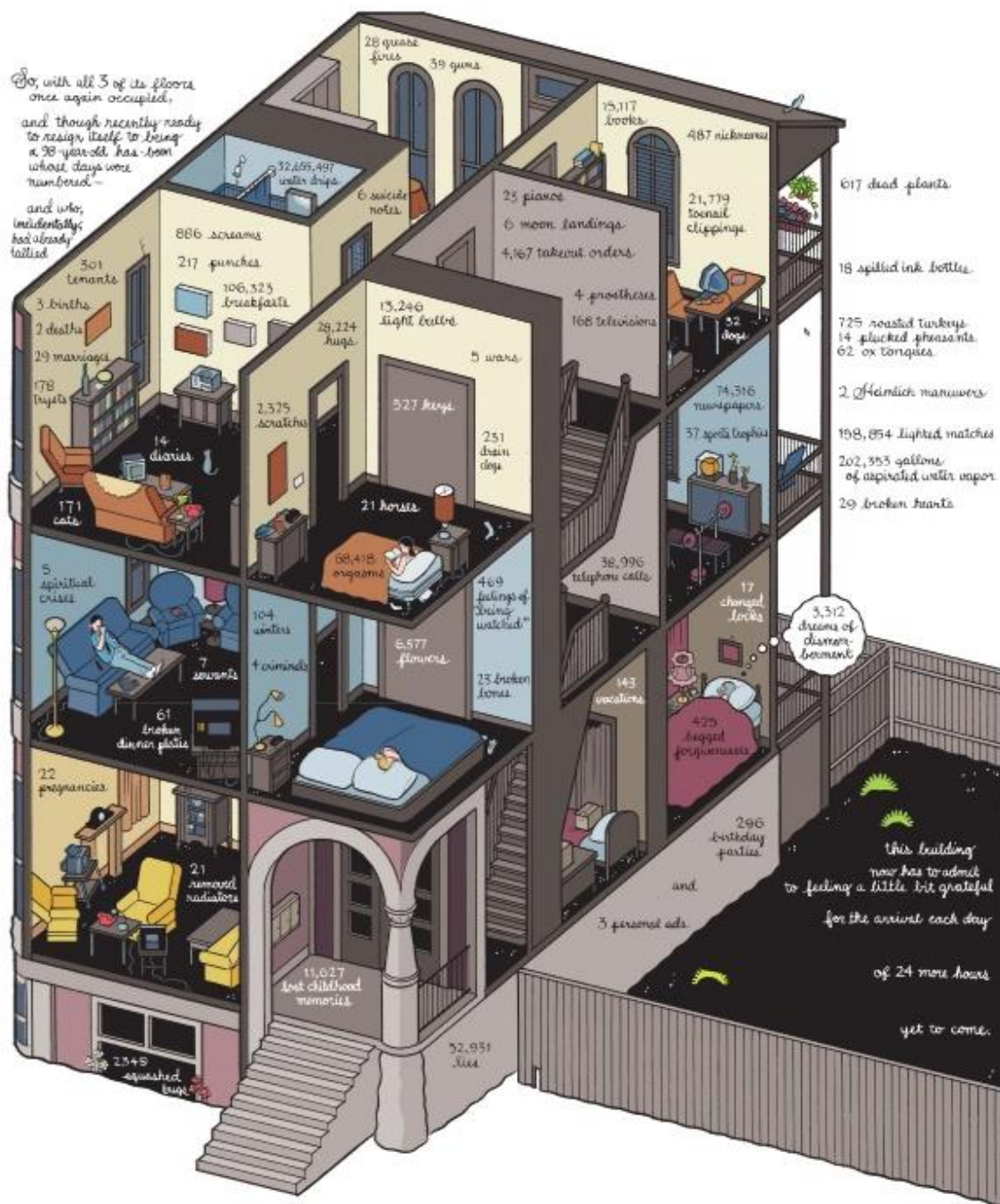
Fig. 1.2 Excerpt from Element 5 ("Little Golden Book") of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.

Building Stories explicitly links individual experience to collective memory by using the apartment building itself as a narrative constant. Ware makes particular use of

lexias, which Gene Kannenberg, Jr. defines as "a distinct textual division in a graphic, not grammatical sense: a block of text which is designed to be read/viewed as a single unit, usually (although not always) a smaller sub-unit in a larger structure such as a panel or page" ("The Comics of Chris Ware" 309). The lexias punctuate images of the building's occupants sleeping, reading, and watching television, evoking the neat labels of museum exhibits. Each one contributes to the liturgy of collective memory the building has witnessed and housed over decades: "28 grease fires," "469 feelings of 'being watched'," "22 pregnancies," "5 spiritual crises" (Element 5).[10] The reader witnesses the building's current occupants taking part in the same habits and routines enumerated by the lexias, seamlessly uniting them with the unseen past of the building's previous inhabitants. Peter Sattler writes: "In their enormous numerical excess, these items outstrip the scope of any one individual form, indeed of any one life" ("From Comics History to Personal Memory" np), and the lexias of this page emphasize the continuum between individual and collective experience. Today these characters are united as occupants of this decaying building and as participants in a much larger series of memories.

Ware's construction of the apartment building as both an illustrated object and the subject of the page breakdown demonstrates how the building itself has become a conduit for memory. "The strip, the page, the double-page, and the book are multistage multiframes," writes Groensteen, "systems of panel proliferation that are increasingly inclusive" (30). The successive stages of the multiframe—working, in this case, from the

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[10] As mentioned in "A Note On Citation," *Building Stories* defies even modest attempts at citation. I have made reference here to the Element number alone and hope the reader will find the included figures helpful when establishing the placement and sequence of excerpted text.

outside in—expose the history of the building by degrees. The cutaway image of the apartment building (fig. 1.2) is the final page of a triptych that opens Element 5, each successive image paring away the building's facade to reveal the characters within. Over the course of those three images, the building transforms from a dingy manse "embarrassed by the ill repair of its entry" to a storehouse of memory and sentiment, "11,027 lost childhood memories" haunting its doorstep (Element 5). Ware's empaneled apartment building transmutes the classic grid structure of graphic narrative into literal building blocks, the gutter between panels forming studs and floorboards, memories suspended between each storey (and story) of the building. It is a stunning example of how "[t]he frame is at the same time the trace and measure of the space inhabited by the image" (Groensteen 29) and a demonstration of how graphic narrative is uniquely well-equipped to express the construction of memory. Every finely observed crack in the wall is evidence of the past lives of the building.

Ware's omission of the building's facade dissolves the distinction between interior and exterior and is indicative of the porousness between the public and private lives of the characters. His sustained use of isometric projection and cutaway drawings of the building invites the reader to peer into spaces that would otherwise be off-limits. Warner argues that rather than a strict compartmentalization of "public" and "private" there is a "continuum of publicness" (25) at play in the interactions between people. Element 5 of *Building Stories* documents the events of a single day—September 23, 2000—within the walls of the apartment building. Ware tracks the incursions the characters make into each other's lives over 24 hours with almost painful precision, dwelling on what Margaret Fink Berman describes as "the micro-gestures that narratives usually elide" (195). Ware lingers

on the tapping sound of the Unnamed Woman's crutch, the muffled arguments of the

second-floor couple, broken plumbing, and a lost cat, creating "an atmosphere of

ordinariness" (Berman 196) that extends to painstakingly rendering specks of dust and

crumbs on the floor. While the characters go about their daily lives their actions intrude

upon and affect one another: the Unnamed Woman's broken toilet leaks water into the

second-floor apartment, irritating her downstairs neighbours, and necessitating an

unplanned meeting with the landlady on the ground floor. No matter how diligently the

characters might try to compartmentalize their lives, overlap is inevitable: even the most

banal of private events have public consequences.

The interactions between characters in *Building Stories* incite moments of

memory exchange that are reinforced by the visual grammar of the page. When the

Unnamed Woman ventures into her landlady's apartment she is struck by the similarity of

their living arrangements: "I stood there for a second or two in the bathroom that was, for

all intents and purposes, identical to mine, and wondered exactly what it was that made

lives turn out the way they do" ("9 a.m." Element 5). The panels of "9 a.m." recall

Ricoeur's contention that recollection will "imply one's own body and the bodies of

others, lived space" (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 36). The panels that frame the

Unnamed Woman and her landlady share the space of the page, and those panels equally

share the space of the building. The Unnamed Woman's foray into her landlady's

apartment is part of the same sequence where she learns that they both studied art and

both had unusual dreams the previous night. There is also the deadpan note implied by the

bathroom itself. "I wondered if we might even become good friends" ("9 a.m."), muses

the Unnamed Woman before dismissing the thought and returning to her own apartment.

There is a leakiness between the lives of these characters, an unintended spillover of sentiment that attracts and repels them in equal measure. The "9 a.m." sequence highlights how thin the dividing line between these characters really is, and how the specificity of one's memories and history are less rare than expected.
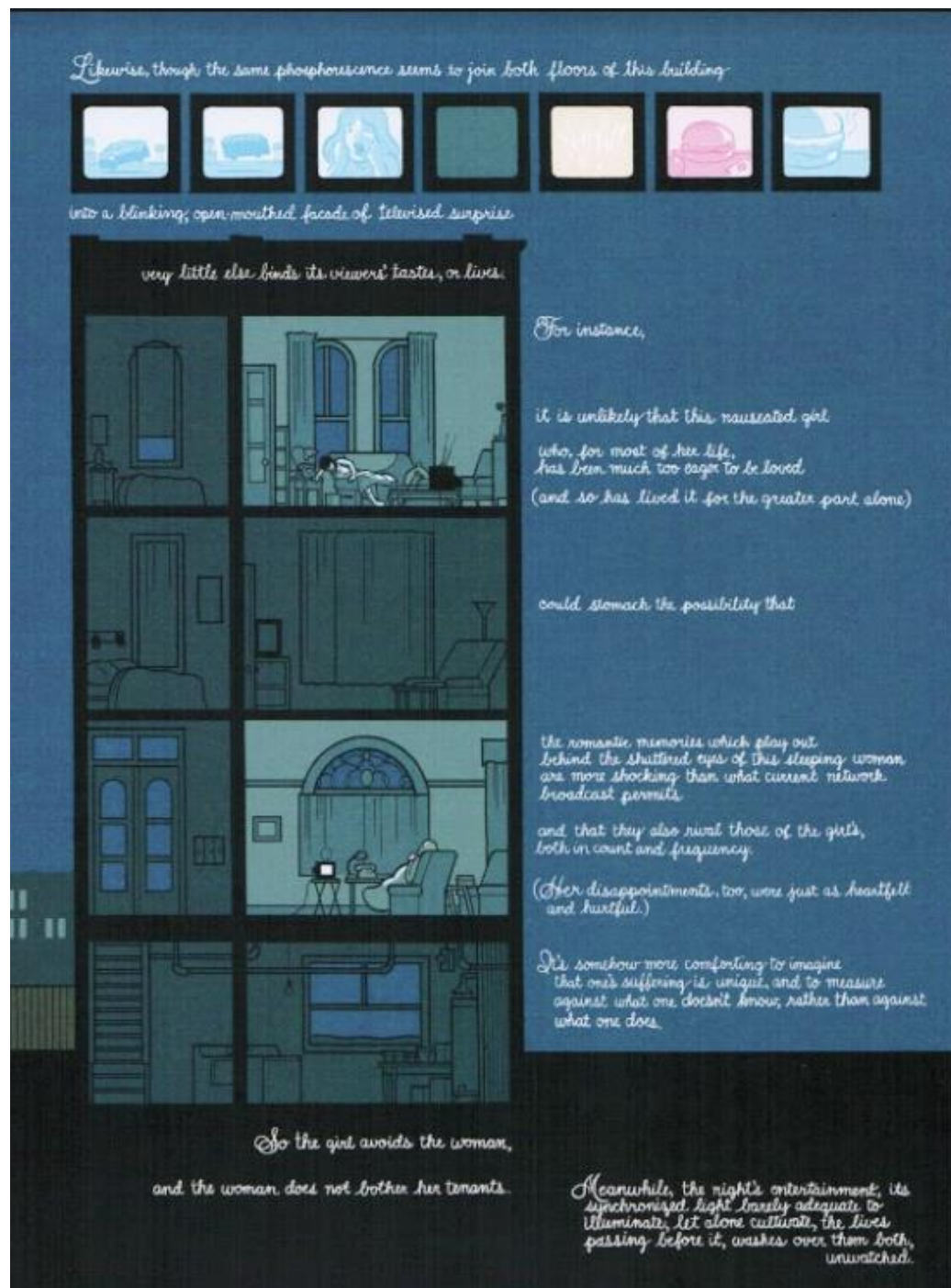
Fig. 1.3 Excerpt from Element 9 of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from
Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.

Ware underscores this sentiment by revisiting[11] the relationship between the

Unnamed Woman and her landlady in Element 9. The first glance at the closing page of

Element 9 would suggest their relationship never grew beyond a brief moment of kinship.

Ware presents a slice from the Unnamed Woman's life, an evening scene of her

apartment building once again rendered in a doll-house cutaway (fig. 1.3). The domestic

"zone of noninterference" seems particularly strong: the Unnamed Woman and her

landlady are divided by a blackened, unoccupied middle floor. The lexias provide a visual

counterweight to the frames that compose the building, balancing out the composition of

the page and acquiring more iconic and narrative heft than a caption or speech balloon

alone. These lexias also resist identifying a bond between the Unnamed Woman and her

landlady, corroborating the visual isolation of the two characters suspended on separate

floors. The lexia that forms part of the literal roof over the characters' heads declares,

"though the same phosphorescence seems to join both floors of this building [...] very

little else binds its viewers' tastes or lives" (Element 9). Circumstance would seem to be

the only thing joining these two neighbours, their choice of evening entertainment

nothing more than the common refuge of the insomniac.

There is, however, a double-consciousness at work within this page, one

embedded in the graphic structure of the building itself. "The panel is enriched with

resonances," Groensteen writes in *System*, "that have an effect of transcending the

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[11] Element 9 was originally published in a modified form as *Acme Novelty Library 18* in 2007; the page in question is present in both *18* and *Building Stories*. The Element 5 strips were published as part of Ware's run in "The Funny Pages," which spanned 2005-6. While it is impossible to account for Ware's private creative timeline, the publication chronologies of Elements 5 and 9 would place Element 9 as the later addition to *Building Stories*.

functionality of the site that it occupies" (148). The Unnamed Woman and the landlady are confined to their separate floors, but the spotlit panels of their living rooms highlight how each has experienced a common history of desire and heartbreak: "the romantic memories which play out behind the shuttered eyes of the sleeping woman [...] rival those of the girl's, both in count and frequency./(Her disappointments, too, were just as heartfelt and hurtful" (Element 9). Although "the girl avoids the woman, and the woman does not bother her tenants" (Element 9) they have lived parallel lives, a realization framed by their parallel panels on the page. The roof lexia acquires an ironic tone in this context, and the lexia alongside the basement panels reinforce this: "It's somehow more comforting to imagine that one's suffering is unique, and to measure against what one doesn't know, rather than against what one does" (Element 9). This statement is the literal and figurative foundation of the relationship between the Unnamed Woman and her landlady, buried low on the page and next to the basement. Despite sharing the memory of disappointment, each would prefer to privately nurse her grief. They are reluctant observers of a common past.

Collective memory depends on the integrity of individual memory, which is in turn derived from the free exchange of recollections. Reminiscing, Ricoeur writes, "consists in making the past live again by evoking it together with others, each helping the other to remember shared events or knowledge, the memories of one person serving as a reminder for the memories of the other" (38). Frank Kennedy and Violet Glow are willing collaborators, eager to take on the role of raconteur to revive the memory of George Sprott, unearthing a little of their own past glory along with those memories. The Unnamed Woman and her landlady are unwilling confidants, their parallel histories only

glimpsed in their fleeting public interactions. The strict observance of public and private

hinders the exchange of memory, cloaking certain recollections in uncertainty and leaving

particular memories inaccessible. The suppression of memory—intentional, accidental,

or protective—and the gaps that develop as a result of that suppression become twin

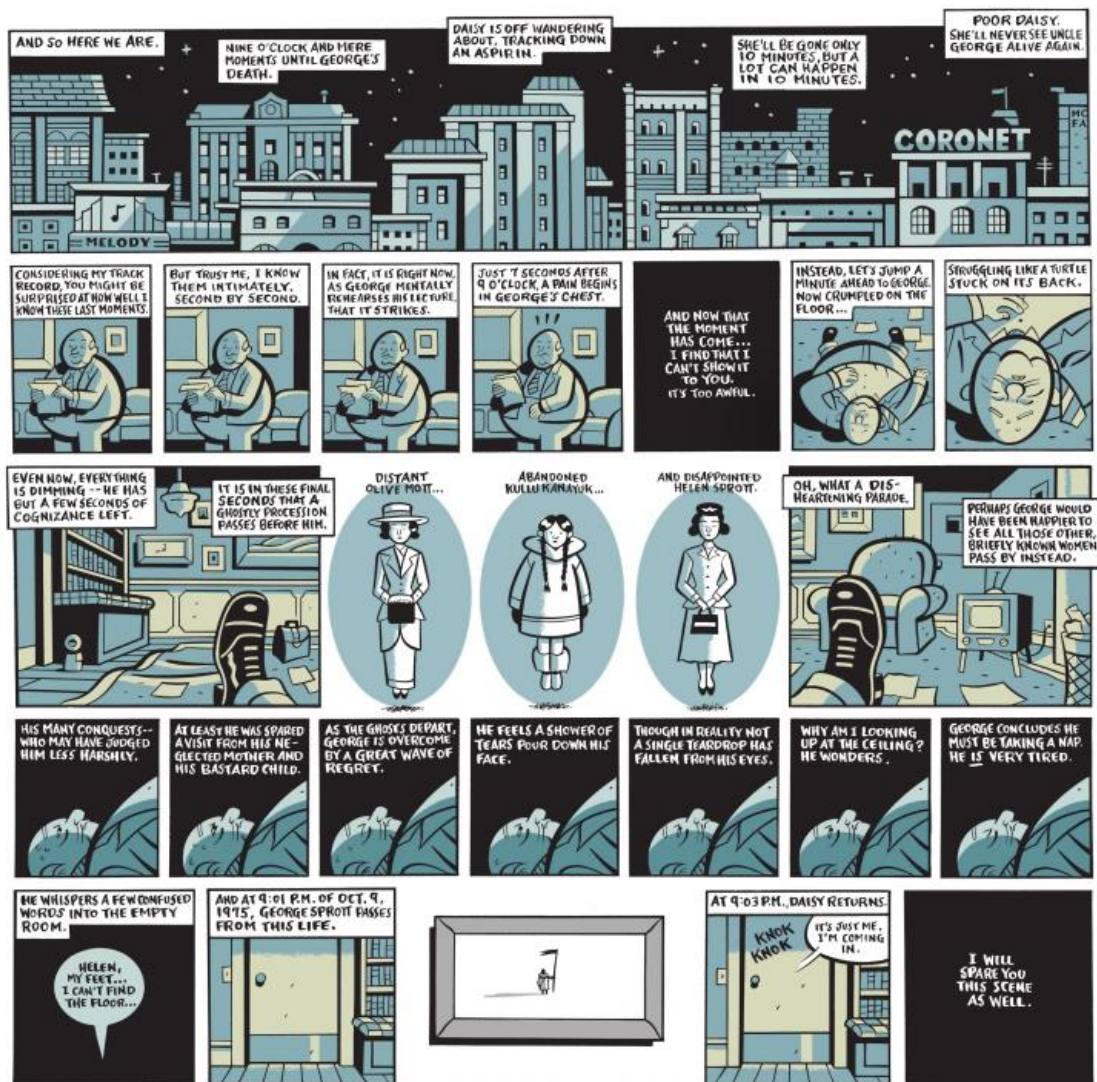thematic concerns in *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*.

Fig. 1.4 Excerpt from "And So, Here We Are" from *George Sprott: 1894-1975*. Used

with permission from Drawn & Quarterly. Copyright Gregory Gallant.

There are two notable absences from the historical record within *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*: the moment of George's death backstage at the Coronet Lecture Hall, and the accident where the Unnamed Woman loses her left leg. George Sprott's death is the subject of grim anticipation from the outset of *George Sprott*, impossible to ignore in the bracketed dates of "1894-1975." The Unnamed Woman's disability threatens to become her sole defining feature in the absence of a name. Groensteen argues in *System* that "Comics is a genre founded on reticence. Not only do the silent and immobile images lack the illusionist power of the filmic image, but their connections, far from producing a continuity that mimics reality, offer the reader a story that is full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning" (10). The reluctance of *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* to dwell on the moments of death and injury that mark the characters' lives frustrates the reader's instinct to reconcile these fragments of memory with one another to create a coherent chronicle. Reticence becomes both a formal property and a narrative strategy, one that prompts a deeper inquiry into why some memories endure while others fade.

The sidestep away from a direct depiction of George's death in "And So, Here We Are" is part of a series of elisions and blackouts that Seth employs to emphasize what the audience cannot know, only imagine. George's heart attack is rendered as a black panel overlaid with narration in white text: "And now that the moment has come ... I find that I can't show it to you. It's too awful" (2.5). It is part of a trio of blacked out panels: George addresses the hallucinatory figure of his wife in the second (5.1), and the third obscures the moment George's niece, Daisy, discovers his body (5.5). The narration clearly frames these gaps in the record as an act of delicacy—"I will spare you this scene" (5.5)—and as

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a gesture of discretion: there are some things that should remain private, even for a figure as public as George. The fade to black, a hackneyed trick so often deployed to indicate death in the least imaginative way, becomes a mournful acknowledgement that death is a moment beyond memory.

The moments and panels preceding George's death, however, are loaded with memory, the ghosts of George's past intruding on the private reverie of his last moments on earth. The middle of "And So, Here We Are" is dominated by the floating portraits of three women (fig. 1.4, row 3) who mark key waypoints in George's life. Olive Mott, Kullu Kanayuk, and Helen Sprott hover on the edges of *George Sprott*, but in this chapter they finally become the center of attention. Each woman has already lived and died independent of George, experienced life and created her own memories, but George is the figure that unifies and focuses the connections between them. Halbwachs argues that "our recollections, each taken in itself, belong to everybody; but the coherence and arrangement of our recollections belongs only to ourselves—we alone are capable of knowing and calling them to mind" (171). George is the only character who can place Olive, Kullu, and Helen in sequence and bind them in memory, having jealously guarded their connections in his private recollection. As George loses consciousness and slips away from life, "the ghosts depart" (4.3), signalling that their memory is slipping away along with George. Only George (and, by the end of *George Sprott*, the reader) is capable of recognizing the history they share.

"And So, Here We Are" addresses the same tension between the public and private faces of George Sprott alluded to in the twinned interviews of Violet Glow and Frank Kennedy, among dozens of others. A photograph of a much younger George

appears twice on this page, first in the background of panel 3.1, and then in a much larger rendering as the swing panel 5.3 in the last sequence of frames on the page. The appearance of the photograph here is itself a reprise: the audience can recognize the moment the photograph was "taken" from the beginning of the work as part of "Merrily We Roll Along," the segment that documents one of George's Arctic expeditions from the 1930s. This image of the Gentleman Explorer is the public profile George clearly preferred and nurtured with his lectures, films, and television show. Yet this triumphant portrait is relegated to the background of panel 3.1, and its suppression is telling: in this sequence, is the less glamorous memories of George's life that command attention, and Olive, Kullu, and Helen occupy the foreground. The image of George Sprott, Arctic Conqueror, is cut down to size, his heroic sense of self diminished next to the portraits of the three women he neglected, abandoned, and cheated. The contradiction at the heart of George's memories is given physical form in "And So, Here We Are." The reprise of the photograph in the final sequence of the page provides a bittersweet beat just before Daisy discovers her Uncle George's body. The page recomposes itself, bringing this image of George in happier times back to the foreground for his final audience, setting into motion the commemorative work that will be inherited by the people George has left behind.

Fig. 1.5 Excerpt from "5th Floor, End of the Hall" from *George Sprott: 1894-1975*.

Image used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly. Copyright Gregory Gallant.

George Sprott emphasizes the necessity of collective effort not only to remember

George himself but to preserve his individual account of his experiences. The majority of

the interviewees in *George Sprott* are themselves elderly by the time they share their

memories, and the physical effects George left behind are rapidly dispersed. A curious

bellhop surveys the state of George's private rooms at the Radio Hotel after his death and

wonders, "And what about all those things left behind in that place? Did those relics make

up a record of a man's life?" ("5th Floor, End of the Hall" fig. 1.5). Daisy's decision to

sell those relics and her delayed response to collect the tapes of George's show hastens

the decay of George's legacy. These actions (and inaction) mark a second death for

George: Daisy's admission that she "waited too long. They'd [CKCK] disposed of it all—

dumped their entire pre-1980 video library" ("The Narwhal Press" 3.1) is layered atop the

image of a graveyard and George Sprott's tombstone. Ricoeur notes the importance of

these "external points of reference for recall: photographs, postcards, diaries, receipts,

mementos ... these signposts guard against forgetting in the future" (38). In lieu of these

objects of memory, reminiscing must compensate for the lack of physical frameworks. Reminiscing is likewise dependent on external points of recall. "Forgetting is explained by the disappearance of these frameworks, or of a part of them," argues Halbwachs, "either because our attention is no longer able to focus on them or because it is focused somewhere else" (172). Memory requires nurturing and attention: an unsustainable task for one person alone. Just as George's death weakens the memory of Helen, Olive, and Kullu, the decline and disappearance of those who remembered George weakens the memory of him in turn. "I do know that for a few months after George died, those who knew him well could still strongly feel him nearby," the narrator informs the reader in "Life is But a Dream," "But now, all these years later .../they do not feel his presence in the world anymore" (5.1-4). Without constant collective recollection, the memory of George fades.

Fig. 1.6 Excerpt from Element 12 of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.

There is a double absence regarding the nature of the Unnamed Woman's injury in *Building Stories*: a reticence to discuss how the injury happened and a refusal to dwell

on that injury as the single defining feature of the Unnamed Woman's life. The Unnamed Woman freely discusses her prosthesis and the considerations of living with it: "I've had *six* legs now total ... people don't realize it, but when your body changes, the prosthesis has to change too ... I've had my kid legs and my teenage legs and my college legs ... I've even had skinny and fat legs, though I hate thinking about that part of it …" ("Her Leg" Element 9 4.2). The accident itself, however, is only directly referenced twice. Mr. Bell, the plumber who arrives to repair the Unnamed Woman's broken toilet in Element 5, comments on her prosthetic leg in passing—"Sport injury?"—to which the Unnamed Woman replies, "It's more of a, uh, life injury" ("5 p.m." Element 5). The accident comes up again in Element 12: her husband's co-worker asks about "the accident" at a party (fig. 1.7). The Unnamed Woman's response is just as oblique as her answer to Mr. Bell: "It's pretty simple: lake ... boat ... motor ... me ... They thought they could save it but, y'know ... didn't … " (Element 12 verso 2.3). Berman interprets these ellipses and elisions as a positive choice on the part of Ware, one where the Unnamed Woman's amputation is treated as "part of the general realism of the built space, apprehensible but not exaggerated ... not melodramatized either" (202). The absence of a graphic depiction of the Unnamed Woman's accident is, in this interpretation, an act of kindness similar to *George Sprott*'s refusal to show George's death: the reader can imagine well enough what happened, and it is the work of the panel and the page to contextualize the memory of the event.

The Unnamed Woman's injury is inextricably bound with the actions of others. Her prosthetic leg provokes public curiosity, welcome or not. Berman argues: "*Building Stories* looks frankly at its third-floor inhabitant and her experience in a way that isn't

moralizing or hypervigilant, but conscious, attending to the constellation of interactions with people and the object world as well as the spatial practices that comprise her particular, idiosyncratic belonging" (202). The stranger at the staff party thinks nothing of inviting himself to scrutinize the Unnamed Woman's body with a graceless knock (fig. 1.6). The Unnamed Woman's prosthesis one of Ricoeur's "external points of recall" transformed into a grim commemorative object, a graphic *memento mori* both fascinating and disturbing for the violence it implies. The Unnamed Woman's terse summary of the circumstances surrounding the accident suggests a story that has been stripped down after years of telling it. Her reaction to the stranger's knock on her leg is also surprisingly nonplussed: "***Wow***, how wildly inappropriate of him but somehow completely innocent and sweet" (Element 12, verso 3.1). The trauma of the accident appears dulled by recollection, the vividness of the memory fading from years of use as the subject of cocktail party chit-chat.

Memory, however, is rarely as simple as polite social banter, and as the conversation unfolds between the Unnamed Woman and the stranger a gap appears in the account of the accident. The stranger asks point blank: "So ... was your dad driving the boat?" (Element 12, verso 3.4). The question hangs in the middle of the panel, unanswered and unresolved, casting a shadow over the memory. It is, however, anticipated in the first panel that documents the conversation between the Unnamed Woman and the stranger. The Unnamed Woman remarks of her father: "... I mean, the guy was an ***English*** teacher ... you'd think he'd have written ***something*** down, right? But not one ***word*** about our life, my mom, the accident ... nothing …" (Element 12 verso 1.1). The stranger, and the reader by extension, has only the Unnamed Woman's account of the

event, and that memory is cryptic at best. This shift in perspective brings the relationship between individual and collective memory into sharper focus: memory is often at the mercy of someone other than the self that remembers, its retention and reconstruction dependent on the actions of others. The Unnamed Woman's father either neglected or actively chose not to record the events surrounding his daughter's accident, depriving his daughter and the audience of a crucial perspective of that event.

Fig. 1.7 Excerpt from Element 12 of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.
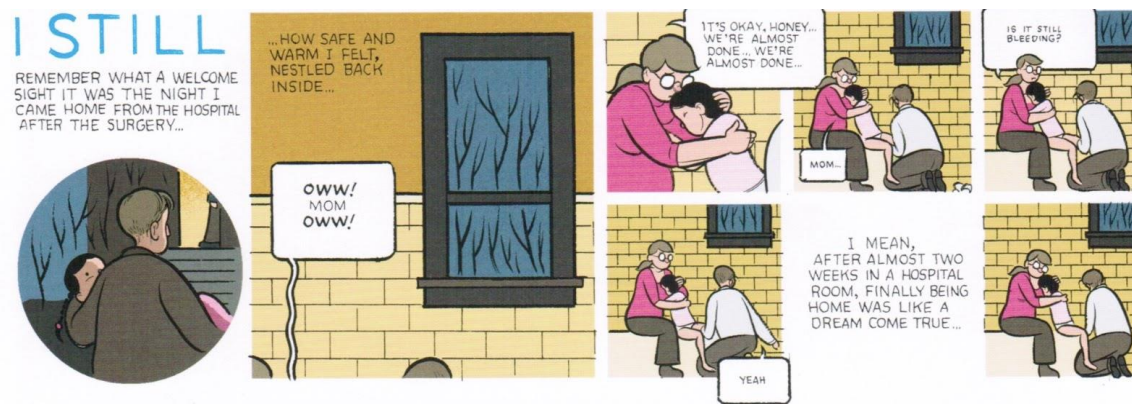
Fig. 1.8 Excerpt from Element 12 of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.

The visual record of *Building Stories* suggests that the Unnamed Woman and her father enjoyed a relatively close relationship, making the documentary omission of her accident even more glaring. Element 12 pairs the Unnamed Woman's recollection of her father's decline and death from cancer with the aftermath of her own injury, twinning their narratives. The front page of Element 12 (fig. 1.7) shows the Unnamed Woman caring for her father during chemotherapy. The inside spread shows her father carrying her home after her hospital stay (fig. 1.8). These acts of caring are spatially linked, their figures changing sides as the Unnamed Woman grows old enough to care for the father who tended to her. The proximity of these sequences suggests a portrait of a family drawn together by difficult circumstances. Publicly, these figures are the image of a devoted family: the Unnamed Woman accompanies her father into a public washroom to care for him, and her father carries her over the threshold from public to private life, ushering her home. Each has created a safe, private space for the other to take refuge in.

However warm these memories are, they are undercut by a betrayal of memory. While the Unnamed Woman's father did not keep any record of his daughter and wife, he

did preserve a written record of an affair, old love letters from a teaching assistant, that only comes to light after his death. The record of his affair devastates the Unnamed Woman and her mother, shattering their memory of him. "How could I ever look at him the same way again? How could every memory I had of him now not be refracted through this one act of deception?" (Element 8) the Unnamed Woman wonders, part of a series of strips appropriately titled "Disconnect." The frameworks of memory that remain for the Unnamed Woman are contradictory, even irreconcilable, and subject to distortion by others. "Was your dad driving the boat?" acquires a rhetorical tone when read against the doubly suppressed memories of the Unnamed Woman's father. He was a gatekeeper to a particular moment in time, and even after death, his presence and his memories structure the Unnamed Woman's own recollection of her life. The Unnamed Woman's father still commands a significant share of her private recollection of the event, and her public account. While he may not have written a word about the accident that profoundly altered the trajectory of his daughter's life, his presence still shapes the Unnamed Woman's perception and presentation of that moment.

The border between public and private memory is permeable in *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*, and the effort to recall is a collaborative process. When the Unnamed Woman and George Sprott remember and are remembered, their memories are influenced by the actions of others. These actions have an undeniable effect on the effort of the individual to recall, to recount, and to reconcile. Characters testify, record, and document their memories in an attempt to pin down the essential truth of those memories, only to have another account conflict with theirs, for someone else to remember differently. The

integrity of memory is a collective responsibility that transcends the notions of public and

private.

Chapter Two

George Sprott and *Building Stories* exist in constant temporal flux, haunted by the past and endlessly renegotiating the meaning of the present. Ricoeur writes that "Hauntedness is to collective memory what hallucination is to private memory, a pathological modality of the incrustation of the past at the heart of the present" (54). This incrustation is expressed through the reprise of panels and sequences, revisiting memories from multiple angles, and layering recollections from different perspectives. "Current" sequences are haunted by the memory of "past" sequences. Memory lingers as a residue for George Sprott and the Unnamed Woman, marring the clarity of the present with the inconsistency of the past.

George Sprott and *Building Stories* distort their images of the present by introducing complex and often contradictory chronologies. *Building Stories* provides access to the Unnamed Woman's thoughts and recollections while destabilizing nearly every framework the reader has to order and contextualize those memories. *George Sprott*, in comparison, employs a precise set of times and dates to orient the reader to the events of George's life, only to double back on those same events and cast doubt on their veracity. These are opposite approaches to the same question: how can one person be relied upon to remember anything, either mundane or momentous, with authority? Halbwachs argues in *On Collective Memory* that "we distort that past, because we wish to introduce greater coherence. It is then reason or intelligence that chooses among the store of recollections, eliminates some of them, and arranges the others according to an order conforming with our ideas of the moment" (183). *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* embrace the distortion of the past as a means to comment on the spatial and social

practices that inform the preservation of memory, prompting a reconsideration of the waypoints both characters and readers use to orient themselves within the chronology of the work and the flow of time. What results are memories subject to endless manipulations, bending the arc of recollection toward the needs of the present.

A discussion about the temporal indeterminacy of *Building Stories* must first acknowledge the white box in the room. The fifteen print elements of *Building Stories* announce Ware's defiance of the most basic temporal markers: where is the beginning, middle, or end? The absence of numbered pages bound in a single volume dominates critical appraisals of *Building Stories*, where it is considered as "a 'book' under erasure" (Kashtan 421), "insistently a collection of *pages*" (Sattler "Building Memories: Hers, Mine, Ours" n.p.), and a "novel-in-fragments" (Ghosal 77). There is a reluctance to dub *Building Stories* with a title as pedestrian as "graphic narrative." The "book-in-a-box" approach is certainly impressive, but that approach is an outgrowth of the formal strategies Ware employs panel by panel and page by page. It is worth bearing in mind Ware's own assessment of the language he works in from the introduction to *McSweeny's 13*:

> A cartoon drawing lives somewhere between the worlds of words and pictures, sort of where road signs and people waving their arms in the middle of lakes operate: you don't really spend a lot of time considering the esthetic value of an arrow telling you not to crash, or the gestural grace of a person drowning; you just read the signs and act appropriately. (11)

Ware's appraisal of comics, while glib, distills the relationship between a graphic narrative and its reader to a nearly subliminal understanding. Even without the usual landmarks (page numbers, chapter breaks), the reader can still recognize the narrative structures inherent to graphic narrative and proceed accordingly. *Building Stories* still scans as a "comic book" even if it requires a double-take to reach that conclusion.
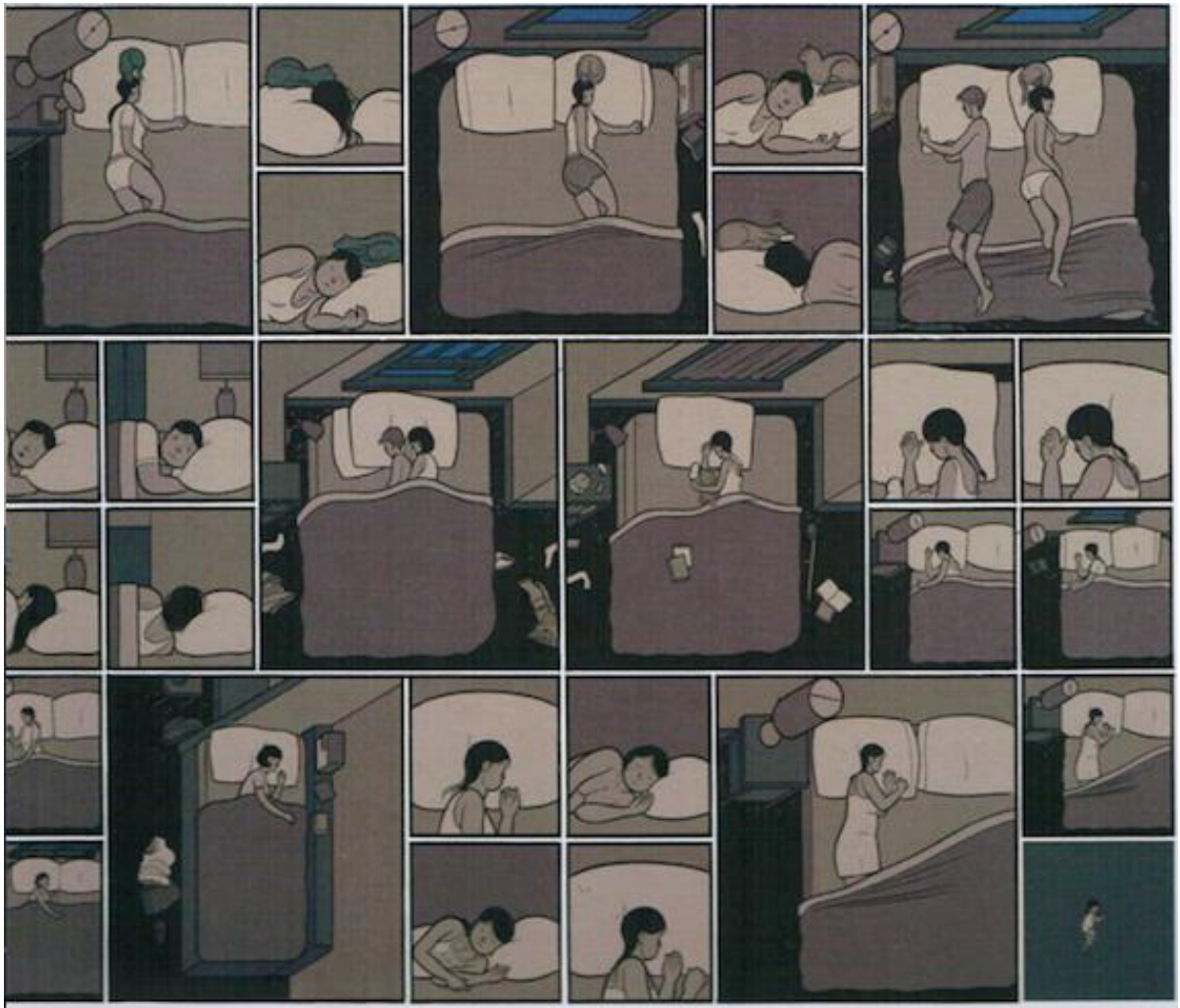

Fig. 2.1 Excerpt from Element 9 of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.

This is not to say, however, that variations of grid, sequence, and layout do not exist. Much of the work and pleasure of reading graphic narrative develops from renegotiating the spatial and temporal relationships between images with each subsequent expression. Groensteen describes this process as "vectorization," and goes on to argue, "the meaning of a panel can be informed and determined by the panel that preceded it much like the one that follows it. If there is a vectorization of the reading there is no unidirectional vectorization in the construction of meaning" (*The System of Comics* 110). A series of panels (fig. 2.1) can depict an entire lifetime at a glance, and bend time back onto itself with a simple juxtaposition. As the reader crosses the gutters and traverses the space of the page, they can take in however much (or little) of a sequence as they like, skipping ahead to certain panels or returning to review past images. The effect of this "plurivectoral narration" (Groensteen 108) is a story that can fast-forward and rewind the life of a single character at the reader's discretion. Graphic narrative can tolerate a high degree of manipulation or compression of this sequential relationship, even up to the point of dispensing with the interpretive framework of a "book" altogether.

Serialization further contributes to the distortion of sequential relationships in *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* by introducing narrative breaks that both reader and creator must reconcile. As Seth noted of his own work on *George Sprott*, "I couldn't count on the reader dutifully following it [*George Sprott*] week to week" (Hoffman and Grace 127). Serialization introduces temporal uncertainty by design, but, as Benoît Crucifix rightly notes "the way that Seth and Chris Ware are transforming their periodicals, responding to that change [from serialized story to graphic novel] shows how they embed the graphic novel as part of a larger practice of serialisation" (9). Ware

released portions of *Building Stories* under other names (including *Acme Novelty Library 19*) and in a variety of publications before collecting those fragments as *Building Stories*. *George Sprott*'s serial narrative in the *New York Times Magazine* developed out of Seth's long practice of publishing serialized comics, notably *Palookaville*. "The Funny Pages" itself functioned as a kind of experiment in retro comics creation, a throwback to the days of cliff-hanger endings and special edition Sunday coloured strips. Seth and Ware's embrace of serialization resists a trend observed by Crucifix: "alternative comics are increasingly 'disciplined' by literary standard as the graphic novel is taking stock" (9). Serialization amplifies the temporal indeterminacy that characterizes both *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*, offering multiple entry and exit points to each narrative.

George Sprott uses its opening pages to address this phenomenon directly. A double-page spread alternates drawings of an infant George Sprott-to-be with Sprott the Elder, a plump old man at what the reader presumes is the end of his life. The narrator ruminates on the nature of time and existence, calling attention to how the present images contribute to that perception:

> These boxes in a row—perhaps they're not just a sequence./Perhaps the action in the middle box.../isn't merely determined by the action in the box before it./Maybe it is also influenced by what <u>must</u> occur in the box that follows./It needs to fulfill and anticipate in both directions./Maybe it is in this way that the future determines the present as much as the past. (8.1-9.3)

Each image of George is distinct and intelligible on its own, yet each panel suggests the existence of others, shaping the reader's perception of what has happened, what is happening, and what will come to pass. Seth uses the same technique in this sequence as

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Ware does with Fig. 2.1 to express the fluidity of time within *George Sprott*,

foreshadowing the thematic concerns with time and memory that will follow these

opening pages. This opening spread also opens the first crack in the timeline of *George*

Sprott: this sequence is unique to the codex form of *George Sprott* and was not included

as part of the series' original run. Thus, sequentiality becomes a powerful tool for

directing the reader's experience of a work's temporal style. "All cartoonists have a

signature 'style'," writes Ware "that exists beyond the look of their art or the quality of

their writing—a sense of experience, a feeling of how they see the world—as expressed

in how their characters move, how time is sculpted" (*McSweeney's 13* 11). The essential

polysemic quality of graphic narrative—noted by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, Groensteen,

and others—articulates the chorus of narrative voices Seth and Ware score with the

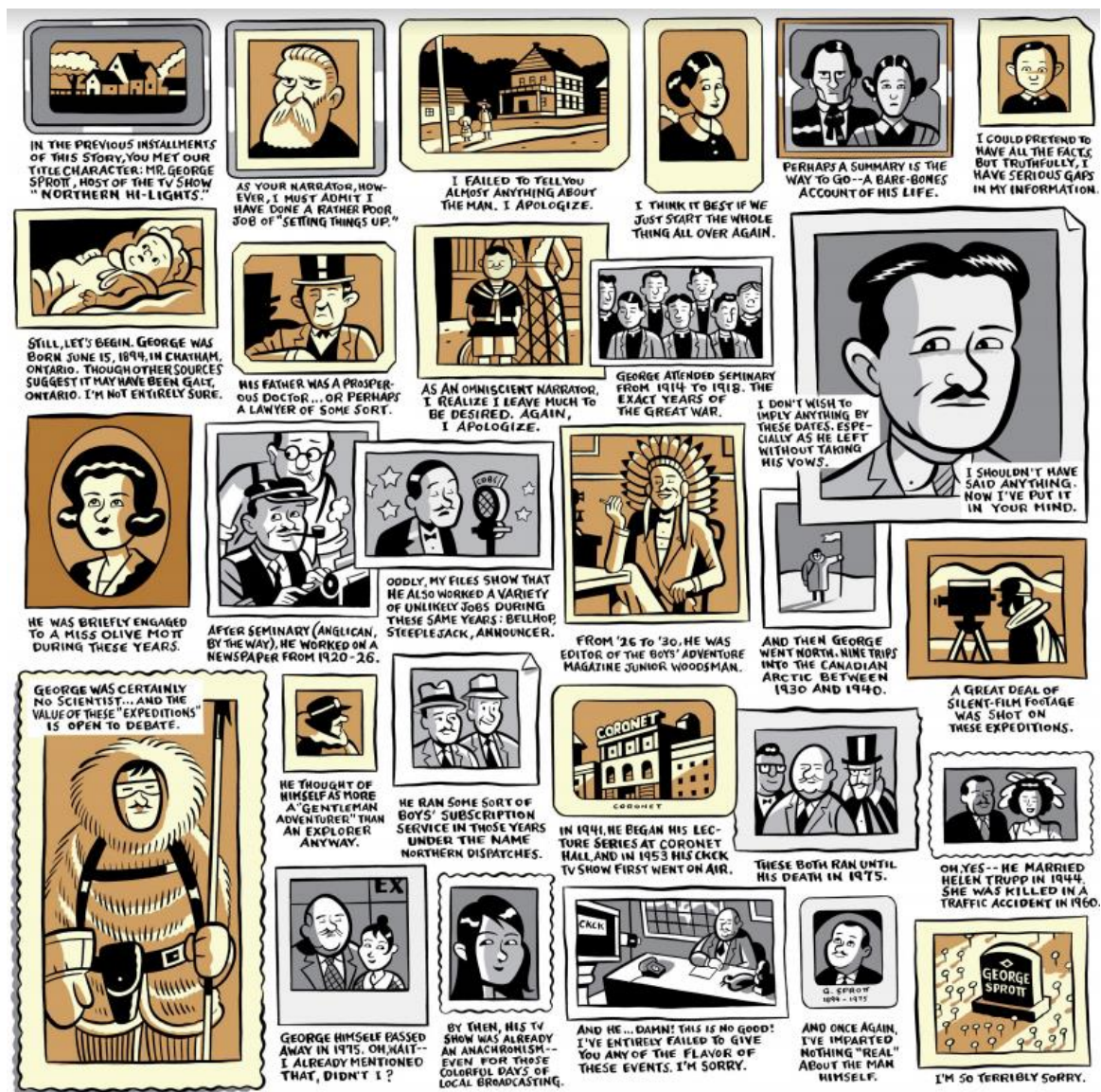rhythm of the multiframe in *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*.

Fig. 2.2 Excerpt from "A Fresh Start" from *George Sprott: 1894-1975*. Image used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly. Copyright Gregory Gallant.

While there are a multitude of temporal waypoints throughout *George Sprott*, they are unstable. Each interview with one of George's former colleagues is meticulously dated with the year it was conducted. Multi-page spreads detail the particular events of single days, and chapters are titled with dates and times to orient the reader within the

timeline of George's last hours. There are, however, skips and repeats in the playback of

George's life, moments where image and text contradict each other. Daniel Marrone

observes that this chapter demonstrates "a kind of atmospheric memory apparently

untethered to any particular subjectivity" (75), something the narrator of *George Sprott*

calls attention to with the inconsistencies of a "A Fresh Start," declaring, "I could pretend

to have all the facts, but truthfully I have serious gaps in my information" (1.5). Basic

points of George's biography, including his place of birth and the occupation of his

parents, are unclear. The uncertainty expressed by the narrator is echoed by the

composition of the page. Presented in the style of a scrapbook, the photographs of "A

Fresh Start" (fig. 2.2) overlap and jockey with one another for page space. Some of the

illustrations are incomplete, figures are cropped out, and others are rendered in silhouettes

that obscure the faces of their subjects. None of the images are explicitly labelled to

indicate their subjects or dates of capture, leaving the reader to infer who these people are

from the narrator's testimony alone. Groensteen's observation that comics "offer the

reader a story that is full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning" (*The System of

Comics* 10) is particularly apt with "A Fresh Start": the panels that compose this page

obscure as much information as they reveal. Reduced on this page to a handful of

photographs and the testimony of a single witness, the account of George's life is

incomplete.

"A Fresh Start" depicts George's entire life in microcosm, a single page that

reflects the commemorative impulses of *George Sprott* as a whole. The role of the reader

is to regard both the local and the global views of George's life and reconcile them,

despite being in a floating position Marrone identifies as "somewhere between history

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and memory" (75). Pascal Lefèvre argues in "The Construction of Space in Comics" that "In general the reader expects that the diegetic space of a comic is sufficiently coherent: he expects—in analogy with daily life—a consistent space, because he tries on the basis of cues (given in the panels) to form a global image of the complete space" (159). Lefèvre goes on to assert, however, "The reader's expectation of a consistent diegetic space is often wrong" (160). "A Fresh Start" promises a coherent overview of George's biography, but it quickly becomes evident that portions of George's life have been lost or suppressed. Missing photographs and shadowed images mark the trace of forgetting.

Seth further challenges the chronological coherence of *George Sprott* by interlocking multiple timelines in single sequences. "Merrily We Roll Along" depicts one of George's fabled Arctic expeditions of the 1930s (fig. 2.3). Seth illustrates a small northern settlement and George's interactions with the people who inhabit the camp, lingering on the face of a child, before triumphantly setting off in a convoy of vehicles. George is shown smiling proudly, standing beside a flag he has planted in the snow. The text narrates two related events. First, George has awoken on "this morning" (1.3) to an obituary for Olive Mott, a former lover, in the daily newspaper. The narrator declares that "George had loved Olive passionately between the ages of 20 and 22./He had loved her in a way that had defined his whole identity. George and Olive" (2.2-3). This would suggest the dates of their affair are between 1914 and 1916, while George laments (via the narrator) in the "present" 1975 that he never saw her again after the end of their romance. A sequence of nine panels underlines the Arctic sequence with images of George on the set of "Northern Hi-Lights," his television show. This George Sprott informs the reader that the preceding images are from "my film of Frobisher Bay from 1936" (5.7). Thus,

1936, 1975, 1914-16, and the undated Northern Hi-Lights episode all converge in a single

page. Lefèvre writes that each reader must find a way to "cope with these various aspects

of space and to make meaning of it all" (161). The complexity of this sequence alerts the

reader that, in spite of the dates in the page, the narrative chronology of *George Sprott* is

fundamentally fractured, intersecting at multiple points rather than running in a straight
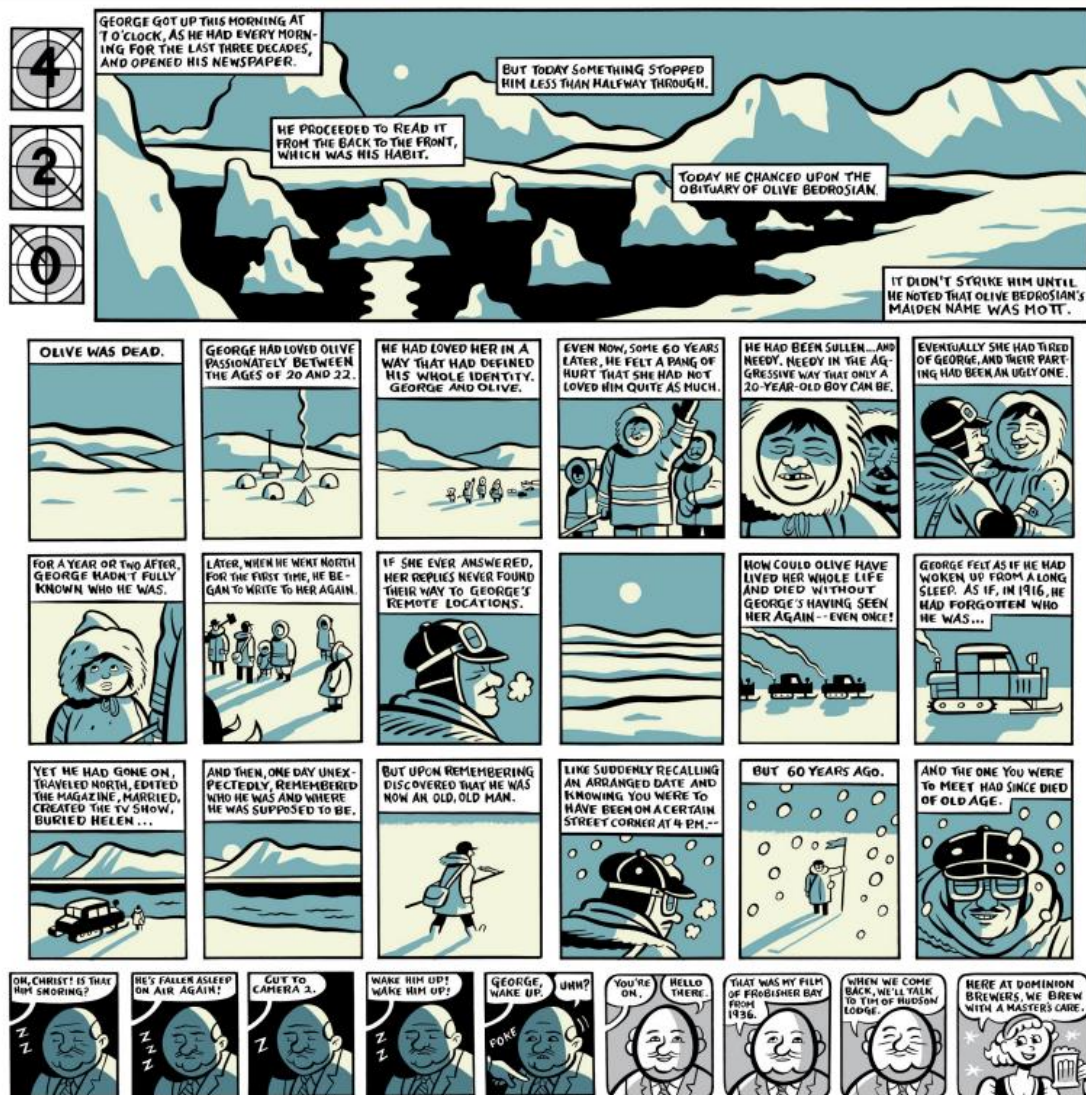
line from 1894-1975.

Fig. 2.3 Excerpt from "Merrily We Roll Along" from *George Sprott: 1894-1975*. Image used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly. Copyright Gregory Gallant.

The tangential chronologies of "Merrily We Roll Along" foreshadow the conflicts of memory that play out across *George Sprott*. It would seem counterintuitive to hold up "Merrily We Roll Along" as an example of forgetting, but this page illustrates George's strategic neglect of certain uncomfortable memories in order to create a more flattering and coherent personal history. George bleakly notes that he is haunted by the past and has long avoided its unpleasantness: "I have tried hard to live a life undisturbed by the past./However, old age has a way of bringing it all back to you./And with a potency that is completely unexpected" ("A Few Word From The Man Himself" 5.5-7). "Merrily We Roll Along" is presented as an archival documentary of one of George's Arctic expeditions; the opening countdown "screens" and the closing panel depicting a cheerful commercial plug bracket this page as George's presentation of his history. George's memory of the 1936 trip to Frobisher Bay conforms to his preferred chronologue, one where he found warm welcome within an isolated community and adopted the mantle of an explorer. The reader, however, will discover that George's friendly face masks multiple timelines. The layering of text and image within "Merrily We Roll Along" and across *George Sprott* induces temporal uncertainty, one where images of past and present stand side by side angling for the reader's attention and trust. Among the ghosts crowding George's past is Elisape Kanayuk, George's illegitimate daughter. She is the child pictured in "Merrily We Roll Along" and she challenges the authority of George's memories in her own chapter, "The Daughter" (fig. 2.4).

Fig. 2.4 Excerpt from "The Daughter" from *George Sprott: 1894-1975*. Image used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly. Copyright Gregory Gallant.

Fig. 2.5 Excerpt from "The Daughter" from *George Sprott: 1894-1975*. Image used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly. Copyright Gregory Gallant.

Seth revisits crucial panels from "Merrily We Roll Along" in "The Daughter," to illustrate the links between Elisape and George and their conflicting memories of George's visit to Frobisher Bay. Elisape's memory figures George as an absent father who abandoned her and her family and refused to acknowledge Elisape or her mother, Kullu, in any way (fig. 2.5). Elisape informs the reader "He [George] got my mother pregnant in 1930 and she never heard from him again" ("The Daughter" 1.5) and that the 1936 visit to Frobisher Bay was a repeat event: "He did come back! In the late '30s"

(3.6). The panel depicting six-year-old Elisape and the reception between her grandfather and George (fig. 2.4) are subtly altered from their first appearance in "Merrily We Roll Along." Elisape appears alone in her panel in "The Daughter," rather than tucked behind the sleeve of another character ("Merrily We Roll Along" 3.1). The angle of the panel illustrating Grandfather and George reorients the viewer's position, showing the two figures in three-quarter profile from the opposite side. These are visual cues that the audience is now viewing the Frobisher Bay visit from Elisape's perspective, not George's, and that view is decidedly less flattering. There was no room for the Kanyuks in George's account of his visits to the Arctic, and so he omitted them, but Elisape remembers differently.

Shifts in perspective, tone, and focus shape each iteration of an image in *George Sprott*, evidence of the distortions, either conscious or unconscious, that affect memory over time. The reprise of images and sequences is at the heart of Seth's approach to organizing the flow of memory through time in *George Sprott*. Groensteen argues, "The reprise of the same panel at two locations in a comic, contiguous or distant, does not constitute a perfect duplication" (148). There will always be variation, however small, between images separated by panels or pages; however, "The repetition raises the memory of the first occurrence" (148). Repetition places mnemonic markers for the reader throughout the work, laying a network of waypoints that guide the reader through the timeline(s) of the narrative.

George's memories are entangled with those of others. Whether the gaps in his memory are strategic (omitting Kullu and Elisape Kanyuk from the official record of his life) or accidental (the missing or obscured photographs of "A Fresh Start") they are

evidence of Halbwachs' assertion that "There are surely many facts, and many details of certain facts, that the individual would forget if others did not keep their memory alive for him" (182). The reminiscing, documentary films and a lifetime of accumulated ephemera all point to a desire on George's part to remember, but Seth's construction of pivotal sequences make it clear that recollection is not a linear process. The integrity of memory is dependent on the actions and corroboration of others. More crucially, memory changes with time. It is subject to the distortion and deformations of those who remember, and individuals have different motives driving their preservation efforts. Like fractious witnesses at a crime scene, the memories that accumulate around George compete with and sometimes contradict one another. The moments of narrative discord throughout *George Sprott* articulate the unreliability of any single memory and the dependence of memory on others.

The fragmented physical structure of *Building Stories* challenges the reader's attempts to gather those fragments and mark the passage of time within the work. "How is it possible, in a work built from fragmentation and diversity, to overcome the disparity of viewpoints and achieve a unified construction?" writes Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, "Or, again, how can surface and story space be reconciled?" ("From Linear to Tabular" 130). While Fresnault-Deruelle's comments are directed at graphic narrative generally, they anticipate with uncanny precision the particular challenges of reading *Building Stories*. The reprise of images across *Building Stories* becomes crucial, as with *George Sprott*, for recognizing instances of temporal overlap and its effect on the construction of memory. Reprise allows individual panels and smaller sequences to develop texture and acquire

significance with each successive occurrence, highlighting the pervasive sense of déjà vu that suffuses every element of *Building Stories*.

Perhaps the most spectacular examples of reprise in *Building Stories* are the three interlocking sequences that bring together the experiences of the Unnamed Woman, her landlady, and the female half of the second-floor couple. Using their shared apartment building and the surrounding streets as a temporal reference, Ware explicitly links the memories and timelines of all three of the building's female occupants in three dizzying sequences (figs. 2.6, 2.7, and 2.8). The circuits of the three women may differ in time, but Ware makes it clear they share the same sense of unhappiness about their circumstances. The landlady departs the apartment building in Element 6, gingerly stepping out into the street muttering, "No ... I simply can't bear to go back in there …" (Element 6). The female half of the second-floor couple (I will refer to her as the Neighbour hereafter) departs the apartment building in Element 7 and she, like her landlady, is grumbling: "I'm never anything but nice to him ... I thought today would be different, but it's always the same ... it *never* changes" (Element 7). Finally, the Unnamed Woman undertakes the same journey as her neighbours, this time in the snow-speckled panels of Element 1. Her monologue might be the most desperate and bitter of the three: "Am I going to live here for the rest of my *life*, though? *choke* I can't! I can't *bear* it! I'm ... I'm just going to keep walking ... I'm just going to keep walking until I freeze...until I fall down into the snow …" (Element 1). Read together, these pages vibrate with memory and the recollection of their sister sequences.

Fig. 2.6 Excerpt from Element 6 of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.

Fig. 2.7 Excerpt from Element 7 of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.
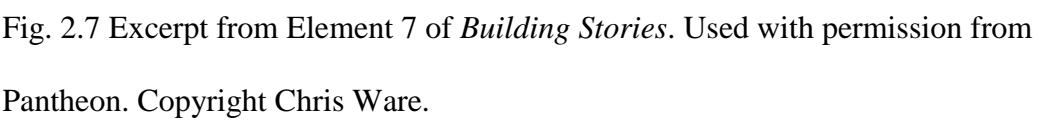
Fig. 2.8 Excerpt from Element 1 of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from

Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.

The Triplet Series implies that memory develops at the intersection of space and

time. Groensteen contends in *Comics and Narration* that the multiframe system of

graphic narrative is "an instrument for converting space into time, into duration" (138).

That contention continues his treatment of the multiframe in *The System of Comics*, where

he argues: "the panel is enriched with resonances that have an effect of transcending the

functionality of the site that it occupies, to confer the quality of the *place*" (148). The

standard left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading pattern one automatically adopts in Western

graphic narrative predisposes certain panels to acquire this quality of place. The top left

hand and bottom right hand panels often become powerful narrative touchstones because

they bracket the events of an individual page, signalling a natural "start" and "end" for the

reader. In the Triplet Series, it is the black panel that signals each character's return to the

building that acquires this sense of place (see panel 4.6 in fig. 2.6). While the panel marks

the end of the sequence (and the bottom of the page, in the case of fig. 2.6), it also mirrors

the leading panel of the sequence, suggesting a circularity and repetition of the episode

therein. Despite each character's protests that they will not return to the apartment

building, they are drawn back again and again. The panel embodies Ricoeur's sense of hauntedness with each iteration. It resonates with the weight of each woman's choice to return and their failure to realize their promise to leave with each reprise of the image. Although Ware illustrates these episodes one at a time, the reprise of the terminal panel makes it clear that these characters are bound by a shared experience of disappointment and it can be traced back to a particular place. The moment and place of return collapse in the space of one panel, embodying a common memory of failure.

The composition of each page of the Triplet Sequence invites the reader to conflate the temporalities each individual character occupies. It is an effect that Ware has used throughout his oeuvre. Georgiana Banita observed the same strategy in *Jimmy Corrigan*, noting that Ware's page composition creates "an imaginary present in which the narrative levels communicate one to one rather than in progression, all characters following the slow script of a fictive contemporaneity, in which they interact like so many recycled childhood icons" (182). Banita's suggestion of a one-to-one level of communication is particularly relevant to *Building Stories*, where the likelihood of a reader encountering these three series in this order is nearly impossible. Rather than rely on the forced sequentiality of a bound book, Ware uses rigorous composition to emphasize the interconnected mnemonic landscapes of the three series and characters. The core sequence of panels that illustrate each woman's walk, starting and ending with the front door of the apartment building, are near-perfect duplicates of each other. There are shifts in expression and differences in dialogue, but the grid remains unchanged across the three pages. The superstructure of the page implies a temporal affinity between the three women and their experience with building they share: their private chronologies

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connect, however briefly. The precision of Ware's composition makes separating their

chronologies difficult. Perhaps the Landlady's series is the "first": she has, after all, lived

in the building the longest, and her memories reach back the farthest. Her series, however,

slips forward and backward in time, as the reader is confronted with both the young and

elderly version of the character gazing out across the page. This temporal instability casts

doubt in turn about when the Neighbour and the Unnamed Woman undertake their walks:

the background of their series is generically "contemporary," and seasonal shifts aside, it

is impossible to say who walked first. Rather than view each character's experience as an

isolated event, the composition of the page suggests that their walks are part of a

continuum of experience, a shared history informed by their transit through a shared

space.

The sense of memory developed through shared spaces evokes Pierre Nora's

concept of "*lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory" (Nora 7). Nora describes *lieux de*

mémoire as sites "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (7). The apartment

building and the surrounding streets might seem unorthodox candidates for status as *lieux*

de mémoire, since the term is more often applied to commemorative sites consecrated by

a significant historic event (war memorials, for example). The building of *Building*

Stories is no official monument, yet it holds enormous commemorative significance for

its inhabitants. Nora argues that "Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures,

images, and objects" (9), and by this definition the apartment building is a *lieu de*

mémoire par excellence. The apartment building is one of the few recognizable landmarks

that appears across *Building Stories*, save for the Unnamed Woman herself, and its

presence grounds the temporalities of *Building Stories* by binding them to its address. The

apartment building is where some of the most potent memories for each character are

formed. It hosts the final stages of the Neighbour's domestic partnership (a breakdown

the Unnamed Woman witnesses with one ear pressed to their shared wall, eavesdropping

on its decline). The Landlady has spent her entire life tied to the building as a resident,

proprietor, and caretaker. Finally, the Unnamed Woman may find the bottom of her

misery while living on the third floor, but her apartment also shelters her first tentative

romantic moments with the man who will become her husband. The apartment building is

a storehouse of memory, rich in recollections.

The overlapping timelines of the Triplet Sequence are enriched by their

resemblance to one another and their shared orbit around the apartment building. In their

reprise they carry the trace of time. The durability of those memories depends on the

practice of recollection and the continued reinscription of the past in the present.

Halbwachs argues "A recollection is the richer when it reappears at the junction of a

greater number of these frameworks, which in effect intersect each other and overlap in

part" (172). Ceremonies, rituals, mementos, and memorials can all serve as frameworks

for memory, ways of preserving accounts and ways of being in the world. "Depending on

its circumstances," Halbwachs continues, "society represents the past to itself in different

ways: it modifies its conventions. As every one of its members accepts these conventions,

they inflect their recollections in the same direction" (172-3). The effectiveness of a

framework for recollection thus relies on its continued use and reinscription within

present memory. A lapse in this process is when ritual degrades into habit, or memorials

age into obscurity. The streetscape behind the Unnamed Woman, the Landlady, and the

Neighbour transforms over time: vehicles shed swooping 1950s fins for more

aerodynamic shapes; businesses open and close; public transit shifts from trolley cars and the tram lines are removed. The landlady is alert to these changes, but even so is still surprised by the shifts that happen in her neighbourhood: "***Going out of business?!*** Why, it can't be! I remember when it … " (Element 3.2.3, Fig. 2.6). The landlady's surprise at the impending demise of a local business is a cue that going through the motions of memory is not enough to ensure memory survives: buildings and memories are both at risk of decay by neglect. The landlady is one of a dwindling few who can steward the memory of the neighbourhood but eventually she too will succumb to the flow of time. The Triplet Sequence is doubly haunted by the echo of history traced by Ware across these sequences, and the certain knowledge that those echoes will eventually decay into silence.

Time alters even the most durable of recollections. By the close of Element 5, the Unnamed Woman will return to the apartment building by chance five years later and experience a potent blend of disgust and comfort: "***God***, I was so wretched and miserable when I lived here [...] So why do I feel ... ***nostalgic*** about it?" ("3 p.m." Element 5). Recall that the Unnamed Woman's journey to the apartment building and back was perhaps the most miserable of the three sequences (fig. 2.8). She wallows in the certain knowledge that she will never find happiness, have the opportunity to form a true romantic relationship, or have a child. It is a classic Chris Ware portrait of despair. Five years later, however, she is married, and parked outside her old apartment building with a crying infant in the backseat of her car. Without regular interaction with this *lieu de mémoire*, the potency of the Unnamed Woman's memories of the apartment building and her time there fades. Halbwachs argues that forgetting is a consequence of the

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frameworks and landmarks of memory altering over time (172) and that "landmarks become multiplied in proportion as our memory explores regions closer to our present, to the point that we can recall all the objects and all the faces on which yesterday our attention was even slightly focused" (175). The passage of time has blunted the immediacy of the Unnamed Woman's recollection of her "wretched and miserable" time in the apartment building, replacing these older memories with the more readily accessible memories of the recent past. The cares of the present overtake the woes of the past.

Memory is not a static category but a state of flux, and the structure of graphic narrative amplifies the distortions of time and recollection. *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* deliver Groensteen's "story full of holes," each narrative fractured by conflicting accounts and attempts to obscure or alter the memories of George and the Unnamed Woman. Not all of these obfuscations are malicious, or even intentional: the passage of time wears down recollections, defeating even the most conscientious of historians. The memories of George and the Unnamed Woman rely on frameworks and landmarks for their existence and legibility, surviving through a collective effort to remember.

Chapter Three

There are no endings in *George Sprott:1894-1975* and *Building Stories*. Although

the reader may reach the final page of *George Sprott* or rummage through the paper

pieces of *Building Stories* to reach the "last" one, these stories continue beyond the

framework of their printed pages. *Touch Sensitive* (Ware's iPad app comic), Seth's

cardboard Dominion models, and the musical collaboration *Omnis Temporalis* are

thematic extensions of *Building Stories* and *George Sprott*. These are distinct narrative

and artistic productions that can be appreciated independently of *Building Stories* and

George Sprott, but they should not be relegated to an auxiliary position in relation to their

parent works. *Touch Sensitive*, cardboard Dominion, and *Omnis Temporalis* do not

simply annotate *Building Stories* and *George Sprott*: they anticipate and enrich the

exchange of memory within and between them, creating a unified narrative horizon.

Appreciating that horizon requires the reader to be unusually attentive to spaces

that are normally overlooked or excluded from a narrative. These exclusionary zones are

what Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre term "perigraphy" and "paratext" ("The Work and

Its Surround 192). Perigraphy identifies the marginalia and publishing marks that are

usually regarded as incidental or unrelated to the work proper, including barcodes,

catalogue data, or serial numbers. Paratext includes dedications, prefaces, and

commentaries. No space is off limits for invention, intervention, illustration, or

embellishment in *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*, including spaces perennially

marginalized or excluded from the main work. Seth and Ware's sustained engagement

with the perigraphy of their works opens a channel for the reader/audience to pass

between the codex forms of *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* and their other creative iterations.

The extension of the narrative project into the extradiegetic space of graphic narrative doubly animates the reader's experience of, and with, the text. What is implicit in the process of reading and breaking down a page of a graphic narrative becomes explicit when a reader is required to assemble that same story and invited to walk around a set made to mirror the world of that page. Seth and Ware's extension of narrative space is an invitation for the reader to consider how their memories interact with and influence their experience with *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*. Ricoeur writes: "The shared experience of the world rests upon a community of time as well as space" (130), and *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* extend that community beyond their pages. The commemorative practices of collective memory and the process of recollection are reimagined in the opening of a box, the tap of a finger on a touch screen, or the traversal of a gallery space.

Seth and Ware have a history of reclaiming the margins of their works and putting them to creative use. Each copy of *George Sprott* shipped with a paper band looped around its back cover. This is where the inventory barcode and ISBN serial information was relegated, and under those identifying tags was a small note: "The artist requests that this band be disposed of upon purchase." A similar band with the same inscription has been affixed to most of Seth's hardcover publications. Seth swiftly dispatches the demands of commerce and marketing while still maintaining his artistic sensibility. Ware has likewise made a habit of annotating even the most mundane of publication data. The Library of Congress publication data printed inside the lid of *Building Stories* categorizes

the work as "260 pp., 41 x 28.5 x 4.5 cm x 14 individual easily misplaced elements." The

back of the box does not present the traditional plot summary, but rather "[a] pictographic

listing of all 14 items (260 pages total) […], with suggestions made as to appropriate

places to set down, forget or completely lose any number of its contents within the walls

of an average well-appointed home" (Element 15). Neither of these tweaks to traditional

publishing marks should surprise the seasoned Chris Ware reader. Ware, after all,

included instructions on the back of the hardcover edition of *Jimmy Corrigan: The*

Smartest Kid on Earth that the book should be filed under "Literature/Self-Help" and

included a blurb attributed to *Entertainment Weekly* that alleges *Jimmy Corrigan* is the

"Third Best Book of the Year." Seth and Ware exert control over every inch of space

allotted to *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*.

This lack of distinction between content and package is not unprecedented in

comics. Charles Hatfield notes in "An Art of Tensions" that "many comics make it

impossible to distinguish between text per se and secondary aspects such as design and

the physical package, because they continually invoke said aspects to influence the

reader's participation in meaning-making" (144). Ware has commented on the influence

of alternative comics on unifying the aesthetic and narrative aims of graphic narrative,

particularly Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's periodical *RAW*: "At least that's

where I first saw it done in comics, where design was more than simply wrapping

something in a nice cover. Art and Françoise paid attention to what the content of the

book was and created something to contain it that reflected the content and tone of the

story itself" (Chute "Panel: Graphic Novel Forms Today" 153-54). Content and container

need not be mutually exclusive.

It is not enough, however, for perigraphy to function as a bonus feature to the work, an inside joke, or a clever trick. Baetens and Lefèvre rightly note, "Opening up the potential of the perigraphy presupposes […] that the continuum mapped out should not stop at the threshold of the work, but should continue throughout the entire volume" (198). Without this continuity or totality of creative vision, such excursions into the perigraphy are little more than a pleasant diversion for the reader. Baetens and Lefèvre call for an effort "to transform the whole volume into an *articulated network*," (197) and invoke the idea of "unfurling" (198) as the means to accomplish this transformation. These terms are analoguous to Groensteen's concepts of the network and braiding: "Braiding ... manifests into consciousness the notion that the panels of a comic constitute a network, and even a system" (*The System of Comics* 158). Perigraphy provides a space where the plane of the work may intersect with the plane of the reader, marked with real-world considerations of cost and cataloguing. Bridging these two planes requires a concerted act of creative will (not to mention a compliant and generous publisher), but the result is a work whose thematic concerns resonate with every register of the narrative.
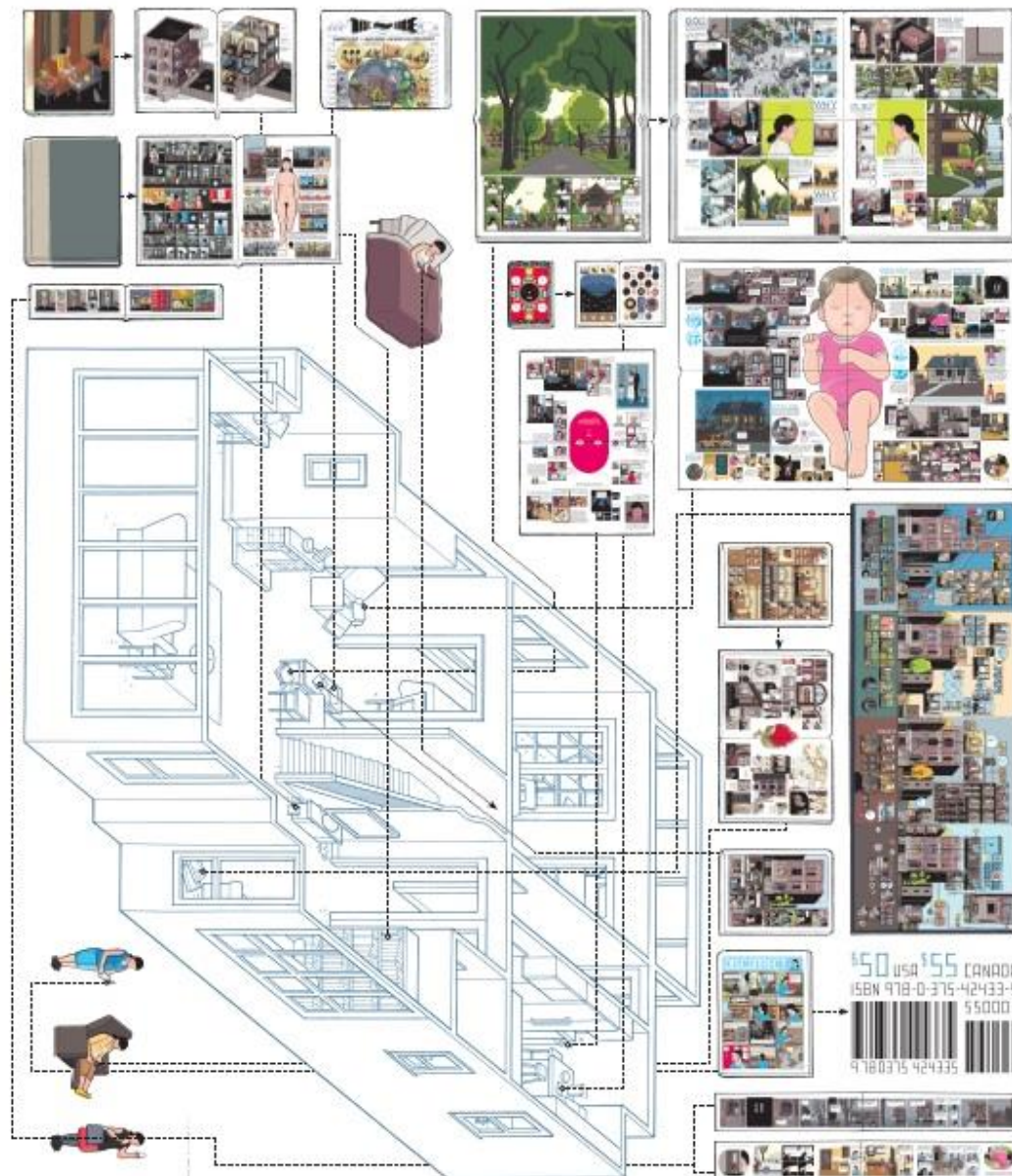
Fig. 3.1 Back box view of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from Pantheon.

Copyright Chris Ware.

Building Stories builds a consistent narrative worldview that begins with the surround and permeates the work proper. The back "cover" of *Building Stories* does indeed show the promised "pictographic listing" of every item included in the box (fig. 3.1). Each item is linked, via diagrammatic arrows and dotted lines, to a specific location in a cutaway drawing of a residential dwelling. Dotted lines connect four versions of the Unnamed Woman to the dwelling: she, too, is reading, in the Ware-ian equivalent of the happy figures celebrating the successful assembly of a bed frame at the back of an Ikea instruction booklet. This is as close as the reader will get to any instruction about the "correct" order in which to read *Building Stories*, and it collapses the function of an index, summary, and preview into a single space. Since a prospective reader cannot sit down in the middle of the bookstore to crack the plastic on the work (not in good conscience or taste, anyway), Ware develops a workaround. It is a solution that manages to be both practical and evocative, since the cover lays out the themes that will wind their way through the work—loss, obsolescence, and desire—while attending to the technical details required by the publisher.

Seth uses the perigraphy of *George Sprott* to reinforce the sense that the reader is entering George Sprott's world, and that the object at hand is an extension of that world. Seth claims the back cover of the book for a massive rendering of the logo of George Sprott's "Institute of Polar Studies," a logo that is repeated on the inside title page where the colophon would traditionally appear. The book carries George's imprint, not the publisher's. Seth also claims the leading pages of the books, which are often kept blank as a side effect of printing and binding, as rich narrative territory. He embellishes these pages with oversized renderings of the book's title, a double-page portrait of "The Stars

of CKCK-1966," and the double-page series of comics titled "George is Born." All of these images occur before the title page proper, which is itself faced with a 'photograph' of George interviewing a guest on the set of his television show, "Northern Hi-Lights." There is no real period of transition where readers ease into the world of the work. From the moment readers pick up the book they are absorbed by the rhythm of the work.

Seth and Ware's holistic approach to perigraphy hedges against the hazards of overinvesting meaning in marginalized spaces. "The fragmented elements of the perigraphy belong to very different registers," observe Baetens and Lefèvre, "they are heteromorphic layers, whose cohabitation on the page is often random" (192). There is a justifiable reluctance to read too much into the placement of a barcode or publisher's data in the case of virtually any other work given that very few artists exert the same level of influence and control over the design and presentation of their work as do Seth and Ware. *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* dissolve that heteromorphic distinction, seamlessly blending the diegetic prerogatives of the work with the requirements of extradiegetic space.

The pictograph that graces the back cover is ample evidence of Ware's efforts to link the contents of the *Building Stories* box with its container, but he extends that link to the most marginalized of spaces. The edges of the box are embellished on three sides with yet more drawings, two mini comics and a single "gag panel." These are not throwaway panels: in tone, form, and content they are indistinguishable from the images inside the box, and they offer clues about the nature of the story to come. The Unnamed Woman, "a protagonist wondering if she'll ever move from the rented close quarters of lonely young adulthood to the mortgaged expanse of love and marriage," as the back box declares, is

shown in various domestic configurations in these box-side comics. She jogs with a stroller, inspects flowers with a man and a small child, and makes a meal in a kitchen with the same male figure in the background, each image an answer to the box text's proposition. They go beyond the instinct to simply "illustrate the book ... give a foretaste of the pages inside, and at the same time celebrate the talent of the artist" (Baetens and Lefèvre 195-6). The *Building Stories* box does not just enclose the graphic narrative; it extends it, deploying the same visual codes as the elements inside the box to square the story, rendering it flush and true.

George Sprott extends the multiframe by emphasizing unfurling and braiding as co-dependent processes. The endpapers of *George Sprott*, both front and back, are designed as the test patterns for the CKCK television station. The front cover endpapers are in black and white, a style that would read as contemporary for the George Sprott of 1953, just beginning his CKCK broadcast career. The endpapers of the back cover are the full colour bars of the 1970s, at the end of George's life. Although separated by the pages in between, the endpapers can still be read as part of a sequence, related to each other even over a distance, the expansion of the multiframe pushed to the absolute limit of the printed work. The endpapers are a visual bookending of the dates inscribed on the cover, and as they usher the reader into the work they reinforce the reader's role as witness to the arc of George's life.

George Sprott and *Building Stories* use perigraphy as a permeable narrative membrane, one that allows the worlds of the reader and the work to interact freely. The horizon between the worlds of the work and the reader is hazy despite the natural inclination of the reader to regard those spheres as separate. Baetens and Lefèvre contend:

The work is received as a fictional object, even when its relationship to reality is very clear. Its outer frame, however, although it may include elements from the promised fiction, is measured against the referent: the name of the author refers to a biographical person, the publisher's details designate a business that is real, not imaginary, and the price of the book, the barcode and the ISBN number are all part of a universe that also includes the book, but where the the laws of the fictional world do not hold sway. (193)

Baetens and Lefèvre's contention is sound: *Building Stories* and *George Sprott* are works of fiction. They do not surrender that status simply because a reader may find scraps of verifiable information. Ware explicitly hedges against this with the disclaimer inscribed inside the lid of the box: "This is a work of fiction [...] Any resemblance to actual living, dead or insensate persons, events, municipalities, locales, historical figures, emotions, sensations or unnameable poetic impressions is entirely coincidental, or at least not deliberately intended to catalyze litigation." But the referents are not quite fixed: "Seth" and "Chris Ware" are a pseudonym and a diminutive, respectively; the Unnamed Woman jogs past Frank Lloyd Wright's Arthur B. Heurtley house in Element 13; the city of Dominion would not look out of place anywhere in mid-century Ontario. Seth commented on this slippage in the promotional interviews for *Omnis Temporalis*: "All you have to do is move one step away from yourself: if you make it like a 70-year-old man instead of a 50 year old man, people literally do not seem to make such a strong connection. If you make it a little too close ... they think it's your story even if it's not" ("Omnis Temporalis"). There are degrees of fiction and a continuum of reality.

This destabilization of the narrative threshold where fiction and reality blur facilitates a transition that Ricoeur summed up as "a moment when one has to move from an *I* to *we*" (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 119). Peter R. Sattler argues in "Past Imperfect: *Building Stories* and the Art of Memory" that with *Building Stories* "Ware cares less about representing the 'memory of an experience' than about reproducing memory *as* an experience—that *Building Stories* attempts to reconstitute memory, coaxing its readers not only to remember feelings, but also to *feel* remembering" (207). He goes on to argue that "Comics ... exist on a fluid experiential boundary between insides and outsides, between the experience of imagining a world and the experience of seeing it" (213). Perigraphy, especially vivid and richly observed in the case of *Building Stories* and *George Sprott*, renders this boundary even more dynamic. By treating every space as an extension of the narrative, not just the pages bracketed by title and acknowledgement, the perigraphy of *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* introduces the work to be done by the pages within. An unusually active perigraphy has profound implications for the reader's role in preserving and constructing the memories in and of the work.

That transition, aided by perigraphy, is means of addressing one of the struggles of collective memory identified by Halbwachs: "But how can we imagine that our recollections, whether individual images or an assembly of concrete images, can result from a combination of schemes or frameworks? ... How can the container reproduce the content?" (*On Collective Memory* 173). Earlier I considered Halbwach's concept of frameworks in relation to the Ware's treatment of the streetscape that surrounds the narrative's eponymous building. Here it is useful to consider Halbwachs' conception of frameworks as the result of a cascade of connotations provoked by the naming and telling

of objects and stories. Halbwachs contends "[i]t is language, and the whole system of social conventions attached to it, that allows us at every moment to reconstruct our past" (173). The frameworks of memory can quite simply be the stories we tell each other and ourselves about the past, triggered by the shared knowledge of objects, places, and people.

Graphic narrative may be uniquely positioned to answer Halbwachs' question, since the dynamic between container and content, image and frame, is inextricable from the experience of reading any work of graphic narrative. Element 5 of *Building Stories* is particularly evocative when read with this question in mind. This segment of *Building Stories* is often referred to as the Little Golden Book for its replication of the children's publishing staple of the same name. The Little Golden Book presents a case of compound perigraphy: it has a separate set of endpapers (illustrated with a whimsical woodland motif), covers, even its own gold foil wrapped binding.[12] By adapting a recognizable object to his own narrative ends, Ware creates a site of nested nostalgia. The Little Golden Book is obviously an integral part of the world of *Building Stories*, but it potentially resonates with the memory of a reader who has encountered a similar object outside of *Building Stories*. This object-within-an-object is a flashpoint for collective memory, a site where memory is both created and contained for reader and characters alike. It mobilizes the reader to remember not only their encounters with works like these, but to feed their own recollections back into the work. The opposite scenario is also true:

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[12] Element 9, which is a near-replica of *Acme Novelty Library 18*, is the only other element that has a solid binding.

if a reader has never encountered a Little Golden Book outside of *Building Stories*, or is not alerted to the reference, Element 5 loses its mnemonic potency. Ware illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of collective memory with a single nostalgically-charged object.

Ware evokes the entwined history of his own comics and the comics medium by design: *Building Stories* is riddled with inside jokes and wry nods to the meta-history of *Building Stories* and comics at large. Element 9 is a near-perfect replica of *Acme Novelty Library 19*. Elements 11, 12, and 13 are printed at broadsheet size and left unbound in the *Building Stories* box, a tacit acknowledgement of the traditional newspaper landscape long occupied by comics. Element 10 winks at that history again: "The Daily Bee" reads as a cross between small-town weekly newspaper and a front page from the heyday of William Randolph Hearst's publishing empire. Ware includes two Elements (1 and 2) that are comics printed on simple strips of paper and he progresses to a stapled collection of strips in the case of Element 3. "[T]he experimental box-of-comics format of *Building Stories*," argues Benoît Crucifix, "directly stems from Chris Ware's practice of dispersed serialization, self-reflexively mapping out the material history of comics" (9). The fourteen elements of *Building Stories* are collected and collective memories, not only of the Unnamed Woman and the characters around her, but of the reader who assembles them and the author who nested the memory of a medium within the narrative.

Fig. 3.2 "Browsing" from Element 8 of *Building Stories*. Used with permission from Pantheon. Copyright Chris Ware.

Ware's "self-reflexive mapping" reaches a crescendo in "Browsing," the final

page of Element 8. It is a page that also simultaneously demonstrates the flexibility of the

multiframe and its potential to connect meaningfully with perigraphy. This page

illustrates the Unnamed Woman relating the events of a dream to Lucy, her daughter,

where she discovers that someone has put together a book of her life (fig. 3.2), "And it

had *everything* in it ... my diaries, the stories from my writing classes, even stuff I didn't

know I'd written ... everything I'd forgotten, abandoned, or thrown out was there ...

everything … " (3.1). The Unnamed Woman goes on to explain the unusual structure of

her dream book: "And it wasn't—I dunno—it wasn't really a *book* either ... it was in. ..

pieces, like, books falling apart out of a carton, maybe ... but it was ... *beautiful* ... it made

sense … " (3.3). Torsa Ghosal argues this section makes a "metafictional leap, where the

synthetic aspects of the narrative come to the foreground [at] a thematic level, the author

values the book's body for its ability to activate distinct textural and readerly dynamics"

("Books with Bodies: Narrative Progression in *Building Stories*" 93). This is a moment

where the border between reader and character becomes very thin, and the work of the

reader to collect the Unnamed Woman's story comes to the fore. The carton that contains

the Unnamed Woman's memories is in the reader's hands, the organization of those

memories up to the efforts of the reader. Closure is still in effect here—the reader makes

the connection between the dream book and the real book—but the moment is ultimately

framed by the reader's experience of assembling the narrative, one booklet at a time. The

inclusion of a thumbnail rendering of the booklet where "Browsing" appears on the back

of the *Building Stories* box completes the circuit between narrative and reader: the

diagrammatic arrow links the booklet both to a location in the pictograph house and the

barcode information, linking the diegetic and extradiegetic planes of reading. The memories of the Unnamed Woman are not hers alone but shared with and retained by the reader.

The closing pages of *George Sprott* hand the duty of remembering George and witnessing his life over to the reader. The "Epilogue" notes that the fictional CKCK was not particularly conscientious when handling its archives: "The station dumped all its old shows. Everything. Even Sir Grisly. The bastards" (3.3). The test-pattern endpapers read as a decorative void, their relative blankness an echo of the erasure of George's past. Owen Trade, who showcases his collection of George Sprott memorabilia in the "Epilogue" notes, "nobody under 40 even knows his name any longer./This stuff I've saved here ... it's his legacy" (4.5-6). That collection of fragments is now in the reader's hands, a fact underlined by a final panel included in the acknowledgement and copyright information page of *George Sprott*. The top of the page includes a drawn photograph of "Abandoned Kullu Kanayuk" ("And So, Here We Are" 3.3). Although it is not labelled, it is unmistakably her. It is a poignant inclusion: this too is George's legacy, although he spent his entire life denying it, and the reader can recognize the willfulness of that amnesia here. What haunted George Sprott now haunts the reader, occupying the perigraphy that should belong to the reader alone.

George Sprott and *Building Stories* layer the harmonies between reader and narrative to develop a deeper resonance within their stories. The flexibility and durability of perigraphy in *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* offers an interpretive approach to parts of the work that stand outside the border of the text proper and beyond the margin. *Touch Sensitive*, cardboard Dominion, and *Omnis Temporalis* are distinct artistic

productions, yet they are tied to the expression, themes, and memories of *Building Stories* and *George Sprott*. They more properly fall under Baetens and Lefèvre's definition of paratext, commenting on and expanding the thematic concerns of *Building Stories* and *George Sprott* at large from outside the margin. They are driven, however, by the same impulses to commemorate, recollect, and share.

Touch Sensitive first appeared in 2011 as part of *McSweeney's* iOS application, and it illustrates the slow decay of affection between the couple who share the apartment building with the Unnamed Woman (who does not appear in this segment). It appears again in an expanded form in *Building Stories* as part of Element 7. Digital access to *Touch Sensitive* has been unreliable: *McSweeney's* ceased support of its application in 2013 (after the print publication of *Building Stories*), ending access to *Touch Sensitive* in the process. The project was resurrected in 2016, and became its own standalone application for iPad, "...with all the original gestures and transitions intact—even though the 'swipe' gesture, which then felt natural, now seems a little excessive. Who would've guessed?" (*Touch Sensitive: An iPad Comic by Chris Ware*). You can download it for free right now, provided you have the technology at hand to do so, and keep it for however long your software remains up to date.

The restrictions of code, the cost of owning a sophisticated device, and the application's assumptions about the habits and speed of the average reader, render *Touch Sensitive* a potential exercise in frustration. The narrative arc of *Touch Sensitive* is revealed one swipe at a time, enlivened with subtle animation: the female half of the couple flushes when the reader swipes over her encounter with a co-worker; a certain segment of narrative is only revealed if the reader taps a particular portion of the screen

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labelled "READY." This apparent inhibition of reader autonomy is central to Groensteen's reservations about the effectiveness of digital graphic narrative: "The reader must advance through the narrative in the order specified and coded by the author and there are fewer opportunities for the eye to wander and discover unexpected harmonies between panels and pages." Groensteen further contends that the spatial memory offered by a printed page is also superior to a digital rendering. "A printed comic can be perceived as a collection of images spread out across the page, arranged according to a positional logic that is easy for the memory to retrieve," argues Groensteen, " [whereas] when a comic is read on the screen, as each page succeeds the next it also replaces and effaces it, precluding the mental retention of the arrangement of panels" (66-7). Groensteen, however, did not anticipate a work as fragmented as *Building Stories*, nor did he foresee the potential narrative plasticity offered by digital graphic narrative.

Touch Sensitive is more than an early draft of a story that became part of *Building Stories*: it anticipates the concerns of collective memory that animate *Building Stories* as a whole. *Touch Sensitive* is framed as a "memory fragment" retrieved from "this area's consciousness cloud" (np *Touch Sensitive*) by an English student of the future. She accesses the story of the second-floor couple as a filament of memory drifting in a digital ether. The unnamed future student waits for the fragment to reload, her view screen displaying messages indicating her software is trying to create an interpretive framework for the memory: the program is "accumulating new biography," "processing sensory residue," and "reconstructing emotional state" (np *Touch Sensitive*). Aaron Kashtan argues "this section of *Building Stories* takes on added significance when read in both print and digital versions at once; it is a liminal text whose true significance rests neither

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in its print form nor in its digital form but rather in the space between the two" (441).

Ware unites the reader of *Building Stories* and the unnamed future student of *Touch Sensitive* through the act of assembly, aligning their thematic approaches to collective memory in the process. *Touch Sensitive* omits whatever conclusions the student may have reached about these strangers from the past, and the present reader of *Building Stories* may or may not find the act of self-directed narrative assembly satisfying. Both reader and digital retriever are, however, trying to create a coherent story through fragments and scraps, with varying degree of success.

The fragility of *Touch Sensitive* as an "object" that exists in the real world further links the planes of memory within the work and in the world of the reader. Ware alludes to this ephemerality in the commentary on the back of the *Building Stories* box: "With the increasing electronic incorporeality of existence, sometimes it's reassuring—perhaps even necessary—to have something to hold on to" (Element 15). The disappearance of *Touch Sensitive* with the demise of the *McSweeney's* application is a practical reminder of the instability of memory at the heart of *Building Stories*. Paper is in danger of decay, and digital files can be rendered obsolete and inaccessible. *Building Stories* is not quite the reassuringly solid object promised in Ware's cover copy, but a reminder of the ongoing effort of recollection that enables memory to endure.

The acts of reconstruction undertaken by the characters and readers of *Touch Sensitive* and *Building Stories* highlight the dependence of memory on the archival efforts of others: recollection is not simply the retrieval of a single memory but summoning an entire network of emotion and sensation. Kashtan takes an optimistic view of the interplay between digital and analog in his appraisal of *Building Stories* and the *Touch*

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Sensitive sequence: "As an art which developed out of print but employs logics of fragmentation and linking often associated with digital media, comics combines the continuity of analog media with the discreteness of digital media" (441). In both print and code, Ware dismantles the framework of print graphic narrative and reconstructs it through the touch of the reader. Where Groensteen would argue the reader is fundamentally hindered by the technical restrictions of a touch-based reading device, I would counter that the reader's touch becomes the bridge not only between diegetic and extradiegetic narrative space, but also the mechanism that allows memory to acquire order and structure. The *Building Stories* reader can backtrack, shuffle, and re-sequence each element of the story at will, creating a unique spatial and sequential memory of the work with each reading. *Touch Sensitive* and *Building Stories* suggest that the comics reader is more resilient and resourceful than previously suspected, and the language of comics more plastic than the grammar of the grid would imply.

Dominion, as either a fictional backdrop or realized space in the form of a gallery exhibit, is a place where the memories of the reader coalesce and common experience is forged. The gallery space extends the site of memory for *George Sprott*, collecting the traces of narrative and combining them in a physical space that a reader (now viewer) may traverse at will. Groensteen observes:

> A page of comics is offered at first to a synthetic global vision, but that cannot be satisfactory. It demands to be traversed, crossed, glanced at, and analytically deciphered. This moment-to-moment reading does not take a lesser account of the totality of the panoptic field that constitutes the page (or the double page), since the focal vision never ceases to be enriched by peripheral vision. (19)

Seth's cardboard Dominion models and *Omnis Temporalis* may be read in this spirit of "peripheral vision," as extensions of the narrative project laid out in the pages of *George Sprott*. Candida Rifkind dubbed these interconnected narrative spaces "the biotopographies of George Sprott" (227). Rifkind uses the term to designate "Seth's multimedia project, which attempts to map a fictional life across surfaces in ways that invite us to contemplate the very lack of depth, the superficiality, the gaps and absences, of any such endeavour" (227). I would argue that these exhibits allow for the flow of memory between audience and work in a way that makes plain the moment-to-moment exchange that happens between every panel on every page of a printed work. They are independent from the main work, but their existence enriches the possibility of those pages and links the world of the reader to the world of the story.

The material Dominion is a series of cardboard models fashioned from repurposed Fed-Ex delivery boxes and house paint. Each represents a piece of the fictional city's civic life, its streets lined with buildings familiar to the reader of *George Sprott*: the Coronet, the Melody Grill, even Daisy's Narwhal Books are all represented among Seth's cardboard models. The buildings have toured galleries across Canada as part of the *Seth: Dominion* exhibit, but their origin goes back much further, pre-dating *George Sprott* as both character and narrative (*Palookaville 20* 42, 44). The development of *George Sprott* owes much to the existence of Dominion as "less of an artistic project and more of an interior landscape" (Seth 44). Seth notes that Dominion occupies a unique spot in his creative output: "I think the city of Dominion fulfills some place in my life similar to what I imagine Alexander Calder's circus probably did for him. Part of his art and yet set off to the side from the main body. 'Artwork' that has none of the 'work' in it" (48). Yet

the city of Dominion frames the events of *George Sprott* as much as any panel or speech bubble.

The inclusion of the cardboard Dominion within the pages of *George Sprott* is a site of exchange between the fictional world and the reader's world. Photographs of several cardboard models occupy full pages of the book, and they punctuate and reflect the chapters around them. The photograph of the model of the Narwhal Book building, for example, faces "The Narwhal Press" chapter, where Daisy explains the press's origins and demise. The inclusion of the models in photographic form creates another circuit of recollection between the reader and the narrative. Unlike the illustrated photographs that occur in *George Sprott*, these photographs refer to objects in the non-fictive world of the reader. The buildings of Dominion are places that can be seen, even visited (by a lucky few), and therefore remembered. Rifkind argues "Seth's comic book and cardboard city are representational surfaces that inhabit the time-space of the present in order to send us—readers, gallery goers—into contemplation of what was and, just as importantly, what might have been" (241). The reader may carry their own memory of an encounter with Dominion's cityscape, one that does not necessarily have to be bound by the body of the book.

George Sprott continues to grow and evolve beyond the pages of the original graphic narrative. The Richmond Art Gallery (RAG) exhibited a unique collaboration between Seth and composer Mark Haney from 9 April-25 June, 2017 in Richmond, British Columbia. Seth's sketchbooks, Dominion models, and artwork from *George Sprott* were exhibited alongside performances of Haney's *Omnis Temporalis*, a sonic adaptation of *George Sprott*. Haney scored *Omnis Temporalis* for double bass, cello,

alto/bass flute, and voice. Four vocalists shared performance duties for the libretto, with

dedicated actors for the roles of George and Daisy Sprott, while the remaining pair of

actors covered all of remaining character parts.[13] Each performance of *Omnis Temporalis*

was staged on a small cardboard-clad set designed by Seth to mimic the CKCK studios

where George Sprott records "Northern Hi-Lights" in *George Sprott*. The joint effort of

Seth and Haney transformed *George Sprott* into a chamber oratorio.

Adaptation is nothing new for comics. I am certain at this very moment the reader

could visit the nearest movie theater and find at least one film adaptation of a comic book

property. The work of alternative comics is resistant to the studio blockbuster treatment.

When the National Film Board of Canada commissioned a film treatment of Seth and his

work, director Luc Chamberland used animation to adapt Seth's comics for the screen.

The resulting film, *Seth's Dominion* (2014), retains the wistful nostalgia that suffuses

Seth's work. *Omnis Temporalis*, however, is not simply an adaptation or animation of

past work. "We're actually doing a collaboration here that is for the public, to be seen ...

[This] isn't an artefact of something else," Seth remarked at the opening of *Omnis*

Temporalis, "This is a new piece of work created out of my work and out of Mark's work

coming together" ("Omnis Temporalis"). *Omnis Temporalis* is between the planes of

adaptation and reimagination, between performance art and gallery exhibition.

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[13] The original RAG production of *Omnis Temporalis* featured musicians Mark Haney (double bass), Mark Takeshi-McGregor (alto/bass flute), and Marina Hasselberg (cello). The cast comprised Richard Newman (George Sprott), Dorothea Hayley (Daisy Sprott), koralee (Narrator, Ensemble), and Jovanni Sy (Ensemble).

Fig. 3.3 Photograph from the set of *Omnis Temporalis* at the Richmond Art Gallery

Seth's claim that *Omnis Temporalis* is a new work poses a challenge for

reconciling its narrative and performative aims with those of *George Sprott*. A piece of

chamber music is not a graphic narrative, yet there are affinities between the two.

Groensteen argues in *Comics and Narration* that "Everything that has duration contains

music, just as everything that is visible contains graphic design and everything that moves

contains dance. Duration, whether short (a three- or four-panel strip) or long (a 300-page

graphic novel), is a natural dimension of comics narrative, as it is in any other narrative.

Consequently, so is 'music'" (133). Groensteen refines the essentialism of this statement

by focusing on the rhythmic properties of graphic narrative, the undeniable sense of

pacing and flow that develops as a reader engages with a graphic narrative. The

multiframe structure of graphic narrative is a framework not only for space and the

image, but for the rhythm of observation and reading the work at hand. The transposition of *George Sprott* into a musical form is not as outlandish as it may appear.

The composition of *Omnis Temporalis* is indebted to its source material in tone, content, and sensibility. Haney's libretto is structured by large sections of dialogue and description taken directly from *George Sprott*. Daisy Sprott's declaration at the top of "Uncle George"—"I miss him to this day" (1.1)—is transformed into a soaring, mournful refrain for the soprano playing her in *Omnis Temporalis*. The interstitial advertisements that dot *George Sprott* become running patter for the Ensemble members voicing the civic chorus of Dominion. The music, in turn, shapes the perception of the characters: George's motif, unsurprisingly, is structured by Haney's double bass line; Daisy's takes shape in the contrast between the soprano vocal and the quiet pulse of alto flute. *Omnis Temporalis* enriches the experience of *George Sprott* immeasurably. Peter Sattler's earlier observation from *Building Stories* that a graphic narrative (and in this case, chamber music) can compel its audience "to *feel* remembering" (207) is particularly acute in this case. The audience of *Omnis Temporalis* is a witness and participant of an elegy played out in real time and space.

Seth and Haney's decision to structure *Omnis Temporalis* as a piece for chamber ensemble binds it closely with the narrative structure of *George Sprott*. The interviews the narrator of *George Sprott* conducts with George's friends, colleagues, and fans forms a chorus throughout the work. The Ensemble of *Omnis Temporalis* gives voice to that text, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in counterpoint or cacophony. Here the narrative aims of *Omnis Temporalis* and *George Sprott* are most closely aligned: memory is an act of collaboration and corroboration. Memories echo and rely on one another for their shape

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and duration. "There are no recollections to which words cannot be made to correspond," argues Halbwachs, "We speak of our recollections before calling them to mind. It is language, and the whole system of social conventions attached to it, that allows us at every moment to reconstruct our past" (173). *Omnis Temporalis* gives voice to the memories that shape *George Sprott*, inviting the audience to develop their own memories of George and the work in turn. The series of collaborations between creator, language, and medium that deliver the work to an audience come alive in a new way. To speak of *Omnis Temporalis* is to speak of George and *George Sprott*, and to carry the memories of the character through the memory of an encounter with the work.

George Sprott is a man lost to ephemera, his legacy a scattered collection of photographs and mementos. There are plans to release *Omnis Temporalis* as an audio recording in the future. For now, however, the work exists only in brief YouTube video clips,[14] score sheets, and the memory of its audience. Music, as with life and with George Sprott, is ephemeral.

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[14] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D68addJp32I
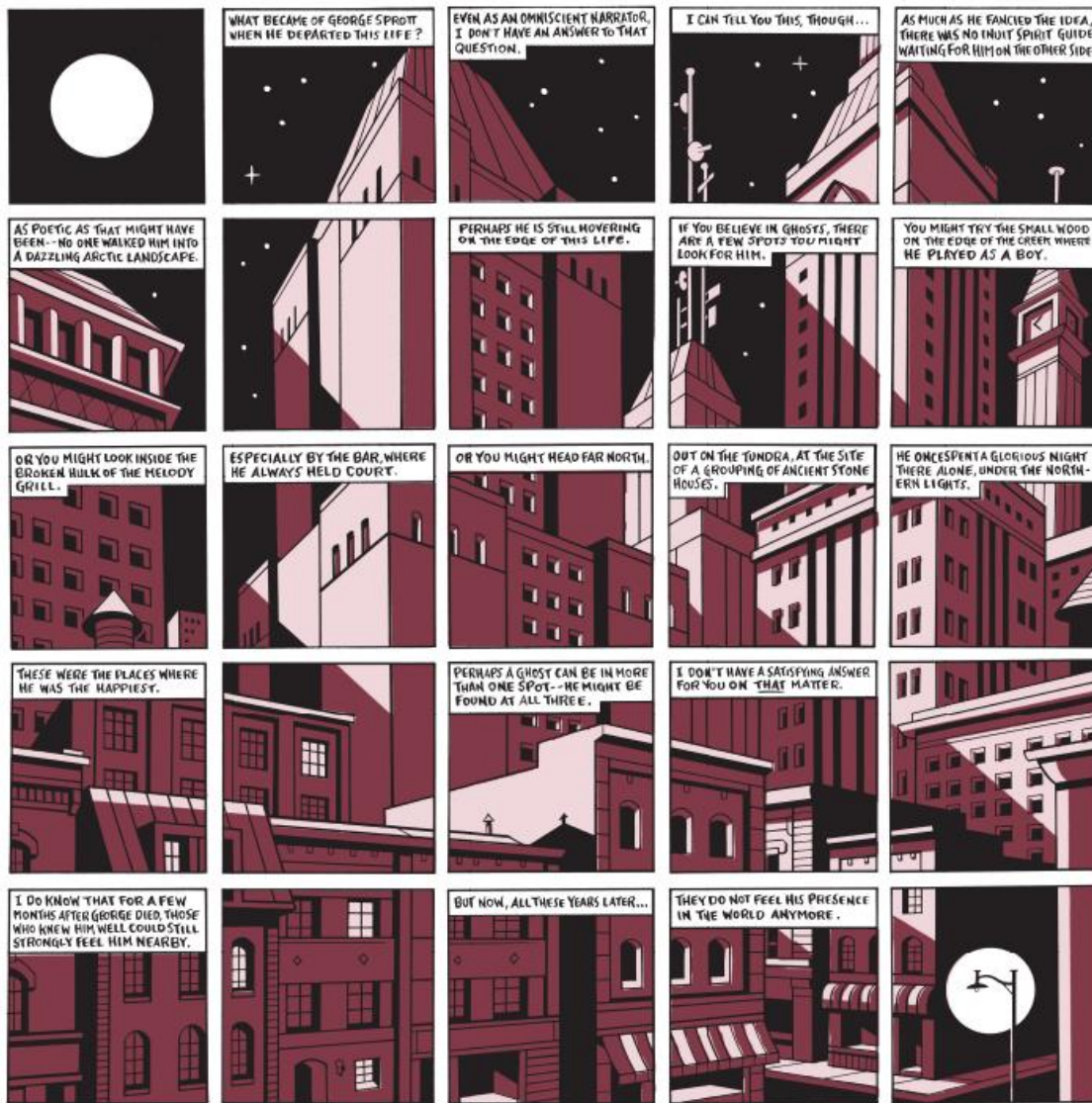
Conclusion: Nothing Lasts (Five Years Later)

Fig. 4.1 Excerpt from "Life is But a Dream" from *George Sprott:1894-1975*. Image used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly. Copyright Gregory Gallant.

While neither creator has gone dormant in the intervening years, *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* mark watershed moments in Seth and Ware's careers. Seth has published another sketchbook comic in the style of *Wimbledon Green* (*The G.N.B Double C: The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*, 2011) and further issues of

Palookaville,[15] but nothing on the same scale as *George Sprott*. Ware has been active

with commercial commissions and design work, but save the recently published

Monograph (2017), eager readers are still waiting for the next installment of the *Acme*

Novelty Library—or whatever dizzying narrative Ware is working on next. Neither Seth

nor Ware has published a work that touches the narrative scope of *George Sprott* and

Building Stories—at least, not yet.

      George Sprott: 1894-1975 and *Building Stories* remain unique in their approach to

the subject of memory, even though nine and six years have passed since their respective

publication dates. Their physical formats still command attention when propped up on the

shelf, literally dwarfing their peers. Meanwhile, the durability of (auto)biographic graphic

narratives shows no signs of weakening, in line with the overwhelming popularity of life

writing as a general publishing category. The most recent *New York Times* nonfiction

bestseller list[16] counts four of the top five volumes as biographies. A random sample of

any week in the past year reveals a similar distribution. Reader appetite for "true" stories

of "real" life is voracious.

      The preceding pages have offered a reading of *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*

that accounts for the bifurcated nature of memory: the individual feels a powerful sense of

ownership over "their" memories, yet those memories originate and exist in a world that

is shared with others. Collective memory seems an unlikely filter to apply to a pair of

stories that seem intensely focused on the memories of a single character, but by

regarding the whole mnemonic horizon of *George Sprott* and *Building Stories* it becomes

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[15] Vols. 20-23. Seth claims to have finally "finished" the long-running *Clyde Fans* storyline with Vol. 23.
[16] November 26, 2017 as of this writing.

clear that memory is not a solitary object or pursuit. The communities George Sprott and

the Unnamed Woman inhabit shape their memories, comment on their forgetfulness, and

steward their legacies against the assault of neglect. Seth and Ware's paratextual forays

into digital comics, gallery exhibitions, and musical collaborations highlight the

reciprocity between individual and group recollections, including the reader and audience

as part of the meaning and memory-making process of each work.

A shift in focus to the perspective of collective memory has productive

implications for graphic narratives beyond *George Sprott* and *Building Stories*. Many

graphic narratives that fall under the category of life writing owe their creation to intense

collaborations. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is inconceivable without the exchange of memory

between Art and Vladek Spiegelman. That exchange in turn informs the presentation and

recollection of the Holocaust, one of the most horrifying examples of collective memory

and trauma. Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1997) and *Safe Area Goražde* (2000) are graphic

journalism and the documentation of history. They rely on the accumulated recollections

of dozens of individuals to form a single narrative portrait of their respective conflicts.

Collective memory asks how an individual (in this case, Sacco) can shift the direction of

those memories through organization and composition. Collective memory encourages

one to consider the many strands of recollection that bind people and history together, not

simply the dominant thread of history.

Related to the question of how "we" remember (however that "we" is defined for

a given group or era) is who remembers, and who has the privilege of recollection. This

question is particularly pressing for comics, where certain voices carry further than

others: it is a field that is still dominated both critically and creatively by men. The

majority of scholarly resources relevant and available for the preparation of this work, for example, were male-authored. While comics often provide an outlet for alternative stories that struggle to find a publishing home elsewhere, the patterns of privilege still persist. What makes *Building Stories* and *George Sprott* notable is their attentiveness to the pains of domesticity and the indignities of female experience, large and small. Think of the Unnamed Woman, shamed for her sanitary habits by both a stranger and her own husband. Think of Kullu Kanyuk, erased from memory and history by the man who used and abandoned her. The question of who remembers haunts both *Building Stories* and *George Sprott* and would provide a worthwhile extension of the questions of collective memory raised within this study.

The formal distortions Seth and Ware apply to the multiframe of their graphic narratives, and their manipulations of the material presentation of their works, also have implications for how a reader views the stability of that multiframe elsewhere. Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014) bends chronology in ways that rival even the most fractured timelines in *Building Stories*. McGuire nests multiple images within single pages to open illustrative "windows" into the past of a particular location. Images from 1952, 1701, and 1000 B.C. might all share a single page at any given point. *Here* asks the reader to consider how all the histories of a location shape a place over time, even if those events go unnoticed or time erodes their traces. Graphic narratives like *Here*, *George Sprott*, and *Building Stories* demonstrate that behind the utilitarian appearance of the grid, the panel, and the strip is the limitless possibility of reinvention.

Finally, I hope the reader of this work has grown to appreciate (as I certainly have) the affinities between the work of Seth and Chris Ware. The genesis of this project

was the sense that critical appraisal often overlooks the quiet charms of a work like

George Sprott in favour of the dramatic presence of projects like *Building Stories*. Other

readers appear to share this feeling: over the course of writing this project various

academic and non-academic works have been published that speak to the affection and

fascination that Seth's work inspires. I wanted to avoid the impulse to separate the work

of Seth and Ware into discrete artistic categories, privileging one over the other. They

share similar thematic preoccupations and references, and in the small world of

professional cartoonists, it would be impossible for them to avoid interacting with one

another. It seemed natural to me to read their works together to find the same threads of

nostalgia, memory, forgetting, and history woven through both.

Remember: nothing lasts. As George would say at the end of each episode of

"Northern Hi-Lights": "May the sun never melt your igloo." If only we could outlast the

sun.

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