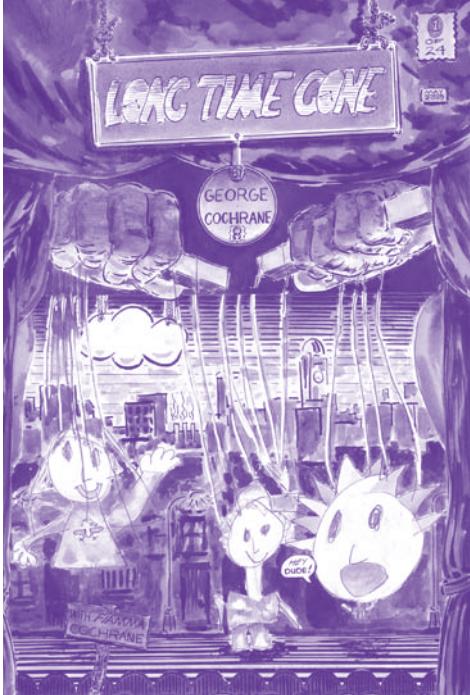


George Cochrane: Long Time Gone

From *Little Nemo in Slumberland* to *Peanuts* and *Batman*, comics have been a pop culture staple since the early twentieth century. The form has often been dismissed as juvenile entertainment or relegated to a cultural ghetto, but, over the years the graphic novel and its precedents have gained legitimacy as a sophisticated literary and artistic form. As early as the 1950s, pop artists, including Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, appreciated the abbreviated, visual style of comic strips as well as their significance as a mass-produced medium with a wide reach. Picasso and De Kooning were both fans of *Krazy Kat*, as was Philip Guston, who turned to the language of comics in a search for a new vocabulary in his paintings in the 1970s. That decision, however, was not embraced by critics until after his death, when the line between “high” and “low” was finally being erased.

More recently, a diverse range of contemporary artists—Raymond Pettibon, Rivane Neuenschwander, and Kerry James Marshall, among them—have looked to comics both for their form and for their social content. As these museum- and gallery-based artists have incorporated aspects of the comic strip genre into their work, the creators of comic books and graphic novels have also become more appreciated as artists and auteurs in their



own right. Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, and R. Crumb are among the most well-known of this generation, the latter having enjoyed several museum retrospectives both here and abroad.

Brooklyn-based painter George Cochrane, whose work *Long Time Gone* is now on view, was drawn to the graphic novel for its easy marriage of image and text. Working in a serial format as a painter, Cochrane also saw the potential in comic books for presenting multiple narratives and time frames simultaneously. The viewers' choices in navigating a comic are also of interest to the artist, who points out that readers must decide whether to look at the

images first or to read the text. Likewise they must determine whether to follow the narrator or read the individual dialogue bubbles as they find a path through the layered story lines and images.

Cochrane's *Long Time Gone* is a 24-chapter, autobiographical graphic novel that chronicles one 24-hour period in the artist's life. MASS MoCA is presenting the original drawings for the first two chapters, "Bird Gets the Worm" and "A Nick of Time." The work's structure and central narrative theme are based on Homer's *Odyssey*, the saga of the Greek hero Odysseus' epic journey home told in 24 chapters, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a modern translation set in Dublin and told over the course of one day. The language and details of the various narrative threads are also influenced by a host of literary, musical, and visual sources, including the



Bible, Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Inferno*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the poems of William Blake and T.S. Eliot, nursery rhymes, the children's books of Maurice Sendak and Williams Steig, jazz compositions, Bob Dylan's recordings, lyrics by Sonic Youth, and, of course, comics.

The course of the 24 chapters roughly mirrors developments in the history of the comic (including graphic novels, daily strips, and Sunday pages) over the past century. The first chapters quote early precedents such as

Lynd Ward's wordless woodcut books from the 1920s and early master works such as Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (which was in turn the model for Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*), George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, and Frank King's classic *Gasoline Alley*. These early chapters also flash forward to the contributions of greats such as Will Eisner and Jack Kirby.

Throughout this graphic novel Cochrane interweaves his six-year-old daughter Fiamma's drawings and text with his own. The artist's previous project, a suite of portrait studies of Fiamma, evolved into the father-daughter partnership for this new venture, in which Fiamma has shifted from a collaborating subject to contributor. Here we see Cochrane tapping into his young daughter's unbridled creativity, as he simultaneously records her developing language and drawing skills. The work thus becomes a document of language acquisition on many levels; the artist is chronicling his own education as he becomes conversant in the vocabulary of the comic form. As he emulates existing comic works, Cochrane's interpretations become increasingly sophisticated as the chapters progress. A meditation on fatherhood and the creative process, it also serves as a study of the comic book's significance as a sophisticated, cross-generational storytelling medium.

In *Long Time Gone* George and Fiamma's odyssey begins at 4:44 a.m. on a rainy Brooklyn morning. A paper recycling truck (a reference, perhaps, to the artist's re-use of existing stories) is stopped outside their apartment building when Fiamma is awakened by a nightmare. The narrative continues, following George throughout his day, documenting the small adventures and battles he encounters as he makes his way home again. Chapter 1 functions like an overture, introducing the major themes and visual foundation of the rest of the chapters. It finds our protagonist performing his usual, morning rituals and searching for milk for his morning coffee (a reference to the first chapter of *Ulysses*). He then ventures through a

storm** as he searches for his boat-like station wagon, lost until Fiamma's "art elf" saves the day with supernatural powers, much as the goddess Athena does throughout the *Odyssey*. George then makes his way to his Long Island City studio, a modern day manifestation of Calypso's island.

Chapter 2 is denser and more closely adheres to Joyce's symbolism. Recreating Stephen Daedelus' history class from the second chapter of *Ulysses* which, serendipitously, begins "You, Cochrane," George has a flash back to his own high school Latin class. In a short play inserted later in the narrative titled "The Studio Players" the dialogue is also taken from this chapter. George's Greek landlord, Mr. Ricci, plays the part of Joyce's Mr. Deasey, a translation of Nestor the charioteer in the *Odyssey*. Subtle references to the horse—an important symbol in Joyce's chapter—run throughout Cochrane's. (The artist's own skinny steed is his "caballo," meaning both easel and horse in Spanish.) A central story line of the chapter is inspired by the buckets of rain overflowing in George's studio. George day dreams about pirates bailing out their ship, a nod to his own piracy of the work of other artists. References to *Moby Dick* also appear in the form of ruminations on the color white inspired by Melville's chapter "Whiteness of the Whale." Fiamma adds her own ode to the color white with a poem about milk. The chapter ends when the rain subsides and George heads up to the studio roof to paint the skyline. The thick fog leaves him painting a field of white, a seemingly blank page, which could suggest both the threat of failure and the beginning of something new.

Visually *Long Time Gone* merges the history of the comic with the history of art, referencing the painters depicted in early comics as well as the works that have influenced Cochrane, including Massacio's *Expulsion from Eden*,



Raphael's *Transfiguration*, Rodin's *Adam*, the serial photographs of Edweard Muybridge, Color Field painting, Guston's *Sky* and the perceptual environments of James Turrell, whose installation at P.S. 1 is just down the street from Cochrane's studio.

As the title *Long Time Gone* (an unreleased song by Bob Dylan) suggests, music also figures prominently in the novel, and functions much like the traditional Greek chorus. *Bird Gets the Worm*, the title of the first chapter, refers to a Charlie Parker composition, which in itself is a be-bop interpretation of *Lover, Come Back to Me* by Sigmund Romberg and Oscar Hammerstein II. On the first page of Cochrane's first chapter, the dialogue is taken from a conversation between Dylan and the Band about the blues tune *Bring it on Home*. The theme—again, the lover returning home—echoes the driving force of the *Odyssey*, as well as the artist's interpretation of the historic tale in his own daily journey away from home and back.

* Ulysses is the Roman name for Odysseus.

** Depicted throughout the story, rain is a common motif in comics—a means for artists to illustrate their signature style and innovation.

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About the Artist

Born at 4:44 a.m. on August 27, 1971 at an American army hospital in Fürt, Germany, George Cochrane was raised in Dublin, New Hampshire. His art training began at the Cambridge School in Weston, Massachusetts and continued at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, where he earned his B.A. He has an M.F.A. from Hunter College, City University of New York. His work has been exhibited at Guild Hall, East Hampton, New York; Momenta Art, Brooklyn; Repetti Gallery, Long Island City; and Martin Kudlek, Cologne, among other venues. He recently presented a paper on his collaboration with his daughter at the College Art Association's 97th annual conference in Los Angeles. Cochrane is an Assistant Professor of Art at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison, New Jersey. He lives in Brooklyn and works in Long Island City, Queens.

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The original drawings for Chapter 3 of *Long Time Gone* will be on view at 5 Holden Street as part of the North Adams' DownStreet Art project from June 25 through October 18.

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Chapters 1 and 2 of *Long Time Gone* are for sale at Hardware: The MASS MoCA Store.

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George Cochrane: Long Time Gone
is on view at MASS MoCA
May 23, 2009, through December 31, 2009

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Curated by Susan Cross