Chris Ware’s Failures

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Abstract

Why bother taking the time to read this? Aren't there better things you could be spending your money on? Isn't there something worthwhile you could be doing right now? This is the immediate reaction we might expect from Chris Ware at the thought of a critical volume of essays devoted to his work. Indeed, he had much the same reaction when first informed about the 2007 Modern Language Association roundtable on his comics that served as the origin of this present collection: "I must say, I'm not sure whether to be pleased or terrified that my stuff would fall under the scrutiny of people who are clearly educated enough to know better. I'd imagine that your roundtable will quickly dissolve into topics of much more pressing interest, or that you'll at least be able to adjourn early for a place in line at lunch, etc."

Ware’s readers and fans have come to expect this characteristic self-abnegation in all of his public performances and publications, an insistent rhetoric of failure that imbues everything from Ware’s interview and critical writings to the layout and packaging of his hardbound book-length publications. Ware artfully edits the least flattering portions of review on the inset pages paperback editions of Jimmy Corrigan, informing his readers that the volume they hold is both "weighed down by its ambition" and "nearly impossible to read." Ware’s self-written catalogue for his 2007 solo exhibition at Omaha’s Sheldon Memorial Gallery appeared under the title “Apologies, Etc.” and lamented the collection’s “unerringly inexpressive” contents (see plate 4). The exterior band of Ware’s hardcover The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book (the title itself devaluing the contents of the book to the realm of the sub-literary) is graced with a prolix apologia promising that readers will be “gravely disappointed by the contents of this volume” and offering a long list of other functions the discarded book might serve: "A Disappointment * A Used Book * Trash * A Cutting Board * Food for Insects and Rodents * A Weapon * Fuel * Attic Insulation * The Focus of an Angry Review * Recycled Wood Pulp in the Paper of a Better Book * Something to Forget about on the Floor of Your Car * A Tax Shelter for the Publishers." Even the very barcodes of Ware’s works rarely appear without a self-flagellant quip or reminder to the book’s purchasers that their time and money could be better invested elsewhere.

Comments

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