

Calendar

You Can't Just Churn Them Out

Graphic Novels at Comic-Con

A really good cartoonist," said Chris Oliveros, "is one who inherently understands the possibilities of writing, drawing, and storytelling as well." The 37-year-old founding publisher of Drawn & Quarterly elaborated a bit, by phone from Montreal, where he is based. "So they know how to pace a story, when to use dialogue, when to use captions." They also know when to keep silent. "They know when the pictures can say something that words can't. It's a very fine knowledge and a very fine balance."

He was speaking shortly before leaving for Comic-Con International 2003 in San Diego, the largest annual

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gathering of comic-book publishers, creators, and fans in the world. (A reported 63,000 attended last year.) In Drawn & Quarterly's booth at the convention, Oliveros said he would introduce the paperback edition of *Summer Blonde* by Adrian Tomine, a graphic novel given front-page coverage by the *New York Times Book Review* when it was released in hardcover last year. Populated by characters who wouldn't be out of place in *Ghost World* (the graphic novel by Daniel Clowes that was made into a movie), *Summer Blonde*, along with five other graphic novels in the group review, will be significant in the form's history if only because of that rare, distinguished, mainstream press attention.

Not all graphic novels are fiction, so the term is misleading. In fact, some of the best of these long illustrated narratives are nonfiction. For example, the grandly successful *Maus: A Survivor's*

Tale, the 1992 Pulitzer Prize winner by Art Spiegelman, is about the real-life experiences of the cartoonist's father in Nazi Germany. "And there's also Joe Sacco," said Oliveros, "who is what they call a 'cartoonist journalist.'" *The Fixer*, which Drawn & Quarterly will publish in November, documents Sacco's time in Bosnia. An earlier graphic novel by Sacco, *Palestine*, is about daily life in the occupied territories of the Middle East.

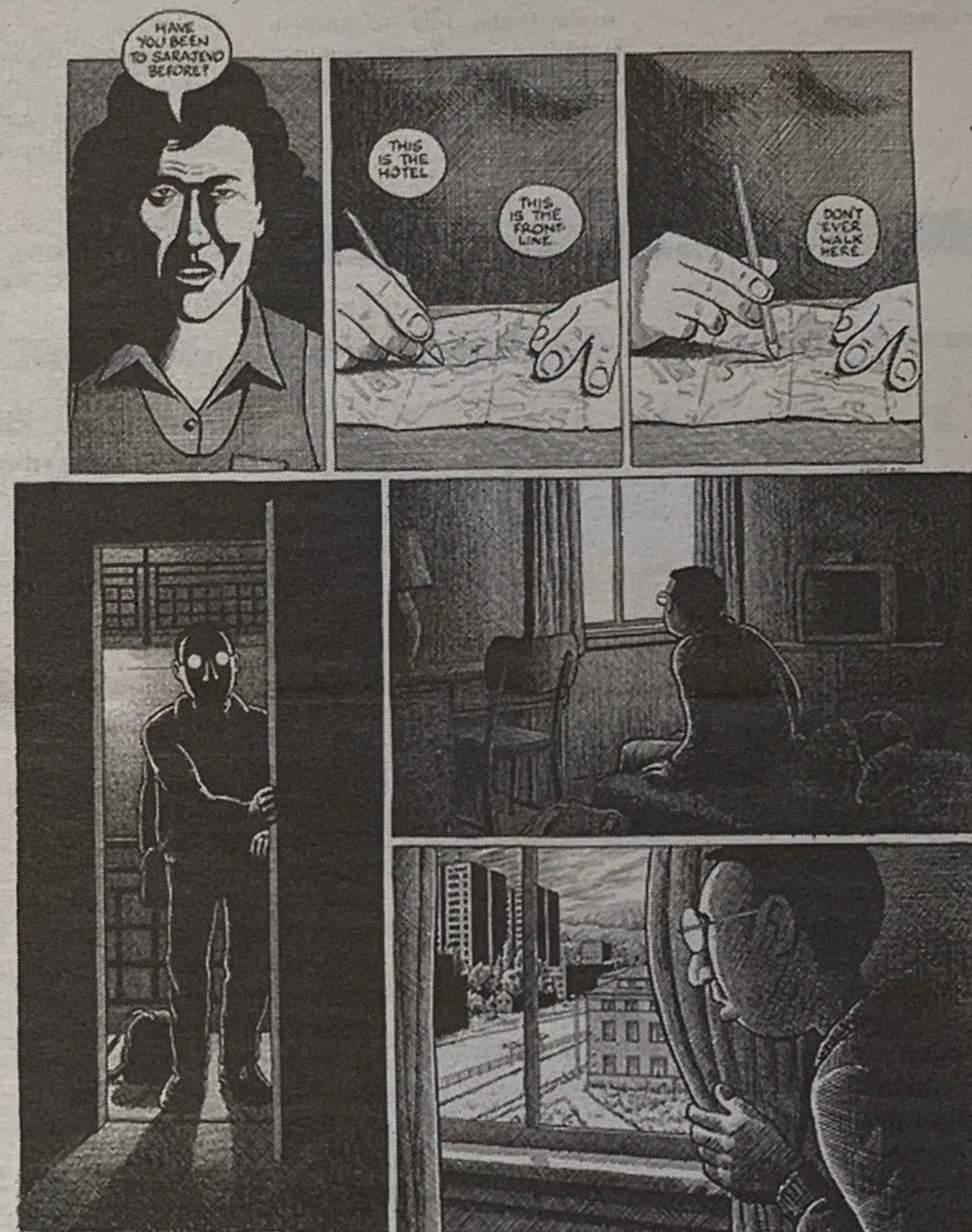
Chris Ware is "probably the biggest thing in graphic novels right now," Oliveros said. Ware's fictional *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* was published by Pantheon to wide acclaim in 2000. Fantagraphics is bringing out Ware's latest, *Quimby the Mouse*, the story of an angst-ridden rodent, and the publishing house will be promoting it in San Diego.

"Another one that I think will be among the biggest books of the year is *Blankets*," Oliveros speculated. "The cartoonist is Craig Thompson. There's a lot of buzz around that book. You see it being talked about on the message boards. It clocks in at almost 600 pages. It's going to be a hefty, hefty book. It may well be the longest graphic novel ever published. I've only seen the artwork, which is just absolutely beautiful, but I've heard that it's the autobiographical story of the author's childhood and teenage years. He apparently grew up in a fundamentalist household and rebelled."

Thompson's publisher, Chris Staros of Top Shelf Productions, based in Marietta, Georgia, confirmed that theme and said Thompson would be at Comic-Con to promote *Blankets*, due to be released officially on July 23.

Will Eisner, arguably the originator of the graphic novel, plans to be there, too, said Comic-Con's promoters. "The consensus is that the first graphic novel, published in 1978, was Eisner's *A Contract with God*," said Oliveros. "Until then, there were only comic books of the stapled pamphlet variety, featuring superheroes and so on." Then Eisner (b. 1917) came out with his semi-autobiographical story of Jews in the slums of New York during the 1930s.

Still, no avalanche of



From *The Fixer*, by Joe Sacco

graphic novels followed. That wouldn't come until after the first volume of *Maus* was published in 1986. "Spiegelman really is a pioneer," said Oliveros. "He was one of the original underground cartoonists, with R. Crumb, back in the '60s. By the early '80s he had started a comics anthology, *Raw*, that presented for the first time sophisticated subject matter. I think *Maus* inspired many cartoonists who are doing good work today. They look back on *Maus* and say, 'That was the book that changed my perception of what can be done with comics.'"

As the potential publisher of future classics, what is Oliveros looking for? "I suppose we're looking for unique stories," he said. "The cartoonists we publish are not interchangeable. It's the same in filmmaking or normal novel writing. There's only one Woody Allen and one Dave Eggers. You can't just churn them out. Ultimately we're looking for people who have a unique perspective on things."

Another (female) graphic novelist

who has generated considerable reader interest lately is Marjane Satrapi. Her debut volume, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, was published first in France, then in the United States by Pantheon in April. It's about her growing-up years in Tehran during the overthrow of the Shah, the Islamic fundamentalist rise to power, and Iran's war with Iraq.

The convention's official hours are noted below, but promoters expect many other activities to go on until 1:00 or 2:00 a.m.

— Jeanne Schinto

Comic-Con International 2003
Thursday-Saturday, July 17-19,
10:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m.;
Sunday, July 20,
10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.
San Diego Convention Center
111 West Harbor Drive
\$30-\$60 (all four days);
\$12-\$25 (for single-day)
Info: 619-491-2475 or
www.comic-con.org



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