

Aria

CHRIS WARE

DANIEL RAE BURN ON CHRIS WARE

...Take any Sunday funnies page from the 1920s, compare it with any one of today's, and you will see overall a near-catastrophic decay of craft, quality and style.

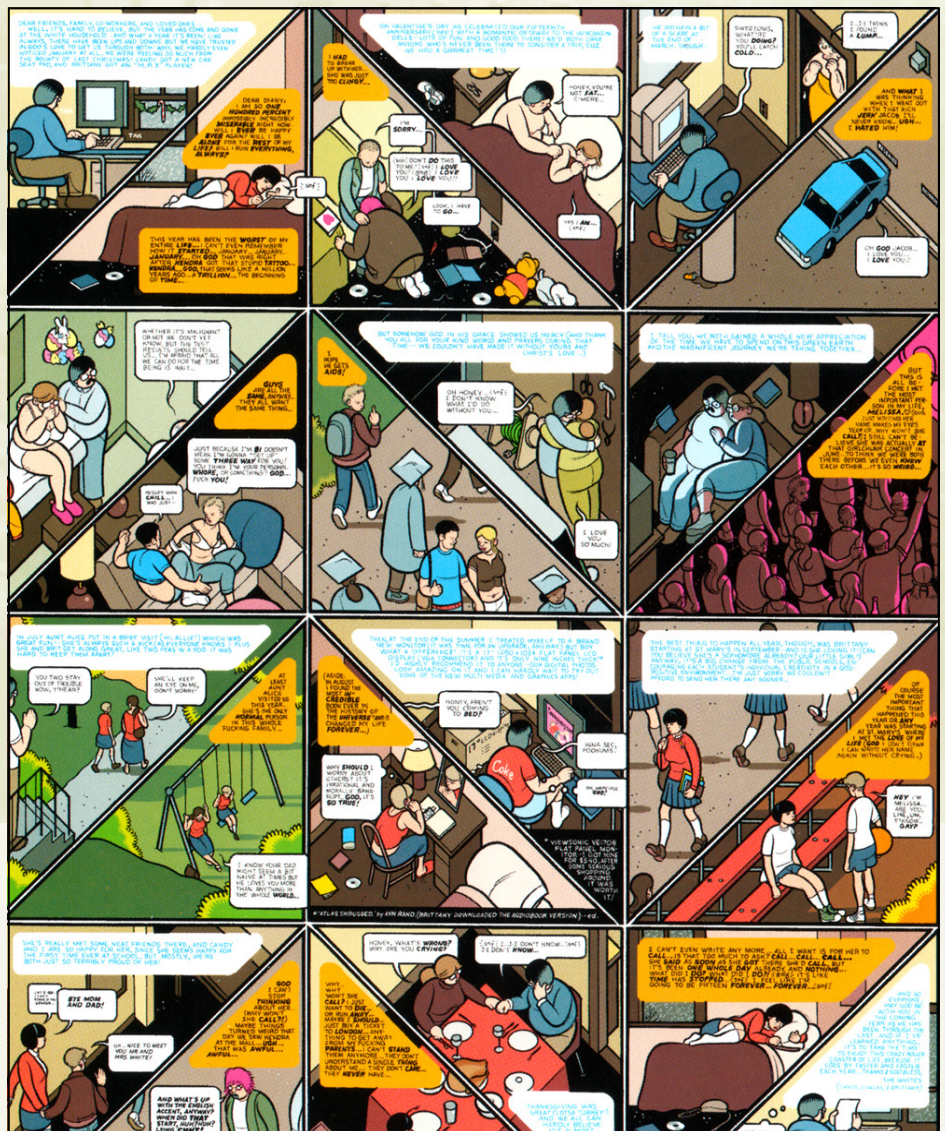
"The basic idea of comics is just slapping word balloons on top of drawings", Ware says. "That is so boneheaded."

Chris Ware saw the way out of this arrested development not by looking forwards but by looking backwards, before the wrong turns of the 1940s and 1950s. In the early years of the 20th century, artists like Windsor McCay ("Little Nemo in Slumberland"), George Herriman ("Krazy Kat") and Frank King ("Gasoline Alley") laid abroad foundation for the structure of comics, mainly because they were not yet limited by a conventional, concrete idea of what comics should be. Although each artist wrote in the comics language, each invented his own rules for using it, essentially building a visual grammar to fit his world view. "The earliest cartoonists each seemed to have an individual sensibility," Ware says, "an individual take on what they were doing and how they designed the page. The main thing I discovered by looking at the early comics is that there are infinite ways that one can do them."

More than any other young cartoonist, Ware has demonstrated these neglected, infinite possibilities. By recognizing that comics are analogous to a host of other disciplines - including writing, drawing, painting, typography, music, theatre and architecture - and by uniting these arts on the page by virtue of his skill as a graphic designer, Ware has made comics that are truly comic, not only in the humorous sense but in the linguistic sense. He uses Topffer's strange language so well that he writes comics as much as he draws them, even when his comics contain no words at all. This comic literacy is clearly the result of Ware's intellect and relentless curiosity about the form, as evidenced by his nearly

algebraic expositions of the comics language. But it would be unfair to dress our pictolin-guistic expert in a black turtle-neck and oblong eyeglasses. All of the midwestern fellow's theoretical acumen is the mere by-product of his humble, and more profound, emotions. "I rarely ever did a comic just for the sake of experimentation," says Ware. "Even when I

did, I was always trying to get at some kind of feeling." If the comic strip is literally a map of time, and time is the distance between tragedy and comedy, Ware has used his comics to bring the two opposites painfully close. In doing so, he has closed the distance between his life and his art.



Comic supplement to the Chicago Reader, 20 December 2002.

Ware splits each of the year's twelve panels diagonally to give his page the overall up and down rhythm. This split also allows Ware to use color and writing to show how Chalky White's life oddly parallels the life of his daughter.