

= It 's a Good Life , If You Don 't Weaken =

It 's a Good Life , If You Don 't Weaken is a graphic novel by Canadian cartoonist Seth . It appeared in a collected volume in 1996 after serialization from 1993 to 1996 in issues # 4 ? 9 of Seth 's comic book series Palookaville . The mock @-@ autobiographical story tells of its author 's obsessive search for the work of a fictional forgotten cartoonist .

Seth presents the fictional book as a work of autobiography and features figures from his life such as his friend and fellow cartoonist Chester Brown . The minimalist artwork draws from the styles of the early New Yorker cartoonists , rendered in thick brushstrokes with heavy blacks against a greyish @-@ blue wash . The story unfolds with a nostalgic and melancholic tone , and several wordless scenes take the reader on a tour of Southern Ontarian city- and landscapes . The book gained Seth a reputation as part of an autobiographical comics trend in the 1990s . It won two Ignatz Awards in 1997 and ranked No. 52 of The Comics Journal 's " 100 Best Comics of the 20th Century " .

= = Background = =

Seth , a cartoonist then based in Toronto , first drew attention to his work in 1985 when he took over art duties from the Hernandez brothers for Mister X from Toronto publisher Vortex Comics . In April 1991 he launched his own comic book , Palookaville , with Montreal publisher Drawn and Quarterly . By this time , Seth 's artwork had evolved to a style inspired by The New Yorker cartoons of the 1930s and 1940s .

Self @-@ revelatory autobiography was a prominent genre in alternative comics in the early 1990s , drawing influence from the works of Robert Crumb , Harvey Pekar , Art Spiegelman , and others of the earlier underground comix generation . Seth had focused on autobiographical stories since Palookaville debuted . Friends of his appeared in it , most prominently fellow Toronto @-@ based cartoonists Chester Brown and Joe Matt , who also featured each other in their own autobiographical comics . Though a work of fiction , Seth presented It 's a Good Life , If You Don 't Weaken as another autobiographical story , an approach inspired in part by Lynda Barry , who mixed autobiography with fiction in her comics . Seth showed far more restraint in the content of his work than did Matt and Brown , whose comics revealed personal details such as their authors ' masturbation habits . The three share a melancholy worldview and a self @-@ deprecatory approach .

= = Synopsis = =

Seth is a cartoonist obsessed with collecting cartoons and other items from bygone eras . He rants about the modern world and criticizes himself , in particular to his friend and fellow cartoonist Chester " Chet " Brown . While searching for information on cartoonist Whitney Darrow , Jr . , Seth comes across a cartoon signed " Kalo " in The New Yorker . Fond of this older style of cartooning which resembles his own , Seth sets off to find more about this obscure cartoonist .

Seth begins a relation with a woman named Ruthie , whom he first spots while conducting a search at the Toronto Reference Library . He remains self @-@ absorbed and pays little attention to her interests , though she shows enthusiasm for his and discovers Kalo 's real name ? Jack Kalloway . Seth learns Kalo had spent his life in Seth 's own childhood hometown of Strathroy in Southern Ontario ; when he makes a visit there he refuses to allow Ruthie to accompany him , and a month later breaks off the relationship , to his later regret .

After two years of no progress Seth finds out that Kalo had run a real estate business in Strathroy that his daughter inherited on his death in 1979 . He returns to Strathroy where he interviews Kalo 's daughter and 93 @-@ year @-@ old mother . He learns that Kalo spent years as a cartoonist in New York and gave up cartooning for real estate after returning to Strathroy and marrying . Kalo 's mother had kept a collection of her son 's work , but lost it when she moved to a nursing home . In the end , Seth has only the eleven cartoons he had found , which append the book .

= = Publication = =

It's a Good Life , If You Don 't Weaken was serialized in issues # 4 ( December 1993 ) through # 9 ( June 1996 ) of Seth 's comic book Palookaville , published by Drawn and Quarterly . It appeared in collected form in September 1996 from the same publisher . Seth said his mother used the title phrase when he was growing up . On the cover , Seth labelled the work " a Picture @-@ Novella " ; this allowed him to avoid the term " graphic novel " and instead use " an antiquated @-@ sounding term " . He has used the term on all his later book @-@ length works of fiction .

The book has been translated into a number of languages . A French edition appeared first in 1998 , and then in an edition more faithful in production to the original English one ? with blue wash on yellowed pages ? and in a different translation in 2009 . An Italian version followed in 2001 . In 2004 , editions appeared in German , Spanish , and Dutch . Editions appeared in Danish in 2010 , Korean in 2012 , and Polish in 2014 .

= = Style and analysis = =

The story takes place in the 1980s and follows Seth , a cartoonist whose life revolves around cartooning and collecting nostalgic items . He feels ill @-@ at @-@ ease in the modern world and pines for bygone eras . His obsessions and cynicism alienate Seth from most of those around him .

By the time he began the serial , Seth had developed a style derivative of The New Yorker stylists of the 1930s and 1940s . In the book 's appendix Seth describes Peter Arno as " possibly The New Yorker 's greatest stylist " . Seth appropriates the sophisticated , jaded satirical mood , thick brushline , and compositional sense of Arno 's work . Seth 's brushline is simple and organic , and he gives attention to buildings , landscapes , weather conditions , and other background details . The brushstrokes broaden into thick black shadows , sometimes flattening figures to near @-@ abstract silhouettes . A greyish @-@ blue wash accents the otherwise black @-@ and @-@ white cartooning . The novel is printed on yellow paper , giving an aged feeling to the book .

Several wordless scenes unfold in an atmospheric panning through landscapes and cityscapes , with a particular focus on older buildings . The third section opens with such a sequence ? tangential to the plot ? in the Royal Ontario Museum . The detail in the buildings is much greater than in the simplified delineation of the characters .

In a self @-@ referential twist , the character of Seth at one point discusses his love of the New Yorker style with Chester Brown , while the story itself is drawn in such a manner . Brown expresses his appreciation for such cartoonists but disappoints Seth with his lack of enthusiasm . The cartoonist Kalo is fictional , though this is not revealed in the book . Seth produces the Kalo cartoons in a New Yorker style , yet distinct from the art in the rest of the book . Seth 's use of a real person to comment on Kalo 's work makes the fictional cartoonist 's existence seem more plausible , as does an actual photograph on the final page purporting to be of Kalo .

A strongly nostalgic and melancholic tone pervades the narrative as the Seth character searches for peace and meaning in his life . The narrative is presented as confessional and revelatory : it displays the protagonist 's interpersonal problems and self @-@ doubts , and at one point he is depicted as naked . He often talks of his obsession with the past ? his own childhood and earlier eras ? either through dialogue with friends or in captions as he wanders the streets . Seth 's interpersonal encounters tend to be one @-@ sided , revealing his reactions to and judgments of those around him .

Seth navigates the city on foot ? cars , bicycles , and public transportation rarely even appear ? as he talks with friends or rifles through used book shops . For literary theorist Barbara Postema , the character fits the archetype of Walter Benjamin 's flâneur ? the wandering urban pedestrian out of touch with his own time and obsessed with the past . Seth pines for a past not his own and obsessively collects consumer items from earlier in the 20th century . His focus is primarily on the period from the 1930s to the 1950s , a time he feels particularly " Canadian " . He goes as far as to wear an old @-@ fashioned overcoat and broad @-@ rimmed hat , for which passing teenagers

taunt him , saying he looks like Clark Kent or Dick Tracy . He declares to Chester : " I do think life was simpler then ... easier for people to find personal happiness . " Brown disagrees , saying , " I think it 's always been difficult for people to be happy . " Seth dreads the future and allows his memories of childhood to dominate his thoughts , but recognizes and criticizes his own obsessions : " There 's something in the decay of old things that provokes an evocative sadness for the vanished past . If those buildings were perfectly preserved it wouldn 't be the same . " Despite this consciousness , he continues to pursue his collecting .

Photographs recur as a motif , such as family portraits in Kalo 's scrapbooks or wedding shots in a diner on which the focus dwells . Another motif is an old apartment building , the image of which appears at moments when Seth questions his search for Kalo . For Postema , Kalo 's neglected work is similarly " unpreserved , unnoticed , and left to decay " .

A male @-@ centred viewpoint dominated English @-@ language comic books throughout the 20th century and , with few exceptions , placed women in subordinate roles as victims , helpers , or sex objects . To academic Katie Mullins , Seth 's narrative viewpoint follows from this tradition , though the book superficially has little in common with the masculine adventuring generally associated with mainstream comic books . The author 's female characters play peripheral roles , and the character 's obsessive collecting and self @-@ absorption alienate him from relationships with females , who at times encourage him to find meaning in life outside comics ? advice he ignores . The book highlights the overwhelmingly masculine homosociality of the collector 's world , which Seth hints at with the name of the " Book Brothers " book store the character frequents . In one panel , the store sign is obscured so that only " Book Brothe " is visible , suggesting a " Book Brothel " , and thus evoking the fetishism inherent in collecting . The intelligent Ruthie provides a love interest that nevertheless manages only to feed Seth 's self @-@ absorption : he is attracted to her physically and also to her bookishness , but she takes second place in his life to his obsession with Kalo , whose real name she discovers for him . Seth finds he does not know her well enough to give a satisfactory answer to Chester 's " So what 's she like ? " Whenever she leads the conversation to her own thoughts and interests , Seth changes the subject . She ends by leaving him .

In every event and conversation , the protagonist draws parallels to something he has read in comics . He has a withdrawn personality averse to risk @-@ taking ; he declares himself a " true adherent of avoidism " , and quotes the character Linus from Charles M. Schulz 's comic strip Peanuts : " No problem is so big or so complicated that it can 't be run away from . " His mother 's home , which he calls " sealed in amber " as it never changes , provides him a safe berth from the ever @-@ changing modern world .

To comics scholar Bart Beaty , Kalo 's giving up cartooning for familial duties provides the protagonist an opportunity to evaluate his own life : his failed romances , his obsessive collecting , and his relationship with his family ? in particular his mother , whose home is an emotional safety zone for him . The Seth character declares , " I used to like to get inside cardboard boxes and close them up behind me . I enjoyed being in that safe , confined space . My mother 's place is a lot like those boxes . "

Seth finds it hard to understand the fact that the cartoonist he admires could give up a cartooning career and still find happiness in the last twenty years of his life ; he come to accept it after a visit to Kalo 's mother in a nursing home . He discovers that his Kalo collection may always remain incomplete ? though the family once had a scrapbook filled with Kalo 's cartoons , they long ago threw it away . By the end of the story , Seth has found a mere eleven of them . When Kalo 's mother reveals Kalo 's contentment with his choice to give up cartooning , Seth must face the anxiety of his life choices and what a " good life " may mean to him . As a mother who has outlived her son yet does not mire herself in the past , Mrs Kalloway provides an unsentimental contrast to how Seth views and deals with the world .

= = Reception and legacy = =

In the middle of its serialization , reviewer Kent Worcester called It 's a Good Life , If You Don 't

Weaken " one of the very few essential exemplars of the potential of the medium " . On its publication , It 's a Good Life became a primary inspiration , after Art Spiegelman 's Maus , on the cartoonist Chris Ware 's efforts and thoughts on the potential for the graphic novel form .

The book won Seth two Ignatzes at the award 's inaugural ceremony in 1997 : one for Outstanding Artist and the other for Outstanding Graphic Novel or Collection . In 1999 , the book placed No. 52 on The Comics Journal 's " 100 Best Comics of the 20th Century " . The book appeared on GQ 's " 20 Graphic Novels You Should Read " list in 2009 and on the British journalist Rachel Cooke 's list of ten best graphic novels . It ranked No. 16 on the Scottish Herald 's " 50 Greatest Graphic Novels of all Time " list in 2013 and No. 25 on Rolling Stone 's list of the " 50 Best Non @-@ Superhero Graphic Novels " in 2014 .

Since the book 's publication , Seth has achieved a particularly high level of critical and popular recognition compared to other Canadian cartoonists . According to academic Nick Mount , it is " the first Canadian graphic novel to ... make the crossover from underground praise to mainstream praise " . In 2005 he was the first cartoonist to have a solo exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto . By 2006 It 's a Good Life had sold 15 @, @ 000 copies in English .

Seth has called Charles M. Schulz his primary influence ; his reputation for design led in 2004 to Fantagraphics Books enlisting him as the designer for the Complete Peanuts . The New Yorker @-@ obsessed Seth has managed to have his work published in The New Yorker itself , including the cover to the March 2004 issue .

Seth followed It 's a Good Life with a similar work , the nostalgic and melancholic Clyde Fans , which began serialization in the following issue of Palookaville in 1997 ; it had yet to finish as of 2013 , and during its serialization Seth published a number of stand @-@ alone books .