

PUBLISHING HISTORY



OPTIC NERVE #1, self-published, August 1991



OPTIC NERVE #3, self-published, January 1992



OPTIC NERVE #5, self-published, February 1993



OPTIC NERVE #7, self-published, August 1994



OPTIC NERVE #2, self-published, November 1991



OPTIC NERVE #4, self-published, June 1992



OPTIC NERVE #6, self-published, September 1993

*Transfer of
publishing duties to
Drawn & Quarterly*



32 STORIES (original book edition)
Drawn & Quarterly, 1995

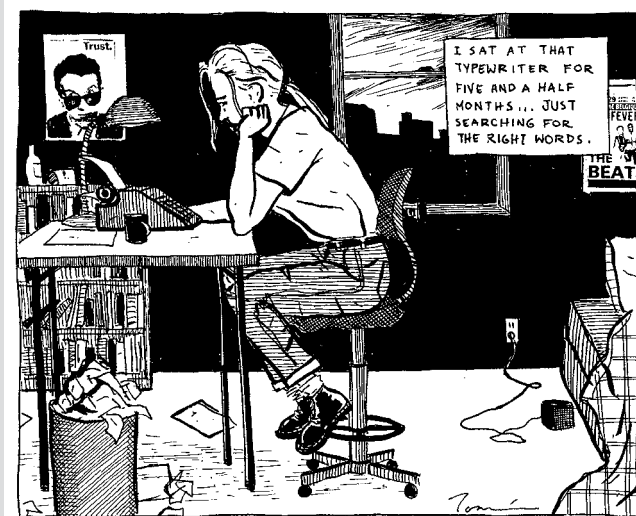
*Graduation
from high school,
start of college*



LEFT: "Winning" (excerpt), unpublished, 1989



ABOVE: "Lonely Lunch" (excerpt), unpublished, 1991



RIGHT: sketchbook drawing, 1990

INTRODUCTION

Originally published in the 1995 book edition of 32 STORIES

by Adrian Tomine

THE BOOK YOU HOLD IN YOUR HANDS would not exist had high school been a pleasant experience for me. Having moved to Sacramento, California just weeks before the first day of class¹, I became painfully aware of my detachment from any type of social interaction early into my freshman year. It was on those quiet weekend nights when even my parents were out having fun that I began making serious attempts to create stories in comics form. It was a cheap way to keep myself occupied, and when a strip started really coming together, I actually forgot that most of my peers were interacting and socializing. (The subject matter of these early strips, though, is rather telling: parties, friends, and dates figure prominently for some reason.)

I continued in this direction for about a year, filling up sketchbooks that I didn't intend for anyone to see. One holiday season, my older brother Dylan was back in town and he happened to take a peek into one of these secret tomes. I was initially furious with him for invading my privacy, but was quickly placated when he offered excessively complimentary feedback on my comics. He was the first person to read my writing, and his response encouraged me to do something with those stories.

Around this same time, I had sent away for Terry LaBan and Julie Doucet's self-published mini-comics and was quickly inspired to put my own strips into a similar format. I carried a few of my sketchbooks down to the local Kinko's and made copies of what I thought were the least embarrassing stories of the batch. After several neophyte paste-up and stapling fiascoes, the first issue of *Optic Nerve* was thrust upon the world, with an optimistic print run of twenty-five.

Aside from the kind encouragement of my family, this first effort was met with general disinterest. Most local comic stores didn't want to touch it, and the shop that did let me leave a few copies on consignment was absolutely unable to sell a single one. And rightfully so, I guess: one dollar is a lot to ask for a few pages of sloppy ball-point pen drawings.

I made a concerted effort to improve with issue two. Concentrating more on autobiography, I tried to accurately transcribe true experiences in a humorous tone. (I definitely got the "truth" part right; the "humor" is still debatable.) In this issue

¹Since this introduction was originally published, a few people have expressed confusion about this, i.e. "Why do you say you moved to Sacramento right before starting high school, when, in your author's bio., you say you were born there?" Not that it's of any great significance, but the explanation is that I moved away from Sacramento when I was two and returned when I was fourteen. Fascinating, huh?

I also took my first serious stab at creating a realistic fictional character. Amy, the narrator of “Solitary Enjoyment,” was inspired by a particular girl who seemed to be reading thick novels in the downtown Tower Books every time I went there late at night.

I enjoyed writing from this fictional point of view so much that I continued Amy’s story in issue three. At this point, I learned the useful trick of taking a personal experience and veiling it with a sex change or two. The story “Patriotism is Alive and Kicking” is a forced attempt at “social commentary.” By this time, I was getting a little bit of mail response, and this was the first strip that people bothered to criticize.

The best story in issue four is “Train I Ride,” a one-pager that I hacked out at the last minute before dashing off to Kinko’s. I wrote it as I was lettering it, thinking about someone I knew who had recently moved far away. Continuing my tradition of hit-or-miss experimentation, I tried my hand at biographical non-fiction with the Kerouac story. I have not attempted this again since.

Between issues four and five, I graduated from high school and left home. I drew most of the pages in my college dormitory when I should have been studying, and in retrospect, the last panel of “Haircut” seems particularly relevant to my emotional state at the time. “Lifter” is important, if only because it taught me what type of shading film not to use. “Two in the Morning” is another Amy story, and a fantasy of sorts: wouldn’t everyone like to be reunited with their unrequited love to talk things over?

With issue six, I decided to improve the production values on *Optic Nerve*. I made the leap from Xerox to offset printing and even sprung for a two-color cardstock cover. To afford this, I increased the cover price to two dollars, irritating several “small-press” purists in the process. “Leather Jacket” was the last Amy story, at least for now. Some people have told me that “Allergic” is “the funniest shit I’ve ever done,” but I suspect that has more to do with the inherent humor of other people’s suffering than anything else. “Smoke,” like issue four’s “Train I Ride,” is the story I wrote and drew the quickest and have come to like the best. (The original, more pretentious title for this collection was *Smoke and Other Stories*.) The brush I used to draw this story was a very cheap #0, and I just gave up on trying to create any kind of precise line.²

As I began work on issue seven, I received a Xeric grant, allowing me to make *Optic Nerve* a rather lavishly produced mini-comic with a huge print run. The “small-press” purists who were offended by the two-color cover on issue six probably gave up on me altogether when they saw the full-color cover on this one. At least two of the fictional stories in this issue are the result of taking an actual experience and rewriting it with my stand-in character behaving in an even more creepy or pathetic manner. I think with this issue, my artwork became a little stiff: I was whiting-out each brush stroke until it was “perfect,” and I obsessively drew every straight line using a ruler.³ My dissatisfaction with the art was, nevertheless, highly educational. (Similarly, I learned an immeasurable amount from the stories in each issue in which my writing or drawing veered perilously close to the styles of my various comic book idols.)

²I hate to keep intruding here, but I can’t let this glaring dishonesty go unchecked. The artwork in the story “Smoke” is not the result of some “happy accident” involving a cheap brush. I was consciously attempting to emulate the inking style that David Mazzucchelli used in his comic book *Rubber Blanket*.

³Again—nice try, Adrian. The problem with the artwork in issue seven wasn’t simply that it was “a little stiff.” It’s that it was completely overwhelmed by the influence of Daniel Clowes’s comic book *Eightball*.

Just prior to the release of issue seven, I received The Phone Call from Drawn and Quarterly's Chris Oliveros. I had been pestering him since issue three of *Optic Nerve*, so it was an indescribable thrill to hear him offer to publish my comic. I was completely fed up with the business side of producing a comic by that point . . . I felt like I was spending more time filling orders, hassling store owners for the five bucks they owed me, et cetera than actually writing and drawing. So, in late 1994 I signed a contract with Drawn and Quarterly, effectively ending the mini-comic incarnation of *Optic Nerve*.

My original plan for this book was to release a "best of"-type collection, allowing me to weed out the pieces that I found particularly embarrassing. However, as I began the selection process, I realized that the "to omit" pile was growing disproportionately large compared to the "to include" pile. I found I had reservations about the vast majority of this early stuff, and that I was about to offer my publisher a pretty slim collection. So I decided to give up on trying to discriminate and to just throw it all out there for people to see. I hope that this book offers some entertainment, if only in that it documents the "artistic development" of my teenage years.

(I should note that a few names have been changed for this edition. It's easy to be completely faithful to life when you think no one's going to see the story. In retrospect, I feel I was somewhat intrusive to others in a couple instances, and have tried to rectify that. I've since learned to be much more sneaky.)

If this book is the first example of my work that you've seen, I implore you to please seek out the more recent issues of *Optic Nerve*, available from Drawn and Quarterly. It's the work I'm proudest of, at least for the time being. Finally, if the tone of this exceedingly verbose introduction seems designed to make you feel like a fool for buying this book, a clarification is in order. There are some readers (maybe many) who swear that the stories contained here are the best work I've done and will ever do. They may be right . . . in which case, you're all set.

NOVEMBER, 1995



ABOVE: "Crazy Girl" (excerpt), unpublished, 1992



ABOVE: "What I Do" (early version of "Solitary Enjoyment"), unpublished, 1992