



THE JULIES

An introduction by Dan Nadel



...EMENT SUIVI
UNE LEGETE-HAR
PEIDE D'AMOUR

I DON'T
KNOW WHO
I LOVE THIS
GUY SO MUCH
I'D NE RIME
A RIEN JE
L'AURA!
JAMAIS!
LOCK AWAY

Julie Doucet's comics are among the most natural works in comics history. By natural I mean: they unspool steadily as you read them with the assurance of a slightly cracked *Little Lulu* story; they are of, by, and about a person who we live and grow with for a dozen years; and they're entirely of a piece with, but not bound by, the times in which they were produced. Let's look at that last bit first. Contrary to popular memory, Doucet's work, which was consolidated in her series *Dirty Plotte* but spread across anthologies throughout the late 1980s and '90s,¹ does not contain very much autobiography. But it contains a tremendous amount of "Julie Doucet," a character who functions as master of ceremonies, friend, and provocateur. She's an endearing character who, despite her surreal, outré, and grotesque stories, never plays the object of our voyeurism. Her constant presence out in front never allows for a reader to distance herself from the proceedings.

Dirty Plotte, quite literally from page 1 of the minicomic and subsequent comic book series, is fronted by Julie (for the sake of clarity, I'll use "Julie" when I'm referring to the character and not the person). The very first page of the self-published minicomic *Dirty Plotte* no. 1 depicts Julie being smashed by a subway car. Two years and fourteen issues of the minicomic later, the very first story of the comic book series *Drawn & Quarterly* published (all of which feature self-portraits on the covers) opens with Julie explaining the word *plotte* and the anatomy it represents

and demonstrating its use in the vernacular. Page 2 opens with Julie announcing she is "a very shy girl." A page and a story later, Julie levitates to the bathroom to handle an overflowing tampon, in perfectly timed panel beats—steady and careful and funny. The back cover of the issue features a dream of visiting (a dreamy) Chester Brown. She'd been at it a couple of years already, but for many readers, this was the first they'd seen of Julie Doucet, and she was both a talent and a persona to contend with.

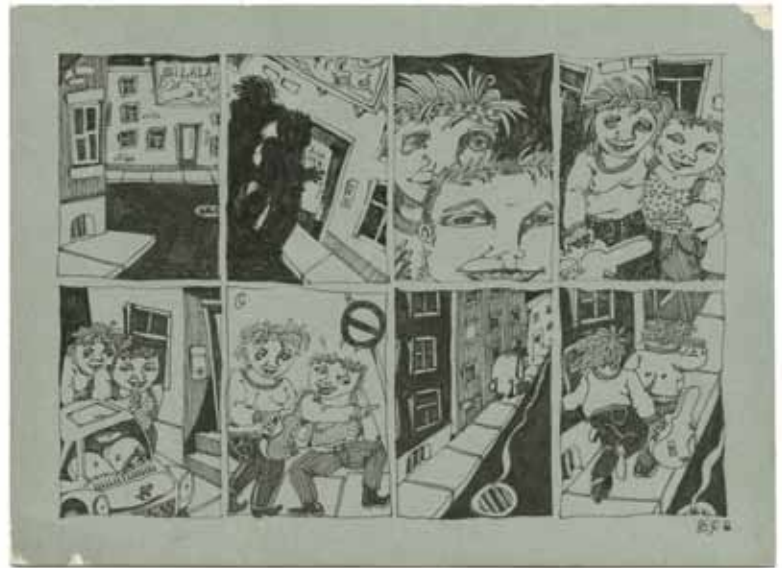
Julie Doucet was born in Montreal on the last day of 1965 and grew up in the residential suburb of Saint-Lambert. She's described her family as upper middle class and artistic, and her memories of childhood as pleasant. There were some comics around the house, mostly French classics: Gotlib's *Rubrique-à-Brac*; *Tintin*; *Asterix*; *Le Concombre masqué*. Her father studied furniture-making and woodworking but inherited and ran his father's plumbing company. He would later sell that firm, return to woodworking, and eventually build sailboats. Her mother studied law and was a probation officer. They divorced when Doucet was eleven. She lived with her mother, with whom she did not get along, and from ages twelve to seventeen attended school at Couvent Saint-Lambert, a Catholic school. Doucet remembers the student body of five hundred as homogeneous except for five or six hippies, of which she was one, and two punks. At that age she was already drawing in depth and



Previous two spreads: Sketchbook (1988) // Above: First published comic. Appeared in the school paper at Cégep du Vieux Montréal (1985)

interested in writing and drawing simultaneously. Doucet attended Cégep du Vieux Montréal from ages seventeen to nineteen—which is similar to junior college, but part of the publicly funded school system in Quebec—and in 1985 she began her art studies at l'Université du Québec à Montréal.

Some fellow students saw her work and thought she might like to publish comics with them—they were involved in *Tchüze! bis*, a seven-issue anthology produced by the Québécois cartoonist and publisher Yves Millet from 1985 to 1988. Though not a happy one, this was her first publishing experience, and she wound up in both the school newspaper and related zines in Montreal, which Doucet found underwhelming in content and circulation. This early work, most of which has never been reprinted, mostly consists of vignettes of fantasy characters. There is a winsome sensibility at work here, but also a commitment to standard comic strip formats—panel borders and progressions are already in place. Doucet was, even then, a traditionalist when it came to the formal structure of the medium. Without feeling beholden to any particular history of the medium, her rock-solid storytelling is comparable to that of mid-century masters such as Hergé and John Stanley and, most notably, Robert Crumb, who similarly employed a cartoon version of himself. Both Doucet and Crumb create straightforward pages of panel progressions in which all aspects of the drawing, from foreground to background to lettering to the smallest detail, appear to be the simultaneous creation of a single hand. Doucet's world, like those of the best

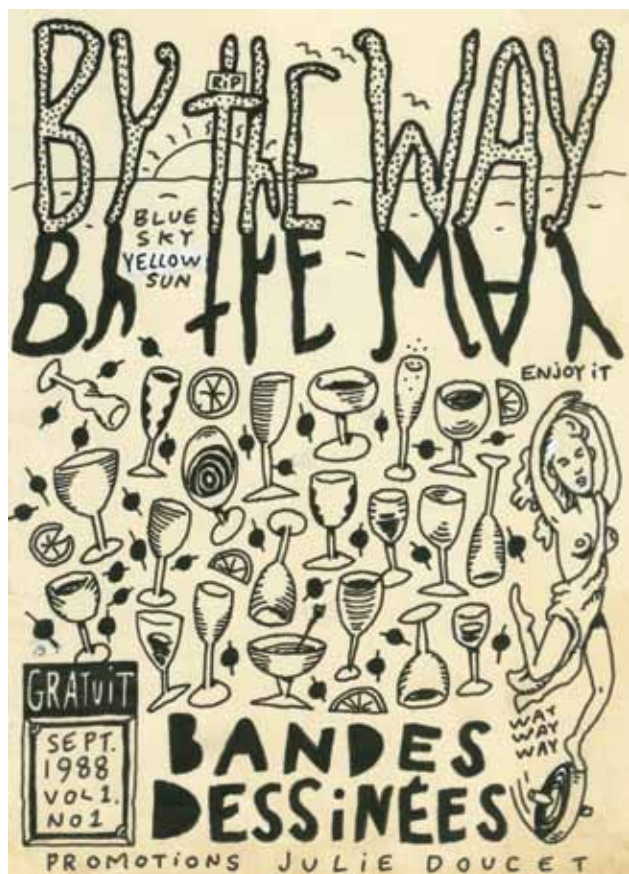


Early comic, unpublished (1985)

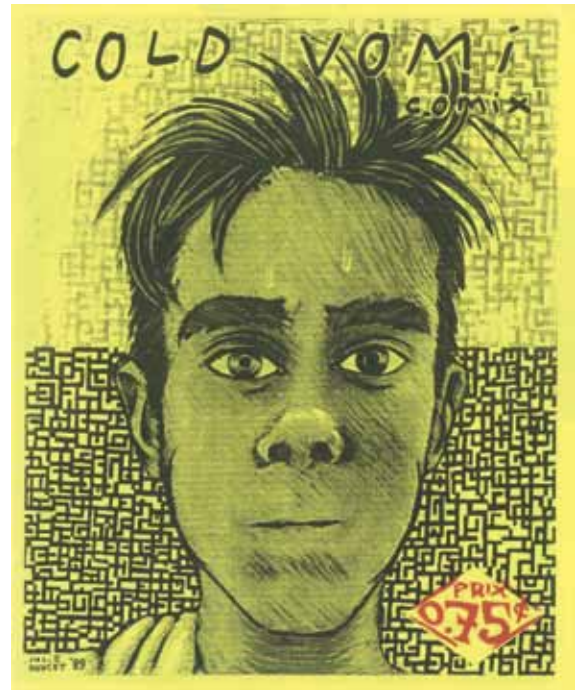
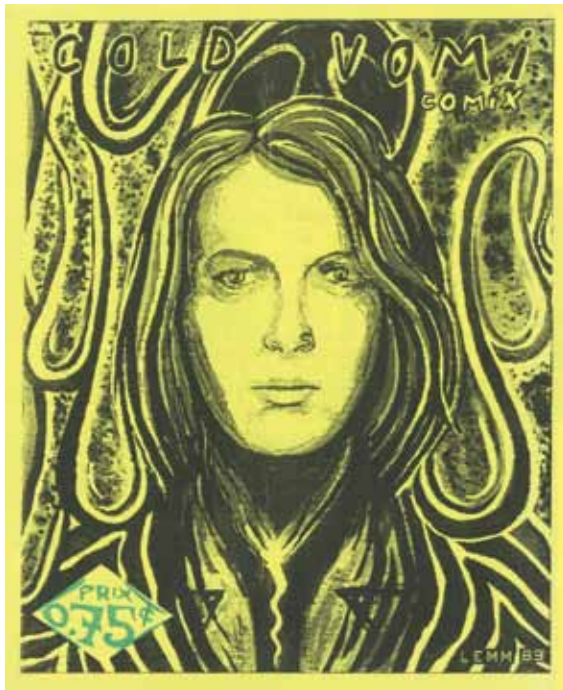
cartoonists, is one entirely of her own creation, with no concern for mimesis or verisimilitude.

And then a couple things happened simultaneously. In 1987 Doucet began a zine with a cartoonist friend, but when he dropped out of it, she began to think of her own title. Around that time, “purely by chance,” she saw *Factsheet Five*, which would play a key role in Doucet’s life. Founded in 1982 as a science fiction fanzine, it evolved into an international directory of zine reviews. Throughout the 1980s and ’90s, it was the hub of the zine world—each issue containing a couple thousand reviews of zines of every possible kind, including comics. She ordered some zines from *Factsheet Five* and realized that the simple xeroxed and stapled format was something she could do on her own. Whatever came back from *Factsheet Five* gave her the idea, or at least the impetus, for producing a monthly minicomic of her own, as well as for resisting what she considered the slow pace of other zines and comics anthologies. She dropped out of school, went on welfare, worked at a gallery/copy shop two days a week, and started her own zine, *By the Way*, which was first released

in 1988. And in September of that year Doucet released *Dirty Plotte* no. 1. She composed the name of the the project that would define her comics life by hunting through a dictionary and combining words. It was in the spirit, she said, of “men’s hardcore comics with naked women all over the place.”² She liked the idea that *Dirty Plotte* could have been one of those—“And when Americans or Anglo-Canadians ordered issues, I’d always include a letter explaining what the word meant.”³ Later, in 1992, Doucet returned to Couvent Saint-Lambert and spray-painted “dirty Plotte” on the statue of Mother Marie-Rose. Julie remembered, “When I first started to draw comics I wasn’t starting a career. I didn’t even expect to ever be published: such a thing seemed impossible. It was in the ’80s, there really was no future at the time, so might as well do something you liked. Which was for me drawing silly stories. No censorship whatsoever, total freedom. I knew guys who were doing fanzines. I joined them, but eventually got frustrated with them because they were too lazy, too slow. So I decided to create my own. It was my home, my art space.”⁴



Front and inside covers of *By the Way* (1988)



Doucet sent that first issue to *Fact-sheet Five*, and the response was fast and enthusiastic. And while some stores refused to carry the title, most sold it through and she got good feedback. She also began to discover her own taste in the medium, which included work by F'murr (Richard Peyzaret), Nicole Claveloux, Willem, Vuillemin, and Olivia Clavel. She discovered Crumb in French translations published in an old 1960s Québécois music/culture magazine called *Mainmise*, and would soon encounter Chester Brown's *Yummy Fur* and John Porcellino's early *King-Cat*.

She remembers: "I knew by then that my comics were strong, appreciated..."⁵ And though publicly reticent, Doucet was, and remains, ambitious, so she pushed forward: "I was terribly shy, going to bookstores, comic book stores, and record stores to ask them to sell my zine was a HUGE ordeal for me. But still, I did it. I guess I was sick of waiting for

An Appreciation // Diane Noomin

My first introduction to Julie Doucet's work was in *Weirdo*, edited by Aline Kominsky-Crumb. I was delighted to discover such strength, humor, and honesty in a cartoonist I had never heard of. Aline's plan as editor was to include as many talented women cartoonists as possible, some from *Wimmen's Comix* and some from who knows where. *Weirdo* was also the springboard for the creation of the *Twisted Sisters* anthologies.

The story of Doucet's that I chose for *Twisted Sisters: A Collection of Bad Girl Art* was from *Weirdo*. "Heavy Flow" was also the first story of hers that I had come across. Its depiction of Doucet as a gigantic Godzilla-like monster trampling skyscrapers and drowning people in menstrual blood as it pours out of her is one of the most powerful images I have ever seen. To discover that she also had a unique, wicked sense of humor and the facility to create a coherent though often surreal narrative made me realize that she had that rarest of talents—the ability to let her stories flow from brain to fingers to page without impediment.

That she herself was her main character gave her work an immediacy that drew many fans. A mixed blessing: people who admire your work assume they know you, especially when your character is female and autobiographical, and when sexuality is important to your stories.

I only met Julie once, years ago in Seattle, but I had a professional acquaintance with her as editor of the two *Twisted Sisters* anthologies. She would often include small prints on rice paper along with her letters and art for the books. An extra I definitely appreciated.

I am still awed by Julie's ability to create quirky yet believable and relatable characters as well as the fully realized world they occupy. ●



something to happen in my life.”⁶ She would complete fourteen issues in eighteen months. No more waiting. Those early issues look like an artist finding her way, but the bones of her work are there and strong. Like a lot of young cartoonists, her pace is staccato in stories like “The Artist”—almost a flip-book approach—but she’s committed to clarity and drawing-as-mark-making from the first page. In the ensuing issues she plays with using characters like the short-lived “Martin,” tools with *Star Trek*’s Kirk and Spock, but eventually settles into “Julie”

as the mischievous and funny primary protagonist of her comics. By issue 4 she’s chowing down on a male torso for dinner; in issue 5 she ran “I’m Not Afraid of the Breast Cancer,” which is kind of a “fuck off” to fear albeit hosted by a Julie first with a wine bottle, then on the operating table, then post-op, with gold rings in her chest for “a joyous sucking.” Part of the appeal of this work is that she tells her transgressive fantasies with a wink, and always with Julie in the foreground. Reality, and men, were ancillary.

Pages 14–20: Complete run of *Dirty Plotte* minicomics covers (1988–1990)



Issue 6 (February 1989) features the now-classic “Heavy Flow,” in which she once and for all overturned the male narrative of strength and turned what would be taboo and grotesque in autobiography into a fantasy of strength and dominance. Every panel builds and builds, as Julie grows in strength and bloodiness—overflowing with detail. That she’s able to maintain focus on the primary character and keep it in a traditional comic is as stunning as the subject matter.

In early 1989, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, then well into a visionary run as editor of the anthology comic *Weirdo*, publishing Phoebe Gloeckner, Penny Moran, Mary Fleener, Carol Tyler, and Dori Seda (all of whom would be included in one of the more important anthologies of comics: *Twisted Sisters: A Collection of Bad Girl Art*, edited by Diane Noomin and published by Penguin in 1991), as well as Crumb, S. Clay Wilson, B.N. Duncan, and former editor Peter Bagge, responded to Julie’s comics in a letter: “Your grossness reminds me of some of my

HEY YOU MEZ

DIRTY PLOTTEN NO. 4

JÉSUS REVIENT, JULIE S'EN VA!

MORVE

PNEUMONIE

CIAO!

PÔLE NORD

PUS ET ERYSIPELE TUBERCULOSE FIÈVRE TYPHOÏDE

FANZINE FEMINISTE DE MAUVAIS GOUÛT

DECEMBRE 88 VOL. 1 NO. 4 MENSUEL

BANDES DESSINÉES

EXCLUSIVITÉ JULIE DOUCET

PRIX 25 CENNES

BE WILD!

UNE AMIE QUI VOUS VEUT DU BIEN

EXCLUSIVITÉ JULIE DOUCET

PRIX 25 CENNES

FANZINE FEMINISTE DE MAUVAIS GOUÛT

JANVIER 89 VOL. 1 NO. 5 MENSUEL

LE MONDE IL EST IM...

UNE AMIE QUI VOUS VEUT DU BIEN...

NO. 7a

MARS 1989...

MINI PLOTTE DRINK

HAIR

PRIX 25 SOUS

BANDES DESSINÉES

POUR les nos 7 a+b ensemble

HEY YOU DRUNK

MINI PLOTTE

NUMERO SEPT 7b

on a soif!

PRIX 25 CENNES

MARS 1989



own work, especially a story I did called ‘The Bunch Plays With Herself.’ Anyway, I’d be interested in using ‘Heavy Flow’ sometime in the next year...” Kominsky-Crumb had broken ground by focusing on her own body and all its societally unacceptable forms and functions with a ruthless eye for gross-out moments and in a drawing mode that owed as much to Jean Dubuffet as to any comics. And likewise, many of the contributors to *Twisted Sisters* were working powerfully in either a memoir or a pastiche mode.

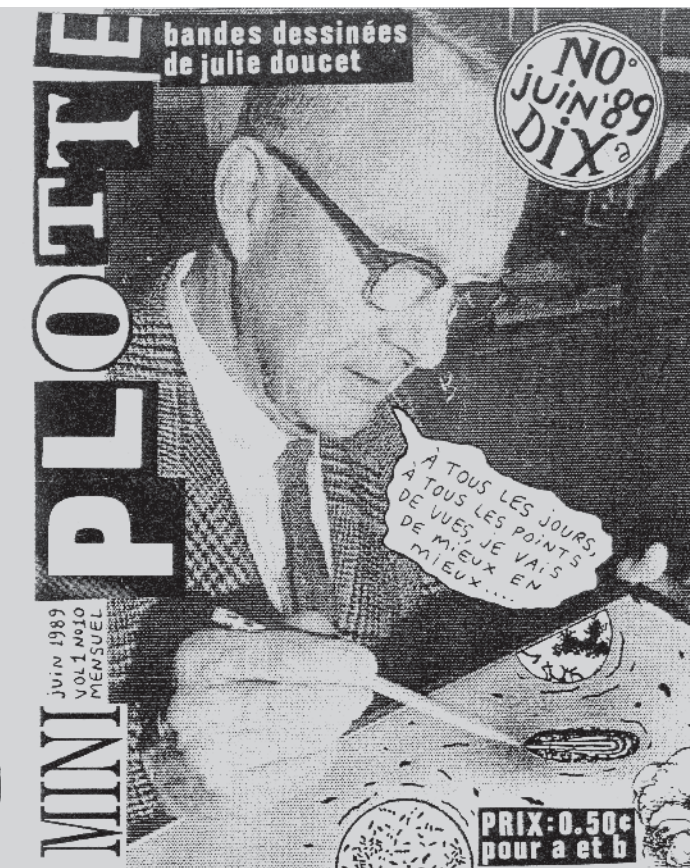
But Doucet was going further still—making her body into a place of power and fantasy in a cartoon drawing and storytelling mode not so far off from Albert Uderzo’s *Asterix*. She was not riffing on any established genre conventions or telling anecdotes. Moreover, Doucet could not be dismissed as “primitive” (an ignorant but sadly all-

too-common dismissal of Kominsky-Crumb and other female cartoonists). Her drawings combine the elegantly sinewy lines of Louise Bourgeois with the sense of space and brutal individuation of George Grosz. She’s wildly enacting, not specifically examining. Where Kominsky-Crumb wondered aloud in her comics about what people thought and think, Doucet just proceeded. In some ways, the great virtue of *Dirty Plotte* is that it is not reflective. Both the artist and the character are always in motion, always moving forward—so much so that the dozen years (1987–1999) that constitute Doucet’s comics output were spread across four cities in three countries. Later, Doucet would say: “During that time in my life [1988–90], I was not questioning what I was doing, my work. At the time, it was very spontaneous and fresh. It was not polished—it was so unconscious, so directly my mind on paper...”⁷



In issue 10 of the minicomic (June 1989), “Julie,” the imaginative, nonplussed mischief-maker, is playing with slabs of ice as a surface for art and romance; a few months later, Doucet inaugurated volume 2 of the series and allowed other contributors into the mix, including her early booster, John Porcellino, in issue 3. In March of 1990 she published her infamous “Alcoholic Romance,” one of the all-time great odes to substances and the pleasures of being alone. Because Julie, even with a stylish man on her arm, is forever on her own. On the back cover of the issue Doucet asks for a model for her comics, and she answers

her own request with the final issue (*Mini-Plotte Comic* no. 4, June 1990). In “Striptease” she takes “Steve,” who supposedly offered himself, chops him up, and paints the wall with his severed cock. It’s deliberately, even slowly paced, with copious detail and lightly cartooned characters, as though Doucet was taking her sweet and funny time with this new canvas. In her 1997 interview with Andrea Juno, Doucet remembers, the “idea came from *L’Echo des Savanes*, a comics magazine in France. They had a page where they wanted male readers to ask their girlfriends to do a striptease, take pictures, and send them to the





magazine, which would print the photos. And people did it. In every issue, there was a full page with about six Polaroids of girls stripping. My cartoon was a parody of that.”⁸ She was deliberately turning a convention on its head and chopping it to pieces—this says more than Doucet would let on in other interviews. She knew the boys’ world of comics, and she enjoyed tweaking it. Over the years, Doucet has been asked repeatedly about her feminism, and her answer to Juno is perhaps the most telling: “Of course I’m a feminist, even though that can mean so many things. I would say ‘yes,’ because of what I do. And my own position is not to let anybody forbid me to do what I want. You have to be yourself and do whatever you want to do. But I’m not really a feminist in the sense that I’m not going to write about it and try to convert people, saying, you should think this way or that way, blah blah blah. Trying to make people think your way by banging on their heads with a hammer is no good.” Doucet would not be tied down. She was neither going to allow herself to be preached to, nor preach herself. She would be free.

With her modest minicomics success and appearance in anthologies came contact with other cartoonists and publishers. Chester Brown remembers:

In May of 1989, in the Toronto comic shop the Beguiling, I came across a copy of *Slum Dog* no. 2, a minicomic collection of strips mostly by the cartoonist Peter Sandmark. I didn’t know Sandmark’s work, but I flipped through the mini, saw some drawings I liked, and bought it. When I got home and read *Slum Dog* no. 2, I realized that the best piece in the book—about menstruation and levitation—wasn’t by Sandmark, but by another cartoonist named Julie Doucet, who was also unfamiliar to me. There was a small note that more work by Julie could be ordered from a Montreal address. Given the strength of that levitation two-pager, I sent Julie some money. I got back in the mail nine issues of her self-published *Dirty Plotte* minicomic. That was one of the most exciting reading experiences of my life. The strength of her drawing style, the power of her voice, the way her talent was bursting off of the page—it was all thrilling and made me a little jealous. I couldn’t help but compare her work to mine, and I found mine suffering in the comparison. I immediately began re-evaluating what I was doing as a cartoonist.

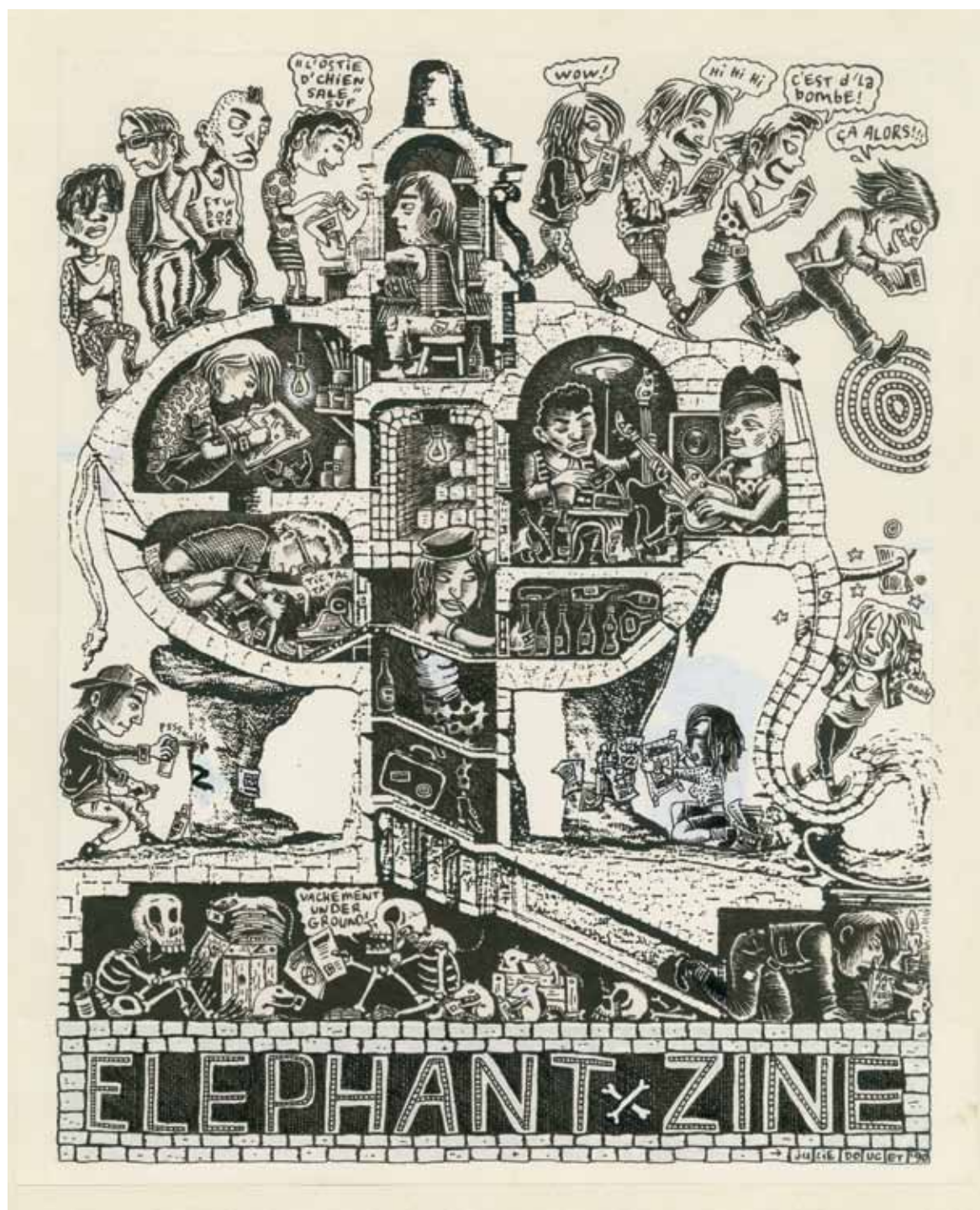
And that was only the beginning. Julie’s early cartooning was already amazing, but it only got better over the next few years as she developed her talent. It’s not hard to see what I and lots of other readers responded to in her work. I tend to like cartoonists who take risks, and Julie never played it safe. At the same time as her cartooning seemed confident and full of vitality, she often made her fears and insecurities the central focus of her stories, resulting in a compelling dissonance between those emotions and her virtuosic abilities.⁹

Yummy Fur no. 20 (April 1990) features a back-cover recommendation for the *Dirty Plotte* minicomic; like other cartoonists, Brown used his own platform to launch others, and these blurbs in alternative comics became a roving *Factsheet Five* for comics—an artist-only network of recommendations that was more powerful than any other outlet. Even before this blurb, Brown wrote to Kim Thompson at Fantagraphics to recommend Doucet to the publisher; Thompson would, by as early as 1990, express regret at not having published her.

Chris Oliveros, then a young publisher only planning to release an anthology, remembers “seeing the early *Dirty Plotte* minicomics around 1989 in local stores in Montreal. This was around the same time that I was in the early stages of launching *Drawn & Quarterly*. Within a few months [March 1990] I wrote to Julie and I started publishing her comics in several early issues of the *Drawn & Quarterly* magazine, which ultimately led to the D+Q-published *Dirty Plotte* series, beginning in October 1990. (The first issue was cover dated 1991 but was in stores in October 1990 because I thought all magazines and comics had to list advance dates!)”¹⁰ *Dirty Plotte* was the company’s first solo comic book, followed shortly thereafter by Seth’s *Palookaville*.

The environment into which Oliveros released *Dirty Plotte* no. 1 (which, as with the first four issues, contained new work as well as reprints from the minicomics) is hard to imagine now. Sales of the second issue nearly doubled the first, and at its mid-nineties peak, *Dirty Plotte* was selling over five thousand copies an issue. For some perspective, that’s a respectable number for a graphic novel you love and think is doing great in 2018. Sales were mostly through comic book stores, but there was a small non-comics network that offered strong support to Doucet (along with titles like *Love and Rockets*, *Hate*,

Opposite: *Fantastic Plotte* would have collected the best comics from the *Dirty Plotte* minicomic series. It was never published (1999)



and *Eightball*), which included Fallout Records in Seattle, Criminal Records in Atlanta, and See Hear Books in New York. And by the very early nineties, Tower Records started carrying *Dirty Plotte* along with other leading alternative comics in their flagship stores, thus becoming one of the first indie-friendly large chain stores to carry comics.

Against this success story angle, in 1991 longtime underground music and literature critic and publisher Byron Coley wrote: “The lack of distribution and shelf space afforded ‘real’ underground titles during the last several years is utterly frustrating. Even in major college towns, such as Boston, it has been all but impossible to buy copies of even relatively well-selling independent

Above: Poster for a zine fair in France (April 1990) // Opposite: Excerpt from *365 Days* (2007)

Through Thick and Thin // Chris Oliveros

On the weekend in October 1990 when *Dirty Plotte* no. 1 was first pulled from boxes at a convention in Toronto, Julie Doucet set in motion everything that followed for D+Q. Seth, when he saw it, asked me if I'd like to publish his new comic book, *Palookaville*. About six months after that, one of Julie's biggest early supporters, Chester Brown, agreed to move his seminal *Yummy Fur* series to D+Q. Around that time, a teenager in Sacramento named Adrian Tomine was inspired in part by Julie's work to write and draw his own minicomic, *Optic Nerve*. Over the next few years he mailed copies to our "office" (actually a one-bedroom apartment I lived in with my partner); *Optic Nerve* debuted as a D+Q comic in 1995. Later in the decade another future D+Q cartoonist had a similar artistic epiphany through Julie's work, this time a teenager from a Montreal suburb who would later go by the pen name Geneviève Castrée. Julie is the foundation of Drawn & Quarterly: from the debut of that first groundbreaking issue of her comic book you can connect the dots to almost every other D+Q cartoonist in that first ten years.

I think part of what made Julie's work so influential is that she emerged with such a distinctive voice alongside a remarkable, fully formed artistic sensibility. I have a lot of respect and admiration for Julie as an artist and I always tried to do right by her, but I have to admit that I was even more fearful of making a mistake on one of Julie's books than I was with other D+Q cartoonists. This might have something to do with the fact that around the time Julie and I signed our little one-page, handwritten contract, she told me she'd had

a terrible experience with her previous publisher and hated him so much that she'd like to "see his head under a truck" (a comment she repeated later in a *Comics Journal* interview). I was probably too fearful to ask her what he could possibly have done wrong, so instead I laughed nervously and hoped that our new publishing arrangement would enjoy a better fate.

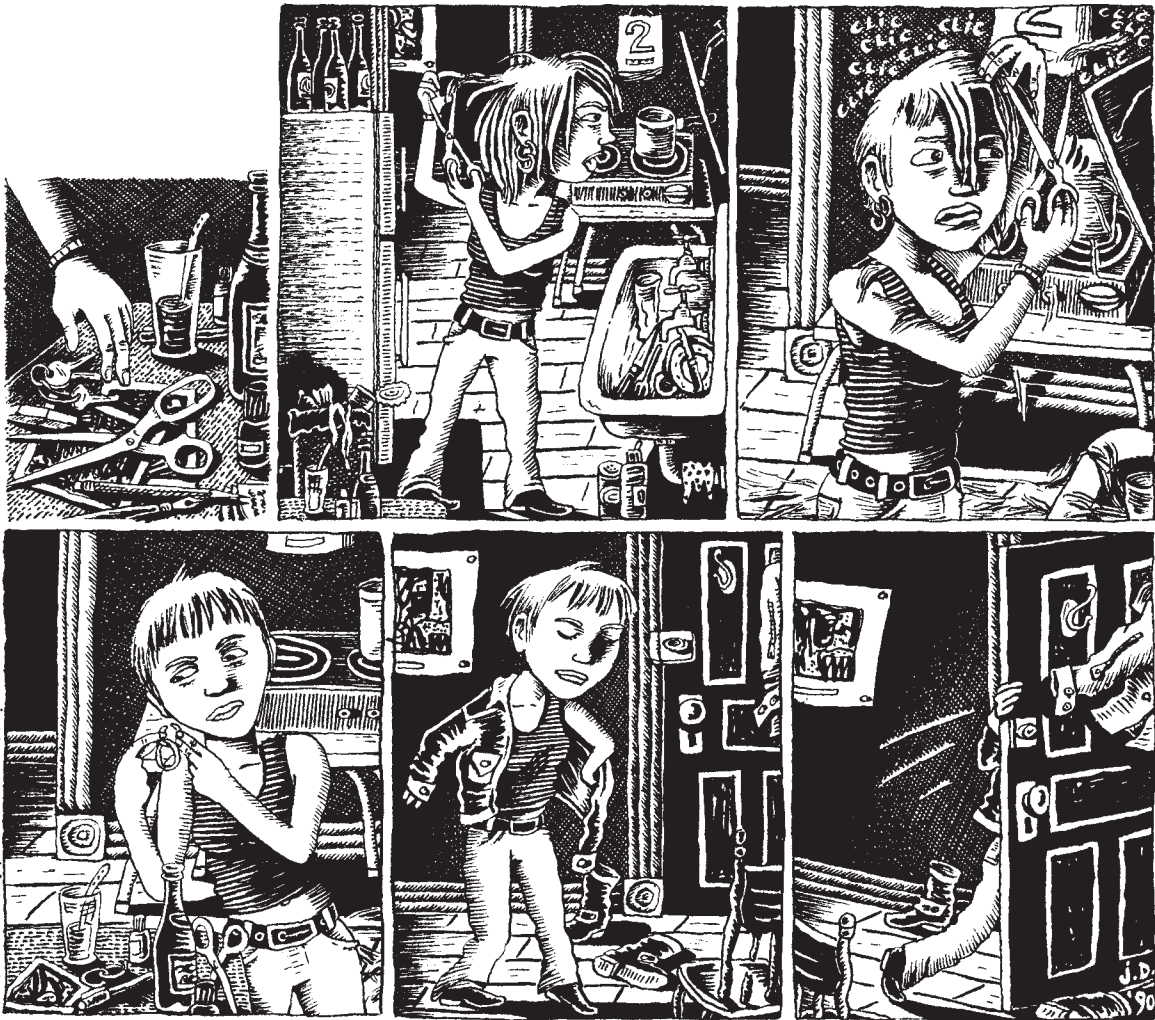
As far as I can recall, everything did go well for at least the first eighteen months. But when *Dirty Plotte* no. 5 was published in 1992, I really thought I was done for. That issue was the first time that Julie used grey ink washes for a story ("Missing"), and in those pre-computer days artwork was still shot with a giant, old-fashioned camera at a pre-press lab downtown. The line screen was all wrong, which caused the greys to become too dark and murky in the printed version. By then Julie was living in Seattle, right where our rival publisher Fantagraphics is located, and I had to call her to explain that I'd made a big mistake. The error was fixed and paid for before any of the bad batch was distributed, but I feared that she'd bolt, placing me in the same ignominious category as her last publisher.

Thankfully things did improve from that low point, and D+Q continues to publish Julie's work in one form or another almost three decades later. Still, I've always been cautious about doing or saying the wrong thing with Julie, a feeling that can possibly be traced back to that "head under a truck" comment from years ago but more likely has to do with the enormous respect I have for her as a cartoonist, and what she means to D+Q. Some things are so precious that it's hard not to worry.

And then there was that one time around 2002 when I wasn't even aware that I offended her, when evidently the only words I used when looking through *365 Days*, her new diary comics, were: "Hmm...interesting." That book is actually one of my favorite works by Julie, and I could kick myself for not having been more articulate in praising it when she first introduced it to me.

Well, I guess these have been interesting times, working with Julie. Julie Doucet is one of the most talented artists of her generation, and publishing her work has been one of my greatest honors at D+Q. I'm especially thankful that she took a chance all those years ago on what was then a one-person company that had barely existed six months earlier, and that she has stuck with us for so long, through thick and thin. ●





titles like *Hate* and *Eightball* on a regular basis. And most shop owners have never heard of the likes of Wayne Honath or Mary Fleener. With few exceptions, the sort of home-brewed, screwball, out-there stuff I grew up on is available solely to those persons willing to mail endless streams of \$1.25 checks all over the planet. Every once in a while, however, somebody gets the bright idea of hauling some of this lovely stuff out of the pit of obscurity, buffing it up, and showing it off to the world-at-large.”¹¹

So, in short, after the astonishing artistic evolution evident from 1988 to 1990, not to mention the incredible rush of productivity and success of the minicomics, the comics world in which Doucet found herself was not terribly appealing. Coming as she did from a cultural place of her own—both as a Québécois artist and as a zine-maker—once she was in comic book stores, Doucet was sharing space with people with whom she had little in common. And she had little time for the kind of his-

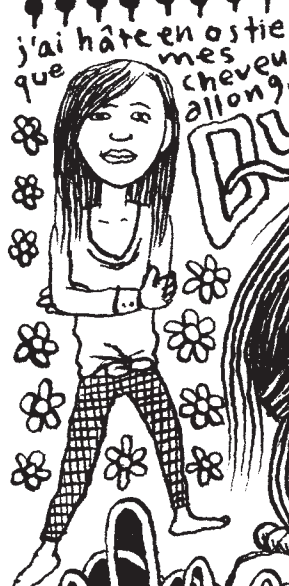
torical fetishizing that cartoonists were so involved with (and still are). Her disregard for a comics “canon” was, like so much of her work, ahead of its time. This was her art, and the idea of being in dialogue with “comics” was not on the agenda. That said, Seth, one of those history-minded cartoonists with whom she was in close publishing proximity, but from whom she couldn’t have been more different, emailed me the best description I’ve read of the era:

■ The world of “alternative” cartooning was utterly vague. It was not some concerted effort by a “movement” of cartoonists. It was an unconnected, somewhat spontaneous emergence of a couple of dozen serious-minded cartoonists who wanted to do something deeper with the medium. Even that is overstating it. Mostly it was a handful of guys who grew up reading *Mad* and Marvel comics and wanted to be those kind of cartoonists and then outgrew the

Above: Jam comic that never made it to the jam stage (1990) // Opposite: Unpublished drawing (1991)

"YOU FRENCH HAVE A DIFFERENT WORD FOR EVERYTHING!" ISN'T THAT CUTE? LET'S TRY TO DRAW NOW.

JE SERAI ECOE-
QUAND JUREE DE FAIRE



BEER
COCAINE
MANQUÉE
WEIRD BEGINNING



DES COMICS JE FERAI DU CINE' MA,
J'ECRIRAI ET PRODUIRAI DES FILMS, YE!
AUJOURD'HUI LE 21 AVRIL 1991
ON A MANGE' DU POULET.



JE VOUDRAIS
LUI MASSACRER
LA FACE MAIS
J'OSE PAS OK FAIT

JE NE SUIS PAS CAPABLE DE
DESSINER QUELQUE CHOSE
D'INTELLIGENT MAUDITE MERDE
IDEES DE COVER ET DE BACK COVER: DES EP.
COUCHES PLEIN LA PAGE OU BIEN UN PASTICHE
DE LIVRE D'ENFANT (POUR BACK COVER)
FIN

material but somehow were dead-set on drawing comic books anyway. Looking back, as chummy as we all are now (from that generation), we did not know each other and in some cases weren't even all that sure we had much in common besides having grown up reading most of the same junk. Julie was different than this. Look at the group of cartoonists from the 1980s who persisted—Peter Bagge, Daniel Clowes, the Hernandez brothers, Chester Brown, Jim Woodring, etc. A very diverse group when you think about it. Very different goals. Only in retrospect did this group look cohesive. None of these cartoonists (including myself) agreed about what we were trying to do. The conflict between high and low art was very evident. Some wanted more respectability, some wanted more subversion. That's why there was such an obvious tension between *Raw*

and *Weirdo*. I was a couple of years behind this group and was really watching with intense interest how the new cartooning was developing.

Everyone had something to prove...even just getting the work published was a triumph. But the stakes were so little. No "career" could really be made of it. Sales were pathetic and no comic shops cared about what we were doing. The best you could hope for was a few letters in the mail from devoted cranks. But people were committed. Fantagraphics and Kitchen Sink were two shining mountains (and Raw Books maybe, too). In my mind, that era is grey/brown in color. A hazy world of long boxes and mylar sleeves. Of record shops with a few dog-eared copies of *Love and Rockets* fading at the front corner. Of sleeping bags on comic shop owners' floors after a poorly attended signing. Of comic fans who liked *Eightball* and the *Rocketeer* equally!¹²

A Fan's Notes // Adrian Tomine

I first encountered Julie Doucet's comics at a crucial time in my life, when the superhero comics I'd grown up with had finally, completely lost their appeal, but the far-fetched dream of becoming a cartoonist persisted. I know I was in high school at the time, so I'm guessing it was probably around 1989 or 1990. Based on Chester Brown's glowing recommendation in his comic *Yummy Fur*, I sent some cash to Julie's Montreal address, and a few weeks later I received a meticulously hand-crafted packet of her comics. I had seen a few minicomics at that point, but something about Julie's in particular had a huge impact on how I thought about comics and, on a broader scale, what I wanted to do with my life.

Aside from being shocking, funny, and beautiful, those early *Dirty Plotte* minicomics were inspirational because they made cartooning seem both attainable and impossible. The fact that they were so clearly hand-

made, by one artist with a one-of-a-kind vision of the world, gave the teenage version of me that wonderfully narcissistic feeling of "Hey, maybe I could do this, too!" That the stories themselves were deeply personal, quotidian, dream-based, and concise only added to that admittedly arrogant but exhilarating feeling. And the fact that the art, the language, the stories felt so new (and in some ways alien) to me made it clear that comics as a medium had infinite possibilities, and that as much as I tried, I could never even come close to what Julie was doing. That was exhilarating in its own way, especially for a kid who, only a few years prior, had no greater ambition than to "draw comics the Marvel way." There was no going back to superheroes after that, and it wasn't long before I was printing copies of my first minicomic at the local Kinko's.

I followed Julie's ensuing career closely, tracking down and collecting her work wherever it appeared. The evolution of her art and writing

through the years that Drawn & Quarterly was publishing *Dirty Plotte* was staggering. The release of each issue felt like a new album from a favorite band. It was an event. Every development in her drawing style or her storytelling or her sense of design was thrilling, and impossibly, it all kept getting better.

Even fifteen years after she unofficially retired from comics, I still think of Julie as kind of the platonic ideal of a cartoonist. Visually, her work is complex, meticulous, wild, and thoroughly alive, simultaneously building upon and departing from comics orthodoxy. Her style is at once haunting and sweet, beautiful and grotesque, but also completely, indisputably original. Every line, every detail, every person, even every coffee pot is a part of Julie's universe. The stories, while often dreamlike or even nightmarish, are brilliantly readable, depicting and evoking a wide range of moods and emotions. Even her most mundane story is revelatory by virtue

Opposite: Back cover of *Yummy Fur* no. 22. Chester Brown plugged *Dirty Plotte* here, as well as on the back cover of no. 20 and the inside back cover of no. 17

More concretely, let's look at what was published alongside Doucet's *Comics Journal* interview¹³ (reprinted here on pages 40–49), which appeared in 1991, just after issue 2 of the comic book, but was conducted in May of 1990, during her minicomics days. Matt Groening is the cover feature. Inside: a Gary Panter sketchbook; a full-page ad for *Dirty Plotte* no. 3 and a subscription offer on the inside cover, with blurbs from Daniel Clowes, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Chester Brown, Krystine Kryttre, Mary Fleener, and Harvey Pekar. Also inside: reviews of Kyle Baker's graphic novel rom-com *Why I Hate Saturn*; the disastrous anthology Harvey Kurtzman's *Strange Adventures*; the aforementioned Byron Coley on Cat-Head Comics (including *Buzzard* no. 1, which included Doucet); advertisements for David Mazzucchelli's first issue of *Rubber Blanket* and Seth's *Palookaville* no. 1 with blurbs from Brown, Joe Matt, and J.D. King. What is important to

note here is that Doucet was one of the few artists in “alternative” comics whose work was without artifice. This is not, by itself, a good thing, but unlike the highly stylized cartooning of Bagge or Fleener, or the 1950s-era affects of circa 1991 Seth, King, and Clowes, the baroque ink-work of Kaz and the neo-expressionism of Mazzucchelli, Doucet came across as unadorned. She was not working a style. Like Crumb, her drawing was as unique to her as handwriting—there was no separating the two, and yet, unlike some of the outliers published in *Weirdo*, her work was always clear and crisp—one can't not read it.

The publication of Doucet's interview in 1991, along with *Twisted Sisters* and, of course, *Dirty Plotte*, made it a pivotal time for her, and it was also a bit of a moment for alternative culture in general. Famously, 1991 was “the year that punk broke” (memorialized in the documentary of the same name, which followed Sonic Youth on a

of its specificity, its language, its eccentricity. Most importantly, her comics are self-expression in its purest form, and that, to me, is the greatest possible use of the medium. At this point in her incredible artistic evolution, I'm not sure that Julie would take this as a compliment, but I still think of her as that increasingly rare thing: a natural-born cartoonist, who, when she puts pen to paper, just somehow instinctively does everything right.

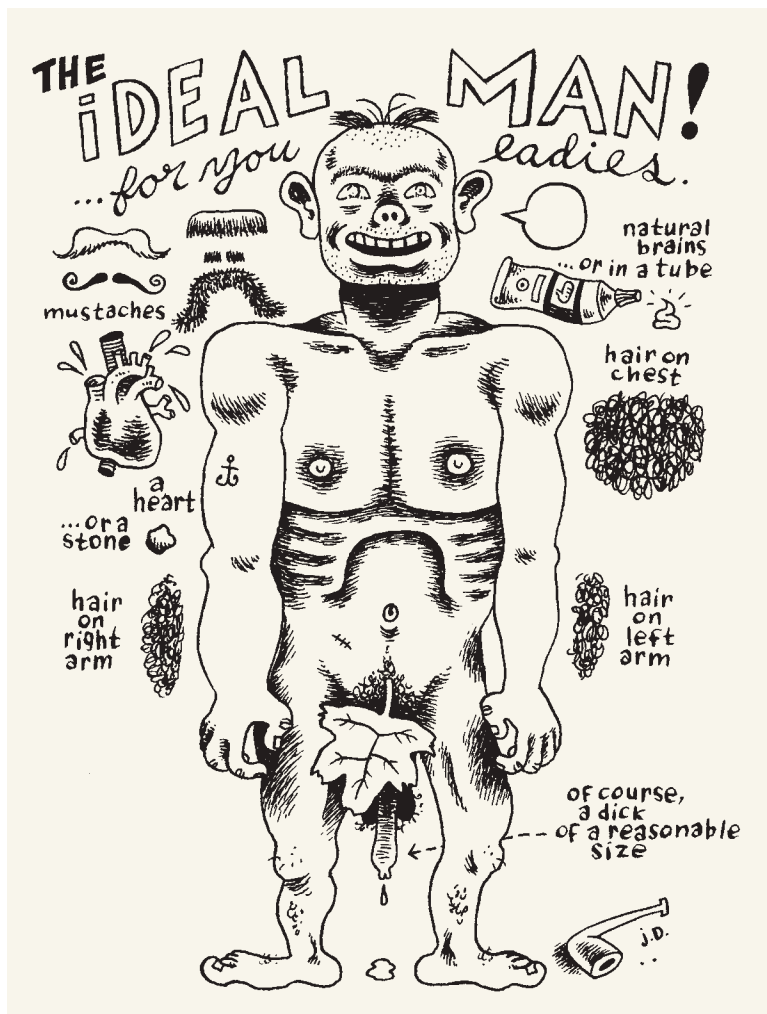
I first met Julie in person more than twenty years ago, and we've crossed paths a handful of times since then. But to be honest, I don't feel like I know her that well. I've had the good fortune of becoming friends with many of my favorite cartoonists, and while I treasure those relationships, there's something great about the fact that Julie Doucet is still this mythic force, somewhere far away, creating art that only she could make. Almost thirty years after receiving that packet of minicomics in the mail, I'm a fan, and I'm eternally grateful for that experience. ■



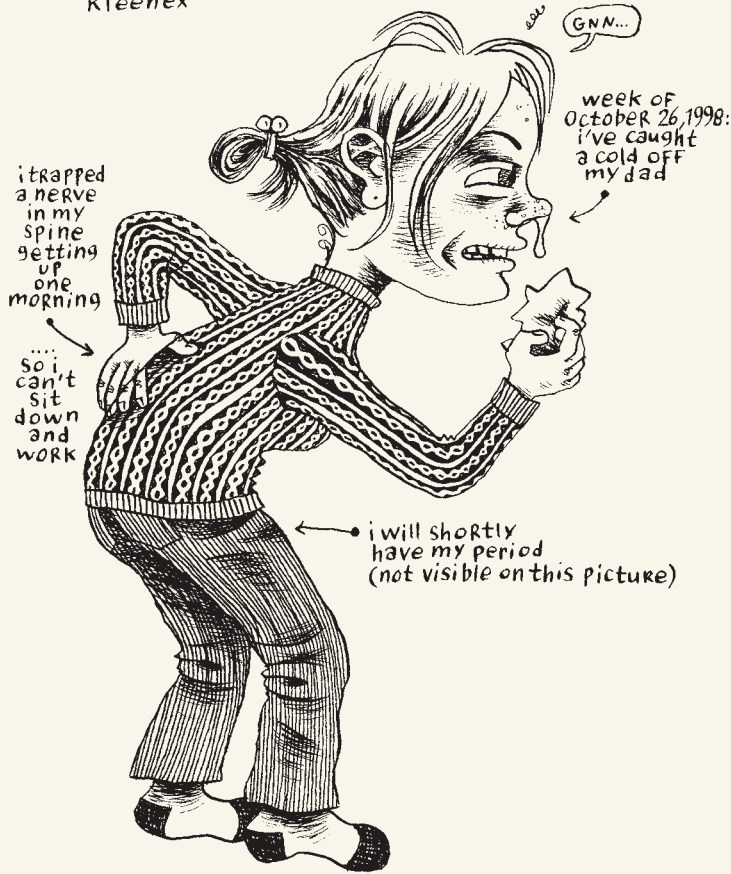


European tour, with appearances by Nirvana, Dinosaur Jr., the Ramones, Babes in Toyland, and others), when the alternative went mainstream. Or, as Thurston Moore intones in the film: “This tour is like a dare: We know there are other kids out there like us. It’s a dare to our parents, it’s a dare to the Bush administration...” These were the years of the birth of the Riot Grrrl movement, Bikini Kill, of the Breeders and Sonic Youth, Liz Phair, and PJ Harvey. This was *Dirty Plotte’s* true environment. Some of the dominant underground publications included zines like the true crime title *Murder Can Be Fun* by John Marr, the transgression omnibus *Answer Me!*, the autobiographical *Cometbus* by Aaron Cometbus, and V. Vale’s *RE/Search* books. The latter series both documented the present and created its own history. Titles included *Modern Primitives* (1989: the major introduction to body piercing and massive tattoos); *Angry Women* (1991: female writers across disciplines, including Kathy Acker, Valie Export, bell hooks, Lydia Lunch, Carolee Schneemann); *The Atrocity Exhibition* by J.G. Ballard with illustrations by Phoebe Gloeckner (1990); and later, in 1997, *Dangerous Drawings*, a collection of interviews by Andrea Juno with artists including Doucet, and still one of the best interview books on comics. Alongside the music, comics, and literature was a welcome surge (if then a correspondingly repressive categorization as “bad girls”) in highly personal figurative painting by the likes of Sue Williams, Nicole Eisenman, and Rita Ackermann. In sum, the alternative culture revelled in taking control of its own debasement. Writ large,

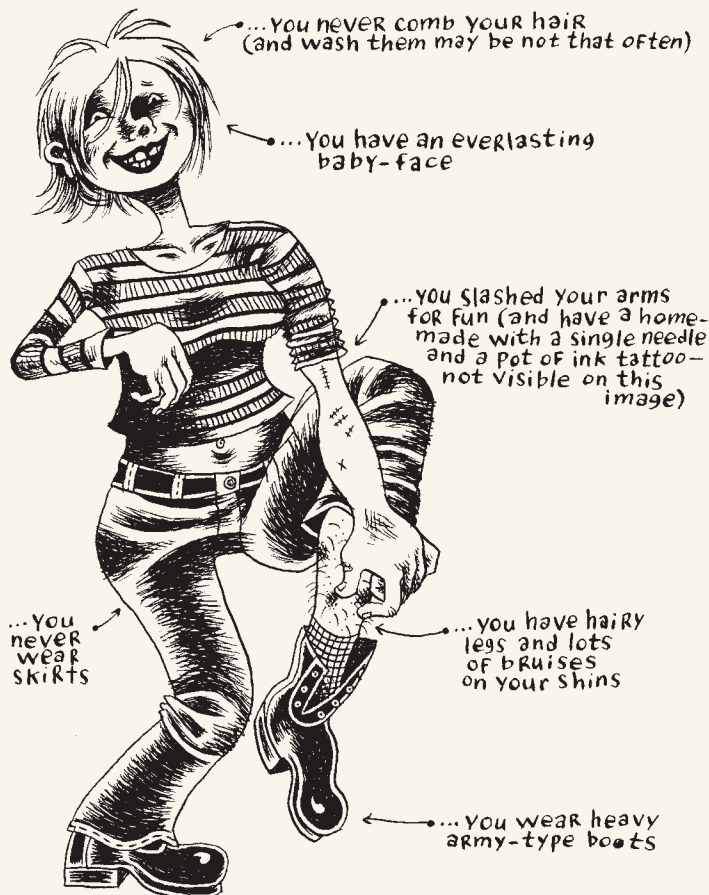
Top: Cover art for *Buzzard* no. 7 (1992)
 Bottom: Unpublished drawing (1998)



self-portrait
with crumpled
kleenex



ARE YOU A REAL WOMAN WHEN...

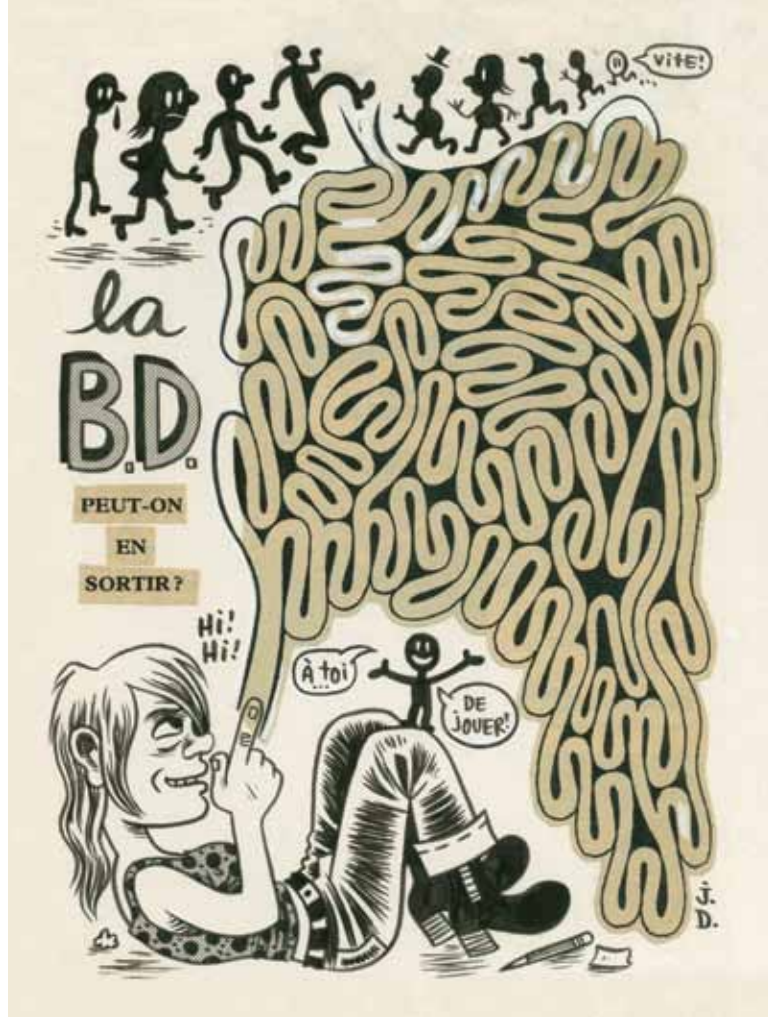


think of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” as a reappropriation of every repressive aspect of the shiny 1980s image of high school. It wasn’t enough now to rebel—one had to darkly shock. Thus the trend for serial killer art, the carnivalesque, and everything “bad.”

Moreover, all of this darkness sold pretty well. The upside was that for a few years early in the decade there was a tremendous interest in underground art that had once been far more marginal (and would become so again). After all, when I first read Doucet’s comics in 1992, I was sixteen and *Dirty Plotte* seemed impossibly sophisticated, of a piece with all else that was happening at the time—with bands like Fugazi and Dinosaur Jr., zines like *Ben Is Dead* and *Dishwasher*, and comics like *Hate* and *Eightball*. Alternative culture was small enough then that a kid from Chevy Chase, Maryland, could have a few records, a few comics, a copy of *Factsheet Five*, and feel connected to some other culture. Of course, the downside of this is that by the middle of the decade, the alternative sold so well that it briefly became the mainstream, and the surplus of product overwhelmed an audience that soon grew out of it.

The first couple issues of *Dirty Plotte* anthologize the minicomics and include stories that, to new readers, must’ve been like being confronted by a full-blown talent. “Monkey and the Living Dead,” featuring the artist’s cat, Monkey, is confidently drawn and told and would become signature Doucet: the elements of each panel are in constant motion; her spaces are, as ever, set in 2-D perspective and are alive with meticulously detailed surfaces and objects.

From *Sophie Punt* no. 1 (2000); later collected in *Long Time Relationship* (2001)



The early 1990s are a kind of sweet spot for Doucet comics—she found a detail-driven narrative mode that played to her love of drawing and complex pictures but was not yet the horror vacui mode that would eventually drive her to distraction later in the decade. Issue 6, published in 1993, is probably the series’ best. It includes, of course, much discussion of penis names, but more importantly, it contains her single-page “If I Was a Man” comics. These concise frolics move from gag to gag with the precision of a Harvey Kurtzman comic strip. Other meditations on Julie having a penis take surprising turns: from the opening page of “The Double,” we track “Julie” through a party as she guides us through crowds of finely delineated humanoids and back to her own apartment, where, by dream-logic, she finds a doppelganger with a penis and begins to have sex with him/herself. These comics often came from Doucet’s dreams: “For a long period of time, my dreams came in a perfect story structure. I guess I feel better now, I don’t have such strange dreams anymore.”¹⁴ Julie’s time as a man is revelatory reading—as usual, she doesn’t dwell, doesn’t ponder, but just acts. She is clear-headed and wants to put her penis to use. Ever practical and funny, she goes to work with her new appendage. Doucet also begins a series of surrealist excursions with “Robert the Elevator Operator” and “Lisa Fifi and Biscuit.” The difference between these series and the dream comics is that Doucet seems to be following Robert as he brings us through an imagined landscape, one entirely built on whatever Doucet felt like drawing—an

None of these things appear static, either: many panels read like a Jorge Posada print animated by the Fleischer Brothers, with cans, pots, or phones as alive as Julie or any other figure, all pulsating to an invisible beat. The back-cover painting of issue 2, with Julie the “poor lonesome cartoonist,” is a funny riff on her sudden fame and a winking acknowledgment of her public identity as a somewhat befuddled but confident cartoonist and observer of life. She was funny, and one has the sense she knew it.

The following issue begins with a cover painting of all the various Julies and a jam-packed mail bag. In this era, Doucet excelled at a kind of “domestic” strip—Julie at home, acting with and through a room and its contents. These are wonderfully odd meditations on just being alone in a room in a body. Doucet had an uncanny sense of physical comedy and it was never better than in these strips. “A Day in Julie Doucet’s Life” presents our hero grumbling to waking life in a room festooned with stuff. And as the perspective shifts in each panel, Doucet miraculously maintains everything in its place in the room. Issue 4 (1991) is replete with letters to Doucet, and includes her impish request for the names of readers’ or their partners’ penises. The comic begins with Julie now in New York, opening with her introducing readers to her new apartment and boyfriend (later the subject of *My New York Diary*); it also includes another domestic strip, “Clean Up Time,” which ends with her famous “Julie says: be nice to your plotte!”

¹⁴“Comics: Can you escape?,” *Ferraille International* (May 2000)

old man in boxer shorts pulling a toy dog? Sure. Dancing on a tiny overpass across a busy street? Why not. These narratives are akin to Nicole Claveloux's drawing-intensive psychosexual comics of the 1970s. Like Claveloux, Doucet is using comics as a place for visualization. The only rule is that the sequence be tight and the drawing precise. There is no ambiguity in these fantasies.

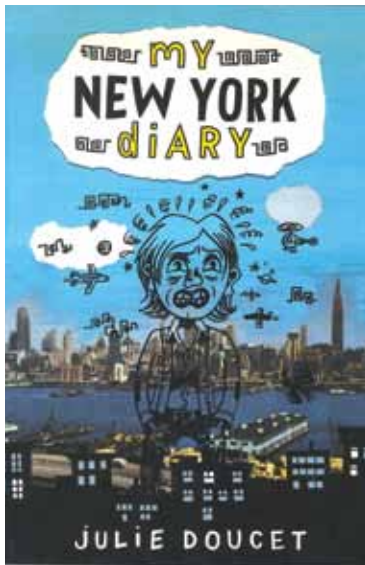
At this stage (issues 5–7), Doucet was living in Seattle, reeled in by the thriving comics scene. But she was still dreaming of a solo life. Asked about her ideal living situation, she says: "I would live by myself in a huge apartment with a grocery store just at the corner of the street so I wouldn't have to walk much to go buy my beer. My place would be a shelter for cats. I wouldn't have to worry about money...and my motorcycle would work for a change."¹⁵ By the spring of 1994 Doucet was back in Montreal, where she began the autobiographical material that would fill the book *My New York Diary* and run throughout the rest of the series. But her interest was starting to flag. Issue 8 was partly an anthology of other artists' work, and while *My New York Diary* was her most sustained comic, she was increasingly frustrated with the demands of the format and the audience. Doucet moved to Berlin in 1995 and finished the story and the series there. Issue 12 was the unannounced last issue. "I was running out of steam. I remember being increasingly frustrated with not being able to have the energy to do anything but comics art-wise...but I don't remember the exact moment when the decision was taken, what triggered it. I kept on going. I was stuck in Berlin illegally, broke, no other ways to make money..."¹⁶

When collected in 2000, *My New York Diary* became Doucet's reputation, in a sense. It was the work that most easily fit into a genre; it was also a work that looked back to the early 1990s, when many readers first encountered "Julie." It is an interesting kind of doubling—to address in comics form a time in her life during which she'd been drawing stories that appeared to uncork her psyche for all to read. It is an unsentimental and driven work—quite clearly what was on her mind and what needed to be made at the time. It lacks the flights of fantasy that marked the early 1990s, and is perhaps her most traditional work. In her depiction of her daily life, and her struggles dealing with other people, we get a look at a second cartoon Doucet. Not "Julie" the goofy host, not the "real" author, of course, but some other in-between creation, which, for

the sake of clarity, I'll call JD. Doucet's cartooning in this book is relentless—every inch of every panel is packed with memory, as though she couldn't stop filling in her own story—or couldn't part with it until it was all out of her on paper. Doucet maintains the same line weight in all aspects of each panel, obliterating the background/foreground hierarchies, and effectively neutralizing any obvious clues to what the reader should and should not value.

As a book, *My New York Diary* is simultaneously a story about male objectification of women, a remembrance of an abusive relationship, and a coming-of-age story. It is a baffling work. The JD we meet in the first two chapters, which chronicle her CEGEP days, is a passive, uncertain character, unsure how to handle the imposed desires of the men around her. She loses her virginity in a perfunctory, nearly anonymous encounter with an older hippy; goes home with a fellow student and, to her evident surprise, succumbs to his advances; and is charmed and then trapped by a fellow student who slashes his wrists in front of her, implicating her in his attempted suicide and forcing her to care for him. Through all of this, readers are kept at a distance. We never know quite how JD is processing all of this. That bit of information is, perhaps ironically, only contained in the comics made from 1987 to 1991, in which the cartoon Julie possibly acts out her feelings rather than documents them.

The New York portion of the book is a close-up look at the slow-motion disintegration of her relationship with the boyfriend she moved to Washington Heights, a neighborhood in north Manhattan, to be with. The couple do far too many drugs; they argue; JD has a miscarriage; and she is feted by the New York crowd of cartoonists. As JD finds her footing in the city and her comic book success continues, the boyfriend is jealous, needy, and finally cruel. Their love affair declines in inverse proportion to JD's confidence in the world. We never know what JD is thinking beyond her body language and facial expressions. JD is as opaque as Julie, but decidedly less gleeful. More serious and melancholy. More of a person. It is only at the end of the story that JD allows readers into her thoughts, and then it is simply to proclaim that she has no regrets. And, perhaps the only bit of fantasy in which the artist indulged, she does so as a band plays her out. Throughout the book, men have inflicted their bodies and their psyches upon JD, but her mind and her body are affirmed to be her own—not any man's and also, interestingly, not



My New York Diary // Jami Attenberg

Here are some things I like in a book: When characters are messed up (because I am messed up, and then I feel less alone in my messed-upness). When you feel like you can see the blood of the author on the page. Stories about creative young people emerging into their own unique identities. An inherent feminist quality. A happy ending that involves one person leaving another behind. I am probably making myself sound like the worst person in the world, but at least I know what I like, and I like *My New York Diary*, Julie Doucet's important, brave, and entertaining autobiographical graphic novel about her time in New York City in 1991.

The comic touches briefly on her time in high school (she loses her virginity to an older, shaggy-haired artist and thinks to herself, "Oh well, I guess this is it!"), and art school in Montreal (where she obsessively drinks coffee and dodges men), but the heart of *My New York Diary* depicts her move to New York City to live with a pen pal she has finally met in person and fallen in love with.

They live in Washington Heights, at the time a trash-filled, crime-ridden neighborhood, and there is already

discontent: Doucet longs to be downtown, closer to the art and comics world. But the apartment is cheap, and together she and her boyfriend make their art side by side. At the time Doucet was working on her *Dirty Plotte* comics, parts of which appear in *My New York Diary*. (I'll let you google the translation of "Plotte.") The two of them also drink, do whippets and speed, fight, and screw, this last act mostly halfheartedly. All the while Doucet struggles with her epilepsy. As the drinking, drugging, and fighting amp up, so do her seizures. The boyfriend turns out to be clingy, obsessive, and competitive. Her life is a mess.

And yet I remember when I first read this book in 1999, new to New York City myself, I wanted to slip into the pages with her and experience her life. It was not terribly different from my own. I was new in town with just a few friends; I was a struggling artist, a feminist, a substance abuser, a night owl, and completely mystified by male behavior. (I am still many of these things, if I am being honest here.) Her energy practically vibrated through the book. She took all those things that I was merely contending with and turned them into a piece of art. She cracked open my universe a little bit. Here was how to take control of your own narrative.

Reading it now, nineteen years older and wiser, I want to reach into the pages and pull her toward me and tell her to chill out on the whippets and get an apartment in the East Village immediately—not that it was any safer there, but at least she'd have some friends. As much as anything else, the book feels like a historical document. Doucet talks about seeing Karen Black perform on the Lower East Side. She goes to art parties and hangs out with

Art Spiegelman, Françoise Mouly, and Charles Burns. She sees New York City through fresh eyes, capturing every detail of this compelling moment in its history. There's lots of letter writing in this book, not an email in sight. I used to send beautiful letters. Did you?

I'm stuck on the narrative here, but also I loved all her stuff. All the pens and coffee cups and dirty dishes in the sink and shoes and wine glasses and tipped-over beer cans and guitars and messy bookshelves and telephones (landlines!) and all the beat-up furniture and the VCRs and tiny stuffed animals and crookedly hung artwork and paper everywhere and just...stuff. Detritus. Evidence. Everything in Julie Doucet's rooms is present and accounted for at all times and precisely placed. There was chaos in her world, but the detail and the precision of Doucet's work showed it was possible to depict the messiness of life with order and control.

Truly, *My New York Diary* inspired me to be more open in my own work. At the time I was just starting up a blog, and soon I would begin to place personal essays with online magazines. I wrote about my sexuality and my flesh and my relationships. Inside I was screaming. But Doucet taught me there was a way to write it down so I could be calmly heard. Blood on the page, blood on the internet: it's not any different now, although at the time it was something brand new to share your voice online. These days I will bleed just about anywhere, but seeing someone who had created an alternative for herself taught me to seek out new possibilities. And at the end of the book, Doucet shows us just that when she leaves her bad relationship behind. For a young woman, that's just as important a lesson as anything else. ●

Cover for the first paperback printing of *My New York Diary* (November 1999)

the readers'. And so, in a defiant gesture, she walks alone out into the infinite cartoon space.

In reality, Doucet finished the story in Berlin and then returned to Montreal in 1998. The following year she serialized her comedic mystery story, *The Madame Paul Affair*, which is her very own *Tintin* album. With *Madame Paul*, Doucet completed a twelve-year cycle of comics-making that encompassed everything that interested her in the medium in every format, publication, and mode available, moving from complete unknown to a recognized great in the medium. But the longer she was involved in the medium and industry, the more she was ill at ease with the notion of being a cartoonist—just that one thing—for her whole life, and frustrated by how eagerly her male peers embraced that identity, not to mention what she felt was their inability to talk about anything other than comics. She'd had enough of the "comics world," which was (and is) so much about canon-worship and engagement with a male-dominated historical narrative. And the attention she once enjoyed was now smothering her other ambitions. Doucet was, from the beginning, one of the most self-possessed artists in the medium. She knew when she needed to stop. In 2006 she recounted: "I quit comics because I got completely sick of it. I was drawing comics all the time and didn't have the time or energy to do

anything else. That got to me in the end. I never made enough money from comics to be able to take a break and do something else. Now I just can't stand comics. I'm not interested anymore."¹⁷ It's rare for any artist, let alone one who achieved the stature Doucet did in her medium, to make such a public and angry break. Doucet's act was as powerful, in her way, as her decision to self-publish *Dirty Plotte*. She would not be restricted by anyone or anything, and she was willing to blow up the bridge behind her. And despite publishing visual poetry and a copiously drawn memoir, she's never returned to comics as a medium.

Historians and critics often think of comics as a lifetime pursuit, but it isn't always so—it shouldn't always be so, really. Artists should, quite obviously, touch down where they need to and take off when they want to. For Doucet, "pictures and words together will always be extremely interesting, but that can take so many different forms. I feel I am a writer. Now I think I really underestimated that. Writing is very important to me, really."¹⁸ And since 2000 Doucet has explored that mix with the same integrity and rigor that she did comics, producing an unparalleled body of zines, prints, and objects, many of them self-published. She has also remained in Montreal, at last in a place of her own. "Julie" retired, as did "JD," but Doucet continues, with no regrets. ●

1 A sampling of the remembered and forgotten: *Weirdo*, *Pictopia*, *Buzzard*, *Heck!*, *Snake Eyes*, *Women's Comix*, *Rip-Off Comix*, and of course *Drawn & Quarterly* itself. *Raw* excepted, she managed to cross into every comics scene available in North America at the time.

2 Andrew Dagilis, "Julie Doucet's Secretions" (interview conducted in May 1990), *The Comics Journal* no. 141, 1991.

3 *Ibid.*

4 "Interview with Julie Doucet!," *Ladygunn*, April 8, 2010, <http://ladygunn.com/people/interview-with-julie-doucet>.

5 Author correspondence with Julie Doucet, 2017.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Andrea Juno, "Julie Doucet," in *Dangerous Drawings: Interviews with Comix and Graphix Artists* (RE/Search, 1997).

8 *L'Écho des Savanes* began publishing in 1972

and featured a mostly male assortment of cartooning greats: Moebius, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Jacques Tardi, Guido Crepax, and Jean-Claude Forest.

9 Editor's correspondence with Chester Brown, January 2018.

10 Author correspondence with Chris Oliveros, December 2017.

11 Byron Coley, "Caterwaul," *The Comics Journal* no. 141 (1991).

12 Author correspondence with Seth, December 2017.

13 Dagilis, *op cit.*

14 Juno, *op cit.*

15 Peter Bagge and Helena Harvilicz, "Let's Get to Know Julie Doucet," *I Like Comics*, 1993.

16 Author correspondence with Julie Doucet, 2017.

17 Dan Nadel, "A Good Life: The Julie Doucet Interview," *The Drama* no. 7 (2006).

18 *Ibid.*