

# Table of Contents

Childhood Romance . . . . . 1



# Childhood Romance

By David Thompson

If God and the Devil reside in the details, the pages of Chris Ware's *Acme Novelty Library* (see also *Headline*, *Mute* 20) offer an unexpected sanctuary to both.

A poignant blend of comic strip satire and Lilliputian typography, *The Acme Novelty Library* upends all expectations of the comic book form. Irregular, in every sense, *Acme*'s dimensions change with every issue, from pocket-book to tabloid and most points in between. Its themes are those of childhood wonderment, cheap advertising gimmicks and the routine cruelty of the adult world; a tragicomic counterpoint of promise and disappointment that is at once disturbing and howlingly funny.

From the unrequited love of Sparky, a pathetically dependent, disembodied cat's head, to the undelivered dreams of *Tales of Tomorrow*, Ware's emotional levers pivot not on what is realised or revealed, but on that which is withheld: '*You can now make more money than your grandparents did. You can find friends without having to go to church, and you can curse out loud freely. You can get your face stretched tight like when it was new, and you can be sick and not die for a really long time.*' ('Advert' for Dr Linn's Bronchial Wafers.)

Although the lyrical abstraction of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* is a discernible point of inspiration, *Acme*'s astringent melancholia is unique. Each issue is a masterpiece of mordant humour and meticulous illustration, from intricate causal diagrams to small and fiendishly complicated self-assembly toys. As much contemporary art abandons the numinous in favour of notional gestures and semantic noodling, Chris Ware is reinventing the archetypal medium of childhood with an intelligence and richness of expression that is increasingly hard to find in the art world's institutional spaces.

David Thompson <david.thompson AT eidosnet.co.uk> is a journalist and author. As part of record label Emit, he talked to Hari Kunzru in *Mute*.

*The Acme Novelty Library* //

Fantagraphics Books // \$9.95.

Mail-order enquiries T: 001 206 524 1967

Chris Ware Resources [<http://quimby.gnus.org/warehouse/resources/resources.html>]

Fantagraphics Books [<http://www.fantagraphics.com>]