

Mapping Fantastic Chicago: Fantasy Literature and the Urban Imaginary

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Abstract

The study of the genre of urban fantasy presents a unique opportunity to study how the city is conceptualized. Most critical work, however, has focused on spatial possibilities of imaginary cities, rather than investigating the differences between real life cities and their fantastical versions. This thesis examines contemporary urban fantasy about Chicago in particular, a city unique in its tendency towards realism in literary and cultural production, and in the influence of the Chicago school of Urban Sociology, which pioneered mapping of urban spaces and processes. This investigation focuses specifically on the question of mappability within *The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, by Emil Ferris. In *The Time Traveler's Wife*, I examine the characters' attempt to nostalgically reappropriate urban space in the face of passing time by remapping the city, drawing on the ideas of Svetlana Boym and Michel de Certeau. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, by contrast, finds sanctuary rather than terror in the unmappable parts of the city, looking for possibilities for marginalized groups in the liminal spaces between the real and the imaginary. Both works, in setting their stories in the real-world city of Chicago, comment on the fantastical possibilities of the city itself and the danger—and joy—of the unknown.

Introduction

In the past several years, a number of works have been published in a genre that could be called “Chicago Urban Fantasy.” These works create their own representations of the city of Chicago that combine tropes from genre fiction—including the gothic, classic pulp comic books, science fiction, romance and fantasy—with the representations of Chicago inherited from literary giants like Nelson Algren and Theodore Dreiser. Moreover, these works have situated themselves in relation to the representation of the city conceived by the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, whose insistence on mappability and ideas about human ecology have fundamentally altered the city’s built environment.

This thesis will examine how contemporary works of urban fantasy conceptualize the city of Chicago. I will focus in particular on the way that these texts map space, given the importance placed on mappability within the Chicago School. I will first lay out a definition of “urban fantasy” for the purposes of this thesis and lay out some of the implications of such a genre, especially as it relates to the idea of mapping. I will then touch on the political implications of such mapping, discussing the ideas of the Chicago School and how these ideas are modeled in the popular urban fantasy series *The Dresden Files*.

The bulk of the thesis will be devoted to two recent works: *The Time Traveler’s Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger, a bestselling novel published in 2003, and the award winning graphic novel duology *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris first published in 2017. *The Time Traveler’s Wife* exemplifies the desire in urban fantasy to specifically map the fantastical version of the city onto the real city, describing in detail numerous real streets and buildings within a fantasy novel. I tie this impulse to Svetlana’s Boym’s investigations into a nostalgic remapping

of space, as the characters attempt to reappropriate the real space of the city from the inexorable changes of time by virtue of moving over them. In so doing, they reject the sociological view of the city in favor of a more subjective and embodied mapping.

In *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, by contrast, Ferris drops the specific geography of the city of Chicago and instead takes up its iconography, using the tools of urban fantasy in order to craft new spaces that allow marginalized characters to self actualize. In so doing, Ferris draws on a long tradition of immigrant literature within the city that constantly remaps the spaces of the city created by a history of oppression. Both works must thus “map” the city of Chicago to create a new fantastical version, but, while *The Time Traveler’s Wife* reifies the mapping impulse of existing power structures built out of the sociological model of the city, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* rejects mappability in favor of more abstract notions of placemaking.

Part I: Little Chicagos

While scholars like Alexander Irvine have defined urban fantasy as any fantastical work in an urban setting (including both real and imaginary cities)¹, for the purposes of this thesis I will be defining urban fantasy as works of literature that employ tropes from pastoral fantasy² to a city in the real world (Irvine 1). Unlike works set in imaginary cities, these works must somehow create a setting of magic within an existing geography. Unlike realist works, by contrast, a fantasy text about a given city can literalize concepts and imagine beyond the bounds

¹ Irvine breaks urban fantasy into two types: stories set in real world cities that contain fantasy tropes and fantasy set in imaginary cities. Many of the latter category fit into the movement called “The New Weird”, which combines tropes from horror, fantasy, science fiction and the gothics to create stories that embrace monstrosity and alterity. Many “weird” texts, including *Perdido Street Station* by China Mieville and the *Ambergris Trilogy* by Jeff Vandermeer, are specifically urban and create fully fleshed out urban settings, a process Irvine sees as more fruitful than the urban fantasy simply making use of a real city. While these “weird” cities have their own lessons for urban studies, my thesis limits the definition of urban fantasy to simply Irvine’s first category, positing that these texts have their own important lessons to teach.

² By “pastoral fantasy”, I mean the logics of the genre as pioneered by *The Lord of the Rings*, incorporating ideas from myth and folklore to create an adventure story in a marvellous world

of reality. Urban fantasy can theoretically, thus, both stay rooted in a specific city and incorporate the heightened possibilities suggested by fantasy.

The genre of urban fantasy also presents unique opportunities in its practice of “worldbuilding”. Like any piece of fantasy, a piece of urban fantasy must build a magical world in which to set its story. As Farah Mendlesohn explains in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, this magical world can appear in a piece of fantasy in several ways: a text might be an “immersive” fantasy, beginning and ending in a magical otherworld (Mendlesohn xx), start out in normality and enter a “portal” to an otherworld (xix), deal with an “intrusion” from an otherworld (xxi) or exist in a “liminal” state (xxiii) that makes the reader doubt the appearance of the “real” world (zero world). For the writer of urban fantasy, each of these options requires recreating the real city and examining how it presents opportunities for magic without compromising its identity as that specific city. This process of world-building over an actual space presents a unique opportunity to re-envision the urban form and view the possibilities represented by fantastical genres.

Urban fantasy, however, isn’t the only way that cities have been narrativized and recreated. Any author writing about a city—especially one world building with the urban form—must contend with existing narratives, whether literary, popular or even governmental. This is a fundamental difference between pastoral and urban fantasy: while a pastoral fantasy author building a world from scratch has a blank slate on which to build a plot and characters, urban fantasy authors must build atop existing ideas of the city in the popular imagination. The world created by urban fantasy is thus always a palimpsest; the fantastical world cannot be analyzed as a world unto itself but as one of many layers.

In the case of Chicago, an essential layer comes from the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, the term for the work of the department of sociology at the University of Chicago in

the early 20th century. The work of the Chicago School is unified for the most part not in terms of concepts but by methods, including an emphasis on field research, documentary data and cartographic evidence. Many of the researchers came out of a tradition of social work and social reform, but the Chicago school sought to be objective, training students to undertake sociological research like investigative journalists in the field (Chapoulie). Another important feature in much of the Chicago school's research was the idea of mapping, which they used to compile statistical data from around the city on the racial makeup of neighborhoods, the percentage of foreign-born residents and the quality of housing stocks (see fig 1 in Appendix) which were then used to create models of cities as wholes (Chapoulie 103).

Carla Capetti has linked these sociologists out in the field with canonical naturalist authors like Nelson Algren, James Farrell and Richard Wright (many of whom were friends with Park and the other sociologists), who were writing what she calls "sociological novels" that conducted a kind of ethnographic study of their particular neighborhoods (Capetti 15). Both the scholars and the writers focused on poor immigrant neighborhoods, detailing the decline of traditional family values and the rise of crime. According to Capetti, however, these writers often wrote "from neighborhoods" as an alternative to the sociologists, who traveled to poor neighborhoods to describe the residents as subjects rather than fellow citizens. In her conception, these authors "creatively undermined" the sociologist narrative by writing about the poor as characters rather than data points (Capetti 16).

However, while the Chicago naturalist authors may have differed from the Chicago school methodologically, many images of Chicago created by the Chicago School appear in these works, most notably the idea of the "ecological approach" (73) explained in Robert Park, Ernest

Burgess and Roderick Mackenzie's pioneering 1925 monograph *The City*. The ecological view considered the city as a type of human ecological organization following similar rules to those attributed to plants and animals, including ideas of "adaptation", "evolution" and "competition" for scarce resources (Park et al 64). Park and Burgess also coined the concept of "neighborhood succession" (61), which claimed that neighborhoods transitioned from one ethnic group to another in similar ways to plant succession in an ecosystem—and with the same concept of one group "invading" (76) another to take over its ecological niche.

In Chicago literature, this analogy for human society as a type of complex ecosystem shows up time and again from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* to Nelson Algren's *The Neon Wilderness*, both naturalist novels touching on the hardscrabble life of immigrants in the city. The city-as-wilderness shows up constantly in Algren, often as a metaphor for the ways that the human had become so corrupted by urban life as to become almost mechanical, or the mechanical human. While Algren is a naturalist writer, his metaphors can verge into world building of their own, defamiliarizing Chicago into a strange and wild place, as in this selection from "Design for Departure", a story from *The Neon Wilderness*:

She drifted without effort into the fluorescent jungle of the fourth-rate cabarets. This was the true jungle, the neon wilderness. Sometimes, the dull red lights, off and on, off and on, made the spilled beer along the floor appear like darkly flowing blood. Sometimes the big juke sang.

And always voices, half subdued, merged with the mechanical voice of the juke, till the human voices sounded mechanical and the juke sang in half-human tones. Sometimes the people sang as though they were being turned on and off, on and off, by a giant lever, some secret lever which Ryan held somewhere behind the bar (251/252)

In Algren's conception of Chicago, the city has lost any internal order to become wild and unchartable, while the people lose their fundamental humanity to become something else. In the same way, sociologists in the Chicago school were fascinated by the dissolution of the

immigrant family, tracking the ways that individual identity was swallowed in the wilderness of the modern city. Algren doesn't literally call his characters invaders, but by taking up the same metaphor of human ecology, Algren and others could not help but reify these conceptions of the city.

In their original conception, these ideas were not meant to hurt the people they described (despite the dehumanizing aspect of the discourse). Human ecology was innovative at the time for its emphasis on environmental, rather than biological, causes for urban poverty. Park and other sociologists were active in progressive-era social reform and used their ideas to promote investment in poor neighborhoods (Chapoulie 96). However, these ideas of human ecology were used beyond the ivory tower to justify the displacement of many of the very people Algren gave voice to. As explained by Wendell E. Pritchett, urban planners and housing advocates of the time appropriated Park's idea of human ecology and applied it to the real world, calling certain neighborhoods "blighted", as if they had been infected by a disease or invasive plant species. Pritchett explains that this the term "blight" gave racist policies an aura of scientificity, allowing for large scale programs of "urban renewal":

Blight was a facially neutral term infused with racial and ethnic prejudice. While it purportedly assessed the state of urban infrastructure, blight was often used to describe the negative impact of certain residents on city neighborhoods. This "scientific" method of understanding urban decline was used to justify the removal of blacks and other minorities from certain parts of the city. By selecting racially changing neighborhoods as blighted areas and designating them for redevelopment, the urban renewal program enabled institutional and political elites to relocate minority populations and entrench racial segregation. (6)

This very process, in fact, occurred in the neighborhood surrounding the university of Chicago. Using some of the same mapping techniques as the sociologists (see fig 2), reformers (with the collaboration of the university) argued that the neighborhood of Hyde Park needed to be entirely torn down and rebuilt ("renewed") to better serve the desired existing residents of the

area. In reality, many of these infrastructural changes had the effect of keeping white flight in check and reducing community and living spaces for people of color. Urban renewal made the neighborhood far less dense and connected, with apartment buildings replaced by single family homes, mixed use developments with suburban style shopping centers and thoroughfares with one way roads (Hirsch). Similar processes would occur across the city and country, with the use of the maps and the concept of “blight” as tools to naturalize massive displacement (Pritchett).

While Capetti has inaugurated a tradition of reading Algren, Farrell and Wright through the lens of these sociological concepts, they have not yet been tied to genre fiction—an area in which I argue they are particularly suited. As I explained above, the genre of urban fantasy is always tied up with the idea of mapping as it must build a world within an actual city. In Chicago, mapping is intimately tied with the Chicago school. The metaphor of human ecology and the city-as-wilderness also builds its own kind of fantastical world out of Chicago, complete with Park’s language like “invaders” and an idea of “blight” or infection. Any author writing about the city of Chicago and making use of these metaphors taps into the tradition of dehumanizing marginalized groups and justifying urban renewal.

I will illustrate an example of this reification in the popular Chicago urban fantasy series *The Dresden Files* by Jim Butcher. *The Dresden Files* stars Harry Dresden, “the only wizard in the Chicago Phone Book”, who solves and fights magical crimes in the city of Chicago over the course of 18 books. Many of these magical crimes are actually invasions: monsters and other intruders enter Chicago from the “Never Never”, to which Dresden must banish them. Chicago must be protected, with danger coming from the outside that might corrupt its residents. Like the proponents of urban renewal utilizing Park’s idea of “human ecology” to clean up “blight”,

Dresden is also looking for “invaders” entering Chicago from a different world, and hoping to find ways to manage them, control them and keep them away from residents who might get corrupted.

Like the sociologists and advocates of urban renewal, Dresden also makes ample use of cartography. In *Proven Guilty*, the eighth book in the series, Dresden creates a model of the city he calls “Little Chicago” by meticulously mapping every street within a two mile radius of Burnham Harbour.³ The model is “of enormous value for [his] work”, provided that he has correctly collected data on every part of (his admittedly very small subsection of) the city, as it will allow him to magically affect events from a distance across the entirety of the city (Butcher 334). Using the model, Dresden is able to identify invaders and fight monsters without leaving the safety of his home, moving his spells around the board like generals moving troops around a map in a war room. The idea of “Little Chicago” in the Dresden files takes this concept of control-by-map and adds magic, literalizing the ways that mapping a city from afar can confer power.

While this thesis aims to paint a partial picture of the genre of “Chicago Urban Fantasy”, I am of course aware that a few books cannot define an entire genre. At the same time, I have no desire to create rigid rules for what does or does not count as Chicago Urban Fantasy, seeing it instead as a rhetoric that can be incorporated into works, whatever their genre. Indeed, the divisions between “genre fiction” (popular fiction marketed for mass consumption) and “literary fiction” (traditionally, realist novels) are often stifling, especially given the long-held scholarly view that producing genre fiction for mass markets somehow has less “literary merit” than

³ The laughably small radius of Dresden’s model compared to the actual city of Chicago is likely due to the fact that Butcher seemingly never visited the city he has set his books in. This thesis, however, focuses its criticism on the intentions behind mapping the city at all rather than on Butcher’s clear failures in his attempt.

something like high modernism (Adorno et al). While genre fiction has experienced a much-deserved revival in scholarly literature in the last fifty years through the works of Darko Suvin and Frederic Jameson among others, insisting on the distinction between them can occlude the way they exist in the same literary ecosystem. As Jameson puts it, rather than seeing them as opposites, a better model might be “a dialectical conception of this field of study in which modernism and mass culture are grasped as a single historical and aesthetic phenomenon” (Jameson 21).

Rather than defining a genre, I hope to provide something like case studies of how a few texts, in conversation with the ideas of the Chicago school, can provide valuable insights into how a specific city can be imagined. Most scholarship on the rising genre of urban fantasy, like the works in the collection “Popular Fiction and Spatiality,” have focused on the depictions of imaginary cities, mostly neglecting what I see as the crucial connection between the “real” and “supernatural” versions of a city. By zeroing in on the texts that specifically make use of the real world city of Chicago, I hope to highlight the ways that Chicago in particular opens itself up to reimagination and alternative spacemaking, even though Chicago urban fantasy is less defined than that of a city like London, which seems to more easily lend itself to magical insertions.⁴

In my investigation, I will be focusing mainly on the “measure” of mappability. I define “mappability” as the extent to which the world of a the given text (ie, its version of Chicago) directly corresponds to the real world, using the same place and street names—in other words, to what extent a reader could plot the events and locations of the story onto real world of Chicago. Any piece of urban fantasy must contend with this question of mappability, but I believe that it holds especially true in Chicago because of the legacy of the Chicago school and the ways in

⁴ Examples of London’s urban fantasy range from *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman, *Rivers of London* by Ben Aaronovich, *Kraken* by China Mieville and many others.

which maps of the city were historically used to reify existing power structures, as I demonstrated with *The Dresden Files*.

I believe that most texts in the “genre” of Chicago urban fantasy can be placed somewhere along the spectrum of mappability I define using *The Time Traveler's Wife* and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, but these two texts are also meant to exist on their own merits and with their own unique relationships to depicting the city of Chicago:

The Time Traveler's Wife stands out among works relying on an exact mapping of the city because of its specificity. Rather than just borrowing a common understanding of Chicago to add atmosphere or using the existing city as a foil to somewhere else (or some other time), the Chicago of *The Time Traveler's Wife* is fully fleshed out and appreciated, with attention paid to the smallest details. The text uses the changing city—and the main character's attempt to map and control it—as a part of the book's larger battle to stop time from passing.

My Favorite Thing is Monsters, by contrast, rejects mapping entirely. In so doing, it arguably fits into a long tradition of immigrant writing about the city, one that attempts to create spaces outside the bounds of the dominant culture. Even in Chicago specifically, one could point to any number of writers, including Stuart Dybek, Nelson Algren and Aleksandar Hemon, who likewise break down the boundaries determined by setting. While these works present new narratives about the city of Chicago (and will constitute the final section of this thesis), these works mainly fit into a tradition of realism or magical realism rather than engaging with “pulp” genre fiction tropes, whose inherent possibilities and emphasis on mapping this thesis hopes to highlight. For that reason, I chose to focus on *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, which pulls direct inspiration from horror magazines and movies, as well as using the more traditionally “lowbrow” medium of comics. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* revels in the spaces created by the simple

possibility of magic, using the rhetorics and symbology of classic genre fiction to explore their possibilities.

Part II: Mapping Nostalgic Chicago

Since its publication in 2003, *The Time Traveler's Wife* has sold millions of copies around the world and spawned at least two movies, a mini series and a musical as adaptations. The book tells the story of Henry and Clare, a couple living in Chicago trying to navigate a marriage despite Henry's "Chrono-impairment", a condition that randomly transports him through time and space whenever he gets stressed. The first part of the novel concerns itself mainly with their meeting and its emotional implications: Clare meets an older Henry as a child, fifteen years before they ever meet in the present. Once the two of them have gotten together, much of the plot of the book is centered around trying to control and eradicate Henry's time traveling problem. Henry constantly longs for his early childhood before he first time traveled, when he last had a normal life. In the end, Henry's "Chrono-impairment" ends up killing him, as he time travels to the empty "Monroe Street Parking Garage" (Niffenegger 431) in a freezing Chicago winter. The resulting hypothermia and extreme frostbite (that turns him into an amputee) weakens him to the point where he dies within a few months.

Despite the title, the novel has an obsession with place as much as with time. Most of *The Time Traveler's Wife* takes place within the city of Chicago, its locations described with such specificity that I could map most of the novel onto a map of the city, including Henry and Clare's house, Henry's childhood apartment and the routes Henry drunkenly wanders before meeting Clare (see fig 3). Niffenegger also highlights several Chicago institutions—specifically, restaurants, venues and museums that a longtime Chicago resident would recognize, but that a

non-resident might not (see blue markers in figure 1). In fact, several restaurants that the characters visit in the book had already closed by the time the book was released in 2003, though they existed in the mid-1990s when the characters supposedly visited them. These references, then, do not simply invite the reader to envision the events of the novel into real places but into a specifically idealized, nostalgic version of the city that is already irredeemably lost.

This section will track the ways that *The Time Traveler's Wife* maps its setting onto the city of Chicago. In contrast to a sociological mode of mapping, I will focus specifically on the idea of mapping as a nostalgic act. In the face of inexorable time, Henry attempts to regain control by reappropriating pace, re-traversing parts of the city to force it to match up with his nostalgic ideal. In so doing, Henry casts himself as an alternative sociologist, remapping from an embodied and spatially grounded perspective.

In her seminal book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as a historical retreat from the modern inexorability of passing time (13). While she investigates nostalgia in several domains, homing in especially on the connections between nostalgia and nationalism in the post-Soviet states, one of her core points connects the nostalgic attempt to regain control of time with an attempt to gain control of space. Boym claims that a nostalgic “chart[s] an affective geography of the native land”(12). While this new “affective geography” may have connections to a real-world old country or hometown, the longed for native land is always fundamentally inaccessible: cut off by time as much as by space. Boym appropriates Reinhart Koselleck’s concepts of the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” (Boym 9), where the space of experience provides a way to actualize and travel to the past in a world increasingly focused on progress towards the future. Boym says that “nostalgia, as a

historical emotion, is a longing for that ‘shrinking space of experience’ that no longer fits the new horizon of expectations” (10). Boym describes how industrialization and technologies like the railroad created a progressive, rather than cyclical view of time (10). Instead of looking towards the future—the horizon of expectations—as has become the post-industrial default, the nostalgic attempts to dwell in the “space of experience”, revisiting a lost home (lost both spatially and temporally). By creating an “affective geography of the native land”, which metaphorically spatialized this lost “space of experience,” nostalgics could “account for the assimilation of the past into the present” (10).

For figures where the lost home exists as a space in the real world, creating this affective geography thus overlays an alternate version of a place over existing space. This palimpsest exists not only in an immigrant's conception of the Old World, but also in the ever-changing neighborhoods of a city like Chicago, where the neighborhood of childhood might seem like a lost world even twenty years later. According to Carlo Rotella, neighborhood literature compares the present day to the “old neighborhood” and the “old country”, both of which are retroactively idealized ways of life that are dying out but still peek through the interstices (“Literature of Neighborhood” 60). In Rotella’s conception, this double identity of the neighborhood as the present and the past makes it haunted. He focuses on the work of Chicago short story writer Stuart Dybek, in whose stories “the ghosts of an older city...appear in the wrinkles and gaps of an emerging neighborhood order” (“Literature of Neighborhood” 63-64). Dybek, for the most part, toes the line of magical realism: in many cases, these ghosts are simply “peddlers with horses and wagons” (Rotella 63) or “grandparents and other Old World figures whose incantatory foreign speech, music and folkways seem at once alien and intensely familiar” (64). Only rarely does Dybek dip into explicit magic; most of the time, as in the story “Hot Ice”,

where the frozen body of a drowned girl is rumored to cause miracles, or the story “Blood Soup” where the protagonists’ dying grandmother asks for a soup she thinks will cure her, magic is a matter of belief. However, Rotella’s language of “ghosts” and “incantatory foreign speech” provides a potential role for fantastical literature in describing the urban, literalizing the sense of being in several times at once.

The Time Traveler’s Wife is no less haunted by a lost world or “old neighborhood”, as Henry constantly travels back to the Chicago of his childhood. Henry himself is often a kind of ghost, forced to travel back to a world he cannot change: most notably, he persistently travels back to the scene of his mother’s death (and his first experience time traveling) and re-witnesses his defining trauma. The adult Henry haunts his young childhood, watching his parents interact, meeting his mother on the train and watching her sing, but, like a ghost, he cannot affect anything around him. This ghostliness in some ways literalizes the metaphorical journeys of the nostalgic who constantly revisits the lost homeland (in their memories) without ever being able to return.

While the adult Henry haunts his own childhood, his childhood haunts him in its turn, coloring his vision of modern day Chicago. Henry is obsessed with places of old Chicago, be it Ann Sathers Swedish restaurant where “as lifelong Chicagoans, [he and Gomez] could probably sing [the menus] from memory in two part harmony” (137), the “legendary Berghoff” restaurant (117), “the Aragon, with all its faux Spanish splendor” where Clare’s grandmother danced “to big bands...in the thirties, when everything was new and lovely” (151) or the “Get me High Lounge, a place where anything can happen” (117). Even the most seemingly inconsequential scenes are usually set in longtime Chicago stalwarts: Henry takes Clare’s friend Charisse for coffee in “Don’s Coffee Club” (424); Clare hangs out in “Caffe Peregolisi” (233) and meets

Henry's ex-girlfriend Ingrid in the "Berlin" Nightclub (236); Henry passes classic restaurants "Kopi's" and "Reza's" (349) while time traveling into the neighborhood of Andersonville. All of these locations were objects of childhood nostalgia for Chicagoans of Henry's generation and have their own paratexts of Facebook posts, articles in the Reader and wistful reminiscences from Chicago old timers (Ward; Dukmasova). Even in the 90s, most of these institutions were products from an earlier era being "lost" by gentrification ("The Last Drop"). By the time the novel was released in 2003, a few had already closed. Niffenegger does not simply paint a picture of 1990's Chicago; she finds real places that had existed in Henry's childhood and which represented a Chicago increasingly being lost by gentrification.

An interest in the past city likewise seems to dictate the way Henry navigates Chicago, which often appears completely inefficient. For example, in a fit of depressive wandering on the anniversary of his mother's death, Henry walks "over to Water Tower Place and catch[es] the #66 Chicago Avenue bus, get[s] off at Damen, and take[s] the #50 bus north" (Niffenegger 117) to the Get Me High Lounge. Both buses are the actual numbers for the Chicago and Damen buses, and would constitute a way to the historical Get Me High Lounge at Damen and Honore ("The Night President Carter"). The route, however, wouldn't make any sense for anyone familiar with Chicago: Henry is supposed to be coming from the Berghoff restaurant, a famous downtown institution, and the walk to Water Tower Place would take at least twenty minutes—a walk Niffenegger doesn't mention. Looking on a map, the entire trip could be reached more easily by train, rather than two buses and a walk. Niffenegger provides no easy explanation for why Henry would take such a roundabout—though carefully mapped—route, neglecting to even mention the easier path by train. Instead, this route seems to be another idiosyncrasy of Henry's relationship with Chicago, one only a Chicagoan reader would notice.

In fact, Niffenegger at times suggests that Henry's Chicago may be entirely different from the real world. Midway through the novel, Henry and Clare visit a doctor at the University of Chicago hospital in Hyde Park. After dropping Henry off, "Clare drives off slowly down 59th Street and crosses the Midway. She has an errand to do at the Smart Gallery" (Niffenegger 303). The Smart Museum, located on 55th and Greenwood, is (and has always been) on the same side of the Midway as the hospital in the real Chicago ("History"). Clare and Henry's Chicago, then, doesn't line up. It's tempting to see this error as simply an error on Niffenegger's part, were it not for the insistence on naming the streets: why insert directions at all if they are incorrect?

Instead, one can read this continuity error of sorts as a sign that Henry's Chicago is less an exact replica of Chicago than an example of a "cognitive map" (Soja 74) that derives its logic from Henry's own conceptualization of Chicago. Niffenegger signposts each neighborhood with historic institutions (like "Reza's" and "Kopi's" in Andersonville) or often lists a litany of streets, as when they rush down Lake Shore Drive to try to rescue Henry from the parking garage ("we pass Irving, Belmont, Fullerton, LaSalle: I exit at Michigan. We fly down the deserted corridor of expensive shops, Oak Street, Chicago, Randolph, Monroe" (432)) just as a city resident might orient themselves in space. These lists do less to describe the place they are passing or to describe direction than to provide free indirect speech into Henry or Clare's mental state, counting familiar locations as they speed towards an uncertain future. By this logic, then, the mistake in the location of The Smart Museum, or Henry's absurd route in getting to the Get me High Lounge, could be a symptom of his own forgetfulness of location in telling the story⁵.

⁵ To this end, the least specific geographic areas in the *Time Traveler's Wife* are on the South and West sides, areas Henry could be expected to know less well than the North Side.

This physical tracing of space illustrates Michel de Certeau's description of walking in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau compares the act of walking to the act of speaking, where, like the speaker, the walker "actualizes...the possibilities" (98) of a space by walking it and choosing certain ways of moving compared to others. Just as a speaker uses rhetoric and style to shape language within an already set system of "proper meaning constructed by grammarians and linguists" (De Certeau 100), pedestrians make specific choices of where to walk and what to think about and remember within a set network of roads, investing those spaces with signification. In fact, de Certeau says that the city itself is only "a pullulation of passers-by, a network of residences temporarily appropriated by pedestrian traffic" and "haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places" (103), in language directly echoing the metaphors used by Boym and Rotella. Walking in a space and creating a rhetoric of traveling through it allows the pedestrian to gain ownership over the space and to define it anew.

De Certeau holds the idea of the city as a "network of residences" in contrast to that of the "facsimile" of the city seen from above by the urban planner, sociologist or government official, which he represents with the metaphor of looking down at New York from the World Trade Center. As he says, "this panorama-city is a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices. The voyeur-god created by this fiction...must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them" (93). In other words, Certeau condemns the top-down views of such actors as the Chicago school, who attempt to understand the city by mapping all of it, while remaining an "alien" and a "voyeur" watching activity from the outside.⁶

⁶ Capetti argues Algren and other naturalist writers opposed just such a position attempting to write ethnographies of their various neighborhoods from a position focusing on the people within the neighborhood rather than from the outside looking in

By this framework, Henry's wandering and nostalgic "affective" mapping of Chicago makes him one of the masses constructing the city from the bottom up, as opposed to the top-down mapping practiced by the Chicago School. However, Henry is no less a kind of sociologist, observing and commenting upon city life from his own perspective within it. This sociological role stands out on the occasion where Henry does take on the position of de Certeau's "voyeur god". On the eve of the new millennium, Henry looks out over Chicago from a tall building in Wicker Park and thinks about how (he knows) the city will change:

More people, many more. Ridiculous traffic, but fewer potholes. There will be a hideous building that looks like an exploding Coke can in Grant Park; the West Side will slowly rise out of poverty and the South Side will continue to decay. They will finally tear down Wrigley Field and build an ugly megastadium, but for now it stands blazing with light in the Northeast. (332)

Just like de Certeau's World Trade Center observer, Henry looks down over a version of Chicago rendered small and untouchable and reflects on it in broad, unspecific terms that treat people across the west and south side as an undifferentiated mass. Henry is doubly a "voyeur-god" in this scene, as he has gained his omniscience from traveling the future and watching what will happen, giving him an artificially broad view of both space and time compared to people living their day to day life. His next lines, however, resist the urge towards a top down approach: after identifying the "decay" (blight, in other words) on the South Side, Henry's prophecy touches on Wrigley Field, the ultimate nostalgic old Chicago location. Even at his most sociological, Henry eventually focuses on beloved elements of his childhood city that will soon be lost. The chapter ends on the stroke of midnight: "time stands still, and I hope for better things to come" (Niffenegger 332). For someone who knows the future, "hope" might seem unnecessary or foolish, but in hoping Henry seems to reject the role of the "voyeur-god"

and forcibly return himself to the state of ignorance of those who wander space and time normally.

If Henry stays rooted in time by creating a version of the city based on his own internal navigation and nostalgically important locations, it is fitting that his ultimate demise comes from perhaps the ultimate symbol of the uncaring, unspecific modern city: a parking garage. Henry's death is precipitated by his time traveling into "The Monroe Street Parking Garage" (431) in January. Because he always appears naked on his travels through time, the freezing temperatures give him hypothermia and extreme frostbite, so that he has to have his legs amputated upon returning to the present. Eventually, his inability to walk means he gets shot and dies during another time traveling episode at the end of that year.

While Niffenegger is specific with the name of the parking garage—as with every location in the novel—there is no actual "Monroe Street Parking Garage" with that name. While there are several parking garages around Monroe Street, Niffenegger doesn't specify which one, instead inventing an entirely new location defined by its unspecificity. Most of the parking garages in that area also likely connect into the broader world of Lower Wacker Drive, a network of streets underneath downtown Chicago (famously featured in another Chicago urban fantasy: *The Dark Knight*). While Niffenegger does call the parking garage a "subterranean concrete world" (432), she doesn't name this world Lower Wacker or give any indication that it might be specific to Chicago. While, as David Pike illustrates, underground areas can often be liminal spaces of possibility (Pike 142) the unspecificity of the parking garage renders it simply an endless landscape of unspecific human change on the built environment.

By not choosing a real parking garage, Niffenegger creates a parking garage that could appear in any city—in any suburb—in America, and at any time over the last 50 years. Parking

garages are an epitome of the “placelessness” of post modern America, the symptom of car culture where everywhere looks the same from the same strip malls and built environment. These endless landscapes of concrete resist the production of space discussed by Rotella and de Certeau: if a place looks like anywhere else, how can it be a palimpsest of layers of experience? In the same way, a parking garage discourages walking as a form of meaning making, privileging only a view of the city from out the window of a car. In the confrontation with the concrete reality of the modern city, all of Henry’s “affective geography”, based on walking around familiar places, comes to naught.

Part III: Magic in the Interstices

At the other end of the spectrum of mappability in Chicago fantasy literature stands the recent graphic novel *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris, which came out in 2016 to great acclaim, winning the 2017 Ignatz Awards, two Eisner awards and garnering attention from such comic book superstars as Alison Bechdel and Art Spiegelman. The novel and its sequel from 2024 tell the story of Karen Reyes, a young girl coming of age in the 1960s in the Chicago neighborhood of Uptown, learning important truths about her family and growing into her nascent sexuality. The book also stands out for its use of imagery and elements from pulp horror movies and comics: most notably, Karen continuously draws herself as a werewolf instead of a girl, but many other characters within the story drift into monstrosity, evoking the power that marginalized groups can find in reclaiming the labels of monstrosity.

Unlike *The Time Traveler's Wife* and its insistence on a careful mapping of the existing streetscape, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* (MFTIM) engages with the city of Chicago more obliquely, taking up elements specific to the city but remaining unconstrained by Chicago’s

actual geography. This lack of geographical specificity allows Ferris to reimagine spaces in the interstices of the city. Ferris rejects both the top down mapping of the Chicago school and the bottom up or “affective” geographies of de Certeau and Boym, embracing instead the liminal spaces and identities that defy explanation.

I will track Ferris’ embrace of liminality in three sections. The first will focus on her use of the comic, a medium that Ferris subverts by drawing outside traditional cels. I argue that literally reappropriating the margins of the page allows Ferris to challenge the hegemony of a linear progression of time, much like Boym’s nostalgics. I will then focus on the marginality of the “fantastic” genre as defined by Tzvetan Todorov as a genre that defies categorization, with events existing on the “frontier” between the real and the marvelous. Finally, I will track some of the ways Ferris creates an alternative (but inherently unmappable) geography within the world of the novel, focusing in particular on her use of the Uptown underground tunnel system.

Much of the power of the comic comes from the way it is a spatial medium, forced to convert a narrative into physical space on a page. As explained by Scott McCloud, “unlike other media, in comics, the past is more than just memories for the audience and the future is more than just possibilities” (104), as a reader can simultaneously see the action of the entire page—which may represent many moments—even while they read the moment contained in a single cel. Comic book writers (including Emil Ferris in *MFTIM*) can even break the assumed left-right sequence of the page, pushing readers to experience the story out of order or see many moments at once (McCloud 105). In this way, the comic form challenges the “modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time”(13) discussed by Boym, allowing readers to simultaneously inhabit the “horizon of expectations” and the “space of experience”. As Victoria

Aarons puts it, comics “created the discursive conditions for a disruption of the temporary linearity and spatial boundaries” (Chute 358).

Because of this special relationship between space and time on the page of the comic, writers like Ferris are able to create spaces out of time on the page by playing with the understood rules of how comics function. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud identifies the “gutter”, that is, the space between cells, as the key to the passage of time within comics, as it represents the gaps between discrete moments that the reader must extrapolate (McCloud 94). For this reason, if a writer runs a panel off the edge of a page instead of using a gutter, McCloud claims that “time is no longer contained by the icon of the closed panel but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space” (103). By a mechanism as simple as removing a gutter, then, a writer like Ferris can create a place out of time: a space like the nostalgic’s “space of experience” where the teleological flow of time is briefly halted.

In MFTIM, Ferris uses this technique constantly, creating a syncopated geography of time and space on the actual page that forces the reader to slow down and inhabit each moment. While Niffenegger relentlessly maps the nostalgic world onto the real world, Ferris resists mapping altogether and reaches for something else, turning away from the traditional lines of possibility and of progress.

While Ferris in many ways subverts the form of the comic, the graphic novel has long been considered a medium presenting unique possibilities for expression, less constrained than other genres because of the lower expectation for realism. As asserted by Hillary Chute, bearing witness using comics rather than photographs allows a survivor (or their children) to depict an inherently unimaginable experience. While a war photograph carries an implicit expectation of

objectivity, everything in a comic is clearly drawn and interpreted, facilitating the understanding that witnessing is inherently subjective (*Disaster Drawn* 168).

Chute speaks extensively about the Pulitzer-Prize-winning graphic memoir *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, in which the son of holocaust survivors tells his father's story by drawing Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. As Chute discusses, upon the publication of *Maus II*, Art Spiegelman wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in response to the fact that his book was classified as fiction—rather than nonfiction. To Spiegelman, the fact that he drew his characters as mice and cats does not make his book a work of fiction, a kind of plea for the validity of graphic memoir. His mice, he said, were elements of style that helped him better express a fundamentally true narrative. As Spiegelman wryly put it, “I know that by delineating people with animal heads I've raised problems of taxonomy for you. Could you consider adding a special "nonfiction/mice" category to your list?” (“A Problem of Taxonomy”) The *Times* capitulated, and moved *Maus* to nonfiction (*Disaster Drawn* 183).

Maus stands as the most well known example of a whole genre of Holocaust comics, evidenced by the existence of the collection of essays *Beyond Maus: The Legacy of Holocaust Comics*. Each of these texts grapples with representing the unrepresentable using the tools of the comic book form. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* fits into this tradition, especially because of the subplot surrounding Anka Silverberg, Karen's upstairs neighbor who dies under suspicious circumstances at the beginning of the first book (and whose name Dana Mihalescu argues is an explicit homage to Spiegelman's mother, Anja Spiegelman, a holocaust survivor who committed suicide (359)). Anka's death launches Karen onto a pseudo-noir investigation into her life, including long stretches where Karen listens to her audio testimony of her experiences during the holocaust and WW2. Because of these similarities, some of the “problems of taxonomy” that

Maus faced could be equally applied to *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*: does drawing Karen as a werewolf automatically make the story a work of fantasy, even if set in a real place and grappling with real events? (Especially given the instance when Karen's brother forces her to confront her image in the mirror and confirm she is not a werewolf (fig 4.8)). Or, as Spiegelman suggests, should these figures only be taken as metaphor, and elements of style rather than plot?

The French theorist Tzvetan Todorov defines a genre he calls the "fantastic", lying at "the frontier between [the] two adjacent realms"(44) of the marvelous and the uncanny. He defines the marvelous as the unequivocally supernatural, and the uncanny as the supernatural proved false, meaning that the fantastic exists in the "hesitation...experienced by the person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). Alongside the border between the marvelous and the uncanny, Todorov identifies another important distinction between which the fantastic must sit: between the "allegorical" and the "poetic", where in the former case supernatural events are taken as simply meaning something else (ie, the mice as Jews) while in the latter only as poetic, literal words.

While Todorov defines a spectrum between the uncanny and the marvelous, he is stricter with the division between the allegorical and the poetic, claiming that a fantastic work cannot fall into either category: in his view, the divisions are discrete, rather than continuous. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, however, fits into this strange space between the allegorical and the fantastic: the events of the novel are mostly not proved as definitively true or false (keeping the novels squarely between the marvelous and the uncanny), but Ferris leaves up to interpretation the extent to which the fantastic elements of the book are meant to be taken literally. Some, like

Karen's drawing herself as a werewolf, are clearly metaphors, as evidenced by Karen's brother forcing her to draw herself as she actually looks (fig 4.8).⁷

Other fantastical elements, however, are more ambiguous: Karen's friend Sandy, for example, seems to be a starving child of union organizers leaving Appalachia who goes to Karen's school, except that none of the characters other than Karen can see her. In the second book, Sandy is identified as the ghost of a child who died of parental neglect ten years earlier (Fig 5.3). But Sandy is never confirmed as a figment of Karen's imagination; in fact, at the end of the second novel the supposedly imaginary Sandy finds Karen curled up in an alley and gets her help. When Karen asks Sandy whether she might be dreaming, Sandy tells her that "Karen, there ain't much difference 'tween them thangs. Now just you lie still an I'll git you some help" (Fig 5.8). Help arrives on the next page, though Ferris never clarifies if this is because the imaginary Sandy went to find it or simply by coincidence. Ferris thus troubles the epistemological impulse to find out what is "real" and what is "dream"; regardless of whether or not the events "really" happen, she seems to suggest that their very possibility makes the novel fantastic and provides new opportunities.

At another point, in the first novel, Karen draws out the oral history of her neighbor Anka Silverberg, whose testimony she listens to as a part of trying to solve her murder. According to her testimony, Anka, who worked as a prostitute in a "pharmacy", was taken to a manor where she was supposed to get some sort of rest and relaxation. Instead, Anka narrates how she is taken to a cavern and held down by masked figures, who attempt to sacrifice her for some evil purpose. She fights back, unmasking one of the figures and running to a nearby cabin in the woods (figs

⁷ In perhaps another gesture towards avoiding categorization, Ferris does not use page numbers in either volume of *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, making citation difficult. I will be referring to pages of the book by referencing figures in the appendix, which contains images of all of the pages I mention in this section of the thesis

4.5, 4.6 and 4.7). Alongside its unbelievable (though not quite supernatural) story evoking fairy tale villains and rescuers, the manor is drawn with an architectural motif of medusa's head (figs 4.5 and 4.7), a symbol established in an earlier part of Anka's narrative to symbolize the victimization and resistance of the prostitutes. Ferris also recycles the image of the pentacle on the hand from *Wolfman*, (fig 4.6) and the image of the Eternal Silence Statue in Graceland cemetery (fig 4.4). The existence of these symbols betrays a metatextual awareness and puts into doubt the whole narrative, despite the fact that it's coming from a supposed oral history. The whole section, upon first reading, seems like an allegory for the holocaust that relies on supernatural rather than human terrors to tell an untellable story.

Later on in her testimony, however, Anka discusses the concentration camps explicitly, putting into question the metaphorical nature of the previous episodes concerning human sacrifice. If not for the camps, what does the human sacrifice scene allegorize? Is it meant to be taken literally, catapulting the novel into the realm of the gothic? Ferris refuses to offer a clear answer on how to interpret this episode, especially as references multiply throughout the novels to other uses of human sacrifice with similarly ambiguous levels of truth: Karen's Maoist friend "The Brain" says billionaires "practice human sacrifice" (fig 5.4), and Karen at one point reads the green men that adorn buildings around Chicago as a marker of "how in olden times they used to sacrifice a person and bury their body in the foundation for a new building. They thought it gave the building special powers" (fig 5.1). The human sacrifice episode thus takes on a multiplicity of meanings, unlike symbols in a pure allegory like *Maus*. Ferris troubles the other boundaries of the fantastic as defined by Todorov, between the poetic, the fantastic and the allegorical. She provides a number of explanations for the allegorical meaning of the human

sacrifice passages, but by remaining in the ambiguous borderlands, the concept is opened to become one that can transcend any individual meaning.

By taking up this legacy, Ferris' use of the fantastic mirrors the way that she draws outside the lines, rejecting traditional geographies of genre and resolutely remaining in the “borderlands”, once again crafting a space for understanding simply by refusing to take on the expectations of any one genre.

This embrace of liminality extends into Ferris' worldbuilding. While the world of *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* seems to be Chicago, the story ventures into imaginary spaces inserted into the real world geography—a stark contrast to the specificity of mapping present in *The Time Traveler's Wife*. One case in point is the motif of the green man, a symbol of fertility from British folklore used as an architectural ornamentation. In *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, the symbol appears constantly, not only on the sides of buildings (including Karen's apartment) (fig 5.5) but also on the key to her basement, in one of the pulp horror covers that mark chapter breaks (fig 5.1) and in Karen's dreams. Ferris even invents a pub called “The Green Man” where Karen's gangster neighbor hangs out at the beginning of the first novel (fig 4.2). While there are in fact green men sprinkled on buildings around the city (“Going Gothic”), none of the green men in the book seem to line up with real places, as they might in *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Instead, Ferris takes a common architectural motif in Chicago architecture and extrapolates it to explore its fantastic possibilities, creating an alternate version of the streetscape.

Throughout the two books, the presence of the green man motif links several disparate fantastic elements, serving as a marker of magic on the built environment. As mentioned earlier, Karen reads the presence of the green men on buildings as a sign of human sacrifice: “In the arcane magazine about the green men there was this story about how in olden times they used to sacrifice a person and bury their body in the foundation for a new building” (fig 5.1). The trope of human sacrifice within the novel now gets evoked at each image of a green man. Ferris often adds a green man in the background of street scenes—suggesting a hidden world of sacrifice and dark magic beneath the existing Chicago streetscape.

Even more importantly, the symbol of the green man marks the entrance to the secret tunnels beneath Uptown where Karen seeks answers for the death of her neighbor. There is an actual tunnel system beneath the neighborhood of Uptown, likely used for transporting coal between buildings and later famously used by Al Capone to store bootlegged alcohol out of the Green Mill tavern during Prohibition (“The Facts and Fiction”). Under Ferris’ hand, however, the tunnels take on entirely new meanings and snake to new parts of the neighborhood, including Karen’s basement.

Ferris first introduces the tunnels early on in the first book: Karen finds rose petals in her basement leading to a mysterious door marked with a green man, a door bolted shut later that night (Fig 4.1). Over the course of the two books, the tunnels return in a series of dreams and visions, where several ghostly figures (including the dead Anka and a demon in the painting at the Art Institute of Chicago) tell her she needs to enter the tunnels to solve the mystery of Anka’s death. These interactions are filled with strange symbolism, including the constant image of the green man and of the rose petals—repeated not only with Anka but also her dead brother Victor and her first date with her girlfriend Shelly (fig 5.2).

The surrealism of all these encounters gives the tunnels a strange quality of being only symbols in and of themselves. In fact, in one sequence in Graceland Cemetery where a stoned Karen meets the ghost of female detective Kate Warne, the tunnels become almost absurdly metatextual. Warne tells her that the “the hidden room you mention is very likely not a room at all but an entrance...to a great network of underground tunnels and rooms, a city beneath the city”(fig 4.3) and that she can enter said network through a grave in the cemetery—one with the name MacGuffin (fig 4.4). MacGuffin is not the name of a tomb in Graceland cemetery or any real world entrance to the tunnels: rather, a MacGuffin is a plot device meaning an element that drives the story despite being relatively unimportant. In other words, Ferris names the entrance to the tunnels after the literary device she employs.

At the same time, the tunnels also exist as real spaces, rather than simply as metaphors, dream spaces or a plot device. At the end of the second book, Karen and her friends finally enter the tunnels under her house, looking for some clue to Anka’s death. The “underground city” they find turns out to be a brothel—what Karen says her brother would call “Titty City” (fig 5.6). Upon further exploration, they also find the ventriloquist dummy and notebook of Karen’s missing neighbor Mr. Chugg in an abandoned theater, before getting caught and taken into the Green Mill bar (5.7). The Uptown tunnels in the real Chicago definitely connect to the Green Mill, a real establishment, and almost certainly to one of the theaters nearby (likely the Uptown Theater next door) where Karen finds Mr. Chugg’s notebook and dummy.

By connecting the imaginary locations of Karen’s house and the Macguffin Tomb—where the real-world tunnels do not go—with the Uptown Theater and the Green Mill—where they do—Ferris reconnects the ghostly, surreal and seemingly imaginary Macguffin with a real world

place. This is similar to the function of subway maps in urban fantasy as explained by David Pike: the subway system is simultaneously the entrance to the unknown underground world and the best way for the protagonist to understand and navigate this strange place, making them a fundamentally liminal place between the upper and lower worlds. Maps “assert that what appears to be concrete and mundane can always escape into the fantastic” (Pike 142). In the same way, while the Uptown Tunnels are unmappable and unknown, their anchoring in the recognizable locations of the Uptown Theater and the Green Mill gives the tunnels a liminal quality between magic and reality.

Ferris uses this semi-imaginary space to stand up for the characters in her novel that lie outside typical Chicago society—most notably the residents of “titty city”.⁸ Throughout both novels, Ferris grapples with the sidelining of prostitutes and sex workers, including Anka during and before the holocaust and Uptown sex workers in the 1960s. Indeed, Karen herself, exploring her nascent lesbianism, often seeks out and finds connection with these figures. In the unmapped space of the tunnels beneath uptown, these marginalized groups are able to create a space away from the prying eyes on the surface, a space that makes explicit the sexual tensions of the surface.

The idea of the tunnels as a place of answers stands in contrast to the “subterranean concrete world” (Niffenegger 432) of the parking garage in *The Time Traveler’s Wife*. While both the streets of Lower Wacker Drive and Uptown tunnels exist in the real world,⁹ Niffenegger does not tie these tunnels to real locations, as Ferris does with the Green Mill and the Uptown Theater.

⁸ We also learn that this space shelters Karen’s brother Deeze as a child after he accidentally shot his twin brother, another example of the tunnels being used as a space outside the purview of mainstream society.

⁹ In fact, Lower Wacker Drive is the more mappable of the two tunnel systems, as the streets are open to the public and have their own labeled street system in contrast to the unknowability of the Uptown Tunnels.

Both novels end with a trip to the underground to uncover a truth, but these truths and the role of the tunnels are radically different: Karen's tunnels are an alternative space for stigmatized activities, while Henry's parking garage is a nonplace revealing the fundamental placelessness underlying the supposedly mappable Chicago. In other words, *The Time Traveler's Wife* betrays a deep fear of unmappability (despite its resistance to top-down sociological urbanism), but *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* revels in spaces and events that defy categorization.

Ferris best expresses the possibilities in the liminal at the end of the duology, when Karen hides from the police in the closet used by "a psychic medium" to trick people into believing that "they were talking to dead family members" (fig 5.9). In a space specifically created because of belief in magic, Karen is sheltered and protected from the threatening authorities. Ferris thus suggests that the spaces created by a belief in magic—spaces, like the tunnels or the closet, that wouldn't show up on any map—can protect marginalized groups and provide an alternate, more nurturing version of the city to live in compared to the city plotted by the authorities.

The use of the medium's cabinet also evokes "the uncanny" (in Todorov's terms), as it is a mechanism disproving the existence of magic. However, rather than being a disappointment or a waste, Ferris suggests that even the *possibility* in magic creates a space for alternate ways of life, a sense that could be expanded to the tunnels and the rest of the novel.¹⁰ Regardless of whether the tunnels or the green men are truly marvelous or simply an elaborate metaphor, the possibility of magic invests the whole real world city with the possibility of new spaces underneath.

¹⁰ Ferris' illustration of the potential in magic reflects the ghostliness of Dybek's writing as described by Rotella ("The Literature of Neighborhood" 63-43). Even though most of Dybek's explicit "ghosts" are proved false through some misunderstanding or mechanism, the brief moments where Dybek explores the possibility of ghostliness have their own kind of power. Ferris' work takes these lessons further by remaining in the doubtful space of the fantastic, as well as by highlighting the potential in even lowbrow monster stories

My Favorite Thing is Monsters, like *The Time Traveler's Wife*, engages with the question of mappability posed by the Chicago school and the requirements of the genre of urban fantasy. Rather than remapping the city on its own terms, MFTIM rejects mapping entirely, instead emphasizing the possibilities inherent in the liminal spaces—between buildings, between genres and between truth and fiction.

Part IV: The City of Many Nicknames

This thesis has endeavored to present an overview of a few approaches to mapping within the broader canon of contemporary Chicago fantasy literature (to the extent that any such canon exists). *The Time Traveler's Wife* reappropriates the city in the face of a worrisome future by creating an “affective geography” remapping the city from the bottom up, while *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* creatively expands elements of the urban form and resists direct mappability. Along the way I have touched on a few other books, including the work of Stuart Dybek (especially as studied by Carlo Rotella), *The Dresden Files* by Jim Butcher and *The Neon Wilderness* by Nelson Algren. I have mentioned these other texts in part because I recognize that no genre can be summarized in only two books (or five). This section of the thesis will therefore briefly attempt a similar analysis of the mapping of Chicago across a broader range of Chicago books, with the goal of seeing how my two primary texts fit into a broader ecosystem.

As enumerated in the introduction, I have chosen these specific books for several reasons: *The Time Traveler's Wife* stands out as a uniquely popular exemplar of fantasy literature set in Chicago, selling millions of copies and inspiring adaptations in several forms. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, by contrast, has been critically acclaimed since it was released, and covered in every major news source in Chicago as a magnum opus (Borelli). While not as well known as *The Time*

Traveler's Wife, it is a breakout recent example of fantasy literature in Chicago dealing with marginalized groups and with a unique relationship to the city that is both heavily indebted to real places and willing to imagine new ones. Both works are relatively well-known, and they engage critically with the city itself.

This stands in contrast to the vast majority of works of contemporary Chicago urban fantasy, which arguably fail to engage critically with spatiality. Perhaps taking the lead from *The Dresden Files*, many of these books fit more with a general “vibe” of the city rather than trying to match any specific landmarks beyond tourist locations. Many works, for example, engage with Chicago’s gangster history and the idea of speakeasies, including *Last Call at the Nightshade Lounge* by Paul Krueger, the Mick Oberon series by Ari Marmell and *Blind Tiger* by Jordan Hawk. There is also a critical mass of novels, especially inspired by Erik Larson’s bestselling nonfiction book *Devil in the White City*, that use the setting of 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition (Graff). I did not focus on any of these novels because their depictions are for the most part predicated on aura rather than spatiality, with the city standing in for specific desirable atmospheres.

Several of these books defining a “gritty Chicago” have political implications. Just as Algren, Wright and the other “sociological” writers discussed by Capetti spoke for the working class through their writings, some genre fiction authors likewise make use of this “gritty” aesthetic in order to unearth the city's larger problems. Most notably, Rebecca Beyer discusses the detective novelist Sara Paretsky as using her novels to condemn the city’s organized crime and corruption, using the hard-boiled detective novel conventions most commonly associated with Los Angeles (356). As illustrated by the underground adventures within both *The Time Traveler's Wife* and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, Chicago, like LA, hides dark truths under its

surface. Paretsky's works do not re-build the city and add magic as a piece of urban fantasy might, but she nonetheless uses the unique tools of genre fiction in order to highlight the city's problems.

Chicago could also claim several books not set in the city itself but taking an image I call "mundane Chicago" as a starting point to go somewhere more magical. These works include everything from *The Princess Bride* to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to *Emily in Paris*, as well as Audrey Niffenegger's other book *Her Fearful Symmetry*. These works do not rewrite Chicago in a magical way but see it as the mundane environment from which magic springs. Chicago also stands out in particular because of its role as a (or potentially "the") midwestern metropolis. Chicago stands as a foil to the idealized rural life in the rest of the Midwest as the urban center of sin. At the same time, on a national scale Chicago is the innocent foil to the glamorous, roiling coastal cities. In the case of both "gritty Chicago" and "mundane Chicago" the books tend to engage in the kind of nostalgic mapping of the city represented here by *The Time Traveler's Wife*, but with far less specificity, as mapping is only used to reify a certain "brand" for the setting.

I should also mention the international bestseller *Divergent* by Veronica Roth, a young adult dystopian series set in Chicago that came out in the same period I have discussed. The Chicago of *Divergent* bears little relation to the existing city except for a few important landmarks, including the Ferris Wheel at Navy Pier and the Sears Tower, though fans have nevertheless managed to map out the approximate spaces in the city where the various "factions" might be based. As in the case of the works framing Chicago as a mundane foil to magic, *Divergent* arguably uses the (present-day) city mainly as a foil to what it will become in the future. The real world of Chicago serves as a built-in foil to the destroyed dystopian world *Divergent* inhabits, making it all the more strange and inhospitable. Other works, like Blake

Crouch's *Dark Matter*; Ling Ma's *Severance* or Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* arguably take up similar narratives in their "dysopianization" of Chicago.

While this thesis has thus engaged with a specific subset of "urban fantasy", I would also like to challenge the primacy of genre and categorization. In many ways, works like *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* have far more in common with Chicago's naturalist literature than with other pieces of urban fantasy, like the Dresden files, especially as concerns their relationship with the city. As I have mentioned, Nelson Algren in particular engages with his own version of worldbuilding through his consistent metaphors painting the city as a wilderness. The Chicago of Algren's books is a lawless place of drugs, fighting, crime and lost potential: a jungle of the human spirit. Algren's Chicago, like that of *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, seems to resist mappability. However, this strangeness is not a source of potential but of fear, as when Henry enters the unmappable parking garage in *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

I have also briefly touched on the work of short story writer Stuart Dybek, whose work toes the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Like *The Time Traveler's Wife*, Dybek's work nostalgically remaps the city, calling into doubt the labels created by groups like the Chicago School and emphasizing the palimpsest nature of his neighborhood, Little Village. Dybek's work also engages in some of Ferris' unmappable insertions, likewise slipping unreal places into an existing neighborhood to view it in a new way. Dybek has many disciples (at varying levels of realism), including Alexei Galaviz-Budziszewski and Gabriel Bump who could likewise fit into a broader genre.

There are thus as many contradictory literary imaginings of Chicago as there are nicknames: is Chicago "The Windy City", "The City of Big Shoulders," the urban foil to the idealized midwest, the idealized epitome of American middle class life, the city of Al Capone or

the “Neon Wilderness”? While I have focused on two versions of literary Chicago that engage most explicitly with real spaces in Chicago and the supernatural, all these conceptions come together to create the idea of the city we call Chicago.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have presented an example of the ways in which urban fantasy can be used as a lens through which to understand a specific city, in my case the city of Chicago. Urban fantasy literature presents a unique perspective in that it simultaneously crafts a world for a fantastic story and situates this story in the “real world”, reinvesting the mundane with new possibilities for magic. In Chicago, the question of mappability takes on a special valence in response to the influence of the Chicago School of Sociology, whose emphasis on mapping space has broad influence on both urban planning and the canonical literary texts of the city, defining an urban imaginary with which every text in the city must contend.

Each of the texts I consider falls on a different place on a spectrum of mappability: while the *Dresden Files* by Jim Butcher most closely mimics the Chicago imagined by the Chicago School, my two central texts—*The Time Traveler’s Wife* and *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*—present two alternate possibilities of mapping. The main character of *The Time Traveler’s Wife* reappropriates Chicago in the face of a frightening future by creating his own “affective geography” lining up exactly with the streets in the real Chicago, engaging in bottom-up rather than top-down creation of a space. In *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*, by contrast, author Emil Ferris takes up elements of the atmosphere of Chicago to insert new spaces into the city scape where readers can imagine themselves. Each of these texts reinterprets the city

of Chicago according to their priorities, creating a new version of the city that still fits onto reality.

Despite increased scholarly interest in the domains of popular literature and spatial theory as it applies to literature, urban fantasy and its latent possibilities have been relatively unexplored. While I have no desire to strictly define “Chicago urban fantasy” as a genre, looking for the ways in which authors specifically bring magic into an urban setting can have implications for both literary and urban studies. Unlike the potentially broader category of “magical realism”, urban fantasy always must have an implied spatial component: urban fantasy by its very nature creates a layered world of magic and realism that presents possibilities for reimagining the urban space. Just as genre fiction more generally can literalize metaphors and anxieties, urban fantasy takes conceptualizations of the urban space and literally places them on top of an existing map. As my thesis demonstrates, urban fantasy literature underlines the continuing importance of prevailing urban imaginaries like those created by the Chicago school, while simultaneously equipped to imagine radical alternative mappings inaccessible through a purely realist mode.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Bill Brown, for all of his help in turning this thesis from an idea into reality. I am also grateful to my two departmental preceptors: Nell Pach from English Language and Literature and Christopher Kindell from the Committee on Environment, Geography and Urbanization for reading all of my drafts, answering my many questions and providing a timeline to take on such a daunting task. I would also like to thank Clovis Gladstone, professor of my class Corpus Building and Corpus Statistics in winter 2025, for providing me with the digital humanities skills to pull out so many locations from *The Time Traveler's Wife*, greatly strengthening my analysis, as well as Bridget Madden and Allie Scholten from the Visual Resource Center for invaluable advice on my images, as well as scanning all the pages I needed from *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*. Finally, this thesis would not have been possible without the support of my family and friends, especially Merrin Seegers for telling me to read *My Favorite Thing is Monsters!*

Appendix: Images

Fig 1: Map of Hyde Park by the Department of Sociology, courtesy of the University of Chicago Library LUNA image collection

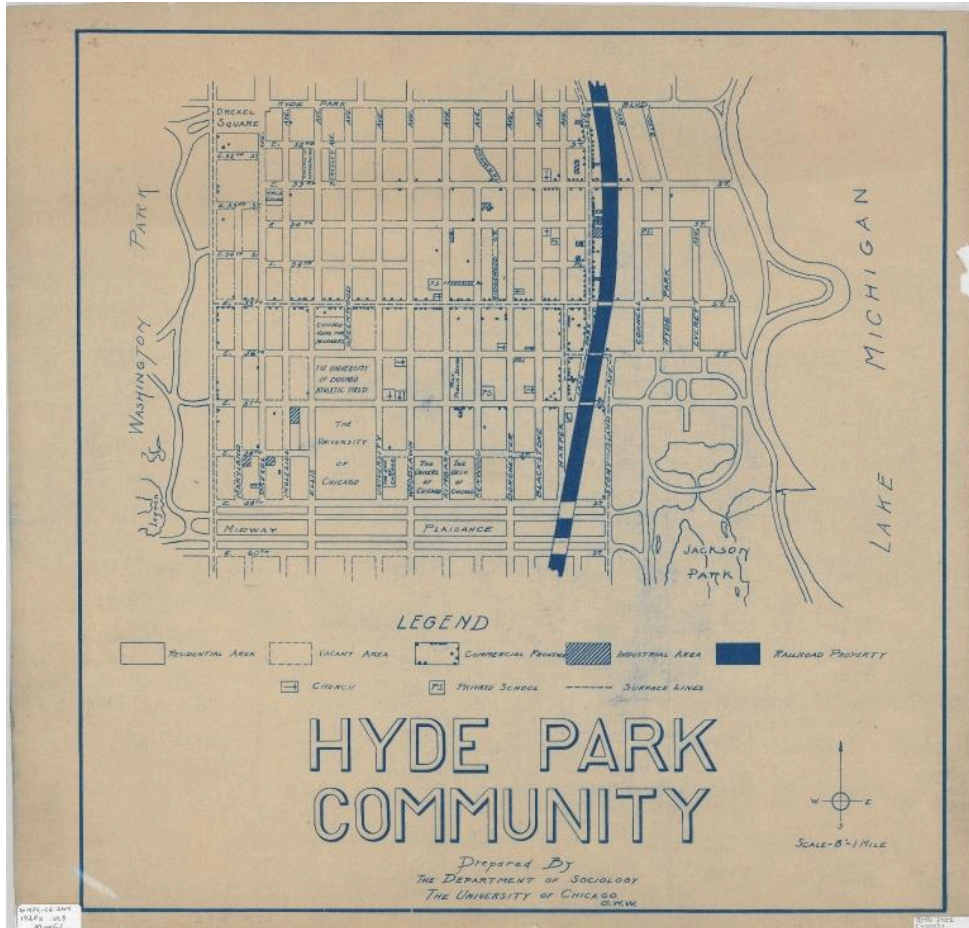


Fig 2: Map of Blighted areas in Hyde Park prepared by the South East Chicago Commission for urban renewal planning purposes, courtesy of the University of Chicago Library LUNA collection

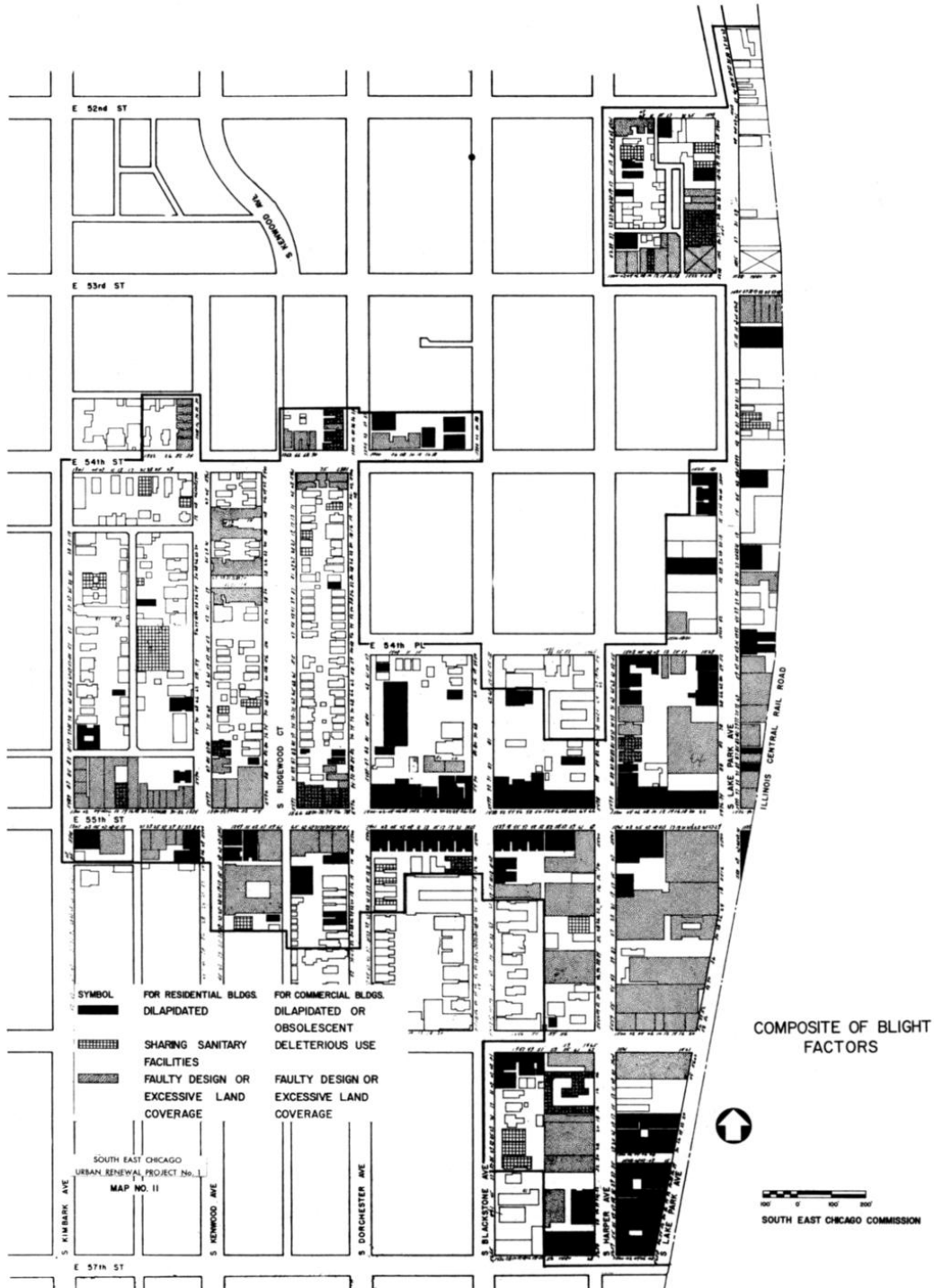


Fig 3: Map of Locations in *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Map prepared by Lena Birkholz in QGIS after cross referencing text of the novel with the Chicago Street Names data set from the Chicago Data Portal and searching streets in Philologic to pull specific locations

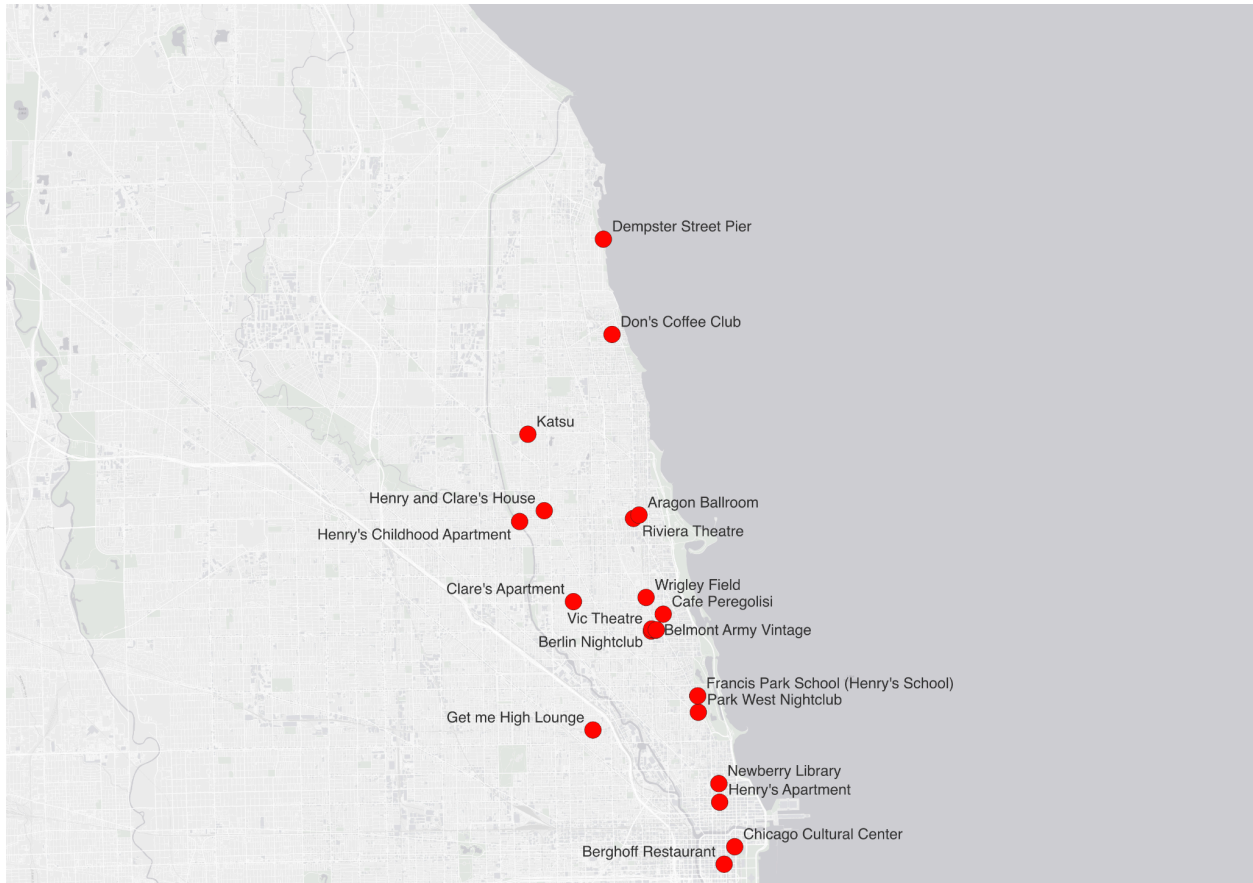


Fig 4: Images from *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters Book One* (2017)

Fig 4.1: Rose Petals in the basement after Anka's Death

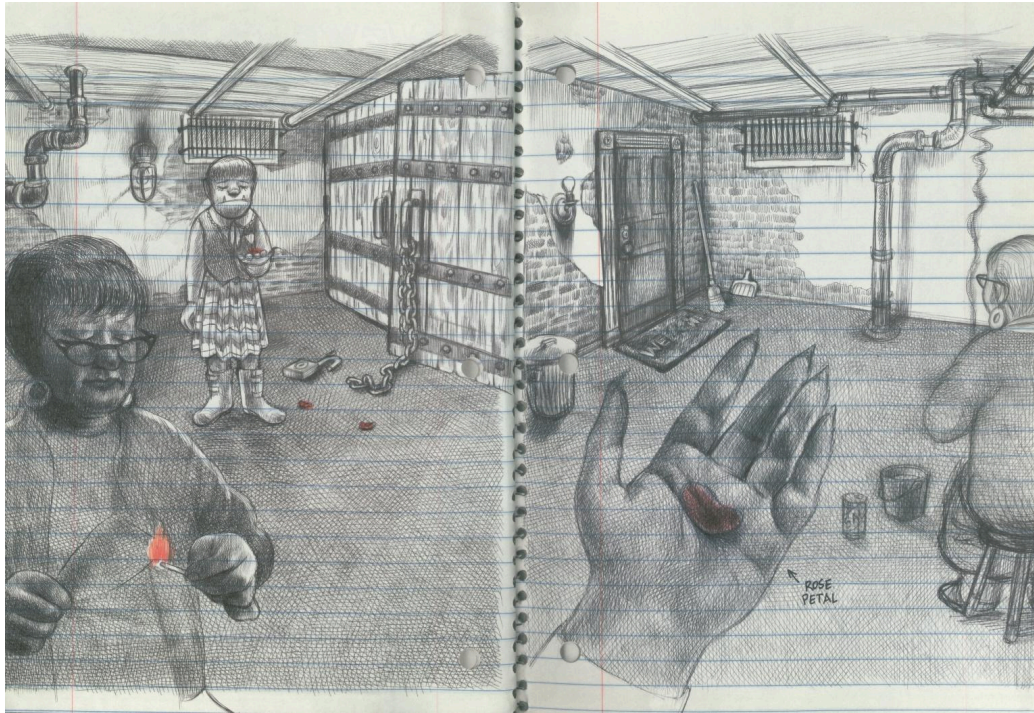


Fig 4.2: Jack Gronan at the "Green Man Club"

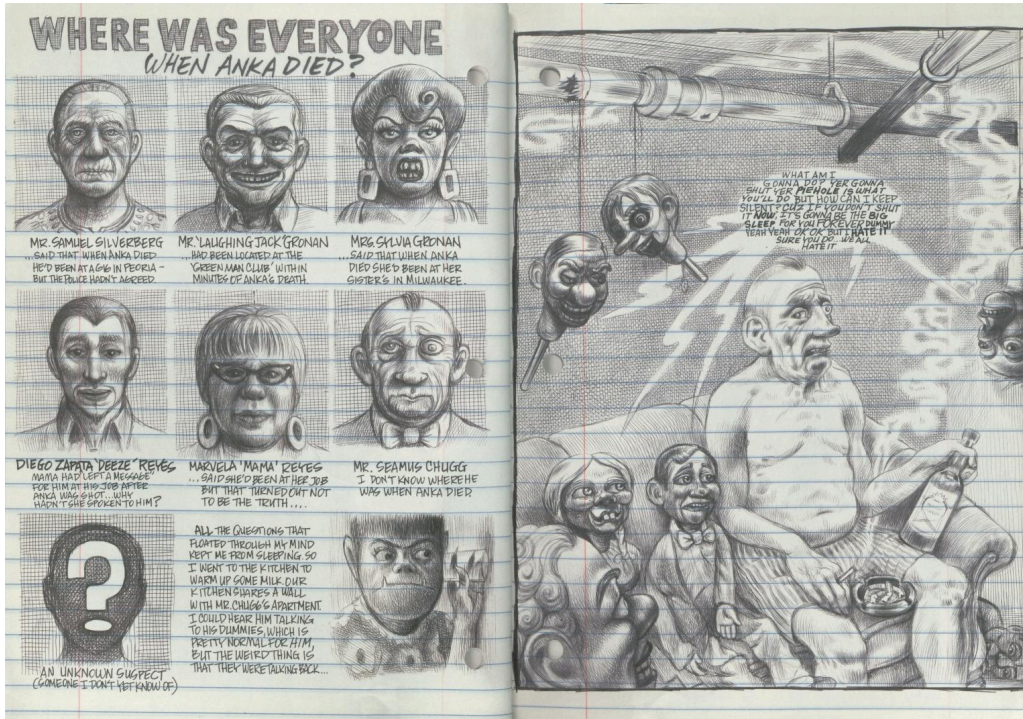


Fig 4.3: Kate Warne tells Karen about the Uptown tunnels

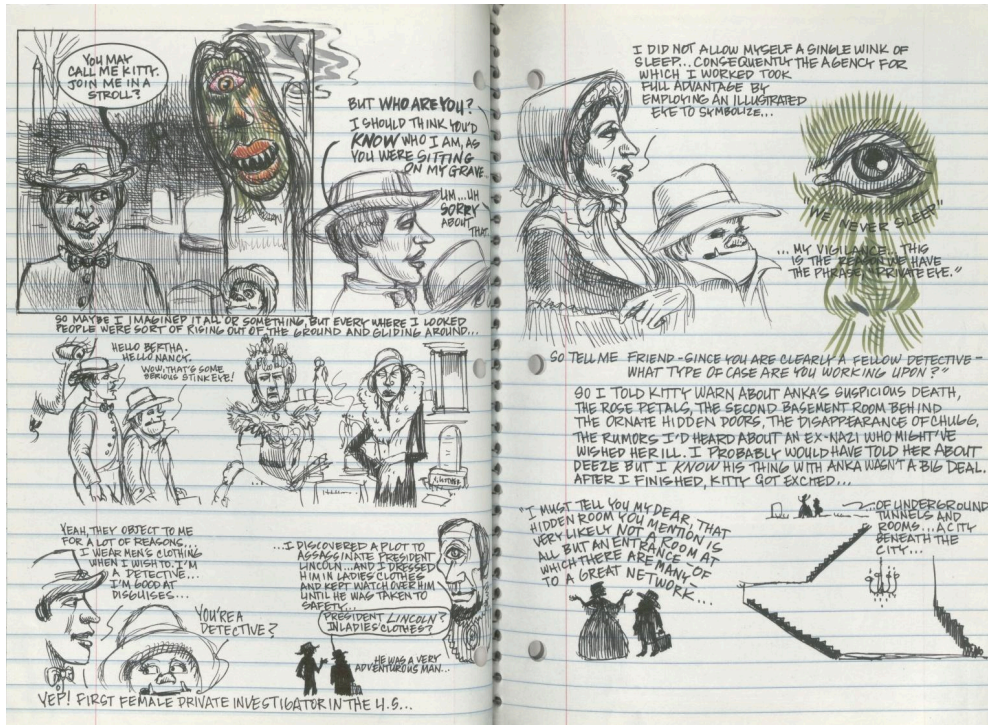


Fig 4.4: The MacGuffin Tomb and Eternal Silence Statue in Graceland Cemetary

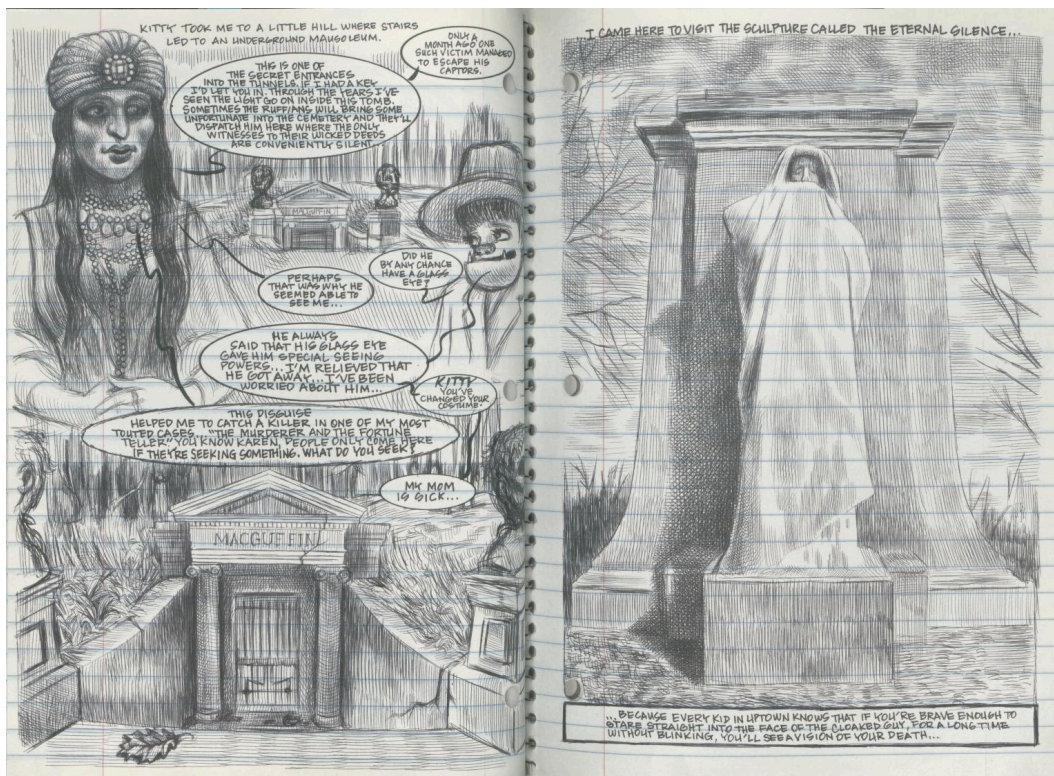


Fig 4.5: Attempt to sacrifice Anka

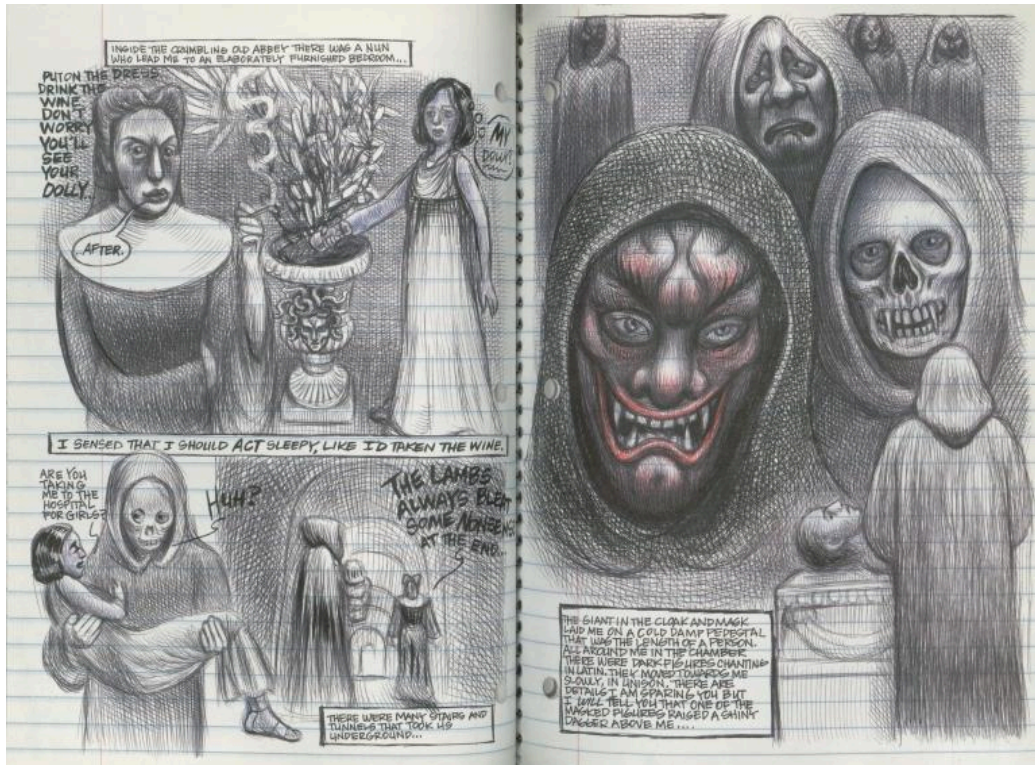


Fig 4.6: Attempt to sacrifice Anka (note pentacle on hand from Wolfman)

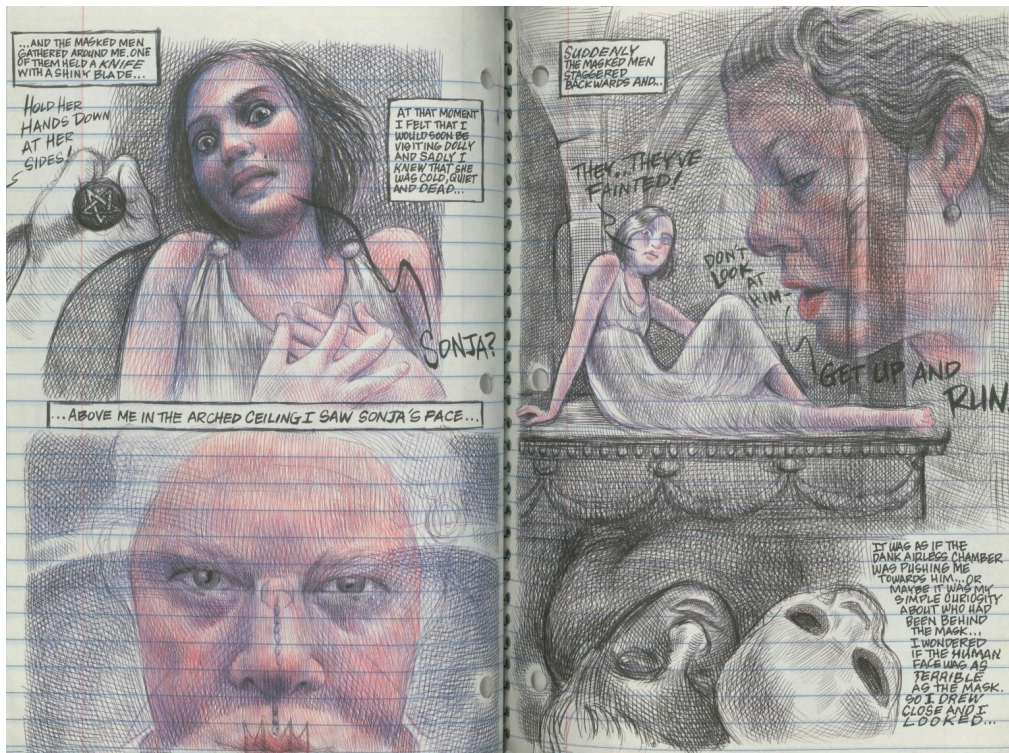


Fig 4.7: Anka escapes from the human sacrificers (note medusa head)



Fig 4.8: Karen confronts the fact that she isn't a werewolf

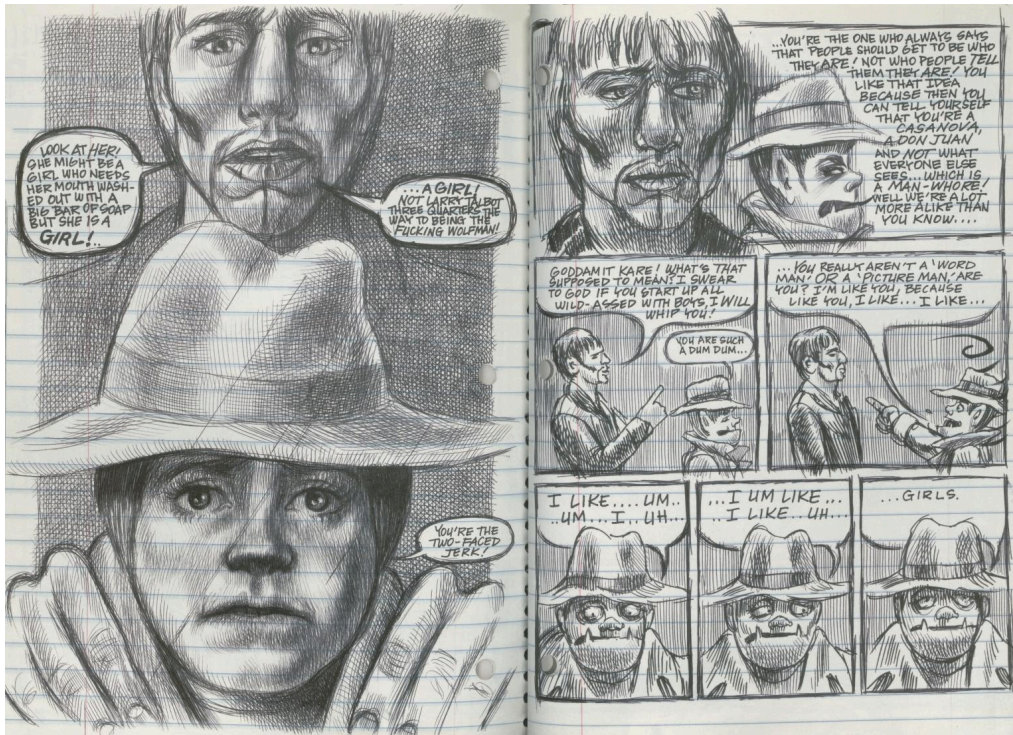


Fig 5.5: Green Man on Door to Tunnels

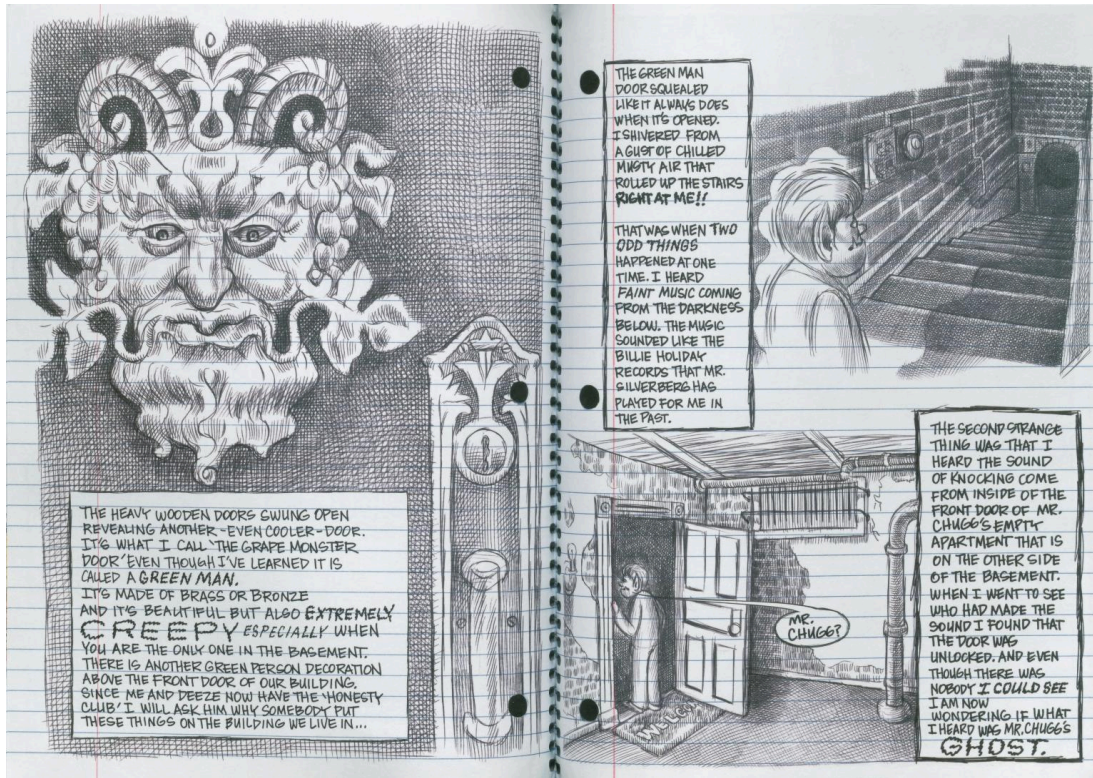


Fig 5.6: Into Titty City

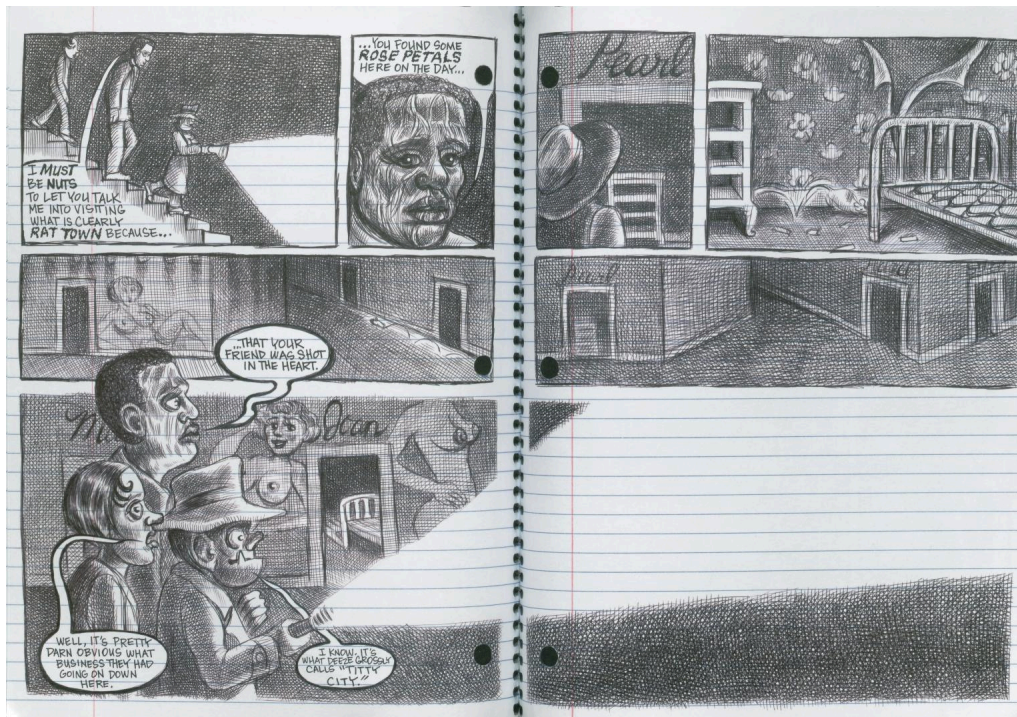
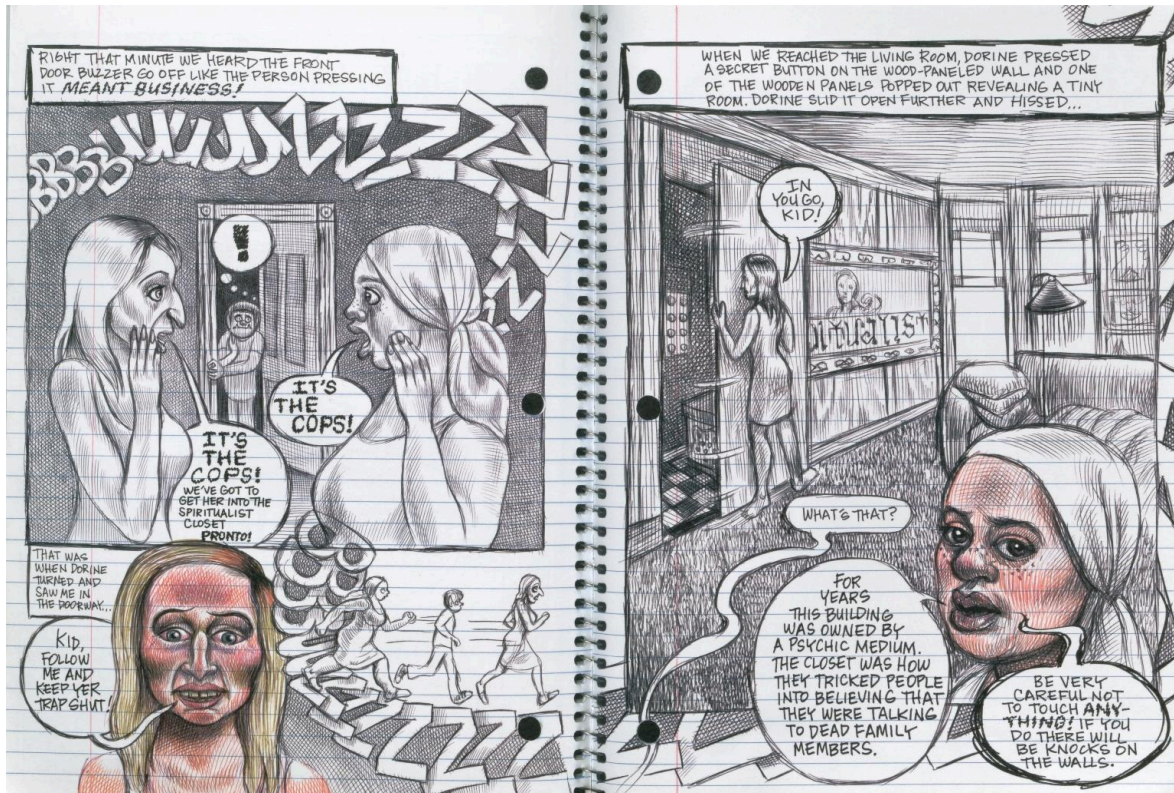


Fig 5.9: Hiding in the Psychic's Closet



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