Arts & Humanities

The Confessions and Obsessions of Ariel Schrag

A young cartoonist draws inspiration from high school.

By
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|
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The teenage experience has long been the lifeblood of American popular culture. From early rock ’n’ roll to teen movies to TV shows like Beverly Hills 90210 and The OC, portrayals of high school kids — naïve, curious, knowing, rebellious, alienated, wounded, beautiful, cliquey, ecstatic, insecure — continue to attract audiences. Indeed, the culture is so glutted with coming-of-age tales and teen sex comedies that it seems a small miracle when an artist comes along and makes the material feel new.

Cartoonist Ariel Schrag ’03CC has done just that. As the creator of four high school–based graphic novels (or long-form comic books), Schrag, 26, has already earned a place as one of the wittier and more perceptive chroniclers of teenage angst. Schrag’s four largely autobiographical books — Awkward, Definition, Potential, and the soon-to-be-published Likewise — cover the high school years of a female character named Ariel, a brainy, vulnerable, anxiety-filled science buff who discovers that she’s attracted to girls. That desire is the key to the books’ main dramatic complications, most notably in the 200-page Potential, in which Ariel, a junior, falls in love with an elusive, noncommittal senior named Sally Jults. Their relationship, which for Ariel swings uncontrollably from joy to heartache, is resolved, in the final panels, in a moment of quiet realization that’s as poignant and moving as anything in today’s novels or films — an achievement all the more impressive considering that Potential was drawn and written while Schrag herself was still a teenager.

“When I was a kid I drew all the time,” says Schrag, now a writer and story editor for the lesbian-themed Showtime series, The L Word. “But the way that I drew always involved stories.” In the short film Confession: A Film About Ariel Schrag (2003), by Sharon Barnes, Schrag describes her process this way: “Taking my life, editing it, then taking what I’ve edited and crafting it.”

Born to artistic parents (her mother is a composer and music teacher; her father, a lawyer, was once a draftsman), Schrag grew up in Berkeley, Calif., across the bay from the original underground comics mecca of San Francisco — favorable geography for a young, sexually conflicted cartoonist. Schrag took full advantage of her colorful environment, attending punk rock shows and skipping class to hang out at Comic Relief, a comics shop just blocks from her school. But it was an earlier moment of discovery that set Schrag on her path.

“I was around nine,” she remembers. “My dad had this stack of comics high up on a shelf in his office, and he would get them down and give them to me and my sister — these old Plasticman and Uncle Scrooge comics. But then I went back to look at them, and they were really high up on the shelf, so I climbed up on his desk and found that there was another pile, which was all the R. Crumb and sexual spoofs of Disney. And that was so fascinating, so I started sneaking these R. Crumb books and reading them.”

For the young Schrag, these adult comics (the term refers to sexual content as well as works aimed at older readers, e.g., Art Spiegelman’s Holocaust story, Maus) combined the visceral thrill of pornography with the radical notion that comics could go deeper and further than talking ducks.

“I loved the idea of being able to write whatever I wanted in this format,” Schrag says. “It felt to me like unexplored territory in a way, because the pile of sex comics and the pile of kids’ comics seemed to exist at these two poles, and I was really interested in what was in between.”

A few years later, at Berkeley High School, Schrag began exploring that in-between territory, producing a series of frank, humorous, emotionally direct comics based on her dealings with friends, school, drugs, family, and sex. This formula comes together most effectively in Potential, which was published by Slave Labor Graphics during Schrag’s first year at Columbia. Most of the book’s action is done in a lively doodling-in-back-of-class style that emphasizes the innocence of the adolescent

characters, while the interspersed dreams and fantasies are rendered with sharp, detailed realism that allows Schrag to show off her drawing chops (she actually staged photographs with her friends, based on the scenes she was writing, and then drew the pictures from the photographs). The dual styles produce a convincing effect of shifting consciousness; and where many storytellers stumble, Schrag succeeds in capturing some of the obscure logic and strangeness of dreams, with sequences that are both visually and structurally credible. But ii's real revelation is in the text. Combining the chatty rhythms of a high school diarist with an empathy beyond her years, Schrag writes smart, truthful dialogue that is both heartbreaking and hilarious, such as when an anxious Ariel consults her biology textbook to find evidence of homosexuality in the animal world, or when Sally and Ariel conjecture about who's a dyke and who isn't at their school, or discuss the imbalance in their relationship. The book's considerable insights into human relations seem the natural, effortless result of the author's honesty — what is sometimes called the wisdom of youth.

In 2002, Potential was optioned by the production company Killer Films (Boys Don't Cry, Happiness, Far From Heaven), where it is being developed into a movie (Schrag wrote the screenplay), following a recent trend in which adult comics like American Splendor by Harvey Pekar and Ghost World by Daniel Clowes have been adapted into films.

"What a lot of people told me they like about the book is that it's not the sort of coming-out story that's become a cliché," Schrag says, referring to the well-known obstacles that face many people who come out — being teased, beaten up, ostracized, or disowned by family and friends. None of that happens in Potential. And while Schrag is sympathetic to the more tragic coming-out stories, she does not think that they should define the experience, or even that they necessarily make for better drama. "You can't rely on tragedy to tell an interesting story," she says.

Nor can a writer rely strictly on talent to tell that story. While many young authors fall prey to verbal excess and gimmickry, Schrag was too busy writing down what was happening to her to lapse into literary self-consciousness. Nothing in her books feels labored or contrived. In that sense, being a teenager worked in her favor.

"With everything I write now," she says, "I still think that I can remain unself-conscious. But when you're a teenager you want everybody to look at you, and it's that sort of raging self-obsessed exhibitionism that overpowers any sense of 'What is

someone going to think if they read this?' because you're way more interested in somebody thinking anything about you. But when you get older you don't crave that quite as much; you're more aware of how your work might affect people, and how it might change the way people think about you."

Which is one reason why the final book in her high school quartet, Likewise, at over 400 pages, has proven to be the most challenging. "I became obsessed with revealing the most grotesque or private elements of myself. I feel Likewise is the most difficult book to share because I was on this mission of self-exposure."

Schrag is challenging herself formally as well: Likewise is modeled after James Joyce's novel Ulysses, with which Schrag became "obsessed" — a word she uses often — during her senior year of high school. Stream of consciousness, Bloomian peripatetic wanderings, and varying literary styles are among the Joycean effects employed by Schrag, who majored in English at Columbia. Joyce aside, Schrag says she draws her inspiration mainly from other cartoonists, including Joe Matt ("A huge influence; does a lot of autobiographical stuff"), Daniel Clowes, Gabrielle Bell, Ariel Bordeaux ("Her comic was from a woman's perspective — fun, raunchy, mundane stuff that I felt I could write about and wanted to write about"), Art Spiegelman ("In the third grade I did a book report on Maus"), and, most important, Lynn Johnston, whose long-running strip For Better or For Worse, about a suburban Toronto family, is one of the few comics in which the characters — as in Schrag's books — age in real time.

After graduating from Columbia, Schrag supported herself by selling comics on the street in her neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. She was also an art instructor in an after-school program in Bedford-Stuyvesant and, in the fall of 2004, taught a graphic novel workshop at the New School. All the while, she continued to work on her comics — drawing, writing, and inking in her usual tireless and compulsive way. But the solitude of that life was beginning to take its toll.

"I was going crazy drawing comics in New York," she says, "living in a windowless basement and always feeling like I was on the verge of some kind of nervous breakdown."

Schrag's career then took an unexpected turn. Her entertainment lawyer, whom she had hired after being approached by Killer Films, also represented Rose Troche, then an executive producer on The L Word. The lawyer gave Troche two versions of

Potential, the book and Schrag's screenplay, and on the strength of those writing samples Schrag was given a meeting with Troche and L Word creator Ilene Chaiken. The meeting, which took place in February 2005, ended in Schrag's being offered a job to write for the show. Two weeks later, she moved to Los Angeles.

On the face of it, the transition from cartoonist to television writer might seem a difficult one: the cartoonist, after all, has full creative control over her material, whereas the TV writer is part of a much larger creative team. But Schrag welcomed the change.

"Being able to write about these fictional characters was so exciting," she says. "I was so used to writing about myself."

There are, of course, other advantages to writing for a hit TV show: good money, a dose of fame, and the excitement of being part of a cultural phenomenon — The L Word, which follows the lives of a close-knit group of lesbians in Los Angeles, is one of Showtime's most popular series, buoyed by a fiercely devoted fan base.

"Working for The L Word is so fun and wonderful, and it's improving my writing in so many ways," Schrag says. "What I like most about it is the collaborative part. With this job, we sit around in a room and just talk and laugh all day, coming up with stories, and it's just the most fun job I could ever imagine."

While she continues to dedicate herself to The L Word, Schrag is still completing Likewise, as well as a series of short comics called Linen and Things that spans her childhood to the present. In addition, she's working with an editor at Viking Books on an anthology of comics about middle school, which will include reprinted material by Dan Clowes, Joe Matt, Gabrielle Bell, Ariel Bordeaux, and two of Schrag's own pieces. And while she plans to return to The L Word for the next season, she leaves no doubt as to where her deepest commitment lies.

"Comics," she says, "are the most intimate, personal work I'll ever do."

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