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Kevin Mutch Interview

By Jeffery Klaehn

This interview presents a conversation with Canadian cartoonist Kevin Mutch about his graphic novel, *The Rough Pearl,* which addresses issues surrounding the intersection of class and race privilege in the "precariat" creative communities in and around New York City. *The Rough Pearl* is a sequel to Mutch's earlier graphic novel, *Fantastic Life,* which was set in Canada and won a Xeric award in 2010. Prestige, status and cultural capital in relation to art worlds are thematically central to both graphic novels. This interview discusses these topics as well as representations of race, ethnicity, gender, and identity in comics; historical exclusion of comics from "high culture" and comics drawing inspiration from "low culture"; intersections of markets, technology and audiences; and marketing of art and popular culture. This interview was undertaken throughout April-May 2020.

Jeffery Klaehn: Please tell me about *The Rough Pearl.* What informed the story and your approach to telling it?

Kevin Mutch: *The Rough Pearl* started off as an attempt to write an autobiographical story about an ill-advised romantic relationship I got into in my very early thirties in Winnipeg Canada, but it started to develop a mind of its own (as these things often do) and insisted on setting itself in New York City and New Jersey, where I was living at the time. Any semblance of honest autobiography went downhill from there, and the book turned into a "what if" fantasy about how I *didn't* meet my wife, Melissa.

I'd describe my storytelling approach as ad hoc – I generally have an idea for the first panel or page, but not too much further. Often when I'm finishing "roughing" a page (sketching out the panel layout and loose little drawings of the characters and their dialogue) the next page suggests itself to me and I scribble a little note along the

bottom margin to remind myself of what to write the next day. Mentally, that entire process is harder than it sounds – I'm usually too lazy to write more than a page a day.

As a result of writing this way, I'll often get about a third of the way into a book before I start imagining any sort of plot or "story arc" or resolution, and many of those ideas wind up getting tossed out anyway once the characters have their say – they'll start getting into fights or sleeping together or something, and it throws the whole outline into chaos.

The only thing that really helps me tie it together is that I keep remembering little anecdotes from my life that would fit in nicely here and there, and those tend to have more structure. I often think of my books as collages, with chunks of true story glued together with whatever interstitial lies or fictions I can dream up.

So, given all that, *The Rough Pearl* developed pretty organically, reflecting whatever anxieties (mostly around making a living and a career as an artist) were on my mind at the time. I was already in my late forties when I was writing it, so a lot of what concerned me was the way life in and around New York City was driven by the brutally high cost of living - even by the late nineties it was almost impossible to be a "boho" artist there unless you had family money - and the compromises it forced everyone to make. You meet a lot more "art directors" than artists.

That's why my lead character Adam is so fixated on this idea of losing his "free will" - he's all hemmed in by circumstance. (See Figure 1.) That's also why I drew the book in a "realistic" style (by indie comics standards, anyway) - I wanted the drawings to have as much gravitas as possible to reflect the idea that these people are grown-ups, forced to face reality in their lives after the parties are all over.

JK: How long did it take you to produce *The Rough Pearl?*

Kevin Mutch: Seven years – although I was working on another (still not-quite-finished) book called *The Moon Prince* at the same time, which slowed me down a lot. Like many graphic novelists, I'm obsessed with my production schedule — so I can tell you that I normally produce a completely finished page of comics (including story, art, lettering and coloring) in about twenty working hours. What with the necessities of making a living and raising a family, I'm lucky to make fifty pages of comics in a year.

JK: What were the most rewarding and perhaps most challenging aspects of creating the work?

Kevin Mutch: Graphic novels are ridiculously time-consuming undertakings (and certainly not a good way to get rich), so just getting to the finish line counts as both the most challenging and the most rewarding part. Other than that, the formal problem of how to make the drawings in a new style I hadn't used before, which would work in a comics form and also be consistent for hundreds upon hundreds of panels — that was a real mountain to climb. I tried out many different stylistic approaches and wound up re-drawing parts of the book several times!

JK: Without giving away key details of the graphic novel, what can you share about how humor plays into your art and storytelling?

Kevin Mutch: Well, I've always been drawn to what gets called "black comedy" nowadays – *Dr. Strangelove* is my favorite movie of all time – I think because it has lots of sharp contrasts.

An artist friend of mine once told me about how he liked to bake apple pies: the tartest apples he could find and lots and lots of sugar. I'm attracted to depressing and fraught

scenarios, but I'm also attracted to humor, so I try to have to have both – for balance *and* tension. (See Figure 3.)

JK: I appreciated the lead character's internal dialogues throughout the graphic novel. Also the *Star Trek* "Mirror, Mirror" original series episode call out and the references to Canada wedded into the story.

Kevin Mutch: The funny thing about living as a Canadian in the US (like Adam and his wife) is that most people there never realize you're a foreigner, and even if you mention it to them it'll get sort of discounted: "Oh, that's not *really* a different country" – so my stereotypical Canadian anxiety about inauthenticity would just get worse!

JK: The story deals with contemporary social issues, like struggles to manage one's self, to cope, and to find (elusive) happiness. At one point the lead character comments that his student's art advances representations of sexuality, identity and race. What does *The Rough Pearl* represent, in your view?

Kevin Mutch: I'm reluctant to speak for anyone but myself – which is why my stories are somewhat autobiographical – but my wife is African American and we have two biracial children, so discussions about race, class, gender and power are continual in our house.

I think the central line in the book from Adam's perspective is when he thinks to himself: "Well, that's the story of my goddam life. Always in the right place at the wrong time." (See Figure 4.) Adam is a white/anglo/hetero male who feels like he missed the boat – like if he'd been born a decade or two earlier his whole life could've been so much easier.

Part of the story is about the ways even people who only recently acquired privilege can be oblivious to it (like Adam's wife Anna) and part of it is about how people in the process of losing their privilege can be oblivious to how much they still have compared

to others (as Adam himself hopefully comes to realize when talking with his student/object of infatuation, Regan).

JK: The graphic novel also explores meritocracy and social class. (See Figures 5 and 6.) And is it fair to say place is also central to the narrative? The closing scenes are suggestive of what? Early on the lead character comments about gentrification. This is closely followed by a dinner party scene in the apartment he shares with his wife in which one of the invited guests expresses voyeuristic desires to see how the other half lives. At another point the lead character's wife mentions his potential to secure a full-time teaching gig specifically in relation to her desire to move to a bigger house. And there's character movement throughout the graphic novel as a whole featuring physical as well as prominent immaterial, internal places. What can you tell me about these ideas, without giving away central plot points or sharing information you'd prefer readers discover on their own?

Kevin Mutch: Growing up in Canada, I was constantly assured that we were striving to create a multicultural and multiracial "mosaic," whereas the United States was a "melting pot" where ethnicity dissolved to form an "American" nationality. But the reality in most big American cities – especially New York – is that different groups live in different neighborhoods.

Adam and his wife live in Union City, NJ, which is cheek to jowl with Manhattan (it's the first town Tony drives though after he goes around the helix when he exits the Lincoln Tunnel in the opening credits of The Sopranos). It's the most densely populated city in the US, with 65,000 people crammed into one square mile and, as the mayor once said to me: "if you wanna count all the illegals you can add another 15,000 to that."

The population is heavily immigrant and overwhelmingly Hispanic. It's largely working class, and as a result it's the last neighborhood so close to Manhattan with affordable real estate. So even though Adam and his wife are immigrants themselves and certainly

not rich, they could fairly be viewed as privileged gentrifiers -- and (Anna's claims of community involvement notwithstanding) they're not making any efforts to counteract that impression.

Instead, Adam and Anna dream of moving three miles east to a hipster part of Brooklyn (even in the 1990's people like them couldn't afford Manhattan), but they're never going to make it – Adam can't make enough money as a lowly adjunct. So everyone resents everyone else and dreams of making it big while knowing full well that the game is rigged.

In the end, Adam imagines (or possibly experiences) both the finality of his failure, the ongoing hope of somehow beating the odds, and a sense of impending, apocalypse level doom. And interracial sex!

JK: I was actually going to mention that in relation to place and movement – from one relationship to another, and possibly also moving from one bed to another? And *The Rough Pearl* strikes to the realities of North American university teaching and the obscenely high degree of inequality and exploitation that exists but is almost never spotlighted in meaningful or sustained ways. (See Figure 7.) Is it fair to say that *The Rough Pearl* and its narrative can be read as suggesting that some semblance of nominal economic and career stability is important for one's overall mental and emotional health? Hyper-precarious employment, inequalities and impermanence are central elements of Adam's unfolding narrative.

Kevin Mutch: I would agree that the sense of a "stacked deck" Adam feels is central to his spiraling mental problems. He was born in the early 1960s – the book takes place in the mid 1990s – so he's actually an early "Gen Xer," and like many people of that vintage his life turned out very differently than what he was led to expect as a kid. (See Figure 8.)

So not only is his white male privilege eroding away, but so are all the underpinnings of a secure existence – long term employment, pensions, health insurance, affordable housing. Meanwhile, his wife is doing much better than he is – she's on tenure-track at Columbia – so he feels like a failure by the standards of masculinity he grew up with.

JK: Really, I think both Regan's and Adam's stories can be read as critical commentary on prevailing economic systems that perpetuate, normalize and legitimize inequalities. I'm thinking too of the highly disturbing scene in the bar that Adam witnesses. It's like a downward spiral as the characters are striving to cope, live and escape. Because Adam's sort of fumbling forward, trying to maintain control of his spiraling circumstances, and Regan's trying her best to escape via her art while looking at what she's compelled to do to earn money as a practical means to an end. She seems detached from those experiences – although we can only infer this, as we don't know what's she's really feeling, subjectively, as she deals with total objectification. It's interesting too how she turns this on its heels, with her art and creativity, seizing agency through artistic expression, as she moves between places, contexts.

Kevin Mutch: I think that's a good way to characterize her, as hoping art will be a way forward in the face of everything stacked against her. She comes from a less privileged background than Adam (Adam's dad was a cop in Canada, so working/middle class, but Regan grew up in pretty dire poverty in Baltimore) and she has a less romantic view of art than Adam does. I'm actually in the middle of writing a scene in my next book where she reappears a few years later, offstage, and is becoming a successful commercial photographer in Los Angeles.

JK: The graphic novel's launch is only days away as we're undertaking this interview. What's it feel like, anticipating a major work's release?

Kevin Mutch: Well, as I write this Fantagraphics has released the book – and almost every book store in the entire world is closed due to the Covid pandemic. My timing was exquisite! But just seeing a copy in print with Fantagraphics' logo on the spine is deeply satisfying to me – reading their books was what inspired me to start cartooning again in my early forties – after more than twenty years away from it.

JK: What are your thoughts on how cultural capital, status and prestige work within the field of comics and cartooning?

Kevin Mutch: Conflicted. I spent a long time in the "fine art" world as a painter, critic, curator (and even gallery owner for a while) and I always hated the disconnect between the self-image of artists and their work as "radical" and "critical" and the reality that their entire ecosystem is dependant on the patronage of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world. Whereas comics, produced as cheap open-edition multiples (in artworld jargon) don't have that problem — $100 copies of *Kramers Ergot* notwithstanding, heh.

But certainly there's a circulation between high and low in any cultural field, and even a proudly lowbrow/outsider medium like comics can't avoid getting sucked upwards here and there. I do like knowing that just about anyone can afford to buy a copy of my book, and if it somehow also winds up getting reviewed in an art mag — that's great too (and maybe a better way to achieve that than by painting!)

JK: In what ways has music intersected with your art throughout your career?

Kevin Mutch: I was a very geeky kid, reading science fiction and comic books in my room in Winnipeg. Around the time I got out of high school I started working as a dishwasher in a cafe where the staff were all music-loving counterculture weirdos. They turned me on to all sorts of stuff, especially punk rock, which completely changed my life – not least by helping me dress better so I could get girls. Punk and Post-punk had

very rich connections to both comics and visual art, which was a big part of how I segued out of making underground-style comics into Neo-expressionist paintings – don't worry, I became a god-fearing Conceptualist later.

I also made record covers and music videos for my friends The Crash Test Dummies, and eventually wound up in New York City years later running the "imaging" department for one of the Big Three record companies. I moved back to Canada with my family in 2018, but I still make my living doing Photoshop work and illustrations for the American music business.

JK: You won a Xeric Award for your first graphic novel, *Fantastic Life* (Mutch, 2011), in 2010. (See Figure 9.) Please tell me about this work and how you came to create it.

Kevin Mutch: *Fantastic Life* was written in a very similar way to *The Rough Pearl* (in fact, *The Rough Pearl* is a sequel to *Fantastic Life,* set about a decade later). So, it's a bunch of anecdotal incidents from my youth glued together with fictitious elements – especially the zombie parts! It's drawn in a more traditionally "cartoony" indie comics style that I thought suited the twenty-something protagonists. I started it as a short story called "Uncertainty Principle" – which I shamelessly included in an experimental comics anthology series I was co-publishing and co-editing at the time called *Blurred Vision* – and then extended it to novel length when more ideas kept popping into my head.

Also, from a formal perspective it was an experiment to see if I could still draw comics after twenty years away from them — and boy was I rusty! But the great thing about making comics in the era of Photoshop is that it allows you to rework images extensively and quickly, so I was able to polish the drawings to my heart's content, and it wound up looking not *too* bad. It was actually included in *The Best American Comics 2011,* which really surprised me and made me realize that this was a worthwhile path to pursue.

JK: In 2009 you wrote a blog post about "an increase in the number of artists and art forms coupled with the increasing fragmentation of their audiences" (Mutch, 2009). What motivated you to blog about comics and comic art?

Kevin Mutch: I started that blog ("Next Issue") with Geoff Grogan, a New York based artist and cartoonist who shared my concern at the time that "art comics" as they were called (and maybe still are) had seized the spotlight from the "literary" indie comics of the 1980's and 90's (the mostly autobiographical graphic novels and stories that followed the earlier "underground" comics of the 1960's and 70's) to the detriment of "story." Instead, with "art" comics there was a formalist emphasis on the visuals, often making explicit reference to fine art antecedents like German Expressionism, the Chicago Imagists, Philip Guston, etc.

Geoff and I both have backgrounds in contemporary art, so we wanted to examine those claims to "high cultural" status critically, especially given the way they drew on Expressionist and related sources but ignored newer developments — at a time when various flavours of Conceptualism were dominant in the art world itself. I don't want to speak for Geoff (those blog posts are still up, so he can speak for himself), but I thought it was a mistake for something as marginal and disreputable as comics to aspire to "high art" status, anyway. High art should be aspiring to "comics" status!

JK: To revisit the central themes of that post, what are your thoughts on comics and intersections of markets, technology and audiences today?

Kevin Mutch: Well, at the time I was writing for that blog I was certain that the impending arrival of tablet computers like the iPad would be the death-knell of print comics, and that didn't happen – unless the Covid pandemic finally finishes them off! Instead, we saw a bifurcation between types of comics (and prose) that suited the ephemeral nature of reading on tablets and those that didn't. Romance novels, for

example, get consumed quickly and perhaps compulsively - and are very popular on tablets, while used book stores often won't deal with the printed versions these days. Newspapers have a similar life cycle, as do some serial "superhero" comics.

But art table books, literary novels, fashion and photography magazines, and yes, many comics have another function as totem objects - trophies you can shelve for display - and so are still largely bought in print form. Recently we've seen the same effect with music - a large part of the business is digital streaming, but an increasing number of young people buy physical LPs to possess as tangible artifacts.

Nevertheless, digital production and consumption of media has continued to splinter audiences into smaller and smaller niches — I myself can't be bothered to watch what my son calls "live TV" any more because Youtube videos exist that are laser targeted to my specific tastes — zero-budget shows about comic books, science fiction novelists, obscure punk bands, etc. I'd be surprised if there's more than a few thousand people in the whole world watching them!

My question as a comics blogger ten years ago was: If that's the future, how much longer can big-budget entertainments continue to be produced? A rump mass culture has held on longer than I expected then, but arguably at the cost of lost relevance. The most popular music or movies or even network TV shows of the 1960's and 70's often had depth, complexity and ambition that were obvious even at the time. I'd agree that the best pop culture today is often much better than that — but it's certainly not nearly as "popular".

Still, it's thrilling to see "alternative" comics — as marginal a form as poetry, by sales numbers — insinuating itself into influential and prestigious (if not "popular" in the old, mass sense) positions in the culture through the leverage of TV and movies, My teenage daughter had us watch *The End of The F***ing World* with her on Netflix and seemed

happy to find some common ground with us culturally. I just wish I could get her to read the comic it's based on.

JK: How would you characterize the comic scene in Canada? Has it changed over time, in your view? What does "Canadian comics" mean for you?

Kevin Mutch: I'm woefully ignorant of the current comics scene in Canada (and everywhere else!) because I don't have enough time to make my own work, let alone read other people's – much as I'd like to. I was pretty knowledgeable about comics up to around 1980 because I read them obsessively, but then I went to art school (hoping it would help me become a cartoonist) and had that beaten out of me.

I paid some attention to it in the 90's though, when I was on the board of an alternative gallery in Winnipeg and we brought in some graphic novelists as visiting artists. One of them was Chester Brown, who sent me a copy of his book *Ed the Happy Clown* which deeply impressed me and, in retrospect, started me back on the path to making comics.

Then, shortly after we moved to Hamilton recently there was a big show of Canadian "indie" comics work that my buddy Joe Ollmann co-curated at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, so that was actually a good chance to get up to speed. Canada really punches above its weight in this world for some reason!

I wonder if perhaps the geography of Canada plays a part – maybe artists feeling cut off from art centres like New York (or even other Canadian cities – Winnipeg is unbelievably isolated) are attracted to a modest medium like comics that can be cheaply reproduced and sent through the mail.

JK: Let's return to the question of status and cultural capital in relation to art and comics, which is also central to the graphic novel.

Kevin Mutch: I'm one of those people who sometimes get uncomfortable with the term "graphic novel" because it sounds a little pretentious but also gets uncomfortable with the term "comics" because it doesn't sound serious enough – imagine if all films were referred to as "comedies."

Comics are getting more and more acceptable in academic contexts and graphic novels (the "serious" ones) are actually fashionable in literary and artistic circles now. This may spell doom for their outsider cred, but at least they still have strong connections to "low" culture, from which they can draw nourishment (see a piece I originally wrote back in the 90's for more on this; Mutch, 2001) in ways that have long been problematic for serious visual art.

To be frank, I haven't seen many "literary" comics that I thought worked well as literature (and almost no "art comics" that I thought worked well as art), and I don't actually think the historical exclusion of comics from "high" culture was unfair. Like "novels" when that form first started (or theatre, or just about any other "art" I can think of) "graphic novels" started out as popular entertainment and need time to develop more range and depth.

Having said that, I think comics have tremendous potential as a medium – especially given the shifts we see underway to a more visual culture and the increasing tension between the cost of producing television and movies and the size of their audiences. A graphic novel can be produced by a single (determined) person!

Anyway, as an aging punk rocker I'm happy to make art and write books outside of the journals and galleries and grants and teaching jobs that support high culture. If "graphic novels" eventually do develop an equivalent level of "cultural capital" I hope there will still be young people making their own zines and minicomics for each other and not giving a damn about their status in that world.

JK: Which comic artists have influenced you?

Kevin Mutch: I'm deeply influenced by a number of mainstream comics creators who I read avidly as a kid – Carl Barks, Will Eisner (except for the racist caricatures) and Jack Kirby for example, but also prose science fiction writers like Robert Heinlein and Alice (Andre) Norton, as well as a lot of the cartoonists from *Heavy Metal* magazine in its early days – especially Moebius and Richard Corben. I'm probably more influenced by older "underground" cartoonists like Gilbert Shelton, Vaughn Bode and Robert Crumb than by a lot of later "alternative" comics because I wasn't following them at the time, but I was around for the rise of "ground level" comics in the late 70's and really enjoyed Dave Sim's work (despite his later controversies).

I wouldn't term anyone after that an "influence" per se because I was pretty set in my storytelling ways by my twenties, but in the early 90's Chester Brown and Peter Bagge impressed me a lot, and since then I've particularly admired Jason Lutes, Joe Sacco, Eddie Campbell, Dan Clowes and Alison Bechdel. In the last ten or fifteen years I've especially liked Matt Madden, Jessica Abel and Bishakh Som's work, and also Noah van Sciver (nice to see a younger cartoonist these days who cares so much about storytelling).

I think as an adult my comics have been more influenced by music than by anything else – especially by British postpunk bands like The Fall, Swell Maps, and Wire. Oh, and Tom Waits! Tom Waits was a very specific inspiration for the look and tone I tried to get in *The Rough Pearl*, although I'm not sure if I achieved that.

JK: Please tell me about your upcoming works, *Like a Ninja* and *Moon Prince.*

Kevin Mutch: *Like a Ninja* is the third book in my Adam series, I suppose. It's set about ten years after *The Rough Pearl*, and Adam has finally got himself a steady job, working

in the music business as a Photoshop artist. This gives him a ringside seat for the marketing of popular culture and the ways the artists themselves are packaged (and literally reshaped).

It's also about the evolution of the "creative class" in places like New York into a part of the "precariat" – gig workers with no security – and how the workplace has been stripped of any expectation of privacy with computer surveillance and open plan offices.

Needless to say given my years in the music business, it's semi-autobiographical.

The Moon Prince is a trilogy of science fantasy comics set in a world where slavery never quite went away. I wrote it for my kids (and made them pose for the main characters) after I realized that I couldn't read them many of the adventure stories I grew up loving – because they're hopelessly racist and sexist.

In particular, I was a huge fan of the various Edgar Rice Burroughs series (Barsoom, Pellucidar, etc), and I was horrified to find when I tried to show a Tarzan book to my African-American son that the whole thing was racist garbage. I mean, obviously I should have expected that, but it was a lot worse than I remembered.

So, in response, I came up with a story that turns the template for those books upside down. Instead of a white male "chosen one" saving "colored savages" from each other (and usually forging an empire for himself in the process), *The Moon Prince* is about two biracial kids who escape slavery for an adventure in space and find out that the aliens they meet aren't actually as backward (or helpless) as they assumed.

Author's note:

Kevin Mutch can be visited online at http://kevinmutch.com/ and *The Moon Prince* can be accessed at http://www.themoonprince.com/.

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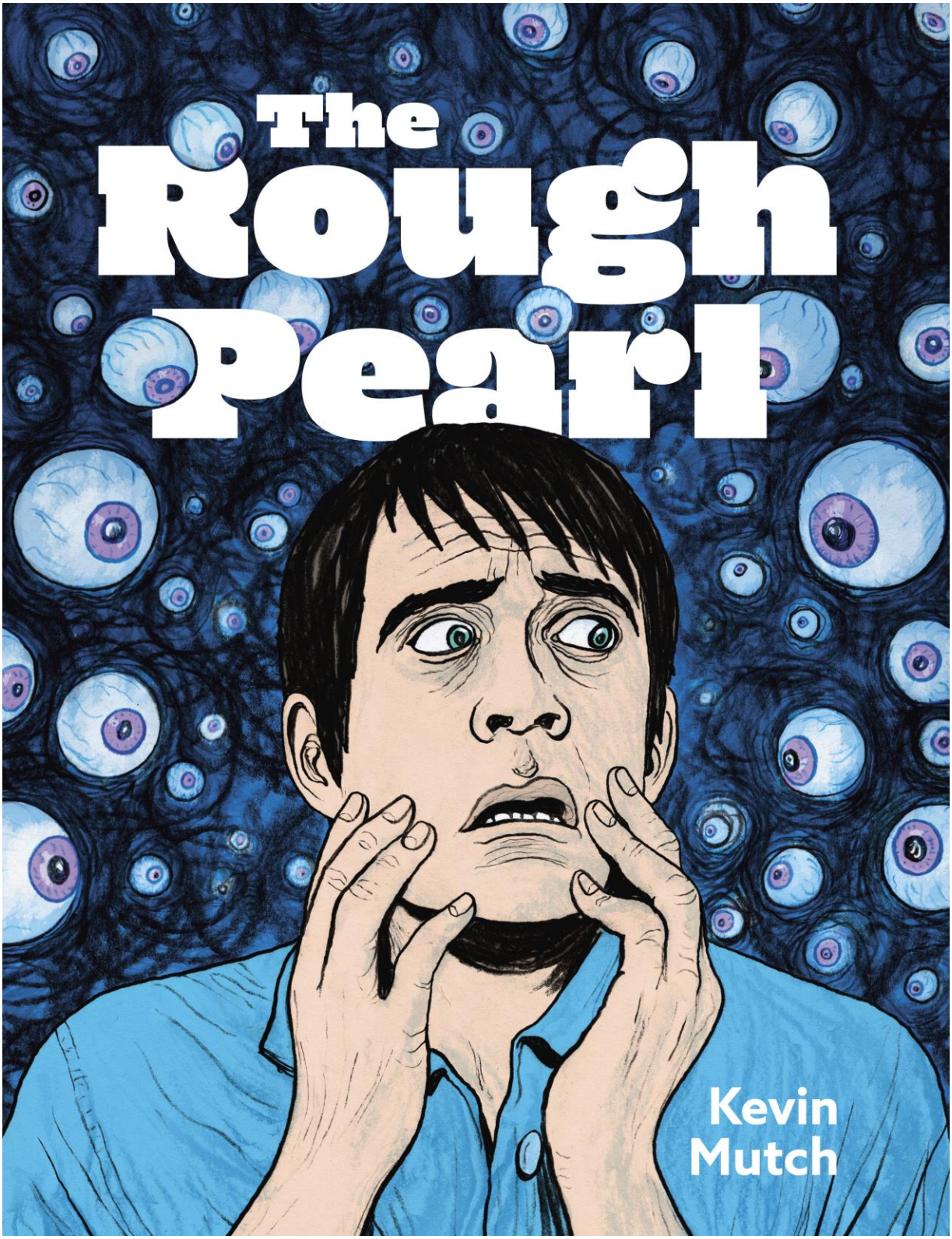
Figure 4. *The Rough Pearl* cover. Copyright Kevin Mutch. Use is courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.



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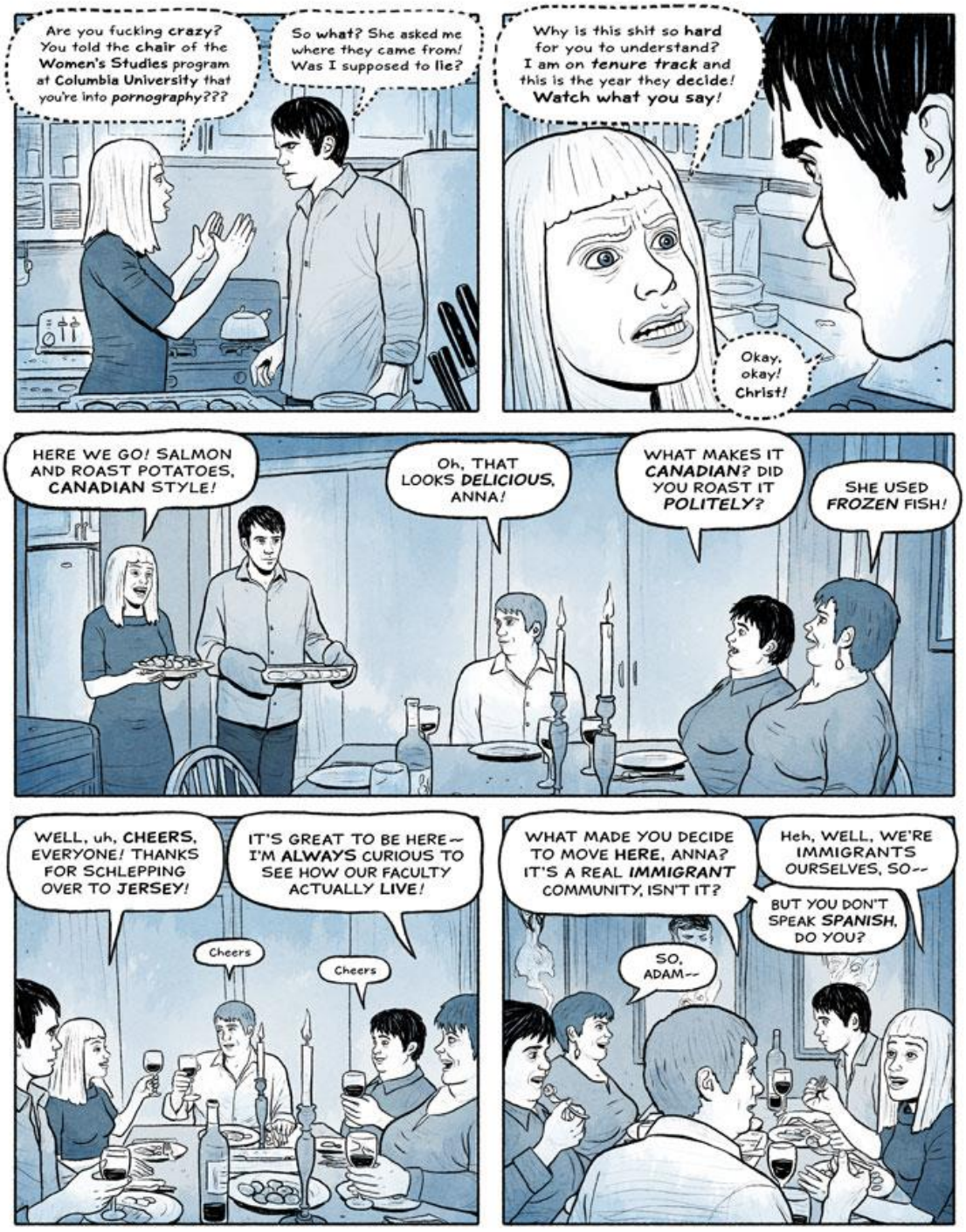

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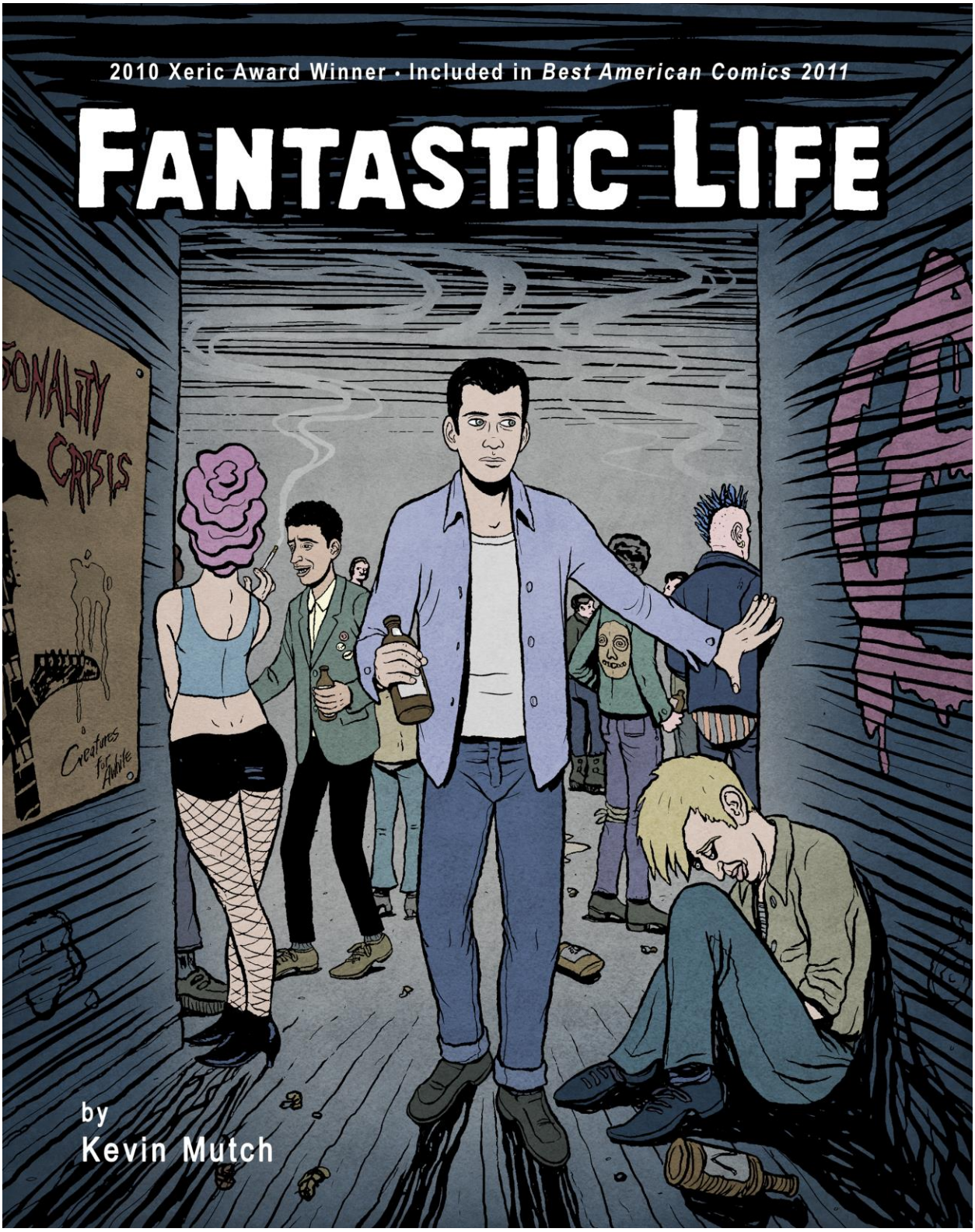

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