

Is chris ware's
building stories a
book?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Chris Ware's box of fourteen printed works, *Building Stories*, follows the inhabitants of a brownstone apartment building in Chicago. Mainly following the building's third floor resident, an unnamed woman with a prosthetic leg, *Building Stories* also follows the apartment building's second floor residents, a middle-aged couple whose relationship lacks a sense of romance, and the building's first floor resident, the apartment building's elderly landlady. The reader, consequently, follows these characters through Ware's unconventional collection of newspapers, bound books, pamphlets, magazines, and broadsheets. These fourteen assorted forms of printed works are all interrelated, however, they are not placed in a categorical manner. Instead, the reader is encouraged to read each item in an unsystematic or random order. Because, in *Building Stories*, everything is interrelated, it can be considered a story, however, because these written works aren't bound together in a sequential order as decided by the author, *Building Stories* cannot be considered a book.

A story, according to American writer, Mark Twain, is a tale that "shall accomplish something and arrive somewhere" (Philip Martin). A story, therefore, follows a certain purpose or goal through a series of events. These events, however, should not be retold in complete entirety. For example, in Philip Martin's, *How to Write Your Best Story*, Martin explains that it is the writers' "job to select only the details needed to make a story a good one" (Martin). Writers should, therefore, share only the best or most important of what happened as does Ware in *Building Stories*. In his collection, although not chronological, Ware shares something in each different comic that is of important occurrence. This, then contributes to the story and its purpose as

a whole. For instance, if Ware hadn't included the comic of the second floor couple arguing over money with the third floor resident overhearing, the reader would not have known why the third floor woman, who works in a flower shop, offered a free bouquet of flowers to the woman who lives below her. A story, therefore, could be defined as a chain of events that are invested with meaning. This is the act of taking many things that have happened and organizing them in a way where, whatever is most important is taken and shaped into a story. Most stories are the compilation of confusing thoughts and events, which are organized into a collection and not necessarily put into any particular order, of what could be important to a story.

In *Building Stories*, Ware provides the reader with only certain memories of his characters so that the story, in entirety, makes logical sense. For instance, the third floor woman seems, at one point, intensely emotional and seems to yearn for her younger years. The reader only understands why the woman feels this way because Ware depicts the, at that time, wife and mother hearing from her old boyfriend. This event brings the woman back, in memory, to her earlier years, which were much different from her current ones. *Building Stories* goes back and forth between time in Ware's collection of different mediums. The memories that arise as regards each character in the fluctuating story, further extend the story's purpose or main goal. The way in which Ware organizes *Building Stories* into different mediums, forces the reader to assemble the pieces in whichever way they desire. This idea, seems to be part of Ware's goal for *Building Stories*. His primary objective is to show how a person's memories exist in chaotic fragments, but can come

back in a forcibly clear manner to engulf that individual with immense emotion. Even though these memories may have once been quite vague or ambiguous, they are quite comprehensible when remembered. In Ware's collection of interrelated works, linearity does not matter. Instead, because memory is so important to the theme of Building Stories, Ware wants you to read each item in a manner that would replicate recalling an actual memory. Seeing realistic, arbitrary memories, is replicated or simulated in the way Ware has organized his story: completely randomly.

A person, similar to the characters in Ware's Building Stories, can see their memories by thinking of them on command or completely unintentionally. At one moment, one of Ware's characters or anyone in general, could be fully aware of where they are in the present, but then they could become immersed almost immediately into a memory and have their reality be completely irrelevant. With a compartmentalized story dedicated to different memories, the reader is able to see each and every character from their own perspectives, thus, putting the reader above each of them. As the story is read, each medium begins to intertwine with the other, which allows the story of each individual character to deepen. The reader, thus, overlooks each character, virtually in a godlike manner, looking in to what each of Ware's characters cannot necessarily see at certain points throughout the story. As the reader gathers information from each medium, each containing a story, a bigger, more coherent story is put together. Finding these "resonances and links that connect one piece to another is the game" created by Ware that "brings the whole [of Building Stories] together" (Martha Kuhlman). Chris Ware's Building Stories is most definitely a collection of

stories that accumulate into one, bigger, superior story. However, because the reader is able to read it in their own, individual order, the story cannot be considered a book. A book, is typically defined as a written work that is comprised of bound pages. These bound pages are put within their book's covers in an order decided by the book's author. In Ware's Building Stories, though, this order is entirely up to the reader. Therefore, how the reader interprets the story depends completely on the order in which they choose to read the fourteen comics. For instance, the reader may begin Ware's story with the elderly woman on the first floor, with Branford Bee, or with the woman on the third floor.

With whatever comic the reader chooses as their beginning to Building Stories, the story is going to vary from reader to reader. The order in which the story is read is likely to differ among many readers, although, if Ware had formatted his story into a book, it would be the same for his audience. If Ware had chosen to do this, though, the story's primary purpose surrounding memory wouldn't be as clear. Being engrossed in each character's perspectives would still be possible, however, being a part of their recollection of memories in a way that is realistic, wouldn't be as probable. The reader wouldn't be able to fall, unsystematically, into a character's memory like they are able to do with fourteen, potentially different ways of proceeding with the story. So because Ware's different mediums are all interrelated, Building Stories can be described as a collection of stories which build upon themselves; hence the name, Building Stories. However, because these stories are not bound in an explicit, consequential order, the story cannot be considered a book.

Works Cited

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