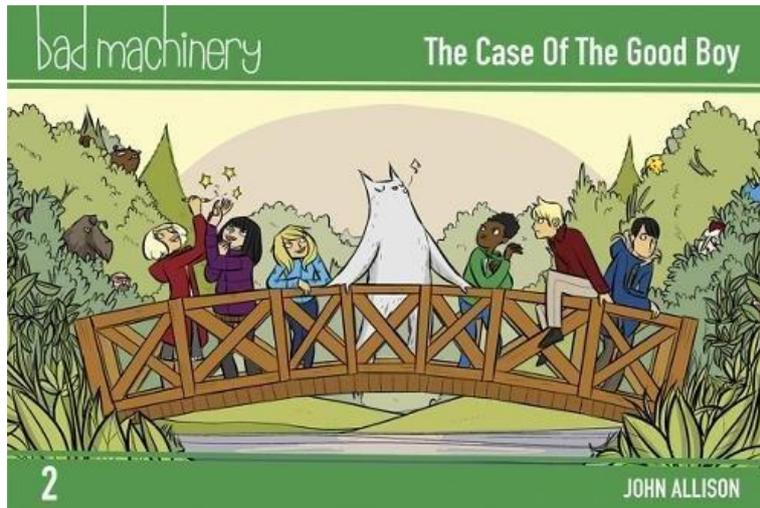


Bad Machinery by John Allison

[Intermediate]



Meet Linton, Lottie, Shauna, Jack, Mildred and Sonny – the very best friends you'll ever have.

"Who are you phoning?"

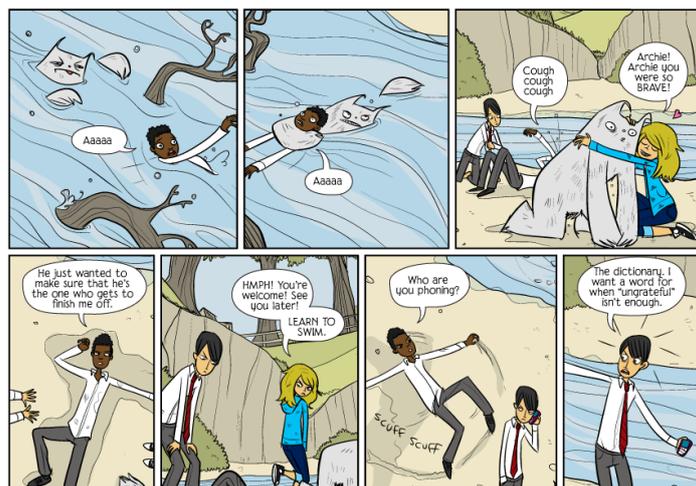
"The dictionary. I want a word for when "ungrateful" isn't enough."

John Allison is the king of comicbook comedy and knave of its mischief. It's especially true within **BAD MACHINERY**, his ten-volume series of intrigue, sleuthing and astutely observed friendships between pre-teen, tween and eventually teen school children; their behaviour, language, speech patterns, perspectives, preoccupations and wonky knowledge... often gleaned from adults. Sometimes they voice it with doubt but Lottie's more likely to proclaim it with a fervent conviction. Or, here, Mildred:

"Be careful not to sit on a rusty nail. That's basically deadly."

Allison is also Britain's finest current cartoonist, equal to America's Kyle Baker and the late, great Will Eisner in movement, energy, supple forms and exuberant gesticulation through which they all communicate so many telling details about what's happening not just without, but also *within*.

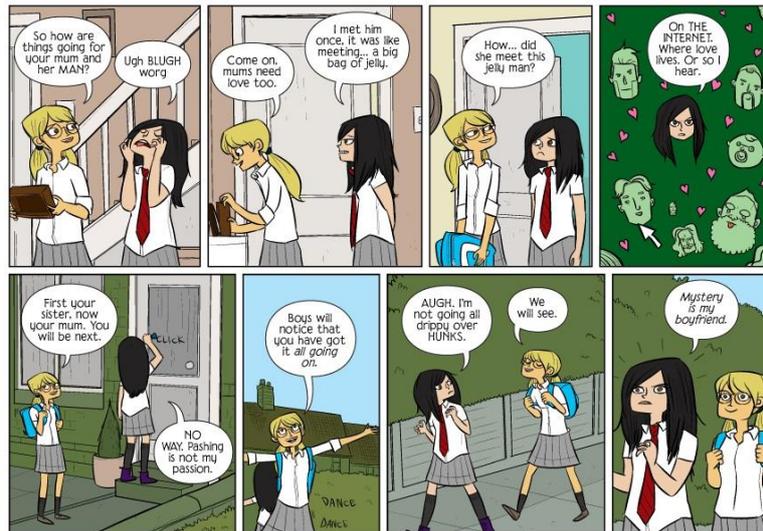
At the top, for example, we have Jack admonishing young Linton who has been saved from drowning by Mildred's new and curiously capable dog which leapt into the water with suspiciously anthropoid grace. Hmmmm. Rather than lying lifeless on the sandy shore, Linton is scuffling about in circles either through petulance and irritation or in order to dry off his back. I don't care which: this movement which few others would have thought of brings extra life both to the panel and the exchange.



Where Allison also excels is in his body-language *restraint* whose nuance says so much more. His characters' expressions are priceless: Lottie's head lifted, eyes closed in sanctimonious disapproval or approbation; Jack and Linton's epileptic response to the theme-park ride Obliterator 500; Sonny's super-serious, fire-lit eyes on sensing something ripe for investigation, or Lottie's blazing into the distance with a ferocious passion and deadpan earnestness: "*Mystery is my boyfriend.*"

The town is Tackleford in Britain where we have two hundred different words for rain. You'd have thought the prospects were limited for those with pre-determined bedtimes, but Tackleford seems to attract strange doings: barn-based pyromania, toddler theft, time travel, onions as a staple diet...

In any case, real life proves curious enough. At one point Linton's greatest mystery is how his newly promoted police Dad will cope with the Gravel Pit Estate crime rate whose graph is soaring so stratospherically high that, as Linton says, "I wouldn't want to ride my bike up that."



None of the boys have the first clue when it comes to romance – the prospect becomes tentatively talked about, yet merely wafts vaguely towards them from a wholly unfathomable future – but the girls instinctively recognise that when it comes to loyalty it's "Sisters before Misters" and are as completely clued in as ornithologists when it comes to how to treat new boys at school:

"He's wandering off."

"He seeks the company of his own kind."

"Are you sure we shouldn't have spoken to him?"

"No! We'd have put the stink of girls on him. The boys would have rejected him. Pecked him to bits."



The boys *do* possess some no-no knowhow, but it's more about *self*-preservation, like a daisy-chain crafted absent-mindedly (as you honestly do) then draped over your crown or neck:

"Sonny, take that off. Someone will thump the dinner out of you."

"Thump the dinner" is so artfully chosen: as well as being more apposite for Allison's extended readership than anything more brutal, its selective precision is funnier for adults. Make no mistake: although I commend *BAD MACHINERY* to those as young as seven, some comedies are cleverer than others, and this will hook all with its recognition factor, like the first time you went round for tea at a friend's, encountering new food and alien customs. Perhaps you've blanched when more technically proficient children have seen through the jumbled mess that is your computer and its so-called filing system? So often the adult world is rendered ridiculous through less cluttered eyes, like a parent sizing someone up at a glance: "He was very polite on the phone. Sounded very handsome."

Allison relishes words and phrases since lost to casual conversation. He's the only person I know to have typed "petticoat" in the last three decades, and I suspect he could draw you an accurate cross-section of a Singer Sewing Machine. Few can spring between sentences with such nimble dexterity, eschewing more obvious barbs in favour of an unexpected epigram for life, plus his irreverence gets far more effectively to the pertinent point than any real-life caution, like this Health & Safety sticker:

"WARNING: DON'T TIT ABOUT ON LADDERS."

He nails young ones' pouts and passion, often inversely proportioned to whatever merits it, and the way everything is taken so personally. Lottie's language is a scream. When it's suggested "Maybe this will be your summer of love", Lottie retorts, "I am sorry to report that my skull has just filled up with sick." It's a pre-teen's sentiment voices with the eloquence of an adult. Below (she speaks second) the phonetic and slang components compound the comedy with their contrast to the precocity.

"His face was flickering on and off with the Creeper's, like a pirate radio station cutting in and out."
"Worr you can tell she's a writer. Well evockertive."

BAD MACHINERY has the highest hit rate of any comicbook comedy for Allison originally published the series online, page-by-daily-page, which means that each page is a satisfying snapshot / story complete with comedic punchline – verbal, visual or so often both. It's an extraordinary discipline.

It's an extraordinary series, available in all the finest comic shops *and, I hope, School Libraries!*

