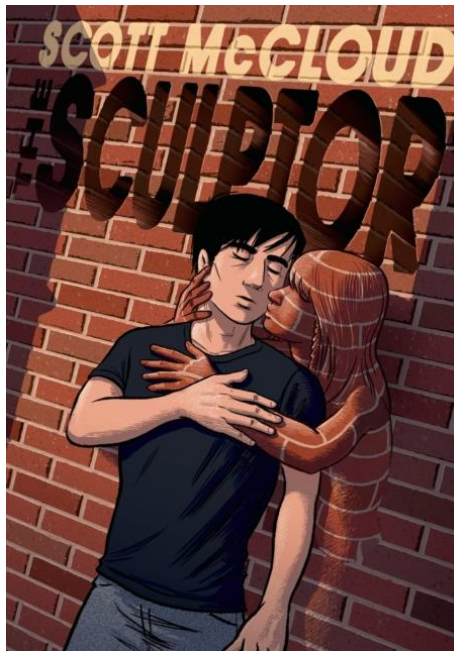




The Sculptor by Scott McCloud

[Contemporary Fiction]



"I'm not afraid to die, Harry."
"Give it time."

THE SCULPTOR is a riveting feat of magic realism rightly described by Neil Gaiman as “The best graphic novel I've read in years”. It raises key questions about art, its reception, personal popularity and financial reward. I guarantee it will speak to all hearts about perspectives, priorities and paying attention: what actually matters, what makes you happy and how you can bring happiness to others.

David Smith is far from happy and fails to bring happiness to others. The last of his family and alone in a diner on his 26th birthday, David's feeling miserable, lost and left behind. A former college prodigy and protégé of an influential investor, David's future as a sculptor looked stellar. But in the full flood of a media spotlight which served him so well, David was summarily dropped. In the Art world where one critic can influence an entire room of sheep-like journalists and investors with a single turn of phrase it was professionally devastating; on a personal level it has destroyed his self-confidence and hope for glory. Oh yes, his rent is due and he's just lost his job flipping burgers.





Unexpectedly in walks his dear Uncle Harry – they haven't seen each other in years!

It's good to catch up. Sheepishly David confesses all about his past plight and current predicament. To cheer him up, Uncle Harry conjures out of his pocket a comic which David drew as a child: of himself a super-sculptor, able to bend with his bare hands any available material – even a car – into the most fabulous, fantastical shapes! David's embarrassed, but so happy that Harry cares. And then, smiling, David starts to remember. "Man, the last time I saw you, you were..."

There follow four silent beats alternating between Uncle Harry's patient, soft, sincere but impassive gaze, and David's dawning realisation. He opens his eyes, as the pair of them recede. "... dead."

Silence in the diner. There's silence in the street outside. A crowd in the cubicle next door bursts into "Happy Birthday!" celebration and a television commentator racks up the sports fans' tension.

"Life doesn't always turn out the way we plan, David."



Uncle Harry determines for David an alternative route of a wife, kids and a life teaching while working on his art at night in the basement. His boys will get married and have kids of their own. A life lived long and well, with security and much joy along the way! "And yeah, you'll wonder what could have been, but less as the years go by."

But for David that's not enough. "That... isn't me. It *can't* be..."

"What would you give for your art, David?"

"I'd give my life."

So Uncle Harry offers David a pact: as fantasised, David will be able to sculpt from any object with his bare hands. The only limitations will be his imagination... and a new, indissoluble end to his lifespan: a non-negotiable 200 days. Before David agrees too hastily, Uncle Harry shows David what happens next. Flesh-and-blood hand meets skeletal bone: THERE IS NOTHING.

THERE IS NOTHING NEXT Still, David accepts, and the very next day falls in love...

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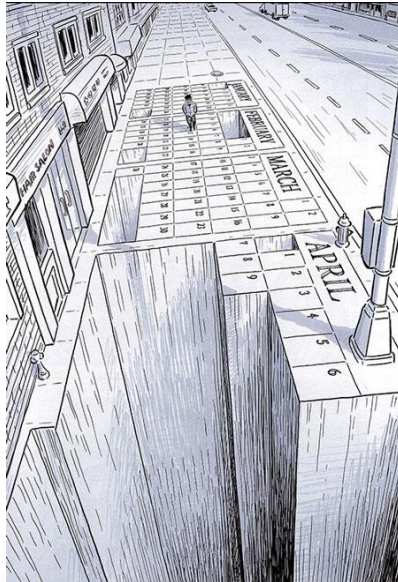
"I thought if I just gave it everything I had..."

That's how I sell the book on our shop floor; I never need more. But this is the 500-page *magnum opus* from the creator of UNDERSTANDING COMICS and MAKING COMICS so...



Obviously THE SCULPTOR's no Rom-Com – although there *are* many moments of sublime tenderness and laugh-out-loud courtship / embarrassment between David and Meg. (Does this include the best sex scene in comics? I think so. It's intensely intimate rather than explicit.)

Nor is this a Faustian Pact because 'Uncle Harry' is as up-front about the price to be paid as he is diligent in unobtrusive, follow-through mentorship. There are discussions about Art, Art criticism and absolutes, about history, objectivity and subjectivity. David needs them, for he's not swift in adjusting to a limited timescale with even wider ambitions so he continues making the same sorry mistakes. With great power does not necessarily come instant self-awareness nor self-guidance.



As to the sheer beauty of it all, the light is as thrilling whether down in the subway or up in a thunderstorm-night, when lying together on grass, wandering alone in the cemetery, overlooking Manhattan with a palpable sense of space between buildings, or as the door opens up and his best friend Ollie first surveys what David's been creatively up to in his stark rented loft.

The two key moments which visually McCloud had to nail without fail were always going to be the initial manifestation of David's new gift and then when our sculptor first puts his mind to deploying it: on a block of cold, hard stone which would take months to chip away with a mallet and chisel. As the low morning sunlight floods in, David pauses in front of the "stubborn old bastard", throws away his tools and feels his way around the block. He raises his hands and... Wallop! The most spectacular, liquid explosion of unyielding granite!

More powerful still is the rooftop heart-stopper which will send you reeling from one racing reaction to the next faster than a Ferrari with its pedal to the metal. In each carefully controlled climax, the art goes full-bleed to the very edge of the page, the panel gutters vanishing to reduce distance between the reader and what they're witnessing and so *experiencing*. There are similarly gasp-inducing moments during the first two times he spies Meg, the second across a crowded club, everyone else fading to an ethereal blue as David focuses in on her black hair and skirt, and pursues.

Later on, just before his days grow painfully few and time accelerates rapidly, the narrative pauses for a page worthy of Will Eisner depicting a tiny David, hands in his pockets, navigating a pavement made out of calendar dates after which lies the stone chasm of death. He can of course die ahead of his time so the beginnings and ends of each month which would be blank on a printed calendar are here treacherous, bottomless pits. Throw in its overheard perspective and a thrillingly acute vanishing point and you have a visual interpretation of Time quite emphatically waiting for no man.

Lastly, I love rain and almost anything eroded by light. The final page of the penultimate chapter ends with David alone in a borrowed apartment looking out at a Manhattan skyline on the other side of Central Park surrounded by shrubbery. Every element of that soft, pale, blue-grey panel streaked by



torrential rain is sublime, but it's the fluid squiggles at the base of the bushes which really made it for me. There are a lot of expressionistic squiggles once you start seeing them. That's keen intuition.

Eventually you'll reach the end of the road, as will David, but although I'm keeping my poker face on, THE SCULPTOR's multiple climaxes are far more halting and wide-ranging than you can possibly suspect. And oh, the reprises!

True Fact: Page 45 is named after page 45 of UNDERSTANDING COMICS, the most important book on comics of all time. It's also a comic and so, like MAKING COMICS, it is self-demonstrative. Hurrah!

Also Recommended by Scott McCloud: ZOT! Contains the best coming-out sequence of all time.

