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INTERVIEW



'My claim to fame is footnotes': an interview with Derf Backderf

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ABSTRACT

In Spring 2020, Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo, American editors of the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* sat down with Derf Backderf to discuss his new book, *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*. Highlighting how important this work is as a graphic monument to the 50th anniversary of the May 4 shootings, they spoke with Derf about his journalistic training, his development as a cartoonist, and his interest in depicting regional events that sustain global interest. Primarily featuring his new book, the conversation focuses on the power of the comics form to witness historical trauma and unbury victims through the drawn image, including those murdered on the Kent State University campus in 1970.

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In Spring 2020 we sat down with Derf Backderf to discuss his new book, *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*. As teachers in the Department of English at Kent State University, we sought to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the May 4th shootings with this interview. Sitting down over coffee with Derf, we talked about his development as a cartoonist, his training in journalism and how the comics form has evolved in the course of his career. We also discussed how his work documents regional events within an international context, emphasising the emerging importance of the comics form, which has a unique connection to the region of Cleveland. In the time of the coronavirus, when this interview will be published, and the cancellation of the in-person May 4 memorial events, we recognise that Derf Backderf's book takes on increasing significance as one enduring witness to history within a literary form that he calls a 'documentary comic.'

Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo Can we begin by thinking about the act of cartooning such a well-known event? The Kent State shooting is commonly associated with and represented by photography with one of the most recognisable images, which you recreate in your book, being of Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over the body of Jeffrey Miller. This event is rarely – if ever – subject to illustration or cartooning. How does changing the medium affect how we receive these images?

Derf Backderf Well, comics is the art form I picked way back when, so, no choice. That scene is a tough one, though, because that image is *so* well known. What I focused on to capture that moment of terror was not the girl, but the sound of her scream, which carries across three pages. Because you don't get the scream in the photo (Figure 1).



Figure 1. From Kent State: Four dead in Ohio, 236–37. Reprinted with permission from Derf Backderf.

So that was my thinking there. That was a challenge. The two images that are the most well-known are the scream, and the guard turning and opening fire, and you've got all sorts of sound effects on that page, too. My approach is the same with both images, to try to create a different sensory reaction, if that makes sense. I'm trying to depict the shock and horror, but in a different way.

Camden It's a different kind of representation, too. You're also appealing to the comics form which has a tradition of rendering sounds through script. Did you draw from – I'm curious about your technique as I just saw you sketch an image in my book – did you draw from the photo and other photos?

Derf Well, I look at the photos and then interpret the visual. A lot of the photos were really lousy, that's just the way news photos are, so a drawing can be much clearer. In terms of what happened in the three days before the shootings, there are almost no photos because everything happened at night. With the photo technology of the time, you couldn't shoot at night, certainly not big crowds, certainly not people moving. Those night scenes – and I draw a really good night scene, I'm proud of my night scenes – I think those were very effective pages and they bring something new to the story. Those images didn't exist until now, but with comics, using accounts, using references, I can recreate those scenes very clearly. So that's what comics brings to this.

Camden Recreating these images of the events at night does capture the anticipatory horror of the event.

Zullo That horror is very clear. Being a student at Kent State, I learned the story, but this is the first time that I feel that I truly understand the horror of the event beyond a list of facts.

Derf Good. That's who I wrote this for, the people who *don't* know the story. *Kent State* is really a cautionary tale. What's scary is our current problems circle right back to around 1970, in terms of political rancour and in terms of distrust of each other, and we have apparently learned nothing along the way. Fake news and all the rest of that applies there too. We're back in 1970. All that is missing is the people in the streets. The mobs are all online now. I don't know if that's better or worse, and there certainly are, still, huge protests, the Women's March, for example. But all we're lacking is the street combat that we had in 1970. Since the police have spent 50 years perfecting their crowd control arsenal, I don't even know if it's possible anymore. Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

Camden and Zullo Right, as we've said, there is so much feeling in this volume and you capture the loss of each individual person. I think we often remember them as the 'four dead in Ohio.' And, of course, the Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young song is an anthem. But here the comics form kind of gives each person their stories back. You're telling the stories that were not in photographs, it is that sense of reclaiming the lives of these four victims that is so important for the story and for anyone who went to Kent State. We need to know the story: that is what makes us able to recover the lives of these people.

Derf That's why I made it personal, that's why I made it about the four kids. When they are cut down, and I show exactly *how* they were cut down, it really is a gut punch for the reader. There was no reason for it to happen. It was completely inexplicable. All of these great political forces of the era came crashing together in that one place. It could have

happened anywhere. It *should* have happened at Ohio State, where the protests were much larger and far more violent. It sort of happened at Berkeley, but not the shootings. The National Guard at Kent State was already exhausted when they arrived on campus, and these are all things we know, but of course, needing a nap is no excuse for manslaughter. The guys who shot into the crowd, and there were only a handful of them, there was something else going on. It was malevolent.

Camden and Zullo This brings us back to the point that the feeling lies in this anticipatory terror. We know what is going to happen, we all know what is going to happen *now*, but the way you set it up, you capture how unsuspecting they were. And as a reader you almost feel like you could stop it. I felt like: ‘Don’t, don’t do that!’ ‘Stop!’

Derf Like a slasher film.

Zullo Yes, for example, when Jeff was putting on his bandana, we know that this is one of his final moments. It’s that feeling of helplessness that does make it feel like a slasher film. Reading the book, physically, also gives you that feeling, as you get closer to the end – as you hold fewer pages in your right hand you realise you are closer to the moment that these kids will die. The story almost implicates you or brings you in as a participant – as all good comics do.

Derf It is weird – the way the story played out is interesting, because every day starts very quietly, and then the tensions build. It climaxes with an explosion, tensions dissipate, and then the tension builds again the following day. But each day it gets a little more tense. You also have a lot of quiet moments, but this is where you find the humanity of the story, where Jeff is hanging out with his friends or Allison is walking around campus with her boyfriend. These moments are where we learn about these kids, about their hopes and dreams and fears, etcetera. So, those quiet moments are very, very important.

Camden They’re filled with innocence. They’re college kids. They’re just having fun and finding themselves and it’s a wonderful time of life and it was taken from them. In particular, Jeff as an innocent figure in all of this. He wasn’t an SDS and he wasn’t a Weatherman.

Derf No, no, not at all. This was his first protest, probably. His first active protest.

Camden and Zullo This leads us to our next question: cartooning is such an affective mode of representation, inviting the reader to connect with the characters and scenes being depicted. This story cultivates our empathy towards the students as you bring their lives into focus in ways that we have not seen before. You also draw horrifying moments such as the shooting itself or Nixon’s announcement to invade Cambodia. These iconic images of Nixon on the television screen ([Figure 2](#)) or the National Guard on Kent State campus pervade our imaginations: how do you capture them with fresh perspective? How do you use your cartooning process to distance the reader and reinforce the evil of, say, Nixon’s invasion? Was there any particular attitude that you assumed as a comic artist? You used the idea of the sound that captures some of the horror, but was there any version of that that you used when you rendered the other side, so to speak?

Derf The war spilled out into the living room, that’s the classic description of how America processed the Vietnam War, so that scene of the televised address is very



Figure 2. From *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, 9. Reprinted with permission from Derf Backderf.

important, and accurate. Nixon sent, what, 30,000 young men to their deaths, essentially to further his political ambitions, so it's hard to find anything good in that guy. I don't think there *was* anything good. And Jim Rhodes was a lesser version of Nixon, an incompetent version of Nixon. What I find satisfying about that was that Nixon threw Rhodes under the bus after the shootings, because he had no further use for him. Not that it hurt Rhodes; I mean he was re-elected twice, so he didn't pay a heavy price at all.

Like I said earlier, most people don't know what really happened on May 4. They may have heard of the shootings, something happened, and some protestors got killed, and that's the sum total of what they know. They don't grasp that the government was actually shooting dissenters to silence them. I think that Kent State had a very big, lasting impact on protests. At least as far as engaging the authorities violently. It's not necessarily a bad thing. Nothing good comes from violent protest. It didn't accomplish what they wanted it to do. I think it's much more effective just to fill the streets and do it peacefully.

Camden That was a big debate in terms of civil rights.

Dorf And a counter-argument from the radical fringe. The Weathermen wanted to turn the streets of America into war zones. They wanted violent revolution. They somehow convinced themselves that this could happen in the United States. It seemed like it *was* happening in places. When you're sitting here in Cleveland in 1968 you see plumes of smoke coming out of Glenville, yeah, I imagine that looked like revolution. Violent protest was counterproductive. That's when a lot of people fled the city. It didn't accomplish anything. It made the situation in the inner city worse. It made the lives of people who lived there worse. A peaceful protest, that may have done something, may have not, who knows? It's hard to say. Kent State similarly had a chilling effect on the protest movement for years and years and years.

Zullo Let's talk more about your relationship to the Ohio history of protests. Readers of your book will already know the answer to this question, but can you tell us more about why the Kent State shootings? What brought you to this project?

Dorf Sure. Well the opening scene of the book explains my connection. Just before trouble flared up at Kent State, the same national guard unit occupied my little hometown Richfield, Ohio. That really affected me when I was a kid. It was a huge event in my life. ([Figure 3](#)).

Camden To have those soldiers there?

Dorf Oh yeah. It seemed as if we were under martial law. The soldiers camped in a rec field right across the street from my elementary school. Whenever the school buses would drive by the guard, the driver would make the kids lie on the floor of the bus! And as crazy as this sounds, nobody ever explained anything to us kids. Nobody came in, nobody from the guard, nobody from the town government, I don't even remember the principal explaining anything. We were left to process it on our own. All of the kids in school were scared. A lot of them were Teamster kids, so these were their dads and uncles at risk. These were men who were my neighbours. They were my friends' fathers, they were my little league coaches, and cub scout leaders. They weren't union boogeymen to me, the way they there were to Rhodes and his base. It was very disturbing, but it sparked something in me intellectually. It really got me more interested in the news and thinking

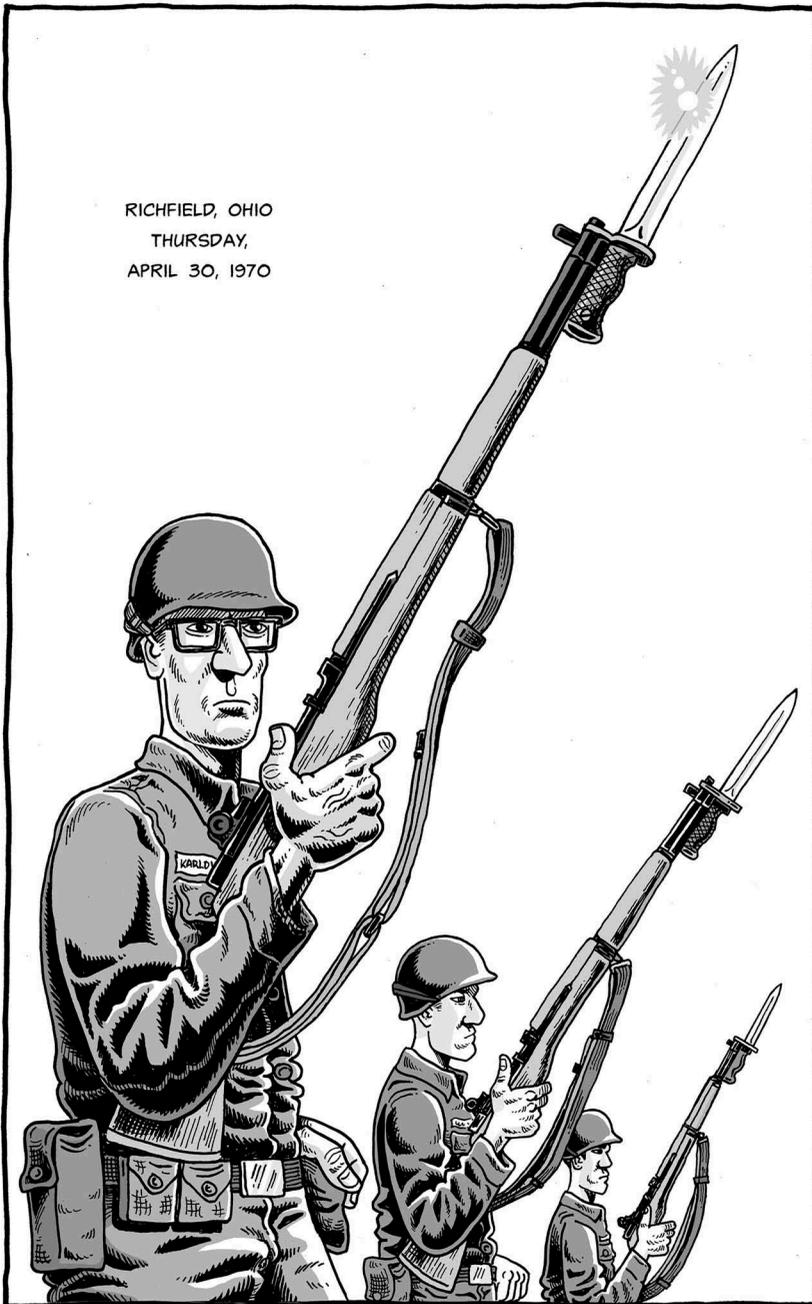


Figure 3. From *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, 1. Reprinted with permission from Derf Backderf.

about things. It was like all the problems of the world came rushing in with the guard. They had always been an abstract before, in that clueless kid way. They were a constant in my life. I didn't remember a time when the Vietnam War *wasn't* happening. I didn't remember a time when there *weren't* street battles, or cities in flames.

So, this really was a smack across the face. It spurred my interest in the news and other things, and that led to me becoming a journalist and going to school as a journalism major and all that stuff. I trace all of that back to Kent State. That's my connection. And it's weird, I mean it's not like having bullets whizzing over my head, or seeing my girlfriend lying on the ground in a pool of blood, but that's how history affects people; it fans out into society in different ways.

Camden But it's immediate and also at an age when it's really formative; I would think there is some way in which it provides a kind of distancing or dislocation, all of a sudden you're recognising this is a feeling of being invaded. It is not trustworthy; it makes you anxious.

Derf Yeah, very much so. And all the parents were anxious. It was a tense period.

Camden But your response – which is cool – is to start to research and to start to think and to start to formulate your ideas through cartooning.

Derf Yeah, right, I began reading more. I was a paperboy then, an *Akron Beacon Journal* paperboy. I was reading the comics page before that, of course. After May 4, I started reading the political cartoons, trying to figure them out. I was like 'well, they're cartoons, so I *should* like them.' Then I started reading the news sections of the paper. I know this sounds obnoxiously precocious, but I went on to work for my junior high and high school newspapers, and I then went to Ohio State on a Journalism scholarship, so it's not *that* preposterous.

Zullo You've probably been asked many times, but who did you like to read in those newspapers? Who were you reading when you were a kid?

Derf The first comic strip I remember was *Peanuts*. That was the peak of it too, so it was really good. *Doonsebury* was added to the comics page sometime in the early Seventies. That fit in nicely with my own political stirrings. And then there was *Mad* magazine. It spread out from there. By the time I was 11 or 12, I was reading *National Lampoon*, or trying to read *National Lampoon* and comprehending about 10% of it, but they had comics too, so, I just keep trying to figure it out.

Camden It is such an American story, the importance of the newspaper in your youth.

Derf Back then it was, not anymore. Newspapers were where 90 percent of the news originated in 1970. This wasn't necessarily better than the ways news is generated now. For example, the *Kent Record-Courier* headline on May 4 was 'Two guardsmen, one student dead.' They blew the story that was right under their nose *and* put students in danger in the process! All the locals grabbed their shotguns and got in their cars and drove around looking for students. So, newspapers had the same errors and partisan agendas as cable news does now.

Camden and Zullo Speaking of reporting and archives, can you tell us about the archives? What were you looking for? What did you find? What did you leave out?

Derf Well, you have to stay focused, that's the important thing. At the beginning of the book you sit down and think about it for a while. What's *my* book about? I decided to focus on the four, to show it through their eyes and their experiences. Those were my parameters. I didn't veer from that very often. You've got to work in a little context, some

of the other things that were happening in 1970 that played a role in May 4, but I really stuck to my premise as much as I could. One of the four was present at, or at least watching, every event, so I could tell the story almost completely through them. There have been a lot of books about May 4. Some good, some bad. There are probably 60 books. So, if you want to read about a certain aspect of it, I'll guarantee there's a book out there that covers that. So, I tracked down research material that fit into my concept, looking for friends and associates of one of the four, or accounts of what they were doing.

It is astonishing how much material is in *The May 4 Collection* at Kent State, and there's a second archive, *The Yale Collection*, which contains all the material from the deposition and discovery from the civil trials from the 70s. The families didn't want it in Ohio, so they sent it to Yale. It's just a mountain of material, so the challenge was digging through this material and finding those little pieces of gold. I couldn't use all of it. Some things didn't make it into the book, for space reasons. A few scenes got shortchanged for the same reason. The only one that I really regret was the last scene, with Professor Glenn Frank pleading with the students to leave. It's just one page. And I would have liked it to have been about 3 or 4. It was just such a dramatic moment. They were heroes, you know, for what they did, standing between the guard and the students. He was quite a character. But I simply ran out of room. I had already gone over my page count.

There are also a lot of oral histories, where people recorded their account. They're in *The May 4 Collection*, and a few other places, and I listened to them all, around 140 of them, and took notes. If I had follow-up questions, I would track down the people who gave the oral history and I'd ask them to clarify certain details. Most were happy to do so. For example, there was an account by a student who was with Jeff on Sunday night. They were fleeing Guard patrols and took shelter in her house and the Guard tossed tear gas in her front yard. I originally drew this as a Jeep driving by with a soldier throwing a gas grenade onto the porch. But her account wasn't clear on this, so I tracked her down and asked her for details. She said 'Oh no, it was a helicopter.' That's even better visually! It's been 50 years, and everyone has told their story at some point, so there are a lot of accounts out there. Well, almost everyone, not the Guardsmen. They can't, because they perjured themselves, first of all. Secondly, the shooting was probably premeditated, which means it was murder one, and there is no statute of limitations on capital crimes, not on a Federal level. We don't have the political will to prosecute them, certainly not in the current climate, but they're obviously terrified that such a thing *could* happen. So, they stay silent. Some have taken their secrets to the grave.

Camden and Zullo So, this discussion of documentation does bring us to our next question. Many comics take on global traumas – the Iranian Revolution, the Holocaust – and bring them into focus through the individual. You look at these regional, local traumatic events in history – *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, *My Friend Dahmer*, even *Trashed* – and show at how the daily life in Northeast Ohio can suddenly take on international import (Figure 4). How do you understand comics to be suited to this process of witnessing and documenting local histories through the timeless lens of art? And criminal trauma with your previous book, with the Dahmer book, the trauma of that local crime. It's kind of an intersection in your career.

Derf I never think locally. I'm casting a wider net. I think in terms of how this book is going to resonate nationally, and then internationally. *Kent State* has already been sold to four foreign publishers. To accomplish this, I look for the universal themes. With *My*

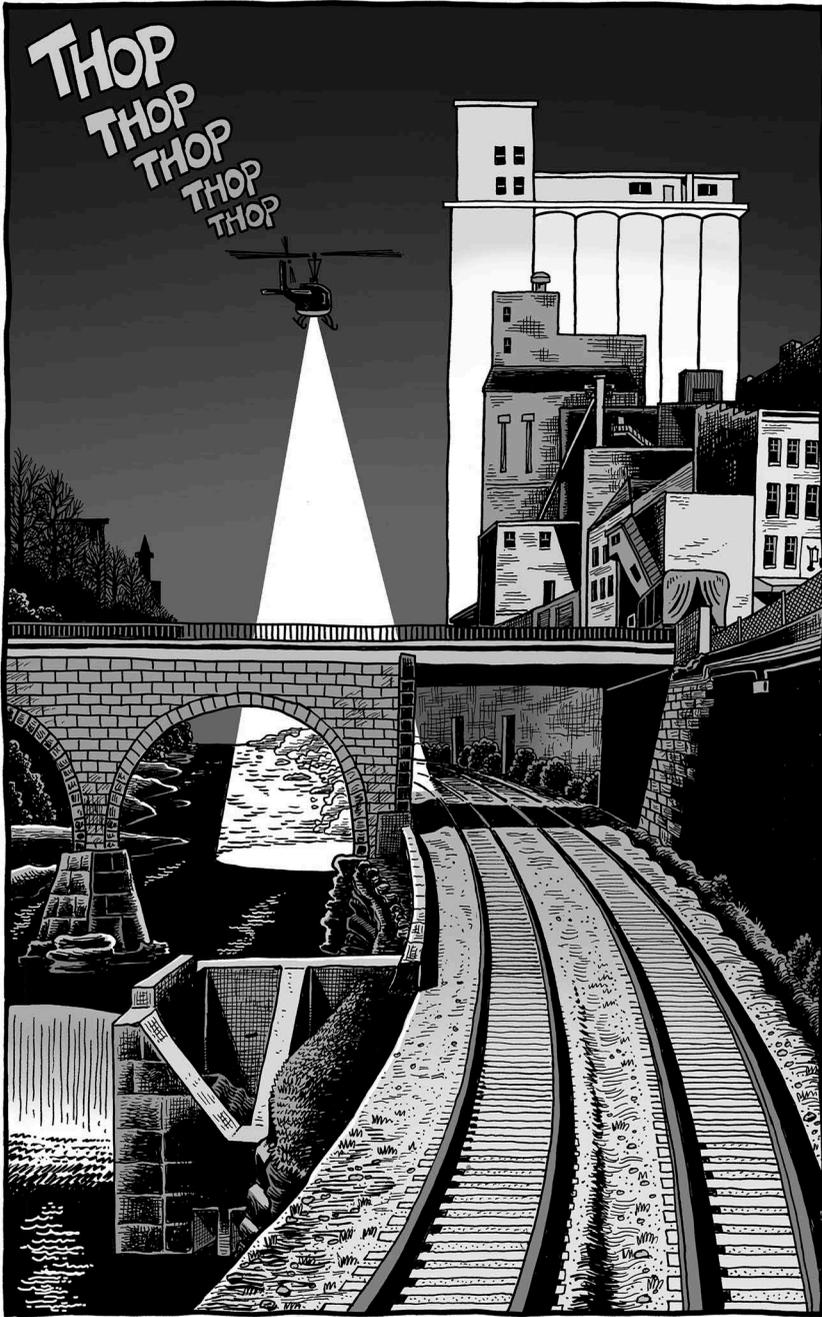


Figure 4. From *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, 161. Reprinted with permission from Derf Backderf.

Friend Dahmer, it's the kid that falls between the cracks, and the infamy of Dahmer and his crimes. With *Kent State*, it's the bitter price of dissent (Figure 5). For example, people in France are *very* interested in this book because that's what they're experiencing right now.

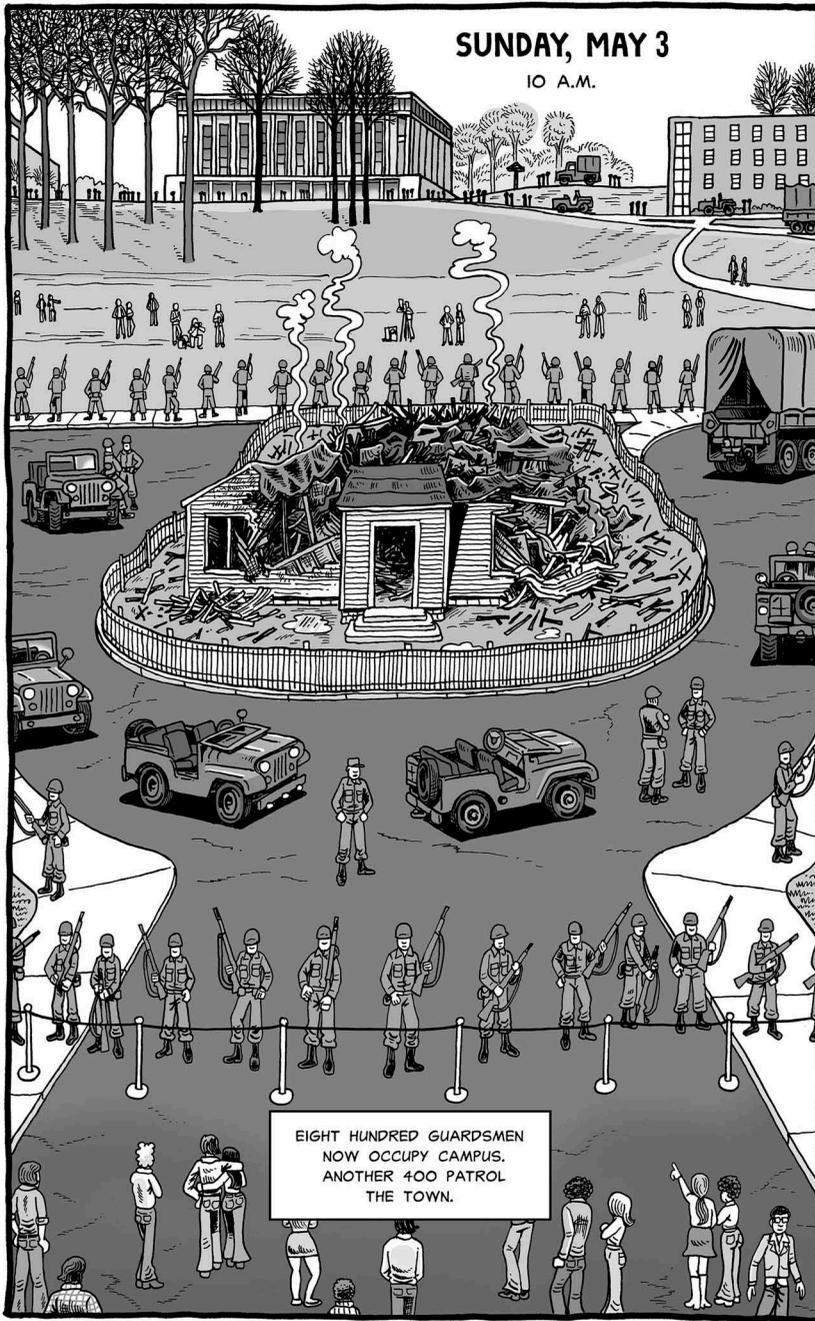


Figure 5. From *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, 111. Reprinted with permission from Derf Backderf.

Zullo Even *Trashed* (Figure 6) is about crimes, I mean it is, the way that we have so much trash now because of all these corporations. It is a crime against humanity.

Camden It's a crime against the future.

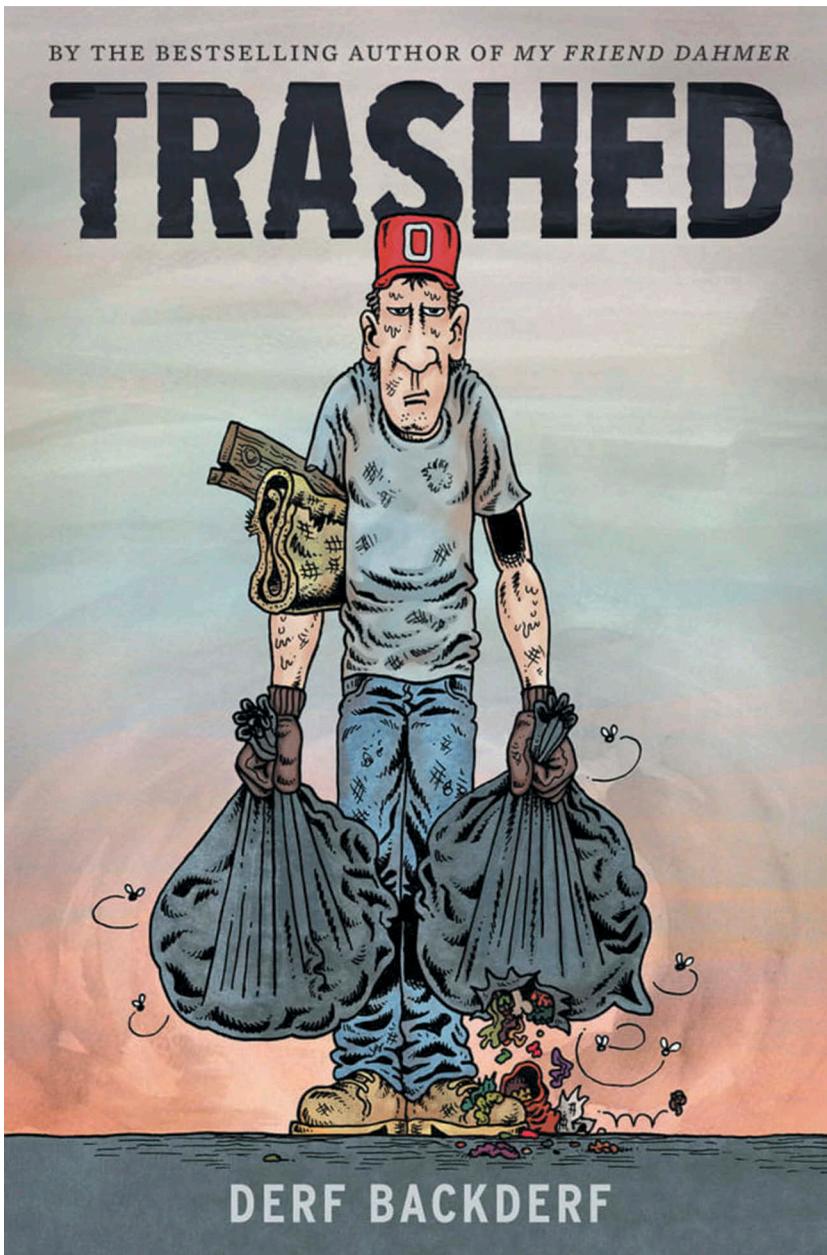


Figure 6. *Trashed*, cover. Reprinted with permission from Derf Backderf.

Derf Right, I agree, so that's what I look for when I tell a story. I don't mind putting in lots of local references, just for Ohioans. When I did my comic strip, *The City*, I wrote it that way, too. People in Cleveland took it to be very Cleveland because they saw all the little local references sprinkled in there and they knew I lived here. When I published the same strip in LA, or Chicago or Miami, readers thought it was about their city. Because the actual theme of each strip was universal.

Camden and Zullo Because of your years of experience making comics, what do you think it is about the form that serves to document, to be a medium of witness?

Derf Comics is just an art form that lends itself to that, especially visually, but I don't think that's all the art form is. I've seen all kinds of different comics; I don't see any particular one leaping forward. Memoir is still around, as is fantasy, and everything else. It's such a wide tapestry. Some of it is great, some awful, some just mediocre. Memoir is especially tricky, as popular a genre as it is. I thought a lot about the dangers of relying solely on memory when I was doing *My Friend Dahmer*. That's why I sought out corroboration for everything. With *Kent State*, even with so many eyewitnesses, people remember the same event very differently, and some of their memories are all over the place.

Camden and Zullo That's an interesting idea. So, in your book, how do you deal with it if two people remember the same event in different ways, what did you end up drawing?

Derf Well, I just looked for more accounts until I found consensus. I also compared them with other research material and with news reports, and some of those are very good, for example from the *Akron Beacon Journal*, or the *Daily Kent Stater*. I'd look through the news archives to find the factual narrative of the scene, then I'd compare it to the memory someone had of that same scene to see how it synced up. If it was way off, then it was a red flag, although maybe you can still get something useful out of the emotion of it or something else. It's not like you have to throw the whole thing away. We're talking about a half a century ago, so some memories now are only a lingering feeling.

Camden and Zullo How did you capture the distortion? Did you capture the way that some people can distort?

Derf Well sure, the rumours, some of the townies with their crazy rumours and beliefs. Paranoia played a big part in the story. Not just the townsfolk, but also law enforcement, the government, and the guardsmen were all hearing rumours, just these ridiculous rumours. They had a 24-hour guard at the water plant because there was a rumour the Weathermen were going to spike the water with LSD! That's why everything is sourced. I mean, the final footnotes are 25 pages long. Every scene, almost every panel, is sourced. So, if you want to disagree with a source, okay, but here's the footnote that lists where that scene came from. I did the same thing with *My Friend Dahmer*. My wife, who was a reporter for many years, was very insistent on that.

Camden I think that's a true distinction with the footnotes because that would not be the case with, say *Persepolis*, which is entirely a memoir; it seems to me that this is truly a documentary comic, as you say.

Derf My claim to fame is footnotes. There is no other creator who has footnotes like I do, for good or bad.

Camden As we think about comics and your work in particular, can we turn to a recent deeply flattering *New Yorker* article on Roz Chast where she is said to have a full collection of your work. Adam Gopnik remarks in that article that comics is 'gawky, confessional truth-telling, and boundary-crossing.' Indeed, he seems to highlight your work as particularly

exemplary of this quality. Do your feelings on comics as a form resonate with this description?

Derf It's all of those things and a couple hundred more. You know, it's the *New Yorker*. [laughter]. It's also the only time I've ever gotten the slightest recognition from the *New Yorker*, because it was brought up by Roz, their biggest star, whose work I love, of course. Otherwise, I don't exist to the *New Yorker*.¹

Camden and Zullo Your comics appeal to a different audience perhaps. To go back to this question of comics, let's think about the form in context of contemporary social media, which relies on the rapid-fire tweet as a mode of communication: comics on the other hand slow down time while, one might suggest, revealing truth in gaps, interstices, pauses, and haptic representation. Can it be said that this medium perhaps attempts to awaken our humanity through its slow pace and regenerative gestures?

Derf Well, I think it's a very measured way of taking in visuals of an event because you *can* pause, and you can think it over for a bit before continuing, as opposed to, say, film, which carries you along. I think that's true, and that's the power of the comics. If you read them correctly – and a lot of people don't – if you just stop and look at the page and what is happening and look at the background and take in all the visuals and try to figure out why the creator made those decisions and how it connects to the story. You just have to take your time with comics. They're something you really have to spend time with. And that's unusual. You don't do that with most other art forms. Maybe music. Well, you don't stop with music, but you listen to it over and over. Comics is unique in that way; you can just take your time, go at your own pace. The cartoonist is in total control.

Camden Because of the gutter you reckon something of your own imagination?

Derf If you use the gutter. I'm kind of a gutter guy. You know, when I was doing *The City*, my gutters were all bent and twisted, and things popped through them right and left, completely experimental, so it hasn't always been that way. Now I'm much more traditional.

Camden and Zullo Any reason for that in particular?

Derf Because I wanted clarity. I wanted that narrative clarity. Besides, I've already had my fun I spent 20 years stretching and twisting the medium and doing all sorts of crazy things with the art form (Figure 7). But when I started telling longer stories, it was all about the story. My work is very traditional now. It's all textbook. There's really nothing there that you would say 'Oh, that's really experimental' – especially in the *Kent State* book. For me now it's all about the story. And now all my books have been that way.

With the gutter you just have a little space. It breaks images up. What you get with a lot of mainstream comics is that there are no gutters. The art is butted up against itself. You open a page and say, 'OK, where do I start with this?' The creator should be making the decisions for the reader, like 'here's where you start, and now you go over here, and now here.' You have to be very careful to lead the reader through the scene. A lot of these

¹Since meeting with Derf Backderf for this interview, his work was featured in the *New Yorker*. His book, *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* was featured prominently in Jill Lepore's article, "Kent State and the War that Never Ended." <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/04/kent-state-and-the-war-that-never-ended>

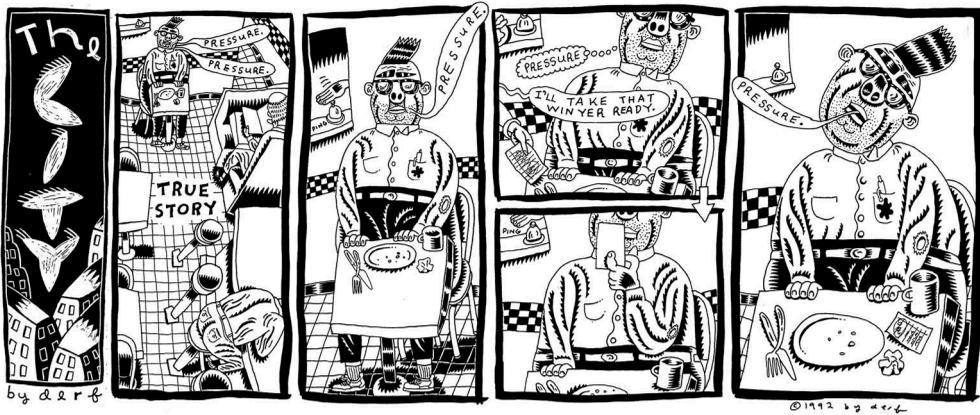


Figure 7. 'Pressure' from *The City*. Reprinted with permission from Derf Backderf.

artists have no idea what they're doing. They're like 'this'll look cool.' Sometimes it is—and mostly it's not. That's predominantly a mainstream comics problem, by the way.

Camden Speaking of mainstream comics, I've been looking at the thought bubble recently and the fate of the thought bubble. What do you think about it?

Derf I use it sparingly. I'm a big dialogue guy. I like the way people talk to each other and interrupt each other. With non-fiction work, I also didn't have access to their thoughts, and it seems preposterous to include them. I think that dialogue is more important than thoughts for this story. That's just my own preference. Even in *My Friend Dahmer* I never show what's going on in Jeff's head. I imply what's going on in his head but there's not a thought bubble. I hadn't thought about that before. In my kind of comics there's a lot of narration and that replaces the thought bubble. I do use narration. I use it in *My Friend Dahmer*, and I use it here. But you can't get too crazy with narration, or the story will bog down. *Kent State* is a page-turner. It's a powerful story. A great narrative. You want those pages to keep flipping.

Camden and Zullo One of the last things we were thinking about reflecting on is how you have moved from the comic strip to the long form graphic narrative, or documentary comic as you call it, where do you think comics will go next?

Derf Graphic novel sales rose 16% last year. That pretty much answers your question right there. And that's after virtually every year, double digit rising. Kids comics, like *Captain Underpants*, are also hugely successful now. Those are everywhere. I saw them in Costco the other day. It's really such an exciting time to be in comics. The superhero stuff is just circling the drain. Good riddance. The big corporations have dominated the conversation for too long, and there's no longer a reason for them to do so, because their sales don't justify that domination. You've got comics and you've got superhero comics. Everyone loves the superhero movies, but nobody buys the comics. Nobody reads those things. I grew up on superhero comics. I loved a lot of them, but they were much better then. They're played out.

Camden and Zullo The graphic narratives are better. That's not to say that there are not great series now that come to the surface and revive our attention because they become relevant again. For example, we've done a lot of work on Wonder Woman, early Wonder Woman, dedicating a whole issue of the JGNC to her. There's nothing like those William Moulton Marston, H. G. Peter and later Joye Murchison comics. Some of the early comics— and every once and a while some modern mainstream comics— really do break through. But, yes, kid's comics and narratives really do seem like the future.

Derf That's what kids are reading now. I mean, the superdude comics, they lost the kids years ago. They're not getting back, not with what they're putting in them now. The kids are going to take those kids comics and that's going to lead them to other genres of comics. It's fun to watch. I've been reading and making comics my whole life, but I was mostly doing a comic strip, which was a completely different animal and different audience because it was free, it came with the free papers. It's not that kind of active participation, where you have to put down money and buy a book. Because weekly comics were free, they were more disposable. There were some astounding comics in the weekly papers, just stunning. Some of the A-listers now started in the weeklies. Burns, Ware, Katchor, etc All those guys started in the weekly comics. So did I, and it was great, but that genre no longer exists, so I don't bring it up a lot. It sounds like 'Oh, in my day . . . ' It has no relevancy to anybody starting out now. I did it, but you *can't* follow my path. What you have to learn as a cartoonist is how to recognise what's working and what's not. Yeah, don't try to make it in floppies because the floppy is sinking into the tar pit. I've always had good instincts about when to bail—this genre is over, time to try something new. I bailed on political cartoons, I went to weekly papers, then I bailed on weekly papers, I went to long form comics. This is it. I don't have another reboot in me. I'll ride this one to the end.

Camden So, what you're saying is its now the long form? Its the narrative or the book.

Derf It's a different market. It's different economics. You have got to think about these things. And I'm *so* much better at books than anything else I ever did, which means, of course, I wasted a quarter century back there! But to be fair, this form didn't exist when I started drawing *The City*. In 1990, there were no graphic novels. The French had their long form comics, the 'albums' that date all the way back to Hergé. Other European countries have different comics traditions. The Japanese have Manga. And comics tastes vary from generation to generation..But the Europeans have the same issues that we have regarding comics, with it being very much a boys' club, although that's starting to change. They don't have the nasty political battles that we have here, with Comicsgate but still, there's still a definite divide, like ours, between mainstream and indie comics. Here, we had to create our own system, because we were locked out at mainstream cons and the mainstream comics press. We had to create our own world for 10 or 15 years. But now our world is thriving, and mainstream comics are on the rocks. We have these two comics worlds that are completely separate. There's some crossover, but mostly they're separate. That wasn't our choice, but it's working out to our advantage.

Camden It's just so obvious. You think, 'Oh my God, if I see one more romantic rendering of the ideal woman I'm just going to give up right now.' [laughter]

Derf The ideal woman. [laughter]

Camden and Zullo Okay let's stop there, we should push on, but really, this has been such a privilege.

Derf Oh, sure. My pleasure. Thanks! This is the calm before the storm.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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