

# A FAN'S NOTES

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***YOUR VIGOR FOR LIFE APPALLS ME:  
ROBERT CRUMB LETTERS 1958-1977***

Edited by Ilse Thompson

Fantagraphics

7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115

272 pages; paper, \$14.95

Perfect-bound bibliographies track his career, a 1994 movie exhibits him and the family he sprang from, his work is often autobiographical, and yet, as Gary Groth notes in his introduction, R. Crumb's letters to Marty Pahls and Mike Britt still have a few surprises for even long-time followers of his life and art. Crumb wrote the bulk of these letters before he turned twenty. Many of them feature lists of old records and comics which, aside from exhaustively demonstrating a distinctive range of interests, have little interest value to general readers. Many of the letters discuss, with all of the wit and wisdom of a bright schoolboy, free will, religion, sexuality, and art; and too few of them reflect on his life after he makes his way in the world. Robert Crumb may be the greatest comics artist of his time, but the juvenilia of this self-proclaimed "teenageless teenager" doesn't exactly invite comparison to the output of Rimbaud. So how does a stack of letters from the Fantagraphics archives stack up as a book?

This project grew out of the *R. Crumb Checklist* of Don Fiene, a "multi-volume compilation of Robert Crumb marginalia," Thompson writes. Making a few minor corrections, she transcribed nearly all of the letters; some are photocopied, with cartoons where the cranky nerd artist portrays himself as a middle-aged man, pudgy and jowly, in glasses, business suit, and bow tie. One of the photocopied letters runs as a remarkable 16-

page comic strip, with drawings providing vignettes that obliquely comment on the exposition. Crumb sits on a railroad track, babbling over two panels (all caps in original):

I think that as far as art is concerned, too much concentration is not good... This is also true, though not as much, in writing... Concentration is liabel [sic] to smother feeling... Art is at its best when it comes by whim, inspiration born of a passion. What concentration that is used should be the result of years of living... Mmm... That doesn't make sense, does it... Well, skip it...

Meanwhile, a locomotive approaches, ending his train of thought with a full panel SPLAT. Another sequence of pictures accompanies him as he realizes he probably won't be able to take a vacation he'd been planning—a scene that plagiarizes by anticipation a Mr. Natural comic to appear a decade later: Crumb draws a dream babe for himself, starts making out with her, and she disappears in a poof.

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Various pieces recommend this book. The editor's note sketches a mild circle—or, circular file—of editorial hell, footnotes provide authoritative identifications, and the publisher's introduction combines astute critical observations and comments from Crumb. A wonderfully descriptive letter of a bus trip to New York City suggests how Crumb might have drawn this adventure, and the accumulated revelations of his wacky family



*Cartoon used with permission*

eventually depict a fascinating, if pitiful, scenario. Unfortunately, most of it reads like a collector's edition. I mean that two ways. Aside from collectors of old music and comics who might value a serious fan's list of must-have acquisitions, Crumb collectors should find this book essential.

However tedious the mentality of the fan may be (Crumb himself writes of avoiding "fanboys" in the 1970s), there's something to admire in those who must possess and be possessed by the objects of their enthusiasm. These letters evoke an eccentric community of alienated souls, people desperate to stay in touch with each other through a relationship of shared passions, because without these connections they are at the mercy of a world where their parents fight and their brothers go crazy and life after high school is just like high school, which makes everything much worse.

Although the author of these letters may not have originally intended them to be presented this way and although the editor could have used more stuff from the seventies, *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me* is conceivable as a kind of documentary autobiography, an assemblage which has more in common with a diary found in an abandoned house—or even with a wallet found on the

street—than with any published book of letters. Whether collected at random or through a process of passive selectivity (many months after Thompson first informed him of the project, Crumb told Groth that, had he known, he would have provided more material), the book stands apart from the refined examples of autobiography that glut the market. Words plod, thoughts take off and then bellyflop. Recounted events meander while omitted information suddenly hits home—not necessarily because of something stated here but perhaps because of something remembered from the Terry Zwigoff film or from a biographical essay by Marty Pahls to introduce one of the Crumb anthologies. Not that Crumb's preference for plain speech doesn't serve him well here: given a household to escape from where the buzzword "dysfunctional" is laughably inadequate, his use of understatement seems reflexive, more sensible than artificial. In the context of a real letter written at the time, the boy's discovery of his Mom's unconsummated suicide note (scrawled on the back of a birthday card to his kid brother) is no mere trope, no creative writing class exercise for stalwart literary cadets to hone their craft in quest of that Kakutani Holy Grail, seamless prose.

Crumb's letters brandish their seams, but it would be romantic to make too much of their awkward charm or of the patterns suggested by their inclusion in this book. Nonetheless, there's enough stuff here to inspire some fanatic to write the most glaring omission in the bibliographies of works about Robert Crumb: a critical biography.

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