



Cheap Novelties: The Pleasures of Urban Decay, with Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer

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The classic graphic novel by the landmark cartoonist is back in print for its twenty-fifth anniversary

Cheap Novelties is an early testament to Ben Katchor's extraordinary prescience as both a gifted cartoonist and an astute urban chronicler. Rumpled, middle-aged Julius Knipl photographs a vanishing city--an urban landscape of low-rent apartment buildings, obsolete industries, monuments to forgotten people and events, and countless sources of inexpensive food. In Katchor's signature pen and ink wash style, *Cheap Novelties* is a portrait of what we have lost to gentrification, globalization, and the malling of America that is as moving today as it was twenty-five years ago.

In 1991, the original *Cheap Novelties* appeared in an unassuming paperback from the RAW contributor; it would become one of the first books of the contemporary graphic novel golden age, and it set the stage for Katchor to become regarded as a modern-day cartooning genius. Drawn & Quarterly's twenty-fifth anniversary edition is a deluxe hardcover.

Cheap Novelties: The Pleasures of Urban Decay, with Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer Details

Date : Published October 1st 1991 by Penguin (Non-Classics) (first published 1991)

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Author : Ben Katchor

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Genre : Sequential Art, Comics, Graphic Novels, Fiction, Graphic Novels Comics

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From Reader Review Cheap Novelties: The Pleasures of Urban Decay, with Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer for online ebook

Drew Lerman says

The greatest thing in the world. Gorgeous, witty, silly, melancholy, meditative, and so IMAGINATIVE. (Katchor is obviously a serious old socialist but he has the imagination of a smart hypercurious kid.) Pure pleasure. This is why New York was invented, so Ben Katchor could process it thus.

David Schaafsma says

I first read Katchor's (1996) Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer, the middle book of THREE books about Knipl, a real estate photographer, and this one is the first collection, from 1991. The third, Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer: The Beauty Supply District (2000). These are strips collected from The Jewish Daily Forward and other magazines. They create a kind of nostalgic, humorous, absurdist view of NYC, with a decidedly Jewish edge. The focus is on architecture, maybe, but it is also kind of like an urban archeology, where he finds artifacts, tools, evidence of quirky culture. He's amazing, funny, insightful, odd.

Here's a few strips on this page, I hope, so you can see his quirky sketchy style:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=juliu...>

Here's Jerry Stiller as Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer, which was featured on on NPR Weekend Edition:

<http://hearingvoices.com/webwork/isay...>

Auggie Heschmeyer says

The short, six panel stories in this collection feel almost as if Raymond Chandler had turned his focus from the suburbs to life in the city and then gotten someone to visualize them. It's quirky sometimes and melancholic just as often. Not every story leaves an impact, but enough will make you look up from the book and go, "Hmm," that is makes this a book worth checking out.

Adam says

Absurdist humor, and deeply, sadly cynical, but a marvel of insight into what makes people and cities tick. The drawings are rough, but detailed and fascinating. And the writing is like listening to an inner monologue wrought from a lifetime of hope and disappointment. Truly unique!

Lisa Rector says

I like the way each page episode begins with a drawing of some long forgotten item, like a bird whistle, typewriter eraser with brush, handheld pinball maze, rabbits foot, kazoo, trick flower that squirts water, with his name printed on it. I loved visiting the different areas of the city he was photographing, and the memories they'd trigger in his mind, as well as the conversations that would pop up during his journey.

Steve Hersh says

One of the best comic strips I've ever read. Perfect, just perfect.

Rose Gowen says

Is Ben Katchor a genius? I think so.

Kurt says

This is a comic strip that took a while to get into my system, but it came to really stick in my mind. No punchlines, mostly ambiguous stories of a world that's disappearing.

Helen says

This wonderful book consists of two parts: The first page is a collection of one-page incidents/musings about the protagonist, the real estate photographer Mr. Knipl, which usually wrap up with either a gag, ironic ending, or sad commentary on how things have changed, or some inexplicable ending. Each page starts with a drawing of a cheap novelty - a giveaway or promotional item - that advertises Mr. Knipl's business. For some reason, I found these illustrations of promo items great - they "resurrected" items that are not that much in circulation today, or used as promo items that much these days, gimmicks that have fallen out of favor, or devices that have mostly lost their importance - things people don't need as much today given the shift to digital communication, such as a small plastic pencil sharpener. All these cheap items hearkened back to a time when cheap items were still thought of as "great" even cheap items had some sort of cachet or were at least briefly sensational. People were once satisfied with much cheaper novelties - there was some worth attached to many things that I suppose have been rendered obsolete/worthless/throwaway items by now. Although actual paper and ink books as opposed to digital books are holding on, tablets and other digital devices have sort of turned the tables on a range of things that people once valued, and were willing to spend money on. This book is a look at a past era, before so many things lost their value. Or, put another way, before we had to have certain things like pencil sharpeners, telephone directories, or letter scales for example, in order to function at school, home, or work. Of course many people still own many of the things of the past era, but they're probably considered a charming throwback/antique by many who are used to

using their devices to communicate, look things up, take & send/share photos, and so forth.

Even Mr. Knipf's business may have been rendered obsolete meanwhile - although that I'm not sure of, given that there may well be a knack or special skill involved in photographing buildings - by the rise of cameras included in the ubiquitous smart phones that can take entirely free digital photographs. The book is an elegy to a prior era, when people would use public telephones, obtain information from newspapers, pamphlets, and so forth, a time when smart phones were unknown. Information was scarcer, and discussing news may have been seen as having more value or importance, than today, when information is ubiquitous on any news web site (also, since the advent of all-news cable channels). Although it's unimaginable, there was a time when even a glimpse of a newspaper headline while riding the subway, was a big deal, something that might be discussed at home. Information was seemingly more valuable because it was scarcer, or, except for broadcast TV or radio, you actually had to buy a newspaper or magazine to get news. The news stand has been replaced by Google news, or any other of the news sites such as Yahoo, while the encyclopedia, the library especially the reference room at the library, has been replaced by the rest of the internet - enabled by Google. Most of the information, news and past information, is now at the modern person's fingertips.

But despite the glut of information, which should have made us all better informed if not "smarter" the country managed to elect as President an uninformed, prejudiced dunce. Prior to the present era, information usually went through a curation process, that is, editing, by educated editors and journalists. There were standards - but today, Trump has taken the sort of ignorant prejudiced "paranoid" rantings a vagrant might utter on the street, and elevated them to political rhetoric. Trump rode this ranting prejudiced style of speech into the White House because the populace for the past few decades is familiar with ranting messages on the internet, that would not have seen print in the prior era of educated editors deciding what letters to the editor see print and so forth. Because of the democratization of expression the internet enables, which is a good thing, Trump's rantings are "accepted" since so many people on line also exaggerate etc. Prejudice/lies can be easily disseminated via the internet, where comments and postings aren't censored. Think back to the prior era of standards vs the present era of anything goes. If people are skeptical of what they read in comments, and what they hear Trump say, they will be easily led to believe that the press is also exaggerating or manipulating information for political ends. The "alliance" that once existed between the people and the people's watchdog, the press, is broken, as the people end up mistrusting their former ally, the hard-hitting independent press. This is of course exactly what Trump wants. Trump not only wants to lie because he can then never be pinned down definitively on any issue and thus can never be said to have flip flopped on any issue, he wants that level of confusion to permeate society, so that institutions such as the press aren't trusted, just like he is "accepted" as not telling the truth - or saying anything he wants on any given day, and then changing it the next day. The people are of course weakened when they lose a prior ally, the press. The same tactic is applied by Trump to the judiciary when decisions do not go his way; in this way, he weakens the notion of an independent judiciary, rather the judiciary must always agree with Trumpism. Once gov including the judiciary and the press are weakened, there is nothing to believe which is exactly what Trumpism wants - a confused populace that might believe anything since it trusts no-one & nothing. Trump probably will attack eventually fundamental protections in the Constitution (although he's sworn to uphold it) and might get away with initiating various changes to the Constitution in order to concentrate increasing power in his own hands (weaken individual rights and strengthen the power of the Executive).

Anyway, the point of the above discussion is to somehow hint at the "lost world" depicted in Katchor's book, includes a "lost world" of less information, but perhaps more integrity/stability, less confusion.

Part two of the book is a story of about 20 pages set in the (notional) world created in the one-page stories of part I, the cheap novelty district, with various stories playing out, including that of an arcane organization that is seeking a photographer and eventually finds one (Knipf). There are many sub plots in the endlessly

interesting story, which come together in the final sequence.

The drawings are great throughout the book, especially the highly detailed street scenes with whimsical store names and so forth. You get a glimpse of the lost world of soda fountains - were eventually replaced by canned soda - crowded cafeterias (mostly all gone by now) - inexpensive coffee shops, and so forth. Drawings of interiors of candy stores when they included soda fountains, five-and-ten cent stores, skee ball alleys, will, for those of a certain age, bring back memories of these establishments. The drawings have an ageless and perhaps memorialized look to them - which is fitting considering they depict a lost world although many of the gags/circumstances are funny. The one word that came to mind when I thought about what I would write in my review, was elegy, that is, sad poem memorializing a lost, maybe less phony (despite the book focusing on cheap novelties) era.

Laurent says

Geniale grafiek van een van de belangrijkste graphic novel auteurs van dit moment. Subliem, doordacht, diepzinnig, grappig, veellagig, literair. Superlatieven schieten tekort. Aanrader!

Stewart Tame says

I'm always happy to read Ben Katchor's work. There's a poetry in his evocations of older modes of city living. His dusty store shelves and dingy cafeterias are familiar to anyone who's wandered the side streets of any major city.

The book consists of a series of Katchor's Julius Knipl strips, followed by a longer story revolving around one of Knipl's photography assignments and all the various people he encounters on the way. Knipl, a real estate photographer, is a perfect character for Katchor to use to explore the archeology of the modern city. Although their styles are nothing alike, Katchor's work reminds me of that of underground comics artist and Zippy the Pinhead creator Bill Griffith, particularly his Griffith Observatory strips. Both artists possess a keen eye for architectural and cultural detail. I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Recommended!

Ollie says

This book is nice and simple, and maybe our review of it should be the same.

Comics get a bad rap for being only about superheroes so their potential for telling common everyday stories is often ignored or overlooked. As a medium they can tell stories as subtle and personal as any other art form, and Cheap Novelties is as good of an example as any.

Knowing nothing about Ben Katchor I went into this book as a complete blank slate and found myself completely charmed by the subject of Julius Knipl and his profession as a real estate photographer. Sure, the idea that real estate in the early 1900s needed photographing is compelling enough, but during his adventures we also find Knipl interacting with various aspects of New York that are long gone and maybe even forgotten. He reveals a part of life most of us never knew about or thought about like rubber band salesmen, dead storage businesses, old theater facades, and Peruvian hot sauces that are actually made in New Jersey.

Much like a memory, his images are rough and imperfect, and create a unique world that's alien to us but based in reality. Cheap Novelties might be too dry and ethereal for some and that's understandable, but for those of us who relish in the preservation of the old, it's quite a find.

John says

It is odd, but refreshing. It has a God's eye POV that reminds me of Zippy The Pinhead's sentimental mode. It is about the impermanence of cities, the momentary happinesses that are more likely to be remembered than revisited. At the end is some 20 pages that resemble something lengthier than the one-pages that precede it but are actually very fractured and prefigure the more concise works that followed it chronologically but close out the book. Very smart, but so low-key that you have to approach it somewhat at peace but in the mood for a casual stroll.

J says

Julius Knipl is always a delight to follow on his various city rambles and the site seeing along the way is wonderfully obscure and absurd to the point of not quite being certain whether it is reality or some skewed version half the time.

Adan says

These collected comic strips feature real estate photographer Julius Knipl and a whole lot of nostalgia for a New York that never existed, or at the most, existed in only the barest approximation of what is depicted. Nevertheless, I found myself yearning for diners and cafeterias, signposts and seltzer drinks, cigar manufacturers and theaters that I would never had experienced, even if they had been real.
