Chapter Four

World Building

Sense of Place, Perspective and Research

THE WORLD IS A **BIG PLACE**.

CAPTURING ALL OF ITS SIGHTS AND SENSATIONS IN LITTLE RECTANGLES CAN BE A DAUNTING **CHALLENGE**.

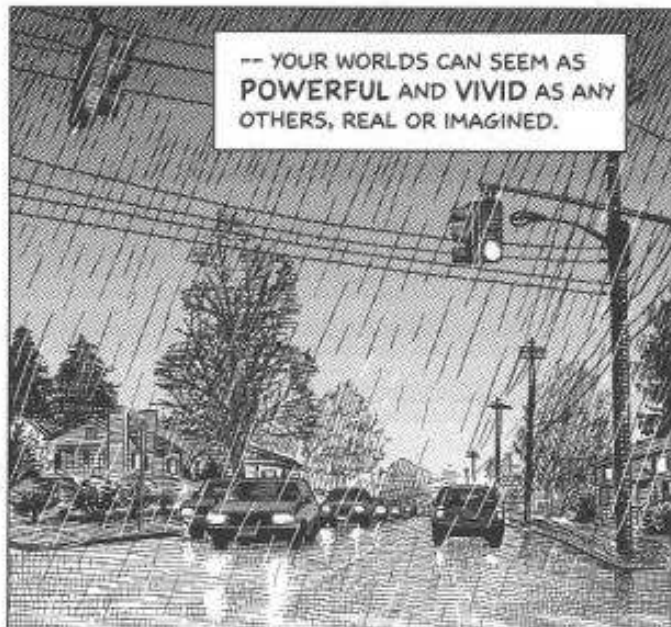BUT WITH KNOWLEDGE --

-- EFFORT --
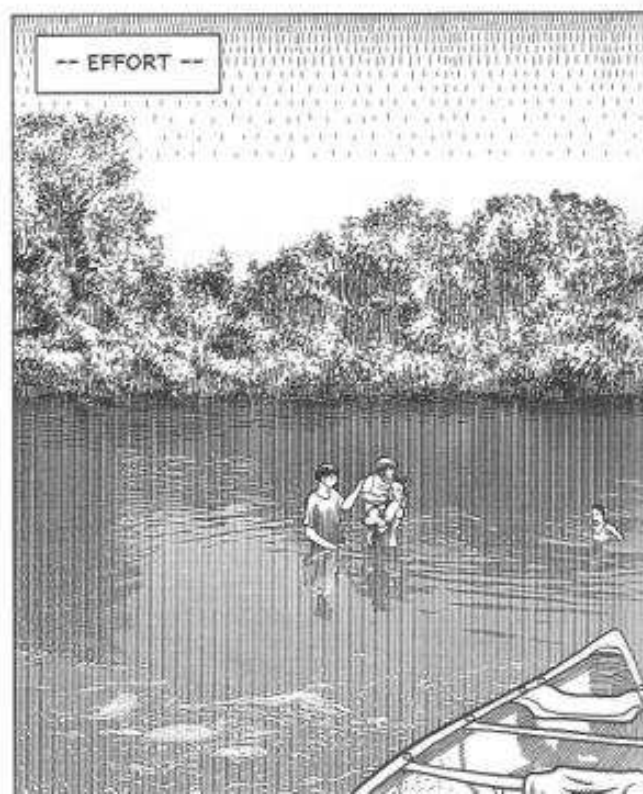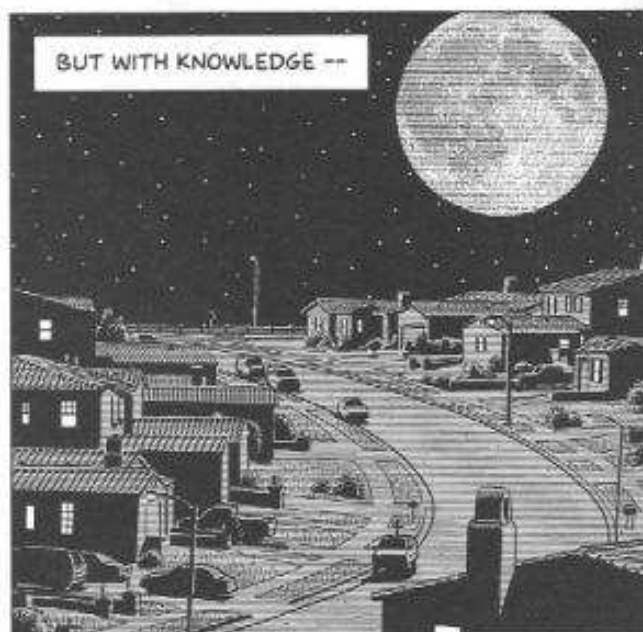
-- AND A WILLINGNESS TO GO BEYOND THE MERELY "ADEQUATE" --

-- YOUR WORLDS CAN SEEM AS **POWERFUL** AND **VIVID** AS ANY OTHERS, REAL OR IMAGINED.

SWEATING SUCH DETAILS CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DRAWING A PAGE IN **SIX** HOURS OR DRAWING IT IN **TWENTY** --
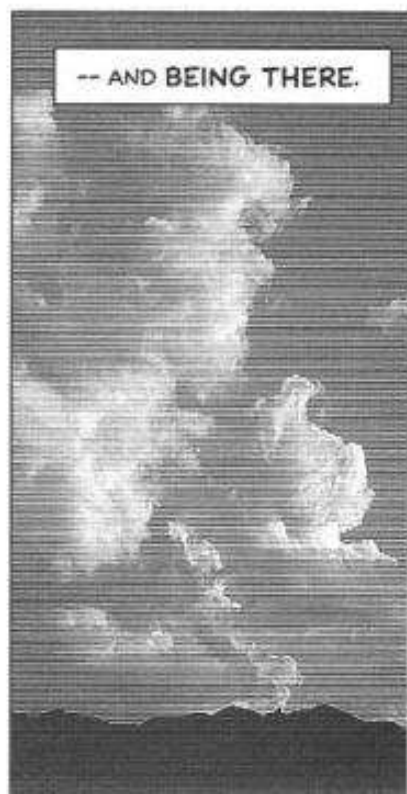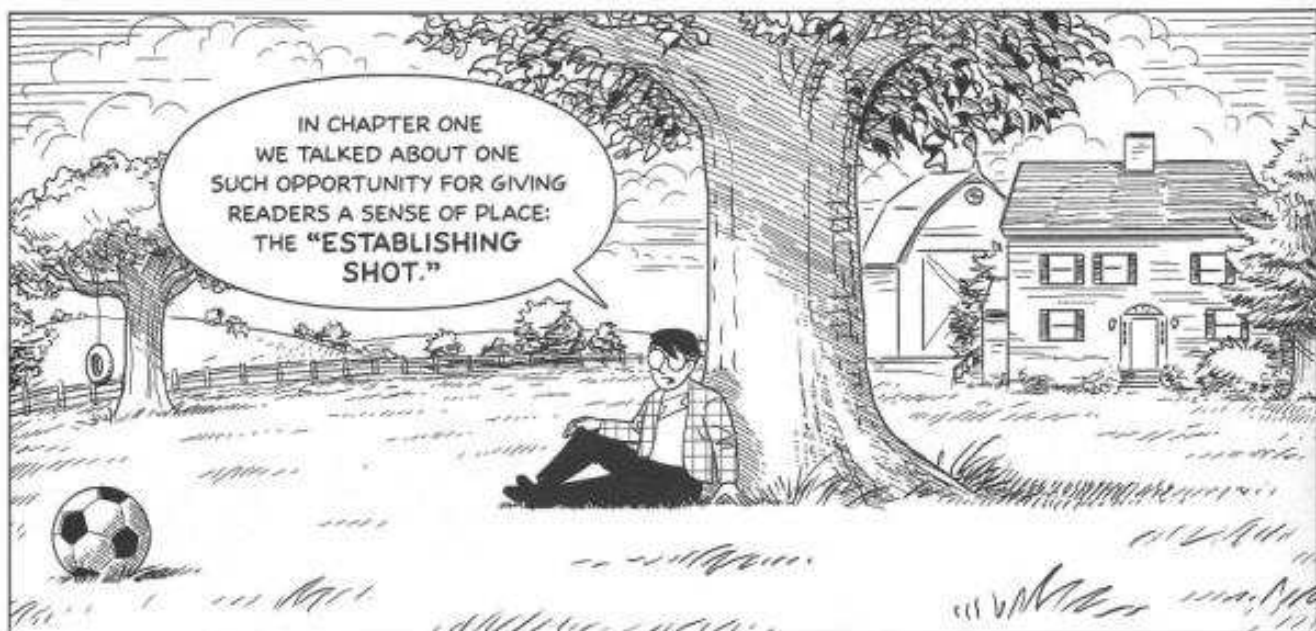
-- BUT FOR YOUR **READERS**, IT CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE --

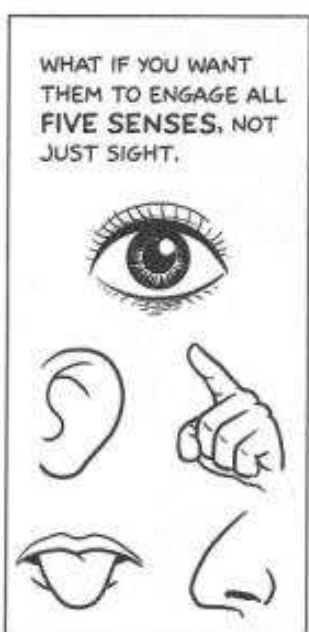-- BETWEEN **KNOWING** WHERE YOUR STORY TAKES PLACE --

-- AND **BEING THERE.**

IN CHAPTER ONE WE TALKED ABOUT ONE SUCH OPPORTUNITY FOR GIVING READERS A SENSE OF PLACE: THE "ESTABLISHING SHOT."

Y'KNOW, THOSE BIG **LONG-SHOT** PANELS THAT TELL YOU WHERE YOU ARE, USUALLY BEFORE ZOOMING IN TO THE PROTAGONIST?

THAT ONE FOR EXAMPLE.

WELL, IF JUST **TELLING** YOUR READERS **WHERE** THE STORY TAKES PLACE IS YOUR PRIMARY GOAL --

-- YOU CAN PROBABLY GET BY WITH JUST ONE OR TWO PANELS OF STRAIGHTFORWARD, ECONOMICALLY DRAWN ESTABLISHING SHOTS PER SCENE.

AFTER THAT IT CAN BE ALL **MEDIUM SHOTS** --

-- AND **CLOSE-UPS** --

-- WHICH USUALLY REQUIRE LESS WORK THAN, SAY, DRAWING **700 LEAVES** EVERY TIME YOU WANT TO PUT A **TREE** IN THE PANEL.

I MEAN **LOOK** AT THAT THING -- IT'S A **SQUIGGLE** FOR PETE'S SAKE! BUT YOU **KNOW** IT'S A TREE BASED ON THE PANELS BEFORE.

IF, ON THE OTHER HAND, YOU WANT **MORE** THAN JUST CLARITY AND EFFICIENCY --

-- YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER SOME **ADDITIONAL TECHNIQUES.**

WHAT IF, RATHER THAN JUST GIVING YOUR READERS THE SENSE OF **LOOKING** AT A SCENE --

-- YOU WANT THEM TO FEEL **SURROUNDED** BY IT?

YOU ARE HERE X

WHAT IF YOU WANT THE ENVIRONMENTS IN YOUR STORY TO PROVOKE A SPECIFIC, SUSTAINED **MOOD?**

WHAT IF YOU WANT THEM TO ENGAGE ALL **FIVE SENSES**, NOT JUST SIGHT.

WHAT IF, IN FACT, YOUR STORY IS **ABOUT** THE PLACE YOU'RE DRAWING?

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE'LL CONSIDER HOW PANEL CHOICE, COMPOSITION, RESEARCH AND DRAWING TECHNIQUES CAN HELP YOU **ACHIEVE** THESE GOALS --

-- STARTING WITH SOME SLIGHT VARIATIONS ON THE STANDARD "ESTABLISHING SHOT."

COMPARE THE PANEL ABOVE TO THE FIRST PANEL ON PAGE 160, AND YOU MIGHT NOTICE A FEW DIFFERENCES.

FIVE DIFFERENCES INCLUDING:

1. THE **EXPANSION** OF THE PANEL OUT TO THE PAGE **EDGES,** KNOWN IN THE PRINT INDUSTRY AS A **"BLEED."**

2. A GREATER LEVEL OF **REALISTIC DETAIL.**

3. THE LACK OF A WORD BALLOON.

SNAP!

4. A LOWER, **OFF-CENTER** CAMERA ANGLE.
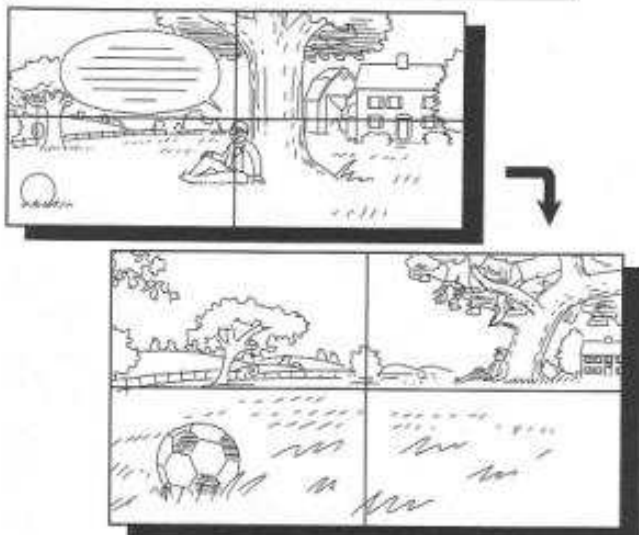
5. AN INCREASED **SENSE OF DEPTH**, BOTH IN TERMS OF PERCEIVED SIZE AND THE FADING OF DISTANT OBJECTS.
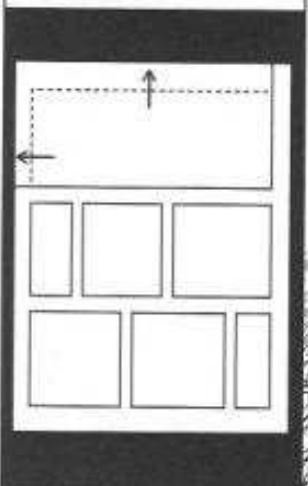
NOW, I CAN'T READ YOUR MIND.*

BUT I'D BE WILLING TO BET THAT THE **SECOND VERSION** OF THAT SHOT PRODUCED A DIFFERENT READING EXPERIENCE IN A FEW SUBTLE BUT IMPORTANT WAYS.

BLEEDS, FOR EXAMPLE, TEND TO **OPEN UP** A SCENE --
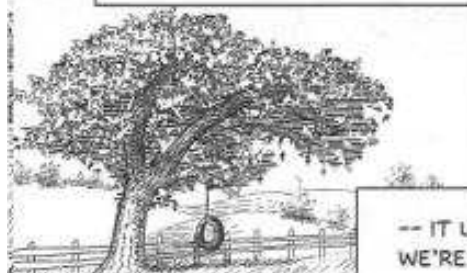
-- NOT JUST BECAUSE OF THE INCREASED PANEL **SIZES** --

-- BUT ALSO BECAUSE THEY'RE NO LONGER FULLY **CONTAINED** BY THE PANEL BORDER AND CAN, WELL... "BLEED" INTO OUR WORLD --
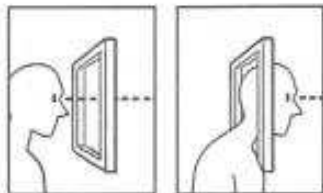
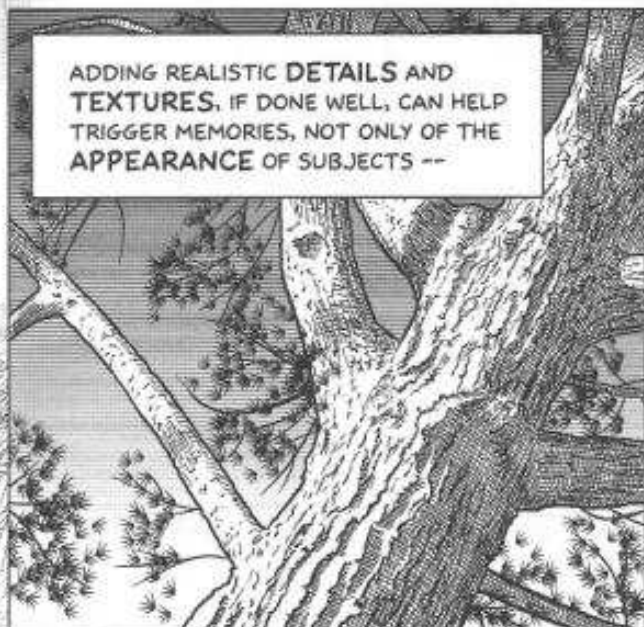-- OR PERHAPS BECAUSE WE'RE CONDITIONED BY THE **PANEL-AS-WINDOW** EXPERIENCE --

* YET.

-- AND IF A WINDOW FRAME HAS PASSED BEYOND OUR PERIPHERAL VISION --

-- IT USUALLY MEANS WE'RE **THROUGH** IT.

ADDING REALISTIC **DETAILS** AND **TEXTURES**, IF DONE WELL, CAN HELP TRIGGER MEMORIES, NOT ONLY OF THE **APPEARANCE** OF SUBJECTS --

-- BUT ALSO THE WAY THEY **FEEL** --

-- OR **SMELL** --

Play

-- OR **SOUND** --

-- AND HELP BOLSTER A SENSE OF **RECOGNITION** ON THE PART OF THE READER.

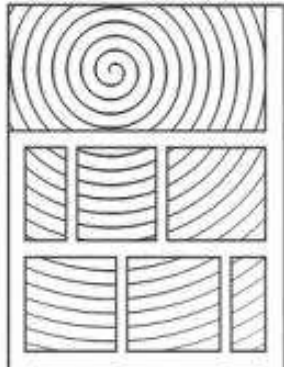**SILENCE** HAS THE EFFECT OF REMOVING A PANEL FROM ANY PARTICULAR SPAN OF TIME.

WORD BALLOONS HAVE A PERCEIVED **DURATION** SO THE PANELS THEY'RE IN DO TOO.

WITHOUT THAT IMPLICIT TIME STAMP WHICH WORDS PROVIDE, A SILENT PANEL DOESN'T "END" QUITE AS CRISPLY --
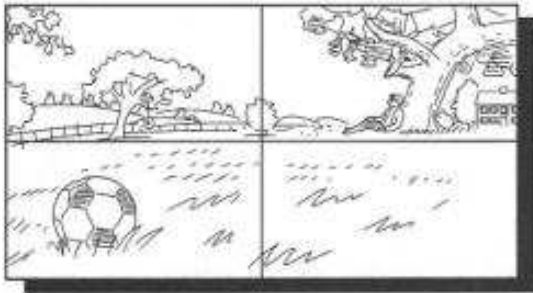
-- AND THE **EFFECT** OF IT CAN LINGER THROUGHOUT A PAGE.

SILENCE ALSO ALLOWS READERS TO STEP OFF THE TWIN CONVEYOR BELTS OF PLOT AND DIALOGUE LONG ENOUGH TO LET THEIR EYES WANDER AND **EXPLORE** YOUR WORLD, INSTEAD OF VIEWING IT AS NOTHING MORE THAN A PASSING BACKDROP.

GIVING READERS THAT LICENSE TO "WANDER" IS ALSO A BYPRODUCT OF AN OFF-CENTER **CHOICE OF FRAME.**

SUCH COMPOSITIONS CREATE A SENSE OF ENTERING A SETTING WITH A PERSON **IN** IT, RATHER THAN MEETING A PERSON WITH A SETTING **BEHIND** THEM.
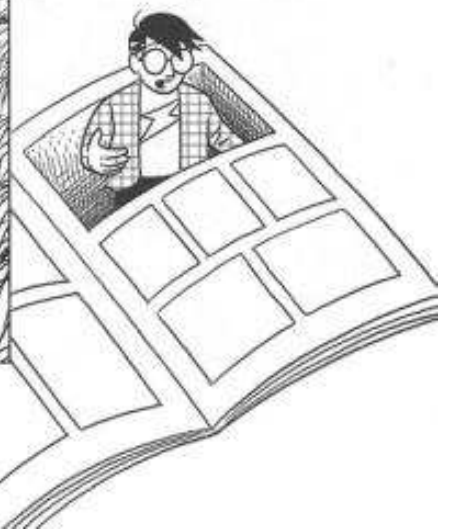
BY NOT "BLOCKING US AT THE DOOR," AN OFF-CENTER FIGURE, FACING AWAY FROM THE READER, CAN INVITE US TO **FOLLOW** IT MORE FULLY INTO A SCENE.

FINALLY, AN INCREASED **SENSE OF DEPTH,** CAN INCREASE THE PERCEIVED **SIZE** OF A SETTING -- REGARDLESS OF ITS SIZE ON THE PAGE --

-- AND WITH IT, THE READER'S SENSE OF BEING **SURROUNDED** BY YOUR WORLD.

THE SECOND VERSION OF OUR ESTABLISHING SHOT IS A BIT LESS **EFFICIENT**, SINCE IT LEAVES OUT A WORD-BALLOON WHICH -- IF THIS WAS AN ORDINARY COMICS STORY -- WOULD PRESUMABLY HAVE TO GO **ELSEWHERE**.

BUT OTHERWISE, NONE OF OUR MODIFICATIONS REQUIRED EXPANDING THE PANEL BEYOND THAT TOP THIRD OF A PAGE. EVERYTHING STILL HAPPENS IN **ONE PANEL**.
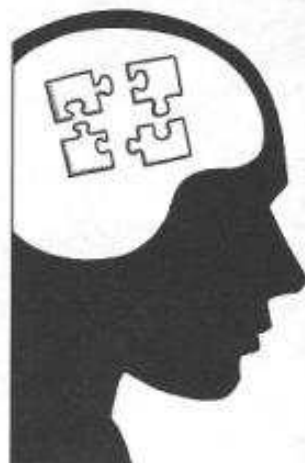
SUPPOSE, HOWEVER, THAT YOU HAVE PLENTY OF ROOM TO TELL YOUR STORY; IS THERE ANY REASON TO USE **MULTIPLE** PANELS TO ESTABLISH A SETTING?
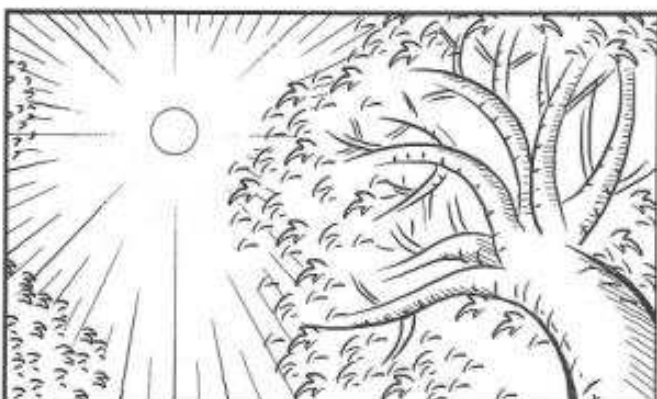
ONE OPTION IS TO SPLIT AN OPENING SCENE INTO **FRAGMENTS** USING ASPECT TO ASPECT TRANSITIONS, A TECHNIQUE POPULAR IN JAPANESE COMICS.

IN THIS METHOD, THE SCENE IS "ASSEMBLED" IN THE READER'S **MIND**.

AS 300+ PAGE GRAPHIC NOVELS HAVE BECOME MORE COMMON, SOME NORTH AMERICAN CARTOONISTS ARE ALSO STARTING TO EXPLORE THE POTENTIAL OF **MULTI-PANEL** AND EVEN **MULTI-PAGE** SCENE-SETTERS IN HOPES OF CREATING MORE POWERFUL AND MEMORABLE WORLDS.

HERE THE READER EXPERIENCES THE WORLD IN MUCH THE SAME WAY THAT HE OR SHE WOULD IN **"REAL LIFE."**

LOOKING AROUND... UP... DOWN...

WHATEVER CATCHES THE EYE.

ONE PIECE AT A TIME.

FROM A 3-PAGE SUNRISE BY CANADIAN COMICS ARTIST SETH, FROM *CLYDE FANS* BOOK ONE.

THIS LENDS AN AIR OF **FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE** AND BOLSTERS THE ILLUSION OF WANDERING **THROUGH** A SCENE.

AND WHEN NO ONE IS IN SIGHT, AS IN THE ABOVE PAGE, YOUR READER IS FREE TO FORM A PERSONAL **RELATIONSHIP** WITH YOUR WORLD EVEN BEFORE YOUR **CHARACTERS** DO.

MULTI-PANEL SEQUENCES ALSO GIVE YOU TIME TO BUILD A SPECIFIC **MOOD** FOR YOUR WORLDS -- A PROCESS THAT TAKES **TIME** TO ACCOMPLISH IN ANY STORYTELLING MEDIUM.

ANOTHER OPTION IS TO TREAT *EVERY* PANEL--

--AS IF IT WAS AN ESTABLISHING SHOT--

--AND ADD WALL-TO-WALL ENVIRONMENTAL DETAILS WHEREVER POSSIBLE.

THIS APPROACH, TYPIFIED BY SOME EUROPEAN GRAPHIC ALBUMS, CAN CREATE A STRONG SENSE OF PLACE.

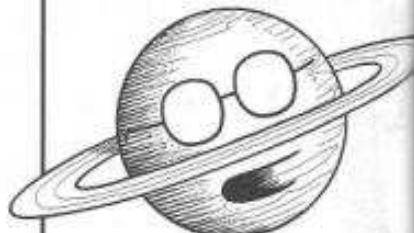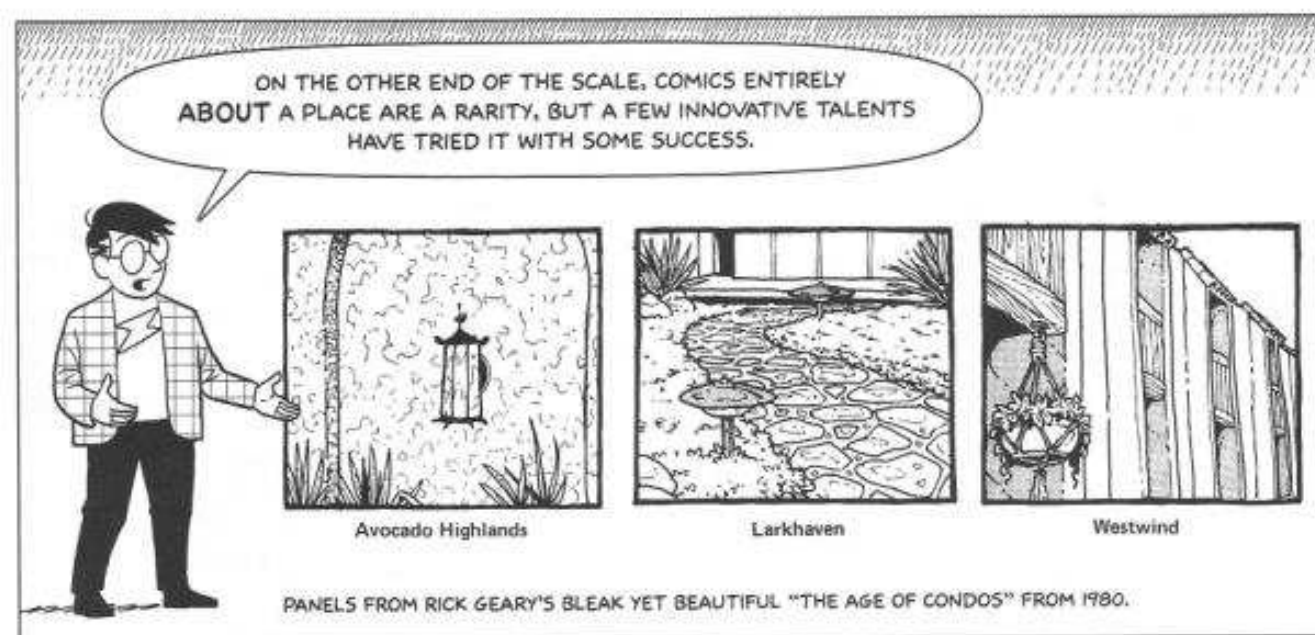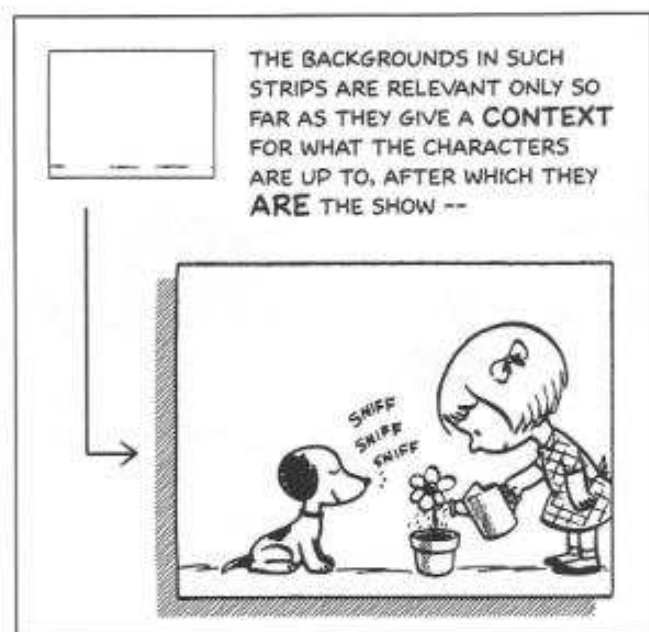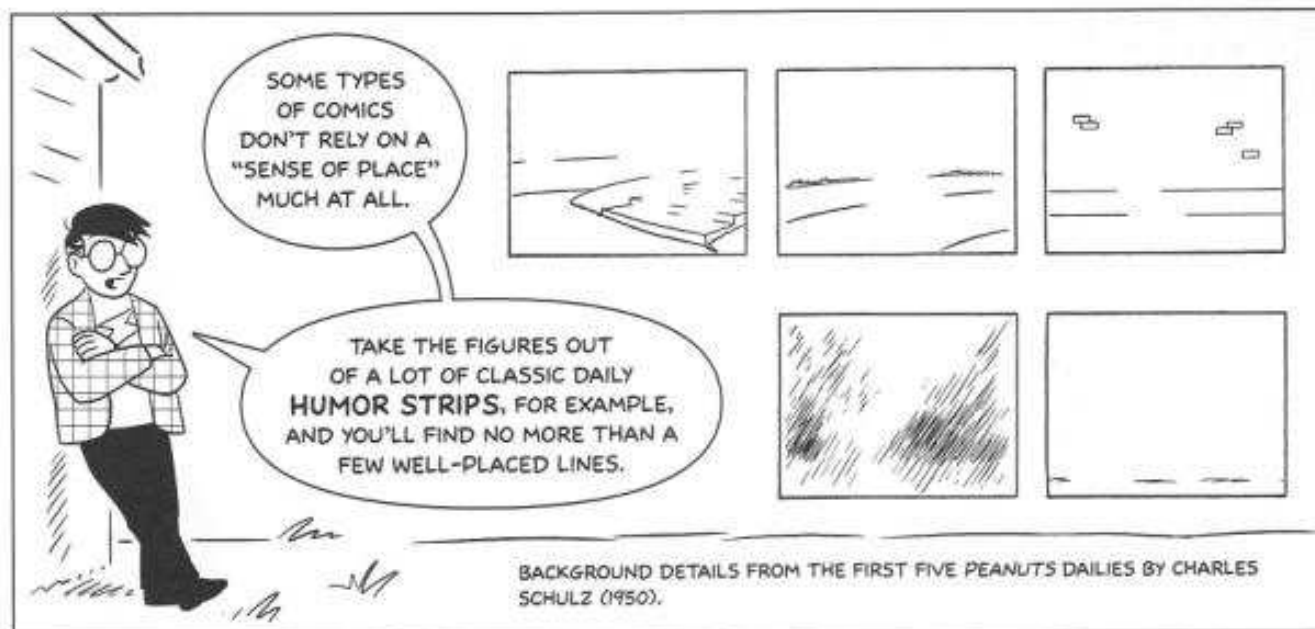IF YOU DON'T MIND THE LONG HOURS AND SORE HANDS, IT MIGHT BE WORTH A TRY.

PICKING THE RIGHT APPROACH FOR YOUR STORY WILL DEPEND ON THAT STORY'S **PRIORITIES.**

SOME TYPES OF STORIES, LIKE SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY OR HISTORICAL FICTION ARE AT LEAST PARTIALLY **ABOUT** THE WORLDS THEY INHABIT --

-- AND THEY MAY REQUIRE THAT YOU LAVISH CONSTANT ATTENTION UPON THE **DETAILS** OF THOSE WORLDS.

STORIES ABOUT **MODERN RELATIONSHIPS,** ON THE OTHER HAND, MAY ONLY NEED THEIR FAMILIAR, EVERYDAY SETTINGS REITERATED ONCE IN A WHILE, WHILE THEY FOCUS INSTEAD ON AN **EMOTIONAL** LANDSCAPE.

SOME TYPES OF COMICS DON'T RELY ON A "SENSE OF PLACE" MUCH AT ALL.

TAKE THE FIGURES OUT OF A LOT OF CLASSIC DAILY **HUMOR STRIPS**, FOR EXAMPLE, AND YOU'LL FIND NO MORE THAN A FEW WELL-PLACED LINES.

BACKGROUND DETAILS FROM THE FIRST FIVE PEANUTS DAILIES BY CHARLES SCHULZ (1950).

THE BACKGROUNDS IN SUCH STRIPS ARE RELEVANT ONLY SO FAR AS THEY GIVE A **CONTEXT** FOR WHAT THE CHARACTERS ARE UP TO, AFTER WHICH THEY **ARE** THE SHOW --

SNIFF SNIFF SNIFF

-- THOUGH IF THE MOMENT REQUIRES IT, MASTERS OF THE GENRE CAN STILL CREATE A VIVID SETTING.

SLURP SLURP!

ON THE OTHER END OF THE SCALE, COMICS ENTIRELY **ABOUT** A PLACE ARE A RARITY, BUT A FEW INNOVATIVE TALENTS HAVE TRIED IT WITH SOME SUCCESS.

Avocado Highlands

Larkhaven

Westwind

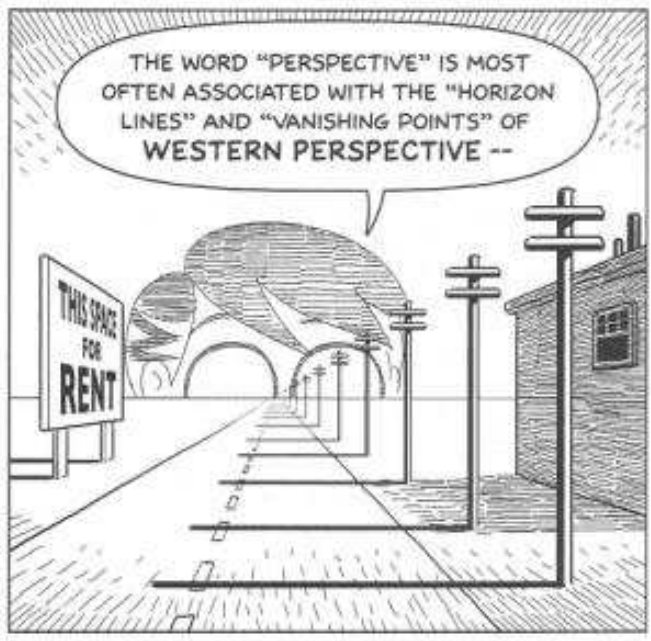PANELS FROM RICK GEARY'S BLEAK YET BEAUTIFUL "THE AGE OF CONDOS" FROM 1980.

TO MAKE THESE WORLDS OF YOURS VISUALLY **CREDIBLE,** YOU'LL NEED TO TACKLE THE SUBJECT OF DRAWING SCENES IN **PERSPECTIVE.**

IT'S A SUBJECT MANY ARTISTS FIND **INTIMIDATING.**

FORTUNATELY, DRAWING IN PERSPECTIVE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ALL THAT HARD.

IN FACT, WITH THE RIGHT APPROACH, IT CAN BE KIND OF **FUN!**

THE WORD "PERSPECTIVE" IS MOST OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE "HORIZON LINES" AND "VANISHING POINTS" OF **WESTERN PERSPECTIVE** --

THIS SPACE FOR RENT

-- BUT IT CAN REFER TO ANY ATTEMPT TO REPRESENT A **3-D WORLD** ON A **2-D SURFACE** LIKE THIS PAGE.

THERE ARE PLENTY OF GRAPHIC DEVICES THAT CAN INDICATE **DEPTH**.

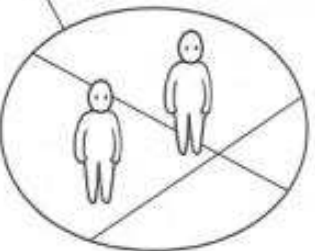CLOSER OBJECTS CAN **OVERLAP** MORE DISTANT ONES --

OVERLAP

SIZE

FADING

-- OR THEY MAY APPEAR **LARGER**, HAVE DARKER OR THICKER **BORDERS** OR SIMPLY BE **LOWER** ON THE PAGE IN VIEWS FROM ABOVE.

POSITION

AN ARTIST WITH A **MINIMAL STYLE** LIKE JOHN PORCELLINO MIGHT DRAW HUNDREDS OF PAGES WITHOUT EVER GOING NEAR A VANISHING POINT, BUT STILL CREATE A CONVINCING AND CONSISTENT WORLD USING SUCH BASIC DEPTH INDICATORS.
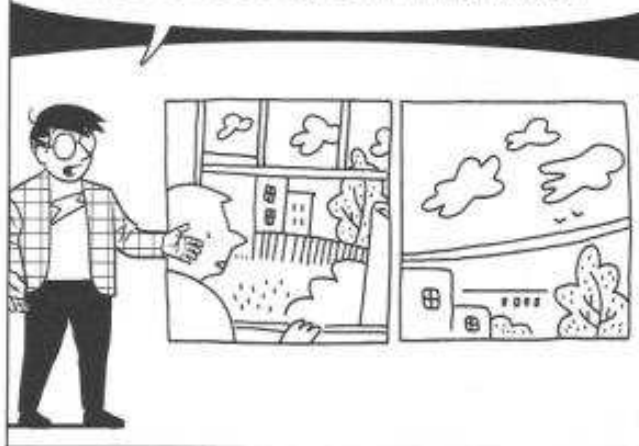
SOME ARTISTS BUILD THEIR SCENES ON A SLANTED CHECKERBOARD PATTERN WHERE PARALLEL LINES DON'T CONVERGE; A TYPE OF PERSPECTIVE SEEN IN EVERYTHING FROM PERSIAN PAINTING TO GAMES LIKE THE SIMS.

COMPELLING STORIES HAVE BEEN TOLD IN COMICS USING **DIAGRAMS** OF A WORLD SEEN ENTIRELY FROM ABOVE --
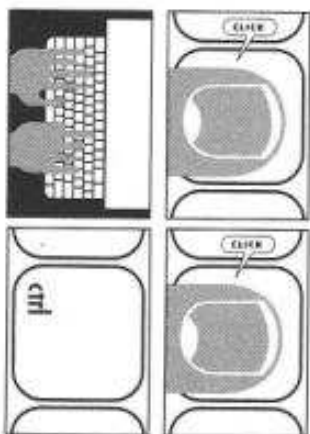
-- BIOMORPHIC LANDSCAPES WHERE THE ONLY INDICATION OF DEPTH WAS IN **OVERLAPPING** --
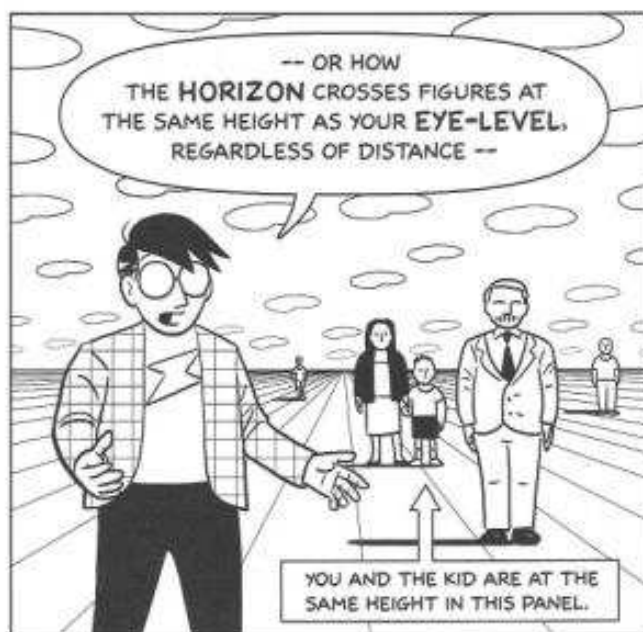
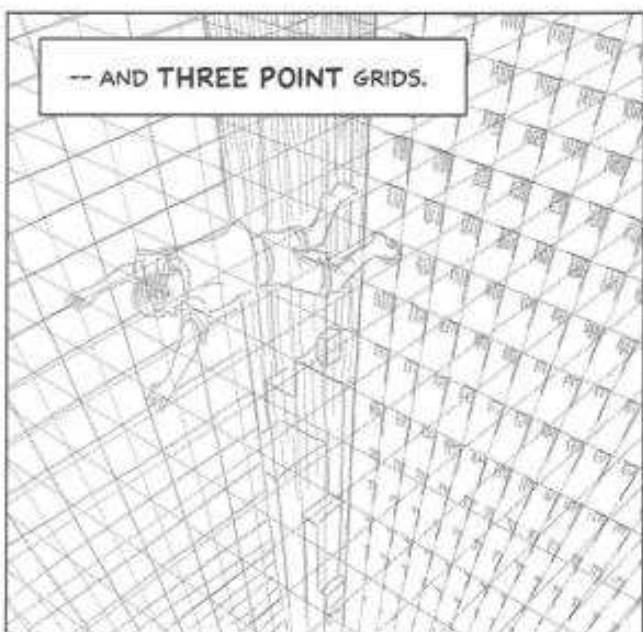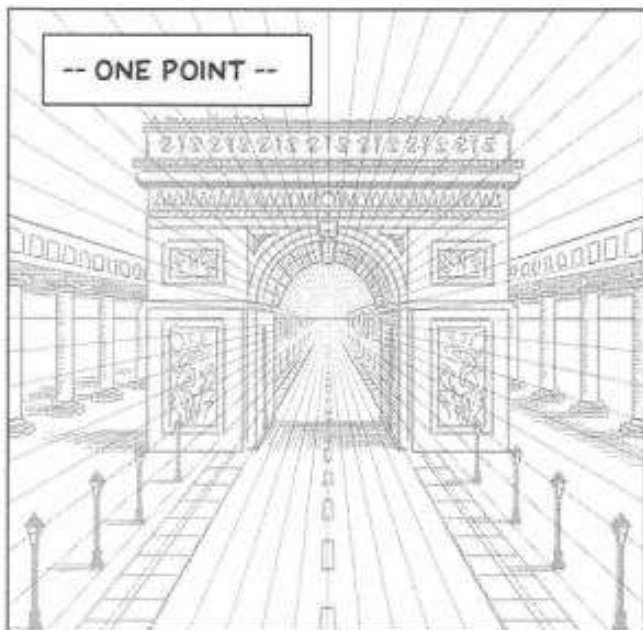-- AND USING PERSPECTIVE THAT'S ALWAYS JUST A LITTLE BIT **WARPED**.

IF YOUR APPROACH IS **CONSISTENT**, AND THE CONTENTS OF YOUR STORY ARE **INTERESTING** ENOUGH, YOUR AUDIENCE WILL PROBABLY ACCEPT WHATEVER TYPE OF PERSPECTIVE YOU USE.

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THAT SAID, IF YOU WANT YOUR WORLD TO LOOK AS "REAL" AS POSSIBLE IN THE CONVENTIONAL SENSE, WESTERN PERSPECTIVE IS THE WAY TO DO IT.

I CAN'T OFFER A FULL-LENGTH COURSE IN WESTERN PERSPECTIVE IN THESE PAGES. FOR THAT I SUGGEST DAVID CHELSEA'S BOOK ON THE SUBJECT* --

-- BUT HERE ARE SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW PERSPECTIVE AND COMICS CAN WORK TOGETHER.

IF YOU'VE TAKEN A FEW DRAWING CLASSES IN SCHOOL --

-- OR YOU'VE ALREADY READ CHELSEA'S BOOK --

-- YOU MAY ALREADY KNOW SOME OF THE BASICS --

-- SUCH AS HOW OBJECTS ON A PLANE CONVERGE WITH DISTANCE --

-- OR HOW THE HORIZON CROSSES FIGURES AT THE SAME HEIGHT AS YOUR EYE-LEVEL, REGARDLESS OF DISTANCE --

YOU AND THE KID ARE AT THE SAME HEIGHT IN THIS PANEL.

-- OR HOW CIRCLES COMPRESS TO OVALS WHEN VIEWED FROM THE SIDE.

AND YOU MIGHT HAVE SOME EXPERIENCE WITH APPLYING --

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-- ONE POINT --

-- TWO POINT --

-- AND **THREE POINT** GRIDS.

BUT IN COMICS, THESE ELEMENTS HAVE TO COEXIST WITH THE VARIOUS CHOICES AND DEMANDS OF **WRITING WITH PICTURES.**

CHOICE OF **MOMENT**

CHOICE OF **FRAME**

CHOICE OF **IMAGE**

CHOICE OF **WORD**

CHOICE OF **FLOW**

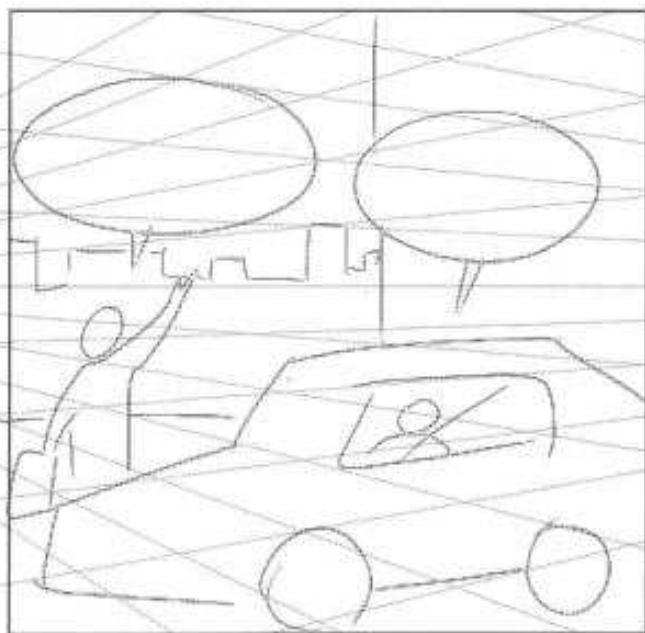COMICS PAGES ARE STRUCTURED AROUND HOW PEOPLE, OBJECTS AND WORDS ARE PLACED ON THE **PAGE** --

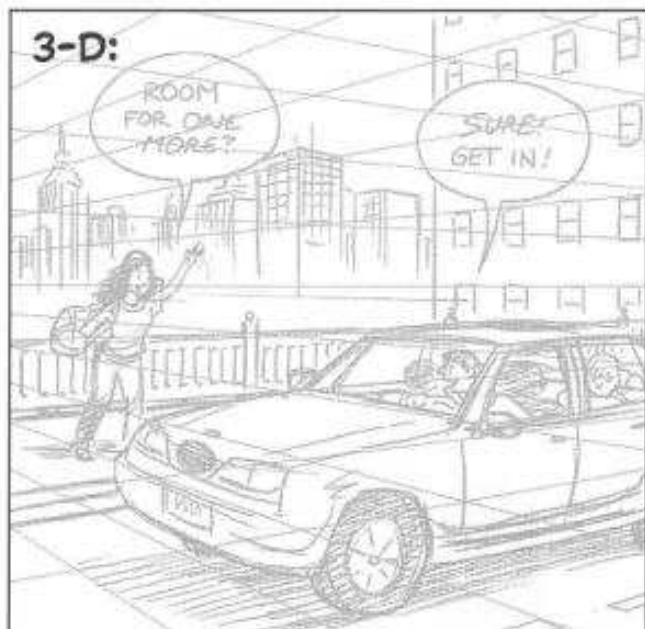-- SO MOST PANELS BEGIN THEIR LIVES AS A COLLECTION OF FLAT, **2-D** ELEMENTS.

2-D:

BALLOON 1

BALLOON 2

CITY BG.

GUY 1

AND IT'S ONLY **AFTER** THOSE RELATIONSHIPS ARE WORKED OUT THAT A **GRID** IS LAID DOWN --

-- AND A MORE FULLY REALIZED **THREE-DIMENSIONAL** SCENE STARTS TO EMERGE.

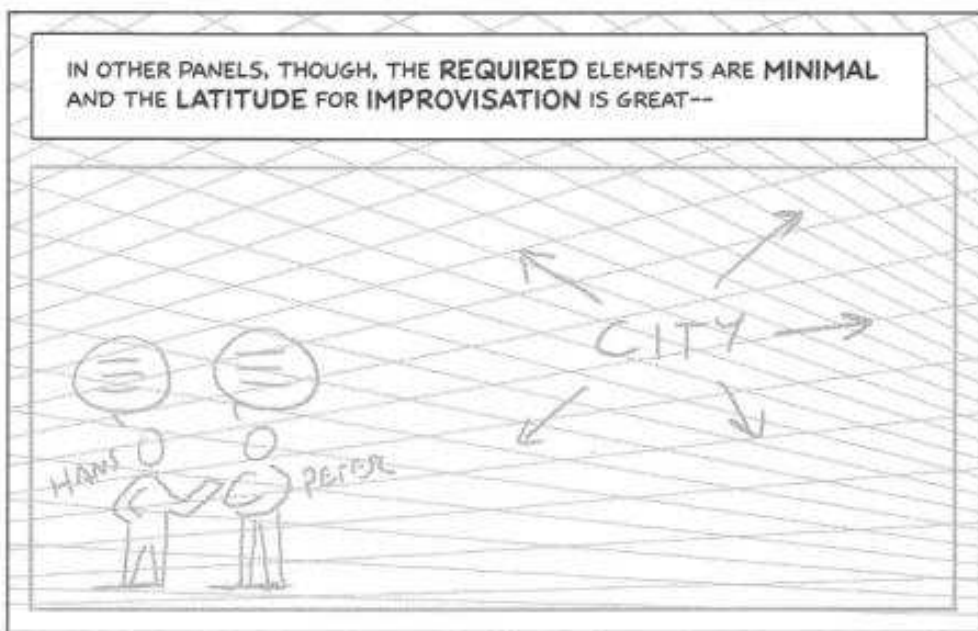**3-D:**

ROOM FOR ONE MORE?

SURE! GET IN!

SO THE FIRST JOB OF PERSPECTIVE IS TO SERVE THE **LAYOUT** OF THE PAGE AND ENHANCE THE **STORY,** AND SOMETIMES THAT DOESN'T LEAVE MUCH ROOM FOR IMPROVISATION.

IN OTHER PANELS, THOUGH, THE **REQUIRED** ELEMENTS ARE **MINIMAL** AND THE **LATITUDE** FOR **IMPROVISATION** IS GREAT--

CITY

HANS

PETER

-- AND THAT'S WHEN YOUR **IMAGINATION** CAN TAKE OVER!
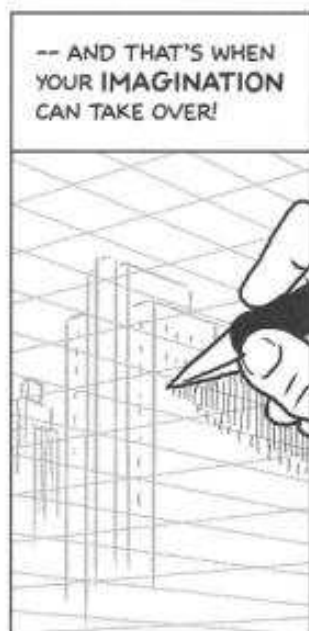
WORLD-BUILDING COMICS ARTISTS LIKE FRANCE'S **MOEBIUS** HAVE DEMONSTRATED JUST HOW FAR THAT **LICENSE TO IMPROVISE** CAN TAKE A PAGE.

ONCE A GRID IS IN PLACE, **WHOLE WORLDS** CAN BE SUGGESTED IN JUST A FEW SQUARE INCHES OF PAPER.

THE KEY IS TO LET YOUR **IMAGINATION** WORK IN THE **3-D** SPACES THE GRID SUGGESTS.

TRY IT NOW. STARE FOR A WHILE AT THE **GRID** IN PANEL TWO.

WHAT DO YOU **SEE?**

IMAGINATION AND IMPROVISATION CAN HELP YOU WITH **REALISTIC** SCENES AS WELL AS FANTASTIC ONES --

-- BUT IF YOU'RE GOING FOR A STRONG SENSE OF REALISM --
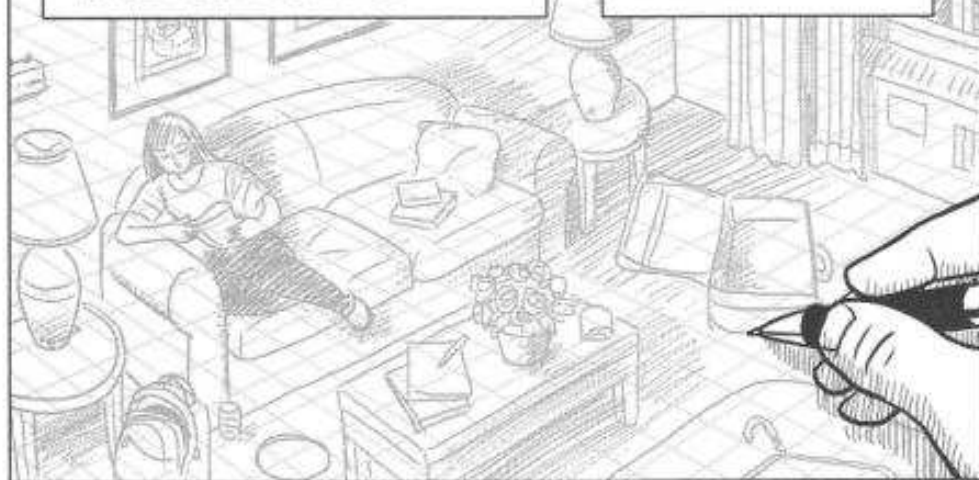
-- YOU'LL ALSO NEED TO DO SOME **RESEARCH.**

PAF!

IF THAT SOUNDS ABOUT AS MUCH FUN AS A ROOT CANAL TO YOU, YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

LOTS OF OTHERWISE TALENTED ARTISTS TEND TO **SKIMP** ON RESEARCH -- ESPECIALLY WHEN ON A **DEADLINE** --

IT'LL DO! IT'LL DO!

TICK! TICK!

-- WITH PREDICTABLY **BLAND,** BUT **PASSABLE,** RESULTS.

BUT EVEN A LITTLE **EXTRA EFFORT** IN THE RESEARCH DEPARTMENT CAN GO A **LONG WAY.**

GOOD RESEARCH MAY MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A **GENERIC** GAS STATION --

GAS

GAS SNACKS
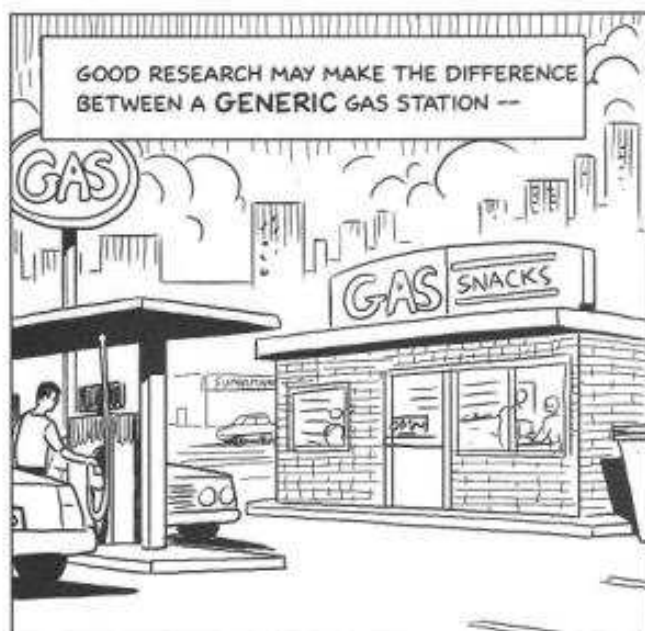
-- AND ONE THAT CONNECTS WITH YOUR READERS' **MEMORIES** AND **EXPERIENCES.**

Food Mart

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OR BETWEEN A RUN-OF-THE-MILL BUILDING --
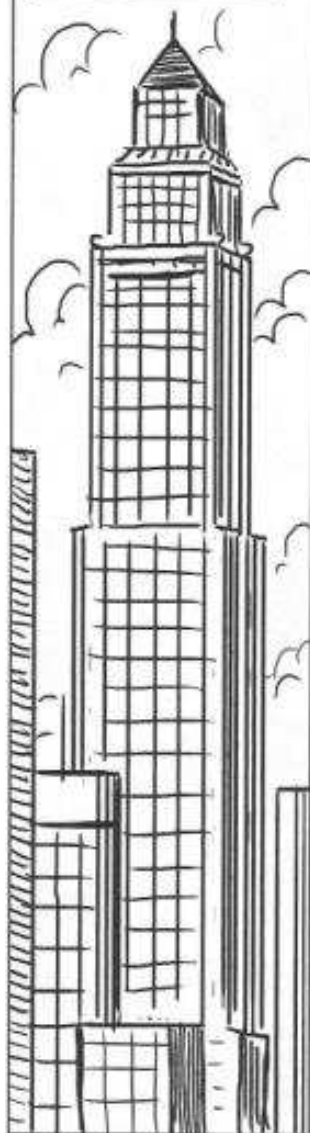
-- AND ONE WITH **CHARACTER** AND **CREDIBILITY**.

EVEN WHEN WORKING IN MINIMAL **CARTOONY** STYLES, GOOD RESEARCH CAN HELP YOU FIND THE **ESSENCE** OF A LOCATION --

-- AND THANKS TO THE **WEB**, ARTISTS CAN NOW FIND **PHOTO REFERENCE** ON EVERYTHING FROM **AARDVARKS** TO **ZINNIAS** IN MINUTES.

STILL, IF YOU NEED TO DRAW ANYTHING WITHIN **DRIVING DISTANCE** --

-- IT CAN REALLY PAY OFF TO GET SOME **ON-SITE** PHOTOS --

-- OR EVEN ON-SITE **DRAWINGS**.

TAKE SOME TIME TO **LOSE YOURSELF** IN THE ENVIRONMENTS YOU DRAW --

-- AND YOUR **READERS** WILL TOO.

WANT TO KNOW THE **SECRET** OF DRAWING **GREAT** BACKGROUNDS?

DON'T THINK OF THEM AS "BACKGROUNDS!"

THESE ARE **ENVIRONMENTS.** THE PLACES YOUR CHARACTERS EXIST **WITHIN** --

-- NOT JUST **BACKDROPS** TO THROW BEHIND THEM AS AN AFTERTHOUGHT.
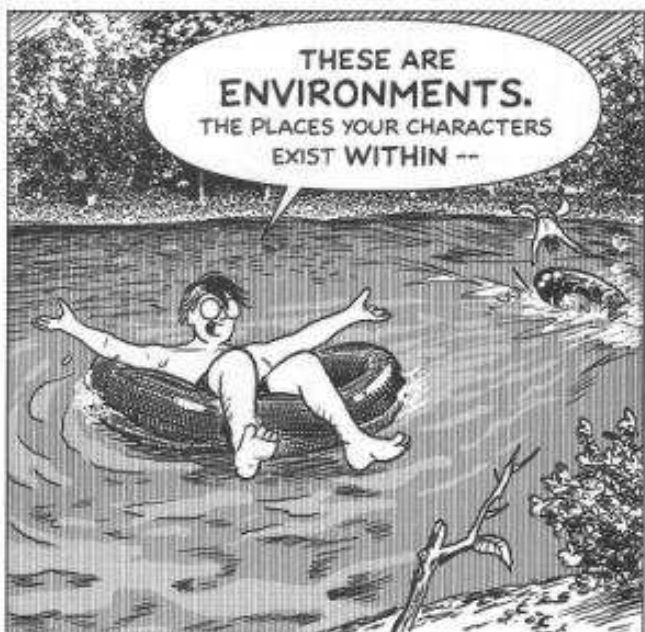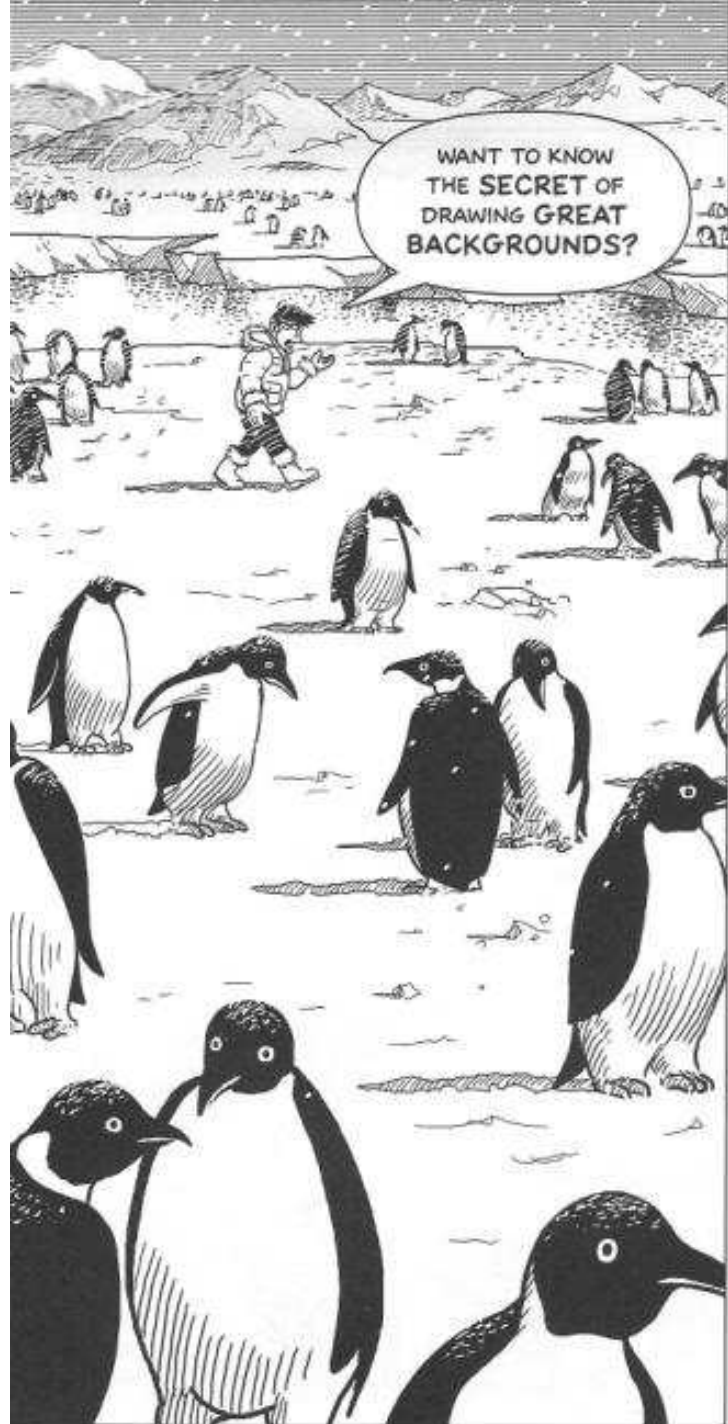
TOO MANY ARTISTS FORGET THIS AND BECOME WHAT EISNER CALLED **"SLAVES TO THE CLOSE-UP"**; STICKING WITH THE ONE THING -- **PEOPLE** -- THAT THEY'RE CONFIDENT THEY **CAN** DRAW --

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-- AFRAID THAT IF THEY PULL THE "CAMERA" BACK THEY MIGHT HAVE TO DRAW A DOZEN THINGS THEY'VE NEVER DRAWN BEFORE.

THOSE WHO HAVE SEIZED ON THAT CHALLENGE, HOWEVER, HAVE CHANGED COMICS HISTORY WITH THE WORLDS THEY'VE CREATED.
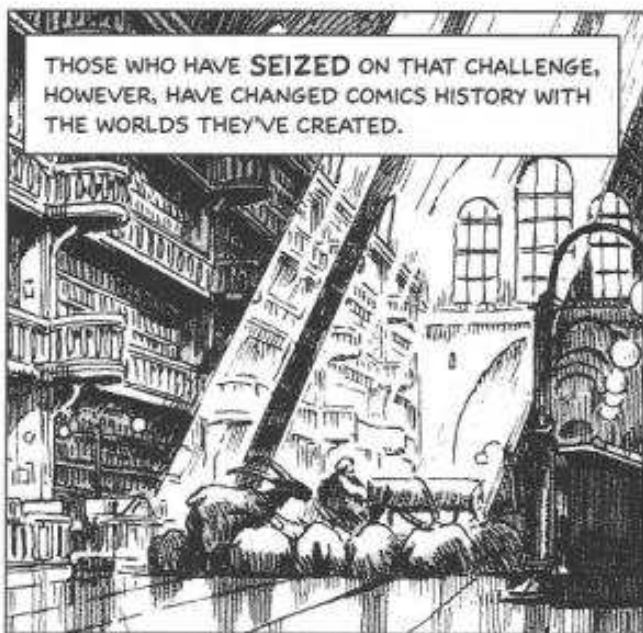
ART BY HAYAO MIYAZAKI (SEE ART CREDITS, PAGE 258).

AND SO CAN YOU.

JUST REMEMBER TO LET YOUR READERS STEP INTO YOUR WORLD --
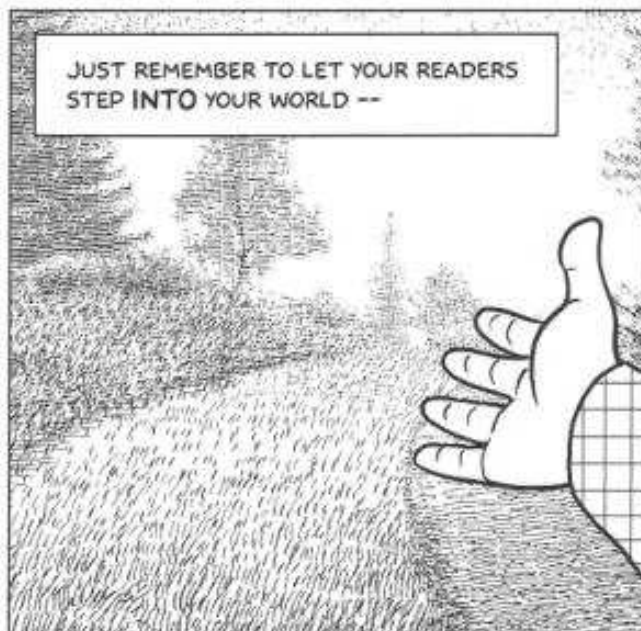
-- MAKE THAT WORLD UNIQUE --

-- AND GIVE THEM A REASON TO COME BACK AGAIN AND AGAIN.
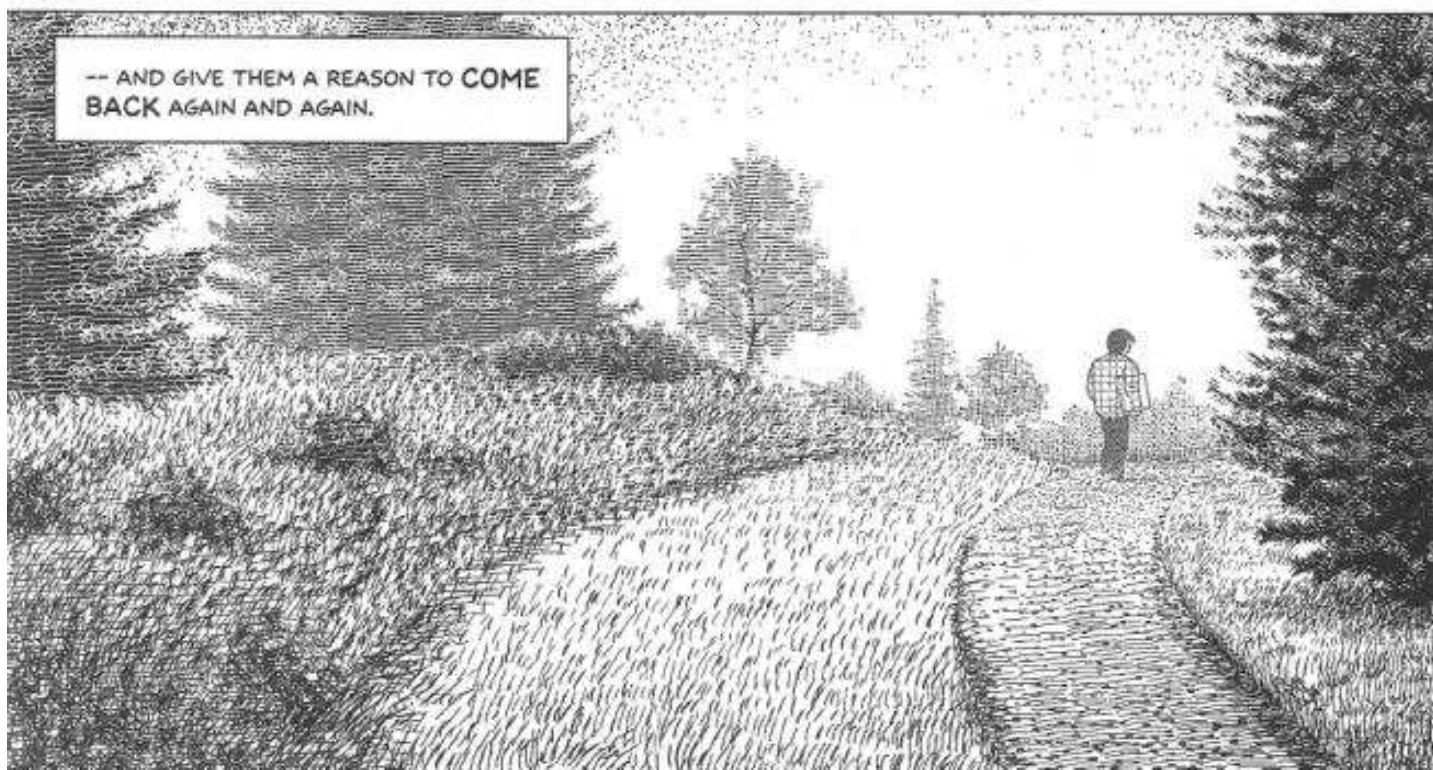
NOTES

CHAPTER FOUR - WORLD BUILDING

PAGES 158-159 - HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

I OPEN THIS CHAPTER WITH SOME LABOR-INTENSIVE PANELS, BUT I HOPE I'M NOT SCARING ANYONE OFF. YES, YOU CAN CREATE A STRONG SENSE OF PLACE WITHOUT SPENDING A DAY ON EVERY PANEL (AND THIS SPREAD TOOK A WEEK SO I MEAN THAT LITERALLY). THE REASON I'M PUTTING THE HARD WORK UP FRONT IS THAT THE RATIO OF ARTISTS PUTTING TOO LITTLE WORK INTO ENVIRONMENTS VERSUS THOSE PUTTING TOO MUCH IS ABOUT NINETY-NINE TO ONE. WE ALL FIND EXCUSES TO SKIMP ON WHAT WE DISMISSIVELY CALL "BACKGROUNDS" AND THIS CHAPTER IS MY ATTEMPT TO COUNTER THAT TREND.

PAGES 162-163 - ESTABLISHING SHOTS ON STEROIDS

IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT THERE'S NOTHING TECHNI-CALLY WRONG WITH THE FIRST ESTABLISHING SHOT I SHOW ON PAGE 160. IT'S CLEAR AND COMPREHENSIVE. THE FIVE CHANGES FEATURED IN THE PUMPED UP VERSION SHOWN ON PAGE 162 AREN'T MEANT TO REPAIR ANYTHING; THEY'RE JUST OPTIONS FOR TAKING THE ESTABLISHING SHOT TO A DIFFERENT LEVEL, AND A WAY OF RECONSIDERING THE GOALS OF SUCH PANELS, FIVE TOOLS THAT ARE AVAILABLE IF YOU WANT TO USE THEM. I HAVE NO DISAGREEMENT WITH ANYONE WHO LIKED THE FIRST VERSION BETTER.

PAGE 164, PANELS 7-9 - SILENCE AND LENGTH

LENGTH OF STORY CAN AFFECT A COMICS ARTIST'S WILLINGNESS TO INCLUDE SILENT PANELS. THE RELATIVELY SHORT LENGTH OF AMERICAN COMIC BOOKS MADE SILENT PANELS RARE FOR MANY YEARS, WHILE MANGA, WITH ITS THICK ANTHOLOGIES BOUND FOR THICK COLLECTIONS, INDULGED IN LONG, SILENT SEQUENCES ON A REGULAR BASIS. STILL, EVEN SHORT STORIES CAN BENEFIT FROM THE OCCASIONAL PAUSE IN THE SOUNDTRACK.

PAGE 165 - A LICENSE TO WANDER

THIS CONNECTS TO THE DISCUSSION OF FRAMING ON PAGE 25. WHEN A CHARACTER IS DEAD-CENTER, THEN THE PANEL IS ABOUT THAT CHARACTER AND EVERY-THING ELSE IS "BACKGROUND"; WE DON'T HAVE TO SMELL THE GRASS OR FEEL THE BREEZE BECAUSE OUR PROTAGONIST WILL DO THAT FOR US. BUT WHEN THOSE IMAGINARY CROSS-HAIRS OF THE FRAME ARE POINTING INTO EMPTY SPACE, THEN THE PANEL IS -- AT LEAST

PARTIALLY -- **ABOUT** THAT SPACE, AND EXPLORING IT WILL BE THE READER'S FIRST IMPULSE.

THE IDEA OF NOT BLOCKING THE READER AT THE DOOR IS ALSO CONSISTENT WITH THE "RULE OF THIRDS," A TECHNIQUE USED IN ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY TO PURSUE MORE DYNAMIC AND PLEASING COMPOSITIONS. THE RULE HOLDS THAT IF YOU DIVIDE YOUR PICTURE INTO THREE SECTIONS VERTICALLY AND HORIZONTALLY AND PLACE YOUR POINTS OF INTEREST AT THE INTER-SECTIONS OF THOSE LINES, THE COMPOSITIONS WILL BE IMPROVED. THERE'S NO PROOF FOR SUCH RULES, OF COURSE, BUT YOU MIGHT WANT TO TRY IT YOURSELF AND SEE IF YOU LIKE THE RESULTS. DAVE GIBBONS, OF WATCHMEN FAME, HAS MENTIONED USING THE RULE IN SOME PANELS (SEE BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR THE BOOK ARTISTS ON COMIC ART).
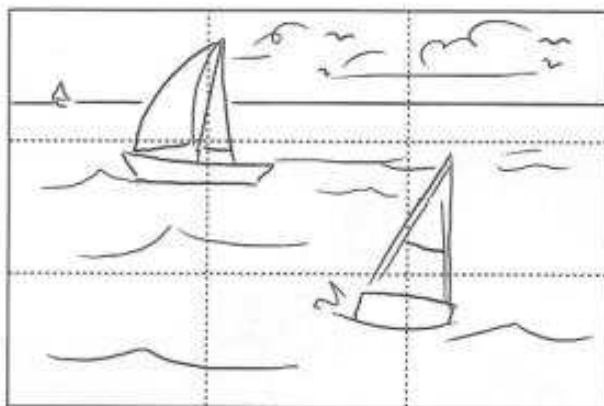
FOR SOME HEAVIER MATH AND ANOTHER THEORY OF WHAT-LOOKS-GOOD, YOU MIGHT WANT TO LOOK INTO THE EVER-POPULAR "GOLDEN RATIO" AND SEE WHAT KINDS OF RESULTS IT CAN PRODUCE IN YOUR WORK. ALWAYS REMEMBER, THOUGH, IF IT DOESN'T LOOK GOOD TO YOU, IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW MANY THEORIES (INCLUDING MINE) TELL YOU IT'S GOOD. DRAW WITH YOUR EYES, NOT YOUR EARS.

PAGE 166 - FRAGMENTS AND THE SENSES

ON PAGES 88-89 OF UNDERSTANDING COMICS, I SUGGEST THAT FRAGMENTED TRANSITIONS LIKE THIS CAN ALSO RECALL OTHER SENSES, SINCE THE MENTAL ACTIVITY THAT STITCHES THEM TOGETHER DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ENTIRELY VISUAL BUT CAN DRAW FROM THE OTHER SENSES AS WELL.

PAGE 168, LAST PANEL - ...BUT DON'T USE THIS AS AN EXCUSE!

EVEN EVERYDAY SETTINGS LIKE OFFICES AND APART-MENTS CAN BE VISUALLY RICH, SO DON'T SKIMP TOO MUCH ON THOSE ENVIRONMENTS. EVEN IN SCENES WHERE THE AUDIENCE IS FAR MORE INTERESTED IN WHAT CHARACTERS ARE SAYING THAN IN WHERE THEY ARE, A LITTLE ATTENTION TO THE DETAILS AROUND THEM CAN HELP EVOKE A MOOD, CONNECT WITH READERS' SENSORY MEMORIES OR REMIND THE READER OF THE BROADER CONTEXT THAT THE CONVERSATION IS TAKING PLACE IN.
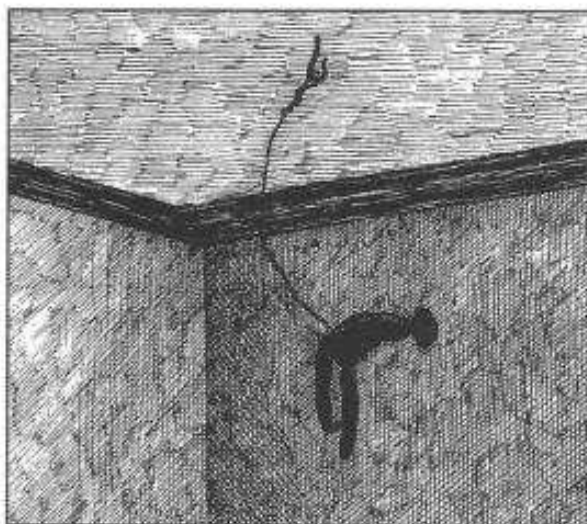
YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO AS FAR AS DEREK KIRK KIM:

...BUT AT LEAST CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITIES.

PAGE 169, LAST PANEL - STORIES ABOUT PLACE

EDWARD GOREY'S SILENT STORY "THE WEST WING" IS ANOTHER COMIC (WELL, I CALL IT A COMIC) THAT'S EFFECTIVELY ABOUT A PLACE AND LITTLE ELSE. IT CAN BE FOUND IN HIS COLLECTION, AMPHIGOREY (PERIGEE TRADE, 1980).

PAGE 171, PANEL 2 - JOHN PORCELLINO

PORCELLINO'S COMICS CONVEY A VERY STRONG SENSE OF PLACE WITH ALMOST NO RENDERING, BUT HE HAS A GREAT EYE FOR DETAILS AND FREQUENTLY INCLUDES -- WITH JUST A FEW LINES -- OBJECTS THAT TRIGGER MEMORIES IN THE READER THAT AN ARTIST WITH A MORE LABOR-INTENSIVE STYLE MIGHT HAVE MISSED. SINCE I OPEN WITH SUCH DETAILED IMAGES, IT'S

IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT SOME ARTISTS GET THE JOB DONE WITH FAR FEWER LINES.

PAGE 174, PANEL ONE - PERSPECTIVE GUIDELINES

NON-REPRO BLUE PENCILS ARE ESPECIALLY USEFUL FOR DRAWING GUIDELINES. THEY DON'T DISTRACT FROM OTHER PENCIL WORK AND DON'T NEED TO BE ERASED BECAUSE TRADITIONAL PRE-PRESS TECHNIQUES DON'T PICK THEM UP WHILE DIGITAL PRE-PRESS CAN EASILY KNOCK THEM OUT. SEE CHAPTER FIVE AND ITS NOTES FOR MORE INFORMATION ON SUCH TOOLS.

PAGE 176-177 - REFERENCE TAKING

WHEN YOU WANT TO GET THE DETAILS RIGHT, YOUR REFERENCE OPTIONS INCLUDE:

- GO TO THE SOURCE AND DRAW IT.
- GO TO THE SOURCE AND MAKE SKETCHES YOU CAN REFER TO WHEN DRAWING IT LATER.
- GO TO THE SOURCE AND TAKE A PHOTO TO USE FOR DETAILED REFERENCE (OR DIRECT COPYING, IF APPROPRIATE).
- FIND A STOCK PHOTO ON THE WEB THAT YOU CAN BUY FOR A FEW BUCKS AND USE FOR DETAILED REFERENCE (OR DIRECT COPYING, IF APPROPRIATE).
- FIND A PHOTO ON THE WEB AND USE IT AS REFERENCE FOR AN ORIGINAL DRAWING (BUT NOT COPIED DIRECTLY, SINCE IT'S NOT YOUR PHOTO).

IF YOU HAVE THE TIME AND YOU'RE NEAR YOUR SOURCE (FOR EXAMPLE, A FIRE HYDRANT) IT'S ALWAYS PREFERABLE TO START NEAR THE TOP OF THAT LIST. DRAWING FROM LIFE IS STILL THE BEST WAY TO GO IN MOST SITUATIONS. BUT REALISTICALLY, MOST OF US -- MYSELF INCLUDED -- FIND IT HARD THESE DAYS NOT TO JUST GO TO THE WEB AND SAVE THE TIME.

PERSONALLY, I THINK COPYING FROM YOUR OWN PHOTOS, OR FROM STOCK PHOTOS THAT YOU'VE BOUGHT ONLINE, IS LEGITIMATE IF IT REALLY IS THE BEST IMAGE

TOP DOWN: ART BY DEREK KIRK KIM, JOHN PORCELLINO AND EDWARD GOREY (SEE ART CREDITS, PAGE 258).

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FOR THE JOB. THE PARKING LOT ON PAGE 165 WAS FROM A PHOTO I TOOK, FOR EXAMPLE, AND THE BUILDING ON PAGE 177 IS TAKEN FROM A PICTURE I BOUGHT FOR $3 AT ISTOCKPHOTO.COM. IN BOTH CASES, IT TOOK A LOT OF SEARCHING TO FIND JUST THE RIGHT ONE.

COPYING REALLY ISN'T OKAY IF YOU'RE USING SOMEONE ELSE'S PHOTO WITHOUT PERMISSION, BUT SO LONG AS YOU'RE MAKING SOMETHING NEW AND JUST USING THE PHOTO FOR GENERAL REFERENCE (THE WAY I DID WITH THE TAJ MAHAL ON PAGE 177, FOR EXAMPLE), YOU'RE ON SOLID GROUND, BOTH LEGALLY AND ETHICALLY.

PAGE 178 - CHARACTER AND ENVIRONMENT: A THEORY OF SEPARATION

THE LINES YOU USE TO DRAW A CHARACTER ARE DIFFERENT FROM THE LINES YOU USE TO DRAW THE ENVIRONMENTS THEY LIVE IN. THEY SERVE DIFFERENT PURPOSES AND READERS READ THEM IN DIFFERENT WAYS. WHEN READERS SEE THE LINES THAT MAKE UP A CHARACTER'S EYES, FOR EXAMPLE, THEY'RE LOOKING BEYOND THOSE EYES TO THE THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS REVEALED IN THEM; THEY MIGHT EVEN FEEL A SENSE OF PARTICIPATION IN THAT CHARACTER'S INNER LIFE AND INVESTMENT IN HIS OR HER FATE. WHEN THEY SEE THE LINES THAT MAKE UP A BRICK WALL, ON THE OTHER HAND, THEY'RE MORE LIKELY TO WONDER HOW THE WALL FEELS TO THE TOUCH OR NOTICE HOW SHADOWS FALL ON IT. THE WALL BELONGS TO THE REALM OF SENSES -- SIGHT, SOUND, TOUCH, TASTE, SMELL -- BUT NOT TO THE REALMS OF EMOTION OR IDENTITY.

IN MOST COMICS, DRAWING STYLES DON'T VARY MUCH BETWEEN CHARACTER AND ENVIRONMENT. WHETHER IT'S A MAILMAN OR THE TRUCK HE'S DRIVING, MOST ARTISTS USE ROUGHLY THE SAME STYLE ON BOTH. STILL, IF YOU LOOK CLOSELY, YOU MIGHT NOTICE SOME SUBTLE DIFFERENCES. WITHOUT CONSCIOUSLY INTEND-ING TO, I THINK THAT MANY ARTISTS TEND TO MAKE THEIR CHARACTERS A BIT MORE CONCEPTUALIZED, CARTOONY OR EXAGGERATED, WHILE ENVIRONMENTAL DETAILS LIKE BUILDINGS AND CLOUDS STAY CLOSER TO THE PROPORTIONS, CONTOURS AND SHADING OF THEIR REAL-LIFE COUNTERPARTS.

A FEW ARTISTS HAVE REFLECTED THAT SPLIT MORE VISIBLY, THOUGH, USUALLY DRAWING DELIBERATELY CARTOONY CHARACTERS COMBINED WITH CAREFULLY RENDERED, REALISTIC BACKGROUNDS. IN *UNDERSTAND-ING COMICS*, PAGES 42-44, I TALKED ABOUT THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THIS APPROACH, NOTING HOW SOME MANGA ARTISTS HAD USED IT. THE IDEA BEHIND WHAT I CALLED "THE MASKING EFFECT" WAS THAT THE SIMPLY DRAWN CHARACTERS FACILITATED IDENTIFICA-TION (A PHENOMENON I HAD TALKED ABOUT IN THE PRECEDING 12 PAGES OF *U.C.*) WHILE THE MORE REALISTICALLY-RENDERED DETAILS OF THEIR WORLD EVOKED THE SENSORY EXPERIENCES OF THOSE CHARAC-TERS MORE EFFECTIVELY. "ONE SET OF LINES TO SEE. ANOTHER SET OF LINES TO BE."

SINCE WRITING ABOUT THE MASKING EFFECT IN 1993, I'VE MADE THINGS EVEN MORE CONFUSING WITH FOUR DIFFERENT LEVELS OF IDENTIFICATION:

CHARACTERS:

> THE HUMAN OR HUMAN-LIKE CREATURES THAT WE'RE EXPECTED TO IDENTIFY WITH AND ASSIGN PERSON-ALITIES, MOTIVES AND EMOTIONS TO.

EXTENSIONS:

> CLOTHES, TOOLS, WEAPONS AND OTHER OBJECTS WORN OR HELD BY CHARACTERS WHICH SERVE AS EXTENSIONS OF THEIR IDENTITIES (E.G., WE DON'T SEE OUR UNCLE JACK AND SAY "OH, THERE'S UNCLE JACK AND HIS CLOTHES, GLASSES AND CELL PHONE"; WE PERCEIVE ALL OF THOSE THINGS AS A PART OF UNCLE JACK'S IDENTITY AND JUST SAY "OH, THERE'S UNCLE JACK.")
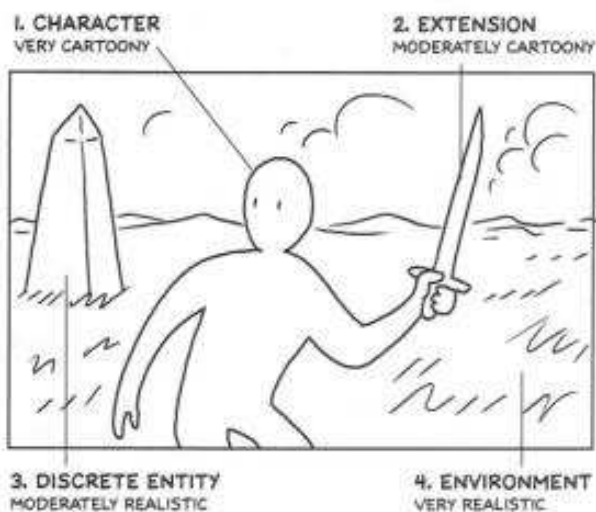
DISCRETE ENTITIES:

> OBJECTS, ANIMALS OR PLANTS THAT HAVE A DISCRETE IDENTITY AND SHAPE, SEPARATE FROM THE CHARACTERS, BUT NO PERCEIVED MOTIVE OR EMOTION. A CAR, A COUCH, A POTTED CACTUS, A STOP SIGN, A SLEEPING ELEPHANT. THINGS THAT MIGHT BE SAID TO HAVE A "PERSONALITY" BUT ONLY IN THE METAPHORICAL SENSE ("OH, WHAT A SAD LITTLE TROPHY") NOT IN THE SENSE OF AN INNER LIFE.

ENVIRONMENTS:

> SUNSETS, MOUNTAIN RANGES, GRASS, SHADOWS, WALLS, BODIES OF WATER -- SUBSTANCES THE CHARACTER IS LIKELY TO REACT TO ONLY AS SENSORY EXPERIENCES, NOT AS DISCRETE ENTITIES.

SINCE THESE CATEGORIES ARE BASED ON READER PERCEPTION, THE STATUS OF SOMETHING IN ONE CATEGORY CAN CHANGE IF THE PERCEPTION OF IT CHANGES. A CELL PHONE SITTING ON A TABLE UNUSED MIGHT BE SEEN AS A DISCRETE ENTITY; A CAR THAT REARS UP ON ITS HIND WHEELS AND STARTS TALKING MIGHT BE SEEN AS A CHARACTER; A CHARACTER THAT DIES AND BECOMES A SKELETON COULD BE SEEN AS A DISCRETE ENTITY.

IF THE MASKING EFFECT WERE APPLIED TO THE FOUR, THEN, THE LEVEL OF REALISM WOULD GO UP AS WE MOVED FROM CHARACTERS TO EXTENSIONS TO DISCRETE ENTITIES TO ENVIRONMENTS, LIKE SO:

I. CHARACTER
VERY CARTOONY

2. EXTENSION
MODERATELY CARTOONY

3. DISCRETE ENTITY
MODERATELY REALISTIC

4. ENVIRONMENT
VERY REALISTIC

THIS IS ONE OF MY WEIRDER THEORIES, SO THINK TWICE BEFORE EXPERIMENTING WITH IT. IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN SUCH THINGS, YOU MIGHT WANT TO JUST TRY IT AS AN EXERCISE OR TWO TO SEE IF YOU LIKE THE RESULTS. I THINK IT COULD WORK, BUT I DON'T HAVE ANY PROOF. I'VE TRIED A VARIATION OF THE IDEA AND FAILED, BUT I MIGHT TRY IT AGAIN ONE OF THESE DAYS.

OPTIONAL EXERCISES

#1 - DRAWING THE REAL WORLD

TRY CREATING A SHORT (2-4 PAGE) SKETCHED COMIC IN WHICH EVERYTHING IS DRAWN DIRECTLY FROM LIFE. SCOUT OUT A LOCATION. GET FRIENDS OR FAMILY TO POSE FOR YOU. MAKE SURE YOU HAVE ANY PROPS ON HAND. IN SHORT: PLAN YOUR COMIC AS IF YOU WERE PLANNING A SHORT FILM. BE SURE TO START WITH A BIG WIDE ESTABLISHING SHOT OF YOUR LOCATION (PAGES 160-162) OR WITH AN EFFECTIVE MULTI-PANEL ESTABLISHING SEQUENCE (PAGES 166-167). USE A CAMERA IF YOU NEED TO, BUT TRY DRAWING IT ON THE SPOT AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, USING JUST YOUR EYES, PENCIL AND PAPER.

#2 - GUESS THE MOOD (PAGES 166-167)

CHOOSE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING THEMES:

- ABANDONED
- SERENE
- FORBIDDING
- WELCOMING
- OFFICIAL
- EXOTIC
- INNOCENT

THEN MAKE A SINGLE PAGE, NINE PANEL COMIC SHOWING FRAGMENTS OF A PLACE BASED ON THAT THEME. NO CHARACTERS AND NO WORDS. JUST IMAGES FROM A SETTING, REAL OR IMAGINARY, THAT YOU THINK EXPRESSES THE THEME.

NOW GIVE THE LIST AND YOUR COMIC TO A FRIEND AND SEE IF HE/SHE CAN GUESS WHICH THEME YOU WERE TRYING FOR.

#3 - YOU ARE HERE (PAGES 166-167)

WHEREVER YOU ARE, RIGHT NOW, NOTICE YOUR SURROUNDINGS. LIST NINE ASPECTS OF IT; SIGHTS, SOUNDS, SMELLS, TEXTURES, ETC... CREATE A SINGLE PAGE, NINE PANEL ESTABLISHING SEQUENCE THAT MANAGES TO EVOKE ALL OF THESE QUALITIES FOR THE READER.

ALTERNATE VERSION: TAKE PHOTOS OF WHAT YOU SEE AROUND YOU, THEN SELECT NINE THAT BEST REPRESENT YOUR SURROUNDINGS AND THE VARIOUS SENSATIONS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH IT.
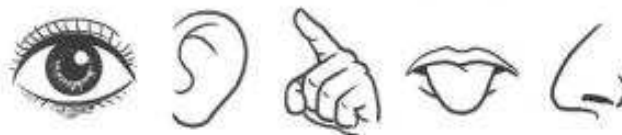
#4 - PERSPECTIVE EXERCISE (PAGES 170-175)

IF YOU'RE COMFORTABLE WITH PERSPECTIVE ALREADY, OR YOU'VE READ CHELSEA'S BOOK (SEE BIBLIOGRAPHY) TRY THIS:

TAKE A PHOTO OF AN OBJECT WITH A FAIRLY COMPLICATED SHAPE AND A LOT OF PARALLEL EDGES OR RIGHT ANGLES (A CAR, A LAWN MOWER, A COFFEE MAKER, A FIRE HYDRANT). MAKE SURE YOUR VIEWING ANGLE ISN'T STRAIGHT ON, BUT FROM AN ODD ANGLE, SO THAT YOU CAN SEE TWO SIDES OF IT AND ITS TOP OR BOTTOM. THEN TRACE THAT PHOTO INTO A SMALL SECTION OF A LARGE PANEL AND USE IT TO INFER A PERSPECTIVE GRID. USING THE GRID, DRAW AN INVENTED SCENE AROUND IT. THEN IMPROVISE ONE OR TWO NEW PANELS, INCLUDING THE SAME OBJECT, BUT USING A NEW GRID OF YOUR CHOOSING TO SHOW IT FROM DIFFERENT ANGLES.

#5 - REVISIT YOUR PAGES!

IF YOU'VE ALREADY DRAWN SOME COMICS, TAKE A CLOSE LOOK AT YOUR PAGES AND SEE IF YOU WERE SHOWING ENOUGH OF THE WORLD THAT YOUR CHARACTERS INHABIT. IF YOU'RE LIKE MOST ARTISTS, PROFESSIONAL OR AMATEUR, THE ANSWER IS PROBABLY NO. CAN YOU FIND ONE PANEL IN PARTICULAR THAT COULD HAVE BENEFITTED FROM PULLING BACK THE CAMERA AND GIVING YOUR READERS A BETTER VIEW OF YOUR WORLD?

ADDITIONAL NOTES AT:
WWW.SCOTTMCCLOUD.COM/MAKINGCOMICS