

FEATURES

THE EMIL FERRIS INTERVIEW: MONSTERS, ART AND STORIES (PART 1)

Paul Tumey | February 16, 2017 | 4 comments



“Emil Ferris is one of the most important comics artists of our time.”

- Art Spiegelman, quoted in *The New York Times* ("First, Emil Ferris Was Paralyzed. Then Her Book Got Lost at Sea." by Dana Jennings)

A reclusive person, Emil Ferris, author of the just-released breakthrough graphic novel, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* (Fantagraphics, 2017), has not allowed much personal information out in the world. This is her first long form interview.

In my earlier review of *Monsters*, I wrote: “The author, one Emil Ferris, seemingly arrives from nowhere to join the ranks of graphic storytellers of the first order.” A single mother who has supported herself for many years as an artist-for-hire, including designing McDonald’s toys and working in animated films, Ferris has developed a complex visual-verbal style that is at once extremely refined and highly personal and used it to create her first published work., thrilling in its artistry.

In this interview, conducted February 7-10 2017 in several Internet chat sessions and additional rounds in email, Ferris challenges a lot of labels, putting them in quotation marks. This is a telling detail about the outsider stance of this author-artist. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* similarly challenges commonly held preconceptions, including how a graphic novel should look and work. In conversation with her it becomes clear *Monsters* is new and different because Ferris, a gifted artist, is approaching comics and graphic novels from an offbeat, hard-fought viewpoint.

Part one of this two-part interview covers Ferris’ background, her life as an artist and her love of monsters.

Emil Ferris, author of MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS

Paul Tumey: First off, let me thank you for this interview, Emil. After I read *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters, Book One*, I was intensely curious about you and your novel.

Emil Ferris: I'm glad to be talking with you, Paul.

Paul Tumey: You've had quite a journey with this book and, as I understand it, your life to date. Why don't we start with you and your early years? *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* is set in 1960s Chicago. Is that autobiographical?

Emil Ferris: Yes, I was born in Chicago but my parents left here when I was around a year old and, when I was five or so, after living in Albuquerque New Mexico and Santa Fe my father—a dyed in the wool Chicagoan - moved us back here to a low income building in Uptown.

Paul Tumey: Were your parents artists?

Emil Ferris: My parents met as two hippie art students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. My mother described offering to "Clean his brushes, if he would stretch her canvas..."

Paul Tumey: Have you always been a visual artist? Did it begin for you as a child?

Emil Ferris: It began with *Lil' Abner* actually!

Paul Tumey: A *Tribune* comic from 1964 to 1977, when you were growing up in Chicago. Of course, it got started before that, in 1934 I think. Tell me about that, please.



L'IL ABNER original comic strip art by Al Capp, 1964

Emil Ferris: My mother, an artist herself, kept me busy by giving me the strip cut out from the paper when I was about two years old. I could not walk until I was closer to three years old, due to having scoliosis, but I began to draw very early. She said at two I began very carefully copying the characters from the strip and she said my drawing at two surprised her because it was so exacting.

Paul Tumey: So you were drawing before you were walking. And it seems comics got into your blood at an early age. Did you read much comics growing up?

Emil Ferris: *Mad* was my oasis. It was so defiant and contentious and it demanded that the social structure be questioned and that it explain itself!

Paul Tumey: *Li'l Abner* had a lot of satire in it, too.

Emil Ferris: Looking back, I realize that it did. At the time, I was just enamored by the concise drawing style and by emotions caught in a few scritch-scratches made by a quill pen.

Paul Tumey: Were the adults in your childhood years questioning social structure? What were your parents like when you were a child?

Emil Ferris: My father was the child of an immigrant who became the tailor, dressmaker and furrier for a lot of wealthy famous people. My grandfather had a furrier shop only blocks away from the “murder castle” of H.H. Holmes and was here through the “Devil in the White City” period. My grandfather paid his (required) protection money to Al Capone - and I understand he liked him - calling the young Capone, “a nice young man.” Apparently, he preferred to pay protection money to Capone than the Chicago Police. So in this story I'm telling you that my father—who loved history and was something of a philosopher—understood that the world was not a place of blacks and whites but a much more inscrutable and complex place.

Paul Tumey: Can you share a little about your background?

Emil Ferris: My mother is descended from indigenous Mexican people, German, French and Irish emigres and the Sephardic Crypto Jews of New Mexico, who fled the Spanish Inquisition and ended up there in the early 1600s.

Paul Tumey: What a rich heritage. I was in a thrift store yesterday, and I found this collection of poems and prose by Robert Frost. I opened the book at random and read this passage of words spoken by Frost in a 1923 interview:

"America means certain things to people who come here. It means the Declaration of Independence, it means Washington, it means Lincoln, it means Emerson—never forget Emerson—it means the English language, which is not the language that is spoken in

England or her provinces. Just as soon as the alien gets all that—and it may take two or three generations—he is as much an American as the man who can boast of nine generations of American forebears. He gets the tone of America, and as soon as there is tone there is poetry."

I think this helps me get at why your book is so rich and works on so many levels. In part it may be the immigrant experiences that happened close enough to our own time they still swirl around and influence us. The courage and desire to make something of one's life with hard work is an inspiring example.



Spread from MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS

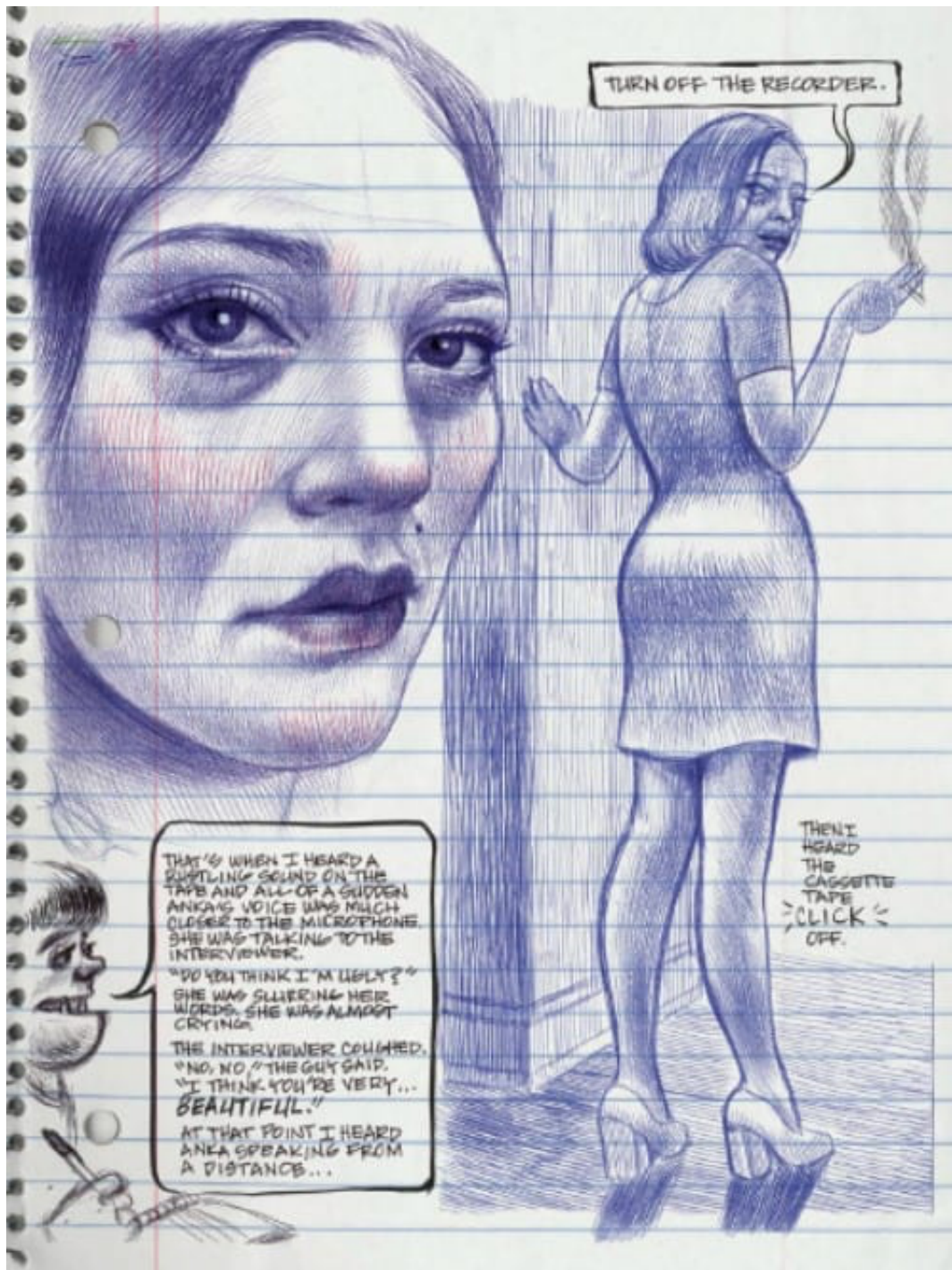
Emil Ferris: My maternal grandparents were both very invested in what they world have described as the American ideal of service—a life as a service. My grandfather, who became the Chief Justice of the Appellate Court of New Mexico, was a Spanish-speaking man who attended the University of Chicago and was proud of his Mexican heritage. He worked tirelessly on behalf of the less fortunate. Currently, these disparaging, fallacious things—that some people feel

“empowered” to spout off about regarding people of color—really piss me off. When this country is beautiful and strong, it is so because of the genius and nobility of people from many and varied places. That should be celebrated. It should be something of which we’re *all* proud.

We should be in the service of protecting freedom. People are not our enemies. Fear and ignorance are our enemies. While I was making the book, I thought a lot about how works like *Maus*, *Fun Home*, *Jimmy Corrigan* and others, really set me free. There are so many great books within the graphic “canon” that are situated firmly in that ideology of service. I drew and drew and truly hoped that what I did would inspire others to tell their stories, to really believe in them and honor them.

Paul Tumey: I would be surprised if *Monsters* doesn’t inspire others to tell their own stories. I know it’s inspired me. I have admired Spiegelman, Bechdel and Ware for having the courage to tackle the Important Stuff, perhaps out of a sense of service. There's a photo of Art Spiegelman during the time he was working on *Maus* and his shape had temporarily shifted -- he looks very dark and full of shadows -- and no wonder, considering the history of vileness and suffering he was processing to make *Maus*. Perhaps he went back in time and deep inside, to a dark place.

Emil Ferris: That's interesting to me. The way we manifest these emotional storms that are inside of us. I worked myself into some dark places as I wrote the story and then very pointedly I drew while in that state, as an experiment, and hoping that the lines would congeal into a torrid emotional sub-statement. Something perceivable to one's base or core, reaching the viewer on a subliminal level.



Page from MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS

Paul Tumey: Is that when you developed the graphic style using layers of thin lines to define forms and space and to also create emotional tone? It works on a subliminal level, directing both the eye and the emotional response.

Emil Ferris: I'd been using that technique when working with pen and ink and I knew that Deeze taught Karen these techniques and she was willingly bastardizing them by drawing in Bic pen. But in terms of actually being sad, angry and afraid when I drew: that was the experiment.

Paul Tumey: How long have you had that remarkable graphic style -- how far back does it go?

Emil Ferris: I think I really started developing that style when I was about eight.

Paul Tumey: And I agree—a flashy style with substance isn't worth much, I think—facing off with the difficult feelings is what gives the whole enterprise depth. I feel that when I read *Monsters*. That pulled me through the narrative as much as plot. You can see artists getting into that space and producing work of remarkable depth and complexity, and then backing off from it, perhaps out of survival. It seems very intense and consuming ... although the work that can come from that state can bring rewards.

Emil Ferris: I agree. I think that's the sacred geometry, if you will, that makes theater cathartic. The capacity we have to feel an emotional state and move through it towards empathy and understanding and yet have it all be 'fictional' 'play-acting' and thereby safe. The artist is a willing servant to those altered states and a shamanic being taking us down a dark path, meanwhile punching holes into the tunnel to allow us light and hope and a view as we travel that dark passage. That view is sometimes a page, a scene, a moment of film or a painting, poetry, music, dance, vision.

Paul Tumey: That shamanic journey, the transformation of one's self and life, is captured with sensitivity and vision at several key points in Book One of *Monsters*. I'm thinking of Karen's shift into werewolf mode and later, her psychedelic trip in the graveyard at night.

Emil Ferris: As unlikely as it is, there is some truth to that graveyard tripping scene. When I was a kid I belonged to the Marble Cake Kids, a little theatrical troupe of children of many different races run by two counterculture mavens called Leo and Mila. The troupe had their base at Hull House on Beacon Street, only a stone's throw from Chicago's infamous Graceland Cemetery. So necessarily as a kid obsessed with monsters, I decided I needed to sneak into Graceland and

wait for wonders. When I was finally able to get into the cemetery, the actual wonders were the graves of famous Chicagoans whose stories I researched as I got older. There was also a ghost child rumored to live in the cemetery who I desperately wanted (and still want) to appear to me and befriend me. As for the marijuana connection, that occurred after I was a bit older, when imbibing of the weed and going into cemeteries became a pastime of mine.



Page from the graveyard scene in MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS

Paul Tumey: I see you put the iconic "Eternal Silence" monument that is at the Graceland Cemetery into that scene in *Monsters*.

Emil Ferris: Yes, and there will be others in *Book Two*.

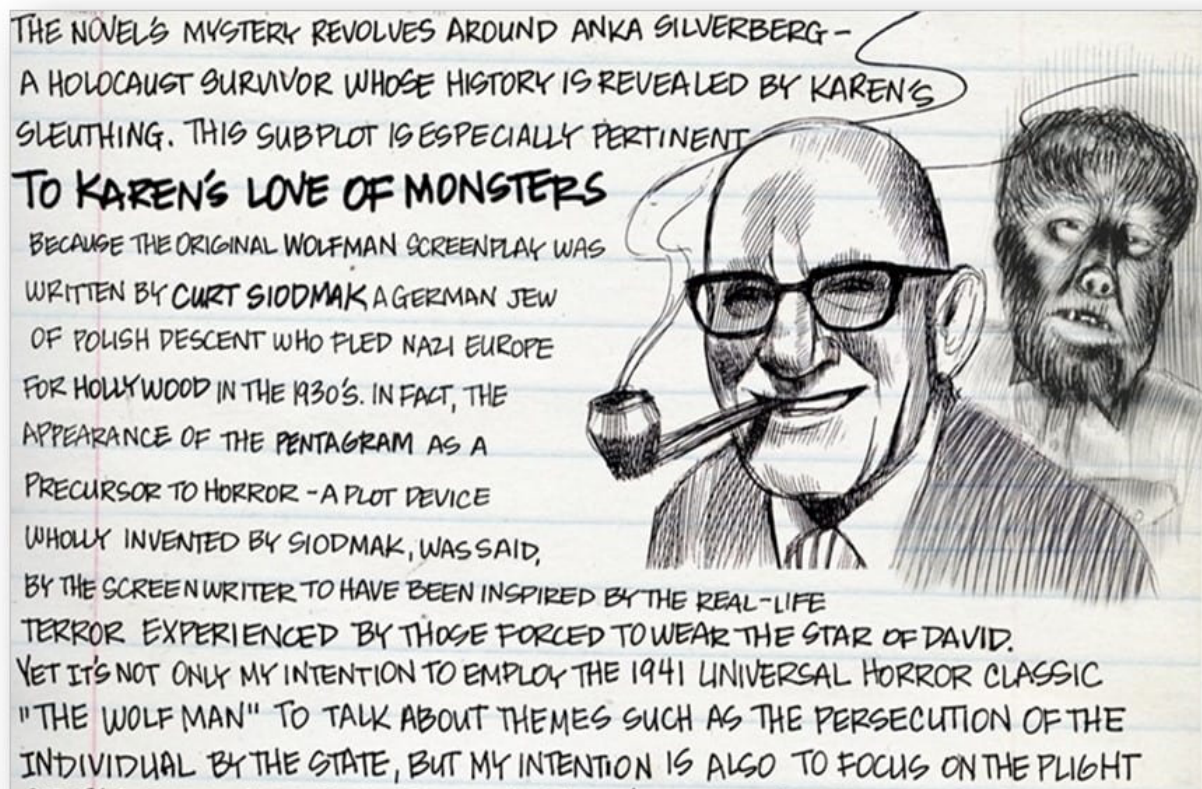
Paul Tumey: So you were, like your character of Karen Reyes, a young girl obsessed with monsters?

Emil Ferris: Very much so. Monsters consumed all my thinking. Monsters, art, Dickens and the questions I had about my sexual identity.

Paul Tumey: Your novel makes me want to go watch old B-movie horror films, especially *The Wolf Man*, which I've never seen. The 1941 one, with Lon Chaney, Jr.

Emil Ferris: I find it interesting that the U.S. release date of the movie, December 9th, 1941, is bracketed between the first executions at Chelmno (December 8th 1941) and the German Declaration of war on the United States (December 11th 1941)

Paul Tumey: Really? Another case of highly symbolic timing.



Unpublished art from the original submission package for MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS
(copyright 2017 Emil Ferris, used with permission)

Emil Ferris: The screenwriter is Curt Siodmak, a Jew who fled the Nazis. Pay close attention to the pentagram scenes, those were Siodmak's. They work within the plot very much like the labeling with the Star of David foreshadowed doom in Nazi Germany.

Paul Tumey: I just read an interview with Siodmak. I'm very interested in his work.

Emil Ferris: Me, too. I did a whole teeny graphic novelized bio of him as part of the sales package for the book - to contextualize the book.



Images of pentagrams from THE WOLF MAN (1941)

Paul Tumey: Siodmak wrote *I Walked With A Zombie*, one of my favorite films.

Emil Ferris: No, I know! I loved that movie. I have it.

Paul Tumey: I have it, too. I have the whole Val Lewton set!

Emil Ferris: Me too! Val was tops.

Paul Tumey: How did you get into monsters as a kid? Did you read *Creepy* and *Eerie*?

Emil Ferris: I did. But I discovered them later. When we moved to Chicago I began watching *Creature Features* which was a show that aired B-movie horror at 10pm on Saturday nights. That became the central focus of my life. But, I will say I was primed to love monsters via an early childhood in New Mexico.

Paul Tumey: Why is that? Are there monsters in New Mexico? I've never been.

Emil Ferris: The Penitente art of New Mexico, featuring Death Carts and the traditional Retablos. I remember my grandmother taking me to Santuario de Chimayo and I remember passing a cemetery built and decorated by local people. The saints -guardians at the gates - were very menacing. Their bodies were those of manikins, their haloes were bicycle wheels, the sun was setting - it was that beautiful glowing radioactive type that was due to the nuclear testing - gorgeous New Mexican sunset and I knew these saints, these badass guardians were the “Golems” of the town and that they meant business.



One of the monsters that inspired Ferris as a young child. Nasario López, Death Cart (La Muerte en

su Carreta), ca. 1860 [Courtesy of Yale University's Center for the Study of Material & Visual Cultures of Religion]

Paul Tumey: Holy Shit! Nice monster!

Emil Ferris: Terror is beautiful in New Mexico. It is very beautiful.

Paul Tumey: Why do you think you resonated so much with the B-movie monsters? What was it about them that captivated and consumed?

Emil Ferris: When I was suddenly exposed to the Wolf Man, Dracula (and his gorgeous Brides) and Frankenstein, I would weep for them. Their lives were so tortured and yet they were so forlorn and beautiful like New Mexico, like outsiders, like the people I loved most.

Paul Tumey: So you see the monster-figure as an outcast?

Emil Ferris: Well usually that is what the monster is. Although I make a distinction between good monsters—those that can't help being different—and rotten monsters (not sure they even deserve to be called the sacred “m” word, truly) those people whose behavior is designed around objectives of control and subjugation. I don't really think they deserve the title of monster. In my mind that's an honorable title. It represents struggle and wisdom bought at a high, painful price.

Paul Tumey: It seems to me both categories of people are represented in your novel.

Emil Ferris: I remember a woman calling a Vietnam Vet a “monster.” And I remember thinking—because I had a friend whose brother came back utterly transformed by the experience of his service—that if he was a monster it was because he'd been broken and reformed in new and terrible ways and why would that be laid at his doorstep? Could it be laid at Larry Talbot's doorstep? We are the receivers throughout a lot of life. We receive so much from the larger world and what light we are shown is all we have to make more light within. It's understandable to me, this tremendous rate of suicide, homelessness and addiction among the returning vets of our most recent wars. The book was crafted with them in mind, too.

Paul Tumey: In your novel, you mix it all up. No one is all good or all bad. Schutz, for example, seems to be, well, pretty evil. He's a Nazi collaborator and does S&M scenes with child prostitutes. However, he is generous and helpful to Anka when he doesn't need to be. He's sort of her "Schindler." The "scenes" they play out are very complex; they are not black and white at all.

Emil Ferris: Yes, so many times we look at a life and judge it, but the good that people do is often sidelong with cruelty born out of terrible provoking need. Like monsters, we are creatures motivated by hunger. But also, like monsters, we are capable of mercy and love.

Paul Tumey: That's a compassionate and balanced view. One thing I realize that needs to be said is that *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* is not a "creature feature" in the sense that it offers horror and fear of these beings. When I look at Karen's "copies" of the monster mag covers, I don't feel dread or revulsion -- instead I am fascinated by the beauty of the images and how you've drawn them. Later, when I learned about Anka used as a child prostitute, *that's* when I felt revulsion and horror.

Emil Ferris: We are the monsters. Yes, I believe we are and I'm not unhappy to be aware of this fact.

Franklin, from MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS

Paul Tumey: It seems to me your visual treatment of Franklin, who has a horribly scarred face, and whose name and form evokes the Frankenstein monster, captures this. At one point, you drew Karen imagining him with a radiant inner light shining out through his scars, a core of goodness.

Emil Ferris: I think there are things that happen to people that ennoble them - should their choice be for that. That does make one see tragedy as being a kind of honor.

Paul Tumey: Do you think the ennobling comes from victims choosing not to pass on the suffering to others in an attempt to help themselves feel better?

Emil Ferris: I think that would be part of it, sure. That there is something ennobling, empathic about choosing not to pass cruelty on but there is this other thing, too. I'm thinking of people whom I've known who were broken by life and then engaged to re-form themselves (and this is the heart of the monster ideology to me) in order to be more extraordinary and more powerful within themselves.

Paul Tumey: A transformation, or a transmuting.

Emil Ferris: The old saying goes something like, "there are no brave people, only people willing to carry their fear into battle." I think this is true also for suffering, mental illness, emotional scarring and profound catastrophes of the soul.

Paul Tumey: I am thinking of alchemy. Joseph Campbell said the true meaning of alchemy and the philosopher's stone was not to turn objects into gold to increase material wealth, but to turn suffering and pain into love and joy to increase spiritual wealth.

Emil Ferris: I like that. I like that a lot. And although I never said those exact words as I wrote the book I'd say you put your finger on what my mantra, if you will, was throughout the process. If you've ever refined gold, it's a rather brutal process. You heat the gold almost to the point you'll destroy it and then a gray tear of dross weeps out. Immediately the heat must be turned off. The dross is the impurity. Weeping and extreme pain are required to remove it.

Paul Tumey: I'm guessing you've refined gold, perhaps as part of your art training?

Emil Ferris: Yes. A ferris is an ironworker and I suspect that is what my family was way back when. I took to metalwork immediately.

Paul Tumey: That's cool. "Ferris" probably comes from "ferrous," which is a word used in connection with iron compounds. The gold refining process you describe leads to a thought I have that Art is the process of transmuting one thing into another. It's kind of an arcane, secret knowledge of how that is actually done, the methods. Sometimes art contains within itself a record of various "monstrous" experiments that contains clues for others who might want to travel the same path. Such is the deep thinking your novel elicits!

Emil Ferris: I like that. I think it's true. I'm thinking about the question in regards to myself. Making art was such a given in the home in which I grew up that there was never any intentionality about it. So, for me to separate it out and consider how it works in the book, is to consider how it works for me, since Karen's mindset was very much mine as a child.

Ferris shows how her novel's form mirrors its content. Unpublished art from the original submission package for MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS (copyright 2017 Emil Ferris, used with permission)

This interview is concluded in Part Two. [Click here](#) to continue reading.

Note: To raise funds needed to complete Book Two, Emil Ferris is running a crowdfunding campaign. Among the different levels of support, for \$108 (the Chicago Cubs waited 108 years to win a World Series), Ferris will put a contributor into Book Two of My Favorite Thing Is Monsters. See [YOU CAN BE IN MY GRAPHIC NOVEL](#).

FEATURES

THE EMIL FERRIS INTERVIEW: MONSTERS, ART AND STORIES (PART 2)

Paul Tumej | February 22, 2017 | 1 comment



Emil Ferris, author of MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS

“She uses the sketchbook idea as a way to change the grammar and syntax of the comics page ...”

- Art Spiegelman in *The New York Times*, February 17, 2017 (“First, Emil Ferris Was Paralyzed. Then Her Book Got Lost at Sea.” by Dana Hennings)

This interview with Emil Ferris (see [Part One here](#)) was conducted February 7-10 2017, just prior to the long-delayed release of Book One (of two) of *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*. The book was due to come out on Halloween 2017 and then the shipper, the giant Hanjin, abruptly sank into bankruptcy and the copies were

stranded in Panama. This was only the latest in a series of events that Ferris refuses to assess as unfortunate. Mid-way through the multi-year process of creating the novel while working 16-hour days and living extremely frugally, it became necessary to find a second publisher (the first publishing house, when they saw the book Ferris was creating, realized it was beyond their scope to properly market).

All of this came in the years after Ferris contracted West Nile virus from a mosquito bite and fought her way back from paralysis. Among other setbacks, Ferris' computer, needed for the creation of Book Two of *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* gave up the ghost (see her crowd-funding campaign [here](#)) Despite this astonishing backstory, her novel must be—and deserves to be—assessed on its own merits, which are considerable.

During the days we spoke, *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* received attention from several media outlets including [a write-up](#) and [a generous preview in The New Yorker](#) and [a staff pick selection in Publisher's Weekly](#). Right after [Part One](#) of this interview ran, *The New York Times* ran [a full page profile](#) on the Chicago artist and NPR's Fresh Air praised it in [a particularly lucid review](#). It's no surprise that book has gone into a second printing. Ferris has expressed gratitude and joy at this attention, and remains grounded and focused on the aspects of her life that led to the creation of this extraordinary work.



Paul Tumey: I just read your new auto-biographical comic in *Chicago Magazine*, "The Bite That Changed My Life," which was published today. You join a rich tradition of gifted visual storytellers published by the *Chicago Tribune*, including Frank King (*Gasoline Alley*), Garrett Price (*White Boy*), Harold Gray (*Little Orphan Annie*), Chester Gould (*Dick Tracy*) and E.C. Segar (*Popeye*). To me, your work in *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* is every bit as fascinating.

Emil Ferris: Thank you! It was a hard piece to do because it required that I encapsulate and objectify a difficult time in my life. I'd never done anything graphic/textual about it. But the reward is always in the same place as the difficulty.

Paul Tumey: I especially loved the bit where you tell about meeting Art Spiegelman. I understand he was pretty nice to you?

Emil Ferris: He is one of the most legendary forces within comics and one of the kindest and most sensitive and generous people I've ever met. He liked and has championed the book.

Paul Tumey: You write in your *Chicago Magazine* piece that, after receiving Art Spiegelman's praise, you excused yourself to go hug an octopus. This is perhaps an image of the embrace of attention your work is generating, I think.

Emil Ferris: Hah! You divined that! You are very sensitive and really very correct. Yes, it's been rather daunting and pleasing at the same time.

Page from MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS

Paul Tumey: Part of answering "the call" is, I think, not just making art, but living in synch with the ripples in the moonlit lake radiating out from that bold act. I'm guessing you are in for some ripples as more and more people discover your work. As we sit down to talk, we are about one week away from the release of the book – delayed for months.

Emil Ferris: I could draw your questions. They're such beautiful images!

Paul Tumey: Wasn't *Book One* originally scheduled to be released on October 31, Halloween? And then that whole thing happened with the shipment of books being "arrested" by the Panamanian government.

Emil Ferris: Yes, that's correct. There are two important dates in the book - Halloween and Valentine's Day. The book actually ends up beginning on the same day that it is released. That is the day a bullet tunnels through Anka Silverberg's heart, which begins the mystery of her death—and her life. I didn't pick the date of the second scheduled book release – it's the inspiration of Jacq Cohen at Fantagraphics.

Paul Tumey: Another bit of synchronicity is the classic Universal horror movie *Dracula*, was released on Valentine's Day in 1931. I think the timing on your book, with the help of Jacq Cohen, turns out to be poetic.

Emil Ferris: The whole story of the book is like that ... catastrophes followed by what amounts to windfalls and blessings, if you will.

Page from MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS

Paul Tumey: I'd love to discuss your method to creating art and comics. The page layouts of *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* are complex and organic. Each page is unique. You don't use the device of panels very much. How did you construct this book? Was there an outline?

Emil Ferris: There should have been far more of an outline than there was. I allowed the writing and the drawing to simultaneously direct the story.

Paul Tumey: What was/is your method for constructing a page? Do you have a thumbnail, or do you just start drawing?

Emil Ferris: I discovered things by virtue of both the writing and the drawing. I am attracted to certain images in context of the portion of the story. I know they have to be there. I let them suggest the next images to me. Then I begin to collect them and think about them in a purely visual way. I draw in the Golden Mean and repetitive shapes and textures.

Paul Tumey: I really enjoy the playfulness in the juxtaposition of the elements.

Emil Ferris: Thank you! I like the pages to echo certain subtle things. Sometimes I like a word you read to be near an eye so that when you read that word you take in a 'sense memory' - if you will - of an eye. These things collide in the mind and the attempt is to heighten the evocation and resonance for the reader. This was something that the Surrealists taught and something I think I understood and wanted to emulate but it requires intuitive drawing to do that.

Paul Tumey: That helps me understand why the reading experience of *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* is different from most other comics I've read. There's layers and connections. This is a very different approach to making comic books than the one I know -- which is to have script, block it out, layout the panels on pages, pencil, letter, ink, color, and so on. This assembly line method was created in the late 1930s by Will Eisner, among others, to allow multiple people to crank out pages. Of course, later on, in his own work, Eisner became a master of organic, innovative page layouts. Your pages to me feel like SPIRIT splash pages in the sense that they work both as a kind of poster, a narrative and as a text-image poem – they are both part of the narrative and stand outside of it. Many of your pages work this way.

Emil Ferris: Those pages that defy time are some of my favorites. I refused to learn how to tell time. I did not learn till I was almost 12. I felt it was a dangerous artificial construct. The pages use time in an emotional way, that isn't always linear.

A tribute by Emil Ferris to Alan Rickman and the character of Severus Snape, a modern monster in the tradition of Lon Chaney, Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. (copyright 2017 Emil Ferris, used with permission)

Paul Tumey: I've worked out you averaged a page every three days. Does that sound about right?

Emil Ferris: Actually it was probably about a page every two days.

Paul Tumey: That is impressive, to say the least. Earlier, you mentioned the story of the making the book was "... catastrophes followed by what amount to windfalls and blessings." Can you share a little of that story? I'd love to know more.

Emil Ferris: Yes, There were a lot of setbacks and challenges in the process of making the book. I'm glad to relate them; it might be instructive for people who also have a story to tell. During the production of the book I went broke, experienced some homelessness due to various catastrophes, lost important relationships and had myriad physical disability setbacks and obstacles. But I believed in the story and I narrowed my focus and just kept going.

Paul Tumey: Books One and Two together are about 600 pages? It's an ambitious work. And, like *Maus*, *Fun Home*, etc. it's got something different and new and, if you'll pardon the word, strange, to offer. Was it hard to find a publisher?

Emil Ferris: The two books together are coming in at closer to 800 pages between the two. And yes! It was a challenge. I have a great agent who held with me throughout the trials of the thing. The book was noticed early on by Katie Adams and initially the book was slated to come out with the extremely wonderful publisher for whom she worked, but, when finally they had the book in hand the publisher felt that I would be best off to do it differently. (The head of this company, Judith Gurewich is a total mensch!) That publisher decided to ask nothing back from the support they gave me to complete the work. I was deeply grateful, utterly broke and completely lost when they decided not to publish it. So Holly Bemiss and myself, we hit the (publishing) street like two Depression Era sales dames carrying worn suitcases full of encyclopedias (my book, "the big monster"). We went from town to town and then were 'taken in" by the kindly folks at Fantagraphics, Gary Groth and Eric Reynolds, who just threw everything behind the book they could.

Paul Tumey: I'm glad they did, and I predict they will be very happy with their decision. Just today (two days after we started this chat) I see you've gotten a great write-up and preview at *The New Yorker*, and *Publisher's Weekly* choose *Monsters* as a

staff pick. Did you get many rejection letters?

Emil Ferris: I think the rejection math, was 48 rejections out of 50 submissions. I want people to know that. It's important for them not to give up.

Unpublished page from the original submission packet for MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS, showing early character drawings of Karen and her brother Deeze (copyright 2017 Emil Ferris, used

with permission)

Paul Tumey: What's the genesis of *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*? What's the earliest form of the idea for you that you can recall?

Emil Ferris: More than twenty years ago I took a screenwriting class at what was the Center Theater over on Devon in Chicago. I was working on a screenplay based on this vision I had of a werewolf lesbian girl being enfolded into the protective arms of a Frankenstein trans kid. That idea never left me. That vision of two 'monstrous' outsiders was then the impetus behind a short story I wrote in 2004 that was published in an anthology. Karen was still talking to me (growling at me, really) and it was on that short story that I based the book.

Paul Tumey: When did you start creating the book in earnest?

Emil Ferris: Six years or so ago I began drawing. I have been drawing ever since. I am in the service to these characters and now I love them and I do their will.

Paul Tumey: And so when did you get "the bite" of West Nile virus?

Emil Ferris: I got that bite 14 years ago.

Paul Tumey: So you created *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* after fighting your way back from paralysis that kept you from being able to draw. You've written that making art healed you.

Page from MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS

Emil Ferris: It really did. I was told by the Head of Neurology at a really major hospital that I would never walk again. He was quite sure that I wouldn't but I think the experience of going to the School of the Art Institute was just what I needed. Making the decision to grasp at a better thing - I had no college level art education

- was like this statement to the universe that I refused to take the paralysis, 'lying down' if you will. All of a sudden there I am, surrounded by these marvelous, talented, largely generous younger people.

Paul Tumey: How did the younger students react?

Emil Ferris: Their eyes went wide first day of class, as oftentimes I was the oldest person in any of my classes and at first I was in a wheel chair - so I was very different than they were. But they delighted me. There is so much talent and decency among those whom people call “millennials” that I have come to hate hearing them dismissed and denigrated.

Paul Tumey: I know! I think that generation is so special, from what I've seen.

Emil Ferris: I do, too! I love them. So many of the younger men are free from misogyny. They had strong loving mothers whom they respected and the younger women are just such all-out badasses!

Paul Tumey: Did you conceive of the book as a spiral bound diary from the start?

Emil Ferris: Yes. That was what I knew it had to be. I had many spiral bound notebooks as a kid. Just like Karen's. That part was utterly autobiographical.

Paul Tumey: I find it interesting the cover of *Book One* shows Anka, and not the main character, Karen. It's sure a compelling image and she is beautiful as you draw her.

Emil Ferris: If you look closely into Anka's eyes on the cover, you will see Karen's reflection.

Paul Tumey: I'd like to talk about the characters in the book a little. Is the character of Karen's older brother, Deeze based on anyone in particular?

Emil Ferris: Yes. His various attributes make him a complex, sympathetic and yet not entirely 'good' character. In that way he is like quite a few people whom I know. His penchant for 'womanizing' (in the parlance of the time) is legendary. Yet he is a soulful person. Can I tell you who he is based on without alienating some important people? Nope.

Paul Tumey: Fair enough. I'm impressed you gave an informative yet diplomatic answer. Deeze is a great character, and I don't want to spoil anything for readers, but I love how you subtly foreshadow his story in the early scenes. I also love Karen's mother in the novel, she is so flawed and yet so lovable in spite of the flaws. She's shown more than once in bed, asleep and I thought of that Tom Waits song, "You're innocent when you dream."

Page from MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS featuring "Mama"

Emil Ferris: Awww! Yes, I love Mama. She is so desperate to protect those whom she loves. She isn't educated in the common sense of the word but has a deep and dedicated sense of decency. I love her superstitions, I remember my grandmother making me lift my feet when the car we were in crossed over a railroad track and I remember what she called 'padiddles' which was when an oncoming car had one busted headlight. Can't remember what we did to protect ourselves from that curse ... which was basically that we would never find our true love. Yeah, superstition and a very early childhood in New Mexico went hand-in-hand.

Paul Tumey: If I recall, Mama's superstitions in *Monsters* are from an Appalachian background?

Emil Ferris: Yes, Mama is from the Ozarks originally. She is of Irish and Cherokee decent.

Paul Tumey: I was fascinated, as well by Karen's friend, Sandy, who comes from mining country in Kentucky. There are a lot of characters in *Monsters*, and they have a rich variety of cultural backgrounds. I felt so sorry for Sandy -- she seems so sad, and hungry.

Emil Ferris: Well her story was based on a true experience of mine. I went to the birthday party of a child and those were the circumstances in which she was (very barely) surviving.

Paul Tumey: That's so tender and sad. And then there's Anka -- a truly complex and great character. Her back story is nested inside the book and takes us back in time to Weimar Germany.

Emil Ferris: Weimar Germany represents one of my favorite time periods in all of history. Socially, such a contrast between dark and light - and in that way very much like the severe, almost carved, juxtapositions of dark and light within the work of such artists as Beckmann, Kollwitz, Grosz, Dix, Nolde.

Paul Tumey: You captured that feel very well, I thought. That shift was for me totally unexpected, and it put much higher stakes on the table, and not the kind of stakes that defeat vampires! As we wind this up, we are just a few days from *Book One's* official release. *Book Two* is in the works, yes?

Emil Ferris: Yes, I'm drawing, drawing. Drawing and drawing. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters, Book Two* is scheduled to come out in October of 2017.

Paul Tuney: Is there anything you can share about *Book Two*, due out Halloween this year?

Emil Ferris: A lot of the focus is on the parallels between what is happening in Karen's life—her questions about her sexual identity—and Anka's difficult choice regarding how best to save the six children she has rescued. Essentially, *Book Two* is about how we survive the most difficult things within a broken world, and about how love and art can save us.

Cover of MY FAVORITE THING IS MONSTERS, Book Two

Additional Links:

Part One of this interview

The Comics Journal review of My Favorite Thing is Monsters

Note: To raise funds needed to complete Book Two, Emil Ferris is running a crowdfunding campaign. Among the different levels of support, for \$108 (the Chicago Cubs waited 108 years to win a World Series), Ferris will put a contributor into Book Two of My Favorite Thing Is Monsters. See [YOU CAN BE IN MY GRAPHIC NOVEL, here](#).

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TOPICS

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