

# The Liberal Imagination Unlimited: On Joe Sacco's *The Fixer: A Story From Sarajevo*

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**Abstract** Joe Sacco, arguably the most respected comics artist-journalist of his generation, dramatizes the stories of individuals whose lives have been traumatized by their involvement in the Middle East conflicts and the Balkan Wars. Through the defamiliarizing form of comics, anecdotal rather than panoramic perspective, and self-effacing autobiographical narrative, Sacco challenges the faux-objective stylistics of mainstream journalistic treatments of these unsettling topics. In *The Fixer: A Story From Sarajevo* (2003), Sacco addresses the problematic relation between the time-limited but saturational attention of the Western News Media's gaze and the war violence itself. Sacco interprets the Balkan conflict as in part a performative response by unacknowledged persons to a fleeting experience of notoriety. Interested in telling the stories of persons caught up in war after the mainstream media has moved on from covering their story, Sacco's work also has implications for our understanding of the relationship between liberalism ethics, and the aesthetics of comix

**Key words** graphic narrative; collective trauma; the shaping of memories

Joe Sacco (born in Malta in 1960, now resides in Portland, Oregon), arguably the most respected comics artist-journalist of his generation, dramatizes the stories of individuals whose lives have been traumatized by their involvement in the Middle East conflicts and the Balkan Wars. Through the defamiliarizing form of comics, anecdotal rather than panoramic perspective, self-effacing autobiographical narrative, and interested relation to the effects of war on his subjects over a lengthy time period of observation, Sacco challenges the faux-objective and quick-in-quick out stylistics of mainstream journalistic treatments of these unsettling topics. While best known for the award-winning *Palestine* (2001) and *Safe Area Gorazde* (2000), I will discuss one of Sacco's somewhat lesser known and slightly later works—*The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2003)—in order to concentrate on what SUNY Buffalo Art Curator Lisa Fischman refers to as Sacco's project of recuperating “voices systematically excluded from mainstream news coverage to the margins of history.” The specific aspect of this recuperative project in *The Fixer* is in fact the desublimation of the problematic relation between the time-limited but saturational attention of the Western News Media's gaze and the war violence itself. Sacco interprets the Balkan conflict as in part a performative response by unacknowledged persons to a fleeting experience of notoriety.

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Sacco's work also has implications for our understanding of the relationship between liberalism ethics, and the aesthetics of comix. I will demonstrate the connections between these terms by concentrating on usages of a recurrent phrase, obsessively persistent, in Sacco. The phrase put me in mind of Scott McCloud's commentary about the dialogic nature of comix. The phrase also put me in mind of retro neo con Lionel Trilling's ideas in *The Liberal Imagination* (1974) of literature as a forum for political reflection, but in a complex manner that privileges the ambiguity of readerly responses to the unique, inscrutable nature of the individual. Here is Sacco's mantra-like phrase in *The Fixer*: "But put yourself in [fill in the blank] shoes." The shoes that Sacco wants "you" (meaning me?) to "put" on belong in *The Fixer* to the iconic version (in McCloud's terms) of Sacco himself, of The Fixer named Neven, and also of Bosnian President Izetbegovic (79), a corrupt politico involved with trying to save his ass by authorizing the murder of a renegade paramilitary leader named Celso. Celso is accused by NATO of bludgeoning to death and decapitating anywhere between 30 and 10,000 of the Chetniks, the pejorative term for Serb nationalists who commanded the hills surrounding what was once the multicultural enclave of Sarajevo, in order to ethnically cleanse said city of Bosnian Muslims.

McCloud's theory is that more than any other visual art form, comics, because of the structural feature of "gutters" and "borders" that exist in space, and because of the time it takes for the reader/viewer to move the eye from one frame to the next, a gap, or liminal space, opens in the reader/viewer's interpretive consciousness. According to McCloud, it is into that in between space, a paradoxically full empty space of implied activity and characterization, that comix foreground the reader/viewer's dialogic co-creational activity (in Bakhtin's terms). McCloud notes that borders between frames do exist in filmic art, but because of the rapidity with which the frames are displayed, the spatial and, therefore, interpretative dimension of the border is omitted. Describing an axe murder to demonstrate the readerly dimensions of comix (what the choice of an axe murder to illustrate his points says about McCloud is, I suppose, the subject of another analysis of a comix master fascinated by primal instruments of brutality!), he writes:

Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the Reader. I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style. All of you participated in the murder all of you held the axe and chose your spot. To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths. (68 – 69)<sup>1</sup>

Following McCloud, Sacco directly addresses the reader with the relatively unusual intimate second person address of "you" and "yourself." He then commands this "you" to take an imaginative leap into "the shoes" of *The Fixer's* diegetic icon for the

authorial personae, as well as *The Fixer* himself and also the corrupt Bosnian president. By doing so, Sacco, again following McCloud's analysis of the medium's emphasis on Barthesian reader response and Bakhtinian dialogic co-creation, wants to bring the reader directly into the text. This is so to the point where we readers should not merely see Sarajevo, in modernist fashion, from multiple perspectives. We should quite literally partake in Sarajevo multiply. And while BEING THERE we are not merely to witness and testify in Tragedy Chic khakis ala Anderson Cooper and Christiane Amanpour. Instead, we are instructed to collaborate in the carrying out, remembrance, and representation of said atrocious events. Sacco thus offers a perplexingly multiple, ethically ambiguous, and ethnically complex situation in which we the readers are asked to don not one, not two, but three pairs of shoes in the course of one narrative. At least two of these pairs of shoes are owned, not by victims (who has trouble feeling empathetic identification with a victim?), but victimizers. We are to wear the shoes once worn by Bosnian men. These men are directly implicated in mass murder and the covering up or defending of these crimes. From their point of view (from their shoes), their acts may not have been crimes in the first place, but merely the inevitable excesses of war. From their point of view, mass murder may naturally take place when your beloved city, Sarajevo, once itself a multicultural space, is under siege by Serbian extremists who want to make any Muslims disappear by any means possible. Walk a mile in those shoes, Anderson Cooper, Sacco is saying. See if your snow-white hair and snow-white and o so crisp khaki jacket remain without some drops of blood and the stink of shit on them.

In a fundamental sense, *The Fixer* is never about uncovering the secret or true account of who did what vicious and inhumane things to whom and why in Sarajevo between 1992 and 2001. Like the great modernist texts *Citizen Kane*, *Light in August*, *Heart of Darkness*, or *The Great Gatsby*, the narrative is not about the narrator expressing confidence that he has gotten to the bottom of Neven, an uncanny figure of repulsion and attraction to Sacco. Rather, the text enacts the process of Sacco's inquiry and imaginative recreation itself, or what literary critic David Thorburn, discussing *Heart of Darkness*, has called "a drama of the telling." Thorburn states, "Marlow seems either unable to find conclusive meaning in his experience or reluctant to acknowledge its meaning. There is a deep sense that Marlow needs to tell the story again and that his material is so psychologically disturbing that the tale will always be unfinished...Marlow's fear that he is like Kurtz haunts his narrative and is one of the reasons that the narrative is evasive and temporally fragmented. The story takes on an epistemological or philosophical dimension, dramatizing the problem of knowledge, of the limitations of our cognitive powers" (26). Thorburn speaks of "Marlow's tentative, back-tracking, interrupted narrative [that] creates two separate 'stories'—one story is the traditional adventure or action, the second a running commentary on that action and the difficulties of retrieving it in memory and words: a drama of the telling" (25)<sup>2</sup>. Sacco's desire to collaborate with Neven in the recreation of his story is, I am saying, diegetically repeated and doubled in Sacco's invocation of our entrance into the text via the wearing of the shoes of those responsible for atrocities, for the covering of them up, and for the libidinal-driven desire to recover and artistically re-

create the story of Neven, Sacco's dark double.

Sacco's gambit—to make us see, quite literally, through the eyes of perpetrator's of mass killing as well through the eyes of a confused, used, and compassionate comix journalist—is what put me in mind of Trilling and that phrase, which to be honest I never quite understood, *The Liberal Imagination*. Is Trilling for it or against it? I wondered. It turns out Trilling is for it, but he feels most liberals—such as those who preferred the social realism of a poor stylist such as Dreiser over the difficult modernist style James—don't have it. Under the influence of Freud and modernism in general, and writing in the wake of the Holocaust and World War Two, Trilling wants to open liberalism up to the irrational, or to what he calls “the primal imagination of liberalism” (xv). Trilling defined Liberalism as “a political position which affirmed the value of individual existence in all its variousness, complexity, and difficulty. And since this was so, literature had a bearing upon political conduct. Literature, especially the novel, is the human activity which takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, complexity, difficulty—and possibility” (vii). As in Trilling, we see in Sacco the promise and problems of a certain kind of imaginative liberalism. This brand of liberalism refuses to “just say no” to the enabling of the author and reader to enter into, with empathetic identification, the perspectives of what Trilling calls “individual existence in all its variousness, complexity, and difficulty.” Trilling's privileged authors such as Isaac Babel, the intellectual Odessa Jew who rode with the anti-Semitic Cossacks on their rampages into Poland in his *Red Cavalry* stories. Just so, Sacco revels in hanging in the hood with the murky, undecidable, ambiguous Neven. Truth is put in question marks.

Let me focus in some detail on the first time the “But put yourself in my shoes” mantra refers to the Sacco icon. I will do so to illustrate how *The Fixer*, like iconic modernist texts such as Babel's in the hands of Trilling, foregrounds a “precise account of variousness, complexity, difficulty—and possibility” (vii) and that defines culture in such a way that it does “not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group or tendency” (9). Occurring on page 11, the equivocal “but” signals Sacco's acknowledgment that his presentation through the first ten pages must be pressing against the reader's moral sensibilities, the very kind of perspective that Trilling felt led liberal critics to privilege a Dreiser over a James. Why isn't Sacco condemning Neven as a crazed, alcoholic mass-murdering thug looking to shake down a naive young journalist, rather than waiting like a forlorn lover for Neven's return?

In two prologues, one dated 2001, one dated 1995, Sacco describes his obsessive relationship with Neven. , In 2001, we learn, he is still hanging out by himself in the cafes, streets, and promenades of post war Sarajevo. He is waiting, Beckett style, for the return of Neven, aka the Fixer. In the second prologue, from 1995, we quickly discern (more quickly than does Sacco?) that this Neven is, among other things, a desperate, broke, isolated, narcissist with a seriously blood stained past. His list of crimes includes, by his own account, participation “in some illicit activities. . . carjacking. . . .” a bank robbery or two” as well as getting “mixed up with some tough guys from Britain, the States, South Africa, Belgium. . . .” (22) as well as “dealing guns, selling them to Palestinians” (23). Neven is not even particularly

welcome in the ironically named Holiday Inn in Sarajevo where he waits to be storyteller, local guide, and, maybe even a pimp, for visiting journalists. Unfortunately for Neven, and, one could argue, I suppose, or Sacco as well: “The action isn’t what it used to be. The journalists have followed the flies to somewhere else” (5). Sacco is looking mighty tasty to Neven when he enters the empty lobby of the Sarajevo Holiday Inn. In 1995 a cease-fire is in the works, but Sarajevo is still a very dangerous place to be. Poignant panels directly follow Sacco’s plea that we put ourselves in his shoes. We get a truly harrowing sense of the existential darkness and profound sense of fear, isolation, and “what the fuck did I get myself into?” scenario Sacco has entered himself into for reasons that remain quite murky to the end of text. We see an extremely dark space, etched masterfully in black crosshairs. The establishing shot depicts Sacco in the left foreground, primarily in black, entering a large, very dark lobby that is cast as a collection of imposing and bewilderingly abstract shapes (Communist era modernism) that seem to belong in a Sci Fi movie space ship. The lobby is empty, except for Neven, who is sitting in the mid background on a lounge chair, waiting. Waiting, it turns out, for months. Waiting for some minor foreign journalist to talk to, to lead, since all of the mainstream journalists from the CNN crowd have left town. The scene is set as if Neven is a predator, a spider, and Sacco is the vulnerable insect, the moth-like prey. The dazed looking female clerk at the reception desk points to a map indicating the close proximity of the hotel to the still hot front line. Sacco, like a scared, lonely, shut in, enters his dark spare room. He gingerly stares at the window, lies flat on his bed with his clothes on, as if he is in shock. After resting on the side of the bed like a character out of Edward Hopper, then splashing water on his face, he takes his dark lumpy shape downstairs where he faces Neven: “Let me buy you a coffee,” says Neven, who will end up draining Sacco’s pockets, and they are off to the races, Neven playing Stanley, Sacco playing Blanche. Opposites attracting each other, they have had, in the words of Tennessee Williams from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, this date from the beginning.

How easy is it for us to understand, empathize, and enter into Sacco’s subject position? Sacco is aware that he is, if not an unreliable narrator, then someone we might not care to enter into empathetic identification with for the next 90 pages of this text. One thing is for sure, we can’t fault Sacco for failing to be self-effacing, self-critical, self-aware of his own, and shall we say, limitations in judgment about the kindness of strangers. Physically, his icon is nothing to write home about. He appears to be nerdy with round intellectual glasses, small, slump shoulders, flimsy armed, a bit pudgy, with big ethnic lips and a big nose and a little pack around his shoulder almost like a female pocketbook. With his dark hair and bulbous nose and thick lips he looks different/other from the rather Aryan looking Sarajevo citizens who promenade, the young ones anyway, looking like Aryan Gods and Goddesses. What IS he doing here?

And if we can bring ourselves via The Liberal Imagination Unlimited to walk a mile in Sacco’s icon, then how are we then able to perform a switcharoo and start being/seeing as Neven? Is Sacco saying that we, like him, are sado-masochistic voyeurs, rubber necking, not on the highways for carnage as in Warhol’s “Death and

Disaster” series, but at a world-class atrocity? Through Sacco and our own dialogic co-creationism we will be transported into the dizzyingly complex, infinitely unreliable place where any easy us versus them, good versus bad, moral versus immoral, victim versus victimizer, truth versus lie kind of ethics or aesthetics do not seem to apply. We become, like Sacco himself, not a noble witness with clean hands, ala Cooper and Amanpour, but a dirty accomplice, ala Babel’s intellectual soldier Liutov in “My First Goose” from *The Red Cavalry*. As critic Cicely A. Richard reports, Babel’s Liutov responds to the jests from comrades in the Galician War over his intellect and sensitivity by killing a goose at the home of a peasant woman in an attempt to gain acceptance from his fellow soldiers. One could argue that Sacco’s fears, sexual desires, loneliness, and need to believe in someone else as a protector or truth bearer take hold on him, skewing his judgments, and letting a murderer take a pass.

Given the traumatic scenario from their first meeting in 1995, we wonder doubly about why is Sacco so obsessed with meeting Neven AGAIN in 2001 six years after a first meeting in which Sacco himself admits, “But in the absence of other game—and as a matter of professional pride—he could not allow me to escape so easily. For if I did not have much meat on my bones, I was as big a pigeon as was likely to cross his sky anytime soon. . . . ?” (19) Why is Sacco still stuck in Sarajevo after all the action has gone away? Let me return to Trilling in order to take a stab at an answer. In a fine essay on “Freud and Literature” from *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling’s description of various characters in Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* (1762) as representing id and ego, are suggestive of Sacco’s Sarajevo. A space of Id unleashed, the inhibiting elements of what Freud called “civilization” are desublimated. With Neven as tour guide, Sacco enters a realm of something like pure Id. Violence, heavy drinking, rampant sexuality, thievery, and lawlessness run unheeded. A key into understanding Sacco’s fascination with Neven lies in his libidinal fantasy of Sarajevo as a site of pure excess. It is a space of the body that is savage, primal. It is a space that challenges the self-conscious, self-effacing, guilt-ridden persona that I’d associate with a hyper intellectual looking squiggly armed, worry wart such as Sacco imagines himself to be in *The Fixer*. His ambivalent feelings towards Neven speak to this struggle between Sacco’s self-consciousness, ego-centered hesitancy, and his desire to give himself over to the Id represented by Neven.

Sacco’s picture of Neven is, in the end, to use a favored term of Freud’s, Trilling’s, and The New Criticism, ambivalent. Near the conclusion of the text, Sacco can represent his icon as laughing at himself and at Neven with a kind of grudging affection and acknowledgment of his own schleimeildom. Sacco realizes that a tape recorder, allegedly owned by Neven and lent to Sacco so he could do his interviews, was in fact not something that belonged to Neven in the first place, but rather to one of his comrades, Dutch. Sacco’s tale foregrounds the desire-driven relationship of reader and writer, listener and teller. This in the end is why Sacco tells us he sticks with Neven over the course of several years, even after he hears from other, more trusted sources, that Neven’s stories of his heroic exploits as a half-Serbian born defender of the City of Sarajevo fighting alongside a renegade crew of Muslims, are probably puffed up with a lot of hot air: “Neven is a godsend to me, too. Finally

someone is telling me how it was—or how it almost was, or how it could have been—but finally someone in this town is telling me something” (101). Sacco asks us to enter into the text in a way that may (and probably should) make us uncomfortable and circumspect about the author’s motives for entering the same tale. He implicates us in a story of involving the same warped and despicable, but somehow also affectionate and addictively fascinating, persons he has wrapped himself up in for six years. Sacco’s work is thus primarily about what the mainstream media doesn’t reveal to us about the strange relationship between teller and tale. Unlike the CNN celebrity journalists, Sacco does not present himself as a preachy moral witness above reproach. He is certainly not beyond implication in the co-creation of the scenes he is, belatedly, reporting. He does not pretend that the scenes he depicts and the participants he travels with would exist in the same way without his, pay for play, presence. After his work as a paramilitary marksman ended, Neven’s occupation as *The Fixer*, after all, is primarily escorting international journalists into and out of the danger zones. Sometimes his task is providing them with hookers (“That’s part of the program. It’s completely normal. I’ve arranged whores for journalists about 12 times” [7]). Sometimes he is providing worldly, if a bit long in the tooth, wisdom: “Do you know what is the only animal that kills for pleasure? That creature is called *Homo Sapiens*” (25). Sometimes he is providing deep background on the dizzyingly complex relationships, both adversarial and conspiratorial, between the Bosnian State, the Serb nationalists, the Bosnian Army, the Bosnian police, and the renegade Bosnian paramilitary, which, in the end, breaks away from the Bosnian State so that there is a civil war within a civil war: “The Green Berets are not a single group but a collection of autonomous armed cells built around popular or self-elected leaders” (27). To add to the almost absurdly comic confusion of the situation, Sacco notes that the charismatic leaders of the paramilitary groups sometimes turn out to have the same nickname (“Celo”). Sometimes Neven’s task is to offer self-aggrandizing and undecidably veracious narratives of heroism. Neven, for example, describes how, with a small band of icy veined brothers defended the city against Serbian tanks. Not least of all, Neven serves to make Sacco, represented as a timid, passive, guilt-ridden, out of sorts, out of place journalist, feel safe. Neven also allows Sacco to feel a little sexy walking in the hood with a Big Man: “With Neven, I’m like a teenager on his first few dates—a little enthralled, a little infatuated perhaps, maybe a little in love, and what is love but a transaction. . . I am vulnerable, understand me. It is war, for Christ’s sake, and now that I’ve got myself into it, I need a hug, a support group, someone to carry me gently over the rubble” (14). Hard to imagine hearing Anderson Cooper admit to the affective relationship he and other embedded journalists must experience in comparable traumatic crises. It is this exposure of Sacco’s own libidinal, emotional, psychic needs to create a bond with Neven that becomes the primary subject of Sacco’s self-analysis. His self-mocking, self-critical perspective flies in the face of the garden variety MORAL OUTRAGE that is so typical of the CNN version of the story. Sacco asks us, as in Holocaust testimony in a film such as *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, to think differently about what we mean by reliable witness. This is so to the point where Neven’s annoying behaviors, his self-aggrandizing memories,

for example, his excessive need to talk to Sacco and maybe even to take advantage of him, his alcoholism, his violent outbursts, are really a part of the living, real-time testimony about what Neven has been through over the 1990s. As in Caruthian trauma theory, the telling of the tale of what happened back then is not so much redeemed in the present telling, but acted out as if for the first time. Sacco's *Liberal Imagination Unlimited* is truly an example of seeing things 360.

## Notes

1. McCloud continues: "Participation is a powerful force in any medium. Filmmakers long ago realized the importance of allowing viewers to use their imaginations. But while film makes use of audiences' imaginations for occasional effects, comics must use it far more often. From the tossing of a baseball to the death of a planet, the reader's deliberate voluntary closure is comics' primary means of simulating time and motion. Closure in comics fosters an intimacy surpassed only by the written word, a silent, secret contract between creator and audience" (68–69).
2. Thorburn adds: "The narrative structure displaces our attention from the traditional narrative matter of the story and toward the drama of the telling of the story. Conrad foregrounds the act of narration itself; one of his central themes is the problem of telling the story. As Marlow continues his fragmented and digressive tale, we realize that he is preoccupied with the difficulty of recapturing what happened" (25).

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