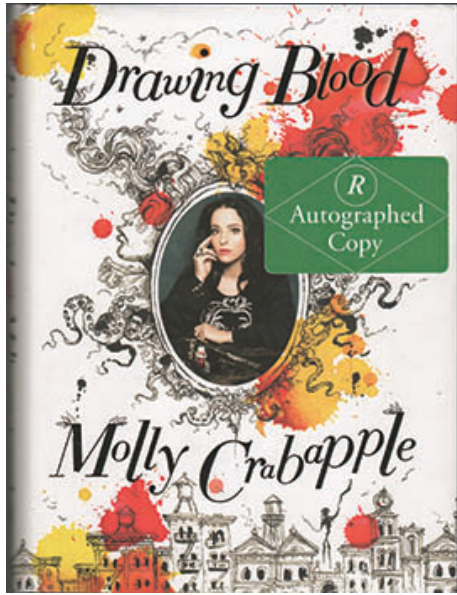


Portrait of the Illustrator as a Young Woman

Book review by Jaleen Grove

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Drawing Blood

By Molly Crabapple

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This is the story of a girl and her sketchbook.—M.C. — p. 4.

Molly Crabapple – birth name Jennifer Caban – is a visual journalist who writes and illustrates investigative reports for *Vice* about conflict zones and marginalized communities. Prior to her work in this field, she was active in New York City's burlesque and pop surrealism scenes as a model and artist (with terms in London), and was one of the originators of the Dr. Sketchy life drawing movement. *Drawing Blood* narrates her path from birth in 1983 to illustrator-reporter in 2013.

. . . in that four-cornered kingdom of paper, I lived as I pleased. There I was the actor, not the acted upon. When my mind turned in on itself, I drew anyway, learning that art can't save you from pain, but the discipline of hard work can drag you through it. My pen became my life preserver. – p. 4.

Something that stands out in reading *Drawing Blood* is how many implicit taboos Crabapple has broken on the way. First and foremost, one does not expect a 30-year-old to write an autobiography. We especially do not expect a young woman to do it – such immodest young-turk moves have historically been a masculine preserve. As such, she risks the book being dismissed as a mere vanity project. But vanity is a particularly misogynistically-coded pejorative, historically used to halt the advancement and self-expression of smart and/or beautiful women, and we should pause and check our biases before rejecting supposed *grisettes* who dare to publically claim their accomplishments. Such temerity is a firm signal that Crabapple is not going to play by the rules. She doesn't disappoint: as the pages fly by, she drops out of art school (Fashion Institute of Technology) and badmouths it for good measure; she becomes what many would call either a bad girl or a bad feminist (doubly damned!) when she cultivates her Morticia Addams beauty and exploits people's weakness for sex appeal; she strip-mines social connections and siphons start-up money out of social media; and she defies normative ideas of what a white girl can do when she travels alone in Muslim countries and infiltrates war zones to get juicy subject matter. This is the book's plot, in a nutshell. But it is much more than that.

I took iPhone shots of the crowd, went back to my studio, and got out my paints, eager to capture the protestors [. . .] I wanted to draw it all. I wanted to show myself there was still a reason to draw. We live in the most image-saturated age in history, and a thousand cell phone pics mark the occasion whenever a cop cracks a protestor's skull, but I wanted to prove that artists had a reason to leave the studio – to show that illustration had something to say. – pp. 257-258.

For one, it's a much needed documentation from the point of view of a cultural industry peon of the historical moment when the creative class was aggressively tapped to swing cities' economic makeup, resulting in not just neighbourhood gentrification but increased distances between upper and lower classes, and the stampeding capitalization of the unregulated international contemporary art market. Although her florid literary style calls attention to itself and conveys a counterproductive surreal quality at times (a typical writing hazard for highly visual people), Crabapple still provides a veritable ethnography of these and other major events of the last twenty years, from 9-11 to runaway neo-liberal excess to the 2008 recession to Occupy Wall Street to Arab Spring. These are all related from her counter-cultural girl-on-the-street perspective, cockroach-infested living, seedy abortion clinics, sequin g-strings and all.

Superprocessor mathematics had liberated money from the uncertainty and sweat of real companies, real labor, the blood and muck of the body . . . The Goldman Sachs boys blew their money buying Louboutins for sleek, cat-eyed girls of my acquaintance, girls who babysat them as they came down from coke. Dominatrices who fucked themselves

onstage with butcher knives (dull, don't worry, and the blood was fake) turned up as trophy wives [. . .] The Box was purchasing our culture, we thought. Every day, performers lined up, hoping to be bought themselves. – p. 171.

Throughout, her tabloidesque approach is also what threatens to undermine her. For readers who have had the blessed privilege not to grow up modestly in an overpriced metropolis, or who have sheltered themselves from the racier elements of show-biz and the predatory and parasitical support of it by the wealthy, this book will seem exaggerated or unbelievable. Such readers might dismiss Crabapple's experiences and methods of career advancement as the actions of, if not a shameless hussy, then of a shameless hustler at the very least. For those who choose to read her through this limited and judgmental lens, it will be easy to dismiss her later success as a visual journalist – with her unlikely doodly, offhand-looking, comedic drawing style, so different from other visual reporters' more slick and sober academic approach – as the product of hype and good looks. Likewise, the reader who is mainly interested in art and illustration from a connoisseur's standpoint might feel Crabapple is playing up the kiss-and-tell too much: is this book just more sensationalist advertising for the celebrityhood Crabapple seems to lust after?

I was not cool. Cool is not needing. As I turned twenty, all I had was need. I loved the profiles of careless rich girls that filled the pages of New York magazine. In their photos, they were all hip bones and ruffled hair and bitten, just-fucked lips. . . Every story left a knife of envy in my ribs. What I would have given to be one of those girls. They were so glamorous, these blank girls on whom you could drape salvation. – p. 95.

To the question of whether the book is shameless self-promotion, I emphatically declare YES – but it's not without purpose. In picking this book up, you are undoubtedly complicit with the scopical regimes the author displays for your amusement so well, regimes that position Crabapple's body and face in your mental gaze, and that reflect a construction of who she is off the lavish descriptions and illustrations like so many trick mirrors of other beauties, friends, lovers, and big names that she decorates the pages with (about 120 illustrations and ornaments in all).

By posing for Suicide Girls, where guys pay \$7.99 a month to download naked pictures, I was choosing to repurpose my body as content, to reframe it as porn [. . .] When my first photo set went up, I watched the comments dizzily. 'Lovely.' 'Perfect.' 'I'd eat you up.' Hundreds of people posted about me . . . I gobbled up each one. – pp. 88-89.

But it is in this portraiture and self-portraiture we find a second important value of this book: it's a gritty fuck-you account that tells you what it is to be a young female creative industry professional in the twenty-first century. The subversive feminist critiques of ex-porn-star Annie Sprinkle come to mind – I once saw Sprinkle sensuously play with her famous bared breasts during an academic keynote talk, at the same time as showing us graphic photos of her breast cancer surgery and advocating for the sexual rights of persons with disabilities. Like Sprinkle, laced throughout Crabapple's self-modeling the reader will find a determined feminist

deconstruction of the very channels of sexism, glamour, capital, and celebrityhood that she manipulated to get to where she is today.

No one had ever understood my art like Richard Kimmel did. Where others saw a bunch of topless cartoon girls, Richard saw weapons. He saw the anger that dragged my pen across paper, the cynicism that narrowed my chorines' eyes. . . Neither of us came from money, but we lived in a world dominated by those who did . . . and so we were forced to charm and flatter, to use our art to construct universes for their delectation. But I hated them for it. . . I distorted my victims' flaws until they swelled like ticks, all their defenses ripped away. – p. 189.

' . . . The main thing I get paid for is drawing sexy girls. You're always selling girlhood, one way or another.'
'Yep.' She nodded. *'Before you can be an artist, an activist – you have to be a girl first. And the right sort of girl too.'* – p. 227.

The book is a how-to manual in which she bares all. Cunningly, she shows not merely how hussy and huckster intermingle, but *why they must* for ambitious but unskilled minors living in a still-sexist world, who have not got time to rack up crippling art school tuition debt, to trade precious studio hours for minimum-wage jobs, to listen to anyone who tells them their rookie art isn't ready yet, or to settle for freelance in an increasingly poor-paying field. This text is an exposé of the systemic challenges faced by those who pine for a career in illustration – and it teaches by doing exactly what it critiques: it forces you to partake in the profitable spectacularization of the protagonist. But it's a spectacularization that the author directs. Herein lies the lesson.

Using watercolor paper, I tried to capture the sticky heat of Eleftherotypia's pressroom. In diluted ink, I sketched the clouds of smoke, under which the glamorous financial editor stared off into the distance. I gouged the paper with my pen to capture the violent stillness of the now-empty Syntagma. . . . As I illustrated Discordia, I found that drawings, like photojournalism, could distill the essence. Unlike photography, though, visual art has no sense of objectivity. It is joyfully, defiantly subjective. Its truth is individual. – p. 312.

Crabapple has branded her artwork with splatters of ink, spider-silk lines, and judicious floods of colour. It's a bit odd and perhaps churlish of her that I find no reference in *Drawing Blood's* self-reflection to Ronald Searle's flowery, needling poison-pen, nor to gonzo journalism and Ralph Steadman's scratchy, ink-blotty cartoons. They are surely her aesthetic predecessors, from Searle's secret documentation of his four years as a P.O.W. in a Japanese internment camp, his sexy-brat schoolgirls, and his court reportage; to Steadman's whacked-out illustrations of Hunter S. Thompson's drug-addled *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and his ensuing obscenely visceral political cartoons. Perhaps the omission is simply Crabapple breaking the rules again, this time plunging the envy-knife into the backs of the Freudian Fathers so that

she can be free to self-determine. Self-determination is the ultimate message of the book, and it's not a bad one, given how necessary it is for illustrators these days.

When you're a young woman, older men always want to help you. There was Adam, who followed me to a convention where I was speaking. He left messages with the hotel staff and had to be dragged out by security [. . .] There were innumerable invites to dinners at clubs . . . All these men said they would take us out of our pitiful circumstances and onto the grand stage of life. They never did. – pp. 181-182.

Drawing Blood opens and closes with Molly Crabapple sketching prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, thus laying the ground for her next book, on reportage. As of February 2017, she has been traveling in India speaking on dissent and her illustration practice; and designing posters that quote Black intellectuals James Baldwin and Audre Lorde to support PEN America (which defends authors' freedom of expression), and Black and Pink (which supports LGBTQ, HIV, and prisoner causes). If she continues her trajectory as a prominent reporter and commentator, and as an influential person in the illustration world, *Drawing Blood* will be vital for future scholars of illustration. Meanwhile, instructors who are a generation or two removed from their students (or junior faculty members) ought to read this book in order to gain insight into the pressures their charges and colleagues face (the story of how Crabapple fell between the cracks at FIT alone is a cautionary tale for every educator, for instance). Illustration students seeking career options may find things to both identify with and to protest – excerpts may even be suitable for class readings and discussion as well.

. . . the [New York Times] article's pull-quote was a bit of cheek. 'It's not how much you cultivate your talent, but how much you cultivate your name,' they quoted me as saying, running the words beneath a photo of me in mint-green tulle, peeking through a picture frame. The comics scene was predictably scandalized – by now I had a bit of a reputation for being cynical – but I was trying to counter the pious lie that good artists would automatically be recognized. – p. 203.

Finally, the pressure to brand oneself and cultivate personal visibility, in order to have the least fighting chance of having a voice in world events and of surviving in today's media ecology, is a pressing matter for debate that Crabapple's story opens up. If the cult of personality ever overshadows craft, whither illustration?