



DRAWING FROM MEMORY Do you remember the first time? That winter when snow was on the ground and you were in love and nothing else mattered? Craig Thompson does. Following up his award-winning graphic-novel debut, *Goodbye, Chunky Rice*, this brilliant young cartoonist has released a massive autobiographical memoir in comics form, *Blankets*, to rapturous reviews. The achingly romantic story of how a teenaged Craig found and lost both love and faith in the snowy fields of Wisconsin, it's winning over legions of unlikely new fans. A&F's Sean T. Collins thinks you should be among them, and he offers this interview with Craig to prove it.

The rural Midwest is almost a character in your book. Having never really been there—except for one speech and debate tournament in Oshkosh, Wisconsin— But that's like "the big city" compared to where I grew up. I remember visiting Oshkosh when I was little, and I thought it was the biggest city ever. In high school, too. Sad, huh?

So how did where you raised affect you? It affected everything. I feel really blessed at this point in my life to have had that kind of upbringing, because it creates so many nice stories, and it's made the rest of my life so easy because I came from such a pit of human existence. There are so many beautiful things about where I grew up in terms of nature, but in terms of culture, it was the most deprived environment you could grow up with, yet very American. I didn't grow up in Texas, and yet I witnessed distinct All-American culture: the cowboy hats and the cowboy boots, being chased through the woods by guys in pickup trucks, and getting beat up all the time. I think that's part of the American experience. (laughs)

It takes a lot of balls to put yourself out there in an autobiography. How did you decide to do that? Reluctantly. I didn't want to do an autobio. I had my theme first, which (my theme) was what it's like to sleep next to someone for the first time. I didn't want to focus on a plot or story. I wanted to focus on an emotional experience, and have it be very believable. And when I started thinking about that in my own life—the first girl that I slept in the same bed with—this sort of coming-of-age story started to unravel. Instantly, I was like, "Oh, that's not bad." And then once I remembered that I'd slept with my brother since early childhood, and it's a totally different thread—the romantic relationship versus the sibling relationship with my brother—suddenly, there was a story, and I couldn't resist it.

Did you know it would take 570 pages to tell it? I mean, it's the size of a regular novel, not a comic. I thought it would be about 250 pages. Then it doubled. But, right away, I wanted it to be a big book. All these crappy mainstream comics are, like, 24 pages, and entire epics unfold in a handful of page. Worlds are created and destroyed, all these explosions and action and drama... I just wanted to make a big, huge-ass book where barely anything happens. It's an emotional experience rather than action.

And clearly that's attracting readers who don't normally read comics. Yes. I think the size is almost a gimmick. It's big, and people are curious, like, "What is that thing?" And then, if they flip through it (since most won't even bother to flip through a comic) because of the size, they see that it's not about the traditional things they associate with comics. I think it's different from what they've ever seen before. And the story is pretty universal.

Was it painful to revisit your first love? No. It wasn't painful to look at

"MY THEME WAS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO SLEEP NEXT TO SOMEONE THE FIRST TIME"

the past—it's painful to look at the present. The religious issues were still continuing in my life, in my relationship with my parents. That was painful. The romantic aspect was fueled by things happening in the present day, too, but that was therapeutic. The other part was a struggle until the end.

In the book, you reject your fundamentalist upbringing. How did your family react? I don't have a very communicative family. I called them after I had sent them *Blankets*, and we talked for about fifteen minutes before I said, "You should be getting the book any day now, I mailed it about a week ago." My parents said, "Yeah, we got it"—there was quiet on the line. So I said, "Oh, did you get a chance to read it," and my mom was like, "Well, I read half of it, and your father has read the whole thing already." More quiet. So I had to really probe them. I'm like "Well, there's a lot to talk about, huh?" and they still kind of avoided it. There's this big avoidance thing in my family—I don't have an intimate relationship with them in terms of conversation. It's very Midwestern, very stoic. There's not a lot of exploration of anything, which accounts for the really conservative religious views. People aren't allowed to question or discuss that stuff.

Was *Blankets* your one-sided conversation with them? Yeah, in a way. I like to think of it as an initiation, something to kick things off. I didn't know any other way to do it. This is my way of establishing my view, my opinion, and they can do with it as they please. I hope that doesn't sound mean!

I understand that you still haven't spoken to Raina, the girl whom the book is about. That part is literal. I cut off contact with her. The main reason is that I was an immature high schooler, and didn't know how to handle being friends with somebody that I'd dated. Now that's not a big deal. Maybe she'll see the book, though. I wouldn't mind being back in contact.

How does your current girlfriend feel about your paean to your ex? Well, there's so much of our relationship projected onto the book, especially because at the time I started it we weren't together, and I was focusing that longing for her into the book. Many elements that have to do with our relationship are obvious, especially to her, so she's not jealous. She shouldn't be anyway, because at the end of this book, the boy doesn't stay with the girl. It's not an eternal-love, happily-ever-after sort of thing.

Craig Thompson drawing Craig Thompson painting Craig Thompson and Raina, photographed by Kyle Green.