

The Persistence of Memories

Jennifer's Journal: The Life of a SubUrban Girl, Vol. 1, by Jennifer Cruté

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reviewed by S. Qiouyi Lu

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Jennifer's Journal is a delightful series of personal anecdotes illustrated with sequential art. Although its narrative starts off light-hearted, Cruté introduces some heavier elements toward the middle of the book as Jennifer begins to explore and experience depression, difficult family dynamics, religion, and sexuality.¹

The grayscale art in *Jennifer's Journal* is deceptively simple—at first glance, the round faces seem minimalist, but the characters are all very expressive and dynamic. Every background is carefully drawn. A close examination of the characters' clothing reveals the stitches in jean seams and the drapes in billowy dresses. The art is not so much simple as it is deliberate—every line serves a purpose. Cruté's lettering is also fantastic. The various fonts, weights, and speech bubble shapes convey tone and emotion, and visually underscore the actual text. Regardless of whether panels are clearly delineated, whether art extends past the panel boundary, or whether there are any panels at all, the flow of the story is never confusing—the absence of reading roadblocks reveals Cruté's masterful handling of page layouts.

Jennifer welcomes us into her story by introducing her family: her mother, a fashion designer who chose to work at a bank after marriage for stability; her brother, whose art and creative sculptures inspire Jennifer to draw as well; and her father, a bus driver who encourages his children to doodle whenever they go to work with him. Photographs of actual drawings and items from Cruté's childhood punctuate the introduction and give *Jennifer's Journal* a scrapbook feeling while emphasizing its autobiographical nature.

1 Although the graphic novel is autobiographical, in this review, I distinguish between "Cruté," the author/artist, and "Jennifer," the main character in the graphic novel.

Then Jennifer walks us through other scenes from her childhood, from stories of being scared of the dark, to her misunderstandings as a kid, to quintessential suburban life: pets, bike accidents, family vacations, and family gatherings. Moments from her friends' lives interrupt Jennifer's tales and offer glimpses into the lives of other suburban children, many also of color. Racial misunderstandings begin to dot Jennifer's childhood, with white children saying the N-word around her and her family.

A family portrait starts the next chapter in *Jennifer's Journal*, and here we see the first hint that all is not as harmonious as Jennifer has presented it to be: over her smiling father's head a thought bubble reads, "I won't be in this picture for long." In the previous chapter, Jennifer characterizes her father as someone who pulls the occasional insensitive prank, but for the most part, he's by her side. After the family portrait, Jennifer begins to muse more about her father's irresponsibility and her parents' constant fighting. It's heartbreaking to see Jennifer learning coping tactics at a young age—as spiky, angry yelling fills a panel, Jennifer continues playing with her toy frog in another room and learns to avoid her parents. Cruté creates palpable tension through the juxtaposition of calm narration with angry shouting and exaggerated emotions on her parents' faces versus more neutral expressions on Jennifer's face. Although young Jennifer doesn't fully understand what is happening, readers—and a growing Jennifer narrating—can see her struggle clearly. As a more mature Jennifer reflects on her parents as people with their own personalities and interests, she wonders how they ever became a couple. Page 50 in particular weighs heavily: Jennifer narrates that she "understands certain decisions," followed by a panel showing her smiling parents on their wedding day,



with a thought bubble coming off her father that shows a mouse in a wheel, and a thought bubble coming off her mother that says, “He doesn’t hit me.”

Jennifer’s Journal then jumps back to 1915 Georgia. Jennifer relates the story of her great-grandmother Pearl, who eloped, and says on page 52, “From what I hear, they lived happily ever after—for once in my family. Jeez.” She tells stories of Grandma Faye, who had eight children. Although Grandma Faye’s domestic life at first seems cheerful, that idyllic domesticity crumbles once Jennifer’s controlling grandfather Jake enters the picture. Although these anecdotes may appear at first to be an unrelated tangent, they actually come at a perfect time in the narrative: as Jennifer struggles to understand her difficult home life, she introspects and reaches back to find the intergenerational trauma that informed her mother’s decisions.

The rest of the graphic novel discusses religion and spirituality. Even as a young child, Jennifer had questions about stories in the Bible. Some biblical stories disturb Jennifer, and Cruté shows Jennifer’s conflicted feelings by illustrating quotes from the Bible, then having one of the characters deviate from the biblical text. Of all the pages in this section, and even in the whole book, page 75 stood out the most to me. Prior to this page, Jennifer wonders why Satan has multiple names. When she gets older, she names various self-defeating personalities within her and realizes that this is why Satan has multiple names: evil and misery manifest in many different forms, but they all serve to tear people down. Although this volume of *Jennifer’s Journal* doesn’t discuss her experiences with depression, this illustration sets up an antagonist for the next volume and is an evocative, tragicomic representation of depression.

Toward the end of *Jennifer’s Journal*, Jennifer finds herself pulling away from the church as she witnesses two-faced behavior, hypocrisy, and sexual abuse. Her homosexuality also becomes a source of cognitive dissonance—while the church preaches that homosexuality is a sin, Jen-

nifer begins to realize that maybe she is homosexual herself. When Jennifer gets to college, she lets go of her Christian beliefs and explores Buddhism and Taoism. Her icon, Miss Buddha Bear, gradually comes into existence within the last pages, and *Jennifer’s Journal* ends with Miss Buddha Bear teaching a lesson on heaven and hell to a samurai.

Jennifer’s Journal may feel a bit disjointed, but that disjointedness serves the narrative. The back-and-forth between presenting a straightforward image from Jennifer’s childhood, then complicating that image, reflects the processing that Jennifer does as she grows up. As a child, she doesn’t realize that anything out of the ordinary is happening, but with time she comes to reflect and understand her experiences in context. That processing hurts all the more when juxtaposed with the naïveté of childhood, but it is also a necessary part of growing up.

Although my individual experiences were different, so much of the arc of Jennifer’s life resonates with me. *Jennifer’s Journal* tells not just Jennifer Cruté’s story, but also my story—the story of growing up in suburbia, yes, but also the stories of finding my own identity and learning where toxic thoughts and abuse originate from. The only people who won’t be able to relate to *Jennifer’s Journal* are those who have lived completely perfect and happy lives, but I’m certain those people don’t exist.



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S. Qiouyi Lu left both coasts to settle in Columbus, Ohio—for now. This is their first review.

