

Øystein Sjøstad (Oslo) on:

A Dog's Struggle.

Martin Kellerman's *Rocky* as Autofiction

Many comics are autobiographical; what makes *Rocky* so special is that the autobiographical story stretches over so many years and is still ongoing: tomorrow when I wake up and go out to get the newspaper, I'll be able to read what's happened to him since the last installment. This eventually unique life story is told through thousands of strips that stand on their own with good, sometimes fantastic one-liners, but which also draw a picture of ourselves and our times, about what's happening right now, and that authors would gladly cut off a hand to gain access to because it's so difficult to grasp: the tone we speak in, the things we're concerned about, the knowledge we have about the world – yes, all the things we can't read in Tolstoy.¹

Karl Ove Knausgaard

Abstract

This article is about the Swedish daily comic strip *Rocky* by Martin Kellerman. The article views *Rocky* as an example of autofiction due to Kellerman's use of an anthropomorphic cartoon self and the daily comic strip's narrative structure. One of the article's goals is to show how the daily comic strip as a medium creates an original day-to-day space for exploring a life story.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit dem schwedischen Tagescomic *Rocky* des Autors Martin Kellerman. *Rocky* wird aufgrund Kellermans Verwendung eines anthropomorphen Cartoon-Ichs und der narrativen Struktur des täglichen Comics als ein Beispiel für Autofiktion betrachtet. Ein Ziel des Beitrags ist es zu zeigen, wie der tägliche Comic als Medium genutzt wird, um einen originellen Raum für die Erkundung einer Lebensgeschichte zu schaffen.

Øystein Sjøstad is a Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas at the University of Oslo. He holds a Ph.D. in art history from the University of Oslo. His main research interests are European painting 1860–1900, Semiotics, and Comics.

¹ »Selvbiografiske er det mange tegneserier som er; det som gjør *Rocky* så spesiell, er at den selvbiografiske fortellingen strekker seg over så mange år, og at den fortsatt pågår: I morgen, når jeg står opp og henter avisen, vil jeg kunne lese hva som har hendt med ham siden sist. Denne etter hvert unike livsfortellingen blir fortalt gjennom noen tusen striper som ikke bare står støtt på egne ben med gode, noen ganger fantastiske onelinere, altså vitser, men som også tegner opp et bilde av oss og vår tid, om det som foregår akkurat nå, og som forfattere gjerne kutter av seg den ene hånden for å få tilgang til, for det er det som er så jævlig vanskelig å få tak i: den tonen vi snakker i, de tingene vi er opptatt av, den kunnskapen om verden vi har – ja, alt det som vi ikke kan lese ut av Tolstoj.« Karl Ove Knausgård, 2012, p. 6.

Martin Kellerman's daily comic strip *Rocky* first appeared in the Swedish newspaper *Metro* in 1998. It was soon published in Finland, Norway and Denmark – in newspapers and as monthly magazines. *Rocky* has since been published as book collections, rendered as a theatre play (2001), and as short animated films (2008). Two volumes of *Rocky* were published in English by Fantagraphics Books in 2005 and 2009. The comic ended in 2018 with daily strip number 4,200.² It would be fair to conclude that this is one of the most popular and most-read Scandinavian comic strips.

The comic unfolds in real-time and appears to be autobiographical. In many interviews, Kellerman has talked about the parallels between his own life and that of Rocky. I will quote from some of these interviews throughout the article. Rocky is often ruthlessly private, and especially in the early editions, the strip depicts an everyday life devoid of ambition. This is typical for autobiographical art: a person's life does not need to be extraordinary in order to be of interest to others.³ The *ordinary* is a key theme in the history of the character Rocky. As Kellerman says, »I'm not trying to shock anybody. People do swear and people do get naked, and there's nothing really shocking about it. They're not devil worshippers, it's just ordinary people doing ordinary stuff.«⁴



Figure 1: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*, strip no. 5. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.

The comic starts in 1998, with Rocky, a young unemployed comic-book artist, sleeping on different friends' sofas. The first years of *Rocky* deal with Rocky's life from about 20 to 25 years of age: growing up in a disappointing world, difficulties in becoming an adult, wondering what to do with your life, not achieving your goals, unable to afford a place to live and always sleeping on a friend's couch, finding a girlfriend, being dumped, cheating on your girlfriend, drinking and partying. Already by the fifth strip, he gets dumped by his girlfriend for the first time (fig. 1). *Rocky* is also about spending an excessive amount of time hanging out with buddies. This latter point is perhaps the comic's main subject: it is in large measure a depiction of friendship between men. In these early years, Rocky fears being alone and ending up alone. He reaches his 30s, a period in life when friends are involved in relationships and having children, but he still is single much of the time. On the other hand, like most people in their 30s, Rocky

² Kellerman has also made Sunday pages in addition to the daily strips. The complete comic has been published in Swedish in three volumes: Kellerman 2008, Kellerman 2013, and Kellerman 2018. A one volume collection of *Rocky* was published by Kaunitz-Olsson in December 2021.

³ El Refaie 2012, p. 39.

⁴ Quoted in MacDonald 2005, n.p.

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has a better financial situation and can travel more. Now the *Rocky* strips appear more often as a travel diary recorded from places such as New York City, Oslo, Barcelona, Berlin, and Thailand. A recurring theme in the later years, after Rocky turns 40, is the joy of being single – how nice it is not to have children and responsibility. A lot has changed for Rocky within this 20-year period; in the final year of the strip's publication, we see the character really enjoying his own company, doing laundry, preparing dinner and wine for one, and watching *Game of Thrones* alone on his laptop computer (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*, strip no. 3976. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.

The title of this article is, of course, a wordplay on Karl Ove Knausgård's famous six-volume literary work *My Struggle* (2009–11). It is not a coincidence, since »Karl Ove« and Rocky sometimes enter each other's universe. Rocky is one of Knausgård's favorite comic strips, and he even briefly appears in it as a character.⁵ Kellerman is, in turn, a fan of *My Struggle* and says in an interview, »I love the books, think they're fantastic.«⁶ Knausgård is first mentioned in the comic in a strip showing Rocky holding *My Struggle: Book 2* (fig. 3). Rocky comments on the book in the two first panels:



Figure 3: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*, strip no. 2836. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.

⁵ Knausgård writes: »The first thing I do every morning is turn on the coffeemaker. While the coffee is brewing I go out to the mailbox and get the newspaper. The first thing I read is the daily Rocky strip. After that I leaf through the sports section, then the cultural section and finally the news. This order of reading is prioritized: the most important first. When the coffee is ready, I pour myself a cup, walk across the courtyard, enter the office, smoke three cigarettes and drink the coffee before I start working.« »Det første jeg gjør hver morgen, er å sette på kaffetrakteren. Mens jeg venter på at kaffen skal bli klar, går jeg ut til postkassen og henter avisen. Det første jeg leser i den, er dagens Rocky-stripe. Deretter blar jeg meg gjennom sportsdelen, kulturdelen og til sist nyhetsdelen. Denne rekkefølgen er prioritert: det viktigste først. Når kaffen så er klar, skjenker jeg meg en kopp, krysser gårdsplassen og går inn på kontoret, hvor jeg røyker tre røyk og drikker koppen med kaffe før jeg begynner å jobbe.« (Knausgård 2012, p. 5).

⁶ »Jag älskar böckerna, tycker att de är fantastiska.« (Quoted from one caption in Ullberg 2013, n.p.).

Never have I been so glad to be single and childless as when I read Knausgård! He's so damn tired! All he wants is to be left alone and write, so what does he do? He gets a wife and three children and plagues himself for the rest of his life! He should've done as I did – just not give a shit!⁷

In a later strip we see Rocky reading *My Struggle: Book 5* in bed, then sarcastically exclaiming how »exciting« it is to read Knausgård's long and detailed descriptions of his mundane life (fig. 4). This could also be read as a meta situation in which Kellerman/Rocky comments on his own strip *Rocky*.



Figure 4: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*, strip no. 2982. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.

My aim in this article is not to make a comparative analysis of *Rocky* and *My Struggle* (although one could say that a main difference between the two is that while Karl Ove always seems to be unhappy and miserable, Rocky seems to have found happiness in his later years' solitude), but to test the idea that *Rocky*, made in the often-overlooked medium of the daily comic strip, succeeds in doing what Knausgård does in his much-analyzed and discussed *magnum opus*: namely, to present a personal story about mundane daily life stretching over a very long period of time. The daily comic strip has seldom been granted academic analysis and is looked upon as the lowest of all the comic and cartoon genres. I would claim that the daily comic strip, as demonstrated by Kellerman, has powerful aesthetic qualities in its potentially never-ending daily unfolding.⁸ Reading a comic strip like *Rocky* is close to a real-time experience of life – or at least it is a convincing experience of real time: I experience a day in Rocky's life as if it were a day in my own life.

Comics and Autofiction

Autobiographical comics originated in the American underground *comix* scene in the 1960s and 1970s, with artists such as Robert Crumb and Harvey Pekar. These works are characterized by a rough drawing style and private

⁷ »Aldrig har jag väl varit så glad över att vara ensam och barnlös som nu när jag läser Knausgård! Så jävla less är han! Det enda han vill är att vara ifred och skriva, så vad gör han? Skaffar fru och tre barn, och bara plågar sig genom livet! Han borde gjort som jag – bara sktit i det!« Kellerman 2013, p. 459.

⁸ The Swedish author Tomas Lappalainen, in his small book about *Rocky* (2011), stated that »It [Rocky] reminds me of Karl-Ove Knausgård's literary project *My Struggle*, except that Kellerman is not stopping with five volumes, but most likely will continue writing in real time until the end of time.« »Det påminner om Karl-Ove Knausgård's romanprojekt *Min Kamp*, fast med den skillnaden att Kellerman inte stannar vid fem volymer utan troligen kommer att fortsätta att skriva i realtid tills tiden tar slut.« (Lappalainen 2011, p. 14).

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subject matter, often sexual in nature. Many of the artists were preoccupied with existential questions relating to the grim world they found themselves in and their most mundane everyday doings. This was the first time comics were made for an exclusively adult audience. According to comic scholar Joseph Witek, »[t]he comix blazed the way for the present-day historical and autobiographical comic books by developing both a group of artists who could write fact-based narratives in comic-book form and an audience prepared to read them.«⁹ Since the 1970s, the autobiographical comic book has been a popular genre – it is often called autographics, graphic memoir,¹⁰ or graphic life writing.¹¹ The renaissance of the autobiographical tradition in the 1990s was instigated by comic-book artists such as Daniel Clowes and Chester Brown in North America. At the same time in Europe, it became increasingly common in the independent small-press comics scene.¹² Kellerman's *Rocky* must be seen as part of this second wave.

The genre of *autofiction* has been developed as an alternative to autobiography since it was conceptualized by Serge Doubrovsky in the late 1970s. The concept was first used to analyze literature but is today also used when discussing the visual arts. There is no consensus in the scholarly literature on what autofiction is, but important to Doubrovsky's understanding of it is the idea of the unconscious, and to see the self as unstable and multifaceted.¹³ I will not adopt a psychoanalytic use of the concept but have chosen to use it in my analysis of *Rocky* because it names a genre that accepts and appreciates the blurring of reality and fiction; it does not question the *mélange* or view it suspiciously. The artist is not pretending to be objective. Autofiction as a genre is open to being creative and experimental in its treatment of the self, life stories, and reality. It creates a larger space than does autobiography for artistic and subjective experimentation.

Kellerman uses autofictive space to create a certain distance between himself/reality and his art. He calls the character »Rocky« rather than »Martin«, and he draws Rocky as a dog.¹⁴ Since the other characters are also drawn as animals, he has created a funny-animal universe. »Funny-animal« is a descriptor for comics with animal-characters like Mickey Mouse, Krazy Kat, or Fritz the Cat. Animals act as humans, which is especially hilarious when Donald Duck eats turkey for Christmas or Rocky gets a dog. Anthropomorphic figures effectively »hide« the comic's reality, seriousness, and adulthood. There is a gap between how Rocky appears when talking to dogs and frogs and when he talks about the often-adult subjects, and it is surprising how quickly we as readers forget this gap and start believing that the characters are reenacting reality. An example illustrating the many layers in *Rocky* is a scene

⁹ Witek 1989, p. 52. See also chapter 12 in Miller 2007.

¹⁰ Whitlock 2006, p. 965.

¹¹ Herman 2011, p. 231.

¹² Beaty 2009, p. 227.

¹³ Jones 2009, p. 3, and Mortimer 2009, p. 22. Doubrovsky coined the concept of autofiction, at least partially, as a critique, or as an alternative, to Philippe Lejeune's important theorization of autobiography (Lejeune 1989). Read more about this discussion in Gasparini 2004, pp. 22–27. See also Gusdorf 2016.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the use of animals and the fictitious name »Rocky« instead of »Martin« are the two reasons why Nina Ernst is not including Rocky as part of her groundbreaking study of Swedish self-biographical comics. Ernst 2017, p. 19.

from when Rocky and a friend travel to San Francisco and visit The Charles M. Schulz Museum in Santa Rosa. While there, they get lectured by a guide about comics (fig. 5). It is a funny episode in itself, but also a clever way to pay homage to Schulz and let Rocky and Snoopy meet – dog to dog.



Figure 5: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*, strip no. 3743. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.

It seems like the medium of comics is perfect for autofiction. Perhaps there is something about it that invites an artist to be autobiographical, if not more than in other mediums, then at least in a very specific way.¹⁵ Witek effectively summarizes this idea:

As postmodernism recasts human subjectivity from a privileged unity to a site of discursive conflict, cartoonists have found ready to hand an art form long accustomed to rendering time as space, characters as multiplicities, and the disputed frontier between self and not-self as a permeable zone open for exploration.¹⁶

According to the comics scholar Hillary Chute, the nature of comics »inclines comics to autobiography, biography, and other modes of life writing.«¹⁷ Furthermore, she says, the »form of comics has a peculiar relation to expressing life stories.«¹⁸ One reason why comics is an enabler for autofiction is the closeness between the body and the art – between the hand and the paper. As Chute writes:

Comics is largely a hand-drawn form that registers the subjective bodily mark on the page; its marks are an index of the body, and its form lends its pages the intimacy of a diary. Comics works are literally manuscripts: they are written by hand.¹⁹

Drawing is, in a way, a more direct, authentic, and subjective way of exploring the world than, say, text, painting, film, or photography. It is a more basic human activity than many other artistic means of self-expression (»everyone« draws as a child, before learning to read and write).

¹⁵ Chute 2016, p. 297, and Witek 2011, p. 228.

¹⁶ Witek 2011, p. 230.

¹⁷ Chute 2016, p. 295.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 297. She repeats the point elsewhere: »Handwriting underscores the subjective positionality of the author.« Chute 2010, p. 11.

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Another reason why autobiography and autofiction may play such a big role in the current comic art scene is the need that ambitious comic-book artists have to legitimate their art and role as artists. Comics have for so long been looked upon as low culture, kitsch, and as only for children, but the genre of autobiographical comics is for adults; the works are produced by adults who have serious artistic ambitions.²⁰ But Kellerman might not be that interested in this kind of legitimization; he may instead want to use the low cultural reputation of comics to his advantage and treat the medium as a creative field for artistic experimentation: what happens when a person's life is presented in one of the most ignored and disrespected art forms – a funny-animal mass-produced newspaper strip? *Rocky* is the answer.

A Cartoon Self

A journalist confirmed in 2013 that the rooms and furniture in Kellerman's own apartment are just like in Rocky's apartment.²¹ There is also a story about how one of Kellerman's girlfriends refused to be a character in the comic but would not let Kellerman give Rocky a girlfriend who was *not* based on her – as if she then would be jealous of Rocky's cartoon girlfriend.²² So not even Kellerman's closest friends know where he starts and Rocky ends. A journalist once asked Kellerman if his friends found it difficult to cope with the fact that he was making such an honest comic strip based on them. Kellerman responded:



Figure 6: Martin Kellerman, drawing from Tomas Lappalainen, *Martin Kellerman* (Stockholm: Orosdi-Back, 2011), p. 124. © Kellerman, 2022.

Sometimes I can be like a parasite and live off them a bit. They generate a lot of material. I try to work around it and wait for a while if it's delicate stuff, if someone breaks up or does something stupid. They're patient with me. My friends are just such perfect cartoon characters. A lot of times they say things and all I have to do is write it down. Their personalities match and complement each other so well, it's impossible not to write it down. If I wait a while, even the upsetting stuff they can still laugh about.²³

We find the blurring between Kellerman and Rocky visualized in the book that Tomas Lappalainen wrote about Kellerman in 2011. It ends with a drawing of Lappalainen interviewing Kellerman (fig. 6), who represents himself as Rocky. Another funny example is from the Swedish comic journal *Bild & Bubbla*, in which the editor Fredrik

²⁰ Beaty 2009, pp. 229f. See also El Refaie 2012, p. 45.

²¹ Ullberg 2013, n.p.

²² Ibid.

²³ MacDonald 2005, n.p.

Strömberg interviews Kellerman, and Jimmy Wallin draws the interview in the style of Kellerman – of course representing Kellerman as Rocky (fig. 7).²⁴



Figure 7: Fredrik Strömberg and Jimmy Wallin, Comic page from *Bild & Bubla* 174 (2008), p. 21. © *Bild & Bubla*, 2022

In autofiction, all distinctions between the author, narrator, and protagonist are blurred.²⁵ The aforementioned anecdotes from interviews with Kellerman adequately demonstrate this. There is not *one* self, but multiple selves. A »cartoon self«, a term coined by Charles Hatfield, is a non-stable self with different creative opportunities than those available to a »literary self«.²⁶ Like being a talking dog. The protagonists in most autobiographical comics are anti-heroes, and these comics often have an ironic and sarcastic tone. Self-mockery is normal. We find this also

²⁴ Strömberg & Wallin 2008.

²⁵ El Refaie 2012, p. 53.

²⁶ Hatfield 2005, p. 114.

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in *Rocky*. A comic book artist can, through self-caricature, present his or her life in a way that is impossible in other media – a self-caricature can both create distance because of the caricature (everyone knows it's a caricature and not the real person), and through this distance, represent intimate, private, difficult, painful, and troubling issues, since it is *just* a »comic« with »caricatures« anyway. This possibility is even greater in a funny-animal strip like *Rocky*. The »cartoon self« can, ironically, be more honest, revealing and authentic than the real self. (There is no face to lose – only a cartoon dog). The »cartoon self« shares this quality with caricatures – a caricature can also gain access to the »real person« in a more effective way than can a painted portrait or a photograph. One of the points of a caricature is to go behind the façade and reveal a person's essence no matter how embarrassing. Asked if he ever worries about revealing too much of himself, Kellerman answers no: »Before I did this, I would sort of worry. But when I did the first ones, it was a leap. Once you do it, it's a relief. Sometimes it's a nice feeling to take a giant crap on yourself.«²⁷

It is clear that the figure Rocky is a made-up version of Kellerman and what the scholar Gillian Whitlock calls an autographic avatar.²⁸ Rocky is Kellerman's avatar. Kellerman has said in an interview that he did not have much of a life to brag about when he started drawing the comic – he could use that as the comic's premise, as a way of putting his miserable life to good use.²⁹ Whenever something sad or upsetting happens to him, he at least knows it will make a funny comic strip.³⁰ Avatars can explore things that the real person behind the comic would not do. Kellerman, for instance, can place Rocky in situations that he as Kellerman would avoid, because the situation is awkward or too silly, or maybe even dangerous. He can let his avatar say what he himself would never dare say out loud. On the other hand, Kellerman can also become Rocky's avatar. He admits to doing things in real life which he perhaps otherwise would not do, simply in order to include them in the comic. He uses the medium as a way of getting out and about more and trying new things.³¹ So who is whose avatar?

Literary historian Inge van de Ven has presented the concept »a serial self« when writing about Knausgård's *My Struggle*.³² The serial self is a self-representation that is closer to those we find in social media, for instance in blogs, Facebook, and Instagram, which might give daily updates on an open-ended life, often with an emphasis on the more mundane and repetitive aspects. Instead of a closed narrative based on formulaic structures, we get a series of episodes from the person's life. Van de Ven discusses a consequence of this:

[We read] an abundance of smaller, fragmented stories instead of an overarching narrative structure that binds subject and memories in Aristotelean unity. The interplay of repetition and variation at the structural core of

²⁷ MacDonald 2005, n.p.

²⁸ Whitlock 2006.

²⁹ Lappalainen 2011, 34.

³⁰ Ibid., 6.

³¹ Ibid., 34.

³² Van de Ven 2016. The concept »serial selves« is also used by comics scholar Frederik Byrnt Køhlert in his study of representations of marginalized identities in contemporary comics. See Køhlert 2019.

serial narration leads to performative and cumulative self-presentations that emphasize how self-image changes over time, sometimes even from one moment to the next. Serial autobiography thus permits the author multiple and ongoing attempts at self-representation, rather than claiming to reflect a fixed sense of self that precedes its representations.³³

Kellerman's *Rocky* is also a good example of this type of serial self because of the opportunities the daily comic strip medium gives. More about the comic strip's narrativity later.

The Backstage Self

Knausgård's own publishing company Pelikanen started publishing *Rocky* books in 2012, and Knausgård has also written forewords for these. In 2013 both Knausgård and Kellerman were invited to participate in the popular Scandinavian talk show *Skavlan* (figs. 8–11) to promote these publications.³⁴ This, of course, became a story in the comic strip: it centers on how awkward Rocky thinks the whole TV experience is. It gives us glimpses of Knausgård, or at least of how Rocky experiences Knausgård: grumpy, egotistical, and introverted. The *real* Knausgård pretended to be unhappy with the representation of himself in this sequence and responded with extreme sarcasm in one of his forewords to the *Rocky* books he published:

I read your strip every day, as you know, but this I was unable to read. I saw how you drew me, that was enough, I couldn't relate to it, and I asked my wife Linda to tell me when the *Skavlan* episode was over so that I could safely return to reading *Rocky*.³⁵



Figure 8: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*; strip no. 3013. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.

³³ Van de Ven, p. 8.

³⁴ Kellerman 2018, pp. 9–16.

³⁵ »Jeg leser som du vet stripene dine hver dag, men disse klarte jeg ikke å lese. Jeg så hvordan du hadde tegnet meg, det var nok, det kunne jeg ikke forholde meg til, og jeg ba Linda, kona mi, si fra når Skavlan-episodene var over, og det igjen ble trygt å lese Rocky.« Knausgård 2013, p. 5.

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Figure 9: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*, Sunday page no. 525. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.



Figure 10: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*, strip no. 3016. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.



Figure 11: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*, strip no. 3017. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.

Knausgård writes that the *Skavlan* experience in itself was humiliating, but then, to make matters worse, he was re-humiliated in the *Rocky* strips:

Three years of hard work, four thousand pages of writing summed up in this false image. Sour as an old pot. I'm not sour, goddammit. I'm not a damned introvert. And I'm not fucked up. I'm actually pretty happy, and in fact very funny. It's just that I'm not always able to express it.³⁶

Knausgård cleverly reacts just as so many of the people he has written about have reacted against *his* writings. The foreword is thus an absurd, funny, and paradoxical text.

This episode is an example of Rocky's »backstage self«, that is, the representation of front- and backstage behavior. Backstage is where the character can withdraw and relax and be »out of character«, as Elisabeth El Refaie has pointed out.³⁷ It is also where one can practice one's own representation of oneself to the outer world. It is this backstage world that is often the focus of autofictive comics – and this is also true in Kellerman's case. Much of the comic strip is about Rocky by himself, in private and intimate situations which we would normally be unable to view. (There are numerous episodes with Rocky on the toilet.) The strip becomes even more interesting when Kellerman switches between the front- and backstage, showing us how the characters behave differently in the two domains. This is illustrated by the Knausgård sequence, where we see the two characters talking to each other literally backstage before and after the talk show. But much of *Rocky* happens backstage, when Rocky is by himself in private moments not meant for people to see, and thinking what people are not meant to hear (but the reader gains access through the thought balloons). An example is when he goes on a beach holiday with his family but spends most of the time alone in his hotel room and on the balcony (fig. 12). The whole episode demonstrates that he, like many introverts, really enjoys his own company and being backstage.



Figure 12: Martin Kellerman: *Rocky*, strip no. 3468. © Kellerman/Kaunitz-Olsson, 2022.

³⁶ »Tre års hardt arbeid, fire tusen siders skrijving summert opp i ditt usanne bilde. Sur som en gammel potte. Jeg er for faen ikke sur. Jeg er for faen ikke innadvendt. Og jeg er for faen ikke forurettet. Jeg er egentlig ganske glad, og faktisk veldig morsom. Det er bare det at jeg ikke alltid får det ut.« Ibid., p. 7.

³⁷ El Refaie 2012, p. 141. El Refaie is inspired by and paraphrasing Erving Goffman's classic study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956).

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The Daily Comic Strip's Narrativity

Kellerman says that what he strives for is simply to keep going (although he ended the comic in 2018).³⁸ He says he likes repetitiveness and how the comic is as organic as reality; everything seems the same from day to day but seen over a longer period of time, one can notice a change. This is why a daily comic strip is so perfect for this kind of autobiographical experiment. Every day there is a new strip, and like a steady rhythm, it is as if it imitates life itself. When looking back at all the years, he says he can notice small changes in his own personality – the changes become visible in the comic.³⁹

We readers, if we have one of the large collections of *Rocky* strips, can move through Rocky's life and investigate his development. This also gives us extra freedom in how we approach the comic strip – we do not need to start at the beginning – few readers start with the first *Rocky* strip ever made (but everyone starts on page one of Knausgård's novels). Even though the comic unfolds chronologically, our reading of it seldom does; we may read it in any order whatsoever. This reflects how we meet people: we fall in and out of each other's lives. The *Rocky* strip is simultaneously available in different newspapers, in its own magazine, in big volumes, and online. We move in and out of the *Rocky* strip in a way that we could not do with a series of novels like *My Struggle* (you are unsure whether what you are reading in a *Rocky* comic book is something that happened before or after the comic strip you read in a newspaper yesterday). This fragmentation can in itself also be a metaphor for remembrance and memory. Therefore, when it comes to comic strips, the reader has exceptional freedom.

Perhaps it is no surprise that Knausgård is so interested in *Rocky*. His own project, *My Struggle*, is partly inspired by the nineteenth-century *feuilleton*, a type of serial literature that could go on for many volumes. The comics medium itself could also be seen as born out of the *feuilleton*; it is often mass-produced in cheap publications associated with low culture. The daily newspaper strip first appeared early in the twentieth century and can be seen as a cross between nineteenth-century caricature, satirical journals and the *feuilleton*. The *feuilleton*'s narrativity is characterized by a steady rhythm of unfolding. There is an open-ended quality to the narrative: the story simply grows out of the text without any clear structure involving a beginning, middle, and end. The daily comic strip has a similar structure. An auto-fictional daily comic strip can be looked upon as a potentially unending mapping of a life.

It is worth stressing that the newspaper strip is a distinct medium, different from graphic novels and comic books. Joseph Witek elucidates the difference: »Comic strips come to us unbidden, as supplementary features of a daily or Sunday newspaper, and their gratuitous nature imposes on them formal and thematic constraints: comic strips must be brief enough to fit the space requirements of copy editors, and their themes must be general (and genteel) enough

³⁸ Ullberg 2013, n.p.

³⁹ Johansen 2013, n.p.

to appeal to a broad audience.«⁴⁰ Witek also differentiates between the »gag« strip and the »continuity« strip, which emerged in newspapers in the 1920s. Neither, however, have an especially high status in Witek's opinion:

Even the continuity strips (those with an ongoing storyline) [...] are paced slowly enough and narratively redundant enough to accommodate the reader who looks in on the plot only occasionally. Comics books on the other hand, are voluntary purchases, and their themes are tailored to specific audiences.⁴¹

Comic books are, in Witek's view, for loyal readers with a real interest in that specific book, while the newspaper strip is one of many entertainment features in newspapers. This is especially relevant for gag strips, but even the strips with ongoing storylines have problems becoming great comic art, at least according to Witek:

Even the continuity strips, with their ostensible narrative basis, depend for their effects on accretion of incidents and repetition of motifs rather than on a building causal sequence of events.⁴²

But this really has nothing to do with the comic strip medium in itself. An ongoing comic strip can tell just as touching and relevant an adult story as a comic book and graphic novel. The daily repetition over the years can make stronger impressions on the reader than a single graphic novel. Kellerman's *Rocky* is one of the most successful comics in using the strip format to tell a serious life story. He has taken the comic-strip medium in a new direction.

I tend to agree with comics critic Robert C. Harvey, who, in his pioneering study of newspaper strips, expresses admiration for their aesthetics:

The [Sunday] comics were integral to the recreational function of the paper. Ostensibly, they kept kids from bothering their parents on their day of rest. But it was the father who bought the paper, and he read the comics, too. The humor in many of them, in fact, would be lost on all but adult readers. From the very beginning, the Sunday funnies, masquerading as entertainment for children, entertained the grown-ups, as well.⁴³

Funny animal comics, in particular, masquerade as children's entertainment, but it is fair to say that comics such as *Krazy Kat*, *Peanuts* (with Snoopy), *Pogo*, *Maus*, *Fritz the Cat*, the many books by Jason, and of course *Rocky*, are not actually for children. The newspaper strip genre at its best can be just as grown-up, serious, and complex as the comic book or the later graphic novel. And while Witek, Chute, and most others who study autobiographical comics focus on comic books or graphic novels,⁴⁴ I would claim that the daily newspaper strip has the potential to be even more successful at mapping a life: one strip a day can create a narrative rhythm more similar to life. Furthermore, a daily comic strip like *Rocky* is close to what the literary historian Isaac Cates labels »diary comics« – a diary

⁴⁰ Witek 1989, p. 6.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 6f.

⁴² Ibid., p. 8.

⁴³ Harvey 1994, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey even argue that single volume collections of comic strips such as *Peanuts* and *Doonesbury* paved the way for the graphic novel. See Baetens & Frey 2015, pp. 66–69.

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presented in comic book form. Although it is not a *real* private diary, it is a diary meant for beholders and it is honest if not authentic:

[T]he diary is required by its nature to preserve the unknowability of its future and the merely provisional meaning or value of the present it describes, and therefore must always lack the narrative structures and hermeneutic composability⁴⁵ at which large-scale life writing always aims.

This open-ended unfolding is characteristic of the ongoing daily comic strip, not the comic book, and it becomes a metaphor for life itself. We do not know what will happen to ourselves tomorrow or a year from now, and nor do we know what will happen to Rocky. The comic character and the reader have a common fate.

The goal for this article has been to show how Kellerman, through the concept and genre of autofiction, has expanded the daily comic-strip medium through the way he uses a funny-animal comic self(s) and the medium's characteristic day-to-day narrative over a period of twenty years. The result is not only a story of a person's development from a young to a middle-aged man, but also a depiction of the Scandinavian *Zeitgeist* for the last twenty years. *Rocky* presents us with a convincing depiction of our times, and it is this what makes *Rocky* a rich material for many future studies.

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⁴⁵ Cates 2011, p. 216.

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