

The Secret to Superhuman Strength



Alison Bechdel
Author of Fun Home

For Hol



JONATHAN CAPE, AN IMPRINT OF VINTAGE, IS PART OF THE PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE GROUP OF COMPANIES WHOSE ADDRESSES CAN BE FOUND AT GLOBAL.PENGUINRANDOMHOUSE.COM.



Penguin
Random House
UK

COPYRIGHT © 2021 BY ALISON BECHDEL

LINES FROM "TRANSCENDENTAL ETUDE" BY ADRIENNE RICH FROM *THE DREAM OF A COMMON LANGUAGE: POEMS 1974–1977*. COPYRIGHT © 1978 BY W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, INC. USED BY PERMISSION OF W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, INC.

BOOK DESIGN BY ALISON BECHDEL

COVER: DESIGN © ETTA VOORSANGER-BRILL, ILLUSTRATION © ALISON BECHDEL,
BACKGROUND © KATSUMI MUROUCHI/GETTY IMAGES

ALISON BECHDEL HAS ASSERTED HER RIGHT TO BE IDENTIFIED AS THE AUTHOR OF THIS WORK IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COPYRIGHT, DESIGNS AND PATENTS ACT 1988

FIRST PUBLISHED BY JONATHAN CAPE IN 2021

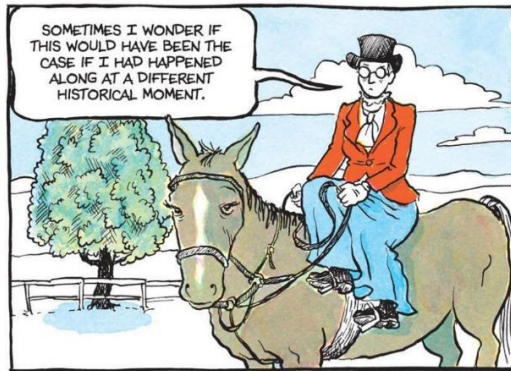
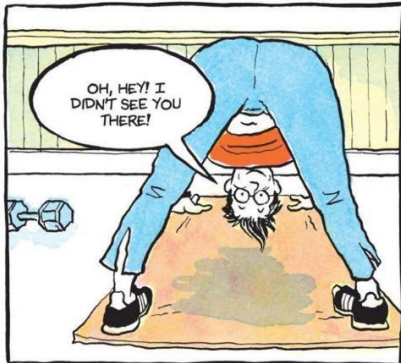
PENGUIN.CO.UK/VINTAGE

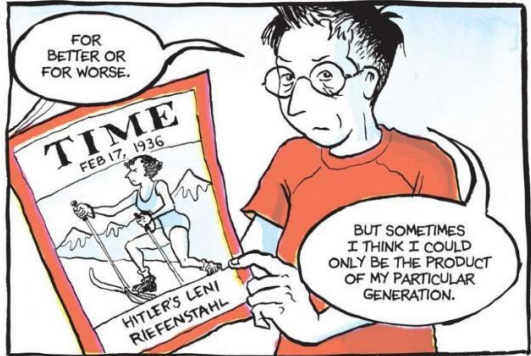
A CIP CATALOGUE RECORD FOR THIS BOOK IS AVAILABLE FROM THE BRITISH LIBRARY

ISBN 9781473597693

THE AUTHORISED REPRESENTATIVE IN THE EEA IS PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE IRELAND,
MORRISON CHAMBERS, 32 NASSAU STREET, DUBLIN D02 YH68

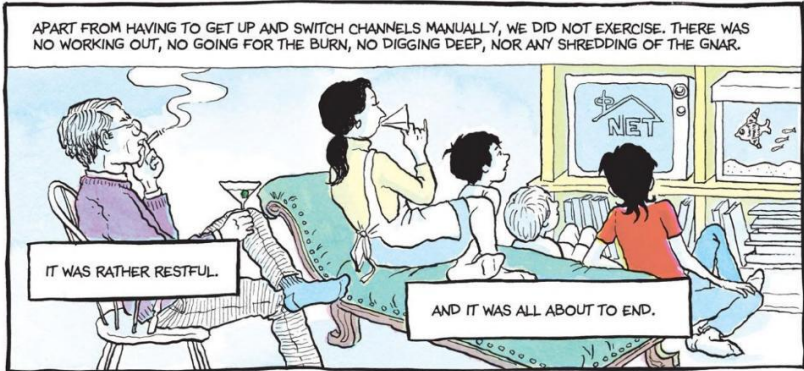


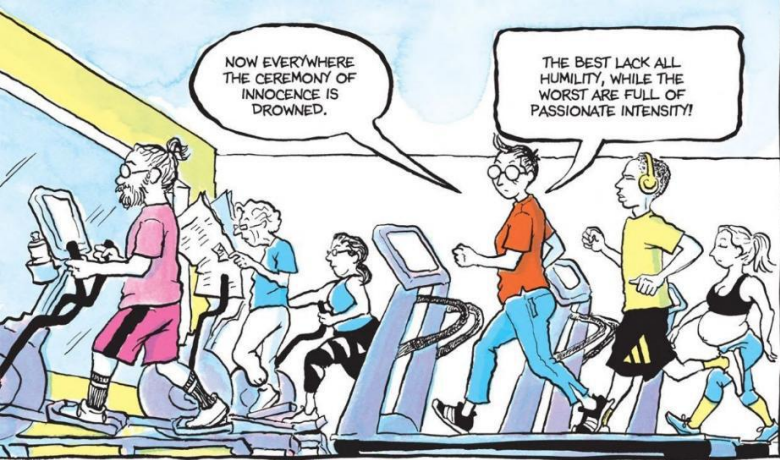




I WAS BORN AT THE END OF THE BABY BOOM, IN THE PRIMORDIAL DARKNESS JUST BEFORE THE DAWN OF THE EXERCISE EPOCH.

EVEN IF I HAD BEEN INTERESTED IN SPORTS, THERE WERE NONE. NOT FOR GIRLS. BOYS HAD LITTLE LEAGUE, BUT THAT WAS IT.







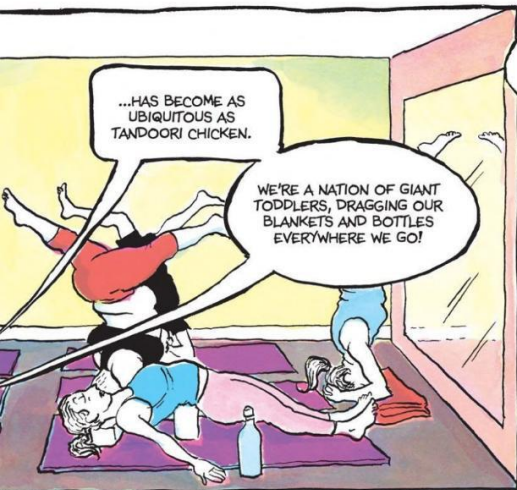
YOU PROBABLY DON'T EVEN HAVE TO CHANGE YOUR CLOTHES BECAUSE YOU'RE ALREADY SPORTING ATHLEISURE WEAR!

PERHAPS YOU'RE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING MORE LIKE A REVIVAL MEETING. IN A DISCO. ON BIKES.

YOU'RE ON A JOURNEY! YOU'RE NOT THE SAME WRETCH WHO WALKED IN HERE TODAY!

\$128 FROM LULU LEMUR

YOU'RE A WHOLE NEW WRETCH!



...HAS BECOME AS UBIGUITOUS AS TANDOORI CHICKEN.

WE'RE A NATION OF GIANT TODDLERS, DRAGGING OUR BLANKETS AND BOTTLES EVERYWHERE WE GO!

FOR GOD'S SAKE, DON'T FORGET YOUR CORE!

IT'S A WONDER WE EVER EVOLVED TO WALK BEFORE PILATES CAME ALONG.



WHAT GNAWING VOID PROPELS THIS CARDIO-PULMONARY FRENZY?

GNRH!

THE SPIRITUAL AND MORAL BANKRUPTCY OF LATE CAPITALISM?

THE DISEMBODIMENT OF OUR INCREASINGLY VIRTUAL EXISTENCE?

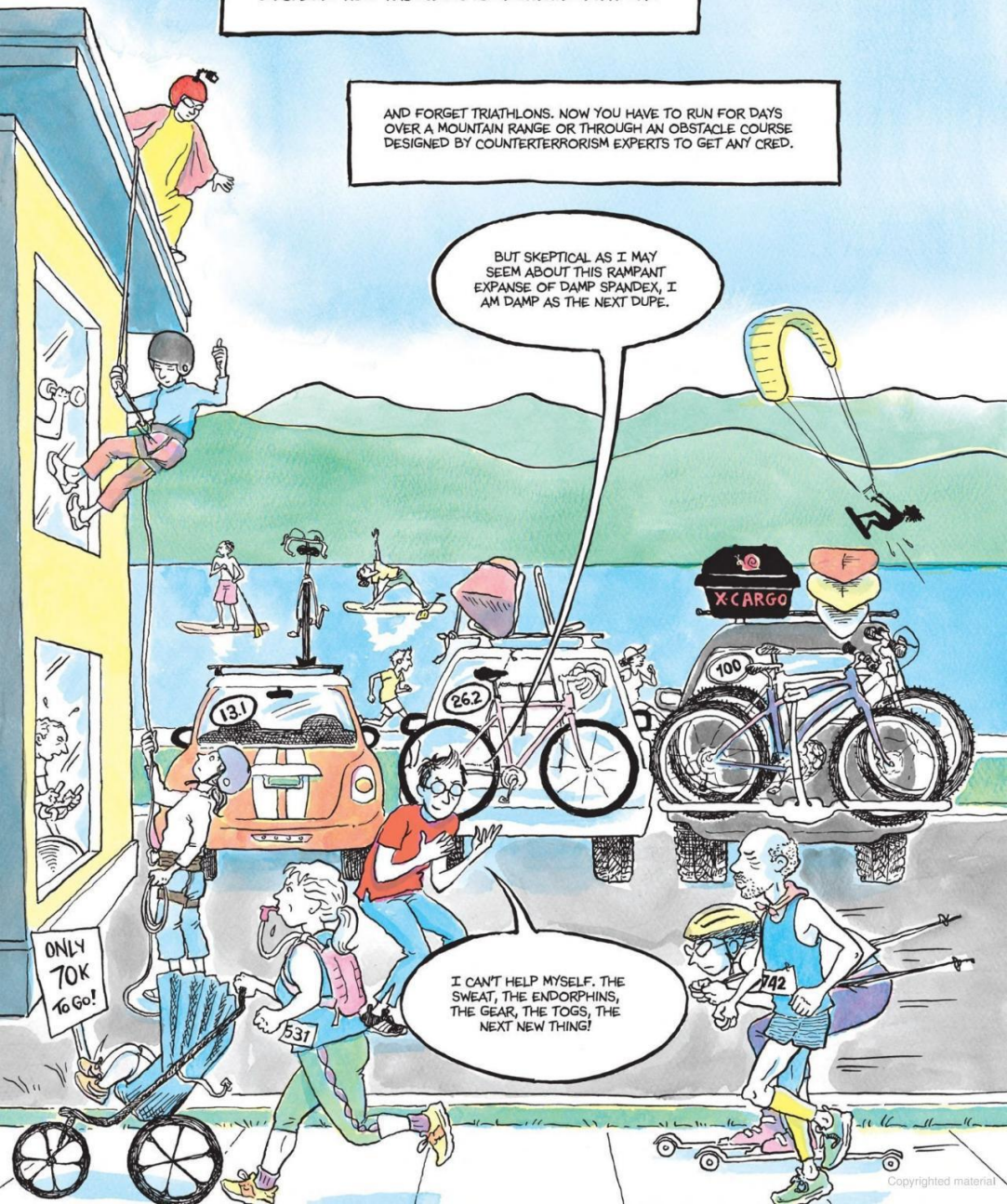
A BOTTOMLESS CREDULITY THAT "6 WEEKS TO A 6-PACK" IS HUMANLY POSSIBLE?

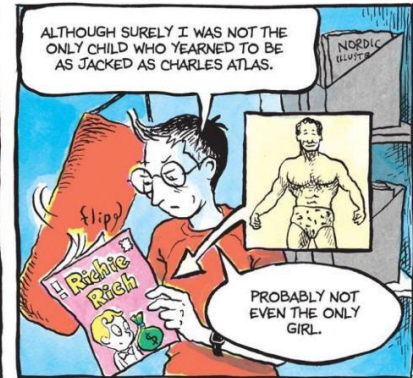
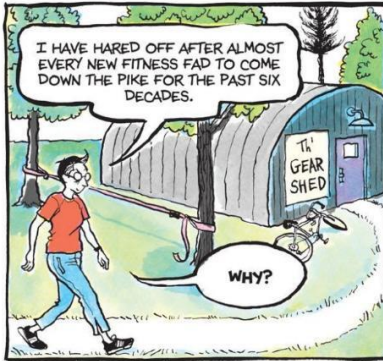
IT'S EVEN WORSE OUTSIDE. A NEW ACTIVITY REQUIRING A SPECIALIZED ROOF RACK SEEMS TO BE INVENTED EVERY DAY.

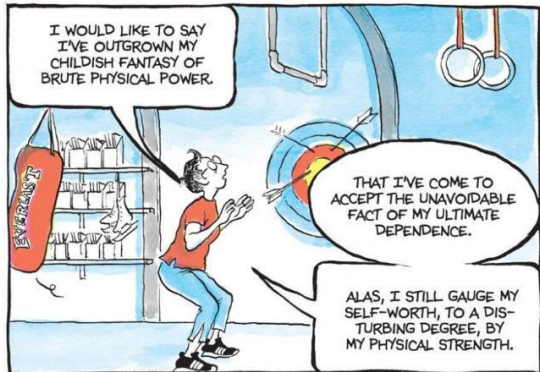
AND FORGET TRIATHLONS. NOW YOU HAVE TO RUN FOR DAYS OVER A MOUNTAIN RANGE OR THROUGH AN OBSTACLE COURSE DESIGNED BY COUNTERTERRORISM EXPERTS TO GET ANY CRED.

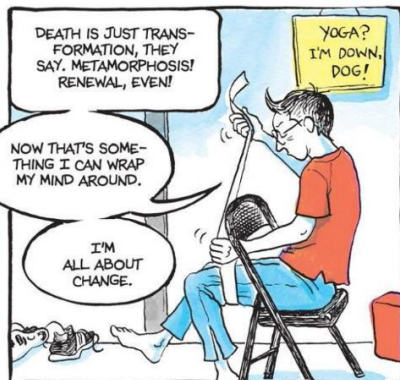
BUT SKEPTICAL AS I MAY SEEM ABOUT THIS RAMPANT EXPANSE OF DAMP SPANDEX, I AM DAMP AS THE NEXT DUPE.

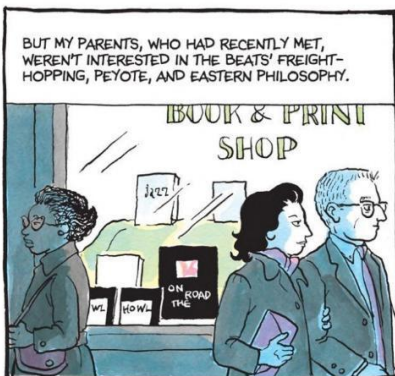
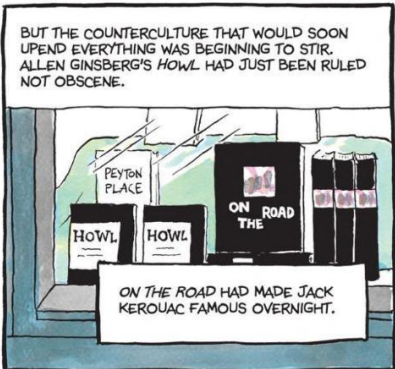
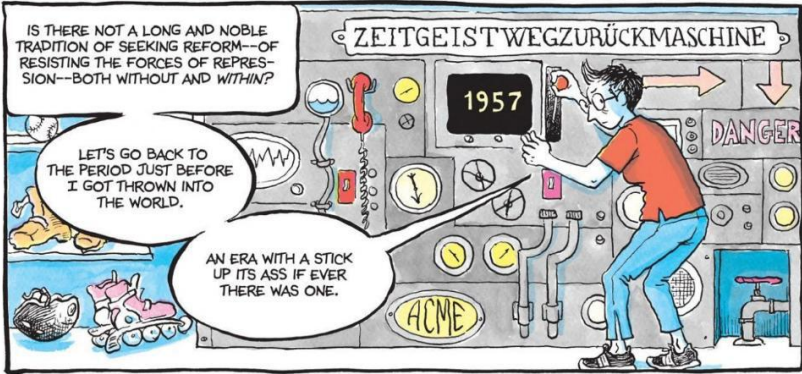
I CAN'T HELP MYSELF. THE SWEAT, THE ENDORPHINS, THE GEAR, THE TOGS, THE NEXT NEW THING!

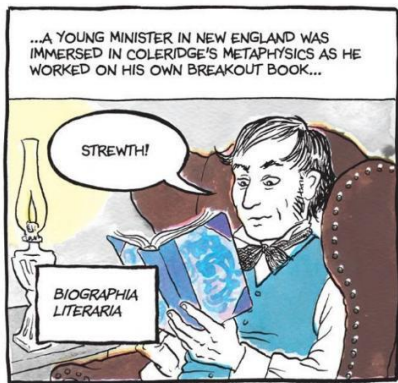
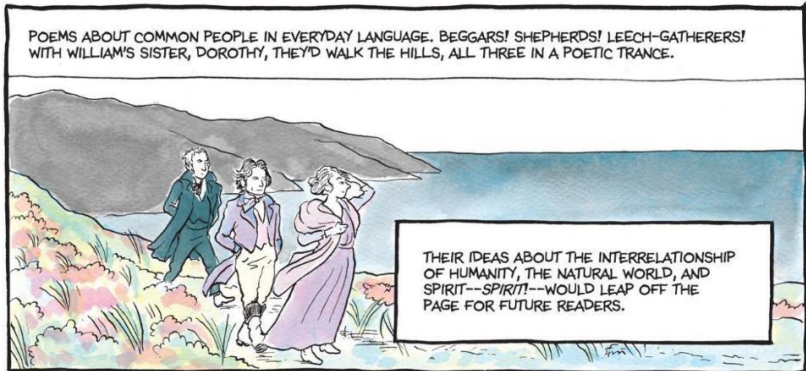
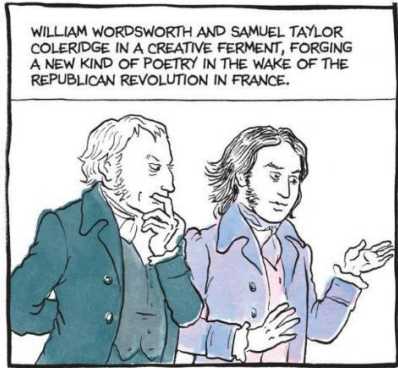
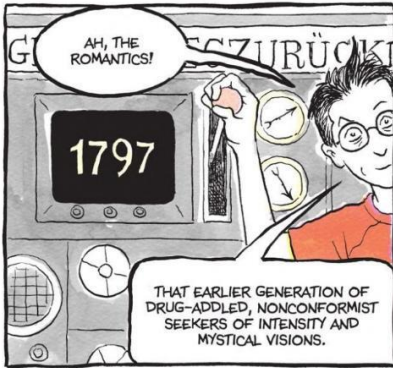




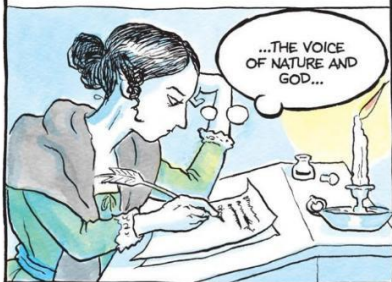








...WHILE NEARBY A YOUNG JOURNALIST WORKED ON AN ESSAY EXTOLLING COLERIDGE AND WORDSWORTH AS "THE PILOT-MINDS OF THE AGE."



SOON THE POET/PHILOSOPHER RALPH WALDO EMERSON AND MARGARET FULLER WOULD FOUND THE TRANSCENDENTALIST JOURNAL *THE DIAL*.



THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS WERE DISTURBED BY THE WAYS IN WHICH THEIR YOUNG DEMOCRACY WAS BETRAYING ITS OWN IDEAL OF LIBERTY.

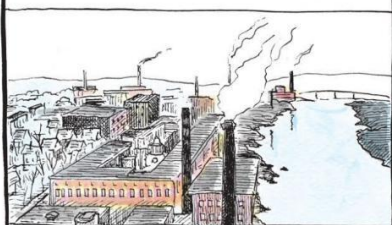
SLAVERY, THE "INDIAN REMOVAL ACT," GRABBING LAND FROM MEXICO, THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN, BRUTAL CONDITIONS IN THE NEW FACTORIES.



EVEN AS THEY MET IN EMERSON'S PARLOR, A GIANT TEXTILE MILL COMPLEX WAS BEING BUILT* A BIT FARTHER NORTH IN LOWELL, WHERE THE CONCORD RIVER FLOWS INTO THE MERRIMACK.

*TO CASH IN ON ALL THE COTTON ENSLAVED PEOPLE WERE HARVESTING IN THE SOUTH.

BY THE TIME JACK KEROUAC WAS BORN IN LOWELL IN 1922, THE MILLS WERE IN DECLINE. THE POSTINDUSTRIAL AGE HAD BEGUN.



(THE FISH WERE LONG GONE. EMERSON'S PROTÉGÉ HENRY DAVID THOREAU NOTED THE ABSENCE OF SALMON IN 1849.)

AND SOME TIME LATER, AS MY FUTURE PARENTS FROlickED IN NEW YORK CITY...



...KEROUAC WAS SEVERAL STOPS NORTH ON THE I.R.T., IN THE APARTMENT OF JOYCE GLASSMAN, ONE OF THE MANY HAPLESS WOMEN WHO HOUSED AND FED HIM OVER THE YEARS.

HE WAS REELING FROM HIS SUDDEN NOTORIETY.



I THOUGHT YOU WERE UP IN THE COUNTRY WRITING.

I COULDN'T STICK IT. IT'S TIME FOR ME TO GO BACK TO MY MOTHER'S.

AT HIS MOM'S HOUSE, HE'D BANG OUT HIS NEXT BOOK, *THE DHARMA BUMS*, ON A TWELVE-DAY BENZEDRINE BENDER.

THE DHARMA BUMS IS ONE OF MY FAVORITE BOOKS.

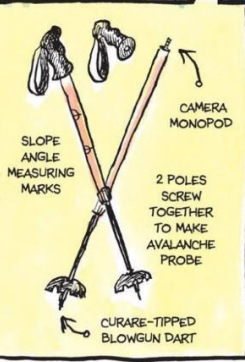
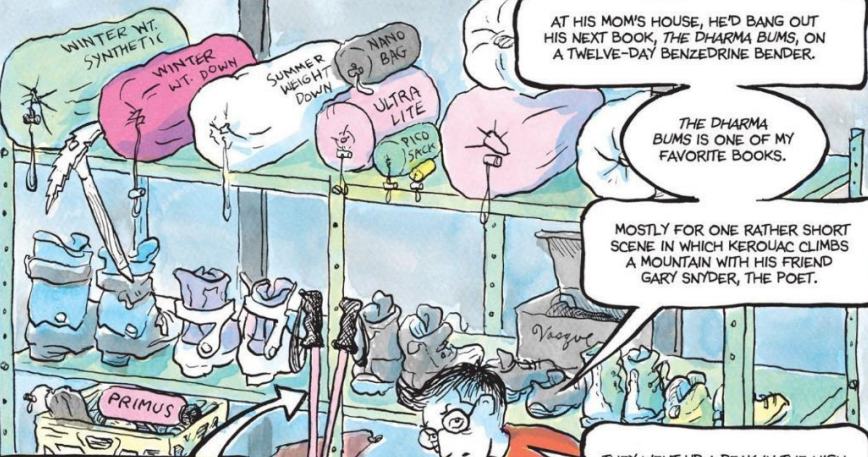
MOSTLY FOR ONE RATHER SHORT SCENE IN WHICH KEROUAC CLIMBS A MOUNTAIN WITH HIS FRIEND GARY SNYDER, THE POET.

THEY WENT UP A PEAK IN THE HIGH SIERRAS CALLED MATTERHORN* ONE DAY IN OCTOBER OF 1955.

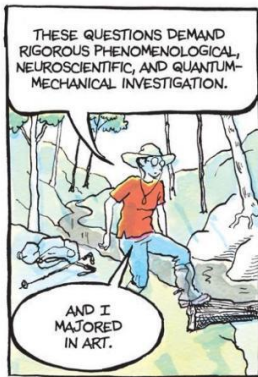
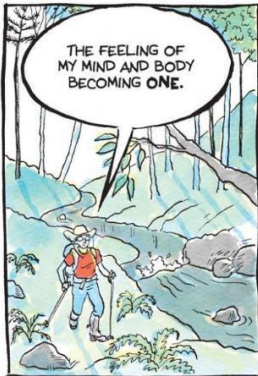
THE FACT THAT THEY DID THIS BACK BEFORE IT WAS REALLY A THING HAS ALWAYS ENTRANCED ME.

JACK HIKED IN TENNIS SHOES AND CARRIED A GIANT FLANNEL SLEEPING BAG.

*FOR ITS SLIGHT RESEMBLANCE TO THE ACTUAL MATTERHORN IN THE ALPS.











THE SNEAKERS OF THIS ERA PROMISED TO MAKE ME "RUN FASTER, LEAP FARTHER, AND STOP QUICKER." LITTLE DID I KNOW, THE SNEAKERS OF THE FUTURE WOULD ACTUALLY DO THESE THINGS.

THE ADIDAS JUGGERNAUT WAS STILL YEARS AWAY, AND NIKE'S "MOON SHOE" WAS NOT YET A GLINT IN BILL BOWERMAN'S WAFFLE IRON...

