

Cars and Batman

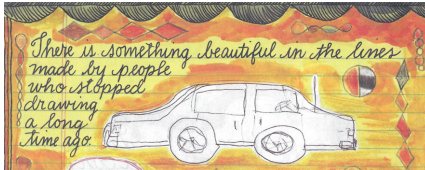


Fig. 1: Excerpt from “Let’s Draw a Car and Then Let’s Draw Batman.” Barry, *Syllabus*, 25.

When I try to introduce comics analysis into an academic setting focused on texts rather than images, I often hear responses like, “I don’t understand that,” or, “What does that mean?” Furthermore, when I suggest incorporating the drawing of comics to deepen our understanding of the medium we are analyzing, a common reply is, “But I can’t draw!” If you encounter the same doubts and perceived limitations with your students, I encourage you to try Lynda Barry’s “Draw a Car and Then Draw Batman” exercise in your classroom.¹

In her teaching practice – which she describes in her book *Syllabus* (2014) – artist Lynda Barry is particularly interested in “people who stopped drawing a long time ago” (Fig. 1). She aims to bring “drawing back into someone’s life – which is different than teaching them to draw” and to evoke the “drawing that is already there – is still there in spite of everything” (38). Thus, her adaptation of Ivan Brunetti’s exercises from *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice* (2011, 25–26) proves particularly effective in this context.

Similar to Brunetti, she asks students to draw a car first, and to do so “even if [they] don’t know how, to see what happens,” limiting the time to “two minutes or one minute” (Barry 2014, 26). Whereas Brunetti asks students to keep drawing cars within progressively shorter time frames (five seconds being the shortest; 2011, 25), Barry focuses on students’ reactions, which range from fear to involuntary laughter (2014, 26–27), and devotes ten entire pages to showcasing her students’ drawings. She “ask[s] people to stand up and look at each other’s drawings,” possibly reinforcing the “terror” that fills the room (28). Inspired by Brunetti, who asks students

1 And be sure to do it yourself before delving into Ranthild Salzer’s article on “masculinity enactment” in American superhero comics (2025) or exploring Renée B. Adams’ comic about the even more heroic *Women on Boards* (2025) in this chapter.

to “[d]raw quick doodles (5–10 seconds each) of famous cartoon characters, from memory” (2011, 26), Barry then asks them to “draw Batman” (2014, 29). While Brunetti describes the results as “technically speaking, ‘wrong’ – but also kind of right at the same time” (2011, 26), Barry uses the metaphor of “the spook house” (2014, 32–33) to describe the drawings that emerge from “all the not-knowing that both scares and delights us to bits” and that “we have no way to control” (33). In their respective exercises, both artists allude to a state of reduction and imperfection that has been defined as constitutive of comics and requires no artistic training.

Bibliography

Barry, Lynda. *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2014.
 Brunetti, Ivan. *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice*. New Haven, London: Yale UP, 2011.

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Fig. 1: Barry, Lynda. *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2014. 25.

