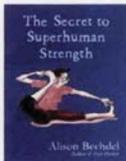


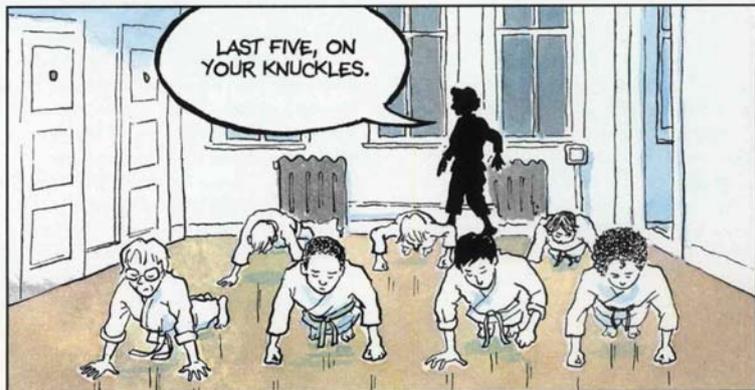
FOUR STUNNING NEW GRAPHIC NOVELS

From the authors who do words with one hand and pictures with the other.



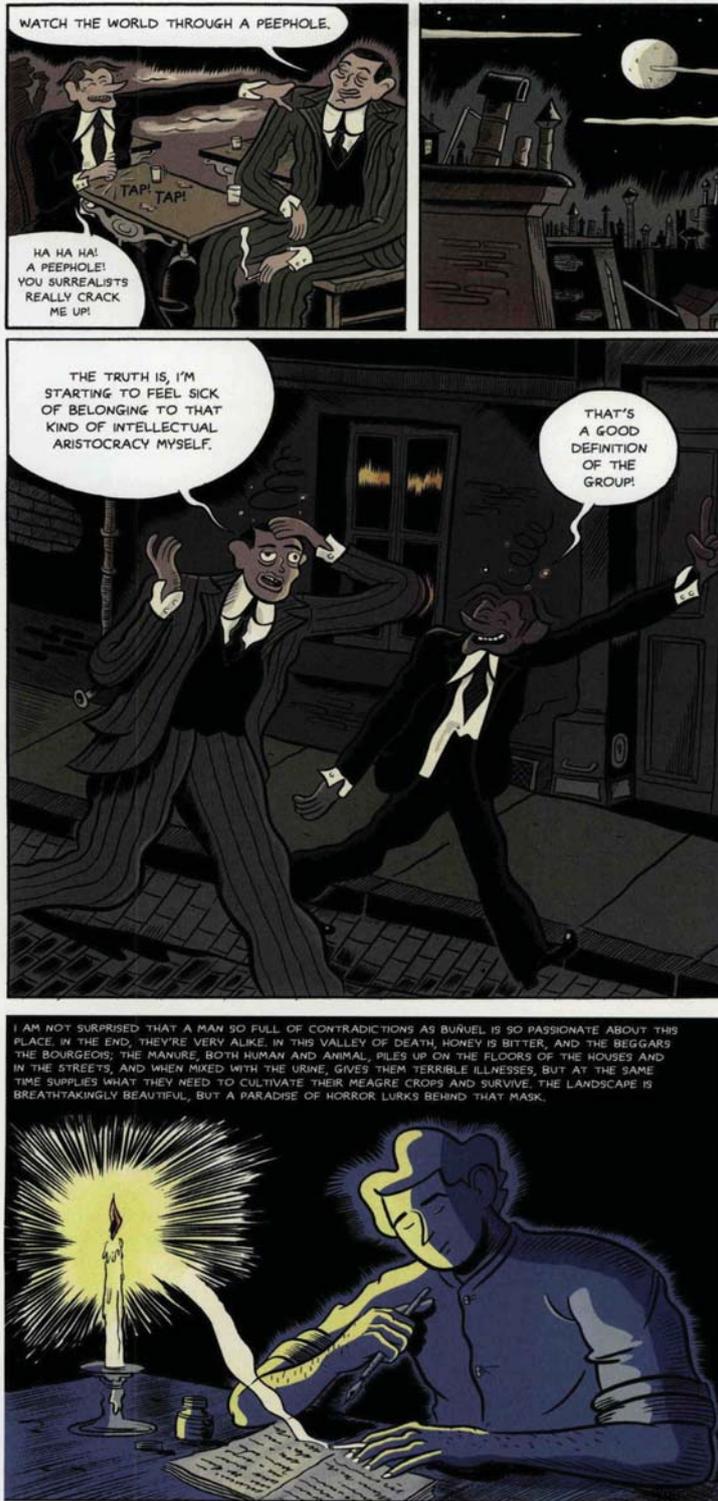
THE SECRET TO SUPERHUMAN STRENGTH
BY ALISON BECHDEL
JONATHAN CAPE, £16.99.

Alison Bechdel is best known for her classic graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, about growing up in a Pennsylvania funeral home with a closeted father who went on to kill himself. The book, inevitably, became a hit musical. *The Secret to Superhuman Strength* is also autobiographical, taking on her lifelong dedication to pushing herself beyond her physical and perceptual limits. Born “just before the dawn of the exercise epoch,” Bechdel declares she has always been “a vigorous type.” An early false start with transforming her appearance came as a child in the sixties when she responded to a Charles Atlas ad in her comic book that promised muscles galore. For the next fifty or so years she tried a bit harder, seeking transcendence through running, skiing, cycling, martial arts and a long list of other punishing activities, all of which she committed to with maximum ferocity. When not incinerating carbs, she developed a deep curiosity about how those such as Coleridge and Emerson positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* nature, the better to allow its hyper-energising properties in. And also those such as Jack Kerouac who tried to locate the mouth of the same mystical river through drink and narcotics. Her commitment to physical exertion finds its inverse counterpart in her chronic lack of self-belief, as best shown in “The Semi-Sadistic 7-Minute Workout,” a parody of a High Intensity Interval Training routine from the *New York Times*, where instructions to plank or lunge are replaced by commands such as “On gruelling round of speaking engagements, (sic) realise you



are performing some kind of version of yourself. Wonder if this is what it's like to be a sex worker.” By the present day, just as the media is starting to fill with lunatics insisting they won't wear a mask because Covid is a Democrat hoax, she does reach an epiphany of sorts – we are not the

centre of everything. While that conclusion might feel scant reward for all the mental and physical energy she has fired Hadron Collider-like at the problem, this thorough and clever book more than justifies her enormous power bar, cycling equipment and pilates class expenditure.



WATCH THE WORLD THROUGH A PEEPHOLE.

HA HA HA!
 A PEEPHOLE!
 YOU SURREALISTS
 REALLY CRACK
 ME UP!

TAP TAP

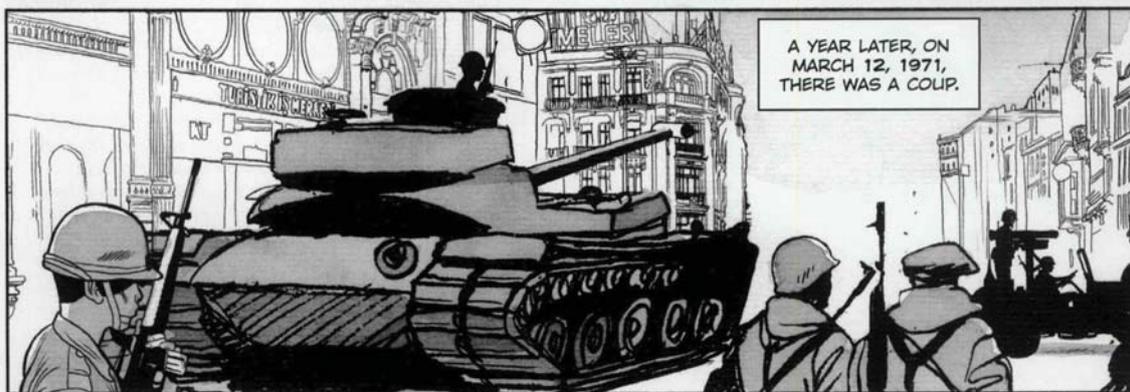
THE TRUTH IS, I'M
 STARTING TO FEEL SICK
 OF BELONGING TO THAT
 KIND OF INTELLECTUAL
 ARISTOCRACY MYSELF.

THAT'S
 A GOOD
 DEFINITION
 OF THE
 GROUP!

I AM NOT SURPRISED THAT A MAN SO FULL OF CONTRADICTIONS AS BUÑUEL IS SO PASSIONATE ABOUT THIS PLACE. IN THE END, THEY'RE VERY ALIKE. IN THIS VALLEY OF DEATH, HONEY IS BITTER, AND THE BEGGARS THE BOURGEOIS; THE MANURE, BOTH HUMAN AND ANIMAL, PILES UP ON THE FLOORS OF THE HOUSES AND IN THE STREETS, AND WHEN MIXED WITH THE URINE, GIVES THEM TERRIBLE ILLNESSES, BUT AT THE SAME TIME SUPPLIES WHAT THEY NEED TO CULTIVATE THEIR MEAGRE CROPS AND SURVIVE. THE LANDSCAPE IS BREATHTAKINGLY BEAUTIFUL, BUT A PARADISE OF HORROR LURKS BEHIND THAT MASK.

BUÑUEL: IN THE LABYRINTH OF TURTLES
 BY FERMÍN SOLÍS
 SELFMADEHERO, £14.99

The Spanish surrealist Luis Buñuel may be lauded now for his outrageous cinematic imagination, but people had less time for his nonsense while he was still around. The action opens here in Paris in the early thirties, where his scandalous films *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or* have failed to bring about the social upheaval the movement had hoped for. Indeed, as he lurches about the city at night a few drinks in, he's started to wonder whether the surrealists are good for much at all, especially "the overdressed harpy," Dalí. Still, films have to be made, so he heads to deepest Spain and the village of Las Hurdes, where the destitution is beyond anything a surreal imagination can summon. The people are starving and have barely enough energy to throw stones at the interloping creatives, one of whom – Buñuel – is dressed as a nun. The result is his film *Land Without Bread*, (a pseudo-documentary in which scenes of utter squalor are given a jaunty travelogue narration and inappropriate music.) At the outset of the book he had declared his daily ambition modest: "Give me two hours of active life and twenty hours of dreams." (When the mathematical gap in his logic was pointed out, he said he'd spend the other two hours watching "the world through a peephole.") Yet he found he had bigger ideas. He supported the Republicans in the Civil War and moved to the United States following their defeat, then Mexico, and continued to work in film. *Land Without Bread* is still bewildering viewers today.



TURKISH KALEIDOSCOPE
 BY JENNY WHITE
 PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, £18.99

Turkey feels like one of those countries whose appearance on the news rarely seems to clarify much about its inner turbulence, and it turns out things weren't much easier to make sense of in the early seventies. *Turkish Kaleidoscope*, by an American who was in the country at the time to study for a Master's at Ankara's Hacettepe University, is an attempt to fix the revolutionary chaos of the period into some sort of coherent image. The political configurations may be tricky to discern amid the fighting and slippery alliances, but there can be no doubt

about the viciousness of the violence (see: a bus passenger receiving an ice pick to the cranium for it being filled with the wrong political opinions.) *Turkish Kaleidoscope* follows four principal characters amidst the student foment, two from the left, two from the right, although as the author explains from the outset, "Rightists referred to themselves as idealists. The left called them fascists. Leftists were self-defined revolutionaries. The right called them communists." The wider political background was a contest between secular government and the more religious and repressive military, the latter struggling to believe there was any organisation better suited to run the country, and eventually taking over. The list of political groupings is long and impenetrable, with an added wrinkle provided by the large numbers of rural poor moving to the cities, who

to the exasperation of the left, tended to not only support conservative groups who were usually indifferent to their predicament, but also liked to rationalise events superstitiously and clung to such reports as corpses rising from their graves on the election of an unpopular figure as a true political picture. For all such folkloric interpretation, the turmoil was authentic, and no doubt is one of the roots of today's equally baffling (for the outsider, at least) political panorama in that most excellent country. By the end of the book the panels switch to colour to show the protagonists leading more elderly present day lives, bumping into each other on the Bosphoros ferry and wondering where their efforts got them. In the final frame, older and younger generations of the same family are still arguing about the policing of demonstrations.

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COMA
BY ZARA SLATTERY
MYRIAD EDITIONS,
£18.99

In May 2013, Zara Slattery of Brighton developed a sore throat while sitting at the bedside of her mother as she succumbed to pneumonia. It persisted during the grief at her dying, and also as she resumed life's pleasures and obligations, until one day she bumped into the corner of a table. That innocuous collision seemed to ignite whatever her body was skirmishing with inside, and after a pause for the GP to prescribe painkillers and bed rest for the acute distress that followed, she found herself in hospital with suspected necrotising fasciitis – the flesh-eating bug. The book wavers between two states: her comatose hallucinations, which are generally nightmarish with the occasional specific hint at something happening around her in the real world, and the life of her husband Dan and children, the latter getting on with their infant priorities, the former gradually crushed by keeping the show on the road and being summoned to the hospital to receive increasingly grave prognoses. Attempts to hold back the bug's march fail, and Dan is first confronted with an ultimatum that amputation of a leg is unavoidable, then after subsequent application of the scalpel, that there is nothing more that can be done. Doing nothing turns out miraculously to be the right decision, but the trauma wrought must be immense.

